

Reading Sheet for Workshop 4



The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door. He took off his hat and came slowly forward. The floorboards creaked under his boots. In his black suit he stood in the dark glass where the lilies leaned so palely from their waisted cutglass vase. Along the cold hallway behind him hung the portraits of forebears only dimly known to him all framed in glass and dimly lit above the narrow wainscotting. He looked down at the guttered candlestub. He pressed his thumbprint in the warm wax pooled on the oak veneer. Lastly he looked at the face so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed moustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping.

It was dark outside and cold and no wind. In the distance a calf bawled. He stood with his hat in his hand. You never combed your hair that way in your life, he said.

Inside the house there was no sound save the ticking of the mantel clock in the front room. He went out and shut the door.

Dark and cold and no wind and a thin gray reef beginning along the eastern rim of the world. He walked out onto the prairie and stood holding his hat like some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time.

(from *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy)

On a clear day the island can be seen from the mainland, the long ridge of its tree-ringed hill breaking the horizon to the south. Fishing fleets sometimes pass its rocky shores, and the fishermen stare at the dark outline of the great ruin that tops the hill, but they don't stop. The island has nothing for them. Little grows on its bare sides, only tufts of dusty grass, and the circle of ancient olive trees round the roofless hall. Also there are stories about the island, of wizards who can summon storms, of talking animals, of men who can fly. Such matters are best left alone.

The island is called Sirene. Long ago a band of travellers settled here, and built the high stone walls on the top of the hill, and planted the olive trees for shade. The building has no floor, other than the grass and rock that was there before. It has no roof, its tall windows have no glass, its wide doorways no doors. But it's not a ruin: this is how the people who built it meant it to be. No timbers to rot, no tiles to slip and fall. No glass to break and no doors to close. Just a long, light space swept by wind and rain, a house that is not a house, a place to meet and sing and then to leave again.

Now after many years the sound of footsteps is heard again on Sirene. A woman is following the long rising path from the shore. No boat lies moored in the cove, and yet she is here. She wears a plain faded woollen robe, and is barefoot. Her grey hair is cut short. Her face is weathered, lined, brown. How old is she? Impossible to say. She has the face of a grandmother, but the clear eyes and agile body of a young woman. She barely pauses for breath as she makes her way up the hillside.

(from *Slaves of the Mastery* by William Nicholson)