

One

They think they mark her ending here, gathered in the watery day to mourn. It is the place for her, they think, this field of stones in death's domain, the place where she belongs. They cannot know as I know, that she's not here. Not she, nor I, nor even he who speaks her eulogy; not the truth of us, not the best of us.

How could we stand among the tombstones in the long gray day? It is out there we are, yonder in the gold afternoon and green pastures where the laughter of those summer children carries in the soft breeze.

We became the shell of them. Did she know? Does he?

I take such comfort from those young wild children. I live among them and love them with all that I am, celebrate and laugh with them and love them, love them hard.

I'll not mourn for her as they who stand here do. Would I spread my grief on the setting sun, the moon gone over the mountain, the tide returned to sea? I'll not mourn but revel in what was and is and cannot be extenuated or dismissed.

I cannot mourn. I am not here.

I am in the Secret Field, in the corner under the Sorting Tree, sitting in the tall grass of late summer with my back against the tree's rough bark. My horse, named Arthur because he is a king of a beast, slobbers and froths from the green clover he has rooted from the depths of the orchard grass to chomp and slurp with the gusto of the monarch that he is.

It is a cool place where the shadows of the woods edge shelter me from the burn of the August sun. I feel the breeze flow down off Rebel Mountain, down the trail through the boulders where she comes ariding when she comes.

I watch among the boulders, expecting her to burst through and cross the field at gallop, black hair flying wild, one arm waving from the back of her grey hunter, who never runs without thinking himself home on the track.

There, too, I watch, where the thick hedge marks the highest boundary of the mansion's parks, several of them stepping up the sweep of the long rise; from there he might come, flying over the hedge on some splendid mount with a rebel yell and a grin that shines still from this distant place.

It is not him standing thus, black-suited with bare head and troubled eyes. It is not him and it is not her in that box with its atrocious frippery.

I'm expecting them. They'll be here any moment for it is that time of day when obligations have been fulfilled to the satisfaction of those who rule our young lives and the doors have been thrown wide and the horses bridled and mounted bareback. It is that time of day when by unspoken agreement and the natural excitement of young minds we race to keep each other's company.

We race across the afternoon on the bare backs of our mounts in simple joy at the wind in our face and the summer's smells and the expectation of our own congregation.

They'll be along. I have nowhere to go. I can wait.

I watch the corner where she'll soon come riding, the distant hedge where he'll come flying as only he can do. I am at peace.

Arthur does not care. He works at the clover in pure delight, glad to find that which does not grace his own humble pasture and pleases him mightily. He munches with a gentleness surprising, unexpected driven by such enthusiasm. The great upper lip gathers it in to the snick of his teeth and the munch and slobber and blissful roll of soft dark eyes and flicker of his delicate brown ears.

I am grateful for him. He entertains me while I wait. I rushed too quickly along the path in the woods and now I'm early. We could have taken our time, Arthur and I, could have lingered along the way at the fort that Paul and I built so long ago. I could have dismounted to kick my shoes at the brown leaves of years past, lying thick and undisturbed around the masterpiece that was such an endeavor. I could have stood to recall

how Roth had taken off his butler's suit to help us haul the scraps of wood from Paul's barn; how Roth had complained and warned that Mister Harrison would not take kindly to the theft of that which was his, despite Paul's assurances that what belonged to his father so too belonged to him.

But I had not stopped or even let my eyes stray to our crude refuge. There was nothing new about it; no one but Arthur and I traveled this path, unless Paul came down to the rent house on a rare visit to my home.

Most likely it was simple excitement kept me going, letting Arthur gallop at will through the thick woods, knowing it well enough to care not what speed we traveled, knowing when to duck for low-hanging limbs or when to rise to meet the leap over the log across the trail.

I feel excitement easily and for no great purpose in this August of my boyhood. It is, like life, an end in itself.

I watch for them with the sure knowledge that this day will be fulfilled as expected. It is the assurance of the very young, and only some of them. I don't know the value of it, not yet.

Someone speaks the futile language of bereavement. Someone weeps out loud. Someone refuses to see me even as I stand across the grave to examine him for any trace of that long-ago friend.

It surely is not him across the gouged earth in the hopeless afternoon, him who cannot look at me.

Nor is it she or anything that remains of her, within that gaudy box.

If there is an outbound soul who lingers moments more to watch and mourn for the change in us, she makes no wail.

If there is the trace of her joy in the scent of the flowers, a remnant of her love in the rubble of my poor heart, it hasn't found me yet.

If he is something left of Paul and I am something left of that boy who galloped fearless through woods and perilous trail, I invite them. Come, I say, feel the wind in our hair and the lunge of the horse, the joy of the day.

They are less real than those summer children, those wild horsemen of the afternoon: he with the lost eyes and Eve, whose name is spoken in the cloying mist with such finality, as though anyone could put her anywhere she had no wish to be.

I see them weep, I hear their cries. I know they think they bury someone dead. I marvel at how wrong they are, how much they don't know.