

The Mullein

ALLYN WOOD

She had been seriously ill. For a few days it made no difference that it was autumn, one of the most beautiful that she might know. She stayed in the front room on a cot with an abundance of cool pillows. The door remained open, for there was a kind of claustrophobia while she scarcely breathed; by lack of oxygen all other capacity for emotion was suspended, and with forced objectivity she contemplated the ensuing question, Does cessation of breathing *end* all emotion? Yet gradually she grew better, and happy, and carefree. Closing her eyes and lying back in the pillows, listening, she heard sounds impressionistic of spring. She transformed autumn into spring at will; and as the air like soft rain-water cooled her wrists, she felt that she was rising out of the earth.

One day her mother came in with a pot containing a large mullein which she had dug up from the lawn. "Here," she said, placing it on a stand near the cot. It was monumental, heroic size—with an air of reserve. Fascinated, the girl gazed at its velutinous whorl, from the lowest wheel of wide spatulate leaves, coarsened by drifted soil, to the close white-furred rosette, its meridian, holder of the secret dewdrop.

Evening came and cool combers of nightwind through the open door. Day began for the mullein: day of noctuids, sphinx, and hawk-moth; for though it was not now in bloom, to night it remained companion, presence, and held salon. Deliberately the leaves began to move, upward, sideways, inward, creating new angles with one another, each leaf singly sentient and informed of its relation to the

whorl. The girl and her mother watched breathlessly until the room was black; even then they could feel the power of the mullein.

She began to lie awake at night, and she grew much better. When only they alone were awake, in the hours of the threshold of time, and the vague thunder of the city was silent, she jotted notes in a book which were almost unreadable by day.

A cricket sings of eons lingering. Out of the wet air the song of trains . . . oh marvelous slumber-song! Earth moves toward morning under my hand . . .

It seemed to her that she was being taught by the plant something still indefinable and inherent.

II.

She woke thirsty. She rose and floated a few steps to the transparent bottle in which water glowed coolly moonlit. She felt unsolid, yet strong. In her mind she saw herself modeled in minute black particles suspended in moonlight. When she moved, they shifted evenly. She felt just a bit like laughing but was up where the trick is unknown. She poured water into a glass and drank. Water in the moonlight . . . or was it water in the street-light, water in the street-light? Tensely tranquil. Tilting her head, she knew that it was a rind filled with particles in suspension, coiled and glistening shavings—she made a silent serious laugh—and as the liquid of the suspension shifted, her body swayed to and fro.

She turned back elastically, stretched

to bed, snapped under the covers, crouched there suddenly, shivering.

Next morning she grabbed her notebook and wrote what she could remember of faintness, exploring its significance. The mullein slept. Magnetically her attention turned to it; the bottom whorl of large flat leaves had dried and become grey. It looked unwell.

I have experienced pure existence without whys, without clues! Conscious almost without thought, like a plant . . . The sensations are unreasonable, yet occurred for some reason. Fantasy must be some kind of reality . . .

Her mother brought breakfast on a tray. Afterward it was more difficult to recall the other reality. Questioningly she studied the mullein.

III.

It was dying. Now, even as it dried, the great plant radiated a power which was unmistakable. As the girl gained strength, the whorls detached, circle after circle; as she returned to the reality that claimed her, the mullein, to a lesser degree, became merely a biennial completing its second year. They who had shared herbacious leisure, who had ventured motionlessly into night, to one of whom pure existence was its dignity, to the other an experience of weakness—what, finally, is the secret of them? Hopefully she poured water into the pot, separated the few remaining leaves to restore the secret drop.

Rabbitries

ALLYN WOOD

The girl in the car drove slowly out of the city. She crossed train tracks with a leap of the heart, following the straight line which was the street and then the highway. By its outer edges will the city be known by those who arrive and depart, will it be loved by those who can love, with fatalistic wonder, their creation! As she passed by the monstrous grain-elevators, it began to snow, great dry flakes falling slowly and sparsely from a sombre sky. She put back her head and worshipped. Following the invisible sun southwestward across rolling country, she turned from the highway to a rutted road. School was out and children flew before her like snow-birds, ducking into houses and running across fields of winter wheat to houses far, running through grey-lemon air to catch

the snow that fell into the frosty furrows forever, disappearing.

The girl began to look for a particular house. Soon she recognized it by the long outdoor hutch behind the bungalow; a door flung open.

"Come in and make yourself at home!" welcomed the farmer's wife (and pot-bellied stove in the parlor). "I've bread baking in the kitchen, but Henry will be in in a moment." The girl stood alone before the stove; the yeasty room, flickering with flame-light from a hundred mica windows, seemed to expand with a spongy sizzle like hot bread. The farmer entered, shouldering a basket of kindling.

"Afternoon, ma'am; I can show you the rabbits now. Looks like we're in for the first snow."