

My dear Branwyn,

It has been some time since we last argued. And some more time since we last agreed. This morning, I found myself missing those exchanges. Missing them enough to write. And perhaps enough to visit. Unless I can solicit a visit from you and Ruth instead. One of us should certainly travel before summer turns up all the grasses of the trip. (I promise to think of some contentious topics for discussion between now and then.)

Of course, Maugery and I would be most delighted if you accompanied us in hir. Firth is feeling too near Druinham these days. In our younger years, it felt so far away. Nowadays, it somehow manages, or at least seems, to creep closer and closer every summer. It's such a recluse of a town, Druinham. Always was. Just a pack of wandering robes drifting in and out of those honeycombed hills.

No words are that important (in my estimation, though surely you disagree). Those well-robed druids give up the trappings and luxuries afforded by hir (okaz, okaz, Firth too, sort of) to vigilantly stare at a book from birth to death. They don't even really read it. Mostly, they just watch it. Watch it be where it is. And make sure that's where it stays. And it does. Generation after generation, the book stays put. Where's the excitement in that? I couldn't do it. And, dare I say, neither should they. If the kids being born in those hills had education enough to make an informed decision (would you rather spend your adult years in Druinham or anywhere else on the Connected Continents?) you can't tell me one child would decide bookwatching is the compound gerund he would prefer to commit his life to. So it seems sad they were sentenced to it in posterity's eternal lottery. It makes notions of "voluntary" a little bit hazy. Evidence that slavery still thrives in nature, just not in culture. And pretending that any problem is a predicament of the past is what permits it to persist. (A little poetry, dressing one's words can always soften their charge, I find.)

Poetry aside, I can already hear your rebuttal. It occurs to me this is a topic we would probably see eye-to-ear on. At least until I talked your ear clean off. Then we'd see eye-to-head-cavity. And that'd give us something new to talk about. Something new to argue about. Surely something political, about which I would surely be right and you surely wrong... because every spring, hir blooms its change. Every puff of pollen promises progress. And keeps its promise. By comparison, every day, Firth looks even more like it did yesterday than it actually did yesterday.

Any hint of novelty is just some new way by which Firth has somehow made itself more closely resemble the beginning of time. But(!) therein, of course, is its charm. And acknowledgement of that charm, of course, is my praise.

It's a bit harder to come up with praise for those mood-ruining druids wandering your western fields. But I know the sympathy you fasten to all creation, and I know it won't be suspended for my correspondence. So let me, as a show of respect (for you, not for them), attempt a compliment (for them, not for you). Here goes:

The folks at Druinham mosey through life with far more purpose than I have. And there's something to be said for purpose. Something good.

But I wonder how good their particular purpose is. If you take a moment to think about it (a moment I'm currently undertaking), it doesn't seem especially challenging to come up with a nobler purpose than curating a one-book library.

Here's one: Give our children a better life than we have. The fulfillment of that purpose means every future generation flourishes a little more than the previous. Indefinitely. Or at least until the whole world looks, tastes, and smells like hir, thus becoming unimprovable. Sounds like the noblest of all purposes to me.

But, as I think about it some more (without you here to outwardly argue with me, I'm forced to direct my arguments inward), I do see a flaw in that purpose. It's a flaw made most apparent by my current paradise's disputable history: *Ruportedly* (okay, *probably*), the early gardeners of hir used to purchase, as bazaar wares, children. Poor ones from the poor families in the Stone lands. They'd haul droves of them up to hir every spring.

Couldn't have been too hard a task owing to how hungry their bodies weighed. A single horse could pull a population if the cart were big enough to house it.

The instant those under-educated, over-hungry, under-aged, over-worked children exited their carts, they became hirfs, the lowest of the servants. Indentured, but practically to the flowers. If our honesty is comprehensive (and honest with itself), we have to concede this was a better indenturing than some of its alternatives. Yes, yes, terrible injustice, flowers aside. We know that now, surely did then.

But the facts are: these hirs almost always produced sons and daughters, who themselves grew to know nothing but the fruits and the perfumes, and eventually the freedoms, of hir. If it be true their mothers and fathers suffered (again, flowers aside), then in their suffering, they fulfilled life's purest purpose (giving one's progeny a better life than their own) a thousand times over. ... Perhaps there's a hole in my theory on purposes.

I do appreciate how this definition assigns no accomplishment to the druids. But I'm a little bit troubled by the finding that, to be imported into the promised land a slave, capable of posterity, is the greatest path to prosperity. My formula may need some revision.

But my first point still stands: I respect that Druiinham's kin feel a strong sense of purpose. And I can almost admire the behaviors it inspires in them. I, unlike any hir or druid, have no such purpose parenting my behaviors. I haven't the spiritual obligation to protect some ancient tome. Nor have I the honorable misfortune of maximizing the gradient between my own suffering and my child's flourishing.

I just dawdle around the gardens. That's all I do. Yesterday, tomorrow: every day is the same. Morning, evening: these aren't things I consider. Risk, danger, an appetite: these do not threaten my yesterdays or my tomorrows, my mornings or my evenings. My world is bordered by sunshine and satiety.

Sometimes I wonder if that's what it was like everywhere before the first maps were drawn. Maybe after the idea of a map had formed, but before the labor of its creation had taken place. Way back then. I wonder if the whole world, at that exact moment, was just a huge, shaggy hir, jungling with delights.

Did you know the natives never made a single map? Not one. It makes sense. Why would they? Their lives were like mine: no matter where you walk, it's nice. Anywhere you depart, anywhere you arrive, and the whole trip in between: nice. So there was never any need to get too structured about where they were headed. Cartography consumes the hours one could have spent indulging nature's gifts.

But today, instead of basking in the breadths of that beauty, we stare down at pieces of paper everywhere we go. It's difficult to withhold the upbraiding here.

One step out of hir's grounds and it's nothing but hunched necks on the march, every one of them afraid for themselves.

Afraid of loneliness, they spend their nights staring into the maps, plotting journeys to lands where they never quite settle. They always depart before they really arrive, keeping a few paces ahead of the loneliness that's surely on their heels.

Afraid of the creatures and other dangers of the continents, they spend their days staring into the maps, plodding those pointless journeys not by pasture and path but by counted paces. North, east, north again, never freeing their eyes from the page.

I understand why the first maps were made. There was an occasional danger lurking abroad, and a very occasional need to journey across its dominion. So we united our fears and our cleverness, and we created the map, forever after guiding travelers safely afield of any such peril. But, as is often the case, our fears confound our cleverness. That's why everything on those maps looked so hazardous. And relics of those hazards still appear on the maps we employ today. Just look for the fabled creatures that crawl each continent. And tell me you know of a reliable sighting of a single one of them. An honest man's encounter is far rarer than a humming bug pollinating in the winter (which would certainly have more sightings if people could simply fold up their maps and befriend the earth they measure).

Every passing year, folks seem to know a little bit less about the world in which they live, and they seem to live just a little bit less than they know... if that makes sense. The cure? Just come to hir, where fear has not separated its hiros (or even its hirfs) from nature.

Maybe... (returning to the subject of the druids)... Just maybe those maps are how they keep the get-me-out-of-here kids penned at Druinham. They show them the maps. Is this where you're thinking about going, kid? Where the huge, terrible monsters are? The older the map, the scarier it is; the scarier the map, the better. Because the prospect of watching an old book from the first sunup to the last sundown cannot possibly excite the mind of a child.

Especially since the book itself is barely legible. And even less coherent. It's as though every word was written before the invention of words. Language has changed since it was penned, but not the premise of prophecies. That's stayed the same: I predict this specific thing, and then that specific thing happens.

Fine. But every prediction that's come true out of that book must have happened very shortly after the invention of words. And everything that didn't happen way back then hasn't happened yet. So how do we know the book wasn't written halfway between those events and today?

Maybe the ancient druids aren't as ancient as we all believe. They just pretended to be. And they continued their make-believe by writing about a bunch of specific events that already happened. The druids weren't predicting futures with such extraordinary accuracy, they were foretelling pasts. To me it's more suspicious than surprising that every detail was so perfect. But only about the oldest ones. Every prediction that hasn't happened yet is extraordinary only in its ambiguity. Given enough time, and flexible enough interpretation, every last prediction might sound, more or less (and more or less importantly), true.

That's what I suspect. And it's what I suspect you suspect as well... given that one of the most terrifying (and certainly most vague) predictions involves your town, the oldest in the Sandlands. Mr. Missing-Body or Empty-Bones or whatever it was called is coming, havoc in tow.

I assume we interpret that as the Thorn King. He'll trample in to unloose a cloud of woe on a bunch of peaceful nobodies? (I say this with both endless and enormous affection.) That doesn't really feel like the most effective use of his might. But let's say my doubts are pliable enough to permit this interpretation. The rest of the prophecy insists my imagination (and my gullibility) be stretched even further.

A child is born. That part is clear enough. That child has two dads or something (starting to get a little vague). Two dads and three seasons of winter, or the other way around. I can't remember. And I can't remember where it goes from there. But wherever that is doesn't seem especially important because I know this is a point of agreement between us (one of few). I know this because, if you believed in any of that, you wouldn't be living in Firth.

Or making trips to Lyonhall for the summer tournaments (I have neither forgotten your tales of Mizjak nor accepted their authenticity).

Or drinking with the bottomless and bottomed out drunks at Moonkrug.

In your defense, you don't do that last one. Two out of three though.

Since leaving Firth, I visit none of the three. So, in a way, I carry more belief (and believe in those beliefs even harder) than you do. And perhaps that means I bear a greater purpose in life than you do. Perhaps... Perhaps...

Much to discuss when you visit (or, less ideally, when I visit you).

I'll stop here.

I do hope and trust you're well. Please send along my warmest wishes to Ruth.

Kindly, and response-expectantly,

*Marcus*, the indecisive arbiter (as you so tenderly put it in our last exchange)

p.s., Maugery just told me to tell you that she thinks of you and Ruth both fondly and often. And that if we don't hear from you before the year is up, we'll assume Hollowheart came for you (Maugery apparently recalls the prophetic details in keener detail than I).

Okay, I'm really done writing this time.

From him with love (and much more of it than I indicated here),

*Marcus*, who is decidedly done with this letter