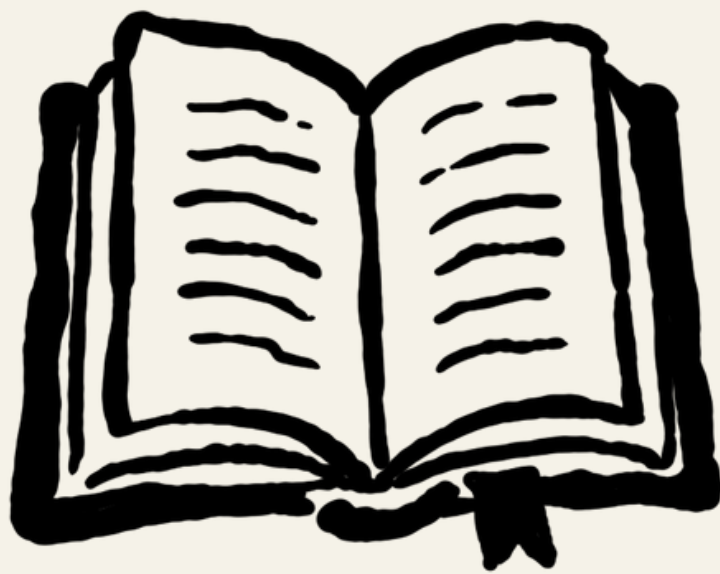


*Catalog of
Birchfell's
Lost*



Baren Millet

*Catalog of
Birchfell's
Lost*



Baren Millet

INTRODUCTION

My name is Baren Millet. I was born on Day 30 of Leafturn, Year 475 since the Founding of Birchfell. I reside in the house just across the road from the Bell Tower, directly south of it. I grew up in a household familiar with the bookbinding profession, and I have continued in that trade. As an artisan of bookbinding and book repair, I act at times as a liaison between Birchfell's Town Council and the Deepfolk Press. For much of my life, my training and work focused on these unique tasks.

Then came the plague years. I thank all that is good and just for Marigold's care of our townsfolk.

Even more of us would have succumbed without her efforts. However, in the aftermath of that wretched sickness, my eyes were opened to what we lost: Records written in memory alone that cannot now be retrieved, as well as all the material possessions left behind, unaccounted for, without a clear path forward for the bereaved. I detected an opportunity to assist households in managing and cataloging their inheritances, which appears to be a service much neglected even before the plague years. Just about everyone can easily acknowledge the burden of a person's absence from their lives, but far too few realize this is only half the burden.

The remainder is not who we lost, but what is left behind by the lost. There is an extra dimension of grief that comes with the cheerless yet necessary labor of managing the inheritance. In assisting households in cataloging and distributing their inheritances, I have found my work can easily shoulder a noticeable portion of that awful burden of grief. Organizing and processing leftover possessions often gives the bereaved more time and space to process the emotions of the loss itself.

It seems I have now become known not just as the town's bookbinder, but also as its "cataloger of the lost." While "the lost" initially referred to the people we have lost to death over the years, some have interpreted the title in another way.

Many Birchfellows, adults and children alike, have taken to depositing unattended items they discovered in their daily labors at my doorstep. In turn, those who have lost something have taken to visiting me in the hopes that I might have it in safekeeping somewhere. I now have a crate in my workshop dedicated to "Lost & Found" items, and it seems I now manage that peculiar function for all of Birchfell. Curious how these sorts of things come about.

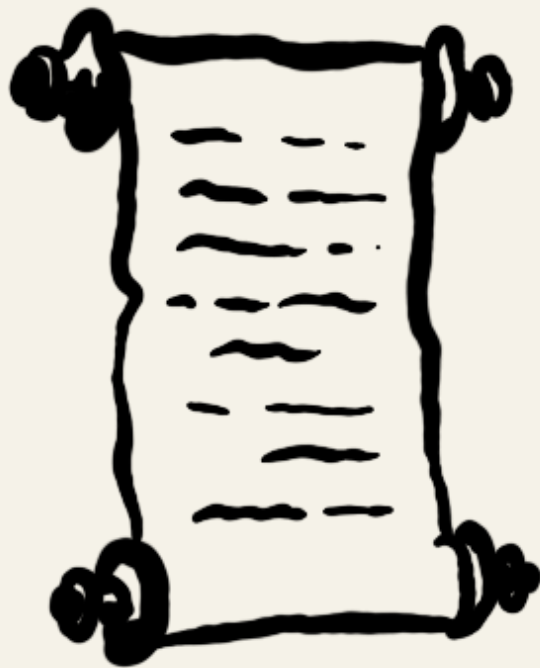
I now have quite a number of volumes of cataloged inheritances, lists of lost items, and records of commissions for bookbinding and book repair.

This particular volume you are now reading is an abridged collection that I feel is representative of the work I have done in Birchfell in the past decade. In the event that the larger archive does not survive, it is my hope that abridged volumes such as this one can give our posterity—or the posterity of other peoples—a substantive glimpse into what Birchfell & its inhabitants were once like.

The remainder of this book is divided into three main segments. The first is a series of “lost letters” I have transcribed into this volume. The second is a group of selected entries from my Catalog of Inheritances.

The third is a space I wish to set aside to allow myself to describe the full process of what I have come to call "Death Cataloging." I will then conclude the volume by musing a little further upon my work, as well as my hopes for Birchfell and the Valley at large.

LOST
LETTERS



L O S T L E T T E R S

What follows is a series of transcripts of undelivered or returned letters left unclaimed for years in the town's Lost & Found. I always make an effort to help return correspondence if it is clear who wrote it, but each of the letters below have no names associated with them, nor is there enough information to ascertain their exact origin or destination. In most cases I have to open the letter to try to determine where it belongs. Sometimes this helps, but in the case of these letters, it did not.

Cataloger's Note: "Unsent" means the letter was found on the street or elsewhere outside the town courier's route. "Returned" means the letter was processed by the town courier, but could not be delivered & had no return address and thus was placed in the Lost & Found.

AN UNSSENT LETTER OF FORGIVENESS

Good day neighbor,

Fourteen years ago, we were discussing potential solutions to a problem that affected our properties' mutual border. You made a suggestion I did not agree with. In fact, I censured you for even suggesting it. This led to a rift between us that for many years I was content to leave be.

Perhaps your own memory has been kinder to you. I recall your faithful hound—may she sleep peacefully in the folds of The Valley—bounding in your wake.

*I was carrying a bundle of barbed rope,
which I would soon add to my border
fence. Now do you remember me?*

*You had enacted your proposal and I felt
slighted. Cheated. What is worse, you
censured me before The Council when
your hound was harmed near our
borders. I was convinced it was just that
one thorny bush that had harmed her.*

I was wrong.

*Seasons & sickness came and went. All
the while I allowed a rift to fester in my
heart.*

I thought less of you with each passing season and avoided speaking with you again.

At first I believed it was our mutual anger that kept us apart. For years I told myself this. But alas, at least for my part, it was my shame that kept me silent. That shame is what festered, like a moldy, unwelcome fungus.

Soon enough you moved away to Ashlight Cottage. Still in town, but we no longer shared a border. Thus, I had another excuse to not bother with it.

But now, my own house is empty too. I have no one close to me anymore, and that silence allowed my shame to make its presence more keenly felt. I want to move on. I want to fill the emptiness with something else. I want your friendship again. At least, I want to try before it is too late.

Will you allow me to beg for your forgiveness? Will you forgive my pride, my ignorance, my fault, as I have now forgiven you any slight I believe you had dealt to me? Will you be my friend once more?

I am not sure if I will send this to you at all. I am not sure if this would simply be best delivered by my own mouth.

Perhaps this letter, regardless of its fate, is the proper plot where I could cultivate and prune the growth of my festering shame into some sort of bloom of forgiveness.

Oh dear, perhaps you also remember the poor quality of my attempted analogies.

Perhaps you can forgive that too.

AN UNSENT CONFESSION OF LOVE

I need your help desperately. I am not certain how to say this with my own mouth so I hope this letter is clear enough.

Five days ago, on Day 1 of Sproutrise, I jolted from bed believing I had vastly overslept. The light on my closed eyes felt like midmorning when in fact I had only been struck with the first rays of sunrise through my window. The sun was far too bright all day long, which made everything else too bright for comfort. Perhaps "bright" is not quite the right word.

*Would it make sense for me to say...
soaked with color? Regardless, no one
else seemed to be having this problem.*

*The next day, I noticed I could hear a
neighbor's gossip from across the street.
I admit I sat for a while with my
window open due to curiosity...before a
dog nearly barked me deaf.*

*Three days ago, I gagged at the terrible
sweetness of my favorite pastry from the
baker of Woolfoot Fen. I had a hard time
stomaching any food that day.*

Yesterday, I could smell the tang of bell metal from morning to night. It was the thing that overpowered other strong smells. I felt sick again.

This morning, I struggle to write because I have suddenly become aware of the tiniest bumps and grooves of my parchment as the pen scratches along.

I have been spending the past several days trying to determine the cause of all these strange sensibilities, and I have concluded that it all began when your hand brushed mine at the marketplace in The Wheel. I am sure you remember.

*I stammered like a fool once I collected
my purchase from your stall.*

*Now that my world is no longer the
same, I beg you to help me stop
wondering what you think of me. All
you need to do is tell me you are
disinterested, bellrooted, seeing another,
anything to remove the uncertainty that
plagues my perceptions. Once I know
your thoughts and feelings towards me, I
believe I can move on to life as normal.*

*I thank you for reading, and I look
forward to your answer.*

A RETURNED PROPOSAL TO THE COUNCIL

Dear Anonymous Birchfellow,

We have received your proposal and assure you in all solemnity that we have each taken the time to earnestly study it, carefully review the town budget, thoroughly discuss all potential options in our meetings, and eventually come to a decision, which we provide below.

We regret to inform you that the Council has unanimously rejected your proposal. Such a project would be an undertaking greater than anything Birchfell has seen in its long history.

Necessary tasks would include planning the gargantuan project, conducting the equivalent of an intrusive door-to-door census to procure proper permissions from every household and business, as well as placing every able-bodied member of the town into a continuous daily work schedule covering a period of several months (setting aside all other necessary tasks in the town in the meantime), to say nothing of the tremendous amount of resources required to mix and distribute the sheer volume of pricy pigment that would be necessary to see this to completion.

The justification for town-wide efforts of this magnitude would need to be far more compelling than any potential benefits we could discover in our discussions.

Put simply: We cannot "paint the town pink like foxgloves." We hope you can understand our decision.

Sincerely,

Town Council of Birchfell



Cataloger's Note: This letter was once fixed to the door of Council Hall for lack of any better method of communication. Many of the townsfolk got a good chuckle out of it for an entire week.

A RETURNED INVITATION FOR TEA

Dear friend,

I really look forward to our weekly tea-meal visit. It is a shame we had to miss the last couple of weeks. Your ill health and my grandchildren demand much from us these days. This time, I think I have found the secret ingredient to making our chats even more pleasant and enlightening. I do recall your complaints about misremembering little things and I heard from my neighbor that whisper pedal is supposed to help with memory and concentration. But it seems it needs to soak in spirits so that may be a bit too strong for you.

Also, if not prepared properly it could cause ringing in the ears, which would definitely not do for us.

But then I overheard my other neighbor talking about silverfern to help with a clear mind. I asked her for more details and it sounds to me like the perfect beverage for our chats. It's meant to be sipped like tea, though I have not tried the flavor out for myself yet. I was warned to keep it in a dark place and that there could be side effects to having too much. I figured weekly ingestion would do little harm. I could go on and on about the grandchildren but I want to save as much gossip and talk for when I see you again.

I feel we have a lot to catch up on.

See you soon.

[illegible]

[Note written on back of letter]

Return to sender. New resident does not recognize the sender or the original recipient.

Cataloger's Note: It is very possible the intended recipient lived in the house that was put up for sale by the Council recently. The previous household owner had passed away and there seemed to be no surviving family members to help manage the estate, nor was I ever contacted about it or realized the need.

In cases like this, the Council handles whatever is left over, which often results in a public sale of possessions, including the house. What is particularly puzzling is the absence of friends and acquaintances stepping forward throughout this process, which is why this letter remains in the Lost & Found box to this day.

AN UNSENT LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND

Dear Mr. Wimblethimble,

*Thank you. Thank you for being
there when I needed a friend. Thank
you for being there after I saw father
make a flute with a wimble and mother
make a scarf with a needle and so I
thought I could make a friend with my
eyes.*

*Thank you for not going anywhere
even when I felt I lost you, even when
I did not see any of the other kids
make their own friends and so I saw*

*how you are not really made up of
wood or wool or anything...just made up.*

*Thank you for staying with me even
when I did not believe in you and cried
myself to sleep that one night after Lily
laughed at how I looked like I was just
talking and playing by myself and I saw
the space you stood in the way other
kids saw it.*

*But after wiping away the tears I could
look past that and remember that I
made you up because I missed my baby
brother a lot, so then I thanked you
and now thank you for being the friend
I needed after I lost one.*

*I know the only reason you can read
this is because I think you can, so
thank you for reading this with me.*

Sincerely,

Your imagination friend

AN UNSENT LETTER TO MARIGOLD

Marigold,

If you ever get this, I hope you can forgive me for nurturing an observation that may not be fruitful. I know you have felt the gratitude of the town many times over, especially when you returned. You seemed happy, but for your smile. It reminded me of the well-practiced smile my mother used, a practice inherited from her own mother, when she wanted to shade a melancholy truth with a face of joy.

*I know nothing of your experience
or your sorrows, for we've never
exchanged more than a few words in
passing. But perhaps knowing that
someone sees you as more than a
healer will be a salve for your
weary heart.*

*Oh, what is this nonsense I am
writing? It is not my place to say
such things to a near stranger.*

CATALOG OF INHERITANCES



CATALOG OF INHERITANCES

What follows is a selection of some of the noteworthy inheritance cases I have handled since I started keeping records of them (in the tail end of the plague years, approximately late Leaftern Y.503). They are abridged from my full multi-volume collection titled, "Catalog of Inheritances." I attempted to provide here a wide range of situations to help give a fair impression of the way our lives—and deaths—are like at the time of writing.

Names have been removed to respect the privacy of households, but the entry number matches the full entry in the complete volumes. An interested researcher can reach out to me directly for any inquiries about my full archive of records.

ENTRY 4

Death Date: Glowdusk 5, Y.503

List of Possessions

- 1 well-tended garden
- 1 embroidery design in progress on an apron
- 5 dresses, each with a different embroidered design
- 2 pairs of shoes
- 1 pair of work gloves
- 1 hairbrush

Summary: A young spouse taken too soon. This was a person who clearly enjoyed staying busy with some project or other. It was difficult to hold a conversation with the surviving spouse because of how hard they were taking the loss.

Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—it was not difficult to catalog the inheritance of a recently bellrooted household. The most challenging items were the projects that were carefully tended to by the deceased. The last I heard, the surviving spouse had resolved to finish works in progress the best they could. We all need to find our own ways to manage not only the grief, but also the space left empty by a keenly felt absence. In spite of the initial despondence I witnessed, I am ultimately optimistic about the survivor's future.

ENTRY 21

Death Date: Snowtide 23, Y.504

List of Possessions

- 3 shirts
- 2 pairs of pants
- 1 pair of shoes
- 1 pair of intact work gloves
- 26 pairs of tattered gloves
- 2 whittling knives
- 18 broken knives
- 5,437 wooden sticks, each with a whittled design (complexity varies widely)
- 11,894 stones, loosely sorted by shape, size, and color

Summary: The most humorous inheritance to date, but also the one that took the most time to catalog.

Weeks, in fact. It is times like this that try my self-imposed standard for accuracy in recordkeeping.

Naturally, the surviving children and grandchildren could not possibly keep all of the keepsakes their progenitor clearly cherished for decades. Knowing that made discussion about next steps difficult. Several household members expressed great anxiety and frustration because they felt trapped between the sheer volume of the inheritance and the memory of their loved one. We had several long conversations about all of this. For some in the household it was an emotionally taxing decision, but a combination of practicality and reassurance eventually led to a unanimously chosen plan.

After each direct descendant and friend of the deceased claimed whatever rocks, sticks, and more that they wanted as keepsakes of their own, a bonfire was set up. The unclaimed stones were used to make an impressive brazier behind the house. The rest of the unclaimed inheritance was used as fodder for the fire. This foundation of sticks and stones formed one of the most beautiful celebrations of a life well lived the town had ever seen. In honor and memory of the deceased, the flame lasted for hours into the night as it continued to be fed by the collected objects and tended to by the household. The ashes and brazier of that fire remain near the household to this day as a unique and beautiful monument.

We tend to attach great meaning to certain objects because we feel they are attached to certain memories. When those objects begin to feel more like a burden, perhaps it is best we remember it is perfectly reasonable to throw things away. After all, memories live in our hearts and minds, not in mindless objects.

ENTRY 53

Death Date: Greentide 16, Y.507

List of Possessions

- 1 shed containing a woven basket,
2 fishing rods, some fishing line,
and 6 fishing hooks
- 4 shirts
- 2 pairs of pants
- 1 pair of shoes
- 1 bed frame with a chalk line
drawn around it
- 1 mattress
- 1 side table
- 1 comb
- 1 piece of white chalk
- 1 dusty purse of coins
- 1 cabinet marked with chalk,
containing 1 each of a plate, fork,
knife, spoon, and drinking cup
- 1 porch outlined with chalk
- 1 wooden chair
- 1 table
- 1 stool

Summary: Grief accompanies every death, but at times a mixture of relief with the guilt of feeling that relief may also be present. This is what I detected from the surviving spouse and children of this household. It is not my business to delve into personal affairs any more than I must, but this kind of work often makes such matters unavoidable. In addition, even if the death of a close household member is felt as a burden lifted, the burden of dealing with their physical possessions is not so easily taken away. I am grateful I could assist in some small way towards the eventual healing of this household.

ENTRY 70

Death Date: Greendusk 6, Y.508

List of Possessions

- 1 large house containing many personal possessions and furniture items*
- 1 small house containing equipment for baking, sewing, and candle making*
- 1 shed containing farming tools*
- 1 shed containing glass making tools*
- 1 shed containing hundreds of jars of collected plants and insects*
- 1 shed containing hundreds of jars of preserved food*
- 1 draft horse (Sage)
- 2 dogs (Parsley, Thyme)
- 1 cat (Rosemary)

**Full inventory in unabridged catalog*

Summary: This is one of the largest inheritances I have cataloged to date, so much so that to include the full list in this volume would take more pages than would be practical. A testament to the impressively diverse set of interests, skills, and experience cultivated in a single independent lifetime. In spite of this, the deceased had no next of kin to claim any of it. I consult with the Town Council in such cases, which generally takes possession of the inheritance and the work that goes with it. My cataloging work was certainly a tremendous boon to the Council, allowing them efficient oversight of the fate of each item according to what they felt best benefited the town.

I often wonder how the deceased might feel about how many people of Birchfell directly benefited from what they left behind.

A town-wide auction was held for the animals. I can confirm each one has been taken to a good home that will value and care for them.

ENTRY 84

Death Date: Frostwane 19, Y.510

List of Possessions

- 4 iron nails, each engraved with the name of one of the surviving children
- 1 small pile of ash and debris

Summary: A parent wealthy in bitterness. It became clear soon after I arrived that the household did not invite me to catalog & distribute the visible inheritance because there was nothing left unclaimed at the time of death. Rather, they wished for me to find evidence of a “hidden inheritance.” The grown children of the deceased were adamant that they were each owed a piece of the fortune their father supposedly amassed from his decades of work.

After some investigation, I determined this was a homestead built upon a foundation of egotism, animosity, and resentment.

Eventually I discovered a loose brick that covered a concealed compartment within the physical foundation of the home. Inside was a cavity of ash containing scraps of charred parchment, tarnished jewelry, warped leather, & cracked bells. I turned the brick over and read the carved, soot-choked words: "Behold Your Birthright."

Apart from the items above, it seems the true inheritance was a lasting legacy of virulence that will take at least a generation to process, should they so desire. Regardless, it is quite clear to me that I am no longer welcome in that particular homestead. A fact I confess I do not bemoan.

ENTRY 89

Death Date: Leaftern 29, Y.511

List of Possessions

- 1 homestead with a modest yard
- 2 dresses
- 1 apron
- 1 pair of shoes
- 1 hairbrush
- 1 wooden pendant
- 1 Brief account of a Stagnant's pilgrimage (see Appendix)

Summary: Considering the circumstances, this person had long been considered the last member of their generation within the household and the signs of failing health were painfully clear early on. The rest of the household worked to take care of many of the possessions beforehand, which made my work very straightforward.

The final remaining possessions were passed down to the oldest surviving child. The life of the deceased was richly blessed with love but also burdened with grief and even guilt. The passing of a loved one is never easy, but there is melancholic comfort in witnessing an entire household coming together to aid in a soft, sweet, slow transition.

ENTRY ○

Death Date: Refer to Summary

List of Possessions

- A small clay doll, broken in two;
Kept in a drawer within the household
- A small knitted hat; Kept in a wooden crate within the household
- A muddy handprint on the inside of the household's entry door;
Undisturbed

Summary: This is an aggregate entry representing several deaths of those precious souls who did not survive to their own Naming Watch or the year after it. Most of these do not leave any material possessions, with the three listed above as the only exceptions I have yet found.

In spite of this, the intangible potential and hope these little ones leave behind could be some of the heaviest burdens I have ever witnessed a family bear.

There are very few circumstances in which so much grief is felt on behalf of one the bereaved knew so little about.

THE PROCESS OF DEATH CATALOGING



There is not much in the way of formal process when it comes to inheritance management in Birchfell, mostly because for the majority of this town's history it seems such things are not typically handled by anyone outside the household of the bereaved. However, grief impacts each one of us in a different way, and having to sort through and process a loved one's possessions can be an added burden no one wishes for. This is why I have often offered my services, and many households take me up on it.

When a household requests or accepts such services, this is usually the order of things:

1. I meet at least one representative from the household of the bereaved to learn more about their situation and make a preliminary estimate on the volume of work before us. In this meeting I make it a point to establish the goals and desires of the deceased's survivors.

2. I return home with any notes I have taken and start to make a general plan.

3. I set up another meeting to begin the specific inventory work. This is where I begin to take careful note of each possession belonging to the deceased, as well as any other estate or ownership established in writing or verbal agreement.

If I cannot complete a full catalog within a few hours, as it sometimes happens, I schedule future meetings until I have made a full list in writing of all the deceased's possessions, as well as any notes from the bereaved about what might be done with them.

4. I write up a plan to process each item on the inventory. Generally, this means mentally sorting each item into distinct actions such as, “Dispose,” “Donate,” “Sell,” “Keep for [relative’s name],” and so on. If there are multiple household members wishing to keep a particular item, or to divide parts of a collection between themselves, I write up an equitable plan for them to carry out so each member has an equal opportunity to claim what they wish. These plans can be simple or complex as the case may be, at times feeling like a sort of auction or game.

5. I deliver the full written plan to the household, explaining each step, and helping them execute the plan. I am flexible enough that if there is any disagreement about the plan, I defer to the household. This is all in their service, after all.

6. With a proper plan put forward for the household, payment is given if agreed upon beforehand. I tend not to ask for payment in the cases of very simple inheritances or households with few resources. This is generally when my work is finished. The work of disposing, donating, selling, and so forth are typically handled by the household if there are enough able members. Sometimes I help with this work as needed.
7. When all is said and done, perhaps even before then, there will usually come a time when one or more of the bereaved express a heightened sense of relief, as if a weight lifted from their shoulders. Sometimes these expressions are so apparent that I wonder if some sort of supernatural effect is following my work. Perhaps a manifestation of the deceased? Perhaps simply a matter of heightened emotion in a trying time?

Whatever the case, it seems to me that this “death cataloging” work I do resonates with many of my Birchfellows in a way that I find very rewarding.

B R I E F C O N C L U S I O N

I must admit, the completion of this volume is a heavy burden lifted from my mind. With the manuscript complete, I feel I can now rest a little easier knowing I have it recorded at last, ready for it to be set in type for the printing press. After which, I will get my needles and cord to work on the binding. I already have the wooden boards ready for the book covers. There will be two copies, one for my own records, and the other in a special public bookshelf (which is likely where you are reading this).

There is still so much that can be said about this Valley, as well as the life and energy present within. I do not think there is nearly enough curiosity and wonder about the familiar rhythms and rituals and routines of our days here, let alone anywhere beyond.

But I know there are some who do have that curiosity.

May our collective conversation with this land and its people continue for many generations to come. May my days continue to be kept busy with requests to bind more books to be filled with life and history. May the lives of my Birchfellows continue to be documented & cataloged for posterity's sake far beyond the limits of my own.

May you, attentive reader, fare well in our Valley. I give my extensive, sincere gratitude for your time and attention to my words, and the words and lives of my dear Birchfellows.

Baren Millet

Day 30 of Frostwane,

Year 512 since the Founding of Birchfell

APPENDIX



A STAGNANT PILGRIMAGE

I see the signs.

I feel my breath slowing down.

I see the trees marked with sigils.

I feel my heart relaxing.

I see a bird still as stone.

I feel like I just ate & drank.

I see an unfamiliar sky.

I feel lost in thought.

I see the Pilgrim's Wall.

I feel Stagnant.



This note was written by the deceased's brother, who had been listed in my unabridged catalog (under Entry 79) out of respect for the wishes of the household. Approximately three years ago, it was well known in the town (though not much discussed) that this brother felt drawn to the ideals of the Stagnant sect near the Pilgrim's Wall and had left Birchfell without warning. This rarely happens, but when it does the missing person is considered dead for all practical purposes because they never return from their pilgrimage.

A year or so later, Saffron found a piece of parchment carried by the wind. She brought the parchment back to Birchfell, and the household recognized the handwriting.

The words seemed to have been written with a very shaky (or perhaps excessively lethargic) hand, but the penmanship really was unmistakable.

Therefore, this short note is what is left of that brother, & his sibling kept it to their dying day. Whether it was written as an assessment of the self, or as a moment of poetic musing, or even as an attempt to give peace & assurance to their household, to most Birchfellows it has instead become yet another cautionary tale against the dangers of the Pilgrim's Wall.

— ◆ —
The Heritage
These words were inked and set
by Deepfolk hands
Year 512
— ◆ —

