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Mythic Circle #40

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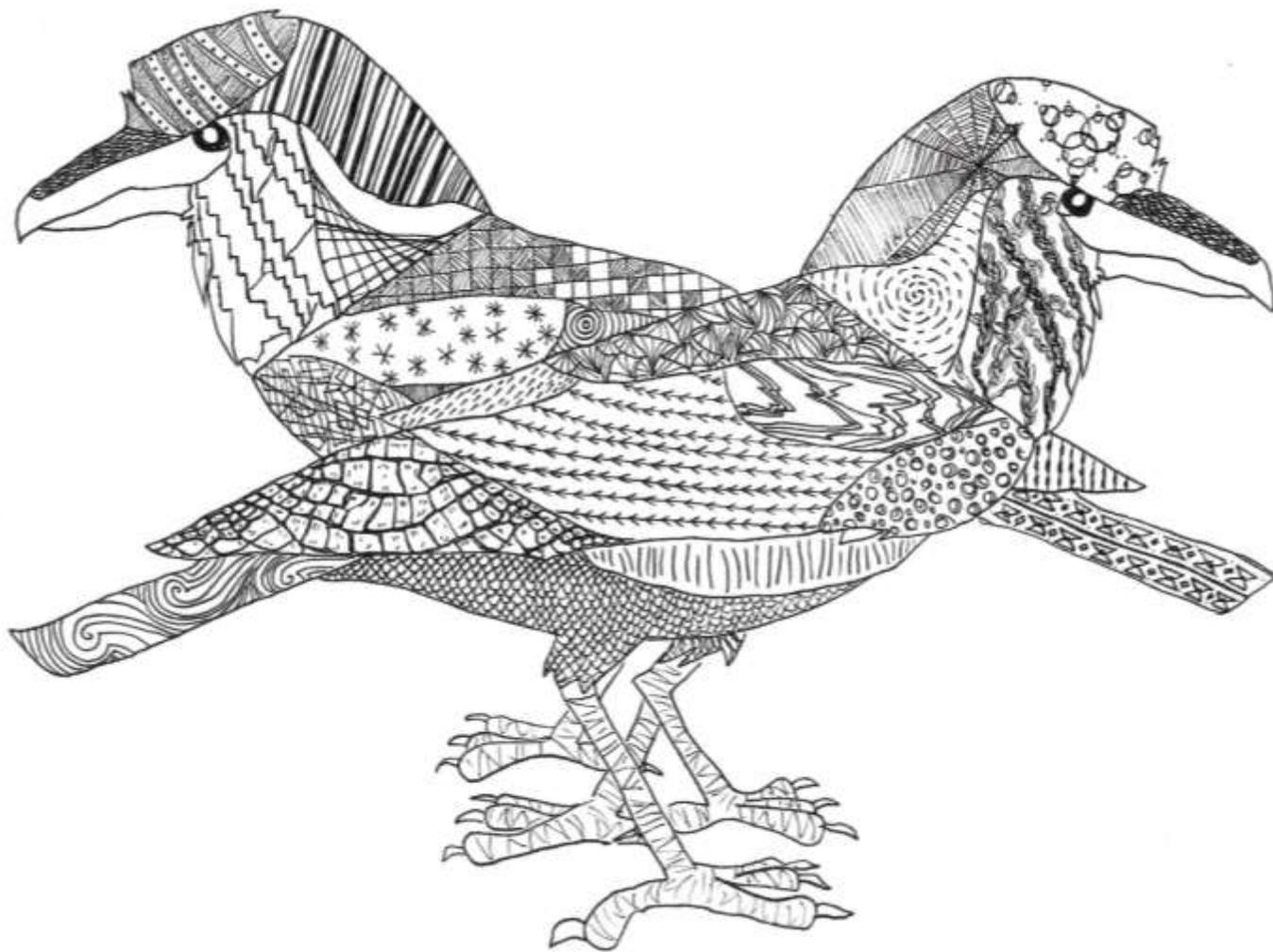
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Mythic Circle #40

The Mythic Circle 40



2018

The Mythic Circle # 40, 2018

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Bethany Abrahamson: Cover illustration.” Huginn and Muninn”
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Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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Editorial: This Issue

In this issue *The Mythic Circle* welcome new authors. Mathew Block offers a take on spiritual struggles in the current millennium, while Gea Haff deals with a more aesthetic perspective on existential angst. Clinton Nix does something new with heroic encounters and metempsychosis. *Mileva Anastasiadou* offers a tale which shows that the transition between the Zodiac ages of Pisces and Aquarius may not be as smooth as some Jungians have thought. Christopher J. Tuthill and Jude O Mahony also show myths invading our present in ways which, in prose or poetry, are always unsettling. Holly Day, Robert Field Tredra, and Marissa Glover explore the Mythopoeic tradition in varying tones ranging from cheerful to cryptic to somber.

Returning to our pages once again, Ryder W. Miller examines how culinary skills affect the war between the sexes. S. Dornan, as she explains, follows Mark Twain as he seeks more experience of the world, this time not as a gadfly but as a firefly. Joe Christopher, R. L. Boyer, and Gwenyth Hood also return with short poems.

Bethany Abrahamson provides our evocative cover. A quilting piece by Marion Snee Hood illustrates the poem in her memory by her daughter Gwenyth. A helpful cat posed, but anonymously, as the shadowy feline to get out of Holly Day's "Carving," on the back cover.

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*, #41, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2019, 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 Gwenyth 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: Gwenyth 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

The Poet, the Prince, and the Prophet

by

Mathew Block

It was Saturday morning, 8:00 a.m. A red dawn stretched endlessly across the sky, and the sailors down at the local wharf—true to the old aphorism—“took warning.” The little town was silent, save at the fast-food diner. There, as they had every Saturday since time long forgotten—there the madmen held counsel.

There were three in the party, jokingly nicknamed the Poet, the Prince, and the Prophet by the townspeople. It was common knowledge that none of the three was quite sane. “But,” the waitress who saw them week in and week out would say, “they’re harmless enough when it comes down to it.” That was the general assessment—utterly mad, but nice enough as far as mad people go.

They were at their usual table this morning, and while the Poet and the Prince were in good spirits, the Prophet was unusually quiet. “Today,” he muttered to himself, crumbs infesting his scraggly beard. A crow passed in front of the window; the Prophet watched it circle once and then travel out of sight. He shuddered, and took another bite of the greasy burger. “*Today*,” he said again, drawing his friends’ attention this time. “The signs are clear.”

The Prince focused his narrow eyes upon his companion. “Is it so?” The Prophet nodded slowly. “That I should have lived to see such dark times...” the Prince trailed off. Addressing himself to the Poet, he continued more firm of voice. “It’s good you are here. The story will need telling.”

“Oh, I have words,” the Poet sighed. “But are they the right words? It’s very hard, sometimes, to tell the right ones from the wrong ones. They look so alike, you see.” He sipped on his straw. The sound of sucking air filled the restaurant for a few seconds.

The Prince nodded. “Dark times,” he said simply. “Dark times.” They were silent then for a minute and a half.

The waitress interrupted them. “Hi guys,” she said. “Can I get you anything else?” She motioned with the pen in her hand towards an empty mug before the Prince. “More coffee?”

The Prince smiled sadly. “No,” he said. “We must be going.”

“Must we?” the Poet exclaimed.

“We *must*,” said the Prophet. “We have no choice.”

The Prince put some money on the table—he knew the cost by heart—and the three rose together. “Bye,” said the waitress as she gathered up the plates.

They were nearly to the door when the Poet turned and surveyed the empty restaurant. “Good bye,” he whispered. His friends paused. “Will you remember us?” he murmured. “Will you remember the three who stood here, swords bared?” He held aloft the straw he had saved from the garbage. “Will you erect some monument in our name? Will children not yet born stare in awe, peek in wonder from behind their mother’s skirt while their father proclaims: ‘Here they sat! Here they laid the stones of our salvation.’” He wiped the tears from his eyes on his soiled sleeve.

“Will you remember us?” he asked again. “Or are we already forgotten?”

The Prince wrapped an arm around him. “Maybe,” he said, “it’s not so much about whether the poem is remembered. Maybe it’s enough that the poem was read aloud at all, enough that it sundered the silence once with peals of thunder.”

The Poet looked up into the face of his friend. The Prince kissed him on each cheek.

The Prophet spoke. “God, at least,” he remarked, “shall remember.”

“Let us go then,” said the Poet, voice wavering.

“Yes, let us go,” said the Prince.

* * * *

They journeyed from there down back

alleys, utterly silent. They were nearing the docks when the Prophet motioned the others to stop. A crow, scavenging in a dumpster, looked up. It fluttered its wings, rose on the air, and landed a few feet in front of them. It watched them with a quizzical, expectant look.

The Prophet took a step forward and bowed his head. “Speak, for your servant is listening,” he said.

The crow cawed a high-screaming caw. The Prophet trembled visibly and moaned.

“What is it?” cried the Prince. All at once a great wind rushed in. The Prince’s dirty cap was taken from his bald head. The Poet shrieked and fell on his face. Trash from the dumpster flew up and around them, pelting them with tin cans and newspapers, pizza crusts and lemon rinds. But the Prophet and the crow did not move.

As suddenly as the wind began, it died. Slowly the crow spread its wings and took flight. The Poet and the Prince rushed to the Prophet.

“What is it?” the Prince asked again.

The Prophet licked his chapped lips. “It is as I foretold: today is the day of destiny.”

“You mean...” began the Prince.

The Prophet took a deep breath, then another. “Yes,” he said at last. “That ancient serpent is on his way. He rises against this place even now.”

The Poet whimpered. “Take courage, friend,” the Prophet smiled a weak smile, revealing two missing front teeth. “God has sent us his angel to strengthen us. Did you not feel his Spirit among us even now?”

“Would that he would send us salvation,” the Poet breathed.

“He has sent us ourselves,” said the Prince. “That is enough.”

* * * *

About 3:00 p.m. the sky grew black. “You boys best be headed home,” an elderly lady called to them from her porch. “There's a big storm coming this way. Just heard it on the radio.”

“Yes,” the Poet said, his voice high and attenuated. “We are heading home. Our journeys are nearly at an end, and we have grown old so young.”

“That's nice, dear,” said the old woman, not really listening. Shortly she disappeared back inside and the door closed.

They continued walking and were soon at the harbour. The boats were firmly fastened, but the waves—so violent had they grown—still rocked the boats dangerously against the docks. The madmen walked out onto the longest pier. Lightning broke the sky and a sea-swell rose up over them, soaking them to the bone.

“Men!” cried the Prince when the thunder died. “It is for this moment that we have been born. Satan falls upon this city, and we, we three alone, can prevent his victory.” He clasped hands with the Prophet and the Poet. “It has been my greatest honour to lead you these many years. It is my dying pleasure to lead you now in this final battle.”

The thunder cracked beside them. The Poet stumbled but the Prophet caught him. The Prince pulled a broken plastic tiara from his pocket and placed it upon his head. It did not blow away though the winds shrieked

about them. Then he took a Swiss Army knife from another pocket in the old coat and flicked it open. The heavens split and the rain roared down.

“Prepare yourselves,” shouted the Prince to his companions. The lightning cracked again, dancing just above their heads. The Poet pulled out a chewed pencil. “Have you nothing else?” asked the Prince.

“My tongue and my pen have ever been my weapons,” cried the Poet, his face illumined by the fire in the sky. “I'll be damned if I rely on anything else!”

“But against the forces of hell?” the Prince questioned.

“There are two things the Son of Perdition hates,” the Poet spat. “The first is beauty. The second is truth. I intend to give him both in equal measure.”

The Prince smiled a tired smile. “And you, my friend?” he asked the Prophet.

The Prophet undid the twine holding up his pants. He unfastened the buttons of his jack shirt and let it fall into the raging sea. So too he removed his shoes, his socks, and his tattered underwear, until at last he stood naked in the storm. It was hailing now.

He turned to the Prince. “Your domain has ever been that of the earthly realm. You,” he addressed the Poet now, “have been given authority over the heart. But I...” he was interrupted as lightning struck the mast of a sailboat forty feet away. It erupted into flame.

“But I,” he shouted again defiantly. “I have been given the gift of reliance—of trust in a God greater than I. And it is on his strength I shall rely in these final moments, not my own.”

A howl above the din of the storm broke

forth. "It is time!" the Prince cried, clutching his knife.

A twisting black mass appeared before them, and in the midst of it a great screaming face of shifting shadows.

Somewhere far off a crow cawed.

"For God and man!" roared the Prince. And the three leaped into the swirling vortex.

* * * *

It was Saturday morning, 8:00 a.m., a few weeks later. The weather was clear and all the fishing boats were out on the water. The little port-community was silent, save at the fast-food place near the edge of town. There a truck driver, passing through, had stopped for some breakfast.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waitress asked. The truck driver put down the newspaper he had been reading.

"No, I think I'm fine," he replied, wiping his face with a napkin.

The waitress motioned to the newspaper on the table. The front page read: "Waterspout kills three, bodies recovered."

"Real sad about that," she said. "They used to come in here every week around this time."

"Hmm," the driver nodded, very little interest evident in his voice."

"The funeral's scheduled for this afternoon at St. Mike's," she continued. "I'm hoping it'll be quiet enough around here to go."

A crow fluttered by the window, and the driver put down his paper. "Why were they out on the water?" he asked at last.

"No one's sure," she said as she cleared the dishes. "They weren't exactly sane, of course, so that probably had something to do with it." She paused. "Real sad," she said at last "Utterly mad, but nice enough as far as mad people go."

Cocked Eye of a Crow

by

Holly Day

I think of the places where I want to die
and it's never in a bed, never with my family
it's always somewhere warm and damp, alone under the sun
the sound of birds and crickets and frogs
my only company.

And in this place where I breathe my last
there will be only flowers in the air, not the dry exhale of
hospital sheets,
not the smell of my own body, rotting away
the last thing I feel will be the soft tickle of grass
an insistent furred nuzzle of something checking my pulse.

Tradition

by

Joe Christopher

Much like the head of John Baptizer
To Salome borne, his death's deviser;
Much like the head of a Keltic foe,
To next be placed for shelving's show—
On a platter held, so came a head,
The platter filled with blood be-shed:
Thus Peredure in silence saw
The strange procession, arousing awe—
Most strange it seemed, most strange it was,
A bloody strangeness, in thought ablaze.
How odd that after-poets told
Not of a head by blade unsouled,
Not of much blood but wine to sup,
Not of a platter but a cup.

The Girl Who Fell in Love with Death

by

Gea Haff

Once upon a time there was an innocent girl who fell in love with Death. Her mother was most displeased with this course of events as were all the young maiden's suitors. They did not believe her when she said she was saving herself for Death.

A fancy, they scoffed. A fad, they laughed, though not without a wrinkled brow. "Then why not go to him now?" one spat in frustration.

"Because," she said, "he will not have me. He says I'm not yet of age. But I will wait and save myself only for him. If you touch me, He shall punish you."

And although they did not believe her, when they closed their eyes at night they were set upon with such a cold dread, it gave them pause in the morning with the coming dawn. And as there is an endless supply of young pretty girls, each suitor moved on, certain the girl was mad and not worth the trouble of their lust.

And so the years passed.

Her mother, having died peacefully, the young woman lived alone in the forest, but she was not alone, not for a moment. All the trees were her siblings and they embraced her, whispering their secrets in her ear and guarding her fiercely.

The birds sang their songs to her. Sometimes they screamed: Pay Attention! Wake Up Now! Listen, Listen, Listen to the Language of God.

In time the stag, the wolf, the branch and the bird shared their secret most secrets too. The ant, the bee, the bit of soft green moss, entrusted to her the mysteries.

The Earth is a map. You are Earth.

She learned to read the Spider's Web and to decipher the Map of the World.

To understand the Language of God.

And she fell ever more deeply in love with Death. He was her greatest teacher and guide. He slayed her doubts and taught her to conquer her fears. It wasn't easy. He made her work for it. Death loved his initiations. He could be rough, brutal even. But no being was a more loving lover than Death. In the dark of night, as she lay in the deepest forest, he came and wrapped her in his embrace. He gave her comfort. He gave her courage. He filled her with the roar of his wings.

One day a dark prince appeared in the

woods, bloodied and scarred. He didn't look like a prince. He was a man, not a boy, and a worn battered one at that. But there was strength to his shoulders still. Defiance in his eyes. His hands were hard as steel and they gripped her when she lifted his head to give him cool water to drink.

He opened his eyes and they were filled with blood. It startled her. She was accustomed to death but she gasped all the same. She had never seen a man so marked with its imprint still able to breathe. She realized it was only the blood vessels in both eyes, ruptured like star bursts, fractured crimson flames.

She led him to her hut and she healed him, all the while waiting for Death to come visit.

But He didn't.

Sometimes she thought He was already there, sipping on broth and nettle tea, staring at her with his healed eyes. While she waited for Death she wondered, had he slipped inside this man maybe for a moment? So pale was his hair as to be almost white. So blue were his eyes as to be almost frozen. His breath steamed in the winter air. He drank her hot brews. He submitted to her ministrations. And every night he grew stronger than the one before.

The wolf howled one midnight when the moon was full and ripe.

And still Death did not come.

"Why have you abandoned me? the girl cried out to Death. "What have I done? How have I offended thee? Tell me!" she demanded to the darkness.

But all was silence.

She sank to her knees. "I am yours. I have only ever been yours. Why do you shun me?" she whispered to the abyss. That night the girl fell asleep upon the moss beneath the moon, beside a wolf. A stag paused under a great Elm and drew God down through his horns into the Earth.

The man, a fallen prince, found her there desolate upon the ground.

"I am here, my love," he whispered. He turned her over so that the kiss of the moon fell upon her face.

"I am here my sweet," he murmured. He laid his lips upon her mouth, his hand upon her breast. With a knee he edged her thighs apart.

She opened her eyes and saw Death gazing down at her.

"Save me," he begged, and he plunged deep inside her. She screamed to the stars in pain and ecstasy. She arched and opened and gave herself freely.

And there upon the forest floor with a wolf and stag watching while all the trees held their breath, Death claimed his maiden. He made her whole upon the crushed grass and through his endless baptism initiated her into the mystery of freshly created things.

The End

--Inspired by Garcia Lorca's essay on Duende

Through the Crack

by

R. L. Boyer

I will open my mouth in parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old.
—Psalm 78:2

The world appears before me in the shape of a giant egg.
In the center of the egg a tiny crack appears and grows:

Through the crack I see the shapes of the coming deluge.
Through the crack I see apocalypse appear.
Through the crack I see the murder of the innocents.
Through the crack I see the world turned upside down.

Through the crack I see insanity of nations.
Through the crack I see the twilight of the gods.
Through the crack I see the moon turn red with blood.
Through the crack I see a global *danse macabre*.

Through the crack I see the terror of philosophers.
Through the crack I see the death of God and man.
Through the crack I see a plague of fiery serpents.
Through the crack I see the dragon eat the knight.

Through the crack I see the raging of the prophets.
Through the crack I see the noonday sky grow dark.
Through the crack I see Pandora's Box wide-open.
Through the crack I see the plumes of mushroom clouds.

Through the crack I see the tragic fate of millions.
Through the crack I see the shape of things to come.
Through the crack I see things which cannot yet be spoken.
Through the crack I see the birth of a strange, new world.

A Chance Meeting

by

Clinton Nix

An elderly man with a brown sash tied at his waist stooped to gather fresh leaves from the ground. The sun hung high, baking light into all under the sky's canopy. The man was graying at the temples, and wore loose-fitting garments of simple cloth. He dropped the last leaf and root into his satchel, wiped his wet forehead, and let loose a delighted sigh.

Along the sunbaked trail, he watched the birds chirp their florid melodies, and the swaying leaves imitate the babbles of a brook. This likeness made him thirsty, so he rerouted for a drink from the nearest river.

A frog lingered in the stream, eyeing him as he approached. He knelt at the bank, dipping his dirty hands in the cool stream, cupping a pool to his face to sip. The rippling water mirrored his squared features and gentle smile with mirror-like crispness.

The frightened whinny of a horse broke his reverie, followed by the frantic clapping of hooves. He had caught sight of broken branches far in the distance, a sight which most people would strain to see.

"Help, kindly," a voice croaked.

The elderly man waited, and at the second cry, approached the disturbance. The stranger's voice grew hysterical at his approach.

"Help! You there! I am Alvadantia—a true-blooded Galdratian! For the love of our motherland, help me out of this earthen tomb!"

The man-sized pit was covered in freshly broken branches, but seemingly of a crude and elementary nature. The elderly man

leaned over the hole and espied a younger man with dark brown hair in his mid-thirties, clad in leather and mail vestments and with sword at waist. A jewel dangled from his neck which radiated a vibrant red hue. The man's knee was scraped, his leather torn and bloody from the fall.

"Good sir! Bless my luck that a hermit travels these woods. Would you kindly help me out of this pit? I seem to've gotten myself ensnared."

The hermit paused to get a good look at the traveler, deciding on how to act, and then turned his back to the hole.

"Sir—sir?"

"Grab the rope, if you are able," the hermit spoke from above, dropping a knotted rope into the pit.

The jewel bobbed and danced around the traveler's neck as he was hoisted out. Upon exit, the traveler bent over, chuckling.

"You have my gratitude," he said, putting out his hand for a shake. The hermit obliged, but the ruddy glow of the jewel stole his glances all the while. "Now this is peculiar—I didn't see the pit at all before, but now it's very plain." He stood, bracing his chin in ponderous thought.

"My horse was misbehaving—went into a mad fit. Right mad. I don't know what came over it. I was taking a short break from my travels, but the damned thing got the devil inside him and trotted off. He's gone for good, I surmise. Might I ask if you live nearby?"

The forest dweller lingered in thought a moment. "I do, yes; it isn't but a few paces

along this path. Allow me to take you there, if it is what you need.”

They approached a hovel built from glistening stones and freshly laid wooden beams. The smell of smoky wood filled the air, and a flock of sparrows landed on a nearby tree branch, singing as if to announce their arrival. Inside the hut, the hermit led the man to a wooden chair, tended to his wounds, and offered tea. He placed a clay pot over a small firepit, all the while fixing his eye upon the brimming jewel. The water went to boil, and he poured steaming herbal tea into two clay cups. The hermit had kept quiet the whole time, but finally broke the silence after sitting for tea.

“Mind if I ask what the necklace is? It has quite the shine.” He sipped the hot tea, his eyes trained on the jewel.

“Curious, are you? Certainly—this is an enchanted rune. Or so it was spoken to me. It glows in—” The traveler paused in thought. He lifted his cup and took a sip in contemplation, but spat and slammed the cup down, spilling scalding water on his hands. “Good heavens!”

“My apologies . . . I am terrible with guests—my own senses have grown rather dull over the years,” the hermit said.

“A steely tongue,” the traveler added, picking up a towel to wipe his hands. “Ah yes, about the jewel. It had been enchanted with the sacred rituals of the high priests of Galdratia.” As he continued speaking, his voice wavered for dramatic effect. “Eleven priests, so they say, fasted for eleven days, fixating upon it the blessing of the divine tongue, *and so on and so forth.*” He paused for a smile, continuing: “Legends notwithstanding, the damnable thing has been glowing for the past hour straight, ever since I set foot in the forest, so I don’t know what to make of it,” he said, toying with the jewel.

“What a fantastic story,” the hermit added. “I am led to wonder, however . . . if such tall tales as these simply melt away when brought to fire.”

“I’m beginning to wonder myself—by the way, you didn’t provide your name. Care to indulge me?”

“Oh, my name? I’ve spent many years in isolation . . . I’m afraid I’ve forgotten,” he said, staring into his cup.

“Ah, wouldn’t you know—well, as I had so ungraciously blathered before, my name is Alvadantia—Alvadantia Demiro Thastrius *the Second*, officially—but you can spare the formality. Alvan will do.”

“It is a pleasure, Alvan. What brought you through these woods? It is rare to see a traveler.”

“I’m glad that you asked, sir—goodness—I’ll just call you ‘Hermit’—how does that sound? I’m glad that you asked, Hermit, as I am in pursuit of a—how shall I say—a legend.”

“‘Hermit’ will do—ah, a legend?”

Alvan picked up his cup, blowing ripples into the water. “There is a particular demon that I have vowed to hunt. He has been thus named the ‘Fiend of Galdratia,’ and I have thusly devoted my life to his vanquishment.” Alvan flushed with austerity, his eyes piercing the cup. “However, I’m beginning

to believe it’s nothing but windy whispers. My father was a hunter as well, and was slain, rather gruesomely, by—and get this—‘an abominable terror, gray, white, and black in color, like charred, ashen wood, and donning many ferocious arms,’ as witnesses had reported,” he said.

“Unfortunately, it is merely offhand prattle at the local bar of which I heard this news. My father . . .”

“This demon,” the hermit interrupted, pausing to contemplate, “if it really does *exist* in some form, do you believe it will be

as the legend says?”

Alvan slammed his cup down. “This is troubling,” he bemoaned, “and is left to be seen. But I have sworn upon my father’s good name—I will find the truth of it.”

“Your father—I’m terribly sorry. I assume your jewel ... it has something to do with this legend?”

“Correct,” Alvan replied, his voice trailing. “Ah—but to the matter at hand! Happen to witness any gruesome beasts or baddies traipsing by lately?”

“Can’t say so,” the hermit said, leaning back. “But I have a question for you.”

“Gladly.”

“Do you, by chance, believe in the soul?”

“In—the soul? Well, yes. That’s a rather silly question.”

“Do you believe,” the hermit continued, “that every living thing has a soul? Or rather, animals, or say, perhaps, even the very despised creatures one might not expect?”

Alvan paused to let his mind wrap around this question, his eyes squinting in discomfort. “No—no, I think rather not,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s preposterous. That creature is a soulless devil.” He pursed his lips to spit.

“I apologize for the unusual question—you must understand, time is in excess in these woods, and I tend to ponder eccentric notions. Pay no mind.”

Alvan let out an awkward chuckle. “Oh—by the way, whatever were the traps for? You also hunting? It’s quite the hazard for a passing traveler.”

“In a manner of speaking,” the hermit said. “Although they were set long, long ago.”

“Well, according to the rune, there seems to be *something* of import nearby.”

“Is that what it is for?”

“Ah, I wonder. This is the first time I’ve used the damnable thing. Couldn’t tell you either way. By the way, would you mind if I were to rest here for the night before I left? I could rather use a small reprieve from travel.”

“No mind,” the hermit said. “I will prepare a bed for you. Just sit and drink.”

* * * *

That night, Alvan tossed and turned, as from a terrible dream, sweating, calling out indecipherable words. The hermit, meanwhile, stood awake near a window, basking in the moonlight, as if to ponder some unsolvable riddle that sat far out in the forest. He crept silently over to the bed, hovering above the sleeping man. As the moon reached its meridian, the hermit’s shadow grew larger and played like a dancing flame in the night. The jewel sang ever louder, painting ruddy hues along the walls.

Early next morning, Alvan rose before the sun and set off in haste from the hermit’s abode. Walking through the dark forest trail, he was filled with a terrible sense of dread, as he had ghastly dreams of being eaten alive—and felt as though he were being watched, though upon waking from the night terror, there was in fact no one present—not even the hermit. However, the birds, deer, and other fauna of the forest seemed to be waiting for him to wake, peaking into the window to greet him. Alvan had decided to leave a note for his gracious caretaker before he left, as an attempt to soften the disrespect of departing without a formal goodbye.

Shortly thereafter, he took a break for water and rations, which the hermit had graciously prepared for him the previous night. He happened upon an oddity—the

jewel. The ruby light had dimmed to a faint glow. And it wasn't until he sat to chew on the dried berries and nuts—which were fresh and delicate on his tongue—when he had an epiphany, unexpectedly, and then spit out the half-chewed remains.

* * * *

In front of a bare stone jutting out of the ground like a crooked slab, the hermit sat in contemplation. The air was quiet and dark in the moments before sunrise. "*Fiend of Galdratia,*" he whispered. He ripped a few blades of grass from the earth, his eyes flickering from thought.

The hermit consigned himself to sitting, with no will to move. This silence was temporary, however: Alvan appeared, spotting him from a distance, and approached with his hand on the hilt of his sword, his rune screaming bloody hues. The grass swished underfoot as Alvan stepped, and he knew he *must* have heard it. He was to speak, but the hermit raised a sudden hand in the air to greet him.

"Take a look about you," the hermit said, still as stone. "What do you see?"

Alvan looked at the forest, noting the vibrant leaves, the lush shrubs and trees, the supple earth, the flowing river singing happy notes, and the flat stone jutting in front of the hermit.

"I've come for you," Alvan said, ignoring the question.

"So you understand now," said the hermit, "or, perhaps not?"

"I don't follow."

"Take a look at this stone. It may hold some significance," he said, pointing to the bare rock. However, it was no more a mere rock; it appeared as a makeshift gravestone, mossy and tarnished, with the words 'ALVADANTIA DEMIRO THASTRIUS'

carved in thick letters.

"I didn't think to write 'The First,'" the hermit said in low timbre, clenching his eyes shut.

Alvan gripped his sheathed weapon tight. He grit his teeth, muttered "father," and then charged. But by this moment, the hermit had already let loose of his illusion with a twitch of a finger. The once-lush forest metamorphosed, amid Alvan's stride, into a desolate field pocked with lifeless trees, dirt, and rocks. Clouds choked the sky from light, as if the sun itself were repelled. A decrepit skull lay near the tombstone; unable to be distinguished, it was a relic of some forgotten being.

Alvan's sword hummed as it slid from the sheath. He towered behind the hermit, his sword hoisted above like a readied guillotine.

"Do it," the hermit whispered. "Take revenge for your father."

Alvan's eyes lingered on the gravestone, splitting his mind for a brief moment, frozen in the act. His heart ached, and the desire for revenge washed away. In his thoughts he screamed, angry at himself for hesitating. Unable to accept this traitorous change of heart, however, he steeled his heart.

The sword fell with great fury, slicing the hermit's body in two, starting from collar bone, rending clean to left hip. Alvan was startled at how completely and ferociously his swing had severed the hermit's body, as if it were made of parchment paper—but attributed it to the terrible fury of his pent up rage. He stood for a moment, his ears ringing, his heart pounding.

The hermit, however, had maintained a recognizable shred of life even still.

"Please—will you honor me?" he croaked. "Turn me over, your slay, your kill; and give me a proper send-off."

Alvan did not speak, but grimaced, and

submitted to the hermit's request. He turned the severed body over, his own body moving as if not of his own will.

"My name—will you hear my name, and my final confession?" Blood spattered from the hermit's trembling lips as he spoke.

"Speak."

"I was named 'Gora' in those days—and your much sought after *Fiend of Galdratia*." He broke into a guttural cough, wrenching from the fatal wound. "I was terrible; a demoniac thing of legend, it is true—but I had long since abandoned that life. I made my repentance, content to live in this phantom forest for the rest of my days. I gave up the killing—nary a human, bug, nor animal was murdered by me then. It was ... a past life. But the past is relentless—a purveyor of justice. Your father was a hunter who came to slay me on account of my legend, just as you have come. And yes: I slew him, violently, and feasted upon his body." He paused, the words burning with the blood dripping from his lips. "However, I was much concerned, and unsatisfied with the life of savagery ..."

Memories seared anew in Alvan's mind, yet he felt an emptiness swallow him—the cavity of his chest, the former home of his

heart, vacant.

The demon coughed once more, straining to speak again.

"You have witnessed my confession. Now, take my name with you, carry it, bolster yourself with it. Alvadantia the Fiendslayer—avenger of your father's killer. Slayer of the demon 'Gora'!"

Alvan could not speak; it was as if the words were ripped from his throat. The hermit—Gora, the demon—spoke one final time.

"But we know of another, hidden truth. The peaceful hermit, who spent his days harmoniously—an illusory harmony, though it was. Say, do you believe—" he paused, his eyes drifting, "—in the purification and rebirth ... of a soul?"

"The absurdity," Alvan gasped, his hands slackening.

"I believe," the hermit whispered.

His lips curved into a serene smile, and his eyes grew dull and aimless. And with those words, the last drop of life seeped from him. And his final illusion faded with it, transfiguring his body into a six-armed monstrosity, smoky flesh gray and white like ash in a fire, that lay severed on the barren ground.

Monsheffa

by

Ryder W. Miller

Manny looked at the computer and began to write after minutes of staring at the screen and out the window. He was having a writer's block and was spending time thinking about going outside now, and the drink he put down at his side beside the computer. It was warm today, and the Kombucca was cold and tart. Sometimes he liked a drink by the computer when he worked to make the experience easier, funner. The writing required concentration. The drink was a treat, but now older, he shied away now from the drinks that could get one in trouble.

His hands now moved over the typewriter:

"It was a time when women were doing their share of the cooking."

He could not tear up the paper on this one. It was on a word processor. He could delete the line though. Manny reminded himself that he liked Science Fiction and he erased it and started typing again:

"It was a future where women were doing their share of the cooking."

He did think part of romance had to do with cooking. It was something that people had to work out, preferably before they had children. If he wrote this line maybe one of his readers would think that she could cook for him in the future? Maybe there were still woman out there who knew a man liked to eat. He was worried though that some might take offense. He thought this was no longer a fit subject. He was not a warrior, but he did like some of those tales. He also was no longer a pluckable spring chicken.

Manny thought back to the day when he made a joke to an ex-girlfriend of his. She could be so serious sometimes. Things though had changed, especially with inflation and the high cost of living. It was not funny anymore. He realized he was not eligible and practical. He did think of himself as fun, but that was not enough.

There was that fateful day where he made a joke and it was too much. He did have the comeback ready, but it did not work out as planned. He wasn't being serious, but who would know. He was older than the woman, but he did not think of himself as older.

There they were in the supermarket and he said "With me you can do the cooking."

Betty gave him an angry look.

Manny replied "With me you cannot do the cooking."

This was the men-are-always-wrong joke. It also was self-deprecatory so someone else did not have to say it. Later he thought that this kind of joke could backfire and he and the guys would have to take a cooking class. That might not have been why they broke up, but he thought she would laugh. He was trying to be brilliant about it. He was trying to be funny, but this was dark irony for her. This was also the good' ol days and he did not want to move forward. Did everything, especially the tangles of romance, have to make sense? Were they still co-dependent? Were they not passive aggressive?

He was now trying to write a story, and he was not sure if it was about her.

This though was a fantasy story and maybe he should better stick with the first line. He could not write anymore now, but liked the later line better even if he was not going to use it. He could give a girl a hint that he wanted cooking, but such an interest was not in style now. It was funny now thinking about cooking when there was once a time where some woman pursued a man's heart through cooking. Now it was fashionable to be gay, it was part of the movement politics, and wanting food could be consistent with being gay. Maybe that is what would attract a gay man to a woman? It was amusing to look back and wonder if these old guys were going through this same thing also as he was going through now. He wanted an old fashioned wife he thought, but just was not eligible to be a father. He was not really ready yet to be a bread earner. He would have to write a best seller to buy a house for her to live and raise a child probably, but he was probably just not that good of a writer and he was not really with the times.

Things sure seemed to have gone sour. He though was still processing the past.

Manny would write later. For now he would go for a walk in the park and take a nap under a tree. There were usually women at the park, but he usually could not talk with them. He was a bit big to be a stranger and also a little old. In the big field he would rest and think of how to proceed. He loved the park in all seasons, and especially liked watching the buds come out of the trees in the spring. The park reminded him of Narnia with fireflies, lamp posts, stately buildings, and amazing birds and trees. Magical and with splendor.

He was resting now under the blue sky and in the warm sun. There were wonderful bubbly cumulous clouds in the sky. Maybe

things would be different when he woke up later.

He found himself now in a boat. He was shaking off the sleep while the boat shook in the water. He did not know how he got there. In the distance was an island and he would have to row there. It might be more than a mile.

There was a smell though that he did not understand. It was the smell of women's perfume. He was wearing it. Suddenly he grabbed himself to find out what was going on. The boat was shaking again. Manny was quite surprised.

He noticed that he had a set of breasts. Not man breasts, but women breasts. He reached down and it was gone. He reached down again and they were gone and something else was there. Manny did not know what to think. He was in shock. He was now a changed person. He was not really *really* a woman, and he was in a warrior's dress. He was a warrior woman on his way to an island. How can this be, he moaned to himself? He tried to see his reflection in the water and could now make out that he was a blond. He, no she, had red lips and large eyes. Her breasts were full sized and she smelled of flowers. What did he do to deserve this? He just also wanted cooking? Maybe this, though, would be an adventure with lessons to learn? He was never strong about writing about women. Did this make him Trans?

What should she call himself, oops, herself? Manny, or Amanda. People would hear that. He reached down to the side of her leg and realized she had a sword. There was also a little gear in the boat.

Amanda grabbed the oars and started rowing towards the island. The water was flat and there was not a lot of wind. The waves were small and did not hold back the boat which he, no she, propelled with her

oars. Amanda wondered if she could be a lesbian. From the looks of her garments he figured that these were medieval times. Sappho from Lesbos would now be at least 1000 years old here probably.

This though could be anywhere back then. It also could be a created fantasy world. Maybe he was on the shores of Middle Earth. Hopefully she was not on the way to forbidden Numenor. The island though was not that large. Amanda wondered what sort of people and creatures she would find there.

It took her, she guessed, a few hours to make it to the island. It grew big before her on her journey there. Most of what she saw was green. There were not a lot of trees, but there were some shrubs and some grassy areas.

There was also a dock with a few boats. There was probably an attendant there, and she would have to go search for him. Amanda drew the row boat up to the dock and decided to stop there. She could have docked off the side elsewhere, but she was very curious to see where and when she was.

This could be an adventure he could write about if he could return. He did not relish here seeing how the other side lived. Amanda though was a warrior who could carry a blade, and probably knew how to defend herself. There might be other pleasant surprises in store for her here also.

Amanda walked up and down the dock to see what was about. She had made good timing and there were a few more hours of daylight left. She did not have a lot of provisions, she could find something there, but wanted a good meal. She was also tired from the boat trip across the water. She would have liked to have seen fish or marine mammals, but was happy to recognize the birds she saw. The seagulls were elegant, but

rowdy. This seemed like she was on Earth or at least a world in the imagination of an Anglophone writer. She also had some coins in one of her "pockets". She might need to pay to dock here, but she would also find out what was going on sooner if she landed.

Looking around the dock she noticed that much of it was empty and some of it was damaged. There was area that was caved in. It almost seemed as if someone had stomped on it and broken it to pieces. She would be careful to watch for such spots and avoid the area. It was not very well made, but by the look of the ships it appeared if the people had not a lot of knowledge about how to use metals. All this was made of wood.

After a bit she found a gazebo of wood with a man sitting at it. He was wearing leather and hides, and had a long beard.

"Who might you be?" he said warily, but welcoming anyway.

"Why I am Manny," Amanda said by accident.

"Mandy? Amanda? Is that what you said? Did I hear it right?"

Amanda smiled at herself and indicated yes to the latter.

"Welcome Amanda. Nice to see someone like you on a visit. What brings you here?"

"I was lost and did not know where I was. Where am I?"

"Why this is Monsheffa. Not quite as bounteous and populated as it once was. We have fallen on bad times."

"What has happened? And who might you be?" Amanda responded with a sigh.

"Why, I am Tolen, and we had a bad visitor who decided to stay."

"I am from York," said Amanda realizing that this was shaping up into an adventure. She reached down to see that she still had a sword on her hip. She realized she must be in her mid-thirties. She might not find a mirror here, and figured she would come across as a

dyke. They probably did not know of such things here though.

“I want to hear more about it, but now I am hungry and tired. I have coin. Can you feed and house me?”

“We don’t always like visitors here. You might do well to sleep in your boat tonight. I can give you a hide to sleep under. The Inn might be dangerous.”

“What un-welcomed guest do you speak of? Was it a dragon?”

“No. We were lucky that it was not. It was Trontasora. She came here to ‘grace’ our shore. Very large actually and bit bossy. She ate our old Mayor, broke down areas of the dock with her wonderfully large legs and could show up anytime at the Inn with all sorts of culinary requests. Not a very big eater for her size, but she does get angry and hungry.”

“She is a giant?”

“Yes, she chased away a lot of the resident here. They no longer wanted to live here when she decided to stay. Not that many boats left here.”

“Why did she come?”

“Don’t know. I guess she was a conqueror of sorts. She decided not to eat me. Might want to talk with the folks at the Inn. The new Mayor and their child is still there. The Island is a bit abandoned now, but the Mayor is still a functionary. They will have better food up there.”

Amanda liked that Tolen was very straight forward with her, but there was more to find out. She would leave her boat here and be on her way for what seemed like was going to be an adventure.

She found that she had firm footing despite the time on the water. The island was luxurious with green places and streams. There was a bit of mountain in the center and some some abandoned villages. There were

people who used to live here and some still did, but there were still empty dwellings.

Amanda followed the road to a central village. There was an odd shaped building there which he gathered was where the Mayor now resided. She did not see that many people along her way, but she was more interested in food now.

There was no doorman at the Inn and she let herself in. She quickly found the Tavern and restaurant. There was a man surprised and annoyed standing behind the bar.

“Who might you be,” he said to her.

“Why I am Manny,” she said by accident.

“Is that Amanda?”

“Yes,” she smiled at herself this time.

“What brings you here?”

“Not sure. I guess I am here for an adventure? Wondering first though what has transpired here?”

“Well this giant moved in. She chased many off the island. She took over. I am the new Mayor. I have a child, Geroso. I am still the Mayor, but I have to cook. Now. I am Lasko or I used to be. Now I cook not to be eaten. And Gerosa, who should have Divine Right does not have the destiny he once had.”

“Divine Right you say?”

“Yes. Bloody right. That is why I cook for Geroso and hope. I figure he is the one who is smart enough to get someone to cook for him. He is also innocent so far. In a man’s life he usually has done a thing or two. What has Geroso done wrong? Nothing. Meanwhile this giant Trontasora has to be fed or people will be eaten. I have not been required to cook people, but I am sure the thought has crossed the mind of the giant.”

“Can you feed me now. I have been on the water the whole afternoon.”

“Sure, I can feed you. What will you have?”

“Whatever you offer.”

“I might be smart enough to be Mayor, but that doesn’t mean you will like everything I have to make.”

“I don’t have discerning tastes. A piece of meat, some potatoes and vegetables will be fine. I don’t wish to deprive Geroso.”

“You won’t. We are regularly supplied with swine and wonderfals from the fields.”

They sat down for a meal and Lasko brought the food. It was a large portion of meat and vegetables which Amanda was happy about.

Amanda was impressed by Geroso, who was polite and already a bit of gentleman, He was not puckish, but grateful.

“Why are we so lucky to have you here visiting us?” he asked.

“I was given an adventure.”

“We could sure use a warrior. Things have been tough since the giant moved in,” said Geroso.

Geroso smiled at her.

Amanda found it charming. Someone had taught him right. She was not sure now what she would need to do. She did want to meet this Trontasora. Geroso was smart enough to have someone cook for him Amanda thought in a sly way. He should be obeyed someday. There were all sorts of things he had not done yet.

Amanda would have to wait until after her encounter with the giant to decide what to do. For now, food, thanks to Lasko, and a warm smile from Geroso.

They offered her a place to stay for the evening and she would be off the next morning on an adventure. Amanda figured that if she woke up as a woman warrior then she would probably know how to use a sword. This might be a fantasy, but it sure seemed as if she was a part of destiny now. She was here for a reason.

When she woke up the next morning there was fruit and milk by her door. She ate it quickly and was on her way. Through the village and then up the hill she would have to go. She had sturdy boots, but the way would be tiring. She now had a lot on her shoulders and would probably remember this one for the rest of her life. Maybe this experience would make him a more attractive man, thought Manny, but he was scared that he would be stuck in this woman’s body for the rest of his life. He might have been happier if he was a red head also. Right now, though, he was wondering if he was going to wind up as someone’s lunch.

She found a path leading out of the town. It let up into the hills. It was not a very pronounced path, but she should be able to take it to where the giant rested. There were also the marks of giant footsteps along the way. There were also a few dead animals and people. When examining the bodies she noticed that there were bite marks and pieces of the bodies were missing. There was a dead horse with a missing stomach. A soldier without legs.

Gruesome, Amanda thought. She took out her blade and felt the edge to see that it was still sharp. It was. She would rather talk to the creature, but it did not seem like there was a chance to do so.

Trontasora was her name. Amanda wondered who she would be. She would probably find out today. Maybe there would be a conversation. This would be different than a brusque conversation between a woman and a man who wanted to air some stuff he had on his chest. Manny liked to say what was on his mind and he liked to make a joke, he was impressed by irony, but now things were different that he was Amanda.

He had reached the upper areas of the trail and was happy that his feet were not

hurting. Amanda started looking for a structure where Trontasora would reside. There were some trees at the top here and some stony outcrops. There was probably a cave out there somewhere.

Amanda walked into the rocky outcrop and decided to yell for her.

“Trontasora, where are you? Come out.”

Amanda decided to walk further and try again.

“Come out Trontasora.”

Amanda heard a loud sound and suddenly there was a large form before her.

Trontasora was three times as tall as her with a large face and scary teeth. There even was some paint on her face. She walked with a limp, but the ground shook below her. There was a pained and angry look on her face.

“Who are you?” the giant asked angrily.

“I am Amanda. I am here to set things right.”

“Oh, really? So thought I.”

“What?”

“Did you ever think about how Giants were treated?”

Amanda was surprised that she was taking this tactic with her. She might not have talked to a man this way.

“You eat people with that painted mouth of yours,” Amanda said.

“There used to be more of us. We were spread all out over these islands.”

“You are vile.”

“We were hunted. You never have been hunted despite your pretty dress.”

“You caused chaos here.”

“I was widowed and not understood.”

“Sorry about that Trontasora. It has turned you vile.”

“Who are you to talk with me about this?”

Amanda pulled out her sword, which shone in the sunlight.

“I am here to protect the island. I am here to restore the monarchy.”

“I demand chaos,” said Trontasora.

“Life does not give us everything we want.”

“Nor does death,” Trontasora said. She picked up a large rock and threw it at Amanda, who stepped out of the way in time.

“Stop that,” said Amanda. “Let us talk further.”

Maybe there is a way to stop this she thought. Amanda had an idea. Maybe if she decided not to eat people she could live in peace on the island with other people.

“Before this turns into bloodshed I have an idea.”

“What if I have an idea?” said the Giant.

“I will hear your out.”

“I don’t have one yet, but I may.”

“If you eat me things are not going to change here.”

“What if I don’t want them to change?”

“What if you give up eating people?” asked Amanda.

“What will I eat?”

“Livestock, food off the trees, vegetables from the farm.”

“Who will give those to me?”

“Why if you provided some service to the island they could be given to you as a tribute. You could also grow your own food and keep your own cows.”

“I ate them because they hated me.”

“You acted out your anger, but you are not alone here. I could probably make an arrangement with the Mayor and his next of kin.”

“What will I get?” asked Trontasora.

“You will get a home. You will need to help protect the island if necessary. Otherwise we might need to duel,” Amanda put the sword in its sheath. “You will also have to stop breaking things.”

“What do you get from this?”

“It will be a peaceable kingdom for me. I can barter the peace and then I might be out to sea for more adventures. Come with me now to the Inn to make the peace. There is someone special I would like you to meet. I don’t think you would mind listening to him. He is innocent and still worthy of being cooked for.”

“It is a good thing they sent a woman to do this. I would not have listened to a man.”

“I think you will listen to this child. His island was ruined, but you can save it. His father will cook for you also if you stop wrecking the place.”

Amanda realized that there were things that a woman could just do better.

Amanda did not know what was next after this or what to think, but she could not think about it now....

The New Apartment

by

Holly Day

The tiny lizard runs up the wall, disappears into a dark corner driven in by the rain. I contemplate getting up finding the lizard and putting it back outside but decide to be charitable, let it stay inside.

Weeks later, I find its desiccated corpse curled into a fetal knot behind the moving boxes trapped, perhaps, by the cat, or dead from the heat I pick it up by its brittle tail and toss it outside wonder why so many of my kind acts

end in tragedy. .

Goat Rock Medicine

by

R. L. Boyer

In the shadow of Goat Rock, on the wave-swept
beach below, my Medicine Shield seems (almost)

complete: a spiral circle constructed on virgin sand
(smooth, without traces) in the form of a Mandala, a

cross within a circle of labyrinthine spiral patterns—
at the center, my horsehide drum, made by a shaman

of the Chepang tribe, covered with talismans:
black and white stones, four kernels of corn from

the garden of Red Earth Descendants: Indian Corn—
Yellow Corn, Red Corn, White and Black Corn

People of the sacred Medicine Wheel, emblems of
ancient Turtle Island prophecies, the End of Time—

and the short pale tube of mysterious magical power,
potent with *mana*, a charm for protection, gifted by

Mayan sorcerers to protect me in the potent darkness
of the sacred ancestral ceremonial grounds, as I

carried out their instructions after rituals end, where
I learned the sacred tongues of spirits and birds, where

I was attacked by demon dogs, possessed, my knee
fresh-bandaged where their teeth tore my skin, where

(I was told) the ghosts of Ancestors gathered behind
me to watch, where I used the power of my songs and

sacred ceremonial eagle feather, where I carried the
sacred bundle of the Mayans in ceremony for the first

time and received many visions from *Taita Wachuma*,
where I wore the amulet of my native Ancestors—
the smooth black stone made for skinning shields—
around my neck and carried the drumbeat for the

ceremonial camp, through the deep dark hours of night,
while shamans prayed nearby at their sacred *mesas*,

while Baby Sasquatch shrieked in the woods, also
nearby, on holy ground, where the sacred drum must

never cease beating through the long, long night,
where others assigned to relieve me fell asleep, and

cold and exhaustion (almost) overcame me in the
dark under the stars beside the campfire where

shamans sang, waking inhuman familiars whose
voices chirped and shrieked in the darkness under

starry heavens while others slept, where shamans of
the Maya, Mohawk and Blackfeet gathered, laid out

their sacred *mesas*, led ceremonies, passed down
since ancient times, sang songs of power in the steamy

fire-heated sweat lodge we built by the icy stream,
where the deep heartbeat of my drum ebbed and

flowed, like the beating of waves here at sundown—a
heartbeat rhythm, of ebb and flow—the eternal circle

of the Deep, of Mother Earth, Source of Life, her
voice the rhythmic thunder of waves, lapping the shore at

high tide, drawing near to the Shield and my sand-made
Mandala, the spiral Medicine Circle already fading, a
memory, erased (as I watch) by the surging Deep.

The Song of Thetis

by

Christopher J. Tuthill

I was playing on the beach with my children, Christian and Ella, when Christian ran off ahead of us, as he often did. He disappeared over a dune as Ella and I were inspecting a hermit crab.

“Christian!” I yelled. “Wait up! What did I say about going off on your own?”

He didn’t respond, but five year olds never do, particularly if they’re on the beach and have found something interesting to look at.

I took Ella by the hand and we ran up the dune and back down it, but among the beachgrass there was only a lone gull, no Christian. In the depression at the bottom of the dune we found ourselves standing in small, trickling creek that ran down to the sea. I saw two sets of footprints in the muddy creek bed, one small, one beside it that was larger. But no Christian.

I panicked, and began to run upstream, yelling at Ella to follow. We ran for ten minutes or so, she skipping along happily through the water, stomping here and there, yelping when she got herself wet, oblivious to the terror I felt. My heart pounded in my chest as I imagined my son’s abductor.

But no matter how far we ran, there was

still no sign of Christian. On both sides of us the dunes now seemed impossibly high and steep. The sun was starting to set, casting a long shadow across the bank of the stream bed we found ourselves in. Here the footprints in the mud vanished beneath the water.

We went forward. The creek became deeper and swifter and we now walked along its edges.

“Daddy, I think maybe we should go back to the house and get mommy,” Ella said.

There’s nothing like sage advice from your six year old to give you confidence.

“We’ll go back in a little while,” I said.

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“But where’s Christian?”

“We’ll find him soon. He’s probably just hiding from us. Playing a little game.”

We went around a little bend in the stream, and there was a large oak on a green hill. The stream flowed out from beneath it. On the grass, beneath the tree, lay my son, curled on his side. His eyes were closed, and for a moment I was terrified that he was hurt, but I could just see in the dim twilight that his chest moved up and down as he lay there. He must have fallen asleep.

Then from behind the tree came a young

woman. Her hair was silver, and white and yellow and purple flowers were arranged in it here and there. She wore a thin, white dress that seemed to shimmer in the dusk.

“Simon,” she said.

“Yes?” I said. I could hear the terror in my voice.

“Come up here with your daughter and sit with me awhile.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Come up here with me. Your children are safe. Only talk with me awhile.”

“Why did you take my son with you?”

“He followed me. I don’t take anyone against their will.”

Ella was climbing up the side of the embankment, and now I saw her beside the girl. She went to her brother, curled up beside him on the grass, and was soon asleep.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I am Thetis,” she said.

I climbed the embankment. A chill passed through me as an evening breeze came from the ocean. When I was up on the hill beside the tree, I looked out toward the sea, but could only see the creek running downhill. Soon even that would be cloaked in the dark.

“Look, miss,” I said. “I got separated from my son, he just ran up the beach and I couldn’t find him. And now here he is, but it’s getting dark and we’re going to have a hard time finding our way back to the cottage.”

Thetis walked up to me, put her hands on my shoulders, and drew her face close to mine. Her eyes were silver, like her hair, and she smelled of apples. She slid one of her hands down to mine. It was cold, but something more than that. Old.

I was afraid, but I didn’t move. Her eyes pierced through me. She was cold as marble to the touch, and as she took my hands in hers, I felt as if she knew my every thought, my every hope and dream and wish. She embraced me, and her cold red lips brushed

against my cheek.

I became very tired, all of a sudden, and I sat down beside my children. I wanted to pick them up and carry them back to our cottage, but became so drowsy that it became too much of an effort to even keep my eyes open. Though I tried to stay awake for Christian and Ella, I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness.

I had a strange dream. Thetis led me to the water as if I were a child. The water was cool and dark, and as I swam I felt as if I were a traveler in a strange land. My limbs felt leaden as I tried to stay afloat in the water, and I was sure I would drown. But Thetis swam alongside me and spoke to me, though I couldn’t understand her words. The sea grew rough, and the waves threatened to drown me, and I worked furiously to stay afloat. It was dark, but the moon shone brightly and I could make out the shore, far in the distance. I yelled out for help, but my voice was carried off by the wind.

I kicked furiously toward the shore, and tried to swim to safety, but my arms felt like sticks ready to break off in the tempest. Then I felt Thetis’ steady grip on my shoulders. She pulled me down beneath the waves, and I tried to cry out but my throat filled with water as I sank.

I woke to the wind howling in my hair. A light mist was coming down. It was dark, but I could see by moonlight the gnarled branches of the oak above me. I stood and shook sand from my pants. My hair was damp and I had somehow lost my glasses.

I looked down and saw Ella, but not Christian.

I picked her up in my arms.

“Sweetheart,” I said. “Ella. Where’s your brother?”

She whimpered and clung to me, but said nothing. I set her back down and ran frantically around the tree. There was no sign

of Christian anywhere.

And the strange girl, Thetis, was nowhere to be seen either.

I called out Christian's name for some time. I cried out in fury and in fear, but heard no reply except the waves in the distance.

"Daddy, can we go home?" Ella asked. Her voice was plaintive. She shivered against the chill night air and I picked her up and we began our walk back in the dark, down the creek bed.

* * * *

We got back to the vacation cottage, where my wife Kara had been holding a vigil for us. A police car was in the driveway beside our station wagon. I opened the door to the kitchen and Kara ran to greet us, overjoyed.

"You've been gone for hours, Simon! Where were you guys? I was so worried I called the police! The neighbors were helping me look for you!" she hugged me tight and kissed me and took Ella into her arms.

I could see the relief on her face change back to worry. "Where's Christian?" she said.

"Did he come back here?" I asked. "We went looking for him. He ran off."

"Ran off where?"

"Ella and I, we ran after Christian. He ran away from us, down the beach—I kept going after his footprints, but I didn't find him. Or, we did find him, under this great big oak tree down the beach a ways. But then I lost him again."

"You lost him? Where is he?"

There was desperation in Kara's voice, and tears in her eyes.

Ella said, "There was a lady with him there, by the tree."

I was suddenly aware of a police officer, a young man in his twenties, eyeing me from the side of the kitchen as I stood in the

doorway.

"Are you saying someone took him?" he said.

"No," I said. "No—there was a woman, but she was just there, with him. She—I... I don't know what she was doing there."

"We fell asleep," Ella volunteered.

Kara sat down at the table and cried as Ella clung to her.

The police officer said, "When did you last see your son?"

"It was just around dark," I said. "What time is it now?"

"It's almost two in the morning, sir."

"That can't be. We were only gone a little while."

Kara was up now, over her initial shock and putting on a sweater. "I'm going to find Christian," she said.

The four of us, the cop, Kara, and I, with Ella in my arms, went back out. The cop gave us flashlights and we walked along the beach, retracing my steps. "He just ran up over that dune," I said, gesturing with the beam from my flashlight. "I followed him up the creek to this enormous old oak tree, and that's where I last saw him, with a young woman. She said her name was Thetis. But he isn't there now, and neither is she."

We walked over the dune together. There was no creek.

The cop said, "Sir, maybe you mean some other dune. But I don't know where. I've lived here all my life, and I don't know of any creek in this area at all."

"It was here," I said. "Maybe not a creek, I don't know. Maybe some runoff. But it was flowing into the sea, and Ella and I followed it along to that tree, and we found Christian sleeping there under the tree."

Before we left the house, the cop had radioed his partner, who now came jogging toward us from up the beach.

"Did you find my son?" Kara asked the

officer. Her voice was shaking and it pained me to hear her so upset.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," the officer said. "But it looks like you found your husband?"

"My son is missing," she said.

"Listen," I said. "This is crazy. I know he has to be around here somewhere. If we can just find that girl again, Thetis, maybe she's seen him. Maybe she knows where he is."

The cop, shone her light at me. I squinted and felt self-conscious all of a sudden.

"Tell me about this girl," she said.

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "She was just there under the tree, and then she wasn't."

"When we woke up, she was gone," Ella agreed. "She told us to lay down."

The officer asked me, "Have you ever seen her around here before?"

"Well, we're here on vacation. We've only been here a few nights," I said. "But no."

"You said you found your son near a tree?"

"Yes, that's what I told the other officer," I said. "I must have gotten turned around, because we can't find the creek or the tree now."

"Sir, have you been drinking at all this evening, or using any drugs?"

"I don't ever drink or use drugs," I said. "I just, I lost my son..." I trailed off.

I knew how it looked from their point of view. I felt numb, as if I were someone else looking in on a tragedy.

We walked around the dunes for some time, shining lights here and there. But we could not find the creek bed, nor the tree, nor Christian.

* * * *

The next few days and weeks were hell. Kara talked very little to me, and if she blamed me for Christian, I understood,

because I blamed myself too.

I went back across the coastline many times during daylight hours, but each time I could see that there was no creek, and no tree anywhere near our cottage. There was a river about five miles up the coast, but Ella and I had walked to the tree within fifteen or twenty minutes.

Kara made and posted hundreds of fliers with Christian's photo on them. He was smiling in the picture, with a little gleam in his eye that meant he was up to mischief. We put up fliers everywhere in the little seaside village. We visited all the neighbors to ask if they had seen him, or Thetis, but no one knew anything about her and none of them had seen our boy.

I was interviewed by the police many times, but nothing I said could shed any light on Christian's whereabouts. The police were polite, but I could see that there were things about my story that they weren't sure about.

One night, about two weeks after Christian disappeared, I was reading Ella a book on the couch before bedtime. It was *The Hobbit*. It had been a long day of posting fliers and walking door to door. Kara sat on the other side of the room, counting out more flyers that she would place around town tomorrow. She was also preparing to go on a local television station, which she had already done twice, to tell our story and try to get the word out again.

I finished up a chapter where Bilbo got the better of some spiders, and told Ella it was time for bed.

"The spiders caught Bilbo in their web," she said. "Just like Thetis caught us. But we can escape, just like he did. She put a spell on you, just like the spiders, but we can shake it."

"Put a spell on you?" Kara said from across the room. She looked up from her notes.

“She kissed daddy,” Ella said. “It put him to sleep, but he woke up, and I bet he can find Christian if he tries.”

“What do you mean, she kissed daddy?” Kara said.

“She kissed him and put him to sleep, but he woke up,” Ella said. She stretched and yawned. Kara looked at me coldly. I had never seen such anger in her eyes.

I got Ella to bed and Kara was waiting for me in the kitchen.

“What was she talking about, Simon?” Kara said. “What did she mean, this woman was kissing you?” Her face was red with anger.

“She’s got an active imagination,” I said. “We’ve been reading Tolkien, so I guess she’s just making things up.”

“Is she?” Kara said. “Then how do you explain that night? You just fell asleep under a tree? Come on! I mean, what is going on here, Simon? It never made sense from the beginning.”

“Look, Kara,” I started. But she was out the door before I could finish. I heard the tires on the gravel driveway as she sped off.

* * * *

We did not find Christian despite weeks and months of looking. The weather got colder, and the seaside cottage no longer seemed like the great idea it had been during the summer. I was able to extend my vacation time, and work remotely with my laptop, but we were burning through our savings. The owner of the cottage was renting the place to us cheaply, because the summer was over and she was a very kind woman who felt badly for us.

By Thanksgiving Kara had found an apartment in town from which she intended to keep looking for Christian. Ella was going to live there with her.

Kara made it clear I wasn’t going with them. I was to come over on weekends to visit Ella, but not before checking with Kara. It wasn’t a divorce, but it may as well have been.

I think the police suspected me of something, but they never charged me with a crime. I must have spoken to everyone in the little town at least twice, but there was no sign of Christian, and no one could tell us anything more than we already knew.

I was determined to stay at the cottage, and I didn’t feel I had much choice. With Christian missing, I couldn’t bring myself to leave, even if it ruined us financially. My salary wasn’t very high, and though the landlady gave us a good off-season rate, we would also have to pay rent on the apartment and keep both households going. Our house was an eight hour drive away, and my brother was checking in there every week, but we were behind on the mortgage there too.

Through all this, I dreamed of Thetis.

I could feel she was nearby, and now that I was alone in the cottage, it was like she was everywhere, calling to me from around the corner of the bookcase, from the fireplace, from the dark corners of the attic. She called from the basement and the yard and the rustling of the leaves outside, and most of all from the endless crashing of the waves on the shore. I knew if I could only find her, it would lead to Christian.

* * * *

On Christmas Day, I went to Kara’s apartment. My wife had aged in the three months since Christian’s disappearance. Her dark hair had streaks of grey in it now that I hadn’t noticed before, and there were lines on her face and beneath her eyes that spoke of many sleepless, grieving nights.

When I arrived, Ella leapt into my arms as always.

“Santa came!” She yelled. She held up a My Little Pony toy that she’d been asking for, and I immediately regretted buying her a hand carved doll from a local toymaker. It was a unique gift, but probably not what she wanted. I was always making mistakes like that with people I cared about.

“Merry Christmas, Simon,” Kara said, without getting up from the couch. They had decorated a small potted pine tree that stood in the center of the living room of their apartment.

“I wish you guys would come back to the cottage,” I said.

“Oh, can we, momma?” Ella said.

Kara ignored the question. “Did you pick up the coffee?” she said. “I’m dying for a cup.”

Of course, I’d forgotten it. “No” I said sheepishly. “I’ll run out and be back in a few minutes.”

Kara said, “Everything’s closed. It’s Christmas.”

“I’ll find a place,” I said.

“Can I go too?” Ella said.

We walked out into the brisk wind of Christmas morning. Snowflakes were coming down through the salt tinged air. In the distance a foghorn blew. Ella snuggled up against me as we walked toward the center of town.

A local Dunkin’ Donuts was open. We went inside and I got some donuts and ordered one of those big coffee boxes. I was overcompensating, as usual. I figured both Kara and I could drink a cup, and maybe later she could reheat some until she could get to the grocery store tomorrow.

Ella and I sat at a small table by the window, and she ate a glazed donut and we talked of all the little, precious things that Ella always liked sharing with me. She told me her

ponies were beautiful, and they were all going to have a tea party later, to which I was invited. For a moment, I imagined that we were still a family, that nothing had changed, that we hadn’t experienced a catastrophe.

Ella looked out the window and her eyes grew suddenly wide. She shouted, “DADDY! IT’S CHRISTIAN!”

I looked and there he was, walking toward us on the sidewalk, laughing and smiling, as happy as he’d always been.

I rushed out the door.

Two figures walked up a rise in the otherwise deserted road. It was Christian, dressed in jeans and winter coat and hat, and beside him was a girl with silver hair, and a glimmering, pale face. She held my son by the hand. It was Thetis.

Christian looked different somehow. Paler, almost sheer, as if I could see through his delicate frame as he walked toward me.

My heart pounded, and I shouted--I couldn’t make any words out, I just yelled incoherently as I ran toward them.

But my cries were lost in the suddenly ferocious, driving wind. I could barely move against the gale force. The snow blew into my eyes, and I could see nothing for a moment. The icy gale stung my eyes as tears rolled down my face.

When I was able to look up again, they were gone.

I stayed in the street and called his name for a long time. I looked for his footprints in the snow, but there were none.

Ella joined me in the street, and we called out his name again and again: Christian! Christian! Christian!

When I asked him, the guy behind the counter said he had seen no one outside but Ella and me. The street was empty and the wind drove the snow against the windows as I stood there shivering, with Ella’s hand in mine.

Ah, *Photinus Pyralis*, My Love

by

S. Dorman

Look at this luminous night! Riding this soft voluptuous air, I dip down and glow, my sensitive antennas quivering. The night is full of the sights and sounds of insectan coupling. This meadow by the woodland is dotted with blips of light. Grass leaves and stems vibrate with chirrings. Everyone yearns for a mate.

Me too. I'm *Photinus pyralis*, a firefly looking for sweet Miss *Pyralis*.

There's a low flyer. What style he has! A cool flash whilst laterally swerving.

See the black contour of the fir trees in the deep blue night on the far side of the meadow? Watch for flashes against that darkness. Oops, there it goes again. Three flashes and darkness, followed again by three flashes. It's *Photinus consimilis* signaling for a mate. Of course only Miss *Consimilis* need apply. She must have replied, with her distinctive two flashes, because he's stopped sending and apparently gone down to greet her.

Ah, imagine the fun they're having now.

I better get down to business, too. Lucky me, I was made for this.

A quick down and a long up, light organ glowing. Now off! Dip and undulate; dip and on! Now off. Ah mama bug, respond to papa bug; I know you're down there.

No luck yet; keep trying.

My glow's yellow-green, but color's not the important thing. Uh-uh. It's the flash pattern. Irresistible. There are a lot of genus *Photinus* around: *Photinus granulatus*, *Photinus pyralis*, *consimilis*, etc.... and each has its own special signal. There's even a larger genus *Photurus*. I'm told the females eat--nope, don't bring up that old horror story! To believe that or not? --But, for *P. pyralis* the others won't do. We all flash differently, move with our own special charm. I flash in a J-shape at six second intervals, and closer to the ground than *P. consimilis*. Nothing else would appeal to Miss *Pyralis*. Oh, she may mistake a flash once or twice. But when she realizes a misflash, that's it. She won't respond the third time. A real cute bug--and smart.

C'mon darlin'. She's down there somewhere in the daisies and mullen. I give a few delicate rapid wingbeats, a luminous dip....

She's there! A half-second flash--precisely timed! I give her another!

Darn. No response. Wait! Double darn--it's only a man with a flashlight threading through the tall grass. Those things ought to be outlawed.

Without our glorious glows, we *Photinus* beetles wouldn't be much to look at. We're

drab little things. Emerging from my last exoskeleton was a bit disappointing until I opened wings and lit up. Our orange organs are shining, complex, tri-layered. The outside layer is transparent and our slab-like light cells shine through. The inmost layer, opaque whitish cells, reflects the beam from light cells. To us luminescence is the most sensual thing on earth. A little oxygen and luciferase--to catalyze the pigment luciferin--and we're all set. Understanding the mechanics of sexual attraction is fine, but it's definitely not necessary for a loving time. I just hope that having the enzyme and pigment named after the deceiver doesn't mean all this enjoyment is evil. How could there be anything evil in this spangled night?

Give myself a few wingbeats and a couple nice shiny J's to shake off the heavy thoughts.

Hey--I think I found one! Give another couple glimmers at six second intervals: timing is everything. Great!--she signals at the right interval.

Oh heck, I don't believe! Here comes another *pyralis* in front of me. He looks fresh from a molt, too. *Humph*. He must've been especially voracious as a larva. Now

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he's down in the grass with her as I sweep past, left out again.

Hmm.... something's amiss.... His light's not right. Better make another pass. His light's still glimmering but suddenly smaller. A closer flyby.... Hey!--that's not *pyralis* with him! She's not even *Photinus*. Look at the scope of that embrace! It's the amazon *Photurus pennsylvanica*--and she's devouring him.

Suddenly I've got a date on the other side of the meadow.

How many passing strangers do you think she's attracted with that unpennsylvanica-type winking? Heard they do a good imitation of *consimilis*, too. They must have quite a repertoire of flash patterns. I'm out of here!

... Well, no reason to give up delight--not when this side of the meadow well away from that fright might have someone for me. But I'm going to be more careful looking for Miss *Pyralis*.

Yeah.

A couple J's. Nice and undulant! Mild night. Full of lights...

Author's note:

This story was written in the foothills of the Alleghenies in the early 1980s and later incorporated into a novel, *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and CS Lewis Talk Things over in The Hereafter*. In the early 2000s this SF was begun as a project for the thesis paper in the CSUDH masters in humanities program (HUX). Mark Twain had written stories imagining travels in various parts of creation, leaving me with an impetus to re-imagine him as a character taking part in sundry aspects of same.

No Body but Yours.

by

Jude O. Mahony

I never fitted in.
Working class androgynous.
I won't bore you with the victim malarkey.
The neglect. The beatings. The state care.
Nor:
The philosophy I read. The wild trips. My time within
The sacred way.
Just let it be read. That I was a
variation across the matrix.
A sociologist's dry nightmare.

Alleyway.
In an abbreviated heroin induced waking dream.
He appeared.
A giant fellow wayfarer and thief.
Offering a bed for the night.
In the abscess of light, I followed.
Hobbling, hypnotised by the steely glints from
His butcher's scrubs.
Welcomed inside.
Pristine room, single wrought iron bed.
Heaven sent, all for myself.
No stinking shared dorm for me this night.

Devilish host.

There was nectar and strong cider. Followed by
opium.

The half night we passed in elided morphemic
whispers. The basic bone and sinew of things.
Pared palaver.

To cut a long story short.
I awoke in a sea of violent
haemorrhaging blood.
Legs stumped.
White as a ghost.
Full phantom pain.
Stretched across the footboard
My calfskin vellumed.
Perfect diamond.
Hand tapped in crimson
Red.

Deconstructed you.
Now beautifully haiku'd.
Procrustes was 'ere.

Golden Treasure

by

Robert Field Tredray

The gold that's found in fairy hill or at the rainbow's end,
Or laid in hoard by long-dead king, or in the dragon's den,
Of old did cast a mighty spell upon the minds of men
That made them search for treasure hidden deep beyond their ken.

But I am smitten by another and a sharper dart:
A beauty more than can be fashioned by the goldsmith's art.
I must forsake the search for gold; from now on, for my part,
I seek the golden love that lives within my lady's heart.

For Marianne

Marion Snee Hood (1926-2010)

By

Gwenyth E. Hood

Lady of gifts, my mother and my child,
Who smoothly led the way, then turned to follow,
With aspect gently fierce and tartly mild,

Before your eyes, no hour was ever hollow.
Whatever the place, your mind would summon vision
From murky ocean depth or sun-washed shallow;

And in braided quilts you wove a bright collision,
Of pictured past, in colorful relief
Where inner strife turned out in bold decision.

Lady of games, our playing time was brief,
Though then it seemed as common as the soil
In spring's bright violet and autumn's tawny leaf,

With hearthside peace rewarding daily toil,
And active romps transformed to musing journal.
Such fragile dreams the passing years might spoil,
But memory makes the pastimes there eternal.



Impressions of a Storybook Princess
(an unfinished quilt piece, by Marion Snee Hood)

(Author's Note for "Marionne": I had long intended and long wanted to write a poem in the memory of my mother, who died in November, 2010, but I never could find the words or the form. Often it struck me how much of what I did and enjoyed in life was a gift from her. This year, as I worked on a study of Dante, I remember that it was she, after all, who had first awakened my interest in Dante by giving me a translation of his *Divine Comedy* when I was a teenager. It then struck me that she was a "Lady of Gifts," and I should write a poem for her in Dante's meter, *terza rima*. A few other notes might explain some references in the poem, and the facing picture. My mother's name was Marion, but in going through her writings after she passed away, I found that she had spelled her name "Marionne" for a short time during her youth, and this made me see another way. She was my mother, but in her last years, I felt protective of

her, as if she were a child, but also, despite her age and wisdom, even though difficult times and illness, she retained a child's wonder and enthusiasm in her view of the world. My mother and I shared an interest in writing, but she also worked with visual arts. She studied, drew and painted portraits, and also worked did quilting quite seriously. She made several quilts to upon various themes, especially family history, but she also did some based on my own stories, published and (mostly) unpublished. She never spoke to me about the quilting piece presented here, but I suspect it was meant as a portrait of a character from one of my stories. I recognized some of the material she used in it from some costumes she made for me, so perhaps it was an idealized interpretation of which she wished I might look like if the world had been very different!)

Intimations of Springs

by

R. L. Boyer

In the depths of Winter, a steady rhythm of
rainfall whispers sleepily over the desolate

landscape, promising new life; whispered
voices of the woodland seem restless, like

hushed murmuring of the dead. Deep in
the damp womb of the forest, a fragile

newborn fern takes root, sprouts skyward,
unfurls at the heart of the greening world.

We Never Will Be Gods

by

Marissa Glover

In school, we're taught the soft spot—
expected to find comfort in Achilles' heel
or Superman's kryptonite. *They're just like us*

we imagine, rejoicing in their weakness, willing
Lex Luthor or Paris of Troy to discover the truth
we already know, prove the hero human.

But Achilles doesn't die from an arrow;
he's still living now, here, thousands of years
after the war has ended. And Superman

doesn't stay buried, no matter what the Batman
movie says. Gods and Superheroes always find a way
to resurrection. Don't kid yourself—

Doomsday is the fate of humans. We are mortal
to the end, if not because of our planet or parents
then because our weakness is hubris, the fatal flaw

buried deep in our heart. We secretly wish the hero
to die, cheer when the greatest among us stumbles.
Glued to the news—when the golden boy loses his luster

we take comfort, dancing in our own dull glow.

The Great Season of the Majestics

by

Mileva Anastasiadou

Anna was about to turn twenty five in a couple months, which meant she had to find a mate. She followed the ritual reluctantly, mainly to please her mother.

“You shouldn’t postpone it much longer, dear,” her mother had said.

“I’d prefer to rely on luck, or maybe fate.”

“I’m sure you do, honey, yet all previous human experience dictates otherwise.”

Her mom was right. When divorces grew to high numbers, scientists proposed the new method, which proved to be working. That’s when astrologers began proliferating, as people relied on them to find their soulmates.

“Based on my calculations, your ideal mate should be a Scorpio, with Taurus rising, and ideally his astrological chart should look like this,” the astrologer told her, showing her the chart of her potential mate.

Anna hadn’t met any Scorpio men in her life. She’d always fallen for Geminis. She felt rather upset with the results. When did this all start? She tried to remember. She was certain, it had something to do with the Majestics, the great new religion, yet she wasn’t so sure. After all, that was a religion, which was supposed to move humanity

forward, to promote critical thinking.

Where did it all go wrong?

* * * *

Leo rubbed the back of his neck, thankful the meeting was finally over. It was pretty tough for him, yet he had no choice but to accept the verdict; it was their turn to run as the gods of the world. He stood still for a while, taking big breaths, wondering how on earth he would announce the news to the rest of the team. They’d certainly feel disappointed. He had always been considered the most powerful among them and he had given a good fight, yet judging by the end result, he proved a failure at negotiations.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, all immortals were eager to govern. It took them much time and many failures to discover that this position required great amounts of responsibility and effort. Power is intoxicating, yet tiring at the same time. When they first rolled the dice, the game proved more difficult than imagined. The Olympians won, yet most of the immortals doubted the result. The war of gods started then, which lasted for many centuries. The Nordics were the first to defy the result. They moved North and ruled there for many

years. In different parts of the world other religions formed, until another meeting was necessary, when they all gathered again at the top of Olympus and decided it was time for a change.

Later on, in most parts of the so-called civilized world, the Christians governed for many years. Yet they decided to retire as soon as they saw the dead end. As the end of the world seemed to be approaching, they called for an emergency meeting at heaven.

At this meeting, everything was different. None of the immortals wanted the job. Who could want a job that would make them responsible for the end of the world?

“It’s our turn and our chance to save the world,” he said to the rest of the Zodiacs, when he went out of the meeting room.

“Really? They entrusted the Zodiacs with such a mission?” asked Cancer, the most pessimistic of all.

“Well, there will be some changes.”

“What kind of changes?” asked Scorpio, the most suspicious of all, leaning to Leo’s side, as if the big secret would be soon unveiled only to him.

“We will be called the Majestics from now on,” exclaimed Leo, in a futile attempt to magnify the moment, to properly announce a significant fact that would encourage the team and offer the sip of grandiosity that the moment deserved.

To Leo’s disappointment, instead of the expected reaction, they all sighed in despair.

“If we intend to establish a new religion, we need a myth, symbols, celebrations,” said Virgo before adding, her face radiating determination: “First of all, we need a prophet.”

Leo was the first one to applaud.

* * * *

Anna met Richard a few days later.

“What’s your star sign?” she asked.

“I’m a Gemini, superfluous, shallow, rather talkative, yet smart,” he said, shaking her hand. That was the way things worked. Star signs were more important than names.

“Pisces here, sensitive, fragile, yet creative and sweet,” she replied. “Nice to meet you.”

They walked around for a while, in silence.

“Do you think we could have a coffee or something?” he asked impatiently, having stayed silent for too long for his standards.

Anna thought about it for a while, taking her time before answering his question. A coffee doesn’t mean anything. A coffee is just a coffee.

They sat on a bench, facing each other, holding two cups of hot coffee in their hands.

“So, what are your plans for Aqualia?”

“I don’t feel that festive this year,” he admitted. He didn’t even want to think about the festive days.

Anna, on the other hand, loved this kind of celebration. She couldn’t wait to take some days off and read all the books she had bought, without having the time to read them on work days.

“Isn’t there a book you want to read this year?” she asked, touching her hair, awkwardly bowing her head, in an attempt

to avoid his glance. His intense stare made her uncomfortable, yet she somehow enjoyed it.

“I prefer magazines,” he said, touching her hand, as if he expected her understanding. She felt disappointed, yet she couldn’t help but respond to his kiss, when he came close and kissed her.

“May Mike’s light bless you,” she told him before waving goodbye. Not so long ago, the Great Prophet Mike lived and died for the Majestics, sacrificing himself for humanity’s enlightenment. Yet still, there were people, who doubted his gift.

Anna felt she should do something about it. She didn’t know what just yet.

* * * *

“I’m a prophet,” Mike reluctantly confided in me.

“Indeed, I am the chosen one,” he said with certainty, as I sat on the chair beside him, staring at the ceiling to avoid his eyes.

“Can you imagine why they have chosen me?”

I couldn’t. Yet his answer didn’t quite come as a shock:

“I was born on the 20th of January. This is the first day of the Great Majestic Season.”

That’s right. The greatest of the Majestics, God Aquarius, is on duty during the season. Everyone born during his season, is supposed to be under his protection.

I was born under the protection of Leo. People born under his protection are nowadays considered cynical, indecisive, prone to self-doubting, yet smart at the same time. In the old days, when the Majestics were only star signs, Leo people were the

most fearless of all. Nobody knows how this changed. Some scientists formed a theory about it, claiming that due to the extinction of lions, the main symbol of Leo, back when the world was approaching to an end, all the characteristics of the sign changed, since the lions, once considered the kings of all animals were finally defeated.

My parents do not believe in any religion and have had some intense conversations with each other and other people as well, in an attempt to understand the roots of God Aquarius. My father claimed that January was the most depressing month of the year, that’s why God Aquarius was invented in the collective unconscious, little by little. My mother said that on the 20th of January, where she came from, there used to be a celebration of a saint of the old religion, St Eftimios he was called, and Eftimios means “the good humored one,” the one who is joyful, which means people desperately needed joy that season.

My parents believe in critical thinking. It’s an irony, if you ask me. The Majestics are the gods of critical thinking, yet my parents don’t believe in them. On the other hand, I find it ironic that a new religion preaches reasoning. Reasoning is rather contradictory to faith anyway. True believers, like Mike, claim that this an inevitable step for the evolution of mankind.

I challenged Mike’s reasoning many times, before finally talking to a psychiatrist about his situation. After a while, as he gained more and more self-confidence, he claimed, during preaching, that critical thinking involves more cognitive acts than plain reasoning; it’s also about abstract thinking, creativity and imagination.

Mike died in the psychiatric department

of the biggest hospital in the country. Until his dying day, despite the medicines he was given, he insisted on his delusion, that he was the prophet. I haven't regretted my decision to betray his confidence and talk to doctors about his illness. Besides, most gods' representatives among mortals had a good friend who betrayed them. My name could have been Judas, had I been born in another era, which is a nice name indeed.

..*.*

They sat on the same bench two days before the great day.

"I've brought you something," said Anna.

"Oh no, I didn't know we would exchange gifts. I told you I'm not that much into Aqualia."

Richard unwrapped the present unwillingly and took a long look at the book she had offered him.

"What is it about?" he asked.

"Most of the species you see here are extinct," she explained.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" he asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"One of those who claim that they know the truth. Who believe all this nonsense they have been telling us, about saving the planet and all. About all the harm humans did to the planet."

"Sure I am." Anna felt offended, yet she didn't leave. At least not immediately.

"Please, spend some time thinking, analyzing facts, before you make up your

mind," she told him, before standing up, ready to head home.

"At least, read the book."

Richard looked the other way, instead of watching her walk away.

She felt disappointed. Perhaps she should have listened to the astrologer's advice, after all. Yet she still liked that man. Somehow, she still liked him.

..*.*

The penguin must have sneaked in through the open window. After walking around the house, he showed up at Richard's room.

"How on earth did a penguin find its way to my bedroom?" he wondered aloud.

There was no way Richard could have known that many years ago the day that was about to dawn was called international penguin awareness day, nor that it was named "Blue Monday" by a few, the most depressing day of the year, which kind of explained the penguin and his own moodiness.

"Happy Aqualia!" exclaimed the penguin, jumping around the room in joy. Richard could not share the penguin's enthusiasm though. He wasn't that much into the festive spirit after all. He couldn't bear any more lectures on the perks of critical thinking that saved the planet some years ago, when people came to their senses and realized that destroying natural resources would inevitably result in their own extinction. He only wished for a carefree life, like the one his ancestors lived, not spending time thinking of ways to

reduce his imprint on the planet.

“I have seen you in books,” he said after a long pause.

“Yep, unfortunately, my species went extinct thanks to your species. I’m only a ghost.”

“A ghost?” asked Richard, without really expecting an answer. Repetition seemed to help him swallow the words of the penguin.

“I’m here to teach you a lesson, as you may have already imagined.”

Richard wondered if he should offer a cup of coffee to the penguin, until he decided that ghosts, especially penguin ghosts, wouldn’t drink coffee.

“To battle your unwillingness to think,” went on the penguin. “Mike the prophet sacrificed himself for you to think, yet you waste your time on TV and cheap magazines.”

“I will keep notes,” Richard said, pretending to be the best student in a class of invisible classmates.

“It’s more complicated than this. You don’t have to learn anything by heart, like you’re used to. You are about to learn how to think.”

Richard felt slightly offended. How dared that stupid creature presume he couldn’t think?

The penguin’s voice went softer, as he tried to make Richard understand:

“You all think that you think. But thinking takes more than just commenting on stuff you have been observing, doesn’t it?”

Richard nodded, although he wasn’t yet sure what the penguin was talking about.

“I’m not used to teaching,” said the penguin, after a long sigh. “It’s actually my first time, so I may get a bit impatient with you.” He then took a tiny little blue scarf out of his pocket and folded it around his neck and as he was folding it, the scarf was getting bigger and bigger, until it was more than a plain scarf, until it looked like a cape, like the cape Superman of another era wore, and then grabbed Richard by the hand and together they flew into the cold night sky.

They landed on a roof, in the center of the city.

“What have you been thinking about during the flight?” the penguin asked him.

“Nothing,” said Richard apologetically. He knew deep inside that this was not the right answer.

“I’ll tell you what you’ve been thinking about. You spent your time enjoying the flight, observing the sights, wondering for a while how on earth we’re flying, yet that thought didn’t last long, because you let yourself trust the ghost penguin that led you. You let your faith win.”

“Isn’t that what this trip is all about?”

“I’m not here to teach you faith. You have enough if it. Faith is not bad, as long as it goes hand in hand with reasoning. Seizing the day is fine as well, as long as it involves thinking too.”

“Balance is what’s most important, isn’t it?”

“It is. Your species has been an expert on faith. The only way to deal with despair though is not through faith, but by thinking. Faith places the problem outside of ourselves, leaving it exposed to external circumstances, letting a *deus ex machina* take care of it and fix it at will. Thinking on

the other hand, internalizes the problem, making us personally responsible to find a solution. To doubt the status quo of things and discover new ways out.”

Richard thought about it for a while. It’s always easier to feel, or even believe in something, than thinking about it with a critical mind. It’s even easier to let other do the thinking for you. Thinking has been underestimated. It’s all about living the moment, feeling the vibes. To him analyzing facts, checking them, deconstructing them, discussing them to discover truth had not been a favorite pass-time.

“Think, think, think!” exclaimed the penguin. “Doubt, deconstruct, synthesize, that’s the only way,” he cried as he took Richard by the hand once more and flew into the night sky, throwing books over the town.

As soon as Richard took his own book and started exploring it, the penguin vanished. He found a tulip where the penguin stood with a note attached to it:

“Thinking is joy. Thinking is magic. It can make your life meaningful. Wounded people, traumatized by everyday life’s expectations, who haven’t had the opportunity to develop thinking skills, cannot see the magic in everyday life. They need it in increased doses. That’s what festive seasons are for,” he read aloud.

..*.*

Her mother welcomed her warmly and took away her coat. Anna kissed her father on the forehead and sat beside him. She unzipped her purse and took out a box. She offered it to her father who looked back

at her in amazement.

“Happy Aqualia, dad! May Mike’s light bless you.” Her father looked at the book his daughter had offered him, his face brightened in enthusiasm.

“Let’s eat,” her mother ordered.

Anna exchanged glances with her father while silently agreeing to leave the book aside for as long as the meal would last.

Once they finished, she helped her mother with the dishes and went to sit by the fireplace with her dad. Her mother came to join them after a while.

“So, what’s the book about?” she asked.

“It’s a very old book actually,” said Anna, who couldn’t wait to analyze the importance of her treasure. Her mother frowned.

“Another old book?” she asked.

“Books are important to develop thinking process, mother,” Anna reluctantly said.

“Thinking is overrated darling,” said her mother smiling impatiently. “It takes time from more useful tasks, like washing the dishes.”

“She’s wounded by everyday life. Magic of everyday life cannot be easily detected by wounded people. That’s why the dose must be increased. That’s what festive seasons are for,” she thought.

That wasn’t a thought she made herself. That was a thought implanted in her brain by Pisces, her protector who had watched the scene silently, invisible to the company of the three mortals, like a guardian angel of old times. Pisces believed in Anna and her creative talent. He was certain she would create the myth necessary for the further

development of the religion.

She went into her old bedroom, disappointed, to have some rest and listen to music. The radio played songs from the old times, “Deep blue day” by Brian Eno, and “Blue Monday” by New Order, another divine intervention by Pisces who attempted to inspire the girl. She decided to write a story herself on Aqualia and the importance

of books and critical thinking and joy. She couldn't possibly know that her story would mark the beginning of a new era, when she sat down on her chair and started writing:

“The penguin must have sneaked in through the open window. After walking around the house, he showed up at Richard's room.”

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Bethany Abrahamson gained degrees in biology and history from the University of New Mexico and enjoys writing in the fantasy genre in her spare time. Her inspiration for her drawings comes from Dungeons and Dragons. When she's not writing or painting you can usually find her playing fiddle or vielle, or crocheting.

Mileva Anastasiadou is a neurologist. Her work can be found in many journals, such as the Molotov Cocktail, Maudlin house, Jellyfish Review, Asymmetry fiction, the Sunlight Press

and others. She's the founding editor of Storyland Literary Review.
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Mathew Block is editor of *The Canadian Lutheran* magazine, and editor of the recent book, *Saints of the Reformation*.

Ron Boyer is a scholar, teacher, and award-winning poet, fiction author, and screenwriter. He completed his MA in Depth Psychology at Sonoma State University and is also a graduate of the Professional Program in Screenwriting at UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. He is currently undertaking doctoral studies in the PhD in Art and Religion program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, where he is dual-enrolled at UC Berkeley. Ron's scholarly research emphasizes interdisciplinary, archetypal theory applied to mythopoeic imagery in narrative art, including mythology, ritual, literature, and film, with a concentration on the mythopoeic art of Dante Alighieri, William Blake, and J. R. R. Tolkien. He has presented academic papers at the first *Symposium for the Study of Myth* at Pacifica Graduate Institution and the *International Conference for the International Association of Jungian Studies* at Arizona State University. He is scheduled to present at the upcoming 33rd Annual International Conference on Indigenous and Ancestral Wisdom, Healing and Transformation sponsored by the Society for the Study of Shamanism. Ron is a two-time Jefferson Scholar to the Santa Barbara Writers Conference, and two-time award-winner for fiction from the John E. Profant Foundation for the Arts, including the McGwire Family Award for Literature. His first short story was published in the horror anthology, *America the Horrific*. His poetry has been featured in the scholarly e-zine of the Jungian and depth psychology community, *Depth Insights: Seeing the World with Soul* (Issues 3, 5, & 7), *Mythic Passages: A Magazine of the Imagination*, *Mythic Circle*, and other publications. Ron's essay on "The Rebirth Archetype in Fairy Tales: A Study of Fitcher's Bird and Little Red Cap" was recently published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Coreopsis: Journal of Myth and Theatre*, where he is a reviewer and regular contributor.

Joe R. Christopher has had one book of poems published by a standard publisher and a hundred or so individual poems in journals. He also has had over half a dozen books of other sorts appear from standard publishers, including a couple on C. S. Lewis. In his retirement, he is trying to turn some of the papers he read at meetings into publishable form—as well as writing more poems.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *The Cape Rock*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Gargoyle*. Her nonfiction publications include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano and Keyboard All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *Stillwater, Minnesota: A History*.

Her newest poetry collections, *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press), *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co.), and *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), will be out mid-2018, with *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy* already out on Alien Buddha Press.

S. Dorman has a Master's degree in Humanities, and is the author of *Maine Metaphor*, *The God's Cycle*, and *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and C.S. Lewis Talk Things over in the Hereafter*.

Marissa Glover is lifelong reader of Lewis and a recent teacher of Tolkien. She teaches writing at Saint Leo University, hosts Friday Night Open Mic, and shares her thoughts more than necessary, which she considers a form of charitable giving. If it counted as a tax deduction, she'd be rich. Her work is found in *Stoneboat*, *After the Pause*, *Amaryllis*, and other journals. Read more at MarissaGlover.wordpress.com.

Gea Haff is a lifelong student of myth and religion. She has an M.A. in Women's Studies in Religion from Claremont Graduate University with a focus on ancient traditions. As a firefighter/paramedic with Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, she has grown intimate with death. Her debut novel, *Anne Brontë Nightwalker*, explores these themes more fully. She is currently writing a novel about fire, EMS, and ghosts.

Gwenyth E. 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, mostly because her mother directed her toward those authors. In 1982, her first novel, *The Coming of the Demons*, was published by William Morrow. She is currently in the process of updating the published book to agree with books 2 and 3 which she finally finished a couple of years ago. Currently she is a professor at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, where she teaches composition and literature. She is working on a book on Dante and has been the editor of *The Mythic Circle* all the years of this millennium and a few more.

Jude O. Mahony, an unpublished poet and eternal optimist, works with the homeless in Dublin and writes about the juxtaposition of modern day marginalization and Greek Mythology.

Clinton Nix is an American writer currently residing in Kyiv, Ukraine. He is a freelance editor by day, and in his spare time pursues his creative endeavors, such as writing fiction and poetry. He has honed his writing style by marrying fantasy and science fiction with mythological, philosophical, and spiritual themes.

Ryder W. Miller is an eco-critic, critic, poet, writer, and journalist. He is regular contributor to *The Mythic Circle*, *Beyond Bree*, *Mythprint*, *EGJ*, and *Rain Taxi*. He has also been published in *Mythlore*. He has 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 working on a collection of short stories titled: *Tales of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* which is soon to be published. Next? Probably a novel.

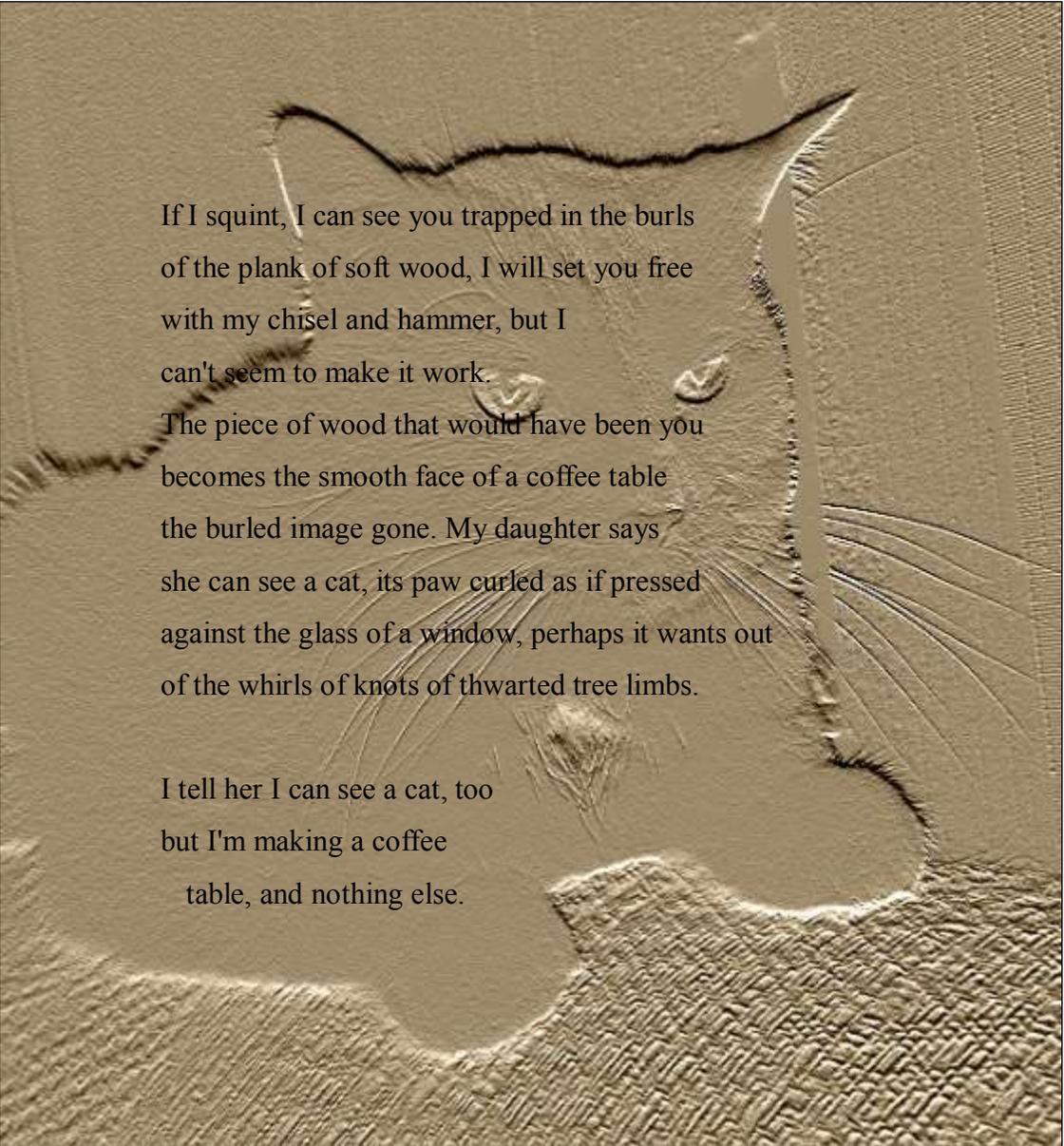
Robert Field Tredray is an independent scholar now living in Robbinsdale, MN. He received the MA degree in medieval English literature from Northeastern Illinois University in 2002. He has been a Tolkien enthusiast since 1964, when he first read *The Lord of the Rings*. He first joined the Mythopoeic Society in the early 1970's, and was a member of the Committee for Mythcon XVI. He presented his first paper at Mythcon XVII, where he also had a drawing in the art show. His poems have appeared in *Pickwick Papers* (the literary magazine of John Marshall High School); *Rime Royale* (a privately published anthology edited by Ruth Berman); *Apocalypse* (the literary magazine of Northeastern Illinois University) number 7, 1999; and *Prairie Avenue Writers: An Anthology*, edited by Sue Fox McGovern, 2014. He has also contributed lyrics to Eileen Marie Moore's song cycle, *Maidens of Middle Earth*.

Christopher J. Tuthill's fiction has appeared in the collection *Dark Tales From Elder Regions* and the journal *Sleipnir*, and his essays on fantasy fiction have been published in the *Journal of Children's Literature Studies* and *A Companion to JRR Tolkien*, among other venues. He lives in Poughkeepsie, NY with his wife and two children.

THE CARVING

by

Holly Day



If I squint, I can see you trapped in the burls
of the plank of soft wood, I will set you free
with my chisel and hammer, but I
can't seem to make it work.

The piece of wood that would have been you
becomes the smooth face of a coffee table
the burl'd image gone. My daughter says
she can see a cat, its paw curled as if pressed
against the glass of a window, perhaps it wants out
of the whirls of knots of thwarted tree limbs.

I tell her I can see a cat, too
but I'm making a coffee
table, and nothing else.