Paul Harding

Walter, Charmed

In the time of the Great Survey, the acreage (3000 acres—1200 of wood, 1800 of meadow) rose in value from 60 pounds to 80. The manor, in the Confessor’s day, was held in demesne by Walter the Shy. In the Hundred Rolls, Walter the Shy’s great-great-great-grandson, Walter the Shy V, is stated to have held a Knight’s fee here and have free warren. This was in 1272. On the Close Rolls for 1274, the year Edward Longshanks finally arrived from the Crusades to be crowned, Alice, Walter’s wife, took demesne of the acreage and the Hall when Walter “fled to under thee woudes.”

It was only because the woods beckoned. Oaks in autumn held half-green and half-brown leaves and the thin light cast through them some sort of script. The wind meandering in the crowns and the trunks rubbing like ship timbers and me beneath the roots hearing the muffle. Alice bore me no ill will. She wished me well in fact. We never had much love in the first, so no ire followed. Ours was a cool intercourse and so it lasted. She came with bread and apples and cheese and sat at the foot of the tree and I poked my head out from between two roots, resting my arms against the ground like a gossipy washerwoman. She called me gopher, badger, hare, and fox. Fox I liked the best, but thought gopher the most true.

It was the Knighthood that sent him underground. He might have gone anyway, but this was a fine excuse. I always caught him rooting about, trying to get into the deepest grass, nest up under the coziest clefts, den in the darkest holes. He loved the water, too. The stream in the meadow was never far away. He said would I understand and I said I would and would still be in the Hall if he needed me, translating all of those old scrolls.

There is the chalk, the clay, and the crag. The Hall is mostly on the crag, the clay being to the south, the chalk to the north-west. The clay is blue. The chalk is filled with the bones of strange fish. There is the river, Lac, shown on the maps as “Flumen.” The parish church, which is on the east border of the Manor, is made of flint and rubble. The road which runs through the property is Roman and, according to the records (Alice knows about them and can make some sense of their tedious Latin) was built by Antonius. His Villa Faustini is generally thought to have been located in the Ixworth parish.
In a strange way, I liked winter best. True it was cold, and the brook froze over, but the earth insulates, and there was no wind down there. And there was something about the shelter that was warmer than a house. But even on the coldest nights, I lit no fire. The only light I used was the sun’s. Cold is warmer in the dark.

How funny he always was, his beard more and more like fine roots, his face more like bark. Good morning, Sir Fox, I’d call and he’d flush red as a maple leaf. Or, Good morning, Sir Hare. We would chat and I’d tell him a little about the Hall. In summer it was the harvest, winter the larder. He listened as if it were a troublesome childhood wistfully recalled or something else as distant and lost as if in time, rather than a house less than a mile away. (He could tell what time it was and when I was coming by the chimney smoke he saw through the trees.) He would eat an apple or a pear, core and all, and then some bread but not the crust. He loved honey the most, though.

O, how I love honey. How it holds the light and confers upon the tongue the perfume of the flower. I live with the voles but my heart is with the bees. It was what I missed most about the Manor. We kept nine hives. The beekeeper had always been a man named Goate. I could remember him from my earliest impressions of life, and my father always said that he could as well, and recollected his father saying the same and that he recollected his father saying the same, and so on. I remember thinking when I was still a boy, all of my forefathers must actually have been recalling his forefathers, and when I asked him one day he lifted his heavy, pollen-dusted veil and said, Must be, but it seems like I’ve known you all. Alice always brought a cut of honeycomb from Goate for me to suck.

Like I said, it was the Knighthood that sent him underground. When some of the King’s Men came to collect him after his second missed this-or-that council, I said, Why do ye think he’s called Shy? This stumped them, then made them mad. They said, As his wife, we hold you beholden to his duties. So I said, Fine, I’ll get my coat and we can go and they went off in a huff.

One morning Alice and I were talking and for some reason I ended up saying, Pity there’ll be no Walter VI. This made us both remark on the warm weather we were having. I felt love for her the first time then, because we both shared the same reasonable outlook on our marriage, which was arranged to consolidate much of the county’s lands. I felt love because we had always been so agreeable. Alice was really rather handsome, now that I noticed, and I felt so much affection for her that it suddenly seemed a pity
there’d be no little boy or girl from our union. Just as suddenly, then, this was what I wanted more than anything in the world. Lovely honey today, Alice, I said, and turned heel and scrambled back into the dripping roots. (It was, actually, a raw and bleary spring morning, with a sleety rain coming in off the sea several miles away).

At the time, when he went under the trees, there was a man from Turin staying in the east part of the Hall. He was a scribe for the Turinese court and said he took an interest in Sir Walter. He said in his broken English, Why he live like a wet little squirrel? I said, I believe he thinks it preferable to that of a squire. The man from Turin said, Ha, ha, squire, squirrel, and went out of the room and down the hall humming in sing-song, squirey, squirrelly, squirrelly squire, ha, ha!

The peasants are hale and thick of head. At harvest, they dress the harvest-man in painted ram’s horns and hoist him above their heads and drink and sing coarse songs. When a woman has the fits, nine men subscribe a crooked sixpence apiece and the coins are fitted into a ring for her. When a child is diseased, he is stripped bare and passed thrice, headfirst, through the cleft split into a young ash tree. After, the tree is bound with packthread and as the bark heals so heals the child. This cures rickets and rupture. The peasants will never kill a hog during the wane of the moon; its bacon will shrink in the pot. It is lucky to set a hen on an odd number of eggs. They hunt squirrels on the day of Christ’s Mass.

Spoils of ten generations stuffed the Great Hall. Carvings from Rome, paintings from Istanbul, glass mosaics, tapestries from the Lowlands. All manner of furniture filled the rooms. There were tables twenty men could not lift surrounded by chairs with legs as thick as tree trunks. There were benches along every wall. There was even a modest throne. Along the walls hung swords and pikes, cudgels and maces, shields with the family standard. Light came in through tall, slim windows. Often it seemed like water and that ours was a sunken or drowned kingdom. Cold was kept at bay by fireplaces into which a tall man could walk without stooping. During the winter months we burned whole trees at a time. Through all of this glided Alice in her long robes. Before I left the Hall for the woods, she seemed to me a benevolent ghost. I most often saw her from a distance, crossing a hallway, going from room to room. In late afternoon or at night, I could not even tell if I really saw her or if my eyes were conjuring her from the shadows. If she noticed me she would wave or curtsey slightly and I would bow back. This now seems odd, the two of us, husband and wife, bowing to one another across such great expanses of stone. We never
spoke. We could not have heard each other’s words. I must have seemed to her the same: some distant soul who happened to haunt the same castle. When the knighthood came and all of the responsibility, I saw all of the Hall and its furnishings as an unbearable burden. Alice was included in that catalog. I thought of her as I might an ivory cross of which I was particularly fond, or a jewel-encrusted box containing the finger bone of a saint (there were, I believe, two of these): fine, doomed, fading, a nuisance. So, when I crawled under the tree and watched her come the next morning, just her in her blue cloak set against the sharp light of the early morning and the long, thick, grass weighed by the dew and the indigo sky and the salty wind pushing through the trees and spinning the leaves in crowds she seemed a vision—no longer a silent ghost, a trick of my eye, a stranger who looked up from those manuscripts she was always working at. When Alice came to the tree with a basket of fruit and cheese and bread and honey and said, I thought you might like some human victuals, Sir Ferret, those simple words in that clear voice split the world open like the sharpest ax and there it lay—love: open, fresh, fragrant. What sorrow.

From the moment I fell in love with Alice, my life was a torture, for how could I be a hermit from my own mind? How I wished I could crawl out of my own head, through the nose or the ears or the mouth. How I longed to vacate the bony Great Hall of my skull and live mindless of myself on the windy heath. She still came every morning with honey and apples and bread and sometimes cold bird. We still talked about her transcriptions and the funny man from Turin and the King’s Men, who sent threatening messages on vellum, stamped with increasingly large and elaborate wax seals of this or that royal whomever, I could never keep them straight, although Alice could and said that things were getting serious. One morning she said, they will probably come and seize the Hall and sign it over to Sir so-and-so. I will be fine. I can scoop up my manuscripts and take one of the carts off to somewhere, some priory. But what of you, Walter? You cannot live beneath an oak. I only looked at her hair as she said all of this. It was jet. Coiled and braided, with wisps fraying in the wet wind. There were field flowers in it. She said, I said, you cannot live beneath an oak. O, beneath an oak, I thought. I cannot live anywhere, now that I have really fallen in love with you. I said, O, I am sure it will all work out. Perhaps I will become a hermit of deeper woods, or a monk, or an anchorite to your anchoress. Even the thought of that—she in a cell, me in a cell, devoting our days to consideration of one another. Rubbish, I thought; my penance will be lengthy for that one. Pass the pheasant, I said. I was imprisoned in inanities. Not even, I thought, a drop of my sorrow must be allowed to leak into my words. The moment I allowed myself the slightest note
of doubt or concern for her or for myself, I knew I would crumble into a blubbing confession.

The Great Hall of Walter the Shy, located in the Hundreds of Thingoe, or, as variously spelled in the Domesday book, Tinchou, Tingoho, Thinghow, Thingohou, Thinhoge, or more remotely, þiŋhouue, or þiŋian, was deeded to Godfrey the Willing in 1276, after Walter’s wife, Alice “flede to a prioree.”

Curse my human heart. I thought that to flee the Hall and its trappings for the roots of an oak was to renounce the ills of the world. How little I knew that my gesture was really one of pride. How innocent we are of our own intentions and true effects. One morning I walked out from among the roots. I wandered out of the crags to the blue clay. I wandered the blue clay and then skirted the crags and came to the chalk. I scratched at the chalk until my fingernails came off. I bled the chalk crimson, looking for a sign. Bones came up from the chalk—the fragile bones of strange fish and tiny creatures named by Adam himself and then consigned to perish. We all perish, I thought, examining a tiny skull, but only after great suffering. There seemed a cruelty to the act of naming that which is already doomed. An inscrutable cruelty.

I fell in love with Walter the Shy when he crawled out from under the oak tree and walked away.

Rumors of the Reluctant Knight, the Shy Knight, Sir Shy the Wanderer, spread quickly throughout the county. At first, the laborers of the great manors held him in a sort of awe, and gave him portions of their meager food. When it was found that the errant noble loved honey, they gave him that, which he took in hand and kissed so that it coated his chapped and split lips and gave back to the giver. He never even allowed himself to taste it, they said to one another. The combs he kissed were traded for a time as relics. It was considered a good omen to catch sight of him scratching at the ground.

The hanged man swings in the salty wind. The bones of his fingers have broken through the tips. He is a feast for birds. The worms in the earth beneath his down-turned feet sense dimly that they are robbed of their due. A boy passes, carrying a bundle of sticks. His face is red from the nip of cold and brine. He passes: oak, corpse, ditch, dinner, hungry, hungry. The boy is the hanged man. [I’m not sure I get the last sentence; did I miss something?]

That year, in June, above the Sea, there appeared two dragons in the air. One vanquished the other and then followed it into the Sea. There was a
Dearth, followed by an Earthquake. In September a Tempest of Thunder and Lightning threw down several churches and rooted up grown oak trees. This Tempest was followed closely by Deluding Rains; those by a Dearth, another Tempest, Inundations, Prodigious Wind, and a Comet. In November, it rained blood in Wales.

Yes, there were floods and fire in the skies and tides that stopped turning, but no occurrence could distract me from following in my mind Walter’s wanderings over the face of the bone-strewn earth. I burned the manuscripts I was working on. The ambassador from Turin came into the Library when my bonfire was in full light on the stone floor. He pulled at his hair and cried Signora! Signora! The beautiful words! You ruin everything for a man who is like a wet little squirrel! He lunged at the flames but the heat pushed him back. His thick eyebrows were singed. So much more is lost than found, he moaned, patting at his face with handkerchief, so much more is always lost than found and you, crazy woman, do this.

What fossil will remain of my love? What bones could possibly be scratched up out of the clay? I can tell you: none. I scratched at the layers of my own spongy brains to find some little relic which I might have carved out of my head and thrown into the sea or worn on a chain around my neck. But, no, there was no artifact, no cup or rotted handle or Roman coin with your face in profile.

I took my vows.

There was a church in the greasy dark. Monks chanted inside the soot-smeared flint. Candles lit the arched window holes. Fiery tokens floating in oil. Wax, stone, wick, and wool. Clear songs cut through the clinging dark: all is good, all is terror, all is good.

I am the baited bear.
I am the poisoned bird.
I am the hooked fish.
I am the fox in the trap eating its own paw.
What am I now?
And now?

I took my vows and devoted myself to the contemplation of this life which consists first of suffering, then of death.

O, aye, he was the one Goate found headfirst in one of the hives, stung so bad his whole face was swelled shut. It was strange, I say, to see Goate and
his assistants in their long keeper’s dresses with those funny baskets on their heads what make them look like they have no faces, poking sticks at him who had got up in a tree with one of the hives and was screaming into it where are you, love, where are you, and pulling out the honey and flicking it down into the grass and all the bees swarming him like a lightning cloud and stinging him and stinging him. Gads, I thought; nothing good can come of that.

I inherited my land from my father, Walter the Shy IV and he from his father Walter III and he—well enough of all that. It was my misfortune to spend much of my youth memorizing our pedigree, which assure you, I could trace back to Adam, or at least Noah. My lands came with peasants and four small parish churches sanctioned centuries ago by the powers that were, which are the powers that be, which, until I took to the woods and then, in my agony, to the countryside, was me. I cannot begin to tell you how many tenants I have strung up by the thumbs or the neck. Of course, I did not string them up myself, I had them strung up by other peasants of slightly higher rank. And, more than thrice the number I have had dispatched (either as example, or, I confess, on the whim of a pert boil or burning sore), have I see my father and grandfather order. Many fair afternoon rides through the country were punctuated by one of them pointing to a rotting corpse hanged from a thick branch, listing in the wind which always smells faintly of the sea. That’s Tom the Raker. He rooked me half a bale. So I filled my quota. The poor are fodder. But now I am poor. Imagine that! Now that I am poor, I notice the poor. If only I had not fallen in love with Alice I would never have noticed the poor. Give what you have to widows and orphans. Am I becoming Christly? Hardly. Give me another chance for the Alice’s love and the Great Hall and I’d throw the rope over the branch myself. I’d hang a million peasants. I’d eat them.

Cor, I remember him ranting, I’ll throw the rope over the branch meself, I’ll eat ye and all yere children, too, and on and on. Me an’ John were gleaning the field, so he was a pain to our work. I’ll give you the rope meself, says John to him, if you don’t go about your way, and the madman says, Ah, is that John the Farmer? And John says, Aye, and he says, I remember hanging your father, and John says, Here, what’s this about me dad, and knocked the bloke’s teeth out and said, Why don’t ye join us now, friend, we’re gleaning teeth today.

Rumors turned to fact. The more the country people whispered about the bogeyman of Thingoe, the more he was seen. He waited like a bear, like a lion; he led children off the way and tore them to pieces. On cold nights
that winter children gathered around their grandmothers, who sat with their crooked backs to the fire and took delight in promising the exquisite tortures of being ripped apart limb by limb or hanging by the feet in a cave and being eaten alive, finger by finger, toe by toe. Children screeched and clung to one another. Darkness and cold and hunger and pain were familiar to them all. It did not take much for them to be able to imagine all of these afflictions gathering themselves up together and snatching lost babes from deserted lanes. O, you’d better be good, children.

How sad I am, so smitten with Alice. She is just a woman; how can all of the world reside in her? Why can I not just step out of myself, away from where that terrible love is, like stepping back from a snapping wolf? There are reasons. There are reasons. O, fanged love! When I am ribs and grass it will simply find someone else to gnaw.

The sheriff finally took him to the jail when they found him trying to hoist an old woman by the neck from an oak tree with his pants. For four days and four nights he was locked up in the dungeon, screaming and howling, Are you here, love? Are you here, misery? They stopped bothering to give him his gruel on the second day because as soon as the sheriff’s man slid the food in through the hole in the door, the madman sent it flying right back out. On the fifth morning, when the king’s men arrived to hang him and they opened the door to the cell, he had disappeared. There lay, though, in the middle of the floor the corpse of an enormous animal that looked equal parts dog, bear, and wolf. The king’s men later swore it had died from trying to devour itself.

When I saw him cut and deformed and raving in the dungeon I fell out of love with him. Pity him? Yes, I most certainly did. I pity us all, for what am I doing here in my cell? But him especially sometimes still, because it is for me he ruined himself and that makes folly all the clearer. This clarity is a gift to me. It is my small grace. It is the mystery of ourselves in the world. It is not mine to solve. How lucky I am, though, to have it to ponder. I think and pray dawn to dusk—how misery begets misery and our madness is to think we can carve it from one another or from ourselves the way we cut bruises from apples.