

The Silt Verses

Chapter IV: Of Lovers, Gods and Beasts

The soft crunch of feet amongst dry leaves.

Carpenter is walking in the woods.

When we hear her speak, she's thoughtful and measured; speaking to her god. Exploring a thought.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

I need to ask you something.

What happened back there in the moonlight - the fishing boat - that wasn't you, was it?

Because for me, you were never truly about that.

Yes, I understand that your lifeblood is water, and water is change just as much as it is death or life, and all things must change.

Yes, there is beauty and finality in the mindless peace of the crawling and chitinous things that are left in the wake of your high tides.

But my eyes would glaze over when I heard Nana Glass speak of these things.

I would sit there in defiant silence with my head bowed as I listened to the Katabasians recite those passages from our sacred texts, the ones which I could not believe in with my whole heart, which I could never whisper to myself in the cradle of moonlight...

...because they were not you as I knew you, my sweet and dangerous river, only some fallible, all-too-human misinterpretation of what you ought to be.

For me, you are stillness. And you are fury.

Back in the reform house, the supervisors would tell us to hold hands as we walked to school, so we didn't lose ourselves in the city.

And we'd scurry in a teetering line of black uniforms up through the city blocks of steel and glass, amidst the endless scaffolds and cranes and the cycling havoc of construction built on devastation, the smug

divinely-branded placards overhead announcing what each new excavation was going to become and how much it would cost to have a home there.

I would dream then, about your waters rising to swallow all of this.

The iron manholes popping open in celebration. The rivets and seams of the world coming loose as you flooded forth.

The sewers and then the streets and smoking towers overflowing with your dark and tempestuous currents, the cries of the hopeless and the damned swelling, and then ebbing, once more as your terrible, final tides swept over them.

All of that wretched, inescapable horror of the life above being swept away and drowned far below.

Silence descending back onto the roads and the cities. A new emptiness.

Becoming a world I could stand to be a part of.

I'm out here in the woods, my dark and lonely river.

I can't see you, but you're everywhere around me.

The ghostly silver birch are the only silhouettes against the flat of the endless mists. They stand out like marker posts at the low tide.

The earth is soft and fluid here, and my boots sink with every step. Your waters truly do extend far beyond their natural territories.

I am perfectly alone here.

I am lightly equipped. A torch, in case I lose my way. A box of matches, in case the torch runs low.

A folding-knife, as ever.

My copy of the Silt Verses, stowed away in a bird-watchers' manual.

I hope that, somehow, the miracle of the fishing boat wasn't really your work.

I hope it wasn't the only truth you wanted to show me.

I'm not sure what I'll do if it was.

At the end of the reading, she falls suddenly silent.

Up ahead, we can hear a pair of raised, bickering voices.

They grow steadily louder as CARPENTER approaches.

CHARITY:

-just wanted to stop and take a photograph.

GARETH:

-We need to get to the springs if we're going to get back to the road before it gets dark. We don't have time for you to stop every five minutes-

CHARITY:

-well, does it matter if we don't make it to the springs?

GARETH:

(Almost a little hurt that she doesn't understand)

But I mapped it as a loop.

We came to see the springs, darling. I don't understand why you-

The couple's voices cut out awkwardly as CARPENTER gets close to them.

GARETH:

(Gruffly)

Afternoon.

CARPENTER:

Hello.

CHARITY:

(Embarrassed)

Hi. Lovely weather.

We hear CARPENTER crunch past them - and then, as their voices recede, they begin to argue again.

GARETH:

-well, do you want to go back? Because we can head back.

Like you say, it doesn't matter-

(Meaningfully)

-even though we mapped it as a loop.

CHARITY:

-I don't want to go back. I just want this to be a nice experience. Not everything needs to be an argument, Gary-

GARETH:

You know what, forget it. Let's keep walking.

Their voices fade entirely.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

The looks of pity on their faces.

"Poor dear. Out here all alone."

Without the yelling and the bickering.

No-one for company.

Do you remember Todd, my river?

For the last two years of the reform home he was my closest companion, during that brief, crowded period of life when connecting with other people seemed so deceptively simple.

I'd learned all of the moves.

You could simply quote the popular films and declare your passion for the popular music and if you drank enough illicit wine together in the dormitories, sooner or later the other foundlings would wrap their arms around you and decide that this was friendship.

Todd must have thought he was being so brave when he finally plucked up the nerve to tell me,

"You know, a lot of the others think we're a couple."

Do they, I said.

"Do you never think about it?" he asked.

I try not to waste my time wondering about what other people think, I told him.

"I mean about us," he said.

I think about you plenty, I said.

Not 'I think about you a lot.' 'I think about you plenty.'

Because even then, young as I was, I knew how words can be used against you.

Todd was already looking so hurt.

He'd led us down to the old bridge in the city park, a place of solitude and running water amongst the smog and the towers, because he knew I loved to walk alone by the running water.

He'd created the perfect conditions for this moment when his great romantic story could begin at last, but for reasons beyond his grasp, I just wasn't allowing it.

He must have thought I was being obtuse.

"You need to talk to me," he said, and angry though he was, he must have thought this was tough love, breaking through my outer shell; really, an act of kindness to confront me like this. "C'mon. Be honest with me. What is this, a religious thing? Something to do with your grandmother?"

Cut and polished fragments of the truth. That was all I'd told anyone.

Even that, it turned out, can be turned against you.

No, I told him. It's nothing to do with my Nana Glass. It's something to do with me.

"You could become a vestal if you wanted to," Todd said, and he said it with a sneer. "Maybe that'd make you happy, becoming a vestal."

I don't want to be a vestal, I told him.

"So what, Mal? You think you don't deserve to be happy? I'm here and I'm telling you that you are. You are so wonderful, so smart, and so...so...you do deserve it!"

That was an intelligent manoeuvre, to try and make me feel grateful for whatever it was that he thought he was offering.

I think I told him, 'Thanks'.

I probably could have said,

'I know that I'm smart. I know that I'm all of these things and more. What does that have to do with you, or you and I?'

I could have made it extremely clear that I had known in my heart, since adolescence and self-awareness came bearing down upon me like a flood, that I didn't want the same things he wanted, and that if I was certain of any part of myself, I could say right now that I never would want them.

But I wasn't certain about myself back then, and I still believed there must be something wrong with me, and even if I had been confident or articulate enough to explain who I was, what I did and didn't want from other people...

...I still don't think I owed him that.

So I was silent.

Todd must have decided I was wavering, because the softness rose in him again as he leant over and gripped my wrist for a calculated second.

He said,
"You're lonely. I know you're lonely, I see you, in the dorms and in the corridors, by yourself. You can't pretend you're not."

With friends like you, Todd, of course I was lonely.

I stayed silent.

I turned, and walked away. Left him there on the bridge without another backwards glance.

It didn't take me long to learn how Todd made sense of the conversation between us; as I heard him tell it to people reliably later on, there was still 'something wrong with me.'

Whatever the supervisors had been trying to teach us about the world and how it really worked, it had failed in my case.

As if faith had anything to do with who I was.

With what I wanted, and didn't want, my life to become.

These are the Silt Verses. And I name our disciples thus, in order of their arrival:

Méabh de Brún

Daisy Bilenkin

Gordon Houston

And B. Narr.

Created by Jon Ware and Muna Hussen

Audio production by Espii Proctor.

This chapter contains scenes of intense body horror. Listener discretion is advised.

For a while, we just listen to her feet, tramping through the woods.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Silence returns to the woods. Time passes on.

I've left my fellow hikers far behind.

It's peaceful out here.

This world is composed of a handful of repeating elements; the crunch of golden leaves, the craning trunks of ghostly white birch, the deepening evening sky.

This is a strange place.

A...tenuous place.

With every step I take, the woods change.

But it's always the same innate patterns, those same elements, recurring and shifting themselves in kaleidoscopic rotation. As if there are only a few trees, and they're coiling in on themselves as I walk.

I wonder if-

CARPENTER:

(Aloud)

Ah - shit!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

I've nearly tripped on something.

An old, rusted wire snare, buried in the long grass, comes up in my boot.

I yank it, hard enough to pull the metal stakes free - then I reach down and lift it up.

The head of the snare is barbed.

The wire is wound like a fisher's lure; scraps of rough cloth or leather, and a single small splinter of bone, have been strung along its length.

There's a little dried blood, a little hair or fur, still clinging to the rim, as if something has been caught in the snare and then carefully removed.

I begin to feel a little uneasy.

This has meaning to it, this little scrap of wire, beyond the obvious.

The bracken is broken ahead. There's a trail leading onwards.

I follow it.

There's a slow creaking.

It grows louder, and louder, as CARPENTER approaches.

She speaks with a growing uncertainty and fear.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Some dull and heavy creature came this way.

It was already caught.

Bleeding from the snare, dragging itself forward, increasingly confused and in pain, unable to find its way, snapping branches and crushing ferns beneath its weight, until it was crawling, finally dragging itself forwards in agony...

...until suddenly the weight was lifted.

I look up, and almost collide.

A great pale body is twisting back and forth in the air before me,
caught and uplifted between the thick birch branches that encircle it.

The elk is rotten. Skinless. Its bleached-bone antlers drooping and
tilting as it swings.

Weeks, or months old.

Things have been eating it from below, and from above.

So it takes a while for me to come to any conclusion, but...

The elk's head is strange. The snout is...somehow wrong. The
dimensions are off. The empty sockets cut oddly into the wrong parts
of the empty face.

Its legs are far too long, and thin. They almost stretch to the ground.

It has no hooves, but rather spindly toes, almost dangling fingers of
bone, encrusted with month-old mud.

Perhaps elk are simply like that in these parts, a small and sensible
voice whispers from just over my shoulder.

*Perhaps not all elk have hooves. You're no zoologist, you don't know
that to a certainty.*

*You don't have any evidence that anything is actually wrong here,
other than a vague and general feeling of unease.*

And perhaps I could even force myself to believe that, until I reach up
and gently swing the carcass around upon its weight, the noose
groaning and creaking as it moves, and I can see the thick
prayer-marks that have been scored into the hide of the beast.

A triangle. Four descending lines. And a circle above, like a radiant
halo.

Not a sign I recognise.

If there is a god haunting this place, I don't think it's mine.

I think I'd like to get out of these woods before the sun goes down.

We hear her get up, and then begin to walk - more quickly.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating, a little more breathlessly, but still sardonically)

Every place I've walked, there've been people like Todd.

Well-meaning petitioners, would-be companions. Lonely and grasping souls who thought they could find their missing meaning in me.

None of them ever did really understand who I was or what I needed.

I have never been more frightened than when I was amongst other people.

I have never felt more alone than when I was amongst other people.

No, my river. Not even now.

(She sighs. She's heard something.)

But you can never quite get away from people, can you?

A moment later, we also hear the approaching voices of CHARITY and GARETH once more.

They still appear to be in heated argument as their voices grow louder.

GARETH:

(Angrily)

There she is again.

CHARITY:

(Trying to placate him)

Okay. I don't think that matters, darling-

GARETH:

I'm going to say something. I want to say something.

CHARITY:

Please don't-

GARETH:

Sometimes you have to take a stand.

CHARITY:

Gareth, please don't-

(Politely, to CARPENTER)

Hello again. Heh, looks like these woods have got us all turned around.

CARPENTER:

(Very brusquely)

I suppose they have. Take care, now. Good afternoon.

GARETH:

(Forcing himself to be polite)

Good afternoon.

We hear CARPENTER'S footsteps as she stalks past them.

It seems, for a moment, as if they're going to let her pass.

Then-

GARETH:

(Exploding just a little)

You should...you should keep your dog on a leash, you know.

Silence as CARPENTER turns.

CARPENTER:

I'm sorry?

CHARITY:

(Trying to cool things down)

It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter-

GARETH strides forward to confront CARPENTER. He's furious, and determined to cause a scene.

GARETH:

(Angrily)

Your dog.

It scared the hell out of my partner, when you came by before.

Growling and snarling like that. If you can't control it, it should be leashed.

CARPENTER:

(With hardening unease)

I don't have a dog.

I didn't see a dog. I didn't hear a dog.

GARETH:

(Spluttering a little)

You don't have a...don't have a...

Of course you have a dog. When you came by before.

CARPENTER:

What did it look like?

GARETH is baffled by this change of course in the conversation.

GARETH:

What are you talking about?

It was your dog, it ran right after you-

CARPENTER:

I don't have a dog, and if anything was running after me, I need to hear about it right now.

GARETH:

This isn't- look, I don't know what you're playing at-

CARPENTER:

(Firmer)

What did the dog look like?

Unexpectedly, CHARITY speaks up.

CHARITY:

(Struggling to find the words)

It was...tall. Long-legged and white. Very long legs. And a strange, um, long snout.

It circled us, it bared its teeth at us, it growled...and then it vanished.

CARPENTER:

And it was following me?

CHARITY:

No.

(Quietly)

No, I don't think it was.

Gareth thought it must have gone after you, because it was gone so quickly, but I don't think that's what I saw.

GARETH:

(Exasperated)

No, you didn't...you don't know what you saw.

She doesn't have her glasses with her, she can barely see where she's going. I have to lead her everywhere.

(Getting furious and upset, to CARPENTER)

It was your dog!

CHARITY:

It ran into the space between the trees.

And it didn't come out again.

CARPENTER:

And you're sure it was a dog?

CHARITY:

I mean, um. What else could it have been?

CARPENTER:

(Very calmly)

Anything else that runs in the forests on four long legs with bared white teeth.

GARETH:

(To CHARITY)

You don't know what you saw. This is ridiculous.

CARPENTER:

(Calmly but decisively)

Yes, it is. We're all in danger and you're wasting my time.

Stop talking.

The sun is setting and these woods are a place you can get lost in. That's a certainty.

Which way is your car?

CHARITY:

It's, um, that way, I think. About an hour and a half's walk.

CARPENTER:
(Incredulously)
An hour and a half?

CHARITY:
(A little sardonically)
We mapped it as a loop.

CARPENTER:
The river road is south-west from here. We need to head that way,
and we need to do it fast.

I've got a friend who's coming to pick me up on the roadside at dusk -
that's going to be quicker than trying to make it to your car.

GARETH:
(Composing himself.)
Look. Look. Steady on. How are we in danger exactly?

CARPENTER:
I think these woods might be sacred to something.

GARETH:
(Confused and a little outraged)
That isn't on the map.

CARPENTER:
(Straining to keep her patience)
No, it wouldn't be on the map-
(Incredulously, losing her patience)
...you're checking the map.

A rustle as GARETH begins to unfurl the map.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
I'm not safe with these people and their inane, restless squabbling. I
don't belong with them.

I will not be safe until I turn from them and stride away through the
ghost-birch woods, and leave them here to the mercy of whatever's
running loose through the trees.

I am going to leave them here.

We hear her take a breath.

And then she makes her decision to do the exact opposite.

CARPENTER:
(Intervening)
Excuse me. Excuse me.

What did you say your names were?

GARETH:
We don't have to tell you that-

CHARITY:
-I'm Charity, and, um, this is Gareth.

GARETH:
(Annoyed)
You didn't have to tell her that.

It's like I'm the only reasonable one out here-

CARPENTER:
(To GARETH, trying one final time)
Gareth. Listen to me, please. Don't talk. Just listen.

I need you to put the map down and come with me, because it's very likely that-

And then we hear something.

A high-pitched, impossibly unpleasant and drawn-out shriek, from somewhere in the depths of the woods.

It's a truly horrible sound.

Silence.

CARPENTER inhales.

Then she turns, and walks away, as quickly as she can.

We can hear her footsteps through the leaves.

CHARITY:
(Growing fainter)
Wh - where is she going?

CARPENTER:
(Calling back)
Catch up or stay behind. It's up to you.

Watch for snares!

CHARITY:
(Faintly)
Hold on!

GARETH:
(Faintly)
Charity!

We hear their footsteps growing closer as they catch up. First CHARITY, then GARETH.

In the dialogue throughout this scene, they're all a little breathless - they're talking while walking fast.

CHARITY:
Did you hear that?

CARPENTER:
(With increasing impatience)
Yes, I heard that.

CHARITY:
Well, what does it mean?

CARPENTER:
(Under her breath)
Nothing good, certainly.

The shriek comes again. Closer.

And, from the other direction, we hear a second, answering shriek.

There's a sudden cracking of branches far in the distance.

GARETH:

Did you see that?

CARPENTER:
Don't stop. Don't look. Walk faster.

Two of them now.

CHARITY:
Well, shouldn't we be running?

CARPENTER:
If we run, they might give chase. This is a good pace. We're brisk,
we're not fleeing.

GARETH:
Who's 'they'? The dogs?

CARPENTER keeps walking.

CARPENTER:
(Unhappily)
They're not dogs.

CHARITY:
You're sure?

CARPENTER:
Yes, I'm sure. Now come on.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
Not quite true.

I wish I could only be certain about the shapes in the distance, slipping
in and out of focus amongst the ghost-birch.

I wish I could deny what I think I saw, out of the corner of my eye.

How their long snouts seem to unfurl when they snarl, twisting jaws
coming in to meet one another like the loop of a noose.

How they're sometimes running on all four long and slender legs.

And sometimes they're dancing, on two.

For a while, we just listen to the sound of feet, crunching upon leaves.

CHARITY had caught up to CARPENTER.

CHARITY:

Do you...know where you're going?

CARPENTER:

Just walking with confidence. But your partner's map didn't seem to be doing much good either.

CHARITY:

I'm sorry. About him.

CARPENTER:

Don't worry about it. You both from the city?

CHARITY:

Yes. But, actually...I grew up near here.

CARPENTER:

Coming back to get married?

CHARITY:

(She makes a gentle noise that very much indicates 'no')

Eh.

We haven't been together all that long. It's been difficult.

(Lightly, but with veiled frustration)

I thought it might be nice to come back and show him where I was from.

CARPENTER:

I don't suppose you remember the fastest way to the road?

CHARITY:

I'm sorry. It's been a long time.

The crunch of feet on leaves.

CARPENTER:

(With a little quiet feeling)

Is it like you remember it? Coming back here?

CHARITY:

(Softly)

It never is, is it?

I can't get a handle on these trees, you know? Everything's so overgrown here.

It's like this place wants you to lose your way.

CARPENTER:

(In agreement - this is very possibly true)

Hm.

They keep walking in silence.

GARETH:

(Suddenly excited)

Look! Up ahead!

Can you see it, Charity? It's a house!

CHARITY:

(Relieved)

Oh, thank goodness.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

We've come to something in the trees.

Salvation, my companions seem to think, and they scurry forward ahead of me with renewed haste and relief combined.

A low hillock peeking up over the trees before us, cleared of birch and bracken, surrounded by drifting pale grass.

And on the top of the hillock stands a grand old house - or something that was a house once, and still wears its face.

The bone-white birch has burst up through the floor, winding its pathways upwards through shattered windows. The falling colonnades are choked with ivy.

This place has thrown itself at the forest, and been impaled upon it.

There's a single glass archway, unbroken, overlooking the central porch.

The empty doorway hangs open, revealing a hall and a staircase within.

GARETH is attempting to take charge. He isn't very good at it.

GARETH:
It's a house.

CARPENTER:
Yes, it is.

GARETH:
(Making up his mind)
All right, come on. We can shelter inside. Barricade the doors. It's elevated terrain.

We can wait it out until dusk.

CARPENTER:
(Uneasily)
I'm not so sure that's a good idea.

CHARITY:
Why not?

CARPENTER:
I came here looking for the haunt of a god. I think this might be it.

GARETH:
I've had enough of this. We're going in. It's elevated terrain.

CARPENTER:
Look, just listen to me-

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
He's no longer capable of listening.

He strides up the hill ahead of us.

He reaches the porch, and presses a hand against the front door to swing it open. He ducks his head in swiftly, looking left and right, like a commando he's heard on the radio serials.

You can just make out the soiled carpet. Musty wallpaper. Golden lamps tarnished and choked with trailing ivy.

Cracks of light through the shuttered windows.

The house, at first sight at least, does appear to be unoccupied.

Silence as GARETH investigates. Then-

GARETH:

(Calling back)

It's all safe. There's nothing in there.

CHARITY:

(Calling to him)

I can't see a thing.

What can you make out in there, darling? Is there a phone?

GARETH:

(Describing his surroundings)

On the wall, but it looks like it's broken.

And...

(With growing uncertainty)

...there's something on the floor.

Huh. Someone's been drawing pictures.

We let that sink in for a moment.

CARPENTER:

(Suddenly)

Get out of the house.

GARETH:

(Almost awe-struck)

It's on the walls, too. On the door-frame...on the stairs.

Trees drawn amongst the ivy.

A black hill and something that walks upon it.

And...under the hill, there's something written.

It says...

There's them that lead, and them that chase.
There's them that lead, and them that chase.
There's them that lead, and them that chase.
(Increasingly frantic)
There's them that lead, and them that chase,
Them that lead, and them that chase-

CHARITY:
Gareth? Darling, I think it might be time to-

CARPENTER:
(To CHARITY, urgently)
You stay where you are.
(To Gareth)
Gareth, are you listening to me?

Leave all of that alone, now.

Come back outside.

GARETH:
(Finally, with almost awe)
Them that lead...and them that chase.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating, with increasing horror)
Gareth turns back towards us.

He smiles, uncertainly, and raises a hand as if to let us know that it's all right, it's quite all right. We don't need to worry about him any more.

There's a faraway expression on his face which is hard to explain.

Like he's realising something.

It's already too late. I can see that now.

His eyes are rolling over white.

His face is growing red.

Then purple, the veins across his forehead and cheeks engorging.

Gareth opens his mouth, as if he wants to speak to us to explain the truth he's realising. But nothing comes out, no sound at all.

His mouth only gapes wider and wider, and he begins swaying back and forth, taking a few uncertain steps, then careening more violently with each new motion, until finally he collides with the plaster of the hallway and drops forwards onto his knees - and that's when he begins to scream.

No, not a scream. Nothing with intelligence or consciousness in it.

This is the mindless bray of a thing that is faced with the agony of its own annihilation, but doesn't understand why or how to stop it.

I put my arm out, instinctively, to block Charity from stepping forwards towards him.

She's crying out his name.

The skin of his palms, as he raises them up to us in a plea for help or comfort...the skin is turning red. Stretching, as his arms distort.

Something is moving up through them.

Pressing up from a hidden place amongst bone and vein, a thick circle of pain pushing up and up, straining through the cracked skin until it finally splits outwards like a flower, and the bloodied, white hooves of bark and birch stretch freely up and out, past his flailing helpless fingers.

Something is beginning to press forwards through his face. Engorging and pressing through his open mouth, twisted horns slicing out through his cheeks on either side.

It's a second face.

An elongated, bone-white elk skull, splitting forwards through the gunge of his bursting cheeks and his nose, those black eyes still set in place and rolling madly behind the streaming flaps of skin, as he bucks and strains, lurching forwards and back, his broken hands clutching at his ruined face-

-and the birch antlers climb and grow overhead, out of the wreckage of his silenced mouth, like trees rising in salute towards the sun.

And suddenly, horribly, we hear the bray.

It's a long, drawn-out shriek, a noise both animal and human, a noise of grotesque, breathy pain.

CHARITY:

(Horried)

Gareth! What the hell - Gareth, NO!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

The elk of birch and bone rolls his two faces back and forth towards, trying to get a look at us.

He's growing taller.

His impossibly long and winnowing legs are groping forwards, the bark cracking beneath the pressure, his bulk steaming and dripping before us - and his fingers claw helplessly around the bloodied hooves that have broken from his palms.

He doesn't know what he is. He doesn't understand. And he's afraid.

He's going to charge us.

From somewhere in the near distance, we hear the shrieking of the dogs.

CARPENTER:

(To CHARITY)

Get up on the roof. Now.

CHARITY:

We can't just-

CARPENTER:

(Furiously)

Now!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

She does as she's told, clambering over the step of my outstretched palms, and I hoist her up onto the cramped roof of the porch.

Her legs kick out, narrowly missing my head, and then she's gone.

I'm left alone on the ground, to make my own way up after her.

The elk of birch and bone is lurching back and forth before me,
clawing at the carpet, his antlers smacking against the confinements
of the hallway.

I take a breath, gaze upwards at - and make the jump.

My fingers claw at the side of the porch roof, and find purchase.

I writhe furiously upwards, lifting my legs in desperation-

-and I swear I can feel the tips of the antlers passing just beneath my
kicking feet, as the colossal shape that was Gareth rampages forward,
out of the old house, down the hill.

Up on the roof, I turn back to look...

...and wish I hadn't.

The elk of birch and bone dashes out over the clearing, its feet sinking
into the soil -

-and it freezes.

Because the snare-dogs are closing in, all around it.

Three of them now.

And taller, upon their winnowing and tree-like legs.

Less dog-like than they were before.

As they charge, their faces split down the centre. Two long and
winding jaws that close like snares.

The elk bucks and circles. It tosses its head, braying and bellowing in
dumb fear, swinging its antlers back and forth to try and keep the
snapping jaws at bay.

It isn't used to these new, tortured limbs. It isn't sure what to do about
the thick wetland mud that it's sinking slowly into.

It doesn't last long.

The snare-dogs lunge in, one at a time, choosing their moments.

The nooses close around the elk's flesh, tighten for an agonising moment, and then release.

Thick red circlets of blood are developing across its thighs and its shins.

The dogs watch the beast turn, and bellow, and bleed, and turn, and bleed, until its movements weaken and the turning slows. And when the time is right, they converge once more.

From beside me, Charity is silent, her face cupped in her hands, breathing hard.

When the biggest of the dogs settles its spooling mouth around the elk's throat, and tightens, and chokes, splitting the jugular, I hear her gasp, and look away.

I keep watching.

Whatever this is, it's part of the ritual. So it has meaning.

Any of this could be useful to us, for what's coming next.

Once they're finished - and whatever they're doing, they're not eating it, they leave behind what they destroy - the snare-dogs turn, rearing up onto their long hind legs, and scatter once again into the trees.

We're left alone on the porch roof, in the growing dusk, as the mangled carcass of the elk of birch and bone steams and twitches in the grass below.

We listen, as CHARITY's heavy ragged breathing rises.

CHARITY:
Oh no...oh no...oh no...

CARPENTER:
I'm sorry.
(Less patient)
I'm sorry, all right?

CARPENTER:
(Narrating, with frustration)
I need her to stop. I need quiet, and space, to think.

CHARITY:
It's just not...it isn't...

CARPENTER:
(Trying her hardest)
It's better if you don't look at him.

CHARITY:
(Distraught)
What in the world...what in the world...Gareth...

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
She holds her head in her hands. She lifts her head to look at the mangled, steaming carcass laid at the porch entrance.

She puts her head in her hands again.

The body, beneath us, is flowering.

Its antlers and twisted ribcage are winding into the sky like newborn white branches, tugging the weight of the carcass upwards as the birch grows.

Ivy is swarming up and out in every direction from the blood that pools beneath the body.

It's an extraordinary thing to behold.

We're both going to die here, I think.

CHARITY:
(Ragged)
Oh, no...no...no, no, no...

CARPENTER:
I get to my feet, feeling the porch roof creak gently beneath me...

...and that's when I realise something.

Before us is only forest.

But behind us, just visible past the ruined roof of the house, I can see the road, a thin strip of concrete coiling faintly between the trees and the distant river.

Less than a quarter-mile away.

It's almost funny.

We came so close to getting out of here alive.

CHARITY:
(Ragged, almost automatic)
Oh, no...no...no...no...

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
And so we wait.

Me, my companion, her shock and grief and incomprehension, all of us perched on the roof of the old crumbling house in the dusk.

In the growing darkness.

Waiting for something to change.

We hear the dogs, shrieking in the distance.

Silence.

They shriek once more.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
Until, finally, it does.

A long moment of silence - before CHARITY's voice breaks it.

CHARITY:
(Excitedly, but still ragged)
Wh- wait! I think I see something!

CARPENTER:
Where?

CHARITY:
Down on the road. Right there.

It was a long way off.

It's gone now, but I think it was a car, or a van - pulling up.

It must have stopped just behind the treeline.

CARPENTER:

I don't see anything. Are you sure?

CHARITY:

I think so.. It was slowing down.

But - oh - it's such a long way, and those things - I don't know if I can-

CARPENTER:

(Calmly but firmly)

I need you to be sure.

Did you see it?

CHARITY:

Yes. Yes, I think so.

Silence. CARPENTER is gazing out into the darkness, trying to figure out if she can see the lights as well.

CARPENTER:

(Decisively)

To hell with it.

All right. Listen to me. I'm going down there. I'll try and make a run for the road.

CHARITY:

Are you sure-

CARPENTER:

It'll be too dark for anyone to see us up here. If that *is* my friend, I need to get close enough to catch his attention.

If you hear a car horn sound four times in succession, then get down and run for the road, as fast as you can.

If you hear me say anything else, if you hear me scream...then stay up here and wait for dawn.

Maybe it'll make it a difference.

CHARITY:

Okay. Thank you, um-

CARPENTER:

Carpenter. It was...Charity, wasn't it?

CHARITY:

That's right.

CARPENTER:

Nice knowing you, Charity.

All right. Here I go.

Wish me luck.

We hear the wood creak. But then nothing.

CARPENTER is hesitating. She hasn't gone yet.

CHARITY:

What's wrong?

CARPENTER:

(Carefully, the thought rising in her.)

I just thought how impressive it was that you spotted those headlights all the way down on the road.

Since you can't see a thing without your glasses.

A moment's silence - and then CHARITY begins to justify herself, stammering anxiously.

CHARITY:

Oh, that was just exaggerating. You saw how he could be.

(As if hesitating)

-you know, maybe you're right, maybe I got it wrong.

I really can't be sure, it just seemed like...oh, I wish I could be sure!

She trails off.

CARPENTER:

(Calmly but coldly)

Well, now you're just laying it on too thick.

A pregnant beat of silence between them.

When CHARITY next speaks, it's coolly. There's a kind of respect between them both.

The masks are off.

CHARITY:

My vision's always been fine, actually. But he liked it when I forgot my glasses.

It gave him a reason to be firm with me.

CARPENTER:

I did get that impression.

CHARITY:

You're not going to pretend you feel bad for him.

CARPENTER:

Not especially. I feel a little bad for myself.

You'd have let me go to my death.

CHARITY:

It might have been kinder.

You could have gone on thinking there was a chance, right until the end.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Every faith has its lures.

Sweet-faced young acolytes who are sent out into the world, to hand out the flowers, whisper kind enticements, and lead the faithless into the sacrificial grounds.

I was one of them myself once.

I'm staring at another one now.

There's a long silence between them.

CHARITY:

Well, what now? Shall we have a battle of wits to decide what happens next?

CARPENTER:

I'm not all that witty. I was just going to see if I could push you off the roof.

CHARITY laughs heartily.

CHARITY:

Let me take that option off the table, then.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

She slips nimbly down over the edge of the porch roof - and drops.

I get to my feet.

The three snare-dogs are back, waiting patiently beside the flowering elk.

Just sat back on their pale, hairless haunches. Their split faces loll open, tongues dangling from their exposed throats. Perfectly still and silent.

I didn't even hear them coming.

And as Charity strides forward and takes her place beside them, the dogs nuzzle and croon around her, their bodies unwinding upwards around hers.

CHARITY:

Will you join us for another chase? I promise it won't take long.

CARPENTER:

Not what I saw.

CHARITY:

We can wait for you to fall asleep. But then you'll be hurting for longer, when it comes.

CARPENTER:

Oh, I'm sure.

CHARITY:

Step into the chapel. Read what's written upon the walls. You can call a god into you.

CARPENTER:

No, thank you. I'll just settle in here.

The dogs shriek, menacingly.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating, with quiet desperation)

Well, now...what next, my river?

Seems like an anti-climactic end for me.

But I have nothing. No tricks up my sleeve, nowhere left to run.

You've left me with nothing.

And then she realises something.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

...no, that isn't quite true, is it?

I have one torch, its light too faint to reach anyone of use.

I have one battered copy of the Silt Verses.

I have one pack of matches.

And beneath the broken window, I have the mouldering church and its rotting carpets.

Seems like fate.

We hear her fumble with the matches - and then a sudden rush of flame as she lights her copy of the Silt Verses.

CARPENTER:

The pages sear. And catch flame.

CHARITY:

That's going to be a more painful way to die.

CARPENTER:

(Distracted)

Probably.

CHARITY:

I'd like you to reconsider before you do any damage. You've shown nothing but respect for sacred places up to this point.

CARPENTER:

(Distracted)

Yeah - well, I hope I burn your fucking woods to ash.

CHARITY:

Don't do it.

We hear the glass of the window shatter. CARPENTER hefts the flaming book, ready to toss it in.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating, forcefully)

My savage, terrible, lonely river.

If you're capable of listening to me - if you've ever listened to me...

...don't let me become this woman's sacrifice.

Let me become a beacon.

We hear the rush of flames below.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating, calmly)

Would have been embarrassing if it didn't spread.

But it does. Fire rolls up across the moth-eaten carpet and the walls of the hallway below.

She looks pissed.

The snare-dogs are dancing furiously back and forth across the lawns, snarling and howling as their rotten church goes up in flames.

The staircase is alight. The upper rooms are already beginning to glow as the fire takes the second floor.

It feels good. Satisfying.

The smoke or the heat will probably kill me in a little under ten minutes.

The sound of the fire rises.

CHARITY:

(Furious)

Carpenter! You're going to suffer! You hear me? You're going to suffer!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Most likely.

Unless I get lucky, and Faulkner hasn't been waylaid somewhere, and he sees the flames from his waiting place on the road.

And if I don't get lucky...at least I get to die on my own terms.

Alone, and spiteful.

CARPENTER:

(Laughing maniacally)

Hey, Charity! Tell me more about your god!

I want to know whose house I've wrecked!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

She doesn't answer. She's vanished into the darkness.

But a moment later, I hear something else.

And we do, too. We can hear it.

A different, mournful sound. A shriek of anger and sorrow.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

The snare-dogs are crying from somewhere below me. It's a different sound that it was before.

Angry and mournful, as the flames rise above me to the cracked roof.

I turn back towards the darkness, exultant, the heat beginning - and that's when I understand the source of their frustration.

Hope stirs in me.

There's a pair of headlights, out on the distant road below, flickering into life.

It's Faulkner. It has to be.

I've been seen.

The incredibly faint sound of an engine starting up, and the headlights turn and wheel in our direction.

He's going off-road.

Rolling uncertainly through the trees towards us.

CARPENTER:

(Hysterical with excitement)

Yes, you wonderful bastard! Yes, yes, over here!

All right. All right, now. You just need to keep driving.

Don't slow down. Don't slow down.

We hear the sound of a car, approaching fast.

Then slowing down.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

No, don't slow down, don't - shit.

(Frustrated, weary)

Nobody listens to me.

FAULKNER:

(Distantly)

Carpenter? Sister Carpenter?

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

The van is rolling up through the grass. It's slowing down. I can see the slender white shapes slinking through the trees towards him.

I can't let him stop.

Shit.

I take a few steps back, breathe deeply - and I take the leap from the roof of the porch.

I bend my knees before I hit the ground.

My ankle twists and cracks beneath me all the same.

Pain lances upwards.

And I can hear the sound of pounding feet coming after me.

So I run for those bright headlights, as fast as I can.

We can hear it too now. Pounding feet. The snarling of dogs, growing closer.

CARPENTER runs. We can hear her breathing hard.

CARPENTER:

(Yelling)

Faulkner! Open the door! Open the door!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

I almost make it.

As I stumble up into the passenger seat, I feel teeth snapping down around my calf. Hot, piercing teeth tearing at muscle and flesh.

Weight dragging me back.

Them that chase.

I writhe around, and she's right there. On all fours, her eyes shining bright with excitement, her face shining with blood.

Her face unwinds on either side, splitting in the centre. Her jaws open up like a trap.

I aim right between the middle of those hollow eyes with my free leg.

And I kick.

CHARITY:

(Singsong)

Them that lead, and them that-

We hear CARPENTER's boot connect with flesh.

CHARITY yelps in pain, and we hear CARPENTER slam the door.

CARPENTER:
Drive, you fool! Drive!

We hear the car roaring into action, then speeding away down the country lane.

In the distance, we can hear the sorrowful howling of dogs. And CHARITY's voice, raised amongst them, in a very human shriek.

We hear CARPENTER, breathing heavily, slowly calming down.

She's injured.

FAULKNER:
Bait and flesh - your leg -

Carpenter, can you hear me? Carpenter?

Carpenter?

FAULKNER'S voice becomes muffled as CARPENTER begins to pass out.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating, but increasingly dazed and incoherent)
They always want...answers out of you, don't they?

I never know what to tell them.

Blood running free. In my hands, over my hands.

Runs like a river.

Keep on running.

STINGER.

END OF EPISODE.