

Conversation Pieces
Volume 14

KNOTS

Short Fiction

by

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To the memory of
Robert Benjamin Richardson Lynch (1947-1989)
my friend Larry
outside poet and visionary collector

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The Cathedral

The Cathedral babbles softly in the winter, in the dead of night. It is too cold for anyone to walk on the quays. At this time all the statues of the great cathedral speak together. It is not only the saints who converse with the rows of the blessed, or Mary with the angels that surround her, or the gargoyles with the damned. It has been too long to hold to such social restrictions. Though the church appears hieratic it communes with itself democratically. Any statue may address any other—even a salamander speak outright to an Apostle. The stone voices are very many: they query from niches, fling from the buttresses, and drop in comment from the towers and eaves. Buzzing softly as a city, the statues speak intently in their deliberation, ever of the same matter.

A good Christian might be surprised, but they do not discuss theology and they never name God or the soul.

For this other matter is still so engrossing that over the centuries not a statue among them has passed a single nostalgic remark on the amendments in religious practice, or at any moment bemoaned the end of pomp and crowds and miracles.

They do not find time to discuss the Parisian dead, either the famous or unknown, all of whom it has watched, strolling, passing, fleeing to itself in final or desperate moments.

They do not discuss Victor Hugo.

The saints and the Virgin and the angels and the monsters whisper of the same incomprehensible forsaking again and again: how the francs-maçons left one day—the master architects with their fine sons—and did not ever return, leaving the cathedral unfinished.

The empty places on the exterior were filled by latecomers of restoration, and it came to pass that these figures speculated on the mystery with all the enthusiasm of the older statues, whose memory of the day was quite vivid. But the outside incompleteness had never been the deep worry of the statues; it was an absence they felt within.

When the master architects and their sons disappeared, the grand design that had been planned for the floor of the interior had not yet been laid. It had been drawn out but not yet set in the paving as planned, with small multicolored stones. Had anyone seen the pattern within before the new, less skillful masons came and covered it with ordinary blank paving? The same rumors still fly back and forth among the statues, but only one suspicion seems to be established beyond doubt. To a bird, or a balloonist, or any eye looking down from the clouds, the cathedral appears quite clearly as a cross. The sole unanimously held opinion regarding the grand, lost design has to do with its intended locus. The statues believe that the original drawing might yet survive, buried beneath the floor in the square at the heart of the cross, where the nave and the transept meet.

But they still hold close debate as to its nature.

The design, insisted one archangel, had been a map of an endless path.

The design, announced Saint Genevieve (who knew Paris best), had been conceived as a huge beatific rose.

The design, snarled a gargoyle from the tip of the spire, was meant to confound, like the Gordian knot, which no one could untie—and it has succeeded, he laughed bitterly.

The design is nameless, uttered John the Baptist, from his head cradled sideways in his arms; it is a strange and austere picture of the world, showing neither beasts nor flora nor cities, but having a perfect circle of white marble as its center, a disc large enough for a man to stand in.

“And how wide would that be?” asked one of the damned.

“About the span of a new-born babe,” the head of John the Baptist replied.

Ashiepattle

1

When, many years after their marriage, the king tried to summon to mind the appearance of his wife on the night he had first seen and fallen in love with her, all that he could remember was her magnificent attire. He shuddered to recall how he had endured the first hour of the ball, before she appeared, in an agony of numbness he had taken few pains to hide. Keeping to his throne and listlessly eyeing the multitude of young women who paraded before him, proud and hopeful in despite of their thick peasant wrists and pitted complexions, he suffered the scene of a busy barnyard to billow up on his dismay; he had hoped for a gathering of goddesses. He had almost made up his mind to plead indisposition to his parents and retire for the night, when his despondent glance rose as if in answer to an unspoken command, and he beheld Ashiepattle framed in the great portal at the height of the stairs.

Her face he could no longer imagine as it had been that night, but her entire figure had roused in him a sensation he could still recall in his own body, vivid and thrilling, a shock of fervid wakefulness floating serenely on the promise of danger. He might brood on that moment forever,

it seemed—he would never lose the memory of the sensation—but he could not ever rediscover her young face. Yet he could see her costume in his mind's eye as clearly as though it stood before him: the splendid bark-and-silver-colored fur thrown so carelessly across her shoulders, like a wolf escaping a parting shot; the ragged convolvulus of her enormous ballooning sleeves, iridescent blue, green, and white, like the splayed abstraction of mallards hung on a door; the dark dagging of the long nether sleeves, like the parted crucial feathers of hawks aloft; the overlaid loops of her meticulously tended tresses, neat and copper tessellated as the scales of an upstream salmon. The quilted lappets jutting from the waist of her vest recalled to him many gentle paws of foxes, hares, and even lions, slain and arranged in a victorious ring. He helplessly imagined unlacing that superficial bodice, to expose the hirsute white lining that so suddenly put him in mind of the bellies of dead doe, and a cheetah he had vanquished once on an excursion to Barbary. The circular motif in the gown's brocade, being gathered from looseness at the ground to neat folds at the waist, contracted into an even impression of fanning feathers on a quail's or pheasant's throat.

Then she had turned away, out of the door, and moved leftward across the room.

And as she moved, he saw that the shape of her wolverine cape described the very quadrilateral of the field, belonging to his father's renegade vassal across the mountain, which he so long and so ineffectually had yearned to possess; and the pure launch of her skirt mimicked the very contour of the fertile hillside claimed by the Bishop of Tours, which he had not briefly, nor successfully, disputed in the ecclesiastical and secular courts, and yet could not yield his claim.

He had stridden after her then and gained upon her figure slowly, intent upon capturing her for one sole galliard at least; when, his hand upon her elbow, she turned at last and

deigned to recognize his quest, though he could no longer recall whether the expression upon her face had been one of surprise, or pleasure, or fear, or a mingled gesture of amazement compounded of all three.

He must have avoided her eyes, whatever they were speaking, for all that he could recall of that ensuing moment was the marvelous pattern of jewels and embroidery on the front of her fur-lined vest. Each emerald, topaz, and garnet burrowed shyly out of a nest of gold stitches, only emerging from the pileous darkness by virtue of this metallic corona, which then feathered out into pinwheels of simple, active wings, so that the jewels seemed to be fluttering from deep, veined darkness into a lighter air. Jewels appealed to him, and he would not ignore the approach of any loyal contributor to the glory of his domain, even ones inanimate as these. He imagined opening the shafts that his great-grandfather had sunk and that his father had abandoned years before, declaring the earth there rich only for farming; he would charge down through the unmapped tunnels with a team of torch-bearers, to hunt the wily, reclusive gems. If the golden stitches were any augury at all, he would find branches of ore to lead him to their lairs. His prey might watch him pass in the darkness and think themselves safe, but he knew they must be rescued, for they had a service to perform in the upper world. *Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit.* The objects he would cause to be fashioned from these fruits of the earth would furnish his humblest subjects with a present reflection of their sovereign's divine inheritance.

So they had performed to the jealous admiration of all her competitors through the long night, until she had announced that she must leave and return home. He had insisted upon accompanying her, for he wished to learn what she, strangely enough, would not divulge: where she resided, and who her father was. But at a bend in the road quite far from the palace, as he lowered his gaze from the moon, he

found she was gone, and the only clue to her whereabouts was a dim trembling in the white column supporting a dovecote that welcomed its inmates as high up as the lowest branches of the trees. He loitered below the dovecote for some time, shook its column, and called out to his lady, but no answer issued from the ghostly hive save a disgruntled cooing of sleepy birds. In such discouraged pursuits he continued until a man accosted him, who claimed title to the birds, and to whom he imparted the story of his escaped mistress. Upon hearing mention of a girl, the man's interest quickened, and he called for a servant to assist him in reaching the height of the dovecote. The two ready men climbed up a ladder and assaulted the dovecote's silence with axe and pick. The birds sprang from the eyes; no one else was within. The prince had then gone disconsolately home.

2

The Queen Ashiepattle stood in the garden, supervising the construction of her bird-castle.

The columns of the base stand like soldiers on either side of the maw of a great toothed bird. Inside, the peacocks had learned how to sing.

Workmen, the blackbird chattered, shatter those tiles! Warp them, warp them! Our permanent nest is only a fragment of ultimate rest! Let the edges be sharp! Never let them match!

All of the larks were sleeping, head tucked under wing, though the petals in the roof overhead modulated ineluctably from golden orange to blue.

When the exfoliating piers of the interior contemplated spring, they regretted the lost decision never to burst into leaf. Reach, and criss-cross, they murmured to each other, as they traced a pattern of starbursts over the underside belly.

Ashiepattle rolled out the plans upon the castle floor. Stained with droppings and footprints, they gathered dimension from the shadows of the reeling wings. Sunshine informed her deliberations now. The workmen must consult the reeling shadows anew each day.

Wounded as women, perforated as a flayed hive, the pierced steeples host scores of patient sparrows, who have endured their waiting long. The eyes, so full of birds, look only inwards.

Oh, helmeted towers, towers crowned forever! Do not look out so narrowly! The jays, the doves, the whippoorwills, even the lonely vulture, crave an impossible spectacle.

Ashiepattle, pleased, put up her hand to touch the woven grille that repelled all vision, then pulled the gate open, strode inside, and peered, as only the birds knew how, through the cunning iron mesh at the walls of her husband's house.

3

On the second day of the feast he had impatiently awaited her return. Unable to remember her face exactly, he nevertheless felt certain, as he scanned the room, that she was not to be found among all the young ladies present. He paced to and fro across the dais, assuring himself that he would know her when she appeared.

He looked up, to see her making her way regally down the stairs. Her head was bent, so that he could not regard her face at all, and she wore a magnificent headdress that concealed both the color and texture of her hair, but he recognized her nevertheless; he knew by the rich, evocative mass of her gown that it must be she.

For as she stepped onto the ballroom floor and let the impressive bulk of her scarlet skirts fall from her careful grasp, he saw that the wide space of that skirt led toward the tightly ornate bodice in a sweep so justly predetermined

that he knew this proportion of part to part was what he had striven to imagine in fruitless dreams, as he talked at length and vaguely to the master builders he had employed for his cathedral. It was the relation of the wide space of the nave, for the common congregation, to the more sacred small dimensions of the chancel, the same that he had so long sought in clumsy sketches and unmysterious diagrams; and here, she had brought that shapely relation to him, all unknowing, in her very presence and the form created by her gait.

Indeed, the more he gazed upon her, the more he saw of the monument that would set his name beside his God's through all posterity. The rondel of brilliant silk in the winking slashes of her upper sleeves would dictate the pattern of wheels above the columns of the triforium. The orderly lace converging from her bosom to the shaft of her throat gave a pattern for the iron delineations of the clerestory windows, and the extraordinary, slender piers that would tie the finely hewn floor to the great vaulted ceiling would flow to that height with the rising majesty of the long fluted folds of her skirt.

He did not hesitate then, but rushed across the floor and caught her up, and they danced as they had on the previous night, nor would he look at any other woman present; until at last she stated her need to depart. He accompanied her almost to the bend in the road approaching the dovecote, eager to see which house she would enter. But, without warning, she hurried away into a large garden that in the darkness could not be said to belong certainly to one house or another. Hurrying after the rustle of her dress, he came to a clearing where there was nothing save a tall pear tree, and here he paused, almost hopeless, until two pears, one after the other, fell inexplicably and rolled a short way through the grass. So he waited beneath the tree and called to her, but though she did not answer, he was content that she must

climb down sooner or later. As he waited, the same man who had helped him the night before came by, and hearing him complain of the strange girl who had escaped again, sent once more for his servant and an axe, and proceeded to chop the pear tree down. But when the tree lay long in the grass, they found nothing in its branches but hard, smallish pears.

Angered to have been so easily misled, the prince made his way homeward, intent that she should not escape him on the third and last night of the feast.

4

The Queen Ashiepattle stood at the centermost point of the bird-castle's inner courtyard and stared up at the circle of sky through the eye of the dome.

How would I ever understand this scalloped darkness were it not for the buds that light my way?

All the brides of the nation have decked the great tree with the excess of their wedding veils. The tree feels their grief. Its stalwart branches droop under the weight of such violent lace.

Clusters of form, beloved of birds, do not accede to sentimentality!

The buds, complex as lettuce, less mute than cabbage, burst their green confinements. Somewhere a virgin responds with an impudent toss of the head.

The globe of the tree is a festival upheld by furrowed veins of earth. I do not want even this tree, but I must accept it.

Figures are climbing the scarred trunk, heading toward the light. Some pause to nap in cups of blossoms.

Anyone who desires to be a bird may be one, and make his home in the branches. I have sung this decision before,

amid the perfumed dizziness of heights, and have never regretted it.

The eye above me is thronged with whiteness.

Yes, thought Ashiepattle, on this spot should the seedling's roots be nurtured.

5

On the third night of the feast, he had stared fixedly at the spot at the height of the stairs with an anxiety that had tensed all the muscles of his upper back so that, when they danced later on, he was riddled by malicious spears though the neck whenever he whirled her around or bent to regard her more closely. He neither answered nor even turned to acknowledge the remarks that a few bold persons ventured to address to him. He only hung upon the impending hope and hard doubtfulness of the nameless woman's arrival.

It was approaching midnight when she appeared at last; he had wished many times in the preceding hours to be allowed to despair, but perverse hope kept him at his strained, monotonous vigil.

Then at last she appeared, and he lost all memory of timorous anticipation and volatile resentment in an access of absolute wonderment.

For her garb upon this occasion was even more wonderful than it had been heretofore. He could not recall in any way whether her body itself had seemed more splendid to him than on previous nights, or whether her gestures imparted any conviction of extraordinary grace, such as she might justly have felt after two nights of such utter success; it was hard to judge of such a fact, when his memory of her personal aspect upon all three occasions was so entirely dim. But she came down the stairs with a motion like the essence of all the elements combined in one lovely concordia; the ineffably neutral-colored lace that dripped delicately from

her every limb summoned up all the nourishing rain that his cherished lands had ever thirstily welcomed, and the lavish profusion of floweret appliqués that graced her shoulders like spring gilding alpine summits put him in mind of that sweet rain's fruits, and the natural, superfluous bounty of a blessed domain. Her torso, wreathed in the wrinkled uproar of susceptible silk, embodied the invisible powers of action possessed by wind and running stream; but all these marvels paled before the revelation of her figure when she turned, and he beheld the incredibly long, minutely embroidered, transparent veil.

It was only then, at this very moment, that he understood the meaning she would always have for him. For this startling train of delicate and encompassing imagery, which seemed only indistinctly to begin, and never to end at all, whose mesh was of so tiny, thin, and yet so strong a texture, assured him that she possessed the clue to every ultimate power, that she drew all being, nay even every will, in her deep veil's wake.

The decision took place then in him. He knew her as the bride he must possess, for look, with such calm and secure and unconscious authority, would she not assure the uniting of his kingdom?

He rejoiced then to have taken such extreme precautions, for he trod the measures with her the more gallantly that night in the comforting knowledge that, even at that very moment, a band of male domestics were at work on the great staircase that led up to the main hall, smearing the surface of each step with a sticky, black, steaming pitch. For this time she must not escape him; he must have her name first and the whereabouts of her father's abode. Thus he led her through the measures into the early morning hours in confident serenity, knowing that he had manacled destiny to his desire.

When at last she declared that she must depart, he betrayed no anxiety, but with the calm surety of one who is certain of his future, responded that, do what she might, he would, on this night at least, see her to the door of her father's home. Perhaps it was the deliberate enunciation of his words, or a too-passionate gleam in his intentful gaze—he would never know the cause—but at this response she sprung away with so wild and quick and suddenly violent an action that he had thereafter no memory of her leaping from his grasp, no vision of the wonderful flowering flight her great gown must have made, no recollection at all of her face or figure as she so rudely seized her departure, except for two flashing points of gold which, he understood later, had been her buckled shoes. In the wake of her vanishment, he gathered his dull wits and hurried to the smeared, smoking stairs. Upon reaching their height, the smoldering in his own breast subsided into a species of fearful puzzlement.

In the dark gray light of incipient morning the striped mist still rose off the molten pitch like the hot exudation of newly dinged furrows. No one was in sight. Far from holding her there, struggling like a mythic voluminous beast in the black trap he had laid for her, the steps were desolate as an unlettered page, full of hope but sterile for lack of capture. They smoked in frustration, except for the pure, winking vestige of an idea. There, three steps from the bottom, a shape like a contracted heart dimly shone. He could not himself dare the gluey mess to retrieve it, so he called his henchmen. None could approach near to it; they all foundered and stuck after several steps. It was not until almost noon, when the pitch had fairly dried, that the small shining shoe could be pried from the livid crust and brought into his angry presence. The granular jet rim along the sole only whetted his appetite further.

6

The Queen Ashiepattle climbed up the scaffolding left behind by the workmen who were adorning the bird-castle's spandrels. She walked to its farthest edge and stood just under the barrel of one of the pierced steeples, looking up.

A hundred blades minced her apron's astonishment, each brushing lightly as a day of commonplace happiness.

In the breathing of winter, the curve of each dark sill molts a thick lip of down. Each casement pouts at the others.

Admit the sympathy that you feel for our estate, you clouds! The inchoate migrations never pause here.

This fathomless tile-work, these azure quadrangles, await the angular alighting of angels.

The myriad starlight dictates the certainty of possibilities.

A gray border may exhale a rose, a black beam diffuse persimmon manna. Such fortunes are too lovely to read.

One stormy night the lightning stilled three wild geese in midair.

Though the light clashes, and the rain nails me with slivers of steel, a denial of the necessity of these parceled vistas will not be wrested.

These are my vistas, said the last beholder ever to exist in the dying world. I will lose myself in them though time itself cease.

As the night drew on, the Queen felt herself roused by the steeping of darkness and the subtle cooing of birds. She undid her apron and left it, folded, on the scaffold floor. Then, lifting her heavy skirts, she carefully, slowly made her way down through the ribs, by the ladders.

7

Now he looked back in a species of grim bewilderment on the vicissitudes of the probing courtship that had then

ensued. He recalled the quiet, healthy look in the daytime of the garden of the man who had owned the dovecote and the pear tree, who had helped him to fell both in his urgency, though to no avail. He had had to try three houses that fronted on that large, luxuriant garden before he discovered the right one. The first two houses he essayed owned no daughters at all.

He would not, he determined, clenching his fists and shutting his eyes as the unwanted memories intruded themselves, dwell on the disastrous fiascos of his initial misprisions. He had already paid enough for his two mistakes—and would go on paying!—in the embarrassment that such public retraction of his word had cost him, more, far, far more, than the actual expense of keeping in a respectable cottage two blind women who could barely hobble, with a dozen menials to wait upon their crippled solitude. What he chose to remember now was the slow, reluctant production of his present wife, and how the frail but tall girl, whose auburn ringlets straggled down out of her kerchief to stray over a high-boned cheek flushed with emotion, never shifted the lucid calm of her green eyes from his face as she seated herself on the rickety three-legged stool near the hearth and removed her rough sabots. Even now he could see the peculiar, uneven assortment of toes, none too clean and red with bunions and blisters. She had held out her hand for the poor golden shoe, stiff by then at both heel and toe with the rust of dried blood, and still encrusted along the whole sole with tenacious pitch. She had shown no distaste in putting it on, and stood up before him quite easily, her foot comfortably lodged. Indeed, when she walked, it flipped ever so slightly from her heel, as though her lack of a stocking, and the wear and tear the slipper had suffered, rendered it ever so slightly too big. He had refused to take his eyes from her foot for any moment; this time he would trust no one, but only abide his own witnessing. So he concentrated on the blistered foot

as it slipped into the shoe, and trod back and forth, that he might survey its just fit himself. And he found himself fascinated and rapt by the simplicity with which, out of the utter debasement of the once-beautiful slipper, a vision of the unalloyed worth of experience seemed to rise, like a golden wave surging out of pollution and dross. He raised his gaze at last and, of a sudden, recognized the woman he had desired increasingly for three festal nights. He caught her up in his arms, and shed bitter tears of recovery and relief, and berated the owner of the dovecote for not immediately revealing this treasure to him, for she had ever been destined for his queen. He bade her fetch the three magnificent dresses, and when she had brought them down, he brusquely commanded the two sisters to carry indoors, from the cart that had formed his whole train upon that visit, a richly carved chest he had brought for the sole purpose of bearing the wonderful gowns away. When they protested that they could barely walk, much less lift and transport so heavy an object, he quashed them with an additional mortification: they themselves should carefully wrap and pack, in fine silk tissue, Ashiepattle's dresses. He would watch to see that the task was done well. The unhappy women hobbled tearfully to the door. As soon as they had clumped over the threshold, he planted another kiss on his beloved's forehead and bade her go gather her other things.

That had been his last moment of untroubled happiness. For even as she gathered up her few belongings and made ready to depart that house forever, he had heard the odd rush and low throaty whispers and insidious clicking that had never deserted them ever after. By the time the dresses were packed, and the two women ordered to lift up the chest and bear it back out to the cart, and sit, one upon each side, to see the cargo safely borne on the bumpy ride to the palace, the monotonous noise was almost incessant, and only dulled to a whirr when they passed out of the door; then a

great riotous flapping suddenly flung a shadow high up into the sky. Being at that moment still uncontrollably glad, he hardly paid it heed; he had eyes only for his precious, lovely bride. But as he put her up on his horse, the whole sky was suddenly full of birds, converging on a spot directly above the stationary cart, like the vortex of a whirlwind.