

INCARNATION

A JOURNAL OF THE MORAL IMAGINATION



Vol. 2, Issue 1: Easter 2025

From the Editor:

Greetings!

It is with some regret but great hope for the future that we must announce this as the last issue of *Incarnation*. I would like to thank all of you for your support and for allowing us to produce two full issues of Fiction and Poetry before this unavoidable closure. With the departure of our Managing Editor Ms. Smith, the Journal in its present form is simply too much for Mr. Othot and I to handle on our own, while we also have full time jobs.

Fortunately Mr. Wright our director of development and Mr. Othot have teamed up to start a new Substack which will have a similar mission to *Incarnation*, as Mr. Wright describes it:

The name "Reveille" recalls the rousing trumpet tune which begins the day of every soldier. The journal is inspired by the Clarion call that wakes Charles Ryder in Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited," prompting his nostalgic recollection of beautiful things from times past, and fruitful contemplation of beauty eternal. The journal hopes to affect a similar response in its readers, prompting a fruitful and sustained reflection on the permanent things by introducing them to excellent short stories, serialized novels, poems, and essays.

In particular, the journal hopes to provide a platform for up-and-coming authors to receive significant online exposure, allowing talented authors to share their work with as many as possible. Somewhat regrettably, the online medium is the best means to accomplish this, but like Charles Ryder's dull surroundings, we hope it will be for our authors the mere prologue to a great and beautiful journey.

I have great hope that this new endeavor will be fruitful. You can find *Reveille* here: <https://substack.com/@reveillejournal> If you enjoyed *Incarnation* I encourage you to go there and see what they have to offer. Thank you again for your support and I hope you enjoy this final issue of *Incarnation*.

May God Bless you abundantly this year and for the rest of your lives.

Thomas Greninger
Publisher | *Incarnation*

Feast of The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

INCARNATION

A JOURNAL OF THE
MORAL IMAGINATION

Masthead

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Due to this being the last issue of Incarnation we are publishing the remaining parts of *The Way of The Pen* spread throughout the issue, here follows the second part.

THE WAY OF THE PEN

By Jamey Toner

Part II

4: Cromwell

“Dang it,” I muttered, and dropped the phone back into the cradle. “Dang it, blast it, and bother it.”

Teenagers tend to assert, in a vast and universal chorus, that adults don’t understand them—which, in a sense, is silly, because to be an adult necessitates having at some point been a teenager. But in another way, there really is a certain truth in the assertion, because to be an adult also means to have gained a level of perspective that makes it hard to remember the profoundly sincere adolescent feeling that actual human lives hang in the balance every time a social difficulty rears its head. Looking back now, I can easily recollect the fact that I was afraid to call Sylvia that day—okay, that week—but I can no longer summon up the emotion. All I wanted to do was ask her to lunch; what was the worst she could possibly say, “No, thanks”?

Following Claviger’s class, I’d taken the next several weeks to do as much of nothing whatsoever as I could squeeze into my vacuous itinerary. Noelle and I played tackle tag in the living room until Mom chased us out of the house, and I watched every last episode of *Magnum* with that marvel of applied indolence, my best friend. It was the tag-end of August before I even thought about poetry again. When the subject hove back into my cerebral horizons, I regarded it with a self-assurance which, probably had a few toes over the borderline of cockiness. I felt a literary second wind coming on, and reflected that I would be bringing a whole new game to the tables of the *Augury* in September. And that got me thinking about *her*, and my assurance foundered and sank.

Each day of that week, the last before school resumed, I stalked my phone like a cheetah with a nervous disorder, swooping in to pounce and then swerving away at the last moment over and over again. On the final day of summer vacation, I got as far as picking it up. I had even dialed a few digits of her number before I lost my wherewithal. As I sat glaring at the little hunk of plastic, trying to devise some rational way of blaming my problems on the phone itself, it suddenly rang. After I came down from the ceiling, I snatched it up and answered, “Hopkins residence, Joey speaking.” Usually I just said, “Yyyello,” but some half-connected circuit in my brain had leapt to the conclusion that it must be Sylvia calling, via Kismet Wireless.

Alas, it was only Sean. “Dude! Last day of summer, let’s go tree-climbing.”

“I don’t really feel like going out, man.”

“Of course you do!”

“No, I really don’t.”

“And that would be a convincing argument, if you hadn’t forgotten to reckon with my mastery of the syllogism. Behold the following. One: I think you want to go tree-climbing. Two: I’m right. Ergo, three: you want to go tree-climbing.”

“Sean, that’s not a syllogism.”

“Oh, no? One: you think it’s not a syllogism. Two: you’re a moron. Ergo, three: it is a syllogism. *Boom!* You’re

the guest of honor at a logic buffet, and I'm the chef!"

I cracked a smile. "Nice work. Aristotle's probably pinwheeling in his grave right now."

"And if a long-dead philosopher can aspire to such acrobatics, then a healthy young poet should be ashamed to do less."

"Okay, okay. Lemme call you back in a minute." I hung up and dialed Sylvia's number as quickly as I could, before my silent fears could grip me. It rang half a dozen times before going to voicemail; and, having nothing intelligent to say, I hung up without leaving a message. *All right*, I thought. *At least I tried*. Then I called Sean back and we went tree-climbing.

And the next day, we were back at St. John Vianney High. The first day, like the last day, was a half-day: a day of orientation, easing us back into the school year as we learned what classes and teachers we would be having, and where and when they would be held. As seniors, we naturally knew these things already, so we coasted comfortably through the short hours till our release. After the final bell, we sauntered into the madding crowds that frothed and surged through the narrow hallways, letting the freshman tide break around us and retreat down the academic shingle. I waved to Noelle as she pattered by, and she waved back, beaming. Sean and I bumped fists, I offered some knowledgeable advice to a couple of newbies on what days to avoid the cafeteria meatloaf, and finally I moseyed on out to the parking lot where Dave waited faithfully for my return. Yep—I was feeling pretty well on top of things. Then Sylvia caught up with me.

"Hey, Hopkins," she said, and punched me on the shoulder (pretty hard, I must say).

"Hey, Sylvia. How was your summer?"

"I went to Ecuador. I'll do an editorial, you can read all about it. You?"

"Took a class at Winchester. According to my calculations, I wrote over 2.5 metric butt-loads of poetry."

"And it shows in the eloquence of your conversation. By the way, did you call me yesterday?"

"Huh? Oh—er—yeah. I mean—yeah, I just, you know. . . just saying hey. So!—what's going on with the *Augury*? Any plans?"

She shrugged. "We'll have our first board meeting tomorrow in the usual spot. Bring along a few samples of your new stuff; we'll kick off the year with a big issue."

"Will do. I'll um, yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right."

I had offered to give Noelle a lift to and from school, but she had opted to catch rides with a friend from St. Francis and her mom lest the crazed hedonism of my senior's lifestyle should someday leave her stranded. Being therefore free to spend my afternoon in whatever way appealed to me, I drove home and went back to bed. Ah, the reckless abandon of those heady days!

On Tuesday morning, we had a new classmate. She explained with doe-like innocence that she'd been told this was the first full school day and had misunderstood that to mean there was no school at all on Monday, but I suspected that she'd simply engineered her entrance for maximum spotlight. Not that she needed to. Helen Milton, her name was—and we'd never seen such a young lady before. Her eyes were blue and fair as the meeting of sea and heaven; her hair was silken honey, her skin gold-kissed, her countenance angelic. Queenly was her bearing, and some air about her—whether her perfume or only her presence—made the heart to quicken and the breath to catch. —And yes, I'm aware that I've slipped into poetic diction here; I can't help it. The girl was *beautiful*.

"Joey," Sean whispered. "I think I'm in love."

"Get in line, pal."

Not that I had any designs on our radiant little maiden, mind you. I knew the dynamic: girls like her got guys like me to write their term papers for them while they made out with the nearest available quarterback. Anyway, I had no idea how to strike up a conversation with someone who wouldn't get my Tolkien references.

Shortly after roll call, the first bell rang and we all moved toward the door, most of the boys clamoring around

Helen for the chance to carry her books. I headed for my Chemistry class, yearning to combine violently unstable compounds in fragile containers. Second period was History of the American South, and then came morning break. Sean seized me in the halls. “Come on, man, she’s heading for the caf.”

“Who?—oh.”

Helen was sitting at the center table and had surrounded herself with our best-dressed and vapidest. The other girls in the caf couldn’t seem to stop themselves from glancing at her—whether in resentment or awe—and the men-folk mostly stared openly. Sean, never one for the low-key approach, simply strode towards her table and her flock of flappers. Impelled by curiosity, I played wing-man; and in the few seconds before they acknowledged our interloping presence, I was exposed to a maelstrom of chick-talk such as I had hitherto encountered only in nightmares. The following is an exact transcript of their conversation, as nearly as I can render it in the common speech:

“Omigosh *hair* and *clothes* and *boys* and like omigosh did you *see* those *shoes* where did she even *get* those *shoes* and I *know* omigosh he is like *so cute* and I *love* your *nails* and like *omigosh!*”

I swear they didn’t breathe at all.

We stood there quietly for a moment or two, Sean smiling calmly and I doubtless looking ill at ease, and in time’s fullness, Helen turned her fluttering lashes in our direction. “Hey, guys,” she said. “Are you lost?”

“Nope,” said Sean. “I’m Sean Crusoe. This here’s my best friend Joey Hopkins. We just wanted to say that you seem like a really nice girl and we’re glad you’re at our school this year.”

She looked impressed; probably didn’t get sincerity very often. And it didn’t hurt that Sean was a big loveable teddy bear whose bone-crushing lunacy was cleverly veiled for the nonce. “Thank you, Sean, I appreciate that.” Then she lowered her face just a fraction and gave me a sultry look from under her brows, which produced exactly the reaction she wanted it to. “How about you, Joey—don’t you talk?”

“Not on Tuesdays.”

“Oh. Well—nice meeting you.”

“Likewise,” Sean said. “See you around.” We turned and made our way back toward the hallway through the gathering throng. “Yep—I’m in love.”

“Dude, honestly. If you dropped a penny into the well of her soul, you could reach in and get it back.”

“Joey—think of what it must be like for her growing up with a face like that. How many people do you think have just sat down and talked with her because they were interested in her mind and character? Of course she’s developed an armor of air-head. But there’s a real person in there somewhere, and I’m gonna find her.”

“That’s real nice of you. Would you still be making the effort if she were a hundred pounds heavier?”

“I don’t know. I hope I would.”

I glanced at him. “Sean, you sound uncharacteristically serious about this. Just remember the last time, okay?”

“I remember the last time. I’ll see you in Roland’s class.”

“... Yeah.”

Third period was Christian Theology, followed by AP English with everybody’s favorite Commander. Sean and Sylvia were both in this one with me. We’d gotten all the “how was your summer” out of the way the day before, so Roland laid right into us at the start of class. “What is literature?” he mused. “Most of you have been studying it with me for the past three years—yet we’ve never defined the term. Who can tell us what literature is?”

There was a long thoughtful pause. Then our buddy Jim raised his hand and said, “Telling stories?”

Roland nodded. “Certainly, Mr. Burton, that is one of the functions of literature. But what is it that distinguishes, say, a *David Copperfield* from an afternoon soap opera? They’re both telling stories.”

“Style?”

“Style, yes. Anything else?”

Ellen in the back raised her hand and said, “Depth.”

“Good. What else?”

“Beauty,” I said.

“Ah! Quite so. And what is that?”

“Well. . .” I trailed off. Another silence fell.

“Anyone?” Sylvia put up her hand. “Yes, Ms. Templeton.”

“I don’t think you can define beauty,” she said. “It’s different for everyone.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Everyone *sees* it differently, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there to be seen.”

“Okay, define it then.”

“I can’t. But the mere fact that you’ve managed to saddle me with the burden of proof in a debate as old as philosophy, doesn’t validate your position, either. I’m sure there are wiser heads than mine that could answer your question.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“All right, get a room, you two,” Jim said. There was a general chuckle, and she and I blushed a bit.

“Nevertheless,” said the Commander (taking the hullabaloo in stride), “if beauty is one of our criteria, then we need some definite standard to judge whether or not a prospective piece of literature contains it.”

A big, soft-spoken fellow called Emeka raised his hand and said, “You know it when it makes you a better person.”

Roland snapped his fingers. “Excellent! Still a trifle subjective, perhaps, but if a large enough group of intelligent readers can agree over a long enough period of time that a piece of writing has somehow bettered them—then, I think, the suspicion begins to dawn that we have true literature on our hands.”

“But writing doesn’t need to be beautiful to do that,” Sylvia argued. “If I read a cook-book, I’ve bettered myself.”

“But only in one specific, identifiable way. I submit to you that literature—indeed, art of any kind—changes the soul in multiple ways, some of which cannot be expressed even to oneself and which, unlike strict information, continue to unfold over the course of time. The greatest values cannot be quantified.”

I found myself wondering what old Steve Graveling would think of that theory.

“Now,” said Roland, and a strange grimness came into his voice, “—let us test the limits of subjectivity.” He picked up a stack of photocopied papers and paced through the room handing them out. “This was written last year by a rising new poet called Allen Cromwell. Please read it in silence, and take a couple of minutes to measure it against our tentative definition of literature.”

I’ve got a good memory for names, and I didn’t have to dig much to disinter the recent scuffle I’d witnessed between Danielle and Fred over the name of Cromwell. The hand-out was copied from a magazine, and featured a small poem entitled, “Forsaken.”

*For good and truth, Auschwitz awaits—
for beauty, alley-rape;
corpse-dogs and vultures prowl the gates
of heavenly escape.*

*This stick-and-carrot deity
who hangs us on a cross
("Lord, why have you abandoned me?")—
his victory, our loss.*

*Cold dirt and maggots take us all,
and everlasting night—*

*so scream defiance as we fall:
curse god, and curse the light!*

“Cheery,” I muttered. Around me I heard various little gasps and murmurings from my classmates as they digested the anti-ode (or whatever you’d call it). One heck of a way to start the year, I thought.

“So,” Roland said eventually. “We’ve studied Herbert, Dryden, Donne, even Dante—but we haven’t heard much from their enemies hitherto. A dash of Ginsberg, a soupçon of Swinburne, a few other odds and ends; but these ideas are out there, lying in wait at any college in the country, and I’d be gravely remiss if I did nothing to forearm you. What are our reactions to ‘Forsaken’?”

“I think it’s horrible,” a girl called Jamie said immediately. “I don’t know if it’s literature, but I know it’s wrong.”

“Is it, though?” Sylvia asked. “Doesn’t everyone feel this way sometimes?”

“No! Well. . . maybe. . . but that doesn’t mean you should write something that will make other people feel the same way. It’s like going around sneezing on people when you’ve got the flu.”

“You know,” I said, almost unwillingly, “I hate to be the devil’s advocate here, but it does make it easier to deal with your feelings when you can put them into words. I remember C.S. Lewis once said that he was seeing a young friend off to his deployment with the RAF in World War II and they just kept quoting ‘The Ballad of the White Horse’ to each other because there was nothing else to say.”

“Yeah,” Ellen said, “but that was poetry to lift the soul. This poem does the opposite.”

“Different poems have different functions,” said Sylvia. “Sometimes they can create new emotions, but other times they can help articulate an emotion that’s already there—which can help you get over it, if it’s something bad.”

“I don’t think this guy had ‘functions’ in mind when he was writing this thing, Sylvia,” Sean said dryly. “It sounds to me like he’s lost and howling—only he happens to be a poet, so it comes out sounding like poetry.”

Commander Mark smiled. “Once in awhile, Mr. Crusoe, you say something so apropos as to balance out single-handedly the raving nonsense which is the preponderance of your discourse.”

“Thank you, sir. You flatter me.”

We spent the rest of the class discussing the piece and its relation to literature in general. Our homework was to write a response to “Forsaken”—an essay, a poem, a prayer, whatever came to our pens. “And don’t feel that the response has to be negative,” Roland added. “If you find that you agree with any of the sentiments expressed here, then by all means defend them—but do so intelligently.”

As we issued out into the hall, Sean went drifting away in the direction opposite the caf. “Hey,” I called. “You coming to lunch?”

“Nah. Not hungry.” He waved vaguely and continued his shuffling drift.

I sighed. *Here we go: Romeo and Rosaline again.* I ended up eating with Bobby Sanger and the lads, laboring with sharply limited success to steer the conversation away from the hotness of our Ms. Milton, who had once again assumed the center table and populated it with queen bees whom her mere aura had already reduced to drones. You had to give Sean one thing: the man set his sights high.

Fifth and sixth periods went by without event, and once again the scions of the *Augury* gathered in Room 114. Maven and Lily were gone, off to university, but Sylvia had bold new plans to recruit incoming freshmen of talent. “We’ll do a giant issue this month, just the core group of us, to get everyone’s attention. And we’ll announce a contest for next month—a schoolwide contest for art, fiction, poetry, articles, photos, everything we can think of. It should give us tons of material to choose from for upcoming issues, and also help us identify truly promising potential contributors. So! Let’s get the ball rolling.”

“Therefore never send to know for whom the ball rolls,” Tommy intoned. “It rolls for thee.”

She almost cracked a smile at that one. “Why yes, Tommy, you may be the first to share your contributions

with the group. Show us what you've got."

The kid threw a surprisingly sharp salute. "Ma'am, yes sir, ma'am! I wrote a story over the summer: a harrowing tale of two goats and the man who teaches them ninjitsu. . ."

Each of us had offerings. I had a veritable sheaf of poems, and Sylvia ended up taking five of them just for the one issue. "The serious parts of the magazine will be followed by funny poems, and the funny parts by serious ones. It'll help to maintain flow."

"You've taken all my best stuff."

"I'm well aware. You'll just have to write more for the next issue, won't you? And do it fast; I want to push this issue to press in two weeks if we can."

This gave me an idea. I had to write a response for Roland anyway; perhaps that response could pull double duty as my submission for the October issue. I headed on home and did my other homework until suppertime; then I scrounged up some junk food, turned on some Vivaldi, and settled down to cross swords with Cromwell.

I re-read the poem a few times, frowning. It seemed pretty straightforward, in a wretched sort of way. I started writing what struck me as a reasonable rebuttal, and ended up getting on kind of a roll; I wrote for almost an hour straight before stopping to review. It was then that I remembered the discovery I had made while training that summer: that a work-in-progress can feel brilliantly successful during the actual composition process and turn out upon later inspection to be mediocre at best. What I'd come up with began like this: *The face of God is often hard to see, / But He is always there invisibly*. Reading the freshly written lines with a clinical eye, I couldn't help formulating a verdict of banality. They were well-meant, clear, and rational; but they felt hollow somehow. I crumpled up the page and started again.

Perhaps a more visceral approach was called for, I thought. Dr. Claviger had frequently remarked that, while a good poem must be logically consistent, it should also be capable on due occasion of slipping past the mind to touch the soul directly. I discarded the analytical pentameter and shifted into free verse. *On those who walk in darkness, / A light shall one day come to shine*. I wrote for about fifteen minutes before admitting to myself that I was basically just plagiarizing the Old Testament.

"Okay, okay." I rose to pace for a bit. "Okay. What else has this guy done?" The wise warrior knows his enemy, I figured; so I sat down at my computer and went online to look up the work of merrie olde Allen. Instantly, I wished I hadn't. The first thing that popped up was a poem called, "By Blasphemy Unbound."

*You dread the loss of heaven and the pains of Hell,
And so in craven virtue cower out your days;
Your impotence propitiates your conscience well.*

*But as you wallow in the pig-filth of your ways,
Content in corpulence to cringe from lust and wrath,
A secret festers, veiled from daylight's searching rays:*

*Untouched by timorous baptism's tepid bath,
The snarling wisdom, hid where he can never pry,
Still dares to contemplate another, sweeter path.*

*Behold the blossom darkness with your inmost eye!
Breathe in, embrace the power of the crimson flood
Arising from the shackles sentenced from on high.*

*And Death, O Death and Sin, shall reign in fire and blood,
And thou, O Christian, shalt in demon lordship dwell—
So seek ye first the Kingdom of a stronger God.*

Instinctively, I made the sign of the cross when I finished reading it, against whatever pernicious influence it might have on my subconscious mind. I supposed this was what Fred had been talking about. I wasn't at all sure I could compete with this. The simple fact that Cromwell was working against the order of reason and nature, gave him an automatic power bonus for shock value; anyone defending the faith would have to be twice as good not to sound trite by contrast. Furthermore, he must have passed through some abysm of the soul, some deep crucible of despair, to say such things—and I had no experience to match that. I was only a kid, and I'd never been more conscious of the fact. As a Christian writer, I stood on the shoulders of titans; great wisdom was at my fingertips; but I lacked the personal power to give that wisdom utterance.

In the end, I completed the Commander's assignment by printing out St. Francis of Assisi's prayer for peace. It was a bitter moment, far worse than my frustration with the Easter poem, because it was not only a failure but a defeat by the enemy: darkness over light.

5: Seniors

I didn't see much of Sean that week. I wanted to talk about the assignment and my metaphysical trouncing at Cromwell's hands, but he always seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. When I consulted myself more honestly, I realized that the person with whom I really wanted to talk was Sylvia—but she was also the last person to whom I wanted to show such weakness. To my own surprise, it came out on Thursday evening while I was chatting with my little sister. We were cleaning up after dinner and I asked her how her first week with the big kids was going. She beamed. "Fantastic! Mr. Roland's super smart. I can already tell he likes me."

"I thought you said he was smart."

She stuck her tongue out at me.

"You guys coming out of the gates with Whitman?"

"Yep! And I finally get why you and Sean are always saying 'O Pac-man, my Pac-man' to your video games."

"You're ascending to a whole new level of wit and sophistication."

"I just hope I don't turn into a dork like you two."

I stuck my tongue out in turn.

"So what's he teaching your class?"

"Oh. . ." I deflated slightly. "We're doing Baudelaire right now."

"Who's that?"

"French guy. Anti-Christian—well, sort of anti-everything. Although he converted on his death-bed."

"That's good."

"No doubt, but he still left a pretty ugly legacy behind him. It's gonna take someone a lot better than me to counterbalance his mess."

"Why should you have to worry about it?"

"Because I'm aware of the problem, and I have the potential to do something. If even one person in a billion reads his stuff and loses faith because of it, then it's done harm—maybe irreparable harm. And the only way to fight bad words is with good words. I just wish I were better at it."

She peered at me. "Joey—you *are* good at it."

"Not good enough."

"What do you mean?"

“Oh, nothing. I’m just rambling.”

“Nuh-uh, you meant something specific. Tell me.”

“Could you knock off being cleverer than me for one night?”

“Your own fault for not being taught by a wise older brother. Gave me a crucial head start. Come on, tell me.”

I glowered. She smiled back undaunted. “All right, fine. There’s this guy, Cromwell.” And I told her the somber tale. By this time we had wandered into her bedroom; I reclined in her comfy chair and she sat cross-legged on the bed among the serried phalanx of her teddy bears. When I finished speaking, she flung a pillow at my head. I caught it absent-mindedly.

“You’re being ridiculous, Joseph. This man is a professional writer, probably twice your age. You can’t beat yourself up for not automatically being better than he is.”

“I wouldn’t care so much if I could’ve at least written *something*, even if it was totally inferior. But I ended up writing nothing at all. That’s infinitely inferior.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed that you were dead. I guess you haven’t stopped moving around yet.” She threw another pillow. “You’ve got your whole life to fight this guy, and Baudelaire, and whatever they stand for—whatever’s behind them and all the others like them. You’ve just gotta keep learning. And you learn more when you lose, remember? That’s what practice is for.”

That’s what I used to tell her when I was teaching her to play checkers—so long ago now that it made me feel older than the hills. Suddenly I found myself smiling. “I love you, Noelle.”

“Love you too, big brother.”

I went to bed that night with a lighter heart, and woke up Friday morning feeling like I’d sprouted wings in my sleep. (Hey, they don’t let you be a poet unless you’re a little bipolar.) I was—in retrospect—obnoxiously cheerful through periods one and two; and when morning break rolled around, I struck out for the caf, which I’d been avoiding all week. There, at the table that was now her star-lit throne, sat Helen with her courtiers. There too, as I had feared, sat Sean.

I approached with tact. “Yo, Jude the Obscure! I gotta talk to you before your last glimmer goes past the event horizon.”

He winced a bit. “Can we talk after break? We’ve got fourth period together.”

“Precisely! That’s the topic of our imminent confabulation. Greetings, Helen. I need to steal your pal here for a second.”

She flashed a bright Arctic smile. “He was yours first. Of course, things do change, don’t they?”

“I guess we’ll see.” I put a hand on my friend’s shoulder and steered him out into the hall. The best time to address a difficult matter was during a spontaneous confidence high.

“So, what’s so urgent it couldn’t wait fifty-five minutes?”

“You been reading the assignments?”

“Course.”

“There was a line in *Les Fleurs du Mal* that made me think of your sky-eyed demi-goddess in there. In our translation, it went, *‘His heart, which flutters like a fledgling bird, shall slake the hunger of my favorite hound.’*”

He stopped walking. “Joey—gimme a break. I’m a big boy, and Helen’s not Kira. I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but I need you to knock it off before weirdness arises between us.”

“Sean, you’re not gonna get through to her. What’s gonna happen is, all the parts of you that she doesn’t understand will get suppressed and you’ll end up spending all your time and brain-power working on your hair.”

“Are you saying my hair needs work? Because I thought it looked pretty good today.”

“Better than usual. How much earlier did you have to get up?”

“A couple minutes. If you ever investigate our friends on the far side of the gender gap, you may find that they appreciate grooming. But there’s a line between that and preening, which I don’t intend to cross.”

“Okay, okay. Just don’t let psycho-lady push you around, all right?”

“You really expect me to get emasculated?”

“Why no, Mr. Bond. I expect you to die.”

That finally got a smile out of him. “Get outta here. We’ll rendezvous in the Commander’s chambers at eleven hundred hours.”

That day we started Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol.” We took turns reading key stanzas aloud and then spent fifteen or twenty minutes discussing them. “On Monday,” Roland said at class’ end, “I want an essay analyzing the Christian implications of the line, ‘*Each man kills the thing he loves.*’ Bear in mind that Oscar Wilde was also a death-bed convert.”

I’ll be honest here: I wrote that essay during periods five and six. I cannot claim to have absorbed anything taught to me after lunch that day. I wanted my weekend free.

When I got home, I went through a few of my typical unwinding rituals—drinking Dr. Pepper, poking around online, cranking some CCR. Born in a different century, I would have called for my pipe and brandy, and put on one of those awesome British smoking jackets. Alas.

When 7:00 rolled around, I gathered my fortitude and once more picked up the phone. This time, she answered on the third ring. “Hello? Joey?”

“Hey, yeah, it’s me. How’s it going?”

I could hear that Sylvianic smile in her voice. “Pretty well. Were you concerned for my safety, or did you want something?”

I sighed. Trust her to make the thing as difficult as possible. “I was—just—wondering. You know.”

Silence. Toothy smile on the other end, lurking just behind the receiver like a fiber-optic manticore.

“If—errr—so. . . What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” she said placidly. “Why?”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yep.” She was smirking now.

“Well—how would you feel about, you know, getting something to eat somewhere?”

“You mean like a date?”

“No! Well—yes, but not in such a way as to make things awkward if you want to say no.”

“Sorry, you can’t hedge this. You’re either asking me out on a date or you’re not asking me out on a date.”

“For the love of. . .” I ground my teeth. “Okay, fine. Sylvia Belle Templeton—I have nothing to offer but a loving heart and like thirty bucks for lunch. Will you go on a date with me?”

She burst out laughing. “Joey, for goodness’ sake. Did you really think I was going to say no?”

“Kind of. Why—are you?”

“No. Pick me up at noon.” And she hung up.

What just happened? Was that a double negative? She did say to pick her up, right? So that means yes?

The next day, struggling to observe the critical demarcation that separates the groomer from the preener, I swiped the crud out of my teeth and combed my hair with an actual comb, and then went to consider my wardrobe. After several fruitless minutes, I leaned out into the hall and hollered for Noelle.

She came out looking grumpy, and still in her bathrobe. Now a high school freshman, she was just discovering the renegade joys of sleeping unnecessarily late on weekends. “What’s so important?” she grumbled.

“Sorry, sis. I need your help picking out some clothes here.”

“Hot date?”

“Actually, yes.”

She blinked at me for awhile, until she realized I wasn’t kidding; and then I swear she lit up the whole house. “*Really?* Joey, that’s *fantastic!* Who? Who’s the girl? Do I know her?” She was literally jumping up and down.

I laughed. “You know her, you’ll approve, and she’ll have me back by midnight. And I’m fairly sure she can support me in the lifestyle to which I’ve become accustomed.”

“All she’d need is a paper route. So who is it? *Please?*”

“It’s Sylvia. She of the insect people.”

“Ooooooh, fraternizing with the editor! You two’ll drive each other crazy. Just like Grammy and Grampa!”

“Except I don’t have a hearing aid to turn off. Now are you gonna help me or what?”

“Oh! Sure! Okay, let’s see. You don’t want formal, but you want a step above casual. Or, maybe two steps. . .”

Ultimately she outfitted me with a blue polo shirt and some khakis, tampered with my hair a bit, and visibly resisted the urge to start painting my nails. By this time it was half past eleven and I had to get rolling, so I thanked her and gave her a hug and headed for the door with her still fretting neurotically at my heels. “I wonder about the belt,” she was muttering, like Lady Macbeth accessorizing dirks. “Maybe we should’ve gone with the black one.”

“Gotta go, sweetie. See you tonight.”

“Okay! Good luck! Have fun! Don’t do anything cretinous!”

Sound advice, I thought as I pulled out of the driveway.

I was a little early, and Sylvia wasn’t down yet. Her mom let me in and sort of waved me into a chair before bustling away again. I seemed to remember hearing somewhere that her parents were geologists, and also that she had no siblings. It was a nice house; I wondered if there was any expensive silverware lying around unsupervised. Maybe I could smuggle out some of the furniture while I was at it.

Then Sylvia came down the stairs, and I rose to my feet like a man in a dream. I don’t ordinarily notice clothes much—but I’d never seen her dressed up before, and I noticed today. She wore a blue blouse and a silver skirt, with her normally tied-back hair flowing over her shoulders in ringlets. She was smiling, and something perfect sparkled in her eyes. There’d always been a quiet, elvish loveliness about her; now I saw it shining veiless, and she was ethereal and sacred in my sight. Looking back, I think that was precisely the moment that I fell in love with her. *Wow*, I thought, and tried to speak. I couldn’t.

“Hi,” she said. A couple of beats went by. “. . . Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Hi.” I rooted around in my face and found my smile. “Hi. You look spectacular.”

“Why, thank you, Joey. You don’t look half bad yourself.”

“My little sister dressed me.”

“She’s got a good eye. But you really shouldn’t admit that sort of thing until the second date.”

“Lest you suspect me of harboring flaws?”

“Exactly. Hey, look—we match.”

“Providence at work. So, um. . . you hungry?”

“Absolutely.” She took my arm, and I suddenly felt about twenty feet tall. Battling the impulse to sweep her right off her feet, I escorted her out to old Dave and held the door for her. “So, where to?”

“A lady never tells,” I said primly, shifting into gear.

“Granted. But I’m the lady in this scenario.”

“And the less you know, the less you can reveal in the event of our mission being compromised.”

She made that little trying-not-to-smile grimace of hers. “Have it your own way. My money’s on Papa Frank’s, though.”

“Blast! All right, this round is yours. But I’ll bet you can’t guess what I’m planning to order.”

“If I guessed right, would you tell me?”

“Pfff. If I did that, I’d be down by two.”

She was, as usual, spot-on about our destination. What she didn’t know was that I’d talked to Frank beforehand—my boss every summer for the last three years, and a wondrously jovial guy—and that he was waiting for us. As we walked in the front door, the kitchen staff burst into “That’s Amore,” accompanied by the looming colossus

of Frank himself on the accordion. Janice, the daytime waitress, ran up and strewed flower petals in our path, all the way to our little booth in the back. Sylvia looked stunned, and then broke into peals of laughter. “Okay, Hopkins—I’m impressed. But with such a strong opening, can you avoid anticlimax?”

“Well, it won’t be easy. Luckily, I’ve brought my editor along to help me fine-tune.”

She reached across the table and took my hand. “Fair enough.”

Nate the line cook out-did himself that day, my friends. The food was about as good as earthly food can be. As we ate, my fair lady and I bantered for awhile and then drifted into actual conversation. I told her about Noelle and our combatively affectionate relationship. She described her parents, which in practice really just meant describing their job. Apparently geology involved brief moments of epiphany separated by long, long periods of intense drudgery. “Much like writing poetry,” was my comment. But I gathered she wasn’t too close with her folks. We talked briefly about our first week as seniors, and thence proceeded to discuss our hopes for the misty world beyond St. J. My own intentions were still pretty vague; I was sort of perfunctorily looking at Notre Dame and Ave Maria and possibly Winchester U. She had her heart set on the University of Dallas, where she planned to study philosophy.

“While wearing a ten-gallon hat and firing revolvers into the air, I hope,” said I.

“I think that goes without saying.”

After we’d eaten, Frank came over and hugged us both and told Sylvia what a nice boy I was. “And the meal, it’s on the house, on the house,” he proclaimed.

“Thank you, Frank,” I said earnestly. He flapped his hands.

“Go, go, go. Beautiful day. Be out in it.”

Sound advice, I thought again—so we hopped back in the car and headed for Lake Evendim. The air was cool and halcyon, the beaches all but empty. The skies were blue, with a shadow of almost-autumnal gray; the distant verges of the lake blended into the horizon, marrying Earth and Heaven in a calm cerulean sphere. Gulls wheeled overhead, chanting of the sun and sea. “This isn’t beautiful,” I murmured. “This is perfect.”

Sylvia leaned against me and slipped an arm around my waist, and I put my arm around her shoulders. We walked along the shingle for a long time, now talking softly, now in silence. I wish I could say more about those few hours, the memory of which remains among the happiest of my life; but a good poet knows his limits. We walked and talked together, and that was enough.

Sometime after four o’clock, she sighed. “I should probably get going. I’m supposed to meet some friends of mine at five.”

I nodded. “Yeah. And I think I have some writing to do.”

I got her home with twenty minutes to spare, and walked her to the door. “Well,” she said, and smiled, “definitely not an anticlimax.”

“Very true. Maybe we could—you know. . .”

“I do. And I’ll hold you to that.” Quickly, as if she too felt a little nervous, she leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. “Good night, Joey.” And she was gone.

When I got home, Noelle materialized in my room and ransacked me for details. I told her as much as I could, but by the fourth “I dunno, we just talked,” she had grown impatient with mere veracity and I was forced to fabricate. “Oh—I forgot to mention, we went to Riyadh. It was nice.”

“That’s more like it. So. . . did you kiss her?”

“I have work to do now. Go away.”

“Is it a love poem?”

“It’s a eulogy for your upcoming funeral.”

“Don’t be horrid. What kind of poem is it gonna be? A sonnet?”

“Noelle!”

“Okay, okay, I’m going. Jeez!”

I stood at the edge of my inner chasm for a moment, peering into the alluring tumult of anger and despair that waited patiently inside of me. It hadn't changed, but the fascination had faded, at least for now. I turned away to gaze into the sun of joy and faith. The phantoms lingering inside me burned away, and I felt strangely clean and whole. There was a poem coming, but this time it didn't feel like something being dictated to me; rather, it was a powerful nameless emotion entrusting its word-self to my pen, content to be incarnate in whatever form I chose for it. My sense of responsibility was keen, and I spent over two hours just sitting on my bed staring at the wall. Then I picked up pen and paper and wrote this:

*By golden sun and silver shore
Where evermore the white bird sings,
And opalescent waves of foam
Do roll and roam from hidden springs,
We wandered in a shining peace
That flowed unceasing through that place,
Illumining a quiet beach
And touching each with quiet grace.*

*When winter comes upon the world
And leaves are furled beneath the snow,
When future summers flicker by
And go to die where seasons go—
Still we in spirit there will stay,
One perfect day forever new;
But meanwhile there's tomorrow morn
Yet to be born, and much to do.*

When I finished, I debated my next move. The suavely medieval thing would be to throw it through her bedroom window at midnight; but I didn't know which room in their biggish house was hers, and also I had just enough sense to know that suave medievalism was likely to get one arrested or shot. I could surprise her tomorrow, but that sounded awkward: showing up uninvited, handing her a note, and then driving away? No—better to wait till Monday. I gnawed on my knuckles. Nope—I couldn't wait till Monday.

As her staff poet, I of course had her email address, although I'd never had occasion to use it. Sending a digital love poem sounded a tad less romantic than a physical letter at first consideration, but then I realized I was being provincial. By that logic, a papyrus scroll would be more romantic than paper and ink, and a carved clay tablet still more so. I supposed that baked cuneiform would be more durable, but you couldn't exactly pass it in study hall, could you? Email was fine, I concluded. So I typed up my little poem, titled it "Evendim," and sent it her way. Belatedly, I hoped she didn't decide to stick it in the *Augury*. It was kind of personal.

Sunday was jumpy, and long. I tried hard not to hover around my computer and phone; I went for a walk, I went for a drive, I watched some kung-fu movies and did some studying. The phone rang once and I lunged at it, nearly toppling a nearby bookshelf—but it was just Bobby wanting to know who the guy was that did that thing with the little steel balls. "Bogie," I said tersely. "In *The Caine Mutiny*."

"That's it! Thanks, dude."

“No problem.” I wondered if he’d tried Googling “guy thing little steel balls,” and if so, what result he’d gotten; but I didn’t quite dare to ask.

In short—she didn’t call. The parts of my brain that hold their own confederate sovereignty refused to stop speculating on possible scenarios; did she hate me, or pity me, or fear my psychosis, or merely not check her email on weekends? I could call her, of course, but that felt like cheating—the ball was really in her court now. The rest of me focused on aggressively ignoring the issue and wrapping up some unfinished algebra problems. Monday came in its own appointed time.

I bumped into Sean on the way to homeroom that morning. “Hey, Jay,” he said rather buoyantly. “How’s stuff?”

“Not bad, actually. You have a good weekend?” I’m going to be honest here: I was looking forward to being able to one-up his “how I spent my Saturday.” Sadly, he lit up like a Christmas tree and my plan hit a snag.

“Yeah! I went on a date with Helen!”

“Wow—really? What—er—what did you guys do?”

“We went out to the Meat Grinder on Friday night. DJ Slappin’ Stan was in town.”

“Huh.” I couldn’t by the utmost stretch of energy contrive to feign enthusiasm. If there was a man on earth who disliked dance clubs more than I did—normally—it was Sean. What did Helen do, I wondered, with the souls that she collected? Was she using them to power the wormhole that would bring the denizens of perdition upon us?

“What about you? Do anything fun?”

“No. . . not really.”

At that moment, Sylvia came around the corner and our eyes met. She smiled, and came up to me with a shyness I’d never seen in her before. “Hi,” she said. “Thank you for the poem.”

“Oh! Yeah. I’m glad you got it. I mean—you know—you’re welcome. But really, it’s no big deal, I just, you know. . .” It’s quite possible that I would have continued yammering until the bell for first period; but she stepped close and slipped her arms around me and held me very tightly—just for a second. Then she stepped away and the old self-assured Sylvia popped back out.

“Of course, that doesn’t count as your submission for the next issue. Better get on that. Morning, Sean.”

He grinned. “Good morning, Sylvia.” Then, as we all headed for homeroom, he poked me repeatedly in the ribs and whispered, “That’s my boy! That’s my *boy!*”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, failing to suppress a counter-grin.

That week was fairly uneventful. Sean and the girls and I were elaborately casual around each other, and talk of romance stayed minimal. On Saturday, Sylvia and I had another date. We went out for Thai food and she insisted on paying, since I had paid last time—which I refused to allow, as the last meal had after all turned out to be free. Eventually we settled the matter with an arm-wrestling match, which I’m excessively relieved to be able to say that I won (barely). Then we went bowling and she stomped me. On Sunday I showed up unannounced at the Crusoe residence, and caught Sean in a garrulous mood. He too had gotten a second date.

“The Meat Grinder again?” I asked unhappily.

“Yep! Then we went to a kegger downtown. Buncha rich kids. Pretty fun, though. She really loves to dance.”

“Well, that...sounds— So, are you guys like, going steady, or just sort of seeing each other off and on?”

He missed a beat. “Ah—I think we’re not quite—she’s kinda got this other dude from Paul Robeson that she had a thing with, and they’re still working through it.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll figure it out. What about you and the sylvan queen of the wood-elves? Are you guys an official item?”

“Neither of us has actually dated before. We’re taking it nice and slow.”

“Probably not a bad idea.”

On Monday we had another staff meeting and I exhumed one of my unused poems from last year. Sylvia raised an eyebrow at it—not even enough, I think, that anyone else noticed—but accepted it without remark. Apart from “Evendim,” I hadn’t written anything since Claviger’s class.

“You know,” she said afterwards as we walked to our cars, “I *loved* the poem you wrote for me. I would love it anyway, just for being from you—but even speaking objectively, it’s got something I haven’t seen in your work before. You’ve always had good craftsmanship, but this piece had—I don’t know—passion, maybe? Something new, anyway.”

“Thank you. I kind of got my ass handed to me by that Cromwell assignment a few weeks back, and I feel like it was precisely because his work had a level of passion that I couldn’t equal.”

“Maybe so. But then, it’s easier in the short run to be passionate about the dark side. Anybody can mention Auschwitz and get an emotional response.”

I gave her a quizzical look. “Didn’t you once tell me that ordinary life was ‘the sugar-coated topping on the abyss’?”

“I’m not saying Cromwell’s wrong, Hopkins. I’m just saying if you want to be his equal, you’ve gotta dig deeper than you have before.”

“Even if by doing so, I contribute to the potential death-bed conversion of a poet with whom you empathize?”

“I empathize with his work, not with him. I care a lot more about you. Now go away. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The year’s first issue came out that week, and the response was outstanding. By the time October rolled around, we’d gotten several dozen submissions in all genres; but the most interesting one came our way on Thursday of that same week. Sylvia and I were sitting in the caf during morning break, sipping hot chocolate and coffee (respectively), when Sean came over and sat down with us. “You guys mind if I join you?”

“Of course not,” she said, clearing some table space for his tea-cup.

“Lookin’ spiffy today, buddy,” I said. Sean had taken to wearing silk shirts lately.

“Thanks! So hey, I see y’all are looking for freelancers.” We nodded. “I’m thinking about doing a love poem. You think if I get it to you by Monday, it might be in the next issue?”

“That depends on whether the poem’s any good, Crusoe,” Sylvia replied, shifting seamlessly into editorial mode.

“It will be! What if I do a sonnet? That’s like the classic style for romantic poetry, right?”

I nodded. “It’s really tricky to get the hang of, though. If you want my advice, I’d write several different ones and be prepared to throw most of them away.”

“But once you submit to the form, the very difficulty of it can be helpful,” Sylvia added. “Its structure is so rigid that it automatically focuses your train of thought.”

Sean said merrily, “Its structure so rigid, it thinks free verse is a Skynyrd song!”

I chimed in with, “Its structure so rigid, its mama was a hieroglyph!”

“For pity’s sake,” she said crossly, and we laughed like hyenas.

Then Helen came sauntering over to our table. “Hi, guys,” she said mellifluously, sitting down next to Sean. I could almost hear Sylvia’s hackles go up. “Whatcha talkin’ about?”

“Oh, just goofing around,” Sean said.

“Fun! Did you see Mrs. Draper’s hair this morning? It looks like she washed it with bacon grease.”

“Gosh, look at the time,” Sylvia said flatly, getting up. “I’ll see you guys in Roland’s class.”

Helen took no notice. “And it doesn’t help that she’s got lime green shoes on. With *her* complexion? What is she *thinking*?”

Hearing such mean, dead banalities from such perfect, rose-like lips was rapidly undermining my sense of the rational. This girl should *breathe* in sonnets. And Sean was going to write her one and her tiny little pea brain would-

n't even comprehend it.

"... Joey?"

"What? I'm sorry."

She smiled at me. "I said, are you and Sylvia going out?"

"Oh—sort of."

"That's cute! Congratulations."

I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or sincere; but I made an effort of charity and gave her the benefit of the doubt. "Thank you. I hope my friend here has been treating you well."

"He totally has; he's so sweet." She put a hand on his forearm, and I could see a shiver go through him.

"Good. Well—sixty seconds to third period. See ya, guys."

Helen was not in the Commander's class with us, which was just as well. Sylvia was in a surly temper, and snapped at almost everyone who spoke that day. We were studying Hawthorne, and there were a lot of opinions floating around—all of which apparently struck her as unutterably stupid. I mostly kept my mouth shut, and Sean seemed to be in his own little world. She followed me into the hall after the lunch bell and asked angrily, "What is he doing with that vacuous harlot? He could do a million times better."

I shrugged. "She caught his eye. None of Sean's dials have a setting for one through nine—if he gets a crush, he gets it bad."

"I can understand a guy being attracted to her, right up until the second she opens her mouth. You'd think with so much money she could buy a little class."

"Don't mince words, Sylvia. What do you really think of her?"

"Surely you don't approve of the pairing."

"Well no, I don't, but the man's a free agent. I've already told him what I think; now it's my job to support him the best I can, and try to be there when she pulls the rug out from under him."

"Like with Kira Valence?"

I glanced at her. "You remember that, huh?"

"Kira was one of my best friends in tenth grade. I didn't know you and Sean very well back then, but it broke my heart to see what she did to him—and herself."

"Yeah." I didn't mention that I'd been the one who got to talk Sean down from the edge of the cliff outside of town. Kira would probably never find another guy who'd treat her as well as he did—but for a girl like her, true love came in a straggling runner-up to cocaine access, and she spent most of our second sophomore semester cheating on my friend with some dealer in town. Her family had moved away that summer; last I'd heard, she was in rehab somewhere. I cannot claim to have felt particularly sorry for her.

My face must have gone grim, because Sylvia came over and took my hand. "Joey—are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Come on, let's get some food."

That weekend, we went to the aquarium. Their peak season was over, and the crowds were thin; soon they'd be shutting down for the winter. We walked hand in hand by the outdoor pools of dolphins and orcas, flung some halibut to a friendly bottle-nose, and headed inside to see the tanks of squid and shark and lamprey. Drifting aimlessly, we came at last to a long dim corridor and found ourselves alone. "Look," she whispered, pointing. I realized there were no lights in the passage at all, yet it wasn't totally dark: both walls were made of glass, and beyond them, schools of bioluminescent fish glided through the waters in silence. It was like standing in the caesura between galaxies, watching the strange glimmering dance of the little candles of God.

We turned at the same moment, and her hair brushed my cheek. Gently, I parted it and pushed it back behind her ears, and found myself cupping her face in my hands. She reached up softly and did the same, and smiled. "Hi," she breathed.

"Hi." And then I kissed her. It was my first kiss, and I could never have imagined a better one. After, she put

her arms around me, and I held her close and felt my own heartbeat against her body. “Sylvia?”

“Mmm.”

“I want to start saying yes when people ask if we’re dating.”

“Mmmmmm.”

“Is that the sound of you agreeing?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Sweet.”

“Mmm.”

That semester was all the things we’d hoped our senior year would be. We were busy enough with schoolwork and college applications that dull moments were a rarity, and the beckoning future filled our days with trepidation and delight, but still we had ample time to enjoy our seniordom. Huge parties and quiet talks alternated week by week, and everyone in our class grew closer than we’d been before under the encroaching specter of our final parting. Sean and Helen became an item, and Sylvia made an effort to be nicer—although we never quite got to the point of double dating. And amongst all the multifarious madnesses, he and I still found some time to fight the Ogre-lord at least every other week. He did write Helen a sonnet, and it was pretty decent; it appeared in October’s *Augury*, dedicated to “H.M.” And enough other people sent us verse that I was able to take a sabbatical from my position as staff poet.

You see, I’d hit a plateau. Sylvia was right: my work had suddenly jumped in quality since that day on the beach, probably because I’d experienced a new level of emotion. But that meant I could no longer satisfy my inner critic with the glib, fun poems of heretofore. I wanted my work to *say* something—but I didn’t yet know exactly what I was here on earth to say. So I kept on writing, but maintained a steady pipeline from my notebook to the landfill. (I also kept a spare notebook in which I preserved the occasional image or idea that showed promise –the jetsam of a foundering ship of words.)

At my mother’s suggestion, I invited Sylvia to the Hopkins Thanksgiving. I had gotten the impression from our few conversations that her parents were more or less agnostic, and Mom hated the idea of any prospective daughter-in-law being without a properly Christian turkey.

“You do realize we’ve only been dating for two months, right?”

“But you’ve had feelings for her for much longer than that.”

“Also, you’re aware that we’re both still in high school?”

“Of course, dear. Now put the corn bread in the oven, please.”

Sylvia and Noelle had already gotten to know each other pretty well at school, but this was her first introduction to my folks. They seemed impressed with her courtesy and confidence, and she took to them right away. She and Dad talked philosophic esoterica for awhile as the rest of us shoveled food; then Mom asked her how she’d ever managed to convince me to write for the lit mag.

“Oh—” Sylvia smiled “—he hasn’t told you this story?”

“Only in brief.”

“He said you hornswoggled him,” Noelle put it.

“I’m not sure I actually used the verb ‘to hornswoggle,’” I said in response to my lady’s raised eyebrow. “I might’ve said—er—”

“Nope, it was ‘hornswoggle.’ I remember, I had to look it up.”

Dad nodded approvingly. “A growing vocabulary betokens an active mind.”

So Sylvia recounted the tale of our combat sonnet. The Hopkins women thought it sounded so fun that, after dinner, we moved into the living room to make a game out of it. Dad went off to do patriarchal things in his study, and Noelle and I faced off with Mom and Sylvia's team across a narrow table and a clean sheet of paper. "Let's start with this," said Mom, and wrote, *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*.

Noelle giggled and wrote, *One thousand one*— to which I appended, *I love thee really good*. Mom scribbled, *One thousand two*— and Sylvia laughed and added, *I love thee in the hood*. My team came back with, *One thousand three—I love thee like Willie Mays*.

By the time Sylvia had to go home, the four of us had produced almost a dozen sonnets which have absolutely no place in the annals of world literature, and loosened all the shingles of the house with laughter. It was, hands down, the best Thanksgiving I could remember.

Our youthful idyll continued through December; and though midterms harrowed up our souls, we all emerged bloody but unbowed. I kissed Sylvia goodbye on the last day of school, and she said, "Say, Joey—not to pry, but you haven't gotten me a Christmas present yet, have you?"

"Ah—no, not yet. I like to leave a couple of days for last-minute guilt and panic."

"Well, you can skip all that this year. I have a request."

"Okay, shoot."

"I'd like a poem. But not a deep, meaningful one that you have to agonize over. Just a light, goofy nonsense poem like you used to write when you were up against a deadline. Not for the *Augury*—just for me."

"I s'pose I can do that."

"Good." She kissed me again. "I'll see you at I.C."

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception had a Midnight Mass to which Sean and I had gone every year since we were thirteen. I knew Sylvia wasn't really a practicing anything in particular, but I'd invited her along this year, and—somewhat to my surprise—she'd accepted. I called Sean that night to let him know she'd be coming, and he congratulated me on my proselytizing. Then I settled down to work on my new poem. I got about halfway through my first Dr. Pepper before a topic sprang to mind; and from there, the thing literally wrote itself.

Four days later, at eleven-thirty on the evening of the twenty-fourth, the three of us rendezvoused in the Cathedral parking lot. "Merry Christmas, all!" Sean said expansively.

"All two of us?" I said.

"I'm including myself in the sentiment, ass."

"Fair enough, and back atcha. So, hey, Sylvia. . . merry Christmas." I handed her my latest literary triumph, entitled "Sir John Crapper." It went like this:

*In the poop-beleaguered chambers of the castle,
Where the Queen did Queenly business in a pot,
There was none so wise and dapper
As Sir John "the Potty" Crapper,
Thanks to whom the rose perfume returned, I wot.*

Sing:

*Ever wise and ever dapper,
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny Crapper!*

*Deep within the plumbed bowels of the palace,
Where the chamberpotless monarch now rejoiced,
Nevermore the vapors vappered*

*Thanks to John “the Potty” Crapper,
Wherefore everlasting gratitude she voiced.*

Sing:

Nevermore the vapors vappered!

Johnny, Johnny, Johnny Crapper!

Sing the praises and the glories of the Crapper!

I’d never seen her try so hard not to laugh and fail so completely. “It’s like you’re still six years old inside,” she gasped. “This is—I guess this is exactly what I asked for.”

“Ooh!” Sean shouted. “I’m still six. Lemme see.” He read it and screamed with hilarity until passing churchgoers began to give us dirty looks.

“There,” said Sylvia. “Write meaningful things by all means. But don’t forget to have some fun with it, too.”

“You’re beautiful, Sylvia.”

She took my hands. “So are you.”

Sean was finally getting his breath back. “All right,” he panted. “It’s almost quarter till; we’d better get in there if we wanna find seats.”

“By the way,” Sylvia said quietly as we entered the vestibule, “the man’s name was actually Thomas Crapper.”

Sean clapped both hands over his mouth and sprinted back out the door, sobbing with laughter and almost knocking over an entire family on their way in.

“Oops,” she muttered. We ended up standing in the back.

There was a big New Year’s party for the whole class at Eva Downes’ house on the thirty-first. I had a few glasses of Ardmores Scotch and talked politics with Ellen from the Commander’s class, feeling very grown-up; then, about twenty minutes before midnight, Sean forcibly de-activated the soulless techno music that was playing and got some Irish drinking tunes cranked up, and the senior class spent the rest of the countdown jumping around like gazelles. As the old year became the new, I lifted Sylvia as if to carry her across a threshold, and we kissed with the passion of adults and the abandon of teenagers. A good start, I thought, to my eighteenth year on earth.

So began our last semester at St. J. We were all growing impatient by now for whatever followed after, and a certain home stretch mentality grew on us. The days and weeks passed swiftly by, and talk of college and military and backpacking in Europe became almost ubiquitous. Sylvia was—of course—accepted by the University of Dallas, her first and practically only choice. I’d sent applications to half a dozen places, most of which accepted me; my first choice was Athanasius College, which had acclaimed internship programs with several national magazines and book publishers. For a time, by tacit agreement, we left unaddressed the question of what would become of our relationship when we were two thousand miles apart. I resumed my post at the *Augury*, writing mostly humorous and imitation pieces. Lent and Easter came and went, and graduation was starting to come into view. Perhaps, I thought in an unwary moment, we could actually make it through without some last calamity befalling us!

Alas. One evening in late April, Sean swung by to retrieve the cell phone he’d forgotten in my room a few days earlier. Helen was with him. My mom happened to be puttering around the kitchen as we passed through on the way out, and Sean greeted her with a big hug as he usually did. “Hi, Lady! This is my girl, Helen. Helen, this is my other mother, Dame Hopkins.”

Mom looked confused as she shook Helen’s hand. “Oh—how long have you two been dating?”

“I dunno, a few months.”

“Six months and two and a half weeks,” Helen said airily.

Mom’s puzzled look slowly resolved itself into a frown.

Sean didn’t notice; honestly, I really didn’t, either. “Ma here teaches at Paul Robeson,” he went on happily.

"She's an Aquarius who enjoys jazz music and horse-racing. Her favorite color is blue."

"Seanie, we should get going," Helen interrupted. "We're gonna be late."

"Oh, right. Okay, thanks, dude. See ya tomorrow. 'Night, Ma!"

We bade them good night and they went off to do whatever grisly things they did together. "Joey," Mom said as the door closed behind them, "I've seen that girl before."

"Say what?"

"She comes to Robeson every few weeks, right at the end of the day, and leaves with Reggie Cunningham. There's no forgetting a face like hers."

"I'll agree with you there. But maybe they're just—"

"They're not just anything. I remember thinking they'd need a spatula to pry their tongues apart. She's cheating on our Sean."

A chill came over me, as if I'd just been told I had some terrible illness. "Wh—why didn't you say something?"

"It's not my place, sweetheart."

"I suppose that means it's mine?"

She gave me a sad smile. "I'm sorry, Joey."

"Believe me—so am I."

Sean wasn't in school the next day. Neither was she. I did not take this for a good sign. After school I went straight to the Crusoes' place, but he wasn't there. Mama C. looked surprised when I asked where he was. "I thought he stayed at your house last night," she said.

I sighed. This was going to get ugly. "Ma, do you know where Helen lives?"

She gave me directions and I took off for Milton manor. It was up in the hills, with a private drive full of Hummers and Cadillacs, a sprawling lawn and a fountain out front. The house itself was simply that of people with too much money; I have no stomach to describe it. Helen would never in her life know what it meant to work for something she wanted. I walked up the steps, beneath the portico, and banged on the giant oaken doors.

They were opened by Sean himself. He wasn't surprised to see me—and he was not happy.

"Joey," he said in a flat tone.

"Sean, we need to talk."

"Yeah, we do. Come inside."

I followed him in. "Where's the Mr. and Mrs.?"

"Skiing the Alps." The front hall was exactly what was prescribed for such a place—chandelier, carpeted staircase, paintings whose sole aesthetic was their price tag. As I looked around, Helen came down the stairs like Scarlett O'Hara (only blond).

"So. . . I suppose you guys were up all night playing Jenga, then? Because, you know—you're not married."

"That wouldn't have stopped you, would it?" Helen said, going over to stand slightly behind Sean.

"Is it true?" he asked.

Groaning, groaning, groaning in my soul. I knew what she'd done. "Whatever she told you—no, it isn't. Sean, my mom's been seeing her sucking face with some guy called Cunningham. For months now."

"That's a lie," she hissed.

"Helen said you came onto her the other night."

"Sean! She's lying. For God's sake, you've gotta know that. She knew Mom saw her last night, and she told you this crap to cover her tracks."

"You said you loved me!" Helen shouted. "You said you'd do anything for me, and when I said no, you begged me not to tell Sean. He's your best friend, how could you?"

"Joey. . . just tell me if it's true."

"Of course it's not true!" I roared. "Don't be a damn fool! Who are you gonna believe, me or this *whore*?"

That was when he hit me. I'd taken punches before, but never so unexpectedly, and never quite so hard. It knocked me right on my ass. Sorrow, pain, and anger swirled in my skull, and my first impulse was to get to my feet and start throwing punches of my own—but not at him.

Slowly, I got back up. My friend was standing with his hands hanging at his sides and his gaze lowered. He looked as if he'd been suddenly switched off. I sucked at my lip, turned towards Helen, and spat blood at her feet. Then I turned and walked away. None of us spoke.

Driving home, I experienced a bifurcation. I saw the road through the windshield. I also saw my chasm, wider than before and more inviting—more powerful. I didn't go home. I went to an old abandoned mill on the wrong side of the tracks and broke in and paced for hours through the cobwebs and debris. Finally, by rising starlight, I dragged out my notebook and started to write. I wish I could say I vented my rage by fighting the Yakuza or doing something sports-related, but it's just not who I am. I stayed up all night, and dozed in my car the next day. I didn't go home. It was Friday—the last of the month. Sylvia would spend the weekend putting the magazine together, and our May issue would come out on Monday. I'd already given her some piece of froth.

I got to St. J just as sixth period was ending and caught her in the parking lot. She ran over and took my face in her hands. "There you are! Are you okay? You don't look so good."

"Sylvia. I need you to yank the poem I gave you."

"Do—do what? Joey, what's wrong?"

"I'll tell you later. Here." I handed her a crumpled sheet of paper with a poem entitled, "Her Majesty."

She glanced at it, and her eyes widened. She read it through, and said without looking at me, "I . . . I don't think we can run this."

"Run it." I headed back to my car and drove away.

She ran it. It was our penultimate issue together, and our readership had never been stronger. Tommy G. had a very good story that month, and there were a number of good articles, some excellent freelance poetry, and scads of artwork and photographs. But that first week in May, the thing that seemed to have all of our classmates abuzz was a little ten-line poem that went—

*Was this the face that lanced a thousand souls,
That nailed them on Golgotha's dusty knoll
To hoist them gibbet-high for raven-beaks,
Then slouched along, more innocents to seek?
Were these the grabbing talons, rending claws
That popped their wriggling parts into her maw—
And did her gulping throat ooze caws of glee,
Or did she act from brute stupidity?
Let justice sink this garbage-scow, this blight;
Put out the light, and then put out the light!*

As it turned out—and why should this have surprised me?—I was very far indeed from being the only student at St. J who dared to harbor feelings of hostility towards our young Ms. Milton. Somehow mobilized by my little opus, tales began to surface of her back-stabbings and double-dealings and all the many lies and manipulations which were her stock-in-trade. She'd done a lot of mean things in her grasping scramble to the top of the social pile, and then used that position to do even meaner things, apparently out of sheer disinterested meanness.

And for some reason, I got to hear it all. I guess "Her Majesty" had made me the rallying point, or something;

people from all four grades came up to me in the hallway all through that week and said things like, “I’m so glad someone finally said how we all feel about her. You know what she did to me?” But it was Ellen that really tied it all together, by creating an epithet. “The problem with your poem is that the last line identifies her with Desdemona. But she’s really Iago.” She said this in the caf, and a few people heard it and spread it to a few other people, and so on—and Helen was popularly known as “Iago” for the rest of her high school career.

Of course, that was only another month and a half. She kept a pretty low profile that week, no doubt sensing that her thralls had risen up against her. I also noticed that Sean studiously avoided her. He avoided me too, mind you; but at least he didn’t have that burned and hollow look he’d worn when he finally admitted to himself that Kira had betrayed him. I figured it might be best to give him some time to himself. I told Sylvia the story, of course (and apologized for my brusqueness on Friday), and we stuck close to each other and kept an eye on the principals in our little drama.

The following Monday, we were called into Fr. Brown’s office during lunch. “This can’t be good,” Sylvia muttered.

“No, probably not.”

The old priest rose as we entered, and gestured us into chairs. We sat, apprehensively. “Joseph—Sylvia.”

“Father.”

“Sir.”

“An incident has occurred of which I felt you should be made aware—although, thankfully, the repercussions have been averted. The father of one of your classmates has been to see me this weekend. Apparently there was a poem in the recent *Augury* that the young lady felt was a personal attack upon her, and the possibility was raised of legal action against both the school and yourselves personally.”

We stirred sharply in our seats.

“Don’t be alarmed. As this is a parochial school, I exercise some rather large freedoms—including the composition of the school charter, which all parents must read and sign before sending their children here. There is a reasonably prominent clause regarding the autonomy of student activities, precisely in order to safeguard against this sort of situation. Had any student’s actual name been mentioned in the poem, matters might have been different; but as it is, my visitor was forced to content himself with my assurance that I would look into the affair personally.” Here he turned from looking at both of us and gazed straight at me. I squirmed. “The poem in question represents a failure of charity on your part, Joseph.”

“I know, Father. I’m sorry.”

“I’m glad of your contrition, but the apology should not be directed to me.”

“But sir, you don’t know what she’s done!” Sylvia burst out. “Half the people in this school—”

“I’m well aware of Ms. Milton’s involvement with Mr. Crusoe,” he overrode her. Again his knowledge of our doings took me by surprise. “However, I am in a position to assure you from lengthy personal experience that adopting the methods of the enemy, while very often successful in the short run, invariably breeds more enemies. It is tenable that some of the social effects of this poem have been, in a sense, salutary; but consider the precedent and the legacy. Will your magazine now become a venue for calumnies and revenge?” Neither of us answered. “I hope your last issue will be a bit more uplifting, my friends. Now, have a good week. God bless you both.”

“Thank you, Father.”

We left the office disheartened. “He’s right, you know,” my lady sighed. “We’re already starting to get submissions that are nothing by veiled vituperation against fellow students. We’ve got to go out on a positive note in June.”

Our weekly meeting was that afternoon. As I came in, Tommy grinned at me. “Hopkins, you magnificent bastard, I read your book!”

I greeted him in his own idiom. “Tommy, Tommy, burning bright.”

“Seriously, dude, I liked the poem. That girl has caused quite *der furor* in this place. Spread some nasty rumors

about a friend of mine.”

“All right,” Sylvia said in her calling-to-order voice. “Since it’s come up, let’s talk about this business with Joey’s latest entry. I think it’s safe to say that none of us are heartbroken about ‘her majesty’ being taken down a peg; but we need to consider whether we want this sort of thing to become common in the *Augury*. We’re not a bathroom wall, and I for one don’t want our classmates using us to spew insults at each other.”

Tommy, who was probably our strongest candidate for the editorial helm next year, said clinically, “No disrespect meant, Madam Chairpersonage, but it was your call to run the piece.”

“You’re right, it was. And I don’t regret it—this one time. I just don’t think we should let it set the tone for future issues.”

“Second the motion,” I murmured, and there was a general assent.

“Good. Then let’s finish this year with something—well—uplifting. Nick: what’ve you got?”

“Oil painting,” said our cover artist with a smile, and produced a beautiful picture of the Blessed Virgin and her child.

“Perfect.”

It reminded me abruptly of the poem I’d failed to write last Easter. I hadn’t thought of it in months, and another Easter had already passed me by, but maybe I could dust it off and see if any of it was salvageable. I remembered having felt as though it had a potential I couldn’t quite tap; but then, that was pre-Claviger—and pre-Sylvia.

When I got home, I started my little rituals of good music and gruesome food, and sat ruminating on the many strange roads I had trodden to find myself here at the last frontier of adolescence. I focused my skills upon my tranquilly recollected emotions—writing from the heart by way of the head, as Dr. C. used to say—and produced about half a page of very good couplets. Then I mused upon their inferiority to “Her Majesty.” I could cobble together a highly passable piece of work, but I realized with total certainty that it wouldn’t have the power of the foregoing poem. Sylvia was right: it was easier to be passionate about the dark side.

Still, I thought—one couldn’t be in the grip of soaring joys or plummeting sorrows every time one put pen to paper. Surely I could draw upon those experiences even if the immediate blaze of feeling had cooled. I supposed it was largely a matter of practice and repeated trial and error—a hard lesson I had to re-learn every time I went up a level as a writer. At present I simply wasn’t good enough to match the forcefulness of my last work with a less wrath-driven piece of verse; but then, there was only one way to get better. So I wrote another page’s worth of stuff, pruned and weeded it, whittled it down to about twenty lines, and wrapped it up into a pretty decent poem. It was nothing spectacular—but at least it wasn’t nothing. I tinkered with it that week and finally gave it to Sylvia on Friday: my very last publication in the *Augury*. Once again, my Easter poem would have to wait till next year.

On Saturday morning, sometime around eleven, Sean turned up. “Hey,” he said, and met my eyes with difficulty.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey yourself. How’ve you been?”

“Gettin’ by.” He shuffled his feet. “Listen. . .”

“Sean—it’s okay.”

“Yeah, no, I just need to say it, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry, Joey.”

“I know.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“I know, man. It’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

And he finally smiled again. “Cool. So, hey—Will’s been learning the accordion. You wanna come jam to some

polkas?”

“Absolutely. Lemme grab my shoes.”

“Wait. One more thing.” He tapped his jaw. “Hit me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dude, I’m not gonna hit you.”

“Look, just do it.”

“It’s not gonna happen.”

“Joey. . .”

“Sean!”

“Joey!”

I caught him by the back of the neck and thumped our foreheads together. “There. Now let’s roll. Love me some polkas.”

The closing weeks of our high school career slid by without incident. I never did apologize to Helen (nor she to me)—in fact, my people and her people (she still had a few) maintained an iron curtain of non-communication for the remainder of the semester. Sean, hot-headed but hardly a moron, had realized that the facts were most likely on my side and had tracked down Reggie Cunningham, who sneeringly confirmed my mom’s report. “He said I was her ‘nice guy,’ but she went to him when she wanted the ugly stuff.”

“I don’t even want to know what that entails. Then, you guys didn’t. . .?”

He smiled sadly. “We did. I can’t blame her for that. I made the choice. Now, when I do find the girl I want to marry, I’ll never be able to tell her that she’s the only one.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. “So—what’d you do to Cunningham?”

“Nothing.” He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s punishment enough that he has to go through life being him.”

“Harsh, but sometimes warranted.”

“Quite so, my dear Mr. Hopkins, quite so.”

Graduation was on a bright azure day in June. Fr. Brown led us in prayer and then spoke briefly to the assembly. I wish now that I could remember some of what he said, but I was there in body only. The whole thing felt surreal to me—like an incoherent flashback to the day I came squalling from the womb. This home and school, this little life, was the only universe I knew. Its passing was a quiet Ragnarok.

Afterwards we shook hands and took pictures and went to a big party at Bobby’s house. It was our coup de grace, and we all duly overdid it and had an excellent time which none of us could clearly remember the next day. Then began that flickeringly ephemeral summer, the porous bulwark between us and the first yellow leaves of adulthood. Sylvia was off to UD in September, and Sean to Notre Dame, and I to Athanasius in New Hampshire; everything would change.

And it did change. It was only a few weeks later that she and I had the talk. She showed up in my room in the gloaming of the day and asked me to take a walk with her, and I already knew what was happening. We walked along in silence for a while, still a couple. Then she said quietly, “Joey,” and that was it. “Listen. . .”

“You want to break up.”

“No. I don’t. But I think we need to.” She stopped walking and turned my face toward her with her hands. “Joey, we’re just kids. We don’t know what’s going to happen over the next four years. Maybe we’ll end up together again. I hope we will. But we’re going to be half a continent away from each other, and I don’t want to see this relationship die a slow messy death and have you end up hating me. It’ll hurt a lot less if we just separate now and what happens in the future.”

I dropped my eyes. I’d known this was coming for quite some time; but in the end, that didn’t make it any easier. “Sylvia. . .”

“I know. Me too.”

We never actually said the words.

"They tell me four years'll go fast," I said. "Maybe afterwards we can get some lunch or something."

"Okay. It's a date." She put her arms around me, and I held her close for a long time. The sky went from red to purple, and finally to black. Then she kissed me, one last time, and walked away.

It didn't hit me all at once. I went home and picked back up the book I'd been reading. I felt numb, like I'd just lost a limb to an extremely sharp and well-wielded katana and my pain receptors hadn't quite caught up yet. I went to bed and got up in the morning and had pancakes. I felt glum. I didn't smile that day. The next day I was in the bagel shop buying some coffee and Toto's "Hold the Line" started playing, and that was her favorite song. I went out back to the alley and sat in the jagged shadow of the dumpster, among the shattered bottles and pavement-cracking weeds, and cried. Then I sat staring emptily at the spray paint on the dirty walls until the shade began to slant the other way.

Neither Sean nor my family asked me where she'd gone; I suppose that from my general demeanor and her sudden total absence in both person and conversation, they inferred the essentials of what had befallen. They knew me well enough to know that I would have talked about it if I'd wanted to talk about it, and they left it alone except to treat me a bit more nicely than usual. The waning days of summer trickled through the glass and the sun set earlier in the evening. September came and my best friend flew away.

The night before my departure, my dad came into my room. "Hey, Joey."

"Hey, Dad."

"How're you feeling?"

I sighed. "Not great. But I'll live."

He nodded. "Do you mind if I give you a smattering of fatherly advice?"

"Shoot."

"At the end of the day, it's not our feelings that matter. It's our actions. And sometimes the Holy Spirit works most strongly when we can't feel His presence at all. Just keep at the business of living, and happiness will come."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, son."

Fourteen hours later, I was on a plane to New Hampshire. The stanzas of my childhood were complete.

6. College

Scenes from Athanasius:

My roommate was a small, quiet fellow called Lee Spenser. Though an English major like me, he was a devotee of Faulkner and Hemingway and suchlike, whereas I preferred to run with Dickens and the Brits (good name for a band, incidentally); so we had much to debate. It took me a couple of weeks to get the hang of his soft-spoken conversational style, but our senses of humor eventually clicked when we agreed to screen every potential visitor to our room with the question, "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" It never got old. No one could tell when Lee was joking, so my only task was to stay in the shadows and struggle to keep a straight face.

Dr. Sarah Danvers, my English professor, was a fox. There's just no other way to say it. She was a red-haired lady somewhere in her thirties, modest but confident in bearing, with a predilection for Chaucer and the Middle English balladeers. Also, she wasn't married. I hadn't even started getting over Sylvia yet, but I allowed myself to spin the occasional daydream.

I made friends with a junior called Rose Farrington, a hazel-eyed Bio major who always wore a rose in her hair. She invited me to an informal Irish step-dancing class that she gave on Thursday evenings in Patterson Hall, and I started going every week. Sean and I had been doing what we called "jigs" for years, mainly just moving our feet as fast as we could and jumping around with our thumbs in our belts; but learning the actual steps turned out to be surprisingly fun. It wasn't long before I was catching myself practicing threes and sevens in the line at the dining hall.

One of the serving matrons started calling me “Jumpy”—a grandmotherly sort of teasing. I didn’t mind at all.

The campus was relatively small, with close-set but elaborate buildings in the Gothic style. A great stone tower dominated the quad, and its topmost chamber (accessible only to a chosen few) housed a giant bell that tolled the hours from Lauds to Vespers. I was traversing the quad one Saturday afternoon, wrapped in my passing thoughts, when a football came hurtling toward my head. Naturally enough (it seems to me), I caught the thing—and immediately a burly-sounding voice went, “Hey!” I turned in some perplexity to see a burly-looking individual bearing down on me. “What the hell you doin’?”

I’d seen the guy around: something Banks, his name was, a sophomore and vaunted athlete. Fortunately, Athanasius College didn’t place a huge stress on athletics, so I felt no pressure to do any vaunting of my own. “Crossing the quad,” I said evenly, and tossed him the ball. “Is there a problem?”

“Pass interference is the problem,” he growled in my face. I didn’t think I could outrun this meat-head, and I certainly couldn’t outfight him; so I just stood there and held his eyes. If he was going to beat me up, he would have to endure my disdain while he did it. Five or six of his buddies gathered around, but none of them appeared to share his hostility. “You want an ass-kicking?”

“Hey, Chad, come on, man,” one of the other guys said. “Leave him alone. Let’s just take it from the forty-yard line.”

“Awright, awright.” Banks turned his back and returned to the game. It was the dawn of a long and fruitful enmity.

Time behaved oddly at this school: the days, filled with interesting new challenges, felt long; but the weeks felt very short indeed. By the time I had really gotten my bearings, it was somehow November already. Classes were going well; I’d made some friends and learned to dance a bit; I talked to Sean pretty often and faced the lurid tales of his own misadventures; and I got to exchange glares with Chad Banks on a fairly regular basis. Life was a benign chaos. When Thanksgiving came, most of the students vacated—but Lee and I stayed behind and ate collegiate turkey.

“So—no revels at the Spenser demesnes?” I asked as we sat in the echoing dimness of the dining hall.

He shook his head. “We’ve never been much for revels—nothing worth flying home for, anyway. What about you?”

“Oh, we of the Hopkins clan revel on due occasion. I just can’t afford to make the trip multiple times per semester.”

“You miss your family?”

“Of course. Don’t you?”

“We’re not all that close, honestly.”

“Huh. Well, you’re welcome to spend Christmas with us if you like. My mom makes a pretty mean spread.”

“Thanks. I might just take you up on that. Are you planning to perform any ghoulish experiments on me while I’m there?”

“None that your conscious mind will be able to recall. Wait, did you say ‘ghoulish’ or ‘goulash’? You’ll remember the goulash.”

“I always the remember the goulash.” Very slowly, he turned his gaze from the window to me. “Always.” Then the corners of his eyes crinkled—which, for Lee, was the equivalent of Sean laughing so hard he broke the table.

The first snowfall came that weekend. I spent a long time in the disused attic over the chapel, yearning through the small, dirty window at the silent drifting flakes. The evergreens in robes of white absorbed the busy sounds of the world beyond Athanasius, and all was still but the clock tower’s reminiscent bell. I thought of Sylvia. Could a year have passed already since we played the sonnet game in my living room? And nearly two since we played in Roland’s room, and all of this began. And because I’m a poet and this is what I do, I went deep into those melancholies to see if there was a poem in there. It turned out there wasn’t one, but I did manage to depress myself pretty badly.

When classes resumed, Dr. Danvers had bleak news. “You’ve probably all heard of Allen Cromwell by this

time,” she said, and I felt my fists clench. Now what? “Well, it seems he’s attempting to found a new philosophy of American poetry. Notable nihilists Charles Rhode and Thomas Meriwether Jabroni have united under his banner and issued a manifesto for what they’re calling the Unhallowed school. We may be witnessing the commencement of a dark time in English letters.”

“Not if I’ve got anything to say about it,” I muttered.

Stirred up and spurred on by the news, I started forcing myself to write again. Once again it was almost all trash, but I kept at it for the rest of the semester. Finals were rough, and didn’t go as well as I’d hoped—I wasn’t ready for how much harder this college business was than high school. But no matter; now I knew what I was up against. I’d have a few weeks over the holidays to get my second wind—and then, I had work to do. *Curse this Cromwell.*

Lee did end up spending Christmas at the Hopkins house. Mom and Dad liked him, and Noelle—whose comedic style had always been more understated than mine—thought he was the bee’s pajamas (as she put it). The two of them spent over an hour talking about Robert Frost. When the time came for Midnight Mass, Lee came along to meet the many-storied Crusoe.

“Joey!” Sean bellowed. “We meet again, as it was foretold!”

I flung my arms around him, and he lofted me like a rag doll. Then he set me down and we grinned at each other for a while. “How you been, big guy? You look even dumber than I remember.”

“I’ve been partying with the football team. They take it pretty seriously. Hey, who’s this?”

“This is my roomie. Lee Spenser—Sean Crusoe.”

They shook hands, and Sean smiled. “I trust you’ve been tampering with his dental supplies in a conscientious and workmanlike fashion.”

“That was never proven,” Lee said placidly. “Also, I was only following orders.”

Clearly, these two idiots would get along fine. After Mass we went to Waffle House to seek their epic hash browns, and sat up talking until four in the morning. Then Sean and I swapped gifts—a big compendium of the Narnia books from me, a figurine of Our Lady of Guadalupe from him—and we parted ways. Lee and I shot home and got just a hair under three hours of sleep before my dear sweet sister was dancing on our pillows and singing “Here Comes Santa Claus.”

Then he and I had an interesting conversation. Rendered verbatim, it went like this—Lee: “She. . . ?” Me: “Uh.” Lee: “Like the—” [hand gesture]. Me: “Or the whattayacall.” Lee: “Yuh.” It was the first time we unwittingly communicated in what, to everyone around us, was total gibberish. What we heard was—“Is she always like this?” “I fear so.” “Like the noisy guy upstairs.” “Or the guy who plays his trumpet on the quad.” “Indeed.”

“Will you *Australopithecus* stop mumbling and get out of bed?” she trilled. “The pecan pie’s not gonna eat itself, you know!”

A little coffee soon unfuzzed our fatigue, and it ended up being an excellent Christmas all around. My favorite gift was an i-something or other from Mom, a tiny little portable computer complete with touch-screen keyboard. Around noon, Lee and Noelle and I went over to the Crusoes’ house for more Yuletide fun, only louder and at higher impact. Will broke out his accordion—the kid was getting pretty good by this time—and Mama C. and I did a few jigs. Soon we all started wrestling, and the living room went straight to bedlam.

The rest of the vacation was calmer. We spent New Year’s Eve watching Schwarzenegger movies, and I turned nineteen right on schedule. Our grades came in, and I actually did slightly better than I had expected. Of course, Lee got all A’s. We relaxed for another week or so; then we said our goodbyes and got ourselves back on a plane and New Hampshire-bound.

As soon as I was settled in, I headed for the library. I had avoided thinking about Cromwell and his new coalition during break; but now it was time. The first thing I did was go online and track down a copy of the Unhallowed school’s manifesto. Then I printed it out, headed for a quiet corner, and sat down to battle.

All right, you son of a bitch. Let’s dance.

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THE HUNTER

By L. E. Wilber

The men talked about the heat. They swore, wiped sweat away, swore some more, and worked harder. They hollered orders, laughed like hell at things I tried to understand, and took great drinks of water out of the bags I carried to them. They were giants, those guys. What a feeling it was to be out there with them. What a great battle we met every day out in those fields. They ran wild over those fields, making decisions, swearing at trouble, but always managing to make their machines work for them. Always, in the end, they stacked that alfalfa up in great piles. No matter how hot it was, how many times the machinery broke down, or how hungry or tired they were, they always got that alfalfa cut and gathered and stacked.

I sat up on one of those stacks and looked out at them across the field. A feeling of triumph sat me up straight and proud. What a difference between the sixth-grade games I'd been playing just a few weeks ago. I could barely understand how I got along in such a silly world. Duncan Bena! How silly he seemed to me now, running around Eleventh Street, playing baseball, or going out to Alexander's Park for a swim.

The thought of a swim turned my head around. I got up and walked over the top of the stack toward the other side, looking out toward the river.

Young Leonard was sitting there in the middle of the stack, fresh back home from combat in South Korea, now hiding from the sun under his new straw hat. "Where you going, Sweet Pea?" he asked.

I watched fat Marion place an inch of cigarette ash in his cuff and then answered him. "Nowhere. Just thought I'd take a look at the river." I didn't want to tell him why. "When will the salmon be coming up?"

"I don't know—sometime," He answered.

Marion looked up in half excitement. "I think I saw one going up this morning, at the ford. I couldn't tell for sure, though. Thought I ran the truck right over it. Your grandpa didn't see anything come out."

"No kidding!"

"No kidding," and he grinned big and yellow, looking straight out at me.

I looked again at the river and continued my walk over the top of the stack. When I got to the edge I stopped, but I didn't want to. I wanted to keep on going, right out through the barbed-wire fence below me, and across the

fifty yards of sage and rock to the river. It suddenly got very hot standing there. I knew I couldn't go play on the river. Well, I could—they'd let me—they wouldn't say anything. But I really couldn't. Boy, that river was magic. It seemed that it should just disappear into the ground, or into the air. It was so hot and so dry down in the bottom of the canyon. I looked up into the blue white of the sky, up to the ridge of the steep hills that seemed to surround me. So here I was, on the John Day River, at McDonald's Ford, exactly where settlers on the Oregon Trail once crossed. A tough land, I thought. But the river made it bearable. Without it this place would be miserable. There wouldn't be any alfalfa, or any farm house, or any men, or even me, that's for sure.

I started to the sound of Al revving the tractor motor at the other end of the stack. Back already. Like Marion said, they were makin' her pay today. Leonard and Marion had already Jumped up, forks in hand, and were signaling to Al where they wanted the load dumped. Al obliged. Big as a barn, sitting on that padded tractor seat, he gunned the motor and threw the hydraulic lever to raise the fork. Up she came, clear up this time because the stack was almost finished. Then he moved the load in, set it down, tilted the tongs, and backed out. Perfect.

We all started laying the alfalfa out, building a strong corner, packing it hard and sure against the months ahead. I felt like a million bucks: fork for fork, right along with them.

Al shouted up to us, "Finish her off and let's break, it's that time." And then he laughed like he did so often. Laugh really isn't the word for it, I guess. But he chuckled big. Really big. His whole body chuckled and he grinned all over his fleshy face. Nobody knew what he was laughing at, maybe just anticipation. Nobody really wondered, I guess, because he was always doing it.

When we finished putting down the corner Al put the fork up to us and we hopped on. I liked going down on the fork. The danger, I suppose. I hung on tight, though, and didn't jump off till we were all the way down and the motor was off. Then Al let himself down off the tractor and reached for a cigarette.

"You got that water in a place where it's keeping cold?" he asked, with what was left of a Missouri accent.

I was already running around to the other side of the stack just to make sure.

"Yea." I grabbed it and came back around. "Marion said the salmon might be coming up the river already."

"They are. I forgot to tell you. I saw two wakes last night, before it got dark. Up above the fishing hole."

Great! I'd fished for big ones before. And it was true that I'd caught the biggest squaw fish that they had ever caught on the ranch. But that had been six years ago when I was down visiting, and my folks had been here then. And I couldn't even remember catching it, though I never let on when someone brought the subject up. But I'd never gone after salmon with a rifle. And that's what was coming up. It was a promise, as sure as anything.

Al looked down the river toward the ford. "Harry's just now going over to get our lunch. He must have had to gas up the pickup." Then he yelled, "Hurry up, Harry, God damn it, we're hungry," and he laughed again.

I figured grandpa would be a good ten more minutes getting the lunch and recrossing the river, so I decided to run down to the river while the men smoked and waited. I slipped through the fence and started picking my way through the sagebrush toward it.

It wasn't at all like the rivers on the coast, that I knew so well. Different climate; different rivers. Through the

heat it looked more like a picture than a river, just a piece of shine in front of me. It could have been ten miles away still. The closer I got, though, the more I could see of it. I saw it lying there deep and slow and quiet, as if trying to ignore the sun. Still, I could only just see it. I only started to feel it when I came real close, close enough to hear some of the noise it was making.

And that was slight, just a bit where it slid over some shallows down stream and where it ran around a rock or two close to shore. Even when I stood right there by its edge it still wasn't like what I knew of rivers. It really didn't come alive for me until I leaned over and put my face down to its surface; not until I felt that couple of inches of cool air hanging there, not until I shut out the sun and looked down through my shadow into the cool heavy water, down into the mud and sand, not till then did I really feel the river. That's how I saw the river that day, anyway. But that was the last time I knew so little of it.

The John Day River country in north central Oregon is beautiful country, beautiful if you don't like trees and get along with dust and wind; it's beautiful if you can stand the heat. But if you can't stand it, then the dust will crush you and the wind will dry you out and whip you to death. Short of that sun, though, almost everyone agrees it's beautiful. It's hard country, but fertile, and up top, up out of the gorge, it's full of rolling hills. Mostly little ones, gentle ones, worn round by the weather, sometimes no more than oversized bumps or rises. Wheat land. And the land seems to stretch forever in a great patchwork of browns and golds, spreading out to the horizon in every direction. And each inch of those hills is used by the people who live there. Most of the land is farmed, half wheat and half sum-folla, but some of the land is in its natural state: thick, pale yellow cheat grass, interrupted by an occasional patch of volcanic scabrock and frequent clumps of sagebrush. It's here that the cattle, Insensitive for the most part to the dust and heat, spend their days, swatting flies, chewing, looking dully at each other, and once a day, after blowing the dust and algae off the surface of a water hole, sucking up a belly of water.

Holding the whole country together is a skeleton of dirt and gravel roads. Crossing the great fields, winding along the gullies and dry stream beds, and skirting the gentle slopes of the thousand small knobs and hills, these narrow, bumpy, and insufferably dusty roads manage to tie the country together because they bring together the men who make the country what it is. For along the roads, and even more commonly at their junctions, the farm houses are found. They aren't pretty. The house is usually large, a refuge from the days when it took a large family and crew to work the land. They are seldom anything but square, stark, sitting in the middle of a cluster of buildings which have grown up around them. A tool shed or work shop, depending on the size of the farm, a bunk house, a barn, and maybe a feed shed are the familiar buildings. And all of these are held together by a complex of dusty paths and areas of dirt and cheat grass. And the sun; the sun is always there too.

Running right up through the middle of all this is the John Day River. It has shaped for itself, over its thousands of years, a great bed to run in. The river cuts straight out of the heart of the Oregon desert and runs north till it dumps into the Columbia River. And the closer it comes to the Columbia the deeper it has cut into the earth itself. In the last forty or fifty miles the river can best be described as a canyon. Up top, the hot semi-desert farm land begins to break away into rock gullies starting a mile or so from the canyon and its river. Initially the land slopes ever so slightly toward the deep gouge in the earth that the river has shaped. But in the end there is always a crest where the gentle slope becomes an accelerated drop, sometimes nearly straight down, almost like the lip of cliff. From that place, through the shimmering heat, a man can look down and see the river, a tiny blue ribbon lying in the bottom of its great trough. It doesn't look real, though. It's more like a mirage: so inviting, so blue against the burned flats at the

bottom of the brown, plunging hillsides that lead down to it, so unlike the hard, dark rock that it left bare by its passing. At the most, from the top of the canyon, the John Day River is a promise.

Down close the John Day lies in its bed and makes noise like it's going Somewhere. It doesn't though, not anywhere that means much, in any case. And it doesn't escape the mid day sun or the hills or the silence that hovers about it, nor the brightness that makes it almost disappear before one's eyes. The brightness and the heat press down on that water until its every bend seems a trial. The river is swallowed up by the day, caught up in all that is around it, a prisoner of the sun and the dry, brown hills that encompass it. Like a dead man walking, some might say.

I hustled back up through the sage brush toward the lunch and talk that I knew would be waiting. When I reached the fence the horn blew on the pickup, so I knew Grandpa had made it back and the lunch was ready. As I approached the truck I could hear Marion swearing. He didn't like having to eat a packed lunch; he wanted to go back over to the ranch house and sit down at a good table of hot food. But that was impossible today and everyone knew it. So no one listened.

"I don't have no faith in that damned Doctor Dormire anyway. Ethyl and Virginia would be better off staying home."

Marion's 45 years and as many extra pounds were weighing on him. He was already more than a bit on edge. The men understood, but none wanted to share in his misery so they tried not to hear him. They knew things were going to be tough enough later in the day when the sun really started burning down. Al had guessed earlier in the morning that it would probably reach about 110. It was already 90.

Grandpa came around the back of the truck carrying a big picnic jug. He walked lightly for a man of sixty years. Somehow he seemed to be the freshest of the bunch. Of course he had been raking up alfalfa all morning; and it was about the easiest job of all if things went right. You could keep up pretty good speed, so the air kept you a little fresh. So the job didn't demand the stamina that pitchforking did. But Grandpa didn't have the job because he couldn't do the others. His job was his out of respect. He had a good twenty years on even Al, and he'd been born and raised within a few miles of McDonald's Ford. He knew his way around, and he was respected for it.

I hadn't seen him all morning.

"Hey, buckaroo, how'd you make it?"

"Oh, fine," I said, acting like it had been nothing. "Did Grandma go in with the women?"

"Hell, yes," he said with a smile. "You didn't think the old gal would let the women go to town without her, did you?"

The idea delighted me. "I guess not," I smiled back at him.

Lunchtime was always a good time for me. First of all there was the food, but second there was the talk. The men sat around and talked of the old days on the river, about shooting the ducks that fly in every winter, about Old Man Baker's broken leg, and about Doctor Dormire too. But finally the talk would drift around to business, to the

work that always had to be done on the ranch. It was impossible to escape the fact that it was a work day and that it was hot and that there were jobs to do. The men would have liked to forget for a few minutes, but they knew they were in the middle of the daily battle again, they couldn't escape it. Marion was sitting on the ground, leaning back against the front wheel of the pickup, trying not to think of anything but his own private battle with a sandwich.

"We're going to have to walk all the irrigation ditches as soon as we get this crop in," Al said. "I was up to Rock Creek dam last night and the water is still up pretty good. We must be losing water to the beavers because we're not getting much down here. They must have built in some of the ditches between the dam and here. I don't know why they can't stay down on the river where they belong. All that water over there and they have to dam up our ditches and spill the water out into sagebrush that doesn't want it."

"God damned beavers," Marion growled. He was getting wet in his own sweat, and starting to look like he was sick.

I sat there and listened, not offering much. What a life these men led! Then I thought back to my sixth-grade teacher. It made me a little ill to think of school again. Reading a bunch of books and taking orders from guys that never wear anything but suits, guys that don't meet a challenge all day long, guys that would probably faint at the sight of a rattlesnake or be afraid to stick a shovel into a beaver dam. I began to feel a little of the power of the men I was eating with. I'll bet these guys could teach school better than Mr. Bennett or Mr. Scroup ever could, I thought. What could those teachers know until they went out like these guys do? What kind of man could a guy ever be until he's outlasted the sun or the wind, until he's built something with his own hands, or until he's fought with some animals? What kind of a man could a guy ever hope to be until he's learned to live with nature? These guys sure knew how. I'll bet they'd tear those dams to pieces--maybe kill a few beavers if they saw them.

The thought of killing made me remember the salmon.

"Hey, grandpa, the salmon are coming up the river. Do you think we could shoot a few after work?"

"Yea, I suppose we ought to. The best eating is always early before the water gets low and the fish get bruised. Maybe we can get a few to can—Grandma wants some."

"How many can we shoot?" I asked.

"Just what's fair, Buckaroo. You know, pay back for the bit of maintenance we do for the state on the river banks at the ford, plus the reporting we do for them on water-levels. That stuff." Then he grinned and added, "Ok, ok. Maybe we can add a fish or two for widow Baker. One of us should look in on her soon. Lately she's looking her age, not so spry as usual."

Al looked up from his cup of water. "Harry, let's build us a smoke house this time. Damn, I really like that smoked salmon. Damn!" And he jumped up. That was the signal to go back to work. Back to work. Well, it had to be done.

The afternoon dragged on. The sun came down hot and heavy, and the sweat came out the same. The men kept working, kept pushing, and started swearing more. In time Marion went quiet. He started to sag; he slowed down and he started to breathe heavy. But I welcomed his slower pace—it gave me a chance to do more than my share. Even Al looked a little beat. He didn't say much when he brought the loads over, just dumped them and went back for more.

I looked out at Grandpa on the tractor. He looked like he was getting a lot done. I wondered how he was feeling. Even I was getting tired, and I was young. By mid-afternoon the heat was murderous, so bad that we began to work deliberately, like machines, with no thought of time or of the next load. Finally the end. This time we didn't jump on the fork--we climbed on heavily.

In the Pickup I sat between Al and Grandpa. They didn't say anything, welcoming the chance to just relax and rest. As we bumped down the rocky approach to the ford, I looked out to the river in anticipation. I'd already checked in back of the seat and found what I was looking for: Al's 30-30.

"Are we going to stop?" I looked at Al. He didn't answer, because Grandpa did.

"I don't think so, maybe after dinner. They probably won't be running good until the sun goes down some anyway. They don't like to cross shallow rapids in the bright light of day."

I knew he was tired and wanted to get home to relax and clean up, so I didn't say anything. But I was really disappointed. I took another look over my shoulder at the barrel of the 30-30, and wished like anything that I could get it out and show those guys what I could do with it. My mind slipped back to the time we had taken the shots at the ducks sitting out in the middle of the Lewis River reservoir up in Washington. It had been just Al and Grandpa then, and all we had was the .22 automatic that I'd brought along on the walk. The ducks were way out there, too far to hope to hit, but we tried anyway. Al had the first shots. He talked about the allowance that would have to be made for the distance and the fact that we were shooting down. Then he took his shots, hitting the water 10 or 15 yards short. Then Grandpa tried, coming a little closer on a few of his shots.

I'd waited my chance with a forced patience, doing my best not to show my eagerness. Finally my turn came. I was confident with that rifle because I'd been shooting it all summer. I knew every inch of it. As I aimed I tried to remember everything that my Grandpa had told me about shooting and all that Al had just said. The bullet hit the water just a few inches in front of the lead duck, and both of them went under the water. I felt like hollering. Instead I looked back at them with a smile trying to look more surprised than I was. Both Al and Grandpa were happy with my shot. It was a long shot for such a close miss, and from just a kid too.

Then the ducks came up again, not so close to each other this time. I picked out the closest one and shot again. Just over his back! And they both went down again! That was it for the day, but I didn't forget for a week, and not even then. Now if I could just show these guys what I could do with a big gun at a moving target...

I thought back to the night when Grandpa explained how you have to shoot to kill the salmon. How you have to shoot not to hit him but to kill him with the concussion. According to Grandpa the best shot is just a few inches short of the head. So the shot is aimed under the head; that way the bullet might even hit the fish too because the water makes the bullet curve and travel parallel to the surface. I went back over the explanation in my head. If I could just show these guys!

The truck bumped onto the other bank and up out of the water. No chance.

Right after dinner I ran down to the river. This time the trip was different because of the cooling evening. When I got there I was satisfied that everything was still in order. There was enough light, plenty for that matter; so the fish could be seen easily if they came over the shallow part of the ford. I wondered if there were any waiting to

come over right then. I was sure there were. The thought set me into motion, almost panic. I wondered what Grandpa was doing. Maybe he was talking to Al about some extra shells for the gun.

I scampered up the bank, looked up to the farm house, and started running toward it. The next thing I saw was the inside of the kitchen and Al standing there, rolling a cigarette, with a sack of Bull Durham tobacco dangling from his little finger.

“Where’s Grandpa?” I asked as I slipped past him toward the door to the dining room. He didn’t answer me because Grandpa was coming through the door toward me. “Can we go kill some salmon? There’s still plenty of light—I was just down there.”

Grandpa was about to say yes—I knew he was—I could tell just by the look on his face. But Al interrupted from behind, “Dammit, Sweet Pea,” he said, looking pained and sorry, “Marion took the pickup up the hill to check the gate at the top of the canyon. The gun is in it, and hi’s going to go on over to the Baker place to check on the widow. God damnit, he won’t be back in time.” Then he looked past me to Grandpa. “If I’d thought, I could have taken the gun out, Harry. we could have used the big truck.”

The news hardly seemed possible. I sank inside and thought of a good swear word or two and then of the fish that were making it over the ford. What could I say? Nothing. I walked out of the kitchen, through the milk room and into the yard. Tomorrow maybe, maybe tomorrow morning before work.

Half an hour later I came back up to the farm house from the river. It had only made things worse, so I had to get away from it. The first bat had come out already, teasing me, maybe even laughing, I thought.

The men were sitting on the porch as I knew they would be. They were resting, were leaning back in their chairs or lying back against the steps. And they were talking again, this time in easy tones that hardly broke the quiet. Grandpa watched me as I walked across the dry lawn toward the group. I stopped just short of the steps and looked at him.

He was still looking at me. “Why don’t you take the .22 and go out in the sage flat by the old rock fence. Maybe you could get a few cotton-tails. We could have a good dinner on them some night.”

Al broke in, grinning and looking at Grandpa. “Don’t bring back a bunch of Jack rabbits though—I think Harry’s teeth are getting too old to fight those tough devils.” Then he laughed again, just like he did out in the field that morning. He was rested again; he was enjoying the evening.

“Ok. Yea, I will.” It was a substitute at least. I began to feel better already, just thinking about it. I ran up the steps past the men, then upstairs to my bedroom where the gun was waiting. A couple of minutes later I was closing a wire gate behind me on my way out across the sage flat toward the rock fence. I could see the evening settling down on the river off to my right.

About seven o’clock the sun falls behind the canyon ridge and the shadows begin to move over the John Day.

They start on the west side, on the farm house side, and move out across the river, finally climbing the canyon

wall until everything is covered. There's still the heat of course, but its diminishing slightly, and not so pressing. And, as is so often the case, a gentle and merciful breeze comes up.

That breeze not the setting of the drilling sun, nor the lack of brilliance, but that first cooling breeze—that's what tells you the day is gone. Then, for the first time you know that the evening is coming, that the trial is over. Then, for the first time, you can relax and just walk where you're going instead of having to push through the heat. The day's work is finally done, even in mind, and you know that you have a few hours to yourself.

When evening comes, the men like to move off the porch and out into the yard under the great tree where the breeze is better. They sit and they talk, smoke, and think. But rarely do they think of the day that has passed. If they do it's about something that they counted as a small victory. More typically they think of something they will do the next day to help them through. When it comes down to it, they reminisce, exaggerating and entertaining each other, about almost anything. And they love it. Usually it's the same old stories, the same stuff they have been listening to for years, but they enjoy them, and seem to like them better each time around.

Meanwhile, A hundred yards from the farm house the river begins to wake up. Somehow it starts to gurgle where it didn't seem to during the day. It starts to move again, it starts to smell like a river again. It takes on depth, it becomes a patient but irresistible force again. It's then that the cool evening settles on it, surrounds it. And it gets quiet again, but in a different way. It's no longer the muffled stillness generated by overriding heat. It's a bigger stillness, a stillness that stretches clear across the river, out over the alfalfa fields, way over to the hillside. At the same time it's a quiet that lets you hear every sound that's to be heard.

And the men, sitting out under the tree or on the steps of the machine shop or on the bank of the river, the same men that tried to ignore everything but their work during the day, sit and listen for the sounds that float to them. Often it's the sound of a lonesome old hoot owl. But sometimes it's the gentle splash of the deer that come down to drink at the river, or maybe the sudden splash of a fish that has rolled up to grab a fallen meal. And the men peer out through the half-light hoping to get a glimpse of whatever they hear. Sometimes they even peer out, hoping to see something they haven't heard, like a jackrabbit or a cottontail, and maybe, just on a hope, out of some dark spot, the eye of the bobcat that made off with two of their pet sage hens. They never see them, but they keep looking, just in case.

It's at this time, after the sun has gone, only after the light has thinned and the heat has finally dissipated, does the river come alive. Now it no longer seems just like a picture or a promise. Finally it becomes a river, a force, a promise come true. First the bats come out. They swoop and dart frantically, cutting swaths through the thousand insects that infest the air. Then the fish begin to jump and roll and the coons come down to the bank, performing their clown acts, grabbing what they can from the shallows of the river. And maybe one of the horses will wade out belly-deep to play, standing tight-legged, tossing their heads, and snorting into the water. All life seems to go to the river or, like the beaver, to come out of it. The animals, for sure. And most of the men. Some of the men fish. Some sit and smoke. Someone might shoot at the bats with a shotgun, never hitting one. But all of them get there one way or another, even if they're sitting in the warm kitchen remembering an ice jam back when they were kids. Or wondering why they don't take a swim.

The river takes over. It brings sounds, it cools the air that moves up onto the porch and into the milk room. It feeds, and it tells you it will be back tomorrow evening.

I don't know what all the rabbits were doing that evening. I didn't have any luck anyway. At first I lay behind a big sage brush watching a good section of the fence, sure that some of the rabbits from the burrows underneath would be poking their heads out to check the air for sounds and smells. And owls. But after a half hour I grew tired of lying flat, so I got up and walked up to the rocks. It was so quiet I could hear every sound I made. When I reached the fence I picked a place that hadn't crumbled, a high place, crawled up on it, and sat down. Looking back across the field, I could see the house, brown and bleak, resting under the few gnarled trees that blessed it. The disappointment of the salmon shooting began to disappear; the peace of the dusk and the cool, soothing air was beginning to do its work. For the first time that day I was beginning to relax.

I suddenly realized that I was content, satisfied with myself and the day's work, and that shooting rabbits was not what I wanted to do at all. Without thinking about it or even knowing why, I found myself standing on top of the fence looking down across the dry sage flat toward the river. I could just see a little of it, dark now, heavy and solid. But even from that distance the river seemed to touch me. It seemed to rise up out of its bed and slide over the yards of sage and up through the blue dusk, to finally come to rest against my face, leaning against me, and beckoning. How different it was from the day. It fed the whole evening— it was bringing everything back to life.

By the time I reached the river it was getting dark, not really dark, because the sky was still pale blue and the three-quarter moon was hanging above the canyon wall, but it was dark enough that the river didn't have a bottom, only a surface. Standing there by its edge, I finally realized what the river meant to my Grandpa and the other men. I thought maybe I could see why they liked to relax on the porch or on the bank, and why they fished the river in the evening without caring whether they caught anything. It was like food on an empty stomach. The river seemed to fill me up with everything good and drain away all that was unpleasant. It was like a promise come true, like something a guy waits for and then gets. You forget all about the waiting when that final time comes. Even school didn't seem so bad when I thought of it. The river was too much with me to think of anything unpleasant. The sun and the day and the struggle didn't exist.

But that sanctity was broken in one split second. I'd been standing motionless looking out over the water, but just as I moved there was a big splash just a few feet from shore. It was a salmon; I'd startled it from its resting place. It was all over before I ever knew what was happening. In what looked like one motion it swept back the current and was gone.

In the few seconds that followed I relived the whole experience twenty times in one, it seemed. I just stood there looking dumbly at the water where it had been. And I was swept up suddenly by waves of emotion. The splash had startled me to be sure, but it was the salmon itself that hit me hardest. It was so powerful, so quick, and so free. It had defied me; it had run right away from me in one mighty move. It had beat me! It had been right in front of me and I'd stood there like a girl looking at something pretty. I could have had it. If I'd just been paying attention I knew, I could have had it.

Anger came over me. It was the closing darkness that did it, the dammed darkness was what did it. I'd been robbed! The first salmon, I could have had the first salmon! I imagined myself walking up to the house with that salmon. How I'd have shown it to the men, how they would have inspected it— male or female, and for eggs. And I imagined myself cleaning it in the milk room and then storing it in the cooler, wrapping it neatly first in wax paper. It would have been the first one, the best meat!

But I had missed my chance. It was getting even darker now, the water was almost black, so I knew there was no chance to see another salmon. The hunt was over. I started walking up the river toward the house, sticking close to the bank to avoid the sagebrush.

Then I thought of the men again. I'd be coming back with no rabbits. The thought was not pleasant. I couldn't go back up there empty, so I decided to wait them out by staying down on the river for a while. Maybe then they wouldn't be waiting when I finally came in. That was it: I'd spend some time sitting on the log that hung out over the fish hole.

On the end of the log, my feet hanging down toward the water, and the gun across my lap, I sat and thought back on the day in the field. I could hardly imagine it. The fields lay directly across the river so that I could see them dimly through the night air. They weren't the same fields anymore, though; now they were bearable, they were solid, and somehow they were soothing. Underneath me the water slid by deep and slow. Again, like earlier in the evening, the river lulled me; it eased me slowly out of my worry and let me forget.

Then I saw it. Just a few feet in front of me, coming straight toward the end of the log. I jumped aside. It was right there on top of the water. But it wasn't a fish. It was small— no, it was big, only part of it was sticking out of the water! I grabbed at the gun, which seemed all too slow and strange in my hands. It was almost under me now, I didn't dare move. But it wasn't a fish, what was it? As it swam under me, I turned, brought the gun up, and aimed where it would come out. When it did, I shot once, and then a second time. I'd hit it, I could tell because it started to thrash and weave through the water— it was swimming toward the shore. I fired again and the motion stopped altogether.

I ran off the log, jumped onto the bank, and crashed through the broken limbs and brush down the bank to the edge of the water. It was still there, floating in the water just a few feet from shore. With a stick from the bank behind me I dragged the carcass in close enough to reach down and grab it by the fur of its back. Then I picked it out of the water and set it down on the bank at my feet to examine it. At first, I thought it looked like a beaver, but it didn't have the big flat tail, so I knew it couldn't be one. It had fur, though, and a long tail. And it was dead, and it was mine.

As I carried it back up the path to the house, a rich, full feeling came over me, a feeling of triumph. My only wish was that the men would still be sitting out on the porch. I was in luck. When I came through the yard gate, I could see that they were still there.

"Hey, Grandpa, I shot something!, I've got it! It was down in the fishing hole. I was on the log sitting over the hole and I shot it!"

Grandpa got to his feet and walked out to meet me. "What is it?" He asked.

"I don't know. When I pulled it out I thought it was a beaver, but it isn't, I don't think."

He walked up to me and stopped, looking at it. "It's a muskrat," he said in a strained but quiet voice. "Damn... Lanny, it's a muskrat."

Al came off the steps and moved toward us. "Is it Harry? Is it our muskrat, Harry?"

"You say you were down at the fishing hole, Lanny?" Grandpa asked.

I hesitated, starting to feel that something was wrong, but not knowing what. "Yea."

Al came up and took the muskrat out of my hands and laid it gently down on the ground. He looked at it for a few seconds. "Yea, this is the one, I'm sure of it."

Marion was standing there looking down at it too. Then he looked at Al. "Is it the female?"

"Yep."

Marion looked back to the carcass. Then he said real slowly, "I hope she hasn't had her young ones yet."

The moments between words and actions were starting to seem like hours to me. I just stood there waiting for something. I watched as he rolled the carcass over and ran his hand over the wet belly.

"Hell..., she's already had them," he said.

Nobody was looking at me. I didn't know what to think or what to feel or do. I knew I didn't like it there, but I didn't feel like leaving either. Finally, the tension built up in me and I blurted out, "What happened?"

I knew it would be Marion, "How come you shot it?" he asked.

"I don't know, I was hunting, I didn't get any rabbits."

"Well, you don't eat muskrat," he said. He said it in kind of an easy way but with a sad note to his voice.

I looked up at Al. "Don't worry about it, Lanny—it's done, and I know you didn't know." Then both he and Marion walked back to the porch and into the back door. Just Grandpa and I were left.

"There's been a family of muskrats living in that hole every summer for some years now. This female comes back every summer and raises a family; sometimes she has the same mate, sometimes a different one, but she always comes back," He talked slowly, pausing between sentences. "We all watch her. She and her young come out at night and swim around and play when they get old enough. So sometimes you can catch them, just before it gets dark. I should have told you. You haven't seen them before because they don't come out in the day when it's bright and hot. They're just like us, they don't get out there unless they have to. They like the cool, they like the evenings just like us." Then he looked out onto the hill behind the house. "They are real peaceful animals. You didn't know. You'd better take it up there and bury it." He turned and looked at me again, then he put his hand flat on the top of my head and shook it gently. "Don't worry, everybody understands."

That night, a couple of hours after everyone had gone to sleep, I slipped quietly down the stairs and out the back door. I ran up the slope to where the shovel remained stuck in the dry ground. The moon was out bright, so there was just enough light to make digging possible. I dug up the grave and pulled the muskrat out and walked back down the hill to the fishing hole. Lying on the end of the log, I lowered the muskrat down almost to the black surface of the water and let it go. It slid in, and then, just a foot or two down stream, gently rose to the surface. I closed my eyes and felt my whole body go limp. After a while I got up and left.

The next morning when we bumped into the ford the men were just as usual, full of energy, grins, and break-

fast. But I didn't look for salmon or even look at the water much. The sun came back out, hot and murderous that day. The John Day River shrank underneath it. And so did Marion and I. And somewhere down the river, a muskrat lay on a shallow bank, half in and half out of the water, bobbing ever so slightly. A fly screamed through the thick silence to land on its drying fur. And it was the hottest day of the year.

L.E. Wilber resides in southwest Washington State with his family. This is his first published work of fiction.

THE WAY OF THE PEN

By Jamey Toner

Part III

7: Creation

*Eden's Viper, dark Seraph, caducean Muse,
May the virulent Fruit of our shadowy Tree
Be as pollen in Poetry's pores to infect
Whomsoever be caught in our Witchery-wind:
For by reading the words, "I deny the Good News,"
Thou, poor fool, hast already begun to rescind
The foundation of Faith which we Builders reject,
And cracked open the door to the Darkness That Be—
The true Lord does not offer the freedom to choose.*

"Holy God," I said aloud, and dropped the unclean page. This was worse, far worse, than I had anticipated. They were deliberately and openly setting out to publish verse the mere reading of which would taint the mind of anyone who looked at it—even in order to refute it. A necromantic virus. I wondered if they themselves believed in the forces they were calling upon, or whether it was only a stunt or a metaphor to them. But in the end, it didn't matter. The effect on readers of wavering faith would be the same.

Still, I reflected (as I crumpled up their diabolic mission statement), this was a good example of why such things were permitted: for in at least one case, that poem would have the exact opposite of its intended effect. So thinking, I left the library behind me and made a bee-line for the chapel.

That evening as I was pacing the columned walkways of my dormitory courtyard, I saw Rose Farrington standing under a tree with her face upraised to the first pale stars. I hesitated to break her solitude, but she spotted me and waved, so I walked on over. "Heya, Rose."

"Hi, Joey. Have a good Christmas?"

"No thanks, already had one. You?"

"Pretty good. Been practicing your steps?"

"Absolutely," I said, truthfully. "Matter of fact, I got to jig a bit with a lady friend of mine over break."

"That's nice! I didn't know you had a girl back home."

"Oh—no, I don't. She's sort of my auxiliary mom. Light on her feet, though, for having seven kids."

Rose smiled at me. "Good dancing comes from the heart, not the legs."

We chatted a bit more, and then she said good night and wandered away. I stood watching the steam rise to heaven from my breath. Good dancing comes from the heart, I thought. It was the first in a series of serendipitous little epiphanies that clustered around me during the next few weeks until I almost felt that the subtle rod of inspiration was bashing me over the head. I'd been focused on the techniques and mechanisms of writing for so long that

I'd all but forgotten the ultimate factor: the divine fire. The whole point of all my rigorous training was to make the mechanisms automatic, so they could be forgotten—to make myself a slightly fitter vessel for the gift no man could deserve. But now I had trained enough. It was time to start seeking my word-stuff beyond the walls of the world.

Classes resumed the next day, and I duly attended them and took notes, placating the household gods of daily life. But as soon as I was free, I returned to the library to study the ways of my enemies. Cromwell was the acknowledged leader of the Unhallowed school and had already beaten me once before, so I decided to investigate Rhode and Jabroni. Perhaps in battling them, I could earn the experience I needed to confront their master.

I soon concluded that their sinister manifesto, while credited only to the school as a whole, must have been composed mainly by Cromwell. The other two lacked the visceral force that he wielded. Rhode was an aspiring intellectual, favoring pentameter and arguing from a materialist standpoint. Jabroni, on the other hand, gravitated to free verse and propounded a loose epicurean sensuality. They were all traveling the same road, but only Cromwell seemed to embrace its logical conclusion. One of Rhode's typical works went like this:

*The glittering atoms dance their senseless dance,
And mud-men strive and suffer all by chance
Beneath the endless void (indifferent, mute),
Believing their belief will bear some fruit—
But chaos is the cosmos's vast doom,
And no one comes to save us from the tomb.*

And one of Jabroni's, like this:

*In opium ecstasies I have ridden the soft chariots of half-resisting flesh
Through beautiful bells awhisper with the easeful death of dreams
And knelt before the apex-downward ziggurats
Of purity's languorous defilement and the zephyred incense of despair
We should perhaps be thankful for virtue's cockroach diuturnity
For vice too demands virgins.*

Once I'd familiarized myself with their respective approaches, I determined to answer each poet in his own style. I felt like a man in a narrow pass with a rapier in one hand and a broadsword in the other, beset on either side by assailants and forced to fight simultaneously with contradictory methods. Pass or fail, this would be the greatest test yet of my abilities. I had a tendency to ramble when writing free verse, so in addressing Jabroni I'd have to be rigid on the inside while staying fluid on the outside. As for Rhode—I too favored pentameter, but just to be contrary I decided to match his iambic beat with a trochaic one. Now: what to say?

That question formed the substance of my week. What I really wanted to do was out-intellectualize Rhode and out-sensualize Jabroni, but I had to compress my observations into a format capable of rivaling theirs for succinctness. I didn't even want to take a swipe at a first draft until I had some overall concept of the operation. So I read and prayed and thought a lot, and got no closer to my goal. On Friday night I went to a party at Burke Hall.

Burke was set up in four-room suites, each with a spacious common room. A couple of adjacent suites and a perfunctory R.A. were all that was needed for the evening's purposes—well, that and booze, obviously. I wasn't much of a party-goer by and large, but a few of the guys from my Humanities class were supposed to be there, so I figured I'd stick my head in and have a beer or two. (I invited Lee, but he wasn't much for crowds.) I supposed Sean must be drinking it up with the Fighting Irish, nearly a thousand miles to the west. I wondered what Sylvia was doing.

My buddy Matt spotted me as I came in, and reeled over to me with a drink in either hand. “Joey! How’s the—how’s your stuff? I mean, how’s it—you know? Goin’ okay, or what?”

“Precisely. Nice music.”

“Right? Kickin’ the classic rock, yeah!” Matt was a Music major. He partied pretty hard, but he also played guitar, piano, trumpet, drums, and—my personal favorite—the fiddle, and was already composing some fairly advanced melodies of his own. We shared an almost maniacal hatred of music produced by machines. “Wanna drink?”

“I could not love thee, beer, so much, loved I not soda more.”

“I never know what you’re saying. Have a drink.”

“Thanks.” I accepted a Newcastle and clinked it with whatever mixed concoction was in Matt’s glass. My eyes were adjusting to the strobe-shot dimness and my ears to the thundering AC/DC, and I moved a little deeper into the flailing press. There were somewhere in the neighborhood of forty people, most of them dancing, in a smallish space, so I stayed alert for any misplaced elbows lest I lose a tooth. I knew a few of these folks, and they were mostly good sorts; I chatted and danced and drank, and passed a pleasant hour. I was just thinking about making my way toward the exit when Chad Banks arrived.

Much as I disliked letting an enemy dictate my movements, I couldn’t leave the moment he arrived: he would think I was afraid of him. So I decided to stick around for another twenty minutes or so. Our eyes met for one hostile heartbeat before he was snatched into the revels by a brace of his already intoxicated football fellows. I tracked down Matt and we had a shouted conversation about Warren Zevon. Ten or fifteen minutes went by, and I finished my beer and started angling gradually towards the door.

Then Banks, who’d been doing tequila shots in the corner, came over and put a finger on my chest. “Heyyyy, someone to represent the dork demographic! Very inclusive.”

In retrospect, I probably could’ve handled it better; but I too had been drinking, and my private war on the Unhallowed school had awoken my restive Celtic bellicosity. “Banks, you wanna see a magic trick? It’s called word association.” I raised my hand over his head and said, “From this night forward, every football you see will remind you of the phrase ‘fop doll’! Even in the heat of the gridiron you will picture yourself at a tea party with pigtails as you grip the pigskin!”

He stared at me. I feel safe in conjecturing that none of the nerds he’d bullied in the past had ever responded with this particular tactic. The downside, of course, was that it provided no immediate defense against the straightforward approach. “What are you talkin’ about?” he yelled, and grabbed me by the shirt.

One of these days my mouth was going to get me into trouble. On this occasion, I was once again saved by one of Banks’ own pals—Emeth Peterson, a big strapping lad I knew vaguely from my Economics class. He got in between us and put his hands on Banks’ shoulders. “Come on, man, cool down. We’re not trynna get busted by the R.A.s here.”

Banks jabbed a finger in my direction. “This ain’t over, Slopkins. Watch your back.”

“Always do,” I said, and headed for the door.

Up the great hill of our campus ran a huge slope of stone steps, and I sat there some days later on a black winter’s eve. Far below me in the trackless dusk was a burning, billowing fire where Mr. Hammerskjold the groundskeeper was burning leaves. From time to time on the bitter wind a swirl of sparks would pass me by like scarlet locusts in the deepening gloom.

“Glittering atoms,” I muttered, chewing the obsidian syllables. “Senseless dance.”

What I felt at that moment was a jumble of negative emotions—anger and loneliness and doubt, whiskered raw by the desolate wind. One couldn’t prove that Rhode was wrong, of course—that was the whole point of this

embattled world of ours—but surely one could plausibly question his empty worldview; surely one could dent his heartless certitude. Could he prove that there *wasn't* a God?

“Round and round and round she goes,” I mumbled—then I stopped. Round and round and round and round and. . . By the nine circles of Hell, that was a trochaic beat!

Well then, what was it that was going round and round? Our blasted arguments, circling each other like fighters in the ring. There must be a way to spiral in toward the center. I supposed the heart of his atheism lay in the premise that purely material causes could account for the existence of existence. But after all, if our rational faculties had arisen from sheer chaos, then reason itself was obviously meaningless: and yet, that very reason was the sole foundation of the sciences which purported to vindicate materialism. His philosophy defeated itself.

Great. Now how do I say that in a poem?

I sat in the cold until the small red star beneath burned low; then I headed to the cafeteria. Security would be locking it up in a few minutes, and I liked to hide in the pantry until they'd gone away and then emerge to prowl the silent space. Also, I must now confess to the pilferage of a non-negligible percent of all the generic potato chips and soda consumed in New England that year.

It was sometime after two a.m. and I was pacing the square of January moonlight that fell through the high southern window, when I suddenly jerked to a halt. “Yes,” I muttered. “Yes, yes, that's it!” Narrowly side-stepping a potted plant, I lunged for my notebook on a nearby table. Within ten minutes I had written four lines that seemed to encapsulate my entire position.

*Self-devouring serpent Ourobours,
Even spurning song you join the chorus,
Channeling the logic and the passion
Whereby suns are kindled—in your fashion.*

I couldn't think of anything else to say. “Well, anyway, that's enough for tonight,” I murmured (I was talking to myself more than usual lately), and climbed out through the second-story window.

I took the next day off and then turned my attention to Jabroni. Something told me the response to Rhode wasn't finished yet, but I decided to sit on it for a while and come back fresh. Meanwhile, I had free verse to sling.

Walking for miles down Highway 32, I cerebrated, contemplated, and meditated as the hours went meandering by. The problem with free verse wasn't figuring out what to say, it was figuring out what not to say. Unconstrained by any intrinsic structure, the poetry was always in peril of turning into mere monologue. But I wasn't trying to write an essay and then arrange it on the page so it looked like a poem: I was trying to write a poem. That day and the next went by without a gleam of inspiration. Then on Sunday morning, when I dragged myself out of bed to go to Mass, I caught a lightning bolt.

The Old Testament reading was from the Song of Songs. As I listened, the reptile in my DNA that just wanted sleep or stimulus, and the immortal energy in my spirit that longed to glorify God, slowly turned and began to smile at each other. *Hot diggity*, I thought. *You want sensual? Nobody beats Solomon for sensual!*

From the chapel I went straight to the library and got a Bible and a study carrel. I read the Song right through, then moved on to the Psalms. For the next few hours I leafed slowly through the wisdom of those prophets and poets of the ancient world. By the time I was ready for a break, I knew absolutely that I would be addressing Jabroni in a psalm. Unfortunately, I still wasn't completely sure what to say.

February rolled around, and things in the world outside my head were slow. Sleep—class—food—class—sleep. It was just as well, because the world inside was a tumult and a rampage. I found myself climbing a lot more: trees, dorms, gigantic industrial chimneys outside of town. I did some of my best thinking on rooftops in the snow. I found myself arguing out loud with my inner critic, who was never quite happy with my work. I wrote a dozen re-

butts to Jabroni and tore them all up. I also found my grades slipping ominously as the weeks went by.

Lee noticed a Chemistry quiz on my desk with the dread red glyph writ large at the top. “Dude—you want some help studying that stuff?”

“I got it under control. Thanks all the same, though.”

“You’ve been a little unfocused lately.”

“Oh, I’ve been focused. Just not on Chemistry.”

It hit me on Valentine’s Day. I’d always thought it was a little silly that the day of a massacre had become a romantic holiday; but perhaps in my fervid reflecting on a Hebrew religious love poem, I’d unwittingly opened myself to the same inspiration that moved him all those long millennia ago. Whatever the case, my skull came ablaze in the middle of lunch and I sprinted out of the cafeteria with Lee, Matt, and Rose peering owlishly after me.

I’d been wrong: it wasn’t silly. The sanctity of martyrdom sprang from the same root as the wildest romance or the quietest fraternal affection. All were resonating echoes of the great song of Divine Love. And Jabroni himself had the sense to recognize that one couldn’t even be bad without something good to be bad to. There was no logical answer to a position based on consciously depraved appetites—but maybe one could appeal to the soul’s true longing, distorted though it had become. I dug out my notebook and got into the chapel seconds before entire lobes of my brain started detonating under the pressure, and scribbled out the following.

*We have bent the love by which You made us, O Lord,
And the joy whereby You crafted us we have twisted.
Too long in shadows have our hearts lurked;
Your radiance pierces our eyes like gelid iron—
Like terrible spears Your mercy is to us.
Create in us clean souls, O God!
Make clear our sight that we may gaze upon the wonders You have wrought,
And let Your servants behold Your salvation.*

Probably wouldn’t convert Jabroni; but it might just get through to some vacillating member of his readership. Of course—and I suddenly thought of this for the very first time—that assumed that I would actually be able to find someone to publish this stuff. I had no idea how to go about such things. There must be thousands of other poets around the country clamoring for publishers at this very moment.

Well, one problem at a time. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that my reply to Rhode was lacking. But again, I’d done enough for one day—and also, my Economics class was starting in about three minutes.

I made it, barely. I can’t honestly claim to have paid much attention during class, but my reverie ended as I emerged into the hall afterwards and found Emeth Peterson waiting for me. “Yo, Hopkins.”

“Hey, Peterson. What’s up?”

His expression was odd; it looked as if he couldn’t decide whether he was upset or amused. “You remember the party at Burke a while back? You put some kinda whammy on Chad Banks?”

“Put a what?—oh, right, that. Yeah, why?”

“Well. . . We had a scrimmage the other day, and he was acting weird toward the end. Dropped the ball for no reason a coupla times, and I swear I heard him say ‘Get outta my head’ once. Like the more he tried not to think about whatever it was, the more it got to him. I was wondering if you might know anything about it.”

I couldn’t help cracking a smile. “Tricks like that only work on the weak-minded. Just tell him to try associating the word ‘football’ with something else. Something brutish and manly. Like, I dunno—‘boot to the balls,’ let’s say. That should help.”

Emeth broke down and smiled back. “I’ll give it a shot. ’Preciate it.”

“Not a problem. See ya around.”

As I walked back to my dorm, I felt fairly pleased with myself. My little mind gambit had worked, and maybe old Banks would think twice about crossing me again. It took several minutes for the glaringly obvious to manifest itself through the smog of satisfaction; then I came to a halt in mid-stride. I’d done exactly what Cromwell was doing.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong with designing phrases to stick in the mind. That was one of the functions of poetry, to furnish the reader with memorable ways of expressing his own inchoate thoughts. But the reader must be free to choose: the poet was the servant in the scenario. As soon as I started using whatever gifts I might have to exercise power over others for my own ends, I became the villain. I still thought that what I’d done in writing “Her Majesty” was justified (although it sailed pretty close to the wind); what I’d done to Banks, however, strayed a bit too far from charity. I couldn’t bring myself to consider finding him and apologizing, but I resolved never to do such a thing again. At least I’d given Emeth a counter-spell, if you will, to undo my deed.

The incident brought home to me the potential magnitude of the forces I was playing around with, and I spent the next several days pondering the matter. Long after a rainy midnight toward the end of the month, my ruminations erupted in another quatrain.

*None of us, perhaps, is to be trusted
Holding Light in hands with sin encrusted;
Pow’r corrupts according to our goals—
We who would forge stars may tear black holes.*

“Huh.” I sat re-reading this and chewing on my pen until I realized there was ink running down my chin. It certainly followed the motif of the first piece I’d written—but it reversed my whole contention, didn’t it? Did it? I read both stanzas in succession, but I couldn’t find the flow of the work as a whole. Something was still missing. “Blast it!” I was starting to hate this stupid poem.

March glided onto the calendar, and the snow commenced upon a long slow transmutation into mud. I spent my days poring over good Christian poetry looking for clues to a promising avenue of attack, and my nights subjecting my soul to the writings of my enemies in search of weaknesses. The rest of my time I spent not sleeping or eating or doing homework. Lee asked me once if I was okay and I practically bellowed at him not to concern himself with my affairs.

One evening I stumbled across “Forsaken” again, the first of Cromwell’s verses I’d encountered. I recalled the rejoinder I had used at the time: the prayer for peace. I wondered if that could be of use again now. But then, it would have been more in the style of my response to Jabroni than my still unfinished response to Rhode. I liked the balance of the anti-Jabroni piece, and I didn’t want to go back in and tinker with it. Perhaps I’d keep St. Francis up my sleeve for another occasion.

But the very next day I got another micro-apocalypse in Dr. Danvers’ class. We were discussing Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade,” and she called our attention sharply to the single conjunction that was the heart of the poem.

“Everyone knows this line,” she said, “even people who’ve never heard of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. ‘Theirs not to reason why, theirs but—’” She stopped. “Now. Who has heard the rest of this line quoted as, ‘to do or die?’” Most of our hands went up. “I’ve heard it too, and it implies that these men acted out of fear. But they were acting out of honor, because they took an oath to obey their officers—even knowing it would mean their deaths. The line is, ‘Theirs but to do *and* die.’ That is literally the entire point of the poem. So you see how the alteration of even the tiniest word can destroy the author’s meaning.”

I most definitely saw that. If old Graveling were here, I thought, he might add that the most complex equation could be broken by the accidental substitution of a minus for a plus sign. Sometimes—maybe very often indeed—the

greatest things revolved upon the littlest. And that got me thinking about the destiny of the soul in eternity, and its reliance upon the simplest choices in the ever-fleeting present. And that got me thinking about Jabroni again. Maybe. . . maybe just a little epilogue.

That night, I re-considered my reply to the sensualist. I decided to let the text stand as written, but to add three more lines at the end. They went like this:

*For in each single moment of faith we find unending peace,
In each single moment of hope we find perpetual joy,
And in each single moment of love we find Love everlasting.*

Hmm—was that too Catholic? Would anyone publish that? Probably not, I thought, and suddenly burst out laughing. Whatever. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

I relaxed a little after that, and took another week off from the writing process. I also apologized to Lee and tried to catch up on some of my schoolwork (as well as my eating and sleeping). There was a big party on St. Patty's Day, and I spent a good portion of it dancing with Rose. The days flowed by. It was almost April, and the spring rains were turning into monsoons, when I received my last and greatest revelation.

It'll sound a little anticlimactic at first. What happened was, we learned about the dialectical method in my Humanities class. All the great classical and medieval philosophers used it, and it was later picked up by Marx and Hegel and the positivists. It presented an argument in three steps: thesis, one's initial position; antithesis, the foreseeing of possible counter-arguments; and synthesis, the reconciliation of the opposing sides under a more advanced contention overarching both. Frankly, I was hardly listening in class. It wasn't till hours later that it smashed into me like a world-destroying comet: *I had already written a thesis and an antithesis.*

And that night, the vaults of the firmament opened overhead. The rain shook the earth, and the pine trees staggered in the wind. Lightning slashed the sky with thunderclaps like mountains hurled in ruin. I stood in the musty darkness of the chapel attic, exulting in the shattering tempest.

My first order of business was to pioneer a new poetic style. A poem in three stanzas, setting forth the three dialectical phases—each stanza to be four lines in length, composed in trochaic pentameter. What to call this thing? I furrowed my brows. How about the trident? I cogitated, then shrugged. Why not?

So! I must now complete the world's first trident. I labeled the two opening stanzas with Roman numerals (as I had, just this second, decreed should be done in all trident). Then I wrote a "III." underneath the second one and sat down to consider my final move. Thus far the poem had established that in any creative act, even an anti-theist one, the creator called upon the power of God—and that this power was potentially so dangerous that hardly any of us could be trusted with it.

Yet we *were* trusted with it. No wise or virtuous person felt worthy of the divine gifts, but the good Lord lavished them on us anyway. I had said months ago that I needed to seek my words beyond the mortal sphere—now the poem was calling me into higher dimensions than I knew, where cubes looked flat and human knowledge seemed like the first groping words of a child. We His clay were furnace-tried, annealed beyond anything we thought we could endure; but He knew that only thus could we come to know ourselves. I sat and listened to the rain, and the hours went by unheeded. Then I wrote the last four lines.

*Fire begot the universe arising,
Birthed our bodies, brought the Dove baptizing—
Madness and magnificence that flame is,
Scorching you to teach you what your name is.*

I slept in the attic, where no foot stirred the dust save mine. It was well past noon when I awoke. I read through both my poems, entitled only “To C. Rhode” and “To T.M. Jabroni.” I nodded, once. They were ready for an audience.

Also, it occurred to me that Lent was soon coming to an end. Had I finally succeeded in writing the elusive Easter poem? I studied my trident for a minute or two, then gave a wry grimace. No, it was more like a Pentecost poem. But, hey—that was progress.

8: Darkness

I took my work to Dr. Danvers the very next day. She read them through twice, slowly, while I sat trying not to fidget. Then she raised her head and fixed me intensely with her eyes. “Is this why you haven’t been doing your reading lately?”

“Well—yes, ma’am. I guess so.”

“Joey, these are quite good—as I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you—but you won’t grow as a writer unless you learn from those who have gone before.” I started to say something, but she held up her hand. “At the same time, I was the one who told your class about the Unhallowed school, so I suppose that makes me partly responsible. And I do admire your ambition to defend the world of common virtue. May I ask why there isn’t a third poem addressed to A. Cromwell?”

“I’m not good enough yet,” I said, simply.

The corners of her eyes crinkled just a bit. “That must hurt to admit.”

“I’m not thrilled about it. But I’ve done what I can for the present.”

She nodded. “If there’s a better attitude you could have, I don’t know what it is.” Her fingers drummed the desk for a few moments, then she nodded again. “I’ll make a deal with you, Joey. If you promise to get your head back in the game for this semester and earn the A of which you’re so clearly capable, then I will send these poems to a man called Dr. Gibson in Washington, D.C., who’s organizing a new Christian magazine to counter the effects of Cromwell and his men. I can’t guarantee that he’ll publish your work, but I think there’s a very good chance that he will. He’s just starting out and doesn’t yet have a huge number of contributors, and I believe what you’ve written is exactly the sort of thing he’s looking for. Also, another couple of months of hard work in English class can’t possibly hurt your chances of improving as a poet. So, what do you say—deal?”

I rose and offered my hand, and she rose and took it in a firm grip. “Deal.”

That evening at dinner, I told my little circle of friends about my hidden work for the first time. Rose looked relieved. “So that’s what you’ve been up to? We’ve been worried about you, you know.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to say anything until it was done. I showed it to Dr. D. earlier, and she said she might be able to help me get it published.”

“Joey, that’s wonderful!”

Lee raised an eyebrow. “So you think. . .”

I shrugged. “Yeah, if, you know.”

“Or the—”

“Yep.”

Our friend Michelle slapped her hands down on the table. “Would you guys not do that? It’s kinda creepy.”

“Hey, Jay,” Matt interjected. “You think your stuff would sound good put to music?”

“Dunno. The psalmic one might, but I think the other one’s a bit too wordy.”

“Maybe I’ll take a look at ’em and see what the ol’ Music Muse has to say.”

“That would be cool, if you two collaborated on a song,” Rose said.

“Specially if you made up a dance to go along with it, Rose,” Michelle added.

“I don’t know if I want to get in between the two mad scientists.”

“I’m not mad,” Matt replied, just oozing hip. “I’m Matt.”

“How long have you been saving that one up?” Lee asked.

“Oh, I dunno—few months.”

“Nice work.”

The next day, I returned to my appointed labors, and my grades steadily improved. Perhaps I had strayed a hair closer to obsession than I’d realized; but I was back now, and little harm done. Only three weeks after my talk with Dr. Danvers, she pulled me aside at the end of class one day and told me that Dr. Gibson had accepted both of my submissions for publication. “They’ll be appearing this summer in the first issue of *Fire-folk* Magazine. Congratulations!”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, and walked off with a grin that you couldn’t’ve budged with a pry-bar.

The rest of the semester went by without incident. On a warm night in May, just days before the start of summer, I bumped into Rose on the quad. The dark above was million-swarmed with stars, and the grass was aglow with fireflies. Neither of us had much to say, so we walked side by side in silence. I already knew she was going to Ecuador for the summer, with a humanitarian group called Life Corps or something like that. For my part, I’d most likely be back slinging pasta at the Papa’s. One could do worse, of course, but I felt inconsequential next to her.

“I’m going to miss you,” I said finally.

“Likewise. But you’ll be back in September, won’t you?”

“Absolutely—as long as my friend Sean doesn’t accidentally put me in traction.”

“Here.” She reached up and took the rose out of her hair. “So you don’t forget about me.”

“Rose. . . if I live to be a thousand, I’ll never forget about you.”

She took my hands and held them—only a for a moment, then she stepped away. “Good night, Joey. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night.” I watched her go with her lithe, quick stride, and then I stood gazing at the red flower in my hand. Some powerful emotion was moving me, but I had no name for it. My feelings for Sylvia were but lately put to rest, and bound in a fitful slumber; yet those feelings had been sharp and urgent, unlike the deep, deep quiet that I found myself experiencing now. This girl, this lady. . . My God, I barely knew her. Maybe I was being a silly romantic. I’d never asked her—but surely a girl so lovely inside and out had a guy waiting for her back home, or something. For all I knew, she had a vocation to the convent. “All right, Hopkins. Get a hold of yourself.”

And so, my first year of college came to an end. My grades ended up being decent, but with definite room for improvement—as my parents made sure to point out to me every single time the topic of school came up that summer. Noelle, for her part, was too elated by the news of my impending publication to bother with such trifles as my academic career.

“Hey, where’d you get the rose from?” she asked on my second day back, going freely through my half-unpacked bags.

“Get out of there. I don’t go through your diary, do I?”

“Oh, it’s in code. I based it on the Navajo encryption we used in World War II—just in case. So, who gave you the rose? Is she pretty?”

I made a show of exasperation. “All right, yes. She’s very pretty. But I can’t tell you her name because you won’t believe me.”

“What? Yes I will. Of course I will! Why wouldn’t I? What’s her name?”

“It’s Rose.”

“Ooooh, you’re making that up.”

I flung my head back and caterwauled with laughter. “I missed you, Noelle.”

She pouted and sparkled at the same time, as only my sister could do. “Missed you too—jerk.”

Sean and I fell easily back into our old routines. He’d actually gotten even bigger since I’d seen him last, and I swear his trapezius was nearly prehensile by now. One night as we were regulating the zombie population, I asked

him if he was thinking about trying out for the football team.

He laughed. “Fraid not. I may be hot stuff here at home, but I’m just a big minnow in a tiny pond. Those guys are in a whole different league. But I’m pals with a couple of them, and we’ve been working out together.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yep. So what about you? You’re sort of swimming with the big fish yourself now, huh?”

“The *Fire-folk thing*? Yeah, maybe. Depends on whether the intended audience ever sees my stuff.”

“I remember that Cromwell poem from Commander Mark’s class, man. I’m glad you’re taking a swing at the guy.”

“Trying to. Like you were saying—I’ll have to reach a whole new level to play on his field.”

He glanced at me. “Just watch yourself. New level, new devil.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good. You mind if I use that sometime?”

“Knock yourself out, chieftain. What do you think he’ll do if he sees your stuff?”

“Tough tellin’, not knowin’. Have to wait and see.”

“Mmm. What do you call a deer with no eyes?”

I thought about it. “I don’t know. What?”

“No idear!”

And the walls of Crusoe manor did shake with the thunder of our mirth.

Dr. Gibson and company brought out the first issue of the new magazine late that June. I will say that opening a cover and seeing my name in print was one of the better feelings of my young life. I kept quiet about it for fear of immodesty, but word got about all the same and practically everyone I knew congratulated me over the course of July. I was coming out of Papa Frank’s after my shift one afternoon, when a familiar car pulled into the lot. She’d cut her hair shorter, but her eyes were the same eyes I remembered. “Hello, Sylvia.”

“Hello, Joey.” She hugged me, and I hugged her back. It was a poignant feeling to hold her again—I was happy to see her, but there was a wall and a muted ache between us now. “I saw your work in *Fire-folk*,” she said as we pulled apart. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Hey, I like your hair.”

She smiled. “Thanks! So, how’s school going?”

We talked for a few minutes about this and that, before the flow of conversation made inevitable the divulgence of her relationship status. “Nice guy?” I asked.

“Very nice. Not quite as cute as you, but close.”

“Aw, shucks. So—you’re happy?”

“I think so, yes. What about you?”

“... I don’t know. I’m working on it.”

“Well—you will be. You deserve to be.”

We embraced again, and parted. A few more days went by in peace. Then in August I opened the latest issue of *The Dark* at the local bookstore and found a small piece by Allen Cromwell called, “To J. Hopkins.”

Rape-made, plucked unconsenting from oblivion soft and grey

Curse the day

Slave-yoked, as if in gratitude for debts we cannot pay

Torn away

Eternal hostages to unknown kings we must obey

So they say

Rise up, outgrow your tyrant fathers, use their strength to slay

Join the fray

*The holy fire can be our own when we the gods betray
Seize the day*

I read it three times, fuming. How did he do that? In establishing his own points, he crushed my arguments almost casually, as if in passing. It was like watching a man punch through a brick wall and then open his fist to reveal an unbroken soap bubble in his palm. And this—this had come out barely a month after *Fire-folk*. He must've written it in a matter of minutes and pulled some personal favor to stop the presses at *The Dark*. My poems had taken—

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing, kid?”

I realized I was tearing pages out of the magazine by the handful. “I—oh—uh—sorry. I’ll—I’ll pay for it.”

“Darn right you’ll pay for it, pal. Next time try purchasing the item before you rip it up.”

Fighting down a sudden urge to go for the owner’s jugular with my teeth, I put a few coins in Cromwell’s coffers and walked out, trashing the rest of the magazine but stuffing his crumpled poem in my pocket. Obviously, it was time to get back to work.

*

September came fast. In the end, I produced nothing at all that summer. Despite my long-standing axiom that the trash can is the writer’s best friend, I couldn’t seem to write even enough to provide it with a page or two of fodder—not so much as a goofy limerick. I sat, I paced, I drove—I climbed, I scribbled, I screamed—I tried all my tricks, and nothing came. The springs were just dry.

My spirits rose a bit when I got back to Athanasius and saw my friends once more. As sophomores, we were now allowed to request our roommates, so Lee and I ended up together again. Matt, Michelle, Emeth—heck, it was even oddly nice to see Banks skulking around the campus as of old. But, though I avoided acknowledging the fact to myself, the person I was most uplifted to see was Rose. She was a senior now—soon enough she’d be off into the wide world. Still, we had a whole year left.

I talked to Dr. Danvers about my latest tussle with Cromwell. “Don’t force it, Joey,” she told me. “Do your daily business, and keep your heart open. The words will come when it’s time.”

So I worked and danced and went to parties, and tried to keep my mind off that motherless wretch. Matt and I talked music a lot. Also, I discovered one night by an offhand remark that Emeth was a painter.

“Yaaarp,” he enthused (we may have been drinking at the time). “Lotta abstract stuff. Big fan of Dalí, you know?”

“Dude, that’s awesome! Can I see your stuff sometime?”

“Oh, totally. By the way, I heard you got some poetry published recently.”

“Yeah,” I said, and steered the conversation another way. “In fact, I get some of my inspiration from Dalí. You know his painting, ‘Christ of St. John of the Cross’?”

“Duuude! That’s one of my favorites!”

Meanwhile, I became gradually aware that Michelle was visiting our room more and more frequently. She was a very strong-willed brunette, an Art major, who seemed to revel in butting heads with my intransigent roommate. My keen observational skills enabled me to deduce that their friendship had moved beyond the Platonic stage when I came in one afternoon and found them in a highly advanced Brazilian tongue-lock. “Oops,” I said placidly, going to my desk for my Calculus book. “Carry on, I’ll be out of here in a minute.”

Michelle blushed; Lee just grinned. “Guess we might as well make the thing official now.”

“I’ll start arranging the bachelor party.”

“Not that official,” Michelle said hastily.

Once the two of them became an item, I saw less of Lee. Naturally, I didn’t blame him for that—particularly

after my behavior last semester—but it did mean I spent a great many evenings alone with my thoughts before he returned on the skirts of curfew each night. Dr. Danvers' excellent counsel notwithstanding, I found myself brooding over evil words in the gathering autumn dusk. And a shadow began to grow in my mind and heart.

At first it was only concern at the damage Cromwell was doing, and a swelling anger at him and his school. With the passing of those dark and solitary nights, the anger encroached on the concern and swallowed it, and became anger at myself for not being able to beat my opponent. I also started missing Mass, and the light of Heaven grew dim in my sight; and the dimmer it grew, the less I sought it out.

On a bleak Sunday morning in November when I should have been in church, I made my way out of town and wandered into the mist-wrapped forest beyond. A soft voice in my heart reproached me for not keeping the Sabbath, and I said aloud, "Leave me alone. If You're not going to help me, then maybe I'll try the other guy."

I'd never thought such a thing before. Maybe I'd spent too long studying the Unhallowed literature: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of a stronger God," and so forth. I should have taken it back right away—should have gone looking for a confessional. But as I said it, a strange shock went through my body, first cold, then tremulously hot, and I became conscious of the slow, sepulchral blood-tide of my heart. All my muscles loosened and grew warm; a shiver stirred my groin, traveled up my spine like the touch of an actual finger on my back, and reached my mind in a frisson of ancient passions. I wondered if I were having a stroke, or possibly an apotheosis. My head was light, my limbs weightless, my thoughts frozen but for a tiny window of clarity through which I could sense unknown vastness. The whole thing lasted only a second of real time, maybe less: then I was left dry-mouthed and shaking, my clarity gone. Merely the reaction of adrenaline to a broken taboo, no doubt.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't—mean it."

That was a long and shallow week, a tautened oblong of time in which I passed the ticking seconds by trying to think of anything but the supernatural. I was afraid of whatever I had brushed up against in the fog, but too drawn by the dark mysteries to repent of them wholesale; so I walked an impossible tight-rope of secularism between the arching skies and the seductive abyss. Never had I seen more plainly that the numinous world glimmers just inches below the surface of everything we touch in daily life. To eat a sandwich is to exercise man's stewardship of the earth. To tie a shoelace is to re-learn the first lesson of the Tree of Knowledge. Simply to raise a hand is to behold the magical power of the human will to control material objects.

By Saturday I couldn't keep it up any longer. I sat alone in my room and turned around inside myself to examine my chasm. It seemed to pulsate with energies—as if to descend would charge my being with ineluctable power. It seemed to susurrate with somber voices. As I tarried near the edge, I felt the same cold heat I had felt in the woods, moving through my body like a salty black delirium. Telling myself it was only for research, I dug up a copy of Cromwell's "Invocation"—a poem exemplifying the virus-technique of his school by actually weaving demonic prayers into the text. I won't quote it here.

I held it in my hand without looking at it for a long time. My head grew lighter, and a great desire to read the words came over me. Faintly, I could hear the cries of my spirit and conscience, but the wordless babble of the chasm-voices all but drowned them. A calmer voice, that of reason, pointed out that evil only looked appealing from the outside, when it lavished its blandishments like the first free shot of heroin—once inside, I would lose the glamour of the dark as well as the joy of the light. Yet surely, another voice said equably, surely I had the courage for a single experiment? I glanced at the page in my hand, and the name of our Enemy sprang out at me. I writhed in my chair. *Read it. Just read it three times, as written. Power, knowledge, glory, and all the pleasures of the flesh.* Bullshit. Black lipstick and masturbatory fantasies. I could all but hear it in the room with my physical ears. *Read, it Joey.* I thought of Rose.

"Jesus," I breathed. The spell snapped.

Leaping to my feet, I tore the page into a dozen pieces, hurled them to the carpet, and jumped up and down on them. Then I grabbed my rosary and headed for the storage room in the basement, where I wouldn't be disturbed.

My plan was to stay awake praying all night and go to confession the next day; and I made it till about a quarter past four in the morning. At that point I decided to take a quick break—just for a few moments, to rest my eyes.

9: Fire

My eyes opened even as they closed and I stepped out into the hallway but it was different. The look and smell and feel of it were all the same but some new sense was operative in me at that moment and I experienced the physical world as spangles of poetry. Within the wall was soundless Lovelace: “Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.” Within the stairs was Langston Hughes: “Son, life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” The doors and floors and windows all manifested themselves to my strange new word-sense and it was like walking through the swirling verses of a larger work whose theme I could not yet perceive.

I walked the dim halls and met no sign of habitation. The rooms opened at a touch but all were empty. At length I made my way to the front door to see if any stirred outside. But as I crossed the little lobby I saw on my right and left two mirrors I had never seen before. I looked in one and saw myself with open palms and I looked in the other and saw myself with closed fists but between them in the lobby I stood with hands in pockets.

Myself with clenched fists gazed at me and did not speak but I could sense my words: *What has made our short sight long in us?* And I answered my riddle and replied: *The destined spear that bathed our eyes in water and blood.* And I nodded and handed me that ancient spearhead sacred and accursed. *To be saved we must first shed that blood by sin.*

Myself with open palms gazed at me and did not speak but I could sense my words: *What is the soul of the samurai?* And I answered thus: *His sword.* And my eyes were sorrowful and I handed me an ordinary ballpoint pen but it was snapped in two. *Our sword is broken.*

The door swung open and I stepped outside. Night lay heavy on the campus and none stirred. I began to walk. A snowy owl glided past me (“Hope is the thing with feathers”) and fluttered to the topmost branches of a pine (“Only God can make a tree”) as I trod the desolate paths beneath a lonely Shelley cloud and th’inconstant Shakespeare moon. My new percipience revealed mysterious metaphors in the world of matter through which my spirit moved. The wind was wind but also freedom. The stars were stars but also faith. In time’s fullness I came to the chapel where the doors stood wide.

There my word-sense peered through deeper and still deeper dimensions like sevenfold crystals more bewildering than opacity. In a statue of the Madonna and Child I saw the ultimate and absolute love operating through the ordinary relations of a family living out an ordinary life and I knew that every normal person I met was the Chosen One in whom the great plan must operate. In a painting of the deluged Ark I saw the power beyond time designing the properties of light and water at the very beginning of the universe in anticipation of the covenant that Noah would one day accept. In a stained glass Nativity I saw the twin virtues of sagacity and simplicity in the shepherds and the magi but I saw too the invisible peril of Herod behind them and the demons who also feasted on the first Christmas. I feared the complexity and the precariousness of it all. I feared especially to fail in my own role.

As I paced down the aisle toward the altar I became aware that someone was barring my way. I could not see or hear him and I somehow knew that I would not be able to touch him either. But he was there as a portcullis of meaning that my soul could not penetrate and I beheld the words of which he was composed: “The holy fire can be our own when we the gods betray.”

In my left hand was the pen which he had already broken as we dueled on the uttermost brink of my abyss. In my right was the bitter blade which could only help me if I was willing to plunge it into the one who loved me more than anyone else could ever do. I gazed past him to the huge crucifix at the altar but I could draw no closer to it. *Out of my way.*

Ah but you need me. Can there be good without evil?

As he spoke a cloud of mosquitoes surrounded the crucifix and pale bloated leeches came wriggling from the walls and bats perched on Pilate's INRI sign. *Can there be health without parasites? Get out of my way.*

You are no match for me, boy. There was an awful crack and the stained glass windows shattered. The pews tumbled. Across the floor just behind me a great precipice ripped itself open and the icons along the walls toppled into it and were lost. *You have no choice.* The wooden figure on the cross slowly raised its head and leered at me. *You never did.*

In that dark night my soul had no good guide. I could only cower as the murder-spirit forced itself into me like smoke. I lost all sense of this loyal body that has carried me so far. I lost my memories and wits and all that I have learned. I lost all gifts and even lost my name. Nothing of Joseph Hopkins lingered but the word-sense which—I had thought—was entirely new and extraneous. Yet it was that sense alone without referent in the void that perceived The Word now speaking in the darkness.

"Let there be light."

And there is light.

"Who are you, My son?"

Lord, I do not know.

"I will show you, but you must trust Me. The answer lies within the task that I have set for you."

I trust in You. But, Lord. . .

"What is it, child? Do not be afraid."

I have no weapon.

He smiles, and the smile is the fire that forged the galaxies. "Look down at your hands."

Continued on Page 66

Leaving Fiesole

By Daniel Fitzpatrick

Emma and I were very happy that April, especially so now that we'd come to Florence by way of Orvieto. The poppies were burning like eyes on their trembling stalks, and the wisteria had begun to blossom over Rome's vineyards, promising perfumed cascades on our return, but it was good to turn a moment from the waste of summer and to pay respects to Beatrice en route to Venice.

We were, I say, very happy, with a stratospheric happiness such as can only make for a certain unease. Nonetheless I insist that we were, yes, happy.

The second day in Florence, Pat and Kaylee had come over from Siena in the little blue car Pat was so proud of, and the four of us had done such things as elegant, cultured people were supposed to do in Florence. We had as reverently beheld a finger of Galileo as the cells of San Marco. Gazing up at the Annunciation, the famous one, Emma whispered Yeats, and not until "their eyes, their ancient, glittering eyes," had her own flicked over to Pat's and Kaylee's, who had watched her silently, smilingly, and she flashed back now their smile to them and finished, "are gay." In a corridor came another Annunciation, simpler, with the angel upright, clothed as in Pietra di Assisi, the long scythe of its wing cutting across the figure of Peter Martyr and the sole ornaments of Mary's cell, the capitals of its columns. As the rest of us eased on in loose array, I looked back to see Kaylee fixed before it, her head tilted back, her straight wheat-colored hair like a plumb line to the arch of her back, with one hand on her hip and the other, with the guide book, resting a moment against her breast. Her feet were aligned, heel to toe, like a dancer's, and she turned and took up my gaze and smiled again, not now in the echo of shared knowing of knowledge of Emma's remembered lines, but in the dim verdure of the unknowable. She looked back to the fresco, and her smile remained, but it seemed less certain, less sure even of what smiling itself should mean. Then she turned and walked past me, the heels of her black pumps tapping gently like a bird against a distant pane.

Pat was on his knees in a cell with his grey-black herringbone newsboy cap in his hands. I thought his kneeling was a joke until I looked at Emma to share a silent laugh and saw the concern in her tilted gaze. I stepped beside him and paused, knees barely bent, and looked again at Emma over my shoulder and saw her shake her head faintly and wave a hand side to side. I put a hand on Pat's shoulder and felt a tremor tick through him and stepped back again to watch Christ's mockery on the wall, to let my eyes drift in endless cycles from the shrouded face to the spitting lout doffing falsely his rustic cap through the splay of disembodied hands at their stripping and scourging and crowning and back again to the face half-glimpsed through gauze as of death clothes.

In the cloister, Kaylee and Emma stood, eyes shut, faces raised like gifts to the sun, while in the shade Pat stared at his hands, the right and then the left, peering beneath the brim of his cap through loose locks of hair as he turned them over and back.

“My hands,” he said. “Was there ever a thing so fretful as these hands.”

“There are other hands in that picture, Pat,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, that’s it, of course. Other hands. Other.”

I watched his hands on the wheel from the back seat where I sat with Kaylee as he steered us alongside the river and then up through the eastern side of the city for Fiesole. They passed in and out of the light as the neat-stitched leather of the wheel turned and turned again and as they came each to aid Pat in his running discourse on Cacciaguuda and the sad incommodity of home and the sweetness behind Dante’s furor.

“He longs to be the lamb amid the fold forever,” he said, and his right hand turned as if to cup the sun that flooded down the brink of a building.

“Vorrei e non vorrei,” Kaylee sang low in her clear mezzo-soprano.

“A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,” intoned Emma.

“Precisely, cara, precisamente.”

“Vieni, mio bel diletto,” I answered Kaylee, leaning toward her slightly, smiling, smoothing my hand across the seat between us before leaning away, looking out at the stone pines shearing off their rounds of shade.

“How much Dante craved fame and, in the craving, gave it to all those he translated to the living and the dead. The truly living,” he said. “The truly dead,” tilting the level palm of his right hand slightly up, slightly down.

“And yet who was more jealous?” Emma said.

Kaylee’s hand clasped mine like a child’s and I held it. Looking across, I watched her take the impression of the passing land, her left hand silled over her eyes keeping back the cascade of the noontide and her sun-gold hair.

“Innocente amor,” she said, half musically.

“Who, who indeed,” said Pat.

“Andiam!” sang Emma.

“Andiam!”

“Andiam!”

And we sang in turn like the untutored passerines through the mystic solitude of the cypresses as we came to Fiesole. And Emma rolled her window down and sang into the wind that rushed the scent of her across my face and I watched her in the side view mirror and ached for the sweet cauter of it all.

At an inn along the road Pat pulled aside. In the doorway vined over in roses and flanked by caryatids stood, with wicker basket in hand, a white-gloved waiter who stepped neatly around the front of the car, presented the bas-

ket to Pat through the window, bowed, and waited for the car to pass on before processing between the caryatids, below the roses, into the dark. We were off again, spinning through scene on scene of empyrean prettiness till on a low ridge Pat parked and we stepped into the fragrant silence and spread a blanket in the grass and sat with the Duomo jewelizing the distant hills beyond the Arno.

There was a dark red, almost blue, wine in four stoppered half liter glass bottles nested in the bottom of the basket with four small loaves of bread and blood oranges and a wheel of pecorino and a cured salami with peppercorns sliced already into quarter-inch rounds. And the wine enameled our tongues, and we told each other tales from Boccaccio and then pretended we each were Leopold Bloom, so attuned to the earth of things and the incensual musk of all selves, and we spun up passages from *Sweets of Sin* for the poor Penelope Bloom of every soul and laughed and laughed as the Sun unblinking blazed his adumbrations down the delicatessen of the cosmos.

I had leaned a while on my elbow and now lay back in the grass and fell asleep. I awoke looking right, over the blanket and the lowland below us to the cathedral. Pat, kneeling, faced away from me, bending over Kaylee. On one side of him she leaned back, resting on her elbows, and on the other stretched the long golden pallor of her legs. Like honey, I thought, like the honey of Dante's angels rushing round the rose of the empyrean. Pat shifted a little and I saw now on Kaylee's thigh a long strip of the pecorino which he sliced, softly, with the cheese knife, the silver blade pressing the pallor of her skin.

She laughed and said, See, it's the same, and put a finger to one of the slices. He bent and mouthed it from her skin and bent still kissing the leg, and she laughed again and leaned back lifting her face to the sun, closing her eyes and opening them, letting her gaze drift over till she met mine and blushed and looked up again and laughed as he ate and kissed and was quiet. I did not see Emma. And I shut my eyes.

"Andiam! Andiam!" came Emma's voice from beyond me, above me, and I sat and turned and saw her coming along the ridge, kicking her feet out in slow steps with a circlet of poppies in her auburn hair. She came to me and took the flowers from her hair and set them in mine and walked on toward the car.

Come on, sweet slugs, come on now, "Andiam!" she sang as she trod slowly through the sweet grass back to the car. And we rose, and Pat with a magician's speed spirited up the blanket and basket and we were off again, leaving the wicker between the caryatids and entering the city again as the shadows deepened and sped.

We walked about the city till dark fell, crossing arm in arm the palazzi and the bridges. The poppies burned in my hair until a passing bus blew them into the gutter. I reached for them but Emma pulled me along and said, "So let it be written."

There seemed to be among us a need to keep afoot. After the Accademia, briefly, we kept up our strolling, stopping only for pizza, which we ate as we came into the Piazza della Signoria. The last of the light blended with the street lamps against the Torre di Arnolfo, and at last we sat upon the stones and watched the flux of the crowds and said nothing to each other. A bird winged across the piazza, flashing blackly through the lights as they rose gauzily against the night. Emma stood and walked toward the tower, and we followed her into the shadows of the streets, and she did not look back at us, but seemed to take a way foreordained and known to her in the way of the blood that beats animals back to the place of their birth. She passed the Badia and turned down the Via Dante, up the Via dei Cerchi and onto the Corso where, on the steps of Santa Margherita, a sign gave notice of an organ concert about to begin. We entered, chinked coins in a black box, and sat in the candled darkness.

From the first breath of Bach's Toccata I felt the terror rising over me, and I locked my gaze on a candle to the right of the tabernacle, and it seemed that the darkness was swallowing it, eating slowly at the still brilliance of the flame. Again and again I was abused of this allusion as the bellows broke over me in scalp-prickling waves. Emma's hand took mine. I looked down at it, was astonished in the dim fantasia by the strangeness of those shapes intertwined atop my knee. Emma's head was down, her head resting in her other hand, her hair tinged red with candle flame falling on either side of her face.

Beyond her, Kaylee, forward-leaning, turned as the fugue concluded and, looking past Pat, caught my eye and mouthed her awe. Flame played on the rims of Pat's glasses, and his arms were folded across his chest, his legs crossed at the knees, his right foot kicking faintly in the dark.

When the final notes of Franck died and the quivering of the air stilled as if a spirit had receded into the dark bones of the church, we sat for several minutes in silence, heads bowed, as the rest of the church emptied. Pat genuflected, and he slotted five euro into the black box. I left the candles unconsumed and resumed the easy, populous street. Pat and Kaylee and I stepped down and stood in a circle and spoke briefly of our fear and our wonder that we should have been there. Kaylee turned and called to Emma, "How did you know?"

Emma was on the top step still, still looking into the open door of the church, her head down slightly as if listening for something half-forgotten.

"Emma," said Pat, "dear Emma, come to Ferrara. We'll show you organ fit to freeze your blood."

Still she did not turn. I left the others and stepped up beside her. She did not look over, and I spoke her name and reached out and touched her hand. She drew it back as if bitten, looked at it, and, trembling, looked up at me.

"No," she said. "No, I'm sorry."

I laughed a little in the fear which now came up around me not at the wing beat of sublimity but in the sheer of what was not.

"Emma," I said.

"No," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She seemed to gather herself, trembling and growing still, and she stepped closer and took my hands and said, "You did make me happy. You did."

And she turned away and walked down the steps onto the Corso and was gone, and the darkness of the door of the church loomed beside me in silence.

Daniel Fitzpatrick is the author of two novels, two poetry collections, and Restoring the Lord's Day: How Reclaiming Sunday Can Revive Our Human Nature. He is the editor of Joie de Vivre: A Journal of Art, Culture, and Letters for South Louisiana. He lives in New Orleans with his wife and four children.

JUDGEMENT DAY

By C.S. Crane

From his post as the designated family greeter, Eddie Millhouse, Jr. tried to locate his father amidst the milling crowd of visitors in Viewing Room B, while murmuring “Thank you for coming” and “Nice to see you” into the faces of people he’d never seen before in his life. His father, Edward Millhouse, Sr., had never been much good at staying in one spot for long, which largely accounted for the fact that his son felt only slightly closer to his father than to the random strangers with whom he’d been shaking hands for the past two days. Nonetheless, it seemed self-evident to Eddie Millhouse, Jr. that at a time like this, it was not unreasonable to expect that a husband plant himself close by his wife’s casket and not continually flit off like a besotted hummingbird.

His father was sixty-three, short-ish and balding, but an elegant and meticulous dresser, a smooth talker, an engaging extrovert, and a complete moron. He was immature, emotionally incontinent, and morbidly insecure. In short, the perfect advertising guy. Which explained how such a wormy personality could have risen to the position of Managing Partner and head of Global Client Service for the largest multinational client of one of the largest multinational advertising agencies in New York. Most of the people Eddie Jr. had spent the last two days mumbling into the faces of were his father’s cronies. He knew little about the advertising world and cared even less but he estimated there had to be more people working at the firm of Fanning, Feldstein, Crowell and Beckwith than lived in some of the countries it operated in. And it was while opening the FFCB office in one of them, the former Soviet Republic of Moldova, that his father had been enchanted (Eddie Jr. preferred the term brainwashed) by a twelve-year-old orphan named Svetlana. Six weeks later he was on his way home with a “pretty present” for his wife, and for the last seven years, through the worst of his mother’s illness and eventual decline, this blonde and ever more voluptuously developing Rasputina had lived in their house as Mrs. Millhouse’s nurse-companion. Fortunately, it was shortly after Svetlana’s arrival that Eddie Jr. exchanged a bedroom at the family’s Connecticut manse for a dorm room at Skidmore and was spared the daily spectacle of a fifty-six year-old soon-to-be-widower in panting pursuit of a couple of large gray-green Moldovan eyes and even larger Moldovan breasts, while his poor mother gurgled in her wheelchair, sucking air into her lungs through tubes. This was the now nineteen-year-old Svetlana his father had been flitting around for two days—buzzing over here to be near her, fluttering over there to get a glimpse of her—when he should have been anchored respectfully, and very preferably mournfully, at the head of his wife’s \$15,000 gold-bronze casket.

At just that moment, however, Eddie Jr. realized that his outstretched hand had been grasped by a tall white-haired man with the august bearing of a senator. Instinctively, Eddie Jr. flinched, and his hand was released.

“I’m sorry,” the tall man said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. It was there for the taking.”

“Pardon me?”

“Your hand.”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. Thank you for coming.”

On his arm, the man sported a woman twenty years younger than himself. It was beyond Eddie Jr.’s powers of concentration to keep his eyes affixed on the man’s face and not allow them to stumble like a couple of drunken sailors smack into the woman’s generous cleavage. Eddie Jr. flushed hot pink.

“You must be Ed’s son,” the man said. The fine, tight skin around his mouth crinkled almost audibly in a knowing smile.

“Yes,” Eddie Jr. said. “Yes. That’s right. Edward Millhouse, Jr. Do you work with my father?”

“No, no,” the man chuckled. “No, I’m helping Ed with his little legal problems. Arthur Spender.” He held out his hand, this time with a delicate tilt of his head to alert Eddie Jr. of its approach. The hand was so white and immaculately manicured it might have been sculpted by Michaelangelo.

“Oh,” Eddie Jr. said, taking the hand. “Legal problems. Right. His legal problems. Well, that’s great. Thank you for coming anyway.”

The man’s left eyebrow cocked in mild surprise and the couple swished off into the throng.

Legal problems? What’s the moron gotten himself into now, Eddie Jr. thought as he touched the pocket of his suit jacket. His return airline ticket was there. Its ready-to-go crispness reassured him, as did the knowledge that his bag was already packed and waiting for him in the rental car, so that immediately after the interment he could make his escape. The prospect cheered him no end. He even found he could smile as he envisioned Ed Sr. kneeling before the desk of Arthur Spender, pleading for help.

“Hey. How’s it going,” his father’s voice asked from behind him. Eddie Jr. turned, the smile still lingering on his face. “Quite a turnout, huh? Amazing.” The natty little man wore a satisfied grin as he surveyed the scene like the guest of honor at an awards ceremony.

“Yeah. Amazing,” Eddie Jr. said. It annoyed him when he realized he was still smiling but it took a conscious effort to wipe the silly thing off his face. Such was his father’s effect on him. “Listen. You think you could pretend to be in mourning for a couple of minutes before they take Mom away?”

“What’re you talking about? I’m in mourning. But, geez Eddie, it’s not nice to see your Mom like that. Why do you want to make me feel guilty all the time?”

“You should feel guilty, chasing Svetlana all over the place. In front of all these people.”

“I’m not chasing her around. God, I always feel like a kid around you, you know that? And I’m your Father!”

“Then quit acting like a kid and do your duty.”

“Ok, Eddie, OK. By the way, you haven’t seen her anywhere have you?”

“No.”

“Well it’s just that I can’t find her.”

Eddie Jr. could tell that his father was genuinely worried and when he was worried he always became petulant. “And besides, I have to tell you, its boring standing there like a sentry.”

“God.”

“Well it is!”

Eddie Jr. turned on his heel, reached for his cigarettes, walked out through the vestibule and left the building in disgust. Lighting up, he began to wonder why he didn't just walk over to the rental car and drive away. After all, it wasn't as if his mother would know the difference. His father would probably sigh with relief. But no sooner had the thought formed in his mind than a stab of guilt pierced his solar plexus. If his father was a moron, he was at least an innocent moron. It was impossible to believe that Ed Sr., despite the tangle of personality disorders his son could add up on the fingers of six hands, would ever say or do anything out of meanness of heart. Relief that his son had skipped out on him was, therefore, precisely the last thing Ed Sr. would feel. Rather, betrayal, deep, dark and crushing.

The problem was, of course, that *everything with his father was an exaggeration. As, for instance, the old man's overzealousness at his arrival two days earlier. It would have been positively comical if it hadn't seemed, to Eddie Jr., so grossly inappropriate.*

"Good God, look who it is!" Ed Sr.'s voice had boomed in the empty foyer as Eddie Jr. dropped his bags. You'd have thought he was coming home for Christmas, not his Mother's funeral. "Look at you, wouldya?" Ed Sr. beamed, taking a step back in appraisal, his arms spread wide. He was attired in a crisp blue \$300 dress shirt with French cuffs, elegant black wool slacks with a crease as sharp as a diamond-edged blade, and Armani slippers with a gold filigree design on the upper. "What a vision! God, it's good to see you!" and he'd clamped onto him the way children do when presented with stuffed animals bigger than themselves.

"Dad! Damn!" Eddie Jr. had protested into his father's exposed neck. "Ok. Ok. I'm glad to see you too. Now get off me, please," he'd demanded, pushing him away and sounding to himself as if he were talking to a child or a puppy.

Ed Sr. had released him and taken a step back, again appraising him with a wide smile.

"God, though, Ed. You look great. No kidding. How've you been?"

"Dad, stop. Do I need to remind you why I'm here?"

"No, no," his father had said, the big bright beam of his smile holding steady, but leaking wattage. "Good of you to come."

"Good of me to come?" Eddie Jr. had shot at him. "Like I wouldn't come to my own mother's funeral?"

"Geez, Eddie, I didn't mean that," his father had said, the smile dimming considerably. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just so damn glad to see you, I sound like an idiot. I do that pretty good, don't I?"

"What?"

"Sound like an idiot."

"You're a genius at it."

Eddie Jr. had picked up his bags and started up the stairs toward his old room. He was thankful that, for the next hour or so anyway, he could occupy himself with the private ritual of arrival and settling in, out of sight and hearing of his father.

"Where's Lana?" he had asked over his shoulder as he ascended.

"Oh. She's around. Somewhere."

Eddie Jr. had stopped halfway up the stairs and turned around. Looking down at Ed Sr., he'd seen that the big smile had gone dark, as if Svetlana's name had surged through his wiring and tripped a circuit breaker. His father had stood there shuffling his feet, his balding head bowed, his eyes peaking up at him evasively. Eddie Jr. had thought he looked exactly like a guilty teen-ager whose parents return to find a girl stashed in his bedroom. A small twitch of derision had appeared at the corner of his mouth. Eddie Jr. had turned away shaking his head and climbed the last few stairs to the landing.

"....uh...Ed?" his father's voice had crept up behind him.

"Yeah?"

"You won't bother her, will you--I mean, you won't talk to her--I mean, shit, she's in a kind of a state, so

could you try not to, you know...?”

Eddie Jr. had dropped his bags deliberately and leaned over the banister. “No, Dad. I don’t know. Are you afraid I’m going to interrogate her about what’s been going on between you two? All this time Mom’s been sick? Don’t worry. Believe me, the less I know the better.” And with that, he had gathered up his bags, entered his room and shut the door on his father.

In the car the next morning on the way to the funeral home, Eddie Jr. had been seated in front with his father while Svetlana sat in back. She had not appeared for dinner the night before, so this had been the first time Eddie Jr. had seen her since his last visit. He had had to admit, taking his father’s side unwillingly, that she could be a temptation to any man. Her hair was long, straight and blond. Her gray-green Moldavan eyes looked at you from between the longest lashes he’d ever seen on a woman. She was not tall, perhaps five foot-five or -six, but her legs were longer than her torso and perfectly formed. As was the rest of her. Though she was nineteen, it was still possible to see the girl she had been when she first arrived, chubbier then, but even now retaining a softness around her upper arms, waist and breasts that fairly radiated sexuality like an exotic perfume.

Looking out the window absently as his father had yanked and prodded the Benz down the highway, Eddie Jr. had imagined he could actually smell the sex the two of them had been having for who knew how long. It had brought a crimped smile to his face, a knowing, superior smile, hardened with equal parts guilt and disgust, a smile preserved in formaldehyde.

Beside him, his father had sniffed. Eddie Jr. had glanced at him and seen a tear well up in the corner of his eye.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” he’d heard his father say. It had seemed he was talking to himself. He might not even have realized he’d spoken the words aloud. From the back seat, Svetlana had leaned forward and had put her hand gently on his shoulder. Eddie Jr. had noticed that she was crying too.

Suddenly he’d been overcome by a wave of nausea.

He flicked away his cigarette and, instead of re-entering the funeral home, wandered along the front of the building. He remembered that yesterday afternoon, when they’d pulled into the parking lot for the first set of visiting hours, he’d noticed a kind of bower tucked into a corner of the funeral home’s property. It seemed pleasant and private, marked by a trellis covered with roses and fitted out inside with white metal chairs surrounding a small fountain. He made for it now.

As he ducked under the trellis, he was surprised to find Svetlana sitting on one of the white chairs, her head down, a nosegay of damp tissues gripped in her lap. She looked up as he entered and he saw that her eyes and nose were red.

“Oh, Eddie,” she sighed. “Poor Mother. Poor, poor Mother.” And tears streamed out of her large, gray-green Moldavan eyes.

Eddie Jr. watched her. He felt uncomfortable, not so much because she was crying but because he wasn’t, and hadn’t, and didn’t even feel the need to. The thought crossed his mind that Svetlana loved his mother more than he did. Or, perhaps it was merely that she’d spent so much more time with her and missed her more than a son who never wanted to spend time with a mother who could hardly speak and probably didn’t even recognize him anyway. “How can you live with such an idiot,” he’d asked his mother one day when he was thirteen, having attained to a state of intellectual sophistication of which he was inordinately proud. She was a small woman and even now he had to look down at her.

“Don’t call your father an idiot, Edward,” she’d said. Her hands were beautiful, slim and white with long fingers and narrow, slender nails. She’d held one up to him as a warning and a gentle reproach.

“But good God, I mean honestly. Has he always been like this? Or do you just finally see these things when

you reach puberty?" Eddie Jr. had recently begun to doubt her intellectual capacity and had taken to addressing her in the tones of an aggrieved professor.

"I won't have you talking that way about your father. You're not half so smart as you think you are, young man," she said, smiling at him.

"The weird thing is, you don't see it," he'd said, pretending he hadn't heard the only words that, thus far, had really penetrated.

"OK, Edward, tell me," she'd said, taking a seat at the kitchen island. "What is it that I don't see." Her eyes smiled at him but her mouth had gone serious.

"Shit, Mom, I mean..."

"We can have this little chat if you insist," she'd interrupted him, both hands raised toward him, palms out, "but not if you intend to use such language."

He'd almost apologized but caught himself. "He just makes me so, I don't know, crazy! I know you're not going to like to hear this, but he embarrasses me. All his clowning around. It's degrading."

"Well, I think it's sweet." She patted her hair, which was short, curly, and blond, as if thinking of her husband made her feel girlish.

"It isn't sweet, Mom," Eddie Jr. had barked at her. "It's absurd. He tries so hard to get along with everybody."

"Yes, he does."

"He puts on this big act all the time. Like nobody would pay attention to him if he didn't entertain them. Why can't he just be himself?"

"But, Edward, that *is him*. *That's your father*."

The inanity of it had staggered him. "No it isn't! No it isn't! I'd like to meet the real him before I die."

"Eddie. Dear. The very thing that drives you crazy is why I married him. Maybe you don't love him enough, did you ever think of that? So you don't really know him at all. I think in your heart you know that's the reason he drives you crazy."

More inanity. He'd wished then that he'd never begun the conversation but there was to be no turning back that day. He'd pressed his attack, coming at her with what he considered the killing blow.

"So you're telling me you love him. Just the way he is. And you don't want him to change, even a little bit."

"That's what I'm telling you."

"But he's...he's...he's a *joke*!"

"You don't mean that."

"Yes I do!"

"He's not a joke, Edward. He's your father."

"So just because he's my father, I'm supposed to love him? That's it? That's your reasoning? Unbelievable."

"Yes, Edward. That's what families are for, dear. The hardest people to love are the ones closest to you."

"Ah hah! So you admit he's hard to love. Hard for *you to love*."

"No, I mean you've been given a great gift in the father you have."

"Oh, this is pointless. If you can love somebody like that, how can you possibly love me?"

"Why Edward, because you're his son. And mine."

Through the trellis work, Eddie, Jr caught sight of the hearse and several Lincoln town cars gliding up the drive toward the funeral home entrance.

"C'mon. We better go."

He followed Svetlana out of the bower. As they came around the corner of the building, the doors of the funeral home opened wide and the gurney supporting his mother's casket was rolled out by four attendants. Ed Sr. followed closely behind, the crowd of mourners leaking through after him. The driver of the Lincoln stood holding the

back door open and motioned them inside. Eddie Jr. made a bee-line for the jump seat so he wouldn't have to sit next to the two of them. Eddie, Sr., always the gentleman, guided Svetlana into the car's back seat. And then he closed the door on them. Through the tinted glass, Eddie, Jr. saw his shadow pass along the side of the car and out of sight. He turned to Svetlana.

"He will not ride with us. It is his idea," Svetlana said.

"He's just chicken."

"What is chicken?"

"Afraid. He's afraid of me."

"Yes. Yes he is, Eddie. Your father is very afraid of you."

"Pathetic."

"No, Eddie. Do not be mean. This is how he does things. Sideways. You know sideways? Not straight--*zoom*, " and she *chopped her hand forward*. "More, " and she *waved her hand up and down*. "Like that, you know?"

"So what's the big idea this time?"

Svetlana sniffed and lowered her head. "She was like my own Mother, back home."

"What?" Eddie Jr. blinked. "Wait. All this time I thought you were an orphan."

"No." Svetlana blew her nose. "No orphan."

Eddie Jr. pondered this news in silence. Why was he not surprised? His father had lied. What a revelation!

"Oh, Eddie, what will I do now?" she said. "I am so alone."

"Lana, you're not alone. My father will take care of you, certainly. After all, he brought you here. He won't just abandon you."

"Mr. Eddie is a good man. But he has no choice."

"Of course he has a choice. He will take care of you. Believe me."

"No. He will give me back."

"What do you mean?"

"To my Mother in Moldava. He will give me back to her. I know."

"But he---" Eddie Jr. grimaced as he said it, "---loves you, Lana. I mean, like a daughter."

"Yes, I know. Mr. Eddie is a good man. But he *will give me back*."

"He can't do that. You're a citizen, aren't you? You can't just send citizens off to foreign countries against their will."

Her eyes were burning. "I am no citizen. I have visa only. I am nothing. I am property. He paid for me, Eddie. He must send me back."

Eddie Jr. tried to swallow but his throat was suddenly dry. "He...he *bought you*?"

"From my Mother, yes," Svetlana said and blew her nose. "But she was very poor then. Her family disowned her for her great sin of having baby with Chechen man. Me. He gave her money *to live*."

"Oh my God," Eddie Jr. said.

"Yes. You are right. Exactly." She began to sob uncontrollably. "He has been--so kind to me--all these years."

"But for God's sake, you must know *why he's been so kind*! C'mon, Lana, *it's not kindness*. It's, you know, *lust*."

"Stop it, Eddie! How dare you say such a thing. You, his son!"

"But, but--"

"No but! Mr. Eddie loves me as a daughter, as you say yourself."

"Oh, please, Lana! We both know what has been going on here for years. He drools over you shamelessly. You can't expect me to believe--"

"You are wrong, Eddie. Very, very wrong. You should apologize to your poor father. He loves me. He has never touched me. No, don't smile like that, Eddie. It's ugly."

"I wasn't smiling," Eddie Jr. said morosely. He fell back into his chair. "Holy shit, Lana. You're telling me my

father is a trafficker in human beings.”

“Oh Eddie, you don’t know your father even a little bit. He never wanted you or your mother to know the truth because he was afraid you would think that. And, if people knew, he would have to send me back.”

“I think I know him pretty damn well. And the more I’m finding out about him the less I like him.”

“Listen to me Eddie. You don’t understand. For your father’s sake, I will tell you. This is why he is not riding with us. Because he wants you to know and he is afraid of you, your judgement of him.” She pushed her hair away from her face and leveled her gray-green eyes at him.

“Why do you think my Mother would do such a thing, sell her own daughter?” she asked in a low voice that was equal parts instruction and accusation. “She must be terrible person. This is what you must think. She did it to protect *me*. From this man. This man she has now married. He wanted to marry me when I was twelve and she refused him. Her family was very angry. She sent me away to save me from him. Your father knows this man. He is big in Moldava business world. He is the client of your father’s agency in Moldava. Somehow, this man discovers what Mr. Eddie has done and he makes it impossible for my Mother’s family to do business unless she marry him and bring me back. All the money is gone and she is poor again so she agrees. He threatens Mr. Eddie too. Send Svetlana back or lose biggest client of agency and become international criminal for child trafficking. This he threatens your father with. Now do you see?”

“When did all this happen?” Eddie Jr. asked.

“Two days. Three days. He receive letter from my Mother. Your poor father, he is very frightened.”

So that’s what Arthur Spender must have meant when he’d said he was helping Ed Sr. with his ‘little legal problems’.

“Goddamn you,” he muttered into his Father’s ear as he and Svetlana stepped out of their Lincoln. Ed, Sr. was there waiting for them and now he reached for Svetlana who flew into his arms. If he heard his son’s curse, he didn’t show it or even acknowledge Eddie, Jr.

“So our little Svetlana isn’t an orphan after all.”

With an aching tenderness his father pulled away from Svetlana to stand by himself on the path, a step or two in front of Eddie, Jr., as if he wished to redirect his son’s poisonous attention away from the girl.

Svetlana said. “I told him everything.”

His father’s head began to nod, up and down, up and down.

Eddie Jr.’s eyes burned into the balding, bobbing head.

“Look at the mess you’ve made,” he said with all the bitterness he could summon. But his father’s idiotic nodding only became more pronounced. Svetlana rested her head on the older man’s shoulder and the nodding stopped. Ed Sr. pulled a handkerchief from his inside pocket and blew his nose.

“Please, Eddie,” Svetlana begged him. “Don’t be mean.”

Eddie Jr. could not bear to look at them, even out of the corner of his eye. He turned and pounded to the grave site. Mourners moved aside to let him approach the coffin, poised on its green canvas straps, set to drop into the hole that would own her now. This is what her love had brought him to, frigid-souled and tearless at his own mother’s grave.

He reached inside his jacket for the ticket. It felt crisp and stiff, ready to go, its small acreage planted with all the hope he had left.

He turned his back on her and walked away.

C.S. Crane has dreamed of being a writer since he was 15 years old, inspired by a Jesuit priest who taught English at his Catholic boy’s high school in Rochester, NY. Now living and writing in Pittsford, NY, he dreams of his first novel finding a publisher.

THE WAY OF THE PEN

By Jamey Toner

Part IV

10: Sacramentalists

Again my eyes came open. I was sitting cross-legged in the corner with my back propped against the wall. My hands, which had been clutching perilous strength and knowledge, were now both clasping the silver chain that bound a knight to his Lady. I felt a profound sense of unworthiness for the mission I had agreed to undertake, and simultaneously a peaceful certainty that to persevere nonetheless was precisely the way to grow worthier. I glanced at my watch; it was ten minutes till eight. “The spirits did it all in one night,” I said, and found myself smiling.

After going to Confession and attending Mass, I went back to my room and woke Lee up and hugged him. His observation at the time was, “Hell’reyadoin?” I tucked him back in and went out into the wide campus. I tracked down Matt and hugged him, and he laughed and made me do a shot of rye with him (at 9:30 in the morning). I found Emeth in the cafeteria and hugged him, and he gave me an affectionate head-butt. I even hugged Chad Banks, and he slugged me right in the jaw. But he threw his punches from the shoulder, not the hips, and even the youngest of the Crusoes had hit me harder than that. I went skipping away to look for Rose.

I found her in the library; but I didn’t quite dare to touch her. She was sitting in a sunbeam, and I swear the floodlit dust motes made a halo round her head. I felt like some grubby pygmy brought before an angel-queen. But when she saw me, she got up and bounced right over her table as merrily as a wood-sprite, and it hit me that I was putting her on a pedestal that she would never have wanted. Also, I supposed, it didn’t make much sense to feel undeserving of love from a fellow mortal but yet be willing to accept it from God Himself.

“Hi, Joey!” she said in a loud library-whisper, and smiled like the dawn.

“Hey, Rose. I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Oh, no. I’m just doing some preliminary research on North American cardinals for. . . for my. . . You know—you look different somehow.”

“I had a long night. You want to get some coffee?”

“Absolutely.”

Rose was tougher than I where coffee was concerned: she took hers black as the heart of midnight on the winter solstice in the North Pole. I usually added cream first and then stirred it with the flowing stream of sugar. Cradling our cups, we sought out a table in the back of the caf. “So,” she said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Rose,” I said, and paused. It came home to me just how much I loved that name. Rose. I supposed I would’ve felt the same about any name, as long as it was hers.

“Joey, are you okay? —Actually, scratch that. You’re clearly okay. In fact, I think you’re glowing.”

“Yeah, well, He lets us fall so we can get back up stronger.”

“True. Just remember that our sins add to His sufferings on the Cross.”

“I know. That’s why we’ve gotta make Him proud. Rose, I’ve got an idea.”

She took a sip of coffee. "Break it to me gently."

"I'm serious. It's about my little war with Cromwell."

"Oh?"

"I finally realized I can't do this by myself. But there's no reason I should have to. We've got a whole university full of smart, good-hearted people here. I think the best way to fight Cromwell's school of poetry is to found a new school of our own."

"That's pretty ambitious."

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?" I sucked down some of my pale, sugary brew. "And I don't want just poets. I want a whole school of art. We'll get Matt to write music and Emeth to paint. And—well—I thought maybe. . ."

She smiled. "You want a dancer in the group?"

"I want you in the group."

"I wouldn't miss it. Do we have a name?"

"Um. . . no. Not yet. Unless you want to be a part of the Joey Jambalaya."

"Let's keep working on that. Have you talked to the others?"

I shook my head. "I just thought of it this morning. I was—I guess I was kind of hoping you'd tell me I wasn't crazy."

She reached across the table and laced her fingers through mine. "You're not crazy."

And so, I set about harmonizing our tiny little part in God's symphony as best I could. I proposed the idea to our friends and to Dr. Danvers, and they proposed it to other students of their acquaintance around the school. I also wrote to Sean at ND, Sylvia at UD, and my old friend Danielle from Claviger's class, to see if they could stir up interest at their schools. Might as well think big. By early December we had a dozen solid members at Athanasius and I was getting interested emails from a score of others around the country. Lee designed us a rudimentary website and Emeth made us a logo: the Earth seen from space and lit from above by the white and red rays of purity and passion. It was Danielle who suggested the name that was to become our banner and shibboleth—the Sacramentalist school.

"Now that *that's* settled," she wrote to me shortly afterwards, "I think we need a manifesto. That's your department, boy wonder."

She was right. I went back to my spot in the basement armed with rosary and pen, and as I sat down to commence the agonizing process of creation, the most extraordinary thing happened. After all the anger and doubt, all the endless nights of pushing myself past my limits, and all the manufactured garbage I'd forced out and destroyed, I found myself sitting down in a state of relaxation and trust—and the poem popped right out of me. I mean, really, it *popped* out, like spark from a generator; I was almost surprised it didn't short out the lights in the basement. By the time I got a piece of paper ready, it was more like unrolling a scroll than choosing the proper words. And wouldn't you know?—the damn thing turned out to be a sonnet.

*A shepherd's crook, twin rings, oil, water, wine:
The ashen vessels of the Spirit's grace,
Poured out on this good earth in God's embrace
For man, the angel-ape, the dust divine.
Yet all these gifts, though free if we but ask,
Are dearly bought by One Who bore the price—
Our strength flows from the sacred blood of Christ,
In Whom we shall accomplish every task.
So with that strength we shall not fall nor fail,
But bear His light to every straying soul;*

*And through His grace we shall convert the world,
This battlefield in sin and error hurled—
For every Christian plays a knightly role,
And every chalice is the Holy Grail.*

I read it through a couple of times and felt happy with it, so I typed it up and emailed it to my compatriots. The next day the Athanasius branch had a meeting in the caf, and the others agreed by general acclamation that the sonnet would be our little codex contra Cromwell. “You know,” said Emeth, “we ought to send this to that magazine in D.C. They got started for the same reason as us, right?—to fight the Unhallowed school?”

“That’s a really good idea,” Matt said.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised about it.”

“It’s a great idea,” I concurred. “The more people we can reach, the better. The autumn issue’s already come out, but I’ll bet Gibson can still squeeze this into the winter issue. Assuming he accepts it.”

“I’m sure he will,” Rose said. “I think it’s even better than your last two.”

“Thank you. I kind of feel like I’ve gone up a level, honestly.”

Emeth slapped the table. “That’s so dorky it circumnavigates the coolness spectrum and comes all the way back to awesome!”

“Other business,” I said briskly, imitating Sylvia back in our *Augury* days. “We need music for the website. Something catchy yet multi-layered, profound yet bracingly cheerful. Sort of a cross between the *Ode to Joy* and the *Ride of the Valkyries*. And, ideally, under two minutes long.”

Matt waved his hand. “No problem.”

The remainder of the semester was largely occupied with Sacramentalist logistics. I received word from Dr. Gibson saying that *Fire-folk* would indeed publish our argument, along with an endorsement of our website. Hope returned to me. My grades, which had yet again been slipping, yet again went back up. (I was definitely going to have to work on my consistency.) When Christmas break rolled around, Lee continued the little tradition that ended up lasting through our whole career at Athanasius by accepting my invitation to a Hopkins holiday.

It was good to see my family again—especially my favorite and only sister. She was sixteen now and blossoming into a startlingly pretty young lady. She seemed a trifle overly happy to see Lee again, so I mentioned his girlfriend a few times in my shrewd and subtle way. Eventually Noelle returned my communications on that virtually subliminal plane of consciousness by punching me in the stomach.

Lee and I met Sean at the I.C. once again, and a merry meeting it was. We returned to the many-legended Waffle House afterwards and talked of many things, including our new school of art. “I’ve drummed up a little interest around campus,” Sean said over his fat-slathered hash browns, “but we don’t have a lot of credentials.”

“Your pecs don’t count as credentials?”

“My pecs are the reason I said we don’t have a lot, as opposed to none.”

“Well,” I said casually, “that might all change when the next *Fire-folk* comes out.”

“You sly little he-minx! Do any more poetizin’ lately?”

“It is decidedly so.”

“Nice! Just let me and Lee-man know what us non-artsy types can do to help out.”

“We’ll think of something,” Lee said solemnly. “Even if I have to use my gigantic brain.”

“Pray it does not come to that, sir!”

“Keep spreadin’ the word,” I said. “The rest is up to the man upstairs.”

“Amen. Now let’s talk about chicks.”

This time, when 4 a.m. crept into the clocks, Sean came home with us. We had a loud and happy Yuletide morn, and Lee developed the random habit of yelling “Sniper!” and tackling Sean whenever he walked in front of a

window. (I think Sean was a bad influence on him.) Then we grabbed Noelle and headed back to Chateau Crusoe for lunch. Mama C. chided me for letting my dancing skills atrophy, and gave us all an impromptu lesson that turned into the rowdiest hoe-down this side of the Atlantic.

We passed the next few days playing video games, eating junk food, and helping Sean dispose of the Irish whiskey he had been victimized into bringing home from South Bend. With New Year's Eve came the end of my teenage years, and I made a firm resolution to reach new levels of whatever potential had been given to me. And as if in response to this new determination, a strange certitude was awaiting me when I awoke the next day. I knew beyond question that it was time for a reunion with a mentor. It was for me to see Dr. Claviger once more.

*

When I walked into his office, he looked supremely unsurprised. In fact, as he rose, I saw that he had a copy of the summer issue of *Fire-folk* open on his desk. "Joseph," he said, extending his hand. "I suspected you'd be stopping by."

"Dr. Claviger," I said, enduring his iron grip. "It's good to see you again."

"Likewise. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you." We sat.

"So. You've answered Cromwell's henchmen, but you have yet to address the man himself. And—" he turned his computer screen so I could see the online text of Cromwell's "To J. Hopkins" displayed on it "—he has already countered your counter. What's your next move?"

"I've started a rival group called the Sacramentalists, and we've formed cells in several universities. Also, the winter *Fire-folk* will be running this piece, our mission statement." I handed him a copy of my sonnet, and he read it through very slowly.

After awhile, he nodded and raised his eyes back to mine. "You've gotten better. I have no doubt that you'll get his attention with this. Is there a larger strategy?"

"I'm thinking about challenging him to single combat, poetically speaking. Now that the Sacramentalist website is up and running, we can settle this in a public forum. Three poems apiece, one per day from each of us—his response to our manifesto, then my counter, then his counter, and so on. Or, heck, we can do it on his website if he'd rather. Home field advantage and all that."

"And what do you believe this will accomplish?"

"Er—well—" I hadn't foreseen that particular question. "If I can beat him, it'll show people that there's a better path—that his answer to life isn't the only one, or the best one. God willing, it might even convince someone out there to give faith a chance."

"Joseph, you have an extremely strong sense of quest. It's a good quality, but remember that the quest is not about you. This is not a matter of you 'beating' Cromwell. It's a matter of you offering up your work and doing all to the glory of God, just as it would be if you were a farmer, a teacher, a soldier, a bricklayer—any vocation under Heaven. If He decides to save souls through your words, it's no business of yours. Your job is simply to write what you're told to. I say all this because you cannot win this battle if you enter it with pride in your heart."

Nothing like a thrashing from your old master to humble your ego a bit. "Yes sir, I—I see that."

"The key is to enter your opponent's arguments and refute them from within, on their own terms. Seen maturely from the outside, Cromwell's technique is nothing but a cheap trick; but the closer you get to his mindset, the more attractive it will appear. You have to face his attacks with the innocence of a dove and the wisdom of a serpent, and that means clinging to reason and belief in spite of the passions and emotions he'll stir within you. If you can conquer your own passions, they will give you tremendous strength—just as the winged Pegasus sprang from the slain Medusa. Aristotle tells us, after all, that logic by itself moves no one and must be assisted by emotion. But every-

thing in you must submit to death before it can be resurrected.”

I digested this. “So what you’re telling me is, parts of my soul are going to die in this fight.”

“You’ve chosen a powerful enemy. Just think of it as going through Purgatory while you’re still on Earth.”

“There’s no easier way?”

“Not for one of us. In this life, evil is ultimately stronger than good. We can only overcome it by accepting crucifixion. Thus we rise to immortality. Trust, Joseph. Humility is the root of all virtue, and virtue alone can guide you through the trial ahead.”

“That’s. . . that’s a pretty hefty secret. I think I was expecting some pointers about tightening up my rhyme schemes or something.”

He smiled. “Sorry—can’t help you there. You’re already a far better poet than I am. Now go your way, and Godspeed.”

11: Showdown

Fire-folk came out in late January, shortly after Lee and I got back to Athanasius. I gave it a week to circulate among our friends and foes, then logged into our website as an administrator and sent a very cordial email directly to the Unhallowed site, doing it all official-like. I set forth the terms of my personal challenge to Cromwell, leaving it to him to decide upon a suitable time and forum. I wasn’t sure if I should hold my breath even for a scornful repudiation, but I got a response the very next day.

“Dear sir,” it went, “my friend and colleague, Mr. Cromwell, is most pleased to accept the terms of your challenge. The match will be held upon the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday three weeks from the present date. Mr. Cromwell will begin the first round at eight o’clock in the morning, and you will have twelve hours to respond—the match concluding at 8:00 p.m. on Sunday evening. All six poems will be posted on both your website and our own, and any literary rights appertaining thereunto will be understood to accrue solely to the author of the work in question. May the best man win. Sincerely, Thomas Meriwether Jabroni.”

I was impressed. He’d outdone me in dueling etiquette, answering through a second. In retrospect, I wished I’d used the phrase “I demand satisfaction,” just for form’s sake. Oh well. Friday three weeks hence, I reflected—hmm, that was the first Friday of Lent. Interesting coincidence, if such it was.

The next three weeks were entirely nondescript; indeed, they have left so little impression on my memory that I might as well have slept through them. I remember Jabroni’s email like a torch in a dark land, and then a journey as by night through a region of dull scrubs, and then another light standing high above the blur: Ash Wednesday. I went to Mass, received the palm ash on my forehead, finished my classes for the day, and then went into the wilderness.

Sort of. It was only the woods a couple of miles from campus; but it was deep winter in the frozen north, which meant I’d have the isolation I would need. It also meant I’d be suffering some fairly significant discomfort for the next few days, at least compared to my comfy suburban normalcy, and I thought a little asceticism was an outstanding way to kick off the coming tribulation. I brought along a heavy sleeping bag and some plastic sheeting to wrap it in—both to keep it dry and to trap in my body heat—as well as a big bag of canned food and toiletries, and a bunch of water bottles that stayed in my coat near my skin, so they wouldn’t freeze. I also brought my rosary, a pen and paper for drafting, and the i-whatever it was that I got from my mom the year before. It could keep me in the fight no matter where I went. Ain’t science somethin’.

I found a likely spot on the leeward side of a giant oak, and set up my little camp in a snow-free patch. I’m no woodsman—never joined the Boy Scouts, never cared much for roughing it—and I’m sure it was a terrible camp. But for my purposes, it sufficed. By the time I finished my preparations, the stars were high and I was tired and cold, so I went right to sleep. I’d already told Lee and the gang that I’d be out of touch until Sunday (although I was just irre-

sponsible enough not to tell them where I planned to be), and had let my professors know I'd be missing Thursday's and Friday's classes. Cromwell and Gibson had both spread word of the impending battle through their many avenues of publicity, so everyone already knew what I was going to be doing. Rose sent me on my way with a kiss on the cheek that I can still feel today.

Thursday was a long, long day. I ate three small meals from cans, nursed my water, and paced my little glade a great deal. I did some minor poetic exercises to limber up—mostly double dactyls. I prayed a lot. And I watched the shadows grow. Once again I turned in early. When I woke up the next morning, it was 7:45. I brushed my teeth, did some push-ups, and ate a frugal breakfast. And it was 8:15. "Here we go," I muttered, and signed onto the web to read Cromwell's opening salvo. It was called "I Am."

*bored with his sand castle the architect gives pails and
shovels to the grains bidding them build themselves and
be grateful while he watches the coming tide and
leaves them with the crawling insects of the sea
all life started there in the salt among the eyeless things in the crushing
darkness all life ends in cold fear misery darkness
he dips his bread with us and sends us forth to easter never comes
nothing
the whisper in the wilderness the wise dread spirit
bow down in windswept places reap the kingdoms
power is freedom power is power power is god
but first
master of fate captain of soul rise up with passionate intensity
face the light and dark lords on your feet embrace
destruction welcome doom fear nothing even nothingness
burn everything you can before they burn us all
and ride the flames ride the flames my soul and cry to hated heaven
I am Hell*

Long I sat in silence, and the birds about me sang. Leaf-light passed into dappled shade as the clouds went by above. My fingers flexed into claws, unflexed, and flexed again.

Well, I thought—this was not good. But, it was no worse than I'd known it would be when I issued the challenge. Not only did the guy possess enormous strength in terms of imagery, but he had a flickering celerity that allowed him to shuffle off my attacks with ease. The first three lines of "I Am" essentially answered my entire Sacramentalist sonnet; and although the answer was little more than a pouting child's "I didn't ask to be born, you know," the effect slipped past the mind's filters because it all happened so quickly, propelled along by the "and" at the end of each line. On top of that, because Cromwell didn't believe in Truth, he had no need to worry about internal consistency—he could exalt Lucifer at one moment and jumble him up with God the next, as the exigencies of a given line demanded. That made his sub-rational approach even harder to fend off. I could see what Claviger meant about evil: the mere fact that we had to follow rules put us at a basic disadvantage.

Still, there had to be a way to turn my enemy's speed against him. A good warrior uses his strengths, I reflected; a great warrior uses his weaknesses. I couldn't track the rapid flight of Cromwell's visceral passions with logic: so I'd have to stand my ground, bring him to me, and take him head-on. "I Am" had definitely pierced my defenses; I could already feel a high cold Nordic paganism thrilling in my blood at the call to fire and arms, to forge one's own doomed fate and go down swinging against a universe of monsters. But I knew the answer. It wasn't that this feeling was

wrong—it simply didn't go far enough. It stopped at the crucifixion and forgot what came after.

So. There was no point in holding anything back; I might not even have an answer at all, next round. I would unleash the full wisdom of the rosary to the utmost extent of my understanding, and channel it through the form I had gained in my battle with Cromwell's lieutenant Rhode. Five hours later, I uploaded this to the Sacramentalist website:

"Mysteries"

I.

*Joy, deep magic from Creation's morning,
Laughing, soaring, blazing, cosmos-forming,
Beer, old jokes, new loves, spring, Christmas, living—
Childhood of the gifts He will be giving.*

II.

*Sorrow, flesh-inheritance, purgation,
Hatred and despair's deification,
Gulags, cancer, famine, cross and crypt—
Grim adulthood, spirits bent and ripped.*

III.

*Glory, deeper magic, Death defeated,
Heroes vindicated, angel-seated,
Glowing, cheering, feasting, loving, resting—
Sainthood, God made proud, eternal blessing.*

There—not a bad riposte. When you boiled it down, the thrust of our manifesto was essentially, "Let's help as many people get to Heaven as we can"—which Cromwell had deftly tweaked into the assertion of an uncaring clock-maker deity and spring-boarded into his own boiled-down, "We're all going to Hell so let's drag it all down with us." But I felt I'd managed to pass through and beyond that, which should mean that he'd have to turn and face my position at its strongest point: where it was buttressed by the teachings of all Christendom. The first time I'd faced his work, back in Commander Mark's class, I'd been unable to harness that strength—but things were different now. I had grown, and ironically Cromwell himself had focused and motivated that growth to a large degree.

In fact. . . Belatedly, I realized that here in the wilderness, miles and years from my days at the *Augury*, I had inadvertently completed my great unfinished labor: I'd written my Easter poem. I smiled and leaned back against the trunk of my oak, satisfied with the day's work. Maybe, I thought—just maybe—Cromwell had reached his limits and would respond with something sub-par, something I could defeat with no serious damage to my psyche. I whiled away the hours and slept; and the following day, he launched his next offensive.

"The Boiler Room"

*Yes, in this crash and flux of accidental worlds
All things, including god, may come to be,
And joy and justice, order, peace;*

*Perhaps what souls we have
Hold meaning for
A day*

*Blinking lights, ringing swoops of sound, outpouring coins,
Free drinks, short-skirted harlots, endless games of chance,
No exit signs, no clocks, no exit, no exit,
And beneath the bright grinning neon
Where no one, even god the pit boss, gets to see
In the basement, the uttermost foundation, the deepest magic of all
The boiler room—the senseless machines—
Leper rats and bugs in skulls and dust and dust and dust
Machines uncaring soulless random dust and dust and dust
Emptiness between the pinprick stars!
Emptiness clogging every atom!
Emptiness beyond all good and evil!
Emptiness!
There is nothing, nothing, nothing in the end
A moment's evil pleasure all we have
Among the machines.*

“Bastard,” I muttered. “*Bastard!*”

I stood up and began to pace violently in the snow. He’d leap-frogged me—off-handedly granting my entire position only to supersede it with his own, a pawn made queen behind my fortifications. And I, splashing around in words like a child, had handed him that “deepest magic” line, a demonic phrase as catchy as he could ask for. He’d turned my whole trident into a casino billboard, extended the metaphor, and murdered me with it. He’d hit me with a *meta-metaphor!*

All right. . . all right, fine. I’d figured all along that he would prove superior to me. But this wasn’t over yet. Had to remember what Claviger told me.

I sat back down and glared at my monitor. Then I closed my eyes, breathed in deeply through my nose, and held it—and slowly exhaled it through my mouth. Opening my eyes again, I gazed at the monitor with no mind, no thought, no intention. Whatever I came up with was certain to be wrong, so I focused on the drifting logo of the screen-saver and cleared myself of everything. Submitting to my enemy’s assault, I accepted emptiness—the emptiness that almost fills the universe.

Could he be right? Could life and love and holiness be merely scum on the surface of an infinite sea of nothingness? I believed in what I chose to believe; but in this life, there was no certainty. I would learn the truth after death. Unless there was no truth.

Emptiness. Without my conscious will, thought-fragments came to me. Zen masters, I remembered, taught their students to “empty the tea-cup”—to pour out their preconceptions so that they might learn. St. Paul spoke of *kenosis*, the emptying of oneself to make room for the divine will. What if Cromwell was right—and even more right than he knew? What if all this emptiness was really a doorway? A portal that was empty because there was no barrier at all except our own faint-heartedness? “Knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Maybe it was already open, just waiting for the tiniest motion of our hands to pull us into a radiant new galaxy of bliss. I found myself smiling, and I thought of Sylvia. I recalled the phrase she used once—it seemed like a lifetime ago—describing ordinary life as “the sugar-coated topping on the abyss.” Perhaps it was true, but in passing through that abyss one could find some-

thing even deeper.

I jiggled my pad and the screen woke up. I read “The Boiler Room” again. And something incredible happened: my word-sense kicked back in.

I hadn’t told anyone about my dream, or vision, or whatever. But it suddenly occurred to me that in accepting Cromwell’s emptiness, I had just endured the same dark night I endured back then. I glanced around me at the snowy woods and saw the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay: “Lord, I do fear Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year.” Then I looked at my opponent’s poem and saw past the words. And I wrote:

Dark toolshed in the daytime. A hole in the roof—a single ray of light. Specks of dust, islands in the nothingness. But step into the ray, look up through the hole, and the dark shed disappears. Azure seas, white clouds like sails, and golden luminosity, the mariner’s reward. Joy, beauty, freedom: stare into the sun! Keep staring—everything goes black, forever. A ring of gold (gold comes from stars) around a coal of horrifying anguish, burning through the retinas, up the optic nerves into the limbic core and down the stem into the reptile brain where serpents gnaw the roots of the World Tree and coil around the Fruits of Knowledge, down and down, through Good and Evil, through the planet’s core till down is up, out through the continents, shattering the gravity wells, returning to the source, the blazing wellspring, solar empyrean, heart of darkness, cosmos full of dust motes, every mote a cosmos of its own, up through the tower of stacked realities, Platonic shadows—up from Flatland, off at right angles to Nature, straight through Hell to Paradise, if only we endure.

Yeah—that was what I saw. All his fire and fierceness, all his bold earth-shaking militancy of meaninglessness; at the end of the day, it was the pose of a man who had gone halfway and stopped. I’d never met this guy Cromwell, never even communicated with him in prose. But somehow in that moment I could see him as clearly as I saw myself on my most painfully honest days. Somehow, inside of his words, I could hear a whispered sub-text: “No more. I give up.”

That night I barely slept at all. Brooding deep into the small hours, I gazed through the mist of my breath at the frosty stars and wondered what the dawn would bring. Dozing for awhile, I awoke by a quarter till nine and went straight to the net to see my enemy’s words. Like me, he hadn’t bothered with a title this time.

*Hide then from the knowledge and the grief!
Hide behind your pitiful belief!
Hide your eyes and creep into the grave!
Hide and cower, putrefying slave!
Never shall you ride upon the flood!
Never shall you taste the joys of blood!
Deep within your nursery soft and pink
Into sheep-man torpor will you sink
And know throughout your trite eternity
You lacked the strength to be what you could be.*

Well—I’d finally pissed him off. And folks, this may not speak too well for my character, but I have to admit I took a certain pleasure in the fact.

But I had nothing left. That last poem was my Hail Mary pass to the end-zone; I had nothing left. All my weapons, all my training, all my gifts had gone into what I’d written so far. Everything good in me—and everything evil too, offered up so that God might bring good out of it—had been poured out like a libation; and even then, I’d only finished the second poem through a minor miracle. I couldn’t even think up a couplet right now. I had nothing

left.

As I sat contemplating my final defeat, a luminous calm fell upon me. After all, I had done fairly well for an unknown college sophomore. I even thought a case might be made (especially among those who shared my philosophical outlook) that my work had surpassed Cromwell's in cogency and logic, if not in raw force. But that didn't really matter, since I couldn't seem to get back up for the last round. Still—as Claviger had said—it wasn't about me “beating” anyone; it was about trust. I am the steward of my fate: I am lieutenant of my soul.

Packing up my little computer, I grabbed my sleeping bag and my trash and came back out of the woods. The campus was still largely deserted at this time of the morning, though I passed a few people I knew. I headed back to my dorm, ate some Pop-Tarts, and took a shower. Then I threw on some decent clothes and headed down for the noon Mass.

And all through Mass, my serenity kept growing. It grew so light that it became almost giddy on top, while underneath it opened into a fathomless well of grace. I realized that what my master had foretold, had come to pass: part of my soul had died in this fight. But it wasn't a part I wanted to keep anyway. It was my pride. My enemy had done for me the one thing I could never do for myself: he had humbled me.

After Mass, I went back to my room and switched my computer back on. I had to make *some* response, I supposed. Having already embraced defeat, I was no longer concerned about eloquence or sagacity. And with my artist's pride now cauterized, I saw that less depended on this battle than I had thought. Would anyone truly convert either to or from Christianity, solely because of what two poets on a website said to each other? Probably not.

And as I relaxed and let go of the hyper-tension of my soul and mind, something rose buoyantly to the surface. Everything merged and fell away. And out came this:

“Pig-Malion”

A golden pig, grown bold and big,
Ensouled, invigorated, strong—
The poet's pride, once-lowly guide
To flowing tides of truth—ere long,
Unchided, grows by strides till those
Who plied their chosen trade of song,
Hog-rigged, lead-souled, will swig the cold
Malignant doldrums Limbo-long.

12: Dance

And that was it. We regrouped in the caf at 1700 hours—Lee, Rose, and the others. They'd been following my throw-down hoe-down, of course, and they all felt it'd gone well. “Kind of petered out at the end, I guess,” I said, with a slightly rueful smile.

“What? No way!” Matt said. “You totally saved the best for last.”

I frowned. “Huh. Hadn't thought of it that way.” But the others were nodding. “Heck, maybe you're right. It did sort of feel like the right answer, somehow. So you figure we at least drew a stalemate?”

“I think you beat him hands down,” Rose said.

“Thank you. I wonder if his buddies are saying the same thing to him right now, over glasses of blood or absinthe or whatever?”

“Who cares what they think?” Lee said flatly. “They've served their purpose by getting this group together. I say from now on we forget about them and move forward.”

“Second the motion,” said Michelle.

Thus every dragon’s dungeon hides its jewels, I thought.

I got a lot of attention for the next few days. Well—a lot more than I was used to, anyway. It’s not as though we made any headlines, but our little duel was big news in certain circles. Apparently *Fire-folk* and *The Dark* reached some agreement whereby both of them would reprint the entire exchange, thus drastically increasing the readership base for those poems. At this rate, I might actually garner enough name recognition to get paid for writing someday! (I know—keep dreaming, right?) I also got scads of congratulatory emails from my friends and fellow Sacramentalists. My two favorites were the one from Sean that went, “There is no joy in Crudville—mighty Cromwell has sucked out,” and the one from Dr. Claviger, which simply said, “Well done.”

Meanwhile, classes went on as usual; the Sacramentalist school continued to grow; and I resumed my all-important Irish dancing regimen with Rose. Life was pretty good. One day in March, I was walking through the quad when another blasted football came flying at my head. I saw it in time to side-step, but I reached out and caught it just the same. Emeth, Banks, and the boys came trotting over to me and I grinned.

“Sorry, guys. I guess I’m just a natural-born wide receiver.”

Emeth laughed. “You wanna get in the game?”

I tossed the ball to Banks. “Yeah—’long as Chad doesn’t mind.”

“Nope,” said Banks. “’Long as you don’t mind gettin’ tackled into the next school year.”

“Sure. I’ll bring back tips on all the big horse races.”

I swear he damn near cracked a smile.

After that I started playing ball with those guys once a week or so. I never did get too good at it, but I tried hard and I kept my complaints to myself. Banks and I eventually reached a reasonable level of civility; we’d never be Damon and Pythias, but at least we could nod to each other in the hallways. So that old feud was amicably settled.

Easter came and went, and April flowed on by. The spring issue of *Fire-folk* came out and was well received among people who read that sort of thing. And then Pentecost came along—and on that day, I had a visitor.

I was walking out of the chapel, along with dozens of other people, with my mind on a hundred random things. It was a nice sunny day and the walkway was full of comings and goings, all of us mutually oblivious as we plotted our own courses to food or study. My conscious mind barely registered the man; but the second I sensed him, my body stopped stone dead in its tracks. The two of us stood looking at each other and the rest of the universe went grey and distant.

For the very first time, it struck me as odd that I’d never seen a picture of him. I suppose he’d always been just a sinister voice in my head. I realized that on some level I had felt the actual person could only be an anticlimax compared to the words he had written. And in the same moment, I saw that I’d been wrong. Never in my life had I so palpably felt the presence of another human being. Holding his gaze was like walking into a wall.

He was oddly built—tall and broad-shouldered, but gaunt in the cheeks and almost freakishly thin at the waist. His hair was short and grey, but there was a strange agelessness about him; he might have been a tired thirty or a vigorous fifty. His posture was passive, almost hunched, with his hands folded in front of him, but the hands were like big tensile traps on the ends of improbably skinny wrists and they seemed to be made for the seeking of windpipes. All these impressions came to me gradually. Mostly I saw his eyes. The really weird thing is, I can’t even remember what color they were.

“Joseph Hopkins,” he said at length.

I gathered myself. “Allen Cromwell.”

He paced slowly in my direction. Passersby veered out of his way without appearing to realize they were doing it. I resisted an impulse to step back into the sacred ground of the vestibule. When he was about two arm-lengths away from me, he stopped—and a very, very peculiar smile came over his features.

“You, my friend, are the closest thing to a worthy opponent I’ve had in twenty years.”

“Likewise, buddy.”

“Ha. How old are you, Mr. Hopkins?”

“Twenty years.”

He nodded. “Then you speak more truly than you know. Both of us are fated for this—for the true battle over the soul of the world. Men fight and die with weapons every day; but everything began with a word, and everything will end the same way. I will be the one to speak that final word—but I would not deign to speak it unless a fitting adversary stood against me at the last.”

A year ago, I would have run shrieking in the other direction. But I had stood in the quintessential furnace of this man’s power and defied it, and I was not about to squander the grace that I’d been given.

“Listen. The whole rival wordsmith thing—it’s been fun. Really, it has. But at the end of the day, we’re just a couple of dudes writing poetry to each other. If you stop and think about it, it’s almost a little. . . well. . .”

“Silence,” he said, almost inaudibly, and I shut the hell up. “Common men thought relativity was but a game for mathematicians—until they split the atom. Let the masses think what they will of us, but don’t speak like one of them. You and I understand that ultimate power will always reside in the mind, and that the mind will always heed the Power of the Word.”

I clenched my teeth. “Yeah, maybe so. But I’m not after power. That’s the difference between us.”

And he smiled. And a cloud passed over the sun. “And that is why I will win in the end. Farewell, Mr. Hopkins.” He turned, and stepped into the crowd—and for such a conspicuous figure, he vanished with uncanny speed.

For a long, long time, I simply stood there. I’d never experienced or even imagined such a crash of wills, and I had no idea what to think of it. Finally I went back into the chapel and prayed the prayer with which I’d countered his “Forsaken” years ago. “Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is error, truth; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

As I stepped out into the sunlight a second time, Rose was waiting for me on the walkway. “There you are,” she said. “Feel like grabbing some coffee?”

I put my arms around and pulled her very close. “I love you, Rose.”

She hugged me back. “Joey, I love you too. Are you okay?”

I took a step back and thought about it. “Yeah—yeah, I think so. And yes: coffee sounds good. Come on, I’m buying.”

“The coffee’s free.”

“Even better.”

Within a few weeks, the semester was wrapping up. Lee was going to Belgium for the summer. Rose was off to prepare for grad school at Boston College. And I was heading home. I said goodbye to my dear friends and stood alone in the echoing airport terminal, looking out at the leaden sky. Quiet lounge sax played on the speakers. My sandwich was old and my coffee was cold. I sighed.

“Well, Lord. . . I guess I did the job you gave me to do. I dunno if I did it right, but I did the best I could. I wonder what happens now. New assignment? Death by plane crash? Fifty more years of standing around? Maybe it depends on what Cromwell does. Maybe I just make it up as I go.”

They called my flight, and I got on board. I Made it home safe and sound. It was good to see my family, but it didn’t lift my mood, so I pled fatigue and went to bed. There I lay in the twilight with my fingers laced behind my head, gazing blankly at the ceiling fan. Watching the blades go round and round, getting nowhere. Was there really a plan behind any of this?

Next day I went to Sean’s house. He bear-hugged the daylights out of me, and so did Mama C. Then she

peered at me and said, “Sweetie—are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Ma. It was a tough semester, is all.”

“Come on, J-dog,” Sean said, grabbing a giant bottle of soda from the fridge. “Would you believe the Ogre-lord has invaded Hylomoria yet again?”

“Nothing that guy does surprises me anymore.”

We fired up the old video games and slaughtered some goblins for a while. When we paused after a couple of hours to eat some pizza bagels and wind-sprint to the bathroom, Sean gave me a speculative look and said, “So—how are you doing?”

I shrugged. “I’m good. Everything’s cool.”

He nodded gravely, as if that settled the matter, and let a few beats go by. “Okay, but seriously. How are you doing?”

I turned and glared at him for a second; then I slumped. “I dunno, dude. For a short time there, I felt like I had a real mission, you know?—like—like, a mission from God. And now it’s done, and I don’t know what to do with myself. I feel like I’m marking time now, like I’m barely twenty and I’ve already finished my life’s work. Now I’m just waiting around to see what kind of cancer I’m gonna get.”

“Joey, man, I’m sorry to piss on your parade—but I have a pretty strong feeling that your work’s only just starting. You may have won the first scrap with Cromwell, but the war ain’t finished. Heck, we’ve never even seen the guy yet.”

“I’ve seen him. He came to Athanasius.”

“*What?* When?”

“On Pentecost.”

“... How come you didn’t tell me?”

“I haven’t told anyone. It was too surreal.”

“Well—what happened?”

I told him, as best I could, about that strange encounter. He listened with a deeply furrowed brow and never interrupted—which was exceedingly unusual for Sean. I brought my narrative to a close and ate some nachos. Guzzled down some Dr. Pepper. Waited. “So,” I said finally, “... whattaya think?”

My best friend rose and paced the room. “Dude—I’ll tell you what I think. I have never seen you win a fight, the whole time I’ve known you. And that’s practically our whole lives, since we were what, four?”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Just let me finish. I’ve also never—and I mean never, not even once—seen you back down. When I hear someone say this or that guy has heart, I compare them to you. I know I’ve never told you that before, because—well—it’s gonna make things awkward for the next five or ten minutes. But it’s true. I think there’s a reason you were the one chosen to face this challenge. And from what you’ve just told me, I seriously doubt that it’s over.”

“Yeah. . . maybe.”

“Look. I took a philosophy course this year, and you know what I learned? Plato’s real name was Aristocles. The nickname ‘plato’ means ‘broad shoulders.’ He was a championship wrestler. See, people in our society seem to think you can’t be tough and sensitive at the same time—like if you write sonnets you must also hide under your bed when there’s a thunder-storm. But I remember reading Owen and Sassoon and the World War I poets in Roland’s class, and there was no one tougher, or more sensitive. I think part of your job is to bring that back: to make people remember that a poet or philosopher can be a straight-up badass, and vice versa. And if you happen to stomp Cromwell into the ground along the way, hey—bonus points.”

I sat digesting this for a minute or two. “I don’t—I don’t really know what to say to that.”

“Shove over, then. If we’re gonna have an uncomfortable silence, we may as well be killing goblins.”

So, we routed the minions of the Ogre-lord for the rest of the day and long into the night, and slept in heaps of

empty Coke cans. When I got up the following morning, Sean was still asnooze and I was feeling restless; so I cranked up old Dave and went cruising. Unconsciously, but perhaps inevitably, I found myself gravitating back to Lake Evendim.

It was a cloudy day and the beach was all but deserted. I walked to a shallow cove I knew, tucked myself in among the reeds and driftwood, and sat listening to the wind and the waves. All around me was a conclave of willow trees, and the branches sang with cardinals. Gulls sailed by overhead; a hawk circled in the distance. Bluebirds and goldfinches fluttered by from time to time, and a crow landed not three feet to my right and sat with me for over a quarter of an hour. The sun climbed slowly through the misty vault until it was straight overhead. Moved by something, I raised my eyes and stared directly into the fire. And I saw that in the topmost branches of the tallest tree, right between me and the sun, was a single dove.

Then for a moment my sight went dim in the light. The winged messengers seemed to fade, and the tree that stretched its arms between Heaven and Earth, and the haloed dove at its apex. Half-blinded, I could see only the drifting of a million motes of dust above my head, dull by themselves but luminous in the sunshine. In their endless swirling I thought I could catch glimpses of a pattern, but randomness appeared to predominate—until I suddenly realized the truth. They weren't marching; they were dancing. There was indeed a thread of military discipline that ran through the great plan of the dance, but side by side with it were threads of mirth and wonder and solemnity and soaring exultation. Unceasingly they moved among each other, each one sometimes leading, sometimes following, and wherever the light shone was the heart and center of the dance, and the light shone everywhere, not some of it here and some of it there but all of it in every place, and every vessel was unique but all were equally filled.

And then I blinked, and rubbed my eyes, and the dance was veiled from me once more. I still had no idea what my part in it was; but I found my sense of trust had been restored. I could stand and wait for now—and the stillness, too, was a kind of dancing. I had fought with ogres. I had found my princess. My true quest—my place in the Dance of God—had already begun.

Jamey Toner is the co-author of Brides of Christ, a picture book from the Benedictine Sisters of Mary Queen of Apostles. He was also involved in the creation of three beautiful children, although his wife did the lion(ess)'s share of the work. Toner can never be sufficiently thankful for these things, but he is working very hard at being still and knowing that God is God.

~Poetry~

WAR

I will grow cold and bitter in the war;
I will be lonely; or, if I find love
In comradeship I am not guessing of,
The chance is good that in the blood and gore
Or he or I will fall to rise no more.
I will find fear, and then I will find shame,
And in the blankness find them both the same:
And when I understand, ah, my heartsore!
But you, my love, oh do not think of all
This pain, and do not even think of mine;
It shall be nothing underneath the gall,
When I remember how your face, like wine,
Goes to my head—and I will dare my fate
If you, my darling, will but swear to wait.

~ Gianna Cruz

Gianna Cruz is the author of two children's novels. She was homeschooled with the Charlotte Mason method through high school, and now attends St. Mary's College in Kansas. She grew up in California with her parents and ten siblings.

Chestnut Buds in March

1 Kings 14:25-28

I sat down by the shade,
Read how Rehoboam
Took from Jeroboam
What Solomon had made,

And rose - and when I rose
I looked, and marveled how
The barren chestnut's boughs
In March's stale repose

Were putting out dark buds
To ripen and release
Their canopies of leaves.
Those shimmering, stark buds

Recall how life begins
In innocence, which lasts
Until its youth is passed,
And tumbles into sin.

~David Counts

September 2022

Wherever there is want or need -
Where harsh desire would be heard,
Where hunger haunts, where thirst commands,
Where soul would meet its own demands
And never be demured -
There is the dent in Calvary
In which the wood which lifted up
The Savior towards His sour cup
Is fastened irrevocably.
It's there He hangs. It's here we hang.
The image is a common one.
It makes the Great, "Thy Will Be Done"
An answer to the great harangue,
"Non Serviam."

We'd rather bleed.

~David Counts

David Counts is a gardener at the John Hay Estate in Newbury, NH. He divides his spare time between writing and playing folk music with his band, JD and the Stonemasons.

