

All hail to the noble companie  
Of students in holi Alkimie;  
Whose noble practice doth them teach  
To veil their art with mysty speech  
-“The Hunting of the Greene Lyon”

**University of Alberta**

Unmaking

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

Department of English and Film Studies

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Spring 2012  
Edmonton, Alberta

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To Cory and Mom, my readers and believers.

## ABSTRACT

*Unmaking* is an allegory of the alchemical process through the tale of a medieval hunt. It combines symbolic alchemical language with the scientific method established in both alchemy and hunting in the medieval and early modern period, and presents this research as a “speculative” historical fiction. That is to say, if the coded procedure present in the manuscripts was the way to achieve alchemy, then *Unmaking* is what that process might look like.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There is a large party of supporters who I would like to thank; however, I resolve to keep this acknowledgement shorter than the thesis itself. I would like to thank the members of my committee: my supervisor, Shyamal Bagchee; my reader, Garrett Epp; and my external, Natalia Pylypiuk. I would also like to thank Richard Van Camp, the 2011-2012 EFS Writer-in-Residence for his patience and advice. Finally, I would like to thank Corrinne Harol, Kim Brown, and Marcie Whitecotton-Carroll without whom I could never hope to graduate. In addition to the people who assisted in this process, I would also like to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council for their financial support in this project.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the final chapter of his book *On Literature*, Umberto Eco writes that throughout his career as an essayist he satisfied his desire to narrate in part “by making a narrative out of every critical essay” (307). He goes on to say that decades later when he began to write fiction, his stories “could not be anything other than the account of a piece of research (only in narrative this is called a Quest)” (307). For me, the notion of a Quest is appealing in that the esotericism of the ivory tower has always conveyed to me more magic than elitism. As a Masters student, I also tried to satisfy my urge to narrate my academic papers—sometimes successfully, other times missing the mark. While I respect the work that goes on behind these carefully guarded gates of academia, I crossed them knowing instinctually that in order to be a good writer I needed to learn to be a good reader. I believe that my purpose is to present carefully researched material in an imaginative and accessible way. I respect the power of the narrative and its ability to reach wide and sometimes unexpected audiences. Whether the genre is parable or myth, analogy, et cetera, narrative provides insight through pleasure. Be it inadvertently or with heraldic clarity, narrative attempts to persuade and always informs. My compulsion to favour narration over persuasion has resulted in this project—a hybrid piece of research and story-telling. My goal is and has always been to take my research, and not myself, seriously. This piece is not quite fiction, not merely reporting; I present to you a speculative narrative in the purest sense of the term and suggest that *if* the topic of my research was true then this story is

what it might look like. *Unmaking* is an allegory of the alchemical process woven through the plot of a medieval huntress.

In my opinion theoretical readings of a text should take secondary importance over pleasure. I believe that the role of a text is ultimately to delight. If the text accomplishes such, then the reader will be inclined to interpret further meaning, be it instructive, persuasive, political, social, satirical, or any pendulous combination therein. While reading for broader context is valuable, indeed essential to our understanding of culture, this type of work would be moot without texts that affect. Literature needs to inspire before it can influence. However, that is not to say that I do not place value in theory. I think it is important, especially in historical fiction, to acknowledge that one's work will reflect and document a moment in history and culture. In *A Passion for Narrative*, Jack Hodgins states that "besides being familiar with superior works of fiction, the writer should also become aware of ways in which contemporary writer-critics are exploring the relationship between writer and reader" (17). Theory is not the framework of this piece; nevertheless, this piece was written with deliberate consideration that it would be interpreted. Its school of thought, however, is my own, as Hodgins goes on to say that "the only theory worth having is the one you work out for yourself in a manner that is consistent with the way you see the world" (17). Using the research I compiled about medieval hunting, alchemy, and allegory, I explore creatively how narrative is used to approach criticism, and in turn how criticism might be presented as narrative.



### **Narrative as Criticism: What this Text is Doing**

If I were to propose a theoretical task to my readers I would ask them to consider the hypertextuality of historical fiction. That is to say, what does the superimposition of an older text onto a newer text create? The notion of hypertextuality begins well before the rise of digital media, and was introduced largely by Gérard Genette in his 1982 book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, in which he defines hypertextuality as “any relationship uniting a text B [...] to an earlier text A [...] upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (5). In its basic connotation, hypertextuality means that one text cannot exist without its predecessor. In this spirit, *Unmaking* is the hypertext that rests upon all the alchemical manuscripts that compiled my research. It exists in this manner because the alchemical texts that came before it are literally the ingredients in the recipe of my alchemical fabula. Eco takes up the concept of hypertextuality in a digital world, remarking that it “allows us not only to travel through a textual labyrinth (be it an entire encyclopaedia or the complete works of Shakespeare) without necessarily ‘unravelling’ all the information it contains but to penetrate it like a knitting needle going into a ball of wool” (11). Here is another important part of my method, for as I sifted through the many alchemical manuscripts and hunting treatises in order to gather information for my story, I allowed myself the freedom to choose the symbols and trivia within those texts that would constitute the truth of my story. However, because my sources are derived from hundreds of years of carefully guarded tradition, I had to respect where and in what contexts these symbols and fine details could be used. Eco

goes on to say about hypertext that it “has much to teach us about freedom and creativity” but it does not replace the unchangeable story that “make[s] tangible the impossibility of changing it” (14). In my opinion, this piece combines Genette’s theory of hypertextuality with the playfulness of hypertext as Eco describes it, but with an austerity adhering to documented alchemical and medieval hunting rules.

Is this piece historical fiction? My characters are pure fabrications: Mercury and Adam did not exist as real people in the medieval to early renaissance period. I found no account during my research of a huntress who undergoes mystical experiences in a forest, or a hunter who slips into madness while pursuing a woman in the woods. This is not historical fiction in the sense that I am retelling the story of historical figures. Yet, there are elements to this story that pay homage to or follow the tradition of literature that makes up a part of our history. For example, while I did not research and then compile the narrative of a hunter named Adam who chases after a woman in the woods, his story is inspired by hunting tropes prevalent in texts about medieval courting. In addition, I include many elements found in medieval literary traditions such as my retelling of the story of Nastagio from Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, the use of allegory which is central to the structure of my story, and finally the alchemical recipe I created from highly-regarded alchemical texts.

Each of these points will be further explored, but before that I would like to briefly discuss Lionel Gossman’s claim in his book *History and Literature*, that allegory is a medieval type of historical fiction. He writes:

The allegorical method sought a new meaning, a *sensus spiritualis*, which, while not excluding the original meaning, completed or transcended it. It started out from the sign or word which had become strange in order to attribute a new meaning to it, a meaning engendered by the intellectual world of the reader and commentator, not by that of the text. (58-9)

He further explains that by using allegory, medieval writers were able to extrapolate scripture without corrupting the sacred text. A good example of this type of allegory is the medieval play, *Wisdom*, in which Lucifer attempts to persuade Mynde, Wyll, and Undyrstondyng to stray into corruption: “In þe soule ben iii partyes iwys: / Mynde, Wyll, Wndyrstondyng of blys, / Fygyre of þe Godgede, I know well thys; / And þe flesche of man þat ys so changeable / That wyll I tempte, as I gees” (*Wisdom* 357-361). Lucifer’s triple effort to influence the might’s choices suggests the three temptations of Jesus on the mountain before his crucifixion. The story reflects events in scripture; however, because the play does not borrow its plot directly from scripture and the main character is not Jesus, the playwright is free to a certain amount of prudently crafted artistic interpretation.

I attempt to do the same by authorizing the symbolic language of alchemy as the primary meaning and layering an allegory upon it in order to demonstrate its significance. Yet it is this fixation with language that makes *Unmaking* a modern piece of historical fiction as well. Gossman later states in his book that “instead of simply accepting language, together with the secondary categories of

literary norms and genres, as given and working within the conditions it provides, the modern writer is constantly crossing frontiers and extending outward the limits and possibilities of writing” (229). This supports the hybrid element of *Unmaking* because I transform my research into a sequential speculation of what the alchemical process may look like allegorically. “The writer,” Gossman continues, “is now not so much a revealer of truths, a speaker of divine language, as a maker of meanings and a restorer of human languages” (229). I interpret the language and construct meaning to the literal extent that a new world is created for my alchemical process.

### **Criticism as Narrative: How this Text is Doing it**

Now that I have argued that allegory is part of historical fiction, I will explain the allegorical elements of my thesis. First, a disclaimer: it is not my intention to influence the reader’s interpretation. I will not explain the purpose and meaning of all the alchemical symbols, but encourage the reader to interpret and find meaning wherever his or her intuition is inclined. However, the elements outlined in this introduction are foundational to the process of how this narrative was constructed, and therefore it is necessary for me, in the context of an MA thesis with a requisite critical element, to offer some explanation of their meaning and significance.

There are three main aspects of allegory that make up parts of *Unmaking*. First, in his book, *Allegory: The New Critical Idiom*, Jeremy Tambling explains that “at its simplest, allegory is a way of saying one thing and meaning another”

(6). Of course, allegory is not simple. It differs from metaphor and symbol, both in form and function. Metaphor is based on resemblance. It is a comparison made, then discarded (6). Occasionally a metaphor may include symbolism which has, according to Eco, a “duty [to] make clear, at the point when it seems didactically useful and appropriate” (147). According to Tambling, the Romantics aptly classified symbolism as one part of the natural world compared with another, creating unity among everything (178). In summary, a metaphor is a complex idea simplified through comparison, and a symbol is a corporeal tie to another component of our reality. Allegory is metaphor extended and symbol complicated. Where metaphor is discarded, allegory maintains a double meaning—or indeed multiple meanings—through the entire story. While symbolism is emblematic, allegory is the synecdoche of a larger story. *Unmaking* tells the story of a huntress, her developing power, and a hunter’s symbiotic need for her; however, there is a story beneath which I invite the reader to interpret that outlines the alchemical process. The hunting story is the metaphor extended into allegory, and symbolism is used to connect the reality of my story with the world of alchemy. At its simplest, this story is actually about the hunt for the philosopher’s stone.

The second of these characteristics is necessary in order for the first to exist, for in order to penetrate the surface meaning of the story, the reader must draw aside the allegorical veil. Tambling summarizes Boccaccio’s theory of the veil, explaining that he believed first that “the ‘veil’ of allegory keeps truth away from the multitude,” second that “the burden of responsibility for locating the

truth is placed upon the reader or the beholder,” and finally that it shall be more "precious" to discover the truth through “strong intellectual effort and various interpretation” (28-9). With this in mind, one can see that alchemy is traditionally concealed behind an allegorical veil.

In *The Mirror of Alchemy*, Roger Bacon writes: “the forerunners of this Art, who have found it out by their philosophy, do point out with their finger the direct and plain way, when they say: Nature, contains nature [...] for likeness is said to be the cause of friendship, whereof many Philosophers have left a notable secret” (ch. VII). This passage exemplifies Boccaccio’s characteristics of the veil. First, Bacon suggests that the “forerunners” discovered the Art, meaning the burden is on the apprentice to interpret the truth. Second, alchemists boast that with Boccaccio’s aforementioned “strong intellectual effort” the truth is “direct and plain.” And finally, these alchemists write about the art in a “secret” or veiled manner in order to keep it away from the multitude. To guard their secrets from the thousands of would-be alchemists seeking fame and fortune, knowledgeable alchemists dressed their recipes in elaborate symbolic language. Mercury, for example, is referred to as “the silvery water, the ever-fugitive, the divine water, the masculine-feminine, the seed of the dragon, the bile of the dragon, divine dew, Scythian water, sea-water, water of the moon, milk of a black cow” and more (Holmyard 26). Alchemy, one can see, is veiled by sundry metaphors which, as I have mentioned above, is an attribute of allegory.

The hunting story draped over the alchemical recipe is the most obvious veil in *Unmaking*. However, like the alchemical authors I researched, I also weave

symbols into the fabric of the allegorical veil. Colours such as black and red, animals like the stag and hart, and physical states including hot and dry are all veiled symbols that reference alchemy. At times the reader may find these symbols too insistent or out of place, yet my intention is to force the reader to combat this near-impenetrable code before pushing through to alchemical meaning. Allegory requires “strong intellectual effort,” after all.

Finally, in the third chapter, at the most vitriolic stage of the alchemical process, I incorporate the Hunter’s World which is the veil manifested into a physical construction. The Hunter’s World is the veil personified. Portrayed with images of the body, this physical veil becomes the hunter. It observes the forest with a voyeuristic lens which makes Adam feel scrutinised. This veil surrounds not only the alchemical sub-meaning of the story, but the surface plot as well, and this elevation brings the veil closer to the reader’s attention. This is a key component of the story, because not only does the Hunter’s World-as-veil emphasize a heightened allegorical moment, but it also *becomes* a tool in the alchemical process.

This brings us to the final component of allegory prevalent in this text. Arguably the most recognizable element of allegory, particularly in medieval literature, is the personification of complex ideas or specific qualities or attributes. Tambling defines personification as “an imposition of the subject onto the other, a way of projecting feelings onto the outside and making them seem to be universal representations of reality” (173). This type of personification is widespread in medieval drama, for example the aforementioned play *Wisdom*, as well as the

other Macro plays, *Mankind*, and *Castle of Perseverance*. In these plays, the characters are named after abstractions such as Mercy, New Guise, Penance, and Peace. Allegorical personifications, which Gerald Prince calls emblems, embody the characteristics of their eponymous traits (25). They are as emblematic as imprints on a coin. However, abstract ideas are difficult to compartmentalize, and therefore these personifications represent their attributes by exploring within their stories what it does and does *not* mean to be their namesakes.

Gordon Teskey suggests in his book *Allegory and Violence* that this internal conflict within the emblematic vessel is a form of violence which culminates in a capture, or a conclusion imprinted on the vessel by allegorical interpretation. He explains, “what the act of capture exhibits is the truth over which allegory is always drawing its veil: the fundamental disorder out of which the illusion of order is raised” (19). In *Unmaking* there are a number of personifications that directly represent their alchemical namesakes. The most obvious example is Mercury, but there is also Adam, an alchemical symbol for sulphur; Albion means white rock, or in this context, salt; Ursula is the she-bear or protector, and there are also the personified skulls and truncated tree. These personifications, particularly Mercury and Adam, grapple with not only their own identities, but also with each other, resulting in the ultimate capture of themselves, and therefore the truth. In a project that attempts to be unquestionably allegorical, I believe it is fitting that the surface-narrative is identifiably violent and preoccupied with labelling its characters.



### Critical Writing: What this Text is Using

I would now like to move away from symbolism and allegory and turn to the surface-narrative of *Unmaking*. Other than a verse entitled *The Hunting of the Greene Lyon*<sup>1</sup> found in the 1652 edition of Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (Linden 278), hunting is not a common metaphor for alchemy. However, hunting and alchemy beget similar quests involving nature and desire, and the hunting story lends itself quite naturally to the alchemical process. I found hunting in the medieval period interesting for many of the same reasons alchemy intrigues me: tracking, capturing, and dressing or butchering require a certain amount of science; animals are classified with particular roles and methods for handling; and gender plays a significant role in its discourse.

Perhaps one of the more well-known medieval texts involving hunting is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In it, Gawain is bound by duty to combat the Green Knight, but before he faces him, Gawain sojourns at the estate of a mysterious albeit jovial host, Sir Bertilak. During his stay, Gawain is entreated to three days of rest while his host engages in three hunting excursions. This section of the poem provides an example of the juxtaposition of hunting and courting, for as Bertilak pursues his game, Gawain is the target of Lady Bertilak's sexual pursuits. However, what interests me the most about *Gawain* is the detailed account of dressing fallen game in the field. In *Hunting in Middle English*

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<sup>1</sup> As a footnote, it was an annotated copy of *Hunting of the Greene Lyon* owned by Isaac Newton that led researchers to unveil his interest in the secret science. For further reading on this subject, see *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy or, The Hunting of the Greene Lyon* by B.J.T. Dobbs, Cambridge UP, 1983.

*Literature*, Anne Rooney compares the “breaking” process in *Gawain* to that of two primary hunting sources of the period: the *Boke of St Albans* from the early fifteenth century and the *Tretyse off Huntyng* from the mid- to late fifteenth century. Rooney uses these texts to summarize twenty-six stages of breaking a deer: cutting away its skin, slitting the belly and removing the innards to the pelt for the dog's reward, severing the head, and then encouraging the dogs with shouts and whistles as they eat the guts (169-170). She compares this account to the process in *Gawain*, noting some omissions and restructuring, but arguing that, in general, the process is consistent. This suggests that unmaking the quarry was procedural, a required skill among enthusiasts of the sport, and accessible by way of manuals, treatises and most likely oral traditions. I chose to borrow information about unmaking the stag and boar from *Gawain* rather than hunting manuals in order to pay homage to the literary tradition in which my thesis resides: presenting research by way of narrative.

Nevertheless, I also drew extensively from two major treatises on hunting from the medieval period: *Master of Game* written by Edward of Norwich between 1406 and 1413, and *The Art of Hunting* by William Twitti, written in 1327. Together, these texts offer a comprehensive guide to hunting in the Middle Ages, describing the disposition for various prey, what methods of hunting were appropriate for certain animals, and in the case of Norwich, an ample catalogue of hunting dogs and how to train them. With these texts and some key secondary sources, I was able to construct an arena for hunting quarry, most significantly the hare, boar, unicorn, hart, and stag, as well as the dogs in the *par force de chein*.

The hare is unique among all the hunted game according to Twitti, and he wrote extensively about this animal and with great admiration. In his edited version of *The Art of Hunting*, David Scott-McNab explains that Twitti found the hare to be the *meruailoust* beast, most likely because of its apparent hermaphroditism. The testes of the hare are abnormal in that they descend only during mating, and therefore give the impression that the hare can change its gender (38-9). Edward of Norwich, too, wrote that the hare “is at one time male and another time female” (181). This gender duality is intrinsically connected to alchemy—the alchemical hermaphrodite or *rebis* being a key component to the philosopher’s stone—and therefore the obvious emblem for Adam to imprint on Mercury, remarking that “she is the hare.” Other characteristics of the hare that resemble Mercury are its rambling path—it is not known to run in a straight line (Twiti 39), its difficulty in tracking and capture—Norwich remarks it “will not suffer any twig or grass to touch her” (16), and finally that it is hunted with greyhounds (22), which is Mercury’s familiar companion.

The boar is another animal that is not a known symbol in alchemy, yet I believe warrants consideration. To begin, Norwich describes the boar as “a proud beast and fierce and perilous” (46-7). Unknowing alchemists such as Adam often placed themselves in danger due to their pride, suffering among other injuries, chemical burns, exposure to toxic fumes, and diseases brought on by overexposure. Furthermore, along with hare and deer, boar hunting was an acclaimed pastime among landowners, offering a specific challenge due to its resilience and ferocity, which is validated in *Gawain* in which Bertilak alone

possesses the courage to slay it (Griffin 56-7). In addition to the accounts I equate to false or prideful alchemical processes, I open with the unmaking of the boar because of the commitment despite the dangers to conquer it.

Rhetorically, the boar offers an interesting example of the dialogue between medieval treatises. Norwich remarks that “good hunters *of beyond the sea* say that [... boars] bear medicine on account of the good herbs and the good flowers that they eat, but thereupon I make no affirmation” (his emphasis 48). This rhetoric echoes the style of alchemists who often write about what other alchemist declare. For example, Albertus Magnus decrees in the *Libellus de Alchemia* that “some persons, and there are many, wish to contradict us, especially those who neither know anything about the art nor are acquainted with the nature of metals” (Linden 101). Elsewhere, Roger Bacon reports in the *Radix Mundi* that “*Euclid* the Philosopher, and a man of great understanding, advises to work in nothing but in *Sol* and *Mercury*” (Linden 115). Norwich engages in this same sort of analysis with the boar, explaining that he has heard it said, but is either unwilling to confirm or disagrees with such statements.

The remaining animals in *Unmaking* involved in the hunt are well-known alchemical images. The dog and the bitch are symbolic of philosophical sulphur and argent vive (Abraham 58). United, these animals represent the mercurial water, which is the purifying bath required to create the philosopher’s stone. This coupling is also represented by a mortal confrontation between a dog and wolf in the *Book of Lambspring*, resulting in a “mortified” body “rendered white” (18). I provide almost every character with a dog because not only are dogs essential in

hunting, but they prepare each character for the possibility of an alchemical union. In hunting, Edward of Norwich spoke most highly of hounds, regarding them as the “most reasonable beast, and best knowing of any beast that ever God made” (75). Each dog included in *Unmaking* is catalogued by Norwich with certain dispositions and abilities, which I will go into in detail in the glossary.

As previously mentioned, the stag and the hart were prized quarries among noble hunters. Norwich explains that there are a number of strategies when hunting a hart, which is solitarily hunted, in contrast to the deer-hunts which flush out herds of young does. He writes that hunters are known to trap deer; however, “in England they are not slain except with hounds or with shot or with strength of running hounds” (30). This type of hunting is called *par force de chiens*. A pack of scenting hounds or *lymers* were led on leash through the forest until they caught scent of the prey, at which point the hunting party would assemble and prepare for the hunt. The hounds would be loosed, encouraged by the hunter’s horn, and the hart would be driven through the forest. As it grew exhausted, the hart would retreat to a water source, at which point the hounds would close on the stag and swarm it for the kill. The Master of Game or a selected hunter would then cut the hind-quarter tendons and dispatch the quarry. Following this were the ceremonies of unmaking and the *curée* or rewarding the hounds (Almond 68-69). This is the hunting method I chose to represent in *Unmaking* because of its multiple stages, fast-paced sequence, and party hierarchy. In addition, I included the *a l’affut* method in which a bowman is concealed behind a tree with the quarry driven to him (72). This was known as the companion role because it was less

violent and personal. Traditionally, women were situated in this space during hunting, and I felt it was also a suitable place for Albion, who is oftentimes involved, but always stands outside the tension.

In alchemy, the stag or hart represent the *cervus* (or *servus*) *fugitives* or “fleeing hart” (Abraham 32), also referred to as the Runaway Slave, which is a symbol for alchemical Mercury (Ruland 292). In the *Book of Lambspring* this slave is symbolised as a deer, and it represents the soul. “They are concealed in the forest / But happy shall that man be called / Who shall snare and capture them,” Lambspring writes, referring to the philosophical mercury essential to the philosopher’s stone (14). As mentioned above, the hart was a prized quarry among serious hunters, creating a fitting symbol for the hart as an object of desire.

Indeed, according to Marcelle Thiébaux in *The Stag of Love*, the hunt for the hart or stag is a classic allegorical mode in the medieval period, particularly used in courting narratives. Thiébaux writes that there are five types of stag iconography: “thirsting stag, serpent-slaying stag, nobly antlered stag, harried stag, and transpierced stag” (41). Each of these icons can be found in *Unmaking*, although some more readily than others. For example, the serpent-slaying stag rejuvenates itself by sucking the poison from a venomous serpent and drawing the medicine therein. The thirsting stag dwells in life-giving waters. The nobly antlered stag often represents Christ, and it generally represents noble ranks filled with faith and mystical guidance (42-43). The harried stag “was said to be *malmené*” (from the French meaning ‘to knock about’) “a word used just as commonly elsewhere in the figurative sense, of heroes, martyrs, and lovers driven

to extremes of suffering or to death” (35). Finally, the transpierced stag is chased daily by the arrows of evil and vice (46). Each of these icons have similarities to scenes in the narrative—Mercury’s encounter with the toad, the repeated scenes in the river or the sustaining dew from the leaves, the stag skull and all its advice, Mercury’s unmaking and Adam’s dissent into agony, and finally the numerous pursuits throughout the narrative. One additional factor of the allegorical stag is the consequences of its evasion. Thiébaux explains that if the stag is not caught, ultimately the hunter becomes the victim of circumstance:

Metaphorically and symbolically, therefore, the chase becomes an imperative Journey by which a mortal is transported to a condition charged with experience: a preternatural region where he may be tested or placed under an enchantment; a transcendent universe; or the menacing reaches of the self. The act of the chase may reflect not only the compulsion arising from within his own nature to undergo change, but also an external force that imposes this necessity on him: that is, the god.  
(57)

This, above all, connects the allegorical stag to *Unmaking*, for Adam and Mercury certainly embark upon a journey into a region where they are tested, placed under an enchantment, then transcend this universe. Subsequent change is dependent upon the conduct of each character to resolve their respective compulsions. Mercury remains humble enough, while Adam becomes a victim of his own chase.

Yet how realistic is Mercury as a huntress? Certainly the alchemical elements of her character are rather fantastical, but would a woman engage in hunting at all during this period? Our Victorian sense of the medieval woman would dictate no; however, a recent publication by Richard Almond titled *Daughters of Artemis* provides comprehensive examination of the huntress in the medieval period by way of tapestries, marginalia and illuminations, and concludes that women were highly involved in the sport. There is a notable absence of women in hunting literature, and so Almond borrows his evidence from images depicting women trapping rabbits, standing with the bowmen *a l'affut*, and riding astride. He concludes that hunting was one of the most important activities of the medieval period, and there is no reason why women wouldn't take part. "[F]emales" he declares, "actively participat[ed] or assist[ed] in hunting at the appropriate level for their rank" (5). Almond's acknowledgement of the conspicuous absence of women in hunting literature emphasizes the importance of Mercury as a character. It is time the medieval huntress is represented.

On the other hand, hunting mythology is populated by women such as the Roman Goddess, Diana, and the Greek, Artemis. Therefore, while Mercury apprentices to a hunter and learns the skills of tracking and survival, at the same time she represents the powerful wild women of the hunt. Almond explains that during the late medieval to early renaissance period, many painters depicted "classical hunting scenes with divine women dominating" (25). One such painting is by Lucas Cranach the Elder who produced an alarming and beautiful painting depicting the story of *Diana and Actaeon*. In the painting, Diana and her nymphs



are bathing in a pond when they discover Actaeon spying upon them. Actaeon's head turns into that of a stag's and he is chased off by a pack of dogs. Elsewhere, in *La Sphera*, written by Leonardo Dati in 1472, there is an illustration of Diana with "two horns of the crescent moon projecting from the sides of her blonde-haired head [...] and she is accompanied by a hound, probably a greyhound" (25). These are some of the hunting scenes I chose to recreate in *Unmaking* due to their central female figures.

One final image worth mentioning here is the unicorn. According to Almond, medieval bestiaries instructed that the proper way to kill a unicorn is to "throw a virgin to it" (qtd. in Almond, 40). That is to say, if the unicorn crosses paths with a virgin it will curl up into her lap or in some accounts suckle at an offered breast, at which point it will fall asleep and the hunter will be in position to slay it. Some accounts, however, depict a less than passive maiden and unicorn. In the *Ornesby Psalter*, located in the Bodleian, the unicorn attempts to throw off its attacker, while the maiden raises her arms in protest. Unicorns were not known as passive creatures. They were reputedly ferocious enough to slay an elephant and charge an armed soldier (43). Given this gender-specific role, I believe the maiden deserves acknowledgement for being the true agent in the unicorn hunt.

In alchemy the unicorn represents the masculine portion of the Mercurius (Abraham 206). Factoring in the circumstances of the unicorn hunt, one can see that the unicorn makes an apt symbol in alchemy: it requires a feminine presence to tame it, and has a dual personality of fearsome beast and gentle pet. In the *Book of Lambspring*, the unicorn accompanies the deer in the forest, completing the

trinity of the deer, forest, and unicorn as the soul, body, and spirit (15). If one considers its alchemical representation, it is no wonder the unicorn is difficult to kill, for the spirit needs no elixir to claim immortality.

### **Writing Critical: How this Text is Made**

Alchemy is the pursuit of the philosopher's stone: the legendary material that will turn base metals into gold and create the elixir of life. Its philosophers spend their lives interpreting and rewriting the formula of nature. No two recipes are alike, and yet the philosophers caution that this is an exact science: "In many ancient Books there are found many definitions of this Art" Roger Bacon states at the beginning of *The Mirror of Alchemy*. He then goes on to paraphrase Hermes Trismegistus, explaining that "Alchemy is a Corporal Science simply composed of one and by one, naturally conjoining things more precious, by knowledge and effect, and converting them by a natural commixtion into a better kind" (ch. I). It is not surprising that alchemy's history is fraught with falsehoods and frauds: its definition is impossibly simple.

I determined that in order to understand what the alchemical process might look like I would construct my own alchemical recipe. There are so many delightful symbols scattered among a library of texts that I could not choose one primary source on which to model my narrative. Therefore, I set about making my own alchemical process. My method was simple: I read many alchemical texts, took note of the symbols and in what part of the text they were located, consulted lexicons and dictionaries, and ultimately constructed a sequence of the alchemical

symbols that would be present in a nature setting, particularly conducive to hunting scenes. I divided *Unmaking* into four chapters, each encompassing an alchemical phase represented by a colour. Colour-represented phases are present in most alchemical texts, and the order is almost universally accepted. With that in mind, I chose four stages, represented by black, white, yellow and red, which are supported by alchemical scholars such as Allison Coudert, who explains:

Early Greek alchemists had inserted a yellow stage between the white and the red, but this dropped out of European alchemy. Sometimes additional colours were inserted like the ‘peacock’s tail’, a gorgeous medley of colours, appearing after the white stage. Some authors maintain that the black stage could happen more than once. But these are minor variations on the basic colour sequence from black to white to red, which had to occur in that order. (42)

Within these chapters I was meticulous that only the designated colour was mentioned, with the exception of silver, gold, and green. Silver and gold remain because of their metallic associations with alchemy, and green, while also an alchemical phase (Abraham 91), is the colour most associated with hunting. Richard Almond notes that green was the traditional colour for dress while hunting, and he quotes Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen who write that the “provocative Gabrielle [d’Estrées], who preferred to ride in a man’s saddle, occasionally display[ed] a leg—encased in a green silk stocking” (129). Green occurs naturally, and does not intrude into the symbolism of my allegory.

The placement of the peacock feathers is a good example of the contradictions I faced while constructing this process. In *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Abraham situates the peacock phase directly between the black and white stages, citing Roger Bacon who explains “there appears also before whiteness the peacocks color” (Abraham 142-143; Bacon ch. VI). However, in the above-mentioned quote from Coudert, she reports that this stage appeared after the white phase. I chose to heed the instruction of Nicholas Flamel who writes in his treatise *Hieroglyphics*, “in this operation of rubifying, although thou do imbibe, thou shalt not have much black, but of violets, blue, and of the colour of the Peacocks tail” (ch VII). Therefore, there is a brief mention of peacock colours in the smoke when Adam’s cottage is burning in chapter one, but they are more prominent in the second chapter in order to suggest a transition out of the white phase rather than into it.

Continuing briefly with Flamel, I would like to address the notion of the female alchemist. I have already argued for the validity of the huntress, but did women practice alchemy? Certainly the female essence is important to the entire alchemical philosophy, which demands a “union of opposites in perfect harmony, the wet and the dry, male and female, body and soul” (Coudert 64). A quick perusal of Flamel’s *Hieroglyphics* reveals his wife, Perrenelle to be an active participant in his quest for alchemical understanding. In addition, Coudert mentions Thomas Norton’s instructions in his *Ordinall of Alchemy* on this subject when he writes “Therefore all the Ministers must be Men, / Or else thei must be all Woemen; / Set them not occupied one with another, / Though some to you be

Sister or Brother; / Yet thei must have some good disporte / Their greate labours to recomforte: / Then nothings shall better avaunce / Your worke” (59-60). It appears that women were accepted as alchemists as much as their male counterparts. Indeed, Flamel spotlights women in his alchemical iconography, explaining that he has “rather chosen to cause paint a *woman* (his emphasis), to the end that thou mayest judge, that she demaunds rather this [multiplication], than any other thing, because these are the most naturall and proper desires of a woman” (Linden 134). In other words, women make suitable alchemists because they perform a sort of natural alchemy. Literature about alchemy does not typically star women as protagonists. From Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, to Cohelo’s novel with the same title, and Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*, up to more recently *Harry Potter*, and Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* series, the alchemists are male. I would suggest, then, that *Unmaking* spotlights the underrepresented huntress, and the often ignored female alchemist.

A final component and somewhat of an experiment in *Unmaking* is the use of time and tenses. The reader will notice that the tenses shift in the story. Adam’s story is always told in the present tense. Mercury’s story operates at a different speed than Adam’s, beginning in the past tense, and then eventually catching up to the present. The Monk retells a legend which includes yet another history within it. This tale is a *mise en abyme*, or “a miniature text embedded within the text” (Prince 53), which operates as a grand scale “anticipation-within-retroversion” or “referring forward within a back-reference” (Bal 98). The Monk in the present refers to a story in the past which in itself contains a history, and the whole tale

foreshadows events in the future. (This reflexive quality of *mise en abyme* is also a functional trait of Mercury. The mineral mercury is a component of mirrors in the medieval period; Roger Bacon's *Mirror of Alchemy* reflects upon the necessary qualities of alchemical ingredients, apparatus, as well as the alchemist's character; and Mercury the character is a reflection of the divinely chosen agent.) Finally, the story begins in the present tense and ends in the past tense. These shifts are deliberate. Alchemy promises to deliver the elixir of life which renders immortality, and allegory is designed to unveil absolute truth; therefore, time is irrelevant. This story is meant to exist at all times simultaneously. Gossman says of historical fiction that "time is no longer assumed to be a uniform medium in which historical events occur or historical phenomena have their existence, and which in itself establishes a continuity among these diverse phenomena, but seems rather to be multiform, constituted differently by the phenomena placed in series" (245). I have attempted to construct a number of indefinable deviations in time so that the story's sequence is what Bal refers to as "achrony" or "a deviation of time which cannot be analysed any further" (97). By using shifts in tenses that interrupt and later provide parallels in the chronology, temporal ambiguity of the prologue and epilogue, and an unclear period and passage of time within the story, my goal is to provide a sense of time that exists outside of linear and corporeal chronology. This juxtaposition of my four part process with sequential transgression attempts to set a time where alchemical eternity might exist. I hope that the reader experiences this multiform of time when reading *Unmaking*: that this story is all at once a medieval tale, an ephemeral allegory, a persistent

process, and a contemporary piece of literature—medieval modernism, if such a thing exists. I hope it is perused slowly, and that time passes quickly while it is read.

This brings me to the final item on this introductory agenda. A great deal of research went into this project in order to include a vast array of symbols and other details regarding alchemy and hunting. The breed of dog assigned to each character is deliberate. The titles of the chapters, the behaviour of Albion and the Monk, the clothing and jewellery, imagery in the Hunter's World, the basilisk, the lion, the flowers, some of the lines in the dialogue, all this and much more arguably warrant explanation for their placement in this text. This, more than any other facet of this project caused me great restlessness. I detested the idea of footnotes interrupting the flow of the narrative. There is no fouler reading experience than the intrusion of demanding feet. Endnotes are not preferable, as they require a lot of flipping and subsequently a lot of time. This thesis is to be enjoyed as one might delight in any other piece of fiction before taking it to academic task. I implore you to read this piece with as much pleasure as your taste allows. Still, for some, the pleasure of reading requires explanation of meaning. Therefore, in lieu of footnotes, I have included a glossary of terms and ideas. While some of the glossary entries may be more common knowledge than I anticipate, I felt obliged, at least for the purpose of the MA thesis, to err on the side of inclusiveness in order to demonstrate the scope of my research. Glossed words are not marked within the text; the glossary merely serves as an appendix to the story. My hope is that my readers will happen upon a word or idea, suspect

that it has a deeper or alternative meaning, and locate it in the glossary. This is perhaps a test of the potency of my allegory, for if the reader rightly suspects a term to contain allegorical meaning then I have highlighted these symbols and ideas effectively. In addition, it is my hope that the glossary will provide this story a level of naturalization, by which I refer to the term defined by Prince as a “network of devices through which the receiver of a narrative relates it to an already known model of reality and this reduces its strangeness” (68). Through the glossary I seek to validate the elements incorporated in my speculative narrative.

I hope you sincerely enjoy this thesis as you would any good novel. While the research is important and the alchemical process and allegorical fiction carefully constructed to adhere and pay homage to very old literary traditions, I hope first and foremost that you consider this to be a good piece of creative writing. As I mentioned in the opening of this introduction, I firmly believe that it is possible, even necessary to present carefully researched material in a manner that is not only informative, but also entertaining—*to teach and to delight* as Horace decreed. The recipe I created is no longer my own; it will now be flavoured by the interpretation of the reader. It is impossible to write an allegory with a universal conclusion. Tambling proposes the same, remarking that “perhaps giving a definition of allegory may be misleading: perhaps there is no definite thing called ‘allegory,’ only forms of writing more or less ‘allegorical’” (2). I like to think that in the spirit of hunting and alchemy, the reader will scout and track a concept through a forest of ideas with the patience to allow that idea to



gestate, adding the right amount of interpretation at the appropriate moment, and make this story his or her own. Is this not how we read all stories? Eco philosophises that “no matter what story [authors] are telling, they are also telling our own story” (15). Stories make tangible sequence and consequence. They expose to us the inevitability of the end of the quest. Eco says that “stories that are ‘already made’ [...] teach us how to die” (15). Certainly a story about hunting raises such an issue, yet this is also a story about the process for eternal life. Hunting is about life and death, alchemy is the balance between, and together they form a wondrous tale.

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First *they know only* Black;  
*and all none* Corrupts, *but*  
*the fire* Next to them is  
Pure *and within it* White.  
*And it is* Then revealed! *It is*  
Snake *circling itself, intensely*  
Biting *at its own* Tail.  
*In the middle,* Finally,  
*It is caught* Red *and raw, and*  
Unveils *all eternally to* Itself.  
*It is caught* Red *and raw, and,*  
Finally, *in the middle,*  
Biting *at its own* Tail,  
*circling itself, intensely,* Snake.  
*And it is* Then revealed! *It is*  
Pure *and within it* White.  
*The fire is* Next to them  
*and, Corrupts all none but*  
First *they know only* Black.

## PROLOGUE

In a forgotten village on the side of a dusty lane beside the butcher and across from the grocer is a public house with two rooms at the top of a set of rickety stairs. In one of the rooms sits a haggard nurse in a heavy travel-worn woollen coat and a drooping bonnet. She holds a vigil over a pale young man. Pools of his sweat collect where his shoulders press into the straw bed. In the other room a crisply starched couple sit in pregnant silence, he at the writing desk and she at the window. The hush broken only by creaking floor boards. Below, a snoring lump beneath a faded riding blanket sits in the corner, a protruding hand gripped talon-like around a half-empty tankard. Behind the bar, a balding man in his forties wipes his nose with the corner of a greasy apron. Coarse whiskers along his cheeks stick out further than his ears, and they twitch to the rhythm of the tune he whistles. It is an everyday here at the Emerald Tablet. Whether it is the beginning of April or All Hallow's Eve, this is what transpires within these walls.

Outside, the wind pushes against a wooden sign: faded paint imparts the remnants of a green stone before a golden sun. It swings on an iron chain hanging from oxidized bronze bars, with flakes of green drifting off like snow. The sign bangs against the oak door, creaking and clanging, persisting like an abandoned clock, drumming a near rhythm. Scrape of the chain, bang of the sign, creak of the bars, the noises drone on, carried away with the swell of the wind. Scrape, bang, creak, they are cogs in a wheel gathering speed until the scraping, the banging, the creaking harmonize together to herald an approaching storm.

The door swings open with a gust, spilling the last of the sunlight evading the clouds over the threshold. An old stranger emerges, carried on the columns of light that buttress the dust beneath his feet. He enters wearily supporting gnarled red hands on the door frame, and sniffs at the darkest corners of the room. The bartender clears his throat loudly onto a darkened patch on the dirt floor and the stranger jumps at the noise.

“Travelled long, then?” The bartender quips with an evaluating sideways glance. The traveller ignores him and swings the door shut, cringing at the sound of its rusty hinges. He seats himself in the corner of the room opposite of the swaddled patron.

“Expecting someone?” The bartender tries again. Still, the stranger ignores him and cocks his ear to the sound of the wind.

“Now look ‘ere.” A third attempt. “I’ve no room for ye upstairs, so unless ye’d like to stay for a pint, ye’d best head back out that door.” He advances on the drifter, his apron ties swinging at his sides, but before he reaches the table the strange man flicks a gold coin the size of a quince before his dripping nose, and the bartender halts, catching the coin out of the air.

“So you’ll be wanted to be kept in drink then?”

A grumble emits somewhere behind the thick folds of the stranger’s hood and a flagon of ale arrives on his table before the man’s long beard stops swaying.

“Don’t believe I’ve seen you around these parts,” a tremor in his voice betrays the bartender’s unease. “The name’s Will. Er, ye traveling through?” The air grows thick with the visitor’s hush and the bartender cuts through the suspense

by banging empty tankards on the bar and spitting again onto the dark spot on the floor.

The lump in the corner breaks the monotony by calling for another round, and Will gratefully busies himself refilling his glass and brushing crumbs from the table onto the floor. He cannot fathom why the hair on his neck bristles from the stranger's presence. He carries no weapon and his fatigued frame seems near to crumbling in the wind. Yet his demeanour is that of a cornered wolf, skittish, fierce, and unpredictable. Time could not come soon enough for the door to close behind him and the room become peaceful once more.

The stranger sits motionless behind his deep hood, the flagon untouched before him. He shows no desire for a quick pint, and Will steels himself for a long afternoon. Yet, some wolves make loyal pets, just as some lapdogs become rabid, and perhaps the stranger could do with some understanding. Will had yet to meet a stranger he couldn't turn into a friend, and this friend had gold.

He pours a thick dark spirit from a bottle hidden beneath the bar and downs it in one swill. Then, pouring himself a larger dram, he takes a breath and arranges himself at the table next to the hooded figure.

"I understand," He begins, letting the words spill out to hide the quiver in his voice. "if ye don't want to talk, but ye seem like ye could use a friend. Do ye care to spill a tale?" He forces himself to stare into the shadows beyond the hood, waiting for a face to emerge and a story to begin.

Finally, the stranger reaches for his ale and takes a long, slow drink. When he puts down the glass it is far from empty. Will leans forward, anticipation



squeezing lines onto his brow, but the stranger continues to hold his peace. Will scrapes his chair against the floor and stands to return to the bar.

“You strike me as worthy, Will the bartender.” The stranger begins, barely a whisper drifting out from beneath the deep hood and the long beard. Will returns to his seat, unsure how to respond. The stranger continues. “Do you know of the subtle science? The vitriol? The universal stone? The chemycal wedding?”

Will sits with his mouth dangling open, expecting a tale of love, power, loss, truth, anything but this. “I,” his response trails off into the persistent wind beyond the door.

“Would you like to know the process? I can show you the recipe, if you like.”

The wind suddenly halts and sunlight trickles through the cracks in the walls and beneath the door once more, weighed down with birdsong. Will’s mouth grows dry and he takes a sip of his gin. Whether it is the strength of the spirit running through his gut, or the unsuspecting gentle voice of the stranger, or perhaps it is the sudden tune from the birds, Will nods slowly, enchanted by the moment.

The stranger buries his tankard in his hood and it emerges empty. The stranger’s lips smack and his beard twitches. Then, the hood falls back to reveal a pair of coal-black eyes, flames licking deep within cavernous pupils. A chill washes over Will as he sits frozen, locked in a stare like a faun before a fire.

## NIGREDO: THE GIFT AND THE DEBT

The boar's corpse looks out of place on the table. Adam moves his furnaces and alembics off the work surface in order to unmake the largest boar he's known in the forest. Uncertainty agitates the back of his thoughts like a healing scar. The animal's filth and tallow could corrupt his work, but he can't leave such a great trophy in the hands of a less worthy hunter. So he has his men drag the corpse to his modest cottage on the edge of the forest. They don't come in. No one is allowed in. Not yet. There will come a day when Adam is prepared for the world to know him—but not yet, so he keeps his work and for the most part his life, a secret. Some day they will know, but not today.

The beast was once ferocious, intimidating, its tusks broad, sharp and deadly. Now it lies like discarded excess, its tusks jutting out awkwardly like limbs, its neck bent unnaturally. Yet while its body is to Adam an unsentimental trophy, an imposition on the space where Adam keeps his life locked away, still the weight of the animal pressing into the earth has carved a path from where it took its final breath to the threshold of Adam's door. And while nature will eventually erode that path, the wind will blow new fallen leaves over the trail and footsteps will splice this route with the fate of another's, the path from the last moment of this mighty boar to the entrance of Adam's secret world will always exist.

Adam secures a heavy apron over his tunic and selects a blade from beside the whet stone. The boar lies on its back, each limb brushing the very corners of the table. Adam begins to skilfully cut off the head. His fingers roam over the

broad joints of the forelegs, searching for the crease where shoulder blends into neck. Here he guides the point of the knife through coarse hair and into the skin beneath. The hide is tough and resists, but soon there is a subtle gust of air as the windpipe is severed and the lab is filled with the metallic pungency of the liquids of life and the wet sounds of its unmaking. The table begins to darken with fluids, grease, and the muck hidden in the folds of the boar's skin. A few strong hacks through the spine and the head is freed. Adam grasps it by the tusks and places it on a nearby shelf where it watches its muscles become meat. Next the knife slides from the belly to the breast, following the curve of the spine. Adam scoops out the miles of entrails and slops them into a pot over the fire. They sizzle and shrink as Adam cuts bright broad filets from the bulk of the beast. He removes the liver and places it apart from the rest. The lab is now a compendium of fragrances—wet wood from the table, residue from the alembics and mercurial tinctures, burning dung, sweat and grime, the musty minerals and organic riches of body and meat, and from the pot on the fire the homely smell of cooking. Adam tears pieces of dense bread and soaks up the blood from the table and adds the morsels to the innards. He removes the rustic gruel from the fire and carries it outside to the waiting alaunts. Their reward falls to the ground with a wet slap and the pair acknowledges it with yelps of violent and gluttonous celebration.

In the lab Adam selects a length of rope. Though the boar is hollow now it is still heavy and for the first time Adam wishes he had a servant to assist him in the heavier or less desirable tasks. He ties the boar's feet tightly together and heaves it off the table in a slow, deliberate tug. Bottles on the shelves rattle as the

body hits the ground and a small cloud of dust drifts around Adam's feet. He pulls the monster to the corner of the room and secures the rope through a hook in the ceiling. Then, pulling, grunting and cursing, he raises the boar into the air. It swings like an apparition, the hook creaking from the weight of the corpse. Adam wipes his hands on the white apron leaving trails of black, yellow and red. The boar's head stares down at him from its place of honour among powders, pellets, and potions. It holds Adam in a rigor mortis gaze. It is impossible for an animal to whisper, especially an animal who is now only a head. It is impossible and therefore it is true.

\*\*\*

The day of her fourteenth birthday, Mercury sat by the creek trying to read the psalms in her book of hours, but her attention strayed to the illuminations bordering the text. Animals peeked out from behind the bright tangle of foliage. A faun, hare, dog, and on the opposite page a mighty stag, greater than sixteen points, a powerful boar, and a unicorn. The pictures moved her more than the words and she wondered why the nuns of the monastery didn't venture out into God's first temple, this forest garden paradise, in order to spend time with the beasts He charged to the care of humankind. Her thoughts turned briefly to her father and she mused whether there were any animals upon his merchant ship. She wondered whether he had any books to keep him company. She did not think of him too often anymore, and there were no memories to kindle thoughts of her mother. A patterned rustling drew her attention across the creek. Through the trees burst a giant stag of fourteen points. Its hide was slick with perspiration and

vapour exhausted from its nostrils in great heaves. It stumbled into the creek and buckled its legs into an awkward roll. Next came the sound of dogs, and presently they emerged, snapping and snarling, from the trees. A horn blast sounded in the distance. The dogs nipped relentlessly at the stag's flanks as it kicked the pack away. A few more short blasts from the horn and the dogs retreated slightly to pace at the edge of the creek. Soon a new pack, men on horses, burst through the edge of the forest and surrounded the stag, shouting "Hurrah" and "Say-ho".

Mercury watched all the conditions of life unveiled in front of her simultaneously. She saw pain, anticipation, excitement, guilt, pride, lust, hunger, ambition, fear, and joy. She saw ferocity and innocence in the hunters and the prey. She knew immediately what she saw was both a necessity and an atrocity—simple and sad. She saw the stag resist and succumb, ebb and flow, inhale and exhale; its soul gave in to inevitability and let out its spirit. It transcended life before its life was ended. All at once and also slowly over fourteen years, Mercury became that stag. She saw it struggle in the creek through her eyes and her eyes became the stag's. She was wet with perspiration and the water from the creek. Her shoulders tensed with the pressure of fighting and of letting go. Covered in the hide which would make a great trophy—a blanket to cover a wedding bed—those broad shoulders were weighed down with the pressure of living, of dying, and of understanding. Mercury fought as the dogs nipped at her cloven hooves, bit at the tendons in her powerful legs. Her antlers disturbed the smooth rocks in the creek bed and she felt clay imbed itself into the soft velvet covering the horns on her mighty head. The hunters whooped and hurrahed, the

dogs snarled and barked. Then, from behind a tree came a calm breath housed in a beautiful vessel. The archer emotionlessly surveyed her in the creek. He understood what it was to pity and need, to seize and to let go. He drew the arrow in his bow and aimed steadfastly at Mercury's heart. She relaxed and prepared for the extension of his body to enter her. The arrow pierced and felt like fire, and she celebrated its totality. All was still. Life leaked from the wound in ripples and floated to where Mercury sat on the opposite bank, seeing and being. The waters of death washed over her feet.

Then the hunters seized her four legs and tied them together. She was dragged from the creek and surrounded by dogs and men. A knife plunged into her belly and slid between her breasts to the hollow crevice on her throat. Her pelt was peeled from her body and discarded on the ground. Her nakedness burned as the cool air licked at her moist flanks and chops. Her innards were yanked from within and placed on the pelt, presented as a banquet to the dogs that swarmed and feasted. She felt wet, hot and thick. Steam wafted from her guts, heavy with the smell of bile. Her liver was removed and presented to the man who rode the largest horse. He dropped it ceremoniously into a sack hanging on his side. Mercury stood and crossed the creek. She wanted to look inside the empty cavern where her guts used to be. Her movement alerted the group and they gawked at the innocent girl with wide, dark eyes that mirrored the stag's. The hunter who received the liver dropped from his horse and, drawing a long blade, bent over the body of the stag. He grasped her antlers firmly in his left hand and, drawing the blade in one swift stroke, sliced through the throat. There was a grinding sound as

the blade met bone, and he severed the head from the spine in a quick chop.

Mercury stared unblinkingly as she saw herself decapitated. She was unmade.

Body, soul, and spirit, all separate all together. All one, all none.

“My lord, she is but a girl,” one of his companions declared. “Honour her with the foot instead.”

“This lady receives the head,” he grunted, turning back to his horse. The party began to gather up the dressed stag, packing it away with the rest of their tools and bounties. The companion who spoke glanced through Mercury, visibly embarrassed at his lord’s slight. The hunter with the liver watched curiously as Mercury too gathered up her belongings. She tucked the book of hours into a fold in her dress and dragged the head labouriously to her side of the bank where she did not bend her steps to the monastery, but followed the creek to wherever its source.

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The shelf supporting the boar’s head is rotting. The moisture that gave shape to the features of the beast slithers out from behind the skin and paints itself on the back of the shelf, oozing its way into the cracks of the wood, staining and stinking. Perhaps the wood will eventually distil the matter and the shelf will lighten and smell sweet again. Perhaps not. Adam timidly touches the snout and it responds like a sea creature, spongy and wet. The boar is violent, angry, a demon. It has no use, no meaning in Adam’s laboratory. In the horn of the hart ferments the first material, the quintessence. The horn of the hart incubates; it is the womb of the mind. The boar is a demon, a harbinger of Satan, a conquest. It is the maker

of combatants, it does not measure worth. Yet as it rots on Adam's shelf it is remaking itself. The brain, the eyes, and the cartilage of the nose descend to the base of the skull to become new earth, where minerals and vegetation and crawling things take up new dwellings. This head is the body of knowledge. The body is the womb of the soul. The soul is the vessel of the spirit.

The furnace sits in the corner of the room and Adam places it upon the table. He pushes ash and yew branches into its opening, rubbing them upon themselves, wedging them together like prongs, like new branches of a hybrid tree growing within a hot, dry cave. He strikes a flint and the tender bark on the branches curl into themselves, the outside of the bark exploring the inside, turning its skin outside in. Smoke begins to curl out of the chimney and Adam inhales it, tasting the roughness on the back of his throat. Flames flick out of the top like serpents tongues. The young branches sizzle and spark, bewailing their demise, negotiating their metamorphosis into ashes, to earthen fire.

Adam removes the boar's head from the shelf and places it near the furnace. The skin on the side of its face closest to the fire glows the colour of the thick, ashy embers. It emits a fetid perfume from its drooping mouth, and stagnant eyes continue to stare at Adam. He removes his tunic and underclothes. Exposed and vulnerable, he faces the rotting demon. This worthless animal which has no place in the recipe of divinity will show Adam the way to God's company. It will be done because it is impossible. And Adam is pulled into the cloudy eyes, the eyes that tremble as the maggots feasting on the matter behind them jostle for the spaces where the sweetest meat remains. In this new world where rot is God and



smell is touch, Adam's body is caressed and licked by the animals born from death. The tiny creatures eat each other's legs; they slither over Adam's thighs, and enter the moist places behind his knees and under his arms. He feels worms bury themselves behind his ears and he hears the sound of decomposing flesh. Hears the sound of evaporation and distillation. He nestles himself in the sinus cavity and examines the inside of the spongy snout. Swims in the primordial sea where the first essence, the fifth essence, the first material births and dies all at once and never again, because it is all impossible. He feels his skin tingle and thicken like the porous snout. His lips grow as wide as his thighs, his tongue becomes erect, and he tastes decomposition and hears fermentation. His body bubbles and froths and sizzles like fire.

The black soil of brain matter and mucus and glandular secretions makes a cool bed for Adam to lie. Rolling gently among the creatures that fester in the skull he makes himself a cocoon. The creatures eat his eyes, pull at his hair, and drink the sweat that pools on his chest. He tastes bile in the back of his throat, but he does not rise from his voluntary grave. Here he will stay until it is time for him to be born. He reaches for the tinctures on the shelf, the alkalae and sulphur. He drinks the aqua vitae and it burns his oesophagus. There is a new smell of burning hair, and he senses that the skull is now smoking. Soon the skin, still clinging to the bone, will shrivel and expose the calcinated apparatus where Adam beds himself. He adds powders and roots to the fire and the heat intensifies. He can feel his own skin drying and shrivelling, crackling from the heat of the building fire. The branches are long disintegrated and Adam adds a cake of horse dung. The

spaces between the skull's teeth suddenly widen, and Adam peers through their gaps into the fire of the furnace and they become the gates of hell. From within the flames he can see Beelzebub calling to the boar, his servant on earth. The boar tries to respond, but the creatures living in its skull have eaten its tongue and replaced the muscle of speech with Adam's body. But he will not respond to the devil. He has conquered its servant and so now he is the master. Hell will give up its secrets and they will lie buried inside Adam's tomb solidified by ten thousand thousand insect legs and the slobber of one thousand thousand tongues feasting on rot. A shadow crosses the light of the fire and Adam is thrown into the milky darkness of an eclipse. And on the shadow moving across the light rides the angel of death. It is tall and feminine and it speaks to Adam in throaty whispers.

“All your work is in vain. It is a failure and that is good. Keep dying so that you can succeed.”

The Angel of Death prises Adam's mouth open and the creatures creep down his rigid tongue and they taste like earth. They paw at the back of his throat. His teeth are pushed out of his mouth as more creatures wriggle in. He opens his throat wider and they writhe into his stomach. His belly is full of decomposing insects. They taste like minerals, they taste like plants, they taste like earth, air, fire, water. They taste him.

The furnace cracks and sparks, and fire leaps from its womb to the boar head. The skin bursts from the skull and floats to the ground in ashes. The insects in Adam's stomach cringe and curl and roll on top of each other, searching for moisture and hiding from the flames. Adam breathes in the fire. His skin bubbles

and he digs his fingers into the spongy skin on his face and his arms. He tears his skin from his bones and covers the boar's skull with it. He makes the fresh decomposed earth into a new skin, hard and protective. It is cool and moist and his breath is hot and dry. He blows on his skin and the fire on his breath melts. The earth on his skin freezes.

The fire is a snake, rubbing and discarding its skin along the rough surfaces of the floor, exploring the curtains and the windows, smelling with its touch. It slithers across Adam's table marking curved patterns in the grain of the wood. Yearning for its temperate counterpart, it sniffs out the source of the coolest air and reaches for the door. It slides itself down the table leg and across the dirt floor, leaping from a puddle of grease here to a pile of soiled rags there until it makes acquaintance with the shelf with the alchemical tools. Tinctures of mercury, sulphur, salt, aqua, terra, and zephyr are consumed without judgement by the equalizing flames. The alembics and vessels rattle with the pressure of elemental conjunction. The Aristotelian properties, the hot and dry, the cool and moist, the cool and dry, the hot and moist, force themselves in and out of the glass vials until they explode from the pressure and the confusion, the change, and the joy. The fire in the furnace is concentrated, intense, too hot for this moment, and Adam loses control of it, can no longer contain it and so it contains him. Adam's laboratory becomes the vessel. He is the victimized stone. The skull cracks and the insects flee from Adam's body, taking his armour and leaving him exposed once more. He slithers beneath the burning table. The ceiling crashes upon the far side of the room. Adam rolls to a corner of the lab so-far untouched. More vessels

explode and he is showered with shards of glass. Liquid metal drips upon his head, melting his hair. In the thick smoke he is blind, and he follows the sound of the dogs outside. He is boiling. His skin bubbles and flakes, in ecstasy no longer, but frantic pain. He reaches the door and lifts the latch; his hand is seared and sticks to the glowing metal. He tears it away, leaving part of his grip behind, and bursts through the door as the remaining containers of experimentation erupt in a toxic cloud of peacock colours and descend into black, sticky grime and dust. His laboratory folds in on itself, covers itself in its excrement, and crumples into an unorganized heap that resembles the greasy, chaotic entrails of the boar, roasting on the flames of ambition and error, fit for only the feast of dogs.

Outside the door Adam gawks at the travesty. It could be done because it was impossible. Rather, it simply is impossible. Satan's messenger delivers the final call of the hunt. It is Adam who is trapped, splayed, and unmade. He reaches his hand and rests it on the space in the air where the cloud of destruction begins. As he lets his hand linger he is pulled once more into the cloud slowly drifting from the laboratory. It has escaped from Adam's experiments and will spend eternity mingling with the air, exploring new fires, plunging itself into the surface of the sea before the sky claims it once more and it falls onto the head of another misled alchemist, another harbinger of the hunt, another messenger of the devil, and also the messengers of God. Yet as Adam holds on to the barely tangible evidence of his failed experiment he senses movement within the crumbling laboratory. He waits, expecting the boar's head to drag itself by its tusks and reunite with the rest of its evil bones. Yet it is not the boar that moves but another

body—long, powerful legs, strong shoulders apex at a proud head where the smoke traps the light and gathers it into the shapes of horns. There is a bow strapped to the figure's back. She is barefoot, cloaked in a gown of moonlight. Her eyes are the colour of pewter, her hair that of a young ash tree. She holds the confident expression of an animal-of-prey that always escapes the hunt. She stands within the smoke breathing in and surveying the landscape as though it were a fresh meadow. She rotates smoothly, her eyes dart from ceiling to floor, and Adam can see that she is reading her location. She is documenting the history of this space in her memory. She is looking for something to catch. She is hunting. A hare bounds from behind a tree and crosses the path between Adam and his crumbling laboratory. She is a soul emerging from the crucible like gold. Something new and bright, exposing all that is good and peaceful behind the cacophony of chaos. It is the message from God after the exchange with the devil's messenger. It is the dawn after the dark night of the soul. This is Adam's trial by fire, and she is the beginning and the end, the light and the dark, the masculine and feminine, the gift and the debt. *She is the hare, Adam grinned; I will make her a hart.*

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Is there anything more incomplete than a head without a body? Mercury began by pushing the stag's head in front of her, pressing her smooth child hands into the back of the skull and digging the balls of her feet into the moist, leaf-blanketed earth. To a distant observer she was a new sort of animal. A creature that walks with its nose to the ground, licking the decomposing leaves and fallen

twigs and kicking up the disregarded morsels it passes. But soon her back tired and she began to pull the head behind her like a mistress leading a reluctant pet. The base of the head was now smoothed with dirt and the pelt on its chin was worn from scraping on the ground.

Her thin gown stuck to her back causing her shoulder bones to jut out like undeveloped wings—like the beginning of the evolution from human to angel. Mercury stopped and shifted the book of hours in the folds of her dress, grabbed the stag by the horns and continued to follow the path of the creek. She had never been this far into the forest before, but she was not afraid. Life was different now: she would never again fear pain or death after experiencing both. She craved it now, wanted to become its councillor, its advocate, its representative. She would not become the angel of death. No, she was not so arrogant as to think that God had charged her to lord over her human community. Instead she would be an ambassador, one who knew what it was to live, what it was to die, and what it was to be living and dying at the same time. Far ahead the creek curved back on itself. *If I keep following the creek I will end up where I started, at the place where I died.* She was tired of dragging the skull, tired of feeling its resistance on the ground. She grasped it firmly by the horns and pushed, letting it roll as far as the slight slope in the ground would allow. She pushed it again and the skull rolled a little further until it began to gather speed. Mercury soon found herself running, chasing after the skull as it burrowed a path through the forest, throwing soft earth left and right and behind like wheels on a horse cart. Mercury and the skull reached the bend in the creek, but the skull did not continue to follow the water,

instead it continued straight, and soon Mercury could no longer hear the sound of the trickling water. Eventually she could no longer smell the hawthorn, heavy with damp, and the ground no longer squished under her feet, but crackled with the dry sound of breaking twigs and crumbling leaves. The skull rolled at an awkward gait, as skulls are not spheres and they do not travel naturally on the ground. When the nose touched the ground the skull jumped slightly and bounced onto its forehead. The antlers knocked this way and that, keeping the skull on a mostly-straight path like wings buffering the soupy cloud in the wind. Mercury's hair became tangled in the chase: it stuck to her cheeks, her neck, and the hollow between her newly-developed breasts. The skull called to her. *If I am important to you then you will follow me. If I am you then you will stay with me, if you are me then you will go where I go.* So she ran behind her companion, the beast that was her, the trophy that the hunter gave her, the brand that marked her as the champion of nature. She no longer looked ahead but trusted that the skull would lead her safely down the unknown trail. She closed her eyes and tracked the stag's head with her mind. Her mind and the mind of the stag's were connected by God. They were the creatures of God and they would communicate through his words. So she ran without thinking, and the stag's mind thought for her. Until it stopped.

The skull reached the truncated tree. A wide trunk pocked with holes like wounds. Some were the abandoned homes of creatures, those who lived in a solitary way, shunning their neighbours and their tribes, their packs, their pods, their herds, their murders, their harems. Other gaps were made by the acidic saliva of time drooled on these weak spaces causing them to melt and trickle away from

the tree that stood adorned once, forever ago, with the colours and textures of living. Now what stood was crippled, ancient, it was a headless body with fruitless limbs. The skull nestled itself at the base of the truncated tree, filling a shallow space where once furred creatures made their homes. The skull fit into the space as though it was a throne, as though the skull broke away from its body and rolled to this spot in order to take up its rightful place as the ruler of the disembodied and the decomposing. The truncated tree was the colour of slime in a dirty river. It was green and black all together and always apart. As Mercury paced in front of the truncated tree its colours shifted and stirred, like water and oil agitated enough to combine for just a moment. It was a short tree. Its top was jaggedly cleaved and ended abruptly just above the fingertips at the ends of Mercury's outstretched arms. Four branches stuck up above the top of the tree, forming an uneven platform surrounded by mighty pillars. The tree was bare, but it was covered in secrets.

Mercury sat beside the skull and picked the twigs and leaves from its scuffed pelt. She spoke to it softly, addressing it with revelry and respect. She asked the skull what it was to exist, and what was more important, breathing or being. The skull answered breathlessly. Mercury asked the skull if it was better to sit at the base of the truncated tree than at the head of the mighty stag. The skull answered motionlessly. She asked the skull if it was happy. The skull answered by releasing tears of dust and broken leaves from the spaces where its eyes receded. She asked the skull if she was happy. The skull answered by floating



dust and broken leaves into her eyes. Her eyes watered, and she breathed and moved.

She boosted herself up into the tree, using the skull as a stepping stone. Her bare feet sank into the soft, crumbling bark and the moist, new earth press between her toes. She was wild now, and at the top of the tree she eased herself into a comfortable position among the branches on the uneven stage and observed the forest. From below her the skull buried its scraped chin deeper into the ground and it settled itself to observe what Mercury could not see. As she watched above so the skull watched below. Between the two they saw the entire world from the centre of the forest. They fixed themselves into the tree like gnarled burls that grow on the side of ancient maples. When Mercury was hungry she would call to the skull and it would provide her with berries and sweet, young grasses. When the skull was thirsty Mercury would collect the dew pooled in the leaves of young healthy trees that stretched themselves over the truncated tree like an ominous threat, or perhaps a blanket covering its elder. Mercury would bend the leaves so that the pools of dew would trickle down the slimy trunk and rest in the porous crevices of the skull's eyes, receding nose, and dangle-jawed smile. The skull would speak to Mercury, whispering the secrets that it and the truncated tree knew about nature, the forest and life. Mercury listened with rapt attention, asking for further details about the sun and the moon, and the metallic taste of water when it came from the right pond at the precise moment of the year. She began to discover the dew in the leaves and the berries provided by the skull in new ways. She noticed that in the morning the dew tasted sweet and young, like green

apples, but when the sun set and the air grew cold the new pools of dew tasted earthy, like potatoes. She began to notice that when the wind blew the sky was quiet but the ground was alive with noise, and when the air was calm it was filled with the breeze of voices.

The truncated tree played a polite host to the skull and Mercury while the seasons changed. The air became drier and hotter, and then the ground became colder and wetter. Mercury grew taller while the skull shrunk, shedding its skin, releasing its brain, and willing its nose to crumble beneath it. Mercury was an eager listener and an enthusiastic participant; yet, there were many times when the tree and the skull seemed to chuckle at a joke that Mercury did not understand, and at other times they would grow silent and solemn, and the air around them would heat and intensify as though the skull and the tree were sharing a private moment that Mercury could not grasp. It was as though often they communicated through a vibration of nature that Mercury could not hear, see, taste, touch. She strained her ears, widened her eyes, opened her mouth and stretched her fingers, but when she did it was as though the tree and the skull whispered more quietly, shuttered even softer, chuckled a tad deeper. Mercury did not resent her companions. Their exchanges never purposefully omitted Mercury: it was more like she was grasping at air. It is the tree's nature to eat the air, and the stag's to read messages upon it, but to Mercury the air was temporary, the thing that rose and fell in her lungs. To the tree and the skull the air was a space where they spoke to each other; to Mercury the air was borrowed. If Mercury thought long and hard about it, she expected to feel the same about water, earth, and fire. The

tree and the skull existed within the properties of the world that Mercury simply sat upon. Up here in the uneven platform of the truncated tree, Mercury would only experience the world from her elevated place. She would never understand what it was to wither and shrink on the ground and bleach in the sun like the skull. She would never feel her roots soaking up the moisture from the new earth in which skull's soft bits had transformed like the roots of truncated tree. She needed to know what it was to live within nature instead of perched privileged on top.

"Skull," she called down as she wrung evening waters onto the antlers below her, "I want to know how to hear the secrets shared between you and truncated tree. Can you teach me how to be like you?"

"No," stated the skull simply. Mercury dropped the leaf she was holding and it drifted like a tear to the ground.

"But I want to understand all that you know and share with truncated tree. How can I make myself better?"

"Do you question your worth?" the skull asked with wet bones once dressed in lips.

"Why won't you teach me?" Mercury shook the leaves above her so that evening dew rained on their heads.

"I cannot teach you because I cannot lift you onto my back and carry you to the places where you will see and feel and understand. I can only remember what it might be like to hold you on my back."

"Can you teach me then, truncated tree?" Mercury asked, feeling younger than she had since climbing up into these branches.

“No,” the tree shivered. “I cannot teach you because I have never seen or felt these places that skull knows. I have only tasted them on the wind. You cannot learn like me because you cannot taste like me.”

“Then am I to always live among you knowing only half of what you say?” her voice cracked like a weakened twig.

“Perhaps.” truncated tree and skull responded and retreated into their private vibrations, leaving Mercury entwined in her perch, connected to them both by touch, but so very alone.

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When that April the showers came and relieved the droughts of March—the droughts that parched the roots of every tree—there rode a Monk on a giant black horse. First the threesome saw a hare weave through the trees, kicking up the ground and dodging through the narrow gaps between the trees. A lymer came soon after, braiding its path with the hare’s, driving the prey to a clearing or a creek, to the end where the hare would become something new. Mercury thought back to the day of her unmaking, remembering the pack of dogs and the party of men. She searched the distance for the group of hunters, but the rider was alone, his robe, the colour of raspberries, trailing behind him, his noble head bald and shining in the cold morning light, speckled with perspiration and wilderness dust. His skin was the colour of a ripe choke cherry, dark and wrinkled, pocked with scars and imprints from the sun. His horse was fit for battle, its nose was broad and shiny, its black eyes sparkled with ferocity, and its ears rotated in every direction but down. The steed navigated as nimbly as the hare and Mercury

watched the gap diminish between hunter and prey. As the hare darted past the truncated tree it threw dirt over the skull. The tree's branches rustled from the disturbance, and the skull bounced subtly from the commotion, jostled from the crevice where had nestled comfortably for so long. Mercury sat motionless feeling the heartbeat of the frantic hare, anticipating the heartbeat of the eager Monk.

He was so close to the tree now that Mercury could see his rich eyes, the colour of gold. A brooch in the shape of a love knot clasped his cloak closed at the base of his throat. "Say-ho," he urged his dogs on, laughing through his commands, and his laughter reached the corners of those bright eyes. She called to him from her natural throne, or perhaps it was a cage. She shouted greetings, cautions, curses, but his hunting cries and the thundering hooves drowned out her trepid voice. She rose and waved to him, bouncing nervously on the balls of her feet. The Monk laughed and shouted, but his reciprocation was with the hare: those golden eyes would not cast themselves on Mercury. The horse charged closer to the truncated tree, and the vibrations from its gallop shook the dirt from the skull. Mercury leaned against one of the branches trying to make herself larger, more noticeable. She smothered the Monk with her stare, taking his image into her mind like a prisoner eats gruel, like a child eats honey, like a babe clings to a breast.

Soon it would be too late. Soon the Monk would race by in pursuit of his quarry and Mercury would never know if he might show her what truncated tree and skull could not. She let out a whimpered sigh and let go of the branch. The Monk was almost beneath her now, but he rode so fast, laughed so loud, he would

not raise his attention to her. He was holding court in the kingdom of his private adventure. Then, just before he reached the space where the branches extended, where he would have to duck to ride under truncated tree, a branch broke off and tumbled into his path. The horse reared and swerved, twisting awkwardly and shrieking horrifically and the Monk leaned back dangerously in the saddle. He dug his heels deeper into the horse's flanks, but the mighty black beast was too surprised by the fallen branch to heed the order. Mercury watched as black mane shook and powerful hind-legs bucked. The Monk fell sideways off the horse as it diverted sharply around the tree. Miraculously both beast and rider seemed uninjured. The horse ran further into the trees and stopped, sniffing with dignity as though insulted. The Monk gathered up his robes and brushed twigs and leaves off his shoulders and examined a shallow scrape on his knuckles. He sucked the wound briefly before shaking out his hands, brushing off the accident with flippant ease. He cursed quietly under his breath and examined the fallen branch. Pacing around the truncated tree, he kept his gaze downward, unaware that Mercury stood above him, wide-eyed and mouth gaping. The branch had fallen after she released the pressure of her weight. She could not have broken that branch. Truncated tree gave a part of itself for this moment. Mercury knew that instant the Monk would teach her what her friends could not. She called to him.

“Are you hurt?”

The Monk started, drawing a small dagger from his belt. “Who's there?”

“Raise your eyes, sir.” She called, willing more confidence in her voice than her throat could carry.

The Monk arched his neck and examined the girl, coated in months of elements. She was wild, with tangled hair and filthy feet.

“What are you doing in that tree?”

“Learning,” Mercury shrugged obviously. “What are you doing below the tree?”

The Monk wrinkled his brow, but still the golden eyes shone through the slits of his lids. “What does it look like I am doing? I’m collecting my wits and now I will collect my horse.”

“Pardon!” Mercury called. “Please, sir. Allow me to be your apprentice.”

The Monk paused, crumpling his face into an impatient grimace.

“Child, you need to leave the forest. I cannot take you as an apprentice. If you want to take the cloth then go to a monastery.”

“I came from the monastery. I don’t need one to teach me of the cloth. I mean to ask you to show me the ways of nature and of the hunt.”

“What do you mean by this?” the Monk stood fatherly, his hands on his hips.

“I have been unmade.” Mercury responded boldly. “I have seen what it is to be quarried, to fall in the creek, to be surrounded by packs of dogs and men. I know what it is to have my innards removed and fed to the hounds. I have lived while dying. But I do not know how to be a master of it. Please, teach me what I do not yet know.”

The Monk surveyed this strange girl housed in a barren, lifeless tree. She was strange, filthy, and yet pure. There was something about her that he felt he

could like. But he was a solitary man, happiest with the creatures and creations of God that did not speak back to him. He did not know what to say to this girl, and so he turned silently and sought his horse.

Mercury tried to call to the Monk once again, but she knew he had made his decision. There was nothing Mercury could say to convince this Monk, this man of God, this natural hunter, that she was meant to follow him. So she held her tongue, and she held her hope. But if the skull still had its tongue it would not hold it at all. Instead it would have shouted to the Monk, threatened him, cursed him, implored him. The skull would have negotiated apprenticeship fees, appealed to the Monk's sense of duty and hospitality. The skull would have made the Monk listen, if it had a tongue. But the tongue had descended into fresh earth months ago. It was no longer the skull's to use. Its antlers, however, would always be the tools of the skull. They were the extension of the cranium when the skull had a body, when it had lips that dipped into the frothy creeks where the moon reflected the sea of dawn. When the hare fled past the tree the skull shifted and rolled out from its comfortable place at the base of the tree. It now sat precariously at the edge of a dip in the ground. The antlers shifted and the skull rolled under the Monk, tangling his feet as he bent his steps toward the horse. The Monk, who prided himself on his agility, fell again and the skull and the Monk found themselves tied up in a knot tighter than the one that clasped his cloak.

Mercury looked away, turtling her head into her shoulders as the Monk roared. But soon she realized that his voice was not drenched in anger, but laughter. He picked himself off the ground, gently kicked the skull aside, and



looked at Mercury. “Well child,” he barked through his laughter, “climb down from that pedestal from which you cling. It seems I have been given two warnings to pause today, and I must listen before God sees fit to break my neck.”

The truncated tree bowed and placed Mercury lovingly on the ground. The skull rolled quietly back into its hollow at the base of its companion, the Yggdrasil skull of the sky, body of the earth, blood of the sea. Mercury smoothed the humble hoary gown she’d donned for her birthday three seasons before. It was spotted with dirt from the truncated tree, sticky in places where birds placed their sap-covered feet, torn where the fabric caught in the cracks of the ancient bark. It was slivered and stained, and it stretched tightly over shoulders grown broad and proud over the course of the year when Mercury lived with the shells of dead things. The Monk had stalked, with careful steps, off to retrieve his horse, and Mercury sorrowfully caressed her friends.

“I didn’t know I wanted to leave,” she humbly bent her head.

A breeze rustled through the barren branches of truncated tree and cooled the warm, worn spot that had only recently cradled Mercury. Sweet morning dew trickled from nearby leaves into the skull’s vacant nose. *You will always be here*, the moment seemed to say, and so Mercury joined the Monk and his lymer, and together they parted, leaving the hare bouncing through the forest, unaware that the dead saved its life.

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Mercury swayed on the back of the Monk’s horse and watched as the trees grew further apart. They rode in silence; the only noise was the snuffle of the

lymer as it searched for new quarry or a small morsel. The dog was fascinating to Mercury, much different from the pack she remembered a year ago. While those dogs were sleek, shaped like arrows and everything about them looked sharp, this dog appeared almost friendly. It had great wrinkles on its face and shoulders, its paws were wide and padded, its ears flopped comically as it ran from scent to scent, and its nose was obviously a source of pride for the Monk. The lymer missed not a glint of perfume among their surroundings. It followed trail after trail of mysterious histories that Mercury could only imagine. It paused at the base of trees, and nestled its face into patches of grass and low-growing bushes. Once the dog snorted abruptly and bounced upon a small mound of earth. It pawed at the ground and pressed its face into a small hole hidden from the pair on the horse, but visible to the great sniffer on the ground. The Monk halted the horse and patiently allowed his companion to wiggle and wag, digging at the spot until it was no more a mound as a scratch in the earth. Soon, a gopher emerged from the hole, squeaking and twitching. It darted between the great beast's legs and scampered off into another part of the forest, while the lymer simply sat and observed with a curious cock of its great, wide head. The Monk chuckled and clicked his tongue. The horse began to move, and the small hunting party continued on their way.

They rode for the rest of the day and Mercury was content to familiarize herself with the pattern of her new master's breathing. When the sun began to set and the forest turned chill she buried herself into the thick folds of the Monk's cloak. The love knot dug into the hollow in the Monk's throat, but he did not stop

her from pulling on his clothes. How she did not freeze to death while camping in that peculiar tree, he wondered. It was as though she had crawled into a womb and her bizarre companions nourished her and allowed her to gestate there. Mercury did not remember falling asleep, but at once the horse stopped, the dog let out a low, satisfied bark, and Mercury raised her head off the Monk's shoulder and opened her eyes. They had come to a clearing where the Monk was camped. He had a large pelt stretched from a tree to the ground providing shelter, and there was a circle of stones with a pile of ash in the centre. Here and there were bundles tied in trees or pelts hung from low branches. The clearing was exposed to the endless sky, but Mercury felt in this place a comfortable feeling of home. She descended from the giant horse and looked around.

“Are you hungry, then?” The Monk unsheathed his dagger, sword, axe and hunter's horn and placed them carefully next to the tent.

“Some.” Mercury began to gather twigs and leaves from nearby and piled them near the fire pit.

The Monk reached high into a tree hanging over the circle and pulled down a tightly-drawn bag. He untied it and produced a thick slice of dried meat. “Here, you look gaunt,” he passed the meat to Mercury who eyed it with amazement. It had been three seasons since she tasted meat. The skull provided her with the food of its memories. She ate berries and grasses, the flesh of animals had not touched her lips while she stayed in the truncated tree. She accepted the supper from the Monk and, sitting close to the circle where the smallest remnants of warmth exhaled from the circle of ash, she tore a small corner from the offering

and placed it on her tongue. It tasted of salt and smoke, and strength. It tasted like blood, and the memory of circulation coursing through this precious slab.

Mercury rolled the small morsel around on her tongue, allowing her mouth to salivate and soften it before precisely chewing it, savouring each fibre of flavour as it traveled through her mouth and down her throat. She took a larger bite, and soon she was consuming with the ferocity of a dog. The Monk paid no attention, but set to rekindling the fire and laying out a second pelt on the ground.

“The night will come on too fast for me to set you up with cover tonight. You can crawl under there and I’ll sleep out here,” he paused, “with the dog.”

Mercury swallowed, “No, please, you’ve extended your courtesy to me enough tonight. Do not let me also take your bed. I am used to sleeping under the stars and welcome it.”

Once the fire was lit and the Monk had satisfied his hunger, tossing the rest of the smoked meat to the patient dog, and a pile of hay and grains had been placed before the horse, Mercury led the Monk to his bed like a grown child might lead a father. He was about to protest, about to explain to her that although his skin was folded and marked enough to compete with the lymer’s, he was young yet, and virile, and needed no arm to lead him to slumber. But instead he let the gentle child with her strange balance of savagery and innocence lead him under his canopy. He closed his eyes and allowed the brightness of the fire behind his eyelids melt away to black, and sleep carried him to the places where God whispers truths that we will never quite understand, but that we can never forget. Mercury sat next to the lymer and placed her small hand on his broad head. The

dog paced in a tight, brief circle and settled down beside her, and for the first time in many months Mercury embraced the warmth of a living body that expanded and contracted with breath and stretching muscles, and she slept with a smile.

In the morning the Monk crept quietly around the camp while Mercury slept, a hairy paw draped across her shoulder. “Damn dog,” he muttered as he cut spring onions and horseradish into a pot. When the Monk placed a pot of water on the fire and, adding a few leaves, it transmuted into a dark, strong tea, Mercury rose and rubbed her eyes and nose.

“I have slept late,” she tried to shake the tangles from her hair. “Is there something I can do to help you?”

“You can sit down and drink that tea,” he grumbled, tossing the last of the foraged vegetables into the pot. “I will not teach you to hunt until you hear my tale.” Mercury took the tea from the fire and, seeing two cups placed nearby, poured and listened silently.

“I would like to talk to you about tragedy.” The Monk accepted the mug of tea and leaned back against a fallen log.

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Lucifer was the brightest of all angels, but he stood high on the pedestal of his own importance and so he fell. Adam—our first grandfather—there was never a man held in such high degree, until he sinned himself out of the garden. Then there was Sampson, who was a champion, imbued with the strength of lions and the Lord. He was a great hunter and a noble warrior, a defender of his people and a conqueror of his adversaries. But he was scorned and shaved. Hercules too fell

from fortune. Kings and Earls, people with power, Nero, Alexander, Cesar, De Petro Rege Ispannie, De Petro Rege de Cipro, I have told these tales before. But these are the tragedies of men. I will tell a story told to me by a poet on a pilgrimage, and he heard it from another poet. You will hear the story of Nastagio.

Nastagio was the son of a merchant in the town of Ravenna. Each day he would set a small table at the market beside his father's and sell humble pottery and apples. While he was not a master potter, his bowls and platters were of good quality and decent price. He was beginning to build a reputation among the other merchants, and there were some who were already loyal to him, even at his youthful age. But Nastagio just turned twenty, and, because his father could not afford to pay a master potter to take Nastagio as an apprentice, it was time that the boy took a wife and staked a space where he might begin his own orchard. There was one woman in the city who Nastagio would gladly give up any future career, claim to land, bag of gold, or whatever else a man might want just for a chance to clasp her hand in his. Paola was the daughter of the city judge. They lived at the top of the hill in a great house attached to the palace wall. She graced the market only occasionally, when she was in need of a new roll of silk, or craved something exotic from the merchants who travelled across the sea. Whenever Paola would walk through the market, Nastagio would offer her gifts of his finest pottery or the choicest apple, but she ignored his advances, giggling maliciously to her ladies in wait.

But Nastagio was kind-hearted and ambitious. He did not waiver from his gentle advances, trusting that dedication would chisel through the walls of her stone heart and expose to him the contours of her love. And so when one day Paola hastened to his table and selected his most intricate bowl his heart leapt with hope. Paola rolled the bowl in her palms, turning it over and over, admiring the delicate etchings around the rim. She ran the pad of her finger over the flowers and leaves, filling her fingerprint in the spaces that Nastagio carved out. Nastagio opened his mouth, searching for the perfect words to tell Paola that the bowl would never be as beautiful or as cherished as her. That he would throw himself into the fire where he hardened these pots, if only for the chance to spend a moment at her feet. He wanted to tell her that he would give her every bowl he ever made, every apple he ever grew, every coin he ever earned, just for the chance to make her happy for a day. That he would spend his lifetime making her happy with whatever she wanted, if only she would let him. He wanted to tell her all these things, but instead he watched in awe as she contemplated the finest piece of pottery he had ever thrown, and then he watched her let it slip from her fingers and fall to the ground. The bowl bounced off the edge of the table, splitting in half. One half fell to the ground and shattered into a hundred pieces, while the other rattled on the table, trembling from the violence that wrenched it apart.

Paola glared at Nastagio triumphantly. She did not utter a sound. There was no shocked gasp, no embarrassed shriek, she did not laugh timidly or utter sincere apologies. Instead she shrugged and walked away, leaving Nastagio to pick up the pieces of his prized work and toss them into the bin with his broken heart. The

language of her body—her contemptuous shoulders, her tightly folded arms, her neck twisting her head away from him—seemed to scream at him, warning him that she would never give her life to him, and that he would spend the rest of his days trying to spin a life half as rewarding as a moment of happiness with his cruel intended. Nastagio left the market early that day and returned to his humble chambers in his father's house.

Nastagio busied himself in his room, turning over the objects on his dressing table in his hands, mimicking the way Paola held the pottery bowl. He ran his fingers over the details of his leather belts, his quills, his bone comb, his bugle. He ran his thumb over the hunting dagger his father gave him on his most recent birthday. The blade, never far from its whet stone, cut easily into the pad of flesh, cutting a line of sorrow through the print of his thumb. Nastagio grasped the ebony handle, pressing his blood into the crevices of the wood and, drawing hesitant gasps of cowardly strength, he pulled his thick woollen shirt away from his neck and pointed the blade at his heart. The point of the knife dug into his skin, drawing forth a pool of sweat and blood. He crumpled the muscles in his face into a figure of pain and regret and steadied himself to plunge the dagger and end his sorrow. Suddenly the dagger was ripped from his hands by a servant who entered to tend his fire. The servant threw the knife aside and Nastagio fell to the floor like a discarded coat. He wailed heartbroken sobs, terrifying the young servant, who ran quickly for his parents. Later that evening it was determined that Nastagio would leave the city and seek solace in the woods nearby. He was to



spend some time hunting and walking, as long as was needed to mend his mind and forget Paola's cruelty.

Nastagio took his hunting attire, his bugle and now sentimental dagger, as well as the servant, Biondello, who saved his life, and retired to a modest cabin in the woods nearby. Each day he hunted or simply wandered through the forest paths, seeking signs and cures for his broken heart. At night he would return to the cabin where Biondello waited for him with a cheerful fire and rustic dinner. Biondello was particularly efficient at preparing a hearty campfire bread and succulent broth. Yet despite the peaceful nature of his surroundings and the medicine of homey meals, Nastagio pined for the life that would not be. He missed the imperious woman who dropped his advances as simply as she dropped his wares. Each morning Nastagio would wake disappointed that his prayers were not heard in the night and fresh air still filled his lungs.

Barely a week into Nastagio's exiled sojourn he wandered a new direction away from the cabin, bending his doleful steps toward the river. A distant scream froze his steps. Soon, from the direction of the cabin came a young woman, naked, with brambles in her hair and cuts and scrapes over her legs and back. She came bursting through a cluster of trees, pleading for mercy at the height of her shrill voice. Her voice was raw and sounded as if she had not whispered in ages, but only pleaded through bawls and squeals. Close behind her followed two huge mastiffs, snarling and drooling at the back of her legs.

The dogs were nothing like the ones Nastagio knew from hunting with his father. These were the dogs that guarded the gates of hell. They were massive!

The curves of their bodies artful anatomical models of muscle. The thick folds of skin over their faces did nothing to dampen their ferocity. They buried their teeth into the flesh on the woman's thighs and their great paws toyed at the flanks on her loins. Nastagio watched in horror as thick pieces of flesh tore from her legs and dangled grotesquely from the dogs' mouths. She ran, tearing at branches and spider webs in her way. Nastagio shouted, trying to distract the satanic beasts, but they were fixed to their quarry and the woman soon fell beneath their weight. Each dog busied itself with one of her legs, pinning her to the ground leaving only her arms to fight off the beasts. She was filthy, and rivers of shining gore streaked down her blanched skin. Trembling, she begged for mercy. Then, from the cluster of trees where Nastagio saw her appear came a knight in dark and dented armour sitting atop a great black horse. He shouted at the woman curses of anger so vile it offended Nastagio down to the depths of his stomach. The knight rode toward the cowering woman, neglecting to call off the dogs that buried their teeth deeper into her loins. As their heads tossed back and forth, almost playfully, Nastagio could hear tendons tearing from the woman's thighs.

“And of course now I kill you,” the knight spoke casually, brandishing a sword at his side. Nastagio shook himself from his shocked silence and stepped between the knight and the woman. Having no weapon of his own he tore down a branch from a nearby tree.

“You offend me, Sir,” he called, steeling his voice against the great threat of the violent knight. “To think someone saw fit to dress you in the garb of a knight while you have the demeanour of a snake. What vile business have you

with this poor woman?” Nastagio waved the branch in the face of the horse, but the beast merely sniffed with annoyance.

“Nastagio,” the stranger-knight responded, giving the broken-hearted merchant hero pause. “Yes, I do indeed know your name. I am Guido degli Anastagi, a citizen of Ravenna when you were simply a swaddled mouth at your mother’s breast. Stand aside, Nastagio, for this is no business of yours.”

Nastagio lowered the branch and observed the knight curiously. He did not recognize the knight’s voice, and he could not see his face behind his helmet. *I don’t know you, Sir*, he was about to say, but a cry of pain and a crunch of the woman’s bones interrupted his thoughts and he raised the branch once more.

“Then the people of Ravenna will want to know that they have been misguided into knighting a knave!”

“I will tell you what you see, Nastagio, and then you will bid me leave to get on with this offensive habit. You will find this very familiar, I’m sure.” And, without waiting for Nastagio to agree, Guido launched into this tale.

*I loved this woman. Yes, I loved her more than I loved my own breath. But all she loved of me was the opportunity to see me suffer. She teased me in front of her ladies in wait, she bade me do humiliating tasks for her. I walked her tiny, useless dog while she retired to the bathhouses to perfume her hair. When she returned she would shower the little rat with kisses and loving words while I stood nearby like a beggar. She invited me for lavish dinners where I would sit far from her at the table and she would flirt with the servants. During a tournament I asked for her kerchief and she dropped it on the ground behind my*

*horse where it fell in dung. I knew then what I meant to her and that I was condemned to a lifetime of humiliation. It was too much to bear, and one evening, as I took a solitary walk along the great wall guarding fair Ravenna I gazed into her window where the light caressed the shape of her body. There she stood, a beacon for the city, an object for all to desire. She could have refused my requests, rejected me courteously in the manner that courting dictates, but instead she dedicated herself to combating my loving advances with scornful japes. I could not bear it a moment longer. She had trapped me in a tournament of courtship that I could never win and she would never release me. I stepped off the wall and fell gratefully to the wild lands beyond the city. I knew as I slipped through the air that an eternity entombed in the shallow mud would be more comfort than a lifetime encased in a sour promise.*

*But I awoke. My body was not as broken as my heart, and it beat a weak, sorrowful rhythm. Above me stood my horse and a presence I did not recognize. It was a harbinger of condemnation, an angry servant of God, and it was there to deliver my punishment.*

*“Knight,” the angel said, its voice thunderous, sad, and disappointed, “you reject your miraculous body and defy God’s bidding that you live.” I rose and averted my eyes in shame. “But God has some sympathy. He has seen how you have suffered in life. While you have not valued your life there is another who has not valued hers. God has seen the way she has made you suffer. He has seen the way she abuses God’s creations. You have both acted in sin, and while you*

*were bound together in life without love, so you will be bound together in death without love.”*

*There came a disturbance from the wall’s gates and I gaped in horror as my beloved flew from the city in her bed clothes, followed closely behind by my two prized dogs. She shouted mercy and cried for peace, and it filled my heart with anger and disgust. This woman, who had treated me with vile hatred while I was alive, suddenly begged me for mercy as though she deserved my kindness. The dogs drove her past me in the direction of the forest and I found myself mounting my horse.*

*“You will hunt this woman as she hunted your misery. Together you will tour the spaces where she trapped you in humiliation and pain. She will be hunted as you might hunt a fox or faun, and you will reward these mastiffs as you would after the chase. Then, when you find yourself standing over her, admiring the curves of her once energetic body, feeling conflicted because you mourn her and hate her, she will rise up and you will chase her again.”*

*I could barely see her now, scrambling away from my dogs, but I could hear their barks, calling me in the direction of this unnatural prey. I spurred my horse and we gave chase. “You will chase her for as many years as the months she spent revelling in your pain,” the angel called to us from my temporary grave.*

*“I do not know how many months it has been since I was cursed to play this mortal game, but I do know it must be a Friday, for each Friday we pass that cabin yonder on the way to the river where the two of us once spent a sad and awkward weekend together.”*

Nastagio dropped the tree branch and fell to the ground. The dogs still grappled with the hunted woman, who let out exhausted whimpers. The knight moved easily past Nastagio and disembarked from his horse. The woman ceased to struggle and glared at the knight through her tangled hair with a look hovering between hatred and shame. She leaned back on her elbows, accepting the inevitable act, and exposed her breasts and throat to the point of the sword. She let out hardly a cry when the knight plunged the knife into her belly and directed it up to her throat. The dogs backed off obediently and Guido eased his hand deep into her stomach, sifting through her most private spaces, navigating through the soft selections of organs and the hard curvatures of bones, wading through wet sounds and rich briny smells, pulling out her guts, liver, and slowly-beating heart. He threw them to the ground and the dogs pounced upon them, covering their faces in the thick sludge of blood and tallow. Their long tongues smacked greedily and they devoured the heart that beat but did not feel, the intestines that digested but did not savour, and the liver rich with the bitter drink of cruelty. Nastagio averted his eyes and covered his ears, conflicted with senses of pity and revulsion. He rose to the sound of a galloping horse. The woman was gone, and Nastagio watched as the knight on the horse followed his dogs to the distant river.

When he was once again alone he walked slowly back to the cabin where Biondello busied himself laying fresh bread and smoked meat on the humble table. The fire was raging in the hearth and the heat was suffocating. Nastagio sat in the chair closest to the fire and accepted a stein of rich, dark ale. He chewed his meat slowly and stared intensely into the fire. From the corner of his eye he

thought he spied a salamander leaping playfully around a burning log. When his bowl was empty and he drained the final swill of ale he called to Biondello.

“I need you to deliver a letter,” he pulled a piece of parchment and quill from the small writing desk in the corner. When he was finished writing he folded the letter, dripped wax on the flap and sealed it with his family’s simple mark. A smile blossomed on his face “Deliver this to lady Paola, and then return to me with the provisions for an impressive feast. I would like to entertain her and her own once more.” Biondello accepted the letter, bowed and obediently began to clear the table. “Leave this to me,” Nastagio leapt up in high spirits and began to gather the dishes. “If you hurry you can be in Ravenna by nightfall.” Soon Biondello found himself riding his master’s fastest horse, perplexed at the sound of its confident speedy hooves and a cheerful tune whistled inside the cabin.

A week later Nastagio welcomed the caravan of horses and carriages, its occupants observing their quaint surroundings with a mixture of scepticism and grace. Paola stood next to her carriage, arms crossed, chewing bitterly on her tongue and refusing to meet the watchful eye of her neglected suitor. Nastagio asserted himself into her arms, wrapping his grasp around her waist and spinning her playfully in the air.

“Paola, my love. The woods here were n’ere filled with beauty and serenity until you graced its shadows.”

When Nastagio placed her gently on the ground she stumbled and squeezed herself out of his arms. She searched desperately for her ladies and escaped to their protective circle of gossip and judgement.

“No matter,” Nastagio clasped his hands. “Come, let us sit down to the happy banquet I have prepared.”

The party followed Nastagio away from the cabin and through the trees to a small collection of tables set out under the forest canopy. In the distance they could hear the babbling of a river, and above the rustling of leaves. Nastagio directed each guest to their place, sitting Paola at the head of the table. They feasted on Biondello’s exquisite bread and soup, and then venison and roasted wild onions. For dessert they ate forest berries and cream.

Conversation was easy and light as the lords and ladies admired the unique setting for a dinner party. They remarked that the colour had come back into Nastagio’s complexion and his own parents were delighted to hear the laughter once again in his voice. Throughout the meal Nastagio tried to engage Paola in cheerful banter, but she characteristically answered him with short responses and curt replies. The shorter she was to him the more he seemed to relish in their conversation. Finally, just as Biondello cleared the dessert, a distant scream erupted. Nastagio hushed the murmuring crowd and directed their ears to the direction of the plea.

From the bushes once more came the nude woman, cut and torn, with the mastiffs chomping at her heels. Nastagio marked the puffy scar running from her belly to her breast and saw now that although she cried for mercy her eyes had run out of tears. It was as though she recited lines of yielding and begged for her life out of habit. Nastagio saw the whole scene with new eyes and merely thanked God that it was not he who was cursed with repeating this macabre tableau. Yet



for his guests it was the reaches of discourteous violence. The ladies around the table covered their eyes and ears and shielded themselves behind their kerchiefs. The gentlemen rose from their seats and attempted in vain to call off the dogs. When the knight on the black horse arrived they surrounded him, brandishing daggers and fists. But Guido called down to them, recounting the same tale he first told to Nastagio merely a week before. Nastagio watched Paola hungrily she observed the woman become scrap for the dogs. Chilled by the horror, tears froze in her eyes and she fixed a glassy stare.

When the macabre theatre was finished and the knight fled to once again hunt his quarry, Nastagio rose and thanked his guests for coming. The party quietly began to gather their things. Paola clutched the arms of her chair and trembled. Her face was bloodless and her eyes drooped to her lap. A small line of perspiration clung to her lip. Nastagio sat beside her and took her clammy hand.

“Paola, my dear, has this scene frightened you?” Nastagio smoothed her hair as though she were a pet.

Paola lifted her eyes to his calm, proud face. “Nastagio, my love” the words felt thick and poisonous on her tongue. “I know that I have not been kind to you these past months. Forgive me now.”

“What is it that you are saying?” Nastagio moved from the chair to kneel at her feet.

“I have perhaps been too flippant, dear Nastagio.” Paola continued. “Of course my games were all in jest. I would be,” she swallowed her free spirit, “honoured to be your wife.”

Nastagio bid her to rise and surrounded her with an oppressive squeeze.

“Of course you will.’

Nastagio returned to Ravenna with his parents and Paola’s party that same evening, and within a week they were married. Nastagio suggested they spend the following Friday at the cabin where they sealed their wedding promise and then venture for a day down to the river, but Paola complained of illness and she remained cloistered in her room for nearly a month after the wedding. Nastagio busied himself with the affairs of his new house, familiarizing himself with his bride’s expenses, her hobbies and her friends. By the time Paola emerged from her room Nastagio was a fixture in her society. She displayed to him stone-faced pleasantries and congratulated him for carving a place in her home.

Nastagio and Paola had many children, and their life together was woven prominently into the fabric of their histories. Eventually, no one could remember a time when old Nastagio and Paola had been apart. But whenever a dog found its way into their home, or if Paola heard a distant bark or howl in the night, she would shrivel into a trembling young girl and hide in her chamber for days while Nastagio spent his time traipsing through the house from room to room, dining on liver and tripe.

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The morning fire had long burned out, and Mercury clutched her empty mug. The lymer snored and smacked his lips, and above them a crow called a cryptic message to the trees. Yet, despite nature resounding a commotion of the

language of life, to Mercury all felt very quiet. She could hear the tea swimming in her stomach and her heart beat a sympathetic rhythm for the hunted woman.

“I ask you,” the Monk stirred the pot of stew that had been cooking on the fire and began to dish out rations for himself and the girl. “To whom be this a tragedy?”

Mercury accepted a plate and stared at it thoughtfully. She chewed slowly on a piece of rabbit and toyed with a sliver of horseradish. Finally she looked squarely at the Monk and responded, “To all of them.”

The Monk did not reply but ate deliberately, and Mercury did not question him further. Finally, when they had broken their fast and sipped on more tea, the Monk nodded. “Today you will begin to hunt.”

Mercury ran a finger from her stomach to the base of her throat. She remembered so vividly the day of her unmaking, and the pleasure she felt at experiencing necessary pain, the relief she felt when the sense of dying healed itself into the miracle of rebirth. She felt sorry for both of the women in the Monk’s story, and she felt curiously disappointed in Nastagio. They all acted poorly. Paola, Nastagio, the knight and his maiden—none of these characters understood what it was to be the predator or the prey. Mercury understood immediately that the game was about power, and with power came duty. She gathered all the dishes and took them to the creek to rinse. The lymer followed behind her and sniffed at the back of her thighs, but it did not sink its teeth into her flanks. Mercury dipped her tangled hair into the cool water and flipped it behind her in a flamboyant arch; the lymer snapped at the droplets of water that

hung in the air. Together they ventured back to the camp like old friends. The Monk watched them with growing fascination, “Damn dog,” he smiled.

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The forest breathed. Thick organic smells wafted from the ground in the hot afternoon sun, floating to the Monk’s tongue. It smelled of fallen apples, feces, stale campfire, sunshine and evaporated dew. The couple crept carefully around the trees, crawling under fallen logs and skipping padded feet over shallow puddles and thorny bushes. Somewhere in the trees twigs snapped and the ground rustled as the fox wound its way with thoughtful steps toward an unsuspecting hare. Mercury caught glimpses of the fox’s bushy tail flicking through between the trees, but the Monk scouted for the fox’s eyes, beady and black and full of threats and taunting.

They had tracked this fox since the night before, setting camp near its den and waking before the birds to watch its habits. The Monk challenged Mercury to outthink the fox, and so they followed its footsteps so that she might fit her feet into the prints they left in the ground. When first the fox came out of its den it sensed Mercury watching and quickly retreated into its narrow cavern between the large stone and the fallen tree. But eventually its hunger overcame its fear and it carefully poked its arrowhead face out of the hole. Mercury ascended into a tree and instead of following the fox from behind she tracked it from above.

“The universe,” the Monk explained, “is not forward and behind, and your history is not future and past. What I tell you is not fiction. The universe is all things all at once. What is above is like that which is below, and what is below is

like that which is above. All things were created by the Being, and that Being adapted all things from the one word, Being. Its father is the sun, its mother is the moon, and the wind carried it in its belly to be nursed by the earth. Its son is perfection of the world and the word, and if it becomes earth its power will rise in a burst of energy greater than itself. Therefore, separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the palpable, act prudently and with judgement. Ascend to heaven with rationality and then return to earth with understanding. Obtain power, glory, and the superiority, and shadows will fly from you. This has more strength than strength itself and can penetrate every real thing. And that is how the world was formed.”

Mercury did not understand the Monk’s words, but the message spoke to the silent part of her thoughts she could only access through imagining she understood. So she observed the fox, following its movements by climbing from tree branch to tree branch, until the ground appeared as far from Mercury as the sky. Soon the fox became accustomed to the sense of being watched and moved about its day as though Mercury was a bird. It eventually caught the scent of the hare and the game of hunt and hunger began. Mercury lowered herself from the trees and joined the Monk in a silent survey of all that was the fox. She kept her attention focused on the cunning creature. She could hear the hare ahead of them, but she willed herself to disconnect from the inevitability of its death. The part of her that connected with the stag yearned to flee, to wrap itself in the soft pelt of the singular creature, the being that was both male and female and did not run in a

straight line. But just as she felt her nose twitch and her ears lengthen the Monk shook her roughly and gestured to the fox.

It stood like stone, one leg suspended in the air as though completing that step would release the string and shoot its arrow-face in the direction of the hare, plunge its teeth into the plump backside just above its powerful legs. Mercury's breath caught in her lungs and she felt her toes twitch, urging the fox to plant its paws and run. She licked her lips and smoothed her tongue over the pattern of her teeth. They grew sharp in her mouth and her jaw narrowed to a point. The Monk watched her curiously. She appeared the same bony wild girl he shared a campfire with that morning, but what he saw was merely a vessel. Her spirit had once again left her and she was the fox—the fox that suddenly ran.

Mercury shot through the trees in the direction of the quarry. Her tail whipped past low branches and stones. She felt hunger in her blood, excitement in her bones, and desire in her muscles. The hare bounded left and right, never taking two steps in the same direction, but Mercury's sleek body navigated the path as though she borrowed movement from the snake. Her small feet kicked up mud but her claws kept her from slipping. She felt sweat gather beneath her pelt and her ears twitched from the pressure of the wind rushing past her. The hare was losing speed, running blindly and losing confidence. Mercury sprang forward and her claws extended. She plunged them into the back of the hare. Together they rolled in a violent combination of kicks and scratches. She growled and the hare let out a hiss, baring its teeth in a desperate snarl. When the bodies came to rest Mercury leapt off the hare and licked blood from her claw. The hare rested on

its side, its breath ragged and shallow, a deep gash pulsing at its neck. Mercy stepped over the body and wrapped her teeth around the wound. She felt the blood trickle into her mouth, felt the hare's body jerk and kick once more, and finally she felt the familiar sense of relief and release. She pawed at the hare's corpse, tearing fur away from flesh, searching for the richest and most delectable morsels. Then, her blood mingled with the taste in her mouth as the arrow entered the back of her neck and pierced her brain.

Mercury screamed and fell to the ground, clutching the back of her head. She pulled her hands away, but of course there was no wound there. She studied the fox and the hare, their bodies embraced in an obscure tangle of feasting, flight, fear and fatality. And all at once Mercury understood again. She had been the hunted, she had been the hunter, she died and survived. She was the tooth and the flank, the arrow and the wound.

"Even when you make the kill," the Monk explained, removing the arrow from the fox's head, "you are a victim of the earth."

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Before Adam is a world shaped like a cone. He walks through the blurry scenery, unfocused and unfiltered. His alaunts lead his body, but they frequently glance behind at their master whose lips twitch and whose hair is crisped with the flames of failure. He stumbles barefoot and shirtless through the woods, directed by the alaunt's tails slapping against his knees. The space closest to him is infinite and oppressive and he feels the weight of the center of the earth and the limits of the atmosphere pressing on him like a vice, bandaging him tightly so that he

cannot move. But ahead is focus, the fifth element, the quintessence, the one element that encompasses the all. He concentrates on the solidity of his hounds, feels their short hair on their tails brushing against his legs. He smells their tangy breath, hears their grunts and pants as they labour through the forest, unsure of what they are tracking, but aware that something in the distance is driving their master forward. The alaunts' faces are almost comical with their thick wrinkles and heavy brows, but beneath the wrinkles and the flopping jowls are powerful jaws and large teeth. Adam trained these beasts to slice relentlessly through hide and muscle, to look on larger beasts as bigger rewards. He shudders to think that they would take his own legs from him if they were but given the scent of his blood and the proper tune of the horn.

The alaunts tramp further into the point of the cone. The crumbled cabin, a heap of furniture and fixtures, vessels and vials, sits at the entrance of the concaving tunnel, and the further Adam wanders from the cabin the less he feels its dominance, the less he feels the weight of the universe. He is simply wandering now, driving his steps toward God's thoughts. His knees wobble, his mouth is dry, there are floating black spots in his vision, and he sniffs obsessively at the forest, smelling nothing. It is the vacancy of newness, the freshest space where ripeness and aromas have not yet oozed pungency into the cracks of surfaces and invisible mists in the air. He falls to the ground where the alaunts lick his face. Their breath clings to him in sticky strips and now one smell taints this holy space. Soon another smell creeps in, the smell of nothing in particular, the chemical reaction of two things clashing, the smell of the change of time, that



unidentifiable smell of change. Adam rolls onto his knees and swims, crawls, pulls himself onward, toward the point at the very apex of the cone where the greatest secrets are squeezed into the smallest spaces.

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There are crows circling Mercury's head. Some of them are real, and their old feathers drop from their wings and brush against her nose as they descend to the ground where they will become a tool, something that will end in a point; whether it is a quill or an arrow, it will serve the same purpose: it will keep the objective on target. Mercury tilts her face to the wind and drinks in the crows' messages. Some of them tell lies, tricking her into believing that she is simply an innocent young woman, strayed from the monastery, and that some day she will wake up in her familiar bed circled by sisters with wrinkled, worried eyes, whispering powerful prayers from memory. Some of the crows tell Mercury that she is a hart, that she is lying in the river and that the hounds are tearing at the tendons above her knees. Some of the crows tell her that she is a fox, and that she is hungry for a hare, as nimble as young shoots at the beginning of spring. They tell her that her face is shaped like an arrow and that when she leaps her bushy tail brushes the ground. Another crow tells her that the Monk is her godfather and that she is a child of the wildmen, that she is the cousin of nymphs and that she will one day marry a man with the head of a stag. Another crow tells her that she is a new creature on earth. That she is the fish of the land, the bird of the sea, she walks on the air. She is the entire yellow species, and where her feet tread there spring forth flowers made of silver and mushrooms made of gold. The crows

circle her head and they speak to her of death. They speak to her of a man who came to the gates of hell through the mouth of a boar.

The last story leaves Mercury's stomach cold and her jaw tight. There is something about the man in the story that leaves her uneasy. He sounds like the dark to her light, the anger to her joy, equal in passion, averse in purpose. She does not seek hell through the mouths of the beasts, but the path of heaven down the trail of animal prints. Perhaps this stranger that the crows speak of will show her more than the Monk knows, perhaps the man that the crows speak of has crawled from the roots of a fallen tree just as she descended from the height of the one truncated. Perhaps she knew that he was coming.

Ahead, the Monk blows on his hunter's horn and his lymer howls in return. There is game ahead, perhaps a hog or a hart. The lymer drives Mercury and the Monk closer to the river and ahead they hear the rustling of hooves. Mercury counts the time between the strides. The silence is too lengthy for that of a hog. A hart, she guesses. The forest around her becomes familiar and she hears water bending itself around a curve in the river. She is close to the space where she was unmade, just on the opposite side of the river. Sights and smells embrace her like family. This is a happy space for her. The lymer yelps excitedly and the Monk urges it on with his laughing voice. His horn sings, *trou-rou-rou-rou-rout* – *trou-rou-rou-rout*, the lymer responds with short yelps, Mercury calls "So-howeh," and the hart throws itself into the protection of the river. If Time had a body Mercury might observe it on the opposite bank, musing on the compact nature of the world. Mercury might even hear Time remark how coincidentally

Mercury's adventures seem to begin, or do they end, at this very point near the bend in the river. But Mercury does not know that Time watches her because she is too focused on the game, driving the hart into the river, pulling an arrow from the quiver at her back and releasing it as though it is an extension of her arm, piercing it into the hart's chest. The lymer pounces into the river, tangling itself in the hart's legs, gripping its claws on the slippery riverbed, thrusting its jaws around tendons, heaving its weight on top of the struggle. Mercury descends from her horse, a gift from the Monk, and draws a blade from her belt. She barks a wordless command and the lymer subsides. Now, gripping the hart confidently under the chin, Mercury draws the blade across its throat and the river once again is coloured with the hues of life and death.

And at this moment the beginning and the end, the hunted and the hunter cumulate into one body, bubbling in the froth of one river. Time whispers the truth: this space is the vessel where Mercury was reduced, broken, concentrated and matured. This is the laboratory where life is dissected, studied, perfected. She pulls the hart from the river and slices away its pelt, laying it out on the ground like a shadow, and she slices into the belly, pulling the innards out and placing them on a pile in the centre of the pelt. The lymer advances and buries its face in the customary reward. Small flecks of drool, blood and unidentifiable paste from inside the ropes of endless intestines spray from the lymer's mouth and land on Mercury's arm. She brushes away the splashes and fumbles with the crooked feathers at the end of her arrow.

Time in the forest moves slowly, and while Mercury has spent two lifetimes among the trees—the life behind the monastery wall and the life free of rooms and modesty—she is still a girl with bony shoulders, tangled hair, youthful glowing cheeks and dirty feet. But her eyes are silver pools, scuffs and impressions of memory. Her pupils are surrounded by the wrinkles of questions and complications. She is the ambassador of those who run until they are dead. She reads the sun, smells drying animal dung, listens to the chatter of crows. And all of it takes place within the confines of this wild space. This space is a vessel, an alembic perched atop the furnace at the centre of the earth. In this space she has matured like the droplets of copper and iron that nestle in the cracks of the cold moist and the hot dry.

After the lymer laps up the last morsel of the centre of the hart, Mercury gathers up the pelt and secures it with a length of twine. The Monk separates the meat from the bone, sectioning the meat into manageable sacs. He does not congratulate her or offer her praise. He has not done so since the second time she captured her quarry. They are no longer master and apprentice, but silent hunters who communicate through channelling the wind and animal tracks. Theirs is a content partnership, one that exists because there is no reason for it to become severed. Mercury washes her dagger in the blood-tinged river and watches as it drains itself clear again, the remnants of the life-liquids traveling further downstream to dye the drink of fishes and forest dwellers. The evidence of the hart is no longer here: it has travelled elsewhere, like smoke.

A strange squeak catches Mercury's attention. She slides the dagger back into her belt and follows the direction of the noise. Soon she comes upon a crow, shiny and contrasting sharply with the bright green of the leaves where it hides. The crow's wings flap violently, but it does not fly. It squawks feebly and Mercury raises herself onto the lowest branch to investigate. The crow is caught in a trapper's wire. Its neck is wrapped tightly and each tug squeezes the wire further beneath the feathers. Mercury places a hand firmly over the bird to keep it still. She can feel its fear and the short bursts of air squeezing in and out of the tired little lungs. She tries to cut the wire, but it is too firm for her dagger. If she had only sharpened it after washing it in the river. She tries to untangle the frightened bird, but the knot is endless. Each time she loosens one side of the tangle the other side tightens. She can feel the crow's pain, hear its cries for mercy. There is nothing to be done: the crow is ensnared in the unfortunate grasp of circumstance. Mercury strokes the tiny beak and the bird's muscles soften in her grip. She whispers offerings of comfort and wishes the crow a safe journey wherever it shall go. Then, gripping its head in one hand and its body in the other, she twists quickly; the tendons pop in the crow's little neck. The body falls slowly from the tree, its wings spread wide, catching the wind out of habit. Mercury opens her hand, surprised to find the head of the crow cradled in the centre of her palm.

"I must leave you now," the Monk calls to her from the ground, pondering the headless bird.

"Why?" Mercury climbs down from the tree.

“Consider that we are both trapped like the crow. Consider even that I am those wings and you are the head. Is it better for us to remain together for as long as we can when in our hearts we know that nothing can come of this but our death, or is it better that we separate now, cleave ourselves from this trap and take the unknown journey while we may choose to do so?”

“I don’t understand.” Mercury grips at the folds of the Monk’s cloak.

“When I took you under my care, or at least under my tutelage, for you have never needed my care, I sacrificed my solitary life for the sake of your needs. And while I love you, dear child, you know that we are creatures of solitude, you and me. One who will remove the head from the body of a friend in order that they will not suffer must understand that.”

Mercury studies her dirty feet and, after a dense pause, “I understand,” she nods.

“Tomorrow we will divide our things and I will follow the river one direction, you the other. Our paths will dissolve in the same draught, carried by the rain wherever we might travel.”

That night they dine on roasted venison, gorging themselves on as much of the animal they can fit in their bellies. They smoke the rest of the meat and divide it evenly. The Monk supplies Mercury with a pot and a roll of thick hide. He also gives her rope, arrows, bowstring, a whetstone and a small bag of coins. Mercury gives the Monk all her devotion.

The next morning they walk together to the river and bathe in the morning sun. The Monk washes the spots of dust from his smooth head and Mercury

waters the lymer's tongue with droplets from her tangled hair. All three water the river with their brief tears. After they finish they gather their things and, allowing themselves a moment for embrace, they turn their backs and lead their horses separate ways. The lymer hesitates a moment, but after snorting in Mercury's direction he follows loyally in the footsteps of his master. Mercury wonders if anything in the forest could be that loyal to her.

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Adam leaves bits of his knees and elbows, his wrists and the palms of his hands scattered across the forest floor. The days since his laboratory succumbed to the alchemical fire have melted into a viscous tincture of time. His clothes hang in threads and his shrunken waist swims in the remnants of his tunic. The moon has not seen him take the shape of a man since the last time she revealed her full face. He slithers on the ground, touching with his whole body, as though it is all fingers. His stomach is empty, his tongue like parchment. He mumbles his thoughts constantly, translating the language of his mind, exposing secrets that would make even his dogs cover their ears. He narrates the feel of his body dragging over the rough forest carpet. He coos about sliding into moist dark places, cries out curses upon the jagged rocks and sticks that jab into his hips and the tops of his feet. His teeth clench with jealousy of the cheerful chirp of birds, and he sucks in air greedily, composing a slurpy whistle. His throat tenses in anger, his legs drag sluggishly behind him. But he does not stop moving through the forest, driven by the vision of the smoky woman illuminated by a silver aura.

So while his body is raked raw, he boasts to nature about his worthiness, and he indulges gluttonously on the violent offences on his body.

Adam's debaucheries flow from his mouth and cling in the cool air in an evil mist before his face. The droplets of his breath form images of his enemies strangled at his feet, the curves of women trembling beneath his touch, the atrophied muscles of inaction, and the greasy jowls of indulgence. His breath stinks of bile and the crevices beneath his arms and between his buttocks waft the musky pungency of sweat thickened to paste. Yet as he makes his way deeper into the forest a quiet gurgle of a fresh spring river begins to drown out the murmur of his ranting. The air fills with the smell of fresh grass bulging thickly at its roots, fed by the stream. Wild flowers and sweet berries lend mingle perfume with the onslaught of Adam's offensive stink. Soon, the chambers in Adam's skull behind his nose are bulging with the scent of beauty. His breath catches in his throat and he is interrupted by the peaceful hum of the contented forest. The dogs, who circle Adam restlessly, suddenly relax and sit at ease. Adam stops crawling. Before him stands a gnarled, twisted, stunted tree, its age made relevant not by its height, but by its thick trunk. At the base of the tree, nestled comfortably in a crevice is a mighty stag skull, its many-pronged antlers broad and impressive, its hue bleached brilliantly white by the sun.

The smells and sounds of life intensify, and the sun burns brighter and hotter through the trees. The ray focuses itself on Adam's back and spreads a blanket of energy along the length of his body. Adam feels the pressure of his weight on the ground lighten and soon his head droops towards his chest and his



arms dangle before him. He is lifted into the air and carried above the canopy of leaves. He is moving over the forest like a migrating bird. The filth and stink clinging to his body drip off of him like water. The sun burns his scalp, dripping liquid gold onto his head, forming a helm with wings.

To his left he hears the sound of laughter and a naked boy with a mischievous face materializes out of the mist, walking easily as though on the ground.

“What is this?” Adam croaks, exercising his voice for the first time in uncertain days.

The boy evaluates Adam curiously and slowly approaches as if he is a new creature the boy has not seen. “It is only the beginning.”

Adam holds his breath, ashamed of his desire to take flight. Then, the boy grasps hold of his small penis and pisses at Adam’s feet.

Adam lurches out of the stream, shouting in shock. The boy laughs louder and, shaking his member, he hops gently and floats vertically so that his face is level with Adam’s. Then his face contorts into threatening concentration and he grasps the new helm on Adam’s head. Biting his lower lip, the boy gives a sharp tug and the helm is torn away, ripping off pieces of Adam’s scalp and the tops of his ears. Adam cowers from the masked devil and raises his hands to push the little creature away. The boy entwines his small, powerful fingers between Adam’s and twists and tugs, severing Adam’s hands from their wrists. The pain causes Adam to crumple and he falls toward the ground, crashing through the trees, bouncing off branches, painting leaves and bark with spatters of his blood.

In a small clearing in the centre of the forest Mercury stoops to pluck a delicate flower caked in mud created by a distant rain. She admires the simple flower—six curled petals arranged around a delicate stamen. Despite the dull colour and rough texture of the mud, she believes—knows—that within is a simple beauty. Carefully, so that she does not agitate the muddy armour, she fixes it to a lock of her ashen hair. Near the space where the flower grew is a cluster of mushrooms, and Mercury collects them in a stiff hide basket strapped over her shoulder, resting on her hip. She searches the clearing for berries and roots, enjoying the slow, easy task of gathering that contrasts sharply with her rapid hunting routine. Her horse is tethered close to the stream with a stack of long grasses, and Mercury hums along to the tuneless symphony of solitary silence. Shadows of birds fly across her frame, decorating the forest with dancing shapes, weaving in and out of the trees, their lightless outlines skirting the ground. High above her, far enough away that the noises are only heard by the small part of the spirit that can only speak when it is too late, a figure is plummeting to the ground, crashing against branches and startling the birds and squirrels. The top of Mercury's head begins to tingle with the force of the air the falling body pushes upon her. Adam descends upon her like a raindrop and the ground soaks them up, drawing them into a soft grave.

In the darkness the smells of decay return and Adam tastes the sweet stench of death. He cradles his bloody head with the stumps of his arms and curls on his side to whimper despairingly. He is not alone. Through the offensive odour of his decomposing body, the mouldy stench of his grave, there is a hint of the smell of

youth and femininity. Adam's eyes adjust to the darkness and there the silver woman lies, eyes closed, looking peaceful and pleasant. Adam moves to brush a strand of hair from her face and pulls his mutilated arm away quickly, ashamed at his imperfection in the presence of her beauty. She does not stir. He eases his face closer to hers and grasps the lock of hair gently between his lips. Still she does not respond, and he manoeuvres her hair off her cheek. His temple touches her ear and he caresses her face with his own. Their noses touch, their cheekbones grind together, Adam moves closer so that he is held in the contours of her frame and he presses her lips to his. He runs his tongue over the pattern of her mouth, tasting her skin and dust, feeling the soft hair on her upper lip brush against his taste buds. She is his mind-constructed beauty of fair form. Adam smooths a bare leg over the soft fabric of her dress and it shifts and rises above her knee. He entwines his leg with hers and soon his is half lying on her motionless body. She is warm, and her soft, pillowy thighs arouse Adam's desire. He can feel the blood running beneath her skin, but she is not present. She is a vessel, incapable of consenting to Adam's body and soul. Adam lets his legs linger there, cradling the nest beneath her hips, and he lies still, silent, and hopeful.

The sun descends, cooled at the conclusion of its daily toil, and kisses the ground near Adam's grave. A magical wind stirs from the west and a dragon approaches the golden celestial lord. Its wings stretch and eclipse the sun, layering the world in the liquid fabric of shadow. The dragon lowers its bulk atop the grave, carving out its shape with its great claws. Then it brushes the surrounding earth away with its gentle breath until the grave stands out like a tomb. Small

roots and stones decorate the rectangular mound like epitaphs of nature. The dragon crouches low to the ground and folds its wings along its back. The sun now peeks out from behind the bulk of the great beast as though it is a curious neighbour. Taking in a great breath, the dragon opens its long mouth, exposing a shiny black tongue and jagged and broken teeth and exhales a continuous flaming breath as long as the night. The tomb burns and melts, hardening into coal black as ebony, then stone, smooth and glossy like onyx. The two bodies huddle within, roasting in the intense heat of the magical flame. The heat brings the bodies to a boil, concentrating Adam's passion, his sense of touch, his desire, his need. The sun has long disappeared, trekking its habitual way around the earth, and soon it begins to cross the forest from the east. The dragon lifts its face and snuffs out its fiery breath. It spreads its great wings once more and retreats to the west, just as a light morning rain descends upon the earth.

## ALBEDO: WORTHY OF KNOWING

Important events occur in this forest in April. Whether it is the same April that found Mercury paired with the Monk, returning from his pilgrimage to once again take up his physical tête-à-tête with God, it is hard to say. Yet here it is again (or still) April—although it is the end of April, when spring is boiled until summer rises in a fragrant vapour. The rains pour heavily on the tomb the dragon forged, washing away the earth, the roots and the stones, cleansing Adam and all his grievances. His wounds are bathed in the fresh water of life, the aqua vitae; he opens his mouth and invites the new water to pour down his throat, moistening his suffering tongue and washing out his stomach which is still caked in the slurry of insects that invaded him all that time ago. The tomb has eroded away, and he is left at the centre of a wide earthen nest. He begins to stir, stretching his legs, feeling their desire to move and run once more. He raises his head and wrings out his rust-coloured hair. His fingers are stiff, but they feel real and natural, like new shoots of a perennial plant. His loyal dogs have found him once more and they sit with naive concern, rocking from one paw to the other, licking their noses and twitching their ears. Adam reaches for the woman in the smoke and discovers he is alone. There is not even an imprint on the ground next to him where the curve of her hip may have rested. There is a lily where her head may have lain, void of colour, radiating the purest white Adam has ever seen. All around him the mud nest is the colour of pale clay, transformed from the dark soil where he was planted the night before. Adam emerges from the impression like a young shoot growing from white soil.

What joy, what freshness in the breeze! How smooth the air feels flowing in and out of nostrils that have been reborn. Adam stretches his arms to the sky, tilting his head back so that his red hair brushes against the back of his shoulders. He smiles broadly feeling his teeth cool as they are exposed to the elements. His cheeks are stretched into the pleasant pain of muscles worked into a proper exhaustion. The dogs bounce around him excitedly, jumping in and out of the hole from where their master emerged. They wag their tails, nip at his knees, lick the rain from his legs, and roll over his feet, covering their coats in the pale earth until they look like animated statues. Adam laughs if only to hear the miracle that is his voice: the vibration in his chest and throat a celebratory call announcing the discovery of life. He greets the loyal beasts he has ignored on his journey through despair.

“Hallo,” he rubs their ears and noses. “Did you fear you lost your master forever? Truth be told, I did as well. But come!” Adam leaps to his feet and begins to scan the ground, “We have a new quarry, my beasts. A miracle, a hare with pallid hair and skin cool and smooth as silver.” The dogs respond with low growls and snorts, and begin to trail closely behind Adam’s steps. He combs the ground, examining a broken twig and an upturned mushroom. He darts from tree to tree searching for a caught hair or thread of clothing. His dogs sniff the dip in the ground and then point their noses to the sky. Finding no clue among the trees, Adam returns to the grave and places himself in the center where he awoke. The flower catches his eye. He runs his fingers over the bright petals and plucks it from its unusual space, “a flower that grows below the grave and not above.” He

closes his eyes and brings the flower to his nose, breathing in its scent. “This is more than the smell of a flower,” he remarks to his dogs, lowering the flower to their eager, wet noses, “this smells of power and strength. This smells of memory. This smells of the hare.”

The dogs snuffle and snort; their tongues slap and slop in their mouths making hollow wet clapping noises and drool drips from their teeth. They sweep their noses over the broken twigs and upturned mushrooms and their canine cadences crescendo in a burst of excitement. Adam pulls his horn from his belt, a forgotten trinket dangling uselessly during his descent into despair, but now it feels familiar and welcoming against his lips. He blows three times and commands his alaunts, “avaunt cy avaunt, so how!” And barking and howling, they set off at a steady gallop through the trees, their wide noses low to the trail, their ears angled forward, their tails aloft, and Adam running closely at their heels.

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Noises amplify through Mercury’s nerves. She unties her horse, which stamps and pulls its head away from her, annoyed at being unceremoniously left alone saddled and harnessed all night. Mercury tries to smooth the tremors from her voice as she urges the horse to keep still. Every rustle of a leaf, crack of a twig, scamper of tiny paw, echoes in Mercury’s ears as though a stampede approaches harnessing weapons. She quickly takes stock of her belongings, noting that she still has a basket full of mushrooms and roots at her hip. Mercury grabs the reins and moves to guide the horse away from the river where it spent the

night alone. Just as she mounts, familiar footsteps raise the hair on the back of her neck. A stag, magnificently large with a girth of antlers like mature branches, charges into the river and gives pause. Mercury rears her horse around to gaze at the impressive creature. She recognizes the look in its eye, the heave in its breath and the sweat on its back. Somewhere in the distance behind the animal a hunting party is drawing nearer, feeding their dogs and horses with their enthusiasm. The stag stands up to its flanks in the slow-moving river locking its warm large eyes on the ashen-haired hunter who does not advance. Mercury eases her horse into the river until it too stands with its slim, powerful legs deep in the water. On equal footing, the horse and stag are roughly the same size. They both stand like statues holding secrets. One animal breathes in gasps, sucking in energy around it, the other animal stands patiently waiting for leave to stretch its muscles and expend its energy. Mercury sits atop the calm horse and composes a silent lecture. *Pause*, she thinks to it, *pause and relax. When you are filled again with life then—the* stag lowers its head and laps at the water fresh as though just awoken—*run*.

The stag smiles, not with a curved face and bared teeth as we recognize the grins upon our own faces, but it smiles with its antlers, its hooves, the flick of its tail. The stag smiles with the curvature of the muscles in its shoulders and its hind quarters. The stag smiles for the joy of feeling blood contained within its body and not oozing through a gash in its neck or a puncture at the back of its head. It smiles as though the chase between it and Mercury is but a jape, a jest, a favoured story told before the post-dinner hearth. Mercury clenches her teeth and sucks in air between her wide-stretched lips. Her face holds the posture of a smile,



but it is not: it is the grin of concentration, the tension in the shoulders that pulls at the cheeks. The distance between Mercury and the stag waxes and wanes like the tension on a bow string—sometimes relaxed like a routine exercise, then stiff and tense, like a soldier rushing to a battle. When the chase winds itself into a flurry the participants' smiles grow more severe, like the bow that yields to the string.

Each pursuit happens in a unique forest. The map of this forest is penned again in Mercury's mind every time she chances a new quarry. What was once the rock her horse nearly stumbled upon when she tracked the fox is now the boulder that causes the stag to veer left instead of sticking true to the path toward the meadow of wildflowers. Here, where the hare was first spotted grazing on a cluster of tall grasses is where the stag tangles its back hoof in a knot of thick roots, leaving Mercury a precious moment to close some distance. There, at the tree where Mercury discovered the trapped crow, where she ascended into the next phase of her lifelong hunt, the stag knocks down a thin branch with its antlers and Mercury's horse rears up to avoid it, all but throwing the rider from its back. With each game the forest dons new dangers.

There is a new danger in the forest. A heavy shadow had fallen from the sky, its weight pressed upon Mercury until she woke beneath the ground, coddled by a stranger who stroked her hair with bloodied stumps for hands. She could still feel the fire on the outside of her grave, baking her inside an earthen casket. Her essence had bubbled and steamed and mingled with the stranger's until they were expanding together as one like a loaf of bread. She remembers struggling to keep hold of her identity—the ambassador of the hunted, the mistress of the hunt—she

clung to her fiery strength which heated the iron will that branded her unique. She felt the buried prisoner caress her as though she was his lover, and it was all she could do to retreat inside herself like a squirrel squeezes into the crack of a tree, to bury herself in a crevice in her soul until she was no longer in her body baking in a kiln. She retreated so far into herself that she came out the other side into an endless space that was her spirit. There she waited with the patience of a predator until she saw the earthen tomb crack and crumble and she escaped back through her body, gathering up her limbs from under the weight of the sleeping stranger, and hurried into the morning, leaving the still-warm baked white tomb far behind.

Mercury races after the stag, chasing without seeing. She is distracted by her thoughts of the terrifying and strange night and her horse is fuelled by her instinct. Somewhere below her she is vaguely aware of another creature giving chase. Another animal driven by the need to play the game of run and chase, give and take, kill or be killed. Mercury loosens the reins of her obedient beast and it shakes its head, feeling freedom but staying the quest. It darts around the tightly-braided trees, left and right, over the stones, through puddles and ponds. Mercury tucks her head into the curve along the side of her mare's neck and nestles herself into the cocoon of pondering. What was it about that space, that activity, that moment in time that delivered her into the arms of a stranger in the depths of the earth? Did something push her to that moment the way she now drives the stag down a path different than if the creature merely spent the afternoon strolling through the trail of berries and sweet grasses? Is the new beast running beside her, weaving its way through the trees, avoiding the horse's legs, driving both she and

the stag to a lair of secrets? Mercury looks down and surveys the spotted greyhound accompanying her on the chase. Is the greyhound God in disguise? Is she, the ambassador to the hunted, called to an ethereal council of underground creatures where she might speak through her sleep and her silence? Was it a dream? Does it matter? The stag bucks and kicks up stones and dirt, the horse brays and snorts out mist, the dog shakes its coat and sheds some fleas, and the forest sighs and sways uninterestedly. The trio reaches another small clearing and the stag slides to a halt. The horse slows to a trot and rests its back end against a tree, giving the air of a casual observer. The greyhound sits as though given an order. Mercury shakes her head and clears the memories of the night. She is the envoy of the pursued and she will place herself where nature intends her to be. She will sacrifice her body, claim the space where she stretches out her arms to praise the skies, she will sing out cries of pain and joy, she will water the ground with her blood and tears, and she will honour the complexity of life even while she smothers it. But her freedom and her solitude are her own, and she will not again place herself in the arms of another. The stag nods knowingly and disappears into the forest, leaving Mercury to tend to her convictions. What the Monk lectured, she now knows with seasoned truth: she is a creature of fierce independence.

Mercury clicks her tongue and her horse bends its steps in the opposite direction of the stag, narrowly tripping over the greyhound, still perched patiently at the base of the benevolent huntress. "You can come along," she adjusts her posture, shaking out the tension in her reins and her shoulders, "but don't expect

me to save your neck.” The greyhound kicks a flea off her scruff with a back leg and licks the air as if to say, *my neck will mind its own business, thank you kindly*, and the newly completed hunting party, horse, hound, and huntress, venture a new adventure in forest parts unknown.

A trumpet of hooves and horns, a clatter of harnesses jostling against thighs, a hurrah of voices and howling dogs swell around her. The greyhound perks her ears and beats a paw against the ground, fighting a trained instinct to join her pack. Mercury steadies her horse whose back grows rigid with the defensive urge to charge into the emptiness. The forest changes from an autumn of reflection to a blizzard of commotion, packed with swirling men on horses, dogs pissing on trees, squires tightening reins and fidgeting with packs, and a cacophony of voices. Mercury squints her eyes because she cannot close her ears. Soon she cannot see the forest for the men surrounding her like sentries, taking in her shape with their eyes, pawing at her with their curiosity. The greyhound emits a low growl and the hunting pack responds in turn. A great bearded man on a white horse arranges himself at the front of the pack and observes the woman of the woods. There is something familiar about the man, his bushy beard covering a jaw, as wide as his broad forehead, and his pale tunic, decorated with horns and knives hanging from leather belts, and spotted with blood and dirt. Mercury sees again in her memory this man, large and looming, plunging the hunting knife at his side into her belly, sawing off the hart’s head and presenting it to her with a mixture of mockery and curiosity. It is the same master of the game who tore her

from the day of her birth and implanted her in the womb of the forest a lifetime before.

“Where is your little book, child?”

Mercury’s thoughts stumble. She had forgotten all about that book of hours, its illuminated images tucked in the margins, colourful scenes of woodland creatures with large eyes peaking from behind brightly painted foliage. It must have slipped from her belt as she followed hart skull to truncated tree. She had learned more from the Monk than from any book she leafed through at that river.

“I replaced it with a bow and horn, my lord.”

The lord sniffs and wipes his nose on the back of his gloved hand. “I knew there was something about you that day, wild creature. Are you a nymph, then?”

Mercury surveys her small hunting party: herself dressed in dirty garb, her ashen hair tangled down her back, her silver eyes follow the line of her arms to her hands, to the reins of her saddle atop her dappled mare. Large white spots scatter over its back and face and down its powerful legs to where the greyhound sits still like the night, the shade of a mercurial moon. Her party is the monochromatic colour of the sky before the rain, the forecast of turbulence, change, and satiation. “I am an ambassador, my lord. I am the one that negotiates between the hunter and the quarry. I am the trophy: I am the chase.”

The Master of Game lets out a guffaw louder than a horn blast and his shoulders roll with the exertion of his outburst. His rumbling drowns out the sound of the gentleman emerging from the trees, a large bow and quiver of arrows in his hand. “That’s a lot of destiny for a girl,” the lord roars. “Methinks you are

as I see you: a wild girl who might do well to return to her book. Where is the stag that we chased to this part of the woods? Perhaps you can tell me that without rambling cryptic.”

Mercury feels the bowman’s eyes rest upon her. She remembers his elegant face and the arrow that once extended from his lean arm to pierce her side. She chooses her words carefully, directing her speech at the lord, but her eyes to the bowman. “If you do not know, then you are not worthy of knowing.”

A hush falls over the hunting party like a settling fog and the lord’s face grows ominous as a sudden squall. Mercury’s new greyhound lets out the tiniest whimper and even the ever-rustling leaves fall still. Yet Mercury sits defiantly atop her steed, and she meets the Master’s gaze as though their stares are lances and they are jousting with stubbornness. Someone slowly pulls a dagger and the sound of metal against leather sheath floats in the air like a handkerchief dropped, signalling the start of a tournament. But before the Master can raise his hand against the woman in the woods, her greyhound rears on its hind legs, stretching its frame as tall as his horse’s face and lets out a great toothy snarl. The Master’s horse stumbles and its rider drops the reins and slides clumsily off his saddle, tumbling thunderously to the ground in a heap of leather and lancets and limbs. Then an angry storm of knives and curses erupt. Mercury backs her horse away from the master who is untangling himself from the dirt. His fellow hunters and loyal servants advance, some trying to capture her horse, the kennel-master lunges for the greyhound and a flurry of hands reach for the padded curves of her body.

Mercury clenches her horse between her knees and draws her sword in one hand and her dagger in another. She makes great swipes with her blades, but she is primed to stalk, chase and kill quickly. She is not a warrior, and she is unprepared for battle. On her left a hunter falls to the ground, a pool of blood spreading over his shoulder and his face drains to a ghostly white. Behind her a grizzly man with face covered in scars leans from his horse and cups her breasts, trying to pull her onto his steed. She sticks the point of her dagger into the thick flesh between his thumb and finger and the attacker shrinks away into the swirling crowd. A heavy blow connects with her elbow and she drops her sword and presses her face against the comforting curve of her horse's neck, fighting the stars swimming in her eyes. The Master climbs astride his horse once more and he pulls a great broadsword from a sheath on his back. Mercury feels a strand of hair tussle against her face and she hears a brief, high whistle whooshing past. Then, before the point of the great two-handed sword leaves its scabbard, the Master drops his arm to his side and hunches forward on his horse. An arrow juts out where his shoulder meets his neck, in the same tangle of tendons where he severed the hart's head. The rest of the hunting party sways its attention from Mercury to the source of the arrow, scanning the trees for an accomplice. Mercury holds her breath as tightly as her wounded arm. A squire enters the tree-cover in search of the mystery bowman and soon Mercury is all but forgotten as hunters and dogs spread out looking for the attacker or tending to their lord's wounds. He shivers and inhales in great ragged breaths, but he keeps balance on his horse, and

Mercury is sure he will survive. She backs her horse silently out of the melee and disappears into the trees.

She walks her horse slowly in a senseless direction, trying to push the pain of her arm out of her mind. Strangely, it is not her own safety, or even the health of the Master who nearly took her life—and her body, that concerns her, but whether the stag found anonymity in the protection of the trees. After the way the lord treated her—declaring he knew all about her and making demands on her in jest—she meant what she said about his worth. A man such as that, fuelled by bloodlust soaked in drink, did not deserve to claim the life of the stag that paused. She prayed the lord would never cross paths with that knowing creature. She prayed the stag would keep its secrets and its head.

A sudden movement, indiscernible to the injured rider, caught the greyhound's attention and she let out a sharp yelp and a growl. Mercury clenched her teeth and reached instinctively for her sword, but it lay forgotten in the scuffle.

“Looking for this?” The bowman ducks from behind a thick, gnarled trunk with Mercury's sword gripped casually at his side. Mercury sits frozen like a young deer, weighing whether to flee or approach timidly. The greyhound steps between the two, silent but threatening. “That is a special beast,” he extends the sword, handle first, to Mercury who accepts it cautiously with her weaker arm. “She was a favourite of the Master of Game. He will be loath to lose her.”



“That was no Master,” Mercury replaces the sword in the sheath at her side, “but a butcher. I am sure I’m correct in saying that he did not even give his animals names.”

The bowman shrugs, “what do you call her?”

As if aware she is the centre of discussion, the hound shakes the dust from her coat and sits tall as a figurehead. “Ursula,” Mercury glances approvingly at her companion. “And this,” she patted the mare’s neck where she nuzzles her face when she grow tired of travelling, “is Charger.”

“T’is unusual to name a horse, is it not?”

“Some might say it’s unusual to name a bowman.” Mercury cinches the sword tighter to her side.

“And who might say that?” the bowman laughs.

“The stag that is pierced by your true arrow.”

“Albion,” he introduces.

“Mercury.”

“You’re hurt,” Albion steps forward to examine her arm. Mercury tries to shrug him away, but the pain makes her wince.

“My cottage is a day’s ride from here.”

“Will you not be missed?” she asks guardedly.

Again, Albion shrugs noncommittally, “I am a bowman for hire; I go where I’m needed.” And, producing his waiting steed from a nearby copse, he guides Mercury through the never-ending and ever-changing forest.

If one fixes an eye on a distant spot it begins to appear as though the world passes underfoot instead of one traversing the world. It is no wonder we think, no matter what sense dictates, that we are the centre of the universe. Mercury places her attention on the most distant tree, a frayed thread in the centre of a tapestry. They speak to each other about mostly hunting. She tells Albion that she loves the smell of dung when it has been sitting in the shade for half of the morning, but when it has baked until the outer later is hardened and begins to crack then the smell turns her stomach. He tells her that there is nothing more beautiful than an animal print that has become firm after a rain and the edges begin to turn white like dust on a sculpture. They spend great amounts of time not saying anything at all.

“Are you a widow or a prioress?” Albion breaks their long silence.

Mercury brings her horse to an abrupt stop. “Your question is quite absurd, don’t you think?”

“I don’t waste my mind considering the value of questions when it is the answers that carry wealth of meaning.”

“There you are wrong, sir.” She searches in the pack at her side for an apple. “It is the questions that hold all the power. Questions dictate the possibility of answers, and questions reveal much about their asker.” The apple finds its way to Charger’s flapping lips.

“Go on.”

“If that lord back there you called Master of Game asked the right question then he would not at this moment be staunching the hole from an arrow in his neck.”

“Really?” Albion searches her quizzically, “And what question should he have asked?”

“You will recall that he inquired to me *where is the stag*, when he should have asked *what direction did the stag go*. A Master of Game does not sit idle on his horse waiting for the quarry to be carried to him like a lord at a banquet. A Master of Game seeks out his prizes in a tournament of wits and worth. Again, that Lord is no Master. I question whether he is even a Lord.”

“You speak bravely, my lady. If anyone in this county heard you speak so of that lord you would be brought forth for a hefty reward. Lord Hannigan does not take kindly to threats or japes. Truth be told, he does not take kindly to very much at all.”

“It has been so long since I have lived among ranks of others I would be hard pressed to know who is a lord and who is a serving wench. I prefer to live among the ranks of the hunted.”

“It seems to me you live at the top of those ranks.”

Mercury scans the trees in all directions and spurs her horse once more. Somewhere in this forest is a strange man who bedded her in a grave. “We are all hunted,” she answers.

They continue their voyage, Mercury brooding on recent events and Albion humming an improvised tune. Her arm throbs and she is weary, eager for a

soft spot to rest. She casts quick glances at her new companion, unsure whether she should trust him, whether he is authentic. He seemed to materialize out of the trees like a hero from a legend. “Why did you help me?” She searches his face for traces of trickery.

“That is most certainly an absurd question.” Albion laughs. They continue for a quarter of a league with only the sound of hooves and paws rustling over leaves and the odd chirp from above to distract them.

“Why did you not answer me?” Mercury presses.

“Because, my lady, as I said, it was an absurd question.”

“I do not think it absurd at all. Your motives for helping me will define what happens next.”

“How so?”

“Because if you believe you helped a defenceless maid and will be rewarded by the comfort of her embrace—if you intend to wear me like a pelt, then I shall stop now and return to take my chances with Lord Hannigan.”

“And if you think for one moment that I am guided by the thrust of my manhood instead of the point of my arrow then you should return to Lord Hannigan. We shall see then who wears you like a pelt.” Albion retorts. Yet his words are not soaked in venom, but salted with jovial play. Mercury has never met someone so cheerful, so savoury. His response puts her at ease and she falls in company with his pace and smiles.

“Well then, my lady. How now do you define what happens next?”

“You shall provide me a soft space for healing and we shall share meat and story.”

Albion laughs his brackish laugh and spurs his horse into a gallop, and Mercury keeps pace right behind him.

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In a clearing peppered with cooling fires and tangled footprints Adam studies the past. He dances across the tracks of horses and hunters, replicating their moves as they clashed with an outsider. He envisions the tableau: someone chases a hoofed beast, probably a stag, into this clearing and then stops. A surefooted hound dogs the individual's steps. Then a great hunting party arrives, sporting hundreds of dogs and swelled pride. The leader of this party parallels himself with the stranger and they face each other down with words. Then the party becomes a mob and they rush upon this unknown person. Yet for whatever reason the outcast escapes. Adam scrambles over the stage, reading the roles of each player, examining the dung from the horses, the droplets of blood on leaf and bush, the thread from a torn tunic, a tuft of wiry hair pulled from canine scruff. He recreates a parry here, a four-legged lunge there. His arms swing wildly and he shouts battle cries. Adam plays all the parts, the horses, the dogs, the cavalry and the commander. He stands in the centre of where the melee took place and spins wildly, jabbing with imaginary daggers and thrusting with invisible swords. Beads of sweat appear on his brow and his dogs snap excitedly at his heels, burying the remains of hunter footprints under their paws. Adam crawls on his hands and knees, sniffing at the unwelcome horse's footprints. He scoops up a morsel of its

ding and rubs it appraisingly between his thumb and finger and lists a steady stream of utterances. *Apples and chestnuts, liquid excretion dried in the sun, sleep and sex and apples and chestnuts.* Yet gone is the language of despair; instead, he delivers a maniacal soliloquy of pleasure. He smiles so widely his lips strain almost to cracking and he lets out a sporadic bark of laughter that echoes off the leaves.

A strand of ashen hue catches Adam's eye as he crawls over the deep hoof prints in the soft earth. So subtle it seems to challenge the limits of contrast, but where all the eyes of the world see nothing but texture, the fibres of nature, Adam bears witness to the secret of those filaments. He bends his face so close to the earth that he breathes it in and examines the pale strand. Then grasping the fine fibre he eases it gently from the dirt as though he is pulling the thread of Moirae. And there, curving elegantly around the nail of his index finger is the mark, the evidence, the beginning of the real pursuit. Adam barks his strange laugh, runs the filthy hair over his tongue and sniffs it hungrily. "It is her. The woman in the smoke, the emanation of the moon, the ever-fugitive, the seed of the dragon." He secures the hair to an emerald ring in the pouch at his side. "She leaves herself behind for me, so that I may track her and propagate through the ardour of our mutual love. Together she and I will be the victorious warrior."

He skips around the battleground once more, leaping over small pools of blood, the remains of a scavenged dog, and the tracks of savage men and startled horses, humming songs of matrimony. He calculates the trail of the stranger, no longer strange to his heart, and marks where she left the scuffle. At the edge of the

clearing he retrieves his animals, scratches his dogs behind their ears, mounts an abandoned horse, and follows his treasured footsteps, unknowingly passing the thick bush where the bowman emerged to save her life.

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The moon is high above the travelers when the trees finally begin to thin and the air spreads itself out, free from the oppressive weight of thick tangles of branches. Mercury and Albion give no hint to each other of stopping, and although the pain in Mercury's arm has turned fiery and her head is swimming, she shows her new companion no sign of weakness. She will ride as far as he dares her—as far as she chooses to let him dare her. They walk deep into the night, and although there is only the sharpest sliver of a young moon, the sky is clear and the light is unusually bright. It casts a silver tide across their path which bubbles up the trunks of the trees so that they appear gilded sentinels. Soon the edge of the forest is visible, tapered to saplings so short Mercury easily peers over their heads. A sudden feeling of dread overcomes her. It has been too long since she left the comforting embrace of the forest. Outside the protection of the trees she is exposed to the mercy of the expanse. Apocalyptic scenes of raining fire and blowing earth fill Mercury's head and she swoons slightly on her horse.

“Are you unwell?” Albion watches her.

She ponders her response behind an austere guard, keeping him at length, but something about his concerned face coaxes her answer, “it has been so long since I left the forest I am taken by the vastness of,” she paused, vastness of what?

Albion sprinkles the pause in conversation with his salty declaration, “T’is a grand world, my lady. T’is grand in many ways.”

Mercury peeks through the cracks of her protective wall, thankful for the interjection. “I am no lady,” she croons.

“True, I heard what you said to the lord. An ambassador. It all sounds very important and boring.”

Mercury glances at him with mischief in her smile. “Perhaps I am something more.”

“More?” Albion teases, “Pray tell what else could my lady possibly be?”

“I have heard it said that perhaps I am a nymph.”

“I do not think that a possibility.”

“No?” Mercury finds herself slightly disappointed by Albion’s resistance to her flirt.

“Not a possibility, but absolute truth.”

He spurs his horse to a gallop, coaxing Mercury into a game of chase. She pauses, filling the moment with a smile and a shake of her head and then urges her mare into a run. Albion’s laughter leaves a trail and Mercury shouts playful taunts in place of a horn. Ahead a dot on the horizon grows into a modest cottage guarded by a sheepfold with two pure-white lambs grazing like drifting snowflakes. The pair slows to a trot as they approach the cottage and soon they are greeted by the excited bark of a dog. Albion descends from his horse and scratches an eager shepherd dog behind the ears. It bows its head between its paws and its tail wags high in the air.



Mercury stands beside her unruffled greyhound, resting her hand peacefully on its head. “That beast does not seem fit to guard those sheep,” she laughs.

“This beast is only fit to guard the scraps from my table.” He removes the saddles from both horses and tosses them over the fence. The pain, briefly forgotten in the chase, spreads through Mercury’s arm once more and she hugs it close to her chest.

Albion leads her gently into the cottage, leaving the dogs to acquaint themselves with the sheep. Inside he seats her at a well-scrubbed table and tends to a fire. Mercury scans the room. The walls are smooth earth rubbed near to a shine and a thatched roof nestles itself on sturdy rafters above her. A small ladder leads to a loft hanging over one corner of the room and Mercury can just make out a tidy bedroll. Sprigs of herbs hang from hooks on the walls, along with baskets, a cooking pot, a large knife, and a broom. A large chest sits in a far corner, firmly clasped but not locked. On the wall behind Mercury stands a wooden shelf housing a few flasks and earthen containers, a lute, a pipe, and a book.

“There is a woman’s touch here.” Mercury muses, triggering Albion’s well-worn chuckle.

“The only woman to touch this cottage is you.”

Heat spreads over Mercury’s face and she fumbles a sheepish response. “I did not mean to say—I simply meant...”

Albion raises himself from the fire and crosses to the table. “Some might say there is a man’s touch to your hunts.”

“I made assumptions—” Mercury stares at her hands.

“Never be ashamed of your assumptions. Collect them, examine them closely, and discard them, but never be ashamed of them. They are the stuff that lessons are made of.” He extends his reach to Mercury’s coddled arm and she jumps at the pain. “I will find you something to wear while we dress your arm.” Albion crosses to the chest and rummages inside.

Mercury sits ponderously, unsure of what to say. If pressed to put it in words, Mercury has to admit that she feels superior. She is a ferocious nurturer and a gentle killer. Why might she be the only person to live in the cleft between the masculine and the feminine? As soon as her thought forms, Mercury chastens herself, observing humility. *I am an ambassador*, she whispers, *a representative, not a superior creature.*

Albion returns with a simple linen tunic absent of sleeves. “I trust you can manage,” he gestures to her clothing. Mercury nods and he retrieves the bucket from a hook on the wall and leaves the cottage. The work is slow-going. Mercury is pleased to see that her own tunic is not soaked through with blood, but the fabric clings to her arm nonetheless. She grits her teeth and wrestles her arm out of her garb and pulls it over her head with her good arm. Once free she evaluates her injury. There is little blood, but her whole upper arm is covered in a blistering scrape, and her elbow is swollen. She cannot see her shoulder, but it feels as tender as the rest. She eases into the borrowed tunic, places her arm gingerly upon the cool tabletop and waits.

The bowman returns with his bucket of water and a bright golden apple clenched between his teeth, juice dribbling down his chin. He sets the bucket on

the table with an energetic thud and water sloshes above the rim, dripping onto the table surface. He thrusts his hand into the water and pulls out a second apple and, drying it on the hem of his tunic, offers it to his guest. Mercury accepts it and raises it to her lips.

“Hold,” Albion rests his hand upon hers. “I will reveal to you a culinary secret.” He strides to the shelf behind her and selects one of the small earthen pots. Carrying it back to the table as though it were a treasure, Albion removes the lid and lavishly draws out a pinch of white powder.

Mercury observes the ceremony gape-mouthed and full of wonder. “What magic is this?”

Albion reaches for her apple and places it on the table. He draws his dagger and chops the fruit in half. Then, sprinkling the two halves with his mysterious ingredient, he offers it back to Mercury in a grand gesture. “It’s salt,” he exclaims proudly.

“Salt?” Mercury lets out a sharp scoff. “You are a trickster, bowman. To think, you enchanted me with simple pantry stock.”

Albion shakes his head, “I ask you not to mock me until you have tasted my offering. I leave the judgement to your innocent mouth.”

Mercury accepts the apple and sniffs it. She lets the tip of her tongue explore the tiniest fraction of its surface and her cheeks begin to tingle. She closes her eyes and takes a large bite. Juice runs down her chin and her whole mouth bursts with the sweetest apple flavour she has ever known. A groan of pleasure escapes her lips from behind the morsel.

“Tell me truthfully. What is the potion you put on this fruit?”

“I promise you, huntress, it is salt.”

“But salt does not taste of apple blossoms and honey such as this.”

“Salt preserves, my lady Mercury. And while it preserves it also blends together that which may not combine naturally. Salt is the body that binds the spirit and the soul.”

Mercury does not know what to say, but somewhere in the instincts of her truest knowledge she is certain that Albion speaks the truth. She responds by taking another bite of apple and murmuring pleasantries with juicy lips.

While she eats, Albion tends to her wounds, gently bathing her arm with water from the bucket. Once finished he selects a different clay pot from the shelf and rubs a thick paste on the deepest scrapes on her arm. The salve burns, but not unpleasantly. Next Albion examines her elbow and has her move it every way she can. He seems satisfied with her movement and applies nothing there save bandages he makes from torn cloth. He is done before Mercury is finished the rest of her apple.

The moon sends arrows of white light in through a small crack near the roof of the cottage. Mercury is curled in her bedroll near the dying embers and above her Albion shifts in his loft. She mulls over everything they spoke of during the last two days, Albion is a chimera of the characters in her past, and she begins to wonder if he is the apparition of a fever dream. He possesses the passion of the Monk, the leadership of the lord, the nurturing of the nuns, the kindness of stag skull, the reliability of truncated tree, and the talent of herself. She wonders if he

enjoys any qualities found within the stranger in the grave. Shaking the tension from her neck, Mercury settles into her pillow. She hopes that those two are nothing alike. She prays she will never have the misfortune to find out.

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The crow flops on the ground, rolling and hopping, kicking up leaves and fanning the dust with its wings. Adam cranes his neck to the four points, trying to see why the crow does not fly, but he cannot see through the tangle before his face. He steps back to see what is stopping him from getting to the struggling bird and is startled to discover that what separates him from the crow is a great peacock feather. It sticks out of the ground like a palm tree, fanning its fine strands out from a thick stem. Adam tries to peer through the wider gaps at the base of the feather, but paradoxically, the closer he stands to the great eye of the feather, the harder he has to squint to see through its fibres, but also the clearer is his view of the fat black bird beyond. Adam stands motionless with his eye glued to the spaces between the strands, and as he stands more still than the moss on the trees, the crow comes into perfect focus. Adam reels back, wide eyed and clutches his throat.

At first it seems as though the bird skirts chaotically over the forest floor, but Adam can see now that the bird is trying to peck at a small black head—its own head. Adam becomes suddenly aware of the eerie silence hanging over the grisly scene. The bird has no mouth from which to caw. There is no beak to peck out the eyes of fallen carrion, or force out a worm from the crack in a rotting stump. Horrified, Adam tries to force his way through the tangles to stamp out the

winged monster, but he is trapped behind a forest of feathers. Their great eyes watch like sentinels: indigo and white in the centre of pale wisps, dancing in a breeze cast from frantic wings. The moon casts shadows over the feathered forest, blending into the midnight wings of the headless bird. Then, the tips of the shadows begin to glow and they curl back on themselves like parchment in a fire. As the shadows burn, they send thick ash floating above the peacock tails. A swan flies from behind the moon, dripping drops of moonlight from its back. It snaps at the ashes, swallowing them like tiny minnows, and the uncaught droplets of moonlight turn to snowflakes and float to the ground. The swan descends steadily making great circles in the air until finally it comes to rest beside the crow. Its presence calms the suffering creature which stands beside its head, chest heaving and wings twitching.

Then, the head begins to sink into the ground. First Adam thinks it a trick of the eye, a shadow, or a nudge into the footprint of the new bird, but then the head sinks deeper into the ground until the eyes are covered and only the beak pokes out like a seed marker. Soon the beak is gone as well, and the crow lies still. Next, as though the earth breathed in the small head and now must exhale, a bush expels from the ground, covered in white lilies. The air is filled with the fragrance of summer flowers that radiate off the lilies like heat. The swan approaches Adam, pokes its head through the feathers, pecks at his fingers, and draws him through the tangle into a paradise. The lilies grow all around him, and plush leaves on smooth white birches. The air smells of apple blossoms and cool grass. Only then does Adam notice that everything grows from a polished marble

floor. He looks at his feet where the headless crow lies still, but now it is a pure white dove.

The dove takes flight and moves to the other side of the paradisaal room where a queen sits, clad in white with a silver crown upon her head. She rests on a throne made of lilies with her back to Adam, but watches him in a polished looking glass. The dove lands on her shoulder and she turns in her chair. What Adam mistook for a white robe is actually her pale skin. She bares her chest unabashedly. In her right hand is an alabaster chalice. She takes a sip and offers it to her guest. Adam approaches mesmerized, and his steps echo across the stone floor. He takes the cup and draws it to his lips. The water is cool and sweet, and there is a salty aftertaste, more savoury than unpleasant. He returns the cup to the queen's outstretched hand. The swan approaches with a white rose which the queen accepts and dips into the aqua vitae. A soft coo floats from the mouth of the dove and it flutters down to her breast, pecking at it until her milk runs freely. It stretches its beak over her pale nipple and Adam can just see a tiny tongue lap at the queen's nectar. It is beautiful and grotesque and Adam is vaguely aware that his mouth hangs open.

"Now that you have come this far," she begins, but her voice seems to resonate from the marble itself, "what do you mean to do next?" The queen removes the rose from the chalice. Its white colour drips off the petals and rolls down her fingers, revealing a deep red underneath. She stares at Adam patiently, but he does not know what to say.

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A streak of sunlight cuts across the ceiling and fills with dust as Albion shifts in the loft above. Mercury stares in the swirling shapes until she feels like she, too, floats among the particles of earth and light. She stretches and yawns, and a small rumble escapes from her belly. It feels like an eternity since she ate the seasoned apple and Mercury realizes that the pair filled themselves so much with stories and speech the night before they left no room for an evening meal. She quietly slips from her bedroll and into her soft leather boots. Her elbow is stiff but the swelling has decreased and it hurts much less when she stretches it. The paste has hardened to a crust and it flakes off her arm and shoulder, prickling her new forming skin with oddly painful relief.

Outside, Mercury crosses to the rain barrel at the corner of the cottage and glances briefly at her reflection. While she considers herself suspended as the child of the forest, the maiden ambassador of the woodland hunted, she is surprised to find a woman staring back at her. Wise and wild, she has lines on the corners of her eyes where they crinkle when she smiles and so the sun passes over and does not kiss her there. Her hair is the same pale ashen colour, close to the shade of a dried creek bed, but it tumbles far past her shoulders in untamed tangles. The ends brush against the surface of the water, causing her reflection to wobble and stretch. She cups her hands and brings them above the barrel, and just before she plunges them into the rainwater she notices the traces of white trailing over her fingers and palms like dried droplets across a canvas. *Curious*, she thinks, *it must be residue from the salt and apple*. She immerses her hands in the



water and brings them up to her face, washing the sleep from her eyes and the dreams from her mind.

Albion emerges with a basket filled with apples and berries, a half a loaf of dense, dark bread, and a board with soft cheese. He sets it on a patch of grass and returns to the house saying not even a greeting. Mercury watches him curiously, but not offended, having lately accepted that the activities Albion engages in are always curious and never offensive. He returns in less than a moment carrying another basket, much larger than the first, and Mercury can just see a corner of her linens peeking out from the top of the basket. A large bar of soap perches on top.

“I thought we might spend the day at the creek,” he gestures to a subtle valley dipping halfway to the horizon. “It is a pleasant stroll, only a short walk, and we can break our fast and our backs all at once. Methinks your garb has seen better days.” He sets off without waiting for a response and Mercury collects the basket of food and catches his stride in three quick bounds.

The soft slapping of wet linen on smooth pebbles lull Mercury and Albion into a sleepy sort of working dream. They have each donned simple woollen garb: he in breeches reaching just below the knee, and she in a loose, sleeveless shift. Modesty is unknown at this creek. Their basket of food waits in the shade of an apple tree where providence might shake a few more offerings from laden branches. Mercury wrings out the last of her under clothes, lays them to dry in the sun, and draws a thin sheet from the laundry basket. Her feet dangle in the water. Above, huge, soft clouds bob lazily across the sky. Over the ever present forest a

flock of tiny black birds burst from the tops of the trees and stretch their wings toward the white castles in their airy realm. Mercury sloshes the sheet in the water and selects the bar of soap from the grass between her and Albion. It is soft from the wet work and moulds itself into peaks between her fingers.

Albion finishes wringing a pair of stockings and lays them carefully next to the rest of his clothes. He reaches for the opposite end of the sheet and together they rub and twist and fold until the linen rope between them is hardly a hand's breadth. Their hands are coated in tallow and their fingers slip past each other like curious tadpoles. Then two coordinated shakes and the sheet once again extends in their outstretched arms. The soap and the grime mingle and swirl atop the sheet and as they lower it back into the water the pattern catches the current and liberates its grip on the linen. They raise it and twist again, and the water cascades back into the creek, running down their arms, dripping off their elbows, and splashing their legs. Albion takes the sheet and steps away from the creek. He shakes it out with a sweeping snap and water droplets fly, landing on Mercury's cheeks. She wipes them away with a grin. A sudden breeze catches the sheet and it bulges in the middle so that for a brief moment, it resembles the great, swollen clouds where the black birds reign. Then it flutters to the ground where its last droplets quench the grass and the sun bakes it dry.

The berries are bursting with sweet juices, and they coat the fingers of the resting hunters. Mercury wonders whether salt would taste as magical on the little ripe treats, but Albion does not offer so she assumes no. A berry is not an apple, after all. They pass the morning mixing varied ingredients into delicious bites.

First she spreads a thick layer of cheese onto a piece of the bread and tops it with a sliver of apple. Albion then spreads a bit of cheese on an apple slice and balances a blackberry on top. There is an alchemy at work here in the quiet valley meadow with the sun playing May pole with the clouds. The sun rises higher and the grass becomes hot and dry, while the creek runs cool and moistens their feet. Mercury and Albion bond together with an intimacy void of kisses or caresses. They are siblings woven into the same tapestry, forever poised to join the game with the scent of apples on their breath.

Then, although the sun sits at its highest point in the day, twilight flows over the creek. A breeze, the type that causes the flowers to close their heads to the evening, swallows the meadow. Albion looks to the forest, but it is still as a cleric in prayer. Scents of ginger and coriander ripple up the bank, and some other familiar fragrance that Mercury can't name. Albion rises to his feet and treads around the apple tree. He glances to the cottage and then back to the forest. Mercury's eyes are fixed to the creek.

First, the current's tone is altered by the weight of footsteps. Next there is the cadence of laughter: deep and throaty, the voices of women. Soon after she hears an old song, older than even the creek—so old that she remembers it the way birds and fish remember migration. Figures emerge from the creek's horizon. Their steps are broad and playful and they bounce over the slippery rocks, letting their bright curls dance upon their shoulders. Three of the creatures, for they are like women only brighter, have golden hair, the colour of wheat just before harvest, and three of them have silver hair, almost the same as Mercury's, only

with brighter shine. They are close enough now that Mercury can see their eyes: their eyes are the same pools of silver that reflect her own. She is vaguely aware that Albion has returned to her side. He has fallen to the grass beside their basket, panting bursts of laughter. The nymphs gesture to her through unbroken song and Mercury gathers her clothes.

“I’ll finish the cheese, then.” Albion calls, and Mercury takes a final glance at her companion on the bank of the creek as the current carries her away.

He sits under the apple tree until the mystic twilight fades and the sun dons the face of afternoon. Beside him the blades of grass that curled under her curves begin to rise again. They are cool and dry, and the only imprint of Mercury remains in Albion’s thoughts. He plucks an apple from the tree and rubs it in his hands before taking a bite. It tastes salty from his skin. He pops in the last of the cheese and it coats his mouth briefly before the apple’s juice washes it all away. The berries he scatters for the birds. Albion takes one more survey of the creek, gathers up his linens, hot and dry now, and begins his solitary stroll to the cottage, his heart full of wonder and his head crowded with thoughts. Along the way he passes Charger and Ursula, who walk side by side with intelligent eyes, obediently following the ambassador who named them.

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The moon wanes full to new while Albion keeps to his cottage. It is not a spell of loneliness or a crestfallen heart that holds him behind his door but a feeling of contentment. There is no desire tread over the path that brought the nymphs so close to his door, and so Albion enjoys his time within his walls,

mending and tending, and keeping still. He sharpens his knives and repairs his pots, reweaves a basket and darns his stockings. On the morning after the half moon, Albion sits on a log beside the sheepfold restringing his bow, when something stirs between the paddock and the trees.

He stumbles around the fence, his mind moving much faster than his feet. His hair is tangled with twigs and there is a great tear in the front of his tunic. His hands are bloodied and his knees muddy. He carries a pack but the bottom is undone and the contents forgotten somewhere in the forest. A dagger hangs from a frayed belt, polished and sharp, contrasting severely with the rest of his dishevelled upkeep. A small pouch is tied around his neck and he clutches at it often if only to remind him it's there. He is thin and damp, and his skin is both burned and waxy like overworked leather. Yet, while his body appears as though it tumbled in a barrel of sand, his eyes are as bright as a groom in the spring, and he laughs at the sight of the bowman.

“You've seen better days, Adam.” Albion leans his bow against the log and helps Adam sit in his place.

“Each day I see is better than the next, my friend.” He accepts the seat and pulls off his boots. His feet stick out through holes in his stockings; his toes are cracked and bleeding.

Albion dips his bucket in the rain barrel and places it full at Adam's feet, but it is cupped hands that plunge into the water as Adam slurps loudly, feasting rather than drinking the water. When the bucket is nearly empty he dribbles the

last inch on his toes and chuckles. Albion refills the bucket and tends to his friend's feet.

"Do you have a fever? Should you be bled?" Albion asks, checking his wounds for signs of festering.

"Fever? Fever, yes. I burn. Fevers burn, do they not? I have a fever."

Albion checks Adam's cheeks, his lips, his forehead. They feel cool and only a little moist. His eyes are clear and brighter than Albion remembers. They seem to stare off to incalculable distances. "Adam," he starts, "I want you to look at me." He grabs Adam's chin and eases his gaze back to the sheepfold. "And please don't take offense, but are you mad?"

Adam's mouth pecks and pops like a fish and his eyes are glazed with far away thoughts. The silence thickens until the back of Albion's neck tenses. And then, Adam lets out a roar of laughter so loud that two dogs bark in the distance. A crow takes flight from the base of a bush and it startles Adam into a sudden hush, but once the bird is a speck among the clouds he takes up his laughter once more.

"Mad, my brother? I'm no more mad than you. It is a *glorious* fever. I burn, I *yearn*." Adam throws himself off the log and crawls toward Albion who fights the instinct to recoil. "I have been *touched*," he grabs at Albion's hands and paws at his chest. "I am *silly* with *purpose*. I have *seen* a Messenger of *God*. I have Seen, *see*? I have seen *Her*. And then," Adam suddenly pushes Albion away, "and then she *Touched* me."

The hair on Albion's arms prickle. He slowly folds himself to his knees as Adam grows still and reclaims his seat on the log. For a moment all is silent save the sound of his gentle rocking and his racing breath. It is the buzzing silence, the pause between heartbeats, before an arrow is released. Albion braces himself for, what, he doesn't know, but he feels like a faun who knows by instinct that somewhere there is a threat about to burst from the trees.

Two great alaunts lumber toward the sheepfold and nestle their heads under Adam's arms. Their presence calms their master to a degree and he strokes their heads and plays with their ears.

"I remember the boar," he begins again, speaking to the dogs.

"The one that almost took your head? The one you dragged off for your own?"

"It was a demon, that boar." He continues, still addressing the alaunts. "I crawled in *his* head and saw my way to the gates of Hell. Oh Hell, hallo. And I was made of insects, sex, *Sects* of insects, and they made me more than a man. But it burned, oh it burned; balked, he balked at me—the angel at the gates, and I was *calcinating, congealing, oxidizing*. But maybe something was wrong—no—doubt is for a less worthy man. But then, there she was, in the smoke. When I pulled myself out of the fire, out of the boar, when the insects began to flee, she was there, in the smoke. Untouched by the blackness, she was silver. She is a hare; I will make her a hart."

"Adam, slow down. Please, drink some water. Are you hungry?" Albion's head swims in the onslaught of ramblings.

“And then, when the dragon came, she was with me. After that boy pissed on me and tore my wings off, the dragon baked us in a grave. Our bodies mingled together into—I have her hair,” he claws at the pouch from his neck and works frantically at the knot, finally retrieving an emerald ring, and raises it for Albion to see. Yet it is not the emerald that catches the light and glimmers in the sun, but a strand of hair the colour of a young ash tree, tangled around the gold.

*Mercury*, Albion whispers.

“Precisely,” Adam answers, and the laughter takes him again.

“Are you tracking her?” Albion glances toward the creek. Adam cackles, pulling his knees to his chest.

Contentment is washed from Albion in an icy sheet of unease. He enters his cottage and returns presently, geared for travel. His supply of dried meat has dwindled and they will have to hunt along the way. “Do you have a horse?” He asks.

“I have had.” Adam replies, still rocking so that the log he balances on tips and thumps on its base. “I take them when I can, but they don’t run long and I leave them when they lie down.”

Albion grimaces at the thought of a trail of countless horses overridden and left to perish at the hands of his lunatic friend—a man who was once so robust and sanguine, filled with learned secrets and practiced talents, now half wild and, indeed, half man, drawn and gaunt, and so filthy that only his watery eyes look clean. Yet a man who is half beast is certain to be an even better hunter, and Albion knows that Adam will eventually track Mercury. Unless he can pull



Adam back from madness along the way, he cannot bring himself to think of what might happen, and who might suffer the worst.

He lifts his saddle from its place on the fence and calls his white filly with a click of his tongue. She canters along from a copse behind the cottage and soon he has her saddled and packed. "I don't have a spare, but I know where we can get you a ride along the way. But I won't have you run another horse to the ground, you hear?"

Adam lets the log fall still as he appraises his friend as if for the first time. "You know her?" he asks, the hint of a threat in his voice.

"Yes, and I also know where she is. Well, more or less. If you want to see her then I'm coming with you." Albion mounts his horse and holds her before Adam, defiantly.

"Then *I must Go*." He leaps from the log with supernatural speed. The alaunts jounce around him, running beneath the horse's legs, nipping at her knees, and howling for a chase.

The horse rears up, stumbling over the charged dogs. Her ears pin to her head, stretching the skin taught on her face and her lips peel back to reveal broad, flat teeth. Albion struggles to pull back on the reins, but he is tossed forward and aft in the saddle. One of her legs buckle and she almost drops to the ground, but then she catches her balance and lunges forward. An alaunt leaps in front of her, dodging her forelegs, snarling and yelping. The horse twists awkwardly to avoid the hound and suddenly all her legs are tangled. Albion slips off the side of the saddle just as his horse tumbles with a resounding crash on top of the sheepfold

fence. It splinters in half, impaling the horse in the neck. She lets out a piercing whinny, shudders and falls still, trapping the rider beneath her belly.

“Down is up and the horse rides the master.” Adam says with a boyish tone.

“Adam,” Albion grunts, coughing heavily from the weight of his horse. “You must try and help me, please.” He pushes as hard as he might, but he cannot gain leverage trapped beneath the limp body. “Come around here and help me push.”

“A fallen horse is no good to me.” Adam nudges its back end with his toe.

Albion writhes and squirms, but he is pinned from the stomach down. It is all he can do to prop himself on one elbow and work at the broken fence beneath him. Adam moves back to the log and slips on his boots, then he unsheathes his dagger and steps back to the horse.

“Cut nothing, just push.” Albion fights to keep the panic out of his voice. Adam raises the knife and Albion squeezes his eyes shut, bracing for the unthinkable. He opens them to the sound of tearing cloth. The food sack comes way from the saddle and Adam empties it into his stores.

“Are you leaving me here then?” Albion shouts, his patience finally snapping under the weight of his condition. “At least I won’t freeze with this great hide upon me.”

Adam considers for a moment and rummages quickly among the nearby grasses. He returns with an armload of dried horse dung. He constructs a hollow mound and strikes a flint, and soon it gives off a gentle heat.

“Slow moist fire bleeds the *Greene Lyon*. It will burn for near to a week, longer if mixed with salt.” Then, without another glance, Adam turns to the creek with his alaunts sniffing and circling around him.

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The creek feeds water from the grassy hills into the forest. It nourishes the roots and brings Mercury home. She has taken up the song of the nymphs like a toad to the shores and now even her voice is shifting from the tinny ring of a child to the throaty maturity of these women. They walk mostly in the late morning, stopping along the shore of the creek to pick berries and harvest tubers. In the afternoon they sleep, when the heat of the day becomes their blanket and the cool moist mosses, their pillows. Along the way, Mercury discards her bundle of clothing—the heavy tunic and coarse woollen shift. Even her under-linens constrict her and smother the joy coursing through her body and so one of the nymphs pulls down a swatch of moonlight and drape her in a gown of silver, so pale it appears white until she moves. Then, in the evening they march again, searching for a place to bathe. Sometimes they keep to the creek, yet often their spirits reach out like diviners striking upon picturesque ponds and secret wells. When Mercury finishes bathing with her nymphs, she holds court with the hunted: fauns and hares, squirrels and minks, boars and stags, bears and foxes. They creep out from behind the trees and sit at her feet and scamper through her hair. She holds no laws over them: they come to pay tribute.

Now they come to rest beside a pool in the darkest part of the forest. The trees grow so thick the air is compressed by them. Mercury’s shimmering gown

sticks to her back, and she shrugs it off, letting it fall where she stands. The nymphs, always naked, rush into the clear green water and splash each other, causing rivulets to run from their hair down the columns of their spines and over the curves of their hips.

A cool, dry wind stirs around Mercury's thighs as she steps into the lagoon. Tadpoles nibble gently at her ankles, and a fish bumps boldly against the delicate crease of her buttocks. She wades into the centre of her nymphs and they cup their hands and run water through her resplendent hair, and over her pale breasts and stomach. As she joins in the ritual bathing, rubbing the dust off well-travelled backs and shoulders, and combing her fingers through the smallest nymph's hair. A tune comes to her lips and she begins to hum. Soon the rest of the nymphs join in, layering the song with harmonies and rounds. It's sultry and tempting, and before long it coaxes fireflies and nightingales from their rest. Mercury dips her head below the water and comes up in a fan of spray. All around her is a flurry of dancing and drops of water hang in the air like stars. The nymphs tangle their arms together and swirl until they are carried around by their own current. Soon the frenzied dancing produces the familiar perfume under their arms and between their legs, and the song is interspersed with a pleased moan.

Deep within the shadows, hidden from view behind an ancient tree, Adam stifles a groan. He's followed the scent of the group for days and their sweet perfume of apple blossoms and musk has driven him further into madness. His stockings are uncomfortably tight against the bulge at his front, and his mouth is forever dry regardless of how much he drinks. His head swims with visions of

desire, and he no longer sleeps, certain he exists in a dream. The nymph's song rings thickly in his ears like honey on his tongue. From his place behind the willow tree, among the low-draped branches, he can make out the group of bathers, with Mercury in the centre. She stands up to her waist in the water and her queenly reflection bends toward him, beckoning.

As she angles to the side, Adam begins to glimpse the curve of her breast; the hairs on his arms stand on end. The nymphs circle her, but she is taller and although they are all naked, she seems the most exposed. Adam is overcome with the heat of desire and he feels his face begin to tingle. A nymph turns with a coy look. The wind catches the curtain of branches, peeling them away leaving Adam exposed and ashamed, sure that they have known of his presence for days. He opens his mouth to offer a greeting, an explanation, but he cannot make a sound. His ears burn and his head feels heavy. His eyes feel unnaturally large. Mercury faces him fully, baring herself entirely. Her body language demands speech, but Adam has no voice.

Raising his hands to his head, he feels stiff red hair over his face. He glances into the water and reels at the sight. A man stands, wearing his clothing, the pouch still tied around his neck and the shining dagger hanging at his belt. But his face is replaced by the head of a great stag, complete with spindly horns and a long, broad nose. He shakes his head wildly and tries to scream, but only low grunts escape his lips. The nymphs giggle and point, but Mercury gazes in horror and pity.

Then, Ursula appears, her muzzle stiffened and her teeth bared. She approaches the monster fearlessly, snarling and snapping at Adam's heels. She chases him into the forest, bounding and weaving between the trees. Adam tears through the bramble, pulling and hacking at the growth in his way. His animal mind urges him to leap and skirt, but his man legs do not respond quickly enough, and he falls to the ground, catching his antlers on low growing branches. He rolls to his back just as Ursula leaps on top of him, chomping at his face and hands. Mercury appears, still naked and wet, and she tries to call Ursula off, but the greyhound has tasted stag blood and is gorging on the hunt.

Suddenly, Adam's two alaunts bound from the trees and lunge at Ursula, pulling her away from their master. One of the dogs paces between her and Adam, while the other engages with snarls and fangs. His great jaws snap at Ursula's slender neck and when he moves his head Mercury can see a wide slick of blood.

"Stop them!" She calls to Adam, but he is curled on the ground, clutching at his head.

The hound crashes into Ursula's side, sending her rolling into the base of a tree and she lets out a sharp cry before raising herself on shaky legs. She charges her attacker, and leaps upon his back, sinking her teeth into the folds of its neck, but the alaunt shakes her off and pins her down with his great bulk. The other alaunt licks Adam's face, and his features begin to morph and shrink. Mercury searches in vain for a branch or a rock to beat off the hound, but the forest seems as naked as she is. Ignoring the danger, she advances into the cyclone of canine claws and teeth, placing herself in the centre of the violence. She shoves the

alaunt hard with her shoulder, but the beast ignores her completely and continues to ravage the greyhound. Mercury crawls over to Adam, whose animal face is melting, exposing the human elements beneath.

“Help her, please!” She shakes him roughly, but he is entranced, oblivious to all but his monstrous face.

Then, a great howl pierces Mercury’s heart and she turns to see the alaunt walking away from her beloved partner. Ursula lies still and diminished, a deflated figure of the majestic greyhound that chose the huntress. Mercury belonged to Ursula: Ursula never belonged to her. She crosses paths with the alaunt that ignores her, and sits by the body of her friend. The alaunt returns to Adam’s side and sniffs curiously at his face.

Mercury lies her head on Ursula’s side and begins to sob. The sound shakes Adam from his enchantment and he surveys the moments past. He glances from his dog to the girl. Trails of bloody slobber drip from the alaunt’s lips, and rivers of tears run from the girl’s eyes and through the smoke-coloured fur of her perished companion. Mercury slowly raises her head and pierces Adam with a loathing look, sharp as an arrow. He opens his mouth to explain, but she shakes her head with an intensity signalling danger.

*Run*, she commands, and Adam obeys.

## CITRINAS: THE FURY OF THE GAME

The gnarled oaks, with their deep-cracked bark and twisted branches, appear changed. Strings of moss grow down from the tinier branches, giving the impression that secret caverns hide beyond the veil of each ghostly tree. The ground is cold and dry, but a wet heat sticks to Adam, making his breath heavy and his skin wrinkle. He steps carefully on fallen logs and thick piles of leaves, trying to place his feet where they will leave no trace. He'd ran through the night, putting as much distance between himself and the lady in mourning as his starved muscles would let him, but now as the sun rises he begins to suspect Mercury never left that lagoon. She is probably still there, cradling the canine in her lap like a stillborn babe.

Beneath the watch of a sparse pine tree, Adam pauses for a bit of dried venison and a handful of currents. His water-skin is dry, but there is no shortage of moisture nearby, and Adam quenches his tongue by licking the dew off the dogwood leaves. Everything is still. The branches do not sway or knock together. There is no birdsong, no footsteps cracking twigs or rustling the mottled forest carpet. The air is thick with the smell of animal exertion. Apprehension spills from Adam's chest to his stomach. This is the Hunter's World.

The Hunter's World sweeps over the earth like a net, enmeshing hunters and their prey with impartiality. It feeds off the fury of the game. It drapes itself over meadow and forest, fields of tall grasses and stretches of angry sea. The Hunter's World chases the arena where the game is played: a space ensnaring lesser spaces. It flays the forest's skin, removes the protective facade of the



picturesque, cuts off the head where dreams of pleasant day's activities are imagined, samples the choicest cuts where hunters raise their cups and gorge on triumph, and it leaves only the carcass of necessity, the basic need—the insatiable, shivering, slobbering, clenching, pulsing desire to catch power. The Hunter's World is hot and wet like a mouth, dark and pungent like the upper thigh, smooth and protruding like fingers, and relentless like the heart.

Adam gathers up his things—his pack, his dagger, his empty water skin, and shoulders his shame. He had the hart in his grasp, naked and cowering before him, weak with a broken heart. And yet when she was at her most vulnerable and primed for capture, Adam had run. He turned his back and fled into the forest, leaving her stationary, unarmed, and distracted. Yet, somehow he knows she is still there. If he is quick about it, he can double back and claim her before she moves on. For he is now in the belly of the Hunter's World, and it is a dangerous place for a defenceless hare.

As he makes his way back to the lagoon Adam litters the floor with footprints. His shadow is cast on every tree around him, as though the sun oozes from the ground. Buckthorn and whitebeam shrubs spring up before him and he weaves light-footed between them, trying to balance silence and speed. It is all in vain, for his elbows knock roughly against the enclosing trees and his breathing is loud and laboured in the thick air. Although Adam is a practiced woodsman, well-versed in silence and patience, today he moves like a spent young faun, stumbling and crashing down the path to death. Every choice, every movement marks him as prey. Mindlessly, he cuts his path back to the lagoon, where he might reveal to the

Hunter's World the true prey in this pairing. Out of the trees to the left, his two great alaunts lumber into view. One is sporting a slight limp and a shiny gash above the shoulder. Adam acknowledges them with a whistle and a command, and they fall into line, tromping dutifully through the woods. *Do not limp so in this world*, Adam mumbles, *for it is because of you that our footprints all but glow here*. Yet as the thought forms, he runs his fingers through his hair, searching for the remnants of horns.

The lagoon remains the way Adam left it, mossy green, wet, and filled with nymphs. He approaches quietly, scanning their faces for the hart, but she is not among them. Even the greyhound lies in the spot where she fell. Dried blood on her muzzle forms a thick dark scab. She lies on her side and her legs stick out before her, and she looks like a quarry bound and prepared for a spit. There is a fresh hole dug in the ground, large enough for the greyhound to rest for all time. The earth from the hole waits at its base, and there is a wreath of lilies at the peak of the mound. One of the alaunts, the one that delivered the killing blow, whimpers uncomfortably, and Adam hushes it with a hand on its head. He holds his breath and watches the nymphs, feeling exposed and unprepared. But if they know he is there they do not acknowledge him. They sit quietly, enjoying a jug of rich, milky nectar, and Adam can smell the honey-mead on their breath. It must be strong, for the fumes waft into Adam's nose, making him feel giddy and lightheaded.

He takes a cautious step, and then another, and soon rushes toward the fallen hound, eager to pick out a track or a scent of the smoky hare. Five steps

away, four steps away, and suddenly the world shifts beneath his feet. Flung forward, arms out and legs splayed, he glimpses the greyhound rise above him before the light diminishes and he lands roughly in darkness, leaves glowing in sunlight far overhead. He can hear his dogs barking above him and soon they poke their head over the grave's opening, their ears cocked, offering whimpers of confusion. Adam examines the grave. He picks carefully over the branches and grasses that litter the floor. A sharp kick to a nearby stick sends a tremor across the tangled ground, and the structure suddenly takes shape—a woven canopy of branches that only moments ago concealed the hole Adam now finds himself in. A shadow passes over the hole and across Adam's face, and the Hunter's World peels back the illusion, undressing the greyhound's sentimental grave exposing its sinister truth. Not a grave, but a trap. The alaunts grow silent and Adam can no longer see their faces. The distant murmur of the nymphs' mournful song drifts into the hole. A trickle of dirt showers down and Adam gazes up at the ashen-haired huntress. Through the lens of the Hunter's eerie light, he sees her for the first time exposed and immune to his alchemical fantasies. She is the huntress, a warrior, a wildgirl. She is worthy and knowledgeable, and perfect.

“You are a hare.” Adam calls, buried stubbornly in his resolve. “I can make you a hart. I am the stag, and you are the unicorn.” He claws at the dirt walls, pulling himself up briefly with roots and stone footholds. The anchor gives way and he falls back to the base with dirt and stones raining upon him. Adam suddenly flinches, and the side of his face burns as though he'd been delivered a

great slap. Spots of blood drip onto his hand, and an arrow pierces the ground beside him.

“I am the ambassador, and you are mad.” Mercury spits venomously, and her silver eyes retreat from view. Eventually the alaunts take up their barking vigil, and Adam is certain he is alone once again.

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Adam sits in an elm tree. He has climbed from the depths of the forest, where the roots taper to a point, now to the top of a tree where the branches thin to a switch. It took him the better part of a day and the remnants of his sanity to crawl from the trap Mercury laid for him. His dogs made it worse by pacing anxiously around the opening, threatening to clamour down to sit ever-obediently beside him. Their whimpers made his eyes twitch. When Adam emerged from the trap, nails torn and fingers bleeding, he sat alone among the footprints of the nymphs. The party had left hours before, but their trail was fresh as a spring lily, and he took his time, tracing his lady’s confident footprint with his finger, and reading her trail as though he was discovering a forgotten language. Then, Adam summoned his dogs and marched toward a brook, following it deep into the forest away from the lagoon.

He rubs his chin absentmindedly, feeling for the remnants of wiry tufts of hide and spongy oversized lips. With his dogs stashed in a hastily-built pen within a day’s walk, a pair of caught foxes left there upon the meat pole, Adam sits patiently. He chews slowly on the last of his rations and waits. He has waited a lifetime for Mercury and her enchantments, and he will wait an eternity more. But

the next time he sees her he will not hesitate. He will trap her. She will not be alone. The nymphs will not leave their queen, he is sure of that, and so eventually they will all come to bathe here—but soon or in months he cannot say. *Festina lente*, he repeats to bide the time, “hasten slowly.”

The birds are unruffled in the Hunter’s World, and the most distant cracking sounds echo loudly in Adam’s head. Each time he adjusts his position the tree trembles, and a tumultuous barrage of rustling echoes down the brook. Even his chewing is deafening. And so Adam holds his breath, plants his legs against a wide branch, and acts the lion of patience. The rain and wind pass over him unobserved. His muscles flex only in his memory, and sooner or later hungry rumbling echoes against the walls of his stomach, but still he is fixed to the tree like moss. His skin is as cracked as the tree bark, and his hair becomes brittle as the dead twigs at the tips of the great branches. Eventually, the nails on his fingers grow anew, tinted yellow like the leaves.

She has followed an afternoon rain, when the water rose from pools on the ground in a silvery fog. The nymphs surround her like an honorary guard, circling and weaving around her in a choreographed march. As they pass by her, the nymphs reach out their hands, brushing their fingertips against her body: her strong thighs, her nimble back, her sleek arms. She is nude, proudly so, save for a great hunting bow strapped to her back. Birds circle her head, emitting soft chirps, strangely muffled with no echo, but their calls mingle sweetly with the melody of the nymph’s constant song. Mercury steps lightly toward the brook, leaving no prints behind, and descends into the water until the ends of her hair dangle just

above the rippled surface. Her nymphs follow closely behind and begin their ritual bathing and play. The huntress smiles pleasantly and runs her fingers through the smallest one's hair, but her eyes shoot arrows of watchfulness between the trees. Adam struggles to hold still, fighting back the waves of desire to drop from the trees and pounce on his hare.

A rustle across the brook catches both their attentions, and the nymphs giggle in high pitched tones unlike their typical throaty laughter. They run from the brook and disappear into the trees, leaving Mercury alone to wash the dust from her back. She glances curiously in the direction the nymphs scattered, but soon she returns to scouting the rest of the forest. Adam prepares himself to drop, slowly sliding his hand to the handle of his dagger. Then, the nymphs return, leading a lustrous white beast, more luminous than the freshest snowflake.

It emerges from the trees, following the nymphs like a respected old friend. Standing a head above the tallest nymph, its hooves are the width of a birch tree, its tail long and stringy like the thick lichen growing over the trees. Its head is nearly as broad as the old boar's skull, but sleek and beautiful. Its horn is long and straight, and a golden colour that dims the stars. Mercury rises from the brook and bows her head, folding her hands solemnly before her. The unicorn returns the respectful gesture, bending its front legs gracefully and touching its horn to the ground. Mercury approaches and places her hand on the unicorn's head, just behind the magical horn. Once again, the nymphs take up their splashing, singing songs of joy and celebration, while Mercury and the unicorn retire beneath a large oak tree, heavy with the moss of the Hunter's World.

Above, Adam stares unbelievably at the unicorn and the maiden. He watches as she sits with her back against the very tree that hides him, and beckons the unicorn to her side. It stands above her for a moment, twitching an ear and flicking its tail, and then it curls up like a pet, resting its head in her lap. Mercury strokes its mane, weaving it between her fingers, and begins to hum ancient melodies of the nymphs. Adam moves like a snake, gliding his hand noiselessly to unsheathe the dagger from his belt. He braces himself against the tree and shifts his legs underneath him. He leans forward, plotting the spot to land, just behind the unicorn's back. The world twists into twine connecting Adam and the unicorn, and excluding all else. Even the hare with the silver eyes disappears, save for her pale hand resting on the magical head. His mouth slackens, his eyes are hooded, and he sways in the tree to the rhythm of his pulse. The creature's beauty reaches out like tendrils, causing everything it touches to soften and shimmer, and it kneads Adam like dough until he yields. He loosens the dagger in his grip, but it's glued to his clammy palm.

A black fly buzzes around his head, toying in his vision, darting in and out of his mouth. Two more appear and careen around his ear, bouncing off the side of his head. Soon a swarm of them gather chaotically around him, biting his hands, exploring his nose, crawling in the holes of his torn stockings, but Adam remains oblivious to their invasion, caught in the enchantment of beauty. His body is a water skin, conformed to the contours of the tree, arms dangling among the branches, chest pressed to the trunk with all his weight.

Below, Mercury hums the melody of the Hunter's World, haunting minor tones that resonate in the spine. She strokes the hair at the base of the unicorn's horn and its heavy eyes flutter peacefully. No longer does she glance over the landscape like a threatened squirrel. She bows her head over the mystical creature like a warrior mother, confident and caring. Her thighs grow warm under the body's heat, and perspiration gathers over her stomach, pooling in her centre knot, but she keeps still, keeping disturbance at bay from her sleeping companion. Somewhere above her black flies buzz, but it is all so far away.

The tree above her cracks and leaves and twigs rain down, sprinkling them with pellets of nature, bits of twigs and dried leaves. Mercury leans her naked frame over the unicorn, covering her face against the sudden onslaught of the tree. Another loud snap and the branches directly above her shiver and knock together. The entire tree creaks and sways, as though it is shaking out a rejected nest. Then, a massive branch tumbles to the ground, sending a deafening crackle echoing through the forest, and Adam lands heavily on top of it. Black flies scatter from around his head, taking to the protective anonymity of the sky. The unicorn raises its head, its eyes wide and nostrils flared in surprise. Mercury lifts a protective arm, arranging herself between Adam and the creature. Adam mirrors her defensive form, leaning forward where she leans back, his dagger poised in his outstretched hand. The unicorn kicks and twists until it stands, rearing back on its hind legs. It brandishes its horn like a sword and ducks around Mercury, parrying with Adam and his dagger. Adam stumbles but regains his footing and advances



on the legendary prey. The Hunter's World shivers in anticipation, and Mercury feels the ground begin to quake beneath their feet.

The ground drops away, and they are supported by intense vibration alone. The trees melt into a blur of colour, churning together into a murky golden yellow. Adam and the unicorn pivot around Mercury, reaching for each other with the points of their weapons while Mercury sways between them, baring her resolution like a shield. She keeps Adam's maniacal eyes as the points of her focus, matching his gaze ferociously, clenching her teeth and casting icy daggers from her silver eyes. Adam suddenly lunges around Mercury, pushing her out of the way, and plunges the dagger into the flank of the unicorn. Mercury lets out a cry of frustration and rage. The unicorn rears its head back and kicks with its front legs, smashing Adam in the chest, causing him to loosen his grip on the dagger. Bright gold ooze seeps from the wound in the unicorn's side, spreading beyond the beast and mingling with the yellow murk. The ether closes in around them, pressing against their bodies like amniotic fluid in a womb. Mercury advances on Adam, who struggles to regain his stature after the blow to the chest. Golden muck whirls around them, thickening with the increasing vibrations. She struggles against its pressure, pushing and swimming through the colour, closing the distance between her and the stranger from the grave. Apart from them, the unicorn stands motionless, heedless of the wound in its side. Its horn glows white against the golden pool of chaos.

Adam searches through the opacity for his dagger. Unsure of the direction of the ground, he cranes his neck, sweeping around him in a great circle, trying in

vain to grasp his weapon. He arches his back and throws his arms behind him, flailing his limbs like a drowning man. Mercury ducks beneath his elbow and slams her shoulder into his stomach, causing him to buckle around her like a hand draped over a fist. The vibrations suddenly stop, and time suspends itself, cradled in the centre of their mingled forms. The unicorn walks easily, as though the golden ooze is simply air and, pressing the point of its horn at the base of Adam's neck, it pierces through the scene as though it were tapestry, slicing downwards, creating a fissure of golden light. The gash separates Adam and Mercury into two halves, each of their heads paired with the opposite lower body, so that they appear as two new figures. The unicorn pushes its head through the glowing opening and steps through, exiting the Hunter's World and returning to the forest, leaving the couple behind.

As its tail slips through the veil, the fissure binds itself together and time expands, enveloping them once more. Adam grips Mercury around her waist and lifts her feet off the ground, shoving her to the side. She crumples to her knees and her hands sink into the thick elixir at the edge of the womb. Adam is upon her once more and their bodies clash violently like territorial wolves. Their heads knock together and their hips grind against each other. Mercury grabs at Adam's face, tearing at his lips and curling her fingers toward his eyes. She twists and writhes, pushing him away with one arm, while clawing at his skin with her free hand. Meanwhile, Adam wraps his arms tightly around her body, tangling their arms together, and arranging his legs between hers. Their sweat mingles, their hair falls in each other's faces, and soon their breath heaves together as a sweet

wind. He thrusts a forearm to her chin and pushes her into a horizontal pose, but Mercury bites into his flesh and rolls out from under him, crawling upon his back and nestling her slender arms around his neck. She squeezes with the strength of a snake, and Adam begins to feel his face pulse with constricted blood. He reaches behind and grabs hold of her coveted hair and throws her over his back and onto her own. Standing above her, he searches again for the dagger, but it has sunk through the muck, lost and buried like treasure. He falls to his knees on top of her and clasps his hands tightly around her neck, squeezing until his knuckles turn as pale as her skin. Mercury throws her head from side to side and bucks like a hart. She throws him aside with the thrust of her hips and Adam rolls over in time to see her slither towards him. Then, coiling back, she strikes with blurring speed, smashing her head between Adam's legs.

His legs squeeze together and his hands are pinned to his groin. He rolls onto his front and crawls toward her. There are no more appendages gripping at each other, but simply heads, hissing and snapping, dragging their bodies in tow. Mercury wraps her form around Adam, twisting and squeezing, crawling over his head and baring her teeth at his tapered end. Adam coils his frame around her, flicking his tongue against the end she dangles before his face. They rotate like a wheel, swallowing each other at opposite ends, until their bodies become a ring, swirling within the golden water, pulsating with primordial passion.

Then suddenly the world begins to solidify again, stretching into a bulbous base with a tapered neck. Mercury and Adam are one—the rebis, the ouroboros. They spin in place, basting from the heat of a fire unseen beneath them. They are

a royal couple, crowns of silver and gold upon their heads, stewing in a regal soup, bathing in a barrel while alchemists and curious subjects look on. The alembic narrows and rain falls from the opening where a large white bird shakes raindrops from its wings. They are a snake from the waist down, swimming in the golden aqua vitae, while their torsos take human shape once more. A toad darts through the center of their serpentine circle. They become a two-headed hermaphrodite—dressed half in red, and half white—brandishing a compass and a ruler, and perched on a winged dragon that lies over a globe, breathing fire and gently roasting their legs. Then the dragon becomes a crescent moon and they balance on its points, one hand grasping a golden chalice with a three-headed serpent, the other gripping a white snake with no tail. Their heads bond together at the back so that they are one with two faces, and they wear a great golden crown. White wings protrude from their singular back.

The vibrations increase above them until fire erupts, mixing itself with the golden water, creating a blazing sun. Streaks of light shoot outward, with angels clinging to them like acrobats on silk. A great tree grows beneath them, laden with shining fruits, bursting with sweet juices. The branches grow among their limbs, weaving around their lower half so that soon it appears as though they are part of it. The murk distills from the heat of the new sun and clouds of impurity cower from the golden light. Ravens and swans circle their heads, carrying planets in their talons. Below them, pale naked children frolic with loin cubs. The crown upon their head shrinks as their face morphs into a single, androgynous beauty. Upon their shoulders crawl two great lions, one green and one red, stretching their

snouts to sniff at the sun. The hermaphrodite Mercury-Adam wears a shawl of mossy green that drapes open, revealing two large breasts, and beneath are dozens more, smaller, but filled to bursting with motherly nectar.

Halfway up the tree, at the height where the largest branches begin, there is a knot, a recess burrowed into the centre of the trunk. Around it is carved the ouroboros—two snakes joined head to tail in an endless ring, the scales decorated with golden dust. Nestled deep within the knot there is a bench, littered with vials and earthen pots, glass bottles and other alembics, a steady fire burns in a furnace, casting a pleasant warm light over the work surface. And perched at opposite ends of the bench sit two skulls—one a boar, and the other a stag.

“I wondered if this might happen.” The stag begins, after a silence stretches beyond the boundary of a moment.

“I knew it would.” The boar replies, examining the walls with an uninterested air.

“Did you, now?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“I said I did.”

“So you did.”

The silence returns, filling up their empty eye sockets and wafting between the spaces of their teeth.

“I must admit, I’m a little surprised to see you here.” The stag tries again.

“I’m not.”

“And why is that, exactly?” If the stag had eyebrows he would raise one questioningly.

“Because beginning with me is impossible. It is impossible and therefore it will work.”

“Did this begin with you?” the stag inches forward.

“It did.” The boar continues, pleased he has captured the stag’s interest. “It began right here, between my eyes, when the worms and the fire consumed the seed of gold.”

“He is impatient, the seed of gold. He has not really acted properly.”

“What is the purpose of proper, if the outcome is the same?” The boar spits back, spraying the stag with dust.

“Patience decrees worth. If Adam does not have the patience to let the stone gestate naturally, then this will never work.”

“And what is natural about all this? It is the work of the philosophers to accelerate that which takes God centuries.”

“Is it? Or is the work of the philosophers to understand that which takes God centuries to make?”

The boar does not answer.

“What is it that you want?” The stag urges.

“Gold.” The word rolls around the boar’s mouth like a delicacy.

“Mercury wants perfection.”

“We can buy perfection.”

“You can never understand.”

“I don’t have to. That is why we have Mercury. That is why we are here, a conference of philosophy. I am the want and you are the need.”

“This will never work.”

“It already has.”

“Get out.” The stag responds, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

“I already have.” The boar answers, his voice echoing from far away.

The lions that rest on the shoulders of the great hermaphrodite grow restless. The red paces, roaring impatiently, swiping at insects, and digging its claws into the flesh on which it stands. Meanwhile, the green clamours on top of the crowned head and stretches its muzzle until it touches the sun. The smell of singed fur fills the air and tufts of fire drop from the green lion’s face, but still it holds its nose against the bright heat. Then, opening its mouth and raising its paws, the green lion forces the sun between its mountainous teeth and swallows the sphere whole. The red lion lets out a deafening snarl, springs over the hermaphrodite’s head and pounces upon its green brother. The pair topples from the height of the great rebis creature, crashing against branches as they plummet to the earth in a combative knot. Their bodies smash to the ground causing heavy tremors, and the trunk of the massive tree splits right up the middle. But the lions pay no regard, writhing and rolling in a flurry of claws and teeth. All around them the golden substance shatters and crumbles, raining down on the heads of the naked children and the alchemists, who flee from the path of the battling beasts.

From the crack in the tree rise two pelicans. Their wings are wet with golden water, but they shake off the tincture as they climb higher away from the

violence. The tree falls to the ground in two perfect halves, destroying the rest of the solidified gold vessel, and the birds leave the chaos below and press toward the joy beyond the clouds. They fly together, wings beating in unison, and they pass through thick, swollen white masses, burst through thin, wispy streaks, and dodge past pockets of turbulent air. The smells of the earth, sweet floras, musky soils, heady creatures and tangy oceans, diminish until the only smell is the scent of the void. The only sound is the wind rushing past their wings. All they touch is the crisp thin air.

Then, as the pelicans fly away from the sun and the sky grows dark, their feathers begin to tingle with comforting warmth. They hear far-off bells rise to a crescendo. Their strange bird tongues taste nectar in the air. Above them is a ceiling of white, and beyond that incomprehensible joy. The pelicans burst through the whiteness with their large beaks agape, scooping up joy in their pouches. Then, folding their wings close to their bodies, they turn and dive toward the ground.

The bodies of Adam and Mercury lie beside the brook. There are no nymphs bathing in the water, no unicorns curled up in their laps. In the centre of Adam's palm sits an emerald ring, a strand of silver-ashen hair wrapped around the band. Beside Mercury's head is a great hunting bow and a quiver of arrows. The birds chirp lazily among the trees, disregarding the bodies as though they are nothing but boulders. Harts and stags, boars and hares rummage through the grasses for food, oblivious to the lifeless forms jutting from the ground like exposed roots. Then, two large pelicans circle from above, descending to the earth



like angels. Each bird claims a corpse, landing lightly at their heads. With their strange beaks, sharp as axes, they begin to peck at their breasts. Feathers fly as they work the points of their beaks into their proud chests. Soon, a spark of light begins to glow in the pouches at their jaws. Their heads wobble and gulping sounds emit from deep within, and suddenly the light is regurgitated and bursts from their mouths, suspended at the tips of their beaks. Bending over the corpse's faces, they ease the spark between their cold lips and the light is visible for only a moment as it travels down their throats.

Mercury is the first to breathe again, gulping air as though she is starved for it. She lifts herself onto her elbow and waits for her head to stop swimming. The pelican watches her for a moment then retreats to the brook to rummage on the rock bed for little fishes. Her mouth is parched, and she is about to drag herself after the bird when a glint catches her eye. Beside her, the other pelican is feeding a glowing orb into Adam's mouth, forcing it between his lips. A gold ring fashioned with a deep green emerald rests in Adam's palm. Mercury studies the ring. It is not the emerald that interests her, but a single strand of hair, the colour of her own, wrapped around the simple band. Slowly Adam begins to stir, and air fills his lungs in a rattling breath. Quickly, Mercury snatches the ring from his palm and gathers up her bow and quiver, dropping the ring in among the arrows. She shoulders the bow and crawls toward the brook. Adam glances in her direction, but he is not quite recovered enough to move. Mercury dips in her hands and cups the cool, clear water to her mouth. The gulps revive her and she is

on her feet before Adam props up to his knees. Before he can call to her she enters the thick wall of trees on shaky legs and evades him once again.

There is a field at the edge of the forest, away from the Bowman's cabin, and away still from the shell of Adam's burned out laboratory. It exists on the far end of the forest where the experienced have yet to discover. It is where the animals that succeed in crossing the river, escaping the *par force de chien*, retire to live out their days, free of adrenaline and expectation. This is the edge where the trees are always saplings, and the field expands forever away from the all-consuming forest.

Peppering the field is a sea of yellow lilies, growing in clusters as large as counties. The air is thick with their pollen, and it hums with the buzzing of concealed bees. Mercury steps out onto this field and her toes brush softly against the petals. She moves to the centre of a large cluster and lays down her head. If she squeezes her eyes almost closed, the grass looks like a dense jungle. She yawns, unable to remember the last time she slept. Between the blades of grass a white shape begins to emerge. With great effort, she lifts her head to witness a white lion padding softly across the field. It selects a patch of yellow lilies nearby and trots in a circle like a housecat. The yellow lilies bend their heads to the snow-white lion's paws, and the great beast lies among them, obedient and tamed, while great patches of the flowers continue to flourish and spread out over the endless meadow.

## RUBEDO: A RARE, PERFECT DAY

The forest continues to expand, growing in complexity over the years. Mosses continue to stretch to their limits over the trees and rocks, and short grasses claim their stake in the ground below a sliver of sunlight. The world ferments and bubbles, and within it, Adam and Mercury continue to rise and mature, although neither devote much thought to the other at all.

Mercury lies among the lilies until they grow so tall they drape the white lion in an armour of petals. Soon, the days diminish until light flitters no longer than a day dream. When night creeps over the field and the dew hardens to thick frost, Mercury crawls toward the great white lion and nestles in the crook of its forearm, resting her head on its paw. Eventually, the days begin to grow longer once more, and Mercury rises from her hibernation. There is barely a patch of grass left from which the lilies do not poke their heads, and Mercury suddenly feels she is a guest imposing at court in a land whose language she does not understand. She gathers her bow and quiver, selects one lily and arranges it among the tangles of her hair, and follows the call of her enchanted forest until the trees envelop her once more and the field of lilies retreats to her cache of memories.

She walks directionless, following the sounds of padding paws and chirping birds. She spends days at a time in the company of blackberry bushes, or sitting beneath a bee hive waiting for it to gift her one drop. A herd of red deer pass before her as she sits with her feet in a river, reading the history of the bank, but her arrows remain nestled in her quiver. *So many worlds*, she thinks. *So many*

*lives ago that I sat on the bank of a river much like this and the hunters unmade me, taking off my legs and feeding my guts to the dogs. Then I fell in love with the skull of great stag and we lived in truncated tree. Then, another lifetime ago I was adopted by the Monk and he raised me on a diet of dried venison and stories, when my brother was a lymer and my governess a retired war horse. Then, when I died, and a dragon buried me with a stranger who touched my hair with bloodied stumps, I was afraid. When I died I was afraid. A raven hops from the top of a birch tree, skipping toward the ground on light wings, jumping from one branch to another. Mercury brushes the front of her neck with her fingertips, remembering the decapitated crow caught in the snare. When the crow died he was relieved.*

An ancient east wind rises suddenly, pushing her shoulders back and before her a long wooden table appears, sagging in the centre from the weight of a wealthy feast. A roasted pig sits as the centrepiece, dried figs dot its shiny, crisp skin and an apple rests in its mouth. Bowls of berries and wheels of cheeses rest at steady intervals, with pitchers of dark red wine standing in between them. The chairs are filled with lords and ladies who shimmer like wisps of smoke, and Mercury can see the opposite bank of the river through the sudden visitors. At the head of the table stands a young man dressed in deep green. A sullen-looking maiden sits at the place of honour on his right. He gestures broadly, making a toast that Mercury cannot hear, but she is certain she knows that his language is of love and the commitment of life. As if on cue the woman to his right rolls her eyes and swirls the wine in her cup. Then, a terrifying scream rattles the leaves

and sends the birds into flight. The ghosts at the table look over their shoulders, mouthing silent questions. A woman, naked and bleeding from scrapes on the backs of her thighs and small cuts on her face leaps on top of the table and dashes over the basins, leaping over the roast pig. Two snarling mastiffs chase closely behind, nipping at her raw buttocks and calloused heels. Just before the woman reaches the end of the table one of the mastiffs takes a giant leap and pushes her toward the ground. She tumbles off the table in a painful heap, with the two snapping dogs tearing strips from her flesh. The guests cover their ears, with only a few rising to try and help her. The host stands at the head of the table, watching the tableau hungrily, while his lady covers her mouth, swallowing the bile in her throat. Mercury observes patiently, waiting for the newcomer. She watches the host with pity and the slightest hint of disgust. *Nastagio*, she whispers.

The knight arrives upon his intimidating horse. A conversation ensues, and Mercury imagines the debate and pleas among the horrified company. She hears only the woman's voice, which has softened to a tired whimper. *Nastagio* gestures to the naked woman and smiles coolly at his future bride. She raises her eyes timidly to his face, her lips quivering like a child's. The rest of the party take their seats once more with furrowed brows and patches of red blossoming on their cheeks, and the knight raises a broadsword high above his head with two hands. *Nastagio* leans forward, knocking over his bride's cup of wine, but all he has eyes for is the approaching mortal moment. He licks his lips and his hands begin to tremble. The arrow that rushes toward him goes unnoticed, even when it pierces through his left eye.

His face swirls in a wisp of smoke and folds in on itself. The other guests dissolve as well, turning to cold breath upon the wind. The table crumbles like dried leaves and the food shrivels away to dust. The knight and the dogs melt into puddles suspended just briefly in the air before they splash to the ground, mingling with the dried leaves until they are spots of muck. The naked woman studies Mercury with her hunting bow poised in her hand, the hand that launched the arrow still hovering beside her ear. Mercury curls a corner of her mouth into half a smile and the naked woman, still bleeding from her perpetual assault, gives a slight shrug of surprise. She takes a deep breath and flames begin to trail over the paths left by her blood, licking her eagerly until all that remains are ashes arranged in the shape of her curves. *We are all victims of circumstance, Mercury decrees, and heroes of our choices.*

A dappled mare emerges from the forest; varied tones paint her the colour of a rain cloud. She stops at the edge of the river and takes a long drink. “Charger!” Mercury laughs, “It is nice to see you again. Have you been waiting long?” The mare moves to stand beside her huntress, and she climbs easily onto the horse’s back, the feel of her rough hair prickling Mercury’s naked thighs. “Back to the beginning, I think.” She urges the mare on, and they venture through the thick growth to the centre of the forest.

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The years passed without event for Adam. He woke beside the pelican and shrugged off his madness. His hart was gone, he lost her trail, and so Adam returned to his father’s land and ordered a new set of clothes—his own having

rotted off his frame. Now, trimmed in dark red and gold, with soft linen linings and semi-precious buttons, Adam grows restless once more. The stone may have eluded him, and his new possessions may reek of hereditary credit, but he found adventure, and as far as it concerns him, he wears it well. Weary of the forest, Adam hires a boat and begins a pilgrimage of the coast. He braves swelling storms, sailing in search of mermaids and buried treasure. The sea air brings youth back to his features, but the ruddy pigment burned into his skin doesn't fade. Soon even the fluidity of the ever changing sea begins to grow tiresome, and the salt water rusts his mood. He pays his crew the last of the gold in a purse embroidered with his family monogram and maroons himself on a barren rock that juts out of the water so tall its peak disappears into the sky. His crew shake their heads as they set sail, muttering rumours of his lunacy.

To Adam, the sheer stone cliffs appear as gates of heaven, slammed tightly at his approach. Undeterred, Adam claps his hands together and rubs them briskly as though he is about to conjure a spell to bring them down. He surveys the rock-face, drawing a map of his ascent in his mind. Then, wedging the tips of his fingers into a crack in the wall, Adam begins to pull himself upwards. In moments the ground drops beneath him, and the smell of the sea drifts away. He dangles high above, floating defiantly above the net of death. As the sweat gathers at his temples, and his fingertips begin to tingle painfully, a familiar giggle gathers at his throat. *Oh madness and desire*, he thinks, *how long has it been, old friends?* He presses on, climbing to the heights beyond the horizon.

His climb takes him into the night, where his fingertips, numbed long before, search over the rocks for new hand-holds. He hums a forgotten melody, trying to recall the voices of the nymphs, and time passes easily to the dawn. This silence is unnatural, eerie, and he strains his ears to hear the varied tone in this unfamiliar silent symphony. Then suddenly a voice interrupts. He looks to his left to see a pelican hovering beside him.

“What a waste.” The pelican sighs.

“Would you care to explain?” Adam grunts through the effort of hoisting himself onto a nearby perch.

“I would have swallowed that soul of yours all those years ago had I known you were going to drop it from the top of a cliff.”

“I have no intention of falling, if that’s what you are hinting at.” Pulling himself onto the skinny ledge, Adam manoeuvres to sit with his legs dangling over the edge.

“You look to be without intentions of anything.” The pelican replies, the pouch in his beak wobbling like the jowls of a wizened old man.

“I have intentions.” Adam responds with a juvenile whine.

“No. What you have is desires.”

“And I intend to quench them.”

“The only thing you will be drinking is sea water.” The bird snorts, suddenly taking flight. The movement startles Adam, and he kicks loose a rock that plummets towards the sea, shattering to pieces as it smashes against the cliff on its descent. “You may as well jump!” The pelican screams into the wind as it



flies away. Adam flexes his cracked fingers and glares at the bird until it shrinks to a speck on the horizon. He carefully turns on his resting spot and grasps the cliff once more, pulling himself higher. *This is a thirst worthy of quenching* he mutters, filling the silence with thoughts of success.

That night he finds another perch to stop, curling carefully onto his side he allows himself a moment of sleep. A growl echoes in his empty stomach, but his throbbing hands muffle the pain of hunger. Soon a sliver of dawn cuts through the sky and Adam opens his eyes surprisingly refreshed. He stretches himself to sitting and almost falls off the cliff in shock. All around him boulders bulge from the rock face like mushrooms. Adam leans carefully to the side, bracing himself on his thigh as he draws himself closer to one of the conjured stones. He can see features—lips and nose, and animated eyes. He scans others, taking in their shapes and characteristics. A stone in the distance catches his eye and he lets out a yelp as his heart leaps into his throat. The face on the stone is his old instructor. An eccentric old man who laboured in vain, tucked away in a laboratory at the back of his cottage at the edge of a northern lake, tinkering with furnaces and alembics, pouring over manuscripts so old they dissolved at his touch. As the cough took his last breath, Adam was certain he died of a broken heart, brought on by his failure to outrun death. Now here he sits, his head solidified on this barren mountain, a testament to the sacrifice of their craft. Slowly, Adam begins to recognize others—Bacon, Flamel, Paracelsus, Hermes, Stephanos, the alchemist of Lambspring and the sage of *Splendor Solis*. They all perch patiently looking casually out over the sea as though they were pouring over their

manuscripts. Adam wrests a hand from a crack in the wall and touches a cheek, uncertain whether he is relieved or disappointed to feel soft warm skin and not hard stone. A familiar husky voice rasps out a laugh.

“Them’s a grand claim, my boy,” his professor’s bust calls to Adam.

“What is this madness?” Adam glares at the likeness, searching unsuccessfully for moving lips.

“Madness? You are so bold to accuse me of madness? You’re climbing a bloody wall.” the laughter again cuts through Adam’s pride painfully.

“I am so bold as to be alive.” Adam retorts, continuing to climb. He distances himself from the strange bust and begins to relax.

“Ah, so it is eternal life you are after?” the voice rings no quieter in his ears.

“Of course it is eternal life. You of all people should know.”

“And?” his professor presses, a sing-song taunting tone drips from his words.

“And all the rest. Gold, power, must I say it?” Adam answers, screaming into the wind.

“Apparently you must,” came a sad reply.

“Jealousy, I think.”

“Jealousy is a sin. Adam, I implore you: let go. Unfix yourself from this deadly rock and feel truly alive as you plummet to your death.”

Adam unleashes his maniacal laugh. “Now who speaks of madness?” He rests his foot on the head of an alchemist he does not recognize and pushes roughly, climbing with spiteful speed.

“We are all mad,” comes the professor’s voice, trailing off into the silent distance Adam leaves behind.

Further he climbs until the cliff begins to taper and he no longer has to pull himself straight up. His climb becomes a crawl and soon he is almost strolling casually toward the peak of the great stone mountain. The air is thin and he breathes in large, shaky gasps, but his pride overshadows his discomfort, and he hardly notices the difficulty. Clouds begin to flutter around his ankles, and before long the massive cliff is no longer visible under the cloud cover. *From Hunter’s World to heaven*, Adam muses, *where is that pelican now, I wonder?* Soft rain begins to trickle on his shoulders, and Adam extends his tongue, trying to lick the sky. The air is sweet and young, and the rain drops feel thick as fresh milk.

A breeze picks up and tousles Adam’s hair, and the clouds condense before him. Shapes begin to form: first bulbous and random, but soon they begin to have angles and contours. Adam picks out one that looks like a tree, and another in the shape of a cabin. He sees one he is certain holds the shape of his old furnace, and another that unnervingly resembles the head of a boar. Adam directs his eyes to the apex of the mountain, ignoring the shapes that swirl around him. A smoky silver figure floats in his path, obscuring the peak of his journey. She has tangled silver hair the colour of a young ash tree, and eyes that mimic the

storm. Her pale skin shines so bright that Adam shields his eyes with his swollen hands and stumbles precariously close to the cliff edge. The void presses heavily on his back and he lurches forward, grasping for the reassurance of the rock. The apparition remains suspended motionless before him, frozen in feature, silent in song. She hangs in the air, floating like a spot in Adam's vision and as Adam regains his courage he lifts his eyes to gaze upon her. But it is not her features that catch his eye, nor the curve of her breasts or the angle of her hips. Beyond her white, cloudy form, at the apex of the rock, grows a red poppy, deep as the colour of blood dripping from a ruby onto a rose. Adam arranges himself as tall as his spine will stretch, squaring his shoulders as wide as they will reach. He takes a step toward the top of the mountain, trying to step around Mercury's ghost.

She produces a bow, an arrow poised in the taut string. Adam steps forward again, and the point of the arrow presses into his chest. A drop of blood soaks through his new tunic.

"There is nowhere to run from here." Her voice seems to come from the rock, and Adam thinks back to his stone professor and the taunting pelican.

"You are not real." He retorts.

"The blood on your tunic is real."

"What do you want?"

"Jump." Her response is casual, as though she is asking him to pass a cellar of salt.

"Why?" He balls his hands into fists. "Why is it so important that I jump?"

“If you do not know, then you are not worthy of knowing,” she explains, lowering her bow.

“Worth and madness, I should be the one to offer advice.” Adam snaps, pushing past Mercury to the poppy. He snatches it up and whirls around defiantly, but Mercury dissipates before his feet finish scraping on the ground.

Deep within the mountain a rumbling begins to ripple to the surface. Small pebbles jump about Adam’s feet, bouncing off the rock like raindrops. He drops to his knees and presses his hands to the stone, clinging to the surface as stubbornly as moss. A puff of dusty air rises from the minuscule crack where the poppy grew and swirls around Adam’s knuckles. The crack lengthens and creeps between his outstretched arms, coming to a halt just before his knees. The rumbling grows and the crack widens, blowing stale heat into Adam’s face. Adam rolls to the side and backs himself onto a ledge. Large chunks of the mountain begin to crumble away, rolling down the cliff, following Adam’s trail to the sea. And still the precipice cleaves in two, peeling away from the center as though the poppy had cemented two great masses together.

A dark bulge pushes to the surface, squeezing through the crack, unfolding its bulk in the open air. Adam trembles at the edge of the mountain, his head swimming, his mouth agog. It turns, and a gigantic head housing two opal black eyes and a deep red, flickering tongue looms before him. Adam’s mouth opens so wide that his lips peel away from his teeth as though his skull is bursting through, trying to escape the monster. Sound chooses to hide instead, and he quakes in silence, pinned to the side of the mountain. The poppy slips from his fingers and

floats on the wind before sinking down to the sea. His eyes roll to the back of his head, and just before the darkness takes him a snow-white lion leaps over his head.

The lion paces before the basilisk, growling, with teeth bared, his tail flicking at the ground. The basilisk opens its mouth and lets out a low hiss; an avalanche of stones loosens beneath them. Teeth and claws flash in a blurred arch of attack. The snake weaves its head from side to side, dodging the white lion's deadly paws. The lion leaps over the basilisk's body, a continuous rippling muscle protruding from the centre of the mountain. It pounces at the basilisk's nose and buries its claws into the snake's deadly eyes. A painful scream erupts from the cavernous mouth of the serpent, stirring Adam awake. Blood rains down from the wounds in the basilisk's eyes, dripping on Adam's head and running down his face. The snake shakes urgently and throws the lion to the ground. The lion skids to the edge of the cliff and drops from view. Adam holds his breath, choosing a possible path around the blind snake, searching for a place to hide. Then, bright white paws, streaked with blood, throw themselves over the top of the mountain, and the lion scrambles up from the edge of death. It leaps onto the basilisk's back and pierces its thick skin with claws like daggers. The basilisk bucks and twists, trying in vain to shake off the lion, but it clings on with stubborn strength. Then, the lion lets out a threatening roar and the basilisk halts for a fraction of a breath. A thrill washes over Adam as the lion plunges its teeth into the back of the basilisk's head, ripping and tearing, and slurping at the serpent. A sickening

crunch echoes off the stones. Suddenly the basilisk grows limp, and its body sinks back into the crack; its head flops heavily onto the rock.

The lion steps off the basilisk's back and shakes out its mane as though the battle was nothing more than a struggle over a watering hole. It licks the blood from a paw and struts to the ledge where Adam is huddled. Adam quakes, covering his head in his hands, but the lion nuzzles him gently with its large, wet nose. When Adam lifts his head and searches the lion's calm face he is certain he can hear purring. The lion lets its tongue dart from between its ferocious teeth and licks Adam's nose with the wet tip. Then, shaking its back end, the lion crouches on its powerful back legs and springs into the air, bounds over Adam's head and plunges off the side of the mountain, disappearing into the clouds below. Shaking, Adam leans out over the cliff and catches himself just before he loses his balance. He clammers back to the top of the mountain, weary of balancing his life, and sits with his back against a large boulder, drawn upwards from the quake.

From here he has a clear, but distant view of the basilisk. He watches it until the sun dips below the mountain peak and the air begins to turn. Certain that the monster is in fact dead, he begins to pace, shivering from the cold for the first time since he left the boat. He approaches the monster, willing his steps forward. Great splashes of its blood drape thickly over the rocks and on the ground. Adam reaches out and touches one of the splashes, moving the blood that has already begun to congeal. It is sticky, with a fine gritty texture, and he is surprised that it has retained some warmth for this long. Suddenly a flash of movement catches his eye. He turns quickly, fearful that the basilisk is revived. From its mouth pours an

army of scorpions. They skitter over the rocks, their claws clicking noisily, crossing through a puddle of the basilisk's blood. Soon a large boulder is streaked with thousands of bloody scorpion footprints. Adam takes a cautious step forward and examines the pattern, and as the last of the scorpions crawls away an image is revealed.

*There is a throne surrounded by lilies, and on the throne sits a woman with wild hair and a small crown. She holds a chalice in her hand, and the stem of a rose sticks out from it. Around her neck is a large jewel, and behind her a pelican pecks at its chest. Upon her naked chest there is a toad, its mouth gripped hungrily upon a breast.*

Adam stares at the image for an eternity. He reads it like a manuscript, taking notes in his mind. Then, he reaches out and touches the bloody picture, nearly dry, and rubs it frantically until it is merely a smudge, blotted out by the bleeding of his own cracked hands. He takes a final look at the basilisk, equally as frightening dead as it was in life, and swings his legs over the edge of the mountain, easing his way down towards the sea.

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“Is it a young lady that leads you into the woods today?” Albion does not know what to make of the weathered old Monk with the hunting horn, but they have been travelling in the same direction for over an hour, and the silence was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

“I do not think she would want to be labelled as such,” the Monk nods, inviting Albion to join him on the narrow trail.



“In that case I am certain we travel to meet the same special soul. The nymph of the woods.”

“Perhaps,” the old man shrugs. Albion notes he does most of his speaking through the movements of his neck and shoulders, as though he is not accustomed to conversation. “She is unique,” he attaches to the end of a long pause.

Albion laughs comfortably, “She *is* unique,” he echoes.

Their walk through the forest is pleasant. Albion fills the time with stories and facts, drawing on his easy disposition to see them through to their destination. The Monk nods politely in the appropriate places, letting Albion’s joviality carve a path to their mutual friend.

Soon the sounds of throaty, feminine voices mingle with Albion’s easy ramblings. He trails off in the midst of reciting a recipe for summer wine, and settles into an appreciative reverie. Beside him, the Monk hums along to the distant song.

They arrive in the centre of the forest just as the light grows too weak to cast shadows. Hundreds of fireflies float among the leaves, casting sparkles like candlelight. In a clearing beneath the truncated tree, the nymphs sit in a circle, singing their long-practiced songs. They wear plain silver robes belted at the waste with linen rope. Upon their heads are nets flecked with starlight. As Albion and the Monk lead their horses to the clearing, the smallest nymph runs up to relieve their steeds and tethers them near the creek for the night.

Mercury stands at a long wooden table, laden to groaning with a woodland feast. She greets her friends warmly with cups of mulled wine. Albion she

embraces like a brother, patting him strongly on the shoulder. The Monk stands with his arms crossed casually, a proud smile painted across his face. Mercury throws her arms around his neck and dangles like a child, and although the Monk looks like an austere warrior, he melts into her embrace and holds her protectively around the waist.

“My friends,” she welcomes with outstretched arms, “it brings me more joy than I have words to express, that you have come to my table this evening.”

“Some might say that joy is a pale word when compared to your smile.” Albion flirts, and Mercury offers the mildest blush.

“Some might say you’d wait a fortnight for the chance to speak your salty words,” she offers coyly.

The Monk clears his throat and sweeps his gaze over the table. It is weighed with baskets of apples and clay bowls heaped with berries sweetened with honey. Crunchy loaves baked under coals are set at each place, along with a flagon of steaming wine. In the centre sits a monstrous wild boar, an apple perched between its intimidating tusks. There are also hard boiled duck eggs, a pie of mushrooms and onions, and a bowl overflowing with young greens. At the head of the table sits the skull of an impressive stag. The Monk nods approvingly and averts his eyes to appraise his hostess.

Her hair is shiny and smooth—she had nymphs comb it—and her pale skin is accented with rose-coloured cheeks and lips. She wears a simple dress similar to her nymph companions, but it hangs loosely open, unabashedly

exposing her breasts to the night air, and around her waist is a leather belt securing a horn and a small pouch.

“Please, join me around my table.” Mercury pulls out two logs for chairs and then moves to the opposite end of the table across from the stag. Albion and the Monk take their places and they begin their feast.

The nymphs pause just long enough to fill plates with the sweetened berries, and then they return to their songs, serenading the trio and calling forth the stars until the night is nearly as bright as midday. Mercury and her guests divide their time between feasting and laughter, and soon their stomachs are satisfyingly stretched, although the table seems no less heaped with food.

The sound of horses weaves its way toward the table, and Mercury raises her wine in greeting. A hulky lord in boiled leather and a high collar is the first to show his face.

“Good evening, Lord Hannigan.” Mercury begins, while Albion chuckles in surprise.

“You again,” he barks, pulling his thick leather gloves higher up his arms.

“Me still, my Lord. Would you join us?” She sweeps her arms over the table, gesturing to the abundance of food.

Hannigan considers sceptically, his eyebrows raised and his lips pursed in a smirk. But soon the nymph’s song enchants his defences and before long he is seated at the table, while his horse is watered with the others. Indeed, there is room enough at the table for the entire party, and soon the forest is rumbling with laughter and celebration.

When the fires have shrunk to glowing coals and the birds begin to stretch their voices, and the last of the revelry slumps forward in a drunken snore, one of Hannigan's men approaches Mercury, who has moved to rest her head on the stag. His face is shadowed by a large red hood, and his hands are covered in long sleeves, richly decorated in gold trim. From one of the sleeves he produces a wooden box, and he places it gently on the table before her. Mercury lifts her head to address the stranger, but he turns away before she can utter a word. She draws the box from the table and runs her fingers over the latch, and the stranger retreats to the brook. As Adam unties his horse and leads it away from the party, a muffled croak from inside the box makes his stomach leap.

In the morning the party is roused by frantic nymphs who crowd around the head of the table. Mercury lies still as stone, her skin so pale it is almost translucent. Her hair is plastered to her face with sweat and her eyes flicker in agitation. At her breast is a toad, stomach distended with Mercury's milk, its wide mouth latched upon her with supernatural strength. The Monk attempts to prise the offending creature from her chest, but as he pulls, she cries out a heart-wrenching groan. Albion dips a rag into water from the brook and dabs it upon her burning skin. She suffers so hot he expects steam to rise from her face. Hannigan stands to the side uncomfortably, searching the forest for answers, and not a single person notices that the hunting party is less one stranger.

Eventually, the helpless hunting party departs, with Hannigan mumbling something about calling another time. Albion thanks him on behalf of their hostess for coming, but the dripping sarcasm is not lost on the Lord, who shuffles

away trying to act indignant. The nymphs set up their vigil, humming and caressing, and shedding tears. Even the Monk's lip trembles when Mercury becomes agitated.

Throughout the day she wakes from her sick dreams and clutches at the belt around her waist. Albion tries to remove it, but Mercury fights off his hands as though she is being attacked. Eventually he compromises by slipping the horn from the belt, laying it close by. Then towards sunset, Mercury opens her eyes for the first time. The toad kicks its legs against her stomach, but stubbornly remains attached to her breast. Mercury gags and spits. She tries to sit up, but the toad is like lead pressing on her chest. Gripping at the leather belt, she finds the pouch and works her fingers through the drawstring. Then, she pulls out a ring with a large emerald and raises it before her face. The toad kicks once more and the ring falls to the hollow at her throat before Mercury slips away from consciousness.

The toad goes suddenly very still, and its small black eyes bulge toward the ring. It sits transfixed, bubbles of milk forming at the corners of its mouth. The nymphs stop their song and hold their breath. Albion's eyes narrow appraisingly. The Monk utters a quiet prayer. A strange croaking burp emits from the toad and it pulls away from Mercury's breast revealing a chapped, raw nipple. The toad never takes its eyes from the ring. Then, the emerald begins to tremble upon Mercury's throat, and it jumps like a kernel of corn over a fire. It spins and shudders, then finally cracks so loudly the Monk searches the skies and Albion reaches for his bow. The toad merely gives a slight nod and a heavy blink before hopping off Mercury's chest and disappears into the woods. Mercury breathes out

a peaceful sigh that curls her lips into a smile, and slips into a peaceful slumber as night creeps over the forest.

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At the convergence where the silvery moonlight meets the light of dawn, there is a secret sea. Here, Mercury drifts away in the sobering sleep of healing. She breaks through the surface of the liquid light, the waterless water, and sinks to a depth so deep that the earth above becomes the sky. Gently, she lands among red corals, jutting out of clean white sand. The water is warm and clear, and she breathes it in easily. Mercury walks between the corals examining their smooth angles, brushing her hands over their porous surfaces. They feel rough, but not unpleasantly so, like a cat's tongue, and Mercury finds herself thinking briefly of the white lion, wondering if its tongue feels the same.

Small golden fish dart around, playfully pecking at the morsels that grow in these pores, and Mercury tries to scoop up one tiny fish near her hand. It flits away, swimming around her head and through her tangled hair before moving on to somewhere else. Mercury continues through the strange forest, where the corals grow taller and more twisted. Soon, the tree-like calcinations grow so densely that there is no more white sand to tread upon. Mercury clamours over the corals like a squirrel, gliding from one branch to the next, bending her body through spaces where schools of the little gold fish scatter just long enough for her to ease through.

As she moves toward the centre of the reef the water grows warmer and warmer still, until small bubbles form upon her skin as though she sits in a bath.

The golden fish grow larger too, some near the size of her hand. And somehow the corals seem to glow with their red hue. Finally, she reaches a ring in the reef where the largest coral is planted. Its limbs are curved upwards so that it looks like a vase, and Mercury thinks of the womb in the Hunter's World. There are small spaces, barely wide enough for her to slip through an arm, between the coral branches, and in the centre of this singular coral Mercury sees a giant stone: a ruby among the corals. Her arm slides easily through the gap and she closes her fingers over the ruby. It is hot as fire, but does not burn. When she removes it from the coral the golden fish suddenly scatter, and she floats to the surface of the airy sea and back among her companions.

Her eyes flutter and she lets out an exaggerated yawn. Something upon her throat shifts and falls among her hair. She fishes out the object from behind her neck and produces a gold band set with a strange jewel—a deep red ruby in the centre of a cracked emerald. Mercury plucks the strand of her hair from around the ring and sets it afloat on the morning breeze.

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She finds him not a day's ride from the creek, sucking the marrow from a toad's leg, grease dripping down his chin. He sits at the end of a long shadow that stretches across the grass, originating at the base of a crumpled heap of two monstrous corpses. An elephant lies awkwardly with broken legs beneath its massive bulk. Its trunk rests across the back of its neck like a frayed noose. Two large punctures peek out from behind the trunk and blood congeals from the wounds down the path of its wrinkled skin into its ear. Beneath the elephant lies

the dragon, crushed from its fall. Wings and neck broken, bones jutting through its serpent skin, crumbling to a powder. Adam tosses the toad leg aside and licks his grimy fingers. He closes his eyes and leans his back against a tree; his fingers tap out a rhythm as he waits. She does not take care to approach silently, and her footsteps fall louder than a bear's, but Adam does not stir. He is humming a song near to a nymph melody, but his notes are not quite right.

“I must admit, I did not expect you so soon.” He says as she comes to a stop behind him.

“I believe those are the first words you have spoken to me.” Mercury leans her hand on the tree above his head.

“Well, it is about time, don't you think? How are you feeling?”

“Strong.” Mercury places her hand on top of his head, and Adam shudders. He scrambles to his feet and out of her grasp, whirling around to face her.

There are horns on either side of her head, made from the curves of the moon. Her hair is still the pale silver of a young ash tree, but it is full of golden lustre. She is dressed in a scarlet robe with pink trim, belted at the waist with leather, and the hunting horn hangs as always from her hip. On her finger is a strange ring: a red ruby set in the centre of a cracked emerald.

“I wanted to make you a hart.” Adam pleads, tears welling up in his eyes.

“You wanted the heart that you lack.” Mercury spits. “You could have had what you desired, if only you realized what you truly need.”

“We could have had everything.”



As they face each other an arch of fire erupts around them, holding them together like a bride and groom. Thick smoke begins to coat their clothes, and the flames reflect against the perspiration on their skin.

“We need nothing in this world. You should have been happy with that.”

Adam stares at the golden trim on the cuffs of his sleeves. “You can never understand.”

Mercury sighs a mournful breath: “You were never meant to.”

The fire spreads from the arch above them and falls to the ground, surrounding them in a dome. Adam paces around the enclosure, like a wolf in a pen. He reaches out a hand trying to break through the fire, imploring his skin to withstand the heat, but the flames are too intense and he recoils, sucking on his fingers. Mercury positions herself on the grass in the centre of the dome and places her bow at her side. Above, the dome begins to sag and the fire swirls like a cyclone with large blobs dripping down like liquid gold. They fall upon Mercury’s lap, and she drags her fingers through the fire as it runs down her legs and seeps between her thighs. Adam continues to pace, searching for a gap in the fiery walls where he might burst through, but the heat scorches his eyes and he turns his back to the incinerate barricade.

The liquid fire on Mercury’s lap fractures and spreads like frost on a window pane, and soon it spills onto the grass and begins to take shape. Large antlers of fourteen points protrude from the head of a massive stag that rests its head in her lap like a pet. Mercury hums a minor tune and the beast’s eyelids flutter open, exposing vacant spaces where the flames swirl like whirlpools. It

snorts from wide nostrils and tendrils of smoke drift toward Adam who crumples to his hands and knees. The stag rises and presses its nose to Mercury's cheek. She smiles widely and sweet vapour escapes from between her teeth. Then, the wildfire stag turns and bends its great antlers low to the ground. It paws at the grass sending embers swirling around its legs like pillars, and charges.

Adam cowers and skirts away from his attacker. His back presses against the fiery dome and his hair sings to his scalp. The air is filled with the smell of burned hair, clothes and skin. Blisters pulse on his scalp and burst, dribbling puss down the back of his neck. The stag presses forward and soon it towers above him and drives its antlers into Adam's belly. Adam screams, the air steaming from his lungs as the stag drags its antlers up through Adam's chest. He can feel his guts churn and sizzle and a thick stickiness runs from his throat down his front and pools between his legs. Hooves trample over his neck and face, his jaw is jarred and he can feel the bones grinding against the tendons. Adam's tongue dangles from his mouth.

For an eternity he is jostled by the stampeding fiery beast and as his eyelashes melt and drip into his eyes he clenches them closed and disappears within himself, aware only of his pain and his whimpers. After some time he is roused by the stillness and a cool breeze brushes painfully over his burnt skin. He tries to pull himself to sit, but the pain keeps him curled on the ground. Movement stirs above his head and he forces himself to crane his neck. Above him, Mercury shadows him from the sun, the bow strapped once again to her back. She kneels

beside him and he can see a glint from the large emerald ring decorating the finger of her right hand as she delicately covers his eyes.

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The smallest nymph sheds heavy tears and they splash upon the flank of her white faun. It lies still with death, its neck bent awkwardly beneath her arm. The other nymphs stand off to the side, watching the brook, and waiting for the afternoon to slip into evening. The air is warm and heavy with blossoms and, save for the weeping nymph, it is a rare, perfect day. Suddenly a pelican lands in the brook and jostles the rocks with its beak. The faun begins to stir, raising its head from the nymph's arm and unfolds itself onto shaky legs. Across the brook is a rose bush, weighed down by large red flowers. The pelican watches as the nymph's faun crosses to the bush and feasts on the flowers until its lips stain red and appear to bleed.

## EPILOGUE

*What the hell are you talking about?* She shouted over the music, a neon stir stick shaped like a sword sticking out from her mouth, teasing her lower lip. *I just asked you what the fanciest drink you've ever had was.* The music changed to a pulsating beat and the lights flashed a pattern from blackness to white, yellow, then red. Near the entrance to the dance floor two highly groomed men in sports coats and designer jeans raised half empty glasses and beckoned to their table. *Come on, let's go,* she wriggled out of the booth and smoothed the front of her pencil skirt. *This place always gets too demanding at this time of night.* The two women rose from the table, shook their heads at the men's advances and turned to leave. Pulling a crisp bill from the gold purse on her hip, the one with the incredible story tossed it on the table. A ring with a ruby in the centre of an emerald glimmered in the pulsating light.

FIN

## Glossary

***A l'affut***: A hunting method in which the game is driven to a hunter with a bow concealed behind a tree. This standing station was often the location where ladies and companions were involved in the hunt because it was “personally less violent” than hunting *par force* (Almond 72).

**Adam**: A pseudonym for the *prima materia*, or the “mother of metals.” Adam was believed to be the first philosopher who possessed the alchemical secret before his fall from Eden (Abraham 3, 124; Ruland 333).

**Air**: See elements

**Alabaster**: A class of marble divided into three kinds, one of which is onyx or ruddy alabaster, named because of its flesh-tone. Along with vases and other vessels, alabaster is used in plasters to dress burns (Ruland 18). It is a symbol of the stone attained during the albedo phase (Abraham 4).

**Alaunt**: A hunting dog trained to chase and immobilize quarry, its appearance is similar to a greyhound with a shorter, wider head. Alaunts were bred for “reckless savagery” in order to combat large game. (*The Boar and Bear Hunt* Devonshire Tapestry depicts three alaunts in a *mêlée* with a bear.) According to John Cummings in *The Hound and the Hawk*, Gaston Phoebus recommends in his manual *Livre de Chasse* that greyhounds and alaunts be used together when hunting because greyhounds swifter, but alaunts fiercer (Cummings 14-15). Norwich explains that alaunts which more closely resemble greyhounds tend to be gentler; however, alaunts are “treacherous and evil understanding” and have been

known to kill sheep, other hounds, and even their masters: “And no one ever saw three well conditioned and good” (116-117).

**Albedo:** See phases

**Albion:** From Celtic and Latin, the word has roots in the Latin *albus*, meaning white. Albion is an old name for Britain in reference to the white cliffs of Dover (OED). Since the etymology of “albion” depicts white rocks, this is the name chosen for the character who represents salt.

**Alembic:** A glass vessel in which the alchemical work occurs. It has many symbolic names, including womb, bath, egg, pelican and grave or coffin (Abraham 5-6). Alembics are among the many important scientific discoveries discerned by alchemists and they are still used today for distilling alcohol. Roger Bacon devotes an entire chapter to the alembic and furnace in his *Mirror of Alchemy*, explaining that “in one vessel the whole mastery is performed” (ch. IV).

**Alkalae:** Ruland refers to this as “Vitriol from the mines, or fluid Vitriol” (Ruland 22). It is the term used to describe a saline substance which is extracted from calcined ashes of soda plants (OED). The modern spelling is alkali.

**Angel of Death:** Volatile substances are considered spiritualized and always depicted as winged (Abraham 7). The Angel of Death is the spiritualized essence of the stone during the *nigredo* phase (Abraham 135).

**Apple (berry, fruit):** Mercurius is often described as a tree with endless branches. Upon those branches is the raw fruit, or the *prima materia*, before it is treated to become the stone. With allusion to the Garden of Eden, the fruit represents the soul’s maturity and developing consciousness (Abraham 82;

Ruland 362). Flamel writes in his *Summary of Philosophy* that mercury, or *argent vive* is “like some immature fruit on a tree, which the blossom being past, becomes an unripe fruit, and then a larger apple.”

**Aqua:** See elements – water

**Aqua vitae:** See Mercurius

**Aristotelian Properties:** Aristotle deduced that all matter is made from a pliable material which, when the four properties: hot, cold, moist, and dry, were subject to this matter, it created the four elements: air, earth, fire, and water (Coudert 17-18). Adjusting the combination of these properties would then transform the prime material into another element. Earth is made from a combination of cold and dry, water: cold and moist, air: hot and moist, and fire: hot and dry (Aristotle 2.3).

**Ash:** The calcinated substance rendered incorruptible by fire. The material has undergone the death and decomposition of the *nigredo* stage, and has now entered *albedo*. It is also referred to as alchemical snow (Abraham 12). Paracelsus writes: “the terrestrial stone has come forth from the celestial stone; through the same fire, coal, [and] ashes” (36). That is to say that all matter in alchemy is reduced once more to the prime matter. Ashes are the primary material used by the alchemists to transform into the stone.

**Avaunt cy avaunt:** See hunting calls

**Bacon (Roger):** The author of two key alchemical texts: *The Mirror of Alchemy*, and *Radix Mundi*. Bacon lived c. 1219 – c. 1292. He was a Franciscan friar who was educated at Oxford, and was known for his scientific mind (Linden 111). *The*

*Mirror of Alchemy* is a brief summary divided into seven chapters in which Bacon defines alchemy, describes the nature of metals, the conditions needed for the work, and gives instruction on carrying out the process. For a small treatise, Bacon includes a plethora of information and terms, making it an ideal introduction to alchemy. The *Radix Mundi* is a larger work originally written in Latin and later translated by William Salmon in 1692. Its content is similar to *Mirror*, describing metals, apparatuses, and processes, and is also appreciated for its clarity and lack of alchemical jargon (Linden 111).

**Basilisk:** A giant snake hatched from a chicken egg, the basilisk is known for its deadly stare. Alchemically, it is a symbol for the elixir because it can “kill the base metal upon which it is projected” and transform it into silver or gold (Abraham 16-17; Ruland 340-341).

**Bath:** Matter that is dissolved and reduced to liquid form (Ruland 340). Also, the purifying waters of mercury that cleanse, warm, and nourish the quintessence (Abraham 17). Images from *Splendor Solis* and *Book of Lambspring* depict kings, queens, fathers, sons, and other alchemical characters bathing together to symbolise the conjunction of two matters.

**Blood:** Appears throughout the alchemical process, ranging from the first stage when a death is required in order to cleanse the matter from corruption and impurities, to the mercurial blood of the green lion mixed into an elixir to nourish the infant stone, to the blood-red colour associated with the final stage, *rubedo* (Abraham 28). The *Book of Lambspring* states that salamander blood is purest because it originates from a creature born from fire, and therefore nothing can



corrupt it (29). Blood is also a metaphor for the elixir of the stone itself, as it is the liquid which gives life.

**Boar:** Norwich writes that the boar is more ferocious than the lion or leopard, for unlike the large cats, the wild boar can slay a hunter with one stroke (46). Their ferocity made them worthy game, and the bravest hunters opted to slay this animal not with an arrow, but on the ground with a sword, such as the scene from *Sir Gawain* when Sir Bertilak dispatches the boar with his sword, much to the trepidation of his party: “many feared for the knight, lest he come off the worse” (1588). Cummins discusses the Christian moral symbolism of the boar, outlining the sinful qualities of pride, anger, and physical menace present in the boar, and the power of the good Christian to overcome these characteristics (104-105).

**Book of Hours:** Small prayer books, often with intricate illuminations. Almond reveals one such book dated c. 1315-1330 was given as a wedding present for John de Pabenham and Joan Clifford and contains hunting tableaux, including hounds chasing a hart and a hare, and illustrations of a other game, including a lion, boar, hare, rabbit, and fox (61). Elsewhere he describes a Flemish Book of Hours dated c. 1300 which depicts women and children hunting (113).

**Bride and groom:** At its most basic metaphor, alchemy is a union between opposites: sol and luna, king and queen, red man and white woman, dog and bitch, dragon and serpent, mercury and sulphur. This wedding is not a union of partners as ceremony dictates, but a conjunction between two opposites who physically combine to create the *rebis* or alchemical hermaphrodite. This union is

described in multiple settings such as the lovers in the grave, the king and queen in the bath, and also in the hottest alchemical fire (Abraham 35-39)

**Charger:** Another term for a courser or powerful war horse (OED).

**Child's piss:** The *prima materia* at the *nigredo* stage of putrefaction. Abraham reports that in the *Turba Philosophorum* it instructs the tincture to be prepared “with the urine of boys” (qtd. 40). She also explains that George Ripley compared the putrefaction stage to “playing, pissing children” and the following ablution stage in the *albedo* phase he compares to women washing linen (see laundry) (40).

**Citrinas:** See phases

**Cold:** See Aristotelian properties

**Crow:** In the *nigredo* phase the old corrupted body is mutated and suffers a death so it can be reborn. A significant number of alchemists, including Hermes, Paracelsus, and Ripley consider this corrupted body to be best represented by the black crow. A further symbol is the crow's head, which is decapitated from the body so that the soul may be freed and reborn innocent (Abraham 49; Coudert 45)

**Curée:** The post-capture ceremony of rewarding the dogs. When the stag was caught and field-dressed the small intestines were mixed with blood and bread and placed on the hide for the dogs to eat. This was a noisy ceremony, as the dogs were encouraged by the hunters' calls and horn (Almond 69; Cummins 44-46). Cummins explains that in the case of the boar, the dog's health was a concern, and so the meat was cooked before presented to the boar, as is the case in *Sir Gawain* (Cummins 104; *Gawain* 1609-1610).

**Dew:** Life giving properties of the mercurial waters which wash the substance clean, transitioning it from the *nigredo* to the *albedo* phase (Abraham 53; Holmyard 26).

**Dog and bitch:** A symbol of the conjunction of sulphur and mercury into the fifth element. See bride and groom (Abraham 58; *Book of Lambspring* 18).

**Dove:** A symbol of the pure matter at the height of the *albedo* phase (Abraham 58). In the *Book of Lambspring* two birds, one white and one red, bite each other until one devours the other. Then both birds turn into doves and from the dove is born a phoenix (25). This illustrates the matter's preparedness for transition from *albedo* into *rubedo* where it will become the quintessence for the stone.

**Dragon:** Symbolizes the base matter which is acted upon by the alchemist as a knight may do battle with the serpent (Coudert 126; *Book of Lambspring* 12). Dragon's blood is an alchemical ingredient said to be obtained by a vampire dragon who is crushed under the weight of an elephant it killed by sucking its blood (Coudert 93). Union of a winged (mercury) and wingless (sulphur) dragon results in the ouroborus, signifying the cycle complete (*Book of Lambspring* 20).

**Dry:** See Aristotelian properties

**Earth:** See elements

**Eclipse:** Signifying the *nigredo* phase, the eclipse represents the corruption shadowing the body. It is a time of suffering in darkness before the purifying light. *The Hunting of the Greene Lyon* depicts this event as the green lion devouring the sun (Abraham 66).

**Elements:** Beginning with Plato and therefore Aristotle, and adopted as a key philosophy by the alchemists, all material is the derivation of the *prima materia* into forms, of which the first four of these forms are air, earth, fire, and water (Abraham 68; Coudert 18). Alchemists considered these not common elements as we might know them, but a categorization of the principles characteristic of the four properties (Abraham 68).

**Air:** Symbolizes the volatile (Abraham 4). Unlike the other four elements, it cannot be contained and therefore it is unfixated. *The Words of Father Aristeus to His Son*, the Latin poem first published in 1688 but thought to be much older, states that “Air corrupts all things, and even as it gives life, so it also takes it away.” The letter maintains that air relieves drought by bringing dew, but it also fuels fire. In this manner, air can be considered to both purify and corrupt.

**Earth:** Symbolizes the heavy body of the substance (Abraham 65). Hermes Trismegistus writes it is also the vessel of “corruptible bodies” (Burland 156). This element is used to describe that which is impure and corrupt or corruptible. In his explanation of the procreation of minerals in *The Mirror of Alchemy*, Bacon refers to each of the three unclean metals—lead, copper, and iron—as “earthy” (Ch. 2).

**Fire:** The element with the most responsibility, fire is instrumental in tempering the conditions where the alchemical process occurs. Each phase of alchemy demanded increasing intensities of fires (Holmyard 38; Abraham 76). Paracelsus teaches that “by the element of fire all that is

imperfect is destroyed and taken away” (8), leading to Abraham’s declaration that “alchemy is known as the art of fire” (76). This is the element that transforms material, turns metal to ash or water to vapour, and burns away impurities.

**Water:** Of all the elements, water is understood to have the most states. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the philosophers have a great number of symbols involving water. The supplement to Ruland’s *Lexicon* contains thirty-one separate types of water, including dry water, mineral water, water of the philosophers, thickened water, and water of the world (457-459).

**Emanation of the moon:** Description of the stone by Greek alchemist Stephanos in his work *The Great and Sacred Art of the Making of Gold*, translated by Sherwood Taylor in 1937 (Linden 54; Holmyard 31).

**Emerald:** According to Ruland the emerald of the philosophers is considered the flower of heaven (359). The emerald tablet, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice great is said to contain the secrets of heaven. Paracelsus writes in the *Coleum Philosophorum* that the emerald “defends chastity; and if this is violated by him who carries it, the stone itself does not remain perfect” (37). Furthermore, there is a story attributed to an early western alchemist, Albertus, who claims he witnessed a toad determine the strength and purity of an emerald by falling into a trance (Holmyard 116). For further reading, see toad.

**Emerald Tablet:** Attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the “thrice great,” although later dated to the Roman Empire, the *Emerald Tablet* is a brief lecture on alchemy

structured as thirteen points which has provided the foundation for later alchemists (Linden 27; Coudert 27-28). The Monk's speech on pages 78-79 is a retelling of the *Tablet* in its entirety. For further reading, see Hermes Trismegistus.

**Entire yellow species:** Reference to the distilled and sublimated quintessence quoted from *The Great and Sacred Art of the Making of Gold* by Stephanos (Holmyard 31).

**Ever-fugitive:** A reference to Mercurius, the ever-fugitive or *cervus fugitives* is often depicted as a deer or stag, as in the *Book of Lambspring* (14-15; Abraham 32). It is called the ever-fugitive because Mercurius is unstable and it is its nature to evade capture (Ruland 292).

**Faun:** Like the stag and the hart, the faun is representative of the *cervus fugitives* (Abraham 32). As with other symbols connected to the *rubedo* phase, the fawn in Andrew Marvell's poem "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun" exhibits red hidden behind white when the white faun emerges from the white lilies to feast on the roses "until its lips e'en seemed to bleed" (qtd. in Abraham 175).

**Festina lente:** An inscription written on a furnace in an illustration of Heinrich Khunrath's laboratory in his book *The Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom*. Latin for "hasten slowly," the phrase is a fitting motto for alchemists (Coudert 91-92).

**Fifth element:** Also known as the quintessence. When the four elements are arranged in perfect balance they make up the incorruptible essence of the stone. The fifth element is achieved in the *albedo* phase and is also known as the white

stone. It can change metal into silver and has healing properties (Abraham 75-76). It is known as the burning water and the watery fire and contains all properties so that it exhibits none of the properties. Ruland states that there is a quintessence for vegetable, animal, and mineral which are exclusive and cannot be combined (272-273, 359).

**Fire:** See elements

**Flamel (Nicholas):** Possibly the most well-known alchemist today thanks to the popularity of *Harry Potter*. Flamel was a fourteenth-century scrivener who lived between 1330 and c. 1417. According to legend, Flamel was visited by an angel in a dream who showed him a book, but did not allow him to touch it. In 1357, Flamel bought a book he recognised to be the one from his dream. The book was filled with complicated illustrations and written in a language Flamel could not understand. Flamel studied and experimented with the book on his own for twenty years, but was unable to uncover its secrets. With the support of his wife, Perenelle, Flamel went on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella where he met a Jewish merchant, Master Canches who explained to Flamel that he was in possession of an ancient Kabbalistic text thought to be long lost. Canches explained the images to Flamel and agreed to accompany him back to France; however, he died before their return. Flamel and his wife continued to experiment with the instructions of the book and finally on Friday, 17 January 1382 at noon, they met success. Over the next fifteen years they acquired great wealth, founded fourteen hospitals and donated substantially to various churches and charities. After their deaths, their house was searched in an effort to discover the Flamel's

source of wealth, but the house was empty—including their tombs. It has been reported that Nicholas and Perenelle were sighted in India in 1700 and at the Paris Opera in 1761. The Flamel's are considered the archetypal alchemical couple—male and female working together in perfect balance (Martin 99-101).

**Fox:** Considered a vermin, the fox's popularity grew as a hunting quarry closer to the sixteenth century (Griffin 83). Norwich suggests that fox hunting is good exercise for the hounds, but recommends that a small greyhound be taken, as hounds that hunt larger game usually ignore the fox. He also spends a considerable amount of time complaining of the fox's stench (64-67). Almond reports that the Abbess of Barking was given permission by Henry III in 1221 to hunt fox, making it one of the earliest accounts of fox hunting in England. He goes on to explain the significance of this moment is threefold: first that the quarry was a vermin, second that permission was granted a woman, and finally that she was clergy who were forbidden from hunting and hawking at this time (80).

**Furnace:** Since the alchemical process is so dependent on fire, the furnace was a central alchemical tool. Roger Bacon writes that the furnace should imitate the mountains (volcano) and have no vent for the heat to escape save for the opening below the vessel (ch. V). Ruland dedicates six pages in his *Lexicon* to the many different types of furnaces, designed for specific stages in the process. He explains that there are open and closed furnaces for directing heat, dry furnaces for working without water, and dissolving furnaces for working with. There are



also furnaces which blast heat or intensify it for welding, and furnaces which contain bladders or sand box to contain the work (154-159).

**Glass:** Vessels made from natural glass were the most sought after by alchemists because they mimicked the natural transmutation process. Bacon writes in the *Mirror* that a vessel must be “made of glass or some earth, representing or close knitting together of glass” (ch. V).

**Greyhound:** The principle hounds used in *par force* hunting, greyhounds were used to hunt deer and also hares (Cummins 115). Cummins reports that according to Gace de la Vigne, who wrote *The Pleasures of Hunting*, and Gaston Phoebus, the ideal greyhound should have the “muzzle of wolf, haunch of lion, neck of swan, [...] eye of sparrowhawk, [and] ear of snake” (13). This combination of traits from other animals echoes very strongly of alchemy, especially considering the choice of animals: lion, wolf, swan, and snake are all alchemical symbols. The greyhound seems to be the general choice for hunting dog, evidenced by Norwich who states “the good greyhound should be of middle size, neither too big nor too little, and then he is good for all beasts” (113).

**Hare:** William Twiti wrote in *The Art of Hunting* that the hare was the most marvellous of animals (38). It was thought to possess both male and female strengths due to its apparent hermaphroditism—male hares only exhibited testes during mating season, leading medieval hunters to believe that it could alter its gender. The hare leads sporting pursuits because it never runs in a straight line. For this reason, Norwich recommends one use only masterful dogs capable of tracking and pursuing this cunning creature (14-16).

**Hart:** See stag

**Hell:** The *prima materia* during the *nigredo* phase when it is at its blackest and most tortured state (Abraham 97). Elsewhere hell is also symbolic of the vessel during the calcinations process in the *nigredo* phase (Coudert 44).

**Hermaphrodite:** Mercurius and therefore the philosopher's stone are made up of a balance of binaries. The central figure for this composition is the alchemical hermaphrodite or *rebis*, the chemical wedding between mercury and sulphur (Abraham 98). This union occurs in an alchemical bath, which is reminiscent of the myth about Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who united with the nymph Salmacis while bathing in a fountain (Coudert 132). The philosopher's stone is referred to as the offspring of the royal couple; however, this is not a product from conception, but rather a mingling due to conjunction. Some of the most intriguing emblems and images related to alchemy are of the hermaphrodite, notably those from *Splendor Solis*, Basil Valentine's *Azoth*, and a plate from the *Rosarium Philosophorum*. In *Unmaking*, the section in chapter three with the hermaphrodite was inspired in part by images from the following manuscripts and works: MS Harley 2407, Basil Valentine's *Azoth*, *Rosarium Philosophorum*, *Microcosmus Hypochondriacus*, and *Actorum Chemicorum Holmiensium*.

**Hermes Trismegistus:** Known as the "thrice great," there are over "thirty-six thousand original" texts attributed to Hermes (Coudert 27). He was a legendary figure with a great mind who was said to have given the Egyptians their writing system (Linden 27). The *Emerald Tablet* is credited to Hermes and is considered

his most influential work (Coudert 27). Due to his pivotal role in alchemy, he is the “true and proper name of the Mercury of the philosophers” (Ruland 375). For further reading, see Mercurius.

**Honors of the foot:** If a woman was present during the unmaking she would receive the foot of the deer (Thiébaux 36). However, Almond claims sometimes she was given the head (69).

**Horse dung:** In order to maintain a slow, moist heat, alchemists burned dung. Also referred to as horse-belly, this was particularly used in the putrefaction, distillation, and digestion processes (Abraham 61, 103) Bacon informs us in the *Radix Mundi* that “so long as the humidity remains, the heat is retained; but the humidity being consumed, the heat vanishes and ceases [...] but it may be concerved and renewed, by casting upon it many times urine mixt [with] salt” (Linden 116).

**Hot:** See Aristotelian properties

**Hurrah:** See hunting calls

**Hunting calls:** Vocal calls and hunting horns were used during the hunt to communicate to and command other members of the party and the hounds. Both *Master of Game* and *The Art of Hunting* spend considerable space instructing on the specific commands and horn patterns. For example, both Norwich and Twiti explain that “*so how*” or “*so-howeh*” and “*avaunt cy avaunt*” are commands associated with hunting hare (Norwich 182; Twiti 25). The hunting horn is not used during this hunt (Twiti). During the *par force*, the authors both transcribe specific horn melodies to urge the dogs. Twiti writes it thus: “*trou-rou-rou-rou-*

*rout – trou-rou-rou-rout*” (9), while Norwich writes “*trut, trut, trororo rout*” (179). While there are slight variations, it is evident that hunting involved an established musicality.

**Impossible, therefore true (Tertullian theory):** An oracular saying from *De carne Christi* which states “The Son of God is dead, which is worthy of belief because it is absurd. And when buried He rose again, which is certain because it is impossible.” The truths of God are impossible to reduce to language and logic (Coudert 78).

**Lambspring:** The *Book of Lambspring* was first published by Nicholas Barnaud in 1599 and outlines fifteen verses of the alchemical process. Later, in 1625 it was issued as part of *Dyas Chymica Tripartita* where it was illustrated with a series of engravings (*Alchemy Website*). The *Book of Lambspring* is of particular interest to *Unmaking* because of its forest setting and use of animals as central figures.

**Laundry:** The sublimation stage of the *albedo* phase, this action washes the material of its putrefaction and renders it clean and pure (Abraham 115). Ruland labels the process as a circulation: “Vapour rises, condenses and falls back like a dew upon the Matter, which remains at the bottom” (382). The penultimate emblem of *Splendor Solis* depicts women washing linens, illustrating the purest, cleanest, and most prepared matter (Trismosin).

**Lily (white, red, yellow):** The lily is a symbol of purity, and so a suitable symbol for the philosopher’s stone. Often white and red lilies are paired together to signify the final *rubedo* phase obtained through the *albedo* phase (Abraham 117). Ruland offers the definition of “Lilium” as “Mercury and its fixed flowers [...]

Quintessence of Sulphur” (207). In 1647, Emperor Ferdinand III had a coin struck from alchemical gold he witnessed produced by J. P. Hofmann. Upon the coin was an inscription in Latin which read “The yellow lilies lie down with the snow-white lion; thus the lion will be tamed, thus the yellow lilies will flourish” (Coudert 200; Holmyard 128).

**Lion (green, red):** Frequent symbols within the alchemical process, the green and the red lion shoulder exclusive but related roles. The green lion is the unclean matter of Mercurius before it is treated and purified. It is said to be green because the *prima materia* at this stage is compared to unripe fruit. The blood of the green lion is the excretion from the raw ore which is red and odorous. A well known image of the green lion originates from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* which depicts the green lion swallowing the sun which is the symbol for philosophical sulphur, thereby creating a balance or a union between clean and unclean, and mercury and sulphur. This idea is repeated in the *Book of Lambspring* when the green lion representing the spirit and mercury joins the red lion, which is the symbol for the soul and sulphur, and the two become one (Abraham 92-93, 167; Coudert 48-49; *Lambspring* 16).

**Lovers in a grave:** Signifies the work gestating in the alembic during the *nigredo* phase. See bride and groom.

**Luna:** The female essence of the chemical wedding to its counterpart, sol. Luna represents philosophical silver, moist and cold properties (Abraham 119-120; Ruland 209; Martin 139)

**Lymer:** The name given to a scenting-hound. Lymers were not a specific breed, but were selected and trained to scent and track game. It was necessary that the hound be the model of obedience. Lymers were chosen from the pack very young and kept on a leash with the master at all times, even sleeping in his chambers. Lymers accompanied hunters during bow hunting and *par force*. Lymers were not rewarded during the *curée*, but fed separately out of the master's hand (Norwich 235-237).

**Marble:** The calcinated white stone rendered in the *albedo* phase. Also the recommended surface for grinding substances to powders (Abraham 122).

**Master of Game:** Written between 1406 and 1413 by Edward III's grandson, the second Duke of York, this is one of the earliest examples of a hunting manual in England. *Master of Game* contains valuable information for medieval hunters concerning the nature of game, such as the hare, hart, boar, fox, and otter, and also the dispositions and abilities of various hunting hounds. The Master of Game was also a key role in hunting as the leader of the *par force* hunt. Noble households also employed a Master of Hounds (Cummins 183).

**Mastiff:** Norwich writes that the mastiff has a "churlish nature and ugly shape," and has a good nature for guarding the master's house and other animals. It is also cross-bred with alaunts to produce a hound that is good for hunting boar (122). In the story of *Nastagio* in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the dogs that pursue and attack Guido's condemned love are "two huge and fierce mastiffs" (340).

**Mercurius:** The most important component of alchemy without which the stone cannot exist. Mercurius is the mercurial water or *aqua vitae*, also referred to as the

“water of life” (Abraham 213). The *aqua vitae* is the quintessence, the perfect balance of all the elements, the purest matter from which will emerge the philosopher’s stone (9). Also known as the fiery water, Mercurius first kills and then revives and imprints the *prima materia* with the stone. Mercurius is the *prima materia* and the philosopher’s stone. It is present in various degrees of purity throughout the alchemical process and is considered the matter that will become the stone as well as the concoction that will create it (Abraham 124-128). Abraham summarizes the complexity of the Mercurius, stating that “He is simultaneously the matter of the work, the process of the work, and the agent by which all this is effected” (125). Ruland has multiple entries for Mercurius—one defining it as mercury, and another as sulphur (230-231). In the *Coelum Philosophorum*, Paracelsus says of Mercurius that “the house is always dead; but he who inhabits the house lives” (Paracelsus 26). Elsewhere he writes of Mercurius that it is the “wisest of the Philosophers,” referring to Hermes the thrice-great, the father of alchemy, and messenger of the Greek gods (Linden 166; Ruland 375; Burland 6; Martin 38). Mercurius is also represented by Mercury the god with his hands and wings cut off, rendering him “fixed” (Coudert 45).

**Mercury:** The feminine component of the alchemical pair. It represents the volatile, the unstable, and the spirit (Coudert 23). Ruland writes that mercury “is mentioned everywhere, in every alchemical work, and is supposed to perform everything” (229). Among other names, it is referred to as *argent vive* and quicksilver (Abraham 10).

**Milk:** The nourishing liquor of the Mercurius, also the glue which binds the sol and luna together in the chemical wedding (Abraham 210). Basil Valentine writes that the “Stone of all the Sages has been perfectly prepared out of the true virgin’s milk” (*Twelve Keys*).

**Mind-constructed beauty of fair form:** Reference to the divine knowledge given by God to the alchemists taken from Stephanos’s second lecture in *The Great and Sacred Art of Making Gold* (Holmyard 31; Linden 57).

**Moist:** See Aristotelian properties

**Monk:** Direct from the pages of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the Monk is described as an enthusiastic hunter with a complexion “as broun as is a berye” (GP 207) and a “curious pyn” shaped like a love-knot (GP 196-197). He was chosen for Mercury’s teacher in order to pay homage to the medieval literary tradition of levelling stories. In this spirit, he relays a tale from the *Decameron* as Chaucer did throughout his *Tales*. In the *Tales* the Monk is accompanied by greyhounds (GP 190). Since lymers are not reduced to a specific breed, I chose to refer to the Monk’s canine companion as a lymer instead of a greyhound in order to showcase a wider range of medieval hunting dogs.

**Moon:** See luna

**Moon reflected the sea of dawn:** Another reference to the wisdom taught to alchemists regarding the purest state of mercury taken from Stephanos’s second lecture in *The Great and Sacred Art of Making Gold* (Holmyard 31; Linden 57).



**Nastagio:** Story borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This particular story is depicted in medieval hunting tableaux, such as Sandro Botticelli's series of four wood panels painted in 1482-1483 (Almond 124).

**Nigredo:** See phases

**One thousand thousand:** Hyperbole mimicking Flamel's description of multiplication to infinity: "from an *hundred* to a *thousand*, from a *thousand* to *ten thousand*, from *ten thousand* to an *hundred thousand* [...] and from thence by the same operation to *Infinity*" (Linden 134).

**Onyx:** See alabaster

**Ouroborus:** Described as a snake devouring its own tail, although it is also depicted as a winged and a wingless dragon each devouring the other, or a flock of birds ascending to and descending from heaven. The ouroborus signifies the cyclical nature of the distillation and sublimation processes (Coudert 47).

**Par force de chiens:** A method of hunting using a lymmer to track a boar, stag or hart, followed by a separate hunting pack that outruns the quarry through the forest until it succumbs, usually in a body of water, whereby the dogs immobilize and a hunter dispatches it (Norwich 148-152; Almond 68-70; Griffin 7-9).

**Paracelsus:** Theophrastis Phillipus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, more commonly known as Paracelsus was a controversial medical thinker in the early sixteenth century. He wrote extensively on medicine, surgery, metallurgy and alchemy. Paracelsus was vehemently anti-authoritarian and consistently employed unorthodox healing methods (Linden 151). He was also abusive, drank excessively, and wore his clothes until they fell from his frame (Coudert 23). His

alchemical works include *The Coelum Philosophorum, Of the Nature of Things*, and *Book of the Revelation of Hermes, interpreted by Theophrastus Paracelsus, concerning the Supreme Secret of the World* (cited in Holmyard 31). His greatest contribution to alchemy is the addition of salt to the mercury-sulphur theory (Coudert 23).

**Paradise:** The Elysian Fields, the pure earth attained at the height of the white stage, it is the fertile land in which to sow the seed of gold (Abraham 69).

**Peacock colours:** While there is some discrepancy about where the peacock colours occur, either before or after the *albedo* phase, this phase is so named for the multitude of colours exhibited in the work (Abraham 142-143; Coudert 42). Burland makes a good argument that this stage was so named because of the oily multi-coloured effect present on oxidized metal (Burland 24). Wherever the placement, the appearance of peacock colours is considered an omen of the positive progress of the work. The peacock is also part of a series of bird symbols used in the alchemical process: raven for *nigredo*, swan or dove for *albedo*, and phoenix for *rubedo* (Abraham 142).

**Pelican:** The namesake of a type of circulatory alembic which resembles its curved neck (Abraham 143). The pelican is also symbolic for the red elixir because of the manner in which it fed its offspring. When the pelican regurgitates its food to nourish its offspring it appears to peck its breast, and the substance produced is red in colour (Coudert 49).

**Phases:** the great alchemical work is a long and complicated scientific process. Throughout its course, the matter upon which the work occurs undergoes a series

of scientific procedures. Alchemy is also an allegorical journey through four phases involving death, purification, and rebirth.

**Nigredo:** Paradoxically the most simple and also most complicated phase in the process. Essentially this stage involves burning matter into ash and then fixing those ashes into a solid. First the substance was heated in a vessel which oxidized the material rendering it black. This is also called the putrefaction process, as all the impurities are brought to the surface and the matter decays. As the next process, *albedo* required white ash it can be assumed that this oxidization process often led to complete combustion. Next are the congelation and fixation processes which involve making this matter solid and “fixed” or non-volatile. At this point the material was ready to be purified (Coudert 44-45). Symbols in the *nigredo* phase include: crow, raven, skull, macabre, stench of graves, lovers in coffin, Hades, hell, Angel of Death, skeleton, eclipse, severed head, coal, pitch, ebony, black man, moor, flood, tears, dragon, truncated tree, toad, panther, and green lion.

**Albedo:** In this phase the substance is rendered pure and prepared for the imprint of the stone. Here, the matter is washed and purified in processes labelled solution and digestion. Essentially, the matter is dissolved in a coveted alchemical solution (Coudert 45). Symbols for this stage include: kings, queens, princes, nymphs, or the hermaphrodite in bath or swimming in ponds, drowning, Aqua vitae, peacock’s tail, fragrant smell, moon,

Diana, white rose, dove, virgin, snow, swan, white lily, alabaster, marble, paradise, salt, ash, silver, virgin's milk, glass, red behind white.

**Citrinas:** Greek alchemists included this phase in the alchemical process, but it was later dropped by European alchemists in favour of the peacock's tail. In this phase distillation and sublimation occur. These processes involve vapour rising in the alembic, condensing and falling to the bottom of the vessel where it revaporized. The process is considered an important cycle, and so is symbolized by the ouroborus, or the snake that eats its tail (Coudert 45-47). Other symbols of *citrinas* include: the stag and unicorn, sweat and tears, birds ascending to heaven, and birds devouring one another.

**Rubedo:** The final stage produced the philosopher's stone and also transmuted base metals to gold. In this phase a fermentation process occurs, which involves forming the stone and allowing it to gestate and increase in power. This process is also attributed to the transmutation because the stone has the power to convert other properties into something like itself. The multiplication process involves augmenting the stone so that it may transmute infinite times without losing its power (Coudert 47). Symbols of the *rubedo* phase include: silvery moonlight and dawn light, hot fire, chemical wedding, stained with blood, blushing, poppy of the rock, tyre, basilisk, lion, rose, ruby, red lily, coral, sun, red king, red behind white, pelican, and queen with medallion.

**Poppy:** The deep red colour of the poppy represents the red elixir in the *rubedo* phase. Greek alchemist, Philalethes referred to the elixir as the “red poppy of the rock” (Abraham 152).

**Propagate through the ardour of our mutual love:** Quoted from *Twelve Keys* when Valentine explains the riddle of the stone that is “derived from two things, and one thing, in which is concealed a third thing,” to which he answers that “on account of the ardour of that mutual love which naturally draws them together into one; and as the male and female seed jointly represent that principle of propagation” (Coudert 63).

**Queen in white:** See mercury, bride and groom

**Quintessence:** See fifth element

**Rebis:** Ruland writes of the rebis: “the stone rebis, i.e. Hair” although it is unclear why it is likened to hair (275). For further reading, see hermaphrodite.

**Red beneath white:** Literally, the *rubedo* phase, elixir, stone, beyond the *albedo* phase. Bacon writes in the *Mirror*: “be assured that in that whiteness, redness is hidden” (ch. VI).

**Red coral:** A symbol for the red stone growing out of the mercurial waters (Abraham 47). Coral contains properties of all elements, as Paracelsus explains, “it grows in the sea, out of the nature of the water and the air, into the form of wood or a shrub; it hardens in the air, and is not capable of being destroyed in fire” (38).

**Red man:** See sulphur, bride and groom

**Rose (red, white):** As with many symbols, the red rose signifies the stone in the *rubedo* phase, while the white stone symbolizes the pure elixir. They are said to grow in the philosopher's garden when the red and white roses appear in the alembic. The red and white roses also symbolize the red man and the white woman in conjunction (Abraham 173).

**Rotting:** This is the physical manifestation of the putrification occurring in the *nigredo* phase. Ruland explains that it is a form of digestion which occurs in heated moisture (34). It is due to this metaphor that the alembic is considered a grave.

**Rubedo:** See phases

**Ruby:** Yet another symbol for the red stone (Abraham 175; Paracelsus 38).

**Salt:** Added to the mercury-sulphur combination in the early sixteenth century due to the theories of Paracelsus, salt represents the body in the alchemical trinity. It is found in the ashes after the calcination process and is prized for its ability to preserve (Coudert 23-24, 89).

**Sand:** Used as a bath in the alembic in order to achieve a gentle heat (Abraham 177).

**Say-ho:** See hunting calls

**Scorpion:** In *The New Pearl of Great Price* Petrus Bonus writes that according to Avicenna, "the decomposition of a basilisk generates scorpions" (qtd. in Holmyard 144).

**Seed:** Alchemists structured their belief on matter growing from its base form.

Therefore, gold could be grown from the seed of gold, and philosophical mercury generated from the seed of the dragon (mercury) (Abraham 180; Coudert 111).

**Severed head:** See crow, skull

**Skull:** Similar to Mercury's severed hands and wings, the truncated tree, and the decapitated crow, beheading is symbolic of the *nigredo* phase when the matter must suffer a death before it can be purified and reborn (Abraham 21).

**Snowflake:** A symbol for ash which floats uninhibited due to its purity (Abraham 184).

**So-howeh:** See hunting calls

**Sol:** The masculine, philosophical gold, sulphur component of the chemical wedding. Sol is the blood of the green lion, which is the philosophical mercury (Abraham 185; Coudert 29; Martin 22).

***Splendor solis:*** A beautifully illustrated manuscript published 1582 and penned by the pseudonym Solomon Trismosin (Martin 196; Coudert 126). *Splendor Solis* depicts the alchemical process through a series of treatises accompanied by elaborate plates bordered by plants and animals, and illustrating the volatile union of a king and queen.

**Stag:** In alchemy the stag, hart, or deer is the *cervus fugitives*, the ever-fugitive or the fleeing slave (Abraham 32; Ruland 292). It represents the soul in the alchemical trinity which is united with the unicorn in the *Book of Lambspring* (15). In hunting, the stag is sought passionately as a quarry so much so that it is an allegorical figure of courting and Christian pursuits. Chasing the stag becomes an

allegory of the pursuit of the journey in which the hunter and not the stag becomes a hero and a martyr (Thiébaux 57). In some cases the stag and not the hunter becomes the martyr, as is the case with the poem *Cerf Blanc*, in which the stag becomes enchanted by the beauty of a rose bush and is obliviously swarmed by black flies which signify the bodily tortures that purify the soul (148).

**Stephanos:** Stephanos of Alexandria was a popular thinker in the first half of the seventh century. His work *Great and Sacred Art of the Making of Gold* is a beautiful piece of prose with rich metaphors describing the beauty and power of the nature of alchemy (Linden 54; Martin 72-73).

**Sulphur:** The masculine metal in the chemical wedding. It is characterized by hot and dry in opposition to Mercury's cold and wet. Later in the alchemical process it represents the philosophical gold (Abraham 193; Coudert 89).

**Sun:** See sol

**Swan:** The bird that represents the *albedo* phase in the series of hermetic birds (Abraham 196). See peacock colours

**Terra:** See elements – earth

**Toad:** Has the same symbolic function as the dragon or serpent. The toad represents the stone in its poisonous state. Two stories regarding the toad are incorporated into this piece. First, there is a legend according to Albertus that a toad is capable of appraising the value of an emerald through trance (Holmyard 116). The second involves instructions for creating a healing potion by allowing a toad to feed from a woman's milk. The woman will grow sick and die, but her sacrifice will turn the toad's poison into a powerful medicine (Coudert 145).



**Tomb:** See lovers in a grave

**Truncated tree:** The philosopher's stone is seen as a tree. The roots of the four elements support the branches of Mercurius which produce the fruit of the philosopher's stone. During the *nigredo* phase the matter is dismembered (see skull, crow) and a death occurs. In *Splendor Solis* two plates show images of the truncated tree to depict this alchemical process (plate 19 and 22; Abraham 150, 205).

**Unicorn:** The *Book of Lambspring* uses the symbol of the unicorn to represent the masculine spirit of Mercurius (15; Abraham 206). This mythic creature is legendarily powerful and difficult to hunt. In order to hunt it, the unicorn must first be lured into lap of a virgin (Almond 40).

**Ursula:** The she-bear from Greek mythology.

**Victorious warrior:** Metaphor for the stone written by Stephanos, translated by Sherwood Taylor (Holmyard 31).

**Vitriol:** In Valentine's *Azoth* there is an emblem which includes the Latin phrase "*Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*" (visit the interior of the earth and by rectifying find the hidden stone). The result is an acrostic which spells "Vitriol." This term has become a symbol of the philosopher's matter (Abraham 212).

**Water:** See elements

**White Woman:** See mercury, bride and groom

**Zephyr:** See elements – air

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