

FLORA

Kenlie Rohrer

The Festival of Demeter and Persephone only came once a year, and with it, hundreds of spectators would gather at the center of the capital, waiting in long lines just to get a glimpse inside. The building was not permanent, a square box of thin sheet metal, one that the service workers hammered together every year before it came to town, one that could be discarded and sold for scrap easily, only to be reconstructed again the next lunar year. The box building looked large, deceptively so; after all, how large could something really be that only consisted of four corners? For some reason, the Festival always came at the end of the year, when the weather was about to tip towards the dry season; no one knew much about what the plants had been like, but most knew that plants did not appreciate dryness. There was something called “seasons” that used to take up all the time during the year, the plants changing as the weather changed, and the people were fascinated by this, and so, they were fascinated by the box, or at least what was inside it.

My grandmother had always wanted to go and see the inside of the box, and this year she thought I was finally old enough to go with her and experience it all. That day we got up early, darkness still sweeping the streets, and got into line with the rest of the people. From farther away, the line always seemed like it never moved, like it never got any bigger or smaller. Now that my grandmother and I were in the line, I knew that was not the case, as we seemed to be at the front near the entrance in no time.

I soon noticed something odd. “Where’s the door?” I asked my grandmother, as I could see where the line backed up all the way to the edge of the building. I blinked a few times while focusing on the spot where the people began and ended, and couldn’t see where they were entering the building. I looked at my grandmother, but she was facing straight ahead. She didn’t say anything and she didn’t look at me.

We finally reached the border of the building. I could see the little knots and imperfections in the metalwork of the box, and wondered for the millionth time what the metal had been a part of before it was made into this building, what it was used to make after the building was taken apart again. I was just about to reach out and touch the grains in the metalwork when my grandmother said, “You know, as long as I have lived in this city, I have never once seen them take apart this building.” She still didn’t turn around and look at me. “Now, isn’t that strange?”

I shrugged, even though she wasn’t looking at me. “Maybe it’s all supposed to be part of the magic.”

And it was, because at that moment, we were inside the box. I still never remembered going through a door, but I supposed it was one of those new transmitter things that were popping up all over the place now.

It was a kind of museum, but one unlike anything I had ever seen. There were museums that displayed images of what plants and animals had looked like at one time, but they were poor copies, drawings based off of drawings, not real things at all. I remembered sitting at one of the museums when I was younger, with my grandmother, some other children and their grandmothers, watching the flickering image against the metal wall panel, wondering what it might be like to smell a flower, eat a non-synthetic piece of fruit, or touch the muzzle of a horse...

But this place was full of flowers. Real flowers.

My grandmother immediately sagged against me in awe. I heard her whisper “Praise Demeter. Praise Persephone.” I felt dizzy. I barely knew where to look first. The heads of the things were mounted on handsomely carved plaques; they were made to resemble actual wood, but of course they were only made out of scrap metal, as everything was. They were spaced evenly apart, some far larger than others, some far smaller, so small that I couldn’t even make them out from where I was standing at the very front of the box. I longed to get a closer look.

My grandmother and I rushed like children to each and every plaque, examining the head of each specimen, and laughing aloud to ourselves. “These are just how I remembered them,” my grandmother said at one point, even though I knew it was impossible for her to have been alive when there was any sign of plant life. The plants had gone before the animals, just slightly, or so we had learned at the other museums. The heads of the flowers were almost as large as ours, sometimes even larger. We put ourselves next to them, comparing their size with ours.

We learned the names of the specimens. We learned orchid, lily, rose, tulip, gardenia, amaryllis. There were some with remarkably long green branches coming from underneath the large heads, sticking into the plaques against the wall. I couldn’t believe that the small, frail things could support the entire head of the flower. I couldn’t believe how many different specimens there were. It just seemed too good to be true.

There were so many different colors. Brown, black, white, gray, and green, and all different shades as well. There were even some that had been soaked in a kind of dye; some of them were brighter green, and some were a violent shade of orange. I was unsure that any of the flowers had ever been that shade in real life.

There seemed to be many rooms of the flower heads, but I knew the building had only one room. I decided it was another optical illusion or transmitter like the door had been, and followed my grandmother to the one.

More and more heads. I was starting to tire of the newness, the effects of the initial surprise wearing off quickly. I squinted my eyes and peered down the never-ending hallway; or were they rooms? There seemed to be no end to the flowers. Just how many specimens were there? Surely there were never this many. I looked around for my grandmother, but didn't see her anymore. I shrugged to myself and continued on down the rows, thinking I'd find her a little farther down.

The more I looked at the heads, the more uncomfortable I began to feel. I stared into the face of one of the flowers, a particularly large one called a cactus blossom. I didn't think it looked like a very nice flower at all. The lighting behind it was flickering, and it looked particularly ominous against the dark metal background that made up the walls of the box. I moved on down the row, this time skipping a couple of the heads and settling on one of the dyed flowers. This one was a lily, a calla lily, or so it said on the small line of metal next to the plaque. I thought the brightness of the color would make me feel more comfortable, but what it conveyed was just unsettling. There was a small stick protruding from the center of the head, and if I peered close enough, I could see little beady feelers attached to the stick, fuzzy pinpricks of dust, somethings... I wasn't entirely sure what to make of it, but the thing looked alien. It seemed an orange head pulled taut against a white, white skull, a mouth far too wide and gasping. I saw veins pulsing against the skin, black and sickly looking; they disappeared down the throat and into the body, which was a pale green, jutting into the plaque. The shadows of the thing were all wrong, and seemed to fall to the floor in a massive puddle. They were leaking onto the metal walls of the place, along the back of the flower's skull, down its curving mouth; it almost looked like it had eyes, like it was observing me instead.

I pried my eyes from the sight and looked around again for my grandmother. I still didn't see her anywhere, and by now I was starting to panic. She would understand that the flowers scared me. They came from a different time altogether, they weren't something I was used to. And how were the flowers fed? Didn't flowers need some sort of liquid to survive? Didn't they need sunlight? What was sustaining them behind the metal walls, behind the plaques, behind the heads?

I looked back into the calla lily's face, one last time, and saw there, nestled in its mouth, a human head.

I froze, and my eyes locked with the human's eyes. I noticed immediately that it was my grandmother's head, but it was completely white, as if it had been carved out of smooth alabaster. But everyone knew alabaster didn't exist anymore; the only thing we had was scrap metal.

"Grandmother?" I gasped, and tears pricked the corner of my eyes. I stepped closer to the mouth of the flower where my grandmother's head lolled on its orange tongue, almost as if the flower were taunting me. I always wondered what a flower smelled like, and as I got closer, I could smell its breath, its blood. It didn't smell at all like I thought it would. It just smelled like death, like rotting meat, like blood.

I backed away from the flower, from the head in its jaws, the face, eyes blinking at me, and I bumped right into something. I turned around, and it was my grandmother, with the strangest look in her eyes.

"Where have you been, child? I have been looking for you all day," she said, and her face contorted into a smudge of wrinkles. I realized it was the first time she had looked at me since we had gotten to the Festival. I blinked at her, turned slightly, and looked at the calla lily. "But that flower..." I began, but the calla lily was just a calla lily, stained orange. There was no head, and there was no alabaster, just the slight stench of iron lingering in the air. I still didn't like the look of it staring at me, and I followed my grandmother towards the front of the building without looking back.

We walked for what seemed like hours, her walking several paces in front of me. We walked for so long I didn't know whether we were going to the front of the building or the back of it, but I assumed my grandmother knew where she was going. We walked past hundreds and hundreds of spectators, all ogling at the precious flower heads dangling upon their plaques. I had heard of zoos being a thing in the distant past, but I wasn't sure if there had been zoos for flowers or other plant life; I thought it was only animals. I tried not to think about this as I passed each flower, tried not to think of the mouths snarling at me, the tongues rolling open, the heads that might come out, the smell of human blood...

I realized I had almost lost my grandmother again, and jogged to keep up with her. Since when was she this fast? Perhaps the presence of the flowers was giving her strength, or maybe it was just her motivation to leave this place. Perhaps she was just as freaked out by the flowers as I was.

As we got farther and farther down the rows of mounted flower heads, the fewer people I saw. The box had looked large from the outside, but it was massive from the inside, an uncountable number of flowers, infinite metal panels. My grandmother herself seemed fuzzy in the distance of my vision, stretching into somewhere else entirely, past the boundary and just about to reach it at the same time, crossing the threshold. Maybe there was another transmitter here too, the one that would let us back into the real world. I couldn't wait to feel the stagnant air on my face again.

But it wasn't the front of the box that came into view, or at least not what I remembered to be at the front of the box. My grandmother stopped next to a bunch of stacked metal tables filled with experimental equipment. A bunch of people in stained orange coats were waiting there beside the tables; some of them were fiddling with the equipment, some were standing there patiently, watching us approach. Had the coats once been white? They held their hands behind their backs. I wished they wouldn't hold their hands behind their backs. And on the tables were a few of the plaques, sitting flat, the heads sticking up, mouths wide and begging. The people were measuring out vials of thick, red liquid; the stuff looked gelatinous as it spouted out into multiple different glass tubes.

Glass. They had glass.

There were no other people around, and no mounted flower heads either. The tables were pushed up against the metal walls, and I could see no transmitter, door, or exit in sight, but after all, I had never even seen an entrance. I looked to my grandmother for some sort of explanation, but she was facing towards me, looking back the other way to what I assumed was the actual entrance where we had come in, a strange look of far-away yearning on her face, like she couldn't wait to get back to where the flowers were.

"Thank you for your gracious gift, Mother Demeter," said one of the people around the table. He was speaking directly to my grandmother, and bowed slightly before her. She turned her back towards him, gave him a sharp smile, and said, "Of course. I am only sorry that it took so long."

Before I knew what was happening, my grandmother was walking away, towards the front of the box, towards the flowers, towards the outside, and the people in orange coats were walking towards me. They removed their hands from behind their backs and put them on my skin, bringing me closer to the table with the red liquid. I could see it pulsating and squirming beneath the glass like it was alive, and I knew then what would happen to me. I focused on my grandmother's tiny form until she faded away completely from my sight.

"It is because of you, Mother Persephone, that we are allowed to keep life going," said one of the orange coats as he raised a white suchter to my throat. I recognized it from medical clinics I had been to; it would drain all the blood from my body in seconds, depositing the contents into the suchter to be transported anywhere the user pleased. The orange coat raised the suchter to my neck and breathed into my ear: "Most thanks for your gracious gift."

The Festival of Demeter and Persephone was not just a Festival, but a part of the culture in each capital city that happened to gain its presence. The lines were long and winding, and children were not allowed in unless they were of a certain age. A number of complaints were lodged against the specific construction of the building at one point in time, around the age when the Festival first started coming to town, although no one can quite remember that far back anymore. They said the box-like structure was confusing, maze-like, and was not suitable for a number of spectators, specifically those who were particularly young. They said the flowers were too alluring, too fragrant, and a number of people got lost in the building each year, never to be found again. It is assumed that they made it out, but after that, where did they go? The people who lost family members could only hope and pray to Demeter and Persephone that their loved ones might be found. They would continue to visit the Festival each year, in hopes to see the faces of the lost ones hidden among the blooms.