

John

Belts of heat buffeted the early morning air. Just the thinnest copper strip of light grazed the dim horizon. Already the east wind blew kicking up dust along the plains of the north, smearing the edge of the world to grey. The day had a turn in it; some note was carried in on the wind.

John found a lee in the riverbank, and crouching, cupped water to rinse his eyes. A night of wake and prayer and walk had made them rough and they stung as if with salt.

The river had been diminished of late. Rain had been prayed for but had not come. Yet there was enough water for cleansing and enough for baptism. Baptism would continue whether in torrent or in shallows. God's work was unceasing.

The wind had changed direction now; a hum just beyond hearing. What was that the wind carried? What message did it hold? John pointed his thought to penetrate it.

Reveal yourself..

But nothing.

Ah, there was no use trying to glean it, lean into it, if it would not give of itself freely. Somethings were right to remain as mystery. When God did not draw one's map, it was because one's faith was to meant to divine it.

Yet that weighted air continued its tease...

Pilgrims had camped wide across the unraind plain. Some had been here for weeks. All had come to hear the desert preacher in the camel hair skin, to hear his prophecy and swallow his soul fire and make it their own; to cure their own impassive indifference.

The hide tents clapped in the eastern gusts and here and there, the pilgrims at camp were stirring awake.

It was an immense weight he carried and John wondered how long he could shoulder the responsibility of it all. To bring the heathen into God's will, to turn the pagan heart away from Rome, to strengthen the faithful and make iron their will, and all this to prepare the way for the One to come and make his path straight.

John

Lately, after long nights of prayer, the burden felt heavier; instead of the cleanse of a night devoted, doubt had crept in by stealth. However slight, John berated himself for his lack of faith. The prophecy shall unfold. God's timing was not man's. A messiah was promised and the faithful must respond. Whatever was to come, he, servant of the Lord, could not falter.

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Heat haze shimmered across the land. The sun scald merciless from a clear blue sky.

The river cut deep into the plain, its weight flowing steadily to the south. The faithful snaked from the water's edge, ankle deep in soft mud, up steep banks and far out onto the flat dry.

John, at the snake head, gestured the faithful down one by one, down into the river, and swiftly without care for ego or hesitation, sunk them deep into the thick current and held them there until he felt their surrender. Each one as they emerged, heard his sermon flare and firework into their consciousness; his voice in the desert arrowing sacred thunder and direction for their new life.

"Repent ye! Repent ye! I lay the axe unto the root of your tree. God will grow you anew!"

"We prepare the way for the One that is to come! With our lives we will make his path straight!"

"I baptize you with water but he shall baptize you with fire!"

And on it went in this vein; scores following this route to the baptismal waters. Down into mud they sank and rose reborn into clear air.

The long awake and third day of fast had John ringing with hum and time swifted as the current flowed around, between and over him, and washed the pilgrims clean.

It was nearing noonday when a clang rang himself to ground. He paused in his speech and motion, and stoppered the constant steam of faithful by raising his hand. Here again, he felt the lick of the east wind playing for attention.

A scent had come in on the wind now. Something unearthly beyond his range of knowing. Bland food and hard living had deadened his taste and smell to

John

near nil yet this sweet fragrance curlicued into his brain and provoked some flood like potent memory.

John looked up along the snake line of faithful, silhouetted and backlit by sun. Yet despite the erasure of all features, his awareness hooked on one present. Long haired and slight of build, this one moved as if already in water. His footing was sure and made his way down the slope as though descent was welcome.

Jesus stepped into the water, crimpling the river's edge and, noticed by all, the quality of the current changed.

John recognised this lined one as Essene, but as to the quality of his presence...?

Jesus, in unwavering gaze met the preacher's on level; John's fervent inner fire quaked in the light of this One's gentle power; then the young Essene humbly bent his head and extended his arms, palms in supplication, giving himself to baptism.

Instinctively, and unexpectedly, John laid his hands upon those of the Essene, and in that moment shockingly abdicated his fire and brimstone into the hands of the gentle lamb. The desert preacher who had previously only fallen into ecstatic state through extreme asceticism, fasting and prayer, followed Jesus into the divine presence on a different path; that of tender love and humble devotion.

And in falling into this inspired state together, both, on the same heartbeat, surrendered themselves into the deep. Beneath the water now, an absence of any current. All was in stasis.

To those watchers from the bank, the two were vanished for just a handful of astonished seconds, but to those two under the water, by falling into state together each saw what the other saw, felt what the other was subject to and knew what the other understood. That is, they were as brothers.

Both reborn from the waters, as though on the first day when all was as pure wonder, all John could utter was 'Thou art the Messiah.' His heart shell cracked open and he became pure witness.

John

Jesus held John's gaze but did not answer. He could not. He could only be the messiah if he were to offer salvation to all, be a savior *to all*; yet the task he saw before him was so great, the pit of despair so vast... How to bridge this gulf, to take the mote from countless eyes, unblind so many to God's light?

With a mixture of elation and grief, joy, gratitude to the Lord and sadness, John watched as the Essene walked up and over the embankment - the young man did not look back- and away into the clear afternoon.

This one, illuminated from within, had caused John's world to shift on tilt and in a rush of knowing that his own job was near completion, the desert preacher felt as a lion that had lost another tooth. Only a few words accompanied his long afternoon, 'He must increase as I decrease.'