



THE LOST COUNTRY

A Literary Journal of The Exiles

Fall 2014

Vol. 3, No. 1

THE LOST COUNTRY is a journal published by *The Exiles*, a Literary Club of Fort Worth. Vol. 3, No. 1. Fall 2014.

ISSN: 2326-5302 (Print) ISSN: 2326-3310 (Online)

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Cover art by E. Melinda Morrison.

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Part I

POETRY

Poetry depicts the world of human experience; it reveals to the reader a secret inner meaning, a deeper and transcendent reality which underlies and permeates that experience.

Islam Adhan

by ANN APPLGARTH

In our hotel across the modern street
 from ancient stones in Old Jerusalem's wall,
 we hear it first in midst of darkest night.
 It startles us awake at four A.M.!
 Electric chanting seems to fill the sky,
 the silent city streets, our darkened room.
 It rises, falls, and trembles, then it stops,
 then sings again melodious Arab words.
 Unlike the gifted muezzins, those of old,
 whose natural voices floated through the air,
 this man's voice is harsh and much too loud.
 The modern amplifiers give it edge.
 But, trying to remember what I'd read,
 I know that he is telling us one truth:
 Prayer *is* a better thing than sleep in bed.
 The instant that the call to prayer has ceased
 (as sudden and dramatic as its start),
 I whisper once again these precious words,
 the ones my Lord has planted in my heart,
 the prayer for every living moment's need:
 "O Father, dear, Our Father God who art..."

Possessing the Pond

by ANN APPLGARTH

A red-winged blackbird
 perched on the stump where turtles sun
 proclaims the day. He names this pond,
 for naming a thing can make it yours for
 a time—to love, to use, to guard, to tend.
 I, too, shall name this lovely spot,
 but the name I say is not the blackbird's

word, and I shall own this pond when
Blackbird sings no more, for I am
planted here, and I have found work:
to rise at dawn and stroll along the bank
and laugh at coots that skitter
on the surface of the pond like frantic
water bugs, to count the downy baby geese
and pray that they will thrive, to speak
a word of cheer to that dour duck
who basks and swims and sleeps alone,
to help the sun climb high enough
to skim the rosy Coburg Hills, to seek
the One who named both bird and me.

On Turning Forty-Four

by MELANIE BARBATO

A few years back
I noticed
That the billboard models
Had turned from
Women to girls
Now they are daughters

I started to notice
Smooth skin that sets us apart
More than features, expressions
Their pose no longer directed at me

I do not mourn youth
We will share
The same room on this earth
The bus stop, the mall
I can answer their smile with a smile

But at home
I have turned
The pale soldier's face
Of all the father I had
Face to the wall
I have grown up to him
Now we'll be growing apart
Till I can see him
With motherly eyes

The Chapel Bell

by ERIC W. BRADLEY

Over the ridge
crowned with a halo of haze
from Saturday's waxing moon
the chapel bell
booms

and for a moment
all creation
shudders
in November's purple twilight.

The earth blurs
beneath my feet
and I am afraid
that the bell will shake
and shake
until everything comes undone
and I am torn apart
like a libation
poured into the rattled remnant
of a world
cascading into pure Being.
I am evaporating away,
the last pathetic drop
quenched by a molten sun,
a lingering splash of autumn
cracked and shriveled
by the creeping cold.

But then the bell
booms
and everything files
into fragile order again,
eager to forget

that for one moment the world
 was on the brink
 of being broken
 open
 as if for one moment
 it had to be so.

The Scarecrow King

by ERIC W. BRADLEY

The longest morning of the year
 is the field trip to Ferrier's farm
 when the herd of creatures
 whom I herd
 dawdle off the bus like drunken geese
 with a cacophony of questions.
Mister! Mister! Mister?

There is something about children
 and the farm,
 some coterminous aspect of Being;
 the docile fury,
 the smell of attempted grooming,
 the dearth of inhibition shared
 by all things
 innocent.

We walked along chicken wire pens
 and I snapped at two boys
 enticed by the taste
 of tractor tires and mud.
 And when we crested a ridge
 littered with empty apple bins
 one of the old hands
 wagged a finger to the fields

at what the workers called
the Scarecrow King.

The hay bales burst
at his feet, tribute
to the lord of the field
whose vacuous
black button eyes
searched the sky
and his checkerboard shirt
overstuffed with straw.

The farmers had baled
beyond the river
and bundled the prickly stalks
of ryegrass and alfalfa sprouts
into rolls like unsold sod.
And so the king beheld
his bountiful kingdom
and charged himself with its care
from shrewd rabbits
and the black beaked ravens
longingly circling the sky.

And I wondered
as I stared into the potato sack flesh
of his face
whether I myself
with these grazing rabbits
had become the Scarecrow King
or would become him
when the harvest of my mind
is bare
and there is nothing to offer
this abundant life
but bitter hay
from a recoiling hand.

Bare Trees

by DONALD CARLSON

The trees that line the path are all denuded—
 A January trick that strips things bare
 To disabuse us, lest we be deluded
 That living can continue without care.
 The waning light of day is submarine,
 The trees take on an underwater cast,
 They writhe and swirl like underwater things
 As this day moves from present into past.
 The west looks washed, the sky touches the earth—
 We are the yolk surrounded by this shell,
 This moment bringing both a death and birth:
 The difference can be very hard to tell.
 The dog tugs at his leash: Time to move on.
 Our shadows lengthen in the setting sun.

Evening, July 3rd

by DONALD CARLSON

The sprinklers dance a delicate ballet,
 Their pirouette a welcome twirl of water streams
 That lisp when they spray: *Jeté, jeté, jeté.*
 Fireworks impatiently crackle in the middle
 Distance, the rooftop mockingbird whistles
 A nocturne to usher out the parting day.
 The moon hangs in the southwest quadrant
 Of the sky like a slice of tangerine, waiting
 For your hand to pluck and pop it
 In your mouth, bursting on the palette
 Firm and sweet, atingle, leaving its
 Pale stain of flavor, a welcome finish
 To your day as you make room
 For the arrival of tangerine-scented night.

Knowing

by DONALD CARLSON

Knowing comes to hands as I wrap them around
The handle and shaft of a sharpshooter
Spade to start digging, with my foot and leg
Stamping, plunging, blade champing into turf,
Rubbing blisters and calluses that bud
On my palms. I ply the soil to spell its
Name in an alphabet of root, stem, vine,
Blush of five-petaled periwinkle, flame–
Like dwarf nandina leaf, not unlike

Illuminations made by a steadfast
Scribe hunched, tonsured, in his scriptorium,
A brown wren hopping, trilling rising notes–
Falling notes on a stone sill, foregrounded
Against translucent northern sky. Engrossed,
He traces “*In principio creavit,*”
Majuscule “I” sprouting over parchment
A paradise of shapes in red, gold, green,
Umber, blue, joining hands with his Maker
To stake his claim in the fierce fierce glory
Of Creation. I seek similar pathways,

Fingers curved sore and stricken over keys,
Poised to peck out a rhythm of letters,
Words, phrases, sentences, spells to charm
Such energies as await the proper
Moment to spume into forms that quiver
Over networks of nerves, following roads
Half-remembered, seen in lightning flashes,
Emerging in a palpable pattern,
A dance we do not yet know that we know.

Blue Flame

by WILLIAM DORESKI

In a sand and gravel pit
in the former Yugoslavia,
now the Republic of Croatia,
I'm trying to build a bonfire
with scraps of wood the color
of bones from the Second World War.

Overhead jetliners scorch a path
to Athens, Istanbul, Vienna.
The clear winter sun is blinding.
No one looks down to see me crouched
by an idle blue flame wisping
from a teepee of fractured pine.

Impossible to get warm enough
to avenge the slaughter that followed
the Germans in 1941.
But the little blue flame trembles
in memory of Jews, Gypsies, Serbs,
and everyone else who perished

in the garble of machine guns
or as oily soot above Auschwitz.
Farmers working nearby may catch
a sniff of this burning wood,
but unless they spot me shivering
at this pyre they won't understand.

Of course I don't believe in prayer
but I believe that smoke carries spirits
as high as the atmosphere allows,
then disperses them among the stars
that with grave indifference accept
even the grimmest forms of worship.

Folded into the hills a steeple,
white and capped with gray shingles,
spears a ragged scrap of Heaven.
Indifferent to Ottoman rule
churches like this held their ground
against every common heresy.

Maybe my little bonfire will spread
a thousand vicious rumors
to ignite a hundred, a thousand
little churches; and maybe then
the jetliners will notice the smoke
and wonder who is burning.

Last

by JENNY DUNBAR

Where were you as the world tipped?
The city spewed
The last tree split,
The storm lashed
Took us in its hands,
Wrenched the chambers of my dying heart,
Burnt us up.
Did you recognise the faces at the end
In the long falling?
Did we share glances as we crossed the street,
Passed on the stair as the drum rolled and set us running,
Sat silently as the land turned its back on us
And no dog barked.
Smelling the canker in the air
Where new green shrank,
Sinking without a whisper.
A sigh
Took us with it as the wind stilled
And nothing stood.
Were you there?
Was it you, nonchalant on a side walk
In a mind's weary eye?
A glimpse, a touch just as the lines closed
And shut the sun out.

Good Morning Mist

by JOHN GREY

Sky may be clear up there somewhere
but try telling that to a landscape
clasped by morning mist.
Maybe the quiet water is to blame,
Or droplets set free by the grasses.
But details float like flotsam in the fog,
refuse to make themselves whole.

On the far side of the lake,
cottages serenely sink
in beds of clouds;
Between the brown head
of a spotted fawn
and its swishing tale
trembles a body of liquid crystals.

Sun struggles to break through
but is caught in the nets
like a dolphin at sea.
It sets everything aglow
even if can't come up with
the clarity it seeks.
Every surface shimmers
like it's being blessed.
Even my own wish for light
is satisfied.

No Moss

by MARGARET HAWKE

A rolling stone tumbles,
Sound gone, its path disappears.
No furrowed trail
Remains to mark the journey.

A flat stone thrown
Skips across the still lake
Ripples marking its trail.
Glasslike water returns
To leave no trace.

Bubbles blown
Shine briefly
In the bright sun
Lovely, transient, gone.

An eagle casts a shadow
Upon the mountain side
In a moment's whisper
No longer there.

The rainbow blooms
After a summer storm
And the afterglow lives
Forever in the heart.
Gone, but never forgotten.

Letter to Myself

by RISA HLYMBICKY

If I could write a letter to myself
I'd speak of joys unimaginable
Of things yet to come
That would light my dismal world
Occupy my thoughts
And take over my dreams

If I could write a letter to myself
I'd write of fears, of nightmares
Of heartbreak and failures
Seemingly unbearable loss
Too painful to think of
But somehow eventually overcome

If I could write a letter
I'd tell myself to love deeply
To trust fully and to believe
But also to exercise caution, to discern
And to keep my head in the equation
When my heart wants to take over

I'd tell myself to see a doctor sooner
To stop those terrifying episodes
To be able to sleep again
To live in peace and control the angry haze
The not-me
The chaotic state of being

If I could write a letter
I'd pen tales of great romance
Acts of love, genuine and pure
Later followed by acts of betrayal
Cruel manipulation
And selfish indecision

That somehow didn't negate
The heartfelt actions of the past

I'd write of love that was meaningful
Even if it wasn't endless
A finite but overwhelming affection
A love affair run its course
That faded away
And became nothing but bittersweet memories

I'd write of friendships that lasted
Against all odds
Of those that slipped away too easily
Surrendered without a fight
The regret that followed those decisions
And the constant need to justify
Or those that were battled for
For all the wrong reasons

If I could write a letter
I'd explain the differences
Between making a mistake and correcting one
Between loving and wanting to be loved
Between wanting and needing
Between guilt and regret

If I could write a letter to myself
I'd reveal all the things I know
The experiences and wisdom gained
The mistakes and decisions made
The good and bad alike
That would make me into a person I'd admire
Who I'd be glad to know
Whose letter I'd hope to one day read.

About a Bowl

by LEONARD LANG

He broke the china bowl
with its image of spiraling branches
twining around each other
time and again.
She had displayed it on the mantle
where it rested center-stage near the edge.
It was from her grandmother,
a woman he'd never met,
except in photos and tales of countryside outings
with leafy walks and lunches
on blankets she wished she still had.
He apologized but mentioned
once more
the bowl's
precarious placement.
That night they kiss
and turn off their lights
without other words.
The bowl continues to be broken.
The sun rises again.
This is how it will be now,
each of them says
to themselves.

Transfigured Night

by R. E. LEDEK

For Robert Penn Warren

I was young then, a student. It was night.
The gym was filled with light. I ducked in.

I heard him before I saw him,
the words rolling and reeling,
dancing figures and
singing melodies,
he, a tall gaunt figure, already old.
He was a poet, the real thing, my first.

Now, fifteen years later, he is dead,
Covered with honors, as with lilies.

Two Scenes from a Life

by R. E. LEDEK

The clumps of fir flame like burning coals.
A flight of crows pass quickly overhead,
(like our quarrels).
Yet a secret melancholy lies
on our hearts,
the shadow of sickness and the fear
of worse to come.

The night is solemn as an organ tone.
The moon is full.
Love hurls us high in the air
like children in a blanket.
She watches me asleep and broods.
She dreams of strawberries in winter.

Barroom Smoke and Whiskeyed Eyes

by TYLER MORRISON

That girl is that—just a girl,
A pretty lass, no more, no less,
Herself a self and nothing else,
Whom, I, alas, have never known.

But barroom smoke and whiskeyed eyes
Reveals her form and recognize
A phantom often fantasized:

She stands atop a pedestal,
With elfin hair and Beatrice grin,
Ineffable, inaccessible,
An icon of Grace, or Mortal Sin.

No liquor, no water, this fire could slake!
The smoke then whispers, whiskey-smiled,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake.
Her eyes avert; she blushes mild.
“Sorry,” I add. “Uh, my mistake.”

I drink my fill, cough and stand,
Pay my bill, and stumble off
In search of bed, or at least dry land.

That girl is that—just a girl,
A pretty lass, no more, no less,
Herself a self and nothing else,
Whom, I, alas, will never know.

But if the Onion Breaks

by TYLER MORRISON

What's so hard about loving people?
Send a check, some food, vaccine.
But what's the point of loving people?
You may as well eat Soylent Green.

Even Ivan in his ivory tower
Still loved the human race;
It's effortless to love a stranger,
Especially one you'll never face.
Mankind is perfect—a perfect stranger.
And causes, unlike lepers,
Are easily embraced.

So give your heart—to Africa.
Show charity—from the drivethru lane.
(*Your dollar helped cure cancer.*)
Yes, climb your onion up toward Heaven
—While kicking off those hopeless souls
Still clinging to your callous soles:
Ah, to Hell with all of *them!*

For Kyndall

by TYLER MORRISON

It rained that day; of course it rained that day.
The clouds were dark, the dripping faces pale,
Umbrellas black as suits and ties and dresses.

Drained and gray, I struggled, strained to say
Some sweet remark. But words of comfort fail.
All felt the lack. *No sun would gild her tresses.*

A preacher spoke; he may have quoted Psalms.
I can't recall. But then, by God, he smiled!
Jesus, Heaven, Joy ... This is our belief?

I sob and choke, dig fingers into palms.
I mustn't bawl. But, God, she was a child!
These sermons cloy. Where is all your grief?

Her brother sees; concern is in his eyes.
The water bestirs, compounds, hides not our tears.
He asks, "Are you okay?" Her brother. *Okay?*

A long disease—and then, at last, she dies:
A daughter; a sister; a friend of countless years.
It rained that day. Of course it rained that day.

Let Me Not Be Put to Shame

by B. R. MULLIKIN

When in the morning you feel full
not of the whistles sung by birds,
but of the dark, remembered pains
felt in dreams long left behind—

do not recoil or fear the thought.
For you are not the weaker sort
who cannot feel the heat of shame,
nor face the cold of cool reprieve.

I heard it said when I was young
that pain would fade if given time;
but that is talk to soothe a child
and other older, weaker friends.

So lift your eyes and hum a prayer
that thoughts once old will rise anew
and grief will fill your veins with ice
to conquer any passing fire.

For you must stand before your vain
and see yourself within the glass,
dressed in pearls without deceit,
and softly hum an honest song.

The Road to My Home Is Closed...

by TED ONULAK

What was once plain is now hidden from sight
A still white blanket has covered it all
The road to my home is closed for the night

The snow devils dance before the wind's might
Swirling, they swallow the distant lights whole
What was once plain is now hidden from sight.

Not one hint of green, however so slight
The land that I tramped I barely recall;
The road to my home is closed for the night.

Breath fogs the window diffusing the light
Of that all-seeing eye so far and small
What was once plain is now hidden from sight.

The storm holds all in its terrible bite
No one's expected to visit or call
The road to my home is closed for the night.

Thoughts past and future have all taken flight;
Whirl through the darkness and carelessly fall
What was so plain is now hidden from sight
The road to my home is closed for the night.

The Elements

by DOUGLAS PENICK

I.

To wake from a dream
 Where hundreds of friends
 Read aloud in concert
 A new and unknown poem
 Of which remains:

“The condition of work is always for us
 “To endure the threat to the body’s frame.”

II.

Point suddenly appearing

4 A.M.

Above the street that shines in rain,
 Rusts in the tawny glare of the sodium lights—
 Lifeless;

And the rain blown in sharp gusts
 By the fine aromatic breeze of rising spring,
 Blown then in waves articulate on the glass

Such that

The water strikes on the pane silently,
 Adheres dot-wise, slides forming shoots
 Of golden light diagonal.

And within each shoot gilded by the tawdry light
 Each atom-drop breathes like a cell—
 Not substance,
 Of no duration,
 Continual unrest.

How could this not be the dreamy face
 Of love itself
 Of endless caress.

The elements are energized.

Sudden sheets of fleeting light impelled
 As sashes whipped on rushing rain.

The sodium orange light,
 Looked at here straight on,
 Burns like a martian sun,
 A finger hole of brilliant light
 Seen through a tear in a black shade:
 Bright beyond the previous reality.

v.

Point seeming to remain

A delight of a sad kind,
 Composed of so many blisses:
 Intoxicant unfolding
 Of the endless, sinuous and purposeless song:
 Unlimited variety, balance, adjustment—
 Response
 As bit by bit
 The atoms of all embrace. And vanish
 Carrying the lover off.

vi.

Point dissipating

An excess that will not stop
 As now he lies in the semi-dark.
 The iron basso grinding wheeze
 Of foraging garbage trucks
 And the treble clinking crunch and tenor crash

POETRY

As hundreds of glass bottles are consumed
And beast thus fed so roaring on.

This and darkness now becoming pale
Silence briefly,
Before the varied hiss of orderly flow,
When the lover sleeps
And the workers return.

The Birth of Nations

by NATHANIEL BLACK RUPP

April showers bring May flowers
 Is what she said.
 I remember those flowers,
 Knotted together garlanding your head
 As if you were a child Caesar or a
 Dionysian dancer. As you entered
 The room cold and dripping, your flowers
 Dropped, brown buds dripping,
 You coughed.

We spent the summer wishing for breeze
 And the winter for snow. And up in the hills
 You called me with memories of fires
 And rusted sleds, of beautiful youth
 Flying down hills.
 And as I held you, you said,
 —don't fear
 All the while the Brook had me memorizing Eliot.
 “here is no water only rock”
 —Jove!
 With flowers in your hair!
 And thunder with no rain

Tell each Hercules to rid the world of forest!
 As we build the alter the Thunder brewed.
 “dry sterile thunder without rain”
 the Brook made me recite.
 The thunder is the Word, and the Word the thunder.
 And we built the alter, to see the fire come.
 Amidst the smoke of felled forest, two ravens soared
 The One-Eyed-Father now fully blind
 Is a sacrament to himself.

The Everyman, the hero of the third age, rinsed off his cock
Before putting on his pants to leave.
This jungle is his city. He takes what he wants,
He is free to do what he can, and he can.
And this jungle, the jungle of broken words
—did you look at every likeness?
—are you sure that's him?
The most rotten fruit made the most appealing
With each twist of a word the world turns more
Until the wheel re-turns and the city is a jungle
“Unreal city!”—I recite

The birth of nations is not *like* the birth of man,
So is its maturing and its death—
Jove *is* the sky. Everyman looks out on history
And smiles. His time will come again.
It always will.
You do not scream as you give birth
Just cry.
And look upon history
And never smile.

Moonlight

by SALLY THOMAS

The evening lengthens into dreamy sadness.
Across the street in soft rain a man is

Bending, windmilling, stretching his hamstrings, thinking
Himself unobserved. My dog's on the watch,

However, glowering through the screen
As the man finishes stretching and moves off

Slowly, not quite running yet. Yes, off
You go, trudging stranger, lugging your sadness

Like ankle weights. Meanwhile, one mockingbird is
Tragedy enough for me. What is he thinking

There on the iron fence, flipping his tail like a watch
Hand that points everywhere? On the screen

Porch the dog lies down. The fine-mesh screen,
Like a veil, lets rain-light in, keeps mosquitoes off.

It makes home movies of other people's sadness—
Real, imagined, hidden or not, whatever it is

They carry past my house at twilight. Thinking,
Deep inside themselves, they don't notice that I watch

And wonder at them. Look, this girl with a sports watch
Stars in her own brief stop-action film. Then the screen

Goes blank. The extras have all stepped off-
Stage momentarily. Crape myrtles droop with a sadness

That's not human after all, but merely *is*,
A function of the universe's thinking.

I know what you're going to say: *What thinking?*
Perhaps the low-slung gray-green sky doesn't watch

Us after all. Perhaps it's nothing but a screen
For the town's lights at night to bounce off,

Pink as cotton candy, no joy or sadness.
You might tell me, *Remember that the moon is*

Not a light—we only say it is
Because we like the word. Just now I'm thinking

I'd welcome moonlight's blue glow, like a watch
Face: *Look at the time!* Nose to the screen,

The dog moans in his throat. So much remains off-
Limits to him. Is the whole world made of sadness?

As the rain picks up, he and I watch through the screen.
Here again is the runner, all smiles, possibly thinking

He's outrun his life; he's peeled off, like a t-shirt, every sadness.

Souvenir in Trier

by SALLY THOMAS

Green oil smoked and caught. One murky light
Went bobbing one time through one finite night

Here on the northern edge of an ordered world
Shrinking inside its borders. The oil-smoke curled

Invisibly on the darkness and was gone.
The lamp survived to nest, a squat clay hen

On the shop lady's palm. *Sehr gut?* she said,
Feigning patience. Fifty deutschmarks for a dead

Zippo, or its enduring antiquarian
 Equivalent dredged up from some Valerian-

 Era street-beneath-the-street, common as dirt
 Itself—was it worth that? Would a t-shirt

 Have meant more, or a postcard matted and framed
 To say, *We Were Here?* A lamp that flamed

 Once briefly, waned, died, and was thrown away:
 Does it revive for us that chancy day

 Of sun, rain, each other, in that town
 At the end of the straight road, where the stone

 Walls rose, fell, were scattered, all but one
 Time-black segment standing in unveiled sun

 To be photographed and photographed by us
 And forty Japanese whose crimson bus

 Snorted as it waited in the street.
 Blink went forty-one shutters. That was it.

 A woman wiped her lens and then her sunglasses
 With special tissue. So a moment passes

 Into silence and is lost. What passed between
 The Black Gate and the shop remains unseen.

 Did we eat ice cream? Did you hold my hand?
 Was I morning-sick? Mein freund, mein freund,

 I can't remember. Only the shop-room, dim
 After the brilliant street, only the woman's firm

 Question—So? Her impassive silhouette.
 What else did she have to sell us? I forget.

Ellen and Bathsheba

by SALLY THOMAS

1.

Everybody's run away or dead.
They sit quilting in the cold half-light.
Bathsheba's taken Ellen's Granny's chair.
Rocks and rocks. Her brown feet bare
And pink underneath as a pig's snout.
The shoats are gone. The soldiers shot them dead.

I could eat some bacon now,
Bathsheba says. Ellen says, *We ain't*
Got bacon. You know we ain't. You know,
So what's the point of wanting it? Potato
Apiece for supper. Her needle stabs a faint
Wound in viney-tracery muslin. Just now

She could eat some bacon, too. Anything.
Her hands are thin, the blue wormy veins
Surfacing like bream on cloudy days.
Bathsheba's lucky, fishing. And her belly's
Swelled up tight, shiny as a pecan's
Hard brown skin. She's dreamy as anything

Nowadays, Bathsheba. Doesn't sit
On the floor like she's supposed to. Ellen pretends
She doesn't hear how Granny's chair creaks
As if Granny still sat there taking tucks
In Ellen's skirts to shame her. Granny's hands
Punished without hitting. There she'd sit.

Fingers whipped the needle in and out.
One inch. For sassing me. Bathsheba, round
And smile-less as a gourd, stitches stars
across her quilt-patch. They've all gone, the raiders

In their stained homespun. Ellen hates the sound
Of their voices even now. *Get out,*

She stood in the door and said, while they laughed
And wrung the rooster's neck. *Get out,* she said.
They laughed. Rooted in the flour barrel.
Underneath her bed. They found the squirrel
Bathsheba'd shot and dressed. *Get out,* she said.
One soldier roughed Bathsheba's hair. Laughed,

I like 'em dark and wild. Bathsheba's eyes
Blank. *You get out now.* He took her hand.
I like the looks of this. Later he peed
On the barn wall whose shadow he had sowed.
A harvest he won't see. Silent, round
As the moon above the trees, her moonless eyes

On her piece-work, Bathsheba stitches stars.
Ellen's all bones. Empty. Run away
Or dead. Everybody. Granny's chair
Creaks, but it's Bathsheba. Fuzzy hair
Plowed, corn-rowed. The moon's a white hole in the sky,
Hard, blue, stitched with winter stars.

2.

Ellen's Granny plaits her hair. Talks the while.
Got your mother's mouse-brown, ain't you. No curl
Neither. Law mercy, a plainer girl

I never saw. Ellen stands. Lets Granny pull
Hard, harder, hardest, till her skull
Feels stretched, her forehead a white knuckle

Bound with hair. One braid's a meager handful.
Before last summer she had no Granny at all.
Ma took sick. Pa rode the mule to Nashville,

Brought back this Granny with her spiteful
 Hennish face. Her down-mouth. Loving trouble,
 Nursing sorrow, milking anybody's soul

For venom. *Now, your ma, she wadn't beautiful
 Or even pretty. Or nothing but a fool.
 She wadn't fit for nothing useful—*

*She couldn't of raised you. The fingers pull
 Ellen's hair tighter. Don't you howl.
 I'll yank you bald, missy. I will.*

Ellen hears the March rain rattle
 At the windows like handfuls of gravel
 She throws to shoo the chickens. A feeble

Light hangs in the sky. The green-tailed, evil-
 Eyed rooster drips on the fencerail.
 Pa cleans his gun. Granny says, *Hold still.*

3.

Shot him, that's what she did. Squeezed the stiff
 Trigger as if she were milking. Saw him startle
 As he did his buttons up. His knees buckle.
 A rose bloom through his butternut jacket.
My God, ma'am. How could he call her *ma'am*
 When she's only nineteen? A spinster girl.
 How old was he? He fixed his blue eyes,
 Mild as water, on her face. Then he died.

She had to flush Bathsheba from the woods.
Help me dig this hole. Bathsheba shaking,
 Clutching her calico. *Dig,* I said.
Them others might come back. In the end
 She dibbled it herself. Since then,
 Bathsheba's useless, almost. Goes fishing

Because she feels like it, not because she's told.
Dredges bream in the last cornmeal.

Bony fish, bream. Not much flesh.
White bones like splinters in the mouth.
When it rains, Ellen hates to glance
Outside, afraid the winter mud
Might be afloat with things she'd recognize.
Flotsam and jetsam of what she did.
I'm not sorry. He had it coming.
Picks the sharp, translucent bones from her tongue.

4.

Suddenly the brown woods blush
With redbud, subtle and purplish

As the burn on Ellen's left cheek,
A puffed mauve lip, misplaced. Granny's tonic

For sore udders—beeswax and goose-grease
—can't rub it out, can't erase

What made it. Bathsheba's hand
Closing on the poker. In the end

Ellen had pulled it from the fire to make
Bathsheba mind again. Remember her work

For once instead of purely disappearing
With her fishing pole and crawlers of a morning,

Coming home when she pleased. Ellen said,
Ain't nobody set you free. You'd be dead

Day after tomorrow, without me
Keeping you. Bathsheba didn't say

Nothing. Took the poker. Touched the red
Tip to the white face. Then fled.

5.

All night she thinks she hears something cry
Lynx Baby Starving barn cat
Turning over she mutters *Let it die*.

It wails and wails Bathsheba's blankets lie
Empty She tries not to think of that
All night she does think Hears the thing cry

In the woods as if it meant to mortify
What's left of the world Her wool blanket
Over her head she mutters *Let it die*

Now please sweet Jesus The chilly sky
Shivers above the roof Keeps silent
All night She thinks *If I could cry*

I'd drown in tears Eyes gritty-dry
Is it abandoned Beaten *God shoot*
It she mutters turning *It's bound to die*.

She can't think of going out to see Die
Herself most likely trying And for what
She sits up Listens to it cry

I'll go out and see come day
Everything looks better by sunlight
How would it look now Cry cry
Poke the fire See it lick Let it die

6.

Nobody to hunt the deer they fatten
on apples Ellen's apples that she owns

Not that apples mean much Not gladly
gladly means feeling *unresistingly*

Ellen lets the deer browse Can't make herself
 lift down the shotgun again from its pegs

over the fireplace Crack it
 open slide a shell home

If there were any left Too much
 Trouble And nowadays weakening she

Can't think about blood
 And who'd butcher it No-good Bathsheba

Claps her hands to her mouth Not that
 They're not hungry They're always hungry

But hunger's less work than
 What it takes to be satisfied At daybreak

The deer step among the crabbed old
 Trees stretching their girlish muzzles soft

As gloves to reach apples the wind
 Hasn't yet shaken free

7.

on its high foundations the house rides
 floods of winter grass dry-brown
 as watermarked muslin when the wind
 passes through ellen dreams she hears
 granny walk from room to room her dark skirts
 muttering like wind in the grass
 what isn't on its way someplace else
 no telling what bathsheba dreams do
 they dream ellen wonders sitting up
 sometime before dawn hearing whimpering

from the pallet by the door is it like
dogs' dreams all chasing never catching
her own dreams only repeat
things that can never be again
ham on the table steam rising
granny saying *honey marry that one.*
with your face you're not bound to do
better in this life now that one's dead.
this one run away another shot
deserting at manassas death cowards
now no news at all not even smoke
on the brown winter air all the world's
turned sepia its own daguerrotype
the house fades into a vague background of trees
fence collapses smokehouse door hangs
on one hinge the mule's harness
stiffens on its peg inside unseen
ellen and bathsheba lie down
not speaking each in her own place
waiting for the night to shut her eyes

Conversation

by A. M. THOMPSON

My language draws your vision into mine.
I watch you listen quiet as a net
until your silence pulls me, intertwines
and tangles meaning, disconcerting, whets
my closest hope that single soul was two
and sown apart, unknowing to today:
a unity again. Long felt but new,
unworded lifelong, only now betrayed
by speaking spaces. Speak aloud I will:
The will to tell my nearest feelings out
determines, falters, fails, and closes still.
That was so near expression, nearer doubt.
An instant alters silent meaning down
to unvoiced love and solitary sound.

Blueberries

by JANE VICK

I'm picking blueberries, (she said to me)
tomorrow morning
until I don't know when
and she became June too, for a moment.

all her pink, and lavender,
her summer-colored hair and
heartshaped face
peeked out,
into the evening.

I was reminded, again
of flowers and of blue,
of the ways which we can be
on a warm early morning

when berry juice has stained our fingers
the sun painting our clothes white
and our shoulders
olive brown

(when she left, what remained
were the colors, and temperatures,
of the June evening that enclosed her)
and the reminder
of blueberries.

Lines On A Silent Storm

by MARY JESSICA WOODS

Silent lightnings flashing forth
From a hazy womb of cloud—
Mute cries of light.
Instant white, bright, flickers of pain,
Momentary scarlet seams,
As if of the anguish of a nebula,
The toil of eons and of primal fire,
Morphed to a moment.
A series of eerie splendors
That rise from the heat-thick dark to glimmer and glower,
To taste the air with quick, crooked snakes' tongues.
Oh, the silent and hammering light.
Fire born of water,
Vapor-sparked flames,
Beat away at the night.
Your cloud comes not here.

Snowy Stanzas

by CHANGMING YUAN

December

As the sun sinks deeper every day
Into the other side of the world
The shadow is getting longer, darker
Making our lives slant more and more
Towards night, when nature
Tries to balance yin and yang
By covering each dark corner
With white snowflakes
Ever so softly, quietly

As each twig frowns hard at twilight
Why not give it smile and thus
Book a space in heaven?

January

Standing alone
At this coldest spot of the doorway
You pause, wondering which door to
Knock at, which to
Push or pull
So you can go inside
A warm room where you know
You cannot stay for the whole year
Nor would you come out of the same door
But which to enter:
The narrow door with a wide exit
Or the wide one with a narrow exit?

February

Rolling, flowing, dripping
From the palest memories of last year

The melting snow stops moving
But hung everywhere
Like crystals
Against the freezing fits of frantic winds

With the moon always broken
In this shortest month of the pearl
No love can be purified
No couple can enjoy a full honeymoon

Part II

FICTION

A literary work of art is mimetic: it imitates an action. However, the action imitated is not the external face of deed and activity, but the inner action of the heart, a “movement-of-spirit” located in the mysterious depths of the human person.

The Adventures of Sir Angst of Morosia, Part II: In Which Sir Angst Battles a Dragon and Gains a Boon

by THOMAS R. CHANEY

Sir Angst was traveling down a not-smooth road to a hole in the ground to do battle with the most bored dragon in all the realm: Anwe the Apathetic. This quest was a burden laid upon him by Alice's fairy godmother as proof of his not-base character and not-ignoble intentions. Her true name was unpronounceable to those unable to see sounds, but the men of the realm preferred to call her Mentis.

He wasn't sure about the not-pleasant revelation that Alice had a fairy for a mother. He had nothing against fairies generally speaking, however he had misgivings about pursuing a lady related to one. They were always popping by at odd times and they never bothered to warn you. Furthermore, he had heard that those raised by fairy godmothers tended to be emotionally stunted, always relying on magic to save them from the consequences of their actions. They also, he had found, tended to carry a sort of entitlement mentality when it came to courtship. They almost always expected men to limit their immediate self-interest and consider factors beyond personal gratification. Angst had always found this to be a particularly not-not-unpleasant thing, and yet here he was. Trailing a bored dragon on one of the most unscenic and unremarkable routes in all the realm. If there was a God, Angst felt that he could not justly be blamed for deserting this place.

The lovely transportation and accommodation arrangements provided by the Scholarly Warriors Guild had ill prepared him for this journey. There was no divan carried about by servants. In fact he found himself walking about on his feet as though he were a peasant. Gone were the morning, mid-morning, afternoon and mid-afternoon tea intervals and the lovely card games that often accompanied them. Gone too were the jams, jellies and exotic cheeses that soothed his hunger and pleased his palate. Instead he had a package of week-old pepperonis, some slightly moldy cheese and matzo crackers. Thinking

of those bygone days of yore caused a not-happy sensation to arise in his stomach. He had been on the journey for five whole hours, perhaps it was time to eat. He sat down and took out his provisions to break his fast. He stared blankly at the dusty ground before him, slowly becoming aware of a not-present element. Previously when he had to set out to consume nourishment there had been a sheet already there on which to place the food. He suddenly came to the realization that the sheet did not always and simply arise as a byproduct of his desire to eat. But if that was the case, how could the sheet have been there all those many other times? This was yet another of life's deep mysteries that he stored for later pondering, but for now he tended to think it was Mentis' fault. In the meantime he found a few not-smooth rocks and arranged them into a sort of makeshift coffee table. He also noticed that eating was a much more mundane task without a minstrel to sing a merry song to him. Life on the road is filled with many hardships, Angst had concluded.

Out of the corner of his vision he saw a largish troll carrying a club of not-soothing size in his hands. He had a not-satiated look in those bulbous protrusions, and he gazed upon Angst's meager provisions with an almost lascivious countenance. Angst was a man who was enthusiastic about few things, but the fundamental right of individuals to own and protect their private property was one of them. The unfortunate brute had probably never encountered civilized folk before, and so was unenlightened about his moral imperative to go hungry rather than violate a universal law of human nature. He could not of course be held culpable for this, for he had never had a chance to hear these sensible words emitted from Angst's scholarly mouth and so was not malicious but simply ignorant and wrong-headed. Angst would now rectify that situation with one of his lectures: Private Property and Man in His Natural State. He opened his mouth to speak. Unfortunately, however, he was quite hungry and thus his arms embraced his provisions and moved them toward his chest in a not-unprotective way. He tried to say something about how private property is a sacred thing that no individual or government has the right to seize without due cause, but the only words that came out of his mouth were: "No, my pepperoni and crackers!"

The troll looked at him somewhat quizzically, with an expression that expressed stoicism and a twinkle in his eyes that suggested amusement. “Yours? By what right do you claim them to be yours?”

A common objection, Angst had found in his many travels, and one which could easily be refuted. Since his bowels were protesting a certain absence, however, he decided to persuade on the basis of common convention. “Well, I bought them when I was passing through Resignation, you see, and in the land of Morosia if you buy something then it’s yours. Do you follow?”

The troll held back and gave off a hearty laugh that sounded more akin to mockery than Angst would have liked. “Indeed I do, weakman, indeed I do. But I am stronger than you, and could gain your prize for myself if I so desired. How then can you claim that these are yours if I have the power to take them from you.”

This troll was an odd sort, and Angst was beginning to dislike his inane logic. “You could very well take them from me by force, however that would not change the fact that they belong to me. Private property, you see, is the heart of every human endeavor, and it is unjust to unlawfully dep-ACK!”

The troll, you see, had suddenly lunged at Sir Angst at a not-unhasty pace, grabbing his throat in the process and holding it with fingers that resembled giant sausages (if, that is, giant sausages possessed tendons that felt as though they could crack a walnut). “I know very well of your human laws, and they disgust me. You embrace the weakness of your laws while I use the strength of my arms. I have had many chances to see which is the stronger in these parts. So far, your ways have proven far less effective than mine.”

Suddenly he thought that Mr. Troll’s face looked very amusing, but as his field of vision began receding he thought that this might be a momentary euphoria caused by a lack of oxygen. He began to gesture toward the food lying below his dangling feet. The troll looked even more amused than before, and suddenly took on a sardonic expression in his countenance.

“You’re offering it to me? Oh, how gracious of you sir, to think of me in my lowly state.” His expression had changed back to menacing, although his giant sausage fingers had relaxed a bit around his neck.

Angst managed to summon up enough breath to say a few dry words. "I'm not offering all of it, I'm simply offering to share. Of course, I'd respectfully request that you let go of me in reciprocation."

The troll looked quizzical once again, although whether he was considering the statement or simply drawing out the torture Angst was not entirely sure. "Share? I have heard of this thing. It is a way you weakmen have of stealing from your betters through trickery. Still, I am quite hungry, and it has been a while since I have had anyone to talk to." He stared into his eyes with a questioning gaze. "I will let you live, for now. But know this, weakman, I will not share anything of mine own with you."

Angst sighed. "That is perfectly acceptable." The dumb beast probably had nothing worth sharing anyway.

After they had satiated themselves sufficiently to loosen their tongues, Sir Angst thought it might be an opportune moment to inquire after his dinner guest who had so recently tried to kill him. "So...what is it you do exactly?" Angst inquired.

"Me? Why, I am a professor of law at Morosia University."

Angst found that notion highly doubtful. Being a Morosia man himself, he doubted that their standards had dropped so low that they were accepting trolls. Still, a man who was on a quest to slay an apathetic dragon and had previously so valiantly defended the fourth wall ought not be too skeptical of implausible developments. "Really? I actually graduated from Morosia U, with honors, actually. I was also the captain of the rowing team."

The troll looked at him with a look of earnestness for a moment, then smiled broadly. "I'm joking you fool. Gods, you weakmen are gullible, but you are the most gullible one I have ever met. To think, a troll being a professor at a university! Next you'll tell me that not all small people are elves! Hraw!"

In fact, as Angst had painfully learned through a lesson involving a straight-razor, that last statement was true. But it would've been considered rude to contradict his guest in his joke. The troll continued. "No, I suppose according to your weakmen customs I don't really do anything, except sleep and hunt for food. I used to live with a community of trolls, but they found my opinions unpleasant and disturbing."

Angst could understand how that might be the case, and found sympathy with their judgment. “They didn’t respect my strength or my honesty, and so they banished me because they were jealous. Now I just roam the countryside, seeking what or whom I may devour.” This conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn. The troll noticed his unease. “Be at peace, weakman, I don’t eat dinner guests. I do have some standards. Anyway, what is it exactly that you, um, do?”

“I used to be a Steward in the Department of Scholarly Warfare, but the war has taken a nasty turn and the kingdom needed me as a soldier. That didn’t work out, however, as it seems that I was far too brave for their needs and so they let me go. I then met a woman who is, well, really quite ample in certain key areas. Then I met her fairy godmother, who tasked me with slaying a dragon in these parts. I was on a journey to the Cave of Crushed Dreams for that very reason when I encountered you.”

The troll was silent for a moment, and then spoke. “I see. Well, seeing as I’m not doing anything better, would you mind if I accompanied you on your quest? I haven’t killed anything worth killing in quite some time, and I have a feeling that this would be a refreshing change of pace for me.”

Angst thought about this for a moment. On the one hand he was quite an irascible sort, but then again the road does become quite lonely when one is alone. “I don’t see why not. If we are to travel together, however, there are two things that I require: first I must know what I can call you, and second You must allow me to slay the dragon myself so as to prove my worth.”

The troll chuckled at this. “As for the second condition you need not worry, weakman, I detest dragons. Pacifists, they call themselves, they’re nothing but damn cowards. As to the first, you may call me by name, Nitchy the Glorious.”

“You have added Nitchy to your party!” A voice exclaimed from above. Was it the narrator? What does that even mean? Angst chided himself for his momentary lapse into internal monologue.

He looked up, and saw Mentis descending from the sky with her usual mischievous face. “Great. Let me guess. You’re my guide?”

Mentis touched down and lit up a cigarette. “Look,” she exhaled, taking her first puff. “I’m not happy with this either. I don’t really like you, to be honest I think you’re kind of a schmuck. But Alice seems quite taken with you, and I don’t think your sorry arse has what it takes to slay a dragon, bored or no. So I’m here to make sure you make it out of this in one piece. Clear?”

Angst took a moment to stare at the chain-smoking, winged silhouette standing before him. Having a fairy for a guide was vexing to be sure. Yet there seemed to be something not-un-useful about her, and if he had any hope of gaining Alice he would have to learn to tolerate Mentis. “I don’t like your meddling ways, fairy. Still, I suppose you might be able to offer some not-unconstructive tips as I go about my quest. I suppose I would not object to having you as a helper.”

Mentis gave him one of the most derisive smiles Angst had ever seen, and then gave a bow that seemed less-than-sincere. “Oh, you are most gracious, good sir. I’ll try not to cramp your style overly much. You should be grateful, it’s not easy being a single fairy godmother. I’ve taken time out of my busy schedule to be with you today, time that could most likely be more productively spent elsewhere.”

Angst was growing annoyed with her impertinent attitude. If she kept up with it, he might even tell her that. “Well, since you’re helping and all, any suggestions as to the best way to slay the dragon?”

Mentis blew a hearty puff of second-hand smoke his way. “Slow down there, Galahad. You’re not just going into any dragon’s lair, you’re navigating the Cave of Crushed Dreams.”

Angst had a sneaking suspicion that he was about to enter into one of those pesky expository conversations that were always the bane of quests like this one. “Pray tell, Oh wise fairy, what is so special about the Cave of Crushed Dreams?”

“I’m glad you asked, oh noble knight.” There was that almost mocking tone again that Angst so heavily disliked. “Thousands of years ago, when the Passions still roamed the earth—”

“If you don’t mind, could we skip the flashbacks and go straight to the relevant part? This is my personal opinion, of course, but I find that flashbacks are for amat-”

“The Cave of Crushed Dreams was built in primordial times by the daemon Melancholia to test the inner strength of mortals. There are three trials every knight hoping to gain entrance must undergo: Strength, Love and Mortality. To date no mortal knight has ever completed all three trials.”

“Until now, that is.” Angst had been rehearsing that line for years now, he was gratified by the opportunity to finally use it. Mentis, however, looked rather nonplussed.

“Well, no mortal knight has ever been aided by me. You’re lucky that Alice favors you. With my assistance and the help of that rather large friend of yours you might manage to not make a complete fool of yourself.”

Now it was Angst’s turn to feel nonplussed. “Shall we to the cave, then?”

Mentis threw her cigarette to the ground and put it out with her combat boots. “Yes, let’s get this over with.”

An indeterminate amount of time passed until finally they reached the mouth of the cave. There was a plaque on the wall to the entrance of the cave that read:

TO ALL VISITORS: Welcome to the Cave of Crushed Dreams, a historic relic from the primordial age of Morosia’s past. We hope you enjoy your quest to this place, but please be aware that there are a few guidelines for visiting this site: 1) No littering. We’ve been finding a lot of candy wrappers. No one’s trying to point fingers here, Lloyd, but we know it’s you and it’s not funny, so stop it. 2) Only one boon per knight, be a caring looter and leave some booty for the next wayfarer. 3) Mind the dragon. Thank you for your consideration

—The Morosia Tourism Board

“I thought you said that no mortal knight had ever completed all three trials.” Unlike the masses, who took in lies as others did opiates, Angst did not like being deceived.

“Did I? It must have been a slip of the tongue, or perhaps something to make you feel a bit nobler about your quest.”

Angst felt sufficiently noble already, he didn’t need a fairy’s compliments to boost his not-small ego. He decided to let this insult pass, however, so that he could attend to the business at hand. The mouth

of the cave was completely obstructed by some kind of stony wall, with a rather large boulder standing slightly to the right of it. “Any suggestions, Oh deceptive one, as to how one is to remove this rocky obstruction?”

“It’s no mere obstruction, Angst, it’s a gate. This is the test of Strength. In order to open the gate, you must push that boulder up that rocky incline over there.” She gestured toward the keystone of the cave entrance, where a spiraling path had been dug from there to the boulder.

Angst looked at the boulder with a not-unintimidated look, and wondered how his waifish figure could accomplish this. “Very well, then. I shall do this task, just as I shall with the other two.”

“Are you sure you can do this by yourself, weakman? It looks a very largish rock, and you are not a largish man.”

Angst waved him off with a hand. “Do not fear, noble Nitchy. Though my size may not communicate this, I actually possess a not-inconsiderable strength in these arms of mine. Stay here and watch me perform this feat.”

Mentis and Nitchy watched and waited. And waited. And waited. Angst stressed and strained every muscle of his body for what seemed like hours. Step by step, inch by inch, the boulder was slowly but surely moving upward. Finally, as it was nearing sunset, he finally reached the summit of the path. Angst felt a not-inconsiderable amount of pride and accomplishment at performing this grand deed. His self-satisfaction quickly faded however as the boulder very quickly rolled back down the hill to its starting-point at the mouth of the cave. Angst did not cry, though that seemed a not-implausible reaction given the circumstances. “How...disconcerting,” he said with a slight tremble in his voice.

Mentis noted his upset with a look approaching a mild concern. “Come on, Angst. You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you? The hill is shaped in such a way that the boulder rolls back down as long as you’re not pushing it.”

Angst stared at her in angry disbelief. “You mean to tell me that this hill is built so that the task cannot be completed. That’s unfair! That’s cheating!” His eyes filled up with the moisture of righteous anger.

Mentis stared back at him, stoic as ever. “The boulder isn’t unfair, and it isn’t fair. It simply is.”

Angst was growing tired of Mentis and her damned riddles. “Alright, then, how in the bloody hell am I supposed to pass this trial?”

Mentis crossed her arms and put a mischievous smile on her face. “Not in the way that you think. Look, Angst, I don’t approve of hand-holding, even among those I favor. I will give you a hint: You cannot hope to defeat the boulder. You therefore must simply accept it, and try to work around it.”

Angst searched through the corridors of his mind for a possible solution. Nitchy could certainly try his hand at moving the boulder, but he would face the same depressing results in the end. Then he had a sudden idea. “Nitchy? Could you possibly keep the stone wall from closing after I put the boulder up the hill?”

Nitchy eyed the stony gate for a few moments, possibly analyzing its strength. “For a long time? No, weakman, I cannot do that. I could possibly keep it open long enough for you to gain entry however.”

Angst thought about this for a moment. “Let’s try it. At the very worst, we will end this trial none the better for having tried it.”

Mentis rolled her eyes and lit up another cigarette.

Angst clambered down to the summit of the hill, took a moment to collect himself, and began pushing the boulder. “Urgh, Nitchy, be ready to hold that gate open as soon as I get this back up!”

“Very well, weakman, I will wait for you until then.”

Angst heaved the boulder up the hill with greater effort than before. It felt as though every tendon was about to snap this time. He finally got it back up the hill again, and Nitchy moved toward the entrance to hold the gate in place.

“I’m holding the gate, hurry weakman!”

Angst motioned to Mentis to finish her cigarette as he jumped over the arch to squeeze through the gate while the boulder moved downhill once again. The gate was bearing down on the troll’s shoulders halfway by the time Angst went through. “Mentis! Hurry!”

Nitchy was grunting heavily now. “Coming!”

Mentis somersaulted through the not-large aperture and gained entrance. She lit up another cigarette. "You're not as dim as you look Angst."

Angst wasn't sure how to take compliments from Mentis, especially when they sounded so much like insults. "What exactly do you mean, Oh noble fairy?"

Mentis stared at him for a moment in disbelief. "What? You mean you completed the task and you don't even know the moral of it?"

"I thought that's why you're here. Why should I bother about the moral when you can easily explain it for me? Isn't that your purpose?"

Mentis took another puff, scowled, and rolled her eyes. "Jiminy Christmas, I was wrong. You are as dim as you look, but extremely lucky nonetheless. The point of the task is to show you that although life is full of toil, there are still friends who can help you shoulder the burden. There, happy now?"

Angst looked at her with a look of self-satisfaction. "Indeed I am. If the other tasks are as relatively simple as this, I should be in Alice's loving arms in no time."

"Slow your roll there, Lancelot. That was the easiest task. The two others will be much harder, I assure you."

"However difficult they may be, I'm sure I can meet the challenge." Thus they went on their way, groping in the darkness in the Cave of Crushed Dreams.

As they went their winding way through the descending darkness, Angst thought it might be worthwhile to ease the tension of the party by engaging Mentis in what common folk call 'not-large talk.'

"So tell me, O enchanted one: What is going to occur when I reach the second trial, that of love?"

Mentis sighed and lit another cigarette. "The trial of Love is guarded by an ancient sorceress named Decepta. She told the world's first lie, and brought the shadow world into being in the process. As punishment, she was cursed with the task of weighing the heart of many a wayward adventurer."

Angst disliked magic in all its forms, not merely in practice but in principle. Magic by its very nature was quite erratic and irrational, and he had been taught over many years to equate rationality with good-

ness. He had won many intellectual battles over the years by arguing that a thing is only good if rationally understood, for a thing can only be good if it is perceived as good by a conscious subject. *If a tree falls in the forest and I don't hear it*, Angst had argued, *it doesn't matter*. “Very well, then. How and in what way will I be tested? Would you grace me with that information, prithee?”

Mentis gave that demure half-bow again. “Gladly.” She took another drag of her tar. “Decepta has a special spell she uses on you adventurous types, a very elaborate illusion.” She laughed a bit to herself, then cleared her throat and continued. “She will take the form of the one you love most, through a spell she calls ‘Affair of Despair.’ And,” she smiled what appeared to Angst to be a very grim smirk. She took another deep drag before beginning again. “Well, you wouldn’t believe the rest even if I told you. Oh look, a light at the end of the tunnel. We must have made progress over the course of our conversation. Ain’t exposition grand?” She patted Angst on the back in a sardonic gesture of friendship. “Well,” he sighed, “at the very least it’s a decent way to pass the time when nothing else is happening.”

He grabbed his sword hilt. Perhaps he could seize this Decepta and force her to yield before she even had a chance to conjure her malicious conjuration. As he came closer toward the light, however, it grew increasingly bright, eventually blinding even the outer limits of his field of vision. Nevertheless, he kept moving forward though the blinding light.

Suddenly he regained his vision and found himself standing in a not-large amphitheater, with colourful walls emblazoned with red and yellow geometric shapes behind him and an audience bench to the front of him. Seated in the audience bench were Nitchy and Mentis, the latter in the process of lighting another cigarette. “How did you two even get over there? You were two lengths behind me a moment ago.”

Mentis shrugged her shoulders while taking a puff. “We are precisely where we are meant to be, Angst. That’s life. Sometimes you move it, and sometimes it moves you. Try not to think about it overly much.”

Angst sighed, removing his hand from the sword hilt. Very well, he would resign himself to, well, whatever in bloody hell this is. He decided to look at the colourful set of red and yellow directly behind him. There was a small podium to the left and to the right two small sedan chairs with a wall separating them. Directly behind the podium was an obnoxious circular logo, with a red circle and yellow letters that somehow glowed, emblazoned with the words *Affair of Despair*.

Behind the podium was a man with a disturbingly cheery smile on his face that suggested perhaps he was a bit too happy to be here. “Hello, everyone, and welcome to *Affair of Despair*, the most existentially depressing contest in all of Morosia. Our latest competitor is a swarthy man from the land of Morosia and valiant defender of the fourth wall of Resignation. Please give it up for, SIR ANGST!” Angst saw a strange sign that flashed the word “APPLAUSE” directly above his head.

Nitchy and Mentis waved their complimentary flags while very stoically exclaiming “yay”.

“Now, Angst, you will soon have conversation with someone who will take on the form of the one you love most. The trick of this game: You will not recognize this person with eyes or ears. This yonder wall will partition your faces, and your beloved’s voice will be warped beyond recognition through the power of magic.” He flashed that pearly white and eerily joyful smile again. “Let’s get started.”

Angst positioned himself to the chair on his far right beyond the aforementioned partitioning wall. He was not perturbed in the slightest degree. Grand illusions or no, he knew where his affections stood and to whom they were oriented. Though he obviously could not see her face or discern her voice, he knew without a doubt that it would be Alice on the other side of yonder partition. Speak of the maiden; he thought he had just heard her approach the other side of the wall and seat herself at the opposing chair.

“So,” the unrecognizable voice began with what sounded like a hint of nervousness, “what shall we talk about?”

Finally, a task that required his not-inconsiderable talent for verbal combat had come to him.

He began to expatiate upon various topics such as the proof of immortality within time apart from any considerations of an afterlife. He heard his companion giving sounds of mild assent here and there, and he thought for a moment about how eloquent he must have sounded at this time. He rather envied this doppelganger-Alice her ability to hear such clear and irrefutably rational truths coming from his not-unlearned mouth. He then began to talk about all the things he had accomplished (“valiantly defending the fourth wall,” “taming a savage troll,” “rolling a giant rock up a hill,” etc., etc...), hoping to impress her with romantic tales of his grand and heroic deeds. She gave somewhat milder sounds of assent this time, and seemed to have reached that level of intellectual overstimulation that the common folk call ‘boredom’. He decided to move on to his hopes, dreams and aspirations, which were many and far too involved to include in the telling of this story. At this turn he suddenly found that Alice had grown strangely enthusiastic at their conversation.

“I quite agree with you, that would be a thrilling and thoroughly heroic adventure to undertake. The quest you just mentioned, that is.”

Angst smiled at himself, Alice was proving to be quite eloquent at this moment.

A shrill bell suddenly sounded. The morbidly ecstatic host interrupted. “Sorry, lovebirds, but that bell means that we’ve reached the final round of our contest. Sir Angst, it is now up to you to decide: Who is this beloved with whom you’ve been having such a pleasant conversation?”

Angst did not show an ounce of hesitation in his response. It had to be his flaxen-haired beauty, with such a mind on her besides. It took quite a lot of intelligence to understand and admire rhetoric of Sir Angst’s caliber. He had not noticed that particular quality in her, previously, but he supposed that six hours is really a rather short time in which to truly know anyone. “It can only be one person in all of the realm. It is the golden-haired creature who stole my heart in Resignation. Erm, the town, that is. It can only be the pretty-eyed Alice.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mentis stooped in what was either a fit of coughing or laughing. He felt a deep and growing sense of disdain arise in his soul. Could he have possibly been mistaken?

Gods know it had never happened to him before, yet Angst could not in good conscience dismiss it as a philosophical possibility.

The host smiled that kind of delightedly sympathetic grin reserved for pitiable fools. “Ooo, so close! Remember, Angst, there is a certain bit of magic at work in these proceedings.”

“I don’t quite understand. The sorceress was meant to take the form of the one I love.”

The host put his index finger up from his cue cards in a gesture of pious correction. “Not quite, my noble friend. There’s a very important qualifier you’re missing when recollecting that statement. The sorceress will only take on the form of the one you love *most*. Sad to say, that person is not Alice. We’ll not leave you in suspense any longer though. Everybody give it up for, DECEPTA!”

Nitchy and Mentis waved their flags again with a flippant “yay”, although Mentis looked decidedly amused at this time. Decepta came out in her adopted appearance, and if Angst had had the capacity, his eyes would have quite rolled out of his head and onto the floor. The man he saw looked exactly like him, although he inexplicably wore a dark brown goatee upon his chin. He stood there for a moment in utter stupefaction, as though he had just become the butt of some supremely cosmic joke.

“You’re telling me that the one I love most is myself.”

The host gave him a condescending smile this time, and wagged his finger piously “Not quite. It’s really quite impossible to truly love yourself by yourself even with the strongest of magicks. You are rather in love with an image of yourself. After all, you don’t have the goatee of your ideal self. Which is really something you should consider, by the way.”

The moisture of righteous anger was soon found returning to the not-insensitive tear ducts of Sir Angst. He had tried to grow a goatee once, but despite 3 years of not shaving, he still had nothing to show for it except a bit of what the common folk call ‘peach fuzz’. He would, however, be thrice damned before he’d allow anyone to know that. “So,” he sighed, “the one I love most is a visage of myself with a beard, is that it? So I should just go home now, I suppose? I should just grow a beard,

buy myself a mirror and take it to church and make an honest glass out of it. Is that what I'm supposed to do?"

"Not quite, my good sir. The magic of the Cave of Crushed Dreams is more reformatory than it is punitive in nature. Don't be too discouraged. A vast majority of our contestants begin out of self-love. That is the first step on a much longer journey. It's not bad for a first step. But, as you can see, it makes for a rather disappointing destination. Love is something you may have in yourself, but it is not meant for yourself alone. Rather like a good story or a nice bottle of wine, it is a gift that one only truly enjoys by giving and sharing with others. We do, however, intend to send you on your way with a lovely parting gift, which might help you in your quest."

He handed him a rather light box, which Angst promptly opened. The box was entirely empty, save for an elegant note handwritten at the bottom. Angst picked it up and unfolded it. It read: *You have worth.*

"It's a box," Angst demurely declared. "What, pray tell, do I do with it?"

The host gave a short, derisive chuckle and then explained. "Why, you're supposed to put things in it of course!"

Angst felt very confused the more these explanations progressed. "Alright, fair enough. What sort of things?"

"Your things, if you have any. If not, ask someone else to share their things with you. Eventually, their things will become a part of your box, and you may be asked to share some of your things with someone else. That is the only stipulation of Dr. Arcus Pluvius' charity box: that you share as much as you have enjoyed. In this way you will go on in life, bearing boxes for one another. Now, I'm afraid you must be going, you have one more trial to complete before you face the dreaded beast Anwe!"

He cheerily gestured toward the exit door, where Angst found Nitchy and Mentis waiting for him.

"Angst, don't look so solemn," Mentis suggested, her face now taking on an almost maternal look.

"I made a complete and utter fool of myself. Here I am, the most egotistical knight in the entire realm! I had a pleasant encounter with

my beloved, who although a projection of me is somehow more handsome than I am! I failed the trial of Love. I, who should have been champion, could not get past mine own self to complete it. I should give up now and go home.” He bowed his head in defeat.

“If you’re worried about what I think you’re worried about, I kind of picked up on the fact that you were a tad enamored with yourself quite some time ago. But I think your heart’s in the right place, and at least now you see your error. Some knights never make it that far.” She patted him, awkwardly and lightly but kindly, on the head. “I think that there’s a part of you that could love Alice, perhaps sometimes even beyond yourself. Relax, our hearts have all been a little hollow at times.”

“Yes, indeed, weakman,” interjected Nitchy the Glorious. “Now, we had best get going, the trial of Mortality awaits.”

“Indeed, noble Nitchy, let us be off!” And so they went through the exit door to the amphitheater, and moved toward the third and final trial.

Sir Angst worked his way through the dark and winding corridor at a not-unhasty pace. Darkness gave way to darkness as he strode through the gloom. Finally he came upon a not-small gargoyle in the middle of a stony alcove, bearing a not-cheery expression upon his stony face. On the gargoyle’s chest was a stone medallion that bore the inscription: Ask me about the Trial of Mortality. Angst stirred his courage within himself, but was frustrated to discover himself not-unfrightened. Perhaps the courage would take a moment to warm itself up. He waited for a few indeterminate moments, yet still the courage was not present in him. He wished that he could be like one of the knights of legend, who faced peril with not an ounce of fear or fright.

Mentis lit another cigarette with a sardonic expression. “What are you waiting for Angst?” She exhaled in a puff of smoke.

“You know, on second thought, I’m not sure this was such a good idea. Perhaps we should head back home. I’ve still got some pepperoni and crackers, perhaps we could make a nice picnic to cap off our little adventure. What do you say?”

“Alright, if that’s what you want. I know Alice had her heart set on you, but I’m sure she’ll endure.” She flicked her cigarette in a gesture of intentional insincerity.

Damn her and her stupid riddles. Angst chided himself again for the lapse into internal monologue. These episodes are becoming more and more frequent. Stop it! “Well, you see, I did complete the first two trials. I don’t suppose that, well, I don’t suppose I could get, um, a prorated boon for this adventure?”

Mentis stared at him blankly as she took another drag off her tar. “I see. You want me to prorated my goddaughter? Are you serious?”

Angst was vexed by this fairy’s dense nature. He certainly did not give any indication in words or speech that he was jesting, and he did not have a reputation for making jokes in front of large and intimidating gargoyle statues. “Well, yes, I mean if that is possible. I understand there would be limitations, however I hardly think that weekend visitations are out of the quest—“

“No.”

There was that annoying word again, that monosyllabic utterance that irked him so much. “You have nothing more to say about the matter? A simple no is your answer?”

“Very astute, Sir Percival. See, the way these quests work, it’s all or nothing. You either complete the quest and get the girl, or you abandon it and get nothing.”

Angst sighed; these silly trials seemed to have no end. Although he was still quite frightened, he decided to grit his teeth and endure it. Perhaps the legendary courage of the knights of old would come later. “Very well, then. Um, Mr. Gargoyle sir, if you please, would you tell me about the Trial of Mortality?”

Suddenly fiery orbs of greenish-yellow light appeared in the previously hollow eye sockets of the gargoyle. “The Trial of Mortality is one which everyone must undergo but which no one truly knows. Your life will be weighed and measured. If it is determined you are worthy, you will be released. If not, you will be detained. Are you ready to begin?”

“I—I’m not sure, could you give me a moment to think about it?”

The gargoyle looked confused. “Invalid response. We shall begin the trial then.” Suddenly everything went dark around Angst and his companions.

When Angst regained his composure, he found that he was still in darkness, but was now enclosed inside a pinewood box. Upon further examination, Angst found that it was not unlike a coffin. He heard the faint sound of an organ playing in the background, mingled with murmurs and the smell of candles burning. Am I attending my own funeral? Angst wished to cry out in annoyance, but found that no sound was coming out of his mouth. Wonderful. It seems now that I am only capable of expressing myself in terms of internal monologue.

The crowd suddenly hushed as the minister began to say a few words. “Sir Angst of Morosia was a, truth be told, quite mediocre man of average to meager accomplishments. All in all, he will probably be missed for a short time, after which it will be as if he had never existed at all.” This man is a terrible preacher, he’s not saying anything nice about me at all. “He left behind no loved ones, and a small circle of friends who seemed to regard him with a moderate amount of affection. In summary, he was an unremarkable person who did many unremarkable things in an unremarkable way. Honestly, I don’t even really see the point of a funeral, since it is highly unlikely that any of us will truly mourn his passing.” Damn him! Just because my deeds were unremarkable in the general scheme of things doesn’t mean they were unimportant. They were, after all, tremendously important to me personally.

“We will now take a moment to hear testimony from friends of the deceased.”

He heard the sound of someone clearing their throat, and discerned that it was Mentis. “I didn’t know Angst for very long, and honestly would’ve known him for less than that if I had had anything to do with it. He seemed like an alright guy, it’s too bad that he’s dead.” I’m not dead! He would’ve screamed it, had not the magic of vokhalkhords been temporarily suspended from his throat.

Next was Nitchy. “Weakman made for an interesting companion. Not great, but interesting. I will be claiming his pepperoni and crackers, since it is unlikely he will ever have need of them again. Thank

you.” Damn it Nitchy, those are my pepperoni and crackers! I only agreed to share them with you, you’re not supposed to take them all.

Finally, he heard the voice of Alice. “The noble Sir Angst was a nice enough man, I suppose, though a bit on the waifish side for my taste. I would say more, but I’m afraid I must be off to get my hair trimmed. Goodbye Angst, sorry you’re dead, that’s a really terrible thing to happen to anyone.” No, this can’t be, this mustn’t be. I can’t die yet, I haven’t even truly lived.

Soon enough he was lowered into a small mound in the earth and buried. The burial was formal enough, yet there was a bit too much not-large talk for Angst’s taste. Soon enough, there was silence. The silence of the dead-dead-dead. Great, now even my internal monologue has an echo-echo-echo. Creepy-creepy-creepy. He tried to scratch at the interior of the coffin, but his perfectly-manicured nails did not make so much as a rip in its fabric. Damn me and my excellent hygiene-hygiene-hygiene! There must be some kind of way out of here-here-here. He fumbled around the coffin, looking for a loose board or some implement which could help him escape. Suddenly he found a spoon, to which a note was attached in illuminated script. *Do you want out? Then dig yourself out*, it read. Next to it was a shield on which was inscribed the words *Memento Mori*. At least he gained the boon of a shield that reminded him of his mortality, a reminder he would find unnecessary if he was unable to escape. Angst gave off a soundless sigh. Not many people are given the task of digging themselves out of their own graves, and probably fewer still were given a spoon with which to do so. Nevertheless, with a few stout thrusts of the spoon he was able to break through the wooden vessel, at which point a handful of dust and dirt fell directly into the confused Sir Angst’s mouth. He was not surprised to find that dirt tastes precisely how one would expect, though somehow he did not feel edified to have this particular theory confirmed. He began digging through the soil, which fortunately was still soft. He measured his life out with a coffee spoon. One hour gave itself into the next, and he kept digging and digging until he finally saw the first glimmer of light. He thought that he heard carnival music outside. Finally he had dug a big enough hole to pop his head out to the surface.

“What the bloody hell—” I can speak again. Yay! Damn it, stop with the internal monologue already! It was indeed a small carnival built into the Cave, complete with ferris wheel and funnel cake stand. He looked at the sign directly to the right of him, it read: *See the Astounding Living Dead Man!* Nitchy and Mentis were directly ahead, eating funnel cakes.

“Angst, you made it!” Mentis exclaimed.

“Where the hell am I?”

“The Carnival of Temporal Meaning.”

At this Angst stood himself up and threw the spoon to the ground in outrage. “I’ve been digging myself out of death with a spoon, and you tell me I’m at a carnival!”

“Yup, would you like the moral lesson now?”

Angst could feel more moisture of righteous indignation forming at his tear ducts. “Sure, why the hell not?”

“Life is full of striving, that’s what mortality is all about. Our lives are limited, and so occasionally we have to dig our way through and hope that it makes a lasting impression on those we love and those who love us.”

“This seems an awfully dreary lesson. Is there anything more to it, you know, beyond the striving and meaning and loved ones?” Mentis smiled mischievously at this. “There’s funnel cakes, would you like one?”

Angst didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry at this, so he decided to let forth a sort of chuckle-sob. “Give me a bloody funnel cake, and let’s go kill that dragon!” And so they ventured forth to slay the mighty dragon Anwe the Apatheficent.

As they approached the dragon’s lair, they saw a plaque before the entrance, it read:

Here lies Anwe the Apatheficent, the most bored dragon in all of Morosia. Enjoy slaying the dragon, but please do not use any flash photography while in the dragon’s lair (it ruins the mystique). If you wish to commemorate your experience, postcards and other memorabilia are available in the lobby. Have fun!

“I will accompany you for this journey, weakman. I love debating these pacifist simpletons, and mayhaps I might be able to distract him and leave him exposed.”

“Perhaps your mayhaps is correct, noble Nitchy. Very well, you shall come with me. What about you, Mentis? Mayhaps there is a moral message that you can explain to me.”

Mentis lit another cigarette and exhaled. “Think I’ll watch on the sidelines, you should have the hero’s glory and all that. Good luck slaying the dragon.”

As they walked towards the entrance Nitchy turned back and shouted: “Think it’ll work?”

Mentis responded by mouthing the words “It would take a miracle.”

The dragon was reclined on what appeared to be a rather not-small beanbag chair, and was pressing buttons on some brick-like object in front of some sort of enchanted screen which was displaying images of a sort. Angst took a moment to inspect this not-particularly-engaged creature. His scales were a kind of grayish shade, it looked like a mixture of dried out barley and tobacco ash. His eyes, which were violet, were glazed over such that the not-unperceptive Sir Angst concluded that he hadn’t slept for days. Otherwise, the dragon appeared very much as a stereotypical creature in the final stages of morbid obesity.

He examined the cave and quickly concluded that Anwe was very much a bachelor dragon. Around the beast and his enchanted screen were scattered various plates encrusted with food or a food-like substance as well as can after can of Draconis Cola (*Made with real dragonscale!*). In the corner of the cave were stacked a pile of not-round boxes that stretched from floor to ceiling, upon which were inscribed the words *Peasantworth Pizza—Because you want it!*

Angst noticed the not-entirely conscious dragon looking at him with a look of morose curiosity, or perhaps it was curious morosity, he couldn’t quite discern which.

“Are you the pizza guy?” the dragon inquired, with a barely interested tone.

“No, um,” Angst replied with a not-calm stutter. “You see, I’m Sir Angst of Morosia, former Steward for the Department of Scholarly Warfare and valiant defender of the fourth wall.”

The not-impressed dragon glared at him blankly. “Yeah. So what?” He replied.

Angst was growing quite tired of having to explain himself to every Thomas, Richard and Harold that he encountered on this damned quest. “Well, you see, this might seem a bit awkward and/or a bad time, but...” Angst found himself struggling with words. He honestly did not expect it to be so difficult to announce his intention to slay the flying lizard, but on the other hand he hadn’t anticipated the medium taking the form of a conversation.

“What are you getting at?” the dragon pressed on with his gaze, not-unsuspiciously. “Are you doing a petition? Because I’m not interested in signing anything. Leave me a pamphlet and I’ll think about it. You can go away now.” The dragon turned its eyes from Angst to the screen in a not-undismissive gesture.

Nitchy clapped his hand on the nonplussed Sir Angst’s shoulder. “He has come to slay thee, you filthy pacifist!” He shouted. The dragon did not so much as turn his face from the screen. “Oh, yeah? Well, now’s not a good time. I’ve almost leveled up and I’m not at a good stopping place. Sooo...sorry to disappoint, but I’m going to have to decline. As for my beliefs on war and violence, that’s just your opinion dude. I have my reasons for my positions on the issues, same as you.”

Nitchy looked very not-pleased by this reaction. “Oh I see, because there have to be some very compelling ‘reasons’ for why the most majestic beasts on earth became a bunch of gutless cowards with no regard for their own strength!”

At this point the dragon stood upright, revealing a fleshy torso beneath his white t-shaped upper tunic. “That’s the sort of answer I’d expect from a troll. You guys are a bunch of warmongering morons who are blind to your manipulation by the military-industrial complex.” At this point a shield from out of the darkness flew towards the beast and dinged the serpent upon the head, having seemingly no effect and subsequently flying off into the darkness. “Ow! I’m a dragon you jerk. My armor’s too thick for even the sharpest of weapons. Not that I’m surprised, alphas like you always resort to violence when challenged about your narrow-minded worldview.”

At this point Mentis stepped into the circle of light from the screen and lit up another cigarette, exhaling with gusto. “Oh right, and you dragons are freethinkers who see things clearly as they are. Admit it,” she took another long and satisfying drag from her smoke, “you’re as deluded as your pusillanimous accusations. Just another soft-bellied coward rationalizing your soft belly.”

The dragon stretched himself in a pose of righteous indignation, revealing yet more pink flesh beneath his tunic. “You both are so ignorant I’m surprised you even got here. I could cite study after study that supports my positions on passive resistance, but I’ll break it down in terms even your simple minds can understand. Consider Kensington’s Conundrum, which clearly states that if us dragons were to continue their warmongering ways they would eventually reach a z-OW!” The impact of that same shield against his chest prompted the dragon’s outcry, with no damage done again and the same ricochet into the inky blackness of the cave. The dragon sent his protest into the void. “DUDE! I just bought this shirt a few years ago, you ripped it! Whatever though, karma will even the score one of these days. Anyway, I’m not surprised you think I’m delusional. The light of truth is always blinding to those who live in the cave of ignorance. You would have us chained to that cave, worshipping the shadows.”

Mentis took another strong and hearty puff. “You can pretty it up with whatever flowery words you like, but it all comes down to the same thing. You have no soul down there, deep down in your guts where it counts.”

“The fairy is right, you lavender-tongued worm!” Nitchy interjected. “You have no guts. I’ll bet if someone were to pierce your bowels with a sharp object such as a shield, they would find nothing inside save more soft pink flesh.” Nitchy raised his voice on this last sentence and projected, as if to emphasize his point.

At this stage the dragon rolled his eyes and was now standing fully upright in a fury. “Right. Because passive resistance is always going to seem like weakness to you people. In reality, us dragons are far stronger than your sort can ever hope to be. We don’t have to swing swords to know we’re right, and we reinforce our arguments rather than r-AAAAHRGGHHH!!!” The dragon was screaming in pain, and

both Mentis and Nitchy looked forward to find Sir Angst's *Memento Mori* shield lodged in the belly of a pacifist.

The dragon groaned for an indefinite moment and then expired. Mentis twirled around to Angst and gave him a godmotherly kiss on the cheek. "Angst, you clever idiot!" She exclaimed. "Whatever possessed you to do that?"

The not-ignorant Sir Angst replied with a certain degree of not-modesty: "I took an introductory course on dragonology in my years as a Junior Steward, and one of the first principles is that pink scales reveal the creature's weak spot." Angst smiled broadly, and Mentis and Nitchy exchanged a knowing and sardonic glance.

Nitchy looked upon him with a look approaching pride. "A worthy kill, weakman. Now Mentis, if you wouldn't mind reviving the creature so we can get out of here."

Angst was beginning to feel nonplussed again, a not-unsurprising sensation of not-not-unpleasant proportions at this particular moment. "Wait, so you're going to revive him? Then what in the bloody hell did I kill him for?"

Mentis gave him an affectionate pat on the head. "To prove your worth, Angst. And you have. That was a good move, and you're occasionally a clever man. Dense sometimes, but clever at others." She moved over to the creature, laying her hands upon its carcass and whispering arcane words in a strange accent. "There's one difference, though," she gave Angst a wink. "We're stealing this one. You wouldn't mind giving us a lift since I resurrected you and all, right?"

Anwe the Apatheficent stared at her blankly. "Sure. Why not? It's not like I have anything better to do." "Very well," Mentis replied. "Are you ready Angst?" Angst gave a not-unhappy sigh and then spoke. "Very good, let's go." They rode off into the sunset, not realizing that they had inadvertently begun the second War of the Dragons.

Like to Skeletons

by IRENE L. PYNN

There is a tombstone at the far end of the cemetery that never collects moss. Its face never dulls with neglect. Its pebbles never shift in the wind and rain.

You could walk across the dry and tangled lawn—manicured by the blind caretaker who lives on site—and stumble over a hundred forgotten stones—tended by Victorian ghosts alone—but never see a single flower. Not a vase, not a rose bud, not a potted offering. You wouldn't even spy a wildflower among the withered loneliness of the graveyard. Nothing grows. All is death and lost remembrance.

Except for the tombstone at the far end.

Keep walking, though the obscurity of death will threaten to overpower you, whispering that, yes, someone will mourn you when you die, but very soon after you will dissolve into nothing, both in form and thought. In time no one will be able to decipher the name on your stone, and then your existence will truly end.

And then your afterlife must begin.

But keep walking. There is a light at the end of this graveyard. Propped against the ancient, rusted fence stands the marker for the only remembered bones we know. It practically glows with the affection it receives, standing out like the warning of a lighthouse amid the dark confusion of restless waters. There is a keen jealousy that engulfs the forgotten dead when they lie near someone who is still loved by the living. They would drown in their envy if they could die.

The simple stone at the far end reads *Heath Alan, loving fiancé. I will see you again in Heaven*. Its plot features a flattened patch of grass next to a regularly-renewed supply of the only flowers to be seen on the grounds. We watch each night for the flattened patch to even out. We look each dawn for the flowers to stop coming. We wait. Because the time will come, and when it does, Heath Alan will rise to join us, and he will know what it is to be forgotten.

My people are often angry and afraid—a dangerous combination of emotions, especially in ones who have no need to fear violence. We lose our identities during our underground sleep, and when we finally wake, our headstones are faded, and we can't remember our own names. Or who buried us. Or when we died. How we came dead we can often deduce. Our bodies, though they have rotted away to fleshy skeletons, usually tell the tale. A younger person will almost always display some kind of grievous injury, and there is no need to wonder what happened. An elderly frame is generally assumed to have passed in his sleep. There is debate among our community whether that should be considered a badge of honor or the easy way out. Occasionally one or two bodies arise who were in their prime at death, and they show no signs of physical distress at all. It is as if they died of nothing. Then the whispers begin—was it poison? A cough? Did she drown?

Such morbid questions fill our hours while we wander the cemetery, mysteriously confined to this yard with no guard or explanation. We cannot leave, but we are free to walk the perimeter night and day, as long as we are no longer missed. It is the grief from the world of the living that keeps us in restful slumber. Without that we never rest again.

There may be husbands and wives here together, but they do not know it. One will rise, and then another, but they look upon each other's bones with blank, eyeless expressions, and they carry on, seeing, smelling, and thinking only through the magic of some curse that compels us to stand above our own graves. And yet we can feel love. When I awoke from the earth, I clawed my way to the air and felt in my rotted heart the dull pain of something I had lost. There was a loneliness I could not understand because it had vanished from my mind—but not my soul.

Some things I could tell about myself right away: I was a man. I was probably in my 30s. I was tall and nicely shaped. But my name...my life and death...they were gone.

I clung to my loss like a lifeboat. The more I cared about my past the less deceased I truly was. Someone had loved me once, and out of respect for that person, I would not ignore the aching in my soul that told me we had been torn apart too soon.

It was a bullet, I think. The great hole in my skull told me enough about that. But who shot me and why is something long lost to time. I inherited an eternity of regret and sorrow with no name.

The living woman comes every morning early with fresh flowers, a coffee, and a book. After taking a breath of the lonely air, she strolls sadly across the graveyard to the far end, her long, blonde hair blowing in the chill breeze, and we hide, watching. Some of us choose to stay underground during her visits. It's easier to ignore the pain of obscurity if you cannot see her face.

Her lovely face. She has the soft features of youth mingled with the sophistication of early adulthood. Her light brown eyes look with sympathy upon all the gravestones she passes. Her pink lips are full and slightly curved upward, like a smiling blossom of love upon her mouth. The cold air pinkens her cheeks, and she brushes a golden lock from her face as she reaches her destination and kneels in the flattened patch of grass. Today the dead man has received a pot of daffodils, tall and yellow and vibrant. They seem to light up the cemetery, and the overcast sky parts to let in a little sun.

I wait for her here. I'm always here, hiding just behind the dead tree that hangs its skeleton over her lover's grave and casts a shadow like spider's legs across the ground. For several minutes, she sits in silence, and I smell her perfume through the curse that gives me my senses without a full body. The scent is sweet and light. It matches her slender shape and creamy skin. I absorb her fragrance until she begins to speak with a voice that is soft and kind.

"Today I think we'll read poetry, if that's okay with you?"

I nod, unseen.

"Let's see..." she sips her coffee and flips through the pages of her book. "Wordsworth?"

Yes, *Wordsworth*, I whisper, and I listen to her read. It is not to me. She recites a story of daffodils and loneliness, and I revel in her tone that reflects my own broken heart: she is full of love and sweetness, but there is something damaged in her voice. There is a past full of pain that she cannot forget, just as I live with pain I cannot recall.

I long to move from my hiding place and gather her in my arms. To tell her we can love again, even those of us who have lost someone

or have been lost ourselves. I want to pluck a daffodil from her vase and put it in her hair and taste the honey of her lips and build new memories with her.

But I know I mustn't. I am not the tall, well-built man I must have been once upon a time. To stagger out at her, all bones and rotting flesh and broken skull, would be to blaspheme the blessing she has brought to the graveyard. My ghastly body would frighten her off, and she would never return.

Her voice is an instrument; the poem is her song. I stand, enraptured, as she performs it tenderly with all the love in her broken heart. Did anyone do this for me in the days following my death? Did I leave behind a suffering maiden who came to my side every day to talk of beauty and sadness and her undying love? I never heard her words, if she did. She is lost to me forever—if she existed at all.

A fresh aching swells in my soul. How pitiful that this soft creature has come to share her music with the one person in the cemetery who can't hear her. He will never hear her again.

I wonder at the power of memory. Her emotion touches not only herself and her lover, who rests peacefully because of her faithfulness, but it touches the entire lawn. All around us I see other residents peering from behind their own headstones, looks of longing on their wasted, forgotten faces. The sun has broken through completely and warms our bones as it shines directly on the vase of golden flowers at Heath Alan's plot.

She takes the poem slowly, carefully, letting us dwell in the rhythmic tune of her voice as if we were adrift in a canoe, gazing lazily up at a clear sky filled with possibilities. She brings us this gift without realizing it. And even the cruelest among us are thankful.

And then, all of a sudden, she is done. She closes her book and wipes away a tear. I start forward instinctively, wanting to catch that tear for her and kiss it off her cheek. She gasps. I freeze, half hidden by the shadow of the spider tree.

She is looking right at me. I have made the most terrible mistake, and I remain still, racked with fear that at any second she will stand screaming and tear out of this place forever, leaving us all to suffer alone until our bones turn to dust.

“Who...” she says, her voice a strangled sound nothing like the tune she shared before.

“Don’t be afraid,” I beg. I stay where I am, praying the shadow conceals my horrific appearance.

She stares, uneasy and perplexed. I consider turning and running away, but I can’t leave her.

“Let me see you.”

“I can’t,” I say.

“Why not?”

“Please. I didn’t mean to surprise you.”

Again she scrutinizes me with her light brown eyes, and I watch as her expression turns from worried, to curious, to amazed, to terrified. She can see me.

She stands, shaking.

“Please,” I say again. “Please don’t.”

I know she will scream. I would scream if I saw a corpse standing over me like Death himself in a graveyard. I wait for it to happen.

“You—” she starts quietly. She hasn’t screamed. This frightened angel has looked at me and will not run away.

“I came to hear your poem,” I say, filled with shame for speaking to such a beautiful creature. “It was so pretty...I swear I will not bother you. Please forgive me.”

For a few more seconds we look at each other, and then the pain is too great for me to take, and I back away into the shadow, out of her sight.

“Wait,” she calls, and I stop. I am her servant, though I do not want her to see me again.

She approaches, and I think of the hole in my skull and the little flesh that remains on my bones. I think of my torn clothes nearly withered to nothing and stained with the yesterdays that are long absent from my mind. I look at her. Whole, beautiful, alive. Full of happy tomorrows. She wants something from me. I would give her anything in the world.

Her eyes are wide as she takes me in, and I see that she is not only kind, but brave.

“You live here...” she says, not asking. I wait.

What could she want? For a moment I allow hope to flood my senses, and I wonder whether she has seen in me what I see in her. I want to take her hand in mine, but I resist. I will let her tell me what she wants, and then I will hold her close, and we'll never be alone again.

Her eyes search my face as if she understands me, as if we are two souls locked in sadness together, and only together can we finally escape. I hold on to these precious seconds as I wait for her words.

And then she speaks. "Do you know Heath?"

Of course. I was a fool.

I fall back a step and lower my gaze. "No." I imagine the last of my dried blood running fresh and spilling from my heart onto the grass below. "He cannot wake while he is remembered."

She hesitates and then looks back at his grave. "Oh," is her reply, but it is filled with meaning. That one word brings me to the center of sadness and loss and that breathless moment just after crying has stopped and is about to begin again.

I could run from her now, but I won't. She is the only source of sunshine in a dark place, and she should learn what her lover will never know.

"You keep him safe," I explain, and her red eyes fill with hope. She is listening. I go on. "While the living cling to him, he rests in peace. It is only when you forget that he—" I look down at my own yellowed, bony hands, wringing each other in nervousness.

She snuffles. "I see."

We are silent for a moment, and she adds, "I'm sorry."

I nod as if to say it's nothing to be forgotten, but it isn't. It is everything.

Before she leaves, my love bends down to collect her coffee and her book, and she plucks a daffodil from the vase on Heath's grave. She hands it to me. The stem rests in my bony palm, and the golden petals cast a soft glow onto my fingers. I look back at her. She smiles, and then she is gone.

*And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.*

Monday Oranges

by KEITH L. ROYAL

The observation area at the Albany International Airport had changed little since I had been here with her the last time. In the past three years, the seats had been updated. They looked like something a doctor's office would refuse—fake wood frames with hard orange and blue plaid covered foam seats. You'd think they would have used purple and gold, the colors of the local state university, but a large donor thought otherwise. Just my luck, the blue was near the color of her eyes. All I could think of was those eyes. I was watching an American Eagle regional jet take off when I felt a light touch on my shoulder. I had seen her reflection in the window as she came closer. The reflection was almost too much to bear, and then I saw those eyes. I think she saw me watch her approaching reflection. I saw her smile and I smiled back. I wondered what she saw in my reflection, if she could see through to the outside where planes were escaping. I saw myself reach with my right hand across to my left shoulder to place my hand over hers. "Hello, Sarah," I said as I turned to her with an embrace.

Three days ago my growing list of e-mails included one from someone I had not seen or heard from in three years. Just seeing her name gave me that feeling of a turntable that suddenly lost power and the music slowly wound to a stop. Sarah Watson was the icon of what cute little blondes should be. I spent a lot of time watching her petite perkiness in grad school. She was not very tall and slightly built, just enough curves to interest without being salacious. I was interested, too. I think she knew it, but never let on about it. We had the same writing class, a thesis preparation seminar. She was brilliant, but not a brilliant writer. I had the opposite problem. So, we helped each other. We spent hours together in the library, at Common Grounds, the coffee shop on Lark Street. I guess we went from study buddies to friends to family; family like brother and sister. I would have preferred more like husband and wife. My thesis, a novel for my MFA project, made

my feelings painfully clear if anyone read between the lines. Sarah read between and around the lines.

“Lucius,” she said that last night, “you know how I feel about you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Of course you do. I read your book. But...” she went on. “I can’t be who you write about. I’m not that girl. Not right now.” She told me this as she sat across from me at a window table at Common Grounds. “I don’t want to be tied down.”

“Is that what I do to you?” I replied, angrier than I should have. I showed her the book because we never really talked about my feelings. We talked about everything else. We talked each other through family problems, through dating issues, though those were mostly hers, and just about everything else. Honesty with each other was what our closeness was built upon. Honesty is what led me to write what I felt. It led me to letting her read it because I was too scared to tell her.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Sarah took my hand and stroked it gently. “You are the sweetest man I’ve ever known. I can tell you anything and I know you won’t judge me. Even things that I can’t tell my own family. You take that place in me. My confidant. You don’t tie me down, you free me.”

“I know this talk, Sarah.” I couldn’t look her in the eyes. “This is the dear-John-for-friends talk.”

“That’s only for lovers, Lucius. We aren’t.”

“And that makes a difference how?” I started tapping my ever present pen on the table. “We’ve done almost everything else. Correction, I wanted to do almost everything else. Anything at all, but you stopped. I gave up.”

Sarah looked at me with her head canted to one side. Her eyes were liquid blue and bursting with tears. Her mouth opened and silently closed. I didn’t understand why she’d be crying. She just told me I would not be her lover. That’s what I heard. It’s what I believed. She never lied to me.

“I love you, Lucius,” she finally said. “You are all I think about and it scares the shit out of me.”

“Then, why...” I started to protest, but she put a single soft finger of hers to my lips and I was silenced.

“Because I am afraid I will lose myself in you. I am afraid I will lose the best friend I ever had. I do love you. I just can’t handle being in love with you. Not right now.” Sarah removed her finger from my lips and ran it over the cover of my MFA project sitting on the table between us.

Not right now. The semester ended with us being uncomfortable near each other. I still wanted to touch her, but could only write about what that might feel like. It made for a great MFA project, but it was lousy for a relationship. I watched her graduate that spring. I still had a semester to go. We hugged after the commencement ceremony and shared a brief kiss before she turned and walked away. We didn’t see each other after that. She took off with the Peace Corps or some kind of volunteer thing. I started keeping journals. We exchanged the occasional e-mail about her adventures. I would send sections of my journals. I finally finished my MFA and sent Sarah a bound copy of my MFA manuscript. I hadn’t heard from her since. Not until three days ago and my heart jumped and fell seeing her name. She was back and she wanted to see me.

Three hours ago I woke to the smell of coffee downstairs. My wife always made coffee for me in the mornings. I showered, dressed in my customary dark jeans and t-shirt featuring whatever band I found interesting at the time. This time, it was Disturbed. She was disturbed. The coffee cup crashing into the wall behind my head as I entered the kitchen told me so. Damn.

“Morning, Dear,” I said calmly, sitting at my spot at the kitchen table. “Can I have another cup?” A second cup hit the wall. I don’t know how I kept so calm. I hate conflict. I hate arguing, but those cups were expensive. They were an eggshell blue, almost cobalt with flecks of teal like little irises. Now there were lots of eyes on me. “Well, I guess I’ll just have the two cups today. How about some eggs?”

“Who the hell do you think you are,” she asked, punctuating herself with a third shattered coffee cup.

“I thought I was your husband. Can I have some toast?” I ducked the toaster, turning to see it burst into sparks against the stucco. “Okay,” I sighed. “I can do without the toast.” She didn’t respond. Her back was to me and she was staring out the window over the kitchen sink. I

could see her fingers drumming on the granite counter on either side of the sink, but couldn't hear the beat over the sound of blood flowing in my ears.

"Who is she, Lucius?"

"Who is who, Erin?" I replied innocently.

"It's the woman you wrote about," she paused. She stopped drumming her fingers and hissed at me. "Isn't it?"

Shit. "Oh." I'd let Erin read my journals. Once. She didn't speak to me for days. Something in one of the short stories, or several had pissed her off, royally. Honesty pays, in spades. Shit.

"You were with her last night," Erin turned to face me, arms folded. Her short auburn hair was spiky and unkempt. Highlighted by the morning sun through the window behind her, she looked as radiant as she was enraged. Her eyes narrowed to little green slits, heralding the fling of another coffee cup. I don't know how she missed me at that range.

"You keep that up and we won't be having coffee ever again." Wrong answer. I flinched, expecting another coffee cup. "They were porcelain. A wedding gift from my..." motherfucker! The cup she threw clipped my ear.

"Did you sleep with her?" Erin had moved closer, still separated from me by the kitchen table that seemed way too small to do the job properly. She leaned over the table until her face was within inches of mine, her eyes ruddy and wet. "Did. You. Sleep. With. Her?"

"I slept with you. Remember?" I felt my ear for damage. "Honey, I love you. I only sleep with you."

Erin seemed to consider this for a moment and slid a chair from the table to sit opposite me. "Do you love her?" Her eyes were still stalking me, looking for weakness. The rest of her withdrew, sitting back, arms folded.

"She's my friend. We go way back," I answered, looking past her and out the window.

"Do you love her?" Erin asked again, quieter, with softer, yet still red lined eyes meeting mine.

"Yes," I said after a moment's pause. "She loves me, too." Erin looked away, rolling her eyes by rolling her entire head up and around as if

scanning the room for cobwebs. She unfolded her arms and began to fondle some fruit we always kept in a bowl for snacks. Shit. Ammunition.

“Did you ever sleep with her?” Erin’s voice was barely beyond a whisper.

“Can I just get a glass of orange juice?” I started to rise from the table, but she fired just as I turned toward the fridge. An orange fastball whizzed into the wall behind where my head was a moment earlier.

“Why can’t you give me a straight answer?”

“Those juice up better when softened.” Because you won’t believe me.

“Lucius,” she was watching me again. “Please?”

I looked at her, truly looked at her and for a moment saw that same naiveté I saw when we first met. Sarah had left and my interest in writing had waned, replaced by a need to throw myself into music. I’d always wanted to learn how to play the guitar and since I wasn’t spending money on Sarah, I invested in a nice used Martin D-3. I met Erin when I was noodling around, trying to put the finishing touches on a song I’d written. Of course, I was writing it for Sarah.

“That sounds nice,” came a light voice from behind me. I was sitting on the steps of the New York State Museum in downtown Albany. The steps of the museum look out over the entire Rockefeller Plaza; to the state office towers and the Egg, which was the performing arts center. “What’s it called?”

“Don’t know,” I answered. Before I could turn to see who was speaking, she stepped down from behind me and sat a few steps below. Her spiky red hair had glints of gold and copper. Her eyes shone green. I don’t know how she did that. But however she did, I was fascinated by it. “It’s just something I was messing around with.”

“I’ve seen you around. My name is Erin, by the way.” She extended a hand. It was not smooth, but a little worn, like hard work was not unfamiliar. Her grip was firm surprisingly gentle at the same time. “I’ve seen you hanging out at Lark Street Musing and Mother Earth’s. Do you play out at all?”

“No,” I answered quietly as I placed the Martin back in its case. “I just play for me.”

“And you are...?”

“Lucius. Maguire.” She smiled at me and I think I blushed because she smiled even more.

“Do you know any other songs?”

“Sure. But, I don’t sing. Scares the neighbors. And cats.” I grinned at my own expense, but took out the Martin again. Something about her made it alright to try and sing. I got the feeling she was genuinely interested in what I had to say. So I played and sang an old blues song called “Little Red Rooster”. It was kind of dirty if you understood the words. I didn’t think she would. I was wrong. Erin smiled and grinned at me.

“See?” she said coyly. “I wasn’t scared off. Want to grab some coffee?”

I remembered that moment and looked at her now. Now, she was scared. “I wanted to. She didn’t. We didn’t.” I absentmindedly grabbed an apple from the bowl on the table. “Do you believe me?”

“Why not,” Erin asked, then added snidely, “You obviously like to spend time together.”

“A good way to kill a friendship is to fall in love with someone who just wants to be your friend.” I gave Erin my best honesty look. “She wouldn’t be my friend if we slept together.” I said this, not sure if I meant it or not.

“That’s stupid,” she replied coldly. She regarded me in silence for several minutes. She turned to look out the window behind her. She spoke again, barely audible. “I thought I was your friend.”

“Of course you are,” I said and reached across the table to place my apple free hand on top of hers. “I love you.” She drew her hand away.

“But, I’m not your friend because we sleep with each other, huh?” Her shoulders slumped in defeat. “I’m your wife, but not your friend.”

“You are more than a friend, Erin,” I tried to reassure. “I chose you over all others to spend my life with. But, it’s like she’s a part of my family, a part of me. Do you mind if I get a bowl of cereal?” I don’t think Erin heard any of what I’d said. She looked like she was going to go all Linda Blair, again. The sun was shining through the window with just enough force to make her hair look like an angry orange halo. I got up from my seat to look for a bowl for cereal.

“What do you do with her? What did you do last night, then?”

“We just talked,” I answered. “We just talked.” I spoke without looking at her. Shit. She’s pissed.

“Bullshit, Lucius.”

“You know,” I continued while eating my Frosted Flakes. “She was the first person who cared about me for who I was. It surprised me,” I slurped, but did not look at Erin. “She gave me confidence enough to believe in myself. I took it for love. My first real love.” I grabbed one of the remaining oranges from the bowl and began to peel it.

“I don’t want to know any more.” Erin rose from her seat and began to rummage through the kitchen cabinets. “Want some coffee with that orange? Oh, damn. No cups.”

“I fell in love with her,” I continued. “She said she loved me, too. But she wasn’t in love with me. Not like I wanted.”

“Stop talking.” Erin’s movements in the kitchen became frenetic. She kept looking in drawers, the cabinets, the fridge, but seemed disappointed where ever she looked. She found a hand juicer and began to squeeze some orange juice into a small glass. “Have some orange juice. Just shut up!” I didn’t.

“She just wanted the same emotional support that I wanted but without the complications of being in love. You know, someone to buy you Ben and Jerry’s when you’re messed up inside and then to stick around to help straighten you out.”

“One cup not enough,” she said coldly. “I can squeeze the whole fucking bag!” Erin had found our orange stash and began whipping them at me with deadly accuracy. “Shut up!”

“I can talk to her about things, Erin,” I ducked as I said this. “It’s not the same with you.” She flung an apple at me. “God damn it! Stop it!” She stopped at my sudden anger. “That shit hurts!”

“We fuck, but we don’t talk,” she said eying me coldly before sending one more apple and orange grenade my way.

“No... Yes,” I stammered. “No. It’s like the difference between apples and oranges. And you’ve got to stop throwing them at me.” I was done dodging fruit and moved to stand directly in front of her.

“Give me one reason why I should stop?” she demanded.

“Because it hurts! Those oranges are hard as hell!”

“It was the apple that hurt you most, Lucius,” she said as she turned to leave the kitchen. “There’s a difference.”

Three minutes ago, Sarah had found me in the observation lounge of the Albany International Airport. I was singing “Little Green Apples”, the O.C. Smith bluesy version when she came up to me. She must’ve checked her bags, because she was only carrying her purse and a small carry-on.

“So,” she said expectantly. “Are you ready to go?”

“I’m not going with you, Sarah.” I turned to stare out the terminal window.

“What do you mean you’re not going?” She was surprised. “You said you would tell her you loved me. Didn’t you tell her?”

“Yes.”

“She took it hard? I know I would have. She’ll be fine after a while.” Sarah stopped talking for a moment. “You really aren’t going, are you?”

“No.” I could only manage one word answers.

“Look, I tried to make up for taking off back then. You stopped writing to me. I still thought about you all that time.” Sarah’s voice squeezed the juice out of my heart. I had to gently move her back from me.

“A couple days of talking over old times doesn’t change things, Sarah. I’ve moved on.” I found Erin, or rather she found me. “Besides, I never said I would go. Can we grab some coffee over there?” I pointed to a Seattle’s Best stand down the terminal walkway. “I really need a cup.”

“No!” She grabbed my arm. “What is this? Why are you backing out?”

“I’m not backing out, Sarah.” I touched her face. I so wanted to kiss her. She was still the most beautiful woman I had ever met and the thought of her wanting me was blinding. And that was it. She blinded me. Blindsided me right to the heart I had given to Erin. “I can’t leave her. As wonderful as these couple of days have been, I mean I really loved catching up, laughing like old times...it was like nothing had changed.”

“It hasn’t changed. You still love me. I see it in you. You still love me. When you came to my hotel room, I had your favorite flavor of Ben and Jerry’s waiting for you, didn’t I? I thought that meant something

to you.” She pulled me to a seat nearby and leaned in close to me. Her eyes still blue, near cobalt and pooling with liquid misgivings.

“This time, it’s my life keeping us apart. It’s just.... Not now.” Not now, not ever.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. Be honest with me. You can still do that, can’t you?”

“Bullshit?” I was pissed. I never thought I could be mad at her, but shit. “I was the one who talked you down after every little crisis you had. It was me!” I thumped my chest for emphasis. “I was the one who was always there for you. I held you when your father died. I got you through those writing classes that last semester. Dumbass me actually wanted to be with you and you never noticed.” My voice quieted down. “How could you not notice? All I did was notice you.” I stared into her eyes and for a moment, I had clarity. I wasn’t lost. She never noticed me. Me.

“I...” she shuddered, and looked away from me. “Was I bad to you? I didn’t mean to...”

“No, no...you were the best.” Honestly. “My bad. I fell in love. You are so love worthy. I just couldn’t help myself.” Sarah looked up at me and smiled. I smiled back and it was done. “You didn’t come back for me. You just missed what we had. You just needed a little Lucius fix, right?”

Sarah punched me in the shoulder as hard as she could and laughed as I winced in pain. I guess I was right.

“Damn it! What is with you women and violence today?” I said rubbing my shoulder. She watched me compose myself, then stood up, grabbing her purse and carry on. I stood next to her and we shared a sigh. Then she kissed me. A real kiss with passion and love like I had imagined it would be back then. She really was in love.

We drew back from each other and I reached up to wipe a tear from her eye when we heard her flight announced.

“I’ve got to go, Lucius. Can we keep in touch?”

“I don’t know if that’s for the best, but...” I stopped as she placed her finger over my lips.

“I know,” she said. “Not right now.”

“I...” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

"I was going to take this on the flight, but I'm not hungry anymore. Take it. You look like you could use some nourishment." Sarah pulled a small apple from her purse and placed it in my hand then walked off through security and on to her gate.

I stared at the apple and tossed it a few times. It was a mottled red with flecks of green. I put it in my pocket.

Three seconds ago, I was standing alone at the window of the Albany International Airport observation lounge, humming an old tune when an orange hit me in the back of my head.

"She was beautiful," she said. "Why didn't you go with her?"

"What are you doing here?" I kept looking out the window as Erin stepped up next to me. We both looked out the window at an American Airlines flight that was taxiing down the tarmac in preparation for departure. "Checking up on me?"

"You didn't finish your breakfast. Brought you an orange," she paused. I saw her reflection glance in my direction. "I needed to see her."

The reflection of Erin's eyes seemed dimmer than the brilliant green I was used to seeing. Her eyes had lost their shimmer and her shoulders were slumped. "Why did you need to see her?"

"It looked like quite a conversation." She looked back out the observation window. "She was beautiful."

"Yes." She was the most beautiful woman I have ever known. "She has a certain way about her. Kind of like you." I smiled at Erin's reflection, but it did not respond. "If I had not met her, I could not have loved anyone like I love you." Erin's reflection looked at mine and grinned. Those were the right words, Lucius.

"What did she give you before she left? I saw you put something in your pocket." She took hold of my arm and leaned into my shoulder. "What did she give you, Lucius?"

Life. Love. An apple.

"Lucius?" Erin nudged me when I didn't answer. "Do you regret marrying me?"

I watched Sarah's plane lift gently from the runway and carry her away from me, again. Goodbye, old love. I turned to Erin, lifted my hands to cradle her face. Her eyes were wide with hope, dancing like

dew laden grass in a morning meadow. I kissed her gently on her forehead. Hello, forever love.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“Let’s go home” I said as I took Erin’s hand. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the apple. Erin watched as I tossed it into the nearest garbage bin. No regrets. I hope you know that, Erin. No regrets. As we walked hand in hand toward the terminal exit, I started humming. Erin recognized the song as the one I was playing when we first met. She leaned into my shoulder and I felt her relax. She knows I love her. I only sang for her. But this thing with Sarah, it hurt her. We both knew it. And things between us had changed.

There were no cups for coffee the next morning. There were no oranges either.

Waiting to Let Go

by EMILY RUTH VERONA

It couldn't be called kidnapping because that wasn't what it was. Not to me anyway. Even if the picture could be drawn to suggest it. My sister placed me in the passenger's seat of our mother's Toyota when I was six years old. She was sixteen. As she tossed a duffel bag under my feet she told me we were going for an ice cream cone. We hadn't eaten dinner yet and so I thought that was a little funny. Ice cream before dinner. We always ate late back then—sometimes at seven. Sometimes at eight. Then she loaded a suitcase into the trunk and I waited until she had gotten into the car and closed the door before asking if our mother was coming along. My sister replied quite simply that our mother was dead.

It wasn't as shocking as it sounded. Anna used to say it all the time and so I did not put much stock in the claim. It was never true. Instead of calling her a liar I just pressed my heels against the dashboard and hugged my knees close to my chest while Anna started up the car. It was dark outside and the late November frost could be felt below the skin. The Monday before it had snowed and there was still enough of the stuff leftover to keep the lawn white. Everything felt peaceful with that snow. It made us both so very calm.

Once we hit the highway Anna tried to mess with the radio dial, but all she got was static. Fragments of songs I didn't recognize. After a while she turned the radio off and there was only silence. Time dragged. We drove for an hour and then two and then three without stopping. The car grew comfortably warm and I remember slumping down in the seat, staring with my cheek against the window as stars came out and hung like freckles against the black sky. Close to midnight we stopped at a motel and Anna let me watch television while she combed my hair, and later I fell asleep beside her on that king sized bed.

The following morning we ate breakfast at a diner across the highway and she let me order whatever I wanted, provided it came with a glass of milk on the side. Then we headed back to the room, where she read books and I played with some toys and counted squares on the tiled bathroom floor. We lived like that in the motel room for three days before a police officer recognized our car in the lot from the license plate number and brought us down to the station to be picked up by our mother. Those were a good three days though. Most people go a long time without three days like that, and so I considered myself lucky. Anna didn't slip into the sphere of her malcontent the whole time we were there. She used to have this way of screaming—shouting through her eyes without saying a single word. She didn't do it once at that motel though. In fact, she mostly smiled. Anna had a beautiful smile, when she bothered to show it, that framed her perfect teeth. I always wanted teeth like hers. As a kid mine were like crooked little stones in my mouth. Running my tongue over them was like licking pebbles. I hated them and so I made a point of keeping my mouth clamped shut whenever I could. I was never miserable though—not like Anna was.

My sister grew up unhappy. People just assumed it was in her disposition and so not much was ever made of it. I was deemed quiet like our father, which I took for being true since there was no one around to contradict it. They claimed that I stole his fair eyes. His flat hair. His crooked teeth. Our father was a Marine, but he didn't act like one. He was too passive. At least that's what Anna used to say. I couldn't tell the difference—not until I was much older, when things like that no longer mattered to me.

When she left for good it hurt. I always knew it was coming, but I hadn't been ready for it when it did. At first I tried to stand it, and when that didn't work I tried to find her. It was harder than I thought it would be. For some reason I always imagined we'd have that kind of information lying around in the house somewhere, on the fridge or in an address book. We didn't though. I looked and I looked, but it had taken some time to find out where she was living and where she worked. It had taken even longer to get up the nerve to go there myself and say what needed to be said.

Standing in that hallway then—trying to remember the snow and the motel and the diner from all those years ago—I pressed my palms together before cracking each knuckle one by one. The walls were flat and white and clean. The air smelled like warm copy paper and plastic plants.

I took in a deep, forced breath, but it wasn't enough. I took another and then another. After a few moments of diligently inhaling and then exhaling I walked up to the front desk and asked to speak with Miss Walker. The secretary—a short little woman with thick curly hair and a little bit of fat in her chin—asked if I had an appointment.

“Yes.”

The woman took this as fact, even though it wasn't true, and asked for me to take a seat while she picked up the phone and dialed a number. I chose one of the lumpy oak chairs lining the wall and sat in it. I flattened my palms on my knees. Jeans. Jeans. I shouldn't have worn jeans. And a t-shirt. I looked like a hoodlum. Rubbing my lips together, I tried to lick off the lipstick. It was too pink. Too glossy. I had only worn it because Jessie Pillar had assured me that it looked sophisticated. What did Jessie Pillar know? She was wrong and I felt stupid.

After a few minutes the secretary assured me that Miss Walker was in fact in her office and told me to go all the way down to the last door on the right. I thanked her quickly and awkwardly followed her instruction. Half a dozen broad, wooden doors lined each side of hall. I felt like I was going to an execution. Or deeper down the rabbit hole.

When I reached the last door on the right I knocked once. It was a hallow sound in a higher pitch than I had expected. When I was told to enter I did, and as I stood there in the doorway in those jeans with my cheap t-shirt and that ugly lipstick I tried to smile.

“Hey,” I said, my fingers buried so deep in my pockets that I could feel the muscles in them preparing to snap from the strain.

“Mallory.”

She recognized me. It should have been a surprise but it wasn't. “It's good to see you, Anna,” I said.

Her dark hair curled loosely around her shoulders. She was pale. Anna had always been pale of course, but she was paler still now from

being inside day after day. It made her freckles look starved for light. She stared at me, her mouth slightly ajar but not gaping. We had the same lips. And the same inability to act all right when things were not. She didn't offer me a seat and I was not so bold as to take one myself. Her office was small, just as I had imagined it, with no windows. A desk barely fit against the back wall. An empty chair sat snugly on the left and some kind of artificial tree lurched in the far corner.

"So you work here?" I asked.

She nodded, unable to stop staring at me like I was some kind of anomaly. Concern settled uncomfortably in the vague lines of her face. "Mallory," she said again.

I shrugged, looking around the room. "It's nice. Home-y."

I was full of it but she didn't seem to mind. "Are you still living in Tanner?" she asked.

"Yeah. Still in Tanner. With Dad. And Mom."

She glanced down at the papers that sat between her fingers and smoothed them flat on her desk. "Come in," she said at last, and though it was what I had been waiting for I could not go inside. Not right away.

Instead I scraped the heel of my foot back and forth against the carpet. "What do you do here exactly?"

"Organize events," she said. "I make phone calls and recruit volunteers. Does Mom know you're here?"

"Does it matter?"

"No," she replied. "I guess not."

I nodded. "Good."

She stood up—tall like she always was—and pulled that chair away from the wall and situated it facing her desk. She told me to sit and I sat. She went and closed the door and then moved back to her seat, sliding into it and then leaning over her papers to look at me.

"You're in high school," she said then. It wasn't a fact or a question. It came as sort of a realization to her. I was older. She hadn't expected that.

"I'm sixteen."

"I know," she replied tersely. I hadn't meant what I said as an accusation but she took it that way all the same.

"Okay."

I should have called first. I should have called and asked if it would be all right to stop by while she was working. But I didn't have a number. And I wouldn't have known what to say.

I slid my fingers down along my knees. "How long have you been working here?"

She asked if something was wrong—if Mom was sick or if Dad had died. I told her neither of those things was true but she didn't believe me at first. I had to convince her. All the while she watched with careful, flat blue eyes. They were darkly lit and attentive. When she found out that I had skipped school to see her she told me I was stupid for having done it.

"I know," I said.

"How are your grades?"

I started to smirk. The question sounded so funny coming from her—she who had not called once in such a long time. "Fine. Average I guess. Could probably do better."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because there's more out there than Shakespeare and chemistry."

She glanced at her fingers as they laced together. Anna loved Shakespeare. She used to lie on the sofa in the living room while I dressed my dolls in dresses that always had too many buttons. She'd lie on her back with a bent library book against her knees, her voice high and clear as she read Hamlet aloud to me with all the heart and intensity of a seventeenth century stage performer. Whenever I was sullen she called me her poor little Ophelia. Her darling Ophelia. Mom never liked that much.

"You don't have to worry. I'm passing English."

"And everything else?" She arched an eyebrow. It was always amazing how she was able to do that so easily. A lot of people wouldn't have been able to pull it off, but she carried it well.

"I like history," I said. It wasn't a lie and that made me feel good.

"What do you like about it?"

"The Civil War."

She shifted her weight, allowing her shoulders to rise and fall as her fingers loosened on the desk. There was a beauty mark just at the bottom of her left thumb. Growing up I thought it looked like a rabbit,

though sitting there in her office I could no longer make out the shape. She said something then, but I didn't catch it. I glanced up at her and she was frowning.

"What are you doing here?" she asked for what must have been the second time. That line in her forehead had creased.

"You left me with the freaks."

"That's not true."

"You left me with Mom."

"It's taken you four years to get up the nerve to tell me that?"

"Five."

"Five?"

"It's been five years," I said.

She sighed. The sound was low and soft. "What's going on?"

"Maybe I'm in trouble at school."

"Are you?"

I shrugged. "No. But I could be. Why didn't you ask?"

"If you were in trouble?"

"Yes."

"Because," she said, "You're not."

"But how do you know that? Maybe I got caught selling pot. Or maybe I'm pregnant."

A grin. For the briefest moment a grin slipped across her face, the spaces around it filled with a clear and conscious sense of certainty. "You're not pregnant." She might as well have been laughing.

"How do you know?"

"Because you're not," she said.

I hunched forward, wrists together. "You really think I'm that straight-laced?"

"You're a good kid. You always have been. Momma's perfect little peach."

I scowled. Dissatisfied. Everyone had a place in the family and that was mine. It was Anna's fault really. The only reason I became the good child was because she so eagerly took up the role of the family disappointment. She was a clever girl, but it wasn't enough. She had to hate home—leave home. I became the favorite by default. Momma's

perfect little peach. What an ignorant, whiny thing they had raised me to be.

“Not perfect,” I mumbled.

She shook her head. “You have no idea how much she loves you.”

“That so?”

“I’m really busy,” she insisted. “So don’t waste my time.”

“Why’d you take me with you?” I asked.

Anna looked at me.

“When you stole Mom’s car and drove to that motel outside of Hartford. Why take me?”

She shook her head. “I would have missed you.”

It stung. The words stung. She had really meant to look out for me. She did so much for me, she really did, but eventually my sister realized that the only way she was going to get out of that house was by herself. I was only a kid. She couldn’t have taken me with her. It was impractical. Irresponsible. And more than just a small part of me hated her for knowing it.

“So this is what a non-profit looks like?” I asked, glancing absently around the office so that I wouldn’t have to meet her gaze.

“We actually have to cut down on staff,” she said. “We’ll probably end up firing a few computer guys. Edith might have to go.”

“Who’s Edith?”

“The woman out front who answers the phones,” my sister explained. “There’s just not enough money to pay everyone. The only reason I’m still here is because I’m organized. And I’m underpaid. So how is Dad?”

That was the real question. She had been itching to ask it since she saw me in the doorway. One look at me and she saw him. Our father. Neither of us ever really knew what to make of him and so Anna spent such a great deal of time trying to figure him out. He was away so much when she was growing up. Anna probably saw him once or twice a year until she was about eight or so. Then maybe she started seeing him a bit more. While our mother was pregnant with me he stayed for weeks at a time. It was only after I was born that he started going away again. Work. Our mother claimed it was work that kept him away, but he

needed The Marines much more than they needed him. The Marines were what made him tangible. Without them he only faded away.

I glanced at my palms. They were pink. It was so warm in that room. “He was at that desk job for a while. He retired about a year ago,” I said. “He just sort of mopes around the house now. Doesn’t say much. Doesn’t eat much. It’s like living with a cat.”

Anna nodded. “How does he look?”

“Terrible. Nothing new.”

“He sent a card last year,” she said. “For my birthday.”

I smiled, realizing then that if I had asked my father for her address he most certainly would have known it. “Yeah. He remembers dates. Not always names, but he knows the dates.”

Her phone rang then but she did not answer it. She kept looking at me—watching me. It was like there was something in my face that she had missed but she wasn’t quite sure what it was. I asked if she should get the phone and she assured me that it could wait. Her staring made me want to squirm but I resisted the urge. I was not so little anymore. I did not want to look like a child.

“So this place,” I said, clearing my throat. The ringing stopped. “It’s for teaching? Is that it?”

“We provide tutoring for children with health problems,” she explained. “We send people in to help them keep up with their education during chemotherapy or after operations that cause them to miss a lot of school. So they don’t fall behind.”

“So cancer kids.”

“Lots of kids,” she replied. “Sometimes its cancer. Sometimes heart defects. Children with blood disorders or who have been in accidents that require a lengthy recovery process.”

“Sounds noble,” I told her. “What you’re doing here. It’s a good thing.”

“I think so.”

I nodded—feeling the weight of my head as it bobbed up and down. Silence began to build between us and so I turned my attention to the floor. The carpet was old and blue. I tried to follow the path of the geometric shapes with my eyes but then Anna said my name and I looked up.

“So what about you?” she insisted. “Tell me something about yourself.”

I shrugged. “Like what? My hopes? My dreams? My favorite color?”

The sarcasm did not amuse her, but it didn’t upset her either. It would take much more than that to get a rise out of my sister.

“Are you going to college?” she asked.

“I guess.”

“Do you know where?”

“No. Not yet.”

“What about after college? Any ideas?”

“You mean a job. Like a career?”

Anna nodded.

I crossed my arms rather casually. “Dice inspector.”

She wanted to laugh. I could tell. “A—what?”

“Dice inspector,” I repeated. “Like at casinos. You make sure everything is on the level.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “And what would one study for something like that?”

“Probably dice.”

Anna shook her head and she released a hiccup of a laugh as she sat back again, folding her arms slowly and hugging them close against her stomach. “That really what you want to be?”

I shrugged. “Better than being a doctor, or a teacher—helping people who don’t really want or deserve your help. No offense to what you’re doing here though. It’s different.”

She smiled slowly and the lift of her lip caused a slant in her brow. “Right.”

I shifted my weight and rested one leg along the other. “There’s this guy in my history class. Jim Baskwell. He has an older brother who draws cartoons for some newspaper in New York.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“I always thought that was pretty cool,” I said only to then frown. “But I can’t draw.”

Anna nodded. “When you were little your stick figures always had too many arms and were sometimes missing legs.”

I laughed, knowing she was right in spite of the fact that my memory of it was too vague to be reliable. It was nice though. Talking. Relating. If only that was the sole reason I was there to see her.

“Jim wants to study cars,” I went on. “Engines I think. He likes history a lot though so I don’t know why he just doesn’t stick with that.”

“He probably has his reasons.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

Anna moved her arms and started flattening the papers on her desk again. She didn’t say a word and slowly I felt myself beginning to squirm. She was the same Anna I had grown up with, only she seemed more sophisticated. More in control. I, on the other hand, still felt like a little girl. Her changes outweighed mine. “Tell me,” I said. Both of my feet dropped onto the floor with a light thud.

Her expression sobered and she stared at me. Unblinking.

“What happened?” I asked.

Anna did not stir. “When?”

“With Mom.”

She tilted her neck back so that her chin stuck out. “Mallory. Please.”

“You left me there with her and with Dad and there had to be a reason for it,” I insisted, my heels digging into the carpet as my knees slanted back. “There had to be a reason. Especially if you missed me. Five years is a long time not to call.”

She shook her head. “You were so small.”

“That’s the point,” I said—feeling angrier than I sounded, surely, for my voice was still level. It didn’t squeak. It didn’t snap. “I was small and you were gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. It was genuine. Anna always used to make it perfectly clear when her heart wasn’t in something. Her eyes narrowed and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Sitting there though she did neither.

“So what made you leave?” I asked.

“Knowing is really so important to you?”

“Yes.”

“But even if you knew,” she said, “you wouldn’t understand.”

My cheeks burned. The room was so warm. The staleness of it wrapped around my throat and sank into my pores. I stood up then

and it made me dizzy. She seemed surprised. Gingerly lifting the right edge of my shirt, I leaned in to show her the bruise above my hip. Shades of purple and yellow blended together to create a festering, swollen stain of color.

Anna didn't raise a hand or say a word. Only her pupils seemed to react, for they contracted quite suddenly as her eyes widened until they shined with disgust—not at me, but at the violence that had been committed against my body. One of my fingers accidentally slid against the bruise then and I winced before lowering the shirt again and waiting to see what she would do next.

“What happened?” she asked, her expression unchanged though her voice was wound so tightly that it lacked all breath and could barely be heard.

I sat down. “Momma’s perfect little peach fell off the tree.”

“You fell?”

“Sure.”

“Mallory.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“But what happened?”

I grinned and it made me feel sick. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Cut it out and tell me,” her voice almost boomed. It was so low.

“I’m a clumsy kid.”

“Who did it?” Anna asked starkly.

The room was too hot. I felt ill. “You think someone did this to me?” She didn’t say anything and I all but rolled my eyes. “We both know what you’re fishing for.”

“Mallory.”

“Who do you think did it?”

My sister blinked. The line in her forehead creased. “She did that? She did that to you?”

I leaned back in my seat, but fearing the chair would tip over I did not rest my full weight against it. “How could you know?” It wasn’t fair. “How could you know the kinds of things our mother did and leave an eleven-year-old in that house?”

“Because she loves you.”

“No more than you.”

Anna shook her head—her neck tall and tense. “It’s really not the same thing. You were special to her. She always made it very clear how special you were.”

“And what did that make you?”

“A brat with a mouth.”

“No,” I said. “You can’t divide her like that. There are good mothers and there are bad ones. It doesn’t change from child to child. She’s no better as my mother than she was as yours and you should have told somebody.”

“This isn’t a matter of right and wrong,” she explained. “It’s much deeper than that.”

“So it wasn’t wrong of her to hit you?” I asked.

Anna scowled, so many words perched at the end of her tongue and yet she could not utter any of them. She looked at me, that silent scream echoing around us. And it was clear she wanted me to understand, but doing so meant her telling me what she did not want to say and that my sister could not bring herself bear. Instead she laced her fingers together and waited. The room remained quiet. She tilted her head.

“You got the flu,” I said suddenly.

She squinted. “What?”

“After we got back from that motel. The next day I got ready for school and Mom said you had the flu. Did you?”

Anna exhaled. “She made me sleep in the garage.”

“It was November.”

“She didn’t want me in the house,” she continued. “With you. She didn’t like that I took you away and so she gave me a sleeping bag and told me to sleep in the garage. The next morning I was completely numb. She let me stay home.”

“You should have told somebody.”

Anna nearly laughed, only she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Instead she exhaled heavily. “No one would have believed me.”

“What about Dad?”

“He wasn’t around.”

“What about when he got back?”

“Dad couldn’t help me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“He’s a walking vegetable Mall, have you ever noticed that?” she asked. “He walks. He talks. He knows numbers and the fastest way to load a gun. The man’s a machine, but that’s all he is. A machine. He doesn’t function properly. I’m not sure he ever did.”

“That’s not fair,” I said. The words sounded softer aloud than they did in my head.

“Tell me something that is,” she replied.

“What about when you broke your arm?” I asked. “Was that her?” Anna shook her head. “No.”

“That welt on your hip when you were in high school? You said you got hit with a baseball in gym class.”

“I did.”

“That wasn’t her either?”

“No,” said Anna. And she meant it. I leaned back in my seat.

“The bruises,” I said at last. “On your back and sometimes your arms. The ones Mom called rashes, only they were never really rashes because they were green.”

Anna just stared—the angle of her eyes meticulous and calculated. For a few moments she did not say a word. She only looked at me.

“Those were Mom,” I said. “And you left me with her, Anna.”

My sister shook her head. “She was never supposed to hurt you—”

“And what made me so special?”

“You didn’t know.”

“Know what?”

“A lot of things.”

“Like what?”

Anna stopped. She leaned back in her seat to distance herself from me—from our parents. Our mother. She knew more. She had to know more because I had been so young and had known so very little. All I had were fragments. The high pitch of our mother’s voice when she spoke to Anna. The way our mother looked at her across the dinner table or from a doorway. Even when she smiled at Anna it was different from a normal smile. There was a bitterness—an insincerity—to it. She never looked at anyone the way she looked at Anna.

“You owe me,” I said. “You owe me a hell of a lot more than what I’ve got now. Shit.” Swearing felt good. There was a certain catharsis in it. I let the word linger there between us for a moment—a little fizz of bliss—and then I shook my head. “I can’t ask her. I can’t ask Dad. There’s only you, Anna.”

Empathy. I saw it in her eyes, or maybe that wasn’t it. Maybe it was something else—something bolder and more profound. I couldn’t define it though. It rested beyond my vocabulary and the further I reached out for it the farther away it flew.

“Dad was gone a lot when I was a kid,” said Anna. She took in a breath—slowly—as if doing it wrong would let the air escape her. “He was away more with me than he was with you.”

I shook my head. “That wasn’t my fault.”

“I’m not saying it was,” she replied. “It was never your fault. Or mine. Or even his. It was just the luck of the draw—the way he got his orders.”

“Did Mom love him back then?”

Anna stopped. “She always has.”

“The way she loves you?”

Anna lifted her gaze so that it met mine and I tried to look worthy of it. “There was this one winter before you were born,” she said, “when I was about six. It wouldn’t snow. Not for Christmas or New Years or even my birthday. There was just no snow—none at all. It was some kind of record, I’m sure. No snow for months and then on this Tuesday in March it started snowing and wouldn’t stop. It hadn’t been in the weather reports. The schools weren’t prepared. The plows weren’t ready. They had no choice but to send everyone home. This was back before schools called to inform parents that their children would be going home early. They just loaded all the kids up in the buses and sent us home. No note. No call.

“By the time I got to the house there was maybe an inch or two of snow on the ground. I had a key for the backdoor for when Mom wasn’t there to let me in. She fastened it to this string and put it around my neck every morning and the string used to itch all day long—my neck must have itched from the first grade to the fifth without stopping. Well that afternoon I used the key to go inside. I dropped my backpack

in the kitchen and hung the key on the post by the phone just like Mom had taught me so I wouldn't lose it. Her purse was still sitting on the counter and her coat was on the rack, so I assumed she was home. Sometimes she stayed in all day. She didn't work when I was little—she didn't have to. She'd go to the grocery store or for walks, but mostly she stayed in. I checked all the rooms and then ran upstairs to see if she was in her bedroom. I was so excited to have no school; I couldn't wait to tell her the inane little details. How the principal came on the loudspeaker to announce the closure. How my bus driver swore the whole ride home and how Phil Stevens threw a snowball at his brother when we got off the bus that made his brother cry.

“And Mom hadn't locked the door to her bedroom. I don't know why. She usually locked the door even when we were the only two people in the house. Even when she was alone.

She always locked the door, but this time she didn't and I went rushing in and she was sitting on the bed and this man was there. At first I thought it was Dad—I thought he had come home early. I ran inside and jumped up on the bed, ready to throw my arms around him. I laughed and stared him right in the face. But it wasn't Daddy. I didn't know who he was. He had been buttoning his shirt and he just looked at me with these big blue eyes and light hair and fat eyebrows. He patted my head and smiled so pleasantly as he told my mother what a cute little thing I was. She was furious. I'm sure she was, but she didn't say a word and I didn't look at her. I could only stare at him, still thinking that at any moment this stranger would disappear and Dad would just materialize on the spot. But he didn't. And when the man was finished smiling he got up and put on his tie and his shoes and his coat.

“Mom followed him downstairs to let him out but I didn't go after them. Instead I sat there on the bed, gazing out the window at the snow. There was so much of it by then. Everything was bright and quiet and calm. Then Mom came back in. She took me by the wrist, pulled me off the bed and started shaking me back and forth like she used to do to get me to listen only this time was different. She shook me so hard it made my head hurt. And she asked if I had ever seen that man before and I said no. She slapped me. She told me that I could never tell my father—that it would break his heart and a broken heart

would kill a man like Dad. For a while I thought she was just trying to save her own skin, but she was also right: it would have killed him. So I never brought it up. Never mentioned it. And not once did I ever see that other man again. It wasn't enough though. Not for Mom. I don't think she was ever convinced that I could keep her secret. It started to build up inside her. She was always so worried that I would ruin everything—that everyone else would see her the way I saw her. That I would send Dad away from her.”

“But you were her daughter,” I said then.

“You were her daughter,” Anna replied, her head perfectly still. “You were her beloved second chance and you could just love her, and him, without all the trouble in between. You were her baby. Momma’s perfect little peach.”

For a few moments I stared down at my fingers, trying to imagine tall, elegant Anna as a little girl. I tried to envision the look on her face when she walked into that room.

After some time had passed she let out a breath. “Do you understand?”

“She cheated on Dad,” I said.

Anna nodded.

“Did you ever find out who the guy was?”

“No.”

“Did Mom ever talk about it?”

“No.”

I glanced at my shoes—guilty for asking; guilty for sharpening that low edge in her voice. She was angry. Not at me. But it was still my fault for making her say it. “Is that why she did the things she did to you?”

My sister’s brow grew tight only to loosen again. “You need to understand something,” she insisted in that bold, quiet way of hers. “It’s not like one day Mom was sunshine and rainbows and the next she was this miserable person. She was always sharp tempered. Some things changed after that afternoon, but not everything. People don’t change that much that quickly. It had to be there to begin with. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“All right.”

We sat there. We sat there and we waited; only I couldn't let it go. “But,” I started. “She had it in her to be like that. She was like that with you. Why didn't you tell me?”

Anna shifted her weight. The line of her mouth stiffened. “I watched—and that woman never laid a hand on you when you were little. I made sure of it. She'd yell. She'd have fits. But she never did anything to you. Your relationship with her was always very different than mine was. I thought it would be okay. Dad was there—”

I stared. “The walking vegetable?”

She bit her lip then. That silent scream. “I wanted you to be happy.”
“Is this a joke?”

“Doing that to our family,” she said. “Having our parents deemed unfit and watching you be placed in a foster home because I wasn't making enough money to support you was not the ideal solution.”

“And what about Mom?” I asked—yelling fully then. Yelling as I meant to yell and not simply doing so as best I could. It made no difference to me who heard or what anyone made of it. “She was fit to raise me? This is the woman that did terrible things to you, Anna! How could you really believe that was better?”

“Because she loves you.”

My voice dropped. “Loves me?”

“Because I love you,” she said, her voice louder than I had ever heard it before. She did not shout, but each and every word made me shake. “And because I didn't have the slightest idea what she'd do to me or to you if I reported her for it.”

I shook my head. It was more than I had meant to ask. She had already told me what I wanted to know, but I pushed it further. I made her say it and so there it was. Fear. My stubborn sister had been afraid of the woman. It was something I hadn't wanted to see so why I had I gone so far? It wasn't for her. And it certainly wasn't for me. I got carried away. Apparently I was good at letting things carry me.

“I fell off my bike,” I said and she looked up at me without a word. “Pretty stupid, right? I pressed the brake too fast and fell clean off. Landed on the street. It's how I got the bruise. Mom's never touched me. Not once.” Going there had been a mistake. I shouldn't have done

it. “But I saw what she was doing to you—it wasn’t hard to see—and I knew you wouldn’t talk about it unless you thought she had done the same to me too.”

Anna’s expression changed. Her eyes grew large—wide. Her lips did not part but she went pale so quickly that even her freckles seemed to dissolve. I thought she might faint but instead she rose to her feet and towered over me, her palms pressed against the desk as she leaned forward—staring. She kept on staring.

“I’m sorry,” I said. It wasn’t good enough. I knew that. “Everything else I said was true. I promise. It’s just—she barely talks to me. And when I look at her all I see is what she did to you and with Dad being who he is I just—I—”

“Don’t tell Mom about coming here.”

“I won’t. I was never going to.”

“Good.”

“Anna—”

“How’d you get here?”

“Bus. But, Anna—”

“When do you usually get back from school?”

Every awful feeling I had ever had rose in my throat. “Two thirty.”

“If you want to get home by then I suggest you get going.”

My throat dried up.

“Mallory.”

“You’d send me back?” I asked, only my voice had gone soft again and the words came out like pulp.

Anna sighed. “What else can I do?”

“Report her.”

“Is that why you came here?” she asked.

“No.” That wasn’t it. “No—I—How can you expect me to live with her? Knowing what I know, it’s not fair. The things she put you through.”

“So what’s changed?” she asked. “Whats makes her worse now than she was a year ago? Or two years?”

I blinked, feeling so very small. “I was scared.”

“Of her?”

“Of what you’d tell me,” I said. “Or what you wouldn’t tell me. I was worried you’d turn me out.”

Anna frowned, rubbing her face and releasing a breath. "I don't make enough to take care of you," she explained. "I have student loans, rent—"

"I'm not a little girl."

"You know what I mean."

"You took me last time," I insisted. "You took me to that tiny motel with the ants in the bathtub only I wasn't given a choice then. You never asked your six-year-old sister if she wanted to leave her mom and her dad and her house and all her toys. You just did it because you knew I couldn't stay there. It was the right thing. And it still is, Anna."

Anna didn't say anything. She only looked at me, her eyes so soft and yet so decided. My sister had always been confident in herself; certain in a way most people cannot bring themselves to be.

I stood up, barely able to breathe. "Right," I said, looking at her for as long as I could stand and then turning around and going over to the door. I opened it, hoping she would do something. She didn't though. She remained silent as I walked into the hall and she remained silent as I closed the door behind me.

Anna knew what she wanted and she knew precisely what she had to do to get it. So I was the trade. I was the casualty of the decisions she made. Being in that office did not change things. Shouting would not change things. She had severed her ties and that was that. I could still see it though—even as my hands began to shake—the way things had been. I could see the snow lying along the highway. I could hear the static of the radio—channel overlapping channel as different stations fought to fill our quiet car. I could still feel her fingers sifting through my hair as I fell asleep in that motel room. Only it was all fading. All incomplete. I only remembered it as I did because I had been reminding myself of each detail over and over again for so long that I knew where the pieces were supposed to fit. The memory of a memory. What a sorry thing to hold on to at such an age.

But I couldn't unlearn what I knew. And I didn't want to stop remembering because it was something I needed to have. It had been a good three days. Most people go a long time without three days like that. They go their entire lives, even. And so that was something to remember. And so I considered myself lucky. And as I walked away I

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thought about Anna in her office, knowing I had to go home and knowing it wasn't a place to send me. And so I remembered the snow. The buzz of the radio. Falling asleep on that flat motel mattress. Waiting—just waiting—to let go of all the rest.

Part III

CRITICAL ESSAY

Literature is one of the modes of knowledge through which truth becomes accessible to man. The contemplation of a literary work of art, far from being a momentary diversion, an escape from reality, is, rather, a vision of that deeper reality which we mean by the term Truth.

The Lyric Rhythm of Action: Wordsworth's Vision of Human Life in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"

by STEPHEN SHIVONE

In this essay I want to come to terms, in a limited and provisional way, with the vast and complex movement in art and history which we call Romanticism by examining in detail one of Wordsworth's poems, his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, with a view to understanding the truths about human existence embodied in it.¹ This topic arose from my initial skepticism that the meaning of Wordsworth's *Ode* could be made to apply to human life in general, whether analogous experiences could be found in the ordinary reader's life that correspond to those embodied in the poem. It seemed to me that the experience

1 Wordsworth, William. *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. All references to Wordsworth's poetry will be taken from this text. One need not be a specialist to want to come to terms with the phenomenon of Romanticism. Indeed, Romanticism is one of those problem areas in history, especially in literary history, that every discipline, and every student of every discipline, specialist or no, must seek to address, for the questions it poses remain important questions, remain our questions, and it is in answering these questions that we define our own lives. The importance of understanding Romanticism to understanding ourselves may seem like a rather mundane point to make at the beginning of an essay on Wordsworth. Of course it is important. Yet this importance is precisely what the dominant mode of literary criticism, New Historicism, wishes to deny, or at least to question. According to the approach of New Historicist critics, Romantic poets wrote what they did because they could not have written anything else, since all texts are determined by their cultural context. Wordsworth is simply the name of a particular amalgamation of determinant forces concentrated in a human biological organism. Thus, texts written two hundred years ago do not touch on any realm of "permanent things," to use T.S. Eliot's fine phrase, but merely express a radically contingent perception in the life of one person living at a particular moment in history and in a particular place in which certain economic, cultural, religious, moral, philosophical, material, and personal conditions obtain. The only reason to read texts from the past, then, is to encounter alien attitudes, ideas, emotions, and so on, which cannot possibly be shared by the reader, except through a certain distant sympathy or an effort of historical imagination, for the reader is just as locked in to his particular circumstances by historical forces as the writer of the text.

Wordsworth's *Ode* depicts was the special preserve of the poets; and this fact made his wide appeal in the English-speaking world puzzling. For, indeed, at first glance it appears that this poem, like many of Wordsworth's poems, even those which are ostensibly about non-poetic figures, is merely about the spiritual development of the poet; and, indeed, it has been understood as such by many critics, who have taken it to be either a record of Wordsworth's own autobiography—which indeed it is on one level—or about the problem of the imagination which so preoccupied Wordsworth's musings on art and life—which indeed it is, as well.² H.W. Garrod, for instance, in an old but very fine essay on the *Ode*, writes, "So far as we can judge, so far as general report can be trusted, Wordsworth's experience in this particular [its visionary character] is not that of ordinary men."³ Moreover, seeing as Wordsworth himself worried nervously about the status of his poetic gift—whether he still had it, what it was, where it came from, whether it would return, why it was he had been chosen to receive it—there seemed to me still further proof that Wordsworth himself was simply poeticizing about his own poetic development in the *Ode*. These observations, then, seemed to warrant my skepticism and my impression of the poem as an autobiographical document about his own poetic development, which of course might be of some value to other artist's suffering a similar predicament, but could not be of much use to the rest of humankind—those ordinary readers who do not read poetry out of curiosity about the lives of artists but for the sake of delight and illumination.

This interpretation of the *Ode*, however, came to seem unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, the myth of the child-philosopher which forms the core of the poem seems at once a subtle allegory of the poet and a figurative manner of expressing a universal truth about human life. This section of the poem in particular contains details of structure, psychology, diction, and imagery which function both as means of generalizing the experience of the myth and of pointing to its partic-

2 Cleanth Brooks, for instance, believes the poem is about "the paradoxes of the imagination"; F.W. Bateson, and many others, believe the poem is an autobiographical record.

3 Garrod, p. 119

ular connection to the life of a poet; which is not to say that the rest of the poem lacks any such universalizing devices. Secondly, lyric poems in general, as Helen Vendler argues,⁴ make utterances which presume not an “absolute resemblance” between writer and reader, but an analogous or symbolic one. Lyric poems figure forth experiences which can be analogized by any reader who in his own life has passed through metaphorically similar experiences. In other words, lyric poems, like all literary works of art, tell universal truths by analogy. Indeed, the value of literature to human life depends on the fact that there is a literal difference and metaphorical sameness between the experiences of different human beings. And thus we may be right to see a meaning in this lyric poem which is applicable and important to non-poets. Thirdly, Wordsworth himself, as we see in his Prefaces and letters, intended that his poetry would serve to benefit the common man and not just a coterie of friends or other poets. As Wordsworth himself says in one of his letters,⁵ his poetry is intended to make men more virtuous. Wordsworth wrote poetry for a humanitarian purpose, to make men and society better. Though his poetry was about himself in large part, his purpose was altruistic. And thus it would seem odd, for a poet with such lofty intentions as these, to be writing his great poems so exclusively about the fate of a special class of persons, that is, about experiences so restricted in their application.

For these three reasons, I think, we are justified in seeing the poem as an effort to express something universal, and thus in attempting to see what universal truth or truths about human experience it is trying to embody. To that end in this essay I shall endeavor to expound the content of the central experience embodied in this poem and to defend the claim that Wordsworth sees human life as having what might be called a lyric rhythm or form, and that he sees this rhythm or form as the basis not just of the life the poet, but of any genuinely good life.

Before proceeding to a close consideration of the *Ode*, however, it is not unimportant to note in passing that the *Ode* occupies a key position in any study of Wordsworth’s vision or spiritual development in part because of the special importance Wordsworth himself gave to

4 Vendler, pp. 183-4

5 p.126

it. As F.W. Bateson points out, in both *Poems of Two Volumes* (1807) and his *Poems* of 1815, Wordsworth placed the *Ode* at the end, the position of greatest emphasis and honor, and distinguished it from the preceding poems by means of special typographical effects.⁶ He seemed to regard the *Ode* as a kind of summative statement of the central theme of his vision. This is one reason it should be studied carefully by any student of Wordsworth. Another is that, excepting perhaps the final version of *The Prelude*, it gives his most mature and philosophical expression of the experience in question, despite the fact that *Tintern Abbey* illuminates the some aspects of Wordsworth's view of it more clearly.⁷ Some of his dramatic poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* deal with the same experience, but indirectly and in less explicit and philosophical terms. Therefore, the *Ode* seems a good place to study Wordsworth's view of human existence intensively.

I

The *Ode*, like Wordsworth's great early lyric *Tintern Abbey*, has a triadic arrangement. The three parts of the poem correspond to three different stages of perception that bear a very complex relation to one another. One notices that the two modes of perception described in the first two parts of the poem become involved with each other in the final section, and a new kind of perception emerges, that of the speaker at the end of the poem. So what exactly is the relationship of the three modes? What pattern do they form? The best explanation of that pattern is M.H. Abrams's description of what he calls the "greater romantic lyric." The Romantics, according to Abrams, invented a new type of lyric poem, with its own unique style and structure, which is somewhat difficult to characterize definitively. He describes its general characteristics succinctly:

They [these types of poems] present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises

⁶ Bateson, pp. 137-8

⁷ See F.R. Leavis's chapter on Wordsworth in *Revaluation* for a good discussion of this point.

easily to more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.⁸

Applying this description to the *Ode*, we might say that Stanzas I-IV contain the description of a landscape and the interior process it provokes; Stanzas V-IX contain an elaboration of that interior process in the form of a mythic evaluation or interpretation of that process; and Stanzas X-XI present the insight achieved and the return in a new mood to the outer scene. The only stanza whose function within this movement is vague is Stanza IX, which could belong to the second stage of the poem in the way of explicit dialectical comment on the myth; or it could express the new insight produced by the myth and thus in some sense belong to the final stage. It seems most reasonable to assign it to the second stage since the opening of the ninth stanza is linked structurally to the opening of the third stanza in that it repeats the opening lines of the third stanza almost exactly; and thus the ninth stanza appears to commence a fresh stage in the progress of the poem.

This explanation of the structure elucidates the style and formal movement of the poem and indicates in a general way its content.⁹

8 *Abrams*, p. 77

9 Conversely, however, there is a way of viewing the poem which posits a movement in the poem which is the obverse of progress toward knowledge, or which at least casts doubt on the coherence of this movement. F.W. Bateson, in his work *English Poetry: a Critical Introduction*, claims that the *Ode* presents a speaker suffering from a spiritual problem in the first part; then in the second part it offers a theoretical solution to this problem in the form of a myth which solves the problem by showing that it is simply in the nature of things; in the third part this solution is applied to the speaker's situation and the speaker reflects on its meaning for his present life. Bateson believes

It contemplates the essential movement as that of passing from ignorance to knowledge, or shallow perception to depth of insight, or emotional problem to emotional resolution. The important point for our purposes here, however, is that, viewed according to this analysis of its structure, the poem is seen as tracing the stages in a drama of the mind, a journey of the interior, what Dante called a movement of spirit, with a very specific shape. The poem starts with a sensitive but shallow perception of nature and then moves to a process of deeper reflection on the meaning of human experience. From this reflection, with its great depth and universal scope, a new perception emerges, and on that basis a new assessment of the original perception is made and a wholly new approach to life and nature is adopted. This movement, or *lyric rhythm of action*,¹⁰ underlies the pattern and meaning of the poem as a whole. For convenience, we might designate the three moments in the overall action Initial Perception, Reflection, New Perception (or Insight). In order to illustrate this movement in more detail, let us turn to a close analysis of the poem.

that the third part contains a note of insincerity or is perhaps a subtle expression of the self-deception which Wordsworth practiced upon himself in order to maintain his self-esteem. Quoting lines 193-4, "I love the Brooks which down their channels fret, / Even more than when I tripped lightly as they," Bateson emphatically states:

It is quite impossible to accept this statement at its face-value. All the evidence of the other autobiographical poems confirms the account of his development that Wordsworth gave in the *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*. There was a time when the cataract had haunted him 'like a passion,' but that was from about 1786 to 1793. By 1803 the "Nature's Priest" had become the "Man" living in "the light of common day." The two lines are in reality the merest wishful thinking. They are almost the first indication of the indifference to fact in the later Wordsworth that was to startle Hazlitt and Shelley. p. 144-5.

If we discount the claims of the third stanza as symptoms of spiritual factitiousness, as Bateson does, the movement of the poem is reversed: instead of presenting a speaker passing from a negative state to a positive one, it presents a speaker moving in the opposite direction, away from insight and wholeness and toward loss and diminishment.

10 For a discussion of a similar phrase and a similar idea as it applies to Greek tragedy, see Fergusson p. 18 & pp. 35-40.

II

In the *Ode*, a speaker meditates on his loss of insight. Indeed, insight may be regarded as its central theme, with memory perhaps composing the secondary theme. In the first section, the speaker remembers the former intensity of his response to nature, then observes his presently deteriorated, albeit sensitive, emotional and intellectual response to nature; in the second section, he explains his changing consciousness in terms of a short story or myth illustrating the development of the mind from birth to manhood; then, at the end, in the final section, applying the pattern of the story to his own situation at present, he regards his interior decline with a new awareness of its meaning.

The image of light and the image of seeing control the thematic progress of the poem, as Cleanth Brooks has ably shown.¹¹ They mark the stages of development of the consciousness of the speaker. Thus Stanzas I and II express his situation in terms of images of the sun, moon, heavenly light, and the way in which the speaker responds visually to these things. As the poem opens, the speaker remembers the special quality nature once had for him. The "earth" once seemed "appareled in celestial light," for it possessed the quality which he repeatedly calls "glory." This glory is precisely what he can no longer see: "the things which I have seen I now can see no more." But this does not mean he no longer takes pleasure in the earth, nor that he is without sight altogether. On the contrary, the earth still seems beautiful to him, and he still responds to it with pleasure. Like the moon in Stanza II, the speaker still "with delight / Looks round" him. Nevertheless, no matter what he does, he cannot see things as he once did.

Though the meaning of the opening stanzas seems straightforward enough, a number of ambiguities arise if one examines the diction and imagery carefully. In the first place, it is unclear whether the glory spoken of is a quality which belongs to things or whether it is projected on to them by the speaker's own vision. The latter is suggested by the word *appareled*, a word indicating that the light may not be an inalienable property of things, but rather something capable of being added

11 *Brooks*, p. 124-50

to or removed from them. The word *celestial* complicates the problem further. Does it mean that the light comes from the heavenly bodies? This reading is at least partly supported by the imagery of the heavenly bodies in the second stanza. Or does it mean that the light is a reflection of the “eternal deep” referred to in Stanza VII? For two reasons, I think this the more likely meaning, or at least the primary one, even though Wordsworth may be drawing on both.

First, the word *glory* carries a religious connotation in the Western tradition, upon which Wordsworth may be drawing, and of which he could not have been unaware. In the Bible, for example, glory has several meanings: the totality of God’s beauty; the act of homage due to God from men; the state of the blessed in heaven. But it also has a meaning which is most relevant here: the reflections of God apprehensible in natural things. Wordsworth may have something like this Biblical meaning in mind. He may also be thinking of the more Hellenic valence of the word. Glory referred, at least in Homer and Pindar, to the “flame off exploits,” to use a phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins, projected by the achievement of a hero. Glory was the honor due to a hero for his extraordinary achievement. In both Homer and Pindar, such achievement is not the work of a human being alone, however, but depends on the help of the gods. So the meaning of the word, even for the Greeks, had some connection to the divine, and it may that Wordsworth also has this meaning in mind. In any case, given the word’s history, and the fact that Wordsworth was no doubt aware that his use of the word would evoke the notion of divinity, it is likely that the glory referred to in the opening stanzas refers to the traces of some divine or transcendent reality inscribed on earthly things and apprehensible by human consciousness.

The second reason for thinking that Wordsworth uses the word *glory* to suggest the natural reflections of supernatural realities is that this is the power that the child possesses later in the poem. The child lives in the presence of supernatural realities. He does not see them exactly, but he knows and feels them more deeply than others nonetheless. The child has the vision of glory which the speaker has lost, and this vision obviously includes some comprehension of divine or transcendent realities. Thus we can suppose that the speaker, at the beginning of the

poem, though still able to perceive the inner glory of natural realities, is now unable to see the greater reality which natural realities somehow reflect.

In Stanzas III and IV the speaker turns to a detailed description of his present state by attending closely to his response to the natural scene immediately before him. The time of day and the season—a morning in spring—indicate that this is a moment of regeneration, or should be. The speaker is walking out in the natural world, and in the course of the stanza registers a healthy response to it; by the end, however, he realizes that his present response to nature lacks the quality of his earlier experiences. The oddity about the stanzas is that they are not a lamentation over his state, but a celebration of it. Even though he has lost the earlier vision, he still rejoices in nature. His present response is expressed through images of festivity; and the main action of the speaker in the stanzas is the effort to participate in the feast of nature he feels is taking place at this moment. The speaker manages to experience the great festival of nature in full except for one brief moment when he is beset by a “thought of grief.” He dispels this spell of sadness easily, however, by “a timely utterance,” which probably means that the sounds of nature have healed him of his sadness. In this connection, it is important to note that the speaker’s contact with things in stanzas three and four is no longer through the sense of seeing, but mainly through the sense of hearing. His hearing of nature, however full it may be, does not, however, give him access to the lost glory. Hearing nature is a tremendous pleasure, but it is not as exalted an experience as that which he has lost.

The feast of nature at which he is present includes all of being. The speaker imagines children all over the world picking flowers, mothers playing with their children, “land and sea” and all the “blessed creatures” observing a holiday. The upshot is that this is a moment of complete accord in the world, of harmony between man and man and man and nature. And yet to see the world as a great feast, to see its wonderful harmony, is still to fall short of the highest vision. Returning to the sense of sight, the speaker again laments the absence of the “glory and the dream” which he had known in childhood. But now he also uses another phrase to express his loss which anticipates the “myth” that

he will tell in the middle stanzas of the poem: he says that things have lost “the visionary gleam.” This phrase stresses the contrast, which will become more evident in the story of the child, between pleasure and vision. The speaker presently enjoys a great amount of pleasure in nature, but he has no genuine vision of it, or perhaps we should say through it. Pleasure and vision are incompatible states in the poem, and nature herself, as the middle stanzas show, conspires to lead one away from vision through the enticements of pleasure. Of the two, pleasure is perhaps the more common response to the world, but it is the less exalted one.

After the description of the great feast of being, the next section begins, occupying the middle five stanzas. These stanzas present the story of the child and the speaker’s application of that myth to his present situation. They constitute the core of the poem. They depict, symbolically, the progress of human consciousness in time as a process of diminishment through development, or subtraction by addition. As the ego grows and experiences more of the world, it loses its openness to the transcendent; it loses its vision of glory. The self reaches its climax at the beginning and is gradually ruined through its encounter with the earth and human society. The world in Wordsworth’s, or the speaker’s, view is not the “vale of soul-making” as Keats would later describe it, but the vale of soul-destroying.

Before passing on to examine the myth in detail, we should observe that it is the element in the poem which most emphasizes the universality of the experience it embodies; it is, as it were, the technique by which the speaker’s experience is identified with that of all human beings. The speaker does not just represent the poet, or some obsessive introvert, but man himself. And the child’s life typifies the human condition in one of its most important dimensions, namely, the condition of being an incarnate soul living in time and growing intellectually. This universality is made especially clear through the diction of the narrative: the birth of the child is “our birth”; God is “our home”; the child becomes “the Man”; the foster-child of earth is “her Inmate Man”; the early vision survives in “our embers.” And this use of the first person plural personal pronoun continues after the completion of the narrative, when the speaker applies the lesson of the myth ex-

plicitly to the life of humankind in general. For instance, he says that the recollections of the vision are a master light of “all our day” and “all our seeing.” The terms of the myth thus become the terms of human life in the poem.

Moving on the details of the myth, then, we observe at once that it obviously employs the Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis*.¹² The birth of the soul into the world is “a sleep and a forgetting.” Before entering the world, the soul existed in complete awareness of the “eternal deep.” When it comes into the world, it retains some awareness of this transcendent reality. Its birth does not cause “entire forgetfulness.” But very soon, as the result of a natural process, it begins to forget the heaven which lay about it in its infancy. The vision fades gradually though, and for some time after it is born, even into his youth, the soul “beholds the light, and whence it flows.” And as it grows it moves away from the original light, which is gradually replaced by another light: the “common light of day.” The Platonic trope of the myth, it should be noted in passing, also stresses the universality of the speaker’s experience: through a Platonic myth, the speaker comes to understand his experience as that of the human soul in general. And like a Platonic myth, the story of the child expresses truths about the invisible part of man, which Wordsworth following Plato calls the soul.

The experience of the child obviously parallels that of the speaker, especially in contrasting pleasure and vision. The earth remains a pleasure to the boy even as he loses the vision of glory, just as it does for the man. What the myth tells us is that this process is natural and inevitable. The experience of moving from a visionary sense of nature to mere pleasure in nature is the ordinary course of development. The speaker uses the trope of “mother-earth” to communicate this fact. Earth herself arranges life so that the soul forgets “the glories” it knew at birth and in infancy and becomes content with the more “homely” pleasures which she has to offer. Pleasure in nature is a good thing—it

12 For Wordsworth’s famous note on his use of the Platonic myth, in which he explains its use as a trope, see Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, p. 714. Also, for a good discussion of the differences between the significance of the myth for Plato and its significance for Wordsworth, see Garrod p. 116-9.

is “no unworthy aim”—but it is not the best thing; in fact, it occludes man’s perception of the highest realities.

The contrast between pleasure and vision is sharpened by the description of the child’s growing-up in Stanza VII. The tone of this stanza is more humorous and playful than that of any of the other stanzas, but its subject is perhaps the most serious. The speaker sees the child as becoming more and more disingenuous as he grows older. Using the Renaissance trope of life as a stage,¹³ the speaker depicts the child’s progress from natural simplicity to artificial complexity. It is hard not to see the ideas of Rousseau lurking in this passage. Rousseau was the first philosopher to see individual life and the history of society as an almost inevitable movement away from an original perfection. To live in time was to decline. Before him, the accepted pattern of life had been defined by the Aristotelian idea that life was a process of self-perfection through the acquisition of good habits; nature, in other words, was made perfect by being shaped into second-nature. But the pattern depicted in this stanza is Rousseauian, not Aristotelian. Indeed, there may be a subtle critique of the Aristotelian notion of imitation in the last line of the stanza. Aristotle attributes the phenomenon of poetry to two psychological causes: the fact that humans are imitative animals, which is evident from childhood, and the fact that people delight in imitations. For Aristotle, following these inclinations of human nature would be considered part of human perfection, a part of the development of human culture toward actualization. But for Wordsworth, the imitative instinct is the source of human corruption.

The description of the child’s entry into the world of society and practical affairs in Stanza VII merits some special attention because it touches at once the political dimension of the poem’s meaning and marks a significant point of difference between the terms of Wordsworth’s understanding of human life and those of the Renaissance authors to whose writings these lines seem to allude. Without magnifying the importance of these lines in the poem, we might still see them as exemplifying a kind of paradigm shift, to use a phrase from another

13 Anne Righter examines this trope as treated by Shakespeare with great insight. Her basic contention is that Shakespeare portrayed human life in dramatic narratives because he thought human life had a dramatic pattern.

discipline, in that they locate the source of human flourishing not in practical or political activity but in the quality of the interior life of the soul. This shift is indicated by the obviously derogatory use of the common Renaissance trope of life as a stage-play in which human beings assume a role. Such an image of life contemplates the essential function of man as mimetic and political. Engagement in political activity demands the assumption of artificial roles; participating in “dialogues of business, love, or strife” forces a person to use speech—“to fit his tongue”—that perhaps belies his actual thoughts and feelings, and thus causes a person to be false to his true nature. But this life drives a growing soul farther away from its true source until it is almost entirely cut off. In so far as a growing soul engages in this political life, it drifts farther away from the warm source of original vision, of genuine human flourishing, till it is buried in “custom” which lies upon it “heavy as frost.” In other words, it becomes *out of harmony* with nature’s source.

Thus the interior life of the soul essential to human flourishing is contrasted to the life of political engagement, which is associated with artificiality and spiritual insincerity, and the cause of the transition the one to the other is understood to be the mimetic instinct. Now, the description of how the mimetic instinct first begins to manifest itself in the child’s life expresses another significant semantic dimension of the story of the child, namely, his symbolic connection to the poet. The most prominent fact about the child’s life is that he is a maker. His “dream of human life,” his poetic vision, obviously echoes the speaker’s lost dream; his shaping and framing of his vision, occasioned by various events, into artworks and songs, obviously alludes to the work of a poet. Thus even though the child’s development is universal, it is also particularly related to the experience of the poet. The universal history of humankind is perceived through particular history of the speaker, who might reasonably be supposed to be a poet, and to some extent to represent Wordsworth himself. Wordsworth, through the story of the child, is trying to understand his poetic experience as the universal experience of humankind.

If the myth of the child is the core of the entire poem, Stanza VIII is the core of the myth. Since it is easy to get lost in a forest of abstractions when dealing with this stanza, let us simply rest content with

noting a few of its crucial aspects. The form of the stanza is that of an apostrophe to the child; its content deals with the characteristics of the child's original experience of that transcendent reality from which it was separated at birth and further alienated by its passage through time. In the course of its development, the stanza develops a contrast between two modes of vision.

The first is that of the child's ecstatic vision of the eternal, of which the child is a sort of passive recipient. The supernatural is simply present to him, surrounding and enveloping him like the air, so that he is not even really conscious of it. He takes it for granted, living and moving in its presence. He senses "the Divine in Nature"¹⁴ as an impersonal force which pervades the world, not as a personal being with a name. The child's experience of the divine exemplifies Wordsworth's typical idea of how we encounter the divine. As J. Robert Barth has recently written: "In passages where the real encounter with God takes place, God is not named, analyzed, nor theologized, but simply encountered as a mysterious and transcendent force touching the poet's life, symbolically, in and through his experience of the world around him."¹⁵ Or, to use Geoffrey Hartman's more idiosyncratic terms, in these encounters "apocalypse becomes akedah" when the transcendent is experienced as the immanent.¹⁶

The second mode of vision is that enjoyed by the rest of world, the sort of perception earlier referred to as "the light of common day." It is the sort of perception which the speaker presently has, limited, purely natural, and estranged from the primal ground of being. The speaker, paradoxically, calls those who see all things in this light "the Blind;" the child, who cannot hear or speak yet, sees ("read'st") the "eternal mind" as if effortlessly; the eternal truths which everyone is seeking in life simply "rest" on him.

But, of course, this vision cannot last, and for this nature herself is to blame. The child, blindly following the natural course of things, endeavors to leave his "blessed" state, eventually becoming the slave of "custom" like everyone else. This is simply the nature of things and

14 *Grierson & Smith* pp. 324-5

15 *Barth*, p. 24

16 *Hartman*, p. 225

nothing can stop it. For this reason, the speaker pities the child, who in his own unwitting "blindness" strays away from his own happiness and loads his soul with "earthly freight." The child, we might observe in passing, possesses that natural instinct that Rousseau paradoxically called perfectibility, which impels people to leave the perfect state of nature and to found those associations and institutions which are the source of human misery.

Of the last three stanzas of the poem, much could be said that cannot be said here. Above all, all the many connections between them and Wordsworth's statements elsewhere, in prose and in verse, about poetry, the technique of recollection, and the importance and nature of "spots of time," could be drawn. But these things cannot concern us here, since we must attend only to the main lines of the development of the poem.

The last three stanzas apply the explanation furnished by the myth of the child to the life of humankind in general, and then to the situation of the poet. They are meant to be an encomium, not for the ecstatic vision of the child, but for its persistence in time through memory. In these stanzas the speaker's admiration is not caught nearly so much by the glory of the child's vision as it is by the way in which that vision sustains the human being in time, even makes his life in time seem insignificant by comparison with eternity. As he says, it makes "Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence."

The burden of these stanzas is that the splendor of the original vision, of the "primal sympathy," somehow remains throughout life, as if just beneath the surface, quietly shining even beneath our dulled perception of things and manifesting itself through our bewilderment at the natural world. It is what we might call a *master experience*, that is, an experience which somehow defines and directs the whole of someone's existence, like first love, the meaning of which a person spends his whole life trying to understand. Accordingly, there is nothing in life, not even the most seemingly insignificant moment, which is not affected by the experience and which cannot be understood in relation to it. It sheds its light into every corner. The speaker thinks doubt itself, "those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things," a sign of the presence of the vision, perhaps because it signifies that we

do not regard nature herself as final. The original vision cannot be “utterly abolished” by time, but is always some there, as a “master light of all our seeing,” as a source of “strength,” which “having been must ever be.” And it does not matter how far we seem to be from the vision, it can still be recovered through recollection in a moment of tranquility. “Though inland far we be,” he says, “Our souls have sight of that immortal sea.”

In the final two stanzas, the speaker returns to the present time and place, only to find that somehow, after all, his delight in nature is even greater than it was when he had the true vision. He loves nature even more than when he was a boy. The poem ends on a sober note, however, with the speaker a sadder and wiser man as he contemplates the fate of the true vision in time and the harsh realities of human life. The intoxication of the opening stanzas has disappeared, despite what the speaker says about being more delighted by nature now, and the speaker seems to have gained in depth and wisdom from his acknowledgement of mortality and human suffering. His distress over the loss of the true vision has been mitigated in the course of the poem by a realization that the vision endures and informs his consciousness even now, and that it remains as a source of wisdom and strength from which he can draw faith; now even the “meanest flower” can occasion depth of thought and now those distressing thoughts which he had wanted to escape in Stanza II are accepted with a kind of stoical calm.¹⁷ The difference between his present state and the state of the child, he sees, is simply that now the vision can only be consciously recovered intermittently, though it is somehow faintly present at all times. The vision now furnishes, in other words, intimations of immortality through recollection; whereas then, in childhood, when he lived beneath “its habitual sway,” it was constant and immediately present.

17 John Jones asserts on p. 142 that in the decade between the *Ode* and *The Excursion* Wordsworth came to know Seneca as he knew no other philosopher.

III

One response to this analysis of the poem might well be to suggest that even considering the universalizing devices within the poem, the experience it embodies cannot possibly be construed as applying to each human life¹⁸, but, rather, much more obviously is about the special and extraordinary experience of a poet. And yet I take it that Wordsworth himself did view all of human life in precisely the terms of this poem. In addition to all the indicators of this within the poem, this fact seems borne out by several other considerations. First, there is the fact that the poem's structure is based on a peculiarly universalized version of Hartleian epistemology. As James Ralston Caldwell, in discussing the effect of the Hartley's psychology on Wordsworth, and Wordsworth's modifications of it, explains:

Wordsworth also introduced the concept of the three ages of man. Hartley, in classifying mental activity as sensation, simple ideas of sensation, and complex ideas, had intimated that these three kinds of mentation are characteristic of different periods of life. This suggestion Wordsworth developed into a definite theory of three ages of man-in-nature: childhood, the age of sensation; youth, of ideas of sensation; and maturity, of complex ideas...In *Tintern Abbey*, the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*...and elsewhere, he comments on the divinely ordered progress from the child's vivid and unconscious delight in sensation, through the passionate and imaginative response of youth, to the contemplative and sensorially dim operations of the mind in maturity. For the loss of the warm senses of childhood and the rapt delight in Nature of youth, he finds ample recompense in "the years that bring the philosophic mind."¹⁹

The Wordsworthian view of human life, then, stems from his conception of the evolution of human consciousness in time. He does not think of life in terms of the growth of the virtues, or the imitation of Christ, or the meeting and overcoming of obstacles. No. He thinks of it as a process of mental growth through inevitable stages of different

¹⁸ For a good discussion of this point see MacIntyre pp. 143-4.

¹⁹ *Hartley*, p. 80

kinds of mental activity. And if there is any end to the process, it is the gaining of insight.

Secondly, the Wordsworthian view accepts no distinction between the moral and imaginative, the aesthetic and the spiritual. He does not divide the inner life into its traditional compartments, but views it holistically. David Bromwich, in a recent study, says simply: "I do not think Wordsworth accepted any division between the moral and the imaginative."²⁰ Hence each human life can be understood in terms of its cognitive or imaginative development: this is the preponderant characteristic of life, which takes primacy over everything else; indeed, somehow includes everything else. Wordsworth says at one point, commenting on his "Ode to Duty," that the poet must contemplate "all modes of existence as subservient to one spirit."²¹ This is why Wordsworth's view of the moral life is so connected to his view of sensory response to nature: the one is entirely dependent on the other.²² The proper experience of nature is the source of all his moral being.²³ As Geoffrey Hartman rightly says, "Failure or access of emotion (inspiration) vis-à-vis nature was the basis of his spiritual life: his soul either kindled in contact with nature or died. There was no such thing as a casual joy or disappointment."²⁴

So, given that it seems to be the case that Wordsworth views the whole of life according to the character ascribed to it in the *Ode*, the question naturally arises: what are the central characteristics of the Wordsworthian view? I think we can observe two.

First, each human life is understood as progress through long periods of spiritual and emotional dryness marked by spontaneous and intermittent moments of intense sensation and illumination which then in turn form the basis of similar future moments and which sustain a

20 *Bromwich*, p. 93

21 *Major Works*, p. 713

22 Though there is no space to discuss it in the essay, the influence of the Earl of Shaftesbury is probably evident in Wordsworth's view of the relation between sensation and morality. For a good, succinct overview of Shaftesbury's ethics, see Marias p. 254. Marias makes the relevant point that the Earl's ethics of the moral sense are "tinged with aestheticism."

23 On this point, see Trilling 243, who calls this aspect of Wordsworth's vision his "quietism."

24 *Hartman*, p. 5

person during the dry periods. These moments are spontaneous, not stable like habits, but can be recollected for the sake of strength and consolation and light in the dry times. Hence, insight and memory are the foundation of human flourishing; and the life of the senses and the life of the mind must be cultivated in order to live well. The loss of insight, such as is depicted in the *Ode*, is thus the loss of something at the very center of human happiness. Insight, or receptive contemplation of ultimate reality, has an absolute value in this view of existence. To the extent that one has it, or can access it through memory, one is spiritually fulfilled. Above all, a person is fulfilled through a kind of responsiveness to being; virtue, classically understood as “the utmost capacity of what a man can be,” consists in a certain mode of interaction with the external world.

Secondly, the source of human flourishing is communion with external nature and with God through nature. Life in society is inherently dehumanizing, as Wordsworth argues in the Preface of 1800. A good human life is one lived close to the natural order and in harmony with it. Without direct contact with nature, life becomes false and inhuman. Of course the child is most in contact with the “Divine in Nature” and thus perfection of spirit is found in its purity in the child. Life is, to some extent, a process of diminishment, since the original vision can never be fully recovered.

In view of all this, we can see how the *Ode*, far from simply describing his own artistic development—though it does that, too—maps the stages of the whole spiritual life; it is a comprehensive mimesis of the human psyche moving through time, like Dante’s *Comedy*. Just as ancient tragedy did for the Greeks, Wordsworth’s *Ode* embodies the shape of each human life. And just as the Greek view of life found its natural literary form in tragic drama, so Wordsworth’s view finds its natural form in what M. H. Abram’s, as mentioned above, calls “the greater Romantic lyric.” This type of lyric, for Wordsworth as for many of his contemporaries and for many later poets, captures the central characteristics of human life and agency. Life itself is understood as a specific kind of psychic experience with a lyric character or rhythm. To what extent this idea of human life reflects the spirit of the age—whether it is an accurate mirror of the age’s tendencies

toward emotivism, subjectivism, and an aesthetic appreciation of human life, as opposed to an objective, logical appreciation—cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say, in this connection, that the author of this essay wavers between two responses to Wordsworth's poetry: on the one hand, there are moments when we share Keats's wariness about Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime," and judge that his poetry is simply too subjective to be considered great poetry, or even valuable to future generations. On the other hand, more frequently, we see his poetry as a wise and sensitive voice testifying, in a busy and overly pragmatic age, to the central place which contemplative activity ought to occupy in a genuinely human life, to the need for a deep interior life. If we hear this in Wordsworth's voice, then his poetry should be cherished, for then it is fulfilling the proper function of poetry, which, as Michael Oakeshott says,²⁵ is always to witness at the same time to the primacy of contemplation among human activities and to the inevitable transience of contemplative moments.

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25 see Oakeshott's long essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" in *Rationalism in Politics* for a penetrating discussion of place of poetry in the "map of human activities."

Part IV

BOOK REVIEW

Poetic intuition divines the mystery at the heart of time: that in a way we can scarcely comprehend or imagine, all the elements of our lives are parts of the achieved and which will raise and transform their meaning as it incorporates them into itself.

BOOK REVIEW: *The Republic of Thieves, Book 3 of
Gentleman Bastards Series*

by THOMAS R. CHANEY

Among the many titles in the fantasy genre, Scott Lynch's *Gentleman Bastards series* stands in good company with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *A Song of Ice and Fire* in terms of the rich and deeply textured world it presents to the reader in the process of telling its story. It also brings a fresh and unique take on the traditional fantasy tale by focusing on a class of people often relegated to the sidelines of most heroic quests: the roguish thieves who earn their living by robbing from the rich and powerful. The result is a compelling cast of characters and a fascinating protagonist who regularly achieves heroic deeds while remaining a sort of antihero who mostly acts out of self-interest and self-preservation. It is a testament to Lynch's considerable talents for characterization that Locke Lamora is even more fascinating in this third entry in the series than he was in the preceding two volumes. Even after over a thousand pages, Lynch's antihero still has many surprises for those well-versed in his misadventures.

Longtime fans of this series will probably notice a slight difference in the pacing of this story as compared to the previous two novels. Whereas the first two books were filled with many stories of sword fights, ship battles and assassinations, in this current story much of the fantasy violence is absent in favor of political machinations and simple subterfuge. This is all well and good, as this serves to place the emphasis on the characters and the introduction of a key figure from Locke's past who serves as his primary rival and love interest in this tale. Through another series of misadventures, Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen find themselves in the employ of the notorious Bondsmagi. These Bondsmagi are representatives of a political party in their homeland of Karthain, and they contract Locke and Jean's services to help rig Karthain's election in their favor by making them a deal they cannot refuse. This unusual set of circumstances is made more extraordinary when they learn that the opposition party has contracted similar services from an old friend and associate, Sabetha, who fans will recognize as an important figure from Locke's past who has been

often referenced but never introduced to the reader. Here the logic of this novel's pacing makes perfect sense, since the relatively calm movement of the story throughout most of the book provides the perfect backdrop to the romantic tale of Locke and Sabetha. The story takes a great deal of care in introducing the character of Sabetha as well as providing more vivid details about the history between her and Locke and the nature of their relationship. That's not to say that there aren't plot twists and dramatic actions aplenty, as there certainly are and they culminate in an electrifying conclusion that both satisfies and leaves the reader in eager anticipation for more.

The story takes place mainly within the context of two different cities: Karthain and Espara. Karthain is set during the present moment after the events of the second novel, an ancient citadel that delivers more mystery and intrigue than even a longtime fan of the series might initially anticipate. Espara serves as the location for flashback chapters, which focus on a newly adolescent group of Gentleman Bastard's who are tasked with acting in a theatrical troupe after being temporarily evicted by their esteemed patriarch. These chapters are enjoyable in themselves, both for painting the picture of Sabetha and Locke's first love and for the fun excerpts from the play that they stage, *Republic of Thieves*, an Elizabethanesque tale of tragic romance between star-crossed lovers. Taken together, these alternating chapters serve as a sort of narrative portmanteau with each perspective reinforcing the central tale of the romance of Sabetha and Locke. The Esparan saga tells of how they fell in love in the first place, and the events in Karthain show how many of those elements still persist many years into the future, for good and ill. The final product is a fascinating adventure that both alters and enhances the reader's previous understanding of this long and interesting saga.

Readers new to the series should note that each subsequent title relies heavily on the assumption of prior knowledge of and familiarity with the previous novels. This is especially true of the third volume in this series. First time readers will therefore want to read the first two titles, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* and *Red Seas Under Red Skies*, before picking up this current tale. Anyone familiar with the story of Locke Lamora will find this an immensely enjoyable and satisfying read.