

WHAT WILL BECOME OF US?

BEYOND

THE

BURN

LINE

PAUL MCAULEY

Beyond the Burn Line

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‘Who shall compute what effects have been produced, and are still,
and into deep Time, producing?’

Thomas Carlyle

Part One

Archaeologies of Memory

1.

Three days after Master Able's body was committed to the Mother, a notary appointed by the Office of Last Things met with the old scholar's secretary. Settlement of the estate was in hand; it was time to discuss disbursements and distributions.

'My master's kin gave me a letter setting out terms at the committal,' the secretary, Pilgrim Saltmire, said. 'Including a demand that I quit the house without delay, since my services are no longer required.'

'They should not have approached you directly,' the notary said, with a grimace of professional displeasure. 'So I told Master Able's brother after he admitted to it. As for the quit notice, I may be able to allow you a few days' grace. An inventory must be made and approved, and I can see that it will be no small task.'

They were talking in Master Able's study. A small oval room like a chamber of a stilled heart, lined with specimen cases and book racks, and lit by a single pole lantern draped with a red silk scarf. The notary, a stout, middle-aged person with a precise, patient manner, was perched on the edge of the couch where Master Able had taken his customary afternoon nap. Pilgrim stood before him like a supplicant, leaning on his cane and dressed in the long white shirt, carefully ripped in several places, that signified bereavement and mourning.

'And what about my master's work? The work that is still unfinished?' he said, gesturing towards the low table that squatted in the centre of the room, covered with stacks of books and monographs, letters and loose papers. A fossil coilshell held open the pages of a weighty volume. A saucer caked with dried green ink sat next to a half-empty box of inkstones and a translucent horn cylinder packed with drip pens. It was hard for Pilgrim to think that only he now knew the secret order and significance of this shrine and storehouse, these accoutrements and extensions of his master's marvellous mind. The magnifying lens with which he had scrutinised specimens; the case of measuring callipers; his hand abacus, its

black and white stones arranged in his last calculation. A faint ghost of his musty scent haunted the air and the goatskin hassock beside the table was still indented by the weight and shape of his body. Pilgrim had found him sprawled next to it after he had been struck by the thunderbolt to his brain, his breathing harsh and irregular, his eyes open and glassy, pupils different sizes, a book splayed like a broken bird by his head.

‘The terms of the settlement are quite straightforward,’ the notary was saying. ‘Certain books and specimens are to be gifted to the Library of All People. Perhaps you would help me to find them. The rest of his material possessions, including manuscripts, notes and other personal papers, will pass to his brother and his sisters.’

Pilgrim had anticipated this moment. He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his wallet and said, ‘According to this, it may not be quite as straightforward as you think.’

‘It’s far too late to raise an objection to the settlement,’ the notary said. ‘Especially by someone not related to the deceased.’

‘It’s a short note my master wrote on his death bed. He was insensible for most of the time, but rallied in his last hours and was able to set down a request that I should be given everything I need to finish his work. His handwriting was affected by the injury to his brain,’ Pilgrim said, his heart beating quick and high as he watched the notary unfold the sheet of paper. ‘But he signed and dated it, and embossed it with his stamp.’

The notary pinched a pair of spectacles over his snout and read the note carefully, holding it close to his face in the dim red light, then sat back and studied Pilgrim for a moment. ‘Its intent is clear. Unfortunately, since it lacks a countersignature by an independent witness, it has no standing in law.’

‘It was my master’s last wish,’ Pilgrim said. ‘And I will need very little to carry it out. A small allowance to support me. Travelling expenses for research. No more than a year’s salary, all told. And access to the relevant books and papers, of course. I have made a list.’

‘Apart from you, was anyone else present when this note was written?’ the notary said.

‘My master’s physic visited several times. A few of his friends and colleagues paid their respects, but did not stay long. The rest of the time I cared for him as best I could, helped by his homekeeper. But she was out on an errand when my master woke, and made signs asking for pen and paper.’

The notary took off his spectacles and refolded the note and set it on top of the sheaf of papers beside him. 'Since there was no independent witness, I cannot accept this as a variation of the terms of the settlement. The best I can do is pass it to his kin and ask if they wish to honour it.'

There had been just two representatives from Master Able's family at the committal on the bare hilltop at the edge of the city. Able's eldest brother and one of his nephews, dressed in mourning shirts of much finer quality than Pilgrim's, standing a little way apart from the sparse gathering of friends and colleagues, and like them holding smouldering sweetwood branches and chanting the ancient prayers while two knifeworkers prepared the body for the carrion birds. Afterwards, Able's brother had watched while the nephew had given Pilgrim the notice to quit, and both had left immediately afterwards, without a word to anyone else.

'Given the circumstances, I would think that honouring the spirit of the note is more important than any law,' Pilgrim said.

'I wish I could help you,' the notary said. 'But the regulations of my office make no allowance for that kind of flexibility.'

Pilgrim knew that it was not the notary's fault, but for a moment his anger and disappointment poked through.

'The opinion of my master's kin and tribe is worthless. They were happy to bask in the glow of his reputation in earlier days, but quick to join the chorus of naysayers and jealous rivals who mocked him.'

'Because of this business of the visitors,' the notary said.

'I suppose his brother told you about it.'

'I find it helps to know a little about the deceased.'

'His kin claimed that his work on the visitors had made him a laughing stock and sullied their own standing, and when he refused to give it up they cut off his stipend, out of spite. He wanted me to have the means to finish it. To prove them wrong. To find out what the visitors are, if they are real. To consider what it says about us if they turn out to be some kind of common delusion.'

'How long did you serve as Master Able's secretary?'

Pilgrim touched the pendant that rested on the laces of his white shirt. Inside its amber teardrop a large black ant curled amongst a swirl of tiny bubbles, perfectly preserved by the resin which, seeping from a wound in the bark of a pine tree, had trapped it millions of years ago.

'He gave me this last summer's end, to commemorate five years' service.'

‘You were close to him.’

‘He could be difficult,’ Pilgrim said. ‘Obstinate, irascible, obsessed with his work. But he was also a brilliant scholar. The cleverest person I ever knew.’

The notary pressed the flat of his hand over the note. ‘When I present this to his kin, I will have to explain that it has no legal standing. But I can also point out the unusual circumstances in which it was written, and ask them to take that into consideration.’

‘They will be interested only in its legality.’

‘Sometimes the jolt of a death prompts people to reassess their relationship with the deceased,’ the notary said. ‘So don’t give up hope just yet.’

2.

‘Able’s kin refused to accept the amendment, of course,’ Pilgrim told his friends Swift Singletree and Ardent Whitesand a few days later. ‘And they didn’t have the decency to tell me in person, or even by letter. No, they had the notary do their dirty work.’

‘At least you won’t be beholden to them,’ Swift said.

‘Even if it didn’t have any legal standing, they shouldn’t have disregarded a dying man’s wishes,’ Ardent said.

‘I agree. Even though, strictly speaking, they didn’t,’ Pilgrim said.

‘But the note— Hoy!’

Swift had cuffed Ardent around the back of the head.

‘Have you forgotten how Master Able was, when we saw him last?’ Swift said. He was a tall, sharp-muzzled person, dressed as usual in his black velvet surcoat, the nap worn smooth at cuffs and elbows. ‘Did it look like he was going to wake up, call for pen and paper, and write down his last wishes?’

‘You know that, but his kin didn’t,’ Pilgrim said. ‘Since they failed to pay him a visit after he was struck down.’

‘You wrote it?’ Ardent said. ‘I mean, you made it up?’

‘I believe that it was what Able would have wanted,’ Pilgrim said. ‘Knowing him as I did.’

It was early evening. Pilgrim’s last in Highwater Reach. He had written to his sister and his mother, giving them the news about Master Able’s death and telling them that he was returning to the territory, and had used his meagre savings and the small amount of cash raised by selling most of his books to buy a ticket for the cross-continental train. He hoped that his mother, now a senior auntie, would support his plan to finish his master’s last project, and that his grandfather, even though he was ailing and had recently moved into the Elders’ Lodge, might also put in a good word.

Now, a few hours before the train was due to depart, Pilgrim had entrusted the remnants of his little library to his friends and they were

sharing a bowl of mussels and drinking small beer at one of the stalls in the riverside cheap. Ardent Whitesand was assistant to a senior librarian, Swift Singletree a bookrunner who scraped a living by sourcing rare volumes for scholars and searching out misshelved books, manuscripts and hard-to-find oddities that fell outside the scope of the indexing system of the Library of All People. The three of them were united by their love of books and scholarship, by similarities in age and background (rural; hardscrabble) and because they identified as pures, those who were not affected by the urgent sexual heat which gripped men and women during the Season's carnival of attraction and desire in spring and early summer, and had no interest in what Swift called the low comedy of procreation.

'Doesn't the Library have a fund for cases like yours?' Ardent said as he cracked open the last of the mussels. Despite his bottomless appetite, he was a neat, slender person, carefully sucking up the morsel of flesh and plucking a square of cloth from the pocket of his brocade waistcoat and patting his lips.

'I looked into it,' Pilgrim said. 'And was told that only scholars are eligible.'

He had asked his master's friends and former pupils for help, too, but those few who had not criticised or condemned Able's work on the visitors had little or no funds to spare, and the rest had advised Pilgrim to move on. One, meaning it kindly, had said that the best way to honour Able was to let his last obsession die with him, and remember him for what he once was rather than what he had become. Another had told Pilgrim bluntly that a bright young fellow such as himself should not waste his time chasing ghosts and phantasms.

'What about the Sweetwater Collective?' Ardent said.

'They didn't send so much as a note of condolence after I informed them of Able's death,' Pilgrim said, with a little swell of bitterness. The Sweetwater Collective had been the only sponsor of Master Able's work on the visitors, and he'd hoped, desperately, foolishly, that they would help him, too.

'Shame on them,' Swift said.

'That's why, having tried everything else, I am reduced to asking my kin and tribe for support. There's also an idea about raising some funds of my own that I want to explore.'

'Don't be away too long,' Swift said. 'And don't you dare forget about us.'

‘We’ll miss you,’ Ardent said, reaching across the table to grip Pilgrim’s hands.

Ardent wasn’t the quickest or cleverest of the three, but he was good-hearted and unstintingly generous. In some part, he’d be the first to admit, because he’d had an easier childhood than most pures, unblighted by prejudice and intolerance. Pilgrim and Swift had come of age in tribes which believed that what Pilgrim’s mother had called ‘the condition’ was not part of the continuum of sexual orientation but a phase or a mental or physical defect, something which could be cured by trials of endurance, folk remedies, vigils at shrines and prayers and petitions to the Mother, but Ardent’s tribe believed that pures were especially blessed by the Mother’s grace because they were unencumbered by base desires. Traditionally, they had served as seers or shrine keepers; Ardent had been sent to Highwater Reach to apprentice in the scholar trade so that he could take charge of the tribe’s archives when he returned home.

Pilgrim was grateful for his friend’s concern, told him that he would be back as soon as he had finished the work and written it up. ‘Hopefully with enough money left over to pay for a small printing of a slender monograph.’

Ardent said, ‘But who will agree to print it, if Able’s kin owns the rights?’

‘They own the rights to his manuscript, but the facts belong to everyone,’ Pilgrim said, trying to look and sound as if he believed it. ‘That’s why I am going to re-interview witnesses and find as many new ones as I can.’

Swift’s whiskers twitched when he smiled. ‘A sweet little revenge for their disgraceful callousness.’

‘This isn’t about them,’ Pilgrim said.

‘Really?’

‘Perhaps a little bit,’ Pilgrim admitted. ‘But mostly, I’m doing this for Able. He was trying to discover the truth about the visitors, and I want to finish what he began. Set it against the nonsense peddled by lunatics and charlatans. Speaking of which, Intrepid Windrush paid me a visit yesterday.’

Intrepid Windrush, a plausible opportunist who claimed to be the foremost expert in the matter of the visitors, had published a series of pamphlets promoting a former bear trapper turned preacher, Foeless Landwalker, who claimed to have communicated with the visitors in

dreams and visions. He had arrived at Master Able's house uninvited and unannounced, expressing his sympathy for the great loss to what he called the community of the elect and offering to help Pilgrim make the best use of the invaluable material Able had accumulated.

'I hope you told him exactly why you didn't need his help,' Swift said.

'I didn't say anything,' Pilgrim said. 'Just shut the door on him. Not quite fast enough – he managed to pitch a copy of his latest pamphlet through the gap.'

'If you haven't thrown it away, I wouldn't mind adding it to my small collection,' Ardent said.

'If you read too many of those things their crazy ideas will poison your mind,' Swift said.

'Their pathology is interesting,' Ardent said.

'It's banal,' Pilgrim said. 'Promises of empowerment and secret revelations peddled by pseudo-scholars who stitch stray facts into grand theories of everything. I added Intrepid's offering to the papers the notary will pass to Able's kin. Wrote on the cover that my master had been trying to make the world a better place by disproving this kind of foolishness.'

'Here's to him, and to you,' Swift said.

The three of them drank to that. For the tenth or twelfth time, Pilgrim looked at the coloured glass jars of the water clock that stood at the centre of the cheap's crossway.

Ardent said, 'I still don't understand this settlement business.'

'Why Able left everything to his kin? It was a condition of his stipend,' Pilgrim said. 'Even though they took it away from him, the condition still applied.'

'I mean the principle of it,' Ardent said. 'Why someone would gift their property and possessions to their immediate family, instead of allowing everyone in their tribe to benefit.'

'Do you still feel that you belong to your tribe?' Swift said.

'Of course.'

'Well I don't. And plenty of people who move from hearth and home to the cities don't either. Especially if they make their fortunes there.'

'It's a violation of the great harmony,' Ardent said.

'The rich believe they contribute to the great harmony by passing their wealth to their children, so that they can make even more,' Swift said.

'Able's kin want to suppress his work because they believe it taints his reputation, and theirs. I'm going to do my best to prove them wrong,'

Pilgrim said, and drained his glass of small beer to the suds and banged it down on the table.

It was time to move on.

3.

Pilgrim Saltmire had arrived in Highwater Reach six years ago, with a trunk of clothes and books, and a case of fossils carefully packed in straw. It was the first time he had travelled outside the territory of his tribe. Thanks to his grandfather's recommendation, the celebrated scholar Master Able had hired him as his personal secretary, and he'd been brimming with giddy anticipation and foolish optimism.

Master Able had first won fame while he had still been a pupil of Master Hopestart, the natural philosopher who advanced the theory of selective change, which explained that the vast variety of plants and animals had developed from simpler organisms by the slow, cumulative acquisition of new characteristics. It had been denounced as heresy by priests and philosophers who claimed that because the form of every species was a perfect realisation of the Mother's will, no change was possible unless She desired it, and those changes were always accompanied by global catastrophe. The great flood which had destroyed the terror lizards; the cleansing fire which had put an end to the wickedness of ogres and left the narrow line of char found in sites all across the Union and United Territories; the plague which had turned bears into crazed beasts after they strayed from the right path. Master Able had been at the forefront of debates which had overturned those old beliefs, explaining the principles of selective change with devastating clarity, mocking the chop-logic of its detractors and famously saying that just as natural philosophy should not seek an explanation for the Mother, so religion had no business measuring the world. He had reinforced his status with his work on comparative anatomy, including studies of selective change in bears and the ancestors of people, but by the time Pilgrim became his secretary his reputation was greatly diminished, his health was failing and he had fallen out with many of his colleagues because of his interest in sightings of the visitors.

Pilgrim hired a homekeeper to cook meals and clean the burrow, regularised his master's financial affairs and sorted through stacks of neglected correspondence. He soon became a familiar figure in the halls and reading rooms of the Library of All People and the terraced streets of Highwater Reach, the town in the Library's shadow. Impeccably dressed, leaning on his ironwood cane with every other step as he visited bookshops and printers, or collected packages, letters and tapcode messages from the ferry terminal. He discovered that he had a talent for editing and proofreading Master Able's articles and essays, and for extracting and summarising useful data from books and articles which Able did not have the time or inclination to read. And in addition to his usual duties, he nursed the old scholar whenever he was incapacitated by the polymorphous symptoms of an illness which had afflicted him ever since the excavation of the burial ground of a ruined bear city more than forty years ago – violent headaches, bone-chilling fevers, fluxions of the bowel and flare-ups of the arthritis which had so bent and stiffened his fingers that even on his best days he had to write with a pen slotted into the gnarled knot of his fist, and increasingly relied on Pilgrim to take down his scattershot dictation and turn his digressions and half-finished thoughts into clean prose.

Master Able's worsening health changed their relationship: they were no longer scholar and secretary but dependent and carer. Yet although Pilgrim was often impatient with Able's stubbornness and vagaries, and had no scruples about bullying him into eating and bathing at regular intervals, he was still in awe of the deep powers of concentration and forensic analysis and flashes of the old brilliance that his master applied to his last obsession.

And now Pilgrim was setting out to finish the research which had consumed the final years of Master Able's life, with little more than a case of clothes and fair copies of the incomplete draft of Able's monograph and the relevant notes, correspondence with witnesses and transcripts of interviews. He was driven by loyalty to his dead master and a stubborn belief in the importance of the work, but he had lost his living and after paying for the train journey back to his childhood home was very nearly destitute. As he stood at the rail of the river ferry and watched the pale flank of the Library of All People and the small lights of Highwater Reach recede into the night he felt a deep pluck of sorrow and a quailing of his resolve. It seemed more like a retreat from a disastrous rout than the

chance to save his master's reputation and establish his own scholarly credentials.

After the ferry sidled into its berth in the docks of Concord, the capital of the Union of Civilised Territories, Pilgrim caught a tram that rattled towards the Central Terminus through wide tree-lined greenways lit by the moonglow of incandescent lamps. The underground temple of the railway station was mostly empty at this late hour, as was the cross-continental train. It was drawn by a pair of electric locomotives that were, along with the streetlamps, trams and much else, a product of Master Able's sponsors, the Sweetwater Collective. Like the wealthy dynastic families which were reshaping the economy and politics of the Union, the collective was a new kind of tribe: an association of like-minded people who pooled their skills to reverse engineer artefacts excavated from the fossilised remains of ogre cities, and shared the profits amongst themselves rather than with their kin. As he climbed aboard one of the passenger wagons Pilgrim thought with grim amusement that although the collective had refused to sponsor him, their powerful new locomotives would at least shorten the journey he must make to beg for scraps from his tribe's table.

He rented cushions and a spongy mat, slept as best he could as the train rattled out of the city and sped through the night, and was woken early the next morning when a pair of train hands rolled back the tarpaulin that had covered the wagon during the night. He spent the next three days rereading Master Able's manuscript and making extensive notes and rehearsing the case he needed to make to his mother, or simply watching the scenery flow past the sides of the wagon. Motion was good. It gave him purpose and direction.

Forested hills and broad river valleys patchworked with fields and orchards gave way to the grass plains of the heartland. Pilgrim purchased food from the train hands or from platform vendors when the train stopped at stations to take on or offload passengers and freight and swap out the locomotives' batteries, and early on the morning of the fourth day of his journey, in a cloud forest high on the flanks of the mountain range that curved down the spine of the Union, he disembarked at the station, no more than a low platform and a couple of sheds, beside the saw mill of the little town of Tall Trees.

He was met by Righteous Redvine, one of the animal collectors who had supplied Master Able with specimens for his studies on comparative anatomy and three moonspans ago had sent a note about a sighting in the