

Clouds

Erling Sharp



Artwork by [Ivy Maggie](#).

BARKING WIND ABANDONS BLACK SEA, galloping cliffwards. Finds Solisteles watching cloud wash star away. Evening dew soaks back. Salt dries lip – kind contact Goddess sent.

Northeastern wind shakes sky, Screams for summer's doom. War cloud and rain cloud swirl and recoil, each rejecting uncurled friendship's touch. Yon peak will cut them open soon, bleeding hail, snow, rain. Boom-wave drums cliff. Again, again, again. White spume sprays.

Solisteles shivers. Remembers flame's hot flash and flicker. No fire here. Only cold lingers here. Moor lacks woodland's burdened hand. Barren dune and lofty cliff alike present pauper's gift. Solisteles seeks driftwood daily beachside. Finds feeble fare. Shivering-cold winter beckons.

Master Ancee's keep boasts rattling copse, but Solisteles begs not. No autumn fire. No winter heat. No warm crackle. No dry, sleep-seduced flesh. Only damp soil, damp heather, damp air. Damp, blood-soaked lungs.

Evening gloom descends. Night's bleak breath fogs land. Shiver-hands, shiver-bones, shiver-jaw.

White gull-tribe flees ragged coast, heading inland. Solisteles follows them home. Collapsing cottage. Time-wrecked ruin. Decaying dank den.

Home empty. Heart empty. Stomach empty.

Table-stranded candle burns low. Door barred. Cloak hung. Blanketed sat. Damp air leaks foul death-reek. Snort phlegm and spit. Cough hard and wheeze. Lung leaks red. Life's portion cut nightly. Curl blanket tight.

Cold dirt floor. Jealous draft snatches heat. Shivering nightlong. Early hour brings padded feet. Animal feet. Animal snout. Sniffs door. Once. Twice. Solisteles unpeels eye. Body rigid and waiting. *Shh*. Quiet waiting. Animal snout sniffs no more.

Slow hours seeking breeze-blown gossip. Seeking padded feet. Seeking sniffing snout. Diseased sleep overwhelms.

Pitter-patter roof. Solisteles wakes. Rises. Opens door. Mist-mourned moor. Sky-soaked moor. Wind-herded rain rakes cliff. Sea storm booms. Waves hammer headland, smashing stone stockade.

New moon today. Anclee home today. Hunger ends today. Emptiness ends today. Misery-moor beyond door watches. Waits. Out there, midnight's visitor roams.

Solisteles leaves door open. Turns away. Unrolls Anclee's divination chart. Scythe and sword, fortune and failure, love and loss – chart reveals all. Cradle bed, bridal bed, grave bed – Life's portrait painted. Solisteles seeks his future. Seeking is short.

Gloom-sunk hut shades sight. Tired eye rubbed raw. Belly licks and paws, resenting mind's abstraction. Cloak on, house fled and away inland.

Body sighs, fate-weary and worn. Toothache. Leg ache. Lung ache. Stomach ache. Life's feeble throne fails. God's spring soil sings softly. Barrow-bliss beckons.

Solisteles walks on, food-dreams forcing fatigued feet forward.

Sky-borne seagull-tribe career cliffwards, fleeing dawn's sullen sanctuary. Sea storm's shelter sought instead. Sour omen sadly seen. Should Solisteles flee too?

Wild banshee wind wails. Wet moor grass waves.
Solisteles closes hood, ducks head, hurries on.

Deer trail slices heather wide. Wind whistles and whips. Solisteles looks back time and again, seeking midnight's curious migrant. Sky-soaked moor empty. Stone-grey sky enfolds. Wet world. Weeping world. Clothes saturated. Skin soaked. Stomach's claw selfish host defiles. Three weeks awaiting Anclee. Today, stomach sated. Blessed heat. Blessed sleep. Blessed need nurtured.

Mothering cliff reclaims crumbling farm. Deer track weans worn-earth path.

Fort's single tower escapes low hall. Dirty gauze veils arrow-slit window. Anclee's wife Roan lives here. Visiting alone ill-felt-and-fortuned.

Rusty knocker stains corroding wood. Solisteles knocks. Dog barks and scratches. Woman shouts. Door opens.

Dirty thin Roan. Young face old. Cold moonstone eyes empty. Long lank hair.

'Well?'

'Solisteles. Living cottage-side. Master Anclee here?'

'I know you.'

Roan disappears darkwards. Solisteles waits.

Crow clicks and caws. Dancing white-feathered duke. Blight-fed barrow bird. Death's mournful messenger.

Caw.

Warning, or wisdom's weary cry? Anclee decreed Solisteles the Sight. Sight implores far running now.

Roan unreturned. Door stands open. Solisteles parts collapsing shadows. Enters gloom-hall.

Dark. Dreary. Empty. Dark as diseased dreams.
Dreary as sky-soaked moors. Empty as Solisteles'
stomach.

Dim light feathers thin passage. Mud-soaked puddle
pools underfoot. Solisteles lifts cloak clear. Cryptal fort
no home. Time's insistence weighs heavy here.
Graveyard spirit whispers ever-while – hungry tomb-
trembler mouthing memories. Solisteles makes fast feet.

Bare stone chamber provides grim welcome. Rotting
wooden throne swallows slender Roan. Smoking torch
chokes itself. Smoke's bitter breath stings eye and throat.
Roan's bird-bone finger fingers moulding armrest. Black
dog lays afoot, awatch and waiting.

'I wonder who they were, poor souls made king and
company here. You suppose they were attended?'

'Past speaks here. Ask ghost.'

'What's the point of a queen if she must wash her own
linen, fetch her own ale? Is it not for ordinary folk to run
and fetch and carry? A queen's burden is to sit and wait.
A hard job, maintaining poise the sad day long. They
were lonely here, like me. I sit and wait too. No one
attends me either, not even my own lover.'

'Old timers unpacified?'

'This land is misery-sired and born. I thought you
true-sighted. Do you not feel it? This land wearies of
itself, dreams of waves' forgetful blanket, obscured
seabed's gentle palm.'

'Is Anclee returned?'

'Nor likely too. Probably found better fare on the
road. I should have been a queen, you know. Laughter,
food, warmth. All those god-granted gifts should have
been mine. Anclee brought you here to suffer too. That's

his gift to those he loves, we fools who follow. Trapped here. Lost with no return. Waiting on the mighty Anclee, if only to hear a voice break the still and vanquish dread. Do you dread, Solisteles?’

‘Sometimes. Lonely land. How long fort-bound?’

‘A year. Long enough to sour I’m sure you’ll agree. You don’t adapt. Memories long since absorbed me. I’ll never be warm again. You are food for ghosts here Solisteles. Leave while you can.’

‘Anclee home today.’

‘Oh, he’ll come. One day. Who knows when?’

‘Leave, Roan and Solisteles?’

‘I’ve no will left to resist. I’ll wait for Anclee, a man too requited of the rich to attend his only dearest. He’s pulled east and west, but never to this midden. You go.’

‘Food lacks. Road Long. Winter waits.’

‘Take your chances with the road. Here there is but certainty.’

Gull tribe warned. Crow warned. Roan saw true. Anclee unreturned. Husband’s duty forgotten. Roan betrayed. Solisteles betrayed. Honourless man. Hungry ghost smiles. Lonely ghost whispers. Solisteles must leave.

‘Food?’

‘Yes, eat. You must eat.’

‘How much? Month’s worth? Two?’

Roan looks away, senses sipping foreign nectar now. But vaguely hears now. But vaguely sees now. Soft finger raised and pointed.

Solisteles follows. Finds pantry. Grain sacks stacked. Escape’s path made true. Deep breath, back bent and onto shoulder. Leg shakes. Strength fading fast.

Tomorrow bring cart. Collect Roan and more food.
Leave this place. Take dog. Eat dog.

Rancid smoke-choked hall. Gloom-shadow crowds
bare-naked torch. Final-flame flickers. Dark-form lingers.
Ghost wakes. Spirit hungers. Leaving now or never.

'Back tomorrow.'

'Steady minds the road. Stray not in the dark. Hear
not the voices. They fear neither steel nor the Sight. Be
not seen here again. Tomorrow will find you late.'

Solisteles bends head and leaves.

'First light, Solisteles return.'

Outside. Descending dark muzzles sight. Sullen
cloud. Careless wind. Bent heath swirls. Lackluster
drizzle stings eye.

Heavy sack bends back. Sore back. Exposed cold-
burnt hands. White crow croaks. Head cocked, eyes
locked.

Craw.

Death's nuncio spreads white wings. Darkbound
darts. Solisteles follows, sack-sunken and staggering.
Uncertain path darkly trod and barely seen.

Twilight scatters. Black-clouded starless sky descends.
Storm's blister lanced. Rain flurry falls. Restless wind
whips. Solisteles marches blind. Falling feather brushes
head. Eye upturns. White flicker-wing fast fading.

Craw.

Banshee wears wind's voice full-thin. Ear-full
whispering, far-heard screaming.

No leaving. No leaving.

Solisteles drops grain sack and runs.

Wind flicks blinding salt-spray. Sky booms. Cliff booms. Wave booms. God's bright spear lacerates morose moor. Rain-lashed head bowed.

Dog barks. Now close, now far. Far-off light. Now here, now gone.

Candlelight calls. Home. Inside and door slammed. Bar dropped. Sudden silence. Tired. Rest and hope sought. Water drips.

Candle spills brazen flame. Waiting eyes lick spine. Head turns, sullen eyes rejecting sight.

Roan sits, wolf-skin cloak enclosed and wrapped. Hunting eye. Hunting smile.

'You went off the path?'

'Yes.'

'But you're here now.'

Water drips. Wind whistles. Cold burns. Toe and finger too tenderly iced. Breath-fogged air baits. Cough and phlegm. Wet breath. Blood breath. Bare earth stinks.

'Come here.'

Solisteles goes.

Roan discards cloak afoot, wolf eye shining. Naked pale. Palm meets palm, tongue tastes breast. Kiss. Press body. Flesh meets tender flesh. Bite lip. Roan's scent: august forest quickly rained. Need rubs need. Bone and skin grind together.

Banshee voice returns angry quick. Too late for parting now. Exquisite circle fast embraced and only softly left. Scream becomes murmur becomes silence. World folds hands to watch. Pleasure dart probes. Hungry tomb-host licks air. White crow dances rafter-bound cackle.

Roan's knife unsheathed and high. Womb's mouth
sucks cruel sweetly. Gentle slavery. Last whimper given.
Strength's shallow lake empties.

Knife skewers heart to bone. Ghost paws blueing
flesh. Solisteles stays beyond leaving.

Shallow breath expunges flame. Bar reached and
dropped, door opens. Each step further flees hearing.
Dog barks. Darting gusts dash. Door flaps uncertain.
Slams. Opens. Slams.

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