

## *Strength of Heart*

John was strong. Everyone could tell it. His hard grey eyes and the chill mirth in his voice, a core of cold wire inside his words, made it known. John was a fierce wind, hot or cold as the season needed, but a gust in the chest which pushed back all doubt. A sure wind pushes all aside, every shadow where truth hides, every nook where doubt festers is boiled white, scalded into nothing before such a wind. What can withstand a wind more ferocious than doubt and truth?

So John stamped his will upon all things. He willed himself most of all, and his laughter was a wire lash upon his back, and then twice again upon his face, until his spirit was bloody and withdrew into his strength, which had harnessed the current of agony itself, a strength as a blaze in dry pines which rises up to consume itself and burn the sky. All but the sun fear such a man who does not fear himself, but consumes himself in the crackling fire which rises to make the sun recoil, and then laugh. The sun knows that a fire which consumes itself is a glorious and perfect thing which even the sun respects as it disrespects, fears as it laughs to know such sacrifice. John's strength pleased the sun as a monk pleases the sun when he sets himself ablaze in immolation before the watching world. Who could not love and fear such a sacrifice?

The world knelt down before John. He commanded his weakness be gone, and struck out into the soft flesh of the world, where doubt became his ally, worming the earth in the rotten breast of all he knew. He shone into each doubting crack, each empty maybe in their hearts, and they destroyed themselves for him. All withered before the storm, and knew their own doubt. So do we follow one who is fit to lead, a doubtless soul most sure. We who live in our own shadow are thusly tricked to believe there is no doubt in the heart of the sun! Every desert knows, what comes of knowing the sun, what is left, what lies between the sands, but heat?

Now John had success and riches but a heart of burnt clay from which to drink. He asked his heart, "I have won all the world, melted the clouds into my rain, found the hearts of men as a puddle, a film of breath before the sun and own the weather and the night, where men and women show their round eyes to me, dip their heads and fear me; but I am not happy. Do I have no heart, or do I have no fear and can not fathom my heart?" His heart said unto him, "You have lied to me. You have consumed yourself in flame to conceal your fear... You fear much John!" John heard his heart and raged against it, "You weak filthy lying heart, no wonder I burnt you to a black stone, you rotten thing, who but you might bring me weakness and show me what soft thing I am a flame to consume, a torrent to drown and a blade to scrape you into the desert sand, and bleed you gone!" With this his heart laughed at him with a cold lashing wire inside its mocking laugh, and John heard his heart, "You have done all that and much worse John! You who believe a flame beats in his breast and know a desert happiness which is dry and crackling as sand and heat in your mouth, you chew these words and know: you have

wasted my tears for weakness, and now behold— The desert claims us both!" The laughter was more than John could stand, and he began to go mad.

Like being in a metal box with his laughing heart, reverberating, pounding in a metal drum, his heart drove him mad with its laughing echo. He began to strike himself in the face, and as he struck harder and harder, his madness knew itself, to see what he had become, and he began to laugh as his heart laughed to behold himself. He looked upon himself with his heart's evil knowing, the knowing of his weakness and his hiding! He understood that it was he who had been savaged by his strength, boiled dry, so afraid of his tears and pain, made weak and pitiful, striking himself to awaken the desert and feel its anguish, so long choked dry in burnt tears.

And today the tears came again, but John opened up his dry desert heart before them, and soaked his burnt heart in the tears he wept for his foolishness, as if a burnt earth can grow toward the sun! How has strength without tears found the earth but conquered and stripped, baked and prostrate, barren and burnt before a will which leaves the truth bare, parched, half dead for what it will not know, the tears and rain which it needs to rise up toward the sun. That which is defeated never rises to happiness, and so the desert belongs to a cowardly and jealous sun.

Now weeping for his burnt heart, his heart loved him, and found John's despair touched it, and his heart spoke these tender words to him, "John, you are strong enough now to know me, and so I will show you what magic there is in the world of the heart which is full in tears and happiness."

John picked up the guitar he had not touched for fifteen years and began to play. He wept as he played, and his heart found his thousand lost spirits, each shamed and hidden, bruised and banished behind a burnt tear.

John's head felt as if it were a huge black witch's cauldron. His heart must be a witch or the Devil himself because it seemed that his mind and soul were a black iron vessel into which his heart began to hurl souls. Like a slow rain of hot stones, each plunging into the cauldron in turn, his heart slinging souls from above him, hurling them downward into his hungry, wanting, waiting, empty, black iron, desert cauldron of a mirthless soul, until he was alive with their power, their fear and knowing, their splendor and shame, rapture, horror, life and sadness filled his black iron breast, and he began to glow as a hearth glows once over-fired, now red and soft. Then his heart itself leapt in the cauldron, as if he could stand yet another! Now the belly of Time laughed to know him, and the Devil drew his hands toward God through Music, and the world sung whole and complete pouring through him, every God and heaven sung its sweet lament, echoing into the Devil's ear who leapt up to answer, so do both embrace, and all Gods become one under the fire of song. Now John opened his over-full heart and heard his tear soaked joy sing its love song for the sun; the cauldron of his soul spilling its golden broth, tears and sun stirred together in an open heart which can not resist its happiness, its song of desert sorrow made wet and knowing, rising toward the sun, nourished in a broth of golden tears.

This work is the sole property of the author, Rich Norman © 2010, 2014.