Natan Richert

Nykur

It’s nearly dawn.

I’m on my usual nocturnal walk, since I’m restless as of late anyway. I’d love to have someone walk along my side, but I live alone, and do not mingle with people at all; I do paperwork from home, you see, not many opportunities for socialization. I look down on a steep cliff and admire the empty vastness of the land. Below me spreads a bay, surrounded by pristine, black beaches, which underlie the precipice I have mounted. There are more such hill-giants all around, so ostentatious probably because they’re the only creatures willing to inhabit this area. Nothing would make them hide here. Apart from them, everything’s plain. There are no trees, only rocks and tons of moss. No wonder local folks resort to believing in all those fantastic trolls, elves, and stuff. It makes life more colorful. Once I’ve heard from a friend of mine, when we were both still young and gullible, a story passed down by generations in her family, about Nykur, a deadly horse-like creature lurking in the waters, with only its head and spine poking above the surface, waiting for the lonesome, foolish fishermen who dare mount it, only to drive them into the water, and kill with no mercy. Apparently, the only thing Nykur is scared of is the sound of its own name. I remember how frightened and convinced she was while telling this tale. If only she were here, we would probably laugh at how seriously we once took it. Probably.

The atmosphere dominates the entire landscape with its merciless airstrike, and the mist underneath looks almost as if it intercepted the white, frosty missiles by swallowing them inside its omnipresent, vaporous body—almost. All I can see here, beneath me, is desolation and ravage. Not that I haven’t got used to it. Somewhere far away, a thunderous rumbling can be heard. Probably some huge iceberg has just broken into shards somewhere close to Greenland. The sound was so loud, though, that I’m certain the earth shook at one point. If it weren’t for the noise, I would be sure it was some kind of a subterranean volcanic eruption. Meanwhile, I’m starting to notice minute specks of various colors playing near the water: some reddish-brown, others black, or even snow-white, like chameleons with their forms hardly discernible from the surroundings. A herd of little Icelandic horses are running along the shore with their hairy hooves, all pointed at the future, sweeping through the air so lightly, as if flying with Pegasus’ wings. These animals seem to enjoy themselves in their near-morning routine. They look so carefree and amiable that I’ve decided to descend the hill and take a closer look. The mere sight of them fills me up with such joy, I can’t even imagine how I’ll feel when I’m finally amongst them. When I’m one of them. The shores of Western Iceland tend to be hazardous, especially during winter. Of course I know that; I’m full of reason. And reasons, too.

The more steps I take down the hill, the calmer my head gets. It must be a mere figment of imagination, but if you really think about it, what isn’t? This stillness, eerie though it is, relaxes my nerves—something I’ve just realized I have craved more than anything,

for a very long time. I got so excited I didn't even notice when I started running. Continuing onward with an increasingly rapid pace, the world around me becomes more and more blurry. Whenever I look down at my feet, I wonder if they really belong to a human—the elusive images that flicker before my eyes seem to blend in an uncanny way. Suddenly, the bones begin to crack and bend in ways not known to man. It hurts so much I try to force myself onto the ground and stop, but I just can't. My body feels artificial, as if I've lost control over it. My legs appear deformed now; they are hairy, and my toes have solidified into inseparable forms. Aren't they… horse hooves?!

I think I must have passed out from this tremendous shock, for the rest of my descent remains blurred in my mind, as if it gradually diffused with this mist the deeper I went into it. This mist, which spreads over the whole land, unceasingly, like a universe unto itself. I was still dizzy, but, at least, upon entering the fog, everything becomes clear: I'm no animal—I'm a man. A regular young adult with earthly problems, too. Immediately after having set my feet on even ground, I turn around, and I'm standing there, gaping in awe of the sublime colossus. Its grandeur makes me think I might really have come down from the top of the world. But it's just so lonely up there. How awkward must it be for the giants to stand there, so close to the coast's sandy beaches, almost tasting the freedom of those loose sand particles under their feet. Judging by their morose looks, they, too, crave to be destroyed into bits, gathered by powerful winds, and, ultimately, scattered all over the Earth. Their time, albeit measured by alien clocks, will come one day. They shall not worry, yet they, most certainly, will. What else is there to do? I know: play with the pack! Now, being on the same level as they are, I feel exulted. Or excited. I wonder if they recognize my presence from afar. Probably not. So once again, I rush ahead, using what little strength I have left in me.

After running for 3 minutes, I stop, for a few horses turned their heads toward me, and now look me in the eye with a wary look. Their inspection is ever so quick, because, in the blink of an eye, they are all gone. All but one. This one stands in one place, half-submerged in the water, some twenty feet away from the shore. I slowly approach the horse with my hands put forth, to clarify that I'm no threat. I think my message is well received, since the little one hasn't moved. Not a bit. My skin begins to grow goosebumps, not from the cold. I am aptly dressed. I stop moving and now face the horse, catching a glimpse of my own frightened, yet curious look reflected in its dark eye. I realized it's just that I feel its relentless eye, constantly focused on my face. Hell, not even my face—it pierces straight through the skin and reaches my soul! It seems much more intimate than any human relation I can recollect in my life. Maybe this little being also recognized the connection between us? Maybe it stares at me in the same awe as I did at the rocky giant? These thoughts provided some consolation and warmed me from the inside, shielding me from the stinging frost.

I resume my attempt at uniting with my wild soulmate.

"You're pretty," I whispered.

"Where's your family?"

There is no answer.

Of course there would be no answer. What did I expect, talking to a horse? The sun is rising, the mist is gone, and I am standing on this coal-black beach, too scared to take a step further and touch the animal; too fixated to turn back and return home.

Besides, what a foolish question. One: it's alone—clearly the others left it behind for some reason.Two: you don't ask such personal questions so early if you want to make friends. Three: it's a horse.

Step after step, in a stealthy, yet careful manner, the distance between our bodies diminished. The closer I get, the more astonishing details I notice about this beautiful, disturbingly calm creature standing in the shallows before me. Its face is almost completely veiled by long, white, curly hair, drifting in soft strands over its features. Beneath that curtain, a single gleaming eye peers out, permanently fixed on me. The creature looks like a huge frothy mass, its body half above, half beneath the sea, and the hair gently floating on the water like seaweed pushed and pulled by the frantic tides. The desire to touch and stroke is becoming unbearable now. All this fluffy hair, barely wet above the surface, just tiny drops drooping from singular hairs—the real feathery smoothness must be hidden beneath the water.

An inanimate jellyfish, with its animated tentacles, drifting freely, just as the seas govern.
A lethargic iceberg, its true core cunningly hidden from any human eye.

Enough of this musing, go.

After a quick while, full of short, indecisive steps forward, here I am, standing directly next to my astonishing beauty. Its head is right before me, yet its single gleaming eye still searches for mine — set slightly backward, a pitch-black hollow pupil ringed with a green, almost neon glow. Eerie, yes, but not frightening; if anything, its steady gaze tells me it's watching me as intently as I watch it.

I can finally touch it, and so I do. The moment my fingertips pet the horse's soft neck, heat surges through my temples, my hands begin to shake, my heart flutters, my hair stiffens, my knees weaken, my whole body trembling under the rush. I'm beginning to crave more—to submerge, and let the dark waters slowly entangle my body with the horse's thick, snowy locks, so they can infinitely soothe my skin, wrap tight around my hips in a quiet romantic embrace, and protect me like a baby in a mother's womb. Its position hasn't changed yet. A stone-cold, stone-still creature, abandoned by its lively companions.

"I'm here. I will never leave you."

The horse's allure is almost palpable. A warmth rises in me, a strange certainty that this bond between us could grow into something even deeper. I imagine climbing onto its back, letting it carry me across the entire country. We would watch sunsets. We would doze in the moonlight. We would simply… be. Wait. Permission. I should

probably ask. Still, the feeling won't leave me — that this goes both ways, that something in it has opened a door for me, a quiet space where words aren't needed.

"Don't worry. Let me just…"

And as I speak, I swing one leg over its back, searching for a safe, steady seat. Once I'm firmly settled, we rise together. The creature has risen up in its full, uncanny glory. My hand never leaves its fur — that warm, cloudlike coat I've already grown dependent on. The horse takes the lead, and we move as one, running through the deserted land, our closeness tightening with every stride. Every vein of mine pulses with bright, invigorating life.

We must have gained speed, for the frosty winds are now descending upon my face with far greater weight. Then I notice something appalling—the creature's hooves are pointed backwards, towards the past! Evidently, there are much more things we share in common. This is no horse of this world.

Curiously, though, I know I won't leave. Everyone is flawed to some degree; besides, I already made a promise. The speed keeps rising. A hellish velocity. Images flash before my eyes again.

Something crawls beneath my fingers, as I hold on to the mane. I almost leap back when I see the multitude of white larvae writhing in the fur. I look down—and in the water's reflection, the beast finally reveals itself. The fur has fallen away, torn off by the impossible speed.

What stares back at me is indescribable. Radioactive, ever-glowing eyes sunk deep into a bony, rotting face. The lack of an upper jaw exposing yellow, ancient teeth. Skin peeling in strips. A sight that turns my stomach.

Too late for that, too late for apprehension—the creature hurls me into the deep water. I punch, I kick, I claw upward for a breath of air. But I am defeated. One backward-pointed hoof slams into my stomach. I fold in agony, screaming soundlessly as only bubbles escape my mouth.

The demonic glower rushes toward me. This is the end. There is nothing left. "I. AM. WEAK." I scream from the very bottom of my lungs.

I wake up, half-smiling, half-crying, on the cold-stone shore.

Ever since this otherworldly encounter, whenever the dawn is precisely at its peak, I am torn out of sleep by the wailing outside my window.



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