The Quickening Maze

Adam Foulds

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Extract

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Prologue: The World's End

He'd been sent out to pick firewood from the forest, sticks and timbers wrenched loose in the storm. Light met him as he stepped outside, the living day met him with its details, the scuffling blackbird that had its nest in their apple tree.

Walking towards the wood, the heath, beckoning away. Undulations of yellow gorse rasped softly in the breeze. It stretched off into unknown solitudes.

He was a village boy and he knew certain things. He thought that the edge of the world was a day's walk away, there where the cloud-breeding sky touched the earth at the horizon. He thought that when he got there he would find a deep pit and he would be able to look down into it and see the world's secrets. Same as he knew he could see heaven in water, a boy on his knees staring into the heavy, flexing surface of the gravel-pit ponds or at a shallow stream flashing over stones.

He set off, down into the wide yellow fragrance. The wood he could collect on his return.

Soon he was further from the village than he had ever been, furthest from the tough, familiar nest of his cottage. He walked quite out of his knowledge, into a world where the birds and flowers did not know him, where his shadow had never been.

It confused him. He started to think that the sun was shining in a new quarter of the sky. He felt no fear yet: the sun lit wonders in a new zone that held him in steady rapt amazement. He did wonder, though, why the old world had not come to an end, why the horizon was no closer.

He walked and walked and before he'd thought the morning passed, the light was thickening. Moths flittered under the bushes. Frogs fidgeted along the rabbit tracks and mice twittered their little splintery cries. Overhead trembled the first damp stars.

It was the hour of waking spirits. Now he was afraid.

He hurried around with a panicking heart and found behind him a splay of paths. By chance he got on the right one. As the darkness grew, gathering first in the bushes and trees, then soaking out from them, he found himself approaching his own village. At least it looked like his own village, but somehow the distance he'd travelled made him uncertain. It looked the same. It definitely was the same, but somehow it didn't seem right, in place. Even the church, rising over the wood, the church he'd seen every day as soon as he could see at all, looked counterfeit. Frightened, racing, like a lost bird he flung his light body towards what he hoped was home.

His name. He heard his name being called. John! John! Jo-ohn! Village voices. He could put names to them all. He ran now, not answering, to his own cottage, feeling a tumult of relief as he approached. When he stepped through the open doorway his mother yelped at the sight and flew towards him.

Her strong arms encircled him, her bosom crushed against his face.

'We thought you was dead. In the wood. They're out looking for you. We thought you was struck down by a falling . . . Oh, but you're home.'