**The Sound of Iron**

Joseph Dante La Rocca

 At the cross of two rivers lies a great marble statue of a man upon a pillar. The man is emaciated, wearing the outlines of his ribcage through his skin. The beard covering his face nuzzles itself into his shoulder; those passing close enough by can see he has been carved with a face of eternal consternation. Both arms droop outward, palms forward. He stands one foot upon the other. There is no clothing on him, just naked flesh.

 Eli, a young man headed downstream, found himself at the rivers’ conflux and became captivated by the statue. He, like so many others, was amazed at the details of its craftsmanship: the finely carved hairs on its face, the textured lashes on its back, the skin sagging from each arm. But Eli’s attention was drawn from the statue and towards an iron chain wrapping around its body. It choked its neck, bound its chest, and then sunk into the black waters of the river. He could not find its beginning, only where it disappeared. The water ebbed and flowed, rattling the chain, beating it against its host. In the gloom of overcast, it shone.

 Soon after the statue, there is a town, with lights and outlines of houses barely visible through a constant fog, the only true landmark an occasional person sitting on the bank, a local, a fisherman. Eli’s head was clouded by questions, and when he spotted an old man fishing, he pulled towards him.

 “’Scuse me! Have you seen that statue, a little upstream?”

 “Why, of course I have, that’s our guardian son.”

 “What’s that?”

 “A protector of people, and a friend to all who need it. He keeps me company by the water, watches over everyone, even an old man like me.”

 “You know who made it?”

 “Nobody knows who. It was here before all of us, and our fathers, and their fathers. An unbroken link of generations to pass down not who built the statue, but who it is of.”

 “Which is?”

 “Our guardian.”

 The old man smiled at Eli and asked him about himself. Their conversation continued as Eli sat down next to him. After a while, he offered to take Eli into his house, and the two of them ate well, enjoying each other’s company, talking about the statue.

 Eli asked, “Do you know why that chain was on it?”

 The old man shook his head, “It was made by someone in cruel vandalism, that’s what

we say. Do not focus on the chain.”

 “You don’t suppose it’s dragging the statue under, do you?”

 “The statue is stronger than that.”

 Their conversation waned and the old man showed Eli to a bed, but once left alone, Eli could not sleep. New questions came into his head, or doubts to the old man’s answers, or thoughts he himself could not put into words. A rattling echoed from outside. He left in the night to continue downstream.

 Along the river, fog descended and receded but never left. Eli saw many settled towns, each with their own affinity: a town of gold, a town of endless festivity, a town of beautiful women, but Eli drifted past them all, as before each town was a statue bound in chains.

After much time, Eli reached a bound statue of a man reigning in a horse. The man pointed towards the sky and both man and animal were pitched back in a scream. The cover of fog thinned, revealing men sitting on the riverbank, wearing old uniforms of greys and blues and greens, letting water wash over their bare feet. Their faces were thin, their skin was pale, each resembled the other. They passed bread between each other, tearing off one clump and sending it down to the next person. All ate slowly, savoring every bite. One chain tied itself around each man’s wrists, linking him to the next. With every movement it shook. They watched Eli pass, their stares vacant. At the end of their line a man stood tall, eyes locked opposite the river. A pyre raged before him. Shadows of men walked towards the fire’s edge to heave in what undiscernible darkness each carried, movements harmonized into one mechanical striking of chains, breathing the sound of iron into the air.

 Over time, the riverbank became alien to Eli. All his travels were pointed downstream, passing statues, watching people from afar. Whether men performed acts of horror or decency or joy or mystery, Eli ignored them. Every statue was featureless to him, each sharing the same chains.

 In the twilight of Eli’s youth, a boy called out to him from ashore. “Hey Mister! Where’re you going?”

 Hesitantly, Eli responded. “Headed downstream.”

 “Mind if I join you?”

 He grabbed a boat and paddled alongside Eli. The boy talked at Eli; Eli rarely talked back. After a while however, Eli asked him a question.

 “Back there, were you ashore for a statue?”

 “Something like that. I just don’t know anymore.”

 “They’re rocks.”

 The boy looked at Eli, who talked with his eyes focused forward.

 “Don’t do anything. Don’t mean anything. Will just sink into the water later on.”

 “...”

 “Rocks. All of ‘em rocks.”

 Together they flowed down the river, passing life under the grey of the sky, talking occasionally before the fog deepened and Eli lost him. A steady stream of people continue down the river, on nothing but boats made especially for them, brother craft after brother craft passing over the same blackness. Different rivers flow into the main channel, carrying men who wait for a statue call them. For Eli, each one has blended together, not one distinct from another, and he doesn’t notice when they become sparser later on, then disappear altogether, letting the current move unimpeded. He pushes forward, wanting to be alone, safe from men and the sound of chains, hearing only the river’s flow. The noise grows. The current rushes. Eli descends into rapids.