



Bushkill Choir

The size of the house was barely thirty times its indweller. The walls were insufficient bulwarks to the ruckus without. And not a room in the four was far enough removed from the rounds of the choir outside, singing hymns, lauds and penance to the tenant, the only living saint in Bushkill's lore and registry, Pastor Tim.

They were all there, for sure, such sound does not rise from neighbors suspicious of a thing happening, but from a whole troop of men called forth for an event. They were all there, except Norman Quill of course, from smart Alowicious Burnside to the (otherwise) quiet Ben Lewis, from the cut-up Marty Sherman to the teacher Gerald Hess, from the energetic Joey Mills to the reflective Robert Munsen. They and all of them had been there for the light and dim of days, ever since Mr. Craylen of Bernadette fame said after potluck dinner that "he's no extra ordinary man, Tim. Oh yes, he's a good guy, a kind of guy you'd want sitting your house or teaching your children after school, you know a sort you'd want in charge of the butchery during a depression. Oh, what he'd done for Claud Stephens when his heart stopped for an evening, or the stunt he pulled to get the taller Laney twin back in the game, or even what he'd done to get crazy Jay Wright out of Catesville's loony bin, well, I tell you, maybe he is something special." And for a man like Mr. Craylen, with all he's seen with the Bernadette women and their six carnival mares, to pay such regards to Bushkill's most enigmatic, bare-footed Pastor -- then there's someone

special. And would you believe that Claud Stephens of a second beating heart would venture Bushkill had a saint living in the small house in Harley Jansen's field?

So sure, Silo Coats was there, who drives down to the Catesville prison with old textbooks and pound cakes, and, too, Freddy Bumperlain who pulled his brother Jonas from the icy depths of The Second Lake by a television antenna when he was twelve, and Jonas himself, his brother's senior, who only remembers the new boots he had worn, a gift from tall Miss Eye Shadow And Hard Candy from church. There was Apologetic George Hyatt who is always genuinely contrite the day after his evening speeches at The Dog and Buttermilk, now owned by Jerry Knots, who was also there, duckpin champ of '68 and emcee of the Small Knight's Charity Ball, and with him of course Kelly Warble, who still arranges parts in his auto shop by the frequency of their malfunction than by part number.

There's Peter Montgomery who's been to Europe twice, Christopher Tiern who's married once again on account of his remarkable vitality, Bibs Taylor whose father was an accredited patriot, and Joseph Mailer who still makes wooden toys. There's Gregory Pryde who once caught a bass so big it got some shaved necks down from Humbert State to rubber hammer their taxonomies, Thomas Fidgen who beat the developers down from Stanton back with a fourth edition Bushkill History and Literature textbook, and Randy L. Jacobson who worked on plans for a true rotary engine decades back and ended up with a patent for padded shoes instead. There's Justice

Tayler who's no relation to Bibs Tayler and finds frequent occasion to relay just that parcel of trivia, Perry Britches who has a daughter named Sara without the 'h', Ellis Moonley back from Canada in time for his son's first scrimmage, and Sam Shoemsmith who never can quite figure out the stock market. There's Ben Stanley who raises hunting dogs but no longer a rifle, Lou Donald who used his bare hands and the month of July to clean up a lot behind Jake's Feed and Garden, Jamis Carson who used a full quarter of his inheritance to stock The Second Lake with trout, and Jib Roy who's recovering just fine, much better than expected.

They were all there, all except Norman Quill of course, and they were all good men. All very good men, all hundred cents to a dollar men. Which is to say they couldn't sing, not a chant, dirge, or diddly. And what a squall of noise they made.

What a protracted, loud as visible squall of noise they made. The dissonance scared up grim fairy tales from children in town old enough to know better. Deer swore off new shoots and spring leaves and even Mary Hyatt's diva gardenias to stay in the mountains. Snakes finally got theirs for the Eden nonsense and grew ears. Crows felt like tyros at orientation, and the howling wind was forced to undress and quit its favorite adjective.

The noise, it sounded like singing to the men, it did, but to the indweller Pastor Tim it took an excessive imagination to discern and sometimes to create the hymn.

Himself, he used to be a boy of course, and just as sure he used to arrest as much as the yard as possible with his small frame and make hippos, dragons, God and busses from the clouds wafting in from his forehead. Sometimes they would enter as busses and leave as dragons and the nose of God would yawn as wide as the amazon of his earliest, brightest imagination. Where the earth beneath him would bulge for the passage of woolly beasts repulsed by the sun and air (where he himself lived and was safe). Where the poison of ivy was the balm of elfin tea, and the Japanese Beetles turned to stone when Mr. Tiern pressed them onto the fingers of his wives. Where he had many friends that would always begin as counselors with each the most peculiar advice, and always end up scrubbers of the monstrous tree queen who bathes through the morning. A monstrously fat tree queen, she surely was, and minutes past daybreak he'd hear the monstrously fat and very well advised-to-hurry footsteps splashing down the small crick behind his mother's house. And those were always very good mornings, to have woken up with cause to laugh.

But it would take a lonely child's imagination to hear much of the song in the singing of the men around Pastor Tim's house, and Pastor Tim was no child but a man of twenty-three.

He exhausted his growing years in a slow but sheer retreat from the Word, but only as it was spoken. It started where most ideas end, with retail. When the till-humming craft store on Tooley moved the hour and ten to the new, bright-as-gum mall in Catesville, his mother lost a second

job and his uncle did what any good working brother would do. He gave her the security of the Bible. Hundreds actually, and bestsellers all of them. These were the latest edition, with colored text, large format footnotes, and a stitched frontispiece depicting a vine over the biding Jonah with the worm at his feet. Every bill and change was take-home and sent to the grocer, and his mother knocked the metal and wood slats of screen doors on one side of the road, and he worked the other, pausing for pumpkin bread, milk and candies leftover from Christmas, Easter and Halloween. Pausing to help move the antique bench from the foyer into the kitchen. Pausing to talk about the endless heat, incessant rains and eternal drought, and to hear why they should raise a bond to rebuild the elementary school to back the way it was before. Pausing to read stories from both testaments to old men and ladies who swore that, "no, I think that's my favorite" after humming approval and raising the level in the spittoon. Pausing to read to himself next to the whirling air conditioner pumps between houses.

He had a raven's eye, picking from the record the most evocative parts, the brand Elijah ribbing the prophets of Baal. He left the rolls of Chronicles for the historians to tick down and took with him the royal robes of Haman, the pompous fool. Soon, on porches with overflowing spittoons, on a Good stack of Books, he was telling stories with a flair for the knee-slapping, would-you-believe-the-irony? They were biblical, but the boy Tim wouldn't let a single audience know it, for every Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel there was instead a sheriff named Manny, and for

every first day of the sixth month of the second year of King Darius, there was instead a day so hot your calves would sag down to your shoes.

He had them laughing, all the time swearing no, no, it couldn't be true. And where on God's good earth do you come up with such nonsense? Well there's a lot to read these days he'd say, and they'd drop their fancy down to the stack of bestsellers beneath him and intone, oh, The Book. And should the elders' elders come round the lattice of the porch that second and catch them with their piety down, they'd wax solemn and remark, "oh yes, I know the story now, and it's a very good story."

But that story's not so funny, or ironical, or fantastic or magical. It's not hippos, dragons, or the nose of God in the sky above them, or woolly beasts bulging the ground beneath them, or the monstrous fat tree queen running down the crick behind their houses. Rather it's 2 Chronicles 34:11 or hymn 83b. And with so many slack faces, nostalgic sighs and rounded eyes, it was the end of wonder for the boy Tim. And that's when he decided to try his hand at miracles.

But isn't that 'O Lord, Our Lord,' they're singing now?

Now the only living saint in Bushkill's lore and registry, Pastor Tim, hunkers down to the dusty slats and creeps past the phonograph bequeathed to him by his mother to press his forehead against the dusted translucence for a look, a very inconspicuous look at his congregation.

Yes, there's Silo Coats testing the stretch of his pants, Robert Munsen remembering the words, George Hyatt at the top of his register and Bibs Tayler straight as a lance. Between the downward blinds he could make out a Mr. Tiern measuring the notes with his hands, Ben Lewis keeping his in his pockets, Ellis Moonley with his collar up and is that Ben Stanley's dogs scratching themselves in the hedge? 'O Lord, Our Lord,' it could well be, and so too 'When We All Get To Heaven' and at times 'Glory Land Way' if the wind shifts again. But, oh, when, he wonders, will they yet get to a somber, calmer 'Farther Along,' or better a solo 'Be With Me Lord,' or perhaps a quietistic reverie? Or for that matter, juggling or pantomime or climbing shoulders and forming human castles such as he once saw in an European guide book. Something, something else, tilling a garden, sodding over the sidewalk, alchemizing the macadam to peat, raising woolly beasts from the bog and dressing the oaks with their apelike silhouettes. Perhaps an impromptu town meeting on mathematical theory, the politics of Aztecs, the nature of stone -- something else besides singing, singing louder than the song, singing louder than he could think to dream.

But now who's this in the dented cream Mercedes and close behind the tilting pickup with its tailgate down and six fatty kid legs pressing the corrugated metal, a cyclist on the sidewalk with his helmet to sit on, two farmers in the yard wearing unfamiliar faces, and a man with short sleeves and a dark tie rolling the window of his dented cream Mercedes? He didn't know them, he was certain he didn't

know them, he wasn't sure why they had come, but how could he? How could Pastor Tim with his own voluminous congregation possibly hear it said through his kitchen radio, or how could he have possibly read in last Sunday's paper this weekend's news, that regionally it's reported a winsome little account of a saint living in the Bushkill area?

There's mention of Claud Stephens' heart, his second beating heart, when in the phony light of a village evening, Claud and his seventy years drops to the heels of his hands and balls up like a snapped tendon a full decade of steps from Bibs Tayler's Lock and Key; how out of the blurred periphery comes Pastor Tim to pull the old man into Bibs', and, miraculously, bid the light from the standing lamps to enter Claud's flushed heart, to beat again. There's mention of the taller Laney twin, with a cracked collarbone, laying under his own stars on a soccer field behind Bishop Ireton's School for young men and truant boys, when out of the worried lot comes Pastor Tim, breathing stock supplications and softly reminding the boy of his consciousness; when, miraculously, he hastens from the earth the tallest grasses and weeds, fullest clovers and dirt exalted to mud by his own spittle and drowns the twin in green, when up for air the boy rises and returns to the game, unbothered. And for the triple, there's mention of crazy Jay Wright, husband to Anne and father of seven until he lost his eighth, crazy Jay Wright found near the hatchery weeks later soliciting the fish to stump evolution and stay in the water; and for that, plus masquerading as the Bushkill Goatman by night, he was compelled to the

Catesville sanatorium, a husband and father of seven. A year later, miraculously, Bushkill's Pastor Tim administers the holy sacrament and the next morning crazy Jay Wright's fit to list the American presidents, recite the high school anthem and pledge his allegiance to the flag; pronounced fit to return to Bushkill.

Now, on all sides of a house small enough to lean with a tip of a shovel, from all corners of a region, there stand, clap and sing a growing clamor of good men. All well meaning, very good men, all very good and very loud men. Whose loud, dissonant singing could very well, with the addition of a few more good men, churn the guts of all creatures and force the mothers to miscarry.

And now good, quiet Pastor Tim sits on the slats in the swirling center of his room. He looks at his books and thinks wistfully of his studies. His collection of obscure Papal bulls, his facsimiles of Marlowe's manuscripts, his footnotes to Faustus. A copy of Hattersby's latest treatise on the arise of an artistically bluffed feudal system. The German Bolt's disturbing efforts to redefine all schools of Western thought into a single and simple ideology by easy, if several iterations of the synonyms that stand between them. A 19th century technical manual on manufacturing an entire cultural identity through articles of dress, hand gestures and expletives. A new history condemning Charlemagne's Alcuin of York and some new medical diagnoses for Swedenborg and Yeat's sleeping wife.

On the counter, with summons, waits the thirteenth book of Euclid's elements (for the first dozen are

unbought), a revised dictionary of hapax legomena, and Soyinka's social vision containing organic gods.

A paper positing that the divorce of the spiritual and the profane happened the moment they were uttered in the same sentence. A treatment of a new economic system entirely conditioned upon the perishability of money. A text on the collaborative efforts to biblically canonize Milton and rearrange the books of the Old Testament.

Fondly he thinks of last week's work on a distinct theology tenuously situated upon the irreconcilability of dark matter and dark energy, the unlikely randomness of evolution, the impossibility of static belief systems, the illusive distinction between coincidence and cause, the deficiencies of a knowledge based solely on questions and answers, the raised freezing point of blood, the expansion of the universe, the ascension of a kind or the damnation of an individual, and at once, he thinks aloud, how can one accept the idea of free will under the steady march of technology when these thin walls are trembling like giant vocal chords, and they too are loudly singing 'The Old Rugged Cross,' or is it something else? And suddenly he thinks, with a desperation he seldom endures, how does a man, a figure whom these people -- these good folk of Bushkill and beyond -- how does a man they apparently regard as holy, or on high, or at least highly, how does a man tell them to cut it out? Rain might do it, he thinks.

A sweeping, water up the back of the shirt type of rain. Or sleet or plague of falling chicken fat. A sale at Rotzky's Tent and Bait Bazaar, or smoke at the lumber

yard. A break-in at the domestic pet zoo, or a cozy bolt of lightning__ No, no, he should endure, he thinks, he should endure and suffer like a saint, even to suffer such dissonance as would embarrass God and force Him to Reconsider. He should endure the great, or loud charity of the men. A people he loves and respects to the hair and marrow, a kind as fast as kin, as sure as the year, and of such a spry and opportunistic goodness as not to be found in the hard, congealed print of his books.

Surely it's fancy that such a horrible sound should figure its source in the throat of such good men. And good Pastor Tim knows what a sack of goodness he'd have for a a good pastor to ask his worshipers to cut the hymning. He thinks of all the goodness well above the spoiling of goodness, and the great presence of all good people present, and he thinks right then that poor Norman Quill should also be there, though he might dispel the bunch like rain.

He considers this, and hurries out to tell the men.

Which is quite a palsy to their jubilation. Here's the growing lot, Gerald Hess passing out six-cent copies of hymns and candles for eventide, Peter Montgomery airing out his falsetto, Jonas Bumperlain switching knees and Kelly Warble smiling and singing with his eyes shut. Here's Jerry Knots, Thomas Fidge, and Gregory Pryde singing in rounds and Ellis Moonley singing unaccompanied arias to the Northern Lights. And Joseph Mailer's doing a jig and Lou Donald covers his heart and the man with the dented cream Mercedes tries his overwhelmed best to pull taut the

tremble of his voice by singing upward to the solar heavens. A mass, panegyric transfiguring choir in dramatic counterpoint, when out comes the Subject Himself, like he's walking out of Walt's Fuel and Pancake Shack to pump gas and ask directions.

He walks right into the crowd, and straight up to Bibs Tayler, and with the mass working back its tongues from their stomachs and as hushed as text, says, "Oh, it's a glorious day for song," as if he were happy with the weather.

"Yes," says Bibs, "people come from all over."

"Ah, beautiful thing," says Pastor Tim, "to see a swelling congregation, and in my own yard -- it's lovely, it's lovely that everybody's come to sing praises together."

"Darn near the whole town," says Bibs, "and Catesville, and Thornton too."

"Thornton," says Pastor Tim, "why, that is a long way -- say Bibs," he says, "where's Norman Quill?"

Bibs looks at him, knowing he'll find no answers in the man with the question but hoping that man will ask something else. Something else, like what's his favorite hymn, or if there will be a summer hotter than last? But solely silence, silence marshalling the crowd like a sudden but highly ambitious regent; and this question concerning Norman Quill. He looks to Silo Coats who's smiling like a fat cherub and then to George Hyatt who puckers his face to presume ignorance and then to Robert Munsen, who looks like his eyelids have snapped back to the top drawer of his intellect.

"Norman Quill," says Bibs, thinking of Norman Quill, Bushkill's evangelist to the estranged, a former strict empiricist, a former of all material vices to pique administering men and get the girl; smoker, drinker, and magnanimous addict, a hit for all and all for a hit, who swallowed an errant bottle cap and the better lining of his throat one morning's alcoholic's night. Norman Quill who swallowed a bottle cap and lost his voice and found it weeks later, cowering in a dark place, deformed and abandoned, a monstrosity better kept from the public. Norman Quill who managed to wield it instead for the counsel of kids at the county high school, first volunteering to recommend youths to acts of expression instead of feats of consumption, then as the most popular and paid guidance counselor and experientially ordained evangelist to the estranged. With a voice that only sounds at horrible levels, deformed and monstrous and meaningful: Norman Quill, given to repeating himself.

"Norman Quill," says Bibs, "he is not here."

"Right," says Pastor Tim, "perhaps you could find him, and bring him here to participate in this, our most open and public worship."

"Yes," says Bibs, "Right, let's see, I can do that. I'll go and," he points to the center of town "find Norman Quill, and," he nods "bring him here, to" he searches the faces of his neighbors, Silo Coats smiling like a painted clown, George Hyatt sucking on his teeth and Robert Munsen thinking he should blink, "to sing with us," says Bibs.

"Or I could go if that would be better," says Pastor Tim.

"No, no," says Bibs, "I'll go, I know where I might find him, you should go back inside, and continue your worship."

"Yes," says Pastor Tim, slowly, watching Bibs stand there, "thank you." And Bibs finally turns and like a horse thief through a stable of cows and bells he gently picks his way through the crowd.

Pastor Tim, the living saint, stands and thinks to make conversation, to ask after Peter Montgomery's mother or the week's forecast, but the expression of the silent collective was such he's seen of schoolyard boys telling tales when the protagonist strolls in, that he returns to his small house and his studies, or worship, and hides behind the dusted glass to wait for Norman Quill.

The mass continued.

And waiting, the Pastor had the chance to witness the odd evolution of his choir's hymning. It begins with a single inspired, or bold man in twenty, freeing his recollection of a thousand Sabbaths, love feasts and Pentecosts and uncorking a random song, at times borrowing the melody of the last or another, at times bravely launching into the refrain. Shortly, in less than a measure, the men directly about hoist the line and ease into the melody until across the yard exist several distinct blooms of diverse song. Men caught between the blooms rudely discover there are two or three, and, as Pastor Tim

suspects, each join the song that is most convincingly sung, or if the contest is even, that which is more easily remembered. The men of the smaller blooms quickly disperse and pollinate the more popular, until only the greatest blooms of shouting men and model song play into a pied kaleidoscope of aural ectopia; and sometimes if the process hurries, enough men of one great bloom will shunt verses to the more ecstatic or familiar until the whole choir in unison sings the same loud old song to the end.

In time, the pastor could document the entire phenomenon, predict its patterns, compile the findings into a thesis on social order, formulize it and run for mayor, but time only allowed a few stillborn ideas before an evident shifting of the crowd betrayed the presence of Quill, wading awkwardly in the middle. He was singing, as it were, or so it seemed. For shy to the gathering he began singing quietly, which is to say he did not sing at all, his throat unmoved to any feeble attempt to blow air through its scarred chamber. For Quill, to really sing meant an exhalation of some serious conviction, and, though shy to the gathering, he was too urged by the momentousness of the occasion and even more so by his exceptional invitation to sing. So he sang. He warily brought up the force of air passing through his throat until he just hit the threshold of silence into sound. A very loud sound, and self-consciously he would back off to silence before warily blowing back to the threshold to sound again. He continued the practice for the better part of a song until he became aware that his neighbors in the choir were becoming quite vexed at these

alarming bursts of noise. So, feverish with embarrassment for his fickle performance he closed his eyes and pushed his voice well, well over the threshold and sang a marvelously, horribly uproarious alarum that quickly collapsed the blooms directly about in sudden fright and confusion. Freddy Bumperlain seized the arm of his brother, Perry Britches ducked and Marty Sherman hurled his song sheets to the rippled air, as if the continent had cracked and there's the devil's mill. But while the blooms around Quill had indeed collapsed, the rest of the choir managed to sing high over the plateau of noise like seasoned champions. Several buffers of bodies away Sam Shoemith only skipped a line like a tilted phonograph, Ben Stanley thought of his dogs in the verse 'lo, we point to righteousness,' and smart Ałowicious Burnside decided to sing louder. It was left, then, to the men around Quill to figure a way to dampen, or deflect, or cut entirely this protracted, loud as visible squall of noise. Quickly, across the street they met in committee.

How do men in worship, it's asked of them, men that duly celebrate and honor goodness -- humble, good men -- how do they ask another good man to shut up? "Stomach problems" suggests Marty Sherman, and he clarifies, "if he were to have stomach problems." Certainly, or asthma, or emphysema, bronchitis or hiccups, a bee sting to the thick of the tongue, a bucket of cold water, marshmallows, rubbing alcohol and peanut butter, duct tape, gauze and fishing line, a phone call from a bored

generation, a lonely young anarchist, and a gangly new kid with a rock sling collection.

No, says Jonas Bumperlain, we should embrace him. "His singing is horrible and it's distracting, but his voice is witness to the bad he's overcome. Norman Quill," he says, "is a very good young man, he is our troubled youth's greatest confessor, and the kids love him."

"Yes," says Perry Britches with a daughter named Sara. "Sara," he says, "she told me that when the taller Laney twin was taken to the hospital after the big game, Norman Quill sat with him all night and the four days after that, and taught him how to whistle."

"And he fishes with crazy Jay Wright," adds Marty Sherman. "Gives that man company."

"He is a good man," says Jerry Knots, "and none well enough appreciated."

"He's always there to give a hand," says Jonas Bumperlain."

"Even the least of us," says Marty Sherman.

"And even if his singing is loud and distracting," repeats Jonas Bumperlain, "we should embrace him, for Norman Quill is a good man, and he needs friends."

"Young man like that," agrees Jerry Knots, "needs a lady friend too."

"Yes," says Marty Sherman, "every good man should have a lady friend at least a time in his life."

"Sure," says Perry Britches.

"Keeps the spirit tickled," says Marty Sherman.

"How 'bout Joseph Mailer's pretty daughter," says Jerry Knots, "she's home from school isn't she?"

"Sure is," says Perry Britches.

"Pretty one too," says Marty Sherman.

"We could bring her here right now," says Jerry Knots, "to meet Norman."

"We could," says Jonas Bumperlain.

"Sure," says Jerry Knots, "we could bring her in and have her meet Norman, and maybe they can go out for coffee or cards, or bowling or a movie."

"Sure," says Perry Britches, "even if it means Norman Quill having to leave us."

"Yes," says Jonas Bumperlain, looking at Perry Britches, looking at Jerry Knots, looking at Marty Sherman, "and a pretty woman is decidedly better than any stomach pain. Decidedly better."

Now it's true that Joseph Mailer's daughter is preponderantly gorgeous, she makes men nod knowingly to one another as her parts each swivel and bob on by, and her name is Nikki. But Sara Britches had a devil of a time finding her, so she brought Joseph Mailer's niece instead, Minnow, a puckish girl of twenty. Her hair is dark and it drops and coils to the odd hop in her gait, she rolls on her heels and up to her toes and her face never shies from the sun; and when she was brought to the choir in the yard, the Committee for the Coupling of Norman Quill was convinced it had its model woman.

"Well she's perfect," says Jerry Knots.

"They'll have a good time, " says Jonas.

"Sure, sure," says Perry Britches.

All the while Pastor Tim, their doer of miracles, is watching Norman Quill sing. He's noticed the school busses, the prison busses, and a pair and the whole of Neddy Bunts' taxi fleet down the road. Bushkill school children gawking at the human in the prisoners, seeing the shapes of their fathers and uncles, and the Catesville prisoners reckoning the same of their sons and daughters, when Bart Carter's son and his improvised tractor and trailer/parking shuttle split both groups in two and the teacher and the warden are visibly glad to settle their head counts once the tractor stops. More strangers in denim emptying the trailer and joining their ranks in the neighboring fields, bending the young corn stalks into willow figures and kinking the vines of the tomato plants, ruckusing the shale of the stone walls and claiming the lower branches of the oaks. And there too is Norman Quill, singing with his eyes shut, willfully blind to the eddy of empty space around him, a space that newcomers beware, and join the surrounding blooms and sing impossibly louder.

Pastor Tim, and because he has to, wonders aloud, and he wonders aloud when he'll ever be able to read and study and write again, when only the bullfrogs duel and all the locusts stop at once. He wonders aloud when he'll be able to read and study and write again, and against the whirling bellow of noise outside he thinks how very odd his

own voice sounds. How displaced and otherworldly, distant and alien. He sings a line he wrote, "in troves they must/in boughs they lay," and he can't remember what he meant by it, or if he had addressed it to a person real or imaginary, but he's certain he's able to riddle it out once the choir ends and the crickets tune and the locusts stop all together.

Except louder the choir sings, and so does Norman Quill, and so does the choir; all but a few concerned men and an impish girl in their middle, walking down the road to get away from the racket.

"You can call me Minnow, too," she says to Jerry Knots and the others ripe in the cordials of the convention. The committee is walking in different heights around her, but they're all heading the same direction. "Minnow," says Jerry Knots, "do you know Norman Quill?"

"I know of Norman Quill," she says, "I've heard of him."

"He was in a rock band," says Marty Sherman.

"Yes," she says, "he used to play in a band, and he once chewed and swallowed a light bulb on a dare, and when he was young he was beat up by Stanton High."

"A bottle cap," says Jonas, "he swallowed a bottle cap."

"And he once chewed and swallowed a light bulb on a dare," she says.

"Yes," says Jerry Knots, "and now he's a good young man and works with the kids."

"And the kids love him," says Jonas.

"Oh yes," she agrees, "they do, and he helps out at the training center where they teach the mental patients to play kickball."

"A good man," says Jerry Knots, "and here we are celebrating Pastor Tim when it occurs to us that besides singing hymns we could learn from his example and do a good turn for one of our own."

"All part of the celebration," says Perry Britches.

"Yes," says Jerry Knots, "we thought we could provide for one who gives our town so much."

"That's Norman Quill," says Marty Sherman.

"You see," continues Jerry Knots, "we thought we might be able to show our appreciation if --"

"If," says Marty Sherman, "we were to take him out."

"To a movie or something," says Perry Britches, "or doughnuts and a movie."

"Oh," says Minnow, who's been watching them as if they were reading for a part on the local news. She decides there's time to rub out a clutch from the coils of her hair when Marty Sherman spouts "but who cares eat doughnuts with old men?", followed by a pause designed to convey the request.

She looks up, "and that's where I come in?"

"Well it could be," says Jerry Knots, "it would be, we think, a nice gesture."

"Just a gesture," says Perry Britches with a daughter of his own, "a nice simple gesture."

"He is a good young man after all," says Jonas.

"And we'd pay for the movie so you don't have to worry about that," says Jerry Knots, and there she stands cold; and a mite incredulous and silent as a velvet sheet descending from space. "We just think," says Jerry Knots reassuringly, "that it'd be more worthwhile if someone his own age were to take him out, on us."

"Very straightforward," says Perry Britches, "very simple and good."

"Yes," says Jonas, "all you would have to do is stand by him and talk to him when he talks to you."

"Yes," says Jerry Knots, "it might be better if going out to town were his idea."

"Very simple," says Marty Sherman, "all you have to do is stand by him and smile."

"Sure," says Perry Britches.

"Smile and tilt your head back," says Marty Sherman as he does with his own rumpled head. "And maybe touch your neck with your fingertips like this, and giggle like the grasses are tickling the back of your knees."

"And stand tall," says Jerry Knots, "and keep good posture, and make sure to giggle and keep your face clear of your hair, and every so often --"

"Wait, wait, wait a minute," she says, "hold on," she looks back from whence they came. "I know of Norman Quill, he is trusted by all and he used to play in a band and no one can think to say anything bad about him, except that he has a strange voice. I do see that you are trying to do good by him. I don't necessarily see why, but I do see that

you mean no harm in it. But I certainly won't flirt. I'll stand by him, and if he talks to me, I'll speak with him. And if he seems interested I'll suggest we ditch this thing and go out for doughnuts, but with some friends of mine."

"That's perfect," says Jerry Knots, "that's perfect."

"You'll have a good time," says Jonas.

"Sure, sure," says Perry Britches.

Now the oak boughs are sagging with drapes of bone-filled trousers, the willow figures of corn have been racked to the earth and bullied to dust by hard squarish boots, and the undone stone walls can barely swell the crush of men, women and tucks from Bushkill, Catesville, Stanton, Beasley, Caperton, Giles, Busby, Sprigsville, Wolf's Cross, Buckskin, Laggars, Oxtoe, Bethlehem, Mt. Villa, Longsbury, Ashburg, Lechton and every promise and poor excuse in between. A thousand, it seems a thousand rattling tongues blustered by a single bloated lung, a vortex, inflamed irises, and spittle sprays of mongrel song that precipitate and pit the windows with fish-eye globes to multiply the mass several times again, their egg-shaped faces, their oblong, deformed, monstrous and unfamiliar faces singing screaming unknown verses, their wrapped scores of bodies in heaps of stacks of bunches of piles, their cobbled heads decking the carnage in packed rows -- save for a spot:

An unpopulated spot, an airy bloom in the Pastor's property, where Pastor Tim expects to find Quill alone.

And when he rolls the crust out of his eyes and sleeves clean the dust from a larger window, he does find Quill, singing with his eyes shut, but with some other, some little other, some peculiar girl with her face to the sun and touching her neck and laughing at some unseen and highly amusing escapade.

He's never seen her before, which quite suits his profession because he believes she's lovely. He's certain she's lovely and he crowns her, Pastor Tim, by wondering who she might be and whose she is. Daughter, sister, wife, or mother, whose luck is she? Who plays for her, who wakes, dresses and enlists the whole of his purpose for her? Who calls her by name, who calls her by the name she'd rather be called?

She's lovely, four foot seven and harvest of curls, and Bushkill's newsworthy saint is floored by a single puckish girl in a clearing of the crowd. Seems a thousand tongues wagging for worship, their hymns, chants, lauds and hollers of witness lofting in a gale through the limits of mortal hope and dominion, in reciprocal exaltation of their practically beatified saint, cocooned in a small house in a corn field, and He's sweating like a boy before a mixed party. Like a boy before a girl he's first noticed to be tangibly alive and fantastically real, a girl uncategorical, a girl more than. A sight and soul more wondrous than he's ever seen beyond the epic nonsense of his books and gusting heights of his invention:

She's the sister written out of Genesis for refusing to mother a nation for the dowry of old men, the fair

prophetess who's married to no prophet and brings the Temple's Court of Women to blush and shame themselves to secrecy, the elysian vision that holds hundreds of men under the oxgoad, and the seductive theophany of free will.

She's the changing of clouds, the sky that makes the ground swell, the jealousy that bids the tree queen to bathe into the morning, and she's outside, laughing in his yard. As close to approach as to open a hymnal.

He finds his under a stack of tomes and binders and notes to self, and walks outside.

...

Yet, she dispatched him quickly. That is to say she looked at him for coming but noticed him not a wit. His plan, as it occurred to him slipping out the back door, was to stroll like the Holy Spirit into Norman Quill's exclusive bloom, stand aside the material cast of his intense fancy, four foot seven and topped with curls, and sing. His singing, he hoped, would be punctually improved by its dissimilitude to Norman Quill's loud and awful singing, and he hoped that a fair slice of her attention would reward his efforts. And of course he wished being the subject, or at least catalyst of worship by the giant masses might help his chances as well.

But as loud as he could sing, and he sang his loudest, she did not break the curious regime of rubbing her neck and laughing at nothing.

All he could do, which he did exceptionally well but nevertheless unwittingly, was to capture the attention of everybody else. Thomas Fidgen turned as if he'd found standing the dead of Bushkill's history, Gerald Hess surveyed the crowd to see if anybody else noticed, and Joey Mills, Ellis Moonley, Justice Tayler, Jamis Carson and Jib Roy met his attention. Here they were in Harley Jansen's corn field, and worshippers from distant counties had come to sing praises to their famous saint, and there He was, but a man of twenty-three, singing, and not all too well, next to Norman Quill.

They know there's nothing particularly fantastic or magical about singing to an empty house in Harley Jansen's corn field, and they wondered what people might make of their only saint now that he was standing there among them, visible, and with all the cracks and chips and variability of the living. The question quickly became how should good men -- humble, God-fearing hundred cents to the dollar men -- how should they ask their good pastor to quit the hymning and, with speed, return to his house? But with Claud Stephens' heart beating by its own current, the Laney twin's head right and his body recovered, and crazy Jay Wright slaking his loss in the sacrament, collected and quiet, and not a miracle requested in the county, the consensus among the Bushkill elders was to themselves leave immediately.

And once they did, and Minnow with them for hope of doughnuts, the core was lost and the crowd scuttled of

its resolve, the mass ended and returned to light their houses.

Now the fields are clear, the rubble of rocks marks the old stone wall, pocks in the mud tell of a good gathering, and the boughs of the oaks shrug their bark. They remain singing, the two who remain, the good Pastor Tim and Norman Quill, singing with his eyes shut. They hoist the lines between them. And sing loud the old familiar songs.

And none of them exceptional, or too glorious.