

Camera drone

Wisps of fog are appearing as he climbs, smoke-grey between the trees; so it is not the haze of the silver-backed standing ferns, as he had thought, and he cannot remember how many of those there are this high up, for surely they diminish towards the peak?

He cannot be certain either that it is always along the same path, this journey.

Everything seems to move around him; to trade one landmark against another, turning one about and about as one seeks out the better way, and he knows too well how easy it is to lose all sense of time.

My faith, but how it is a country to confuse! Un paysage sauvage, a wild place, where the land itself can shudder, and often does; entire hills of shattered rock, piled up, collapsing all unbidden; re-making themselves. He feels himself upon the very edge of the Creation; all unfinished, without a history; here there has not been the slow sedimentation of many ages; of man's labours past. His very footsteps lie too lightly; leave so small a mark. His breviary lies heavy in his shoulder pack, importunate - but he cannot use it while journeying, eyes alert to the tree roots, the leaf mould, the damp patches of flat moss, all a-slide beneath the intruding foot.

Towards noon he has come out onto the highest ridges, climbing steadily upwards between the two crests, the False and the True, onto a grassy massif.

Scattered clouds are scudding north-north-east, the sunlight now golden, rippling across the wild grasses. Here are craggy outbreaks of grey granite, like giant's teeth, or the backbone of a mountain in decay, and now at last he has taken out his prayer book, opened to the Offices of the Day, alongside the apples and the bread he has carried, and the clay jar of water, knowing there is likely none to be had till he reaches the next valley. He stretches himself out in a shallow of the rock, warmed in the sun, meaning to begin the duty, but already his eyes are closing, for it has been an early beginning, and it is the Lenten fasting, and his is a long and heavy frame to carry up this mountain, for all his raw-boned height and stride. But the rock is heating his skin, and the sun traces out notes of gold, glittering in the veins of stone, and the wind sighs across the late summer grass, and he is content.

It is the sun, shifting across the ridge, which teases him awake, or makes him think he is. This tracery of leaf though, he regards it idly, flitting its shade across his vision, surely it is somehow wrong: an alien leaf? Its tendrils curl about, and they bear translucent clusters of fruit: yellow-green, and it is the wine grapes - but how can this be? They shine against the blue sky; a miracle, he thinks, arising from within his memory – for no-one could have planted vines upon this mountain. Who to tend them, train them, make them produce? Naught but memory, he tells himself, and half a dream, for all that he seems to feel the press of the fruit; the roll of it beneath his fingers; the weight of it as it lies against his hand – and sees himself cut a bunch with his knife, and place it beside the last of the cheese and the bread and the water, waiting for it to fade away, like the image of the sun on closed eyelids; receding once again into his past, like the sails of the ship that brought him here, dropping over the horizon, never to return.

And the fog is thickening now, and his golden day gone silver-sharp and silent. No more bird calls drip down the canopy, as liquid as melting icicles; no more fan-fan-fan from the wings of the tui; all their busyness stilled, and the chill seeping upwards like crystals, visibly forming; he begins to feel them underfoot, or thinks he does, crunching against the soles of his boots, and suddenly he knows that he should hurry; that something is on its way, and moving fast, and it is then that he sees it.

At first he thinks it is the parson bird, come back.

He hears again the beating of its wings; waits to glimpse it, caught out in the open, flapping to keep itself airborne; but yet he cannot trace it out; it hides itself from him. Where can it be?

And of a sudden there is again a whirring in the air, but this a rush of a kind he has not heard before. It is a steadier, high-pitched thrum – and then it is upon him: it breaks from the tree line, a blinding white circle, a silver halo of shining, its edges all a-shimmer; it strains his vision as it hovers, dancing in the air, a crown of light.

It edges as he watches, back and forth: left; right; left; a gavotte, a farandole, it will not stay still. It rises a little, and falls again, and surely his eyes are deceiving him?

The eye betrays the mind, he tells himself; it has frozen all that is logical, for none of this can be. One imagines. One dreams. It is of the unreal, this.

It circles him, disappearing and re-appearing in the mist, slipping over the bank of rock above him, the sound first muffled, then silenced. And now it is gone.

He stares at where it has been. Rock still. Waiting.

And a voice behind him speaks, a small voice; the voice of a child.

'Excuse me,' he hears it ask, polite, a little cautious, 'Did you see my camera drone?'

And the naming of it cuts into his brain, for that is with precision what it has been: a chimera, a monster of the imagination; something arising from his past, the soft green, vine-clad valleys of the Rhône; it is that, precisely, a chimera du Rhône – but why has it appeared to him now? And why here? And why in this way?

And with that thought he is become a troll from a fairytale, for what is this that has followed him here, all these miles, across so many oceans? In one moment it has turned him into stone. He cannot turn. He cannot move. To the letter, he is petrified.

For there cannot be a child upon this mountain.

'I lost it,' says the voice, 'when it fell behind that ridge.'

'This chimera,' he whispers to the voice, all he can achieve, 'ce chimère... C'est le vôtre? It is yours?'

'My du Rhône,' he hears the voice repeat, and now stands before him, and is a small, dark-haired boy, perhaps six or seven years, oddly dressed, in a single, trousered garment of some strange ice-blue fur, with a cowl, and buttons to the front, and how can all this be? For no-one lives upon the mountain; no-one ever has, even before the slow spreading of the settlers across the plains and into the river valleys, for there is a taniwha here, a water-monster, scurried away into the bowels of the earth; he has seen the great hole it burrowed for itself, and even unbelieving, stays away.

'It's my chimera du Rhône,' he hears the child repeat, insistent, and holding out a small, black implement, with a silver wire standing at the top. 'It's gone out of control', and he shakes the device, and holds it to his ear. 'It won't work any more.'

'I have seen it,' says the priest, finding his voice at last, 'in the sky, your chimera.'

'I think it's landed in among the grape vines,' says the boy, and runs towards the rocks, and disappears.

The priest finds himself loath to make a move, to follow – for where might he be led, and who is leading him? But then his limbs unfreeze, and he moves forward. He scrambles up the rock. He stands upon the ridge. He gazes down.

Nothing. The rocks descend into a great declivity, one of so many upon the mountain; no easy way down, no sure places for the foot – and already, the boy has gone, if boy there was.

Clambering back, he finds once more that he has lost the way, and pauses, considering the direction he has taken, tracing the crush of the grass where his boots have climbed upwards, until he comes again to the rock on which he had lain.

It is cold now. He grasps at it, pulling himself up; it is slate-blue with the forming frost, and on it, there beside his breviary and his water jar, the remains of his meal, lies a single bunch of glowing, green-gold grapes.

'Du Rhône,' he tells himself, for he is of those valleys, and he knows. And he packs them up, and carries them down the mountain.