

# Arete

by Kieran Conrad

The grandfather clock struck eleven.

Elisabeth prepared the roast before leaving for church, early—the winter hour when the morning air sings the skin, the minutes when darkness tatters as light enters the world. The glow of oven breathed as she opened the door. A waft of marjoram, thyme, smoked paprika, garlic billowed forth—sprigs of pulverized plant and the speckling crush of mineral and root—filling the kitchen: The dry rub and the laying on of hands spoke ancestrally in notes of sweet pine and citrus, of wine-soaked flesh—an offering, a biblical act, lambkin tied and crowned with rosemary.

The tolling of bells subsided and Elisabeth, closing the oven door, readied the ingredients for the side dishes. Scurrying, tracing her footsteps like a shadow fleeing light, she hustled around the kitchen, the wallpaper seemingly peeling in her wake, her flowered dress sticking to her skin as she arranged the meal—grabbing a pot, a cutting board, the paring and chef knives. Her heart full of love, she always prepared the Sunday roast for the family. It was clockwork. The days lay like lapidary stones engraved into the surface of the Sabbath, which, poised at the end of the week like a sacrificial altar for the immolation of days, presided to swallow the mundane, the circadian acts and the ticking of clocks.

The potatoes, simple and easy to prepare, invited recipe and routine. On the island, beside the cutting board, she lined them next to the asparagus and peeled, each knife stroke an earthen flay, fragrance emanating small emblems of sew and reap, the telluric culling. She paused, turning to the little index card on the counter, adding to the elegant cursive writing new ink: her recipe to leave her family. It was easy enough to follow and brought comfort to Elisabeth that when she was gone, anyone could create the same results by imitation—no need to think during the act of creation as potatoes were only difficult in that they required a certain amount of time so that the results proved neither too hard nor too soft. Into the deep pot, several quarts of water from the spigot poured. Upon the stovetop, pot was placed atop an open flame. Four minutes past eleven. In half, she cut a stalk of celery, a slice of

onion. She unwrapped several cabbage leaves and placed beside them a bay leaf on the countertop, pausing at the sight of slinking frost whose melt crept across the windowpane, looking out the window at the yard, at the garden hidden beneath the plowed mound of snow. Into the hot bubbling boiling water went the cubed potatoes, the halved celery stalks, the slice of onion, the bay leaf—all coated beneath the the covering of cabbage, the lid sealing the pot: fifteen minutes.

Elisabeth gathered the bundles of asparagus spears, rinsing them in hand, and gazed through the rimecrusted window, considering the frost and thaw, the coming of spring, robins singing hearteningly near whitedraped cones. Cutting board bound, she took asparagus spears and springtime thoughts, trimming the woody stems and considering seed for bird and garden. She planned where to plant the tomatoes and zucchini and cucumbers, the bags and bags of them leftover that she would have to can or share with neighbors, the trellises full of green beans and the raised boxes of berries that—her daydream thoughts cut short as her finger cut too by chef knife nicked from the tumult.

Percy crashed through the front door, a flurry of chilling flakes flying through the air, and, one cane at a time, swung into the house. She eyed the clock. Nine past eleven. The family followed closely behind him, bustling through the storm door into the snowcapped porch, huddled together, shielding themselves from the heavens of howling winter winds, stamping snow shoes on the mat. The jumbled din of loud voices clanged like clock bells tapering as flannelcapped Percy turned to speak.

—I told him to take the god damned money and go take care of things and to stop bothering me.

—But you know that he's not good for it, said George, dusting snow off Percy's coat.

—Will you stop that? What's it matter if a little snow lands on the carpet?

—The floor might get wet and—

—And I don't give two damns about wet carpet or how good the man is for paying me back, said Percy. He's broke. It asks a man a great deal to hold out his hand when he's down and out.

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—Maybe if he spent a little less at the bar—

—You could probably could use a drink at the bar, Percy interrupted.

—Well, he's not known for honoring his debts is all.

—And yet I saw what little money he had go into the coffer like the rest, Percy clarified: I'm not in the loan business.

—But if you did that for everyone—

—You're my son. I'm not asking what you would do. I did what needed being done.

The warmth of Elisabeth's smile waded them inside before turning to the kitchen, catching sight of the dinner rolls which lay rising on the counter.

Percy shambled through the porch threshold, into the dining room, toward the rack onto which he hung his coat and cap and conclusion on the supplicant, moneylending, dens of iniquity. One by one, as though a dam burst upon his entrance, shattered by the battering of gusty wintry gales, a flood of family deluged through the door, pouring into the dining room behind him, a jostling inundation of clamorous postsermon chatter.

There were Percy and Elisabeth, and Percy lived twenty-and-one years, and begat a son in his own likeness after his image, and called him George, and the days of Percy after he had begotten George were sixty-and-one years; and all the days that Percy lived were ninety-and-two years: And he died. And there were George and Helen, and George lived twenty-and-five years and begat William, and George lived after he begat William, seven and seven years, and begat a son and daughter, and all the days that George lived were eighty-and-nine years: And he died. Son and daughter to George lived on to beget children of their own: and William and Anna begat their first born son, Samuel, at seven and seven years past, and Michael, at seven years past. Long were the days of fruitful begetting.

Wisps of bitter air assailed the room as George stood yet in the threshold, oscillating the door, engrossed by the squeaky hinge and wobbly door.

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—Close the door, darling, said Helen, lightly smacking his shoulder with the Sunday newspaper.

—Oh, yes, dear, George said, surveilling the hinge as he closed the door.

From the island, Elisabeth heard the steam spout sibilate and turned to the stove behind her: a pot full with a low bubbling frothy foam of boiling potatoes slow at simmer. Each spud beneath turgid leaf lay murmuring of a forthcoming mash. She slightly cracked the lid ajar, quelling the mashed potato dialectic, and continued snapping woody stem from asparagus which, drizzled in olive oil and sprinkled with tarragon, cracked peppercorn, salt, she placed on baking sheet clad with aluminum foil. The asparagus awaited broiling, an eightminute spell alongside dinner rolls immediately before serving.

—Elisabeth, why isn't the table set? called Percy.

Elisabeth, whitehaired hurryingly with hosiery wrinkling, wrinkledskin, hands coated with olive oil and tarragon, rushed to the dining room, holding tableware. She placed the cloth napkins in the rightful places: Percy at the head of table, herself seated across, George across from Helen, William across from Anna, Samuel across from boosterseated Michael. Fourteen past eleven, the burner fizzled with flame: The potatoes, steadybubbling, boiled foaming froths overflowing the brim. The pot runneth over. Wiping her brow with handkerchief, Elisabeth, gently laying piles of plates and cutlery on the table, dashed to the kitchen to take the potato pot off the stovetop, acknowledging the dinner rolls readyrising, as quarter past eleven roast spoke an aroma, a dirge of broth and bone, breath of rosemary, marjoram, time: moments crisping in the pyre as the hands ticked seconds from cog and wheel, the wind of drum and drop of weight, the clockwork she knew, the sacrificial altar upon which each moment abdicated being to the next.

Percy loomed in the doorway.

—The table still needs setting.

—I was just about—

—Some lemon with the water would be nice, Percy said, his back to her, returning to the dining area. I'm going to light a fire.

Elisabeth quickly knifescraped asparagus stumps from board to bin and, seventeen past, shot napkinward to the dining room to tend to table in need of setting, bestowing silverware first: tines upward, cuddling spoons, poking forth from cloth folds. Anna interjected, taking the plates from unnerved Elisabeth and, tablesetting, allowed her her to finish meals and sentences.

—Thank you, sweetheart, she smiled.

—Don't let him bark orders at you, Anna said, readying the lemons.

—Oh, that? It's fine, Elisabeth said, removing boiling pot from stovetop. He doesn't mean it that way.

Along the living room walls, dotted with modest oil paintings, shelves of fusty, dogeared books and dustcoated puzzle boxes complemented old maps, snow globes, music boxes, a mantelpiece replete with sundials, clepsydras, chronometers—small worlds dissembled into coordinates, containers, patterns, templates, cycles. Family portraits hung beside antler racks and mounted game. The shelves displayed Elisabeth's crafts—doilies, painted figurines, miniatures—and Percy's retired statuses—Justice of the Peace gavel, constable badge and nightstick, taxi and hunting and fishing licences. Hearthside, enthroned upon the armchair, pipe pluming forth a lowglow puff of cherry tobacco, Percy snapped bundles of branches and twigs asunder, crunches and pops cracking at the unspoken promise of the replicated primordial burial of cold and night with a nineteen after forthcoming Promethean flame enkindled.

—Why are there all these books yellow inside? asked Samuel, fixated on the television set.

—They're old, answered Percy.

—Like you? snifflynosed Samuel asked without looking, tossing a book aside. They're smelly.

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George, thudding through a toolbox at the front door, sighed, eyes downcast, shaking his head with embarrassment.

—You don't want to play outside? Percy hinted. When I was your age—

—Can we watch a show?

—I would've been outdoors making a snow fort, Percy continued.

—Well, what about making snow angels outside? Helen suggested from the couch, dandling Michael who, cooing and babbling, listened intently. It would be his first time!

—Can't, Samuel explained, I didn't bring my snow bibs or mittens because we were going to boring church.

—What kind of church? Helen asked rhetorically.

—Boring church, Samuel explained. It's old and smelly too, like these books.

Stifling heathenish words, George rummaged more loudly before changing the topic while Elisabeth placed the butter dish on the twentyone past countertop to warm.

—You were pretty young when you went to work.

—How old? Samuel asked, eyes still settled on the television.

—I was almost fourteen when I began fishing, Percy continued, busting another branch to smithereens. I had to earn money to help the family.

—You got to skip school for fishing? Samuel's eyes brightened.

—It was on the Atlantic, Percy explained, rubbing and tightening his hands. Harpooning by hand—I had to help my parents with more than what grammar and arithmetic could do. The winters weren't gentle up north.

William, donning warm winter outerwear, caught an earful of words before heading outside to shovel and salt the walkways. The hinge squealed to George's chagrin. William vanished into the bright white, the winter gods and the sea gods contesting the spectacle of man and son of man, the harm of generations, the kindling of light by tinder and flint, burnt offerings as hopeful redemptions, the elemental assail on home and hinge, the futile order brought to cold and snow eternal, the lineal staving of time.

—Tell me a different story, insisted Samuel. That one's boring. Knitting a patchwork quilt for bairn Michael, deafened to eavesdropped words, focused on needle and yarn, pattern, template, while George, embarrassed, sighing, arms above head, perused draft of shoddy door, screwdriver removing caterwauling hinge, and shook his head.

—All the stories are the same story, Percy said, pointing to the bookshelves with the tail of his pipe: All those smelly, old books are the same.

—Tell me about the war, Grandpa, said snotsniffing Samuel as he traced the television knobs with his fingers. Where'd all your guns that were in here go?

Anna listened, arranging a bouquet of flowers in a twentyfour of sixty vase on the table.

—I'm not sharing those stories.

—Are they boring too?

—I don't share my stories about those either, said George, sighing again, less quietly. Those stories are—

—Dark and light, cold and warmth, Percy overruled. They're all the same story.

—So does that mean I can watch something on—

—It's the story that starts the Good Book too, George said, smiling, nodding, rubbing his brow in wistful delight before carefully oiling the hinge. Say, why'd you sell your gosh darn gun collection, anyway? You gave them away for a song.

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Samuel became attentive as Percy dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

—They were just collecting dust. The guy offered me fifty for them.

—Fifty? But those were relics. You brought home from the war! said George, the hinge of his mind squalling with flabbergast and flummox. They're worth—

—Not a damn to anybody who wasn't there.

Helen, eyes cast down to needle and twentyeightafter yarn, twitched her nose at the vulgarity.

—They should be taken care of—like this door, George hinged the conversation and thought aloud to nobody. They should be passed down, passed on.

Nobody listened to thoughts aloud to nobody.

Elisabeth scrambled, bequeathing the bay leaf and celery from the drained boiledwater pot to bin, leaving the onion and cabbage, blessing with milk, butter—mashing piles of drained halfpast dairysoused potatoes as bellies thawed to a low and hungry wintry grumble.

—You could keep doing that forever, fixing, tweaking, Percy said, pipe pointing hingeward. And the hinge will go back to squeaking and the door back to being drafty.

—It's never finished, but I tend to it, George agreed, eyes lighting with kindness. It's like a disagreement, and we're glad to be rid of each other's company for a little peace.

Samuel, inattentive and fixated, traced the television dials and gazed into the screen's reflection.

—Maybe the way we feel about the first snowfall of winter and all that shoveling ahead, Helen added, looping a piece of yarn by hook and needle. Or the garden we'll have to plant and tend—



—And you keep lighting those fires against the cold, George interrupted to Percy with moments tumbling over cogs and wheels of time and retorts belatedly.

—Isn't that why all these things are here? asked Percy, standing and ambling to the window to see William shoveling in the white winds.

—What things?

—My lousy paintings, handmade quilts, the old pulp fictions, Percy mused. Lighting a fire.

The limbs and sinew, blood and memory, all gathered to remind Percy of the failing corporeal frame. He made his way back to his armchair and hunched forward, quieting himself in thought, breaking thick twigs and branches with weathered hands, stacking the kindling. He grasped handfuls of newspaper and, twisting pages into cones, he resembled a writer who—nettled by the inability to cohere a flight of fancy with a butterfly net of words—might crumple a page. And like a frustrated writer who crumples scraps of paper—the words, characters, scenes, plots all folding infinitely into a singularity—he compressed the page whose writer, paralyzed by parameters and time, that white void of nonexistence, battled with ink and thought. The something folded back toward a nothing, a whole world unfit to exist, tossed aside.

Kneeling forward as though to pray, Percy lighted it.

The tinder ignited as his breath spoke fire into being, life breathed into a dance of a low flowering flame: words singed, white pages blackened, dark ink into dark smoke, like moments immolating in the grandfather clock, coruscating speckled light across a hoary head of hair.

—Thanks for looking at the door, son, Percy said, rising.

—Don't mention it. I wanted to ask about—

—Where are the knives? hollered Percy, lurching toward the dining room.

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Elisabeth—thirtyfour past unhanding the masher—gathered a number of knives and brought tableward to tuck them into bed with the forks and spoons, spooning, before returning to the kitchen to draw the mashed potato pot a stovetop bath, keeping them warm. She opened the icebox, scooping cubes to clink into lemonsliced coldwater glasses: Tableward once more, on a serving tray, beverages she bestowed.

—I don't want any ice, said Percy.

Kitchenbound, Elisabeth took lemonchilled libations and strained cubes by slotted spoon, how the grandfather clock sifted moments, whisking light and dust into being, and Anna intercepted the iceless slicedlemon glass and brought it back to the table, a water warmly brought, coldly placed.

—You behave yourself, she reminded him so that the others did not hear, her lilting accent thawing the wintry heart of man, blood and sinew.

—That's my limey, he smirked to himself after she left the room.

And limey to the kitchen gathered for the table stack of plate, saucer, and teacup, as William shoveled down the drive, shivering, flinging to the dirty curb sloshy scoops of icy snow where ghostly snow serpents slithered along the asphalt in roaming haunts.

George, heeding his handiwork, closed and reopened and closed the quiet door before entering the living room to look at his mother's collection of old books—anthologies, almanacs, travelogues, novellas—pulling one sporadically from the shelf, eyes glossing over titles as he smiled, shaking his head in affected disbelief, not absorbing a single word.

—She sure has a collection, he announced, dumbfounded, twisting word and time into an oblation to the altar of idle banter.

Nobody responded.

—Now, this here's a book, George said, a maudlin tear nearly forming, marveling as he took the family Bible from the shelf.

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—A beautiful sermon today, Helen gestured, eyes remained cast toward yarnwork.

—It sure was, George said, inspired, his voice rising like dinner rolls on the kitchen counter. The Good Book has it all.

Nobody responded.

—How's the door? Helen gestured, needles stitching thread and cloth like light and dust of star, one to another, patchwork constellations.

George turned to the door to recount a mighty victory over time.

As the winter gods and the sea gods contest the spectacle of man, the door gods hail the votive deed, an unbidden consecration of the sealing of portals by taught screw and silent hinge, an incipient thirtysevenpast devotional to shun the looming etherscape, a cold and desolate netherrealm which stretched in all direction of the cosmos which encroached upon the doorstep of the world beyond.

—The door's prett'near good, darling, George said, returning to the bookshelf, smiling as he pulled one out. I like a good dime western.

Daubed musty with mold and dust, brittlepaged, the yellowed book scarcely held, corroded by time, the binding loose, pages readily slipping from place as though the words themselves might spill off the leaves of paper—words, the multitudes nestled and stowed in place, tethered in tandem by commas, nailed confidently into being by period: words that evanesce without eyes to hail them.

—I wonder what show's on, Samuel pondered aloud as ears forsook his words.

—These other books don't much speak to me, George said, handing Samuel a puzzle box which Samuel handed to the carpet without glance.

George leafed through the dime western rather than reading it, pointing it at the other book genres, the words spilling from brittle yellowtinged pages onto the carpet.

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—I don't really see myself in them.

—Puzzles don't seem very fun, Samuel declared. Why would someone want—

—Why are you trying to find yourself in them? Percy asked, poker in hand, tending to the fire. You already know who you are.

Nobody responded.

Michael, babbling, watched, eyes catching glow of ember and ears gusts of snow against the window as Helen peekabooed and stole his nose.

The dime western grandfather clock mashed potato dialectic seemed to purge the words from the bookshelves, torrents of black ink squiggles cascading from pages and gyring with puzzles into a maw of nothingness, order to bedlam.

—I want to watch movies, Samuel said to the nobodies listening to nothing.

—If we already know who we are, George questioned—mind tinkering with hinge of nothingness, door to meaning—still pointing one book at all the others. What're all of them for?

Elisabeth removed misted eyeglasses and wiped them clean, slipping her hands into hotpad sleeves to place asparagus spears below the broiler, joining the brotherhood of lamb in fiery judgement. Snaps of burst branches popped in the fireplace, a cinderstoked blaze of deadwood burning glowingly red, blushing at modest conflagration.

—We might light fires, Percy said, rising again, ambling toward the dining room, a little less dark, a little less cold.

—And if they don't? said hingeladen George.

—Maybe you can become a good story after you're gone, Percy paused, collecting himself.

Everyone was quiet.

—And hopefully nobody will misunderstand your story when you aren't there to tell it.

—I sure hope so, George thought aloud, smiling and shaking his head and disbelief of door and void. Maybe someone will write—

—My fork's dirty, Percy noted.

Notified, Elisabeth relinquished a box of cornstarch to seek a fork, pristine, blessed—the chosen one foretold with ecclesiastically lustrated handle and whose tines, equidistant, unbesmirched by the eternity of dirt and dust, ennobled a handle unsullied by neighboring philistine cutlery. She brought the chosen fork forth, heavenly showers of golden light cast upon it, to the patriarch's seat at the table while choirs of angelic cherubim sang melodiously, euphoniously, sanctifying the deed while Percy watched her, smirking, and Anna frowned.

Helen, swathed babechild Michael in patchwork quilt, little disconnected squares harmonizing, scrutinizing necessary adjustments. She removed it and took him to his booster seat, elevating him, where he gazed out the window, fatherward, tracing William's movement back to the house, where, in the porch, he clanged snow from shovel, resting it over the mat, before tossing cupfuls of salt scattered across the steps and walkway.

—It's cold out there, William said, entering taught door of quiet hinge, wiping lightbeaded brow and mistcoated glasses and glinting sheen of slush off his galoshes. The snow won't relent.

Hanging jacket, gloves, hat upon the rack, with melting flake on face, snowmantled mustache, William in full fortyafter gait went to warm by inglenook of fire, his scarf radiating a boiledwool scent sweetwarmly while Elisabeth twentytill pulled dress from skin rapidly, fanning herself, in febrile marjoram ovenfevered air strolled.

The family encircled the table, seating themselves, while Helen and Anna, bringing hotpads and racks, serving spoons, tongs, pitchers and placemats, as Elisabeth, eighteento, removed the roast, handled with padded hands, check it: done. Into the dining room, she brought asparagus spears, crisply wellbroiled with olive oil, tarragon, pepper ground from mill, hours ground into minutes, time into dust and light, and bowl of buttery mashed potato

dialectic into which a serving spoon sank while the clock—by wind of drum, by drop of weight—churned in cosmic dance.

Anna brought the roast—the unstringing of chops, the stripping to bone, an unfastening crown of transubstantiation, calamity and hail rosemary, full of bread, the lamb is with thee.

Upon serving, all held hands, bowed heads, prayed:

—Thank you, Lord, spake George, for the blessing you bestow upon us, our kith and kin, for providing us with grace, this time together, this wonderful meal—and for your continued ways in which you show us how to love one another: Amen.

—Amen, echoed all.

—This smells delicious, Grandma, William thanked as he began cutting little pieces of roast for Michael. What spices did you—

—Can you cut my food too? Samuel implored to those who fruitfully begot and fruitfully declined.

—Well, it sure looks good, George acknowledged, eyes widening, cocking his head with incredulity at the wonderment of roast and feast, piling forth a plate heartily with plopped hodgepodge of blood and bone of lamb, spud and spear. It surely does.

—It really is tender, Helen spoke in echolalia of lamb, nose upward, nibbling politely. But the asparagus's somewhat bitter.

Unhearing George smiled in reply as Elisabeth took her seat and goodness smiled upon all.

—My water's lukewarm, informed Percy, Lord of Lamb Hall, Viscount of Lemonslice Hearth.

Elisabeth stood and icebox strode to clink thrice cubes twice into his warm coldwater's cup while Samuel, tugging on sleeve, beseeched the cutting of food, the cutting of attention, as William asked Anna what was the matter. Anna began feeding Michael nibbles of roast

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while Elisabeth, seated again in her quarter till chair, reached for the serving spoon to fill hungry plate.

—Where in the hell's the gravy?

Gravystarved, Percy waited; George, busily shoveling food gobward, flung heavy scoops of mashed potatoes slathered in roast drippings, a humectant dialectic; Helen, nose in air, selectively deafened from eavesdropped demands, ate delicately within the roast hall of lamb, chewing the meat mash mushed in her mouth, looking down her nose into the distance, distantly; Anna looked to William who looked down, away, embarrassed, while snot nosed Samuel, gravyless, groveling, now tugged her sleeve, in want of uncut meat cut; and Elisabeth, who winced, looked for answers in the good gravy's divine providence.

Michael watched all.

Helpmate Elisabeth realized that she hath forgotten the gravy for her husband and, cleansing her hands in the kitchen, sought the tentillnoon reconciliation of transgressions through ablutions, atonement, cornstarch. Saucepan at hand and mixed with milk, she heated from the drippings a hot bubbling five minute gravyboil. Sweaty hot, she hurried back with brimming gravyboat all readyboiled.

Elisabeth sat to lukewarm foodstuffs with foodstuffed family, warmly, and reached for the serving spoon.

—Elisabeth, where are the goddamned dinner rolls? boomed Percy.

The old woman, chasing her footsteps into the kitchen, saw the uncovered dinner rolls slumbering on the counter, cold.

Elisabeth wept.

—And don't forget the butter dish, Percy pointedly reminded.

—Oh, stop it, you big bully! Anna shouted.

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The other family members became ghosts elsewhere in that moment, sitting. They thought themselves not present and sat, elsewhere, there, the grandfather clock devouring time.

Percy, hands on table, sat upright, back leaning against chair, lifting his head upward in recognition, the table creaking, fearful, trembling, and dropped his napkin over his plate, a big barrel chest exhaling one long slow breath, fixed upon Anna, looking through the ghosts who sought salvation. A big smile spread across his face the way cold butter warmly melts over fresh dinner rolls and remained there in a moment of contentment, pleased.

Noon.

Michael witnessed Percy rise to the kitchen to help clean the mess.

The tolling of bells evoked the wheels and cogs, the wind of drum and drop of weight, moments and transience, the beckoned burial of day. The forlorn clanging sounded while nobody listened but the sunlit snow and howling winds that blanketed generations of withered leaves. And all the words burnt in the flames, the deadwood falling to ash like falsehood fallen from lips that wished the first mention of truth. From the ashes, all the ghosts would be summoned from the planes, the warmth and light of fresh ink hailing Lazarus and breathing life into clay memory. The last thrum of the clock paled in the air. The jutting pines ripened with plump songbirds dropping trills of shrilly twittering all meltaway on minty needles washed purewhite with tufts of freshfallen snow as the redbreasted robin perched so full of song it were as though his body burst into flame.