

# A Common Night

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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"So it's another one of her sunset poems," the young woman said, managing to make it sound partly like a question and partly like a bold assertion so that Julian could decide for himself which it was. She gave him a neutral look.

He looked past her, out the second story window to the bare tree outside. Snowflakes were falling.

"Next to 'Leaping like Leopards,' this one seems obvious," said another student, the one with short-cropped black hair. Randal. Or was it Roger? Five weeks into the semester, Julian would ordinarily have had their names down by now.

"I mean, the spots are a clue," Randal or Roger continued. "She died at play, Gambolled away Her lease of spotted hours... When I get to those spots, it reminds me of the one we did last week." He flipped pages and read,

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple

Leaping like Leopards to the Sky

Then at the feet of the old Horizon

Laying her spotted Face to die

"That's one thing I like about reading her," Randal said. "Once you've figured out a few of the poems, you sort of have an idea of what she's up to. It's almost fun."

Two or three in the seminar circle laughed at his "almost".

"I just don't see why she has to work death into every other poem," the young woman continued. "She's so *morbid*."

No one said anything. For an unnaturally long time, the students waited for Julian to stick up for Emily Dickinson.

"Well," he said, but then the next word was very difficult to find. He kept staring at the window, at the falling snow. "Well," he said again.

He had stopped sleeping several nights ago-- two or three. He wasn't sure. For weeks, he'd slept fitfully amidst the daily rounds of Home-Hospice-Campus-Hospice-Dinner-Hospice with the kids. Lately he would lie awake all night, listening to the dark, closing his eyes, but never drifting off.

He blinked and looked away from the window. "Death was rather more present in the nineteenth century," he said. "More ordinary, I mean. We tend to hide it away, but death and thoughts of death were more routine."

"But why dwell on it?" the young woman asked.

He looked at the book in his hands. It was full of words, and it was his job now to summon up some more of them, to use Dickinson to explain Dickinson. He could do it. Even after days without sleep, he could do it, but he noticed what a hollow exercise it had become. Whatever he might say next would sound good and satisfying, but it was just a stream of words.

"Let's look at 675 again," he said, and before they had finished turning their pages he recited the first

stanza from memory.

Essential Oils-are wrung-

The Attar from the Rose

Be not expressed by Suns-alone-

It is the gift of Screws-

"There's a lot packed into the eight lines of this poem," he said, "and we've already talked about how it seems to be about the poems themselves. But you can think about this as a wider metaphor, too. Attar isn't expressed by suns. That is, you don't get essential oils, you don't get the essence of reality by waiting around for it. You have to squeeze it out. Getting the essential oils out is tough on the rose, but it's the only way."

"And thinking a lot about death is a way of squeezing," said Randal.

"I can enjoy life without thinking about death all the time," another student said. "I agree with Chrissie. These poems are such downers. I don't like being depressed."

Julian thought of Von Treppl's dialogue with Death. Don't blame me for the anguish you're feeling, Death told the Plowman of Bohemia. Your anguish is your own fault. If you had restrained your love for your wife, you'd be free of sorrow over her death. The greater the love, while you hold it, the greater your pain in the end. Unpleasure follows pleasure.

Anna was not dead, but she was already lost to Julian. He had sought out the old German text when the tumor had overtaken the speech centers of her brain. She still recognized Julian, but she couldn't speak. The bridge of words between them had burned, and there were things that still needed saying, would always need saying. Holding her hand as she lay watching him was not enough.

But he didn't mention The Plowman of Bohemia to the seminar. Why bother? It was all just words. Dickinson, too, just words from the dead. Empty, empty. The more he had studied dead words, the more dead they had become. It was the words of the living that mattered, and those had run out. He didn't know if the dead words of literature would ever have anything to do with him again.

"There's a poem I read last night," Randal said, "that I think fits. It's 1100." He found it and began to read.

Julian's attention drifted to the window again. Was that a cat in the tree? But it was gone, the round head vanishing almost as soon as Julian had made out the shape.

The last Night that She lived

It was a Common Night

Except the Dying-- this to Us

Made Nature different

We noticed smallest things--

Things overlooked before

By this great light upon our Minds

Italicized-- as 'twere.

The young man's voice droned on as the snow fell outside the window. The words blended and fell in on one another and his voice blended and mixed with the voice of the departmental secretary as she was

saying, "Dr. Preston? Excuse me, Dr. Preston?"

Julian looked away from the window. Randal had stopped reading some moments ago, and Julian was aware that he'd gone on staring out the window for some time after the secretary's interruption. The secretary stood in the doorway, as if she had no right to cross the threshold. "Dr. Preston," she said, "there was an emergency call for you." She held a slip of paper.

"Yes," Julian said. It was time. Anna was going. He felt relieved, and then ashamed. "Yes, all right."

Julian's mother-in-law had made the call from the hospice. She would collect Yvonne from school and Nick from day care and meet him.

As he drove out of town toward the hospice, the snow fell thick and fast. It swirled in his headlights and sometimes blew in the same direction that he travelled. In his daze, it seemed that the car was standing still, that the wheels rolled and bumped but somehow didn't carry him forward. He took his foot from the accelerator again and again, tried his brights, though that was worse. He opened his eyes very wide and fought to stay awake and on the road.

There was no other traffic, and it was dark, astonishingly dark for the early afternoon. Why did the hospice have to be a dozen miles out of town? But he knew the answer to that. He understood.

He almost missed the turn-off. The lights of the hospice were just barely visible from the road. The parking lot had not been plowed, and Julian half drove, half sledged to the far corner of the lot, away from the other cars.

When he turned off his lights and killed the engine, the light outside seemed to shift. It was dark, but not too dark to see by. There was a sort of blue-gray glow to the woods that surrounded the parking lot.

Now that he could release it, Julian felt how heavy the burden of staying alert and focused had been. He wanted to melt into his seat and keep on melting. Something gnawed in his stomach, and he realized that he was hungry. Famished. He couldn't remember eating breakfast-- he'd been so busy getting the kids ready for school and day care. Had he eaten lunch?

They'd have something for him inside, if he asked. They were so good at this place, terribly good at noticing, terribly good at being concerned for everyone involved.

He closed his eyes. He should go in. They were waiting for him-- his son, his daughter, his mother-in-law. He wondered about Anna, wondered if his wife had already...

But he'd know in a bit. He'd go in.

Right now, though, he wanted, for just a moment, to rest here, to let all the effort fall away. He could hear the snow falling, hissing gently, gently, a cottony sound...

A bell jangled.

He opened his eyes. The window was open, and snow was blowing into the car.

The bell jangled again. He squinted into the darkness, and he could see that there was an old-fashioned telephone mounted on the tree next to his car. When the bell jangled a third time, he got out of the car to answer it.

"Yes?" he said. "Hello?"

"Julian?" said the tinny voice in the earpiece.

"Anna?"

"Julian?"

"Anna? Is it really you?"

"Julian?" she said, and there was no doubting that it was her.

"Anna! Anna, sweetheart!"

"Julian?"

"Yes, it's me!" he said. "Oh, God, Anna!" He felt weak with relief. He could hardly stand. "It's so good to hear you!"

"Julian?"

"Can't you hear me? I can hear you fine. Anna?"

"Julian?"

"Anna!" he shouted into the mouthpiece.

Only there wasn't any mouthpiece, just a knot hole in the tree that he had wrapped his arms around. An orange glow came and went, and a voice from behind Julian said, "Bad connection?" He turned. He saw nothing but trees.

"*Bad* connections won't do you any good, you know," said the voice. "In this world, who you know is a big part of who you are." Then the orange glow returned, allowing Julian to make out an enormous caterpillar sitting on a tree branch and smoking a long hookah. The glow came from the tobacco burning in the bowl.

"And by the way," the Caterpillar went on, "Who *are* you?"

When Julian didn't answer, the Caterpillar said, "Well, speak up!"

"I'm dreaming," Julian concluded.

"Yes, yes, of course you are," said the Caterpillar. "Or else someone is dreaming you. You can't tell until the very end! But in the meantime, you might be civil."

Julian pinched himself, or dreamed that he pinched himself. The pain felt real enough, and the Caterpillar was still there.

"I'm Julian Preston," he said, giving in. "Professor of English."

"Professor *in* English, you mean," said the Caterpillar.

"*Of* English."

"Don't be rude. I heard you, just a moment ago, profess to be Julian Preston, and you didn't do it in Latin."

"I mean that I teach poetry."

"I'm not surprised," said the Caterpillar. "Poetry has a thing or two to learn. It has more feet than I do and they're terribly difficult to keep track of. 'A was an archer, who shot at a frog; B was a butcher, and had a great dog.' When you say that one, you ought to beat your chest."

"Why?"

"It's written in Pectorals."

"That's not the right term."

"No?"

"No, but at the moment the correct term slips my mind."

"So *you* say. You've only professed *in English* to know poetry. I think you ought to repeat some. Know any Dickinson?"

"Of course," Julian said, and he recited:

Because I could not stop for Toast-

Toast kindly stopped for me-

And brought along a shapely Egg-

And Jam and Juice and Tea.

We chatted long-Toast knows so much

And speaks of all it knows,

Such matters as the Feat of Rhymes

And whether Verse has Toes-

\* \* \*

Then round about began to dance

The Toast as it talked on

Of how each day gets started with

The Yeasting of the Sun-

\* \* \*

Toast passed the Juice, then passed the Tea-

At last Toast passed the Milk-

The Toast went racing by them all

Until at last I spoke-

\* \* \*

Said I-This is all interesting

Or would be if I knew

How it relates to Any Thing

I think or am or do-

\* \* \*

But as I haven't dined as yet

And as you're toasted Bread-

Instead of puzzling out your Thoughts

I'll eat you up instead.

"That is not said right," said the Caterpillar.

"It does sound a *little* off," Julian admitted.

"It is wrong from beginning to end," said the Caterpillar decidedly, "and revealing, too. I expect you forgot to eat breakfast today."

"I may have. I feel as though there are a lot of things I'm forgetting. When I was speaking to my wife a little while ago, I was quite surprised to be hearing from her, but I don't remember *why*."

"Ah, *that*," said the Caterpillar. "Well, it will be clear soon enough. Not that clarity helps."

"I don't follow you."

"I didn't ask you to, did I?" said the Caterpillar. It put the hookah into its mouth and began smoking again. Then it yawned, shook itself, got down from the branch and crawled away over the black carpet of fallen leaves. "You've got to go deeper in to get further out," it said. "That's the nature of the tulgey

wood."

"The tulgey wood?"

"Where you *are*!"

"Where you are!" said another voice, as if in Julian's ear. He turned, but this time he was quite sure that there was nothing before him but the trees.

"And as long as you are," said another nearby voice, "you've got to be somewhere."

"Until you *aren't*," said a third voice, "and sooner or later you won't be."

"Won't be what?" said Julian.

"Whatever you *are*," said the first voice.

"Or anything else, for that matter," said the third.

Julian wasn't sure, but he thought it might be the trees themselves that were speaking to him. They seemed to sort of sway in time with the words.

"I wish I could see you," Julian said. "It's awfully dark."

"Awfully splendidly," said the first voice.

"Awfully wonderfully," said the second.

"Awfully terribly beautifully dark," said the third. "Too dark to see the stars!"

"No stars! How *delightful*!" said the first.

Now Julian was positive—the voices were indeed coming from the trees, and they were swaying as they spoke. Not only did they sway from side to side, but the bare branches moved like arms. One branch bent down and pushed Julian backwards. Before he could protest, another was pushing him in the same direction.

"Careful!" he said. "I can't see where I'm going!"

But the trees showed no sign that they heard him. They kept pushing him toward a part of the forest that was, if anything, darker than where he already was. And as the branches shoved him, the tulgey wood sang in voices that varied as he moved past different trees:

Beautiful Dark in heaven so wide

Through thine emptiness we glide

How to escape you? There's nowhere to hide,

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

\* \* \*

Beau--ootiful Daa--aark!

Beau--ootiful Daa--aark!

Darkness of Nightfall,

Beautiful, beautiful Dark!

\* \* \*

Even in daylight thou seemst to say,

I'm in the shadows, come, come away.

Not long do we tarry, swift ends the day.

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

\* \* \*

Beau-- ootiful Daa-- aark!

Beau-- ootiful Daa-- aark!

Darkness of Nightfall,

Beautiful, beautiful Dark!

\* \* \*

Creep in about us, comforting gloom,

Without your predations, we'd run out of room,

We welcome you, welcome you, welcome you, doom.

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

Dark of the nightfall, beautiful Dark!

\* \* \*

Beau-- ootiful Daa-- aark!

Beau-- ootiful Daa-- aark! br>

Darkness of Nightfall,

Beautiful, beautiful Dark!

"Chorus again!" cried one of the voices, just as Julian found himself in absolute blackness. The branches stopped pushing. All the trees had just begun to repeat the chorus when a very different voice called out, "Time for the judging! He's needed for the judging!"

"Out, out, out, then!" said one of the tree voices while the rest continued to sing. Branches swept him forward again, but not, to Julian's dismay, back into the light. It was as dark as ever when the words faded into the distance:

Darkness of Nightfall,

Beautiful, beautiful Dark!

He realized, suddenly, that the branches were no longer urging him forward, though he'd kept on walking.

Julian stopped.

"You might go a little further," said a voice.

"Contrariwise, you might stop where you are," said a voice much like the first. "It hardly matters to us. *You* be the judge."

"He *is* the judge," said the first.

"I don't suppose," said Julian, "that you would have a light?"

"If you suppose we did, then we may not," said the first voice.

"Contrariwise," said the second, "if you supposed we didn't, we might yet. And if you didn't suppose at all, we could still. That's logic."

Suddenly, the sun was blazing overhead, and Julian found that he was standing on the edge of a cloud. If he only took a step to the left, he'd go plummeting toward the distant ground.

The speakers, not to Julian's surprise at all, turned out to be wearing identical outfits, and stood, each with an arm around the other's neck, a little higher up on the cloud. Julian could see "DUM" embroidered on one of the collars, and "DEE" on the other. Of course, round the back of each collar would be "TWEEDLE."

What did surprise Julian was that Tweedledum and Tweedledee were not fat. In fact, they were almost skeletal.

"Bring on the Ace!" said Tweedledum, and four playing cards entered through a door in the cloud. Two of the cards walked on either side of the Ace of Spades, who was struggling heroically against them.

The fourth card, walking behind, carried a large axe on his shoulder.

"I won't! I won't!" said the struggling Ace. "I positively refuse! Never! Never!"

"What's this about?" said Julian.

"It's about over," said Tweedledee.

The soldier cards dragged the struggling Ace behind a screen that was just short enough to show the axe rise a moment before it fell with a great CHOP!

Three cards emerged from behind the screen and exited.

"What do you think?" said Tweedledum.

"Ghastly!" Julian said.

"Quite," said Tweedledee.

"Contrariwise," said Tweedledum, "it was heroic. But is it the best?"

"The best?"

"That's right," said Tweedledee. "He's only seen one."

"The Deuce! The Deuce!" cried Tweedledum.

Four cards emerged from the door in the cloud. This time, the prisoner was the Deuce of Spades.

"He's not struggling," observed Julian.

"Why should I?" said the Deuce. "The thing to do is accept what's coming. There's nothing to be done, anyway."

The cards went behind the screen. The axe rose and fell with a CHOP!

As the surviving cards left, Tweedledum said, "Well?"

"Horrid!" Julian said.

"I was thinking *philosophical*," said Tweedledee.

"Better than the first?" asked his brother of Julian.

"You're asking me to *compare* them?"

"He's right," said Tweedledee. "He has to see them all before he can decide."

Next was the Trey of Spades. He giggled as he was led toward the screen.

"What's funny about this?" Julian said.

"It won't really happen, you know," the card said. "This is a big cosmic joke. What happens next is an



illusion. Nobody really dies. I'll be right back, you'll see."

The axe rose and fell.

"*Foolish*," said Tweedledee. "There are some advantages to that one."

"They don't last long," observed Tweedledum. "Four's next." He called out, "The Four! The Four!"

The Four of Spades emerged and actually led the way to the screen. He tried to hold himself up, make himself a little taller than his guards. "I give myself willingly," he said. "Let there be a lesson in this. I permit, I invite it, so that you will all remember!"

"*Martyr's death*," Tweedledee said as the axe fell.

"Well I don't think I *will* forget it," Julian said, "or any of the others!"

"You can hardly call it outstanding, in that case," said Tweedledum, and he called for the Five.

The Five of Spades had to be dragged to the screen. He said nothing, looked at no one.

"*Morbid* sort," said Tweedledee a moment in advance of the CHOP!

"He has my sympathy," said Julian.

"But does he have your vote?" asked Tweedledum.

"Yes," said Tweedledee. "Which one wins?"

"I can hardly say that any of them won," said Julian.

"A tie!" said Tweedledum and Tweedledee together.

Tweedledum added, "Wonderful!"

"Blue ribbons for all of them!" said Tweedledee, clapping his bony hands. "How democratic!"

"Well done! Well done!"

"And since we are done," said Julian, "how do we get down?"

"Well," said Tweedledum, "you could jump."

Julian looked over the edge of the cloud. The ground was a very long way down. "Jump?" he said.

"That would be suicide."

"Contrariwise," said Tweedledee, "it could be homicide, with the proper encouragement." And he gave Julian a push, then jumped behind him. Tweedledum followed.

As they fell, Tweedledum said, "Jumping is to Suicide as Pushing is to Homicide."

"How about burning?" said Tweedledee.

"Firecide," said Tweedledum.

"Drowning?"

"Lakecide!"

"Oceancide!"

"Rivercide!"

"Pondcide!"

"Poolcide!"

"Sewercide!"

"Oh, that one's especially good," said Tweedledum.

"Then there's dying in your sleep," said Tweedledee. "That's bedcide."

"In an automobile: Roadcide."

"By falling: cliffcide or mountaincide."

"It's not the falling that kills you," said Tweedledum. "It's the hasty stop at the end."

"Speaking of which," said Tweedledee, "how about leaping from a tall building?"

Tweedledum scratched his head with a skeletal finger. "Give me a hint?"

"What are you likely to meet?"

"The Cidewalk!"

Until then, Julian had been too busy falling to take part in the conversation, but he noticed that although they seemed to be dropping like stones, the ground was not getting any closer. "I wonder," he said, "if perhaps we'll survive."

"We have so far," said Tweedledum.

"Contrariwise," said Tweedledee, "that's not always the best indication." Then he said, "We haven't asked if you like poetry."

"Some poetry," Julian said cautiously. "When there's time for it and my mind isn't quite so occupied with death."

"That's the very time!" said Tweedledum. "What shall we repeat to him? We barely have time for one before we hit, I think."

"The Tiger and the Engineer is the longest," Tweedledee replied. "If we have time for just one, we should make it a long one." And he began to recite.

The void was empty as a pail

Containing only air:

Except the air was absent and

The pail, it wasn't there.

How long this lasted none could say

As none was quite aware.

\* \* \*

The absence finally ceased to be,

It simply couldn't last,

When Something suddenly arrived

From nowhere with no past.

No one was there to measure it,

But it was Something vast.

\* \* \*

The stars bunched into galaxies,

The land cooled and congealed;

The sun shone bright and tartly

Like a lemon that's been peeled,

When two came walking close at hand

Across the cosmic field.

\* \* \*

The Tiger and the Engineer,

Who trod the new-made ground,

Saw absence in the Somethingness:

"There's still not much around!"

They said, "If there were more to this,

We'd find it more profound."

\* \* \*

The Engineer, whose task it was

To supplement Creation,

Began to work, though at his back,

With equal application,

The Tiger stalked to bring his works

To their annihilation.

\* \* \*

Said he, "We need some mountains

To enhance the flat horizon."

The Tiger said she quite agreed,

So Engineer devised 'em.

Then with her massive sweeping tail

The Tiger pulverized 'em.

\* \* \*

"And if there were some trees about,

Now wouldn't that be grand?"

So Engineer arranged for some

To sprout out of the sand.

The Tiger gave each trunk a swat

That no tree could withstand.

\* \* \*

Then for a while the Tiger walked

Most peaceably behind,

While Engineer was raising up

Two things of every kind,

From fish to frogs to chimpanzees,

And then, at last, mankind.

\* \* \*

The Earthly population swelled;

The Tiger was astounded.

"And now we'll dance a merry dance,"

The Engineer expounded,

"To celebrate fecundity

And all that we have founded."

\* \* \*

Hand in paw and paw in hand

They circled as they sang,

"Not long ago was nothing,

Now we've got the whole shebang,

From shoes and ships and sealing wax

To Finland and meringue!"

\* \* \*

"The time has come," the Tiger said,  
"To focus our attention  
On how this crowd will grow and grow  
Without some intervention."  
The Engineer considered this  
With growing apprehension.

\* \* \*

"Why not let them multiply  
And swell and grow forever?  
These recent ones, the hairless apes  
Are marvelously clever.  
They'll entertain us endlessly:  
Just see how they endeavor!"

\* \* \*

And it was true, these human things  
Were good at clever tricks.  
They dressed themselves in ostrich skins,  
Built Taj Mahals with bricks;  
They learned to ski and parachute  
And light cigars with Bics.

\* \* \*

"I'm tempted some," the Tiger said,  
"To do as you suggest,

And let them cover all the globe,

Key Largo to Trieste.

The counter argument is this:

They're easy to digest."

\* \* \*

With her great paw, the Tiger snatched

A recent generation,

Chewed it up and swallowed it,

And said with some elation,

"With claw and tooth I engineer

Creation's cancellation."

\* \* \*

Just what she meant to say by that

Was in a moment clear,

For in a gulp she ate the anti-

Podal hemisphere.

She ate the ground they stood upon;

She ate the Engineer.

\* \* \*

She had swallowed all the Earth,

She took a bite of Mars

And when she finished chewing that

She swallowed up the stars.

The Tiger then was singular,

Which briefly felt bizarre.

\* \* \*

"A Tiger ought to finish what

A Tiger starts to do,"

That's what she said, and bit her tail,

And ate herself up, too.

Thus begins a Universe,

And thus it bids adieu.

On that last word, Tweedledee disappeared, and with him, Tweedledum. In their place was a man in black armor. He wore a helmet in the shape of a horse's head, and in his arms was a large bundle of rags.

"What's that?" said Julian, nodding at the bundle. "A parachute?"

"Perhaps rescue was the wrong word," said the Black Knight. "What I should have said is, 'Here I am, reliably.'"

"Oh," said Julian. "So that's who you are."

As they fell, the wind began to unwind the rags, which weren't rags, really, but one piece of cloth. A shroud.

"Tell me," said Julian. "Tell me why."

"Lots of reasons," said the Knight. "There are poems and songs about it. *You* should know."

"I want your opinion," Julian said. "I want your version."

"Well," said the Knight, "there is a song that I'm particularly fond of. If you'd like to hear it."

"I asked, didn't I?"

"So you did," said the Knight. And he sang:

I met a sickly, sickly man

Upon his bed a-lying:

I tapped him with a two-by-four

And asked why he was dying.

"See here," I said, "I want to know

What is your soul's intention?"

I asked because it mattered, though

I failed to pay attention.

\* \* \*

He said, "I die because the whales  
Who swim the salty waters  
Won't introduce me to their wives,  
Much less unto their daughters.  
And so I die of loneliness  
for love I never knew,  
The floaty whale-ish sort of love  
That might my life renew."

\* \* \*

But I was thinking of a plan  
To dig a hole so deep  
Insomniacs could hurtle down  
And safely fall asleep.  
This hole would open at each end,  
A metaphor for living.  
Distracted thus, I had to shout,  
"What answer were you giving?"

\* \* \*

He coughed a bit, and then he wheezed,  
"I'll tell you if I must,  
The likes of me is never pleased  
To linger here as dust.  
I'm meant for finer things, you know,  
I'm made in God's own image.



I'll live on as a concept, say,  
A quark or line of scrimmage."

\* \* \*

But I was puzzling out a means  
Of earning higher wages  
By building artificial Queens  
For London's daily pages.  
"See here!" I said, "You make me feel  
I'm wasting all my breath!  
Now tell me how it is you die,  
And why life ends in death!"

\* \* \*

He said, "The answer's plain enough,  
You needn't holler so.  
I'll tell you how it is we come  
And why we have to go.  
Life is a rope of broken pearls  
That once was painted green,  
It's carried by a pair of girls  
Who stop sometimes to preen.

\* \* \*

"The butter that they walk upon  
Spews from eternal churns,  
The pearls glow like the pages

Of a novel as it burns.

And so, you see, simplicity

Requires that our lot

Be that we exit, when we must,

With only what we brought."

\* \* \*

For once I followed what he said,

Since I had finished thinking

About a poison that would cure

The ills of too much drinking.

I thanked him much for telling me

His insights into dying.

He said it was a piece of cake,

Then did it without trying.

"I suppose," Julian said, "that's as satisfactory an answer as I'm going to hear."

"I haven't heard any better," said the Knight, "and I've heard them all, believe me." The blowing shroud knocked his helmet slightly askew, but he didn't rearrange it. "Any time you're ready," said the Knight, "you can reach out and grab my hand."

"And if I'm not ready?"

"Then sooner or later," said the Knight, "I'll reach out and grab yours."

The shroud continued to unwind and at last ripped free in the wind. Anna's body, curled up like a baby's, rested in the Black Knight's arms; the fingers of his right hand twined with hers.

Julian reached out to stroke Anna's hair and tuck a flying strand behind her ear. He thought of the end of a different poem, a poem about another woman dying. He'd heard the first lines of it just recently. It ended like this:

We waited while She passed-

It was a narrow time-

Too jostled were Our Souls to speak

At length the notice came.

\* \* \*

She mentioned, and forgot-

Then lightly as a Reed

Bent to the Water, struggled scarce-

Consented, and was dead-

\* \* \*

And We-We placed the Hair-

And drew the Head erect-

And then an awful leisure was

Belief to regulate-

"That's a good one, too," said the Black Knight. Julian hadn't known he was speaking the lines aloud.

"Contrariwise," said Julian, "they're all good. It's not a question of which poems to say. It's a question of saying enough of them enough times."

The Knight was silent for a bit and then said, "I'm not sure I follow you."

"I didn't ask you to, did I?" said Julian.

"Didn't ask me what?" said Anna's mother. She had gotten up to tuck a strand of Anna's hair into place, then returned to her chair next to Yvonne.

Julian's leg tingled. It was falling asleep. He shifted Nick on his lap. "For something to drink," Julian said. "How about some juice? Nick, that sound good to you?"

Nick nodded with his whole body, head and shoulders going in opposite directions. "Apple juice!" "Yvonne?"

His daughter sat very still in her chair, looking at her mother's lifeless face. She had known that her mother was dying. It had been explained to her many times. But it was clear that she didn't know what to do with the event now that it had arrived. She hadn't cried. She hadn't asked any questions.

"Yvonne? Some juice?"

"Okay," she said.

Anna's mother left the viewing room.

Julian took his daughter's hand in his. She didn't respond. Julian followed her gaze to the place where Anna lay.

Julian squeezed Yvonne's hand and sang a single note three times: "Mi, mi, mi."

Yvonne kept staring straight ahead. Julian withdrew his hand, bounced Nick on his knee and sang, Ring around the rosie,

Pockets full of posy,

Ashes, ashes,

We all fall down!

Yvonne looked at him. Julian started the song over, and Nick struggled to get out of his lap. Julian set him down.

"Ashes, ashes," Julian sang, and Nick started to dance. He collapsed on cue, then said, "Do it again!"

"And again and again," Julian promised. And to his daughter, he said, "If you want to, you can help me sing."

Nick sang, "Rosie, rosie!"

Yvonne smiled a little, then stopped smiling.

"If you want," Julian said.

And then he repeated the song, singing it as if it were the song that Nick thought it was, a song about playing on the grass in a circle. But Yvonne was old enough, knew enough now, that she might be able to hear what was really in the words. It was in the words of so many songs. But not enough. New songs were needed all the time, and they needed singing again and again.

You've got to go deeper in, Julian thought, to get further out.

"Ashes, ashes," he sang, "We all fall down."

And on the next verse, his daughter joined in.

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