
7-15-2016

Mythic Circle #38

Gwenyth E. Hood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hood, Gwenyth E. (2016) "Mythic Circle #38," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2016: Iss. 38, Article 15.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2016/iss38/15>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mythic Circle by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Mythic Circle #38



The Mythic Circle

38/2016

The Mythic Circle # 38, 2016

<u>Editorial: This Issue</u>	42
<u>About This Publication</u>	50
<u>About Our Contributors</u>	55

STORIES:

<i>Myles Buchanan</i> — Brackenstead.....	6
<i>Charlie W. Starr</i> — The Ferrens of Tar Kiln.....	13
<i>Ryder Miller</i> —The Undiplomatic Girl.....	36
<i>Georgia Ann Banks Martin</i> —A Visitor from the Moon.....	44
<i>Lee Clark Zumpe</i> — The Great Hall of Ahkurst.....	52
<i>William H. Wandless</i> —The Finest Jest.....	58

POEMS:

<i>Marly Youmans</i> — After the Black Chrysalis.....	4
<i>Chelsi Robichaud</i> —Solitude.....	43
—Sin—.....	43
—Siren's Call—.....	64
<i>Gania Barlow</i> —Poem for the lost library of La Mancha--.....	50
—Creüsa—.....	51

ILLUSTRATIONS

L. C. Atencio: Cover illustration.
Emily Metcalf: p. 61; back cover.
Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

Copyright © 2016 by The Mythopoeic Society; all rights revert to authors and illustrators.

After the Black Chrysalis

by

Marly Youmans

Cracked.
Cracked open—praise
To that, for that, praise
That the black, feathery lint
Was washed clean from my face,
That the black, feathery lint
Came off in wisps and shreds
And crinkled threads
Like thrums from a loom,
Like lines of false poetry,
Like cat fur in the mouth
On waking.

For hours I lay
Motionless
While they licked
The black, feathery lint
From my mouth and ears,
While they combed
With fingers and lice combs
The black, fine-feathery lint
From my hair.
Grateful.
Praise
To them, all
Backing away,
Leaving me
With the hush
(Praise to the hush)
And the mirrors.

In the black
I had turned to melt,
Rippling pour of metanoia,
My body, my mind a creek
Bearing sticks and leaves,

Tearing them over the rocks,
Far-faring, far, far
Until I knew no place,
No likenesses,
No name, no map.
Nothing pinned me.
Nothing moored.

Then came.
Then, came
The further change.
Like a terrible
Vice in the gut,
When a medicine
Comes and goes
Gathering up a sickness,
Smoothing the rumpled muscles,
A relentless hand that gathers,
A waistband sewn
On a gathered dress—like that, I
Was born again,
Gathered into the air,
Into the company
Of the others.
Washed,
I was
All
Wash,
All sparkle,
All dewdrops.

They hung me
From rafters to dry.
They left me there to dry
In long loneliness,
And when my joints

At last, at last
Joined me,
Made joinery,
Made joinery of me,
Made a house of me,
Made a place to live—
When my strands
Of muscle loved and held me
Fast, and my washed
Upside down hair
Began to expand,
To have its own thoughts
And volition, and so
Like a forest of antennae
Floated into the air,
For the first time
I saw what came
Along with me,
What came
From me,
To me.

The
Mass
Of them like net,
Gossamer and black
With colors—stains
Like the ones that sun and Gothic
Windows rain onto floors,
Glass stained, stained, pane
Marked with glass-blebs,
Marked with shade,
All stained
But dawn-beautiful—
Eyes and eyespots, I
Was nothing but seeing,
Nothing but losing
Myself in seeing
What was still
Nameless,

Naming them only
As like one
Thing after
Another,
Not yet knowing,
Hardly
If at all
Believing.
I glimpsed them,
The mass of them like
A burden, trailing from my back.
And then I saw them, saw more, saw better,
Saw colors and scales and shape,
A morpho iridescence,
An inward architecture
Resembling a grove of trees,
Winter limbs splotched with Christmas lights,
Red and blue, leaf-green and yellow
Wrapped in a cloud of shadow.
Like some colossal, mad gown,
All stain and supports and gossamer,
A triumphant gown with train
Designed for a monarch, for a queen,
The wild, imperial silks
Catwalked in some alternate Paris,
Some metaphysical Fashion Week.
I saw the mass of them.
The name flowered in my mind.
Then the grief (change is grief),
And then the praise (change is also this), it
Streamed, filled me until I tingled,
The dew gathering
And flinging from my
Upside down staring eyes,
And the life and light and blood of me
Coursed through the veins of that mass
Like branched lightning,
Flash of joinery, flying
Sap of fire.

Brackenstead

By

Myles Buchanan

When the morrith trees started to thin and I no longer had to stoop and crawl, I nearly started weeping with relief. I'd been travelling through the Morrithwood for nearly five days, and all that was left of the rations for the journey there were a few scraps of deer jerky I'd been putting off eating. As for the forest, well—morrith trees are pretty enough from a distance, hunched and gnarled and fairy-tale charming with their hollows and shadows, but try walking through them days on end, roots tripping you, morrith-needles attacking any exposed skin. All because Jerrin had decided Tourin Galad *had* to die in a remote northern village, that this was paramount to the rebellion's efforts. Probably more convenient to just ambush Galad's convoy a few miles outside the capital, I'd had the good sense to point out, but Jerrin shook his head before I'd finished speaking: I had missed his point.

"It's not enough to just kill him, Sora," he said. A few years ago we'd holed up in a system of caves just south of the Morrithwood, caves which seemed to exist for the specific purpose of amplifying Jerrin's overwrought speeches. "I want him toppling from a dais," he said. "I want a burst of blood in the morning air. I want the villagers to *see* it. To understand what we can do. What we *will* do. For them, for us. For the people of this land. You're the best we have, Sora, and—"

"All right, all right," I said. If you let him

get started with this sort of thing there was no slowing him down. "You don't need to sing me a ballad. I'm going to do it. Just don't expect me to be all smiles. Can I at least have a horse?"

Jerrin grimaced. "I'm afraid not. Dara and Terin are heading back for round two against the outland garrisons in just a few hours. And going on foot should be quicker anyway. Four days if you take it fast, and you'll have plenty of provisions. The main forest roads are clogged with Holorrom. Plus, isn't this exactly your kind of thing? It's right out of your gnomish storybooks. Journeys through the haunted forest. Quaint Morrithwood villages. And here I was thinking you'd be excited."

"Yeah, sure. It's the chapter about slogging through miles of identical wilderness I'd rather skip. Not to mention the chapter about getting searched at the gates and hanged in the village square."

Jerrin waved this aside. "Unimportant details," he said. Then he leapt up from his chair. "That reminds me—I have something for you." He produced a cloth bundle and slid it across the table to me. "Open it."

Inside was a shining silver crossbow.

"Dara picked it up during the raid. It's the latest Holorrom design. You can load four quarrels at once and fire them all in less than five seconds."

I picked it up and ran my hands over the chilled metal. "It's heavy," I said.

“Impractical.” But I couldn’t help smiling. “Less than five seconds?”

“Try it out if you don’t believe me.” He laughed. “Hellfire. I like you, Sora. I don’t think I say that enough.”

I could see the village gates in the distance and could hear the sounds of conversation on the main road, which was now only a quarter-mile or so to the west. The root-rutted forest floor became a soft path, and the morrith trees gave way to large oaks and laurels and thickets of rhododendrons with wide spaces of bright grass between them. I realized I was walking through the village’s quiet garden, and it reminded me so much of my old home that I had to stop for a moment and get myself together, putting my hands on my knees and looking down at a patch of flowering clover. Long before the days of the Holorrom, gnomes had made these gardens on the borders of each Morrithwood village, in the space between the tangled morriths and the first cottages. I used to run on similar paths with my little village friends, in a different village, long gone now.

Out from under the dense ceiling of branches the day felt warmer, and I remembered it was only the beginning of September. I’d lost some perspective under the morrith trees, done what Jerrin had warned against and ended up bound in memory. It was difficult not to think about a similar summer night, seven years ago, when I fled from a different quiet garden to the Morrithwood beyond while my old life burned. Not that I remembered much—I was eleven—just a lot of wind and rain, patches of coasting clouds overlaid with morrith branches. The glow of red where my village and family had been, quickly dimming as the fires ate through the straw and dried wood and the rain pounded it all down to soggy ash. The texture of twigs and moss through my moccasins. Of course I’d thought I’d seen

gnomes. It wasn’t hard to imagine them, with their white hair and crinkled faces and frail child’s bodies. I’d wanted to see them.

But no point in thinking about that now. What was this village even called? Something *stead*, like everything else in the north, but of course all I could think was Morstead, the name of my childhood village. I joined the convoy of wagons and carts and weathered woodsmen on the main road, the embankment of which was covered in layers of bracken. Ah yes. Brackenstead. How could I have forgotten?

Jerrin had been right—there was no security to speak of at the village gates. This was a good thing, since all I was carrying in the pack was a blanket, the Holorrom crossbow and ammunition pouch, and provisions for a speedy journey back south. Tough to piece together a cover story for that one. I looked at my feet apologetically and edged in behind a bickering family of five as the guards looked on. They were boys holding spears and wearing a few scraps of chain mail, just a few years older than me. I cringed at the thought of killing them, if things went sour, but there was no point in worrying about that now.

It hadn’t occurred to me how similar it would all be, the main market street and cobblestones and small thatched cottages. Even the late-summer breeze seemed gentle in its sorrowfulness, as if the world had some message for me. Yes, this is the way I used to think, as a spacey eleven-year-old. I took my time heading up the street. The merchants and food vendors were closing down their booths, making final transactions. One difference: tiny maple trees lined the streets, narrow trunks with smooth violet bark and leaves already full red. I watched two children climb through one of the trees, a boy and a girl so identical they had to be siblings. The boy looked back at me immediately and I looked away. The trees confused me. They

seemed too tidy and ornate. I wondered who had planted them and why.

"Raspberry tarts!" A short bearded man brandished a basket, and I was endeared in spite of myself. I shook my head but gave him a smile.

I found a room at one of the cheaper inns, which resembled an overlarge and misshapen cottage with a few extra levels crammed under its roof. But inside it was bigger and more popular than it seemed. The clamor of raised voices was overwhelming at first. Too many hours with no one but trees can fool you into thinking you're the only person in the world.

The only room available was on the second floor. "Hope you don't mind cozy," the man behind the counter said.

"Not at all," I told him. A few years before I would have only accepted a first-floor room facing the alley, with a window I could lock and easily open. What can I say? I'd grown careless in my old age.

At the bar I burned Jerrin's funds on chicken and potatoes and gulped a mug of cheap woodsman's beer, taking even breaths, my back turned to the other patrons. With nasty tangled hair and an unwashed face I figured I'd pass for a boy in the loose clothes I was wearing. My hope was to sip my drink, listen to the clash of happy voices and watch the sun get splintered apart by morrith trees, preferably without some off-duty village watchmen or (worse yet) earnest farm boy coming over to ask me where I was from. This plan really seemed to be working, and I was so spaced out that somehow I managed not to notice the hush that fell over the room and Tourin Galad himself, who sat down right next to me.

"Hello, young girl," he said, not missing a beat. He was wearing a glittering silver mail shirt and a dark cloak. Like all the Holorrom his hair was black. By his face he couldn't have been more than thirty-five, which

startled me a little. I'd been picturing an old man. And maybe if I hadn't been caught up in nostalgia, hadn't been sitting there piecing together details of a life there was no way for me to ever go back to, maybe then I would have had the good sense to dodge around the other patrons up to my room. I was tipsy enough that I probably could have bathed and fallen asleep reasonably quickly, woken in the morning ready to put the rapid-firing crossbow to use and get the hell out of there.

"Good evening, my lord," I said. As soon as he broke eye contact I glanced behind him: two thickset silver-armored Holorrom, hands clasped in front of them. I wondered if they would sit me back down if I tried to leave.

"Aren't you a little young for that?" Tourin Galad asked. He pointed to the half-full mug in front of me.

"I'm older than I look, my lord." I offered. "Usually a bit cleaner, too. You'll have to excuse me."

Galad shook his head. "You don't have to apologize. It's not as if it's exactly your choice."

I knew his angle, of course. Tourin Galad had also been raised in a modest Morrithwood village, or so he claimed, and whenever he visited the smaller towns to make sure the woodsmen were thinking happy woodsmen thoughts and paying their exorbitant woodsmen's taxes, he could be counted upon to buy some struggling pastoral type a warm meal at a local inn, or pay a wealthy family to treat a dewy-eyed orphan as their own. Easy enough to see through, you would think, but it seemed to work. If taxes were a little high, well, so what? There were orphans to feed. If the Alchemists Guild had to harvest a few more children than usual in a given year, well, at least Tourin Galad valued the life of the common man.

"Please pardon me, my lord," I said, getting up from the stool. "I don't want to

waste any more of your time.”

Galad reached out and took hold of my upper arm—not hard, but firmly enough that I couldn’t escape without doing something extravagant and cover-blowing, like breaking his wrist. “How about a loaf of wheat bread to share?” Galad said. “A young man I spoke with at the gates told me it’s delicious. But I doubt I could finish an entire loaf to myself.”

“Thank you, sir, but I just ate, and I couldn’t possibly—”

“Oh, none of that! You Brackenstead folk are far too unassuming. You’re hungry—so eat!”

“But my father says—”

“I’m sure your father taught you never to speak out of turn or ask for anything of a lord. But I’m offering this to you. There’s no shame in it. It is a lord’s gift.”

“If you insist, my lord. And thank you, very much.”

Why did I allow this to happen? I’m really not sure. Obviously this was nowhere near according to plan. I could picture the way Jerrin would lower his face into his hands when I told him about it, his incredulous laughter. Jerrin’s official protocol had me shooting Galad down the following morning, during his formal address. Hooded and cloaked, I’d be climbing back down to an empty alleyway, ditching the crossbow and rejoining the crowd while his bodyguards were still picking up the pieces. Then it was back into the forest and away. That was the ideal. But the inn was livening again, heads turning, people murmuring. I made some effort to shake my hair over the profiles of my face, but it wasn’t going to do any good. I’m still not sure why I didn’t run. You’d think I could have figured something out. I should have.

After the barmaid set a mug of beer in front of Tourin Galad and disappeared into the kitchen, he turned to me. “So, tell me about yourself,” he said. “How long have

you lived in Brackenstead?”

“Actually,” I said. “I’m not from Brackenstead.”

Tourin raised his eyebrows. I could see the exchange was already more complicated than he’d anticipated. “Not from Brackenstead,” he said. “Then where?”

“Well,” I said. “My village was a lot like this one. Morstead, it was called. It even had a Quiet Garden. But people came and burned it down when I was six.”

Tourin’s face clouded and I threw him my best look of sorrowful innocence. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he eventually said.

The barmaid came back with the wheat bread and a swirl of butter in a small ceramic dish. Plainly something was the matter with me. Why not a different northern village that the Holorrom *hadn’t* put to the torch? Why not a nice, boring summary of my piteous years as an orphan waif?

“I wondered,” Galad said. “Your speech is too proper for a beggar child’s.” He sipped his beer. “I suppose you lost your whole family.”

“I think so,” I said. “I never saw them after.”

He knew the truth, of course, even if he didn’t know I did. My village had been one of the few in the Morrithwood to show any real organized resistance. There were rebels everywhere, of course, mothers and fathers who picked up knives and brittle heirloom swords when the Alchemists’ Guild came for their children, isolated dissenters who could be shot down and hanged. But once it became clear there was real organization in Morstead, the Holorrom stopped bothering to single people out, didn’t even try to take the children they’d wanted so much. They simply arranged themselves around the perimeter of the village and sent flaming quarrels into the buildings and the people who came out of them. It surprised me how quickly things could be burned, how readily

my whole life had flamed and sparked and gone dark.

"And what have you done with yourself since?"

"Oh, not very much," I said. "I go from place to place. I beg and find food where I can. Today I got enough extra to come to the inn. Mostly people are nice to me."

"Mostly," Tourin Galad repeated. He'd been frowning down at his plate but he looked up at me now. "Can't be easy. Living day by day. I grew up in a Morrithwood village too, you know. Twenty, maybe thirty miles west. We used to explore the forest in the summer."

"We?"

"Just me and my friends. You know, children you fall in with because they're your age in a small town."

The hearth against the opposite wall had been built up and a group of Brackenstead villagers stood around it, firelight leaping between their bodies. Absurdly I felt content. I guess it was nice to talk about something other than filling some Holorrom dignitary up with crossbow quarrels or garroting a corrupt master of coin. And it obviously beat sulking under a bunch of morrith trees. Already the long hike to Brackenstead felt unreal, swallowed into the murk where all my memories seemed to go. I thought about the night before, trying to fall asleep, watching through a patchwork of dark branches and needles as a low moon slid across the sky, and it felt just as distant as everything else. I thought of the clover patch near my old house, the way the little flowers had seemed to glow in the hours before dark, and some playmate of mine who had loved them. I couldn't remember her name.

I sipped the last of my drink. "Where are they now?"

"My old friends? I have no idea, truly. Still there, I would guess. Living their little lives. I haven't been back since."

"Since you were taken, you mean."

Galad looked at me evenly. "You should be careful," he said. "That kind of talk won't do you any favors. You've lived long enough to have figured that out, I would think."

"I'm sorry, my lord," I said. "I forgot myself. It's just—the way the other children talk. You hear things, and—"

He raised a hand. "You don't need to apologize. Really. It makes sense. It's how I would talk too, if I knew only what you knew. It's a problem of information—you're smart enough to understand that. You only see what must be paid. You don't see the good that comes of it because it happens out of sight."

"Not all of it," I hazarded, and smiled at him. I figured I may as well cover my tracks, perform a little more of the clueless grateful orphan. "I would have gone hungry tonight if not for you. You're doing a kind thing right now."

He grimaced, glanced over his shoulder. "Hardly," he said, and his voice seemed to change. "So I bought you a little food on the kingdom's penny. It might seem like a generous act to you, I guess, but..."

"What is it?" I asked. I guess I figured I was just having fun. But I knew time was getting away from me. With every minute my cover story seemed flimsier, and my pack, wedged just below me, began to look more and more like what it was: a death sentence, if anyone found out what was inside.

Something of this must have shown on my face. "Is this how you normally talk to lords?" Galad asked.

"I don't usually talk to lords at all, my lord."

He laughed, looked away and then back at me, and finally gave me what seemed like an unwarranted smile. "Right," he said. "Yet here we are."

"Drinking the inn's cheapest beer."

"The inn's cheapest and oddly delicious

beer,” Galad said, still looking at me. For a moment I wondered if he was going to excuse himself, but then he said, “Two more, please!” raising his hand, and the barmaid was taking the empty glasses away.

“You just need to drink more woodsmen’s beer,” I found myself saying. “They must be doing something bad to it in the capital.”

“It’s wine country up there, I’m afraid,” he said. “They disdain this stuff, though obviously they’ve never tried it.” He lipped foam from the top of the mug. “It all just rests on pretension.”

“I wouldn’t know, my lord.”

He laughed. “I suppose you wouldn’t. But I know you’d hate it.”

“You know?”

“Oh, you might be impressed at first. The flowers and fountains and the buildings polished till you can practically see your own hellstained reflection in them. But it’s fake, all of it. The buildings. The people. The wine you have to drink. You’d see through it in a moment.”

Finally I understood what was happening, the thing between us making everything seem so strange. He wanted me. It was obvious now—his shifted posture, the newly self-conscious youth in his features, the hope in his eyes. I had the impulse to giggle. Torchlight fluttered in the windows and patrons streamed into the inn, bellowing and laughing. I felt a cool gust of evening air. When I straightened in my chair I was startled by the heavy throb of alcohol, glimpsed Galad’s bodyguards in the corner of my eye and almost jumped. I had actually forgotten they were there. It was time to go. “My lord,” I said. “I really should be—”

“I was there, you know,” Galad muttered.

Something lurched in me. “You were where?”

“I squired for Morth Lowin. The general who led the attack on your village. If I’m thinking of the right one, anyway. I was just a

boy, younger than you are. Fourteen, I think I was. I’d never seen so much fire.”

He sipped his beer, looking down. “I didn’t do anything. Nothing other than put on Lowin’s armor and saddle his horse. And then guard him as...as it happened. There wasn’t—”

“There wasn’t much to do, was there?” I said. “Can’t have been a very challenging battle for the Holorrom. For us, though....” I looked at him. “Well. There was quite a bit of fire.”

“I wouldn’t have done things that way. It was unnecessary. Even Lowin looked a little pale. But I was fourteen.”

“Right. You said.”

I imagined how it must have looked from a distance, the first quarrels cutting down the night watchmen, the next striking straw and thatch. Faint smell of smoke in the night air, cries of alarm then terror then pain. A rising perimeter of flame.

He started to say something more, but a big red-faced man shouldered his way up to the bar and stepped between us. “You’ll pardon me, lords and ladies,” he bellowed. Apparently he didn’t realize who he was talking to. Galad’s bodyguards took the man by the arms and pulled him back. “You aren’t to stand between them,” one of them said. The man twisted in their grip, indignant, and I swept my pack from the floor and put the sole of my boot into the nearest guard’s hamstring, just above the greaves. The three men toppled into Galad and I ran for the door. Someone put a meaty hand on my shoulder and I threw an elbow behind me. There was a grunt of pain and the hand released me.

It was a busier night than any I could remember from Morstead. I walked quickly up the main street for a block or two, the miniature maples glowing in the torchlight, then dipped down a side street toward the village’s edge. The torchlight and voices

grew faint, and I wondered if they were produced somehow by the same receding source. I tucked myself into the shadow of a doorway and took a few minutes to get myself together. My heart was still going like crazy and it was hard to keep from laughing out loud. Galad, the lovestruck village boy. Galad, who'd been on the verge of inviting me back to his quarters to bathe and spend the night with him. I imagined him as an awkward fourteen-year-old, watching as the flames leapt up in Morstead.

After a few minutes I got to my feet and followed an alley toward the Quiet Garden. The guard patrolling the Garden's edge looked tired, moved along his route with a stoop. I slipped past him without slowing down. By now I figured things had calmed down at the inn. The man who had scuffled with Galad's bodyguard was fine, I figured—they didn't want a big ugly scene, not on the eve of his address. And Galad himself? Well, he was maybe a bit confused, probably irritated and a little disappointed, but, well. Orphans could be unpredictable, flighty. Anybody knew that.

I thought of the elder days, when white-haired gnomes had walked the paths, sung under the trees and rhododendrons and somehow managed not to get bored out of their minds. I walked the ruined paths, patches of disintegrated cobblestones just visible beneath the lichen and fallen leaves. I could still hear the voices of the villagers, the low hum of it, drifting. Already my presence had been forgotten.

I remembered being able to see my own house from the Quiet Gardens of Morstead, a mid-sized cottage at the village's edge. In the late afternoon my house always looked magical, my life magnified and sparkling in just the way I'd always wanted it to be. There was another girl who had used to go with me. We'd run down the paths, try to climb the

rock-frozen stumps of trees. When it was time for us to go, the last light would touch clover in the overgrown grass and make it seem to glow. "It's the clover hour!" this friend of mine would say, and I never understood what she really meant by it. She sort of sang it out, but sometimes it seemed like she was asking a question, as if she wanted to stay longer in the garden and was waiting for me to say that I did too. But we never did. By nightfall a part of me was ready to go back home. I wasn't sure what more there was for us out there.

Following what was left of the path I found a group of rhododendrons spaced apart in a clearing, leaves and the twists of their branches making shadows on the starlit grass. Their blossoms were already wilted, like the flowers knew autumn was on the way, but the leaves were green. Soon there would be sleet and snow, even in the beginning of autumn, and the leaves would wilt. I thought about ducking under the rhododendrons and spidering through their branches, climbing from one to the next like a squirrel, the way I had with that friend of mine. Her hair had been bright blonde, I remembered, nearly white by the end of the afternoon. I touched the bark of one of the rhododendrons limbs but it didn't climb. It would have been ridiculous.

I moved on. The Quiet Garden was ending, giving way to the close-packed morrith trees I'd just escaped earlier in the afternoon. I spread my cloak beneath the last laurel tree, sat down and took the rapid-firing crossbow from my pack. I thought silver was a good color for a weapon, and I liked how it gleamed in the dimness. I took four quarrels from the ammunition pouch and set them beside the crossbow. I lay back and looked up at the thin shadows of the leaves to wait for morning.



The Ferrens of Tar Kiln

By

Charlie W. Starr

I

I can't expect you to believe everything I'm going to tell you. The story at least *begins* truly enough with a caving adventure one October day in Eastern Kentucky. Old U.S. 60 snakes its way through the upper half of the state from Ashland on the Ohio River through the foothills and on toward Lexington, Frankfort and Louisville beyond. It used to be the only way to travel through these parts till Interstate 64 cut a gash

through the Daniel Boone Forest back in the 70s. If you like the scenic route, though, and aren't afraid of who or what you'll run into, you might follow 60 down from Ashland and through Grayson on your way to Morehead. But before Morehead you'd find yourself in the little town of Olive Hill, known primarily for its frequent floods and Smokey's Truck Stop, a restaurant which got itself on one of those cable food channel

shows for its big hamburgers and homemade pies (the apple pie really is worth the trip).

Local cavers know that, in downtown Olive Hill, you turn South off 60, cross the creek and wind your way along till you come to a certain landmark. There you make a turn, go up the hill and over the hill and over a couple more till you find the dirt drive which takes you down to the farm where you'll park at the old barn to gear up for the day's adventure. This is, of course, after you've called Mark (and we'll just leave last names for another time) for permission.

Mark is a member of the local caving grotto—E.S.S.O. “Grotto” is the word you use for a club of cavers. My wife and I joined a few years back, but Mark has been exploring Tar Kiln cave since he was a kid. His family owns the farm and part of the land the cave runs through. Mark will tell you it's the longest cave in Elliott county. If you're serious about exploring it, you could spend a day inside (and still not get everywhere). Lots of people in the region have heard of Tar Kiln. The main entrance has sadly been a popular spot for young partiers who don't clean up after themselves. You can tell those less-than-serious cave explorers by their flip flops, beer cans and the fact that they mistakenly call the cave “Tark Hill.”

A road runs past the main entrance—just a dirt track now used by four wheelers and the occasional horse rider—a road which long before 64 or 60 or even a railroad used to be the only mode of long distance travel in the area. Mark isn't sure about the name, but he believes the name “Tar Kiln” traces back to the boiling of pine wood for the production of tar and turpentine—what folks used before petroleum. I suppose there might have been an industry associated with the cave in that way. Mark's tried to look into the history of the cave's name but hasn't

found anything definite.

II

I parked between the barn and a row of hay bales that Autumn Saturday, a crisp morning and cloudy but not too cool and a promise of sunshine later—a good day for caving, especially with the fall leaves turning all silver and gold and red in the last ditches before winter sleep. My wife, Becky, parked next to me, our twin green and gold SUV's loaded with college kids. We piled out, drawing seven students with us. There wasn't an official “caving club” at the college or anything like that. Our daughter, Alli, was a student there in her senior year and she enjoyed caving, so together we just managed to drag another half dozen students with us who we were close to in one way or the other—mostly nerdy kids interested in doing something they'd never have a chance to do any other time: explore a wild cave.

“Gearing up,” which I mentioned before, amounts to putting elbow and knee pads over some clothes you don't mind getting wet or muddy, donning a helmet and hiking boots and double checking your light sources before putting on your gloves. Serious cavers wear high luminescent lights on their helmets, usually more than one. We managed to set up a few of the kids with make-shift headlights—headband lights duct taped to cheap helmets (the rest of them would have to use hand held flashlights). Despite having decent head gear ourselves, Becky and I still carried spare flashlights in our backpacks and several ziplock baggies full of batteries. While doling out bandanas (which you wear under your helmet for stability and sweat), I started to run short and one of the young men, Zach, was left with no choice but hot pink which he seemed to embrace with more enthusiasm than his girlfriend Jessie cared for. We also

managed to outfit the girls in some old industrial jumpsuits—the kind auto mechanics wear to keep their clothes clean. The suits were too big and made the ladies look a little frumpy but that just added some humor to the day's charm. Then, with everyone dressed and the hatchbacks shut, we headed west from the barn at the start of a mile-plus downhill trek to the cave.

Becky led the group across a small field—she likes to start out strong—and to a fence, part wood and part barbed wire, which you can only get past by climbing over. None of the kids seemed overly intimidated by the obstacle, and no sooner had I warned them about the “land mines” in the field below (cow patties) than Becky, Alli, Max and Mike were taking off down the steep slope of the cow pasture and heading toward the creek. Max is Alli's fiancé, but I don't hold that against him. He's a good kid. He actually graduated from the college last year and moved back home but came down because he loves caving. He brought his friend Mike with him for the same reason. Now Mike had never been in a wild cave before, but Max knew he'd love it too. As Alli explained it to me, “Mike is that kind of crazy friend people have who's actually trying to sign up to be a Navy Seal.” Well he was charging down into the fray as fast as he could. I smiled at his enthusiasm and held him back as well.

The cave guides in this instance (Becky and me), weren't in much of a hurry. This was because neither one of us was in the best of shape (unless, in my case, you count “round” as a shape), and the mile walk down to Tar Kiln would be followed—after hours of caving—by a mile walk back, all up hill, with this cow pasture, the last and steepest hill, being the final obstacle to our return. Besides, we had to walk a bit slowly because of the cargo Becky was carrying in her backpack.

At the bottom of the pasture is a creek. You can walk a trail alongside it for a while, but at some point you have to cross over to the other side or you'll walk right off a cliff you might not see coming. The water flow is narrow enough that a well placed rock allows you to cross the stream without getting your boots and socks wet (that'll come later).

The creek's other side had more trees. Their fallen leaves obscured any trail you might be looking for to the last downhill leg of the hike.

Two years ago I came to an important conclusion: Autumn leaves are more beautiful on overcast days than on sunny ones. There they are in all their fiery glory—like the leaves on these trees near a farm in Elliott County Kentucky—shining their own light, playing at *being* the sun when the *actual* sun has gone to rest behind gray clouds. When the sun is out, the two fires compete with each other. When the sun is hiding, the trees blaze with color, and you sense the nostalgic joy and pain of the fall. This year I decided that Autumn leaves are prettiest in Eastern Kentucky as well. It's the grass, you see. In my old home in Texas, the leaves aren't as pretty as further north, but the real difference is the grass. Texas Bermuda grass dies in the winter—it sits brown and ugly in yards and on hillsides. But the strong, willful bluegrass of Kentucky stays green year round. It just stops growing in winter so the mowers can take a break. Now you look out, then, at a distant green hill dotted with the oranges, yellows and reds of the fall leaves (sprinkled with the green of an occasional pine), and that contrast of colors, that beauty of the living and the fading away...well it just makes you think of a picture you've seen somewhere before, even if you can't remember when or where. It was that kind of “pretty” out—a perfect day for hiking and

caving.

We made our way along the hill on this side of the creek, crunching through untouched leaves, trying to divine our way along.

There's another barbed wire fence, one you can step over if someone pushes it down for you—this is the landmark you look for. From here you make your way down, the ridge above to your right, an emerging ravine below to your left, and soon you're afforded a nice view of the creek bed cliff I mentioned a minute ago and its trickling waterfall coming into view on your left. A massive black wall, a good sixty feet high, curving inward at its base so that, at first glance, you think that might be the entrance to the cave. It isn't, but that creek, pouring into that ravine, directly feeds one of the entrances to Tar Kiln. By the time you reach the ravine floor you come across it.

I told Becky to hold up.

"Alright, gang, be careful, but step through this narrow. Notice on the right these sink holes—those are signs that a cave is running beneath us. And over here on the left, then, if you look carefully down this pit you'll see the Water Fall Entrance to Tar Kiln."

"Dr. Starr, are we going to climb down there?" asked Jessie.

"It's a little more dangerous than I care to try," I said, "and besides we'd have a whole lot of crawling to do if we went that way than the other way I intend us to take. So don't worry, we're not going to enter Moria from here."

Everyone chuckled at this because we carry an ample share of nerd-dom in our company, and all these students were *Middle-earth* fans, especially Jessie (you remember, she's Zach's girlfriend—Zach of the hot pink bandana). Jessie's one of my Humanities majors (as are Alli and two of the others). She's a fair skinned, golden

haired young lady with pretty blue eyes behind big glasses (a geek stereotype I know, but it's true of her I swear) without which she might be as blind as a cave dwelling flying rodent. Definitely one of my geekiest. Boyfriend Zach as well: their idea of a date is a *Star Wars* movie and a game of D&D (my kind of fun). They make a cute couple, but they're currently that "annoying" kind of in love—the giggly, cuddly kind—that makes you wish football season would start or a Kung Fu movie would play on cable somewhere. For total brain power, though, you could do little better than these two.

The ravine widened and sloped gently down to the old dirt road. Once on it, we turned left through the valley, keeping an eye out for a certain outcropping of rock, the landmark for the entrance we wanted.

"Like a fairy-tale."

"I'm sorry?"

I was leading now, Becky about twenty feet behind. She was talking to Emily.

"The hills," she was saying, "the trees, the rocks, especially these giant boulders—I just want to climb on one and stare—I've always said this place was like something out of a fairy-tale."

"We don't have anything like this in Ohio," Emily answered. "It's like someone picked them up and just set them there."

"I think they're seats for giants," Becky said.

Emily is also one of my majors. Besides that she's Alli's roommate and my student assistant. A petite girl, she chopped her hair off after her freshman year—now it looks like something out of a *Gatsby* movie. It's nice, and so is she. Alli and Emily share the perfect physical feature for caving—tiny. When Alli was young and even smaller, we'd send her into the tight spaces in caves we were exploring—maybe not the most protective of parenting choices. I figured if

we wanted to know whether or not what was on the other side of those little holes was worth seeing, we send the person least likely to get stuck. It had always worked and was going to be helpful again on this trip.

My guess was that Max would most likely want to lead the charge into tiny places on the excursion, but having Alli in the troupe always made for a good backup plan. Her name's actually "Alathia"—it means truth. But "Alli" works for family and friends, and I've taken to calling her "Al" for years now. Not sure why, but I've always thought it was cool when a girl had a guy's name. There's probably something from Plato's *Symposium* in that, but it'd be too much of a digression to get into. Anyway, Alli could've married most anyone she wanted; I wouldn't have been a jerk of a father-in-law. But I actually *like* Max. He's courageous, and I think he'll watch out for my daughter. I admire the respect he's shown her over the last few years, and he's one of those tall, athletic kids who looks like he could hold himself in a fight. Not that the macho thing is a good definition of husband, per se. It's just that Max comes across as both strong and gentle at the right times, and I think that strength will translate into having a good relationship with his wife. We've taken him caving a few times, and he loves to jump in head first.

"Hey Charlie!" he called as I picked a path along the dirt road around ever present standing puddles. "Is that the entrance?"

That was literally the first time Max called me "Charlie." He was used to calling me Dr. Starr and was hoping to break the habit. He took a few English classes with me. Not a great student (just so you know I'm not a blind fan of the boy); Alli will have to check his grammar for a lifetime.

"No Max. Besides the correct outcropping to watch for, you can also look at the road ahead. See the little hill—that's

the only one the road runs over between here and the main entrance. Over there, to the left of the hill—that's our outcropping."

We left the road and walked up to and then over and around several boulders—more of Becky's furniture for giants—and down sharply into a sink hole. We stood before a hole in the cliff side most people would never know was there—a gash in the rock at our feet only a few feet high and perhaps twice as wide.

"Okay gang," I said, "this is the second 'Sink Entrance.' The first one is farther back that way and a tighter squeeze and longer crawl; we go in here. Turn your lights on and follow me."

III

Following me meant stepping in and down for what was going to be a *crawl* to adventure—frankly my least favorite part of the journey. At first the floor is rocky and you're half-standing, half-crawling, using all four limbs to climb over the uneven terrain. Then you drop to your stomach to squeeze under a low ceiling, and then, at the T, turn left and down, and at the next T, turn right. Now you're on a much smoother, dirt surface. Then it's a steady crawl, with one left turn to make your way to the main passage, and you're in the cave called Tar Kiln.

Unfortunately, I missed the first left and went right instead. I was in the lead, and there was a train of eight other people following me, many of whom had never gone into a cave let alone crawled into a small space like this, and I had already gotten them lost. I had literally forgotten about the first T's existence (and it's not really a true T—hard to explain). I crawled down the passage I thought I was supposed to be in; it started to get smaller than I remembered. There was a lot of drift wood I didn't remember as well—proof that this

entire cave could flood on a rainy day (yes, it was overcast outside, but the chances of rain were zero—at least according to my I-Phone—and the sun was due out any time). I got down to the end of the little tunnel I was in and was, by that time, crawling on my stomach, not my hands and knees. I did find an entrance into the cave, but it was too small. People could fit through it, but it just wasn't what I remembered, and I wasn't sure I could be one of those people who squeezed through. I told everyone to hold their place, and I backed up to a spot where I could sit up. I pulled out my copy of the Tar Kiln map and looked at it, seriously considering the possibility that flooding had brought silt into the cave, filling our entrance, and ending any chance we had of getting inside. Then I had a flash of genius.

"Hey Al!" I called.

"Yeah," came an unseen voice echoing in the back of the train.

"Come check this out. I don't know if I've made a wrong turn or things have changed."

Alli had been in this cave many times. I figured she was small enough to get through the hole I'd just seen, and she might be able to get her bearings in the cave and then find the real entrance or else confirm my fear that we'd found it already and couldn't get through. Long part of the story short: she crawled down the little tunnel, followed by Mike, who had no intention of being turned around at this point in our adventure. I didn't think he could squeeze through that hole. I was completely wrong. He was muscular, but also skinny, if that makes sense. A real athlete, anyway. Alli called back to me from inside the cave, having a look around. Meanwhile, she had sent Mike through a hole to see if he could find us. He did.

'Great start to leading the group, Charlie,' I thought. But at least our journey was back

on, and the goal I'd set for this excursion—an area of the cave I'd yet to explore—was still intact.

If you're five foot ten, you can't quite stand up straight when you first enter the main passage, so I stepped to the right a bit where I *could* stand upright and turned to wait for the others to join me. Paul came and stood beside me and started pulling an electric lantern out of his backpack. A bit awkward, but it gave off a lot of light.

Now Paul may be the most interesting real-life person to put into a story, but I swear I'm not making this up. He's probably a genius for starters. It fits his appearance: tall and thin with a 'fro of curly, brown hair and a generally shy, quiet disposition. He usually wears holey jeans and T-shirts and avoids shoes whenever he can. He hardly ever takes a note in class but can pull facts out of his head like out of an internet search engine. I suspected something early when I saw him spending all his time in my classes making Origami paper cranes while listening to my lectures, something I think he did his entire freshman year. Eventually several thousand cranes made their way to the ceiling of the Smith building at the college, dangling from more strings than I could count. My suspicions about Paul's intelligence were probably confirmed when he took up the challenge in comp two class of writing an analysis of Coleridge's enigmatic poem, "Kubla Khan," something even I wouldn't try to do! The paper was brilliant. I read six hundred freshman comp papers a year. I hardly ever remember them let alone praise their excellence. Paul's paper was amazing. And as I think about it, I suppose the topic from his freshman year was apropos of his joining this little caving excursion in his senior year:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea....
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves
of ice!

The Khan, Kubla could've easily built his
Xanadu in Eastern Kentucky.

The others made their way into the main passage and gathered round. Becky brought up the rear—it's called "tail gunning"—to make sure no one freaked out in the smaller passage. Many who thought they weren't claustrophobic have found out otherwise on their way into Tar Kiln, and Becky has had to save a novice or two from their own paralyzing fear. So first we checked to make sure no one was crying (everyone seemed okay for the moment). Then I pointed to a little pile of rocks on the floor which Alli was rebuilding.

"That, children, is what we call a 'cairn.'" It was put there to mark the exit. Along this main passage you'll find a number of holes in this side-wall which lead to some interesting rooms and domes, but only this one gets you back out. There are other exits from the cave but each of those presents its own challenges, and this one is the one you now know about."

The more stand-up-able part of Tar Kiln runs roughly west-to-east, with a good amount of meandering included, the main entrance being on the east end and the water flow running in that direction. We had entered on the south side, and I was now facing that direction.

"Okay, and now let me explain how this works." I pointed to my right. "The more you go that way (roughly west), the lower the ceiling tends to get—the more bending over and eventually crawling you'll have to do. The more you go that way," pointing to my left, "the higher the ceiling tends to get and the easier your stroll through the cave. We're going to try to stay together, but if

you do feel the urge to wonder off, don't do it by yourself. The first thing I want to do, though, is take us to the Picnic Room. We can drop off our backpacks there and move on.

"Charlie." Becky walked up to me at that point and lifted her backpack. I thought I knew what she was doing: opening the mesh pouch to let the dog out. And I mean that literally. She did, in fact, open up the pack to pull out our five pound Chihuahua/Rat Terrier mix, a mostly white haired little girl with two brown spots on her back (though they were starting to migrate onto her tail and butt in her middle age) and brown patches on her eyes and face. Her official name was Phydeaux (pronounced Fido—it's the Cajun spelling), but Becky refused to call her that because, as she explained it, "I'm not going to have a girl dog with a boy's name." So Becky insisted on Deaux-e (Doe-ee), and nicknames like "Dodo," "Dodgers," and "Dog Breath" have since abounded. Anyway, Deaux is a caving dog and enjoys being underground. Becky had carried her down the long trail to get here, but now let her loose. She started sniffing around as soon as she hit the floor. But that was not the reason Becky had approached me.

"Jessie's having a little claustrophobia," she quietly said.

So I'd been a little bit wrong on my initial evaluation. Max and Mike were ready to charge into the underworld, with Paul close behind, but we needed to take it easy.

I nodded and said, "Okay, everyone, let's start an easy walk in that direction," and I pointed to the eastern or bigger end of the cave.

As the boys took off with Alli, Becky and Emily, Deaux-e's little tail wagging along ahead, I dropped back beside Jessie and Zach. She was a little wide-eyed, but was never one for hysterics.

"You okay?" I asked.

And she replied, "I am now that I'm in a bigger space."

"You wanna be in here?" I continued.

"No, but as long as I can stay in a space like this, I think I can handle it."

And so she did. For the rest of the trip, she walked the lengths of the main passage with us but didn't take any smaller ones till we had to exit and there was no choice.

We walked, then, two hundred yards or so down to the Picnic Room. As you walk this stretch of Tar Kiln, you make a double S-curve set of turns. I had to tell the guys that the side passages they really wanted to look at would come later. We passed the entrance to the Black Rock passages—we'd come back to that—and then the key hole, which is easy to miss (especially walking in this direction), but kept pressing on till a straight-away took us into the Picnic Room.

This is the largest chamber in this part of Tar Kiln. There's a huge slab of a rock on the floor from a "breakdown" (when part of the ceiling falls) which is big enough to sit a dozen or more people on—that's the Picnic Table. It's at a slight angle but is otherwise flat enough so you can climb up and sit on it. I explained all this to the kids (when your 51, anyone in their twenties is a kid), at least except for the part about the ceiling caving in, and then told them to drop their backpacks on the Picnic Table. We'd come back here later for lunch (which consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a Lays Variety Pack of chips, and a box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies—all dished out among the various backpacks at the beginning of the trip).

"Now check your packs," I said, "for your spare flashlights or anything else you might need. We want to take those with us."

We turned, then, and went back in the direction we'd just come from. Jessie and Emily were helping Becky count bats—she

likes to keep track and report the numbers to the grotto.

"Has that white fungus attacked here?" Paul asked. I was surprised he knew about it; most non-cavers don't. Then I wasn't surprised he knew. It was Paul.

Becky answered: "Yes, we're sorry to say it has. It's called 'White Nose Syndrome.' It irritates the bats and wakes them up during their winter hibernation. They go looking for food and can't find any and end up dying."

"It came from Europe," I added.

"Yes," Becky went on. "It came over from Europe, and it'll probably kill eighty or ninety percent of the bats over here. We haven't been able to go into a lot of caves for a long time because of quarantines. But now that the disease is everywhere, they're starting to open back up."

"Hey, Dr. Starr."

"Yeah, Emily."

"What's the cave like in winter?"

"It is exactly like this. Once you're a few feet inside any entrance, the temperature outside the cave has no effect on the temperature inside. The cave interior remains a constant 54 degrees."

"Really?"

"Yeah, well 52 or 54. I can never quite remember."

"So sometimes we go caving in winter," Becky added.

"But if you get wet, the walk back to your car can be chilly," I said. "Ah, here we are."

IV

About half way between the picnic room and the entrance cairn I stopped us. Half way up the north wall, just a little below my head level, was a hole called the Key Hole, this because...well...it looks like a key hole—one of those old-fashioned kind.

I pointed the tiny hole out to the others,

told them what it was called, and then said, “And you all are going to get a chance to crawl through that.”

Mike and Max thought that was awesome. Emily went “Whoa, through that?!” Jessie shook her head and Deaux-e sniffed Alli’s boots, wondering why they smelled like Becky (Alli was borrowing one of her mom’s pair of boots).

To assuage fears I quickly said, “Oh, you’re not going to crawl in through there, you’re going to come out from what starts as a much larger entrance. But I wanted you to see your exit, first. Now we’re going to walk about thirty feet that way to see how you can get to this point.”

We walked down to another hole, this one something of a crack at the bottom of the wall, but still taller and wider than the hole I’d just shown everyone.

“Alright, gather round. Now this will be just a quick little adventure for anyone who wants to try it. If you don’t want to” (looking at Jessie), “you don’t have to. This is the entrance to the Black Rock passage. If you stoop down and step in here and then make your way along the wall to the right, you’ll be behind this wall”—I patted the north wall of the main passage—“and making your way a short distance to the key hole. Now you will see a passage go off to your left. Do not take that. If you do you’ll be in the Black Rock passage and could get really lost back there.”

“And never be seen again,” Zach quipped.

“And the rock on that side—the walls—really are completely black,” Alli explained.

“Yeah,” I went on, “so just stay to the right, and then you’ll get a chance to squeeze through the tiny Key Hole—a cool caving experience, right?”

Actually I’d never done it myself. One of my handicaps as a caver is bad shoulders. Both have dislocated multiple times and the

left one has had four surgeries to correct the problem (it got so loose that I could sneeze or pull the sheet up in bed the wrong way and pop it out of the socket). There’s a particular way to get through the Key Hole which involves putting both arms in front of you—I’m not sure my arms wouldn’t pop out in that position.

Everyone wanted to do it but Jessie, Becky and me. The dog didn’t care. So I sent them in, and the rest of us went back to the Key Hole to wait. Zach was the first one through. Jessie was happy to see his helmet light shining through the hole. As I said, the Key Hole is half way up the wall, so I could stand there and see straight in.

“Okay Zach,” I said, “Here’s how you wanna do this: turn on your left side and reach forward with both your arms. Start worming yourself through the best you can and then look here where I’m tapping—get to this point by squirming and then you have a hand hold to grab so you can pull yourself through the rest of the way.”

He did great. Of course when you pull yourself through, you’re halfway up a slanted wall. So you need to keep holding on to let yourself down. I stood by to spot anyone who needed to avoid falling on their head. Everyone else made it well enough. As Alli was coming through last someone said, “Alli you’re being born again--,” and “Squeeze on through” or something like that. I then said, “I can see the head, Mrs. Tar Kiln. Push!” That got a chuckle. I grabbed Alli by the hand and helped her out and another small part of the adventure was complete.

“Okay, back to the Black Rock passage,” I said. “Grab your maps, and let’s take a look.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna go,” said Becky. “My fibro’s acting up a bit. This’ll be a good time to rest.”

Becky has fibromyalgia. People have

only been hearing about it for a decade or so. It hit Becky about that long ago. Her body isn't under attack or being wounded, but her nerves keep telling her brain she's in pain. It comes and goes, often with changes in the weather, but that's not always a definite predictor. She always has a little pain. But unfortunately she often has a lot. Anytime she goes caving is a choice for her to do something pretty extraordinary, and I really admire her courage for that. We pray about it all the time, but this thorn in the flesh hasn't seemed too quick to remove itself just yet. Becky holds onto II Corinthians 12 when the pain is particularly bad: "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

"Deaux-e and I will go back to the Picnic Room and get the lunch things out," Becky decided.

Jessie wanted to go with her, and Zach, though he wasn't feeling shut in, was commenting on how much he enjoyed the sun. He decided he'd stay out in the main passage too. But they didn't leave till they looked at our plan of attack on the map.

So let me try to describe the two Black Rock passages to you, and then you'll get a sense of what we were in for. Basically, north of the main cave passage runs another, narrower corridor. It never grows very wide. It breaks off from the main cave at one end—down near the Water Fall Entrance—and rejoins later, right at the spot where the water begins to deepen, as I mentioned before. The passage never narrows so much that you have to turn your body to get through it, but it does give you a feeling like you're making your way through the passages of a maze. As with the main passage, the Black Rock is a crawl down near the Water Fall Entrance and gradually raises its ceiling as it moves east so that large parts of it can be walked through, though with a fair amount of stooping over.

Sometimes this "first" Black Rock passage runs close to the main cave, sometimes it drifts further north away from it. Besides the two ends, it connects back to the main passage twice, including at the entrance near the Key Hole where we were now standing. The passage is actually several feet from the main, but it suddenly turns toward it as if purposely made to do so. If you're looking at the map which gives you the view of the cave from above, you see that the passage turns toward the main cave at an angle, connects to it, then turns away at the same but opposite angle (in a kind of V shape) but also continues on apart from this split so that the whole connecting passage looks like an upside down letter A (again, from the map's-eye point of view). This entrance, anyway, is the easiest way into the Black Rock passage. It puts you roughly in the middle of it.

But now the description gets more complicated. There is a second Black Rock tunnel. At its western end, the Black Rock is some distance from the main cave. But a hundred feet or so along it splits. The first passage, the one I just described, begins to draw near the main cave. The second passage, however, curves north and runs away from the first, further into the hill than any part of the cave. Eventually this second Black Rock channel dips down till it meets the first passage again, just before it connects to the main passage at its eastern end.

Imagine going hundreds of feet underground through a hole you have to crawl thirty feet along just to get to where you can stand up again. Then imagine crossing that big passage and finding another tiny hole to crawl through. There you find another corridor, further away from the light of day—deeper under the earth—a very long but narrower tunnel whose ceiling shrinks in the west to a belly crawl. Imagine then finding yet a third passageway, one you

can only get to a long way around. There in that even smaller tunnel, three layers back, if you will, from the light of the sun, the freedom of open air—there in that labyrinth you learn a new definition of the dark. The third tunnel back, that second Black Rock passage far under hill—that was my goal for this expedition. I had explored the first Black Rock passage before. And yes it's true I had a map for reference and others had been there before me, but that far passage was my unseen territory, and I intended to conquer as much of it as I could.

We checked our copies of the map, and I made the decision to head east through the more open half of the tunnel. There was a fair amount of stoop-walking, but the path was generally easier and a bit more upright. I kept my eye on the map. First I watched for a sharp right turn, followed by an immediate left. Then after a straight-a-way there's a fork—straight on to a dead end or right to continue. A gentle curve left and another right and back around to the left—here we were just on the other side of a wall from the Picnic Room (again, according to the map), though we couldn't see it or hear anyone on the other side. But then the corridor continued left and away from the main cave. A few more feet and we came to a triple fork: right and away, or straight to a T, or left through a narrow tunnel. Right and away would take you to the end of the Black Rock tunnel. The narrow passage on the left, or a left at the end of the T ahead were both entrances into the second Black Rock passage. Max and Mike took off, leaving the rest of us behind. I had made sure they knew how to get back to the main cave if they lost us, and Max had been in the first Black Rock passage with me a year ago. I wasn't too worried about them. The girls and Paul chose to crawl through the narrow passage because it was less wet. I chose to slosh through the wider T passage and in only a

handful of seconds met them on the other side.

And yes, that was the moment water filled my boots for the first time this trip. There's a phrase in our language called "crossing the Rubicon." It's an allusion from history about passing a point of no return. Cavers know they've crossed that point the moment they feel the icy water of a cave flood their boots. In this instance, we'd crossed another point too, into the second Black Rock tunnel.

It didn't do Alli, Emily and Paul much good to take the narrow passage. They only avoided water for a few extra seconds. I heard the "Oh" and "Ah, that's colds" ahead of me, as they hit their first calf-deep pool. I smiled and called out, "If your feet aint wet, you aint cavin' yet." Yes, English teachers use slang words. I think the wetness and cold took Paul by surprise, and he lost his earlier enthusiasm.

We eventually caught up to Max and Mike (only because they stopped to wait for us) and walking became stooping for most of the way. At what I calculated to be the approximate halfway mark into the passage, it became a crawl. We didn't know how open the rest of the tunnel would be. Max and Mike went on ahead to find out. The girls and Paul followed at a slower pace. And I made a decision:

"Hey Al!" I called.

"Yeah!"

"I think I have to call it for myself. Now that it's a crawl I think I better start heading back while I still have some energy!"

"You know, working out could help with that!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Alli is worried about me dying young. I'm out of shape, and I make up for it by not eating right either. The good news in my daughter's quip: it's obvious she loves me. So...I did something right...married

someone who could raise kids well. Anyway, I'd been doing alright this trip. My "taking it slow" strategy had worked fine. But I knew I had limits and knew I'd better turn around. The kids had maps, Alli and Max had been here before, and Alli knew the main passage pretty well.

Okay, it was probably not the best choice for a guide to make, but I didn't want my limitations to hold the young ones back. In the end they did find their way back with no problem (Max and Mike even made it all the way through the back passage), and the choice to return alone was...well, if I hadn't done it, I'd have had no reason to write any of this down. I turned back to make the exit journey. Physically it was a good call. Walking that far, bent over, was starting to labor my breathing.

The sharpest turn in the second Black Rock passage is also the furthest under the mountain (foothill, really, but mountainous enough for us). As I started to make the right turn there on my way out (keep in mind I was walking stooped over, staring mostly at the floor), I caught a glimpse of something that shouldn't have been there. In fact it couldn't have been there before. None of us had seen it on the way in (which frequently happens in a cave—something you miss going one direction is clearly visible going the other). There to my left was a good sized opening. It wasn't on the map. For a minute I even wondered if I was tired and just seeing things, that I'd misjudged what I was capable of doing. But I never hallucinate (at least not so far). I looked behind me and thought about calling the others. I also thought about just marking it on the map and going back as I'd planned—an expedition for another day.

It's really important that I convey just how unusual this was, even at this point of making a decision. If there's a "caving code," one of its rules is "Don't go caving

alone," and another is "Don't leave your group, especially if you're the guide!" But then there's also this: just as I call myself an intermediate caver, I also judge myself a man of intermediate courage when underground. Going into an unexplored cave passage, one not even on the map, was not something I would typically do without someone more experienced (like Mark) in the lead. In hindsight, I wonder if the peace and calm I was feeling at the time weren't born of...well...a bit of magic. At any rate, that I turned and headed down the passage was, for me, remarkable. Yet it was nowhere near as surprising as what I found there.

V

The tunnel ran straight, and the ceiling rose almost immediately. I was able to stand and freely move down the corridor. I easily walked another fifty feet if not more. How could something this substantial be missing from the map? Half of me knew I should be turning back. You don't go caving on your own (though Mark once admitted to me he'd done it as a kid), and you don't leave the people you're guiding, especially without telling them. But the other half of me felt no fear. I should've been cautious, even a little nervous, but there was a calm come over me I couldn't explain. I forgot about what I should've done and lost all track of time.

The tunnel cut to a sudden right—the wall at almost a right angle; it hardly seemed natural. What came next *definitely* wasn't. The passage turned upwards at a steep angle. I wouldn't have been able to climb it but for the stairs. That's right, stairs. And they hadn't been carved by the slow working waters of Mother Nature. Their angles were even, their lines true. They had been cut with instruments and the chipped pieces removed.

"Are you serious?" I asked no one and then mounted the stairs.

I counted 33 steps. At the top, the

corridor continued straight, but the walls were smooth and square. This tunnel was artificial, and whoever had carved it had cared about its being level and having right angles. It went on perhaps another twenty feet before it came to a dead end. A big rectangle of smooth, flat wall stood before me. Or not completely smooth: there was writing on it. Five lines of carvings to be exact. The top line—a couple feet above my head—looked like old Norse runes (or something like it). The second line seemed more...I don't know...*advanced*? Like cursive carved into the rock but in letters I'd never seen before. The third line, though, seemed primitive again. It was pictographic, like Native American cave drawings. The fourth line was definitely in Latin. I don't know Latin, but I recognize it when I see it. A phrase in block letters. I'm pretty sure they (and probably all the others) meant the same thing as the fifth line which was the real shocker. It was written in English. Just two words but in some form of calligraphy. They said, "Knock Thrice."

You know how, in all the horror movies, this would be the part where the audience would be screaming, "Don't knock! Whatever you do, don't knock on that wall!"? That voice of fear was completely gone from me. My calm had become peace and was bordering on the delight of wonder. I touched the wall and ran my fingers over the letters just to make sure they were real. Then I took off my thick glove (it seemed the polite thing to do), and I knocked on the wall, one, two, three times. My bare knuckles against the solid slab hardly made a noise. Still I stood there with a sense of expectation.

A minute or two passed. Then the utter silence was broken by a pop. I jumped but quickly recovered. The pop was followed by a hissing sound and sand and dust blew out from an emerging rectangular seam. Stone

quickly grated against stone as the wall began to swing away from me. A door of solid stone opened up, inviting me in.

I was still underground, but the round chamber in which I found myself was clearly handmade, not part of a natural cave. The walls were lined with wooden shelves, and two more rows of shelves ran through the middle. Oak barrels filled the corners, some standing on end, others on their sides and stacked pyramid-like with shelves on either side to hold them in place. A few of these had wooden spigots in them. I saw copper pots and iron pans on one shelf and mugs and cups of wood or silver on another. Most of the shelves were filled with burlap sacks or pouches of a finer material—something like silk—and these seemed to be filled with food-stuffs: oats and salt and perhaps ground wheat. Other shelves had food simply sitting out on them: apples and pears, and dried fruits as well. I saw onions and potatoes, radishes and carrots, wheels of cheese and glass jars filled with honey. There was butter on a dish and some dried meats hung on hooks. Another row of hooks were draped with dried tobacco leaves. Still another held a string of garlic cloves, thyme, basil leaves and other dried plants I couldn't recognize. I suddenly felt hungry. I didn't dare touch a thing.

"Well?"

The voice came from nowhere and I was again briefly startled.

"Uh," I said, profoundly. "Hello?"

"Yes, come along then, I don't cotton to strangers nosing about in ma cellar. Come, up the stairs lad, so we won't be strangers anymore."

I finally saw a set of wooden stairs at the other end of the room. That's where the voice had come from. I should have been scared. I should've turned around and gone to fetch the others. Instead I was utterly delighted and crossed the room without a

second thought. I looked up the stairs. I saw a hand rise, fingers outspread.

“What manner of creature are you who sheds a greater light from his head than any of the fairest I’ve ever known?”

“What? Oh, the headlamps. Sorry.”

I took off my helmet and shut the lights off. My eyes took a moment to adjust, but then I was clearly able to make out a figure at the top of the stairs. He (the voice was certainly masculine) was holding a candle.

“Ah, there you are. A man after all, is it? Well come up and introduce yourself. We trade on manners here.”

Again without hesitating, I ascended the stairs. From the bottom of the staircase the figure had looked imposing, but as I climbed his stature shrank. I smiled to find the commanding voice belonging to a person who came well short of four foot six. I couldn’t yet see him clearly for the darkness of the hallway I was approaching. But he quickly remedied that.

“Come, sir, to the library. Plenty of light in the afternoon. Let’s have a good look at you!”

‘Library!’ I thought. Now I was excited (what can I say, I’m an English teacher). I stooped through the door and found myself in a cozy hallway, the ceiling a half foot above my head. The floor was of packed earth but the walls and ceiling were paneled with wood. At the far end was a wooden door in which was a tiny round window, like a porthole. Through this a small amount of light entered. My host led with his back turned to me so I still didn’t get a good look at him. His pants might have been made of wool from what I could tell. There was a roughness to their texture. They were brown, I think, and tucked into a pair of shin-high boots. His shirt was white, definitely made of cotton, with loose, almost billowy sleeves. And he wore a red vest which had a bit of a sheen to it like satin or silk, but it

was sturdier. I don’t know, I’m lousy with fabrics. He had a tousle of hair on top of his head, but the sides and back were straight and long—two thin braids fell over his shoulders in front and one down the middle in back. My first thought was ‘mullet’ but then I decided he was pulling it off without any kind of an 80s air.

Near the end of the hall he opened a door to the left. The handle and hinges were wrought iron—black. I had to stoop to enter behind him, but, again, the ceiling was high enough to let me stand straight. A large paned window invited the sun to light the space up, and I blinked to again adjust my eyes. As my host blew out the candle and crossed to a table, I took in the room. While the hallway had seemed a mix of frontier rustic and old English inn (like the man’s outfit, I quickly decided), this room had the inn’s charm but a natural otherness difficult to explain. The furniture was all of wood, but none of the pieces were fit into right angles. Three small chairs near a fireplace had curving backs, armrests and legs. Even the seats were round about the edge and concave on the surface. There were bits of lattice work filling in the back, and similar lattice—like vines weaving in and out of each other—running up in columns on the walls and carved into the wooden table from which my host was removing a large chair—obviously for me. But the lattice forms weren’t woven in straight crisscrossing angles. I recognized the ancient shapes which appear in what’s called a Celtic knot. I’m sorry I can’t explain it better than that, but if you look it up you’ll see what I mean. Oh, one other thing: the wood in the furniture and on the walls and ceilings varied in colors—it wasn’t all dark and lacquered. Shiny, yes, but also with lighter woods—beige here, even ivory there.

“Here you are, lad. Come have a sit next to the fire. You look a bit cold with those

wet boots.”

“Oh my boots,” I realized. “I must’ve tracked mud all over—”

“Now, now. Not to worry, not to worry. We may stand on manners but we’re not too much on formality. Have ’em off if you like. Won’t be a bother.”

“We?”

“Ah, yes. Well nowadays that’d be me, myself and the four-leggeds wouldn’t it.”

I sat in the chair, feeling the warmth of the fire to my left, and the little man took a smaller one in front of me. Normal people would’ve sized him up (no pun intended) immediately. I, of course, first took a look at his books. It was indeed a library with shelves lining all the free walls. The books were ancient: bound by hand in leather dyed red, gold and green (like the colors of the hillsides coming down to Tar Kiln cave), with gold filigree in twisting lines (like the Celtic knot again) on the spine. None of them were titled (or if they were, it was in symbols I didn’t know which looked more like pictographs than letters).

Then I turned my attention to the magical little man before me, as he had been focusing his attention on me. A wry smile and a penetrating look were on his face. His eyes gleamed in the firelight but without any Poe-ian malice. Of his clothing I got little more detail. The breaches were belted and buckled—a brass buckle. The vest was fastened with leather ties, not buttons. His face was clean shaven, and while his cheeks were round, the overall appearance of his face was more angular—arrow like but never sharp. His whole presence suggested two qualities at once: earthiness and otherworldliness. His very build was lithe, almost catlike—a graceful presence—save for his feet which seemed a bit large in the boots he wore—larger than his frame called for, and round and flat. I might’ve said he was dressed like a Kentucky frontiersman

from the late 1700s, but he bore himself like a nobleman from the court of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. There was indeed a magic about him.

Then he began the conversation: “You’re not him.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The little boy, all grown up. Little feller who used ta crawl about down in the cave by himself. Came this way a time or two.”

“No, sir, I’m not him,” I said.

“Good lad, him. Quiet and well mannered.”

There was an awkward moment of silence where we just stared at each other.

“Not very talkative, though, are ya?” he continued.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m just a little overwhelmed. You’re not on the map.”

“Map? What map?”

“The Tar Kiln map. The map of the cave.”

I pulled my slightly muddied map from a pocket and, unfolding it, handed it to him. He took it from me with an eager hand and poured over it with a delighted smile.

“Oh that’s well done,” he said. “Very well done. Not very artfully done, mind you, but accurate to a fault.” He moved to hand it back. “I don’t suppose I can keep it?”

“Oh, uh, sure, I can find my way back...I think.”

“Ah, my sincerest thanks, son, truly.” He looked at it admiringly. “You’re right. I’m not on the map. I’m right in front of you. The most interesting things often are.”

I smiled. “Sorry. I meant your home—the tunnel and the stairs leading here from the Black Rock passage—none of it’s on the map.”

“Just as well,” was his cryptic reply. “But what brings ya, then?”

“I’m in the local caving grotto...or club. People in the area who like to explore caves.”

"Ah, an adventurer, then!"

"Well, not much of one. I teach over at the college in Grayson and brought some of my students over for a *little* adventure. Most of them won't ever visit the caves in the years they're here and won't have any to explore themselves when they get home."

"So you're a teacher."

"Yes."

"A fine and noble profession."

"Oh, thank you."

"Don't mention it. And does the teacher have a name?"

"Starr. Charlie Starr."

"Starr. Hmm. An ancient name. A strong name. And Charles, is it?"

"Well—"

"A kingly name that, though not so old. Can't be more than sixteen or seventeen hundred years old a name like that—in its derivatives at least."

"And you, sir? I'm talking with Mr...?"

"Tucks!" His smile beamed. "Tucks is my name. The Tucks are my kin. Tucks were we, an age ago, and a Tucks am I, the last o' them."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Tucks, but—"

"Gabby."

"Uh, well you are talkative."

"No, my name. Gabriel Tucks" (though he emphasized the last syllable not the first). "A fine name too, both ancient and new—well not new to you but to all the Tucks and other little families too. 'Gabby' to my friends, and I can tell that you and I will be fast friends, Charlie. Fast friends indeed, if only for an hour or two."

"Speaking of 'hour,' I should probably be getting back to my wife and the others I brought. They don't know I'm here and—"

"Nonsense, nonsense," Gabby answered. "They won't miss you a moment, I promise."

And for some reason I believed him

completely.

"Besides," he went on, "I believe I can entice you."

"Oh?"

"It doesn't take the magic of the Fair Ones to recognize a lover of a good cup of tea when a fella sees one. You've got the look."

I opened my mouth in both wonder and joy.

"All these coffee drinkers in the new world these days. It's so a man can't find a decent tea or the finest honey and cream to put in it. Whence the English of old America, eh? Where'd they go?"

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed (and then felt bad for using the Lord's name a little in vain—part of it was a praise though).

"What!" Gabby cried back and looked around. "Am I on fire!"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Y'apologize too much."

"Sorry...I mean, it's just that I feel the exact same way about tea and coffee you do. There are so few of us left."

"Aye, well, there are even fewer of me, and the few of us had better stick together."

After that, we were talking like we were old friends. No sooner had he said, "tea" than there was a pot boiling on the fire, fine china cups laid out besides a jar of crystal, gold honey, and the most amazing tea cakes, loaded with fresh butter—easily a quarter inch thick I kid you not—I'd ever tasted. Gabby's idea of a tea was more like our idea of a full meal. The cakes were accompanied by cheeses and fruits and sausages (venison, he said). I'd wondered at first if my tea cup would be more in keeping with his tiny stature but quickly found his cup (and plate and helpings) fit more a person of my size. In fact I couldn't keep up with the speed or volume of his eating, even though he did most of the talking (between mouthfuls).

"You just mentioned 'fair ones,' Gabby.

Like the fair folk of old?”

“Oh, he *has* got some learnin’ this teacher does, hasn’t he?” he winked. “In truth I know what you’re thinkin’ Charlie and you’re almost right. But I’m meanin’ something much older than the stories you’re imaginin’. It was the Fair Ones which brought the twelve families to the West in the first place. So long ago you have no dates fer’t. They it was who first found the Tark Hill and brought us to it.

“I’m sorry, the Tark Hill? You mean Tar Kiln.”

“Oo-hoo, so he thinks he knows something of history, does he? I’m not talking about your Civil War days from just last week, boyo, with your pitch and ovens. I’m talking about the old times. I’m talkin’ ‘bout Tarks. Nasty creatures. Big as a house. Well a little’uns house anyway. Used to eat the local wildcats for breakfast—and that was back when the cats was a head taller than you standin’ on all fours. Slimy tongues and scaly skin—there was dragonish blood in ‘em fer certain, I tell you. It was a fearful battle taking the caves below, destroying their putrid den. We lost one of the Fair Ones to it and three from the families, including the head of the Tucks clan. In the end we had to burn them out of those “Black Rock” passages as your map calls them—back when they was one giant cave till the battle collapsed most of the rock and the water since ran the walls smooth. But I’m gettin’ ahead of m’self. You asked of the Fair Ones.”

His eyes glazed over with memory, and he sat back to tell a tale far older than even the one he’d just told. By the hints he gave, I guessed it was thousands upon thousands of years ago that the twelve families, a clan of tiny people living in what might have been Northern Europe or even England—I couldn’t be sure—were chased from their homes by “bigguns,” by men. They had

heard rumors of a far off country which only the Fair Ones knew about, a place they might be safe. The Fair Ones were a different kind of men—again, it was hard to get a clear explanation from him—apparently there was something magical about them. They had heard of a wondrous land in the West, but they feared for some reason that it could no longer be reached. Still, six of them of the very few who were left in the old world, decided to attempt the journey and take the twelve families with them.

They did not find the place they’d hoped to find. They found America instead. And when they were certain they’d come somewhere they could at least make a new life for themselves, even if by a struggle, they settled in. Turns out that place was Kentucky. I couldn’t believe half of what he was saying, of course. But *he* seemed to believe it. “It was the Fair Ones that taught the grass here to sleep in winter without dying,” he said. “It was the Fair Ones who built the caves just to the north of here for half the families, places eventually occupied by the natives of this country,” he said.

“Caves? You mean Carter Caves, the State Park?”

“Well there was a day when the State didn’t exist, now wasn’t there m’boy? You been up there? To that ‘Park’ o’ yours?”

“Yeah, I love it there.”

“Seen those big overhanging rocks, what is it, ‘natural bridges’ they call ‘em?”

“I’ve seen three that I know about.”

“Used to be a township’s full of the families living under each, though the walls was completely enclosed then. But that was so long before my time even I’ve forgotten what happened to them. In truth, in truth. Long before my 673 years.”

“Oh come on!”

“What is it! The fire’s fine, yeah?”

“Sorry, Gabby, sorry but you want me to

believe you're almost 700 years old?"

"Don't look a day over 250 do I?" he smiled. And then turning his head from one side to another for my inspection: "Just a touch of gray at the temples, eh? Just a touch." And then with a bit of false anger: "And don't interrupt your elders when they're spinnin' such intrestin' tales now, child."

I suppose I could've been offended by him calling me "child," but whatever he believed about his age, I had a feeling he was older than he looked, and I remembered thinking I'd had the right at my age to consider any kid in his twenties a "child."

Still I tried to call him on the age thing: "Yeah, but—"

"I know 'tis hard to believe. I hardly believe it myself sometimes. The littluns of the families you see, we didn't live much longer than any of you bigguns." Then he became very serious: "But the Fair Ones, now. They lived forever, 'ceptin' if somethin' killed 'em. They never aged, and they were beautiful. That's what it means, 'Fair Ones' or 'Fair Folk' as you call 'em. Like they bore the glory of God in their bodies. Aye, I think they did. I take it you've read stories."

"We have these tales about the Middle Ages in Europe" I said. "Tales of a fairy people who lived in a land just parallel to ours—just next to it. Usually a place you could see across a river but never get to yourself. The Fair Folk were beautiful and magical. Sometimes mischievous, even dangerous."

"Ah, dangerous, you never said anythin' truer there. But evil, no, not our Fair Ones. They were good. Utterly good. There's also some truth in what you said about the land next to the land. Come, I'll show you, then I'll finish the point I was makin'—you'll have to remind me now."

"About?"

"About explainin' my age."

That was about the only straight answer I got from the little man.

VI

We left the library (Gabby grabbed one more tea cake for the walk) and headed to the front door. He opened it and led me out into the daylight sky. I turned for a moment to see that the house had been built partially into the side of a cliff. Then as I turned my gaze in a circle I saw that the place in which I found myself was completely surrounded by cliffs. It was a small canyon—high stone walls on every side. As far as I could tell there was no way out except the way I had come in.

"I had no idea this place was on the farm," I said.

"Neither do the farmers," Gabby replied.

I looked at him. He winked. Then he took me on a stroll through his estate.

Within the canyon walls were several buildings—barns, a stable and a chicken coop—and a few pens. I didn't see any animals but I could smell their presence. There were numerous naturally planted trees and several more in a row—fruit trees in a small orchard. There was a spring in the center of the land, and the water from it meandered through a tiny creek (small enough to step over) and out the same cliff side we'd come from. A small open field had been hoed into rows and contained a variety of ready to be picked crops. The buildings had the same quality I'd seen inside the house: a mix of some down-to-earth, homey elements—straight lines, practical doors and fittings—and more ornate, ethereal ones—curves and complex patterns and decorations where none were needed. That building was more the former, this one more the latter, and still another, a mix of both. The whole canyon floor was a testament to the influence of two cultures, or rather two distinct races (if Gabby's words could be

trusted).

"Winter's comin'," Gabby said. "Harvest time soon enough. Time enough to keep me busy. I get into less trouble when I stay busy."

"Less trouble?"

"I'm a bit of a prankster, I must confess. Can't resist the more whimsical magics the Fair Ones left behind in me—my father left behind. Makes for great, what is it, 'folk tales' they call 'em?"

"You do all the harvesting, all that food processing I saw in your cellar, alone?"

"The animals are a great boon ta the work. Come, I'll show ya."

We came up to a wooden fence—one of the pens—and leaned over (I had to lean a lot), staring at nothing in particular.

"Mmm. Smells like life, Charlie. A good life and God given."

"You believe in God?"

"Why shouldn't I? He believed in me enough to make me. Now let's see then. Oi! Caliburn! Where are ye, ya pig?"

I was a bit taken aback by Gabby's rudeness just then. Then a hog walked out of a nearby shelter, and I realized Gabby had been talking to him. The hog looked inquisitively in our direction.

"There's a good lad, Cal. I say, would you like to have a meet with my good friend here, Charlie?"

The hog shook his head.

"He's a bit shy. Not used to strangers. You don't mind?"

"Oh, no; course not," I said, as if the feelings of pigs were a regular topic of conversation.

"Well alright then, Cal. Would ya mind then heading over to the orchard and giving the apple tree a shake—fetch back a few Honey Crisps for dinner."

The hog perked up at this and then squealed something that sounded amazingly articulate, though I was hardly an expert in

porcine speech.

"Yes, you and Freddy can have both have one—even two a piece." Aside to me he added, "Freddy's the horse. He's very kind t' the others, often helps them with their work. And so a farm favorite."

Cal the hog didn't have to be told twice. He jogged passed us and over to a gate in the fence. There he stood up on his back legs and pressed a lever upward with his right foreleg. What looked like a counter-weight on a pulley system gently opened the door and let the hog out to do his chores. Just outside the gate he tucked his snout under the strap of a leather bag, one that had clearly been made for his size. A flick of the head brought the bag up onto his back with two loops hanging on either side. With practiced step he put one hind leg through one of the loops and then repeated with the other. A pull of a string near his snout drew the loops tight and he was off in a moment with his piggy backpack on the way to fetch some apples.

'Apples!' I thought. "You mentioned Honey Crisps. Apples?! Those are my favorite. My wife and I only discovered them when we came to Kentucky."

"Aye."

"Yeah, the best tasting apple in the country."

"In the world, I'd venture, Charles me boy."

Gabby was beaming. A big smile stretched across his face and he bounced on his toes for a moment, tucking his thumbs into his vest pockets at the same time.

"What?" I asked. "What is it?"

He looked around as if to see that no one else was listening. Then he said, "Honey Crisps, young sir...I invented 'em."

I smiled and gave an incredulous, "Okay."

He went on as he'd done before, ignoring the slightest skepticism on my part: "There's

magic in ‘em, ya know. Some of the last magic of the Fair Ones left in these parts. Oh, mind you, not much so as anyone can tell something strange going on...but they do taste quite good don’t they?”

He looked off at nothing again; I joined him, and we stood in silence for a moment. Then: “You were going to tell me about your age,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes. Hmm. How to put it. Well as plain as day I suppose: It was about a thousand years ago. Three of the Fair Ones decided they’d helped enough here, decided they’d go further west and see what help they could give to the natives across the continent. Very few of the families remained, then, mostly the Tucks and kin, but we could manage alright and had managed quite a name for ourselves among the tribesmen. Something had been happening to the Fair Ones, something slow and slight. They started to grow smaller here in the new world. Till they was barely a foot above the height of the tallest of the families.

“‘Our time passed ages ago,’ my father used to say. ‘We are just remnants, perhaps even castoffs—but if so, that of our own doing. And we are diminishing.’ The families, you see were much smaller. I have my father’s height. Or the height he came down to. In that age, just yesterday, it didn’t seem so strange for the last of the Fair Ones to join the littluns’ families in marriage. Oh, what a rare privilege. And what an act of self-humbling.”

“But no humiliation, I hope.”

“You are a perceptive one, Charlie. No, no humiliation what’s ever.”

“So you have the blood of the Fair Ones in you,” I said, putting two and two together.

“Yes and Aye. I do.”

“And they lived forever.”

“At least until they died. But not without leaving a slew of long-lived children.”

“They died?”

“Best not tell that story; it saddens the beasties.”

“Sorry.”

“Best focus on the living. True, there’s some sadness to’t. I have a brother and a sister I haven’t seen in a century. But they have no family of their own.”

“They’re still alive?”

He nodded. “I can tell, in ma heart.” But it’s ever too dangerous for us to make long journeys anymore. I’ll never see ‘em again. Don’t know, even, where they are exactly.”

He stood and breathed a sigh of resolve.

“Well that’s it then. I’m the last kin of the Tucks you’ll ever find in these parts. And the last of the Fair blood flows through these veins.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And no, I won’t live forever. I’m a Tucks, too. Now and then I feel my age.”

He looked at me and clearly saw an expression he didn’t like. I wasn’t paying attention to my feelings, of course. I was too busy feeling them. It may have been grief, or it might have been pity, but he responded half-jokingly: “Here now, I’ll still be around long after you’re gone! Kentucky hasn’t seen the last of the Tucks just yet. Mind your looks now or I’ll...I’ll sneak out to your grave and put pink, girly flowers on it. Now I know you, don’t think I’ll not be keepin’ an eye on ya.”

Gabby turned and drew me away; he wanted to show me the rest of the canyon farm. He talked about his parents, trying to describe what it was like to have a nearly immortal father and a down-on-the-home mom. *He* made instruments of wood and gold which made your heart melt upon the hearing. *She* dug potatoes as big as a cat and made the best chips you’d ever put to tongue. Eventually we made the round back to his house and stopped by the front door. Gabby looked up at me. I looked down at

him. Though somehow it was the other way around.

Then he said, "Charlie there's a goodness in you. One that doesn't belong to you."

"I actually understand that," I said. "But not very much of it, I think."

"There's not much in any men these days. The world has fallen from several heights. But don't underestimate what's in you. It's a crime against the Gift Giver. At the same time, I'll be honest: there's a bit of fear in you too."

I nodded my head. "I also understand that pretty well."

"True, true. But don't *overestimate* that either. If there'd been no courage in you, ye'd have never found the door to my cellar open to ya. Mark that. It's part of the magic."

I thanked him, and he led me into his home and back to the cellar door. There I donned my caving helmet, turned on the lights, put on my gloves, and headed down the stairs without another word.

VII

I made my way back to the far Black Rock passage (or rather the near one from Gabby's point of view). It was as cave quiet as ever. I figured I'd been gone a long while, but turned right to step further into the passage just in case anyone were still back here.

I called out, "Anyone here!" and was startled to get an answer.

"Yeah! We're still here. I thought you were going back?"

It was Alli. They were still slowly pressing forward. The puzzle was momentary. I remembered my Arthurian tales. Time in Faerie just doesn't operate the same as time in our world. I smiled. Gabby had been right. Or else I'd had the most vivid hallucination of my life.

"Yeah!" I called. "I'm heading back."

"Dr. Starr!"

"Yeah, Paul."

"I think I'm going to go with you."

"Okay."

It took him twenty seconds to join me. Then we turned and headed out. I thought about showing Gabby's back door to Paul but wondered if I should. Then I found a last surprise that day: there was no door. There was no side passage leading to it. I was certain of where it should've been. It just wasn't there. And though I wasn't too upset by it, I did give second thought to the possibility that I'd just dreamt the whole thing. As time would pass, I'd continue to wonder about this more and more. Only the memories of Gabby and the tea and the farm and Cal the hog, played out in my imagination every time the doubt became too depressing—only those living memories shook me loose and convinced me of the reality of what I'd experienced.

Paul and I made our way out of the passage, around to the first Black Rock tunnel, and followed the way back to the exit near the Key Hole. Paul almost missed it.

"Are you sure?" he said. "Should we check the map?"

"We don't need the map," I answered. "I know the way home."

We made our way out and went on to the Picnic Room. Deaux-e barked to announce our arrival as she did that of the others twenty or so minutes later. Max and Mike had indeed made it all the way through the second Black Rock passage. The last of it was belly crawl. Alli and Emily had turned back. They met each other on the way out. Becky and Jessie distributed the PB & J's and everyone but me ate a good lunch. I nibbled at a protein bar but was full enough, body and soul. I didn't talk much. Fortunately no one noticed the distance to

which I'd withdrawn. Still there was a job to do and cave guide was mine for a few hours more.

When we emerged from the Sink Entrance through which we'd entered, we found that the morning clouds had burned off, and a bright sky was above us. But of course, I already knew that. The fun wasn't quite over yet. Instead of turning right and heading back up the road, we turned left and headed down to the main cave entrance. There we spent another hour exploring some of the bigger passages in the cave. I'm pleased to say Jessie walked right on with the rest of us, allowing no fear to keep her from finishing the experience.

After that came the long trek back down the road, up the ravine, across the creek, down the path, and up the pasture hill. We changed at the SUV's and bagged all the dirty cave clothes for a good washing later. Then, with the sun setting behind us, we headed home.

VIII

I grant it, that that should be the end of the story. But who was going to believe it? I struggled for weeks with whether or not I should even tell Becky. Didn't want her worrying about my sanity. In the end, I chose not to. Not immediately, anyway.

A few months later I remembered something that had happened at a grotto meeting over a year before. On a particular Monday of each month, the Esso grotto gets together in Flatwoods, a sort of suburb of Ashland. We meet for dinner at the Giovanni's—I'm a fan of all-you-can-eat pizza...okay, I should be more honest: I'm a fan of all-you-can-eat anything. Then after dinner we walk across the side street to the public library for our meeting. One time, while we were still in the restaurant, I overheard Mark talking with Stan our

current grotto president. Besides being the world's leading expert on Tar Kiln cave, Mark is a nice guy. Soft spoken. A true Kentuckian. He's an electrician by trade, a caver by the best of fortunes. In his quiet voice he was talking to Stan (as he prefers to be called) about some of his journeys through the tighter spaces in Tar Kiln. Some of the channels up beyond the Water Fall Entrance are so tight, you have to reach up in front of you, grab the rocks in your way, and move them behind you to get through (I shivered a little bit). Stan then asked if Mark had been everywhere in the cave and Mark, in his quiet voice, said he had. He'd had a lot of years to work on it.

Then Stan asked a question: "Ever seen any Ferrens down there?" He asked it with a smile on his face—a kind of whimsical expression that said he didn't expect a serious answer.

Mark smiled too, and with a little shake of his head said, "Nah."

"Did you say *ferrets*?" I asked.

"No, Ferrens," Stan replied. "A magical creature from Kentucky folklore. Especially connected to caves."

Now there's something you need to know about Stan. He truly *is* an expert caver, and more of an expert on Kentucky caves than anyone in our region, if not in the whole state itself. Stan discovered and named half a dozen or more of the caves around the State Park, and he discovered the original entrance to one of the largest caves in the state over in central Kentucky! He was part of the team which surveyed that entire cave system. So when Stan says something about Kentucky cave lore, it's worth paying attention to. At the time, of course, it was just a fun story—interesting local trivia. But then, that one day when the memory of that conversation came back to me for no apparent reason, I put two and two together. It just wasn't that much of a stretch from

“Fair Ones” to “Ferrens”—not the way Stan was pronouncing it.

And then there was the look on Mark’s face. At the time I read it as, “Ah, funny joke.” In hindsight, though, I wondered if his expression were more along the lines of “Keep the secret”? I haven’t asked him. I don’t think I should.

I think I might have mentioned once in passing to Mark that some of the names of Tolkien’s hobbits came from our country. A Ph.D. at the University of Kentucky—a guy named Davenport—wrote about it in an essay: visiting with a history professor friend of his over in Shelbyville Kentucky—the man had been a fellow student with Tolkien back in the day. The historian used to tell Tolkien stories from Kentucky folk lore, and Tolkien had especially enjoyed hearing the names of real people from our fair state, folks like Barefoot and Boffin and Proudfoot (I can attest to having taught a Proudfoot or two myself at my own college). If I did mention that to Mark in passing, he never said anything about it, not that I remember.

At any rate, despite the external evidence and my own experiences, there was definitely a time when I started to doubt myself—whether the thing had happened or was just something I’d dreamed up. This especially occurred when the outlandish thought entered my head that the Indian name for our state was possibly a derivative of the *kin* called *Tucks*. “Well that’s just stretching it too far, Charlie,” I said aloud. But who knows how much influence *all* the Ferrens (the big and the small) had in the region in those ancient days? Coincidentally, on the very next day I walked out into my backyard to find the yard tools I’d had laying around—shovels and a pick and a few other odds and ends—were standing in a neat row against the brickwork of the house, and I hadn’t remembered doing it.

Then I noticed they’d been polished clean—not a speck of rust—and I *knew* I hadn’t done that. Beside the tools, planted neatly in the ground, there grew a cluster of flowers...with pink, girly petals. About a month later I pulled a Honey Crisp apple out of the fridge and cut it up to share with Becky. She said, “I didn’t know we had any of these left.” And I said, “The drawer’s full. Didn’t you just buy some?” She hadn’t.

I still have my doubts. But I’m sure, now that I’ve written the story—finally sort of “confessed the unbelievable”—I’m sure a lot of readers will be pretty sure themselves that I just made the whole thing up out of a mixed bag of love for Eastern Kentucky foothills and caves and love for the perilous realms where magic is as common as wishing. Yet I say it’s not about fairies and wishes. Far too many people think fantasy just an avenue for escape, but I like what C. S. Lewis said in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” (in *Of Other Worlds*):

It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for [the reader] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his lifelong enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.

Yeah, that’s it. And maybe, sometimes, it works the other way around. Maybe there’s a wood that enchants the stories of anyone who’s ever seen it. Maybe that wood’s in Eastern Kentucky.

The Undiplomatic Girl

by

Ryder W. Miller

The knight Gawain watched as the young lady walked away again. She was fair and slight of form. There was also a wonderful shimmer of silver in the green dress she wore, but Gawain found her perplexing. He had faced many challenges in his day as a knight of the Round Table, many adventures, and she now offered more. He was not the best of the knights, he was not the first knight or the toughest of his brothers, but when right was on his side there were usually none who could oppose him. He would not take on Lancelot, reasoning that it would be a loss to the Round Table whether he won or lost, but he would not shy away from a battle with a barbarian or an aggressor. Things had changed for the better and he was a part of it. The Round Table was now sacrosanct, but not everybody understood what it had achieved. It was a wonderful light in what had been a dark kingdom. It had principles and it defended the weak. Kyra, the departing maiden, did not seem to always recognize this. She was searching for a knight. She also wanted to be great and change the world. Gawain thought she did not seem to notice that there were those before her who had tried. Would she build upon their gains or seek to replace them? He did not know.

There were some who were not happy with how the Round Table had changed things. The knights of King Arthur were the victors. God they said was on their side. Right was on their side. There were, however, some losers. Gawain wondered if King Arthur could offer them some succor.

Kyra wanted to belong, but she did not really approve of everything. She needed Gawain to take on a foe for her at the tournament. This woman was fair and brave, but he did not understand what had happened. The divine had interceded and Arthur was victorious, bringing peace to a riotous kingdom. She chose a man for Gawain to battle, who was a distant cousin. For Gawain, it seemed as if this was the wrong choice for a confrontation. Kyra was also not interested in him in this way. The tournaments were friendly enough, but one could inadvertently create boundaries between people at them.

Gawain was used to women not always being happy. They did not carry swords and shields. They did not joust with lances. They did get in their way when they could. A damsel in distress could be dangerous. Though he was afraid to say so, some seemed to practice at it. They wished to disturb the brotherhood of men. They saw it as a wall. It seemed at times like it was just for their own enjoyment. Gawain thought it was not fun being vulnerable. Gawain had brothers, and they were proud and dangerous. Kyra was an only daughter, and she could be fierce. Woman like her were often forgiven for it. He found that he needed to choose between her and others, now distant family members. He did not know what others would think. He also wondered how his distant aunt would react. Parathena did not want family fighting. Kyra wanted Gawain to challenge Hothfer who wore brown leather. Gawain did not know him

very well, but a challenge would stir things up. He had not decided yet what to do.

He had met Kyra months back at a tournament. He did not always like those things, but one could find people they did not see very often there. They were a bit dangerous, but they did keep men fierce. He would usually lose before the final round, but he was still competitive even though he had passed two score years. Those who won were given prizes, but the goal was not to kill others. There were the great knights like Lancelot and Tristan who would usually win the day. Some considered him frumpish. He was also slow to anger, but when angry he burned like fierce coals for an interminable time.

Kyra did something that was unusual. She had asked if he needed aid and teased him when he refused. After the tournament battle he was tired and bruised. She offered to help. He would have to take a long ride back to the castle where he would take off his bloody armor himself and relax and then sleep. He was not hurt, but he was tired that day.

He did not have a wife, no prospects actually, and had become accustomed to it. His life was simple and jealousy made him hard and fierce. He did not need comforting. He was not used to it. Most women had eyes for others though, especially Lancelot. Gawain though was used to the simple life of a soldier. He was one of the brotherhood. At these tournaments he usually caroused with other soldiers.

But at this tournament they met. She seemed to be now leading him in a different direction, but with her it would be too big of a personal change.

Now before him was a lass of child rearing age. Her brown hair was tied in curls. She had thin lips and large green eyes. There was a smile on her face as she approached.

"Well fought," she said.

Gawain was surprised to find himself with a grin on his face. He did not always get this type of attention. He grew up with a bunch of brothers and in many cases the women in their circle preferred others to himself.

"Well thank you. And who might you be?"

She smiled showing uneven teeth. "Why sir, I am Kyra."

"Do I know of you?"

"I am not of noble birth, but my father is a Blacksmith and we serve the Round Table."

"Yes, I know of the Blacksmith. I remember seeing you as a child."

"Yes, and I remember some of your visits."

"Fine swords and armor he can produce."

This maiden must be almost a score younger than him Gawain realized. The Blacksmiths were usually of a loyal sort. Here was a girl who might not know her way.

"I wish that I could take one up myself."

"Not such a worthy goal."

"You would be different if you were not able to carry one."

"Having a sword brings to one responsibilities and burdens."

"It seems like so much fun."

"At times," said Gawain.

"Is there a matter for which you need assistance? Are you not spoken for?"

"I have not found the right one yet."

"Is this something you need the help of another than your father for?"

"He is too old."

"Did you seek a champion?"

"Yes," said Kyra. "I thought I had found one. That is where this tale begins."

This seemed like it was going to be more than he had bargained for. He was not accustomed to comforting. His brothers were stoic and as a group others knew to keep out of their way. They, however, could scare a

lass off. This woman was a child of a blacksmith and had clearly seen his like before. Her mind might be hard like a blade.

"I had met one that I approved of, but things went adrift."

"Adrift? And who might this be? What was his offense?"

"Hothfer was a fine-looking knight. He was a strong soldier...."

"My kinsman Hothfer? He is distant, but I know of him and my distant aunt Parathena."

"I did not know you were related."

"He is a distant nephew. An able soldier. I have not heard of any disloyalty from him," said Gawain.

"He can stand to learn some more about women."

"Can't all us men," said Gawain with a smile. He thought of some of his and his brothers' romantic escapades.

"You wrong me, sir. He wronged me and I wish to teach him a lesson!"

"It is wiser in matters of love, that between men and women, to seek also succor."

"Hothfer might be a loyal knight, but like many he is not suited for marriage and children."

"Quite a charge Kyra! Do tell me more of what transpired if you can? It seems as if this is a matter that is best kept between lovers."

"It never got that far."

"We speak too much now. You still have anger and he is a kinsman. Best to discuss this again next time," said Gawain.

"It might be a long time before we speak again."

"Yes. I hope though that you are not angry next time."

"I would rather not wait."

"I will take up your charge, but you must wait until the fires cool down. You ask me to confront a relative. Though distant, he is still kin."

"When will we talk next?"

"At the next tournament. I will hear your charge there if you still wish to make it. You have your opportunity to make peace with Hothfer before then. I am tired now and must go," said Gawain.

Kyra glared at him, but then her disposition changed. "I am likely to still be angry then," she said.

"We will see then," said Gawain with weariness.

It was a common practice for damsels to seek help. It was also something that Gawain was willing to do. But he did not know much about Hothfer and expected that he might be guilty of the same faults. He had covered for his brothers before, but they tried to respect women when they challenged them. They sought to be reformed men. It was sad though this animosity which did not always seem to have a recognizable source. There were some women who were dead set against men. They blamed them for the ills of the world. They also set men against each other. Some men might even argue that they brought out the worst in them.

Gawain had seen what they had done to his brothers and realized that there needed to be a brotherhood between men. It was necessary for there to be a military that could defend the country. But there were also some men who needed to be stopped. There were men with barbaric rituals and traditions elsewhere. Most women were not born in positions where they could rule. It fell upon the shoulders of men who had the power and therefore the responsibility. He did not want Kyra to make divisions between the Round Table and others. They needed allies elsewhere, but they also had rights to uphold.

He hoped that Kyra would cool down before the next tournament. He hoped that they could resolve their differences. On the day of the next tournament he could

challenge Hothfer himself. It would be best to keep it between themselves. He could humiliate Hothfer himself there. That might be enough for Kyra. It was hard to know yet what to do or what had transpired. He would decide then. Some women were willing to forgive an offense, but some were too grave to forgive. Women, he learned, also had their rules. He also had to think of Parathena and her kin who might distance themselves from him and his brothers and also the Round Table. Maybe there was a way to offer largesse and succor instead.

He would consult his brothers who might help find a remedy to this problem. He hoped that there would be forgiveness in the meantime. For now he would go back to his abode and take a well-needed rest. Hothfer might be younger, but he was not seasoned and clearly had others who found fault in him. Gawain was not yet angry and he hoped he wouldn't need to be. There was diplomacy to think of.

Gawain was not sure if he wanted to go to the next tournament, but realized that he had made a commitment to Kyra. It was there he might find out what had transpired. He really wished he could avoid this confrontation. It could be harmful to the Round Table he thought initially. He then realized that maybe it would strengthen their ties with the disenfranchised. It would show that they would champion the powerless. It would also mean that they would hold each other to a higher standard. His brothers did not know how to advise him since they did not know what had transpired. There were plenty of angry girls in their day. That was part of their value. They would harden and toughen a man if they could. Some of them sought to trap men that way. They were especially forthright because of the prevalence of warfare. Part of being a knight was knowing how to defend oneself and those they represented.

If he was a farmer or tradesmen or builder, things would be different. These were common folk who usually needed to be defended. There were times when they needed to go to war, but usually knights would solve the problems for them. It was their duty, but they also received payments in kind for it. The peasants depended upon the gentry to protect them. The knights had to study warfare to be up to this charge. They also needed funds to purchase metal-ware from blacksmiths.

Kyra was technically a peasant. She must have been done wrong by Hothfer who may have sought her out for fun. Knights were not always allowed to do such things. But maybe Hothfer did not understand that knights needed to follow a code. If they did not, God might not be on their side. It was battle that sought out who was wrong, and what was right. A maiden could turn such things out of balance. There might be unnecessary battles. Some might be hurt unjustly. It might take a long time to sort such things out.

If Hothfer was humiliated in a duel, that might appease Kyra. Maybe that would be enough for her to keep what was probably matters of love between them, Gawain kept thinking. Older women seemed to be able to live better with this. Young women wanted to change the world more, as did young knights, but there were things worth protecting. It also seemed as if things remained the same.

He decided that he would tie up his horse farther from the tournament grounds so he could walk more and see if he could find this young lady. He would not be jousting today. He would battle on foot. He would also challenge Hothfer directly if he could. He was an elder and people would understand if he taught this young knight a lesson.

Gawain walked slowly through the parade ground. Some noticed him, but none stood in

his way or stopped him while he was on this errand he did not yet understand. Kyra would be easy to pick out, but he wondered what people would think if he talked with her in front of others. He wanted to be private about this, but if he approached her that might not be possible. He also would not find her in the reserved seating.

Some gave him a knowing smile as he walked by. She would be there to talk with him if it was still important. He would have to have patience also.

Among the crowd he saw Kyra, who was now wearing a red dress. Her hair was tied back and in curls. She did not seem like she was enjoying herself.

What am I getting myself into? Gawain thought as he approached her.

She took him as a surprise and seemed ambivalent about bumping into him there. She was relieved, but not happy.

"What is it you wish to discuss with me?" Gawain said as he was trying to take her to a place where they could talk alone. He put his hand on her shoulder and nudged her to indicate this, but realized that maybe he should remove it.

Defensively, he said that he needed to talk with her in private.

She seemed irritated by this but followed him to a private place anyway.

Some noticed them in the crowd as they streamed by, but they did not stop to hear what they were saying to each other.

When they were alone and had her attention Gawain said, "What do you wish of me now?"

Kyra collected her thoughts for a moment and then began, "I gave your proposal some thought and think we should keep this between us three."

Gawain was relieved and sighed.

"We make mistakes also. What is it that you wish me to do?"

"Women cannot be treated as such. He did not offer generosity. He offered humorous bantering instead."

"I have brothers, Kyra. We like to make a distinction between blood sport between men, and matters of love. We prefer fun in matters of love. We seek respite and sometimes mirth."

"Is the world suited for such?"

"Yes. And we are brothers in arms to protect ourselves from all sorts of foes."

"Women are not supposed to be treated as property or exist just for amusement."

"It depends upon how one sees the marriage contract. It depends upon how one defines relationships."

"We are at war also," said Kyra.

"However we must do so with wit and wiles. Can I carry a sword? Would I have a squire?"

"This is a long conversation, Kyra. Can you tell me what your charge is? What is it that you wish me to do?"

"I would have you keep this between the three of us. That is something Hothfer does not know. That is something that he will need to learn. That is also something that those who heard his tales will need to be reminded."

"How many of those might that be?"

"I don't know. But there is a remedy."

"What is that?"

"If you make an example of him, others will know not to discuss the matter further."

"Hothfer would know, but do you think the others would learn from this?"

"Yes," said Kyra. "I want to be there when others watch him fall."

"I would be more willing to do this if I knew what transpired between you."

"I prefer that remain between us."

"I would be better about my business if I knew."

"All right then. We both grew weary of each other. We did not have things really to give each other. I did not find him generous.

He also thought he could seek out others to tell of what transpired. He laughed at me."

"Did he?"

"Not with many. He is not very popular."

"Would you take humor away from the world? Do you wish me to publicly let people know what transpired?"

"The humor is not for everyone. If you'll be my champion in this that will be enough."

"I wonder how others will react to me besting him before others."

Kyra was now annoyed. "Is that not what tournaments are about?"

"Not usually. I will do this for you, but you must not do this to a knight again."

"What if I want to? What if I need to? This is beyond my control."

"I hope fate shines better upon you. You are a fine looking lass who is a skilled talker. I would imagine you will have choices for the next."

"After this day, after this battle with Hothfer, they will need to be formidable."

"Yes I will do this for you this day. I will also keep the discussion between us. I will be your champion and this should keep things quiet."

"Thank you, Gawain."

"And what if I lose? Will you still be a diplomatic maiden?"

"Yes, because of the generosity you have shown."

Later that day in the tournament Gawain made it official that he sought out single combat with Hothfer. Some wondered about what this was about. There was some murmuring, but it was clear that Gawain and his brothers would not be dismissed lightly.

Hothfer was surprised by the actions of his distant kin. His annoyance was clear. It was clear that he seemed to be getting a public scolding.

His anger was palpable.

Gawain knew he had the advantage. He was more skilled. He also had more respect

and admiration. Hothfer's big battles were before him. Gawain had met his challenges. This was also likely to be the only time he would be able to talk with Hothfer. It was likely to be through yelling at each other while they dueled. Hothfer might be more forthcoming. It would have to be decided here in the tournament.

The crowd had now assembled to see Gawain. Hothfer would have preferred not to have been challenged by a distant renowned kinsman. They stood now before each other while the crowd looked on.

"Why do you challenge me?" asked Hothfer.

"It concerned the lady Kyra," said Gawain.

"Need we fight over such a matter?"

"She has not really given me a choice."

"What is her charge?"

"It is between you two and I need keep that between us three. Humor appears to be less popular these days," said Gawain.

"That is sad. I will not fight you."

"Many might not be satisfied with that."

"I do not wish to injure you, kinsman."

"We are here for sport."

"I will accept my defeat."

"That might not appease Kyra."

"I wish to be done of it."

"Raise your weapon."

"I will not."

Gawain tried to find Kyra in the crowd but she was too far away for him to see her expression. She was alert and attentive. He could tell from her posture.

"Take up your weapon," Gawain said again.

"I do not wish to combat with you."

"You will attend to Kyra's wishes."

"I will if I can. I now would like to leave. You are the victor. I submit."

"That might not be enough," said Gawain who now had an idea. He switched his sword to his weaker arm and took off his helmet.

For a moment he faced the crowd and then hit Hothfer over the head with his helmet. Hothfer lost his balance and fell to the ground. The crowd laughed in a short conceit.

Hothfer rubbed his head while Gawain walked of the field hoping this would suffice.

Gawain walked past Kyra into the crowd. There was a satisfied smile on her face when

he nodded. He hoped that this would be the last of it. Love. Diplomacy. Things really seemed to have changed in this Modern Age. He would not share this joke with everyone.

Editorial: This Issue

In this issue, we welcome some new writers with a variety of tastes and techniques. Publishing with us for the first time, Charlie Starr contributes a short story which features the passion of spelunking, with background of Kentucky folklore and other mythologies. Mary Ann Georgia Banks Marin explores a timeless old Chinese tale. Myles Buchanan brings us “Brackenstead,” an excerpt from his developing story of a fantastic world in conflict, where a pragmatic authoritarian government faces down rebels who dream of freedom. Gania Barlow offers two sensitive poems inspired by the classics, while Marly Youmans presents prophetic poetry partly in the style of Yoruban praise poems.

We also welcome back some previous authors. In fiction, William Wandless, who published “The Third Mercy” in *MC31* (2009), and “Ornery Corn” in *MC 37* (2015), now brings us “The Finest Jest,” exploring the conflict between faith and the drive for conquest in a remote ancient Eastern setting, with a style reminiscent of Poe and Lovecraft. Ryder Miller, in “The

Undiplomatic Girl,” shows the impact of social change on King Arthur’s court. Lee Clark Zumpe examines the merits of diplomacy in extraterrestrial conflict. Chelsi Robichaud presents three short poems based on themes from the *Odyssey*.

Once more, L. C. Atencio provides a cover illustration, while Emily Metcalf produces two wonderful illustrations for “The Finest Jest.”

Special thanks to Bethany Abrahamson for her help with editing and layout.

SOLITUDE

by

Chelsi Robichaud

Reduced to a great nothingness,
a lack of a lack,
I wonder where my friends have gone.
But surely it matters not
in this loathsome sea.

I have ventured out to find them,
only to be met by silence.
They have left, on the winds.
Not even a nod to our days
of intimate companionship,

Have I been reduced to this?
A woman alone on the sea,
a gaunt figure, surrounded
by the Siren's call.

This is my dystopia:
And it is called solitude.

SIN

by

Chelsi Robichaud

I have sinned.
Though the masses say it is no crime,
I know of the dirt that covers me.

I retch, but it changes naught.
It is the space behind my eyes that has shifted.
Desires have been valued over life.

How can I redeem myself?
The gods know what I have done.
They peer into my soul with their golden eyes
and judge my heart accordingly.

There is no hope for me.
I have changed my ways
but the weight of my crimes
sits heavy upon my mind.

I will drift about the shores of Greece,
until Poseidon claims me.

A Visit From the Moon

by

Georgia Ann Banks-Martin

From the beach, you could see the island. My mother said no one lived there anymore and she didn't know why. I wanted to live there. I wanted to be a goddess and live forever. Mother said there used to be a goddess and people who lived forever. From the pier, in midsummer, I could see that some of the trees had bright orange fruit hanging from their branches. I thought I could use them in an elixir. I looked up immortality drinks and found a long list of plants that used to grow in the mountains. I was sad when I found out that most of them had disappeared, and that the drinks had proven not to work. That didn't stop me from dreaming about being a goddess. That is, until the day when my mother and I left the pier just as it started to rain.

We had hoped to catch some fish, but the storm started up suddenly, and we had to go home. The winds were high and wrapped my long hair around my eyes like a blind-fold, and I fell into the street. When I got up, my blue dress was too muddy to be washed. Mother made me throw it into the trash. After my bath, I went to bed while Mom made mooncakes for the Moon Festival. I wanted to help, but last year when I was supposed to be putting the red frosting on the cakes that had cooled, I started eating them. I ate almost all of them before the festival even started. Mother was mad because she had to make another batch. I couldn't help myself—they were so good, and I only got to eat them every fifteenth of October.

The Moon Festival was always fun. I loved the lanterns and the smell of the incense, but the fire dragon dance was one of the best parts. The dragon was big and red, made from thousands of sticks of burning incense. It was two hundred and nineteen feet long, and it took three hundred people to make him twist and curl like a giant python.

Some people said that many years ago there had been a typhoon a few weeks before the Moon Festival. While everyone was cleaning up from the storm, a python ate all of the farm animals. The people had no milk, eggs, or meat. Some the villagers went on a hunt, killed the snake, and hung it from the flag pole in the center of town. In the morning, everyone went to see the snake, but the body had disappeared. Arguments broke out. Shouting filled the square.

"They lied! They didn't kill the snake!"

"Yes, they did! Someone stole it!"

"The hunters took it!"

"Why would we take!"

"For the money!"

This went on until the people grew bored and left. Days passed without an answer. Soon, half of the town's people were sick. It seemed everyone had a high fever and a hard time breathing. Some had red spots on their skin. Those who had the spots died. No one understood what was happening until, one day, a wise man came along. He told the people that the python was the son of the Sea Dragon King. The only way to be healed would be to perform the fire dragon

dance during the festival for three days. So the people performed the dance, and to remember what happened, they continued it every year. Nothing that interesting ever happened anymore.

Since it was raining, band practice was canceled; my brother came home early to play his trumpet in his room. I knew he really needed to practice, but he sounded so bad I wanted to take his trumpet and smash it like a soda pop can. A couple of times in the past, I'd hidden it from him, but Daddy said that was mean. Really, the whole band was horrible. They couldn't play or march. Daddy said it was Kelvin the drum major's fault. He was always leaping and spinning, and sometimes he looked like a mime or a deranged dancer trying to win a contest.

The morning after the storm, everyone was outside. Some people were asking if the festival would be canceled. Big trees were lying on their sides with their hairy roots sticking out into the streets like the feet of people too tall for their beds. On one of the trees, I noticed some ants crawling in two lines, one coming and the other going. I decided to follow the line that headed toward the pier. When I got to the pier, I realized that the tree continued all the way to the island, where it seemed to be snowing.

I saw a lady sitting there, and I called to her, "Hi! What's your name?" The lady moved a little but didn't stand up. "Hi, over here!" The lady held her head down and tried to cover it with her arm. I made my way along the fallen tree to the island. The lady wore a long blue dress that was a little dirty; it had odd splotches all over it. I couldn't tell if the stains were grease or dirt. The wind kept blowing her long hair around her head and eyes. When I got close enough to touch her, the wind stopped blowing and the snow stopped too—only it wasn't snow. It was small pieces of clear glass, and most of it had fallen in a circle around the woman,

who whispered that her name was Chang-E. I told her my name was ChangChang.

"Hello, ChangChang. I used to live on this island, but that was many years ago. Now I live on the moon. The wind blew me out of my house through an open window. It's an interesting way to travel. It only happens when I'm needed down here. No one lives on this island anymore. We used to have a lot of fun when I lived here. Of course, the place does look a bit smaller than it did then."

As Chang-E stood up, the last of the glass dropped into the pile that circled her feet. She stepped out of the ring of glass onto the soft white sand. As she moved, her dress took on a sort of iridescent glow and the dirt disappeared.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Clean your dress?"

"Oh, moon dust. Best dust anywhere in the heavens, it is very easy to work with. I just shake my dress a little and the dust goes away. Nothing like the dust you have here."

I looked up and saw a pretty cloud that looked like a bird. "Well look at that!"

"That's Chi and An. You will like An, she is a wonderful bird. Chi rides on An's back all the time. I hope he has my mantle."

As we watched, I could see that Chang-E was right. The cloud was getting closer; it was a bird with large, flapping wings, whiter than anything that I had ever seen, and, indeed, there was a man riding the bird as if it were a horse. The bird landed in the glass circle, and Chi slid down An's thigh. When he was on the ground, he took the piece of fabric he was wearing around his shoulders and handed it to Chang-E.

"Thank you. I was getting cold. Chi, I would like you to meet my friend Chang-Chang. We've been chatting. No one lives here anymore. What a waste of land, but it has been a long time and things in the dust

world are always changing. I bet Chang-Chang has never heard of my dear Yi, have you, ChangChang?"

"No. My mother may know him, though. I could go get her. She's getting ready for the festival, I think. The storm blew down a lot of trees, so there's a lot of stuff to clean up. I hope some of them fell on the school, right over the band room. That would keep my brother from playing his awful music! Anyway! You wait here and I will go get my mom."

"Ha-ha, no dear. I'm sure had she known him, you would know of him too. Festival? You mean the Moon Festival. Why aren't you home making mooncakes?"

"Cause I eat them all!"

"I see. Everything, even the cassia tree over here, is different. It may be a relative of the old one, but it isn't the same one, just doesn't seem to be as full as the one that was here before. No, I don't think there is anything left from back then. Let's go over to the tree and sit while I tell you both all about me and Yi."

The cassia tree hung over the circle. I found a nice patch of sand while Chang-E sat on a glass stool that Chi had unloaded from a pack strapped to An's saddle. Chi took a place near Chang-E's feet.

"There used to be ten Sun-birds who lived in a mulberry tree in the Eastern Sea. Each day, one of them would take their mother, the Mother of the Suns, on a ride around the world in her carriage. After a lifetime of doing this, the Sun-birds got bored and decided it would be more fun if all of them were to go with their mother on her ride. So that's what they did, but that made life here on the dust world very hard. The people didn't have food to eat or water to drink because all of the fields dried up and the rivers dried up too. Then the trees died, so there was no place to go to get away from the heat. That is, if you were brave

enough to even go outside. Soon, people started to die, just a few at first, the older ones and the poor ones who had nothing in their pantries to eat or drink. But after a few weeks, it became obvious that all the people were dying.

"The emperor didn't know what to do, so he prayed to Di Jun, the father of the Sun-birds. Di Jun understood and agreed that something had to be done before no one was left alive on the dust world. He sent the divine Yi to scare the Sun-birds into returning to the normal way of doing things, but when Yi saw what had happened to the dust world, he got so mad that he picked up his bow and killed all but one of the Sun-birds. This pleased Yi, but it completely displeased Di Jun. Yi had murdered Di Jun's boys, so he was banished to the dust world—no longer was he immortal.

"For a while, that didn't worry him, because the dust world people needed him to protect them from Fei Lian, the Count of the Winds, who was a big ugly bully. In fact, he looked like a bull and had only one eye and a serpent's tail. He would create these big storms that tore up the trees and flattened all the houses in the towns. So, one day, Yi went after the Count. When the Count saw him coming, he jumped into a large sack that he had in his cave. When Yi got to the cave, he looked around and didn't see anyone, but he sensed that the Count was home. Being a bull, the Count didn't have much use for furniture, so there wasn't a bed to look underneath, or cabinets or closets to open up. So the only place he could have been was in the sack that was neatly placed against the sidewall. Yi took his bow and arrow out and shot into the sack. The sack popped and the Count reappeared. He tried to run. Yi shot him in the knee with an arrow. Defeated, the Count surrendered and promised never to cause trouble again.

"On his way home, Yi came across an overflowing river. It hadn't rained in weeks, and Yi knew that the water god had to be the cause of this. So, he shot an arrow into the foaming river. Soon, the river went back to its normal size and a man on a white horse appeared from the middle of the water. Taking no chances and not wanting to be killed by the angry god, Yi shot first and wounded the god in the eye. The god ran off as fast as he could on his horse. Then Yi noticed a girl in the water too. ChangChang? Can you guess who that girl was?"

"No."

"Why, it was me! Yi thought I was the prettiest girl he had ever seen and asked me right then and there to marry him before some other man did. I was so impressed by Yi's bravery that I agreed to be his wife. Years went by and Yi continued to accomplish heroic deeds. He fought a wind bird and Chilsetooth, and was awarded the title of Marquis Pacifier of the Country. As he grew older, though, he began to understand that his banishment really did matter. He would die soon, all of his heroic feats would be forgotten, and in time I would die too. One day, while he was hunting, his horse ran away from him. Yi chased the horse into the Kunlun Mountains, where he met the Queen-Mother of the Jasper Sea. 'Yi,' the Queen-Mother said. 'What is the matter?'"

"My horse ran away, and I must find him."

"Is that all? Just be still for a while, he will come back to you. Why don't you wait here with me?"

"Alright," Yi said, and he sat down.

"You say that you are troubled by the loss of your horse, but I sense there is more. Please tell me what this burden is that you bear."

"Yi said, 'I'm getting old and will soon die. I don't want to die. I don't want the dust world people to forget what I have done.

None of the gods are willing or able to help them. Only I can save the people. After I'm gone, who will listen for their cry for help?"

"You are right. The dust world must never be without you. Being without you would mean that they would likely die by the hand of some great evil. What about your wife? Doesn't she want to live forever? She was once immortal. She may not remember. She was once a goddess, but was reborn as a human so that you wouldn't be alone in the dust world. She was placed in the care of the water god, who cared for her like she was his sister. When she was old enough to be married, he was to bring her to you. But, as you know, she grew into a striking young woman, and the water god couldn't bear to see her leave. So he overflowed the river to entice you to fight for your bride's hand.

"I have a way to solve your problem. In my garden grows an orange tree whose fruit, when properly prepared, gives anyone who eats it immortality. I will give it to you because you have proven yourself to be of great service to the dust world. I can give you two pills made from this fruit if you think your wife wants it."

"Yes! I want her to live forever with me!"

"Alright, I will give you two pills, one for each of you. They are to be taken after you have prayed and meditated about the matter for one week. After you have taken the medicine, you will return to Heaven and be fully restored. However, you will always hear the people's cries for help. Please be careful, do not leave them where others will find them. Do not take them without following my directions. The outcome can result in the person becoming more than just immortal, and I will not be able to offer you more."

"Yi began to cry. 'Thank you, Queen-Mother.'"

“Now go outside and see if your wayward horse has returned. I will bring the pills to you.’

“Yes, I will do that. Thank you.’

“And so Yi went to see if his horse had indeed returned. He looked on the side of the palace. He looked in back of the palace. The horse wasn’t there. Just as he was about to give up, he saw a white figure in a nearby valley. He went a little closer and saw that it was his horse. He ran down the side of the mountain and got him. He would have gone back to the palace, but the Queen-Mother came to the valley and gave him the pills wrapped in a red cloth.

“Once he was home, he hid the pills in a box of arrowheads and went to visit a farmer who was demanding to see him. There was a pack of wild boars and a dragon threatening the people who lived in a nearby valley. He had to leave right away, so a messenger was sent to tell me of Yi’s new mission. He was unable to return home for several months.

“One day his favorite student, Feng Meng, came by and asked if there were any arrows he might have for practice. The boy recognized the box right away. When I opened it, I found the pills and recognized what they were used for. I gave the box to the student and sent him away. I was outraged. I put both of the pills in my mouth. Instantly, I tasted the sweetest orange juice ever created. Then the sweetness turned just as bitter. I tried to drink a glass of water. Before I could finish, I began coughing and dropped the glass on the floor. It shattered in an odd ring around my feet. I stared at it for a while in amazement. Then I noticed an orb growing from the glass. It was milky white and grew quickly, like a large soap bubble, until it trapped me inside of itself. I kicked and picked at the sides, but I couldn’t get out of it. I sat in that orb for a week before the wind blew me out of my kitchen window. When Yi finally got home, I was floating

away. He tried to catch me. He jumped and jumped, but I was rising too quickly. He started to shoot arrows, but for the first time, he missed.

“Yi was deeply hurt over losing me.

Some people said he became mean, yelling at people for anything they did wrong, especially his archery students. One day, he left home and didn’t return, so a rumor began that he had been killed by Feng Meng.

“But that is not what happened. Yi went to see the immortal king Xi Wang Mu, who said to him, ‘You had regained the favor of the gods through your good works. But in your haste to care for others, you neglected your wife and yourself. You should have prayed, mediated, and taken the immortality pills together before you left on your journey.’

“So, he was only partially restored to his former place. The gods allowed him to build me a palace on the moon, but he was required to live on the sun and assist the surviving Sun-bird. I can never visit him. Instead, he has to visit me at my home on the fourteenth of each month.

“Now, I live on the moon, where the only other living beings are my servants, the white hare, who mixes elixir all day, and the three-legged toad. No one speaks to me or plays games with me, or even offers to tell me stories. When I’m needed, an orb appears and the wind takes me to my new destination. That is how things work, and this is where I draw my joy from now: the fact that Yi and I represent and help to maintain the Yin and Yang, the natural balance of life here in the dust world, and up there in the cosmos.

“You must respect your mother. She works hard on baking for the festival. She really could use your help.”

Suddenly, I heard the faint sound of school band music. They were at it again.

“My, my! ChangChang, is that the marching

band? Chi, bring An over so I can get a good look. ChangChang, you come too.”

We climbed onto the back of the huge white bird and flew high up into the clouds. I was sure we wouldn't hear anything, but I was wrong. We heard every wrong note! We saw every crazy move!

“ChangChang, look at the drum major! Look at his dancing. He is great. Chi, take us back to the island. This band isn't in tune. They need help. ChangChang, I want you to go to where the band is playing. I will see you shortly.”

After Chang-E and Chi left, I walked as fast as I dared on the tree trunk until I was on the other side of the pier again. Then I ran over to the park, where the band was playing. Just as I got there, the drum major threw his staff into the sky and it became a bridge. The drum major, being the silly creature he was, just kept on dancing his nutty dance until the whole band was standing in front of the castle, on which was inscribed: “The Spreading Halls of Crystal Cold.” I ran in behind them. From the door came a sorcerer who held his hands up, and the players' instruments disappeared.

“You have been invited to a dance. Please follow me.”

The band members did so in silence. Inside, on her great crystal throne, sat Chang-E. To the drum major, she said, “You are a child of the mundane world of dust. Great is your fortune, since you have been able to find your way here!” Chang-E called for her attendants, who flew in on their white-winged horses, and the best music ever heard began to play as everyone danced under the cassia tree. When the dance was over, Chang-E gave the sheet music to the drum major, and the sorcerer returned the band's instruments. Then all of us mortals came back to the dust world, where suddenly the band played well. I stopped looking for immortality, stopped stealing the

mooncakes, and stopped asking about the island.

“The Visitor From the Moon” was inspired by a story called “The Legend of the Lady on the Moon,” retold by Yan Li in her novel *Lily in the Snow*. The story, and many like it, is told to young children during the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival. During these events, people enjoy making crafts, listening to music, eating traditional cakes and fruits, and admiring the full moon. The primary character, Chang-E, is the Lady or Goddess of the Moon, who is famous for having stolen the elixir of life from her husband, Yi.

Yi is a divine archer who comes to Earth to defend her from various enemies, some of whom are the ten Sun-birds that keep it warm. When they begin to misbehave, their father, Di Jun, asks Yi to help him regain control over them. Instead, Yi kills all of them except for one.

Intrigued by the story, I wanted to know more about it and started to do some research. I was able to trace the story through its characters and other retellings, which were titled differently. Lin titles the story “The Legend of the Lady on the Moon.” Frederick H. Martens, in his book *The Chinese Fairy Book*, titles the story “The Lady of the Moon.” Scott Littleton, in *Mythology: The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, breaks the story into three: “The Times of the Ten Suns,” “The Elixir of Life,” and “The Death of Yi.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers a short retelling under the entry of “Hou Yi.” I used elements from all of these sources to create my story. I have assigned the mysterious woman the name Chang-E because she is my moon goddess, and her husband is the archer Yi. In general, the name “Chang” is a unisex name meaning “to flourish for a long time.”

Poem for the lost library of La Mancha

by

Gania Barlow

After the books are burned
there is a hush
and then a flutter of ashy syllables
out into the world—

to be read
by the bottoms of our shoes
their black phonemes smeared across
pages of dirt and stone.

(There in the courtyard a knight
no longer
and his lady
doesn't).

In the still solemn manner of madness
each Manchegan among us
spells out the remains of the story
in muddy war lines
down our long gray cheeks.

&

Tell us again,
Don Quixada, Quexada, or Quexana,
what the fire read

because if you tell it
with your whole body
in a line like a string,
a chain, a graph
of hoofprints in the dust
like a line of music
we can't quite remember

if you tell it as though
it is still here

it is still true

About This Publication

The Mythic Circle is a small annual literary magazine published by *The Mythopoeic Society*, which celebrates the work of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and other writers in the mythic tradition. (For more information about the Mythopoeic Society, contact Alicia Fox-Lenz, Communications and Social Media Manager, E-mail: correspondence@mythsoc.org)

Copies of the next issue, *Mythic Circle*, #39, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2017, can be pre-ordered through the Mythopoeic Society's website, < <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic->

circle.htm>. Back issues are available at < <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/mythic-circle-history.htm> >. Any trouble with the website may be reported to Gwentyth Hood at <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>.

The Mythic Circle exists primarily for the benefit of writers trying to develop their craft in the Mythopoeic tradition and publishes short fiction, poetry, and artwork (mostly illustrations of stories and poems.) We have, as yet, no hard and fast length limits, but we as a small publication, we must think very well of a story more than 5000 words long to publish it. Shorter stories have a better chance. By editorial policy we favor our subscribers.

Submissions and letters of comment should be sent to: Gwentyth Hood, English Department, Marshall University, Huntington WV 25701, or e-mailed to <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>. Paper submissions should be double-spaced and should include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. E-mailed submissions are preferred. ---

Creüsa

by

Gania Barlow

If Aeneas doesn't see Creüsa
dead or dying,
 alive or living,
what is she?

caught like a cat
between
a shadow cloud of possibilities

within the burning box
that has been Troy.

If she can tell him *go and be*
does that mean that she isn't?

Or just that she chooses

to remain neither/both
in the archestereotypical
circling
of the feminine./?

while he
has to take up his father and go
the straight-winding path that ends
in the inevitable:

 a city built for a city razed,
 a sword at the enemy's throat
 a son already crowned
with flame.

The Great Hall of Ahkurst

By

Lee Clark Zumpe

Tarak limped along the long corridor, muttering to himself beneath the flickering florescents. The subterranean passage stretched out before and behind him, a serpentine artery curving gently beneath the surface of the planet. Once bright and full of life, the grimy channel had fallen into disrepair and contemptible neglect over the years. A wave of systems failures, a spate of irreparable malfunctions and a generation of mechanically inept slackers had sealed the lid on this coffin.

Tarak knew this place would be his tomb. The underlings would eventually find a way through the network of sensors and automated battle stations, overrun the passages and kill anyone they found. The underlings would have their revenge upon him, if age itself did not lay claim to him first.

The old man cursed bitterly the fate that had befallen his beloved home.

Tarak tugged nervously at his mangy beard. His great-great-great grandfather had worked on this very corridor, sweating in the grim darkness and chipping away at the stone with his pickaxe. As a boy, Tarak had heard stories dating back hundreds of years – stories proudly retold generation after generation by his family, over tea, after dinner. His grandfather spoke of the wars his ancestors fought to claim their empire, and of the horrors they found deep in the earth.

Tarak caressed the steel buttress with a

trembling hand. His pudgy fingers tapped the reinforcements anxiously, taunting them to admit the weakness of their age. Behind the thick metal casing, beneath that veil of fortification, the solid rock of the earth's crust bristled with hideous life.

Tarak wondered how much longer these walls would stand.

*Weakest of all are those castle walls
Guarding nothing but shadowy halls.*

An old proverb, one Tarak remembered from childhood. No one read the scriptures any more, of course, but those verses had a way of surfacing at appropriate moments to unsettle the soul.

Tarak opted to remain behind when most of his kind willingly chose to forsake the realm. Only a handful remained now, wandering the lonely passages, dreaming about past glories and reliving ancient battles through song and story. Old men like Tarak – too stubborn or too proud to relinquish their heritage – now haunted these halls, breathing the last few breaths of musty air in their lost world.

Tired and cheerless, the little old man propped his stubby bones against the wall, pressing his furrowed brow against the cold steel plates. He had been old when lasers had replaced swords, when drills had replaced shovels, when antibacterial ointments had

replaced folk remedies. He had watched as the handwritten tomes of his ancestors had been digitized and stored on computers. He had watched as the crude artificial intelligence of machines had been substituted for soldiers along the watchtowers. Like a creeping tumor, technology had eclipsed everything that had been, had swallowed his birthright, and had devalued the legacy of his people.

Technology had even seduced his children away from him, into different lives on another world.

A faint whisper echoed through the corridor. Behind him, the shadows writhed timidly. The old man shuddered and picked up his pace.

The corridor soon gave way to a vast enclosure – the Great Hall of Ahkurst. Tarak immediately felt soothed by the warmth of torchlight. The sparkling glow of the flames illuminated the hall, peeling back the shadows to reveal the magnificent painting spread across the ceiling. The fresco recorded the history of his race from the time they had been driven underground. It depicted the most renowned of their leaders, revealed the most triumphant scenes of their wars with the underlings, and chronicled the slow but steady progress of their empire.

No more than a dozen Elders sat at the Long Table. Tarak recognized Aziz and Ezra, the brothers from Tahlmot Bottoms. On his right hand sat Luranus of Toth; on his left he found Bohr.

“Tarak, old friend – it is good to see you.” Urik, a decorated warrior in his youth, nodded and smiled. “We were just speaking of the Kobalds. Have you seen any?”

“No...but,” Tarak took a seat at the table, warily glancing over his shoulder. He could not shake the feeling that something had followed him. “Something is out there, something must be out there. The halls aren’t as still as they once were.”

“Aye,” chimed in Aziz. “And something

smells out there.”

“That’s probably Ezra’s feet!” Luranus retained the worst qualities of his ancestors. He chuckled though no one else found his witticisms particularly funny.

The Elders spoke of Kobolds encroaching on the outermost perimeters. They spoke of disappearances amongst the residents of the outlying communities – the small, unshielded villages whose inhabitants shunned all forms of technology. Their numbers had been in decline for some time, but now reports suggested only a few dozen remained.

“It’s the Kobalds, it must be,” Ezra barked. “They’ve always been just outside of our walls, waiting for an opportunity.” Coal-black and mindless, the Kobolds lumbered through the darkest hollows of the world. Legends claimed they feasted on solid rock, and drank lava like water. “They’ve come to reclaim the territory they lost in the wars...”

“And if they have...how long before the other underlings become their allies? How long before the rock wraiths and the orcs and the dragons stir from their nests?” Tarak accepted a goblet of ale offered to him by a servant. “How long before we are faced with more formidable threats than those bumbling oafs?”

“We have sufficient weapons to...”

“Sufficient weapons? Our laser canons have no energy to power them. Our plasma rifles are scattered across hundreds of miles of tunnels, gathering dust in storerooms and closets and kitchen pantries. Our dilapidated android sentries all short-circuited years ago.” Tarak wrestled his dagger free from its sheath and thrust it into the stale air of the room. “This is the only weapon I trust...”

Even as Tarak’s words echoed through the hall, an exceptional blast of wind flooded the chamber, extinguishing all but one of the torchlights. Formerly managed by mechanized climate control mainframes, such uncontrolled currents of air had become more and more

common.

"Can't someone look into that blasted weather system?" Luranius tugged at his cloak, pulling it close to his stout body. His folded his stubby arms across his chest, hid his shaking hands beneath the material. The cold bothered his thick, stunted bones. "Perhaps we should have joined the others. Perhaps we should have given in and left all this behind."

"No..." Bohr, who had been silent until now, spoke. "I do not blame those who migrated – this is a dying world to them, and they had whole lifetimes before them. But for us – for the Elders – we would not fit in well with the surface-dwellers."

"We could have, had we chosen to," Luranius reminded him. "The DNA restructuring procedure would have given us the appearance of the surface-dwellers..."

"Aye," said Bohr, "But we would never be surface-dwellers." Bohr's face crumpled into shadowy ridges as he fought back emotion. His three daughters had gone to live on the surface, and the old man missed them. "Those who left were of a different generation – they accepted the marvelous gifts of science and technology without question, without hesitation. We prefer the old ways – though some of the comforts of the modern age appeal to us, we still favor to live our lives as our ancestors lived theirs." Bohr smiled as he tilted his head back and eyed the painting overhead, now barely discernible in the thickening shadows. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I also prefer to die here with my ancestors – nestled in the warm earth, and not upon some roofless, grassy pasture beneath endless skies where beasts can ravage my lifeless corpse."

Silence fell upon the room as each of the Elders nodded in agreement. Unlike their children, the Elders remained shackled to the customs and traditions of their forebears.

"Enough of these shadows – let us have some light again," Luranius said.

Aziz and Ezra grudgingly took leave of their comfortable chairs and began relighting the firebrands.

"Wait," Tarak said, turning and peering down the corridor that had delivered him to the Great Hall. He sniffed at the still fluctuating stream of air. "Do you smell that?"

The Kobalds shambled out of the shadows like a slow-moving rockslide, their stony pitch-black hides interrupted only by the crimson fire of their eyes. The dark, dim-witted things howled as they approached their ancient enemies.

"BREACH!" screamed Luranius, and he leapt to his feet and scampered across the Great Hall to the far end of the room.

Tarak jumped up onto the face of the table, brandishing his blade with no less courage than his ancestors had in the wars of old. Urik stood by his side, a laser pistol gripped firmly in his hand.

"Does that thing work?" Tarak snarled out of the corner of his mouth, never once taking his eyes off the loathsome Kobalds.

"It used to...haven't had any reason to use it in a hundred years."

"Aziz, Ezra!" Tarak and Urik edged across the table until they stood in the center. Tarak spun his head around, scanning the shadows. "Where are you two? Find something to defend yourselves with and get up here!"

"They left." One of the Kobalds lethargically hobbled over to Tarak's chair and sat down in it. "Looks like you two," the Kobald sputtered, "Have been left to defend the realm on your own..."

"You...you speak?" Tarak's eyes had grown wide with astonishment. Nothing in the history of his people had indicated Kobalds had the capacity for intelligent dialogue. "What...what do you want?"

"Well," the Kobald said, "An apology would be nice; but, short of that, we'd like to reclaim some of our property taken by your ancestors."

“But we...”

“Look: You don’t need it, there’s hardly any of you left.” The Kobald leisurely extended an arm and clasped Tarak’s goblet of ale. He drew it to his lips and sipped at it casually. From the expression on his gritty face, he appeared to be pleased with the taste. “We’ve gotten tired of living in caverns, sleeping on rocks. We’d like to fill in some of your vacant lodgings.”

“You want to live with us?”

“Why not? We’d like to learn more about how you built this place.” The Kobald smiled, its crimson eyes narrowing into narrow slits. “It would be fair compensation for what your ancestors did to mine, don’t you think?”

“I suppose...” Tarak gradually lowered his dagger. Urik, standing beside him, scratched his head.

“Maybe we could even help you get some of your equipment working again – seems like things have started to fall apart around here.”

“Maybe...”

“I know all this is rather sudden – and I’m sure you need to discuss things with your

governing council.” The Kobald stood, bowing in respect. “We will take our leave now, and we will give you some time to think things over.”

“Fine...”

“Our attaché will be in contact with you to negotiate a settlement.” Moving at a snail’s pace, the band of Kobalds filed back into the corridor. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

Moments later, Tarak and Urik still stood shaking on the long table beneath the vast painting in the middle of the Great Hall of Ahkurst. The other Elders had apparently scattered throughout the network of tunnels, and probably cowered in the shadows awaiting gruesome and violent deaths.

Tarak sheathed his dagger and sat down on the edge of the table.

“So much for the glory of battle,” Tarak mused.

“It’s a strange, new world,” Urik admitted, sitting down beside his friend. “Do you think the dragons have ambassadors and mediators, too?”

<End>

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

L.C. Atencio holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of Central Florida, with scholarly emphasis on illustrating literary works. Atencio’s poems, “Believing in words, not in whoever,” and “Staring through the cracks of reality,” were published in 2012 in *Nota Bene*, an anthology by The Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. He has edited and judged college journals such as *Phoenix Magazine*, *The Cypress Dome*, and *The Florida Review*. His poetry and short stories have been published internationally in *Westview*, *Perspectives*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Storyteller*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Grey Sparrow Press* and others. His illustrations have been featured in college magazines such as *Aries: A Journal of Art and Literature*. Atencio is proud to be an experimental novelist for the everyday person, and a book illustrator. To get in touch, he may be contacted at <http://creativewriter0.wix.com/lcatencio>.

Georgia Ann Banks-Martin, MFA, is best known as a poet and the editor of *New Mirage Journal*. She has led workshops for the Jane's Stories Press Foundation and the Writers International Network Zimbabwe. She has read her work at various conferences, such as Writing By Degrees and Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and other national locales. Her work appears in both magazines and anthologies. Some of her poems have been translated into Farsi by the Persian writer and translator Farideh Hassanzadeh-Mostafavi. Banks-Martin's most recent collection, *Rhapsody for Lessons Learned or Remembered*, is best described as experimental, in the sense that the poems blend memoir with historical fact and ekphrastic technique to explore the overall theme of the rediscovery of self and establishment of self within the greater fabric of the human experience. If you would like to learn more about the writer, please visit her webpage: georgiabanks-martin.com.

Gania Barlow teaches literature at Oakland University in Michigan. Her research focuses on the literature of medieval England, but she also finds herself inspired to read, teach, and write poems about stories from many other times and places. She has published both creative and scholarly work, in journals including *Agni*, *The Chaucer Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*.

Myles Buchanan grew up in Portland, Oregon, and is an aspiring fantasy writer, currently working on a collection of linked stories called *Sorrowlands*. He is a lifelong fan of J.R.R. Tolkien and Lord Dunsany and has a particular interest in the treatment of forests in fantasy literature. He earned his B.A. in English at Kenyon College and is currently pursuing a Master in Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Eastern Washington University.

Gwenyth Hood was born in White Plains, NY, but moved with her family to Brandon, Vermont at the age of seven. She developed a love of reading and writing at an early age, discovering some favorite authors—Rudyard Kipling, Shakespeare, and J. R. R. Tolkien—at roughly the same time, in early adolescence. In 1982, her first novel, *The Coming of the Demons*, was published by William Morrow. She has been the editor of *The Mythic Circle* all the years of this millennium and a few more. She teaches English at Marshall University and is trying to market her Science Fiction trilogy, *Exiles from Distant Stars*, which she recently finished.

Emily Metcalf is a visual artist born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, and currently living in Indiana. She holds a BA in Drawing & Painting and Graphic Design. A voracious childhood reader, Emily grew up visualizing and drawing the scenes from her favorite books. Today, she views creativity as part of humanity's essential nature, and as a way to reflect the love of God. Emily works in watercolor, pen and ink, photography, and digital media.

Ryder W. Miller is an eco-critic, critic, poet, writer, and journalist. He is regular contributor to *The Mythic Circle*, *Beyond Bree*, and *Mythprint*. He has also published stories at *The Lost Souls* website. He is the author of *Tales of Suspense and Horror*, co-author of *San Francisco: A Natural History*, and editor of *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey*.

He is currently looking for a publisher for a collection of stories titled: *Tales of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*.

Chelsi Robichaud is a 23-year-old graduate student writing and residing in Ottawa, Ontario. Her work has appeared in *Transition*, *Mythic Circle*, *The Copperfield Review*, and *The Commonline Journal*. She is currently working on a comic book that focuses on women's issues.

William H. Wandless is a professor of English at Central Michigan University, where he teaches and writes about eighteenth-century fiction, modern genre fiction, and American popular culture. His own speculative fiction has appeared in *Dark Realms*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Supernatural Tales*, and several other journals.

Charlie W. Starr is a sometime writer, teacher, and minister as well as a full time husband, father and now grandfather. Charlie enjoys caving, reading, writing, movies and television and all things C. S. Lewis. He and his wife Becky have been married for 31 years; they have two grown children and a five pound dog named Phydeaux.

Marly Youmans is the award-winning author of thirteen books of poetry and fiction. Her most recent novels are *Maze of Blood*, a story inspired by the life of Robert E. Howard, and *Glimmerglass*, a transformation tale about a painter who believes she has seen the Muse in the woods near her home (Mercer.) Her most recent books of poetry are a collection, *The Foliate Head* (UK: Stanza Press) and a post-apocalyptic adventure in blank verse, *Thaliad* (Montreal: Phoenicia Publishing.) "After the Black Chrysalis," while aiming at a very human passage through darkness and transformation, makes use of the blackening pupa of the monarch and the changeability of the morpho, as well as the riot of color and form that belongs to the order of butterflies, long linked to the soul. The poem is part of a manuscript called *Rave*, its poems begun as a response to Yoruban praise poems.
www.thepalaceat2.blogspot.com

Lee Clark Zumpe has been writing and publishing horror, dark fantasy and speculative fiction since the late 1990s. His short stories and poetry have appeared in a variety of publications such as *Weird Tales*, *Space and Time* and *Dark Wisdom*; and in anthologies such as *Corpse Blossoms*, *Best New Zombie Tales Vol. 3*, *Steampunk Cthulhu* and *World War Cthulhu*. His work has earned several honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror collections.

An entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, Lee has penned hundreds of film, theater and book reviews and has interviewed novelists as well as music industry icons such as Paddy Moloney of The Chieftains and Alan Parsons. His work for TBN has been recognized repeatedly by the Florida Press Association, including a first place award for criticism in the 2013 Better Weekly Newspaper Contest.

Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit <http://www.leeclarkzumpe.com/>.

The Finest Jest

by

William H. Wandless

---Begin Transmission---

The scientist in me could not help but admire the elegance of your plan. It was simple, logical, pitiless. If everything went smoothly, only one of us would die.

As the intended sacrifice, I of course could not help but harbor some small resentment for my seven traveling companions. Even so, from where I now recline I can pity and forgive them, as I hope you will forgive me for allowing you to persist so long in your many errors.

If I take pride in having outmaneuvered you, Oskar, I think we might both forgive my vanity as well. Although you chose me, I coaxed and at last compelled you to make that choice. There are perhaps a dozen living men with the requisite expertise in the ancient alchemies and hydraulics of the Koppa, men eligible to lead such an expedition, but none so plainly...expendable. The others have families, protégés, ties to universities and learned societies. Who better to send to the altar than the notorious Harrison King, recluse and widower, the eccentric whose fussy archaeological and archival work had earned nothing but the disdain of his peers?

It took me two decades to cultivate that

reputation, Oskar. If you knew how often I leafed through the journals and laughed myself breathless at your mangled translations and so-called research you would know how much such undeserved disparagement pained me. I imagine you now in your study, surrounded by your unread books, staring dully out the window as you try to decide how to proceed.

Forgive yourself as well, Oskar. You are a man of action, not thought. You have ambition but lack vision. You command vast resources and thus have purchased what you could never earn. You are a slave to facts you scarcely understand. I am a man of faith.

Will you be surprised to learn I knew of your machinations from the very start? All the practiced lies of your emissaries could not conceal your clumsy attempt to play the puppeteer. Who else could or would fund a search for the lost temple of Mynjaya but the great Oskar Svavarsson? What other "scholar" would be content to send mercenaries to attempt the inner sanctum of the Queen of Dreams, a site untouched for 1500 years? And who else would be bloody- and simple-minded enough --to believe he was doing nothing more unsavory than trading flesh for treasure?

Believe me, Oskar, no other fool would do.

For your folly I forgive you. The hour of my trial has nearly arrived, and if I am to be numbered among the chosen of the Goddess I must cultivate magnanimity.

You were, after all, most useful to me. Never before have I traveled so comfortably; never before have I been so coddled, fattened like a lamb meant for a rich man's table. We passed so readily from the capital through the territories of the Tamil Tigers that a less worldly man would never guess Sri Lanka was at war. Your agents were lavish in their bribes and judicious in their threats, and I drowsed all the way from Katunayake to Anuradhapura.

Our overland path from the village will be easy to retrace, even for one such as you, though I fear you may struggle to find the entrance to the cavern. It is well hidden and skillfully sealed. I took the liberty of removing the battery from the transmitter your men left in the grotto beyond the ebony forest, and I led them on a convoluted march, though I of course knew precisely where to go. I could not afford to have the second team you will certainly send find us too quickly. The seven attendants you sent were more than enough for my needs.

Please offer my condolences to the family of Kirtland (I doubt you know him by his Christian name). I was really quite fond of the boy. He alone seemed somewhat reluctant to lead an old man to his doom, and he treated me with especial kindness.

He lost his footing as he helped me make the treacherous descent to the cavern floor, I'm afraid; his loss was a lamentable necessity. You see, our company was one too many in number. Had you been able to produce a more sensitive translation of *Mynjaya's Finest Jest*, you might have known that.

When we reached the bottom I

abandoned all pretense and raced to the tunnel that would bring us to the temple. Your men could scarcely keep up! I was obliged to loop back and guide them, unnerved and confused as they were. I would like to believe they were overawed with genuine reverence, that they knew they neared something sacred, but doubtless they were merely disoriented by the massive stalagmites that rise up from the cavern floor, a host of stony growths so similar in size and shape that they are all but indistinguishable from one another. It is no wonder the Koppa called this place "Mynjaya's garden."

I broke bread with your men near the entrance, knowing the privation that awaited me, knowing what awaited them. There I indulged in a rare pleasure, for which I offer you my thanks.

I drew from my pack the golden cylinder from the Akaragama dig, the one you bought at auction and tried to play like a recorder at the Stockholm symposium, and I treated my audience to an impromptu rendition of your performance, your red-faced, tuneless tooting. Your men all laughed, just as I laughed all those years ago.

Who but you could believe the Koppa would squander their gold on such a trifle? And who but you could believe I would not recognize such a singular artifact--a once in a lifetime find--when your emissary presented it to me as a relic from a newly-discovered site? I have seen that cylinder in my dreams for years, Oskar, and the thought of it steeled me for the work to come. What to your eyes was an ill-made musical instrument was to me the confirmation of Mynjaya's intricate design.

I hope you will concede my superior appreciation of the Koppa when you read the inscriptions flanking the passage that leads to the sanctum. The characters will look identical to the untrained eye (and to

your eyes especially, which have long been satisfied by rubbings, transcripts, and facsimiles), but they epitomize everything the Koppa believed of our Goddess. To the left, etched in acid with tapering downward strokes, we see the six characters that identify Mynjaya as the “Fountain of All Falsehood.” To the right, etched with tapering upward strokes, we see the selfsame characters identify Mynjaya as the “Fountain of All Truth.”

I will leave behind my own translation of Mynjaya’s Finest Jest for you, Oskar, and I urge you to remember this lesson. It will unriddle this paradox and the mystery of what’s to come.

Along the sides of the tunnel leading to the sanctum you will see a line of interlocked golden cylinders embedded in the walls, all more perfectly tooled than the discarded one found at Akaragama. I hope in years to come the Koppa will be given due credit for their alchemical advances, which will correct countless errors in our understanding. They were centuries ahead of their time.

I fear I have not spoken kindly enough of my escort in this account. I believe they were all good men in their way.

They gave me ample time to explore the temple by the light of our halogen lanterns, marveling at the artistry of the Koppa and the sublime beauty of Mynjaya, bright, benign, and billowing in all the frescoes that surrounded us. They were more patient still as I subjected them to a lecture on the design of the sanctum--its flawless geometry, the ingenious ventilation, the incredible smoothness of the concave altar basin, the ornate etched faces of “Mynjaya’s choir,” which encircled the chamber and murmured eerily through their gaping mouths. They were good-natured auditors, mindful of the little life I had left.

I wish you could have seen the chamber

in its original state, Oskar: the imposing altar of polished jet in the center, the golden shackles that dangled from it, the six low golden pedestals that flanked it, and of course the golden downspout that pierces the ceiling above it, emerging from the painted urn held aloft by the bas-relief arms of the smiling Goddess. I’m afraid you will find it in the same condition as the temples in Kuwait and Kenya: cleansed, spent, and empty.

I showed your men the subtle differences in the etchings to each side of the altar, the text of Mynjaya’s long, duplicitous poem. I showed them the halo of hammered silver plinths that ring the chamber, topped with sculptures depicting the phases of the moon, celestial reflections of the Goddess. And at last, knowing their forbearance was not without limits, I showed them the star-shaped aperture at the head of the altar and the fabled silver scepter, an artifact made by the hierophant’s own hands, a T-shaped stave that ends in a matching hexagram quite like an asterisk, the linchpin of the shrine’s design.

They were far more interested in the enormous doors symbolically barred by the scepter, however, which they surely guessed was the entrance to the vault of the Koppa, a legendary reliquary. I opted not to clarify. Doing so seemed cruel.

I did not correct their understanding of the ritual, either, even as they shackled me to the altar. They knew that the high priest was to be gifted to the Goddess, and they knew how the hidden hydraulics activated by the pedestals would lift him up to her. They believed the great doors would open. That was enough.

I offered no resistance; though the shackles closed loosely around my wrists, I remained in place. I asked them to leave me my pack and a lantern, in case they were needed in the next world, and they were



kind enough to humor me, doomed as they believed me to be.

Tell me, Oskar, did you ever wonder why a high priest of Mynjaya, an initiate into her deepest mysteries, would document so minutely the manner of his own horrific execution? Did the readiness of the celebrant to sacrifice his life so that six acolytes might be exalted by the Goddess never give you pause? I would like to think you were persuaded by Patel's tenuous conjecture, that the words "sleep" and

"death" were cognate to the Koppa, that there could be no greater gift for her chosen priest than an eternity of disembodied slumber. I am convinced, however, that the absurdity of such altruism never even occurred to you, avaricious as you are.

Remember, Oskar: Mynjaya is the divinity who at the dawn of creation lulled the Six Gods to sleep and snatched all that we know of the world from their dreams. When Father Sky and Sister Sea planned to flood the earth by sealing the opening

through which the ocean empties into the underworld, it was she who fashioned for them a stopper made of salt. Above all else, the Goddess is a trickster. Those who are dear to her do not yield up their lives needlessly. They emulate her methods.

One of my attendants retrieved the silver scepter, cradled it in his arms, and carried it to the head of the altar. He matched the asterisked end to the star-shaped aperture, eased it carefully downward, and turned it like a carpenter's auger until it would turn no more. A purring, gurgling sound emanated from the mouths of Mynjaya's choir as hidden valves opened and fluids flowed.

One by one your men mounted the golden pedestals. When all six had taken their places the altar rumbled upward, propelled like a piston, and I ascended with it, perhaps fifteen feet above the temple floor. I could hear the members of my escort calling out to one another, no doubt steadying themselves as their pedestals trembled, shaken by the waters coursing beneath them, but my attention was engrossed by the bas-relief carving I could now almost touch. In the frescoes Mynjaya's smile is kind, beatific; the lips of the graven face above me, however, discernibly smirk.

Most versions of the *Jest* (your own included) preserve the Latin translation of Trithemius and indicate that the uplifted priest will be "anointed with strong water"--that he will be doused and dissolved in *aqua fortis*. A ghastly, terrible fate! Had Trithemius understood the pivotal significance of upward strokes in Koppa character, however, he would have known that, at least in the relevant passage, the author wrote "weak water." A critical difference, don't you think? I was, to be plain, anointed with a trickle of rosewater, and as it drained from the altar basin the

remaining hydraulics of the shrine came alive.

All other references to "strong water" in the *Jest* involve the telltale downward strokes, and nitric acid indeed issued from the gaping mouths of Mynjaya's choir. Your men, to their credit, did not panic then, seemingly safe on their perches, though one cried out when a stone slab slid into position and sealed the chamber.

I concede that the enterprise staggers the imagination: all that gold, gold the Koppa might have traded with their neighbors, hammered into pipes and used as plumbing to carry their acids. We moderns, to whom Stonehenge and Giza are now tourist attractions, remnants of benighted times, too often fail to fathom the lengths to which genuine reverence might drive a pious people.

I would like to think that better scholars understood the piping properly--that they recognized the nature of the rite and the volume of acid needed to complete it--and opted to remain silent, content to rifle your pockets while you persisted in your folly, explaining away the use of the golden cylinder in a manner entirely inconsistent with all we know of the culture. Surely the fact that the Koppa compounded their acids centuries before the Mesopotamians put many off the scent, but only the most dimwitted among us could fail to correlate their obsession with alchemy and their mania for hoarding gold.

The Koppa naturally knew that correlation; therein we find the transcendent genius of Mynjaya's truest priests revealed.

To dupe an inept archaeologist and his underlings is one thing. I have no doubt you assured your men they would be safe on their golden pedestals, that they would only need to see the ritual through, that they would be handsomely rewarded when the strong water dissolved the silver scepter and

drained from the chamber through the star-shaped aperture, opening the vault of the Koppa as it ate away locks beneath the temple floor. I have no doubt you convinced them that performance of the sacrifice was obligatory, that to attempt the vault by any other means might destroy the artifacts within. Given such assumptions, which required me to do no more than anticipate the deductions of an orthodox, unfeeling intellect, my mission was simple.

Imagine, in contrast, the challenge faced by those devious priests. They would need to induce an enlightened, established people to seek out a remote sacred site, to abandon hard-earned worldly comfort at the prompting of their Goddess. They would need to persuade an entire society that an enormous expenditure of manpower and rare resources would be requited by Mynjaya. They would need to convince engineers and alchemists to suspend their work and their researches to build a buried temple only seven men were meant to enter for a single ceremony. And they would need to tempt six initiates--earnest, learned worshippers versed in the doctrines and mysteries of Mynjaya--to sanction and witness the suicide of their hierophant. My modest betrayal pales in comparison to such magnificent treachery.

Positioned as I was, I must speculate about most of what happened next. The rupture of the silver plinths, however--hammered thin and hollow, as I guessed they must be--suggests how the priest introduced hydrochloric acid into the chamber.

The resultant mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid, what Pseudo-Geber called *aqua regia*, was apparently unknown to the Koppa. Evidence suggests they all but abandoned hydrochloric acid when they began synthesizing nitric acid, a far more useful solution for their etching, dyes, and fertilizer. That the high priests of Mynjaya

fathomed its singular purpose, however, is beyond question: the complete disappearance of the golden pedestals attests to its presence.

I am sorry to say your men did not perish quickly or well. Most inhaled caustic fumes before the ventilation system could whisk them away; all screamed hoarsely as their golden perches disintegrated beneath them. I heard splashes as they fell or leapt, one by one, into the acid below. When at last the waters that had buoyed the altar retreated and my own perch returned to its original position, all were gone.

I am convinced the Koppa acolytes who entered the chamber believed themselves safe, just as your minions did. They were to serve as proxies for the Six Gods, and their perches were proof against the action of the acid. They would bear witness as the chamber filled below them, watching as the strong water washed away a selfless sacrifice--a scapegoat standing in for all the corruption in creation--then wait for the silver scepter to dissolve and the waters to recede. They would reenact Mynjaya's deliverance of mankind from the Flood, the doors would open, and they would return to their people with divine gifts and wisdom granted by the Goddess, prepared to usher in a new age. They ran only symbolic risks in a drama of devotion.

If you read *Mynjaya's Finest Jest* as attentively as I have, however (the stone tablets, of course, and not the transcripts), you will find in it a peculiarity. The author makes a seemingly careless error: in one instance, and in one instance only, the characters signifying "silver" appear to be written entirely with downward strokes. The silver scepter, the key fashioned by the high priest, is not made of silver but its opposite. It did not dissolve as the acolytes imagined it would. Should you have it examined, I believe you will find it is made

of tantalum, a silvery metal resistant to acids of all kinds--a splendid jest indeed.

The enormous doors at last unlocked, but not until the pedestals and their passengers were gone. I have fasted and meditated five days, stranded on my little island, sipping the water I kept in my pack. At dawn on the sixth day those doors will be thrown open, and—if she finds my devotion and sacrifice acceptable--Mynjaya will claim me as one of her own.

Before I lay down my pen, let me do you

a kindness. There are six temples, three more in addition to the three you know. One is in Yemen, another in Cyprus; I have paid visits to both, and you will find them as you find this site: wrecked and empty. The final shrine to Mynjaya, however? You'll just have to see for yourself.

---End Transmission---

OS: Doors are open. King nowhere to be found. Please advise.

SIREN'S CALL

by

Chelsi Robichaud

I cry my grief out to the sky,
the grief that Aphrodite would not calm.
The Siren's call that lured him
now sings me to my death.

If only I sang so sweetly,
in my arms he would lay.
Now I am alone,
in this abyss of a sea.

How sweetly he sang to me,
before his voice was silenced.
His words would have woken me
as I drifted towards Elysium.

How will I survive
in this solitude?
I see the Siren's yellow eyes
and clutch my driftwood
tighter.

The Hidden Entrance

