

Amarathine with Other Short Stories and Poems

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Published by Reid A. Peterson, 2023.

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AMARATHINE WITH OTHER SHORT STORIES AND POEMS

First edition. July 8, 2023.

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Written by Arron Steep.

Winter Break

Once yonder snowy
wasteland thawed
beneath it lay most
verdant scene
Springtime promise
midst the sod
forthcoming bud
defies the fiend
The deep blue of
a darkened sky
held the eve in
bold solemnity
The burning orange
glow of the lights
on empty streets
welcome me home
Midnight air is
cold to breath
memories distant
my fingers freeze
Resonance of
hollow passions
delay my wanted
dreams

Threshold of Dawn

Cheerful sunlight filtered through the canopy, dancing across the underbrush. Broad, verdant leaves waved in tandem as the sky's cool breath aroused them to motion. Tree limbs bent in gestures of praise. The air was fragrant with fresh, earthy repose. A hushed "tick-tock tick-tock" harmony flowed through the trees like a lullaby.

The Son pressed a hand to the rutted bark of an ancient tree, fingers trailing the grooves and knots that defined its surface. Warmth answered at his touch, like the kind smile of a friend or the gentle embrace of a mother.

The Father was pruning the shoots from around the base of a neighboring tree. His gentle contact and mercifully swift "clip-clip-clip" drew no more than a sigh from the boughs overhead. Once the task was finished, the Son and the Father collected their tools and exchanged a smile on their way. Their footsteps pressed softly into the organic detritus of the woodland floor.

From the heart of each tree came the steady rhythm, the ticking steps. The trees of this timberland were unlike any other. They had a life of their own. A sentience, even. At the center of their trunks, each tree had a special adornment: a clock face with all its intricacies, including timepiece hands for the hour, minute, and second; ornate glyphs took the form of primeval sylvan script; and all this behind a thin, transparent glass-like bark. As the trees would age their clocks' natural adornments would also change. Elaborate designs like trimmings, moldings and inlays formed. The eldest of the trees possessed such detail and elegance in their faces as to rival any grandfather clock crafted by human hands.

The land itself was enchanted, or so Father said. These trees with clocks for faces were effectively immortal. The very concept of death was a foreign one. Time passed, but always toward eternity. All the more reason for concern, when the Son suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Oh, no. Father!"

The Son could hardly speak for the shift in ambiance. The air took on an uncommon chill, and the bright atmosphere dropped to a more somber tinge. There before them stood the rare sight of a young tree which had died. Its once thick, reddish-brown bark had turned into a sickly, hoary texture and had waned to papery dryness. The branches were twisted and bare. Most of the tree's leaves had fallen, shriveled orphans in the fallow grass. The ground about its roots had also been affected, for few grasses or herbs could be seen growing nearby.

The Son touched the tree's flesh but he pulled back quickly in shock, for there was no warmth or even the slightest hint of vitality. Only a fierce, empty cold remained—a void so abhorrent that it made him shudder. Such emptiness was a sharp contrast to the vibrant, persistent life of the remaining woodlands around them.

"What happened, Father? How can this be?"

The Father groaned, wavering on his feet. A deathly pallor drained all color from his face and his mouth fell as if to express a deep disturbance, but no words came.

The tree's face was raw with implications, and the boy looked upon the wonder with sad recognition. One of the tree's spindly limbs, bowed unnaturally, was bent back upon the timepiece. The bark of the limb was split from strain at the outer curve. The translucent tree bark covering the clock face lay shattered on the ground. Like the desperate grasp of the forlorn damned, the bough's extremities held taut, like a cucumber vine, to the hands of its own clock.

As if appealing for explanation, the Father looked around the wooded glen. But the trees did not answer him anymore than they did the Son. Their only reply was the groaning of boughs in a sudden gust of wind. Yet the anguish and grief were palpable.

“We can’t always know why,” said the Father, at last. With a grim edge to his normally serene face, the man added, “I’ll collect the tools.”

As he did so, the Son dropped to his knees. How could the tree resort to such a terrible act of self-immolation? As he waited, the boy’s mind ran wild in trying to understand. His imagination fought to grasp what he was seeing.

“If only I knew what you were thinking,” the Son thought desperately. His words implored the woodland to share a witness of this unbelievable heartache.

The Father returned with their implements. “We must cut it down. It’s diseased.”

Eventually, the tree finally fell beneath the swing of their axes and the tug-and-pull of the crosscut saw. With each pull, their own hearts were rent painfully. The dead tree, to a degree, seemed already well decayed. The innermost heartwood had been reduced to pulp, as if by a churning grief.

The Son wondered quietly as they worked: had this inner sickness preceded the tree’s personal destruction, or merely followed in its wake?

Once the tree was felled, they took turns chopping apart the boughs and severing the trunk into smaller pieces. The thinnest limbs were so dry as to easily snap in the strength of their gloved hands. They loaded the wood upon a pile and started a fire. Smoke burned the Son’s eyes as the stump too was hallowed and burned. The flames consumed the remains hungrily, erasing all evidence of the tree’s former existence.

The Father and the Son had worked well into the night. By then the moon was casting silver beams through the canopy, shifting at the gesture of the leaves. In the end, all that endured was an ashen ring around a blackened-out pit.

Their backs and arms were sore, their clothes damp with sweat. The Father gathered once again the tools. He rested a hand upon his child’s shoulder and left in silence. The Son remained longer, requiring final moments to grieve and reflect.

A gleam of moonlight danced across the neighboring trees’ clock faces. Vaguely, the Son perceived the sky was turning from jet black to a deep purple: that the shadows no longer fell as profoundly.

“Dawn is at the door,” the Son whispered. As he said this, he came to a sudden truth that served only to deepen his anguish.

Fresh tears flowed anew as the Son’s empathy carried him. The saddest fact of all was now plain, the realization of what was now before him. Although long burned to ash, the image was pressed into his mind. All the trees surrounding him now bore the same measure of time as was frozen in the lost tree’s strenuous grasp. The hour hand at one angle, the minute hand at another angle. It was this time exactly, twenty-four hours to the dot when this tree had succumbed to final defeat and ruin.

The Son shuddered a cry. “You brought your own life—once so full and beautiful—to a horrible end. You gave up at the night’s darkest hour! Oh, but if only you had known the worst was soon ending and that the light of hope was soon to rise!”

Cascade



The voices
the shouts

cascade, and

blend to create

one sound

A cacophony

distinct in turns

the waves

from a disruption

like ripples

they grow

and change

evolving, an

unending

vibrant

flow

The voices

the shouts

from many mouths

and many lips

waves persisting

until at last

a remnant

the final word is spoken

and like the start

the sound
that's made
is sharp
and clear
Only then
once all has faded
from cascade
to whisper
all quiet

Mentor

The so-called beach in this small town was no more than a sandbank. The gravelly sand rose abruptly from the still waters, covered with litter and gray driftwood. To my surprise, there was a large crowd of people strewn about, each as if poolside at a vacation resort.

My feet sank deep into the sand at every step, the shoes I was wearing an unfitting defense for the damp, invading particles. Trudging along, I finally spotted the reason for my visit. His back was turned to me but there was no mistaking the curly mess of red hair, the demure of his posture and how he was hunched over something in his lap.

I softly came around the fallen beam that served as the boy's bench and sat down at the opposite end. He seemed ever as before withdrawn, all his focus bent on the crumbled notebook before him.

Waiting for some perceived opportunity of right timing, I finally spoke up. My greeting however went unnoticed, and so we sat in silence for several minutes. In the meantime, I emptied the sand from my shoes and deliberated if it was warm enough to remove my jacket—the weather was as seemingly undecided as I was. As much as I wanted to fulfill the purpose of the mentorship program, I was not without serious doubt.

I think what most helped me through the uncertainty was the link I suspected we shared. After all, I had been his age once. Our circumstances growing up were by no means identical. Yet still we shared that introspective hurt, that turmoil which can be so rarely expressed. I had seen it before in his eyes, the thoughtfulness behind an otherwise vacant countenance. He only needed to see that his isolation was not so far removed, as it seemed to be. And I had an opportunity to be the contact he needed.

The silence between us was filled by the sounds of cars on the nearby freeway, by a dog yelping at the tree line, and the escalating conversation of a couple passing through—and with them, wafted the pungent stink of cigarettes.

With what I thought to be a glance my way, I began the conversation attempt anew. This time, however, I presented to him a drawing pad that I had carried with me: a token, I hoped, of my intentions and goodwill. For a mere second, I caught the glimpse of interest; although, it was just as quickly lost again, dark eyes turned hard and narrow.

"I don't want your pity gift," he said pointedly. "You people think money fixes everything."

It was clear to me that the boy was jaded from past attempts to console him. Perhaps they had never taken the time to understand him fully, or maybe they had tried and failed. Of course, I am not a professional counselor nor was I informed on the prior situation, so I won't claim to know the answers. All that I knew at that moment, however, was that I had to try.

"It's not a pity gift, Daniel." I placed the drawing pad beside him. "I thought you could use a proper sketch pad. That's all. That notebook looks pretty worn. How long have you had it?"

"I dunno, a few years..."

"When I was about your age, I used to draw a lot too. Monsters and aliens, mostly. Superheroes too, but I could never get those proportions right," I smiled to myself in reflection.

Daniel kept working in his notebook, but at least I felt like he wasn't completely ignoring me anymore. So, I continued by saying "How about you? What do you like drawing?"

After a pause and a sigh, he replied: "Fantasy stuff, mostly. Manga."

"That's cool. Do you mind if I take a look?"

More hesitation. Then he relented. His notebook settled into my outstretched hand tentatively. The book had worn and tattered edges speaking of a distinct personality. This simple, spiral-bound notebook of lined paper was, in fact, Daniel himself. The notebook bore his soul plain to the viewer—the very core of his person revealed. Perhaps this notebook was the best glimpse into that hidden part of Daniel than anyone had ever known.

Recognizing this fact as a matter of inspiration, I opened the notebook and began looking through the contents. Layers of pen and pencil marks filled each page, each a complicated but intriguing mural of emotion and thoughtful musing. I could barely make out where text had been eased and over-written in pen, fanciful cursive buried beneath layers of typographic designs and bizarre creatures.

To be honest I was enamored in that moment, for each page was a powerful conviction against the long-since-abandoned longings of my once-creative self. Fairly speaking, there was nothing traditionally masterful about the contents of that notebook; and yet, something about the drawings touched me. Maybe, just maybe Daniel and I shared that similarity I had first suspected.

Realizing that I had been gaping at the boy's notebook for some time now, I looked up. "This is really good! I'm impressed."

The look on his face was hard to read, but somehow I knew he understood my genuine interest. I returned to viewing his notebook, turning from page to page until I came across a full-spread composition that was so delicately designed I felt my jaw drop. A series of ornate, interweaving shapes framed a dramatic scene of two heads—grotesque and deathly—locked in a passionate kiss. It was simultaneously hideous and captivating. My eyes followed the complex line-work, over and over and over again.

With new respect and curiosity for this boy and his notebook of artwork, I asked him more about the drawing. I wanted to know how he conceived of such remarkable concepts. With earnest presence then to match the sketch, Daniel told me of the story behind it.

And so began our friendship.

Shades of Me and You

I am not the same as you
Because all broken hearts turn differently
like leaves of fall, they're drawn into the wind
We are different shades of green

though you may not be so keen
about this life and what you've been
we're all different shades of green

I am not the same as you
Because all broken hearts float home
like empty boats, in the eye of the storm

We are different shades of blue
we may seem the same to you
if you look you'll see it's true
we're all different shades of blue

I am not the same as you
we're all different shades, it's true
I am not the same as you

A Most Successful Failure

The Dean of Students, Sir Alden Chandler, removed his reading glasses and neatly tucked them within the breast pocket of his tweed jacket. He laced his fingers together upon the large oak desk and adopted a smile that squirmed uncomfortably within the congress of grayed whiskers. "According to our records, you have applied to the university four times previously, Mr. Sullivan Sibbs."

"Selby," said the young man across from him.

"Pardon?"

"I despise that name. I go by Selby, not Sullivan."

The old man looked him over, forming his words slowly. "Ah... I see."

"And yes, I very much wish to attend this school."

"Well, then!" Sir Chandler's smile reformed, lips squirming like worms baking under the scorching sun. "I'm most pleased to say, Mr. Sibbs, that you have just been accepted. The fifth time's the charm, you might say. Welcome to the University of Dorjford!"

With an expression that hardly betrayed his excitement, Selby shook the dean's hand. "Thank you, sir."

"Talk to Miss Daube, my secretary, and she will arrange everything for you. A tour of the campus, finding you a room, class schedules, and so forth."

Selby nodded, still bearing his inscrutable gaze. He buttoned up his navy wool blazer and took up his travel bag. Walking back out of Sir Chandler's office, Selby waited near the secretary's desk, where she was actively engaged on a Bell model 102 telephone.

With an expression of mild annoyance, the secretary glanced up briefly. She covered the mouthpiece with brightly manicured nails of the same shade found throughout the entire aspect of her petite figure: from the top of her red-shocked head and the soft touch of rouge upon her cheeks to her bright pursed lips and checkered dress. "Yes?"

"I was told to talk with you about finding a room and..." began Selby.

"Yes, yes, alright," she said hurriedly. A quick and utterly pathetic attempt at a smirk crossed her glossy lips. "Just a moment, love."

A quarter hour passed as the receptionist gossiped with someone on the other line. Abruptly, Miss Daube hung up the mouthpiece. She dug into a filing cabinet and withdrew a set of paperwork. The secretary slid a form into the Royal Portable typewriter on her desk, punching away at the keys. Another twenty minutes went by, at which time she glanced back up at Selby, who was waiting impatiently nearby. Gesturing with a manicured finger, the receptionist directed him toward her and then began to write something on a slip of paper.

"Here," she said, holding out the paper and a small envelope. "This is the student hall where you'll be staying, the room number and its key. I'm sure you can find your way."

With a muted grunt, Selby took up his things.

“THE NAME’S JOHN HEATH.” The younger man with bright blond hair stuck out his hand. “Welcome to the university, friend.”

Selby nodded coolly as he set his travel bag down on the cot. “Does anyone else stay here?”

“No, sir, not in this hall at least; just as it’s been for a while now. Admissions for the university have been low of late, and so most of these student halls are only half full.”

John kept up the mostly one-sided conversation for nearly an hour as Selby unpacked, until he managed to excuse himself to the wash closet. The man seemed pleasant enough, thought Selby, although he suspected John’s talkative nature may prove an annoyance in the future. It was only by the promise to join him in a friendly game of rugby (with several other students of the adjacent Palmerston College) that Selby was able to quiet the man.

Two Weeks Later

Selby’s punch, a blur of bloodied knuckles, made a large crack as it made contact with the other man’s jaw. He flexed his fingers and found they ached, and he would have guessed his own bones were the source of the sound were it not for Lucas Burkart writhing and groaning on the floor. Selby wiped the single dribble of blood from his cheek, wincing slightly as he brushed across a bruise—only minor wounds. The other combatant, however, was clearly worse for the ware; blood ran freely from his torn lip, his jaw was visibly broken and hanging abnormally.

Selby shook out his bloodied fist, casually watching several of the onlookers leading Lucas to the school doctor. Taking his blazer from a black iron railing, Selby placed it under his arm and began to massage his aching hand. He watched his defeated nemesis for only a moment before beginning to walk back to his dorm.

He looked back at the sound of his name to see John Heath jogging toward him. “What in God’s name were you thinking?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?” John grabbed and held him back. “Selby, what’s going on? You can’t go around beating the bloody hell out of every spoiled brat that happens to offend you. The world’s full of them, especially here in Dorjford. You’ll wear yourself out. Besides that, there’s only so much the university is going to tolerate. There’s the time you threw a wobbly in Professor Adam’s class. That stunt you pulled over at the pub. And now this!”

“Not to mention my night out with Miss Daube. I’m sure it’s a night she won’t soon forget,” hinted Selby.

“That wasn’t funny. She could have been injured.”

“I seriously doubt that, John.”

John met Selby’s stare intently. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why not? You really think people like them deserve any better? Burkart, Adams, Daube... they’re just like my father. Frauds and liars that put on pretty faces to whatever suits them. They all got what was coming to them.” Selby wiped the blood from his cheek again.

"I suppose that's true," said John in a troubled tone, as Selby began to walk away. "We all are subject to the natural law of sowing and reaping. Everyone will get what's coming to them. And so you just helped that along, right?" He paused for a moment. "What about you Selby? When are you going to get your just reward?"

Selby paused and looked the younger man over for a tense few moments, fighting back the urge to hit him. Instead, he turned to walk away. Plenty of words came to mind, but nothing seemed appropriate. Selby may be a bitter man, but John was his friend. One of his only friends. The unexpected admonition had affected him somehow: however, he wasn't ready to face his true self yet. Selby would delve further into his self-centered world, where no one else and nothing else mattered.

Two Years Later

Selby Sibbs wasn't sure what he felt as he waited for the motorcar to come pick him up. He had fought so hard to climb up the social hierarchy, out from the slums of his childhood and the long shadow of his father. He had fought, set his sights, and reached his goal. He had proven that a Sibbs was not beyond making a name for himself; his father, Sullivan Sibbs Sr., was no longer the dreaded future he would look to. Whether he'd been at all successful was still to be gathered. He hadn't been attending the University of Dorjford for a month before he'd been kicked out, and so was having difficulty deciding whether in fact he'd arrived victorious. He'd proven that he was a better man, he realized. That was good enough for him. He ran his fingers through his thinning Irish hair, and sighed purposefully. He couldn't help but allow a twisted grin to come around at the thought; he had indeed been a most successful failure.

Hidden Truth

Into this void I pulled myself
this black hole of the mind

In my search of hidden truth
what did I truly find?

Forsaking all my worldly ties
and all I'd ever known

In my lust for knowledge lost

I quavered to the bone

Achieving what I'd always dreamed
(or at least so I thought)

I found myself bonded to
that wisdom that I sought

Amaranthine: Divine Descent

The gracious Anthine looked down from her perch at the Citadel. She was dressed in the fairest gown of pearl. Her hair, as dark as the night and ornate with twinkling points like stars, flowed in tight curls over her shoulders.

“When shall your foolish pining cease, dear sister?” Destin joined her upon the veranda and gazed out over the plains of Kar. “There is a good reason why we long ago abandoned the mortals to their idle ways. What use have we, masters of the Citadel, to care for such lowly creatures?”

Anthine eyed her brother sympathetically. “There is more to the race of men than you give them credit, brother. You see them as weak: and yes, they are. But there is more to them than this alone. Weak they may be, but in that truth also shines a profound strength. I do not expect you to grasp my meaning.”

“Strength amidst weakness? You are right to say I grasp not your meaning. There is no profit in such words. Men are born of the dust. Their lives are as brief as a flowering bud that withers after a short season. Men return to where they began—to the earth—and are none for the better.”

“A fleeting beauty is no less profound, brother. One day I hope you see as I do.” After a moment of reflection she resumed with vigor, saying, “Perhaps if I were to prove my case? Bring to you evidence of my belief? Were I to bring before your counsel, to judge him, a man of valor and integrity, a man worthy to stand at the Citadel—would you then hear me?”

“You will find no such man,” Destin laughed. “A good man is a rare enough breed, let alone a creature worthy of any higher aspiration.”

“I will find him,” Anthine insisted. “This I swear. By my own stars, I swear it.”

Destin’s mocking smile turned to one of gentle amusement. He observed his sister watching him. He noted her certainty: her eyes that burned like twin suns and the granite fixation of her countenance.

“Your challenge is set then,” Destin relented. “Bring to me a man of worth, and I shall renounce my words. This likewise, I swear. By my own stars, I swear it. Though I severely doubt, dearest sister, that such a feat can be made.”

“Just you wait, brother,” Anthine replied. She took her brother’s arm as they together left the veranda. “Before the Light sets upon the Edge of the World, I shall bring to the Citadel the very man you doubt to even be!”

ANTHINE WAS MOST EAGER to begin her quest; however, in proper wisdom she first sought the aid of her allied brethren, her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The first she sought was the god of wind and storm. Anthine asked Seraph (for that was his name) a means by which to traverse the earth. Therefore did Seraph give to her a powerful chariot that was adorned in opal and sapphire, glowing of rainbow’s light, and driven by the four winds of heaven.

“The best of transport is by this chariot called Tempest, which rides upon the exalted empyrean heights! No passage is more sure, nor swift then this!” So said Seraph proudly. “If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall lead you true!”

Anthine thanked Seraph graciously. Then she set out to meet her second allied brethren, those of her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The second of allies was the goddess of sight and truth. Anthine asked Libra (for that was her name) a means by which to search the earth. Therefore did Libra give to her a dainty looking glass of purest crystal and glowing, polished brass.

“The best of sight is by means of this looking glass called Wisdom, from which none can hide or disguise,” Libra insisted, “If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall see you true!”

Anthine thanked Libra graciously. Then she set out to meet her third allied brethren, those of her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The third of allies was the god of peace and order. Anthine asked Justin (for that was his name) a means by which to secure protection against the evils of the world. Therefore did Justin give to her an elegant bow and quiver of arrows, crafted of hardy ash wood and trimmed with sleek ivory and silver.

“The best protection is by means of this bow called Reckoning, from which no foe may overcome or challenge,” Justin declared. “If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall see you safely to him.”

Anthine thanked Justin graciously. Then she said goodbye to those of the Citadel. Being now well prepared—with chariot, looking glass and bow—Anthine set forth upon the winds to look for her prize: the Man of Kar.

THERE WAS ONE AMONG the gods of the Citadel who despised the very hope and fond regard that Anthine held for man. The goddess of death and chaos, Halla, set in her heart to come against this quest with all that was in her power.

As Anthine traversed the vast stretch of sky in the chariot called Tempest, so it was that Halla plotted against her. As Anthine gazed intently through the looking glass called Wisdom, so it was that Halla cast her lot with the foul powers of the air. In every way possible Halla came against Anthine and prevented her progress.

For seven long days, they battled in the skies over Kar and through the darkening clouds. For seven long days Anthine shot upon her enemies with the true-aimed arrows of Reckoning. And after seven long days, the power of Anthine now proven greater than the power of Halla, the enemy fled in defeat.

The Man of Kar

Amar of the Southern Doud was a man of lowly birth and accolade, a quiet soul that lived beside the river Marandi in Kar. He lived alone, simply and quietly, while keeping careful watch of his flock. Amar often walked in the woods about the Marandi, even as the pale moonlight lit upon the trees and danced on the gentle waters. There was a peace in the quiet of night, a solace that Amar relished above all things.

Amar walked among the poplar trees and listened to the lapping water with an enlightened smile, but his solace did not remain. The looming threat had returned.

Possessed of most foul appearance and vile intent, the rakkishi were the bane of Amar’s existence. From the mountain heights of the deepest night, the rakkishi would descend to wreak havoc upon those who lived in the mountain’s shadow. These beasts were driven by a ravenous and insatiable hunger. Coming with quick and silent steps the rakkishi would fall upon the wood of Amar’s favor.

The rakkishi were silent in their hunt, not known until they struck their victims—be it a stray herd beast or unfortunate, weary traveler. With a terrible, unnatural cry as of the anguish of devoured souls the rakkishi would fall upon the chosen and consume them without a trace.

With resolute strength and courage, Amar had defended his flock against the rakkishi many times before. This time would be no different. To many the rakkishi were the unseen death but Amar was no normal man. He was so well attuned to the nature of the wood, of the river, and the vale surrounding his home that Amar could hear the rakkishi's presence like a discordant melody upon the air.

So familiar had the song of the Southern Doud become to his ears (and in his very heart and soul) that Amar quickly knew of the rakkishi predator.

Taking up his hardwood staff and girding up his tunic's hem, Amar crouched into the brush and awaited the approaching rakkishi. The hunter became the prey that night and with a fearless cry Amar came upon the beast. A strike of the staff burst a curse from the lips of the rakkishi. Amar then leaped upon it, one hand holding firm in the dirty mane, and the other striking severe blows until vitriol flowed like blood from the soulless beast. At last the creature turned away and fled back to its mountain den.

Thinking nothing of his victory—only thankful to find peace once again—Amar resumed his walk in the moonlight. His heart was full, as the woodland song seemed to call his name.

ALL THE WHILE, THE kindly goddess Anthine observed the man from afar. She was struck by Amar's joy in the simple life: in his appreciation for the beauty of the vale, by his courage against the foul rakkishi, and most of all for his humble heart that derived no pride from his achievements.

"Surely, this is the man that I seek!" thought Anthine happily. "He is one to whom I shall present to my doubtful brother. If there is any good man among those who dwell in Kar, it is he!"

As wise as she was gracious, Anthine felt the matter fit to investigate further. To herself she said, "Though he works kindly and with good-hearted deeds toward the wood and creatures of his care, how then does he act in proportion to his fellow men?"

Saying thus, Anthine deemed it good to take the form of a maiden of Kar, a simple child in appearance and manner. She clothed herself as a vagabond and set to come upon Amar's home some way down the river Marandi.

The night was yet full. Shadows cast where demure moonshine fled. Anthine listened as she walked, loving quickly as did Amar the beautiful song of the vale. The leaves rustled in a fair breath of wind. The river water lapped softly like kisses upon the bank. Thick, tender grass caressed Anthine's bare human feet as she walked. Doves cooed from branches above and crickets spoke in turn, each a measure of the nightly symphony performed in the Southern Doud.

The House of Amar

Anthine was soon upon the place where parting trees gave up residence for a most humble dwelling. The house was built at the upper end of a gentle hill topped by stone like a misshapen crown: sturdy logs and stout boulders were its form. The sodded roof was adorned with wildflowers, the walls with hanging moss and vines. Lazy smoke rolled out from a hollow

tree at the dwelling's heart. From a small window glowed a cozy, orange light. All in all, the home of Amar seemed to say that the woods itself was the architect and there was no question of his right to live there.

To the side of the dwelling along the slope of the hill was a wide, stonewalled paddock. Within this enclosure slept the gentle herd beast of Amar's keeping. The calm and quiet sleep of his herd suggested absolute faith in their master's protection.

Anthine shivered in the cool of the night and pulled to herself the tattered shawl that held her. In this guise as a daughter of man, she longed for the warmth and comfort hinted from within the house. So she came upon the door and rapped lightly with growing expectation.

AMAR OPENED THE DOOR of his home. At first, he appeared surprised and uncertain. No doubt, this was an uncommon sight: another human in this secluded wood. Upon noting the sad-looking maiden who trembled upon his threshold, Amar's heart was filled with compassion. "Child, what brings you to my door?"

"I am lost," trembled the maiden. "I am cold and hungry. Please, sir, may I come inside?"

"Gracious Divine, yes, come in—come in quickly!" Amar led the girl toward the hearth fire at the center of his home. He retrieved a heavy-woven blanket from his bed and carefully laid it upon her shoulders. From over the fire, within a small stoneware cooking pot, Amar served the maiden the savory stew that was to be his own evening meal. "Here, child, eat and be well."

The maiden ate the stew voraciously. From time to time she would look upon Amar with timid eyes, but just as quickly turn back to her meal. Amar simply watched her, waiting to offer any further aid as may be required. Soon the maiden had ceased to tremble, the stew bowl resting upon her lap. Heavy eyelids drew her to a sudden sleep before the enchanting embers at the hearth.

As she slept, Amar reflected deeply. There were no other settlements for many leagues around, so how could a young woman like this come to be so far away and alone? He was eager to learn whence she had come. What had brought her to the wood? Even so, he let her sleep; and carefully, he took her in his arms and placed the maiden in his own bed. Amar then laid his garments upon her, for fear that her chill might return in the night.

Amar watched the dancing fire dwindle to meditative embers and was soon asleep in his lone, oaken chair. In the night he dreamed of the woods he loved, and a sweet young maid came upon it from the very heavens. Little did he know that this dream was an oracle, the truth of the maiden being that she was the goddess Anthine manifest.

THE NEXT MORNING AMAR awoke to the smell of spiced porridge. The hearth fire had been rekindled. The home itself, he noticed, was well swept and clutter put to order. The maiden smiled at Amar with eyes dark and wise; the timidity of the night before replaced by a calm, sure presence. He was bemused by his dreams and freshly intrigued by this wanderer's purpose and simple beauty. There was something inexplicable that tipped his heart to love her.

The maiden hurriedly brought to him a bowl of porridge, a cup of the vine and bread spread with honey. Gratefully, Amar ate. His eyes, however, could not tear away from her. The maiden likewise ate, each in silence save for the wordless glance shared between them. When the meal was finished, he spoke.

“Tell me, child, what is your name?”

She smiled demurely. “My name is Minara, kind sir.”

Amar (being a man of earthy lore) commented on how she bore the name of the bright eastern star that was said to watch over men. It was a most beautiful name, fit for a most beautiful woman.

Minara blushed with pleasure.

Even as they spoke, the sun championed the horizon and broke through the window in triumph. The timing of the sun’s appearance Amar took to be an omen, though he did not know its full meaning.

“Indeed, this maid is born of heaven,” said Amar to himself. He recalled the tales of old: the creation of the cosmos and the powers of the sky. Wrought forth from these came the guiding lights, as such as the one for which the maiden here was named. So Amar loved her all the more.

“Minara, from where do you travel? How do you come to be in this place, so far removed and alone?”

The maiden looked longingly out the window and sat down with a sigh. “My home is far, far away from this wooded glen and river land. You would not know the name and I could not justly describe to you its beauty. I left with a purpose to find a precious thing. No one else would believe me, but I knew it was out here... somewhere.”

Amar asked her what it was that she sought. “Tell me only what you seek and I shall give aid in every way I might.”

“How kind you are!” Minara said, beaming with joy. “Oh, I think I have found what I seek, kind sir, but there is more to come that must prove my confidence...”

The Rakkishi Attack

Amar adjured Minara to stay as long as needed. So Minara remained in the vale of Southern Doud in the company of ever-loving Amar, until she could better grasp the nature of his character; thus, fulfilling the quest of Anthine the wise.

Then one evening the sky darkened above the mountains afar: ominous plots were brewing, and Minara knew it to be the workings of the vengeful Halla. Even so she asked aloud, “What do my eyes see?”

Amar looked to the darkness and was burdened with knowing concern. “That yonder darkness, mountain born, bodes not well for all beneath its shadow. I wager the rakkishi are in a terrible uproar, meaning to overtake all that lives within the vale. We must not linger in the woods tonight but to the safety of the indoors.” And so saying, he took up Minara’s hand, to lead her away.

“Do you mean to hide?” she asked.

“No, not I,” he replied. “But you I would see spared the sight of such foul creatures. You shall be safe within. I must defend myself.”

Here Amar turned his eyes to heaven. “Oh, Gracious Divine, I pray. Hear me now. Grant me this night the strength required to vanquish my enemy.”

Indeed, that night his prayer was heard by one of heaven.

The night was long and yet the foreboding evil hung upon the air like a lecherous spirit. Amar kept Minara hidden safe inside while he stood careful watch among his flock. His eyes peered into the shadow of the wood, his ears strained to hear the song of the vale and any falseness therein working.

The sky was clear overhead. The stars shone brightly like the keen eyes of heaven drawn to watch the enfolding drama. Amar, for his part, resolved himself on the task of keeping the lives in his care.

At last from the trees came the phantoms—silent to natural hearing, but straining the song of the vale. One by one they crept, teeth bared and eyes burning red. Taloned feet strode upon the air, heads low and tails still as death. The rakkishi had come with a united purpose: to kill the man called Amar, the very same who many times before had driven them back.

Yet this night was different. The ghoulish beasts were driven by darkness even worse than they: by the very hate of Halla. The rakkishi pressed up the hill, prowling the edge of the pen. Long, serpentine tongues rolling around in razor-toothed mouths.

The flock trembled in the wake of the oppressive dark. They struggled to flee, but came only together with greater proximity: panting, groaning and paws stamping uneasily. Amar took up his staff and pressed through the flock, to the edge of the paddock, and braced himself boldly against his foes.

“Come forth, cursed mountain spawn; come then, if you dare! I have fought your kin before. I have driven you out every time. I have ruined your every threat. Were there blood to spill in your soulless forms, yours would fill this vale completely.”

The rakkishi continued their slow and taunting approach, hissing and snapping at his words. Yet even so, the righteous Amar grew bolder in his speech.

“Do you not know whom you come against? Am I not the bane of the rakkishi? Lest you forget it—I am the spoiler of your passions, the counter to your demand! Am I not the one from which your kith flee in terror, finding no rest? Am I not the one that holds this vale in my hands, guarding the wood and river from your infesting and rotten clamor? Do you know me not?”

The monstrous beasts were giddy with bloodlust. Their pacing increased, limbs trembling with anticipation and their ungodly growls and moaning driving to a horrendous crescendo.

“I am Amar of Southern Doud—a servant of the Gracious Divine! You come before me, to my home, to challenge me. Pray you know, therefore, not I alone do you disregard, and you are gravely mistaken.”

Blind with rage and instinct, consumed with their own fury and that of Halla, the rakkishi attacked.

The Saving

Minara heard Amar’s prayer. With a silent but potent blessing she empowered his defense. His staff burned with every strike against the rakkishi. His skin became as hard as iron, talon and tooth breaking as they struck. Neither did Amar tire all the night as he fought back the relentless scourge.

As the dawn’s light broke upon the heights of the wood, the amethyst night exchanged itself for brazen gold and beryl. The rakkishi faltered in their attack and not even the fear of Halla’s wrath could persuade them to remain. So they fled, groaning and howling, back across the vale, out from the Southern Doud and up into the dark of the mountains.

The blessing of Anthine was now faded. Amar rejoiced aloud and honored the powers of heaven for his victory. His flock crowded giddy about his feet. Minara came forth from the house and embraced him, kissed him and praised his mighty deed. "Here is a hero of Kar, a man of true virtue!"

"No, no—please, do not say so," Amar retorted. "This victory was born by greater strength than my own. The Gracious Divine alone deserves the honor and praise you offer me. Assuredly, my prayer was heard and answered; I found favor and was given the power to overcome the evil assault."

"You speak wisely," replied Minara, smiling. To her observance, there was no doubt to the worth that Amar demonstrated. "You are brave, true, honest, and humble, Amar of the Southern Doud. Surely you are the greatest of all men, and rightfully so to have received a potent blessing."

Minara took his hands. She gazed into Amar's eyes, which were as deep green as the woodland he lived in. Her face glowed with happiness and his in turn with love and wonder. With a strength she had yet shown, Minara spoke. "Amar of Southern Doud, Son of the Men of Kar... I have found what I was looking for."

"And what have you found then?" He asked incredibly.

At that moment, Minara was transformed before him. She was once again called Anthine, the gracious and enchanting goddess of the Citadel. Her ebony hair enshrouded her like elegance, and a circlet of diamond and yellow topaz topped her head. Her dress flowed about her feet with shimmering points of starlight. Her golden eyes were sharp, brilliant, and as deep as the cosmic sea. Her skin, ruddy and smooth glowed with pure radiance.

So seeing this awesome change, Amar immediately fell to his face in reverence. But she, having compassion—and, yes, even love—took him up and set him before her. She smiled at him, her kindness overcoming his trembling. "Who are you, my lady?"

"I am the gracious goddess Anthine of the Citadel; I am also Minara Kind-Light, bright star of the High Heavens and Watcher of Kar. I have come to find a man of worth and integrity, one that might stand before the rulers of the Citadel as proof of your kind's profit to this world. You have proven yourself most clearly, dearest Amar. Come, let us visit the masters of the Citadel."

Ode to 285

Slopes of stone and timber rise on either side, like the gate to another world. The sky is crystal clear, clouds making counsel with snow capped peaks.

Watch for beasts braving the asphalt river! Beware the mountain's tears which fall with more hazard than man's! Prepare to be swallowed alive and spewed out again! Be weary of the world's edge on your horizon!

The surge of humanity courses through this bulging vein like blood pumping from the urban heart. Claustrophobia and big-city urgency twist like the curves of a sinusoidal wave. Steep descents and the sheer shoulder's edge hint at impending ruin.

The souls who live here are brave and hearty. Their homes are narrow and pinched between the mountains fists: the results of long and stubborn persistence. Although Babel was crushed, mankind scraped and climbed the towers God Himself had built. They fought and clamored against the fierce nature of that awesome lonely place.

Stale Desperation

Dickie's heart was racing with excitement and boiling over with anger. Her fingers were trembling. Easy targets were everywhere and Dickie was savoring her plan now in action. Blaring country music would mask the noise of her implement. She climbed a tree just outside of the party area, where she found a perfect view. She straddled a branch and shoved her backpack over her lap. Dickie loaded the device, aimed, and squeezed the trigger.

THWUP! Thud!

A projectile slammed into a car door. Several nearby students laughed as one of their own, in shock, spilled a cup of beer all over himself. Dickie smiled.

THWUMP! Thwack!

A group of burnouts staggered and collapsed in a daze of delirium. Dickie laughed aloud.

THWUMP! Bonk!

The heads of two lip-locked lovers collide violently. Dickie could hardly restrain herself.

THWUMP! Thud! THWUMP! Crash! THWUMP THWUMP THWUMP!

Dickie kept on firing, sometimes missing, but usually not. Her laughter became hysterical. Her eyes were blurring with tears, her face growing hot. Dickie's whole body was shaking now. She could barely hold the device as its weight grew exhaustive and she herself collapsed.

AFTER SCHOOL ONE DAY, Dickie walked down the usual backstreet alley. She liked this route. There were no judgmental stares here, or impossible standards to live up to. No cliques to be excluded from, and no cruel peers to ridicule her. In this alley there was only the cracked pavement, transient refuse, and dilapidated building walls. Even the oppressive vastness of the sky above was a constrained view by these decaying ruins.

Far up ahead, a van was parked outside a loading dock. By the time Dickie arrived, the van was long gone and something had been left behind. On the ground lay a tubular device, part metal and part transparent plastic. There was something like a hand grip and lever at one end, which also projected a metal hose with an attachment nozzle. The other end, the plastic half, had an opening that was a little wider than Dickie's palm. A valve and pressure gauge was attached near the equator of the device. Dickie recognized this as a t-shirt air cannon, as might be used at a sporting event. She picked it up.

She considered walking into the building, to leave it there. That would be the right thing to do. But something stopped her. In fact, the longer she held the air cannon the more Dickie felt convinced otherwise. This uncommon device didn't belong in that store, nor did it belong in the van from which it had been discarded. This object—this tool—was meant for her.

Dickie resumed her walk home, the weight of the air cannon resting against her hip. Striding along the cracked pavement of the alley, she felt an uncommon confidence take root. Her eyes didn't lay downcast as was habit, but now she looked straight forward. The now-humbled enemies of her imagination watched fearfully from behind broken window panes.

Over the next few days, Dickie familiarized herself with the device. She purchased a CO₂ tank. At first she used items from around the house as ammunition: such as bean bags or tennis balls. For targets, Dickie set up bottles from the neighbor's recycling bin. She played with the cannon's launch angle to improve distance and sampled less conventional ammunition. Come weekend, Dickie was more than proficient.

The next week Dickie was brooding on her walk through the backstreet alley. School had been miserable. Again. Her face still burned with embarrassment. Every step was a resentful stomp in the face of her peers. She hated them. She hated every single last one. Those who picked on her, as well as those who stood by and watched. The typical consolation she found in the alley's countenance was not enough anymore. Not today.

All she could think about was the cannon and how its weight felt in her hands. Dickie knew the first thing she would do once she got home. And she couldn't get home fast enough.

Dickie then stormed past a bakery. At that moment, a trash bag of days-old bread was being tossed into a dumpster. Some of the bag's contents spilled at her feet: a hardened bagel struck the pavement like a brick. The unexpected sound startled her. Dickie burned holes in the back of the bakery worker's head, who didn't even notice her.

Dickie paused in her seething and stared at the bagel. She felt a benign regard for its symbolism, discarded and scorned just as she was. Dickie grasped the bagel in her fist.

THE WEEKEND HAD COME and Dickie ran home rather than walked. A crumbled event poster was in her pocket, advertising a tailgate party. She knew which of her classmates would be there. She was counting on it.

Once Called Friend

Once called friend, we talked of deep
things and I took joy in your presence

But your counsel turned bitter

my sin turned you against me

to you I became as rubbish

and to my enemies you aligned

My love for you turned to dread

my thoughts of you bring anguish

I confessed my wrongdoings

I called out to My God for help

He heard my tearful prayers

and consoled my broken heart

“Deliver me!” I cried aloud, free

me from this sickness of soul

and save me from my foes

Yes, once I called you friend

but now you seek my death

once I called you friend, but

now you contrive against me

your betrayal weighed heavy

and my spirit was depressed

But the Lord My God, is here

he is my Refuge and Counsel

to Him I express my heart

in His presence I am found

The Lord, My Friend, is faithful

Something Like Fate

It was for the best, they had both agreed.

This world had been their home for more than three years, but they were no longer safe. Things had changed. Too much attention had been drawn from their allies among the local insurgents and native swamp-dwellers. Those loyal to the evil regime had multiplied.

No, they certainly were not safe here any longer. But was it really for the best?

The man held the child, the young ruddy-faced toddler, with hands that had seen far too much violence. “This is not the life we wanted for you,” he whispered. “This is not the life your father had wanted.”

The woman beside him knew what he was thinking. She might as well have been reading his mind; it wouldn’t have been the first time. “It’s for the best,” she said mechanically, the mantra they had unwillingly procured for themselves.

The words caused the man to frown. How many times had they said that, how many times after all they’d been through and after all they’d done?

The man was reminded of his many transgressions, of his temptation and how he had succumbed to the darkness. Even after his redemption, the man remembered the part he played in the downfall of others; he vividly recalled the children killed by an enemy he had failed to protect them from. He winced to think of the lives taken in that battle, this very child in his arms, whose parents were killed—one immediately, the other not so long afterward.

The man thought about the natives he had trained against the evils of their day; he had forged warriors, but to what end would they ultimately fail? More criminal masterminds, more deranged knights-errant? Or would they be desolated (as so many before them) under the evil regime’s ruthless galactic conquest?

The man then considered his most recent student. This was the one he had sent away to survive amidst a rag-tag group of adventure-seekers, on a planet in the very heart of that same evil regime. He had envisioned that student’s ruin, and desperately sought to spare him of that. Or had he unknowingly sent the young man straight to his demise?

And now... now the man was fleeing his new job, home, and life to escape the impending doom that was ever encroaching upon them. They had to leave. What choice did they have?

The worst part of all was yet to follow. The man knew that he was slipping. He was not the father this boy needed, he never could be. He was not the husband his wife needed, for there was too much darkness left in his heart, no matter how diligently he fought to purge it from within.

He saw the brokenness that lay between them all, as if his inner sight made tangible the invisible threads that once bound them together. He was hurt, and she was hurt. He had fallen and still felt the slimy shame of his past. She had been forced to slay her protégé and this after suffering the deepest of betrayals.

We’re too broken, the man mused, watching her dark eyes as she took the child from his arms. She caught his stare, and paused, the mutual understanding as clear as crystal, as mournful and final as a loon’s call.

They would find a safe place for the child. They would take a break from their attempts of parenting and from their marriage of play-acting. They would leave no clues to their former lives, nothing to tie them to their past.

They had already destroyed their iconic weapons and burned their order's robes. They would shroud themselves in new identities and quench the inner sight which once so strongly defined them.

Something like Fate was tugging at the heart of Candrai Enn'ado, and he knew that soon he would know why. He would embrace it, even if it meant doing so alone.

It was for the best.

Set Free



Was first lost, then was found
thus freed from the Law;
from the curse, that there hung
on a tree
Though bonded, was torn
from the claws of Hades,
so saved, My Beloved,
set free

Obscura

There is a stillness in the approaching twilight that haunts the young photographer and stirs within him a deep unease. The DSLR camera feels heavy in his hands, as if in open resistance. The evening sky darkens. Only a few minutes remain before this moment will pass and the opportunity is lost. Despite the risk, he waits anyway. He isn't ready. He doesn't yet know why.

The photographer watches the marbled clouds, painted tangerine and plum amidst the tired cherry sun. He cannot help but stare at the drowning light with somber, distracted eyes. For some inexplicable reason his unease is mounting to dread. Something is stirring within him; something is challenging him. The photographer does everything he can to find a sense of calm in the scene. He tries to correct his thoughts, but they are locked down tight on the circular track of his mind.

He is reminded of a certain friend. She is from another country. He recalls her tawny hair, curled and wild; her blue eyes and ready smile; her alto voice with sing-song accent. She is an artist, like he is, and they have many other things in common besides. There was a strong attraction between them, although it was particularly complicated in the end. Just like their friendship, the scene he now beholds has wrought in him a disparity of emotion: the hint of something obscure, tangled with murky apprehension.

The photographer hefts the camera to his chin, his finger hesitating over the shutter button. He feels as if taking this picture would mean losing something personal. Moreso, it would be a reminder of the lost friendship. He peers through the camera's viewfinder which frames the awesome composition of natural beauty. Dusk hangs before him like an incorporeal muse.

Then, just like a camera's aperture, the realization clicks into place. These feelings are both ridiculous and unfounded. He isn't losing anything. The sun will rise again in the morning, fresh and bold and blazing. With it, the glowing orb will carry the promise of a brighter future. Another chance. Another day. Another hope. Now he comprehends the 'why' for his trepidation. He knows that this day, of all days, is one for which he loathes to say goodbye. Today was perfect. Today was comfortable. Everything that transpired in the past twelve hours had been the fulfillment of his idyllic romantic longings. He knows, of course, that no good thing can last forever. All moments are transient. Each is only the thin facade covering a reality far less attractive but far more meaningful. These moments are hope encapsulated. These moments are defined by their impermanence. They fade and change; they come and go like friendships. However fleeting, these moments are equally defined by their impact, which last for all eternity.

The young photographer snaps the photograph.

Vain Soul

Too tired to care for sleep
dreams persist but waking I
can all too readily tell
the change inside of me
Oh, this vain soul
there's no recourse for you
This path of mysteries
the only way on through
Not a single cloud to see
their eyes have all gone dry
The rolling stone is stilled
(mine was made of flesh)
Warm sunshine glow that
thawed my icy blood
Might it be too late now?
Can I let this go?
Oh, this vain soul
there's no recourse for you
This path of mysteries
the only way on through
Thoughtless, mine sacred
lonely grip choked me
Wanting while wasted
constantly distracted
Fantasy devised now

kept me from sleeping
Morning moves swiftly on
the day's-old wishing
Too tired to care for sleep
dreams persist but waking I
can all too readily tell
the change inside of me

Winona and His Rump

I stare through a doorway, the room within half cast in shadow. The young man inside, Winona, sits behind his board of musical keys. His fingers dance across its surface, a soundless orchestration of melodies beyond my ears' comprehension. A monotone rhythm is all I hear.

Winona stops abruptly. He casts aside the conch shells that share to him their secret melody. He stands and walks forth from his darkened hideaway, lips parched for waters salt-less. Bearing forth into the light, his form is revealed: tall, lanky, and face sharply defined. Stalking through the outer bower, Winona rounds the bend and drinks from the fountain.

Having drank his fill of the fresh waters, Winona returns gracefully to his secluded habitat. He slows and stops at the entrance to his chamber. His eyes shift to me, wide, and overpowering with freakish delight. His nose, narrow and sharp, tilts on the edge of threatening accusation. He thrusts his hips abnormally effeminate, hand raised and hovering for a long uncomfortable moment.

Suddenly, and with a cruel swift movement, Winona swings down his hand and strikes his rump with ungodly enthusiasm. A curt smirk touches his lips. He falls back away into the darkness, closing the portal behind him.

My soul is wounded beyond restoration.

Fin.

Reality's Rope

You were so beautiful
once, my love; the sight

by which my heart had
never before encountered
or ever since recovered

Your face is
that of a cherub
the brilliance of
a thousand stars

Your eyes, dark
as the deepest forest
and just as enchanting
held me firm

Who it was you were before
perhaps you've never been
the memory I thought was
true, only just a dream

I fell in love with a shadow
with a trick, a mirage
with a trompe l'œil

Born of a misconception
fed by a foolish man's hope
bred in the heart of a dreamer
but choked on reality's rope

The King's Promise

There once was a girl named Hanna, who knew that her world was all wrong. She could feel in the earth and see in the sky, and hear through the bird's mournful song.

One gray-chilled morning, far grayer than most, Hanna walked the worn country road. Many times she had taken this path through the wood, yet the weather seemed now to forebode.

She went on the road past an old barren field, where weeds and bushes grew thick. She spotted a Man, lying wretched and frail, who was horribly, utterly sick.

He was sprawled in the dirt, mouth gaped, breathing shallow—Hanna shed tears at the sight. Not knowing his name or where he had come, she knew that to help him was right.

Hanna put all her strength into helping the Man, leading him back to the road. She helped him to mount her trusty pet mule, who wasn't quite used to the load.

The mule grew tired and almost fell twice, but carried the sick Man all the way. Reaching home Hanna led the Man to her bed, and nursed him all night and next day.

As the sun started setting the following day, Hanna slept having drained all her strength. When she opened her eyes she let out a gasp, for the bed was now empty full-length.

Hanna turned around quickly, heart quickening pace, wondering where he had gone. Standing before her, looking quite well, he spoke, "Do not fear, nothing's wrong."

"How are you well?" asked Hanna in awe. "Last I knew you were still deathly ill!" "I suffer for those whom I've called," he replied. "And yet more is my father's will."

"All that I've done is out of my love," said the Man. "For those who are close to my heart. Give me your trust, Hanna. Follow my ways. I offer you a brand-new start."

Hanna felt deep relief at the sound of his voice and then fell to her knees at his feet. "These words that you speak, they hold so much truth. It was destined that we two should meet!"

"Then you trust me?" he asked with a comforting smile. "You'll forsake all you know for my way?" Hanna nodded her head, tears flowing with joy. "I'd surely do that any day!"

Then he said, "It's not time, but there will be a day when I call my beloved to me. We shall be joined at a feast in my house. With your own eyes you shall see."

"Until then my child, I give to you now a gift that will help you do right. My Promise," he said, hands opened and showing an object of brilliant warm light.

Hanna held in her hands the gift from her King, and wondered in awe at its glow. In a whisper, the words "remember me" came, comforting further her soul.

Looking back up to where the Man had just stood, she sighed when she thought of the wait. With his Promise in hand, she was willing to stand as long as was needed for fate.

Hanna did wait for many long years, until one bright afternoon; while she worked hard in her field and her garden, along came a protracted boon.

Next to her heart, in the folds of her shroud, came the luminance glow of the gift. Her King's Promise glowed and filled her with love, like a gentle invisible kiss.

So she began on her arduous quest through the lengths of her world toward the end. Although she escaped the worst of herself, new trials Hanna knew would descend.

Boldly she stepped, the Promise held tight, along the darkening road. An end that would have her lose all she had gained, on vicious clawed hands and teeth stowed.

The Terrible Horde of Imptations stormed across Hanna's only way on! Their small evil eyes and cunning, cruel grins made her wonder why she'd ever gone.

Yet the Promise she held expanded its glow, striking the Horde with great fright. Howls and moans of deathly disdain, drove the Imps back into the night.

"The worst is behind me," thought Hanna with hope that her journey was almost complete. "Oh, I'm sorry to say but that's simply not true," said a slithering voice like deceit.

A bitter-cold wind pushed through the trees, stirring up golden curled flakes. Arose from the earth, a hideous beast, with bat-wings and tail like a snake!

The beast drew a breath and forth from its mouth flickered a tongue, forked and thin. "I know why you come, but I can't let you pass, for I am the gatekeeper, Syhn.

"None pass by me, for I guard the way from those who are wishing to flee..." He rose to the air, wings spread full and wide, and growled, "...as you will soon see!"

Hanna was gripped with a darkness so great that she feared she'd certainly die. But then she remembered the Promise she held and dismissed all those fears for a lie.

Down came Syhn's jaws, reeking of death—the stench of sulfur and smoke. The Promise she held transformed in her hand, killing the beast with one stroke!

The serpentine monster thrashed for a time, but then crashed to the ground quite loudly. And as it lay still, the Promise—it changed—now in the form of a key.

Key in her hand, Hanna came near the gate, which the beast had fought to keep locked. With a turn of the key, the gates opened wide. And through them Hanna thus walked.

Inside, she found others who shared in her joy and Hanna's great burden felt less. The bond they all felt through the love of their King, overcame all the journey's duress.

Lastly the King called those that he loved, so that all might partake in the feast. He spoke in a voice that carried afar: "The pain you once knew has now ceased.

“I have drawn you, beloved. I wrestled with death. Now all of you can join me here. You’ll have rest in me now. You will sing! You will dance! My Promise you always kept near.”

She smiled for the peace, love and joy she had found, here at the King’s perfect house. All of her life Hanna had seen so much wrong, but at last, her sorrow was doused.

Poison Ivy

Y ou looked so innocent
I didn't suspect the danger
I came of my own volition
how could I have been so blind?
You crept up on me
I've been allured by Ivy
The look in your eyes
had filled me with desire
your touch was like a fever
conflagration on my skin
You crept up on me
I've been strung out on Ivy
Pleasure I first knew
has bled me of jocundity
you abused me for so long
my heart began to blister
You crept up on me
I've been poisoned by Ivy

The Mangar Prince and the Fairest Daughter

In those days the races of Falaer lived in peace, upholding their virtuous duties as caretakers of the world. The age of discovery had begun; the ancestors of the mighty mountain tribes, the Mangar, were in dominion over the lands of the west. They were a powerful race, and among the most noble was a prince named Imdel, a strong man who was wise and cared very much for his people. Every spring Imdel would set out to survey the vast domain of his people, from the western sea to the valley of Emendil in the east, from the southern shores of Gaman to the wild woodlands of Ilfalden in the north.

One year Imdel decided to travel through the rough country of the north, further than he had ever gone before. He set out alone, with only a wooden staff, his cloak, and a few supplies. His journey was long and arduous for there were few roads in that part of the world. Then, having traveled the wild lands for a fortnight and a half, Imdel grew tired and very thirsty. Eventually he came upon a sylvan glen; a grove of yew, hemlock, and pine that grew about a clear mountain spring. A pool filled the deepest end of the glen, fed by the spring and was emptied into a winding river around the arms of the mountain.

Drinking from the cold waters of the spring, Imdel was greatly refreshed. The prince named that place Erdonnoth, which means “place of fortune” in his native tongue. (To this day the forest grove and mountain spring within are still known by this name.) Yet even as Imdel considered everything he saw and reasoned, he grew suddenly tired and fell asleep at the water’s edge.

The prince was awoken before dawn break by an alluring song that seemed to ride the air like a crisp, redolent breeze. He was first convinced that still he slept, for the woods were otherwise still. Soon, a company of women—beautiful, sylph-like maidens—came into the glen, singing an enchanting melody and dancing. As they came to sit by the pool their beauty captivated the prince, for there was none akin to the Daughters of Faera in either grace or charm. He then spoke among them, presenting himself after the manner of his kin. Although in awe of the prince, due to his great stature, the women soon after welcomed him. (In those days, the Mangar and Faera lived peacefully among their brethren, for the spirit of strife had yet to rise among them.)

Imdel became very fond of the Daughters of Faera and listened to their endless song with much devotion. He remained with them for many days before he went home, promising to return the following year. This journey he made yearly, always yearning to return the following spring. Ever did the prince grow fond of the songstress maidens, and they of him; they would sing of nature and of heroic tales after their own tradition. Yet there was one among the company of maidens whom Imdel loved above the rest, for she was fairest of all and had the sweetest of voices. In turn, the Fairest Daughter also loved the Mangar prince.

One day, the Elders of Faera who had been watching them all, said unto Imdel, “Oh Prince of Mangar, you are strong, wise and caring. We know that you love the Daughters of Faera for you visit them every year near the mountain spring. More so, we know of your love for the Fairest Daughter. Would you then marry her and be joint to our kin?”

“I would have it and with much joy,” replied the prince.

"If this you vow," said the Elders. "Then you must learn the song of our people. You must seek out the seven songbirds in their seven wild groves. Once you have learned our song, the song that the wild birds sing, return again unto us and the Fairest Daughter shall be given to you. Yet beware, for many trials lay ahead of you."

Imdel agreed and immediately went out upon the greenwood trail in search of the seven groves. Over hill and under vale, across rivers and through grassy fields he went. He then came to a crossroad in the greenwoods, where the trail split two separate ways: one path leading northeast and the other leading southward.

As Imdel pondered the right course of action, a creature of the woodland appeared to him. The animal was slim with a bushy tail and patterned fur. What's more, the creature could speak: the likes of which Imdel had never before encountered. "Where do you travel, oh Mangar Prince?"

"I seek the seven songbirds of the seven groves, so that I may learn their melodies and marry the Fairest Daughter."

"Help I can offer you," quoth the woodland creature readily. "If the Prince would so wish."

When Imdel agreed the creature continued. "Three words of wisdom I offer, and closely you must follow lest your quest fail. First, do not heed what you expect to hear—further from its aim, the closer you shall come. Second, when you become weary by the winding trees or stone, do not rest where the mossy bed may tempt you; instead, take the hardest space as your place of rest. My third and final word," said the creature. "Be careful while seeking your prize. Do not fall for idle distractions or become captive to silver-tongued words and rare beauty. If you obey these three words of wisdom, Prince of the Mangar, only then shall you succeed in learning the songbirds' melody."

"Do not heed what I expect to hear? What riddle is this?" Imdel wondered. Yet before he could ask further on the matter, the woodland creature had slipped away.

Imdel waited at the crossroads, until he heard the song once more upon the air. The tune, so soft and complete, appeared to roll from the left-most and northern turning path. And so Imdel went that way. Hours passed, and Imdel was no further along than where he had begun. The song appeared to grow louder and closer (as if it should be upon the very boughs overhead), and yet there was nothing to prove it so. Imdel eventually traveled further than the ending tail of the rivers born at Erdonnoth; the edenic scenes receding into the more foreboding realm of the Durmork.

Feeling defeated, Imdel then remembered the creature's word of wisdom. "How foolish, I am! My guide said to forget what I perceive as right, but do the other. The song seems close, ever close, but never so. I must turn back."

So Imdel turned back again and returned to the split path. This time, Imdel chose the right-hand road, away from which the song seems to play. Hours passed once again, and slowly the song faded to near quiet. Imdel wrestled with doubt but resolved to press onward.

As the journey continued, the day was now near spent. Dusk was falling. Imdel grew much weary, in both body and mind. He struggled to continue. Surely, he thought, he must soon rest. At first he stepped upon the soft mossy floor, which was kind to his feet. Recalling the animal's wisdom, however, Imdel made bed upon the hard dirt of the greenwood trail. But sleep would not come. For too hard was his bed, no matter how he struggled or turned. At last, Imdel said, "I cannot bear this difficulty. I need only for a moment the tender growth upon my feet." So he stepped away from the path. His arm wrapped around a tree, his feet embraced by the soft ground. He meant only to do so for a moment, yet before long he had succumbed and made his bed in the undergrowth.

Awoke he did quite suddenly, for Imdel then found that he was a captive! For the roots of the tree had bound him, and the soft mossy bed had nearly swallowed him into its dark bosom. Imdel struggled and fought for his freedom. It was no small feat, yet he eventually broke free.

Once the sun had risen again, Imdel resumed his journey. The greenwood trail wound this way and that way, until at least he came upon a clearing. Before him lay a great field, open and bright. At its center were the seven groves, each a cluster of trees of variable type. From the branches danced the seven families of songbirds, twittering their melodies into a joyous refrain that stirred Imdel's heart.

As Imdel approached the seven groves, he noted a large stone among them. Upon the stone lay the form of a sleeping maiden. This surprised Imdel. Furthermore, her beauty entranced him and so he approached her. Drawing closer, he noted her supply shape draped in a shimmering gown, her flowing amber hair, and her golden skin. As he watched her, she stirred from her sleep, slowly opening her eyes. Upon seeing him, she smiled and his heart melted.

Imdel asked the woman what she was doing here, and she told them that she had come to hear the concert of the songbirds, but had fallen asleep. Imdel told her about his own quest to learn their melodies. But he hesitated to mention for whom he had come to do so. To mention the Fairest Daughter seemed an insult to the lady before him. "They will not heed you," she said to Imdel, speaking of the birds of the seven groves. "They are selfish creatures, and refuse to give unto others. Be so warned."

Nonetheless, Imdel had come all this way. Leaving the maiden's side, he addressed the songbirds. "I have been sent by the Elders of the Faera. Please teach me your song so that I may know the song of their people likewise." This he said to all seven of the songbirds in their seven groves, but the songbirds refused to teach him for they knew him not. This he asked of the birds for seven days, every morning as they sang from their nests in the boughs. Yet every day they refused and would not teach him their song.

"Did I not tell you?" cooed the maiden. "The songbirds do not listen to reason, but only to strength of will. If you wish to learn their song, you must capture them and force them to do so. It is the only way." She then advised Imdel on how to do so.

The prince then went out and cut down three hundred saplings, stripping them of their skin to fashion rope, which he weaved into a net. He did so, saying, "If the songbirds will not teach me freely then I shall capture them and demand of them the song."

So, for several days more he hunted the reluctant songbirds, capturing the seven and asking again that they teach him their song. "Do this and you shall be freed. Then, perhaps, you will learn to be more kind to a prince of the Mangar."

The seven songbirds then taught Imdel their melodies, and quickly he learned it. But in the course of this time, the maiden (who still remained) wished to learn their song also. And so Imdel forced the birds to speak to the maiden too, but they violently protested. In anger, the maiden transformed! She changed then from the form of a Faeran beauty into one of an ugly, beastly changeling. She tried to eat the songbirds, tearing at their nets with terrible claws.

Realizing this changeling was his third trial, and having before neglected the wisdom of the animal guide, Imdel acted to right his mistake. True to his word the prince released the songbirds, allowing them to return to their homes in the boughs of the seven groves. The changeling beast could no more do them harm. He then turned against the changeling, and they fought among the grasses of the field. Imdel pitted his strength against the swift and fierce beast, and soon arose the victor. The beast's corpse he left dead upon the field.

Imdel then apologized to the songbirds. He asked them how he might right his wrong, and they told him what to do with the corpse of the changeling beast. He followed their instructions precisely. Thus, having endured the trials of the Elders of Faera, the Mangar prince made the return trip to Erdonnoth. This time, the journey felt much more swift and his longing to be united with the Fairest Daughter inspired him. At last, many days later, Imdel came among them and sang their song. With their blessing, then, Imdel took the Fairest Daughter to be his wife and they lived evermore together.

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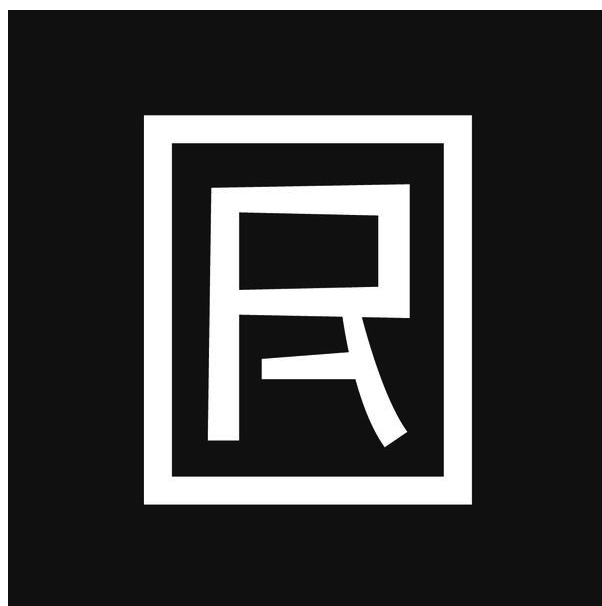
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