
7-15-2013

Mythic Circle #35

Gwenyth E. Hood
Marshall University

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



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

Recommended Citation

Hood, Gwenyth E. (2013) "Mythic Circle #35," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2013: Iss. 35, Article 1.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2013/iss35/1>

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

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



Online Summer Seminar 2023

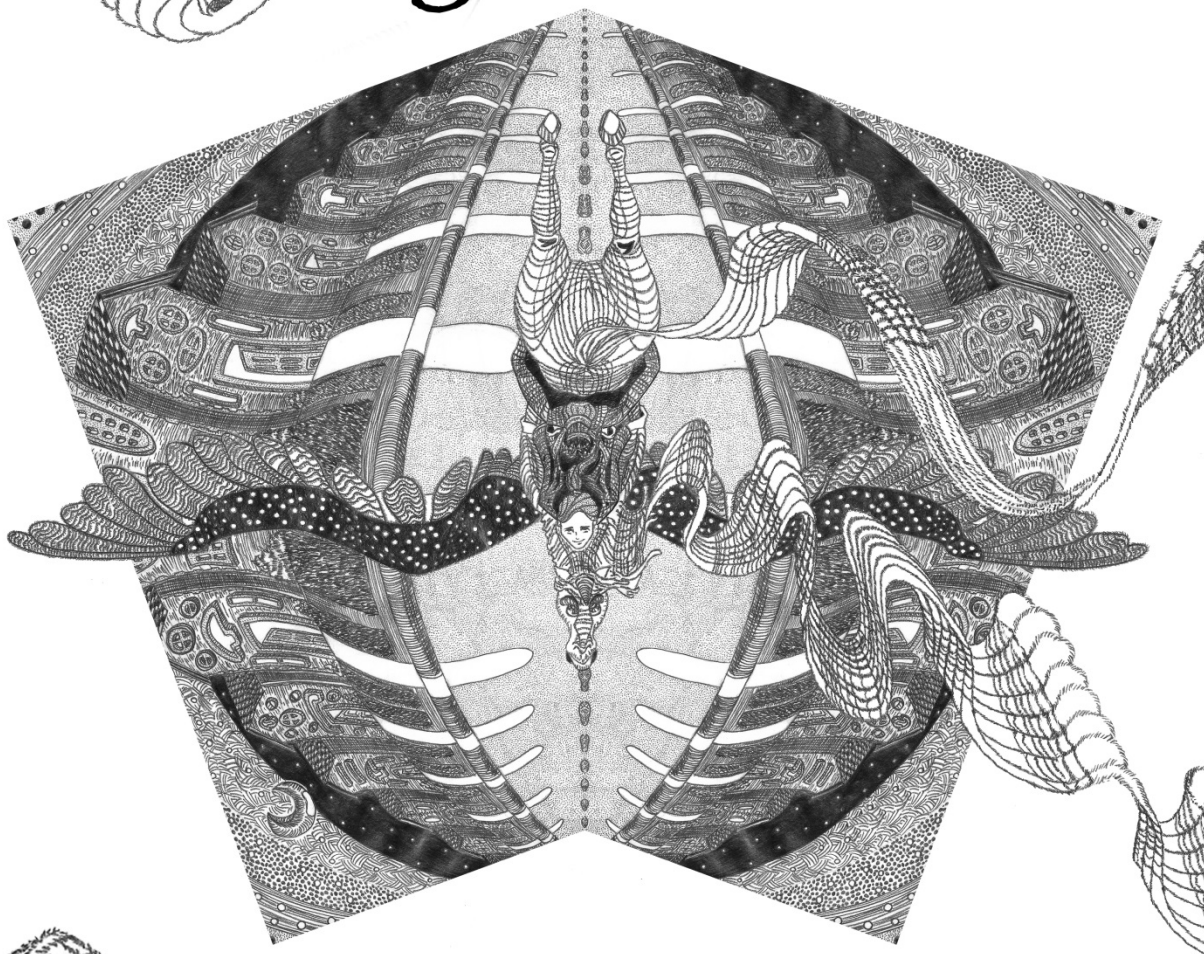
August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

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



Mythic Circle #35

The Mythic Circle



35 / 2013

About This Publication.....	39
Editorial, Comments from Readers, Books by Mythic Circlers.....	39, 40
About Our Contributors.....	40

STORIES

<i>Tannara Young</i> —The Summer Valley	2
<i>Anna Kashina</i> —Mistress of the Solstice (excerpt)	21
<i>Joe R. Christopher</i> —Poseidon and Queen Cassiopea.....	29
<i>Joanna Michal Hoyt</i> —The Mind Has Mountains.....	35
<i>Scathe meic Beorh</i> —Myself to Myself.....	48
<i>Dag Rossman</i> —The Night of the Wolf Riders.....	51

POEMS

<i>Seth Leeper</i> –Persephone Rising.....	17
<i>Alexander Dove Lempke</i> –The Pale Wanderer, p. 22; -- Kurdénras	42
<i>David Sparenberg</i> —Dream of Death and the Way of the Shaman.....	27
-- And of Our Mother.....	50
<i>Ryder Miller</i> —The Eye.....	46
<i>Shane Clack</i> --Friday	47

ILLUSTRATIONS

- L. C. Atencio: Front cover; pp.2, 4, 5,6, 7, 8, 9, 10,11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 29, 30, 31,32,33, 34
 Tim Callahan: p. 20, 24, back cover
 Gonzalo Canedo p.38, 50
 Philip Reuss: p. 43

Editor: Gwennyth E. Hood

Copyright © 2013 by The Mythopoeic Society; all rights revert to authors and illustrators.

The Summer Valley

by

Tannara Young

Jehan ran down the road, his chestnut hair flying in disarray about his dirt smudged cheeks. He loved to run, to feel the wind against his face and the freedom of his speed. The rowan trees, planted in lines along either side of the road, flashed past him as he sprinted with all exuberance of youth newly released into spring after a long winter. As he rounded the bend in the road, he skidded to a stop. Just out of sight of his house an old woman stood under the flower laden trees.

Her hair hung down in a thick, white braid. She wore a gown the color of new spring leaves under a darker green cloak. Her dress hung loosely on her thin frame and her face folded in wrinkles, with laugh lines about her eyes – eyes of a gold-flecked green – which looked years younger than her face.

Jehan skidded to a halt, abashed. He had never seen her before and strangers seldom came to his small, remote village.



Her eyes lit as she saw him and a smile spread across her face. His shyness disappeared and he grinned back, crinkling

up his dancing brown eyes and showing off the lopsided gap of a missing tooth.

“Good morrow, child,” the old woman said. “What a fine day for running.”

“I run the fastest in my whole village,” he announced, proudly. “I can win all the races, even against Simon, who is twelve.”

“And how old are you?” she asked him.

“Eight,” he said, drawing himself up. “My nameday was just last month.”



“Eight,” she sighed, wistful. “It’s been a long time since I was eight.”

He glanced her over, doubtful she had ever been as young as eight.

“Jehan!” his mother’s voice came faintly. He danced backwards on the road to wave at her, before looking back to the old woman.

“I have to go,” he said. He hesitated, oddly reluctant to say good bye. “Would you like to come and meet my mother? She made current buns this morning. She would let you have one.”

The old woman smiled. "No, but thank you. I must go." Her eyes grew sad. "I just wanted to meet you and to say good bye."

He stared at her. "Um... good bye," he said, confused.

His mother called again.

"Good bye, Jehan," said the old woman. "Better not worry your mother." She turned and slipped into the trees, not going by way of the road safely guarded by the rowans, but into the Forest beyond them. Jehan stared after her in astonishment. Within moments her green cloak had disappeared into the shadows. His mother's voice became more irritated. He spun on his heel and sprinted back to her.

"Mother," he cried, "mother – I think I just met a fairy."

His mother laughed as he barreled into her. She hugged him. "A fairy, Jehan? On the road!"

"Yes!" he enthused, "she was as old as the oldest trees except for her eyes. And she knew my name. When she said good bye, she knew my name without me telling her."

"Or she heard me calling," laughed his mother. "What would a fairy be doing on the road, silly? Come on, let's get supper started. Your father is on his way home."

As they went inside Jehan glanced back down the long sunlit road. Nothing stirred there except the breeze ruffling the leaves.

###

Jehan slid quietly through the thick green shadows of the Forest. His bag already held a brace of quail, but he was not ready to return to the village. The sun, climbing toward noon, had only just begun to banish the chill from the early summer morning. He wanted to enjoy the lovely day, away from the noisy village where everybody always had their nose poking into everybody else's business. Here, in the quiet of the Forest, he could think his own thoughts and dream his own dreams.

The other villagers only went into the Forest when strictly necessary and then tried to stick to the well known areas. He knew his mother and father would be horrified if they

knew just how deep he ventured into the green shade. But the unexplored regions drew him, and he loved to search for glimpses of the true wonders of the Forest.

Once he had seen a troupe of little people, no bigger than his knees – their skin a smooth pale green and their hair wild tangles of twiggy brown – dancing with fierce abandon on a bed of moss. Another time he had seen a flock of birds as brightly colored as a rainbow settle, trilling, onto a tree. Once, coming home in the dusk, he had sworn he saw a silvery shape among the trunks, a graceful shape with a long flash of light coming off its forehead: A unicorn.

He had felt moments of terror too. A large black creature had once chased him up a tree. It looked something like a wolf, but with a misshapen jaw, and red, baleful eyes. It circled below him for a time, but then a rustling in the bushes had attracted its attention and it loped off. He had not gone into the Forest for a month after that, but eventually the lure of its wonders drew him back.

Today he slid between the trees, brushing against the new summer leaves, so bright they looked as though they were illuminated from within. His dark hair was pulled into a tail and his stained leather breaches and jerkin camouflaged with the sun-dappled wood. His bare feet made little sound on the leaf-litter.

Ahead he saw a place where the dark trunks opened into a wash of golden sunlight. He ducked around a craggy boulder and stopped, catching his breath in wonder. He stood on the edge of a small valley. The ground fell away, perhaps about fifty feet or so, into a wide canyon where the trees grew in a few scattered clumps. Lush, green grass dotted with flowers shone in the bright sun. Nearby a small stream spilled over the edge of the cliff and fell into a stony pool below, before wandering off into the grass.

Entranced, Jehan climbed down the rough rock wall and landed lithely on one of the green hillocks below. He knelt for a moment beside the little stream and took a drink of

the clear, sweet water. Then he set off, following its winding path into the sunlit valley.



As he rounded a spur of the cliff, he saw that the valley was bigger than he had thought. He had climbed down at the narrowest point and it opened out into a wide flowery field, with copses of trees here and there, and the little stream glinting with reflected sky.

As he stood admiring the view, a movement caught his eye and he froze warily. Then he stared in astonishment. A young woman drifted across the meadow. She wore a wreath of tiny wild roses on her ruddy hair and had tucked the skirts of her leaf-green dress into her belt, showing her calves and narrow, bare feet. Her clothing appeared odd, very simple and old-fashioned, not like the layers of colorful skirts and tightly laced bodices of the girls in the village. Her hands were filled with more flowers and a soft smile flitted across her

lips. She looked ethereal; shimmering against the grass as if she was but a mirage of sunlight and sparkling water.

Jehan let out his breath, and though the sound was whisper soft, she turned suddenly and looked at him. She stood not far away – ten yards perhaps – and he could see that her eyes mirrored the color of the sunlit leaves of the young birch beside her.

They stood frozen for a long moment. Then she began to back away slowly, never taking her eyes off him. Suddenly afraid she was going to vanish, he took a step forward and said, “Wait!”

She stilled, staring at him.

“Please don’t go,” he said. “I’m sorry I intruded. I didn’t know anyone was here.”

She deliberated for a moment, then her shoulders relaxed slightly and she said, “You didn’t intrude – I mean, I was just exploring.”

She had a lovely voice, low and musical, and he thought that he would be happy to stand right there in the warm sun and listen to her speak for an eternity. But she waited for his answer and as he stood there, silent, she began to look nervous again.

“Are you a fairy?” he blurted out. He could have kicked himself, but she seemed like a creature of another world, appearing in this enchanted valley like a dream.

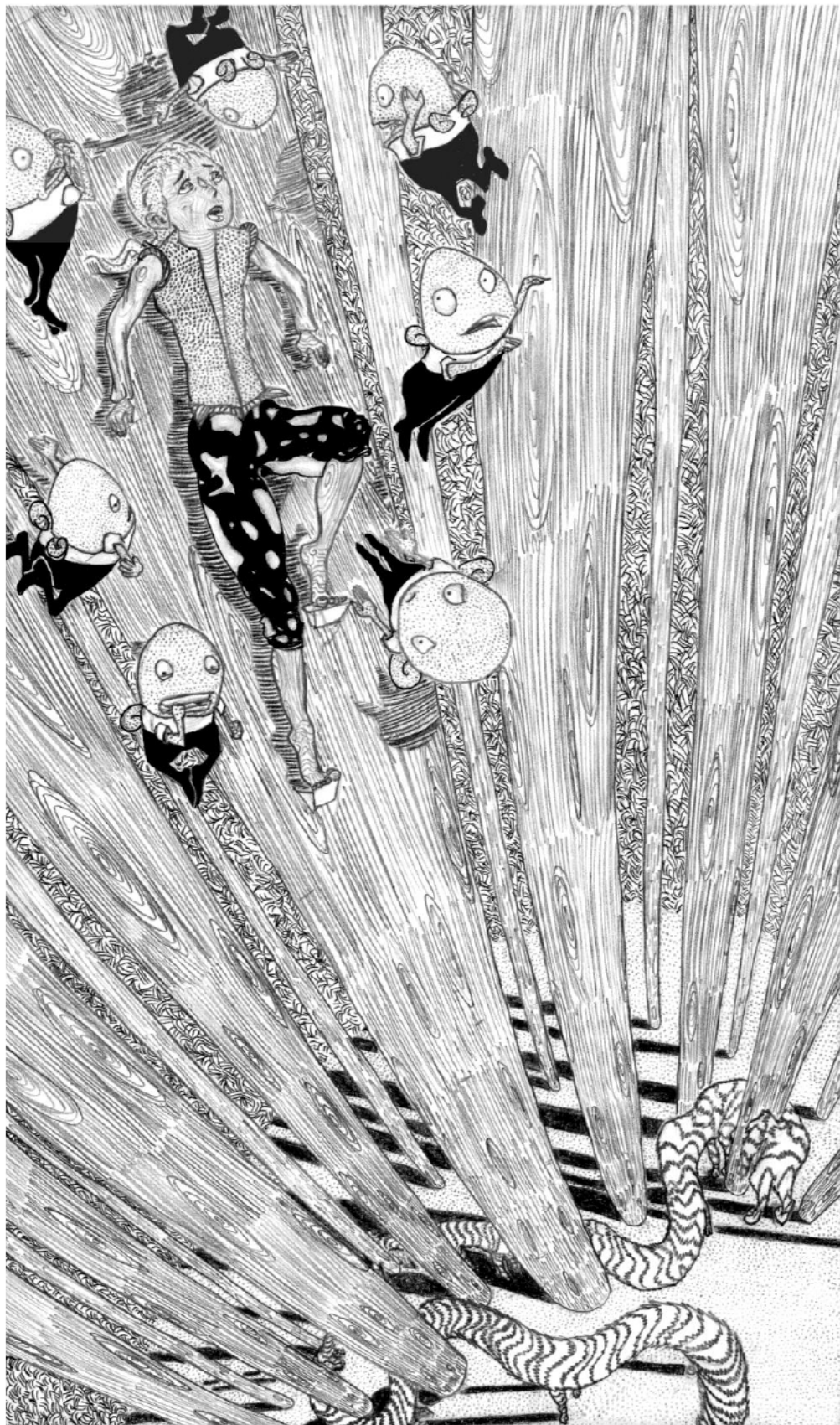
She looked quite startled, and then eyed him cautiously. “No,” she said. “I’m not a fairy. Why on earth would you think I was a fairy?”

He knew his face flushed, but he hurried to answer. “I don’t know. You’re just so beautiful and you seemed to appear out of the sunlight or something. The Fair Folk are said to sometimes look like us, but with unearthly beauty.”

She blushed and looked down at the flowers in her hands.

“I’m Jehan,” he said, stepping forward and holding out his hand. “I was exploring too.”







She hesitated for a long moment. Then she stepped forward and took his hand. "I'm Ysabel," she said. She glanced up at him as she spoke and they stood frozen again staring at each other. He could feel the cool press of her hand against his palm and smell the warm scent of the roses in her hair.

How long they might have stood there he didn't know, but there was a sudden whirr of wings as a small flock of sparrows landed beside the water. They both turned to look and the startled birds took off again, disappearing into a nearby tree.

"Ysabel," he said, savoring her name. "Do you come here often?"

"I only found the valley today," she said. Slipping her hand out of his, she pointed back the way she had come. "I've been

gathering herbs. I am apprenticed to the herb-wife in our village."

"Where is your village?" asked Jehan.

"I live in Sallot," she said, pointing again to the north-west.

"I know Sallot!" he said. "I've been there to sell furs on market day. But it's almost a full day's journey along the Rowan Road. How did you get here?"

"It only took me since sun-up," she said.

"Where are you from?"

"Erivay," he gestured south.

She shook her head. "I've never heard of it."

"It's pretty small," he allowed. "Maybe a third of the size of Sallot. There's only one village farther down the Rowan Road before it ends at Rhyen."





"I have never been to Rhyen," she said. "I haven't ever been farther from Sallot than I can walk in a day. Some of my friends want to go to Rhyen or even to the King's capitol."

"What about you?" asked Jehan.

"I doubt there is anything I can see in even the King's city that is more wondrous than what I see every day in the Forest."

He smiled. "I will never tire of exploring the Forest either." They had begun walking and soon came to the place where Ysabel had left her basket. Jehan picked it up for her as they continued wondering through the rich summer meadow.

The little valley was particularly rich in herbs. She showed him the swaths of a rare mint – dark green with purple stems, and then the fat *elentra* root, also called *bloodstop*, prized for treating wounds.

As they wandered past one of the high rock walls, Ysabel suddenly said "Oh!" and caught Jehan's hand, pulling him toward a young tree that grew in a sheltered nook. The tree's branches hung low and heavy with ruby-red fruit that glistened, translucent in the sun.

"What is it?" Jehan asked.

"Honey-sap plum," she said, plucking one of the fruit. She bit into it and closed her eyes for a moment, savoring. "Try it."

He took the plum she held out and took a bite. The flavor exploded across his senses. It was sweet and tart and tasted of flowers and honey and the heat of the sun, and something else that was the essence of an enchanted summer day.

She smiled and reached up to wipe the juice that had dribbled onto his chin. He caught her hand, pressing it to his face and stared at her.

Slowly her smile faded, but the expression that replaced it made his heart pound and his skin flush. He took a step forward and lifted her chin so that he could kiss her lips, tasting sweet and wild from the plum. She shuddered and closed the distance between them, her hand framing his face. The plum slipped to the ground, forgotten.

That night Jehan lay awake, staring through the darkness. He drifted through the day's memories – as sweet and strange as a dream: straying through the dappled shade under the copses of trees, Ysabel's hand warming in his own; the sound of her laugh; the blush that heated her cheeks, her long lashes brushing against the rosy color. He felt as though he had told her every hope and dream he had stored in his imagination and that now he carried hers as well.

Though he felt he had barely slept, he woke in the pale gold dawn and slipped out of the house and into the dark trees, long before anyone else stirred. She couldn't have come yet, he thought, it was too early. But as he ran across the dew-kissed grass, he saw her passing out from the shade of a huge old oak tree, stepping into the rosy light of morning. In an instant he had reached her and cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. The morning birdsong wove a bright melody around them, as her hands came up to catch hold of his shirt, pulling him closer as she leaned into his caress.



She silenced him by sitting up and drawing his lips to hers; he could again taste the sweetness of the honey-sap plum on her lips.

"Of course I want you to come and find me," she said. "Of course I want to marry you."

That summer stretched into a blur of green and gold; the long hazy heat of the days were only briefly interrupted by the warm nights where the stars hung low in the deep indigo sky. Some nights Jehan never returned home, instead sleeping in the long grass on a blanket with Ysabel curled at his side. During the day they explored the valley and sat for hours talking or just dreaming.

He told her about his family – younger and older sisters and his one young brother; the little house that seemed too small for them all, though his eldest sisters lived elsewhere in the village with their husbands and their own children.

She told him about her brother who had raised her when their parents had died in a fever, the skills she was learning as an herb-wife and her dreams of one day planting a garden full of the herbs she gathered in the Forest.



One afternoon, as they lay under the honey-sap plum – with plum pits stacked in a little pile between them - Jehan sat up suddenly, startling Ysabel, who dozed in the sun.

“I shall come to your village,” he said, his eyes alight with excitement. “Ysabel, I shall come to your village tomorrow and ask your brother for your hand. Then you can come and meet my parents.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “Jehan, are you asking me to marry you?”

He flushed. “I’m sorry, I should have said it differently, I should have asked you first if you wanted...”

The journey to Sallot took most of the next day. Jehan paused outside of the town to wash his face and change his shirt from an old patched one to his holiday best. He brushed the dust from his boots, patted down his hair and entered.

Confusion struck him at once. The square was bigger than Ysabel's description. "You will first see a smithy, near an old conker tree," she told him. But his first sight was the inn, called the Sign of the Dragonfly. Once passed the inn yard, however, he saw the smithy and beyond it the ancient horse-chestnut tree spreading over the well.

He found the lane she had directed him to, but paused in more confusion. She had said he would find five cottages, but he counted eight. Hers was supposed to be the last one, with an apple tree in the yard. The second to the last had an apple tree, while the last had huge old roses climbing up to its upper window.

As he wavered, irresolute, a young woman came out of the cottage with the roses, a small child balanced on her hip. She smiled in a friendly way, saying, "Good morrow, sir. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes," he said, relieved. "Pray, which house does Ysabel Lauru live in?"

She looked confused. "There is none of that name here," she said.

"I came to the wrong lane then," he guessed, puzzled.

She hesitated. "I know of none of that name in Sallot," she admitted. "I was born and raised here. There is a young child, a babe really – Ysabel Farrow – the daughter of the tanner, but I do not know the name 'Lauru.'"

Jehan stared at her with a dawning sense of horror. "You've never heard the name? But she told me herself – she has golden-red hair and eyes green as birch leaves. You've never seen her?"

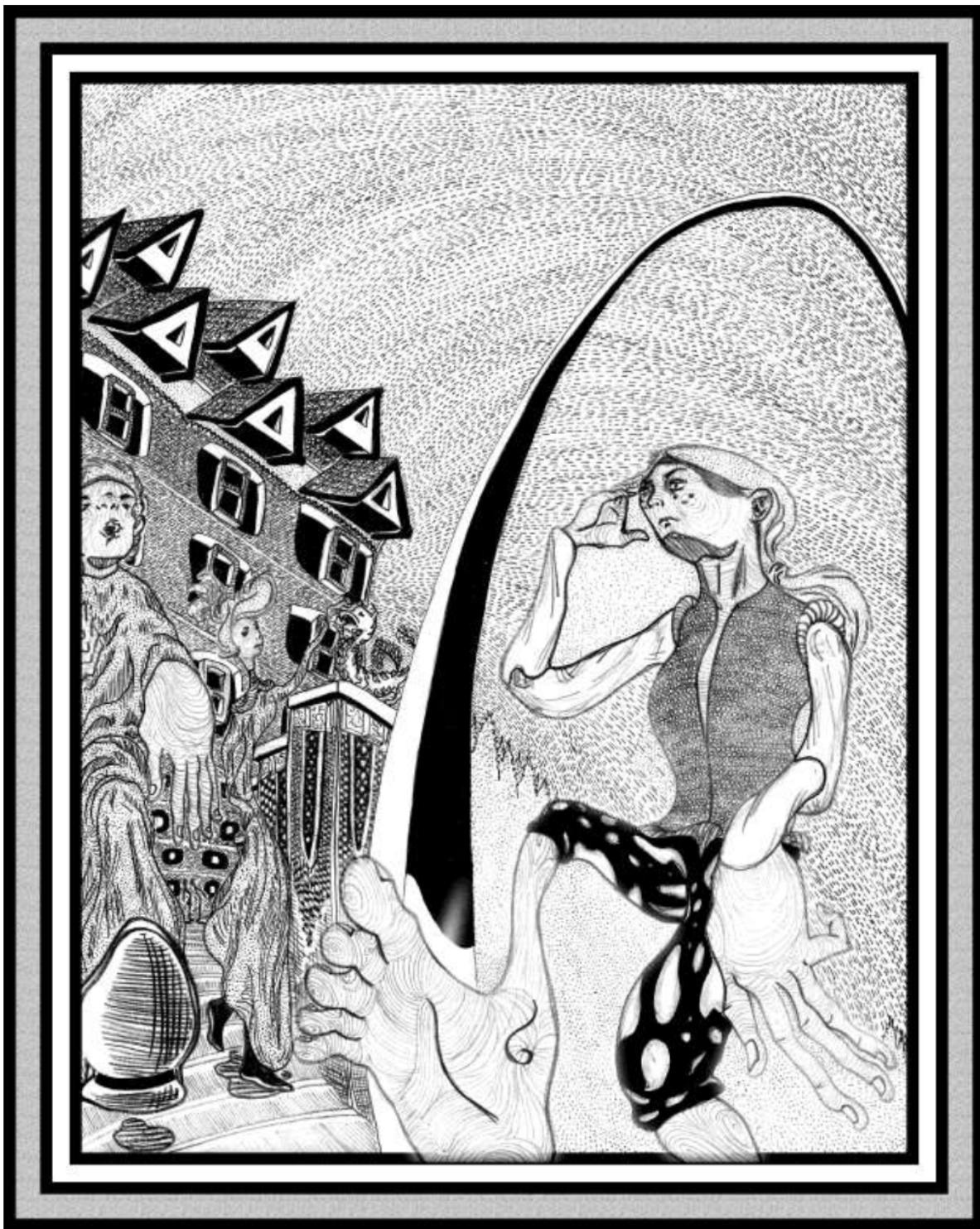
The young woman looked doubtful. "Bette, the innkeeper's wife, and her daughters have red hair. There's also my neighbor Toman - his hair is reddish. No one named Ysabel."

Jehan thanked her and went dazedly to the inn, where the girl serving the tables indeed had red haired, but was not Ysabel. He questioned her and she shook her head. "There is none of that description here," she said. He asked a few of the patrons at the inn and then a couple of men on the street, but besides young Ysabel Farrow, no one knew the name. He left the town as the sun slid behind the trees, too upset to think about taking a room or even a meal at the Dragonfly. He stumbled through the dark forest, coming into the valley just as the dawn began to warm the sky. Ysabel came to him as the valley flooded with light.

"Where were you?" he cried. "I went to Sallot, but no one there had heard of you."

"Where were you?" she retorted. "I sat beneath the apple tree and sewed all day, but you never came."





They stared at each other. "I asked everybody I met," he said. "On the street, at the Dragonfly..."

"Where?" she said, startled.

"The Sign of the Dragonfly? The inn just beside the town gates?"

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she sat down slowly on a nearby log. Her face showed confusion and a touch of fear.

"Ysabel?" he asked, sitting beside her, taking her hands.

"Robert Wellwood has plans to build an inn. He and the smith talked to the village council for permission. They have agreed that the building shall begin next spring."

"I don't understand," said Jehan. "I saw only one inn in Sallot and it was old and venerable."

She looked at him then and said, "Jehan, what year is it?"

"By the Lorgren Calendar the year is 1432," he said, slowly.

Her face went white. After a long silence, Jehan whispered, "Ysabel, what year is it?"

"By the Lorgren Calendar the year is 1368."

They sat, silently, hands clasped. A lark sang sweetly overhead, fading away into the blue.

"How is this possible?" Ysabel asked finally.

"It is the magic of the Forest," said Jehan. "They say that time runs differently in some parts of the Forest. Those old tales - folks who go into it and come out a hundred years later thinking a day has passed."

"Those are only stories," protested Ysabel. "And we have come out into our own time each night we part."

Jehan thought for a long moment. "I will come with you," he said, finally. "I will come to your time."

"And leave your family?" Ysabel pulled her hand away. "Think of it, Jehan! You might be dead before your parents are even born."

He turned to look at her. "Ysabel, you might be dead before I am born."

They stared at each other in horror.

That night she let him try to come with her, but as they left the southern end of the valley, climbing the faint track up the wooded slope, he felt her hand in his grow insubstantial. He tried to tighten his grasp, but there was nothing to hold onto and her face faded into the shadowy twilight.

"Ysabel," he called, and thought he heard the faintest answer:

"Jehan, my love, tomorrow, come to me tomorrow."

After that night, they seldom talked about the strange twist of time which allowed them to meet. They gathered stones and fallen branches and made a little hut near the waterfall. Jehan made seats from sections of a fallen tree and Ysabel put wild roses and white poppies in an earthenware cup and made them a little stone oven.

The valley turned from green to gold and from gold to amber as the chill of winter began to seep from darkness into the dawn. The grass grew high, producing fat seed-heads. Asters and goldenrod replaced the summer flowers, and wild carrot bloomed, white and lacy. The petals of the roses fell, leaving scarlet hips ripening in their place.



Then, on the evening of Harvestmass, Jehan slipped away from the bonfires and the great

communal feast that marked the autumn equinox and ghosted through the dark trees, along a hidden path that he had followed now so often. He came into the valley as the first stars bloomed against the azure sky. He saw Ysabel, her pale dress covered in a cloak of dark wool, running across the dry grass, silvery in the light of the rising moon.



"Jehan!" she cried, laughing. "I thought you might not come." It was a trick of the light perhaps, but he thought he saw the shivering stalks of grass through and beyond the sweep of her cloak.

"Jehan!" she cried. Her voice melted into the wind. For one brief moment he felt her against him, her lips cool on his, her hair blowing sweetly about them and then he held nothing but the shivering moonlight.

"Jehan..." the wind whispered. "Jehan..."

The valley was empty day after day. Beech leaves fell in silent drifts of gold. The grasses lay their seeds down onto the mat of roots and black earth. When Jehan came in the morning a tracery of frost shimmered on the red leaves of the rose canes. Birds gathered and then flew southward. And Ysabel did not come.

In the darkness of winter, Jehan stopped going. He lay in his bed and imagined the green branches arching over the roof of the

little hut and the heavy smell of the poppies on the rough table. When his eyes shut, he dreamt of the hut covered in snow, whiter than the poppies, whiter than the fine skin of Ysabel's throat and breast.

At long last, spring stirred. The pale blades of grass pushed up through the dark soil and little cups of purple and gold crocus sat among them like jewels on the robe of a king. Jehan's wild irresponsibility of the last summer and dark depression of the winter had mellowed into a new maturity that his parents watched with anxious pride. He began to build himself a little house, nestled into the eaves of the Forest. As the weather warmed, the villagers gathered to bless the new sown fields, which already put forth green shoots into the lengthening days.

Then on the eve of St. Flores' Day, as Jehan was finishing shingling the roof, a stranger came to find him, hailing him by name.

He swung down, wiping the sweat off his face with a rag, and the two men took stock of each other. The stranger was older than he, with threads of silver in his ruddy gold hair. But his eyes were strangely familiar. He held out a callused hand and said, "I am Toman Lauru."

"Lauru!" Jehan gasped. He stared wide eyed at the man, then took in an unsteady



breath.

"What?" he asked. "I mean why are you here? Who are you?"

The man stared at him for a long moment, looking almost as disturbed as Jehan felt. Then he fumbled in his vest and drew out a sheaf of paper. "I am your grandson."

Jehan read the paper

"Jehan, my love," it said. "Come back to the valley. Between high spring and high autumn, in the daylight of the year the enchantment holds. At the moment you read this I am gone these many years. But if you come to me, come this very moment, I am waiting for you in the valley. Please come back to me."

The paper fluttered to the ground at Toman's feet as Jehan disappeared into the Forest at a run. There was the path he had worn through the trees, there the cliff at the edge of the valley and, as he leapt down it, heedless and nimble as a mountain goat, there was Ysabel running across the new spring grass to meet him.

###

An eight-day later, Jehan returned to Sallot. He retraced his steps to the lane that had eight cottages and went straight to the one with the ancient apple tree in the yard. He knocked on the door. An old woman answered. She was tall with silver hair in twisted braids upon her head. Jehan hesitated. He could see Ysabel in her elegant cheekbones and narrow hands, but her eyes were his own clear brown. He stood dumbstruck; she was equally dazed.

"Mother? Who is it?" Toman's voice came from the back room.

"You are my father." Her voice was so like Ysabel's that Jehan swallowed hard, before he could speak.

"Yes, I am."

Toman came up behind her, followed by another woman, small and dark haired with a dark-haired baby on her hip. The child's eyes were green as his father's, green as his great-grandmother's.

Jehan pulled his gaze away from his great-grandson and looked again at his daughter. He held out his hand. "Ysabel says she named you Jeanette," he said. "I'm... I'm so very pleased to meet you."

Jeanette's eyes filled with tears as she smiled, took his hand, and drew him inside the cottage.

###

In a small valley nestled in the Forest, a sturdy hut sat near the waterfall. About it grew a garden, planted with spring onions and broad-beans and the first spiky leaves of poppies sprouting among the vegetables. But for the running water, the scene lay quiet under the pale spring sunlight. An old woman, with a thick white braid and eyes of a gold flecked green, came down a path worn smooth by years of passage. She stood for a long moment, looking at the hut and the garden. Then she crossed to a young honey-sap plum and knelt beside a stone that lay there. She laid a spring of young rowan leaves beside the name upon the stone and traced the letters with her finger.

"Today I saw you in the spring of your life," she said, softly, "running down the Rowan Road. You never told me if you remembered that day or ever knew it was me who stopped you to say good-bye that one last time."



Persephone Rising

by

Seth Leeper

For the Uninitiated in the Rites of Eleusis

History tells us the lives of Demeter and Persephone are forever changed when Persephone is abducted by her uncle, Hades, from a field in broad daylight and taken to the underworld. Demeter, at first unaware, is devastated when her daughter disappears, and upon discovering her whereabouts, makes several pleas to Olympus to get her daughter back...

Demeter, a goddess of fertility and earthly replenishment, refuses to feed the earth until her daughter is returned to her side. When the pair is united again, however, it is discovered that Persephone consumed a pomegranate seed (some say four, six) while in the Underworld, and as a consequence, must spend part of the year with her uncle below the surface of the earth, and the other part above ground with her mother...

During the time Persephone resides in the depths of the earth, humans experience the cold and challenging Fall and Winter months, and enjoy the light and freshness of plentiful Spring and Summer when she resides with her mother on the surface...

Disappearance, Week Five

I wear the rags of a common vagabond,
weeping into layers of tattered cloth.
Perched upon the fountain's edge I see

a young girl, she reminds me of you.
Hair like sun-kissed wheat and barley,
radiant maiden skin, milky in daylight.

She smiles at me, invites me to her home,
I dwell here in discretion, keeping my
rags wrapped close. By night I

nurture an infant son, encasing him
in the flames of eternity. My task
interrupted by his mother's outrage,

I rise to my full goddess height and
cast the infant down. My grief unfolds
in streaks of blinding light and heat,

I leave the mother shaking with knowledge.
Remorse wears thick on her face, but I
shall not return before the fires of Eleusis.

Disappearance, Week Nine

Encircled by a field of dry barley,
the ground chafes
beneath my scabbed
calloused feet.
There is no one in sight.

I've come here to call for you, daughter,
to peer down into the cracks
between surface and bowels.

I dig into the earth,
scraping away at dead soil,
expelling worms,
dislodging roots,
uprooting lost stones.

Above and behind me
fly innards of agriculture.

I scrape away dirt
until my fingers bleed,
nails break.

Breath short, persistent.

I dig, screaming your name,

hot tears,
hot tears escape me.

Disappearance, Week Seventeen

I can hear the cries of the hungry:

the sobbing mother who can't feed
her infant, sound of disappointed
children going to bed with empty stomachs.

Before you were taken, daughter,
we would have fed them together,
brought them fresh soil, rich grains,
crisp water. We would have celebrated

the rising sun with them, danced
in the field, bloomed flowers with
simple touch.

But there is no light inside me, daughter,
just a vast hollowness, a bottomless well.

I see no joy, no glee to adorn. I feel
no connection to the people, nor the land.

My life-giving womb is dead.

Not a seed will germ while I await
our reunion. No desperate pleas,
rotting carcasses of sacrifices, or

temples can pierce through the heavy
clouds of grief. By now the

flames of sacrifice won't save anyone.

Endless distance sprawls
between myself and the faithful.

Hades Speaks

In my defense:

my rough words,
aggressive manner,
were the purest tributes
I could offer you.
Your beauty blinded me,
the heat of it, thick on the air,
heavy on the stone walls,
doused the air in heady

coercive aromas. I never
knew myself in your presence.

My hands would get away from me,
I would forget myself.

I'd come to
at the sound
of your screaming,
and by then
it was too late.

I'd gone so far,
come so close

to push you far away

Persephone rising

You may never understand
the blood red wounds

left on my psyche, my spirit,
after my first time
in the underworld.

You may never care to hear
how I dissolved in your presence,

pacified by your brute strength
and authority.

Enough time has passed, red wounds
now blue; will stronger. The scars and bruises

scabbed and healed, cured by the delicious
oxygen and fresh waters aboveground.

Potions and soothing remedies helped
center my mind, calm my nerves. Experience
taught me diplomacy on land and beneath it.

I am Queen now. I bestow mercy
and vengeance in the same fist.

Time has eroded
the lithe spring maiden

and left a fertility goddess
of life and death.

I give and take away
within the same breath,

and I denounce
the unlawful, the forced-upon, the exploitive.

I denounce you, Husband,
but for now

contempt offers comfort
until history writes another page

for me to kill you in.



Mistress of the Solstice (excerpt)

by Anna Kashina

(The dark essence of Russian myth.)

I stood beside my father and watched the girl drown. She was a strong one. Her hands continued to reach out long after her face had disappeared from view. The splashing she made could have soaked a flock of wild geese to the bone. She wanted to live, but there was no escape from the waters of the Sacrifice Pool.

I looked at my father's handsome profile. His pale face, awash with moonlight, looked magnificent. The power of the Solstice enfolded him. It made me proud to be at his side, his daughter, his head priestess. He was the one who mattered. The only one.

The girl's struggle ceased. The rippling water of the lake stilled, glittering in the silvery light of the near-full moon. We watched the flicker of the glowing candles set in the flower wreaths as they floated downstream. A few of the wreaths had already sunk—bad luck for their owners, who would most likely die before the next Solstice. Maybe one of them belonged to the next Sacrifice Maiden?

I felt my father stir next to me, as he too peered into the amber depths of the lake.

"A fine sacrifice, Marya," he said. "You did well."

"Yes." I closed my eyes to feel the familiar calmness wash over me. I was detached. I didn't care.

I didn't even know her name.

My eyes still closed, I sensed my father throw off his cloak and stand naked, his arms open to the cool night breeze.

"Bring her to me, Marya," he whispered.

I stretched my thoughts, seeking out her body tangled in the weeds on the bottom of

the lake, seeking the spark of life that still remained there, trapped, beating in terror against its dead shell like a caged bird. I reached for it, brought it out, and gave it to my father. I sensed the moment the two of them became one, her virginal powers filling him with such a force that the air around us crackled with the freshness of a thunderstorm.

He sighed, slowly returning to his senses. I kept my eyes shut until he found his cloak on the damp grass and wrapped it around his shoulders. I sensed his aura returning as he once again became himself. The Tzar. The immortal. The invincible.

The undead.

We could hear people singing in the main glade. The celebration was at its full. Soon they would be jumping over the bonfire. As the night reached its darkest, quietest hour, they would break into couples and wander off into the forest. "Searching for a fern flower" they called it. Fern has no flowers, of course. But searching for it made a good excuse for seeking the solitude of the woods. Besides, the blood of virginity spilled on the Solstice night glowed like a rare, exotic blossom of true passion. Those who found their fern flowers tonight were blessed by Kupalo.

I could hear the whisper of every leaf, every tree, and every flower in the forest. This was the night when the powers of Kupalo roamed freely in the world; this was the night when everyone's mind was clouded by Love.

Except mine. Love had no power over me. My mind was free.

The book from which this excerpt is taken will be released November 30, 2013, by Dragonwell Publishing

The Pale Wanderer

by

Alexander Dove Lempke

I walked into a purple dell
between one hill's voluptuous swell
 and one's hard, craggy face—
and there were fourteen head-sized stones
 scattered around that place,
that sang a song whose mournful tones
grew loud and keen as I advanced,
and all throughout the vale they danced.
I came in close, and saw each rock
 had finely-lettered words upon it,
written carefully with chalk.
I read them all, and saw they bore
 the fourteen lines of some strange sonnet
that no man had read before.
I picked one up and set it down
while all its fellows danced around,
and with a firm command I tried
to make the dancing stones subside
so I could place them in a row
and read the sonnet; to my woe
no sooner had I one in place
 and went to fetch its rocky brother
but the first one off would race
 while I was grappling with the other—
finally, I brought them all
and made a tower, near as tall
as my full height—and read the song
that they had jumbled up so long.
And once I read it, no more will
infused the stones, and they were still.

I left the valley wistfully,
because the rocks had given me
no knowledge that I had not known
and now were lifeless lumps of stone.
And as I traveled on, I came
into a forest old in name—
an ancient wood, beneath whose shade
there waited many a peaceful glade.

I found a clearing in the wood
and thought the air was sweet and good;
the scent of the surrounding pine
was heady as an anodyne.
But then I caught the fainter whiff
 of something sweeter—sickly-sweet—
and as I took a deeper sniff
I frowned and vaguely wondered if
 I neared a heap of rotten meat.
Across the silent dell there stood
a bush of gnarled and knotted wood,
among whose leaves of ocean-green
lurked berries of incarnadine.
I neared the bush and underneath
 there lay a boy with hueless skin;
 his face was wan, his hair was thin,
his snowy forehead wore a wreath,
 and last my glancing eyes took in
the berries his right hand did hold.
I took his hand; his hand was cold,
and through his lips there blew no breath

but the unseen, silent wind of death.
I walked up to a nearby tree
and, whispering an apology,
I broke a branch I thought looked tough,
broad, long, light, strong and straight enough
to serve me for a digging tool
to put to rest the dead young fool.
And so I dug a little pit

 beneath an old and angry tree,
and laid his body into it,
and laid the brown earth over it,
 and soon his spirit came to me.
He was a thin, transparent child;
his face was wan; his hair was wild,
and, placid as a cat, he smiled.
“Stranger, you have my thanks,” he said,
“for else among the sleepless dead
I now would wander without rest;
but into Earth's warm, welcoming breast
you have returned me; for this deed
I give you knowledge that you need—
there is a hill just east of here
 from which a cold spring flows,
and by that water, cool and clear
 there blooms a bright blue rose—
 amid three jagged rocks it grows,
and if you pluck it, it will burn
blue-hot in your hand and turn
into whatever you require—
indifferent what you most desire.
You may pursue it, or refuse—
I only give the chance to choose:
go seek the rose upon the hill
and pluck it—or another will.”
I bowed my head, and calmly waited
as the spirit dissipated.

A half-mile east I found the hill
from which the rampant-splashing rill
ran clear, and by its side, among
three craggy rocks, the blue rose sprung—
and slowly as a creeping fox
I plucked it from its cradling rocks.
And in my hand, the rose of blue
burned like the sun, and burning grew
 into one shapeless, azure flame,
then, settling into shape anew
 grew hard and gleaming, and became
a peerless sword whose glancing blade

was deadly as a heart betrayed.
I held the sapphire-pommeled hilt
and, moaning, felt my spirit wilt,
because the wise and ancient hill
had given me a sword to kill.

Back down beneath the forest shade
I walked, and my blue-gleaming blade
 was heavy in my hand;
I passed a stone that marked a mile
that wore a roughly chiseled smile
and suddenly the sword of blue
 grew weightless as a wand.
I heard the scrape as someone drew
a heavy sword from a heavy sheath,
and from the shadows underneath
the circling trees a man stepped forth
whose skin was tinted as the earth;
his beard was long, and antlers spread
their fearful branches from his head,
and looking on my face, he said:
“You trespass here, for every pine
that branches in these woods is mine,
and now you pluck a rose to bring
a wicked and a withering thing
into my wood; well I too hold
a deadly sword whose name is old;
and I will fight you blade to blade
for bringing yours into my glade.
Here are my terms: if you are slain,
 that sword you hold which bluely glows
no more so withered shall remain
 but shall become once more a rose,
and I shall plant it once again
beyond the meddling touch of men.
But should you lay me in the dust
into your hands will I entrust
my magic cloak of black ram's-wool,
which renders form invisible.
If you accept the terms, attack;
or else depart, and come not back.”
I nodded, bowed, and took my stance
to start the great soul-severing dance.

The pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to hear the ring of blade on blade;
the passing wind drew still to look
on what red course our battle took.



I struck; the tip of one great horn
from his great hairy head was shorn.
He struck; the sound of parting air
was all his seeking broadsword found.
I struck; and from his side left bare
the blood ran purple on the ground—
and the pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to see blood dripping from my blade.
We clashed again, and sword on sword
made echoes scream the voice of steel;
I struck; I dealt the forest lord
a blow that three men could not deal,
and the pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to see my savage might displayed.
He stood; I knew not what great will
kept him alive and standing still,
but he was more than mortal, and
he held the power of the land
in one strong, slowly weakening hand.
He struck; I blocked the downward swing—
he drove me nearly to the ground.
I struck; around me echoing
I heard the soul-disquieting sound
of pine wood creaking without breeze
and needles weeping from the trees,
for calm, serene, and antler-crowned,
the tall, the brown, the strong lay dead,
a purple pool around his head.
His more than mortal blood outflowed
upon the shady woodland road;
before my feet the warm blood pooled,
and, changing strangely as it cooled,
it blackened, and my puzzled eye
witnessed the blood solidify,
until the dark and sanguine pool
transformed into a cloak of wool.
I picked it up and put it on,
and to all vision I was gone;
the faintest shimmer on the air
betrayed that I still lingered there.
I walked, a whisper ill-defined,
until I left the trees behind,
for when they felt me passing near
the branches shook as though with fear.

Beyond the woods, the dusty road
reached where a hill-creek rushed and flowed,

and near the ford, a sapling pine
held one end of a washing-line,
and downstream, at the water's bend,
an ash tree held the other end.
There was a woman, gray and old,
that knee-deep in the water stood,
and in the stream, so sweet and cold
she washed a tunic stained with blood,
scrubbing at clothes but wearing none,
her skin all brown from years of sun.
And from her old and weathered chest
each heavy, brown, uncaptive breast
did nearly to her navel sink,
weighed down with milk that none would
drink.
She saw me not—the raven wool
had rendered me invisible
to even such a one as she,
who all things otherwise would see.
I scanned the dripping washing-line;
I scanned it twice, but on it spied
no clothes I knew; I faintly sighed,
because some other death than mine
the washer-woman prophesied.
With careful footsteps I drew near
the rushing water, cool and clear,
determined I should make no sound,
for only thus could I be found.
I stepped into the stream, and made
the slightest splash; I froze in place,
but found my presence unbetrayed;
no hint of hearing marked her face.
I stole in close, until I stood
a step from where she scrubbed at blood,
and then I lunged! I seized one breast
that nearly to her navel sank,
and like a starving man I pressed
the nipple to my lips and drank.
The woman cried out in surprise,
but tightly shut I kept my eyes,
and sucked the breast until its store
was empty, and it flowed no more,
and since I thought the milk was good,
I drank the other vessel dry
before I stepped away, and stood,
and opened up my misting eye.
The washer woman said, “Reveal
yourself, whoever dares to steal

my precious milk; whoever snuck
upon me, by great skill or luck;
reveal yourself! Your presence show,
and tell me what I must bestow.”
Before her last word's echo died,
I cast the veiling cloak aside.

The washer woman said, “I see
you are the one who's plundered me.
And now your wish, as you must know,
it is my burden to bestow;
so tell, what do you most desire,
or wiser, what you most require?”
I said, “I wish for what I want;
let this hard chaos be my haunt
no more, and let my memory
 be vacant as the void, and clear;
and no more let me feel nor see,
 and no more taste, or smell, or hear.
Yes, take my flesh and blood and bone
and make of it a standing stone,
and let the moss grow over it,
and put no spirit into it,
and let the rock not bear my name,
but let me die to future fame.
Then take my soul, and set a flame
as cold as hell upon it; burn
 my spirit into nothingness,
and let my mind and reason turn
 oblivious, blank, and conscienceless.
Yes, end my unrewarded role
and utterly unmake my soul.
Or if it cannot be destroyed,
but send it hurtling through the void,
and slowly, let that standing stone
by moss and wind be overthrown.”

DREAM OF DEATH & THE WAY OF THE SHAMAN

By David Sparenberg

Old ones came to me and cried out, “Wake up! Get to your feet. Come with us now. Hurry, for God’s sake. Look into the circle, everywhere, point by point. Urgent: she is dying!”

Out of fear I peered into the mystic and out of bewilderment, tremulous, I replied, “What does God have to do with this?”

One of the elders answered in voice distraught, “Everything. God’s anguish is beyond the boundaries, even beyond the horizons of human thought, feeling, emotions. Should she die, God’s suffering will be boundless, ineffable—a suffering both infinite and eternal. We speak here of a wild god. Yet, perhaps, as akin as microcosm is to macrocosm to your own bereavement should you lose to death your bride, your beloved, the peerless living jewel of your thundering heart and envisioning soul.”

Then again in chorus the old ones cried aloud, “Awaken! Stand. Be quick. The need is pressing and excuses are but denials playing into the ubiquitous power of the degrees of death. Know—she is dying! Why then do you delay?”

How terrible here was my fear, how profuse the sweat chilling my confused flesh; how bewildering the horror of this midnight summons, disturbing me out of mind in that anguished swelter of light eclipsing and devouring darkness!

But next one of the elders revealed his face from out the encompassing night and spoke his desperate, revelatory declaration: “Spirits wander about this time, coming to each and all living, to plead with a singular message and let you know that we too are afraid. We who have nothing to fear of death, fear this impending death. So profound was and is our love. Yet we are weak now beyond these gossamer apparitions and faint beyond this haunt of breathless words.”

In the passage of a moment, writhing like a ragged cloth in wind and rain, the ancient added, “So upon you, you and none other, does the ultimate rest: shall she live or die?”

Whereupon on third occasion, in pleading hurt and outrage, the united voices of the old ones cried, “Wake up! Rise to noble height, deep rooting into ageless instincts. Acts of beauty are required and your love is the holy medicine of this hour. Only hasten. Take nothing with you from the industries of men and give no thought to tomorrow more than that the dawn is guaranteed in floral light and bird song.

“Now is the presence and now the power. As it now that she is dying and extinction is threatened to the womb of life and time. Now too, upon the pin point of decision, is the hour of healing.”

Forthwith my eyes opened with pathos and sanity, and I awoke with my face a field of rain and the drumming hard of my anguished and repentant heart. That without physical hesitation or

mental reservation, but feet together on the ground, I walked out into and through the insecurity and uncertainty of darkness, determined to move toward a renaissance of light. For once awakened and alert I understood that my dream was a dream of sacred poetry and my dream a dream of holy prayer.

For I had here, through visitation, a sense within of my part in healing the Earth. For Earth, she who is mother to all living and bride to God of creation, is dying. Yet her death cannot happen—this must not be.

Here then is a dream of death that is a speaking truth and here then what follows is the way of the shaman and the warrior's choice, opposing death. For life is in the blood as in the breath, and both blood and breath are common.

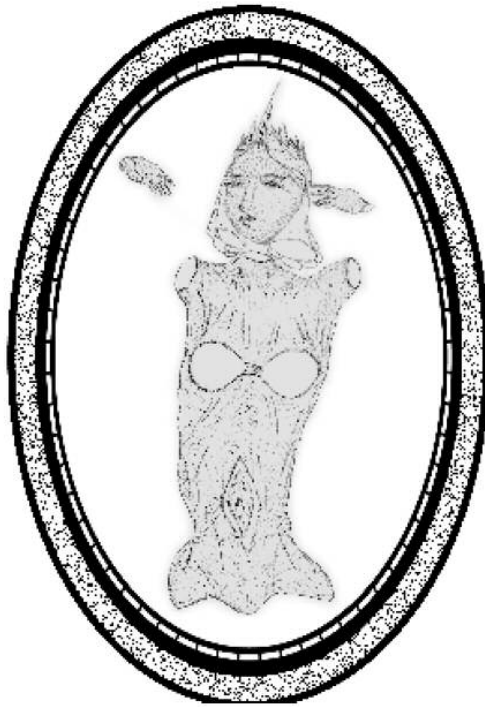
Tell me this: In a narrative universe such as this of consciousness, if a person uses a story to tell a truth is not the story part of the truth being told? And what is such storytelling but remembrance and what is the narrative of mythic memory but the shaman's dream as story come again to offer guidance?

Poseidon and Queen Cassiopea

by

Joe. R. Christopher

Once upon a time, back before the later Greeks from the steppes of Russia had conquered Greece and the island Crete and distorted the true myths, a beautiful queen lived in a kingdom on the shore line of the Mediterranean Sea. The kingdom was that of Phoenicia, engaged in trade along the coast with the Minoans of Crete and the Egyptians. The king's name was Cepheus and the queen's, Cassiopea.



Cepheus had been a prince in the city-state of Joppa (then under Egyptian control); his family originally came from Nubia. Phoenicia was matrilineal in royal descent—through the

eldest daughter—but the function of rule went to her husband as long as his wife lived. Thus Cepheus was very protective of Cassiopea.

She was famed for her beauty, but she had once visited Egypt and she knew that standards of beauty varied in different places; she also knew that she could afford cosmetics and a comfortable life, which meant that she did not age as quickly as many women did.



She also, secretly, wore a girdle under her robe, for she had given birth to four children. Although she had many things, including attractive children, and lived (for all her rank in society) a relatively conservative lifestyle, still one thing bothered her.



She had never been granted a vision of the gods and goddesses. Many people saw the gods and goddesses even daily; sailors told tales of Poseidon arising and quelling the waves; young women said their pregnancies were due to their being commanded by one male god or another; soldiers claimed that Ares had led their troops into battle. Of course, *Ares* (for example) is just a short way to indicate whatever war god the local soldiers believed in—*Resef* or another. For the sophisticated believed Ares and Resef were different names of the same god.

*

One day when Queen Cassiepea was in the temple of Poseidon and his consort Amphitrite (then still called Poseidea, and known as Poseidon's sister); when the queen was making the prescribed offerings for a sea-going nation, she sighed and looked at the statue of Amphitrite and said, "I wish I could see the goddess in person."

"What did she say?" asked one of the female hangers-on of the court, a gossip and tale-teller, whose welcome depended on her news of the latest scandal.

"Something about herself—she said 'I'—

and about the sea-queen's person," replied another. "I couldn't quite hear the words."

"Do you suppose she was comparing herself—that famous beauty—to the goddess's?" asked the first.

"Oh surely not," said the second. "Surely not."

"Surely not," echoed the first, in an ironic tone.

And so the story spread.

*

Queen Cassiepea was horrified when a maid told her the rumor that she had said she was more beautiful than Queen Amphitrite. Cassiepea went to the temple, made sacrifices to the Queen, and stretched herself down on the floor before the idol and prayed that the goddess would not seek revenge against her for something she had not said.

But as these stories spread, the word came to Poseidon, then at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, that the earthly queen had insulted his wife's beauty. As the sea can sometimes be peaceful and mild for days at a time, but other times can storm and rage, so Poseidon this time did not pause to question the report. He raised his massive trident and plunged it into the sea floor not far from the coast of Phoenicia. The tectonic plate at a depth beneath the place where he struck, shattered. The earth shook. The water drew back from the shore and then, in a tsunami, rushed at the coast, wiping out fishing villages and summer palaces alike. Not far from the coast, it washed through temple of Poseidon, killing the people but leaving some of the stone pillars standing—although the earthquake had brought down the roof and the friezes.



After the aftershocks had quieted and the people began to come back to the coast to rebuild their lives, the body of Cassiepea was

found not far from what remained of the temple, and the body was laid on a bier in preparation for her cremation in a pyre. The

appropriate wood had to be located far inland and brought to the temple.

Cassiepea's eldest daughter, Andromeda, came to the throne; she banished her father to Joppa, accepted presents from many suitors, and (some say) eventually ran off with a wandering Greek. But that seems unlikely.

Soon after the earthquake and the flood, invisibly, "in a mist" as it was described at the time, Poseidon and Amphitrite walked down the coast and considered his handiwork. They were mainly naked, for they were sea creatures, but they did not worry about being seen by those with second sight—humans knew the dangers of *lèse majesté*. They came, in their wanderings, to their temple, roofless, idolless, with most of the beams and tiles and the shattered friezes now carried outside.

Cassiepea's body was swollen and decaying. Poseidon, who had taken the form most familiar to his worshippers of a green-skinned, gilled, and bare-headed humanoid, carrying his trident, paused by the queen's body. "She *was* beautiful, when alive, it seems."

Amphitrite, also a green humanoid, but wearing a crown set with many pearls, replied, "And her mind—what is left of it—suggests she was, for a human, virtuous."

Poseidon, his mood no longer one of anger, said, "I will repay her sufferings."

He held his trident in his left hand, tines upright, and pulled his index finger of his right across a tine. The ichor swelled to the surface. Putting his right thumb next to the cut, he pressed, holding his hand above the dead woman's gaping mouth. Three drops fell into her mouth, and the decay was slowly arrested and reversed.

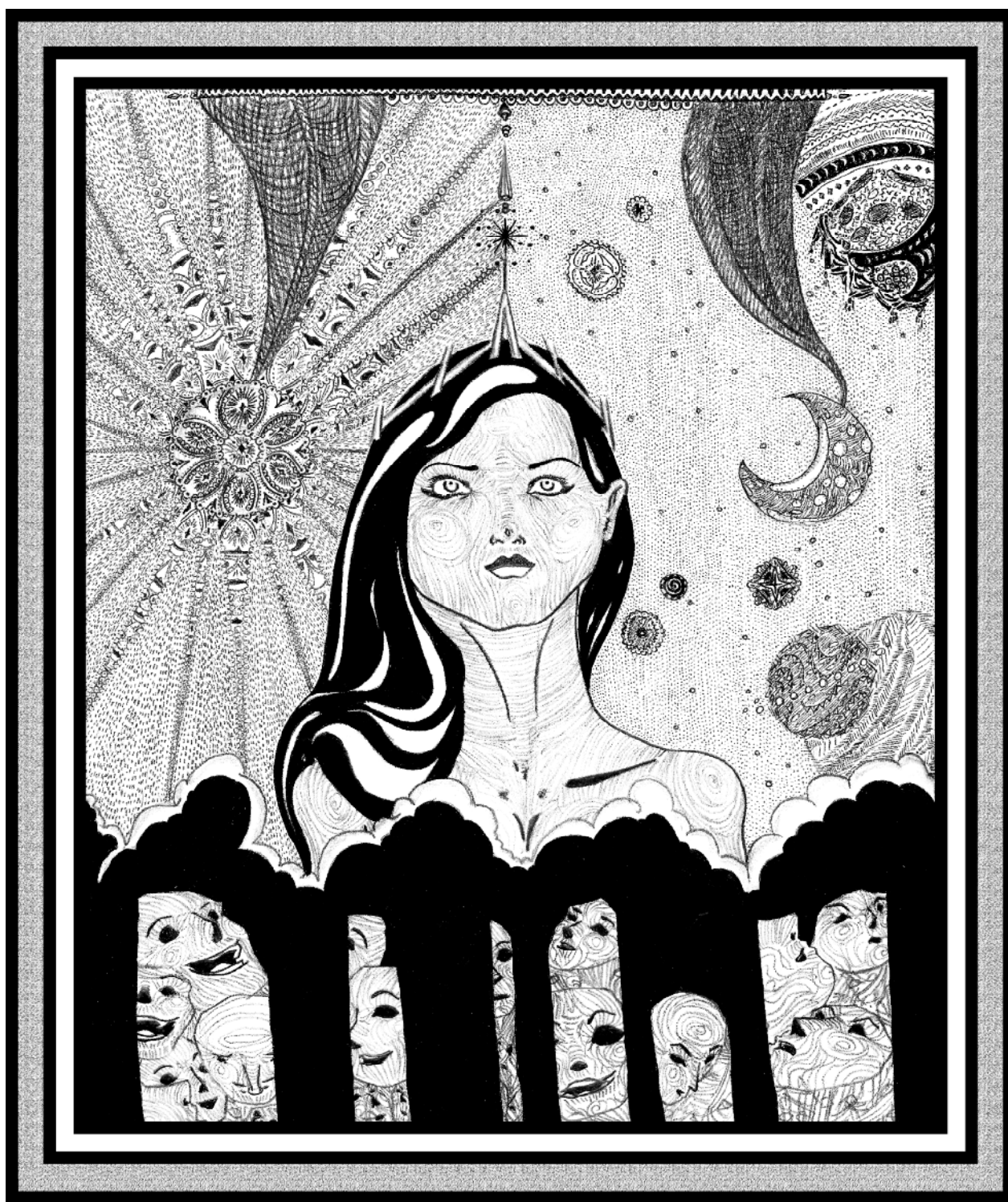
Poseidon waited for the reversal to take effect—but what is time to an immortal?—and then grasped Cassiepea by her left hand, his wounded finger against her wrist. He said, "Come now, arise," as he pulled her slowly to her feet. The sheet which had partially covered her fell away.

"My dear," he said in politeness, "your apotheosis is nearly complete. Come, and I'll give you a place to honor in my brother's realm of the sky. You shall dance forever around the northern star."

And Cassiepea inclined her head and bowed before him. She knew her body was now firm as in youth, no longer with the stretched muscles of a woman who had given birth, no longer needing a girdle. And when she raised her head and looked at him and at her, seeing them clearly, she smiled—smiled radiantly, as was most appropriate.

II.

Cassiepea, male chauvinists they were
Who told your tale in later days, who swore
You'd bragged about your beauty, and your daughter's,
And so deserved the monster come for slaughters,
And too the storm—not one, but twinned disaster:
As if that hype would make the excitement vaster!
And then they claimed Poseidon's gift of glory—
Was false! His aim, instead, denunciatory.
They claimed, in circling 'round the northern star,
Your actions there were strange and most bizarre,
Balancing on your head half of the day—
A clown! at whom all men were meant to bray.
In short, they thought their view from earth all truth
About the starry realm, and thus their oath.
But seen within the stars, earth's up and down,
Is most absurd—for earth has small renown.
The gods don't raise the foolish to the skies—
Your merits gained your dance above earth's eyes.
Your daily dance brings joy, brings lasting joy;
The spirits float upon emotion's buoy.
You take your part in that far greater Dance
That spreads across the sky's extravagance.
The same Great Dance that's seen by a trillion eyes,
The dance that swirls across galactic skies.
No planet finds the patterns much the same,
But each will greet its star-spread with acclaim.
And when high gods, outside of world and time,
Will view a galaxy in pantomime;
When they, in conclave met, with glance prehending,
They'll see it swirls and spirals to its ending.
Until the heat death comes, and great in-folding,
Till then you'll dance, to joyfulest beholding.



The Mind Has Mountains

by

Joanna Michal Hoyt

Maybe I'd never have seen it at all, that first time forty years ago, if I hadn't been nerve-scraped with my first visit to the city. I was thirty years old and felt about six. The lights and the sirens and the horns and the huge buildings and the signs crowded my ears and my eyes and my mind. There was nowhere to rest. And the people!

Where I came from there were more trees than people, and when I met people on the street I noticed them and looked them in the eyes and waved. In the city there were people, dozens, hundreds, everywhere, and they looked right through me. There wasn't time to notice them all, but I couldn't quite stop noticing either: a lean coppery man with a big white dog on a leash, a pale girl chewing gum, a man chasing his hat down the sidewalk, a woman waving an armful of fliers....

It looked like some of them needed help. At home there weren't so many of them at once, and mostly I knew who they were so I could do something about them. But what could I do about the woman pointing and shouting at somebody who wasn't there, or the man with the sign saying WILL WORK FOR FOOD? I tried to look away from those people, and it just made me see them clearer. I saw the mother that way too, at first.

Her skin was really black not just cafe-au-lait, and she had five kids, all below waist height, bobbing around her. Either they weren't speaking English or they were speaking it with a foreign cadence. She had a grip on the wrist of one of them, probably so he wouldn't run off, and a hand on the head of another one who seemed to be cry-

ing. The mother wasn't crying, she looked like she was done with that--she looked so tired. And there--

There, finally, was something to rest my eyes on, something smooth and soft and dark, darker than her skin, darker than anything I'd ever seen. It wove through their group, its touch slackening the boy's pull against his mother's hand, lifting the crying girl's head. The mother's hand rested on its arched neck, and she smiled a small slow certain smile, and her eyes were dark like the thing she touched. None of them looked at it. They climbed stairs and went through a door just as I registered the shape of the dark thing, the delicate hoofs, the silver-glinting eyes, the--did I really see the horn?

I thought of following them if they'd gone into a church or a store or something, but the sign above the door said *Refugee Resettlement*. I couldn't just wander in there looking for a unicorn.

That's how it was, or anyway how I think it was. Most of what I remember now--most everything, not just the city memories--is like a jumble of old photographs, not sorted, not labeled, most of the faces familiar most of the time, a few--more and more, lately--unrecognizable, some starting to fade, some stuck together, tearing when I try to separate them. But that creature, I think of it and it's almost here with me now.

Mind you, I used to look for unicorns, at least half seriously, when I was a girl. And once when I was twenty, when I thought I was in love, I thought I maybe glimpsed one. But I more than half knew it was just a drift of snow in the moonlight, just the way I more than half knew Gregory

and I couldn't make any kind of a decent life together, what with wanting different things. I got a few letters from him after he went off to law school and I went off to be a farmer's apprentice. After a while there wasn't any language in which we both could say the things we meant. Eventually I gave up on looking for that kind of love, or for unicorns either. And then, ten years later, I found one without looking at all.

I didn't believe that it lived in that city. I didn't see how it could--though maybe people had more need of it there. For the first year after I came back from the city I looked out for it, or others of its kind, on moony nights in the woods, on hot days in the garden and the hayfield when any shade would have been a joy. Of course I didn't see one, and after the first year I put the wanting by. I had enough to do, minding the goats and the hens and the garden and the people I had to tend.

Children I never had, and I missed them, maybe, more than the man who might have given me them, but other folks' children were in and out of my farm. Some hadn't been well treated. Judith...her face goes in and out of focus in my mind, like most things now, but I remember the fear in her. She'd be pleased enough picking berries with me, or trying her hand at milking the goats, or swinging from the maple tree. But let anyone come up behind her--let anyone touch her, which I did once, before I knew better--and she'd scream and shrink away down into herself.

Well, one time she came and the light was gone out of her eyes, and egg-gathering and swinging and kite-flying and carrot-pulling didn't bring it back. There I was not daring to touch her or to ask her what was wrong. I'd tried that, too, more than once, and she wouldn't ever tell, and she pulled further away just to make sure she wouldn't. Finally I set her by the pond and gave her some crackers to feed the fish with, and I went off to change the chickens' water. I wouldn't have had to do it right then, except I had to get away from her for a

minute and hit something hard and then maybe try to pray a little. I came back slowly, quietly, trying not to startle her, thinking to see what she held herself like when she didn't figure she had me to hide from.

She leaned back against the willow trunk with her shoulders relaxed, and her frozen-over blue eyes were dark and soft like the creature that lay there with its head in her lap. One of her hands was in its mane, one in the long grass-stems on her other side. She wasn't looking at it, or at anything, she was just looking, wide open, like a pool under the sky.

I took a step back and tripped over the handle of a shovel I'd left lying. I didn't fall, but I staggered a bit, and the shovel-head clanged, and she looked around with her lap empty, her shoulders braced, and a small wary light in her eyes.

It had just been a glimpse, but I was fifty-two then, old enough to know when I'd seen something and when I hadn't. I didn't know if she'd seen it. I didn't ask her anything or say anything about what I'd seen. If she had seen it, maybe a secret like that would be some balm for the hard hurting one she always carried, maybe it would give her strength to spit the other secret out one day. I reminded myself of that whenever I caught myself wishing that I could have such a fine secret of my own.

That was eighteen years ago. Two years ago the pictures in my mind started to slip out of their albums, pile up and stick together. First I couldn't remember where I'd set down my trowel or my basket of seed garlic--mind, that had happened to me sometimes right along, but it started to happen more often and faster. Then I'd go out thinking it was time to set out the tomato seedlings, and find that the tomato plants were already out and heavy with fruit.

It wasn't the disaster it might have been. My brother Ed, he'd looked set to stay single like me, but then when he was forty he married Marian, and she had twins. Michael took to boatbuilding like his father, and Lucy took to farming like me. She and

her John started working the fields that I'd never had time to do anything with except to let them out for hay, and then as I got slower they took more of the parts I'd used to do myself. They were good with me when my knees went, and they were good with me when I told them my mind was going--which wasn't a surprise to them, not by the time I'd nerved myself to say it, but I'm grateful that I worked myself up to tell them before they worked themselves up to tell me.

Last night I was in a misery with it. I'd called Lucy "Marian" three times running at supper, and asked her when she thought Sage would drop her kid, and Sage had had it three days ago, as I knew very well when it happened, and know now, but didn't know at supper, and probably won't know tomorrow, or maybe half an hour from now. And I apologized enough to get on John's nerves, and I knew it, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

Lucy did her best with us. She sent John off to fix--I forget what--and told me not to take it so hard. She said I'd put up with them when they were just learning how to do things, when she dropped a whole big tray of onion seedlings and half of them couldn't be saved (though I did tell her off for that, or maybe now I only think I did), and when he stuck the tractor in the swampy place I'd warned him about five times, and of course they didn't mind putting up with me. She was so patient at me I couldn't stand it. I went out on the porch to look at the clouds over the moon and brood. I tried to pray, and it didn't work. I tried to say the poem by...by...wait, I can remember... yes, Gerard Manley Hopkins, that's it. I used to say it to myself when I couldn't pray. Last night it was gone out of my mind, all but two bits, "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" and "O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed..." Those said it right enough but weren't enough to soothe me. I gloomed at the sky while it gloomed back at me.

I don't know how to say what happened next. I was just standing there, clenching my hands on the porch rail, and thinking about what I'd lost already and what I was going to lose, and wishing the moon would come out so I'd have light, at least--not the porch light bulb making a little glare spot and darkening up the shadows outside its reach, but real light. I thought some third-rate poetic thoughts about the clouds obscuring the light in my mind. I shut my mouth and my eyes tight against the dark out there and wished I had something besides darkness inside. And then...

Then was the part there aren't words for. The nearest I can say is that I thought, well then, if it's dark, let it be dark. Not bitter, just--just straight, just seeing what was, saying all right. I opened my mouth and my eyes, and the clouds were thicker, but it was all right; I thought I could have unlocked my knees and my grip on the rail and just leaned back in the dark, and it would have held me up like seawater, clear and buoyant and moving and safe like that. I didn't try that. I sat down on the porch for a while, safe in the dark. I would have stayed longer, but I thought Lucy would start worrying over me if I didn't come in. Sure enough, she was in the entry. By the time I got through the door she was innocently straightening out the boot box, but she looked pink enough so I figured she'd been on her way out to get me.

"It's all right, Lucy," I told her.
"Sleep well. I plan to."

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. That's one thing that gets easier as I get older. But I don't sleep as deep as I used to. I woke up in the dark; the clock by my bed said 10:30 and there were voices coming from the porch.

"She'll be all right after all, I think."

"Lu, you know she isn't likely to get any better--the doctor said it's degenerative--I mean--"

"I didn't mean that. I mean she'll be all right with it."

John made the grunt he makes when he can't agree and doesn't want to disagree.

“She said so when she came in--said it was all right. And she looked--her eyes were all sort of dark and soft and--well, sure. I think something happened out on the porch.”

“Something?”

Lucy attempted a light laugh that didn't quite come off. “I thought I saw it, actually.”

“The unicorn.”

John laughed, soft and low. “Still in love, are you, Lu? With me, I hope?”

“I expect I might be. But it wasn't like that. It was all black, and it was with her.”

I thought then that Lucy seemed to think my hearing had gone along with my memory. I thought, waking up this morning--after I remembered where I was and what day it was and what had happened last night--that maybe she'd meant me to hear.

I don't think she necessarily expected me to remember. I don't expect myself to remember, not all the time. Whether or no, he'll be waiting for me in the dark.

The End



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 **Edith L. Crowe, Corresponding Secretary**, The Mythopoeic Society, PO Box 6707, Altadena, CA 91003. E-mail: correspondence@mythsoc.org)

Copies of the next issue, *Mythic Circle*, #36, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2014, can be pre-ordered through the Mythopoeic Society's website, www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/preorder/. Back issues are available at www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/history/.

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

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

Editorial and Commentary

This Issue

In this issue, we welcome back some previous authors, namely Dag Rossman, with more of the story of Faragrim, the Draug. Joe Christopher also returns with a new perspective on an ancient myth. Ryder Miller shares a short poem relevant to contemporary problems. David Sparenberg once more shares more of his poetry, evoking myths of Earth and environment.

L. C. Atencio, with us for the second time, provides a lively cover illustration and brings two stories to vivid and detailed life. Tim Callahan provides three grand and vibrant scenes of conflict, one of them the back cover. Philip Reuss returns with a spooky illustration of a demonic challenger to the world order..

With us for the first time as short story writers are Tannara Young, Joanna Michael Hoyt and Scathe meic Beorh with their stories, one in a contemporary setting, the others in the distant past or in another world. With poems based on familiar and unfamiliar mythology, we welcome Seth Leeper, Alexander Dove Lempke and Shane Clack. Also new to *The Mythic Circle* is Gonzalo Canedo with his illustrations of half-seen presences in two poems.

Comments from Readers

(The following are comments on
Mythic Circle # 34, published in 2012)

--The illustrations are relevant and complement the content.

Monique Berry
Hamilton, ON, Canada
Founding Editor & Publisher of Halcyon Magazine

“Ring of Fairies”

This simple verse by Lee Clark Zumpke reminds us that, when the all-too-real terrors

of the modern world may threaten to overwhelm, we have recourse to the magic of nature, a magic that is just as real whether the fairies dance in the glade or in our minds. The charming illustration by L.C. Atencio that accompanies the poem envisions the fairies in the casual dress of our age, a subtle gesture that underscores the enduring and ever-renewing power of that magic.

Larry W. Moore
Broadstone Media LLC

Books by Mythic Circlers

Besides the authors in this issue, I am happy to offer congratulations to Anna Kashina, whose *Mistress of the Soltice is forthcoming this fall*. An excerpt from her “Ivan and Marya” was published in our 2004 issue. Dag Rossman, whose *The Walker In Shadows* is being published this year. See details in their biographical sketches, below.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

L. C. Atencio is a senior at the University of Central Florida who is seeking a bachelor’s degree in English with special emphasis on creative writing. Furthermore, he’s an honor student who has received collegiate achievements in the literary field, such as having his essays showcased in the hall of fame of advanced literary courses. In 2010, he was also the poetry editor for the 13th issue of Phoenix Magazine; the magazine was published last year. His poems have appeared in *Aries: A Journal of Art and Literature, Perspectives, Black Lantern Publishing: A Macabre Journal of Literature & Art* and *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

Scathe meic Beorh is the founding editor of *Ontos*, a periodical of mythopoetic writings. He is also the author of the story collections *Children & Other Wicked Things* (James Ward Kirk Fiction) and *Always After Thieves Watch* (Wildside Press), the mythic satirical novel *The Pirates*

of *St. Augustine* (Wildside), and the mythopoetic studies *Emhain Macha Dark Rain* (RS Press) and *Golgotha* (Punkin House).

Gonzalo Canedo-- was born on the 25th of December 1979 in A Coruna, a Galician city in Spain by the seacoast of the Atlantic Ocean, in the Europeans land's end. Nowadays he lives in Edinburgh. You can find out more about Gonzalo in his website at <www.canedo.weebly.com>. He dreams of wild reeds and rivers.

Tim Callahan graduated from the Chouinard Art School with a degree in illustration. He has worked in the animation industry as a background designer and layout artist for over 20 years and has regularly contributed art for *The Mythic Circle*. He and Bonnie met while working on the infamous Bakshi production of Lord of the Rings.

Joanne Hoyt lives with her mother and brother on a Catholic Worker farm in upstate New York where she spends her days tending gardens, goats and guests. In the evenings she reads stories that open into the world of wonder and mean more than they explain; sometimes she tries writing stories in that tradition. Her attempts have appeared in publications including Scheherezade's Bequest, Rose Red Review and Daily Science Fiction.

Anna Kashina grew up in Russia and moved to the United States in 1994. She has a Ph.D. in molecular biology and is a published author of fantasy and historical fiction. She lives in Philadelphia, PA, where she combines her successful career as a scientist and her passion for writing.

Seth Leeper is a writer and vocalist residing in Brooklyn, NY. His poems have previously been published in Gertrude, Zenith Magazine, and Awosting Alchemy. He has written fashion columns and e-books for AND Magazine and Hyperink.com, respectively.

Philip Reuss is an art student at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, expecting to graduate with a BFA in Traditional Illustration in May 2013. Philip enjoys diversifying his portfolio between various areas of illustration, from t-shirt design, to book cover art, to children's book illustration, especially of fantasy and science fiction subject matter. His artwork can be viewed at <philipreuss.com>.

Douglas "Dag" Rossman has been retelling and, more recently, expanding upon the Norse myths and legends for the past thirty-three years before live audiences across the Midwest. He has four published collections of original short stories (many of which first appeared in this magazine) set in the Nine Worlds of Norse mythology. The three most recent ones, *THE DRAGONSEEKER SAGA* (2009), *WAY OF THE ELVES* (2012), and *THE WALKER IN SHADOWS* (2013), have also been characterized as young adult fantasy novels. They can be purchased from the publisher, Skandisk, Inc., 6667 West Old Shakopee Road, Bloomington, MN 55438.

David Sparenberg is the international author of two eco ebooks, *LIFE IN THE AGE OF EXTINCTIONS* & *THE GREEN TROUBADOUR SOURCE BOOK*. Both titles can be downloaded using the following link: <<http://www.ovimagazine.com/cat/56>>. Downloads are free.

Kurdénras

by

Alexander Dove Lempke

I

Oh ancient destroying Sun,
oh ancient reviving Moon,
how, how was this evil done?
Around my feet are strewn
the bones that once held the flesh
of all men who were brave and fought—
now burned up like worthless grass
when the farmer has come to thresh.
Sing, sing of the fiend who brought
this vicious design to pass!

I know his all-veiling name:
Kurdénras! the Duke of Hell—
but whose is the terrible blame
that such a dark birth befell?
Whence came the awful strength
of his all-unsainting hand,
that holds the scepter of bone?
How came he to rule the length
of the once-unravished land?
He rules all the land alone.

His wrath is a shadow of wrath
and his lust is a shadow of lust,
twin bonfires hedging the path
of the weak and stumbling just;
all flowers and fields and trees
he puts to the torch, and smothers
all flames that he did not set;
all fiends of the lands and seas
are called his sisters and brothers—
what father could them beget?

And how can a feeble singer
survive in this wasted shire?
How, how can a grass-blade linger
in such an all-dimming fire?
Oh ancient destroying Sun,
oh ancient reviving Moon,
I sit, a mere broken man
at the feet of the evil one—
I know I am dying soon,
but tell me how this began.

I hear you, reviving Moon,
you Stars in your wheeling courses;
your sweet, heart-soothing tune
and your roar like the hooves of horses,
roaring with ancient rage
at the impious feet of sin
that stepped on the virgin time
of an old, first-ravished age.
Oh tell me, how did it begin?
Enlighten my dying rhyme.



II

The firstborn of angels now was a shapeless shade
of power and power's thirst, a bodiless ache
for more of that might he vainly had dared to take,
which consumed him—the first betrayer, thus self-betrayed.
Now drifting on nothing, formless, himself a void,
ravaged by thirst he could nevermore hope to slake,
dead beyond death and hating all that could live,
a high-born maker unmade, refusing to make
but choosing destruction, so by himself destroyed,
he never again could take, but still had the power to give.

He searched all worlds for a creature he might unmake:
cunning and swift, and filled with a predator's guile,
something whose nature, once bloated and rendered vile
would be merciless, mighty and fierce—and he found a snake.
His power he poured, his power of hatred burning
into the virgin serpent's slumbering coil—
awaking, white hot, it fled to the ocean's deep;
it hissed, and the ocean hissed and began to boil.
And there in the hissing heart of the waters churning
the serpent was taking new flesh, cursed never again to creep.

The rumbling sea and the fertile, steadfast earth,
the mountain's summit, the lowest lurking pit,
the milk-young clouds that had never before felt dread
all trembled to feel—oh horrible!—that unbirth.
Enshrouded in seas he burned like a star of drought,
unserved by the flame: the strands of his flesh unknit,
his heart-strings unwound, his mind and his meat unwed,
his passion unbound, the song of his soul unwrit,
his tongue unsealed—a voice from the snake rang out:
his terrible name was uttered, and never may be unsaid.

“Kurdénras!” the word outrang from the writhing storm—
“Kurdénras!” the echoes groaned as the planets wailed,
and out of the clearing steam was the snake unveiled:
the four unequal limbs of an angel's form
projecting in massy bulk from a towering frame
where once the graceful length of his body trailed;
he bared his fangs and opened his yellow eyes
and the mountains moaned and the depths of the ocean quailed—
and after the awful utterance of his name,
new blasphemies ran from the evil mouth of the lord of lies:

“Tremble Almighty! for I am immortal made—
nevermore cursed to crawl in the pious dust
or taste for my prey by means of a mortal tongue.

I now am your shadow's son, by his power arrayed
in mighty and fearful limbs and a name of dread,
loosed from desireless sleep to exalted lust.
By numberless worlds are your fruitless praises sung—
let them sing mine, for my arm has declared they must.
From every vein, let the vigor of life be bled,
from every last lifeless rock, the strength of destruction wrung!”

The star of plagues, first formed of the demon race
thus rose in his power, ablaze with the fire of hell,
and forth his first laughter rolled like a clanging knell,
shooting a fearful quake through the vault of space.
He rose, the firstborn of evil, as yet alone,
but chosen to rule whole multitudes as they fell,
to send out the ranks of the first betrayer's spawn.
Let all men hear, if words can suffice to tell—
if knowledge can hope to ready, let it be known:
he rose, and the heavens shook at the sight of his evil dawn.

The Eye

by Ryder Miller

Please
don't take and share
my picture if you
don't know me.

Please stop
waving your phone
in self defense
if you don't need it.

Great protectors
they can be,

but one need be
reminded that one is
not always innocent
in front of
these new eyes.



FRIDAY¹

by Shane Clack

“Far in the deep dank belly of Earth ‘neath the white-crested sea-waves,
Deep as the calm, airy sky blue and pervasive leaps high,
I to my comrades so slowly turning heaving a vast sigh
Comfortless words all woe spoke with a quavering voice:
‘Men of my heart, I would not have my memory tainted by fearful
Faithless behavior. I, steadfast with you hitherto...
Bold I know has my heart been before and bold my commands when
Fate seemed to loom so close—bravely a-flashing my sword!
Yet now when the hands creep closer and closer, now when more certain,
Staring into my soul—the spectre of Death all gaunt!
Quaking and trembling into my limbs enter now like an ether.
Fear shakes the sacker of Troy, with’ring his hair like a man
Four score winters old and beset with infirm’ty and sorrow...
Chance of my dying on Earth, falling in war with my men—
Life-giving Sun looking on with a hope still withheld for us mortals,
Promise and hope yet obscure—heart’ning and helpful no less!—
Such chance, such apprehension of death on the field and of war-wounds
Never, no, never would stop, nor keep back my fame-seeking hand.
Here I stand though wholly defeated and dreading a certain,
Waiting and watching doom—I, who above all want rest,
Dreamless slumber warm and enclosing me next to the own dear
Wife of my youth, find instead—‘Stead of divine, succ’ring Sleep—
I meet his cold, witless brother...and he never yields up his own guests,
Renders them back to the Day. Never! But deep in this place,
Deep in the woe-weary grave he will stow his own til the Sun fails,
The Moon dip her garments in Styx—blood-red and death-wreaking Styx!
Banish from hearts all hope in the presence of Man’s final ruler!
Hades is calling and here, lowly, I bid you farewell!
Tho’ told by the Sibyl of unlying lips—by the unerring Phoebus—
Told that my steps I’d retrace, still I believe this my end!’”
Ending his speech then the god-like king turned away to the gloaming

¹ Author’s note:

“Friday” is my retelling of Odysseus’ descent to Hades, recounted in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Any one well-acquainted with the epic poem will recall that Odysseus journeys to Hades (imagined in Homer as a land on the edge the world, rather than below it) only to hear the prophecy of Tiresias. He succeeds in this mission and then lingers to speak to the shades of famous men and women who have gone on before. Hades does not, in fact, seem to hold a lot of fear for the mortal hero not yet fated to die. In my re-imagining, however, I call into question that self-assuredness of Odysseus. How many men—even heroes—would enter the abode of Death so unaffectedly, whatever the promises that they would return again?

The poem’s title makes reference to a circumstance of its composition, rather than to something inside the poem itself. It was written at a very early hour on the morning of Good Friday. Seen in this light, you might say that Odysseus’ speech here constitutes a Gethsemane of sorts. It represents, at the least, my typological understanding of Book 11.

And plodding his path from the slow-ebbing light he was swallowed by shadow...

Myself to Myself

by

Scathe meic Beorh

Hilda awoke startled. She cried out. Her dream horrified her. A man was being punished in a manner as brutal as the blood-eagle, tied to—or in some way hanged from—crossed wooden beams. She could not be sure. She wiped her tears away, stood, and found her legs. A mist that reminded her of clouds lay close to the grassy earth where she walked. She moved with slowness, unsure of her steps, for she did not recognize the land. “A bad dream, but I feel good now,” Hilda said to herself, trying to build her confidence. It was then that she saw him. He sat at the riverside on an outsized stone. His legs were crossed, both feet tucked beneath him. His face was covered by a hood of a cloth not dyed, but she could see part of his long black beard. His hands, draped about his knees, looked strong; weathered. A bowl of salted fish and bread sat next to him. Hilda trusted any man who sat with such assurance. “Sir?” she said as she halted, placed her feet together, and folded her hands in front of her. “I am looking for my mother.... Do you know the *hlæf-dige*² called Alvi Stormursjávarsíða? I am her daughter, Hilda. My father is the *hlafweard*³ called Blad Starkbeväpnar. Do you know him?”

The stranger turned his face to Hilda and smiled. She took in a quick breath of surprise, for she had never seen such eyes—eyes like swirling woad pools—nor such peace upon any countenance.

“I am pleased to meet you, Hilda

Bladsdóttir. I am the *hlafweard* Frälsare⁴ Gudson.”

Do... do you know my fólk, Hlafweard Frälsare? And, will you tell me where this place might be? I have somehow gotten lost. I have awoken only a few moments ago, you see, and, while I slept, someone has moved me to a place I do not know.”

“Are you normally picked up and moved while you sleep, Hilda?”

“When I was little, yes, but not now. I’m too old to carry around. I have already begun my... my womanhood. *Oh!* I’m... I’m sorry....” Hilda’s hasty words made her blush and turn her eyes away.

Frälsare said nothing, only held out his hand for the girl to sit next to him on the stone. She inched forward. “Come,” said the warrior. “I see something in the river that may tell us where are your fólk.”

“You are a seer, Frälsare?”

“Some have called me a seer, yes. Come. *Sit.* I will give a young woman room enough of her own.” The lord slid to the edge of the stone. This provided Hilda with ample space to sit with him in comfort. She did so, and found that she held no fear of him whatever. His body did not threaten hers. She felt only tranquility with him.

“You are so calm, good sir.”

“Some say that as well.”

“How can a warrior such as yourself be one of such calm? My father is good to his family, but he is a violent man in his love for us and for our people. My mother, same as that. No one crosses our threshold with fire in his eyes and maintains that fire.”

“Strong fólk, Hilda, sounds to me. But many

² ‘loaf-kneader’ or bread-maker; origin of ‘lady’ (Old English)

³ ‘loaf-ward’ or loaf-keeper; origin of ‘lord’ (OE)

⁴ ‘Savior’ (Old Norse)

nightmares.”

“Sir?”

“Look into the waters as they run by. Close your eyes and tell me what you see.”

Hilda shut her eyes, but was taken aback by what she saw so that she opened them again in quickness and grabbed the arm of Frälsare to steady herself lest she fall from the rock.

“What did you see there, my lady?”

Hilda has never been called ‘lady’ before. She felt cared for by this strange warrior Frälsare. “I... I saw six warriors. They came across the river. They carried two people whose... whose throats were cut. Blood poured forth as if their deaths were new.”

“A party of armed men numbering less than seven are thieves.”

“I know those words. That is a saying of my father.”

“An old saying indeed. Who were the dead you saw?”

“I do not know. I could not see their faces.”

“Will you look again? Be not afraid, Hilda. I am here. Keep hold of my arm, if you wish.”

Hilda closed her eyes. Being of tough stock, she kept them closed as she wept and said what she saw. “The six warriors, two of them shield-bearing women... come toward us as if they walk over the waters—a magic feat I have never heard of before. Across the shoulders of the strongest two men are thrown... are thrown... a man and a woman. I still cannot see their faces.”

“Enough, sweet girl. Open your eyes. You have seen enough.”

Hilda coughed. Blood filled her mouth and spewed over the front of her white over-dress. “Something... wrong...” she said as she fell into the arms of her new friend.

#

“*Vakna, Hilda. Awaken.*”

Hilda opened her eyes. She felt hungry. Frälsare gave her salted fish and bread. She ate with hardiness. She stood. Her legs were stronger than before. “Did I sleep?”

“You slept, but now you are awake.

There is a pool of water just there. No breeze blows. Go and see yourself in it.”

Hilda went to the pool. She dropped to her knees. Her fingers savored the coolness of the long grasses where she knelt. She looked into the pool at her reflection. She cried out with what she saw, and recoiled. She fell backward. She scrambled across the ground like a wounded animal.

“What do you see?”

“My... my throat! It has been cut!”

“Yes. Last night. As you slept in the house of your fólk.”

“But... the six warriors I saw on the river?”

“*A party of armed men numbering less than seven are thieves.*”

“We... I... do you mean... that I and my fólk were... slain by thieves? As we slept? Slain by the six warriors I saw... *oh!* Was it my mother and father they carried? Where are they now? Where are my fólk? Was it my mother and father who lay dead on their shoulders? Where are we? This place is not my home! *I want to go home!*”

“Does this place not look like your home? Do you not recognize that oak tree just there? What about the riverside here? Does it not seem a little familiar to you? And those hills just there. Have you not climbed them many times?”

“Maybe. But... I have never heard of you, Frälsare. Who are your people? And... why do you dress as you do? You do not attire yourself like the men of my land. I also see now that you are not armed! You do not even carry a spear. I see not even a belt knife with you. Yet... your hands... they are weathered as they should be, yet soft like those of a woodworker. Do you work with wood?”

“I did, as a trade, before I began my true work.”

“What do you mean? What is a *true* work? Is not work what a man or woman does in life?”

“Have you heard this poem, Hilda?”

“Which? Say it.”

*“I know that I hanged,
on a wind-rocked tree,
nine whole nights,
with a spear wounded,
and to Odin offered,*

*myself to myself;
on that tree,
of which no one knows
from what root it springs.”*

“Yes. That is the word of All-Father Odin. We were being hurt by the witch called Heidi. She wished to destroy mankind. Odin saw no other way for us to be saved than to sacrifice himself on the majestic yew tree called *Yggdrasil*. He pierced his own heart with his own spear. Then, when he came back to life, he had with him a runic *godspell* that saves us all.”

“That is a beautiful story, Hilda.”

“It is a true story. It really happened.”

“I should know,” said Frälsare as he pulled his shirt from his belt and showed Hilda the wound in his side.

“My... my g-god Odin?”

“If that is what you wish to call me, yes. *I am*. The Beginning and the End. No one comes to the All-Father except through me.”

“Then... who are you?”

*“To Odin offered,
myself to myself;
on that tree...”*

“Will... you take me there, Frälsare? To the Tree?”

“I will. Look over there, Hilda.” Frälsare gestured with a nod. The girl turned her head.

“A cross... of wood?... *no! my dream!*”

“The Tree of Life, Hilda. Know that the one who believes in me, though found dead, yet shall live. Come. I have much to show you.”

And of Our Mother
by
David Sparenberg

If animals see and trust you
you are somebody
if sparrows rest
safely on your shoulders
if deer drink the silent
harmony of water from your palms
if the wolf with the lion
and the lamb walk beside you
if the bear brings you laughter, guidance
and wisdom of the medicine bundle and
eagle soars high overhead, miming
the narrative of new day
creation—then you are somebody:
beloved of our brother
the sun, our sister the moon
choreographing life's waters,
and of our Mother the Earth.



THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF-RIDERS

by

Dag Rossman

The Hill-Giant Eggther roused from his restless sleep atop the grassy mound he called home and crouched up on his haunches. At first he was uncertain what had awakened him, but as Eggther listened to the trees in the nearby Ironwood creak and groan—despite there being no wind to move them—he realized that something was amiss. Even the light of a full moon failed to penetrate the dense mist blanketing that fabled forest, so the giant’s usually keen eyesight was unable to discern the cause of the eerie clamor.

Wide awake now—and thoroughly uneasy—Eggther reached up to retrieve a sleeping rooster from an overhanging limb.

“Best stay close to me this night, Fjalar, old friend. There’s mischief afoot in the Ironwood, I fear, and I pity the poor souls that run afoul of it.”

And Eggther was right. For at that very moment, in a large clearing deep in the heart of the forest, the self-appointed “Queen of the Ironwood,” Angrboda—the sometime mistress of Loki—had gathered together a group of her followers, that band of troll-hags whom fearful humans referred to in hushed tones as the Jarnvidjur. Also on hand was a pack of giant wolves, which served as steeds for the troll-hags when their marauding ways led them beyond the confines of the Ironwood.

“You all know the story of how that miserable mortal who calls himself Dag Ormseeker came to the Ironwood a few years ago and bamboozled me into letting him take a limb from one of our trees. In exchange, he agreed to give me a kiss but—curse the tricky rascal—he kissed my nose instead of my lips and so escaped falling under my spell.”

Groans and mutterings arose from the throats of her listeners.

“Still and all,” Angrboda went on, “he and his big girl friend, the giantess Brekka, didn’t get away entirely unpunished. No, indeed. Shortly after they’d left our forest, I caused an avalanche to sweep over them. The girl was killed, but the Ormseeker survived and was carried off to Asgard by that pesky busybody Heimdall.”

Moans and curses followed mention of the name of that feared and detested Aesir god.

“Even now, the humiliation of that day gnaws at my innards, so I’ve decided to bring an end to it . . . once and for all.” Angrboda paused dramatically as she surveyed the expectant faces of her followers. “Word has come to me from the beak of a wandering *hu-hu*, the kind men call a troll-bird, that the Ormseeker has left Asgard and been spotted both in Alfheim . . .,” the troll queen’s audience groaned yet again, for there is no love lost between trolls and Light Elves, “and in Midgard where he wanders about telling stories. And it is in Midgard where he can be most easily taken by a band of wolf-riders.”

“Taken, your Highness . . . and eaten?” asked one bold troll-hag, licking her lips in anticipation.

“Taken unharmed, my dear . . . and brought back to the Ironwood so I can have my vengeance on him. When I’m finished—*then* we eat him!”

Angrboda grinned a most unpleasant, toothy grin while her followers cheered and hooted their approval.

“And what of his companions—if he has any with him when he is found? Should we bring them back here, too?”

Angrboda shrugged her massive shoulders. “I really don’t care what you do with them . . . just remember the old saying that ‘dead men tell no tales.’ It wouldn’t do for word of your

deed to reach certain ears in Asgard, so leave no living witnesses behind you when you return to the Ironwood. Now, which of you shall I send?"

"Send me."

"No, me."

"Count us in," clamored a three-headed troll.

"Why should you have all the fun?"

"Stop pushing me!"

"Get yer bloody elbow outta me eye, you old . . ."

"Silence!" commanded Angrboda, flinging up both arms menacingly. "You can't all go . . . that's out of the question. Someone has to stay here to protect the Ironwood and your queen from the likes of Thor should he choose this time to pay a visit. Four wolf-riders should be enough to capture one mortal storyteller and drag him back here . . . especially when one them has three heads to spy out the land. That's right, Leikn, Leirvor, and Ljota—you may go—and Bryja, Skrikja, and Ulfrun will ride with you."

The jubilation shown by those Angrboda selected was partially dampened by the dark looks and evil mutterings of the ones who had not been chosen.

"Sisters, hush," bade the troll-queen.

"Those who remain behind—Amma, Angeyja, Blatonn, Geirnefja, and Vargeissa—will also have important tasks to carry out while we wait for our sisters to return, I can promise you that. So please do stop grumbling. You're giving me an awful headache." Angrboda glared at the five from pain-bleared eyes, then snarled: "And you know you don't want to do that . . . you really don't."

Silence ensued. After a time, the berated five slipped away on wolf-back to patrol the borders of the Ironwood, while the chosen four—or was it six?—gathered up their traveling gear and, without a word, departed from the great gray forest into the outer lands, there to track down their intended quarry . . . for however long it would take. Relentless in their pursuit, the wolf-riders had never yet failed on a hunt. May Odin take pity on poor Dag Ormseeker in his time of peril!

* * *

"But you can't go off by yourself, Uncle Formindar," cried the distraught elf-woman Aelas. "I've really been looking forward to having Dag and I take a long trek through Alfheim with you."

"There is no simple reason for my decision, my dear, but go I must. I'm afraid I have put my love of family ahead of my duties as the Guardian for far too long. Now that you and Dag are finally husband and wife—and can look after each other without any help from me—it really is high time I resumed making my annual circuit throughout Alfheim."

"But why couldn't we come with you, Uncle? Surely Dag could tell his tales in Alfheim as easily as in Midgard . . . or in any of the other Nine Worlds." Turning to her husband, she asked: "Couldn't you, my love?"

"More easily and more safely, too, I suspect," Dag replied, "but if I'm to work my way back into Odin's good graces, I think it would be wise for me to resume my storytelling rounds among the peoples he most wanted me to reach—the humans of Midgard. They are the ones most likely to forget the gods' existence—and the threat of Ragnarök—if they don't hear the old stories retold from time to time. So, I'm afraid it is off to Midgard for us, dear one, and we'll just have to look forward to swapping yarns with your uncle when next the three of us share the same tent."

"I guess so!" Aelas sighed. "At least we'll have each other's company . . . and that means a lot to me, and hopefully to you as well."

Dag squeezed his wife's hand and quietly said: "You know it does."

"But what about you, Uncle? Couldn't you find a traveling companion?"

Formindar smiled gently. "You two have been my closest companions in recent years but, of course, my fang-mate, Falan, knows what is in my heart better than any other. Yet it would not be right to ask her to abandon for weeks on end the tent she shares with your father, Skuttar. Her place is with him . . . and all three of us know it. No, I am content with my own company most of the time, so I am never lonely when I travel by myself."

Aelas continued to frown. "But it just seems kind of sad, somehow."

"Well, my dear, since my happiness seems to be of such a worry to you, I can see I will have to share with you and Dag something that I have told no one else save Falan. Watching the joy you two share in each other has both warmed my heart . . . and reminded me of what has been missing in my own life: the love of a good elf-woman."

Aelas's mouth gaped in surprise, but then clapped shut as she recalled a certain day when she and her uncle had encountered a young Merin paddler named Dattulas who had conveyed them by coracle to a village at the edge of the sea. Dattulas had introduced himself as the "son of Tsiwakan" and said that he and his mother lived near the head of the fjord in a village called Siskebu. It was clear at the time that Formindar had visited Siskebu years before—and that he knew Tsiwakan well enough to remember her with considerable admiration. Hesitatingly, Aelas voiced what was on her mind: "Tsiwakan?"

While Dag frowned in puzzlement, Formindar nodded. "Tsiwakan it is, Aelas, and my, what a memory you have! Dag, let me tell you what this is all about. Many years ago, when I had been serving as Guardian for only a very short time, I made my first visit to the Merin people along the Great Fjord and the sea coast extending away from its mouth. While there I made a point of spending at least a few days at each of the villages getting to know the elvish folk, letting them get acquainted with me, and finding out if there were any problems I could help them resolve.

"I started with the coastal villages, then moved inland along the Great Fjord. By the time I reached Siskebu at the head of the fjord, I was bone weary and sick to death of conversation. My *lotkulas* had fled, and I needed nothing more than solitude and rest. Fortunately, the village healer recognized my needs and insisted that the other villagers respect my privacy until I had recovered.

"The village elders set aside a tent for my use in a secluded area a short walk from the main encampment. The only visitors I saw

each day were the healer and his daughter, who had agreed to bring me my meals . . . and to play her harp and sing for me when her father thought that might prove soothing to my spirit. The harpist, of course, was Tsiwakan. Beautiful to behold she was—and quiet in manner and speech. She put me in mind of a tranquil sunlit tarn . . . and when she sang, I could envision a playful mountain breeze rippling across the surface of the water.

"Thrown together as we were in almost total isolation—and under such romantic circumstances—how could I have failed to fall deeply in love with Tsiwakan? Although less demonstrative than I in word, Tsiwakan soon made her feelings clear in deed. Had I remained in Siskebu, I am certain that we would have wed. Alas, ere long, a summons to a Muorra tribal council in Vuobmai arrived, and I had no choice but to leave at once to attend the meeting. My parting from Tsiwakan was a tearful one, and I promised to return for her as soon as my responsibilities as Guardian permitted . . . but I never saw her again."

"Oh, Uncle Formindar, how could you abandon her?" Aelas cried. "That poor girl, that poor, poor girl!"

Dag said nothing, but he slowly shook his head in disbelief.

Formindar raised a hand in protest. "Now wait just a minute before you two rush to judge me too harshly. You have not heard the whole story. The Muorra tribal council for which I had to return revealed a number of serious problems that required the Guardian's full and personal attention. Well, with one thing and another, the weeks ran into months and more than a year passed before I was able to wend my way once more into the land of the Merin. Gossip among the Alfar flies faster than Odin's ravens, and long before I could reach Siskebu for my long-awaited reunion with Tsiwakan, I learned that the healer's daughter had long since married a young elf of the village . . . and that their 'happy union' had already been blessed with the birth of a son!"

"Dattulas!" exclaimed Aelas.

"So it would seem," remarked Formindar. "Anyway, there I was feeling very badly about

not returning to her much sooner . . . only to learn that she had found a new love shortly after I left. It was difficult to believe that the Tsiwakan I thought I knew could be so fickle, but there was no denying the existence of her husband and child. So, pushing aside my feelings of guilt, anger, and love, I closed off my heart from thoughts of Tsiwakan and turned my feet away from Siskebu.”

“Dear Uncle, I am so sorry to have misjudged you. But I have to ask: if Tsiwakan is married, why do you want to see her now?”

Formindar scratched his head. “Well, it is rather complicated. I really thought I had succeeded in putting her out of my mind for more than twenty years, but meeting Dattulas brought all the good memories flooding back. In all the time we spent with him, he often spoke of his mother but never once mentioned his father. This started me wondering if Tsiwakan might be a widow or, at least, that she and her husband had gone separate ways. So, I decided Siskebu would be the first place to visit . . . then I can see for myself how the land lies. Perhaps nothing will come of it, but I do want to see her lovely face again and hear her sweet voice.”

Aelas threw her arms around her uncle in a warm bear-hug, while Dag gripped one of his shoulders and spoke with heartfelt sincerity: “Our thoughts and prayers will go with you, sworn-brother, and may the outcome of your quest fulfill your fondest dreams.”

“Thank you, my dear ones. With your understanding hearts and good will, I can leave Vuobmai in high spirits. I will take leave of your parents this evening, Aelas. Then Raiko the goshawk and I will depart at first light. Will you be heading out on your storytelling tour of Midgard shortly?”

“Within a week, I should think,” Dag replied, glancing over at Aelas for confirmation and receiving her affirmative nod.

“Well, you are both experienced travelers, so you hardly need any advice from me. There is one magical device I want to send along with you, however, that might prove useful in an emergency. It has already saved Aelas from a

life of slavery and likely death, and that not so long ago.”

“Oh, Uncle Formindar, surely you don’t mean the thunderstone? Why that is your most precious possession!”

“Not nearly so precious to me as the two of you. Here, take it.” The elf wizard handed over a small pouch that contained the vaunted amulet. “Aelas already knows how to use it although, of course, I hope that you do not encounter any situations so dire that you will need to do so. Still, my heart will rest easier knowing that you have it at hand.”

Formindar turned back the tent flap and stepped outside, calling back over his shoulder: “Safe journeys to us all, and may we have some wonderful stories to share when next we meet.”

* * *

The sun had scarcely sunk beneath the western horizon when four strange riders emerged from the mouth of a cave in the rough country of the Alfmark, which separates Alfheim from the rest of Midgard. Heavy-bodied—almost lumpy—they appeared, each wrapped in a huge black cloak whose deep hood concealed most of the facial features of the wearer. Only the tips of their long, thick noses could not be entirely hidden. And had an observer been able to see beneath the hems of their cloaks, rather than riding boots he would have beheld broad, furry feet!

The steeds were almost as unique as their riders. Giant wolves they were, each as high at the shoulder as a bull moose. And well they might be immense, for they were kin of the fabled Fenris . . . and thus at the beck and call of their mother, Angrboda of the Ironwood, who had borne them to giant lovers in later years, after Loki had ceased to come calling. Savage scions of a savage line, these furry brothers would only submit to being ridden by Angrboda’s troll-hags . . . and even those fearsome females could control their steeds only by using vipers for reins.

With a pair of those venomous reptiles clamped onto the corners of their mouths, the wolves had little choice save to obey their riders. A jerk on the rein would cause a viper

to bite down hard, thus releasing a burst of venom into a wolf's tender mouth tissue where it could enter the blood stream. Because the wolves were so large, there was no danger of a bite proving fatal, but the resulting pain was sufficiently unpleasant to insure the wolves' cooperation. Clearly the relationship between the troll-hags and the wolves was not one based on mutual respect and affection.

"The woodcutter we invited into the cave for a little breakfast seemed awfully reluctant to join us," cackled Bryja. "You'd almost think he suspected we intended him to *be* breakfast."

"A real shame how people just don't trust each other any more, ain't it?" replied Skrikja. "Still, he roasted real nice, din't he, once he stopped wigglin' on the spit and screamin'?" Like to give me a headache there for a little bit."

"Oh, Skrikja, yer jest too soft-hearted," opined Ulfrun. "Music to my ears it were. What do you girls think?" And Ulfrun turned to the three-headed troll astride the wolf at her right.

"A little dinner music is always nice," said Leikn. "I thought he tasted a little stringy," muttered Ljota. "And you're all missing the point," snorted an exasperated Leirvor.

"Which is what, exactly?" queried Bryja.

"Which is that Angrboda expects us to find Dag Ormseeker and haul him back to the Ironwood for her as soon as possible. She didn't send us on a dining tour of Midgard and the Alfmark. The point, sisters, is that this fellow gave us the clue we needed before he became our meal . . . and all you seem to care about is how he tasted and whether or not he screamed in tune."

"Well, if yer so smart, missy," growled Skrikja, "why don't ya remind us jest what this great clue was."

"Leika and Ljota and I talked to the man just before you skewered him with the spit and started to turn him over the fire. He said that a young storyteller had stopped by his village about a week ago, along with an elf-woman and their two dogs. That has to be the one we were sent to find! So if we ride to that village tonight and sniff around carefully, we should

be able to pick up Dag's scent. Then we can put the wolves on his trail no matter what direction he's taken since."

"Wonder what elf tastes like?" muttered Skrikja.

"Oh, Skrikja," huffed Leirvor, "you're impossible! Come on sisters, let's ride." And the four great wolves—bearing their black-cloaked riders—padded off into the darkening night.

* * *

Since learning from Freyja of his kinship to Dag, Faragrim had been walking steadily—but unhurriedly—across Midgard from Oppland to the Alfmark. The goddess had told him that Dag was now in Alfheim, and Faragrim was confident he could find him there once he entered that mysterious realm. The draug had never visited the land of the Light Elves before, and the prospect of doing so added yet another level of excitement to his quest.

Faragrim's musings were interrupted by the shrill "skree, skree" of a stooping falcon, which swooped over his head to alight atop a moss-covered boulder. There—surrounded by a shimmering golden aura—the falcon transformed into a beautiful blonde goddess.

Dropping to one knee, the draug cried out: "Well met, my Lady Freyja . . . but what brings you here in such haste?"

"Bad news, I fear, my hero. Odin has just sent me word by one of his ravens that your kinsman Dag is in great peril! He and his elven bride have left the relative safety of Alfheim and are on their way into Midgard to resume his storytelling rounds on behalf of the All-Father. Odin has learned that four wolf-riding troll-hags have been sent out by Angrboda to capture Dag and carry him back to the Ironwood . . . and last night they picked up his scent."

"That *is* terrible!" exclaimed Faragrim. "I must go to Dag's aid at once. Do you know where he is now . . . and how far behind him the wolf-riders are?"

"One cannot be certain how far Dag and his wife will travel each day since they have no reason to think they are being pursued, but Odin opined that the trolls might catch up with

them two nights hence at the Sjoa gorge, which marks the boundary between the Alfmark and the rest of Midgard.”

“Two nights?” gasped Faragrim. “Even running day and night I could not possibly get there in time.”

“Not unless you call again upon the spirit of your moose friend,” said the goddess. “I am sure he would be more than willing once more to help you defeat his old enemies, the trolls.”

“A wonderful idea, my Lady. I’ll invoke his spirit at once.” And, as he had done once before in the company of Gudmund at the village of Kverndal, Faragrim planted the butt of his rune-staff in the ground, traced a pattern of runes in the air with his free hand, and intoned a runic chant:

*“Once more, old friend, take form
And move upon this land,
That we might hasten forth
To thwart a trollish band.”*

Faragrim’s rune-staff disappeared in a cloud of mist, to be replaced almost at once by the form of a moose-draug. The huge bull had eyes that glowed with the light of flickering bale fires . . . not unlike the eyes concealed within Faragrim’s deep hood.

The moose-draug seemed to sense the need for haste and bent his front knees so Faragrim could more easily mount behind his shoulder hump. The cloaked rider sprang to his seat and, as his mount rose again to its full height, the man called out to the golden goddess.

“Give us your blessing, gentle Freyja, and grant that we arrive in time.”

But the tireless moose-draug was already in full gallop, so it’s not at all certain that Faragrim heard Freyja’s reply before he was carried out of earshot.

* * *

Four hulking wolf-riders drew rein at the crest of a pine-dotted hill that sloped down to the rocky rim of the Sjoa, whose cascading waters had carved out the rugged gorge in ages past. Grim in its aspect—and all but uncrossable save by the narrow wooden span of the Sjoabru that lay but a short distance upstream—the gorge heralded the end of the

Alfmark and the beginning of the rest of Midgard.

“Dag’s scent is very strong now, sisters,” Leirvor declared. “He can’t be very far off, so keep a sharp lookout. Humans and elves don’t see very well in the dark, so Dag and the elf-woman have surely bedded down for the night.”

Indeed, they had, for it was only a few moments later that Bryja called out: “Look, down there in that cluster of boulders near the edge of the woods. Isn’t that a small campfire with someone stretched out beside it? How careless is that? We can ride right up to them, and they won’t even know they have company until we’ve grabbed them!”

“Still, it doesn’t hurt to be a little cautious,” said Leirvor thoughtfully. “Angrboda would never forgive us if we let Dag get away. So, let’s dismount here and surround them with trolls and wolves as we walk down there and slowly draw the circle tighter and tighter. Skryja, you and your wolf approach from the west; Bryja, from the east; Ulfrun, from the north; and Leikn, Ljota, and I will come up from the river side. That way there’ll be nowhere for them to run if they should happen to waken too soon.”

Leirvor’s plan proved to be a good one. For as quiet as they were, Ledgi and Darra were very light sleepers and the hounds soon sensed the presence of approaching danger. With growls and howls, the faithful dogs placed themselves between the now fully awake Dag and Aelas and the rapidly narrowing ring of giant wolves and their even more menacing riders.

Dag stoked the fire with fresh wood and the resulting flare of illumination fully revealed the nature and extent of the peril facing him and his wife. The three-headed troll seemed to be the leader of the wolf-riders, and it was to her (or them) that Dag spoke.

“Good evening to you, ladies. We had no idea there were any trolls living in this neck of the woods, let alone any that had such magnificent steeds as you are riding. We trust this is just a friendly call on a pair of travelers passing through the neighborhood. We don’t

have much food on hand, but we would be happy to share what we have.”

“My, such a polite young man,” opined Leikn. “Too slick-tongued, if you ask me,” growled Ljota. “Angrboda warned us about Dag’s tricks,” Leirvor reminded them. Turning her face back to Dag, she declared: “Your offer of food will be will taken, Ormseeker, even if not in the way you intended. Once we have you trussed up for delivery to Angrboda, we will dine on elf meat . . . and your dogs will feed our wolves!”

Dag was shocked into momentary silence, but Aelas spoke up: “I have absolutely no desire to be your next meal . . . or to have you haul my husband off to Angrboda for her to torture and kill. Are you sure there is nothing we can say or do to persuade you to leave us in peace?”

“Only in pieces, dearie, but never in peace,” smirked Leirvor.

“Well then,” sighed Aelas, “on your heads be it.” The elf-woman drew the thunderstone from her pouch and held it aloft. Striking its golden rim with the tiny iron Thor’s hammer that hung from the rim by a fine chain, Aelas declared: “May the Light take these cruel trolls.”

A huge burst of sunlight lit up the hillside and the wall of the gorge, turning night into day and temporarily blinding the wolves and dogs (Dag and Aelas having closed their eyes). The animals moaned and howled at first—until their eyes were able to adjust to the sudden change—but the trolls, they said nothing at all. Leirvor, Leikn, and Ljota, Bryja, Skrikja, and Ulfrun had all been turned to stone—to match their hard hearts—in that moment of total enlightenment.

The conquest of the trolls did not remove all of the danger menacing Aelas and Dag, however. The four giant wolves remained—all sons of Angrboda and bound to the service of their evil mother. Unable now to bring Dag as a captive to Angrboda, the wolves harbored vengeance in their hearts and they determined to kill him and Aelas on the spot, then carry the torn bodies back to the Ironwood in their

mouths as proof they had been true to the troll-queen’s command.

As the wolves crouched ever lower preparing to charge, Aelas spoke to Dag: “I’m so sorry, my love, that the thunderstone can’t deal with the wolves as it did the trolls. And I’m afraid I can’t shoot more than one of them before the other three are upon us. So little time, and so many regrets. I only wish . . .”

What Aelas was about to wish was abruptly cut off by Dag’s shout of “Hark, what’s that?” as the sound of hoofbeats thundered across the wooden Sjoabru to the accompaniment of maniacal laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Too late for the trolls, I see, but just in time for the wolves,” shouted Faragrim as he and the moose-draug burst on the scene.

The wolves recovered quickly from their surprise, two of them moving to intercept the newcomers while the other two sprang at Aelas and Dag. Already anticipating the attack, Aelas drew her readied bowstring to her ear and drove a feathered shaft deep into the chest of the oncoming wolf, mortally wounding the great beast whose momentum carried him into Aelas and knocked her off her feet.

Dag’s attacker, seeing what appeared to be an unarmed man and assuming him to be easy prey, leapt upon him with great jaws agape—thinking to dispense with him in one powerful bite. Imagine the wolf’s surprise when his victim, instead of cringing backward, actually stepped toward him and grasped the wolf’s tongue in an iron grip. Startled, the wolf tried to clamp his jaws down on the offending forearm only to discover that it, too, was as hard as iron. Choking, teeth in pain, and beginning to panic, the wolf started to shake his head violently from side to side in a desperate attempt to dislodge Dag’s grip on his tongue. The Ormseeker was shaken so hard he could scarcely tell which end was up, but he persisted through it all . . . and sooner than it seemed, Aelas regained her feet and planted two arrows—the second fatal—in the body of her husband’s adversary.

Meanwhile, the moose-draug had lowered his magnificent antlers and charged head-on

into one of the two wolves coming toward him and Faragrim. The impact bowled over the wolf and, before the furry beast could scramble to its feet, the sharp hooves of the moose-draug were hammering its body—cutting flesh and cracking ribs. The wolf tried to fend off its assailant with its own sharp teeth, but they were of no avail against already dead flesh that could not bleed or feel pain, so the moose-draug continued to trample the wolf until it was dead.

Just before the moment of impact with the first wolf, Faragrim hurled himself from the back of the moose-draug, rolled over on the ground a time or two, and rose to his feet to engage the remaining wolf. It may have appeared an uneven match, but Faragrim had giant ancestry in his bloodline, so his size and strength exceeded those of mortal men. As soon as he began to grapple with the wolf, it realized that it had met its match. Seeing its packmates lying dead or dying, the wolf made one last desperate effort to loose itself from Faragrim's fatal embrace . . . then, freed at last, it rushed off toward the Ironwood, tail between its legs—whimpering, not howling, for it knew there would be none to answer.

Dag and Aelas waited hand-in-hand near their campfire as Faragrim and the moose-draug approached. When Faragrim stopped a few feet away, Dag stepped forward and offered his hand.

"We don't know who you are, sir, but we do thank you—and your moose, of course—for saving our lives."

"I'm just glad we could get here in time to help, though it looks as if the two of you were able to deal with the trolls without any assistance. Sometime you'll have to tell me how you managed to conjure up sunlight in the middle of the night . . . oh, yes, I saw the light flare up from the other side of the river."

"It seems as if you were looking for us," remarked Aelas.

"Oh, I was, indeed I was. Freyja sent me as soon as she learned there was a band of trolls on your trail."

"Freyja sent you?" Dag exclaimed. "Just who *are* you, stranger?"

"Why, I am your brother, Dag. Heh-heh-heh-heh."

Dag's jaw dropped in disbelief. "But my only brother, Vidga, is dead."

"And so I am, kinsman, but now I exist as a draug in Midgard rather than as a spirit-warrior in Valhalla, or as one of those poor hapless souls who dwell with Loki's daughter, Hel, beneath Niflheim. Freyja could not free my spirit from my dead body, but she gave me a calling—as a hunter of trolls. Whenever and wherever trolls menace human communities, I am charged with tracking them down and putting a stop to their foul deeds—peacefully, if I can persuade them to cease and desist, or violently if they will not. Vidga Völundsson I was born, but now most folk call me Faragrim Trollsbane."

Dag was stunned. "This is just too much to take in all at once. I have so many questions."

"Of course, you do," replied Faragrim. "As do I. But if you and your lady have no objections, I would like to travel with you for a time before I have to go back to dealing with trolls. It would give us a chance to get to know each other."

Dag and Aelas readily agreed, then settled down to seek again some much needed sleep. This was more easily done when Faragrim assured them he would keep watch the rest of the night since he never slept. The next morning the couple awoke refreshed to find Faragrim strolling around the campsite. The moose-draug had disappeared while they slept, but Faragrim now carried an ornately carved, antler-headed walking stick . . . a most appropriate accessory for a traveler about to cross the Sjoabru and begin a trek into the heart of Midgard.

