

**THEODORE ENSLIN**

*The Spirit  
of a Lark*

**McPherson's Fortnight**

*Series One N<sup>o</sup> 7*

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## The Spirit of a Lark

I had left my native village in sadness and disgust. I was not old at that time, but the handful of friends I had had—people who had similar interests to mine—had all died or moved away. I was living alone on the outskirts of town. Except for running necessary errands, I rarely went into the village itself. I was not exactly shunned, but most of the inhabitants, young and old, considered me odd, and in some cases a downright nuisance. It was certain that our interests were dramatically opposed. Somehow it had seemed possible for me to continue in an unfriendly environment, in many cases grubbing my living from the land. I foraged for food and fuel. I had never held any sort of permanent job, and that catch phrase ‘the commute to work,’ made me cringe, and that cringing was often evident to others who had chosen a different path. I am sure that many people were jealous of my apparent leisure, with no visible means of support, and it had been whispered among the usual gossips that I was probably engaged in some sort of criminal activity. I had never married, or had a long term engagement or relationship. My house was sub-standard by local notions of what it should have been like. I rarely took part in local celebrations. In earlier times these oddities would have been tolerated, if the oddball had not interfered with more ordinary lives, but now anything that was out of lockstep with the crowd was suspect. Worse still,

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I had no affiliation with a religious organization—a man to be avoided.

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So, exit from exurbia. That was easy in itself. I decided to travel light, and put a few provisions in my knapsack, leaving most of my few belongings behind, even to a half cup of warm coffee on the table where I had finished breakfast. I took the usual route of my few earlier excursions—off my left wrist. But this time I seemed to be half asleep, barely aware of a long journey which included bus travel, and then a walk with several companions who were not particularly pleasant. One man, a giant, led the way through a dense forest. He carried what seemed to be an ancient pikestaff with which he pointed the way.

When we had cleared the woods, my fellow travelers had disappeared, and I was in familiar country—marshes and meadows where my friend, Roy Basileus, had his duck blind. I reached that, passing a cottage which I didn't remember. Roy came out from his adjacent house, and greeted me warmly: "Ah, so you have finally come." He explained that he had built the cottage, and now lived here full time. The duck hunting was good, and he had few other interests. He invited me in for a roast duck dinner. I have always been very fond of wild duck, and these were excellently done—a far cry from the commercial 'duckling'—most of it bone and grease.

Roy invited me to stay over, and perhaps to go with him to the blind in the morning. He advised me not to go up the rise to the windmills. Most of them were not in operation, and abandoned. "And Zerlina is not here." He chuckled for a moment. So he knew details of my former visit. I agreed to stay with him that night, but said that I would have to leave early the next day. "Then

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I would advise you to take the beaten path across the marshes. You may find something to your liking there.”

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I stayed that night after Roy's repeated urging, and left early in the morning. A land mist soon burned off, and I was aware that I was crossing a gently rising grassland that seemed limitless. Here and there I saw the remains of isolated farmhouses. There was no sign of life. The sun was hot, and I was glad that I had taken a canteen which Roy had given me. It was good and slaked my thirst, but it was not water. The meadows had gradually risen to a rocky terrain. Here and there solitary trees dotted the landscape. In the distance I saw a steeper rise and what might be a forest. When I reached it I was confronted by a steep escarpment. There seemed to be no way up, and yet I was certain that I must get beyond it. There was a small stream that flowed along the base with pools in the shade of the forbidding rocks. I took advantage of one of them and went in for a swim.

Very pleasant. And refreshed, I started looking for some sort of path that would lead me to the top. Eventually I found a fault in the ledge where there seemed to be a natural staircase. I tried it and found that there were few difficulties. Steps, but nothing more dangerous. When I had reached the top I was in deep woods, but there was a well-defined path that soon led me out of the trees to another vast meadow. This time it seemed almost subalpine. The grasses were more sparingly scattered—a tougher breed than those below. The ground was arid—no intervening marshes as there had been in Roy's country. A clearer air. But the path continued. I followed it for what seemed many days and nights. Did I eat or sleep along the way? Who knows? This was a place that did not answer to ordinary timing.

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Eventually I reached a fairly large river. The remains of a bridge spanned it, and I crossed it warily. On the far side there were a few abandoned cellar holes, and several wells that had evidently served some sort of settlement. But the more or less level grassland seemed to end a bit farther on—dropping off as abruptly as it had risen when I had first entered the high grassland.

Not far from this dramatic change in the landscape, there was a slight descent, and a separate meadow which seemed as limitless as the others. It was different from the various levels of terrain through which I had passed. It seemed to have been recently cultivated, and the grass grew as lush as in the lowlands. It seemed to have been artificially built, a vast oval shape, that indicated husbandry. There were two dilapidated farmhouses at one end of this grassland. They seemed deserted. I went up to the first one. It was barely standing. The floors sagged under my weight. The whole structure seemed ready to collapse. I beat a hasty retreat.

Going on to the second house, I found it in better condition, despite its swayback roof and broken windows. I went in across a great slab of granite. The door stood partly open, but seemed intact. I went through a short hallway to a large square room, which was partly furnished with a square table and a number of chairs. What surprised me most was a neat stack of boxes which seemed familiar. Indeed they were. Many of the belongings which I had left behind were in them, much as I had left them. On the table was a cup of coffee, the same one that I had left. It was still warm. Was I still in my former house in the other dimension? Apparently not—this was quite obviously another house. At the end of the room there was a section set up as a farm kitchen. There were cupboards and a few counters,

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and an old cast-iron cookstove, as well as a soapstone sink. At one end of this there was a handpump. I tried the handle and a stream of water came out of the spout. It was surprisingly clear, as if it had been used recently. Evidently someone had primed the pump, and cleared the water shortly before my arrival. Behind the stove there was a neat stack of wood as well as kindling.

I was not disturbed by any of this. It seemed that I had made this journey, and that it was mine in ways that might not have been the same for others who had suddenly found the circumstances of their lives changed. It seemed obvious that I was in the place where I should be, at any rate I was here.

I went further into the house through a door that stood ajar, into another room at the back of the kitchen. My old couch was there, and a small table at which I had worked. An alcove led to another room. A spare bed of mine was there, freshly made, and much more neatly than it might have been after my hit-or-miss attempt at it. Suddenly I became very tired, almost as if I had been drugged. It was growing dark outside, or it may have been merely that I was half asleep. I scarcely remember undressing and climbing into the bed—a bit higher than more modern ones.

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I woke in what I suppose was morning. Timing, even natural timing, had changed so much that I couldn't keep track of it as I once had. The room was bright, and my dingy belongings looked cleaner than they ever had in my former home. Neatly stacked, they would have to be put in some sort of order, before the inevitable clutter of daily living rearranged them into a semblance of something that could be called my own. Perhaps another room would do better for some of it.

I went back into the kitchen. The stove was warm,



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and there were biscuits on the warming shelves. Coffee was bubbling in a percolator. I sat down to eat and drink a better breakfast than I had had in a long time. Finishing it, I went to the sink. A large basin of hot water was already in it. I washed the few dishes and arranged them in a strainer. Then I decided to look over the rest of the house. There was a staircase off the main room, and I went up to the second floor. There was another large room there, and one a bit smaller, fitted out as the true bedroom. Three sides of the larger room had bookshelves floor to ceiling, and my books were in labelled boxes waiting to be distributed.

I went down again and found a back door to a sort of outside cellar. From it, a bulkhead up another short flight to the outside. As I started up, the upper door opened, and a young girl, little more than a child, greeted me with a laugh. "Call me Lark, if you like." Yes, she had prepared breakfast, knowing that I was still asleep, and when the 'porters' had brought my belongings, she had had them put in what she hoped were appropriate places, knowing that I would be coming soon, and would need some of them. She apologized for the broken windows, and various other signs of disrepair, and said that everything would be set to rights. She wanted me to see the place as it was, and whether or not I was willing to move in. I was speechless, and for the first time since my arrival I was surprised. I think I thanked Lark, but she was gone.

I spent the morning upstairs, arranging my belongings. I thought I heard various sounds, hammering and other noises perhaps the creaking of old beams common to older houses. Outside there were innumerable bird calls, perhaps the 'zeek' of insects, crickets or cicadas. I realized that I was hungry, and went downstairs to try to find things for lunch. There was no need.

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The table was set, and again, a finer meal than those to which I had been accustomed was ready for me. It was so good that I thought I would like more. Even as I thought this, another bowl of chowder appeared. I was no longer particularly surprised at any of this. Perhaps 'Lark' was responsible, but she was nowhere in sight. The dishes vanished as soon as I had finished, and I looked around me. The sagging floors were straight. The front door had been rehung, and opened and closed easily. The broken window panes had been replaced. So this was how it was to be. The door opened and Lark reappeared. But this was not the little girl of our earlier encounter. A young woman instead. She asked me if I had found things satisfactory, including lunch? I certainly had. "You are Lark?" "Of course." She advised me to stay downstairs for the afternoon, perhaps go for a walk. And again she was gone.

I decided to take a walk across the grasslands, in a direction that I had not taken before. I seemed to go a great distance for many hours. It was beginning to get dark by the time that I had reached the house. But I had already noticed that the ordinary (arbitrary) divisions of measurement meant little in this country. I had been struck by the fact that when I was rearranging my former belongings the few clocks that I had owned were missing, and I no longer had the watch which I had worn in my former life. That did seem a bit odd, but I had already learned not to question such differences, and earlier I had entered off the wrist country, on my former visit to the land of the windmills. There had been such differences there. During my return to 'my' house I had become hungry once more. It would be very pleasant to have lobster for dinner. Formerly, I had been very fond of it. When I came into the dining room I found a large platter with a pair of them inviting me

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to eat. I did so, along with several glasses of the brandy, similar to what Roy Basileus had given me. After I had finished, Lark appeared once more, as I had imagined she would. This time she was a striking middle-aged grande dame, dressed as if for a party.

She asked after my walk. Had I found it pleasant? Was the dinner to my liking? After my enthusiastic replies, she suggested that we go upstairs. Everything was as I had left it the previous morning, except that the rooms were spotless—better housekeeping than that to which I had been accustomed, and these windows and doors had been repaired as they had been below. Nothing of mine had been disturbed. Lark asked me if it had been done as I might have wanted it? Again I was enthusiastic, but suggested that there might be more light on what I took to be the north wall of my bedroom. She simply answered “Ah,” and disappeared.

I woke after what I supposed to have been a full night's sleep. It was just beginning to turn light, much of it coming through two large windows where there had been none a day before. Going downstairs, breakfast was ready as I had thought it might be. When I had finished, and the debris had vanished, the little girl, Lark, appeared once more. She seemed in a playful mood, and skipped around the room. Finally she asked me if I had slept well, and did I like the new windows in my bedroom? Then she asked me more about yesterday's walk. Did I miss anything? I assured her that it had been a very pleasant saunter, but in all this prairie-like expanse, I did miss woods, and perhaps a stream. She laughed, and said that I need only follow my wrist in this direction—and she pointed to what I took to be north. “I think you might find something that you will like.” As soon as she had disappeared I set out. It did not seem far. I could see a line of trees, and eventually I

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reached them, and indeed it was a splendid woods. The trees were a vast assortment of the many kinds to which I had been accustomed in my former home, but there were many others which I had never seen before. There were several well-defined paths, and I followed one of them until I had reached a small stream, which was extremely clear, with occasional deep pools. I stopped at one of these, stripped, and went in. The water was refreshingly cool, but not frigid. When I came out I discovered a tray with various picnic foods, and a bottle of the brandy to which I had become accustomed. Obviously I had not been forgotten. I dressed and ate my lunch. Going further, I discovered open patches in the woods, and many kinds of berries, strangely, but not strange here, they were all in fruit at the same time. I picked a quantity as dessert. Further on I discovered a slight depression where there were palms, and other tropical growth. It seemed that nothing had been forgotten. There were many different kinds of birds, and at one point I saw a large group of deer who seemed not at all disturbed by my presence. I walked on for several more hours, if time could be reckoned that way. Finally I decided to go back. I reversed the process along my left wrist, and was soon back in the familiar grassland. Before going directly to the house, I went to the edge of the ravine. It was as dark and forbidding as it had been when I first discovered it. But it interested me, and I wondered if it would be possible to explore it on another walk. But there was growing darkness, and I decided to go home.

I went in half expecting to find the evening meal waiting for me, but there was nothing. However, in a few minutes there was a knock at the door, and Roy Basileus appeared with the usual offering of a pair of ducks. I was very glad to see him. The one thing that dis-

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turbed me in all of this was the lack of any companionship, except for the daily visits from Lark. Roy suggested that we prepare the dinner ourselves, and as I have always enjoyed cooking we did—roasting the birds in the cookstove oven, which I hadn't used before. It was a splendid meal, washed down with the usual brandy. Roy settled back in his chair, and asked me how I had been faring. Did I enjoy the life here? Then he laughed a bit, and said, "Of course you don't have Zerlina." I assured him that that was not troubling me. That brief encounter had posed many problems, more than I had needed. "Yes, there are advantages to a solitary life, particularly if the daily living is assured without much effort." He added that so long as I paid attention to the left wrist, and did not attempt to go in other directions, the various 'fingers' would answer all of my needs.

I was about to ask him what he meant by the various fingers when Lark appeared, this time as an old woman, striking, but a dowager. She and Roy obviously knew each other. He laughed. "Oh, I do prefer an elder to a young girl," and she smiled and kissed her hand to him. The conversation became general, and Roy took his leave shortly thereafter, urging me to visit him soon, either at the blind or the house. Lark then asked me if I had enjoyed my visit to the forest. I assured her that it had been splendid, and that I would visit it again, if that was permissible. "Of course. Spend as much time there as suits you. Is there anything else that you would like to do?" So I asked her if it would be all right to go down into the ravine.

There was an immediate change in her attitude. After a brief pause she shook her finger and said, "That is forbidden. If you insist, I cannot prevent you, but you will have lost the use of your wrist, and you will not be able to return here." I could see that she was serious,

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and certainly there was no real reason why I should go there, particularly into such forbidding country. So I said that I would respect her wishes.

“A wise choice,” and she was gone once more.

My life continued, as it had begun since I arrived. Anything that I needed was immediately available. I spent much time in the newly discovered forest. I began to do more things for myself, such as cooking, and the various household chores, but whenever I didn't do these things, through forgetfulness, or desires to do other things, they were done for me as before. Occasionally I visited Roy Basileus, following the ‘finger’ that he had indicated when he had pointed out the route to follow. Although I sometimes went to the edge of the ravine, looked down and across to the far mountains, I did not go any further, even though there were moments of temptation. Lark appeared almost daily in one or another of her various guises. At one of her visits I did say that I missed a few things, such as music which had been important to me in my former life. She told me to look on a table upstairs in the library which had become extensive, since any book which I had asked for appeared. I found what looked like a very large book—perhaps a dictionary. I opened it and found that it was a catalogue of all of the music that I had ever known and cherished, as well as much that I had never known. In the margin before each entry there was what appeared to be a small black button. I pressed one of them, and immediately the piece began, surrounding me and filling the room, as if I had been in a concert hall. I had never heard or understood the music so clearly. This was to become one of the greatest gifts in my new condition. Looking at what had been a blank wall earlier, I could see the musicians, as if I were at an actual performance, not unpleasant,

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but rather strange. Over the next few hours I pressed a number of the buttons, with the same result. Music again became an important part of my life.

I experimented with the various 'fingers' from my wrist, and found it possible to go to numerous places beyond the grasslands. There was a large pond, almost a lake, to the left of the forest. There were hills. When I climbed them there were views that went as far as Roy Basileus' house, and the duck blind. I could see the farther hills where I had spent time among the windmills. But all of the horizons appeared to end with a clearly defined drop-off—the ravine. Lark continued to appear with her inevitable questions as to what I might want or need, and for a while, at least, I let her know that I was quite happy with things as they were.

I listened to much music, including stage performances of a number of operas. One night, as I was a spectator at a performance of *Don Giovanni*, I noticed Zerlina, my Zerlina / Ms. Anonymous. For a moment I wanted to go to her. I noticed the scars on my left wrist. There was a momentary ache of nostalgia. No, I had no desire to return to that episode, but from then on I did have a persistent longing for some sort of companionship, not necessarily an erotic involvement—simply more than the occasional visits of Lark or Roy.

The seasons gradually changed. Eventually there was winter, but it was gentle—a few moderate snows that soon vanished. There was always heat in the house, whether or not I attended the fires. I have always liked wood fires, and attending to them, but if I forgot, or was asleep, what was necessary continued, and there was always a supply of fuel behind the kitchen stove, and the larger one that heated the upstairs.

But my feelings of loneliness increased. At times I felt that I was in a gilded prison. Finally one evening

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when Lark had appeared as the middle-aged matron, dressed as if for a festive occasion, I told her of my restless loneliness. Would it be possible for me to have some sort of compatible companion, not necessarily a woman, merely someone with whom I could talk, and share my pleasures?

She was quiet for a moment. "Yes, that is possible, but you will forfeit everything else that you have here. Eventually you will have to return to your former home, and you will never be able to return. You will have lost the power of your left wrist. Think carefully before you ask this. Take time."

It was as if I had been struck by a blinding light. No, I had no wish to return to what had been a very unpleasant situation. For a number of days I was as nearly unhappy as I had been in that other life, although outwardly nothing had changed. I spent a period of time as if half-asleep. I took no pleasure in any of my advantages.

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Eventually I seemed to wake up, after a troubled sleep. Yes, everything was as it had been. My breakfast was waiting as usual. I ate and attempted to view the situation in a different way.

I have both the seen and the unseen presence of Lark, and the occasional visits from Roy Basileus, as well as my even fewer visits to him. I suppose that all of this should be enough, even though I have to admit that despite all of my advantages, occasionally, I, Benjamin, am lonely, not necessarily for companionship, but for those few things (some would say that they were many) which I cannot have, and continue here. Therefore I will not ask for company, more than what I have. Nor an entrance to the ravine.

AH! BUT I AM LONELY



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THEODORE VERNON ENSLIN was born in Chester, Pennsylvania on March 25, 1925. Over his sixty-year career as a poet he published roughly 120 books and chapbooks with many of the preeminent literary presses in America and England. He is widely regarded as among the most musical of innovative American poets, having incorporated a considerable range of musical forms into his verse. He has famously remarked that he prefers “to be considered as a composer who happens to use words instead of notes.”

In 1958, a decade after he began the serious pursuit of writing, his first book, *The Work Proposed*, was published by Cid Corman’s Origin press. He is often associated with other Origin writers, including George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley.

Ted Enslin moved to Maine in 1960, where he lived until his death in 2011. The Maine landscape and its geographic isolation have an integral place in his poetry, and are reflected in the works’ distance from literary fashion or the academy. Among his major books are the five volumes of *Forms*, the two volumes of *Ranger*, and *Then and Now: Selected Poems, 1943-1993*. In addition to poetry and short fiction, Ted Enslin has written a play, “Barometric Pressure 29.83 and Steady,” and an extended essay on Gustav Mahler. He released a 20-cd collection of his poetry readings through Solstice Farm Productions. “The Spirit of a Lark” is the second part of *I, Benjamin*, a “quasi-autobiographical” fable of an artist’s coming-of-age.

*I, Benjamin*, <https://tinyurl.com/sstp538>