

FICTION APRIL 10, 2006 ISSUE

IN THE REIGN OF HARAD IV

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In the reign of Harad IV there lived at court a maker of miniatures, who was celebrated for the uncanny perfection of his work. Not only were the objects of his strenuous art pleasing to look at but the pleasure and astonishment increased as the observer, bending closer, saw that a passionate care had been lavished on the smallest and least visible details. It was said that no matter how closely you examined one of the Master's little pieces you always discovered some further wonder.

Among the many tasks of the maker of miniatures was supplying court ladies with carved ivory plants and triple-headed sea monsters for their cabinets of delight, drawing the fur and feathers of fabulous creatures in the "Book of Three Hundred Secrets," and, above all, replacing the furnishings of the old toy palace, which the King had inherited from his father, and which was filled with moldering draperies and cracked wood. The famous toy palace, with its more than six hundred rooms, its dungeons and secret passageways, its gardens and courtyards and orchards, rose to the height of a man's chest and occupied its own chamber, across from the King's library. In return for his duties the maker of miniatures was given a private apartment in the palace, not far from the court carpenter, as well as an ermine robe that entitled him to take part in official ceremonies. He was assisted by two youthful apprentices. They roughed out the larger miniatures, such as cupboards and canopy beds, fired the little earthenware bowls in a special kiln, applied the first coat of lacquer to objects made of wood, and saved precious time for the Master by fetching from the palace workshops pieces of ivory, copper, lapis, boxwood, and beechwood. But the apprentices were

not permitted to attempt the more difficult labors of the miniaturist's art, such as carving the dragon heads at the feet of table legs, or forging the minuscule copper keys that turned the locks of drawers and chests.

One day after the completion of an arduous and exhilarating task—he had made for one of the miniature orchards a basket of brilliantly lifelike red-and-green apples, each no larger than the pit of a cherry, and as a finishing touch he had placed on the stem of one apple a perfectly reproduced copper fly—the maker of miniatures felt in himself a stirring of restlessness. It wasn't the first time he had experienced such stirrings at the end of a long task, but lately the odd, internal itching had become more insistent. As he tried to penetrate the feeling, to reveal it more clearly to himself, he thought of the basket of apples. The basket had been unusually satisfying to make, because it had presented him with a hierarchy of sizes: the basket itself, composed of separate slats of boxwood bound with copper wire, then the apples, and, at last, the fly. The tiny fly, with its precisely rendered wings, had caused him the most difficulty and the most joy, and it occurred to him that there was no particular reason to stop at the fly. Suddenly, he was seized by an inner trembling. Why had he never thought of this before? How was it possible? Didn't logic itself demand that the downward series be pursued? At this thought he felt a deep, guilty excitement, as if he had come to a forbidden door at the end of a private corridor and heard, as he slowly turned the key, a sound of distant music.

He set out to make an apple basket the size of one of his apples. The new wooden apples, each with a stem and two leaves, were so small that he was able to carve them only with the aid of an enlarging glass, which he set into a supporting frame. But even as he struggled pleasurably over each apple he realized that he was dreaming of the fly, the impossible fly that, as it turned out, was visible only as a speck on the minuscule stem, though it was perfect in every detail when viewed through the glass.

The King, who had praised the original fly, looked at the new basket of apples with astonished delight. When the Master invited him to observe the apples

through the glass, the King drew in his breath, appeared to be about to speak, and suddenly clapped his hands sharply, whereupon the Chamberlain strode in. The King instructed him to view the miniature fly through the lens. The Chamberlain, a cold and imperious man, gave a harsh gasp. By the next morning the story of the invisible fly was known throughout the palace.

With new zest, as if he were returning to an earlier and more exuberant period of his life, the middle-aged but still vigorous Master devoted himself to a series of miniatures that in every way surpassed his finest efforts of the past. From the pit of a cherry he carved a ring of thirty-six elephants, each holding in its trunk the tail of the elephant before it. Every elephant possessed a pair of nearly invisible tusks carved out of ivory. One day, the Master presented to the King a saucer on which stood an inverted ebony thimble. When the King picked up the thimble, he discovered beneath it a meticulous reproduction of the northwest wing of his toy palace, with twenty-six rooms fully furnished, including a writing table with ostrich-claw legs and a gold birdcage containing a nightingale.

Scarcely had the maker of miniatures completed the thimble palace when he felt a new burst of restlessness. Once embarked on his downward voyage, would he ever be able to stop? Besides, wasn't it plain that the tiny palace, though but partially visible to the unaided eye, revealed itself too readily, without that resistance which was an essential part of aesthetic delight? And he proposed to himself a plunge beneath the surface of the visible, the creation of a detailed world wholly inaccessible to the naked eye.

He began with simple things—a copper bowl, a beechwood box—for the material he worked with was, before magnification, itself invisible and required of him a new degree of delicate manipulation. He quickly recognized the need for more powerful lenses, more subtle tools. From the court carpenter, he ordered a pair of complex gripping devices that held his hands still and steadied his fingers. This was no work for an old man, he thought—no, or for a young man, either—but only for someone in the full vigor of his middle years.

His first masterpiece in the realm of the invisible was a stag with branching antlers. Through a powerful glass he watched the invisible sharpen into the visible: the head twisted to one side, the mouth slightly open, the lips drawn back to reveal the teeth. He carved it and painted it down to the last detail, tooth and hoof and pale inner ear; and it was said by some that, if you looked very closely through the enlarging glass, you could distinguish the amber irises from the bright black pupils.

No sooner had he finished the stag than he embarked on a far more challenging task: an invisible garden, modelled at first on one of the thirty-nine palace gardens but quickly developing its own, more elaborate design. During the early stages a sudden draft destroyed a week's worth of work. With the aid of the court carpenter, for whom he drew up a plan, the maker of miniatures constructed a teakwood box with a sloping top, in which was set a square magnifying lens. Two panels in the sides of the box slid smoothly up and down, so that a pair of hands might be inserted, and the square lens, attached to a system of rods and screws, could be raised and lowered. The intricate and delicate garden, protected from disturbing currents of air, grew slowly until it contained dozens of twelve-sided flower beds, fourteen varieties of fruit tree with individual leaves, a system of crossing paths paved with tesserae of ebony and ivory, onyx fountains carved with legendary creatures, snails under stones.

Although the King expressed wonder and amazement at the garden seen through the glass, and praised the Master's conquest of a new world, he asked many questions about the lens and the teakwood box, as if he suspected them of working a spell. At last the King permitted himself to wonder whether his maker of miniatures might not soon return to the visible miracle of his exquisite palace furniture. In the King's voice the Master heard a tone of unmistakable reproach. As he explained the apparatus and adjusted the lens, it seemed to him that by venturing beyond the visible world he had embarked on a voyage more perilous than he had known.

But already he had thrown himself into the crowning masterpiece of this period: the King's famous toy palace, entirely invisible to the naked eye. The more than

six hundred rooms would be completely furnished and scrupulously rendered in every detail, including dovetail joints in the cabinets, working locks on the drawers, and fifteen dozen complete sets of knives, forks, and spoons in chased silver, each with the royal insignia—a crown and crossed swords—worked onto the handle.

During the construction of his palace-beneath-the-glass, the maker of miniatures paid several visits to the original toy palace, and was startled each time by the vast building that towered almost to the height of his shoulders. The chairs in the council chamber were the size of his fists. Ever since his own work had taken its slight and necessary turn, its odd, unaccountable swerve away from classic smallness toward another, more dubious realm, his two apprentices had assumed the task of supplying furniture for the King's toy palace. And the Master saw that it was good: they were well suited to large and striking effects; he had perhaps been unduly harsh in limiting them to elementary tasks, in the days when such things concerned him.

One day, while looking at a desk in the King's toy palace, the maker of miniatures fell into a reverie. Fastened to the drawer of the desk was a pair of brass lion's-head handles, which had once seemed to him the height of elegance and had cost him three days of work. The smallest object in the toy palace was a silver needle no thicker than a hair. It occurred to him, not without pride, that the entire palace he was now constructing beneath his glass, with its more than six hundred rooms and its gardens and orchards, could be enclosed by the eye of that needle.

But even as he sank deeply into his little world he felt at the back of his mind a slight itching, as if he knew that his palace, even that, could not satisfy him for long. For such a feat, however arduous, was really no more than the further conquest of a familiar realm, the twilight realm of the world revealed by his glass, and he yearned for a world so small that he could not yet imagine it. As he worked on his palace the craving grew in him, and he seemed to sense dimly, just out of reach beyond his inner sight, a farther kingdom.

He began to see it more clearly, with growing excitement, though he confessed to

himself that it was less a seeing than a desire gradually hardening into a certainty. Although he now worked with material so minute that it was invisible to the unaided eye, it remained true that the invisible was made visible by his lens. If to others he seemed a magician who brought the seen out of the unseen, in fact he worked wholly in the visible world. It was an ambiguous and elusive world, which vanished into the invisible as soon as the glass was removed, and yet it was a far cry from the purely invisible realm he sensed just beyond. And he longed to construct objects so small that they would escape the power of the mediating glass, remain submerged in the dark kingdom of the invisible.

He began as always with a simple object: an oblong ivory box with a sliding top. Although the box was so marvellously small that it remained invisible even through the glass, he continued to make use of his teakwood viewer with the sloping top and movable lens, for the familiar apparatus served to concentrate his attention and steady his fingers. The ivory box, which never once emerged from its hidden world to reveal itself to the eye of the Master, was completed in seven days. With his inner eye, he contemplated it coolly and felt a calm elation. Despite the absence of visible evidence, he was certain of its formal perfection, of the elegant precision of its parts—never had he taken so much care.

Immediately he threw himself into a more ambitious task: a beechwood peacock with outspread tail. The enchanting peacock, radiant with unseen colors, took him nearly three weeks, and when he was done he felt ready for the task he had secretly been preparing for: an imaginary kingdom.

And so he set to work on his invisible kingdom, with its walled cities and winding rivers, its forests of beech and fir, its copper mines and temple towers, its spoons and insects. By the end of a year he had completed a single city. The city contained cobbled streets and market squares, baskets of grapes on the fruit sellers' stands, merchants' houses with pillared balconies overlooking courtyards, individual bottles in the glassblowers' shops. He felt tired and exhilarated, and as he imagined all that remained undone, stretching out before him like an immense adventure, he found himself wishing that he could reveal his work to someone, as he had once been able to do. The solitude of his task was never oppressive, but

from time to time, in the pauses of his day, he felt a touch of loneliness. The King no longer summoned him, and his apprentices had moved into an adjoining chamber and taken on apprentices of their own.

One afternoon, when he was deep-sunk in his invisible kingdom, there was a rap at the door of his chamber. Half raising his head from the teakwood box, the maker of miniatures called for the visitor to enter. The door opened to admit two of the four new apprentices. They began by apologizing for disturbing the Master at work, but explained that they had long admired his unsurpassed art and could not resist the desire to pay their respects and to beg for news of his latest work, of which they had heard confused and contradictory reports. Their own work was still crude and trifling, they had scarcely the skill with which to fashion the leg of a table, and they hoped that a visit to the Master would instruct and inspire them. The Master knew at once that the apprentices, who were both quite young, were very sure of themselves and were belittling themselves only out of courtly politeness, but the loneliness of his last months was soothed by their words of homage. Giving way to temptation, he moved aside to permit them to view his kingdom through the glass. True, they would be able to see nothing, for he had dropped fully beneath the floor of the visible, but perhaps they could somehow sense, as he could in the darkest depths of his mind, the splendor and precision of his invisible art.

The first apprentice bent over the glass in the sloping top of the teakwood box. After a few moments he stepped aside and allowed the second apprentice to bend over the glass. When both had done looking, the younger of the two said that the Master's work was indeed incomparable. Never in his short life had he seen anything so remarkable in both conception and execution. At once, the second apprentice gave voice to his admiration, saying that even in his dreams he had not dared to imagine such loveliness. And, indeed, it was the highest of all honors simply to be in the presence of so great an accomplishment. Then the two apprentices thanked the Master for dignifying them with his attention and respectfully took their leave. The maker of miniatures, knowing that they had seen nothing, that their words were hollow, and that they would never visit him again, returned with some impatience to his work; and as he sank below the crust of the

visible world, into his dazzling kingdom, he understood that he had travelled a long way from the early days, that he still had far to go, and that, from now on, his life would be difficult and without forgiveness. ♦

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