

I was raised in a gaunt house with a garden; my earliest recollections are of floating lights in the apple-trees.

I recall, in the orchard behind the house, orbs of flame rising through the black boughs and branches; they climbed, spiritous, and flickered out; my mother squeezed my hand with delight. We stood near the door to the ice-chamber.

By the well, servants lit bubbles of gas on fire, clad in frock-coats of asbestos.

Around the orchard and gardens stood a wall of some height, designed to repel the glance of idle curiosity and to keep us all from slipping away and running for freedom; though that, of course, I did not yet understand.

How doth all that seeks to rise burn itself to nothing.

The men who raised me were lords of matter, and in the dim chambers I watched as they traced the spinning of bodies celestial in vast, iron courses, and bid sparks to dance upon their hands; they read the bodies of fish as if each dying trout or shad was a fresh Biblical Testament, the wet and twitching volume of a new-born Pentateuch. They burned holes in the air, wrote poems of love, sucked the venom from sores, painted landscapes of gloom, and made metal sing; they dissected fire like newts.

I did not find it strange that I was raised with no one father, nor did I marvel at the singularity of any other article in my upbringing. It is ever the lot of children to accept their circumstances as universal, and their particularities as general.

So I did not ask why I was raised in a house by many men, none of whom claimed blood relation to me. I thought not to

inquire why my mother stayed in this house, or why we alone were given names—mine, Octavian; hers, Cassiopeia—when all the others in the house were designated by number.

The owner of the house, Mr. Gitney, or as he styled himself, 03-01, had a large head and little hair and a dollop of a nose. He rarely dressed if he did not have to go out, but shuffled most of the time through his mansion in a banyan-robe and undress cap, shaking out his hands as if he'd washed them newly. He did not see to my instruction directly, but required that the others spend some hours a day teaching me my Latin and Greek, my mathematics, scraps of botany, and the science of music, which grew to be my first love.

The other men came and went. They did not live in the house, but came of an afternoon, or stayed there often for some weeks to perform their virtuosic experiments, and then leave. Most were philosophers, and inquired into the workings of time and memory, natural history, the properties of light, heat, and petrification. There were musicians among them as well, and painters and poets.

My mother, being of great beauty, was often painted. Once, she and I were clad as Venus, goddess of love, and her son Cupid, and we reclined in a bower. At other times, they made portraits of her dressed in the finest silks of the age, smiling behind a fan, or leaning on a pillar; and on another occasion, when she was sixteen, they drew her nude, for an engraving, with lines and letters that identified places upon her body.

The house was large and commodious, though often drafty. In its many rooms, the men read their odes, or played the violin, or performed their philosophical exercises. They combined chemical

compounds and stirred them. They cut apart birds to trace the structure of the avian skeleton, and, masked in leather hoods, they dissected a skunk. They kept cages full of fireflies. They coaxed reptiles with mice. From the uppermost story of the house, they surveyed the city and the bay through spy-glasses, and noted the ships that arrived from far corners of the Empire, the direction of winds and the migration of clouds across the waters and, on its tawny isle, spotted with shadow, the Castle.

Amidst their many experimental chambers, there was one door that I was not allowed to pass. One of the painters sketched a little skull-and-crossbones on paper, endowed not with a skull, but with my face, my mouth open in a gasp; and this warning they hung upon that interdicted door as a reminder. They meant it doubtless as a jest, but to me, the door was terrible, as ghastly in its secrets as legendary Bluebeard's door, behind which his dead, white wives sat at table, streaked with blood from their slit throats.

We did not venture much out of the house and its grounds into the city that surrounded us. In the garden, we could hear its bustle, the horseshoes on stone cobbles and dirt, the conversation of sailors, the crying of onions and oysters in passageways. The men of that house feared that too much interaction with the world would corrupt me, and so I was, in the main, hidden away for my earliest years, as the infant Jove, snatched out of the gullet of Time, was reared by his horned nurse on Mount Ida in profoundest secrecy.

When we did go abroad, Mr. 03-01 warned me that I should not lean out at the window of the carriage, and should not show my face. He told me that, should I ever run away into the city, I would not return, but would be snatched up by evil men who would take

me forever away from my mother. This was, I know now, but a half-lie.

I imagine that I was a silent and solemn child—as solemn as my mother was smiling and gay. The appearance of solemnity was much increased by the fact that, from my earliest youth, my head was shaved, and I was made to wear white wigs, so that even in childhood, I had the look of age. I was told that the hair for my wigs, and for my mother's—for she too was shaved and wore white wigs, though hers were towering, and marked with jet-black ribbons—that this hair came from a pensioners' home in Prague, where hair was farmed in exchange for soup and bread. Such wigs could not have been inexpensive; but they were simply one of the extravagant customs of that place, and I found them unsurprising.

In the parlance of that house, the master, Mr. Gitney, was called 03-01 because he was the head (and so 01) of the third family enumerated (that is, the Gitneys). He was attempting to introduce a numerical system of naming, with the idea that it would rationalize human relations. 01-01, therefore, was our glorious majesty the King—the initial 01 signifying His Majesty's family, the House of Hanover. The Queen was 01-02; George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales, 01-03; and so on. 02-01 was His Lordship the Earl of Cheldthorpe, a very Mæcenas whose generous patronage allowed our household its investigations, and whose portrait hung, stained yellow from flares and exudations, in one of the experimental chambers.

In the years as I grew, my mother must have perceived the peculiarity of our situation; but though she may have noted, she did not discover its irregularities to me by word, look, or gesture.

Or, by God—I reckon now, now that it is all gone—yea—mayhap she did discover it to me, in every gesture, in all looks, in the space between each word—and I, never knowing her elsewhere, did not know how to parse her warnings and subtlety.

How would her smile have appeared, did we not live in that house? Would it have been the one I know as hers—the which I saw slow-spreading across her soft and radiant features to greet each gentleman who attended our musical *soirées*, of an evening? (For when the gentry would gather to hear her play upon the harpsichord, and hear me, no taller than her waist, play upon the violin, she smiled upon each and every one of them as they watched, wigged and fingering their canes.)

I did not ask why we were not numbered, as the others were; I suspected that it was due to my mother's royal blood—for I was told from my earliest youth that she was a princess in her own kingdom, could she but get back to it from her exile. In her bearing, she was still a queen.

They called themselves the Novanglian College of Lucidity, and devoted themselves to divining the secrets of the universe, so praising the Creator, who had with infinite art manufactured such a dazzling apparatus; and each investigation into the incubation of tern-eggs or the mystery of sediment was but an ear pressed to the mechanism, the better to hear the click of gears, the swiveling of stars on cog and ambulating cam.

I was taught not merely the arts and knowledge of the physical world, but was given the strictest instruction in ethics, schooled in those virtues that must ever enflame each Christian heart: kindness, filial duty, piety, obedience, and humility.

Above all, brought up among the experiments and assays of these artists and philosophers, I was taught the importance of observation. They showed me how to be precise in notation, acute in investigation, and rational in inference. After I watched them pet a dog for some days, then drown it, and time its drowning; or after I watched them feed alley-cats to lure them so they could toss them off a scaffold and judge the height from which cats no longer catch themselves, but shatter; or, yea, after I saw the philosophers of this college acquire a docile child deprived of reason and speech, and, when she could not master the use of verbs, beat her to the point of gagging and swooning; after such experiments as these, I became most wondrous observant, and often stared unmoving at a wall for some hours together.

They quizzed me on what I had observed staring at these walls.

Once, at dinner, seated at the table, 03-01 asked me what I had noted in my hours spent immobile. I said, "Nothing, sir."

He said that one could not observe *nothing*.

The girl deprived of reason—who had just been beaten—began to sob. The servants were weighing and recording my dinner.

I ventured that I had watched a daddy longlegs. He asked what hypotheses I had made in that time. The girl sobbed and beat the table. I looked down at my dinner, which was before me, now. I said that I wondered whether the daddy longlegs was a spider.

Mr. 03-01 said to me, "Prove that it is so. Through the exercise of logic. Is the daddy longlegs a spider?"

I hesitated. He nodded to his manservant, who came to my side

and picked up my food, not yet touched, and passed it to 03-01, who held it suspended across the table and waited for my reply. I could not think, with the moaning of the unfortunate speechless girl. I was hungry.

“Come along,” said 03-01. “State your proposition as a three-part proof. A syllogism.”

My mother urged me, “Octavian? ‘One. Spiders have eight legs.’”

“Please observe silence, Your Majesty,” said 03-01 to her. “You shall not give him help.”

I repeated, “One. Spiders have eight legs.” Considering it, I continued: “Two. Daddy longlegs have eight legs. Therefore, three, daddy longlegs must be spiders.” I felt great relief. I looked covetously at my meal.

“I am afraid not,” said 03-01. “That is a faulty proof.” As he lowered my plate and fed my dinner to the dog, he explained kindly, “You exhibit an illicit process of the minor term. Your proof is invalid. The first phrase, supplied by your mother, was not suitable to your purposes.” The dog was lapping my dinner off the plate. “You might as well retire to your bedchamber,” he said to me. “You will get no food tonight at this table.”

I turned to my mother. “Mother?” I said. “Mater?”

She sat staring imperiously across the table at no one—at a portrait, perhaps, on the wall. Her hands were poised near her fork and knife, but she did not raise them to eat.

03-01 said, “Your mother advised you poorly. This is not to deny her considerable charms; but in future, you would be well advised to attend less carefully to her every word.”

She protested, "He is my son."

"Let us say rather," said 03-01, "that he belongs to all of us."

Thus, having observed, I retired; and I began to wonder who held power in that house, and who had none.