

CRACK'D POT TRAIL

A MALAZAN TALE OF BAUCHELAIN AND
KORBAL BROACH

STEVEN ERIKSON



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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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Also by Steven Erikson

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“There will always be innocent victims in the pursuit of evil.”

The long years are behind me now. In fact, I have never been older. It comes to a man's career when all of his cautions—all that he has held close and private for fear of damaging his reputation and his ambitions for advancement—all in a single moment lose their constraint. The moment I speak of, or might surmise, arrives the day—or more accurately, the first chime after midnight—when one realizes that further advancement is impossible. Indeed, that caution never did a thing to augment success because success never came to pass. Resolved I may be that mine was a life gustily pursued, richly and admirably attained and so forth, but the resolution is a murky one nonetheless. Failure wears many guises, and I have worn them all.

The sun's gilded gift enlivens this airy repose, as I sit, an old man smelling of oil and incense, scratching with this worn quill whilst the garden whispers on all sides and the nightingales crouch mute on fruit-heavy branches. Oh, have I waited too long? Bones ache, twinges abound, my wives eye me from the shadows of the colonnade with black-tipped tongues poking out from painted mouth, and in the adjudicator's office the water-clock dollops measured patience like the smacking of lips.

Well I recall the glories of the holy cities, when in disguise I knelt before veiled tyrants and goodly kissed mendicants of the soul, and in the deserts beyond the crowded streets the leather-faced wanderers of the caravan tracks draw to the day's end and the Gilk guards gather in shady oases and many a time I traveled among them, the adventurer none knew, the poet with the sharp eyes who earned his keep unraveling a thousand tales of ancient days—and days not so ancient, if only they knew.

They withheld nothing, my rapt listeners, for dwelling in a desert makes a man or woman a willing audience to all things be they natural or unnatural; while I, for all the wounds I delivered, for all the words of weeping and the joys and all the sorrows of love and death that passed my tongue, smooth as olives, sweetly grating as figs, I never let a single drop of blood. And the night would draw on, laughter and tears and expostulations and fervent prayers for forgiveness (eyes ashine from languid explorations of the paramour, the silk-drenched beds and the flash of full thigh and bosom) and if the spirits of the sand and the gods of the whirlwinds might flutter in shame and breathless shock—oh no, my friends, see them twist in envy!

My tales, let it be known, sweep the breadth of the world. I have sat with the Toblai in the mountain fastnesses, with the snows drifting to bury the peaks of the longhouses. I have stood on the

high broken shores of the Perish, watching as a floundering ship struggled to reach shelter. I have walked the streets of Malaz City, beneath Mock's brooding shadow, and set eyes upon the Deadhouse itself. Years alone assail a mortal wanderer, for the world is round and to witness it all is to journey without end.

But now see me in this refuge, cooled by the trickling fountain, and the tales I recount upon these crackling sheets of papyrus, they are the heavy fruits awaiting the weary traveler in yonder oasis. Feed then or perish. Life is but a search for gardens and gentle refuge, and here I sit waging the sweetest war, for I shall not die while a single tale remains to be told. Even the gods must wait spellbound.

Listen then, nightingale, and hold close and sure to your branch. Darkness abides. I am but a chronicler, occasional witness and teller of magical lies in which hide the purest truths. Heed me well for in this particular tale I have my own memory, a garden riotous and overgrown yet, dare I be so bold, rich in its fecundity, from which I now spit these gleaming seeds. This is a story of the Nehemot and of their stern hunters, and too it is a tale of pilgrims and poets, and of me, Avas Didion Flicke, witness to it all.

There on the pilgrim route across the Great Dry, twenty-two days and twenty-three nights in a true season from the Gates of Nowhere to the Shrine of the Indifferent God, the pilgrim route known to all as Cracked Pot Trail. We begin with the wonder of chance that should gather in one place and at one time such a host of travelers, twenty-three days beyond the Gate. And too the curse of mischance, though the season was unruly and not at all true. Across the bleak wastes the wells were dry, the springs mired in foul mud. The camps of the Finders were abandoned, their hearth-ashes cold. Our twenty-third day, yet we still had far to go.

Chance for this gathering. Mischance for the straits these travelers now found themselves in. And the tale begins on this night, in a circle round a fire.

What is a circle but the mapping of each and every soul?

The Travellers Are Described

In this circle let us meet Mister Must Ambertroshin, doctor, footman and carriage driver to the Dantoc Calmpositis. Broad of shoulder and once, perhaps, a soldier in a string of wars, but for him the knowledges have long since been plucked loose. His face is scarred and seamed, his beard a nest of copper and iron. He serves the elderly woman who never leaves the tall carriage, whose face is ever hidden behind the heavy curtains of the windows. As with others here, the Dantoc is on pilgrimage. Wealth yields little succour when the soul spends too freely, and now she would come bowl in hand to beg before the Indifferent God. On this night and for them both, however, benediction is so distant it could well be on the other side of the world.

Mister Must is of that amiable type, a walking satchel of small skills, quick to light his pipe in grave consideration. Each word he speaks is measured as a miser's coin, snapping sharp upon the wooden tabletop so that one counts by sound alone even when numbers are of no interest. By his singular squint people listen to him, suspicious perhaps of his cleverness, his wise secrets. Whiskered and solid, he is everyman's footman, and many fates shall ride upon his shoulders anon.

* * *

The second circle is a jostled one, a detail requiring some explanation. There are two knights among the Nehemothanai, the stern pursuers of the most infamous dread murderers and conjurers Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, and close upon the corpse-strewn trail of these two blackguards are these dangerous men and women, perhaps only days from their quarry. But there is more to their urgency. It is said a mysterious woman leads a vengeful army, also seeking the heads of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach. Where is she? None here know.

Tulgord Vise has announced himself the Mortal Sword of the Sisters, and he is purity in all but name. His cloak is lined in white fur downy as a maiden's scented garden. The bold enameled helmet covering his stentorian skull gleams like egg-white on a skillet. His coat of polished mail smiles in rippling rows of silver teeth. The pommel of his proud sword is an opal stone any woman could not help but reach out and touch—were she so brave, so bold.

His visage glows with revelation, his eyes are the nuggets of a man with a secret hoard none could hope to find. All evil he has seen has died by his hand. All nobility he has granted by his presence has sired in nine months' time. This is Tulgord Vise, knight and champion of truth in the holy light of

the Sisters.

Wheel now to the other knight, so brash as to intrude upon the Mortal Sword's winsome claim to singular piety. By title, Arpo Relent is a Well Knight, hailing from a distant city that once was pure and true but now, by the bone-knuckled hands of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, a sunken travesty of all that it had once been. So does the Well Knight charge, and so too is announced the very heart of his vow of vengeance.

If blessed white bolsters the mien of Tulgord Vise, it is the gold of the sun to gilt Arpo Relent. Stolid intransigence and the concatenation of comportment between these two knights promise a most uncivil clash to come. Arpo is broad of chest. Sibling swords, long-bladed and scabbarded in black wood filigreed in gold, are mounted one upon each hip, with pommels like golden eggs that could hatch a woman's sigh, and proud indeed of these weapons is Arpo Relent, and most unmindful of sighs is this paragon of chastity, and what might we make of that?

* * *

With the company of three brothers who might well beat up gorillas for merriment, Relish Chante could be destined to live a life unplucked, and had not Tiny Chanter himself stared hard at the haggard of artists and said, clear as the chop of an axe, that any man who deflowered sweet Relish would get cut so clean not even a starving sparrow could find the worm?

In the middle of this stark, blood-draining pronouncement from her biggest brother, Relish had wandered off. She'd heard it a thousand times, after all. But what is known at present and what is to become known are different things. For now, let us look upon this most charmingly witless woman.

Black silk, as all know, is the mourner's vanity, and one is reminded of such flowing tresses when looking upon Relish's hair, and in the frame of such dangerous honey there resides a round face with cheeks blushed like slapped buttocks, and raven feathered lashes slyly offering obsidian eyes to any who would seek to claim them. Fullest of bosom and pouched below the arms, sweetly round of belly and broad-hipped, this description alas betrays a sultry confession, as I am yet to note clothing of any sort.

* * *

But such brothers! Tiny's mother, lost in the forest of Stratem beneath a most terrible storm, found refuge in a cavern, plunging straight into the arms of a cave bear, but in the instant of crushing contact, all notions of culinary anticipation alighting fires in the bear's brain quickly vanished and in their place a sudden expostulation of amorous possibility lifted them both heavenward. Who would knuckle brow at the audacity of such claims, when the offspring of the wrestlers' pact stood solid and true before all witnesses? The giant man's eyes dispensed all confusion regarding the contrariness of his name, for they were beastly small and rimmed in lurid red with all manner of leakage milking the corners. His nose was a snubbed snout glistening at the scent of blood. His teeth had the busyness of rodents. He bore the muscles of three men misaligned upon his ursine frame and hair sprouted from

unlikely places to match the unlikely cunning of the words trickled out from between curling lips.

His brothers held him in much terror, but in this detail's veracity one must roll in a bed of salt given the malice of their regards upon the turn of Tiny's montane back. Midge Chanter was twin to Flea Chanter, both being the get of their mother's misadventures upon a sea strand where walruses warred in the mating season and she had the tusk-gouged scars to prove it. Such origins are beyond argument, lest whiskers twitch and malodorous weights heave upward and close in deadly lung. Unlike Tiny and his beastly cloak, Midge and Flea wore with brazen pride the hides of their forbears.

Other siblings abound, t'was said, but mercy held them at bay with a beater's stick, elsewhere and of their grim tale we must await some other night here at the flames of poetic demise.

* * *

Among the circle of hardened hunters but one remains. Silent as a forest and professional as yeoman, Steck Marynd is no boister of past deeds. Mysteries hide in the crooks of roots, and if eyes glitter from the holes of knots their touch is less than a whisper upon death's own shadow. He is nothing but the man seated before us. His face is flat, his eyes are shallow, his lips thin and his mouth devoid of all depth. His beard is black but sparse, his ears small as an ape's and muscled as a mule as they independently twitch at every whisper and scuff. He chews his words into leather strips that slap wetly at night and dry up like eels in the day's sun.

Upon the back of his shaggy horse he carries a garrison's arsenal, each weapon plain but meticulously clean and oiled. He has journeyed half the world upon the trail of the Nehemoth, yet the crime to spur such zeal he will say nothing.

* * *

We now turn, with some relief, to the true pilgrims and of these there are three distinct groups, each group seeking blessing at a different altar (though in truth and as shall be seen, they are all one and the same). Sages, priests and scholars stiffen their collars to unwelcome contradictions though nevertheless speak true, but as I am none of these worthies, uncollared as it were, that which on the surface makes no sense disturbs me not. Thus, we have a host of parallel tracks all destined to converge.

The Dantoc Calmpositis, eldest among the venerable Dantocs of Reliant City, must remain creature unknown. Suffice it to say she was the first to set out from the Gates of Nowhere and her manservant Mister Must Ambertroshin, seated on the high bench of the carriage, his face shielded by a broad woven hat, uttered his welcome to the other travelers with a thick-volumed nod, and in that generous instant the conveyance and the old woman presumed within it became an island on wheels round which the others clustered like shrikes and gulls, for as everyone knows, no island truly stays in one place. As it crouches upon the sea and sand so too it floats in the mind, as a memory, a dream. We are cast out from it and we yearn to return. The world has run aground, history is a storm, and like the Dantoc Calmpositis, we would all hide in anonymity among the fragrant flowers and virtuous nuts.

precious to none and a stranger to all.

Among the pilgrims seeking the shrine of the Indifferent God is a tall hawk of a man who was quick to offer his name and each time he did so an expectant look came to his vultured eyes, for did we not know him? Twitches would find his narrow face in the roaring blankness of our ignorance, and if our eyes glistened on and dripped from the raven feathered hair draped down the sides of his pressed-in head, well, none of us would dare comment, would we? But this man noted all and scratched and pecked his list of offenders and in the jerking bobs of his rather tiny head anyone near would hear a grackling sound commensurate with the duly irritated; and off he would march, destination certain but unknown, in the manner of a cock exploring an abandoned henhouse.

Well attired and possibly famous and so well comforted by material riches that he could discard them all (for a short time, at least), he proclaimed for himself the task of host among the travelers, taking a proprietary air in the settling of camp at day's end beginning on that first night from the Gates of Nowhere, upon finding the oddly vacated Finder habitations past the old tumulus. He would hold on in the days and nights to come, grasp hold of this role even as his fine coat flew to tatters and swirling feathers waked his every step, and the cockerel eye-glint would sharpen its madness as the impossible solitude persisted.

Clearly, he was a man of sparrow fates. Yet in the interest of fairness, our host was also a man of hidden wounds. Of that I am reasonably certain, and if he knew wealth so too he had once known destitution, and if anonymity now haunted him, once there had roosted infamy. Or at least notoriety.

* * *

Oh, and his name, lest we forget, was Sardic Thew.

* * *

Seeking the shrine of an altogether different Indifferent God, we come at last to the poets and bards. Ahead, in the city of Farrog, waited the Festival of Flowers and Sunny Days, a grand fete that culminated in a contest of poetry and song to award one supremely talented artist the Mantle, proclaiming him or her The Century's Greatest Artist. That this is an annual award, one might hesitantly submit, simply underscores the fickle nature of critics and humans alike.

The world of the artist is a warren maze of weasels, to be sure. Long bodies of black fur snaking underfoot, quick to nip and snick. One must dance for fame, one must pull up skirts or wing out carrousel for an instant's shudder of validation or one more day's respite from the gnawing world. Beneath the delighted smiles and happy nods and clasped forearms and whatnot, resides the grisly truth that there is no audience grand and vast enough to devour them all. No, goes the scurrilous conviction, the audience is in fact made up of five people, four of whom the artist knows well and in so knowing trusts not a single utterance of opinion. And who, pray tell, is that fifth person? That stranger? That arbiter of omnipotent power? No one knows. It is torture.

But one thing is certain. Too many artists for one person. Therefore, every poet and every painter

and every bard and every sculptor dreams of murder. Just to snap hand downward, grasp hard the squirming snarling thing, and set it among one's foes!

In this respect, the artists so gathered in this fell group of travelers, found in the truth to come an answer to their most fervent prayers. Pity them all.

* * *

But enough commiseration. The poet has made the nest and must squat in it whilst the vermin seeth and swarm up the crack of doubt and into fickle talent's crotch. Look then, upon Calap Roud, the elder statesman of Reliant City's rotundary of artists, each of whom sits perched in precarious perfection well above the guano floor of the cage (oh of course it is gilded). This is Calap's twenty-third journey across the Great Dry of inspiration's perdition, and he is yet to win the Mantle.

Indeed, in his wretchedly long life, he draws close upon the century himself. One might even claim that Calap Roud is the Mantle, though none might leap for joy at the prospect of taking him home even for a fortnight. There is a miserable collection of alchemies available to the wealthy and desperate (and how often do those two thrash limbs entwined in the same rickety bed?) to beat off the three cackling crows of old age, death, and ambition's dusty bowl, and Calap Roud remains a sponge of hope, smelling of almonds and cloves and lizard gall-bladders.

And so with the miracle of elixirs and a disgustingly strong constitution, Calap Roud looks half his age, except for the bitter fury in his eyes. He waits to be discovered (for even in Reliant City his reputation was not one of discovery but of pathetic bullying, backstabbing, sordid underhand graft and of course gaggles of hangers-on of all sexes willing, at least on the surface, to suffer the wriggles of Calap's fickler every now and then; and worse of all, poor Calap knows it's all a fraud). Thus whilst he has stolen a thousand sonnets, scores of epic poems and millions of clever offhanded comments uttered by talented upstarts stupidly within range of his hearing, at his very core he stares mouth open, upon a chasm on all sides, wind howling and buffeting him as he totters on his perch. Where is the golden cage? Where are all the white-headed fools he shat upon? There's nothing down there but more down there going so far down there is no there at all.

Calap Roud has spent his entire albeit modest fortune bribing every judge he could find in Farroy. This was his last chance. He would win the Mantle. He deserved it. Not a single one of the countless vices hunting the weakling artists of the world dragged him down—no, he had slipped free of them all on a blinding road of virtuous living. He was ninety-two years old and this year, he would be discovered!

No alchemies or potions in the world could do much about the fact that, as one grew older and younger, so too one's ears and nose. Calap Roud, as modestly wrinkled as a man in his late forties, had the ears of a veteran rock ape of G'danisban's coliseum and the nose of a probiscus monkey who'd instigated too many tavern brawls. His teeth were so worn down one was reminded of catfish mouths biting at nipples. From his old man's eyes came a leer for every woman, and from his leer came out a worm-like tongue with a head of purple veins.

Object of his lust, more often than not, was to be found in the Nemil beauty sitting languidly upon the other side of the fire (and if temptation burns where else would she be?). Purse Snippet was dancer and orator famous across the breadth of Seven Cities. Need it be even said that such combination of talents was sure to launch spurting enthusiasm among the heavy-breathing multitude known to inhabit cities, towns, villages, hamlets, huts, caves and closets the world over?

Lithe was her smile, warm her midnight hair, supple of tongue her every curvaceous utterance. Purse Snippet was desired by a thousand governors and ten thousand nobles. She had been offered palaces, islands in artificial lakes, entire cities. She had been offered a hundred slaves each trained in the arts of love, to serve her pleasure until age and jealous gods took pleasure away. Lavished with jewels enough to adorn a hundred selfish queens in their dark tombs. Sculptors struggled to render her likeness in marble and bronze, and then committed suicide. Poets fell so far inside their poems of adoration and worship they forgot to eat and died at their garrets. Great warleaders tripped and impaled themselves on their own swords in pursuit of her. Priests foreswore drink and children. Married men surrendered all caution in their secret escapades. Married women delighted in exposing and then murdering their husbands with ridicule and savage exposes.

And none of it was enough to soothe the unreasoning fires crisping black her soul. Purse Snippet knew she was the Thief of Reason. She stole wisdom from the wise and made them fools, but all that she took simply slid like lead dust between her amorously perfected fingers. She was also the Thief of Desire, and lust pursued her like a tidal surge and where it passed other women were left bloodless and lifeless. But with her own desires she was lost in frantic search, unable to alight long on any branch, no matter how inviting it had at first seemed.

So she had found a grey powder that she took in draughts of wine and this powder which had so blissfully taken her away from everything now revealed its true self. It was the Thief of her Freedom.

She would enter the famous shrine of the Indifferent God, seeking the blessing that none other had ever achieved. She believed she could win this, for she intended to dance and sing as she had never before danced and sang. She would steal the indifference from a god. She would.

She could not remember when last she had felt free, but she could not think of anything she wanted more.

Each night, alas, the powder beckoned her.

* * *

Arch rival to Calap Roud was the illimitable, ambitious, inexcusably young Brash Phluster. That he delighted in the old bastard's presence on this journey could hardly be refuted, for Brash so wanted Calap to witness youth's triumph in Farrog. With luck, it would kill him.

Seven years Calap had been defecating on Brash, trying to keep him down on the crusty floor, but Brash was not one to let a rain of guano discourage his destiny. He knew he was brilliant in many things, and where he lacked brilliance he could fill those spaces with bold bluster and entire unfounded arrogance. A sneer was as good as an answer. A writhe of the lip could slice throats across

the room. He eyed Calap as would a wolf eye a dog, appalled at a shared pedigree and determined to tear the sad thing to pieces at the first opportunity.

True talent was found in the successful disguise of genius, and Brash accounted himself a master of disguises. His future was glory, but he would reveal not a single hint, not one that some craggy critic or presumptuous rival might close in on, stoat fangs bared. No, they could dismiss him each and every day for the time being. He would unveil himself in Farrog, and then they would all see. Calap Round that stunning watery-eyed dancer, Purse Snippet, and the Entourage too—

* * *

The Entourage! Whence comes such creatures so eager to abandon all pretense of the sedentary? One envisages haste of blubbering excitement, slippery gleam in the eye, a lapdog's brainless zeal, as a canvas bag is stuffed full of slips and whatnot, with all the grace of a fakir backstage moments before performing before a gouty king. A whirlwind rush through rooms like shrines, and then out!

Pattering feet, a trio, all converging in unsightly gallop quick to feminize into a skip and prance once He Who Is Worshipped is in sight. The Entourage accompanies the Perfect Artist everywhere at gatherings great and small, public and intimate. They build the walls of the formidable, impregnable keep that is the Perfect Artist's ego. They patrol the moat, flinging away all but the sweetest and most defecatory intimations of mortality. They stand sentinel in every postern gate, they gush down every sluice, they are the stained glass to paint rainbows upon their beloved's perfectly turned profile.

But let us not snick and snack overmuch, for each life is a wonder unto itself, and neither contempt nor pity do a soul sound measures of health, lest some issue of envy squeeze free in unexpected public revelation. The object of this breathless admiration must wait for each sweet woman's moment upon the stage in the bull's eye lantern light of our examination.

To begin, we shall name all three and attach to each select obtuberances in aid of future recollection. Sellup, first for no particular reason, has seen twenty-three summers and remembers in excruciating detail four of them, from the moment she first set eyes upon her beloved Perfect Artist to the very present found in this tale. Of her first eighteen years she has no memory whatsoever. Was she born? Did she possess parents? Did they love her? She cannot recall. Brothers? Sisters? Lovers? Offspring? Did she eat? Did she sleep?

Dark brown and springy was her hair, whirling in spirals down upon her shoulders. Singular was her eyebrow yet miraculously independent in its expressions at each end. Her nose, narrow and jutting, bore all the mars of inveterate ill-considered interjection. Her mouth cannot be described for it never ceased moving long enough for an accurate appraisal, but her chin jutted with blurred assurance. Of her body beneath her flowery attire, no knowledge is at hand. Suffice it to say she sat in the saddle well with nary a pinch upon the horse's waist. Sellup of the blurred mouth, then.

Next was Pampera, linguistically challenged in all languages including her native one, hers was the art of simpering, performed in a serried host of mannerisms and transitory parades from pose to pose, each pose held, alas, both an instant too long and never long enough. In the span of one's self settling

into a chair, Pampera could promenade from crosslegged on a silk cushion with elbows upon inside knees and long fingers laced to bridge the weight of her chin (and presumably all the rest above it) to a sudden languorous stretching of one long perfectly moulded leg, flinging back her head with arms rising in rampant stretch to lift and define her savage breasts, before rising to her feet like smoke swinging round with a pivot of her fine hips wheeling into view the barrel cask of her buttocks before pitching down on the divan, hair flowing like tentacles as she propped up her head with one hand whilst the other (hand, not head) endeavoured to reinsert her breasts into the skimpy cups the style and size of which she likely settled upon a month into puberty.

For Pampera, it must be noted, puberty was buried beneath virginity deep in a tomb long sealed by a thick mound of backfill, with the grass growing thick and high and all significance of the hump long lost to the memory of the local herders. Despite this, she was nineteen years old. Her hair, for all its tidal pool titillations, was the hue of honey though tipped with black kohl ink a finger's width at the ends. She had the eyes of a boy's fantasy, when eyes meant something, the two of them being overlarge and balanced just so to hint at warm scented boudoirs wherein things slid from mothering to something other with all the ease of a blinking lid (or two). Sculptors might dream of smoothing out her likeness in golden wax or creamy clay. Painters might long to lash her fineness to canvas or stuccoed wall, if not ceiling. But one could not but suspect the obsession was doomed to be short lived. Can an object of lust prove much too lust-worthy? Just how many poses are possible in the world and how did she come by them all? Why, even in sleep her repose palpitates in propitious perfection. The sculptor, looking upon this, would despair to discover that Pampera is her own sculpture and there was naught to be done to match or hope to improve upon it. Painters might fall into toxic madness seeking to match the tone of her flawless skin and it is to the toxic we will return to precipitate our reminding of dearest Pampera.

Could a poet hope to match her essence in words without an intermission of nausea?

* * *

To return to these three, then, we at last come to Oggle Gush, innocent of all depravity not through inexperience, but through blissful imperviousness to all notions of immorality. A slip of mere sixteen years since the day in wonder her mother issued her forth, as naturally unaware of her pregnancy as she was of the innocence her daughter would so immaculately inherit, Oggle Gush deserves nothing but forgiving accolades from paladins and scoundrels alike (excepting only Great Artists). Ever quick to smile even at the most inappropriate of times, shying like a pup from a master's twitching boot one moment only to cuddle in his lap upon the next, squirming as only a thing of claws, wet nose and knobby limbs can.

Not one of her deeds was ill-meant. Not one of the numerous fatal accidents trailing her could be said upon her threshold. When she sang, as she often did, she could not find a solid key if it was glued to her tongue, but all looked on in damp-eyed adoration—and what, perchance, were all thinking? Was this an echo of personal conceits crushed and abandoned in childhood? Was it the unblinking

boldness of the talentless that triggered reminiscences of childish lavishments? Or was it something
her dramatic earnestness that disengaged some critical faculty of the brain, leaving only sweet
smelling mush?

Oogle Gush, child of wonder and plaything of the Great Artist, all memory of you is sure to remain
immortal and unchanging. As pure as nostalgia, and the cold cruelty with which you were misused, and
but does this not take us to the Great Artist himself, he with the Entourage? But it does indeed.

* * *

Nifty Gum has thrice won the Mantle of the Century's Greatest Artist. His Entourage of three as found
upon the trail across the Great Dry, only a month past numbered six hundred and fifty-four, and if not
for Oogle's well-intentioned housecleaning beneath the deck of the transport barge, why, they'd all
still be with him. As if Oogle knew a thing about boats and whatnot. As if she even understood the
function of hull plugs and drain holes, or whatever those things were called.

He looked taller than he looked, if one can say such a thing and by the sure nods all round, it seemed
that one can. He wore his cloak and measured his stride as if he was a bigger man than he was, and
not one of his even features could be said to be exaggerated yet neither were they refined. In gathered
host they were pleasant on his face, but should one find them neatly severed and arrayed among rivals
on a hawker's bazaar table, why, none would even so much as reach for them, much less buy them—
except, perhaps, as curios of mundanity.

Of talent's measure Nifty Gum had an ample helping, nothing to overflow the brim, yet something,
fire, a wink, a perspicacity for promotion, the brazen swanning of his sweep and flurry in passage
(trailed as ever by his giggling entourage), something or perhaps all these things and more, served
him so well that his renown was as renowned as his songs and poems. Fame feeds itself, a serendipitous
glutton of the moment prescient in publicity.

For such a figure, no exaggeration can be overstated, and the glean of modesty rests in uneasy
thin veneer upon a consummated self-adoration that abides the presumption of profundity with all the
veracity of that which is truly profound. And to this comment my personal failure as a poet has no
bearing whatsoever. Why, I have never viewed words as worthy weapons, having so many others of far
more permanent efficacy at my disposal.

Indeed, as I look upon myself at this fire upon the twenty-third night, I see a young(ish) poet of
modest regard, scant of pate and so casting nothing of the angelic silhouette upon yonder tent wall of
Nifty Gum's cascading curls of thick auburn hair achieve without his giving it a moment's thought, and
the gifted rarely if ever regard their gifts except in admiration, or, more deliciously, of admiration in
witnessing the admiration of others for all that which is of himself, be it voice or word or hair.

No, I am retracted unto myself, as was my wont in those times, the adventurer none knew, a teller of
tales to defy the seam of joinings between those I spun in the Great Dry all those years ago, and the
tale that I spin now.

Lives hang in the balance at every moment, in every instant, for life itself is a balance, b

*sometimes the sky is bright overhead and brilliant with sun and heat and sometimes the sky is dark
with the cold spark of stars dimmed by mistral winds. We see this as the wheel of the heavens, where
such a belief is only our failed imagination, for it is us who wheel, like a beetle clinging to a spinning
ring, and we are what mark the passing of days.*

*I see myself then, younger than I am, younger than I have ever been. This is my tale and it is his tale
both. How can this be?*

But then, what is a soul but the mapping of each and every wheel?

** * **

*Upon such stately musings rests lightly, one hopes, this addendum. On the twenty-third day just past
the grim mottle of travelers came upon a stranger walking alone. Starved and parched, Apto
Canavalian was perhaps in his last moments, and as such might well have met a sudden and final
demise at the hands of the Nehemothanai and pilgrims, but for one salient detail. Through cracked lips
that perhaps only filled out with a steady diet of wine and raw fish, Apto made it known that he was
not a pilgrim of any sort. No, more an adjudicator in spirit if not profession (aspiration
notwithstanding), Apto Canavalian was among the elite of elites in the spectrum of intellectualia,
shaper of paradigms, a prognosticator of popularity in the privileged spheres of passing judgement.
He was, in short, one of the select judges for The Century's Greatest Artist.*

*His mule had died of some dreaded pox. His servant had strangled himself in tragic mishap on
night of private pleasuring and now lay buried in a bog well north of the Great Dry. Apto had made
this journey at his own expense, the invitation from Farrog's mystical organizers sadly lacking in
remuneration, and had nothing left of his stores save one dusty bottle of vinegarish plonk (and, it soon
became known, his dread state of dehydration had more to do with the previous nine bottles than with
a dearth of water).*

*If artists possessed true courage (and this is doubtful) their teeth-bared defense of Apto's life in the
moments following his discovery would do well as admirable proof, but so often in life does one
mistake desperation and self-interest for courage, for in mien both are raw and indeed, appalling.*

*Even venerable Tulgord Vise withdrew before the savage display of barely human snarls. In any
case, the vote had already been concluded.*

** * **

*The night is younger than you might think, and the tale now lies before us, an enormous log
mysterious origins quick to drink flames from the bed of coals, and the fat sizzles and the circle
drawn tight save the Dantoc who remains, as ever, within her carriage.*

*Let us, for convenience, list them once more. Apto Canavalian, newly arrived and perhaps more
pallid than salvation would invite. Calap Roud, an artist with a century of mediocrity lifting him
minuscule heights. Avas Didion Flicker, venerable voice of this modest retelling. Purse Snippe
demure in the sultry flare of flames, her eyes haunted as dying candles. Brash Phluster, destined a*

first to speak in the circle only moments away, sitting like a man on an ant hill, feverish of regard and clammy with sweat. Nifty Gum, redoubtable in his reclination, polished boots gleaming at the ends of his outstretched legs upon which are draped two of his Entourage, Oggle Gush, her lashes brushing every slow blink the precious bulb of Nifty's flower, and Sellup, brow awiggle like a caterpillar on a burning twig, whilst Pampera shifts to a new pose artful in breastly impression upon the side of Nifty's auburn-flowing head and what gurgling promise does that single imprisoned ear detect?

Tiny and Flea and Midge Chanter command the bulwark upon one side of the circle, a pugnacious wall wildly bristling and smelling like a teen-aged boy's bedding, and close to Tiny's scabbed hand sits Relish Chanter, lips smeared in grease and casting hooded wanton but unwanted glances my way. Steck Marynd paces off to her right, ghostly in the faded glow of the hearth. Growl might his stomach but damned if he will soothe it in this company of beasts. Well Knight Arpo Relent sits in the shiver of firelit gold glaring at the Chanters while Tulgord Vise picks at his (own) teeth with the point of a dagger, poised as ever for a cutting remark.

At the last seat is our host, and lest we forget his name, it is suited to muscled sartorial commentary, thus stunning the memory to recollect Sardic Thew, avian in repose, cockerel in assuredness though perhaps somewhat rattled by this point in the proceedings.

Thus, and so well chewed this introduction not a babe would choke upon it, one tremulously hopes.

** * **

The tale begins with sudden words in the light of the fire, the heat laden with watering aroma, and in the gloom beyond three horses shift and snort and the two mules eye them with envy (they look taller than they really are, and those brushed manes are an affront!). The Great Dry is a frost-sheathed wasteland beyond the fiery island, a scrabble of boulders and rocks and stunted shrubs. The carriage creaks with inner motion and perhaps one rheumy eye is pressed to a crack in the curtains, or an eye perched upon dainty hopes cocked in the folded crenellations of a peep-hole.

And of the air itself, dread is palpable and diluvian.

A Recounting of the Twenty-third Night

“But listen! Whose tale is this?” So demanded Brash Phluster, a man who was of the height that made short men despise him on principle. His hair was natty and recalcitrant, but fulsome. He had teeth aligned in a mostly even row, full lips below a closely trimmed moustache and above a closely trimmed beard. It was a mouth inclined to pout, a face commissioned for self-pity, and of his nose nothing will be said.

Declamation ringing in the night air, Brash awaited a challenge but none came. We may list the reasons, as they could be of some significance. Firstly, twenty-three days of desperate deprivation and then horror had wearied us all. Secondly, the pullward weight of necessity was proving heavy indeed at least for the more delicate among us. Thirdly, there was the matter of guilt, a most curious yoke that should probably be examined at length, but then, there is no need. Who, pray tell, is unfamiliar with guilt? In punctuated pointedness, fat snapped upon coals and almost everyone flinched.

“But I need a rest and besides, it’s time for the critical feasting.”

Ah, the critical feasting. I nodded and smiled though none noticed.

Brash wiped his hands on his thighs, shot Purse a glance and then shifted about to make himself more comfortable, before saying, “Ordig’s only claim to artistic genius amounted to a thousand mouldy scrolls and his patron’s cock in hand. Call yourself an artist and you can get away with anything. Of course, as everyone knows, shit’s fertile soil, but for what? That’s the question.”

The fire spat sparks. The smoke gusted and swung round, stinging new sets of eyes.

Brash Phluster’s face, all lit orange and flush and lively, floated like a thing disembodied in the hearth’s light; his charcoal cloak with its silver ringlets shrouded him below the neck, which was probably just as well. That head spouting all its words could just as easily be sitting on a stick, and it was still a wonder that it wasn’t.

“And Aurpan, well, imagine the audacity of his *Accusations of a Guilty Man*. What a heap of tripe. Guilty? Oh, aye. Guilty of being utterly talentless. It’s important—and I know this better than anyone—it’s important to bear in mind the innate denseness of the common people, and their penchant to forgive everything but genius. Aurpan was mercifully immune to such risks, which was why everyone loved him.”

Flea Chanter grunted. “Give that leg a turn, someone.”

Brash was closest to the spit but naturally he made no move. Sighing loudly, Mister Mu

Ambertroshin leaned forward and took hold of the cloth-wrapped handle. The crackling, sizzling haunch was weighty, inexpertly skewered, but he managed it after a few tries. He sat back, glanced round guiltily, but no one met his eyes.

Darkness, the flames' uncertain light and the smoke were all gifts of mercy this night, but still the stomach lowered heavy and truculent. No one was hungry. This cooked meat would serve the morrow on the aching journey through a strangely emptied Great Dry, the twenty-fourth day in which we traveled, felt abandoned by the world, the last left alive, and there was the fear that the Indifferent God was no longer indifferent. Were we the forgotten, the sole survivors of righteous judgement? It was possible, but not, I fear, decided as I eyed the leg over the flames, likely.

"So much for Ordig and Aurpan," said Tulgord Vise. "The question is, who do we eat tomorrow night?"

* * *

Critical feasting being what it is, sated and indeed bloated satisfaction is predicated upon the artist's death at the table, as it were. More precisely, the artist must be dead. Will be dead. Shall be naught else but dead. Limbs lie still and do not lash back. Mouth resides slack and rarely opens in affronted expostulation (or worse, vicious cut the razor's wit, hapless corpses strewn all about). The body moves at the nudge only to fall still once more. Prods elicit nothing. Pokes evoke no twitch. Following a series of these tests, the subject is at last deemed safe to excoriate and rend, de-bone and gut, skin and sundry. Sudden discovery of adoration is permitted, respect acceptable and its proud announcement laudable. Recognition is at last accorded, as in "I recognise that this artist is dead and so finally deserving the accolade of 'genius,' knowing too that whatever value the artist achieved in life is now aspiring to be worth tenfold and more." Critical feasting being what it is.

* * *

Well Knight Arpo Relent was the first to speak on the matter (what matter? Why, this one). There had been desultory discussion of horses and mules, satisfaction not forthcoming. Resources had been pooled and found too shallow. Stomachs were clenching.

"There are too many artists in the world as it is, and that statement is beyond challenge," and to add veracity to the pronouncement's sanctity (since the gaggle of artists had each and all shown signs of sudden alertness), Arpo Relent settled a gauntlet-sheathed hand upon the pommel of one of his swords. The moment in which argument was possible thus passed. "And since we among the Nehemothanai, whose cause is most just and whose need is both dire and pure, so as to speak in the one voice of honourable necessity, since we, then, require our brave and loyal mounts; whilst it is equally plain that the Dantoc's carriage can proceed nowhere without the mules, we are at the last faced with the hard truth of survival."

"You mean we need to eat somebody." So said I at this juncture, not because I was especially dense but speaking in the interest of pith (as one has no doubt already observed in the tale thus far). "Say

plain” has always been my motto.

To my crass brevity Arpo Relent frowned as if in disappointment. What artist asks such a thing? What artist lacks the intellectual subtlety to stroke the kitty of euphemism? When the game shall not be played, fun shall not be had. The nature of ‘fun’ in this particular example? Why, the “fun” of self-justification for murder, of course, and what could be more fun than that?

Tiny Chanter was the first to play, with a tiny grin and a piggy regard for the poor artists who now stood miserable as sheep in a pen watching the axeman cometh. “But which one first, Relent? Fat or skinny? Obnoxious to useless? Ugly to pretty? We need a system of selection is what we need. Flea?”

“Aye,” Flea agreed.

“Midge?”

“Aye,” Midge agreed.

“Relish?”

“I like the one with the shaved head.”

“To eat first?”

“What?”

Tiny glared at me. “I warned you earlier, Flicker.”

At some juncture in discourse with a thug, one comes to the point where any uttered word shall obtain as sole justification for violence. It is not the word itself that matters. It is not even the speaking thereof. Indeed, nothing of the world outside the thick skull and murky matter it contains is at all relevant. There is no cause and no effect. No, what has occurred is the clicking of a gear wheel, winding down to the moment of release. The duration is fixed. The process is irreversible.

Resigned, I waited for Tiny Chanter’s pique to detonate.

Instead, Relish said, “They should tell stories.”

Steck Marynd took this moment to snort, and it was an exquisite snort in that it clearly counted as the first vote on the matter.

Tiny blinked, and blinked again. One could see the tumult of confusion whisk clouds over his brutish visage, and then his grin broadened, frightening away all the clouds. “Flea?”

“Aye.”

“Midge?”

“Aye.”

“Knight Relent, you happy with that?”

“I am ‘Sir’ to you.”

“Was that a ‘yes’?”

“I think it was,” said Flea. “Midge?”

“Oh aye, that was a ‘yes’ all right.”

At this moment Tulgord Vise, Mortal Sword to the Sisters, stepped into the understandable gap between the Nehemothanai and the limpid artists (of which, at this juncture, I blithely count myself one). He blew out his cheeks (his upper ones) and stretched a measured regard upon all those gathered.

including the host whose name momentarily escapes me, Mister Must, Purse Snippet and the Entourage (poor Apto was yet to arrive). One presumes this was meant to establish Tulgord's pre-eminence as the final arbiter in the matter (yes, this matter), but of course he too possessed but a single vote, and so the issue was perhaps, for him, one of moral compass. Clearly, he saw in that moment the necessity of justification, and upon ethical concerns who else but Tulgord Vise could dispense adjudication?

Well, how about the victims?

But the retort is equally quick, to be found in the puerile weaponry all within easy reach of those with nothing to lose and everything to gain. Since when do ethics triumph power? So uneven was the debate no one bothered to troop it out for trampling. Accordingly, Tulgord's posturing was met with all the indifference it deserved, a detail entirely lost on him.

The nightly procession was thus determined, as we artists would have to sing not to be suppressed. Ironically, alas, the very first victim had no tale to attempt at all, for his crime at this moment was the object, with all the terror of a lifetime being picked last in every children's game he ever played, and some memories, as we all know, stay sharp across a lifetime. "Just eat the damned horses!"

But Arpo Relent shook his head. "There is no question of any more votes," he said. "As any one of proper worth would agree, a knight's horse is of far greater value than any poet, bard or sculptor. It is settled. The horses don't get eaten." And he glowered as was his wont following everything he said.

"But that's just—"

It is safe to say that the word this nameless artist intended was "stupid" or "insane" or some other equally delectable and wholly reasonable descriptive. And as added proof when his severed head rolled almost to my feet following the savage slash of Tulgord Vise's blessed sword, the mouth struggled to form its thoughtful completion. Ah, thus did the memory stay sharp.

The first poet, having been killed so succinctly, was butchered and eaten on the eleventh night upon the Great Dry. The sixteenth night saw another follow, as did the twentieth night. Upon the twenty-second night the vote was taken following Arpo's raising of the notion of mid-day meals to keep up one's strength and morale, and so a second artist was sacrificed that night. At that time the ritual of critical feasting began, instigated by a shaky Brash Phluster.

Two more hapless poets, both bards of middling talents, gave the performance of their lives on the night.

At this point, listeners among you, perhaps even you, might raise an objecting hand (not the first one you say? I wasn't paying attention). Thirty-nine days upon the Great Dry? Surely by now, with only a few days away from the ferry landing below the plateau, the need for eating people was past. And of course you would be right, but you see, a certain level of comfort had been achieved. In for the pinch in for a pound, as some sated bastard once said. More relevantly, thirty-nine days was the optimum crossing, and we were far from optimum, at least to begin with. Does this suffice? No, of course it doesn't, but whose tale is this?

Ordig now resided in bellies with a weighty profundity he never achieved in life, while Aurpan

last narrative was technically disconnected and stylistically disjointed, being both raw and overdone. The critical feasting was complete and the artists numbered four, Purse Snippet being given unanimous dispensation, and by the host's judgement sixteen nights remained upon the Great Dry.

While talent with numbers could rarely be counted among the artist's gifts, it was nonetheless clear to all of us sad singers that our time upon this world was fast drawing to a close. Yet with the arrival of dusk this made no less desperate our contests.

* * *

Brash Phluster licked his lips and eyed Apto Canavalian for a long moment, before drawing a deep breath.

"I was saving this original dramatic oratory for the last night in Farrog, but then, could I have a more challenging audience than this one here?" And he laughed, rather badly.

Apto rubbed at his face as if needing to convince himself that this was not a fevered nightmare (it might haunt all professional critics), and I do imagine that, given the option, he would have fled into the wastes at the first opportunity, not that such an opportunity was forthcoming given Steck Maryn and his perpetually cocked crossbow which even now rested lightly on his lap (he'd done with his pacing by this time).

In turn, Brash withdrew his own weapon, a three-string lyre, which he set to tuning, head bent over the instrument and face twisted in concentration. He plucked experimentally, then with flourish, and then experimentally again. Sweat glistened in the furrows of his brow, each bead reflecting the hearth's flames. When those seated began growing restless he nudged one wooden peg one last time and then settled back.

"This is drawn from the Eschologos sequence of Nemil's Redbloom Poets of the Third Century." He licked his lips again. "Not to say I stole anything. Inspired, is what I mean, by those famous poets."

"Who were they again?" Apto asked.

"Famous," Brash retorted, "that's who they were."

"I mean, what were their names?"

"What difference would that make? They sang famous poems!"

"Which ones?"

"It doesn't matter! They were the Redbloom Poets of Nemil! They were famous! They were from the time when bards and poets were actually valued by everyone! Not pushed aside and forgotten!"

"But you've forgotten their names, haven't you?" Apto asked.

"If you never heard of them how would you know if I knew their names or not? I could make up any old names and you'd just nod, being a scholar and all! I'm right, aren't I?"

Calap Roud was shaking his head but there was a delighted glimmer in his eyes. "Young Brash, serves you ill to berate one of the Mantle's judges, don't you think?"

Brash rounded on him. "You don't know their names either!"

"That's true, I don't, but then, I'm not pretending to be inspired by them, am I?"

“Well, you’re about to hear inspiration of the finest kind!”

“What was inspiring you again?” Tiny Chanter asked.

Flea and Midge snorted.

Our host was waving his hands about, and it was finally understood that this manic gesturing was intended to capture our collective attentions. “Gentlemen, please now! The Poet wishes to begin, and each must have his or her turn—”

“What ‘her’?” demanded Brash. “All the women here got dispensations! Why is that? Is it, perhaps because everyone eligible to vote happened to be men? Imagine how succulent—”

“Enough of that!” barked Tulgord Vise. “That’s disgusting!”

Arpo Relent added, “What it is, is proof of the immoral decrepitude of artists. Everyone knows it’s the women who do the eating.”

Moments later, in the ensuing silence, the Well Knight frowned. “What?”

“Best begin, Poet,” said Steck Marynd in a hunter’s growl (and don’t they all?).

A wayward ember spun towards Nifty Gum and all three of his Entourage fought to fling themselves heroically into its path, but it went out before it could reach any of them. They settled back, glowering at each other.

Brash strummed the three strings, and began singing in a flat falsetto.

*“In ages long past
A long time ago
Before any of us were alive
Before kingdoms rose from the dust
There was a king—”*

“Hang on,” said Tiny. “If it was before kingdoms, how could there be a king?”

“You can’t interrupt like that! I’m singing!”

“Why do you think I interrupted?”

“Please,” said the host whose name escapes me again, “let the Poet, er, sing.”

*“There was a king
Who name was ... Gling
Gling of the Nine Rings
That he wore—”*

“On his bling!” Flea sang.

*“That he wore one each day
Of the week—”*

Apto broke into a coughing fit.

“Gling of the Seven Rings

*Was a king whose wife
Had died and sad was his sorrow
For his wife was beloved,
A Queen in her own right.
Her tresses were locks
Flowing down long past
Her shapely shoulders and
Long-haired she was and
Longhair was her name
She who died of grief
Upon the death of their
Daughter and so terrible her grief
She shaved her head and was
Long-haired no longer
And so furious her beloved
Gling that he gathered up
The strands and wove a rope
With which he strangled
Her—oh sorrow!”*

The “oh sorrow” declamation was intended to be echoed by the enraptured audience, and would mark the closure of each stanza. Alas, no one was in a ready state to participate, and isn't it curious how laughter and weeping could be so easily confused?

Savagely, Brash Phluster plucked a string and pressed on.

*“But was the daughter truly dead?
What terrible secret did King Gling
Her father possess
There in his tower
At the very heart
Of the world's greatest kingdom?
But no, he was a king
Without any terrible secrets,
For his daughter had been
Stolen, and lovely she was,
The princess whose name was
... Missingla
And this is her tale known to all*

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