

Lumbering forward, the mountains echoed across the evening desert cold. Watching their peaks bobbing closer and closer agitated the stomach, or so he thought. Bursting as a sore from sick, doubled over and covered in black. A putrid air coming up in great bursts from deep inside him. What fine clothes these are, he thinks! The path is speckled with gurgling maroon, as is the once fine shawl draped carefully around his neck. A colorful contrast to the otherwise muted tones of sand and dust, though he hardly bothers to look back at his handiwork. His legs march mechanically forward, giving the faint impression of a wound doll which poverty deprived him as a child.

A fine, intestinal vermillion stretched lazily across the sky as if suspended from a meat hook not in accordance with but in spite of those laws which demand it fall vertical alone. He succumbs to reminiscence, dreaming of the verdant hill and trickling stream along which his home was built. His father was a butcher, among other things, wielding an almighty knife the size of a childish forearm. Down and deeper down, falling into the salted flesh of fellow creatures brought before the always-the-same sort of self-same divine justice. Perhaps god had something of the butcher to him, but he does not hold this thought in his theater of mind. No, it lingers somewhere backstage, perhaps hanging itself in the rafters where it would set an example to others who would seek to question those things which are known for certain. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living god, his father muttering quotations from the book neither he nor his child-son ever learned to read. Plenty of truth dripped down into the eager hearts of the faithful yet always drop by drop and always descending, the fact of which he never did see. A religious man was his father, off to church each sunday to pay his ablutions for the un-souls of the pig and chicken and calf which met a holy end at the end of another forearm of another animal. A redundancy perhaps, although he also does not think this. So he goes, each week.

The priest is of a stature which is best suited to the boards the rich boys had in their homes. Boasting and bragging of a deep intellect, they would scold him for not understanding the movements of the pieces, which were to him like those of the celestial spheres. There was a science here as there was up there and far away that could have been a comfort were it not for their squeaking voices that chipped away at what solaces there are to be found in the systems of the lord. This was the nature of the priest, to look as a small trinket carved of ivory, brought a long way from home to be made into something utterly homely. A thing that is also a person, a piece replaceable but immediately recognizable as that which it is. The people in town were just as their priest and as such he may not have noticed, that father-butcher of his which was just like that fine tradesman from the next town over, who may well have also had a son. He did though, in his own childish way, each week he went with his father to obtain the forgiveness needed to wash away the evening sky painted across the floors of the butchery.

Was his father a good man, he thought as the rocks returned suddenly from their retreats at the periphery of his vision. He trips and falls and the rocks grow so large, covering the whole of his sight in the moment his forehead collides with the dirt. And the answer was yes, of course. Of goodness there was no greater example than a churchman, a man with many progeny, a man who would not touch the bottle nor strike his wife. He rises to his knees, scraping the bloodied

knobs and staining the dust. Father was moral in a time when it was great and difficult to be such and this is undeniable. At the bedrock of the finest nations is a peasant just like his father, who plies an honest trade each morning and keeps an honest home each evening. This is good and decent and not even the lowest of the piglets brought to his slaughter could deny that his father was a fine man. One of the finest in all the world, albeit that was a thing hard to test.

The world, as it goes, seemed to be progressively smaller as one step followed the next. The bile is red and perhaps beautiful, were he a painter and lacking in the fine powders used in the creation of wondrous colors as the painters had. Perhaps he was once a painter, in a life which was recycled in the deep bowl-place where this material emerged from, but the thought is foolish and he pushes it from his mind. Perhaps there was a certain goodness hidden deep inside him, although he dismisses the thought with a shake of the slumped head. Why only now do the rotted innards emerge, they who were the treasure of his life and refuge of his decency. No, no, the red is just another of the weary colors of the world and he walks on assured.

A fine man, yes, and among other things a good soldier, or so it went. This was a time before his child-self could remember, before he built memories out of scraps of bread and rations of air. There were three old men in the market each damp morning, sitting and murmuring to themselves as the fog slowly lifted from the square. They walked on canes and on each other, cracked as they were by the jackboots of an insatiable time which demanded from them all subservience of the sort no dictator would think to ask. Walking rarely and sitting often, elderly kings of corvids and cats which weaved aluminum stories with the small rapiers their false teeth sheathed. He would sit nearby, perhaps around a corner for he was never allowed near such wretches whose fathers were surely not good men. He would sit nearby and listen, picturing their words weaving an illustrious silver, a tarnished web in the air. The crooked kings therein told him of soldiering and of the skills of his father.

This was a town of soldiers, or so it sounded by the webs spun by the elderly men. He was a man of import, a good man, one that fought the enemy with valor and purpose. He would butcher them, yes, in a well of wonderful violence the likes of which lesser men write histories of. They would, in the times past when war was a sport and only the undeserving suffered, have called him a hero for the number of widows he made of foreign women. But today is not yesterday and in accordance with the divine laws he is to be called a good man and it was clear he was good, or at least so his son thought as the mountains continued in their steady march.

It was a long time coming, he knows but does not think, as he cranes his head toward the setting sun. There is an ocean between the grave of his father and his own, as he has no intention of returning to the place of his birth to die.

A magpie with feathers that reflect the dimming celestial light, encompassing the firmament in its long-tipped wings. The bird is perched on a steep, multicolored rock which in the mind accentuates the depth of its blackness, for the thing is black as bile and white like ruddy bones. What lovely clothes they were in earnest, covered in a gurgle of inside matter which would truly be better served elsewhere. The bird sings a death rattle and its age becomes clear, the chords warbly and unrefined, although not so much as to disavow the suggestion this was

once a beautiful song. Yes, there is beauty all around this ancient landscape, whose age cannot fully hide the fact of its glory. Nature makes for itself a most gorgeous and plentiful progeny, but he pays the all-mother no mind because the magpie holds him hostage with its eyes.

There is dust in his hair as he trudges on and it grows heavier, but never so heavy as to lessen the luster of such wondrous auburn hair. He remembers the bird, tries maybe to call out to it. The words could never have passed his lips, the cracked bloody things they are. Words which were lost somewhere between the meaty bodies of the brain, although it is of uncertain certainty if the words were even to make it so far. He thinks of the ship that sailed the ocean, of the storm that nearly took her into the fiery embrace of the foamy deep.

A cabin with a small window, really a slit, in which the man spent the greatest portion of the voyage which was to take him away from the many graves of the many good men and fewer good soldiers. He sat staring through the window, absent-minded in his contemplation of the structural integrity of the grime-ridden windowpane in between him and the broiling waves. He was sweating, although he does not think of this precipitation now in the dry. Gun-metal is the darling of the theater stage now, as he remembers the cool press of the barrel against the side of his forehead. One bullet, saved for such an occasion when his life was not fully his own and it is a shame he has not the gun now as he wanders. The mountains come quick as the waves before them and this, he thinks, is the cause of his uncontrollable tremors. He is afraid. His life is not his own and perhaps the brine will have him now, in one form or another. A moment of inspiration and he drops the gun and ascends toward the deck for reasons uncertain then and now. In the gale, trapped where the ocean is most vast, was a dark, flapping shape. Poor and desperately small. There it stood upon the rock, magisterial and demanding. It succumbed to the deep, sharing the fate of a great number of poor souls that night. Its eyes held a black empty, cold as the place all the good men go. Perhaps he was mistaken, only the doubt was gone as a man has no use for doubt so late in life, although he does not know just yet that he is of a dying stock.

A magpie sits on a rock nearby as he moves and it does not mind the bile-trail following him. As a matter of fact, the bird picks absentmindedly at the corners of the trail, picking at circular slabs of offal which when considered do indeed look vital. The eyes never look upon the meal, no, they remain focused on him as one step follows the next and the following does the same. He thinks he has failed the test, imagining two tiny sparks of judgment. He knows his father would please the bird, trailing behind him the cool scent of the morning dew and freshly polished metal. The bird remains on the rock and he begins walking toward it absentmindedly, as if concerned with something else. The bird picks at the meat he leaves behind, little bits of himself excised on the journey. Those deepest parts which could find no home better than such lovely clothes and such marvelous a sunset.

The bird stays, the bird goes, and he reaches the rock. Collapsing to his knees, he folds into himself, tucked his arms into the place his chest once was. The carrion that filled him in is gone and he had not noticed, or at least does not think he did, until the tarnished ivory ribs tickle what remains of his beard. This has happened before. This is a posture not his own, a thought that passes backstage in a series of short charges as his mind marshals what remains of its strength. He will die here, alone in a sea of orange tinged dust and blood. The piglets were

maybe just as thoughtful in their final moments, this an idea he entertains lustily, but he disbelieves the thought on account of their relative age and the suddenness of the mortal blow in their case. They could never see the forearm which would slice clean through their necks and he has well been staring at the arm which the sky extends to pluck the life from him. He stares up and imagines he sees a bloody sun staring down at him, though in truth the guilty party is well over the horizon.

Taking great big mouthfuls of almost viscous fluids and mostly liquid organs, the man dies. He does not realize, or at least not quite. Instead he is thinking about the magpie, if it was a fine man in its day and perhaps that is the origin of its place of honor. His father, perhaps.

The bird feeds happily on the corpse, rolling lazily within the cavities until its feathers are matted the finest royal burgundy.