
Lee Carroll
The Watchtower
You can't see them, but they are watching you.
Some are there to protect you, others to destroy...

About the Book

The last in a long line of women sworn to guard our world against evil, jeweller Garet James is struggling to come to terms with who – or what – she really is.

Will Hughes, the alluring four-hundred-year-old vampire who tasted her blood and saved her life, could help, but he's disappeared. Garet believes he's in France, searching for the Summer Country, the legendary land of the Fey where he might be freed from his vampire curse.

Desperate to understand her legacy, Garet follows Will. In Paris, she encounters strange, mythic beings – an ancient botanist metamorphosed into the city's oldest tree, a gnome who lives beneath the Labyrinth at the Jardin des Plantes, a dryad in the Luxembourg Gardens – meetings that convince her she is on the right path.

But Garet is not the only one trying to find the way in to the Summer Country – and the closer she gets, the more dangerous it becomes …

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Lee Carroll

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To our daughters, Nora and Maggie

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Nothing would be possible without our loving and supportive families.

1

The Pigeon

THE PARK OUTSIDE the church smelled like pigeon droppings and cat pee. At least I hoped it was cat pee. After my first week in Paris, I realized that I hadn't seen any cats. Pigeons, yes. Each morning I sat with the pigeons and the still sleeping homeless people, waiting for my chance to sit inside the smallest, and surely the dimmest, little church in Paris in order to wait some more … for what I wasn't sure. A sign. But I didn't even know what form that sign would take.

It had all started with a silver box I found in an antiques shop in Manhattan, which I had unwittingly opened for the evil Dr. John Dee—yes, John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's alchemist, who should have been dead almost four hundred years, but wasn't—unleashing the demons of discord and despair onto New York City. With the help of some fairies—Oberon, Puck, Ariel … the whole Shakespearean crew plus a diminutive fire sprite named Lol—I had gotten the box back and closed it, only to have it stolen by Will Hughes, a rather charming four-hundred-year-old vampire whom I'd fallen in love with. Will had taken it to open a door to the Summer Country and release a creature who could make him mortal again so we could be together, so I suppose I could forgive him for that. But why hadn't he taken me with

him? I would have followed Will on the path that led to the Summer Country. Will had told me on the first night we met wandering through the gardens outside the Cloisters that he had taken the path once before, following signs left behind by his beloved Marguerite, who turned out to be my ancestor. The first sign had appeared outside an old church in Paris. The path always changed, Will had told me, but it always started in that church. You just had to wait there for a sign that would tell you where to go next.

So when, months after Will disappeared, just when I thought I'd gotten over him, an anonymous art buyer sent to my father's gallery a painting of an old church in Paris, which my father identified as Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in the Latin Quarter, I knew the painting must have come from Will and that he was asking me to join him on the path to the Summer Country.

I made my plane reservation right away and booked my room at the Hôtel des Grandes Écoles, the little Latin Quarter pension where my parents had spent their honeymoon. I told my father and friends Jay and Becky that I was going to Paris to research new jewelry designs at the Louvre and in the Museum of Decorative Arts. I read in their eyes how thin the pretext was, but they hadn't questioned me too deeply. After the events of last fall—a burglary, my father getting shot, me ending up burned and battered in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx—they didn't need to know more to think I could use a couple of weeks away. And what more diverting place to go than Paris?

If they had known I planned to spend my mornings sitting in a dim, musty church waiting for a sign from my vampire lover, perhaps they would have suggested a month in the Hamptons instead.

On my seventh morning in the church I had to admit that the old women with their string bags and the old men with their copies of *Le Monde* were all more likely to receive a sign from the doe-eyed saints on the walls than I

was. I slipped out of the quiet church, avoiding the eyes of the black-robed priest, who, after seeing me here for seven mornings in a row, must have wondered, too, what I was looking for, and escaped into the only slightly more salubrious air of the Square Viviani.

Like the church, the Square Viviani needed something to boast of besides its homeless inhabitants and free Wi-Fi access. For Viviani, it was the oldest tree in Paris, a *Robinia pseudoacacia fabacées* planted in 1602 by the botanist Jean Robin, now leaning so perilously toward the walls of Saint-Julien that I found myself worrying that one of these mornings, on which I would no doubt still be sitting here waiting for my sign, the oldest tree in Paris would fall onto the oldest church in Paris and collapse with it, like the two old drunks curled up like nesting spoons on the next bench.

To keep such an event from happening, the city of Paris has propped the twenty-or-so-foot-tall tree up with a cement girder ingeniously sculpted to look like a tree itself, and the actual tree has been fortified against some blight with an unsightly patch of gray cement, one large enough that I could probably have squeezed into the hole it filled. It made me feel sorry for the tree … or perhaps it's just that I was feeling sorry for myself.

To make my self-pity complete, a pigeon landed on my head. I was so startled I let out a yelp and the pigeon flapped indignantly to my feet and squawked at me. It was an unusual one, brown and long-necked, perhaps some indigenous European variety. I looked closer … and the bird winked at me.

I laughed so loud that I woke up one of the sleeping drunks. She clutched her ancient mackintosh around her scrawny frame, pointed her bent fingers at me, and gummed a slurry of words that I interpreted to mean *He fooled you, didn't he?* Then she put her fingers to her mouth and I realized she was asking for a cigarette.

I didn’t have a cigarette so I offered her a euro, and she slipped it into an interior pocket of her mac, which I noticed was a Burberry *and* her only garment. She pointed again to the brown pigeon, who had taken up a commanding pose atop the *Robinia pseudoacacia*, from which it regarded me dolefully.

“Amélie,” the woman said.

I pointed to the pigeon and repeated the name, but she laughed and pointed to herself.

“Oh, you’re Amélie,” I said, wondering if it was her real name or one she’d taken because of the popular movie with Audrey Tautou.

“Garet,” I told her, then gave her another euro and got up to go. If I needed a sign to show me that I was spending too much time in the Square Viviani, it was being on a first-name basis with the homeless there.

I decided to go to the other place I’d frequented this week—a little watch shop in the Marais. The owner, ninety-year-old Horatio Durant, was an old friend of my parents’. On the first day I had visited him, he took me on what he called a horological tour of Paris.

“They should call Paris the City of Time,” he declared, striding down the rue de Rivoli, his cloud of white hair bobbing like a wind-borne cloud, “instead of the City of Light.” He showed me the enormous train-station clock in the Musée d’Orsay and the modernist clock in the Quartier de l’Horloge composed of a brass-plated knight battling the elements in the shape of savage beasts. He took me to a watch exhibit at the Louvre, then to the Musée des Arts et Métiers to see the astrolabes and sundials, where I fell in love with a timepiece that had belonged to a sixteenth-century astrologer named Cosimo Ruggieri. It had the workings of a watch revealed through a transparent crystal, but its face was divided into years instead of hours. Stars and moons revolved around the perimeter, and inset into a small window, a tree lost its leaves, gained a snowy

mantle, sprouted new leaves, and turned to blazing red. I sketched it again and again, making small changes, until I found I had an unbearable itch to cast it into metal. Monsieur Durant told me I was welcome to use his workshop. He lent me not only his tools, but also his expertise with watchmaking. A week later I had almost finished it.

After I left the park and took the metro to the Marais, I spent a few hours happily etching the last details on the timepiece. I had modified the design by adding a tower topped by an eye with rays coming out of it.

"That's an interesting motif," Monsieur Durant remarked when I showed him the finished piece. "Did you copy it from someplace?"

"It was on a signet ring I saw once," I replied, without mentioning that it had been on Will Hughes's ring. Will had explained that the ring had belonged to my ancestor Marguerite D'Arques. The symbol represented the Watchtower, an ancient order of women pledged to protect the world from evil. Four hundred years ago Will had stolen the ring from Marguerite and left in its place his own swan signet ring, which had subsequently been handed down from mother to daughter until my mother had given it to me when I was sixteen just months before she died.

"A watchtower for a watch," Monsieur Durant remarked, squinting at it through his jeweler's loupe. When he looked up at me, his eye was freakishly magnified and I felt exposed. Did Monsieur Durant know about the Watchtower? But he only smiled and said, "How apropos!"

After I left Monsieur Durant's I stopped on the Pont de la Tournelle. As I watched the sun set behind the turrets of Notre Dame, I realized I hadn't made my evening vigil at Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. Checking my new watch, which now hung around my neck, I saw that it was almost ten o'clock. The long days of the Paris summer had fooled me. I felt a twinge of guilt then, followed by a pang of grief. I wasn't

going to get a message. If Will had really sent the painting of the church—and even that certitude was fading fast in the limpid evening light—perhaps he had only sent it as a farewell. An apology for betraying my trust and stealing the box. A reminder that he'd needed it to embark on his own quest for mortality. Perhaps it served no more purpose than a postcard sent from a foreign land with the message *Wish you were here*. It hadn't been an invitation at all.

With another pang I recalled another moment by a river. That very first night I had spent with Will we had sat on a parapet above the Hudson and he had told me his history. "When I was a young man," he had begun, "I was, I am sorry to say, exceedingly vain of my good looks, and exceedingly shallow. So vain and shallow that although many beautiful young women fell in love with me and my father begged me to marry and produce an heir, I would not tie myself to one lest I lose the adulation of the many."

I remembered looking at his profile against the night sky and thinking that he might be forgiven a little vanity, but that he had surely gained depth over the centuries.

But had he? Might I not be just another of those young women who had adored him and whom he had spurned?

The sun-struck water blurred into a haze of gold light in front of my eyes. I thought it might be one of my ocular migraines, but then I realized it was only my tears blurring my vision.

He isn't coming, he isn't coming. I heard the words chiming inside my head as the bells of Notre Dame began to toll the hour.

How many disappointed lovers had stood on this bridge and thought those words? How many had leaned a little farther over the stone parapet and given themselves to the river rather than face another day without their beloved?

Well, not me, I thought, straightening myself up. As I did, I felt the timepiece ticking against my chest like a second heart. I looked at it again, pleased with the work I'd

done. The week hadn't been a total waste. The timepiece would be the basis of a new line of jewelry when I got back to New York. I'd found exactly the inspiration I'd told my friends I'd come here looking for. Could I hate Will for calling me to Paris if this was the result?

No. The answer was that I couldn't hate him. But that didn't mean I had to spend the rest of my vacation sitting in a dark, musty church waiting for him.

I walked slowly back toward the Square Viviani. I had never tried to go to the church after dark, mostly because of the concerts that were held there at night. To night was no exception, but I thought if I waited until after the concertgoers left, I might be able to sneak in. I felt I had to go tonight while my mind was made up. I had to go one last time to say good-bye.

The concert was still going on when I got there, so I waited in the square for it to finish. At first the square was crowded enough with tourists that I didn't worry about being safe here at night. This area by the Seine, across the river from Notre Dame, was especially popular with the students who filled the schools on the Left Bank during the summer. I listened to a group of American girls laughing about a man who had approached them outside Notre Dame that day.

"Was it crazy pigeon man again?" a girl with wavy, brown hair and a dimple in her left cheek asked.

"No," a redheaded girl answered. "It was crazy pigeon man's friend Charlemagne man!"

"Oh, yeah!" a third girl with black bangs low over her forehead replied. "The one who went on about how Charlemagne was a great man and he founded the schools so we could come here to study art. Don't you think he's got Charlemagne mixed up with Napoléon?"

"I think he's got more than that mixed up!" the dimpled girl responded.

I listened to them dissect the crazy ranting of the two street characters—I'd seen them myself in the square in front of Notre Dame—and then go on to talk of the paintings they'd seen at the d'Orsay that day, the eccentricities of their art teacher ("What do you think he means when he says my lines need more *voce*?"), and the accordion players on the metro ("I like the one at the Cluny stop whose accordion sounds like an organ"), and I thought, how wonderful to be a student in Paris! Why shouldn't I enjoy myself the way they were, reveling in the whole scene instead of waiting for a sign that wasn't going to come?

The girls talked until the one with the brown, wavy hair looked down at her watch and gasped. "We're going to miss the midnight curfew if we don't run!" she said. I was as startled, looking at my watch, as she was by how much time had passed. As they hurriedly left the park, I noticed that all the tourists were evaporating into the night. The last of the concertgoers were hurrying away—all except one tall man in a long overcoat and wide-brimmed hat who'd paused at the gate staring in my direction. Perhaps he was just waiting for someone—or maybe he was a thief waiting for the park to clear out so he could rob me—or worse. Certainly the homeless people wouldn't be of any help. The ones who were left in the park—Amélie curled up in her raincoat with her companion—were already asleep or passed out.

I got up to go, my movement startling a pigeon roosting on a Gothic turret. It was the long-necked, brown pigeon. He landed a few feet from me and fixed me with his strangely intelligent eye. Then he fluttered up to the leaning tree, landing on the scarred bark just above the cement gash. His claws skittered for purchase there for a moment. His glossy brown wings gleamed in the streetlight, revealing a layer of iridescent colors—indigo, mauve, and violet—beneath the brown. Across the Seine

the bells of Notre Dame began to chime midnight. The pigeon steadied himself and began to peck at the cement. Startled, I noticed he pecked once for each toll of the bells.

Okay, I thought, someone has trained this bird and is having a laugh at my expense. Could it be that man in the long coat and hat waiting at the gate? But when I glanced over, I couldn't see the man at the gate anymore. I couldn't even see the gate. A ring of darkness circled the square that was made up of the shadows of trees, but also something else … some murky substance that wasn't black but an opalescent blend of indigo, mauve, and violet—the same colors in the pigeon's wings—a color that seemed to be the essence of the Parisian night.

As Notre Dame chimed its last note, I looked back at the tree. The gray cement was gone, peeled away like a discarded shell. In its place was a gaping hole, pointed at the top like a high Gothic arch. The brown pigeon stood at the center of the arch staring at me. With a flick of its wing —for all the world like a hand waving me in—he turned and waddled into the vaulted space inside the tree as if going through his own front door. Clearly that's what the gap in the tree was—a door. But to what?

Perhaps I had misread my invitation to come to Paris, but surely this was an invitation. Maybe even a sign. I might not get another. I got up and followed the pigeon into the oldest tree in Paris.

2

Shattered Glass

“THE POET IS coming!” Will Hughes said.

“What?” Bess, his companion of the moment, asked.

“Christ, I completely forgot!” Will declared. A slender, paleskinned youth in his late teens, he propped himself up on one elbow in the luxuriant grass. He and Bess had been lying in the shade of his favorite secluded grove on his father’s estate, Swan Hall, and now when he reached into his pocket and extended his pocket sundial into a sliver of sunlight, the shadow indicated it was already past two. The sonneteer must be waiting for him in the great hall. The servants wouldn’t admit him to the study where they usually worked together unless Will was actually in the house.

He pictured his tutor sitting on one of the huge wooden benches just inside the front door, legs crossed, his features with a superficial air of patience that didn’t quite conceal his irritation at being kept waiting. Which, since his tutor and the poet were the same person, could be a displeased moment that would soon find its way into a sonnet, complaining again about “the young man,” whose father, Lord Hughes, knew to be him, Will. Will thought he’d better hurry, especially as he had to first usher Bess covertly off the grounds of Swan Hall via a winding,

secretive route. Neither of them were exactly … dressed yet. Will would pay a price with Bess for rushing her off, yes. But he took a deep breath and clambered to his feet.

“I’m really late,” he mumbled.

“You care about that poet so much,” Bess complained as Will hoisted her to her feet. She put up her coils of glimmering black hair and then adjusted her bodice without her usual pretense of modesty. “I have so little confidence in us having a life together! Perhaps you would be happier with that weird man, even if he is old enough to be your father.”

Will grinned at her ingratiatingly, then pulled her to him for a kiss that lingered. Lingering kisses were known to soothe Bess—and not just Bess. The last point being, after all, the heart of the problem the poet had been hired to address. Bess—who in any event had been deemed unsuitable by his father—had her competitors. But none of them, including Bess, persisted in Will’s thoughts the way the poet or his words did. A few of the poet’s lines were running through Will’s thoughts now, as he and Bess hurried down the footpath that exited the estate at a location where large bales of hay were stored:

The truth in love inebriates like wine,
until time turns it false as mountain snow
white clouds will conjure, giving us a sign
we never know the truths we think we know.

Will didn’t fancy himself a poet yet, but these lines by his tutor ran in his mind right now so compellingly that he suspected he might want to someday try spinning a poem of his own. Or maybe it was just the charismatic influence of the poet that made these lines surge within him. The poet’s eyes twinkled, and his pale lips curved into a quick

smile, but it was the sense of almost immeasurable depth about him that Will found irresistible.

Maybe the man's depth also made him write and speak so convincingly about immortality, about how begetting children could make a father live forever.

Of course, that was the message the poet had been hired to deliver, as Will knew his father was anxious to have him give up dalliances and focus on a special someone, in the interests of both procreation and probably also some lucrative interfamily business arrangement Lord Hughes could finagle from his only son's nuptials.

Though lately the poet had been flirting with another theme—how poems themselves could provide immortality—and for some reason that had seemed to draw Will even more forcefully to him.

Then *we never know the truths we think we know* was interrupted in his head as he realized he'd lost track of time standing at the boundary of the estate, Bess glaring at him.

"Will!" This exclamation, uttered as she stomped her foot, cut off his reverie. She held out her arms and stood poised, waiting for the expected kiss. He obliged her, and with a caress beyond that, and finally they parted. Will watched Bess continue on her way with a hopefully sufficient pretense of concern, until she vanished behind the hill.

Bess had recently been getting more insistent on their future together, yet there was, even his father's wishes aside, to be no future. She was quite the satisfying lover, with her ample curves and bright blue eyes, but he needed to at least feel for her what he could for a poem: *The truth in love inebriates like wine*. He needed to be in love like that if he was going to love at all. Bess's perfumed curves and sensuous lips weren't getting him there. He sounded out the line now as he headed back toward Swan Hall, in an emphatic iambic beat that was all the rage of England,

sweeping over the countryside alongside the popularity of the sonnet.

The lines would sound even better in a few minutes, coming at Will's request from the beautiful lips of the poet.

When Will came into the great hall, the poet was sitting exactly where he had expected him to be sitting. But his expression radiated despair, not impatience.

"I am sorry for the delay," Will said stiffly, uncomfortable at the man's expression. "I was … detained." Then he winked to suggest the risqué nature of his detention. "Lost track of time." No point in lying. When it came to love and its lesser cousins, the poet could see through flesh and bone.

There was no response in the poet's features to Will's words or presence. He continued to look agitated; his high, round brow was furrowed, one of his cheeks was damp as if he'd just wiped away a tear, and his eyes darted nervously as if on the lookout for a rabid bat. But after a while he reached out his hands to take Will's.

"I came here with exciting news today," the poet said, "and also anticipating as always another of our beautiful hours. But who did I find waiting in the hall but your father. Fine enough. But my conversation with him did not go well."

"My father! He's not due back until after sundown. He's here?" Will would never have risked his dalliance with Bess had he known his father to be at the estate. The gruff, old autocrat's obsession with the marriage issue—and his capacity for disinheriting Will—made being caught with Bess too outrageous a chance to take. Suspicions among the servants about his activities were tolerable. But not a chance encounter with the lord while Will was with so inappropriate a lady.

“He’s gone off again but will be back soon. He’d come back early on some pretext from business in London. It sounded like the real reason for his sudden return was you.”

“Me!”

Edgar, his father’s footservant, emerged from the passageway that opened onto the great hall near the front door and began to officiously polish the handle of a sword hanging on the wall to his left. Will and the poet were lingering longer than usual in the hallway before entering the study, and even their subdued voices could probably be heard elsewhere in the cavernous, drafty house. This moment wasn’t propitious to do anything unusual. Will rose in silence, letting go of the poet’s hands, and walked toward the study, the poet following him. Edgar allowed himself a glance behind him before returning to his polishing. It was just as well that Edgar hadn’t seemed to catch a glimpse of their hand clasp.

Entering the study, Will sat in a chair at an oak desk where his favorite onyx writing pen gleamed on its marble stand, and the poet sat in a plain maple chair facing him, from where he had a clear view of Will’s features though his own were in shadow. “Lord Hughes said that you and I should remain here until he returns, even if it is several hours. The good lord has a special person he wants you to meet.”

Will groaned.

“He also said to convey his caution to you that you are to be punctual for all future meetings between us. If there are any.”

“But why are you so agitated? I’m the one he’s bringing someone to meet! Or, some*thing*, more likely.”

“Because I came here today, in addition to the usual instruction, to tell you remarkable news. Unfortunately I blurted it out to him. He took to my news like a

sledgehammer to glass. So I'm sitting here now plucking the glass slivers out of my soul."

Will winced. He'd never known the poet to use such dramatic language in conversation before. And he was baffled as to the facts. "What is shattered?"

"My life circumstances, since your father will not pay me what I am owed for tutoring you."

"But why would you ask for payment now? Our studies continue through the end of the year." It was May.

The poet stood up for emphasis. He extended his hands in front of him, palms up, in a gesture of beseechment.

"Anne and I have not had the happiest of unions, Will. You must have gleaned this a hundred times, a thousand, from things I have said. Indeed the heart of my message to you has been for you to select your own mate and not let circumstances do it as I unfortunately have, though I understand your father's oversight is a burden I did not have to cope with. But I have made my mistake and paid my price in suffering, though I cannot swear that all my moments with Anne have been miserable—we've had some happiness, too …

"But now, in the past year in London, I have met the woman of my dreams, my soul mate, the infinitely lovely and tender Lady Marguerite D'Arques, whom both my blood and my mind summon me to be with. And if I do not go to be with her now, she will be returning to France in a fortnight, because of a family crisis. Her sister—an evil woman—is plotting to take over the family estate in Brittany. I have beseeched Marguerite to put aside all thought of her ancestral riches and throw in her lot with me. But I must at least be able to provide her with a roof over her head. I cannot go to her penniless!" At this thought the poet gasped, and his palms closed to fists. He trained his gaze more directly on Will, though his eyes were filling with tears.

Will was speechless. The crisis sounded dire, but some good news was in what the poet was saying, for the poet. But no good news for Will. After a pause he offered modest congratulations and best hopes for the crisis. Then he added, anger welling at the apparent end of his own relationship with the poet, which had meant so much to him, “What of all your speeches to me of the sanctity of marriage? On offspring as immortality? Are you having children with Lady Marguerite?”

Will wished he’d replied more sympathetically. But he did not want his tutoring by the poet to end. And he knew that his father, on the subject of contracts, including marital, would be implacable. Lord Hughes’s worldview had no shades of gray. And no sympathy for romantic love.

“That’s the view your father hired me to promote. But I’m tired of deceiving for pay. Children do bring a kind of immortality, yes. One subject to the whims of fate, but one that can go on a while with good fortune. But a greater immortality is the love that should precede them, and that can inspire great art as well. My sonnets for example, which are not subject to war, or accident, or illness. I hold no hope for the salvation of Sundays, so love and art are my beliefs, and their immortality is greatest when they combine to create great love and art. This is the truth I have discovered in life, not the clichés your father hired me to spout.

“Even the actor who recites great lines onstage achieves immortality, for lines can live on in the minds of his audience. It’s a crime that I’ve been speaking to you of rank begetting, which a mongrel or rabbit is capable of.

“But I rant too long. I must leave Stratford for London because if I don’t, Marguerite, the only woman I have ever loved, will go. That is the heart of it.”

“Your family?”

“Susanna and Judith will be provided for. Unlike Anne, I love them, but I cannot live a lie with them any longer. If

your father cuts me off from the ten thousand pounds I am due, I am offered employment in London as an actor and writer. I had hoped to go to her better provisioned, but she cares so little for material things that I believe we can get by. Still we must have something …"

Then the poet, his eyes glistening, approached Will. He stretched his hands out and took Will's hands. Will let him do it with reluctance; he understood the force of his tutor's emotion, but was appalled at the sudden end to their tutorial friendship, and the indifference toward him it suggested. True love notwithstanding.

But the poet went on, "Don't think I am neglecting our bond. I will approach the subject of your future with a new sonnet, composed feverishly this very morning and already recorded in my memory." He recited it while gazing into Will's eyes. The tremor in his voice told Will that every word of it was genuine:

When London sags with mediocrity,
your presence on the stage will thrill, astound,
and save next winter from despondency:
you will be King of Thespians. So crowned!
Late winter streets are dark there, teem with cold,
but even shadows will have learned your name,
a prominence to warm you when you're old,
such acting and such writing granting fame
to outwit death. Will Hughes you are the sun
to shine on all of England!—greater than
mere birthchanced heir, The Hughes's only son:
the legacy of such a gifted man
should be his fire within, that's never ash,
his blood that flows immortally. My wish!

The poet dropped Will's hands as if overcome by emotion and retreated a few steps from him. Will was

dumbstruck at the enormity of the poet's belief, and at the prospect of the upward cataclysm that would occur for him were he to take this message literally.

The poet went on, "So I urge you, with every fiber of my being, to accompany me to London and join the much esteemed acting company at which I have been offered employment. My assessment of your talents is as objective as Pythagoras's the area of a triangle. Leave this crass estate, this money-monastery. Your gift for poetry and your sheer presence can make you an immortal and allow you to escape from the clutches of what ever creature Lord Hughes is bringing to you this very hour."

Will thrilled to the poet's confidence in him. The poem's rousing conclusion, its references to immortal blood and fire, set off some tingling, suppressed sense of destiny. He had the intuition that this destiny could be buried in his family's primordial past, an awareness with a quite tenuous basis—some whispers he'd heard among the servants when he was much, much younger; ambiguous words his long-departed mother had once said to him—regardless, the word *blood* seemed to revive this consciousness. Perhaps among his remote ancestors one had once achieved great glory. And he should—must!—do the same. *Blood*—possibly something about the kind running in his veins was special.

Will then tried to dismiss his reaction, as it seemed ridiculously self-important, and he had practical concerns to weigh. But it wouldn't go away even as he voiced his concerns to the poet.

"Swan Hall may be a money-monastery as you put it, but it has been home all my life. I am flattered that you would even consider asking me to accompany you to London, but my father would disown me if he knew I considered the notion." The exchange of the lands and wealth of his inheritance for the trumpeting of a sonnet seemed more reckless to him with each word he uttered.

“You can be employed as an actor with none other than the King’s Players themselves at a considerable stipend,” the poet countered. “For they are my new troupe. We can continue our private lessons. You will become the great poet and actor destiny wants you to be.” The poet clapped Will enthusiastically on the shoulder. “You can be my protégé, Will Hughes. My offspring in the realm of beauty. As my own son, Hamnet, would have been had he survived. Think about it, man! An immortal. Living forever on the page and in the hearts of the English nation. The world!”

Will was moved by the soaring enthusiasm of the poet. But though he admired the poet’s willingness to risk the small fortune Will’s father owed him, his bravery concerning Will’s far greater personal legacy seemed a trifle facile, like the brave noble fighting in the rear to the last yeoman. It hurt him to hurt the poet, but he stepped pronouncedly away, retreating into an alcove above which hung the family coat of arms—a black swan rising on a silver field—and a pair of crossed swords. Responding to the wounded look in the poet’s eyes, he murmured, “I need time to take this in. It would be such a different world. I feel like I’m standing now with both feet planted on either side of a chasm while the earth is shaking, the chasm widening.”

“I do understand, Will.” Slowly, a bit sadly, the poet returned to his chair and sat down.

Then came a fierce knock on the door. They knew from the imperiousness of the sound that Lord Hughes had returned. Will walked unenthusiastically to the door and opened it. He offered his father a distant but respectful bow, then stared appraisingly and for a painful length of time at the bashful young woman his father escorted, whom Will recognized as Lady Celia, the future Duchess of Exeter. She was attired in a billowing floor-length dress so modest it were as if the spirit of a nun massacred by King Henry VIII inhabited her. Her face was broad at the temples and

narrow at the chin, giving the superficial effect of some strange drinking cup. Her shadowy gray eyes—at first cast down and then raised slowly to meet Will's—glowed only like the faintest embers of dying coals. The scar across her lower left cheek did not help her loveliness, nor the faintness of her eyebrows. Will looked away with a cruel abruptness as her eyes met his, a mocking half smile playing at the corners of his lips. It was dangerous to behave this way in front of his overly dignified and occasionally bellicose father. But he couldn't help himself. This woman could be the death of him!

Lord Hughes was tall and retained both the lean muscles of his youth and the severe expression of his time as a military commander. Though long out of the king's service, he wore a uniform this afternoon. His features had so many angles to them they might have been a geometry lesson; they were dominated by two piercing eyes that would have done any raptor proud. The angles sharpened and his eyes glared as he observed his son's rudeness. But Lord Hughes was not going to stand down from the appropriate polite formalities with a sudden expression of wrath, at least not if he could help it.

"Son, this is Lady Celia, the future Duchess of Exeter, whom you have once before met at court in London. Your ladyship, this is Will Hughes, my only son and heir."

The bow and the curtsy that followed were as feeble as if those performing them were no longer living. The lady had noted Will's cold arrogance and might well have been said to be mortally offended already. Nonetheless, she began to steal furtive glances at his sleek and luminous features even amid her wounded irritation, showing a sudden spirit that Will had a history of evoking even among the most sheltered of females. For him, her presence was so heavy it seemed to have caused all air to be drawn out of the room, leaving him no options for breathing. But he tried

not to direct further exasperation at her. The source of his repression was his father, not her.

Will's loyalty to Swan Hall swung on one side of an alchemist's balance right now, while the other weighed a possible new life in London. Avoiding Celia was on the same iron tray as the poet, the poet's sonnet, and the Globe Theatre. On the opposite tray a grand pile of gold bars lingered powerfully, gleaming.

"May we enter?" the lord asked sarcastically, as Will continued to stand in the doorway. Will whipped away from him with an obedience so quick it also flirted with sarcasm and went back to his desk. Lord Hughes strode heavily into the center of the room, Celia a few paces behind him. The poet stepped forward to face Lord Hughes; from the rear it looked to Will as if he might have been trembling slightly. He bowed and mumbled, "My lord," in a voice so tentative Will had to strain to hear it. Lord Hughes nodded impassively, then presented Lady Celia with a small gesture.

"My lady graces this afternoon and lights up the room as if a second sun has suddenly arisen," the poet said.

Will marveled at the man's ability to let images flow even in the most adversarial of settings. His father addressed his next words to the poet.

"You must pardon this interruption. An urgent matter has arisen which the three of us must resolve." A wave of the lord's right hand seemed to include the window behind the desk as a fourth party to the negotiations. There, a heavy curtain embroidered with a biblical scene of Jesus turning water into wine was drawn against the afternoon sun, obscuring the stained-glass window itself. "I am mindful of our discussion a short time ago and have reached a decision which should enable you to go on with your life."

Will was struck by how much his father's beneficent tone toward the poet contrasted with the tension in his

physical bearing. Perhaps his father was directing his internal wrath right now more at his son than his son's tutor. Perhaps Will should have been a little more cautious in his dismissal of Lady Celia.

The poet bowed again and said, "Yes, my lord?"

"You have served well as my son's tutor and have been an admirable model for him with your brilliance. I am sure he has absorbed a lifelong benefit from knowing you. However your outrageous demand as to ending instruction early, and, even more shocking, your intention to break your marital bonds, have convinced me that these lessons must cease immediately. I have found a better method for persuading Will of his obligations. The Lady Celia will be the perfect bride for him. Let us waste no more time. I will more than generously pay you for all your lessons through today, and you can go on your merry way. As for you," the lord added, gazing with some ferocity at Will, "your trifling with my wishes is over. You must ask the Lady Celia's hand in marriage."

"When, my lord?"

"Now."

"Now? I have only been in her company a few minutes."

"You have known her long enough. Too long, in fact. You should have proposed at the very sight of her. But from what I know of this young woman's kind and forgiving nature, I suspect she may not hold your slight against you forever. Isn't that right, my lady?"

The lady nodded the most demure of nods, but looked unhappy.

"Well, I'd sooner lie with a rotting horse," Will said. "And if I knew her fifty years, I wouldn't ask for her hand in marriage."

Then Will took a deep breath. He'd astonished even himself with such provocative language. But he had felt a deep sense of relief uttering these obnoxious words. As if he no longer had to live the lie of obedience to his father.