

# **The Fairy Prince and Other Fairy Tales and Fantasy**

**From the "Major Works" series**

**CJS Hayward**

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# Table of Contents

[Barbara's Tale: The Fairy Prince](#)

[A Dream of Light](#)

[Espiriticthus: Cultures of a Fantasy World Not Touched by Evil](#)

[Janra Ball: The Headache](#)

[The Steel Orb](#)

[The Sign of the Grail](#)

# Preface

C.S. Lewis, in *The Chronicles*, and George MacDonald, who wrote not only fairy tales but the first fantasy novel in the English Language (*Phantastes*), touch the child in all of us. These works were inspired by them, and were written out of the author's attentive reading of C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald.

But they each enchant in their own way.

# The Fairy Prince

Adam looked at his daughter and said, "Barbara, what do you have to share? I can hear you thinking."

Barbara looked at her father and said, "You know what I'm thinking, Daddy. I'm thinking about the story you made for me, the story about the fairy prince."

"Why don't you tell it, Sweetie? You know it as well as I do."

The child paused a moment, and said, "You tell it, Daddy."

Here is the tale of the fairy prince.

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Long ago and far away, the world was full of wonder. There were fairies in the flowers. People never knew a rift between the ordinary and the magical.

But that was not to last forever. The hearts of men are dark in many ways, and they soon raised their axe against the fairies and all that they stood for. The axe found a way to kill the dryad in a tree but leave the tree still standing—if indeed it was really a tree that was still standing. Thus began the disenchantment of the entire universe.

Some time in, people realized their mistake. They tried to open their hearts to wonder, and bring the fairies back. They tried to raise the axe against disenchantment—but the axe they were wielding was cursed. You

against disenchantment – but the axe they were wielding was cursed. You might as well use a sword to bring a dead man to life.

But this story is not about long ago and far away. It is about something that is recent and very near. Strange doings began when the son of the Fairy Queen looked on a world that was dying, where even song and dance and wine were mere spectres of what they had been. And so he disguised himself as a fool, and began to travel in the world of men.

The seeming fool came upon a group of men who were teasing a young woman: not the mirthful, merry teasing of friends, but a teasing of dark and bitter glee. He heard one say, "You are so ugly, you couldn't pay a man enough to kiss you!" She ran away, weeping.

The prince stood before her and said, "Stop." And she looked at him, startled.

He said, "Look at me."

She looked into his eyes, and began to wonder. Her tears stopped.

He said, "Come here."

She stood, and then began walking.

He said, "Would you like a kiss?"

Tears filled her eyes again.

He gave her his kiss.

She ran away, tears falling like hail from her eyes. Something had happened. Some people said they couldn't see a single feature in her face that had changed. Others said that she was radiant. Others still said that whatever she had was better than gorgeous.

The prince went along his way, and he came to a very serious philosopher, and talked with him, and talked, and talked. The man said, "Don't you see? You are cornered. What you are saying is not possible. Do you have any response?"

The prince said, "I do, but it comes not in words, but in an embrace. But you wouldn't be interested in that, would you?"

For some reason, the man trusted him, and something changed for him too. He still read his books. But he would also dance with children. He would go into the forest, and he did not talk to the animals because he was listening to what the animals had to say.

The prince came upon a businessman, a man of the world with a nice car and a nice house, and after the fairy prince's kiss the man sold everything and gave it away to the poor. He ate very little, eating the poorest fare he could find, and spent much time in silence, speaking little. One of his old friends said, "You have forsaken your treasures!"

He looked at his friend and said, "Forsaken my treasures? My dearest friend, you do not know the beginning of treasure."

"You used to have much more than the beginning of treasure."

"Perhaps, but now I have the greatest treasure of all."

Sometimes the prince moved deftly. He spoke with a woman in the park, a pain-seared woman who decided to celebrate her fiftieth wedding anniversary—or what would have been the fiftieth anniversary of a long and blissful marriage, if her husband were still alive. She was poor, and had only one bottle of champagne which she had been saving for many years. She had many friends; she was a gracious woman. She invited the fairy prince, and it was only much later that her friends began to wonder that that the one small bottle of champagne had poured so amply for each of them.

The prince did many things, but not everybody liked it. Some people almost saw the prince in the fool. Others saw nothing but a fool. One time he went into a busy shopping mall, and made a crude altar, so people could offer their wares before the Almighty Dollar. When he was asked why, he simply said, "So people can understand the true meaning of Christmas. Some people are still confused and think it's a religious holiday." That was not well received.

Not long after, the woman whom he met in the park slept the sleep of angels, and he spoke at her funeral. People cried more than they cried at any other funeral. And their sides hurt. All of this was because they were laughing so hard, and the funny thing was that almost nobody could remember much afterwards. A great many people took offense at this fool. There was only one person who could begin to explain it. A very respected man looked down at a child and said, "Do you really think it is right to laugh so much after what happened to her?" And then, for just a moment, the child said, "He understood that. But if we really understood, laughter wouldn't be enough."

There were other things that he did that offended people, and those he offended sought to drive him away. And he returned to his home, the palace of the Fairy Queen.

But he had not really left. The fairy prince's kiss was no ordinary kiss. It was a magic kiss. When he kissed you, he gave his spirit, his magic, his fairy blood. And the world looks very different when there is fairy blood coursing through your veins. You share the fairy prince's kiss, and you can pass it on. And that pebble left behind an ever-expanding wave: we have magic, and wonder, and something deeper than either magic or wonder.

And that is how universe was re-enchanted.

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Adam looked down at his daughter and said, "There, Sweetie. Have I told the story the way you like it?"

The child said, "Yes, Daddy, you have," climbed into her father's lap, and held up her mouth for a kiss.



# A Dream of Light

You pull your arms to your side and glide through the water. On your left is a fountain of bubbles, upside down, beneath a waterfall; the bubbles shoot down and then cascade out and to the surface. To your right swims a school of colorful fish, red and blue with thin black stripes. The water is cool, and you can feel the currents gently pushing and pulling on your body. Ahead of you, seaweed above and long, bright green leaves below wave back and forth, flowing and bending. You pull your arms, again, with a powerful stroke which shoots you forward under the seaweed; your back feels cool in the shade. You kick, and you feel the warmth of the sun again, soaking in and through your skin and muscles. Bands of light dance on the sand beneath you, as the light is bent and turned by the waves.

There is a time of rest and stillness; all is at a deep and serene peace. The slow motion of the waves, the dancing lights below and above, the supple bending of the plants, all form part of a stillness. It is soothing, like the soft, smooth notes of a lullaby.

Your eyes slowly close, and you feel even more the warm sunlight, and the gentle caresses of the sea. And, in your rest, you become more aware of a silent presence. You were not unaware of it before, but you are more aware of it now. It is there:

Being.

Love.

Life.

Healing.

Calm.

Rest.

Reality.

Like a tree with water slowly flowing in, through roots hidden deep within the earth, and filling it from the inside out, you abide in the presence. It is a moment spent, not in time, but in eternity.

You look out of the eternity; your eyes are now open because you have eternity in your heart and your heart in eternity. In the distance, you see dolphins; one of them turns to you, and begins to swim. The others are not far off.

It lets you pet its nose, and nestles against you. You grab onto its dorsal fin, and go speeding off together. The water rushes by at an exhilarating speed; the dolphin jumps out of the water, so that you see waves and sky for a brief moment before splashing through the surface.

The dolphins chase each other, and swim hither and thither, in and out from the shore. After they all seem exhausted, they swim more slowly, until at last you come to a lagoon.

In the center, you see a large mass; swimming closer, you see that it is a sunken ship. You find an opening; inside, all is dark, but you find a passageway.

After some turns, you come up in a different place. You come up through a fountain in a public garden; the bushes and ivy are a deep, rich shade of green, and sheets of water cascade down the yellowed marble of the fountain. It is ornately and intricately sculpted, with bas-relief scenes of a voyage.

As you study the pictures, day turns to night, and all that you see is

bathed in moonlight. You are looking upon a statue: a delicate, slender, elfin nude, whose long hair cascades over her shoulders and about her body. She is reaching up to the sky, as if to touch the moon and stars. She is carved out of white marble, which looks pale blue, almost luminous, in the moonlight. It looks as if she was taken from the moon, and is rising up to touch it again.

The statue is on a tall pedestal of black marble. In the moonlight, the forest has a very deep color, a green that is almost blue or purple; the dark beauty of the night makes the statue seem almost radiant. Off in the distance, you hear a high, melancholy, lilting song; it is played on a harp and sung by a voice of silver. There is something haunting and yet elusive about the melody; it subtly tells of something wanted and searched for, yet not quite reached. And it is beautiful.

You sit, looking at the statue and listening to the song, for a time. They seem to suggest a riddle, a secret - but you know not what.

You walk along; fireflies begin to appear, and you can hear the sound of crickets chirping. There is a gentle breeze. The sky stands above like a high and faroff crystalline dome; the trees and grass below surround you, like little children who see a beloved elder coming, and run clamoring for a kiss. The grass is smooth and cool beneath your feet. There is a sweet, faint fragrance in the air, as of lilacs.

A round little girl, wandering through the forest, sees you and comes running. She is dark, with olive skin, and her black hair flares out behind her. She is wearing a dark green robe, the color of the forest, and her step is almost that of a dance - as if she is from a people where moving and dancing are not two different things. She is holding, in her hand, a simple bouquet of dandelions. "Look, look!" she says, "I have flowers!"

She jumps into your arms, welcoming you. Her touch is soft, and gentle. It is not near the softness of a grown woman; it has rather a ... simplicity. It is hard to find the right word. Then you recognize what it is. It has something of the carefree play of a child, but there is more than even abandon. She is holding you with complete trust. You do not doubt that she could fall asleep in your arms.

She begins to talk to you about many things. She talks about the forest, about people, about the stars, about God. After a time, you realize that she is not merely talking, but singing, as if the first words she heard were the words of a song. After another time, you realize that you have lost her words completely, and are entranced by the song. Presently she stops, and says, "Spin me! Spin me!"

Little children everywhere like to be held by the arms and swung around; this one is no exception. After you are both very dizzy, she takes you by the hand and begins, leading you along a path, to show you little details of the forest that you had never noticed before. Apart from the little details, there is something else which you begin to slowly see in the forest. The song by which she speaks, the dance by which she moves - and not just her, you do not doubt, but her people - seem to be echoed in the forest... and then you realize that rather they are echoes of the forest. Hearing, seeing, feeling that beauty from another person - you still do not doubt that they come from her, but they also help you to see what was always there but you had not noticed. As you walk along, you are lost in thoughts about the genius of all great artists... and begin to think about visiting an art gallery, not so that you can see what is in the gallery, but so that you can see what is not in the gallery.

The path widens out, around a shimmering pool. The golden flames of torches around the pool glimmer when reflected in the pool. There is singing - singing like that of the little girl, but the sound of a whole orchestra as next to the sound of a beginning flute. Men and women together pour fourth a rich harmony. The air is sweet with a delicate fragrance of incense; one of them brings you a cool wooden cup. Inside is a strawberry wine. It is sweet, and sour; the taste brings back memories of earliest childhood.

A circle forms among the people, then another, then another. Soon all of the people are spinning and weaving in a joyful dance. After a time, you realize that you are at the center; they are softly singing, "Welcome, Somebody," and listening intently. Arms and hands reach out, and sweep you into the dance. The dance is ordered, but also free; it draws you in, and, as you move, you feel that you can do no wrong.

How long the dance lasts, you do not know; still filled with its bliss, you find yourself sitting and talking with the people. One of them finds a soft seat of moss for you to sit on; another brings you a plum. Its taste is tart, and it has the texture that only a plum has — and, when you bite into it, you know that it was still on the tree when it was chosen.

The night winds on, and, after a time, you are led into a building woven out of living trees, with a bed of loam. Into it you sink; it is soft and deep...

You find yourself standing at the edge of a forest and a grassy plain. The mouth of a cave descends into the earth, and just before this is an old man sitting on a three-legged wooden stool. He is wearing a coarse grey-green robe, and has a long, flowing white beard. He is staring intently into the forest, with a concentration you have never seen before. It is like a gaze into a lover's eyes — nay, even deeper, a probe into the soul.

He shifts positions a few times, in his sitting, and at last stands up, takes the stool, and begins to walk towards the cavern. When he was looking into the forest, you were absorbed in watching him; now, you notice another man, a young one, approach the former.

"Is it Senex?"

"I am he."

"Senex, the great teacher?"

You see the old man's hand move to cover his mouth, but not quite quickly enough to conceal the faintest crack of a smile. The young man stands attentively, waiting for words to come.

The old man's frame shakes once. A second passes, and then it shakes again and again. Then sounds the laughter that he had been attempting to conceal. Soon, the old man is convulsed with mirth, and making no attempt to conceal it.

After a while, almost doubled over with laughter, he begins to pull himself up. You can see his face from a different angle, and you see a

merry twinkle in his eye. He places his arm over the young man's shoulder.

"Forgive me, brother, but it has been ages since anyone has addressed me as 'teacher' or 'great'. You cannot imagine how funny it sounds to me."

"Are you not Senex, who has traveled the seven seas, who has seen visions and been visited by angels, who has written treatises and instructed many?"

The man chuckles, and says, "Yes, I am all that, and much more. I am the image, likeness, and glory of God. I pray, and in my prayers I touch the stars and shake the foundations of the kingdom of Hell. I am a king and priest. I am a son of God. My name is written in the book of life. I am a god."

"Then why do you find it funny that I address you as 'great', or 'teacher'?"

"Because I am more than a great teacher, as are the children who dance through this field, as are you." Here the old man smiles at the young. "Come, now. Do you doubt that you are God's own son? What teaching, or miracles, or visions, or conquests, or exploits compare with that?"

"But if you are so great, why should you object to being called a great teacher? Surely the title is not false."

"My dear god - and now I am not addressing the Creator, but you yourself - what is wrong with the title is not that it says that I am a great teacher. I am. What is wrong is that the title implies that there are others who are not so great," and here the old man gave a great belly laugh, "when the truth of the matter is that the other people are so much more than a great teacher. I will not mind being called 'teacher' by you, if you agree to address everyone else as 'god' and 'goddess'. But if you will not call them 'god' and 'goddess', then simply call everyone 'brother' or 'sister'."

The young man stands in silent reflection for a time. "I came in search of a man who could share with me profound wisdom; I see now that I have found him. So now I ask you: Give me a profound insight, that I may contemplate it for the rest of my life, and grow wise."

"Do you not know that God is love, that God loves mankind, that we have the new commandment to 'Love one another'?"

"All of this I have believed since I was a little boy."

"Then I give you one more lesson, to contemplate and learn for the rest of your life."

The young man listens, eager with expectation.

The old man bends down, plucks a blade of grass, and holds it in his outstretched hand.

The young man takes it, and waits for an explanation. When, after a time, the old man says nothing, he says, "This blade of grass is like the blade of a sword. Have you given this to me as a sign that I should contemplate spiritual warfare, and be ready with the sword of the Spirit?"

The old man says, "You should, but that is not why."

The young man thinks for a time, then says, "This grass is nourished by the sun, and so tells of it. Grass and sun exist as God's creation, and tell of him. Is this why you have given me the blade of grass?"

The old man says, "What you said is very true, but that is not why, either."

The young man says, "When Christ lived on earth, he lived as a carpenter, and observed and was surrounded by the birds of the air, the grass of the field, the lilies, and ten thousand other things. Have you given me this blade of grass to remind me of Christ's time on earth, or of his humanity, or that this is a place he passed by?"

The old man says, "You are still right, and you are still wrong."

The young man says, "Then what profound truth can you be teaching me? What secret key escapes my grass? I asked if you had given it to me as a symbol of a profound spiritual truth, and you said, 'no'. Then I asked you if you had given it to me that I might deduce by logic what it tells about God, and you still said, 'no'. Then, after that, I asked you if you had given it to me as a historical reminder of what has happened about blades of grass, and your answer is still the everchanging 'no'. What can I possibly be missing? What am I leaving out?"

The old man turns to face the young, and looks deep into his eyes. "This blade of grass I have given you," he said, "because it is a blade of grass."

There is a look of puzzlement on the young man's face, which slowly melts into dawning comprehension. He steps forward and kisses the old man, with a long, full kiss on the lips, and then steps back and bows deeply - and the old man bows to him - and says, "Thank you." When the old man has responded, "You are very much welcome, brother," the young turns, clutching the blade of grass as if it were a diamond - no, more than that, as if it were a blade of grass - and walks back into the forest. There is a smile on his face.

You walk off in the field, and lie down on the grass. The day is growing warm and sultry; a faint breeze blows.

The breeze carries with it a small, white feather of the softest down. It gently falls on the sole of your foot. The breeze blows this way and that; the feather catches here, rolls there on your foot, brushing ever so lightly, up and down, up and down.

You feel a finger, cool as marble, just barely touching the back of your neck. It tingles; you can feel the sensation radiating up and down your spine. The feather brushes against your foot, and the finger just barely touches the back of your neck. It is a slow, lingering, tingling sensation; as time passes, the sensation becomes more and more real, and just won't go away. It tickles so.

A time passes, and you find yourself walking along a beach. It is almost dusk, and the rainbow colors of sunset are beginning to spill



almost dusk, and the rainbow colors of sunset are beginning to spin across the sky. It is autumn, and the many-hued leaves of the trees fall about, twirling this way and that in the wind. There is a smell of mist and brine in the air; the waves run and twirl about your toes.

A bird flies off to the right; its flight is light and agile. It flies to and fro, this way and that, until it disappears into the sunset.

There is a feeling of wistfulness, of a presence departed. To the left, you see a grayed swing, rocking back and forth in the wind; its rusty chain squeaks. It is in the yard of a boarded up house, with a garden long overgrown in weeds.

On a whim, you slowly walk up the path into the yard, and sit down on the swing. You rock back and forth; there is a feeling of emptiness. Images form and swirl in your mind.

A tree is felled; from its trunk are taken the staves of a barrel. Fresh and white, the staves are slowly covered with dust; each time the dust is disturbed or brushed off, the wood underneath is darker, grayer, rougher.

People are born, walk hither and thither, grow old, and die. Generations come and pass, and the earth grows older. People learn how to live - and then die. Vanity of vanities.

Everything is dreary, desolate, fleeting. The walls of your vision grow narrow and dark; your mind and imagination seem to protest the motion. It grows darker and darker.

After a time, you see a light - a little light. As everything around grows darker and more drab, the light does not grow brighter, but neither does it grow dimmer.

A voice sounds in the shadows - you do not doubt that is the voice of the light - says, "Come closer."

You come closer, and you see that she is a flame. A little flame.

A thousand questions form in your mind. They pour forth from you - Why is it all so meaningless? Why do things wither and decay? Why does

Why is it all so meaningless. Why do things matter and decay. Why does evil run rampant?

The flame listens patiently, and then speaks. "Look into me."

You look into the flame, and you see everything you saw before, but it looks different. The boards of the cask are no less grey. But you see that inside the cask is wine - wine which grows rich and well-aged. The people still die - and now you see an even darker death for some. But you also see past the death, past the mourning and grieving, to a birth into life - a richness and a fullness that could not be imagined from before.

"Flame, can I step into you, so that I may be delivered from the unpleasant things?"

"No, dear one. That is not the way of things."

"Then what can you give me?"

"I give you this: that you may always look into me, and that I will never be quenched."

"Flame, what is your name?"

"My name is Hope."

You look into the flame, and again see the outside world. There is still the sadness, but there is an incredible beauty. An ant crawls across your finger; you sit entranced at the wonder as its little body moves. Then you look at a rose bush, quivering in the wind - it is covered with thorns, but at the top of each stem is a flower that is still God's autograph.

You get up and walk further.

You see a little girl on her knees, and standing against her, a man holding an immense sword. The man raises his sword over his head, and brings it down.

Then you see the sword stop in the middle of the air. There is a clanging sound; the man's powerful muscles ripple in his exertion, but

the sword does not move an inch further.

Then you slowly see a shimmer in the air, and there is another sword - a sword that seems to be forged of solid light. A sword that is blocking the first. As you watch, you see an angel beginning to become visible. It is powerful, majestic, and terrifying. The man drops his sword, and runs in blind terror.

You can see the angel's sword here, a hand there, the hem of his luminous robe. But what you see is fleeting, and you cannot see the whole angel.

"Why cannot I see you? I can see the grass, and see the girl. Are you not as real as they?"

You see a little boy, walking on the beach, picking up a pebble here, a shell there, a piece of driftwood every now and then, and putting them into a sack.

Then he comes upon a fallen log. And he grabs one protrusion, and then another, trying to lift it. But it will not budge.

"Some day, you will be able to see God himself. But now, you can not see things that are too real for you to see."

You see a diamond, slowly rotating, in light. One facet after another seems to sparkle.

As you watch, not just what appear to be the facets, but what appears to be the diamond, seems to change form, shift, and sparkle in different ways. The light itself seems to shift color, direction, focus.

Then speaks an almost silent voice: "You are looking upon the one thing which never changes, in a light that has been the same since before the creation of time."

There is a moment of silence, and you feel a surge of power rush about you, and tear through your very being. It is like a blast of wind, throwing you off your feet so violently that wind itself is knocked out of

you. It is like the liquid fire that explodes out of a volcano. It is like a flash of light beyond intense, light that is so much light that you cannot see. It bears like an immeasurable weight and presence on your mind and spirit; its might and force fills you with awe - no, more than awe, fear - no, more than fear: terror. It is a reality which lies beyond imagination.

A booming, thunderous voice commands, "Fear not!" Then a hand reaches out and touches you, and you are filled with strength. It holds and stills you; you dimly realize that you have been quivering as a leaf. You somehow find the strength to stand, and if anything see a greater glory and majestic power than before. This being before you is like a storm in solid form. His feet press into the earth with the weight of a mountain, and shine like the sun in full glory. He wears a robe woven of solid light, and at his side hangs a sword sheathed in fire and lightning. His hands radiate power; they seem by their energy as if they are about to tear apart the fabric of space. You dare not look upon his face. Suddenly, you find yourself falling at his feet.

Again booms the voice: "Do not worship me! I am not God!"

A hand lifts you up, and sets you on your feet. His touch is more intense even than his appearance - you are sure that it will destroy you - yet somehow it makes you more solid.

It is all you can do not to fall down again. Somehow the words come, "Who are you?"

"I am a spirit, formed before the foundation of the world. I am a star, who sang for joy as the world was created. I am a messenger, who stands in the presence of God himself and then flies out of the heavens to wage war against the darkness. I am your servant. I am an angel."

Suddenly, images flash through your mind, images to which it would be merciful to call surreal and bizarre. You see chubby little boys fluttering about on birds' wings. You see voluptuous women, suspended in mid-air, whose clothing is perennially falling off. It is as if you have all your life seen pictures of Don Quixote wearing a wash-basin as a helmet, holding a dull sword and sitting astride poor, plodding Rozinante - and then, suddenly and out of nowhere, find yourself staring the paladin

Roland, with his sword Durendal drawn and the rippling muscles that have torn trees out of the ground, face to face. You find yourself babbling and attempting to explain what you remember, and suddenly see the angel shaking with a booming, resounding laughter.

"What, my dear child, you would wish me tame and safe, like a little pet?"

It would be much easier to face a creature which was safe, which one could predict. It would be a great deal less disquieting, and a great deal less disturbing. Yet, somehow, you feel a feeling deep within you that it would be an immeasurable loss.

He stretches out his hand. "Come, take my hand. I have something to show you."

You extend your hand, and find it engulfed in a force that is like electricity. Yet somehow, you feel something else as well - a touch. The angel spreads out great, glorious, golden, many-hued wings, and with a mighty jump launches into the air.

You speed along, both of you. Colors and forms speed by. Then, suddenly, you are at a place that is absolutely still, absolutely silent, and pitch black. "Where are we?"

"That is not a question that I can answer in terms that you will understand. Only watch."

You begin to see a pair of hands, They are together, and facing outward. Then they slowly move outward - and behind the hands is left a rainbow, in all its colors. The hands turn, move along, complete a perfect circle. It is the most perfect rainbow you have ever seen.

Then the left hand strikes the rainbow, and it shatters into innumerable miniscule fragments. The right hand takes the shards, and with a single motion scatters them across the blackness. Each piece of the rainbow glows with light, a little reflection of the whole, and then you see a faint, pale, crystalline blue glow. The pieces are scattered irregularly, and one looks almost like - here an insight comes like a flash - a

and she looks almost like here an insight comes like a flash a constellation.

There is no horizon, no landscape, no other light. There are stars in every direction and from every view. The view is the most breathtaking view of the sky that you have ever seen.

Then the angel takes your hand again, and says, "Do you understand what you saw?"

"I think I do."

"Good. Then let me show it to you again."

Forms shift and move, and you see a faint, nebulous sea of matter spread about in every direction. It is not still - no, it is moving. You look deeper, and you can see that it is dancing.

Then you see a circle forming, and spinning. And another around it, and another. Soon many circles shift and melt together. The ones on the inside seem to move with more speed, vibrancy, energy. Then you can see a kind of a ball forming.

The swirling matter around it spins inward, more and more tightly, until a fire seems to light inside - and fills the new-formed sphere with radiance. Flashes of light, bursts of glowing forms, like water on a pot boiling, seethe and foment. In your silence and stillness watching it, you begin to realize that spheres are forming, coming to light, becoming stars, all around - and, just as the stars formed out of forms dancing, the stars themselves are forms dancing, in a great, glorious, majestic dance.

The strains of a Christmas carol ring in your ears: "Fall on your knees. O hear the angel voices!" Suddenly you realize that you and your host are not still at all, but swept into the great dance - and, about you, you can see shimmers of... you know not what.

After a long, glorious, blissful time, the angel again takes your hand, and again you find yourself swept away. When you find yourself at rest, you are again in pitch black.

"And why am I here?"

"To see what you have seen, for the third time."

You wait with eager expectation, to see what could be next. Inside you, the images foam and mix. The rainbow, containing each piece and found in each piece, the colors, the moving dance, the energy... You try to push it aside, so that you may attentively perceive whatever changes may be happening...

Time passes, with still the forms fermenting in your mind. You feel serene and at rest; the place is a place of profound peace. After a time the images begin to fade, leaving behind a feeling, a wholeness, a satiety. It is like, after a vivacious dance has ended, sitting down, cooling off - and, then, at rest, finding the joy and the intoxication of the dance still in your heart, and your head floating in the air. It is like, after finishing a meal, sitting with its feeling of fullness.

After a time, you break the silence. "Why has nothing happened here? Why have I seen nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing? Am I here to wait?"

"Has nothing really happened here?"

"Nothing that I can perceive. I haven't seen, or heard, or felt anything."

"Really? You have perceived nothing?"

"Perhaps I have perceived something so subtle and ethereal that I can not notice it. I do not doubt that this place holds something wonderful. But I have not noticed anything."

"Really?"

"Why do you answer my questions with other questions, with riddles, instead of telling me anything?"

"Do I?"

After a time, pondering what this could mean, you ask, "Am I here to wait, for something that will happen? If I am, can you tell me when it will happen? Or at least tell me if you can tell me?"

The angel is silent for a moment, and then says, "When you have seen one of these things, you have seen more than one thing. You have seen the shattering of the rainbow; one of its fragments is the one near your home that shines light on your fields and mountains. But the rainbow is also the one, beautiful, perfect language that was before man took upon himself a second time the quest to become gods."

"But did not the sage say that we are gods?"

"Yes, you are gods, and more than gods, and will become more than you even are now. But the man who would exalt himself to godhood, blasphemes. Would that men could learn to be men, without trying to ascend to godhood or even be heroes."

"Should I not learn to be godlike?"

"Learn to be a god, not in the way of the man who wills to be the highest of gods, but in the way of the God who was willing to be the lowest of men."

After a time, the angel continues on.

"In a way, each shattered piece of the rainbow - including the language that you now speak - contains the pattern and image of the whole. But in another way, it has lost some of the colors. There are things that were in the whole rainbow, that are not in the piece.

"So I will answer your question, about waiting, with a word from another language. The word is not a word which answers the question, but rather which un-asks it. So I answer you with this word: Mu."

"But why do you un-ask the question, instead of simply answering it?"

"That I will tell you, if you first tell me, to use an expression from the



child's' words of your land, if the elephant in your refrigerator is eating peanut butter. Is the elephant in your refrigerator eating peanut butter? Yes, or no?"

Your mind is quite full; it is slow work, pondering and absorbing all that you have seen and heard. Finally you ask, "Before anything happens, may I wait here and ponder, and digest things?"

The angel says, "Yes indeed; that is why you were brought here."

A time passes in the silence, the stillness, the darkness. It is the beginning of the slow growth that makes a newborn experience into a full-grown memory, and brings it into who you are. It is the rest which makes every work perfect.

This lasts you know not how long. After a time, you realize that you are in a different place. You are with a man of sorts - if 'man' is the correct word to use. 'Man' is not a wrong word, but there are many others. He seems to be of no particular age. He is fully what every simple child is; he is fully what every ancient sage is.

After a time, you begin to wonder what his age is, and how long you have been there. You see him smile, and then burst out laughing. "Come," he says, "Let me show you what I see." He places his hand on your head, and suddenly you see an image - of a little child, in a magnificent and wondrous cavern full of rubies, and emeralds, and sapphires, and diamonds. He is off in a corner, picking up lumps of coal.

"This place is full of diamonds; come, enjoy, take and carry off as much as you are ready to carry."

Then you begin to look around, and see that you are indeed in a cavern of sorts. It is filled with a brilliant, powerful light; the walls and ceiling, full of irregular bulges and niches, seem to be gilded and encrusted with glowing gems. The space is full of forms magnificent and wonderful - fountains, statues, pedestals, crystalline spheres, animals. Everything in the room seems to have the breath of life.

You begin to gather gems; each one, luminous, seems to have its own

particular feel, its own particular energy - you can almost hear a music when you touch them. Their cool, crystalline forms seem to be of congealed light.

After you have gathered a great many, you notice a peculiar phenomenon: the more you carry, the easier it seems to be to pick up even more. The gems embrace each other, and begin to form a vast interlocking structure about you. It forms a great, shining suit of armor - a scintillating armor of adornment, a living form that is as light as thought. As even more time passes, the gems begin to melt into you. As each flows into your body, you feel its energy and light, and soon, a high, subtle, ethereal music courses through your veins.

At last you stand, armored with an armor that is flawless. It gives, you do not doubt, a protection against blows that a man of iron would envy. Yet the armor is not dark and cumbersome; it is light and energizing. Your skin is as soft and sensitive as ever, and you feel the unfettered lightness of nudity, free as Adam - no, you realize, a greater lightness, for a nude person is only not fettered by clothing, but this armor fills you with the freedom of which fetters are but a crude attempt to oppose. Carrying this armor leaves you more free to move and dance, and fills you with a positive energy.

You revel in the fullness, the intoxicating lightness. After a time, you realize that the man is looking upon you. He is smiling.

You begin to ask how much you owe for this wonderful treasure, and he breaks forth in peals of merry laughter. "These treasures are not for sale. They are a free gift. Come and fill yourself to overflowing with these treasures as often as you wish."

"Then they cost nothing?"

"No, they are very costly. They are more costly than you can ever imagine. But they are given freely, like water and light and breath, and a thousand thousand other treasures that no money can possibly buy."

"Then why are they given freely? Surely such things are worth a price!"

page.

The man laughs again. "You are beginning to grow alive - just beginning. When you are truly alive, you will dance so freely that you will need no one to tell you these things, because the answers will be in you."

After a while, he hands you a chalice. "Here, drink this, that you may remain dreaming." You drink it, and have a flash of insight that waking is not the only aroused state. In a moment, you reach out and touch a star.

You find yourself inside a castle of ice. It is cold, elegant, pure. It is night-time, and the deep blue of the starry sky provides the light. You walk about in a magnificent structure, through halls and archways, around pillars and doorways, all the time in a great silence. The place is majestic and massive.

The coldness of the ice fills the palace with a deep peace. There is a rest here. You cannot see, nor feel the presence of, yet you somehow sense a kinship to the resting dead, sleeping, awaiting the dawn when sleepers shall rise.

As you step, as you breathe, you hear your echoes, and then the echoes of your echoes. The silence has a presence.

It is a timeless place. There is no hurry, no rush, no clutter. The sparseness of the architecture is matched only by the stillness of the air. You stand and walk, footfall after footfall penetrating the vastness. For it is vast and large; it is ordered, and yet unknown.

Through the glassy ceiling above you see the stars, and as you look at them, you can begin to hear the faintest tinklings of ethereal music. Your ears listen with a new keenness, flowing from the crystalline armor, and you can hear, not a music breaking the silence, but a music in the silence. It is, like the palace, sparse, and simple. It has an order and structure, and yet not time; it is a music which sounds as if it has always been there.

After a time, you realize that you are singing a song - sparse, simple, crystalline, and beautiful. It would not be quite right to say that you started a song: rather, that you have joined a song - a song that always has been, and always will be, a song which is sung not by you alone, but

has been, and always will be - a song which is sung not by you alone, but by angels and archangels, by the living and the dead, by the rocks and stars and trees themselves. And for the tiniest fraction of an instant, you can almost see the song rising, as incense, in the presence of He Who Is.

As you walk through a corridor, a transformation begins. Tendrils of mist curl about your feet as a shroud slowly rises from the ground. The walls become the walls of tall, narrow buildings lining the sides of the road. They are like ancient, cracked vellum, and ivylike bushes of yellow roses climb the sides.

All is still as you walk the streets; the only motion you can see is that of the mist dancing about you. Every now and then, you catch, out of the corner of your eye, what seems to be the form of a person just disappearing around a corner - but you are never sure.

After a time, you come upon a massive, dark Gothic cathedral. It is carved out of black marble. As you pass through the doors, the air becomes very dry; there is a feeling of imminence.

As you step into the sanctuary, the building itself is rocked by a blast of sound. Your body vibrates as you hear the deep, rich sounds of an organ resound all about you. The song is a fugue, turgid and complex. You hear three parts playing, then four, then six - interwoven, turning about, speaking to each other. It is in the key of E minor.

The song continues for almost an hour, woven with a deep sense of mystery. Like the building, like the city, it is filled with a dark majesty. There is a strain you are listening to hear - and you seem almost to have caught it, now here, now there, but then it vanishes. The song comes to a climax, and then a thunderous resolution. Then the sanctuary becomes as silent as before.

A shaft of light falls, and you see a man walking towards you. He is tall and lean, and wearing a black robe with golden edges. He has black hair, and a thin, close beard. His step is stately and regal, but does not make a single sound. He reaches you, and, bowing deeply, says, "Greetings."

His eyes meet yours, and you see that he has a piercing, probing gaze. It is intense, looking deep into your eyes - no, more, deep into your soul. And there is something else - you can not tell what. You begin to gaze back, and you realize what it is. His gaze is gentle.

He reads the questions on your face, and after a time says, "I cannot tell you everything that you wonder now. If I were to say the answers, answers that I am only beginning to understand, they would sound like trivia, or sound meaningless. And if I could make you understand them all, I would do you a great disservice."

"Why?"

"Because the questions you ask are the right questions, but they are also the wrong questions."

After a time, he begins again.

"But there is something which I can do. I can lead you to the library."

He leads you through a twisted passageway, then down a stairwell. The stairwell alights in a room with shelves upon shelves upon shelves of dust-covered tomes.

"And," the man says, "I can give you this."

He reaches into the folds of his robe, and gives you a black rose.

It is a queer feeling to be alone with that many books. You reach on one of the shelves and pull one out. It is an illuminated manuscript. It tells a story deep, and detailed, and rich, and subtle. What you can read of it is like barely seeing the ripples on the surface of a lake, while untold forms move about below in the depths.

You replace it and look at another. It is a manual of philosophy and theology. It tells something about God - but it is also too subtle and complex to understand. And there is something else... It is like reading a book about arrangements and variations of color - to a man who has been blind from birth.

Then another... You can tell from its form that it has a sort of reason, or structure to it, but you cannot tell what. At first, you find what seem to be logical errors - and it does contradict itself, sharply and in many ways... and yet... you have the feeling that you are like a man, versed in logic and philosophy but devoid of emotion, poring over a joke, trying to understand it as an argument - and having no idea why others read it and then do something called laughing.

Another book, and another. Each time it seems like you understand something, you find yourself more confused than before. After a time, it becomes words upon words - and the more words are added, the less meaning there seems to be.

You sit down, exhausted and bewildered. After a time, you realize that a woman is standing some distance off. She is wearing a robe that is purple and black, with long sleeves and a long, flowing skirt. Her long hair, which falls behind her to a length you cannot tell, is jet black, and yet her skin is almost luminous.

She steps forward, and, embracing you, gives you three kisses on alternate cheeks. "Have you learned anything yet?"

"Nothing. I can't understand anything in the books."

"Have you thought to see what you can learn?"

"I have thought, and I do not doubt that there is a lesson, but it is seven times over too subtle and too complex for me."

"There is a lesson that you are missing, but not because it is too subtle and too complex. You are missing it because it is too simple and too obvious."

"I have read from two and ninety books, and cannot share with you the least shred of wisdom that is found in them. I do not understand. So in what wise am I to claim that I have learned?"

"Is there not even one thing you can claim to have learned?"

It is with frustration that you say, "Only the littlest thing - that I do not understand."

"That is not so little as you think."

She looks at you for a second, and now you can see, as well as a probing gaze, a hint of a smile. "Come; you are fatigued. Let me take you so that you can eat and rest." She places an arm around you - her touch is soft and responsive - and leads you through other passageways into a room with a table.

The table is set with plates of clear glass; the table is set with bread, fish, and white cheeses, and there are two glasses of white wine. She leads you to a chair, which offers a welcome rest, and then sits down opposite you.

After you have eaten a couple of pieces of bread, you see her again gently looking upon you. "I can see the question in your eyes. You are wondering, are you not, why you were not simply told that you do not understand."

"Yes."

"Would you have understood that you do not understand? As you do now?" She pauses, and takes a sip of the wine. "A mouse can only drink its fill from a river, and no man can learn what he is not ready to understand."

The rest of the meal is eaten in silence. It is a calm, peaceful, prayerful silence. The bread is flavorful and dense; the cheese is mild; the wine is dry and cool.

After the meal, you both sit in more silence. It is a time of rest... and also of community. There are no words and there is no touch, and yet you can sense a kind of attention, a welcome, from the lady.

When you feel refreshed, she leads you through another passageway, and out to a door to the street. She gently embraces you, and says, "It is time for you to go, and begin to taste some of the other secrets of this city."

I do not know if we shall meet again, but I suspect that it will come to pass. Fare Thee well."

The street is different from the one you first saw - it also is enshrouded by a cloak of mist, but it is wider, and there are people passing by. Their clothing varies some, but much of it is variation on a dark grey theme, almost seeming to be mist in solid form. A young woman passes by on the other side of the street; a cascade of ebon hair hides part of her face - yet you can still see, in one corner of her mouth, a hint of a smile.

You come across an open square, with an intricate pattern of stone tiles in the center. Two opposite corners have trees - gnarled, angular, and leafless. One of the corners has a fountain; cascading sheets of water fall between many-leveled pools, in which silvery and golden fish swim about. The opposite corner has a statue.

The statue is on a large pedestal of dark grey marble; the statue itself is of blackened bronze. It is of a man, gaunt and haggard, and clad in rags. His arms are raised up to Heaven, as is also his head, and yet his face bears a look of despair. The pedestal bears the inscription, "I am thirsty. Who will give me something to drink?"

You find a jug, and, filling it at the fountain, climb up the statue and pour water into the statue's mouth. You hear sounds of water flowing, and then there is a click. It is followed by a whirr of moving clockwork, and, getting down, you see that one of the sides of the pedestal has turned inwards, revealing a shaft descending into the earth.

A lantern is at your feet; you light it, and begin to climb down the ladder at one side. It descends into a passageway; taking one direction, you come to a four way intersection. The left path turns into a circular room, with a domed roof, and a pool in the center. You test its depths - and find it descends below the floor.

Inside, you find an underwater passageway. You swim through it, and surface in a room with rough walls. Climbing upwards, you find the room to narrow into a shaft, which turns into a low passageway, and then opens into another room



opens into another room.

This room is lit by the glow of torches; it is large and rectangular. At the center is a thick, low stone column, about three feet tall, with some protrusions bulging from the top. When you come closer, you see that it is an intricate clockwork device; working with it, you find a pattern in its motions, and work with it until there is a click, and a segment of the far wall slides into the ground.

The passageway is dark, as was the room and passageway which you traversed without your lantern, and it opens shortly into another room. At first you cannot see; then, as you step in, your eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. Inside this room, you see another statue.

This statue is a male nude. It is an iron statue; it is immense, and the figure is powerfully built. It is in the middle of a stride - a long, powerful stride, one which seems almost to shake the ground. His eyes bear an intense gaze, one which seems to almost flash lightning, and one arm is raised, and hand outstretched, in a gesture of authority. The surface of the statue is rough and unfinished. There is something in this statue that seems to almost radiate power and energy and weight and light.

And yet, when you look closer, you notice something different. The eyes seem sad. And then, looking closer, you suddenly realize that the statue is bound by shackles. The shackles are a monstrosity, a violation; they threaten to wear down his energy and burden his strength. You grab at the shackles to see if you can pull them free, and feel a chill and drain run through the body. You drop them in shock.

As you stand in the room, you seem to even more be able to see - not only the forms, but the absurdity and injustice. The man's great strength - it is straining against the binding chains. Your eyes trace the shackles to where they are engulfed by the floor.

Then you realize that there is another set of shackles, empty, open. You shudder to look at them; the touch of one of the chains sapped your soul; breathing felt as if you had been forcefully struck on the chest. You begin to back out of the room... and you see the statue's eyes.

.....

He is not pleading; he is not begging. If anything, his eyes say "Go far away; that these chains imprison me is bad enough, without one more." You do not see pride, of someone unwilling to receive help, or the cowardice of one who dare not ask. It is rather the compassion, of someone who would not wish his worst enemy to feel the misery he feels. You feel a stirring inside your heart. What the man does not ask, conscience and every noble instinct demand. And you walk in.

A chill sweeps through you as you cross the threshold. You can almost see a presence that is unholy. At each step you are jolted. And yet... you have the strength to follow.

You fasten one of the open shackles about your feet; it stings like the sting of a scorpion. The other, and you feel as if you are sinking into the ground. A shackle is fastened around one hand, and it is all you can do not to fall down. You place your other hand in the last, and begin to close it...

The shackles fall from the man's feet, and you see a surge of power ripple through his muscles. He crouches down, and then jumps up with a force that shakes the earth. He raises his hands upward, and there is a blinding flash of light.

Your sight slowly returns, and you find yourself on a grassy knoll bordering a field. A small grove of saplings is to the left, and a field of dandelions is to the right. From somewhere near come the sounds of birds chirping, and a babbling brook.

You see the man who was shackled, standing nearby. He is looking upon you, and smiling. He picks you up and gives you a hug - a crushing, invigorating bear hug that makes you feel very much alive - and a big kiss. Then he sets you down and opens a large leather pouch. He fills two large stone bowls with stew, and draws two draughts of cider from a small barrel. The stew is a piping hot, well-spiced, and hearty beef stew, but the cider is cold and mild - you could drink quite a lot without getting drunk.

He tells you of how he came to be imprisoned - he let a love of probing mysteries become a love of secrecy, and a love of the beauty in natural darkness become a love of evil, so that what was wholesome and

free became perverted and enslaved - and then asks of your story, how you came to rescue him. He listens eagerly and intently.

After a time, he says, "There are many people who knew of my disappearance and do not know that I am free; it is time for me to go and tell them that I am free, and how you rescued me. But before I go, I give you this." He raises one hand to Heaven and places the other on your head, and speaks a blessing. You cannot understand the blessing, but there is something about it that strikes you... and then you see, in an instant, not just one little fragment in the blackness, but the whole radiant rainbow. He is speaking the first language, before it was broken, and - though you cannot understand it - you are moved by its power, its love, its light.

He presses slightly harder on your head, and your spirit surges with joy. Then he runs off into the distance, bounding like a stag.

After a time, you begin to walk along, into the forest. It grows thicker, and the colors richer and deeper. You can feel warmth, and humidity, and wind.

As you walk along, the forest opens into a wide, grassy clearing, with thick, long bluegrass. A few small raindrops sprinkle on your face; thunder rumbles, and soon there is a heavy and torrential rainstorm. The rain is warm, and in it you begin to run and play.

A woman, short and with a full and rounded figure, begins to dance with you, and soon you are swinging around, and dancing in the rain. Sheets and columns of rain fall, and in the lightning flashes you can see the trees, the leaves - the whole forest - dancing and spinning in the wind.

The woman is laughing; you can hear the laughter in her voice and see the laughter in her eyes. On a whim, you reach and pinch her side; she laughs and squirms. She jumps and tackles you - it is half a tackle and half a hug - and knocks you over.

After wrestling around for a few minutes, she turns and walks towards a large, ancient, gnarled oak tree, and sits on a large bulge a little distance above the ground. As she sits, you vaguely realize that the tree's

distance above the ground. As she sits, you vaguely realize that the tree's form has almost the shape to welcome a human - your eyes did not pick it out, but she seemed to have walked to it as naturally as if she were breathing. She is leaning a little to her left; a ledge of wood forms almost a cushion for her to lean on - one might say that her body is curled into the wood.

You begin to look on her, and see how beautiful she really is. Her skin glistens with little drops of water. She is dark, with olive skin and large, soft, welcoming eyes that seem to enfold you, taking you in as the waters of a lagoon take in a swimmer. There is something that draws you about your hands.

Her hands are small, and seem to contain the beauty of her whole body in miniature. They are rounded, curved, and Rubenesque. You can see soft skin gently enfolding the inside of her hands; it has a looseness and amplex so that you do not see vein and bone, only the rich color of skin. Her fingers are tiny and thin, with very mignonne nails and fingertips. The texture of her hands is subtle, yet gives her hands reality; you can see the strata and shapes in the tiny wrinkles on the back of her hand, the dark, faint hairs, and the many sheets of lines that twist and turn over the inside of her hand. Through her fingernails, you can see a glimpse of white, pink color which contrasts brightly with the rest of her hand.

And yet the shape is only half of the beauty that is in her hands, for they are not still, but in motion. It is a slow, still, lyrical motion, an adagio dance. It does not overpower the senses or make a clamoring demand for your attention, but it is yet deeply moving. Her fingers, palm, and thumb slowly move, in a rich harmony. You can see waves in her fingers as they wend back and forth. The motion is extremely simple, and has a periodicity that comes back to a single thing, yet somehow you do not wish it to be more complex, or do something new - at the moment, you would have difficulty understanding why anybody watching this slow undulation would want to see anyone else. It seems that she is speaking in a language with her hands, and you long to understand what her hands are saying, to put it into words. Then you look deeper, and you realize that you do understand what her hands are saying, and you cannot put it into words because it is a truth different from what words express. You

into words because it is a truth different from what words express. You rather feel and sense... peace... rest... stillness... the motion of breath... the beating of a heart... the music that lies in and beyond silence... the ebb and flow of water... day and night and the four seasons turning in cycle... the rhythm of a song that does not pulse, and yet has order... tufts of long, dry grass, resting in a field... the tops of trees, blowing in a wind... a rock, buried deep in the earth, remaining a rock, in the process of not-changing... the light at dusk, and yet not the light of dusk for the sunlight at dusk fades, and this, even in its softness, would not rightly be said to fade.

She begins to walk along a path, leading you, and takes you to a small hovel. You step inside, and as your eyes adjust to the light, you see a very old woman. She is emaciated, and in her face are etched lines of pain. She begins to try to get up, and say something, but the sounds are hardly understandable as words, and the young woman gently places her hand over the old woman's mouth and leads her to lie down. Reaching up to the wall, she brings a flask of wine to the old woman's lips, and helps her drink a little. After that, she goes to a chair, and picks up a wooden recorder, and plays it. It is the same song as her hands danced: soft, still, and beautiful. It has a very soft, woody sound, and the notes themselves are... like the color grey, like a gentle light, like a friend's voice. You are lost in the music, carried away by its beauty. Slowly, the song tapers into silence, into a rest allowing the music heard to sink in. You look at the old woman, and see that she is still, absolutely still. Her eyes vacuously point into space.

The young woman gets up, with infinite gentleness, and with her hand slowly closes the old woman's eyes. She turns to you, and, speaking so softly that you can barely hear her, says the first words you have heard from her: "She was my grandmother." You can see the tears forming in her eyes.

It is dusk, and the last rays of the sun ebb into darkness, into a dark and moonless night.

The next day, you begin to build a pyre in the middle of the field. Some people come by from the wood and help; they are bearing little gifts and each embrace her. There is not what you would understand to

gins, and each embrace her. There is not what you would understand to be a ceremony; they each come and go. After a time, you realize that the animals also come, and pay their respects in their own ways. Dusk comes again, and she takes a lantern and sets it at the bottom of the fire. Flames begin to lick upwards, and then touch the grandmother's body. Then the young woman screams, a piercing, dissonant, discordant scream of which you would not have thought her capable. She begins to sob uncontrollably, and weeps the whole night long.

The woman stands up to greet the coming of the dawn, the tears still streaming down her face. The first rays begin to break over her face, and then you notice something... different. Something that you had not noticed before.

You see pain in her face; it is of no effort to see that a great hole has been torn in her soul. And yet there is something else. She is beaten, but not crushed; wounded, but not destroyed. If she is bleeding, it is because there is living blood coursing through her veins. It would not be quite right to say that she is not too badly hurt because she is a deep person; rather, she is very badly hurt because she is a deep person. And yet... you cannot quite tell what it is.

She turns to you, and sees the puzzlement in your face. She reaches, and with one hand touches your eyes; her lips move in silent prayer. Then she takes her hand back, and you slowly see something else. You see angels all around, and feel the Spirit of God. One of the angels - great, mighty, magnificent - has wrapped his arms around her. The angels are still, and... intent. It would be a gross distortion to say that one of them waves a magic wand and makes the pain go away, and yet...

You cannot quite see, and yet in your spirit you sense, prayers, around and under and in her. You cannot understand all of what is going on. The pain is not taken away, and you share the pain as well. And yet... Though you cannot say what, you can sense someone, and something happening, which is infinitely greater than the pain. And you, again, hear singing.

Sister, let me be your servant. Let me be as Christ to you. I will laugh when you are laughing. When you weep, I'll weep with you.

Pray that I might have the grace to Let you be my servant, too.

When you feel so weak and burdened, When the world is harsh to you, Know that Christ has gone before you, Felt the pain and shed the tears. As Christ has so giv'n to others, So he will also give to you.

And e'en with Christ you're not alone, For we are Christ's body, too. We are all brother and sister. Your burden is our burden, too. As you have so giv'n to others, So we all shall give to you.

A little boy runs up with something clutched in his hand, and kisses her. He says, "I love you. Sorry you hurt bad. Havva big gift. Look!" He opens his hand.

Inside is a blade of grass.

# Espiriticthus: Cultures of a Fantasy World Not Touched By Evil

## Nor'krin

The Nor'krin are tall and strong, with thick, sandy blonde hair, deep blue eyes, and white skin that turns reddish when they go south from their frost-kissed land; the Janra affectionately refer to them as the Northern giants. They love to run across the snowy plains and up to the peaks, to feel the crispness of the air, and to drink the cold and crystalline waters of the flowing streams.

There are not very many of them; they live nomadic lives, spread out across the snowy North, carrying with them only their clothing, their hunting weapons (a large bow and quiver of arrows, an axe, and a knife), a canteen, and a handful of tools and other miscellanea.

Theirs is a culture of oral tradition and folklore, filled with a richness of symbolic thought. Their thought is expressed by storytelling. Some tell of people and actions full of goodness, love, and wisdom; some are allegories packed with symbolic detail; some are both. The evenings — from the meal onward — are times when the clans gather together, and the oldest member tells tales until long into the night, when the fire has died down to embers and the icy mountain peaks glisten in crystalline blue twilight.



blue starlight.

(The language is one which revolves around the oral tradition; its grammar is fairly simple, sufficient for basic expression, but there is an extensive vocabulary fitted to epic poems, great tales, and the transmission of a symbol-filled body of lore)

Their experience of sense is primarily aural, centering around the communication and preservation of their tradition. The other senses all play a part in their knowing about the world around them and its enjoyment, of course, but the ears dominate.

Coming of age is very significant in Nor'krin culture. It is the event upon which a child becomes a full member of Nor'krin community, and appreciates it fully, for it is accomplished in solitude. It is the same for male and female, big and small.

Denuded of all possessions save a hunting knife and the clothing on his back, the child begins a solitary trek, south through the land of the Urvanovestilli and Yedidia, penetrating deep into the thick forests inhabited by the Tuz, until he enters a village, and, coming inside a shop, says, "Blacksmith, blacksmith, find me a task, give me a quest."

There are as many quests as there are questions. Some are easy, some are hard; some are simple, some are complex. Whatever the quest be — be it finding an amethyst in the caves, climbing an immense mountain, answering a riddle, memorizing a book — he leaves the blacksmith shop and does not return until the quest is completed. (It must be said that, though some quests have taken years to complete, recorded history has yet to see a Nor'krin fail. A child leaves the immediate presence of his family, but remains in their prayers; they have great faith, and it is in this faith that they tread securely into the unknown.

Upon the return, the blacksmith begins to ask questions: "What is your name? What is your family? Who are you? What is your story?" — and begins to fashion an iron cross. This cross is at once a cross as any other, and a unique reflection of the person who wears it; no two are alike.

It is with this cross worn about the neck that he returns to his clan, come of age.

Nor'krin greet each other by standing opposite the other, placing the left hand on the other's right shoulder, and lowering the head slightly; the gesture is a sign of respect.

The emotional side of their culture is not as intense or spectacular as many others, but is present and offers an important reflection of what they value. They know a deep sense of respect and appreciation; when they think of others, the first thought is, "This person is an image of God," and there is a feeling of respect. The mountains, the trees, and the streams all bear a magnificence which they appreciate. Nor'krin worship services are filled with awe at the One whose glory is declared by tales, by lives, and by the created order. They are traditional liturgical services, where the place of the homily is taken by long tales and stories, conducted by the eldest members of the clan.

The Nor'krin homeland is named 'Cryona'.

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## Tuz

Many wayfarers go south, early in life, to buy equipment; they need only wait, and a blacksmith will forge a pair of iron boots which will last for life.

The people are dark and strong; their eyes shine with power and lightning. The average Tuz male is short, stout, very broad-shouldered, and built like a brick wall; a thick, straight, jet black moustache and a thick, curly beard push out of leathery skin. Women are equally short and stout, but do not have such broad shoulders, being (relatively) more plump and less muscled, and do not have the moustache and beard (usually).

Their buildings are hewn of solid granite, with iron doors. The villages are small and scattered, joined by worn paths passing through the rich, deep green of the forest. It is this forest, fertile and full of beasts, from which the heart of their meal comes. They are more than fond of spicy meat stews and bear jerky. Their beer is dark, thick, and strong, and every house has at least a little bit of khor, a spiced rum which is occasionally used by the other peoples as a pepper sauce.

The Tuz work hard and play hard. They are often hired for heavy work in the construction of Urvanovestilli palaces, and their work rarely receives complaint. After work is over, they tend towards wrestling and general rowdiness; if they are present, Janra children (and occasionally adults) are tossed about.

For all of their rowdiness, the Tuz do possess a great deal of restraint; even after a couple of beers, they seldom give each other injuries beyond occasional bruises and abrasions, and Janra children do not receive even a scratch. (Most of them rather enjoy being tossed about).

The usual greeting is a crushing bear hug, often accompanied/ followed by a punch in the stomach, some wrestling or tossing around, etc; it is generally toned down a bit for children and

visitors from afar, but there is always at least a spark of rowdy play.

As much as the Nor'krin are at home in the cold, loving everything that is crisp and chilly, the Tuz love heat. Their land is by far the hottest, but that doesn't stop them from munching on peppers and wrestling around. Blacksmiths' shops and fire and sun-hot iron — these are a few of their favorite things.

The Tuz also build obstacle courses of stone and iron and rope, which the Janra have no end of finding new and inventive ways to use; a slack rope which Tuz climb along the underside of will be walked — or occasionally run — atop by the Janra; jumping shortcuts, backwards or inverted travel, and acrobatic ways of avoiding raw strength moves are common. Tuz, by contrast, have very slow and methodical paths.

They are, indeed, probably the most constant and unchanging of peoples; the process of maturing is a process of becoming more who they are. Their sense of order is also great; they value greatly the gift of being well ruled.

A child, at the age of ten, is presented to the village elders and the various guildmasters. They spend a day talking with the child and his parents, in order to determine his talents, interests, and personality; then they spend another day talking and discussing amongst themselves; then, on the third day, his profession is announced, along with the master to whom he will be apprenticed. The results are sometimes surprising, but always embody a great deal of wisdom, and the selection of a vocation is a gift for which the child is grateful.

Children learn a way of life filled with discipline, tradition, and respect for elders. It is quite simple, not at all ornate when compared to some other philosophies, but it has a power, a solidity to it, and love, faith, honor, friendship, and hospitality are things that they truly live by. Their families and communities are very close, and their friendships are loyal until death. They do not pay as much emphasis on verbal articulation of teaching as a way of life. There is thought, but in its expression, words take a second place to actions. That a life of faith involves discipline is declared very loudly by Tuz hands.

The are very aware of the value of solitude and prayer; it is a common practice to simply leave, taking nothing save clothing and a hunting knife or axe, and go up into the mountains for a few days of solitude, allowing time to pray and to be refocused.

Their language has, in speech, a very heavy, thick, consonantal feel, full of grated 'h's (which is often present in 'k's, 'r's, 'g's, and 'b's). The speech is terse and concrete.

Their experience of sense is also very concrete, centered somewhere between visual and aural. Sight tells what is around and where, and what is happening and where. Hearing tells what is happening, and where, and what is being said.

The emotional side of their culture knows such things as accomplishment, tradition, exertion, and discipline. There is an emotion that comes from a job well done and a challenge mastered; they value it. To have a heritage and respect elders as well as enjoy children brings a feeling of right order. To wrestle around, run, or laugh heartily has a pleasure. To control oneself has a joy. Things such as these are what they feel.

Tuz worship services are be short and sweet, with worship embodying a great deal of fervor.

The Tuz homeland is named 'Rhog'.

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# Urvanovestilli

The first thing to strike a visitor is the devices. In every house and many shops there is a tinkering room; a large workbench is covered with every imaginable sort of gear, spring, hinge, lever, chain, and shaft; the clock is only the beginning of clockwork. Two nearby cabinets — one filled with tools, one filled with parts and working materials — stand neatly closed; at the touch of a button, a drawer springs out, and shelves slowly slide up.

The craftsmanship of clockwork devices is, along with the study of diverse subjects — theology and philosophy, history and literature, science and mathematics — a hobby that symbolizes the culture. Each piece is created not only for utility, but also for artistic effect. Cuckoo clocks and spring loaded umbrellas, Swiss Army Knives and mechanical pencils, player pianos and collapsible telescopes: mechanical objects such as these fill the land.

The ornate complexity of the devices reflects the ornate complexity of thought. The language, quite possibly the most difficult to learn, allows a speaker to express detailed and nuanced thought in exacting specificity. There are twenty four verb tenses, so that there is (for example) a different past tense for a brief, well demarcated action, and one which occurred over a period of time; there are twenty four other verb forms, which are like verb tenses as to conjugation and construction, but express the verb in an atemporal manner. Their language has much room built in for conjunction and logical connectives, nesting and predicates, as well as subtlety, implication, and allusion.

They have a complex and formal system of etiquette, although it must be said to their credit that they take no offense at a wayfarer who is warm and friendly but does not know their rules; they understand how simple the heart of politeness is.

Their speech is clever and witty, and they are fond of abstract strategy games. They enjoy ornate and complex polyphony, and will spend hours exploring theology and philosophy (two disciplines which

they have the wisdom not to separate).

Urvanovestilli culture places a very heavy emphasis on a facet of virtue which they call *contrainte*. *Contrainte* is a kind of inner constraint, where order is approached by adjusting conditions inside before conditions outside, and not letting oneself be wrongly controlled by external circumstance. A similar concept is embodied in the words 'moderation' and 'self-control.'

*Contrainte* enables a man to be free and use that freedom responsibly; it enables a man to have access to drink without getting drunk; it enables him to think constantly without becoming rationalistic. The Urvanovestilli homeland has the richest natural resources in the world, and (with centuries of first rate craftsmanship and efficient work) they are by a wide margin the richest nation in the world. Despite this, they keep a very cautious eye on wealth, so as not to be enslaved by it. Theirs is not a culture of consumption; though some of their interests — art, sculpture, board oriented strategy games, tinkering — generally are pursued in a manner that involves wealth, the bulk — discussions, prayer, dance, imagination, thought — do not. Consumption as a status symbol and waste are both seen as vulgar.

In *contrainte* is also balance and complement. There is time in solitude and time in community, freedom and responsibility, private and public property, work and rest.

It is in *contrainte* that an ornate system of etiquette does not obscure love, and elaborate ceremonies do not obscure worship. Just as they do not have their sights set on wealth — they do not look to it for happiness, security, and other things that it can not provide — and are therefore able to enjoy it (among other and greater blessings) without being harmed, so also they set their sights on love and worship, and therefore do not permit rules of etiquette or liturgical forms to make themselves the focus and cause hearts to become cold and dusty.

*Contrainte* likewise allows them to act efficiently without becoming efficient. Off of work, life takes a calm and leisurely pace; nobody fidgets. It allows them to be very judicious in their use of money, and at the same

time very generous; their hospitality is lavish, and it is unheard of for anyone — friend or stranger, native or foreigner — to go hungry in their land.

The single greatest mark of *contrainte* lies in that, with all of their achievements, they remain open to the gifts of God. *Contrainte* itself — though they work very hard to cultivate it — is not something that they try to achieve on their own power, but ask for in prayer, expecting to receive as a gift from God. Nor is it set up as the supreme context, the *Supra-God* to which God must bow down; they know nothing of religion within the bounds of *contrainte*. *Contrainte* does not "point to" itself as an object of worship, but rather God; it brings, in worship of God, a desire to grow in faith, hope, and love. It is like being reasonable enough not to be rationalistic.

On the surface, the *Urvanovestilli* culture appears to be the antithesis of that of the *Shal*. One is complex, and the other simple; one is rich, and the other poor; in one, people sit and talk for hours; in the other, people sit in silence for hours.

At the very heart, though, they are very much the same; *Urvanovestilli*, when traveling and visiting the *Shal*, feel that they are at home; the *Shal* find the *Urvanovestilli* to be brothers. They see beyond, rest in God's love, and love their neighbors.

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The *Urvanovestilli* are quiet, patient, temperate, and refined. They are classically educated and cultured; their country is a federation of republics, each one ruled by a senate in a tradition that has remained unchanged for centuries. Tradition is strong, and families remain together; come evening, three or four, sometimes even five generations sit down at one table, eating and drinking, talking and listening, long into the night. There is a great respect for age, but a respect that in no way despises youth; the oldest spend a great deal of time caring for the youngest. Indeed, one of the first sights to greet a visitor who steps inside an *Urvanovestilli* mansion is often a grandfather or great-grandfather, with a long, flowing white beard, sitting with a child on his knee.

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Urvanovestilli names are long and ornate. The full name is rarely spoken outside of formal ceremonies; even Urvanovestilli do not often pronounce thirty syllables to refer to one entity; all the same, each one is considered important. The names are:

**Family name:** This is the first and foremost of names, and the most cherished; it is the most commonly used.

**Maiden name:** Among married women, this follows.

**Birth name:** This is the name given at birth, and is often used within families and when there are several people of the same family present.

**Reserve name:** This is a very intimate name, which is not always known outside of family and close friends; it is spoken with a great deal of affection and familiarity.

**Baptismal name:** This name is chosen at baptism by people who know the person well, and given a great deal of prayer; it is used especially in religious contexts.

**Regional name:** This tells of the city or village a person comes from, carrying with it connotations of regional flavor and culture. It is used primarily in reference to travelers or (occasionally) people far away.

**Friend names:** These names (some do not have any; a few have ten or eleven; the average is two or three) come according to friends; a friend can bestow a name, and it becomes thereafter formally a part of an Urvanovestilli full name. When such a name is bestowed, it will become the name used primarily by the person who chose it.

The phrases of politeness — those which would correspond to hello, goodbye, please, thank you, you're welcome — are all benedictions; they take innumerable forms and beauties according to the people and situation. Blessing is something which they value; they often speak of good things — friends, virtue, art and music, food and drink — as so many blessings from the heart of the Father.

The traditional greeting is a hand raised, open save that the ring

finger bends down to meet the thumb, or (when greeting a child) placed atop the head; the gesture is a symbol of benediction. It is followed by three kisses on alternate cheeks.

In youth, Urvanovestilli are filled with a wanderlust. They voyage to many different places, seeing different nations and lands — as well as the variety of their own cities — and enjoy experiences which provide a lifetime's worth of memories. The wayfaring is never really complete, though, until it becomes the voyage home: the Time sometimes comes after two years of travel and sometimes after ten, but the Spirit always makes it clear. When that Time comes, each Urvanovestilli spends a little longer — perhaps a month — with the people he is visiting, and then leaves, with a very passionate and tearful goodbye.

It is Time to return home, to put down roots, to deepen, to mature; Time to wholly enter into the homeland. From this point on, the Urvanovestilli is no longer a wayfarer. The memories of his travels are cherished and very dear, a set of riches that he will always carry with him, and he will still send blessings, gifts, letters, and occasionally visits to friends in far away lands, but it is no longer time to go here and there; it is Time to grow into family, friends, and city.

Urvanovestilli writings and teaching, the means by which theology and philosophy are transmitted, take many forms — poems, riddles, parables and allegories, personal conversations, to name a few — but the predominant form is a systematic and structured logical argument: point one, point two, point three, subpoint three b, conclusion one... The structure carries allusion, nuance, and beauty; it leaves room for the speaker to make a very beautiful craft of words.

They enjoy being absorbed in thought; it is how they spend a good time of each day. They do not look down on sensation — indeed, they have a great appreciation for what is a very highly developed art, music, and cuisine — but it does not fill their world as it does that of many others. Abstraction and complexities of thought are fundamental to their experience of the world: sensation leads into perception, perception leads into concrete thought, and concrete thought leads into abstract thought. Moments of immersion in the senses are rare, Sensation, being the

outermost layer, is governed and enjoyed from within. Its form is generally of aural and visual character; the aural side is shaped by words, and then accommodates the other plethora of sounds, and the visual side is shaped by the forms, the spaces, and the interactions of their devices, and sees something of springs and gears in the world around.

Their faces appear at first glance to be almost expressionless — a faint hint of a smile, perhaps — until you look at their eyes, the first window to the fire and intensity within. Urvanovestilli eyes — whether brown, amber, hazel, grey, or blue — bear an intense, probing gaze; in Urvanovestilli culture, eye contact is almost continual, and reflects a fire, an intensity, a passion, that fills their way of life. It does not take long to be reminded that eye contact is a form of touch; their eyes seem to be looking into your spirit. The gaze, in its intensity, is never cold and calculating, never the chilling, devouring stare of a steel face beyond which lies a heart of ice; at its most intense and most probing, it is the most filled with love, and most easily shows the intense fire within. They can rest — and they know calm and tranquility — but there is a great energy within, an energy that shows itself in their artwork and writings. Those who read their theologians certainly do not fail to notice the depths of wisdom and insight, but what is most striking is their love for God. The passion — of their love for God, for spouse, for family, for their neighbor; of desire to grow in virtue and knowledge, for their work — burns, and their experience of emotion — of discovery, of awe, of appreciation of beauty — is long and intense, complex and multifaceted. This emotion is the other side of *contrainte*; it is the same virtue that enables them to enjoy wine in temperance, and to be moved to tears by music and theater. It is not a "virtue" of stifling — that would be far too easy, but of control and proper enjoyment. Just as they find abstinence from drink to be too easy, a way of dodging the lesson of moderation, stifling emotion and crushing it would be, to them, a way of dodging the lesson of passions rightly oriented in accordance with holiness and love — not to mention an unconscionable destruction of an integral facet of being human.

Those Urvanovestilli who are the most virtuous, the most filled with *contrainte*, are nearly always the most passionate.

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Urvanovestilli are usually short, but look like very tall in miniature, with clear white skin and jet black hair. The men have a thin and wiry frame, with sharp and angular features. They have flaring eyebrows coming out of a prominent brow, a thin, hooked nose, and tufts of fine hair flaring away from their ears. Skin holds tightly to bones, muscles, and veins, and arms end in long, thin hands with nimble fingers. Their voices are a very soft, almost silent tenor.

The women are somewhat slender, but a slenderness which is graceful and rounded. Their features, as well as their build, bear this slender, graceful, rounded character, and their movements are light and flowing. (If the men know more of passion, the women know more of calm). Their voices are high and clear, with a sound that is like silver, like cold and crystalline water, like clear, light, dry Alsace blanc.

Urvanovestilli worship services are long and complex, with ornate liturgy and ritual. The language is florid and ornate (like that of the liturgy stemming from St. John Chrysostom) and every sentence of the liturgy would embody theological truth. The homilies (although not the only part of the service which varies (much of the liturgy itself changing according to a traditional pattern dictated by a complex algorithm) from week to week) are themselves not that long. They are of moderate length, and differ from the liturgy — which presented different doctrines sentence by sentence — in being a full and well-developed presentation of one single idea, expressed in unequalled detail and eloquence.

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The Urvanovestilli homeland is named 'Flaristimmo'.

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Urvanovestilli city — Capitello

Capitello is the capital of the Urvanovestilli land, and the classical Urvanovestilli city.

At the very heart lies a cruciform cathedral. It is an immense domed building, the outside in white marble, covered with statues and spires. Inside, all is dark — or so it seems to a person who first steps in.

Someone who steps in first stands in place, seeing nothing really, perhaps a few points of light in the darkness... and then, very slowly, begins to adjust. It is cool inside, and very still. The silence is a silence that can be heard, a very real and present stillness. As he begins to step into the coolness and the silence, he begins to see light — light that had gone unnoticed at first, but as he steps into it, becomes more and more visible. The light is shining through a thousand candles, each one bringing a little bit of light, a little bit of warmth, to what is around it. Then, after the candles become visible, it is seen what they illuminate — mosaics, worked with colored dyes and gold leaf... and faces.

Outside of the cathedral lies an open garden with fountains and statues. Around the garden lies a circle of seven great halls. In clockwise order, beginning south of the cathedral, they are:

**Library:** This collection, the largest in the world, has at least one copy of all known writings, and a scriptorium in which they are copied and transmitted.

**Device museum:** This is a clockwork building filled with exemplary devices (and copies in various states of disassembly).

**Senate:** This building is decorated with arts and crafts from the cities throughout the land; it is a place where senators (two from each city and one from each village) meet to govern the nation.

**Mayorship:** This is the local senate, the seat from which public affairs are run; the majority of political power is on a local level (the senate being the head of a confederation), vested in the town elders.

**Forum:** This is an immense amphitheater which hosts a variety of speakers, panels, and open talks. Lecture is the predominant medium and presentation, but poetry and storytelling occur not infrequently. The forum, along with the evening worship services in the cathedral, walking in the garden, attending a concert, or looking through the art museum, is appreciated as an enjoyable way to spend a night out.

**Music hall/theater:** This hosts concerts and recitals, theatrical performances, operas, dances, pyrotechnic displays, occasional Janra

acrobatic performances, dramatic readings, puppet shows...

Art museum: Half of the space is devoted to permanent exhibits, and half to temporary displays. Most of the finest artwork ever produced by Urvanovestilli, and a good deal of the finest artwork from other cultures, may be seen here.

Outside of the seven halls lies what is called "the mélange"; outside of the mélange lie fields, pastures, and vineyards; outside of the farmland lies forest.

The mélange is a large annulus which contains mansions, shops, roads, paths, public squares, gardens, open lots, little forums and theaters, restaurants, and so on. It is where a great deal of life and culture transpires; in the little nooks and crannies, inside the parlors of the houses, a lot transpires.

The Urvanovestilli enjoy going out, but the enjoyment does not come from despising being at home. The parlors, which have the distinction of being within a person's home and hospitality, are lavishly furnished, with couches, chairs, lanterns, some instruments, a liquor machine, some sculpture or paintings, often a fountain or clock or... and people enjoy sitting around, talking, reading, performing music...

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### Urvanovestilli city: Éliré

Éliré is known among the Urvanovestilli as the city of seashells. While most Urvanovestilli cities are built out of white stone, in ornately embellished classical geometric forms, Éliré is built out of sandy yellow stone, in flowing curves; buildings seem like giant seashells. The artwork and jewelry are crafted from seashells and other treasures from the sea — coral and pearls — and the public squares are filled with fountains and pools, where colorful fish swim about.

The people enjoy swimming, and often meet the dolphin population; they enjoy each other.

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## Urvanovestilli city: Mistrelli

Mistrelli lies in the heart of the Fog Valley; a shroud of mist cloaks the ground, out of which rise trees and tall buildings with spires and towers. Inside the buildings are all manner of tunnels of tunnels, secret passages, and trapdoors; there are clockwork devices in each one. Throughout the city are spread a handful of entrances to a vast underground labyrinth, of which the better part is known; there are all manner of doors and puzzles inside.

The city is full of rose bushes, climbing up the sides of the buildings, over and around gates; most are yellow, but there are some of every color.

The people take a long time to get to know, and their personalities always have hidden gems. Their study of theology emphasizes mystery and the incomprehensible nature of God; Connaissance, a theologian from Mistrelli, began and ended his magnum opus with the words, "I do not know."

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## Urvanovestilli city: Fabriqué

Fabriqué is the biggest of Urvanovestilli port cities; it lies on the Tuz border, and is the site where ships — full rigs with multiple masts, many sails, and innumerable ropes — are built. They are polished and ornately carved, well suited for transport and trade as well as a work of art. The crews hired tend to be heavily Tuz — strong and sturdy workers who have no problem tying a rope as thick as a wrist in waves and storm — and set sail to other Urvanovestilli ports and ports around the world, transporting voyagers and cargo to destinations near and far.

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# Yedidia

The Yedidia culture is a culture of vibrant life. They live in buildings woven out of living trees and plants; the doorways are filled by hanging curtains of leafy vines which softly part as a person passes through.

Their manner of gardening spins out of a wonderful talent for drawing beauty out of the forest; many visitors come for the first time, do not even realize that they have stepped into a garden; they only notice that the forest's beauty is exceptional there.

The Yedidia are very sensitive to the rest of Creation; they speak in a melodic, lilting tongue of the purest song, but even that language is not the one that is closest to them. The first language of every child is that of rocks and trees and skies and seas. They know how to call birds out of the forest to fly into their hands; they know how to make plants flourish.

They have ears to hear the crystalline song by which the Heavens declare the glory of their Maker. They appreciate the beauty of the created order as it tells of the Uncreate with a power that can not fully be translated into words — and they use the language of Creation to speak of the mysteries of the Creator, whose fingerprints are everywhere in nature.

They look into the great and unfathomable vastness of space; it furnishes the language by which they tell of the great and unfathomable vastness of the Creator. They know the energy, the great fire out of which the sun pours out light and energy; it furnishes the language by which they tell of the energy and great fire in the heart of the Father, offering warmth and light freely and without cost. They dance in the rain, the life giving water poured out from above; it furnishes the language by which they speak of springs of living water come down from Heaven. They admire the beauty of the lilies of the field, which simply rest in the sunlight, rain, and dew showered on them; it furnishes the language by which they speak of resting in the love poured out. Their eyes are not closed when a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies...

They are sensitive to the silent beauty that is sometimes unnoticed



even by the Janra. They enjoy the brilliance of the sun, and the pale blue luminescence of the moon; the gentle warmth of a summer night, and the powerful motion of a pouring rainstorm (and there are few things many Yedidia enjoy more than being thoroughly drenched). They look at the veins of a leaf, the hairs of a caterpillar, the motion of a snail; they listen to the song of birds, the sound of wind whispering amidst the leaves, the splashes of water flowing over rocks; they taste the cold freshness of water, the tartness of lemons, the sweetness of strawberries; they smell the soft fragrance of jasmine, the spice of cinnamon, the freshness after a rain; they feel the velvety softness of a rabbit's fur, the raspiness of a rhubarb leaf, the roughness of bark, the smoothness of a worn stone, the gentle kiss of a summer breeze, the springiness of pete moss, the shimmering heat of fire long into the night, the light tickle of a crawling gecko, the fineness of a child's hair, and the warmth of a friend's face.

They are as intuitive as they are perceptive; the emotions of friends especially, but strangers as well, are quickly understood; be it singing together, a friendly joke, talking, listening, leaving alone, sitting together in silence, holding a hand, giving a hug — they always seem to know.

The Yedidia make wines and incense which even the Urvanovestilli do not come close to. It is, though, the Urvanovestilli who make their garments. Some are short, some are tall; some are slender, some are rounded; they tends towards being fairly short and fairly round, but there is a lot of variety. All, though, have olive skin and dark, shiny black hair; the women wear a long, flowing robe of kelly green, over which cascades of hair fall and spin, sometimes reaching to the waist, sometimes almost touching the ground; the men wear cloaks and tunics of walnut brown. The clothing is soft and light as air; it streams out in the motion and jumps of dance — like their music, smooth, soft, flowing, graceful.

"Dance, then, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the Dance, said he." Theirs is a culture full of joy and celebration; it is full of smiles, and always willing to welcome a visitor. Finding something good, they look for someone to share it with.

They are very sensitive to the cycles of nature, of the day, of the phases of the moon, of the seasons in turn. They shape the regular

rhythm of their songs, and provide a sense of constancy and regularity, again, which furnishes the language by which they speak of the constancy and regularity of the Creator.

The traditional greeting is a soft and gentle hug, one which often lasts a while (or a butterfly kiss, or...). That touch, as their faces and voices as they speak, bears a great deal of expression: The phrase of greeting used means, literally, "Here is a person in whom I find joy." The words remain the same, but the music of the speech colors it to perfection.

Though each culture has its own drink — even the icy cold water enjoyed by the Nor'krin is appreciated by visiting Janra, who recognize it as a gift given without sowing or reaping — drinks are one of the first things that come to mind when most people hear the word 'Yedidia'.

First of all are their wines. Nearly all of the finest wines are made in their land. Red and white, and a little bit of rose and green, are stored away in caves to age for years, perhaps decades, before being opened to enjoy with friends and memories.

After the wines come cider; it is served hot and well spiced; the spicing is done in many different ways, and gives a wonderful variety to a very soothing drink to warm a cool evening.

There are fruit juices of every color of the rainbow; strawberry, pear, guava, banana, apple, peach, and fig are but the beginning of a very long and flavorful list. There is, though, one strong point of commonality: the fruit is always still attached to the plant a few minutes before it is served.

(the variety of fruit juices is fermented and aged as are grapes to make wine, but that variety of drinks is reserved for very special occasions)

They also enjoy teas and infusions; the trees and herbs provide another spectrum of tastes to sip with friends.

Roots of various plants are sometimes spiced to provide another drink.

Yedidia cuisine varies somewhat from region to region. In some places, it is based on fresh fruit, and in others, on breads, cereals, thick soups and vegetable stews; the latter is spiced, lightly salted, and often has some meat for added flavor. All forms of Yedidia cuisine begin with a small salad (either garden or fruit), have a main course of some form of the local specialties, are followed by a platter with an assortment of breads and fresh fruits, and end with a dessert of cheeses or cured fruit.

Life, to the Yedidia, is one big, long party, and, to the Yedidia, song is the symbol of celebration. They sing in the morning, and sing in the evening; they sing while working, and sing a prayer — hands joined together — before meals. Thought is expressed in song; the first place to look for an expression of their perspective on theology and philosophy is in the verses of their hymns. There are many cherished songs shared across the nation, but there is also much spontaneity and improvisation; their way of speaking/singing is in metered verse, and a wealth of their wisdom is embodied in the rhythm of hymns, regular and dependable as the cycles of nature. The day, the moon, the year — these different cycles are echoed in the structure of verses.

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, For the love which from our birth over and around us lies: Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night, Hill and vale and tree and flower, sun and moon and stars of light: Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child, Friends on earth, and friends above; for all gentle thoughts and mild; Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For Thy church, that evermore lifteth holy hands above, Offering up on every shore her pure sacrifice of love: Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For Thyself, best Gift Divine! To our race so freely given; For that great great love of Thine peace on earth and joy in Heaven.

that great, great love of mine, peace on earth, and joy in heaven.  
Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears, All nature  
sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. This is my  
Father's world: I rest me in the thought Of rocks and trees, of skies  
and seas; His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise, The  
morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise. This is my  
Father's world: He shines in all that's fair; In the rustling grass I hear  
him pass, He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget That though the  
wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet. This is my Father's  
world: the battle is not done; Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and  
earth and Heaven be one.

The Yedidia are the most alive to sensation; each sense is valued, and  
each one provides something a little different.

Touch is pre-eminent; it is enjoyed immensely, and they consider it  
the most informative of senses. Touch tells them of texture and  
temperature, of moist and dry; by how things respond to pressure, they  
can feel what is present beneath the surface and what structure it forms;  
it tells much of emotion. When sensation yields perception, touch  
provides them with the greatest richness.

Smell is a sense of memories; to walk through an orchard is to  
remember seasons past. It no less bears a tale of what has happened; each  
person bears his own distinctive smell, and a place by its smell tells who  
has passed by. Many different things leave a mark on a placés scent, and  
to smell is to be told, as if in a far-off memory (indeed, like those that  
smell mysteriously triggers), what plants are present, what the weather is  
like and has been, who has passed by, what fruit was picked — though not  
all of this is perceived all of the time, the fragrance of a place often tells  
bits and pieces.

Sight is a sense that works by light illuminating all that it shines on (and this is something from which they draw a lesson). It tells of the color, the form, and the beauty of what is around; what is moving and what is still; it tells of what is far away and can not yet be touched. It serves as a guide to what is around, as a guide by which to move and act in an unknown situation, and it bears its own beauty; all of this provides lessons about God and about faith.

The first sound in their mind, and the one they most love, is song. The song of a friend's voice, the song of a bird chirping, the song of a babbling brook, the silent song of silvery blue starlight — all of these are listened to and enjoyed.

The taste of food tells of the time of year and of culture. Drink and food are a kind of art, and its taste tells both of the time of year and how it was prepared.

Yedidia emotions have a fluid character; they are a sensitive people who are easily moved and who show their emotions quickly. Their celebration is filled with smiles and mirth — as is, indeed, much of life. Tears are held to be very precious — in their language, the same word means 'tear' and 'diamond' — and they know tears, not only of sorrow, but also of joy. Tears come to greet both memories and powerful music, and mark as both sign and symbol the most significant events in life — farewell and death, yes, but also a loved one regained, and birth, and marriage. Memories and hopes, also, are precious. They know sorrow, but never bitterness; however deep and angst-ridden the sorrow may be, deeper and more healing is the joy. Farewell is always marked by the thought of, "I will be able to enjoy your presence again;" on many a deathbed has been spoken the words, "We will be brought back together again in the heart of the Father. It will not be long."

Yedidia worship services are filled with songs — celebrations in which everybody participates.

The Yedidia homeland is named 'Syllii'.

## Yedidia Character: Sylla

Sylla is relatively short and rounded; she has dark, olive skin and soft, brown eyes. Her hair falls down to her waist, and she wears a long, flowing kelly green robe, as is traditional among Yedidia women; more often than not, a chain of flowers rests in her hair. She chooses to go barefoot, so that she can feel the grass, the moss, the earth, and the stones beneath her feet.

The only possession which she carries is a small harp; a slow strum accompanies a soft and gentle song. She also has with her a pet: a milshh: a small, eyeless animal, about two feet long, with brilliant golden fur that is long and soft, two large, pointed ears, eight short, flexible legs ending in large paws, and a shiny black nose which is always sniffing inquisitively. It is both shy and curious, and it is very warm and affectionate; it is usually very calm and sedate, but often becomes very excited when it smells someone familiar.

A quote:

Fair is the sunlight;  
Fairer still the moonlight;  
Fairest of all, is the light of thy face.

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## Jec

The Jec life is filled with faith, humility, and simplicity. They live in small rural villages, where farmland — pastures, fields, orchards and vineyards, the village commons — outlies a few houses, some artisan's shops, and a simple church.

They are peasants very much like those chosen to be apostles, and the carpenter who chose them. Farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers — clothed in rough, plainly colored robes, they are the sort of people one could easily overlook in the search for the spectacular. It is calloused hands and dirty fingernails that are lifted up to God in worship, and that continue to worship by placing a yoke on a pair of oxen, gathering firewood, peeling carrots and potatoes, or threshing wheat. There are many who are given great wisdom and knowledge, a faith to move mountains, or who speak in the tongues of men and angels, but they do not bear an otherworldly air or a strange electricity; they appear as men and women like any other, usually harvesting barley or carving wood.

Their thought is expressed in parables, little stories, and proverbs, the first and foremost of which are "Love Yahweh your God with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your mind, and all of your might," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is a great sense of community and continuity, carrying the torch passed down by the saints who walked before.

They do not really travel; most are born, live, and die within a few miles of a single point. They do not look down on wayfarers who voyage far and wide to see the height of mountains and the vastness of seas, and enjoy the richness of the visible and invisible artifacts of the variety of cultures, but they pay a lot of attention to what is easy to pass by without noticing. They know their culture, their village, and its people very well.

Jec culture is a culture of the very small. They see the great in the small; in the Law of Love is seen all of virtue and right action; in a tiny shoot pushing out of the ground they see an immense oak whose branches will someday provide shade; in a simple gift, they see the love

that gave it. They are fond of the words, "He who is faithful in little is also faithful in much." Piety is given expression in the tiny details of everyday life, to which careful attention is devoted. They search to love God by seeing to the needs of whoever they are with.

Gift giving occupies an important cultural position; each gift serves as a little symbol, a little morsel, of love. The gifts are very simple — poverty does not permit the spectacular — but are given generously. A flower, an apple, a song, a blessing, a handshake, a prayer, a poem, a cup of cold water wood carved into a statue or a whistle, an oddly shaped pebble, a skin of wine, a walk, a story, a patterned candle — all of these are given.

Sight, sound, touch, smell, taste — there is nothing really special about their use of senses. They notice and enjoy little details; there is not much more to say.

The language has simple rules and few words; it is one of the easiest to learn, and bears well the load of talking about everyday matters, about personality and friendship, and about God.

When two Jec meet, one is usually coming to visit the other, and something of this notion of visit and welcome is embodied in the greeting. The visitor comes with one arm outstretched and hand open, saying, "I give you my love." The host clasps the outstretched hand, bowing slightly, and says, "And I return to you mine." These actions are accompanied by a gentle smile.

They are fairly short, with tan skin, brown eyes, and hair that is usually brown (and sometimes black or sandy blonde).

Their emotions are the emotions of being human, the common points of feeling shared across all culture. They know at least something of laughter and peace and passion and tears and awe; if there is one point that runs strong, it is a sense of tradition, community, continuity, and place; they have a sense of unique importance and a part in the great plan (two concepts which are not really separate in their thought).

Their worship services are simple, without any real distinguishing



Jec worship services are simple, without any real distinguishing remarks — no bells and smells, just a week by week liturgical service presenting the Gospel message and embodying worship. The opening words of each service are, "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh your God is one. You shall love Yahweh your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your might. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love one another."

The Jec homeland is named 'Tev'.

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# Shal

The language is soft, gentle, simple, and calm. It is spoken slowly, as if it were a lullaby; it has few words: simple, little words with rich and profound connotations; 'Way', 'Tao', and 'Word' are like the nouns which are used.

Even the verbs are rarely verbs which tell of action. Rather, they describe that which is; 'be', 'abide in', 'embody', 'love', 'nourish', 'support', 'is the friend of', 'know', 'receive', 'is from', 'resemble', 'live', are the essential words which a child would learn as one of our children would learn words such as 'walk', 'talk', 'eat'. Just as our language has different words — 'walk', 'run', 'jog', 'sprint', 'mosey', 'trot', for example — which tell of the action of moving by the use of legs, so their language has at least a few different words to tell of being, or understanding, or abiding, or loving. The way of speaking sometimes does not even need verbs; there are more adjectives than adverbs.

The genius of the language is embodied in a flowing prose which is the purest poetry; words with the simplicity of a child. It does not have abruptly ending sentences, but rather slides somewhat like Hebrew; one thought gives form to the next. It has something like the feel of the prologue to John's account of the Gospel, or his first letter; it has something like the feel of a Gregorian chant; there is nothing abrupt in their speech or music. They speak, but even more, they are silent; there is a communion.

The understanding is one which sees beyond, which looks at the surface and sees into the depths. They stand dazzled by the glory of the starry vault, and worship the awesome Creator who called them into being; they look at a friend's face and see the person behind.

Their culture is a place of perfect order. It is ordered by things being placed rightly; by God worshiped by man, the spiritual ahead of the physical, being beyond doing.

It is of this that God is known in all of his majesty, that spirituality

becomes rich and profound, that there is a right state of being. This brings the lesser things to flourish. Men shine as they reflect the glory of God. That which is physical is enjoyed immensely — the warmth and softness of a friend's touch, the sweetness of a freshly picked orange, the fragrance of a garden of flowers, the sound of a bird's song, the colors of a sunset — all of these things are received gratefully. Being, they do; they tend the garden, and create.

The order flows from resting in the Spirit and from love; there is no one who thinks of order. The truthfulness knows nothing of oaths; the order knows nothing of rules, nor even of honor and morality.

The culture is best understood, not by looking at men, but by looking at God. God gives generously, and they receive and rest in his love.

There are many people in modern society who, when waiting in an office or at a traffic light, become agitated and begin to fidget; they are hollowed out by an excess of doing. The Shal are innocent of such hurry. They act, but it is a doing which flows from being.

Food, wine, music, incense, touch, silence, storytelling, dance, drama, puppetry — it is not often that they all get together to have a celebration (they prize greatly time spent alone with one person, and then extended families and tightly knit communities).

Shal culture does not exactly have greetings as such; their way of thought works differently.

To say 'hello' or 'goodbye' is an action of an instant, in two senses. In one sense, it lasts for an instant; no one says 'hello' twenty times or shakes hands for five minutes. In the other sense, it marks an instant, the instant where absence becomes presence or presence becomes absence.

The Shal do not really think in terms of instants; time is measured and perceived — or, rather, not measured and not perceived — by moments. A friend is present, and he is enjoyed, and then he is absent, and then there is solitude. In the place of a greeting, the Shal have a presence. With the Shal, you never get the feeling that you are alone and there is another person nearby who is also alone; you never get the

there is another person nearby who is also alone, you never get the feeling that there is a close group of friends nearby and they are inside and you are outside. If a Shal is nearby, he is present; indeed, the Shal have a very present touch.

Life, to the Shal, is full of moments. There is a meal with friends, and then there is reflection in solitude, and then there is a beautiful song, and then there is time with a friend, and then there is prayer, and then there is sleep, and then there is work tending to the trees... There is not interruption or haste; a moment lasts as long as it is appropriate for a moment to last.

Their moments of community are profound; their moments of solitude are even more profound. 'Withdrawing' is what they call it; it is a time of stillness, and an expression of a love so profound that all other loves appear to be hate. It is a time of finding a secret place, and then withdrawing — from family, friends, and loved ones, from music and the beauty of nature, from cherished activities, from sensation — into the heart of the Father. It is a time of — it is hard to say what. Of being loved, and of loving. Of growing still, and becoming. Of being set in a right state, and realigned in accordance with the ultimate reality. Of purity from the Origin. Of being made who one is to be. Of communion and worship. Of imago dei filled with the light of Deus. Of being pulled out of time and knowing something of the Eternal.

This withdrawing fills them with an abundant love for other people, and gives them a renewed appreciation for nature and music; it fills them with silence, and fills their words and song.

Their perception of the world is quintessentially tactile. Sight, hearing, and smell all work at a distance; touch perceives what is immediately present. The eyes, ears, nose, and tongue are all organs of sense at one place on the body — more sensitive in some places and less in others, to be sure — and feels all of what is immediately present. Touch provides the physical side of the presence which is so greatly valued.

The emotional side of the culture is filled by peace, in which is embedded joy and contentment. It does not change very much or very quickly — though it encompasses affection, or appreciation of beauty, or a

special serenity, or absorption in thought.

Their appearances have the peculiar property of not seeming to be any particular age. If you look, age is not very difficult to judge, but somehow the thought doesn't come up. They have a rounded shape, soft eyes, and warm, soft skin.

Shal worship services are different from the others. They are characterized, not by the presence of words, but by the presence of a profound and penetrating silence where God is imminent. There are a few words, but they are not where the essence lies.

The Shal homeland is named 'Liss'.

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# Janra

The Janra, unlike any of the other cultures, have no homeland; they voyage among the other lands, where they are generally well-liked and warmly received. Their wayfaring is at once literal and symbolic: literal in the sense that they know that they are passing through this earthly country for a better one. They enjoy all of the lands that they visit — they have an informal character, and always seem to be at home — but they know that none of them is really home.

It must be said that they know how to move. They can walk, skip, and run, of course, but that is only the beginning. Trees, buildings, and cliffs are climbed like ladders. Come oceans, rivers, and lakes, they will happily swim. Be it lightly skipping atop a thin wall, or jumping out of a window to grab a tree branch and swing down, or running at top speed through the twisty passages of the Southern mines and caves, they make acrobatics seem another form of walking. Somehow, even flipping through a window or somersaulting under a table, they have an extraordinary knack for barely missing collisions with hard objects; the Urvanovestilli are still debating whether this is the result of skill or luck.

The dances of the Urvanovestilli have a marvelous complexity, and those of the Yedidia are known for their flowing grace, but there is still nothing like the spinning energy of the Janra. The Janra are very adaptable, pulling bits and pieces from other cultures and setting them together in vital new combinations. In some of the dances can be seen bits and pieces — moves of strength that look like Tuz wrestling, or complexity from the Urvanovestilli — and the result is nothing short of breathtaking.

In their adaptability, they usually speak at least a few words of each language, and usually borrow whatever form of greeting is common in the land they are visiting. They are familiar with the household objects (often enough to use them in new ways). This, combined with a flair for practical jokes, is occasionally enough to annoy the town guards, but (more often than not) their antics leave people laughing, sometimes to the point of tears

the point of tears.

The Janra have a remarkable talent for not remaking God in their image. Their description of Jesus is anything but boring and respectable — a firebrand with a phenomenal knack for offending religious leaders, in the habit of telling respectable pillars of society things such as, "The prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of you." — and they are known for an honesty that can be singularly blunt. They know that he passed over scribes and lawyers to call, as disciples, a motley crew of fishermen, tax collectors, and other peasants — one terrorist thrown in to make matters interesting. They are, however, just as cautious not to water him into only being a social reformer who had nothing to say about sexual purity.

For all of their sharpness, for all of their ability to bring forth the most embarrassing Scriptural teaching at the worst possible moment, it must also be said that the Janra have hearts of pure gold. Love and compassion are constantly in their thought and action; they are the first to share their food with a beggar, say hello to the person who is alone, or ask, "Are you hurting?" The accusations brought against them are accusations of having too many quirks, not of being unloving.

Their language is of a force that is not easily translated into writing; of course it has nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. and respects masculine and feminine, but intonation, speed, vocal tension, and other factors tell at least as much; they carry connotation and sentiment, express the level of clarity of understanding the speaker believes he has, and many more things. There are also a number of verbal tics, on the order of two or three dozen ('Eh?' is, however, not included, and apparently perceived to be a mark of general silliness); in a sense, they don't do anything, but in a sense, they add a very nice pepper to the speech.

Janra thought involves a kind of sideways logic, which is part of why their ways of speaking are difficult to describe. They take little bits and pieces from different places, and put them together in unexpected ways, making connections that can be very surprising. They are very good at reading between the lines, and sometimes perceive things which were not intentionally meant to be communicated. Sometimes they borrow

manners of speech from other people — conversation, structured argument, metered verse, stories, parables, and so on — but their usual way of speaking has all sorts of sideways jumps and turns, with segues that can be rather odd, and often leaves gaps; these gaps are not a matter of sloppiness, but rather something like a joke or riddle where the hole is intentionally left to be filled in by the listener.

"When it comes to games, never try to understand the Janra mind."

-Oeildubeau, Urvanovestilli philosopher and anthropologist

It is known that Janra sports usually last for at least half an hour, involve a ball, two or more teams, running and acrobatics, and animated discussion. Beyond that, neither the Urvanovestilli's logic nor the Yedidia's intuition are able to make head or tail of them. In general, the teams appear to have unequal numbers of players; the players often switch teams in the course of play; teams are created and dissolved; the nature of the activities makes sudden and radical changes; there is no visible winning or losing. There are occasionally times in the course of play when some intelligible goal appears to be being approached... but then, all players seem to be approaching it in a rather erratic manner (when asked why he didn't do thus and such simple thing and achieve the approached goal by an inexperienced anthropologist, one of the Janra said, "Technically, that would work, but that would be a very boring way to do it," and then bolted back into play: the extent to which game play is comprehensible heightens its incomprehensibility). Late in life, Oeildubeau hinted at having suspicions that, if the Janra believe that they are being watched, they will spontaneously stop whatever sport they are playing, and instead begin a series of activities expressly designed to give any observer a headache.

Janra come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, showing bits and pieces of other races; they tend to be of moderate to tall height and a lithe build. Most are fairly light skinned (although a few are rather dark); a fair number of them have skin spotted with freckles. They have every imaginable color of hair (black, brown, blonde, grey, white, red, tweed, shaven head, etc). and eyes (brown, blue, hazel, grey, amber, purple, etc).



They wear loose clothing in a variety of colors, usually quite vivid; red, purple, and green are the most common of solid colors, and patches or stripes of some pattern or the whole rainbow appear not infrequently. Therefore, Al is a pud.

Their sensation of the world is primarily visual, and in a way patterned after their thought; visualizing and visual problem solving comes very naturally to them. They see, as well as beauty, a world to interact with, and parts to rearrange and make something new. Sound and touch serve largely to complement and extend visual image; taste and smell are enjoyed, but do not play a terribly large role. The other side of the coin (to problem solving) is observing and enjoying, which is also very much a part of culture.

Their emotional life has several sides. They carry with them, in their emotions, a little bit of every place and people they visit — the passion and control of the Urvanovestilli, the peace of the Shal, the festivities and music of the Yedidia, the respect of the Nor'krin, the enjoyment of exercise of the Tuz, the common factor of the Jec. Perhaps the most prominent side of all is laughter. Janra are immeasurably fond of banter and practical jokes, and have an uncanny knack for guessing who is ticklish. There is an element of what is carefree, spontaneous, and given to pure enjoyment of simple pleasures; there is also a large element of being immersed in sidethink, and they enjoy greatly the flash of insight when everything fits together. They are curious and enjoy discovery.

There is another side to this emotion which seems paradoxical, but fits perfectly. There is a difference between childlike and childish, and not a trace of childishness is to be found among them. They enter the Kingdom of Heaven as little children — in particular, like one little boy who stood up before crowds of thousands and asked, "Why is the Emperor naked?" Of all the skills people learn as a part of growing up, they know perhaps least of all closing their eyes and using intelligence as a tool to make oneself stupid. They are moved by what goes unnoticed, smiling at the beauty in a single blade of grass, and weeping at the death of a beggar who, homeless, friendless, handicapped and burned, explained that he was unable to drop a knife taped to his defunct hand for self-defense, but was still shot and killed outside of the White House by

men entrusted with the responsibility of protecting innocent life.

There are two things to said about Janra worship. The first is that they adapt and participate in whatever is the local manner of worship (as do traveling Urvanovestilli and other wayfarers) — in that regard, they make no distinction between themselves and the peoples that they visit. The second — and this does not stem from any perceived defect in the other forms of worship, but from who they are — is that they hold their own worship services.

These services do not occur at a fixed time and place (though they occur more frequently when Janra are on the road between different locations), but at random intervals and locations, spontaneously. Anyone and everyone is welcome, and children and sometimes adults of other races are usually present.

They are a warm and informal occasions, where anyone can take the lead, and a great many activities are recognized as worship; the Janra have a particularly strong emphasis on the priesthood of the believer and the sacredness of everyday life. People sit in a big circle, and people or groups of people come to the center to present or lead as they wish.

There is no canonical list of activities that are performed at these services, but the following are common.

\* Songs. The Janra sing their own songs (often improvised) or those of other peoples; those of the Yedidia are especially treasured. While singing, the people are sometimes still, sometimes swaying, sometimes clapping, and sometimes dancing with their arms.

\* Prayer. One person will lead a prayer, or people will pray popcorn style, or...

\* Sermons. A theologian or philosopher will preach a sermon.

\* Sharing. Someone will share an insight or experience from personal life.

\* Dance. The whole assembly will dance, sometimes in a long, snaking line.

\* A joke is told. The Janra are fond of laughter.

\* Drama. One of a few people will present a dramatic presentation, play, or skit.

\* ...

- ˆ Group hug, usually in whatever is the common greeting of the land.
  - \* Ticklefest. "Blessed are the ticklish, for the touch of a friend will fill them with laughter."
  - \* Silence. This is treasured.
  - \* Reading from the Scriptures.
  - \* Reading or recitation of poetry.
  - \* Storytelling.
  - \* Juggling and similar activities.
  - \* Acrobatics.
  - \* Instrumental music.
  - \* Non sequiturs.
  - \* Miming.
  - \* Mad libs.
  - \* Impressions and impersonations of various and sundry people.
  - \* Janra-ball. This occurs in a modified form such that members of other races, while still not understanding anything, are capable of participating. (Nobody gets a headache.)
  - \* Eucharist. This is the most solemn and important moment, and occurs exactly once in a service — at the end.
  - \* None of the above. This category is especially appreciated.
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### Janra character: Nimbus

Nimbus is fairly short and wiry; he has light, almost white blonde hair, deep, intense blue eyes which sparkle and blaze, and a rich, laughing smile. He wears a loose, shimmering two-legged robe of midnight blue, from the folds of which he seems to be able to procure innumerable items of Urvanovestilli make (for example: goggles (waterproof), telescope, silk rope and grappling hook with spring-loaded launcher, climbing/rapelling harness and gear/self-contained, spring-loaded belay), lantern, tool kit (large blade, precision blade, compass, wire saw, corkscrew, ruler, reamer, chisel, pliers, scissors, needle, punch, protractor, file, and sharpening stone), paper pad, mechanical pencil, supply kit (string, pencil lead, chalk, flask of oil, wire, miscellaneous device components (gears, springs, shafts, etc.), cloth), meal kit, tinderbox, mechanical puzzle, mirror, whistle...).

During childhood, he spent a lot of time in the land of the Urvanovestilli, and began to take an interest in tinkering. He has very much his own way of tinkering, from an Urvanovestilli perspective; he is fond of all manner of kludges. The resulting devices have caused his Urvanovestilli mentors to conclude that he is mad (the truth of the matter being that he is not mad, but produces and modifies contraptions in such a manner as to drive any honest Urvanovestilli tinkerer mad). When the city unveiled a new fountain in the public square, he added a pyrotechnic spark; when, in a public ceremony, the mayor celebrated his wife's birthday by presenting a specially commissioned music box, the tune somehow changed from "Happy birthday to you" to "The old grey mare ain't what she used to be."

He does, however, possess a sense of what is and is not appropriate; his practical jokes never take on a mean or spiteful character, and he does possess a strong degree of contrainte. He does appreciate the variety of cultures he visits, and enjoys Urvanovestilli philosophical and theological discussions.

He is, in short, as Janra as any — left-handed and colorful, warm and compassionate, and a heart of solid gold.

A quote: "What? You think I would do something like that? I'm hurt." (generally accompanied by a wide grin)

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# All

"Not all flesh is the same: men have one kind of flesh, and beasts have another kind of flesh, fish have another, and birds another still. There are also celestial bodies, and terrestrial bodies; the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. The sun has one glory, and the moon another, and the stars still another; star differs from star in glory."

I Cor. 15:39-41

"God does not create two blades of grass alike, let alone two saints, two angels, or two nations."

C.S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength

This world is an exploration of good, a set of musings about cultures not fallen. The variety of cultures exists because of the nature of good.\*

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the same Gospel, the same message of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, crucified for the forgiveness of sins and raised from the dead.

They each, however, present this one Gospel with a distinct flavor; it is with a great deal of wisdom and respect for this one Gospel message that Christian tradition has vigorously resisted attempts to reduce the four books to one single, homogenized account. Matthew emphasizes the Kingdom of Heaven and peace; Mark emphasizes action; Luke provides a physician's account of healing and sensitivity towards the despised; John provides a poetic and mystical account of love and intimacy. It is to faithfully represent this one Gospel that the Spirit inspired the writing of multiple accounts.

Faithfulness to a God of color and vibrancy means anything but a dull, monotonous cookie cut-out series of identical believers; just as a person is most faithfully represented, not by multiple copies of one photograph, but by many different photographs from many different

angles, so images of God may faithfully reflect him by being different from each other.

This is why there are different cultures, each with its own emphasis on philosophy and way of life. (Within these cultures, though I have far from described them, should be many different sub-cultures, communities, and individuals. There is a masculine and a feminine side to each culture — or, more properly, each culture recognizes the importance of men who are masculine and women who are feminine). The differences, however, are differences of emphasis, just as the previous analogy spoke of different photographs for the sake of faithfully representing one entity.

It is in this same substance that people of other cultures look at each other and immediately see human beings; the differences are a source of heightened enjoyment between brothers and sisters. It is in this same substance that they love God with their whole being, and love their neighbors as themselves. That there is one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, of all that is, visible and invisible, that God is holy, possessing all authority and all wisdom, that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light, Love from Love, the Word made flesh, perfect God and perfect man, crucified for the forgiveness of sins and raised from the dead to be the eldest of many brothers and sisters, that there is the Holy Spirit, a fire of love and energy shooting between the Father and the Son, the new structure of obedience, that the fear of the Eternal is the beginning of wisdom, that God created the sky, the earth, the seas, the plants, the animals, and saw that it was good, and then created man in his image, and saw that it was very good, that the order of the universe is spiritual as well as physical, that God loves man and has given him the Law of Love, that man has as facets cultas and culturas, individual and community, that he created them male and female, faith, hope, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control — things such as these are the reality unequivocally confirmed by all men. Cultural differences provide richness and variety that enhances understanding between brothers and sisters who love one another.

When a character is developed, with a cultural and personal flavor,

do not overlook that which is to be common across all cultures and people, the same identity which holds culture and personal uniqueness.

One brief note, in the interest of clarity to avoid unnecessarily offending people: I am a white, male American who has lived in South-East Asia and Western Europe. I find cultures to be objects of great beauty, but make no pretense to be well-versed in all of them, nor to have included each of them in this world. The absence of some cultures is not meant as a statement of "My culture exists because of Creation and your culture exists because of the Fall;" I tried to envision a world not fallen, and began to create it with a background that certainly includes my theological knowledge, but also includes my cultural background and my own personality. If some members of other cultures would like to make a similar creation based on their knowledge, go for it; if you send it to me, I'll enjoy reading it. I have not, however, myself gone out of my way to include other cultures; I am not ashamed of this. I am grateful to God for the personal and cultural fingerprints that I have left on this creation, and hope that other people, other images of God to whom it is given a slightly different manner of reflecting God's glory, have been able to read it in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

\* Careful readers will have noticed some things — ergo, meat eating, rebuke, the Cross (a symbol of redemption from sin), which do not correspond to Eden. The cultures exist, not always as what sinless cultures might have been in Eden, but sometimes what sinless Christian culture might be today, were such a thing possible. To state some things more precisely: it is a world in which physical evil exists, but not moral evil. I would request that the reader overlook the indirect marks of sin, as the cultures were designed around other concerns primarily.

# Janra Ball: The Headache

## The Original Cultural Context

"When it comes to games, never try to understand the Janra mind."

-Oeildubeau, Urvanovestilli philosopher and anthropologist

It is known that Janra sports usually last for at least half an hour, involve a ball, two or more teams, running and acrobatics, and animated discussion. Beyond that, neither the Urvanovestilli's logic nor the Yedidia's intuition are able to make head or tail of them. In general, the teams appear to have unequal numbers of players; the players often switch teams in the course of play; teams are created and dissolved; the nature of the activities makes sudden and radical changes; there is no visible winning or losing. There are occasionally times in the course of play when some intelligible goal appears to be being approached... but then, all players seem to be approaching it in a rather erratic manner (when asked why he didn't do thus and such simple thing and achieve the approached goal by an inexperienced anthropologist, one of the Janra said, "Technically, that would work, but that would be a very boring way to do it," and then bolted back into play: the extent to which game play is comprehensible heightens its incomprehensibility). Late in life, Oeildubeau hinted at having suspicions that, if the Janra believe that they are being watched, they will spontaneously stop whatever sport they are playing, and instead begin a series of activities expressly designed to give any observer a headache.



# Rules

1. There is no winning or losing.
2. The game has one ball, which must be kept in motion at all times. If the ball ceases to move, nobody may speak or act except to move the ball.
3. Il est interdit de parler en anglais au sujet de l'objet du jeu.
4. Any player may give any other player a rule point, provided that there is no alliance or "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" arrangement between them, at any time. Any player who has a rule point may spend that point in order to add, delete, or modify a rule in accordance with the spirit of the game.
5. Every player has a persona, or modus operandi, through which he is acting and answering questions. If any other player successfully identifies this persona or modus operandi, it must immediately be changed.
6. There is no rule number 6.
7. Each player must somehow touch another player before or during addressing him in speech.
8. No player may move from one point to another without using at least one acrobatic, dance, or martial arts motion.
9. Any use of a card deck or game board requires one change of rules for the card/board game per move.
10. Any rules disputes are to be resolved by no judge, until all involved parties come to a confusion which is more chaotic than in its initial form.
11. All players must wear one black sock and one white sock.
12. We're sorry, but rule number twelve is not available at this time. To leave a message, please rotate your telephone clockwise by ninety degrees, and simultaneously press 'q' and 'z'.
13. Any player who does not understand all of the rules, in their entirety, is immediately disqualified.
14. Any player who attempts to memorize all of the rules, or attempts to play the game by keeping its rules, is immediately disqualified.

## FAQ list

Q: What is 'Springfield'?

A: Springfield is a game in which two people alternate naming state capitals, and the first person to name Springfield wins.

Q: What's the point of that?

A: The objective is to be the first person to say 'Springfield' as late as possible. The point is to see how far you can go — and still be the first to say 'Springfield'. It's not a game of mathematical strategy. It's a game of perception.

Q: What is Psychiatrist?

A: Psychiatrist is a game in which one person, the psychiatrist, leaves the room, and all of the other players agree on a common delusion (such as believing themselves to be the person immediately to their left). The psychiatrist then enters, and asks the players questions, attempting to guess the delusion.

Q: What is spoon photography?

A: Very well known.

Q: What is Janra Ball all about?

A: Wouldn't you like to know?

Q: Why did you answer my question with another question?

A: How else could it be?

Q: What are the teams like?

A: Highly variable, and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Q: How do I get ahead in the game?

Q: How do I get ahead in the game?

A: Mu.

Q: Why won't you give me a straight answer to my questions?

A: Come, come. Aren't there much more interesting ways to grok the game?

# Ingredients

Springfield, Monty Python, Calvin-Ball, body language, Harlem Globetrotters, sideways logic, Thieves' Cant, intuition, counter-intuitive segues, spoon photography, creativity, Zen koans, Psychiatrist, adrenaline, perception, tickling, urban legend Spam recipe, swallowing a pill, illusionism, modern physics, raw chaos, F.D. & C. yellow number 5.

# The Steel Orb

I awoke, seared by pain. The images dispersed. What were they?

a flat rectangular courtyard, where brick pillars enshrined a walkway, and in the center was a great pool, filled not with water but with silt impressed with intricate patterns—a place that was silent and still, cool in the shade, with robed men moving slowly and conversing without breaking the stillness

alleys and courtyards and tunnels and passageways that made for a labyrinth, with a byzantine structure only exceeded by turgid forms beneath its surface—I was moving through it before I had grasped its rhythm

a vortex, draining life and beauty, draining the life out of—

there was also a single grain of incense, its fragrance filling—

there had been a storm, with wind and water and lightning moving faster than I could keep pace with, a storm, a storm—

then I awoke.

I had washed up on a beach, barely conscious, torn by thirst. I did not see the city in the distance; I saw only a man, clad in a deep blue robe. I tried to call out to him, but I was torn by violent coughs.

Then the scene blurred, and I passed out of consciousness.

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When I regained consciousness, I was in a room. There was a man whose hand was on my heart; he looked familiar, I thought. A woman handed him a cup, which he placed to my lips.

Time passed. I could feel warmth and coolness moving through me. My thoughts slowly quickened. He reverenced me, making on himself the great sign, bowing, and kissing me. I went to stand, but he held me down. "Take a time of rest now. In a day I will introduce you to the city."

I looked at him. The blue robe looked familiar. A question did not arise in my mind; I only wondered later that I did not ask if he had been expecting me, or if he knew I wanted to be a Teacher. Something in his repose kept the question from arising.

The woman looked at me briefly. "My name is Pool. What languages do you know?"

If anything, I sank further back into my chair. I wished the question would go away. When she continued to listen, I waited for sluggish thoughts to congeal. "I... Fish, Shroud, Inscription, and Shadow are all languages that are spoken around my island, and I speak all of them well. I speak Starlight badly, despite the fact that they trade with our village frequently. I do not speak Stream well at all, even though it is known to many races of voyagers. I once translated a book from Boulder to Pedestal, although that is hardly to be reckoned: it was obscure and technical, and it has nothing of the invisible subtlety of 'common' conversation. You know how—"

The man said, "Yes; something highly technical in a matter you understand is always easier to translate than children's talk. Go on."

"And—I created a special purpose language," I said, "to try to help a child who couldn't speak. I did my best, but it didn't work. I still don't understand why not. And I—" I tried to think, to remember if there were any languages I had omitted. Nothing returned to my mind.

I looked down and closed my eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good with

I looked down and closed my eyes. I'm sorry. I'm not very good with languages."

The woman spoke, and when I looked up I noticed her green veil and the beautiful wrinkles about her eyes. "You novices think you know nothing and need to know everything. When I was near your point in life, I knew only six tongues, and I'm still only fluent in four." She revered me, then stepped out the window. Her husband followed, although their spirits still seemed to blow in the wind through the window.

I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, and I awoke with a start. The man was just stepping into the window, and I could hear a clink of silver. "Will you come to the marketplace? I want you to find the Galleria."

He still had not told me his name, nor I mine, but as we walked, I told him about the great storm; it was wild on land but wilder at sea. He wondered that I survived the storm, let alone that I washed up; he quoted the proverb, "Where the wind blows, no one knows." We came to a merchant with dried fruits; he looked at some oranges. "Have you seen Book since you came back?"

"Yes, but I didn't get to talk with him long."

"What did he say?"

"He only said two things. The first was, 'Put my little daughter down!' Then the second was... let me see if I can remember. He began to say, 'No, don't throw her in the—' But I couldn't hear the rest of what he hoped to say, because he threw a bucket of salt water at me. Which reminds me, I don't have salted fish today, but I have some of the finest oranges from the four corners of the world. This orange grew in an orchard where it is said that the trees once bore jewels. I could sell you this fine assortment for two silver pieces each."

My host sounded astonished. "Two silver pieces each? You are a dear friend, of much more value than the wares you sell. I doubt if you paid two silver pieces for this whole lot of fruit—look at this one! It must have rotted before it was dried. I can talk a bit, but I'm only buying wheat today." He turned away.

The merchant grabbed his arm. "Don't go yet. I'll give you a friend's price." I think he said something else impressive, but their haggling could not hold my interest. The market was pungent with strange smells. I recognised the smell of spices, but what else was there? Something strange. I could hear a tantalizing sound of gears, but that was not it. There was a soft sound of wind. What was evading my mind?

I realised my host was walking, holding a bag with some dried oranges. I hastened to follow him.

"My name is Fortress," he said.

"I am Unspoken."

"Unspoken... That's an ambiguous name. You seem to be shrouded in mystery. Have you seen the Galleria?"

We stopped in the Temple, drinking the flow of chant and incense, and reverencing the holy icons. Then we walked out. Fortress showed me a hedge maze in a public park, with a great statue in the centre. I looked at the pedestal, and something caught my eye. "There's a passage down hidden in the pedestal to the statue. Where does it go?"

He laughed. "You're subtle."

I waited for him to continue.

He remained silent.

I asked him, "Will it help me find the Galleria?"

He said, "It helps me find the Galleria. It will only distract you from it. The far wall of the pedestal opens to a passage down, but it only reaches a network of caves where boys play. There is nothing in there that will interest you."

"Then what," I asked, "am I to do to find the Galleria?"

"Why don't you search? The Galleria is not outside the boundaries of this little labyrinth. Only beware of the first solution you want to latch



this little labyrinth. Only beware of the first solution you want to latch onto. That is often a distraction, and if you are to find a solution you are looking for, you need to be able to grasp something slippery in a place you are not looking."

I knocked on earth with my ear to the ground; I looked at the cracks between stones; I even scraped a piece of chalk someone had left on the stones, trying to see if its trace would show me a different stone. I found a few loose items; someone had forgotten a brush, and I pushed a lot of earth aside. I searched and searched, but I found no sign of a passage, no sign of anything unusual save the echoes of a hollow shaft in the stone beneath the statue. It was easy for me to find the mechanism to open the pedestal; indeed, I saw a boy emerge from it. I looked around near the statue: could I be missing a second passage nearby? Yet here the search was even more frustrating.

Fortress gave me a slice of orange, and I searched, hot, parched, the whole day through. I was near the point of tears; nothing in the ground offered the faintest trace of a way down.

I sat back in desolation. I rested my back against a hedge; I could see the sleepy sun's long golden fingers sliding across the hedge. I closed my eyes for a few minutes to rest; I opened my eyes, and could see that the sun's fingers had shifted. My bleak eyes rested on a funny bulge in the hedge. That was odd; it looked almost as if—I stared. Standing out from the hedge, illuminated in stark relief, was a bas-relief sculpture.

Someone in a robe—what color robe?—swam in the ocean. He swam down, down, down, down, deeper than a whale can dive, and still deeper. Something about the picture filled me with cool, and I began to see through it, began to see the web that it was—I felt a touch on my head. "You've found the Galleria. Would you like to go home now?"

I looked. Past Fortress I saw another picture of a swordsman wielding the great Sword, slicing through darkness and error. The Sword swung around him, slicing through monsters around him, and then with no less force slicing through the monsters inside him. I could see—what? It hurt him to cut at errors inside him, but he wielded the Sword against the darkness without and within. I looked entranced.

"Stand up." Fortress was looking at me. "You've seen enough for now; I normally only look into one picture, and you have looked into two after finding the entrance into the Galleria. We will see more of the city later; now, you are tired."

It wasn't until I began walking home that I realized how exhausted I was. I ate my meal in silence, lay in my bed, and sunk into sleep. I awoke, still tired, and was relieved when Fortress told me that he had one proper lesson for me but he would need several days' mundane work for me after that, and it would be a while before anything else exciting happened.

There was one workroom, one that had a forge, an unstable stack of cups with gears and levers, and a box of silt for drawing. There were several mechanical devices in various states of disassembly; Fortress picked up one of them, and turned a crank. I could see gears turning, but the white bird on top moved very erratically.

Fortress looked at me. "Does it work?"

"Not very well."

"What part is causing the problem?"

I turned the device over in my hands, pushed and pulled at one axle, and turned the crank. After some time, I said, "This gear here isn't connecting. It's worn and small."

"So if I replace that gear, it will work better?"

I hesitated and said, "No."

"Then what is the problem?"

"The entire device is loose. The teeth aren't really close enough anywhere; there's room for slipping."

"Then is that one gear the problem?"

"No. It is only the easiest thing to blame."

NO. IT IS ONLY THE EASIEST THING TO BLAME.

"Then you did not help yourself or me by telling me that it was that one gear."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he held up his hand and said, "People will often ask you treacherous questions like that, and they usually won't know what it is that they're doing. A Teacher, such as you seem to want to be—"

"How did you know I wanted to be a Teacher?"

"How could I not know you wanted to be a Teacher? A Teacher, such as you seem to want to be—" he continued, "gives an answer that will help the other person, even if that answer is not expected, even if the other person doesn't want to hear it."

Fortress shook the clockwork and said, "What would make it work?"

I said, "You could replace all the gear heads with something larger?"

He said, "What if you couldn't do that? What if the gear heads were made of delicately crafted gold?"

I hesitated, and said, "I can't think of anything that would help."

"Anything at all?"

I hesitated again, and said, "If you made the casing smaller, it would work. But how would you—"

He reached down and pulled two metal plates, plus some other hardware and tools, setting them before me. I took the tools, disassembled the original device, and reassembled the new device with a slightly smaller frame.

It worked perfectly.

He asked, "Is there any way for the bird to bob up and down, as well as turn?"

I tried to think of how to answer him, but this time I really could think of nothing. My sense of mental balance, my sense that my understanding was big enough to encompass his Lesson, was wavery. I was unsure.

He took a metal rule, and smoothed the surface of the silt inside the box. He then began drawing with a stylus.

"What if the rod were not solid, but had a cam and inner workings like this? Wouldn't that work?"

I looked at him, slightly dazed. "You must be a great metalworker. Can you do that?"

He paused a moment and said, "I might be a great metalworker, and I might be able to do that, but that is not why I am asking. Would it work?"

"Yes."

"Could you make it roll?"

"Yes. Put it in a hollow round casing and then it would roll as part of the casing."

He laughed and said, "Could you have the front move forward and the back stay in place—without it breaking?"

I cleared the silt's surface, and began to work diagrams—rejecting several as they failed, working one almost to completion—and then saying, "But that would require a shell that is both strong and elastic, and I have not heard of any who can make a shell like that."

He seemed unconcerned. "But would it work?"

"If I had such a shell, yes, it would work."

"Then you have created it. Could you make one that gives birth to another like itself?"

I sketched a descending abyss of machines within machines, each one smaller than its parent.

"Could you make one that gives birth to another machine, just like itself?"

"Yes, if they were all constantly expanding. By the time a child gave birth, it would be the size of its parent when the child gave birth."

He seemed impressed, not only at what I said, but at how quickly. He closed his eyes, and said, "I will only ask you one more question. How would you design a machine that could design machines like itself?"

I looked at him, at the disassembled machines, at the silt, and then to a place inside myself. "I can't, and I can't learn now."

He looked at me, opened his mouth, and closed it. He said, "We can move to another Lesson. For now, I want you to look at the gears, separating the worn ones from the ones that are new, so that I can melt down the worn ones. You've got a meticulous day ahead of you."

He left, and I began to work through the gears. The work began to grow monotonous. He returned with a leather sack over his shoulder. "I just acquired a number of broken clockwork devices which I want you to disassemble and separate into parts that are usable and parts that need to be melted down. I'll be back shortly with some metal to melt down and forge new gears out of." He set down the sack, and I looked in disbelief at the intricate machines with innumerable small parts. I had a bleak sense of how long a stretch of dullness was ahead of me. I started to lay them out so I could disassemble them.

He returned, holding a pike in his hands. "You seem strong, and you've had some time to recover. Come with me. Thunder has spotted a bear."

---

Fortress stood, armed with a sword, a crossbow, and several quarrels. He had given the pike to me; we followed several other men and spread out into the woods. Fortress told me, "I want you just to search,

and cry out if you see the bear—we'll come. Don't attack the bear; just set the pike if it charges, and run once it's hit. I think you have a good chance of noticing the bear. Don't take any unnecessary risks."

We spread out, and I moved along, my feet slipping noiselessly on the forest soil. It was more of an effort than it should have been; my body seemed to move with all the fluidity of sludge. The forest looked more rugged than usual; the storm which almost killed me had torn through the forest, and the storm's mark was far heavier on the forest than the city. I thought of the saying that a storm is liquid fire.

I looked at a tree that had fallen. The dead tree had broken a branch on another tree, and left an unpleasant wound. I cut the hanging branch with my pike, to leave better wound. Then I placed my hand on the tree to bless it, and left it to heal.

I thought of how the hunt would go. Someone would see it, then the men would gather. Those the bear faced away from would fire a volley of arrows. Those it chased would run while others taunted it. When the hunters left the city, there was an edge of excitement; I don't think it would be the same if it were not risky.

I continued to move along noiselessly, and looked for a creek. I was thirsty. I blessed another tree, hoping it would heal: the storm had left some rather impressive wreckage. It was dead silent, and when I cut a damaged branch from a third tree, two things happened. First, I heard a babbling brook, and realized how parched I was. Second, part of my pike caught on the tree, and I couldn't wrest it free.

Leaving the pike for a moment, I stole away from the tree and refreshed myself at the brook. I sat for a moment and rested, breathing in simple joy. Then I heard a stick snap on the other side of a rocky outcropping. I realised I could hear some very loud pawprints.

I slithered up the rock, and looked around. I saw nothing.

Then I looked down, and saw the biggest bear of my life.

It looked around

It looked around.

It smelled.

I held tight against the rock.

Something under my right hand moved noiselessly. My fingers wrapped around a large stone, the size of a man's skull.

Fear flowed through me. And excitement. I lifted the rock, slowly, noiselessly, and brought my legs in. I lifted the rock.

I felt with my left hand, and found a rock the thickness of my wrist. A flick of my wrist, and it crashed thirty cubits away.

The bear turned its head, and began to run.

As it ran, I jumped.

I began to fall.

I could see the forest moving as if it had almost stopped.

Between every beat of my heart, a thousand things happened.

I landed on the bear's back, astride it as if I were riding it.

Immediately the bear tensed, and began to turn.

The rock, still in my hand, crushed the bear's skull.

I could hear a crunch, and the bear's body suddenly went limp.

My hand released the stone.

The stone began to fall, about to roll over on my leg and crush me.

My hand caught a thin branch from a tree.

I pulled my legs up and pulled the branch as hard as I could.

It was over.

I tore it off.

The bear's body turned.

Something slapped my other palm.

I pulled with all my strength, and my body lifted from the bear.

The bear hit the ground.

I looked around.

Most hunting parties killed a bear every few years.

I had heard of a warrior who had killed a bear alone.

I had never heard of someone kill a bear with only the weapons the forest provided.

I lowered myself to the ground.

I watched the bear breathe its last.

I shouted with a roar like a storm's fury.

Other men began to arrive. Their jaws dropped when they saw me standing over the bear's carcass—empty-handed.

Fortress walked up to me.

I smiled, with a smile of exhilaration such as I had never smiled before.

He looked into me, looked at all the other men, then curled up his hand and slapped me.

The slap resounded.

I touched my face in disbelief. I could feel hot blood where his nails had struck me.



"You disobeyed," he said.

He looked into me.

"Next time you do that," he continued, "it will be a bear's claw that slaps you. I don't know what the bear will look like, but it certainly will be a bear's claw that slaps you."

---

I feigned happiness as I walked back. I tried not to stomp. It seemed an age before I came back to the house; I climbed up the wall and into my room and sat on my bed, furious. The sounds of jubilation around me did not help.

He came up, and said, "We've been invited to visit someone while people are building a fire."

A man was at the entryway; I followed him, and my hosts, through some streets into a room. There was something odd, it seemed; I could not have thought of this at the time, but while the other people paid no heed to my anger, but all of the people with me subdued their joy. Suddenly we walked in a door, and I saw a beautiful girl, holding a clay tablet and a stylus. The whole world seemed brighter.

Fortress said, "How is our lovely ventriloquist?"

She looked at him as if her face were melting. I looked at Fortress, and he raised his hand slightly. He would tell me the story later.

The man exchanged reverences with me and said, "Welcome, bear slayer. My name is Vessel. My daughter is Silver, and my wife is Shadow. Find a place to sit. Will you have a glass of wine?" His wife unstopped a bottle.

The girl said, "Father Dear, will you tell us a story? You tell us the best stories."

I said, "Please. I miss listening to a good storyteller."

Vessel said, "In another world, there was a big forest on an enormous mountain. There were plants that grew gems as their flowers, only they were so rare it would be easier to take the gems from a mine—and people didn't harvest them, because the plants were so beautiful. It would have been a sacrilege.

"There was a dark stone hut, round as a leaf, and in it a Teacher as old as the mountains, with wisdom deep as its mines. He had a gravelly voice, like a dull and rusty iron dagger slowly scraped across granite. He —"

Silver interrupted. "Bear slayer, some time you must listen to my father sing."

The man continued as if nothing had been said. "The forest was rich and verdant, and every morning it was watered by a soft rain."

At the sound of the word "rain," I suddenly felt homesick. It rained frequently on my island, but here—I had not seen rain at all.

Silver said, "Rain is a natural wonder that happens when a great ball of grey wool, lined with cotton of the purest white, sails in the Abyss and drops packets of water. Apparently this wonder has been seen in this city, though not within the time it would take a mountain to be ground to dust. This did not stop my father from making a tub on the top of our roof, putting sealed pipes down, so that he could pour water from a pipe in our room if Wind were ever silly enough to blow some of that grey wool over this city."

Vessel placed a hand over his daughter's mouth and continued. "He was a many-sided sage, learned in arts and wisdom. Among the things he crafted were a ferret, so lifelike you could believe it was real. If you forcefully squeezed both sides, it would walk along in its own beautiful motion."

Silver pulled her Father's hand down and said, "I think I saw one of those wonders from a travelling street vendor. I looked at some of the craftsmanship and heard some of the gears turning. It must have been made by someone very competent, probably not someone from this city."

That didn't stop Father Dear from—"

The man stood up swiftly, flipping his daughter over his shoulder, and walked into the hallway. Shadow said, "That story didn't last long, even for our family. May I serve you some more wine?"

Vessel walked out, holding a key. "Please excuse the disturbance. I have locked Silver in her room. As I was—"

Silver slid through the doorway, stretching like a cat waking from its sleep, and ostentatiously slid two metal tools into a pouch in her sleeve. "I'm disappointed, Father Dear. Normally when we have guests, you at least put something heavy in front of the door."

Some time later, I saw Vessel and Silver sitting together. Pool, Silver, and Shadow had left, and I could hear the warm rhythm of women's talk and laughter from a nearby room. Fortress said, "We were waiting for you. The other hunters have pulled the bear in. Come to the roast!"

I wanted to ask them something, but there were more footfalls outside. I could already hear the drummers beginning to beat out a dance, the singers with their lyres, the priests with their merry blessings, the game players, and the orators with their fascinating lectures. It was not long before we were at the city center.

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A young man pulled me off to the side; I saw, on a cloth on the ground, what looked like several pieces of a puzzle. "And now," another man said, "you push the pellet in, and fit the pieces together." He moved his fingers deftly, and I could see what looked like an ordinary crossbow bolt.

"What is that?" I said.

"Let me show you," he said, handing me a cocked crossbow. "Do you see that bag of sand on the roof?"

"Yes."

"Shoot it."

I slowed down, took aim, waited for the target to come to the right place, then fired the crossbow. There was an explosion, and I felt something sting my face. When I realized what was happening, I could feel sand falling in my hair.

I looked at him, confused, and he said, "It's an explosive quarrel. The head contains a strong explosive."

"Why was the shaft made of puzzle pieces? I don't see what that added to the explosion."

He laughed. "The pieces fly out to the sides, instead of straight back at you. It's quite a powerful explosion—you might find it a safer way to kill a bear."

I made a face at him, but I was glowing. So these people knew already that I had killed the bear.

I spoke to one person, then another, then heard people clapping their hearts and calling out, "Speech! We want a speech from the bear-slayer!"

I stood, at a loss for words, then listened for the Wind blowing—but I heard only my name. I listened more, but heard nothing. Then I said, "I am Unspoken," and then the Wind blew through me.

"I am Unspoken," I continued, "and I love to peer into unspoken knowledge and make it known, give it form, or rather make its form concretely visible. Each concrete being, each person, each tree, each divine messenger, is the visible expression of an idea the Light holds in his heart, and which the Light wants to make more real. And his presence operates in us; he is making us more real, more like him, giving us a more concrete form. You know how a creator, making art or tool or book, listens to what a creation wants to see, wrestles with it and at the same time bows low before it, sees how to make it real; that is how the Light shines in us. And when we listen to the Unspoken and give it voice, we are doing what a craftsman does, what the Light does with us. How do we

give voice to an unspoken idea, an unspoken expression? We can't completely do so; what we can say is always a small token of what we cannot say. But if the Wind is blowing through us, we may make things more visible." I continued at length, turning over in my spirit the ideas of tacit knowledge and invisible realities, visible, and the divine act of creation reproduced in miniature in us. I traced an outline, then explored one part in great detail, then tied things together. When my words ended, I realised that the Wind had been blowing through me, and I felt a pleasant exhaustion. The festivities continued until we greeted the dawn, and I slept through most of the next day.

All this excitement made my chores in the workshop an almost welcome relief. It began to wear thin, though, after perhaps the third or fourth consecutive day of dismantling tiny devices and then staring at tiny gear teeth to see if they were too worn to use. I began to grow tired of being called 'bear-slayer'—was there nothing else to know about me?—and there was an uneasy silence between Fortress and me about what I had done. He did not mention it; why not? I was afraid to ask.

I worked through each day, and had an hour to my own leisure after the songs at vespers. Mostly I walked around the city, exploring its twists and passageways. It was on one of these visits that I heard a whisper from the shadows, beckoning. It sounded familiar.

"Who is it?" I said.

The voice said, "You know me. Come closer."

I waited for the voice to speak. It, or rather she, was alluring.

I stepped forward, and sensed another body close to my own. A hand rested lightly on my shoulder.

"Meet me here tomorrow. But now, go home."

As I walked home, I realized whose voice it was, and why I didn't recognize it. It was someone memorable, but she had changed somehow, and something made me wary of the change. Yet I wondered. There was something alluring about her, and not just about her.

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The following morning, Fortress looked into me and said, "No."

Then he left me in the workshop, and I was torn as I sifted through the day's parts. I was trying to understand my intuitions—or at least that's what I told myself. What I didn't tell myself was that I understood my intuitions better than I wanted to, and I was trying to find some way of making what I understood go away. I touched my cheek, and felt the healing wounds. Then I made up my mind to stay in the building that night.

Evening came, and I realised how long I'd been sitting one place. So I got out, and began walking the other way—just a short distance, to stretch my legs. Then I remembered a beautiful building in the other direction, and I walked and walked. Then I remembered something I had overheard—Fortress's first rebuke had not been everything it seemed. And I found myself in the same place, and felt a soft hand around my wrist. As we walked, and as I could feel my heart beating harder, the ground itself seemed to be more intense. I followed her through twisted passageways, then climbed down several rungs to a place barely lit by candlelight. A strange scent hung around the air. There was something odd, but I could not analyse what. I saw a man in a midnight blue robe bow deeply before me.

"Welcome, Bear Slayer. You did right to kill the bear."

"How did you know—" I began.

"Never mind that. You did the right thing. Fortress is a fine man and a pillar of the community, and we all need him picking apart devices, day after day—or has he asked you to take that task so he can do something interesting? Never mind. Fortress is a fine man, but you are called to something higher. Something deeper."

My heart pounded. I looked. He looked at me with a gesture of profound respect, a respect that—something about that respect was different, but whenever I tried to grasp what the difference was, it slipped out of my fingers

out of my fingers.

"Your name is indeed Unspoken, and it is truer than even he knows. You were touching an unspoken truth when you left your pike and attacked the bear."

I couldn't remember any unspoken Wind, or any sense of good, when I disobeyed, and I was excited to learn that what I wanted to remember was true.

"And I have many things to teach you, many lessons. You were not meant to be staring at gear after gear, but—"

It seemed too good to be true, and I asked him, "When will I be able to begin lessons?"

He said, "You misunderstand me. I will teach you. But go back to him; you have learned enough for tonight. My lessons will find you, and show you something far greater than sorting gear after gear, a power that—but I say too much. Go. I will send for you later."

My stomach was tight. I was fascinated, and trying not to realise that something wanted to make me retch. "But please," I said. My voice cracked.

The man shook his head.

I said, "At least tell me your name."

"Why do you ask my name?"

I heard a sound of a blade being drawn, and a crowd parted to reveal a man holding an unsheathed sword. "Clamp! Do not send him out yet!"

The man who had spoken to me drew a dagger, his face burning red. "Poison! How dare you!"

"How dare I? You should not have held the place of glory to begin with. You—"

"Do you challenge me?"

"I do."

What happened next I am not completely sure of. Part of it I could not even see. But what I did see was that Poison was great enough a swordsman to make a mighty swing in a tight room.

I saw him swing.

Then I saw Clamp raise his dagger to parry.

Then I heard a high pitched shattering sound.

Then there was a flurry of motion, and Clamp fell over, dead.

In his hand was a sword hilt, and nothing more.

Clamp turned to me, and said with surprising sweetness, "Do come back, my child. Fortress is a fine man, and no doubt he will teach you many important things. We will see each other later."

I was almost dumbfounded. I stammered, "How did you— What kind of power lets you—"

He bowed again, very deeply. "Farewell to you. We will meet again."

"Please."

"You need sleep. You have a long day ahead of you."

I stood in place, then slowly walked out. I was elated when I heard his voice call after me, "If you really must know something... Everything you have been told, everything you believe, is wrong. Illusion. You just began to cut through the Illusion when you killed the bear. 'Wisdom is justified by her children.' But don't try to understand the Illusion—it is a slippery thing, profoundly unspoken, and we will see each other soon enough. I'll find you; my classroom is everywhere. Do sleep well. Fortress is a fine man, worthy of respect and worthy to teach you, and I do not doubt he will teach you many exciting and important things."



I walked back, my heart full of recent happenings. I got into bed, and pretended to sleep.

That morning, I felt like my body was made of frosty sludge. I got up, and when Fortress looked at me, I forced myself to bow to him.

That was the last time I bowed to him in a long while, or indeed showed him reverence of any sort. I resented it even then.

I resented the day's sweeping and cleaning, but some of my thoughts congealed. Some of my unspoken thoughts began to take solid form. The respect I had been shown—it was different from the respect I was used to. It meant something different, something fundamentally different. It said, "From one noble soul to another." And the place of meeting was devoid of any adornment, any outer beauty. It had the sense of a place of worship, but as a place it was empty, almost as if it were irrelevant to—there was another thought in the back of my mind, but I could not grasp it.

That night, I thought I heard the sound of Fortress crying. I smiled and slept soundly.

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The next morning, Fortress said, "Unspoken, you've seen a lot of gears, but I don't think I've shown you how to make a cam. Cams are terrifically interesting, both in terms of making them and what you can make with them. I'd like to show you how to make cams, then some intriguing devices that use cams. Thank you for the sorting you've done; we should be able to pull exactly the parts we need. Let me heat up the fire, and then we can both work together." He looked at me, and seemed surprised at the boredom in my face. We did exactly what he said, and I made several new types of cam, one of which he really liked. There was wind blowing in my ear, but I couldn't open up and listen to it—I merely wondered that this new activity was even duller than sorting broken parts.

At the end of the day, I said, "When are we going to have a Lesson? I mean a real one?"

He looked at me, held his breath, and said, "I can only think of one Lesson for now. It is not one that you would like."

I said, "Please?"

He said, "Humility is the hinge to joy and the portal to wonder. Humility is looking at other things and appreciating them, instead of trying to lift yourself up by pushing them down. If you push things down, that is the road to misery. Pride pushes things down, and it cuts it off the one thing that could bring joy.

"You are seeking joy where joy is not to be found. Seek it elsewhere, and it will find you."

I hastened out to the street.

Once on the street, I went where I had gone before, but no one reached out to me. I explored, and found several people talking, gardens, statues, and a bookstore I'd not seen before, but there was nothing that interested me. Where was Clamp?

I went back home, and Fortress said, "Have you heard of the Book of Questions?"

I feigned interest. "I've heard about it, and it sounded fascinating," I said, truthfully. "I'd like to hear what you can tell me," I lied.

"I was just thinking about one of the questions, 'What is reverence?'

"There are three things that we do when we reverence each other. We make on ourselves the great sign, and we bow before each other, and we kiss each other.

"The Sign of the Cross is the frame that sets the display of reverence in place. We embrace each other in the Cross's mighty shadow.

"Bowing is the foundation of all civilized discourse. When we bow, we lower ourselves before another; we acknowledge another's greatness. That is the beating heart of politeness; that is the one reason why

politeness is immeasurably more than a list of social rules.

"A kiss is everything that a bow is and more. A kiss is a display of reverence, and of love. Do you know why we kiss on the mouth?"

I looked at him, not seeing his point. "What do you mean? Where else would one kiss?"

"I have travelled among the barbarian lands, and there are tribes where a kiss on the mouth is the sort of thing that should be saved for one's wife, or at most one's family." He must have seen the look on my face; he continued, "No, they are not distant from each other, and yes, they live together in genuine community. It is altogether fitting and proper, and our embrace would be out of place in that land. Just because you or I would find it strange to pull back from our brethren this way, as if we were talking to someone through a wall, does not change the fact that it is woven into a beautiful tapestry in their community.

"But let us return to our lands. Kissing on the mouth is significant because it is by our mouth that we drink from the Fountain of Immortality. We reverence the Temple when we enter it, kissing the door and entrance; we ourselves are the Temple, and our mouths are the very door and entrance by which the King of Glory enters when we Commune. Our mouths are honored in a very special way, and it is this very place that we show our reverence.

"But there is another reason. It is by our mouths that we breathe the wind, that we spirit; it is the very spirit that is present in the mouth, and our spirits are knitted together. So the kiss is everything the bow is, and more, and it is the fitting conclusion when we reverence each other. It is communion."

I listened with interest. His words almost pulled me out of my misery.

He closed his eyes, and then said, "Do you know how long it is since you have kissed me?"

I began to approach him.

He pushed me away. "Stop. Go and learn to bow, truly bow. When you have learned to bow, then you may kiss me."

I walked out of the room, pretending to conceal my fury.

---

Dull, empty day passed after dull, empty day. Fortress tried to teach me things, and I really had no doubts that he was a fine man, but... whatever the great Illusion was, he not only believed it; he couldn't think to question it. I found Silver from time to time, and had comfort by her, but... I didn't understand why she wouldn't take me in to the group. And the rest of the world grew bleaker and bleaker.

Then it happened.

I snuck behind her one day, never giving a hint of my presence, until I found myself led into the chamber, the meeting place. They were chanting; there was something elusive about the chant, and I remained hidden in the shadows. Then Clamp himself saw me in the dark, and said, "Welcome. You have made it." There was a wicked grin on his face.

"Why did you not call me back? Why did Silver not lead me here? Was I not worthy?"

"You were not. Or, I should say, you were not worthy then. We were testing you, to see when you would make your own way in—then you were worthy. That you have come is proof that you are worthy—or at least might be. It does not speak well of you that you took so long. Look at me. Your very face tells me you have been drained by things unworthy of you—dull people, trivial lessons, a warhorse being taught the work of a mule.

"Or at least that's what I could say being generous. I think you are still enmeshed in the Illusion—it is still quite strong in you. So strong that it can probably affect what you see, make what is before your eyes appear to be what it is not.

"There is another test before you. Take this dagger."

He placed in my hand a stone dagger with a serpentine curve to it. It

was cold; a coldness seemed to seep through my body and my heart began to pump the icy chaos of a sea at storm. I felt sick.

"There is a clay dummy in the next room, exquisitely fashioned. Place this dagger where its heart would be. You will cut through the illusion, and be ready to drink of the Well of Secrets."

I walked. Aeons passed each footstep; each footfall seemed like a mountain falling and beginning to crumble. And yet it seemed only an instant before I was in the next room.

My stomach tightened. I could not say what, but something was wrong. There was something like a body that was deathly still.

I could see the feet only; the face was covered. Some Wind blew in the recesses of my heart, and I tried to close it out.

I walked over, my stomach tighter. The Wind inside me was blowing louder, leaking, beginning to roar. And then I smelled a familiar smell. How could they make clay smell like—

I twisted the dagger and tore the cloth off the dummy's face. It looked like Fortress. Then Wind tearing through me met with the breath of his nostrils.

I gasped.

I threw up.

There was a sound of laughter around me—or laughing; I could never call it mirth. It was cruel and joyless, and tore into me. And still I retched.

"Do you need help? Or are you really so weak as that?"

"Maybe you didn't belong here; not all who merely force their way in are truly worthy."

I looked around on the ground, and saw Fortress's staff.

In a moment I snatched the staff, and cast away the dagger.

I stood, reeling.

"I am not worthy. I am not worthy to be here, still less to be with Fortress. And I'd like to take a heroic last stand, and say that if you're going to kill him—if whatever black poison you've used won't already do so—you'll have to kill me first, but I would be surprised if I could achieve any such thing against you. I cannot call myself Fortress's disciple; that illusion is broken to me. But if I may choose between reigning with you and being slaughtered with Fortress, I can only consider being slaughtered with Fortress an honor that is above my worth and reigning with you to be unspeakable disgrace!"

Clamp looked at me with a sneer. "I don't know why I ever let you in, disciple of Fortress." He grabbed a sword, and made one quick slice.

I felt hot blood trickling down my chest.

"Go on, to your fascinating gears and your deep, deep lessons. Carry your Teacher. We'll meet again. Now I don't think you're worth killing. I don't know what I'll think then."

The blood flowing down my chest, I picked up my unconscious Teacher and his staff.

"The path out is that way. Never mind the drops of blood; you won't reach us this way again."

As I carried his heavy body towards the marketplace and then his home, I panted and sweated. Fortress seemed to be regaining consciousness. I staggered across the threshold and then laid him on the bed.

Pool looked ashen. "Are you all right, Salt?"

Fortress looked at her. "Never mind me; the poison they used is short-lived. I'll simply need more sleep for a few days, and life will go on. Look at Unspoken. I have not been that stunned by a man's behavior in

many years."

I collapsed on the floor, then rose to my knees. "Fortress. I have sinned against Heaven and before you. If you have any mercy, show one more mercy that I do not deserve. Give me money that I may return to my island, and no more inquire into things too wonderful for me."

Fortress turned to Pool. "Get one gold sovereign, a needle, and thread."

I looked at him. "One gold sovereign? But that would buy more than —"

"Bite this," he said. "I'll try to make the stitches small."

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"I still do not understand," I said.

"Never mind. Tell me what our robes mean."

"Your robe is blue, the color of starry Heaven. Your gift is the one thing needful, to be focused on the Light himself. My robe is green, the color of earth. My gift is to attend to many things on earth. I have wanted to gain the higher—"

"The green robe, and all that it symbolises, is needed, and I do not think you appreciate your gift. And not only because both of us look to the Light and attend to the Creation it illuminates. Place the two colors on the Cross."

"That is a child's exercise."

"Place the two colors on the Cross."

"The blue robe is the color of the vertical arm of the cross, the great tree whose roots delve fathoms down into earth and whose top reaches to Heaven. It is our connection with the Light. The green robe is the color of the cross's horizontal arm, connecting us with other creations. Is there a reason you ask me this?"

He placed his finger at the top of my chest, at the very center—at the top of my wound.

Then he ran his finger down the freshly stitched skin.

I winced in pain.

"It seems you are not a stranger to the blue robe."

My jaw dropped when his words unfolded in my mind. "Fortress, I cannot believe you. Before, you were being generous. Now you are being silly. This wound is not the arm of the cross reaching from Heaven down to earth. I earned this by my own wickedness, and you would destroy me if you knew what evil I had done."

"Are you sure?"

"Fortress, this evil is far worse than lust. It lures you with excitement, then drains the wonder out of every living thing. What are you doing?" I stared in horror as he removed his robe.

"Look at me."

I closed my eyes.

"Trust me."

I opened my eyes, and looked upon his body. Then I looked again. There was a great, ugly, white scar across the top of his chest. He made the sign of the cross on himself, and when his fingers traced out the horizontal arm of the cross, the green arm, I saw his fingers run over the scar.

"I know that pain better than you think."

I was unable to speak.

"Pool is getting you something to eat. You've had quite a difficult time, and your pain will continue. Let's spend tomorrow at the Temple, and then we can get to tinkering "



and then we can get to thinking.

I was weak, and my wound pained me, but there was a different quality to the pain.

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I felt weak. Still, as I entered the Temple, it didn't matter. Once inside the doors, I was in Heaven, and Heaven shone through earth more clearly than it had for long. I smelled the fragrant incense, the incense that ascends before the divine Throne day and night and will ascend for ever.

I walked into the middle part of the Temple, and lay down on the cool, unhewn stone floor, drinking in the glory. I looked through the ceiling at the Heavens: the ceiling was beautiful because it was painted with the blood of sapphires, and more beautiful because it was not sealed. It had chinks and holes, through which the Heaven's light shone, through which the incense continued to rise, and through which Wind blew. I could hear it howl and whisper, and I looked at the Constellations, all seven of which blazed with glory.

I saw the Starburst, a constellation in which one single Glory shot out many rays, and then these many rays coalesced into the one Glory. I let it resonate. I thought of the Creator, from whom all things come and to whom all things return. I thought of learning one thing, then learning many things, then finding the one interconnected whole behind them all.

I looked at the Window of Heaven: a saint shining through a picture. What was it of symbol that was captured so well? In the Constellation one could see the present connection between the saint and the Icon he shone through, indeed itself a window into how the divine Glory shines in a man.

I saw the threefold Tower: on the ground level was body, and then the lower of the upper floors was that which reasons and assembles thinking together, and the higher of the upper level was that which sees in a flash of insight precisely because it is connected, indeed the place one meets the Glory. What were some of the other nuances of these levels?

Then I looked at the Sword, the Great Sword in the War that has been fought since before ever star shone on dew-bejewelled field and will be fought until stars themselves are thrown down, trampled under those who laughed as children among the dew. It sweeps wherever there is Wind, larger than a mountain, smaller than a gem-collecting aphid, stronger than the roaring thunder, so sharp that it sunders bone and marrow. Why, indeed, was it given to men?

The Chalice, the great and Sacred Chalice itself, that held the fluid more precious than ichor, the fount of incorruptibility, a fount that will never be quenched though the mountains should turn to dust and dust turn to mountains. The Chalice from which we drink, the Chalice we kiss when we kiss the—why again should men be so highly exalted?

The Rod and Staff, as ever, were crossed against each other. "Your Rod and Staff comfort me," rise in the chant. The Staff's curves offered comfort to a straying sheep, I knew. And the Rod that went with it—a club with metal spikes, ready to greet predators. A shepherd was a hardened man, an armed guard ready to fight with his life when wolves came to destroy his sheep.

And last, the Steel Orb—a ball, rolling all around an animal hide as the hands at its edge moved up and down, making a slope now here, now there, now a valley, now a shifting plain. The Steel Orb indeed moved throughout the two levels—or was it really one?—of the threefold Tower, now here, now there, now met by complex construction, now silence, now a flash of inspiration. The Steel Orb is the inner motion that is inseparably connected with the world of invisible truths. It is the ear that listens when the Wind blows. It is the placid pool that reflects all that is around it.

I closed my eyes. Then I looked at the Eighth Constellation, the whole starry roof. The Greatest Feast, when death itself began to move backwards, must have come early that year, about as early as possible; the Constellations stood fixed as they had appeared the year the Temple had begun, just after the day began, and the great Vigil began. There couldn't really be a more representative night to represent the year, nor a better time of that day to stand in.

My breath was still; I stood up, revered Fortress and the other Icons, then found the waiting priest and cast off my sins in penitent confession. I do not even remember feeling relieved from that, which is strange: I stood in the stillness as it became song, as voices rose in chant, and the morning was greeted and the divine liturgy began.

I do not remember the liturgy; I do not remember even when the liturgy ended and the priest held a healing service and anointed me with the oil of restoration. What I remember was when it ended, and there were people all around me, their faces alight. It was like waking from a dream, a dream of which one remembers nothing save that there was an inexpressible beauty one cannot remember.

I walked home in Fortress's shadow, and only then remembered something that didn't fit. I remembered—or thought I remembered—the priest's strange advice after my confession: "Be careful. You have a difficult journey ahead of you."

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Fortress sat down in front of the work bench. He picked up one gear, then set it down, then rooted through some axles, and sat back.

"Unspoken, I've asked you to sort gears, take machines apart, put machines together, melt gears down, and forge new gears from the molten metal. I've asked you to repair machines, and tell me when gears were made of too soft of a metal. What I haven't asked you to do is tinker. So we'll have a race. Today you can think, and I'll make a mechanical cart. Then you can make a mechanical cart tomorrow. And we'll see, not whose cart can go fastest, but whose cart can go farthest in the smooth part cloister. This will be part ideas and part choosing the best parts. Why don't you go up to your room? You'll have the range of this workshop tomorrow."

I paced up and down my room. I thought. There were several coiled springs in the workshop; having seen some of his previous designs, I was almost sure he would make something spring-powered that would go the distance the spring kept. And how was I to outdo that? He would probably know what spring was best, and he would almost certainly know

now to choose parts that moved with each other.

A faint whisper of Wind blew in my mind. I turned over different designs of springs—could I make something more powerful with two springs? The Wind grew, slightly more forceful, and I tried to make it tell me how to best use springs. It became more and more forceful, but I was afraid to drop everything and listen. I began to see, not springs at all, but a burning—

Then I sensed something.

There was something that radiated beauty and fascination. I could not see it. But I sensed it.

"Who are you?" I said.

"I am your Guardian," came the answer. "I was sent to you."

I looked. I still could not see anything, but the beauty is overwhelming.

"What is the idea that is slipping? It has fire, and I hot steam, and—"

"Pay no mind to that. It is nothing."

"How can I build a better spring?"

"Don't. Build a simple, spring-driven cart out of good parts. Then take a knife, and nick the axle on your Teacher's wagon. That is all. It will bind slightly, and your cart will go further. Or it should."

"But—is that fair?"

"Is that fair? He took the first choice of everything, and you know you lack his year's practice. Come. He wants you to surprise him. He wants you to show ingenuity. This is something he wouldn't expect of you."

I thought I could see colors glowing, shifting, sparkling. Somewhere, in the recesses of my being, it was as if a man jumping up and down and

shouting. It was almost enough to draw me away.

"But how can I find his cart? Surely he will hide it, so it will not be a temptation to me."

"Never mind that. I will show you. Just watch me. I was sent here to draw you into Heaven's beauty."

Entranced, I watched the colors shift. It tasted—I tasted the same excitement, the icy brilliance of lightning and the tantalizing heat of lust. I never knew that Heaven could be so much like my former craft.

The next day I built a craft, but no pleasure came from it. It was drained of pleasure, but I was looking for that enticing presence. It seemed to have gone.

Where was Fortress's cart? I couldn't see it. I looked in nooks and crannies. Something seemed wrong. Then... I was aware of the bad intuition first. But I heard a shimmer. "Look right in front of you."

Ahead of me, on top of a pile of disassembled devices, was a cart.

I took a blade, and nicked one of the axles.

The shimmer spoke. "One more thing.

"Look at me."

I looked, and the beauty seemed at once more intense and hollow—and I could not look away.

"Sing an incantation over it."

"What?"

It seemed as if a dark hand was pushing me forward.

I chanted, and watched in horrid fascination. Something seemed to shimmer about my cart. Whenever I looked at it, it seemed the same, but whenever I turned away, it seemed as if there was some beautiful incense

rising from it.

The next day, it easily won.

Fortress looked at his cart crossly, with consternation and puzzlement. He seemed to be looking through it.

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The next thing I remember was retching, on the workbench. Fortress and a priest were standing over me, although I did not notice them at the time. All I could notice for the time being was an overpowering stench. I wanted to keep retching forever. My spirit was sapped.

"That was not a Guardian," the priest said. "You have listened to a Destroyer."

"If you meet that presence again, make the Sign of the Cross and say, 'Lord, have mercy.'"

I looked at him weakly. "What can I do? I thought I had repented."

"You have repented, and you need to repent again. Pray and fast this week, then make your confession, and come to the Table. Don't go anywhere near that shimmer, no matter how attractive it is. Run, and invoke the Holy Name. And talk with Fortress and me. And if you fall again, repent again. The saints are all praying for you."

I tried to take it in. His words stung me—not because of what he said, but because of why it would be appropriate to say them.

He revered me, bowing low. I felt something in his reverence.

---

With Fortress's leave and the priest's, I went to the monastery to spend my time in prayer and fasting. I took a lump of dry bread each day, and some water.

As the hours and prayers passed, my head seemed to clear. Foul desires raged, but I just resisted them.

The third day after I was at the temple, I ate nothing, and sang songs, and my body seemed lighter. I remembered the secret learnings I'd made, and they seemed vile, paltry. As the sun set, I suddenly thought of Silver. I was off here, selfishly caring for myself, while she was in the vile grip that squeezed me! I stole out of the monastery, and found her almost immediately.

She placed an arm around my waist. I pulled back, but she held me and said, "I'm just placing an arm around your waist. What is it?" I spoke with urgency and concern, and she 'just'... I do not wish to recall the full shame, but when it was over, Clamp stood over me and threw a hemp belt. "Bind his hands."

---

As I was walking, captive, I thought of the advice the priest had given me. But how was I to make the sign of the cross? I could try. I tried to move my hands, hoping something miraculous might happen.

Clamp struck my face, and said, "Don't try to wriggle out."

My face stung. I held my tongue, and then let out a rebel yell: "LORD, HAVE MERCY!"

The world seemed to move like melting ice.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

I watched every detail of rage flare in Clamp's face.

I heard a shift of cloth and bodies moving.

I saw his hand raised, to strike a crushing blow to my face...

...and descend...

and caught in the talons of an iron grin

...and caught in the talons of an iron grip.

I did not turn my head. I was too bewildered to look and see why my face was not stinging.

I had somewhere heard that voice before. It seemed familiar. And it was speaking quietly.

I had heard this voice speak quietly in contentment. I had heard it speak quietly to tell a secret. I had heard this voice speaking quietly in banter. What I had not heard was this voice speaking quietly because it was beyond rage, a rage that had gone beyond burning fire to be cold enough to shatter ice.

"Let him go," the voice hissed.

I recognized the voice of my Teacher.

"Let him go," Fortress glared.

Clamp laughed, and let go of me. "Fortress! How wonderful to see you! May I get you a glass of wine?"

Fortress began working on my bands. He said nothing.

Clamp said, "A great Teacher like you has much to offer, could probe much secret wisdom. You seemed to have a knack for—"

I felt my stomach quiver.

A crowd was beginning to form around us: no one was right by us, but many were looking.

Fortress said, "No."

My stomach knotted. I had an overwhelming sense that I should move.

I obeyed it.

Clamp looked at Fortress



Clamp looked at Fortress.

Fortress looked at Clamp.

The anger in Fortress's face began to vanish.

Clamp seemed to be leaving fear and entering terror.

I backed off further.

I saw a faint ripple of muscles across Clamp's body.

I began to scream.

Metal sang as a sword jumped from its sheath.

I saw, moment after horrid moment, the greatsword swing into the side of Fortress's head.

Then I heard a shattering sound, and when I realised what was happening, Clamp had been thrown up against the far wall, while Fortress was in the same place.

The sherds of a sword hilt dropped from Clamp's hand.

The anger vanished from Fortress's face. He looked, and said, "Come back, Clamp. We need you."

I could hear the sadness in his voice.

Clamp ran away in abject terror.

I had been fasting. Even if I had not been fasting, I would have...

I fainted.

---

My head slowly began to clear—much more slowly because Fortress was carrying me again.

"I'll sleep at your doorway at the monastery," Fortress said, "and fast

with you."

I closed my eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't deserve to—"

"Not as punishment, Unspoken. You've endured punishment enough; harsh fasting and vigils are a much lighter load than—but you are weak and vulnerable now. You need the support. And I would like to share this with you."

The fasting passed quickly. Or more properly, it moved very slowly, and it was hard, but there was cleansing pain. The Wind moved through me, and gave me respite from my burdensome toil of evil.

When it was the eighth day, Fortress and I returned to the Temple. A mighty wind was blowing all around, and its song and its breath moved inside. Wind blew through every jewel of the liturgy. And there was—I couldn't say.

After the end of the liturgy, when I was anointed for healing, Fortress said, "Let's go home and get to work. Pool has some money to buy a chicken, and—why are you hesitating?"

"Could I return to the monastery and fast for another week?"

"Why? You have done what the priest asked. You needn't do more. There is no need to engage in warfare above your strength. Remember, the Destroyers always fast."

"That's not why."

"Why, then?"

"That's what I am trying to find out."

---

I prayed and fasted, and my head seemed to clear. I succeeded that week from returning to my vomit; I think it was because Fortress spent the week with me, and he was generous to spend that long without seeing Pool. He prayed with me, and at the end, my mind took on a new

keenness. I still did not know what it was the Wind was trying to tell me.

But I no longer resisted it. Fortress gently said, "You have fasted further, and I will trust you that it was the right thing to do. But why not let this fast meet its summit in a feast? I can buy a chicken, and we can sit down at table."

"But the—"

"Do not worry about that. If the Wind holds a message for you, the Wind will make that clear enough. Let's return."

Once home, I asked him a simple question. I think the question was, "Why are you so concerned for me?" Or it might have been, "What is your experience with the poison I tasted?" Or something else. And he gave a long and interesting answer to me.

I don't remember a word he said.

---

My stomach was full of roast chicken, dried lemon, and all the bread I wanted. Pool was generous with wine. Fortress's voice was humming with the answer to whatever question I asked, and I could hear the chatter and laughter of small children in the background. It concentrated my thoughts tremendously.

What was your error?, the Wind whistled in my ear.

In a moment, I searched through the evils I committed and drew in a breath. Pride, I said in my heart. The primeval poison that turned the Light-Bearer into the Great Dragon. The one evil that is beyond petty sins like lust.

You embraced that evil, but what was your error?

I drew in another breadth. Everything. Lust. Magic. Scorning the beauty of the Light. Seeking to order the world around myself. As I think over the great evils that exist, I do not see that I am innocent of any one of them, nor free of their disease.

Those wrongs have been obliterated forever. They are no more. You are innocent of them. You are being healed. The vilest of these, your pride itself, is a smouldering coal thrown into the infinite Ocean. What was your error?

I do not understand. I have hardly made errors greater than these—if 'error' is even the word. Do you mean something small by 'error'?

No, something great and terrible. What was your error?

I do not understand.

What was your error?

With my inner eye, I saw the pelt and the Steel Orb, only frozen. The Steel Orb needed to move, but it was locked in place. Those words haunted me, chased me, yelled at me. I long lie awake that night, searching to see what was being asked. At last, as the pale light of the dawn began its approach, I drifted into sleep.

I saw, in vivid detail, the moments of my descent. Only it was different in my dream. When I had actually lived it, I saw things through a veil, through an Illusion. I suffered empty pain, and thought I was gaining wholeness. Now the illusion was stripped away, and I saw every moment how I had thrown away gold to fill my hands with excrement. And every time, the Glorious Man looked at me and asked what the Wind had asked, "What was your error?"

I saw a time when I listened eagerly. I was being told secrets, hidden truths beyond the ken of the ordinary faithful. I was, I had thought, being drawn into the uppermost room and tasting with delight its forbidden fruit. The Glorious Man looked into me, looked through me, and asked, "What was your error?"

I was awake, bolt upright in my bed. My body was rigid. In the window I saw that the dawn had almost come. "Fortress!" I called.

In an instant, Fortress was by my side. "What is it?"

"You have felt the pain I felt."

"Every evil by which you have poisoned yourself, I have done, and worse."

"What was your error?"

He paused a moment, and said, "Pride."

"No. What was your error?"

"More evil than I can remember."

"When you descended into that living Hell, did you embrace evil alone, or did you embrace evil and error?"

He drew in a breath. "Climb up to the roof with me."

---

The dawn was breaking; stream after stream of golden, many-hued light poured over the edge of the city. We both sat in silence.

Fortress seemed completely relaxed.

I was not.

"Fortress, I did not win our race."

Fortress's eyes greeted the sun.

"I know."

He drank in more of the light, and said, "Would you like to have another race?"

Time passed.

"You can choose who makes his wagon first."

"You make your wagon first."

I drew a breath.

"It must be painful for a Teacher to watch his pupil descend into filth and have to rescue him and carry him back."

"To me, that is a very good day."

I looked at his face, trying to find sarcasm or irony.

I found none.

"Why?"

"Clamp was my pupil."

I didn't know what to say. I fumbled for words. I tried to meet his pain.

"You seem very happy for a man with no children."

I saw tears welling up in his eyes.

I began to stammer.

He said, "Let's go and build our cars. If you want, you can take the silt board so you can design your wagon while I'm building mine. A fair match would be balm to my soul."

---

I looked at the board. Something was ticking in the back of my mind—fire on the spring, was it? But why? I set to work on the board, trying to reconcile something burning with a spring and gear box. Something was knocking in the back of my mind, but I couldn't listen to it. In the end I told myself I'd make a spring driven wagon with a lamp on top: a large one, that would burn brightly.

The next day, I set about smithing the lamp. I enjoyed it, and it was a thing of beauty. Almost at the end of the day my eye fell on something, and I saw that Fortress had left the best spring for me.

The next day we raced, and I lit my lamp. It burned brightly. It finished two laps, while Fortress's cart made fully twenty laps round the cloister, but he liked the lamp; its flame was a point of beauty. "Keep trying," he said, "although I'm not going to ask why you put a lamp on. I'll be in the workshop sorting gears; could you care for customers?"

---

At the evening meal Fortress seemed preoccupied; it looked as if he was listening.

We sat in silence.

He moved, as with a jolt. "Unspoken, what were you saying to me when we greeted the coming of the dawn?"

My face turned red.

"No, sorry. I mean, before then."

"I don't know. My sense was that it was something important, but I doubt if—"

Fortress dropped his bread and moved to give Pool a deep kiss. "Come with me, Unspoken."

---

As we walked, he turned to me and said, "The Great Fast is approaching, and we all need to purify ourselves. You especially."

"But I am working on—"

"That is why you especially need to be purified. Forget that completely."

I recognized the route to the monastery.

"There are some things I can give you, but you need to be at the monastery. As much as you are able, submit discipline as if you were a monk. Draw on their strength. Afflict yourself. Gaze on the glory of the night."

Light.

"But—"

"Trust me."

Not long after, we arrived at the monastery. He spoke briefly with the head monk, Father Mirror, and revered me. "The Mother who held the Glory in her arms now holds you in her heart and in her prayers." Then he left.

---

The rhythm of the calendar, of the week, of the day, became clearer. My head itself became clearer. With the discipline I became hazier and the Glory became clearer.

I was praying in my cell, and suddenly it was illuminated with beauty and light, so that the flame of my lamp could not be seen. I was dazzled, and at the same time uneasy.

I looked, and I saw the form of the Glorious Man. He looked at me and said, "You have done well."

I felt as if there was something jumping up and down, shouting for attention, inside me.

"I will tell you what you are to write about your error."

I was fascinated. Or almost fascinated. I turned my ear to the man jumping up and down. And wrenched myself away.

I bowed my head, and said, "Glorious One, I am not worthy."

Immediately I reeled. A stench, that felt as if I was touching fetid—I do not want to say what it smelled like. I fell backwards, reeling and gasping for breath.

I heard a shuffle of cloth, and then footprints. The chief monk stepped in. He looked displeased, although I wasn't sure he was displeased at me. He bid the other monks leave, and said to me, "My son,



tell me everything."

I hesitated. "You need to sleep so you can greet the morning in chant."

"My son, another of my brother monks can lead that greeting even if you are still talking when it comes."

I opened my mouth, and talked, and talked, and talked. He seemed surprised at times, but looked on me with kindness. At the end he said, "I will take the cell next to you and pray with you. The whole monastery will pray over you."

"I am not worthy—"

"And I am not worthy to serve you and give you what strength I can. If it were a question of being worthy—" he shuddered. "Sleep, and rise for the morning chant if you can."

That night I was riven by my dreams.

---

Evils in me that I thought were dead rose up with new life. I interrupted Father Mirror often, and he told me to pray, "Heavenly Glory, if you want me to fight these impulses, that I will do." And I did. Gradually the fight became easier. I began to count the days, and contemplate the Glory.

As time passed, I lived to join the monks, the stars and the rocks, beings of light, in contemplation above everything else. I looked into the Glorious Light when—

I felt a hand shaking me. I opened my eyes, and collected my presence. Then I closed my eyes and looked away.

"What is it?"

His face was radiant. "I was looking on the Glorious Light, and—"

Silence

SILENCE.

"I am not worthy to look on you. That light is shining through your face. Leave me alone."

"My brother."

I said nothing.

"Look at me."

I turned to face him, keeping my eyes down.

"You would not see this light coming from my face unless it were coming from your face as well."

"You mock me. My face? I am not a monk, nor have I gone through years of discipline. And I have—"

"The Wind blows where it will. You could not see this light at all unless your face were radiant."

I said nothing.

"I have come to call you. It is time for the Great Vigil."

"Time for the Great Vigil? The Great Feast tonight? But it is scarcely a day that has passed since—"

"I know. I am not ready either. But the Feast is here. And those prepared and unprepared are alike compelled by the joy."

I went through the Great Vigil at the monastery, revered each of the monks. Then Father Mirror accompanied me home, the dark streets lit by the brilliance of his face. I joined Fortress and Pool in the revelry; I danced with Pool. Then Fortress walked home, one arm over Pool's shoulder and one arm around mine. When we stepped across the threshold, Fortress said, "It is time for a race."

I let Fortress build his wagon first, and insisted that he take the best spring. Then I sat down with the silt tablet.

My intuition had been to mix fire and water. Or something like that. Or burn water. Or—I sketched one design after another, trying to see how they would help a spring, or gears for that matter. Towards the end of the day, I sat down, perplexed, and wiped the slate clean. I had given up.

That night, I prayed my giving up. Then—it took me a long time to get to sleep.

In the morning, I left the springs alone entirely. I pulled out the metal lamp and made a nearly-sealed water tank to go above it. I put the water tank above the flame, and fitted something special to its mouth. By the end of the day, I was exhausted, and my fingers were sore.

The next day, Fortress wound the spring, and I took a tinderbox and lit the flame. He looked at me slightly oddly, and when he turned his cart around at the end of the first lap, looked at me gently.

My cart hadn't moved.

At the end of the second lap, he asked me, "Did your cart move?"

I said nothing.

At the end of the fourth map, he said, "Your cart is moving."

And it was. Steam from the heated tank was moving one part, which turned gears, to the effect that it was moving very slowly. And it continued moving slowly for the rest of the day, finally stopping after it had run a full seventy-two laps.

Fortress walked away from me with a look of amazement.  
"Unspoken, I've got to tell my friends about you."

---

As I was drifting off to sleep, the Wind whistled in my ear: What was your error?

The Steel Orb broke free from one spot, and began to roll, first one way, then another. It seemed to be exploring its strength, moving just a little this way, just a little that way.

I wrestled in my thoughts, like a man trying to lift a greased boulder. I was not trying to lift it yet; my fingers slid over the surface, seeking purchase.

Thoughts flowed through my mind, wordless thoughts that slid away whenever I tried to capture them in worded form. I grasped after them with patient, eager expectation.

I did not notice when I descended into the depths of slumber.

I was staring into a dark, deep, colorless, shapeless pool, and trying to see its color and shape. There was light behind me, but for the longest time I did not look into it. Then I looked into the light, and turned, and—

A voice said, "Awaken!" and I was shaken awake.

Fortress and Father Mirror were both crouching over me. I sat up, nervously.

"What is it?" I said, flinching against a rebuke.

"Last night, I was speaking with the bishop," Father Mirror said, "when a messenger arrived, limping. He had been severely delayed. A Holy Council has been summoned, and the bishop requests that Fortress, you, and I join him on his travels."

"Me? I would just be a burden."

"Never mind that. He did not tell me his reasons, but he specifically requested that you join him immediately."

"What about—"

"No 'what about'. Will you obey?"

I turned to Fortress "May I use your crossbow?"

I turned to Fortress. "May I use your crossbow."

"A crossbow has been packed on your horse."

"On the way out, may I visit a friend?"

"Quickly."

Still in a daze, I revered Pool and bade her farewell. Then Fortress gave his farewell, and we found the horses.

I knocked on a door—I thought it was the right door—and said, "I've been summoned on a journey by the bishop, and I do not understand why. But may I buy all of your explosive quarrels? I have some money I could offer."

"Bear slayer, you may have them. Without money. Just let me get them." He stepped in, and seemed to be taking a long time. I heard more and more rummaging, and Father Mirror sounded impatient. Then he came out, looking sheepish. "I'm sorry. I can't find them. I've looked all around. I wish I—"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Just remember me."

Before the sun was above the mountains, we were on the Road.

---

We rode along at a cantor. The horses were sleek and strong, and I placed myself opposite the bishop.

He placed himself next to me.

"My son, I offer my apologies, but I wish to talk with you."

"Why?"

"Tell me about what you did wrong. And what you've done since."

I told him, and he said, "There is something more. What more is there?"

"I don't know how to say. It's just that... something about it seems different from struggling with sin. Like there's something different involved, that is error."

"All sin is error. Pride especially is illusion."

"But... Would you say we believe the same things? Perhaps you understand them better than I, but would you say we believe the same things?"

"Yes, certainly. But they do not believe the same thing. It is not a single mistaken belief."

"What would you say if I said it wasn't just an error in the specific thing one believes, but an error so deep that... an error whose wake said, 'What you believe is private?'"

The bishop turned towards me.

His eyes narrowed.

"The highest part of the inner person is mind, but it is not private. In an immeasurably greater way than the five senses, it connects with and wrestles with and apprehends and conquers and contemplates the spiritual realities themselves. Those who choose error grapple with these realities in the wrong way like—like a man trying to climb a mountain upside down. The mountain is there, and the hands and feet are there, but they're not connected the right way."

The bishop was silent.

"But... When I stepped into that vortex, I had something of a sense that I was breaking away from the mountain, like it was an illusion, and creating my own private hill, and forging the limbs of my body that I could use to connect with it. I—"

The bishop remained silent.

I fumbled. A flash of insight struck. "I was stepping into a secret,

hidden reality, rejecting ordinary people's reality. That is pride. But normally when we say 'pride', we mean an evil of which one part is illusion. Here there it is more like the Illusion is the spiritual reality, and bitter pride is its handmaiden. No; that's not quite right. The relationship is—"

He looked at me. "That's enough for now. Let us chant psalms together. I want to hear more, but please, my son, don't believe I'm only concerned with getting that out of you." He paused a moment, long enough for me to realize how tense my body was. "Now Fortress told me you're quite a tinker?"

---

"He glared," the bishop said, "and said, 'and I will not speak with anyone lower than a bishop!'"

"What did you say," I asked.

"I looked at him wearily, and said, 'Believe and trust me, good man, when I say that no one here is lower than a bishop.'"

He paused a moment and continued, "Unspoken—"

A flood of memories came back. It was not what he said, but how he said it. He had spoken in my island's dialect. His accent was flawless.

"How do you know my island's dialect?" I asked. "I come from an insignificant and faroff island. Nothing important has ever come from that island, and nothing ever will."

"That's easy enough," he said, "I was born there."

"Unspoken, I am a man like you." He paused, and continued, "There is a place I was born. I have a father and mother, and brothers and sisters. I remember the first time I skipped a stone, the thrill when I reinvented the pipe organ. I contemplate and pray, hunger and—"

"Your Grace, how did your father introduce you to the art of memory?"

"When I was a boy, I loved to swim. I swam as much as I was allowed, and some that I wasn't. There was a lagoon, with a network of underwater caves, and some of them I was allowed to explore. My uncle chipped and ground a mica disc enclosed in a ring of copper, and showed me how to close my eye around it. I could see under the water, and I watched the play of light inside the one largest cave. My uncle also gave me a bent spear, with the head pointing sideways, and I speared many meals with it.

"One day my father looked at me and said, 'Fire, if you could decorate the cavern in the big pool, what would you put there?'

"I thought and said, 'Blankets along the wall so I could feel something soft.'

"He said, 'What else?'

"I said, 'Nothing else.'

"What might you imagine?'

"There's nothing else that would work.'

"And things that wouldn't work?'

"I hesitated, and said, 'A candle to see by, and something to write with.'

"What else?'

"Come. You are wilder than that.'

"Color, as when the leaves of the forest go green.'

"And what if there were passageways branching off? What would you like to see there?'

"He led me to imagine this vast network of rooms and passageways, each one different, each one holding something different, each one different to be in. It was a wonderful game and swimming was almost as



different to be in. It was a wonderful game, and swimming was almost as enjoyable as this activity.

"One day, my father added another dimension. He walked up to me with a rope and said, 'Do you see this rope?'

"Yes,' I said.

"What is the strangest thing that could happen to it in the antechamber to your labyrinth?'

"If it were not soaked, for it to fall down to the floor.'

"My father was silent.

"Or it would be peculiar for it to fall, not up or down, but to the side.'

"I expected a smile. My father looked at me and said, 'Surely you have imagined things stranger than that.'

"I said, 'It could coil and uncoil, slithering around the walls before coming together to a bundle—and then coming together and vanishing.'

"My father smiled and said, 'And what of that plate there? What could happen to it in the room under?'

"I laughed at the things I imagined; such strange things happened to the things in my rooms, and I invented things on my own. Then I began to be bored, and my father saw my boredom. 'This game bores you. Let's move on to something else.'

"Look up. Note what position the stars are in. After ten nights' span, I will open the cover of a box and you will behold forty things you've not seen before. Then I will leave you with the box and eat a large loaf of bread. When I have returned, I will return and we will climb that peak, and when we reach the top, you will tell me everything you saw in the box.'

"I jumped slightly, and waited for him to explain himself.

"... ..

"When no explanation came, I said, 'I can't carry a wax tablet when I'm climbing the peak.'

"He said, 'Nor would I allow it if you could.'

"I said, 'Then how will I do it?'

"He said, 'I've already told you.'

"I was angry. Never had he been so irrational as this. For seven days I searched my heart in wrath, searching. On the eighth day I rested from my wrath and said, 'He will say what he will say. I renounce anger at his request.'

"He had begun his odd request by releasing me from my labyrinth; I delved into it. I imagined the first room, but I couldn't banish the rope coiling and uncoiling. I swam to another room, only to have something else greet me. I swam around, frustrated again and again when—

"My face filled with shame.

"I spent the next two days playing, resting, swimming. I moved through the imaginary labyrinth. When my father pulled the cover off the box, I placed everything in my imaginary labyrinth, one in each room, exactly as he had taught me. It took him a while to eat the bread, so I stared at the box's rough leather lining. We walked, and talked, and the conversation was... different. I enjoyed it.

"He asked me, 'What was in the box?'

"I said, 'A key, a stylus, a pebble, a glazed bead, a potsherd, a gear, an axle, a knife, a pouch, a circle cord, some strange weed, a stone glistening smooth by the river's soft hands, a statuette, a crystalline phial, a coil of leather cord, a card, a chisel, a mirror, a pinch of silt, a candle, a firecord, a badly broken forceps, a saltball, a leaf of thyme, an iron coin, some lead dregs, a bite of cured fish, a small loaf of spiced bread, some sponge of wine, a needle, a many-colored strand of parchment, an engraved pendant—hmm, I'm having trouble remembering this one—a piece of tin wire, a copper sheet, a pumice, a razor, a wooden shim, a pliers, and a

measuring ribbon.'

"'I count thirty-nine,' he said. 'Where's the fortieth?'

"I ran through my rooms and hesitated. 'I memorized thirty-nine things, then stared at the rough leather inside the box. I didn't see another; I don't even have the trace of memory like when there's another one that I can't quite spring and catch.'

"When I said, 'rough leather inside the box,' he seemed pleasantly surprised. I didn't catch it at the time, but I understood later.

"And that was how my father let me taste the art of memory. How did your father teach you the art of memory?"

"I don't have as good a story to tell. He introduced me to the more abstract side—searching for isomorphisms, making multiple connections, encapsulating subtle things in a crystalline symbol."

"Oh, so you've worked with the abstract side from a young age. Then I have something to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"I want to speak with you further. I'd like if you could inscribe in your heart the things you tell me. When we return—pardon, if we return, if we are shown mercy—I may send you to the monastery and ask you to transcribe it so it can be copied."

My heart jumped.

---

His Grace Fire asked me, "If you were to crystallize your dark journey in one act you did, what would it be?"

I slid my mind through my sins. I watched with a strange mixture of loathing, shame, and haunting desire as I—

"Stop," he said. "I shouldn't have asked that. I tempted you."

I looked at him and blinked. "None of the actions I did encapsulates the journey."

He cocked one eyebrow.

"Or rather, all of them did, but the entire dark path is captured by one action he didn't do. I neither gave nor received reverence."

"That doesn't seem surprising," he nodded. "Pride is—"

"That's also true," I said.

He looked at me.

"In our reverence, we greet one another with a holy kiss. That is hard to appreciate until you have tried to step outside of it. We try to be spiritual people, but however hard we try, matter is always included. Every one of the Mysteries includes matter. We worship with our bodies. Fasting does us good because we are creatures of body—all of the Destroyers fast, all of the time, and never does any of them profit by it. Our great hope is that we will be raised in transformed, glorified and indestructible bodies to gaze on the Light bodily for ever.

"More to the point, the holy kiss is the one act in the entire Sacred Scriptures that is ever called holy."

He blinked. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but you are right."

"And... there was licentiousness; we could do wrong with our bodies, but this is only for the reason that the holy kiss was not possible. The spiritual embrace draws and works through body, because body is part of spirit. Their asceticism and libertinism alike exist because of a wedge between spirit and body."

"How can they do that? That is like driving a wedge between fire and heat."

"Of course you can't," I said, "but they think they can."

"My son," he said, "you are placing things upside down. We fast to

my son, he said, you are placing things upside down. we fast to subdue our bodies, which have become unruly; spirit and matter are not equal partners, nor is matter the center of things. In this world or the next."

"You're wrong," I said. "You only say that because your approach to spirit has always assumed matter. If you had genuinely lived the life and practice of believing that matter was evil, was not our true selves, not illusion, you would understand and not say that."

I winced when I realized what he'd just said. I waited for his rebuke. Or a slap.

"Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

"Or maybe that was too bold. Spirit is supreme; the Glory is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. But... struggling to subdue matter, and impregnate it with spirit, does not let you realize what place matter has. Returning from despairing in matter as evil is very different."

"Despair?"

"Despair..." I thought. "Matter is evil, probably the evil creation of an evil god. If that is true, you cannot relate to the cosmos with joy, not even abstemious joy. You must despair in it. And—I think this is connected, it's all connected—if the entire cosmos is an illusion which we must escape, then no less is its creator the same sort of thing. There's a perverse acknowledgment, I think, that the cosmos must reflect its Creator and radiate its glory. Because if they believe this horrible thing about the cosmos, they believe the same about its Creator, and as they transgress the cosmos as an obstacle they get past, so they transgress its Creator as an obstacle to get past. From what I've heard, their pictures of subordinate gods vary, but one of the few common features is that since this cosmos is evil or illusory, and this cosmos must reflect its Creator, the Creator himself must be something we need to get past if we are to find real good."

"You are describing an error that is really more than one error."

"Yes. Things are... private. They consider themselves more spiritual, more of the spiritual power we use to touch spiritual realities, yet somehow they have a hydra's different pictures of what those spiritual realities themselves. In some of them it almost sounds as if that spiritual apprehension is private."

"I won't ask you to inventory everything that was private. Did you see any of the Scriptures?"

"Not many. And those I read were... odd."

"Odd?"

"The Gospels are wondrous documents indeed."

"Indeed."

"But they never pander. Never does a writer say, 'I tell these things that you may be titillated.' However amazing or miraculous the events are, the miracles are always secondary, signs that bear witness to a greater good.

"And I appreciated this after the few occasions I was able to read their Gospels. Those books do not tell the story of when Heaven and Earth met; the ones I read don't tell a story at all; they are collections of vignettes or stories, that suck you in with the appearance of hidden wisdom. They appeal to someone despairing of this cosmos and seeking what is hidden behind it. Your Grace, only when I had tried to dive into those crystallized vortices had I realized how pedestrian the Gospels are: the Glorious Man shines with the uncreated Light and we blandly read that his clothes are white as no fuller on earth could reach them."

"Hmm," he said. "That's like—a bit like the difference between marriage and prostitution. In many ways."

"And... if you understand this basic despair, a despair that forges the entire shape of their relationship to Creation and Creator, you will understand not only their excessive asceticism and their license, their belief that the Light is not good, but also their magic. The incantations

and scrolls are in one sense the outermost layer of a belief: if this Creation is evil and illusion, if one must transgress it to find truth, then of course one does not interact with it by eating and drinking, ploughing and sewing. One must interact in hidden, occult ways, and gain powers."

"I see. But don't get into that; I'd rather not have you remember that poison. And I assume you could say much more, but I'm beginning to get the picture, and I want to pray and contemplate the Glory before meeting any more of it.

"How would you summarize it, in a word?"

"There are many ways our Scriptures can be summarized in a word: 'Love the Glory with all of your inmost being and your soul and your might, and love your neighbor as yourself.' 'He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Glory require of you, but to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly in the Light.' 'The Glory became a Man and the Glorious Man that men might become Glorious Men and Glories.' And this error could be summarized in many ways..."

"Your spirit too pure for this unworthy cosmos."

"Take a rest," he said. "I think you've said enough for now. Let's pray."

"Oh, and one other thing. When your heart is set on pushing past the One Glory, there seem to many gods offering their protection and guidance."

"Pray, child. You've said enough."

---

We reached another city, and Fortress said, "We have a decision to make. The city we want to reach is due East. The road turns, and heads almost directly south."

I said, "Why?"

"Because East of the city is the dark forest."

The bishop looked at him. "I think we can enter the city and buy a good meal. But we lack the time to take the Southern route."

Less than two hours later, we were re-supplied and heading East. It was weeks before we met anything worse than stepping in poison ivy.

At night, I was awoken by the sound of a foot shuffling. I looked around; it was still Fortress's watch, and Bishop Fire and Father Mirror were already getting up. The campfire was burning low, and in the flickering torchlight I saw a ring of many eyes.

"Black wolves," Fortress whispered. "Stand up and mount your horse slowly."

I reached across my bedroll. Fortress hissed, "No. We can't afford that. I don't know what—"

I slid up on my horse and slowly reached for my crossbow. Fortress hissed, "Are you crazy? There are more wolves than quarrels, and they'd be on us by your third shot." Then he cocked his head and said, "Whisper soothing in your horse's ear. And be ready to gallop."

The wolves had become visibly closer in this scant time; one started to run towards Fortress's horse. Then Fortress reared and parted his lips, and bellowed.

I have never heard a man roar that loudly. Not before, not after. It hurts my ears to think about it. He roared like thunder, like waterfall, like an explosion. The wolf was stunned, and immediately he was galloping forward, the wolves running from him in abject terror. It was all I could do to control my horse, and it took some tracking before Fortress found Father Mirror.

We sat in our saddles; every sound, every smell, seemed crisper. Then I realized that tendrils of dawn were reaching around, and as we rode on, we descended into a clearing and His Grace said, "Look! The great city itself: Peace."

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It seemed but an hour and we were inside the great city itself. Having taken time to drink our fill of water, but not eat, we came into the great chamber where the holy bishops and the other attendees were gathered.

I could hear Wind blowing. I tried to listen.

"And I know," an archbishop said, "that not everyone can scale the hidden peaks. But you misunderstand us gravely if you think we are doing a poorer job of what you do."

Several heads had turned when we entered. An archbishop said, "Your Grace Fire! May the Glory grant you many years. Have you any thoughts?"

The Wind whispered in my ear, and quite suddenly I climbed on top of a table in an empty part of the chamber. I ignored the shock of those around me, so intently was I listening to the Wind's whisper.

"If that is anything," I shouted, "but a lie from Outer Darkness, may the Glory strike me down!"

I heard a click, and then several things happened at once. I was thrown violently forward, and I heard an explosion. I felt an unfamiliar sensation in my back, and I tasted blood.

A deathly silence filled the room. I began to move, and slowly picked myself up. "I repeat," I said. "If that is anything but a lie from Outer Darkness, may the Glory strike me down."

There was another explosion, and I felt fire on my back. I stood unmoved.

"I repeat. If that is anything but a lie from Outer Darkness, may the Glory strike me down!"

The Wind whispered, "Duck!"

I ducked, and a crossbow quarrel lodged itself in the wall.

Time oozed forward.

There was a scuffle, and four soldiers entered. One of them was holding a crossbow. Three of them were holding Clamp.

"Fathers and brothers, most reverend bishops and priests, deacons and subdeacons, readers and singers, monks and ascetics, and fellow members of the faithful, may the Glory reside in Heaven forever! I speak from painful awareness that what that son of darkness says is false. That is how it presents itself: a deeper awareness, a higher truth.

"This Council was summoned because you know that there is a problem. There are sins that have been spreading, and when you encourage people to penitence, something doesn't work. It is as if the disease of sin separated us from our natural union with the Light, and when the chasm was deep, the Glorious Man became Man, the Great Bridge that could restore the union... and something strange happened. Men are sliding off the Bridge.

"Fathers and brothers, the problem we are dealing with is not only a chasm that needs to be bridged. The problem is a false path that leads people to slip into the chasm.

"This error is formless; to capture it in words is to behead the great Hydra. It will never be understood until it is understood as error, as deadly as believing that poison is food.

"It is tied to pride; far from enjoying Creation, visible and invisible, however ascetically, it scorns that which we share, and the path of salvation open to mere commoners. It's the most seductive path to despair I've seen. I know. I've been there. The teaching that we are spirit and not body, that there is a sharp cleavage between spirit and body... I don't know how to distinguish this from proper asceticism, but it's very different. When we fast, it is always a fast from a good, which we acknowledge as good when we give it back to the Light from whom every good and perfect gift shines. This is a scorn that rejects evil; I don't know all the mythologies, but they do not see the world as the shining of the Light. The true Light himself would never stain his hands with it; it is the evil creation of a lesser god.

evil creation of a lesser god.

"And it is despair. It tingles, it titillates, it excites at first, and all this is whitewash to cover over the face of despair. Everything that common men delight in is empty to them, illusory joy. The great Chalice, that holds the meat of the Glorious Man's own flesh and holds the fluid more precious than ichor, his own true blood, the fluid that is the divine life—that all who partake see what they believe and become what they behold, younger brothers to the Glorious Man, sons of Light, sustained by the food of incorruption, servants in the Eternal Mansion who are living now the wonder we all await—I will not say what exciting thing they propose to replace it by. Some manage, I know not how, to find greater wonder in saying the Man was not the Glory and the Chalice as we know it is nothing. But it is in the beginning as sweet as honey, and in the end as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword. In a word, it says, 'Your spirit is too pure for this unworthy cosmos.'

"It is not healthy to dwell long on such things; I will not tell how its broken asceticism turns to people believing they can do whatever they wish with their bodies. (If the body is evil, not our true self...) He who long gazes into darkness may find his eyes darkened very soon or very slowly. In either case it is not good. But I will say this: Gaze on the Light, be strengthened by the Glorious Man, and listen to the Wind, and the better you know it, the less Darkness will look like Light. And we can rise against this error as error."

The archbishop who spoke when I entered said, "Would His Grace Fire please speak? I believe he has been rudely interrupted."

His Grace Fire looked at him levelly. "I have already spoken," he said, "and I have nothing further to say."

Then His Grace turned to me. "Unspoken. Your robe is damaged beyond repair. Would you like a green or blue robe to replace it?"

My voice quivered. "A green robe was chosen for me. I need to—"

"That isn't what I asked of you. Would you like a green or blue robe to replace it?"

I looked at Fortress.

He fell on his face prostrate before me and said, "Dear Unspoken, you have surpassed my humble tutelage for ever. I release you."

I turned back to His Grace Fire. "A blue robe."

Then I turned to Father Mirror. "To gaze on the glory as a member of your monastery."

A flask of oil was in the bishop's hands. "Unspoken, I give you a new name. You have spoken the unspoken. You have delved into the unspoken, searched it out, drawn forth jewels. I anoint you Miner."

All was still as he anointed my forehead, my eyes, my mouth, the powers of my body.

The Council's decision was swift. My words had opened a door; insight congealed in the hearts of those present. It moved forward from discussion to decrees, and decrees in turn gave way to the divine liturgy.

I had never been at a Meal like that, and have never been at one since. The uncreated Light shone through every face. I saw a thousand lesser copies of the Glorious Man. The Wind blew and blew. The Glory remained with us as we rode home.

We rode in to the city, and I saw Pool. She—she looked different. But I couldn't say why. Was I seeing a new beauty because of the Light? I sat silently and watched as Fortress dismounted. She walked up to him, and slowly placed one arm over one of his shoulders, and then the other arm over the other of his shoulders, and looked at him and said, "There is life inside me."

His eyes opened very wide, and then he closed them very tightly, and then he gave Pool the longest kiss I have ever seen.

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"Wait," Father Mirror said. "First discharge your duty to our bishop. You will have this life and the next to gaze on the Glory. My guest room is

free to you for as long as you need."

I looked at him wistfully.

"The highest oath a monk takes is obedience. That oath is the crystallization of manhood, and when you kneel before me as your father, your spirit will fall in absolute prostration before the Father of Lights for whom every fatherhood in Heaven and on earth is named. And if you are to be in obedience to me, you can begin by waiting to take that oath."

I waited.

The days passed swiftly. Quills and scrolls were given to me, and I inscribed three books. I wrote *The Way of Death*, in which I wrote about the error as a path, an encompassing way of living death, in which error, evil, and sin were woven together. I contemplated, prayed, and spoke with Fortress and others. Then I wrote *The Way of Healing*, in which I answered the question, "If that is the path we should avoid, what path should we walk instead?" Then I wrote *The Way of Life*, in which I left the way of death behind altogether, and sought to draw my reader before the throne of the Glory himself. I wrote:

But what can I say? The Light is projected down through every creature, everything we know, yes, even the Destroyers themselves. But if we try to project upwards and grasp the Light, or even the hope that awaits us, it must, it must, it must fail. "In my Father's house there are many rooms." These rooms are nothing other than us ourselves—the habitations and places into which we invite friend and stranger when we show our loves, and the clay that is being shaped into our glory, the vessels we will abide in forever. The Tree from which we were once banished, has borne Fruit without peer, and we will eat its twelve fruits in the twelve seasons. Yet a tree is smaller than a man, and a man is smaller than—

The temple where we worship, where Heaven and earth meet, is now but the shadow cast when the Light shines through the Temple that awaits us. The Light is everywhere, but we capture him nowhere. He is everything and nothing; if we say even that he Exists, our words and ideas crumble to dust and if we say that he does not

words and ideas crumble to dust, and if we say that he does not Exist, our words and ideas crumble beyond dust. If we look at the Symbols he shines through, everything crumbles, and if we say that everything crumbles, those words themselves crumble.

I end this book here. Leave these words behind, and gaze on the Glory.

I dropped my pen and sat transfigured in awe. I was interrupted by shaking. "It's time for the Vigil?"

I began to collect myself. "Vigil?"

"The Vigil of when Heaven and earth met, and the Word became flesh."

I opened my eyes. I realized the end of a fast had arrived.

"The books are finished."

"Finished?"

"Finished."

I do not remember the Vigil; I saw through it, and was mindful only of the Glory. The head monk learned I had finished, and the bishop was called.

Then came the feast. Pool held a son at her breast, and looked dishevelled, tired, radiant. Fortress beamed. His Grace Fire spoke on the three gifts given the Glorious Man: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. Gold was a reverent recognition of his kingship, Myrrh a reverent recognition of his suffering, and Frankincense a reverent recognition of his divinity. He turned these three over and over again, blending them, now one showing, and now another. His words burned when he said that in the person of the Glorious Man, these gifts were given to the entire community of Glorious Men.

The feast was merry, and when it wound down, Father Mirror welcomed me into the community. It was a solemn ceremony, and deeply

joyful. I swore poverty, chastity, and obedience. I found what I had been seeking when I fled my island. Then I was clothed—I was given the shroud, the cocoon of metamorphosis by which I was to be transfigured during the rest of my life.

After I retired to my room, I heard a knock at my door, followed by quick footsteps. I looked around, but saw no one.

Then I looked down, and saw a gift box. It was empty. Or was it?

Inside was a single grain of Frankincense.

# The Sign of the Grail

George had finally gotten through the first week at Calix College, and the chaos was subsiding. Bored for a minute, and too exhausted from the busy work to start researching something, he sat down, tried to remember something strange that he meant to investigate, and tried some more.

When he finally gave up and tried to think about what else he could do, he remembered a book he had seen in his closet, perhaps left over by a previous resident. He pulled out a fan and a lamp that were placed on it, and pulled out a large book. The entire leather cover had only eleven letters, and the dark leather showed signs of wear but seemed to be in remarkably good condition. The golden calligraphy formed a single word: *Brocéliande*. All across the front lay dark, intricate leather scrollwork.

What was "*Brocéliande*?" After looking at the leather and goldwork a short while, George opened *Brocéliande* and read:

The knight and the hermit wept and kissed together, and the hermit did ask, "Sir knight, wete thou what the Sign of the Grail be?"

The knight said, "Is that one of the Secrets of the Grail?"

"If it be one of the Secrets of the Grail, that is neither for thee to ask nor to know. The Secrets of the Grail are very different from what thou mightest imagine in thine heart, and no man will get them by looking for secrets. But knowest thou what the Sign of the Grail be?"



"I never heard of it, nor do I know it."

"Thou wete it better than thou knowest, though thou wouldst wete better still if thou knewest that thou wete."

"That be perplexed, and travail sore to understand."

The hermit said, "Knowest thou the Sign of the Cross?"

"I am a Christian and I know it. It is no secret amongst Christians."

"Then know well that the sacred kiss, the kiss of the mass, even if it be given and received but once per year, is the Sign of the Grail."

"How is that? What makes it such as I have never heard?"

"I know that not in its fullness. Nor could I count reasons even knew I the fullness of truth. But makest thou the Sign of the Cross when thou art alone?"

"Often, good hermit; what Christian does not?"

"Canst thou make the Sign of the Grail upon another Christian when thou art alone?"

George's cell phone rang, and he closed the book and ran to hear the call better. When he came back, though he spent an hour searching, he could not find his place in the heavy book. He turned outside.

There were a lot of people, but what he saw was the castle-like stonework of the campus, the timeworn statues, and finally the great wood with its paths, streams, and meadows. He got lost several times, but not truly *lost*, as he was exploring and finding interesting places no less when he lost his sense of direction. The next time he found his way, he went to the cafeteria and sat down at a table, part listening and part sifting through thoughts.

When he got home, his mind was hungry again, and he opened

*Brocéliande* to the middle:

Merlin howled.

"Lord of Heaven and Earth, I have everything I want, or rather everything I fled to. I have left the city and the company of men, and am become as a wild beast, living on grass and nuts.

"Is this because of whose son I am? Some say I have powers from my father, serving the Light only because the prayers spoken when some learned of that dread project. Yet here outside of castle and city I have learned things hidden from most men. I can conjure up a castle from the air, but not enter and live in one: I live in the wood as a man quite mad."

Then he looked around. The trees were a verdant green, yet he found apples. Presently he came to the fountain of *Brocéliande*; he rang not the bell but drew deep and drank a draught. The forest were his labyrinth and his lair.

A hawk came and set him on the branch close up.

Merlin said to it, "Yet I can speak with thee: no element is a stranger to me."

A sound of footsteps sounded, and Merlin ran not away.

Merlin his sister *Ganeida* laid a hand on Merlin his arm. "Come, Merlin. This is unworthy. I have brought thee food for a journey: King Arthur summoneth thee to his court."

Merlin beheld the wood called *Brocéliande*. He beheld its holly, its ivy, its trees shaken by storm and wind. He thought of the animals. And there was something about this forest that drew him: it seemed larger on the inside than the outside, and there was something alway that seemed shining through it, like faint and haunting music which he had by struggles learned to catch as he withdrew from castles and the world of men.

Then Ganiada did start to sing a different song, a plain and simple folk tune, and Merlin his heart settled, and he did walk with his sister.

George slowly closed the book.

He imagined the scene; there was something about Merlin that haunted and eluded him. There was—

There was a knock on the door.

He opened it. It was one of the people from dinner.

"Do you want to see a movie?"

"What movie?"

"We're still deciding. But there are a few of us going to the theater."

George thought for a moment. Up until that point he thought he didn't want to read more of the book for now. When he declined the invitation, there was a fleeting insight which he forgot the next moment.

The next day in class, the figure of Merlin had a stronger grip on his imagination.

If George had less energy, his classes might have suffered more. As it was, he was getting by, and he slowly began to realize that there was something more that gripped him than horses, swords, and armor. He kept opening more to see the beautiful fantasy, so different from his world. At one point he turned the page:

Then Queen Guinevere did sigh and wept sore.

A lady asked, "Milady, what is it?"

"This Grail cometh even now. Is it accursed?"

"The Round Table shattered sore hard and knights return with strange tales. Such a holy thing this Grail is called, yet when it

cometh the rich Grail yet burneth like fire. Already King Arthur his work is unraveling.

"Will it even take from me my Sir Lancelot? Or can I take even my Lancelot from the Holy Grail?"

There was something in the back of George's mind. He sat back, thinking, and then closed the book to make a brief visit to the unspoilt beauty of the wood.

When he went in, he noticed a great beech tree, lying, weeping. It seemed that there was something trying to get out of the verdure. There were ferns and moss around, and he walked and walked. The path took many turns, and George began to realize several things. First, it was dark. Second, he was lost. Third, a chill was setting in. Fourth, he could not see even the stars.

Before long he was running in heavy, icy rain, branches lashing, until a branch hitting his chest winded him. He sat down in stinging pain and regained his breath, then felt around and crawled beneath an outcropping. Here the rain at least would not get to him any more. He spent the night in waking shock at what this great pristine nature, unsullied by human contamination, was really like: the forest seemed to be without reason or order right down to the awkward surface of the rock that he was painfully lying on. Long-forgotten fears returned: when a little light broke through the clouds, were those things he saw rocks, fallen trees, or goblins? He spent a long time shivering, and when the sun rose, he thirsted for light, and got up, only half awake, and followed it until he came to the edge of the forest and saw the castle-inspired buildings of the college. A short while later he was warming up with a welcome blanket and the welcome sound of voices in conversation.

Something was eating away at the back of George's mind.

Perhaps because of his weariness, his attention in class was chiefly on the flicker of the fluorescent light and how the buildings, which on the outside were so evocative of castles, were so modern on the inside. The one thing that caught his mind was a set of comments about either how

we must be individuals and do our own thing or else we are all community and individuality is an illusion. He wanted to be haunted and meet hints of a larger world, and others' passionately held opinions seemed like they were taken from *Newsweek* and *USA Today*.

What was on TV? He stopped in the lobby and saw a show with a medieval set, very carefully done to convey a medieval flavor, and watched until a heroine looked at a magical apparition in a full-length mirror and said, "I am having... a biochemical reaction!" He could not explain what failed to confront him, but he walked out. It was Freya's Day, commonly shortened to "Friday." When he learned how the days of the week were named, for Norse gods or celestial bodies—namely, Sun's Day, Moon's Day, Tiw's Day, Wotan's Day, Thor's Day, Freya's Day, and Saturn's Day—something seemingly pedestrian met him with a touch of a larger world. Now, it seemed, things that looked like they could tell of a larger world confronted him with the utterly pedestrian?

His homework did not take long.

Then, amidst Bon Jovi blaring through the hall, George began read. What he was reading seemed to affect him more like a song would than a story: a lullaby almost. He read of Arthur walking into battle, carrying an icon of the Virgin above him. There were mighty blows, armies with their mounted shock troops, great knights clothed in chainmail hauberks astride elephantine destriers, and in the center Arthur holding what seemed to be a story within a story, an icon that opened out onto something larger, and yet something he could not see in his mind's eye.

Then at another place he read as Arthur crossed land and sea and placed his sword on the ground and claimed a second Britain, and then gave of his knights, his brothers, and his substance to make a place like Great Britain, with forests and orchards, fields and towns, until he had given what he could of his spirit to make a Little Britain.

George looked through and began to see things weaving in and out: an intensity, a concentration, and not just that he was entering another time but he was entering another *time*, though he could not tell how it was different: he only sensed that time moved differently, and that his

watch told something very different.

Then all of this seemed to crystallize as a grievously wounded Sir Lancelot came to an hospitable knight and Elaine his daughter spent endless time healing his wounds. Love so overwhelmed her that she poured herself out with such intensity that when Lancelot left for the only woman he could love, her body emptied of spirit and life floated on a bier in a boat until Arthur's court wept at the most piteous tale of her love. George found himself wishing he could weep.

—over hill, over dale until the night was black, and neither candle nor star pierced it. The great knight his destrier shook the earth. The great knight was clad in a double coat of mail and the shaft of his greater spear was as a weaver's beam. Then he did stop to dismount and his own steps shook the earth.

Before him was a chalice of purest gold, radiant with light—radiant as the day. He walked before it, his steps shook the earth, and he stood taller than ever he did stand, until his hand grasped it.

The light blazed brighter and a voice in the air spake, "Lancelot, Lancelot, why mockest thou me?" The light blazed, and Sir Lancelot fell against the ground in tremors, and his horse fled far away in terror.

Then Sir Lancelot spake a question which I will not tell you.

The voice answered with words not lawful for man to write, and the pure gold chalice vanished and the light with it.

The knight wist not why he ran, and later he awoke him in a strange place where there were neither man nor beast in sight.

George closed the book. He had been reading for a long time, he told himself. What was there to do?

He looked around the school website for clubs and organizations, and none of the many things people were doing caught his eye. He walked around the campus, looking at the buildings. He went to the library and

wandered around the bookshelves, and picked up a few items but set them down. Then he returned to his room and sat down for a while.

He was bored for the rest of the day.

That night, as he dreamed, he saw a castle, and walked into it. Whenever he looked at his body, he saw what looked like his ordinary clothing, and yet he believed he was wearing armor. He walked through hallways, chambers, the great hall, even dungeons, trying to see what he was searching for. At last he was in a room where he heard people, and smelt something ineffable. He caught a glimpse of a chalice that he could not see, yet he sensed its silhouette, bathed in indescribable light on either side, and he saw light rising above its core. But he never succeeded in seeing it.

He awoke from the strain to see it. He heard birdsong, and the fingers of the light of the dawn were brushing against his face.

Something crystallized in George's mind, and he did not need to tell himself, "I am on a quest."

The next day he went into the city to look around in the medieval institute, and tried to see what was there. He managed to walk at a brisk pace, almost run, through the museum, and was nervous over whether he would get out by the time he had to leave to catch dinner. Nothing caught his eye; nothing seemed interesting; everything seemed good only for a glimpse.

There was something eating at him.

During the next week, George discovered online reproduction sword dealers and looked at the perfectly machined character of the many closeup images available online. He didn't buy anything, but after the week thinking and failing to find other places, George returned to the museum. Maybe there was something he had missed.

He stopped at the first sword.

The sword, or what was left of it, looked like it had been eaten by

worms, if that were possible. The deeply pitted surface intrigued him; it had all the surface of the complexity of a rock, and he thought that if he could take a magnifying glass or a zoomed-in camera lens to this or that part, it could pass for the intricate surface of a volcanic rock.

The handle didn't look right at all. It was a thin square rod connecting a thick blade and a thicker pommel, and seemed the very definition of "ergonomically incorrect," as if it had been designed to gouge the wearer's hand or generate blisters. It held for George something of the fascination of a car wreck. Why on earth had the museum put such a poor-quality specimen on display?

Then he read the rather large plaque.

The plaque read:

This sword was excavated in what is now Cornwall in Great Britain and dates to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. It is considered to be remarkably well-preserved, being one of few such finds to be straight and in one solid piece, the metal part lacking only a handguard, and is one of this museum's prized holdings and one of the most valuable gifts from an anonymous donor. The handle, of which only the metal tang remains, was probably wood or possibly other organic materials.

Think for a moment about the time and place this sword would have come from. Everything was made by hand, and there was little wealth: owning a sword would have been like owning a car today. Microscopic examination suggests that this sword was made for someone wealthy, as there are tiny fragments of gold embedded in the blade.

What was life like when nothing was made by machines or mass-produced and therefore things were more expensive and there was less you could buy? What was life when you could not travel faster than a horse and what we today call information could not travel faster than people? What would your life have been like when you would have probably been born, lived, and died within a few miles of the same spot? Life was hard



miles or the same spot? Life was hard.

But then look at the other side of the coin: can you think of anything people then would have had that you do not have today?

George looked at the sword, and tried to imagine it whole. At least he could tell what shape it suggested. And he tried to think about what the placard said, with none of the technologies he was used to. What would one do? Practice at swordplay? Wander in the forest?

George saw in his mind's eye Sir Lancelot kneeling on one knee, his sword point in earth, his sword pointing down, taking an oath. Then George looked over the sword again and it looked like Lancelot's sword: he imagined Sir Lancelot—or was it George?—laying his right hand on the sword and taking a mighty oath, and for a moment the sword in the museum took its full cruciform shape. And then as his eyes traced over the contours of the sword, it looked almost a relic, and he saw now one thing, now another: one scene from *Brocéliande* gave way to another, and something tugged at his heart.

He tried to imagine a great feast given by King Arthur to his nobles. There was something of that feast right in front of him, and it seemed to suggest an unfolding pageant. Knights and ladies dined with uproarious laughter, while minstrels sung enchanting ballads, and—

George realized someone was tapping on his shoulder. "Sir? Excuse me, but it's time for you to leave."

George turned and saw a security guard, and in puzzlement asked her, "Why? Have I done something wrong?"

She smiled and said, "You haven't done anything wrong, but I'm sorry, the museum is now closing. Come back another day!"

George looked out a window and saw that the daylight had completely fled. He realized he was very hungry.

He left after briefly saying, "Thank-you."

When he arrived home he was even hungrier, but even before he

WHICH HE ARRIVED HOME HE WAS EVEN HUNGRIER, BUT EVEN BEFORE HE began eating he began looking through the same sites, selling swords.

None of them looked real to him.

After eating part of his meal, George opened *Brocéliande*, flipping from place to place until an illustration caught his eye. He read:

Merlin walked about in the clearing on the Isle of Avalon. To his right was the castle, and to his left was the forest. Amidst the birdsong a brook babbled, and a faint fragrance of frankincense flowed.

Sir Galahad walked out of the castle portal, and he bore a basket of bread.

Then Galahad asked Merlin about his secrets and ways, of what he could do and his lore, of his calling forth from the wood what a man anchored in the castle could never call forth. And Galahad enquired, and Merlin answered, and Galahad enquired of Merlin if Merlin knew words that were more words than our words and more mystically real than the British tongue, and then the High Latin tongue, and then the tongue of Old Atlantis. And then Galahad asked after anything beyond Atlantis, and Merlin's inexhaustible fount ran dry.

Then Sir Galahad asked Merlin of his wood, of the stones and herbs, and the trees and birds, and the adder and the dragon, the gryphon and the lion, and the unicorn whom only a virgin may touch. And Merlin spake to him of the pelican, piercing her bosom that her young may feed, and the wonders, virtues, and interpretation of each creature, until Galahad asked of the dragon's head for which Uther had been called Uther Pendragon, and every Pendragon after him bore the title of King and Pendragon. Merlin wot the virtue of the dragon's body, but of the dragon's head he wot nothing, and Sir Galahad spake that it was better that Merlin wist not.

Then Sir Galahad did ask Merlin after things of which he knew

him nothing, of what was the weight of fire, and of what is the end of natural philosophy without magic art, and what is a man if he enters not in the castle, and "Whom doth the Grail serve?", and of how many layers the Grail hath. And Merlin did avow that of these he wist not none.

Then Merlin asked, "How is it that you are wise to ask after these all?"

Then Galahad spake of a soft voice in Merlin his ear and anon Merlin ran into the wood, bearing bread from the castle.

George was tired, and he wished he could read more. But he absently closed the book, threw away what was left of his hamburgers and fries, and crawled into bed. It seemed but a moment that he was dreaming.

George found himself on the enchanted Isle of Avalon, and it seemed that the Grail Castle was not far off.

George was in the castle, and explored room after room, entranced. Then he opened a heavy wooden door and found himself facing the museum exhibit, and he knew he was seeing the same 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century sword from the Celtic lands, only it looked exactly like a wall hanger sword he had seen online, a replica of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Provençale longsword that was mass produced, bore no artisan's fingerprints, and would split if it struck a bale of hay. He tried to make it look like the real surface, ever so real, that he had seen, but machined steel never changed.

Then George looked at the plaque, and every letter, every word, every sentence was something he could read but the whole thing made no sense. Then the plaque grew larger and larger, until the words and even letters grew undecipherable, and he heard what he knew were a dragon's footprints and smelled the stench of acrid smoke. George went through room and passage until the noises grew louder, and chanced to glance at a pool and see his reflection.

He could never remember what his body looked like, but his head was unmistakably the head of a dragon.

George sat bolt upright on his bunk, awake in a cold sweat, and hit his head on the ceiling.

The next day, George went to the medieval history library that was almost at the center of the campus, housed in a white limestone tower with one timeworn spire, and intricately woven with passages like rabbit holes. The librarian was nowhere in sight, and owing to his eccentricities the library still had only a paper card catalog, emanating a strange, musty aroma. George started to walk towards it, before deciding to wander around the shelves and get a feel for things medieval. The medieval history librarian was rumored to be somewhat eccentric, and insisted on a paper card catalog with no computers provided, which many of the students said might as well have been medieval.

His first read traced the development of symbol from something that could not give rise to science to something that apparently paved the way in that a symbol and what it refers to were no longer seen as connected. It seemed hard to follow, some where the argument was obscure and even more when he followed the reasoning: he grasped it and grasped it not. As he read, he read of the cultivation of cabbages and tales of kings, and whether grotesques could let pigs have wings. He read of boys doing the work of men and men who acted like boys, of children who asked for bread and their fathers would give them stones *in* their bread, of careful historians ages before the great discovery of history and classicists preserving the ancient life after the ancient life met its demise, of strange things that turned familiar and yet familiar things turned strange, of time becoming something a clock could measure, of those who forged, those who plagiarized, and arguments today why no medieval author should be accused of plagiarism for what he copied, and yet he read of a world where few died of old age and minor cuts and illnesses could kill. He read of the problem of underpopulation, the challenge of having enough births, and untold suffering when there were not enough people.

Yet to speak this way is deceptive, because all these wonders and more were made pedestrian. The more he studied, the fewer wonders he met, or at least the fewer wonders he could find, and the more he met a catalog of details. He read the chronicles of kings and those seeking what could be recovered through them, and however much he read King

Arthur was not mentioned once. Though he spent weeks searching in the library, the haunting beauty of Brocéliande had been rare to begin with and now he wot of it not none.

And the fruitless search for the history of Arthur led him to knock on the librarian's door.

"I'm in a bad mood. Leave me alone!"

"Please."

"You can come in if you must, but you would be better off leaving."

"I've looked all over and found neither hide nor hair of a book on King Arthur. Does this library have *nothing* on him?"

"King Arthur? No, not this part of the library; look in the appropriate sections on the electronic card catalog in the regular library."

"But I want to know the history of Arthur."

"The history of King Arthur?!? What can you *possibly* mean?"

"I had been reading about King Arthur outside the library."

"The general library has a number of the original sources, along with more literary criticism than one person can possibly read, and what little the history of literature knows about more and less obscure authors. And our literature department has several renowned scholars on Arthurian literature. But why are you trying to find King Arthur in a medieval *history* library? That's as silly as looking for the history of the animals in Aesop's fables."

"You don't believe in Arthur?"

"No, I don't. Though I could be wrong. A lot of scholars, *wrong* as they may be, believe there was an Arthur around the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a warrior owning a horse, though the consensus is that he was not a king. These—"

"So Arthur was a knight and not a king?!?"

"No, he wasn't a knight. He couldn't have been. If there ever was such a person."

"But you said he had a horse and—"

"You're making a basic historical mistake if you're imagining a warrior then, even one with a horse, as a '*knight*'. It would be like a historian five or six centuries from now studying our technology, and knowing that Saint Thomas Aquinas was an author, imagining him doing Google searches and composing, in *Latin* of course, on his computer's word processor.

"Warriors owned horses, but stirrups hadn't reached Arthur's supposed land, and without a stirrup it is almost impossible to fight while mounted. A horse was a taxi to get a warrior to battle to fight on foot like everybody else, and nothing more. A warrior with a horse was a warrior with a better taxi to get to the scene of battle. A knight, on the most material level, is an almost invincible mounted shock troop compared to the defenseless-as-children so-called 'infantry.' And then you have the ideal, almost the mythos, of chivalry that developed about these mighty brutal warriors.

"The Arthurian legends were never even close to history to begin with, even if they hadn't grown barnacles on top of barnacles, like... a bestseller with too many spinoffs. All the versions have their own anachronisms, or rather the earlier versions are nothing like anachronisms, projecting a legendary past for the kind of knight that was then becoming fashionable. You have a late medieval Sir Thomas Mallory fitting knights with plate armor that would have been as anachronous for an Arthur of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century to wear as it would have been for a knight of Mallory's day to be equipped with today's Kevlar version of a bulletproof vest.

"I don't think it's a particularly big deal for there to be anachronisms; the idea that anachronism is a problem is a complete anachronism in evaluating medieval literature; saying that Chrétien de Troyes built on anachronous social ideal is as silly as complaining that the

It royes built an anachronous social ideal is as silly as complaining that the accounts of animals in a medieval bestiary are not doing the same job in the same way as a scientific biology textbook. Of course they aren't, but you're being equally silly to read a medieval bestiary as something that should be empirical scientific biology.

"Of course, getting back to anachronism, Mallory has guns which—"

"Guns?!? Machine guns? Handguns? Rifles?" George said.

"Nothing fancy, just early cannon, not a modern assault rifle. But there are none the less guns in the pivotal late medieval version of the story, which had Arthur's son and nephew, Mordred, besieging—"

"Which one was Mordred, and what was the other one's name?" George said.

"Which one? What do you mean..." The librarian said, pausing. "Aah, you get it. For that matter, the stories tend to include endless nobles whose family tree is, like a good nobility family tree, more of a family braid, and—"

It was around then that the conversation became something that George remembered with the confused memory of a dream. He knew that the librarian had explained something, but the closest he could come to remembering it was a discussion of how networked computers as the next generation of computing contributed to a unique medieval synthesis, or what actually seemed to make more sense of the shape of that "memory," the sound of an elephant repeatedly ramming stone walls.

What he remembered next was walking—walking through the library, walking around campus, walking through the forest, and then...

Had he been asked, he might have been collected enough to say that this was the first time in a long while he was not on a quest.

What was he doing now?

Was he doing anything?

Where was George?

He was lost, although that didn't register on his mind. Or perhaps he wasn't lost, if "lost" means not only that you don't know where you are, but that you wish you knew.

George was in the city somewhere, if that was where he was. A great forest of steel, glass, and brick. Some was adorned by graffiti, other bits by ugly paint. This was definitely not the castle to him, but the wild wood, much more the wild wood than what was merely a place with many trees and few buildings. What made the wood a wood and not like a castle, anyway?

George looked around. In front of him was a boarded-up restaurant. The sign said, "Closed for minor renovations. REOPENING SOON." Its paint looked chipped and timeworn, and from what he could see looking in the dirty windows, it was dusty inside. What, exactly, did the menu say? George could see the menu, and some pictures of what was probably supposed to be food, but even though he was on the edge of hunger, the hazy blurs did nothing to make his mouth water.

George walked a good distance further, and saw the bright colors of a store, and heard music playing. He wandered in.

Inside, the store was bustling with activity. Just inside, there was a demonstration of electronic puppies: an employee was showing the puppy off. On a whim, George walked over.

The young woman was saying words commands which the puppy sometimes did not respond to. She handed it to children to pet, who responded with exuberant warmth. But the more George watched the scene, the more the whole scene seemed off-kilter.

The puppies were cute, but there seemed to be something much less cute when they moved. What was it? The puppy's animation seemed neither like a cute stuffed animal nor like a toy robot. It seemed like a robot in a puppy costume, but the effect was... almost vampiric.

Then George looked at the employee again. She was quite attractive.



but her smile and the exaggerated energy for her role... reminded George of makeup almost covering dark circles under someone's eyes.

He ducked into an aisle. Below were not only unflavored dental floss and mint floss, but many different kinds of floss in all different colors, thicknesses, and several different flavors. But the choices in the actual floss were dwarfed by the choices in the cases: purple-and-pink containers of floss for preteen girls, larger rough-looking containers made of dark stonelike plastic for a man's man, and sundry groups—including trainers for babies who were still teething. George saw a sign above a display that said, "We bring you the freedom *TO CHOOSE!*"

He tried not to think about sledgehammers. He tried.

George was looking for a reason to stay in the store. There was eye-catching color everywhere, and he saw a section of posters, and started flipping through art posters, looking for something to buy, until he saw the sign above the posters. It said, "Priceless masterpieces from the greatest museums of the world, conveniently made available to you in American standard poster size and format, for only \$4.99 each."

Somehow the store's showmanlike displays seemed a bit hollow. George left.

George wandered out, something not quite clicking in his mind. He knocked on the building next door, and a voice said, "Just a minute; come in." He opened the door and saw a sight in shadows. A man was heading out a door. "As soon as I've finished taking out the trash and washed my hands, I can help you."

A short while later, the man emerged. "Hi. I'm Fr. Elijah." He extended his hand, his head and hands standing out against the darkness and his dark robe, and shook George's hand. George said, "I'm George."

"What can I do for you?"

George stopped, and thought. He said, "I was just looking around while I was waiting for my thoughts to clear."

Fr. Elijah said, "Are you a student?"

George said, "Yes."

Fr. Elijah said nothing, but it did not seem he needed to say anything just then. George was growing calm.

"May I offer you something to drink? I was just going to make tea, and I don't have a full range of soft drinks, but there should be something worth drinking. There's a pitcher of ice-cold water if you don't care for an old man's coffee or tea."

George said "Yes."

"Wonderful. Come with me." The two began walking, and they sat down.

George looked at him.

Fr. Elijah said, "Please sit down," motioning to an armchair. "Did you want coffee, water, or tea? I have cookies. Oh, and there's milk too."

George smiled. "Could I have a chalice of milk?"

Fr. Elijah turned to get the cookies, a cup and some milk.

George said, "I meant to say a cup of milk. Sorry, I was trying to be a little more serious."

Fr. Elijah said, "You can explain, or not explain. It's your choice. But I think you *were* being serious. Just not the way you expected. But we can change the subject. Do you have a favorite book? Or has anything interesting happened to you lately? I can at least listen to you."

George said, "I was just at the store nearby."

Fr. Elijah asked, "What do you think of it?"

George said, "Are you sure you won't be offended?"

Fr. Elijah said, "One of the things I have found in my work is that people can be very considerate about not being offensive, but sometimes I have something valuable to learn with things people think might offend me."

"Ever wonder about the direction our society has headed? Or see something that left you wishing you could still wonder about that?"

"A lot of people do."

"I was already having a bad day when I wandered into a store, and just when I thought things couldn't get any more crass, they got more crass. I've just been invited to buy an identity with the help of a market-segment dental floss container."

"You're a man after my own heart. I've heard that the store manager has some pretty impressive connections. I've heard that if none of the dental floss containers in the store suit the identity you want to have, and you ask the manager, he can get your choice of floss in a custom container made by a sculptor to meet your whims!"

"But isn't there more to life than that?"

"I certainly hope so! Oh, and did I mention that I've found that store an excellent place for important shopping for April Fools' Day? I'm hoping to get my godson horribly artificial sugary-sweet tasting lacy pink floss in a container covered by red and white hearts and words like 'Oochie-poo.' He'll hit the roof! On second thought, he'll be expecting such a gift... I should probably give it to him on what you'd consider August 12."

"Why? What's special about August 12?"

"That's a bit of a labyrinth to sort out. Some Orthodox keep the old Julian calendar, while some keep the 'new' civil calendar, which means that those who preserve the old calendar, even if we manage not to go off in right field, are thirteen days 'late' for saints' days, celebrating July 30, the Feast of Saint Valentine, on what you'd consider August 12. What you call Valentine's Day is the Western celebration of the saint we celebrate

on another day, and it's a bit of a Western borrowing to use it for pseudo-romantic purposes to pick on my godson, as that saint's feast did not pick up all the Western romantic connotations; Saint Valentine's story is a typical story of a bishop who strengthened people against paganism and was martyred eventually. Every day is a feast of some sort, and every feast—that is, every day—has several saints to celebrate... but I'm going on and on. Have I confused you yet?"

"Um, 'right field'? What does that mean?"

"Oops, sorry, personal expression. In the West people go out in left field and go loony liberal. In Orthodoxy, people go out in right field and go loony conservative. Some of the stuff I've been told would make me at least laugh if I didn't want to cry so badly. Sorry, I'm rambling, and I was trying to hear you out when it looked like you've had a rough day, right up to a store telling you there was nothing more to hope for in life than things like dental floss with a container designed for your market segment. Let me let you change the subject."

"Um, you're probably wondering why I said, 'chalice of milk.'"

"I would be interested in hearing that, but only if you want to tell. I have a guess, but I really don't want you to feel obligated to say something you'd rather not."

"What is your guess?"

"That you said 'chalice of milk' for an interesting reason that probably has an interesting connection to what, in life, you hope goes beyond the trivialities you were pushed into at that store. A chalice, whatever that means to you, is something deeper and richer."

George opened his mouth, then closed it for a moment, and said, "Does a chalice mean anything to you?"

"Oh, yes. A chalice means quite a lot to me."

"What does it mean to you?"

"George, have you ever seen a chalice?"

"No, but it's pretty important in something I've read."

"Would you like to see a chalice?"

"The chalice I've read about was made of purest gold. I'd imagine that if you have a fancy wine glass, maybe lead crystal, it would look poorer than what I'd imagine, and there are some things that are big enough that I'd rather not imagine."

"Well, there are some things that are bigger than can be seen, and that includes a chalice. But the chalice I have—I can't show it to you now—has the glint of gold, which has more layers than I can explain or know."

"Is there a time you can show it to me?"

"Yes, come during the Divine Liturgy, and you can see the chalice from which I serve the Eucharist. I can't explain—I know this offends some people, and I will understand if you are offended—that it would not be good for me to give you the Eucharist if you are not Orthodox. But you can see the chalice as it holds a treasure infinitely more valuable than its goldwork."

"What is that?"

"The Eucharist."

"Isn't that just a symbol?"

"Hmm, there are six hundred ways to respond to that. I can get into some of the intricacies later. If you want. Or we need never talk about it. But..."

"Saying the Eucharist is 'just a symbol' is as silly as saying that the Eucharist is 'just the body and blood of Christ'. What else do you want it to be—a designer container of dental floss?"

George's laugh was interrupted by a knock at a door. Fr. Elisha

George's laugh was interrupted by a knock at a door. Fr. Elijah looked at his watch, and his face fell. He said, "Just when the conversation was getting interesting! I'm sorry; I have an appointment."

George said, "Well, I won't take any more of your time; I'll come on Sunday. What time?"

"The Divine Liturgy starts at 9:00 Sunday morning; I'm sorry, that isn't a very good time for college students. Arriving five minutes late isn't a big deal. Most of the professors of campus can give you directions to my parish, the Church of the Holy Trinity. And bother that I have to end our talk!"

"That's OK. Do you have some literature that you want to give me? Where are your pamphlets?"

"Hmm, that would take some time to explain, and I can explain later if you want. But I don't have any pamphlets. If you want a book I can go to the library and you can borrow one. But Orthodox people don't usually feel obligated to stuff your pockets with as much paper as we can and leave you walking away feeling guilty that you dread the prospect of reading it. Come back; I enjoyed talking with you, and if you want I can get something from the library. But only if you want. Please excuse me." Fr. Elijah stood up and bowed slightly, but reverently, to George as they shook hands.

"Coming!" Fr. Elijah said. "I'm sorry; I was just trying to wrap up a conversation. Please come in. It's been a long time since I've seen you, and I've been looking forward to it."

George stepped out, and walked out. He stopped by a window to look into the Church building again.

He could tell nothing that looked to him like a chalice, but everywhere was the glint of gold.

George wandered back with a spring in his step.

He returned home and opened *Brocéliande*, and read:

Blaise turned at a slow step. "Why callest thou thyself empty? Hast thou none, my son?"

Merlin answered him. "Forgive me, my master, my lord."

The wind was deadly still.

Blaise turned even more fully. "What is it, my pupil?"

Merlin reached out his hand. A mighty wind blew, such as openeth doors that be closed and closeth doors that be open.

An apple tree shook of a violence and apples met their place on the humble earth, all apples did so which fell, save one which Merlin his hand did close upon it.

The wind blew and blew, stronger and stronger it blew, and Blaise looked upon Merlin, and spake: "Flyest thou now, my hawk?"

Merlin his chaste teeth closed in on the apple, and the great and mighty wind closed a door against the stone and hushed to become a soft murmuring breeze, as a still small voice.

Merlin looked upon his master. "Though the Grail remain a secret and a secret remain the Grail, men shall know it even under its cloak of samite most red. When a man shall grasp the secret of the Grail then shall he grasp the mystery of the Trinity."

Blaise looked upon his servant. "And who shall be in that grasp?"

Merlin spake softly. "My lord, I wit me not."

Blaise said, "My lord, it is well with thee."

Merlin abode in a quiet still spirit.

The hours and days passed quickly, until it was Sunday and George left a little early and arrived at the Church of the Holy Trinity early, looked at his watch and saw 8:52 AM

LOOKED AT HIS WATCH AND SAW 8:55 PM.

He stepped inside and found things suddenly cool. There was a dazzling darkness, with pure candlelight and lamplight glittering off of gold, with fragrances of smoke and beeswax and incense. There was a soft chanting, and the funny thing was that it was hard to say whether the Church seemed full or empty. He saw few people, even for the small space, but he had rather a sense that the place was full of worshipers, mostly unseen. He could feel glory, almost as a weight.

There seemed to be a continuous faint commotion as people entered, went to the front, doing something he could not tell, and walked around. He stood as most people were standing, although some were sitting and people seemed to bow or move their hands. It is not exactly that George did not feel conspicuous as to how he was standing out, as that that was not quite the greatest way he felt conspicuous.

How did he feel conspicuous? George found no answer he liked. The whole situation seemed foreign to him, and for the first time it did not seem so much that he was examining something but that something, or someone, was examining him and judging him.

Something happened. Or rather, this time the something that happened meant that people were sitting down, in pews around the edges or on the floor, and the chant had become ordinary speech. Fr. Elijah said,

In the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

Last week after Liturgy, little John came up to me and said, "Fr. Elijah, I have a question." "What, I asked." "I saw *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* Friday and it was really, really cool! Could you tell me all about the Ark?" So I paused in thought, and exercised a spiritual father's prerogative. I said, "You know what? That's a good question. Let me think a bit and I'll answer that question in my homily." And when his father said, "But weren't you going to—" I said, "Don't worry about *that*. I'll blame the homily on him, and if people find it duller than a worn-out butter knife, they



can call you at work and complain." And *finally* I got him to crack a faint smile.

So this is the homily I'm blaming on him. First of all, the Ark of the Covenant is a spiritual treasure, and is spiritually understood. It is not lost, but it is found in a much deeper way than some expect. For it is both a *what* and, more deeply, a *who*. You can look up in fact where it is, and the amazing thing is that it is still guarded as a relic rather than treated simply as something that merely belongs in a museum, and the hidden Ark is in fact greater than if it were displayed in a showcase. It is one of many treasures the Church guards, and it is at the Church of our Lady Mary of Zion in the Ethiopian city of Axum. I've been there, even if I could not see the Ark. But the Ark which holds the bread from Heaven and the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed is in the shadow of the Ark to whom we sing, "Rejoice, O Volume wherein the Word was inscribed" and whose womb is a garden of spiritual treasures, "more spacious than the Heavens" as we say, by whom we are given the greater and in fact greatest Bread from Heaven. When we read of the Ark coming to King David and of the Theotokos or Mother of God coming to Lady Elizabeth, there are some surprising parallels which seem stunning until we recognize that that is just how Luke might be telling us that the Theotokos is someone to whom the Ark hints. There is a profound connection to the Arthurian legends, in which the Sir Galahad is granted to see into the Holy Grail and beholds a wonder beyond the power of words to tell. And it is in fact a misunderstanding on a number of levels to think that that rich Grail is confined to—

If George were sitting on a chair, he might have fallen off it. He was, fortunately, sitting on the floor. When he caught himself enough to follow the words, he listened closely:

...these other images. It was from the virgin earth that the first Adam, by whom we all live natural life, was taken. It was from the parched earth of the Virgin Theotokos that the last Adam, by whom we are called to the divine life, was given. And still this is not to tell how the first Adam, wanting to become God, lost his divinity, until

God became the Last Adam, raising up Adam that all of us who bear Adam's likeness might become divine, bearing the likeness of God. Death entered when we took and ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and now everlasting begins when we obey the summons to take and eat the Fruit from the Tree of Life.

Is it possible to call Mary Magdalene the Holy Grail? Yes and amen. We can call Mary Magdalene the Holy Grail in a very deep sense. She spoke before the Emperor, and that incident is why after all these years Christians still color Easter eggs, red eggs for the Orthodox Church as they were for Mary Magdalene, when she presented a red egg to the Emperor, perhaps miraculously. There are only a few dozen people the Church has ever honored more. She bears the rank of "Equal to the Apostles," and an angel told her the mysterious news of the Resurrection, and it was she who told the Apostles who in turn would be sent ("Apostle" means "Sent One") to the uttermost ends of the earth.

The Holy Grail is that vessel which first held the blood of Christ, and it is the shadow of that symbol in which the body and blood of Christ become real so that they can transform us. The Eucharist is misunderstood through the question of just what happens when the priest consecrates the gift, because the entire point of the transformation of the gifts is the transformation of the faithful so that we can be the Body of Christ and have the divine blood, the royal bloodline, the divine life coursing through our veins. God the Father the Father for whom every fatherhood in Heaven and earth is named. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each the King for whom every kingdom is named, so that the Kingdom of Heaven is more, not less, of a Kingdom than the kingdoms we can study on earth.

In the third prayer before communion, we are invited to pray, "O Thou Who by the coming of the Comforter, the Spirit, didst make thy sacred disciples precious vessels, declare me also to be a receptacle of his coming." Mary Magdalene bears powerful witness to what a disciple can be if she becomes a humble earthen vessel in which there is another coming of Christ. She became the Holy Grail, as does every one of us transformed by the power of Christ's body

and blood. If you only ask questions about the transformation of bread and wine, the Holy Grail is merely a *what...* but if you recognize the larger transformation that has the smaller transformation as a microcosm, the Holy Grail can also be a *who*: you and I.

It would take much longer to even begin to speak of that nobility of which you will only find the trace and shadow if you study royalty and their bloodlines. I have spoken enough.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

George was at once attracted, entranced, repulsed, and terrified. It seemed like more than he had dared to dream was proclaimed as truth, but that this meant he was no longer dealing with his choice of fantasy, but perhaps with reality itself. The chanting resumed. There was a procession, and what was in it? Ornate candles, a golden spoon and something that looked like a miniature golden lance, something covered with a cloth but that from its base might have been an intricately worked golden goblet, a cross that seemed to be glory itself, and other things he could not name. It was not long before George heard, "The holy things are for those who are holy," and the reply—was it a correction?—immediately followed: "One is holy. One is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen."

George wanted to squirm when he heard the former, and when he heard the latter, he headed for the door. The spiritual weight he had been feeling seemed more intense; or rather, it seemed something he couldn't bear even though he hoped it would continue. He felt, just for a moment that this was more than him having an experience, but he failed to put his finger on what more it might be.

Once outside, he tried to calmly walk home, but found himself running.

George found himself walking, but in completely unfamiliar surroundings. He spent a good deal of time wandering until he recognized a major road, and walked alongside it until he returned home

recognized a major road, and walked alongside it until he returned home, hungry and parched.

He opened *Brocéliande* for a moment, but did not feel much like reading it. George went to check his email, began looking through his spam folder—to see if anything important got through, he told himself—and found himself wandering around the seedier side of the net.

In the days that followed, people seemed to be getting in his way, his homework was more of a waste of time, and somehow *Brocéliande* no longer seemed interesting.

Friday, George missed dinner and went, hungry, to a crowded store where a white-haired man stood right between him and the food he wanted... not only blocking the aisle with his cart, but adding a third 12-pack of soda to the bottom of his cart... and seeming to take forever to perform such a simple task.

After waiting what seemed too long, George refrained from saying "Gramps," but found himself hissing through his teeth, "Do you need help getting that onto your cart?"

The white-haired man turned around in surprise, and then said, "Certainly, George, how are you?"

George stopped.

It was Fr. Elijah.

"Can, um, I help you get that in your cart?"

"Thank you, George, and I would appreciate if you would help me choose another one. Do you have a favorite soda?"

"This may sound silly, but Grape Crush. Why?"

"Help me find a 12-pack of it. I realized after you came that it was kind of silly for me to inviting people like you inside and not having any soda for them, and I've been procrastinating ever since. Aah, I think I see them over there. Could you put that under your cart?"

George began walking over to the Grape Crush.

Fr. Elijah asked, less perfunctorily, "How are you, George?" and reached out his hand. At least George thought Fr. Elijah was reaching out his hand, but it was as if Fr. Elijah was standing on the other side of an abyss of defilement, and holding out a live coal.

Fr. Elijah shook George's hand.

George tried to find his footing on shifting ground, and managed to ask, "Fr. Elijah, how are you going to get that soda out to your car?"

"Usually someone from the store helps me put things in my trunk or something; I've never found a grocery store to be a place where nothing is provided."

The chasm yawned; George felt as if he were clothed in filthy rags.

"Um, and at home?"

"The Lord always provides something. Sorry, that sounded super spiritual. Usually it's not too long before someone strong comes by and can carry things."

George tried to smile. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Fr. Elijah made no answer with words. He smiled a welcoming smile, and somehow the store began to remind him of Fr. Elijah's office.

George kept waiting for Fr. Elijah to say something more, to answer, but Fr. Elijah remained silent. There seemed to be a warmth about him, as well as something he feared would burn his defilement, but Fr. Elijah remained silent, and pushed his cart, which had a small armload of groceries and a heavy weight of soda cases, to the register.

"I can help you load things into your car, Fr. Elijah."

Fr. Elijah turned with warmth. Gratitude was almost visible in his features, but he remained strongly silent.

features, but he remained strangely silent.

George momentarily remembered to grab a sandwich, then returned to Fr. Elijah in line.

George began to wonder why Fr. Elijah was not speaking to him. Or rather, that was the wrong way to put it. George could not accuse Fr. Elijah of being inattentive, but why was he silent?

George began to think about what he had been doing, and trying not to, to think of something else, to think of something else to talk about. But images returned to his mind, and a desire to—he certainly couldn't mention *that*.

Where were they? Fr. Elijah had just pushed the cart to his car, and slowly fumbled with his keys to unlock his trunk. George thought with a shudder about what it would be like to an old man to load cases of soda, even 12-packs.

"I can help you unload the soda at your house."

Fr. Elijah turned and made the slightest bow.

Once inside the car, George made a few nervous remarks about the weather. Fr. Elijah simply turned with what must have been a fatherly smile, but said nothing.

George did not consider himself strong, but it was only a few minutes for him to get the handful of cases of soda tucked into a slightly messy closet.

Once back in the car, Fr. Elijah seemed to arrive almost immediately at the dorm.

George said, "Now I remember. I wouldn't ask for another ride back, but I should have asked to borrow a book from your library."

Fr. Elijah turned. "*Should* you?"

George said, "What do you mean, should I? Are you mad at me?"

Didn't you tell me that I could borrow any book in your library if you wanted?"

Fr. Elijah said, "For all I am concerned now, you may borrow the whole library, if you want to. Or keep it, if you want."

"Then why don't you want me borrowing a book now?"

"I have many good books you could read, but right now, you don't really want one of my books."

"What do you mean?"

"If you genuinely want to borrow a book, I will gladly talk with you and suggest what I think would be your deepest joy. But why are you asking me for a book now?"

"I thought it would be polite to..."

Fr. Elijah waited an interminable moment and said, "Something is eating you."

George said, "You have no right to—"

Fr. Elijah said, "I have no right to this discussion, and neither do you. Thinking in terms of rights is a way to miss the glory we were made for. But let us stop looking at rights and start looking at what is beneficial. You don't have to answer, but are you happy now?"

George waited, and waited, and waited for an escape route to open up. Then he said, and the saying seemed like he was passing through white-hot ice, "I've been looking at—"

Fr. Elijah said, "Stop, You've said enough."

George said, "But how did you know?"

Fr. Elijah sighed, and for a moment looked like he wanted to weep. "George, I would like to say something deep and mysterious about some

special insight I have into people's souls, but that is not it. I am a father, a confessor, and one of the biggest sins I hear in confession—'biggest' not because it is unforgivable; Jesus was always ready, more than ready, to forgive this kind of sin, but 'biggest' because it keeps coming up and causing misery, is the sort of sin you've been struggling with. I count myself very fortunate that I grew up in an age when you could have all the basic utilities without getting all sorts of vile invitations coming whether you want them or not, and I am glad that I do not feel obligated to purchase some nasty pills because I'm not a real man unless I have the same drives I had at the age of eighteen. What a miserably small and constricted caricature of manhood! I count myself a real man, much more because I have not suffered what tends to become such a *dreary* dissipation and deflation of any real manhood."

George said, "You're not mad?"

Fr. Elijah raised his hand, moved it up and down and side to side, and said, "I am blessing you, priceless son."

George said, "How can I be free of this?"

Fr. Elijah said, "Come with me. Get back in the car."

They drove for a few more minutes, neither one needing to say anything, until George noticed with alarm the shape of the hospital.

George said, "Where are we going?"

Fr. Elijah said, "To the emergency room."

George looked around in panic. "I don't have money for—"

"Relax. None of the treatment you will be receiving will generate bills."

"What on earth are you—"

"I'm not telling you. Just come with me."

They walked through a side door. George's heart pounding, and



They walked through a side door, George's heart pounding, and George noticed two people approaching immediately.

Fr. Elijah turned momentarily, saying, "*Buenos noches, Señoras,*" and motioned with his hand for them to follow him.

As they and George followed, Fr. Elijah said, "Because of the triage in an emergency room, and because mere seconds are a matter of life and death in treating really severe injuries, people with relatively 'minor' injuries that still need medical attention can wait for an interminable amount of time."

Fr. Elijah suddenly stopped. George saw a boy with skinned knees, whose mother was slowly working through paperwork. Fr. Elijah said, "Take away his pain."

George looked at him, halfway to being dumbfounded. "What?"

Fr. Elijah said, "You heard me." Then he turned and left, so that George saw only Fr. Elijah's back and heard from him only broken Spanish.

George felt grateful that at least he wasn't too easily grossed out. He could look at lacerated flesh and eat if he needed to. George sat next to the boy, smelled an overwhelming odor from his blood, and suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

George tried to refrain from swearing about what Fr. Elijah could possibly have meant. Badger the hospital into giving anaesthesia sooner? Kiss it and make it better? Use some psychic power he didn't have? Find a switch on the back of the kid's neck and reboot him?

For a while, nothing happened, until the boy stopped sobbing, and looked at him, a little bit puzzled.

George said, "Hi, I'm George."

The boy said, "Mr. George."

George tried to think of something to say. He said, "What do you get

when you cross an elephant with a kangaroo?"

"What?"

"Really big holes all over Australia."

The boy looked at him, but showed no hint of a smile.

"Do you not get it?" George asked.

The boy said, very quietly, "No."

"An elephant has a lot of weight, and a kangaroo bounces up and down. If you put 'weight' and 'bouncy' together, then you get something that, when it bounces, is so heavy it makes big holes in the ground."

The boy said nothing until George added, "That's what makes it funny."

The boy made himself laugh loudly, and just as soon winced in pain.

George tried to think of what to do. After a while, he asked, "What's your favorite color?"

When the boy said nothing, George looked at his face and was surprised at the pain he saw.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Tommy."

George thought about what to say. He began to tell a story. He told of things he had done as a boy, and funny things that had happened (the boy didn't laugh), and asked questions which met with incomprehension. And this went on and on and on.

George wondered why he was having so much fun.

Then George looked at Tommy.

When was the last time George had even *begun* to do something for someone else?

George realized three things. First, he had stopped talking. Second, a hand was holding tightly to his sleeve. Third, there was something he was trying very hard not to think about.

George looked, and Tommy asked, "Mister, are you a knight? I want to be a knight when I grow up."

George had never before felt such shame that he wished the earth would swallow him up.

"Mister?"

"No, I am not a knight."

"You seem like a knight."

"Why?"

"You just do. Do you know anything about knights?"

"I've been reading a book."

"What's it called?"

"*Brocéliande*."

"Tell me the story of Brookie-Land."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't read all of it."

"What have you read?"

George closed his eyes. All he could remember now was a flurry of

images, but when he tried to put them together nothing worked.

George was interrupted. "Do you have a suit of armor?"

Immediately, and without thought, George said, "What kind of armor? I mean, is it chain mail, like a steel, I mean iron, sweater, or is it the later plate armor that gets into the later depictions? Because if there were a King Arthur, he would—"

"Did King Arthur know powerful Merlin? Because Merlin could—"

"I've read a lot about Merlin—he could build a castle just with his magic. And it apparently matters whose son he is, but I couldn't—"

"I want you to show me—"

A voice cut in. "Tommy!"

"Yes?" the boy said.

"The doctor is ready to see you... Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt, but—"

"Why does the doctor want to see me?"

"Because she wants to stitch up your knees, Silly Sweetie. Let the nurses roll you away. I'm glad—"

Tommy looked in puzzlement at his knees, saw how badly lacerated they were, and began screaming in pain.

There was a minor commotion as the nurses took Tommy in to be stitched up, or so George would later guess; he could never remember the moment. He only remembered walking around the emergency room, dazed.

Truth be told, though, George felt wonderful. He faintly noticed hearing Fr. Elijah's voice, saying something in Spanish, and joined a group of people among whom he felt immediate welcome. Then the woman who was on the bed was taken in, and Fr. Elijah, and to his own surprise, George, bid farewell to the other members of the group.

George and Fr. Elijah were both silent for a long time in the car.

Fr. Elijah broke the silence.

"Would it be helpful to talk with me about anything?"

"I have to choose just one?"

"No, you can ask as many questions as you want."

"Besides what I started to tell you—"

"Yes?"

"When I was talking with that boy, I mean Tommy, the boy you introduced me to, I—I'm not sure I would have said exactly this, but I've been spending a lot of time reading *Brocéliande* and no time choosing to be with other people... would you keep that book for me, at least for a time?"

"I certainly could, but let's look at our option. You sound less than fully convinced."

"I don't want to give it up."

"Well, yes, I wouldn't want to give it up either. But is that it?"

"No... I'm really puzzled. Just when I thought I had managed to stop thinking about never-never land and start thinking about Tommy, the kid asked me about never—I mean, he said that he wanted to grow up to be a knight, and he asked me if I was a knight. Which I am *not*."

"That's very mature of you..."

"And?"

"What would you imagine yourself doing as the right thing?"

"Getting away from that silly desire and be with other people

instead."

"Hmm."

"Hmm what?"

"Have you ever read C.S. Lewis's 'The Weight of Glory'?"

"No."

"Ok, I want to stop by my office before I drop you off at home, because I'm going to go against my word and give you literature to read. Although I only want you to read a few pages' essay out of the book, unless you want to read more essays—is this OK?—"

"I suppose."

"Because C.S. Lewis talked about the idea of unselfishness as a virtue, and said that there's something pitiable about letting unselfishness be the center of goodness instead of the divine love. Or something like that. And the reason I remembered that is that somewhere connected with this is this terrible fear that people have that their desires are too strong, and maybe their desires are too much in need of being deepened and layered, except I think he only said, 'too weak.' Today I would add: in a much deeper way that you can remedy by dangerous pills in your spam.

"Maybe you don't need to get rid of that book at all... maybe you should lend it to me for a time, and let me enjoy it, but maybe not even that is necessary."

"Why?"

"My guess is that if you read enough in that book—or at least the ones I've read—you may notice a pattern. The knight goes to the company of the castle and then plunges into the woodland for adventure and quests, and you need a rhythm of both to make a good story. Or a good knight."

"I fail to see how I could become a knight, or how knightood applies

"I fail to see how I could become a knight, or how knighthood applies to me."

"Hmm..."

"Hmm what?"

"Maybe that's a can of worms we can open another time... For now, I will say that the reason the stories have knights doing that is not because the knights wore armor and rode horses, but because the people telling the stories were telling the stories of men. Who need both castle and wood. Keep reading *Brocéliande*, and push it further. Push it to the point that your college and your city are to you what the castle was to the knight. Or even so that you don't see the difference. And alongside your trek into the enchanted wood, meet people. I would suggest that you find a way to connect with people, and work with it over time. If I may offer a prescription—"

"Prescription?"

"A priest is meant to be a spiritual physician, or at least that is what Orthodox understand. And part of the priest's job is to prescribe something. If you're willing."

"I'll at least listen."

"First, I want you to spend *some* of your time with other people. Not all."

"Doing what?"

"That's something you need to decide, and even if I can offer feedback to you, I would not make that decision for you. You need to have a think about it."

"Second, something for you to at least consider... Come to me for confession. I cannot give the sacrament I give to Orthodox, but I can bless you. Which isn't the immediate reason I mention it. Even if I were not to bless you, and even if Christ were not listening to your confession, there would still be power in owning up to what you have done. It gives power

would still be power in owing up to what you have done. It gives power in the struggle.

"Third, do you access the Internet through a cable or through wireless?"

"An ethernet cable. I don't have a laptop, and I've heard that the wireless network on campus is worth its weight in drool."

"Do you have a USB key?"

"Yes."

"Then give me your Ethernet cable."

"What kind of Luddite—"

"I'm not being a Luddite. I'm offering a prescription for you... There are different prescriptions offered for the needs of different people."

"So for some people it is beneficial to visit—"

"For me it has been. When I was trying to figure out what was going on, I went to a couple's house, and with their permission started looking through the pictures in their spam folder until I'd had more than enough. And I wept for a long time; I suddenly understood something I didn't understand about what I was hearing in confession. I still pray for the people photographed and those looking at the photograph, and some of the women's faces still haunt me—"

"The *faces* haunt you?"

"Yes. Understand that at my age, *some* temptations are weaker... but I looked at those faces and saw that each one was somebody's daughter, or maybe somebody's son, and my understanding is that it's nothing pleasant to pose for those pictures. At least the faces I saw reminded me of an airline stewardess trying really hard to smile peacefully to someone who is being abrasive and offensive. But as I was saying, I count my hour of looking to be of the greatest spiritual benefit. But it would not benefit you, and it is my judgment that in *your* case a little of what programmers



call a 'net vacation'—though I invite you to use lab and library computers —could help you in—"

"Do you know what it's like to give up the convenience of computers in your room?"

"Do you know what it's like to ride a horse instead of a car for a short time? I do..."

"But riding a horse is at least... like... um... it's more like Arthur's world, isn't it?"

"If you want to look at it that way, you're welcome to..." Fr. Elijah stopped the car and stepped out, saying, "Please excuse me for a moment." The shuffling seemed to drag on, and Fr. Elijah stepped out with a book and got back in the car. "Oh, and I almost forgot. Please don't make this a matter of 'I won't do such-and-such or even think about it,' because trying not to think about a temptation is a losing game. I am inviting you to a trek from castle to wood, and wood to castle, with both feeding into a balance. Here is the book with 'The Weight of Glory' and other essays. Now..."

Calix College was in sight almost immediately, and Fr. Elijah waited outside George's dorm for what became a surprisingly long time... he wondered if he should go up and see if George had changed his mind, and

---

George walked out and handed him a cable in the dark. It was thick and stiff.

"I thought Ethernet cables weren't this thick and stiff."

"It's my power cable. I put stuff I need on my USB key."

"Good man."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye, and George, one other thing..."

"Yes?"

"There is no better time to be in a Church than when you know how unworthy you are."

"Um..."

"What?"

"I appreciate how much you're stretching, but..."

"George, I want to ask you something."

"I've been serving the Divine Liturgy for thirty-eight years now. How long have I been worthy to do so?"

"Is this a trick question? All thirty-eight?"

"It is indeed a trick question, but the answer is not 'thirty-eight.' I have *never* been worthy to serve the Divine Liturgy, nor have I ever been worthy to receive communion, nor have I ever been worthy to pray at Church, or anywhere else. We can talk about this if you like, but am not just being polite when I say that there is no better time to enter the Church than when you know yourself unworthy. Maybe we can talk later about what trumps unworthiness. For now, I wish you good night, and I would be delighted to see you join and adorn our company on Sunday."

George climbed up in his room and sat in his armchair, and it felt like a throne. He was exhausted—and on the other side of shame. He began dutifully opening the C.S. Lewis book, glanced at the title, then tossed it aside. It was not what he really wanted. He picked up *Brocéliande*, wiped the dust off the cover with his hand, and opened to its middle, to its heart. George read:

rode until he saw a river, and in the river a boat, and in the boat a man.

The man was clad all in black, and exceeding simple he appeared. At his side was a spear, and was a basket full of oysters

illed.

"I ask your pardon that I cannot stand. For the same cause I can not hunt, for I am wounded through the thighs. I do what I might, and fish to share with others."

The knight rode on, Sir Perceval he hyght, until he came upon a castle. And in that castle he met a welcome rich, before a King all in sable clad round, and a sash of purple royal girt about his head, and full majestic he looked.

Then in walked a youth, bearing a sword full straight, for it were not falchion neither scimitar, but a naked sword with a blade of gold, bright as light, straight as light, light as light. The very base of that sword were gem work, of ivory made and with sapphires encrusted. And the boy was girt tightly with a baldric and put the sword in its place. In utmost decorum the sword hung at his side.

The boy placed what he shouldered at the feet of the King.

Spake the King: "I ask your forgiveness that I do not rise. Partake of my feast."

Simpler fare was never adorned by such wealth of wisdom. The body was nourished, and ever more spirit in the fare that was read.

Anon processed one man holding a candelabra of purest gold with seven candles, anon another, anon a maiden mother holding a Grail, it was such a holy thing! Anon a lance that ever bore three drops of blood. And ever Perceval wondered, and never Perceval spake, though it passed many a time. With a war inside him Sir Perceval kept him his peace. Anon the King spake, "See thou mine only food," and anon came the Grail holding not a stone neither a snake but a single wheaten host, afloat as a pearl in a sea of wine, red as blood. And never the King ate he none else.

Here a page was ripped out from *Brocéliande*, with yellowed marks where once tape failed to mend what was torn.

The damsel arose from her weeping. "Perceval! Perceval! Why askedst thou not thine enquiry?"

George soon fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Saturday he rested him all the day long: barely he stirred.

In his dream, George heard a song.

All was in darkness.

The song it came out of a mist, like as a mist, melodic, mysterious, piercing, like as a prayer, mighty, haunting, subtle, token of home and a trace of a deep place. How long this continued he wot not.

The one high, lilting voice, tinged with starlight, became two, three, many, woven in and out as a braid of three strands, or five, or ten, as a Celtic knot ever turning in and out. And as it wove in and out, it was as the waters of a lake, of an ocean, of a sea, and George swam in them. George was ever thirsty, and ever he swam. He swam in an ever-rippling reflection of the Heavens at midnight, a sea of unending midnight blue and living sapphire.

George's feet sunk and he walked on the noiseless loam. Up about him sprung blades of grass and he walked into a forest growing of emerald and jade atop pillars of sculpted earth. Anon he walked slowly and slowly he saw a farm with the green grass of wheat growing of the fertile fecund field.

Upon a ruins he came, a soft, silent place where a castle still lingered and the verdant moss grew. Then through a city he walked, a city alive and vibrant in its stones, though its streets were a for a moment at a rest from its men. And in that city, he walked into the Church his heart, and found a tome opened upon a wooden stand entwined by vines.

George looked for a moment at the volume, and for a moment he saw letters of sable inscribed in a field argent. Then the words shifted, grew older, deepened into the depth of a root and the play of quicksilver. The script changed, the words spoke from afar, and became one word

whose letters were hidden as behind a veil, one word inscribed at once in ciphers of luminous gold and congealed light that filled the book and shone all around it until—

George was awake, bright awake, wide awake, looking at a window the color of sunrise.

He arose to greet the coming of the dawn.

George went to Church and arrived almost an hour earlier than the 9:00 Fr. Elijah had given, and found to his surprise that although there were few other people, things had already begun. The fragrance of frankincense flowed and gold glittered, and he caught a word here and a phrase there—"Volume wherein the Word was inscribed," "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal," "Blessed is the Kingdom," "Lord have mercy." Then he heard a phrase he had heard innumerable times in other contexts. A shibboleth later taken from the New Testament, "The just shall live by faith," completely broke the illusion. George had had plenty of time to get sick of words he knew too well, or so it appeared to George. Yes, he was glad people understood them, but wasn't there more to understand than that? Even if they were both straightforward and important...

The homily began.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the surprises in the Divine Comedy—to a few people at least—is that the Pope is in Hell. Or at least it's a surprise to people who know Dante was a devoted Catholic but don't recognize how good Patriarch John Paul and Patriarch Benedict have been; there have been some moments Catholics aren't proud of, and while Luther doesn't speak for Catholics today, he did put his finger on a lot of things that bothered people then. Now I remember an exasperated Catholic friend asking, "Don't some Protestants know anything *else* about the Catholic Church *besides* the problems we had in the sixteenth century?" And when Luther made a centerpiece out

of what the Bible said about those who are righteous or just, "The just shall live by faith," which was in the Bible's readings today, he changed it, chiefly by using it as a battle axe to attack his opponents and even things he didn't like in Scripture.

It's a little hard to see how Luther changed Paul, since in Paul the words are also a battle axe against legalistic opponents. Or at least it's hard to see directly. Paul, too, is quoting, and I'd like to say exactly *what* Paul is quoting.

In one of the minor prophets, Habakkuk, the prophet calls out to the Lord and decries the wickedness of those who should be worshiping the Lord. The Lord's response is to say that he's sending in the Babylonians to conquer, and if you want to see some really gruesome archaeological findings, look up what it meant for the Babylonians or Chaldeans to conquer a people. I'm not saying what they did to the people they conquered because I don't want to leave you trying to get disturbing images out of your minds, but this was a terrible doomsday prophecy.

The prophet answered the Lord in anguish and asked how a God whose eyes were too pure to look on evil could possibly punish his wicked people by the much more wicked Babylonians. And the Lord's response is very mysterious: "The just shall live by faith."

Let me ask you a question: How is this an answer to what the prophet asked the Lord? Answer: It isn't. It's a refusal to answer. The same thing could have been said by saying, "I AM the Lord, and my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways. I AM WHO I AM and *I will do what I will do*, and I am sovereign in this. I choose not to tell you how, in my righteousness, I choose to let my wicked children be punished by the gruesomely wicked Babylonians. Only know this: even in these conditions, the just shall live by faith."

The words "The just shall live by faith" are an enigma, a shroud, and a protecting veil. To use them as Paul did is a legitimate use of authority, an authority that can only be understood from the inside, but these words remain a protecting veil even as they take on a more

active role in the New Testament. The New Testament assumes the Old Testament even as the New Testament unlocks the Old Testament.

Paul does not say, "The just shall live by sight," even as he invokes the words, "The just shall live by faith."

Here's something to ponder: The righteous shall walk by faith even in their understanding of the words, "The just shall live by faith."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

George was awash and realized with a start that he was not knocked off his feet, gasping for air. He felt a light, joyful fluidity and wondered what was coming next. This time he realized he was sure he saw a chalice; the liturgy seemed to go a little more smoothly and quickly.

As soon as he was free, Fr. Elijah came up to him. "Good to see you, George. How are you?"

George said, "Delighted... but I'm sorry, I haven't read 'The Weight of Glory' for you yet."

Fr. Elijah said, "Good man... no, I'm not being sarcastic. Put first things first, and read it when you have leisure. How did you find the homily?"

George said, "It was excellent... by the way, it was really for me that you preached last week's homily, right? You seemed to be going a good bit out of your way."

"It was really for you, as it was also really for others for reasons you do not know."

"But weren't you getting off track?"

"George, I have a great deal of responsibility, concerns, and duties as a priest. But I have a great deal of freedom too. I can, if you want, draw

a priest. But I have a great deal of freedom, too. I can, if you want, draw on King Arthur and his court every service I preach at from now until Christmas."

"How much do you mean, I mean literally? One or two? Four or five?"

"Huh? 'Literally'? Um, there is a temptation in the West to devote entirely too much time to what is literal. I *was* exaggerating when I said every service from now until Christmas... *but*, if you want, I'd be perfectly happy to do that literally, for every service you're here." Fr. Elijah extended his hand. "Deal?"

George paused in thought a moment. "Um, you've said that I could take all the books in your library and keep them if I want. I know you were exaggerating, but..."

"Yes, I was. But I am not exaggerating when I say that you can take them if you want."

"Don't you love books?"

"Immensely, but not as much as I want to love people! They're just possessions, and there are much greater treasures in my life than a good book, even though books can be quite good. Can we agree that I'll preach on something in Arthurian literature every liturgy I preach at until Christmas?"

"What if I'm not here?"

"We can make it part of the deal that I'll only preach on that topic if you're here."

George hesitated, and then shook his hand. "Deal."

Fr. Elijah smiled. "Some people have said my best homilies and best surprises have come from this kind of rash vow."

George started to walk away, and then stopped.



Fr. Elijah said, "Is something on your mind?"

George said, "What if other people don't like you preaching on something so odd? What will you do if people complain?"

Fr. Elijah said, "Then I can give them your cell phone number and have them call you at all hours of the day and night to grouse at you for foisting such a terrible proposal on me. Now get some coffee. Go! Shoo!"

After getting home, George did his laundry, looked to see if anyone was hanging out in the lounge (everybody was gone), and played games in the computer lab. It was a nice break.

The next day in math class, the teacher drew a grid on the board, drew dots where the lines crossed, erased everything but the dots, and set the chalk down. "Today I'd like to show a game. I'm handing out graph paper; draw dots where the lines cross. We're going to have two people taking turns drawing lines between dots that are next to each other. If you draw a line that completes a little square, you get a point. I'd like a couple of students to come up and play on the board." After a game, there was a momentary shuffle, and George found himself playing against the kid next to him. This continued for longer than he expected, and George began to piece together patterns of what would let his opponent score points, then what laid the groundwork for scoring points...

The teacher said, "Have any of you noticed things you want to avoid in this game? Why do these things lead to you giving points to your opponent when you don't want to, or scoring points yourself? This kind of observation is at the heart of a branch of mathematics called 'combinatorics.' And almost any kind of game a computer can play—I'm not talking about tennis—is something that computers can only play through combinatorics. I'd like to show you some more 'mathematical' examples of problems with things we call 'graphs' where a lot of those same kinds of things are—"

She continued giving problems and showing the kinds of thought in those problems.

George felt a spark of recognition—the same thing that attracted him

to puzzles. Or was it something deeper? Many "twenty questions" puzzles only depended on identifying an unusual usage of common words, "53 bicycles" referring to "Bicycle" brand playing cards rather than any kind of vehicle, and so on and so forth. Some of what the teacher was showing seemed deeper...

...and for the first time in his life, the ring of a buzzer left George realizing he was spellbound in a math class. It set his mind thinking.

In English class, he winced, as just as before-class chatter seemed about to end, one of the other students said, "A man gets up in the morning, looks out his window, and sees the sun rising in the West. Why?"

George was not in particular looking forward to a discussion of literature he wasn't interested in, but he wanted even less to hear people blundering about another "twenty questions" problem, and cut in, "Because the earth's magnetic poles, we suppose, were fluctuating, and so the direction the sun was rising from was momentarily the magnetic West."

The teacher laughed. "That isn't the answer, is it?"

The student who had posed the question said, "Um... it is..."

The professor said, "So we are to imagine someone going to a gas station, saying, 'Which way is East?', and the attendant responding with, 'Just a sec, lemme check... I know usually this way is East, but with the Earth's magnetic fluctuations, who knows?' You know that in a lot of literature, East and West are less like numbers than like colors?"

"Um... How could a direction be like a number *or* a color?"

"There's colorful difference and colorless difference. If I tell you there are 57 pens in my desk, I haven't said anything very colorful that tells much about pens, or about my desk. But if I tell you a rose is a delicate pink, I've told you something about what it's like, what it's *like*, to experience a rose."

"So what color is East, then? Camouflage green?"

"East isn't a color, but it's *like* a color where camouflage green and fiery red are different. In both Greek and Russian, people use the same word for 'East' and 'sunrise'... and if you're really into etymology, English does this too, only we don't realize it any more. 'East' in English originally *means* 'sunrise,' as 'Easter' comes from the Anglo-Saxon name of a goddess of light and spring. Such terrible things the Orthodox miss out on by their quaint use of 'Pascha.' For us, the 'big' direction, the one which has the longest arrow or the biggest letter, the one all other directions are arranged around, is North; in Hebrew, it's East. There is a reason many churches are arranged East-West and we often worship towards the East, and that has meant something for the U.S... Would you agree that we are part of the West?"

"So our land is the worst land?" George said.

"Well, if you read enough Orthodox nut jobs, yes... particularly if this land is their home. But U.S. land, or part of it at least, is called utter East... the one U.S. state where Orthodoxy isn't edgy, exotic, fruitcake or 'other,' is Alaska, where there has been a native Orthodox presence, strong today, for over two hundred years. You know how, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis has a wood nymph speak an oracle that has drawn Sir Reepicheep all his life?

"Where sky and water meet,  
Where the waves grow sweet,  
Doubt not, Reepicheep,  
To find all you seek,  
There is the utter East.

"There's something big you'll miss about the holy land of Alaska if you just think of it as fully a state, but just one more state, just like every other state. It's the only state, if 'state' is an adequate term, with a still-working mechanical clock on the outside of a public building that was made by an Orthodox saint. Among other things.

"And the idea of holy land that you would want you to travel to feeds

into things, even in Protestant literature like *Pilgrim's Progress*, which you will misunderstand if you treat the pilgrimage as just there as a metaphor for spiritual process. I have found it very interesting to look at what people classify as 'just part of the allegory,' even though we will read no simpler allegory among the readings for this class. Now in reading for today, have any of you had an experience like Pilgrim's wakeup call at the beginning of Bunyan?"

George's head was swimming.

Why were his classes so dull before this week? He remembered previous math lessons which, in various ways, failed to give him puzzle solving, and in annoyance, turned to previous English lessons, when—

—why hadn't he paid attention? Or, more accurately, when George had paid attention, why hadn't he let it be interesting?

Philosophy also turned out to be interesting; the professor began the unit on medieval philosophy by asking, "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?", eliciting various forms of derision, then asking people *what* they were deriding, began asking "How many of you can touch the head of the same pin at once?", produced a pin, and after students made various jostling efforts, asked whether a pin could accommodate a finite or infinite number of angels.

This was used to a class discussion about the nature of matter and spirit and whether angels dancing on the head of a pin would push each other away the way human bodies would... and at the end of class the professor began asking if people wanted to talk about how unfortunate it was that medieval philosophers *had* to use the poetic image of angels dancing on the head of a pin where others would have used the colorless language of analytic philosophy.

In chemistry, the professor did nothing in particular to make things interesting. George still enjoyed the lecture as it built to a discussion of isotope distributions as used to compute average molecular weights.

George was quite surprised when the weekend approached, spent the weekend playing card games and wondered at how quickly Sunday came

weekend playing card games, and wondered at how quickly Sunday came.

On Sunday, George entered the strange world of the Church building. It seemed more, not less, strange, but things began to make sense. "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." was something he noticed often, and he, if not understanding, was at least comfortable with the continual hubbub as people seemed to be moving about, sometimes to the front.

As the service passed, he found his eyes returning to, and then fixed on, an icon that showed three ?angels? sitting around a stone table. In the back was a mountain, a tree, and a building, a faroff building that George somehow seemed to be seeing from the inside...

The perspective in the picture was wrong. Wait, the perspective wouldn't be *that* wrong by accident... the picture looked very distorted, and George wanted to reach out and—

George looked. The perspective vanished, not at some faroff place on the other side of the picture, but behind him, and the picture seemed at once faroff and something seen from inside.

And what was it, almost at the heart of the icon, or somewhere beneath it, that the three peaceful, radiant, great ?angels? almost seemed clustered around? It looked like a chalice of gold.

George was looking, trying to see into the picture, wishing he could go closer, and seeing one person after another come closer in the dance of song and incense. George instinctively found himself backing up, and then realized people were sitting down and Fr. Elijah began:

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sir Thomas Mallory in *Le Morte d'Arthur* has any number of characters, and I want to describe one of them, Sir Griflet, who is completely forgettable if you don't know French: he appears briefly, never stays in the narrative for very long, never does anything really striking at all. His lone claim to fame, if you can call it that, is that

Mallory refers to him as "Sir Griflet *le fils de Dieu*." For those of you who don't know French, we've just been cued in, in passing, that by the way, Sir Griflet is the Son of God.

Now why would this be? There some pretty striking things you can do if you are a character in that work. Sir Griflet is not a singular character who has the kind of energy of Sir Galahad, or in a different but highly significant way, Merlin. For that matter, he does not have even a more routine memorability like Sir Balin who wielded two swords at the same time. He's just forgettable, so why is he called *le fils de Dieu*, I mean the Son of God?

In Chretien de Troyes, who is a pivotal author before Mallory, a character with a name that would become "Griflet" is equally pedestrian and is named "fis de Do", son of Do, which has a root spelling of D-O where the word for God in that form of French is D-E-U. So a starkly pedestrian character, by an equally pedestrian language error, seems to have his father's name mixed up with how you spell the word for God. How pedestrian, disappointing, and appropriate.

There is a somewhat more interesting case in the story of a monk who believed that Melchizedek was the Son of God, and this is not due to a language error. If you were listening when the readings were chanted from the Bible, you would have heard that Melchizedek was "Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life: but made like unto the Son of God, abideth a priest continually." This may be surprising to us today, but that's because most of us have lost certain ways of reading Scripture, and it was a holy monk who thought this. He made a theological error, not a mere language error, and when his bishop asked his assistance in praying over whether Melchizedek or Christ was the Son of God, he arrived at the correct answer.

Now let me ask you who is really the Son of God. Do you have an answer now?

I'm *positive* you're wrong. It's a forgettable person like Sir

Griflet or Melchizedek.

When the Son of God returns in glory, he will say, "Depart from me, you who are damned, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you showed me no hospitality; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick or in prison, and you did not visit me." And when the damned are confounded and ask when they could have possibly failed to do that, he will answer them, "I swear to you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it for me."

We, in our very nature, are symbols of the Trinity, and this does not mean a sort of miniature copy that stands on its own in detachment. The Orthodox understanding of symbol is very difficult to grasp in the West, even if you haven't heard people trying to be rigorous or, worse, clever by saying "The word is not the thing it represents." And talking about symbols doesn't just mean that you can show reverence to a saint through an icon. It means that everything you fail to do to your forgettable neighbor, to that person who does absolutely nothing that draws your attention, you fail to do to Christ.

And if you are going to say, "But my neighbor is not Christ," are you not straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel in what you are being careful about? Your neighbor as such is not Christ as such. True, but this is really beside the point. It betrays a fundamental confusion if any of the damned answer their Judge and say, "But I wasn't unkind to *you*. I was just unkind to other people." We are so formed by the image of Christ that there is no way to do something to another person without doing that to Christ, or as this parable specifically says, fail to do. And I'd like you to stop for a second. The last time you were at an unexpected funeral, did you regret more the unkind thing you said, or the kind word you failed say, the kind action you failed to take? Perhaps it may be the latter.

Christ hides in each of us, and in every person you meet. There is a mystery: the divine became human that the human might

become divine. The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God. God and the Son of God became man that men might become gods and the Sons of God. Christ took on our nature so that by grace we might become what he is by nature, and that does not just mean something for what we should do in our own spiritual practices. It means that Christ hides in each person, and to each person we owe infinite respect, whether they're boring, annoying, mean, lovely, offensive, fascinating, confusing, predictable, pedestrian, or just plain forgettable like old Sir Griflet.

You owe infinite respect.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Did George want to go up to the icon? He went up, feeling terribly awkward, but hearing only chant and the same shuffle of people in motion. He went up, awkwardly kissed the three figures someplace low, started to walk away in inner turmoil, turned back to the image, bowed as he had seen people see, and kissed the chalice of wine.

It was not long before he saw Fr. Elijah come out with a chalice, and draw from it with a golden spoon. This time he noticed people kissing the base of the chalice. There was nothing awkward about them, and there seemed to be something majestic that he began to catch a glimmer of in each of those present.

George later realized that he had never experienced worship "stopping" and coffee hour "beginning." The same majestic people went from one activity into another, where there was neither chanting nor incense nor the surrounding icons of a cloud of witnesses, but seemed to be a continuation of worship rather than a second activity begun after worship. He was with the same people.

It didn't occur until much later to George to wonder why the picture had a chalice... and then he could not stop wondering. He picked up *Brocéliande* and read:

The knight and the hermit wept and kissed together, and the



hermit did ask, "Sir knight, wete thou what the Sign of the Grail be?"

The knight said, "Is that one of the Secrets of the Grail?"

"If it be one of the Secrets of the Grail, that is neither for thee to ask nor to know. The Secrets of the Grail are very different from what thou mightest imagine in thine heart, and no man will get them by looking for secrets. But knowest thou what the Sign of the Grail is?"

"I never heard of it, nor do I know it."

"Thou wote it better than thou knowest, though thou wouldst wete better still if thou knewest that thou wote."

"That is perplexing and hard to understand."

The hermit said, "Knowest thou the Sign of the Cross?"

"I am a Christian and I know it. It is no secret amongst Christians."

"Then know well that the sacred kiss, the kiss of the mass, even if it be given and received but once per year, is the Sign of the Grail."

"How is that? What makes it such as I have never heard?"

"I know that not in its fullness. Nor could I count reasons even knew I the fullness of truth. But makest thou the Sign of the Cross when thou art alone?"

"Often, good hermit; what Christian does not?"

"Canst thou make the Sign of the Grail upon another Christian when thou art alone?"

"What madness askest thou?"

"Callest thou it madness? Such it is. But methinks thou wete not all that may be told."

"Of a certainty speakest thou."

"When thou dwellest in the darkness that doth compass round about the Trinity round about that none mayeth compass, then wilt thou dwell in the light of the Sign of the Grail with thy fellow man and thy brother Christian, for the darkness of the Trinity is the light of the Grail."

George got up, closed the book, and slowly put it away. He wondered, but he had read enough.

George dreamed again of a chalice whose silhouette was Light and held Light inside. Then the Light took shape and became three figures. George almost awoke when he recognized the figures from the icon. George dreamed much more, but he could never remember the rest of his dream.

That week, Fr. Elijah's homily was in George's mind. He passed the check-in counter as he walked into the cafeteria, began to wonder where he might apply Fr. Elijah's words... and stopped.

The line was moving slowly; he had come in late after wandering somewhat. Sheepishly, he stopped, looked at the woman who had scanned his ID, and extended his hand. "Hi, I'm George."

The woman pushed back a strand of silver hair. "Hi. It's good to meet you, George. I'm Georgina."

George stood, trying to think of something to say.

Georgina said, "What are you majoring in?"

"I haven't decided. I like reading... um... it's really obscure, but some stuff about Arthur."

"King Arthur and the Round Table?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful son. Can you tell me about it sometime? I always love

wonderful, son. Can you tell me about it sometime? I always love hearing about things."

George said, "Ok. What do you... um..."

"I been working at this for a long time. It's nice seeing all you students, and I get some good chats. You remind me of my grandson a little. But you're probably pretty hungry now, and the lines are closing in a few minutes. Stop by another day!"

George ate his food, thoughtfully, and walked out of the cafeteria wishing he had said hi to more of the support staff.

That week, the halls seemed to be filled with more treasure than he had guessed. He did not work up the courage to introduce himself to too many people, but he had the sense that there was something interesting in even the people he hadn't met.

On Wednesday, George went to register for his classes next semester, and realized his passwords were... on his computer, the one without a power cord.

After a while, thinking what to do, he knocked on a floormates' door. "Um, Ivan?"

"Come in, George. What do you want?"

George hesitated and said, "Could I borrow a power cord? Just for a minute? I'll give it right back."

Ivan turned around and dragged a medium-sized box from under his bed. It was full of cables.

"Here, and don't worry about returning it. Take a cord. Take twenty, I don't care. I have them coming out of my ears."

George grabbed one cord, then remembered he did not have the cord for his monitor. He took another. "I'll have these back in a minute."

"George, you're being silly. Is there any reason you need *not* to have

a power cord?"

"Um..." George opened his mouth and closed it. Then he hesitated.  
"No."

George left, registered online, shut his computer down, left the room, did some work at the library, and went to bed.

Thursday he was distracted.

Friday, it was raining heavily, and after getting soaked in icy rain running to and from his classes, George decided he would check his email from his room... and found himself wandering through the spam folder, and threw the cords out in the dumpster.

Sunday he walked into church with hesitation, and Fr. Elijah almost immediately came over. "Yes, George?"

George hesitated.

Then he told Fr. Elijah what was going on.

Fr. Elijah paused, and said, "George, do you know about the Desert Fathers?"

"No."

"A group of people a bit like the hermits in Arthurian legend. Some people think that Merlin was originally based on such monks... but aside from that speculation, they were much holier than either of us. And there was one time when someone asked them, 'What do you do?' And what do you think the Desert Father said?"

"Pray? Worship? Live a good life?"

"'We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up.' That is the motion of Orthodox life, and if you see prostrations, you will literally see us fall and get up. I'm not sure if you think that if you repent of a sin once, the hard part's over and it's all behind you. In my sins, I have to keep repenting again and again. You have fallen, now get up. And get up again

repenting again and again. You have fallen, now get up. And get up again. And again. And again. And keep getting up.

"The Lord bless you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

George walked away still feeling unworthy, and everywhere saw a grandeur that seemed to be for others more worthy than him. Everything around him seemed royal, and Fr. Elijah preached:

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In our commemorations, we commemorate "Orthodox kings and queens, faithful princes and princesses," before we commemorate various grades of bishops. The bishop is in fact royalty; instead of calling him "Your Majesty," we call him "Your Grace," "Your Eminence," "Your Holiness," "Your All Holiness." If you do research, you will find that the bishop is more than a king: the bishop is the Emperor, and wears the full regalia of the Roman Emperor.

One question that has been asked is, "The king for the kingdom, or the kingdom for the king:" is the king made king for the benefit of the kingdom, or is the kingdom a privilege for the benefit of the king? The Orthodox choice of now requiring bishops to be monks is not because married persons are unfit, or rather necessarily more unfit, to serve. Most of the apostles in whose shadows the monastic bishops stand were married, and the monk bishops I have met consider themselves infinitely less than the married apostles. But a monk is given to be a whole burnt offering where nothing is kept back and everything is offered to God to be consumed by the holy sacrificial fire. (Or at least that's what's supposed to happen, but even if this is also what's supposed to happen in a marriage, it's more explicit in monasticism.) And it is this whole burnt offering, unworthy though he may be, who makes a bishop: Orthodoxy answers "the king for the kingdom:" the king is made king for the benefit of the kingdom, the bishop serves as a whole burnt offering for the benefit of the diocese.

Now let me ask: Which of us is royalty? And I want you to listen very carefully. All of us bear the royal bloodline of Lord Adam and Lady Eve. It's not just the bishops. I will not go into this in detail now, but the essence of priesthood is not what I have that "ordinary" Orthodox don't have. It's what I have that Orthodox faithful *do* have. And without you I can celebrate the liturgy. And the essence of royalty is not what a king or bishop has that a "commoner" or faithful does not have; it's what king and bishop share with the ordinary faithful. The Greek Fathers have no sense that "real" royal rule is humans ruling other humans; that's a bit of an aberration; the real royal rule is humans ruling over what God has given them and over themselves, and doing that rightly is a much bigger deal than being one of the handful of kings and bishops.

And each of us is called to be what a bishop is: a whole burnt offering in humble service to the kingdom—large or small is not really the point—over which the Lord has appointed us king. It may mean showing conscience by cleaning up your room—and if you have a first world abundance of property, it is a very small way of offering them back to the Lord to keep them in good order. It means carefully stewarding precious moments with other people, maybe saying, "I hope you have a wonderful day," and saying it like you mean it, to support staff. And it means humbly ruling your kingdom within, in which both Heaven and Hell may be found. It is when you serve as king, the king made for the kingdom, that your kingdom will be your crown and glory.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

After Church, a young woman stormed up to Fr. Elijah. She had, at as far arm's length from her body as she could hold it, a clear trash bag holding a pink heart-shaped piece of artisan paper that appeared to have writing on it. She stopped opposite Fr. Elijah and said, "*Do you know anything about this note?*"

Fr. Elijah smiled gently. "It appears someone has sent you some sort

of love note. How sweet!"

"Were *you* involved?"

"What, you think I would do something like that? I'm hurt!"

The young woman stood up straight and put her hand on her hip. Fr. Elijah turned to George and said, "Would you like to know what's going on?"

The young woman said, "Yes, I'd love to hear you explain *this*."

Fr. Elijah said, "George, the elephant population in Sri Lanka is in some peril. They're not being hunted for their ivory, let alone for their meat, but there is a limited amount of land, and farmers and elephants are both trying to use an area of land that makes it difficult for them to both support themselves. So some people tried to think about whether there was a way to make a win-win situation, and make the elephants an economic asset. They asked themselves whether elephants produce anything. And it turns out that something that eats the enormous amount of food an elephant eats does, in fact, produce a *lot* of something."

George said, "I don't see the connection. Have I just missed that you're changing the subject?"

The young woman said, "He *hasn't* changed the subject."

Fr. Elijah said, "They're using it to make hand-crafted artisan paper, colored and available in a heart shape, which you can buy online at [MrElliePooh.com](http://MrElliePooh.com) if you're interested."

George looked at Fr. Elijah in shock and awe.

The woman said, "Grandpappy, you are *such* a pest!"

Fr. Elijah lightly placed an arm around her shoulder and said, "George, I'd like to introduce you to my granddaughter Abigail. She has a face as white as alabaster, raven-black hair, and lips are red as blood. And she has many merits besides being fun to pick on."

Abigail stuck out her tongue at her grandfather and then shifted to his side. "And my grandfather does many fine things besides be obnoxious... Can't live with him, can't shoot him... You should get to know him, if you haven't." She gave him a gentle squeeze. "There are brownies today, George, and they're great! Can I get you some?"

George read in *Brocéliande*, and wandered in the wood, and the castle of Calix College, and the surrounding city. Fr. Elijah began to introduce fasting, and George found something new in his struggles... and began to make progress. Nor was that the only thing in George's life. He began to find the Middle Ages not too different from his own... and he was puzzled when he read in *Brocéliande*:

And in that wood anon saw Sir Yvain a lion fighting against a primeval serpent, and the serpent breathed fire against the lion his heel, and a baleful cry did the lion wail. Then Lord Yvain thought in his heart of which animal he should aid, and in his heart spake, "The lion is the more natural of the twain." And anon he put his resources on the side of the lion, and with his sword he cleft the ancient serpent in twain and hew the serpent his head in seven, and warred against the wicked wyrm until he were reduced to many small bits. And he cleaned his sword of the serpent his venomous filth, and anon the lion kept him at his side.

And anon Sir Yvain slept and an advison saw: an old woman, whose colour was full of life and whose strength intact and yet who were wizened, riding upon a serpent and clothed in a robe black as coal, and spake and said, "Sir Yvain, why have ye offended me? Betake ye as my companion." Then Sir Yvain refused her and there was a stench as brimstone aflame. Then a woman clad in white, riding astride a lion, new as white snow did courtesy and said, "Sir Yvain, I salute thee." And about her was a fragrance of myrrh.

Anon Sir Yvain awoke, and sore amazed was he, and none could interpret his advison.

George spoke with Fr. Elijah, and asked him what the passage meant. Fr. Elijah said, "What does this passage *mean*? You know, that



isn't as big a question in Orthodoxy as you think... but I'll try to answer. In fact, I think I'll answer in a homily."

"It had better be impressive."

"Fine. I'll preach it as impressive as you want."

"When?"

"On Christmas."

That evening, George called Fr. Elijah to say that he was going home for Christmas... and then, later in the week, said, "Fr. Elijah? Do you know anybody who could keep me? My parents were going to buy me a ticket home with frequent flier mileage on an airline, but my grandfather is ill and my mother used up those miles getting a ticket... and money is tight... I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Well, you could talk with your College and try to get special permission to stay over break... but I'd prefer if you stayed with me. Because we agreed that I would only preach on the Arthurian legends, including your Old Law and New Law, if you were there... and I was so looking forward to preaching a Christmas homily on the Arthurian legends."

"Can't you preach it without me?"

"We agreed and shook hands. I have that homily for Christmas, but only if you're there."

"Um... I would be an intruding—"

"George, I am a priest because I love God and I love people. And I do meet people quite a lot, but my house is empty now. It would be nice to have some young energy and someone to share more than a Christmas dinner with?"

"Are you sure?"

"You know how to get to my place. I'll see you whenever you want to

you know how to get to my place. I'll see you whenever you want to come over."

On Christmas, Fr. Elijah preached,

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Christ is born! Glorify him!

In the Arthurian legends, there is a story of a knight who sees a serpent fighting a lion, kills the serpent, and wins a kind response from the lion. In some versions the knight has a vision in which one woman appears on the serpent and another on the lion, and we learn that these women represent the Old Law and the New Law.

What are the Old Law and the New Law? One can say the Torah or Law of Moses, and the Gospel, and that is true up to a point, but the "Old Law" is not just a take on Judaism. Sir Palomides, a Saracen, described with profound confusion between Islam and paganism (and the problem with Islam is not that it is pagan but that it is not pagan enough—it is more emphatic about there being one God, even more than the one God is), becomes a Christian and is asked to renounce the Old Law and embrace the New Law. Even if Sir Palomides is in no sense a Jew.

In the ancient world, it is not enough to say that the Orthodox Church understood itself as the fulfillment of Judaism, politically incorrect as that may be. The Orthodox Church was even more fully the fulfillment of paganism, and if you understand what was going on in Plato, you understand that paganism was deepening. The Orthodox Church is the place where that final deepening of paganism took place. And I would like to explain for a moment why Orthodoxy is pagan and neo-"pagan" forms like Druidry aren't.

The popular stereotype is that paganism was merry and free until Christianity's grim hand came down, and that's like saying that difficult toil was carefree until someone came along and with a grim hand invited people to a feast. Pagan virtues—courage, justice,

wisdom, moderation—are retained in Christianity, but they are not the virtues of joy by themselves. C.S. Lewis said that if you're not going to be a Christian, the next best thing is to be a Norseman, because the Norse pagans sided with the good gods, not because they were going to win, but because they were going to lose. The Norse decision was to meet the Day of Doom, called Ragnarok, and go down fighting on the right side. And so the Norse have a tale of the war-god Tyr who took and kept an oath even at the price of letting a wolf bite off his right hand, and there is something very much like ancient paganism in keeping an oath though it cost your right hand.

What Orthodoxy offered paganism in the ancient world was precisely not a grim hand flattening everything, but retaining the virtue already recognized in paganism while deepening them with faith, hope, and love that live the life of Heaven here on earth. The Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are the virtues that can see beauty, that bring Heaven down to earth, that can call for the whole Creation to worship God: as we sing at the Eucharist, joining the Song that summons the host of angels, sun, moon and stars, heavens and waters above the heavens, sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying fowl, kings and all people, princes and rulers, young men and maidens, old men and children—all called in the Psalmist's summons to praise the Lord.

If you want to know how today's "neo-paganism" can fail to be pagan, I would recall to you the Medieval Collectibles website which offers a medieval toilet cover so you can have a real medieval coat of arms on your, um, "throne." The website's marketing slogan is "Own a piece of history," but you're not owning a piece of history... or think of the interior decorator who was told, "I want an authentic colonial American bathroom," to which the decorator replied, "Ok, so exactly how far from the house do you want it?"

Some have noted that the majority of books written by Orthodox today are by Western converts, and there is a reason for that. The Reformation almost created literate culture, but the opposite of

literate is not illiterate, but oral, in a way that neo-paganism may want to create but is awfully hard to recreate. Even in its spiritual *reading* the Orthodox Church remains an oral culture in its core while it uses writing: many of its most devout would never write a book, and even now, sensible Orthodox will answer the question, "What should I read to understand Orthodoxy?" by saying "Don't read, at least not at first, and don't *ever* let reading be the center of how you understand Orthodoxy. Come and join the life of our community in liturgy." Orthodoxy is not better than classical paganism in this regard, but it is like classical paganism and it keeps alive elements of classical paganism that neo-paganism has trouble duplicating. (A neo-"pagan" restoration of oral culture bears a hint of... I'm not sure how to describe it... an oxymoron like "committee to revitalize" comes close.) After years of the West tearing itself away from nature, people in the West are trying to reconnect with nature, and some neo-"pagans" are spearheading that. But look at Orthodoxy. Come and see the flowers, the water and oil, the beeswax candles and herbs, the bread and wine that are at the heart of Orthodox worship: the Orthodox Church has not lost its connection with the natural world even as it uses technology, and it may even have a fuller connection with the natural world than paganism had; classical Rome could sow salt in the soil of Carthage and go out of their way to pollute out of spite, which even environmentally irresponsible companies rarely do today. Which isn't getting into the full depth of a spiritually disciplined connection to nature like that of St. Symeon the New Theologian—in the Orthodox Church we call him "new" even though he's from the fourteenth century—but it's missing the point to ask if Orthodoxy is pagan because of the role of the saints in worshipping God. If you want the deep structure, the culture, the way of life, of paganism, the place where you will find it most alive is precisely Orthodoxy.

The Arthurian author Charles Williams makes a very obscure figure, the bard Taliesin, the pilgrim who comes to Byzantium sent to bring a treasure and returns with the Pearl of Great Price, the New Law. In Stephen Lawhead, it is Merlin who appears as the culmination of the Druidic Order and the apex of the Old Law: the

old learned brotherhood is disbanded and Merlin proclaims the New Law, and this is really not just a story. The Evangelical Orthodox Church was formed when a group of Protestants tried to do something very Protestant, reconstruct the original Christian Church through studying old documents. *Very* Protestant. And they came to a certain point, that when they quizzed an Orthodox priest, they realized something. And the Evangelical Orthodox Church entered the Orthodox Church because they realized that the Old Law of Protestant searching to reconstruct the ancient Church needed to be fulfilled in what they realized was the New Law. The Holy Order of MANS—MANS is an acronym, but not in English; it stands for *Mysterion, Agape, Nous, Sophia*, some terms from Greek that are deep enough to be hard to translate, but something like "profound mystery, divine love, spiritual eye, wisdom." Do these mean something Christian? Do they mean something esoteric? In fact the Holy Order of MANS was something of both, and they pushed their tradition deeper and deeper... until the Holy Order of MANS was dissolved and many of its people followed their leader's sense that their Old Law led to this New Law. If you know the story of the Aleut religion in Alaska, the shamans—and it is difficult to explain their "shamans" in contemporary terms; perhaps I should refer to them as people who had tasted spiritual realities—said that certain people were coming and to listen to the people who were to come. And the people the shamans foretold were Orthodox monks who had in turn tasted of spiritual realities, such as St. Herman of Alaska. Not, necessarily, that moving from paganism to Orthodoxy was that big of a change for them. It wasn't. But the Aleuts recognized in these monks something that was very close to their way of life, but something that could deepen it, and it was because of their depth in their Old Law as pagans that they were ready for an Orthodox New Law. Stephen Lawhead has a lot of carefully researched history—at times I wished for a little less meticulous research and a little more riveting story—but whether or not anything like this can be confirmed archaeologically in the Celtic lands, the same kind of thing can be confirmed, even as having happened very recently.

But when I say "Merlin," many of you do not think of the herald of the New Law and for that matter many of the older sources do not

of the New Law, and for that matter many of the other sources do not do this either. If a boy today is enchanted by just one character from the Arthuriad, it is ordinarily not King Arthur, Pendragon though he may be, nor Sir Galahad, who achieved the Holy Grail in some versions, nor Sir Lancelot, who is proven to be the greatest knight in the world, nor the Fisher-King, nor the fairy enchantress Morgana le Fay, nor King Arthur's peerless Queen Guinevere, whose name has become our "Jennifer." It is the figure of Merlin.

Today, if you ask *what* Merlin was—and I intentionally say, "what," not "who," for reasons I will detail—the usual answer is, "a wizard." But if you look at the stories that were spread from the Celtic lands, the answer is, "a prophet." In the Old Testament, one of the prophets protests, "I am neither a prophet, nor a prophet's son," and another prophet says something to the Lord that somehow never gets rendered clearly in English Bible translations never choose to get right: "You violated my trust, and I was utterly betrayed." The Hebrew word for prophet, '*nabi*', means "called one," and one never gets the sense in reading the Old Testament prophets that the prophets, when they were children, said, "I want to grow up to be a prophet" the way people today say, "I want to be the President of the United States."

And this idea of Merlin as *prophet* is not just a different or a more Christianly correct word. The Arthurian legends may be thought of today as "something like fiction;" even when people in the Middle Ages questioned their historical accuracy, those people were throwing a wet blanket on something a great many people took as literal fact. There is a book called *The Prophecies of Merlin*, which was taken extremely seriously for centuries, as the word of a prophet. And one gets the sense that in modern terms Merlin's identity was not a self-definition that he chose, not in modern terms, but something that was thrust upon him.

It may sound strange to some if I say that the earlier attempt to build a castle on Merlin's blood, and Merlin's later calling a castle out of the wind, relate to Christ. But if you think I am pounding a square peg into a round hole, consider this: Sir Galahad, whom some consider a painfully obvious Christ-figure whose strength is as the

consider a primarily obvious Christ figure, whose strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure and who is always strong in the face of temptation, enters the world after Sir Lancelot, the greatest knight in the world and a man who goes above and beyond the call of duty of faithfulness in his devotion to another man's wife, goes to a castle, is given the Arthurian equivalent of a date-rape pill in the form of a potion that makes him think his hostess is the woman he's been carrying on with, and that night sires Galahad. You may call this a magical birth story if you like, but it doesn't give us much advance notice that the son born will turn out to be the Arthurian icon of purity who will achieve the Grail.

So how is Merlin, who reeks of magic, introduced? In the oldest surviving work that flourished outside of Celtic circles, in fact written by a Celtic bishop, Merlin appears when King Vortigern searches for a boy without a father, and hears Merlin being teased for being without a father. And let me be clear, this is not because his father has passed away. We learn that the Devil wished to be incarnate, could only come into the world of a virgin, found a virgin who was spiritually pure, having only slipped in her prayers once, and thus the person meant to be the anti-Christ was conceived. The Church, just in time, said powerful prayers and the boy, born of a virgin without a sire, commanded all the power over the natural world he was meant to, but would serve the good. Now is anyone going to say that that's not a reference to Christ? Merlin is most interesting because of how the story itself places him in the shadow of Christ.

One thing that's very easy to overlook is that in the story where there's a terrible storm and Christ is sleeping in the front of the boat while his disciples are asking if he doesn't care that they were going to die, is not just that the disciples were right: in that part of the world there were storms that could very quickly flood a boat and kill people when the boat sank. Christ stands up, and says something to the storm before rebuking the disciples for their lack of faith. And that's when the disciples *really* began to be afraid. Mark's Gospel is the one Gospel with the simplest, "I don't speak Greek very well" Greek, and at this point he uses the King James- or Shakespeare-style Greek Old Testament language to say that when Jesus

commands the storm to be still and it actually obeys him, *that is* when they are most terrified.

Before Jesus stopped the storm, they were afraid enough; they knew the storm they saw was easily enough to kill them. But this was nothing compared to the fear out of which they asked, "Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" This person who had been teaching them had just displayed a command over nature that left them wondering who or what he was, a "what" that goes beyond today's concern about "who am I?" and has something that cannot be reached by angst-ridden wrestling with who you are.

Something like that question is at the heart of debates that people argued for centuries and are trying to reopen. What, exactly, was Jesus? Was he an ancient sage and teacher? Was he a prophet? A healer or a worker of wonders? Someone who had drunk of deeper spiritual realities and wanted to initiate others into the same? Was he something more than a man, the bridge between God and his world?

The answer taken as final was the maximum possible. It was "Every one of these and more." It pushed the envelope on these even as it pushed into a claim for the maximum in every respect: Christ was maximally divine, maximally human, maximally united, and maximally preserved the divine and human while being the final image both for our understanding of what it is to be God and what it is to be human.

And what, finally, would we have if we deepened Merlin? What if he were the son, not of the worst finite creature, but of the best and infinite Creator? What if he had not simply power over nature but were the one through whom the world was created and in whom all things consist? What if we were dealing with, not the one who prophesied that a few would find the Holy Grail, but the one who gave the Holy Grail and its gifts that are still with us? What if Merlin were made to be like the pattern he is compared to? When Merlin is deepened far enough, he becomes Christ.



The Christian lord of Cyprus was out hawking when his dearly beloved hawk—I don't know if the hawk was a merlin, but I can say that a merlin is a type of hawk—became entangled in the brush in the wood. Loving the hawk dearly, he ordered that the branches be cut away so that he would still have this hawk, and when that was done, not only was his hawk found, but an icon showing the Queen and Mother of God on a throne, and the Divine Child enthroned upon her lap and an angel on either side. They found what they were looking for, but they also found a singularly majestic icon of the Incarnation.

The Christ Mass, the Nativity, is an invasion in the dead of winter. It is the feast of the Incarnation, or more properly one of the feasts of the Incarnation, which is not something that stopped happening once after the Annunciation when the Mother of God bore the God-man in her womb.

Everything that the Christ Mass stands for will eventually be made plain, but the Christ Mass is a day of veiled glory. When God became man, he was born in a stable. When Christ returns, he will appear riding on the clouds. When he came, a choir of angels proclaimed the news to shepherds and a few knees bowed. When he returns, rank upon rank of angels will come in eternal radiant glory and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the manifest glory of God the Father. When he came once, a star heralded the hour of his birth. When he returns, the stars will fall as ripe figs from a tree and the sky itself will recede as a vanishing scroll. Every thing that is a secret not will be made plain, but he first came in secret...

...and he comes today in secret, hidden in us. For the Incarnation was not finished after the Annunciation, but unfolds still as Christ is incarnate in the Church, in the saints like St. Herman of Alaska, a wonderworker who was seen carrying logs weighing much more than himself, stopped a forest fire, calmed a stormy sea, and left behind a body preserved from corruption as it was on display for a month at room temperature, and left behind much of the Aleut Orthodox community that remains to this day—and also in us. And the Incarnation is still unfolding today. The castle of the Arthurian

world is more than stone walls and a porticullis; the castle is almost everything we mean by city, or society, or community. And it is the castle writ large that we find in the Church, not only a fortress waging war against the Devil but a people ruled by her Lord. This Castle is at once founded upon a fluid more precious than ichor, not the blood of a boy without a father but the blood of a God-man, without father on the side of his mother and without mother on the side of his Father. It is the Castle still being built by the wind of his Spirit still blowing—and remember that the world behind the Medieval West did not always stow "spirit" and "wind" in sealed watertight compartments: the wind blows where it will and the Spirit inspires where it will, so this Castle has a Spirit blowing through it that is more windlike than wind itself.

And until the Last Judgment, when every eye will see him, even those that pierced him, it is his will to be incarnate where he is hidden behind a veil to those who cannot see him: incarnate in the Church and in each of us, called to be his saints, and called to become Christ.

Christ is born! Glorify him!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Fr. Elijah turned around, stopped, bent his head a moment, and at last turned back. "Oh, and one more thing... George's number is in the parish directory, and these homilies that talk about King Arthur and his court have been all his fault. If there's *anything at all* that you don't like about them, I invite you to call him at all hours of the day and night to grouse at him for foisting such terrible ideas on me."

That evening, George came, and after some hesitancies, said, "When can I become Orthodox?"

"At Pascha. We can continue working, and you will be received in the Church."

George thanked him, and began to walk out.

"Um, Fr. Elijah, aren't you somewhat surprised?"

"George, I was waiting for you to see that you wanted to become Orthodox. Go back to your reading."

The Christmas break passed quickly, and the first class after break was the introduction to computer science. The professor said, "Most of my students call me Dr. Blaise, although you can use my last name if you're comfortable. I wanted to offer a few remarks.

"Many of your professors think their class is your most important class, and that entitles them to be your number one priority in homework and demands outside the classroom. I don't. I believe this class is a puzzle piece that fits into a larger puzzle. Exactly how it fits in will differ, depending on whether you become a major—which I invite you to consider—or whether you choose an allied major but focus on something other than computer science, or whether your interests lie elsewhere and I am broadening your horizons even if your main interests lie somewhere else. I will try to help give you a good puzzle piece, and in office hours especially I want to support you in helping fit this piece of the puzzle into the broader picture.

"My best student was a mechanic; car and airplane mechanics, for instance, are solving a problem with a system, and I have never been so stunned at how quickly a student learned to debug well as with this mechanic. I've found that people who know something about physics, mathematics, or engineering pick up computer work more quickly even if you don't see a single physics equation in this class: learn physics and programming is a little easier to learn. And it goes the other way too: one of my colleagues in the math department explained that students who know the process of taking something and writing a computer program to reach the desired results, correctly, are prepared to do something similar in mathematics, and take something and write a correct proof to reach the desired results. Learn something in one hard science and you have an advantage in others."

One student raised her hand. "Yes?" Dr. Blaise asked.

"What about those of us interested in philosophy or religion? What if we're doing something computers won't help us with? Are you going to teach us how to use word processors?"

"Well, I'd point out that there is a long tradition of studying mathematics—geometry—as a sort of mental weightlifting before studying philosophy or theology. Or some of my poet friends say that it's a way of poisoning the mind, and I'll respect them if they want to say that. But for many of you, it is useful, even if we don't teach word processing—ask the lab tech for sessions that will teach you how to use computer software. Computer *science* is about something else; computer science isn't any more about how to use computers than astronomy is about how to use telescopes."

The student raised her hand again, slightly, and then put it down.

Dr. Blaise said, "I'd like to hear your thought. If you aren't convinced, other people probably aren't convinced either, and it will do everybody good to have it out in the open."

"Um... But why does..." She paused, and Dr. Blaise smiled. "I want to study English."

"Good stuff. So does my daughter. It's a bit of a cross-cultural encounter, and I think it can benefit English students for the same reason my majors benefit from taking English classes. But never mind programming specifically; I want to talk about how the disciplines can integrate. Programming won't help you the same way as some of the humanities will, but I'd like to talk about how things might fit together.

"I saw one of your English professors, a lovely medievalist who knows the Arthurian legends well. She was talking with one of the campus ethicists, who has interests in the history of moral theology. The topic of discussion? One that you might wince at, on the short list of positions the Catholic Church is unpopular for: contraception. And the ethicist said he'd found something he thought the medievalist literature professor might find interesting.

"The history of contraception like almost any other big question

The history of contraception, like almost any other big question, involves a lot of other things. And one of those things involves a suggestion by John Noonan, not for one of several proposed answers for a question, but of an answer to a puzzle that has no other answers, at least as of the time Noonan wrote.

"The vision of courtly love, and what is celebrated in that love between a man and a woman—probably another man's wife, for what it's worth—is an ideal that was all about celebrating 'love', and in this celebration of 'love,' there was a big idea of 'Play all you want; we will encourage and celebrate play, whether or not you're in marriage; just be sure that you do it in a way that won't generate a child.'

"Scholars do have difficulty keeping a straight face in the idea that the courtly romances are coded messages about secret Cathar teachings. They aren't. But they flourished as nowhere before in a land where something of Catharism was in the air, and, like contraception, the idea of celebrating 'love' and encouraging people, 'Play, but do it in a way that don't generate a child' is not exactly Cathar, but is the sort of thing that could come if Catharism was in the air.

"And, the ethicist went further, the Arthurian romances are done in such a way that it is very difficult to demonstrate any clear and conscious authorial understanding of Cathar teachings, let alone coded messages sent to those 'in the know'... but that doesn't mean that Catharism had nothing to do with it. And not just because strict Cathars would have taken a dim view of *this* way of taking their ball and running with it. A *very* dim view, for that matter.

"Catharism, called Gnosticism as it appeared in the ancient world and various other things as it resurfaces today, has various things about it, and not just wanting to celebrate love to high Heaven while understanding this wonderful 'love' as something which one should be able to do without generating children. That's not the only thing, and it is one point of including Cathar elements without doing them very well.

"Catharism, or Gnosticism or whatever the day's version of it is called, is deeply connected with magic, and this occult element has a lot of ideas, or something like ideas, if you get very deep into it. And in the

Arthurian legends, there is an occult element, but it isn't done very well. There are dweomers all over the place, and Merlin and almost every woman work enchantments, not to mention that all sorts of items have magical 'virtues', but the English professor had almost no sense that the authors were really involved with the occult themselves. It was kind of a surface impression that never had any of the deeper and darker features, or the deeper secret doctrines of one in the know. It kind of portrays magic the way a poorly researched TV show portrays a faroff land—there may be a sense of interest and enchantment untainted by actual *understanding* of what is being portrayed.

"And besides that surface impression, there is something of self-centered pride. The only people who really have a pulse are nobles living in large measure for themselves, knights who are trying to do something impressive. Commerce never seems to really taint the screen of luxury; furthermore there is a sense that being in fights for one's glory is no great sin, and it doesn't really matter what those fights do to the others. It's a very different view of fighting from 'just war.'

"The Arthurian legends are undoubtedly classics of world literature, and it is terribly reductive to say that they're simply a bad version of Cathar doctrine. That denigration of their literary qualities is not justified, just as dismissing Star Wars as just a bit of violent Gnosticism or Catharism or whatever is out of line. Star Wars would never succeed if it were just dressed up Gnosticism.

"But it does raise the question of whether the literature of courtly love, so foundational to how people can understand 'love' today and understand what it means to celebrate 'love' and say that the Catholic Church hates love between men and women if it will not recognize that contraception will help that love be celebrated with less unwelcome 'consequences'... It raises the question, not of whether the literature is bad literature and not worth study, but whether it is very good literature that contains something fatal."

There was one more question, and Dr. Blaise began discussing computer science. At least George believed later that the professor had been discussing computer science, and trusted others' reports on that

score.

But George did not hear a word more of what Dr. Blaise said that day.

The computer science class was a night class, and when it was finished, George found himself surprised when he entered the parsonage.

Fr. Elijah was sitting, his back to the door, staring into the fireplace. A large volume, looking like an encyclopedia volume, was sitting open on Fr. Elijah's sparsely appointed desk. Fr. Elijah, his back still to the door, said, "Come in, George. What is the matter?"

George said, "I hope I didn't interrupt—"

Fr. Elijah said, "I was just resting a bit after reading something. St. Maximus's language gives me such trouble."

George rushed over to the desk. "Maybe I can help." He looked, and looked again, until he realized the volume had columns of Latin and Greek. The volume was printed, but it looked old, and there were worm holes.

"Come in and sit down, George. You don't need to be reading St. Maximus the Confessor quite yet, even if your Greek is better than mine, or you find the Latin easier. Now sit down. You didn't come here so you could help me understand the Greek, even if I wouldn't be surprised if, bright lad as you are, you know Greek a good deal better than I do."

"It's Greek to me," George said, forcing a smile, and then shaking. Fr. Elijah rose, turned around, and said, "Sit down in my chair, George, and enjoy the fire. I'll step out into the kitchen, make some hot cocoa, and then we can talk. I wish my cat were still around; she was a real sweetheart, and she would sit in your lap and purr. Even if it was the first time she met you." Fr. Elijah left, silently, and went about making hot cocoa. He returned, holding two mugs, and gave one mug to George. "I put extra marshmallows in yours."

Then Fr. Elijah sat down in a smaller chair, in the corner, and sat,

listening.

George blurted out, after some silence, "I think the Arthurian stuff I read may be Gnostic."

Fr. Elijah took a sip.

"One of the people in my class said that Arthurian literature arose because of the Cathars."

Fr. Elijah took another sip.

"Or something like that. It seems that a lot of what people do as glorious things in courtly literature is Gnostic."

Fr. Elijah took a slow sip, and asked, "Like what?"

"Well, the ideal of love is big on celebrating love, only it's better if children don't get in the way, and you're careful to keep children out of the way. And there's magic all over the place, and nobles are superior."

Fr. Elijah took another sip.

"At least that's how I remember it, only I'm probably wrong."

Fr. Elijah stroked his beard for a moment and said, "Well, that's a big enough question that we should respect the matter by not trying to sort it out all at once. Let's not assume that because it is so big a question, we are obligated to rush things. If it is a big question, we are more obligated *not* to rush things."

"*Why?*"

"Ever hear of Arius or Arianism?"

"You mean racism?"

"No, not that spelling. A-R-I-U-S and A-R-I-A-N-I-S-M. The race-related bit is spelled with a 'Y'."



"Ok."

"Arius was a deacon who was really worried that his bishop was saying something wrong. So he rushed to correct his bishop, and in his rush to correct the Orthodox Church founded a heresy. He gets it worse in the Orthodox liturgy than even Judas; various other heretics are accused of being taught by Arius.

"There were two mistakes he made. The biggest and worst mistake was fighting the Orthodox Church when they said he was wrong, and that was the real problem with Arius. But another mistake was trying to rush and fix the problem of heresy he thought his bishop was guilty of.

"Holier men than either of us have rushed and said something heretical in their rush job. I'm not sure either of us are going to go warring against the Church and trying to fix it has thought about our correction and said 'No,' but if you've raised a big question, or your class has, that's all the more reason *not* to rush."

George said, "So what should we do?"

Fr. Elijah said, "Take a deep breath and a sip of cocoa," and waited. Then he said, "Now what is it that has you so wound up?"

"I thought there was really something in what I was reading."

"There probably is."

"But the idea of love, and all the magic, are some sort of second-rate Cathar stuff."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, I'm not sure... um... well, they're big on the experience of love."

Fr. Elijah sank a little into his chair. "In other forms of Gnosticism, there is an idea of some things as experience... and they are understood as experiences, significant as experiences, and not as significant for other reasons... and I can see some pretty Gnostic assumptions feeding into

reasons... and I can see some pretty Gnostic assumptions feeding into that ideal of love. You may be right..."

"But isn't love to be celebrated? How else could it be celebrated?"

"In the New Testament times, celibacy was encouraged despite the fact that it was giving up something big. But the something big is not the obvious 'something big' people would be worried about giving up today... it's having children to carry on one's name. There is a good deal more.... People, even with hormones, were interested in some other things *besides* pleasurable experiences. There is more I could explain about what else *besides* 'being in love' could make a happy marriage between happy people, but... Sorry, I'm ranting, and you're not happy."

"Fr. Elijah, if what I'm saying makes sense, then why on earth did you preach those homilies? Were you lying... um, I mean..."

"Don't look for a nicer word; if you think I might have been lying, I would really rather have you bring it out into the open than have it smouldering and damaging other things. No, I'm not angry with you, and no, I wasn't lying."

"Then why—"

"George, allow me to state the very obvious. Something was going on in you. And still is. It seemed, and seems to me, that you were coming alive in reading the Arthurian legends. As a pastor or priest or spiritual father or whatever you want to call me, I made an appropriate response and preached homilies that blessed not just you, but also several other people as well. Now, maybe, you are shattered, or maybe you are ready to begin hungering for something more. You know how, in classic Gnosticism, there's a distinction the Gnostics hold between the so-called 'hylic' people who don't have much of any spiritual life, meaning people who aren't Christian in any sense, and the 'psychic,' meaning soulish, not ESP people, of Christians who have a sort of half-baked spiritual awakening, and the 'pneumatic,' meaning spiritual, Gnostics who are the real spiritual elite?"

George said, "It doesn't surprise me. It's absolute bosh from

beginning to end. It has nothing to do with the truth."

Fr. Elijah closed his eyes for a moment. "George, I am not quite sure I would say that."

"What, you're going to tell me the Gnostics had it right?"

"They had more right than you think; they're *seductively* similar to Christianity. They wouldn't have anywhere near the effect they're having if it were any other way.

"You know how Orthodox Christianity is patted on the head as a sort of lesser outer revelation that is permissible for those who have reached the outer courts but are not ready to enter the inner sanctum of the Gnostics' secret knowledge? That's *backwards*. The Gnostic 'knowledge' might be excusable for people who have not reached the inner reaches of Orthodoxy. It is the Gnostic that is the light-weight spiritual reality. And it is the light-weight spiritual reality that is the Old Law which the New Law fulfills more than the Old Law can fulfill itself. You reacted to something in the Arthurian legends because there is something there, and if you now know that they are not the New Law, I will ask you to excuse me if I still hold those legends to be an Old Law that finds its completion in the New Law. The highest does not stand without the lowest, and part of the New Law is that it makes a place for the Old Law. Including that spark of life you saw in the Arthurian legends."

"But why *preach* as if you found so much in them? I were to ask you to do something silly, like preach a sermon on how things have been censored out of the Bible, would you do that too?" George took a breath. "I'm sorry; you can change the subject if you want."

Fr. Elijah said, slowly, "I have a question for you, and I want you to think carefully. Are you ready for the question?"

George said, "Yes."

"Can we know, better than God, what the Bible should say?"

"No."

"But quite a lot of people do think that. A lot of people seem to be trying to help the Bible doing a better job of what it's trying so hard to say, but can't quite manage. Or something like that."

"I've read some liberals doing that."

"It's not just liberals. Let me give one example. George, have you been big in Creation and evolution debates?"

"Not really."

"Christians have several options, but for the *Newsweek* crowd, there are only two options. Either you're a young earther, or you're an evolutionist, and the new 'intelligent design' is just the old creationism with a more euphemistic name. Rather depressing for a set of options, but let's pretend those are the only two options.

"Now are you familiar with what this means for dinosaurs?"

"Um..."

"The connection isn't obvious. We've seen, or at least I have, cartoons in magazines that have cave men running from T. rexes or hunting a brontosaurus. Which is, to an evolutionist, over a hundred times worse than having cave men whining loudly about the World Wide Wait. There's a *long* time between when the last dinosaurs of any kind, and the first humans of any kind, were around. As in hundreds of millions of years longer than humans have been around in any form. On that timeline, it's a rather big mistake to have humans interacting with dinosaurs.

"But if you have a young earth timeline, with the whole world created in six days, then it's not such a ludicrous idea that humans might have interacted with dinosaurs... and your English Bible offers an interesting reason to believe that humans have seen living dinosaurs. Have you read the book of Job?"

George said, "Um, no. It's one of a lot of..."

Fr. Elijah interrupted. "There's a lot in the Bible to read, and even people who read the Bible a lot don't read it quickly unless they're speed-reading, and then it still takes them a couple of weeks. If you can call that 'reading the Bible;' I've tried it and I think it's one of the sillier things I've tried—a sort of spiritual 'get rich quick' scheme. I was smart enough to stop. But if you check your English Bible, you will see in Job a creature called the 'behemoth,' perhaps because the translators on the King James Version didn't know how to translate it, and the 'behemoth,' whatever that may be, is a mighty impressive creature. We are told that it is not afraid though the river rushes against it, suggesting that whatever the behemoth is, it is a big beast. And we are told that it stiffens or swings its tail like a cedar, the cedar being a magnificent, and quite enormous, tree which reaches heights of something like one hundred fifty to two hundred feet. And regardless of where you stand on Creation and evolution, the only creature that has ever walked the earth with a tail that big, or anywhere *near* that big, is one of the bigger dinosaurs. So the Bible offers what seems to be excellent evidence that people have seen dinosaurs—alive.

"Which is all very lovely, of course given to the English Bible. But first, the 'behemoth' is in fact an overgrown relative of the pig, the hippopotamus, and second, it isn't really talking about his *tail*. The same basic image is translated unclearly in the Song of S—"

George spit out a mouthful of soda and took a moment to compose himself. "I'm sorry. Did I—"

Fr. Elijah looked around. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that as you were taking a sip. Let me get you a napkin. Here."

George said, "Ok, so maybe there are some other vivid images that have been, bowlderized—you know, edited for television. Anything more? Were any ideas censored?"

Fr. Elijah said, "A bit murky, but I'm tempted to say 'yes.' One idea has been made less clear; there may be other tidbits here and there. A couple of forceful passages that may be interpreted as implying things about contraception don't come across as clearly. But that may not be

copyright; there is a double meaning that is hard to translate correctly in English. I don't find the English translation strange. But there's one story in the Old Testament, where the future King David is running from King Saul, who is leading a manhunt and trying to kill David. There are a couple of points that David could have killed Saul, and at one of these points, David's assistant either encourages David to kill Saul or offers to kill Saul himself, and David says what your English Bible puts as, 'I will not lay my hand on the Lord's anointed,' or something like that. Would you like to know what it says in Hebrew or Greek, or in Latin translation?"

George said, "Um..."

Fr. Elijah got up. "I wasn't expecting that you would; it's really not that important or even as impressive as some people think. If you don't know those languages, it may be easiest to see in the Latin. Aah! Here's my Latin Bible. Just a minute. Let me get my magnifying glass." After almost dropping a dark green Bible with golden letters on the cover, and an interminable amount of flipping, he said, "What is this word here?"

"I don't know Latin."

"Never mind that. What does that word look like?"

"It's a lowercase version of 'Christ,' with an 'um' added."

"Yes indeed. And at the top it says the name of an Old Testament book, in Latin 'Liber Samuhelis.' What do you think the word you pointed out means?"

"I told you that I don't know Latin."

"What's an obvious guess?"

"Um..." George paused. "Christ."

"Yes indeed."

"What does the lowercase 'c' mean?"

"It means nothing. As a matter of language-loving curiosity, the text is in Latin; either in the manuscripts or in this printed Bible, capitalizations follow a different rule, and 'christus'/'christum'/'... isn't automatically capitalized. Now why is the Old Testament book of Samuel using the equivalent of the 'Christ'?"

"Because the Latin is messed up?"

"Ernk. Sorry. Bzzt. Thank you for playing, but no. The Latin is *fine*. It's the *English* that's messed up. The Latin correctly translates, 'I will not lay my hand on,' meaning violently strike, 'the Lord's Christ.' Didn't you know that the word 'Christ' means 'anointed'?"

"Yes, but..."

"The Bible, Old Testament and New, uses 'Christ' for those who are anointed—the Son of God, prophets, priests, kings, and ultimately the people of God. The whole point of becoming Christian is to become by grace what Christ is by nature, and even if we can never be perfect in Christ, there is something real that happens. If you ever become Orthodox, you will be 'Christed,' or in the related and standard term, 'chrismated,' meaning, 'anointed with holy oil.' And, at a deeper level, the anointing is about anointing with the Holy Spirit, as Christ was. And the New Testament in particular says a lot about Christ, but the Bible calls Christ or Christs others who are anointed. But the Bible translations, coincidentally by people who have much less room for this in their theology, introduce a division that isn't in Hebrew, Greek, or the Catholic Church's Latin, and translate the Hebrew 'moshiah' or the Greek 'christos' one way when it refers to the one they think is 'really' Christ, and another way when it refers to other Christs even if what the text says is, quite literally, 'Christ.' They introduce a very clear divide where none exists in the text, using a language shenanigan not entirely different from some mistranslations translating 'God' with a big 'G' when the Bible talks about the Father, and a 'god' with a little 'g' when the Bible refers to Christ. Perhaps your Bible's translators still say 'anointed one,' but there is some degree of censorship. The reader is saved the shock of too many correctly translated and explicit statements that we are to be little Christs, Sons of God, living the divine life—there's a word for the divine life in

Greek that is different from the word for mere created life, and that dimension doesn't seem to come through. It's not all censorship, but there's something not quite right about the translators who refuse to either consistently say 'Christ,' or else consistently say 'Anointed One,' so that the readers never get the something important in the Bible that Western Christianity does not always get. But there is enough mystery in the Bible. Sacred Scripture is unfathomable even apart from relatively few areas where the translators try to make sure that the reader does *not* get the full force of the what the text is saying. God exceeds our grasp; he is and ever shall be Light, but whenever we try to shine a light to search him out, its beam falls off in darkness, and the God who is Light meets us beyond the cloud of darkness enshrouding him.

"I say this to answer your question, which I know was purely rhetorical. I'd prefer not to scandalize people and have to clean up the pieces later, but even the tough old women you see in our parish aren't so prissy as you might think. But I want to more directly speak to your intent, and the deep question behind your asking if, because you had hypothetically asked me, I would preach a sermon about the Bible and censorship. I wasn't crossing my fingers or simply saying what I thought would please you, when I preached about the Arthurian legends, and there is nothing I wish to take back. I really was preaching in good faith."

"Then I don't want *Brocéliande* for now."

George said, "You may like the book. I don't. I don't want it any more."

"Then may I take a look at it? I would like to have it, to look at. If you don't want it any more, that's fine, but you can have it back any time."

"Fine. Maybe it will be better for you than for me."

"By the way, what are you doing for Spring Break?"

"Dunno. Do you have any suggestions?"

"There are some truly beautiful places where you could get blasted out of your mind, acquire a couple of new diseases, and if you time it



right, come back still in possession of a rather impressive hangover."

"Um..."

"Yes?"

"Why don't we just cut to the chase and get to your real suggestion?"

"Aah, yes. It turns out that there's a finishing school which is offering a week-long intensive course in the gentle art of polite conversation, but—oh, wait, I was going to suggest that to my granddaughter Abigail. I would never make such a suggestion to you. Finishing school—what was I thinking? What I was really wondering was whether you have considered one of the alternative spring breaks."

"Like Habitat for Humanity? But I have no skill in construction."

"That's not really the point. Last I checked, Habitat for Humanity had nothing on their website about how only seasoned construction workers can be of any use."

"But aren't there a lot of things that could go wrong?"

"Like what?"

"I might hit myself on the thumb with a hammer."

"If you're worried about being at a loss for words, last April Fool's Day my godson gave me a book listing bad words in something like a thousand languages, and you can borrow it. There are worse things in life than hitting your thumb with a hammer, and if it's that big of an issue, I'd be happy to ask the head of Habitat for Humanity to refund your wasted time. If you're worried about getting sunburned, the store next door has an impressive collection of sunscreen containers, giving you options that rival those for dental floss. I personally recommend the SPF 30 in your choice of soft pastel-hued plastic bottles with a delicate floral scent created through a carefully blended confection of unnatural chemicals. I don't think that Habitat is going anywhere where you'd be in real danger of snakebite, but I can help find a kit you can use to bite the snake back.

Have I left something out?"

A week later, and (though he did not tell Fr. Elijah) realizing that Abigail was also a student at Calix College, George returned. Fr. Elijah said, "Why the long face, George? Just a minute while I make some tea."

"Um, I'm not signed up for the alternative spring break."

"George, I only asked you to consider... tell me what's on your mind... *if* you want to."

"I was in line, and I just missed signing up."

Fr. Elijah sat in silence.

"I could have gone, but there was a girl in line after me, and she really wanted to go. I let her have the last slot."

"Excellent. Some would call it sexist, but I'd call it one of the finer points of chivalry."

Fr. Elijah paused and then said, "Could you come with me to the house for a second?"

George gulped.

Fr. Elijah led George out to the house and rummaged on a shelf before pulling out a CD. "George, could you put this in the CD player and hit play? I've figured out how to use the CD player several times, but I keep forgetting, and I don't want to keep you waiting." He handed the CD to George and said, "I'll be right out. I need to make a phone call." He stepped into another room and closed the door.

George looked at the CD, did a double take, and looked at the player. He began to hear a rap beat.

As I walk through the valley where I harvest my grain,  
I take a look at my wife and realize she's very plain.  
But that's just perfect for an Amish like me.  
You know, I shun fancy things like electricity

YOU KNOW, I SHUN fancy things like electricity.  
At 4:30 in the morning I'm milkin' cows.  
Jebediah feeds the chickens and Jacob plows... Fool!  
And I've been milkin' and plowin' so long that  
Even Ezekiel thinks that my mind is gone.

I'm a man of the land! I'm into discipline!  
Got a Bible in my hand and a beard on my chin.  
But if I finish all my chores and you finish thine,  
Then tonight we're gonna party like it's 1699!

We been spending most our lives, living in an Amish paradise.  
I've churned butter once or twice, living in an Amish paradise.  
It's hard work and sacrifice, living in an Amish paradise.  
We sell quilts at discount price, living in an Amish paradise.

A local boy kicked me in the butt last week.  
I just smiled at him and turned the other cheek!  
I really don't care; in fact, I wish him well.  
'Cause I'll be laughing my head off when he's burning in Hell!  
But I ain't never punched a tourist even if he deserved it  
An Amish with a 'tude? You know that's unheard of!  
I never wear buttons but I got a cool hat.  
And my homies agree, I really look good in black... Fool!  
If you'll come to visit, you'll be bored to tears.  
We haven't even paid the phone bill in 300 years  
But we ain't really quaint, so please don't point and stare;  
We're just technologically impaired!

There's no phone, no lights, no motorcar,  
Not a single luxury,  
Like Robinson Caruso,  
It's as primitive as can be!

We been spending most our lives, living in an Amish paradise.  
We're just plain and simple guys, living in an Amish paradise.  
There's no time for sin and vice, living in an Amish paradise.  
We don't fight. We all play nice, living in an Amish paradise.

Hitchin' up the buggy, churnin' lots of butter,  
Raised a barn on Monday, soon I'll raise another!  
Think you're really righteous? Think you're pure in heart?  
Well, I know I'm a million times as humble as thou art!  
I'm the pious guy the little Amlettes wanna be like,  
On my knees day and night, scorin' points for the afterlife,  
So don't be vain and don't be whiny,  
Or else, my brother, I might have to get medieval on your heinie!

We been spending most our lives, living in an Amish paradise.  
We're all crazy Mennonites, living in an Amish paradise.  
There's no cops or traffic lights, living in an Amish paradise.  
But you'd probably think it bites, living in an Amish paradise.

Fr. Elijah walked back into the room and served the tea, smiling gently.

George said, "Um..."

Fr. Elijah said, "Yes?"

"I'm not sure how to put this delicately."

"Then put it indelicately. Bluntly, if you wish."

"I hadn't picked you out for a Weird Al fan."

"It was a present."

"Who would buy you a Weird Al CD?"

"A loved one."

"Um... do you ever do something less spectacular, like play chess?"

"I'm not a big fan of chess, and besides, I've visited the chess club at the Episcopalian church, and it seems the Anglican Communion isn't going to produce that many more good chess players."

"Whv?"

...

Fr. Elijah sipped his tea. "Can't tell a bishop from a queen."

George coughed, sputtered, tried to keep a straight face, and then tried to steer the conversation back. "When were you given the Weird Al CD?"

"For April Fools' Day. The present is much appreciated."

"I like Weird Al, but why did you play that?"

"Because I was just on the phone."

"And?"

"I've just arranged for you to spend your Spring Break at an Amish paradise."

"Um..."

"Yes?"

"Are you joking?"

"No."

"Are you being *serious*?"

"Yes."

"Are you being sadistic again?"

"Yes, I'm being very sadistic."

"*Why*?"

"I'm not saying."

"I'll be bored to tears."

.....

"Perhaps. But boredom can be good, and not just because it can build character."

"Um... Never mind. I've grown rather fond of computers. I've found out the hard way that I rather need them."

"If it's *that* hard for you to spend a few days without spam, you can use your cell phone to read all the insulting messages telling you that you can't handle money, or that you need snake oil diets, or some part of your body is too small, or you're not man enough for a relationship with a real woman and must content yourself with pixels on a screen. And if you forget leave your cell phone at home, you might be able to borrow one of theirs."

"Amish don't use phones or the Internet. They're 'just technologically impaired;' didn't the song say that?"

"You can ask them; I'm sure one of them would be willing to lend you his cell phone."

"Um..."

"Let's forget about *that*; we can talk about it later if you want. Anyway, after school gets out, come over here with your bag. Someone else is doing some running, and will give you a ride. He's a bit hard of hearing, so he's not much good for chatting in the car, but he's a great guy. But you can gripe to him about how backwards the Amish are."

"Oh, and one more thing... I'm not exactly sending you into bear country, but if one of the workmen were attacked by a bear, I'd be very worried."

"Um..."

"Yes?"

"*That* seems obvious."

"But not for the reason you think. I'll explain why after you return."

There was a knock on the door, and Fr. Elijah opened it.

"George, I'd like to introduce you to Jehu. Jehu, this is George. Oh, George, I'm sorry for being a pest, but could you open your bag and pull out everything inside?"

George looked at Fr. Elijah, rolled his eyes, and began unpacking.

"Which of these items mean anything at all to you? Which have a story, or were expensive, or were a gift?"

George looked at Fr. Elijah, who stood in silence.

"You can put anything that means anything to you in this closet; it will be here when you get back. I'm not sending you to a den of thieves, but..."

George began shuffling and sorting while Fr. Elijah waited. When he was finished, Fr. Elijah said, "How much does your windbreaker mean to you?"

"It's new, but I want to have it with me on the trip."

"Take it off. You have an old sweatshirt or two."

"Sorry, I insist on this one. It doesn't mean that much to me."

Fr. Elijah said, "If you must..."

George said, "I've taken enough out. Have a good evening." He stiffly shook Fr. Elijah's hand. "You better have a good reason for your odd behavior."

Fr. Elijah said, "I can explain later, if you need me to."

George repacked the remaining half of his luggage into the duffle bag, and left with Jehu.

Some days later, Fr. Elijah heard a knock and opened the door. "George, George! How are you? I must hear about your trip. That's a

lovely jeans jacket you have there. Is there a story behind it?"

George gave Fr. Elijah a look that could have been poured on a waffle, and then began quickly taking his coat off.

Fr. Elijah said, "You wouldn't throw a coat at an old man who doesn't have the reflexes to block it... I must hear the story about the coat, though."

George closed his mouth for a second, and then said, "Filthy sadist!"

Fr. Elijah said, "It sounded like you had an interesting trip."

"Did you call and *ask* them to be obnoxious?"

"I did no such thing."

"Honest?"

"I called and asked them to go easy on you."

"You called and asked them to go *easy* on me?"

"Well, you seem to have gotten through the matter without getting any black eyes."

"You call that going *easy*? These guys are pacifists, right?"

"That depends on your idea of a 'pacifist'. If you mean that they don't believe you should use violence to solve conflicts, then yes, they are pacifists."

George said, "*And...*"

"But does that make them wimps? In any sense at all?"

"You *did* say that you would be worried if one of them were attacked by a bear... *Why?*"

"I'd be worried for the bear."



George sunk down into his chair.

"You must have some stories to tell."

"They wanted help raising a barn, and they wouldn't let me do any of the stunts they were doing *without a harness*, but when I went to the outhouse, things shook, and when I opened the door, I was over ten feet in the air."

"Earthquake?"

"Forklift. I don't know why they had one."

"Did you ever think you would sit on such a high throne? I have a suspicion that's higher than even my bishop's throne."

"We are *not* amused."

"You are using the royal 'We,' Your Majesty. Excellent."

"The first day, I didn't take off my shirt at work, but I did take off my windbreaker, and when I left, they nailed it to the beams!"

"Excellent. Is that why Your Majesty has a new, handmade jeans jacket?"

George gave Fr. Elijah another look that could have been poured on a waffle.

"I should maybe have told you... They don't think anything of nailing down any clothing that's taken off as a practical joke. Did you ever get an opportunity to nail down some clothing or something of theirs?"

"Yes, but like a gentleman, I did not."

"That was rude of you."

"You mean they're *offended* at what I didn't do?"

"No; I just said it was rude. They wouldn't be offended. But what I was going to say is that the women have lots of denim, and are very adept at sewing new clothes; it's almost like making a paper airplane for them. Or maybe a little bigger of a deal than that. But you seem to be laboring under a sense that since the Amish are such backwards people, they aren't allowed to have a sense of humor. Were you surprised at the sense of humor they had?"

"Filthy sadist!"

"So did you get bored with nothing interesting to do besides surf the web through your cell phone?"

George said, "Filthy sadist!" Then he paused.

Fr. Elijah sat back and smiled. "George, I believe you have a question."

George hesitated.

"Yes? Ask anything you want."

George hesitated again, and asked, "When can I come back?"

Fr. Elijah just laughed.

George walked around, and had a few chats with Abigail on campus. She started to occupy his thoughts more... and George wondered if he really wanted to dismiss all of the literature of courtly love.

He tried to put this out of his mind the next time he saw Fr. Elijah.

He thought he'd pay a visit, and knocked on Fr. Elijah's door.

Fr. Elijah said, "I'm glad you're here, George. Did you know that a man-eating tiger got loose on the campus of Calix College?"

George stood up and immediately pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "Do the police—"

"Sit down, George, and put your cell phone away, although I must commend your gallant impulse. This was before your time, and besides, George, it starved."

George said, very forcedly, "Ha ha ha."

"Sit down, please. Have you had any further thoughts about your holiday with the Amish?"

"It seems a bit like King Arthur's court. Or at least—"

"Why would that be?"

George sat for a while, and said nothing.

"Are you familiar with Far Side comic strips?"

"Yes."

"I expected so. You like them, right?"

"Yes, but I haven't read them in a while."

"Do you remember the strip with its caption, 'In the days before television'?"

"Can't put my finger on it."

"It shows a family, mesmerized, sitting, lying, and slouching around a blank spot where there isn't a television... I think you've had a visit to the days before television. You didn't even need a time machine."

George sat in silence for a moment.

Fr. Elijah continued, "If you want, I can show you the technique by which the Bible is censored, and how the translators hide the fact that they've taken something out of the text. But do you know the one line that was censored from the movie production of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—the Disney one, I mean?"

"I didn't notice that anything was censored."

"Well, you're almost right. Now it seems to be religion that is censored, Christianity having replaced sex as the publishing world's major taboo, and Disney did not censor one iota of the stuff about Aslan. But there is one line of the book that almost gets into the movie, but then Father Christmas merely makes a smile instead of verbally answering the question. Do you know what that line is?"

"What?"

"Battles are ugly when women fight."

"Um... I can see why they would want to smooth over that."

"Why? Battles are ugly when *men* fight. There is a reason why Orthodox call even necessary fighting 'the *cross* of St. George.' '*Cross*,' as in a heavy, painful burden. I've dealt pastorally with several veterans. They've been through something rough, much rougher than some people's experience with, say, cancer. And it is my unambiguous opinion, and that of every single soldier I've spoken to at length, that battles are ugly... whether or not women fight. Therefore, battles are ugly when women fight, and you'd really have to not understand battle, think it's the same thing as a violent fantasy or watching an action-adventure movie, to deny that battles are ugly when whatever group fights.

"So why make such a big deal over a single line, 'Battles are ugly when women fight?' Why is that one line worth censoring when Disney has the guts to leave Aslan untouched? What's a bigger taboo in the media world than Christ?"

"Umm... I can't put my finger on it."

"Ok, let me ask you... What do you think of the Amish women?"

George tried not to stiffen.

"I'm sorry, George, I meant *besides* that... When you're my age you can forget that for women to dress very modestly can—"

"Then what *did* you mean?"

"Imagine one of those women in a fight."

George tried not to make a face.

Fr. Elijah said, "My understanding is that they're strong and hard workers, probably a lot stronger than many men you know."

George said, "Um..."

"Would you deny that they are strong? And tough, for that matter?"

"No..."

"Does it bother you in the same way to imagine an Amish man having to carry a gun into combat?"

"No. He'd be pretty tough."

"But the women are pretty strong and tough too. Why does it bother you to think about one of them entering combat and fighting?"

George said nothing.

"The women strike you as stronger and tougher than many men that you know. So they're basically masculine?"

"Fr. Elijah... the women there almost left me wondering if I'd met real women before, and the men left me wondering if I'd met real men before. I don't know why."

"I think I have an answer for why the idea of an Amish woman fighting in battle bothers you more than an Amish man fighting in battle."

"What?"

"I've been reading through *Brocéliande*. Let me read you a couple of passages." Fr. Elijah returned momentarily, and flipped through *Brocéliande* before reading:

Sir Galahad he rode, and rode and rode, until saw he a dragon red. Anon the wyrm with its tail struck a third of the trees against the earth that Sir Galahad they might slay. Anon Sir Galahad warred he against the wyrm.

The dragon charged, and anon Sir Galahad his horse trembled, and Galahad gat him down to earth. The dragon laughed at Sir Galahad's spear which brake to-shivers, and breathed fire red as Hell.

Sir Galahad gat him behind his shield, and then charged with his sword, though it should break as rotted wood. Anon the dragon swept him, though his helm saved Sir Galahad his head from the rocks.

Then Sir Galahad, who his strength was as the strength of a thousand because his faith was pure, leapt him and wrestled against the beast. Anon the beast turned and tore, against the knight, until the knight he bled sore. Never was such combat enjoined, but the knight held his choke until the dragon his death met.

Fr. Elijah pulled the bookmark out, and found one of several other bookmarks:

Rose the smoke of incense, of frankincense pure the garden did fill. 'Twere many women present, that hyght Lady Eva, and Lady Elizabeth, and Lady Anna, and Lady Martha, and Queen Mary. Sang they a song, 'twere of one voice, and in that song kept they a garden: in the garden was life. Queen Mary a radiant Child gave suck, and others gave life each in her way.

Verdant was the place of their labour.

Fr. Elijah said, "I think you're missing the point if you're trying to tell if there are differences between men and women by asking who is tougher."

"Why?"

"It's like asking what the differences are between apples and oranges, and then thinking you need to justify it with a measurement. So you may say that apples are bigger than oranges, until you realize that navel oranges are the size of a grapefruit and some varieties of apples don't get that big. So maybe next you measure a sugar content, and you get really excited when you realize that maybe oranges have a measurably lower Ph than apples—a scientist's way of measuring how sour they are—until someone reminds you that crabapples are so tart you wouldn't want to eat them. And all this time you are looking for some precise scientific measurement that will let you scientifically be able to distinguish apples and oranges...

"Is it simply a measure of some difference in physical strength that makes you not like the idea of an Amish woman in battle? If you knew that the women were equally as strong as the men, identically strong, or tough or whatever, would that address..."

George hesitated. "But..."

Fr. Elijah sat silently.

"But," George continued, "the idea of an Amish woman in battle... I know some girls who wanted to go into the military, and it didn't bother me *that* much. And the Amish women *are* pacifists."

"So if those women were gung-ho military enthusiasts, even if they weren't soldiers, then you wouldn't mind—"

"Ok, ok, that's not it. But what is it about the Amish?"

"George, I think you're barking up the wrong tree."

"So what is the right tree? Where *should* I be barking?"

"When people notice a difference with another culture, at least in this culture they seek some 'That's cultural' explanation about the *other* culture."

"So there's something about *this* culture? Ours?"

"George, let me ask you a question. How many times in the Arthurian legends did you see someone invite a man to be open about himself and have the courage to talk about his feelings?"

George was silent.

"We still have the expression, 'wear the pants,' even though it is no longer striking for a woman to wear trousers. It used to be as striking as it would be for a man to wear a skirt."

"Um... you don't approve of women wearing pants?"

"Let's put that question on hold; it doesn't mean the same thing. Abby wears trousers all the time. I wouldn't want her to do otherwise."

"But..."

"George, when have you seen me at the front of the church, leading worship but *not* wearing a skirt?"

"Um..."

"But I wouldn't want you wearing a skirt. The question of wearing a skirt, or pants, or whatever, is like trying to make a rule based on size or tartness or whatever to separate apples from oranges."

"It's the wrong question, then?"

"It's *fundamentally* the wrong question... and it misleads people into thinking that the *right* question must be as impossible to answer as the wrong question. Never mind asking who is allowed to wear pants and who is allowed to wear a skirt. We're both men. I wear a skirt all the time. You shouldn't. And, in either case, there is a way of dressing that is appropriate to men, and another to women, and that propriety runs much deeper than an absolute prohibition on who can wear what. And this is true even *without* getting into the differences between men's and women's jeans, which are subtle enough that you can easily miss them,



but important."

"Like what?"

"For starters, the cloth is hung on men's jeans so that the fabric is like a grid, more specifically with some of the threads running up and down, and others running side to side. On women's clothing, jeans included, the threads run diagonally."

"And this is a deliberately subtle clue for the super-perceptive?"

"It changes how the cloth behaves. It changes the cloth's physical properties. Makes women's clothing run out faster, because it's at just the right angle to wear out more quickly. But it also makes the cloth function as more form-fitting. On men's jeans, the cloth just hangs; it's just there as a covering. On women's jeans, the cloth is there to cover, but it's also there to highlight. This, and the cut, and a few other things, mean that even if men and women are both wearing jeans, there are differences, even if they're subtle enough that you won't notice them. Men's jeans are clothing. Women's jeans are more about adornment, even—or *especially*—if it's something you're not expected to notice."

"So we do have differences?"

"We do have differences despite our best efforts to eradicate them. We want men to be sophisticated enough to cultivate their feminine sides, and women to be strong enough to step up to the plate."

"Um, isn't that loaded language?"

"Very. Or maybe not. But one of the features of Gnosticism is that there keeps popping up an idea that we should work towards androgyny. Including today."

"Like what?"

"Um, you mean besides an educational system that is meant to be unisex and tells boys and girls to work together and be... um... 'mature' enough not to experience a tingle in the relationship? Or dressing unisex?"

Or not having too many activities that are men only or women only? Or not having boys and men together most of the time, and women and girls together? Or having people spend long periods of time in mixed company whether or not it is supposed to be romantic? Or an idea of dating that is courtly love without too many consciously acknowledged expectations about what is obviously the man's role, and what is obviously the women's role? Or—"

"Ok, *ok*, but I think there was more—"

"Yes, there is much more to the Amish, or the Arthurian legends, than what they hold about men and women. But there is also much more *in* what they hold about men and women—all the more when they are telling of Long Ago and Far Away, so that political correctness does not apply to them, so that men who go on great quests can be appreciated even by a woman who thinks men would be better off if they would just learn to talk more about their feelings and in general hold a woman's aspirations of conversational intimacy. And the Amish are 'technologically impaired,' or whatever you want to call them, so they're allowed to have real men and real women *despite* the fact that they are alive today. But the pull of men taught to be men, and women taught to be women, is powerful even if it's politically incorrect, and—"

George interrupted. "Is this why I was trying to keep a straight face when you were asking me to imagine an Amish woman carrying a gun?"

Fr. Elijah thought. "For an Amish man to have to fight in battle would be bad enough. An Amish woman entering a battlefield would be something that would cut against the grain of their life as women. It's not so superficial as the women being dainty and not strong enough to hold a gun."

"The men seem stronger and tougher than the women, though."

"Yes, but is it only a matter of being tougher? Is what you observed simply a matter of the women being tough but the men being tougher?"

George was silent.

Fr. Elijah looked at his watch and winced. "Always when I'm having a good conversation... George, I'm sorry, but I've got someone coming over any minute, and a bit of preparation. Sorry..."

George picked up his belongings, and Fr. Elijah blessed him on his way out. Then George stepped out, and Fr. Elijah momentarily opened the door. "Oh, and by the way, George, I have some more of that paper, if you want to write her a love note." He closed the door.

George scurried away, hoping that Fr. Elijah hadn't seen him blush.

It was not much later that April Fool's Day came, falling on a Sunday. George did not feel brave, and paid a visit to Bedside Baptist. The days seemed to pass quickly with Abigail in the picture.

On Earth Day, George listened and was amazed at how many references to Creation he heard in the liturgy—not just the reference to "his mother, the earth," but how plants and trees, rocks, stars, and seas, formed the warp and woof by which the Orthodox Church praised her Lord. The liturgy left him wishing Fr. Elijah would put off his preaching and say something to celebrate earth day...

Fr. Elijah stood up.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today is Earth Day, and I thought that that would provide an excellent basis for my preaching today. The very opening chapters of Genesis are not about man alone but man and the whole Creation. There are some very interesting suggestions people have made that when Genesis says that we were told not only to "be fruitful and multiply," but "fill the earth and subdue it," the word translated "subdue" is very gentle, almost an embrace, as a mother nurtures a child. Which is a very lovely image, but is absolute hogwash.

The word translated "subdue" is the word Christ uses for exactly what Christians must not do by "lording their authority" over other Christians as the heathen do. The book of Genesis tells of this

beautiful Creation and then has God charge us with a charge that could much better be translated, "trample it under foot." And what better day than Earth Day than to talk about why we should trample the earth under foot, told to us in a text that is resplendent with natural beauty?

Many people today call the earth 'Gaia', and that is well and good. Today one calls a man 'Mr.' and a woman 'Miss' or 'Ms.' or 'Mrs.' if there is no other honorific, and as much as adults all bear that title, in Latin every woman bears then name of 'Gaia' and every man bears the name of 'Gaius.' And if we are speaking of the earth, it is well and proper to call her Gaia; only someone who understands neither men nor women would think of her as sexless!

If you are dealing with a horse, for instance, it helps to keep in mind that they are prey animals with a lot of fear. Never mind that they're much bigger than you; they're afraid of you, as you would be afraid of a rat, and need to be treated like a small child. But you can only deal with a horse gently after it is broken and after you have made it clear that it is you holding the reins and not the horse. You need to be able to treat a horse like a little child if you are to handle them... but if you spoil it, and fail to establish your authority, you have a terrified small child that is stronger than an Olympic athlete. You *do* need to be gentle with a horse, but it is a gentleness that holds the reins, with you in charge.

There are a number of fundamental difficulties we face about being in harmony with nature, and one of the chief ones is that we are trying to be in harmony with nature the *wrong* way. We are trying to take our cue from our mother the earth, perhaps instead of taking our cue from technology. And it is excellent to treat Gaia gently, and perhaps technology is in fact quite a terrible place to take our cue from, and something else we absolutely need to trample under foot, but there is something mistaken about the rider taking his cue from the horse. In Genesis we are called to rule material Creation as its head: we are to give it its cue, rather than following. Perhaps you have seen the *Far Side* cartoon that says, "When

imprinting studies go awry" and shows a scientist last in line with ducklings follow a mother duck... which is very funny, but not a recipe for a life well lived. We are made from the same clay as horse and herb, but unless we are deeply sunk into the even worse cues we will take from technology when we fail to rule it, we do not serve our best interests—or the earth's—when we ask her to dance and expect her to be our lead.

But enough of what is politically incorrect in the West, where we say that men should not lead and mean, in both senses, that humans should not lead the rest of Creation and that males should not lead females. I could belabor why both of those are wrong, but I would like to dig deeper, deeper even than saying that lordship applies to every one of us even if we are all "a man under authority," *including* me.

Patristic exegesis of the rule over Creation is first and foremost of a rule over our passions and over ourselves. We are not fit to lead others or Creation if we have not even learned to lead ourselves; "better is a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." If you are following a Western model, then you may be thinking of a big enterprise for us to start ruling Creation which is really beside the point. If you save yourself through ascetical mastery, ten thousand will be saved around you. Never mind that this is mystical; it is a matter of "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you." You become a leader, and a man, not by ruling over others, but by ruling over yourself.

We are in Great Lent now, the central season of the entire Orthodox year, not because it is about ruling others or about ruling Creation—it isn't—but because it is about ruling ourselves. We are not to seek a larger kingdom to rule outside ourselves; we are to turn our attention to the kingdom within, and rule it, and God will add a larger kingdom outside if we are ready. The first, foremost, and last of places for us to exercise lordship is in ourselves, and our rule over the Creation is but an image of our rule over ourselves, impressive as the outer dominion may be.

We bear the royal bloodline of Lord Adam and Lady Eve, and we are to be transformed into the image of Christ. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God, with all that that means for our rule over ourselves.

In the Name of the Lord and Father, and of the Son who is Lord, and of the Heavenly King, who is the Holy Ghost, Amen.

After his Sunday dinner, George thought it would be a good time to wander in the wood.

In the forest, he found himself by a babbling brook, with the sound of a waterfall not far off. George brushed off a fallen mossy log and sat down to catch his breath.

George began listening to the birdsong, and it almost seemed he could tell a pattern. Then two warm hands covered his eyes.

George tried to look up, remembered his eyes were covered, and brought his own hands up to his face, briefly touching a small, soft pair of hands. Then he said, "It's definitely a man..."

Then George turned. Abigail was sticking out her tongue.

Abigail's dress was a rich, deep, deep red, the color of humble earth seen through a ruby. A pair of bare white feet peeked out from beneath a long flowing skirt, a wide, golden straw hat sat atop her locks, and dark, intricate knotwork lay across her heart.

George looked down at his own feet and saw his own worn combat boots, before looking at Abigail's face. She smiled and said, "Boo!"

George said, "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking a walk, as I do from time to time."

"Must be pretty rare for you, if this is the first time I've seen you."

"You're in the woods more often than I am?"

A squirrel darted out, climbed across Abigail's foot, and scurried away.

George asked, "It wasn't afraid of you?"

"Most of them aren't, at least not that much of the time."

George looked at her, and she said, "It's not such a big deal, really. Read any good books lately?"

"No, and—ooh, I told Fr. Elijah I'd read C.S. Lewis, something or other about 'glory.' I need to get back to him."

"Maybe it's a box you're not meant to open, at least not yet... if I know Grandpa, he's probably forgotten about it completely."

"But I should—"

"You should leave it a closed box, if anything. How are you?"

George looked at the forest—how like a garden it looked—and then Abigail. He was at something of a loss for words. He looked down at her alabaster feet, and then her face. "Having a good day."

She smiled, and a sparrow flew between them. "There's a hawk in here somewhere, only it's hard to find. You can spend a lot of time exploring this forest. I'm having a good day, too."

George sat for a while, trying to think of something to say, and Abigail said, "You're being pretty quiet now."

George said, "I've been looking at majoring in math."

Abigail said, "Um..."

"You know how to tell if a mathematician is an extravert?"

"Nope."

George looked down and said, "He looks at *your* feet when they're talking to you."

Abigail giggled. "Have you heard my Grandpappy's theory on how PMS got its name?"

George said, "Um..."

She giggled again. "Something about 'Mad Cow Disease' being taken."

George stiffened, and looked for something to say.

Abigail said, "Stop it, George. Just stop it. Don't you get it? Don't you stand and listen or sing the hymn where the the Mother of God is honored as the Ewe that bore the Lamb of God and the Heifer that bore the Unblemished Calf?"

George's mind raced. "I suppose that if, in the same breath, Christ is called—"

Abigail interrupted. "Next time you're in Church, listen, really listen, as the Mother of God is honored, then listen as Christ our God is worshiped. There's a difference. Don't try to analyze it or even put your finger on it. Just listen, and... George, do you understand women? At all?"

George looked for something to say, but found nothing.

A dark cloud blew across the sky, and cold rain began to fall more heavily until it poured.

George said, "May I lend you my jacket?"

Abigail said, "I'm fine."

The rain grew colder, and began to pelt. George and Abigail both rose and began scurrying towards campus. George took off his jacket and started to place it around Abigail's shoulders.

Abigail said "I don't—"



Abigail said, "I don't

George looked down and said, "I'm wearing boots and you have bare feet," and wrapped his jacket around her shoulders. Then a gust of wind tore at Abigail's hat, but George caught it.

Then they ran back, with George shivering under his threadbare T-shirt. When they got back, he went to his dorm and she to hers. George called Abigail and confirmed she was OK, took three long, hot showers, and spent the rest of the evening sinking into a lounge chair in his bathrobe, sipping cocoa, and thinking.

Tuesday evening, George found time to visit Fr. Elijah. He wanted to talk about another subject. Definitely another subject.

"Fr. Elijah, are you busy?"

"I hope not... come in."

"After all this, I still want the Holy Grail."

"Excellent thing, my son... the chief point of life is to search for the Holy Grail."

"But will I find it? I mean... I'm not sure what I mean."

"May I show you something old?"

"As far as material age goes, it is much older than the Holy Grail."

The old man opened a desk drawer, and fished out a small box.

"I thought this might interest you," he said, and took something out of the box, and placed it in George's hand.

George looked the item over. It looked like a piece of bark, not much larger than a pebble, and yet it seemed heavy for a piece of bark. "Is this stone or wood? I can't tell which it is."

"Is it stone or wood? In fact, it is petrified wood... from the Oak of Membré."

MAMBRE.

"Oak of Mambre? Should I have heard of it before?"

"You probably have, and if you can't remember it, there is something you're missing."

"What is the Oak of Mambre?"

"I'll tell you in a bit. When you grasp the Oak of Mambre, you hold the Holy Grail."

"How?"

"The Oak of Mambre is older than any of the civilizations you know; for that matter, it might be older than the practice of writing. Do you know about Abraham?"

"The one Paul calls the father of all who believe?"

"Yes, that Abraham. The Bible tells how Abraham met three men who came to him, and showed the most lavish hospitality, giving them the costliest meal he could have given. And it was then that the men promised the impossible. It is clear enough later that these men were in fact angels, were in fact God.

"From the West, you may not know that even if we Orthodox are big on icons, it's fingernails to a chalkboard when Orthodox see the Father portrayed as the proverbial old man with a beard. Christ may be portrayed because of his incarnation; the same is not true of the invisible Father, who is not and never will be incarnate. Icons of the Father have been fundamentally rejected, but there was one exception. From ancient times there has been an icon of Abraham's hospitality to the three men, or three angels, and centuries ago one iconographer showed something deeper: it is the same three men or angels, but instead of a table with a lamb as in the old version of the icon, there is an icon with a chalice atop an altar. In both the old and the new form of the icon, the Oak of Mambre is in the back, and it is this same oak for which I have shown you a fragment."

"Is it holy because it is old?"

"Being old does not make a thing holier. The pebbles in your yard are of stone ages older than the oldest relic. Though they are, admittedly, part of the earth which received Christ's blood on the cross, and which Bulgakov rightly calls the Holy Grail.

"A thing is kept and preserved because it is holy, and if people will try to keep a holy thing for a long time, it will probably be old to most of the people who see it. Same reason most of the people who have seen the Liberty Bell saw it when it was old because people have been keeping it for a long time, much longer than the time when it was new, so most of the people who have seen, or will see, the Liberty Bell, see it as an old treasure. But back to holy things: a holy thing is, if anything, timeless: when there arose a great evil in Russia and Marx's doctrine helped people try to make paradise and caused a deep, deep river of blood to flow, the communists in the Orthodox heartland of Russia made martyrs, and in that torrential river of blood made more Orthodox martyrs than the rest of history put together. God will preserve saints' relics from that, and it may be that there are more relics from the past century than all centuries before. And they are not the less holy because they are new. But let us return to the Oak of Mambre and why, if you grasp it, you hold the Holy Grail."

"Ok. Why is that?"

"The Church has decided that the only legitimate way to portray an icon of the Trinity is in the hospitality of Abraham. And the Icon of the Holy Trinity is the deepest icon of the Holy Grail—deeper even than an icon that I can show you that shows the Mother of God as a chalice holding her Son. Where is the Holy Grail in this icon?"

"Is it that little thing in the center?"

"In part. Where else is it?"

George looked long and hard, seemed to almost catch something, before it vanished from his face.

"There are different interpretations," Fr. Elijah said, "and the icon conceals things; even the angel is a protecting veil to a reality that cannot be seen. But in the layers of this icon, the deepest glimpse sees the Father on the left, the Spirit on the right, and the Son in blood red clothes in the center, encased as in a chalice, showing the reality in Heaven for which even the Holy Grail is merely a shadow."

George turned the stone over in his hand with awe, closed his eyes, and then looked at the relic he held in his hand. "So I am holding the Holy Grail."

Fr. Elijah said, "Yes, if you look on it with enlightened eyes. Where else do you meet the Holy Grail?"

"In every person I meet?"

"'Tis hard to answer better than that. When you become Orthodox, you will receive the Eucharist and kiss the chalice, and, perhaps, find that the Holy Grail is achieved not by an unearthly isolated hero, but by a community in common things."

"But why do people kiss the Holy Grail? I mean the chalice?"

"If you call it the Holy Grail, even if your tongue slips, you may be understanding it. The Western view is that there is one original chalice and the others are separate sorts of things; in Orthodoxy, what is the same between the Holy Grail and 'another' chalice runs infinitely deeper than what separates them; the 'real' thing is that they are the same."

"But why the kiss?"

"Let me ask you a question. Do you think a kiss has more to do with worship, or with mental calculations?"

"Does it have to do with either?"

"You haven't read the Bible in Greek."

"What does the Greek Bible have to do with it?"

"Quite a lot, but it will take me a bit to explain why. But there is a deep tie.

"The main word for reverence or worship, in the Greek Bible, literally means to kiss. Part of what you'll keep coming to again and again is that the West understands the mind as the thing that calculates, and the East understands the mind as what knows, and is enlightened, because it tastes and even more deeply because it worships. I don't know how to put this clearly, in terms that will make sense to someone who does not know the spiritual realities involved. There is a false kiss—I dare say, the kiss of Judas or a kiss that is hollow like the kiss of Judas—that is nothing more than a calculated act. But there is also a kiss that has something to do with worship, and it is no error that Orthodoxy has things 'with love and kisses.' We embrace icons, crosses, holy books, each other with reverence that includes a kiss. And rightly done, such kisses are connected to worship."

"I still don't understand why."

"Let me make a momentary detour; I'll get back in a moment. Old texts can be at once something we genuinely experience a deep connection to, and something treacherously unfaithful to our assumptions. What would you say, for instance, that the medieval Scholastics are talking about when they use the word that is usually translated, 'intellect'?"

"I try to keep my mind free of preconceptions, especially when dealing with something unfamiliar."

"So you'd be open to anything they'd say about the intellect's ability to draw logical conclusions from one thing to another?"

"They can let the intellect draw conclusions however they want to."

"But here's the thing. They *don't*. It is a fundamental error to read 'intellect' as 'the thing that reasons by logical deduction. Saying that the 'intellect' is what makes deductions by reasoning from one thing by another is like saying that an object's height is what you measure with a

bathroom scale, or that its weight is measurable with a ruler. It's a fundamental error; the intellect is precisely what does not reason from premises to conclusions."

"Then what is the intellect?"

"I usually don't use the term 'intellect' for it; the closest English equivalent I can think of is 'spiritual eye'. But even that misses what exactly this spiritual eye connects with. And this spiritual eye was known to the Greek Fathers no less than the Latin scholastics; if anything, the Greek Fathers were more attuned to it. Scholastic theology is an exercise, to a large degree, of that which reasons; the theology of the Fathers comes from another place. The spiritual eye is that which connects with spiritual realities, that which worships above all—and if you want a good, short definition for what 'intellect' means besides 'what IQ is supposed to measure,' use the definition 'where one meets God.' If reasoning deduces what you may not see yet, the spiritual eye *sees*, and knows by what it can see, not by what it can pull from other things it already has. This reasoning from one thing shines like the sun in Western Scholasticism."

"And that's something you don't have in Orthodoxy?"

"We do have it. But reasoning shines like the *moon*: it reflects the light of the sun in each of us, the sun of our mind's spiritual eye. It plays more of a supporting role."

"And what does all of this have to do with your ritual kiss?"

"There was an awful video I heard was shown in one of your college's psychology classes; I don't know if you've seen it. It was talking about one psychological theory, and discussed how reward and such could be used to reduce autistic behaviors. And it showed a scientist, or psychologist, or something, who was patiently training a little girl to not do whatever he was trying to stop her from doing, and the girl lit up when he gave her a kiss. And then, along with a fake-sounding Mommy-ese talking in a high-pitched voice which I *assure* you was not spontaneous, he started to use almost forced kisses to, well..."

George cut in "Manipulate her?"

George Catlin: Manipulate Her.

"Yes, you found the word I was looking for. The one time I heard Abigail talking about that video, she said there was a bit of bristling going though the class; the students were uncomfortable with something about that video and its one more mere technique, a mere *tool*, for changing a little girl's behavior."

"Is the spiritual eye, or whatever, spontaneous? Is it about spontaneity?"

"I'll have to think about that... I'm not sure I've seriously thought about whether the spiritual eye is spontaneous. But spontaneity is not the issue here. The point has to do with what place a kiss should come from if it is not to be hollow. Have you noticed that none of the icons I've showed you have a signature?"

"Because the iconographers are not supposed to be what we think of in the West as artists, with their own signature style and their big egos?"

"A little bit. Iconography is art, and artistry and talent do mean anything: the iconographer is not a cog in a machine—and may be doing something much bigger than trying to use art supplies for self-expression. There is something self-effacing about iconography—something very self-effacing—but you find that when you bow down and efface yourself, it is you doing something much bigger than otherwise. Writing icons is a form of prayer, a spiritual exercise, and it is said—just like we speak of 'writing' icons rather than 'painting' them—that it is inadequate for an iconographer to sign the icon, because the icon is written, not merely by the iconographer's hand, but by his his spiritual eye. It is ever much more than a merely material process, and when you become Orthodox you may sense icons that have spiritual depth and icons that let you see no further than the wood, and if you receive this gift, you will be responding to the spiritual process out of which the icon arose."

"I have sensed something... the icons still look like awkward pictures to me, but I'm starting to find something more."

"That is good. And your mouth—with which you breathe in your

spirit, and show the reason of speech, and will receive the Eucharist—is not that *by* which you may give a kiss; it is that *through* which you may give the kiss that comes from and to some extent is the embrace of your spiritual eye. That's when a kiss is furthest from the hollow kiss that Judas gave. The knowledge of the spiritual eye is something I have discussed as sight, but in the ancient world all people recognized something touch-y about all the five senses, not just one. And this knowledge and drinking are exemplars of each other, draughts from the same fountain, and it is not an accident that 'know' has a certain sense in the Bible between, for instance, Adam and Eve: the spiritual eye knows by drinking in, and it is a fundamental error to think that the holy kiss has nothing to do with knowledge."

"This sounds like a fairy tale."

"Maybe you know your fairy tales, and know that there is something magic about a kiss. As one scholar put it, examples of the kiss as a means of making and breaking enchantments have been found in the folklore of almost every culture in the Western world. Orthodoxy has something more than this enchantment. There is a spiritual mingling, and even the Eucharist is understood as a kiss, and a kiss that embraces others: in the Eucharist, the body of Christ is offered up, including a token of bread for every parishioner—before being distributed. Have you not noticed that the best bishops and the most devout of the Orthodox, give the best kisses? But let me step back a bit.

"The difference in understanding symbol is one of the biggest differences between East and West. In the West, at least in its modern forms, a symbol is a detached and somewhat arbitrary representation. In the East a symbol is connected, cut from the same cloth as it were. The difference between Orthodoxy and various Protestant schools is not whether the Eucharist is a symbol, but what that means—that the Eucharist is an arbitrarily detached token, connected only in the viewer's mind, or whether it is connected and in fact the same on a real level.

"We are made in the image of God, which means that how you treat others is inseparable from how you treat God: you treat God with respect, love, or contempt as you meet him in the person of others. And the things



that we reverently kiss in Orthodoxy are all connected with God. We show our reverence to God in how we treat them. And if a person is being transformed according to the likeness of Christ, then it is fitting to reverently kiss that person and show respect for the Lord.

"To give the holy kiss rightly is a microcosm of faith and community. You cannot do it alone, nor can you do it apart from worship. If you look at the things that fit together in a fitting kiss, you have love, God, your neighbor... there are a great many actions that are listed in the Bible, and many of them are holy actions, but only one is called holy: the holy kiss. If you grasp the Holy Grail in your heart, and you grasp this kiss in its full sense, you will know that the sacred kiss in which our souls are mingled is the Sign of the Grail. It is the eighth sacrament."

George was silent for a long time. "I don't think I know enough to be Orthodox."

Fr. Elijah said, "Join the club! I know *I* don't know enough."

"But you're a priest!"

"And you cannot become Orthodox without entering the royal priesthood. You aren't ready to be Orthodox just because you know a certain amount; you're ready when you're ready for the responsibility, like getting married, or getting a job, or any other of a number of things. You are ready when you are ready to take the responsibility to return the Creation as an offering to God and shoulder a priestly office. And, in your case, I might add, when you enter the great City and Castle called the Church, and are ready for the Sign of the Grail."

"All I know now is my own unworthiness."

"Good. You're growing! Ponder your unworthiness and give it to God. Do you want to take *Brocéliande* back now?"

George gladly took the book back. He returned to his room, and some time later, George began reading:

The hermit spoke. "Listen as I tell the history of Saint George.

"The King wept sore. 'The land is weeping, the land itself weeps. The dragon hath devoured every damsel of the land, every last one, and now it seeketh mine own. I bewail the death of my joy and my daughter.'

"Then Saint George said, 'By my faith I will protect her and destroy this fiend,' and Saint George prayed and gat him his destrier and armed him and fewtered his spear and rode out and faced the sea.

"And the dragon arose from the sea and his deeps. And venom were in the wyrm his heart, and the grievous stench of death stank all round.

"Then the serpent charged upon Saint George the ever victorious knight, and the dragon breathed fire which brake and were quenched upon Saint George his shield, a grand cross gules upon a field or.

"Then Saint George made him the Sign of the Cross.

"Then Saint George smote the dragon, the great paladin his great spear dove into the dragon his mouth and dolve far beyond that insatiate devouring maw, until the dragon his head were riven asunder from the dragon his body trampled by Saint George his horse. And Saint George hurled the wyrm his head into the dark thrice cursed valley far outside of the castle.

"That day the King and the whole castle made such merriment as had never been since, for we do not know merriment today. There were jugglers and jesters and a table full filled, and before evensong the King gave George the hand of the King his daughter. That were the gayest of all."

The knight asked the hermit, "Why speakest thou me of this history?"

The hermit spake unto him and answered, "Sir knight, thou hast given me not thine name. What be it?"

"Thou entreatest of me my name? Thou askest what none hath asked of me aforetimes. My name is called Sir Perceval. And now I ask of thee of what I have asked not aforetimes. Had Saint George heard tell of whom doth the Grail serve?"

George slowly closed the book, and put it on a shelf. He momentarily wondered why he treated *Brocéliande* as something to read alone. There was something that seemed just out of his reach.

And then George realized something deep, deep inside himself.

Then it was Holy Week.

Or at least George wanted it to be holy week for him, too.

George found himself standing in Church, in the holiest of surroundings, and struggling to pray. Memories arose; painful memories of stinging things done by those he loved. Voluptuous images sometimes followed. He struggled to pray, but his mind remained locked in earthly struggles. His body ached in the long services: there were icons, chanting, and incense without, and struggles within. He wanted to rest in worship, and he couldn't.

In his mind, he remembered a moment when a beggar had come to him, and wouldn't stop pleading no matter how much he annoyed George. The image filled his mind, and George was startled when he turned and saw the beggar's face on the wall. Why was that?

George was looking at an icon of Christ.

He had fallen short, and not only in seeing that beggar as nothing but an annoyance. Did George really have no common bond with that beggar?

For that matter, did George have no common bond with the civilization that he disdained, the civilization that included everybody he knew from the beggar to his parents, the civilization that gave him everything from his clothing to his language? Was it there for no other

purpose than for him to criticize and feel superior to?

Fr. Elijah, moving amongst the congregation, swung the censer before George in veneration.

George barely noticed that some of these thoughts were giving way, and he was aware, with almost a painful sharpness, of something else.

George mulled over Fr Elijah's words about hollow kisses, and then started to see how hollow *George* was.

Unworthy thought he felt, George stood with growing awe and wonder, waiting until Great and Holy Thursday, the one day in holy week where wine was allowed. "Ordinary" wine was allowed, held in honor and in remembrance of the Last Supper, when wine became the blood of Christ and the eucharistic chalice was forever given to men. This day, if anything, was to George the feast of the Holy Grail.

And so he stood entranced, as if he were entering from afar. He watched the Last Supper as here and now, as Fr. Elijah stood "in the flame" before the altar, and then listened as he read the Gospel according to St. John the Evangelist, of the night when Christ loved his disciples to the last, and prayed out from the glory he shared with the Father before the worlds had begun.

And Fr. Elijah read and read, reading until George's body ached from standing.

Then someone walked over to twelve unlit candles, and lit one. The first.

George's heart sank. There were eleven candles still to go.

The readings continued, and became shorter, until the twelve candles were lit. George began to feel anger at the unending readings—until he heard Christ's words from the garden of Gethsemane: "What, could you not watch with me one hour?" Who were those words spoken to?

And then, when the readings had run their course, the liturgy followed—at once unlike an intimate gathering in an upper room in external appearance, but yet like the place that feels like home though nothing on the outside resembles the home. George thought for a moment about a historical reconstruction of the Last Supper pursued through academic rigor in archaeology... and then realized he needed no such thing. He was watching the Last Supper all around him, and in the words of Fr. Elijah's remark, "You didn't even need a time machine."

Or was this liturgy a spiritual time machine? Certainly time flowed in the most interesting ways, now quickly, now slowly, swirling about in eddies... there was something George could not put his finger on, but he understood for a moment what could make a person imagine a way to turn back time.

And so George found himself almost surprised when Fr. Elijah said, "He gave it to his holy disciples and apostles, saying, 'Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you, for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Then the faithful sealed this with their, "Amen."

Then Fr. Elijah said, "Likewise, he took the cup of the fruit of the vine, and having mingled it, offering thanks, blessing, and sanctifying it, he gave it to his holy disciples and apostles, saying, 'Drink of this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.'"

The disciples around him sealed this, with their, "Amen."

George looked in wonder at the chalice that was raised. He thought, "This is it. This is the Holy Grail, forever given, that belongs to Christ's disciples."

As the liturgy continued, and Fr. Elijah proclaimed the Holy Gifts, the people continued to seal the Gifts with their "Amen," and George watched as they received from the chalice, and kissed the chalice in reverence, and (though George paid this little attention) Fr. Elijah's hand.

George found himself basking in the glow of that long moment for as

the liturgy continued and Fr. Elijah anointed those around him that they may be healed in soul and body.

As he walked home, he thought, "I have seen the Holy Grail. It has been under my nose. Very soon I will be one of those who share it, one of those the Holy Grail belongs to."

When George got home, he slept as peacefully as he slept in ages.

Then George entered the Church on Great and Holy Friday.

The whole service moved slowly, felt like something great but alien that slipped through George's fingers no matter what he did to grasp it. Around him were some who were silent, some who were singing, and some who were weeping. A great cross was brought out, and a great icon of Christ hung on it with nails.

And then something clicked in George's heart.

Some years before, he had been at a martial arts demonstration and saw a fifth degree black belt standing like a picturesque statue, looking quaint and exotic, holding a beautiful pair of fans. And then, for an instant, there was a flurry of motion as he was attacked by six other black belts with swords. And then, an instant later, George saw a fifth degree black belt standing like a picturesque statue, looking quaint and exotic, holding a beautiful pair of fans, and all around him were six other black belts with swords, on the ground, crying.

That had for long been the greatest display of power George had seen.

Now something was at the back of his mind.

Here was a new image of strength.

Were they the same?

Were they different?

Was the true nature of strength strength in weakness?

was the true nature of strength, strength in weakness:

The fifth degree black belt showed strength behind apparent weakness—or at least what looked like weakness to an outsider like George; he had no idea what it would look like to someone who was not a barbarian like him. To him, the martial arts demonstration seemed to show strength, if a show was needed, and a strength great and powerful enough to vastly understate itself. And the One before him on the cross showed more of the same... or was that really true?

Was it?

Something about that did not sit well.

Inside George's heart flashed an icon that had been on his mind—of a Man, his head bent, a purple robe about his wounded body. The robe was royal purple to mock the "pretender," his hands were bound, and a crown of thorns rested atop his bent head.

Atop the icon was an inscription in Greek and in English:

Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΗΣ ΔΟΞΗΣ

THE KING OF GLORY

George raised his eyes to the crucified God.

This was another kind of strength.

George began to weep.

This was the strength that prayed, if there was any way, that the cup might pass from him.

This was the strength that prayed, "Thy will be done."

This was the strength that drank the cup to the dregs, and shattered it forever.

This was

THE KING OF GLORY  
THE KING OF KINGS  
THE LORD OF LORDS  
THE GOD OF GODS  
THE LION OF JUDAH  
THE FIRSTBORN OF THE DEAD  
THE RESURRECTION AND ETERNAL LIFE  
THE NEW MAN AND THE LAST ADAM  
THE UNCREATED GOD  
THE DIVINE, ORDERING WISDOM  
THROUGH WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE  
BY WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE  
IN WHOM ALL THINGS CONSIST  
THE LORD OF THE CHURCH AND ALL CREATION  
THE BRIDEGROOM OF THE CHURCH AND ALL CREATION

Had George ever known what it was to worship?

George stood in awe of the one who was, in truth, the Holy Grail...  
or rather, the one for whom the Holy Grail was but a shadow.

And who was George next to such holiness and power?

Unclean and defiled.

When George had thought about going to his first confession, it had looked to him like the least attractive part of the picture of becoming Orthodox. But now, even if he knew even more dread, he wanted, not so much to be unburdened for himself, but to turn himself in and render what was due.

He didn't just think he needed to. He simply knew that it was something that he owed with from the core of his being.

What evil had he not practiced?

He prayed aloud, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and then in spirit and body fell prostrate before his God and



Lord.

George returned home, mindful of his sin, but ever so much more mindful of the greatness of the Lord and Savior.

He spent Saturday in the terrifying struggle to repent of his sin, to face his sin and write the spiritual blank check that he feared in the unconditional surrender of rejecting sin.

When he confessed his sin, Fr. Elijah blessed him, said, "I'm sorry I can't give you the sacramental absolution yet—that will follow your chrismation," and then said, "Welcome home, son. Keep repenting."

And then the vigil was upon them.

It began with George standing in the center of the action as he stood before the congregation and, answering Fr. Elijah, renounced the Devil and all his works, rejecting sin, schism, and heresy, and vowed himself to Christ as a member of the Orthodox Church.

Then Fr. Elijah anointed George with sacred chrism, chrismating him with the fragrant oil of anointing that sealed George as a little Christ, as spiritual prophet, priest, and king, as one of the faithful in the Orthodox Church. This oil of spiritual blessing that worked in him more deeply even as it was wiped away from his skin—the emblem of the Spirit that penetrated like a sword. Fr. Elijah absolved George of his sins, and then the newly illumined servant of God George, stood before the congregation.

Then George faded into the background while the vigil unfolded, and he could never remember all of it—only that it seemed like a treasurehouse from which more and more wondrous treasure was brought forth. George remembered later the incense, the chant of "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death," the call of "Christ is risen!" and its answer, "He is risen indeed!", repeated triumphantly, in English, in Slavonic, in Arabic, in Spanish... and most of all George remembered the faces around them. There was something more deeply radiant and beautiful than that of someone who had won millions of dollars. The vigil lasted for hours but though George ached he barely

condemns. The vigil lasted for hours, but though George ached, he barely minded—he almost wished it would last for hours more.

When it was time for the homily, Fr. Elijah stood up, his face radiant, and read the age-old homily of St. John Chrysostom, read at all kinds of Orthodox parishes on Pascha for ages:

If any man be devout and loveth God,  
Let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast!  
If any man be a wise servant,  
Let him rejoicing enter into the joy of his Lord.

If any have labored long in fasting,  
Let him now receive his recompense.  
If any have wrought from the first hour,  
Let him today receive his just reward.  
If any have come at the third hour,  
Let him with thankfulness keep the feast.  
If any have arrived at the sixth hour,  
Let him have no misgivings;  
Because he shall in nowise be deprived therefore.  
If any have delayed until the ninth hour,  
Let him draw near, fearing nothing.  
And if any have tarried even until the eleventh hour,  
Let him, also, be not alarmed at his tardiness.

For the Lord, who is jealous of his honor,  
Will accept the last even as the first.  
He giveth rest unto him who cometh at the eleventh hour,  
Even as unto him who hath wrought from the first hour.  
And He showeth mercy upon the last,  
And careth for the first;  
And to the one He giveth,  
And upon the other He bestoweth gifts.  
And He both accepteth the deeds,  
And welcometh the intention,  
And honoureth the acts and praises the offering.

Wherefore, enter ye all into the joy of your Lord;

Receive your reward,  
Both the first, and likewise the second.  
You rich and poor together, hold high festival!  
You sober and you heedless, honor the day!  
Rejoice today, both you who have fasted  
And you who have disregarded the fast.  
The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously.  
The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away.  
Enjoy ye all the feast of faith:  
Receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness.

Let no one bewail his poverty,  
For the universal Kingdom has been revealed.  
Let no one weep for his iniquities,  
For pardon has shown forth from the grave.  
Let no one fear death,  
For the Saviour's death has set us free.  
He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it.

By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive.  
He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.  
And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry:  
Hell, said he, was embittered  
When it encountered Thee in the lower regions.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.  
It was embittered, for it was mocked.  
It was embittered, for it was slain.  
It was embittered, for it was overthrown.  
It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.  
It took a body, and met God face to face.  
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.  
It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!

Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!  
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!  
Christ is risen, and life reigns!  
Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave.  
For Christ, being risen from the dead,  
Is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion  
Unto ages of ages.

Amen.

And then the prayers moved very quickly—joyously—radiantly—and the Eucharist was served, George being called up first among the faithful to receive it.

Then the newly illumined servant George received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

And George kissed Fr. Elijah's hand and the chalice,  
forgetting it was the Holy Grail.

And when the liturgy finished, Fr. Elijah announced to the congregation, "You may kiss the convert."

Then the feast began,  
a faint fragrance of frankincense flowed,  
and a fragrant fragrance of flowers flowed.

Fr. Elijah spoke a blessing,  
over a table piled high with finest meats  
and puddings  
and every good thing,

and the fruit of the vine poured out.

Every door and every window was opened,  
and the wind blew where it willed,  
and the wind blew where it pleased,  
and George settled in to his home,  
grateful to God.

Then someone told a Russian folktale,  
and someone began singing,  
and people began dancing,  
and a little boy chased a little girl,  
clutching a flower.

And men and women,  
children,  
young and old,  
saluted George with a kiss,  
every last one  
of his brethren.

And the crystalline light  
of a sapphire sky  
blew through the window,  
and angels danced,

and saints below cracked red Pascha eggs,  
red in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene,  
a holy grail,  
and George laughed,  
and wanted to weep,  
for joy.

Then George and Abigail talked long.

George could never remember now long the celebration seemed to last. It seemed that he had found a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed, filled with every kind of wonder, at once Heaven and home, at once chalice and vine, maiden and mother, ancient and alive. It was the family George had forever wanted to enter.

Then George kissed Abigail—a long, full kiss—and absolutely nothing about it was hollow.

When he stepped back, Fr. Elijah tapped him on the shoulder. "By the way, George... I know this is down the road, but let me know when you two get engaged. I'd be happy to do your wedding."

George looked at Abigail, paused, and said, "Abigail, do you see how the candlelight glistens off your Grandpappy's bald spot? Isn't it romantic?"

Fr. Elijah and Abigail turned to each other and said, "It's about time!"

Then Fr. Elijah said, "Welcome to the Castle of the Saints, George. Welcome home."

