The primary modes of fiction are the fantastic and the mimetic. This holds in verse as in prose. In the last article of this series, I introduced poems which deal mimetically with the natural and historical worlds. In this final article, you will find poems which respond to the world with fantasy.

Now here's the hard part: defining terms. In brief: when writing mimetic poems, the poet deals with his or her world and his or her contemporaries in terms of psychological and social realism. But with the fantastic, the poet invites elements of a fantasy world—supernatural or hyperreal, future or alternate—to enter the poem, if not to own it.

Historically, because of its religious dimension fantasy has been the serious response to the world. Perhaps the pre-eminent examples of modern fantastic poems are *Paradise Lost* and *Faust*, one an epic, the other a drama. Mormon poets have at times adopted fantasy as a response to their world, most recently Paul Cracroft in his *A certain testimony: a Mormon epic in twelve books* (patterned on *Paradise Lost*).

Nothing here attempts the scale Cracroft works on. Our first poem, "mythical bird," focuses on a single moment of enlightenment. In its present-tense, ahistorical verse, the fantasy is a welcome surprise. The poem celebrates the natural world, one in which people believe themselves central. Most campers have been initiated by some such ritual as the snipe hunt described here. Before the last stanza, there is only one surprise in this accurate (and fond) description of a snipe hunt, the word "yuga". Its insertion in the phrase "in a half hour he realizes" makes it act like an interjection ("fool!") masking its meaning, making it unnecessary to understand the narrative. It marks the passing of an age, from the naiveté that lets one believe in the snipe to the skepticism that insists, with all the weight of a Tenderfoot's hard-won experience, that "there is no such thing as a snipe." Such physiological detail as "flashes in his eyes scurry like birds across the dark grass" pass that experience on to the reader. They convince me that the psychological portrait is accurate; the details fit the mood of one left holding the bag. But once you appreciate those details, you are still left with the snipe.

"Oblivious to ritual" the snipe goes on with its life. For the scurrying snipe there is no such ritual as this hunt. The snipe is oblivious to ritual—and to evolution. She does not take part in the evolution (or, more appropriately, devolution) of the age. She lives on, despite her mythic self—and because of that other existence as a mythical bird, lives largely unmolested by the mischief that evolving scouts so lovingly practice.

From this brush with the mythical we turn to the legendary, the world of kings and courts. Like Miller, Linda Sillitoe has in mind a collision between the contemporary and the timeless. Most kings, at least in the days when they needed tasters to protect them from palace politics, did not need nor have senior counsel. Their word was law, and they did not have lawyers to interpret (a gross though necessary simplification). But presidents do. And if the president has a "taster," someone who samples the public opinion, someone who tests the wind, it would be the vice-president. The last one who got poisoned on the job was Spiro T. Agnew (after all, outside of accepting a little money, what did the man do, if not insure Nixon's desirability?). Since the poem is an allegory, I'm not required to identify each of the candidates with an actual personality—nor can I. But one of the surprises of this poem is its narrator—we do not learn until the last stanza that the speaker is the successful candidate.

The King has shown shrewdness in choosing his taster, acting on the assumption that the cook would not accept a bribe to poison her own son. But the taster displays greater shrewdness, in his commentary on the choosing, in his portrayal of the poisonous atmosphere of the King's inner circle—and in his assessment of his own position, as one "whom all call idiot." He expresses no overt scorn for the King and his ministers. He asserts his confidence in his own ability—not just to taste, which he can do well enough, but to survive: "I can see the poison swimming in the soup" he says, leaving unspoken the conclusion implied in "Nor have I... any cause to fear." He
mythical bird
the hollering and
beating of bushes by
the older scouts decreases
and finally ceases
the Tenderfoot
crouches holding
a paper bag
his thighs
ache slight
wind rustling of branches
and something
a leaf or
mouse maybe
nibbling along the ground
dont impinge on the
silence
enclosing him
the stars
bright as newly created

flashes in his eyes
scurry like birds
across the
dark grass
in a half hour
(yuga)
he realizes
there is
no
such thing as a snipe
and he will have
to make his way
back
to the campfire
alone afraid
of the night
he doesn't think to leave the empty bag
the snipe oblivious to ritual
goes on year after year
mating rearing young nesting
pecking around scurrying out of the way
oblivious to evolution

—ROB HOLLIS MILLER

does not mean to taste the poisoned soup.
For his poem "Salamander," Robert Rees turns from the world of his contemporaries to the origins of Mormonism. The element of fantasy in that world is Joseph Smith's story. Rees writes that

like most Mormons, when I first read reports of the now infamous Salamander letter, I was intrigued. When I read the text of the letter in the Church News (28 April 1985) it seemed authentic. What really interested me about the letter was the insight it seemed to give into young Joseph's mind—his way of thinking, his use of language. . . . Believing that we can usually get closer to an experience through images and symbols, I was particularly interested in the allusion to the white salamander. Here, I thought, was a concrete image with poetic possibilities for trying to understand young Joseph's experience.

Reading about salamanders, Rees discovered a large cluster of imagery associated with them:
The richest of these was fire, a central, archetypal symbol that has ambiguous and paradoxical associative possibilities. Anciently the salamander was a mythical lizard-like creature that was able to live in fire. . . . Through various sources I discovered that salamanders are associated with: fire, prophets, revelation, the Holy Ghost, angels, the voice of God, the atonement, the resurrection, purification, soldiers, locks, etc.

Inspired by studying the elements of folk magic in the Euro-American culture of Joseph's day, both Rees and Orson Scott Card have written poems taking seriously the idea that Joseph Smith would know and be part of a fantasy world—or what we now regard, embarrassed by our science, as fantasy. Given the ferment occasioned recently by these ideas, you might wonder if either writer is drunk on them. Sing the poems and see.

Rees takes a more contemporary approach to his verse than Card (whose poem follows the article). He begins with a loose line, three or four stresses, no overriding rhythm, while Card works with iambic pentameter in a formal stanza akin to that of Spenser's Faerie Queen. On the other hand, Card works throughout Prentice Alvin and the No-good Plow in one voice; Rees alternates short, colloquial stanzas in two different voices. One he shares with Card, a rural Appalachian speech. It is the tongue that begins and ends "Salamander," that of a boy introduced to the fantastic in the midst of a very mundane world of sweat, fever, and death. The second voice is that of a prophet, refined by fire, molded by the words of prophets who taught him to stand before God.

This Joseph tells a story different from the official version, one closer to the feelings a young farm boy might have had at being torched by the Spirit. This mixture of fiction and history doesn't require footnotes, because it doesn't present itself as fact. But the strongest element in the poem, the contrast between voices, echoes the tension between the story we learn from Primary on, and the elements of Joseph's life which have
taken on more significance in the light of recent historical research. "Salamander" presents us a series of events which read as a conflagration raging among the pages of history. Instead of wondering what Rees's sources for each event are, read the poem as entirely made-up. That's what fiction is, elegant lies intended to complement grubby history. Rees has tried to re-create the mind of the young, unlettered farm-boy who was given the task, in turn, of re-creating a vanished world from records in a dead language on buried leaves—for a people whose world was rapidly shearing away from all of past history, culture, and thought. Is it any wonder his Joseph says "I awoke and was cold and afraid"? He has seen his world burned away.

Partially on the basis of its whole-hearted return to that same magical world, Prentice Alvin and the No-good Flow was awarded first place in its class in the 1980-1981 Original Writing Contest of the Utah Arts Council. In his general comments on the poems entered in category B-1, "Serious poetry related to a single theme," the judge said, "I was pleased that some poets are going back to the ancients and to old forms. Seldom do contemporary poets go back to Spenserian invention (as did the First Prize winner) to master an intricate new form in which to tell a dramatic story both real and metaphysical." Rather than explore the fantastic world of young Joseph, Card creates a fantasy frontier America, and re-makes the farm boy into an apprentice blacksmith who (as is the usual case with heroes epic and fantastic) is occasionally despised as lazy, worthless, no-good. But Alvin has a few odd traits, one of them second sight. Loose in the woods one day, "the dark that only he could see... reached out and stumbled Alvin down." He is saved from the dark and cold only by asserting its falseness. A red-winged bird sings hime back to summer and tells him a headful of news about himself which is not repeated in the poem. Card has said that he would rather have had a salamander than the bird, but he had already written the poem before Hofmann's forgery was printed.

His is the only long narrative I have received for SUNSTONE. Most long poems nowadays are, like Sandberg's Requiem for a Town, sequences of separate poems, usually published separately (as were his). Writers with a long story to tell usually choose to write a novel. And, in fact, Card has sold this whole story to a publisher as a fantasy series, The Tales of Alvin Maker. This poem, while it served as the genesis of the series, recounts events covered in the third novel, Prentice Alvin (the first two, Seventh Son and Red Prophet, begin the story). "But," as Card told me (before he had written the novels), "I'm still proud of the poem. I liked it better as a poem, but it was a great deal of work with very little audience."

It is not surprising that Card liked the story better as a poem. It shows a great deal of exuberance, more than one might be able to work into a novel—a lot of playfulness, a heavy dose of just plain fun. Card must have enjoyed writing it. It's also a fun poem to read. The story is well-developed, easy to follow, and interesting. The verse is a little loose at times, but a narrative needs a few wrinkles to bend and stretch in. Perhaps there is more of an audience for it now. 

NOTES

1. A Sanskrit word related to "yoke," denoting "one of the four ages of Hindu world cycle, each shorter and less righteous than the one preceding," according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

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THE KING'S NEW TASTER

The King said to his seven ministers, The taster's dead. Now who will be the royal taster? Another slave?
A prisoner glad to flee the dungeon's terrors and die in sunshine, not a cave?
Let the senior ministers speak in turn, the juniors listen sharply and learn. The taster shields the King. Speak then, Brady.

Your Majesty, select your elder son, for he is fair and all the kingdom looks on him and smiles. No plot would seek his life; thus your own protection is insured. He can't be bought—he loves you well. Grisslewalt spoke next, his voice sweet cider, his dark eyes fixed upon the downward movement of the royal thumb.

Nay, King, appoint your Senior Counsel, Brady. The factions love him well. They'll not risk his health to injure yours.
Then ask your sons and (he nods) My Lady to watch him keenly as he pours the tasted wine into your cup. Embrace your enemies as friends, Your Grace. Our friend, Sir Taster Brady, will not fail!

Your Royal Highness, Whitehead softly said, Let me suggest a knight of such integrity that spite will cease.
Vanderbilt is free of all men's hatred and can be trusted. Bring us peace within the court, and thus assure your health.
The King counted all his wealth as kings will do, until he'd thought enough
and then chose me whom all call idiot and he was wise. All day I scoop my tongue through spoons the Cook (my mother) hands me in the kitchen. I'm good at it.
Nor have I, Mariel, any cause to fear:
I watch the billow of a lady's gown and know the seas and how the tradewinds blow.
I can see the poison swimming in the soup.

-LINDA SILLITOE
When Alvin come back from the hill
he was all in a sweat and tremblin'.
He says he looked in a box and saw a
salamander all alive in fire,
and the fire was in his eyes
like small summer suns and it
come out and went into mine,
burning like God's own glory
and I was afraid.

And I saw sylphs of flame,
archangels of the sun, who came to
Cumorah, administering to the night,
their salamandrine fires illuminating
and purifying the darkness.

This was out by the barn, and
I said, Alvin, show me the box,
'cause I saw it in a dream,
full of gold; and so we run
all the way to the hill and
was all out of breath, and
when we got to the place
Alvin says, look Joseph,
it's right there, under that bush!
And I looked and saw the fire, and
then the bush was burning and the
trees was burning and the whole
mountain was on fire, the river
was on fire too, flames all over
the water, joining and
crossing one another, but
none of it was burned.

And I saw them standing in the fiery
heat, like the furnace of noonday,
white as lightning, and beside
them was another, like the heart of the
sun, blazing with holiness and light,
and the fire didn't harm their hair
nor singe their sleeves.

Then Alvin was taken sick with a bilious
colic and was burning with a fever and
said many strange things, some of them
wonderful. And then he held me by the
hand real strong and tight and said,
Joseph, get the plates, whatever you do,
get the plates, and I said, Alvin, don't go!
don't go! And then he was gone, his eyes
still ablaze till father put his hand
on them and closed the lids.

I saw him in the realms of glory,
his whole body white and luminous as
the stones in the box. I saw Adam and
Abraham, and Alvin was with them, and I
saw the transcendent beauty of the gate
through which they entered and it was like
circling flames of fire and the blazing
throne of God ascending into light.

And then it was dark and I
didn't dream for a long time,
and I said, Mother, the plates . . . and
she jest looked at me and didn't say a
word, and I turned to father, but he
wouldn't talk neither, and when I
looked at him, he jest shook his head
and tears come in his eyes.

All summer we worked in the fields, and
when fall come we brought the harvest
in, but always I was thinking of
what Alvin said about the plates. In the
night I couldn't sleep and when the
new moon come I begun dreaming again, and
then one night an old spirit come
to me three times and says, Dig up the gold.
I woke in a sweat and it was still dark.
I got out of bed real careful so's not to
wake Hyrum. I put some of mother's cornbread
in my pocket and took father's shovel and
went up the hill to find the plates.
I heard a owl way off in the trees and
was scared to go on 'cause it might
mean bad luck for me, but the words of
the spirit kept hauntin' me so I went on.
When I found the bush that before was burning, I put the shovel in and dug till I struck the stone box, and when I took off the lid, light come burstin' out and I saw the white salamander and then it was gone but the old spirit was there and he touched me three times—one on the eyes and once on the ears and once on the lips, and his fingers was like fire.

And I saw that everything was on fire: eyes and images seen by the eyes were on fire; ears and sounds heard by the ears were on fire; lips and tongues and voices that came out of them were on fire and the Word itself was a fire within a fire—everything burning, burning, consumed by fire and born again.

When I reached down to pick up the plates the spirit struck me three times again—just like before, and he said, Bring your brother Alvin, and I said, How can I bring him, his bones are buried in the ground? He said again, Bring your brother Alvin, and I said, Should I bring his remains? but the spirit didn’t answer me.

I saw a valley full of bones, dry and white, and a wind from the north and from the night blew on the bones and they were cold, and then a wind from the south and from the sun blew on the bones, kindling the fire shut up in them, and the fire became the word out of the mouth of the prophet and it consumed all who heard it, but the bones danced to life and rose like flames into the air, burning and turning like a great fire bird circling.

When I reached into the box and touched the plates, a shock went through me like a sword of fire, almost melting my bones' marrow it was so hot, and I cried in agony of soul, Why can I not take them? and the spirit said, You have not kept the commandments, you have given in to temptations. Get up and see the signs in the heavens, and learn from the mouth of God.

And I looked and saw the heavens like an endless sea of light—the sun, a glorious luminary of the skies, and also the moon rolling in majesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses. And then all around me darkness grew into trees whose black branches shut out all the light, and I was left alone in the very heart and soul of darkness, and the branches were burning all around me, and their flames black as night began to burn my flesh.

And I cried aloud, O God, forgive me, I am jest an ignorant and wicked boy. Why did you let Alvin die? He was the most righteous one. I don’t know, I don’t know about the sun and the salamander; I can’t see, it is so dark, and my mind is on fire!

And then I saw the fire turn to blood and I was falling from a high window and as I looked up the summer sun fell into blackness and I cried, O Lord, my God!

And I heard a voice like pure flame pierce the burning darkness and it said, I have chosen you in the furnace of affliction, I will destroy you with a consuming fire or I will purify you with a refiner’s fire; your heart must choose.

If you will burn away your sins, I will make my words in your mouth fire that you may warn the nations, and I will make your words a flaming sword that you may slay the black dragon, the fire drake of darkness, and touch the hoard of gold, that it will come alive in your hands to call my people to the endowment of light.

And I awoke and was cold and afraid.

—ROBERT A. REES
PRENTICE ALVIN AND THE NO-GOOD PLOW

Alvin, he was a blacksmith's prentice boy,
He pumped the bellows and he ground the knives,
He chipped the nails, he set the charcoal fire,
Nothing remarkable about the lad
Except for this: He saw the world askew,
He saw the edge of light, the frozen liar
There in the trees with a black smile shinin' cold,
Shiverin' the corners of his eyes.
Oh, he was wise.

The blacksmith didn't know what Alvin saw.
He only knew the boy was quick and slow:
Quick with a laugh and a good or clever word,
Slow at the bellows with his brain a-busy,
Quick with his eyes like a bright and sneaky bird,
Slow at the forge when the smith was in a hurry.
Times the smith, he liked him fine. And times
He'd bellow, "Hell and damnation, hammer and tong.
You done it wrong!"

One day when the work was slow, the smith was easy.
"Off to the woods with you, Lad, the berries are ripe."
And Alvin gratefully let the bellows sag
And thundered off in the dust of the summer road.
Run? He run like a colt, he leaped like a calf.
Then his feet were deep in the leafmeal forest floor,
He was moss on the branches, swingin' low and lean.
His fingers were part of the bark, his glance was green-
And he was seen.

He was seen by the birds that anyone can see,
Seen by the porcupines all hid in the bushes,
Seen by the light that slipped among the trees,
Seen by the dark that only he could see.
And the dark reached out and stumbled Alvin down,
Laid him laughin' and pantin' on the ground,
And the dark snuck up on every edge of him,
Frost a-comin' on from everywhere,
Ice in his hair.

Ice in the summertime, and Alvin shook,
Crackin' ice aloud in the miller's pond,
A mist of winter flowin' through the wood
Fingerin' his face, and where it touched
He was numb, he was stricken dumb, his chin all chatter.
Where are the birds? he wondered. When did they go?
Get back to the edge, you Dark, you Cold, you Snow!
Get north, you Wind, it's not your time to blow!
I tell you, No!

No! he cried, but the snow was blank and deep
And didn't answer, and the fog was thick
And didn't answer, and his flimsy clothes
Were wet, and his breath was sharp as ice in his lung
Splittin' him like a rail. It made him mad.
He yelled, though the sound froze solid at his teeth
And the words dropped out and broke as they were said
And his tongue went thick, and his lips were even number,
"Dammit, it's summer!"
With the snow like stars of death in your eyes? "It's summer!"
The wind a-ticklin at your thighs? "It's summer!"
Your breath a fog of ice? "Let it be spring!
Let it be autumn, let it be anything!"
But the edge of the world had found him, and he knew
That the fire of the forges would be through,
That the air would be thick and harsh at the end of the Earth
And all the flames a-dancin in his hearth,
What were they worth?
"Oh, you can cheat the trees, so dumb and slow,
And you can jolly the birds that summer's through,
I let you get away with a lie so bold!"
But you can't fool me!
And look at that! A red-winged bird
Look at that! The leaves all thick and green!
"You can bury me deep as hell in your humbug snow,
But I know what I know."
And he laughed as he was swallowed by the cold,
He whispered in his pain that it wasn't true.
"It's summer!"
Your breath a fog of ice? "Let it be spring!
Let it be autumn, let it be anything!"
"Oh, you can cheat the trees, so dumb and slow,
And you can jolly the birds that summer's through,
I let you get away with a lie so bold!"
But you can't fool me!
And look at that! A red-winged bird
Look at that! The leaves all thick and green!
"You can bury me deep as hell in your humbug snow,
But I know what I know."
And he laughed as he was swallowed by the cold,
He whispered in his pain that it wasn't true.
"I'm shut of you," said the smith. "What's iron for?
To be hot and soft for a man of strength to beat,
To turn the fat of your empty flesh to meat
For the years to eat."

When the smith was gone, poor Alvin like to died,
For what was a smith that couldn't strike the black?
A maker, that's what the redbreast said he'd be,
And now unmade before he'd fair begun.
"I know," he whispered, "I know what must be done."
He took the hammer from the wallside heap
And blew the fire till flames came leaping back
And gathered every scrap at the fire's side
And loud he cried:
"Here is the crucible, and here's the fire,
Here is the making that you said to make!
Here in my hand are the tools you said to take!
Here is the crucible, and here's the fire,
And here are my hands with all they know of shape.
Into the crucible he cast the scrap
And set the pot in the flames a-leaping higher.
"Melt!" he shouted. "Melt so I can make!"
For the redbreast bird had told him how:
A livin plow.

The black went soft in the clay, the black went red
The black went white and poured when he tipped the pot
Into the mold he poured, and the iron sang
With the heat and the cold, with the soft and the hard and the form
That forced. When he broke the mold it rang.
And the shape of the plow was curved and sharp as it ought.
But the iron, it was black, oh, it was dead,
No power in it but the iron's own.
As mute as stone.
He sat among the shards of the broken clay
And wondered what the redbird hadn't said.
Or had he talked to the bird at all today?
And now he thought of it, was it really red?
And maybe he ought to change the mold somehow,
Or pour it cool, or hotten up the forge.
But the more he studied it the less he knew,
For the plow was shaped aright, though cold and dark.
He knew his work.

So what was wrong with black? It was good enough
For all the hundred thousand smiths before,
And good enough for all the plows they made,
So why not good enough for Prentice Alvin?
Who ever heard a bird so full of stuff,
So full of songs to make you feel so poor,
So full of promises of gold and jade?

"Ah, Redbird!" Alvin cried, "my heart is riven!
What have you given?"

He shouted at the black and silent plow.
He beat it, ground it at the wheel, and rubbed
Till the blade was blackish mirror, till the edge
Was sharp as a trapper's skinnin knife, and still
It was iron, black and stubborn, growin cold.
And broke of hope, he cast it in the fire
And held it with his naked hands in the flame
And wept in agony till it was over.
Here was the taste of pain—he knew the savor:
"The buffalo are rutting in the wood,
A hundred wolves are singin out a dirge,
And a doe, she's lickin while her fawn is fed.
What you be doin while I'm in my bed?
The trees are wide awake and bendin low,
And the stars are all a-cluster overhead.
What will a prentice do when his master go?
I want to know!"

In answer, Alvin only lifts his plow,
And in the firelight it shines all yellow.
"Lord," the smith declares, and "damn my eyes,
My boy, you got the gift, I didn't realize."
The smith, he reaches out. "Now give it here,
That's worth ten thousand sure, I shouldn't wonder,
All we got to do is melt her down
And we'll be rich afore another sundown,
Move to town."

But Alvin, he's not like to let it go.
"It's a plow I meant to make, and a plow I got,
And I mean for it to do what a plow should do."
The smith was mad, the smith, he scald and swore.
"Cuttin dirt ain't what that gold is for!"
He reached his hand to take the plow by force,
But when he touched his prentice's arm, he hissed,
And kissed his fingers, gaspin. "Boy, you're hot
As the sunlight's source.

"Hot and bright as sunlight," says the smith,
"And the gold is yours to do whatever you like with,
But whatever you do, I humble-as-dust beseech you,
Do it away from me, I've nothing to teach you."
Says Alvin, "Does that mean I'm a journeyman? I've a right to bend the black wherever I can?"
And the smith says. "Prentice, journeyman, or master,
For what you done a smith would sell his sister,
Been Satan kissed her."

What was Alvin toin when he left?
I tell you this—it wasn't hard to heft:
A burlap bag with a knot of leaden bread,
A hunk of crumbly cheese, and a golden plow.
A map of the world was growin in his head,
For a fellow knows the edge can guess the whole,
And Alvin meant to find the certain soil
Where his plow could cut and make the clover grow,
The honey flow.
He left a hundred village tongues a-wag
With tales of a million bucks in a burlap bag;
The smith, he swore the gold was devil's make
And therefore free for a godly man to take;
His wife, she told how Alvin used to shirk
And owed them all the gold for his lack of work;
And others said the golden plow was fake
So sneaky Alvin could connive to gull
Some trustin fool.

The tales of Alvin flew so far and fast
They reached him on the road and went right past,
And many a fellow in many a country inn
Would spy his bag and start in speculatin.
"Kinda heavy tote you got, I reckon."
And Alvin nods. "The burlap's kinda thin—
Do I see something big and smooth and yellow?"
And Alvin nods, but then he tells the fellow,
"It's just my pillow."

True enough, if the truth ain't buttoned tight,
For he put it under his head every night;
But country folk are pretty hard to trick,
And many a fellow thought that he could get
A plowshare's worth of gold for the price of a stick
Applied with vigor to the side of Alvin's head;
And many a night young Alvin had to run
From the bowie knife or buckshot-loaded gun
Of some mother's son.
While Alvin beat through woods and country tracks
Comes Verily Cooper, a handiworkin man,
Who boards wherever there's barrels to make or mend,
And never did he find so fine a place.
So nice a folk nor never so pretty a face
That he'd put away his walkin boots and stay.
It happened that he come to the smith one day
And heard that Alvin made his golden plow
And wondered how.

So off he set with boots so sad and worn
And socks so holey, the skin of his feet was torn
And he left a little track of blood sometimes—
Off set Verily Cooper, hopin to find
What tales were envy, and if some tales were true
What the journeyman blacksmith did or didn't do.
He asked in every inn, "Did a boy with a bag
Come here, a brown-haired boy so long of leg,
About this big?"

Well, it came about that the findin all was done
On a day without a single speck of sun.
Young Alvin, he come down to the bottom lands,
Where the air was cold and the fog was thick and white.
"In a fog this deep you'd better count your hands,"
Said an unseen man a-waitin by the track.
"What could I see if a man had any sight!"
And the unseen speaker said, "That the sun is bright
And the soil is black."

Now Alvin knelt and touched the dirt of the road,
But the ground was packed and he couldn't feel it deep,
And though he fairly pressed his nose to the dirt,
Still the white of the fog was all he could see.
"The soil, it doesn't look so black to me."
And the unseen speaker said, "The earth is hurt
And hides in the fog and heals while it's asleep.
For the tree, she screamed and wept when the beaver gnawed
And no one knowed."

"I'm lookin," Alvin says, "for a soil that's fit
To spring up golden grain, make cattle fat."
And the unseen speaker says, "What soil is that?"
"I'm lookin," Alvin says again, "for a loam
That a plow can whittle till it comes to life."
And the unseen speaker says, "A plow's a knife,
And where it cuts the earth is broke and lame."
Says Alvin, "Mar to mend, from the moldrin leaf
Will grow the limb."

"Then go, if you mean to make from the broken ground,
Go till you hear the rushin river's sound,
For there in the river's bight is a dirt so rich
You can harrow with your hand and plow with a flitch."
"Thank you, stranger," Alvin says, and then:
"I've heard your voice before, I can't think when.
In such a fog as this, so cold and wet
Your sight's so dim your memory's in debt
and you forget,

For the fog, it goes afore and it goes behind,
Hides what you're lookin for and what you've found.
And the deeper you go, the dimmer it makes your past.
And yet in all the world, this soil is best."
With that, though Alvin tried to learn his name,
The unseen speaker never spoke again,
And at last the journeyman smith went on to find
In the fog, by listenin tight for the river's sound,
That perfect ground.

Near done was the day when Alvin came to the shore
Of the mighty River Mizeray, all deep
And brown and slow and looking half asleep.
Said Mizeray, "Jes step a little more,
Young feller, and I'll carry you across."
And Alvin, blind as a bat in the fog, he said,
"Don't I hear the rush of a river in its bed?"
But Mizeray, he gave a little toss
And whispered, "Cross."

So again that day young Alvin Maker jedges.
How can he know what's true in a fog so white?
How can he trust what a hidden voice alleges?
He kneels, he touches the soil, he lifts it light,
He crushes it in his hand and it's loose and soothe,
But still old Mizeray's voice can tickle and smooth,
And says, "Come on, step on, I'll carry you
To the only soil in the world that'll ever do,
I tell you true."

Old Mizeray has a voice you must believe.
Old Mizeray has a voice that could not lie.
Old Mizeray, he whispers to deceive,
To draw the tmstin step to the edge, to die;
But the voice, the voice is full and sweet with love.
So Alvin, with his fingers deep in the loam,
He wonders if this soil is good enough,
And again he hears the river's whisperin hum:
"I'll take you home."

And now he doesn't know his north from south.
And his fingers search but cannot find his mouth,
And he can't remember what he came here for,
Or if it even matters anymore.
Only the sound of the river callin him.
Only the whine of his fear, so high and thin.
Only the taste of the sweat when he licks his lips,
Only the tremblin of his fingertips,
Their weakish grips.

He stands, but he doesn't step, he daresn't walk.
He puzzles for the key to this hidden lock,
And he knows the key isn't in that hissin voice.
He knows there's another way to make his choice.
The soil he's lookin for, it's not for himself,
It's meant for the plow he carried all so stealthy;
He opens his burlap bag and lifts the plow
And sets it on the earth real soft and slow,
And sees it glow.
He sees it shine, that plow, it shines all gold,
All yellow, and it gets too hot to hold,
And around the plow the fog begins to clear,
And the wind, it blows till the fog is gone from here.
And he sees the soil is humusy and black
Just as the unseen voice in the fog had said;
And he sees the river lap the shore and smack
And if he'd taken that step, now he'd be dead
In the devil's sack.

For Mizeray, down deep, don't flow with water:
The bottom slime is made of the stuff of night,
The darkness reachin in at the edge of light,
Awaitin for the step of a man unwary
To suck him down and slither him out to bury,
Numb and soundless, pressed in the dark of the sea,
Where the driftin dead look up through the night and see
Forever out of reach the earth in her dance,
O heaven's daughter.

And in the tree young Alvin sees a bird
All red of feather, mouth all wide and singin,
And Alvin, he calls out, "I know your voice!"
But the wind-awaker answers not a word.
Enough for him that his breezy song is heard
And he darts from tree to tree, so coy he's wingin,
And Alvin sighs at the come-out of his choice,
Not altogether sure how the thing occurred,
For the choice was hard.

And while he lies a-restin in the grove,
Up comes young Verily Cooper, shy and smilin.
"Are you the one that they call by the name of Alvin?"
"There's many who's called that name. And who are you?"
"I'm a man who wants to learn what you know of makin.'
They call me Verily Cooper; I work in staves,
I join them watertight, each edge so true,
But never a keg I made that was proof from leakin' Or safe from breakin'."

Alvin answers, "What do I know of barrels?"
"Verily says, "And what did you know of plows?"
And Alvin laughs, and he says, "Ain't you a marvel,"
And up he hops and gives his head a shake.
"Verily Cooper, there's things in a man that shows,
And here at the river's edge we'll plow the earth
And together make whatever we fix to make
And be the midwives at the barley's birth
And weigh our worth."

So they cut an oak and together hewed the wood
To make the plowframe strong and slow of flex,
And they set the plow in place and bound it good
And never mind a halter for an ox,
For this was a livin plow, of tremblin gold.
And when the work was done, they marked their field,
And side by side they reached and took ahold,
And the plow, it leaped, it plunged, it played like a child,
So free and wild.

Verily and Alvin, they hung on;
There wasn't a hope of guidin the plow along.
It was all they could do to keep it to the land;
Other than that they couldn't do a thing.
And at last, with bleedin' blisters on their hands,
With arms gone weak and legs too beat to run,
They tripped and fell together on the dirt.
Aside from the blisters, the only thing much hurt
Was Alvin's shirt.

They look, and there's the plow, still as you please,
Gleamin' in the sunlight. "How'd it stop?"
Asks Alvin, Verily, he thinks he sees
the truth. He touches the plow, it gives a hop;
He takes his hands away, it sets right down,
"It's us that makes it go," he says, and he grins.
Now Alvin laughs, a-settin on the ground:
"Maybe it goes a little widdershins,
But it gets around!"

And as they sat there, hollerin and whoopin,
Out come the farmer folk who lived nearby,
To find out what had caused the fog to fly—
And at the same time do a little snoopin.
They saw that the furrow went all anyhow,
And they said, "If you think that's plowin,
Boys, you're daft! Straight as an arrow, that's how a plow should go!"
And the farmers mocked—oh, how the farmers laughed
At that no-good plow.

That sobered Alvin up, and Verily frowned
"Don't you see that the plow, it cut the earth alone?
We got no ox, we got no horse around!
The plow's alive, and we'll tell you how it's done!"
But the farmers went their way, still mirthful men
For they had nothin to learn from any fellow
As young and ignorant as Al or Verly.
And the plow just sat at the head of its crooked furrow,
Hot and yellow.

The rest of the tale—how they looked for the crystal city,
How they crept to the dangerous heart of the holy hill,
How they broke the cage of the girl who sang for rain,
How they built the city of light from water and blood—
Others have told that tale, and told it good.
And besides, the girl you're with is cruel and pretty,
The boy you're settin by has a mischievous will.
There's better things to do than hear me again,
So go on home.

—ORSON SCOTT CARD