JACK, THE FOLLOWING SUMMER

Robert Crum

Last fall our house was almost lost in a jungle of tumbled beanstalks. The air was green awhile. The light was yellow. But with the first frost the fat leaves turned brown, lost body, and, crashing softly to the ground, they kept me awake all night. They were too large to rake. And we couldn’t burn them without burning the house. And so they festered, until it snowed.

Around Christmas, then, we lost the hen to a red-tailed fox. I found its tracks behind the barn, and the scattered, bright coins of blood, and followed them back to the fence where I stood a long time looking into the dark woods. In no time at all mother had spent the golden eggs. We’re back where we started, though poorer, I think, for what we know. The sky slept in the pond all winter, defeated. Hunger consumed the spring.

And now it is a year. The air this morning is electric with cicadas, though it is too heavy, too humid, to move. Mother smokes in the kitchen, the shades drawn, counting the change. I sleep in, and wake up thinking about the woman I met at the castle gate in that star-misted, far and fertile place, from which the beanstalks rose no further. She must be very happy now that the ogre’s gone. Or very lonely. She must be lovely, lost there, among the stone, corkscrew stairways, the crockery large enough to hide a boy, the outsized doors, the enormous hearth. I am sorry I deceived her, that third and final time, disguised in my dead father’s clothes.
The lyre stands by the window now. Wooden, self-strummed, it still works, though the cat-gut strings come untuned in this humidity. Touched, it sings, and keeps time with the memory I have of the hatchet chopping the trembling stalk, the foliage falling around me, the snapping of a neck.

There is a terror I have outgrown, but cannot give up. Sometimes I think I can smell my English blood. I lean out the window for air, and hear mother, done with the books, suggest we sell the cow again. But I object, I think differently now, afraid, still, of monsters, afraid of becoming one, yearning skywards, yet filling my father's shoes.