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## THE COBBLER'S BEARD

MY PARENTS WERE PEASANTS in the Dutch colony of Dakartuta. Like my paternal grandfather, my father was a farmer who grew plants and herbs, which he sold to practitioners of folk medicine and witchcraft. When I was ten years old my parents took a boarder into our home. The man who came to live with us was an elderly immigrant from a faraway island. He was a cobbler by trade who made the most peculiar-looking shoes. Each pair he designed was the shape of an animal. The left shoe always represented the male of the species and the right shoe the female. Our boarder also had a long grey beard, which reached down to the floor, and because of this it was always littered with dust and debris. Strange odours would seep out from under the door of his room at night and occasionally make members of our family ill. It was also not unusual for us to hear peculiar noises coming from behind his door. It wasn't until many years later, when I studied human sexual perversions as part of my medical studies, that I fully appreciated the import of the peculiar yet urgent vocalizations that echoed throughout our house during the year the old cobbler lived among us.

One day the cobbler's beard began to change colour, and over a period of a month it metamorphosed from grey to green to yellow and finally to a brilliant metallic gold. During the following week his tongue underwent a similar metamorphosis, as it evolved from pink to grey to white and finally to a lustrous silver. Shortly after his transmutation, while eating breakfast at our kitchen table one morning, our boarder's tongue fell out of his mouth into his cereal bowl. He quickly retrieved it, placed it inside a purse he always carried with him, and disappeared inside his bedroom. The following day he was found dead in our outhouse by my older brother, who immediately summoned my father. My father removed the silver tongue from the man's purse and pulled out the golden hairs from his beard. Then he tied the hairs together as if they were a sheaf of wheat and put them, along with the tongue, in a vase filled with the saliva of a rabid bat. On the night of the

next full moon my father placed the man's tongue and beard in a chalice and melted them down into heart-shaped ingots, which he brought into town and sold to the local dealer in precious metals. Apparently the sale of the ingots yielded a substantial sum of money, since from that day forward my family never lacked for anything.