

## Aesop's Forest · *Robert Coover*

DEEP IN THE GLOOM OF THE FOREST, the old lion lies dying in his cave. His ancient hide drapes the royal bones like a worn blanket, rheum clots his warm nose, his eyes are dimmed with cataracts. Yet, even in such decline, the familiar hungers stir in him still, rippling in tremors across his body from time to time like mice scurrying under a tattered carpet, his appetite for power outlasting his power to move, his need for raw flesh biting deeper than his decaying teeth. "I would be king!" he rumbles wheezily, his roar muddied with catarrh.

"Eh? Eh?" asks the fox insolently from the mouth of the cave.

"Damn your eyes. Bring me meat."

He does not trust the fox, of course, but on the other hand he has never trusted anyone, and the fox at least is useful. It is a wise policy, he knows, to keep potential enemies where you can either watch them or eat them. Unfortunately, that now means keeping them pretty close (even now, though the mouth of the cave seems empty of his scrawny silhouette, he cannot be sure the devil's gone) and so, fearing seditious alliances just beyond the reach of his shriveling senses, he has reduced his court to one, this fox, whose very notoriety for wiliness has isolated the wretch from any serious contenders for his power. The fox, a likely victim of any new regime, serves him because it is in the fox's own best interest to do so, though such bitter truths—and his helpless reliance on them—sadden the old lion. He has roared against them all his life, knowing that some truths are just not worth having, and now they have returned to haunt him, as though the instinct for survival were itself the ultimate disgrace. A sigh rips through him like the windy echo of some half-remembered rage: his hatred of duplicity.

There was a time when such treacherous lickspits, leading him to trapped prey, would have served him as prior savories: dispassionately he would have slit their bellies with his fierce claws, nuzzled in the hot wound as though to caress them with their own culpability, and, staring resolutely into their craven eyes already glazing over, his cool majestic gaze the last thing on this earth their fading sight would see, would have eaten their still-pulsing hearts, just appetizers for the feast to follow, juicy morals for the hunchback's fables. He who plots against another, the

fabler would say then, plots his own destruction, and if this was a truth the world felt it could depend upon, it was a truth founded upon his own powerful claws and sharp white teeth, his incorruptible detachment. It is this—his sovereign independence, his lonely freedom—that he now misses most. As must all. For if he was once the source of all their truths, now, crippled, sinking into dry rot, reduced to begging from a thieving liar, he still is: it is truth itself that is changing. Yes, yes, he thinks, we take *everything* with us when we go.

“Who, *what—?*!” Ah. That dumb stag. Vainglory in the flesh. The more or less succulent flesh. The old king, tired eyes asquint, lies low, settling his jowls behind his paws. He’s seen this one before, smelled him before. That funk: the poor fool must still have his stripes, and yet here he is, serving himself up again, will wonders never cease. “I tell you, when he caught hold of your ear last time,” he hears the fox whispering, nudging the stag forward, “it was to give you his last advice before he died.” Such big eyes he has: eyes for looking where forbidden . . . “It is you he wants as our next king: your horns scare the snakes, he told me so!” Inwardly, waiting patiently, the old lion grins. Have to admire the sly bastard: in his way, he’s an artist. “You see? He’s smiling! He’s pleased you’re here! Now lean forward and tell him that you accept your great responsibilities!”

Death is everywhere in Aesop’s dark forest. Asses are drowning under sodden loads, vixens are being torn to pieces by maddened dogs, swans sacrificed for the sake of their songs. Cats are eating cocks. Kites frogs. “What an unexpected treat has come our way!” they cry, descending. All have butcher’s work to do. Eagles and vixens devour each other’s young, newborn apes are murdered by their mothers, hens by serpents they themselves have hatched. Partridges, goats, doves betray their own to preying men, nannies are butchered to doctor asses. At the request of horses, boars are slaughtered: yet happiness is elusive. Snakes are driven to suicide by the stinging of wasps, elephants by gnats in their ears, hares by their own weariness, as though it were time’s way of solving difficult problems. “The moral is that it is too late to be sorry after you have let things go wrong,” the fabler explains, but the fact is it is always too late. Lambs are being devoured by wolves, mice by weasels, fawns by bears, nightingales by hawks, and all by the patient intransigent vultures. Even lions.

The news of the old despot's decline, spread by the fox, stirs ambition in some (a lot of empty-headed people rejoice over the wrong things, needless to say), but provokes skepticism in most: with that fox things are not always what they seem, most here in the forest know that all too well, having learned from painful experience, once bitten and all that, no, seeing is believing. Not too close, though: there are a lot of bones around the cave mouth, and tracks leading up but none leading away.

The fabler watches the watchers watch. It is comforting to the wretched, he knows, to see others worse off than themselves. The victor vanquished, the mighty fallen—it's a kind of narcotic, this pageant, numbing for the cowardly their common wound of mortality. The fabler envies them this easy consolation. In him, something more fundamental is dying with the dying lion, and just when he needs it most, his own death approaching inexorably and apace. Not so much the courage, no, for though his is not so lofty perhaps, being that bitter grit of the misfit, the freak, the taunted cripple, it is no less mettlesome. Not the fabled power either, far from it, he has often reveled in forcing humiliating compromise upon the old tyrant, throwing him into bad company, jamming thorns into his paws and enfeebling love in his heart, snatching him up in nets and cages to spoil his appetite with a moral lesson or two, chiding him with avarice and brutality. Sour grapes? Perhaps, especially now at life's and wit's end when he could use a little last-minute clout, but political power as such has never held the fabler's fancy. Hasn't he turned his crooked back on it all his life, abandoning the court life again and again for his dark uncivil forest? Yes, freedom has been his one desire, freedom and—and this is what the old lion's death means to him, this is what he fears to lose, even as he's losing it—his ruthless solitude.

As though to dramatize his sense of loss, the fox, that cartload of mischief, emerges from the cavemouth now, swaggering presumptuously, his red tail on high, a bloody heart between his jaws. Not the lion's heart, of course—a consumptive rumble from the cave behind the charlatan attests irritably to that—yet it might as well be. That lion's kingly roar once caused havoc at three hundred miles, women miscarried, men's teeth fell out; now it flutters thinly from the cave mouth like wisps of dirty fleece. In the end, crushed by fortune, even the strongest become the playthings of cowards: this is the message of the dripping heart in the fox's grinning jaws. And it enrages him. Not the message, but the grin. It is his, the fabler's, own.

There is a grisly tension building in the forest, the fox can feel it as he stalks the cave mouth, the stag's heart in his jowls like a gag, bitter foretaste of the impending disaster. Well, foretasted, forearmed, he reminds himself with a giddiness that brings a grimace to his clamped jaws—for how *does* one arm himself against the sort of nightmare about to descend here? Eyes blink and glitter behind tree trunks, clumps of grass, leaves, heavy stones: in them he sees avarice, panic, vanity, distrust, lust for glory and for flesh, hatred, hope, all the fabled terrors and appetites of the mortal condition, drawn together here now for one last demented frolic. The looming forest is literally atwinkle with that madness that attends despair.

Two eyes in particular absorb his gaze: the dark squinty lopsided orbs of the little brown humpback, come to hurl himself like a clown into the final horror—for isn't it the cripple who always wants to lead off the dance? The grotesque grotesqued. That loathsome monstrosity now huddles swarthily behind a pale boulder, hugging it as if afraid it might fly away from him, his knee-knobs stuck out like a locust's. A turnip with teeth, he's been fairly called, a misshapen pisspot. His hump rises behind his flapping ears like a second head, but one stripped of its senses as though struck mute and blind with terror. Or wisdom, same thing. What that snub-nosed bandy-legged piece of human garbage has never appreciated is how much they're two of a kind, and how much the fraud owes him for his bloated reputation. The fox has been the butt of too many horseshit anecdotes not to have grasped a moral the fabler seems to have missed: that we ridicule in others what we most despise in ourselves.

The humpback lets go the boulder now and hops, toad-like, behind a stunted laurel. Headed this way, it seems. Can't leave well enough alone. Or ill enough. Perhaps he dreams still of some last-minute escape from the calamity that awaits him, awaits them all in this airless stinkhole of a so-called forest. Well, if he hopes for help from the sorehead behind him, still grumbling in his tubercular senility about the missing heart ("You can stop looking, he didn't have one," he'd told the motheaten old geezer, talking with his mouth full, "anybody who'd come twice into a lion's den and within reach of his paws has to be ninety percent asshole, and that's what you just ate . . ."), then the fool's in for a bitter experience.

As the fabler advances through the penumbral forest, creeping, bounding, stumbling over roots, crouching under bushes, zigging and zagging in the

general direction of the lion's den, he stirs a wide commotion. There are scurryings, flutterings, rustlings all around. Twigs pop, pebbles scatter, leaves and feathers float on the air like the tatters of muffled rumors, stifled panic, as though the forest were beset on all sides—and from within as well—by strange and unexpected dangers. Wild rumors. Hopes. Mad ambitions.

Much of this the fabler reads in all the shit he squats and tumbles in: the hard nuggets of avidity and pride, puddled funk, noisome pretense, the frantic scatter of droppings unloosed on the run in uncertainty and confusion—that eloquent text of the forest floor. He knows it well, he's had his nose in it since the day he was born. "Has he lost something?" people would ask. "He's like a hog rooting in mud." He was pretending to be studying the ground, of course, in order to pretend he could straighten up if he wanted to, an imposter twice over. But out of adversity, wisdom. Once a famous Hellenic philosopher, his master in the dark days of his enslaved youth, had asked him why it was, when we shat, we so often turned around to examine our own turds, and he'd told that great sage the story of the king's loose-living son who one day, purging his belly, passed his own wits, inducing a like fear in all men since. "But you don't have to worry, sire," he'd added, "you've no wit to shit." Well, cost him a beating, but it was worth it, even if it was all a lie. For the real reason we look back of course is to gaze for a moment in awe and wonder at what we've made—it's the closest we ever come to being at one with the gods.

Now what he reads in this analecta of turds is rampant disharmony and anxiety: it's almost suffocating. Boundaries are breaking down: eagles are shitting with serpents, monkeys with dolphins, kites with horses, fleas with crayfish, it's as though there were some mad violent effort here to link the unlinkable, cross impossible abysses. And there's some dejecta he's not even sure he recognizes. That foul mound could be the movement of a hippogriff, for example, this slime that of a basilisk or a harpy. His own bowels, convulsed by all this ripe disorder, fill suddenly with a plunging weight, as though heart, hump, and all might have just descended there: he squats hastily, breeches down (well, Zeus sent Modesty in through the asshole, so may she exit there as well), to leave his own urgent message on the forest floor. Ah! yes! a man must put his hand to his wealth and use it, example is—grunt!—better than precept. Just so . . . But quality, not quantity. Inconsistency is harmful in everything, though no forethought,

of course, can prevail against destiny. Oof! Easy. Accomplishments are not judged by speed but by completeness. With what measure you mete shall it be measured to you again, and so on. That's better. He wipes himself with his soiled breeches, leaves them behind. Doesn't need them here anyway. When in Delphi, as they say . . .

Not all here in Aesop's troubled forest are pleased, of course, to have their miserable excrement read so explicitly. It makes many of them feel vulnerable and exposed, especially at a time when all the comforting old covenants are dissolving, and no one knows for certain who they are anymore, or who they're supposed to fuck or eat. Can one not even take a homely shit without worrying about the consequences, they ask, are there no limits? But of course that's just the point, there *are* no limits any longer, that's the message of the old king's desperate condition, this pointy-headed freak's intrusion here, his frantic bare-ass bob through these dark brambly thickets at the core. Though he talks wolfy enough at times, he rarely comes this deep, skirting the edges mostly where the shepherds keep their sheep, plummeting in here only when lust or terror overtakes him. What beast here wouldn't raise its tail for the hunchback, painful as the experience can be, if that's all it would take to resume the old peaceful carnage? But, alas, it's plain to see it's not rut that's brought the fabler back—that heavy wattle he's dragging through the pine needles and dead leaves between his crooked shanks is, by itself in its gross wilt, cause enough for panic here.

So it is that birds screech, beetles scurry, moles burrow in blind desperation, as Aesop makes his way toward the lion's den. Stupidity, fear, deceit, carnality, treason break out in the forest like scabies. There is the sharpening of tusks, the popping of toads, breath-sucking, the casting of long shadows. Suicidal hares and frogs hurl themselves out of their element, elephants eat their own testicles, worms blind themselves so as not to see the approaching catastrophe. As Aesop reaches the cave mouth, the fox slinks aside, lips curled back, baring his teeth above the stag's heart cradled bloodily in his paws. He snarls. Clouds of fleas, gnats, lice, mosquitos explode from foul-smelling holes in the forest floor like a sudden pestilence. Wells clog with bewildered beasts fallen they know not where. Storms rumble and winds whistle. Flames lap at an eagle's nest. And from high in the sky, a frightened hump-backed tortoise falls.

The fox lies stretched out across the cave mouth, as though to define certain boundaries, or invent them, gnawing, ears perked, at the stag's heart. Inside, the fabler squats in the dirt, his hump resting against the cavewall, gazing morosely at the dying lion, a much sorrier sight than he'd anticipated. "It stinks in here," he says. The lion snorts sourly, cocks one rheumy eye above his paw. "Nothing's so perfect," he grumbles, "that it's not subject to some pisant's criticism." In the old days he'd simply have stepped on him, popped the runt like a blister. Now he's not even sure he sees him. "Misfortune stinks, crookback. Dying stinks. If you don't like it, why do you wallow in it?"

"That's not why I'm here." He stares out past the fox at the dusky forest, which seems to have brightened slightly, as seen from within this dreary cave. An illusion, like hope itself. It's darkening by the second out there. "How is it you've taken up with this miserable blot on creation?"

"Expediency."

"I expected more from you."

"Our expectations are often deceived."

He accepts this continuous mockery though it pains him. Somewhere just below the hump, in fact. What is he doing here in this shithole, taking this kind of abuse? And from an old friend once honored above all others—even his shabby new alliance with the fox is a kind of taunt, a way of rubbing the fabler's nose in his most craven cynicism, just when he needed something nobler than that. Courage, in a word. Proud example. "I've been condemned."

The fox seems to snicker at this. The lion too would appear to have a grin on his face. The floor of the cave is rough and damp, reassuring in its rude discomfort, but somewhere water is dripping, echoing cavernously as though there might be a leak in the remote recesses of his own skull. He shudders as if to shake himself out of here, but he knows he can never leave again. They'll have to come and kill him in this place. Mangy and decrepit as it's become. Sometimes in the past he has managed to stay away from his forest for days on end, imagining himself a man like any other, yet even then these creatures had a way of haunting his consciousness, lingering just beneath it like stars behind the light of the sun, visible only from the bottom of a well. That well he's always dumping them down as a cushion against his own clumsiness. His own attraction to abysses. "Which flap," the lion rumbles wheezily, "were you wagging this time?"

He shrugs his hump. "Sin against Apollo." This time the fox does snicker, standing to scratch a flea behind his ear, or pretending to. "Go have a fit and tumble in a hole," the vicious schemer once said, all too prophetically. His fate now, by decree, he the fabler become his own goat. "I told them the truth, they called it sacrilege."

"Same old story," sighed the lion.

"Same old story."

"Natures never change. You're a meddling foul-mouthed stiff-necked exhibitionist. You remind me of that story of yours about the wild ass and the tame ass."

"Well, but the real moral of that one was—"

"The real moral was they were *both* asses, just the same. What did you think you'd gain by taunting fools?"

"I don't know. A laugh or two?" What does he have left, if not the truth? It has shaped, shaped by his misshapen body, his entire life. One thing about being a monster, it puts you in touch with the cosmos, biggest humpback of all. "I wanted to make the truth so transparent even these pig-headed provincials could see it, that's all." He liked to think of it as a kind of remembering, as though all men were animals in some way, or had been.

"Yes, and turtles want to fly, too," the old king rumbles. "There's only one truth, my friend. If you've forgotten what it is, come a little closer and let me give you a few pointed reminders." A mere reflex. The old fellow hasn't eaten the garbage he's lying in. He laps his jowls with a tongue so dry it sounds like the spreading of sand on stone.

Anyway, it's . . . "Impossible. There's a barrier . . ." At least there *was* . . . Has it somehow been breached?

"If there's a moral to be had, fabler, it can be done . . ."

He'd always thought of that distance between them as ontological and absolute, but now—he stirs uncomfortably. He's rarely come this deep before. The fox seems to have let one, his own commentary on the truth no doubt. He bats the air irritably, his hump scraping the wall behind: "Filthy bastard!"

"He does that from time to time just to let me know he's still here," the lion grumbles drowsily. "You get used to it. Familiarity, as they say . . ."

Not they. He. The rich man and the tanner. Or better yet: the fox and the lion, almost forgot that one. Yet now, these words, too: only an echo



. . . He realizes he hasn't told many fables on the evanescence of truth, brain-rot as the universal achievement. The old lion snorts ruefully. He seems to be drifting off. The hunchback trembles. They'll be here soon. He got away from them once, but they'll find him. Even from inside the cave, he can hear the turbulence out at the edge. He squeezes shut his eyes. Sometimes it feels almost like a dream. As though he might still be back on Samos, living with that fatheaded philosopher and his lascivious slave-fucking wife, the one who liked to say that even her arse had eyes. Any minute, he thinks, I might wake up to a beating or a bath . . .

The tortoise, tumbling through the air, wags his arms frantically. If he just works at this hard enough, he knows, he can do it, persistence has paid off before, he's famous for it. In order to try to free his mind from extraneous matters, such as the rising panic which is threatening to freeze him up entirely and stop his wings, as they should perhaps now be called, from functioning at all, he tries to concentrate on the splendid view he has from up here of the forest, a view few of its inhabitants have been privileged to enjoy, and one he himself will probably forego in the future, even if he does manage to get the hang of this flying thing on this one occasion. Like he told Zeus, meaning no offense, though unfortunately that's how it was taken, there's no place like home. If you don't get there too fast. But his effort to concentrate is frustrated somewhat by the way the forest keeps looping around him, appearing over his head one moment, beneath his tail the next: probably this has something to do with his flying problem.

Why did he want to get up here in the first place? A question he might well ponder, since the second place, rushing up at him like the moral to a foreshortened fable, is all but imponderable. He always tries to judge every situation from its outcome, not its beginning, though each, as he knows, flapping wildly, contains the other, ambition being both goal and goad. But what *was* that ambition? Was it aesthetic? Philosophical? The pursuit of some sort of absolute worldview (already slipping away from him, he notes, as the forest loops by again, losing now in structural clarity what it is rapidly gaining in detail)? A moral imperative? The spirit of rivalry? A rebellion against boundaries? The desire for travel? Who knows? Why anything? Why is the pig's belly bare or the magpie bald? Why does the crab have its eyes behind? Why does the lizard nod its head or the dying

swan sing? Who gives a bloody shit? Should *he* be singing? Why are turtles dumb? Why are their heads flat and their shells hard? But not hard enough? Why has that goddamn eagle left him up here—flap! flap! flap!—*all alone?*

When Aesop opens his eyes, he finds himself lying under a tree in a green, peaceful field, where all kinds of flowers bloom amid the green grass and where a little stream wanders among the neighboring trees. The most savage thing in sight is a grazing cow. A gentle zephyr blows and the leaves of the trees around about are stirred and exhale a sweet and soothing breath: he draws in a deep lungful, as a great relief sweeps over him. What a terrible dream I was having, he thinks. Those shits were going to kill me! He still feels vaguely troubled (it seemed so *real!*), but the stream is whispering, the cicadas are humming from the branches, the song of birds of many kinds and many haunts can be heard, the nightingale prolongs her plaintive song, the branches murmur musically in a sympathetic refrain, on the slenderest branch of a pine-tree the stirring of the breeze mocks the blackbird's call, and mingling with it all in harmony, Echo, the mother of mimesis, utters her answering cries, all of it resolving into a kind of rhythmic tinkle, reassuring in its simplicity like the drip of rainwater after a shower. Better a servant in safety, he reminds himself, than a master in danger, though at first this comes out, better a savory never than born a masker in a manger. Which doesn't make much sense. Is it some kind of oracle? And why is that cow standing there with her teats in the fire and plucked crows in her antlers with meat in their beaks? The trees' breath, he now notices, is not as sweet as he'd thought at first, and what the stream is whispering (how is it he fell asleep out here in this open field with his breeches off?) seems to be some suggestion about staying in line or alive, or playing the—

“What? *What—?!*” He starts up in alarm, opens his eyes a second time. Ah, it is the fox, that treacherous foul-mouth, whispering something in his ear about flaying the lion and wearing his hide as a disguise. “Don't wait until danger is at hand!” He turns his head away. He must have dozed off. But it seemed so *real!* “Fuck these useless shows of strength, humpback! Remember the fable of the hunting dog! Use your wits!”

Perhaps a *third* time, he thinks, straining to pop his eyes wider open. He uses his fingers to press his lids apart. But they *are* apart. Is he dreaming

that he's pressing his fingers to his lids? Alas . . . "It's been tried," he mumbles, trying his voice out.

"Only by asses. The morals of those stories are stay out of the wind and keep your mouth shut."

Would it work? Not likely. He can already hear his pursuers. "We were told to get the one in the lionskin," they'd be saying. "Why am I even listening to a double-crossing liar like you?"

"Because we understand each other. I wouldn't even be here without you, I know that, even if the others don't. You think I'd want to shit you now? Anyway, it's impossible. Think about it."

"He'd betray himself if he could figure out how to do it and profit by it at the same time," the lion growls from inside his paws. "Get back to your post, stinkbreath, before I decide to tear that red tail off at the root and sweep out this stinking boghouse with it!" He watches the miserable beggar slink, smirking no doubt (can't see a damned thing), back to the cave mouth. The hunchback stands to piss against the wall, at least that's what it sounds like. "And don't be fooled, fabler. Wit will *not* get the better of strength. Ever. That's just a fairytale for weaklings. Helps them die easier."

"But I can't outrun them and I can't eat them," the dwarf whines from the other side of his hump as he splashes against the wall. "What am I going to *do*?"

"What you can. There's an inscription here . . ." The old lion knows, in the end, he is going to have to abide by it himself. If puffed-up toads and flying turtles are ridiculous, humble lions are worse. He shakes his mane. If he could just lift his jaws up off the floor. ". . . At the oracle . . ."

"I've seen it." The hunchback is wiping that monstrous engine of his on his shirt. "But I don't know who I am and I don't know where to start."

"You know more than you know," the lion rumbles solemnly, and the fox snarls: "There he is!"

"What—?! *Who?*" squeaks the fabler, shrinking back against the wall he's just fouled.

"It's for me," says the lion, rearing his head up at last. It sways a bit like an old drunk's, but he holds it up there. This is not going to be easy, he thinks. But had he ever supposed it would be? "My herald, as you might say. My advice to you is to take a long walk."

"But—!"

“*GET OUT!*” he roars, and the hunchback, in panic, goes lurching out on all fours, nipped mischievously in the tail by the fox as he scrambles past. “Now come here, slyboots, I want to show you something. We’re going to let you play the hero.”

A plaintive ascendant whine silences the unruly forest. Flappings, snortings, rustlings, scurryings cease. The black-hooded magpie, death’s acknowledged messenger, lowers his gaping beak and from his perch above the cave mouth shrieks: “*The king is dying! The king is dying! Scrawk! Long live the king!*” A kind of communal gasp sweeps through the forest like a sudden brief gust of wind, then dies away. The magpie hacks raucously as though trying to spit. “*Miserable morsels—Harck! tweet!—mortals who, like leaves, at one moment—whawk!—flame with life and at another weakly—prrret! caw!—perish down the drain of Eternity in the mighty whirl of dust, the hour of—wheep!—equal portions has arrived!*” A furtive scrabbling and fluttering ripples now through the forest like gathering applause, from the outside in, rushing toward the center as though beaters were assaulting the periphery. Though only the magpie is visible (even the fox has disappeared), the area around the cave mouth seems suddenly congested, aquiver with terror and anticipation. And appetite. “*Cree! Cree! Creatures of a day, be quiet and have patience, not even the gods fright—purrr-wheel!—fight against the child within us! We go our—WARRCKK!—ways in the same honor already for—caw! caw!—forfeit!*” The magpie’s long bright tail drops like a falling axe. Is it over? Is the tyrant already dead? Heads peek out from behind foliage. Insects hover nervously. Monkeys swing closer, swing back again. A snake uncoils from a limb. A boar in the underbrush snorts and paws the ground. A crab sallies forth, eyes to the rear. “*Either death is a state of nothingness and utter—squawk!—or better never to have been born!*” the oracular magpie cries, and parrots, cats, crickets and hermaphroditic hyenas scream their assent. The entire twilit forest is alive with beasts surging furtively toward the dying lion’s cave. “*Must not all things be swallowed up in—shreek!—a single night? Just SO! Crrr-AWKK!*” As though in fear of being left behind, the animals at this signal burst from their hiding places and rush, squealing and bawling, toward the cave mouth—but just as suddenly pull up short. The old king stands there in the fading light, muscles rippling, fiery mane blowing in the breeze, eyes feverish with fury. With fierce deliberation, he steps forward, his teeth bared. Has this been a trap? “*Only one!*” shrieks the magpie. Ah. But a lion . . .

We found the fabulist at last in the Temple of the Muses, clearly deranged, howling about “death in the forest” and “the revenge of the dungbeetles,” and bounding around arse-high with his nose to the stone floor like a toad looking for water. After having abused us earlier, while still in prison, with filthy tales about the rape of widows and children (“A man put it in me with a long sinewy red thing that ran in and out,” he’d leered: had he been trying to seduce us with these simpering obscenities?) as well as racist slurs, insults against our fathers, and seditious threats to revenge himself upon us, even after he was dead, this grotesque little Egyptian, or Babylonian, was now, in one of our own temples, berating us with sacrilege, shrieking something truly offensive about “God with shit in his eye!” It was almost, we thought, as though he’d come here to our city *seeking* to die.

He was not easy to catch or, once caught, to subdue. As we chased him about the temple, wrestling with him, losing him, catching him again, he kept making brutish noises, now squawking, now roaring, now barking or bleating or braying, as though he were all these beasts at once, or thought himself to be, and at times we did feel somewhat like Menelaus grappling with the inconstant and malodorous Proteus. His stunted limbs were too rubbery to hold, his pot too sleek — finally we caught him by the ears (his Achilles’ heel, as it were) and, twisting them, extracted from him a more human howl.

As we dragged him toward his site of execution, his madness took on a subtler, yet no less bizarre form. He grew suddenly serene, almost flaccid in our many-handed grip, and commenced to lecture us on the evils we were presumably bringing upon ourselves with this action. “Not much time will be gained, O Delphians,” he proclaimed shrilly, as his pointed head bounced along on the uneven ground, “in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Aesop, a wise man; for it will be said of me, that I never did any wrong, never gave any ill advice to any man; but that I labored all my life long to excite to virtue those who frequented me.” Such pomposities, emerging reedily from that twisted liver-lipped mouth with its scattered teeth, under the squashed-up nose and squinty eyes, neither of which ever seemed to be looking at the same thing at the same time, struck us as so ludicrous we were all driven to fits of convulsive laughter, and nearly lost our grip on him again. “Fancy such a warty little thing as you making such a big noise!” we hooted.

“I prophesy to you who are my murderers, that immediately after my departure punishment far heavier than that you have inflicted on me will surely await you!” he squealed then, and we reminded him, laughing, that braggarts are easily silenced, as he was about to discover. “People who brag to those who know them must expect to be laughed at, gypsie, evil tricks don’t fool honest men! Such play-acting has cost many a man his life, you will not be the first or last to perish of it!” We hauled the droll little monster up to the edge of the cliff and prepared to heave him over. Some of us had his arms, some his horny feet. “Destiny is not to be interfered with, melonhead—if you had any real wisdom you’d know that! A man should courageously face whatever is going to happen to him and not try to be clever, for he will—ha ha!—not escape it!”

“Wait!” he begged, gigantic tears rolling down the bumps of his temples and off his earflaps. He seemed prepared to recant at last and, though it wouldn’t save his life, right his wrongs against us before he died. We set him on his bandy legs and stepped back, blocking any possible escape. He cocked his head impudently to one side. “Let me tell you a story,” he said. Ye gods, the little freak was incorrigible. It has been wisely observed, natures remain just as they first appear. When you do a bad man a service, some sage has said, all you can hope for is that he will not add injury to ingratitude, but even this hope was to prove in vain. “There was this old farmer,” he piped, “who had never seen the city and decided to hitch up the donkeys and go see it before he died. But a storm came up and they got lost among the cliffs. ‘Oh God, what have I done to die like this,’ he wept (and here *he* wept mockingly), ‘in the company of these miserable jackasses?’ ” We rushed at him, enraged at such impiety, but he stopped us again with a wild bewitching screech, lurching forward as though stabbed from behind, and we fell back, momentarily startled. “A man once fell in love with his own daughter,” he wailed as though in great pain, rolling his lopsided eyes, and pointing at all of us—what?! what was he saying? “So he shipped his old lady off to the country and forced himself on his daughter. She said, as I say to you, men of Delphi: ‘This is an unholy thing you are doing! I would rather have submitted to a hundred good men than be fucked by you!’ ” We flung ourselves at this loathsome obscenity, but before we could reach him, he hurled himself, cackling derisively, off the cliff, flapping his stunted little arms as though the fool thought he might fall up instead of down.

He has just, with what dignity remains, his knees weak and threatening to buckle, stepped forth from the cave mouth to confront his erstwhile citizenry, when something whistles past his ear and explodes—*SPLAT!*—beside him, startling him just enough to tip him over. What an irony, he muses, shrugging tortoise shell out of his ear, nearly got him before he could even get started. As it is, his jaw is back on the ground again, his paws trapped under his belly. His rear legs seem to have held, but he is not sure what overall impression this position makes. Perhaps they will think he is crouching, preparing to spring. More likely not.

Though he cannot see them, they are all out there, he knows, all he rejected, the trod-upon, the bitten and the stung, the ridiculed, the overladen, all of God's spittle, lusting now for this compensatory kill. The great equalizer that makes their own poor lives and deaths less odious. Let them come. He will have one last glorious fray, one final sinking of tooth and claw into palpitating flesh and gut, a great screaming music of rage and terror, before he dies. If he can just get his feet under him again. How was it he used to do that? He can feel his rump begin to sway, can hear them start to shift and mumble in the clearing down below. His aide-de-camp has slipped out of sight, of course. He has instructed the fox in how to kill him quickly when the time comes, when he's too weak to fight on. He doesn't want to die slowly, or ignobly. Or seem to. He has appealed to the fox's own ambition: let the opposition cut itself up, and then, when he gets the nod, move in as the decisive and heroic liberator. The wily bastard actually seemed moved: perhaps there's hope for him yet.

The sullen hesitant hush is shattered suddenly by another long shrieking whine from the intransigent magpie. "*He who hesitates—SCRAWKK!—flourish only for an omen—hrreet!—MOMENT!*"

And, just as his rump tips and smacks the ground, they are on him: wolves, boars, apes, moles, toads, dancing camels, plucked daws, serpents, spiders, snails, incestuous cocks and shamming cats, hares, asses, bats, bears, swarms of tongueless gnats, fleas, flies and murderous wasps, bears, beavers, doves, martins, lice and dungbeetles, mice and weasels, owls, crabs, and goats, hedgehogs and ticks, kites, frogs, peacocks and locusts, all the fabled denizens of the forest, all intent on electing him into the great democracy of the dead. A boar wounds him with a blow from its flashing tusks as he sprawls there, paws high, a bull gores him in the belly, a mosquito stings his nose, a cowardly ass kicks him in the forehead.

But even as they convene upon his body, something stirs in the enfeebled lion, something like joy or pride or even love. The rage of. His battered head rears and roars, his pierced muscles flex, his blunted teeth and claws find flesh to rend, bones to crush. The air is thick suddenly with blood and feathers and smashed carapaces, shrieks and howls, mighty thrashings about. He even, for a splendid moment, feels young again, that renowned warrior of old, king of the beasts. He no longer knows which animals he's embracing in this final exaltation—one eye is gone, the other clouded, an ear is clogged with bees, his hide's in tatters—but it doesn't matter. It is life itself he is clutching bloodily to his breast in this, his last delicious moment on earth, and it's the most fun he's had since he sneezed a cat.

But then, through the flurry of beaks and antlers and the blood in his eye, he sees the fox skulking toward him, head ducked, an insolent smirk on his skinny face. "No, wait!" he roars. "*Not yet!*" But he should have known better, take pity on such a creature, you get what you deserve. And what he gets is, too soon, oh much too soon, the treacherous villain at his throat. "You *fool!*" he gasps, while he's still voice left. "I can't help it," snickers the miserable wretch, nuzzling in. "It's just my—hee hee!—nature . . ." With a final swipe of his paw (he's being invaded from below, he knows, a seeding of teeth in his plowed-up nether parts as though to found a city there, but it's ceased to matter), he slashes the fox open from heart to groin, then hugs him close, locking his jaws around his nape, their organs mingling like scrambled morals. "It's all shit anyway," he seems to hear the devil grunt as his spine snaps—one final treachery! He feels then as though he's falling, and he only wishes, hanging on as the light dies and the earth spins, that his friend the fabler were here to whisper in his ear, the one without the bees in it, one last word, not so much of wisdom, as of communion. Just so . . . What? What? "*SKWWAARRRK!*" replies the magpie, as the forest extinguishes itself around him.