

The Wall

Once, when I walked this garden the hedges were trimmed, the trees pruned. But now it's all gone wild again. Weeds fill the flowerbeds. The lawn is overgrown.

In those days perfumed bodies draped in flowing gowns, with smooth white skin and scented hair, floated along the paths chatting. Father would greet them all smiles. On the table were fruit and flowers.

The wall ran around the entire garden, unbroken and impenetrable. The gate was always open, but I'd never once been through it. Looking up through the limbs of the trees embracing overhead I could sometimes see the sun. At night I'd hang stars in the sky and leave them there till morning. The moon passed from unseen horizon to unseen horizon.

The night I ran away a demon whispered through my lips. Mother rushed from the house, throwing her arms around me.

"I won't let you go," she cried.

With a mighty heave I broke loose, shouting, "I am what I am, holy mother. Your chains cannot bind me!"

She collapsed to the ground and sat there sobbing, her hair disheveled, her gown soiled.

I escaped through the gate to the city. From a distance I could see the fantastic lights, smell the fantastic smells. I avoided broad avenues and kept to the side streets and alleys, sloshing through puddles and garbage. Old unshaven men stood in the doorways smoking, as they passed the bottle and called out obscenities. A magician with a tattered coat and top hat met me at the end of an alley, outside a club called Paradise Lost.

"Nothing is free," he told me.

I went in anyway. A party was going on. A woman painted up like Botticelli's Venus took me upstairs and offered me a drink. It was bitter. The room was small and furnished with antiques. We lay down on a canopy bed and took off our clothes. The bed sheets were crumpled at our feet.

"Here is Beauty!" I thought.

She pulled me on top and I penetrated her. The sweat from our bodies mingled.

Then my penis died. When I opened my eyes, I saw that her face had grown old, the smooth skin changed to wrinkles. Her hair had turned gray. Her body was covered with open sores, raw and oozing with pus. I withdrew in disgust.

"Embrace me!" she pleaded.

The woman reached out to touch me. Fingers crumbled from her hand.

I rushed from the room and ran downstairs. Men were lying flat on their faces. Empty glasses and plates with half-eaten food were strewn on the tables.

Just then a man walks through the door. His body is emaciated. He's wearing a hair shirt. His hair and beard are long. He leads the way back upstairs and we enter the room. Venus is still lying on the bed, her body putrid and rotting.

"She's dead," the man says. "And there's nothing I can do."

Outside it was cold. Snow was falling. The streets had turned to ice. In a daze I skated from one end of town to the other. A policeman stopped me and asked who I was.

"I don't know," I replied. "I have forgotten."

He took me to the station, booked me, and the next thing I remember is that I'm standing in front of a judge begging and pleading my case.

"You've got to let me go!" I cried. "I'm innocent!"

The jury found me guilty. The sentence was handed down. I sat in my cell for years, like a monk, gazing at the wall.

Then one day I escaped. I'd made myself invisible. I could pass through bars and walls. I was totally incognito, walking, not leaving a trace.

There was no food. I was hungry. I ran into the forest, a ravenous wolf, looking for something to eat. I made peace with the animals and lived in an old cave. Each day I would come out and kneel before the sun.

"Thank you," I cried, "for the morning!"

When I returned no one remembered me. My hair and beard were long. My face was a different face. My father, too, had been forgotten. The garden had turned to briars. The house had fallen down.

Only the gate remained. It was closed. Iron spikes were rusting in the rain.

Now I sit among the ruins, singing songs my mother once taught me. I look at the world outside through gapes in the crumbling wall.

“Here I am,” I whisper to no one. “Here I am.”