

Confessions of an English Opium-Dreamer

They're not happy when I paint. Maybe they think I'll eat the colors, or swallow the turpentine and escape that way. I wouldn't. I need to keep working, to record it all before it disappears, and anyway I'm due for release in two weeks. I wouldn't ruin that now.

Writing, though. Writing they encourage. It produces *clarity*, as Louse says. And I can't do much harm, to myself or others, with a dull pencil. Besides, they expect to read this account afterwards.

Let them read it. Maybe they'll believe me then.

I took opium for the first time at a gathering of artists in Soho. As always, I had just embarrassed myself terribly. There'd been an appreciative communal laugh at a line one of them had quoted—"And what the people but a herd confus'd"—and I had made some comment about William Booth being quite profound sometimes, even if he was a Methodist. This turned the laugh even more general. Apparently, the quotation was from Milton's *Paradise Regained*, as they all knew. Who reads *Paradise Regained*? I'd only read *Paradise Lost*, bored but grimly pushing on, in an effort to give myself the cultural references of the London artists I had found myself among, graduates of Oxford, Cambridge, and the Royal Academy. I was self-taught as an artist and the graduate of nowhere more prestigious than Durham School, and my father did not value literature as theirs did. The one impressive thing I'd ever done was break away from him and come to London to have a chance of one day being one of them.

My humiliation was only forgotten by the group when the host brought forward bitter cakes of solid opium for us to eat like Turks. I was skeptical, but I would have tried anything at that point to cover my blunder.

How to describe one's first experience with opium? It was like falling into another world. I was already a connoisseur of cheap alcohol, as much as the sale of my paintings and the tiny allowance my father sent me allowed, but opium was an entirely different altered state. A soft haze settled across my mind, and I slipped into a sleep which was not sleep, but only the dreamiest, most perfect pleasure, a feeling which lasted for hours. Vivid landscapes burst into bright existence behind my eyelids. The host played his piano for us—Bach, Schumann, Mozart, thundering and gliding across the keys—and I, who had never had much feeling for music, cried tears of ecstasy as the notes seemed to twinkle in the air like dust motes catching the light.

Afterwards, once the visions had passed, still drifting back to Earth, I returned to my flat and studio—one small room inside a sooty, coal-tinged building, but it was in Soho, which was what counted. The haze had lifted, leaving only supreme unshakeable confidence. And all night, I painted. In the morning I had a landscape, in brilliant unearthly colors, breathtaking but unsettling somehow. It was the best thing I'd ever done.

I was twenty-four then, nearly twenty-five, and the time I had left to exhibit youthful genius was quickly fading. I had come to London three years before, and had little to show for it. If I'd only been born earlier—if my father had married younger, if he had found a job at Oxford, if I had been trained by a master—I might have been able to join the Pre-Raphaelites. But as it is, I do not possess that inward eye of Wordsworth's, that gaze which, in gazing, can create a world. I see things, and I feel things, and then I put down on paper or canvas what I see and feel as best I can. So it is too with this account.

(And yet I am an artist, or will be one. She said I am the Artist, and I trust her with everything in me, even now. But then, she always did live in the future.)

I was so relieved to have found a key to unlock my latent genius that the nature of the key bothered me not at all. Countless great men, great artists, fueled their art with opium. I went to still more gatherings, more parties, waiting for the cakes of opium to be brought out again. But they never were.

So I went to Limehouse, where lanterns flickered in the river fog and slimy rotting wood stunk of brine, searching for the silk-draped opium dens every newspaper editorialist had assured me were invading our fair city, seducing Englishmen into luxurious Oriental vice. I only found two, and they were low places full of common men, thick with dirty pillows and opium smoke. The Chinese sailors running them were uninterested in catering to me at all. Most of the customers were sailors and coolies, who eyed me with opium-drugged skepticism as I picked my way through the slumped bodies to lie down on my assigned blanket with my rented pipe and oil lamp. There were a few Indian lascars too, and occasionally on my visits I came across a French soldier or two who'd picked up the habit in Indochina. Only once did I meet an Englishman, who looked as awkward as I felt.

And I never met an artist.

Smoking the opium gave me pleasant reveries, a sense of floating untethered away from myself. But when I came back to paint, I produced nothing out of the ordinary. More and more, I would find myself thinking not of painting but of opium itself. And then I would hurry back to another one of the dens, and put up with more skeptical gazes, more languages I didn't understand passing over and around me, to try to lose myself and discover the vivid life which pulsed within me, the fount of inspiration so easily accessible when only I had had the right

tools. In the dens our lax bodies were crushed in together, curled around each other. If I thrashed, or, more usually, if the man next to me thrashed, I often got a flailing fist to the mouth and an unsightly bruise the next morning. Perhaps opium would only work for me once.

It took a few months, months punctuated by occasional furtive visits to the opium dens and the creation of uninspired paintings, before, on the edges of conversations, I heard the first whispers about Wonderland.

Wonderland was an opium den. Wonderland was a portal to another world. Wonderland was an experience like no other. Wonderland gave you privacy, your own individual room to take the drug in. Wonderland was a place where artists shared walls with viscounts, and poets lay in reveries mere inches away from American railroad heirs. Wonderland was run by a pair of large red-headed twins, and no one knew their names. Wonderland served not opium to smoke, or even cakes of opium to eat, but laudanum, that mixture of opium and alcohol which was the preferred comfort of the lower classes. Only Wonderland's laudanum was mixed with other, secret ingredients. The Twins wouldn't tell any of the customers, even the most loyal and devoted, what was in it. You could view heaven after drinking Wonderland's laudanum, one man swore to me, in a reverent undertone. Awe was itself an accomplishment in a milieu which prided itself on its scathing wit and disregard for the things lesser men held sacred.

Everyone I talked to seemed to know a different route to reach Wonderland, and none could agree on an exact address. But after several nights of searching, shivering in the wind and sleet of an English autumn, I found myself in front of a red door up a narrow flight of stairs in the middle of the twisting alleys of a particularly insalubrious part of Soho. A password, I had been told, must be whispered through the lock, and, teetering between feeling ridiculous and a

vast, euphoric sense of excitement, I whispered the nonsense words, my lips touching the cold metal, “Beware the Jabberwock, my son!”

Immediately the door handle turned, so quickly I had to leap back to avoid being bent over idiotically when the building’s inhabitant came out. That inhabitant was in fact a very tall, very fat man wearing a huge tan duster like an American cowboy, whose hair was so red I could scarcely believe in its reality. In my stupefaction, I wondered vaguely if he was Irish or Scotch, and how I could make the inquiry. I wasn’t sure I wanted to drink laudanum prepared by an Irishman.

“The jaws that bite, the claws that catch,” the Twin said, his accentless voice rumbling, deep, and somehow sinister, his eyes fixing me with—well, it must have been contempt. I can’t say I made the most impressive figure on his doorstep. The Rowlands’ Macassar-Oil I used to keep my hair looking somewhat respectable had mostly been sweated out during my long walk, my beard was wind-ruffled, and my suit was greatly disheveled. And he was so *tall*.

“Pardon?” I said, more than a little terrified. Perhaps he had sampled too much of his own wares.

But when his eyes met mine, they were clear, and malicious. “When you encounter a Jabberwocky, always make sure you have a vorpal sword with you.”

The man was mad as a hatter. “Yes. Um, thank you very much for the advice, Mr.—”

He turned to lead me up another flight of stairs. I might have fled, but I wanted that laudanum more than anything, so I followed.

At the top of the stairs was a narrow corridor lined with many doors. I glanced around, trying to find what I should be looking at. I heard nothing, saw no one. It was eerily silent, entirely unlike the noisy sprawl of the other opium dens.

A sudden rustling noise made me turn. The Twin was pulling something out of one of the many pockets of his duster which glinted in his hand. A tiny corked glass bottle full of dark brown liquid, the bottle the exact length of my ring finger, and not much thicker either. I reached for it, but the Twin pulled his hand back. "A half sovereign."

The price was exorbitant. That was nearly all that was in my purse. I supposed, suddenly resentful, that the artists who had raved to me about the experience and neglected to mention the price might have found a half sovereign less dear than I did. I stood there for a moment in a furious, embarrassed rage, but I was already here, after all, and the Twin was grinning at me provokingly. At last I yanked out my wallet and removed four half crowns. They quickly disappeared into one of the Twin's pockets. From another pocket, he removed a little golden key, which he used to unlock the closest door.

Inside was a very narrow little room, unseasonably and irrationally warm, since there was no fireplace. The only pieces of furniture were a bedframe lined with a thin mattress and an unusually elegant glass table. On the table were a dimly flickering oil lamp and a silver hand-held looking-glass, begrimed with age. The Twin set the golden key and the bottle down on the table. As he left, he said over his shoulder, "Leave the key when you're done. And drink it all in one go. It *wants* you to drink it."

Then the door was closed, and I was alone. With a madman just outside.

I stared at the bottle, and, finally, picked it up. It felt warm in my hand. I sat on the bed, took off my old and neatly mended hat. I felt some kind of ceremony was needed, but I knew not what. And the longing for the opium was overwhelming. And so, I uncorked the bottle, and swallowed.

I had heard, variously, that Wonderland laudanum would taste of cherry-tart, of custard, of pine-apple, of roast turkey, of toffee, and of hot buttered toast. It tasted of none of them. It was bitter—terribly bitter—so bitter I choked. I thought I could taste peppercorns, maybe saffron, maybe sulphur. But I downed the entire bottle.

I lay back on the thin mattress. I felt nothing besides a slight nausea at the aftertaste in my mouth. A faint swimming in my head. So far, this nightmarish experience was not worth the four half crowns.

I was beginning to calculate how late my landlady might accept the rent when I felt it. A sudden tug on the edges of my consciousness. A warmth in my face which grew and grew until it was burning. My skin was on fire. I stretched and struggled for the looking-glass, but it felt as if my arms were moving more slowly than usual. Panic beat within me, but sluggish somehow. I got a hand round the handle of the looking-glass and raised it to my face. My pupils were opium-small, pinpoints only, and my face was wavery, jaundiced, afraid.

I was in a forest. In the space between one blink and the next, I was in a forest. The trees were tall and thin here, with leaves which grew as thick as moss and trapped most light away. Roots, spindly but eager, grew upwards, winding about each other, not content to stay in the ground.

And I was really *in* the forest, not merely looking at it. I stepped, and leaves, purple and curled like cockle shells, cracked and splintered beneath my foot. The wind was as cold as that in the London street I'd been in not twenty minutes before, but bracing, somehow. I felt more invigorated, more athletic, than ever before, as if I could run a mile and feel nothing but the beating joy, joy, joy of my lungs straining, my legs burning, my heart pounding.

I was still wearing everything I had been wearing when I lay down on that mattress. Only my set-aside hat was missing. Christ. What kind of illusion was this? *Was* this heaven?

I began to walk. There was no path. It was a dark forest, as I've said, and I kept turning to follow a motion I was sure I had seen, but was never sure was real. Sometimes I sensed shiftings in the leaves—not malevolent beings, I didn't think, but certainly presences. They were still and silent woods, but still like the moment after a gunshot. I felt *noticed*. They were aware of me.

There was a woman.

She was at the nearest tree, suddenly, when I was sure she had not been there an instant before. She was beautiful, I thought, but it was a strange, unearthly beauty. Her dress was white and lined with ermine—or at least, a fur I thought was ermine—and her unbound hair streaked like ink over her milk-pale skin.

She smiled at me. “Hello,” she said.

I gaped. “Good day,” I returned finally. My voice rasped in my throat. This too was unaccountably real.

“I always know when one of you is going to turn up,” she said. “The Red King begins to twitch a little in his sleep.”

“There are—others?”

She smiled again. It really was a charming smile, despite her bloodless lips, her inhumanly white teeth. “There aren't any others, not yet. Not for you, at least. You live time forwards, like all the rest. How perfectly dull.”

The first. I was the *first* to reach this place. I let the pride swell in me. “I wasn't aware there was any other way to live it.”

“Aren't you?” Her smile turned knowing.

She was right, I realized suddenly. I still didn't know how to live time any other way but forwards, but sometimes—in the best of the opium reveries—a session that was only two hours long could feel like two centuries of dreams. Sometimes forever was just one second.

“Living backwards is my favorite,” she went on. “One's memory works both ways, then.”

I was staring at her and didn't want to stop. “So you remember—forwards? And you remember me?”

“Oh, I remember you. And I remember you meeting the Red King. Come with me.”

And I took her hand, my palm likely sweating horribly against her icy one, and walked with her through the closely-packed trees, peering into the gloom to avoid stumbling over one of those upward-straining roots.

I can't say how long we walked for. Only that soon we came to a circular glen crowded round by trees, so circular it seemed unnatural. In the center, sprawled ungainly on the wet grass, lay the Red King.

I drew closer. He had a red beard, the same color as the Twin's hair, a red doublet and red hose, and a gaunt, craggy face. He could have been carved out of granite, only that he breathed—almost imperceptibly.

A sudden, nameless horror ripped through me. I knew I couldn't stay here, with the Red King's great eyes closed, and his inert body waiting for me. I flinched back.

“All as it should be,” the woman said. “Walk with me.”

And as calmly as she had led me to him, she led me away.

“I'm the White Queen, you know,” she said, as we moved through the trees, the glen fading behind us as if it had never been. “Since we're on opposite sides of the chessboard, I

suppose I should be glad he's doing his dreaming and his wife is as bad-tempered about it as she is, but it does always feel a bit sad to me when they're both out of commission. You're nothing without a good enemy."

"The chessboard? Your Majesty?" I asked, since that seemed the simplest thing to respond to.

"There's no real chessboard, of course. It's a metaphor. Most things here aren't metaphors, but that one is." She patted my shoulder genially. I felt her skin cold through the fabric, and I shivered. "You'll learn in time."

I studied her. The wind—too strong to be a breeze, too weak to be painful—whipping through the trees ruffled the fur at her neck, scattering it across her throat. Her hair lifted in long pieces across her face and tugged away from her back in spirals. She noticed me looking, and smiled.

I sat up, gasping. The lamp on the glass table gave a particularly drastic flicker.

I was here. I was here, between one step and another across that strange forest floor. I pressed a shaking hand to my chest. My heart clopped wildly against my ribs, beneath my layers of shirt and waistcoat and coat.

God. That had been my most vivid vision yet from opium. I had never had a conversation in a vision before. And never stepped on leaves, or seen wind pull through a woman's hair. I knew a man once who claimed that in an opium vision he'd coupled, acrobatically, with a Viennese whore. He had remembered far too many details, and been far too eager to share them. But all these details—lights, smells, sounds—they surely weren't normal for opium visions.

I was still in a haze, but I picked up my hat and left Wonderland, leaving the key and the empty bottle next to the looking-glass, which winked in the lamplight.

I painted that night.

I didn't have a studio outside my flat. I had the one uncluttered corner of my flat, where strange noises happened in the metal drainage pipe outside but some of the gaslight from the street aided my lamps in illuminating my work.

I painted her, of course. On a canvas the size of an atlas, so it would be easy to carry around, easy to put up. Her face, firm-chinned and lovely, her hair streaming behind her, her fur-trimmed gown whispering at her neck. Her smile. Small, quick parallel brush strokes for the fur. Flowing curves of the wrist to paint the wind tugging through her hair, across her skin. She was so real, in my recollection, that I felt I could touch her. She couldn't have felt so real if it was only a vision. Maybe I *had* gone through the looking-glass into another world.

In the afternoon of the next day, I was weak with lack of sleep and food, but I had finished.

I brought her to show Louse that evening in the pub.

Louse's name isn't Louse, of course, but after what happened he doesn't deserve a better one. He was the closest thing to a friend I had in London's art circles, someone I could talk to about more than just the latest gossip, the latest style. While I'd gone to school, and the other artists had gone to better ones, Louse had been tutored at home in whatever he wanted. It had resulted in an uneven but very deep education, and he was more satisfied with his than most men I knew. Louse had confessed once, in a moment of drunken vulnerability, that his parents didn't

like him very much, and now he was embarrassed around me whenever the topic of conversation came anywhere near his confession. I was spitefully glad I had that over him, something to hold onto when I was drowning in inferiority. I put up with his condescension and his brutal evisceration of my work because he was interested in me—and because he paid for our drinks.

After we'd drunk a few whiskys, I unwrapped the canvas he'd been casting looks at and handed it to him. He raised a brow. "Who is this?"

"A young lady I met."

"She has no lips."

I fidgeted under his scrutiny of the canvas. "They're pale, that's all."

"It won't sell unless she has better lips. Were you trying to do her as the Snow Queen? À la Hans Christian Andersen?"

"Since when did you care about art selling?" My hurt and anger roared tight beneath my breastbone, livened by drink.

But he only said steadily, "I care about art selling when it isn't a work of passion. Then its only purpose is to finance the real work."

"It *is* a work of passion! I was inspired!"

"Inspiration is a fever dream of poets. You're smarter than that. How long did this take you to do? A week?"

"A day," I admitted.

"And the subject. You're attracted to her, of course, but that's all that's here. There's no story, no grand tragedy, no doomed passion. Frankly, it's a bit masturbatory. A subject like this only unnerves and cheapens the artist. It doesn't work," he said, looking down at my pride and

joy, “because it’s too clouded. There’s too much emotion and too little thought. It’s petty and private and personal.”

“It’s unconventional, at least,” was all I could think to say.

“Not so unconventional. There’s nothing particularly interesting about your brush work. Rather sloshy, I’d say.”

Sloshy was a term of highest contempt. I flushed. “Damn the brush work! There’s more to art than brush work!”

Not to Louse, though. He was a purist, cold and meticulous. He loved alcohol, but he loved the work more. No matter how we’d caroused the night before, he got up sober, dunking his face into cold water as dawn broke outside his studio—a real studio, a separate room in his flat which caught the light well, empty down to the stripped-bare floorboards. By all rights, his work should have lacked passion, but it didn’t. It was simply restrained in its execution, sharp, coherent, like a colorful daguerreotype. “No distractions,” he’d said to me once when he was in the throes of it, his face exhausted and pale, his hair sleeked back with water rather than Macassar-Oil. “Clarity.”

Clarity was cold and bleak and I didn’t want any of it in my art.

And I had to see her again.

The second time I went to Wonderland, a week later, the money taken in part from my laundry budget, I paid the Twin his half sovereign and hurried into my assigned room, a different one this time, but with that same looking-glass. I couldn’t tell if I’d given money to the same Twin, or if there even was another Twin. The matter soon fell from my mind as I swallowed the laudanum.

Again the nausea, the tugging, the burning, the studying my face in the glass until it all fell away and there she was, as beautiful and unearthly as ever. We walked and talked, and spent hours and centuries together in the watching woods, which posed no danger, I felt, with her there.

She was as lovely a queen as any Rossetti or Millais had painted. She was enough to inspire poetry. I tried. I'd brought a note pad with me into the room, and the moment I came up out of the haze I scrawled a few lines down, hoping to use them to help inspire a painting later. But the next morning, when the fog had left me entirely, the words were smudged and scrawling and all I could make out was, "The slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." Which meant nothing at all.

I kept finding ways to save enough money to see her again and again, even though I was no longer trying to sell any of my paintings. There was simply no time for it. I thought not of painting, not of alcohol, not of opium, but of her. I cut money from my winter clothing budget, from my food budget, and I walked away from my visits to Wonderland hungry, ill-clothed, and smiling every time. One golden afternoon, remembering one of the White Queen's sly expressions inviting me in on a joke, a smile pulled at my lips, this wild and perfect joy tearing out of me. And there, in the street, buffeted by the eternal stream of anxious gentlemen and harried ladies and people who could be dignified by neither term, I laughed.

This was the most magnificent thing to ever happen to me. I needed to tell someone. Louse would be concerned, and disparaging. I kept trying to tell someone at a party, someone who'd been to Wonderland, someone who knew, but it felt too private, my own secret. What if they could somehow get to her, take her from me?

My father?

Definitely not.

My father was a lecturer in mathematics at Durham University. His love was for linear algebra, determinants, symbolic logic—and for explaining them. It made sense to me, until it didn't, and the parts that made sense bored me and the parts that didn't made me tremble with hot shame, red as anger. When he wasn't teaching or with me, annoying me with questions, trying to understand me, smothering me with his care, he was holed up in his office, working, consumed with a love for the problem and the puzzle.

He wanted to solve it.

I've never wanted to solve it.

He'd been so angry when I refused to go to university, and so angry when I left to make my way in London. He had a drawn, plain, freckled face, boyishly unbearded, and tired eyes, and when he shouted he looked incongruous, as though such emotion should not be happening on such a face. I still went up to Durham for awkward holidays, but we did not share the details of each other's lives anymore. I was alright with that. Truly.

As much as I liked her, I couldn't say the White Queen wasn't odd. Usually she was odd in a charming way, but sometimes—sometimes—

It hit me most strongly during one of my visits when she suggested we see the Red King again, and I recoiled.

“You don't want to look at him? Probably best that way. He dreams you into existence, after all. If you disturb his rest, who knows what will happen?” Her laugh seemed suddenly just the slightest bit horrible to me.

“He does *what*?”

“What I said.”

“Does he dream—all of this? You? The woods? This is all his?”

“No.”

“If he dreams me, then surely he dreams everything.” I thought of that awful face, still and carved like a death mask, the instinctive revulsion which pooled in me at the sight.

“Ah, but who dreams the Red King?”

“God?”

She only laughed again. “If that makes you comfortable.”

“I’m worried about you.” Louse had a very serious look on his face, which was even more dour than usual.

“I’m touched.” I was in a cheerful mood that evening, still bolstered by my latest visit with the White Queen, and the pub was bright and raucous around us.

“When was the last time you painted?”

“Last night.” Another painful, frustrating attempt at capturing just a little of the White Queen on canvas.

“Just, you aren’t—concentrating. And you haven’t shown me any of your work for over a month.”

“Why would I? When you have such a low opinion of it?”

“You can do good work,” he said earnestly. “You only have to focus. Avoid distractions.”

“I haven’t been *distracting* myself.”

“Oh? Where do you go so many nights?”

“You’ve been spying on me.”

“I’ve been asking about you. No one sees you as much as they did.”

I sighed. “I’ve been at Wonderland.”

“The new opium den?” He did not look pleased.

“It’s incredible. Like entering another world.”

“You’ve been going there a lot lately, then,” he said. “Surely you could cut back a bit? Spend more time on your work?”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport. Haven’t you read the medical journals? Opium brings you to a higher moral plane. It suppresses all your worst qualities and elevates all your best. No man could force a woman or kill a man while on opium.”

“The doctors are probably smokers themselves. You don’t need opium to create. Just go into your thoughts and build up the vision piece by piece, detail by detail, and then hold it together by sheer will. It’s the only way that really works.”

How to tell him that my thoughts were just echoes of other people’s, including his? And how to tell him that I didn’t want to create my own vision? I wanted to immerse myself in a vision already fully-formed like a world, and then paint it for those not fortunate enough to have made the journey. Not for the first time, I wished I had some Wonderland laudanum in my hand, or even a pipe of opium to smoke, so I could drift away to where thoughts lingered easily, to be handled and inspected like jewels, and no demands were placed on my mind. My throat went dry with longing.

“Well, I’m not smoking opium,” I said smugly, recovering myself. “I’m drinking it.”

Louse grimaced. “Laudanum?”

“Special laudanum.”

“What makes it special, then?”

“No idea.” I grinned at him and his disgusted expression, and drank down my whiskey. I was craving that more and more too.

The next time I went to Wonderland and drank the laudanum, I didn't see the White Queen at all.

There was something different about the woods, something heavy and expectant in the air. And she always appeared before me now as soon as I arrived, but this time I was left waiting. I walked about, calling for her. It felt silly to address her as the White Queen, and vaguely treasonous to call her Your Majesty, but I had settled on Your Majesty as the lesser of the two evils.

And then I heard a noise. A crashing and creaking of destroyed wood, an unholy disregard for the hushed seclusion of the trees, and a—God, a *burbling*, like some monstrous gargling bird.

I spun around, and there it came. Scaled like a trout, with a long serpentine neck and clawed wings like a bat, curled to protect against the trees yet still spread wide enough to show the veins pulsing warm beating life through them. Its deep-set eyes faced downwards like those of some ugly fish, flaming with malice, and its nostrils were armed with fluttering flaps of thick skin. It had insectoid antennae too, and hairy and spindly long fingers like the legs of an enormous fly, tipped with dark sharp gleaming curved claws like an eagle's foot. I'd seen a fly trapped inside a glass paperweight in my father's office, I remembered, wildly. Its green back shining, iridescent, and those monstrously hairy legs.

I began to stumble backwards. What was I to do? Run? Kill it? Why was it here? Was this the Red King's doing? I needed a blade, something that could cut or stab, but I had nothing, not even a pencil. Closer and closer it came, snuffling. Those terrible nostrils flapping, the coiled neck undulating. It gave an angry shriek, and the heat of its breath warmed my face.

I thrashed awake. My flailing hands had hit the lamp and almost knocked it over. There was a burn on my palm, and there could have been a fire if I'd wakened a moment later. I breathed hard, squinting around wildly into the dark, listening for that ghastly burbling shriek, for a very long time.

Despite my terror, I hurried back to Wonderland as soon as I could. The White Queen was in danger, with that *thing* roaming her woods.

Maybe she was gone. Maybe I would never see her again at all. At the thought I was so badly frightened I felt numb.

But when I drank the laudanum and stared into the looking-glass, I came back to the woods. I was never sure I returned always to the same patch of woods, but here I was—and here was the White Queen, waiting for me.

“Oh God,” I cried, hurrying to her. “I thought I would never see you again.”

I wanted to take her in my arms and feel that she was solid, real, but I didn't dare. I never dared.

She smiled up at me, and it smote me like a fist to the stomach.

“There was this beast,” I said. “Like an insect, and a fish, but it was horrible, and it made this atrocious sound, and it almost killed me. I wanted to kill it—I assume that was why it came to me, as a test from the woods—but I didn’t have anything, and I didn’t know where you were.”

“The Jabberwocky isn’t yours to defeat,” she said. “Or anyone’s. He just lives here. His life is not yours to intervene in.”

Beware the Jabberwock, my son.

I was bewildered. “You just live in fear of it?”

“We don’t experience fear as you do. And he wouldn’t kill you,” she said. “That’s not his purpose. The White King probably just asked him to terrify you a little.”

“The White King?”

“I can’t quite reason with him these days. He’s jealous of you, maybe. He annoys me so sometimes, but marriage is marriage.”

“You’re—married?” I couldn’t tell how I sounded. What I felt was dull, lost, as if all feeling had ended.

“Of course. I have a daughter too. Lily.”

I stood in stupefied silence. What was the point of this vision, of seeing her so many times, if it all meant nothing, if there was no future for us, together?

She laughed at my expression. “There’s lots of things you don’t know. And you’ll probably never find them out.”

Her smile—her smile looked suddenly like the Twin’s.

I screamed and screamed and screamed. I stood, but felt nothing. Not the floor beneath my shoes, not the door handle beneath my fingers. I crumpled to the floor of the corridor, felled

by sobs so huge I thought I couldn't breathe. The air was too hot in my lungs. It was like being burned from the inside out.

“Poor sod, he's turned out melancholy,” someone said.

I looked up.

There were several other men here, hazy-eyed with fading laudanum, coming out of their rooms to stare. One man's rabbit nose kept twitching as he sniffed anxiously. I knew other people went to Wonderland—I had heard about Wonderland from them—but I had never seen another patron in all my time coming here, and I felt suddenly invaded, made vulnerable. Had they been in the same place I had been? Had they met their own White Queen? Were they “the others”? I hated them for it, with anger so raw it surprised me.

And then I retched. Over and over again. The bile reeked, reaching my nose and triggering another heave, and another. When I was done, I coughed, the spittle distending from my mouth in long phlegmy strings. Vomit clung to my beard—I could smell it.

The Twin—and his Twin—God, there *were* two of them—took me by the arms and marched me out into the street.

The pavement was icy and slick beneath my feet. I nearly tripped over horse dung frozen solid. From a church I heard the faint sounds of singing for the beginning of Advent. I wandered, weaving in and out of the light of the gas lamps, terrified of being alone.

I found my way to Louse's flat, convinced his confused and sleepy landlady to let me up, and banged on his door. He opened it quickly, and dragged me inside.

He stank of turpentine. He'd been working. “You look awful.”

Now that I was here, I was embarrassed. “I feel wonderful.” I tried to grin at him, and a bit of vomit plopped from my beard onto his clean, clean floor.

“You can’t possibly. There’s—Christ—vomit in your beard, you’re sweating like old cheese, and your face is slack. Damn it all to hell! Is it the opium again?”

He didn’t even wait for an answer. He let me stay, bundled into blankets on the floor of his studio. I thought of the White Queen. She had some other interest in me besides simple affection—if she did feel affection for me. I’d known that all along, maybe, despite my hoping. But I couldn’t understand what it meant, any of it.

The next day, I promised Louse I’d go have a good night’s rest and then meet him for breakfast at some greasy little restaurant. He didn’t seem confident in my going home to sleep. He shouldn’t have been, since I wasn’t.

“Just stay here,” he said. “I don’t want you to be tempted to go back to that place. It can’t be good for you, drinking all that laudanum all the time. It rots the mind.”

I agreed, and made pious promises never to drink laudanum again. But no matter what Louse said, I had to go back. I needed to make her give me answers.

For the first time in weeks, I spoke to the Twin who came to lead me up to a room. “I can pay for two bottles. That’ll make me stay there longer, right?”

His face was impassive. “Time is different with laudanum.”

“But the chances are good?”

“There is a risk of staying longer than you’d like, with more of the opium in your system.”

I forced a self-assured smile. “Do you think I’m a rank amateur? My tolerance is very high.”

He studied me, and I thought he was remembering my sobbing, heaving fit in the corridor last time.

“Alright,” the Twin said finally. And he handed me two bottles in exchange for my pound sterling.

In my small room, I swallowed down the laudanum, first one bottle and then the other. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to ever come back.

“William,” she said, and I jolted. There she was, as white and brilliant as ever, but gray in the moonlight, kneeling in the tall grass next to my prone body, studying my face. I could see the individual hairs of her brows, her lashes.

“You don’t like the name,” she said. “After your father. But a name is not who you are, not really.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes—those mischievous, sweet, malicious eyes—glazed over as she leaned back into the grass. I had to sit up to still see her face. I’d never been in the woods when it was night before, and she was in a strange mood. Well, stranger than usual.

She could sing, that one. Not like a nightingale, not like an accomplished girl in a parlor. She sang harsh and uneven and with such wild eerie power that the hairs raised on my skin, and my being yearned towards her. My affection for her was uncontrollable, even now. “Your name is called son, your name is William, you are called untalented, you are—”

“I am?” I prompted her. My heart beat in my throat; every pulse felt like it would choke me. The need for an answer beat within me, just as strong.

She grinned at me, this savage wild creature, the woods glistening in her hair. I could smell her cruel hunts and her long vigils. She was veiled in the white mystery and clarity of the moon—and the red darkness of blood. “You are the Artist, of course.”

My eyes flashed, as full of malice as hers, as full of flame as the Jabberwocky’s. I had never felt so exultant, so powerful, so complete.

And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Her hands, bony, cold, held my head in her lap. I could feel her nails pressing into my scalp, and I pushed into them. The pain made me feel realer.

“There are things happening here you will never understand.”

“But I don’t understand anything,” I said, helplessly. “That’s the problem.”

She looked at me. Usually her face was alive with humor, condescension, spite. This time her face was blank, as if she had gone from it. “I never expected you to. After all, there will be others.”

I was moving through tall grasses, taller than ever, so tall I couldn't see over them. I couldn't tell if they had grown or I had shrunk. They were sharp-edged, stinging me across the face, and they bent and crunched underfoot. The smell of their wet broken vessels was acrid in my throat.

The White Queen was moving before me, moving backwards, and she was talking to me, but it was all nonsense, absolute nonsense, and she was fading before me, her image warped and bloated like a daguerreotype ruined by liquid spilled unevenly across it. And I couldn't communicate with her properly, I couldn't speak, only inhale, and it was like drowning in a pond, choking on more and more water brimming with scum. I felt flat as a flower crushed beneath a pane of glass, dull, drained, frail, as if one shake too rough could break me.

I was nothing. I was nothing but cells, swimming cells slopping about, like I was some great caterpillar in a chrysalis, and all of me was dissolving. Eventually I would be reconfigured, but into what I could not tell, and feared to know.

I was running, running, and I couldn't stop. I tried to swerve, to move in a different direction, but I was helpless. The beast—the being—the Jabberwocky was somewhere behind me, coming towards me, but this utter helplessness was somehow a worse problem. Surely I must trip on a tree root, please, please, but there were none, or if there were I moved through

them. I couldn't even tell if I was solid. I couldn't move my fingers when I thought to, but I was certainly moving, making my way forward, inexorably. The Red King was drawing me.

A too-familiar voice dragged me out of that place, and into a place between. I saw nothing, but I heard everything.

“Train from Durham—delayed—got your telegram—never been so scared in my life—”

Then Louse's voice, cutting, strident and hoarse. “He was like this when I found him in that den—barely breathing—and his heart rate—”

Then my father's warm, uncalloused hand on my cheek, my brow. “William? William, darling, can you hear me?”

Louse again, damn him. “I had a doctor in—no good, he says—we need to wait it out—”

I drifted in and out of consciousness, but Father sat with me, his hand warm and his voice soft and tender and pained against the encroaching dark.

When I woke up, he sent me to the sanatorium.

I had thought it might be filthy, all rusted chains and sadistic attendants. That, at least, might inspire art, putting me through enough suffering, enough living to make even my inadequate gears turn.

But it was not like that. Only boring and bland, full of boring, bland people. The first few days, I sobbed fitfully, weakly into my pillow for the loss of the White Queen. Without the Twins' laudanum, I had no way of reaching her. She may have never loved me, never thought I was the hero of the story, but I needed her like I needed my heart. When, after a frankly ludicrous amount of debate, they gave me a looking-glass to help me trim my overgrown beard, I

stared into it, willing myself to fade into it, to see her again. A guard stood by, his muscles tensed, as if afraid I'd smash the looking-glass and slit my wrists with the shards. Idiot. If I'm dead I can't see her, so what's the point?

My thoughts are no purer without the opium. I've achieved none of Louse's magic *clarity*. In fact, I exist in a kind of washed-out fog of no effort, of no hope. My thoughts loop in on themselves, jolted every so often out of their tracks. I am forever running after them, trying to catch a piece of an idea, as they wave frantically, streamers of colored light fading when I try to grasp them. Instead of an expression of myself, my thoughts are trains meeting in the lone country in the dead of night, bright lights flooding the dark, wheels squealing, whistles screaming, and then thundering on and away, leaving nothing behind but the memory of noise.

What am I, as a being, without thoughts? What solid identity can I have when I'm just a fuzzy off-white space for things to happen in?

God, I want laudanum.

My father comes to visit me nearly every day. Louse came too, a few times, but I was so angry with him for taking me from Wonderland I didn't speak to him. I will, though, one day.

Father visited on Christmas, and he brought a roast turkey, already cut. I carefully put thoughts of Wonderland laudanum out of my head, and we ate it on my thin bed using the sanatorium's flimsy cutlery.

"The University must be so angry," I said at last. "You skipping out weeks before Michaelmas term ended."

He gave me an inscrutable look. "The University will cope."

We chewed in silence.

Finally, he made a little hacking noise in his throat. That had always been his way of preparing me for a fatherly speech. “I keep thinking this wouldn’t have happened if your mother had lived.”

That I was not prepared for. “What?”

“Women can do this better, raising children. I should have sent you to live with your aunt, the way they all suggested, but—you were mine and you were Jenny’s, and—and I thought I wouldn’t fail you. For your sake, and hers.”

I never liked being reminded I’d murdered my mother. I’d been twisted badly in the womb, wrong from the beginning. “You did just fine,” I muttered.

“Obviously I didn’t. First you ran to London, and now—and now Louis tells me you’ve been spending all your money on drinking laudanum in some den run by Irishmen?”

“I don’t think they’re Irish.”

“I don’t care if they’re Irish.” Father’s voice was strained now. “Come home, William. London’s not a place for any decent man, and especially not a man with your...indulgences.”

“I can’t go. I have to paint. You don’t understand, you never understand!”

“You can paint at home, can’t you?” He smiled, weakly. “The light should be better, at least. Not all this smoke and fog.”

“I won’t have connections! I won’t be able to meet anybody, I won’t be able to exhibit anything, I won’t be able to sell anything!” My breathing became more and more erratic, and it felt all over again like I was choking on scummy pond water.

Father realized it too, and his voice turned gentle again. God, I hated this. “Alright, alright. We’ll settle this when you’re not ill.” And he handed me another slice of the turkey.

Eventually, things got better. My thoughts still go nowhere, and I still don't always own them. But I began to want to paint again—her, of course, but also the trees, the grasses, the Jabberwocky, the Red King. I want to make that world mine before it leaves me forever.

They worried I'd strain myself. I tried reasoned argument, to no avail, and then finally I screamed until my throat was raw and swallowing made me gag. This failed to convince them of my rationality. Finally Father wrote to the director and pled for me, his prodigal son.

I think I'm close to sanity again, as close as I ever was. My sanity is not cold and clear like Louse's, but it is serviceable enough.

And yet I imagine it sometimes, ache for it, now that I'll be free in two weeks. The red door is still there, and the Twins still have their laudanum. I could always go back to Wonderland, if I can still find the way, though I don't know what will be there waiting for me if I go through the door.