

DARK FAIRY TALE

Collected Verse

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THE SLEEPING SON

A Mysterious Castle

There once lived an ancient family
Who presided over their country estate
As long as anyone could remember
Reaching back many hundreds of years

Owing to a past of unsettling incidents
The estate and surrounding vicinity
Always exuded an aura of mystery
No more than once or twice in a year

But no less than every two or three years
A distraught person or party of persons
Appeared from a distant city or town
Village or hamlet outside of the district

Inquiring about news or sightings
Of missing friends, relations or associates
Whose last known whereabouts were always
A nearby inn, tavern, highway or byway

Before the trail and all leads stopped
And they disappeared into the dust
Often, the blame was placed on robbers
Especially since roving bands of brigands

Were known to hide out and harass travelers
Passing through remote and rural districts
Like that of the ancient country estate
Other times, accidents took the blame

However, not single scrap of clothing
Nor trace of bodily remains were ever found
As would surely be the case in drowning
Exposure or mauling by wild beasts

Still, any hint of speculation or gossip
Tended to be squelched and hushed up
Long before it could travel abroad
For whatever the origins of the mishaps

The local villagers were left alone
Moreover, the tenants were well treated
And well compensated for their labors
Though nothing was ever substantiated

About the lady of the estate and her son
Who were the last direct descendants
Of the ancient and influential family
They were nonetheless wary and superstitious

An Unexpected Visitor

One day, a stranger entered the village
And whilst none had need of a hireling
A few were kind enough to offer alms
In hopes of sending her on her way

Perhaps, it was her youth and comeliness
Combined with an air of desperation
That prompted one or two to pull her aside
To make other sorts of offers as well

However, nothing the locals could say
Could deter her from inquiring at the castle
Rather, their pity and shameful offers
Merely served to fuel her determination

Likewise, their provoking wariness
Annoyed and aroused her suspicions
As if one need be highborn oneself
To knock at the scullery of a noble

Likely, she resembled the vagrant she was
Given her unfortunate circumstances
It was no easy task to keep a body fed
Let alone decent and presentable

On the way up the steep, winding path
She ducked behind a bush to change
Into a spare, slightly less worn frock
Smooth her coif and shake the dust from her cloak

After several raps, a maidservant answered
Who seemed a bit hesitant at first
But instructed the girl to wait on the steps
She was not to be left there for long

'Pray enter, my dear,' a woman told her
No doubt, this was the lady of the castle
Given the costly, fashionable gown
And her refined manner of speaking

A Gracious Lady

'It can be irksome to find help,' she confided
 'In such a remote part of the country
 Fortunately, I've always had an eye
 For servants of quality and discretion'

The lady's voice was so silkily smooth
 Her manner so gracious and amiable
The penniless girl struggled to hold back tears
 At this unexpected turn of fortune

Following the briefest of interviews
And tour of the castle by the lady herself
 She was fed supper in the kitchen
And led to her own private chamber

Replete with a fire in the brazier
And freshly laundered bed linens
A clean frock was laid out for morning
Almost as if they had been expecting her

Lying in bed, her thoughts drifted
 To the peculiar demeanor of the locals
Their obscure warnings made even less sense
 After meeting the mistress of the castle

Clearly, the household was shorthanded
 Perhaps, they were well aware of this
And conspired to discourage foreigners
To ensure coveted positions for themselves

Upon such vague musings the girl fell
 Into a deep and exhausted slumber
 She hardly knew how long she slept
Before being awoken by a loud scream

A Misunderstanding

It was always roughly the same dream
Of being chased through a dark wood
Hardly daring to look behind her
Lest she lose heart or expire of fright

She could hear its panting and grunting
As it gained and closed in upon her
Finally, terrified and out of breath
She faltered or tripped to the ground

Just as it was ready to pounce
She would scream and wake herself up
As she looked about the strange room
It took a moment to gather her wits

She tried the door only to find
It had been bolted from the outside
She called out and pounded with both fists
Until lady herself arrived to release her

'What is happening?' cried the shocked girl
'Am I to be your prisoner then?'
'My dear,' the lady answered contritely
'Won't you hear my explanation, at least?

My son's chambers are in this wing
And he is prone to walking in his sleep
I only neglected to tell you before
Because I was so reluctant to wake you'

Her explanation seemed reasonable
Along with her word that only she
Kept a set of keys for that wing
Thenceforth, the girl locked herself at night

In the weeks following her arrival
She eased into the castle routine
Whilst the servants were cordial enough
She did find them somewhat peculiar

Not precisely unpleasant or rude
But reticent and strangely daunted
Similar to the locals in the village
But she supposed it was to be expected

Considering they had been born
And spent their whole lives on one estate
No doubt, there were long histories
And intrigues she was not privy to

Not that she cared to know about them
On the contrary, it was no concern of hers
If her lodgings were quite comfortable
And her wages more than generous

The lady herself seemed a fair mistress
Almost overly obliging at times
And yet, there was a melancholy about her
She reckoned had to do with her son

Though he was tolerably handsome
He seemed to her a wastrel and a brute
His chief forms of diversion being
Drinking heavily and hunting wild beasts

An Unlikely Friend

One night, the girl carelessly neglected
To lock herself in ere retiring to bed
Despite the lateness of the hour
And the impropriety of the intrusion

The son made no attempt to be stealthy
Loudly slamming the door behind him
As he stumbled about in heavy boots
'Awake Sir!' she cried as he entered

Jumping out of bed and donning her cloak
'I am awake and ravenous,' he replied
'For I've not tasted fresh meat in a week'
'Pray allow me see to it for you'

She answered with perfect equanimity
And smiled as if nothing were amiss
Thinking it best to calmly humor him
Until he could be roused from his trance

'I shall bring some up from the larder
Will you take bread and drink as well?'
She thought she might slip past him
On the pretext of fetching provisions

To find the mistress and alert her
When his glassy demeanor seemed to shift
And she sensed he was awake at last
'Fear not good Sir, all shall be well'

,

Like most large houses with servants
The walls of the ancient castle had ears
As news of the incident circulated
So did a flurry of preposterous rumors

The most absurd alleged the mistress
Had purposely unlocked the door herself
Since she was only keeping the girl there
To appease her son's unnatural appetites

Shortly after the unexpected intrusion
The two began to meet for late repasts
In the mostly deserted wing of the castle
Perhaps, owing to her own night terrors

She felt a natural affinity for him
Certainly, he made a wondrous confidant
Since he preferred listening to talking
It was a great relief to unburden herself

To such a patient and sympathetic ear
In truth, she was not born into poverty
And her present status was fairly recent
Following the loss of the family fortune

Her father endured a long downhill struggle
Finally succumbing to a tragic demise
Anxious to avoid insolvency and scandal
Her stepmother hastily wed a foreigner

Leaving the girl friendless and destitute
Fortunately, she was no stranger to work
As her stepmother did not abide idleness
And always treated her more like a servant

'The wearisome struggle,' she confided
'To keep a body and soul together
Indeed feels so onerous at times
One ponders severing them perpetually'

'I have considered the same,' he confessed
 'For I am sick and weary of what I am
 And yet, I believe one like yourself
Might tame even the hungriest of wolves'

The son would oft speak of himself thus
Indeed, much of what he chose to say
 Tended to be cloaked in metaphor
Eventually, she came to appreciate

That beneath his rough and unlikely guise
 Lay the heart and soul of a poet
Whose generous abundance of feeling
And tragic lack of natural expression

Compelled him to drown his sorrows
 Certainly, she was not afraid of him
On the contrary, for the first time in her life
She felt like she belonged somewhere

A Dark Tale

In the past, there had been idle talk
Of secret magic, spells and enchantment
The old family might have employed
To disguise their true forms and natures

Nevertheless, the weight of suspicion
Had always fallen squarely upon the son
His mother cast as a lesser accomplice
Dragged down by maternal attachment

She therefore evoked much sympathy
Even as her son sank into despondency
Happily, as he began to refine his pursuits
And take a genuine interest in the estate

His mother's spirits seemed to rally as well
One evening, he shared his intent at dinner
The very next day she ordered the staff
To prepare the castle for a wedding

So solicitous was she of the young bride
On the evening before the nuptials
She sent up a special goblet of tisane
Her very own recipe which she drank

Every night to induce peaceful slumbers
Trusting the wisdom of her dear mother
For that is what she called her now
The girl drained the goblet ere retiring

In the morning, the frantic knocking
And commotion she innocently presumed
Must be noisy preparations for the wedding
Turned out to be quite the opposite

Alas, dear mother had passed in the night
Naturally, the festivities were canceled
In favor of a small service the next month
In the years following the happy union

The disconcerting reports stopped completely
Leading some to believe it was the lady
Not the son who was the true culprit
Some whispered the maid had accidentally

Confused the two goblets of tisane
Giving the mother the one meant for the bride
There was even talk of human bones found
In secret passageways of the deserted wing

Near the chambers of her sleepwalking son
So that he would appear the perpetrator
If ever they should be discovered
Over time, such rumors were forgotten

Much like a recurring haunted dream
Or insatiable, gnawing hunger pangs
Surely, it was hard to imagine any truth
To such a dark and diabolical tale

VIOLETTE

A Tragic Errand

There once lived a kindly old widow
Who being tolerably well off
Could well afford to employ a gardener
And a nurse for her only granddaughter

Violette was the blessing of her old age
And very nearly perfect in every way
Save for one unfortunate defect
In the form of farsightedness

So extreme was her affliction, however
The old woman was obliged to keep a nurse
Even unto her granddaughter's 15th year
To accompany her charge everywhere

Still, they all managed quite comfortably
On their small yet adequate annuity
In their small yet comfortable house
And the gardener in his own quarters

Though the house itself was ordinary
The property boasted a large garden
Lush with fruits, flowers and vegetables
Of both tamed and wild varieties

One day, Violette was sent on an errand
To gather some berries for their supper
From the thick, tangled hedgerows
Of blackberries, raspberries and dewberries

Which grew all along its perimeters
Naturally, her nurse accompanied her
In case she should trip into a bramble
And accidentally injure herself on the thorns

As they walked along the hedgerows
Filling their baskets with juicy fruit
Violette would pop one into her mouth
So she might ascertain its ripeness

Belladonna

Although it was not so very warm out
Violette began to complain of the heat
How it was causing her head to ache
And make the world seem unsteady

'Oh, how it does spin around me'
Just as her nurse was about to suggest
Her charge had taken in too much sun
And they had better be headed back

Violette began to sway to and fro
The nurse rushed over to her side
Barely in time to break her fall
Before she collapsed onto the ground

As the poor girl lay in a daze in her arms
She saw to her shock and horror
A belladonna bush had taken root
In a dense thicket of blackberry vines

Violette, in her extreme farsightedness
Must have unwittingly mistook it for one
Already her pulse was very weak
And her breath came in shallow gasps

'Oh miss!' she exclaimed, 'you are poisoned!'
'I must go fetch a doctor straight away'
Just as the words were leaving her mouth
Violette exhaled deeply and lay still

The nurse cried out for assistance
Whilst desperately trying to revive her
At last, she gazed into her deep blue eyes
Nearly eclipsed by their frozen, black pupils

As she gently closed the lids over them
A wave of dread and panic washed over her
As she imagined being led off in shackles
And eventually to prison for negligence

For surely, the nurse would be blamed
In a little while she lay Violette down
And quietly stole to the gardener's shed
To borrow a spade and complete the deed

As she dug, she told herself it was mercy
For how would her old mistress bear it?
Surely, it was an act of kindness
To believe her granddaughter run away

Instead of lying dead in the cold ground?
She hardly needed to feign bitter tears
Whilst fabricating a tale to the widow
Of Violette's secret love interest

A young soldier with whom she conspired
To marry and move to a foreign country
All the while swearing her nurse to secrecy
Out of fear her grandmother would object

The Gardener's Dream

The widow dismissed the nurse directly
And embarked upon a frantic search
But in the end she was obliged to accept
The harsh truth of her situation

She could only pray for the day
Her granddaughter was reconciled to her
Of her own free will and choice
Until then, she would not interfere

Now, the gardener was a local boy
Who lived in a cottage on the property
The night after Violette's abrupt departure
He began to be troubled with odd dreams

Of a rapping on the window pane
Or somebody weeping outside the door
Or even more disturbing still
Pleading and crying to be let inside

Only when he ran out to the garden
There was never anybody there
On the third night, he heard singing
Which seemed to grow steadily louder

Until it fairly rang inside his ears
Before growing weak and fading away
The voice was so eerily familiar
It sent a chill up and down his spine

'When I was only ten and five
I died while I was still alive
Come to the brambles and you shall see
The grave where she did bury me'

A Shallow Grave

He awoke choking and gasping for air
The strange words still echoing in his ear
His first clue upon investigating
Was a mostly buried and barely visible

Missing spade beneath the dense thicket
He was trying to avoid pricking himself
Whilst retrieving it from a tangle of vines
When he heard the familiar chorus

'When I was only ten and five
I died while I was still alive
Look for the bloom of the nightshade
And I shall not be faraway'

It was slightly altered this time
And so faint it was barely a whisper
Unsure of whether he slept or woke
And quaking with dread and trepidation

He looked around until he noticed
The telltale oval shaped leaves
Bell shaped buds and shiny black berries
Of belladonna growing in the hedgerow

He dropped to his hands and knees
And crawled until he found a patch
Of loose soil hidden between two bushes
Then began to scoop it with his bare hands

Lo and behold, there lay the body
Of poor Violette in a shallow grave
He tenderly brushed away the loose dirt
And carried her back to his cottage

On the way, he managed to piece together
The most likely chain of events
Including the nurse's made up story
To spare herself and everyone else

Seeing as the old widow had taken ill
He considered waiting a day or two
Dreading to rouse her from her sick bed
And fearing the shock might finish her

Alas, she took a turn for the worse
And he decided she must be told
Otherwise, she might not forgive him
When she saw her granddaughter in Heaven

He carefully brushed any traces of dirt
From Violette's hair, face and hands
Covered her in fresh, clean linens
And went over to break the sad news

He rapped on the widow's front door
And gently bid her come to his cottage
So she might bid her final farewells
Omitting the more lurid details

By claiming he had discovered her
Lying peacefully amongst the brambles
A sad victim of accidental poisoning
By a nearby deadly nightshade

Near and Far

When the widow entered the cottage
Violette lay on a cot in the corner
Her hands folded neatly over the bedclothes
Were it not for her pallor and formal pose

One might have mistook her for sleeping
'What a fool I was,' her grandmother cried
'To think you could vanish without a word
But how can this be?' she lamented

'She looks as if she were resting'
When the widow leaned over to kiss her
A profusion of grandmotherly tears
Rained down upon the girl's closed eyelids

Thereby causing them to twitch and blink
For as good fortune would have it
She had only ingested enough poison
To induce a deep and deathlike trance

Moreover, the loose and hastily dug grave
Had permitted for small pockets of air
Which combined with temperate weather
Allowed her to survive a mistook burial

Not long after the widow's recovery
The gardener asked for Violette's hand
Who happily, no longer required a nurse
Since she could see both near and far

THE KOI POND

The Sage

There once lived a wise and erudite sage
Revered in his own district and beyond
Not only for great scholarship and intellect
But shrewdness and discernment as well

It was the sage's primary occupation
To preside over a magnificent library
Containing countless volumes of books
On every possible question or quandary

Enigma, riddle, puzzle or conundrum
That anyone could ever conceive of
Or had ever considered in the past
Or might wonder about in the future

Every day from sunrise to sunset
Long queues of the inquisitive and curious
Believing, doubting or merely confused
Jaded, desperate and bereaved seekers

Formed patiently outside awaiting their turn
To be directed to the library shelf
Containing the appropriate volume
Even the precise page and paragraph

Though now and again it might occur
That a question was framed incorrectly
Or a quandary was presented inaccurately
Or an assistant committed a minor error

It would never cross anyone's mind
To question the expertise of the sage himself
Since it was simply presumed by all
That he was quite incapable of error

It was rumored that his own mother
Was loath to differ with her illustrious son
Nor had she ever scolded, chided
Corrected or contradicted him as a child

The Fishwife

In truth, neither his public nor peers
Even his most long-standing colleagues
Knew very much about the esteemed sage
Beyond the hallowed walls of the library

Save that he returned every evening
To the shared abode of his wife of many years
Still, it would be safe to say that most
If not all, would have been astonished

To visit their abode on any given day
Only to find him being reprimanded
Over the most ordinary of matters
Not unlike the most mundane household

Of the most unremarkable plebeian
Only with more frequency and severity
'I am obliged,' his wife was known to complain
'To scold twice or thrice so much merely

To counter all of the shameless flattery
And fawning bestowed by all you know
And even those you do not know
Or have never met nor even heard of

Quite nearly driving me to exhaustion'
Periodically, he would gently remind her
With all of the dignity he could muster
Of who was the sage in the family

Alas, it was futile to reason with one
So intractably fixated upon her duty
And dismissing his fame and celebrity
As both ridiculous and vulgar

Her lack of decorum and ensuing rows
Troubled and baffled him greatly
When it all became too much to bear
The sage would oft find sanctuary

In the quiet serenity of the garden
Most particularly a little pond
Where the colorful and shiny scales
Of the orange, black, gold and white fish

Glistened in the sunlit ripples of water
As they swam beneath him in silence
He could brood and ponder out loud
About his nagging, fault finding fishwife

'You neither speak nor comprehend
And yet, what words could improve upon you?'
The koi pond was one of the few things
Both he and his wife could agree upon

As they had always taken great care
As well as wondrous pleasure in it
One night as he sat contemplating the fish
The sage devised a strategy

A Simple Plan

A few evenings later whilst at supper
The sage managed to distract his wife
By remarking upon the lukewarm soup
Ever prickly about her housekeeping skills

She rose at once to refill the tureen
But the complaint was merely a distraction
To slip a vial of potion into her wine
To allay suspicion, he insisted she join him

In two rather than her customary one
By meal's end her goblet was twice drained
And she was yawning and chiding her husband
For pressing her to overly imbibe

That night she fell into a slumber so deep
And so heavy her eyes barely fluttered
As he gently drew aside the bedclothes
And carried her limp form into the garden

He lay her at the edge of the koi pond
Then whispered a few words close to her ear
Before kissing her on the forehead
And lowering her into the water

The next day he left at his usual time
Likewise, the day after and the day after that
Every morning confident that his wife
Would be waiting for him in the evening

As the potion and spell were only meant
To last a day or two and three at most
Never was the plan perpetual banishment
Merely the teaching of a needed lesson

As endless days turned to endless weeks
The sage's misgivings turned to obsession
He would kneel by the edge of the water
Trying to pick out his wife amongst the fish

Day after day he pleaded with the pond
To deliver his fishwife back to him
All the while scouring tome after tome
For counter spells and cleansing rituals

He lost all interest in his official duties
Only bothering to visit the great library
To borrow grimoires on the undoing of spells
And antidotes to magical potions

When he was feeling particularly low
He would drink himself into a stupor
One evening, in a fit of drunken contrition
He lowered his face inches from the water

Freely letting his tears splash on the surface
Whilst gushing words of undying devotion
To every koi fish who swam past
On the chance one might be his fishwife

In the happy event the potion wore off
Or the magical spell lost its potency
The sage always kept one of her gowns
Neatly folded and laid out on the bank

A Kitchen Surprise

At first, he thought he must be dreaming
The cruel, heartbreaking aroma of cooking
And the clanking of crockery, pots and pans
Only his mouth felt dry and his head ached

He leaped out of bed and rushed to the kitchen
To find his wife leaning over a cauldron
Calmly stirring the breakfast porridge
Other than the telltale dampness of her hair

A subtle, golden shimmer to her skin
And a somewhat pungent aroma of fish
Completely restored to her former self
Ere he could utter a single word

She began to describe the details of her dream
'I had nearly forgotten who I was
Until I heard the sound of your voice
Speaking words I could scarcely imagine

How I desperately wished to reply
Alas, I could only blow bubbles
So I prayed with all my heart for a voice
That I might answer you in kind

I must have walked out to the garden
And into the koi pond in my sleep
Because I awoke naked and waist deep
As if emerging from a bath

At least, I did not spoil my gown
Odd is it not? How it occurred to me
To disrobe in such a frame of mind
Have you known of such cases husband?'

The Ascension

She smiled inquisitively as she stirred
As if nothing extraordinary had happened
Though she seemed none the worse for it
The sage felt honor bound to fully confess

'I did have my suspicions,' she sighed
'Though I would hear it from your lips
Think no more upon the matter husband
For I have already forgiven you'

In truth, the fishwife had little interest
In the sacred institutions of men
Whether they be of the scholarly kind
The priestly, martial or gaming castes

Great universities and grand cathedrals
Great wars, battles and heroes thereof
Or games which mimicked wars and battles
And their endless debates and histories

Nonetheless, she had long desired to know
The contents of her husband's mysterious heart
Which to her was of far more interest
Than a spell or contents of a bottle

As it so happened, she was equally
As mysterious and unfathomable to him
'You are like unto the moon,' he confessed
'Waxing and waning as you please

At times, I imagine I can see you truly
Only to have you fade into the night
The sun himself cannot illuminate you
For you vanish in the light of day'

Thereafter, the sage and his fishwife
Agreed not to use speech carelessly
Nor silence in the same way, ever again
Either by throwing too many words about

Or leaving unspoken words to fester
As deep feelings are too precious a thing
To be harshly or thoughtlessly expressed
Or held too closely and stingily to ourselves

THE WOOD NYMPH

A Close Call

There once lived a lonely widower
Who led a solitary life on a homestead
Sitting on the periphery of a forest
Every morning he rose at dawn

To cook breakfast and complete his chores
And retired to bed soon after supper
But not before kneeling beside it
To offer his prayers to a little altar

Situated on the wall above it
In memory of his dear wife and child
His constant and unwavering entreaty
That one day they should all be reunited

One afternoon whilst returning home
From a failed hunting excursion
He spotted a doe grazing at the forest edge
Not a stone's throw away from his garden

Hardly believing his good fortune
He stopped immediately in his tracks
Then slowly and carefully raised his bow
To aim it directly at her heart

He pulled the bowstring to its tautest
And was ready to release the arrow
When he spotted something in the tall grass
The doe was not grazing or foraging

But vigorously licking and consuming
Afterbirth from her fawn and the little clearing
Removing any telltale scents and fluids
Which might attract potential predators

The fawn was likely born within the hour
As it struggled awkwardly to its feet
He slowly lowered his bow and arrow
And quietly passed the innocent pair by

An Act of Kindness

That evening whilst tending to his prayers
The widower's thoughts kept straying
Back to the scene of the doe and her fawn
So, the next morning after breakfast

He gathered up several ears of corn
And scattered them along the forest edge
Nearest the spot where he encountered them
By evening he had all but forgotten

When he noticed the bare, woody cobs
Thenceforth, it became his habit to leave corn
As well as scraps of leftover cabbage
Carrots, apples, berries, acorns and nuts

Each time he scattered the provisions
He left them a tad farther from the edge
And a tad closer to his cabin porch
So he might observe the pair at his leisure

Somehow, it gave him a sense of peace
To see the doe nibbling her banquet of scraps
Whilst contentedly watching over her fawn
As he nursed and frolicked about her

On one particularly busy afternoon
There was a soft grunting at the door
Outside stood the doe and her fawn
Both were staring up at him expectantly

For neglecting to put out their delicacies
At the usual and agreed upon hour
That evening, they all supped together
As the fawn was now eating solid food

Afterwards, he read out loud by the hearth
As was his custom ere being widowed
And though they could not fathom the words
It seemed to him they listened in their own way

Thenceforth, the doe and her fawn visited
Every afternoon to sup and sit by the fire
Or out on the porch to stargaze
And stayed until the first light of dawn

A Return of Grief

Naturally, his wife and infant son
Could never be brought back to life
Even so, the widower was starting to feel
A small glimpse of warmth and purpose

Slowly seeping into his lonely homestead
After a long, dark period of desolation
Until one afternoon he arrived home
To find the doe and fawn awaiting him

Alas, they both bleated in fear and alarm
Leaped off the porch and ran into the forest
He dropped everything and tried to follow
Desperately calling out for them

By the time he returned the sun was setting
He trudged back to his front porch
Sat down and stared at the dead buck
His great bloody antlers still tied to a rope

The blank, lifeless eyes stared back at him
How weary and weighed down he felt
For he could neither leave the fresh kill
Nor bring himself to haul him to the shed

To be butchered, smoked and salted
He dragged the buck to the same tree
His wife and son were laid under years ago
Fetched a spade and buried him by moonlight

As the warm weather turned cooler
Bringing long nights and frosty mornings
The widower kept scattering provisions
But never spotted the doe and fawn again

Then one bleak and frozen winter day
He decided he could wait no longer
And loaded a sled with basic provisions
Determined not to come home without them

He departed after breakfast and walked
Deeper and deeper into the forest
It was evening when he sat against a tree
To watch the hazy, pale orange sun setting

It had been a foolish exercise he knew
He should have turned around hours ago
When the snow began falling heavily
And the wind started blowing it into drifts

Now, there was nary a hope to start a fire
The skin of his face burned and prickled
And he was losing feeling in his extremities
He wrapped himself in his bedroll

Endeavoring to ease the uncontrolled tremors
By picturing himself near a warm fire
Alas, his empty hearth and homestead
No longer held any of its former charms

It was dark when the tremors finally ceased
Replaced by a sense of peaceful surrender
He lay down in the powdery drift
Closed his eyes and waited for numbness

As his thoughts drifted to his wife and son
Something moist and warm nudged his icy cheek
'Over here Caleb,' cried a woman's voice
'Come and help me tie him to the sled'

Earth Angels

He awoke tucked snugly in his bedclothes
A warm compress lay on his forehead
And a fire crackled in the hearth
A strange woman stared down at him intently

Still, there was something eerily familiar
About her liquid eyes and gentle manner
'I suppose I am dead,' he croaked hoarsely
'And you must be my guardian angel'

Then he noticed her soft, velvety ears
As well as a young boy sitting nearby
Possessing the same liquid brown eyes
And velvet-like ears as the woman

'No Daniel, you are not dead as yet
Nor are we angels,' the woman replied
'I do confess to watching over you
Out of fear you would blame yourself

Or worse yet, do something foolish
Just as you were about to do'
She explained how nobody really dies
But merely change into other forms

She chose to incarnate as a nature spirit
In hopes he would take pity upon them
'In truth, we are wood nymph and satyr
Though we oft shapeshift into doe and fawn'

She thanked him for his many kindnesses
Then apologized for running away
'It was a shock to see the buck,' she confessed
'Since he hardly seemed different from us'

A Sad History

Prior to the widower's solitary life
He had made his living as a tinker
Mending tinware cups, kettles, pots, pans
Pewter plates, spoons and oil lamps

In the neighboring towns and villages
Whilst traveling abroad to ply his trade
His wife went into early travail
Alas, by the time he arrived back home

She had very nearly bled to death
He did all he could to stop the profusion
Ere rushing out to fetch the local midwife
He ran three miles to the nearest village

Sadly, it was too late for mother or child
She arrived in time to deliver a stillborn
And his wife soon followed their baby son
There was nothing left to do but bathe them

Change the blood soaked gown and bedclothes
And swaddle tiny Caleb in linen bands
She thereupon put him in his mother's arms
And that is how they were both laid to rest

The day of the terrible tragedy
He vowed never to abandon them again
The misadventure in the snowstorm being
His longest absence from the homestead since

Back to the Garden

Not long after Daniel's full recovery
He gathered up his bows and arrows
And chopped them all into kindling
Never again to harm a living creature

In time, he began to notice something
Strange and wondrous at work in the forest
As he slowly gained the creatures' trust
They began losing not only their dread of him

But also their dread of one another
Like creatures sharing the same homestead
Living together regardless of species
It occurred to him his wife might be right

About them being not so very different
For we are all but lost creatures
Wandering the forests of a fallen world
Trying to find our way back to Eden

THE IRON MASK

The Abbey

There once lived a dashing young lord
Who so mistrusted his pretty young wife
That whenever he was called away
On matters of business or diplomacy

She was packed off to a local convent
Where she was so miserably unhappy
That days or weeks ere each departure
She would petition against her banishment

She so disliked the rigid routine
Of rising at dawn to sing lauds
Kneeling on stones until her knees ached
And trying to sleep on a hard pallet

She complained how she would sooner
Pass the day with her cows and pigs
Sadly, her husband could be intractable
When it came to matters of principle

Alas, he was every bit as cold and rigid
And unlikely to be moved by pleas and tears
As the stone walls of the abbey fortress
Moreover, he was oft so preoccupied

Between his frequent travels abroad
And the complexities of running his estate
That he hardly seemed to take notice
Of the growing coldness and distance

Each time he refused his wife's entreaties
Which she presented with regularity
Since he was oft called upon to travel
For days, weeks or even months at a time

A Double Tragedy

One day the lord was called upon
To make a long and arduous journey
As part of a retinue escorting his sovereign
On a pilgrimage to Jerusalem

They had barely set foot in the Holy Land
Ere the party was attacked and captured
Thereupon spending months in a Saracen prison
Whilst awaiting terms to be negotiated

Whilst thus imprisoned the lord fell so ill
The only thoughts which kept him alive
Were those of his chaste and loving wife
Safely tucked away in the monastery

By the time the party was ransomed
He was such a shadow of his former self
Some doubted whether he would survive
An equally arduous journey home

When he finally neared his manor at last
He chose not to stop there directly
But travel on to the abbey where sadly
Tidings of a second tragedy awaited

In the dead of night some months prior
A stray ember had sparked a kitchen fire
Quickly spreading to the other buildings
And leaving the entire abbey in ruins

Since no bodily remains were ever found
It was presumed that all had escaped
Still, a few were not yet accounted for
His own lady being amongst them

In truth, she was not the only one
Sent to the convent against her will
At the behest of family or guardian
Or there for reasons besides a true calling

Barely recovered from his own ordeal
The lord began to scour the countryside
When she was not found in the vicinity
He rode from village to town in search of her

A Shocking Discovery

One evening as the lord sipped his ale
In a dark corner of a dimly lit tavern
He noted the presence of strumpets
Plying their trade out of the establishment

He discreetly turned his face to the wall
And endeavored to pay them no mind
Whilst he hastily finished his repast
As he prepared to retire to his chamber

He suddenly felt his mouth going dry
And his body start shaking so violently
He felt obliged to grip his tankard of ale
In order to keep his hands steady

So dire were his feelings of humiliation
He thought he might go mad then and there
Instead, he kept to his dark corner
Choosing not to give himself away just yet

It was the wee hours of the morning
Ere he finally spied her leaving the inn
And quickly rose to follow her outside
In a few steps she turned to face him

'So, you find me at last husband
You are come to imprison me I suppose?'
The two argued deep into the night
But she flatly refused to leave with him

The only thing more shocking
Than his wife working out of a tavern
Was the bitter harshness in her voice
Indeed, he barely recognized her demeanor

He had seethed in his corner for hours
Devising a plan to reason with her
Much as he preferred she came willingly
He was fully prepared to take her

As he endeavored to gently grasp her arm
She hastily side-stepped to avoid him
Looking at her husband like a stranger
Trying to accost her with a red hot poker

'Better to wander the world alone
Than try to melt a heart of stone
You had no pity, you had no right
Now you shall know what it is like'

The lord stared in confused exasperation
'Have you lost your senses Madame
To choose such a life over me?'
But she only replied with another chant

'Better a stranger to share my bed
Than one whose soul is cold and dead
An iron mask and suit of armor
Shall now be yours to wear forever'

He stood helplessly as she walked away
Unable to utter a single word
Or lift one small finger to stop her
As if encased in a rusted suit of armor

An Invisible Prison

In time, the lord recovered in body
Alas, his soul and spirit were broken
And his mind felt akin to being
Trapped in an iron mask day and night

He had been ransomed from one prison
Only to be condemned to another
Like all prisons, there was ample time
And opportunity for honest reflection

He had spent months in the Holy Land
Pining to be in the arms of his wife
All the while secure in the knowledge
She was also held a prison of sorts

Likely, their mutual love had grown cold
Long before his ill fated pilgrimage
Nevertheless, he would win try her back
If only he could contrive a way

Alas, whenever he tried to form a plan
Or endeavored to compose a letter
His thoughts and feelings never quite
Corresponded with his actions and words

One evening, the valet knocked at his estude
Looking somewhat abashed and annoyed
He seemed hesitant to speak at first
As if uncertain it merited interruption

A common-looking woman waited outside
Insisting on being granted an audience
Though quite adamant she knew him
She declined to give a name or a reason

A Breath of Fresh Air

The moment she entered his study
His heart seemed to leap into his mouth
And twist his tongue into a state of muteness
Thus, the most he could manage to do

Was to lean slightly forward in his chair
And silently motion her to take a seat
Even as his heart was fairly bursting
With unexpressed thoughts and feelings

How he longed to express his compassion
Or at least inquire after her health
'Thank you for seeing me my lord
It was not my wish to shame you'

He stammered a polite but feeble reply
Ere finding himself at a loss for words
Sensing his tongue tied discomfit
She rose up to move closer to him

How weary and pale she looked
As she limped painfully across the room
'You have suffered much my husband'
She said, 'and well should I know

Since it was I who put the curse on you
Pray believe, I am sorry for it now
Since it has caused me equal suffering
I therefore release you and thus myself'

She thereupon put her face close to his
Took a deep breath and exhaled again
He took in oxygen like one deprived
Quite nearly to the point of asphyxiation

As she blew air into his open mouth
He felt the rusty prison gates creak open
The stone walls begin to crumble
And the cruel mask of iron slipping off

His twisted tongue gradually untied itself
Allowing for long pent up expressions
Of love and tenderness to pour out
Like a torrent of waters breaching a dam

Not only from his side but hers as well
That evening she did not depart the study
Nor her husband's estate ever again
That is, unless it be of her own accord

Or whenever he was obliged to go abroad
Travel always being on the condition
His wife be allowed to accompany him
Which she generally agreed to do

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A Snake in the Grass

There once lived a youthful pastor
Who nearly everyone could agree
Was uncommonly suited to his vocation
Besides being an eloquent speaker

He was pious and fair minded
Indeed, he was everything that anyone
Could possibly wish for in a priest
Most of all, he was devoted to his flock

As news of his sermons on the value
Of simplicity and goodness spread
He was called on by neighboring parishes
Suffering low faith and attendance

To lend inspiration and boost morale
Thus, rein in stray sheep from the fields
As reports of his virtue and adeptness
Fell upon the ears of the local bishop

So unfortunately, did word of his critiques
As he did not shrink from pointing out
The wealth and greed of the diocese
And its corrupting effect on the clergy

Not wishing to confront him publicly
But no longer willing to abide him silently
The bishop dispatched spies to his parish
Tasked with gathering up damning evidence

Of words or deeds which might cast doubt
And aspersions on his character and message
On the contrary, they found much support
And sympathy for his views on reform

The bishop thereby, began to plant rumors
Hoping to sway public opinion against him
Though most would not believe them
Nor take any part in repeating them

It is always possible to find
One or two wastrels and miscreants
Willing to assist an innocent's downfall
And more if there be payment involved

A Solitary Ocean

One afternoon returning home on foot
After giving a sermon in another parish
Percival was accosted by brigands
Covertly hired by the bishop's minions

They had been instructed to punish
And humiliate in every possible way
Only stopping short of murder
To break his body, spirit and vocation

After dragging him from the road
They stripped and beat him mercilessly
Hurling every vile insult imaginable
Whilst whipping, clubbing and kicking

When he had not returned by morning
A group of his devoted flock
Fanned out to search all the main roads
Adjacent byways, fields and woods

Ere long he was discovered in a ditch
Naked and lying in a pool of blood
His face and body beaten so severely
As to render him nearly unrecognizable

Barely able to speak or walk
With no wife or family to care for him
He was carried to the abbey infirmary
Where he spent months confined to a bed

Privately relieved to hide his scabs and shame
He waited for his broken body to mend
Whilst thrust into involuntary solitude
His soul seemed to expand in other ways

Often, as he lay staring at the ceiling
He felt himself floating on a vast ocean
Of a vast and continuous mind
There being no veil between his mind

And the great mind encompassing all things
Beings, countries, planets, suns and stars
All things past, present and future
As time and space merged and melted away

Alas, for all of his expansive insights
The world felt lonely, dark and empty
Thereafter, he did not return to his rectory
Choosing the life of a monk instead

A Lost Lamb

There was one member of Percival's flock
For whom he cared most particularly
Though they had lived in the same parish
And known each other most of their lives

There never seemed to be a good time
Or optimal condition to tell her so
Indeed, he was so extremely patient
And had such faith in divine providence

He presumed the propitious moment
Would simply present itself on its own
Or perhaps because some of his flock
Might have considered such regard

To be entirely misplaced or unsuitable
Not that it could possibly matter now
For in his present circumstances
Everything felt misplaced and unsuitable

Nonetheless, not long after his recovery
Whilst on a special errand for the abbey
He decided to take a longer route
That required him to pass her on the road

Giselle had been lame since childhood
After scrofula spread to her hip bone
Causing one of her legs to be shorter
Because her large family was very poor

She was oft placed near the crossroads
As he approached her usual begging spot
He felt his heart expand inside his chest
And warmth spread to the rest of his body

'How are you today Giselle?' he asked
'Is it not for me to ask you Percy?
Tell me, did you come by especially?
If so, I warn you father is quite low'

'Does your family tell you nothing?
You must have heard of my situation
I reside at the monastery now
And am merely out on a monk's errand'

'Most certainly I have heard of it
And were I not lame I would have come
For how I have missed your visits
But surely they begged you to return?'

'Well naturally, they wanted me to
But I declined with very good reason
What is it Giselle? What ails you?'
For she seemed to look at him strangely

An expression of dismay perhaps
Or an involuntary wince of revulsion
Percival could hardly bear the thought
Of Giselle being repulsed by him

The idea caused his stomach to lurch
And the color begin to rise on his neck
'Can you really not bear to look at me?'
His voice was trembling as he spoke

'What? I am merely surprised is all
I was not told you were a monk now
You are handsome as ever, I believe
A scar or two gives one's face character

In truth, things are a bit worse of late
Father had words with his overseer
And mother blames it on his drinking'
For a moment, Percival felt slightly annoyed

No doubt, Giselle had suffered greatly
And yet, how could her hardships compare?
How could one who never had anything
Comprehend the sting of losing everything?

Through a Glass Darkly

After some reflection in the cloister
Percival wished he'd behaved differently
For some reason he was always rather
More brusque than he intended with Giselle

Alas, he could not seem to help himself
Any more than his deep, secret longings
He resolved to speak with her at length
But it was not so easy to get away

It was a month ere he passed by again
When she was not at her usual station
He knocked at her door to inquire
'Giselle is gone,' her mother said flatly

'She lives in the city with my sister'
Howbeit, she would give no more details
For she had never really cared for him
And secretly thought he put on airs

Somehow, through all of his trials
He always envisioned Giselle waiting
Sitting by herself at the crossroads
Or her crowded, wretched hovel of a home

That day and every day thereafter
He dedicated every spare moment
To envisioning her inside of his mind
And communing with her in his thoughts

After dark, he visited her in dreams
Though it was a bittersweet communion
She always seemed happy to see him
For a while, it seemed like enough

But such subtle rapport had its limits
The dimly lit mirror grew dimmer
As her spirit waxed weak and distracted
And he oft found her weeping by herself

Eventually he managed to discover
The whereabouts of Giselle's new domicile
Fortunately, it was but a short walk
From his mother abbey within the city walls

An Epiphany

When Percival arrived at the lane
He prayed he had been misdirected
A hard looking woman answered his knock
'Any particular preference mon frere?

Or will this your first time here?
Do forgive me,' she added politely
'But we serve a great deal of the clergy'
'Perhaps I've the wrong house,' he replied

'I was looking for a woman called Giselle
I was told she resides here with her aunt'
'Pray tell me how you know her first
Are you a friend of the family?'

'I was their parish pastor, but no longer
Now, if only I might speak with her'
'Do you mean to say won't be paying?'
She replied in a deeply affronted tone

As she stood poised to shut the door
He hastily brought his purse into view
Following an agreed upon sum of coins
Giselle was summoned at long last

She limped over in her uneven gait
'Do not mind auntie, he is an old friend
We shall just sit out here and talk
The air is so awfully stale inside today'

No sooner did her aunt close the door
Than she impulsively grabbed his hands
Sending her crutch tottering to the ground
'Pray don't look at me that way Percy

"Tis as good a place as any for a cripple
Besides, 'twas not like I had prospects'
'Did you not think to tell me?' he admonished
'There is always a choice Giselle'

'I knew what they were planning
But father has debts and mother cannot cope
Should the whole family be turned out
Because I am too pure to do my part?

Strange, how oft I see you in my dreams
Now here you are come to visit
And you shall not claim it was accident
For you are quite out of your way'

As Percival held onto her hands
Lest she lose balance without her crutch
It suddenly dawned upon him
How it was not poverty nor deformity

Nor even this life which condemned her
For she had far less self reproach than he
'You are not a cripple,' he said quietly
'And you do not belong in this place'

The Greatest Gift

Of all his gifts, visions and insights
Surely, this must be the greatest of all
Since it actually made him happy
Fortunately, his reputation served him well

After securing a place as a pastor
In a nearby church in the city
It was not long ere he was in a position
To pay off Giselle's family debts

Meanwhile, his flock had pieced together
The bishop's vile plot against him
Outraged, they demanded justice be done
Following his public fall from grace

The bishop was defrocked and banished
And Percival was offered his former parish
Which he accepted without reservation
Though barred from taking marriage vows

In the official and traditional manner
A great many priests took wives all the same
Especially in rural parishes like theirs
So, Giselle became his beloved hearth wife

As was common practice in bygone times
And whilst frowned upon by the church
It was encouraged by the congregation
Who held the better store of common sense

NIGELLUS

Lost and Found

Long ago in a long forgotten realm
There was a prince called Nigellus
Who lived with his mother and cousin
An orphaned ward of the family

As the prince grew into his teens
He gradually took on sovereign duties
Whilst his mother acting as regent
Was expected to hand the reins to him

Alas, this did not bode well with her
And she bristled at the prospect
Of yielding authority to her son
On the premise he was not yet ready

It was about this time a tragedy struck
When the ward came down with the ague
The onset between illness and her burial
Being only seven days in her case

The prince found it particularly hard
As they had always been so very close
Only of late becoming betrothed
And fell into a deep melancholy

As a lasting memorial of her ward
His mother came upon the idea
Of planting a sapling tree in her honor
Inside the walls of the family gardens

Not long after her tragic demise
It became Nigellus' habit to sit near it
Especially when feeling moody
And distracted as he so often was of late

One afternoon, feeling particularly dull
He fell into light doze on a garden bench
Though not even a hint of breeze
The leaves began rustling around him

Followed by a soft and familiar voice
So close it seemed to breathe in his ear
He bolted up startled and wide eyed
Alas, it was merely another daydream

No doubt, brought on my wishful thinking
Or so he thought until he heard it again
Now quite clearly and distinctly
Coming unmistakably from the tree

Thereafter, he would visit Flora daily
Or often at night before going to bed
Though he could talk about anything
She was always rather vague and reticent

When asked about her own situation
Namely, why she was not dead
And how she came to live inside a tree
She encouraged him to be patient

One day, she would explain everything
Howbeit, it was not the right time as yet
She did reveal to him that her life
And the life of the tree were intertwined

A Fatal blow

Alas, no secret in a castle is kept for long
Far from believing her son mad, however
His mother was greatly concerned
Being quite familiar with nature spirits

Their trickery and underhanded ways
She ordered the tree chopped down
And the stump uprooted from the ground
To protect him from unwholesome influences

By the time Nigellus visited Flora
There was nothing but a hole in the ground
Every last one of her branches taken
And cruelly chopped into kindling

He hastily dropped to his knees
Desperately crawling around in search
Of some small remnant of his beloved
At last, he found a twig with a few leaves

He secretly consulted the gardener
Who agreed to place the twig in a pot
Carefully nursing it until it rooted
And Nigellus could plant it in a nearby wood

After confining his mother to her chambers
He decided the only way to free himself
From her perpetual meddling and scheming
Was to make a case of treason against her

Though based on weak and dubious evidence
The trial was short and the verdict swift
In contrast to her son's popularity
Umbra was always more feared than loved

As the executioner lowered his axe
Nigellus stared in frozen detachment
When her head was held up for all to see
She appeared to glare into the crowd

Most particularly at her son with such
An expression of twisted malevolence
It forced him and many in the crowd
To shudder and gasp involuntarily

'A curse on you,' shrieked the severed head
May you dwell in perpetual shadows
And your flesh grow as rotten as your soul
For you have murdered your own mother'

A Downward Spiral

The hideous display appeared to confirm
Long held speculations about Umbra
And her dealings with the forbidden arts
Beyond any further shadow of a doubt

Still, the trial was trumped up at best
Moreover, one cannot execute one's mother
Without certain grave repercussions
Thenceforth, Nigellus fell into a decline

In the weeks and months that followed
He became derelict in his duties
Seldom leaving his private chambers
And refusing to venture out in public

For fear of staring and jeering subjects
Like a sickness gnawing at his soul
He imagined the pointing of fingers
And whispers of matricide behind closed doors

As his mind and reign deteriorated
His body would swiftly follow
Condemning him to a shadowy purgatory
Precisely as his mother predicted

Dead to the World

To be declared a leper hardly differed
From an official declaration of death
Afflicted were treated as living corpses
Forbidden to inherit, hold office or wed

Prior to their official banishment
To the edge of town or public lazar house
A mock and symbolic funeral was held
Known as the Separatio Leprosorum

Though the wealthy and ruling class
Like a sovereign prince of his own estate
Were generally exiled to remote castles
Or luxurious private leprosariums

A fallen, vulnerable and heirless noble
Could be easily preyed upon
After losing his wealth, title and estate
To his own high ranking privy council

He fared no better than his lowliest vassal
Shortly after his official diagnosis
Nigellus donned his sackcloth robe
Received his bell, his cross and alms box

After stepping into the freshly dug grave
Three handfuls of dirt were thrown over him
'Dead to the world, reborn to God'
Were the last words of the attendant priest

On the way back to his hut one evening
After a day spent begging at a crossroads
He was feeling particularly weary
So decided to make camp under a tree

He made a fire for his solitary repast
And was boiling water for the porridge
When he heard a soft rustling of leaves
And thereupon a soft, familiar voice

'Oh Nigellus, why did you forsake me?
Day and night I waited and watched
Ever more forgotten and forlorn
Is it because I am only a tree?'

He had not even recognized her
For how tall and lush she had grown
From the sapling he planted years before
'Do forgive me Flora,' he wept

'I am sick in both body and soul
And hardly fit company for anyone
I believe I would only corrupt you
Just as I infect everyone I touch

Sadly, I have failed at everything
And that is not even the worst of it
For she curses and will not leave me be
But perhaps, it is only what I deserve'

'Is this how she taunts you?' the tree replied
'Then I suppose she is very much alive
If believing a thing shall make it so
Then the opposite must hold as well'

'If only, but here you are a tree
And behold, my gnarled and deformed flesh
Ere long I shall be blind as well
Better not to see the disgust I inspire'

'Pray do not speak for me Nigellus
For I am far from disgusted
One can only die by being forgotten
And the only way to forget someone

Is not to believe in them anymore
Nor give any credence to their curses
In due course, such things diminish on their own
With that, she stepped from behind the trunk

A Twisted Tale

Once Nigellus recovered from the shock
It took a bit longer to permit Flora
To actually sit down beside him
Sup from the same porridge pot as he

Or hold his stubby, claw of a hand
Nevertheless, she insisted upon all three
Else she would not reveal the mystery
Of how she died or rather did not die

Of how she came to be a sapling tree
Ere turning back into Flora again
'Do you recall my expiring of the ague
Or viewing my body afterwards?'

'Everything happened whilst I was away
Mother had you sent to an infirmary
And arranged for you to be buried nearby
I merely recall how furious I was

Especially your dying amongst strangers
I insisted you be moved to the castle
But she was loath to disturb the dead
And planted a sapling to pacify me instead'

'Well, I was ill but never sent away
Whatever grave she claimed to be mine
Was either empty or someone else's
For there was never a body to bury

Alas, Umbra took a dislike to me
Not long after we became betrothed
She presumed I was weak and pliable
And yet, I was able to resist her magic

When she failed to control or kill me
She resolved to punish me instead
When my recovery became apparent
She decided to turn me into a sapling

Then have me planted in the gardens
Condemned to watch but never to speak
I was overjoyed when you heard my voice
But I did dread telling you the truth

I thought it better to find a way
To reverse the spell and tell you after
She knew very well what she was doing
When she ordered me chopped down'

A Good Morning

Whilst Flora unraveled her twisted tale
Nigellus felt the spidery silken threads
Tearing and falling away in tatters
Like a fragile web in a gust of wind

As the shadows parted enough to allow
The long denied sunlight to enter
He felt the feeling flowing back
Into his previously numb extremities

They did not grieve their former illusions
Of riches, rank, castles and lands
Any more than their illusions of illness
Guilt, punishment, sorcery and death

The devil, having nothing left she wanted
Decided to leave them be at last
Until she had no more substance than
A half recalled dream upon awakening

THE MUTE SWANS

A Strange Visitation

There once lived an aging couple
Who fairly doted upon one another
And yet, they lacked the one blessing
That would make their happiness complete

Over the years, the lady of the house
Consulted every midwife, apothecary
Physician and priest in the vicinity
Patiently ingested potions and tisanes

Bathed frequently in warm spring waters
Slept with amulets beneath her pillow
And prayed devoutly to Saint Anne
In fervent hopes of conceiving a child

Of late, the situation seemed so futile
Her husband begged her to consider an orphan
However, she believed it her destiny
And petitioned that they consult a soothsayer

Even against her husband's wishes
As he put little credence in prophecies
One evening, whilst discussing the matter
A servant entered their chambre de retrait

'I do beg your pardon Mon Seigneur
But a woman is here to see Madame
Insisting she has been sent for
And yet, she refuses to part with her name

She declines even to remove her veil'
Despite or perhaps because of the oddness
And strange timeliness of the visit
Madame allowed her to be ushered in

The woman had hardly taken her seat
When she proceeded to inform the lady
That she was already with child
And would give birth in seven months' time

This would be apparent soon enough
And was not the sole purpose of her visit
Sadly, her tidings also had a dark side
All would be well until his 16th year

Sadly, the boy would suffer a mishap
Forever altering the course of their lives
'For your son's sake and your own
You must take the good with the bad

For it is his destiny,' she concluded
'And cannot be helped or avoided'
She thereupon requested a small payment
To compensate for travel and troubles

'Do you take us for complete fools?'
Her husband demanded angrily
'Madame's barrenness is hardly a secret
And you will not even show us your face'

The woman slowly lifted up her veil
'I once lived in the Castrum of Bram
On the last day of the three-day siege
They cut off the noses and top lips

Then gouged the eyes of 100 prisoners
Save for one who was left with an eye
In order to lead the others
To Chateaux de Lastours as a warning'

Of course, they knew of the Cathars
Friends of God as they called themselves
Whole walled cities, towns and villages
Had been razed and their inhabitants butchered

They had been disinherited and banished
Their ascetics arrested and burned alive
In light of such unimaginable sufferings
They were moved to pity and charity

Even if they doubted the prophecies
It was clear she must possess some gifts
Since her mutilations made it impossible
To see or speak any other way

Two Prophecies

Within days of the strange visitation
Madame was confirmed to be with child
And seven months to the day of the visit
Gave birth to perfectly healthy baby son

For a while they searched for the seer
Hoping for a way to mollify the omen
Howbeit, she seemed to come out of nowhere
And vanished in the same way

Understandably, as Rene entered his teens
His parents grew ever more fretful
So eerily precise was the first prophecy
They lived in constant dread of the second

However well meaning their solicitude
It seemed to bring out a rebellious streak
Since they dared not divulge the true cause
For fear of frightening the poor boy

On the morning of Rene's 16th birthday
He took matters into his own hands
For he longed to go to the market town
And play games with fellows his own age

He awoke at dawn to dress in haste
Satchel already packed with provisions
And purse filled with gold and silver coins
As his adventure might take a day or two

He had nearly reached his destination
When he was accosted by a group of men
Who claimed to be going to the faire themselves
And offered to show him a shorter route

So innocent was he in worldly ways
He did not think to question their motives
Nor make any effort to hide his purse
Or that he was wealthy and alone

They lured him into the woods to rob him
And exchanged his costly clothes and shoes
For a set of threadbare garments
So he would appear to be a vagrant

Whom none would miss or investigate
Lastly, they cut his throat and left him for dead
After he fainted from shock and pain
When he awoke and the brigands were gone

He tied a raggedy kerchief around his neck
And managed to stagger back to the road
Where he was rescued by a pair of servants
Sent out to look for him by his parents

When Rene awoke he was lying in bed
A thick dressing wrapped around his neck
Though his life was out of danger
And the cruel wound would heal in time

He would never speak another word
Save in expressions, signs and gestures
Or written on wax tablets or paper
As his vocal chords had been severed

A Kindred Spirit

One evening, Rene's parents were sitting
In a pensive silence in their chambre privee
When a servant entered with a message
Similar to the one received 16 years prior

When the veiled woman was ushered in
She sat down as if no time had passed
Whilst they eagerly unburdened themselves
'And yet, I perceive there is something else

Pray tell, what you are holding back?'
'One does notice it,' his father confessed
'Almost as if he can perceive our thoughts
Before we can frame them into words'

'Certain abilities,' the woman replied
Are known to accompany loss of senses
Whether it be by birth or calamity
As means of compensating for them'

Indeed, the observation and similarities
To the soothsayer were not lost upon them
And they were surely willing to concede
That muteness need not spell utter doom

One aspect did concern them especially
'How he longs for companionship'
His doting mother lamented
'Particularly for a person his own age'

'I could not agree more,' the seer replied
And revealed that around the time
They welcomed Rene into the world
A Credente woman of the Friends of God

Had also given birth to a child
As she grew older her parents decided
To train as Parfaits and take Consolament
Or Bons Chretiens who lived ascetic lives

'Only last year they were arrested
And sentenced to death by the Inquisition
Both of them burned alive for heresy
After declining an offer to recant

Since her mother was a niece of mine
Esclarmonde was sent to live with me
Though she is my greatest earthly comfort
I believe your son's needs are greater

Moreover, my time is growing near
And I also lament her lack of peers
Since her mother and father's demise
She has not uttered a single word'

Rene's parents expressed their gratitude
In the form of support for her remaining days
Which numbered not so very many
Since she died a mere fortnight later

Her final, parting advice for the couple
Was not to endeavor to control destiny
And to look upwards rather than down
If ever tempted to give in to despair

A Devoted Pair

Rene had tutors for the Trivium
Of grammar, rhetoric and logic
And the Quadrivium of arithmetic
Geometry, astronomy and music

Save for his lack of speech and song
His education was not greatly affected
Indeed, one could argue there was no better
Educated boy in all the district

However, the arrival of Esclarmonde
Was like dissipating clouds after a rain
Or warm spring after a long, harsh winter
Her gentle and complaisant nature

Seemed to sense the wants of others
Before they felt the lack themselves
Over time, the two developed a language
So silent and exquisitely subtle

One could almost envy their lack of speech
For how cumbersome words can be
Compared to the language of the soul
Which conveys so much by a mere look

So perfectly did they suit one another
News of their betrothal surprised nobody
Least of all Rene's parents who insisted
The rite be performed by a Cathar Parfait

In homage to Esclarmonde's parents
Their local priest was in attendance as well
As a sympathetic family ally
Otherwise, the only guests to be invited

Were family members and old friends
Many of whom had Cathar relations
After all, the Inquisition was bearing down
And one could not be overly vigilant

A Wedding Mystery

The ceremony took place on the estate
In front of the private family chapel
The bride and groom reciting simple vows
And blessed by both Parfait and priest

After the usual perfunctory congratulations
The guests began to mingle and partake
Of the abundant wine, food and festivities
Howbeit, it was Rene's plan to slip away

'I would take you on a sea voyage
But for now, we must settle for a rowboat'
When Esclarmonde seemed hesitant
For it was not her nature to be rude

He pleaded with a look and a promise
To return ere anyone would miss them
As it happened, there was a small pond
On a lovely, secluded part of the estate

Replete with a small pier and boat
They climbed in and Rene began to row
As he neared the middle of the pond
The sky began to darken with ominous clouds

Just as he was turning the boat around
A flash of lightning lit up the sky
Followed by a deafening clap of thunder
And howling gusts which rocked the boat

The violent tempest appeared out of nowhere
Quickly drenching the wedding festivities
And forcing everyone to retreat indoors
Everyone save the bride and groom, of course

It was close to an hour before the storm
Subsided enough to conduct a search
It was dusk when the gardener reported
Spotting the boat in middle of the pond

The Swans' Song

Many days were spent dragging the pond
But no bodily remains were ever found
Neither was there evidence of foul play
For what robbers leave valuables behind?

Not only was the boat dry and undamaged
Every article of costly wedding attire
Was perfectly dry and neatly folded
Shoes and gold rings lying on top

After months of delay, the old couple
Were obliged to accept the inevitable
Clothing, shoes and rings were placed in coffins
And buried in a grove behind the chapel

Not so very long after the obsequies
They began noticing a pair of mated swans
And whilst swans are not known for singing
This particular pair was entirely mute

They were oft observed in graceful flight
Swimming or simply resting on the grounds
Following the passing of the old couple
Peacefully and within days of each other

Were reports of exquisitely subtle singing
Coming from the grove behind the chapel
Thereafter, the swans departed as well
Never to be seen or heard from again

A BOAR'S TALE

Trouble with Poachers

'Pray come hither little rabbit
For I've brought you another present
A few flesh wounds and exhaustion
From being chased and harried by dogs'

The imposing ogre was standing
In the equally imposing door frame
A boar draped over his massive shoulders
After making a brief examination

Madeleine busied herself boiling the wine
And soaking some moldy bread in milk and herbs
She thereupon rushed out to the mew
To clean the wounds and apply poultices

'The dogs husband, where are they?
Not injured or harmed I trust?
They can hardly be blamed for their masters'
'Sent on their way none the worse for it

Though I shan't say the same for their masters
Nonetheless, they had been forewarned'
Madeleine knew better than to press on
Since she held no sway on the subject

'Anybody we know of, perchance?'
She inquired, hoping to sway him anyway
'Or from some prominent families abroad?
If so, we shall not hear the end of it'

'Certainly not, but even if they were
It would hardly signify a thing
Since I am well within my rights
To exercise authority over my own lands

The deed is done little rabbit
You may be assured it was quick and merciful
As you know, I waste no time in such matters'
In the early days of her marriage to Piers

She feared never to grow accustomed
To living in a household of ogres
And a table where human flesh was served
Cooked in sauces and herbs or baked into pies

Ironically, Madeleine had been raised
To frown upon flesh eating of any kind
However, nobody pressed her to partake
And it smelled no worse than cow, pig or sheep

Moreover, it was not such common fare
As found in other affluent households
Where charred corpses were served up daily
Since ogres relished only human flesh

Being far too respectable to flout the law
Their appetites were strictly confined to deceased
Paupers, outcasts, criminals and poachers
Or any deemed unfit for consecrated ground

A Namesake

By the time Madeleine finished the dressings
Piers had already long departed
Likely hauling the remains of the poachers
To the larder to be butchered for supper

The rest to be smoked, potted or pickled
Since two whole men were far too much
Even for an ogre and several of his kin
To devour in one or two sittings

'Fear not boar,' she spoke soothingly
'Fortunately, my family has no taste for pork'
To keep him calm she chatted and sang
'Til he fell asleep in a corner of the mew

The next morning was the Sabbath
And though it was customary to attend
Grand-messe in the village with her ogre kin
Madeleine begged to stay back at the mew

Or beast sanctuary as it was oft known
A closed off section of the stone-walled courtyard
Where a boar or other some such creature
Might be kept in protective isolation

Separate from the cows and goats in the byre
Or the chickens, ducks and geese in the fowl-cot
Who freely roamed the cour during the day
And whom, whilst contributing milk and eggs

Held a status closer to pets than livestock
She pleaded the boar was likely to grow skittish
And move about ere his wounds were mended
'A very good morning to you Theo'

For she had already decided upon a name
She thereupon bade him to rest easy
For she had tended all manner of creatures
Not only the domestic ones in the grange

But wild birds, deer, rabbits, squirrels, foxes
As well as a boar or two like himself
There had even been a three-legged bear
And an injured she-wolf at one time

Though they both mended quite nicely
They were not hardy enough to fend for themselves
'So I taught them to adopt gentle ways
And they lived here 'til they died of old age

Now then, shall we try some porridge?'
Madeleine was always glad for an excuse
To spend more time in the grange
Where she never felt lonely or out of place

A Remarkable Skill

Every evening Madeleine visited the boar
Happily convalescing on his soft bed of hay
One last time before retiring to bed
Along with a few more ill or injured creatures

Kept in separate stalls and enclosures
So as not to disturb one another's recovery
Her demeanor was always light and cheerful
As she sang or discussed the day's events

Almost as if they understood every word
Of course, as every good healer knows
It is not the actual words that matter
But the tone and the intent behind them

Only now and again did she seem pensive
And this evening was one of those times
As the boar sat patiently awaiting his turn
His beady eyes observed her every move

Even in the twilight his poor eyesight
Could detect the pink flush of her cheeks
Her heavy, swollen lids and red-rimmed eyes
Whilst she fed, fussed over and tucked away

When she came round to his bed of hay
He grunted and nuzzled her with his snout
'Try not to fret dear Theo,' she consoled him
'For you are very nearly mended and fit

Still, I shall be aggrieved to see you go
For what a consolation you have become'
In truth, the boar was merely feigning a limp
And had no plans to leave whatsoever

They sat for a spell in heavy silence
Until she dabbed her nose with her sleeve
Patted him gently on the snout and rose
She was just closing the gate to the mew

When an unfamiliar voice called her name
'Who is there?' she cried out in alarm
'There is no need to shout,' replied the boar
'I merely wish to know what ails you

Do confide in me whenever you wish
For who can you trust if not your boar?
Who is attentive to your every word
And will speak to nobody but you'

'Oh dear,' she replied, 'it really is true then'
Indeed, she had always thought it uncanny
How he oft seemed on the verge of speech
As if he really did comprehend every word

Little Rabbit

One evening when Madeleine had finished
Tending the other creatures in the mew
She slumped next to Theo on his bed of hay
'Have you ever noticed,' she sighed thoughtfully

'The name my husband calls me by?
It is how he must think of me, I suppose'
'But that is not true, is it Madeleine?
For you are quite complex, I assure you

Even something of a mystery,' he replied
'If so, you are alone in that opinion
Save for myself and one other perhaps'
But when the boar pressed her for details

She kissed his tusk and said it was long ago
Over the next few months Theo became
Something of a beloved pet in the household
And though he never spoke to anyone else

He took care to ingratiate himself with all
For he wished to be close to Madeleine
As well as observe her adopted family
Like most petite noblesse of the ogre race

Piers was well respected in the district
Overseeing his seigneurie with an iron fist
And tithing amply to the local church and abbey
Though Madeleine was obliged to convert

She could never quite warm to a church
Which had killed and dispossessed so many
Leaving her destitute with friends and relations
Either dead or scattered to the winds

Alas, the Crusades and later the Inquisition
Destroyed most of her native Cathar culture
In all the time Madeleine knew Theo
She never questioned his remarkable skills

Telling herself he was a gift from God
To compensate for her many earthly trials
One evening whilst on her way to bed
She stopped by his chamber to bid good night

To find it empty with the coverlet untouched
She searched every corner of the manoir
Then rushed outside to search the cour
By morning, there was still no sign of Theo

A Physician Calls

A full seven months had transpired
When a servant announced a physician
Introducing himself as an old acquaintance
'Theo?' Madeleine gasped in surprise

He had left the country many years ago
But happened to be passing through
When he heard the sad news of her illness
Now, his heart sank at the sight of her

Her complexion was dull and sallow
With dark bluish circles under her eyes
'I look better than I did last week
When the surgeon had me covered in leeches'

'If you will allow me to examine you
We shall endeavor to find the root of it'
Local surgeons, apothecaries and cunning folk
Failed to discover the cause of her feebleness

Lack of appetite, restless sleeping habits
And general, slow wasting of body and spirit
So, whilst Piers may have had qualms about
A strange doctor with unfamiliar methods

He had little choice but to acquiesce
Within the hour Theo was granted leave
To conduct an examination of Madeleine
'If I were to tell you the truth,' she confessed

'I hardly know if you would laugh or cry'
When she confided her feelings for the boar
He did neither, but merely smiled a little
'Tis not your blood that ails you,' he replied

On the contrary, if illness begins in the mind
Then surely the cure must dwell there as well
 Within a few days of Theo's first visit
 Madeleine was showing signs of progress

As she began to eat and sleep more soundly
 Her sickly demeanor improved as well
Thenceforth, the physician was asked to stay on
 Until she was deemed fully recovered

A Face Called Home

On a morn which seemed like any other
Madeleine woke and descended to breakfast
To find husband, family and servants
Going about their business in the usual way

Only looking right through and past her
For all the world as if she were invisible
She walked around the manoir awhile
Ere finally growing bored and walking outside

'Good morning Madeleine,' Theo called out
He leaned nonchalantly against a tree trunk
'How is it you are still here?' she asked
'When I was told you were sent home'

'I believe I am at home,' he replied
Though his answer did not make any sense
At least, he bothered to speak to her at all
Besides, she was growing used to oddities

So, rather than try to correct him
She related the morning's strange events
'For now, they see only what they wish
You are a grown woman Madeleine

Not a child nor a rabbit nor a pet
Any more than I was Theo the Boar'
For long ago he had also wed another
However, the union was far from happy

As his wife could not tolerate a memory
Nor could she dislodge it from his heart
One day, following a jealous fit of rage
She hired a sorceress to cast a spell

To entrap him in the body of a boar
Whilst on his way to find Madeleine
The poachers' dogs picked up on his scent
As his love grew under her tender care

So did her love in spite of the curse
Until it gradually began to lose its hold
And he awoke restored to his former self
Not wishing to alarm the entire household

He hastily departed from the manoir
Only to reappear in the guise of a doctor
'They would not have seen you truly
No matter how hard you may have tried

I ought to know,' Theo continued
'In my weak and woeful state of mind
I nearly lost all sight of myself'
Madeleine understood all this perfectly

As she looked at him and all around
It seemed to her they must be elsewhere
For she felt light and free with nary a trace
Of the frailty which plagued her of late

Or the heavy but familiar desolation
'Where is this place? Are we in Heaven then?'
But heaven is not a where or a place
So much as a true and loving face

THE GRAY MIRROR

Captain Jonah

Not so long ago in a city by the sea
There lived a retired merchant ship captain
Who had spent the greater part of his career
Sailing to distant and exotic ports of trade

After signing on as a cabin boy at 14
He quickly rose in the ranks to first mate
And then to captain at only 21
Not because he hailed from a wealthy family

Who owned a fleet of shipping vessels
But because he possessed a preternatural
Near genius aptitude for navigation
As well as mathematics and sway of men

Tragically, his promising career ended
Abruptly in his 13th year as captain
After a terrible accident on the deck
Spared his spine but left him with a limp

Alas, this was far from the worst of it
Since the accident had severed far more
For he no longer felt any connection
To the earth nor even his own body

As if dragging along two hollowed out logs
Or trying to inhabit a hollow corpse
Never quite inside or owner of it
Merely hovering around the perimeter

Walking on air but unable to breathe it
Touching the ground but unable to feel it
Observing life from his lofty heavens
As his earthly form occupied the space below

He oft felt like the fireplace in the parlor
A valuable and vital part of the household
Whilst stationary and immovable of itself
During his career he amassed a small fortune

Through his primage and cargo shares
As well as private trading of luxuries
Such as silk, tea, spices and porcelain
Combined with steady, lucrative incomes

From ship brokering and commodity trading
There was more than enough to keep
His large household of immediate family
And extended kin afloat indefinitely

As he observed his house full of strangers
Grow ever more distant and preoccupied
He wondered if it was his infirmity
Or had it always been thus?

He was weary of being an exposed
And vulnerable ghost haunting the halls
Alas, when he considered turning them out
His body froze and his feet turned to cement

His one true companion was Sirius
The former ship's cat who resided in his cabin
Now, aside from his daily roaming
He resided mainly in Jonah's study

Belly of the Beast

For a long time he dreamt of the accident
The sudden, violent squall out of nowhere
The screeching of ripping plates and popping bolts
As the hollow iron mast buckled and tore

Violently ripping into his muscle walls
And crunching his pelvic bones like sea biscuits
Four hours he lay pinned to the quarterdeck
The mast rolling with the ship's motion

Grinding into his pelvis with every swell
The crew used iron jacks and pulley systems
And mauls to hammer oak blocks and wedges
Every fraction of an inch, as the rolling ship

Caused the ropes to tighten or slacken
Too fast and the mast would roll and slice him
Too slow and he would bleed out
Finally, spikes and crowbars were used

To lever the gap and drag him free
In the midst of his agony something snapped
It was like a glowing golden hemp rope
An orange and red spinning wheel of flame

Suddenly shattering into cold jagged sparks
Before being sucked into a black void
As he watched the dead, gray embers
He felt an overwhelming sensation of drowning

He feared the deck was taking on water
Ere realizing it was his own body flooding
Into a shoreless, icy sea inside his own skin
A cold arctic blast seemed to extinguish

His passion, drive and connection to the earth
Abandoning him to a dark, bottomless vacuum
He lay in bed for several months in a state
Of near suffocation and loss of feeling

Particularly, in his body's lower half
His brain would command his legs to move
But they only obeyed as dead hollow tools
Condemning him to a life of strictly fixed

Habitual routines practiced from memory
As his form enclosed upon him like a coffin
His restless, unquiet spirit had no choice
Save to expand ever more up and outwards

Like a vast, open web scanning for every
Hidden threat and tension in the air
Alas, his own perimeter was left unmanned
Open to any passing whim and assault

Powerless to steer the ship through or away
Like a disembodied floating head and heart
Or a half ghost tethered to the wheel
He was no longer governed by will and drive

But haunted by the constant dread of being
Sucked into the vortex of his lower body
Leaving little energy for anything save
A stunted and purely mechanical existence

He was a ghost ship floating aimlessly
On celestial seas of abstract thoughts and ideas
Ingesting the addictive opium of dreams
To feed the endless trauma of estrangement

When what he really required was an anchor
To keep from drifting further out to sea
In a safe port where he might recuperate
Long enough to learn to walk the earth again

A Quiet Desperation

Nine years passed in quiet eventfulness
At least, according to the outside world
Where Jonah no longer fully resided
For practical purposes he was deemed fit

Or at least, as fit as he could hope for
Within the confines of medical treatment
According to the family physician's diagnosis
His deranged nerves could be traced

To lingering shock, pain and terror
Manifesting as a deep seated melancholia
His only means to reconcile his torment
Was to don a mask of unyielding reticence

Whether tending to his various investments
Or participating in the odd family function
He was obliged to use his dynamic will
To exert a rigid control over his environment

Thus, he managed to conduct business affairs
And household responsibilities flawlessly
Though in every other way he moved
Neither backwards nor forwards

His former life of adventure being reduced
To a series of strict and predictable routines
He occasionally perused his collection
Of rare books and ancient manuscripts

Whilst he found some reasonable advice
In certain Eastern esoteric philosophies
Strongly advising descent from the heavens
And venturing courageously into the abyss

He would consider it momentarily
Ere ascending back into the clouds
Unable or unwilling to confront the black hole
Such was his aura of quiet competence

Not many would have guessed it concealed
A soul drowning in daily, relentless turmoil
Staring into a void was exhausting business
And he was nearing the end of his tether

One evening when Sirius failed to return
At his usual hour for supper
Jonah donned his overcoat, grabbed his cane
And left the house to search for him

Cast Adrift

The pier was a brief walking distance
And now and again the cat ended up there
Attracted by the ever present odor of fish
Upon arriving he called out for Sirius

Who unlike many if not most felines
Actually responded to his master's call
He walked onto the pier and looked around
Then wistfully gazed out to the sea

Endeavoring to catch some small glimpse
Of a life so utterly lost to him
Finding no sign of Sirius, he turned to go
When he heard muffled sounds nearby

Leaning over the railing at the far end
A woman stared intently into the water
Her incoherent talking and whispering
Was interrupted by gasping, choking sobs

Even in the dim and dusky moonlight
Jonah's wide and wandering vision
Could easily make out her pale face
Wearing an expression of unspeakable grief

Another surprising change since his accident
Was his vision and perception of the world
Like a mariner looking through a heavy fog
He navigated people by reading the hidden

Textures, weights and shadows left in the air
Sharp, jagged edges of the angry and restless
The murky, oily fog of the deceptive
Or heavy granite blocks of most townspeople

He saw the present moment like a flat
Hollow and distant ghostly mirage
To see his hands or street was like looking
Through the wrong end of a telescope

Or watching a stage from the back row
Whilst his vast, sprawling inner dreams
And abstract thoughts felt near and real
Strangely, distance was separate from detail

Appearing in piercing, brittle sharpness
Every shift or microscopic movement
Flashed against his eyes like raw copper wires
He was standing motionless in place

When the woman suddenly looked up
'Are you a constable?' she demanded
If so, I have every right to be here'
'Certainly not Madame,' he replied stiffly

'Do I resemble a constable to you?'
'You might be a trapper out of uniform'
Suddenly, her expression softened
'Perhaps you really are an angel then?'

Captain Jonah was at a loss for words
Unlike the harsh static of the town
Or the oily fog of predators
Her fluid and magnetic gravity

Looked and felt like calm, gentle currents
So much the more startling to see his own
Slate gray shadow clinging to the outer edges
Of her violet, pink and ocean blue field

He knew the color intimately as the texture
Of the freezing, dead void in his lower gut
Seeing his internal torment wearing her form
Shocked him, but also offered a deep

Haunting sense of familiarity
As if she were a fragment of his shattered soul
He was still struggling to find words
When she climbed atop the railing and dropped

An Anchor

It was an awkward and ill planned attempt
Fortunately, the water was quite shallow
They visited a nearby public house and sat
Close to the potbellied stove in the middle

To thaw out and hasten the drying
Of her respectable if slightly frayed serge suite
Over a shared meal and hot toddies
Cordelia's spirits seemed to thaw out as well

She explained she had moved to the city
To live with her aunt and uncle
After the influenza took both her parents
A good three hours later they parted

He offered to walk her to the trolley shelter
But she insisted he not trouble himself
Thereafter, they met in public places
Such as the boardwalk or the trolley park

A local bookshop or nearby coffee house
He promised to let her pay her own way
Once she found work and got ahead of her debts
Indeed, the future looked quite promising

Since there was always need of a bookkeeper
As for Jonah, from the moment he waded in
To pull her out of the frigid ocean
And her field closed the distance enough

For her soft violet, pink, ocean blue
And waist down emerald green ripples
To overlap his frantic, sparking radar
It allowed the buzzing, painful sharpness

Behind his eyes to slow down at last
And the glass wall which separated him to soften
Granting overwhelming waves of relief
Like a battered ship gliding into a safe port

A Sad Situation

The last month had been his first spark of hope
And his only relief from private exile
Since the day of the tragic accident
Making him all the more solicitous of it

From the jagged, murky and heavy
And their probing, prying questions and opinions
For now, there was a temporary reprieve
As his family spent the season in Europe

Then early one morning he had a dream
Of being on the quarter deck during a storm
Only this time he was dragged overboard
As he struggled in the blue, gray churning water

He saw a soft, luminous violet light
And Cordelia swimming madly toward him
Suddenly, the light shattered into gray shards
As he watched the pale, dead embers

Spiraling down into the dark abyss
He saw she was run through with a harpoon
And frantically reached out for her hand
Before she could disappear into the depths

As he held fast there was a loud rapping
As if somebody were knocking on a door
He thought he must still be dreaming
When he heard the persistent knocking again

'Sorry to trouble you at this hour
But this woman claims you employ her
And would be willing to vouch for her'
A patrolman was standing next to Cordelia

However, he hardly recognized her
Gone were the gentle, pastel currents of light
Only sharp, erratic indigo static at her brow
Like a copper web firing blindly in the dark

The rest was bone white and pale silver gray
Her outer edge a frozen, brittle slate shell
He calmly confirmed every word of Cordelia's
Story about being his bookkeeper

Lately aggrieved by influenza deaths
And handed him a sum of cash exceeding
The vagrancy fine to settle out of court
The moment he closed the front door

The previously locked floodgates flew open
'I have no aunt and uncle,' she confessed
'My name is Stella and my parents are not dead
I got Cordelia from a story paper

I've lived under the pier for a month
Before that I lived in the public asylum
I was only discharged three months ago
They were happy to do it after nine years

It was so crowded and never enough beds
Only I had no place to go
I was afraid if I went home
They would only send me back again

So I made up a situation in the city
Otherwise, they would not release me
I am not a bookkeeper either
But I did look for work every day

'Til I ran out of money to pay my hotel
When I saw the constable this morning
I thought for certain he would arrest me
Then it's back to the asylum for good

I was so frightened it felt as if
My blood were draining out of my body
Now I just feel numb and frozen
Sadly, that is not even the worst of it

If I had told you my true situation
You might've really thought me mad
For who could believe such a thing?
I was mad and I am better now

Oh, if only things were so simple
Truly, I should not be walking the earth
I died nine years ago inside my body
But for some reason it still breathes

That is why I thought you were an angel
Or maybe somebody I was looking for
The whole time I was in the asylum
I had but one true friend and ally

Day and night he calls and cries for me
I thought he must be waiting on the outside
And might even meet me at the gate
I know if he were alive he would come

Therefore, he must be on the other side
But I could not even drown myself properly
Now I must live in-between two worlds
And he is left alone in that cold, dark place'

The Caterpillar

Jonah took her vitals and asked a few questions
Then fetched some tea and a light repast
He bade her lie down in his study to rest
Whilst he wrote to his family's lodgings abroad

Over the next few days and weeks
He quietly informed them of his change of plans
And instructed his solicitor to instigate
Such legalities and financial arrangements

As required for a fair division of assets
In coming months there was a good amount
Of opinions, objections and arguments
But every peaceful day that passed saw less noise

Until it eventually faded away
For the humble caterpillar seeks a quiet
Secure cocoon to melt into fluid
And become a new creature entirely

As the energy and feeling dropped back
Down into his lower body and legs
His poor lungs breathed in enough oxygen
And his wandering spirit finally settled down

Into its rightful and sovereign place
The coffin Captain Jonah had been living in
Finally creaked open to reveal not one
But two moths emerging from their cocoon