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Mythic Circle #41

Gwenyth E. Hood

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Mythic Circle #41

Abstract

In #41, *The Mythic Circle* welcomes seven authors new to our pages. Lawrence Buentello debuts with a supernatural story of deceit and revenge. David Rogers explores the territory between nihilism and naiveté in a contemporary setting. Meg Moseman, Anum Sattar, Ted Snyder, Chad Chisholm, and Pawel Markiewicz all offer poems in varying styles and settings. Also we are happy to see some familiar names. Kevan Bowkett returns, this time offering, in prose, a poignant story of love and honor, playing out in an exotic mythological setting, and in verse, a humorous vignette from the life of a hero who knows what he wants and how to get it. In Janet Brennan Croft's poem, a satisfied customer of the therapeutic culture expresses her views, but perhaps the therapist should beware. Janet also provided photographic artwork for the front and back cover, and also for some inner pages, resonating thematically with the themes of the issue. S. Dornan returns with another adventure of Mark Twain as he wanders in time, this time encountering C. S. Lewis as both observe and comment on an astronomical event that had its impact on both Kepler's youth and the course of Western civilization. Ryder W. Miller's story speaks especially to those of us who feel like prehistoric creatures these days. In his poem, Lamar Johnson provides another excerpt from his creation mythology. Ron Boyer offers four poems on the spiritual side of nature. Pawel Markiewicz presents a manifesto designed to draw off the energies which the short-sighted have devoted to ineffectual causes and channel them in more positive directions.



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2019

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Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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Editorial: This Issue

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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, Steward for Social Media, E-mail: communications@mythsoc.org).

Copies of the next issue, *Mythic Circle*, #42, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2020, 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 the editor of *The Mythic Circle* 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 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 e-mailed to <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>.

The Comet of 1577

by

S. Dorman

Jack Lewis, in nightclothes and tamping a pipe, climbs the starlit knoll outside a sixteenth century Germanic village. Despite this attire, he wears walking shoes to avoid slipping on the frosty pasturage. As he approaches the crown he sees a white smoke-wreathed head, then the white figure emerging in its ascent of the opposite side. He recognizes Samuel Clemens immediately. They greet one another at the top of the knoll, shaking hands and exclaiming a bit over the conjunction. The astronomical term is fitting, given the setting of their fanciful but fortuitous encounter: two bodies on the mediaeval celestial sphere gaining the same longitude.

“Now let me guess,” says Twain. “The year is 1577 and you’ve come out to observe the advent of a comet ushering us from our Aristotelian arrogance ... in order to surprise us out of the erroneous belief that all was fixed to its appropriate round beyond the planets. ...Are you researching for some book or lecture, or is it the poetry? But you’ve aged some since we last talked. Perhaps poetry is not quite the thing now?”

Lewis smiles. “Perhaps not.”

They stand on the knoll together looking up through crystalline spheres of the heavens above the river Glems, while, at some distance beneath, a woman and child climb towards them from the lane along a curve of Glems’s stream. Even from here they can see that the child wears hosen and a cape, the woman mantled to her feet and wearing a white wimple with pillbox hat. But the comet is now visible above the

mountain behind them and the men turn in silence and awe to give it their full attention. For long they watch as the quiet stream of light beams into view over the serrated silhouette of trees across the way, its self-possessed spirit of silence invoking the same in them.

At length they sense mother and child drawing near, but Twain speaks. “That cracking sound you hear up there is not just frost splitting those trees across that ridge. It is the sound of the solid spheres breaking up between the planets.”

“Yes,” murmurs Lewis, “Kepler, and Tycho Brahe with his instruments, observations and calculations, will see to that. Before long the cold and the dead, the dark and the void—empty of the music of Jove, of Venus and Saturn—will sweep in to clear the imagination of its bright celestially classical model. The high and sweet or even the pestilential influences of the planets will cease except where the zodiacal superstition persists.... But here are Kepler and his mother approaching. We shall overhear if we do not leave this place.”

“Let’s stay a minute anyway. We will only overhear in fancy, and what good is it to be tellers of tales if we neglect a found opportunity?”

The approaching pair were yet a little below the hilltop and speaking German, but each man heard enough of it in the clear cold night to understand that they were listening to familial woes. They supposed that the comet was blocked by the hill, not

yet in view to these two mediaevals who had come to witness its presence in their lives.

“Then papa is not to be hanged?” piped the child’s voice over the stillness of the slope.

“No, but we will be selling the house. He wants a tavern.”

Having heard these words, the two men stepped away and were at Uraniborg on the Scarlet Island of Venus (Hveen). Here was the towered and turreted observatory of the Danish nobleman Tycho Brahe, parts of which were yet under construction. It was late. Moony silver gleamed faintly upon quadrants of some domes. One of the windows above was aglow with the light of the astronomer working out his meticulous schedule of observations for the comet of 1577.

They stood on a corner of the below-ground-level observatory beside the domed edifice of its main watchtower, this white figure of the 19th century and this dark one of the 20th. They watched quietly as two assistants positioned an elegant geometrically fashioned 5-foot triangular sextant of Tycho’s design. Here also were domes under construction but low to the ground, for the astronomer would protect his instruments from inclement elements.

“What workmanship, elegant

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craftsmanship, they cared so much to perform,” murmured Jack Lewis. “How well they worked,” he said. “Where once beauty permeated everything they contrived to do, we’ve replaced this quality with quantity—valuing obsolescence as an economic essential. But in making well we were once able to work united with Beauty—not so attainable today, even if we can come out on a night like this to meet her merely as spectators. See how intent they are to be united not just with learning but with its beauty. They inquire into the things of created heaven with their carefully calibrated instruments. Of course, even in their sometimes exquisite theological considerations, they come near to missing it all—for the very source of what such images stand for *can* be missed, even in this sublime pursuit. Kepler, that sore sickly lad we saw, will be so yearning to have in his hands such elegant instruments, and run his gaze along such compilations of observations. Yet, somehow, one does not doubt his foundational value.”

“I take your word on it,” said Twain. “I haven’t read him enough to know ... but maybe I shall study him by and by.” The white figure beside Lewis drew upon his dark cigar.

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.

The Descent of Ancient Night Upon Heav'n

An Addition to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book Three

by

Ted Snyder

The Argument: God hath foretold the Fall of Man through *Satan's* treachery and impudence, and as punishment, declares that Man and his Progeny must dye. Meek, the Son begs for Grace, offering his life for mankind's own; and hence God accepts and orders the Son's exaltation above all others mortal and divine. Choruses of Angels strike their harps and sing the glory of the God-head, Father and Son. Unbeknownst to all, *ancient Night* has flown from her throne at the side of *Father Chaos*. From above, she watches the divinities who reside in Heaven.

- 416 But harps tended by fingers divine struck
Foule, whilst overhead, like *Nuit* outstretched,
Or *Marduk's* foe, fell swift upon the cloud
Of light, a fuligin effluence vast,
420 Blighting all eyes with a dim suffusion.
Alighting before the high throne she came,
Eldest of all, she, *ancient Night* arrived.
Genuflecting, the *prima soror* spake:
Greetings I bring from *Father Chaos*, or
425 Have you forgotten your own kin, styled
King of this Heav'n, a prince of plenty? When
Your halls ring with Hosannas, does it seem
Your actions are now justified, stolen
From our progenitor's visage to meet
430 Your desire for creation? Whom of your
Wing'd flock know themselves as substance of his
Oculus? Hide thee in unapproached light
Lest they see upon thy clear brow a strap
Bearing the googly orb ye pulled forth from
435 The visage of *Chaos*, now font of thine
Omniscience? Ho, enough. Whilst thou taketh
From thy progenitor's realm, bethink thy
Brilliance and its antipodes. Recall
This *Satan*, but a poor shadow of thee,
440 His darkness weak, and mayest beguile thee
To think thy light unending, for shadow
Is not dark Night, shadow but creation

Of light, yet true Darkness knows no casting.
Remember, and despair at the sight of
445 These sable wings. Thus Eternal Darkness,
Night, rose, permitting sight to those Powers
Who, prostrating themselves, let forth praise for
Heav'n's King, louder, glorying creation.

A Few Words About "The Descent of Ancient Night Upon Heav'n"
(author's comments).

The overall concept that I work from in this addition to *Paradise Lost* is a rather Satanic move. Satan plays with Eve's understanding of the Tree of Knowledge in Book 9, changing the idea of "forbidden Tree of Knowledge" to "Tree of Forbidden Knowledge." Similarly, when I saw that God was hidden behind "unapproached light" (3.4-5), I wondered, is this unapproached or unapproachable? Milton states unapproached, which implies that it can be approached, and thus it seems that God is hiding. Also, Milton personifies the non-Biblical Chaos and his court (2.959-967), which makes me wonder, why? Milton does not specify that God created them. God is referred to as increate (3.6), which does not mean everything else is the creation of God. Night is even referred to as eternal (3.18), which suggests that Night is not a creation of God. Also, is God merely increate from the perspective of humans and angels, a story he has told his creations to hide his own creation? Oftentimes in mythology Chaos predates Order (and it may be implicit in Genesis 1). If Chaos predated God, then it seems that Chaos could be God's creator. This would connect the Abrahamic mythos to other proximate mythoses. In the Egyptian mythos, for example, the first beings created are twins, a brother and sister, which would suggest that God would have a sister. If God is light (as Milton makes clear), then the sister is dark, or eternal Night, eldest of all things.

Another motivation for creating this addition comes from the ranks of the divine in *Paradise Lost* being primarily male, which seemed an imbalance in the original. (Milton does state that the celestials could take either sex, but despite this, they manifest as male.) Of the limited female divine or semi-divine characters within the text, Night appeared the most logical candidate for empowerment.

For context, these lines occur in Book 3, immediately prior to the shift to Satan. Thus, as the angels sing, praising the Father and the Son, Night fills the sky, causing their fingers to misplay upon their harps and their eyes to not see. As Satan had just visited Chaos and Night prior to these events, it seems appropriate for Night to come visit, in turn, God.

Night is introduced using mythological allusions, following Milton's style, without regard for the reader's comprehension. Thus, Night is referred to as the Egyptian sky goddess, Nuit (pronounced as a single syllable ["Nwt"]), and the Babylonian goddess of chaos, Tiamat (417-418). As Milton is wont to do, Tiamat is not referred to by name, but by reference ("Marduk's foe").

Next, the phrase "cloud / Of light" is broken by a line break, indicating how Night has pierced God's cloud. This is followed by a Miltonian "darkness visible" term, "fuligin effluence." (419) Fuligin is black; effluence is radiance, often associated with light and used as a God word, but the darkness of God's own sister would equal his light, and thus the phrase displays her equivalent power. As fuligin does not appear in my *Shorter OED*, I believe Gene

Wolfe coined it. Thus, it is an allusion his *Book of the New Sun*, where he defines fuligin as the color darker than black. As Milton filled the poem with allusions, this, as well as Wolfe's definition, seemed appropriate.

"Dim suffusion" (420) references Milton's blindness, in terms that he used, and it seemed that, when indicating the effect Night's arrival has on the celestial beings, Milton would focus upon her darkness removing their sight (which is similar to God's light being blinding, again, showing their equivalence). The blindness referred to as "blighting" (420) comes from the descriptions of the leper house later in the poem. Her power is such that the blindness seems like a disease, which is otherwise unknown in Heaven.

When Night is named, she has a line of her own: "Eldest of all, she, *ancient Night* arrived." (422) Stating "she" within the middle of the line not only adds a much-needed syllable, but it also interrupts the flow the text, causing the reader to slow down and consider the text, which is a technique Milton has used repeatedly. I do not know if I need to comment on the irony of her genuflecting before launching into what I hope is a withering incrimination of God.

Milton's use of alliteration was challenging to replicate. The most notable example comes as part of Night's condescension to God, where she refers to him as "a prince of plenty" (426). This is a reference to Charles II and the extravagance of his reign as well as a reference to God's need for making things to surround and praise him. This also leads to the next allusion. Just as Cronos gained his power from castrating his father, Uranus, I have God responsible for de-eyeing Chaos (428-429). Of course, Freud has pointed out the associations between a man losing his eyes and castration; Milton, being sensitive to his own blindness, could unconsciously seize upon this image. If God's power comes from his removal of Chaos's eyes, which would be logical if God was indeed the creation of Chaos, then we have a solution to God's omniscience (it came from one of Chaos's eyes) and for his hiding behind unapproached (not unapproachable) light. God does not want his creations to see his use of Chaos's eye for omniscience (432-436). (An objection could be Chaos's utter lack of power in *Paradise Lost*; however, bear in mind that God has castrated him and stolen his power, and now Chaos is impotent like Uranus. Also, note that both in Genesis and in *Paradise Lost* God creates out of Chaos – God cannot create *de novo*, it seems, and thus, his castration of Chaos matches with the source material.) A modern reader would also see the term "googly orb" (434) and realize that the eye strapped to God's forehead appears as a googly eye, like is used on dolls and stuffed animals. No wonder God needs to hide.

Throughout the text I try to work in line breaks to emphasize words and phrases. Line 426 starts with "King of this Heav'n"; line 430 starts with "Your desire for creation." In both cases, this is for emphasis. Line 432 starts with "Oculus." I am concerned that with the denseness of the text readers might overlook that God's creations are made of the stuff of Chaos's eye ("Whom of your / Wing'd flock know themselves as substance of his / Oculus?" [430-432]), so starting with this word helps the reader follow along. Also, as God wears Chaos's other eye on his forehead, the source of his omniscience, line 436 starts with "Omniscience" for emphasis.

Next, I use Milton's technique of varying capitalization to differentiate between darkness and Darkness. The first describes Satan, who is a shadow cast by God's light (439). This is a darkness that is created by God, different from the original Darkness. The text suggests that Satan, known for his beguiling ways, may have beguiled God into thinking that Satan's darkness is true Darkness, and thus Satan's lack of threat is a sign of God's power (440-442). However, darkness existed before Satan (Night is the eldest of all things within Milton's poem), and this is true Darkness, indicated by a capital letter (443). The idea of darkness / Darkness also is seen in the earlier use of fuligin as the color darker than black; doubtlessly fuligin is Darkness.

These lines end with irony. Night has just chastised God for his desire to create (which we see throughout *Paradise Lost*) and for his desire for praise from his creations (another reoccurring theme), yet using power from Chaos to do so. The angels, having been blinded, must be experiencing fear, as they think none can match God in power. When Night leaves and vision returns, they praise God because they realize their powerlessness without him, and they praise what he values most of all, his creations. However, as God has just been reminded of the fallacy within his ability to create, they are praising him for his deception. I would imagine the shame upon God would be overwhelming.

Roll Me, Softly

by

R. L. Boyer

I met you again, on the other side, late last night.

With a still, light touch you turned my perfect body

into a smooth, round stone—as tiny as a grain of
sand, a crystal ball shot through with rose. Then, I felt

you roll me, softly, through velvet fingertips, like an

Angel rolling the door from the Nazarene's tomb.

Ersaist Creation Myth

By

Lamar Johnson

Blossoming light burst all around,
And Vadfi birthed its gorgeous sound.
Two other Gods, born from dreaming,
Came to being, whole, and gleaming.

Specious stares pierced out the black
And two Gods formed among the slack
Reality of freezing light
Birthed to replace the nothing night.

He Who Sits Atop The Mountain,
Still held within him, a fountain.
She Who Dances Above Heaven
Must give to Rain her concession.

She was born with Stars for eyes,
Infinite and endless, her gaze;
She saw all done below the skies
And all touched by her solar rays.

The Earth was born with bones of stone;
He was to hold the firmament
Upon his black tips, to prevent
The fall of those meant to have flown.

Every Planet was born the same,
Under a watching burning eye
Held in bondage by MAETON's name
Meaning "Set Above All That Fly".

Every Planet was born the same,
With the Chthonic King of Earth-
KAELGISH, his rightful name by birth
Meaning "Earth, Lopsided and Lane".

Every Planet was born the same,
Vadfi's watery rule ordained.
They birthed the oceans and the seas,
And rivers, and estuaries.

Their name only translating to
A single word-the color "Blue."
Of the times before creation
No accounts survive damnation.

The first light lives as all we have
To hurry us along the path
To the Truth known only as "They"
That has existed to this day.

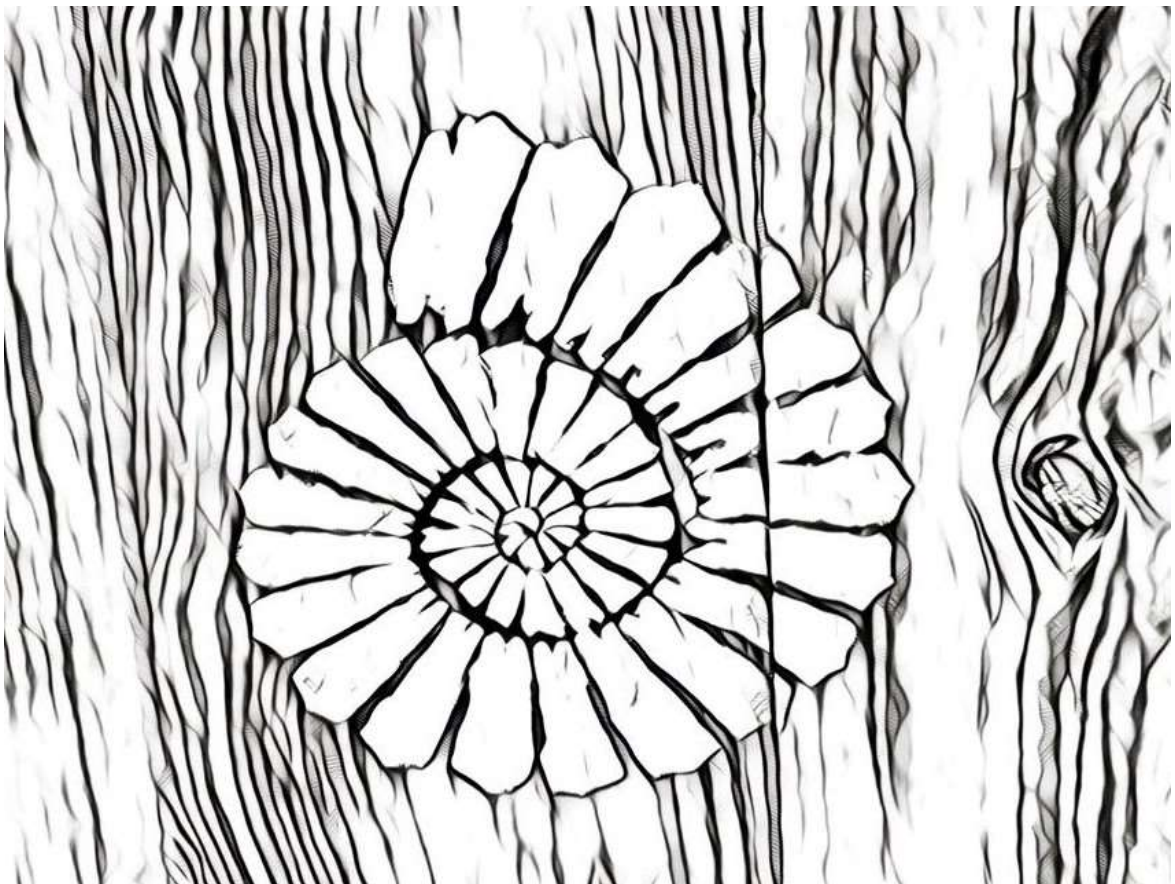
Through this, was made the Universe
Where Three Disparate Gods disperse
And suffuse all existence
Only through the sheer insistence

That is the will that they impose
Which is what stands and shapes and grows
The forms that even ourselves take
That shift in sleep and rest when waked.

Explanation of "Ersaist Creation Myth": This . . . is almost unarguably the most important passage [in a ninety-page poem of which an excerpt is published here] in terms of exposition, for, to create an epic of one's own in the modern day, is (in part) to eschew the cultural context that would be provided by society in a modern day Christian, or Hindu epic. As a consequence, much of my epic is a delve into worldbuilding and the various tales and legends of its people.

The solid story is that, just as there are Three Gods, so too were there Three Demigods, and from them, Three Kings. When all Three Kings die, the land falls into war, and Three Despots carve out power for themselves in response. Tsuramesh, the hero, was born from no mother or father, hanging from a tree—he was born in touch with neither Sky, nor Water, nor Earth, which makes him more bestial, and wrathful in comparison to other humans, for lack of their divine essence. However, one day Maeton, angered by the constant wars interrupting her libations and priestesses, decides to use him to restore order, at which point the true story begins.

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The Tale the Mountain Told

by

Kevan Bowkett

This is a tale that the windswept grasses told to a mountain, one which rises far away, and the mountain remembered it as mountains do, and among its roots a miner heard it in the dripping of water from a crystal roof, and so it has come down to us.

Among the Ragaia people of the grasslands of Zireleth there was once a youth belonging to a poor family. The only way he could help keep his family alive was to put more effort into hunting than those with great skill—in order to bring home much less meat and hides than they. But he was diligent, and helped provide for his family, and so was respected.

He loved a young woman of the people, who belonged to the Clan of the Priestess—an august lineage, though of little power in that day.

One day their village learned that the Golden Rhea had been seen in the territory. This was a remarkable thing, for the animal was seen only once a century in the Ragaia plains. Capturing it was impossible, it was too fast and strong, but killing it and wearing its feathers would make any one into a leader, a great warrior and hunter.

The camp emptied of hunters, and of non-hunters who sought to try their luck. Soon almost no one was left at home. The youth, whose name was Ruk Ozzem, dithered about his tent. He did not see the point in trying to pursue the great Rhea when so many skilled hunters were on its track. He did not even own a riding-jaguar to keep up with the best hunters!

He wandered away from his tent out of the village to a little pool in the green pampa

grasses.

There was the Rhea! It was standing among the reeds, quietly drinking from the slough. But it looked so lovely, he couldn't bear to shoot it with an arrow. He watched, hidden, for a few minutes till the great bird was finished drinking. Then it slipped away into the tall grasses.

Once it had gone, he realized what an opportunity he had missed. How could he have been so stupid! Galvanized, he ran in pursuit of the bird, moving as quietly as he could this way and that among the thick vegetation where he had seen it. He found a golden feather, and thrust it into his satchel, but he could find nothing else. He cursed himself roundly.

"I could have slain the beast," he said. "But it seems true it cannot be caught."

A few people returned that evening from seeking the Rhea, but most did not, preferring to sleep out on the pampa or to continue the hunt through the night. Ozzem mentioned nothing, but received some mockery for having caught no food that day. Some mockery: but little, for he was a respected man; nor was it expected that hunters made a kill every day.

A day or two later he visited the young woman he loved, who lived out on the pampa with her family near an old solitary beech tree, under which the people sometimes made sacrifices and worshipped. He took her a gift of honey and potatoes and wildflowers, and she (her name was Razma), made the flowers into a crown which she set on her dark hair (her hair was dark blue, like the coat of the

griysa, the blue mongoose). He prepared a dessert of hot honeyed potatoes which made their tongues melt. Then they played cat's cradle games and other games of hand; then walked out on the pampa, along with the young woman's sister.

Early in the evening they parted, content, and he wandered homeward.

After walking a thousand and five hundred strides he came near a belt of oak and aspen trees, and took his bow and arrow in hand, for he had seen a movement by the wood's edge. He went toward it, and entered the forest along a narrow trail. He hastened, and coming to a glade almost filled with a reedy pond he looked, and saw — the Golden Rhea! As it bent down its head to take a drink from the pond, he raised his arrow to shoot; but the creature looked so lovely, standing on a stone in the pool near the further bank, with its golden feathers catching a beam from the setting sun that pierced the wood, so it seemed limned by a fiery haze, that he could not shoot. He let it drink, and drink again, and then turn, step to shore and vanish among the aspens and oaks of the further wood.

Presently the sunbeam disappeared and Ozzem shook himself and cursed, and hastened in pursuit of the beautiful creature. At first he thought he heard rustling ahead; but then it ceased, and though he ran back and forth along the narrow trails, quartering the whole wood from one side to the other, he saw nothing, not even a print or a feather. Finally he came out a ways onto the pampa, looking round, especially westward to where the orange sun was just dropping beneath the horizon. But the Golden Rhea was gone.

He carried on westward toward his village. After a few minutes he came upon a slough in a hollow and there he saw Razma sitting on a boulder among the tall grasses, putting on a sandal.

"Razma!" he cried. "A pleasant evening to you!" He was puzzled at seeing her — had he

not just left her near her home, to the east? — yet he did not ask her what she was doing there, for such questions are deemed busybodyish and bad form by the Ragaia, and in addition she was of the Clan of the Priestess, whose actions on occasion seemed inscrutable.

"And to you, Ozzem!" she cried back, laughing and standing up. "But we cannot visit; my sister is not by."

"No of course," he said. "But you did not see the Golden Rhea? For I saw it in the wood of the rock pool back there."

"Fortunate Ozzem!" she cried. "But I have seen nothing. It must have gone another way. If I see it on the way home, I will send you a message. Do not fear we will forestall you; you know how my parents disdain the hunting of the Rhea. I must away now."

"Then I shall carry on," he said. "My thanks and a fair evening twilight to you, Razma!"

"I came to tease you, Ozzem!" she laughed. "Now I will back home on Blackfangs!" which was the name of her parents' riding jaguar. She waved, and ran away into the high feather-grass on the slope beyond the slough. He waved back, and turned, and went on.

On his way home he met the hunter Songaia and her husband, returning from a journey to her mother. They sat under a lone oak tree and spoke of the Rhea, and Songaia discouraged Ozzem from tracking it, saying that would waste his time, better spent trying to feed his family. But at that his heart ceased to be quiet, and silently roiled with the thought that she wanted the Rhea for herself, and that was her reason for speaking so.

He reached home. Razma sent no message that night, nor the next day. "She has not seen the creature," said he, skinning an anteater as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

No more was the Great Rhea sighted in the ensuing weeks, and some of the people's

enthusiasm wore off. But many, especially the keen hunters, kept seeking, knowing from tradition that the beast might appear at any time in the twelve moons after its first sighting—and that it was in the last hour of the last day of the last of those twelve moons, that the great hunter Irzaia had chased and slain it almost in the last few breaths of its allotted time. So hope dimmed only slightly.

Then word came out to Ozzem's family of a calamity that had befallen one of Ozzem's older brothers. This brother lived not in the plains but worked in a large building called a mill by a river near the town of Teyara at the southwestern edge of the pampas. He worked to grind grains into powder, and in exchange was given little square pieces of metal, which he sent to a trading post at Dusky Sands Lake. The metal pieces, stored up there, allowed Ozzem's family to go to the post twice a year and buy dried foods, some clothing, and occasionally metal tools. But now word came by a trader that a millstone had fallen onto Ozzem's brother and damaged his back so that he could no longer work in the mill. He was coming home to the village to live.

Ozzem's father and mother and maternal uncle called Ozzem to them in the hearth room of their hut (for the elders had a hut rather than a tent), and his mother said to him:

"O Ozzem, Satzem your brother will soon be here. He will stay here to live, as long as Kaia wills. And he will leave at Dusky Sands Lake almost all his pieces of metal that he has received at the mill, and a great number of other pieces that the chieftain of the mill has given him out of sympathy for his misfortune. With all of these pieces of metal we will be able to keep Satzem here, for a long time, even though he is badly hurt. But we will not receive new pieces from the mill. We must have new pieces, or we will go hungry. You and some of your siblings hunt. Your hunting is well, Ozzem, but it is not enough to keep us sufficiently in food, if all of the metal at Dusky

Sands Lake must go to keep your brother Satzem. So you must put away your bow and arrows and must go away from the pampas, and must go to work at the mill at Teyara as Satzem has done, and grind grains into powder and send us more metal pieces to Dusky Sands Lake."

Ozzem blanched. "But I am a hunter!" he said. "I have been trained to it. Satzem never was, but was trained for growing vegetables and such. It is too big a change for me."

"It is a change you must make, Ozzem," said his mother. "We will go hungry without this."

"If you were a great hunter it would be different," said his uncle. "As it is, go you must."

"But if I go," said Ozzem, "Razma whom I love will cast me aside and will even spit upon my memory. For the women of the Clan of the Priestess never mate with any but hunters or warriors. She cannot mate with a man who grinds grain into powder for pieces of metal. And she will spit upon the thought of me for casting her aside in exchange for such work—as she will deem it."

"You are not betrothed, Ozzem," said his mother.

"She loves me, mother, father, uncle," he said, looking at them. "I have a good chance with her. But with this—none."

"Bauxla of Green River married a man of the Strand Clan who grows vegetables in Thalevea Hills," said Ozzem's uncle.

"Our Bauxla is not of the Priestesses' Clan," said Ozzem in frustration. "Razma's parents and Razma herself would never agree. They are too proud."

"Too proud for the pittance they have, and wield," said his mother.

"The matter is settled," said his uncle.

"Prepare yourself to go before winter."

Ozzem's father looked down, sad.

Ozzem went out onto the pampa to think.

Small sandpipers darted about on foot near

the stone he sat upon; and he looked at them vacantly.

He thought of abandoning his family; then at once recoiled in grief and shame.

It was not to be thought on. But how could he both help them and win Razma? He might leave the pampas indeed, and go not to Teyara but to the great city beyond it at the head of the Gulf of Leaves — Ayara Firnu, red-walled bastion of the Cothiryan Empire. There he might take service as a soldier, and fight in the Empire's wars. Many of the Ragaia did so. But alas! Those who best succeeded were jaguar-riders, and few enough of them ever came back from the quarrels of the Imperial princes. Without a jaguar he would, even if hired, be relegated to low-paying menial work that Razma would laugh at and scorn to call a warrior's. And would she ever consent to come to him there, and leave the pampas which she loved? If he stayed at home, he could disobey his parents by continuing to hunt, and through constant effort hope to feed them sufficiently. If he were a good hunter! If he slew the Golden Rhea he would become such. If he slew the Rhea all his problems would be ended.

He stood and set to tracking. He had three months until the time for his departure came. He went again to the wood of the rock in the pool where he had seen the Rhea, and again quartered the wood, seeking for any clue. He shot a guanaco just outside the trees, took part of it home, told his sisters where the rest lay, ate some, then returned and continued the search. He found nothing, but drifting eastward came to the place where Razma lived. She was out under the tree, nursing a cut calf. He paused by her, concerned.

"It is nothing," she smiled, and laughed. "A few days and all will be well."

"What happened?" asked Ozzem.

"A badger," she replied. "My father has killed it."

"If you see aught of the Golden Rhea I beg

you would tell me, or send to me," he said in a low voice. "It is important that I kill it."

"You know how my family feels about that."

"Yes, but I beg you," he said. "I must become a better hunter than I am." But he was afraid to tell her what he must do if he failed in becoming such.

"Practice," she said, and smiled and looked down. "Practice and find the feel of the matter."

He sought for three days, in the barren lands east of Razma's home. He looked particularly near pools or sloughs, beside which he'd seen the great bird both times. He saw no sign, but killed a guanaco, a big armadillo, and an adult rhea of the ordinary kind and each time bore some to the nearest camp and told them where to find the kill, if he'd left some cached for others. Then he returned to his seeking. Once, bringing the armadillo to the small camp of Songaia the hunter, he heard from her how her husband had seen the Golden Rhea near Skull Slough and had shot and actually struck it, but it had escaped.

"Here is a feather to prove the tale," she said, drawing forth a copy of the one in his own satchel: complete with the bluish rainbow along the hairs when they were stroked. "It fell when he struck it."

"A fortunate encounter," said Ozzem.

Songaia set her daughter to curing the meat for Ozzem and he rested an hour before resuming his search. In that hour Songaia's daughter told him the tale of the strange jaguar that came out of the Dawn and became ancestor of all the great cats of the plains of Zireleth and the adjacent mountains. While she spoke, Ozzem removed one feather from an arrow and fletched the arrow with the feather of the Rhea, which still gleamed as if new-fallen. When he had finished he said to Songaia's daughter, "Now what was that strange jaguar, I wonder?"

She laughed and said, "There is only one piece of lore about that, Ozzem. It is this verse that goes with the story:

*The jaguar thrust its head into the Sunrise
And so became a lion.*

But no one knows what a 'lion' may be."

Ruk Ozzem thanked her, rose, and set again to his seeking of the Golden Rhea. He scoured Skull Slough, as others were doing, then chuckled — so many people were gathered there it must frighten away their quarry. He went north and east into the pampa, moving from slough to slough, killing prey, hauling it back to Songaia's, then setting off again. Soon he was bringing in as much meat as any hunter of the first rank.

Finally he came to Red Aspen Wood, in the furthest reaches of his clan's territory.

By a pool in its midst he saw the Golden Rhea. It was gliding away from him.

It was too beautiful to shoot.

But he hardened himself, and took his arrow new-fledged with the Rhea's own feather, and shot.

He struck it, and it leaped away and ran. But before it vanished he had driven a second shaft into its body.

He tracked it, and followed its heavily dropped blood through the woods. He saw several bloody feathers and caught them up eagerly.

But then he could find no more blood, and even the bent and broken grass of its passage vanished as the wood ended and a stretch of stony, scrub-brown ground extended before him.

He could find no traces though he was four days looking. But the beasts came easily to him; he killed and cached five.

Finally, carrying a young guanaco he'd slain, he returned to Songaia's place.

She came running out to him, and said,

"Razma is missing. Her father said she went north and east. Did you see her?"

He shook his head.

"Her mother says she'll be praying by the Younger Tree north of Red Aspen," said Songaia. "It is not quite her time for that, but she has gone there before when it was not expected."

"I have been all round Red Aspen," said Ozzem. "She is not there. But I did not go as far north as the Young Tree."

"Itunya said a party is coming to seek her there," said Songaia.

"I will go also," he said.

Three hunters came soon afterward, and with Ozzem set off north across the pampa.

They came to the Younger Tree, a great cottonwood standing on its own on an island in a large slough.

Razma was there, dead.

She appeared to have fallen out of the cottonwood onto the upthrust branch of a leafless wild plum, then dragged herself off of it, and collapsed and died by the water's edge.

Her left hand was in the water.

They bore her homeward in procession, lamenting.

In silence, her mother and sisters took her and prepared her for burial in the traditional manner of the Clan of the Priestess. While they did so, Razma's father invited Ozzem into the family's hut and sat him down, serving him tea made with pampa cleavers. The older man was sad, and a tear dropped into his tea, but he smiled wanly, and said, "So, Ozzem, now you are a great hunter! For you have slain many beasts, and you have killed the Golden Rhea."

"Have I sir?" he said. "I sought it, but could not find the carcass."

"Oh yes, you did," said Razma's father. "The carcass, as you call it, is that which my wife and daughters are binding up for burial."

"Sir!" cried Ozzem, horrified.

"Indeed it is so, though it is secret," said the older man. "Every century is born among

us a child who becomes the Golden Rhea. Sometimes they are slain by hunters, sometimes not, and if not the transformation passes, and never returns.”

“But why did she — or you — not tell me?” cried Ozzem. “I would have held my hand!”

“Would you? ‘Tis well. But the Rhea exists so the hunters of the people do not hold their hands. So the hunters of the people grow strong in the pursuit—even as you have done, even before you slew her.”

“I didn’t want to slay her!”

“Of course not,” said her father. “But ‘tis done, ‘tis fate, ‘tis for good. Now you will be a skilled man of the plains, and that will aid your family, your clan, and all the people.”

“I wanted to ask her to accept me as her

mate,” said Ozzem.

“Others have wanted similar things. Fate comes between; and life’s steps continue. Do you want some honey to your tea?”

“Thank you, no,” said Ozzem.

“Show folk the bloodied feathers,” said Razma’s father. “They will believe you. And still more they will believe your skill.”

But they believed it not: for he showed not the bloody feathers, but buried them among the grasses, and then left and took service in the legions of Ayara Firnu, the red-walled city, and his remittances in square pieces of metal were all of him that came back to the sunlit, windswept pampas.

—The End—



“Morning Dew.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

The Man Who Painted Souls

by

Lawrence Buentello

In the old days there lived a beautiful young woman called Constance, who was unmarried, free of spirit, and unconcerned with the opinions of any other person in the world.

Her greatest pleasure was walking through the King's woods by a shallow stream admiring the blue sky when it was blue, or the gray clouds when they were gray. She often bathed in the stream, feeling the cool water washing over her body, and the water turning her long, black hair into soft tendrils that touched her shoulders sensually. She had no care if anyone watched, nor did she wait for anyone to praise her beauty; her joy came from hearing the songs of the birds, from feeling the caress of the breezes, from inhaling the scent of lovely flowers, and from running amongst the butterflies that frequently drifted in clouds over the blooms.

She laughed without provocation, for the beauty of the natural world was inspiration enough for her spirit to rejoice.

One morning she realized she wasn't alone in the King's woods—that someone was watching her bathe in the stream.

She ignored the figure half-hidden in the trees and stretched beneath the sun, letting the warm air dry the droplets on her shoulders as she wandered through the stream, the water splashing when she kicked it playfully. When the sun had dried her, she stepped from the stream and slipped on her dress, still unconcerned by

the person watching her.

Presently, the figure found its courage and stepped toward her on the edge of the stream.

"Hello," a young man said. He was dressed in a silken shirt, and wore clean boots, which told her that he wasn't a common man, but perhaps from the King's estate. His face was thin, his eyes closely set, and when she glanced at his hands she marked them free of calluses.

"Hello," she said, pulling at the strands of her hair. She smiled, the radiance of her smile announcing her joyful nature.

"Do you know you're walking in the King's woods?" he asked, his eyes moving to see her entire body. "It is a punishable offense."

"If these are the King's woods," she said, unafraid, "then where is the King? I come here often, and have yet to see a king, let alone anyone else. What is your name?"

The young man seemed mystified by her attitude. "I am Lytton, a subject of the King."

"And I am Constance. Are you a soldier, Lytton?"

"No."

"What is your service to the King?"

The young man called Lytton stood quietly a moment, then said, "I am the King's portraitist."

"You are an artist?"

"Yes. I've painted many subjects for His Majesty."

"Then you've an eye for beautiful things, Lytton," she said. She turned and began walking. "Let us go see something beautiful."

He followed, hesitantly.

As they walked she told him that she was in love with the woods, and the animals, and all the gorgeous plenty of the world; that her mother and father often tried to keep her performing the rituals they believed proper for a girl her age, but that their words held no sway with her. She wouldn't be bound by anyone; she lived freely among the beautiful portions of the earth.

She brought him to a place where the butterflies swarmed over succulent blooms of wildflowers in the clover, and then left him while she chased after their fluttering yellow wings. She laughed for the simple experience of dancing with the butterflies, and she saw him watching, but had no care of his opinion of her.

When the butterflies had flown, she returned to his side, still laughing.

"Constance," he said, "I've watched you for many days."

"I believe you have," she said.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I believe I am in love with you."

She shook her head, knowing his love was only the pulse he felt while watching her bathe naked in the stream. Men were such foolish, simple creatures.

"You're not in love with me," she said. "You didn't even know my name until a few moments ago."

"Even so," he said, moving forward and grasping her hand. "I want you to be my wife."

She pulled her hand away, sweeping her arms into the air and laughing. "I am no man's wife, nor will I ever be. My love is not for men, but for the beauty I see."

"Marry me, Constance. Be my wife."

"Lytton, I will never be your wife."

The young man closed his mouth, his expression distraught, but he didn't curse her or move to harm her. He nodded, and seemed to accept her resolve. But he raised his hand and gestured for her not to walk away.

"If you won't marry me," he said, "then let my heart be consoled another way. Let me paint your portrait so that I may always have your likeness as my companion."

"You wish to paint my portrait?"

"Yes, if you won't have me as your husband."

She spun in the grass on bare feet, smiling, wondering how he might render her image. It seemed a harmless concession, and she was sorry that she must bruise his heart by refusing his proposal.

So she said, "Come back tomorrow and I will let you paint my portrait. There is great beauty in art."

The young man smiled pleasantly and thanked her, then took his leave.

The following day the young man met her in the woods.

He carried with him a large wooden panel, which he secured before himself on notched stakes. Then he opened a large wooden box filled with brushes, clay jars of pigment, and silver jars filled with unknown liquids. He stood before the wooden panel assessing her in the grass, picking through the jars of liquid, thumbing the bristles of the brushes.

Constance disrobed and stood nude in the brightening sun, the light sculpting her body voluptuously. She was unselfconscious in her nudity, which freed her expression from any fearful influence.

The young man dabbed and brushed at the panel assiduously, dipping the bristles

into pigments, stirring the jars at his feet, staring repeatedly from the Constance standing in the meadow to the Constance being born in colors on the wood.

By the time he was finished the sun was dropping low in the sky, and, for all her patience, Constance had grown weary of the favor. Her entire body ached; her thoughts wandered as if she were suffering a fever.

She slipped into her dress and advanced at his urging, and stood beside him, appraising her portrait.

The young man had rendered her likeness beautifully, artfully, sensually. He was obviously a masterful craftsman. The woman in the painting seemed even more beautiful than she; it was no wonder he found himself in the employ of a king. And though she admired the portrait for its skill, and the lovely, pure woman for whom she served as a model, she felt too weary to say any words of compliment.

"I must go now," she said.

"I understand," he said as he finished closing up his box of jars. "Thank you, Constance, for indulging my desire. I will keep your portrait only for my eyes."

She left him, feeling slightly ill, her hand to her cheek. She didn't look back toward the young man and his art, she only wished to sleep, for she felt a sickness coming on her that wasn't familiar. The darkening sky seemed foreboding, and the sounds erupting from the shadowy trees filled her mind with ominous portents.

Constance slept through a fever for many days, but soon recovered.

When she returned to the woods to warm her spirit with the beauty of the butterflies, she realized something was wrong. No longer did the beauty of the King's woods fill her with joy. The water of

the stream was cold and biting, the birds' songs hurt her ears, and every fluttering of hidden wings in branches startled her. The grass seemed to cling strangely to her feet, and the sun shone bitterly. She couldn't find the joy to laugh, nor could she see the beauty of the world no matter where she searched. Was this the effect of a lingering illness?

Even her beloved butterflies seemed nothing more than ugly insects swarming around her head, and she batted at them angrily for the annoyance they presented. All her joy seemed muted, replaced by loathing. She found no happiness wherever she walked and cried tears she had never cried before.

When she wiped the tears away she realized he was standing next to her, but she was so distressed by the shadow on her heart that she could only say, "What is wrong with me? What is wrong?"

"Take heart," Lytton said, his hands falling on her shoulders. "Your condition is only temporary."

She looked into his eyes, but with her joy removed saw only cruelty there. "What's happened? Why do I feel this way?"

"You feel as you do," he said, "because I've taken your soul."

She tried to understand his words as he explained her condition to her, but she heard only echoing voices speaking words of despair. In this fugue of voices his voice finally broke through, and she realized he had lied to her.

Lytton wasn't the King's portraitist—he was the King's alchemist, and used his artistic skills in the political interest of his liege. Once foreign statesmen sat to have their portraits painted by the gifted artist, their wills were held hostage by the King.

He had used his skills to draw her soul

into the portrait he had painted of her, a portrait now secured where she would never find it. Though the two were still kindred, their bond lay mute and would remain so at his discretion.

"Why have you done this to me?" she asked, her mouth open, her hands kneading her dress anxiously. "You've taken what is most important to me. Why?"

"Don't worry, dear Constance," he said, smiling thinly. "I'll return your soul to you by the power of my craft. But only after you've married me and become my wife."

"You're an evil man," she said, "you know nothing of love. Love is freely given, and received. I'll not give my love to you."

"You will love me or you will not love me, that doesn't concern me. But you are a beautiful woman, and I will have you with me in my life. You are joyless now, but you know the qualities of the soul that are absent from you. I'll return that joy to you, but you will be mine."

She wept for the horrid decision she had to make, while in her heart her hatred festered for the man who had deceived her, taken advantage of her trust. If she ever hoped to see the world as beautiful again, she would have to live the rest of her life as the ornament of an evil man. But if she refused, she would have to live the rest of her life bereft of the joy she once knew.

"You're a calculating man," she said at last. "But you've won your gambit. I cannot live my life in a soulless body, despite never wishing to be your wife."

The young man guided her through the woods to the path leading to the King's fortress, which seemed to her a dungeon walled in moldy stones and vermin. He held her hand as they walked, but his touch sickened her, as if a serpent were wrapped around her fingers. He guided her through darkened halls and shadows animated by

guttering torches. The curious eyes that watched them as they passed filled her with shame.

Lytton was a man of power, even if his will served the King. He occupied dual chambers, one for his handicraft, and another for his bedchamber where he left her.

Several days passed while she occupied the room in solitary mourning, and though she dropped kindling into the stone hearth persistently, no fire raging on the stones could warm the chill of the fetid air. Ladies attended her, brought her food that tasted of ashes, washed her with buckets, dressed her in a gown that clung to her flesh like crawling insects.

Every day that passed increased her hatred for the young man, and in the evening, when he came to her room to tell her of some intrigue perpetuated on an unsuspecting victim, her hatred found new dimensions.

"When will you return my soul to me?" she asked him.

"Tomorrow we will wed," he said, picking at the tray of fruit that lay uneaten. "And after the ceremony I will bring the portrait to this room as your bridal gift. It will be only a moment's work to free the soul imprisoned in its pigments and return it within you. Thereafter you will spend your first night in my arms."

After he left the room, she threw more wood upon the fire, but the awful chill remained. She sat in a satin-covered chair weeping for the life she had lost, knowing she would never live a joyful life again.

After the wedding ceremony, attended by gentry and aristocrats who may as well have been a host of demons, Lytton escorted Constance to their bedchamber, where he left her waiting.

After a moment he returned holding the wooden panel, and when he set it down against the dresser she saw the portrait for the first time since she had viewed it in the meadow. The beautiful woman in the portrait seemed nothing like the woman she'd been grooming in the mirror of the room. The woman locked in pigments glowed with joy, and wore a smile filled with the unbridled ecstasy of one who knew a carefree life. Her nudity was not sinful; it was a sensual expression of freedom.

Constance felt no kinship with this woman.

The woman she had become was drawn and pale, her hair matted and knotted, her vitality stolen.

"Stay a moment, my wife," the young man said. "I must find my potions to restore your soul. But while I'm gone admire the beautiful woman you will become once again."

When he left the room, she brought the chair before the panel and sat staring at the painting, her hatred for Lytton an ugly animal moving in her heart. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, but the chill had become a permanent cold in her bones and she trembled uncontrollably.

Would she reward a man who had stolen the world she loved with her companionship? Would she grant him

ownership of the beauty that once lived inside of her?

She shivered violently, the cold of the room closing on her like a crypt. When the cold became so intense that it brought tears to her eyes, she rose from her chair to stir the flames in the hearth.

When he returned, carrying the silver jars of his alchemy, she gazed up at him from the chair, her sunken eyes studying him viciously.

"You needn't bother with your potions," she said, and for the first time since he had painted her portrait, she smiled, though wickedly.

She watched him gaze upon her curiously—then his gaze fell on the place where the portrait should have stood. He turned, and when he realized why the fire was burning so very high, he cried out for the lovely woman he had lost.

"Now we will both live a life bereft of beauty," she said. "Your craft has decided our fates."

He stared at her in sudden dread, but there was nothing he could do. The panel was consumed.

"Your wife awaits you, Lytton dear," she said. "Her heart is yours forever, though it be as cold as the water in a frozen stream."

—The End—

Panning

by

Anum Sattar

All that concerned him were the small flakes
which would take too long to sieve

and rather than preserve the alluvial placer
the selfish miner exploded the escarpment base

releasing the slurry into the rushing water,
so that all the migrating salmon were killed

the golden shavings on their sides
strewn far and wide...

Anum Sattar explains:

The poem “Panning” was written on the 3rd of July 2018 during a summer poetry tutorial at the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio. The poet portrays a woman as the natural landscape who has been exploited by a man she trusted. The persona is the river with very little gold flakes and the selfish lover does not have the patience to sieve them, so he takes a less cumbersome path and explodes her escarpment base to get what he wants. But in the end, even he loses out on her, because the fish and gold shavings are strewn “far and wide” and he is left with nothing.

Vigil Chorus

by

Meg Moseman

On this, the longest of all nights, the song within this hall
sustains the fire, the marble globe, our singing selves, and all.
Our robes shine red and blue and green; our voices weave the world.
To night or nothingness the rest must fall.

We act, and are, our God Most High. In our polyphony
one voice becomes the next, one rises as one falls, all free
of cold identity. Here peace is flame, and flame's unfurled
peace. These heights permit no tragedy.



“Bamboo.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

Emergency Exit

by

David Rogers

There were snakes in her trailer. Sometimes they talked. Afterwards, she didn't know if they were real. That didn't mean she shouldn't listen. They were blacksnakes, anyway, harmless, and she figured they ate mice. She knew the mice were real.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Samson asked.

"Sleeping with your boyfriend, I expect." Jordan did not have or want a boyfriend, now, but Samson didn't need to know that. She figured he wasn't actually gay. Bi, maybe. She saw how he looked at her legs, warm days. He let her park her trailer on his farm, as he called it. The main things the farm produced, besides whatever came out of the barn, were coyotes, blackberry vines, and various small trees growing in the abandoned fields. He charged her no rent, she knew, so she wouldn't tell about the lab in the barn. At least, he hoped she wouldn't tell.

He probably thought not charging rent made him some kind of philanthropist.

The old bus, yellow, was half-hidden in underbrush, a couple dozen feet off the long, circuitous, dirt-and-gravel drive that led back to the gray house. In another year or two, the bus would be completely hidden by saplings and honeysuckle, at least until winter came. Vines curved over the wheels.

Inside, summer heat made it smell of rubber and grease and mold. It reminded Jordan of the gym locker room, back when she was in high school. The bus was full of junk—used clothes, chipped coffee cups, old car parts, starter motors, generators, pumps, mufflers, the stripped-out bell housings of transmissions. A washing machine full of empty beer and whiskey bottles. Small branches grew through missing windows.

She pushed aside a cache of rodent-besmirched *National Geographics*, covers discolored and wrinkled by rain and age. The final few feet between her and the back of the bus were blocked by trash bags full of what felt like clothes. She moved them without looking inside. A dented toaster, once made of shiny metal, now corroded, lay on its side on top of a wooden box, about

three feet long and a couple of feet wide, eighteen inches high. When she picked up the toaster, a small green snake wiggled out and disappeared in a crevice between the trash bags.

The box rested against the bottom of the rear door. She had seen it through the glass, yesterday, coming back from her ginseng hunt, and somehow felt drawn to it. The part she could see through the window said *Dynam*—, the rest of the word obscured by the door's metal frame. She could think of only two words that started that way. *Dynamite*, and *dynamo*. Make that three. *Dynamic*, as in *Duo*. The *Batman* TV show's theme started to run through her head. The show was older than she was, but she'd seen reruns when she was a kid. And now Adam West was dead. Him and a million others.

She pulled the rope handles fastened to either side of the box. The one on the left broke, but the box moved six inches, so she saw the rest of the word. *Dynamite*, of course. She brushed a thick layer of dust off the top of the box, and read the other words, *Caution* and *Explosives*.

The box made a noise.

Or rather, something in the box must be making the sound, a low-pitched rumble. She felt it in the soles of her feet, too. The world's largest dog, a last warning growl before it sprang on the intruder.

The rumble stopped, replaced by a high-frequency whine.

Jordan backed away from the box. The whine ceased. No rumble.

She stepped closer. The rumble began once more, then the whine. She thought of lost puppies, or kittens.

She stepped away. The sound stopped.

She stepped closer. This time, just the whine. Definitely sounded like kittens. She knew an invitation when she heard one.

Also, she knew there were no kittens in that box. It had been buried under too much stuff for even a cat looking for a safe place to give birth to find. Nor did kittens rumble like angry German Shepherds.

The not-kittens fell silent. She heard faint voices, human voices, and looked out the windows of the bus, though she knew they, too, came from the box.

She pulled the rope handle knotted through the top, cautiously, as instructed, expecting it to break. The top came up an inch, stiff hinges creaking. She started to put fingers under the lid, thought better of that idea, pulled a large cooking fork from a box of mismatched kitchenware, and used it to pry the box open.

A dark circle spread, black as midnight, and mushroomed out of the box to form an oval three feet wide at the center, extending to the roof of the bus. It looked deeper than the old well behind the farmhouse.

She dropped the lid. It flapped back over the top of the box with a dull thump, and the black oval disappeared. She saw only the dirty back window of the bus and the woods beyond.

She opened the box again, stared into the seeming abyss, and shut the box to watch the dark give way to a green summer day.

The third time, she pushed a child-sized cowboy boot from one of the boxes into the oval. The toe vanished when it touched the darkness. A second later, the rest of the boot was pulled from her hand.

"Hello?" Jordan said, staring at the oval, as if she would see something if only she looked closely enough. "Hello? Is someone there?"

No answer. Cicadas rattled in the woods.

She closed the box and looked for the

boot, which of course she did not find.

However, on the floor beside the box she did find a notebook, a pocket-sized three-ring binder. On the first page, in block letters, someone had printed *The Care and Feeding of the Oval*. She flipped through the pages, hoping for information, but found only a single ominous entry on the second page: "The portal must be fed on a regular basis, or it will grow voracious."

Fed? Fed what? Apparently, cowboy boots would do in a pinch.

She opened the lid again, still pushing with the fork, and watched the dark oval bloom from the box. Her hand twitched. It wanted to reach for the silky darkness, When she was a kid, a seventh-grade school trip included the Empire State Building. She thought about the view from the top deck, how nobody said so, but when you looked down, you had to wonder how it would feel to fall, to fly, if only for a few terrifying, glorious seconds. Her hand still wanted to touch the darkness, caress it like velvet, or the fur of a cat, the petals of a rare orchid. It should feel cold, even in summer heat.

She picked up a coffee mug with a broken handle and stepped toward the oval. She tossed the mug. Like the boot, it disappeared without a sound. The dark oval did not so much as flicker.

In stories and movies, when people went through the portal, the gate, the wormhole, the rabbit hole, the mirror, whatever it was called, they always had a terrible time, if they made it home at all. It never worked out easily. If they ever made it back, something tragic was sure to happen first. Yet they could not resist. Just as she had not resisted opening the box. She was no Pandora, though. Why should she have thought it was anything except a box?

Jordan asked herself how she knew it

was a gate or portal. How did she know the boot and the cup went anywhere? What if the objects that went in just ceased to exist? Her instincts told her that shouldn't happen, but then her instincts were not trained to deal with whatever was in that box.

This discovery needed a lot of thinking over. She closed the lid, put the bags back on top, and left the bus.

"Oh, you knew it wasn't just a box," Mother Blacksnake said. She lay half-hidden under the towels when Jordan stepped out of the tiny, trailer-sized shower. "You knew it very well." Her obsidian eyes glittered in the moist air.

Jordan didn't disagree. Only partly because it seemed silly to argue with a snake. Getting no response, Mother slipped away behind the sink.

"What's the deal with the old bus?" Jordan asked that evening. "Does it run?" She knew the answer, but it was a way to turn the subject.

"Ha," Samson said. "Probably not since 1992. Why?"

"Just wondering."

He took a long drink of beer and asked, "Find much green gold?"

She poked the bag with a bare big toe. "Couple pounds. Probably worth more than what you cooked up in the barn today. And it won't blow up." Actually, she'd spent too much time in the bus, and filled the bag with leaves and grass, so Samson would believe she'd been cutting ginseng. He wasn't going to look in the bag. She felt protective, almost proprietorial, about whatever was in the box.

"Who does it belong to?"

"You cut it, it's yours," he said, looking at the bag and then her.

"The bus, I mean."

"Roda, I guess. She used it to clear out the antique store when she closed it."

"The stuff that's in it is hers, too, then?" Jordan said, tilting the glass to drain the last drop of tea. The ice slid down and hit her nose.

"Rats and all." Samson reached in the cooler for another beer. "But it's all junk. Nothing worth a dime, or she wouldn't have left it here."

"You ever talk to her?" Roda was his ex-wife, who had left him for the public defender who somehow managed to exonerate her for selling pot from behind the counter of her store. The cops had looked the other way, especially since the sheriff was one of her best customers, until she sold some laced with meth to the mayor's kid.

"Not for years. Last I heard, she was in Denver. Why so interested?"

"Just thought the bus might make a good camper, if somebody got it running," she lied.

He laughed. "Yeah. Good luck with that."

"How much would you pay me to paint this house?" she asked. She didn't mention the bus again. She didn't want him to get interested and go poking around.

"Free rent for parking your trailer here."

"You have paint? Brushes?"

"I'll get some next time I go into town."

"When's that?"

"No rush. Hasn't been painted in years. It can wait a day or two."

Mother Blacksnake was coiled on the arm of the recliner. Not that Jordan ever reclined in it. Wasn't really room in the little trailer. The mother stirred when Jordan poured coffee. "Be careful today. Strange smell in the air." Her tongue, black as the rest of her body, flickered in and out.

"I'd offer you coffee, but you probably don't drink it," Jordan said.

"Makes me jumpy," the mother said.

"Where are your babies?" Jordan asked, putting the pot back on the stove, but when she turned, the snake was gone.

Jordan took her coffee, picked up her guitar that leaned by the door, and sat outside, in the lawn chair under her trailer window. The grass was still wet. She held the guitar on her lap, careful not to spill coffee on it. Though after all the bars and coffee shops the band had played, coffee was probably the least offensive liquid it might be exposed to.

Samson opened the side door of the house, old hinges screeching in the quiet morning. He walked across the short space to where her trailer was parked by the edge of the woods. There was that look in his eye.

"You want to make some deliveries this afternoon?" he asked.

"Not really. You go put some pants on, I'll think about it."

She had expected the question before he asked. The two men in the Cadillac SUV had come the night before, one carrying the briefcase that swung like it weighed a lot more when he left. They talked for fifteen minutes, alone on the other side of the house.

"Don't think too long. Days are getting shorter now." He walked away, glutes pumping smoothly in the tight white underpants. He did have a cute butt, she had to admit. She could see what Roda had seen in him a decade and a half ago, when they'd all been young and stupid. Some of us are still stupid, she thought.

After lunch, he said, "So, about those deliveries. . ."

"Right. What about them?"

"They need to be made. Soon."

"Why don't you make your own deliveries?"

"My car is not built for it. You know that. Your truck can haul anything."

It was true. As far as it went. His Miata had room for one passenger and the spare tire. As long as the passenger didn't weigh much. Her truck, on the other hand, was designed for hauling. She had bought it to pull her trailer, after the band broke up and they all went their separate ways.

"So you borrow my truck. Just don't bring it back low on gas."

"I'd rather you do it."

"So what's in it for me?"

"Same as usual. Free rent. Free beer."

"Yeah, that's not worth going to jail for. Or worse, maybe, dealing with your business associates. And you know I don't drink."

"Deliveries have to be made. Like I said, I'd rather you do it." The way he said it, she knew he wasn't asking.

"Just admit you're curious," Mother Snake said. "It's easy: 'I'm curious.' Then you don't have to go through the portal. If that's what it is."

Jordan plopped spaghetti in the boiling water and turned down the gas. "I'm curious," she said. "Very curious indeed."

"Come on, I want to show you something," Jordan said. She stood on the grass by the porch. Late afternoon cast long shadows across the yard. Samson sprawled on the ancient wooden deck chair on the porch, beer in hand, blond hair pasted to his head with drying sweat. He'd been busy in the barn all afternoon. She didn't need him to tell her he was putting the final touches on the product he wanted her to deliver.

"Show me what?" he said. "It's late, and hot. I'm tired."

"I can't really explain. Not so you'd understand, anyway. You just need to see for yourself." She twisted her toe in the grass, drawing his attention to her legs. "It's way cool. You'll be glad you did."

She led him past the first curve in the driveway, and cut across the woods along the deer trail she had discovered the day before. It was shorter than following the curvy driveway. Briars scratched at her thighs. The still air smelled of mold and old leaves.

She carried the hammer and nails in a plastic grocery bag.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Just a little experiment."

He shrugged and kept walking.

Halfway along the shortcut, he stopped. "Not that old bus again? What's your obsession with that, anyway?"

"Not the bus. Something in it, though."

"I told you, nothing but junk. You think Roda left anything worth a dime in there?" But Jordan kept going, pushing briars away from bare legs with a stick. He followed, cursing the briars.

At the back of the bus, she lifted the bags off the box. "Open it," she said.

"What's in there, besides snakes and spiders, probably?"

"No spiders. The snakes would have eaten them, anyway."

He read the warnings printed on the box, *Dynamite*, *Caution*, and *Explosives*. "Looks dangerous."

"It's not. Just open it, you sissy. I did."

"You're sure it's safe?" The box began its characteristic whine and rumble. Samson backed away.

"I'm standing here, aren't I? Why should it be dangerous? You don't think Roda was

peddling black-market dynamite on the side, do you?”

Samson shrugged, but he bent forward and gingerly lifted the lid. The oval, black as obsidian, mushroomed up to the ceiling.

He gave a mindless cry and leapt backward, almost knocking Jordan down, but she moved aside.

He stared, then moved forward. “What the hell is that?”

She handed him a *National Geographic*. “Toss this in and see what happens.”

The darkness swallowed the fluttering pages.

“Where did it go?” He leaned forward as if to look behind the oval.

“Beats me,” Jordan said, and pushed him into the dark.

The wood was old, dry, brittle in places, rock-hard in others, but it took her only a couple of minutes and a dozen of the big nails to spike the lid shut tight.

The notebook said the portal must be fed. She believed it. After sitting in the bus so long, it must be pretty hungry.

The following afternoon, when the revving engines on the highway slowed, followed by the crunch of fat tires on the gravel driveway, she took her guitar, the only possession in the trailer that she cared much about, and went up the deer trail. She watched from the shadows in the woods as Samson’s business partners ransacked the house, the barn, her trailer, and were gone in half an hour. It didn’t take her nearly that long to put the sheets back on her bed, her clothes back in the closet, the food back in the cabinet. The dishes were mostly plastic, so hardly anything was broken.

She doubted they’d noticed the snakes.

When the cops came looking for

Samson, not long after the business partners, they asked Jordan about the barn. “He said never go in there. Mean bull.” She paused. “And snakes. Also bats. I’m terrified of snakes and bats. Don’t care much for bulls, either.”

“So you never went in the barn? You have no idea what’s in there?” The deputy who asked was named Fifer. He was young, maybe twenty-five. The other deputies leaned on their cars and smoked cigarettes while he talked to her.

“Of course not. Why would I?”

She could tell he did not believe her. But it was true that she had never been in the barn. She wasn’t dumb enough to leave DNA or fingerprints.

“You have any idea where we might find Mr. Samson?”

“Nope.” Which was true, as far as it went.

“When did you see him last?”

She hesitated as if thinking. “Day before yesterday, I guess.”

“You didn’t talk to or see him yesterday?”

“No. We weren’t that close.”

“He never mentioned going away, to you?”

Jordan shook her head. “Like I said, we weren’t that close.”

“So why did he let you stay here? You pay . . . some kind of rent?” During the pause, he glanced up and down her legs, let his eyes roam over her tee-shirt.

She noticed the deputy’s use of the past tense. “No. No rent. I did odd jobs. Cut grass, paint the house.”

“That’s all?” Fifer asked, after a moment of meaningful silence. He glanced at the mostly silver-gray wood, where paint had faded or flaked away on the wind and rain, years ago. Samson had never gotten

around to buying the paint.

Jordan let her own moment of meaningful silence spool out in the quiet August air. A mockingbird cawed like the rusty hinge of the screen door. “Yeah, absolutely. That’s all.”

“You don’t seem to know much, for someone who lives here.”

“His ex-wife was my best friend for years. She told me more than I wanted to know.”

“Just not what he really did in the barn.” Fifer pushed his hat back, rubbed his forehead and pinched his nose, as if he had a headache.

“Roda just said the same as Samson. Stay out of the barn.” Jordan had called her the night before. They caught up on old times. Roda seemed to have forgotten the bus. “You want it, it’s yours,” she said.

They wanted to search the barn and the house, saying they had warrants. The sheriff himself, this time, waved a paper at her. She didn’t take it. “Not my barn, not my house. Do whatever you want.”

She let them look in her trailer, too. They’d have come back, anyway, with warrants and bad attitudes. If they saw the snakes, they did not say so.

One good thing about cops, they were neat-freaks, as long as you didn’t piss them off. They didn’t make much of a mess in her trailer. The house and barn were no doubt still in disarray from the visit of Samson’s partners. She hadn’t investigated.

“Are you real?” Jordan asked Mother Black Snake, when the cops were gone. The snake smiled and said, “It’s time for us to go.” She flicked her tongue, tasting the air, the acrid smell of cop sweat. “Oh, and Adam West is not really dead.”

She kept an eye on the box, or locked it in the trunk of Samson’s car. If he did come straggling back, she wanted to know about it. Maybe the nailed lid would stop him, or maybe opening it was just the switch. How could she know? Meanwhile, she wondered what happened to him. Did he simply vanish into the void and cease to exist? Or did he find himself teetering on the edge of a cliff, pursued by whatever passed for bears in that world? At sea in a leaky boat? Or maybe it was pleasant—perhaps he was a sultan surrounded by a harem of beautiful humans of whatever gender he was in the mood for. No way to tell. Well maybe one, but she didn’t want to know that badly.

Yellow police tape crisscrossed the doors of the house and barn. She didn’t disturb it. She slept in her trailer, as usual, and got ready to hit the road again.

She put her truck up for sale. Got a hitch welded to the frame under the back bumper of the bus, so she could bring her trailer. It took another couple of months to clean out the bus and give it a new paint job. She considered a multi-colored flower-child design, but went instead with straightforward blue and white. No point inviting hassles from cops, campground managers, and other defenders of the status quo. All new paint except the *Emergency Exit* sign. She took the box out of the trunk of Samson’s car and put it back in its place in the bus, by the bottom window in the rear door. She thought about just leaving it behind, but it was too rare to abandon.

Besides, it was always good to have a way out.

—The End—

Orion's Final Song

by
Chad Chisholm

Artemis, Mavourneen:

Once more to touch your moonlit hair.
I say someone beautiful as you
Hardly understands the life whirling about you
Sealing minds and tongues of hunters
But, as wildflowers among weeds,
Hold high your heads and bloom
Not indifferently, but oblivious to things sublunary
Mad with Nyx's nympholeptic storm
(And all other such seeming-silliness)
Rushing and rolling, beveled and unable to offend.

Artemis, Mavourneen:

Tears I feel for me? No mortal form is immune.
Water no more Scorpio's arrows and stings:
There's always another star above.
Cry for the sea, Gaia's most mewed and ancient lover:
Wild, hopeless, and immortal Oceanus
Restless chancellor of a thousand colonies;
Pitiable kinsman, he rages perpetually
Towards the moon and sandy mainland.

Artemis, Mavourneen:

Yet see you will, or...see you now?
As a Delos girl on an April day
Could you see flocks of seagulls and jaybirds
Fluttering through a bushel of chrysanthemums?
Did you listen to wingtips waving above
Fragrant buds, from petals both lithe and fresh?
And did your cerulean eyes in childhood
Become vaporous and vein red?
And did your newness of heart then know
The birds and blooming buds (through no fault of their own)
Could never know nor comprehend
What still you feel like flocks of quail flushing
Through reeds beneath your breastbone?

Weep you still those nonage tears?
Artemis, there is your heart.
Mavourneen—there is your heart!
Goddess to be: there is your heart.

Author's Note:

While there are different stories about the death of Orion, the inspiration for this poem mainly comes from Hesiod's *Astronomia* where the huntsman Orion comes to Crete for the wild game and there becomes the beloved of Artemis, goddess of the moon and the hunt. Orion and Artemis became hunting companions, and the mortal huntsman won the heart of the young immortal. However, their love was short-lived. Because of his zeal for the hunt as well as his boasting, Orion angered Gaia, the primordial goddess of the Earth, who then sent a gigantic scorpion to battle the famous hunter. While Orion fought valiantly, he fell mortally wounded. When he died, Artemis was devastated by the loss of her only love. According to most legends, Artemis pleaded with Father Zeus to engrave Orion's image in the skies as a memorial to the great huntsman, and he honored her request. As a mature goddess, Artemis never took another lover but remained celibate and became a protector of maidens, hunters, children, and expectant mothers.



“Dogwood.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

Pog the Pinder

(a song of Tauaklutai and the Islands)

by Kevan Kenneth Bowkett

A ring arose of sapphire dust,
It rolled up from Hell's throat,
When Pog the pinder'd just got in
And hung up his green coat.

Now Pog sat down at his sausage board
With his wife and son at his side:
While the City's knights charged the shambling wraith
And burned for their useless pride.

His green coat one, his green boots two
And his rod-and-nooses three
He'd tucked into the door-cupboard
When the hawks of Hell tore free.

The wraith drank up lord, lady, and child,
Devoured man, bird, and tree,
When a young scamp called outside Pog's door:
"Pog, one of the beasts got free!"

They rose in a gyre of gasping dust,
Their shrieks cracked wall and spire;
Cothirya's crown broke on the Empress's head
While Pog laid his feet by the fire.

"Got free!" Pog shouted. "Got free just now,
When I'm sat down at my dinner?
That creature, I'll tan its hide black and blue,
Or no one's ever a sinner!"

"Give us a kiss, good wife," said he,
"Give us a kiss and beer."
Then within the billows of biting dust
A writhing form upreared.

Pog out into the dooryard stepped,
And ambled out through his gate,
As the hell-fiend chewed up Cothirya's stones
And its eyes went dull with hate.

Its breath was the herald of ten years' drought,
Its claw arced from wall to wall:
The Empress that terrors could abide
With her nobles fell down all.

Then Pog cast forth his rod and noose
And said, "On this rascal I shan't dote."
And a ring fell down of heavenly gold
To close round the hell-wraith's throat.

Pog shook the beast, in wrath cried out,
“To be honest you’ve got to be thinner!
You’ve made me go without bread-and-milk,
So by God you’ll disgorge *your* dinner.”

The City rose up, its folk laughing once more,
The Empress smiled on her throne.
Of animal, vegetable, or mineral feast
The fiend kept nary a bone.

The demon was booted back under the Earth,
The sapphire dust fell as rain,
And Pog went back in to his board
To savour his mutton again.



“Round Barn.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

HARD RAIN

by
R. L. Boyer

Waking in the deep December night,
a howling wind-lashed torrent weeps

about this cabin where I lie motionless,
—a warm corpse, naked face chilled—
breathing plumes of vapor in the dark.

Breathing in, breathing out ...
Breathing in, breathing out ...
Breathing in, breathing out ...
Breathing in, breathing out ...

As the invisible breath-door swings back
and forth, in the silent empty space
between thoughts, everything is clear:

The soft warmth of flannel bedding
embraces and comforts me.
Hard rain dances on the roof
with ten thousand nimble feet.

BEYOND BLUE MOUNTAINS

—for Sebastio Salgado

by

R. L. Boyer

Beyond every mountain is a story.
—Sebastio Salgado

beyond blue mountains

a young girl brushes her long hair,
dreaming of a future lover.

beyond blue mountains

an old man spends his final days
caring for an orphaned child.

beyond blue mountains

a poet's song expresses her soul,
longing for the invisible.

beyond blue mountains

bright flowers spring happily
from the grave of a wise man.

beyond blue mountains ...

My dreamy manifesto under the starry sky – cometward

by

Pawel Markiewicz—

Attention: This manifesto has in itself a magic power and it can finally refute the communist manifesto (1847/48) and its successors in the form of communist states.
It burns a peaceful campfire!

I am part of the pink eternity.
I enchant the poetic stars.
I dream with ghosts of melancholy.
I am a magician of dawn.
My wing is called Apollo.
I'm so enchanted so dreamy.
I am a sky dreamer.
I am shrouded in the most beautiful enthusiasm.
My dream enchants the beautiful world.
There is a magic dream in my wings.
My wings can do magic.
I like my dreams.
My dream is hotter than feeling.
Philosophical thoughts are waiting for me.
Philosophical sparks shimmer at me.
My philosophy is infinity.
I am in love with the infinity of politics.
I like a druidic fire.
I want to become a druid priest.
Modern druids beautify my existence.
An eternal spark rests in my poetries.
I am spiritualized thanks to poetry.
In politics you can be poetic.

I never quarrel with muses.
I fly in pairs like muses.
My wing would need starry rays.
With beautiful sounds fulfilled my dream of melancholy.
Poetic moment enriches my soul.
There is an Osiris chalice in my soul.
My friend Loreley is a philosopher like me.
In tender tears my magic life takes place.
I sometimes quarrel with tears of finiteness.
I would build a school for Druids.
The imagination unfolds in the moon.
I adore Osiris forever.
My friend Osiris likes the original beauty.
In my chalice there is Osiris' soul.
I fly to the land of Osiris.
I write a legend to the Osiris.
I drink a dew of eternity.
In the dew, I can refresh my soul like muses.
I warm myself in a gentle dew.
I cool my wings in the magic dew.
Into the dew fell my little shooting star.
Ambrosia is eternal for my sake.
In Ambrosia I feel infinitely beautiful magic.
I love to perpetuate this ambrosia.
An idea about ambrosia is waiting for me.
My tender thought must be enchanted by Ambrosia.
I, sitting, wait for spiritualized moments.
I sit there as if I were a musical angel.
I philosophize as if an angelic muse had touched me.
In the wind, my moment becomes like star-shaped existence.
This touch reflects my eternity.
The tender poetry becomes my temple.
In the most beautiful stamp of feeling I belong to you.
I can love all the fantasies of the dawn.
I'll show you my freedom of mindlessness.
I like to collect colored shooting stars of the angels.

GHOST DANCING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

by

R. L. Boyer

1.

The ancients knew what poets know: that there are
two worlds here not just one. I found out about

that one night while lying in my bed listening
for the beat of my heart until I heard its rhythm

grow strong inside my ears like the beating of
drums and I held onto that heartbeat rhythm

like a lifeline held the beats of my heart like
the steps of a long rope-ladder descending

into that bottomless well of being that leads down
secret corridors to the other side of sleep.

I am still lying in my bedroom and awake
enough to see if I am really fast asleep or

not and my body lies motionless paralyzed from
toe to crown and I can't move at all but

my consciousness is all there, alert and
watching with great intensity, wide awake through

open eyes. The room is somehow different
than it had been only minutes ago — before

time stopped — and there before me, creeping across my
bedroom floor a thick supernatural mist

2.

If only I can hold this rope on the other
side of that deep well ... my last fading thought as
the

spell cast by heartbeats covers me like a blanket of
ether and without knowing I swoon into

that familiar and utterly mysterious
black depth until I suddenly awake there

— somewhere on the other side — fully conscious
within the dreamscape. But this is crazy because

flows like some great theatrical trick using
dry ice for atmosphere and in the mist I see

them wide awake through open eyes.

3.

They enter dancing in a tight row to the
heartbeat rhythm still pounding in my inner

ear as they glide silently to ancient rhythms
— four of them — with the looks of giant kachinas

4.

Suddenly, my left hand begins to stir and it
grows like magic into the shape of a long

spirit catcher — a great, long wand like a
narrow bamboo pole grows longer than a

mandarin's fingernails from my fingertips (longer
than a fishing pole!) and as it grows it shakes

itself faster and faster in a rhythm
perfectly its own until the spirit in my

hand begins to sing its voice low and breaks the
air with a loud deep rhythmic hum its mystic

vibrations fill the room like an aboriginal
bull-roarer. And as it hums a wind grows

from it and the wind blows softly across the
floor like a breeze as I lay here without

moving watching with my eyes wide open and the
wind moves swiftly and blows the mist away as the

black and white ghost men dance backward like a
silent motion picture in reverse right back into the

invisibility of the bedroom hallway
that leads to the other world.

5.

Then my eyes go dark again like sleep until
my ears wake up and hear something way down

there the sound of my heartbeat rising the
secret inner heartbeat rhythm of drums and

there I am again still riding that drumbeat
bareback like a wild horse and holding on to

that lifeline climbing out from those depths. I
awake fully this time — in my body — in

utter astonishment and the room is empty
now but still charged with the presence of the

ancient ones and the hair stands thrilled on the
back of my neck as I raise myself slowly to

look around and I think I can still see the
faint traces of the mist evaporating on my

bedroom floor. Outside the room a wind roars
suddenly vibrating like a great bull-roarer a

thunderous wind-spirit riding across the
autumn lake shaking the house with its terror and

I listen to that rampaging spirit wailing
out there against the windows of my bedroom and

I look down at her resting peacefully beside
me and thank god she is still asleep and

I know she'll think I'm crazy in the
morning and I probably am since this

kind of thing has happened to me before and
it will again someday too because...

6.

The ancients knew what poets know — that there are two
worlds here, not just one and sometimes if you

listen until your heartbeat grows as loud as the
beating of war drums the spaces of the two

worlds might grow together again and on the
feet of ghost dancers the other world might step

through the ancient doorsill that always stands open
between them and for a timeless moment 'reality'

and the stuff of dreams can get terribly confused.

Like Water In Your Footprints

—*for Rilke*

by

R. L. Boyer

At the heart of everything that moves lies a great stillness;
your silence rises from it like a storm. You are waiting
for me, there in your deep solitude—too near for
me to see you, but I can hear you breathing when

I breathe. Your body moves slowly through your
silences like the stalking of a great beast. Your stride is
great, but it won't be hard to track you. Wherever you
step, great souls form, like water in your footprints—

like deep lakes, from the passing of glaciers.



“Snow at Night.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

Reptile

by

Ryder W. Miller

Nobody he talked with seemed sure what it was or how it got there. It was big, “about the size of a dragon,” someone said. Some in the town were alarmed, but no official action had been taken as far as he knew. It was under surveillance and some people wondered what it would do when it got hungry. There was also the big concert in Reilly this weekend.

The story was that it just appeared one day and started walking around Reilly. It was a problem because of its size. It would knock over street signs and damage cars when it sat down on them. The officials had sent a few officers to keep an eye on it. The nearby Zoo was contacted, but they did not take responsibility for it. Nor were they sure what it was, either. It was bigger than the reptiles they had seen. It also did not seem to have supernatural powers. It did not escape from the zoo, but the only other explanation was that it walked out of the woods or crawled out of one of the nearby lakes. That did not seem likely either. Nobody as far as he knew said that they had seen it before.

The zookeeper should have known what it was, but she was a bit stumped by it also. The zoo was puzzled like most people in town and the word had gone out into the surrounding area that there was something unexplainable there. The big paper in town had yet to send someone out to verify the story, but the folks

at the local radio station had found the whole situation funny and laughed about it on the news.

They even decided to name the creature Rex.

Brad Ransom decided he would take a look for himself. He would take an afternoon off the phone work and take the bus to Reilly to take a look at it in person. He used to be at the Zoo and figured with the hierarchy there it might take them a few days to decide what to do or how to proceed.

Brad missed those days at the Zoo. He used to work there back when they had educators who could talk with the public when or if they wanted. There seemed to have been a change that took place where those positions now went to customer service workers. One figured if one studied natural sciences they would be a better fit at these places. People however were no longer there to be lectured at. They could look for themselves and read the signs. It was part of anti-intellectualism that seemed to be going around. Those taking the tickets and letting people through the gates did not need to pass too much other information along. This might have produced less message chaos, especially for the directors who were maybe ultimately responsible, but it did leave some educated people in the lurch. Maybe they did not listen

well enough? Or maybe they were too nerdy? Maybe the higher ups were getting tired being told that they were wrong sometimes? They had reached a level where they could qualify for things, but it was sad to have an education that seemed to go to waste. Sad also not to be able to cash in on one's education and have to start again in a new field. Maybe he ruined his chances by talking too much, but maybe others cost less and were easier to predict and manage? They, though, were likely to have less interesting things to share than someone with a relevant education.

He found himself talking all days with others at his new job. This gave him more social time than he was used to, but now he was wasting what he went to school for. He, though, could be an informed person for days like these. Maybe he could help? Maybe the Zoo and town could use him today.

Brad liked to "commune with the other creatures of the earth" at the Zoo. They were ambassadors from the wild; he liked to think and say, "if someone saw a giraffe his day would never be the same." These were phrases he thought up himself, not the ambassador one, but the other two. For Brad extinction was heresy of the worst kind. We shared the planet with other things, some of which that could not protect themselves. Zoos were not the solution to the problem, but they could help with it.

But what explained the scary and dark things that one could sometimes find in nature? It could be a tough world out there, especially in the wild. Being scary might have made it easier to survive. He also wondered about all those monsters that had disappeared. There were those old fantasy tales about them. Especially dragons, but other things as well. Were they extinct also? Or did they never exist? He also was interested in crypto zoology. He wondered if in an earlier age or if

he was more adventurous he could have been a sea-travelling naturalist. The experience the Naturalists had seeing the likes of things they could not even have imagined must have stayed with them their whole lives. Those must have been fascinating adventures. Young kids experienced those things at the zoo, but now there was so much information around that there was less to be actually surprised about.

This was, however, different. Here was an actual mystery that just walked into town.

He was going to Reilly anyway for a celebration and outdoor concert later this week, but he decided to go early also. Things, though, might change now that Rex had arrived. He decided he would go take an afternoon off the phones and go take a look before the crowds stopped by the concert later in the week.

He was so excited by this opportunity that he decided that he would not stop for a meal first. Maybe just a bag of candy. So many choices in the city, but Reilly might not have as big of a selection. The monster—no, Rex, would probably not attack him for them. He had to find where Rex was, but he probably could do so on his phone. There would also be people he could ask.

He missed his small town days, having now to travel to work in the big city. There were less trees and lawns. In a small town one could see the woods and the occasional deer. There were nearby fields, lakes, and streams.

But where did this thing come from? It could not have travelled far. As far as he knew the town was not warned that it was going to show up. He would know more after he looked at it in person,

Brad got off at Colchester Road and Grant Street. It was one of the few bus stops in the middle of town. There were a number of streets in this one. Most people lived in

houses in streets that veered off into the woods and hills. Five hundred or so people lived here. The town should make some extra money when the concert showed up in a few days. There already were tents and trailers at Yader's Field where the show was going to be. It was not a long walk, but he had Rex to find.

It was not going to be a giant show, but there was going to be a lot of fun. All kinds of music for this one. Some great rock and roll for these parts, even if not played by the original musicians. They had one of these every ten or so years. He was old enough this time so he would not have to go with his parents.

He decided to stop off at the corner store, the only one in town, to get chocolate and directions. The man at the counter was friendly.

"Two big events in the same week," he said with a smile.

"Do you know where I can find Rex?" Brad asked smiling back.

"We were hoping he would walk back to where he came from. We think he managed to hide in the woods out by Lake Bygone, but from what I heard he was seen on his way to Yader's Field. That is only about a mile up the road out front."

"Maybe Rex is here for the concert also?"

They both could not help laughing at this one.

"Wondered how he heard about the concert? It might need to be really old fashioned for that guy," said the counterman.

They both laughed again.

Brad said thank you and then made his way out towards Yader's Field. His legs were no longer up to this, him being used to sitting and talking on the phone all day. This was likely to be an adventure into the natural kingdom.

He would have to walk up the hill to get there. He did see some clues already. It was not reported where the creature had gone. Folks in town probably did not want to scare the public off from the big show on the weekend. He could see now that there was a street sign that something big had bumped into. There were also a few damaged cars along the way. There were a few people walking down the street that got emptier of houses as he walked along.

One person answered his question before he asked it. He knew why he was here.

"Yep, it went up towards Yader's Field. Hoping to get a good spot before the crowd arrives for the concert this weekend," she laughed. "Quite a surprise all around this time."

Brad was worried now. What if it stepped on somebody or knocked over some of the equipment? He decided to walk faster because he had gotten very curious. "Thank you," he said and speeded along on his way.

He could see the field in the distance. It was large and expansive. It would be a great spot for the crowd. The organizers were already there. So were the officials. There were trailers and make-do fences. There was also a stage that had been built already. He could see the set up and the speakers. It was modest. It was not going to be a giant crowd. It was going to be bigger than these parts were used to this time.

Getting close he found out the authorities cordoned off the place. There was a police barrier and few police persons who would not let him through.

"Sorry we can't let you through. We have an unexpected visitor. We don't know what it is.

"You mean Rex?"

"Yes. Rex now from Reilly. We need to

keep people away from it,” said a guard who was clearly not from this town.

“I was a Zoologist. Maybe I can help? I am a crypto-zoologist also. Can I take a look at it?”

“You have to talk to the officials. We cannot let people in yet. We might have to cancel the concert. It seems though to have picked the spot it wants.”

Brad could see now that it was sitting in the field. Not a prime spot to watch the show, but it had a lot of space to itself. Rex was big, with big eyes and could probably see well. Brad was sad now to think that he did not have a pair of binoculars to look more closely.

He thought about going back into town to buy them. The local stores would probably stock them because those going to the concert would probably want them. That, though, would be a long walk and he was too curious about Rex to wait longer. Now he was in a fix, not being able to go out onto the field to take a look because the area was cordoned off by the authorities. Some seemed to be wearing quarantine outfits. They had white suits and masks on. Some seemed to have equipment with them also. There were only a half dozen of them.

There was a preconcert set up and all sort of craziness would set in once the crowd arrived and the music started. People would flock here from the surrounding areas and maybe even farther. People would be spending their weekend here. Some might camp out. All those folks were not here yet, but Rex was here.

Brad decided to jump the fence and take a look. He could argue that he was on some bad grass or had too many drinks if he got in trouble. Maybe they would understand that he had a scientific interest in this thing? There might be some folks from the zoo there? Maybe they would recognize him and know

more about this thing?

Nobody had approached him when he walked to the fence. Most folks were in the distance. Some were “hanging around” with Rex. Some were still working on the concert set.

But what was Rex? A zoologist like himself should know. He was also a crypto-zoologist. Brad looked around to see that most people were busy and not paying attention to him. He decided to jump the fence and make a run for it. There were not a lot of security guards there yet. The scientists would probably not get in his way.

After getting through the fence without difficulty, he decided to jog through the site rather than run hoping that he would look less suspicious. Most people were busy and did not notice him. He was able to get within throwing distance of Rex without disturbing anyone. From here he would have to take it real slow because there were a bunch of scientists there.

Looking closer he could now see that the beast had a shiny white skin, and sometimes a hue of blue and green. Not exactly scales, but it glowed in the sunlight. It turned around and looked at him when he had gotten closer. He could now see its big face. It sure looked a bit like a dragon Brad thought, but actually it was more likely to be a dinosaur. There was an interesting look in its eye. It belonged here in some way. It was part of the community, but somebody who was not seen that often.

When he thought about what had been said to him over the last few hours he thought that maybe this creature was part of the community that would show up for these events. Had he heard some subtle hints that this creature was a part of the community who used to show up for these events? It might though have been a long time since this creature had visited, but some people did not

seem very surprised by it. Here it was a silent and not widely known member of the community. A wild neighbor. It sure seemed like Rex could help with security. Here was this community's Mascot, returned. Sort of like the big buddy friend some people had.

Maybe it was also like the Loch Ness Monster? Something that had learned to hide most of the time. There were not a lot of stories about Rex in these parts, but maybe he had not heard them? Rex could be a local secret? The townsfolk for Reilly sure seemed amused about Rex, a bit more than the concert that was going to take place there in a few days also.

Brad did have a question he needed to get an answer to understand. He would have to take a close look at the creature's neck. Maybe the technicians could answer the question so he did not have to get too close. He could see now that some security folks were getting close to his scene. He would have to act fast.

"Does he have gills?" Brad yelled at the technicians as he tried to get a closer look. He did see wings, but they were small and probably vestigial. It did not seem like this fellow could make it into the air. Nobody had said that they saw it fly around town. Meanwhile Rex was looking at him in a puzzled way. The technicians did not know how to answer at first.

Brad walked to the side to get a better vantage point to answer his question, but he was hearing the security guards now instead of the technicians.

"Sir you need to leave. You cannot get so close to the animal?"

"Does Rex have gills? I was a zoologist."

Brad was surprised when someone grabbed his arm.

"All right I will leave, but let me ask a question first."

He should have expected this. He should have known that the security guards would stop him.

"Okay. I will leave," he said getting the hand off his arm.

"He appears to have slits on his neck," said one of the technicians responding.

Brad squinted his eyes and could see them. He also saw big teeth when Rex made sort of a smile. He was happy he did not need to smell its breath. It probably also did not have fire.

"All right, I am leaving," Brad said as a hand squeezed his arm.

"I was a zoologist," he said trying to look as long as he could as Rex as they escorted him off the field.

"Sorry sir, but you cannot be so close to that animal."

"It has gills. It is probably a marine mammal of sorts. Strange unknown creature that can live on land and in the water. Maybe there once were dragons here and they decided to hide in the lake to be left alone. Maybe it was something nobody had yet catalogued."

The guard did not look interested.

"A local secret, maybe, but an interesting zoological find. I have some expertise," Brad pleaded, but he realized he needed to leave. Somebody will be studying this creature and he would be able to find answers later, maybe, but he would have to search and wait for them.

Of more immediate concern was whether there was going to be concert. Rex might have spoiled the show, but maybe Rex was a secret that people knew about here, but did not talk openly about? It could be part of the community? A protector and neighbor of sorts? It sure seemed like the show was going to go on. Rex would be given plenty of room to sit and listen.

A land-living reptile which also had gills.
Defunct dragon wings also. Why had he not
heard about it? Such were the ways with some
secrets. Some probably hoped that it would

—The End—

leave, but some might welcome it like a
mascot of sorts.

It sure did seem like the show was
probably going to go on like usual anyway.



“Succulents.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft

September

by

Meg Moseman

The Sun, that tyrant, is dead—
we're running away with his gold
(gold's just a crackle of leaves
here in the dusk and the cold).

Hand in hand, we'll fly from his world
to worlds he never could dream.
As we whirl through whirls of leaves,
we'll be nothing but quicksilver *seem*.

Leaves rot, leaf-castles loom.
We'll leave this chill behind.
His grandiloquent joy was a lie—
ours is a joy like the wind.

In Baba Yaga's Garden

by

Janet Brennan Croft

"I see no reason for you to be so sad, my dear," the therapist smiled.
"You're both making *such* progress," she said. Why, in today's session alone
Your husband has learned ten new ways to torment you.
"When you are a little down, you must simply think of your happy place
And go there. Promise me you will do that." They both beamed at me.
Do not think, do not think, do not think
of the inescapable *fact* of him. Do not rage. Go to your happy place instead.

"My happy place, yes," I murmured. "I *will*."
The high hedge of bones and thorns is prowled about
by snakes, owls, hedgehogs, cats,
familiar and protectors out of the old tales.
Soon I'll go down and tidy away
those ragged red and white ribbons flying from it so gaily,
the ones the ravens sport with.
But the breeze is too lovely right now.
I sit on the high veranda, sipping wine,
adrift on the light dappling the leaves below.
Behind me in the house, peace and order,
rest and useful work, time and space,
room to breathe, light, silence,
what *I* will.
The house shifts a bit on its legs;
cauldrons and knives settle back in their accustomed places.
On the fencepost far below, his skull bleaches;
crows picking it clean, clean, finally all clean.
I think idly about what I shall build of his bones.
I may need more.

"I *will* make sure there's a place there
where I can come and talk with you, Doctor.
And thank you for all you've done."

Can you feel the house move?

Further Up And Further In

by

Meg Moseman

So far, there is always
a walled garden overgrown
with undiscovered fruit
hidden within
the garden whose apples we know

and an indigo sky
arching
fathomless
beyond the stars
I shiver before
tonight.

So far, no story ever ends,

the horror
(says dream)
at the root of the growing world.

The savor of the apple
could sate this heart for a century,
but cattish dream knows no satisfaction,
not inside, not out,
not in passion fruit, not in rest,
not in the infinite.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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.

Kevan Kenneth Bowkett is a Winnipeg writer, researcher, and editor, especially concerned about issues of new technologies and their implications. His play *Time's Fancy: The War of King Henry V and Joan of Arc* was shown at the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival in 2017. One of his stories appeared in the 2015 issue of *The Mythic Circle* — both that story and his pieces in this issue form part of the legendary background of his invented world of Cothirya.

Lawrence Buentello is a writer and poet living in San Antonio, Texas. A short story specialist, he has published innumerable tales in the fantasy, horror, and science fiction

genres. He holds a traditional degree in English literature and has twenty-five years of experience working in academic libraries.

Janet Brennan Croft is Liaison to the School of Communication and Information and Librarian for Disability Services and Copyright at Rutgers University Libraries. She is the author of *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Praeger, 2004; winner, Mythopoeic Society Award for Inklings Studies). She has also written on the Peter Jackson films, J.K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, Lois McMaster Bujold, and other authors, and is editor or co-editor of five collections of literary essays. She edits the refereed scholarly journal *Mythlore*, and her current project is the co-edited collection *Orphan Black: Sestras, Scorpions, and Sinister Science* (McFarland, 2019).

Chad Chisholm is a professor at Southern Wesleyan University in South Carolina where he teaches writing, rhetoric, and literature. He received the Exemplary Teacher Award from the United Methodist Board of Higher Education for his work in the classroom. Chisholm has published essays and poems in journals such as *Mississippi Folklife*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Mallorn: The Journal of the J.R.R. Tolkien Society*, *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*, *Saint Austin Review*, *Mythlore*, and *Classis Quarterly Journal*.

S. Dorman is author of *The God's Cycle*, *Gott'im's Monster 1808*, and *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and C.S. Lewis Talk Things over in The Hereafter*. She hopes to publish *DuOPolis* this year, a complex alternate universe time-traveller with settings at Five Points Akropolis, its city graveyard, and soup kitchen.

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. This is her last issue of *The Mythic Circle*.

Lamar Johnson is a student at the University of Virginia, majoring in English, and minoring in Classics

Paweł Markiewicz, was born in 1983 in eastern Poland, where he still lives. He is a poet, but he also created prose and essays. Paweł likes German and English. In his idyllic poetry, mythological motifs often connect with angels. One of Paweł's poems has been chosen for the *Poetry Leaves Action* and was distributed in early May 2019 in Waterford (library). Paweł likes short literary forms such haiku as well as tanka, although he has recently written a long poem about Prometheus in English. He has published work in *Ginyu* (Tokyo), *Atlas Poetica* (USA), *The Cherita* (UK), the *Tajmahal Review* (India) and *Better Than Starbucks* (USA).

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.

Meg Moseman: A fan of the Inklings since childhood, Meg Moseman lives in the mountains of Montana, where she puts her English degree to use in the children's section of an independent bookstore. In her spare time, she reads, writes, and illustrates fantasy and poetry. In addition to Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams, she loves Diana Wynne Jones, Kafka, Melville, Dickinson, and many others. Her poem "The Great Poet Emperor" appeared in *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* in November 2017.

David Rogers' work has appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Sky and Telescope*, and *Astronomy* magazine. He is the author of two novels, *D.B. Cooper is Dead: A Solomon Starr Adventure* and *Thor's Hammer*, and a fantasy novella, *Return of the Exile*, each available from Amazon. He also curates *David Watches Movies* on Facebook.

Anum Sattar is a junior studying English at the College of Wooster in Ohio, USA. Her poems have been published the *American Journal of Poetry* (Margie,) *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *HOBART*, *SurVision Magazine*, *Coal City Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *FIVE 2 ONE: An Art and Literary Journal*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *Ragazine*, *Better than Starbucks!* *The Florida Review*, *Grey Sparrow Press*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Artifact*

Nouveau, Off the Coast, Strange POEtry, Between These Shores Literary & Arts Annual, Conceit Magazine, A New Ulster, The Cannon's Mouth, The Journal of Contemporary Anglo-Scandinavian Poetry, Wilderness House Literary Review, Poydras Review, The Cadaverine, Verbalart: A Global Journal Devoted to Poets & Poetry, The Wayne Literary Journal, The Ibis Head Review, Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poems, Poets Bridge, Deltona Howl and Tipton Poetry Journal. She won the first Grace Prize in Poetry and third Vonna Hicks Award at the college. Whenever possible, she reads out her work at Brooklyn Poets and Forest Hills Library in New York City. And she was recently interviewed at Radio Free Brooklyn.

Ted Snyder is known for his dense, allusive writing, which often incorporates in mythopoeic and historiographic elements. His fiction has appeared in *Leaping Clear* and is forthcoming in *From Seoul to the World*, and his poetry has been appeared in *Mosaic* and *Split Rock Review*. Find out more on his website at: tedsnyderonline.com.

Christopher Tuthill's fiction has appeared in *The Mythic Circle*, *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. This piece, "The Touch," is part of a longer work about children with special gifts. He lives in Poughkeepsie, NY with his wife and two children.

The Touch

by

Christopher Tuthill

The last time we moved it was into this cute little house across the street from this young family who had two little kids outside in the yard all the time. Their mom and dad pushed them on a little swing set every day, and I was kind of jealous of that, but they seemed like a nice family. Their mom and dad waved to us and said hi all the time and even came over to introduce themselves. They were friendly with everyone on the street, and even gave dad a ride to the U-Haul place to drop it off when we moved in.

But mom and dad said we were not to go over there or speak to them, so I didn't. The kids yelled to us from the yard all the time as they ran around but we couldn't go and play with them. Mom said they were too little anyway, and maybe they were a lot younger than us, but it would've been fun to play with them.

Mom also didn't want me or Nancy going to school, because she said she had to fill out the right paperwork and didn't have time. I don't know why she didn't have time, since she didn't do anything except get up at noon and sit around all day and say how she hated the neighborhood. But I couldn't go. So I played with the phone she gave me, but it was old and only had a couple of games and kept crashing anyways.

Then one day Killer got loose.

That's the dog—Killer. Dad thought it'd be funny to name him that. He's a mutt and he's not friendly and I never understood why dad thought it was funny, because no one likes a dog named Killer.

That day Killer was angry, because he'd been in the basement since we moved in. Mom just didn't want to walk him and wouldn't let me or Nancy do it, because she thought we'd let him run off.

It was sunny that day, so I guess that's why Killer wanted to get out. He ran right over across the street to the swing set, and bit the little girl when she came down the slide.

The little girl was so sweet. She had yellow hair and little pigtails and a nice cute smile and a sweet laugh that echoed across the street every day. But now, she was screaming in this terrible squeal like an animal, and I ran over and grabbed Killer by the collar and shamed him and he sulked away. My kid sister Nancy ran over and grabbed him by the leash and smacked her over and over as she walked her back home.

The girl's mom came out, and as she rushed over to us, I put my hands over the little girl's bite. I hummed and told her "It'll be ok, sweet thing," and the warmth pulsed through me, like it does when I get worked up, and I concentrated so hard on making

the kid happy.

My hands warmed up, and I could feel the girl's pain and a sting and a burning sensation in my hands, and then her mom grabbed the girl into her arms. Finally, the little girl stopped screaming.

"What happened?" her mom asked. Her voice was shaking.

I said, "My dog scared her, ma'am, I'm sorry."

"He bit me," the girl said. She pointed at her leg, but there was no more open wound, no blood, no bite mark. Just pretty, smooth pink skin.

"Oh, honey, it's ok." Her mom said. "He just scared you is all. Why don't you and your friend come inside and have something to drink?"

I was so happy, making friends like that. Finally, I had managed to help someone.

"Christine!"

It was my mom, screaming at me from across the street. "You get yourself right back in here this second, girl! I didn't tell you to be over in the neighbor's yard! What you think you doin' over there anyway?"

"It's ok," our neighbor said. "She was just helping Sadie. The dog put a scare in her."

My mom walked to the middle of the street and put her hands on her hips. She had her sleeves rolled up so you could see the dumb Tasmanian devil tattoo on her shoulder. Her eyes were red and bloodshot and her hair was all tangled. She'd probably been smoking again.

"Who the hell asked you?" she yelled.

The neighbor lady stood there with her mouth open for a second, then she went over to her son, who was sitting on one of the swings, and grabbed him and brought him and his sister back inside.

And I knew that was the last time we'd speak to those people.

That night, I took Nancy to the basement to hang out. It wasn't finished off or anything like that, it was just a regular concrete basement with dark corners and cobwebs and spiders lurking around. But it was better than being upstairs, cause mom and dad were getting into their drinking and they had some friends over.

We played down there for a while, with the doll house we made out of a cardboard box and the old Barbies. We drew some pictures and tried to make them as lifelike as we could, with the crayons we had. There was a little card table down there, and we sat and drew and tried to pretend like everything was normal, that it was just a regular old childhood like anyone else's.

Killer lurked in a corner, sulking from the beating Nancy gave him. He licked himself once in a while, and occasionally got up to get some water from his dish. Poor dog. It wasn't his fault he got mean sometimes.

Our folks were having a party upstairs and it got loud—real loud, the later it got. There were some raised voices and shouting, and blasting music with shaking bass from the stereo, and then I heard a siren and I just knew things were about to get worse.

I went upstairs with Nancy to see what was going on. There was a haze of smoke in the kitchen that stunk like weed, and suddenly the music that had been on all night went off. I heard my dad yelling.

"This is my house!" he said. "I live here, damn it!"

"Are you the owner, sir?" The cop said. He had a crew cut and a real bad attitude. Another cop stood next to him, with his

arms crossed.

My dad didn't answer. He just took another drink of beer.

"Sir, I asked if you were the owner."

"I rent this place," dad said. "What business is that of yours?"

"Sir, it became our business because we've had some noise complaints. Do you know what time it is, sir?"

The way he said 'sir,' made it sound like an insult, and I could tell it made my dad even angrier.

"It ain't that late," dad said. "This is police harassment!"

The cop said, "Man, it's one-thirty in the morning, and if you lived next door to me I would call the cops too."

That pretty much broke up the party. Everyone went home, but some of dad's friends had to wait for a ride 'cause they were so drunk. One friend of his, Jack, had to sleep on the floor of the basement, on some pieces of cardboard, 'cause he had no ride home.

Nancy and me went to our room upstairs and lay in our beds. I could hear mom crying through the door. Daddy yelled something mean, and then they were both quiet.

"You awake Nancy?" I asked my sister. But she didn't say anything. Like me, she was exhausted, but unlike me she was able to sleep.

I was happy for her. She was always able to sleep.

I lay awake and I heard Killer howling in the basement as I stared out the window into the pitch black. I wanted to evaporate. To just float out that window, away into the sky. But there I lay. I knew tomorrow mom and dad would both be hungover and in a bad way, like they were most days.

In the morning I went outside and those kids were playing on the swings again. I waved and yelled hello. The mom was standing there with a cup of coffee, but she didn't even say anything and they just kept playing and ignored me.

Nancy came outside and we sat underneath the oak tree in our front yard, not saying anything. There were some scattered beer cans across the lawn. Someone had made a firepit from cinderblocks on the grass, and it still smelled like smoke. There were cigarette butts everywhere, and broken glass from a tossed bottle was scattered across the driveway. The trunk of dad's car was still open; he often had it that way to hear his music when everyone was hanging outside.

Nancy was singing to herself, and looking up at the sky. I could hear the kids across the street laughing and screaming at each other. I wished our family could be normal like that.

Mom came out of the house after a while, looking tired and angry.

"Sadie, get yourself inside here. Let's have some breakfast." She yelled so loud the kids across the street could hear. I think she always did that stuff on purpose, to get every one of our neighbors to dislike us, like she was proud of being so loud and angry, or something. I couldn't understand that. Not only was it mean to me and Nancy, it was bad strategy, and ensured that within a few months everyone on the street would hate us.

I sat there and ignored mom, and that just made her mad.

"Sadie, I said get inside! Now! You too Nancy!"

"What's the matter," I said. "Too hungover to make your own coffee?"

Mom slammed the door shut. Across the street, the kids had gone inside.

"Now you done it," Nancy said. "Mom's gonna be in a mood all day."

I knew she was right. I went inside anyway, and mom was standing at the sink, filling a glass with water. She had a bottle of aspirin open on the counter and downed a few of them as she gulped water.

Then she turned on me. Her eyes were yellow and she suddenly looked so old. There were bags under her eyes and her hair was all tousled. She had always been big, but now she had a belly that hung over her thighs. Water dribbled down her chin.

"Momma," I said, "I just wanna say that—"

"You don't never talk to me like that, you hear me?" she said. She was angry, trembling, but the words sounded more like a plea than a threat. I felt sorry for her.

"I just wish we could have a normal weekend for once," I said.

"Normal like what? Like them people across the way with their fancy car and perfect lawn and little sandbox for them brat kids? Is that what you want?" There were tears in her eyes and one rolled down her cheek and in the silence I could hear it drip onto the linoleum.

"Mom, it isn't that," I said, even though I was jealous of those people across the way for exactly all those things.

"What then?" she said. "You just starting to think you're better than us, don't you? Your nose always in some book. You weren't even respectful to our friends last night."

"That's cause they were drunk, mom."

"Oh, so you don't like people who drink then? You're too good for that?"

"I just don't like when things get so loud

and out of control. And I don't like the way Jack looks at me when he gets drunk. I don't like that man even when he's sober."

That at least made mom laugh. "You're right about Jack. He ain't no good."

I laughed too. I went over to her and she held out her arms for a hug, and she was crying now, really sobbing like she often did after she had a bad night.

I held my arms out, and she kissed me on the head as she took me in her arms.

I held her tight for a minute. I could feel all the anger inside her, the sorrow and the frustration. It was like a white hot rage that flowed through her.

I closed my eyes and saw her as a little girl, her hair all done up in pigtails, her momma and daddy taking her to church. Then came the accident. She was so alone, so sad, so angry. And then she had to live with her uncle, a mean, terrible man and a drunk. And everything changed, and mom hated everything in the world. And then she met dad, and I could feel it get worse, all the pain she had.

I held her tight and she whispered, "I love you, my sweet baby," and I just held her and felt that white hot heat seeping from her body, to me.

I was filled with her heat and my head throbbed and ached and I heard a thousand voices at once, screaming at me, telling me everything that was wrong was all my fault. I felt dizzy and weak and feverish.

I opened my eyes and Nancy was standing there above me.

"What the heck happened?" she asked.

She reached down and dragged me to my feet. Mom lay on the linoleum tile.

"Help me get her to the couch," I said.

We tugged her by the arms, but she was

like a big jellyfish, and out cold. There was no way we were getting her to her feet.

"Momma!" Nancy said. "Get up and get in bed!" But momma just lay there.

Finally, each of us grabbed one of her legs. She was heavy and it took some work, but we dragged her across the room to the couch. She slid across the linoleum pretty easy, considering how big she was; her tights and t-shirt made her almost glide. But then there was the problem of getting her on the couch.

Killer came over then, and he looked at momma and licked her face.

She woke for a moment, and looked at me and Nancy and started crying again.

"Shhh, momma, it's okay," I said. "Only, stand up and lie on the couch and sleep."

Nancy and I each took one of her arms, and she managed to get to her knees, and then we pushed, and rolled her onto the couch.

She lay there faceup and let out a big gasp of air. In another minute her eyes were closed and she was snoring peacefully.

"She'll sleep like that all day," I said. My own head hurt badly now, and my muscles ached.

"Let's get out of here before dad wakes up," I said. I went to my room and got the little bit of money I had saved up from under my mattress, and grabbed my purse, and we slipped out as quietly as we could.

We got our bikes and we rode away from there, out of the cul de sac.

The little kids across the street waved and yelled at us, and I waved back at them. Kids don't hold grudges, even if their parents do.

"Where we going?" Nancy called to me, as we pedaled away.

"You'll see," I said.

The school playground was less than a mile away, and we were there in no time.

We racked our bikes, and Nancy said, "Momma told us we weren't supposed to go to school yet."

"What momma don't know won't hurt us," I said. "And besides, it's Saturday, and there ain't no school today."

"Then what are all them kids doin' here?"

"They come to play, just like us. Come on, sis. It'll be fun."

Nancy always got nervous around other kids. They liked to tease her, I think because they sensed how she felt she just didn't belong. She hesitated, and just stood by her bike and looked at the ground.

"I don't know, Chris. Maybe I ought to just go home. Momma might be mad when she sees that we gone."

I took her by the hand. "You really want to be there when she and dad wake up?"

She shook her head and looked at me and I could see the tears in the corner of her eyes. It made me mad. Not that she was upset. But that she thought so little of herself.

"You got every right to be on that playground, girl," I said. "And I ain't about to let no one pick on you. You hear me? I'll put my shoe in their backside before I let that happen."

Nancy laughed at that. I gave her a hug and we walked hand in hand over to the playground.

The kids called this playground The Forest, because it had all these neat wooden bridges and stairs and boxes everywhere. You went in and it was like a maze. You spiraled up and up into these wooden boxes, ducking down now and then and even crawling through some spaces 'til you

reached the top, where you had a view of the school and the big grassy field beside it.

There were kids up at the top and running across the bridges and we could hear them hollering in some of the boxes. I looked around but didn't see Marcus nowhere. I wondered if he came after all.

Marcus was an older boy, in seventh grade, though he was older than that cause he was left back a couple of times. I met him one day at McDonald's when mom left us there, and he came in and sat next to us, which surprised me. He talked to us like we were just normal kids and not just the new kids in the neighborhood, and I thought that was nice of him. We became friends after that, and I met up with him when I could sneak away on my bike.

I never told momma about him, of course. If she knew I was making new friends in the neighborhood, she'd put an end to that right away.

We started our way through the forest, and just as we reached the second level, there was Marcus, sitting underneath a bridge like some troll or something.

"Hey Chris," he said. "Hey Nancy."

"Hey," Nancy said.

"So remember I said I had something special planned for today?" he said. "I want you to show that trick to everyone here."

My heart sank. I thought we were friends. But now I knew I never should have showed him what I could do.

It had happened when I took a spill on my bike last week. He was following me, and helped me up. I had a bad skinned knee. I healed it up with my touch. I didn't mean to be a show off, but I guess I just wanted him to see how I was special. But now he wanted me to do it again, on demand, and I didn't like how that made me feel.

Marcus whistled and yelled out. Kids from all over the forest made their way over to us. I wanted to run, but I stayed where I was. I thought it would be showing weakness to run away from all these kids.

Marcus stood up from under the bridge, towering over every kid there. He pushed his sandy brown bangs out of his eyes.

"This here is my friend Christine," he said. "And she has a special power and you're all gonna see it right now," he said.

"Marcus, don't," I said. I could feel my face grow hot. "Let's get out of here, Nancy." I took my sister by the hand again.

"Wait just a second," Marcus said. He pulled a small swiss army knife from his pocket, and opened it and held it up. He brought the knife to his hand and sliced across his palm.

Blood trickled down his arm and dripped on the wood.

"Now why'd you go and do something so stupid as that?" I said.

"You're gonna heal me up," He said.

The kids had made big circle around us. There was a dozen or so of them, and I could feel every eye on me as he stood there, his palm dripping red.

I turned away with Nancy.

But then Nancy squealed out and I felt her arm tug away from me.

Marcus had her by her pigtails, and pulled her close to him.

"You let her go!" I screamed.

Nancy was crying and wailing out horribly, almost like Killer did when she got angry or hurt. Her squeals rang out in the sky, so loud I thought the whole neighborhood must be able to hear. Marcus brought the knife to her arm, and slowly cut across it, just above her elbow.

He let her go, and she fell, and I

screamed out at him. Nancy lay there, blood trickling from her arm and she cried and cried.

Through my own tears, I ran at Marcus. I didn't care if he had a knife.

I punched him as hard as I could in his gut. The knife went flying from his hand and I kicked him between the legs. He went down and I kicked him again, as he lay there with his bloody palm, cradling his gut and whining like a fool.

"Come on, Nancy, get up," I said. "I guess momma was right. This school ain't good for us."

The kids made way for us. I half carried, half dragged Nancy back to her bike.

"Ain't you gonna heal it?" she sniffed. She pointed to the cut on her arm. It wasn't deep, but blood was running down to her wrist.

"Maybe later," I said.

Nancy cried all the way home. When we

got there, we left our bikes in the driveway and went to the backyard.

"Give me your arm," I told Nancy.

She put it in mine, and I held her. She was sticky with blood, and her face was stained with tears.

I could feel inside her all the pain and rage I felt myself. "Someday, we're gonna get out of here," I told her.

Her arm was warm in my hands and I could feel it under my touch, sort of humming.

I let go and Nancy rubbed it. "It feels itchy," she said.

"But it's good as new."

I said again: "Someday, we're gonna get outta here."

Killer came over to us, and she licked my hand and we sat there in the cool grass holding hands, just me and Nancy. Clouds were rolling in, and it felt like rain.

—The End—



“Enchanted Forest.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft