

Shaping a working is an act of poetry—if poetry were also to use strict self-discipline and mathematic precision. Maybe you’d argue that it does; I’d reply by saying that you have no experience with the arcane and therefore cannot make a reasonable comparison.

I shook uncontrollably. Only moments before, I’d killed a man for the first time, the thin blade of my dueling sword sliding sickeningly into him, his eyes wide in shock and sudden fear, the crimson blossom of his spent lifesblood quickly dying his white shirt.

Where I come from, we don’t duel to the death, or even to first blood; we duel to maneuver our opponent into a position from which he cannot easily escape, demonstrating both prowess and restraint, bravery coupled with a recklessness that risks injury to self for the chance to outwit another. Here in Ealthe, life is cheap and only blood will settle a dispute of ever-ephemeral honor. In my haughtiness, I’d thought that my skill at arms would allow me to embarrass Ridley without harm to either of us. Once blows were struck, only then did I understand my old tutor’s meaning when he told me to beware those with great anger and little skill. Ridley’s broad, clumsy swings might have been easy to counter if he hadn’t so overexerted himself in his rage. I wanted to wait for him to tire before moving to the offensive, but the sheer fury of his attacks would have overwhelmed me before he relented, and I could do nothing but strike to kill if I was to survive. A fool I am, sometimes.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t blame him. He’d caught me red-handed with his red-headed paramour, loud as we were in an otherwise quiet and forgotten corner of the college grounds. How he had come upon that spot in the first place, I didn’t know. Not that it mattered.

I hadn’t cared that Ridley and Synne had been known lovers for some time. I hadn’t cared that she intended to use me only as revenge against Ridley for some perceived sleight; the untowardness of it all made it somehow the sweeter. I hadn’t cared that the university might expel me for dueling, or that Ealthen law forbade such violence. We’d had swords close at hand, and the heady rush so common to both sex and fighting makes it easy for one to lead to the other.

I did care once I’d killed him, though. He had been my friend at the university, a gifted scholar and sure to become a talented magus one day. My own recklessness had destroyed all of that.

At the time, though, I’d had no time for mourning or I’d soon have been mourning my own passing. Some of Ridley’s friends had been with him, you see, and when hot words became cold steel they had quickly decided the hero and the villain. The villain’s victory had upset their sensibilities; before Ridley had even fallen to the ground and died they had readied their own weapons or sorceries against me.

Had Synne not intervened—why she did, I’ll never know—I might have been responsible for even more death. Not by my own hand, of course, but had one of our fellow scholars killed by sorcery, death would have been the only penalty permissible under the law.

She had intervened, though, thrown up a barrier against which their initial assaults crashed without effect, sparks springing to life at random and rain beginning to fall from a clear blue sky in a small radius around us, manifesting Flux bleeding away from the Power summoned by those present.

Though the strain of such a sorcery on Synne must have been immense, I did not linger to see to her. Like a rabbit who knows the dogs have smelled him, I bolted. Immediately, my new attackers gave chase.

I am not a runner. I do not find pleasure in it as some, nor am I very good at it. But I am agile enough, and I weaved carefully ably through the afternoon crowds on Asterfaen’s streets, jinking and suddenly changing direction to prevent my pursuers from overtaking me by sheer speed. I’d spent many a night looking for trouble in the city proper, so I knew the streets well. My companions, better students than I, had not and did not.

Even so, the tension of pursuit and the fear of what might happen if caught shrink perception and thought into a narrow tunnel, one through which I could not adequately view the mental cartography of the city I had crafted over time. Thus it was that I took a wrong turn, moving left at a crossroads when I should’ve gone right, and soon found myself facing an old stone wall at the end of Boggart Close. I had gained enough distance from my pursuers that they had stopped at my last turn to determine where I had passed; their arguing voices carried down the street like a herald of their impending arrival.

I looked back down the alley to determine if I might be able to fight my way out—this thought was quickly discarded when I realized that, somewhere along the way, I’d dropped my sword. Empty handed, I turned back to the wall. I’m even less a climber than a runner, and the passage of time had worn the wall’s stones too smooth to find any purchase.

Only one option remained to me, it seemed. I closed my eyes and began to draw upon the Power. As I said, my hands were shaking uncontrollably as the shock of the past moments caught up to me, so I performed the gestures and hand-symbols only with great difficulty. Words spilled softly from my mouth, in a halting mumble at first as I fought to center myself and assemble the thoughts and mental images I would need to form the Power into a working.

As I prepared, the Power enveloped me, a comforting embrace at first that quickly became an oppressive force, as if I’d swum too deep into the sea. I focused my consciousness and intent on the stony barrier, stringing sentences of commanding words together.

The words and the gestures bear no power to shape a working in and of themselves; they are only aids to the practitioner, attempts to focus his mind. A working is shaped through sequences of thoughts and imaginative images formed in the mind’s eye—this is why it is poetry and not natural philosophy. A wrong mental impression inserted into the process could unravel the whole working. What we call “the Power” is the raw stuff of Creation, unadulterated possibility itself, and such a thing is dangerous to unleash into the Avar uncontrolled. Even the small amounts that bleed from well controlled workings as Flux can be dangerous if allowed to accumulate.

After a moment, the gestures and words took effect, all else fading away to leave me with the working. I struggled to shape the Power into my desired form. I formed first an image of a grand stone, a rocky outcropping, the clouds flying past at high speed until time and wind and water reduced the stone to dirt. Next, I imagined the stones of the wall being laid upon one another, mortar slapped haphazardly between them; this image I then reversed, the wall being taken apart

and the mortar scraped away as each stone leapt away from the others. The thought of a breaking chain followed, the snapping links shattering into tiny shards propelled away by an invisible force.

Even as I formed the images, I could feel the Power struggling against me, writhing against the bonds I had placed on it, seeking its own freedom. Given the nature of my working, this proved especially distracting; I could feel other thoughts and ideas lurking at the edge of my consciousness, threatening to intrude and destroy the meanings I had so carefully developed in my mind. No longer did I speak softly; my words now were yelled as the Power swirled into shape. I could hear the footfalls of my pursuers quickening behind me.

Just as the proximity of my assailants’ steps shattered my concentration, the working took effect, the stone wall softening into a thick mud. I forced my way through without hesitation, unable to see as the muck clung to my face and body. As soon as I reckoned that I had passed entirely beyond the wall, I let the working collapse, mud become stone once again. The mud that clung to me dropped away as pebbles, and I could hear the clank of a sword against stone as heavy rock enveloped a weapon that had been swung at me as I fled.

A doorway opened and closed, both literally and metaphorically. That seemed fitting, as I knew that my footsteps must now carry me away from Asterfaen and the university, never to return.