# Shakespeare of the Apes

Robert F. Young

Lowery wakes; it is Sunday morning. Breakfast sounds come from below, but he does not immediately arise. He lies beneath the tousled muslin sheet lackadaisically listening to the faint clatter of cookware, to tap water being drawn, to the muffled sound of Nora’s footsteps on the tiled kitchen floor. The bedroom is awash with bright summer sunshine, redolent with morning’s grass-green breath.

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The walls of my prison cell are the texture of time. The door is a checkerboard of nights and days. Opposite the door, a little window looks out upon Tomorrow, but it is too high for me to see through. The furniture consists of a solitary chair and a small table. Upon the table lies a ream of writing paper; next to it, a quill pen protrudes from an inkwell that has long since gone dry—

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He smells coffee. There will be eggs, Western style, and toast and bacon. He kicks back the sheet, swings his feet to the floor and feels with his toes for the slippers he stepped out of the night before. Felt-shod, he pads into the bathroom where he relieves his distended bladder and washes his face and hands. He combs back into place the straggly wisps of dark-brown hair that crawled down over his domical forehead during his dreams, checks to see whether he needs a shave. He doesn’t quite, but he will very soon; he must trim his minimustache too. It is his only physical affectation and lends him an appropriate academic air.

In fauve dressing gown, he descends the carpeted stairs, walks through the large living-dining room and enters the coffee-scented kitchen. His orange juice glows in a little frosted glass that stands upon the Formica breakfast counter; he dispatches it in three neat swallows. Behind him, Nora says, “Mom and Dad’ll be here right after mass.”

Lowery makes no comment. Nora, who attended five o’clock Saturday mass, drops two slices of bread into the automatic toaster. The counter is set for two; she dishes out bacon and eggs and pours coffee. At thirty-eight, she is not nearly as drab as her disheveled hair and shapeless housecoat proclaim. Her movements reveal a natural litheness, a pleasing fullness of hip and thigh. Her hair, after the dishes are done and put away, will be combed to her shoulders in dark and breathless undulations, the waterfall tresses parting to reveal her narrow bit comely face, her eyes a wild-flower blue beneath plucked black cornices of brows.

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—In choosing her for my mate, I could have done far worse. It is true she is but little less insensitive, but little less materialistic than the other members of her tribe; but she is durable, even more so than her genetic coevals. The females of my native chrono-land are worn out before they are thirty. This is all right—then. But here in the past it iscomme il faut to live with the vase long after the flowers have withered and died; thus, it is well for the vase to be sturdy.

I must include this profound observation in the text of the novel I shall never write—

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Scene 2. The house faces east. In its shrinking backyard shadow, stillform dew-diamonds glisten on the grass. Standing on the awninged patio, wearing walking shorts and gripping a ten-pound bag of briquettes, Lowery surveys his demesne. Not far from the patio a Schwedler’s maple stands. To Lowery’s right, a rear door provides ancillary access to the adjoining garage that houses his Bonneville. Between the Schwedler and the patio rises the outdoor fireplace he built last summer with his own two hands. It is remarkably like the one in the back yard next door that his neighbor, Hungry Jack (the epithet is Lowery’s own), built with his own two hands.

Lowery cannot start the sacred fire this early in the day, but he can and does pour forth the sacred briquettes. Several years ago on the heels of a sweltering summer, in response to some masochistic quirk, he directed his English class to write a composition entitled “How My Father Spends His Sundays.” His masochism was amply appeased: Ninety percent of the fathers were of the same sacerdotal stamp as he and conducted similar carbonaceous ceremonies.

There is no need for him to mow his lawn—he mowed it yesterday. But the grass girdling the base of the Schwedler and that flanking the footing of the patio escaped the rotary blade and is both straggly and unsightly. Dutifully, he gets his trimming shears from the garage and sets to work.

Next door, his neighbor, Hungry Jack, starts up his red riding mower; the Sunday silence, unnatural to begin with, absconds. Jack handles the mower as though it is a big bulldozer, sitting top-heavily on the little toy seat. One of his seven sons comes of the house, rubbing his eyes. He begins running after the little red bulldozer. “Dad! Can I drive it? Can I?”

“No!” Jack roars above theROAR . “Get back inside and finish your cereal!”

Jack waves to Lowery as he makes the first pass. Lowery waves back, looking up from the base of the Schwedler. Seven sons . . .

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—Unlike the Parnassian Block which the Quadripartite psycho-surgeons interposed between my personal unconscious and my endopsychic sphere, the subsequent electrosurgical excision by the Quadripartite techmeds of myvas deferens was a routine rather than a punitive measure. Prochronisms occasioned by cellular retro-dissemination and reassembly create only insignificant disturbances in the time flow and can safely be ignored (consider, for instance, how many CRR’s are involved in installing just one political prisoner in a past cell); however, a single prochronism introduced into the evolutionary pattern of the species is capable of creating a turbulence powerful enough to divert the flow into an alternate channel. Obviously, then, no dictatorship in its right collective mind would, in imprisoning a political enemy in the past, risk his impregnating a female who preceded him on the evolutionary ladder, to say nothing of his accidentally makingenceinte one of his own genetic ancestors.

I would not in any case have wanted seven sons. I do not even want one—

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“Vic,”—Nora’s voice from the kitchen—“the Sunday paper’s here.”

Lowery finishes trimming ’round the base ofAcer platanoides Schwedleri , postpones manicuring the patio footing and re-enters the house. After pouring himself a second cup of coffee, he retires with it to the living room where theSunday Journal awaits him on the end table beside his fauteuil. Scene 3. TheJournal is gaily wrapped in comics; he discards them, sits down and feasts upon the same intellectual viands that by now have been delivered to Jack’s doorstep, and Tom’s and Dick’s and Harry’s farther up the street.

After updating himself on venality, corruption, rape, murder, mayhem, and the weather, he turns to the book reviews. TheJournal devotes an entire page to them. There is a new novel by Nabokov, another trilogy by Barth. In a little box near the middle of the page is a humorous anecdote about Mark Twain. Since first giving its literary reins a shake, theJournal has published at least a thousand boxed anecdotes, half of them about the same literary figure. Lowery, who has read most of them, abandons this one in disgust before he is halfway through the first sentence.

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—“Twainophilia”—I humbly coin the term—is a common ailment among the present-day simians. Ironically, Clemens is most admired by those who have never read him, and to those who have, much of his prestige is owing to a later American literary figure’s having taken time out from the anti-impotence campaign he waged incessantly against himself via his fiction to declareHuckleberry Finn America’s best book. It is true that the Sarn Regime will reserve a niche for Twain/Clemens, but it will be a lowly one indeed compared to those reserved for Nabokov and one or two other twentieth-century giants obscured in their time by that troglodytic shadow out of the past, and it will owe its existence more to nostalgia than to any genuine literary prowess.

Living myself in that omnipresent shadow, I sometimes wonder whether the Quadripartite Tribunal in imposing my sentence might not have exacted greater punishment if instead of ordering a Parnassian Block inserted between my personal unconscious and my endopsychic sphere they had instead permitted the creative flame that consumed me in my own time to consume me in this: to have let me write now with the same wild discipline with which I wrote “before”—only to see the gold I minted hopelessly outshone by the nostalgic glow emanating from that overburnished tombstone—

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The roar of Jack’s toy bulldozer has been superseded by the fainter roar of another ’dozer farther up the street. It nicely backgrounds the screams of children celebrating Sunday morn with bicyclic expeditions ’round and ’round the block. Lowery curses softly, casts theJournal aside. In the kitchen doorway, Nora peers from between her dark waterfall tresses. “Mom and Dad’ll be here any minute now, Vic. Don’t you think you ought to change?”

Upstairs, Lowery showers, shaves, then trims his academic mustache. He gets out a clean pair of summer slacks and a fresh short-sleeved shirt. Nora’s parents pull into the driveway in their Imperial while he is tying his shoes, and he hears Nora greet them at the front door. However, he does not immediately go downstairs; instead, he steps into his study across the hall and sits at his desk. Scene 4.

The desktop is bare save for an extension phone and an ashtray. Underneath the desk, inches from his feet, is a large cardboard box filmed with dust. In the box are a dozen notebooks filled with neat, backward-slanting script, a pair of legal pads similarly filled, a ten-page typewritten outline bearing the title “3984,” two typewritten drafts, similarly entitled, the one rough, the other heavily corrected and revised to such an extent that the words contained in the additions and the insertions outnumber by far those contained in the original text. There is no fair copy.

Next to the desk, a portable Smith-Corona sits up on a metal typewriter stand. Its transparent cover is cracked in three places. Shrouding it is an aura of desuetude so thick it can be cut with a knife.

Lowery stares at the machine unseeingly. Bookshelves cover one whole wall from floor to ceiling. He lights a cigarette and blows the smoke at Emma, Tom Jones, and Moll Flanders; at Becky Sharpe, Jane Eyre, and Lord Jim—

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—Dear Mom and Dad:

A note to let you know that I am feeling fine way back here in the pages of the past. My in-laws have just arrived for the weekly tribal rite at which a burnt offering of barbecued fryers will be presided over by your son Victor. Living among the Tech Age apes was difficult at first, but I have since learned their ways and have made a place of sorts for myself in their society. I have even, as you know, married one of their number. There is a major drawback, of course, occasioned by the Parnassian Block, about which I have written you many times before. But that was to be expected. As you are aware from my previous epistles, I tried in vain during the early years of my incarceration to circumvent it; since then, however, I have pretty much accepted my role as simple-minded preceptor, instilling errata, misevaluations, and misconceptions in the minds of my pupils and telling outright lies to their faces. Lest I give the impression of a state of utter misery, let me quickly add that I have learned to brachiate with passable skill and have even come to enjoy to a limited degree the common pastime of collecting baubles on the forest floor. Well, as I have said, it is Ritual Time again; so I must terminate this latest in the long line of letters that I shall never write. Hope you are well—

Your loving son,

Victor—

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“Vic,” Nora calls from the foot of the stairs. “They’re here.”

He can procrastinate no longer. Woodenly, he descends to the living room. Scene 5. Dad’s mesomorphic frame sports a double-breasted gray plaid; rail-thin Mom is clad in a powder-blue suit. Dad’s cologne is a thick miasma in the room, Mom’s perfume a transparent mist. As always, she makes much of Lowery, kissing him on the cheek. She regards herself as his second mother. Dad stands some distance away. At Nora’s suggestion, everyone sits down, Nora between Mom and Dad on the sofa, Lowery in his fauteuil. Dad dwells at considerable length upon his relatively recent prostatectomy, then goes on to lighter topics such as the pain Mom keeps getting in her side and that Dr. Kelp says is nerves. Inevitably, the conversation works its way around to Tom, Nora’s oldest brother, and Dad just happens to have Polaroid snapshots of Tom’s and Barbara’s three adorable children, taken just last week. Dutifully, Nora and Lowery study the polychromatic photos, Nora passing them to Lowery, Lowery letting them accumulate on his lap and then passing them back to Dad.

It is time for Dad to mention how well Tom is doing in Construction. Dad is a bricklayer, retired, and in his own day did very well in Construction himself. Witness his split-level home in the country; witness his ’74 Imperial standing in the driveway. Lowery squirms in his fauteuil. Nervously Nora lights a cigarette. Dad glares at her. Mom says, “If everybody was a bricklayer, we’d all be driving brick automobiles!” It is a favorite joke of hers, reserved for just such occasions as this.

Nora gets up and turns on TV. The twelve o’clock news has just come on. An airliner has crashed in Chile. Thus far, only one hundred and two have been reported dead, but the figure is not final by any means and may momentarily be increased. Lowery excuses himself on the grounds that he must get the charcoal going—glowing?—and gets up and leaves the room. Behind him, he hears Mom remark, “Poor boy. Every time an airliner crashes, it brings it all back.” She is referring to the airline disaster of twenty years ago in which Lowery’s putative parents were numbered among the one hundred fourteen dead.

Scene 6. Lowery’s chef’s apron is hanging in the kitchen closet. It has been laundered since the last Dum Dum he presided at, but although the grease spots and the charcoal smudges came out, the cute clichés did not (CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLE WASHER, GET IT WHILE IT’S HOT!, HI NEIGHBOR!, THIS SPACE RESERVED). Masochistically, he puts it on. There is a comical chef’s hat that goes with it. He dons that, too, pulling it down till the band digs painfully into his domical forehead.

He procures a can of charcoal lighter from the garage, unscrews the cap and performs the libation; then he steps back and tosses a lighted match onto the drenched briquettes. The sacred flame leaps up, engulfs them briefly, then diminishes. Presently they begin to redden, like Poe’s embers.

In Jack’s back yard, Jack’s seven sons are playing baseball. Jack himself, in his capacity as weekend cop, has left to moonlight in the police patrol car. Dad comes out onto the patio in shirtsleeves, carrying a can of Schlitz. He sits down on the glider and rests the can on his lap. In the kitchen, Mom and Nora ready the fryers for parboiling. The sun has reached zenith, and its harsh golden light covers every square inch of the back yard except the area usurped by the splotchy shadow of the Schwedler. They sky is cloudless and should be blue. It is not: It has taken on a dull metallic glare.

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—In the county courthouse, my birthdate is officially recorded as July 10, 1932. I, who will not be born for two thousand years! The inadequacies of the Quadripartite extend into innumerable areas, but their prowess in physical and metaphysical prolepsis is unparalleled.

However, the falsification of my birthdate constitutes only the opening sentence in the spurious pamphlet re my pseudo-past so efficiently circulated by their agents. Fabrications pertaining to my fictive 1932–58 existence can be found galore in the schools I presumably attended and in the minds of the teachers and professors who presumably taught me. “Classmates” carry implanted recollections of me in their cortices; “old girlfriends” carry false phallic memories of me in their wombs. “Hometown neighbors” remember an only son of a childless couple who went up in one-hundred-octane flames. Each Christmas, I receive cards and/or presents from perfect strangers who claim to be my aunts and uncles and whom I pretend to accept as such. Filed away in some military archive is the service record of one Victor Lowery re a “Police Action” he never participated in. Buried somewhere among my papers is a startlingly realistic Honorable Discharge.

When the Sarn scientists developed time travel during the later years of the Regime, they did not dream of the use to which it would ultimately be put. Nor did the Sarn psychosurgeons, when they devised the Parnassian Link, dream that it might someday be altered into a Parnassian Block.

Such lack of foresight is tantamount to treason. For what more effective means could a dictatorship have of getting rid of a Solzhenitsynian genius than by imprisoning him in the past? And what more effective means could a dictatorship have of punishing an impugner of the state than by snuffing out the very flame that made the impugning possible?

Sometimes in my agony I cry out not only against the forces of evil that robbed me of my birthright but against the forces of good that made the robbery practicable—

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Poe’s embers are in full bloom. Dad makes a round trip to the kitchen for a second can of Schlitz. Nora brings out the parboiled fryers, and Lowery places them on the grill with a long two-pronged fork. Mom sets the patio picnic table. The afternoon haze augments the sky’s dull metallic glare. Jack’s oldest son hits a home run.

The Schlitz fits naturally into Dad’s square bricklayer’s hand. Mom brings Lowery a bowl of Catalina Dressing with which to baste the fryers. She is wearing one of Nora’s calico aprons over the blue suit, and a warm motherly smile. Next door, Jack’s wife dumps half a bag of briquettes into Jack’s outdoor fireplace and drenches them with the same brand of charcoal lighter Lowery used. “After dinner,” Mom announces, “we’ll all go for a Nice Ride.”

Dad sips his Schlitz. Chicken fat and Catalina dressing sputter on poor Poe’s embers; little gouts of smoke arise. Mom takes the fork from Lowery’s hand. “Why don’t you go up on the patio and keep Dad company?”

Trapped, Lowery divests himself of hat and apron; on the glider, Dad and Schlitz make room for one more. In the kitchen, Nora puts water on to boil for corn on the cob. Dad reverts for a while to his prostatectomy, then reminisces about his bricklaying days. He steals an occasional glance at Lowery’s pale effeminate hands. Inevitably, son Tom returns to the center of the stage. “Last week his take-home pay was $666.75.”

Lowery does not comment.

“His withholding alone is more than most guys make.”

“It’s more thanI make,” Lowery says.

“Maybe so. But you teachers ain’t exactly underpaid these days. And that library job you hold down summers don’t hurt none neither.”

The Schwedler is directly in Lowery’s line of vision. He stares at the arabesques of sky formed by the dark red fascicles. Their brassy glare hurts his eyes, and at length he lowers his gaze. The arabesques remain for a while upon his retinas, then gradually fade away.

It is time to eat. Dad procures another Schlitz to go with his meal. Nora, Mom, Lowery, and Dad sit down at the picnic table, Lowery at one end, Dad at the other. Dad heaps his plate with potato salad, crowding his fryer half onto the tablecloth. He keeps an extra ear of corn on hand throughout the meal. Lowery picks at his food. The roar of a power mower comes faintly from the next block as a late riser attacks his lawn. There is a barely perceptible tremor as Sunday shifts into second gear.

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—There are times when I wish I could accept as facts the falsehoods so effectively circulated by my jailers, when I wish I could identify wholly with the simians on the shores of whose dark chrono-continent I have been cast up. But I cannot. It is one thing to ape an ape; quite another to be one. Thus I must walk alone, remembering as I go the green lands of Argo, the yellow seas of Tant, the cogent cities of the artificial archipelago the Guitridges built before the Sarn Regime collapsed: stoically bearing the contumelies heaped upon me when in deathless prose-poetry I dared expose the rotten timbers of the monstrous structure that rose from the ruins of the Regime. A giant striding among pygmies, extolling to their offspring the literary merits of other pygmies not fit to shine his shoes—

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The Imperial, Dad at the wheel, backroads its way along the littoral. Through verdant arches made by sugar maples, past vineyards and houses and barns, Lowery sits beside Dad in the front seat; Mom and Nora share the back. Lowery suggested taking his Bonneville, but Dad would not hear of it. The Imperial has Air; the Bonneville does not. Dad believes in Air. Windows tightly closed, the Imperial breezes by rows of grapevines that seem to turn like the giant green spokes of a massive horizontal wheel. The grapes are—will be when autumn comes—Concords. This is Concord Country.

Dad does not drive far. The Imperial has a tapeworm, genus PVC, and the gasoline gauge drops visibly with each passing mile. Gasoline is dear these days. On second thought, Lowery is glad they didn’t take the Bonneville. The Bonneville has a tapeworm too.

Well, at least Sunday has not been wasted. It has been established that, come fall (barring an early freeze), there will be grapes galore. Mission accomplished, Dad pulls into a Tastee Freeze stand for the day’spiece de resistance . Mom has a sundae, Dad a double-dip, Nora a split, and Lowery a cigarette. Scene 7.

Dad says, “Vic, I wish you wouldn’t smoke in the car.”

“Why not?” Lowery asks. “It can’t catch fire. It’s made out of bricks, isn’t it? Like your brain.”

There is a terrible silence. Dad starts up the motor. “You’re lucky you’re Nora’s husband, or I’d—”

“You’relucky I’m Nora’s husband—not I. Who else but a poor dumb school teacher would have taken her off your hands?”

“Vic!” Mom says.

Nora begins to cry.

Dad pulls back onto the highway, driving with one hand. Lowery stubs out his cigarette in the virgin ashtray. “I’ll bet when you went to school you carried bricks in your bookbag instead of books.”

The Ride is completed in utter silence. The coldness in the car has little to do with Air. Even Mom does not say goodbye to Lowery when Dad lets him and Nora out in front of the house. Lowery perks a pot of coffee in the kitchen, takes a cupful out onto the patio. Scene 8. The sky still retains its dull metallic glare. There is no hint as yet of night. Presently Nora joins him, but she does not speak. She will not speak to him for days. Last time he torpedoed Dad, she did not speak to him for a whole week.

At last the metallic glare begins to soften. For a while, the big bonfire of the sun burns redly beyond the Schwedler. There is a faint trembling of the fascicles as Sunday shifts into third and final gear.

Nora and Lowery go inside. She turns on the TV and they watch the Lawrence Welk Show. Scene 9. The ABC movie comes on an hour early. They have already seen it twice, but neither makes a move to change the channel. Once again, Alec Guinness suffers nobly for the cause of caste. Once again, aging Bill Holden leads Jack Hawkins’s commandos through the bush. Once again, the Bridge is blown to Kingdom Come.

“Dullness! Dullness!” the medical officer cries, striding down the slope . . .

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The news comes on. They watch it, then go to bed. Lowery lies immobile in the darkness till Nora’s rhythmic breathing assures him she is asleep. . . . Then, soundlessly, he pulls the chrono-cell’s only chair over to the wall beneath the cell window and climbs up on the seat. By standing on tiptoe and stretching himself to maximum height, he can grip the windowsill with his fingertips. He pulls himself upward with practiced ease, props one elbow on the sill, then the other. Slowly, he inches himself up and through the stasis field, emerging at the base of a wooded hill. Then he pulls his real body through after him. The field’s inbuilt dimension-correlator keeps it from emerging inside out.

After it settles into place around him, he starts up the hill. It is night, but the darkness is alleviated by starlight, and he makes his way without difficulty along the familiar trail that leads upward through the conifers to the chalet. Once inside the chalet, he puts through a call to a psychosurgeon he used to know and who is still loyal to the Sarn Regime, which has gone underground. Can the psychosurgeon come at once and remove Lowery’s Parnassian Block? The psychosurgeon not only can, he will be glad to be of service to a loyal compatriot like Lowery. He will arrive in a matter of minutes.

Lowery paces the floor, smoking cigarettes. He keeps the lights down low and the blinds drawn because there are Quadripartite agents in the area. At last the psychosurgeon’s aircraft drops down into the clearing in front of the chalet. Lowery runs outside to meet him, and the two old friends walk arm in arm back to the chalet. The psychosurgeon is well up in years, but is unsurpassed in his profession. He directs Lowery to lie down on the divan. Lowery complies. The psychosurgeon opens his little black bag and withdraws a rectangular chrome-plated box. After plugging it into a nearby baseboard outlet, he holds it exactly eleven inches above Lowery’s forehead and clicks it on. Three pencil-thin blue rays leap from the box’s bottom and converge in the middle of Lowery’s forehead. “This won’t take long,” the psychosurgeon says reassuringly, bending over his patient to make sure the rays have converged in just the right spot. “We’ll have it burned out of there in a jiffy.”

The psychosurgeon’s breath smells strongly of Franco American spaghetti. It is a dead giveaway: Only Quadripartite loyalists eat Franco American spaghetti. Lowery shoves the box aside and leaps to his feet. “I know what you’re up to!” he cries. “The Quadripartitewant the Block removed! They sent you!”

“In point of fact, they do and did,” the psychosurgeon says calmly. A fly emerges from his left nostril, crawls diagonally across his hairless upper lip and halts at the corner of his mouth. “They feel that in depriving you of your flame they went too far, and now they wish to rectify their mistake. If you’ll kindly resume your former position on the divan, I’ll—”

“No!” Lowery shouts. “I don’t trust you! I’m going back to the past!”

Instantly, the room swarms with Quadripartite agents.

Somehow, Lowery eludes their clawing fingers and gets through the door. He runs down the hill, expertly evading the grasping hands that reach out at him from behind every tree he passes. At the base of the hill, he homes in on the chrono-window and crawls back through the stasis field and into his cell. He pulls his body through after him, shaking it free from a Quadripartite agent who has gripped it by the heels. It flows smoothly around him in the darkness, sinks pleasantly into the inner-spring mattress. Frantically he feels for the Parnassian Block. It is still intact, still in place. He sighs. Lowery sleeps.