”Not Vainly Did the Early Persian..”

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Abstract

IT WAS the wind’s stopping that began all this. I was starting down the second slope of North Hill on my way downtown. One moment the wind was alive, and the next it hung there, perfectly quiescent, in the air...
"Not Vainly Did the Early Persian . . ."
(being an exposition of a viewpoint)

Jauvanta M. Young

It was the wind's stopping that began all this. I was starting down the second slope of North Hill on my way downtown. One moment the wind was alive, and the next it hung there, perfectly quiescent, in the air. It was just as if someone had pushed a button somewhere and turned it off. The sudden harsh crunch of my footsteps on the cinder road stopped me—and then the funniest hollow feeling swelled up inside of me. Everything looked as if it had been painted—

It was quite dark for that time of afternoon, and heavy, broad clouds were sketched upon the sky in bold, purplish-black sweeps—storm lowering in the west. All the little houses seemed to stand out abnormally clear, and the dahlias near Reverend Purrrington's looked as if they had been frozen in mid-droop by some Gorgon's head. The whole region there—Woodard Avenue and Highland with the dull stretch of hills behind them—was just like a landscape architect's plaything—doll-size, lifeless. I felt as if I could see every little detail of it, even the dust released by the wind upon its sudden death—and that I was seeing from somewhere else—as if everything around me were one thing and I were a completely detached entity.

It was as if I had stepped into a picture frame in which every motion had been fastened down by the painter's brush—wind,
time, eternity, even existence arrested. The picture was completely unfamiliar that way, and I could feel the presence of the Painter behind the pall of storm clouds. I was so insignificant and dust-like in comparison with the great extent of my surroundings—the earth, the storm, the sky, Him.

Second crept after second as a muddy yellow seeped into the dark clouds crouching over Glockner's shed, and I just had to stand there and watch. It was so still that the sigh of my breathing was instantly caught and deadened under the thick muffles of silence. I don't think anything ever made me feel quite so certain that there is a God—a Being so vast that He could at will flatten the wind upon the ground and hold the elements in leash. The storm was coming.

Another time I was coming home in the midst of a blasting thunderstorm, the kind that drowns your sight and deafens your ears. The wet was trickling through my scarf by the time I reached the top of the hill—and then I was nearly torn from my feet by the chaos there.

It was the most bleak part of the hill and the ground was wearing a little thin, exposing the naked rocky ribs of the gaunt dark hill. It always seems as if just at that one spot the wind gathers itself up and dashes its fury out with all its might.

Up there, barely able to stand up under the storm, I liked being wet and torn and blown. With the thunder crashing under my feet I felt wild and primitive inside . . . released and free like nascent oxygen. That wind and rain wouldn't let anyone be petty or weak. It felt so very clean, and I didn't care if my hair did look like a ragamuffin's . . . and I didn't care if everyone else knew that my hair looked like a ragamuffin's. I loved the empty, half-afraid feeling I had, and I felt like bowing my head in reverence. The steppe-dwellers had built their temples in the high, windy places, so why shouldn't I?

And then I went to church. There were candles on the altar, kindled into golden flames by a grave-eyed young boy in an angelic white robe. The light from the windows stained the walls and high vaulted beams with rich crimsons and warm shadows. And then the music began. It was so beautiful that I hardly breathed for fear I'd miss one tender pulsating note. I don't remember the name of the hymn—names didn't seem to matter. It stopped,
and suddenly I realized that the church was crowded. Then the words of the minister fell gently into the pause—‘Let us pray.”

I relaxed into a numb receptive shell, absorbing the smooth flow of words, yet half waiting for something—some little phrase that would climax the mood of worship that I was in. And then it came like a blast of cold air that startled me out of my lethargy, and shook my whole feeling until it began to shiver into pieces.

The sermon: “What We Must Believe”—Must? Slowly and precisely the minister sketched in the crude unthinking cast of beliefs to which I “must” mold my thoughts—communion so many times a year, accept as gospel and believe all basic doctrines of my church, “good” Christians, regular church attendance—all “musts”.

The chill grew on me. This wasn’t Christianity. It was a finite, unbending thing, bounded by four walls and a roof—a particular roof under which men gained individual importance rather than insignificance. The banker and his wife had come in late. Even the minister paused while greedy eyes drank in the cut of her Dache hat.

Back before the altar—the flickering lights wreathing a halo about his head, and what was he’d said?—and there he still knelt, elbows comfortably settled on the altar, looking almost smug! “We do not presume to come to this, Thy table, O Merciful Lord. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table. But Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore . . .”

His voice suddenly seemed hatefully oily and obsequious, and even the light from the stained glass window seemed too bright and cold. I couldn’t understand it. Was he telling God what to do because He had always been merciful? And now again—“pardon our offenses, not weighing our merits.” But why? Why shouldn’t we have to stand up for what we are and have done? Why, Heaven would be so easy to reach if that’s all that we expect—to have all our faults forgiven and overlooked. Man demanding of God that He obey us so as to live up to what we expect of Him. How presumptuous and impudent! But maybe I had misunderstood.

The prayers and exhortations continued, only now my calm was broken. I felt the hardness of the bench, the stiffness of a
coquettish blue veil on a nest of blonde curls. The church was suddenly just a lovely building with a pretty ritual being enacted—by which neither actors nor audience were particularly moved. Church—the House of Prayer—and it smelled of Yardley's and LeLong, spilled ashes, heat and wet overshoes—stiflingly so—and little trivial whispers and glances were filling up the building until I wondered whether there would be room for God. The young candle-lighter laughed silently with a friend, and the sound of a turning page crackled up to the roof as the minister droned on.

"Let us pray—"it came automatically. Consecration of the bread and wine, with the candlelight gleaming from the silver cup softened by the rosy light above—beautiful on the surface, but horribly suggestive of pagan sacrifices to Baal, the drinking of blood, warm and red. I choked.

The bench was narrower and harder than before, more and more like the creeds solemnly intoned, and so solemnly brushed off into forgetfulness. When the last hymn was begun, it was almost a relief, a relief to watch the candle-lighter snuff out the altar lights, a relief to press the minister's moist pink hand and escape into the bright open air—air so vast and moving that I knew there was some one great Being beyond it—One whom I hadn't found within that church. And over and over through my mind ran the words, "Not vainly did the early Persian make his altar the high places and the peaks—." Out of the silences and the storms He comes.