

Lapidary Nights

by Marta Randall

The noise woke me; I lay in bed, listening to the bright sound of leaf on leaf. Another lapidary night, cracking leaves in the forest around the house. I thought dreamily of rising and walking into it, to fix the newly formed crystals before they shattered, perhaps to become crystalline myself. Instead I burrowed deeper into the bedclothes, listening to the rising wind. In the morning shards of emerald lay on the deeper emerald of the grass, or pierced the faceted violets. Another extravagance of jewels, littering my small clearing. I stirred them with one slippered foot, admiring their fire. Useless for my purposes, of course. Hawkins paid for perfection only: the unblemished beryl rose, the symmetrical ruby anemone, the pure silver tracery of veins through an emerald leaf. Or insects: moths, spiders, butterflies: so delicate that too often they shattered in the collecting. Two years ago I found something that looked like a squirrel, russet, auburn, bronze and amber; black jet eyes bright and peering, the glory of a tail caught ruffled and raised. Hawkins took it eagerly and appeared the next week with a cage full of cats -- scarce commodities on Suledan. I refused them. A squirrel caught in a crystal night is one thing, but I won't deliberately expose an animal. My adamant goddess was not pleased.

After breakfast I swept broken leaves into the shallow moat surrounding the cabin. They clung to my broom, melting in the sunlight; in the dankness of the moat their colors mingled to a uniform muddy gray. A process of rot, Hawkins had explained: when things ripen on Suledan, their cells crystallize overnight, except for the seeds. The sun's warmth melts the crystals to provide both organic nutrients for the untouched seeds, and the gases that keep the new growth safe until it, too, is ripe for crystallization. The process interested me less than the result: the transfiguration of light, the translation of the mundane into the fantastic. A poet's dream, this glory out of putrefaction, and to preserve the dream I left leaf and grass emeralds lying in the shade of trees, where they would, with luck, flash and sparkle a few days longer. I put the broom away, gathered my specimen boxes, and went into the forest.

Nature thrives on curls and imperfections, the nibbles of insects, and the raspings of the sun, but

