

Iron / W. S. Merwin

In the age of iron they learned to make filings. They were led to the lodestone and their names for it drifted closer to the words for loving, but were never the same. They discovered how to induce the lodestone to impart its paradoxical virtues to the shoe of a horse, and they taught themselves how to make paper, and make it white. Onto the lodestone-inspired shoe of an unseen horse, in time they laid an empty white leaf of paper and onto the paper they threw the filings they themselves had made, and what they saw then was the rose of the world, with its two eyes and two hearts. One day they set it adrift in a boat, and the iron rose of the world went sailing, the whole world following after. But its north always varied from the true north, and in itself it was never sure by how much.

The horseshoe was made for holding the virtues of the lodestone long before the first horse was domesticated, and from having the horseshoe they conceived of having the horse. Generations of blacksmiths died in ignorance of the drift of their destiny, before the first of them was led to the lodestone. But the horse for which the first horseshoe was made is still unbroken. From the very beginning you could hang up the sacred horseshoe from a tree and strike it once anywhere with an iron stick and all its virtue would fly out of it in a single cascading bird-note, one beat of the galloping horse, after which it would lie still on the ground and let the filings rest over it evenly like dust or snow, itself still nailed to the horse's footprint. And you could do it all again.

They made a drawing of the rose and set the horseshoe at the edge of it and set them adrift and the picture sailed away with the horse at its prow, and its tiers of oarless petals, but its north was not the true north, in the sky. Instead its north turned in varying circles, wandering through infinite outer worlds, at inconceivable distances from the still beam at its true center. How long ago it began! Before the first blacksmith was born, whales sleeping in calm water would swing slowly to face north, the position in which they gave birth. The north of the horse, and of iron, and of iron's rose. The north of the file and of blood, and of ambition and the amber of commerce. Not the axis close beside it, turning in each of them.