

# CORNCRAKE

FEB 2025  
ISSUE 12

## The Dentist ND Wallace Swan

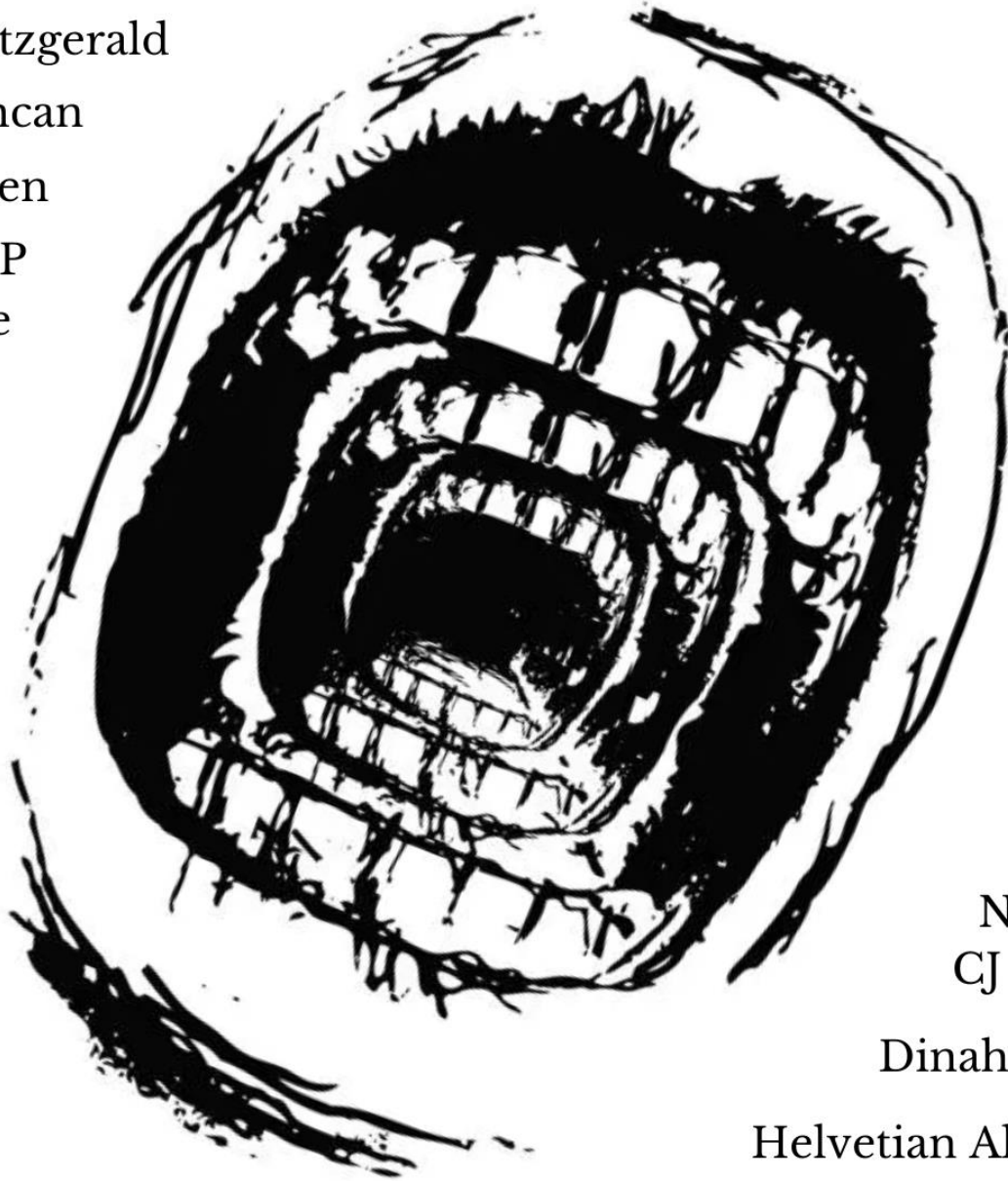
John Fitzgerald

AR Duncan

AR Green

Danny P

Barbare



Nathan  
CJ Hood

Dinah Kolka

Helvetian Alpinist

Alexander D'Albini

NESTING IN THE OAK OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE





# CONTENTS

## ISSUE 12

<b>Editor's Note</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Somerset</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Important Dates</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Dentist</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Trojan Dawn</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Henry V</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Mr Vinegar</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>The Serf's Dinner</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Fading to Grey</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Artist Spotlight</b>	
<b>Helvetian Alpinist</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Eagles Flight Part 2</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Antlers Must Be Shed</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Ophelia's Death</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Selection of Poetry by Danny P Barbare</b>	<b>51</b>

“Me and you are not the same  
and we shall never be.

Life is short and we shall see  
how often we agree.

-Shieldmaiden



# Editor's Note

Ladies and Gentlecrakes! February is here! Another packed issue! We start this issue with a little look at Somerset, the county of Bath and Bristol. The important dates are of great interest to those interested in the history and traditions of England. It is interesting how St Brigid's day was a Regency celebration, but today it's only a holiday in Ireland. I may have a go at weaving my own rush cross this year.

The feature story this month is *The Dentist* by ND Wallace Swan. It was a shocking thing to read, which I included because we all need to get out of our comfort zones once a year.

I was very interested in *Trojan Dawn* by John Fitzgerald, a tale of Brutus's arrival in England. Mandatory reading for those interested in British mythic history. It is illustrated by Rob Floyd who was featured in the art section of last month's issue.

Dinah Kolka, editor of Decadent Serpent - a website dedicated to all things cultural - has written *Antlers Must Be Shed*.

Would you choose power or a comfortable life? Alexander D'Albini, who formerly wrote for the mag under the name Alexander, explores this question in *The Serf's Dinner*.

The artist of the month is Helvetian Alpinist, who is running an exciting new project for artists. The Digital Art Exhibition is where artists can show off their work. Check out his interview for more details and how you can get involved.

The work of Shakespeare is important English heritage, and a delicate selection has been chosen and expounded upon by Nathan CJ Hood who has also written a preface to Shakespeare's Henry V.

Poetry this month is by AR Green, back with some poignant lines in *Fading to Grey*, and Danny P Barbare has sent in a cute selection of short pieces about brooms and biscuits.

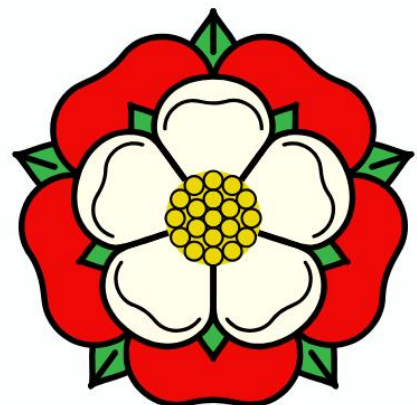
Our running serials are both on their second parts by AR Green and AR Duncan. Good things going on with these. Early Migration man vs Anglo Saxon man, we are spoilt for choice.

## Call of the Shieldmaiden

Editor-in-Chief

Twitter @corncrakemag

*Winner Winner Corncrake Dinner*





The flag of Somerset is the flag of the English county of Somerset. This symbol was mentioned in the book "The Once and Future King" by T.H. White, and is said to have been worn by Arthur during the first joust of Lancelot and Arthur.

# Somerset

Somerset, the county of apples and cheer, stretches along the southern shore of the Severnmouth and the Bristol Channel from the Avon to Exmoor. In the heart of the county are the Somerset Levels, a remarkable flat land reaching in from the Bristol Channel, divided in two by the low range of the Polden Hills. The land of the Levels is at or around sea level and in former days was regularly flooded, and some have suggested that Somerset's gets its name from the reappearance of the land in the summer. The Levels are criss-crossed with "rhines", drainage ditches, and that many of the villages' names end in -ey, "-island" tells of life before the Somerset Levels were drained. One of the most dramatic features here is Glastonbury Tor, a lone hill rising steeply out of the landscape above the town of Glastonbury, burial place of King Arthur. King Alfred of Wessex hid in the Levels at Athelney, before bursting forth and defeating the Danes to restore England. Bath, on the River Avon in the north of Somerset, was the fashionable retreat for Georgian gentry and is filled with Regency charm. It is home to the only natural hot springs in Britain, the pungent water pouring forth at a great rate from hidden wells beneath. On this the Romans built their town and others followed. The result of Regency fashion and local stone is one of the most remarkable cities in the kingdom. Bristol, of the great cities of the realm, split in the middle between Somerset and Gloucestershire. Somerset is known for its apples. (Legend-seekers place the Avalon of legend here, as "Aval" means "apple" in the old tongue.) Apples are widely grown in Somerset, and consequently the county is known also for its cider. Somerset can claim to be the home of Cheddar cheese too, which was first made in Cheddar, a village at the foot of the spectacular Cheddar Gorge in the Mendip Hills. Wells, home of Bishop of Bath and Wells, lies in the middle of the county. It is a small market town with a large cathedral of unique architecture, and a castle. Taunton, the county town is a modest place, built on the wool trade. The western end of Somerset is the wild moorland of Exmoor.

Main Towns: Bath, Bristol (south), Burnham-on-Sea, Clevedon, Glastonbury, Minehead, Shepton Mallett, Somerton, Taunton, Wells, Weston-super-Mare, Yeovil.

Main Rivers: Barle, Yeo, Avon, Exe, Tone, Parrett, Brue, Cary, Frome, Isle.

Highlights: Roman Baths, Bath; Cheddar Gorge; The Mendips; The Quantocks; Glastonbury Abbey & Tor; Isle of Athelney.

Highest Point: Dunkery Beacon, 1706 feet.

Area: 1,640 sq miles

County Flower: Cheddar Pink



# Important Dates This Month

**St Brigid's Day 1 February**, was celebrated during the Regency period. One of the most famous stories from the life of St. Brigid is the legend of her cloak. Brigid approached the King of Leinster, requesting a piece of land to build a monastery. The king, amused by her small cloak, laughed and granted her request, saying, "Take as much land as your cloak will cover." Brigid instructed her four companions to take opposite corners of the cloak and walk in different directions – north, south, east, and west. As they did so, the cloak began to grow and spread across many acres, astonishing the king and his court. The king, realizing that Brigid was blessed by God, fell to his knees and promised to provide her with all the necessities for her monastery. He also converted to Christianity, and his entire household followed suit. This miracle of the cloak is often seen as a symbol of Brigid's generosity, hospitality, and faith. It also highlights her ability to bring people together and to spread the message of Christianity throughout Ireland. In Ireland, it is still customary on St. Brigid's feast day, to weave St. Brigid's Crosses, a traditional ritual that dates back to the early Christian era. The cross is made from rushes, and its intricate design is said to protect homes from fire and evil spirits. St. Brigid of Kildare, the patroness of Ireland, had a significant influence in England, particularly during the Middle Ages. Although she was primarily associated with Ireland, her legacy extended to England. The early Christian missionaries from Ireland, such as Saint Patrick and Saint Columba, brought Celtic Christianity to England. This led to the establishment of monasteries and churches, where St. Brigid's teachings and traditions were adopted and adapted.

**Imbolc** is a Gaelic traditional festival marking the beginning of spring. It is celebrated on **February 1st**, halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. With the Christianization of Ireland, Imbolc became linked to Saint Brigid. According to legend, Brigid was a Christianized pagan, and her feast day replaced the pagan Imbolc celebrations. The Catholic Church assigned this date to honor both Saint Brigid and Imbolc, blending pagan and Christian traditions. Like Candlemas, its counterpart in the Christian calendar, it is a festival of light, which celebrates the first stirrings of spring after the long dark winter. Not surprisingly, in Britain Imbolc is often associated with snowdrops and these are often used in ceremonies to celebrate it. The name Imbolc is usually taken to mean "in the womb" and this is often taken to link it to the time when ewes become pregnant. It may also be related to Gaelic words for both "milk" and "purify". One possible translation of "lamb's milk" would also link it to pastoral events at this time of year. The Goddess Brigid is a particular focus of worship and celebration at Imbolc. Brigid (or Brigit, Bride, etc) is a goddess who is best attested in Ireland, but whom some scholars believe to have been worshipped across the pre-Christian Celtic world. Her name means "bright", "high" or "exalted" and so is easily linked to the brightness of the early spring. Brigid is mentioned in the Irish sources as a triple goddess — often linked to the iconography of a triple flame — and is associated with metalwork, poetry, and healing, among other things. "The fire in the head, the fire in the forge and the fire in the hearth" are all associated with Brigid and so it is common to celebrate bardic skills such as poetry at this time. The shrine of Brigid in Kildare in Ireland is home to a perpetual flame, and a similar tradition exists within Paganism where individuals undertake to keep a flame burning for a day and night in rotation so that there is always a devotional flame dedicated to Brigid. She was said to be the daughter of a Druid who converted to Christianity and Kildare means "the cell of the oak", oaks being associated with Druids giving another possible link back to the pre-Christian goddess.

**Candlemas, February 2**, also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Feast of the Holy Encounter, is a Christian feast day commemorating the presentation of Jesus at the Temple by Joseph and Mary. It is based upon the account of the presentation of Jesus in Luke 2:22–40. According to the Old Testament rules in Leviticus 12, a woman was to be purified by presenting a lamb as a burnt offering, and either a young pigeon or dove as sin offering, 33 days after a boy's circumcision. The feast falls on 2 February, which is traditionally the 40th day of and the conclusion of the Christmas–Epiphany season.

While it is customary for Christians in some countries to remove their Christmas decorations on Twelfth Night (Epiphany Eve), those in other Christian countries historically remove them after Candlemas. On Candlemas, many Christians also take their candles to their local church, where they are blessed and then used for the rest of the year; for Christians, these blessed candles serve as a symbol of Jesus Christ, who is referred to as the Light of the World.

In England, **St. Agatha's** feast day is commemorated on **February 5th** is a revered Christian martyr and virgin saint, born around 231 AD in either Catania or Palermo, Sicily. She was from a rich and noble family and dedicated her life to virginity from an early age. Agatha is known for her extraordinary beauty, which was used as a pretext for torture and mutilation by the Roman prefect Quintianus, who sought to force her to renounce her vow of chastity and marry him. Despite her suffering, Agatha remained steadfast in her faith and was eventually martyred. Although St. Agatha is primarily associated with Sicily and Italy, she has a significant presence in the Church of England. Several Church of England parish churches are dedicated to her honor, reflecting her patronage of various groups, including: Bellfounders (due to the shape of her severed breasts), Breast cancer patients, Rape victims, Wet nurses, People suffering from fires (considered a powerful intercessor). Her legacy is recognized through various church services, prayers, and devotions. While her celebration may not be as widespread as that of other saints, St. Agatha's significance as a patron saint and martyr is acknowledged and respected within the Church of England.

In the Church of England, **Saint Matthias'** feast day is traditionally celebrated on **February 24th**, although some sources indicate it may be celebrated on May 14th instead. The Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, as well as other older common prayer books in the Anglican Communion, observe this date Patronage: Saint Matthias is the patron saint of: Alcoholic recovery (in some Anglican and Lutheran traditions), Carpenters and tailors (in some Anglican and Lutheran traditions), Gary, Indiana; Great Falls-Billings, Montana (in some Anglican and Lutheran traditions), Smallpox (historically, as a patron saint against the disease), Hope and perseverance Historical significance: Saint Matthias is mentioned only in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:21-26), where he was chosen by the apostles to replace Judas Iscariot after his betrayal. His legacy is closely tied to the early Christian Church and its development in England. Saint Matthias was one of the seventy disciples of Jesus Christ and a key figure in the early Christian Church. According to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:15-26), Matthias was selected by the remaining eleven apostles, along with Joseph, called Barsabas, through a process of prayer and lot-casting. Matthias was deemed worthy to join the Twelve Apostles because he had followed Jesus since His baptism by John the Baptist & Witnessed Jesus' ascension to heaven. As an apostle, Matthias was an eyewitness to all that Jesus did, from His baptism to His resurrection and ascension. He was part of the group of 72 disciples sent out to preach the Good News (Luke 10:1-24). In order to celebrate this day, consider: Participate in a Catholic Mass or Liturgy, which will likely include readings from the Acts of the Apostles (1:15-26) and prayers for St. Matthias' intercession. Reflect on St. Matthias' Life: Read about St. Matthias' brief appearance in the Acts of the Apostles (1:21-26) and his selection as the twelfth apostle. Reflect on his humility, faith, and willingness to serve. Offer a Special Intention: Offer a special intention for those struggling with addiction or personal struggles, as St. Matthias is patron saint of reformed alcoholics and those afflicted with smallpox. Honor St. Matthias' Patronage: Recognize St. Matthias' patronage over carpenters, tailors, and those in the trades. Offer prayers for their protection and blessings in their work. Read Inspirational Writings: Read excerpts from *The Liturgical Year* by Abbot Gueranger O.S.B., which highlights St. Matthias' significance and the importance of faith and knowledge in overcoming sin and its effects. Sing Hymns and Chants: Sing hymns and chants, such as the one taken from the *Menaea* of the Greeks, to celebrate St. Matthias' triumph and the victory of faith over adversity. Make a Spiritual Commemoration: Make a spiritual commemoration of St. Matthias Day by setting aside time for prayer, reflection, and devotion, seeking to emulate his virtues and example.

**St. Valentine's Day**, also known as the Feast of Saint Valentine, is a Christian holiday celebrated annually on **February 14**. The day honors the martyrdom of Saint Valentine,

a 3rd-century Roman priest who was executed for performing marriages and ministering to Christians persecuted under the Roman Empire. The earliest recorded celebration of St. Valentine's Day dates back to the 5th century, when Pope Gelasius declared February 14 as a day to honor the martyrdom of Saint Valentine. However, the holiday's association with love and romance is a later development, dating back to the 14th century. According to legend, Saint Valentine restored sight to the blind daughter of his jailer and performed secret weddings for Christian couples. These stories have contributed to the modern celebration of St. Valentine's Day as a day of love and romance. Saint Valentine is the patron saint of lovers, people with epilepsy, and beekeepers. Today, St. Valentine's Day is celebrated worldwide with exchanges of love letters, gifts, and romantic gestures. The tradition of handwritten love letters has been kept alive through the centuries, and the day is often marked with candlelit dinners, flower arrangements, and other romantic symbols. The tradition of linking St. Valentine's Day with courtly love and romance is often attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th-century poem "Parlement of Foules". In Scotland and England, the tradition of sending love letters and gifts on February 14 dates back to the Middle Ages. Like so many other martyrs, the story of St. Valentine is not as pretty as the poem that ascribed hearts and flowers to his namesake. He was executed by beating and beheading on orders from the Roman emperor Claudius II on February 14 in 270 AD. Two centuries later, the date of St. Valentine's martyrdom became the date of his annual feast day, the date to which Chaucer refers in his poem. From the late Middle Ages onward, Valentine's Day has been synonymous with romantic love, somewhat regardless of St. Valentine's circumstances.

**The earliest association** of Valentine's Day with romantic love in English literature appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* – that is, *Parliament of Fowls* or, more plainly, *Parliament of Birds*. The dream-vision poem, written in Middle English between 1381 and 1382, describes the speaker's encounter with a congregation of birds who come together on St. Valentine's Day to select their mates:

For this was on Seynt Valentynes Day,  
Whan every foul cometh ther to chese his make,  
Of every kynde, that men thynke may;  
And that so huge a noyse gan they make  
That erthe and see, and tree, and every lake  
So ful was that unethe was there space  
For me to stonde, so ful was al the place (Chaucer 309-15).

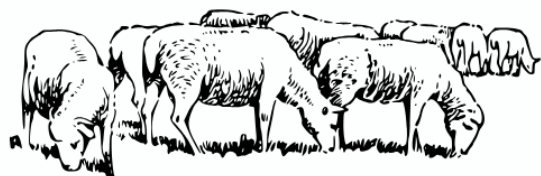
[For this was on Saint Valentine's Day when every bird of every type that one can imagine comes to choose his mate, and they made a huge noise, and the earth and sea and trees and every lake are so full of birds that there was hardly any space for me to stand because the entire place was filled with them.]

**Wales celebrates lovers** with St. Dwynwen's Day (in Welsh, *Dydd Santes Dwynwen*) on January 25th. The tradition similarly invites exchanges of cards, flowers, and heart-shaped gifts as expressions of love and affection. The holidays also share medieval origins, but St. Dwynwen's Day derives from a darker story.

**The tale of St. Dwynwen**, from which the lesser-known Welsh celebration of lovers derives, departs markedly from both the martyrdom of St. Valentine and the light-hearted poem that set his feast day's romantic tradition in motion. There are several variations of her story, all of which date Dwynwen, or Dwyn, to the 5th century as the daughter of a semi-legendary Welsh king.

Dwynwen is described as the loveliest of King Brychan Brycheiniog's 24 daughters, who fell in love in Maelon Dafodil. But her father betrothed Dwynwen to another man, and when Maelon learned that Dwynwen could not be his, he became enraged. He raped Dwynwen and abandoned her.

Distraught, Dwynwen ran to the woods and pleaded with God to make her forget Maelon, then fell asleep. An angel came to Dwynwen, delivering a drink that erased her memories of Maelon and transformed him into ice. God then granted Dwynwen's three wishes: that Maelon be thawed, that she never be married, and that God grant the wishes of true lovers. As a mark of gratitude, Dwynwen dedicated herself to God and spent the rest of her days in his service.





# The Dentist

ND Wallace Swan



I saw her standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Her red dress hung like Christ on the cross. I could hardly stand to look at the spectacle.

The egg flipper with the silicone grip felt nice in my hand. I grabbed the empty bottle of Jack Daniels and bucked it across the room towards the woman, and it flew right through, smashing into countless pieces as it hit the fireplace in the sunken living room. She was never there. This wasn't my house.

There was a knock at the door. I could smell her once more. An older woman, a troll from the internet. I could smell death on her. I took my egg flipper and ran to the door, reaching into my pocket, I realized I had no pants. My jacket was laying near the door, covered in shards of broken glass from the bottle thrown earlier. I felt inside the pocket, and there it was, bear spray.

I grabbed a chair and threw it through the large kitchen window that looked out over the front lawn. The woman shrieked. I made my way through the hold and soaked the woman in bear spray. I could hear her coughing and choking on the relaxing mists. I kept spraying, chasing her down the sidewalk while she pleaded for mercy. I yelled that the Spice must Flow. Soon the can was empty. I sprinted down the street towards the 7-Eleven, leaving her in my dust and spice, writhing for air. I chuckled inside but I knew this was God's will.

The store was surrounded on the exterior by a few dozen youths engaged in a rap battle or something. I ignored them while walking by in my underpants and shirt with a bow tie, which they mocked by calling me *Old Uncle Pennybags*. I entered the store. The smell of overcooked wieners penetrated my nostrils and I nearly vomited. I bought a few tins of Zyn nicotine pouches and walked out. Soon I found myself accosted and surrounded by the exterior youths.

They were sucking through their teeth which was normally an intimidating move, but I immediately punched their leader in the face and all of them started attacking me. I was on the ground being kicked but remained atop the leader. I bashed him good and took a lot of his teeth. I was badly beaten and was being kicked while rising from the pile. I directed my attention to the next candidate and was soon on the ground with him, bashing his face while the rest were kicking me. Soon the man was asleep and I could move on to the next. And the next. And the next. I was able to make about seven of them go nighty night before the remainder scurried off. I chased one down and he begged to be left alone, apologizing. I jumped on him and took his teeth too. A dentist has to eat.

I popped a few Zyns and ran into the forest lining the riverside park, laying down in some tall grass. I quickly fell asleep as the sun set. I awoke in the night, moon shining bright overhead, partial clouds. A family of

raccoons were looking at me in the distance. I got up and sprinted towards them. They tried to run but one was too slow and I punched it solidly in the rear. It squealed and ran away like a coward. I am a big strong man.

Remaining awake, I prowled through the underbrush looking for my next chance at justice. Two police officers were on patrol just outside the entrance to the riverside park. I casually approached them.

One of them noticed me first and as I got closer, they started asking questions, like 'why I was all beaten and bruised'. I told them I had special powers but I would need their guns for the purposes of justice. They refused. I told them they could do this the hard way or the easy way. After which they drew their pistols. I thanked them for their cooperation. They chuckled. Sensing a moment of weakness I dove for the weapons, gabbing one in each hand. The cops fired their guns but missed me. I turned the guns towards each other and said I would spare whoever shot the other. They both shot each other at the same time. Now I had two guns, and so I ran back into the treeline.

I dug a hole about six inches deep and buried the guns there, covering the hole with fall leaves. Even if they found the guns they would never find me, I already burned off my finger prints. I heard the raccoons again, but they were wise to keep their distance this time.

I made my way to the interstate, hoping to thumb a ride. Unfortunately no one wanted to pick up a dirty man with no pants covered in blood. I ran out into traffic until cars were forced to stop. I pretended to be a madman and, as traffic returned to normal, I hopped onto the back of a semi-trailer. The cool fall breeze of Chicago felt heavenly in my blood tangled hair as I travelled at highway speeds holding on for survival to the back of a semi-trailer. I got off at the next truck stop and went inside.

A portly figure with name tag Pedro stood at the counter, asking if he could take my order. No way. No pants no service. I picked up a chair and threw it at the glass cabinet filled with food because I didn't have \$3.75. I grabbed a sandwich and a drink and got the hell out of there. The sandwich was a little crunchy because of the little bits of safety glass when I threw the chair at it, but it was okay. I took a swig of the cream soda I took and poured the rest on my hair to try and clean out the blood. It seemed to work so I took my leave of the place and headed towards Gary Indiana. I hailed a taxi and got in.

The cabbie was a bit disturbed by my look so I said I was jumped, and would pay him if he could take me to my bank in Gary. He seemed fine with this. I popped a few more Zyn and the road ahead started to look more like grey noodles interspaced and stretched out hotdog buns with mustard spilled all over them. The car seemed to transform into a slip and slide and I couldn't remain upright in the seat. I asked the cabbie what he lubed his

seats with and he became incredibly fearful. I told him not to be afraid, I was just curious about the slippery seats.

When we arrived, I slipped out of the back seat and ran to the bank. I didn't have my card so I waited. Eventually a guy walked up to the ATM and I said I will take \$60 please and the man declined. I grabbed the man by his collar and took him to the cabbie. I said my card was declined and It might take a minute to get the money but to hold tight. I told the man I will take the \$60 or his teeth and then also take the \$60. He refused for some reason. Pride cometh before the fall.

Soon his teeth fell like leaves on the autumn pavement and he was napping in a shallow puddle of his own blood. I took my licks but I also took my \$60 in the end, giving it to the cabbie, who watched the entirety unfold. He took the money and drove away. I headed to the beach.

I could see the lake as I climbed the last dune. I sprinted towards the water and had a nice relaxing swim. The dried blood flowed off of me and a nice stain surrounded me in the water. I scrubbed off the bits and bobs which now covered me, and walked out squeaky clean. In the distance, it must have been miles, I could see that woman in the red dress again. I sprinted towards her.

With each step, I gained and with each other step she was dragged away from me. As fast as I would run she would get further away. I eventually passed out from exhaustion.

I awake, face down on the beach, mouth filled with sand. I was surrounded by old television sets, from the 80s or 70s, I wasn't sure. Their power cords were all strung together like a daisy chain, creating a sort of fenced-in area where I was sleeping, like pall bearers who had just lowered a corpse into the grave. Getting up I noticed I was completely alone. There was a pile of magazines on top of one of the sets; its cover flapping open and shut in the breeze.

It was the Sears catalogue from Christmas 1986. it had flipped to the page advertising guns for young boys. 'Based', I thought. But was it based? Or was it a meme meant to distract from the suffering of our times, to make us all slaves to the system no matter who holds power? Well maybe not guns but certainly someone paid for this magazine from so long ago. Who put it here? It is rather unsophisticated, but I supposed it did its work in its day. Certainly little has changed in Man since.

Leaving the scene, I could see no other way, but through the eyes of animals. Birds were possibly an answer to this riddle. How many TVs could one bird carry? Hmm, perhaps fewer than a single TV which means the birds must be working in large teams, like strings tied to a bunch of seagulls. That's it, it must be seagulls!

But I don't see any seagulls here, this is a lake I guess, so there should be lake gulls... but that wouldn't make any sense. Why would lake gulls be flying around with a bunch of old TV sets? IT had to be seagulls. But where were they? Maybe they were in the TVs, sleeping or nesting or something. Grabbing a big rock I walked back to the TVs.

I smashed open the TVs carefully so I wouldn't disturb the seagulls. The screens exploded with a big pop. Oh god what have I done, I might have injured the poor birds. But there were no birds inside! Just wires and junk and smashed up glass and sand. But alas! The mystery was solved, they clearly would hold the wires to carry the TVs, so the seagulls must be somewhere else nearby.

Looking around I saw a large negro man in the distance doing some stretches it seemed like and maybe having a picnic but I was not yet sure. I sprinted towards him as fast as I could. He started to yell at me as I insisted he tell me where he hid the seagulls that brought all the TVs to me on the beach. He said I was a mad man and to get away from his picnic. I was incessant however. I demanded he reveal the location of the mysterious birds or he would pay the teeth price. I told him I am a big strong man. He talked us down from violent conflict saying he wasn't finna having violence today. He said Carl down the road knew where the seagulls was at. He told me the address. He was lying, because the address he gave me was the childhood address of Michael Jackson right near that abandoned highschool. I told him so but he insisted.

After a short scuffle, I made him pay the teeth price and sent him to nighty night time. I headed towards the address anyways in the hopes I would find the seagulls on the way. Soon I was met by a squadron of youths who wished to extort me for financial gain. After collecting more teeth price I continued towards the house, finding it boarded up along with a no trespassing sign. Never would I violate the holy site so I circled the block on foot a few times before realizing how silly I was. You don't find seagulls this far inland.

This meant that the seagulls must have subcontracted the TV set job to a more inland species like Eagles or hawks. I couldn't be certain but I knew it had to be one or the other as everyone knows they do not work together. I was searching for Eagles when a white SUV with tinted black windows pulled alongside me and bullets started flying. I was hit several times, but only flesh wounds and grazing. I ran up to the vehicle and grabbed the door handle. The driver attempted to pull away but I pulled him through the window and started to extract my fee. Dentists have bills to pay. The doors opened up and the passengers started to run off in all directions.

But who put them up to this? Seagull assassins? No, that wouldn't make sense. Maybe it was the cops? But they were dead via co-suicide. What could it be? It must be a

seagull competitor, the raccoons? Trash pandas? I would have to find out. I headed back to the TVs.

Back at the beach, there was no one else around. The big man was gone, but he left behind his picnic. I grabbed a few peanut butter sandwiches, noting that peanut butter was claimed to be invented by a black man. Praise him! The soul rejoices at mashed nuts on bread.

The TVs were gone. BLAST those pesky seagull-employed eagles or hawks! No sign of the glass or wires either. Quick cleanup. That isn't normal ops. They must have dozens of operators to pull this one off. WITHOUT A TRACE! Truly unbelievable. But wait! There is a trail of blood leading down the beach towards another access point.

I approached the blood and stuck my fingers in it and gave it a sniff. Smells like old motor oil. The blood leads right to a five gallon pail of motor oil. Strange way to store blood. I opened up the pail and found it with a few litres of black, foul-smelling blood that smelled like used motor oil. Who collects blood like this? What a weird thing. Right on the beach? But it's probably my blood that was stolen during my sleep. The black tarry blood tastes like metal and oil but I finish off the whole thing. I don't feel so good, probably because the seagulls or raccoons or their accomplices took too much of my blood. I can see another pail further up the beach.

I drank the remaining blood that smelled exactly like used motor oil in the hopes that my life force will be restored. I feel delirious, I can't walk straight...I vomit excessively all over the beach...I stumble and fall into the sand face first. Fucking...Seagulls. I am a big strong man.



# Trojan Dawn

John Fitzgerald



Rob Floyd

**The story of Britain** begins on the night Troy fell. But it begins with the gods as well. Even in that blood-spattered hell, the Divine was present, as Venus – visible only to her son, the Trojan prince Aeneas – dissuaded him from sterile vengeance and strengthened him with a vision of his future destiny: father of the Roman State and Empire. She drew back the veil and showed him Neptune and Minerva – imperceptible to the combatants below – waging war on Troy from Heaven, Jupiter giving them free rein as they tore down the walls and made the city’s collapse certain.

No human agency, she told him, could turn this tide. The future lay elsewhere for the Trojan race – in Italy and beyond. She led Aeneas to his house, through sheets of flame and tumbling masonry, then vanished, leaving him to urge his father Anchises and his wife Creusa to take his infant son Ascanius and leave the city – all four of them – and pass on into exile.

But Anchises had watched Troy fall once before. ‘I did not abandon my station then and I will not abandon it now.’ And as he spoke, tongues of fire began to dance around Ascanius’s head. They did not singe or harm the boy. They were a delight to him, in fact. Anchises took this as a sign and prayed to Venus, who had once been his lover, to send another token, that he might know for sure that his son’s words came from her and not the delirium of battle.

A comet, as if in response, scorched across the midnight sky from East to West. Anchises bowed low to Aeneas and picked up the statues of Apollo, Diana and Venus from the household shrine. Aeneas bore his father on his back and held Ascanius’s hand as they made their way to a secret city gate. Once there, Aeneas turned and saw that Creusa was missing. He ran back into Troy, heedless of the risk, but his living wife he failed to find, just her bodiless shade. ‘I tripped upon a fallen slab,’ she told him, ‘then smashed my head against the stone. Your mother was with me when I died. Everything she told you is true. The dawn, when it comes, will be radiant beyond measure.’

A cock crew, and the spectre disappeared. Back at the gate, Aeneas found that many more Trojans had joined his father and son. This gave him heart as he led them through the woods and up the mountain slope, mourning for fallen Troy but preparing already for future glory.

\*

The journey to Italy was simultaneously arduous, hellish and blessed. Yet Aeneas prevailed and reigned as King over his new city, Alba Longa. He was succeeded by Ascanius, then by his grandson Sylvius. Now Sylvius had a son named Brutus, and when the babe was born the elders of Alba Longa marvelled, for a golden nimbus shone around him which told them he was destined for great and glorious things. ‘He will be another Aeneas,’ prophesied the eldest. ‘As Aeneas

founded a second Troy in Italy, so this Brutus will found a third in an isle to the West and North.’

The people rejoiced and Brutus was loved by all. But when he was twenty he killed his father accidentally with an arrow while out hunting, and by the laws of the city he had to die or go into instant exile. So Brutus set sail with a handful of companions, but before he left he stole into the temple and prayed before the statues that Anchises had brought from Troy.

‘Take my icon with you,’ cried out a wild, ringing female voice.

Brutus stared and gazed about him, but no-one was there. Then he heard the temple guards approaching. He took the statue of Diana the Huntress – he knew it was her who had spoken – and vaulted out the window and down onto the harbour.

Brutus had countless adventures as he criss-crossed the Mediterranean, bringing strength and expertise to the Trojan colonies that had sprung up among the islands. Yet never did he have a goal or final end in view, and for nine years this went on, this aimless sailing, until he began to despair of the ancient prophecy.

One summer’s night on the coast of southern Gaul in a burnt-out shrine to Saturn, Brutus lay down to sleep. Just before dawn he awoke to find Diana herself standing before him. ‘Arise,’ she said, ‘for the island you reach next will be the realm marked out for you by destiny. Emblazon your sail with the visage of my brother Apollo, and when you step ashore hold my icon aloft and your enemies shall fall back before you.’

So Brutus and his men drew the face of the sun god on their sail in blue, gold and purple chalk. They set forth that afternoon. After three days they came to Britain and disembarked at Totnes. Brutus stood upon a rock – the Brutus Stone – and raised up high the statue of Diana. The race of giants that lived there turned and fled and the Trojans were victorious, sweeping through the land like wildfire.

Brutus gave a celebratory feast at the new city he had built on the banks of the Tamesis – Troia Nova. But the giants came by stealth at night and waged war upon their conquerors. Ancestral memories of the sack of Troy surged inside each man, but this time the gods were with them, Jupiter giving Diana and Apollo free rein as they drove Brutus and his men to victory.

Nine nights later, Brutus fashioned a small-scale horse of bronze and hid within it Apollo’s sail and Diana’s statue. He rode south in the third watch of the night to the White Cliffs and buried the horse deep within a shoreline cave. From there, he knew, the gods would guard and protect his divinely-appointed realm.

The sun arose, as he rode back home, over the spires of Troia Nova. Brutus stopped, saw, and understood. The prophecy had been fulfilled. The sacred story of Britain was well and truly underway.

# Henry V

William Shakespeare with introduction by Nathan CJ Hood



**For king, God and country:** *Henry V* is one William Shakespeare's most memorable history plays. In *Henry IV* parts 1 & 2 we had seen the delinquent Hal, led astray by the loveable rogue Falstaff, transform into a noble King Henry V of England. The realm is healed and, for once, it is not at war with itself. This allows Henry to turn his attention abroad, and the play follows his failed campaign to claim the French crown.

The first speech takes place during the siege of Harfleur. The English have been beaten back by the French. As morale begins to crumble, Henry rouses his men for another assault. He calls on them to unleash their primal, animal natures as the heirs of warlike men.

The second is delivered before the Battle of Agnicourt. Tired and surrounded, Henry's men are vastly outnumbered by their French foes. Some lament that they do not have a bigger army. Henry rallies their spirits by reminding them of the glory they will gain from fighting in this battle. The English emerge triumphant.

By Nathan CJ Hood

### Act 3, Scene 1

King Henry:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;

Or close the wall up with our English dead.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man

As modest stillness and humility:

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,

Then imitate the action of the tiger;

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;

Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;

Let pry through the portage of the head

Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it

As fearfully as doth a galled rock

O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,

Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit

To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.

Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!

Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,

Have in these parts from morn till even fought

And sheathed their swords for lack of argument:

Dishonour not your mothers; now attest

That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.

Be copy now to men of grosser blood,

And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,

Whose limbs were made in England, show us here

The mettle of your pasture; let us swear

That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;

For there is none of you so mean and base,

That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,

Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge

Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

### Act 4, Scene 3

Earl of Westmoreland:

O that we now had here

But one ten thousand of those men in England

That do no work to-day!

King Henry:

What's he that wishes so?

My cousin, Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin;

If we are mark'd to die, we are enough

To do our country loss; and if to live,

The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

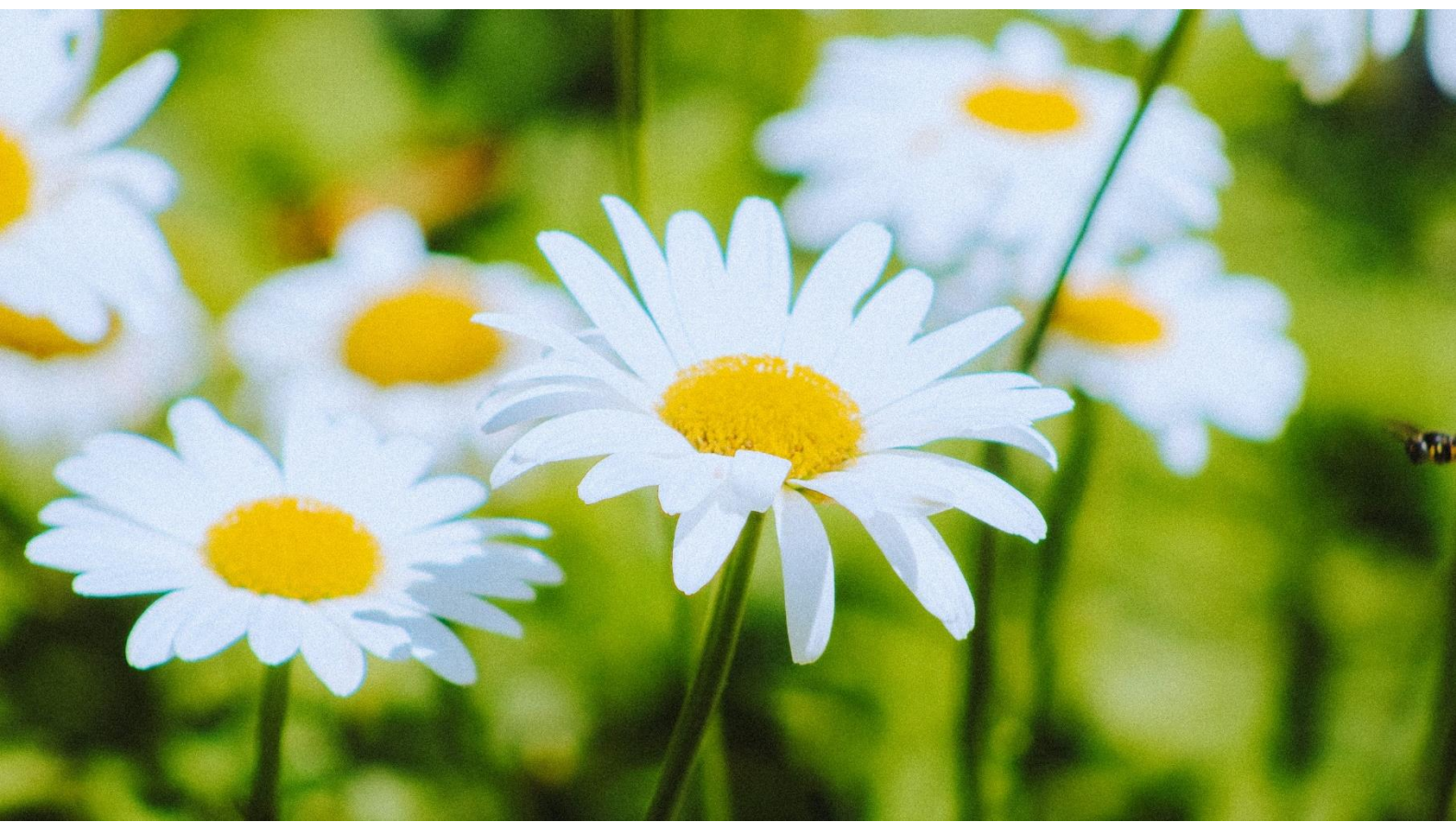
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,

Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;



It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive.  
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.  
God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour  
As one man more methinks would share from me  
For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!  
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,  
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,  
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,  
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;  
We would not die in that man's company  
That fears his fellowship to die with us.  
This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.  
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,  
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.  
He that shall live this day, and see old age,  
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,  
And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,  
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."  
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember, with advantages,  
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,  
Familiar in his mouth as household words—  
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,  
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—  
Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'red.  
This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be rememberèd—  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition;  
And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.



# Nathan Hood hosts The Merry Corncrakes Podcast

Treat yourself to interviews with feature authors and audiobooks of stories appearing in the Corncrake, together with sophisticated discussions on writing and story creation. Watch it now!



Youtube @ncjhood

# Mr Vinegar

Fairy Tale collected by Joseph Jacobs



**Mr. and Mrs. Vinegar** lived in a vinegar bottle. Now, one day, when Mr. Vinegar was from home, Mrs. Vinegar, who was a very good housewife, was busily sweeping her house, when an unlucky thump of the broom brought the whole house clitter-clatter, clitter-clatter, about her ears. In an agony of grief she rushed forth to meet her husband.

On seeing him she exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Vinegar, Mr. Vinegar, we are ruined, I have knocked the house down, and it is all to pieces!" Mr. Vinegar then said: "My dear, let us see what can be done. Here is the door; I will take it on my back, and we will go forth to seek our fortune."

They walked all that day, and at nightfall entered a thick forest. They were both very, very tired, and Mr. Vinegar said: "My love, I will climb up into a tree, drag up the door, and you shall follow." He accordingly did so, and they both stretched their weary limbs on the door, and fell fast asleep.

In the middle of the night Mr. Vinegar was disturbed by the sound of voices underneath, and to his horror and dismay found that it was a band of thieves met to divide their booty.

"Here, Jack," said one, "here's five pounds for you; here, Bill, here's ten pounds for you; here, Bob, here's three pounds for you."

Mr. Vinegar could listen no longer; his terror was so great that he trembled and trembled, and shook down the door on their heads. Away scampered the thieves, but Mr. Vinegar dared not quit his retreat till broad daylight.

He then scrambled out of the tree, and went to lift up the door. What did he see but a number of golden guineas. "Come down, Mrs. Vinegar," he cried; "come down, I say; our fortune's made, our fortune's made! Come down, I say."

Mrs. Vinegar got down as fast as she could, and when she saw the money she jumped for joy. "Now, my dear," said she, "I'll tell you what you shall do. There is a fair at the neighbouring town; you shall take these forty guineas and buy a cow. I can make butter and cheese, which you shall sell at market, and we shall then be able to live very comfortably."

Mr. Vinegar joyfully agrees, takes the money, and off he goes to the fair. When he arrived, he walked up and down, and at length saw a beautiful red cow. It was an excellent milker, and perfect in every way. "Oh," thought Mr. Vinegar, "if I had but that cow, I should be the happiest, man alive."

So he offers the forty guineas for the cow, and the owner said that, as he was a friend, he'd oblige him. So the bargain was made, and he got the cow and he drove it backwards and forwards to show it.

By-and-by he saw a man playing the bagpipes—Tweedle-dum tweedle-dee. The children followed

him about, and he appeared to be pocketing money on all sides. "Well," thought Mr. Vinegar, "if I had but that beautiful instrument I should be the happiest man alive—my fortune would be made."

So he went up to the man. "Friend," says he, "what a beautiful instrument that is, and what a deal of money you must make." "Why, yes," said the man, "I make a great deal of money, to be sure, and it is a wonderful instrument." "Oh!" cried Mr. Vinegar, "how I should like to possess it!" "Well," said the man, "as you are a friend, I don't much mind parting with it; you shall have it for that red cow." "Done!" said the delighted Mr. Vinegar. So the beautiful red cow was given for the bagpipes.

He walked up and down with his purchase; but it was in vain he tried to play a tune, and instead of pocketing pence, the boys followed him hooting, laughing, and pelting.

Poor Mr. Vinegar, his fingers grew very cold, and, just as he was leaving the town, he met a man with a fine thick pair of gloves. "Oh, my fingers are so very cold," said Mr. Vinegar to himself. "Now if I had but those beautiful gloves I should be the happiest man alive." He went up to the man, and said to him, "Friend, you seem to have a capital pair of gloves there." "Yes, truly," cried the man; "and my hands are as warm as possible this cold November day." "Well," said Mr. Vinegar, "I should like to have them." "What will you give?" said the man; "as you are a friend, I don't much mind letting you have them for those bagpipes." "Done!" cried Mr. Vinegar. He put on the gloves, and felt perfectly happy as he trudged homewards.

At last he grew very tired, when he saw a man coming towards him with a good stout stick in his hand.

"Oh," said Mr. Vinegar, "that I had but that stick! I should then be the happiest man alive." He said to the man: "Friend! what a rare good stick you have got." "Yes," said the man; "I have used it for many a long mile, and a good friend it has been; but if you have a fancy for it, as you are a friend, I don't mind giving it to you for that pair of gloves." Mr. Vinegar's hands were so warm, and his legs so tired, that he gladly made the exchange.

As he drew near to the wood where he had left his wife, he heard a parrot on a tree calling out his name: "Mr. Vinegar, you foolish man, you blockhead, you simpleton; you went to the fair, and laid out all your money in buying a cow. Not content with that, you changed it for bagpipes, on which you could not play, and which were not worth one-tenth of the money. You fool, you—you had no sooner got the bagpipes than you changed them for the gloves, which were not worth one-quarter of the money; and when you had got the gloves, you changed them for a poor miserable

stick; and now for your forty guineas, cow, bagpipes, and gloves, you have nothing to show but that poor miserable stick, which you might have cut in any hedge." On this the bird laughed and laughed, and Mr. Vinegar, falling into a violent rage, threw the stick at

its head. The stick lodged in the tree, and he returned to his wife without money, cow, bagpipes, gloves, or stick, and she instantly gave him such a sound cudgelling that she almost broke every bone in his skin.



# The Serf's Dinner

Alexander D'Albini



Twitter @towerofadam

Three men banged insistently on the door of the serf's house. He rose from his chair by the fire and hobbled to the door. Even for someone who struggled to move around, urgency inhabited his every step. Upon unlatching and pulling it open, he saw three bedraggled men. Even to a serf, he recognised the air of aristocracy. All three held themselves with certain intent and confidence. Their clothes were not threadbare, like his own. Nor were they of a poor weave. Regality dripped from their demeanour. 'Hello, dear friend', the three men said in discordant unison. The serf looked puzzled like an uncomfortable silence. The tallest man spoke, breaking the news, 'We were travelling through the woods.' He paused to smile, as though to help the serf understand their dreadful predicament. 'We were ambushed by outlaws. They killed the bodyguards, but we escaped.' The smile broadened, but begging eyes remained. The pause hung like an unwanted guest. 'We are lost, and have been for three whole days. We are starving. You are the first person we've seen. Could we come in for some food and ale?' 'Who are you?', the serf said cautiously 'I'm the Lord of Groomsby. This is Bishop Bone. And this is a merchant. His name is Selwyn of Tidesmarch', the Lord's smile seemed to grow larger and longer than even and his own pleading face. After the serf cautiously inspected their appearance, he nodded in agreement. He stepped back into the house and made his way to his chair by the roaring fire. The Lord sat in the other chair. The Bishop rested his rump on an old wooden box and the merchant perched on the table. Above the fire hung a pot of bubbling stew. The visitors could see the pheasant and vegetables bobbing around the pot as though in a beautiful culinary dance. This was a meal of celebration for the serf. He had managed to ensnare a pheasant and smuggled it back to his home. The aroma from the pot gently filled the air and the three strangers began to salivate. 'Can we share the pot of food?', the Bishop enquired. Then the serf scratched his chin. 'There is only enough for one', the serf said abruptly. The three strangers looked at each other. It was obvious what they were thinking. The serf pulled out a dagger and held it towards the three men. In a moment, they went from those in desperate need to intruders. 'We don't want any trouble', the Merchant said, holding his hands up. Then reaching for his money bag said, 'I'll pay you for your stew. I'll give you all the money I have on me.' The merchant was bluffing. All his money had been stolen by the outlaws. The Bishop stared at the merchant, almost in disbelief. Lord Groomsby had dealt with many of his type over the years and nothing would surprise him. But seeing his opportunity, the Lord offered, 'I'll give you land'. The serf's face was unmoved. He continued, 'I'll make you like me, a landed gentry. Rather than being a serf, you can be a landlord'. His smile gaped like an adder. Through his gritted teeth, he said, 'A simple serf today, tomorrow a great lord'. Along with the final word, his hand unfurled into the air, giving an impression of

otherness. The Bishop coughed. Clearly, an attempt to disrupt the Lord's speech of persuasion. 'You know it's your Christian duty?', the Bishop blustered. 'I am sure God will look on you kindly, if you gave up your meagre meal to me.', His voice lifting as though reading the Sunday collect or a text of Scripture. Impressively, his voice carried around the home like an angel's song. The serf, still holding the dagger in his hand, felt the pull of these temptations. His simple meal had transformed into a pearl of great price. 'What to do?', the serf thought to himself. The three men felt stranded in the silence, waiting for the serf's response. Which way would the wind blow? What would others do? The serf could be rich beyond his wildest dreams, but this would draw unwanted attention. He could be a landlord, but his tenants would despise him as they would know he was truly only one of them. Or he could receive promised riches in Heaven, by letting the Lord and merchant starve to death. A very unchristian thing to do. The serf sighed deeply and then spoke. 'I've heard your petitions, but all you offer is nothing compared to my pheasant stew.' The three strangers were nakedly downcast. He continued, "I do not believe you. You are fools to enter this forest. Even with your bodyguards. How can I trust people who are unwise? And Bishop, I am a good Christian man. I know the Proverbs and I deem you a fool. After all, better is the poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is crooked, though he be rich." There was another knock at the door. All four men turned to look at the entrance to the ramshackle house. The serf walked over to open the door, his leg seemingly feeling better after resisting temptation. There standing before him was Rowan the Outlaw with Oak by his side. As soon as the three sitting men saw the sharp figure of Rowan and the hulking manner of Oak, they ran like rats out the back door. The three men, the serf and the bandits, silently nodded to each other. They left the house, while the serf returned to his bubbling stew, sat down and considered all that just happened.



# A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For A King

## Part 2 Creeping Shadows

AR Green



Eugène Delacroix, Horse Frightened by Lightning



Greyson stood over the acrid, burning remains of the monster. He cursed it under his breath and jammed the splintered end of his broken spear into the flames. To his surprise, the body crumbled and broke apart when he struck it, spreading the fire across the ground. The men standing nearby rushed forward and quickly started stamping out the creeping flames before more of the village set alight. The old guardsman looked over at the burned out buildings and nodded to Kildan as he came towards him.

“Some of these villagers didn’t go down without a fight, m’leod” he said, nodding towards the charred remains of a home.

“Aye, it does look that way, Greyson”, said Kildan, pausing to look at the blackened husk of the building, and spotting one or two other burned out fires scattered around the village. His eyes fell on the lifeless body of the young guardsman laid out on the ground.

“Have the men grab that cart and use it as a funeral pyre for Yarik, you can use the embers to start the bonfire. After their great battle with the demons, the Gods used the demonfire to reseed these lands, so we shall use it to return Yarik’s soul into their hands.”

Greyson nodded. He dropped the broken shaft of his weapon into what was left of the flames and picked up the severed spearhead from the floor, placing it into his pack. Before setting about carrying out his Leodman’s orders, he walked over to the fallen knight and took up his spear.

“Without any blood on this you won’t make it into the halls of our forefathers, I’ll see if I can get some for you,” he said, placing the weapon on his back.

He gathered a few of the men and had them load the body of Yarik onto the cart. Kildan walked up to the body and reaching in with a knife he cut a wooden ring from the young warrior’s belt. He stepped back as a pyre of broken furniture from the ruins of the village was built around the young warrior; once enough fuel had been added, the guardsmen picked up the cart and trundled it over the burning embers of the creature on its one good wheel.

Some men were sent to gather sticks for the funeral ceremony from a toppled over fence nearby. Guards were posted to watch the woods for any signs of movement. Kildan had a quiet word with the guard holding the girl, who’d managed to find out that the village was attacked three days ago. Her mother and father had died fighting one of the beasts, and she did not know where her brothers and sisters were as she’d lost track of them during the chaos. Once the guard had finished retelling the girl’s story, Kildan charged him with her care till they reached Ealocian. The guard nodded solemnly, “I will guard her as if she were

my own flesh and blood” he said, placing her upon his horse.

After a few minutes the funeral pyre was ablaze. Kildan sat atop his horse and led the men in prayer.

“Solorin, we bid you take our fallen brother by the hand and guide him to the halls of his ancestors. May the flames release him from his mortal duties, and free his spirit to walk the path we all must one day take. Oh great Solorin, by your light may we all find and follow the righteous path.”

Findan watched as his father cast the first stick into the flaming pyre and spoke the sacred words.

“In life, duty. In death, freedom.”

He followed his father’s lead and cast his stick into the fire, and repeated the sacred words. As soon as the last guardsman had thrown his stick and spoken the words, the rains began falling once more, hissing as they dripped into the fire. Kildan shouted to his men.

“It is another two days’ ride before we are out of these woods. We will ride as hard and as fast as our mounts will carry us, but keep your wits about you. There will be more of those beasts lurking in the shadows, but we will return to deal with them later. Right now, our goal is to make it home safe, so if you spot any of the creatures, give one blow on your horn and we will run rather than fight for now. So follow me!”

Kildan turned his steed and set off at a trot, meaning to make good progress through the woods. As the party left the village the trees began closing in on either side of the road, until eventually they formed a canopy overhead; the light pitter patter of rain fell on the tree leaves, filling the air with an earthy smell. After riding for several miles, the hair on the back of Findan’s neck stood on end.

“I think they are following us again, father. I can’t see them, but I can feel their hungry eyes upon us.”

“I feel it too, we’ll pick up the pace for a bit and hopefully might lose them” said Kildan, as he leant forward urging his horse to pick up some more pace.

The party cantered along for a mile or two, but the tension among the men did not ease. The grey cloudy sky faded into a dark starless night as Kildan ordered the men to set up camp. The guardsmen quickly threw up their tents by the roadside, before huddling in silence around their campfires. Eating the last of the dried meat the men had been kindly supplied by Leodman Irenhand, they kept a watchful eye on the woods. Kildan asked Greyson to arrange the watch over the night. Torches had been placed around the treeline to ward away the darkness. As Findan sat by his campfire, the young Leodson could feel the unease in the camp; he had overheard some of the men

whispering about shadows moving near the torchlight. Findan stood to make his way to his tent, and looked out into the darkness. As he scanned his eyes over the treeline, he could see no trace of moving shadows. The torchlight flickered in the night, the young Leodson spotted that one of the torches looked to have tipped over - or so he thought. As he looked more carefully, he realised it wasn't a torch at all - two fiery red eyes cut through the darkness, staring right at him. Findan took a step back and placed a hand upon his dagger. As he was watching the red eyes, he almost jumped out of his skin as he felt a hand fall upon his shoulder.

"They've been watching us a while lad. The one that attacked us was likely just a starved chancer that had come to pick through anything left in the village. I have a sense these ones are waiting for something. I would get yourself off to bed and get whatever rest you can," said Greyson.

Findan righted himself, nodded to Greyson, and said "I'll try, but I doubt I'll get much sleep knowing those things are watching us".

What should have been just a few hours, seemed to stretch out into eternity. At least the rain had let up through the night, thought Findan as he stretched. As the young Leodson climbed out of his tent he was greeted by a sky filled with rolling grey clouds and the downcast faces of men - he had not been the only one to struggle with sleep that night. He walked over and sat by his father at the campfire to eat his breakfast.

"We're surrounded", said Kildan.

"I know, but why are they waiting?" asked Findan.

"They are waiting for their leader. We managed to get the little girl from the village to speak a bit more last night. She told us what happened in the attack. They came at night. First they surrounded the village, picking off anyone who attempted to escape. Then after three days of waiting, the pack leader arrived. A wolf three times the size of a horse, she said. The damned thing must have been as big as the great bear Lodric slew on the Godly hunt."

Findan felt his heart sinking, "But Lodric only managed to kill the great bear with the help of the Gods, with the very sword we've been sent to find."

Kildan nodded, "Yes, so we'd best hope that monster doesn't find us before we make it out of these woods". And with that, Kildan stood and began issuing orders to break camp, and make ready to ride once more. They would have to ride hard and hope that the creatures in the trees kept their distance.

As the men cleared their camp, the shadowy beasts in the woods were no longer trying to hide. Several of the creatures sat in the treeline, with their fiery red eyes focused on the group, watching... and waiting. As the party set off the wolfish monsters parted, clearing a

path for them to move along the road. The men rode hard, not stopping to rest their horses, where normally they would. The horses themselves were skittish, and showed no signs of complaint at being pushed so hard. It seemed they, like their riders, would just be happy to be out of this place away from the dark creatures.

As the party pushed on, the trees began creeping closer to the path once more, with low hanging branches seemingly grabbing at the men's spears. The woods themselves began to feel like a noose tightening around the group's neck. The shadows that had stalked them from the village drew closer. One of the men drew his bow and sent an arrow at a creature lurking in the treeline. The arrow skittered through the foliage and buried itself in the dirt. The beast skulked away, and the others drew back to a safer distance.

After many long hours, the light began to fade. The party rode on, eager to make as much as they could of what little daylight was left. As the veil of night was pulled over the sky, Kildan led the group to a small clearing, and they once more began setting up camp and building a ring of flaming torches. Before settling in for the night, many of the men sat staring into the darkness; the sound of rustling leaves and breaking branches sent a chill down Findan's back. Kildan looked on as the night-watch loosed arrows into the darkness at the sea of glowing red eyes.

"Spend your arrows wisely men, you'll likely not be able to get them back come morning," the Leodman said, before he turned in for the night.

Kildan awoke to shouts and monstrous howls. The Leodman stuck his head out of his tent, looking out into the woods he could see scattered fires where some of the beasts had been felled, and dark shadows swarming around the camp by the light of the flames. The bowmen stood in the centre of the camp, quickly nocking and loosing more arrows into the horde. Four more of the monsters fell before Kildan had pulled on his boots. The pack pulled further back, melting into the inky blackness of the woods. Many of the men were awoken by the commotion, the pained howls of the dying beasts dragging them out of restless sleep. There were still no stars this night by which to even try to find a path, so the men simply sat waiting for the dawn.

Eventually, the woods began to lighten up again. The night had been cold, wet and miserable; the flames of the downed beasts had barely abated before the heavens opened. The men sat with the hoods of their cloaks pulled tightly around their faces, huddled by the campfires shivering and soaked to the bone. The Leodman stood and removed his hood, running his hand through his salt and pepper hair, shaking off some of the water. With rainwater dripping from his furrowed brow, he ordered the men to break up camp and mount up. He meant for them to leave these woods before the day was out.

Again the men set about packing up the camp, keeping an ever watchful eye on the treeline waiting to see if the shadows would start moving. An unholy howling started up all around the camp. The little girl from the village screamed in terror at the sound. Greyson scooped her up and quickly handed her to Kieren, who Kildan had charged with her protection. The rest of the men dropped their packs and grabbed the nearest weapon to them, waiting to hear their Leodman's command.

After many years fighting and commanding in the armies of the King, Kildan knew if he made the wrong call now, it would all be over.

Findan turned to his father for orders. He saw a look of cold steel flash in Kildan's eyes as he boomed out, "Get to your horses, leave anything not already packed!"

There was a mad scramble. The men went rushing to their horses and mounted up as quickly as they could. They formed up on Kildan and set off at a gallop, abandoning half of their packs in the clearing. As they rode, Findan spotted a giant wolfish monster running full pelt toward them - smoke and fire billowing from its chest with every breath it took. It was easily three times the size of the first beast they had slain.

Kildan pushed the men and horses as hard as he dared, but the pack was gaining on them. The Leodman knew they would catch the party before they made it out of the woods. Kildan spotted a clearing up ahead.

"We cannot outrun these beasts. We must stand and face them. Make for the clearing up ahead!"

Bruncwic was galloping flat out, the earth shaking beneath the hooves of the party, as they made it to the clearing. Once into the open ground Kildan pulled on Bruncwic's reins, sending the horse wheeling to the right. The party followed his lead, turning to face the pack of monsters that hunted them head on. As the Leodman rode forward, the dark beasts burst through the treeline like smoke billowing out of a raging wildfire. Kildan pulled back hard on the reins and raised his spear so the men could see him.

"Make a circle, we'll stand and fight them here!" the Leodman yelled, waving his spear.

The riders heeded the call and the thunder of hooves faded, being overcome by the snarls and barking of the monsters closing in on them. The men quickly turned their horses so that no matter which way the beasts came, a spear would be ready and waiting to greet them.

The monsters came upon the party like waves breaking upon the shore. The most bold among the pack went dashing toward the spears, then falling back into the churning horde. A creature, three times the size of a bear, came prowling out of the woods. The

hulking monster sat watching as the pack went swirling around the party. The creatures became more reckless, hurling themselves against the shields and spears of the guardsmen. After a short while, a ring of fire surrounded the group. Some of the horses began to panic - one of the horses reared up, bucking its rider into the flames; the monsters moved in quickly to finish him off.

The burnt out embers of the first slain beasts littered the battlefield, as the fighting went raging on. Three more men were felled, falling to the flames and the jaws of the brutes. The monstrous cyngwulf that had been leading the pack finally stood up. It strode back and forth looking for an opening; finding one, it went rushing through the fighting. The beast leapt through the fire in a single bound, lunging at the Leodman. Yarik's spear held by Greyson slammed into the side of the beast, knocking it to the ground. Flames burst forth, driving Greyson's horse back and pushing the spear out of the wound with a fiery hiss. The old guardsman quickly jabbed again at the beast - but it had regained its footing and went skipping backward, avoiding the strike. Kildan spotted his son on the other side of the circle, fending off three of the beasts; he shouted to Greyson, "Go help my son!"

Before Greyson had a chance to act, the monster went charging forward once more and crashed into the captain's horse. Greyson fell to the ground as his horse collapsed beneath him. The old guard frantically scrambled to his feet and drew his sword. The beast turned, leaving the horse, and its red eyes locked onto Greyson. The old warrior raised his sword, ready to strike. The cyngwulf charged, knocking Greyson off his feet - he felt a searing pain in his arm. Gritting his teeth, Greyson drew all his strength and drove his blade deep into the beast's belly. The monster wheeled backward, howling in pain - Kildan saw his opening and launched his spear at the cyngwulf. A loud crack went ringing out, the spear had passed clean through the monster's head; fire erupted from every crack in the beast's coal-like pelt. It reared up on two legs, flames bursting from its mouth, then collapsed onto the floor with a loud thud. The other beasts all stopped dead upon hearing the noise. There was a moment of stillness then, like smoke in a strong breeze, the pack scattered to the wind.

The men collected themselves, taking a moment to rest. The circle of fire was starting to die down, a towering inferno sat in the middle of the ring where the leader of the pack had fallen.

"Gather the wounded and burn the fallen. All have fought bravely here today, and have more than earned a place in their ancestor's halls."

When all was counted, five men had fallen and three had been wounded; including Greyson, the left sleeve of his mail had been shredded and his arm was starting to blister. Kildan looked around at his men,

soot speckled their faces and the smell of burning flesh hung in the air. The Leodman smiled, breathing a sigh of relief upon seeing Kieren - true to his word, the guardsman had managed to keep the girl from the village safe from the worst of the fighting. She sat upon his horse, a small beacon of light in the blackened surroundings.

Poultices were made for the wounded. Kildan walked through the burning glade, cutting wooden rings from the belts of the fallen. Once he had gathered all of them, he nodded and the men who were still of able body gently lowered their fallen brothers into the fire of the cyngwulf. A brief prayer was spoken, and the party made ready to ride. The injured were helped onto their horses and the men set off.

The trees became more sparse, daylight began breaking though the leafy roof overhead. The party had eventually made it out of the woods into the open fields of their homeland, but their return home had not come without a cost. Many of Kildan's best men had been taken from him, men that the Leodman knew he would have counted on for the journey beyond Thregar River - yet the gods had decided it was time for them to travel on to their ancestors' halls instead. The grim duty of telling the wives and children of these men that they would not be coming home, weighed heavily on his mind. Was this the dark tide the king had dreamt of, dark forces rising up to swallow the land? The question swirled around in Kildan's head, haunting him just as the pack had done - the answer went slipping away like smoke in the night.

Wind whistled through the green fields that surrounded the road. The party went marching on, with grief quietly gnawing away at the hearts of the men. Their brothers had fallen; not off on some brave adventure beyond the river but, in their own lands, on the road home. Kildan wondered if this was the Gods testing them to make sure they were ready for the journey and trials to come. He thought of the legend of Lodric - the Gods never acted without reason, men's lives were open to be claimed by them at any moment. The most any mortal could hope to do was face the duties given to them with dignity and honour.

The men trudged onwards, wondering what fate held in store for them beyond the river. They rounded one last turn in the road and their eyes fell upon home. Kildan watched his keep slowly growing tall over the land - as he spotted the wooden towers and walls of the village, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was mid afternoon when the riders passed through the gates, a small group gathered to greet the men as they dismounted. The looks of joy on the faces of those gathered, sharply turned to one of dismay when they realised a good number of the party were missing; upon seeing how gravely some of the men had been wounded, they knew the missing would not be coming home.

Kildan watched as one of the stable boys broke down weeping after being handed the reins to a riderless horse - which Kildan knew to belong to Beorn. The Leodman dismounted and walked over to the boy. He gently lifted the boy's chin and laid his hand upon the lad's shoulder.

"This was the horse my father rode out on," said the stablehand, gripping the reins tightly.

"Your father was a good man. He died a warrior's death, you should have no doubt of that. I'm sure he will find his way to the halls of our forefathers, but that isn't our path to walk yet. I'll bet you want to do nothing more than run home to be with your family right now but, just like your father, you have a duty to carry out. I need you to be as brave for me as your father was. Take mine and your father's horse to the stable. Then comes the hard part, you're the eldest of Beorn's sons are you not?"

"Yes, I am," said the stable boy, drying his eyes on his sleeve and straightening himself up.

"Then you are now the head of your household. When you are done with the horses, go home and bring the news of your father's fate to your family - tell them that he died a warrior's death. You must be the pillar that they lean upon now."

The stablehand nodded solemnly and took the reins from Kildan's hands. Kildan watched the boy lead the horses away. The Leodman sighed, his mind turned to the grim duty of bearing the bad news to those families who had lost loved ones. The confusion, the anger, anguish and despair he was fated to plunge these poor families into. As Leodman, he could hand the duty of informing the families off to his heralds, but these men were his knights. To leave the task to heralds would not be fitting of their station in life. Greyson would normally accompany Kildan to break the news that men had fallen under his command, but Greyson himself was in no fit shape to do anything other than rest.

Kildan headed back to the main bulk of the party and found Findan, "Walk with me son." The Leodson finished up handing the reins of his horse off to a stableboy and joined his father - the Leodman put an arm around him.

"Son, one day we must all go to the halls of our forefathers. When my time comes, you will sit in the Leodman's chair. All of my duties to the kingdom of Gyldenorfia will be passed down to you", Kildan said. Looking up, Findan spotted a glimmer of sorrow in his father's steely eyes - a small chink in his armour.

"I know, Father, and I will be ready when the time comes."

"Of that I have no doubt, but some duties are harder than others. I have one such duty now; Greyson is too

wounded to come with me, do you think you're ready to take his place?"

Findan nodded.

"Good. We're going to tell the families of the fallen, the fate of their loved ones. There will be grief like you've never seen before, and you may not share too deeply in it. We must be seen to be above it, as a steadfast calming force that can be called upon if needed."

The afternoon sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon when the pair came to the first house. Telling the families of the fates of their loved ones was grim work. Findan watched as mothers, wives and sisters broke down in tears. Brothers, elderly fathers and sons cursed and slammed fists into tables and walls. Worst of all, he saw crying children too young to understand, who had been overwhelmed by the outpouring of their family's grief. Findan often found himself struggling to hold back tears as the lump in his throat grew, yet the Leodson kept himself together. He stayed strong for the fallen and made his father proud.

Finally, the pair reached Yarik's smallholding, it sat in a field overlooking a stream running to the east. The father and son passed the home of one of the farming families that worked the fields for Yarik. Findan felt a hand on his chest barring the way forward.

"Son, you knew Yarik better than I. If you're feeling up to it, you can tell the family what fate befell him."

Findan nodded solemnly, "Okay. You were right by the way, I have seen what feels like a lifetime's grief in a single afternoon. Can we wait here while I right myself before we go on?"

"Of course son, take as long as you need."

The young Leodson took a drink from his waterskin, cleared his throat and splashed some water on his face. The sunlight was quickly fading now. Yarik's home was a squat building of only one floor; Findan reached out with an unsure hand and knocked on the roughly hewn oak door. The young man's mind raced as they waited. Whose life was he about to change for the worse?

The door slowly swung open. A young woman with long brown hair and large doe eyes stood in the doorway holding a suckling babe; upon seeing the Leodman and his son, confusion took her.

"M...My Leod and Leodson. I... I thought you were still away? At the King's court with Yarik. I'm sorry, I forget myself. Please, come in." The young woman stammered, stepping back and pulling over her shawl to better cover herself.

"Kathrin, who is at the door?" shouted a man from the back of the home.

"Leodman Kildan and his son Findan."

The two Leods entered Yarik's home. They found themselves in a small cosy hall. Kathrin led the men to a blazing hearth, and took a seat on a wooden stool. She rested her babe in her lap and began swaddling it in a blanket.

"Please, sit," she said sheepishly, pointing to a bench by the fire.

Kildan and Findan took a seat on the bench, and a haggard old man stepped into the room from a door toward the back of the house. He hobbled over, leaning heavily on a stick, and joined them by the fire.

"Where is my son, my Leods, don't tell me that he has run off?" said the old man, with a half hearted smile.

Kathrin watched as the stoney faces of the two Leodmen showed slight cracks of pain. Tears began welling up in her eyes.

"He's not coming back is he?" she asked quietly, between gentle sobs.

"No, I'm afraid he isn't. He didn't run - on our journey back from the capital we were hunted," Findan said, with a tone of regret.

"Yarik died a warrior's death. Were it not for his bravery, we would never have made it back. You should be proud of him and honour his memory," added Kildan.

The old man winced.

"What happened to my son?"

Kildan stood up and gently led the man to one side, away from the fire and out of earshot of Yarik's wife.

"We came upon the village of Whet, in the Bleowoods - most of it had been burned to ash. While we were looking around, we were attacked by a beast of the old world. Your son was caught wrong-footed, and killed by the demon. We gave him a send off fitting of a warrior, and I will be sending men into the woods to clear out the rest of the beasts", said Kildan. The Leodman's stony mask hid his frustration well enough that Yarik's father did not see it, but Findan saw it clear as day.

The old man angrily wrung his hands around his stick. "I'm glad to hear you sent him off proper, I would kill all the rest of those damnable creatures myself if I could, but at my age and with my leg, I'd likely fare no better than my son did." The old man limped over to Kathrin, who was still quietly sobbing; he awkwardly got down on one knee and hugged her.

"We will leave you both to mourn in peace, there will be a service held for the families of the fallen on Fynger Hill to the north of the keep tomorrow evening. You will be welcome there, and a servant will

be along later to bring you Yarik's personal belongings," said Kildan, standing up. Findan followed his father's lead. As the young Leodson left, he could feel the warmth and joy he had sensed when he first set foot inside the home had been snuffed out.

The ride back to the keep felt like it dragged on forever, his thoughts trapped in that small home with Yarik's widow sitting crying over her babe. Who would teach the poor child to become a man? His grandfather looked like it would not be long before he too would journey to find the halls of his forefathers. Fate had handed that young soul a hard road to walk; Findan began wondering how hard his own path would be to follow. A journey to the borderlands was no easy task yet his family were not quite as wyrd as the royals, and so were not able to bend the path fate set out for them.

The twilight had faded into night by the time Kildan and Findan reached their home. The fires of the keep were well stoked, and the food was warm; yet no matter how much Findan ate or how close to the fires he sat, he felt cold and empty. The Leodson gave up on food and headed to his room. As he opened the door a wall of heat hit him. Findan stepped into his room and took a seat by the hearth. The fire danced back and forth, pulling the Leodson's mind back into the heat of battle. A knock came from his chamber door.

"Come in," said Findan, still sitting with his thoughts lost in the fire.

Findan felt warm arms wrapping around him, red hair fell down upon his shoulder.

"Mother," said Findan, looking up into his mother's smiling face.

"Hello son, your father tells me you are to journey beyond the river into the borderlands. It seems just when I thought things might calm down, the winds of change blow all my beloved men away again."

"We'll be fine mother, the king saw our journey in a dream."

"Yes, I'm sure he did, but that doesn't bring you or your father back to me any faster - nor make your leaving any easier."

"I swear we'll be back as quickly as we can. We came back sooner than expected from the capital, maybe this will be no different?"

Findan's mother frowned.

"Don't be foolish son, the borderlands are dangerous,"

Findan lowered his gaze to the floor.

"I know but, if the King has foreseen it, surely our victory and return is fated?"

His mother smiled at him, but the young Leodson could see the pain in her eyes. She gently stroked his hair, "Let us hope so. I will pray that the Gods show you the right path. Now, try and get some rest"

"Thank you, I'll try."

Findan's mother hugged him once more and left, softly closing the door behind her. Findan added another log to the fire, then walked over to his bed and flopped onto it. After sleeping on the hard ground for twelve days, his bed felt like a cloud. However, before he could drift off to sleep, Findan was disturbed by more knocking.

He groaned, and rolled out of his bed, opening the door to find a young serving boy.

"Your father sends for you in his council, m'Leod, he's in his Solar."

"Okay, tell him I will be down shortly."

The messenger turned on his heel and rushed off.

Findan sat gathering his strength then rolled off the bed, he knew his father's councils often ran late into the night. Tired feet carried him along the hall to his father's court, he pushed through the doors to the Solar.

"Ahh Findan, nice of you to finally join us", joked Coyn.

"Have I missed much?" asked Findan, running his fingers through his hair, straightening it.

"No son, we are just getting started."



# Fading to Grey

-AR Green

On the edge of oblivion  
Looking down I see,  
Mine own reflection  
Looking back up at me.

How far have I fallen?  
Colours fading away.  
The seabed is calling  
All's fading to grey.

Looking up to the surface  
My life passing by,  
A distant echo,  
A far off cry.

Those I love reach out  
But none can touch me.  
I've fallen too far  
To the bottom of the sea.  
Where all the world's weight  
Presses down upon me.

# Featured Artist

# Helvetian Alpinist

[helvetianalpinist.substack.com/p/faust](https://helvetianalpinist.substack.com/p/faust)  
[x.com/thunervampire](https://x.com/thunervampire)







**Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I'm Swiss, a painter with a background in academics. I was previously based in Johannesburg, South Africa, but I'm now in the process of returning to my ancestral home in Switzerland.

**Why do you choose oil as your medium?**

I don't work exclusively with oil paints—I've experimented with all sorts of mediums, including unconventional ones from hardware stores. My more recent works, regrettably, have leaned toward water-based paints, which don't quite deliver the effect I'm after. When working on large-scale surfaces, fine art paints can become prohibitively expensive.



That said, I prefer oils for their depth and texture and the complexity they bring to mark-making. Oils feel richer, and while they're harder to use, they're more forgiving when creating abstractions. There's something about the way they wash or drip over a canvas. I think there have been a lot of successful works just by getting the texture of oils right on the canvas.

I've recently started mixing my oils again, using linseed oil and pigments. I like it when the mix is imperfect—it seems to offer the texture I've been searching for, especially on larger surfaces. This will be the starting point for my new work, which I expect to take in a different direction.

**As this is a literature magazine, can you tell us what you've been reading recently?**

Lately, I haven't been able to pick up a book. I miss having a cozy spot to read in my home or studio like I used to. Right now, I'm on the move, resettling, and I've left most of my books behind in what feels like a defiant act of anti-intellectualism. It's cope, though, as most of my reading now is limited to audiobooks and Substack articles.

I've been meaning to order a few obscure titles and books published by 'our guys' since they're more accessible to me now. I also plan to reread some classics. I recently came across an old coffee table book on Ernst Jünger in a secondhand shop. It was filled with photos from his life and a collection of old newspaper cut-outs left in the pages by the previous owner.

In this age of extreme image saturation, I'm looking forward to enjoying printed images again, as I did when I was younger. As a kid, I could spend hours paging through narrative image books like Asterix and Obelix or the Swiss classic Globi. I am not much of a RetVrn guy when it comes to art, but I do want to return to the slower, more intentional experience of paging through thick coffee table books.

**Aside from painting, do you have any other passions?**

No, I'd say painting is my only passion. Everything else feels like an interest — they come and they go. I sperg out on a lot of things. more consistently are interests in history, philosophy, fashion, photography, and even firearms, as well as a few other more fleeting obsessions. I was a fashy goth in the final throes of the scene, married my goth GF, and disappeared. I still have a few residual interests from that era.

**Please tell us about the Digital Art Exhibition that you are putting together.**

The Digital Art Exhibition (DAE) is a project born from the need to create a space for artists outside the constraints of institutionalized art. It's an attempt to bring together dissident creatives—visual artists, poets, and more. Built on the Unreal 5 Engine, the DAE is a fully immersive virtual exhibition space. Visitors will be able to download the application and explore the exhibition in a first-person perspective, navigating a towering, medieval-themed setting where artworks are displayed to scale. Each piece is accompanied by an interactive UI that provides detailed information about the artist and their work. The project is still in development, with a few selected artists already contributing their works. However, it is nearing completion, and we're excited about what's taking shape.

The DAE also serves a greater purpose: organizing a community of creatives around a shared vision. While we may not yet have grand exhibition spaces or established paths for ambitious artists, the DAE is a beacon—a first step in forging a path forward for those creating meaningful art in uncharted territories.

This initiative is as much about experimentation as it is about showcasing art.  
you can view the project on our website [digitalartexhibition.com](https://digitalartexhibition.com)

# Eagle's Flight

## Part 2

AR Duncan



By RHB2002 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=106231064>

**The ships had arrived at midday.** They gracefully cut through the crystal waters and moored between the diminutive fishing boats, the carved figureheads a full measure over them. They furled the green and white canvas sails and tidied up the decks, then the gangplank from the first ship lowered and a party of tall, well-dressed men came ashore. They were met on the dock by three of noblemen of Stratysca in fine clothing, and amongst a larger crowd of curious onlookers greetings were exchanged, hands were shaken, and kisses were given. From down by the water the men were brought up to the hall atop the hill where after a brief introduction to King Armel of Stratysca they were shown to their section of the hall to refresh themselves for the coming banquet. Once the men of note had departed, the dockworkers and sailors began their work unloading food, gifts, and equipment. Each went about their mundane work appropriately suspicious of the foreigners on their precious turf, earthen or wooden, but each were men well accustomed to foreign ships and lands and once the work was done and the alcohol flowed and the men were not so different after all.

As the largest town on the eastern coast of the Goddohenic lands, where the river Isca met the northern sea, Stratysca was no stranger to foreign trade. Men came and went in their seafaring ships to and from every land of the Earth even a casual walk through the docks exposed one to countless different tongues and accents. But these men were different. Rarely were they greeted in such a manner and even more rarely did so many rumours precede them, excited whispers and frantic gossip came from every angle. A man wheeling a cart out of town described the greetings that were given on the dockside to his companion pushing the other side of the cart. Two women stood at the entrance to a home talking about the possibility of war and what that might mean for their husbands. Two young boys excitedly exchanged descriptions of the tall strong warriors with fine clothing and decorated swords at their hips. Both claimed that these foreigners had noticed them in particular and not the other.

Within the hall, beyond those grand wooden doors embossed with iron and silver, and from one of the scattered low lying beds behind the wooden screen carved with stories from the tales of old and word of the poets, Beadmund listened to the clamour of a hall preparing for a feast in honour of the foreigners. In honour of him. He had sat at the upper table beside his father at many feasts but this was his first time being dignified within a foreign hall. As son of Horst, King of Treowick, Beadmund was to be received in Stratysca as was appropriate for a prince but in turn was to handle himself as was proper. He had dealt with minor matters in his father's absence but this was his first time as oathleader as such he had been sent in

care of his uncle, his father's trusted advisor, confidant, and war leader. Ælfric had been born only a year behind Horst and from the moment the newborn was lifted aloft by the midwife in front of the eldest the two were inseparable. At their father's death Ælfric had sworn to serve his brother and soon to be king to the bitter end. He had married once, to the most beautiful woman in the world and the only one who might have had an equal share in his loyalties, but childbirth took the mother and disease the child only days later. Ten months later Beadmund was born and the oath that had been given to the father was inherited by the child with a whole new depth. From this point on he was wholly dedicated to raising Beadmund to glory and preparing him to rule. And now Beadmund lay in this foreign hall listening to his uncle describe the correct oath taking manner in meticulous detail. But he listened with intent. He had witnessed his father take many oaths and wished to fulfil his duty correctly.

"And remember, you're in their land. Here you'll swear by their gods first and our gods second. And its your right hand that covers your heart"

He stared up at his uncle as his right hand moved to cover his heart and he called upon foreign gods first and then the gods of his people second.

"Good. What now?"

Beadmund recited the oath in faltering Goddohenic.

"Good. And then?"

"I present him with the gifts. The torc for him and the linen for his queen. Then I kiss his ring and let him do the same to mine"

His uncle gave a brief nod.

"You'll do well boy. You'll do well". It was measured praise but even that was a rarity from the man. Beadmund took it with the gravity it deserved.

Peering out from behind the screen to stare across the hall he saw three long tables running the length of the dim, smoke-filled hall. The preparations were almost complete and servants walked here and there finishing their business. The great fire flickering at the heart of hall cast shadows against dark wooden walls that had not seen any other light since their laying. Upon this canvas soaked in orange and black, distorted figures emerged to shamble and dance their way with unnatural gait mocking the petty form that cast them. In shadowy hand they held great treasures or weapons dripping with blood, but in the hands of flesh, servants went about their mundane duties with trays of food and pitchers of ale. All these shadows eclipsed the form of those who cast them, except one. She moved with a grace that showed the shadow for

what it truly was. From over the room and beyond the fire she watched and moved with complete elegance, raising the occasional arm to point at some imperfection that offended her nature. She was small but her enormous beauty loomed over the room and cried out the iniquities of ever man and woman around her.

“Carys, the king’s daughter. Already betrothed”.

One of his uncle’s men had sidled up beside him and caught the intent of Beadmund’s gaze.

“You’ll be meeting him soon enough. Son of one of the king’s men and in your father’s hopes, one of your brothers in battle. Keep your dignity and don’t let your father’s plans be naught.

And with that he returned to his business and left the young Seaxing prince to stare out across the hall once more. A servant came to gather the foreign warriors and nobles and the feast began.

Beadmund took the oaths he had trained for with perfect performance and the war was definite. The finer details would be worked out over the coming days but for now new oaths had been sworn and new brothers had been made so pragmatic concerns could wait until the morning. Ale flowed and good food abounded and just as the with the men upon the docks, these elders, nobles, and warrior were all much alike one another.

At the prompting of his uncle Beadmund and two other Seaxing young men joined the table of the young noble men of Stratysca. Together they talked and sang in faltering tongues, showed one another their collection of scars, and proved their worth by emptying tankards of ale. Many hours after the sun had gone only two young men remained in the competition. Eadric and Osmund, the two Seaxing youths, slumped over the table asleep as did the twins of the Stratyscan party. The prince had left for the night and the boy Talhearn now stared off at nothing as he muttered to himself. Beadmund sat opposite a young man much like himself. Tall and handsome and the perfect demonstration of the nobility of youth. Dark hair and hazel eyes, Anaerin was the one who was due to be wedded to the Kings daughter and used every opportunity to draw attention to that fact. He had held his alcohol better than his comrades but still the fatigue was beginning to show.

Without warning he stood up, steadied himself during a moment of unexpected wobbling, then beckoned his newly made brother to follow him. Beadmund was lead outside to the warm summer night with distant stars shining around the full moon in the complete darkness of the clear sky. The warm breeze was a glorious reprieve from the stifling atmosphere of the hall and all it represented in the minds of young men. Across the oceans lay the distorted image of the moon set high in the heavens, as the waters below gently

breathed and the endless back and forth carried on outwards until they were lost from sight in the gloom of the horizon. Somewhere beyond lay a young man’s home.

“Why must the old men continue to talk. We have waited too long for this war”, pronounced Anaerin as he stared up the coastline with its miles of unspoilt beach that wound up to the rocky headland that lay at its tip. Beyond it lay Meildun, and in Anaerin’s mind, glory.

Anaerin had always wished for war. His grandfather had died leading his men in battle and the only a body and the consequences of his honour returned home with the small warband. His grandson had only just been born and the two never met but for as long as he had known himself Anaerin had felt a great distant force watching him and pushing him ever onwards and over time as he heard the tales of heroic feats and victorious raids he became certain that the presence was his Grandfather watching over him. Anaerin had vowed to honour the auspicious inheritance he had been bestowed and was determined to head to war, and if death came with that then so did glory. Years of unrelenting focus had embedded this belief of honourable warfare in his mind so strongly that all else in life flowed from it. It was the source from which the river flowed down to both water the crops and feed the land yet also to break its banks and sweep aside all civilisation. One was not a man until a battle was won and a life had been taken, and between the gods of blue sky and grey stone he took an adolescent oath that he would not marry until he had achieved manhood. The day of the wedding was drawing close and whilst the old men seemed content to talk, youth would not let him sit still. And here he stood next to a young man of the Seaxings a people who knew only war from a young age. Anaerin was certain that this new brother would finally understand him.

Beadmund had been born only days after his father had finished his conquest of Treowick, the city that sat at the centre of the newest great kingdom. Since then his people had spread out upon the land and worked as they knew best. Wherever there was war to be found, mercenary warbands of Seaxing men were found also and as of yet not one peoples could stand before them. In the near two decades since Treowick had been captured it had grown into the wealthiest city in the land full of the plunder and earnings of foreign lands. The Seaxings learned war from youth but as the king’s progeny Beadmund was thrown into the fire remarkably young. He had first been taken to battle when he was eight. At his first battle his uncle had handed him a long knife and instructed him to follow behind the line of his father’s men and drive the blade into the hearts of the unlucky men the tsunami of war had left behind. He killed twelve men that day.

“You shouldn’t rush to war, it might be you who doesn’t make it back”.

“And you will? Of course it will be you Seaxings who know only war and glory that get the honour of battle. And then the loot afterwards”.

“I don’t mean that. You Goddohen are perfectly honourable and will fight well but...”

“Why have you come then? Intervening in a war between brothers to plunder the land and take it back across the ocean. This is not honourable. You fight for greed not glory”.

“I’m here because both of our leaders declared it to be so. I know you Goddohen are entirely and perfectly honourable and will fight as well as any men could but you don’t know war, you Stratyscans haven’t known even a battle in nearly two decades. This passion will get you killed. You shouldn’t wish for war. When you are called to fight, go and honour your oaths, but first worry about coming back alive before you worry about petty glory”.

Anaerin threw the first punch.

In the struggle of the following melee Anaerin pinned his Seaxing foe to the ground until he felt the struggle slow. He picked himself up and stepped backwards never letting his eyes wander from the piercing blue eyes of the young foreigner. Anaerin chided and taunted him then with explosive power Beadmund was on his feet and lunging towards the Goddohen youth, the fight beginning anew. This time, not reeling from the assault, Beadmund soon gained the upper hand and pinned his foe to the ground. Once again they separated but still their passions were not satisfied and once again they clashed. But between quick blows and attempted grapples neither could force submission upon the other. As evenly matched as any two men could be they each grew tired the

same, the enthusiasm of the kicks and jabs lessening as the ragged breathing increased and with each heartbeat success grew further away. Yet both youths lay outside the hall upon the hilltop under the glowing moon and refused to declare defeat. The carousing from the hall, the stars of the heavens, and the calm breeze all disappeared in the pursuit of victory but neither was capable of fully grasping her triumphal beauty.

They knew not how long they lay there but as victory’s embrace failed to materialise with her bountiful rewards the rest of creation faded back in for the two winded young men and their stroming egos. Paces away Ælfric watched the young men act as young men were wont to act. As long as it remained honourable he wasn’t going to stop them and this was nothing that could endanger the oaths that had been declared, as long as the correct words were said. Beadmund would learn those in the morning. He reached down and picked up his nephew, leading him inside. From just beyond the gilded doors of the hall the ever faithful bondservant watched as the elder Seaxing picked up the young foreigner and led him away for the night. Hoc ran to his master and dutifully helped him up. Only the certainty of his ego had been bruised and the two men descended the hill to home as the stars continued to shine and the sea continued its unceasing back and forth.

The following day the fight was of little concern to all but two particular youths and the dogs of war ran ahead to war at full pace, crying as they went. Over the next week when all had been accounted for the four hundred and sixty two men of Stratysca marched out under the glorious sun and along the coastal road. The three large boats of the one hundred and forty eight Seaxings rowed out of the harbour and let the winds catch their sails. Both armies went north and headed up the crescent coast towards the land that lay beyond the headland.





ISOLATION IS DENY. PINY TO BOND.  
FORGE YOUR LINKS!  
PLAY CARDS!

IRON HANDS POKER CARDS

Available on: [RADLOOT.COM](http://RADLOOT.COM)



# Antlers Must Be Shed

Dinah Kolka



Twitter - @DinahKolka

Dinah Kolka is founder and editor of Decadent Serpent [decadentserpent.com](http://decadentserpent.com)

'Катарина, Катарина! Смотри, олень!' I heard my sister's soft voice and begrudgingly stopped playing with a small beetle that was flipped on its back. I looked up - across the plain, on a grassy hill surrounded by firs, I saw a large, majestic stag, its neck long and stretched out with imposing antlers. The stag was looking away from us, far across the horizon seemingly watching the orange and purplish hues of the sunset spilling out onto the Russian skies. I've never seen a stag like this before. As a matter of fact, I have never seen one at all. I stood up abruptly and ran towards the animal; but before I reached him, the stag turned its head towards me, hesitated, and ran away into the distance. I watched it, stretching its legs and running through the European plains at high speed, with a sense of freedom and independence. I followed it with my eyes as it sprinted across the meadow, against the backdrop of the thick green forest, with its evergreen firs and ancient oak trees abundant with leaves and life. The birds were flying high and low against the sunset sky and the whole meadow was suddenly brought to life as the stag was running. My sister smiled at me, with a secret understanding of elder siblings. 'давай, пойдём.' She grabbed my hand, and I followed her, still trying to squint to see the animal. A large cross was dangling on my chest.

*Cairo, 1923*

I woke up abruptly, covered in sticky sweat. The air was stuffy, and I struggled to breathe. It was one of the hot Egyptian nights, filled with noise and ever-present heat. I touched my neck to search for the necklace only to remember it was long gone. The heat caused the linen fabric to stick to my body and I felt a guttural disgust when I remembered where I was. The room was small and stuffy - I was lucky to have a place for myself and did not have to share it with anybody. The room was bare, bar some ornamental wall décor. The ceiling was low with only one window which sometimes offered some respite. There was only just enough space for a bed and a dresser. The orange tint to the walls made it feel warmer than it already was and I felt frustrated with my presence here. I walked over to the window to open it fully. Part of me wished to sleep on the rooftop tonight, but I didn't wish to accidentally stumble onto anyone. My body has been defiled enough for today. The constellations of the stars mirrored the constellations of the bruises on my body caused by the dark hands I tried convincing myself to appreciate. It was a particularly hot night in Cairo, with occasional shouting coming from a nearby café. The thick, mudbrick houses were looming in front of me and if I focused really strongly, the soft sound of the Nile could be heard. Cairo never slept, and it didn't let me do it either. I laid back on the small bed again, curled in a ball. It was still better than Russia, I told myself. The window soon brought the relief of sleep.

I dressed myself quickly, cursing the feeling of stiff cotton against my body. Upon opening my little jewellery box, I cringed seeing the cross still sitting

there, jarring, offending me with its existence. I should have gotten rid of it so long ago, but it was studded with real diamonds, and I knew, perhaps one day when I was ready, I could use it to buy my freedom. Having picked a string of gold-plated bracelets and long earrings, I put them on. I quickly smudged some kohl on my eyes and smiled at my still youthful figure, ignored the malnourishment and focused on the highlighted cheekbones instead.

'красивая девушка!' I said to my own reflection in the mirror with a slight pang of sadness and quickly left. The bustling streets of Cairo were something I welcomed, despite the danger. I was met with a heavy blast of the hot air and the suffocating smell of a mixture of exotic spices and human waste. Locals setting up their stalls at the markets and children playing in the area brought the city to life which made it ever so slightly more bearable. The dust from the streets was irritating my nostrils but I pretended to accept it. After all, it was what I wanted. I walked into the café where my first clients of the day could be found.

'Oh, look, there's that Bolshevik bitch!' A British officer laughed loudly as I entered. I couldn't blame them, and it wasn't entirely a lie, so I just smirked and flirted. He blushed. In the daylight, he scoffed at me, in the nighttime, we united. He didn't particularly care about my politics, and I didn't particularly care about him cheating on his wife.

The café was stuffy and hot, and it's only been a few hours. I left to seek shade, hoping to find a cooler place. As I found myself outside, someone grabbed me into an alleyway. This wasn't unusual, but I felt so awful in the heat. The dark hands on my body again. The foreign scent. The sense of defeat. I cried afterwards, I wailed, as it was getting too much. I thought back to my cross hidden safely in the jewellery case. I ran back to my sleeping quarters, through the busy streets, bumping into people, Arabs, Egyptians, and Europeans alike. I needed to find my ticket out of here.

I rummaged in my jewellery basket and grabbed the cross. I put a shawl over my head so I wouldn't be readily recognised, and I walked into the market area.

I walked into one of the European trinket shops, as I knew I would have better luck with the Europeans rather than the locals. The polite British man smirked slightly upon seeing me.

'How can I help you, er.. Ma'am?'

'Good afternoon, I was wondering if I could sell you this cross?'

'Ah, let me see'

The man grabbed the cross and studied it carefully with a loupe. His eyes widened as he inspected the item but quickly returned to his usual cryptic face.

'Well, if you'd like to part with this, ma'am, this might be worth a whole £3500. Are you sure you wish to deposit it with us?'

'Yes, I'm sure. Please, just take it, it's just a trinket to me.' I said, however, I knew that I didn't mean it. My

grandmother's dying face flashed before my eyes, but I forced it out of my mind.

'Well, that sounds like a reasonable exchange. Please bear with me as I gather the bank notes for you.'

He brought through a little safe box and counted the currency thrice.

'Here it is, 3500 Egyptian Pounds. I wish you a good day, ma'am.'

I couldn't believe my luck. My road to freedom was easier than I expected and all it took was parting with the item that was so dear to my relative. I stuffed the banknotes in my chemise and walked quickly, ensuring I wouldn't attract the attention.

The plan was easy – all I needed was to get to Alexandria and get on a steamship. The only problem was trying to find a way in – I thought painfully of my sister who, despite living in Britain, would never help me.

I knew that I needed help from Mahmoud and that was where I had to go first. It didn't take me long to find him at one of the market stalls.

'Mahmoud, come with me.'

'Darling, I cannot abandon my stall like this! Many Europeans out today, I must tell you, I don't care what people say, I love the British rule, they bring in so much coin! I have never seen this many people interested in such trinkets!'

'Please Mahmoud, this is important.'

'That is acceptable, however, if I miss some rich officer ready to buy out everything I own in exchange for a fortune, I will be blaming you!'

'To be completely honest with you, there is a chance I could reimburse you for it.'

Mahmoud's eyes lit up.

'I suppose that changes things, milady.'

He led me into his small quarters not far from the stall.

'Please be quick. I don't have all day.'

I pulled out my bank notes onto the little table. Mahmoud gasped.

'Who did you rob? Do you realise that we're going to get into so much trouble? What have you done, Katarina?'

'Do not worry, I didn't rob anyone. It's all mine. I sold some of my jewellery. Listen, I need to leave. I need passage to England. Documents, and all.'

'What happened with yours?'

'I believe that's a question to Ahmed who brought me here in the first place.'

'Oh, I am sorry. I didn't realise he'-

'It's fine. The point is, I'm getting out. You can come with me, there's enough money here for two tickets.'

'No, don't worry. You, Europeans, you stick together. My place is here, in my country, which I love. British or not, Cairo is mine as it belonged before to my forebearers. Every grain of sand and every shimmer of wind on a summer's day belongs to me and it will take me when the time comes. In this soil, I was born and to this soil, I shall return. And so should you, by the way. What's good about escaping to

Britain? What's good in more struggle, in the life of an émigré? Return to Russia, return to the home of your people.'

'I can't, the Tsarists..'

'Whites are no longer in power, Katarina. I hear things at the market. The Reds took over, and the tsar died. You're free, Katarina. Go.'

I was deeply surprised but after years of self-inflicted political exile, my heart was muted to the calling of my motherland.

'No, I believe Britain it must be. Russia is the past, Russia is the innocence, the happy childhood, the memories that will never return. I am no longer the same and it would be foolish to try to argue otherwise.'

Mahmoud shook his head in disappointment.

'I am not sure if I can do this for you so fast – it takes many days sometimes and I need to be careful. The eyes are watching. Let's meet at Café Riche at dusk. I will inform you of my progress.'

I walked away feeling the sense of emptiness in my chemise. It was the lack of bank notes which I gave in their entirety to Mahmoud for safekeeping, but it was also the realisation that what Mahmoud said may have been correct.

It was getting dark, but the streets of Cairo were still alive with people. European expats, British officers, local Egyptians and Arabs alike were eating, drinking, indulging in nightly activities and scheming. It was dark and slightly cooler, bringing the relief I craved, but it did not calm my nerves. Date palms and acacia trees were looming above me as I passed them by, giving an impression of shadows and creatures, rather than cooling plants. I nervously found myself at Café Riche, which was quite a walk from Al-Darb al-Ahmar, where I usually stayed. I was concerned about being found out by my superiors from the brothel, although at this point, they shouldn't have noticed me missing yet. I ordered a tea and sipped it in small gulps.

I looked around me. The clientele was typical for this kind of night, full of whispers. I knew they didn't look at me kindly. I was white, after all, so assumed likely to conspire with the British. They couldn't be more wrong, naturally – I didn't care for Egyptian politics and frankly, at this point, I didn't care for any politics at all. My former Bolshevik sentiments evaporated the second foreign fingers touched my body.

As the hours passed, I grew more concerned about Mahmoud. Despite being exactly in the spot we agreed on at a specified time, there was no sign of him, and I grew restless. Additionally, I parted with all my money, my one chance at getting out of here.

Suddenly, the door to the café opened. I lifted my eyes. To my surprise, it wasn't Mahmoud who walked through the door. It was Ahmed.

He grinned at me merrily upon seeing me. A cold shiver ran down my spine. He walked to my table and sat down. I froze in fear.

‘How are you doing, my krasiva dzievoshka!’ He touched my cheek; I turned away with repulsion.

‘See, I thought I’d check in on my merchandise. Some birds have told me you were planning your escape from my little gilded cage. But don’t you worry, this has been taken care of. You don’t have to worry about any further revolutionary thoughts or ideas.’

As he was speaking, I noticed a golden cross studded with diamonds hanging on his chest. His face grew weary, just for a second, as if he felt threatened by something. But this was no time to feel any remorse for him. I knew that if I made the slightest move, he’d curb my freedom even further. So I sat still.

‘Either way, don’t attempt any further tricks like this. It could end up far worse for you.’ He grinned again and left. I shuddered.

I walked out into the night, exhausted. The cold realisation that I put myself in these circumstances was a sensation I could not shake off. The stubborn rejection of my Russian heritage, my country’s religion – all of it in vain, to be defiled by men of Egypt. It filled me with disgust and made me feel wasted and spent, a soul that was once whole was now shattered to pieces. But it didn’t matter after all – there was no redemption, there was no way out. The distant lands of Britannia, only this afternoon the land of milk and honey have now dissipated, long gone and forgotten. I left the café, still shaking. I walked back to my quarters, curled in a ball again and fell asleep.

The next day started just like any other, with men in cafes and alleyways making their advances. But I could no longer forget what happened last night, I could not forget what Mahmoud said to me.

I sought shade and found myself walking away from where I needed to be. I continued walking looking for shade, absentmindedly until I found myself in the Masr al-Qadima, Old Cairo. Wandering through the streets, I found myself in front of the St George’s Church. It was one of the Coptic churches, and I never particularly cared for the area. But this time, some invisible force was pushing me along and I saw it looming over me with its full glory.

The Church was originally built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and recently reconstructed following a fire a little over a decade ago, back in 1904 when it was almost entirely burnt. It was built on top of Babylon ruins, a triumph of Christianity in a foreign land. I was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion upon seeing it. St George, slaying a dragon, the triumph of good over evil. I wanted to go in, but I felt that the spot where the cross used to sit on my chest was slightly burning.

I wrestled with myself as I walked up the steps, looking in and seeing the icons from afar. But every time I proceeded closer, I knew I wasn’t worthy. The Church would have brought me the cool shade I needed and something else altogether—redemption. However, I knew that I had strayed too far from forgiveness.

I ran away from it, I ran and stumbled and wailed once again. The spot where the cross sat was burning like hot coals and I thought of my life as one long

spiral downwards. The rejection of my faith and heritage has led me to these foreign lands only to be defiled and lose my soul in the process. Everything I once held dear was torn and trampled and I was left with nothing left but my own shame. I knelt there, in the hot sand burning me but I ignored it. I ignored the lizards advancing towards me and the Egyptian mongoose sniffing my body. I wailed and for the first time in years, I prayed for redemption.

The overflowing shame was so strong, it has never truly left me. It perched on my shoulder throughout each sin and as I continued farther and farther into my degeneracy, I tried to silence it, but it would never leave. Now, the shame was out in full force, like a heavy stone tied to my chest. I replaced my cross with a boulder and my faith with shame.

I was exhausted from crying and the sense of shame, and I fell asleep, right there in the desert, surrounded by lizards and foxes.

‘Катарина, Катарина! Смотри, олень!’ I heard my sister’s soft voice and begrudgingly stopped playing with a small beetle that was flipped on his back. I looked up - across the plain, on a grassy hill surrounded by firs, I saw a large, majestic stag, its neck long and stretched. This time, the stag was missing his antlers, they were lying next to him, discarded. The animal looked youthful and humble, completely changed. I was determined to touch him and went closer slowly and with humility. Finally, my hand touched its soft fur. I looked into its animal eyes, and they looked back at me, its pupils dilating. Then, I let him go. And so, he ran, across the European plains, it felt almost effortless, jumping forward, free, ever so free. But this time, I understood.

I woke up to the sun shining right in my eyes. I saw a little fox next to me, staring directly at me. Everything felt slightly different as I stood up and realised, I was no longer bound to continue my mistakes. The guilt I felt was what I was meant to listen to all this time.

I walked back to Old Cairo, right back to Masr al-Qadima, to St George’s Church. I walked up the steps, and this time, I found myself inside the Church. There was no mental or physical block stopping me from entering the steps, the door was wide open and I crossed through it confidently. The church was nice and cool, built to withstand the highest temperatures. The frescoes and mosaics were breathtaking, carefully painted by the monks, and the soft breeze reminded me of my childhood, the grandmother, and her last words to me ‘Do not ever abandon your country and your faith – these are the two things you should always hold dear. Your sister may stray, but you were always different. Hold on to it, as if you ever lose your innocence, it will be a great loss for the world’.

I prayed, I prayed fervently for the forgiveness for all my transgressions, for the return to the motherland, for the grasses and the trees of the taiga, for the Moscow ever so beautiful, for my sister to

---

understand, I prayed for the hope and resilience, and for the Russian sun to shine upon me once again.

I walked outside and I simply kept walking. Something guided my feet as I continued, and the views changed from a populated city to the breeze of the Nile. Long papyrus thickets came into view, and I saw multiple birds flying near. I sat near the river, taking in the tranquillity of the place. Suddenly, I saw a Nile monitor, the lizard was moving slowly forward to meet me, with no fear in its eyes. It stopped looking directly at me, with its split tongue appearing now and then. I looked back at it, unsure of how to greet the animal. The animal maintained its eye contact as it slowly walked towards the river, dragging its slow body behind. Something told me I should follow the lizard. I kept watching it and as I looked into the water, I noticed something was shining within it.

I put my fingers through the water and my hands stumbled onto an item. I grabbed it and pulled out my gold cross studded with diamonds. I gasped. The lizard was sitting next to me, still watching me attentively.

I kept walking across the riverbank, suddenly noticing the floating body of a man from afar. I ran towards it with a mixture of disgust and fear. I managed to bring the body closer to me with a large branch that was lying nearby and as I moved the head towards me, I gasped and fell backwards. It was Ahmed. The lizard kept watching me, placing itself onto a pile of freshly dug soil. As I went towards it the lizard moved away. I started digging the soil with my hands, with the soil creeping behind my nails, darkening my skin.

Under the fresh pile of soil, there were my newly made documents and a stash of my money. Wherever Mahmoud's body was, he still managed to fulfil his promise. And so, I was going to do what he wished for me to do. I put the cross around my neck again.

Then I left quickly and got on the late train to Alexandria.

\*\*\*

I stood completely still in front of her grave, adorned in a long mourning dress with a scarf tied around my head. I placed flowers on the grave, hoping she knew, hoping she could see me now, finally at peace. The Russian sun was shining through the tall birch trees directly onto the grave with the name engraved with Cyrillic lettering and filled with gold. I felt the cross on my neck under my coat and squeezed it until I drew a little bit of blood. There was something calming about being able to touch it whenever a flood of shame was trying to overwhelm me. I would not let it. Redemption. I walked across the graveyard to the little forest found on a hill. I sat on the grass, careless of my dress. The forest was filled with the birds singing and I could see mushrooms popping up here and there on the blanket of moss. Suddenly, I saw a small beetle, lying on its back on the ground next to me. I flipped him over and smiled as I watched him trot away.

---



# Ophelia's Death

*William Shakespeare*

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
There with fantastic garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them;  
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds  
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And, mermaid-like, a while they bore her up;  
Which time she changed snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death . .



Ophelia by John Everett Millais



Ophelia (Pause for Thought) by Pierre Auguste Cot



DAVID STECK

Ophelia by Paul Albert Steck





Ophelia (ca. 1869)  
Victor Müller

*Victor Müller, München*



Ophelia Weaving Her Garlands Richard Redgrave

# Selection of Poetry by Danny P. Barbare

## Into a Pan

Step by step with a  
broom in my  
hand  
I sweep the dirt and  
grime  
into a pan  
till the floor no longer  
grins  
or thinks it's a sin.

## Chocolate Cookies

Chocolate  
cookies  
of all sorts

like little gifts  
to me

in the corner  
of my lips

who says  
Christmas  
is over  
anyways.

## Dancing with the Broom

Take me by  
the handle  
says the broom  
and I promise  
you  
I will be a  
natural  
wooden handle  
and straw  
and we will  
shine, dance  
good and square  
colorful  
as the tile.

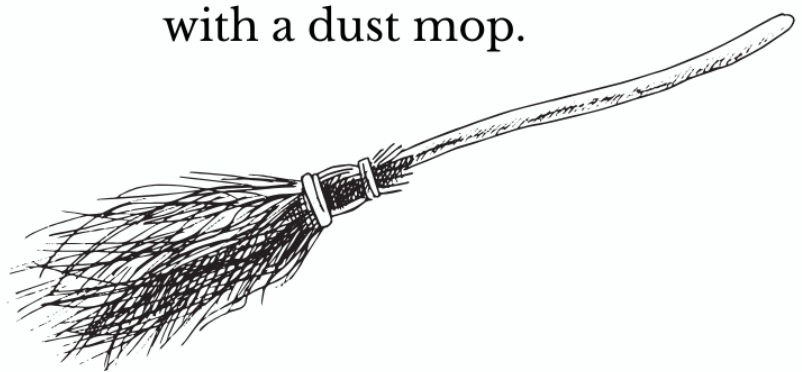
## Creating a Poem

Moving on

no settling of dust

creating a poem

with a dust mop.



May there always be work for your hands to do.  
May your purse always hold a coin or two.  
May the sun always shine upon your window pane.  
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.  
May the hand of a friend always be near to you and  
May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.  
(traditional Celtic blessing)



[corncrakemag.com](http://corncrakemag.com)

X @corncrakemag