

# UC Riverside

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The Songs That Beckon

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## Abstract

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## Preface

The Civil War thrust death and dying into the face of most of the citizens, both north and south saw massive death, however, it was in the south that the death toll rose the highest. Death and mourning were left for the women that had their fathers, husbands, and brothers taken from them. The people coped in various ways as a response to the massive loss that came from the Civil War. The whole country felt the heavy effect of hundreds of thousands of men dying. Widows had strict fashion guidelines with garments worn for specific periods of time as they moved their way through the formal stages of grief.

Spiritualism took hold of those left to grieve. Young girls would act as conduits between the living and dead. Hauntings and communication with the dead were a way for the living to externalize their sadness and loss. Spiritualism provided consultation and a comfort for the tremendous loss, and a chance to have more time with the loved ones. Perhaps the space between living and dead became more palpable as a result of the massive death in a few short years.

**(1870)**

The air felt heavy and thick. Like a cotton blanket wrapped around your face. The house trapped air in it, this was the same air that they were breathing at the turn of the century. I pulled at the thread hanging from my sleeve. The shirt is too big. They moved about, silent, unnerved, waiting. Waiting for what, I didn't know. They notice me, noticing them. It's best to look at the ground. I don't want to talk right now.

“Do you want some pie, dear?” She was a sweet old lady. She had no idea. None of them did. I look away out the window. I can see the air moving outside. I follow a leaf with my eye as it shakes loose from the tree and shivers down to the ground. It does a little spin before landing. My gaze drifts like that leaf. I can see the dirt collected in the cracks of the wood slats that make up the creaky floor. This cabin is old and shabby, a stark contrast to myself; young and strong.

“He isn't speaking again, poor dear. I wonder what could be the matter?” she says to the young girl. The older one is so wobbly it's amazing that she is still standing. They bend over me as I sit in the wicker chair. Clucking their tongues, shaking their heads. The smaller girl has plump cheeks of youth, and she seemed to be the authoritative guide in this mess.

“I don't know what could be done here, better have Alice take a look” the other one says. There they go again. They have no idea. I knew what was coming, they play this scene over and over again and nothing changes. Here we all are, stuck in a loop never changing, waiting. The older one starts to shuffle off to go fetch Alice. The amazing Alice. She was a bit of a local hero from what I have gathered. Surprisingly easy to talk to. The lead felt heavy in

my pocket. I wonder if they will try and take it from me again. The last time Alice tried she couldn't get her fingers around it. I watched her try to grip with her hand, curl her fingers expertly in an attempt to pluck the hunk of lead. But I wasn't going to let it go. It was a piece of my life that represented who I was and who I still wanted to be. This gnarled and folded lump was a part of me, crumpled on itself from the accelerated force.

“Here she comes now! Abigail get it ready.” She was shuffling through the doorway, waving a handkerchief. It made dust particles dance around in a stream of light and sent a faint smell of lavender through the room. Sure enough there was Alice, a heartbeat behind her. Her imposing frame took up the entirety of the doorway, but soon when my eyes adjusted, I could see that it was just an illusion. She was a small and slight young woman. Her large bow perched atop her golden curls that bounced in the soft light behind her. Framed her pale face and illuminated her. She moved slowly into the room, her eyes fixated on me. Her soft shoes switched along the warm floorboards, shuffling slightly but with deliberate care. She sat across from me, pulling out the chair slowly and quietly with control and precision that felt like a million years. She ran her hand along the top of the backrest while she positions herself directly in front of the table. She maintains eye contact through all of this, as if she were to take her eyes off me I would leap up and sprint out the door. Her eyes imploring me as if I had an answer. My arms fell loose to my sides and my head hangs limp. It seems a good time as any to take a nap.

“Shit. We lost him. Keep trying. Let me know if anything changes.” She pivots and slides away. I feel the depth of her body as it leaves the room. I can hear the soft footfall all around me. There are more now. Have they come to take me? I wonder. I know I am asleep, but I cannot tell if my chest is rising and falling yet. I can hear the faint muffles and noises, so I must be here.

“We work all day to get this far for nothing. I think we should try something else.”

“Well what do you suggest then?” She sounds impatient.

“I don’t know, you’re the expert here. You tell me.”

“Well this isn’t working. We aren’t going to get anywhere with him. We might as well throw him back and get another.”

“Then you throw him back! I’m not going for another. I had to trade too much to get this one and you are ready to just give up. They aren’t easy to come by you know? He was already attached to the land and all.”

“Our time is coming to an end, we can’t keep this up if we don’t have support. People just don’t believe like they use to.” The young girl is making an argument, I can see the older one furrow her brow and frown. She opens her mouth and it takes too long for her to form the words.

“Don’t say that! This is all I have, what am I supposed to do now?” The older one finally says. She hangs her head into her hands. The young girl shrugs and fires back a pre-rehearsed diatribe about her own problems and how she isn’t there for a novelty, that she has a gift and the older one is exploiting it. They argue too much. It wears me out. I can’t listen to this. I wish they would just leave already. But they are not going anywhere. They think they are here, in this room. They are ghosts, specters from my mind. Am I imagining them, or are they vapors blown in from another world? I believe that I have seen them many times, but I do not wish to think about them further. Once I fall asleep, they always disappear. Perhaps if I will myself into a deep sleep they will leave me in peace.

I have that dream again. The one where my boots are stuck in the mud. I am reaching my arms out, fingers splayed, desperately reaching. Leaning forward, almost completely



horizontal. My stuck boots weigh me down as make every effort to raise my knee, my face contorted in the effort. I groan and swear and feel the presence. The presence; something is in the air, a heavy knowing. Although I cannot see it, I know it's there and holds all the answers. I know that if I took my boots off, I could run. But when I look down, my laces are all snakes. If I attempt to remove them, I will be bitten. I return to trying to run, but it gets me nowhere. I stretch and reach and grasp, but to avail. Then I hear it. The music that played when Jackson was mourned, the outpouring of grief, the whole of the confederacy was creeping upon me. The hymn we all sang. I know that tune well. *How blest the righteous when he dies!* It booms and swells as the echo of voices singing in unison grows.

*When sinks a weary soul to rest!  
How mildly beam the closing eyes!  
How gently heaves th'expiring breast!*

It is right behind me. I try to grab my knees and pull up, to get my boots unstuck and I get frantic. The music gets louder. It is getting closer. The panic is rising strong now. It's right in front of me. I can see it, so close, with in my reach. I know I must get to it. I look towards it. It is growing brighter by the second. So much that I cannot see anything else, it is so bright. I throw my arms across my face to shield my eyes and bury my face into the crook of my arm.

The bubble of music pushes me over from behind and I sort of fold on myself but go nowhere, my boots still stuck. I wake up in a diminished panic. I know I am afraid, but I don't know why or how. It goes like this sometimes, and then sometimes it doesn't. These little forgetful moments. The cold sweat that beads up, yet somehow, I am dry as a bone. Then I remember Mary.

Mary had my heart. She cried when I left. She said that it was cruel, but she understood. A man has his honor. And wasn't it honorable? To be the one there on the

front. To fight the fight. To win the war. She didn't know that I was scared. She never knew. She called me her brave soldier. I liked that. I puffed my chest knowing that I had the heart of Mary. She could have had any number of suitors, but she chose me. My triumphant return would make her proud. I would win for her, for everyone.

The chair is stiff beneath my spine. The air is so still, not even a leaf rustled. Where did the breeze go? I must have been asleep forever. The tea kettle is starting to rust, when did that happen? Fragmented thoughts flutter through. I get so disarmed when I have that dream. Why in this cruel world would I have these thoughts of Mary, when she is already gone. It's my own unrest tormenting me, begging me to remember her again. To remember that once I had *this*. Once I was a whole. She fell. I tried to stop her, but she cannot listen. I can recall the lace pattern that she wore on her hair. I can recall the pin that was fastened to her shoulder of her black dress. I can recall that her black attire meant that she thought me dead, because why else would she don the color of mourning. I could see the melancholia that emanated from her, it surrounded her, enveloped her. I can recall all this, but not her face. It is a grief-stricken shadow, grey and waxy. Her black laced veil fluttering behind her, sliding off her head as she fell. The breeze caught it and the delicate lace danced in the wind, twisting and turning before rolling down to my feet. I had to stoop and grip the grass to keep from spinning right off the world.

I could smell the grass so long ago and hear the buzz of the insects. I can hear her scream. I wince my eyes closed at the memory and look away to the side of the room out of sheer dread - as if turning will somehow make it go away; as if it is a scene playing out in front of my eyes and to save myself the pain I can simply turn and not see. This cannot be done with memories, yet somehow I still reflex and cringe. There she slips, down beneath my gaze, and I am left grasping at air and grass and dirt. Arms reaching and flailing, pulling me along just in

time to see past the edge that she has gone over. The water pulls her almost immediately and a smear of blood trail behind her on the rocks. My scream reaches no one. It is carried into the wind and whisked away to some far-reaching distant land, too remote and desolate to notice the despondency carried in that scream. My pain is mine alone. No one is there to bear witness. I sob. What can I do? There is the will that is not my own acting on my behalf shaping my destiny. If only she knew, maybe she wouldn't have been so rash. Maybe she would have heard me. I can no longer play the scene again and again. She lays with the ocean and I am here in the house I built for her. It's hard to find her here now. She used to be everywhere. Small things that act as reminders. I struggle to find any now. Just the needlepoint on the wall and her quilt on the bench by the window. I imagine she would gaze out the window waiting for news from me, hoping for a letter and not a telegraph. She had to have known I would be coming. I was right there behind her when she took the leap. Her grandmother made that black lace. I knew it was treasured.

*(1890's)*

I can smell lavender again, (I do believe the spirits have come back to torment me). The air becomes heavy and I can feel pressure in my inner ear. I can feel time slow. They move in slow motion. It is them. They bring this with them. I wish they would leave. They always come back. Maybe today I feel like talking, if there is something to say (they never ask the right questions). They are lost, they are unwanted and unknowing. I don't want to have to be the one to tell them. I have been living here for so long, and they have just arrived. They still smell of earth. It is not Alice. Some other specter, I do not know them. I am confused as to how a stranger has made their way into my isolated cabin in the woods. The way to town is long and perhaps this hunter has lost their trail and needs shelter for the night. It is not uncommon to have

surprise guests, and for some reason I care not that he has entered while I slept. He lights a small fire in an iron pot. The white smoke is inviting. I watch it curl and stretch. I lean in to get a closer look. I can see patterns. It is thick and opaque. The best ones always are. This white plume carries with it a million tiny faces and animals, a whole zoo springing up before my eyes.

“Look there he is!”

“Quick, get the jar.”

I can see them sitting on the floor at my feet, him and his companion. The short stout woman oofs and ah’s her assent, making a big production of the scramble. She lumbers to her feet and pulls a dark sealed glass jar from a shelf above the wash tub. How did I not see that before? Her dress is an odd color, one I have not seen before. It was not grey, although it looked very similar to a fair grey, but also light and bright like a blue. I wondered where she found the fabric of this color. She moves closer to me I smell the lavender.

“Where did this jar come from?” she asks me. I tell her I don’t know, because this is the truth. That isn’t my jar.

“Try something else, something easier.” the young man says.

“What was your name?” What a silly question. Who does this woman think she is? To come into my home and torment me with queries. I should get a priest and exorcise these demons. I think I have had enough of this woman and her man servant.

“Begone foul beasts! Torment me no longer!” I shout into the air with claw hands and heavy fury. My words do not make the impact I had hoped for. They look to each other for answers. I roll my eyes and look away, praying for them to depart, to leave this land. I wish for them to find peace, find home. I clench my eyes and shut them tight. I pray that this is all just temporary, that when I open my eyes the room will be empty. I do not wish to participate in this

grotesque charade. I will not be a party to this. I make a dramatic plea for my prayers to be answered. The war left many souls, and I will not be one of them. I will not be one.

The young man was the voice of reason. “I don’t know how much more we can do, this looks like the end of the line. Better move on and find another location.” Yes, please do move on I thought. Finally, I will get some peace. I do not know what they were after with their random questions. None of it made any sense. I try to think more about it, but somehow the details get tangled. One thread swings with another and I am trying to pull them apart. Was there two or three? Ah, it doesn’t matter. They are gone. I am alone with my thoughts again. I look out the window. It is almost dawn. I can see the bright abyss of swirling fire rising above the distant hills. I loathe the night. The darkness hides the shadows too well and it can trip you. Unexpected revelations in deception, this woozy and vast, all-consuming isolation and controlling my fate, my mind. Does it have my soul? I cannot ask myself this the answer is too great. I cannot pull this thread.

I do not have the dream with the boots and the music. This time I dream of that time my aunt killed the rooster. We were out by the chicken coop, watching them scratch and peck. The rooster walked around, making sure the hens were safe. He displayed his bright plumage and strolled about confident, vigilant and always watchful. I could see the chickens were carefree, looking for grass and bugs, confident in their rooster. Out came my aunt, tossing scratch, chick-chicking and clucking her tongue. They all came running, the rooster bringing up the rear. I suppose that he pecked her too hard, because when he come up to her behind and took a nice nip, without looking, she reached behind her back and grabbed that rooster’s head. She pulled him around in front of her while turning her hand just so and – WHAP – snapped his neck. She grumbled something along the lines of, ‘that will learn ‘em, you don’t bite me!’ I could not

understand how this would be a lesson learned after mortis, but I wasn't going to argue. We had that rooster for dinner. He was delicious.

***(1900's)***

When the sun rouses me, I am unable to determine the day. I am thankful for the light, but resentful that another day is upon me. I can feel the warmth, that heat comes from the window, but the bright red glow seeps cold breath on my shoulders. I slept in my chair again, that must be why I am so stiff. I flex and stretch my fingers, looking down at the boney crooks and curves of each finger. They look grey. I run my fingers through my hair and breathe a sigh. I must prepare for the day. Better late than never I suppose. Looking around the room, I notice some foxes hanging up in the corner. This strikes me as odd, so I go to investigate. I can see upon closer inspection that they are skins. They feel soft, despite the stiffness. I do not recall where they came from. I can see pelts over by the stove. This is curious. These are real items they did not come from me. I know this cabin has been here for a long time. This land has been here for a long time. Longer than I, longer than any person that has come before me. It is a strange and curious world, and many odd things have happened. I have seen life and death and miracles in my short years. I know that with power and faith, mountains can move. There are many things I know. I know deep in my soul and bones and heart. I know there are many a curious wonder that I have not encountered. I know of man, I know of God. I know the great spirit that inhabits us all. I saw this in the faces of the dying and dead.

Still knowing all this, I am left to ponder how these dead animal skins have made their way into this home. Could a soul or spirit have made these furs appear? This thought incites a

faint smile to my parched lips. This is not something that can happen. A spirit is not flesh like I, it cannot lift and move like I can.

The mystery remains. I must whittle away the hours, this day is here, and I need to fill it with my own self and my own thoughts. I have no one to share the time. To share my self, to warm my bed. I read the good book and find solace. I know it by heart, but still I read. It comforts me. I feel less alone. But when I pull my eyes and gaze away from the words I remember that I am alone. I can feel it wrapping around me, the loneliness. My own words echo inside my mind, bouncing around and repeating unable to make their way out of my mouth. The words and thoughts cannot release if I do not talk. I have no one to talk to. Should I talk into the air? Should I cross that threshold, the one that is so faint but always there. Like a soft groove in the dirt below my feet. I could stoop and touch it if I wanted to but will not look down at it out of fear. Only a mad-man would talk to no one. I guess the loneliness and insanity go hand in hand. All those unfortunate souls wandering, and babbling are not insane, they are incredibly lonely instead and just so happen to let it drag them down into the abyss. They cannot see out the other side, maybe if someone were to just listen to them, they wouldn't have gone mad. Maybe that is where the skins came from. Maybe I am already mad. But no, this is just a passing thought. My own hand and fingers would not betray me. Sure, the eyes and ears can do their own part, can be tricksters. They can betray me. But my hands, they cannot. Anything I can touch, and feel must be real and of this world.

I realize the light that pours into the room does not come from the window. The bright glow lives on the wall! Has installed a bright candle? Who would have come into my home and placed a stout candle, and it appears to be encased in glass? I ponder this and find it very curious. It glows a yellow, or an orange, and shines brighter than any candle I have known. I

stare for a long while, waiting for it to burn out. It never does. I want to go to it and touch it. It is so inviting. But I find that I cannot bring myself to examine it at a close distance and instead choose to stay in my chair. I fall asleep staring at it in wonder. I can see that the dust is covering things. I must hire a maid since my Beth and Samuel ran away to join the north. Maybe I am mad about it, and maybe I resent that now I must pay a white lady to come do the dusting. I know that I can not tend to the house and the land, I must get hired help because Beth ran away with Samuel. The disloyal dogs. I gave them everything and treated them right. I felt them family. I feel betrayed. But I know I have no choice, now. Everything I have ever know, my way of life, has been upheaved. I will put in an inquiry at the general store tomorrow, I will worry about it then.

My mind goes back to Mary, and the great loss I felt. I lost many a brother in the war, but that did not do to me like the loss of Mary. She was so foolish. I never understood why she didn't wait for me to return. I could have made it alright, whatever drove her to that rocky resting place. I didn't stay and watch her turn black. The dead will turn black if left to their own devices. I saw enough of that in battle. I came upon a massacre. There were piles and piles of bodies, a massive lump that from a distance had no discernable form. The smell came first, long before you could see the details. It was overpowering, and distinct. Many a time in my youth I had come upon a carcass of a wild animal long expired and was familiar with the scent of death. But this was a far cry from the smell that came from piles of deceased humans. It was sickeningly sweet, but also pungent. The skin turned black when they died, this was a shock I was not prepared for or familiar with. I came upon my first dead man very early on. He had expired not by gunshot, but by illness. He was alone in the woods, propped up against a tree undisturbed for some time. His skin was as black as night. In my inexperience, I thought him a



negro that had died. I seethed at the thought of a defecting slave, the betrayal to the south. I thought of Beth. I want to punish him for his crime, for thinking that he could kill my brothers and run away free and clear to the aggressors. That he would betray his master and threaten our whole way of life. I thought him an ungrateful savage. He was all alone, and I was alone with him. The feeling came over me that I wanted to mark him. He would forever have my imprint on him. He would be desecrated and disgraced, an outward mark of the hate I had for him. I took out my knife and made my way to his body. I lifted the blade near his bloated face when I saw something familiar in his features. His nose and mouth. That stood out to me, his prominent nose was not broad and flat, but protruding and hooked. This was not a black man! But because of the rotting flesh I am taken aback when I realize that it is one of my comrades. I put my knife away and I am overcome with grief.

*(1930's)*

The smell of boiled meat wakes me. How long have I been asleep? I have trouble keeping track of my waking hours. I fear that I have no control over when I drift into slumber. I am in my bed this time, but not in the covers. I must have drifted off after reading. There is a large man in the room. He is able to build a fire and cook meats, so I know that he is real. He is not a phantom, like the others. I leave the door open sometimes. In this part of the woods, it is common. I am so far removed here. There is a trading post a few miles to the east, but no neighbors. He seems familiar. The shape of him, the heavy musk that follows him. Like moss on the timbers of this forest. It clings to him. He squats near the large heavy pot, covered in skins and furs. He has a large beard and mustache. I can see cold dark eyes behind his overgrown hair that is peeking out under his coon skin hat. He has piles of warmth, I am only in my shirt and pants. How does the slight chill affect him so that he must keep layers upon layers

to keep warm? It is not that cold. I slowly sit up to greet my unexpected visitor. When I get close, I can see that he has already drifted off into a weary slumber. Leaning against a support post, that appears to be supporting more than the roof of my cabin. He is no threat, this man with skins. He is weary from travels, I can read this on his creased face. I lean in to get a better look, perhaps a visit. I have not talked with another soul in a long while. I cannot rouse him. I stroke the fur he is wearing. I can feel the coarse hairs, the individual lines of bristle that are attached the dried flesh. He is real. I can see his mouth begin to droop and hang open. A small snore escapes. He is asleep. I know now why he feels familiar. He resembles John. My fallen comrade. That was a particularly bloody battle. We marched, fearful but charged with the hum of the thrill pulsing in our hearts and ears and minds. We were but one unit, marching into sure death. We had hope. We had each other, our brothers. There to defend. We should fear not, the brotherhood formed in those long cold nights under makeshift shelters, eating by the fire. Drinking, playing our songs. I personally knew at least 200 men willing to lay down and die for not only me, but our country. The plight and struggle for our rights, how we chose to live; to overcome an aggressor not from a foreign invasion but from within our own government. It was a great cause that compelled each of us. It drew us near, to its bosom, a promise of a better life without the tyrannical interference that would force our hand and make our lives what it saw fit instead of how we would choose. Who would refuse? None there on the field. All of us were too eager to enlist, fearing the war would end before we would get our chance to fight.

The cruel reality set in when we marched. We saw what the war was doing to our men. The fate of my own life was questioned, my thoughts going to my own mortality. Would I fight and die as all these men had before me? These thoughts vanish in the smell of gun smoke and powder and blood. Who has time for such thoughts? Too soon I was thrust into the march,

eager and famished for the fight. It was hard to even recall all that had happened in that fits battle I saw. I made it out unscathed but so many were not as lucky as I. Gruesome was the task of collecting the bodies well after dark, having only the moonlight to guide me. The overwhelming smell creeping through the air and stretching for miles. The stench alerting every person within the land that death was stretching its long fingers over us all. Splaying the grip to encircle each and every soul, we were all to succumb to its hold. These memories jumble together yearning to make sense in my mind, to reconcile the visions and the smells and the lonely sense of awe that crept over me as I pulled at stiff rotting flesh, heaving bodies onto my death cart. This was before we dug graves where they fell. This was when we would send the man home for burial. That soon ended when the piles of bodies outnumbered the living set with the task of reconciling the death. I sit now overwhelmed with the flood of memories I would likely never completely forget, I spoke out loud to the weary hunter that laid at my potbelly stove.

“Oh John, what a misstep was made when you failed to strike that man in grey. He got one over on you.” I say offhand. To my surprise the hunter is not really asleep, because he responds.

“You say it is what you will do, but to me I cannot tell how messh down thew shmar” the hunter mutters. His speech is slurred through barely parted lips. More breath and sighs than articulation. He is speaking but does not open his eyes. The effort must be too great, that he cannot manage a glance.

“What say you? I cannot understand.” I manage to ask after waiting for further explanation to his ramblings.

“I am not John,” he says. Well I know this, I was merely speaking out loud, and I tell him so. I find that maybe this hunter is also an incredible drunkard, lost in the haze of whiskey and unable to formulate a proper sentence. No matter, I suppose that a half-drunk hunter beats another night alone with only my thoughts and nightmares. I decide to continue talking about John.

“It was witnessing the death of John during that bloody battle that shock and jolted my innocence. I had never experienced combat before and I was not emotionally prepared. I had seen sick soldiers lay dying, or the wounded cry and gasp. But I had not yet witnessed a man being pierced by a bayonet. After a night of rest, we were advancing on the enemy, having already killed the whole front line, moving onto the second when grey uniforms began to almost appear out of the trees themselves. We were on order to push on, to charge with vigor and take their guns and cannons. It was grueling hand to hand combat pitting man to man with nothing more but arms distance between. You could see the eyes of the man that you were beating and stabbing. I swear I could see the moment that a soul left this one soldiers body. His eyes became small and grey. His mouth open for a scream that would never come. Just silent death escaping his parted lips. I leaned off to the side to avoid it. Like his death escaping would take me with it. The hunter was listening to my tale intently. His face was full of response, with a grimace and furrow. My words were impacting him. I continued on.

“It was in this confusing wretched charge that I saw many of my company killed, including John. I had made friends, and enemies, in those nights, but none as close as John. I thought of him as a brother, with this war bringing us closer together. Being so far from home, we found familiarity and refuge in each other. Exchanging stories and laughs. Laugh for fear we would cry. Now I was a witness to the horrors of war, to this battle that took him. We were

side by side, advancing slowly now to the creek. The enemy camp was just on the other side. John and I were looking forward to taking the rations once the camp was seized. I longed for a tobacco pipe and something else besides hard tack. Maybe John was distracted, maybe he was just not aware. We were creeping through thick underbrush and low-lying branches from the dense trees when that grey coat seemingly came directly from the tree trunk. His bayonet out in front, pointing straight at John. I hollered for him to move, but it was too late. I struck the attacker with the butt of my rifle knocking him to the ground. I dropped to my knees beside my friend. I could only sit there.”

“Many have fallen, not fault of ours,” the hunter slowly said. It was nice that he was trying to comfort and console me. Maybe he knew a friend that had met similar means.

“Oh yes, I agree,” I said “I stayed with him, laid there in the thick grass while waiting for a fellow soldier to carry him off. I would not dig a grave there where he laid, as was the fate of many a soldier. I would see to it that he be taken to a church or hospital for a proper burial.”

“That critter’s gonna jump, just you watch far quarts.... whims ergh, mumph”

“Yes...indeed I will, uh watch” I do not know what to say. This man is far gone, it is clear now. Maybe he has a lonely heart like mine, but not the strong mental constitution required for the hard life.

*(1975)*

I can smell the night blooming jasmine. The aroma is so strong it rouses me from my dream. How long had I been asleep? I did not dream this time; I am thankful for that. My head hurts, the throbbing and pounding sound roaring from within my ears pulsed with my temples. I felt as one might feel after a rousing night of libations and conversations. I miss this the most. I

inhale deeply the pungent sweet smell of the flower. This Jasmine is fragrant only at night. A sweet surrender after the devil beckons me. This smell reminds me of earthly possessions and life going on. It is a reminder that the world turns, and we are flung into it. Pulled against our own will. Reminds me that the night will end. That there will be another sunrise. That this will all be over. I can see the stars out the window. I notice a cloud move over the moon and it casts more shadows. I hear a creak.

The warped wood moans distinctly. It is coming from the window. Ah, I see that the pane is being raised. There is a dark figure, coming through my window! I can see the thieves lunge and fall into a heap at my floor. I look around the room. Where is my rifle? Perhaps I left it in the woodshed. No time, they are rising from the ground. I need to get something. Why will my legs not work? I am not petrified, I am enraged. It is man's right to protect his own. It is a man's right to defend. I can see them move about the perimeter. What would they be after? I am but a poor soldier with no treasure or riches.

"I can't see a thing; do you have a light?" one thief says. Oh yes, the better to see what you will pilfer! The nerve, do they not see my moving about? Do they not know there is another soul in this room?! One fetch a candle from his pack. If I move quick, I do believe I can make it past them. I cannot go through the door I will be spotted for certain. I must go through the open window.

"Here is a candle. Light it up, I will pull out some food" says the other one. How long do they plan to spend in my cabin? I will have to find my rifle. I move slowly in the back of the great room, lost in the shadows. Taking refuge where my phantoms lay. Seeking the darkness, I slink to the window. I make a rustle as my legs slide over. I hold my breath and pause waiting for a sign that I have been heard. I stay crouched beneath the window, waiting for a warning that

they are stirring to investigate. Hearing nothing but chatter between the two, I feel safe rising and going to the woodshed. I creep along the side of the building, groping in the dark. Each step is pained with the effort of quiet footfall. I am exaggerating each movement and keeping muscles tense. I do not know if I have taken a breath. The large looming trees feel to be bending to me, their branches reaching to grasp and brush my skin, as if they bend to a will not of their own. These trees sway in a wind making whispers and secrets of the forgotten. I hear the whispers coming from the forest. I hear the cracking of the ground beneath my feet. The whispers are not words. They are the moans of the long lost, I tell myself.

They are not real, not real as I am. At last I make it to the woodshed. I cannot feel my rifle. I groan. This is too much; to be locked out of home with thieves in the midst and no weapon to defend yourself. How does this happen. Where is my rifle? I cannot think straight. I cannot recall with any detail the last time I held it. It could not have been on the field, but I cannot recall a time that it was in use here in these grounds. How can I be so lost? I look around, hoping an answer will appear. I turn in a circle, eyes scanning all the dark surrounding me. The moonless night is not helping my plight. These whispers seem to grow closer I raise my hands to my ears. It is too distracting. My eyes will work better with my hearing lessened. I know an answer will appear. I will find a way to solve this. I will find what I need, I always do. A solution will present itself, it has to. My racing heart and the thumping in my head is the only focus that I bring to myself. I am starting to forget what I am even looking for. Why am I outside? I hear a noise in the cabin. A plate drops, it makes a sharp noise. It startles me.

The thieves, there are strangers in my house. What acts could bring this down to me? How do I deserve this? I cannot catch my breath, it is stuck in my lungs. I cannot force an exhale. I can only inhale. My hands drop from my ears, I cannot keep out the whispers, they are

too distracting. I cannot think of what I need to do. I shrink down to the ground. I am limp with impotence of the will. I cannot find the strength to charge in and beat the two with my or with a club. I wonder out loud what I have become. How many years have passed me by while I lay in wait? Here is the hour when I must muster all my courage and defend what is mine, only to be forsaken by my own self. It is my own undoing. I lay my head into my hands and I weep. I find no courage. I find no solace for myself. All my thoughts, these racing thoughts struggle to line up. To make sense. How can I be outside my own residence, weeping in the dark waiting for thieves to finish their work before moving on? Where is the courage of this great warrior, this killer of men in the name of our rights? I fought for what was right, I fought for this land. I fought and killed so others could have their rights. Here I am, a prisoner by my own selfish cowardice.

Mary would be shocked to see this shell of a man. Oh, Mary. Why of all the haunts and spirits would she not find her way here and spend her eternity with me. Does she not know that I am here, wretched and lost? Were she here, I know what she would say to me. She would say ‘that is our home, would you just give it to them? Would they be free to pluck and pilfer my jewelry? Your cufflinks? Our life? Will you fight? Will you look within yourself and find that fiber of courage?’ I know it’s in there. I did not live through all this war and loss of love and life to give in and run. What be my plan here sobbing in the dark behind the woodshed? To wait the hours? I could do that, maybe when they leave I will come from behind, silent, slow. I wait for the door to open, for the thieves to come out. They have been roaming about for a while now. The cabin is small and sparse. I peer into the window and see that they are laying out their packs and putting blankets down! They don’t plan to rob and flee, they plan to rob and stay! They are taking my whole cabin, my whole possessions and my only claim left in this



world. This cannot be, I cannot let this happen. I shared that cabin with my dear Mary. My cabin that I live and breathe and mourn in. I am huffing and puffing, my rage building so. I can feel my face become flush with the blood coursing through my veins. This is mine, this is real. This is all I have. I will not run, and let these thieves win. I fought and won many battles. I am decorated. I have shown and been witness to bravery beyond compare. These men are in for it now, they will know that they have picked the wrong home to take. This is it. Now! Do it!

I burst through the door, knocking it off the hinge in the process. I am screaming at the top of my lungs, swinging the ax handle with both hands. The two men startle and look to me, but do not move. They are paralyzed with fear.

“GET OUT!” I scream. “Leave this house, now with your life!” I continue, running towards them. They make no move but look to each other. I run to the cupboard and grab a tin. I throw with all my might. My shoulder hurts with the effort, I throw so hard. The tin flies right between them and smashes into the wall. The two men turn and look at the tin hit the ground, all the flour spills out onto the floor. They jump to their feet.

“Did you just see that? What the hell just happened?” One man says. They are looking around the room. I am moving too fast. They are unable to keep their eyes on me.

“Get Out Now! Be gone, you bastard thieves! You will not take my home!” I scream at them, reaching for more items from the shelves. I throw everything I get my hands on. Glass jars fly and break all around. I am running circles, grabbing all I can and flinging it to the wind. Screaming and hollering. I use my axe handle and knock items off the very top shelf that sits high above the stove. Hoping something will land and knock one out. I cannot take them both on, I need to make contact. I have to keep moving. I have thrown or knocked every item in my home to them.

“What the hell is going on?!” One of them screams.

“I told you we shouldn't have come here! We should have pitched a tent for the night, I knew this place was no good!” they are arguing. I have the fear in them now.

“You can say that again, this cabin is freakin' haunted or something. Let's get out of here!”

They are scrambling to gather their things. They are leaving. With no effort, I pluck the table and pitch it at them. The table strikes one on the arm as it flies past and breaks on the ground behind them. They drop their packs and run out the open door. One is screaming. It all happened so fast. I must have run 20 laps around them. There is food strewn about, broken glass and splintered wood everywhere. I knew I put the fear in them. I can hear the faint sounds, the pounding of the pair of feet on the hard ground. I look and see the items they have brought. I see a paper book. It is small and thick, like my bible but I do not recognize the title. The material of their sleeping bags and packs are somethings I have never seen either. What part of the world did they come from? I do not see any of my possessions in theirs.

All of my things are broken and shattered. Except for the chair. My chair is intact. I look at the book in my hands, turn it over to read the title. The cover is worn and yellow. Corners bent and torn, white lines in the binding from all the creasing and reading over and over again. It is well worn and must have been loved many times to have been read so much. I guess that it must be old, older than my own years. I see the title. 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. I have not heard of this story. I consider myself well read. More so than the other men in my unit. I would be the one consulted when an educated decision was to be made. The one sought for advice. Yet, I have not even heard of this book. The book is older than I. This much I am certain. I think. I drop the book. I have no interest in reading now. I can find no humor or relief from all

this. I sit among all the wreckage. I breathe deep. The title haunts me a little. What does it mean, to kill a mockingbird?

I can feel the hard wood beneath me, the chair. I settle in. The night pours in the open door. No stars, no moon. The lantern broken on the ground offers no use. I wonder if I will dream. I wonder if this is all. If this is it. These two hands, these two arms. I wonder if I will see Mary. I can feel the tears rising. The burning wetness, it rises in my drawn eyes. I swallow a lump, that does not go away. My breath is still heaving, I cannot swallow. I can feel a knot in my wretched stomach, joining the one in my throat. The tears spill out and roll down my face, wetting my cheeks and chin. I am alone with myself again. The open door hangs off to the side, the whispers can just come right in. And they do. I close my eyes and think of Mary. Gone too soon. She would not hear me, I reached for her. I screamed her name, I called out until my voice was hoarse. But she would not hear me. I watched her sink below the grass and dirt, she moved so slow, I thought I could hold her and pull her back from the edge. If she had only seen me, she would have known I was there with her. I couldn't bring myself to look over the edge. I knew she lay so far below, I knew she was gone. Like the wind. A long-ago whisper that lingered in my ears and behind my eyelids. She was the light, in my dream. I know that now. I couldn't reach her. And so, it is. I will forever see that moment, the moment that it was over. Oh, my Mary.

The whispers from the woods, are louder. I don't want to hear it, I don't want to know. But wait, the whispers there are words. I know these words. They are not secrets. What is that? Ah, music. Am I dreaming again? I cannot be. I can feel this chair below my spine. Stiff and real. I knock on the seat to make sure. My knocks continue, I can hear my bones making contact with the wood. I can hear the knock, knock, knock of my rapping. I notice that I am

knocking to the beat, the rhythm. It makes a real sound. This chair is real, I am not dreaming. I can hear it now... it is 'Nelly Bly.' The drums are pounding in time. My feet cannot help but tap. The minstrel song from long ago. My whole body knows it. Before I know the tune, my heart is heavy with it. This music is in my being. This melody. I hum along the missing words. My lips barely move, but it comes in strong.

*Nelly Bly shuts her eye when she goes to sleep. When she wakes up again her eyeballs start to peep. The way she walks, she lifts her foot, And then she brings it down; And when it lights, there's music there In that part of the town.*

The words repeat. Perhaps I will see my fellow soldiers, perhaps I will see Mary soon. I will wait, wait for the music to catch up. My laces are already undone. There is no mud, but there is this chair. I can hear it now. I can hear it.

The end.