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Mythic Circle #29

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Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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Metal And Ice

by

Kate Reilly

I watched the pool of life
as it drained out of him.

He told me
he had spent the
whole entire summer
on Pluto.
Painting.

What did you paint?
I asked.

Different life forms.
He said, shrugging.

I told him I was in the ocean
snorkeling
as he ventured out into
the Milky Way.

With a clear helmet
and a silver suit.

He wore a special suit.
Which was even equipped with a
helmet.
Which made him look like a fish bowl.

His eyes, two fish.
His nose, a castle.
His lips, red rocks.

He wore a badge.
Shaped like an American flag
on his chest.

I lacked oxygen that summer.
He lacked gravity.

He once told me he thought the moon,
from far away, looked like ice.

And that he looks like metal.

Bed of Og

By John Kuhn

He had been right to fear disorientation. He could not find the chamber in which he had built his campfire. He had gone a bit too far, had made one turn too many, and the more he attempted to correct the problem, the worse the problem became. In trying to undo the wrong turn he had made on his way back to the campfire, he made three more wrong turns. At length, he admitted to himself that he was irreparably lost, and he considered lying down to die. He shortly concluded that waiting to die would be far more torturous than falling blindly over a ledge, and he continued shuffling forward into the pitch.

He walked for an endless age, unaware of time or space. The only thing he knew was that he was generally and gradually descending, down into the belly of the mountain. He shuffled among its roots, doubtful that he would ever find his way out. He began to grow cold, but he refused to light the little bit of fire he carried in his pouch. He couldn't imagine what he might be saving it for, but it seemed wise to save it.

Peregrino began to count his steps, if you can call them steps. He decided to stop and rest when he got to 60. He

wished very badly that he had a nugget of food, something to sit down and eat as a last supper. But he had nothing with him besides his clothes, his razor-sharp knife, flint, and a tiny handful of dry moss.

Just after he took a slow 46th step, he paused. It seemed colder here than just moments ago. Then he took the step that changed everything.

Down he tumbled, through open space for an unknown interval, finally landing rudely against a sandy protrusion that sloped gradually from a cavern wall. He hit and slid, and the sand tore the skin from his arms and back. When his body came to a rest, he was not dead, but he was not moving. He was unconscious, laying on cold dirt and rocks in the deepest bottom of a cave no man had ever seen.

He awoke to the sound of sniffing. Something was sniffing him. It wasn't a rat. By the sound of it, it was unmistakably larger. It sounded bigger than even a man. Suddenly, it began to talk, but in a voice and a language unlike any he had ever heard. He stayed very still, for some senseless reason afraid to open his eyes.

He had been terrified many times over the past two days, but never as much as at the precise moment when he

heard the big beast's sniffing: then, horrifyingly, he felt its breath against his neck. He was frozen. He was blind. He prepared to scream, but he was too afraid. Nothing came from his mouth. And the thing grabbed him.

The hands holding him had opposable thumbs and felt human, but they were huge. Unintelligible words had come from its mouth, somewhere far above Peregrino, words that were without question language. It was not truly a beast, but something intelligent. This made it somehow more frightening. Peregrino wondered how the creature had found him in the darkness. It must have heard his fall. The thing gripped him as tightly as he had ever been held, stopping just short of causing him pain.

A thumb the size of a sausage lay against his left shoulder blade, and four substantial fingers curled fatly around his right shoulder. He could feel, as he stood, that the thing stood with him, the arm of his captor pressing down from above. In his mind, the only place he could see anything at all, he pictured the creature to be an ugly, muscular troll, perhaps double his size in height and girth. As they walked, his captor often emitted a nauseatingly fearful howl that echoed off the cavern walls. The howls seemed to guide him, and after much walking, they began to be answered with more howls from distant places. Peregrino vomited from fear.

They were very deep in the earth. It had gradually grown very hot and humid.

As a boy, Peregrino had heard stories of giants, titanic fighters of old clad in the skins of oxen. Their size, relative to humans, had varied depending upon the teller of the story. He had never believed they were real. And, if real, he had never believed they could be this big. Without ever expressing it, he had

always believed they were merely stories of tall humans, perhaps heroic ones, their size exaggerated through the years of telling.

Peregrino was brought, after much downward walking with his captor, to an underground city, a center of population, as evidenced by the sounds of many giants moving about. He could hear them all around, but he never saw a hint of illumination anywhere. They lived blind. There were many of them. He wondered if they had ever seen fire or sunlight. He had been led through caverns immense and merely large, ever in utter darkness, and he had heard voices, hundreds of them. At one point, he was led into a space that felt huge, though he could see nothing, and he heard the eager voices of a great assembly. The throng was hushed by a voice of Authority, and that same Authority addressed them in very somber gibberish. His speech was long, eloquent and thoughtful nonsense. Peregrino was all but certain that the giant arbiter, somewhere in the middle of his lengthy oration, had declared that he should die. They took him away from there and put him in a stone niche. He kept looking around desperately for light, but never with any satisfaction.

Captive. He lost track of time, though he was sure he had been in their possession for days now. His cell had a cold, hard, grainy slab covering the entrance. He figured he was being held while they prepared some grisly form of execution for him. Perhaps they would cook and eat him, he thought. Food could not be plentiful in their sunless world.

The cell door was not really necessary. He couldn't run anywhere. He was totally dependent for survival upon his guard, a different troll than the

one that had caught him, he thought, though he couldn't be sure. The guard checked on him often, bringing him ridiculously large portions of smelly food which consisted always of slightly warm fish and some kind of soggy substance, also slightly warm and unbearably salty. Both tasted remarkably like sulfur. Peregrino wondered if the giants fished above ground, or if there was a lake full of fish in their underground city. He wondered how they heated these foods without fire, or if they indeed had fire and simply refused to utilize it for its illuminative qualities. Wood for fires must certainly be scarce down here. Perhaps they emerge on occasion from their caves into our world and gather wood, he thought. Perhaps this is where the stories of giants come from.

The worst thing about this place was the darkness, the oppressive darkness. It was tenacious, all-encompassing, ever-present. It invaded his space, pressing up against his skin and useless eyeballs. He forced himself to stare, to open his eyes wide and strain to see some speck of light. But he was a thousand miles down in an ocean of stone. Occasionally, his mind played tricks on him and he would see a spark, a tiny flash. He would sit up straight, looking in the direction where he had seen the flash, eventually realizing that it hadn't been real.

After the passage of unknown and unknowable hours, or days, or weeks, he was joined in his cell by one of them; luckily, it was one who seemed friendly. The visitor's first act had been to take Peregrino's tiny hands and press them against his own massive face, then head, then neck, torso, arms, hands, legs, and feet, allowing Peregrino a notion of the appearance of his hosts. Peregrino had never had to use his sense of touch as a means of perception, but he felt that the

beasts looked almost human. Next, he touched Peregrino from head to toe with his immense hands. Then he sat with Peregrino and began to talk to him, in gibberish, of course.

After hours of listening and occasionally talking, Peregrino had learned the name of his visitor, the name of this race of creatures, the name of the place, and the job of his visitor.

The visitor's name was Golep, and he was a Nefilis. The place was Invereen. Golep's job was to learn the prisoner's language, as evidenced by his tireless habit of placing Peregrino's hands on different objects and saying, "Niv," a word Peregrino quickly associated with, "What is this?"

Peregrino began to get a notion of time thanks to his new friend, Golep. Golep came to see him regularly and stayed talking for hours. The prisoner learned to associate Golep's arrival with morning and his departure with evening. He realized, too, that his meals were brought at regular intervals. He began to count "cave days," as he called them.

As Golep learned more of Peregrino's tongue, Peregrino grew more and more relieved. He realized that this race found him to be interesting and valuable for learning. He would certainly not be killed until Golep had learned more of his language. And if Golep was to learn his language, surely it was for the purpose of communicating with him and learning other things. The Authority certainly would want to know where this tiny intruder had come from. Perhaps they had long been searching for a way out of the cave, and perhaps he could lead them to believe he knew the way.

After 60 cave days, Golep had developed an impressive vocabulary. On the one hand, he was clearly intelligent,

and on the other, he stayed for long stretches of time, forcing the prisoner to teach him. Peregrino wondered if Golep worked as hard as he did due to curiosity, a strong work ethic, or fear. Regardless, as Golep continued developing his new language Peregrino began to learn a great deal about the Nefilis.

The Nefilis were a race of ancient heritage. They did not believe they were large, but they found it incredible that anyone could be as small as Peregrino. Their features were almost identical to those of humans, except size, save for two facts: their faces were long with narrow chins and very wide cheekbones, and each of their two eyes was covered by a thin layer of skin, an eyelid that could not open.

They were not all giant muscular trolls as Peregrino had imagined them when he was captured. Some were strongly built, to be sure, but others were long and sinewy, graceful beings. All were tall, however. The shortest of them was taller than the tallest humans by two feet or more. Peregrino was the size of a small Nefilis child.

The population of Invereen was less than 100 families, and there was only one other village that they were aware of, named Halolid, although tales of expansive cities abounded, and their explorers (like the one who found Peregrino) were constantly seeking more settlements. From the accounts of Golep, Peregrino gathered that the underground caverns were endless, stretching out in every direction for miles upon miles.

The Authority who had mandated that Peregrino be imprisoned was named Disalis. He was something like a mayor or a king. He was respected and obeyed by all the inhabitants of Invereen, and those from the other village often came to pay him tribute.

The giants ate a variety of fishes and aquatic plants from an underground salt lake found precisely halfway between their village and the neighboring one. They cooked their food in one of a number of underground pools where boiling water bubbled up from deeper in the earth.

When Peregrino asked about fire, he found that Golep did not understand his question. He understood heat, but he did not understand fire. "What is it?" he kept asking. Peregrino was tempted to build a fire with the match and bit of fuel he still had (they had taken his knife long before), but he chose not to, in case he might need a fire later. He would simply explain it.

Peregrino could not explain fire fully because every explanation included things that Golep did not understand. Light is what you see, he had explained, but Golep did not understand the concept of sight. He made Golep touch his eyes, Peregrino's eyes, an act that made Golep gasp. Golep admitted that his people found the idea of the foreigner's eyes being exposed disturbing. Eyes, to them, were internal organs of uncertain function, and they were not sure how Peregrino survived with his eyes exposed.

Peregrino tried to explain sight and light and fire and color and bright and dark and focus and blur. He tried on several occasions, on many different days, in many different ways, but never with any real success. He explained sight scientifically, poetically, childishly. He compared it to the four senses the Nefilis had: touch, hearing, smell, and taste. He talked about colors. He told Golep that the only color he could see in the cave was black.

"That is the color you see, friend," he told his student. "You see black."

"You speak I no see," Golep replied.

"Yes, that is true. But those who can't see, I assume, see black all the time. Seeing nothing but black is blindness. Blindness means you can't see."

"You speak in circles," was the reply. Golep had decided he had no hope of understanding.

The human was driven to make his student understand the idea of sight. He wanted Golep to know what sight was. He noticed, after several attempts at explanation, that his visitor began to respond to his efforts with less enthusiasm and less attention. He finally greeted lessons in the visual arena with a polite and immediate acquiescence that really meant he had given up. Sometimes Peregrino wondered if Golep even believed that sight was real. Some of his comments revealed that he associated Peregrino's concept of sight with the Nefilis' concept of belief. Golep felt that sight was something Peregrino's race *believed in*, not something they engaged in, not something real.

"Someday, you will see," Peregrino had told him. He meant it literally. He wondered if Golep's eyes, buried his whole life under a sliver of skin and a mile of dirt and stone, would even work.

"Yes, someday" Golep had responded. But he had really been thinking, "Niv 'see'?"

The teacher had more luck explaining art and beauty, for the Nefilis had both of them; only they experienced them with their hands instead of their eyes. He told Golep that humans experienced art and beauty with both senses, but mostly with sight.

As his language improved, Golep began to express an insatiable interest in Peregrino's homeland. "Tell me where you are from? Are there more like you?

How did you get here?"

Peregrino explained that he lived outside, in a land on top of the land of the Nefilis. Golep seemed to be offended at the notion of there being a land above his own. He had trouble believing this, just as he had struggled to accept the idea of sight.

"My land is up. In my land there are mountains. I found your land by going into a hole in a mountain, and then getting lost deep inside the mountain. You live inside the earth. The earth is a giant piece of dirt and rock. Here in Invereen, there is earth beneath you, beside you, and above you. Where I am from, there is earth beneath us. But not above us. There is nothing above us. We build houses out of stones piled up, much as your people sometimes do, but we must put tops on our houses, like a hat."

"Why?"

"Because it rains."

"What is rain?"

"It is water that falls down from the sky."

"What is the sky?"

"It is what is above us."

"You said there was nothing above you."

"Yes. I meant nothing hard, like rock or earth. The sky is like nothing. The sky is just air. It is blue."

"That is one of your colors that you see with your eyes?"

"Yes. The sky is blue. And we have plants, like the things you eat from the lake, not the fish but the lake plants. We have plants that grow from the dirt. We eat them. They are green. The plants you eat are probably green, too, but there is no light, so you cannot see it. Or maybe it is white. We have more animals than you have here. Here I have heard of fish, insects, and a couple of small animals, quite rare. When you

speak of them, I think you speak of rats and moles, but I am not sure. We have hundreds of animals, some small like those, and some larger than you."

"Do you eat them?"

"Yes, we cook them on fires and eat them. There is more food there."

"We do not have enough food here. That is why we are dying away. Once there were more of us, but we are dying away now. Every generation, we are fewer. We will be gone someday."

"Then you must come to my land. I can take you there."

Golep was silent.

During the next several conversations, when he began to delve more deeply into the concepts of sky and sun, Peregrino could tell that Golep began to feel that there might indeed be some truth to what he had told him about the plentiful food in his land, the salvation awaiting up above, and perhaps he even believed in the mystery of sight.

"Are you a god?" Golep asked Peregrino one day.

"No, I am a human."

"Are humans gods?"

"Some think they are, but they aren't. We are a race of creatures, like the Nefilis, only smaller. We work and marry and die."

"What happens when you die?"

"We bury our dead. We believe they go to heaven."

"Bury them? In the dirt?"

"Yes."

"So your dead are near us?"

"I suppose they are nearer to you than our living are."

"We place our dead in the hot water, but not where we cook. It is a holy place. You cannot go there. They go away, into the deep."

By this time, Peregrino was no longer a prisoner. His door was left

open. He never left alone, although Golep had taken him around Invereen several times, and many people had touched him, curious yet friendly.

"We are all descendants of Og, a great king," the giant reported. "He is our most famous hero. He brought us here, they say, in a time of great persecution. No one knows where we came from, but they say it was a place of plenty. We had more than we needed. Our teachers say we grew lazy and selfish, and we are being punished. We live in poverty now. There is not enough for us to survive here."

"In our temple, there is something that was his. It is a holy object. It is made of a material that no one has ever found here. It is hard and cold, like flint or quartz, but it is perfectly straight and smooth. We often touch it. It is very cold, and it is not soft. It is long, and low, a rectangle. I will show it to you. We do not know what it is. When I show you, you must not tell anyone. It is holy."

Several days later, the giant took the prisoner to a new chamber and made him touch the holy object. Peregrino knew immediately what it was. It was a bed frame, made of metal.

"Your people came from above, from earth. You are from my home. We have legends of your ancestors. We call them giants. We fear them."

"We came from your land?"

"Yes. This material is called metal. It is made from stones melted in fire. Your people once lived on the earth. They must have moved into the earth sometime long ago. Perhaps they were persecuted by my ancestors."

"But you are small and weak."

"Yes, but we have strong weapons, weapons made of metal. And we have a history of killing, even killing each

other.”

“You spoke of a place called heaven. Where is it?” the giant asked.

“It is up, in the sky.”

“Up, like your people are up?”

“It is far higher, beyond the sky, beyond the stars. It is up.”

“Stars? Is heaven a good place?”

“Yes, a perfect place. Paradise.”

“All good things are up. We have explored for years, looking for more lakes, more food, more Nefilis. We have looked, but we never knew to go up. It grows cold as you rise. There have been more discoveries in going down. Down is where they found our newest cooking lake. Invereen, it is said, began after a band of Nefilis fled the high, cold places. This was long ago. Our explorers go up, and they go straight, but when they do, they are looking for places to go down. We have been taught to go ever lower. That is where we have been taught to search for the good things. We never knew that up was better than down. There is an old saying here, ‘Death waits above.’”

“The place where I was captured was not far from the entrance to my world.”

“The place where you were found is very high. The one who found you is famous now. Many explorers have traveled there after him, even though it is cold. Even now they are searching for your home, but they do not know where to go. There is a great wall there, and they have gone all along the wall in both directions.”

“I came from the top of the wall. I fell from a great height. I must have fallen from the top of that wall. Up. They must go up. They must scale the wall.”

“Yes, I think so. Our explorers do not scale walls often; the walls usually

lead to a dead end, a top. Perhaps this wall leads to somewhere, to a chamber that borders your land. The land with no hat. All good things are up. They must go up.”

On Golep’s next visit to Peregrino’s cave, he sounded very serious.

“I have shared everything you have told me with Disalis, the leader. That was my job. Until today, he had told no one of the secrets you shared. Today, he gathered us together, and he told what we have learned. Your land is our hope of survival; he had to tell them. Now there is a great division in our land. There is great trouble.”

“What trouble? Have I caused it?”

“No. Well, yes. I mean, the things you have told me have caused it. Many do not believe in what you say. It is against many of our greatest teachings. We have always believed that only our God was above us; he inhabits the endless mass of stone that stretches ever up. Now you tell us that the stone ends, that there is a land of tiny people on top of our god and his home. You say you trample our god and bury your dead in the locks of his hair. You talk of things that we have never known. Seeing and colors. These things make no sense. These things are silly; they are magic; they are witchcraft. Many Nefilis think you are a devil, come to lead us astray. You teach that our faith is wrong.”

“I don’t mean to.” Peregrino was afraid. “I merely told you what I know and what I have seen. I am from above. I can take you there.”

“There are those who believe the stories you have told. They are few, though.”

“What about you, Golep?”

“I think you are sincere, but you speak some difficult things. You say there is nothing above your home, but at

the same time there is something above your home called 'sky.' You say we do not see, then you say we see 'black' and that is like seeing nothing. Who can understand these things?"

"I know who can."

"Who?"

"One who has seen them can understand."

"Then show me. Take me to your land."

"I can show you here."

"How?" There was a fearful excitement in the words. "Why haven't you already shown me? You must have known that I doubted your words."

"I have to tell you a secret, and you have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Yes. I promise."

"I can make a fire. I have kept a pouch for making fire with me. I have a bit of fuel and a flint. These are the things one must have to build a fire. A fire makes light. And, in the corner there," he grabbed Golep's hand and pointed it toward a corner of his niche, "I have saved the lake plants I have saved from many meals. It is dry now, and I think it will burn. You must dry a great deal more and bring it."

"You speak strange things."

"I can show you. Fire is not magic. It is real. But for you to see it, I will have to open your eyes. I will have to cut them open."

A sucking sound pierced the darkness. It was Golep expressing great discomfort, or doubt, or both. He was as conflicted as he had ever been. Life had been so much simpler before the stranger came.

An agreement was reached and Golep left. He returned several times over the next few days with armloads of dried seaweed.

"This is dangerous. You are

hoarding food, and we have very little."

"Trust me," replied the human.

After bringing enough seaweed to burn for a significant length of time, the giant came back to the human's cell, this time with Peregrino's knife.

"There are others who want to see your fire," he told the human.

"I will have to cut them," Peregrino replied.

"Yes. They know. You must prove yourself soon. Many are speaking against you to the leader. You must prove that there is light. The leader is neither a skeptic nor a believer. He is merely desperate to find food. If you can prove yourself, they will believe in you. They will believe in your land, the land of many beasts and many meats."

As he spoke, the giant heard the human scurrying about like a rat. He wondered if the human was truly preparing a fire, or if he was merely moving about, carrying out a charade to convince him that it was all real. Then there was a noise. It was small at first, but it grew larger. It crackled and popped. He felt heat and grew afraid. This was powerful magic. He worried that this little imp was indeed a devil.

The giant laid his immense head at the human's feet. The warmth from the direction of the noise was very pleasant. He reached his hand toward the heat. It grew unbearably hot, and he pulled his hand away.

"It is like the hot water, but dry."

"Yes."

Peregrino's eyes adjusted slowly to the tiny light of the fire. He had seen nothing for so long. When he could see, he wanted more light, but he knew his fuel would not last long if he built a large fire. The moss burned fast and he had to feed the fire frequently. He looked all about his cell, practicing the art of vision,

and he looked closely at the giant.

Golep was probably 10 feet from head to foot, perhaps a bit less. He was completely naked, and his skin was whiter than the dead. He was not strong and troll-like. He looked gaunt and scholarly. Nevertheless, he was truly gigantic.

There was no medication, only the knife, still as sharp as a razor, smuggled to his cell by his keeper. It had been kept by Disalis and had not been used. It was made of the same strange material as the Bed of Og. The leader considered it a sign from the deity.

"This will cause you pain," said the human in his tiny voice. "Please do not flail. I am small, and you could kill me accidentally."

The human placed his tiny fingers on the face of his mammoth friend. He felt the concealed orb that was the left eyeball, as big as an orange. He laid the glinting blade against the eyelid and pulled it across. He prayed that he would only cut the skin and not the eyeball.

The giant did not make a sound as the blade crossed his eyelid and exposed bright red blood. He cringed and clenched his jaw. Peregrino made one long cut, and then he went over it again, a bit deeper. There was blood everywhere, but the eye was not truly open. He had not cut deeply enough, and he was afraid to.

Peregrino laid the knife beside the fire and placed the first two fingers of his left hand above the cut in the giant's eyelid and the first two fingers of the other hand below it. He gritted his teeth, glanced at the giant's huge and powerful hands down at his sides and prayed they would not strike him, and he pulled with all his might in opposite directions on the upper and lower halves of the dissected eyelid. With a mammoth effort, the

eyelid tore open, and the giant screamed loudly, more loudly than the human had expected, and long.

The roar of the giant's agony could surely be heard all over Invereen. Other giants would come soon. They already thought he was a witch, and now one of their own lay on his floor writhing in pain, the pungent smell of blood filling the chamber.

Peregrino began to brace his soul for death, much as he had tried to do that morning long ago when he realized he was trapped in the cave.

"Can you see?" he asked, over and over again, the panic evident in his voice. His voice and breath were rapid and shallow. He spoke like a man soon to die. The giant would not answer him. He only moaned. This made the human panic all the more. If only he would answer and say that yes, he could see, he might be able to stop the other giants from killing him. He might tell them all that it is true, all of it; that the human is not a witch or a heretic, and that he knows where there is more food and more light. If only he would answer and say that, yes, he sees.

As the giant rolled about on the floor, alternately clutching and releasing the injured eye, Peregrino caught glimpses of it through the blood and fingers. The eye was white and pale. "He is blind. I have cut him to give him sight, and he is blind," he thought. "This race is blind, all of them. They have lived too long in these caves."

As the human feared, a commotion was raised outside. The giants were nearing, those who wished him ill, and he wondered how they would kill him. Perhaps they would grind his bones. He was sure that Golep would join them after his great pain and colossal disappointment.

When the mob arrived, Peregrino could see them. At least, he could see the two that stood in the doorway. Behind the first two Nefilis, huge white faces faded in and out with the dancing fire, their huge useless eyes bulging just beneath thin curtains of skin.

One of the two Nefilis in the doorway was a defender of the human. Peregrino couldn't understand much of what the two giants were saying, and, in the midst of their heated disagreement, neither of them made facial expressions, making the whole scene eerie and incomprehensible for the human. But their stances and tones of voice indicated to him that one wanted to kill him immediately and the other wanted to talk him out of it.

As the discussion escalated, the white faces behind pushed forward. The room was growing smaller. The giant determined to kill him came into the room and tripped over Golep. He fell in the fire and screamed. The crowd of giants fell back.

"What is this magic, human?" cried the burned giant, in his own language. "You have the hot water on land. It is dry; there is no water. You are a devil."

"It is fire, Ral," came a weak voice from the floor. It was Golep. He spoke in the language of the Nefilis, but he substituted the human word for fire, for the Nefilis had no word for it. "It is what the human has spoken of. It is heat applied to dry things, and it produced more heat. And it makes light." He used the human word for light.

The crowd of giants hushed. Their leader, Ral, spoke up. "You are deluded. You are betraying your god and you people."

"No. I have seen it! That is why I screamed. The light hurt my eye when it first came in."

"You have exposed your eye to be like this monster? You have disfigured yourself to worship his devils!" cried Ral. A shout of dismay came up from the crowd.

"The eye must be exposed to receive light. Light can help us. Light is real. All he said is true! Light lets us understand our land. With light we do not have to touch a wall or make echoes to know where we are. With light we will see the ledges that have taken so many of our children. Light opens our minds to these things, even from far away. We can explore our land better with this tool. I see the light now. It hurts my eye, but it is . . . real. It is real, my friends. There are colors. He speaks the truth, and I can show you. You must believe. I can see. I can see that my blood is one color, and the fire is another. And your face, Ral. I can see your face."

"You will not lead me to his altar, Golep. You will not touch my eye. Perhaps Golep should meet the same fate as this small devil," growled Ral.

The crowd outside the room had grown. Half the town was listening to the debate between Golep and Ral.

"Color. I see colors. We do not have a word for color. You must see color to understand it. Color is real. Light is real. The land of light must be real, too. He has made light here. You must see it. Come touch it if you don't believe. He has made a small light here, and he says there is a giant light in the sky in his land." Golep constantly inserted human words for new concepts like sky and light. This created a great deal of murmuring among the crowd pressing in on the cell.

"We must go there," Golep continued. "The human says there is food there. Much food. He tells us truth. We must believe. It is our only hope!"

“Lies!” cried Ral. “Lies and heresy!”

“Let him speak,” cried a voice from the crowd.

“Let him burn in the lake,” cried another.

The crowd spilled through the door; the defender of the human fell to the ground and was trodden upon. The back of his hand fell against the human’s knife, which lay on the floor. He felt its cold blade, and he grasped it and tucked it behind his back. The angry Nefilis laid hold of both the human and his accursed convert Golep and carried them to the door, toward the boundless darkness outside. Golep was bloody and lethargic as they carried him. Peregrino was in the hands of Ral. As the light faded, Peregrino saw Golep’s sick, bloody eye roll about. He wasn’t sure, but he thought the dull sphere was looking in his direction.

“I see,” the giant said weakly. He was in the clutches of three strong Nefilis. “You told me the truth. They are making a mistake.” He had had sight for only seconds, but these bright seconds were worth more to him than his lifetime in darkness. “We are not blind. We just do not want to open our eyes.”

The light the prisoner had made in his cell had been very small, just enough to bathe a portion of the room with a faint glow. It was quickly gone from the sight of the two captives as they were carried away. Golep’s bloody face, with one eye still welded shut and the other straining to see through the blood and the thickening darkness, expressionless despite the terror he must have felt inside--this was the last thing Peregrino would see. And the last thing the giant would see, and the first, was a jumble of blurs and colors he could not name, senseless expressionism splashed across

the vast black canvas of a civilization trapped in darkness, with one brief and perfect moment frozen in the storm of his new, untamed vision, a moment in which he thought he saw the face of a tiny human looking tenderly at him.

Both heretics were thrown screaming into a holy lake of boiling water. As they died, they smelled the sulfur and felt their skin melt away.

Meanwhile, two believers had joined the trampled defender of the human in his cell. One by one, in solemn ceremony, they each took the knife and cut themselves open. The cut was only slightly painful, and none of them made a sound. But when they pulled their dissected lids apart and the light poured in, they all screamed as loudly and as long as Golep had done. No Nefilis had ever felt pain anything like the agony of new sight after generations of blindness. They screamed in pure agony, but no one came running this time. Everyone was gone to the execution.

As their eyes adjusted to the new phenomenon of light, their screams became moans. The longer they looked at the light, the less it hurt them. The white flame danced, shrinking by the second. They could see blurry shapes and hints of many colors: the gray of the walls, with brown streaks; the black shadows; the white of their bodies; the red blood that covered their faces and hands; the bright silver sheen of the knife; the orange strings of fiber burning at the base of the flame; and the flame’s blue tips, capriciously appearing and disappearing.

The flame grew smaller. The flame went out. Tiny orange embers remained for a second. And then, suddenly, they were gone. These three believers stood in silence.

TATTOOED

by

David Sparenberg

I carry the world
and the biography of history
tattooed into my soul.

I carry images of wars,
the nightmare horrors
of suffering and shame: blood
spilling into my eyes.

I carry the images of love,
the aesthetics of union
and the beauty of two women - one
for the daylight of ascending sun,
one for the night time
of dreaming moon.

I am tattooed
with the birthdays of life and death,
with memorials of children
growing from seed,
with the cycles of many seasons
and all my relations.

I am tattooed
with road signs and footsteps
of red path earthwalks
and the waste of whirlwind
and rattling thorns.

My soul is inscribed
with the constitution
of my immortality,
by this hand of experience
and with a prayer
from the breath of God.

The Myth Of Keji

by Pat Esden

When the Roman legionary arrived, Keji's father sent her away from the campfire and into the tent. But the canvas was not thick and she heard the worst of his message: her father's brother arrested, tried, and condemned to crucifixion. Tomorrow. Outside the walls of Jerusalem.

"For stealing wine?" Her father's voice rose.

"From the garrison." The Roman kept his tone flat. "There is another matter. They have sent a commission, along with payment in advance."

The soft footsteps came across the grass to the tent. Keji slid away from the wall and curled up on her bedroll as if asleep. The tent flap lifted and her mother came in.

Keji held still, breathing slowly. But, even when the entire nomadic camp grew silent she remained awake, staring into the darkness.

Suddenly, the fire outside crackled as if dry wood had been thrown upon it. A hammer struck against anvil and steel. Then, twelve times, there was the hiss of hot iron plunged into water. What was her father doing working this late at night? Why he was still outdoors in the hours when ghosts walked and luck was bad? She shivered and pulled her blankets tight.

#

Clink.

Keji jolted awake. The first streaks of morning light fingered under the walls of the tent. In the rumpled blankets next to her, her mother lay deep in sleep. Her father was not there.

Outside another clink sounded. She scurried from her bedroll and lifted the flap. On the tailboard of their cart, her father was rolling

something up in a lamb's skin, the bundle clanking as he tucked it under his arm. Without a glance at the tent, he strode off in the direction of Jerusalem. She had an idea where he was going. But why was he going alone? Hadn't he always told them that burdens were lighter when carried as a family? She slipped out of the tent and loped after him.

She would follow at a distance, make sure he didn't see her until it was too late for him to send her home. When it came time, she would hold his hand, and he would be glad that she was there.

Keji quickened her pace. In the distance her father's grayed shadow moved across the hilly pastureland, his strides long and swift. She ran to keep him in sight and by the time he passed the olive groves and reached the city wall, her heart pounded in her ears.

Bending over, she paused to catch her breath. Ahead the road bustled with pilgrims and shepherds. Her father joined the flow, a jostling speck fading through the city's gate. As he vanished, Keji's barely-settled heart began to race again. She hurried down the hill, elbowed her way into the throng, and went under the archway and into Jerusalem. Entering the city felt like walking into a narrow valley filled with shadows, echoes and stenches. The buildings hemmed her in. People shoved. Vendors shouted. Market stalls cramped the street. Lambs screamed. Oxen bellowed. The smell of blood and entrails stole her breath.

Keji scanned the street for her father. Where was he? She needed something to stand on so she could see above the crowd. Beside her was a stall filled with crates of chickens. She stepped into it and glanced around.

Skirts rustled behind her. She turned. A

pain stung her cheek. "Steal from me, thieving piss-rat, and I'll kill you." The woman drew back her arm to slap again.

Keji ducked under the woman's arm, close enough to smell sweat and see the woman's coin purse. If she had wanted to, she could have snagged the purse. But today, she was not here for coin.

With the woman's curses still ringing in her ears, Keji crisscrossed the market. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed her father disappearing into an alleyway and dashed after him.

Narrow and dark, the slippery alley reeked of urine. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness and by the time they did she found herself coming out into the bright light of a wide street.

She let out her breath, this street she recognized. Her mother had brought her here last week, showed her where the temple was, where to sit and how to catch the attention of the pilgrims by seeding her beggar's plate with a coin or two.

Today, however, there was no room along the street or up on the square for even the smallest of beggars to sit. She had never seen such a mob. And everyone pushed in the same direction--the direction she was sure her father had gone, toward the far side of the city, the other gate and the hillock beyond. To the place her mother had called the Hill of Skulls. Her stomach tensed and her mind swirled as she thought about crucifixion. Last night when the Roman legionary had come to their camp, she had heard only snatches of the conversation. It had never occurred to her that her uncle's crime had been so great that this many people would come to see him die. Images of bodies she had seen on posts outside the walls of other cities flooded her mind. She could hear the flies, taste the odor of rotted flesh, but she could not recall that anyone had mentioned what those people's crimes had been. She bit her lip, swallowing

back a raw fear. Was no one safe?

Pushing her way into the mob, she let them sweep her up the street: horses, donkeys, priests and prostitutes, a man touching her hair. "Want to earn a coin?" She twisted away from him. Women laughed. How could they drink and laugh? The perfume of myrrh and aloe. Sweet-smelling incense. Keji passed through the archway and beyond the wall, up the hill. When the crowd stopped, she wove between their bodies until she stood with nothing between her and the Roman soldiers that held back the crowd. Only two cart lengths away, up on the flat top of the hillock, three crosses lay propped on mounds of sand, at an angle that elevated the criminal's heads. Despite the dizzying heat, she felt chilled and longed for the warmth of her father's hand.

That was when she spotted him. Her father stood beyond the line of Roman soldiers, by the farthest cross, looking down at her uncle. Her uncle lay on his back, his arms bound to the cross member, his legs falling to one side. Whip marks striped his chest. Even at this distance she could detect the sourness of his sweat, see his eyes--dead drunk. Her father often said he was a stupid thief, stupid when he was drinking. Who steals wine from a Roman garrison when it is free for the asking in your brother's tent?

She clenched her jaw. People from the Dom tribe, like her uncle, like her, needed to stay invisible, to blend in. If only her uncle had . . . and now the Romans knew her father's name and where they camped. After a moment her uncle's lips began to move, but she could not hear him over the din of the crowd. She had to get closer. Skirting the edge of the crowd, she crept past a soldier and knelt by a pile of stones.

Her uncle's voice was a ragged wheeze, "I'm sorry, brother, for what they have made you do. It's not right."

Her father crouched and set his bundle on the ground. "They are the sharpest things

I've ever forged." His voice faltered, dark lines of sweat streaked his tunic. The spikes clanked as he unrolled them from the lambskin.

Keji's body went numb, her eyes unable to turn away from the glint of the spikes. She wished she had never come. She wanted to run. She couldn't move.

The broad shadow of a Roman soldier darkened her father. "Who better to make the nails for a thief than a filthy Dom-smith? Maybe you should hammer them as well," the Roman said loud enough for everyone to hear.

A cheer rose from the crowd.

Her father's shoulders tightened. "I'd die before I'd crucify . . ."

Pushing her father aside, the Roman picked up a spike and the hammer. Before Keji could look away, the hammer rang out, echoing like a bell, like a thunder clap. Her uncle's arm spasmed. She squeezed her eyes shut. Another clang. A grinding crunch. A moan. Her uncle's rasping voice.

"You're right brother, sharp as knives."

Keji opened her eyes.

Her uncle's head lolled to one side, his eyes open, staring. Her father dropped to his knees and bent over, his head touching the ground, his shoulders heaving.

The Roman turned toward the mob, his teeth showing as he grinned. The mob hissed at him and threw stones.

Keji trembled as a cold realization hit her. She followed the eyes of the crowd--they were not here to see her uncle. He was like seed coin in a beggar's plate; something designed by the Romans to garner the mob's attention before the real show began. In truth, it was the man lashed to the middle cross that had drawn the mob.

She studied him: his eyes focused on the sky, his lips moving as if in prayer. He turned his face toward her—

And a blaze of light consumed her. Then, the two of them stood on a hillock above a green pasture watching her mother dance in the shade of an olive tree while her father slept, and her uncle told stories to a crowd of children.

Keji looked away, but she could still feel the warmth of the light and the serenity of the place he had shown her. A raw ache filled her chest—she was sure that he was guilty of nothing.

Suddenly she was running, sidestepping the soldier. "Keji!" Her father struggled to rise from his knees.

A soldier lunged, his fingers snatched her arm. She twisted free and was on the ground, grabbing the spikes. Her hands were too small, the spikes heavy. How many did she have? Not all of them. She was on her feet. She bolted, in front of the crosses. The crowd laughed. A Roman cursed. She sprinted into the crowd. They closed in, then fanned out. Behind her, heavy footfalls sounded. Her lungs burned. Her sides ached . . .

She moved fast, past a fortune-teller, baskets of dates, smoke, roasting meat, under the archway into Jerusalem. An alley, a deserted street, a wall—

"Got you." A man snagged her tunic and spun her around. The legionary was a large man, almost as big as her father. His face flushed and his forehead shone with sweat. Holding the spikes behind her, Keji jerked free from him and backed against the wall.

His brows drew together as he studied her.

Behind her back, Keji worked her hands, pushing the spikes into the cracked mortar of the wall--three of them were all she had managed to take.

The legionary held out his hand, his palms smooth, his destiny line short. "The nails."



She recognized his voice. He was the legionary that had come to their camp last night. And now that she saw his face she remembered him from other visits, in other places. Many times he had come, and always he had ridden the same gelding: a sweet animal, gentled by a man capable of love. As her mother had taught her, Keji widened her

eyes: the sad beggar's look. "I don't have them."

His face didn't soften. "I know that man was your uncle, that your father was forced to smith the nails--didn't you learn anything from that? Thievery . . ." One of his hands waved up toward the crosses on the hill.

"It is your crime as well." His other hand crushed her shoulder. "Give me the nails. I'll say you dropped them."

Her legs trembled. "I don't have them." She hesitated and looked into his eyes. "I swallowed them."

He exhaled in a huff and yanked her forward. "That's impossible."

She brought her hands out from behind her back and put them on her stomach. "They were not so large and the pain is no worse than hunger."

She winced.

He let go of her.

"Stupid girl." His face paled, and then he glared at her. "Stay here. If you're telling the truth this is a better place to die than up there. If you're lying . . ."

She dropped to her knees, buried her face in her hands and dry heaved.

The legionary's steps echoed against the cobbles and once they had faded, she got onto all fours. With a sharp rock she scratched a symbol at the base of the wall. No Roman would understand the markings, but if her father saw the marks they would tell him she had gone back to camp. Then, after glancing at the spikes, she got to her feet and took off running.

##

The next morning, Keji, her family, her father's anvil and iron and all her tribe--their tents and horses, every song, every word, every shadow, each bright remnant--was gone from Jerusalem. They crossed the hills, and in two days' time they blended in with another tribe: wagons heavy with bears, tents and dogs--wandering from India toward Rome.

At twilight, as the moon rose and the sparks of the campfire flew into the darkness, with the scent of roasting scallions and frying pork, her father asked Keji to tell her story to the gathered tribes. And she did, word for word. But when she came to the

part about the man on the cross next to her uncle, she hesitated. How could she explain what she had seen when his eyes met hers? How it felt? How the feeling still burned inside of her, hot and restless like an ember waiting to be fanned to life? Keji stared into the campfire, her voice ghosting over the crackle of the flames.

"He looked at me and a blazing light consumed me, inside and without as well. An instant later, he and I stood on a hillock overlooking a green pasture--a wonderful, horrible place.

"Wonderful because it was all things good, horrible because the man who could have shown me the road to that place is dead, crucified." Her chest tightened with an ache so powerful she couldn't speak.

A low wind stirred the fire, smoke swirling toward the town they had camped outside of. From the darkness came the splash of sheep crossing a nearby stream. Keji looked at the faces around the fire, black eyes reflecting flame. One of the elders rose to his feet and glared at Keji's father. "I have sympathy for your family: for what the Roman's forced you to do and for your brother's death. But, encouraging a child to believe in something that was nothing more than a mirage brought on by too much heat and sun, is shameful."

Keji's hands fisted. "It was real! I smelled the olives and the moist grass. I heard my uncle telling stories and the rhythm of my father's breath while he slept. Felt the quiver of the earth as my mother danced upon it!"

Her father crouched beside her, his eyes challenging the elder. "My daughter tells the truth. The light bathed me as well. It brought me to my knees. I saw the place she speaks of. It is real, offered to us by a man, a savior, and then taken away, as was my brother, by the spikes I forged."

Keji embraced her father and they held each other. The flash of firelight. The drone

of the tribe beyond the warmth of their arms.

"Hush," her father whispered. "Go to the tent. I'll finish your story."

Keji sat back. Lack of sleep lined her father's eyes. "No, I need to tell it." She took a breath, and then told about stealing the spikes and when she came to the part about how she outwitted the legionary, everyone laughed. Keji had no desire to laugh. As soon as the questions turned from her to her father, she stole away to her family's tent and lay on her bedroll, listening to the murmurs of the tribes as she tried to fall asleep. But even when the entire camp grew silent she remained awake, staring into the darkness, her mind flooded with the memory of the green pasture. In the hushed darkness of the tent that green place felt very close. She could feel it inside of her. But how could that be? Then again, why not, the clang of the hammer hitting a spike and her uncle's moans lived inside of her. If only he hadn't stolen that wine—

In a chill of sudden realization, the words the legionary had spoken returned to Keji. It is your crime as well. Like her uncle, she too was a thief, even if at the time stealing the spikes had seemed like the right thing to do. The clang of hammer and spike rang through her body. Keji couldn't swallow. She couldn't breathe. She bolted from her blanket roll and hurried from the tent—into the moonlight, stumbling through the dark pasture land, gasping for breath.

The bank of the stream was slick. She waded in, splashing water on her face and arms. Perhaps the coolness would ease her fevered mind. Keji knelt, the water encircling her. She closed her eyes, trying to rid herself of the thoughts. If only she knew where that green pasture was, her family could go there, ease all their burdens. She bowed her head. Then, though her eyes remained shut, a blazing light vanquished the night's darkness.

On her shoulder, she felt a touch of a

hand and a hand cupped her chin, raising her face. "Open your eyes; the way to the green pasture is before you," a soft voice said.

In front of her, standing in the stream, was the man who had been crucified with her uncle. He reached out and helped her to her feet. As she had known that the green pasture was not a mirage, she knew now that this man was not a ghost. She let her eyes meet his—

And they stood in the green pasture along with her family and her tribe and many others as well. He held her hand. Her heart slowed. And a feeling of goodness and serenity filled her. His voice was the light. "The road to here is not easy. On either side there are traps to lure you from righteousness. Look neither left nor right. The way is before you. You are forgiven. Now go and sin no more," he said.

And as quickly as it had come, the light vanished and she stood alone in the stream, the cool water rippling around her legs. She did not want to move. She wanted to feel like this forever: totally at peace, utterly clean. For a long moment she could hardly breathe, and then her heart quickened and began to soar with the desire to tell everyone what had happened. She waded out of the stream and ran back toward camp. But she slowed when she saw her mother waiting, hands folded across her chest.

"A wonderful thing has happened. I saw the man who was crucified in Jerusalem at the river." She spoke before Mother could stop her.

Mother's eyes narrowed. "Watching your uncle crucified has taken your wits, as it did to your father. It's dangerous to be out alone this time of night. And I have no need to hear a tale about an imaginary ghost."

"Not a ghost: a man, risen from the grave."

Mother pointed to the tent. "Inside, now. Sleep will free you of this delusion."

"I don't wish to be free of him!"

“Hush, do you wish to wake your father when he hasn’t slept in days?”

Keji bit her tongue. She went into the tent and curled up on her bedroll. She’d wait for Father to awake.

#

“Keji,” her mother’s voice brought her from her sleep. Gray light filled the tent. “I didn’t realize you were still asleep. Hurry. The other children are almost ready to leave.”

Half awake, Keji struggled to separate sleep from the reality of what had happened at the stream. She had to make her mother believe her. “I wasn’t lying,” she said.

Mother’s jaw tensed as she set a tunic and a beggar’s plate beside Keji’s bedroll.

A sour taste rose from Keji’s stomach. “I don’t want to. I can’t beg! He said I was forgiven. Thieving from people--”

Mother’s hands snapped to her hips. “Enough of this. I will not tolerate you using your fantasy as an excuse for not doing your share. I will not stand for you insulting our tribe’s ways. There is a difference between thievery and cleverness. When a woman drops coins in your plate because you look sad and poor, who is smarter? Who is hurt? She thinks she has done a good deed. No one is harmed. When a merchant leaves a basket of dates or a purse unattended we do him a favor—teach him vigilance before a thief steals all his dates or coins.”

Mother wrapped her arms around Keji, kissing her hair. “Your father’s come back to his senses. Now forget Jerusalem. Be my good girl again. Take your plate and join the other children.” Mother trembled as she

clutched Keji tight, then she released her and hurried from the tent. Keji pulled on her tunic. No one, not even Mother, could convince her that she had imagined the risen man and the green pasture. He had said she was forgiven and at the time she thought he had meant forgiven for more than just stealing the Roman’s spikes. She had felt cleansed. But her mother had never lied to her. Her mother loved her. Maybe she had misunderstood what the man meant about wrong deeds and forgiveness. It didn’t feel like she had, but maybe . . .

Grabbing the beggar’s plate, Keji went outside. The other children were at the burnt-out campfire dirtying themselves with ashes, making sure they looked neglected.

On the edge of the road, her father talked to a pair of Romans while her mother unrolled bundles of knives for them to look at. Until this moment, it hadn’t occurred to Keji that without her uncle’s help, Mother now would have to stay in camp to help Father instead of taking the children into town.

Keji set her beggar’s plate on the ground and scooped up a handful of ash. Her stomach churned. She rubbed the ash the length of both arms, then on her face. Though cool, the ash prickled and heated as it touched her skin. She bent to pick up her beggar’s plate. But as her fingers touched the hard clay, she heard the dull clink of nonexistent seed coins and she saw other places, other times, other beggars she had sat beside: a man with no legs, a child whose eyes had been replaced by lash marks—and the children of her tribe, healthy beneath their rags.



She pulled her fingers back from the plate and as she did a certain thought filled her: the beggar's plate was not of the same earth as the green pasture, nor was it part of the road that led there. For a moment, Keji stood motionless, and then she knew what she had to do. She brought her bare heel down on the plate. With a loud crack it shattered.

Her mother's eyes went to the broken

plate, so did those of the Romans, her father, all the children. But their eyes did not linger there; they widened and rose, staring at Keji's arms and face. Keji felt flushed. Her skin itched. She looked at her arms to see why everyone stared at them. Where the ash had dirtied her skin, welts erupted, raw and oozing as raised as whip marks. And as they spread, a burning pain enveloped her entire body.

She ran for the stream. Behind her footfalls echoed. The hardness of the earth. Her skin burning. The coolness as she fell to her knees in the water, then went under it.

The man had not said the road to the green pasture would be easy. No matter what her mother said, the falseness of the ash was not right. She held her breath, staying under until her lungs could wait no longer. Then, she rose from the water, her arms and face clean and cool. No trace of blister or even redness.

He had said the way was before her.

In front of her a crowd gathered: shepherds, Romans, other travelers, members of other tribes and her tribe.

The rising sun brushed against her shoulders. She waded through the water toward them.

They splashed into the stream, encircling her. Hands touching her arms. Fingers brushing her face. Frenzied murmurs. Her father pushed out from the crowd. He embraced Keji, his cheek damp against hers. He released her and faced the crowd. "Quiet. Let her speak!"

Keji started to take a deep breath, but it caught in her throat. Where was Mother? She glanced through the crowd, then beyond.

Mother stood on the top of the stream bank, her hands limp at her sides. Their eyes met.

Keji smiled and beckoned for Mother to

join them.

Her mother turned her back, and walked away.

Emptiness filled Keji. Her legs trembled.

Father's hand gripped hers. "Let her be," he whispered. And the crowd hushed.

Keji's eyes went from the empty stream bank to the people gathered in front of her. She swallowed back the sadness and let words rise up from the green place inside of her. "Do you think you have seen a miracle?" She held out her arms as evidence. "What your eyes see is real, but this is only the surface. Let me tell you a story about twelve spikes, about my uncle and the man I saw crucified in Jerusalem and about a road to a place that is green and wonderful. Let me tell you about wrong deeds and forgiveness . . ."

#

Over the years, in market places that reminded Keji of Jerusalem, in front of great temples, in wagons and on ships, when she traveled alone or with those of her tribe, Keji heard her own story, heard it transformed into song and myth, twisted and convoluted depending on the desires of the storyteller. But when she told the story, it was always the same: about a girl who would have stolen all the spikes if her hands had been large enough, about a green pasture and of a crucified man who forgave her for her crimes.

The Little Brown Bottle

From The Letters and Papers of Snow White

by
M. Tatham

I slip out the back door of the chateau into the orchard. The path is strewn with leaves, and the apples smell delicious.

My maid is waiting beneath a tree. She slips a basket, filled with the ripest of the fruit, over my arm and smiles. I return her smile. At last I am going—at last everything shall be made right with Stepmother.

Outside the orchard wall, Henri's valet is waiting to help me into the carriage. He smiles and winks like a conspirator.

You know me as Snow White, my name is Elise. Today the complexion that earned me my sobriquet is flushed with excitement.

I am acting against Henri's wishes. He still fears what my Stepmother might do. But at the moment that he is riding into the City of Chamois, I am departing for her home in Anjunesse. She is no longer young, and I must seize what might be my last opportunity.

The postilion, mounted on one of four white horses that would pull the carriage, inclines his head to me. The valet opens the carriage door and helped me climb the step-stair.

I settle into the snug conveyance. A lark flits past the window. The sun glistens on a world of scarlet and gold. My hope is now certainty that, by God's good grace, Stepmother and I shall reconcile.

I set the basket on the floorboards. A

horsewhip stings the air and the carriage jolts as the horses start off. I murmur a prayer.

The carriage careens as the horses plunge under the postilion's urging. Wind pours through the open windows and braces me. It seems to approve of my good intentions.

Branches heavy with leaves of bronze fly past; shadows sweep over me; I lay my hand on my purse, beside me on the upholstered bench, and feel the edges of my Psalter.

We stop at a tavern where I alight briefly for breakfast, then hasten on.

At the signpost for Anjunesse, a Traveler is waiting. The postilion hurries the carriage by him. I look back and notice the Traveler's dark, plumed hat. He turns to watch the carriage, which has left him in the dust.

The horses again find their pace. The sun is climbing, and I turn from the glare of the window to find the Traveler seated opposite me, his hat shadowing his eyes.

I stammer, "How did you?—Who let you?" then begin to rap on the wall behind me.

The postilion doesn't hear. I stare at the Traveler.

"I must come with you, Elise," the Traveler says.

"Who are you?! And why do you speak

as though we're acquainted?!"

"We are acquainted."

"Show your face!"

With a walking stick he tips his hat-brim back, revealing a long pale countenance, bold eyes, graying hair, and a black mustache and goatee. One of his eyes is slightly lower than the other, a lack of symmetry that is disturbing.

"Who are you?" I murmur.

"Death."

I lean into the corner. "You're mad!"

He settles his hands atop his walking stick and smiles.

A shudder convulses me. "Whoever you are, secure the postilion's attention! You have no business with me!"

"At some point I have business with everyone—even the fairest."

I lean forward. "Where did you hear that phrase?"

"It is common parlance now that your story is known." He tilts his head. "But I do know you. One might say, well. Time after time, she sent me to you, though I was strangely unsuccessful. You must have a special star shining upon your life."

I bite my lip. "Why have you come to me now . . .?"

"It is time for me to take your Stepmother. And you, shall help me."

"I go to offer her forgiveness—you and I want different things."

"Ah!"

He gazes out the window while I steal glances to study him. The carriage climbs a lane between chestnut trees. I rest a hand on my purse in which my Psalter is, and he notices this.

"The Word of Life," he says, his eyes darkening. "You shall find me in those pages. There is much written about me there."

"You are the last enemy the Lord shall destroy."

I quake at my own temerity. Is it wise to

dispute with one who has silenced so many?

He answers, "For a time I still reign over the affairs of men."

I have no answer for this, and turn my gaze to the city on the hill, Anjunesse with its orchards and groves. Anjunesse, the place where I was unhappy. I can just make out the roof of the palace and notice that some tiles were missing.

Death's voice grates. "Your Stepmother is going to die. You can help her, Elise, by providing a gentler . . . means."

From a pocket he takes a small brown bottle and holds it between a thumb and forefinger. "A few drops, and she will simply go to sleep forever."

I rap on the wall sharply.

The postilion does not hear. His orders are to hurry, and he is whipping the horses up a gravel incline toward the city gates.

The basket of apples slides, and an apple rolls out at Death's feet.

He picks it up and tosses it, up and down, up and down. "Remember what she did to you?" He holds it out to me. "You can have both mercy and revenge."

The plume on his hat flutters, and my curls blow about my face. I begin to entertain his terrible suggestion, and am startled when bells peal.

"You must get down at the gates!" I say in a voice that quivers.

"You haven't yet asked what the alternative is."

I cannot bring myself to ask.

"A lingering death from cancer of the bowels." He smoothed his goatee. "Your choice is clear."

I begin to weep, and am grateful for the dimness of the street.

The postilion enters the palace courtyard and reins in at the doors. The paint on the coat of arms is peeling, and there are no longer guards posted. Flanking the doors are potted roses that perfume the air with an innocent scent.

I clutch my purse and stare at my
slipper feet, side by side on the dusty
floorboards.

Death exits the carriage.

The postilion dismounts and approaches.
He must not be able to see Death, for he
looks puzzled when he puts a hand to the
door and finds it open a crack.

He offers me a hand. Behind him,
Death waits with the small brown bottle.

I sink back on the bench and tighten my
shawl around me. If only I'd listened to
Henri!

The postilion smiles. "Majesty . . . ?"

"I've changed my mind—I'm going
home."

I hear him mutter as he resumes his seat
in the saddle. I turn to Death.

"Take Stepmother if you must, but
without my help!"

The carriage wheels about, and I see
Death staring after it.

We descend the stony road and entered
the lane between the chestnuts. A flock of
starlings explodes out of the branches and
startles me.

I go back to musing. Soon Stepmother
will die, an old woman whose nurses
unfailingly desert her. She has probably
been thumping her cane on the floor for an
hour, and there has been no one to answer
but her elderly butler and lady's maid. I
didn't even say hello . . . And really, she
can't be a threat . . . What will her death be
like . . . ?

I conclude that I must see her as
planned, and make peace. Convince her of
Christ's forgiveness by my own. I can
dispatch a courier to Henri, and go home
tomorrow morning.

The postilion grunts when I give the
order to turn back to Anjunesse. Again the
carriage climbs. I select an apple and take a
bite. Sweet juice runs down my wrist into
my sleeve. I smile, hope again stirring

within me.

For the second time, the postilion greets
the sentries in the name of my Stepmother
the Duchess. For the second time, we pass
into the place where I was so unhappy.

Stepmother's butler, Claude, opens the
door and draws me inside, fussing
affectionately over me. We embrace, then he
leads me upstairs at a pace which tries my
patience.

My Stepmother, he stops on the stairs to
tell me, now resides in a few rooms on the
top floor.

Again we climb. On each landing, I
notice dust on the portraits, and covers on the
mirrors.

Just as I thought, Stepmother is
thumping her cane.

The sound is painful. The vision of her
enthroned on a wicker boudoir chair, the
smell of the room—her medicines,
commode, and person—are overwhelming.
Age has its scent, sometimes sweet,
sometimes dreadful.

Stepmother smiles, but seeing my
glance of pity, adopts a demeanor of dignity.

"Elise," she says and offers her face for
my kiss.

As I kiss her I think, for the thousandth
time, that she is really much fairer than I. If
we had been beauties of the same epoch, she
would have outshone me.

"The drops your physician left for me
are on the vanity table," she says.

I gape.

"I like him," she continues. "Tell him
he may attend me!"

A presentiment chills me. "Who . . . ?"

"The physician you sent—the handsome
gentleman in the elegant hat. He left only
moments ago. He wrote a note that tells how
to administer the drops."

On the vanity table, near the small
brown bottle, I find the note. My fingers
tremble as I unfold it.

Two drops in her tea at bedtime,
Majesty. Consider it a mercy. D.

With my back to Stepmother I crumple
this and, pretending to stir the fire, drop it to
the grate.

My glance flies back to the bottle.
“Perhaps you’re feeling well enough to do
without this? If you can’t sleep, I can read to
you. If your head hurts, I can rub your
temples.”

She ignores this. “He makes the perfect
physician. Without any arrogance, he yet has
just the right air of authority to promote
confidence in him.”

“He is an impostor, Stepmother. I did
not send him.”

She reddens. “What game are you
playing?! He said that he knows you. That
you traveled together to Anjunesse, and
spoke of my health. Surely you remember!”

I go to a chair beside her. “I must tell
you something that will sound fantastic—”

“Give me the medicine at once! I know
you—you’re afraid it will do me some good!
What did he say in his note? Am I to take
the drops in something to drink?”

I retrieve the bottle and stand not saying
a word.

Claude raps on the door, then totters to
the table beside Stepmother with her tea and
toast.

“You see!” Stepmother’s shrunken
frame seems to expand with her sense of
triumph. “The tea is here—is it not? I am
meant to take the medicine! If you care so
little about me, Claude shall give it to me.
Where is the note?”

I grip the bottle and try to think. “No, I
shall give it to you . . .”

As Claude attempts to tuck a napkin
under Stepmother’s chin and she pushes his
hand aside, I notice her ragged fingernails.
The sight saddens me.

“Stepmother, doesn’t your nurse trim your
nails?”

“Nurse? She has left me.”

She nibbles her toast as Claude, with an
injured air, closes the door behind him. I sit
very still with the bottle in my lap.

With her spoon, Stepmother taps her
teacup.

“Do as the physician said! Why are you
frightened? Do you fear I shall outlive
you?”

“Stepmother, please! Don’t speak such
utter nonsense!”

Crumbs drop to her bodice. Tears start
into my eyes. Could this be she who planned
my demise again and again? Her murderous
assaults seem dream-like—the nightmares of
childhood only.

She taps the cup once more. I look up
startled, and pretend to doctor her tea.

She watches carefully. “You are sly, my
darling.”

“Why won’t you believe, that I know
him to be an impostor you shouldn’t trust?
Why won’t you trust me?”

“I would rather trust him.”

“Ah, yes!—than the child you so
disliked!”

I remember Henri’s warnings. I think of
him with longing and despair. I slip the
bottle into my pocket.

Stepmother’s face grows crimson. I
worry that she will die of apoplexy. The
golden balls of the clock on the mantelpiece
swing and swing, as I ransack my thoughts
for some solution.

Finding none, I determine to tell the
truth however absurd it sounds.

“Stepmother, the physician who
attended you was . . . Death.”

She laughs and spits a crumb. “A fairy
tale!” Her mouth works furiously. “Give me
those drops—I shall have them!”

I jump up. My purse drops at my feet,
and the Psalter tumbles out with the pages
open.

She glances at it. “So this is why
you’ve come! To convert me. But you
realize, don’t you, that I despise all that! I

despise you as well, my angel! You, with your beautiful face with its pretense of innocence!”

“Stepmother!” I wail as I fall at her knees. “Stepmother . . .” I whisper.

For a moment she lays a hand on my hair, then pushes me away. “Get up from that ridiculous posture!”

I gather my purse and Psalter, and stand, feeling in my pocket the few ounces of deadly weight.

“Won’t you at least listen about Jesus?” I ask. “As life is so uncertain?”

“I’ve heard it all—it is not for me.”

I kneel beside her chair. “Then, at least allow me to stay the night and make sure you’re all right. I’ve badly disturbed you.”

“Yes, you have—and you’ve spoiled my supper! Do whatever you like about staying! I want those drops . . .”

These last words are spoken hesitantly, with a question in her eyes.

“But shall not have them!” I cry.

As she watches, objecting and frantic, I step to the fireplace, uncork the bottle, and tip the contents to the flames, a handkerchief over my mouth.

“You imp!” she cries with admiration.

I am laughing. I feel very light. Everything has fallen back into its usual safe place, even her reproaches.

I hear her saying, “. . . You offered to rub my temples . . .” and turn back to her with joy.

“I have a question,” I say.

“Ask it!”

“It is of a personal nature.”

“Oh, Elise!” She gestures toward the furnishings of her room. “I am beyond fastidiousness.”

“Have you noticed blood in your stool?”

She looks surprised, then smiles. “No. And, I am like clockwork. I may outlive you.”

The carriage is hurrying me toward

home. It rocks on the stretch of road near the tavern. The late afternoon is glorious, the trees lit like candles, and the sky cloudless.

The basket at my feet is empty.

Stepmother was pleased with the apples. She said that her lady’s maid—who is half-blind and palsied!—shall make a tart from them. I pray there won’t be a kitchen fire!

My purse sits on the bench beside me. It too is empty of all but trifles, for Stepmother asked me to leave my Psalter in case she wishes to amuse herself within its pages.

At the signpost for Chamois, a Traveler is waiting. The postilion takes the carriage by him. I look back and see his hat. He turns to watch the carriage.

The horses again find their pace. Dusk is reaching slender arms of shadow. I turn from the window and find the Traveler opposite me, his hat-brim tipped back to show his long, asymmetrical face.

I say nothing. I am an imp! Perhaps I will snatch his walking stick and rap him soundly. I smile at the thought.

“You decided against the drops?” he says.

I nod.

“You shall have your revenge in her lingering demise.”

“No, not really.”

He raises his dark eyebrows. “You are certain?”

“Yes.” I look out at the scenes rushing by. “I have chosen life. And prayed.”

He proffers his walking stick and tries to smile. “I suppose you will want to rap for the postilion?”

I turn back to him to say that won’t be necessary, but he is gone. It feels as though he has never been there, though I knew he has. I tremble all over, even my curls tremble. A crimson leaf flew in through the window and rests at my feet.

The carriage sweeps into the chateau

courtyard, braking at the front steps. Henri is waiting for me. He opens the carriage door and lifts me down into his arms, kissing me. That same kiss once wakened me from a death-like slumber.

He studies me in the light from the lantern, and I tilt my head and grin. We begin to laugh, then race the steps two at a time, arm in arm.

THE END

Soccer Mom

by

Kate Reilly

She laces cleats,
serves oranges,
their skin forgotten
clocks that never got
around to change
after midnight,
and watches the slipper
shatter before the carriage.
Unbelievably, the pumpkin
returns undefeated.

The Matter of Peloponessus by
Joe R. Christopher

"Success in Circuit Lies"

Apollo knew that odes were rhetoric,
polished with love for form, for verbs and
nouns, for ev'ry lovely adjective besides,
 and all the tonal glitz in Greek;
he struck his lyre and sang of Daphne fair,
her olive skin, her laughing mouth, her eyes,
her youthful breasts, her walk with natural
sway-- all this he praised as eros' cause;
desire last not, and so he changed his tone,
lamenting love will pass, attraction gone,
as if the woman's wooden, flesh is barked--
 as if she were no more than tree;
no more to him, of course he meant to say,
for eros catches ev'ry god betimes,
but gods (he sang) get bored through
centuries, and eros casts its net anew.

Daphne's Lament

Iieee! all male gods are rapists!
Women's "no" they take as gaming,
feminine prevarication!
 "No, Apollo, no!" I'm crying;
still he's grasping, sure I want him,
sure I never could refuse him.
Pray'r is all I have 'gainst forcing!—
pray'r that I may somehow 'scape him!—
tears are all I have 'gainst vi'lence!—
tears and screams and finger clawing!—
as I struggle, grows his anger!—
death is better! far, far better!
Suddenly my arms are branches,
suddenly, my fingers leafing,
my toes are rooting, my body trunking.
Better loss of reason quickly,
better moving but to breezes,
than Apollo's brutal raping . . .

Apollo and Daphne

After the epigram by Maffeo Barberini

The man whose breast with passion heaves
Will wrest dead branches and dry leaves.

Achilles Nearing the Walls of Troy

by

Berrien Henderson

The cloud-wrined sky is my tent.
My hearth, the battleground,
Plains soaked in Helios' golden rays.
The all-knowing gods have their ambrosia--
Mine I call the copper taste of war, delicacy indeed.

Slay the choicest ram.
Seal both oaths and covenants
With Bacchus' dark wines.
As for me, I shall offer more sprinklings,
Libations of Trojan blood and the thigh pieces
Of my enemies for the dogs.

Armor and spear, sword and shield,
Glancing in the sunlight.
Scents of sweat and metal greet me.

"I smell your fear, Trojan cubs!"
"You've *my* armor, Hector,
And I am *not* Patroclus.
Remember whom you meet today!"

Come and face me, enemies . . . kindred.
Let us pray strange prayers together
In the savage tongue of war
While Zeus bears the scales of our fates.

But consider--I have forgotten more of war
Than most warriors know, and I learn a new verse
In another day's clangor on the plains.

And today, I seek song.

Tell the women to offer lamentations.
Go and ready the poets,
For Ares approaches with a bronze smile.

This I vow,
To care fame with each thrust of Pelian ash.
All I know of life lies in a well-forged blade.
And like a babe fresh from its mother's womb,
The child blood-soaked and choking for breath,
So, too, am I born--reborn--each battle
And swaddled in the gleaming gear of Hephaestus,
Cunning with fire and hammer and anvil.

The dust of combat my choke others,
But to me--incense for dark-stalking Ares.

I see Trojans arraying themselves upon Ilium's walls
And readying their arrows for me.
Let them cast the feathered shafts,
So much chaff, I say.
Greet me as one, or together,
So long as spear and sword meet--
Wrath to wrath, will to will.

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Glimmer Man

by

David Sparenberg

I am from between the hills,
where the valleys slope and dip.

I am from the gray mist made:
body of man, clothes of a traveler.

I am from beyond the river,
to the west of the west of here.

From a cloud to the right of sorrow,
from a beam to the left of joy;

where a tear is long and slow in falling

and a kiss is stronger still.

Behold me now, for I am here;
behold me not, for I am gone,

between the dreams of time and space
to a place in a knot of thread.

I am the glimmer man, in twilight walking,
telling tales of the lives of the dead.

Behold me now, now that I am;
behold me not, beyond life's bend

JA Howe returns with another lively tale.
This one has been previously published by the
fanzine at www.scifantastic.com.

He Who Sang the Song

by JA Howe

They were at it again. Two of the most respected bards in the College were at story warring, and with a vengeance. The Guild's Master sighed vehemently.

The reason for his latest trauma was a five-foot-eight muscular swordsman, herald to Lord Montague of the Montagues of Black Lake. Montague - sometimes spoken of as "The Mountain" in whispers of awe - happened to be the fiancée of the daughter of Lord Quince who lived between Lockheaver Lake and Foin Mountains. His herald, Yeoman Wick of White Mountains, was small and annoying. However, he'd been heralding for so long that he had gotten the annoying heralds' habit of not thinking of ever toning it down a bit. It reminded the Guildsmaster of why he was glad that the Herald's Hall was on the other side of the field from the Bards' Hall.

"The family of the lady is being sullied, I tell you, and my Lord will not stand for it much longer, Master Owl," Wick was saying. "They are saying now that Lady Quince is a rat-faced, hard-nosed, bitch of a thing..."

Master Owl sighed again, wishing he could turn himself into his namesake for just a little while. Even the ravages of nature would be easier to take than this. "Yes, yes, I do know of what they speak, Wick; the gods only know my own journeymen and apprentices are constantly passing along the news to one another."

"Ah, but did you hear the latest, Master

Owl?" Wick leaned closer with a grin. "Someone got a view of her under the full moon..."

Master Owl raised his eyebrows. "Really...?" he began, before stopping himself. After a good *harrumph*, he looked back at Wick as sternly as he could. "It is well known that the Quinces are of were stock, boy," he said.

"Well, to be honest," Wick continued without seeming to notice, "what I'm truly concerned of is Milord's health. It's an all right thing to have a good tellers' war... I remember the War of the Roses, when Lady Gwen of Jewel Grove and Lady Horowitz were at each other's throats about their flowers."

"Ah, yes, I remember the War of the Roses... but things are different now," said Master Owl. "Ever since the Pope put across that Bull with regards to the matters of house versus house..."

"... because of that stupid boy, I recall," Wick nodded. Herald's knew almost as much gossip as bards did, since they traveled so much.

The original argument this time, as he recalled, had begun with some bragging. A couple bards had gotten drunk at Crossroad Tavern, so the story went, and started going on about the greatness of the deeds done by the houses they favored: Thassalworth Loch, which belonged to Montague, and Grand Gorge, a beautiful manse right near Swan Lake Falls, belonging to Sir Iris Van Grogen,

who was cousin of Lord Quince. Before Owl knew it, his entire college was picking sides and making wagers, and the two bards would rant it out every few months, and it went from simple bragging to nit-picking about the virtues, cleanliness, holiness, worthiness, and honor of house versus house.

It was really Henry's fault, because he had that knack for keeping things in his brain long after they should have been forgotten. And he kept grudges, therefore, for far too long. Henry should really know better by now, Owl thought; people say stupid things when they're drunk, everyone knows that. But Henry was dead, killed by a falling tree, and his apprentice Locksley had decided to take up the banner. Honorable of him, that Locksley, Owl thought bitterly, wondering if he could somehow get the man executed by "accident."

As for the matter at hand, though... "I will speak - again - with the bards in question," he said to Wick, who bowed.

"Much obliged, Milord." He turned smartly and went out. Lady Kent, Owl's mistress, came in as he left. She shot a look to the door.

"Again?" She set the dinner tray down on his desk and leaned over to give Owl a kiss.

"Again. You know, I would love to know what possesses these people to begin with."

She shrugged. "Why bother? Let them fight it out."

"No, it's house versus house now; they've taken to name-calling, apparently. Eventually blood will be shed. And that's my responsibility, because they are after all my bards."

"Yes, but that's what bards do, isn't it?" Lady Kent gave him a wicked grin. "They stir things up."

"You're sure you had nothing to do with this?" he said.

"Yes, dear, I am. The current Lord

Montague is much more to my taste. Less grumpy."

"Yes, well I'd be less grumpy too if I had found the Treasure of Pegasus the Pirate."

"Now, now, remember the edict: Bards are supposed to be unpaid, save in food, clothing, housing, and help."

"Sometimes I wish I had decided to be a Druid, and then I could turn myself into a bear and hibernate in the winter," he said.

Lady Kent laughed. "It's spring, dear, and not even a Druid can change that!"

"Hmph. I guess that this means I will have to speak with my bards. Could you call them up?"

"Oh, right away, Sir!" She curtsied with a wink and zipped out the door.

The two bards appeared in a bit, as Owl was finishing his meat. Locksley looked ready for a fight; he actually had a shiner already, the Guildsmaster noticed. Tiptoe was calm and smooth as ever. He had a reputation for a silky voice that enticed ladies, Owl knew.

"Already at it, Locksley?" he asked.

"Cousin of Lady Q in the hall earlier in t' day, M'lord."

Tiptoe tried to hold back a smirk.

"That's what you get for insulting a lady," he said.

"Enough!" Owl growled at both of them and they stared at him, stunned. He pointed a finger to two chairs. "Sit."

They did.

"I've been lenient till now," Owl said.

"But this fight has gone far enough. If I have to, I will send your titles to the King to have them revoked." Eyes went wide. "But I'm not going to, I think. Since you two have chosen to word-battle, then so you will do. Only one of you will be removed from the College."

"You will within ninety days of this date make peace between the two households. Within that time, invitations will be sent to

this place, to both houses. If I do not see every member of both present, unless there is a good reason, there will be damage.

"Keep in mind this, you two: a bragging match is one thing, but war between homes is another. You have stirred trouble where there was none before. You, Locksley, in choosing to carry on Henry's grudge, have only made it worse when it might have been fixed long ago."

"I was defending his honor, Master Owl."

Owl banged a hand down on his desk. "I did not say you could speak yet! And as to defending Henry's honor, I believe you have sullied it more than he could ever have done. If it were up to my temper alone, you'd lose your title right now and then you could fight all the wars you wanted to, if any lord would take you as vassal!" Locksley looked like he was going to say something and then thought better of it. Tiptoe's face was concerned.

"This is what is going to happen instead: with the peace of both households regained, the two of you will sing and storytell till you can do so no more. You will bring out your finest, and whomever has a voice and the strength left at the end will keep his title. The other will leave the premises immediately, and will not return." He looked closely at them. Locksley was just aching to fight this one out, he could tell, but was smartly keeping his mouth closed. "I'm doing this for the honor of THIS place, Locksley," he said. "I am certainly not doing it for either of you two. Whoever wins, don't think you will get out that easily: I'll think up a suitable punishment for you, something comparable to helping the Druids mix potions, or being forced to babysit the younger apprentices - and believe me, if it comes to that, I'll find the most annoying of them just for you."

"That is your charge now. So go on, you're to head to your places immediately." He sat down and indicated the door.

"Master Owl, may I say something?"

Locksley said.

"No, you may not." Owl pointed to the door, through which Tiptoe had already gone.

For the next couple months, the upcoming fight was all that the colleges could talk about. From the Druids to the heralds to the bards, everyone was excited, outraged, interested in general about Owl's decision on the subject. Wick went about with a smug look on his face, as if he was certain he'd been the cause of the whole thing, and there were quite a few youngsters within and without the colleges who followed him around and willingly did things for him. It became a joke in the College of Bards that Wick had more squires than he knew what to do with - oh, wait, Wick always needed something anyway...

The two households, thanks to a great deal of calming down and fawning on the part of the bards involved, did make a sort of tepid peace with one another. Owl was glad of that; last thing he needed was the King breathing down his neck about fighting amongst the nobility - not that it didn't happen all the time, but if it were because of the bards, that was another matter. Usually it was just some girl, or some land, or some treasure. Owl knew that the current King wasn't too much in favor of the college system and would rather go back to the old method, popular as this new more organized one was. All the specialists in one area, and you can always find what you need, was the motto of the King who'd installed this college in the first place.

"Hopefully this will work," Owl said to Lady Kent the night before. Already they had had word of thousands of people coming to watch and listen to the event. Both Locksley and Tiptoe had been practically in seclusion getting ready, though Owl knew that Tiptoe had that day made a visit to the Druids' college, probably to cleanse his soul with the trees. Locksley on the other hand, when he'd

been visible, had gone about talking himself up like a famous knight heading into battle.

The halls were full the day of the battle and Owl woke with a headache at the sound of one of his apprentices banging on the door. "Master, Master, the Queen's here!"

That got him up fast. "What do you mean, Her Majesty is here?" he said, wrenching the door open.

"She's just outside, Master, looking around; Locksley is talking..."

"I'll be down in an instant," he cried, grabbing his robe fast. Just as he galloped down the stairs, nearly falling, Owl heard Locksley's voice. He could not tell what it was saying, but today it had a particularly smooth tone. Owl burst the door open, taking a deep breath and stopping the overeager bard instantly. Not even Locksley would interrupt the Guild's Master of Bards in front of the Queen. Thank heavens for that, he thought.

"Your Majesty."

She let him kiss her hand. The Queen, tall and quiet, was an old friend of Owl's; he should have known that she would come if only for curiosity's sake. Her eyes twinkled. "Your Bard here was just telling me about the odds of the match. It's an interesting prospect, Master Owl."

"If I may, Your Majesty, I thought it the best way to restore peace in the land."

The Queen smiled wryly. "If only the lords of the land themselves were as quick on the mark as yourself, Master Owl, we might just manage that. As it is, I'm looking forward to this match." The Queen had always been a stout ally of his in maintaining this college, even though her husband cast it as much disfavor as he possibly could. Owl hoped with all his might that neither of the bards speaking today would have any tales she might find offensive - then again, he thought, Her Majesty did have an interesting sense of humor.

"Welcome to my halls, then, Your

Majesty."

Only a few hours later was the match, the duel, the "bardoff" as some had taken to calling it. Owl disliked the word immensely but then he disliked the entire business. He nodded to the other masters as they all took their seats. "An intriguing event, Master Owl," said Master Updike the Herald Master. "My folk have been at odds about it for days."

"Mine have taken to betting acorns," Master Catalina of the Druids' Guild said ruefully. "I've caught one or two at the ogham sticks about the subject too."

"I don't want to know the result," Owl stopped him before he could say. Catalina nodded. "Let's just listen."

And so began the greatest bardic competition since Paroll the Smith joined with Undine the Midwife of the Druidic College, and she commissioned the Bards to sing at her wedding and they couldn't decide between them who was most worthy of the honor. The bards in question today were under strict orders to not tell anything regarding the lords in question, but they made a good showing nevertheless. The "Tale of Bran" was told - in full - and countered by the lovely "Wooing of Etain." There was singing, too, in various tongues, and some poetry; they even managed to drag out some truly old stories of the valour of previous kings and ancient lords of days when the world was dark with plague. Tiptoe told a heart-breaking story of a knight who gave his blessing to an urchin who had the plague, who carried the poor thing twenty miles to a monastery where she might be well, and whose daughter one day married his son. Locksley countered with "The Saddest Poem in the World," about a bard who was thrown out by his friends, and lost all he had, and who managed to wreak revenge by calling on evil spirits, but who was fooled in the end anyway and killed himself. Owl's eyes narrowed listening to the

bard's enunciation, knowing that it was directed at him.

They sang and they said, and it went on for hours. Owl could hear the bards of his college muttering to themselves about proper turns of phrase and enunciation and satire. The apprentices, most of whom had never seen or heard such a thing as this event, sat wide-eyed and silent, enraptured by every word.

As they were both becoming hoarse, Locksley began to sing the "Song of Ages," a very old tune that most bards alive now didn't know. Owl pricked up his ears again; the reason that the Song wasn't taught anymore was that it had power...

Sure enough, the skies blackened as Locksley sang mightily as a hoarse man could. He danced around his opponent like a madman as he sang, and thunder crashed but no rain fell. Lightning shone in the distance. Owl stood up: this was more than enough. But just as he was about to give a cry and end this horror, the ground in the middle of the field began to ripple and shake.

A tree sprouted fast out of the ground there, and grew tall and fair, violet-leaved and silver of trunk. Tiptoe jumped back, falling to the still shaking ground as white flowers began to sprout from the delicate branches. And as Locksley cried the last verse of the Song, a giant lightning bolt came right down and split the tree in half, causing Tiptoe to crawl fast as he could out of the way.

The entire field grew silent, but Owl could feel the electricity among them all. Slowly, reluctantly, he gave a pre-stated signal and climbed down from the benches toward the field. "Locksley, I declare you the winner of this contest," he said as loud as he could, for he was trembling. There were legends about what the Song could do; he'd now seen it with his own eyes. The two halves of the tree bent and swayed in the fast

departing wind of the storm. The sky was clearing. He looked over sadly to where Tiptoe was. "Having sung the 'Song of Ages,' and done it well enough to cause creation itself, I name you the more powerful bard." He felt disgusted as he heard the murmurs of agreement and saw the smirk on Locksley's face. He sighed. "Tiptoe, you must leave the grounds immediately, you are revoked of your bardic title. I'm afraid this is the way it must be." He looked up into the stands where the Queen was, and she had a sad look on her face as well. But those were the rules. Tiptoe stood as best he could and made a bow to Locksley and Owl, and then to the people. And then he went away.

Locksley he called to his room next day, sighing sadly. It had been a sore loss; Tiptoe had by no means been the greatest bard he'd ever studied with, but he'd been a good and honorable man. "And as such, he did what was honorable and left without a fight; I'm sure he'll come to good ends," said Lady Kent that night, comforting Owl. Now he thought of that as his winner entered the room.

"Well, so now you've won - and given us a tree, too," he said. "I will appoint you to classes, of course..." As Owl went on with his talk, he began to notice Locksley had grown strangely silent. Finally, after having talked for half an hour without interruption, Owl couldn't stand it anymore. "Well, say something!"

Locksley shook his head and pointed to his mouth.

"Oh, you cannot speak right now? Well, I'm not surprised; I don't doubt Tiptoe is hoarse as well. Go drink some tea with honey and take the day off. I will see you tomorrow."

But the next day, Locksley couldn't speak either. Owl frowned. "Are you playing some practical joke on me?"

The mute bard shook his head



After a week of this, Owl himself took the bard to the Druids and explained the problem. He did not miss the half-hidden smirks on many of their faces, or the fact that many others left the place where they were rather quickly. Master Catalina himself threw the ogham, though Owl could see that he too had a certain look on his face. Owl sighed to himself, remembering that Catalina had pretty much told him before the match even began that he'd known how it would end up.

"Well?"

Catalina looked up. "He is mute, and mute he will remain," he said. "The 'Song of Ages' is not a song to be sung lightly, or with too much pride in oneself. If vanity is what you seek, then vanity you shall have; vain you were to sing the Song in a competition, indeed, thinking that the power of creation would make you the winner. More powerful you may be, but that is the last thing you will ever create. You will never be able to write or speak or even bear children. You have created enough. This is the word of the gods."

"There's no way to fix this problem?" Owl asked.

Catalina looked at him calmly. "No."

Owl realized that even if there had been a way, the Master of Druids would never have told him of it. He sighed to himself, and took Locksley back to the College of Bards. "You may remain here, if you like," he said, feeling a perverse responsibility towards the mute bard. "You can help with the apprentices, or work in the kitchen." Locksley gave a disgusted look but nodded. He was determined to be able to speak again, Owl realized.

"So you kept him?" Lady Kent said.

"He wanted to stay." Owl looked out the moonlit window. Locksley was down by the broken tree he'd made, bent over. Praying, probably, Owl thought.

Days went by as they would, and

months, and years. The moon turned over, the sun rose and eclipsed, and the apprentices laughed at and kicked at the bard. And the tree remained in the middle of the field between the colleges, strange and beautiful in its strangeness. Owl liked to go outside when he had free time and compose underneath it. The bard Locksley began to wear more and more ragged clothing as if in self-punishment for what he'd done, and people forgot eventually who and what he was. When Owl came across him in the corridors, the shabby figure wouldn't even always register with him as the man who sang the Song.

But the Man who Sang the Song became legendary in the colleges, long after his rags had been lost and he had departed from the world on his own way. Owl, the wrinkled and knobby Guild Master, would hear the story that came out of it with regret. He'd eventually heard from Her Majesty that she herself had taken Tiptoe in and he was now married to a cousin of one of her daughters, and had become thereby a wealthy lord who was famous for his stories at parties.

The tree also lived on, in its spot directly in the center of the field between the colleges. It lived on long after all the human folk involved in its growth were gone, and new apprentices would come to stare at it in awe as their masters told them of the dangers of singing the Song. Then they would often tell the tale of the one who had sung it, and become mute because of doing so. That was usually enough incentive for the students to never think of singing it again.

The story is an excerpt from a series by
S. Dorman which can be read on-line at
<godsaid.blogspot.com>.

God Said

by
S. Dorman

But in the beginning God spoke. There shall be Time, said God. Time and becoming. After and before. Pastpresentfuture, my riddle being Time. I will clothe Time with things--with particles, elements, creatures, events. Thought and emotion shall fill Time. In Time living things germinate, differentiate, grow. Time will expand and contract according to the placement of its bodies and to the measure or interests of its occupying activities.

In Time things will fall and rise; minerals salts gases moisture; species and intelligence, dominions. All things cycle, cycling upward, drifting, falling. But light shall flow straight; yet here and there under certain conditions Time will see light bend. See its sneak around corners, shiver to colors, fall sleightly through cracks. Memory and light shall salt the darkness of Time, overtake Time, turning backward and forward. But light shall see Time bend: as great celestial bodies turn, gravity will work the course of Time. In earth time will be humbled. Forced to creep, weigh and sigh, shudder and weep. But it will pursue with implacable persistence.

In Me Time shall stop altogether.

I let my spheres loose in Time to keep and change its measures. Let gravity layer these spheres; and in some come a layer of life. Earth has magnetosphere, our radiant veil of star-particles; a veil of gas beneath for the protection of Life. Within, we set the

veil of our breath. All exchange breath with me in the veil.

But Earth's pith is molten, full of the great power of melting... sulfurous, fulminating, inflamed. The great mantle above moves the crust about, thrusting up from below with tension and verve. Making mountains. Mantle crushes and cramps the earth, forcing edges under again, humbling and reusing the crust we call earth. Grinding, shaking with terrible violence, the continents heave and slide. Molten heads rise. Rounded, ballooning upward, the Plutons warp and compress the crust.

The energy of the command rises, shaking foundations. At our Word arise the plutons, ascending through layers and bearing unspeakable treasure. Monstrous with bending and folding, burning and pressure, the plutons form forth an array of gemstones, minerals, a catalog of Crystal: Chalcedony Jasper Agate and Beryl; tourmaline amethyst topaz and manifold quartz: there are myriad minerals here.

This! Say the Plutons. This our treasure and glory! This, our implacable power!

But these giants lay hidden inside the mountains in tilted or downturned layers of metamorphism and sediment; guarded and shielded in rock. And Jasper was one of these, a hidden giant, secure. Jasper Mountain patient in waiting.

But without... without move fast

climatic currents. In the veil of Breath float a tumult, extremes of hot and cold; downfalling, uprising vapors of moisture and air. Cyclic, these powers, whirling and twisting. Hot and cold blowing, drying and drenching, freezing and thawing; great Powers played over crustal surfaces, shaking these faces with Weathers.

Composing tiny crystals, water condensed around specks in the veil. Floating and falling they fill the bright veil; ecstatic innumerable; falling in lightness and blizzard. The Earth darkened, snow fell. Snow fell. Snow fell. Snowfall arched over mountains, sinking them under the burden of white. Ice and earth overlaid what was hidden but the grinding of glaciers wore their covering away.

Time wore, uncovering the hidden. Naked, the Meguntic Mountains emerged. Naked stood Jasper, crystalline and exposed. Bald in his beauty, he was polished and running with rain.

In his cracks seeds gathered, the gymnosperms dying then sprouting, stitching themselves together. Dark evergreen, their lacework gathered on the mighty flanks. They sifted their load of hard seeds. In Time came other plants, less hardy yet enduring on lower slopes, those whose seeds were wrapped in soft fruity ovaries. For the veil moderated to yield a Southern influence. Jasper's great features were fringed and garlanded, softened and green. Leaves sprouted, swaying, glimmering.

From south and westward came many manner of animals insects worms spiders; birds, the fingers of which are filled with

feathers. People came, having faces, arms and legs, torsos and hands and imaginings. With imagination they named the mountain for its abounding crystalline formations. They gathered about him, clustering, clinging together; or sprinkled themselves sparsely. The People lived beneath the mountain they called Jasper-snowy-forehead. In winter they hunted, sheltering families. In late summer they climbed and ate Jasper's blueberries. The People encouraged the berry's seed for its sweet ripe blue fruit, burning patches to renew springing growth. Later came people of another kind to Jasper Mountain, climbing Jasper's knees to set permanent dwellings. They called him by his first name, felled his trees, built cabins. They gathered his rocks and turned earth that had collected in the feet of the gymnosperms. These people toiled and stored. Following a period of mutual stress, the two peoples dwelt together; but the first people were thrust to its margins. Yet, in Time, some of each came to share a common descent.

Above them all stood great Jasper Mountain, quiet for the most part, but not ever so. He might gather water from the veil in abundance, flooding them. He might bring snow. He brought awful wind. Jasper collects storm. The Weather and Mountain colluded, holding their council in common. Sometimes they kept the water away.

Even so, over and around People of this great creation was the blessing of God in time. For God said, Let there be Time!

And the People answered, "Ever so! (Will it be ever so?)"

Dolphins, Musical...

by

David Sparenberg

I will go along here: it is a curious way. And a man might meet his truth through journeying. Height of the stars; depth of the sea! Someday the heart will stop. Nobility to the workman who builds a lighthouse-beacon on a shore of broken shells. O candle under Venus' wings! O conch of insular evolution! I will walk my mortal way. For a man might meet himself on the bridge of his intimacy. Eternity in a moment. Like a message in bottle, bobbing on the waves of time, the whispered jinni of a mythic name. Enraptured. Enchantment. Moist and dark the deeps of earth. Someday the visions all will fade and blindness will, beckoning, see. The heart will stop. Then the drama of meandering memories will turn to osprey wings. Silken glory; noble glory; to the warrior-walker whose soul can fully, finally, fledgling, fly. Ah: moment--tender, delicate, hushed. It is not a midnight, lingering in the breath? See! Dolphins--in the web of stars.

I will go, go where goats have trotted, go where wolves have roamed, where only eagles shadows, silent, brush the hems of quiet angels. Accolades fall, like roses out of heaven, burnished, thornless, timeless, for the heart that has remained most whole. Wholeness is a fruit that feeds. And somehow, someday, out there, beyond this present length and touch, a cupid with a virgin's smile hands back as nourishment to the naked soul. Ah: moment.

I will go this way, this. For it is what a man is and is a destiny summoning to be--a key to the rainbow over shipwrecks; a jewel to the crown of victory-home. Vulnerability of passage: rites. Courage: yes. Courage of footsteps in the tide washed sands. Say only this much: the twinkling marks of pilgrimage. And a dream: dolphins, musical--lute, flute, pipes and hand held drums--in the web of stars.

Rhapsody Kinetic

by
Geoffrey Reiter

I am growing old now, and memories slip through my mind like liquid through cupped hands, but whatever else I may forget, there is no force on earth or below it that will erase Christoff Gothart from my thoughts. Every other memory was mere water, but he was like flame, searing his imprint on me. There has never been a day when his face has not flashed before me, so real, so near, and his eyes still so wonder-wide.

I was an assistant professor of piano at the Hertzbergen School in those days, recently arrived from my own education at Leipzig, new and flushed with the exuberance of my own newness. My wife Greta would smile at me once in a while and shake her head bemusedly, and ask in an ever-so-slightly plaintive voice, “Which means more to you, Johannes, your music or me?” A ferally romantic grin would breach my face and I would respond, “You are my greatest music, Greta.” Then I would loosen her dress till it fluttered to the floor, and together we would compose our own private symphony.

But at the school, the piano was my medium, and I would do anything I could to coax beautiful music from it. People would walk by and see me speaking to the instrument, reasoning with it, trying to convince it that it was capable of so much more. “One day,” I used to tell it, “you will realize just what songs can come from you. You will be alive with the notes that spring from your keys.” And then I would resume playing, each day persuading it to begrudge me a slightly more harmonious sound.

Many were amused by my unorthodox ways, but there was one who was most definitely not. He was Wolfhart Strauss, the institute’s primary instructor, and thus my superior. Wolfhart was a tall man, and

powerful, with thick and calloused fingers that never stopped tapping things. His face has become obscured in my mind by many opaque years, but I do remember one aspect: it was always tight, his brow furrowed, his teeth clenched, his nostrils flared, as though everything he did took the greatest effort. His hair, beginning to grey, looked as though it wanted to fall out, but it never did, and I wondered if that was because his scalp would not release it.

I soon realized the cause of his animus toward my methods. He never engaged in any playful badinage with his piano; he was a lord, not a merchant as I was. The instrument was his slave, and he would make it do what he wanted it to. Those meaty fingers of his would strike the keys like thick whips, forcing noise from them. He would wring every last note from that piano, and each cadence would reverberate throughout the building. They always sounded too perfect, like soldiers in formation, as though the moment he ceased applying pressure, they would collapse. Oh, Wolfhart’s execution was flawless, but in the way a siege might be flawless.

Hertzbergen taught music to especially bright pupils between the ages of eight and fifteen; it still does today. There was a specialist on hand in practically every instrument ever conceived of by man, and some that could be found nowhere else. One of our instructors, Professor Meyer, spent his entire life researching the Old Testament, trying to decipher the ancient musical scales and construct extinct instruments. Every now and then I would hear him passing by in the hall chanting, “Selah, selah, selah,” to himself.

But for all our expertise, Hertzbergen was most renowned for its piano teachers. When I

first learned that they had allowed me to teach there, I collapsed and began to lose consciousness. Greta had to slap me several times before I was fully lucid again. My reaction was perfectly understandable, however, for there was not another school on the continent with a better reputation than Hertzbergen in those days. To be chosen to tutor piano there, even as an assistant professor, was the highest praise I could possibly conceive of. And so, my dreams alighting and my pride somewhat swelling, I moved to Hertzbergen and began teaching.

I was two years into my tenure when first I met Christoff. I saw him then as I would always remember him, his bony wingspan stretched across a piano, limbs darting all about, but fluidly, as if choreographed. He was moving as fast as I had ever seen a human move, and yet, while I was watching him, everything seemed to slow, almost stop. His awkward arms and legs moved so quickly that they appeared not to be moving at all, and I just stared at him, astounded at the way every motion was at once graceful and economical, not really motion at all.

And the music! It was elemental in its brilliance, pouring through me like rain, scorching me like fire, chilling me like wind, impacting me like earth. Every note quietly screamed beauty, to the point where I could scarcely breathe, I was so overcome. A flash of envy rent the moment of ecstasy, however, and I was suddenly very jealous of the way he could create such harmony. I had implored my piano to sing, but never had it sounded like that. I stood even more amazed to see that it was Wolfhart's piano that this young boy was playing on. Wolfhart had abused the poor instrument so often that I sometimes wondered if it might one day simply die, its corpse refusing to concede another single note. Now it stood revived, alive under the influence of a child. He played in a way I had never seen; it was not persuasion, such as I employed, nor was it brute will power, Wolfhart's method. It was more like friendship, companionship, relationship, as though he had formed a

personal bond with the downtrodden piano. He was like a savior, liberating from bondage. More than anything, I longed to be able to control sound the way he could.

At last, he finished what he had been doing and looked up, for the first time aware of my presence. I got to see his face then, the face that will haunt me as long as I dwell on this plane of existence. It was such a small face, and frail, with skin that was pallid and ethereal, as though it were not fully there. His face was a mystified one, its expression never quite congruous with its surroundings, always seeming to react in just slightly the wrong way. Those pale pink lips of his, the color of berries too early to pick, were open just a little in what was neither a frown nor a smile, but most definitely not indifference. Behind the lips, I could see the periphery of his teeth, also white, with a thin gauze of saliva giving them an iridescent sheen, like a cloud the moment before the sun emerges from behind it. His eyes were like little seas of crystal, and I know—I *know*—I saw things dancing ebulliently behind them, though I cannot tell you what. Those glassy, glossy irises never looked directly at anything, or at least not at anything I could see. They were distant, distant with awe and with subtle, but very real, joy.

"What is your name?" I requested of him, for at least he knew I was here, though his gaze did not—*could* not—meet mine.

"Christoff Gothart," he replied simply. His voice was high and transient, and I don't know if it could even be called a voice. Even as he was speaking, I wasn't entirely sure what I was hearing, but whatever may or may not have been said, after his lips were done moving, I knew his name.

"How did you play that?" I wondered, trying to stifle the envy and the wonder I felt and look every bit the omniscient professor I was supposed to be. I could tell, however, that Christoff read all my most concealed emotions, for beneath the glaze of reverence in his features, I could make out the outline of that same bemused expression I had seen in Greta so many times. Undaunted, I continued, "What was that piece? I've never heard it before."

How did you learn it?"

"I play what I hear," Christoff imparted to me. I wanted to know more, but before I could inquire further, Wolfhart strode in, each footstep colliding violently with the varnished wood floor beneath.

"I see you've met my newest pupil," he observed, his lupine eyes glancing at the boy and then back at me. "Christoff is a prodigy, but unschooled. I am going to teach him the mechanics of the trade. When I am finished, he will truly be a great musician."

I never took my eyes off Christoff, for he fascinated me as much as Wolfhart disgusted me. The delicate features on that little face were incapable of showing fear, but beneath all the mystery, I could detect the presence of some disquiet.

"He already is a great musician," I informed Wolfhart, finally looking directly at him. "I heard him playing a minute ago. It was the most incredible thing I've ever encountered. He could teach us a thing or two."

"He is good," the senior instructor nodded, though it was more like concession than praise. "But only under our tutelage will he become great. His playing is ruled by emotion. I must teach him that music is a science. The key to harmony lies in the numbers behind the notes."

I shook my head vigorously and scowled. "You're wrong," I said flatly. "Music is so much more than the numbers. It's like all art; it comes from that middle ground between heart and mind, body and soul. I think... I think, perhaps, it comes from heaven."

"Heaven has nothing to do with it," Wolfhart retorted. "Nor does the heart. Music is Reason transmuted into sound. It must be flawless, perfect, mechanical, like a well-constructed clock. As long as Christoff is governed by his passions, he will never achieve the greatness that could be his."

"But Wolfhart, don't you think..."

"Silence!" he shouted, making a slashing gesture with his right arm, as though trying to disembowel my very words. "Christoff is not your student; he is of no concern to you. And if I see you talking to him again, your days at this

institute will be at an end. Have no fear, Johannes; I will instruct the child in the ways of music. You are dismissed."

I had no intention of leaving so obsequiously at Wolfhart's command, and I inhaled deeply, prepared to offer a caustic rejoinder. But then I caught Christoff's face out of the corner of my eye and turned to look at him. Buried deep in his glittering, dewy eyes I saw a note of warning, telling me that this was neither the time nor the place for me to be fighting this battle. I longed to debate Wolfhart, to crush his warped conceptions about what my cherished art was, but a single admonitory glance from that boy halted all my intentions. Looking back in the other man's direction, unable to meet his belligerent gaze, I conceded, "Very well, sir," and morosely stepped outside the room.

That night, I lay in bed curled up with Greta, glad to feel her smooth, pearl skin against my own. I ran my hand through her dark hair which, when fully loose, spilled glossily across her back like an evening stream. I lifted my right hand and gently brought it to her closed lips, slipping a finger between them until I could feel the warmth of her tongue against it. She did not object, humoring my odd mood until I dropped my hand back to my side.

"Sing to me, Greta," I beseeched her. "Sing to me a song that goes beyond numbers and notes, conductors and cadences. Sing something that will remind me what music is supposed to be."

She hesitated only a moment, then began,

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortals ills prevailing.*

Her voice was mellifluous, with that exquisite little Alsace lilt of hers that I love so much. I closed my eyes and listened as she sang, and for a moment, I was almost caught by the same current that had grabbed hold of me when I first heard Christoff playing. Earth and all its dross melted away like wax around me,

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and all that remained was Greta singing, every syllable of the old hymn inundating me in some glorious, unearthly flood.

At last, the song ended and I opened my eyes again. My wife lay propped up on one elbow, gazing at me with that expression I saw so often on her gentle features. She brought her free hand up to my head, running it through the blond folds of my hair, and it felt so relaxing. Knowing that she had me where she wanted me, she asked, "What is the matter, Johannes? What happened at the school today?"

I never once withheld anything from Greta, nor was I tempted to on this occasion. In truth, I had been waiting for her to broach the subject, for frustration had been brewing within me for some time now and craved release. Thus, I was more than happy to oblige her, explaining all that had taken place on that morning. She listened attentively, all the while still tousling my hair, until my story was done.

"So," I concluded, "I don't know what to do. Wolfhart will destroy that child if he is not stopped, I know it. The boy is beyond anyone—I mean *anyone*. Yet how can I save Christoff without losing everything I've worked for?"

"Perhaps you can't," was all she said.

I reached out and ran the palm of my hand over her breast; I think I was trying to remind myself that she was real, that a thousand Wolfhart's could not take *her* from me. She must have sensed what I was doing, and she leaned her face forward to kiss me. Those lips which sang so tenderly were now on mine, and creating a new rhythm within me. My pulse pounded out a private symphony, unheard by any but myself.

"Why did you want me to sing?" she asked when our lips parted.

"I wanted to remember what music is supposed to be," I replied.

"Do you remember now?"

"Yes, I do."

The next day as I entered Hertzbergen, I heard yelling coming from Wolfhart's

classroom. I picked up my pace until I reached it, peering inside tentatively. The renowned musician towered like some son of Anak over the diminutive Christoff, and he was unleashing a chain of expletives at the boy. I wanted to stride in there and pummel Wolfhart until his face was no more than a bloody pulp, all the while shouting, "You don't know music, you bastard!" But I remained out of sight, still afraid of losing my position and, truth be told, quite aware of the fact that I was physically no match for the imposing Wolfhart.

"What the hell is wrong with you, you little ass?" he was shouting.

"You're not even playing the right piece. G-minor, do hear? You're supposed to be playing in G-minor. Hey, are you listening to me, damn it?"

Wolfhart grabbed Christoff's tiny hands in his own massive paws and slammed them down onto the keys. I could see a little trickle of blood start to well up under one of the child's fingernails. But he never uttered a single noise of protest or of pain. His eyes never narrowed in anger or even annoyance. He was well-nigh limp, and only his nearly imperceptible breathing gave conclusive proof that he was still alive.

At last, every finger was in the position Wolfhart wanted it to be in, and he released his meaty hands. "Now play," he commanded, tight leathery features fixed on the keys.

Christoff certainly played, but it was not what his instructor had been hoping for. Those bony limbs began to fly again, and he was creating music *ex nihilo*, filling the classroom and the hall outside with exultant strains such as no lowly piano had ever generated before. For a moment, the music continued; Wolfhart was as paralyzed as I by the brutally holy beauty of what he heard. Then, he realized what was happening and grasped the child by the wrists.

"No!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing? God damn you, can't you follow orders?"



I was about to march into the room and stop him, when I heard a familiar voice cry out, “Selah!” Professor Meyer stood beside me, his ancient, hoary face all but glowing with palpable enthusiasm. He grabbed hold of my hand, and I could feel the veins beneath his thin flesh, like little canals, channeling his excited blood. “Did you hear that?” he asked me. “That was it. For decades I’ve been looking for the original melodies. I’ve studied fifteen languages and a hundred different instruments,

but in more than half a century I had never met with any success until today. Who played that? Well, Johannes, speak up.”

I pointed inside the room, where an infuriated Wolfhart was crouching beside Christoff. “That child played it,” I told him.

“Don’t jest with me, Johannes,” Meyer chuckled nervously. “I’m too old for it. Tell me truthfully, now. Who played that music? Surely it wasn’t Wolfhart!”

“Professor Meyer,” I said, “that child,

Christoff Gothart, was responsible for the music you heard. That is all I know.”

“But that’s impossible!” Meyer objected. “Why, no mere boy could...” He stopped, and scurried into the room. Glad to have an excuse to enter, I followed close behind him. Meyer walked over to Wolfhart, whose hands were clenched in barely contained rage.

“Wolfhart, my dear boy,” Meyer started, “this pupil of yours—he didn’t just play some melody by any chance, did he?”

“Yes, he did, but he’s doing it all wrong. That wasn’t...”

Wolfhart grew silent when he saw that Meyer was not listening to him. The aged teacher was kneeling beside little Christoff, and at that instant, I never saw two people look so much alike. A glance was all it took, and the two connected in a way I cannot describe, or probably even fathom. I am not even certain they fully understood it themselves. But their eyes met, each staring deep into the other in their unfocused way. Meyer took the child’s hand in his as he had with mine, getting some tiny droplets of blood on his own skin in the process.

“Christoff, child, tell me something,” Meyer whispered. “What were you playing just now?”

“The music I hear,” he responded in that inexplicable non-speech of his.

“How do you hear it?” Meyer implored. “Please, I must know.”

“He whispers it to me, and I play it. That is all.”

Meyer looked like he had a veritable cavalcade of questions to ask, and yet, he reined them back. For a few seconds, no one said anything, and the two used the silence to communicate things which will exceed my understanding as long as I dwell on this earth. It looked like the way Greta and I must look when we exchange a meaningful glance, but the relationship was different here. I laugh even as I write this, but in all honesty I cannot call it anything

but brotherhood. Yes, Meyer’s age was approaching a century whereas Christoff had

yet to complete his first decade, but the music had brought everything full circle. There was a filial bond between the two that I can write about but never convey, not with these words anyway.

Wolfhart, as he was so skilled at doing, interrupted this moment of spiritual communication by conspicuously clearing his throat. “Professor Meyer, Johannes, if I may see you outside a moment, please.”

Meyer spared one last reverent look at Christoff, who faintly nodded, and then the three of us got up and stepped into the corridor, leaving the boy alone at the piano.

“What is this foolishness?” Wolfhart demanded as soon as we had crossed the threshold and were outside. “How can you condone that boy’s disregard for the structure of...”

“Don’t speak to me of structure, Professor Strauss!” Meyer snapped more vehemently than I would have thought possible. “Have you forgotten what it means to be a musician, to feel the instrument in your hands and know that you can make it sing a beautiful song, because you love nothing so much? That boy’s music derives from something that transcends anything we can grasp. His notes are divine, his scales heavenly. What he just did a moment ago was more musical than anything this world has heard in the last three thousand years. How dare you try to silence it with your own paltry constructs! You do not know anything about music, Wolfhart, and I do not believe you know anything about life either.”

Maybe my mind is decaying in its age, but I hold an image that seems too clear not to be real: Wolfhart’s face tightening even more, as he petulantly tried to hold back encroaching tears. It frightened me because it was at once so uncharacteristic and yet so perfectly fitting. He looked like a toddler just taken to task by his parents, and now that I think back on it, he had always looked slightly infantile beneath that strained exterior.

I don’t know what he would have said, and I think it is better that I never heard it. But at that moment, Christoff began to play once

again. It was different this time, more intense than ever before. We three were assailed by the glorious sound, permeated by it. It was too much for me to bear, as though I were being fed another meal after already being gorged. My heart was beating ferociously against my chest, and I wanted to scream, but the melody wouldn't let my base noises infect its perfection. It was a rhapsody kinetic, holiness transposed into notes. No, more than that; it was almost incarnational. God was in those beats and cadences, and I was overcome with so much perfectly righteous joy it was painful for my lowly being to feel. How can I describe it? Maybe one day words will catch up with this music, but they have not to this point.

I could not see anything at that point, and I don't even think there was anything to see. All other senses had been overwhelmed by what Christoff's piano was releasing. I shuddered like a leaf caught in a gale, my body spasming to a rhythm of purity. All around me, glory was sung, sung with words that I could hear but not understand. I wanted to know what they were saying, but it occurred to me that if I learned that language, its perfection would probably kill me. Whatever the case, I was swept like a grain of sand on an ocean as tides of praise and glory eddied all around. And the music kept building up tempo, intensifying each moment in a way I would not have believed possible.

And at last, the crescendo's climax. The music of the spheres reached its supreme pitch, worship blazing all around me so powerfully that I wanted to scream, *No more! I am not worthy even to hear this!* I do not think I had a body at that precise moment, for if I had, I am certain that it would have been torn asunder by the spiritual rapture that was engulfing everything. At that moment in time, I was merely existence, listening with my spirit to praises that exceeded my ability to endure.

And then, it was over. I was lying on my back on the floor, my face so drenched with tears of joy and exertion that I was about to drown on them. I sat up, spitting out the saline liquid and trying to inhale, though there didn't seem enough air in all the world to satisfy me. I

was trembling so hard that it took ten minutes before I could even stand. In that time, I simply closed my eyes and tried to collect my thoughts, which were a dizzying mosaic of paradoxical, brilliant tesserae. Even now, though, years later, I have not managed to organize them in the slightest.

At last, I was able to sit up, and then tentatively get to my feet. I looked down at the ground and saw Wolfhart curled in a ball beside the doorframe. I knelt down beside him and took hold of his wrist, hoping to help him to his feet. But he would not let me, pulling away and whimpering incoherently. In that instant before he recoiled, however, I saw something that I had never thought I would. Wolfhart's face was awash with pure, childish terror, eyes wide and horrified of everything around them. Startled, my unsteady legs could not hold me and I fell backward.

Regaining my feet, I walked over to Professor Meyer. His body lay unmoving, eyes closed in what could only be described as contentment. I checked his pulse, but none throbbed through those veins anymore. His mouth was open just a little, and somehow I knew that he had spent his last breath uttering one final, triumphant, quiet, "Selah!"

And then I saw Christoff. He had toppled off the piano bench and was lying on his back, his unnaturally frail body so eerily still. I walked over to him, getting down on my knees to look at the boy. Actually, he did not look much different from the way he had appeared the day before. His eyes were the same lustrous, distant, window-pane color, though I couldn't see anything dancing behind them anymore. But his skin was still pale and translucent as it had always been, perhaps more so. Only one thing about him had changed, and I noticed it instantly. His lips, small and narrow though they might have been, were most definitely forming a smile.

Meyer had finally found the right notes, the voice of holiness transmuted. He was buried in a small cemetery on the outskirts of town, and I visit his grave from time to time, knowing full well that he hears me when I speak to him.

Wolfhart never recovered; he remained a babbling, mindless invalid for the remainder of his life, but I remember that when I visited him thirty years later, he would still tap the wall with his fingers.

Why was I spared? I can't say for certain, but I think it may have been because my music was meant for here. I had Greta as my anchor to this world; the others did not. I feel no ill will about this; throughout our marriage, our music together never ceased to be anything but wonderful. It was the rhapsody *we* were

designed to play, and I believe we have played it well.

And what of Christoff? His parents mourned him, never fully understanding what their son had been. They took him back home to Weimar and buried him in the ground there. But every evening I look into that vast, sparkling night sky and I know that behind it, Christoff Gothart is sitting at some vast celestial instrument, producing glorious music, with a chorus of thousands upon thousands of hosts singing in harmony with him

THE END

Unicorn Living

by

Kate Reilly

She follows night creatures in her dreams
where the unicorn meets her,
brushes its cold horn against the wind
and lets her feel the surface of the moon.

The mane of the unicorn is white
like the crystals from the den Winter inhabits
and where Snow exhales frost.

The clouds whisper to the trees
and the tire swing creaks
pushing itself further into the black space
we call night.

THE TREE-WOMAN

by

Dag Rossman

The onset of Spring brought with it a heightened sense of awareness to the Tree-Woman, who stood upon the strand that bordered the fjord. She could again begin to feel her rootlike toes that probed through the soil and deep into the gravel that lay beneath it, providing her with both support and nourishment. And, increasingly, she grew aware of the sap flowing through her torso and limbs. After the long winter's sleep that had lain upon the land, life was returning to the northern world and to those who dwelt there.

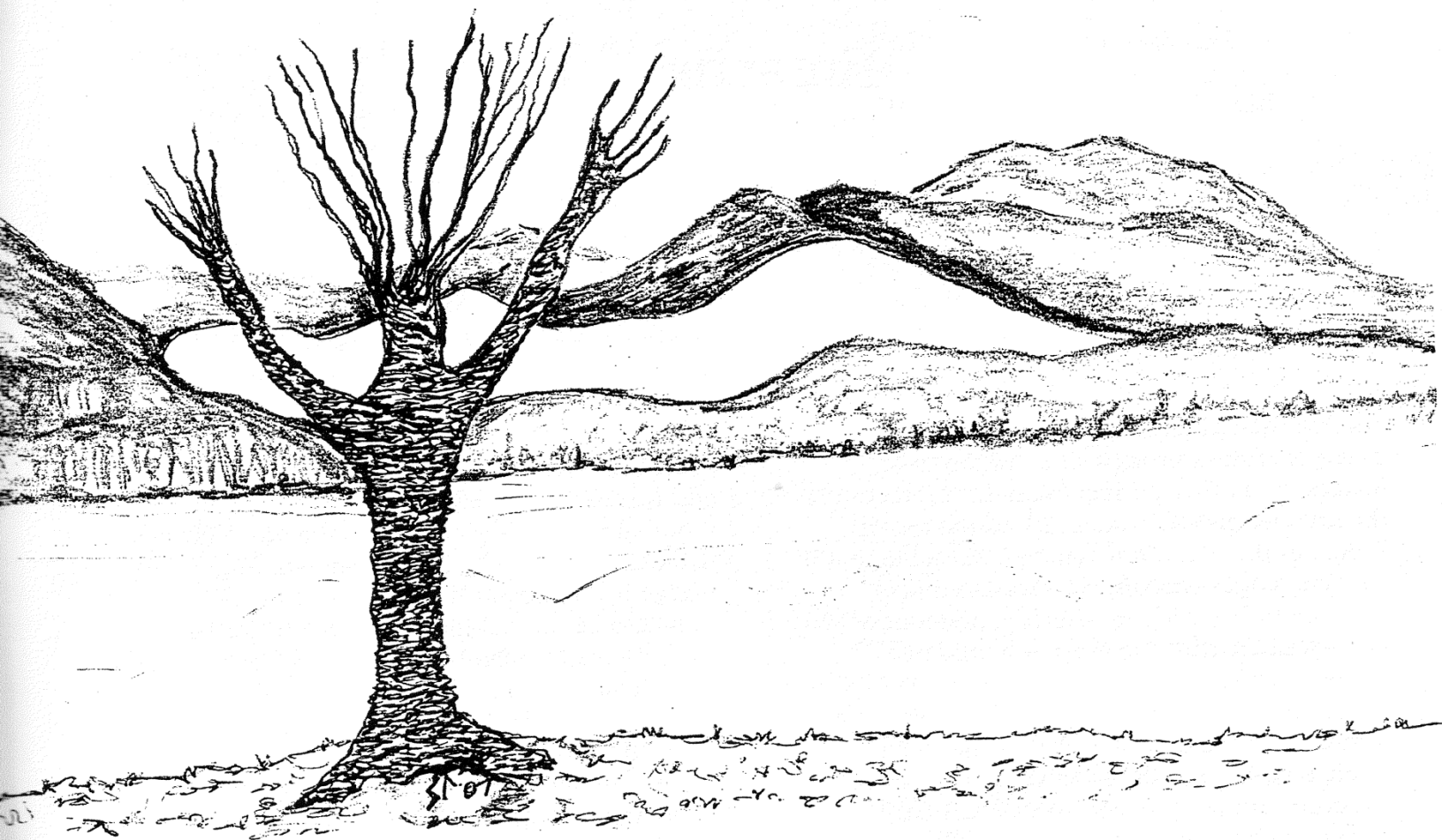
Forcing open her bark-sealed eyelids, the Tree-Woman lifted her gaze to the horizon and beheld, across the mirrored waters of the fjord, the being who was to be both her joy and her bane. There, on her granite couch, reposed the slumbering form of the Snow Queen, cloaked in her glorious garment of shimmering white, her mounded breasts and bended knees thrusting nearly as high as the mountains on which she slept.

The Tree-Woman thought she had never beheld a lovelier sight, and she stretched out her arms with their green-tipped finger buds in mute adoration. Then, looking upon her own gnarled limbs, dull grey skin, and small, rough breasts, the Tree-Woman recoiled in a mental maelstrom of envy and self-loathing.

But life goes on, as do the seasons, and as the Chariot of the Sun came to spend ever more time above the northern realms, many transformations began to take place. The Snow Queen's lovely mantle grew smaller and thinner as it melted away, formed glistening rivulets, and tumbled down the mountainside to swell the waters of the fjord. The granite-grey body thus revealed through the rents in the garment no longer appeared soft and rounded, but now was stark and angular.

Down on the strand, kindly Nature wove a magnificent cloak for the poor, naked Tree-Woman, wrapping her with a leafy green garment festooned with soft, white cherry blossoms. Her beautiful cloak drew many admirers, and soon the newly crowned Summer Queen was holding court for countless bees—who fed at her blossoms—and birds—who nested in the shade and protection of her welcoming limbs.

Peeking out through her leaves, the Tree-Woman looked up at what remained of the threadbare form of the Snow Queen and wondered how she could ever have envied her. And so the Tree-Woman was very happy and content . . . until the next turning of the seasons.



Dag and Sharon Rossman's Note of Explanation:

This story and the accompanying illustration by Sharon Rossman were inspired by Norwegian artist Nicolai Astrup's painting "March Morning," which we encountered repeatedly during a visit to the fjord country of western Norway in 2004, and which haunted us with its images. Astrup (1880-1928) was one of Norway's premier painters to blend folklore images with landscapes. This is the only painting to feature a tree-woman, but many of his other paintings include a recumbent snow-woman in the background.

Frearfire

by

Ryder W. Miller

Once upon a time there was a village in the shade of a mountain where the dragon Frearfire lived. Nobody knew why Frearfire needed the riches, but the villagers every new generation brought the dragon gold, jewels, and other things. Frearfire protected the area from other dragons and the Seven Kings in the nearby provinces. The village, every new generation, would send a new representative with an offering, and a new arrangement with the dragon would be agreed upon.

Seitan volunteered at a council meeting to talk with the dragon. He was a man at arms, a paladin with the mission to protect the common people. Seitan was tall with long dark hair and sharp features. He had served in the battles of the nearby kings and was reputed to be the most noble and ablest knight from the village. He rode a dark brown steed and was also able with the bow. It had been twenty years, a generation, since Frearfire had been talked with again formally. Frearfire had been seen away from his cave recently, flying in the sky, but he agreed to never visit the village if the generational gift was given. Frearfire would have new demands that this new generation would have to satisfy. There were not many soldiers in this new generation, but the few were fierce. This generation of soldiers had advanced metal work, armor and long swords.

The village was secluded in a valley and of no consequence, so the surrounding kings had further reasons not to bother with it. Every once in a long while the Seven Kings

would request soldiers from the village to help in the nearby wars, but they were also fearful to tread upon the property of Frearfire. Frearfire had burned down villages and forests in the past. When he moved the mountain, he was young and voracious. He had destroyed nearly all the surrounding villages. The Seven Kings learned to fear him, and he moved to the mountain to retire. Here on the mountain he would catch the occasional goat and ram. He would bask in the sun and enjoy the cold breeze. Frearfire enjoyed thinking and observing human society, but he didn't converse very often with others. There were dark birds that would visit him and give him tidings of far off places. He would spend much of his time thinking. On his occasional flights he would watch the human settlements grow and develop, but he was not often hungry. He also was retired.

The council was not sure if Seitan was the right one to send. He was headstrong and valiant. The dragon might consider him a threat and there had been talk of putting up a resistance against the dragon.

"We considered doing that many years ago, but his fires are so hot that he could burn down the village. He can melt iron with his breath. Those who challenged him could be boiled alive in his fires," said one of the elders.

"Dragons have been killed before," argued Seitan.

"It would take an army and the Seven Kings will not help us," said another elder.

"It would only take a few men. Maybe

only one,” said Seitan.

“What if you fail? You will kill us all if you try,” said another elder.

The council decided to maintain the old arrangement with the dragon, but Seitan was annoyed. They would satisfy the demands of Frearfire. Frearfire had been reasonable in the past, but might grow angry if he felt that he could be challenged or disrespected. The village did not keep record of the distant past, but many recent generations would sacrifice a virgin to the dragon. There would also be gifts of gold and jewels. Seitan decided he would go talk with the dragon. He was convinced to respect the wishes of the elders.

“I will wear armor. Frearfire need know that there are now armed men among us,” Seitan said.

The elders were afraid that he would go and ruin things with Frearfire, but he was the only one who volunteered for the mission. The elders tried to delay the pilgrimage, and they were successful for a time, but Seitan was anxious to see what would transpire. He wanted to know how their lives would be for his generation. As a child he did not hear much about the dragon, but Frearfire might play a more important role in their lives if the new generation spoiled the traditional arrangement.

The other young men in the village knew that they were not a match for Seitan, and when he decided to go only the elders had a chance to dissuade him. They were unsuccessful. Frearfire would notice the change, but hopefully a peace could be reached. Peace had been reached with Frearfire in the past. The elders told Seitan that Frearfire just wanted to be respected and left alone.

The night before he was to make the journey up into the mountains, Seitan conversed with his ladylove Astral.

“I will not do as you wish until you return,” she said.

“But what if I never return?” said Seitan.

“Then I would have chosen wisely to wait.”

“What if the elders demand that we sacrifice you because you are a virgin?”

“I will run away. We will run away.”

“If you are carrying my child you do not need fear that you will be selected.”

“I am liked, I am not likely to be sacrificed. They will send Gerra, that shrew.”

“The council would prefer that another go speak with Frearfire.”

“You are the bravest. You must finish this task before I am willing.”

“I will be successful. Our children will know peace.”

“If you heed the advice of the elders that will be so.”

“But look how we must live?”

“There are forces beyond our control. We could be at war with the Seven Kings.”

“We live like cowards.”

“We live in peace and Frearfire does not bother us. You are not smarter than the elders.”

“I cannot stomach it!”

“We must stomach it!”

“Okay, and I will continue to wait for you Astral.”

“So have I.”

Seitan left a few days later. The elders were there to send him off.

“The Dragon is older than the oldest in the village. He must be appeased or we will all be doomed. Understand his need for privacy,” said one of the elders.

Seitan was annoyed, but he only nodded approvingly.

They filled Seitan’s horse bags with gold and jewels. Taking pity on the horse, Seitan would get off and walk without it up the trail. It would take him three days to walk out of the valley into the lair of the

dragon. The path was smooth at first, but then it grew rocky and treacherous as he made his way further into the mountains. He used his bow to catch animals to eat along the way. In a cave off the side of the mountain path he rested and made a fire his first night out. For dinner he ate a crow. Villagers regularly traveled this far out of the valley, and he noticed the signs of habitation, but they would not be there to help further along the trail.

Dragons exuded poisons and Seitan, the next day, noticed a change in the vegetation he could find along the trail. Gone were the large trees, instead there were scraggly bushes. The life seemed more guarded. He would not choose to eat berries from these plants because they were more likely to be poisonous because of the presence of the dragon. He also had food in the bag that would last him until he returned to the village.

The next night he could see Frearfire's cave above. He would leave early in the morning hoping to reach him for the conversation in the early afternoon. Even though he was high in the mountain it would be warm because of the sun. That night he watched the sunset from his campsite; it was strange and wild in the presence of the exhalations of the dragon. He had not seen such colors in the sky before. The horse also seemed skittish that evening, but Seitan reassured him. On their way up the mountain, crows stopped to observe them and then flew onward.

The next day Frearfire was waiting for him when he walked up the trail. Seitan had seen drawings of dragons, but he was not prepared for Frearfire's menacing size. He was larger than a house with glittering scales, which changed colors as he moved. Frearfire was standing between Seitan and the cave enjoying the sunlight.

"Seitan is it? I have my spies," the dragon spoke in a deep voice.

"Yes, it is Seitan. I am here to pay tribute. To negotiate."

"You do not wish to negotiate. You wish to see me gone."

"I wish to renew the arrangement between you and the village. I am following the orders of the elders."

"You think you can best me in a duel."

"I am not here to duel."

"Why are you in armor?"

"I did not know what to expect."

"Armor will not protect you from my fires. I can cook you alive."

"I did not know what to expect walking up the trail," Seitan said trying to sound convincing.

"What have you brought with you? More gold and jewels?"

"Yes."

"I can also tell from the smell of you that you have been a soldier."

"Yes."

"The village has not sent soldiers before."

"I volunteered."

Frearfire stood up on his back legs and he was as tall as a tree. His belly glittered in the sunlight, and there was an expression of anger on his face.

Seitan stepped backwards, and the horse shuffled a few yards further behind him.

"There are many of you are there not?"

"I have come alone."

"I mean your kind has spread all over the valley and over the mountains. There is more of your kind than there are numbers of stars in the night sky. The land is not big enough for all of your kind."

Frearfire stood back on all four legs.

"You would be rid of me, of all of my kind," Frearfire accused.

"I would, but it is not my decision. I am following the will of the elders."

"We have worked out an arrangement for generations."

"Were their once more of you?"

“Yes. But we do not breed like pigs. We do not plan to overrun the whole planet,” said Frearfire annoyed.

“Why do you insult us?”

“I can. I have watched what you did to that gentle valley. I have noticed the dams and the declining fish. I have seen the trees cut down. Crows have been eaten. Just the other day you ate a friend of mine. I have noticed the fields that were cleared for sheep. The only thing your kind will give back to the land is your refuse.”

“We have done what was necessary.”

“You breed amongst yourselves like pigs and then you go and kill each other off. Who are you to call me a monster?”

“You threaten to kill us if necessary.”

“If necessary. I defend my kind. I defend my way of life.”

“Why do you not spend time among your kind.”

“We dragons choose to be alone. We have to keep watch over the world.”

“Do you communicate with each other?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Better to understand.”

“What have you brought me? What does your generation wish?”

“I have brought you bags of gold and gems. We wish to maintain the old arrangement.”

“Bring them over here.”

Seitan was angry and he grew hot, but he took the bags from the horse and walked to the cave entrance and dropped the gold and gems on the pile that was already there.

“Is this enough for you?”

“No. I am saving.”

“What for?”

“That is not your concern.”

Seitan figured that it might have something to do with the Seven Kings.

“Are you here to negotiate?”

“We are allowed to negotiate?” asked Seitan surprised.

“What kind of monster do you take me for? There are others of my kind who are less charitable.”

“We live in fear of you.”

“You should. I am more powerful than you. I am also more beautiful. I should cook you alive.”

Frearfire stood on his back legs and Seitan again noticed the colors on his belly like shining gems.

“Does your kind reproduce?”

“You ask too many questions. What is it you want?”

“We want to be free. We do not want to be in debt.”

“I have protected your village. You are in my debt. You are free, but free of me you would be in danger of your own kind and others of mine.”

“They leave us alone.”

“They leave you alone because of me, because of Frearfire.”

“What is it that you ask in return for your protection?”

“I wish not to be bothered. I also wish for more gold.”

“What good does it serve you?”

“That is my concern. Tell the elders that I will respect the old arrangement. I just expect you to return with more gold and gems. Twice as much as you have already brought. Times have changed. It is a cost of living expense.”

Seitan was angry, but he did not show it.

“As you wish.”

“Do not wear armor when you return.”

“Why?”

“You ask too many questions. Do not wear armor when you return with the payment.”

The villagers were happy when Seitan returned with his story. The elders were happy with the new arrangement and there was a big party in the village.

“Bravo Seitan, Bravo,” some cheered.

Astral was smiling at Seitan at the party.

“You are our hero. I have something special for you when you return. You have to wait but not much longer,” she said.

“Yes, we will have peace again. I have waited for you since we were children, Astral. I can wait for you some more,” said Seitan trying not to sound annoyed.

That night there were fireworks and music in The Village. Frearfire would know that the village was celebrating because of the continuance of the old relationship. All that was needed was more gold and gems and the villagers had enough to spare. They sold supplies to the Seven Kings, and considered charging them a fee to keep Frearfire out of their affairs. Seitan did not drink that evening, knowing that he would grow surly. Instead he tried to talk with the elders about the past, but they were too busy celebrating.

“Some other time we will talk in depth about the past.”

“Did you really sacrifice virgins to Frearfire?” asked Seitan.

“Aren’t you the curious one. Yes. Lucky he did not ask for such things. You have saved our future. You will be remembered as a hero.”

Seitan was not sure what to say.

“Thank you,” he muttered.

“You’re welcome, Seitan.”

A few days after the party, Seitan saddled his horse with the bags of gold and gems. He did not wear any armor, but there was a sword at his side.

Astral was there to say goodbye.

“Don’t take too long with the Dragon. Do not ask too many questions. We will celebrate when you return,” she said. She was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes.

“I will wait, as I have always,” he said.

Seitan was smirking when he began walking the horse up the mountain trail. For another generation there was peace with Frearfire. For another generation the village lived happily ever after. Seitan was never seen again.

THE END

EDITORIAL

Here we are again, or rather, here I am, once more the sole editor at Mythic Circle. No doubt MC #29 would have been out sooner had Maria Tatham been able to help me again. Under the circumstances I won't apologize for being late. In fact, now that my sabbatical is over and my workload is not likely to decrease, I suspect that an annual issue coming out in July might be the most reasonable thing to aim for.

We are happy to bring you another fine selection of stories, poems and illustrations. With us for the first time are John Kuhn, Pat Esden, Ryder Miller, Geoffrey Reiter, and Kate Reilly, whose stories and poems explore mythopoeic meanings and insights in fresh and moving ways.

Also, some old friends are returning: S. Dornan with a new take on a creation myth; Joe Christopher and Berrien Henderson with further exploration of Graeco-Roman mythology and its Renaissance interpretations. Dag Rossman gives us another glimpse into Scandinavian mythology, in a story to which Sharon Rossman has contributed an illustration. Likewise returning are JA Howe and M. Tatham, achieving new heights and depths in their stories this time around.

Bonnie Callahan, with the cover illustration, and her vibrant depictions from "Keji" and "Rhapsody," adds a dimension to the issue, as does Tim Callahan with his dynamic evocation of bardic warfare in "He Who Sang the Song," and Jef Murray with his haunting portrayal of Jo Gjendes's grave. We hope that you enjoy MC #29, and we invite your comments, most of all constructive criticism designed to help these writers improve their craft and advance their careers.

ABOUT OUR FRONT COVER, Bonnie Callahan writes, "This cover depicts a rather different mythic tradition than the Mythopoeic society usually features-- a traditional ritual ball game performed in the ancient Mesoamerican cultures. The players are characters from the text *Popol Vuh*. Known as "The Hero Twins" Hunahpu and Xbalanque, they are depicted serving a rubber ball back and forth with elbows and knees." *The Mythic Circle* invites writers to invent stories on this theme.

ABOUT OUR BACK COVER: in MC 28, the last issue, we published a story by Dag Rossman, set, as he explained, "in the Gudbrandsdal district of central Norway, a mostly rural region that values its traditions--both in architecture and in stories. The large and beautiful Lake Gjende forms a gateway between Gudbrandsdal and the fabled Jötunheim Mountains. It was near the outlet of that lake that an historical figure, Jo Kleppe (1794-1884), built his hunting cabin and in time became known as the legendary mountain man Jo Gjende, whose exploits helped inspire the character of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*." For this issue, Jef Murray gives us a magnificent view.

LETTERS

Dear Editors,

I want to thank Tim Callahan very much for the two-page illustration for my “World War I Poems of Nathaniel While” [in MC #28]. In the pattern of the Norse gods against the giants, set above the soldiers of the World War, Tim captured particularly the imagery of “Far from Jotunheim.” I appreciate his effort and admire his result!

I look forward to the letters to see if anyone saw the game I was playing in the poems; but, whether or not anyone comments on them, I appreciate the publication--and appreciate the venue offered by The Mythic Circle for such (occasional) games.

--**Joe R. Christopher**

Dear Editors,

I would like to know more about the game Joe Christopher was playing in MC #28 when he claimed to edit a group of poems by “Nathaniel While.” People cannot help being reminded of “Nat While,” a pseudonym which the young C. S. Lewis used in his early poetry, at a time when he was charmed by pagan mythology and leary of Christianity. Although I don’t remember where I read it, I understand the “Nat While” means something like “I know not what” in Old or Middle English, which is roughly what my own pseudonym, **Nescio Quid**, means in Latin. However, “Nathaniel” is a real name. So what was going on? Does Joe mean to imply that Lewis used the name of an old army buddy for a pseudonym, or that somebody confused the work an old army buddy Lewis’s own work? Is there an “influence study” in the works for young graduate students, or will sober scholars have to straighten out a faulty attribution mess? Please lean on Joe Christopher and get him to talk.

Sincerely,
Nescio Quid

From **Berrien C. Henderson**:

I received my copy of Mythic Circle [#28] early last week and took time to peruse most of it the same day. In particular, I enjoyed the variety of voices and approaches to myth in verse. The publication is definitely an *apropos* forum for writers whose work might not otherwise be the fare of speculative fiction/poetry magazines and journals. . . . It's an honor to appear alongside the other contributors of the journal. Best of luck with the future of Mythic Circle.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The Mythic Circle is a small 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. It has become an annual. The next issue, #30 will appear some time in 2008. Copies of previous issues are available through the Mythopoeic Society Orders Department. The prepaid price for the next annual issue is \$8.00. For preorders and the purchase of past issues, write to: Mythopoeic Society Orders Department, 920 N. Atlantic Blvd. #E, Alhambra, CA 91801, USA. This information and more can be accessed conveniently at the website for the Mythopoeic Society, <www.mythsoc.org>.

Submissions and letters of comment should be sent to: Gwentyth Hood, English Department, Marshall University, Huntington WV 25701, or e-mailed to <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>.

We have, as yet, no hard and fast length limits, but we are a small publication. We have to think very well of a story 5000 words long to publish it, and shorter stories have a better chance. By editorial policy we favor our subscribers. We also favor those who show their desire to improve their work by revising their submissions and submitting them again, even if they do not exactly take our advice. Submissions should be double-spaced and should include stamped, self-addressed envelope.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Bonnie Callahan has contributed art to Mythopoeic publications for over 3 decades. She was in on the premieres of Mythlore, Mythprint, Mythril, and Parma Eldalamberon. Bonnie has worked as a background stylist in the animation industry for over 20 years, and also designs logos, posters, and cards, as well as painting art on rocks.

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.

Joe R. Christopher has published numerous poems, two plays (including “Retirement: A Masque,” which appeared in The Mythic Circle), and ten short stories (including two in The Mythic Circle). His poem about the Pandora myth, “Interiors and Exteriors,” appeared in The 2005 Rhysling Anthology: The Best Science, Fantasy, and Horror Poetry of 2004, published by The Science Fiction Poetry Association and Dark Regions Press. Twice he has won a Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for his academic books. Last summer in England, he presented two critical papers on Tolkien. He serves on the editorial board of The Mythopoeic Press.

S. Dorman is currently working on a speculative piece about the early life of the King of Gondor (Elessar) in Middle-earth; and on a novella, *In the Garden with Mark Twain and CS Lewis*. A sample of an earlier dialogue was published in The Lamp-post, Spring 2007. Her work has appeared in regional publications, in literary and little magazines; and a short story, “Woman in Winter, with Flat” is included in an upcoming Goose River Anthology. The story is an excerpt from her series of rural town novels with mythic overtones, a sample of which can be read at: <godsaid.blogspot.com>.

Pat Esden can be found at her country store in Vermont designing with flowers and selling anything that holds still long enough to bring in a coin. When no one’s buying, she is either cavorting with her husband and dogs or is in the attic working on her current project, a series of contemporary fantasy novels set in upstate New York. Pat’s short stories can also be found in Challenging Destiny #23 and in the upcoming 2007 issue of Cat Tales.

Berrien C. Henderson teaches high school literature and composition. When he’s not chasing down student essays and his own children, he enjoys writing poetry and short stories, studying the classics, and pursuing the martial arts.

JA Howe has been writing science fiction and fantasy, in both poetic and prose forms, for about ten years now. Her most recent work can be seen at the online magazines *PariahOnline* (dotguy.net) and at *Ultraverse.com*. She also has written frequently for the print magazine *Pablo Lennis*.

John Kuhn is an aspiring writer and a tiring high school assistant principal. He lives and works in Mineral Wells, Texas. He is married and has two little boys.

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 Fiction, Raintaxi, and the Electronic Green Journal. Miller is a freelance Environmental & Science Reporter, and Eco-critic, who has lived in San Francisco for a long time.

Jef Murray, whose illustrations have appeared frequently in *Mythic Circle* in the past, and is back with another illustration this time, recently had his Tolkien and C. S. Lewis-inspired illustrations featured in the St. Austin Review (www.staustinreview.com). His paintings and sketches can be seen online at [<www.JefMurray.com>](http://www.JefMurray.com).

Kate Reilly's capacity to blend everyday matters with mythic imagination is well represented in her poems in this issue. Her work has been described as brevity of verse with both depth and acute angles. She is a graduate of the University of Hartford and lives in Westchester County, New York..

Geoffrey Reiter currently holds an M.A. in Church History from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and is working toward a Ph.D at Baylor University. He has spoken on or published essays about Bram Stoker, H. P. Lovecraft, George MacDonald, and Clark Ashton Smith, though "Rhapsody Kinetic" will be his first published work of fiction. Though a New Englander at heart, Geoffrey currently lives in Texas with his lovely wife, Mary.

Douglas "Dag" Rossman has loved the Scandinavian and Cherokee myths and legends for many years and his "The White Path," published in MC #26, was his first attempt to integrate them in a fictional setting. His new book, *The Northern Path: Norse Myths and Legends Retold . . . And What They Reveal*, has now been published by Seven Paws Press of Chapel Hill, NC. It includes both the stories he has been telling "to live audiences for the past 25 years," along with a discussion of "the nature of myth generally and the meanings of Norse myth in particular." His wife, Sharon, has graciously contributed an illustration for his story in our current issue.

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/>](http://thedialogueofbecominghuman.blogspot.com/).

M. Tatham lives in Ohio with her husband Tom. She is very interested in the literary fairytale. Her stories have appeared in [The Mythic Circle](#) and in [Deep Magic: E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction](#). In this issue, she offers a dramatic story which shows how fairy-tale heroines must continue to confront death even after the prince has come . . .

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