

Caedmon's Hymn

Every morning Charlie wakes at 4:00 A.M., his fingers burning with phantom dream fire, the red numbers of his alarm clock blinking like heart monitors from the hospital where he spent six months

*-please keep calm, folks, we have experienced an unexpected storm surge and are compensating with a drop in altitude –
comatose.*

It doesn't matter where he is. Sprawled on his foster parents' couch, or head twined into his arms on the kitchen table, or dewing his back in the grass of the front yard, face upturned to the stars he almost touched. Charlie doesn't sleep in closed spaces anymore, not since

-flight attendants will be circulating to help you with your oxygen masks, please ensure that you put yours on before helping your neighbor –

4:00 A.M. two years ago. 730 days – 121 spent supine in the hospital bed = 609 mornings waking to the sound of the pilot's voice,

-prepare for an emergency crash landing-

among other things: his father's shouting

-oh god Charlie hold on-

and the truncated scream of the woman sucked out the hole in the back of the plane

-approaching ground level-

and then in the midst of it all, a song:

*Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard metudæs maecti end his modgidanc uerc
uuldurfadur*

swe he uundra gihwaes.

Charlie knows that song now. Though he is only nine, he knows things that normal people – people who own a house and live safe in the suburbs with 2.4 children and an accounting job -

do not know. The meaning of the word *sesquipedalian*. The date of the Battle of Lepanto (October 7, 1571). The acrid scent of his sister's skin as it burned, curling away from her bones like sheets of notebook paper.

And all the words – in the original Old English – to Caedmon's Hymn.

Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard.

Now we must honor the guardian of heaven.

He didn't always hear those last sibilant words, though. After he woke from his coma and the whey-faced nurses told him he was one of four survivors from American Airlines Flight 463, and they were very sorry but his father and mother and sister didn't make it, he did not cry. Instead, he asked for books. He didn't care what they were: Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Midnight's Children*, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Charlie didn't understand them, for the most part, but the sensation of slippery alien words on his tongue made him forget his dreams. He read until his eyes shuttered closed and his head drooped onto the pages. Night brought him snatches of sleep and then

hold on folks prepare for an emergency crash landing oh god Charlie

4:00 A.M. came again, and he could feel his hair burning even though it wasn't.

Then one night, a month after he had risen from his six-month sleep, it was different.

He woke, hands fisted so tightly that they left throbbing half-moons of white on his palms. The air smelled of snow and fear.

But instead of screams –

Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard.

Now we must honor the guardian of heaven.

And Charlie knew calmness.

When he spoke the strange words to the nurses the next day, they shook their heads and muttered words like *PTSD* and *hallucinations* and *glossolalia*. Charlie continued, undaunted. When he had reached the song's end, he repeated it in English.

Now we must honor the guardian of heaven, the might of the architect, and his purpose, the work of the father of glory –

You know? one of the nurses interrupted as she oiled his arm with an alcohol wipe. *That prayer. It's familiar. My mother used to say it every night. It's called...* She scratched her head for a moment as she slipped a needle into his bloodstream. *Caedmon's Hymn. That's it.*

The next day she brought him Caedmon's biography, whose pages smelled of disintegrating ink and wine stains. Caedmon, he discovered, was a shepherd who worked for a monastery many centuries ago. Ashamed of the way his eyes slid over the monks' manuscripts without understanding, of the way his fingers could not flutter like birds over the strings of their harps, he left their great hall one night and went to sleep with his animals in the barn. And then the most marvelous miracle happened. God came to him in a dream and told him to write him a song.

I can't sing worth crap, Caedmon told God. Or write.

Just do it, God said.

So he did.

Now we must honor the guardian of heaven, the might of the architect, and his purpose, the work of the father of glory — as he, the eternal lord, established the beginning of wonders. He, the holy creator, first created heaven as a roof for the children of men.

Then the guardian of mankind the eternal lord, the Lord almighty afterwards appointed the middle earth, the lands, for men.

That is what Caedmon sang to God. That is what Charlie heard in his dreams.

Afterwards the nurses believed him when he started having visions at 4:00 A.M. He could tell them if it would rain, and for how long and how hard, or how much their apartments would sell for, or if the dollar was about to drop in value overseas.

You are blessed by God himself, said the nurse who gave him the book.

But that isn't true. Charlie knows that now. Because God doesn't talk like God should, his voice sonorous and booming. Before every vision, as his clock blinks 4:00 A.M. in luminous font, what Charlie hears are the voices of his father and mother and sister. The soft sounds of the Old English words on their tongues are like the music of cirrus clouds before rainfall. If he stretches out his hands, he can feel the angora of his mother's sweater, the one she was

wearing the day she died. He can smell his father's scent of oiled leather and tobacco, and his sister's of brown sugar. But he never catches a glimpse of them. What he sees instead is the future: the headline of the New York Times in two years and seventy-two days, or the plumes of smoke as fighter pilots strafe countries he does not recognize.

So Charlie dreams of street fires and cathedrals, overflowing hospital wards and lacemakers, and under his breath, a prayer to himself, he says *nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard*.