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Mythic Circle #34

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Mythic Circle #34

Mythic Circle

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- L. C. Atencio: front cover, pp.36, 39, 43, 47
- Tim Callahan: p. 8, back cover. .
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Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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The Eye of the Sky

by

L. C. Atencio

Once upon a rather odd night, a kid told me that the sky was asleep.
I frowned in bewilderment. Shrugging my shoulders, I inquired for details.
He said that the moon was simply the eyelid of the sun, and that the eye of the sky
was closed.

It took me some effort of imagination to comprehend where he was coming from.
I soon elaborated on his crazy idea by telling him that sometimes the sky fell asleep
In the middle of the day, just like he often did during math classes; I taught him this is
'a solar eclipse.'

ONE IS STILL LEFT

by

David Sparenberg

Even when the mythic journey is ending and Ithaca is in sight
—one is still left with the world.

Even when the highest personal potential is in hand like a chalice of lovely wine
—one is still left with the world.

If there is war and madness, hate crimes and ecocide
—one must still wrestle with the demons of darkness.

For the privileged luxury is a necessity. Even as the thirsty are dying for water
and the hungry are dying for bread.

To the wretched of the earth, the root of desire
—is a peaceful belly, and a place to sleep.

The Golem of Bidosz

by

Mark Mellon

“Allah, Allah, Allah.”

The janissaries charged the ravelin in bright uniforms and turbans, armed with blades alone, eager to close with the hated Franks. Death in battle meant Paradise. The ravelin towered overhead, a palisaded mound of packed earth twenty feet high, bristling with cannon and musketry. Moufaz, a squad leader, jumped into the defensive ditch and scrambled up, his men close behind. In the face of steady musket fire, they ran up the slope, and tried to climb over the palisade’s sharpened logs.

“Come on,” Moufaz urged.

A soldier fired his musket through a gap in the palisade’s stakes. The heavy lead ball tore Moufaz almost in half. Tergiz thrust his long spear between the stakes and badly stabbed the soldier, only to be cruelly caught in the back by a hook on a long pole. Soldiers slowly dragged Tergiz to his own gory end under Habsburg daggers and spears.

All along the ravelin, musket volleys and cannon fire tore gaping holes in the janissaries’ ranks. Hurling glass grenades exploded. Razor sharp shards scattered everywhere, leaving awful wounds. Cannon fire from flanking bastions also took its toll. Despite horrific losses, the Sultan’s sworn men continued the assault. Had not Yilderim Pasha promised a hundred gold dirhams to the first man over the palisade? The general himself looked down from his bunker on a nearby ridge, a prominent goad to courage. Hennaed brilliant orange, phenomenally long mustachios quivered in the wind.

“Five days yet they keep coming,” Lieutenant von Scala said, blue eyes bright under his crested helmet.

“Keep quiet,” Waldeck snapped.

From Bidosz’s ramparts, he watched Turks attack the ravelin. The walled city topped a jagged hill that dominated the Drava’s headwaters, a key location. Built by Hungarian nobility centuries before, the antiquated high walls were extensively refortified at great effort and expense by Bidosz’s new Habsburg masters to thwart another Ottoman invasion at the empire’s edge. Under an Italian military architect’s careful supervision, the city was encircled by low earthen ramparts, further reinforced with slope walled, stone bastions, and packed with individual strong points. Any siege must first penetrate the outer defenses where besiegers would be hemmed in and raked by intersecting fields of fire.

Waldeck scanned the Turkish lines through a spyglass. Tens of thousands went about their many tasks. Artillerymen pulled tremendous, long-barreled brass cannon forward to fire more rounds. Crimean Tartars darted about on swift ponies, bent on reconnaissance, forage, and pillage. And everywhere, engineers toiled. With artillery, they were the Ottomans’ real strength. Diligently bent over, trench diggers worked with pick and shovel. Earth flew behind them and the Turkish lines slowly encircled Bidosz like filaments of a spider’s web.

Waldeck handed the spyglass to Scala.

“See there?”

Just behind the trenches, two files popped in and out of sight. The line of men that disappeared was empty handed; the line that appeared heavily burdened.

“Those baskets of earth,” Scala said. “They’re digging a sap.”

“Exactly.”

“Let’s use cannon.”

“They’re out of range,” Waldeck said. “The

sap's twenty feet down. Turks know siegecraft. I saw them at Candia."

BADDOOOM

A furious gout of flames, brown dirt, and black smoke. The ravelin was obliterated. The explosion's awful report made even hardened soldiers like Waldeck flinch. Silver trumpets sounded the charge. More janissaries charged the shattered palisade, held in reserve until now, each with a sack of grenades. The ravelin's commander tried to rally the remaining men, but they were simply overwhelmed, blown to pieces where they stood. Janissaries ran to the ruined ravelin's highest point and planted horsetail banners.

"Allahu Akbar. God is great," they shouted. The cry was picked up instantly by every Turk on the battlefield. Their terrible, ululating wail drowned out even the cannons' roar.

"Allahu Akbar."

Jubilant, derisive exaltation resounded like thunder. Waldeck looked on in helpless horror. Only days into the siege and defenses designed to hold out for weeks, if not months, were already destroyed. Through the spyglass, Yilderim Pasha capered like a schoolboy, mustachios waving, heedless of age and position.

"Esterhazy needs to know," Waldeck said.

Scala's eyes were wide. He was breathing hard. Waldeck shook him.

"Hold out while I retrieve the situation," he said. "You're all right?"

Scala assumed a resolute look.

"Yes, Captain."

"Good," Waldeck said with a grin. "Call every man. I'll send the reserve. Strong points must hold out to the last man. Watch for night attacks. Keep them away from the walls."

Waldeck went down the ramparts to Bidosz's cobblestoned, winding streets. They were empty. The populace huddled in basements, undoubtedly shuddering at cannons' boom. Rather than flee and face capture and enslavement by Tartars, most had remained. He passed through the Jewish quarter, down a long

narrow street lined by shuttered shops where goldsmiths, jewelers, and moneychangers and lenders plied their trades.

"Gert."

A man darted from an alley. Thin but handsome, he wore the sober black garb, broad brimmed hat, and white stock of his tribe.

"Lurking, Judah?" Waldeck asked.

"I waited for you," Judah replied. "The rebbe said he'll see you."

Waldeck responded, "That's gracious of him. Tell him as soon as I see Count Esterhazy."

He ran to the town square. The cuirass dug into his chest, making it hard to breathe. Heavy armor plates crashed as he ran. Musketeers idled in the square, indifferent to the sounds of raging, steadily growing battle.

"Lieutenant," Waldeck barked, "Lead your company to the northern wall. The Turks have breached Ravelin Four."

"Sir."

Waldeck hustled into the Rathaus, Bidosz's town hall, appropriated as Esterhazy's headquarters. Under standing orders to let Waldeck pass, guards admitted him to the commander's chambers. Waldeck found him in a red silk robe, bent over a map.

"Your Excellency," Waldeck said, "The Turks have breached Ravelin Four."

Esterhazy jerked his head up.

"That's impossible. Whose fault is that? Yours?"

Esterhazy was red faced from drink. Waldeck kept calm.

"Your Excellency is correct. Nonetheless, something must be done."

"Where's the Duke of Lorraine?" Esterhazy demanded. "He should have relieved us by now. I sent out dispatch riders days ago."

"The riders were caught by Tartars and tortured to death, Your Excellency," Waldeck said. "The Duke of Lorraine needs every man to defend Vienna. Even if he knew, there's nothing he can do."

"What does the expert on siege warfare propose?" Esterhazy sneered.

"Your Excellency," Waldeck said, "the Turks may soon breach the walls. The Zrinyi regiment stands idle. Ready them for a last sally."

"With you in the lead, to certain death?" Esterhazy asked.

"Gladly."

Esterhazy snapped his fingers said. "Done." He reached for a bottle of wine and drank. "If there's nothing else."

"Your Excellency, one more thing. There's a young scholar, Judah Zedok, I hired to teach me Greek."

Esterhazy said, "Your pet Jew. There's talk at the mess of your scholarly pretensions."

"I admire Homer, Your Excellency," Waldeck replied. "Zedok speaks well of his teacher, Sinai Loeb, the High Rabbi."

"The so-called Jew scholar. What of it, Waldeck? By Mary, you tire me."

"Zedok says Loeb has powers, the far sight and more."

"Rubbish," Esterhazy snapped. "The year of our Lord 1683, and you believe such childish nonsense. As if any good could come of any Jew."

"The Turks are at the gates, Your Excellency," Waldeck said. "We've no choice but to try anything that might stop them. If nothing else, it might help morale if the men think we've magic on our side."

Esterhazy drank more wine.

"Do as you see fit, Captain," he said. "On your head be it."

"Exactly, Your Excellency," Waldeck said. He left.

After ordering the Zrinyi regiment to stand to, Waldeck hurried to the Jewish Quarter. Humble wooden houses stood in neat rows. Turk artillery had drawn closer, near enough for massive marble cannon balls to land inside the walls. A sharp whistle warned Waldeck. He dove for cover. A cannon ball crushed a nearby house like rotten twigs smashed underfoot in the forest. There were low moans of pain from the ruins. Waldeck couldn't help. He ran down the street.

Nervous and jumpy, Judah was still there, at his post like a soldier. He led Waldeck to a small house, indistinguishable from other dwellings that crowded the Quarter. Judah opened the door without knocking and motioned for Waldeck to follow.

"This is an honor," he whispered. "The rebbe usually never sees anyone but students and family."

They entered a low ceilinged room, lit by beeswax candles, walls covered by brilliantly patterned tapestries. Scrolls and codices were piled everywhere. An old man with an ornately embroidered, black silk skullcap sat on a red divan, cross-legged and stiff-backed, more like the husk of a dead locust than a human being. Age and asceticism had pared away his face until only a hawk nose and dark, slanted eyes remained prominent.

Judah bowed low and said, "Rebbe, this is the Gentile, Captain Gert Waldeck, a scholar."

The rabbi raised a tremulous hand.

"I know, my son," he said, barely audible over the siege's din. "What would you, Gentile?"

Waldeck said, "Rabbi, Judah says you can work miracles. I've come to ask you for any help you can give."

The old man faintly smiled.

"This is not the first time a Gentile has requested a favor. I have never agreed, despite threats or bribes," the rabbi said. "Judah should have told you. I pay scant attention to the temporal world."

"Rabbi," Waldeck said. "Soon the Turks will break in. Yilderim Pasha has sworn no quarter, to put Bidosz to fire and sword. Jew or Christian, every man will be slain and women and children enslaved. As a man of God, will you not help?"

"It's our duty," Judah interjected.

"Don't lecture me, my son," the rabbi said. "Let me think."

The rabbi sat with closed eyes, long silence punctuated by ragged volleys of cannon fire. By quivering candlelight (or perhaps due to

Waldeck's increasing exhaustion), the old man was invested with numinous light, surrounded by a halo. Waldeck blinked and blinked again. Still the rabbi seemed to hover above the divan, corporal body light and airy from contact with divinity.

At last he said, "The situation is dire. The Jews of Bidosz are threatened. I'd be less than upright in the Lord's eyes if I didn't act."

"Rabbi, my thanks," Waldeck said. "From now on, I am your friend and protector."

The rabbi smiled again.

"You're a good and true knight, Captain," he said. "Return to what you know while I do what I can."

"Send a messenger to the north wall if you need me."

Waldeck left.

The rabbi said to Judah in Yiddish, "Fetch Menachem and Avrom. Tell them hurry and bring what they need for worship."

"Yes, rebbe," Judah said. He left. The rabbi rose from his divan. Moving quickly for his age, he said, "Where is that scroll?"

Night fell, but without peace or rest in Bidosz or beyond. In the darkness, the Turks appeared more like demons from the pit than humans. Cannon roared with tremendous gouts of smoke and flame. There was the clang of blacksmiths' hammers and forges' glow as horses were reshod and weapons repaired. Martial music was constant, blaring horns and thundering kettledrums. Torches bobbed everywhere, each borne by a tireless janissary on the attack.

Thousands of janissaries and engineers pressed past the fallen ravelin. Fire raked them from bastions and the walls. Men fell like new mown hay, but survivors pushed on toward the dry moat, the last obstacle before Bidosz's walls. Habsburg soldiers fired muskets and dropped grenades on milling Turks below. Others in strong points fought on until overwhelmed.

A great battery hammered at the two

bastions, every big cannon in the Turkish siege train. Snipers and light cannon took up positions in the wrecked ravelin. Engineers dug trenches for janissaries to advance and saps below ground to lay mines. Habsburg engineers dug countersaps to blow the Turks up before they reached the walls. Muffled explosions were the only sign of a grim, claustrophobic battle waged below ground. From the ravelin's ruins, a musketeer, fresh off an isolated, Balkan mountain, took a careful bead on a Frank officer in a crested helmet. He prayed to Allah and squeezed his trigger.

Scala fell. Waldeck bent over him, but he was already dead, shot through the helmet. Enemy fire, intense and unrelenting, kept Waldeck pinned behind the ramparts.

"Tell the bastions to direct more fire at the ravelin," he shouted to a messenger boy.

What's the rabbi doing?, Waldeck wondered.

"Allah, Allah, Allah," the janissaries screamed.

In a turnip field, three old men prayed and meditated while Judah and other students frenziedly dug up the black soil. When their unaccustomed toil had produced sufficient dirt for the rabbi's purposes, he said, "Pile it here."

The students dumped earth until a sizable heap formed on the indicated spot.

"You shouldn't see this," the rabbi said. "Go fight the Turks."

The students left. The old men took shovels and shaped and tamped the earth into a man's form over ten feet tall. Labor done, they donned prayer shawls and phylacteries. They walked around the heap, recited the alphabet, and the most sacred and powerful word in the universe, the Maker's name. After their first turn, the pile compacted and hardened to stone. On the second turn, a face emerged, rugged and simple. After the third, the arms and legs moved.

A scaling ladder hit the rampart. Waldeck

raced over, but a big janissary reached the top, about to leap over, yataghan in one hand, triumphant grin on his face. Waldeck smashed his head in with a war hammer. He fell, dead before he even hit the ground. Waldeck and a soldier pushed the ladder over. Janissaries fell screaming. The soldier blew on a smoldering length of slow match until the end glowed cherry-red, lit a grenade's fuse, and dropped it.

"Die, heathens," he shouted.

Waldeck looked back at the Jewish Quarter. He'd been foolish, clutching at straws like a frightened child. Why expect help from a wizened, old recluse?

The rabbi bent low and blew weak, old breath into the earthen man's nostrils. With his right index finger, he traced Hebrew letters on the forehead: "אמת." Emet, the Hebrew word for Truth. As the Maker created Adam, the rabbi quickened the golem.

The giant's eyes opened, full of ponderous life. The colossus rose slowly with a sound of raw rock torn loose from chthonic earth.

After a prolonged, gallant defense, the Löbl bastion had literally shattered under the combined impact of a sap exploded underneath and relentless shelling from Turkish artillery. This left the Buda Gate virtually defenseless. Yilderim Pasha himself took charge. Artillerymen pulled heavy cannon along the zigzag trenches, dug wide to accommodate siege guns.

"Hurry, you sons of Franks. Get those guns in place so we can crack this walnut," Yilderim shouted.

The heavy wooden gates were barred, but not blocked with earth and rubble, another of Esterhazy's odd decisions, inexplicable unless he wanted an escape route. There was nothing left but to stand atop the walls and keep up a continuous fire of musketry and grapeshot.

The area before the gate became a killing field. Hardened Turk artillerymen ignored dead comrades and grimly continued their business

while others replaced the fallen. Yermak the master gunner put a torch to his cannon's touchhole. Fired at nearly point blank range, a marble cannonball slammed into the massive wooden doors. One gate bent from the blow, but held.

"One more will do the trick," Yilderim said.

A second cannon fired. The bent door folded over like a playing card and fell from its hinges.

"We'll have women tonight," a janissary crowed.

"Inside before they rally," Yilderim ordered.

"Everyone rally," Waldeck shouted.

He raced to the shattered gate. Soldiers with pikes used their long weapons to stab any Turk who climbed inside. More men raced to the defense. Musketeers fired into janissaries' faces. Saber wielding cavalrymen hacked men to pieces. The defense was fierce to the point of frenzy, but the Turks, the scent of victory in their noses, had their own battle madness.

"Allah, Allah, Allah," they screamed.

Men scrambled over the shattered gate, sword or spear in hand, shoved comrades aside to attack the Franks, none bolder than Yilderim Pasha, at the vanguard despite his rank. His sharp blade severed an infidel's thigh.

"At them," he shouted. "Tonight Bidosz must fall to the Sultan."

Waldeck and other defenders fought back. It helped that only relatively few Turks could pass through the narrow breach at one time. Soldiers and citizens, men young and old, ran to the gate as word spread that the last, desperate moment to repel the Turk had arrived. Waldeck found himself side by side with Judah who valiantly, if somewhat ineptly, slashed at the enemy with a sword. Waldeck pulled Judah back. He took the sword from him in exchange for his war hammer. Sweat tracked narrow channels in their soot-blackened faces. Judah and Waldeck returned to the fray.

"What about the rabbi?" Waldeck shouted.

He ran a black-haired Circassian through the stomach.

“A miracle is coming,” Judah gasped, near collapse from physical combat.

“Soon?” Waldeck said.

A man next to Waldeck fell dead. Turkish musketeers had pushed through the breach and brought their heavy guns to bear. Christian soldiers fired back in turn, but the Turks had momentum. The Habsburg line buckled. Any moment now, Waldeck sensed, untrained civilians would panic and bolt, even though there was nowhere to flee.

BDDDONNGG

A leaden plod shook the earth beneath their feet. There was another earthquake shock. The noise grew steady and rhythmic. Muslim and Christian alike, a throng at each other’s throats, ceased their strife in awe-stricken fear. A shadowy figure slowly rounded the corner. Plainly vast even from a distance, taller than the low-roofed houses that flanked the street, he advanced with a curious, stiff-legged gait. Damaged from shelling, houses tumbled into rubble with each bone jarring tread of the approaching colossus. The figure emerged into the light cast by a burning house.

“Spawn of Shaitan,” a Tartar cried.

Twice a normal man’s height, the sandy brown colossus was barrel chested with limbs like tree trunks. The only human aspect was the roughhewn, impassive face, eyes blank under Hebrew letters that burned like white fire. Massive arms extended as he drew near, titanic fists balled like a boxer about to fight.

Yilderim Pasha broke his men’s reverie.

“What’s this?” he cried. “Idling like eunuchs? Shoot that Frank abomination.”

Reassured by Yilderim’s confidence and grateful for the familiar comfort of orders in the face of the unknown, musketeers opened fire. Lifetime training had instilled the instinct to kill his foes into a janissary’s very bones. Heavy gauge muskets blasted away at close range, each charge aimed by experienced gunners at the center of mass. Yet lead slugs only chipped tiny, ineffective clay shards off the massive torso.

With an awful groan of grinding stone, the

giant bent over. He picked up a heavy roof beam that lay in the street. The beam looked like a tinder stick in his huge hands. Beam held high, he advanced.

“Make way,” Waldeck shouted.

Terrified Habsburg soldiers eagerly drew away. The giant waded into the Turks.

“Destroy the infidel abortion,” Yilderim Pasha screamed. “Throw grenades. Janissaries, attack.”

Grenades rained down on the rampaging giant with no more effect than hurled pinecones. Musketeers poured round after heavy round into the giant at almost point blank range. They bothered the giant like gnat bites.

A janissary cried, “He can’t die. He’s a djinn.”

He swept left and right with the beam, in grim silence that made the carnage all the more terrible. Placid as a farmer scything wheat, the giant smashed heads, limbs, and torsos into unrecognizable, bloody red pulp. Superstitious panic swept through the Turks. Some cast nervous glances toward the breach, the only way out.

“Don’t lose heart, you wretches,” Yilderim Pasha said. “I won’t be strangled because a few so-called soldiers of Allah turn coward.”

The giant’s dead eyes fixed on Yilderim Pasha. With inhuman aim, he hurled the beam straight at the Turkish commander’s head. Skull shattered like an eggshell, Yilderim Pasha’s corpse dropped.

Incipient fear became outright panic. The cry went up among common Turkish soldiers, “Run for it, lads. No shame fleeing a demon.”

Disciplined formations degenerated into a frightened mob bent only upon escape. They trampled one another in their haste to push through. The breach was packed with men like writhing worms. The giant worked havoc on the rearmost. He crushed them like bugs beneath his feet. The continued slaughter only further fueled the Turks’ terror. Some passed through the breach. Word spread of the infidel monster and Yilderim Pasha’s death.



“Beware. The Franks have a demon.”

Fear became general. The Turkish army, sure and confident of final victory only moments before, ran like so many craven cowards. Tartars and regular cavalry wheeled their horses and galloped away, heedless of their mounts' condition. Janissaries dropped muskets and turned tail. The Turks were so demoralized that standard bearers even threw down sacred horsetail banners to flee.

“Open the gate,” Waldeck commanded.

Soldiers cleared rubble and bodies away from the Buda Gate. The remaining, intact gate was pulled open so two columns of mounted men could pass. At the head of the Zrinyi Regiment, five hundred strong, well armed and mounted, Waldeck held his long lance high.

“At the trot. Harry and kill as many as you can. With me.”

He rode out, the regiment thundering behind him, angry after long inaction, hell bent upon revenge. The giant stood to one side, immobile once the Turkish threat subsided. Outside, the regiment spread out and attacked in squads. Though small in number, the regiment's disciplined units ripped through disorganized Turks like foxes in a henhouse. Lances leveled, they ran men through the back without compunction, sometimes two at a time. Many threw down their lances and used long sabers, hung by cords from their wrists. They cut down foot soldiers and slashed horsemen to ribbons.

They hunted Turks all night, chased them to the Drava's shallow waters and beyond, an orgy of killing that left men and mounts spent, heads hung low, barely able to move. Waldeck ended the pursuit only because of exhaustion. The return was slow and tedious, but weariness was eased by the salve of unexpected victory. Upon their return, they found that the Turks, in their frenzy to retreat, had abandoned their entire camp down to an enormous treasure of gold and silver in Yilderim Pasha's silk lined bunker. Men of Bidosz streamed from the city, Judah among them, to acclaim the regiment and escort them back by torchlight.

“We did it, Gert,” Judah shouted.

“Yes,” Waldeck said. “All due to the rabbi. I'll see he's rewarded.”

A celebration was held the next day in the town square, even as rubble was cleared and the dead were tossed into mass graves. Burghers and their families donned finery. The square was decorated with garlands of bright wildflowers, gathered from the fields by the city's young women. Troops were drawn up in their ranks, dirty and ill favored, with no time to burnish armor or wash uniforms, but still proud, fatigue forgotten in the bright sun. The giant stood in a position of honor, draped with red and white flowers. Initially feared by wary townspeople, they had hailed him as the city's savior once Waldeck and his men assured them that the motionless giant was harmless.

Waldeck went into the Rathaus to fetch Esterhazy. The Count had gone from despair to ecstasy. When told of Yilderim Pasha's abandoned treasure, his joy only grew. He immediately appropriated the booty. Esterhazy celebrated as he grieved, with alcohol. Waldeck found him at his desk in his ceremonial robes, drinking Tokay wine, mouth open in a loose, unpleasant grin.

“Waldeck. Good to see you. Really splendid. Leading that charge, bringing me coin. I was completely justified relying on you. What can I do for you?”

“Your Excellency,” Waldeck said. “We await you outside to celebrate your victory.”

“Splendid,” Esterhazy said. “Even your pet Jew, him too?”

Waldeck frowned and said, “Judah fought alongside me at the Buda Gate.”

“Of course, he fought to preserve his skin,” Esterhazy said. “All a Jew ever thinks about.”

“If it wasn't for the rabbi and his giant, we'd have lost,” Gert said.

“He's only a Jew,” Esterhazy said. “Where is that Grand Rabbi?”

Waldeck said, “The rabbi is ascetic, devoted to prayer and study like a monk. He lives apart.”

“He’ll do what I say,” Esterhazy replied. “I sent men to fetch him. As soon as he arrives, I’ll make my entrance.”

“Beg pardon, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said, “but why? The rabbi’s old and frail. We owe him gratitude.”

Esterhazy laughed and said, “Waldeck, what has come over you? Too many blows to the head? The idea, I owe some Jew anything. I can’t stand them here, the stink makes me choke.”

He drank more wine.

“What do I want with that rabbi, as if my affairs were your business, you wretched commoner. I want him to end that monster outside. As long as that thing exists, it’s a menace, a threat to my authority. Every Jew must leave Bidosz too.”

Waldeck said, “Jews live here under imperial remit. You’ve no authority to drive them out, Your Excellency.”

“I can do what I want, Waldeck,” Esterhazy said. “Understand. I’ve no problem with you playing hero, taking credit for that foolhardy cavalry charge. But don’t you dare interfere.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said.

Esterhazy’s adjutant entered the room and said, “Your Excellency, the Jew is outside.”

Esterhazy said, “Let’s be off.”

He half-walked, half-staggered to the door. Once outside, fresh air seemed to revive him. The rabbi was carried by four students in a borrowed sedan chair. They carefully set the chair down. Judah helped the rabbi out, wizened countenance still serene despite the rude interruption of decades long isolation. Waldeck hurried over to the rabbi.

“Beware,” he hissed, “Esterhazy plans to-”

“Hush, my son,” the rabbi said without speaking. “Let me handle this.”

With the aid of his staff and Waldeck’s strong arm, the rabbi bowed to Esterhazy and said,

“Your Excellency. You do me great honor. How may I serve you?”

Esterhazy barked, “I want that walking statue stopped. That’s a public menace, you know. No telling what that thing might do.”

The rabbi said, “As you order, Your Excellency.”

Esterhazy smiled and said, “Good of you to cooperate.”

“I need a ladder,” the rabbi said.

“Waldeck, have engineers fetch one,” Esterhazy said.

A ladder was propped against the giant’s broad torso.

“Your Excellency will find this of interest,” the rabbi said. “Please stand close so you may see firsthand.”

“Gladly,” Esterhazy said.

The rabbi went to the giant, followed by Esterhazy, who scowled at his slow pace. The old man set down his cane and put an unsteady foot on the ladder’s first rung. Judah and Waldeck tried to help but he said, audible only by them,

“Keep well away.”

Esterhazy watched the rabbi’s slow ascent, even deigned to steady the ladder by propping a foot on the bottom rung. Panting, the rabbi reached the topmost rungs. His palsied hand erased the letter “א.” Only “מת” remained. Met, the Hebrew word for Death.

There was an earthquake’s rumble. The townspeople screamed, fearful the Turks had returned. Bound solely by the rabbi’s will, the giant fell apart. Loose rock slammed down with the impact of a winter avalanche. The rabbi and Esterhazy were crushed by the collapsed giant. Waldeck and Judah ran to the rabbi’s aid, but it was too late. He lay next to Esterhazy, in death as in life his people’s defender, battered face graced by a faint, ironic smile.

THE KING OF THE FOREST

by

Dag Rossman

Firelight flickers in a forest glade. The rhythmic beating of a wooden club on a hollow log echoes throughout the woods. Huge, shaggy figures slowly, silently drift into the glade and seat themselves on large tree stumps encircling the fire. A rare conclave of trolls is gathering, the likes of which no human eye has ever beheld . . . or likely ever shall.

And what a bizarre assembly it is—for no two trolls are alike. All are large, far taller than a man or an elf. Some even rival a giant in size, though all trolls have stooped shoulders, longer noses, and coarser features than their smarter cousins in Jötunheim. But that said, some of these trolls have tails—while others have none—and while most of them have but a single head—including a troll-hag who has hers tucked under one arm—there are a few who have as many as three!

When every stump but one was occupied, the drumming ceased and the drummer hopped up on the last stump, teetering for a moment before fully gaining his balance. Had he fallen, his dignity would have suffered far more than any part of his anatomy.

“You probably want to know why I summoned you here,” declared the speaker when the growing anticipation of the assembled trolls threatened to shatter the silence.

“We sure do, Kraki,” growled a grizzled old troll named Rangbein, “and it’d better be important. I was right in the middle of my mid-night meal when I heard the drum . . . and I’ll bet many of the others were, too. What’s so flaming urgent?”

“*Ja*, Kraki, what’s up?” muttered several of the others while their fellow trolls nodded in agreement.

“Only the greatest threat to trolldom in recent memory!” shouted Kraki. Satisfied that he now had the group’s full attention, the speaker went on to tell of his recent encounter with Faragrim that had cost two trolls their lives.

“That’s right, that’s what he did,” related Kraki, waving his arms excitedly. “A couple waves of that rune-staff Faragrim carries and ‘pouf,’ there went Flegg and Jarngrim right off the cliff and onto the rocks below.”

Gasps and mutterings met this statement . . . and more than one troll glanced nervously over his shoulder. But old Rangbein responded with a query: “And where were you, Kraki, while all this was going on? Couldn’t you have stopped him?”

“Oh, I wanted to, but he . . . well, er, cast a spell on me with his rune-staff so I couldn’t move a muscle. *Ja*, that’s right. Faragrim magicked me like he did Flegg and Jarngrim.”

“Not quite the same way,” opined Rangbein dryly. “For here you stand, hale and hearty, and their corpses lie a-mouldering on the mountainside. How come this Faragrim fellow let you live?”

“I been thinking about that,” said Kraki, “and I guess he wanted me to let the rest of you know what he could do to us . . . figured to scare us into laying off our raids on human farmsteads. But he figured wrong, didn’t he? Us trolls don’t scare easy, do we? There’s only one of him—the other humans are too puny to count—and there are dozens of us. We can do him in . . . and the sooner, the

better, I say!”

This rousing declaration was met with a chorus of cheers and yells of “Death to Faragrim,” but they all fell silent when old Rangbein raised himself up to the full extent his bent frame would allow, cleared his throat, and pointedly inquired: “All well and good, Kraki, all well and good. But there is just one leetle problem, as I see it. What about that rune-staff of his? Seems to me that could more than make up for our advantage in numbers.”

“I’m glad you mentioned that, Rangbein,” declared Kraki, though the glare he cast in the old troll’s direction would have told a different story to a careful observer. “Faragrim caught us by surprise on a narrow trail where only one troll at a time could come at him. Next time *we* surprise him . . . and at a place we choose, where there are no cliffs to fall from and we can attack from all sides at once. It’ll happen so fast he’ll be done for before he can wave his cursed staff.”

There was more applause and cries of “Good idea,” but the ever skeptical Rangbein, more far-seeing than the average troll (there must have been more than a few giants in his ancestry), asked: “And how are we going to get Faragrim to stroll all unsuspecting into this wonderful trap of yours, invite him to a mead-and-cheese party? What kind of a fool do you take him for?”

“Oh, I plan to have better bait for him than that,” growled Kraki. “And it will be an invitation that busybody can’t possibly refuse. If we raid a human steading right after dark—Kverndal, for instance—and carry off some human children alive and squealing like yummy piglets, their parents will go running to their hero Faragrim to save them. You can bet he’ll set off on our trail as fast as he can for fear we’ll kill the little brats before he can catch us. The other humans won’t be able to keep up with him,

so he’ll rush right into our trap all alone. Then we can slaughter him without anyone interfering.”

Rangbein raised one last, feeble objection: “But what if he doesn’t come?”

Kraki peered down his long nose and smirked: “Why then, I guess we’ll have ourselves a leisurely banquet of roast kiddies. Haw, haw, haw!” His crude guffaws were echoed by the roaring approval of his fellow trolls . . . all except old Rangbein, who slowly shook his hoary head.

* * *

Beneath a full moon, Faragrim had been striding across a high meadow on a southern flank of the Troll’s Teeth mountains when the peals of a hunting horn began to reverberate among the cliffs. “Gudmund needs me,” he exclaimed, and bounded downslope toward Kverndal, which seemed to be the source of the call for help.

When the draug drew near the steading, he could see that one of the outbuildings was afire and a cluster of people was hovering by the side of a person lying on the ground. A little to one side, Gudmund stood poised, about to wind the horn yet again.

“What’s the use, Gudmund?” a woman’s voice despaired. “No one is coming. You men need to go after those trolls and bring my babies back before it’s too late!” Choking sobs cut off further speech by the distraught mother.

“Faragrim will come,” asserted Gudmund, “and he can deal with those trolls better than all the rest of us put together!”

“I *have* come,” stated Faragrim quietly as he stepped forward from the shadows into the flickering light cast by the burning building. “Now, someone tell me what has happened here.”

Having already heard Gudmund’s account of his adventures in the company of the draug, his kinsmen didn’t flee from Faragrim’s presence, but they did take a step

or two backward and silently left the explanation of the night's events to Gudmund.

"The first we knew there were trolls about was when the farm animals began to bawl and bleat. Thinking that wolves had gotten into the byre, we men grabbed up our bows and hunting spears and rushed outside to kill them or at least drive them off. And once outside, we saw the roof of the byre afire. After that our full attention was given to getting the animals out and setting up a bucket brigade to throw water on the flames. The women helped, too, but we made the younger children stay back and watch from the open doorway."

Gudmund sighed, then continued: "That's when the trolls struck. The fire had just been a ruse to draw us away from the hall, and when the little ones were unguarded, the trolls snatched two of them, my brother Arne's sweet little Marit and her brother Stein. When the children screamed, we all turned back from the fire, of course, and tried to get them away from the trolls. Since we couldn't use our bows or spears for fear of hurting the little ones, there was little we could do to prevent such powerful monsters from getting away with the children. Odin knows that no one could have tried harder than Arne—he threw himself on the trolls barehanded trying to free Marit and Stein—but there he lies yonder with only a broken crown to show for it. Can you help us, Faragrim?"

"I certainly intend to try my best. But it would help a great deal if you could tell me how many trolls took part in the raid, and what direction they headed when they left."

"I never saw more than four or five of them, but in the flickering light and confusion it was hard to be certain. And they headed west out of Kverndal. Oh, yes, just as they passed out of sight, one of them called back that they took the little ones to avenge the deaths of Flegg and Jarngrim—

whoever they are—and planned to sacrifice the children at midnight."

"Midnight, eh? The nearest stone altar the trolls use for sacrifices lies in Ottidal, the Valley of Fear. That has to be where they are headed. Seeing in the dark as they do, they should arrive there shortly before the hour they named. Even if you had not waited for me, you could not have hoped to be there in time . . . and, of course, you did not know exactly where they were going. I can see at night as well as a troll—if not better—but even running at top speed I fear I could not get to the stone altar by midnight."

A collective groan escaped the group gathered in front of Faragrim. "Then there is no way to save the children?" queried Gudmund desperately.

"I didn't say that, my friend," Faragrim reassured him. "But it *will* take extraordinary means to do so. Everyone stand back."

Driving the antler-capped butt of his staff into the soil, Faragrim traced a pattern of runes in the air with his fingers while intoning this runic chant:

"A forest king thou wert,
A king once more shalt be;
'Tis time to face the trolls,
And set the children free."

A swirling mist began to thicken around the rune-staff, and in what seemed like no time at all, the staff disappeared altogether, replaced by the re-animated body of Faragrim's moose friend, the glow of bale fires gleaming from its dead eyes. Faragrim strode forward to place one hand on the moose-draug's forehead, then speaking mind-to-mind created a visual image of the troll attack and the children's peril. The moose grunted angrily, then bent his front knees so Faragrim could mount up behind his hump.

"Come, Gudmund," Faragrim called out.



“Bring your spear and mount up behind me.”

“Y-you want me to come along?”

“Of course, if you will. Someone needs to look after the children while I deal with the trolls. And the wee ones will feel far safer with their uncle than they would with a draug they didn’t know. Now, hurry!”

Gudmund clambered astride the moose’s broad back and barely had time to throw his free arm around Faragrim’s waist before the moose lurched to its feet and, uttering a hoarse bellow, thundered off into the dark.

After a time the woodland path began to skirt a body of water, and Faragrim called the moose to a halt. Turning his head toward Gudmund, the draug explained: “The trolls made no effort to conceal where they were going—just the opposite. And by setting midnight as the time for the sacrifice they ensured that I would have to come alone—or so they thought. Clearly we are riding into a trap where there are bound to be far more trolls than just the raiders, so I think we need to gather some reinforcements.”

“But where are we going to find any warriors around here?” queried a baffled Gudmund.

“Wait and see, heh-heh-heh,” chuckled Faragrim. “The moose will summon them for us.” And he leaned forward to send a mental picture of his plan to the beast, which nodded its great head in agreement before raising it again to issue a challenging bellow toward the mossy slope leading down to the shore of the tarn.

Shortly a small group of moose, four antlered males led by an old female, came lumbering up from their sleeping place in the woods. They seemed hesitant at first, but once the female had rubbed noses with the moose-draug she excitedly began to talk with the others in a series of grunts and whistles.

“What in the world is going on?” asked a perplexed Gudmund.

“This is the very tarn where our friend was killed, and these are his mate and their

grown-up offspring. Hush a moment and let me mind-speak with them.” Faragrim bent his head in concentration.

Soon the draug raised his head and said: “It’s alright. His mate has lost some of her own calves to the trolls in the past, and she is only too willing to help. The others will go along with what their parents want. Since you are going to look after the children, she has offered to carry you the rest of the way and help protect them. Let me have your spear to fight the trolls. Besides, you’ll need both hands to hold on.”

Once Gudmund had transferred to the back of the old female, the strange cavalcade thundered on toward the lower entrance to Ottidal.

* * *

“It must be nearing midnight,” muttered Kraki impatiently. “That blasted Faragrim should be showing up any moment now.” He turned toward old Rangbein, who had been assigned to stand guard over the two children where they lay trussed together—quivering and quietly sobbing—on a crude stone altar. “Give the kiddies a poke or two so they’ll start screaming in terror. That’ll bring him faster than Say, what’s that noise? Sounds like the roll of thunder, but the sky is clear. Oh, no, it couldn’t be Thor, could it, coming to spoil our game?”

Any further speculation was cut off as the cavalcade of moose swept at full speed into the valley, whose walls rang with the unmistakable, haunting laughter of Faragrim: “Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

Kraki’s knees quavered in spite of himself as he frantically screamed: “It’s him, it’s him! Get him, kill him, smash him, squash” The troll chief’s words were cut off as the moose overran the assemblage of waiting trolls, throwing them into the air with their antlers and smashing them with the hooves of their powerful front legs. For his part, Faragrim thrust from side to side with the spear, using both blade and butt to great

effect. Screaming, the cowardly trolls fled in all directions—those that could still stand—for though bullies enjoy inflicting pain, rarely can they tolerate receiving it.

Thwarted in his plans for revenge on Faragrim himself, Kraki ran toward the stone altar determined that he would at least kill the children. But the old female moose intercepted him before he could reach them. As Gudmund flung himself from her back to shield his niece and nephew, she knocked Kraki off his feet. Before he could get back up, her mate struck the troll repeatedly with his hooves, crushing his skull and trampling him to death. Quiet reigned, except for the moans of a few trolls too badly wounded to flee.

Old Rangbein cautiously poked his hoary head around the tree where he had taken shelter when the moose charged onto the scene. “Is all the nasty kicking and stabbing over now?” Assured by Faragrim that it was, he emerged to take stock of the battlefield, then shook his head and muttered: “I never thought Kraki’s plot to trap you was a good idea, but he talked the others into it . . . for all the good it did him, or them. Well, Kraki’s dead now, and you got what you came for, so I hope you’ll go away and leave us to lick our wounds in peace.”

“Only if all you trolls agree to leave these mountains as soon as you can . . . and never, ever return,” Faragrim responded sternly. “Otherwise you’ll be hunted down and killed right to the very last one. Kraki has shown us that trolls just can’t be trusted as neighbors.”

“Harsh words, Faragrim, harsh words—but I can see where you have reason to feel that way. Well, since it seems we have no choice, I’ll tell the others. Then we’ll be on our way as soon as possible, though where we can go is beyond me. Now, I name you

Faragrim Trollsbane . . . and I pray that our paths may never cross again.”

“That will depend on how your people treat humans from now on . . . and you can be sure that I *will* be watching.” Faragrim’s voice took on a kindlier tone. “As for your destination, well, you might want to consider going to Jötunheim, the land of your ancestors. Those mountains have all the caves troll hearts could desire . . . and you should be far more welcome there than you would be anywhere among humankind.”

* * *

Faragrim’s party returned from Ottidal by way of Moose Lake, as the tarn came to be known thereafter, and there the moose-draug took sad leave of his mortal family.

Once back in Kverndal, little Marit and Stein were restored to their anxious parents. Their father, Arne, had regained consciousness, though he remained badly wounded and at risk of being permanently crippled.

When the excitement had settled down a bit, Faragrim laid his hand on the moose-draug’s brow and chanted another runic charm:

“The children are safe now,
And the trolls off to roam;
You are free to go back
To your heavenly home.”

Gudmund and his kin watched in awe as the old fellow’s body gradually faded away right before their eyes. Soon all that was left of him was the rune-staff that had reformed in Faragrim’s hand, and a wispy astral moose-shape that drifted ever higher in the sky on its way back to Freyja’s lake in Asgard.

THE MARCH OF THE TROLLS

by

Dag Rossman

They see him here, they hear him there;

Those trolls, they think he's everywhere.

His eyes that glow, the laugh of him;

The trolls, in dread, flee Faragrim.

An old Oppland ditty

The great in-gathering and subsequent out-wandering of the trolls from throughout Oppland, following their rout by Faragrim in Ottidal, became a matter of legend and song. After ascending into the high country and traversing the snow fields they encountered, the emigrants descended through steep mountain passes to the broad valleys below. There—save for the tumbling streams they were forced to ford—the walking was easier, particularly for the very young, the very old, and those recent combatants who were not fully recovered from their wounds.

The disorganized line of trolls trended ever northward and eastward in the direction of Jötunheim, the domain of their distant kinfolk, the Hill Giants and Frost Giants. Because of their petrifying fear of sunlight, the trolls could only travel at night or on densely foggy days, so their passage went largely unnoticed despite their large numbers. The trolls were aware, however, that they did not travel entirely alone. From

time to time, a peal of maniacal laughter would ring out to remind them that Faragrim was still dogging their footsteps. On moonlit nights his cloaked figure—eyes aglow deep within the hood—might appear at a distance, sometimes keeping pace with the column, at other times simply standing by watchfully. Thus, without provoking a direct confrontation, these continuing reminders of the draug's presence maintained the trolls' fear of him and hastened them along their way . . . without any detours to raid human farmsteads.

Deprived of this source of food, the trolls began to suffer serious hunger pangs. Not wishing to be needlessly cruel—or drive the trolls to desperation—Faragrim tracked down a herd of reindeer one night and steered it across the path of the marching trolls. Most of the deer escaped, but the trolls were able to bring down enough of them to greatly augment their dwindling rations for days to come. Some of the trolls

loudly boasted about their “accidental” good fortune and their own hunting skills, but old Rangbein had his suspicions that their good luck had a different source, though he kept this thought to himself.

Thus the march of the trolls proceeded: night after night, another mountain followed by another valley until, at long last, the weary, footsore travelers came to the foothills of the highest, most extensive block of mountains in the Nine Worlds. The blue-gray water rushing down the hillside—and the chilly, bracing air it carried with it—proclaimed that the stream could only have originated from one of the great rivers of ice capping Jötunheim. Further confirmation came when those long, keen trollish noses detected the faint but distinctive odor of giants borne by that same glacial breeze. Clearly the trolls had reached their long-sought goal and, re-energized by this realization, they picked up the pace in their haste to find and claim any caves or deeper caverns that could serve as their new dwelling places.

One troll stepped aside from the line of march and waited for it to pass him by. As the excited gabble of his fellows began to recede in the distance, old Rangbein called out into fading darkness of the pre-dawn hours: “Can you hear me, Faragrim? You’ve been our constant companion throughout our trek, so I can’t imagine that you’d leave before you saw us safely out of Midgard.”

A cloaked figure detached itself from the side of a large boulder along the trail where it had stood concealed. “Here I am, Rangbein.”

“Trollsbane I named you back in Ottidal . . . and with good reason. Yet without that herd of reindeer I’m sure you guided onto our path—and the other caches of food that just ‘happened to show up’ along the way—it is almost certain that many of my people would not have survived the march to

Jötunheim. Harsh and dangerous you may well be, but I think perhaps you are not such a bad fellow at heart after all.”

“My only goal has always been to protect humans from trolls; it has never been my intention to harm any troll that behaved himself. Nothing would have been served by starving your people to death—that would only have forced them to raid human farms for food. As a matter of fact, when I explained this to several of the farmers who live in the valleys through which you passed, they were only too happy to contribute the smoked meats and other foodstuffs that I left where you could find them.”

“Well, I thank you . . . and the farmers, too. I won’t forget what you have done, Faragrim, and should another hothead like Kraki ever try to stir the trolls into sending raiding parties back into Midgard, I’ll see to it that my people don’t forget you either—neither the ease with which you overcame the trolls in Ottidal, nor the kindness you showed us on the Long March. Hopefully, that mixture of fear and gratitude will serve to keep us peaceable.”

“I’m sure it will, Rangbein, if the others have the good sense to select you as their leader and heed your wisdom. Now, you’d best be on your way if you are going to catch up with the others. May the sun never shine upon your face.”

The old troll turned on his heel and shuffled on after the tail of the column, which had already disappeared up the trail. Faragrim stood in silence and watched him go out of sight. His musings were soon interrupted by the silvery tinkling voice of a beautiful blonde woman who had walked up beside the draug, quietly clapping her hands in pleasure.

“Oh, that was well done, Faragrim. Not only have you freed Oppland from the threat of trolls, but you did it with relatively little bloodshed . . . and thus gave the trolls little reason to feel honor-bound to seek revenge.

You have far exceeded the expectations I had for you when I knit your body and spirit back together and freed you from your grave.”

“It has been an honor to serve you, Lady Freyja, and to carry out the responsibility with which you charged me. I only hope that you will give me some other task I can undertake for you.”

“All in good time, my hero, all in good time. But for the moment, I just want to be the bearer of good news and surprises. First of all, your moose friend has returned to my lake where—in the course of time—he will be joined by his family after they have lived out their mortal lives. After all they did to help you rescue the children from the trolls, they deserve no less.”

“How wonderful, my Lady! Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

Pleased, the smiling goddess continued: “I intend to grant the same privilege to your friend Gudmund should he not fall in battle and thus qualify for a place in Valhalla. By the way, Faragrim, where is he? I fully expected him to accompany you on the trolls’ trek to Jötunheim.”

“He wanted to come, my Lady, but I pointed out that he would be needed in Kverndal to look after his brother’s family until such time as Arne had fully recovered from the wounds inflicted by the trolls. After that, Gudmund was clearly pulled in two directions by his divided loyalties. So I made his choice easier by reminding him that he could not see in the dark without a light, and I needed to be able to move about quickly in order to keep the trolls guessing my whereabouts . . . which would be impossible if he were following me about with a torch.”

Freyja giggled at the thought.

“I do miss him, though,” said Faragrim ruefully. “He was a good companion.”

“Oft it is said that good friends’ paths cross when least expected. Such is the way

of *wyrd*.” Freyja paused to let Faragrim ponder the saying. “Now for my surprise. What would you say if I told you that you had a living kinsman in the mortal world?”

“How could that be?” the draug asked in astonishment. “Mother never mentioned having any other son or a male relative save for the grandfather I slew to avenge my father’s murder.”

“That’s because she never knew about your elder half-brother until after you had fled your home. Dag is Völund’s child by his first wife, a swan maiden named Hervor. Dag has wandered throughout the Nine Worlds—save, of course, for Helheim, where no mortal being may venture—adding to his store of lore and honing his skills.”

“That sounds as if he were a wizard,” mused Faragrim.

“Oh, Dag has the power to create illusions alright, but not through the use of runes or incantations. No, he uses something much simpler but perhaps even more powerful in some ways . . . for it can cast a spell on everyone within the sound of his voice. Dag is a skald, a storyteller, and a very fine one. His listeners can see in their imaginations the scenes he paints with his words, and when he begins to unveil the plot he literally becomes each and every one of the characters he portrays so that each of them seems to be a distinctly different person.”

“That *does* sound like magic, my Lady. I can hardly wait to meet this brother of mine and become acquainted with him. Where might I be able to find him?”

“Storytellers wander where they will, Faragrim, much like those who keep an eye on trolls. But the last I heard from our mutual friend Heimdal, Dag was residing in Alfheim. Turn your face and feet toward the West, my hero, and sooner or later you’ll arrive in the land of the Light Elves. Now, go with Freyja’s blessing.”

When the draug knelt to receive her favor, the goddess pushed back his hood and kissed

Faragrim's icy-cold brow with her warm lips
before calling up her cat-drawn cart and
riding off toward Asgard.

Faragrim watched Freyja until she rode

out of sight, then he headed back into
Midgard, striding westward—walking on the
heels of his own long shadow, cast by the
rising sun.

Darkedge

by

Lee Clark Zumpe

I remember being a blade once,
A promise of victory;
A harvester of death;
The object of a curse
Upon a warrior's breath.

I cut the air at his command,
I shimmered in the sun.
I slept in leathern bed;
And on days of battle
I was bathed in red.

A name I know he gave to me:
I, a brother he trusted,
I, his only real friend;
Darkedge is what he called me
Till he met his tragic end.

With grace I saw years pass by,
My thirst was yet unquenched,
And still my bite was keen;
But the warrior used me little
For he was not what he had been.

When finally he roused me from my sleep,
Face withered, eyes distant,
His ambitions had been laid to rest.
I wept for the warrior's youth
As I plunged into his breast.

SHADOWING

by
David Sparenberg

Speak into your darkness. Do not be afraid of the echo when it returns to you. Are you sleepless because you have heard yourself weeping? There is so much still to be learned by playing with the games of shadows. Evolution is a mystery not soon to be mastered. And the wand of time is not skillfully in our hands.

Sometimes those who ascend the stairs of knowing seem small and on their knees, and their lips are silent. But how utterly disarming when a robin sings or leaf flutters and you follow the beauty in the eyes of the humble. Suddenly it is as if they are looking at God! Yet they appear no more in stature than children, bowing in a halo of smile.

What a long way more we have to travel and it seems as if we have not enough words even to depict twilight. Yet in the darkness names well up from the secret ancestral caverns of the soul and a person stays awake, cradled in nakedness, listening.

Breath separates silence as black keys of the unknown play like passing spirits on the bone white keys of life. When you are through with restlessness and fear save a small, innocent prayer for midnight. There, on the ribbon of dreams, know yourself blessed if the resonance rebounds and is your own; twice blessed if the sound of sighing that returns belongs to another.

Cupid and Psyche

(for C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien)

by
Nancy Enright

Love as a god or monster?
Who can say – when it's hidden,
High upon the mountain, closed to everyone,
Except the ones inside it.
She can love him but cannot see him,
Has to trust that he's as beautiful as he sometimes seems to be,
But all her past tells her he can't be,
All the lovers who didn't love her, only her beauty;

The years when her sisters married and she lived lonely,
Admired, courted, never loved;
The prophecy she would marry a monster, not a man.
He wants her close, but not too close, not close enough to see his face.
But even this brings joy.

Until her sisters come to her and point out what is wrong –
Should she stay with a man – if he even is a man –
A serpent, slayer, monster – waiting to kill her and her unborn child?
Take a knife and a lamp, they say, look at his face, free yourself from his tyranny.
Their true face of jealousy, fear, and even some love,
Hidden like Cupid's, beneath a mask of pure, protective sisterly concern.

Suspicion cannot live with love, Cupid tells her,
as her lamp's oil wakens him, as she stands over him, looking at the wings, the golden curls,
the face of Love.
Then Love leaves her for a while, abandons her,
Psyche's tasks determined by the cruel goddess,
Her husband's mother.

Love and the Soul – strange bedfellows, but
It doesn't end like this.
At last, in the court of the gods, Cupid renders Psyche immortal –
And they are always one,
Their daughter, once born, named Pleasure,
Her mother's pain transformed to joy in her.

Forgiveness for them all, even the sisters,
Immortality, endless fidelity,
Suffering redeemed and healed ---
A fairy tale, a dream?
Or... an echo of *evangelium* in a pagan myth –
Ancient, dark, and beautiful,
conveying something deeper than itself.¹

¹ This poem is based on the story of Cupid and Psyche, told by Lucius Apuleius in late classical times, and retold by C. S. Lewis in modern times, in his book *Till We Have Faces*. As the author states, the poem "is not meant to be a literal summary of either Apuleius' version or Lewis', but a bringing together of images from both. "

Radiance

by

Robert Franz

Walking by, a gentle flowing, features compose
a tapestry in the wind, leaving streams of pure color in her wake
across the snowy lawn. I call, the sharp crack of a word that perturbs
my waking thoughts: her name. Not staring but sharing the soul
that lies just inside eyes that sparkle crisp, piercing daily
airs to understand the core humanity that is me.
Simple conversation turns quickly to a willful surrender
to the beckoning call of the soul that rests behind the twinkling pools,
opening itself up unto my own. She stands in confidence; my
guards fall and walls collapse to the features soft as
meadow's grass. Smiles bring inescapable waves of elation,
ecstasies that prove addicting to my heart, an image immediately
etched forever in marble mind. Speech in the cold morning light
begets visible wisps, I am immobilized with yearning for my lips
to trace them to source. As brief communication comes to a close
she turns, floating off into the cool brisk of day,
having said so much more than was spoken.

Eunoë

to

Thomas Arthur Hood
December 6, 1924-April 11, 2009

by Gwennyth E. Hood

In the Earthly Paradise, the Blessed drink from Lethe,
Then from Eunoe, river of Good Memory;
So says Dante. Then, sorrows all forgotten,
Only good things come again to mind:
Heavenly treasure, love given and received,
No sin or wrong or grievance—can this be so?

How many things I thought could not be so,
Have come to pass—I hope they drown in Lethe!
Can one divide the trophy from the wound received?
Father, your singing voice booms in my memory,
Your wisdom supplies the storeroom of my mind.
But arthritis gnawed your joints; is this forgotten?

Yes! broken your shackles, infirmity forgotten,
You were snatched from our present strife (or what may prove so),
Freed from our shared sorrows which shadowed your mind,
But cleaving to love, which is not lost in Lethe,
Of the Heaven where you went we have no memory,
But faithful love brought news which we received.

Like a twinkling Christmas tree, sheltering gifts received,
Adorned with the love that made it, mode forgotten,
So shines the place where dear souls meet in Memory,
Buried are the pathways there--it always shall be so,
Hidden under snowfall deep as Lethe,
But evergreen springs through, a beacon to the mind.

Such is Eunoe, sweet balsam to the mind,
Possession of the gift, still given, still received,
While dread and weariness are veiled in Lethe,
Beauty pressed from patient toil forgotten,
That persevering, built what would be so,
Ripened to the sweetness of Good Memory.

Thank you, Father, for your voice in my Good Memory,
For the fruit of your long patience in my mind,
For all that was and what was better so,
For the gleaming store of treasures I received,
The time and place and measure all forgotten
In the glimmering silver-gray of River Lethe

Most precious beneath your gentle waves, O Lethe,
Treasures lie unseen but not forgotten,
So fused in my mind to Good Memory received.

ARCHETYPES or the Great White Whale

by

David Sparenberg

Over many years I've held to the learned idea that the narrative of Faustus-Faust—the man who sells his soul to the personalities of darkness to attain knowledge for control and manipulation of nature—is guiding archetype and psychological profile for the alpha individuals of techno-scientific Western Civilization, and this civilization's threadbare colonial and post-colonial imitators. Nor have I surrendered the concept. Indeed, it would be less than honest not to admit having toyed with the Faustian temptation and my counting the literary expressions by Marlowe and Goethe among my favored studies.

Why, to this very day we uncover the Faustian type in commanding positions, especially in business, politics, the military; genetics. Presently a mounting confrontation unfolds between those possessed by the type and those of the oppressed, or should I say dis-possessed, standing in oppositional solidarity against the soul bartered world order, and rift division between the privileged holding power and powerless expendables.

Notwithstanding, it should be recognized that the Faustus-Faust mythic form is Euro-centric in origin and the European narrative and European authority are no

longer in ascendance. To be sure the decline of Europe's influence is the result of total wars and the irreconcilable tensions between knowledge for progress and the progression of borderless destruction and genocidal marathons stretching from the murderous nonsense of Flanders Fields to the mathematical sadism and racial lunacy of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Faust archetype is weakened in the collective psyche, yet does not utterly collapse or all together disappear. The powerful continue to prey on the vulnerable and naïve in the name of some principle or ideal. Meanwhile, the old archetype concedes interior territories and morphs into a more virulent, obsessive and fatalistic character change—a revision contemporaneous with the Americanization of the global narrative.

In brief, the archetype is no longer solely rooted in the deal making acquisition of knowledge to control but flourishes from draconian capacity to destroy. The metamorphosis is significant in kinship as well as departure, mirroring our transcontinental history's eradication of indigenous peoples and the aggressive transformation of pristine wildernesses into systems of exploitation and profit.

Consequently of late I have turned my imagination to considering another and, I suspect, more accurate variety of the model for the hubris of domination and the pathology that leads to the right of revenge—the right, that is, to eliminate the opposition of otherness, possessing a certain “endtime mindset” and shaping the world course of our species. I do so with alarm and increasingly anxious trepidation. For it is not Faustus, not Faustus today and certainly not Faust alone, who looks out menacingly from behind the social masks and social fabric of a tacit conspiracy to destroy the earth because of its other-than-human mystery. Rather, it is the Faustian cousin Ahab, stark, maniacal, sociopathic Captain Ahab; hate fueled, life threatening, proudly crippled and adversarial; who emerges from the shadows of a near forgotten literature into the Krieg-light of a fanaticized destiny—Ahab, with spigot plugged into and tapping the irksome, murky brew of a powerful, intoxicating human madness.

After all, it is the Ahab archetype, relentless, malicious, compelling, unheeding moderation and the humility of caution, who is prepared to sacrifice his ship and crew—the whole of this earthship Pequod—in a single minded determination to hunt down and kill the untamed, elusive spirit of the deep; that presence in creation that waits for men in suffering, loss and death on the mystic and even desolate high seas of an existence simultaneously compelled to cope with the forces of consciousness and mortality. Individual consciousness and individual and universal mortality.

Perhaps it will make a significant if unsettling impression to recall here that this same, our own embittered Captain Ahab borrows name and more than name from

Ahab of the Bible? There we find recorded in the First Book of Kings this cryptic line: “Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.” ...More than all... more than all before...ah!

Let me fill out a visual composite of the Ahab archetype for the mind’s eye, drawing on but two word pictures from Melville’s novel. Through these words look with me, see the man, as an image of man—as a way of destruction that individual men might slip into to act out their festering fears, wounds and plots of defiance and vengeance. Ahab: crippled, symbolizing imbalance, scarred, bearing the marks of crucifixion through time, stricken by both mono- and megalomania, also revealing extravagant imbalance, hard hearted and hard fisted in his authority, surrounded by a profit lusting crew, hunting and slaughtering whales for oil, disconnected from all pathos and compassion, hell bent upon Moby Dick, and commanding, without external reference, his ship of doom.

The image is harrowing and strikes with terror, not least because somehow beneath the surface of daily compliance it feels disturbingly near, distressingly familiar. Listen now, and carefully, attentively and carefully, to the voice itself.

“Then tossing both arms, with measureless imprecations, he shouted out: ‘Aye! Aye! and I’ll chase him round Good Hope and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition’s flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for men, to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out’...”

Again, harken here, for soul’s sake, for sake of the earth, as Ahab espouses a pernicious philosophy that eclipses the raw capitalism of the New England seaboard as well as a theology lending argument to apocalypse: “All visible objects...are but pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ‘tis enough. He tasks me, he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate, for be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreck that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy... I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creation.”

Howsoever the language is found hurtling over the top and tintured with the archaic, the mood and tone resonates within contemporary ego-inflation, self-

appointed self-importance and carries within its body-articulate an entire civilization's age old spirituality of outrage and betrayal.

At this moment, as at other times in solitude, I am left to wonder how many, if any, Ishmaels, might escape the furthest consequences of Ahab's command and our ongoing voyage toward collective suicide—this human judgment against the justice of otherness, which is the vast display of creation showing an apportioning divinity. In Melville's American masterpiece, Ahab dies, all with him are lost, save a sole survivor, Moby Dick lives and vanishes; as if some gigantic sea deep or cosmic swimming hearse; back into the depths and origins of life. Then the abandoned remnant bear witness to an insane and nihilistic folly.

“So floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, I was then but slowly drawn toward the closing vortex... Round and round then and ever contracting toward the...black bubble at the axis of that...wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, upward gaining that vital center, the black bubble burst, and now...rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin...I floated on a soft and dirge like main.”

How striking that far seeing Melville makes comparison in his closing reflection to Ixion from Greek mythology. Ixion, who too violated divinity and was sentenced to Hades where, according to Ovid in the *Metamorphosis*, the malefactor is described as “Ixion, pursuing and running away from himself on his wheel”: an accurate depiction of antithetical humanity condemned to hell in the confine of a mirroring while overmastering technology. How similar to the outcry of Shakespeare's *Lear*, “I am bound upon a wheel of fire....” Here yet is another human mouthing of the consequence of an equally human madness!

Sister Goulsey's Furnace

by

C. R. Wiley

Pastor Ricky had placed all his hopes on the Hawaiian shirt. He wanted to connect with people and he had seen one of those television preachers wearing one. The people at the TV preacher's church were all tanned and good-looking. Some were even drinking coffee during the service. *I need what that guy has*, Ricky thought. That's why he started wearing the shirt.

The old-guard did not like it, but they were uptight and frumpy. *Probably drink instant coffee*, Pastor Ricky mused. He lifted his cup and took a long sniff. Starbucks. He looked over the rim and admired his reflection in the shiny surface.

By his third cup, his wife had shuttled the kids off to school, and he was settling down to a little mid-morning nap. He was on the verge of nodding off when he heard metal scraping against metal.

It was coming from outside, through the window and above the couch he was on. A red and blue form went up a ladder. Then it dawned on him: he had mentioned off-handedly to Elmer Gullet the day before that the parsonage gutters needed cleaning.

He knew he had to do something. There was a seventy-year-old man on top of an aluminum ladder cleaning his gutters. Not just cleaning them—he was cleaning them in

an accusing manner. Each scrape of the gloved hand in the trough, each tinkle and patter-mat of leaves falling to the ground said, "lazy preacher; laaazzy preacher, preacher."

"Why today?" Pastor Ricky asked aloud, knowing perfectly why.

He wanted to cuss. Instead he stumbled to the closet and pulled out his flannel shirt. On his way out the door he poured Elmer some coffee. "Burning coals," he mumbled.

"Hello, Brother Elmer!" The man was old guard; that's the way you address old guard. "You don't need to do that! I was planning to get to it."

A white-haired man leaned back and looked down a long nose flushed red by the November wind. Two unruly white eyebrows arched in mock surprise. "Why Pastor, I didn't expect to find you home! Thought you'd be out visiting the sick or some such thing."

"Not today. I do that on *Tuesdays*." Pastor Ricky paused to see if that produced the desired effect—perhaps understanding, perhaps a word of encouragement—something like, "*Oh, Pastor, I forgot that today is your day off. You work hard, you need a day off, you deserve it.*" Nothing of the kind, just a faint smile resulted, a little

upturn at the corner of the mouth.

"I brought you some coffee. Want some?" Pastor Ricky lifted the steaming cup. The corner of the mouth turned down. A flicker of annoyance flashed in the piercing blue eyes.

"No thanks, Preacher. Had my fill hours ago."

"Well then, let me get a ladder and help."

"That's all right, Preacher. I'll have this job done lickety-split. You just go back to your prayer closet and intercede for the lost."

The man was a sadist.

Just then the phone began to ring.

"Better get that, might be some poor soul in need of counsel."

When he got in he grabbed the phone like it was a life-line thrown to a drowning man.

"Hello, parsonage."

"Oh, Pastor. I'm so glad you're home!"

It was Emma Coulsey, retired nurses' aide with a house falling down around her. He had tried to persuade her to sell and move to elderly housing, but she had raised her children in that house—the ones that never called—and she couldn't bear the thought. So there she sat, surrounded by memories, in a house that loved her no better than her kids did.

"Sister Coulsey, what's the matter?"

"Pastor," she said trying to calm herself, "the furnace is acting up. I'm so sorry to bother you, but it's making knocking sounds, and there's a funny smell, and I don't have any heat."

Pastor Ricky checked the thermometer through the kitchen window, the one next to Elmer's ladder, right next to Elmer's boot. No scraping. No leaves falling. It read 39 degrees.

"Sister Coulsey, how cold is it in your house right now?"

"Oh Pastor, it is cold," she said sounding like she was about to cry. "Let's see. The

thermostat says 52 degrees."

The woman was 78 years old. "Are you wrapped up? Have you got some wool things on?"

"Yes, Pastor. I'm in the kitchen and I've got the oven door open. It helps a little."

He could see it. A white-faced little old lady huddled by her stove sipping tea, with a coat over her night clothes. He could try to get Bob Johnson over there, but he was in the body shop by now and probably couldn't get away. There was Elmer, of course.

"Sister Coulsey, I'll be right over."

"Oh, thank you Pastor."

He hung up the phone. "Of all days, why today, Lord?"

He glanced out the window. The ladder was gone.

No time for a shower. What to wear? It's Sister Coulsey. He groaned—a suit. To fix a furnace? It was what she expected. He grabbed the old black polyester one, a white shirt, and his most conservative tie.

When he clambered downstairs he shot a look out to the garage. The Honda was gone. His wife had taken it. The Toyota was in the shop again. The only thing to do was to take the Buick.

He had inherited it from his namesake—his grandfather, the Reverend Richard Jehu Clay. It was a black 1968 Electra four-door. It had been all over the tri-state area, taking Grandpap to Sunday School rallies and revival meetings. He had kept it like he had kept himself; clean inside and out—he had even wiped the engine down with gasoline once a month. Just before he died he had pressed the keys into Ricky's hand. "Here, son, she should go to a preacher. She's consecrated to the Lord's work. She ain't ever let me down."

When he got outside Elmer was nowhere to be seen.

Were you eavesdropping, you old Pharisee? Pastor Ricky wondered. *It figures you would make yourself scarce just when I*

could have used the help. He didn't really mean that second thought. What he actually felt was relief.

He got into the car and collected himself. The smell of old vinyl took him back. As a boy he had ridden with his grandfather a lot. He used to lie across the back seat, in those benighted days before seatbelt laws, and look up at the leafy branches flying by and the still sun shining through. And he remembered his grandfather singing along with Johnny Cash as he drove. Johnny wore black because Grandpap wore black, that's what he had thought. But in those days every man of God wore black.

The car had rear quarter-panels like wings—a real preacher mobile—made for rolling over the highways and byways on oversized whitewalls, making the rough places smooth. He pulled out, one easy turn of the wheel following another, turning wide to give parked cars plenty of berth, a graceful whale carrying the prophet to Nineveh.

He pulled into the gravel driveway in front of Sister Coulsey's. Then he went to the trunk. There, in the corner of its vast expanse, was his grandfather's tool box. It occurred to him that he'd never looked inside it. He popped it open. Right on top sat a Gideon Bible, and beneath it an array of tools, all neat and arranged by size and function. The man had been a Calvinist, after all. Pastor Ricky wasn't sure what he could do with them; he wasn't very good with his hands. He snapped the lid shut.

When he tried the doorbell the white plastic button fell off and two twisted wires jumped out. He knocked.

"Just a minute," said a muffled voice from within. After enough time to feel the chill through his coat, the door opened part-way. Mittened-hands and an elderly face appeared.

"Oh, Pastor, thank the Lord you're here. Wait." She closed the door and there was some scuffling. When she opened it again

there was just enough room for her to stand back. Behind her stood a stack of boxes and to the side a cupboard lined with figurines, all squirrels.

"Sister Coulsey, it's freezing in here!"

"I know, Pastor. It's a little warmer in the kitchen."

He went to the thermostat, bumping into boxes. It read 45 degrees.

"If we don't get that furnace going today we'll just have to get you someplace warm until we do."

"Oh, I hope you do, Pastor. It would be such trouble moving my cats."

He stepped into the kitchen and was greeted by litter box odor—that along with a sink filled with unwashed dishes, an open oven door, and bits of cat food strewn about. A small space on the kitchen table had been cleared for a tea cup and the morning paper.

There was a door to one side.

"Is that the way to the basement?"

He opened it without waiting for an answer. A wisp of smoke wafted out and the smell of rotten eggs came along with it. He turned on a light. He discerned piles of stuff on the basement floor and realized it was probably more cluttered than the upstairs.

"That's odd," Pastor Ricky remarked. "I could swear that's sulfur I smell."

"Lord, have mercy." Sister Coulsey said sounding like she might start to cry.

"Now, now, let's see what I can do."

Just then there was a clunk and the light in the basement went out.

"There goes the noise again, Pastor! It woke me up in the middle of the night. It scared me out of my wits."

"I wonder what it could be? Do you have a flash light? I left mine at home."

"I think I do." She went to a kitchen drawer and rummaged around, finally producing a little blue one, the kind kids use.

He turned it on and a weak yellowish beam appeared.

Down he went. The stairs were uneven

and shaky and missing a tread at the bottom. The walls were fieldstone and dank. The floor was dirt and uneven. He wondered what the furnace was like.

There it stood, like some prehistoric thing, looking like Medusa's head rising from the sea. A plethora of ducts came from the top—the old round sort—winding to every corner of the house. The face itself was white and ghostly from a thick layer of asbestos that caked it like cold cream. It was swollen too, at least eight times the size of a modern furnace. It was big, inefficient, and hazardous.

"Ew, that's not good," Ricky said under his breath.

"How does it look, Pastor?" the voice of wan hope said from above.

"I'm still looking. I'll let you know what I find. Why don't you keep warm by the stove? As soon as I know something I'll give you a shout."

The door shut and out went the light from the kitchen.

He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Then he cleared some space in front of the leviathan to work. He didn't know much about this sort of thing but the last time his own furnace acted up the repair man showed him a few things. First, he examined the oil tank just in case she'd run out of fuel. There was plenty. He hit the emergency restart switch on the burner. There was a sound of flames. He placed a hand on a duct to feel for heat. After a minute it was still cold. He listened for the blower. He could hear it fine. Just to double check the flame he reached for the fire box door that sat in the middle of Medusa's head like a little mouth.

"Ouch!" A duct had fallen on his head.

He stood back and examined the offending duct. The hanger had come undone somehow.

He opened the tool box. All the ducts shook briefly, showering him with dust. He found a small screw driver and put the loose

duct back in place. Then he returned to the fire box door.

It took some prying (the old iron hinges were rusty) but it opened. The ducts trembled again. With the burner going it seemed to Pastor Ricky that the interior should have been a warm orange-red, but it was pitch black. He aimed the little beam from Sister Coulsey's flashlight inside. What he saw was the outline of something dark and two little points reflecting light back at him. The furnace shuddered.

He went to his grandfather's tool box for something to probe with. It had two levels; the top was a tray for smaller tools. What he needed was something long. He lifted the tray out hoping to find a longer screw driver.

All the ducts began to gyrate and pull against the joists they were attached to—a screeching sound started low and rose in the background.

This should have caught Pastor Ricky's attention. But it didn't. His eyes were riveted upon the contents of the tool box. There, on top of the wildest assortment of implements he'd ever seen, sat a small book with the impossible name: *Strong's Guide to Household Hell Spawn: A Companion to Strong's Concordance*.

Before his mind could comprehend it, and before his hand could clasp it, a duct crashed down on him and sent him sprawling.

A second duct smashed the tool box, sending its contents across the floor.

He looked up and saw that all the ducts had broken loose and were writhing and turning like hair in a hurricane. From the fire box door a face of flame with two burning eyes stared balefully at him. With a clanging of ducts there came a wail of rage. Pastor Ricky noted that the ducts, which until that moment had been nothing more than a chaotic jumble of tubes, were now a coordinated mass about to fly down upon him. Just in time he rolled behind the water

heater. The sound they made upon striking the floor resembled a car wreck.

The door to the kitchen opened and suddenly everything went still.

“Pastor? Is everything all right? What’s that ungodly racket?”

Ricky swallowed and tried to steady his voice. “I think I’ve found the problem. Just go back to your tea and I’ll try to get this all cleared up.”

“Praise the Lord!” she said and shut the door.

Flames roared.

From his position behind the water heater Pastor Ricky managed to see the gilding of *Strong’s Guide*. He dove headlong and grabbed it, rolling away just in time to dodge another blow. Scampering on hands and feet, he took cover behind the stairs.

He still had the flashlight. He flipped frantically through the book. Fortunately it was organized alphabetically. The first chapter was given over to attics, with subsections. Attics: noises, Attics: ghosts, Attics: unnatural drafts, and so forth. Copious illustrations of fantastical creatures and step by step guides to their removal were contained in each subdivision. In the margins he saw notes in his grandfather’s spidery scrawl. He found the basement section. Basements: supernatural flooding, Basements: nocturnal banging. Nothing for furnaces. He turned ahead looking for the “F” section past, *Closets, Disposals, Doors, Electrical Outlets, Fireplaces* until he finally came to *Furnaces*. It was a long section. He looked out at Medusa. She had quieted down. Ducts lay limply like spaghetti and the little red face in the fire box door had cooled down to orange and black. He had a minute to read.

The first thing he came upon under furnaces was a description of the Flibbertigibbet.

This fire imp likes to dance among

the flames of a furnace. Extremely dim-witted, it is theorized that the Flibbertigibbet mistakes the flames of a furnace for a fairy circle. More annoying than dangerous due to off-key singing and inane jabbering. Identification is the primary problem in dealing with a Flibbertigibbet as they resemble a candle flame.

Treatment: simply turn off furnace. The flame that does not go out is your imp.

Ricky was startled back into the moment by the crash of a duct. Medusa had reawakened and had begun bashing the remains of his grandfather’s tool box. The face in the firebox looked gleeful. Well, it was clear he wasn’t dealing with one of those Flibbertigibbets.

Next he read about something called a Dybbuk.

This devilet takes up residence within the fire of furnace then sends out tendrils of gloom that consume light. Because this species does not affect the heating of a home, it can go undetected for a time. Eventually it will outgrow a furnace and left unchecked will shroud a basement in gloom. In advanced cases whole houses have been made so gloomy as to be uninhabitable.

Nope, he thought, *not one of those*. The next entry was entitled: Ashboy.

The Ashboy resembles a tar baby when cool and a flaming child when hot. It succors its longing for Hellfire by taking up residence in a furnace. He will greedily hoard its heat, making a home uninhabitable if there is no other heat source. Worse, an Ashboy’s cravings for fire can cause him to dangerously over-heat a furnace. In

some cases this has led to the incineration of the house.

That's it, Ricky thought. A screech came from the furnace. The ducts were repeatedly smashing something that looked like a set of salad tongs.

He scanned the chapter and found the section on extracting Ashboys.

The Ashboy is squirmy and difficult to handle. Flame retardant gloves are recommended as well as a Hell Spawn Extractor coated with ground martyr's teeth.

He peered out from beneath the stairs. The fire in the Medusa's mouth had died down again and the little head couldn't be seen.

Now's my chance, he thought. He double-checked the illustration in the book. It showed an Ashboy screaming as it was pinched by a set of tongs. *Tongs, tongs, where did I see tongs?* There they were, right in front of the firebox door. They had been beaten into the floor but they looked like they were still intact. He started to inch toward them. He hoped Ashboys were hard of hearing.

"I heeaarr you preacher man," said a gravelly voice from the furnace.

Pastor Ricky froze and tiny beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. He tried to control a rising sense of panic. Why hadn't he realized it could talk? Until that moment he'd thought of it sort of like a pesky raccoon. Now he saw what he was up against—something supernatural, something intelligent, something damned for all eternity.

Everything began to tip and he felt queasy. A foreboding came over him and grew, like a rapidly expanding thunderhead, supercharged and heavy. He wanted to get as small as possible and let it pass.

"I know what you're up to, preacher man." The ducts began to rise and collect themselves. Two beady points of red looked out at him.

"Be reasonable," the devil purred. *"That old lady up there doesn't even like you. She's nothing but an old gossip. She's meddlesome and spiteful; that's why her children never visit. You should have heard her on the phone just before you came in. She was talking about you, you know, and the shirt you wore in church. And that wasn't all; you should have heard what she said about your wife. Why bother with her? Just leave her to me, I can teach her a lesson. She deserves it, you know she does."*

As it spoke Pastor Ricky could see Sister Coulsey gabbing on the phone, the loose flesh of her chin quivering as she spoke. He felt revulsion and indignation. His heart said yes, the hellish thing was telling the truth, and a hardness formed at the back of his neck. A cold, dilapidated house was a fitting place for the old hen. But the vision continued for some reason and Pastor Ricky saw more: he saw a pair of mittens—fingerless, childish mittens—and he saw them cupped around an old lonesome face.

He mustered up his courage and dove for the tongs. He managed to roll away in time to avoid the crashing metal snakes. He landed in some old paint cans and felt a sharp pain in his side.

The demon was really agitated now. The ducts flew in a mad commotion, smashing posts and sending boxes of Christmas garland into the air.

Pastor Ricky examined the tongs. They were bigger than he had supposed. It took two hands to use them. Each tong was coated with white stuff, probably ground martyr's teeth, he realized with a mixture of awe and horror. But the feature that seemed most peculiar was the wooden spike that ran up a channel on one of the handles.

"You know you're no match for me," the

demon taunted. *"I've corrupted bishops and deceived theologians! Who are you?"* It began cursing, in English at first, then in other languages.

Pastor Ricky had slipped behind the water heater again and from there he assessed his chances. The ducts were a problem but he saw that they were useless in close to the furnace. They just weren't bendable enough. He also saw that the demon was blind on the backside if it didn't come out of the firebox. If he could come up from behind and edge around from there he might be able to get close enough to get a hold of it.

"Please, you don't really think you can sneak up on me, do you? Fixing furnaces really isn't your job, is it? It's deacon work. Besides—it's your day off!" the demon said. Then it started laughing.

Pastor Ricky managed to get behind it by sliding along a cellar wall. The ducts flailed. He had the tongs ready and he began to work his way to the front of the furnace. The opening to the firebox was on his left. He tested the tongs. They opened and closed smoothly. He tensed, preparing to leap forward.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the demon sing-songed from within. *"You won't like what you find!"*

The foreboding grew, the crushing weight.

He lunged, swinging around, thrusting the tongs into the firebox. He clamped down hard on something fleshy and squirming. It nearly tore the tongs from his hands. A rising whine rose and rose from the other end of the tongs, unnerving him, tempting him to let go.

As he drew it out he steeled himself.

It was not what he expected. He thought it would look like the illustration in the book, like a flaming child. Instead what he saw was so shocking, so utterly repulsive, he nearly dropped it. Every fiber of his being,

every sinew and bone recoiled from it.

There in the tongs, grinning and leering back at him with a wicked little face all twisted was a miniature version of himself in a Hawaiian shirt.

"I'm you! I'm you!" it screamed.

"It's me! It's me!" Pastor Ricky cried.

"If you kill me, you'll only kill yourself, Pastor Ricky, and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

He didn't want to believe it—yet he did. But rather than self-pity he felt disgust, that and hatred. He pinned himself to the ground. He knew what the spike was for now.

"No, no! You fool! Don't you see? It'll be the end of you! Don't do something you'll regret! I can help you!"

Two voices screamed the scream of death.

When Reverend Clay awoke he lay upon the dirt floor among piles of decaying Reader's Digests. Hot air was blowing on him from a limp duct near his face. Nearby the tongs stood like a set of oversized scissors thrust into the ground. The Ashboy was gone. But there was a blood stain in the center of Reverend Clay's chest.

He felt the stain: it was still wet. He reached beneath his shirt and felt a little hole.

The kitchen door opened. "Pastor, is everything all right?"

"Uh, yes, Sister Coulesey," he said weakly. "I believe I've fixed the furnace. It'll just take me a little while to wrap things up."

"Praise the Lord! Yes, I do feel some heat coming up the stairs. Thank you, Pastor." "You're welcome, Sister Coulesey."

"I'll make you some tea."

"That would be nice."

It took a little time to put the ducts back. Before long warm air was being pumped upstairs and the creaks of an old house warming began to sound.

Reverend Clay collected his grandfather's tools and put them away along with *Strong's Guide*. The tongs took some

work to remove from the floor.

He dusted himself off as best he could and unrolled his sleeves. His suit jacket slipped on easily and he could have sworn, if he were a swearing man, that it fit more comfortably than before.

When he got upstairs the kitchen was already toasty. Sister Coulsey's overcoat was off and she wore a grateful smile. Tea waited for him on the table along with a dish of

crackers, the kind old folks like.

As they sat, Sister Coulsey said sheepishly, "Pastor, have I ever told you how nice you look in black?"

A smile crossed the Reverend Richard Jehu Clay's face. "Why thank you, Sister Coulsey. I suspect I'll wear it more often from now on."

"Oh, that's so nice," Sister Coulsey replied. "I'm so pleased."



The Big Bad Wolf Versus Hogzilla

by

Raymond G. Falgui

“Today more than a billion domestic pigs live among us. There are millions more in the wild and the numbers are escalating rapidly ... Pigs are exceptionally adaptable animals, and in many places their natural predators have declined or been eradicated altogether...”

“And then there was Hogzilla – an allegedly feral pig who roamed the forests and pastures of a 1500-acre fish hatchery, gorging himself on anything he came across.”

- from blogs on the *National Geographic* website
(<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ng-blogs/>;
<http://www.thorninpaw.com/mt/archives/000745.html>)

It started the way it was supposed to, the way it had been for centuries, perhaps even millennia.

The Big Bad Wolf knocked on the door of the First Little Pig.

“Little pig, little pig, let me come in,” he said.

The words were familiar and comforting. The Big Bad Wolf was a traditionalist. He had been doing this forever, it seemed, but he had never once changed the words – and never once wanted to. That was what he was supposed to say. And the little pig was supposed to say: “Not by the hair of my chinny chin-chin.”

Instead, the little pig opened the door.

And the little pig wasn't so little anymore.

The First Little Pig was huge: he was almost as big as the wolf, and clearly outweighed him by several hundred pounds. The wolf's arms looked positively scrawny next to the First Little Pig's muscled haunches.

“What do you want, Wolf?” the First Little Pig asked in an unfriendly way.

The stories never said anything about what happened after the Big Bad Wolf blew

the house down and got his paws on the little pig. The Big Bad Wolf couldn't speak for other wolves, but he himself had never been cruel. One sharp nip on the neck, and the pig slipped into oblivion as its lifeblood spilled out of it. Quick and painless. The Big Bad Wolf did not torture his victims or play with his food. He just did what he was supposed to, what came naturally to him.

The pigs never resisted. The Big Bad Wolf couldn't remember the last time he'd had to fight for a meal.

But he would have to fight this time. The Big Bad Wolf could see it in the First Little Pig's eyes. He would have to fight the First Little Pig. And he would probably win – Nature had given the wolf the not inconsiderable advantages of claws and fangs. But the First Little Pig would hurt him – hurt him badly – before it went down. And perhaps it was because he had not had to fight for so long, but the Big Bad Wolf discovered that he had no stomach for such a fight.

“What do you want, Wolf?” the First Little Pig asked again.

“Uhhhhh ... nothing,” the Big Bad Wolf said, turning quickly away. But then he

turned back.

“Uhhhh ... if you don’t mind my asking, Pig, how did you get so big?”

“Human growth hormone.”

“Excuse me?”

“The farmer injects me with growth hormone. I get big. Then they harvest the hormones from me. They get big.”

“I ... see,” the Big Bad Wolf said, though he actually didn’t.

“That doesn’t seem very natural,” he added, with a hint of complaint in his voice.

The First Little Pig laughed loudly.

“Nature is what the farmer wants it to be, Wolf. Try the pig down the street. He’s owned by an organic farmer.”

Then the First Little Pig slammed the door in the face of the Big Bad Wolf.

So the Big Bad Wolf could do nothing but walk down the road and knock on the door of the Second Little Pig.

“Little pig, little pig, let me come in,” he said.

When the door opened, the Big Bad Wolf was much relieved. The Second Little Pig was bigger than he remembered pigs were supposed to be (but they’d been getting bigger and bigger over the years, now that he thought about it), but nowhere near the size of the First Little Pig. I can handle this pig, the Big Bad Wolf thought to himself.

But immediately he began to doubt himself. The Second Little Pig was not as big as the first one, but it seemed tougher – harder – somehow. There wasn’t much fat on it; what it did have seemed to be pure muscle. Its hooves were not dull but chipped and cracked, as if they’d been used in many a fight. And the Big Bad Wolf couldn’t be sure if he’d just imagined it, but he thought he’d seen the sharp glint of fangs when the pig briefly opened its mouth.

But that wasn’t the most disturbing thing by far. What disturbed him the most, the Big Bad Wolf realized, was the way the pig was looking at him. It was an oddly familiar

look, but the wolf was certain he’d never seen such a look before on the face of a pig.

It took a few seconds before he realized where he’d seen such a look before.

“Cat got your tongue, Wolf?” the Second Little Pig asked. “What’s the matter? Never had anything look at you as prey before?”

“This isn’t right,” the Big Bad Wolf said. “I’m the predator, you’re the prey. It’s not supposed to be the other way around.”

“It is what it is, Wolf,” the Second Little Pig answered, not unkindly. “The farmer stopped feeding us regular. ‘Feed off the fat of the land,’ he said, but the land’s got no fat on it. Pretty soon, neither did my brothers and sisters. They starved and died. I didn’t want to go out that way, so I ate them. Ate their corpses one by one, and found that I had a liking for meat. But you can’t get meat by waiting for it to die. You’ve got to hunt it. I started with rats, then worked my way up.

“Can you guess what I’ve started eating now?” the Second Little Pig asked, smiling broadly to show that all its teeth were now sharp and deadly.

“But I’m the Big Bad Wolf.”

“No one’s even sure what good or bad is anymore, Wolf,” the Second Little Pig said. “Now git! I’d eat you too, but I’ve already had my fill of your brothers.”

And the Second Little Pig opened the door wide, and the Big Bad Wolf could see in the living room the skins of three of his brothers, laid out like rugs.

The Big Bad Wolf fled with the sound of the Second Little Pig’s laughter ringing in his ears.

The Big Bad Wolf went up the mountain to tell his pack the bad news.

But the pack already knew. “We’re moving over the next mountain to the nature preserve,” they said. “They throw dead meat to you from the trucks, so you never have to hunt or go hungry again.



"This is not the way of things!" the Big Bad Wolf howled to the moon, but his brothers did not hear him. They had slunk away, their tails between their legs.

The only animal left on the mountain with the Big Bad Wolf was an old coyote who sometimes trailed the pack, feasting on its leavings.

"Grandfather, what do I do?" the Big Bad Wolf asked.

"Near the house of the Second Little Pig is the lair of the Third Little Pig, but that is its name no more. The Third Little Pig was also injected with human growth hormone, but it escaped from its farmer and turned feral in the wilderness, becoming the creature known as the Hogzilla."

"I have heard of the Hogzilla," the Big Bad Wolf said. "The farmers banded together and hunted it down and killed it."

"No," the coyote said. "That is the tale the farmers tell. The Hogzilla killed many of the farmers and scattered the rest. Now it rules unchallenged in its own domain."

"How could such a thing come to pass?" the Big Bad Wolf asked.

"You are a wolf, and still remember that you are a wolf," the coyote said. "You already know the answer to that question."

The coyote left the wolf then. For many nights, the Big Bad Wolf howled to the moon, mulling over the coyote's words.

At last, the Big Bad Wolf came to the house of the Third Little Pig (aka the Hogzilla). He knocked on the door, then said the words so dear to his heart.

"Little pig, little pig, let me come in"

The door opened – but there are no words to describe the Hogzilla. No words, at least, that could be used for a pig. Instead, one uses the words to describe a force of nature, for the shadow of the Hogzilla fell

over the wolf like the darkness that blankets the land.

"What do you want?" the Hogzilla asked, its voice the rumbling of thunder. But it was as if the wolf did not hear, or heard words inside his own head.

"Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in!" the Big Bad Wolf said.

And with a howl, the Big Bad Wolf blew until there was hardly any breath in him. When it was over, the house of the Hogzilla was no more, though the Hogzilla itself remained unmoved.

"Stupid git!" the Hogzilla said, but the rumbling of its voice was now the coming of an earthquake. "Stupid git! You smashed my house. You'll pay for that."

But the Big Bad Wolf only smiled, and bared his fangs.

The Hogzilla won the battle, of course, and it is said that nothing now remains of the Big Bad Wolf except for a pair of furry foot-warmers the Hogzilla uses on cold winter nights.

But there is another tale the old coyote tells, and in his telling of it, it was the Big Bad Wolf who won. The Big Bad Wolf devoured the Hogzilla, then grew so large and terrible from his meal that he promptly paid a visit to the First and Second Little Pigs. But that was only to set things to rights. For the old coyote says the Big Bad Wolf does not even hunt pigs anymore. Instead, he hunts a prey that he holds responsible for the upending of the natural order, not to mention the rewriting of traditional fairy tales. But what such a creature is I do not know, nor did the coyote tell.

Excuse me, for a moment, but I think I hear a knocking on my door.

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*, #35, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2013, can be pre-ordered for \$8.00 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 further adventures of Faragrim the Draug, and Ryder Miller, with a new exploration of "magical" realism with a Halloween setting. David Sparenberg also returns with more variations on their poetic themes. Returning also, after a longer space, are Joel Zartman, Lee Clark Zumpe and Gwenyth Hood, with their short poems in various styles.

Tim Callahan, our seasoned and faithful illustrator, once more shows his versatility, doing spooky justice to "The Golem of Bidosz" and rendering of "Francis and the Mouse-King" with great sensitivity. L. C. Atencio, with us for the first time, provides our cover and illustrations for his poems, as

well as three other striking images. Philip Reuss also makes his debut here as an illustrator, with an effective evocation of a scene from Rossman's Faragrim series.

With us for the first time are storytellers Mark Mellon, with a tale of battle and magic amid the Turkish-Hungarian wars, John Mabry, with a fiction about the life of a famous peacemaker, Raymond Falgui, exploring politics, evolution and ecology in modern mythic times, and C. R. Wily, venturing into the poetic theology of the domestic economy. For new poets, we have Robert Franz, Nancy Enright, and L. C. Atencio, exploring nature, myth and philosophy over a wide sweep of time. We hope the readers enjoy this selection.

It Came to me in a Dream, a Humanitarian One

By

L. C. Atencio

Though I shall not live to experience it,
I already miss the feel of the paper.

There won't be any bookstores, not physical ones.

Stories will exist, tales of truth, or deception;
I don't have a doubt.
But books will be no more than a history term:
Something past, archaic, without flavor, or sentiment.

New terms will come for the new generations.
The chronicles of characters, stories, myths, biographies
Will become simple files, heavy downloads, even homework.
Readers won't run into each other by accident.

Books won't smell of new, of old, or of a leaf
That has been left alone in an autumn pile of its siblings.

Creativity will be replaced by business, and editors
Shall shed tears over the passion.
It won't be based on originality, or innovation,
But rather on technological strategies.

Even to professionals in literature, reading, too, will be a job,
For if you take the native writer out of writing,
You only get words, and words are too disorganized, mischievous, and childish
To position themselves into compelling, unique masterpieces.

Neither you, nor I, have the power to avoid it.
If anything, we can teach our children when they get home from school
How to distinguish art from business,
To explain to them how money doesn't necessarily produce bliss.



Books by Mythic Circlers

Besides the authors in this issue, I am happy to offer congratulations to two former Mythic Circlers who have published books which are now available for sale. Selections from Ania Kashina's "Ivan and Marya" tale appeared in our 2004 issue, now has *The Princess of Dhagabad*, a story based on *The Arabian Nights*, appearing from Dragonwell Press, available in hardcover, paperback and e-book from Amazon.com. The first lines of the back cover blurb do tend to draw interest: "When, on the day of her age-coming, the princess opens a mysterious bronze bottle—a gift from her grandmother—she has no idea that she is about to unleash a power older than the world itself. Worse, she is not prepared for the bearer of this power to be a handsome man whose intense gray eyes pierce her very soul. Hasan, her new slave, is immeasurably

older and stronger than anyone she has ever heard of, and he is now hers to command—if she can handle him, that is."

Then there is Maria Tatham, who worked on MC from 2003-2006, and published some pieces with us. In 2011, her first novel was published (Tate Publishing). *The Queen and the Handyman* is a coming-of-age story, in genre marriage of high fantasy and supernatural thriller. It is available as a paperback and e-book at the usual on-line stores. To find out more about Maria's writing visit her website:

<www.christianfantasyforwomen.com>

I join with the other Mythic Circlers in wishing these two writers the best.

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*.

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.

Nancy Enright is an Associate Professor of English and Director of First Year Writing at Seton Hall University. She serves on the Board of Advisors for Catholic Studies and as a Senator on the Faculty Senate. She has published articles on Dante, Augustine, Julian of Norwich, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis.

Raymond G. Falgui teaches English Literature at the University of the Philippines. His fiction has appeared in *Alternative Alamat*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, *Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, and *Innsmouth Free Press*, as well as other anthologies and magazines.

Robert Franz is eighteen years old and attending Ball State University. He has been previously published in “Moonwashed Kisses” and “The American Youth Literary Magazine.”

Gwenyth Hood has been editor of *The Mythic Circle* since 1998. Since becoming editor and until this issue, she published nothing in *MC* except editorials and related commentary; “Eunoë” is a break with this custom. Gwenyth’s work of historical science fiction, *The Come of the Demons*, was published in 1982 by William Morrow, and during her Sabbatical this coming year, she is working on sequels. A work in another genre—scholarship which is the fruit of two sabbaticals, was published this year, 2012 by ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies). There is more information at < www.acmrs.org/publications/catalog/book-honor-augustus-liber-ad-honorem-augusti-pietro-da-eboli>.

The Rev. **John R. Mabry**, PhD, is the pastor of Grace North Church, a Congregational parish that worships in an Anglican fashion. He is the director of the interfaith spiritual direction certificate program at the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry in Berkeley, where he also teaches theology and world religions. He is the author of numerous books on theology and spirituality. His novel *The Kingdom* reads like an unholy marriage of Buffy the Vampire slayer and Charles Williams. He and his wife live in Oakland where they enjoy walking their dog and are losing a never-ending battle against weeds. graduated with a BA in English Writing and attended the MLA Writer's Workshop in Iowa. He has published some journalism in the *South Peace News* and has earned an award at <www.writerstoolbox.com> for my inspirational fiction “Decrease.” He has Science Fiction/Horror stories published in various webzines.

Mark Mellon is a novelist who supports his family by working as an attorney. His work has recently appeared in *Danse Macabre* and *Midwest Literary Magazine*. A Western, *The Pirooters*, is published by Treble Heart Books. (www.trebleheartbooks.com/SDMellon.htm). A steampunk/alternate history novel, *Napoleon Concerto*, is also published by Treble Heart Books (. . . WDMellon2.html). A fantasy novella, *Escape From Byzantium*, won the 2010 Independent Publisher Silver Medal for fantasy/science fiction (www.independentpublisher.com). Most recently, *Roman Hell*, a horror novel, has been published by Amber Quill Press (www.amberquill.com) A website featuring his writing is at www.mellonwritesagain.com.

Ryder Miller is the editor of *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey*. He has published stories at <http://lostsoulsmag.tripod.com/>, and articles and reviews at: *The Internet Review of Science*.

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 years before live audiences across the Midwest. He has two published collections of original short stories (many of which first appeared in *The Mythic Circle*) set in the Nine Worlds of Norse mythology. The most recent one, *The Dragonseeker Saga* (Skandisk, Bloomington, MN, 2009), has also been characterized as a young adult fantasy novel. The story in this current issue of *Mythic Circle* is a direct sequel to “Walker in the Shadows,” which was published in *MC* #32.

David Sparenberg is a poet-playwright, Shakespearean actor, stage director, storyteller and workshop facilitator. His literary work has appeared in over 100 periodicals, journals and anthologies in nine countries and he currently completing a final revision on his first novel, *The Dialogue Of Becoming Human*, a work containing

aspects of Magic Realism, alchemy and archetypal psychology. David is currently involved with a final revision of his first novel. Anyone interested is invited to read the first two chapters at:
<<http://thedialogueofbecominghuman.blogspot.com>>.

C. R. Wiley is a Presbyterian minister living in Connecticut. His young adult fiction has been published in the United States and Turkey under his pen name, Mortimus Clay. His nonfiction has appeared in *Touchstone Magazine*, *Modern Reformation*, *Relevant On-line*, and *The Boston Herald*.

Joel Zartman is a reader and admirer of Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Barfield. He has put in a stint living in Bogotá, Colombia, but has returned to the anglophone world mostly because getting English books outside of it is still harder than you'd think it would be, especially stuff by Williams and Barfield.

Ring of Toadstools

by

Lee Clark Zumpe

*...you demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
Shakespeare, The Tempest, (V.i.36-37)*

Tucked away in the folds of twilight's satiny gown,
Plucked from legend
And teased by the camera eye:
Perhaps at midnight your court I might spy
Beneath the satellite-clustered skies,
Dancing, dancing in the meadow
Beyond the clutch of radar nets
Outside the range of fighter jets,
Dancing, I would find you there,
And glimpse you in the sparkle of a star,
Only to lose you in a moment's passing;
And there, where you gathered on the field,
A ring of toadstools springing from the ground...
Transplanted from some fairy realm,
Enchanted by the glowing moon.



COSTUMES

by

Ryder W. Miller

The three children were reluctant, but Chad Everett, the father, convinced them to go to the costume store that evening. It was a cool evening and slightly windy, but there was no humidity or threat of rain. They walked down the dimly lit streets near their house on their way the main drag where Tricksters Costume Store was.

Tricksters was open late that evening because of the Halloween season. Halloween was only a week away, but it was mid-evening and the store would not be overcrowded with people because most would be at dinner.

"I would rather spend the money on cookies. Rather than a costume you can buy me cookies for a whole month?" asked young Pierre.

"I want a haircut instead," said the blonde pre-debutante Betty.

"I want roller skates or a cool skateboard," said teenage Frank.

"Your mother told me that we will be celebrating Halloween this year. We will all need to make some sacrifices to keep our home a happy home," said Chad.

They had not spent much time in the store when a young woman in a black dress asked if she could be of assistance. She was young but older than Betty and the other kids, with black hair and red lipstick. Her hair was tied back and she sounded like she was from The South.

"We have the chain store costumes in the stands in the middle here," she said.

"Can we get ice cream for dessert?" asked Pierre interrupting her.

"I only have so much money. We need to buy the costumes first," said Chad to Pierre.

The lady smiled, "In the back we have hand made costumes."

"This is a bit ghoulish for me," said Betty.

"Everybody already knows who I am going to be," said Frank.

"Frank is going to be Frankenstein," said Pierre laughing.

"Frankenstein can be cool. There are a lot of Frankenstein costumes," said the store lady.

"Here let me show you the costumes in the back. These were homemade or at least not mass produced," she continued.

The family followed her, but Betty and Pierre walked slowly and reluctantly.

"Here is Madam Trickster's own brand. Your Halloween colleagues may be jealous that you have not brought the chain store brands, but for the fashionable dresser these will set you apart."

Pulling the dress off the rack and talking to Betty she said, "You will be fetching in this dress."

Betty was shy and looked at Chad somewhat uncomfortably. She smiled and took the dress to see if it would fit her. The dress was open and not too tight on the chest. There was also ornate stitching in black. In a pocket on the side there were a set of plastic vampire teeth and a small vial of "blood".

"Men will think twice about saying no to you in that dress. If your hair was also black you would be unstoppable. Your

complexion is fine, but you will also need to wear black shoes.”

Betty was now smiling. Chad reached over to look at the price tag. He grimaced slightly but maintained his composure.

The lady smiled and started talking to Pierre.

“And for you there is the wild man werewolf look. You will not need to buy a costume. Just some old ripped clothes will do, and you do not need to comb your hair. Here is a mask?”

Pierre took the ghastly mask from her and after looking at it put it on his face. He made a fast shrug towards Frank who didn't budge, but laughed instead.

The eyes were highlighted by the mask which was made of sturdy materials. The mask was a little big for Pierre, but there was string that would enable it to be tied around his head. Pierre looked at it closely and was surprised to find that he was smiling.

“And now for you, and is it really Frank?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Frankenstein sometimes wore a suit, but he was green in complexion. Here is the Frankenstein package and here is the suit,” she said pulling it off the rack.

Frank was impressed by the weight of the suit.

“I can also wear this at funerals,” Frank said with a smile.

Chad looked at the price and grudgingly smiled.

“And for you?” the Shopkeeper said to Chad.

“I have something at home. Just for them today.”

The shopkeeper looked slightly annoyed, but she smiled instead.

“Are you all satisfied?”

“Can we get ice cream dad?” said Pierre.

The shopkeeper smiled and said, “We have some candy at the counter.

Pierre and Frank smiled.

Chad led the way to the counter to pay for the costumes.

“I will have to pay by check,” he said.

“We usually do not like to do business by check. Do you have a credit card?”

“I don't actually.”

She now looked annoyed, but said “Okay.”

At the counter she now was smiling again and she gave Frank and Pierre some candy.

“You will be spectacular as a vampire. You will be ghastly as a werewolf. You will be intimidating as a Frankenstein,” she said and then looked at the father.

In the spotlight he said “I will be a pirate and my wife a witch queen.”

She smiled, and then smiled again when Chad handed her the check.

Chad did not buy them ice cream that night and they walked quietly back through the dark streets. The children were excited about having the new costumes. They were also a little nervous about the week ahead of them. They preferred to ignore this season, but mom wanted them to participate this year.

When they got home there was dinner on the table. Jody had baked a chicken and prepared sweet potatoes, salad, and pumpkin pie. The windows were open and there was a breeze in the house.

“Thank you for dinner,” Chad said as he sat down at the table.

Jody seemed pleased as he looked at the costumes they had brought home.

“Madam Tricksters,” Jody said with a smile.

“Yes. And I will be pirate again and you a witch,” said Chad.

“Okay. I am actually getting better at being a witch. I have had some practice,” Jody said with a smile.

“You sure have and so has your cooking,” said Chad.

"Baked chicken again? Why can't we have hamburgers," said Frank.

"Is there ice cream for the pumpkin pie?" asked Pierre.

"My teacher at school said to never cook more than your share for a man," said Betty.

Jody was now smirking.

"You leave your mother alone now. She just cooked a big meal for us. Eat it like you enjoy it," said Chad.

After dinner Chad helped in the kitchen with the dishes. Talking to Jody he said, "You know we have to give them chores. That would make them more appreciative."

"Yes. When they are a little older," said Jody.

"I think they are old enough to do some of the cleaning around here. Betty can help with the cooking, and Frank can do some of the housework. Pierre is a little young."

"Let's wait until after Halloween."

"Okay, we will tell them then."

As Halloween approached, the Everetts tried to proceed into the season as they would have otherwise. Betty was extra studious and Frank spent extra time playing sports. Pierre, the one in the family with the sweet tooth, was on the lookout for extra candy. Their fellow students were already wearing costumes a few days before Halloween, but the Everett children were not very interested in the holiday. It actually took some prodding on the part of Jody to get them to wear their costumes to school on Halloween.

"We paid good money for those costumes," said Jody who was already dressed like a witch when they woke that morning.

Jody reached down and made another tear in Pierre's shirt. Jody and Pierre smiled and Pierre put on the mask. "Here are some earrings to go with your dress and use extra make up today. Red lips to say that you want some blood."

Betty was reluctant and shy, but she did as told.

"Frankenstein was green, put on the green makeup Frank," said Jody.

Before they were ready to go to school, Chad walked down the stairs in a pirate costume.

"How are you mates and laddies," he said to the family.

"You run on now. You will be late for school," said Jody.

"There will be candy later?" asked Pierre.

"Only if you wear the costume. And you Betty could probably practice having a boyfriend for a day. And Frankenstein, you can probably settle some old scores," Jody said not quite seriously.

"Oh Mom," Betty said as they walked out the door.

Many of the students and some of the teachers were also in costumes that day, but most at the school could recognize who was behind their costume. Frank seemed older and maybe ready to have a girlfriend on the cheerleading squad. Betty was shy and anxious, but a number of the boys took extra notice of her. There was candy in some of the classrooms and Pierre took more than his share so he would have savings for the rest of the fall.

The day was going well. Most people going through the motions of being at school, but when the school day ended the change occurred for the Everett children. It would be an afternoon like none other, an afternoon they would never forget. There was an afternoon Halloween party at the school at the end of the school day, and the Everett children decided to explore.

Betty found herself unusually hungry and thirsty, thirsty like she had never been before. She desired the taste of salt and liquids. The hunger subsumed her, and she spent much of the afternoon with a longing she never had before. She decided to talk

with Jock who was wearing his football costume that day. He was sitting alone eating food privately. Jock was surprised when she sat next to him uninvited and on his side to the table.

"Hello Betty," he said uncomfortably.

Betty smiled and drank some of her grape juice with a disappointed look on her face.

"Would you do a girl a favor," Betty whispered into Jock's ear.

"Okay."

When Jock started eating again Betty licked his neck. Jock smiled. Betty then bit into Jock's neck and he smile at first, and then backed off angry.

"What the hell to do you think you are doing? I have a girlfriend. If she catches me with a hickey we are done for."

Jock touched his neck and looked at his hand, "I am bleeding. You bit me. You are taking Halloween too seriously."

Jock reached down and grabbed the rest of his sandwich. He then glowered at Betty and walked away angry.

"You are crazy," he said.

Betty felt dejected and didn't feel comfortable finding someone else to bite. She usually would laugh about such things, but today she found herself melancholy. Everybody seemed so immature. She decided not to stay at the after school Halloween party for too long. She would go home and call it an early evening. What she needed was a good meal. A good meal would make her feel better. The juice was not doing it for her. The blood was actually delicious, but she did not want to take Halloween too seriously.

While most to the students were in the courtyard, Pierre got caught taking too much candy in one of the classrooms. A teacher stopped him.

"That will have to do for the rest of the class as well," she said.

"It was just sitting there. Nobody took any," said Pierre taking his hands out of his pockets where he put the candy.

"Who is in there?" asked the teacher.

"Why it is me. It is me Pierre."

"Take your mask off."

Pierre tried, but mask was stuck on his face. Something had changed. The mask had changed the features on his face. He tried to shake it off, but couldn't.

"I have to go," Pierre said and ran away. The teacher started laughing.

Pierre was now worried and did not know what to do. What if he could never take this mask off? What if he was stuck being a werewolf his whole life? Werewolves only came out on the nights of the full moon, and he may be stuck looking like this every day. As he ran through the school people quickly got out of his way. He was surprised to hear himself howling like a wolf. He had now gotten far enough away from the teacher where he could walk again. He decided to take a look in the bathroom mirrors. He sure looked ugly in the mask, but it was attached to his face and he could not take it off. Actually it seemed as if the mask had merged with his face.

Pierre started crying in fear and decided he would go back to the store with dad and get their money back. He had not agreed to be a werewolf for life. He was angry and despite his small size people were now afraid of him. Pierre did not want to talk with the school nurse. He would be able to get help from his parents when he got home.

Frank was having fun as Frankenstein. He seemed bigger and stronger, more intimidating in his Frankenstein suit. His skin was green, he had a crack in his head, and electricity plugs on his neck. There was a score he wanted to settle today.

Some of the guys on the tennis team had gotten too friendly with him and the other members of the soccer team. The tennis

team captain, Fred, had called him “A doo doo shit.” He was only joking, but Frank had not taken it very well.

He found Fred with a few of his friends at a table eating pizza. Fred and his friends were wearing a buccaneer outfits.

“How are you doing, lad, or should I say monster?” Fred said.

“I challenge you to a wrestling match,” said Frank, angry.

“Tennis is our game here. You have found the wrong crowd, you monster, you,” he said.

His friends started laughing.

Frank felt emotions running through him that he had never felt before. He was full of rage and grabbed a drink off the table and threw it on Fred. Fred and his friends were angry and attacked him. Frank realized that they would have strong arms being tennis players and all, but they were no match for Frank that day. The first one to approach Frank was kicked between the legs. The second Frank picked up and threw. Then Fred rushed him to tackle him, but Frank side-stepped and tripped him.

There was a girl watching who yelled for them to stop. All three of Frank's adversaries were on the floor, and Frank made some distance from them.

“You better go home or you will be in trouble,” the girl yelled.

The three stood up now but did not approach Frank.

“You think some girl is going to dress up looking like the bride of Frankenstein for you. You need to learn to take a joke, and if you don't go home I am going to tell the teachers. Frankenstein learned that he did not belong. He did not fit in. You should read the book,” the girl yelled. She was not in a costume and Frank had never met her before.

Frank nodded and walked away.

“You better not try to do this to us again,” Fred yelled.

Frankenstein laughed.

“Be quiet or we may have to fight him again,” said one of Fred's friends.

Frankenstein smiled to himself, but then he was sad. He had ruined his chance with the girl who had chased him away. Most of the students shunned him when he walked away from the school. He would have to walk on the side of the road all the way home. He then realized that he had changed. He was much stronger than he ever was and there was a strange smell he now exuded. Frank got nervous when he could not wash off the green make-up. What if he was stuck being like this? Frank decided he needed some parental advice.

Betty was the first home. Frank met Pierre on the road. The two brothers decided to go to the store with dad to get their money back. When the two brothers got home Betty was crying.

“Something has come over me,” she said sobbing.

“Us too,” said Frank.

They decided to wait at home for the parents. It was getting dark and the parents would be home from work soon.

Frank and Betty decided to make a meal.

“I want my barbecue steak medium rare,” Betty said.

Pierre put all the candy he collected in a bowl.

“I have enough for all of us,” Pierre said.

The parents arrived together. They had had a happy hour drink at the bar that night. When Jody arrived she could immediately sense that the children were upset. Chad thanked them for cooking dinner.

“We are monsters mom. These costumes made us into monsters. I really want to drink blood and I am afraid to go out in the daylight again,” Betty said.

"I cannot take this mask off. I don't want to look like the werewolf every day of the month. Frank is permanently green," said Pierre.

"And extra strong, but I reek. Nobody is going to want to have anything to do with me like this," Frank said.

Chad was unsure what to say but he looked concerned.

"It serves you right. You were not the best of kids. You were always sort of like monsters," said Jody.

She looked angry then said, "Do you think it is easy being a parent?"

Pierre growled softly.

"I didn't really mean it. Maybe it will wear off tomorrow."

The Everetts decided not to go Trick or Treating that evening. Pierre had lost his taste for candy. Betty ate her steak bloody. Frank used deodorant. They all sat down to watch a horror movie and then went to sleep early that evening. They did not know what they would do if they did not turn back to normal the next morning. But luckily in the morning the children were normal again, and they felt repentant. That was one of the scariest Halloweens of their lives.

"Madam Tricksters," Jody beamed over breakfast.

The Sunset

by

Joel Zartman

A cloud rears up against the setting sun
with glory rimmed and lighted from within
with patches here and veins where it wears thin,
the fire making light and water one.

A fountain plays below the blazing cloud,
its waters rising luminescent white
send sparks of shooting spray in arching flight—
the fountain's joy a joy the sunlight has allowed.

Below the cloud, a silhouetted tree
waves shapes in sunset's mystical, light breeze;
a dust of gold envelops it in seas
of unconditional eternity.

The moment fades out of the west: the cloud
is grey, the tree is dim, the fountain bowed

FRANCIS AND THE MOUSE KING

by

John Mabry

It was just a shack in the woods. The roof was falling in, half of it already open to the winds of heaven. The mortar around the door frame was cracked and falling away in chips the size of fingers. The floor was made of dirt, and, due to the rain of the past several days, was mostly just mud.

"It's a generous gift," said Brother Mark with intentional dispassion. The other brothers shivered in the autumnal morning chill and looked at Francis, their eyes betraying almost desperate hope.

Francis scowled at Brother Mark. He scowled at the shack. Then he scowled at the brothers. "It is too generous for poor brothers," he said at last, almost spitting the words to the ground.

"But Francis," one of the newer brothers protested. "Winter is coming! It is a small place...."

Francis shot the brother a glare that made him bite his tongue. "Brother Bartholomew, I understand your fear of the cold. This is why we must trust God."

"But Francis," Brother Mark interjected, "is it not possible that this is a gift from God? Provided precisely to help us weather through the winter?"

Francis smiled briefly, but the furrow did not leave his brow. Instead, he circumambulated the shack, noting almost with approval its miserable state of disrepair. "The question that I keep asking, Brother," Francis said slowly as he walked, "is this: Who does it serve? If we stay out here, we will be too far from the city to minister to the people there." He stopped and faced the brothers, who were following him around the ruin. "How can you possibly

expect me to agree to a bunch of friars living in luxury out here in the woods, pleasing no one but themselves?"

At his use of the word, "luxury," the brothers, each to a man, looked at the shack, and then back at Francis. "But—" one of them began, but Francis held up his hand to stop him. "We will sleep here tonight, Brothers, but tomorrow we will return to San Damiano."

"Ah, but Brother Francis," Mark objected, "Brother Bernardo said he would meet us here in three days' time."

Francis grunted. "Then we shall live in luxury for three days. May God forgive us." The brothers looked at each other in disbelief, but did not contradict him.

That night, Francis slept fitfully, as he often did. He was awakened by a sharp pain in his left eyelid. The moon, shining through the hole in the roof, was full and strong, and as he opened his eyes, he saw clearly a most amazing sight: a tiny mouse, the color of wet bark, stood upright on his cheek in a pose of brave defiance. On his head was a rough crown fashioned from a silver ring, and in his front paw was a sword that looked all the world like a darning needle.

"Strange beast!" the mouse exclaimed. It seemed to be addressing him, so Francis made an effort to remain still so as not to topple the tiny monarch. "State your business in my realm!"

"Um...I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," Francis began, unsure what to say. "We were not aware that we were

trespassing...but I beseech His Majesty to forgive our trespasses.”

The Mouse King cocked a tiny eyebrow at the friar, but did not lower the point of the sword from its dangerous position very near to Francis’ left eye. Francis struggled not to blink.

“Trespassers must be punished, knave!” the Mouse King pronounced. “And the punishment is death!”

“Ah, then I am comforted,” Francis tried to smile slowly so as not to upset the balance of the rodent sovereign when his cheeks moved. “I am always prepared to die. My concern tonight is whether I shall be nibbled.”

“Do you mock me, knave?” demanded the Mouse King. Francis looked about and noted that the Mouse King was not alone. He stretched his eyes to see as much as he could without moving his head. He saw that there was not one armed mouse confronting him, but scores of them, each with a fierce scowl of defiance upon his furry face.

Before Francis could answer, Brother Bartholomew tiptoed in from a visit to the bushes, and stepped on one of the armed mice, its sword piercing the bottom of his foot. “Mary’s teats!” he swore, grabbing his foot and hopping about on the other. The mice scattered from the hopping doom with squeaking shrieks of terror. In a moment, all the mice were safely hidden and Francis sat up, both relieved and concerned.

As Brother Bartholomew sat and rubbed at his foot, Francis crept on all fours to the door. His heart sank within him as he saw the lifeless body of the soldier mouse, crushed beneath the novice friar’s heavy foot. The darning needle near the little beast was smeared with blood that shone black in the moonlight. Francis made the sign of the cross over the mouse, and picked him up, carrying him to the rough table. Francis laid him out in state, his tiny blade arrayed upon his breast as befits a noble who has fallen in

battle. ***

In the morning, Francis called the brothers together, and with due solemnity, led them through the rites of burial for the fallen mouse. The brothers did not object, but watched their leader with mounting concern as the ritual proceeded.

Brother Bartholomew, still limping from his injury, leaned over and whispered to Brother Mark, “He’s mad.”

Brother Mark smirked, and whispered back, “What? You didn’t know that before? We wouldn’t be here if he were right in his head.”

Brother Bartholomew’s brows furrowed as he pondered this. After the service, when Francis had buried the creature, and had read over him the service of committal, Brother Bartholomew sought him out.

“Brother Francis, I hope you are not angry with me—”

Francis looked at him with a gravity that made the new friar stop midsentence. “Brother Bartholomew, ‘angry’ is too weak a word for what I am feeling toward you right now. I am not angry at you, Brother. I am *wroth* with you.” And at that, Francis rose and stomped off into the woods to be alone.

“Oh, dear...” Bartholomew said, fingering the front of his habit nervously. “He hates me.”

“No, brother,” said Brother Mark, who had been observing the exchange. “I told you, Francis is mad. His moods change like the weather. Be comforted, brother. The next time you see him, he will be kind to you, as if nothing had ever happened. You wait and see.” He patted the novice on the shoulder and called the brothers to prayer.

That evening, Francis only pretended to sleep. As he expected, visitors came again

by moonlight. They came great in number, each of them small and fierce and bent on vengeance. This time, Francis opened his eye to behold a mouse herald perched on his cheek. The herald unrolled a scroll and read from it in a voice both bold and solemn, "His majesty King Cornflower, sovereign of the wooded grove, and monarch of...that stream, over there...we don't have a name for it, really, other than 'the stream'...anyway, His Majesty calls upon the Lord of the Trespassers and Murderers to parlay with him before we commence to battle."

Francis spoke slowly, careful not to move too much for fear of toppling the mouse herald and making the situation even worse. "Tell His majesty that I have no intention of fighting him, nor do any of my brothers. But I will talk with him, and that right gladly." The mouse herald rolled up his scroll and hopped down from the friar's cheek, waddling on his hind legs back to where the Mouse King and his entourage watched from the relative safety of the ruined fireplace.

By this time, many of the brothers had also awakened and were watching the proceedings with looks both surprised and amused. One of them started to rise, but Francis sat up and motioned for them to keep still. Moving slowly and deliberately, Francis poured a cup of wine from a flagon, and, fishing for a moment in a travel bag, took from it a copper thimble.

The friar moved cautiously to the middle of the room and sat cross-legged, waiting and, it seemed, praying. Warily, the Mouse King and his entourage processed towards him. As they came near, the tiny sovereign signaled for his ministers to stand back. There were squeaks of protest, but the King was resolute, and they came no further. Alone, King Cornflower met the friar. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I am so sorry about your noble mouse,

my Lord," Francis began. "My brother did not see him. He meant no malice. He is large and bumblesome and incautious."

"I am not bumblesome!" Brother Bartholomew objected, but Brother Mark shushed him. "I'm not *bumblesome*!" Brother Mark shushed him again.

"We gave him a burial as befits a noble beast, my Lord," Francis continued. "We commended his soul to God, and we performed the appointed service with the sorrow that I truly feel and the dignity that he deserved."

"I know nothing of that," the Mouse King waved away Francis' apology. "I only know that his family demands blood, his clan demands blood, and our race demands blood. You must know that I intend to avenge him."

Francis nodded, but said nothing. Instead he dipped the thimble into the cup of wine, filling it and handing it to the rodent sovereign. Cornflower received the thimble and sniffed at it suspiciously. Francis drank from the cup, then, and seeing this, the Mouse King dipped his tiny snout into the thimble and slurped at the wine cautiously. After a moment, he lifted his head, his snout stained purple and dripping, and, not to be deterred, said, "I will have blood." He indicated his host of warriors, about two score strong, each of them armed and angry. "They demand it."

Francis sipped at his wine and regarded the Mouse King with sorrow. Finally, he spoke so softly that both the friars and the mice had to hold their breaths and lean in to hear. "Brother Mouse—your Majesty—as long as we both insist on being strong, we shall most certainly be enemies. But if we can be weak together, perhaps we might be friends."

The Mouse King regarded him with a new wariness. "You speak like one who is mad."

Francis smiled. "You are not the first to

tell me so, your Highness.”

“Weakness is not a thing to be sought, Murderer. It is favored by none in the forest. It is a thing to be scorned and a thing to be fought.”

“I beg to differ, your Majesty. Weakness is a gift, given by God, and infinitely useful to man and beast alike.”

“You talk in riddles, Trespasser.”

“Then let me speak plain. We could spend all night threatening one another, insisting on our rights, and boasting of our might, until finally we must do our best to destroy one another. Or, we could share this wine, and as we do, I could tell you about what frightens me, what worries me, the cares that fill my days, and you could tell me about your cares, your worries, your fears. Instead of boasting of our strengths, we could share our weaknesses.”

“And what would that accomplish?”

“I am not sure, your Majesty, but my hope is that it will not end in the deaths of many noble mice, nor in the punctured ankles of my bumblesome brothers.”

The Mouse King looked skeptical, so Francis simply began. He told the Mouse King about the friar’s fear for winter, their lack of faith in God’s providence, his own frustration about this. He told him about the gift of the shack, the burden it had become on his conscience, the alienation it was causing between himself and his brothers. He talked about his sorrow and his fear and his deepest concern.

Moved by the friar’s frank speech, the Mouse King thanked him, and began to enumerate his own worries—the hardness of winter, and a shortage of food set aside for it. He spoke of the cats that roamed the forest hungry for rodents of tender years, and the madness of mice in large numbers who are afraid. He spoke of the heaviness of the crown, and Francis nodded, understanding the thankless burden of leadership all too well.

When they had finished speaking, Francis filled the Mouse King’s thimble again. “Brother Mouse—your Majesty—it seems that we are more alike than we knew.” To his relief the Mouse King nodded his agreement, and reached for the thimble without hesitation.

When morning broke, the tiny sovereign drew himself up and announced, “We shall treat again tomorrow,” and withdrew with his entourage into the depths of the shack.

After the friars had prayed and eaten, they spent the day in labor. Under Francis’ guidance, some repaired the roof, some mixed mortar for the door and the brickwork. A couple gathered acorns and nuts and seeds until they had a mountain of them. They then spread them out in the afternoon sun to dry.

Francis himself went into the forest, calling to his sisters the cats, engaging in long and detailed conversations about boundaries and behaviors, extracting from them contracts and covenants quite contrary to their natures, but such were Francis’ powers of persuasion that he procured assurances from each and every one to stay clear of the wooded grove and its stream.

When the Mouse King and his entourage arrived that evening, he approached Francis alone and without hesitation, his fellows watching from the walls. The brothers, too, huddled together in silence, waiting to hear what would be said. His Majesty accepted the thimble graciously, and immediately dipped his snout into the musty wine. After slurping deeply, the Mouse King raised his face to Francis and showed his teeth. It might have been a smile.

“I have spoken to my people,” he announced. “They are still angry, but they

admit the loss of our warrior was probably an accident.”

Francis nodded and grinned—a bit thinly—his relief. “Your majesty,” Francis began, “This makes me glad. I have thought all day about your troubles and have prayed for you. I have also secured promises from the forest cats to stay clear of this grove, and with your permission I am ready to assign brothers to stay here in order to enforce it.”

The friars looked at one another in astonishment, feeling hopeful and relieved. “Furthermore, we come tonight with gifts.” He opened a bag of dried nuts and seeds, and held the opening near the tiny monarch so that he could sniff at it. The Mouse King’s voice was thick with emotion as he said, “This will be more than enough to feed us until spring.”

Distress and sadness washed over the

Mouse King’s face, and Francis asked him, “What’s wrong, my Lord?”

“I fear we have misjudged you, and I beg your pardon.”

“You have it, Brother Mouse.”

“I am also distressed, because we have no gift for you.”

“Ah, your Majesty, but that is not quite true,” Francis said. “For when we arrived at this place, I upset my brothers by saying we could not stay here. And we could not stay here because we could not be of service to anyone we know so far out in the woods. But now, we have found friends here, and here we now have someone to serve. So, if you will welcome us as friends and guests in this stately cottage—which we understand to be your property and your home—we will be content to stay.”

And that is what they did.

