

Oakfast

From Fortune's Hand by R.N. Morris

I see the acorn falling to the ground, full of energy and intent. The stippled cup splits. A tiny tongue licks out.

I see it. I see it all. Now.

This tongue, a shoot, parts the sodden ground, probing it with its insinuating tip. Taking root. It is Nature's business to be questing.

I see this. Though it happens within the closed darkness of the soil.

The speed of it would take your breath away.

And above, another shoot hurtles upwards, a fine jet of living matter fired towards the Sun.

The stem writhes as it grows, whipping the air. It is almost too fast for itself, has not the strength to support its vaunting height. Quick, quick, quickening, it girds itself with growth, thickening into a sapling's adolescent tremor.

I see the parting and spreading of the roots, the restless subterranean colonisation. It is the nature of all life, the urge to encroach.

I see the orb of the heavens wheel about. I see the Sun on its ceaseless course, a bouncing ball across the horizon. The waxing and waning of countless moons. The slow strophes of an eternal dance sped up into a frantic jig.

I see the sapling's tremor steady as it takes on girth. The Sun warms its coarsening skin. It is lashed by downpours. Bent by winds. Pert and unbowed, it springs back, the stamp of its future stalwart nature already showing. It laps up the rain.

A fountain of tendrils shoots out from the stem, lightning thrown back at the sky: the young plant's first branches. No sooner have they waved themselves into rude existence, than a rash of green bursts over them. The leaves are lips that kiss the sky.

The elastic vigour quickly slackens. Autumn's golden cloak crackles like a benign fire over the branches.

Boughs thicken, effortlessly bearing their swaying burden. Acorns!

I see this.

I see the secret accretions building within. Each summer's growth encircling the last.

The tree stands its ground, chests itself out like a warrior, staking its claim for a corner of the forest. But is never still. Its thrusting energy strains ever outwards and upwards.

I see the acorn falling to the ground. I see a host of acorns falling. I see forests shooting up. I see the Earth colonised by the Empire of Oak.

And then I see them come into the forests. The men.

I see men differently now. The oak is more my brother.

The men are kindred with the mites that flit in the sunshine. With the spiders that weave between the leaves. With the woodlice and maggots that scuttle and twitch in the forest's darkest places.

They seek out the finest, grandest oak. I see them survey it with proprietary pride, abrogating its creation to their own account. It is theirs already. Its monumental steadfastness a challenge to their quicksilver wits.

They wield their axes with a sidelong swoop. Two men planting alternate blows, digging the future out of the tree's flesh with remorseless precision. The blows lack reverberation, empty dead clacks hushed up by the surrounding forest, as if in shame.

A pulpy wound deepens. The men's shoulders grow as their work progresses. I see the sweat on their brow, the crook of their wrist as they wipe it away.

A thunderclap cracks within the stricken tree. The men step back, their final blow a sharp nod of twin satisfaction. The forest quakes. The leaves shiver on the outspread tremble of branches. The tree topples into timber.

A horse as big as a dromedary drags it over to the saw pit. The men fall on it like locusts. It doesn't stand a chance against their savage rip saws and adzes. Their hearty muscular swinging of blades. Their oaths and earthy songs. Their cunning wielding of the unwieldy. I see the long flexing metal snap into shape, biting when bidden.

I see this happening all over the forest. Other men bringing low other trees. And in other forests, the same thing.

The forests are converted into open ground, piled high with massive logs.

But it is not over yet. The hurtling of the oak.

The stripped logs are rolled and loaded onto wagons, which hurtle and rattle along country lanes. Or they float in solid torrent towards a new becoming.

The Empire of Oak has been conquered, enslaved, transported. Now it will serve the Empire of Man.

It hurtles into the sawmill, eager for its reformation.

I see the fine, unrelenting teeth of enormous saws.

Water turns the wheel that drives the gang saw, a swinging chisel-toothed pendulum that measures the tree's end and the ship's beginning. It is somehow appropriate that water powers this transition.

I see the saw's teeth sink into the timber. Sawdust fills my eyes. I do not blink.

Sawing and hewing and rasping and shaping. A focused bustle of activity.

The men throw themselves at it, all hands to the latent decks.

I see the swift, smooth glide of the plane, as rough logs are tamed. The men peel off planks and beams and masts, the timbers of a preordained fleet.

Fleet! One word expresses the hastening destiny of the oak.

The raw wood hurtles on, to the shipyards now.

Here I see the timbers bent and beckoned into shape. The workmen stand sweating over pits of humid ash. Steam seeps into the grain, loosening the fibres of the wood, making malleable that unyielding matter. It is slow, aching, patient work. But to my eyes, it happens in an instant. The great wood beams curl like furled paper.

The hefting and hammering begins. The shaped timbers offered up and butted, joints mallet-slammed together. A skeleton of oak forms. The boards fly onto it, as fast as the ruffling of a hawk's feathers. I see the nails fly into the boards, the neat carvel hull complete in the unblinking of my eyes. This is not industry, it is conjuring. The wood of six-hundred trees flies together to form one ship.

Miles of rigging, the ropes from Muscovy, the cordage wound and bound into dense bundles, all are hauled on board and stowed. The folded sails are borne with reverence and ceremony, sacraments on a vast scale.

I see the towering masts rise up. And hear the cheer that rises with them. I smell the tar that caulks the keel.

The quarters are subdivided and fitted, before the mainmast for the men, behind the mainmast for the gentlemen and officers. Chisels snout out details. Abrasive blocks wear away the wood's last coarseness. Under the master carpenter's overseeing eye, beneath the touch of his fine, critical fingers, a perfect surface emerges. He blows away the flecks that mar it.

And now a carnival, a riotous assembly. Exultant colour splashes onto primed and burnished ornamenting. The brushes dance in the artisans' hands. But the music that accompanies this is a solemn death march. The sonorous rumble of the guns manoeuvred into place.

This is what it has all been about, so far, the placing of the guns. For what is this vessel but a courier of cannon fire? The cargo it will trade in: death.

The ovens are built, deep in the ship's belly. In a universe of wood, the fire must be held in brick prisons.

I see the barrels of supplies, the salted meat and fish, the hard tack, the casks of pickled and dried produce, the butts of drinking water, beer and brandy. And the livestock too. The capons and chickens. The goats. Sustenance for the men who will set the course, steer the ship, climb

the rigging, swab the decks, for those who will drink and swear and brawl, who will man the watch, who will sicken and die, who will live to tell the tale. But above all, for the men who will load and aim and fire the cannon, for that is what they are all about.

I see them now, the crew, filing on. They bring with them a couple of cats and a dog, platters and tankards and backgammon boards, playing cards, knives – for cutting food, whittling wood and settling arguments – fiddles, whistles, bass viol and drum, even a portative organ for the captain's company of musicians. One or two may bring a Bible or some other, more dangerous tract.

I see them teem over the decks, a flood of life, raucous and unruly. There is a whetted edge to them, sharp enough to kill. They have that glint in their eyes, a keen hunger: they are avid for movement and action and plunder. They see the prize already. They look into the empty hold and see its expected cargo manifest. The plate, the coins, the gold.

I have looked through eyes like theirs.

And now I see the floodgates open. I see the inundation. The dry dock is no more. The ship at last is in her element.

Another cheer, as the men feel the kick of buoyancy enter their legs, the sudden, giddy instability that can reduce even the saltiest dog to sickness. They know there is no going back. The water will bear them to their destiny.

The hurtling continues. The onrush of oak.

The first commands go out. The sails are raised. The cries of the men are lusty and eager. They are pulling together, with a common purpose. The river widens into estuary. The tide, the wind, the gulls concur. The ocean opens up before them.

But it is not just this one ship I see. I see others too. Setting sail from other shipyards. On other days. (The links of time have been unchained for me now. The minutes, hours and days do not connect. It is one of the ways I see things differently.)

A great hurtling from the forest to the sea.

The energy and intent of the acorn.

All this I see.