

Halcyon Days
A Tone Poem in Three Movements

EXCERPT

I. Sky.

Endless stars shimmer in a wine-dark sky, sparkling lights floating on an astral sea. They watch over an expanse of bushy green trees, bending and folding along the contours of mountain and valley. The light of the stars hardly breaks through the treetops, but every now and again they shine brightly upon small meadows and clearings that claim their own space amongst the crowd of towering oaks.

The nighttime is serene. Mourning doves sleep peacefully in their nest, having shaken free the instinct that keeps them awake. The warm wind, gently flowing around tree trunks, whistles in deep, soothing tones. The grass slowly bends and shifts in its own kind of slumber, softening footsteps of creatures that patter on the forest floor.

This place is sacred. These hallowed grounds are protected by ancient oak and watched over lovingly by every star that hangs in the sky.

In a corner of a long-forgotten meadow, a family of mice peak their heads out and, finding no danger, creep slowly out from a homely burrow. They make their pilgrimage to a small pile of decayed leaves and half-rotten fruits in the center of the meadow. One darts off into a thicket and emerges with a berry, a humble contribution to the shrine. The others chitter and smile as the tiny fruit is added. One by one, others dart off into thickets and bushes, collecting berries, leaves, and nuts, adding them to the pile. Eventually, they gather enough for the pile to stretch a little bit higher than it did before. The mice squeak with glee.

When the moon crests over the meadow, the tree line cannot stop it from joining the chorus of starlight. The meadow glows. A sliver of light wanders its way into the pile.

Something moves.

The mice scatter into the thicket and watch on with fear. The commotion is just enough to wake the nest of mourning doves and two of the neighboring squirrels, who bear witness under the light of the moon to the shifting of the mice's shrine.

The pile rustles a little bit more. The wind takes notice and laps at its base. A leaf falls off the top, then another. The stirring is gentle but enough to shift the foundations of the pile and let the edges fall to the sides, revealing a shard of metal. As the shrine shrinks, the shard grows from one into two, then into four, then into a shape.

A hand faces the sky. It is a deep, greenish-brown and rusted through. There is a wide indentation—a bruise—outlined in blackened singe on its palm, as if it once held a ray of starlight. The hand creaks as steel shifts against steel; it acts of its own accord, but as though it is learning to move for the first time. Its motion is narrow and weak.

The hand turns over. On its back are two rows of strange symbols etched into its skin. The top row is sharp, uniform, and longer than the bottom row. Those symbols etched deeply into the hand's metallic skin, carved with unnatural precision. The bottom row is softer and harder to make out. The etching is uneven and unsteady. Those symbols have more dots and lines off-shooting at stranger angles – there is something strangely quaint about them.

The hand bends its fingers, and it clutches some long dead leaves and a rotted black berry. The objects shift around in the hand, sliding back and forth over the bruise: it feels the leaves and, like damp and fragile paper, tears them unknowingly; it feels each small hill on the surface of the blackberry and discovers every nook where mold hides and the fruit collapses in on itself. With these dead things, the hand learns to feel again.