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## Barren

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*Milton Miller*

## BARREN

**E**XQUISITE, multiple. Only the heart there hunting itself as the river of her girlhood flowed hunting its depth, flowing inland outward to this Gulf where she too had flowed. But it was loss. The salt air and wind bred only scrubby pine in the sandy soil for miles around. It was loss. The inland marsh, scraggy forests of live-oak and magnolia, tangled vines and the cry of quail at the end of October. The rich life she had flowed out of. She saw an image of venous blood oozing through the compressed mouth, some deathless wound, bright and meaning but unexplained. Meaning something unremembered but known, from the heart of life. A man and a girl, violence without desecration, violent searching for the wound of inexplicable meaning. Aimless love. The folly of age and dead gods. Each day the hunt, the river, the heart, the wound, the violence and blood of meaning. The loss.

In the flower she painted. Red like the wound flowing from the mouth of the flower to stem, to ground stained with blood. Repeating always the same image, the same violation, like a judgment.

She wanted nothing to happen. The quiet Mississippi afternoon was good and cool behind the drapes stirring with heavy heat in the folds. Only the eye sailed beyond on the wide stare of the Gulf in the sun, sailed mercilessly into noon and sterility of light, to dazzle the imagination into colorless idiocy. Suddenly she felt starchless and limp before her easel and the hand and brush dropped listlessly. She moaned feeling old complaints of the body, but moaned too because they were not what she moaned for. A slow disgust invaded her like jaundice as she stood, given over to it without revulsion without despair. She put the brush and palette down, turned the easel towards the wall

and stretched out on the couch, head on the arm and feet nerveless barely touching the floor. A pain which started in the groin seemed to her to twitch its way spasmodically through her body upward until it came out at the eyes and she could see it objectively at the rounded angle between wall and ceiling continue to twitch. When she closed her eyes the pain became red and spotted, intolerably enclosed within the skull until she let it out again between ceiling and wall through her open eyes.

When Krantz came in, nearly five, he found her there quiet, thinking she slept. But she heard the car in the gravel driveway stop and in the interval prepared, while the car door slammed to and the footsteps tapped their way to the door, stopping to examine the flowers, prepared, while he stooped over them, imagining as well as if she were there his attentive pleasure, his delicate caress of the petals, stooping lower, lower like a tall willowy tree breaking slowly, noiselessly at the exact middle, a dilation of the long nostrils sucking scent into the skull, the eyes closing with pleasure as the flower seemed to take on a life there too, like an X-ray, the flower bloomed there a moment, and he unbent just as slowly, prepared, surprised as always that his unbending was after all so noiseless, unbroken and natural, prepared for the moment when the key turned in the door and he tiptoed in to peer over the back of the couch and say, relieved but disappointed momentarily in her open eyes, bending again, over the couch, just as slowly again, to kiss her, and as he unbent, "Not asleep." Something between question and remonstrance.

Prepared, happy, she smiled effetely. "Switch on the light, dear. I have only lain here thinking. It is nice that you are home." She felt energy flow back but did not move from the couch.

To endure, to endure. Sailing always on the blind light of the Gulf, an unchanneled depth that was all surface, an infinite regress of light without knowledge. A sound of gulls' meaningless cry. Before the light switched on came back the vision of the live-oak forest, the darting rabbit, the bird cries, the quail, the bob-

white, far away in a clearing the breathless heron settling, and just the sound of the river flowing through the red banks of the land. The sound of nuts falling.

Krantz sat down in the rocking arm chair under the light with the newspaper in his hand. Had he stooped for the paper and not the flower? "Adelaide, you're well." Again question and remonstrance, but concern too. "O quite," she answered him. "What's the news?" "The usual. O there is a new man. Seems a nice chap. From New York. Shall we have him over?" "Married?" "O yes, to a French girl or a Swiss or something of the sort. Anyway, a foreigner." "You have met her?" "No, not yet. Perhaps you ought to call. They know no one." "Shouldn't I give them time to settle?" "Why, yes, I suppose so. Did you paint any?" "I shall get supper. Yes, I finished a canvas. You may look if you like."

Yes, it was true, the canvas was finished though she knew now. It had been finished there on the couch. It needed just that precise amount of pain, delayed and necessary, already painted in, however, as she now recognized. Painting was always prophetic, in just that way. Pain flowers she always called them though always at the moment of painting she forgot to remember until the long patient struggle on the couch and the slow pervasive disgust held her like a spent passion while pain floated nameless in the darkening room and might receive a name when Krantz entered. Perhaps it was also love.

In the kitchen, though it seemed unlikely even to herself, she hummed and sang softly as she softly clattered among the utensils. Irrelevantly it was Liddie who came to mind at such a moment. Her windowless newspapered clapboard shack, the shy children in the dusty yard with the uncloseable gate on a precarious fence which some incredible pretension to privacy had once put there. Perpetual dusk, perpetual mystery within, meaningless colorless furniture without much arrangement like an old half empty second hand store, the moment of shyness, of intrusion on entrance, the awkward suspension, a momentary desecration of

time like the sound suddenly audible, ticking. The offered chair creaked into, Liddie opposite now motherly, enclosing the senses in the musk of her well fleshed body like an unseeable radiance in the womb of the house—the dark goddess who has given birth to you to everything, from her flesh the world, the forest stirring, the birds winging viewless in and through it, faintly, just audible but insistent and deep the river running through life like blood through veins, the faint pulse of absorbing monotone, of just distinguishable meaning. To endure, to endure had another meaning.

She hummed softly the rich life, inexplicable violence, the unborn unremembered unexplained. Supper cooking, pie baking, pregnant with berries and juice. The deathless wound of meaning. To endure, to endure. Loss, she came back to that, and to the red juice she imagined bubbling in the mouth of the pie, oozing through the latticed mouth of the pregnant pie. Was it a god who died? She remembered violence without result.

What had she lost or found she thought looking in at the pie. What she hummed now sounded like a lullaby, into the dry comfortable heat of the oven.