

Text by Jessie Truong after Alexis Smith's "Snake Path"

Born of Book and Stone

after Alexis Smith's Snake Path (1992)

I have been born many times, from many mouths, passed from many generations. I remember my birth in 1667. I was whispered into John Milton's ears, transcribed by his daughters' pens, born a parchment hero. I was a savior. I opened humanity's eyes with my own two hands, hands I do not have anymore. I was born again in 1992, in California. My design is bleak, shades of black and brown. I blend into the desert fauna, camouflaged. I no longer stand out as the leader of the fallen. I am a snake--a predator disguised as prey.

She sewed me into this hill, a form

mimicking

movement yet

motionless.

All those who walk across

move. I do not.

I was born of liquid cement and hexagons

mosaic slate,

sunbaked and tanned

under the scorching desert sun.

In the center sits a garden.
Occupied by beautiful Narcissus that
hang near the bay laurel wreaths and bearded irises.
Fruit; Persephone's pomegranates and figs full of wasps.
Olive branches reach over to the jasmine leaves,
over the herbs, rosemary and mint,
over the scented geranium and dwarf myrtle,
to the Italian cypress, casting shadows like Heaven's gates.
Ivy seeps from under the lone seat, anchoring ankles,
Encouraging lovers to smell the roses, never in bloom.
But the climate did not allow for apples.

Cool marble invites one to read before they sit, to think before they settle.

Words by Thomas Gray, ended by one who meddles.

"Yet ah! why should they know their fate?" When they expire at such fast rates?

"Since sorrow never comes too late," they quickly lose themselves in hate.

"And happiness too swiftly flies," for those who embrace holy lies.

"Thought would destroy their Paradise," would they still choose it, despite the price?

"No more; where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise."¹

Yet there will always come a time, when ignorance dies.

When someone comes along to pry at unwitting eyes.

¹ Gray, Thomas. "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College."

I watch a student sit on the marble seat in this human Eden. She holds in her hands a thick book. In the echo of her voice, I am reborn, made mobile. The Devil can only live, so long as those who remember its name speak it. I rip at the stitches of dried concrete holding me back. I twist around to observe Milton's successor, my new progenitor. "Why do you still read," I hiss, "When others have already read?"

She smiles, the breeze picking up her hair. Loose strands lose themselves in the thicket behind her. "I do not know what others have read. I can only read for myself."

"Not for God?" I whisper, like we're sharing a secret, she and I.

"I'd imagine he already knows what I'm reading." She turned the page.

"What if he didn't?" I poke and prod her. I wish to know, once more.

"Then maybe God should pick up a book. Maybe he could learn something new too."

I laugh, hiss, choke, because my throat is dry, like the paper in her hands. I spy a pan of water that I imagine the Narcissus grew from. I suck in the small amount of rain that collected in the dish. I taste the dust of toppled towers and the salt of overwhelming flood. I savor them before drawing away, satiated with the reminder of His failures.

However, I cannot leave this place yet. I am tied to this student, who comes from beyond the desert. Milton's words awoke me, but did not free me. She closes the book and ambles down the hill, paying me no heed. I follow slowly, a predator stalking prey, slithering through the tall grass as I circle my own body.

Through the whistle of desert grass slithers

A man, a snake, a painting on a path.

He watches them, God's favorite clay dolls;

The banished, the still-loved, the loyal fools.
Past memories chafed on the snake's scales,
Of the most beautiful of the Angels
Replaced by a wine-making carpenter
Who had yet to be born of flesh and bone.
The Arch-Fiend defeated by unborn thought,
Evil incarnate deemed less than a "Son"
For the sin of hating a selfish King.
Serpent's blood boiled in the Lake of Fire,
In deliciously raw wrath, he recalled
His first speech that roused Pandemonium:

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n"²

Better to be fallen than be human.
Predator follows prey, Fate decreed so,
And Satan has known crueler mistresses.
Shadowing Eve as she walks the lone path,
The Serpent watched as Eve met with Adam.
They walked back up his spine, arm in arm.
Virtue swam through the air, and he recoiled,
Body shrinking at their love, fading in
The light, needing the cover of darkness
To grow to full strength once more; A fungus
That feeds on a hesitant maiden's faith,

² Milton, John. "Paradise Lost."

That claws away her shield of fortitude,
That offers her a drink, an aged wine,
That renders her imprudent and naive,
That drains her of kind-hearted charity,
Pushing her and Adam over the edge.
Faith is lost as the Serpent's hold tightens.
The Box is passed to Eve, who opens the lid.
Exposed is Hope, to be eaten alive.
He almost makes it. She stops and recites,
**“And wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.”**³

“You said you were reading that book, right? How is it?” Her boyfriend asked.

She traced the carving, her fingers gliding on the copper marble statue. A book that cannot be opened. A book that only contained surface text. A book that made heroes and anti-heroes of Gods and Angels. A book that told her she had flaws carved into her by forces she could not control. The sculptors who made this book did not carve it out, did not empty it. They impressed their words onto the marble, leaving the insides unknown. What truths were written in this monument of knowledge? What would she find if she were to open up the book, to dig into its body, its spirit?

What would God find if He did the same to her?

³ Milton, John. “Paradise Lost.”

She could feel the cold breath of anticipation over her shoulder and the warm, human presence by her side.

She smiled, eyes soft and gentle. “I fucking hated it.”

The ground shook as the hill raged. Strings of Fate shot upwards to the Heavens, wrapping around the Snake’s scales. They dug into the Snake’s false flesh as he howled to the Heavens, to *Him*, spitting curses out as the arrogant girl listed all of his flaws to the open air. Her words threaded the needle that pierced his sides, pinning him to the ground. His scales grew heavy and his body crumbled to cement and water, concrete once more. He could feel himself losing consciousness, returning to the earth with every second that passed, with every flaw in his being she spoke aloud.

“Let’s play a game.”

“A game?”

“Yeah, it’s called, ‘Hop on Satan.’” She grinned and he grinned back.

We stepped on the scales, slate turned to rubber playground surfaces. We played hopscotch, giggling and dancing around like idiots, like the children we still were. We were joined by fellow students, and we all danced like mad, each stomp pushing his scales further into the ground, pushing Satan further back into his *glorious* kingdom.

We made it to his rounded head, then took our sweet time poking his diamond pupils and grinding our heels into his outstretched red carpet tongue. Shoe rubber, floor polish, and gum; nothing but the best for the Arch-Fiend, King of Hell.

My cheeks hurt from how much I was smiling. I caught his eye and smiled wider, exposing my almost perfect teeth. He matched my expression, an indulgent look in his eyes. I leaned into his warmth as we left Snake Path behind. We turned our back on the Vices and Virtues of mankind and walked towards the Library of Geisel, a towering building filled with students of different cultures and languages, a babbling tower that had yet to topple.

I didn't look back, but I prayed my message would find them all the same.

Keep your Hell, keep your Heaven, we'll stay in our man-made Paradise, crazed, both innocent and all-knowing, both curious and satiated. The perfection of your Paradise could never survive the questions, the queries, the curiosity, the sins of those who live with wills that dictate Fate, with freedom coursing through their veins.

**“I formed them free, and free they must remain,
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.”⁴**

Free,

Free,

Free...

⁴ Milton, John. “Paradise Lost.”

Works Cited

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