

# **The Voiceless**

**By Michèle Ciba**

*I was nine years old when I saw them for the first time, voice vapours. A gentle mist leaving a person's mouth as they voiced their inner thoughts, proclaiming them to the world, audible to the people around them. It was fascinating. The ability to clearly portray the images from one's own mind. Speech, they call it. Beauty is what I see. Of course, we voiceless can also talk. In a manner of speaking. Or not speaking. We do communicate. It's just... We... Never mind...*

She stands before the eastern gate of the Cone. It is early in the morning, but a line has already formed. People dressed in white linen. Their coats flapping in the wind, morning mist still covering the horizon. Finally, a guard steps through the gate, followed by a second, a third. As they exchange tired thoughts, voice vapours in shades of green and yellow waft along behind them. More than one person waiting in line eyes them enviously. This is why they are here. This is what they want. And this is what most of them will never attain.

*Inside I take the stairs to the lower levels. As the light down there grows dimmer, the air becomes mustier. Work waits for no man. Or so we are told. Work may not wait, but I do. For my day. For my time. For my own beauty. For my voice vapour.*

They stand in line once more but not to gain entrance but to await judgement. As each of them adjusts their clothes, flattens creases, flicks of specks of dust and flattens their hair, footsteps become audible. Everyone quiets. Facing the wall opposite they stand, shoulder to shoulder, head bowed, eyes lowered, focused on the smooth stone slabs beneath their feet. As the convoy passes figure after figure, shoulders begin to slouch. Dreams come crashing down. Tears flow silently. Nothing but the clicking of the head official's heels can be heard. Then she pauses. Right in front of her. Her gaze is fixed stoically upon the soft grey slippers she is wearing. But her ears hear it, the official's command. "We'll take her." A soft grey mist fills the air. Voice vapour.

*I watch my step as I follow the head official up the stairs. I mustn't seem too eager. I mustn't walk too fast. My day has come. All those years waiting. And then just like that... No interrogation, no profiling, no tests, no... no communication... Never mind...*

The white light from the ceiling panels seems blinding. They push the gurney down the hall in determined but unhurried steps. All she can feel is her body convulsing. Pain strikes her like lightening, pulsing through her body. Blinding. Deafening. She knows she should breathe, but

she can barely remember how. The only sound comes from the gurney's wheels on the tiled floor, reverberating. The clicking of the nurses' shoes, echoing. Her breath, uneven. Her body clenches. All of it. Every muscle, every fibre of her being. She seems to be dragged down, down, down... Everything pulling, sucking, curving towards the Earth's core.

*I didn't know. None of us did. We thought... Well, we thought it'd be a process. Studying, maybe. Personality tests, maybe. Gene testing? Yes, possibly. But not this. Definitely not this. Breeding stock. Incubator. A womb with a mind of its own. Strike that. Just a womb.*

She looks down on her swollen belly. Her lower torso is on fire. And yet... and yet... There is something fighting to get out, let loose, be free. And it isn't the baby pressing onwards. No, it is something else. Her throat is tight and raw with heavy breathing. She writhes upon the bed. Untouched, unheld, unhelped. The nurses stand apart, watching her struggle. She cannot see them. She cannot see or hear anything, fully taken over by the pain. The pain in her throat grows sharper, even as the pain between her legs lessens. Her body seems to pulsate. Beating with the power not of one, but of two hearts.

*Alone. Alone? Al-one. All one?*

The pain mounts once more. As she feels the skull of her child pass her last barrier, the weight inside her chest begins to throttle her. It rises as her child descends. A nurse steps forward to catch it, while the weight turns into a vile tasting lump inside her throat. Her body seems to rip apart in more places than one. She heaves. She splutters. There is no air and no light. There is only darkness and never-ending torment. Her body shakes and will not rest. For a moment there is nothing. She is nothing. But in this nothing, she is not alone.

*No.*

And then it breaks. Is it her that breaks? Or her body? Or neither? With the last morsel of a strength, she believes she does not possess, she pushes. Two things happen at once. Her child bursts from her, accompanied by life giving fluid, caught by the awaiting nurse. At precisely the same moment the smothering lump inside her throat bursts into non-existence, taking with it the weight she did not realise could be lifted. And from her lips sounds a scream. Not high-pitched but deep and rasping. Not tinged with fear but full of power. And with it comes a voice vapour. A voice vapour of deepest midnight blue. Her voice vapour, from her voice. It hangs in the air before her, hovering, widening, until the light itself seems tinged with blue.

*It all happens in an instance. And in that same instance I know deep in my core that the world has changed forever. Somehow it has been shaken up, rearranged and put back together. All in that instance.*

In the very next instance, she hears and sees the most beautiful thing she could ever imagine. From the lips of the tiny creature, nestled in the nurse's arms, emanates a gentle cooing sound. Not a scream of fear but a seeking sound, curious and tender. And with it comes a voice vapour, soft and gentle but unmistakably of a deep rich golden colour. Wafting upwards it entwines itself with the midnight blue of its mother, lending it a sparkle that seems unearthly. The mother's gaze falls upon her child, as she stretches her arms wide.

*"My child,"*

she speaks, a voice vapour of a lighter blue escaping from her lips. These words, too, come with a gentle sound, though still the command in them is unmistakable. The nurse, stunned, follows it, gently placing the newborn into its mother's arms. He cooes once more, content, and another golden breeze is added to the room. As mother and son look into each other's eyes, time stands still. An eternity passes in a second, while this second could not be held by a thousand books telling its story. Life itself unravels and becomes one, once more.

Then the door opens with a bang. The head official steps inside. "What is going on?" she growls, her voice vapour turning black. The nurses are too stunned to answer, but there is no need. The head official's gaze falls upon the blue voice vapour tinged with gold. Her eyes widen, her throat tightens. "How?" she wheezes, a whisp of dark grey. The child falls silent as the mother raises her head. The newborn and the reborn. The head official frowns. "You have received your voice earlier than expected." She speaks calmly, professionally. But there is a tremor in her voice, and the vapour escaping her is tinged a sickly greenish grey. "You will not speak until the official ceremony has been completed. Hand over the child."

Fear sparks in the mother's eyes. Fear like she has never felt it before. Anguish, dread, trepidation, despair. Pain, of a different kind. Death, of a different kind.

*"No."*

The word is small and quiet. Only a tiny whisp of vapour flows from her. It is new and unsure, unsteady and tentative. But it is growing.

A nurse steps forward. Eyes wide, breathing fast, she stretches out her arms. The mother frowns. Her gaze changes. She swallows, but the word keeps growing, inside her and across the room.

*“No.”*

she repeats, raising a hand to her throat, feeling the vibration. The child whimpers faintly, the mother’s grip tightens. Unsure, the nurse looks back at the head official. She is frowning, too. “Hand over the child. You have received your payment already. Now quiet.”

The mother stares at her for a second. Her face smoothes. Her breathing slows.

*“I will not.”*

Midnight blue once more escapes her lips, dark and rich, silky and dense. Her voice is deeper than she had imagined it to be. Possessing it, she feels richer than she had ever dared to imagine. She straightens, clutching her child to her chest. The head official’s face hardens. “You have received...” But she does not finish, for the mother now speaks, her words drowning out those of her superior.

*“I have received nothing from you, and I shall give nothing to you.”*

The nurses gasp, stepping back. The gold has vanished from the room now. Blue vapours over blue vapours tinge the air. “You have been chosen to...” the head official attempts, but it is futile once more.

*“I will not give to you what has come from my body.”*

Is she speaking of her child or of her voice? Slowly the mother rises, feeling her way onto her feet, struggling slightly to remain steady. Her entire body aches. Head held high she takes her first step. Then another and another. “You can’t!” the head official splutters. “They will not let you. It can’t happen like this. You are to give us that child and then at the ceremony you will receive your voice!” The mother pauses.

*“I am keeping what is mine.”*

Slowly, deliberately, she leaves the room. She takes the time to find a place to dress, both herself and her child, bundling him up and strapping him to her chest, so he would be safe and warm as well as loved. Cradled close to her he falls asleep quickly, though ever so often a tiny glimpse of gold escapes him when sighing in his sleep.

Wrapped in white linen the mother leaves the Cone. It is early morning. As she passes the line of people waiting to gain entrance, she considers speaking, letting the dark blue vapour rise and mingle with the Earth’s mist. But her words fail her. Instead she begins to hum. Only a few people in line turn their heads to watch the mother with the blue voice vapour walk by.

Though their dreams are written all over their faces, questions begin to spark in their eyes as they watch her pass. The mother never looks back. Her dreams no longer live in that place.

*“I was twenty six years old when I first saw my own voice vapour. A powerful fog leaving my mouth as I voiced my inner anguish, proclaiming to the world that I was not alone, my scream for the first time audible to the people around me. It was fascinating. The ability to clearly convey my power over myself. Voice, they call it. Beauty is what I see. Of course, we voiced people can also feel. Not all of us forget the voiceless or steal our children’s abilities. We nurture them, strengthen them, become alive through their presence in our lives. My son is newborn. I am reborn. We walk this life together. We love. We mind.”*