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When wing to wing, feather by feather, the rooks were piecing night together, I took the ring the iron-lipped iron-lidded lion gripped and tapped the call-sign on his hide. He knew me, nodded, moved aside, and as the light fell through the door I walked into your head once more. I could distinguish, layer by layer, each constituent of the air: vellum and beeswax; apple, oak, and elm gone up in years of smoke; tanned pastry, ghosts of roasted meat; the breath of oxlips, wintersweet, jasmine, and Stanely Spencer’s tall corinthian hyacinths on the wall. The old clock in a fancy waistcoat cleared its throat and, poker-faced, pointed to Margaret’s room. I must have slipped in without sound or gust, for on the mantelpiece the frieze had thawed and bountiful Ceres bowed from a festal chariot drawn by cherubs shouldering sheaves of corn for Lammas. Darwin in a chair inhaled his beard. And through a pair of ancient spectacles, tugged free from a book’s teeth, I could see a knickerbockered boy advance to greet a flock of bustled aunts. The clock struck. They went out like flames—leaving their shadows, shrunk, in frames.

And I went also, up the stairs where Catherine Blake’s embroidered hares danced in the moonlight. Ran a bath under the gaze of a lithograph “Sixty-four Years a Queen,” to whom I bowed: “Allow me to presume to higher strains if you will use it first, ma’am.” “We are not a muse.” And so to such a downy bed and downy pillow that the head no sooner settled . . . than today came in with teacups on a tray.

But not today, and not again the day sketched over the counterpane, an airy canvas, to be swept with sunlight in a south transept, and more than sunlight as we walk through Danes’ Blood, welling from the chalk, or in the workshop carve those two owl-guardians of your gateposts, who today, frock-coated mourners, keen for you as we process between. Your books cry your name from the shelf, but where’s your masterpiece—Yourself?

Not in your house, or over there in Brinkley churchyard’s flinty loam. The rooks return and riot, the rooks return and you do not. I shall know where to find you, however, forever. Old master, now that your fire’s out, draw up a chair to mine, and make yourself at home.

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