



Knight of the Autumn Leaf

Eric S. Miller

Siranya began to walk and they made their way slowly toward a glade from where they could hear a low hum issuing. There stood a group of ten women and three men of varied ethnicities before a crowd of people with fur and horns. The ten men and women were dressed as if they were to play Titania's minions in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The ten began to sing. Try as he might, Bernard could not distinguish a single voice from another. The glade sang to him through this group of pixie dust covered fey. Gray vines with autumn leaves wrapped around the singers' glistening skin, and all of their faces had the same expression: eyes closed, mouth open and taut, throat and chest throbbing with the rhythm, and passionate, concentrated brows.

The song was unearthly. Bernard hopped minds and saw how each listener felt differently about the music as the song strummed the audience as if each member were a harp string. Unearthly only because it was beyond Earth, encompassing Earth; it was history through crescendos, the pianissimo of personal tragedy, the cadence of acrobatics, the hymn of shared spirit. Some of the audience saw farmers toiling in the sun, some saw torrential storms. Bernard returned to his mind and on each note traveled through the universe to distant stars and back to the soil in the silences. He shifted to one of Siranya's leaves and felt the brush of her lover's hands on her skin, the crunch of crème brûlée, the smell of rising bread, and the infinite worlds of reading. Bernard left her leaf for others who felt the beating of angel wings on their cheeks, or rain falling on their skin at night under a full moon.

But far from harmonizing and unifying their experiences, what the audience heard was a swelling of a single voice made from the blending of many. It was a low swell that built and broke only to scatter notes up and down in powerful surges. Each note a crystal lattice and each gathered around the others and solidified. The sounds buffeted and pushed against the walls of perception, billowing and then fluttering in ascension and descent. And the ending scorched the preconceptions that the beginning created, that the song must taper out due to its magnificence. But now it rose and consumed itself in glorious glissandos that made the unified chorus sound like a fugue. And more than anything it was a synthesis of all these elements, and that synthesis of audience, song, moment, thrust, pull, flare, and crystal sound was the quintessential aspect that made all present, even the singers, shudder and shake out of their perspectives to a grander whole.

Bernard's mind became indistinguishable from other minds, and when that happened, he knew that he was not dreaming, and that if he was mad, then this madness was a gift.