

# An excerpt from “Ashiepattle”

by Wendy Walker

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When, many years after their marriage, the king tried to summon to mind the appearance of his life on the night he had first seen and fallen in love with her, all that he could remember was her magnificent attire. He shuddered to recall how he had endured the first hour of the ball, before she appeared, in an agony of numbness he had taken few pains to hide. Keeping to his throne and listlessly eyeing the multitude of young women who paraded before him, proud and hopeful in despite of their thick peasant wrists and pitted complexions, he suffered the scene of a busy barnyard to billow up on his dismay; he had hoped for a gathering of goddesses. He had almost made up his mind to plead indisposition to his parents and retire for the night, when his despondent glance rose as if in answer to an unspoken command, and he beheld Ashiepattle framed in the great portal at the height of the stairs.

Her face he could no longer imagine as it had been that night, but her entire figure had roused in him a sensation he could still recall in his own body, vivid and thrilling, a shock of fervid wakefulness floating serenely on the promise of danger. He might brood on that moment forever, it seemed—he would never lose the memory of the sensation—but he could not ever rediscover her young face. Yet he could see her costume in his mind’s eye as clearly as though it stood before him: the splendid bark-and-silver-colored fur thrown so carelessly across her shoulders, like a wolf escaping a parting shot; the ragged convolvulus of her enormous ballooning sleeves, iridescent blue, green, and white, like the splayed abstraction of mallards hung on a door; the dark dagging of the long nether sleeves, like the parted crucial feathers of hawks aloft; the overlaid loops of her meticulously tended tresses, neat and copper tessellated as the scales of an upstream salmon. The quilted lappets jutting from the waist of her vest recalled to him many gentle paws of foxes, hares, and even lions, slain and arranged in a victorious ring. He helplessly imagined unlacing that superficial bodice, to expose the hirsute white lining that so suddenly put him in mind of the bellies of dead doe, and a cheetah he had vanquished once on an excursion to Barbary. The circular motif in the gown’s brocade, being gathered from looseness at the ground to neat folds at the waist, contracted into an even impression of fanning feathers on a quail’s or pheasant’s throat.

Then she had turned away, out of the door, and moved leftward across the room.

And as she moved, he saw that the shape of her wolverine cape described the very quadrilateral of the field, belonging to his father’s renegade vassal across the mountain, which he so long and so ineffectually had yearned to possess; and the pure launch of her skirt mimicked the very contour of the fertile hillside claimed by the Bishop of Tours, which he had not briefly, nor successfully, disputed in the ecclesiastical and secular courts, and yet could not yield his claim.

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