

FOREWORD

Shall I unfix the stars and resurrect wraiths from times past? How can I begin this ode unsung? The Testament of Eld begins with the separation of heaven and sea and earth, writ upon papyrus scrolls. The Cycle of Kings begins with an epitaph for the poet, engraven upon tablets of clay. The Pancalliopiad begins with a catalogue of the heroes whose deeds and meeds are inscribed upon parchments of skin. I know not how to begin, I who am the lesser student of greater masters.

Shall I begin with the arrangement of the universe, the emanations of Time? Shall I sing of an age even before legend, when ettins and elves roamed formless lands? Shall I summon the natural gods long forgotten? Shall I begin with the original language of Man, the most ancient rune carven into the bark of oak? Shall I begin with how the first cornerstone was laid upon the city of Urran? Shall I begin with how the Fire of Fires first sprang alive with volcanic fervour? Shall I begin with the first solemn altar devoted unto the oracle of Dodelphis? Nay, such is not the compass of my small story.

I would form poems about the seven olden champions, Zhaal and Aphridon and Sphendiar and Theracles and Persophon and Jaxilleus and Sinoa, but there are already better poems on that matter. I would write chronicles about the seven illustrious metropolises, Jeriddo and Noph and Sard and Sparthena and Latillium and Londinis and Phoezanthion, but there are already more honest chronicles on that theme. I would compose psalms for the seven splendid archangels, Eosis and Rhabaal and Thaus and Miaphael and Khorda and Mnemon and Trometan, yet poets more devout than I have composed psalms for them. I must rather sing a theme more modest.

Behold! My dimming eyes catch the distant glimmer of crystalline temples. I must sing a circular song about an encircled city. List the faint peals of cymbals and the mute thunder of gongs! I do not speak

the tongues of angels and I can but mutter the tongues of men.
Hearken not I, who am a pale voice in the service of a greater chorus.
My story is a living creature that speaks for itself, and thus it begins
with a paean unto a maiden goddess.

MAIDEN GLORY

Over the gravid plain and the livid sea towers the city called Symarna, sundered from less fortunate kingdoms by walls like mountains and mountains like walls. Her hands reach far into the foam of the western sea and the dust of the eastern wasteland. She rests her feet in the southern fenland and washes her hair in the swirling waves of the river Scamand. Her breasts are veiled with snow, her thighs with sand. Ten thousand kinds of seed grow on her green skin. Her nostrils flutter upon salt-perfumed streets and her eyes scan the livid sea for ships laden with gifts. Her martial throne, Ancora, is an unconquered citadel carven into a sole mountain – even as she slumbers in peace upon a bed of dew and cotton. Her dominion covers a circle of no less than a hundred parasangs, though once it covered thrice the breadth.

She is a maiden always in good company, a nation well beloved of virile empires and handsome republics. Has there ever been a lack of kingly suitors at her doorstep? Wealthy conquerors woo her with golden blood, crowned merchants with bleeding gold. Wizen archpriests whose lips judge multitudes are filled with lawless lust in her presence. What glory is there in winning her warm, myrrh-sprinkled bed! Sometimes they gently tap her doors, trying to seduce her with donations: sometimes they assault her barbicans with battering rams. All the devilry and mischief that is known to the sons of Man, they practice on this lukewarm maiden—whether it be for wedlock or rapine. Symarna is a wise damsel, however, and knows how to secure her own freedom. She sets suitor against suitor with subtle policy and recruits warlike hosts from afar to ward off the lecherous throng. A cunning queen, she sacrifices the children of

strangers to defend her hearth. Thus her fingertips seldom touch cold iron. When submit she must, she does so with serene grace and on her own terms. She is indeed the softest and gentlest of queens in times of peace, though myriads have fallen for her sake in more warlike times. Marauders and pirates, ruffians and warriors all alike perish before her bolted gates and feed her realm with their wealth and flesh. Thus her treasury teems with vibrant jewels, her gardens with lush fruit.

Which city is like unto Symarna? Which city has been chosen for such natural glory, such toil-free bliss? She is neither the greatest nor the most populous, capital of no empire and queen of no people save her own brood. She is no Phoezanthion, empress over twain seas and three continents. She is no Londinis to orbit and conquer the outer oceans. She is no Jeriddo, home to five imperious thrones and ten thousand stolid idols. She is no Sard to raise obelisks of solid gold. She is no Megarinth, mother of colonies greater than herself. She is indeed childless, despite six lecherous husbands and lovers innumerable.

Yet wise men say that the fate of Symarna is the most enviable among all nations. She is a bastion of good fortune, untouched by the troubles of the greater universe. The sea at her doors is friendly, the wind always mellow: she knows neither rude gale nor wild wave. No thunderstorm floods her painted streets, no earthquake shatters her temples of glass. Hunger is a word strange to her tongue, thanks to wheaten plains that stretch from horizon to horizon. Her cisterns overflow with snow and wine. The black plague is a temperate fever under her roof and the scarlet pox fears to spoil her lovely form, leaving behind only a beauty mark. Locusts that invade her meadows fall dead and wolves that enter her realm tame themselves. Wasps and bees weave honey in the same hive, and the leopard watches over the fatling. Her gardens have never been sown with ash and salt: Symarna has never known the abomination of desolation. For this is the city where Ninaddites drew their westernmost borders, where the Hundall forgot their bloodlust, where Sigeans fell by the score.

Poets who sing of earthly paradises abandon their caprices when they behold Symarna. Philosophers who have roamed the world restless, dreaming of vain utopias, find the solace of sleep here.

INVOCATIO

Sing, muse of discord! The tale you must now tell is somewhat black, somewhat white. Sing how ghastly Necessity and fickle Fortune heaped dole and sorrow upon the blessed people of Symarna. Sing how blood and sweat and tears ran like rivulets from the shores of the Livid Sea unto the swirling waves of Scamand. Sing how the happy fate of Symarna was tested with disasters of earth and sea and heaven. Sing of the ordeals and travails that befell Maiden Glory, the guardian spirit of our city. Sing of the crystal temples and painted streets of Symarna, in their direst hour of distress. Sing against the ill-crossed stars which burden unhappy mortals with finite pleasure and infinite suffering. And even if death is the doom of all things living, sing for those who would forget their own troubles until your ode is sung.

Sing of unforgotten feats, goddess of chaos! Sing of things high and low, great and small. Sing of kings and princes who play games of imperium, of knights and champions who perish for fame. Sing of noble houses and simple homes. Shrink from no subject, for nothing is too unholy for your voice. Sing of green envy and blue grief. Sing of cowards and traitors with no less delight than the brave champions of the human race. Sing of men arrogant and vengeant, highborn villains and common heroes. Sing of hierophants and vestal virgins, whores and sell-swords. Sing of magic white and black, the curses of heaven and the miracles of hell. Sing of the sardonic demigods who scorn hymn and prayer, amusing themselves with the toil of mortal toil.

When you tire of singing, seize the brush and paint the world in shades of rose and coal. Paint the dour horrors of war for our wary eyes. Paint the nameless thousands arranged upon battlefields, like

grapes ripe for plucking. Paint sweet meadows red with sour blood. Paint beasts of war bedecked in warlike colours, trampling warriors and toppling like towers themselves. Paint the sky darkish with clouds of arrows. Paint shields that bend and spears that shatter, bones that splinter and skulls that crack. Paint the ravenous wolves and the wolfish ravens that feast upon the fallen. Paint catapults that hurl festering corpses and thundering boulders. Paint the fairest palaces burning, the tallest ramparts crumbling. Paint senseless murder and insensate rape. Paint starving mothers who devour their babes. Sing until your brush is stiff with blood, until the wails of phantoms overwhelm your pale whisper.