

With Misfortune to Return

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By : **Three Shirts Too Many**

Someone once challenged to rewrite a great Western work. To those who recognize what it is, kudos. To those who don't, I'll take the credit for telling the story. Anyway, this work is quite old now, but I thought I might as well share it.



Published on
Booksie

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Across they come, one, two, three. Man, woman, horse and tree. To my eyes, they seem so lovely, as they always have. The cold around my neck, my body frozen as my gaze, intent, watching. Their darkness flashes past on the great gray, and I know what they are: wonderful. On one side of me, someone mumbles something, and on his side, another mumbles something back. I can speak, but I would prefer to watch. Something about the whole thing is wonderful. Man, with his man head, spins, and woman, with her woman head, spins too. Horse and tree remain move away, and house takes its place. House where man and woman go when they rest. We are always in the same spot, and our gaze is always focused. The only thing aside from us, are the many that appear on the wall. I would not trade all the cave and my fellow watchers to not see man or horse or woman or tree or house. They are absolute, and wondrous. Indeed, I am a good watcher, and see what is true, most all of the time. Again, horse appears, for he rests outside, and tree, now elsewhere, has moved as man does, behind the house. Smiling, I watch as the light grows dim, and then more greater, behind me where I cannot see, and man and woman and house and tree and horse all move again, and overhead bird moves by. My feet curl on the cool floor, and I wish I could be closer to the warmth now, here between rests. Here, I am happy.

A lurch tugs at me, and, with a sudden jolt, I am thrown backwards. Nobody notices, not any of the ones I have sat by for so many rests and awakenings, and I feel, for the first time, my back rubbing against the ground. I have never left the same spot before in my life. Why would I leave now? I should not be leaving! Man and woman will not be the same without me, and I will not be the same without them. Underneath, suddenly, the ground is warm. The light is very bright and hot behind my head, and suddenly, I am facing a new direction.

The light is so powerful, so much greater than what I have known upon the wall, my eyes shut, and slowly open, and shut again. And slowly open, and shut again. And again. It is so bright! The heat is so intense. Finally, my eyes can open more. The crackling, so long from behind me, is all around, and a great pillar of light roars toward the high ends of earth, far above me, to the stone ceiling. I tremble, but am able to keep silent. On and on and on it goes, never ending, the light unfading. It is where it comes from, the light, the warmth. It comes from here. Man and woman and all, they come from here, from this other light. This is the source of all of them, and they exist within. I try to reach out, and my arm moves, shaking, for the first time. I cannot reach the light, though, and the heat becomes too intense. So I look up, and I nearly fall back. Looking down upon me, with great empty eyes and the head of man, is man. He is as the walls are, solid, touchable if I could only reach so high. Then I understand. This is the true man, and his image is reflected in the light for us to see. And woman stands with him, and house and horse and all of them. I know in my heart that they are kind, as we are, and they look down, with the empty eyes, the invisible smiles upon their faces, and my terror slowly goes. Here, I am happy. Now I know.

And again, I am moving, but now I struggle. I have seen man and all his companions, and do not wish to go back. I have knowledge now, I know who they are, what they are, and could not bare to look again upon the flat face, knowing what I know, never seeing real things again. Feebly, I kick a leg out in protest, trying to stay back. It is not enough, and the dragging continues. The crackling light fades quickly, as do the reflections of man and his lot, and the true man and his lot. In the dark, the unseeing nothingness one only gets from closing his eyes, I am bounced along, gasping for breath. It is terrifying, but suddenly, the warmth that was the light now becomes much greater, and I close my eyes, knowing they are bringing me back. But it is now different. I begin to feel it all around instead of just from the light. My eyes begin to turn red, on the inside, like the light.

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Thrown down, I open my eyes, and shut them, howling. The light is bright. Impossibly bright. It could cast a thousand images of man all about. Something must have happened. Perhaps I had only seen the light in a time when it was dimmed, and now this was the full thing. Tears form, searing into my head, and I clutch it between my arms, still howling foolishly. Man, can it not be darker? Can woman not make the light much less bright? But then I see dark, when I open my eyes. Reflections, like I saw in the dark, but now many different shapes, and not all of them recognizable. Perhaps I do not see right? No, I do. Reflections of everything, from trees, moving each limb to a long house, twisted and odd and unmoving! A something slippery and cool is under my feet, and I look down. For a moment, it is too bright, but then I realize I can see things. The trees are tall and of alien shades, the house is not long but box, like house, and all around things flash and dart and live in the light. My mouth opens wide, and a sigh escapes. My eyes begin to sting less and less. I turn to see the tree, the house, and I see man, and woman, not watching me, but coming out of the house. Man! Woman! Inside, those where but mere copies! House! Real house. Trees all around. Plants and flowers and a great light above: inside, we saw but false things. For the first time, I realize, this is what is true. Here, I am happy. Now I know. The truth fills my heart.

But something calls my gaze upward, upward, upward, far past the boundaries of the inside, into the strange shade above, great expanses of white and color and warmth and light and the sun coming from the great orb, and the grip on my neck has vanished and I am free and can see all of the light, and, in my heart, there is a leaping. It is what makes it all real. The light, the shadows, the actual things. All of it, the world. I have been dragged out here because I am special, because I was picked to see all of the things I know how they should be, how they were meant to be. In the warm light, no crackling, no smoke, I stand, and breathe deeply. The world around comes to life, the things I now know to be real are before me, and all around, in the light, the warmth, the real. Here, I am happy. Now I know. The truth fills my heart. And I understand.

The tug, the pull, the hard hands slip back around, and I am falling, being dragged back, wrenched back away from movement and onto the ground. With my new-found strength I claw and tear, but it is no use. The force dragging me back has the strength of a hundred men, a hundred real men. Back, away, the light vanishes, and suddenly, the cold floor is underneath, and the darkness is all around. Cuts and bruises are born on my flesh, and suddenly, a great heave, and I cannot move. As I struggle, my containment rattles. Angrily, I jerk my head up, and freeze. Before my eyes lies a great flat wall of stone, on it, the shadows of the shadow of a man dance. And a woman. Angrily, I gnash my teeth, and turn to the man next to me.

â Help me out!â I shout, but he looks afraid. â I have seen the light! Get me out!â He snuffles, and backs farther off. â I saw it! I saw it all! You are man! That is not man!â I wrench at my containment, but there is no way out. â You must not be happy! You must not realize what is true! The truth will fill your heart! You will understand!â I struggle, but I cannot escape. And I struggle and struggle and struggle. There is no escape. I cannot be free. Instead, I stop, and look at the screen, at the man, and my face settles. I can learn to love it again. Surely, I can.

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