

## Both Thorns and Thistles Grow

- 28.10.2023 -

*Death's hand had guided the lives of these four souls as gently as a farmer's wring the neck of the invalid infant hare; yet it had tended to their growth with such care and attention unbecoming of its stature in the universe.*

*The youngest of the troupe had earned its adoration through much the same way in which the runt of a litter may gain pitiful kindness – and as such shall be reviled last. The oldest, in contrast, found itself in the unenviable position of existing on the periphery of Death's niceties, yet their life wound up being all the more suffocated by its gaze.*

*The other two, whose names also remain unknown to me – through lack of discernible interest rather than the fact of which being made unbeknownst to record – seemingly were of credit due to their utter lack of spiritual spontaneity.*

*What, then, has this foursome achieved to lie within the fabric of our imagination all these years since their pilgrimage to the blessed isle beyond that Northern haar?*

*Though the piercing gales may skate blindly by our encampment, let us take this blessed respite to ponder such...*

Illness had choked out the life of this land long ago, yet humanity had prevailed in the insanity which had blossomed. The sickly-sweet incense of rot filled the air as the corpses of the Spring's new harvest lay in a pile on the butcher's cart – diseased and disgraced by God.

Among the rapturous wailing of the earth, four bodies lay. Not becomed by illness, or the contagious terror wedded to such, but pregnant with the wistful whispers of a plot to prevail against their unholy punishment. Under the blackened whiskers of a once-great pine, the four – spurred by the abominable naivety of youth – set off to the Northern shore; where there are heard tales of a Wicken so grave and powerful that the fate of their home may surely be safeguarded.

The ashen soil did not kick-up as they set off on their crusade; but sunk further Hellward, like sand, under their feet.

The group followed the memory of tracks and lanes which made up the former roads of their land – the tapestry of trade had since been defiled by the cancer of their home, like every other living thing. They sailed down the exhausted veins of dirt and cinder which led them to their destination; walking as one, and in ghostly silence, they bore their sins privately yet hid them greedily in their hearts.

The day had been in its infancy when they had set off – its brattish tirade continuing on through the hours – yet as the procession; feet bloodied and soiled with time's leering, first saw the

flickering outline of the ferryman's transport the day's light had been smothered in its slumber.

As the company drew close to the ferryman's presence, the perverted halo of candlelight which once distinguished him gave way to unveil the contorted visage of decaying human remains.

Recoiling, in volleys of disgust, from the ferryman's decrepit corpse; they were conversely all bestowed with the soiled stench of his carcass. The sulphuric wave engulfed them - as if the ocean's salt had preserved the scent of every agonising burst, blister and gurgle his body made as it spoiled; only to baptise them on their reproach.

All manner of life clung to the ferryman's skeletal remains - least of all, his own. While he may have been a captain in life, in death he had become himself the vessel in which all manner of existence carved out for itself a plot of creation.

The right side of his body had retained its composure, as the sea had gifted it that small blessing for a life of servitude; the skin had become bloated and hung off its limbs like meat slowly cooked on the bone. Yet his organs had failed him; and, upon their defeat, the poisoned earth had extended its soylent hand to tend to its new estate. While his sea-bound flank was best-preserved, his left side had been overrun by all manner of pus, mould and toxic evil.

Reeling from the ferryman's maleficence; all but the youngest of the group's bodies gave way at the sight of the infernal corruption of the Sailor's corpse - cleansing themselves through bulimic repentance. The youngest stood, and their gaze

remained unshifted from the malefestation contained within.

As did the ferryman's ship it seemed, as it bowed from the movement of the group - once regaining themselves from the sailor's plight - as they tentatively ventured aboard the orphaned craft. Swiftly going about the preparations to transporting themselves towards the emerald fields of the sea-witch, twisting the bow towards the promise of their viridescent salvation, they allowed the cutting wind to plough their journey Northward.

Though the sea revolted against the ship's dominion, the newfound crew sought solace in their faith and relented against the ocean's tyranny. The aquatic forces of sea and sky tormented them in their passage - waves of battery from the ocean's forces from below, and zealous swells of rain attempted to sabotage them from the heavens - though the pilgrims did not relent.

Ropes were held firm, feet well-planted on their holy barge; lo the ocean's unnatural subjects proposed no surrender. Yet the winds which so readily assisted in their assault soon shifted in favour of the foursome, as a strong Eastern wind imposed the laws of the land upon the ocean floor. As if the plates of the earth had become dislodged from their position, the sea seemed to split like the cranium of an enormous beast; and bestowed upon the group safe passage - through the wound upon the world it had inflicted - to the luminescent isle ahead.

Nearing the enclave's coast, the fragrant respite in which the group had rejoiced in suddenly bowed to the dank of coastal decay which enveloped the island. The putrid corpses of crabs, seeking refuge on the island, attacked the nasals of the group as they set upon the shore. Landing at last upon the island, like the creatures who braved the shore to retreat from the warming seas, they were sure to stoop to balancing on the rotting wooden walkway. To give berth to the tar-like sand which had seized the creatures of the deep from their first steps and wrested them into the choking confines of the earth.

Scarlett vultures sat in a wake, reaping from the arthropods their twilight harvest – the gulls preaching at their newest proselyte in shrieks and bellows. The trusting acolyte, being coerced by the others, almost shone in the day's virgin light – its marbled feathers glistening in the effervescent naivety of youth.

The air was thick with villainy, as if the souls of the damned were trapped there, and spectral hands plunged onto the group's backs; buckling them over in position as if escaping a peaty blaze. Guarding their steps as they walked along the festering gangway, the group mused in silence through a necropolis of crucifixes and sacrifices, as they slowly ventured deeper into a hecatomb pathing their entrance to the sorceress' encampment.

All manner of small mammals were crucified as such; their hide and entrails enthusiastically stretched and draped around a circular wooden frame – all manner of limbs and organs either missing or defiled in turn. Having escaped the

mainland to flee the choking earth, they found solace in their slaughter – their worldly bodies being taken as penance and payment for their sanctuary herein.

And sanctuary our group had at once found. The oldest, with borrowed courage, lifted the outer veil to the witch's tent and beckoned the others in with a satisfied smile; to which they all wryly traded in return.

While each of the group had individual conceptions of how their meeting with their saviour would go, all were underwhelmed by the modest abode of their supposed champion. The group stood in order upon the blackened undergrowth of the tent's floor, and the eldest – now unruly through their faith in their crusade – stepped proudly forward and proclaimed to the festering darkness that they were to seek the counsel of the witch who resides here, and to gain from her the reward of a hero's bidding. In response, a single candle was suddenly lit from the far end of the Wiccan's shelter: illuminating the group, and a lone figure from behind a canvas screen.

The candle-lit sheet cast a shadow onto itself, that of a child – playing with what seemed to be a selection of wicker dolls.

Then the child spoke – and the foursome's souls were, as one, disturbed.

*I would tell of how the child conversed with the four,  
but to do so would be a false witness – for no such  
tale could convey the chill which overcame the group,  
and how their souls had become numbed to Godly  
intervention. But, from what has been transcribed to  
me, the room seemingly reverberated with the sound  
of an otherworldly chorus; speaking as one, from the  
infant's mouth.*

The group had become paralysed from the witch's words, yet the arduous blaze of human foolishness endeared them to continue with their calls for sacrifice, in turn for the bestowment of grander power over the earth.

The eldest was the first to approach the screen; and with a determination unbecoming for a mortal conversing with the sacred realm, he uttered his request to the immortal. He wished to be gifted the power to see the Godly truth of this world – as tarnished as it was.

The second approached also, and – after forcing back the reviling vomit which had harangued its way forth to their throat - wished to have the ability to love the earth, as heartless as it had become since the Saints had left it to its barrenness.

The third, upon gaining confidence from the others negotiating with the witch with such purpose, sat by the silhouette and whispered their request – that they may be able to use their body to provide whatever they could for this world, as starved as it had shown itself to be.

With the three older travellers having brokered with the divine, the youngest gleefully bounded to the witch – their demeanour having shifted since hearing its cascading voice beckon them. They leaned in close to the sorceress, the canvas wrapping round their face as they pushed past the bounds of its divide, and whispered their demand.

They sought for the ability to give all others who wished, the same opportunity provided to them here.

Unlike with the three others, who swiftly recoiled from the witch after they had made their decrees, the youngest stood – still keeled through the canvas, in a quiet confessional – before slowly making their way back into order.

The three other pilgrims smiled keenly at the youngest – confident that they had fooled the witch into ensuring not only their own demands, but all those who would come forth afterwards – but their congratulations were short-lived before they were smote from their palate.

The group were immobilised once more; as if their limbs had united in revolt against their overseers, while their minds and souls were trembling as the heinous bellows of unseen voices rang out. The youngest stood forward from the group - eyes gawking at some ethereal presence – and, in firm procession, stood strictly by the child's figure behind the curtain.

The youngest of the pilgrimage was bestowed by the witch a blade of strange curvature and point from that forged by human will. The knife resembled a bloody thorn; plucked by demon's hand and shaped by the fallen angels of Hell – bleached white with a ruby tip.

The eldest was the first to perish; as the witch's instrument gouged out their eyes, piercing the ducts and lids of his soul in a righteous fury most suited to that of a man gone savage. With a surprising lack of resistance, there was heard the moist pop - akin to a blister being forcibly burst. And their realm was plunged into darkness. The eldest let forth a silent howl as their soul was expunged from the gateway so primitively

forged. Yet the eldest saw the Godly truth of this world – as bloody, blind, and tarnished as it was.

The second fared just as well; as the demon's pawn butchered their carcass with feral precision, slicing their stomach only once in their mercy killing. In their body's last gurgled convulsion, the second let out a sultry spurt before the youngest dove up to their elbow into their abdomen and pulled forth their organs as if hauling freight. Holding the still-beating heart in their hand, the youngest saw the soul pulled from the second's body. Yet, the second grew to love the Earth – as infernal and corrupt as it had become.

The third, having witnessed the benevolent execution of their three comrades, shook and struggled against their invisible bonds. Satan's puppet drove the thorn through their wrists and pared back their skin – exposing the ruby tributaries which were so easily carved from its host. As their hands fell to the floor by their own feet – overcome by the putrid venom of the blade, the third corpse promptly fell to the ground. Yet, the third gave more than their body to provide for this starved world – that which gnawed and gnashed at the salivating thought.

Marked with the gashes of the dead, the youngest of the four now stood outside the witch's canopy and surveyed their new dominion. Beyond the scavenging beasts of the land, they sought gratitude of a higher plain – to be made subject of the Earth. An Earth which had not only been abandoned by its Creator, but imparted upon the Devil himself; defiled and disgraced.

**Overcome with overwhelming pious purpose, the traveller steps aboard their stolen vessel and sets sail back to the mainland to ferry more souls to that tainted Isle. No one dares seek this child of Adam, however they may be sought out themselves - in times of woe - to lead poor wretches to their timely sacrifice.**

*The weather has been tempered in the time of my story's telling it seems; for I hear not only the silence of the Lord in preparation for our continued pilgrimage, but the active preparation of your peers. You should join them, for in due time we shall be reaching the Holy Isle – and I shall continue to guide you through the this twisting gauntlet.*

*As the horse-drawn congregation travelled forth down the ashen slope, Death's hand guided them towards an ever-present emerald shoreline. All manner of ailing and decrepit souls proceeded according to the testament of their spiritual guide; the elderly and the newlywed, and children barely off the teat; all gave everything they could muster to partake in their salvation.*

*Yet the youngest was given exactly what they sought; to give all others who wished, the same opportunity provided to them on that wretched Isle, long ago...*