

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-48735-2 - The Hollow Vale
A Poem by James Turner
Excerpt
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PROLOGUE

What I have been and shall be
Are two sides of a looking-glass,
Polished and unpolished, blurred and bright,
And, sometime, silver as for a bride
Or a home-coming.

I shall take the long road home in the dark.
Yet no man knoweth his home,
Only the road thither and the ache
Which turns him over the hills,
Puts his hand to the smoke-green bole of the oak,
Lifts his eyes into the moonfed darkness.
The long road home in the dark!
And home, whether it be a place
Where feeds the raven, or a high hill
On which rises a temple built in white stone,
Or the hallucination of a spirit along a lane
Trodden and re-trodden always towards the light.

If I shall raise my hands
That the weight of my feet
May be drawn from the earth,
Then it is time to deny myself
And, with curving, to destroy
The shibboleths of youth,
The ardent love of strangeness.

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I will turn my feet now under the dark
Where I have felt an eternal pulse,
I will turn my feet homewards,
Forsake wandering over the plains
Of the spirit depressed,
And down beside the river
Where the osiers are golden rods
I will take, homewards, my shell of experience.
There was a way bright with petals
And polished buds; and there was a way
Golden with empty brass upon which my feet
Trode as in a burning wilderness,
And there was a way about me and about.
The soul fell down into the dark night,
 Into the abyss
Of serpents born of a hollow wish.
The serpent's eye with green light blazed,
The scorpion like a clot of blood,
The hooded cobra drummed out death.
Here the pit, its mouth steel-riveted
 Fired with a brazen dark.
The rising figures of life-myth
Tear at the mind and bite the memory,
Potent to claim the soul turned homeward,
And only at the throat a longing thirst
Like tiger's fangs in a green jungle.

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Fiery liquid burn in me
With a fierce intensity,
Burn my eyes and burn my brain,
Burn my lips with fearful pain.

Fiery liquid burning bright,
Burn my taste and burn my sight,
Sear my flesh and sear my hair,
Consume with flame me everywhere.
That of the fire I be a part,
Burn, at last, within my heart.

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THE QUEST

How brave the flesh on a setting-out,
The mind like a blade of Toledo
Swift and flashing. For the quest
Is nothing but a going-forth into the hollow vale,
Into the winds; and the leave-taking,
The last turn of the head towards the homestead,
The stirrup cup from hands of younger brother,
Is to the mind an adventure.

This is the sought-for cup with silver blazon,
The chalice and the grail,
End and beginning, hate and love,
The spectre of a shield; echo of cloth of gold.

Who goes forth to find what?
The hands shall be like empty stone
Of a statue, and the magic words
Shall avail no more than the laugh of a toad
Against the shut doors, the stone templates.
Flesh of my flesh shall the journey be,
And the bone shall appear beyond the flesh
With the heart torn out and held aloft,
And the apex of a head lifted
As the dome of a cathedral over the crowds
Passing in at the doors, or passing out.
Black shall the flesh be, burnt in the fire

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Of the endless journey over desolate tracks
Where breath is turned into stone,
And the green bird chants to a lonely waste.

And the journey will hold magic.
But who shall say that is no trap
To have heard the song of the maiden over the shore,
Or to have hung beads on the moon
In the lazy days, when purpose waned,
Journey forgotten?

Come now to the terrifying place
And behold the earth like waste of lead,
The leaden waterless desert, greying to dust,
Snaring the feet with its dusty weight,
All, all is gone save the bird of prey.
Others have spoken of the journey,
The lonely heath, desolation in places;
And coming home again have told
Their traveller's tales of squalid holes
Where serpent coils to spring,
Of battles with intangibilities,
The fierce grip of the winds in the wastes.
One has said of the mysterious place
That there is nothing there but God only,
And yet nothing strange. Everything

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In that place was familiar,
Well known and nourished.

Who has listened to a traveller's tale
And did not wish to take his horse,
His spears and his dogs, then, at that moment,
Into the unknown? Brave is the flesh
Before the exaggerated story
And the hearth-worn adventure.

Or who would mark the scars on an old face,
Or stay to enquire whence they came?
For when the day is come surely the sun
Is token enough of possibility
And promise of success, that where one failed
Another will not fail?'

Who now will deny the green bird,
Now that the day is come
When brother's handshake is a welcome end
To dreaming and long wish-fulfilment?
Follow the bird down the hill
Into the hollow vale. Spread out the fine mantle
Over your shoulders till you come
Where pride is bitten in the dust,
And the asphodel melts into the desert.

Many have been and have their tokens;
Some returned not, but their end

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Is the high end of all God's adventures,
A place for the lonely heart,
A little earth to cover nakedness.

This way the bird of prey shall not have all.

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THE LOVING

I have looked down into the ancient city
And seen the streets paved with gold,
The sunlight off the roofs like horned trumpets,
The dogs there gnawing a man's bone.

I have looked into the heart
And taken a gleaming sword from scabbard
To go forth to her and to claim her love

Which none claimed but I

And none knew but I.

I have come to the door of the house
At night, and seen the candle-light
Raise shadows on the stone walls,
And stood, alone, in the empty room
Waiting for the signal and the hour
When I should come to her.

From over the hill tolled the wide bell
Of Fate, curving in over the sea-borne
Loveliness, down as dusk fell,
Down as sun fell into patined woods,
Down into the watermeads.
Shadows have put their tongues
Along the hedges. The hills turned over,
Falling with a slow deep fall

Down to the lowlands.

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Here have I stood within the ancient shrine
With but the muffled bell tolling
Softly over the boundless and enchanted sea,
Waiting here with gifts in my heart
To fulfil the dream and create the Now.

Lonely is the spirit with nothing heard
But the tolled bell over the waves,
Where halcyon nests and the green cups
Make soft murmur under moonlight.
The bordering of life
The sea-girt circle of sky!

Here have I stood beside the sacred shrine,
Within the mansion where I had come
In the course of journeyings taken
For love, for love-sickness and for Truth,
And again for love-sickness.

But now all ways lead from outwards
To inwards. From end of the world
The forked tongues issue flame.
By the well of burning rivers have I stood
Within the naked rock of the castle,
To await her coming.

The darkling bat wheeled in upon me,
Bore down the great wings over fading sun

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Obscuring light with flame diminishing.
And so I stood where Launcelot stood of old,
Where Arthur gave his sword to be returned,
And where that Queen had stood in sorrow;

I stood for her.

The night burnt darkly and the soul
Within that shell increased its fear
To be alone, to face the naked light
Of death, destruction, and a grave.

Trumpets have filled the wide spaces,
Silver trumpets have borne the heralding
Of her coming. Of her coming has the charm
Of wide-mouthed bells given herald.

The heavens split; hands have opened
The cleft to clothe the sapphire woods

In yellow light.

In gold was her raiment, and in gold her shoes,
In gold her girdle and in gold her hair.
From the green sea-depths has she come
With her arts before her and her servants.

The cries of the night bird have been about me,
At my throat a strange strangling
As if a hand from out the spinney, or along the lane,

Or rising from the moat,

Came following.