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As Runs the Deer

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AS RUNS THE DEER

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
The Department of English

by

Mignon M. Fahr

B.A., University of New Orleans, 2000

May 2003

DEDICATION
JMJT

Like a deer that longs for running streams,
my soul longs for thee, my God.
My soul is thirsting for the Living God.
Psalm 42 from the Feast of **St. Teresa of Avila**

Gregory Couert Federico: your music gave words their song:

Sleep well, my brother!

Emeline Marie, artist-mother, **George Elmer**, provider, **Robert Halliday**, woodsman,
and **Edyth**, who gave life. **Rabbi Meir Michel Abehsera**, who gave hope.

Sisters Anita Thurley, **Mary of Good Counsel**, **Emily**, and **Thecla**, who gave Wisdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor **Daniel Doll**, *the better actor*.

Master of the red pen, through whom Craig Evan and Eustace met as kin.

You heard their voices ring loud in the woodlands, believed and, in outrageous generosity, spent hundreds of hours reading, listening, laughing, querying, in patience promoting the continuance of the whole work. You endured a multitude of mixed tenses and lachrymal melodramas so that *through you*, this vision might be born again.

John Gery, living poet, ardent counselor and detector of false notes, whose many meticulous strokes allowed some irony to break at last through the purple haze. **Roslyn Foy**, mythicist of innate sense, willing spirit, and wide knowledge, lending courage. **Shirley Kruse**, staunch Ian mother, unseen fourth of the Committee; One who knows. Professor **Earle Bryant**, amiable witness, hidden in the cedars. The bear at the door.

Special thanks to all friends, especially M. Miriam; Gloria; Melanie; Emile; Rosemary; Buddy; Vivienne; Jim and Mary; Graci, Daughter of the Wind.

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All of you taught me the ways of words. God bless you, all, forever.

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ABSTRACT

These eleven chapters comprise Part One of a novel of thirty-seven chapters, entitled As Runs the Deer. It is a dialectic play on the processes of Time, as well as a play with evolving *dialects*. Nominally set in the 19th c., in an Appalachian-*like* terrain, it shows the difficulties James Ian Pierson meets when emerging out of his wilderness to re-enter his former life. Opening his own story by means of his sycamore cane, the 19-yr.-old amnesiac must soon reconcile his past with the invading “Now!” He evades the intrusion of a drunken hunter, is overcome by the wintry elements, brought from his ice-bed by Welsh woodsman Eustace, befriended by Mercury, ancient herbalist, keeper of the Myths. Frivolous Emily Marie Marchault must also reconcile herself with Ian’s uneasy re-entry. Shackled by gilded chains of manners, she sees herself as overprotected by her guardian, Breton, and chips away at his ivory tower.

INTRODUCTION

“Tell me the story.” It was November in 1995 at Chabad House on Tulane campus, where I was visiting the world-lecturer on macrobiotics. I came for health of body. Meir Michel Abehsera insisted health of spirit: “So you write? You know Norman Mailer? My friend—a good cook. He says all writers can cook. . . . So what is your story about?” He asks this while fishing in his soup for floating carrots. “Ah, so why is this young man wandering out in the wilds?” *He is a partial amnesiac. He has forgotten a memory. Old herbalist Mercury Milton Micklethwyte helps James Ian reclaim his memory.* “A good name! I like your names.” Those little beady eyes are gleaming. I wonder, when will he get serious, tilting his Hassidic hat, while stirring his soup, this strange “doctor,” this iridologist and herbalist and philosopher of the Kabbalah? What in the world does this miserable naive story have to do with my cure? His look straightens me. *All right. Ian has a hidden guilt. His parents have been killed, and he cannot retrieve a vital memory—of why he is here. So he lives wild and identifies with the fleet deer. Then relatives return and he must go back to the woods and seek it alone.* “What is the title? . . .A-h-h-h!” he smiles a cryptic, knowing smile. That night, and at later lectures, Meir would sit with fellow rabbis in the ancient half-circle and tell about the soul which has lost a memory—tell of how it must search and finally go to the body, asking the body to find it. He would tell of the Shabbat deer that leaps away on end of the Sabbath evening, sadly nodding its head, gently looking back over its shoulder

again and again as it leaps. (He gestures with his beautiful dancer hands, in waves, nodding his head, tilting and resetting his black hat.)

I was overwhelmed that night with a little grey-bearded, black-hatted man who danced for joy in Chabad House after the Shabbat meal. Before the long table in the rabbi's dining room that Friday morning, he had held up his thumb, "Do IT! It's a good story. Finish it!" *As Runs the Deer* began and continued as a cure. It is about a soul who has lost a memory. A soul whose cure must be in finding it, somewhere, in the great body of his world.

*

By mid-book, all those estranged seek to re-unite, but a peculiar form of hubris foils each, so that finally Ian must stalk alone the deadly shadows of his past. Emily stands singular in this mostly-male world; her bridal references are from the *Book of Wisdom* and the *Canticle*. Deleted here is an opening poem depicting the Eternal Dreamer asleep beside the River. It signifies the nascent Soul awaking to dawn, its mystic motion and its light. The epigraphs before most chapters are from Matthew Arnold's, "The Scholar Gypsy." This motif of the seeker of divine fire applies not solely to the young protagonists who both seek something vital and lost; the poem nods to us all, exposed as we are in our dangerous birth into Time to "this strange disease of modern life/With its sick hurry, its divided aims," suffering banishment from our "own fair life" (Arnold, "The Scholar Gypsy" 203-4; 224).

Part I: In Illo Tempore

*In the woods, too, a man casts off his years,
as the snake his slough
and at what period soever of life, is always a child.*

In the woods, is perpetual youth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Light dwells quite naturally within a man, in his heart.

Mirceas Eliade

The Sycamore Cane

For most, I know, thou lov'st retired ground,
Trailing in the cool stream thy fingers wet,
And leaning backward in a pensive dream,
And thine eyes resting on the moonlit stream.

Matthew Arnold
"The Scholar Gypsy"

Emerging through filtered light streams, a great red Stag plods up the rise. Thrusting his shoulder to the bare rim, he waxes still against the mauve skies of late October. The air is dry and light here, above the forest's haze, and he widens his nostrils to the cool breeze: on its currents ride oils of cedar and distant cypress, but it bears a sour taint and, warily, he paws the brittle soil. The red clay descent slowly turns maroon in this brink of night; mid rustling grasses, small bands of deer tread lightly from their forage, leaving behind one doe, withdrawn in the shadows. The stag eyes her, then breaking the red clay with his hoof, he snorts loud and free, defiant of the torpid air. Immediately, a cloud unveils the Sun, and her rays burst forth to laminate the waters, gilding every copper leaf and stem. Golden lights dance on the Stag's auburn coat as he lumbers down to the doe's side and the two merge with the forest shades.

Softly, the Sunwake creeps over mound and meadow, hawthorn and pine, skipping earthdips, chasing shadows, bravely hopping over brook and creek in one last play. Swiftly, she steals the burnt and fallow ground, till she reaches the banks of a quiet stream. Here she halts, to embrace with her fire a lone figure carving circles in the white sand with his Sycamore Cane.

The first wind of evening sweeps the grasses, lifting his auburn cascades to the autumn light. And the Light tumbles these waves, leaping upon limbs smooth as a crepe myrtle after the shedding, warming them round with her lambent flames, burning a fiery outline in the residing shades. But indifferent, he picks up an idle stone to skim across the waters, then snaps back as it sinks into the shallows. He leans over the waters and pokes his finger in to watch the blue ripples imprison his image, then widen, in undulating circles, again to free it. The sky appears and fades in the lazy currents, as a cloud reclaims the sun, and a dreary shadow passes over him. So he reclines against a black alder to loll in the evening cool.

In a thorny tangle downstream, a little chat whistles over the rock eddies. She is echoed by the call of a distant whippoorwill, whose chant traces a silvery path across his senses. As she flits from branch to branch, trailing her plaintive call, she bids him follow—to a Mystic Time, where incense of juniper still lingers in the air—to a book-lined study, its high rafters of dark mahogany arched overhead, the soft sheen of slow-burning tapers reflecting in the red tile floor. Scotch Irish ancestors loom from their dark frames to the Blue-Velvet Loveseat below, where long evenings murmur mythic tales. It is a time of warm hearth, merriment and family—a Time which now seems only *fancy*. . .

But he is powerless against its Magic, and the scent of spiced tobacco now encircles him, and he yields to its enchantment . . . till sweet jasmine drifts in again through open windows of amber-glass, and honeysuckle twines along the black iron brackets—weaving in and out, like his fingers plaiting through the silken locks of his black spaniel, Argus, while the little dog bends his head. . . So, as he tumbles once again beneath the heavy loveseat, clutching Argus, *the Voice goes booming on:*

B L A S T THOSE FOOL EDITORS, with their f i n e quills and their
f a t paunches. . . RACHEL ! ! !

The Voice trails out, then returns, as heavy creaking boots slap the red tiles, “Do ye *see* this? They *won't* publish It!” The heavy *slaps* of boots are replaced by a gliding step, as folds of soft material sweep across the floor. The Voice eases a slight bit calmer, “Now d’ye *see* this? Did I not *tell* you? A crew o’ slinkin’ martens—the whole Lot of ‘em!” He bangs the paper with the back of his hand,

“Here, R e a d It!”

But he reads it aloud himself, instead, his voice closing to a munchy sound,

“We are so very sorry to inform you, but we are at odds in establishing the audience to which it might appeal. Your poetry is engaging, but the *embellishments!* Frankly, we find it just a bit in the *raw*, Mister Pierson.’ HAH!” He pauses then storms, “RACHEL! They haven’t the brain to test the heat o’ their own mutton—and they have the audacity to term *my* works a bit-in-the-raw? Let me in yard’s reach of those lascivious mugs and we’ll see whose turn out just a *bit*–in-the-RAW ! ! !”

“*Really*, William.”

But this is an awesome thing here, that anyone would dare contest *h i s words*. As the Boy huddles beneath the Loveseat, awaiting the wrath of Jove unleashed, the soft warm Voice speaks again, in a lilting kind of way, “Where *is* he, William ?” *It is a melodious voice, sweet as jenny wrens:* “He was just here with Argus.”

“TCHH! If I were near their Box-ey BRIT-CHES! ”

“William! *Do* try to calm yourself.”

“I’ll *Not* !”

The Voice growls low, as if hushed, “I’ll *not* be made a fool—Do you understand? Harkens and *his* crew of idiots! Well, I’m sick of their petty little Establishment, anyway. Anything they publish is digestible as—as corkscrews.” There is a pause, as if he is reloading, then he fires once more:

“But I’ll *Not* be IN-sulted by a, a Crew o’ FLAT-heads!”

A flutter of torn papers comes winging down before the opening under the Loveseat and he courageously draws one under to view the neat florid script, when the crash of a fist rattles something glass on the top of the marble table above. The gentle Voice intrudes, “You almost broke that dish, William. Will you please stop this? It’s so childish. . .What’s done is done. You’ll find another Publisher. Now where is he? I was just sewing his cuffs—”

But again the Great Voice bellows: E---e---e---ah-h-n-----E—E—E—AHN!

B L A S T IT, SON—You come here this MINUTE !

“Hush! You’ll not have him come *that* way. Who wouldn’t hide when you burst out like this? And it’s all over something so foolish—” *The Lyric Voice rises suddenly,*

“--And so Vain.”

“What?”

“Yes, *vain*, James William.”

It is the fatal lunge—the mad bull collapses on the Blue Velvet Loveseat, long limbs sprawling over curves of rosewood. And *he* is trapped below by the lean giant above, trousers and boots guarding his exit. But then the legs shift and there is an opening. The long man lets out a long sigh, and with it, the Child emerges from below.

“Ah, so *there* you are!” (*twittering laughter*)

“O, it is vain, it is ridiculous—isn’t it?” (*The long legs shift again.*)

“Come now, your Father is finished his rage. Aren’t you, Will?”

“What? O, of course, love. . . . But I am like a spoilt brat, eh?” (*There is no reply.*) “I mean, I am—vain?”

But as *he* crawls out between the long legs—

IAN ! Where on EARTH ? Just WHAT d’ye think ye are DOIN’ Under There?

Playin’ Mole –Rabbit ? ! . . . O, *coom* ‘long.

The tall man shakes his large hands over his locks, tousling them further,

“I’m Finished.”

But he is, in truth, just begun.

*

The first part of that afternoon was spent humoring hurt pride and cooling a temper. Now his Voice grew grey and low: “That’s not all there is, love. It’s about the Case—and the University. And all those smug Bigots.”

His Father’s voice sounds weary all at once, and his Mother is silent as his Father speaks. So, not minding the tale, *he* goes on playing with Argus on the Persian rug. Argus is greatly misnamed, for he is more content to frisk and tear sleeve cuffs than guard anyone. The Child fondles and caresses him, twirling long black curls about his nimble fingers, confiding in rhythmic murmurs, whilst the little dog chews contentedly on his sleeve-cuffs. He now leans to his earlobe and, in lilting whispers, entrusts to him all the thoughts of Secret Childhood.

But here, in his reverie beneath the black alder, there return to him choice phrases, which float in his memories like the patterns of individual leaves, precise, though cryptic in design: something about *anti-Semites* and *warped social ethics*, and then again,

something about a thing called *the demurrer*--which didn't work. And he hears again the ancient tale of his own ancestry—*of famines, great-grannies, and crossings in skiffs over blistery seas from Ireland to Scotland—of English houses—and papists disinherited—farming others' lands—and of the Highlands—and its daughters and sons and—* “This James William was a one of ‘em!” And how all three sons had to leave on account of their beliefs, and now, here they were and, “People are still *too Stupid and Bigoted* to see God in another creed—or another Man!”

And to a child of eight, it all seems another fable. Yet his Mother doesn't take it so. Her look has also waned. When he turns up from tearing his other cuff out of Argus' teeth, his parents seem two ghosts from another realm. And their son still remembers the hollow feeling inside—that day his Father's face had changed. *How the room shrouded in a subliminal silence, as the monotone of adult voices fixed the atmosphere. . .he hears only the mesmerizing lull of cicadas as the dull drone of conversation continues. So the Child goes on playing with Argus on the Persian rug. . .*

Their faces mist into Oblivion right there and now, are *nowhere* to be seen. He cannot even suppose their features. .And the silly thing is, what is left is just the drone of distant voices and the clear image of the Persian rug—with its turquoise inlays, and its black running-dog pattern along the borders. . .*with the scarlet fringes.*

And soon this, too, fades away.

*

The evening winds again sweep over the rushes, and the little chat hops closer, now, rocking on the tip of a cattail stem, and twitting,

te-teh, te-teh!

--and she is followed in chorus by thrush and warbler all along the water's edge. The young man starts at this and shivers, shaking his head like a young bird ruffling its feathers. A faint shadow darkens his high brow. Instinctively, he reaches for the white cane and runs his lean fingers over its smooth lines, fingering the seven notches. He gazes across the waters—to where the sun is dancing on the sky's mirage:

It is again that day along the placid riverbank with his Father, who, busy jostling his lines, has not made a sizeable catch. A little bored, he wanders over to the water oak, underneath which his Mother is perched, reading Keats' *Endymion* again. He questions her on why her readings never end, but she can return again and again to the same. She laughs, "The same way your Father keeps trying to nab that trout—you just keep casting out the lines and you always pull in something—quite different!" She tosses with this remark a stout chip of bark, marking her husband on the back of his neck,

"OW! Brazen Woman! You are stepping thin now—"

But her grey eyes are twinkling: "You're only jealous because *I've* the *better* cast!"

The next moment is a frenzied calliope of the two darting in and out of trees and about a big maple, till he catches her. Argus is barking fitfully, while the youngster bloats his full red cheeks, making faces and laughing, till his Father pins the Lady's dress under his shiny wet boot, blue eyes gleaming, "Well, they can't say I don't know how to catch *something*, eh? They can't say *that!*"

While they are so, his mother's bonnet falls from her dark curls and the brim catches in the black cocker's white teeth. Then the little dog goes spinning about in circles as the Boy chases *him* through the woods. . . . But she never does get her bonnet back.

And here, the Vision fades.

*

There is a darting glare. He flexes his wrist impatiently, turning the Sycamore Cane upwards; then slowly, he lets it fall to the hard earth, while he heaves a sigh. Drawing it back up, he holds the smooth wood tightly between his palms, as he studies the seven notches etched in its weathered skin. Like a Druid, he is wrapt in the exercises of a ritual repeated nearly every evening, year after year. Embodied in the white cane's lines is an unshakable trust; notched in its velvet flesh is the passing of seven Springs: it proclaims the year of his advent here, and the hopes of his own passing, and so he treats it with a kind of holy *reverence*.

It gains him passage through festive halls where ruby crystal twinkles in the bright chandelier light, and string music floats in white-gloved elegance; where soft pink damask napkins neatly fold into sterling rings and taffeta skirts sweep marble floors of ballroom laughter. It leads along cobblestone aisles, into cedar stables smelling of oiled saddlery and fine tobacco, through carriage yards on rainy afternoons, where odors of heavy varnish and kilned wood percolate the misty air. . . until he arrives one cool and windy late September morning. And he feels about his neck the collar of starched Irish linen *wilting with the endless rain*. . .

A sense of remorse, an acrid humor, comes over him *as he holds the white Cane high in his hands*, and an angry glow flushes his cheeks. Something quickens in his veins—the maddening impulse to destroy an Illusion:

He wishes he could shatter it, like dead bones, over his knees. Instead, he just holds it up in his hands, staring at it. It doesn't weigh much, but feels velvet through the fingers, like the outer rind-flesh of a pumpkin—it is slender, fine and terrifyingly *white*.

He holds it up to the evening light so that it glistens, fastening his palms like praying hands against its sides, rotating it as Indians do to make a fire, only slowly. The thing of it is, staring at it, you can't exactly *see* Time—it just darts off the Sycamore Cane's surface like lightning off a rod. You wouldn't want to *touch* its energy. You couldn't, it being so swift. Its lines run smooth and limber as his own, but now, the Cane is too much to carry. Its slight weight burdens him and he frowns. His face is tense, drawn lean as he stares, as if to transfix the Wood with his gaze. Yes, it is of absolutely *no use* trying to understand Time—it runs through one's life as the waters of the Stream. It is so clear and so fluid, and yet, such a *cold* thing.

Above, the heavy clouds glide on, full, yet barren. They are emboweled with a reddish glow, and darting beneath their shadows over the dark skeletal floors, through crackling debris and powdery leaves, small rodents scuttle nervously along, seeking harbor before nightfall. . .He listens for the whippoorwill. . .she does not echo. Wrestling every nerve and muscle, he waits, sifting the shallow air. . .His gaze intensifies, and

the WHITE CANE FLIES

hurtling like Lightning over the sunken Stream, finding its hard landing in a clump of dead oak branches.

Luminous eyes flash at the crackling: Azure eyes: Bright as the wings of a jay gliding over running waters. Angry eyes. Pupils of shiny ebony with irises rimmed by midnight. Most rare eyes—penetrating and diving-keen.

But Life in Time passes quickly, and he now craves to know it through some other eyes.

These snatches appear to him fast and colorful as a kingfisher swooping to its prey, but leave no more a trace than the rippling circles he now gazes upon in the stream's waters. *They* are only the tinkling of ruby crystal, the Voice of shattered laughter, their faces, fair ghosts that fly in the mist now rising from the banks. . . .To hate their flashes, their lying whispers of intimacy and comfort!

But one cannot hate what cannot be grasped, and he now cowers in fear of what he greatly loves.

Seven Springs

For early didst thou leave the world, with powers
 Fresh, undiverted to the world without,
 Firm to their mark, not spent on other things;
 Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,
 Which much to have tried, in much been baffled brings.
 O life unlike to ours !

“The Scholar Gypsy”

How dark the cold woods seemed that first Autumn! Strange howlings filled the night air with limbless whines and darting shadows. Rustles in bare branches, the shrill of a nighthawk, or swoop of a swallow sent him face-down into the baneberries. But he was cold and alone: twelve years old in a region of powerful forces. Quickly, he'd had to come to terms with danger, until by the gales of early Spring, he could feel the tranquil day. And so in Spring he notched his cane; seven notches mark its smooth bark. Now, his subtlety surpasses even that of those creatures whose quiet paddings and soft wing flutters had once unnerved him. He anticipates storms in their season, can travel by scent and by moss or maneuver by the luminaries of the night, knowing the Ways of the Wind.

Wild creatures have come to know his tracks. In fall, he gathers wild grains and pods, rootstocks and nuts, caching his stores in a vacant hill crevice between heavy rocks, covering them with dry reeds and bitter herbs to mask their odors. Before winter, he treks the mountains for furs, the cast-off prey of cats and wolves. After winter, he claims the pelts of animals starved or trapped in the snow. He strips them of their remaining flesh and binds them with strong gut and leather strips, by way of a pointed rock and his

bared teeth. There are cave-like crevices of rock at the foothills in storm-wind or heavy snow; but if threatened by hunters, he moves quickly to the mountains beyond.

His dry-rotted skins and hides are missing great tufts of hair, and their worn fragments hang on his lanky frame, his strong limbs emerging smooth as bronzed ivory. In the twilight of these shades, with shreds of canvas dangling at his sides, he is stark and striking: an afflicted prophet, or something escaped.

Glistening in the heat, he runs his hills in long, easy strides, his ruddy forehead rising high above brows dark and tilting, his nose cut straight as the Western-most mountain. When pensive, his eyes freeze grey as winter ice; when angry they flash bold as the sky. But they can also soften, clear and calm as tranquil waters. He can be held captive by a feather wafting on a pine needle's edge, or delight in a fallen leaf. Should something in the wind catch him, he will remain still for hours, his face radiant, as some light now kindles bright and hot from within him.

Free-flowing, *his* is a world of fast-changing rhythms unfolding epochs—if one has the vision or some basis for comparison. But life here has come to unsettle him, as he grows suspicious of its calm. Those seasonal storms can rise and crest at any moment, then can pound the whole of nature with incredible fury. But they then dissolve and disappear, so that the universe again reigns in crystalline splendor!

A dull light passes over his ruddy features, now, and his expression softens as though he hears an old familiar voice. But his neck muscles tighten with his fist. He glares at his Cane, propped high across the stream. . . . *Why couldn't he, of his own will, keep to these memories, or hold to one, travelling its beginnings, prying its barriers? A sneer of black humor furrows his lips as the white ember glows hot in his breast. The*

Phantom—he knew the answer! Springing from the nether world, he draws forth these faded glances, these hinted features, much crueler than himself. . . Such lies will not trap him now. Because of *them*, he has traveled this exile. As they return to their waters, he is jolted back—far away from their misshapen Myth.

He knows he dare not emerge from these shrouded forests nor travel any path of man. He senses intruders before their arrival, and should any sniff but a ghost of his presence, his scent is long gone, and his footprints have vanished. He cannot turn his steps otherwise, for there moves in him a current which may be fathomed, like the waters of a high mountain lake, as far deeper than apparent.

In the thick fog of melancholy, he seeks the only mirror of his soul. Now, his black pupils widen, searching for an object half-hidden beneath the sumac bush. As he leans toward it, his long fingers quickly wrap about the cordovan binding, as he draws it from the shadows. The three initials, ‘GJP,’ stamped in gold on its stained cover, glitter softly in the fast-fading light. Tracing his fingers along the incisions, like a reader of Braille, he lays it in his lap and draws his sunburnt legs in to cradle it. Slowly, he opens the cover, then flips to the lines entered this morning; his dark pupils broaden as he reads:

I have again raked the basin. Drought has left its ugly mark. Mugwort in the salt marsh is hard to find and nuts are scarce, most hollow. There’s been a mad rush on the season, but for this morning. There is an alien feel to the air.

He pauses, jutting out his chin, the darkening twilight shading him in deep ochres as he needles his foot with a fine pine straw. He combs his hand through the dry leaves and returns to the passage, thumbs backwards a few pages, searching meticulously, gradually lowering his head as darkness permeates. His chin flat against his chest, he

comes to another entry; he draws it up to his eyes, squinting, then drops the notebook down in the leaves. It is the most he can read now, and he unfolds his long legs so that they shovel the leaves in a straight path before him, as he crosses his arms before his chest. Tilting back his head, he watches the heavy clouds drift above, their slow passage a kind of derision. His grey glance darts to a space of empty sky where a flock of ring-necked geese wing under the faint crescent Moon.

*

Five years before, he had extracted the diary from the hunters' wet baggage. They had somehow managed to enter through the South bogs, east of the River, scrambling through thorn and thicket to a little island, where they set their packs. Smitten with curiosity, he had watched their movements from a safe distance,. They hadn't moved like hunters and were arguing so hotly that the deer had long fled the area. He had kept too distant to make out their distinct features, but in the misty air before the storm, he marked clearly their individual voices. An electric thread shot through his limbs, and he drew no closer. The storm unleashed and hastily they broke camp in a disorderly retreat, which amused him by the chaos hail could wreak on such a crew. When the fury waned and they did not return, he ventured to the spot. Sifting through their soggy gear, he found a satchel filled with books, quills, and two small jars of India ink. Carefully removing these from the bag, he exposed the faded pages to the sun. The cordovan journal was sketchily written into, the rain having blurred it all, and it must have been brought just to record this trip. The other books were just as appropriate—a broad dictionary with chronologies, charts, and a section of thirteen pages entitled:

A Brief History of the World

which was amazingly so. It was printed in very fine type, and he learned from it a special technique of squinting. The second was a literary anthology with forewords, prefaces and indices, containing more foot than body. It was thick as a fat pillow and wide as a stool, so he made good use of it when he was reading the other. These and various small histories took up most of the room in the huge satchel. Like one unearthing priceless artifacts of a lost age, he clutched these books, dusting their pages, and extracting their meanings, until he had all but memorized them. But stuffed in one corner, he found a case containing a long discolored bone comb, a dull file, and a pewter mirror. Wrapped in an oilcloth next to it was a small worn book in black leather, its edges chewed, its pages browned and thumb-printed. It had one faded illustration—a German woodcut triptych of the crucifixion. His attention was fixed upon this image, the only language he could then gather from the little French missal. A hot tingling flush spread over him and he promptly knelt, signed himself, and extracted from his leathern belt pouch an old pair of wooden beads, their spheres now grey with age, and cracked with weather. Suddenly, he lost his balance, pivoting face-forwards into a slushy mess of mud. He arose, scarlet with rage, where he wasn't caked with mud—to find his forelocks touching the little book, now open and resting comfortably dry before him. His hot tears of humiliation blended with the mud in a briny batter. He wiped his mouth and frowned reproachfully, when his eyes fell on words suspended in English on a little holy card of the Shepherd:

I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.

The Scarlet Tanager

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
 And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
 Before this strange disease of modern life,
 With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
 Its heads o'ertaxed in palsied hearts,
 Fly hence, our contact fear !
 "The Scholar Gypsy"

It is time to travel the great northern slopes to collect his winter provisions.

Flinging the small canvas pack over his shoulder, he steps into the chill blue waters and crosses barefooted their gravelly bed. Drawing his white cane from the dead branches, he tosses another pebble into the sunken stream and enters the stretches of a brilliant autumn day: Through goldenrod and cattail stands, he trudges to the thickly-padded forest floor of crimson maple and scarlet oak, where chipmunk and rabbit tag about through twines of greenbriar and fern. He flips twigs at them—and they turn about to fuss or bolt away. Jays and kingbirds provoke each other in noisy chases; two tangle themselves in his thick mane, snapping from his scalp two strands of amber. With the caw of a raven, he sends them skimming the skyline into the upper canopies. The deer have moved on, migrating south to the river. Sighting their tracks opposite his own, he knows this will cost many of them their lives, and he reminisces a bit:

One year, he'd ventured too far into the outskirts. Moonstruck at first by the brilliant plumage of a scarlet tanager, he then tracked it more by its call than by sight in the dense under-growth of the hill forests. Leaping up and down the hills, until he'd passed into the ravines bordering the river, he broke his own code by sloshing across the

deer-crossing. These thickets were virtually impassable. Briars and thorns, thorns and briars, snaking, slippery roots and vines meshed the earth with oak tangles irresponsive to axe or blade. Rocky precipices loomed, then suddenly emptied into deep ravines just beyond the river. Rock slides and sunken earth hid beneath the tangles to catch one's foot—but not one's fall. Down further, along the river's winding beds, lay treacherous bogs. Just beyond was a wild but less dense area, sometimes visited by hunters. From there to his area was no approach save the one he alone knew.

The bright tanager flit in the upper canopies, clicking and calling, then glided down into the lower brush, warbling its song. Casting a feverish spell about him, it lured him on. He followed it slavishly, until he found himself again in that drear entanglement where he was once trapped. Now as he gazed about in the dank place for the first time since his entry in the wilds, the spell of the tanager loosed its hold, as he beheld again the looming trees draped with strange mosses, the woven gargantuan vines and the devilish tendrils by which they clung. There seemed something spiteful to them, malign. Shivering, he covered his grey eyes with the palms of his hand to let his pupils dilate, and then opened them to the twilight. The day had been so bright. Drenched with sweat from his reckless chase, his young muscles in tremor from the strain, he was yet determined; some inner zeal urged him on. Still, the air had changed so suddenly when he crossed. A cold panic seized him, mortifying his limbs. As he searched the shadows, a cloud must have shifted or tree branch swayed, and in the quick beam, he saw the red and emerald feathers glide up the incline.

Seizing stone and root, he swiftly climbed the slope. There, perched atop a twig of arrowwood, it was pecking the deep purple berries. Kneeing over rocks covered with

trailing arbutus and prickly raspberry, he approached, but it darted again from sight. Just then he heard thunder as smoke rose from the ravine. Edging along sideways, belly-down, he clutched a loose stone from falling over the edge, and peered down into the rabble: Deer bound the rocks—does with their young cornered against the cove's steep wall. Each time a terrified one attempted the rocks, she was herded back beneath the cliff by one of the dogs. Then a tumult shook the bushes. From behind the twisted trees, in swift fury, the stag entered the arena. Lowering his great antlers, he thudded the ground and gored the frenzied pack, as they howled, charged and snapped, red tongues rolling in suds. One by one, his little herd escaped nimbly over the rocks as he kept the pack at bay. Mesmerized by this display of the stag's courage, *he* crouched low to the ridge, half dangling over its edge to witness the rest, carefully aiming the loosened stone at the pack. Then his quick eye caught sight of the glittering barrel emerging through the bay laurels in straight line with the fray. In its second thunder, all was finished. The great stag's body, like that of a vanquished prize-fighter, came crashing down.

He must have let loose the rock or flung it, for while his head rang, he heard shrill yips, and a harsh voice, cursing. *It resounded over the stumps and rocks, in the laughing River's currents, and then dully in the high trees, echoing against the empty wood.* But then he found himself kneeling on his heels beside a broad rough tree-root, sick and ashen. A breeze brushed his clammy skin and roused him. It was evening. He was back across the River, surrounded by thick groves of wet-scented buttonbush and hairy red sumac, fairy-wands and jack-in-the-pulpits. *He had been dazed for hours.* . . His own blood had ebbed with the kill.

Since that year, he strictly avoided the deer in late summer and autumn.

Now, in his nineteenth year, the memory still holds.

It seems he has always known the deer, their scent and their ways. Theirs is a wanderer's life, shifting with the seasons, searching for water, fleeing the rifle. Though they are shy and watchful, he often mingles with them, gazing at their graceful strength and gentle beauty, longing to seize one and embrace its slender neck. Rare is the Spring he does not track a doe with fawn in the long grasses. Rarer still when a pair of antlers does not first find his backside. Many a yearling has outgrown him to parallel his tracks, but none flee at his approach. Instead they nod at the presence of a fellow wanderer.

Reclaiming his thoughts, he kicks the dusty ground, and turns from their tracks.

*

The sun is straight overhead, dazzling the tree-trunks. His bright eyes, snow blue and serene, calmly scan his territory, heedful of every motion and seasonal change: Vermillion specks scurry in and out of bark: spider mites trying to escape the sharp eyes hovering overhead, as nuthatches nervously flick their wings. Avid little hunters, the birds perch on thin needles, eyeing with their heads cocked. One sly fellow stalks head-first down the trunk and gobbles all the mites. A large red beetle rises on spindly legs, rocking, and fanning out its antennae. It is enormously fat, and as he pokes its hind legs with a reed, it crawls off under the square grey ridges of hickory bark, its bulbous body still squirming to enter. Through his soles, he feels the lumberings of a not-so-distant bear, so he carries here no longer.

While crossing a barrier of logs, he blocks an assembly line of bees, furious to finish their fall honey; a fuzzy body brushes by his cheek, buzzing a high-pitched caution with its wings. He answers with a quick click of his tongue, but his attention sharply diverts to a long mournful call coming from the valley inlands. Unsettled, he re-assures himself that the deer are further along in the lowlands, past their river crossing. Still, the long bay of distant hounds confirms his first perception. It is coming from the east, where a brush fire has cleared a channel through the thickets. He quickens his pace, apprehensive now, when the mournful call of the hunting horn again winds its lay through the valley. An indignant frown wedges his sepian lips as his dark mellow voice resounds:

“CURSE this DROUGHT! I hope they miss their prey –and sink their filthy boots in the Bogs!”

On this call of vendetta, a spinning arrow sears his left shoulder and he springs behind a large maple, whirling about to find himself face to face with a great swarthy bear of a man, huffing for wind. Clad in smelly leathers, a wide belt girthing his waist, he has the nose of a red potato and shoulders the breadth of an arm-span. Grizzly black hairs cover his body, surrounding his head like a full wreath of death, and his stench is unbearable. He looks only vaguely into the stunned youth’s face, as he swings his great arm down like a paw, “Wi-ell, Git OUT O’ It!—I’m aft tha’ deer just pop’t ‘cross th’ way!” Then his cheeks quirk in as he views the odd being before him with his mottled hides. He notices the rigid hand move slowly to the grazed shoulder: His hair rides the breeze like a red silk banner and his startled eyes bore a hole into the churl’s own.

“But Whot th’ deveel ar’ *yoo*h?”

With fat mouth agape, he sees the crimson creased shoulder, then spots his arrow on the ground. Lifting his heavy head as though the weight of it overpowers him, he scans his subject, frozen in silence before him. Nodding, he squints, wrinkling his eyelid, and studies him up and down, his active eye shimmering, “If this ain’t the *oddest* shap’t turnip I eh-ver did pull from Adam’s Earth!” he starts mindlessly to himself. “But ain’t this th’ queer pass! With tha’ hide o’ ye back, it were ye were a *hoofed un!*” The young man stiffens; deep in his throat he feels a dry withering as the man blutters on, “Wi’ a bettah aim, I’d uv layed ye *flat!*” He raises his heavy black brows and bunches his thick lips as his *turnip* blinks in its silent stare, and the hairy man stoops to the other side of the maple to retrieve his arrow, stumbling clumsily and muttering in a low growl, “Nex’ time, yeh’d better bewar’ ‘bout shewin’ yeself in such Shameful ways!”

Rising from his stoop, he beholds only the open bush, not a twig in motion save for the steady breeze. He views the vacant space from which the young fellow silently disappeared. Standing in the rain of scarlet leaves, the dumbfounded man gapes on this vision of half-realities, summons his repertoire of spirits, and waits in a stupor, too frightened to blink. Finally, he realizes he has only beheld the creature from waist up as he stood in the bush. . .there was the likeness. What was the word? *A Sin--? Very dark and vilish! Surely fittin’ this ‘un.* . .something dark and hot? . . . *Tar!* . . . *Yes, he could see the likeness now on the old malthouse wall, hopping. Many a good brown was downed beneath that painted imageWhat was the word? . . .oh, yes.* He tries to roll it on his heavy tongue, but finds great difficulty, being presently immersed in the spirits himself. *A Sin-tar! That was it.* And now it roars from his lips, as his face lights up. *They were not ord’nary spooks, sin-tars, no, but Roman. . .and this one was firmly mad. . .And he*

wasn't the drunken fool to loll about and find out this un's bag o' tricks! . . . The bear gathers his measure of wits, dashes as best he can through bush and briar back to the fire-clear, springs on his poor horse, and makes a crash to his fellows, screaming unmerciful.

*

The other, for his part, has sprung through to a clearing and sprinted on. He's crossed the hill country and is near the sloping skirts of the mountains when he pauses to air his lungs and get his bearings. Leaning against the trunk of a towering white pine on the edge of a high ridge, he now retrieves his situation: "*Damn!*" His mouth agape like a cat's in the summer heat, he rubs his left shoulder and wipes the blood from his hand to his furs, "Fool meant *me* no harm. Just an idiot hunter who's got no aim!" He's ascended quickly, so his breath fogs the nippy air here. He watches its trail expand and disperse in geiser-like puffs, as he gasps

NOW!

slamming his fist into the rough trunk. He returns his wet knuckles to his forehead, leaning it against the trunk as he wipes the beaded sweat off his brow—"He'll be off, carrying tales!"

Surveying the stretches of conifers before him, as the whole valley is in vista from this ridge, his eyes water in the misty air. He fists his cut knuckles into his mouth, and sucks them, as his greying eyes search. Then the face of the great brute appears before him. . . He tries to repress it, but it is futile. He laughs through his clenched teeth as he catches his wind. He laughs in spite of his jumping nerves and quivering muscles, for he well envisions the brute, with his great ox-eyes nearly popping out, gaping at the air

before him. And his white teeth gleam to the sun. For one free moment, he is a mass of spasms of the silly sort, convulsing against the white pine's trunk. But he sobers quickly.

A sickly feeling overcomes him. For seven years, he has evaded the company of men, sensing their presence often days in advance, cleverly matching the trees, sliding into ridges of rock, dissolving in the densest undergrowth, or disappearing into the sparsest. *Always*, he has watched from a safely distant perch. *Always*, he has been the first to mark. *But now, the devil take all! The stench of this Idiot's reeking breath was unbearable, and it still lingers in his nostrils.* He shakes his head, snorting like a colt. *This fool has flushed him, routed him, stripped him of his cover, in one sweep of a misaimed arrow!*

He rubs his shoulder as the sharp wind cuts his open skin. He has a scarlet hue, which glows beneath his greyed countenance, giving its light from a cold heat, "The superstitious *Asses!*" Now, these ignorants will catch the spark and flame the fire, a fire which will surround his hills and strip his forest and bare him to a world he has scratched and clawed and burrowed mountains to escape. He scans the stretch before him: Though studded with firs and conifers it seems barren. . .His lids come down; he feels overcome with a leaden dullness: He fights it. It frightens him. And he speaks to himself with a numbed sense of alarm: "There'll be no peace for *you, now.*"

He voices it low, shamefully resigned, trying to spark from his dread some shred of a defense. His head aches from ascending in altitude so quickly, and his eyes smart. He listens to the air where is only a suspended whisper. . . .And the wind circles the valley, and creeps through the pine-barrens. It strips leaves bare and howls through crevices,

raking hills and scouring mountains. But it breathes only a sigh in the deepest chasms, settling where no thought forms and no image congeals.

And there it stays, immune to the elements and seasons, from without and within, where it locks its door and seals the entrance, its lintels impassable.

Too disheartened to hold much anger, he simply spies his open tracks. Still drinking the air in heavy draughts, he sinks to one knee, his furs scraping his neck and his hair grazing his face with steady motion in the wafts of wind. Looking over the slight marks, they seem to him deep and broad. He places his finger in one and traces it. "Like an elk with boots on!" he quips aloud, half trying to amuse himself. Then he shakes his damp head and hoists the pack. Hearing no trace of hound nor horn, he yields a long tremulous breath and pushes ahead. The afternoon has taken a hazy cast, as the conifers molder in the sun. Trees are sparser, only a few fir and spruce. He looks to the surrounding mountains. Their grey-violet peaks seem to loom further distant.

In the next days, his steady hands will pull him up over mossy rock and lichen-covered creche. But the same path he has climbed year after year now seems strangely alien. Indeed, the whole of the wilderness, which has ever befriended him, now seems truly wild.

The West Mountain

How can you say to my soul:
Fly! Like a bird to its mountain.?'?
For lo, the wicked bend the bow;
They have fitted their arrow to the string. Psalm 10

A full month had passed and searing winds swept over the mountains before he finally descended their rocky slopes. He had ventured down once at the usual time but, as he'd anticipated, *there were the searches*. He kept near the lower ridges, but every week brought another of the hunting parties. He marked their campfires and heard at times their dogs and horses, for he could read disturbances from a great distance: a soaring of wings, an unusual quiet, a misplaced route for deer or flock of geese. Even the insects gave signals, vacating certain areas, swarming in others. But these signals disappeared. Bitter cold was approaching; mink, badger and hare were all doubly coated, the bear had long hibernated, and cats were uneasy, moaning peculiar long cries, padding the rocks with ginger steps. He had to be canny to avoid their tracks. Only patches of tough mosses were within reach for food, for the earth had baked and hardened in the long drought. Now he scraped the frigid earth with the pointed rock he'd fashioned; in the frost, the raw skin of his hands cracked open and bled before he'd gathered enough for a few days: a handful of roots and a few dried herbs. Breaking his normal rule, he uprooted them whole. Since he had delayed so long his harvesting, the earth now begrudged him her most meager rations.

In the following weeks, he circled almost the entire apron of this mountain, roaming with the stealth of a cat; his nerves wrenched and his skin prickled, readying for

an attack—an assault which never came. There was no telling, now, how long he would be walled up in this vacant area. It is one he knew they would not approach. He rubbed the crusty scar of his flesh-wound: *Is my identity known or only suspected? Surely, they thought me long dead since the accident.* Hunters had been known to vanish without a trace, and even the staunchest woodsman was wary of the West Mountain's skirts.

Ancient legends were attached to this summit, and a superstition which told of a "lay a' th' curse," so none were known to have ever traveled in so far as to reach it. Thus, bound by the wild winds of the river, and protected by its treacherous bog and thicket, the heart of his Valley had heretofore been untouched, its waterfalls unhindered, its denizens secure. Now, with the East Wall broken open by brushfire, large search parties were plunging in, polluting the clear brooks and scarring the earth with their heavy boots.

*

He muses over the word 'alone'—for he has never felt for long 'alone.' Some presence has always been with him, vaguely remote or mysteriously intimate. Often he has immersed himself unknowingly in its radiance. At times it seemed a warmly human bond, at times divine, and he always connected it with what he once knew, never questioning it. Wrapt while saying his beads, his face then illumined and transformed from a wild aspect to the semblance of an angel.

But in the early dawn of Manhood, these favors had subsided. Now, they seem jumbled nonsense. He writes quickly in his ragged diary:

I try to smother my sorrow, to drown out the cries I hear. My God, I am uncertain of anything but the bite of my own cowardice, as that of chains.

Yet when he had lifted up his cane, it parted wide open this Red Sea of his memories! Then, as the waters returned upon his pursuers, they closed about *him*, sweeping his footing in a torrent of images, sinking him in the muck of anxiety. Now his right of passage is withdrawn and the receding waters turn into a murky River guarding a realm he cannot freely enter—a realm he *would* not freely enter. But he is lured there by the Shadow. He must then abandon all to its whim, until, by some little flaw of earthly matter, he has a moment's hesitation, and the Ruler of that underworld sends him crashing back to earthly shores. Then the amnesia returns, leaving him numbed to *why he is here at all*.

A fleeting ghost touches his conscious mind, a sequence of words. As soon as he becomes aware, it vanishes, leaving him uneasy. Fitful dreams in the night encompass him and, as though chained in some dark place, he jolts suddenly awake with the keen awareness that something has been leaning over him. Peering through his tired eyes at the trees looming above, his situation seems as ludicrous to him as if he has fallen from the open sky. Sometimes these dreams bring him to a past he was once secure in; sometimes they weave a past that has never been, the hopes of a future stemming from their mythic roots which can only torment him more.

A peculiar set of words flashes in his memory, but should he pursue its meaning, it drifts like floating ash from his grasp. Now, again it comes crashing in, clenching him with an icy grip: “Run, my Son. . .Run far from here!. . .*RUN!*”

The whirling blindness spins his head. There is some dark knowledge connected with this phantasm; its tendrils cling to him, but he fails to grasp hold of it. Each time a horn sounds in the howling wind, or he seems to hear the whining bay of the hounds, he

sees winter advancing as a stealthy foe. Laboring to drown out the echoes, he desires only to be freed:

*I pass my days in silence, my nights craving companionship,
one Voice that is true.*

*Alone, I have been left to fight an Enemy which will not show
its face.*

*Alone, I am cast off—a stranger to my Father's sons,
an enigma to myself.*

Since his childlike abandon has utterly deserted him, the word 'alone' etches in the dry soil of his being. He begins to draw the size of its meaning.

*

Hungry, he again descends the slopes. Resting against the sleek side of a tall ledge, he stoops to brush two inches of snow off a clump of rock-tripe, which crumbles to a fine powder in his blistered hands. He lifts it to the canvas slung over his shoulder when, suddenly, he hears the earth echo with the thud of approaching hooves. Though his soles are wrapped, he feels the motion. His arm freezes to his side, and he stares at the open spaces. The mountain passages are by this time blocked with snowdrifts and ice, the ground fast freezing. His grey eyes raise slowly to the northern skies, smoky-taupe in colour, heavy, foretelling the rush of a formidable winter. *He should head carefully into the lowlands and seek entry to a familiar cave.* Numb to this knowledge, he cannot press to the woods. Instead, he stares blankly in the direction of the coming horsemen. Mechanically, he turns about and edges backwards, towards the dull, cold rocks.

The swollen winds fly through dry branches of spruce and balsam, tearing the rotted wood, crashing great limbs of it down the mountain sides, moaning in the rock hollows, as he re-ascends the slope, cutting the exposed fingers of his wrapped hands, moving slowly upward. Then the temperature drops, abruptly, as a rush of icy air precedes the storm. Flurries of snow whirl about him, the sleek wind whipping against the rock, a wall of motion immuring him in, making his ascent more difficult. As the snow stiffens his hair and stings his face, his raw hands slip on the wetted rock. His feet miss their hold, sliding again and again down the jagged edges till the leather strips and the extremities they wrap are shredded and bloody. He grits his teeth and opens his mouth into a grim smile. He tastes the snow on his gums: It is not sweet. The air burns his nostrils and sears his lungs with ice-fire.

Broad grey expanses now encompass the area, darkening it. He can no longer see, but finds, by painful touch, refuge in an indented ledge. Quickly, he pulls himself up and curls beneath the overhang, setting his fleece against the wind. But the storm comes in more fiercely; he binds the fresh skins about him, tying them with long leathern strips, pulling them taut with his teeth while he fumbles to remove them from the frozen satchel.

The rage intensifies. And it is here that the Phantom overtakes him, gnawing in his aching hollows, fixing him with vacuous eyes. Its rabid laughter ricochets off the slate walls, so that he holds his head in trembling hands and crouches further into the scant retreat. Covering his face, he shields his eyes from zooming spectres and dazzling visions, from grotesque demons and bright vestiges of youth. They dance their dance in a calliope of revolving colours, their myriad voices crescendoing, then diminishing, in rapid succession, reverberating in shouts and hushed whispers. Sullenly, this troupe

withdraws to the deathless cloak of its Maitre, as one last peal echoes into the dark caverns. Then a deathless Silence falls.

In this vacuous chamber, he hears ringing in his ears the pulsating flow of his own blood. All is whirling white. Slowly, blackness descends and he extends his frigid hand to snow fine as dust and dense as a waterfall—an icy curtain blocking view of stars and light. Ceaseless cold surrounds, invades, and subdues all for two endless nights.

*

He had long gone numb when the second morning lifted the dull atmosphere. Oblivious to all else, he held onto consciousness as the Alban Silence continued her reign. He knew he must descend, get some wood, and build his fire. Slippery with ice, the drifts camouflaging hollows, this exit demanded a delicate energy from one deplete of any. He muttered hoarsely, the grating sound of his own voice rousing him, “*I’ll be buried alive.*” Pushing through the wall about him, he sought the open. His feet were deeply cracked, his hands rigid beneath their wrappings, as he crawled out of the crevice into the misting, with the sun barely visible, sharing only her glare. Descending step by step the narrow slope, he finally placed his foot on the bottom. The entire scenery was alien, as the fine mist cut his face and blurred his vision.

When at last he reached the thin woods, his arms widened and he groped about like a man struck blind. Stumbling over a log, he fell into the deep drifts, then clambered to his knees. He embraced the rough trunk of a spindly tree, struggling to hold to his senses, as the north wind beat down upon the waves of his tangled mane. The bark crumbled, and his arm, still wound about the trunk, slipped, his fingers scraping a path along its edge.

The Husbandman

Thou hast not lived, why should'st thou perish, so?
 Thou hast *one* aim, *one* business, and *one* desire;
 Else wert thou long since numbered with the dead—
 Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy Fire!
 "The Scholar Gypsy"

Eustace Pernicky was late in his day this morning. He'd heard the terrible storm's howling all the night, setting tree against tree in the woodlands; and though he had not stirred from his stone cabin, the oil had burned low. He'd not slept the eve, but listened to the winds, rising and falling; and he'd crept to the sill off and on to peek, wondering what it might be like in the mountains, with those wild howls sending loose boulders crashing down. Yes, he'd told the wife he would not sleep the night, but stayed awake the whole of it in his heavy oaken chair, minding the fire and meditating:

He hadn't always been obliged to spend a good storm thus. No, in his better day, he'd been out *in* it—out in the Northwind's howl and the Snow Queen's raging, the snowdrifts mounting about him like the walls of a submerged kingdom. O, it was a mystic experience, then, in the mountains, but he'd told no one of his journey—*on account o' the supposed lay a' the curse*. O, there were better days Eustace Pernicky had seen—better in his youth, when such a thing was sheer delight to witness and to brave! But now, with wife and house and animals, he was *stuck*.

Well, he hadn't crossed the Ocean with his Gwynedd sheep an' two Ayreshires, sleepin' in the ship's hold t' mind-'em, only t' lose 'em to a Trickster storm, dun it all. So. It was gather his little herd a' Ayreshires, their flaxen pony-tails flashin', pen up his

Gwynedd sheep (all eight a' 'em), an' lead Reuben to his stall, then salt-hay th' roots.

Yesterday had its warning. And being Welsh, he'd taken it.

Yes, and indeed the whole season had made him fidgety and crochety, not one to cross. *Strange year. Lose the best a' ye crops to a drought an' gain entrance to a place ye'd rather not on account o' a fireburn an' a drunk.*

He was just out in his fields, binding the last rakes of October hay, swearing at the miserly harvest and cursing the burnt and withered grounds, when *out the woods come Lee-ways shriekin' unmerciful, boohoooin' like the boneyard Borborite he is. Pffhh!— Carryin' on like a clipped goose, with tha' tale o' his, rilin' up poor Ginny till she fret pitiful, agglin' on and on 'bout his Monster, till the Whole Territory come out to hear.*

Eustace hadn't yet sobered the Idiot, when he broke out and presented his arrow, all tipped in blood—looked like human blood—everyone agreed. “Looks *more* than human.” one put in. *That'd done it. Then they were all in a whirly. But well, there was no sense ignorin' a chance, how-e'er so small.* So Eustace decided then and there, *if a man of 'em was to find this Creature, it'd best be he, himself.*

The men were mad. He didn't trust the air this year. *Nor* the ones that breathed it. There were dark ones lurking about these days—them just as anxious to find results to all this as *he* was to see they didn't. . . Curiosity was the stuff fuelling these country folk in the matter of these searches—foul morbid curiosity, Satan's tool for true—and those little wagging tongues twisting mere story into Bible fact, and simple fact into legend. *And then, of course, it'd been his, Eustace's, to gather and lead 'em. Yeah, it was now his 'duty'!* He'd pointed them out, all right, straight to the Bogs!

Then he and Bryant, his firstborn, had gone off alone. And it was when they reached the River, sinking their own tired boots into the mudbogs, that Eustace *knew*. But they followed the river in its eastward wind, anyway, up to where it divided into smaller branches. And the two had started to see it—the Fireburn—stretched out North to South, the charred tree-trunks and cinder’ed stubble like a black velvet carpet, *beckoning—like a King’s Highway to perdition. HEM!*

They had traveled its length, along the east side of the Dry Creek, up to the edges of the hill country. But it was when they got past the vines and creepers, they just had to stop and scratch their noodles in wonderment. Could a soul figure how that quick-fire was held by the mere creekbed—all too easily straddled by a fallen branch? But if it weren’t for the dry creekbed, the whole country might have cindered. And if it weren’t for the clear from the Fireburn, Eustace had failed to waymake and so enter the bush. *But Nature is an headstrong Woman, if truth be told!* The whole business had caused his brow to crease over-long and Ginny found a new wiggle on’t each night before she pecked it.

The facts were, despite all thrashin’ a’ the bushes, and mainly being thrash’ed by the bushes, they’d met the same all three times—nothing. They *had* met with something like footprints where the rum-bibber had “met his monster.” By that time, the shape was lost. It may well of been a bear, *or it may all a-been but a will-o’-a-wisp.* . . . It pointed straight to the right place, though—the West Mountain.

Now, he and Bryant were dog-tired worn from holding the idiots back with their damned tin-horns and lop-eared hounds. What with listening to that drunkard and bibbing the rum with him! But you couldn’t convince *Lee*-ways of anything respectable:

No Horns. No Dogs. He told 'em. But t h e y wouldn't hear. He knew they'd been listening to that drunken jailor aggling on about his *Sin-tar*. When that crazy dragoon got a thing in his nod, it was all but to wrest it from him. He said, "I'm a-go-an tah spi-rit tha' Sin-tar—He's been waitin' mah Spi-ri-tin'!" All cock-eyed and swaggering in his rum. *Pfhhh! But it was when, what with bibbin' the rum and listenin' t' Leeways—and tired o' being thwack'd by the briars and scratch'd by the bushes, they'd upp'd and shouted to a man, runnin' for torches and lanterns, one half-mooned night,* "We are a-goan' t' *Burn-Out* the Batty! ! !" And they ran for their horses for to set quick-fires all through the bush.

Well, it was Bryant's two fists making meet with jaws and pouches. And Eustace's two were still red and itchy from not a few swings himself. But drunk men are spun easy enough, thank the Lord. And by the time they made it to them, staggering, their horses weren't no-where near. And of course they were all spooked at *that*, wailing—"It's the Deveel's Son done it. He's on us, now ! ! !" *An' they all went flailin' off each's way, screamin' like Banshees in the night.*

"*Quick-Fires! HEM!*" The Welshman cleared his throat and blew into the bowl of his hickory pipe: the greys of morning had softened and Ginny would be about soon. He kept thinking.

After Old Nebley and Brim disappeared out there, where the other strange deaths had occurred, none dared go near to where the Deveel's Son was vowed to roam. To foul a well with a branch of oak-figs taken from its tangles was the constant threat in a feud. The mere thought of spending an eternity there could make rapid saint of an errant sinner, and wicked children needed only be taken to its edge to reform their ways. So the whole

area had been sanctioned as a fit dwelling for night creatures and such as bad dreams are made. Lost souls found their earthly haven there and odious ghouls their trapping grounds—in the Dark Tangles of the West Bogs.

But as to the East End, there was no entrance for the creeper and devil's nail vine (a most disturbing plant, with green-veined dragon's wings for leaves and mean little claws for fasteners, that clutched like wicked hands to the skin—their tendrils everywhere).

Yes, and the rosebays and the berry thickets, and the oak-tangles were unbruisable—until the drought and its fire.

*

But, as he sat restless in his birch chair, something whispered in the Woodsman's ear. It was only a murmur, but its bidding clear: *Don your cap and open your eyes. Hold to your nerve and scan the West Mountain skirts. There's something afoot.* He now meditated on the possibilities: Seven years is a long time to be alive in such a woolly land. But then, seven is a holy number. Yes, seven is a fact of completion in the Holy Writ. And in the vernacular, *it's the end o' a spell a' bad luck.*

But Nature *is* an headstrong woman. None had seen the boy in years and there'd been none but his own to question his being dead—since the Accident. One last attempt had been made, five years ago. *O, but was that a hill-nilly affair!*

What Eustace couldn't figure then, as now, was, if the boy were alive to claim the packs, why should he have need, as he'd made it this long? And why want 'em? —as he shunned a living soul like Hellfire—if he *were* alive. . . But then Eustace had had the twickly feeling of being watched. And he was glad to exit when he did, with body and soul still attached.

After being thoroughly scratched, mangled and drenched, they'd finally given up finding him alive *or* dead.

*

Now, in the grey holds of this storm's morning, he could but wish he'd gone yesterday with the men on the wild search, for he knew they were "a-goan' t' catch a fancy!" *They were a-goan t' help Leeways seize his Sin-tar. (It was his Sin-tar, now.)* He'd sniffed the air days previous and knew then the drought would call forth the Elements. *So, he'd told the men he'd not be off with 'em, but as for him, it was his animals what needed his attentions, with the Storm comin'.* They'd laughed bold to his face, and gone off to their mischief, stone drunk. But Eustace had something in his nod, and he'd tell none. Then yesterday, the snow clouds gathered in the North Sky.

They'd come up calling for him and Bryant, when Eustace had sized the Elements and smelled the storm. *They'd snickered and laughed, every plow-fed one of 'em,* "Well, we're Off, then, Pernicky—and a-goan t' catch ourselves the Spook—Ye'll miss i'tall!" *Maybe they were frozen laughs right now. Listenin' to Lee-ways. Drunken fools. No tellin' what mischief that Borborite would lead 'em to this time. Always ready to ruin and torture God's Creation, the foulies!*

But now, he had vivid recall of the boy so like his father in every aspect. Each time he met the lawyer at his gate, there would be his son, eyeing the Pernicky straw-thatching with such intensity, that Eustace had wondered how his gaze didn't burn a hole in it. (A queer shudder passes through him now at the thought, which irks him at its absurdity.) He would catch the boy's roving eye, assessing every notch and cranny of the stone cottage, and setting upon all the rude-crafted tools about. If his father wandered off a bit,

Eustace was bombarded with a myriad of questions: “Mr. Pernicky, why is that chimney on a lean on the far-side of that *bougar*? How don’t the sparks in the cinders catch the roof afire?! Where do you find that sort of hay for your herd?” On it went. What kind of animals roved these woods at night? Viewing his old Gran’s musket leaning to the barn, he asked, “Do you shoot game for food *or just pleasure*? Why do the deer cross the River, knowing they will be killed? Have you been near the mountains—I mean by the *rule of the Legend*? Mr. Pernicky, *why* haven’t you any new sheep this year? Could I come for the lambing?” He was himself still explaining the lay of things while the boy dangled over the fence, kicking boots up to the sunshine, when before Eustace could steady him from flipping the trough, he’d faced him, feet firm again with a smile hinting a whole wonderment of ideas: Had he learned his skills in a school for foresters? No?! “*Then are you truly happy being just an ignorant woodsman, Mr. Pernicky, without book to read?*” That last one had got him. But looking into the steady eyes of his challenger, he only grinned and chuckled. Resetting his cap to his bristles of roan, he’d assured the tyke that: “God gave each man his own capacities and mine are what *He* sees fit to loan.” That’d quieted him—good. And his Father nearly boxed his ears, as he came. It sent Eustace away in rolling high spirits. Still, it smarted to be so finely prickled by a child.

Once, a Magistrate, a stuffy bag of wind and import, had the misfortune to banter with him; he was lean and tall as an undertaker, but cynical and full of guile. There was the boy, like David, pitching pebbles at the jealous cuff—with red-gold locks drifting over that elvish face, his misty eyes flashing bright, as a sort of weathervane of his soul, he was *holdin’ the stiff at bay! Heh!* Eustace had to step aside for fear of laughing in the whalebone’s face. . . Those eyes always flashed at what seized them, and his long limbs

were cut nimble as a deerling, so that his wife used always remark, nodding her curly head, when the pair rode off, “Fair o’ face, and full o’ grace.” And he would wink back to her eye, “And d e v i l-ment too, Ginny.” But the boy’s face could of a sudden melt a strange color if he caused unwitting hurt. He’d blush straight on, if misunderstood. And here the Woodsman was swift to him, for he weighed him as having a quick heart. Of this the Father was keenly aware; teething his pipe, he’d side to Eustace as their two sons kept to their games, “I’ll wager you, Pernicky, he’ll make either a poet or a priest.” And Eustace would ever answer with his merry green eyes, “Aye.”

*

But now, in this raging winter of mid-December, Eustace shifts again in his oaken chair, knocking out his tobacco, as he fingers the rough edges of the heavy arms. Replacing his amused grin with a firm pucker, he suddenly slaps his thighs, raising himself decisively, and strides to his things, calling flat,

“I’m to the woods, Ginny!”

Her head of fallow curls bobbing fretfully, his wife comes pattering in from tending the stove, “What takes its perch in that head of yours, now?”

A hot flannel cake drops from the plate she holds out hastily to him; he picks it up off the clean red-stone floor and replaces it, “A little bee in my cap, darlin’.”

She watches him eat it, “You’ll be frozen as you stand, you crazy man! You’d best air that evil bee out your silly brain !”

But he finishes the one and wraps the two others in a wool kerchief, placing it in his broad coat pocket, “I’ll be back the day aft’ the morrow—afore the sun’s half-down. Reuben’s takin’ me, now, so I’ll not be wanderin’.” She flings her bouncing curls back

in her demanding way, “Well, *where* are ye headed—so’s I might send some as t’ claim your Re-mains?”

“I have some scoutin’ to’do at the West Mountain skirts.” He would not lie.

She wails, sprawling her eyes over him, “A-a-a-ye! WEST MOUNTAIN ? ! Eee-yoo-stace! Ye’ll not put me through this one! Not to-day, an’ in my age—an’ ye own as well—”

But he looks her straight and steady, holding her plump shoulders in his two large hands, “Be firm, woman. Put a soup on for my return. Eh’ll build me own fire in a dented thicket, and line the spaces with blanket. Eh’ll be travelling by way o’er the Fire-clear near the East Creek. It’s a true way in, now, and eh’ll camp on end of its trail near the Clearins t’night. Tell No One: I’m off t’ claim the Lad; for I know he’s out there.”

And he kisses her appley cheeks, dons his heavy wear, and meets the Elements.

*

It was broad noon, or so Eustace discerned from the intensity of the glare and lack of shadows. In the burning wind Reuben and he had skimmed the snow since the first lulls preceding morning. He’d held his lantern high, waving it before Reuben’s wide chestnut muzzle, who snorted as he led him to the hitchpoles of his sledcart.

It was a chariot, really, if one only looked at the movements of the two as Reuben trotted and cantered in the open spaces before the mountains. The broad Welshman didn’t quite fit in the little vessel he’d fashioned and he had to dig his heels far down to balance his muscular frame. With his knees hardly bent under his great baggy woolens, his arms straight out as he reined Reuben’s broadly arched neck, his jaw set firm as a hay mower, he seemed transformed into a Hercules on commission from the gods.

They made it to the Fire Clear by first evening. Shoveling off the snow, Eustace made a place to stay the white night in a stand of buttonwoods along the Dry Creek's bed. Yes, it was the Wild Wind and the Elements again. Eustace and *they* had many a memory to share. Reuben stood beside the cart, as he tossed the thick blanket over the gelding's withers. The horse came down and bunched against the wagon's sides, and they both slept together, waking at the impulse Eustace took to be morning. He gave the chestnut a pat and a bag of fodder and the two rose, blew the wind from their nostrils, and took again to the Fire Clear.

*

They moved at a good pace heading north first, then west, through the Clearings, and finally into open spaces, endless tracts of spruce and fir stretching before the mountains. Submerged as they were in snowdrifts, some of the younger trees were visible only by their tips and Eustace had to guide Reuben's steps with great care. Just as they were compassing the skirt of the northernmost mountain, a logjam blocked the way. He swore a little, then, begging the Lord's pardon for so doing, backed Reuben up and bade him pick his way around the stand of she-balsams, their resinous beads on the bark frozen and glittering like tiny amber lights in the noonday glare. The old horse looked uneasy, as though sensing something malign; it snorted and rocked its huge head, to signal its keeper. Eustace understood the meaning: before them loomed West Mountain. He kept a narrow eye and taut rein.

Snow flurries drifted continuously, down-like but immutable, restraining all within their tract. Often, Reuben would stop to shake his thick shaggy coat of them, and the husbandman always responded by nodding his head, jiggling his limbs and blowing

his own breath. The atmosphere, for all its soft appeal, was merciless and cold, resisting every motion, punishing every resistance, locking all in its tyrannical hold. To defy its currents cost Eustace and Reuben all their strength; it was like doing battle with the heartless Ice Queen in the faery tale, but both charioteer and horse were set and stubborn, and they met her challenge with an equal temper.

As Reuben plowed about the stand of she-balsams, Eustace scanned the bleak horizon: The blend of earth to sky portended the storm's continuance; the expanses of relentless grey declared its potency. The Woodsman puckered; it was an habitual grimace of his clan. Rubbing his square of rosy chin against his furs and tucking it in his collar, he muttered hasty prayers, hoping to succor stamina, fulfillment of his mission, and in its wake, earn a steaming bowl of good soup.

*

Reuben had just turned by the trunk of a stray spruce when he jerked the reins, whinnied, and pawed the snow. Eustace searched the ground once, twice; he blinked his smarting eyes, steadied the rein, and was about to nudge the gelding on, when he noticed a snowdrift beside the log jam in a triangle of fallen trees. The slight bulge was barely visible, half-hidden by stick and snow, but Eustace perceived its composition by the goosebumps on his skin. He flung the reins over the perch and leapt to the snow, sinking knee-deep, forgetful of his weight. He plowed through the drift and approached the odd formation, flinging off the lightweight timber to reach the form beneath. Sweeping back the light sheet of snow which had made it through the fallen timber, he then stood gazing a moment, stunned:

There he lay, his skin blue with frostbite, his eyelids purple shadows, his dark reddish locks in stiff binds of snow. They mitered his whitened neck, and his head was turned slightly down so that his face was half-buried in the snow, his dark brows uplifted above it in an expression of final surrender. His hand outstretched, his bloodied fingers still clutched the spindly trunk.

The husbandman dropped to one knee and stooped over him. He was unquestionably alive, however slightly so, saved by the very thing he'd fallen over, the trunks and sticks, which had formed a tent over him as they fell in on themselves and sheltered him from the battering storm. Overwhelmed by Providence, Eustace Pernicky rubbed him down, brushed the fine snow from his face, and gently lifted him in his arms. He turned and carried him gingerly to the sled, sludging through the heavy drifts. Bundling his frigid form in the woolen wraps, he measured some contents of the flask he carried about his shoulder into the cracked blue lips. He felt the young man's pulse and marked mirror of his breath, so he settled him down and wrapped the plaid blanket about him. Then he recovered the reins, clapped Reuben, and made through the woods.

It was evening's brink when they met the Fireclear, where Eustace ate the last of his two flannel cakes. As the old horse again cantered, a strange thought crossed the husbandman's mind, a doubt as to the identity of his passenger, the same sort of doubt that winners of a race betray when caught re-eyeing the finish line. Then, the reminiscence of some sure tenet returned to him as he made to resettle the lifeless bundle behind him. He studied the features, reassuring himself, *Well, now, he does favor the Father*. Then, he lay back the blanket. *There* was the scar of the arrow on the top of the left shoulder, all right, but the skin below was all drawn and whitish. So he examined the

right shoulder. Again, no mark. He furrowed his brow, and mumbled aloud, “*Now isn't this the turn?*” If this were not the lad he'd known, his heart would sure sink, but he was glad to be the rescuer of Whoever.

His heart bid him assurance, but his mind, usually assenting in humble agreement, squirmed. *Perhap it faded with the cold. Perhap, over the ill years, the sun had bleached out th' birthmark.* He quickly wrapped him back in the Lord Stewart plaid blanket, the one the Missus Pierson had given his wife in token of her gratitude, years back. The Welshman returned to his seat and clapped, “Get on, now Reuben, get on ! We're off to the Squire's hut ! ”

The large chestnut backtracked a step, then jerked forward, shaking off the snow which'd gathered as he stood, his white-stockinged legs dancing briskly across the forest floor beside the Dry Creek, as he took the lead to the familiar cabin.

Mercury's Manner

—No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours.
 For what wears out the life of mortal men ?
 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
 'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
 Exhaust the energy of strongest souls,
 And numb the elastic powers.
 “The Scholar Gypsy”

“What’s in that direction, Father?”

The land seemed a bit less tangled, as Father and son rode side by side along the narrow backcountry roads: William, on his big white dappled mare, James Ian on his zesty brown pony. The tall rider’s rifle was packed loosely near his leg, for any natural threat, but the day was warm and bright, a thousand diamonds dancing on the new Spring leaves. Wisteria and trumpet vines dipped over trunks against the expanses of sky and sparkling woodland. Warbles of wood thrush, oriole and purple finch trilled the sweetened air. As his mount halted, William Pierson puffed again on his pipe, his red crest ruffling in the breeze and his ruddy cheeks bloating and thinning for the smoke: “*That* is country leading to a former Squire by the name of Milton Merydythe Micklethwyte. Keeps to himself, eccentric sort. Your Uncle Jules studied medicine with him at the University. They’re fast friends, in a turned sort of way.”

“Why ‘turned’?” his son asked.

“O, Milton, it seems, threw his formal training to the winds. Threw *everything* to the winds, for that matter. Made Jules damned mad with him, especially as Jules thought

to set up practice with him. Now, you can't get a word in edgewise between their stabbing teeth, which is why I'm only barely acquainted with the peculiar fellow."

The gritty earth raised a yellow cloud about the horses' stomping hooves as they sent off mayflies. The boy studied the dust smoke as he asked: "What did the fellow *do*?"

He loved to listen to his father's stories, for he would wander from a conversational tone nonchalantly into that literary one, as though he were framing a parable straight. William Pierson resettled his pipe, and shifted in his saddle to his full high stature, gazing across to the purple slopes of mountains, "Well, Milton gathered his friends—Doctors, artists, chimney sweeps, street vendors, poets, and Lord knows *what not!* Threw a big dinner for them all in his mother's parlor. (He still lived with *her* at age forty). Well, after toasts were completed in grandiose fashion, he informed them that he'd considered the matter many a year and had finally decided to 'relinquish his station *as presently known in this World*, and withdraw into the seclusion of the Wilderness.' Your Uncle Reggie is very fond of him—he said the mouths of the well-to-do dropped in their sherry glasses, whilst the common-folk hooted and applauded."

William's vibrant laugh warmed the color in his high cheeks, and he removed his pipe to free the laughter, then placed it back between his teeth, "You need to picture this man in your mind's eye, Jamie. A spry, wiry little fellow, last I saw him—head met no higher than Jenny's flank, here!" He patted his grey mare. "He strutted about as though he had a whole brigade of men in his command. If something you might say prickled him the wrong way, he'd jerk his head back like a bull dog, cock it to the side, and come out with some outlandishly *In--sulting* statement!"

“I’d like to meet him, I really would ! Do you think we could stop by his Manor?” The father choked on his pipe, turning even rosier, “His *Manor*? Low! A wooden cabin built off-center with his two hands and a crooked measuring rod !” The tall man resettled in his stirrups, and removed his pipe again to rub its smooth cedar bowl. His face emptied of its expression as he tapped out the tobacco.

“No, he doesn’t like ‘Meddlers’ as he calls ‘em, curiosity seekers and the like.” His sorrel brows arched as his eyes squinted again to the mountain-tops, their icy blue peaks reflecting in his twinkling irises, “If we had any real business, he’d be glad to humour us. But just poke our noses in on him unannounced. Well, I’d be afraid he’d –”

The boy arched in his seat. “You mean he’d spurn our *company* ? ”

“O, I dunno, Jamie,” William muttered through his teeth, clamped on his pipe, which he had just snuffed out, “I suppose he’d be civil enough, once he’d sized our intents, ye see?” Here, he stopped, an obvious whim of mischief crossing his lively face, “*Hah!*” He laughed heartily, his wide grin dimpling and lightening his rugged jaw. His son knew then he was imagining some fervent interchange between the three. But William drew back to a utilitarian pose, and his Voice came back to its usual deep resonance, free of liltings: “I’m sorry to say, we’ve got to keep straight or we’ll be late arriving at Breton’s. And you know how *he* is about punctuality ! ”

His tone was firmly resolved, but not without its wistfulness. His son sighed in his saddle, gripped his reins, and urged his mount onwards.

*

Within a holy refuge framed by rose and fruit trees, with wild ivy climbing its walls, the little cottage had stood complacently all summer long. But in this gush of

winter, it looked rather choked by the vines, now wilted, browned and stick-ey. Snow laced the roof-rims and window ledges, and a steady stream of dusty smoke arose from the active little chimney atop the bark-tiled roof. Inside, a quaint man hummed busily while working about his habitat. He made up little tunes from songs he recalled, and reversed them along his own lines of expression:

“O---Oh---!” (and he stepped a little livelier at the ups and downs of the changing rhythms, scooping every entrance.) “Ah-h-h---aye Fah—arey sweet and gay, Came a *flittin’* down my way. A—and, just *what* she said to me--- Sir, would *surely* make you Flee!’ He arched his brow rather rakishly, paused at the meter, then shifted back in gear, an octave higher, “O—O---OH! ! ! . . . *This---* Fah-ae ery sweet and mild, Came upon my refuge Wild, And she looked into my eyes, And—”

Here, he stopped the refrain, at a loss for a word which sufficiently rhymed with ‘eyes.’ Now he might have used something in the manner of ‘And she left me to my sighs.’ But though he would allow for altered verse, he tried to have some consistency.

“Oh, my poetry is wanting, I’m afraid. . . Oh, my Foot! Well, that’s what transpires in aging, sonney-boy. Yes, *that’s* the Bitter Gall of it. Not much to living after sixty-five. Times just get slower and slower, and by the time you’re ready to settle back and enjoy i’tall, your senses just can’t perceive it any more. *That’s* the pity of it, yer see, now, Milton. *That’s* —”

He stopped abruptly in this soliloquy, turning to the form stirring beneath the blankets in the corner near the hearth. The little man’s silver beard flowed in the firelight; his eyes, like onyx beads, shone with subtle lustre. He went to the kettle, drew

more thin slip-elm tea, and offered it to the pale lips, “There ye go, yes. An’ jist a little more an’ ye’ll be sassin’ me on your feet and wondrin’ where in Blake’s Blazes ye are!”

Warmth surrounded the cold form as the old man lifted many ladles to the ill man’s lips, so the blood stirred and color relivened the pallid cheeks. Within a few hours, the patient opened his eyes, and there found himself in the company of an aged hermit.

“Aye, friend, I’ve been here many a year. . . Seen Ye-ooh saunterin’ ‘bout the vale, too. But one doesn’t like to disturb the other, so, I haven’t meddled— don’t care for it.” Here, the Elfman shuffled about the room, crackling leaves and twigs and adding them to the rotund little kettle over the fire, until the bitter, aromatic steam filled the half-lit room. He sniffed it, snorted lightly, wizenning his nose, and turned back to his patient, waving his arm in a broad, spiralling gesture, as a sort of introduction:

“Me name’s *Mercury*. And, that’s *all* I care t’ go by,” as if someone there was notioned to call him by another. Then he paused courteously, as if waiting for a half-audible assent from his barely-conscious guest. Though his mauve eyelids clung heavily, the prone young man became visibly wary, rolling his head somewhat to the side, trying to focus on the vision before him, which continued to address him, a taint formally, “Well, I don’t know *your* name, Friend, and if ye choose not to tell me, that’s *your* way. I’m easy to go with.”

But he sounded not the least insulted, as though he really did expect a reply. And he went on conversationally with himself, “Yes, I’ll say, it is as I *am!*” flopping down the tail of his sentence as flatly as a platypus might drop *his*. Then the aged man helped his charge sit up, as he coughed and wheezed. Proffering the strong tea, he held it to the

young man's hands, cupping his own about them, and bid him sip it, so that the pungent liquid could run through him, its heat opening his lungs. The mute recipient drew a few grateful breaths, lifted his lids with effort, thanking the man with his dreary eyes, and fell back into sleep.

*

Nightwatches in winter are generally long tedious affairs—but only for amateurs: Two sharp eyes glow in the amber firelight with coals of their own kindling. The visage glossing their pupils' surface shows no awareness of their focus. Two silhouettes are cut in the wavering light: One, an Old Man, his flowing white hair trailing his shoulders into the full unmolded beard which circles and frizzes in playful ripples--a graceful crown for venerable age, and a darting, unkempt beard to announce *this* elder still holds his flowers. Though small of stature, he is firmly-toned, and his inner vibrancy livens a ruddy bloom through his cheeks, his skin clear and elastic, with a transparency that fairly shimmers in the light. With his curt wiggle of a mouth rising and falling in time with the flame of those fierce little eyes, his grin hides now beneath a terse and solemn tone.

Indeed, a soul might rightly take him for quite a different character entirely at this moment, as something of his essence interchanges with that of his focus: The Other, a fine Youth, his face an ivory-cut effigy nested in burnished waves; lean, yet ruggedly handsome, his mien sculpted by stern demand. Shrewd as Shylock, the old man watches, in drawn pregnant silence. Like two lanterns, their faces glow in the fire's aura, two star-candles embedded in a black-cloaked hemisphere.

A small grey moth flits by, and the vigilant man's attentions are diverted on the delicate wings, fluttering towards the fire. He waves his hand to dissuade the creature from its death, but to no avail. It heads straight to the flames. He crinkles his brow, looks to the youth darkly, and utters low, "Let's see you don't do the same, Adonis."

Awake to Dawn and Dawn's Light!

Here, where the reaper was at work of late,
 In this high field's dark corner, where he leaves
 His coat, his basket, and his earthen cruse,
 And in the sun all morning binds the sheaves,
 Then here, at noon, comes back his stores to use —
 Here will I sit and wait.
 "The Scholar Gypsy"

Streamlets of dawn's light pour through the earthen window with its broken pane, wadded with canvas about the edges. He tries to rise on the floor bedding, pivoting on his wrists, but loses his balance and swings backwards, crashing into a well-placed cushion of buckwheat hulls. At this point, what is dream and what is reality are difficult to distinguish and they meet as misty lake to misty sky: The freezing snow, the exhaustion . He'd dreamed that 'they' had overtaken him. The horrible figure was looming over him, flashing his canine teeth.

He peers again about him. As the gnome is nowhere in the cottage, he now studies this rather unusual habitat: rough-hewn birchen furnishings in this side of the room, which is as far as his snow-burned eyes can see in the pale light. The walls are grass-sodded, sunbaked, reinforced with dark wooden beams and crude, bumpy brick. Every furnishing is painstakingly crude. The blanket itself is threadbare, owing to its construction of various strands of wool and rag of uneven length and width, and a motley blend of colors. It winds in width from about four feet at the top, digresses to not quite three in the middle, and fans to full five at the tip. But it is clean and warm, and he is

grateful. *Whoever he might be, the gnome has treated him kindly.* So, wary imaginings are cast aside as he stares about him into the neat, but close and musty room.

He listens to the wind hooing through the cracks and crevices, to the fire crackling the hardwood logs, slowly consuming them. He stares at the embers' glow, as some far-away memory brushes his senses. A shuffle of boots against the snow outside becomes audible, making its way to the heavy door. He freezes, tensing his jaw, bracing his fists.

With one brisk 'whoosh' of wintry wind, Mercury is before him, accompanied by a fierce dog with wolfen features, a detachment of snow flurries sweeping in regimentally behind. With no more ado, the Elfman shuts the door, grinding it along the dull clay floor. He turns abruptly to the rigid youth, still flat on his floor-bedding. Gesturing in wide circles he announces,

“This is my friend, Apollo. . . I don't believe you two have met.”

The great grey animal lumbers over to him, poking its heavy muzzle about the young man's face, sniffing him. Then, gaping with tongue hanging and yellow eyes glaring speculatively, it shifts its high shoulders once, ambles over to the fireside and sprawls, hind legs back.

“I thought our names would complement each other —Apollo and Mercury— ye see, Mhhh? Well, I s'pose i'twouldn't matter since ye choose *not* t' speak anyway— couldn't possibly concern ye! Now, don't worry—I'm used t' si-lent onlookers: Plenty of 'em about here!” He gestures about as his listener's eyes follow his rolling hand to the loft above, the side cupboard, and the brick mantel above the fireplace. With a little effort, the recumbent finally focuses on eyes staring at him from every corner: Perched on a knot-holed beam is a huge brown owl with black-tipped wing feathers, keeping so

still it is hard to distinguish, blending in as it does with the rough dark wood. By the cupboard, a long-limbed minx blinks her eyes once, in recognition. Stretching out her fine claws, she yawns wide, exposing a thorough set of fangs, before tucking her paws daintily back under her thick silver coat. Above the fireplace mantel, two reproachful black eyes glare at him, a little, tightly-bonneted woman with tighter lips and testy expression, who seems ruefully locked against her will in the two-dimensional prison of her portrait. “I keeps her hanging over the fire t’ protect the place.” Mercury explains: “Me Mother. Helps remind me of how *happy* I am being a celibate man.”

With that, he nods to himself, shrugs his pointed shoulder, and kicks his fleecelined boots off, knocking them precariously near the fire. He turns defiantly to the picture, points his pinky, while squeezing his features in a tight gnarl, and tautly squeaks, “Niver *did* like me t’ do that, did Ye ? Well, *see*, Ye Cannot Stop me! *Nothing* will, and if ye think making those mean eyes will, For-GET It!”

He turns back and smiles queerly at the young man, who takes it all in with smitten curiosity, his pickled expression betraying him. Taking note, the Elfman now returns the look, tilting his head, much like a dog at a weird whistle, “I always speaks to her like that, when I come back in. Have to let one know *who* has the say here. *Not* that she’d really *say* anything, mind ye. But I does it t’ pass the time and tickle me sanity, as I’m sure yee-oooh are fa-*mil*-li-ar with, e-eh ?”

This last phrase is brought to an aggravatingly slow halt, drawn high into a pointed question. His addressed stares wide-eyed and has to catch himself from nodding. The frosty character is difficult to categorize as to locale or culture, for he keeps switching about his dialects. His accent is quite a blend, really, some wordings made-up,

some assumed. His real hailing is impossible to distinguish, and within himself, the youth believes he is being nursed by a true lunatic, as *Mercury* continues on, unperturbed, “Now, all a man *needs* is a little protection from the Elements and four walls from the cold, *and*,” Here, he pauses dramatically, drawing his duck-clothed torso up, “*And— a Wealth of Wisdom.*” He inflects the word as though it were a marvel on the tongue.

“And of course *that’s* not so easy to obtain. . . But, then, ‘H e-e-e r e I *am* !”

It is quite evident now to his listener that *he, too*, is here, despite the odds. The little man continues on in a subdued, “umble’ tone, “So-o-o, I can’t be altogether lacking in her. Wisdom, that is—at *my* age.” He smiles queerly again.

The other, for his part, feels as though he is being hermetically *sealed*. As this Hermes’ tale wanders, tapers and blossoms as incongruously as his blanket, some degree of continuity can be painfully extracted from it. He had once been a Squire, inherited a great deal of property, a great deal of wealth, and a great deal of bother. He’d decided to forfeit all of it, handing his portion to various charities, and so earn his keep by his hands—as a ‘doctor,’ a country doctor, he’d hoped. But well, there were too many inconsistencies in all these upstarts, these young ‘Doctors.’ He’d decided the profession sniffed too much of *audacious presumptions and flagrant ambition*. And all the money they canvassed from their hood-wink practices was squandered on drinking bouts and licentious living, and so creating for themselves healthlessness far worse than that of the hapless lot they doctored, mostly with sugar pills and purgatives. Of course, there *were* a few good worthy ones he knew, one in particular— a close friend. . . But that was all by-the-by, for he’d finally met with the *true Secrets of Healing*, and so had rejected the *of late, conventional* practices, in favor of pure herbal medicine and the like, drawing from

the most ancient and trustworthy sources of knowledge. (While explaining this point, he gestured to his shelves of dusty old tomes.) . . . Meanwhile, his dear Mother was following all this with keen vexation, with inquiries as to his intentions, monitoring his every move. She ceaselessly moaned, “ ‘To *what* is it all coming, Milton ? Milton, to What is all this *coming*?’ ”

The hermit leaned over the youth’s grave face, lifting one eyebrow, while squinting with the opposite eye, “Well, I’ll *tell* you to what it came: I left her! I left the Doctors, left the city—followed the Piper, as they say—I set up me house out here in the Wilds where no man knew my whereabouts—brought only me books and a few tools. . . I didn’t live off the land, but *from* it. There *is* a distinction! I didn’t plant and uproot things and ‘weeds.’ I left things about me as they were for the most part, everything within twenty paces of this cottage.”

His black eyes shone as he eyed the room with a decidedly contented look, “And for Three Blissful Years, I found the first peace and quiet I’d ever known. I built everythin’ meself, from layin’ the foundation, t’ settin’ the timbers, t’ moldin’ the bricks, t’ the furnishin’s ye see about ye now. . . Hooo ! ‘twas a Breeze of Paradise !” Here, he leaned back on his hips nostalgically, as though lying on a cloud: “I was a citizen of the Primaeval Universe, and blessing the One who’d created it, and deemed me in His trust not to corrupt it. O, She was a bright Virgin Paradise then, with none transgressing her borders! Those two *Estates*” (He spit this word out with much disdain.) “weren’t *splittin’* her in twain !” He stopped abruptly, as he noted the shadow on the face of his listener, who all the while had strained very hard to yield no sign of cognizance in his expression.

The old man's ethereal smile changed to a look of chagrin, as he peered sideways at the rigid youth. Then he twitched his long fine beard and chided himself aloud, " Well, I ought watch me wordings here, Milton, lest I set meself in a *trap*." He said this so outrightly to his private self that his listener felt compelled not even to muse on his meaning. Then the lecturer thrust onwards with his autobiographical sketch, telling how he'd carefully covered his tracks and left no clue as to his whereabouts, only declaring to all his loved ones that he was:

*Publicly departing from this Life as is presently known, and
Going on to my temporal Rewards in as much seclusion, as This World permits.*

All in vain. For after all his wanderings and attempts to burn bridges after himself, after all his diligent evasions, his Mother finally located him. And, travelling the seas, she settled very cozily down into his hidden refuge to rule his weary life: "O, we had our good times, it's true: For the first year we read every night from *Paradise Lost*. That's when I changed me name from Milton to *Mercury*, ye see?" Which his listener didn't, but only gazed enigmatically into the little man's weathered features, which waxed rather pathetic just then. The hermit continued, "She did love me in her own possessive way. Obsessive, really. And Damn-it-all, I'd missed her and --Can ye *Believe* this? I was *happy* to have her here. Hmmph!" He paused and then gave again that odd smile, "Damnedly *queer*, human nature, isn't it?"

He had settled opposite the tensely reclining youth, in a stout caned-birch stool. "After many years, she died here," he paused, with a liquidy shine in his eyes, "settlin' in that very chair of bentwood over there. Made it meself. She wanted *it*, too. Best chair I'd made. She was always after me, repeatin, " (His voice changed to a fitfully high

pitch, as though he was inhabited by another, and his features took on an intensely belligerent look) “ ‘Well, Milton,’ (that’s my Christian name) ‘Well! I *thought* it would come to this. I *Knew* It would come— to *this*.’ ”

He rolled his eyes upwards and jiggled his thick wiry eyebrows, “Now mind you, I Did Not quarrel with her. . . No, I let her have her say.” He snorted. “Oh, well, I’ll not go on anymore with all of *that*, as I can see *ye-oooh* ’ve been vexed and prodded Yeself lately, too. All of this disturbs ye. . . Can’t say as I blame ye. . . In *this* Miserable World. . . . Well, I might as well tell ye, I don’t know what to make of i’tall, either.”

It was almost like being at a fast-moving auction, the way the old man kept to *his* side of the conversation as though the other had made many charming and logical points. Any twitch of the muscle, rustle of the bedding, or motion of the thumb was enough to shuffle the old man on. So, his captive audience tried to remain pan-faced, and motionless, although *that* had little effect in shortening the ordeal.

“Here, this fellow I’ve met up with in this side of the woods—Eustan Pea-nucky or somethin’—here *he* comes slidin’ in, flings ye into me arms, sayin’, ‘Bring him ‘round wi’ t’ose twigs o’ yours, and eh’ll be back as soon as eh kin get trooh t’ snow. I promis’t me sweet t’ be back ‘fore nightfall t’morrow.’ And ‘fore I can so much as take the pipe out me own mouth, he lifts ye down and settles ye where ye are now. And he gallops off, just as he comes—”

The Elfman lifted his wiry brows and shrugged, “Until *he* returns with kin and such, and all my secret Privacy’s gone flyin’ ‘bout the four winds and those wretched villagers come crawlin’ ‘bout here and pesterin’ me. I mean, I can tolerate the Woodsman—he is a decent sort. But those *others*—! No, it won’t *do*, I’m afraid not. Raw

Buffoonery—that's all they're capable of— that and *meddling*. . . and I Don't Care
For MEDDLERS! ! !”

The old man screwed up his face tightly into an expression of ill-temper hauntingly familiar to the room. Then, he turned fiercely back to the pan-faced Youth, who was now quite pale again, and taunted, “ But what can *I-I-I* do, *E-eh-h* ?

He lifted his hands in rude defiance and shrugged his shoulder. Then, darting his eyes, he spun on his heels and ruefully gaited to the fire, as abruptly silent as he'd begun. Overwhelmed, his guest knew then he'd just have to weather these circumstances with patience; and when he could, make swift departure. But for now, he needed rely on this character's bent sort of hospitality.

Night blew in and day again, until there was little to do but recover in the Winter's tempest.

Panes 'n Names

While to my ear from uplands far away
 The bleating of the folded flocks is borne,
 With distant cries of reapers in the corn --
 All the live murmur of a summer's day.
 Screened is this nook o'er the high, half-reaped field,
 And here till sun-down, shepherd, will I be.
 "The Scholar Gypsy"

It seemed a week had passed, and this morning he felt stronger. He searched the dim cottage: the querulous little man had gone off early, humming to himself, with the great owl perched on his shoulder. He'd left Apollo behind, for safe-keeping. The wolf's copper eyes followed the young man's every motion. As he made to the door, it laid back its black lips and bared its gummy teeth in a lean grin. He edged slowly back to the window above his couch on the floor, placing his palm against the casing, and felt the frozen trimmings. The pane, cracked at the bottom, was padded with oiled canvas and wooden splinters. He glanced back at the grinning wolf; their eyes entered one another in lupine acknowledgement, and he turned again to finger the opening. It was about a foot wide, and maybe eighteen or so inches high; he marked that, laterally, it would be about twenty-one, near the width of his shoulders. *Yes, with a little prying, he could make it.* But as he began on the splinters, a low growl came from the animal that had padded a little closer. He ceased the activity, gazing instead out into the open. And he did this at a slant, so that his eyes could meet the low window, and the wolf.

Once, he'd boorishly wandered into the grounds of a wolverine. While it was busy scraping the hard earth for something or other with its four-inch claws, grunting through

its powerful jaws like a pig and smelling like its trough, he gazed at it in curiosity, a short distance away. He was studying its fur's yellowish bands and the way it waved its thick head as it scratched and snorted, when it glanced up, to find him gawking. The deuce was roused out of the stocky creature. Dagger-like teeth glaring in the sun, it charged him headlong. He flew straight into the solid trunk of a great northern cedar, and was stunned flat. The beast would have made short issue of him but was so jarred by this fast reel, that its temper receded just long enough for his recovery and swift exit.

Apollo's bared teeth and low growl now had a quality similar to that of the wolverine's.

He became engrossed in his own faraway thoughts as he stood there, gazing into the open, staring out into the continuing snow, marking the surroundings, the types of trees and bushes, until his senses suspended in a kind of trance. A crawling sensation climbed his spine. He whirled around to face the intruder. "How did you – ?" escaped his lips. . . The Elfman was before him, smiling ear to ear. "I leaves it open in the Summer and Spring, only shutting it tight in inclement sorts of weather," he explained, in reference to the half-paned window, as though this exclamation were stirred by his fine work of carpentry. Seeing the flush in his house-guest's cheeks, he addressed the situation directly, the broadness of his grin harassing the other the more, "So-o-o, ye choose to speak to me now, eh laddie? Frightened the wits *into* ye, eh ?"

The "laddie's" cheeks burned on to his ears, lighting up like St. Elmo's fire. It was hard enough to hold this old wag before him as reality, he seemed so pleased to mythicize himself at all points, from his absurd name, to his pointy ears poking under the floppy felt hat, its brim the size of an umbrella, *and* his Van Winkle beard, and baggy clothes with

overlarge black boots to catch whatever might drop. But this Vision chuckled. He stared angrily, and shrank back a bit, placing his arm in the crevice of the pane. His blue-grey eyes glared, his energy bristling like a maimed trapped animal, transfixed in silence.

“O *Stop* it All—the Stupid Tom-Foolery, man !” the Elfman hurled brusquely, “Ye stand there, shyin’ like a bat t’ the light . . . Can’t ye see? I’m the same as yeself ! Why, don’t be so *haughty*— ye look like a silly caveman in those skins! So-o-o, ye’ve got a past t’ hide? *And* ye come runnin’ t’ these woods for cover t’ make sense o’ things? Well, don’t fancy yeself the first for that trick! Maybe there’s been *hundreds* o’ ones o’er the centuries, their bones strewn beneath root o’ oak and cypress. Maybe o’er Epochs’ unfolding—who knows ? But I’ll warrant ye, if they met, as we have, they wouldn’t go about playing imbecilic ‘guess *who*’ games !”

The intruder’s voice had abruptly changed, so that some sound logic and a refinement of voice emerged. His bristling inmate eased his arm down and smoothed the skins on the side of his leg, as the sage opened his mouth again, “I mean, ye don’t have t’ lose ye powers of speech to be a recluse—the faculties wouldn’t cope—ye *choose* the life, don’t ye know?” But his inarticulate captive only stared the more hollowly in his direction. The sage grunted and waved his arm,

“Ah, well. Ye’re shaken and weary. . . Don’t bother talkin’ --I kin always go t’ the hills t’ hear the echo of me own voice. . . Leave ye t’ ye own druthers –‘ No Meddlin’— An’ each body’s happier t’ his own complaints !”

He’d lapsed back to that feigned country-jargon. The young man relaxed back to his former stance and, turning to the open door, heaved deeply the fresh cold air: *The wind sang as it fled through the stark branches. Light snow flurries floated benignly,*

tracing the outer spaces. The old man studied him as he gazed longingly to the open. . . . a moment more and his face had taken on the rays of pale sunlight, making it faintly iridescent. Then the old man quietly shut the scene from his view, as he barred the heavy oak door. With an elaborate iron key, he locked it, returning the key to his deep pocket, bandying, “No, this day, the earth and the clouds—one’s as white an’ fleecy as t’ other. Loose ye footin’ an’ ye might as well *fall* thro a cloud, for the treachery! This is the Worst Winter I’ve seen since I’ve been here. *And Friend, that’s no small length o’ time!*” He pointed to the portrait, as the young man cast down his greying eyes and shifted self-consciously his tall frame. “*She’s* been gone ten years. Lived t’ be eighty-six. She’d be here twenty-seven years this May.”

His non-listener tried to figure the years the man had been there, but it was difficult, tripping over the mother. Finally, it dawned on him that the fellow’s wordings were elusive and nonsensical to a purpose. He flushed, and kept his eyes downcast, fingering threads on a moth-eaten brown shawl over the chair’s edge.

“That was *hers*,” Mercury tossed him, and he quickly pulled his hands off it, as the old man smiled dryly. Then he cupped his left hand over his pipe, raised it to his teeth, and puffed the raw smoke from it. It was unmistakably coltsfoot and buckbean, with a dash of sassafras for spark. The gnome arched back in his chair, lifting and stretching out his legs over a stool, “But, anyways, as I was sayin’, here I’ve been for twenty-odd—” *Twenty v e r y odd years*—he’d liked to have interjected, but started as the man poked out his long nose and twisted it, “*Thirty* years, Friend, to be exact —And *Niver* ha’-I-seen a Winter the likes o’ the one ‘bout us now.”

Apollo was now before the door, as a temple-guard, sprawled, his tongue lolling through a stretch of gummy grin. The old man bantered on, as though they were in some pleasant tea-converse, “I gather it came ‘pon ye-ooh right unexpected, too, e-eh?” He peered at him with half-closed eyes from beneath his floppy hat, smirking ungraciously.

This nonchalant, chummy voice now hotly irritated him, as the old man mocked his own silence: “Well, if ye had *m-y-y* agility and know-how, ye’d have built yeself a *cabin* and retired, instead of rompin’ in the snow’ like a jack-ass.”

The Elfman puffed on his crude pipe again, his hand hovering over its roughly carved bowl. His misfit guest shuffled as he leaned against the mantle. The stocky man peered at him in intervals from below his half-closed lids. Then, with a wisey look, he leaned confidentially forward on his bentwood rocker, “Now, I’m going to tell *you* something --as regards *Me*.” And he delivered measuredly slow, while squinting rudely, “Now, don’t get flighty as you’re wont— because if you’re the least worried about me revealing your identity, *James Ian*, you can hold your mind at rest!”

The youth blanched chalk-white.

He settled into a straight-backed splintery chair, exhaling long as he sunk. The old man’s face was triumphant, “There, there--” he comforted, “Nothing so petrifying as having someone call out your name when you’re naught but an *anomaly* to everyone else, *Mmhhh?*”

He dared not raise his head, as his whitened hands extended over his long legs, nervously gripping his knees. Mercury took on a firm expression. “Well, James, I could humour you no more. The game was a bit much for me. . . You’d better just leave go, now, because my patience is wearing thin as those vacillating fingers of yours.”

“Who *are* you?” was all he could muster.

“Well, *that* I’ve already stated, and I won’t introduce meself twice. . . Nooh—Let’s just say the say, now, hmmmh? Why have you been running so long? ”

Had this ruthless little man known the difficulty he had this moment keeping himself from roaring out in anguish like a trapped beast, he may have been a little less blunt. Faint beads gleamed on James Ian’s cold forehead as his head began to pound: “I— don’t— *know*,” he stammered finally. The dark ebony pupils of his greyed eyes fixed in large dilation and steadily painful contact with Mercury’s, as he uttered quietly, “ I’m afraid I’ve had a loss. . .a loss— of memory.” He exhaled, while looking into those deep onyx eyes. Mercury found his phrasing more than a little erratic. Suddenly, he rushed, headlong: “All I can tell you is that I am terrified of meeting with . . .with I don’t *know* what, or *Who!*”

In this first length of sentence to anyone in seven years, his colour had drained white, flushed red, and, despite the sharp cold in the winter cabin, perspiration dotted his whole face as he searched for some route to escape. Like a panther about to spring, he rapidly scanned the window and door, when he again lifted his brows, venturing to look the old man in the face. But Mercury’s keen eye lashed him on even as he locked Ian in his fierce hold. Ian then had to grip himself to hold to the present Reality. And he did this, unawares to himself, by holding to his own shoulders, so that Mercury’s face didn’t transform, right before him. He edged to a stony pose at the chair’s end.

Mercury was secretly marvelling how the young man spoke lucidly at all, with his wolf-eyes darting about; he looked on the verge of melting, yet he answered in an oddly careful, even courteous manner. But Mercury knew his man, and *this* one was not to be

left to his own devices. So, having jarred open the door a crack, he now pried at its rusty hinges, while honing his tone, “Well, it’s not as though you could evade it *eternally*, James Ian.” The amnesiac listened keenly to the old man’s voice. He looked to his rosy white-whiskered face as a sailor might look to a lighthouse in the storm. Pale with the effort, he clutched the chair’s edge and diverted his gaze to the ravelly rug at his feet. His heart raced as the echoes resounded. In the dark of his mind, he struck something and slowly, his rigid hands came up to shield his waxen face; he slanted them like visors, as the scene seeped through: “I remember—an accident.” His deep-veined hands fanned open. “My parents and I—were-in-a-carriage. It was dark.”

Mercury mused this rasping sounded more like a dream’s relating, while Ian’s vision was fixed on the rug, which he nailed down with his stare: “We were in *rain—driving down in great grey sheets*. . .the roads, slippery, and rocks—plenty of rocks. . .” The sweat came slowly down his sideburns, dripping as down the sides of a stalactite hanging in a dark cave. “Our horse fell under. My father jumped down.” He tugged at the skins about his cold shoulders, removing dry-rotted tufts, “I tried to pull him back into the carriage, but he was sprawled, in my arms—.” Ian opened *his* arms wide, bent forward, and clasped his muscular hands to his knees as to a great weight, and muttered, “—covered in mud.” He lowered his head, encircling his knees, as though embracing the father’s body itself. He held himself there, dragged under by some over-powering current. Groping for words, he drew them out, as from a deep pit: “The rain kept pelting us; I couldn’t see him, but I pulled him in.” His mouth gaped wide as he plunged upward, resurfacing violently, sweatier than before: “His vest was all slippery with mud, it was dripping off him in streams, and I—*she*—”. He flinched and his long hands

released his legs; his skins clung to his wet chest, as he heaved and glanced through the scene to Mercury, gaping, thereby returning to the present.

Apollo arose at this point, yawned, circled twice, and resettled himself. The owl, which had been perched all along behind Mercury, flapped its wings and went to the rafters, as Mercury stroked his long beard.

The grey eyes flashed on him again for the tangible presence of another human breathing in the same space. They turned colour suddenly, to a clear ice blue, and a very mixed expression entered, a combination of horror and gross confusion but with *tenderness*, too. Mercury felt a strange sensation as he witnessed it, a certain burning at the nape of his neck. He'd witnessed that frozen look before—on the faces of criminals or fellows in the asylums he'd had to visit as part of the University training. It'd been one of the reasons he'd left. The corner of his white mustache twitched as the haunted face tautened, “She pushed me out the other door. . . ‘Run, Ian, --to those hills!’ ” He fanned his long fingers before his streaked face and Mercury's hair-ends lifted from his scalp, as the eyes widened voluminously: “ ‘And don't stop— *Run!* ’ ”

By this time he was drenched, even the dry skins now supple and clinging to his whole form. The Elfman felt a shiver up his spine as the youth faced him in a hollow of despair, “I left her there—behind the pane” he uttered quietly. “It was cracked. . . and bloody.”

He closed his eyes a moment, then reopened them, and at once, the words leapt out, “He was dead—He was in my arms, dead.” He stared at his hands flexed before his

shiny wet face, “And the r a i n kept coming down.” He raised his brows as if this rain were now pelting him in the room, as if *it* were the most amazing thing of all. Then, his face clouded over, “That’s all I know. I can’t remember anything else.” He emptied of all color, then drew in, as he glared passionately at Mercury, “I *Can*’t!”

And suddenly he stood up, flung a wild glance about the room, his mouth gaping like a cat’s, and eyed the bolted door. His hands stretched out, as he anchored his fingers in his long wet hair and he stood, like a stunned game bird, routed from the bush, yet unable to take wing.

But his angry plea reached the old man, who held his rude pipe now in his left hand, his frosty head set back and his eyes fixed firm, “ I believe that may be all you *do* know, son.” He himself had turned very sedate, “There’s some awful doings here. Awful.” And his fruitful cheeks grew grey, like a pact of aging, long ago made, had suddenly demanded its pay.

“Calm yourself now. . . I’ll fix some tea—leaves I gathered last summer in the meadows; wild strawberry, plantain, and chamomile. . .”

But the old man’s heavy, hairy arm was not tending the fire nor the kettle as he spoke. It had settled on Ian’s broad shoulder to steady it, while the young man’s dark reddish strands twined limply through his fingers, and tears inflamed his raw drawn face.

Mercury's Art

That thou wert wandered from the studious walls
 To learn strange arts, and join a gypsy tribe;
 And thou from earth art gone
 Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid;
 Some country nook, where o'er thy unknown grave
 Tall grasses and white flowering nettles wave,
 Under a dark red-fruited yew-tree's shade.
 "The Scholar Gypsy"

During the following days, Ian followed his directives, as Mercury Milton bid him clear and dust the many nooks and crannies of the cottage. Watching the little fat fingers of the artful man plying at various tasks was a great source of pleasure to one long apart. Whether it were molding a log to the fire or mending a thready blanket, there was a charism in every action, which engaged him. It never fazed him that he, too, were being meticulously studied, as Mercury was very careful now, not to further humiliate his charge. His patience was remarkable in this respect, and he savored of an other-worldliness, far removed from the judgments of men. A genuine reverence grew in the young man's heart, like that of a disciple, in spite of, maybe just *because of* Mercury's gruff guise and rough manners. The little man had the rare gift of relaying profundities while employing the rationale of a fool. This greatly cheered Ian's spirits. He rebounded with the herbalist's thorough, although at times bizarre, remedies. Still, he could not have perfect rest. The thought of the Woodsman's return was never discussed, but Mercury was keen to his anxiety about this inevitable intrusion.

Micklethwyte assumed an air of indifference, only appointing tasks for Ian to complete. He bade him sort and separate his store of herbs: cleansers, stimulants, tonics,

alteratives, still others reserved for seasoning, and a few just for fragrance. They were kept in crocks and sundry vases of clay, extending upwards in spikes and flowerets, seed pods and sprays, from every corner, in glorious botanical variety--a petrified herbal forest. He fingered the long leaf and stamen of the dried plaintain flower, the stubby roots of the wood violet; he gazed at the well-dried specimens of rosy althea and mallow blooms, lavender heather and purple burdock.

Despite the strict reliance Ian had on the wilds, his teacher was prudish in what herbs he allowed him, and Ian had taken it as a personal affront when Mercury hovered over him and gruffly issued, "Now, James, do-nat go a-mixin' the Holy Thistle with the St. Mary's Thistle !" He was just about to curtly reply when he saw the broad smile span the elfman's rosy cheeks, and he realized his mettle was being tested. He'd laughed a somewhat self-conscious laugh, but Mercury swat him on the back with such a burst of merriment that Ian had to strain hard to appear at ease. This led him to wonder about the nature of this Being-- at once a healer and prankster, sage and eccentric, Ancient and Child. He suddenly turned, "You never married, then, did you, Mercury ? "

Milton twisted his brows, scowling. " Married! " He paused, as if reflecting at all angles on this point, " *Married ?* " His head cocked like a chicken to its grub. He then narrowed his eyes and fixed his inquirer with them sharply, "Why, *yes*, I'm married, and my wife's as relentless a coquette as any you've ever seen!. Or should I say: as You *haven't* seen!"

"Do you have her portrait?" Ian assumed she was dead, and continued unplaiting cleavers and clover. "No, when you've loved someone as much as *we've* loved each other, you don't need a picture, James Ian." Ian thought this a queer reply, owing to the

fact that the elfman's mother's picture presided over every conversation. It would have been refreshing to view a pleasant face flowering the atmosphere. His curiosity overtook and he asked, "Well, pardon me, sir, but how is it that you never mention her name?"

"That's done only for those who have left you, James. *She's never left me.*"

They returned to separating more strands of cleavers. This pause invited another query, "Well, where is she?" Mercury returned, "Oh, keep ye nerve, Boy! She'll saunter over here when Winter's over and shower this miserable dwelling with all her charms to revive us *both!*"

Ian's imagination took wing, now, and hovered beside some blithe fairy creature, then a dark primitive beauty, landing finally near a ghostly gravesite whence it recoiled. He couldn't hold back any longer, but asked quietly of the ethereal man, "Mercury, is she dead?" At this, the old gnome lost his patience, slammed down his bunch of bistort, turned up his canopy of flying hairs and aimed his onyx bullets straight in. He started low and quiet, but his tone had an ember-like quality.

"Dead? Did I hear you correctly?" he said with a politeness that could cut an onion. Ian began to sicken. *The old man must have loved her awfully.*

"Of Course She's Not D E A D!"

His voice coiled down again, couching quietly, "People think if ye choose not to show ye *face* a certain length of time, ye are *dead*. If ye fail to pamper, please and perform a thousand *cheap* tricks of Entertainment, ye are *finished*. If ye take a sideline to all the Major Issues and Latest Dilemma of the Day, ye're *Anathematized*. Just refuse to play according to the endless fashions of Rules and Regulations, constraints and refinements of Society, and yee-oooh are obsolete, Archaic—*Buried?*"

“O JAMES IAN, HEAR ME NOW!”

His voice rang out in such a fretful pitch of passion that Ian feared he had caused him a stroke; and he paled in the expectation, as the fierce beady eyes set on him like bog-fires: “*You* must never believe, that because a being disappears from the tangible, the mundane, that he then *ceases to Exist!* A being has a right to submerge for a time, then reappear.” He cocked his head, rumpling his beard with his stubby fingers, “No. Let me re-phrase it: A Soul has the right, nay, the Du-ty to descend to SHEOL, Need Be, to Claim Its Own LIFE! Is It not So? Or am I Mis-TAKEN?”

The young man had no reply to all this. It was just as though he’d been walking quietly through a peaceful field when a whole artillery of men had assaulted him. For a moment longer, Mercury held his indignant stance. Then, satisfied he’d made enough of an impression on the youth’s wits, he bid him sit in the chair and “have some nice, violet tea.” Daintily, he poured hot water over the cup of blossoms and settled opposite the shaken chap, his terrible color having softened, “Whenever I think of Her, I think of violets, and I thinks t’ meself, ‘Milton, I’d like some violet tea.’ ”

His expression was altogether different and Ian dared not challenge this statement. He was glad just to return to some respite of sanity.

*

After this bout and revival, Mercury sent him back to sort the dandelion—root, leaf and blossom— and even entrusted him with the mandrake root. He was just unplaiting more long strands of cleavers which had been slammed down moments before, when Mercury pulled a strand out of his hands, which was hidden in the bunch, and bellowed like a sea captain,

“HELLEBORE, hidden in the Hold! ”

“Pardon me? ”

“Green Hellebore, I use it for cases of brain confusion and depression. Not that I’ve used it meself too often, mind ye.”

Ian looked at him strangely.

“Well, hand it over here, that’s a dangerous one to have mixed with poor old cleavers. Stimulates the heart. *Very* potent. Look here! Henbane! Dried with the seedpods on it like this, if those pods open amongst the others, ye’ll be sorry ye claimed t’ practice the healin’ arts. She’s a real poison, especially her seeds. But used in an oil an’ spirits, properly blended with a meeker variety, she’s wonderful for spasms and nerves, and the old arthritis— used on the outside, that is. Yes, I might need this one evening for *ye-oooh*.” He smiled as the other squinted and withdrew a bit, “But don’t take it in ye own head, now, or I’ll teach ye no more, for fear of puttin’ a Pandora’s box in ye hands.”

The old man returned the squint and viewed him tacitly a moment. Then, he took the entire plant and stuffed it in his pocket, mumbling to himself, “There, now, ye go, Milton, casting ye pearls before . . .” He raised his frosty head and peered at Ian: “I’ll be more watchful what I say t’ ye now, till I know I can trust ye with weightier matters.” Mercury then bid him sit and called out names of plants he’d passed every day: “Bistort: for hemorrhages, in poultices. Ground Ivy: whimsical little tiers of leaves, hasn’t she? Lovely cleanser, tonic. A wee bitter, though. Henbane: another one to be wary of.” he warned, then scowled and wrinkled his brow, “O, but this is what I’ve already done. . .” he mumbled, and quickly drew the herb and stuffed it with the other in his pocket, eyeing

his student beneath his bushy brows. Ian attended every word, sizing the features of each variety, noting its particulars in his sponge-intellect. Mercury decided he would like one day to entrust him with the secrets of his Art, once the lad had his nog in the right cog, that is.

*

So passed the stretches of Winter. There was little Mercury did not know. Rows of old tomes stocked the oaken shelves: diagnostic material, folk lore, recipes, all pertaining to the arts of healing, stowed in the many volumes, all half-dusted and some quite moldy. But these were perused and fingered at regular intervals by this scholar of herbal medicine. And it seemed to James Ian that this little refuge had awaited his entrance many a year. He wondered how it had evaded him till this hour.

Emily: Another Story

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
I loved her more than health and beauty,
and I chose to have her rather than light,
because her radiance never ceases.

The Wisdom of Solomon

It is a cool night at the end of a long summer, a continent or so away. Emeline Marie Marchault stares out her white-curtained window into the night, which drones cicadas and soft breezes; she relaxes in the evening's embrace, until it draws over her the veil of night, and the drone of cicadas hushes. The moon sets in her monstrosity, an aura of resplendent lights, translucent colors shimmering around her, aqua, gold, rose, violet: *a beauty veiled in her secret recesses, inaccessible, her train of whirling mists enhancing her splendor, as virgins the bride*. Speeding clouds soar far above the earth, full, potent, lit with benevolence. Thin, flighty clouds linger close on other currents, as in some aetherial ballet.

"Ah!" she sighs, "If only I could fly! I would dwell in some Eternal Realm, where whisper these melodies, the shafts of my heart to--" Suddenly, a peppery thought invades this soliloquy as her brow rumples, *But why does the Good God allow such longings when He pins me here in this dreary room? Why fill the earth with such inspirations only to leave me pine away here in gloom?* Then, realizing this impudence will never obtain results, she lowers her dark lashes, "O, please, Mon Dieu! You know my will, and also my heart: *Je suis seule et toute incomplete*. Is there *no* echo to these ardent desires?" She pauses, waiting for an answer. Who knows? She struggles, "J'aspire a--!" Then

slowly, her soft brown eyebrows rise, as she whispers,—j’aspire a la *caresses tendre!*”
in jubilant resignation.

For months she had battled. Romantic broodings? *She* knew where *they* led: to surrender! She renounced any part with them. But there was a rebel in this rebel—one who crept about dark places. The more careful her guard, the more stealthy the Enemy became. . . Now, finally she knows her match: this Enemy is none but herself.

Still, God has made this Self so she must be according to *some* plan of His.

For within her slight frame lives a vibrant spirit; its vigor is such to make her guardian, Breton Antoine Marchault, *very* apprehensive.

*

In past years, when in on leave from the French Foreign Legion, Breton would reprimand his brother Henri that he had “better tie that headstrong girl to her place!” And Emeline and Breton Marchault had always sat rather stiffly opposite each other at table. When he had ceased his travels and grounded himself in order to establish his brother’s will, she had been horrified to find herself in his charge, and so had resigned herself to “a great life of perpetual mortification, such as should make me a saint!”

*

Her father, Henri Francois, had not withdrawn his young daughter from the parlor where philosophers, poets, and artists of various trends gathered for readings and heated debates. Hence, she knew fire and water and how to mingle their effects. Her nurse, Mercedes, was constantly pulling her out of trouble: “O, Emeline! If only your good mother, Angelle Valentine, were here! She would give her virtue to you and her good

sense to your poor father!” *Ton Pauvre Pere, Ton Pauvre Pere!* she repeated as if he roamed the streets in rags.

Mercedes, a pious country woman, had been chosen by Emily’s declining mother a decade before, to succeed her. Hence, Emily knew her prayers, and her missal was frequently in her hands. However, Emily also gave free vent to her literary pursuits. One summer it was the *Chanson de Roland* epic, and *France la Dulce!* Another, it was the songs of the troubadours and the Briton Cycle. Emily read Pisan’s ‘Jeanne d’Arc’ right on to Montaigne; and yet again, the fables of La Fontaine. But it was when she drew in Goethe, Victor Hugo and then Dumas, that Mercedes began her grave suspicions. In fact, all V’s and D’s were suspect, and any author past Q in the Alphabet was generally banned. Mercedes became most vigilant. And, when she found *volumes* of *Rabelais* beneath the bed, and *Voltaire* hidden behind the bedboard! Well, she furiously retrieved *all* of these books and presented them for inspection before Monsieur Henri Marchault himself. Unfortunately, this failed to bring down any grand-ban, so she gathered all of them into a great cloth bag, wheeled them in a wooden tote, and, to Emily’s terror, headed for Pere Benedict, beseeching him to speak to the girl before she were hopelessly *lost-to-the-flames!*

It had never occurred to Emily that there was any disparity in this. She replied to any allusions to her dichotomous bend with a dark twinkle, “If you have a better thought as to how I should learn my letters, *please*, give instruction!” But later, she confessed to Pere Benedict, “Mon Pere, I serve my God only second to myself, and if I continue in this direction, Hell Itself will have difficulty containing me!” Pere Benedict noted that it was a curious thing that proud people always made such a great deal of their faults, even a

melodrama of their pride. He admonished her then to “Be aware your mind is the throne of your soul, my child, where the Spirit of Wisdom should dwell!” and her penance was to withdraw from her adventuresome readings a bit, and “include such sound discourses as those of the Venerable Bede or Thomas a-Kempis or the great Spanish Mystics, Blessed Jean de la Croix and Sainte Therese d’Avile.” She then agreed to wear ‘*le petite brun scapulaire du Carmel,*’ which Pere Benedict handed her through the penitential grill. And she kissed it each morning and night.

Having read at length many lives and exploits of many heroes and saints, she believed that she was about to realize her ambitions for the heights. She mistook this passion for religious fervor and began believing she had a vocation to the cloister or some momentous work, due to the tremendous struggle she was undergoing.

*

It was during her Father’s illness in her thirteenth year that this change had begun. They would go often to Mass together, and take walks along the riverbanks exchanging thoughts. Once, when he viewed her russet locks dancing in the skyline, the glow in her cheeks, the twinkle of her amber eyes, he clenched her hand and said, “I see my dear Angelle is with me !” He then whispered, with a tired voice, “Promise me, Emeline, that you will always choose the best—that *you* will not compromise.” She replied, “*Mon Pere, je t’aime, tu sais.* I will always do what you have taught me. Besides, Mercedes won’t give me any respite!” They laughed and embraced.

He died that winter and she became a serious young girl.

*

So now, at sixteen, she knows what ails her is some lazy streak of mediocrity. Often, she asks Breton if perhaps he shouldn't send her off to work abroad in an orphanage, or at the very least, a bread-shop. The further away the better. And often the more exotic the place she dreams of working in, the more fervently she begs him. Mercedes then hastily intercedes, "Monsieur Marchault, remember, she has no mother to calm her, no brother to tease and soften her. Ah, she is so very lonely, Monsieur—she is a very lonely girl, who, in spite of all, tries to ascend the Mountain of her Ideals."

At this unlikely eloquence, Breton clears his throat, and mitigates his discipline to 'more *agreeable* deportment in the Future!' while lifting his black eyebrows in an imposing arch. For he, too, has grown to love this *egret* with all the affection in a dried heart, and the two cling to each other in an odd, but steadfast bond. She is, in spite of her temperament, a source of delight to his tired being. And he is, despite his tedium, the admiration of her youth.

*

When she had first asked Breton to relate his many travels, he feigned a seamless, droning voice. But she noticed a certain dazzle in his eye when he recounted his trip up the Himalayans, to the rock monasteries where saffron-robed monks chant barefoot in the snows. Or to Northern Africa, where tribes wander in indigo robes, their dark faces filled with decorative scars; the Bedouin poets chanting with flute and lyre or goatskin drum, the Berbers with their sleek mares, called 'Daughters of the Wind.' How special ones are marked with the little whirl of hair on their proud necks, "the mark of Allah." And he told in detail of the times he rationed camel's milk for drink or traded wineskins for goat

meat. . . Now that he is at the mercy of her curiosity, it is a rare week that he does not recount his days as an illustrious *l'homme des armes*.

She is equally well-versed in lore concerning Lottenview, his Estate across the ocean in the Territories. When he first came into establishing his Estate, he had lived in Lottenview regularly (as regularly as a Legionnaire lives *any-where*), only travelling back to France for family gatherings. But it seems that, after a very upsetting occurrence, he had quit the place.

In her eighth summer, Emily had sailed with her father to this new land. There, she'd met with all the Piersons, her favourite, a certain Doctor Jules Pierson, who doted on her. He insisted on her calling him "Uncle." Thinking his name was "Jewels," she laid great stress on the 'w' and the second syllable, so that he always flushed when she thus addressed him. Then he looked, indeed, like a ruby, and that somehow fit her conception of him. She had also met with that obnoxious nephew of his, who so delighted in outwitting her. Whenever the Piersons came to visit, she had tried all methods of evading him; at last only Mercedes' quick flashing eye diverted the girl from some verbal fight with that pest. She noticed his father keeping an eye on him, too, and so she tried always to be near the tall, red-headed gentleman when her father and he settled into a discussion. All other converses in the parlor would halt, and there was a lull in the atmosphere. She was very proud of her Papa, and became very dignified, because she knew her father was so well respected by the Piersons.

But it was then that that bully aimed his mischief at her in stealthy, underhanded ways: She would be calmly seated, listening to some royal adult exchange, her attention steeped in it, when across the table, she noticed a fine thread moving in serpentine

writhings at the table's edge. She quickly diverted her gaze to recover the conversation. Then, a lacey edge of tablecloth would hover in ghostlike fashion. As she shifted in her chair, darting her eyes about the room, she was approached by a discreet query from her Father, always willing to display her precocity. She was forced to return, "*Excusez-moi, mon Pere*—could you repeat the question?" at which point a slight *thump* could be heard beneath the table. While all eyes fixed on this prodigious daughter, the question was restated—and again, the *thump*. She felt dislodged, the trick expected of her submerged in waves of stage-fright. "Oh, never-mind, petite, perhaps that was a little above your head right now. We will ask you to deliberate on it another year, Hmmm?" Then all the table would bloom with ingratiating smiles.

Oh, then! She folded her lips in, smoothed back her dark hair, her downcast eyes shifting till they were parallel with that profligate's. Lifting her lashes she pounced upon his cherub face with all the vindictiveness of a tigress deprived of feasting on her catch. Then the hateful boy's eyes would glow and sparkle till she drew her little self up, made a pristine smile, and turned her face away. *That was only the Beginning*. The first strike of the glove, so to speak. For, he now followed her about in shadow fashion, wholly employed as an agent of torment.

One sunny afternoon, Breton took them for a tour of his gardens. She had loitered from the company to whiff the various fragrances, when, in the corner of her gaze the bushes divided. She shuddered as rustling waves of shrub trailed her while she quickly moved to rejoin the party. Upon arrival, she witnessed the unmentionable standing at the group's tail end as though he'd been there all along.

However on another such occasion, her Uncle Breton had handed her the watering can with a slight bow, while through her eye's corner she saw her adversary snicker.

Walking along the paths of the herb garden, sprinkling lavender and mint and larkspur, she noticed the ligustrum divider become animated. Tiptoeing softly in its direction, and quietly watering the pansies at its foot, she then lifted the can suddenly and doused the

curly head beneath with the remainder. He popped up, shaking as a retriever that jumped out of the lake, and as he blinked, she'd disappeared merrily down the lane.

His father's cheeks reddened with chagrin when the prodigal returned soaking wet, and the tall man thundered, "You'll not stay here looking like a damned water rat! Now go dry that fool head of yours !" Neither did he escape without the rebuff of a lifted eyebrow from the punctilious Breton.

Now, this late-summer evening, Emily recalls that past triumph and her thoughts linger a moment, wondering whatever happened to that Prankster.

Monkey Business

Wisdom is the refulgence of eternal light
 the spotless mirror of the power of God,
 the image of His goodness,
 And She, who is One, can do all things
 Wisdom 7: 26-27

The vibrant Summer quietly receded into Autumn, and winds of change swept over the tranquil French countryside. Mercedes enlisted Emily's aid to can pears—sweet, russet-kissed pears—one of which she chose to sample. She tossed off her apron, stepped up to the window sill, flung open the sash, and jumped nimbly onto the ledge, proceeding to enjoy the sweeping winds and the tumult they wrought in the elms and fruit trees. She gazed over the hilly countryside into the horizon and browsed her stashed-away memories. Then, she turned mopishly to Mercedes. The full-bosomed Pyrenean woman had just turned back from the kettle, “*Mon ame*, Emilie! Why are you so bold? Get out of that window at once! You are not a crow! Get down immediately— before your Uncle sees you there!” Such little acts of insurrection provided her with one of her chief sources of amusement, and so Emily bandied, “Do you think I could take an excursion this winter with Armand on leash beside me? We could meet Ernestine at Aunt Yoland's? Uncle Leonce will be off and they will welcome the company.”

She glanced at Mercedes, who was flapping her apron as if Emily were attempting to fly off a mountain ledge. Emily mused, “I can pack a lunch and spend the day to myself, braving the elements and trudging through fields of snow. I'll carry a book of

poetry and try my hand at a few compositions of my own—it should be very stimulating.”

“You—Ooh-la-la!--You will do no such thing, Emeline Marie. You will come down before I take this spoon to you. You are not too old for a good little tap, you know!” But seeing this made no change in Emily’s position, Mercedes addressed the adventure itself: “You couldn’t write while in the snow, Emilie.” She steadied her huffing voice, “Your hands would get chapped. Such writing will only serve you chillblaines!”

“Ah, but then the hardships would buy me inspiration, True ?” She asked it earnestly enough, but the slight tipping of Emily’s head provoked Mercedes to put her wide hands on her hips, stepping back for one final threat: “Emilie, come down from there before you catch your Death of Cold! If you don’t help me with these pears, we will not finish in time to prepare dinner. And your Uncle is due back, any time now.”

Now this threat of a delay in dinner was indeed more real, and Emily hopped down from the sill, closing the sash, yet leaving the window half-opened, so that she could watch the wind play with the curtains, and feel the cool breeze on her face and hands. “Yes, he is due,” she replied and her deferential smile provoked Mercedes all the more: “Emilie, don’t you plot in your head to upset your Uncle.” Emily yawned, “Oh, I have no intention of disturbing him, Mercedes. I am only hoping for freedom from this ennui. If I don’t do something incredibly foolhardy *very* soon, I will wither away.”

Mercedes huffed, shook her capped head, then raised the warped wooden spoon in command to return to the pears.

*

Breton was very elusive when questioned about the Piersons' whereabouts. She deviously prodded him on, but he never would divulge to her the extent of that family's tragedy; yet the very air with which he waived away the subject surrounded it with a delectable mystery. Once, he replied that last he wrote to her 'Uncle Jewels,' he was well and practicing medicine at his own clinic in the Northern slopes amongst the sheep people. The eldest brother, Reginald, was moving about prisons and workhouses, in the southern regions, where he served philanthropically.

"But why didn't Uncle Jewels marry, Uncle Breton? Why haven't so *many* illustrious men married?" She raised this with a lilt.

Breton arched his brow and cleared his throat, his peppery goatee edging across his burgundy silk cravat, "Well, Emilie, *that* is a gentleman's prerogative. The Celibate Life is embraced by more than priests and monks—and for as nearly worthy motives. There are many whose calling cannot be estimated so much by what they accomplish in this life as by what they become in it. And some would prefer that such an evolution be accomplished *unencumbered*, let us say." His goatee danced stiffly above his silk cravat and his arched brow lowered.

"But what became of the Piersons? You know, that tall well-spoken gentleman—Mr. William? And his lovely wife and—that little boy?"

"Oh." His color receded a bit. "Well, they have all gone in various directions," he said in a husky flat tone, as though his throat held tubers. At the same time, he carefully creased his napkin. Then she asked, "You mean the family disintegrated?" Her face fell in dismay. He looked on in rising agitation, "Well, they were *separated*, let us say."

“That’s terribly sad.” She paused. “I mean, they were so united a couple, so happy and—” He cleared his throat, a flush in his cheeks; placing his fork and knife quietly back on the still-full plate, he raised himself from the chair and said in a low voice, “Emilie, I think I wish to change the subject, if you don’t mind?” as he abruptly left the room.

*

That had been in June, and the memory had lingered in Emily’s fancy as the Great Wall over which she must not trespass. But the subject did come again this past Summer. She was out in the garden with Breton, who was puffing his cigar and looking languidly into the sunset on his white chaise lounge, outstretching his legs, the neatly-pleated grey linen trousers overlapping his white spats. The African finches were playing in their outdoor cage, flitting after each other. The sun glazed the leaves and trunks gold, and garden linnets throated lovely little melodies. She gazed outward, then turned impulsively about and charged him unawares, “Uncle Breton, whatever happened to that Pierson Boy -- I mean, did he run away?”

The exact images conjuring in her brain at the moment were of circuses and gypsy bands. That *would* be so like him. Breton’s fortifications were unmanned this moment and he found her inside the lines all at once, dangling precariously over his parapet, “No, no, he, just disappeared.” He edged back in his chaise lounge, re-crossed his spats, and straightened his trouser pleats.

She edged over his tower a little more threateningly, “You mean, he was so upset with his parents separating that he left?”

“Well, it probably was something like that.”

He cleared his throat in that queer way he'd done before. Agitated, he picked up *Le Journaux* and began reading lines, while rocking his black brows. His niece gingerly walked up to him and inquired very reverently, " Pardon, mon oncle, but no one inquired *where* he went ?" She caught sight of his eyelids rising over the paper, and proceeded, "I mean, he *must* have had some relatives who cared. I know his parents certainly did. Why that alone would have been enough to bring them back together !"

He slammed the newspaper down and glared at her. As she jumped, he declared measuredly, "I am afraid *nothing* in this life will suffice to bring them ' back together,' Emilie. "

With such a caustic statement, the subject was again closed. But a broken air lingered about, so that she began to construe that, secretly, Breton yearned to disclose something. But, then, of course, there were manners—golden chains which smarted her wrists and made her wish to be *anyone* but ' la jeune fille'.

*

Long after the pear canning had concluded, the autumn winds set the air with the nip of excitement, returning spicy scents from far away, all of which blended quite well with lingering aromas of clove and cinnamon from the cooked pear syrup. *That same night, over demitasse*, Emily regarded her Uncle, specifically, his hair: dark black, streaked with grey wisps, with pepper-feathers directly over his ears and a few curls escaping at the nape of his neck. She watched his fine-tapered fingers dexterously swathe the taper in the fire beneath the mantle and light his cigar, then replace the matchbox. He brought the tobac to his lips, slim, burgundy-tinged. His chiseled nose with its high bridge defined his side-view: a handsome figure of gravity tempered by

elegance. Such were the traits of his family. Her father was almost as striking, but not so persistently well defined in feature. Nor in his nature, for Breton's was a most *exacting* disposition. . . They had been silent a moment when, steeped in meditation, he began drifting off in his after-dinner rituals, providing her with hidden amusements.

Her stare fixed on those feathered tufts above his ears and she strained to recall of what they reminded her. She straightened her eyes and locked her gaze on that peppery tuft of hair, as fixedly as a yogi penetrating the sun. Breton began rubbing his neck against his stiff collar, then smoothed his lapel down again. Turning his cool grey eyes to his right, he caught her stare fixed inextricably on his ear.

“What on earth are you looking upon?”

“A Monkey !” escaped her breath suddenly, as though he had delivered her to satori. His reverie so harshly broken by this unseemly cry, he recoiled, and she reset her declaration: “I mean, I was *thinking* of a certain monkey.”

“Does staring into my ear have some power to conjure images of this monkey, Emilie ?” Breton had curved his fine hand holding the tobac.

“O yes, mon-oncle, your *ear* is very much like this *monkey's!* ” She turned ruby-faced to Breton. One eyebrow of his was hooked in plie, the other raised in anticipation. She amended, “I don't mean to say you *look* like this monkey. No, I mean to say your *hair* looks just like his *ears* –”

Breton now tapped the ashes off his cigar end and hastily readjusted in his chair. Smoothing his arm over its surface, he leaned over the table towards her in judicial fashion: “Would you mind clarifying your statement?”

She cleared her throat, widened her brindle eyes and opened her argument as transparently as possible: “You remember when Father and I traveled to visit you that Spring? Well, when we landed in the fog along the coast, and stepped down to the docks, I can remember peering into the fog at all the brown jutting shapes along the boards. And one of these shapes turned into a man as we approached it, a man with a cage and a raincoat and this little chain on his arm connecting him to a—well, it didn’t *look* like a monkey at all, more like a cat. It had a long angora tail. It was black with white tuft markings and these white whisker-tufts over the sides of its face.”

She demonstrated this by sweeping her hand upwards over her ears. “I only knew it was a monkey because Father discussed it with the man. . . Well, I was noticing—that the tufts along the tops of your ears reminded me of that monkey. I mean the contrasting color, in near the same places, black *and* white!”

Her case expounded in clearest detail, she drew back and tucked her chin in, folding her hands neatly on the table’s edge. He raised his chin, put his finger to his temple, and smoothed the pepper hair back over his ears. Then, noticing he had done so, he lowered his chin and eyes from her gaze, grimaced, and then knocked more ashes off his cigar. She capped her story: “It was a very odd monkey. That is why I remember it so distinctly. . . .Breton?”

“Yes,” he began cautiously.

She had been so very deft in such a delicate matter, that now she would attempt the greater hurdle. “Breton, I wish to ask you, because I’m truly concerned—why are

you so afraid of disclosing to me this affair about the Piersons, in view of all we share? ”

There, she'd stated it, tactfully.

Indignant at such brazen cheek, he didn't bother being shocked, but charged full force into her advance: “Emilie !” Again, rung his battlecry, “Emilie !” and finally, he met his foe: “Emeline Marie, I need to tell you something, something as regards your *question!*” She noted a streak of crimson lining his cheekbones, as he struggled to regain his breath, “You refuse to leave well enough alone!” He fumbled for control and steadied to meet his combatant squarely: “ I know you liked them very much, *especially* their son, though he had his digs in your pride.” She was shocked he'd noticed all that. “But there are things better left unsaid. For everyone's sake.”

The two studied each other. She resolved to hold her tongue, which heightened his discomfit and drew him to a conclusion of it: “But since it is only fair,” he finally continued, “ I will say, yes, we searched for the boy. It was after a mishap in their carriage.”

There. It'd spilled like India ink all over him. In his zeal for ‘ rightness,’ he'd been subverted. And so, in confounded throes, he flung open his defenses and, to Emily's delight, broke open his moat with one torrential rush: “Well, it was a sunless threatening day. William must have taken his family by short cut trying to avoid the storm. He went through the wildest and thickest parts to get to me sooner. The heavens must have broken loose, and perhaps they turned their wheel on a stone, but one of the horses fell under and. . .”

“He saw his chance and went streaking through the woods?”

The thrilling flow of Breton's rhythmic ascent had swept her, and for once, he

was glad she had come to her own conclusions. He settled back and repositioned his demitasse cup, “Well, we don’t know, exactly. Let us just say they never saw each other after that. He just disappeared.”

Breton cleared his throat and looked across the room. She took his evasion as profound sorrow, “Oh, Uncle Breton, it is not your fault. He must have known they were going to separate. That’s why he left. Oh, I feel sorry for them and for *him*, despite the fact that it probably suited him just fine, really.”

He looked at her darkly: “I hope not, Emilie, I hope not.”

His penetrating gaze averted. A long silence followed. At last she ventured, “But no one ever found him? . . . He was never seen again?”

Breton swept his arm over the table, brushing crumbs which weren’t there. His cigar had been resting on an ashtray, a peculiar dark brass one from India, shaped like a pointy-fingered hand; he tapped the ashes off and brought the stub to his lips, sipping a smoke, exhaling it and tapping again the cigar into the brass hand.

“Well, there *were* sightings by various peasants: such superstitious churls about in those parts, believing in fairies, woods creatures and such. They might have imagined something fantastic to suit their fancies—and then all this.”

His fluster had only increased with all this explanation; seeing that to Emily it was more like *revelation*, he was turning various shades as his blood rose and fell, owing to his shame at the secret fancy he entertained toward the Myth himself.

“Uncle Breton, are you telling me that he might still be *out there*—in the woods? A kind of Robinson Crusoe?”

Her uncle simply raked back his waves of black and white and, lifting his head up, coughed again, “Emily, it *is* none of your business.” He was red, fully red, now. “Even though it IS *none* of your business, I have just received a telegram from Dr. Julian Pierson.” He cuffed this last remark, as though it were the *piece de resistance* in his grand tactics, instead of his utter defeat. “It seems there was a sighting there by some hunter who swore what he saw was not from the bottle, after he’d sobered, and that it frightened the wits out of him.”

“Oh, *mon oncle*, oh, Breton! This is . . . *fantastic* ! ”

“Yes, I *knew* you would think so, no matter how the whole matter grieves me, I can’t tell you.” He frowned gravely, but could only scold with his eyes. He turned his hand and tapped his cigar stub, as she asked, “ But then he’s been found, this –”

Breton’s right cheek quirked in and the muscles on his temple twitched, “The fool called *it* a Centaur, Emilie. There is no real evidence any *thing* is out there at all. The man was a drunkard.”

This seemed to have no dent in her conclusions: “I am sure his parents will be relieved. They will certainly feel the terrible worry lift from their hearts if they can retrieve him, don’t you think?” Seeing his expression only drew tauter, she slowed and quieted her voice, “At least it gives them some sort of hope. I mean, it might even serve to bring them back together somehow. . .”

She blushed as she realized that she’d again used the dread expression. She darted her eyes upon him. His face carried an ominous look, vehement. She felt a loss of color. He said nothing; then lowering his lids, he spoke quietly, “I know there will be some search parties out there.”

*

It was very difficult dealing with Emily those next few weeks. This wasn't the kind of companionship Breton appreciated now. He wished there had been a way to erase the conversation entirely. He dearly wished he'd had cognac that night after dinner instead of coffee. The stimulation must have produced the entire effect. This frivolous girl of seventeen was now unbearable to deal with. Life was becoming unruly and he wished he were still in service with the French Legion. He longed for the regiment and all the disciplines.

The fields were white, and wreaths of garlic, bay laurel, basil, thyme, and leeks graced every corner of Mercedes' kitchen. She was very happy now that the preserving and canning of so much was completed, so she could settle in the routine of cooking long winter meals or relax in corners to read her prayers, or chide Emily for her flippancy, and Breton for his severity.

Emily was content to wander about, knocking into furniture and reciting long passages from *The Tempest*. Breton made a questionable Prospero, but she made a fine Miranda. Mercedes was difficult to cast as either monstrous slave or delicate fairy, so the likes of Caliban and Ariel had no proper identification. But there was one whose name and imagined features wavered between the two, and who stirred a whirl of emotion in Emily: *James Ian must be Ferdinand*. But she would not divulge this for anything in the world, and her own Great Wall arose within her heart, so high, no prince could scale it. She immediately covered it with the thorns of her own denials, yet embraced the secret hope that the day would come, blooming with the fragrant roses of Romance, wherein she

would be awakened from her boring sleep. So, in this castle of her fantasies, she was harmless to Mercedes, irksome to Breton, and a most stealthy enemy to herself.

*

It was time for planning Christmas festivities. Breton was ordering a trek to Paris where he would spend the Eve at Notre Dame, then attend the Fete at the home of one of his friends, another illustrious Legionnaire. Mercedes and Emily would accompany him, and cousin Ernestine was also invited to join. It was to be an occasion for souvenir. Nevertheless, Mercedes insisted on making certain preparations for the Noel, here at the chateau. She had ordered extra logs for the Yule and red satin ribbons for the mantle and had made agreements with her brother, Edvard, that he should supply partridge and truffles in the event of a change of plans. She kept to her doings, despite Breton's rebukes and Emily's protests, for, "The Future is never certain, and one must always *be prepared*," at which Breton silenced and Emily shrugged.

But Providence was in agreement and Emily and Ernestine soon found themselves with the melting wax of burning tapers licking their fingers while the flames threatened their white mantillas and braided hair as they stood in the darkened Cathedral during the solemn procession preceding a gloriously sung *Missa de Angelis*. She imagined herself veiled in some dark Abbey, *chanting, with good Soeur Ernestine beside her and Mere Mercedes solemnly blessing them, leading them with a lamb to the Holy Creche. Emily would make a marvelous nun, she had decided; and, if only she could convince Mercedes and Breton, perhaps she would form her own Order.* As the Bishop led the procession with the *Sainte Enfante* in his arms, all the lights and candelabras slowly lit and the *Kyrie* was intoned. She was overwhelmed and squeezed Ernestine's wrist, whispering, "Do

you think it will be *this* nice in Heaven ?” Her cousin looked scandalized and virtuously directed her attention back to the Main Altar.

*

They had just returned to the mansion of Breton’s friend, where the sumptuous tables were awaiting, and the resonant drone of cello and violas wavered in the garlanded air, when Breton was approached by his host and presented with a message. The handsome Frenchman then graciously bowed, excused himself, took to his room and did not return for some time.

Emily was busy flirting with a charming student. Mercedes kept glowering from her seat after she learned he was a Philosophy student, and aspiring to be a ‘ *Membre de L’Institute de l’Academie Francaise.*’ The student, Marcel, had just told Emily that he would like to show her “a little of the Louvre” in the next few days, when a hasty tap was made on her shoulder and Mercedes whispered, “We must go find your Uncle.” Thinking this some ploy to unwrap her from the young man’s attentions, Emily turned with a frown and flashing eyes to her nurse, and whispered, “Have you no *tact*, Mercedes? I have *no doubt mon-Oncle* will approve.” Mercedes then excused herself stiffly before the student, firmly grabbed hold of the girl’s cream ruffles and pulled her toward the stairs; the mortified Emily blushed more crimson than her velvet, waving apologies to Marcel and Ernestine, as she was hurried off.

The two found Breton standing in the lamplight, gazing at the Seine. He was wrapt in thought. Quietly, they stood at the room’s entrance, waiting for him to turn. Mercedes discreetly dropped her heavy bone fan upon the floor, at which rattle he turned quickly, with a faded look. Mercedes exited the room, nudging her in her Uncle’s

direction. He waved the telegram before her, then lowered his eyes and spoke quietly, “It is another message from Julian Pierson. Here, Emilie, I think you might read it.” She took the letter from his hand, uncertain whether she should open it. He nodded and so she did:

ATTENTION: Monsieur Breton Antoine Marchault

Merry Christmas to All --- Good News

Am off to Micklethwyte’s soon as snow recedes

Person of familiar descript staying there

Milton keeping him down

Eustace preceding me to identify

Will telly— Terrible Winter Jules

Her face altogether altered in the course of reading it, and when she lifted her eyes, Breton’s were upon her, with grey somberness. She understood, now, that this was ‘their’ secret. The fury already lit her insides, when he solemnly voiced, “Word travels a bit too fast in that place for my comfort.” As she had no idea what he was insinuating, she nodded and assured him, “*Mon-oncle*, this is between you and me. It will never leave this room.”

“I’m afraid it may have to. You see, they want to know if I were willing to return and help identify him, and . . .” At first it didn’t quite faze her, but then it seized her and she flung her arms about his neck, “O, *Thank* you !”

He replaced her arms firmly to her sides, signalling with his eyebrows and a firm nod that she take hold of herself, “That is only a possibility, certainly not a probability,

much less a certainty, Emilie. ” She withdrew, and looked at him sheepishly, “ I’m sorry, Breton, I’m rather impetuous lately. I don’t know why I get so emotional about things.” He paused, then awkwardly patted her wrist, “Quite a natural response, really, petite.”

The strains of carolling arose from the stairs: “*No-o-e-el, No-o-el!*” He suddenly bent over and pecked her cheek, saying, “*Joyeux Noel, Emilie.*”

She blushed—why, she never could say. Perhaps it was the age for blushing. But something overcame her, and her silliness felt miles and years away. She didn’t really grasp the whole of it, but felt it all suddenly very much in her keeping, so to speak. And she understood that he was, somehow, relieved. As she left to return to the Feast, she glanced back. Breton strode to his bureau, again to view the telegram underneath the lamp. His lips drew back into a soft smile as he re-read the sentence:

“Am off to Micklethwyte’s soon as snow recedes.”

Vita

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