
7-15-2009

Mythic Circle #31

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Recommended Citation

Hood, Gwenyth E. (2009) "Mythic Circle #31," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2009: Iss. 31, Article 1.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2009/iss31/1>

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Mythic Circle #31

MYTHIC CIRCLE 31



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ILLUSTRATIONS

Tim Callahan: Front Cover and illustrations on pp. 30, 34, and 51.

Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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ODYSSEY

by

David Sparenberg

My mind is full of images and the rider of the rainbow-wind. Perhaps I am a king or one who sits at the king's elbow and has his ear. My heart is full to overflowing a goblet of the blood of suffering or a chalice of the wine of never ending love

Who or what I am I cannot say but this: If you see me in twilight I might carry a torch or the lantern of the sun or silver candles of eternal moonlight

I have lived in the spirit house of my own dreaming and been dreamed into breath out of nothingness by the mystery of near-distant evolving otherness. First roots of my shadow-stirring are deep down like forked lightning in the dark fertility of this passionate Earth

Possibly I am a bridge or the points of contact from which bridges aspire into arches and traverse time and space I cannot be accurate I am full of the tales of monstrous outrage and punishment Yes and No – Who and whatever I am I become but a stitch in the tapestry of unknowing I merely go from here to there

Images pass over me like a stone battered and bathed at the edge of the seductive sea. And I am carving at the interface of stone and water, moth-like words. Consider please. No matter how much I am aware now or in the beads of now hereafter how much vaster are echoes of my unknowing!

Perhaps I am no more than a whisper escaped out of silence of a phrase of naming forever

unspoken Consider consider please Who comes to the islands of discovery in name of the king – Flesh tattered with traveling face lined with feats of misery

In this universe of choral narrative and beatitude the shaman disguised as epic poet arrives in the courtyard of listeners at twilight: blind with the terror of birds and the magic of winged imagery

Perhaps I am the Taoist butterfly of ambiguous dreams and the feathers of ruby colored snowflakes or dark storm tortured Odysseys, wind blown searching for the palace of Ithaca But there is self-overhearing! One may yet become the world of myth and prophecy.

Perhaps I am king or who the king would be if he were I and slipped behind the arras of time or through the membrane of rivers of forgetfulness and mountains of memory To the shining island where a hero's adventure is homecoming and I am free to meditate on who I have become and who I will be.

There are paths in life that lead to healing and sights that lend themselves to poetry. Moments too, pregnant with the bubbles of eternity. Universes as brought to motion by the breath of a mask of God. I am such as these: one with my own alterity.

Ha! Here I am, lighted in my inner vision: the alchemist of mask making, the dream maker's right hand man.

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, #32, is scheduled to appear in the summer of 2010. Copies can be pre-ordered for \$8.00 through the Mythopoeic Society's website, <www.mythsoc.org>. Back issues are also available. For more information about the Mythopoeic Society, contact:

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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 a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

EDITORIAL AND COMMENTARY

MC #31 has some new authors and some who return. With us for the first time are Mary Johnson and William Wandless, each with a story from an invented mythology. Joel Zartman and Colin Young bring their pithy short poems, also for the first time. Randy Hoyt for the second time offers us a lens into the world of the *Ramayana*, while Ryder Miller comes for the third time, with a look at the hinge between reality and the hidden dimensions.

Some faithful contributors are also returning: Joe Christopher, (by himself and with a new collaborator, Donald Hinkle) Dag Rossman, and David Sparenberg. Once more Tim Callahan generously applies his talents to the cover design and three other illustrations.

Letters are always greatly appreciated in *The Mythic Circle*, especially constructive criticism to help these writers improve their craft and advance their careers.

For this issue, however, our only commentary comes from an odd source. Several issues back, as some readers may remember, we published comments by the diabolic bureaucrat and

(Continued p. 44)

The Power of Love:

A Dream and Amplification

by

David Sparenberg

The Dream:

An elderly man in a frumpy suit, with a hat pulled down to shade his eyes, walks toward the east. The time is early morning. The sun is ascending golden along the eastern horizon. The elder walks with a walking stick.

As the old man moves along a green snake crosses his path. The serpent approaches and coils around the man's stick. When the head of the snakes touches the walker's hand, the serpent transforms, becomes wooden and attaches to the cane.

Shortly thereafter, the elder arrives at a swift moving stream. In order to cross over, the man lays his stick down upon the water. At this, the snake detaches, again becomes green, and swims away. The wooden staff becomes a bridge.

The old man crosses the water on the bridge. As he foots his way, leafy vines, growing out of the stream, coil around the wooden causeway forming a green bower.

On the nether bank, a beautiful woman waits and embraces the elder as he arrives. This is a passionate and miraculous embrace. In the arms of the woman, the old man becomes young again.

A tree, with silver-green leaves and smiling pink flowers, branches above the embracing couple.

Amplification:

Let's understand the process of amplification as a method for extending and expanding the range of possible interpretations by uncovering archetypal or mythological associations. This is a method developed by Carl Jung and we might even think of it as the deep ecology approach to dream work. Amplification is used to develop a field which provides an organic furtherance of texturing, coloration and back-story, as a sort of informational matrix surrounding the dream-core.

In applying amplification to the foregoing dream, it is fairly obvious that the elder is some sort of magician, possibly even a shaman. He moves by the aid of a walking stick, which suggests a disability, very likely an emotional wound or crippling. Yet the stick is also a source of power and a magical potency adheres to it. This may suggest the category of the healed healer, a basic attribute of the shaman. Even if the older is not yet such, he seems certainly on his way to becoming. We are already aware of the healing process the dream is narrating; articulating its curative progression through a series of images which possess distinctive fairy tale qualities (the naivety of supernatural encounter, the transformative power of beauty, etc.). Indeed, it is even open to consideration whether or not the elderly man is recently dead, on his way to dying, or undergoing the

shamanic “little death” which leads into an identity resurrection and renewal.

But let us not leave the walking stick quite so soon. It is called both cane and staff and suggests the potent staff of Moses, which is also associated with snakes and capable of parting water to facilitate a crossing over from bondage to freedom. This emblematic tool also identifies with the wizard’s staff or wand and is associated with such names as Merlin, Faustus and Gandalf.

A further association is possible here besides, that being the suggestion of Eden by bringing wood (tree) together with serpent, which in our initial dream culminates with a couple entwined beneath the Tree of Life. This icon is found in numerous alchemical texts as well.

There is too a green snake and this may be the magician’s familiar or totemic animal and spiritual guide. Yet both stick and serpent can be taken as phallic and it may be significant that the snake is temporarily petrified (loses the color of fertility) and becomes part of the walking stick upon human touch, and that it is only after the advent of the serpent that water appears in the dream. While contact between the head of the snake and the old man’s hand may suggest autoeroticism, that the living entity becomes dead wood says that this is an inadequate outlet for sexual potency and emotional energy.

Water is feminine—the female waters having spiritual significant in certain erotic meditations of Kabbalah and elsewhere—and the stick upon the water revives the green serpent, generates vining, and facilitates the union of man and woman. Crossing water is also an expression of transition from one condition to another or from one mode of experience to another dimension beyond reductive, stagnant or moribund normalcy.

In the dream the passage over water leads to the necessary other, a woman who may be a remembrance of waking life experience, or a spiritual image embodying the power of rejuvenation, or even the ideal woman within,

the one Jung named the anima. Of this we do not know. We know only that the other is called beautiful and her embrace is miraculous. It is indeed the embrace of the power of love. Old man becomes young in the woman’s arms and the couple is finally viewed in a tableau vivant that is paradisiacal. Here they are as were Adam and Eve beneath the flowering Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. Further, through an exercise of active imagination (a technique also developed by Jung and applied by Maria Von Franz), details as to the identity of the woman on the nether bank, her back-story and fuller purpose, can be brought into play.

At last, we consider the tree, which is the culmination of vegetable imagery—the tree ascends beyond the end of the green bower of leafy vines. It has already been established that the tree is a Tree of Life image and highly symbolic. A comment can be made about the plant’s origin. The leaves are silver-green. This identifies the icon as that of an olive tree. The olive is sacred in many cultures, particularly throughout the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions. As such it is a symbol of peace; in this instance of inner peace and the symbol sums up the healing nature of the dream.

Yet the tree is also a creation of imagination and a symbolic hybrid, as physical olive trees do not blossom with smiling pink flowers. The smiling quality, communicating joy, is significant and adds to the symbolic mystery, suggesting natural acceptance or re-integration. The combination of silver-green olive leaves with happy pink flowers (indicative of a slightly cooled down or contained passion) tells us that the dream concludes with a revelation of inner peace and transpersonal, if not trans-human (extended beyond human) harmony. The joyousness of these integral values may even go so far as to indicate a sense of homecoming or achievement of the alchemic opus in the dreamer.

Having presented the initial dream and an amplification demonstrating how this method

of dream enrichment works, here next is a second dream. My reader is invited to try her or his skill at the amplification process with this as the starting point. As you do so, bring into play references from your personal dream library (a useful concept picked up from Robert Moss). Have fun connecting the possibilities. You may well be amazed at what you come up with and where the methods of amplification and active imagination take you. To bring back the deep ecology suggestion one final time: the new paradigm is not about the supremacy of the "I" in autonomous isolation, but about awareness and the intricacies of relatedness.

Second Dream:

A fisherman is in a small boat out on the ocean. In all directions, there is only open sea.

The fisherman pulls in his net and finds that he has caught a beautiful rainbow fish.

The fisherman draws his knife and attempts to cut the fish. To his surprise, the fish vanishes only to reappear after a short interval. The fisherman attempts cutting the rainbow fish several times. Each time the same mysterious sequence occurs: before the knife blade reaches its skin, the fish vanishes. Then again, while the fisherman stares in wonderment, the fish becomes visible once more.

At last the fisherman puts down his knife. Dropping to his knees onto the planks of the skiff, he prays over the shimmering body of the fish. At this, the rainbow fish transforms into a human like creature of indeterminate sex who blesses the fisherman and places in his hand a gift from the bottom of the sea.

The gift is a pearl of unusual luster and size.

Another World

by

Joel Zartman

It is a surface makes another world.
That is what the magic of a mirror
can show. And that's the fascination
with which I gaze into the creek, a pond,
or any water's body into which
one can see depths. After the rain the creek
is clear, the traffic underneath is seen.
And anybody with the sense to stop
and gaze, will gaze, being made to feel the pull
beyond the surface of another world.

A Suburb of the City of Dis

by

Joe R. Christopher

*Halfway through my life, I found myself
standing in a bus queue on a long, mean street;
evening was closing in, and soon enough
a light rain fell—my hair was wet; no treat,
it seemed, remembering miles on miles of wandering,
always the evening, often in rain, on foot,
cheerless shop-windows unlit, and I, meandering.
In some old book (I thought) I've read of this—
this meaningless existence; I stood there wondering.
Meanwhile, quarrelsome people before me, pissed
(they shouted), left their places by time assigned;
two fought and swore. A couple of hot ones kissed,
and left. Withdrawing, one drawled out, "Unrefined."
I waited, hoping a bus still ran on that line.*

NOTE (by Joe Christopher): This sonnet uses imagery from the first part of C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*; in that book, the narrator, after the problems with those waiting for the bus, takes the bus that comes to a trip to a place in sight of Heaven. The last sentence of this sonnet leaves the destination a bit more ambiguous, but to have "hope" is perhaps positive in this theological position. (The uncertainty also makes it clear that this narrator is not the same person as Lewis's narrator.) Lewis's fiction imitates Dante's *Divine Comedy* in various ways, and this poem also imitates Dante—in different ways: (1) The title refers to the City of Dis, which is lower in Hell (in Dante's poem) than Lewis's story seems to be placed; (2) the opening "Halfway through my life" echoes the opening of Dante's poem; and (3) I write about this in a terza-rima sonnet (ABA BCB CDC DED EE), to echo Dante's use of terza-rima in his poem. (Dante does not use a couplet at the end of his sections—and, of course, his sections are far longer than fourteen lines.)

LAO TZU

by

David Sparenberg

Here is the field. These are the trees which grow in this field. This is the ocean. These are the waves which are made and which move by the making and movement of the perpetual and generative ocean. This is the field. These are the lives, the diversity of species, alive in the field. The field and the trees are one. The ocean and waves are one. The lives – the people walking, talking, aware and unaware, eating, procreating, are one with the field. The field is energy, the trees are energies.

The ocean is energy, the waves are energies. The lives – the diversities are energies. And the field, like a bridge, a stairway, a holy ladder, between upper and lower realities, is a sustaining and conveying energy: profound!

The field, it is a language. Trees are dialects. Ocean is a language. The waves are physical accents of excitation, forming, duration. The lives are vernacular terms, in a theater of dialogues, monologues, soliloquies: seeing, listening-sensations, self-overhearing!

Field, it is the language of an arc, of a platform, of a stage, globe, universe, a shaping, peopled with lives, with trees, with brindled billowing waves, articulate energies. Profound! Most profound! The field is consciousness: so the trees are, so the lives are. The ocean, it is consciousness too; so too the waves, consciousness directional—like yin and yang—and antithetical. The field, it is unconsciousness configured. And the lives, the ocean, the players, the waves, in the energy drama, on the energy stage: *Shiva!* The dancing mind, the green dragon – the OM dreamer atop the invisible volcano of *kundalini*, the *qi gong* swimmer – Space... configured.

The field is what it is: a field of energy. The trees are what they are, that there are no trees without field. That there are no lives (in the fluttering tapestry, the budding, bubbling balloons of diversity), that there are no waves, without ocean, without field. No oneness except through the imaginal, through multiplicity.

The ocean is what it is: extension and intensity, breathing out then breathing in. Thus there is no energy without one energy, no consciousness without one consciousness/unconsciousness; no anything, expressed, without the eternally unspoken. No democracy without the first of all flourishing, warring, embattled, recuperative democracies.

So, Heraclitus the Dark; rescued from archaic obscurity by the curiosity of Heidegger; understood that mystery resides inside of mystery, and proclaimed that "*Nature loves to hide,*" that "*The transformations of fire are, first of all, sea; and half of the sea is earth, half whirlwind...*" So saying, he named his doctrine Lao-Tzu, an Asian sage worth remembering and sharing with those who would be wise and cleverly reticent. Who would rather point to a serpent rising into lotus bloom than spill the beans and father much idle rhetoric.

Under any circumstances of honest perception and expression, it is enough to say I or this or that, and to know that my words have included you and regions of otherness-extensive, that circle around us in great coils of magnetic light and bubbling bonds of energy.

Call it, A Way. Or say nothing but look and smile. And charm far generations with the gift of a rightly oriented Oriental mystery where light and dark, field and particle, string and membrane, heartbeat and wink, are raindrops floating in the eyes of deities.

Or, as you enter another's vision, why kiss them prettily! Plant a rosette stamp upon their lips and say, "*This kiss was sent to you by Lao Tzu.*"

The Tear in the Sky

by

Ryder W. Miller

The King Carlsbad stood before the assembled with dark tidings.

“Our nation is about to fall to the Telring hoards. We were prophesized to survive. We strove to bring our light to these dark lands, but we have not gotten the help we needed,” he said.

“The Five Kingdoms will not come to our assistance?” asked a farmer in the crowd.

“They had their own concerns and they will not be able to prepare for the onslaught. We have sent our best men to The Tunnel to hold them there, but they were not many. We should be able to hold them in the canyon there.”

“What will become of us?” a lady asked.

“We will either need to do their bidding or we shall perish, but there is another option. We can flee to The Five Kingdoms. They will take us in. Our forces will hold the Telring off so we can escape,” said Carlsbad.

“What will you do Lord?”

“I will stay to guard the hold, as it was the oath of myself and my forbears.”

“But they will outnumber us.”

“I know, but it will make time for you to escape,” said Carlsbad.

“What of the prophecy? What of those

Emper said would come to protect us?”

“We will not find out soon enough if it will come true. Our scouts will not return soon enough to let us know what has transpired, but we need to make preparations to leave. Their ways are strange and disturbing. Our way of life will disappear. We cannot anticipate what will follow. Though the world is magical we only have ourselves to depend upon.”

“Those who will leave must prepare now. They will soon be upon us and we need hold them off so there is time for the women and children to escape,” echoed Daba the Queen.

“I will wait for Emper to return,” said a young man.

“I will gather what men we can to help protect the caravan,” said another.

“We have a week ahead of them. When they arrive they will slay all that they must. Our town will then be theirs,” said Carlsbad.

“What of Emper?”

“We hope that he will survive and join us, but we all know that he is a strange one who has smoked too much of the Burrely Weed. He has visions, but for these matters we need depend upon steel and brawn, for which we are in short supply.”

The assembled grew quiet.

"I will stay so the others have more time to make it to The Five Kingdoms," said a man.

Carlsbad smiled and said, "Raise your weapon if you will join us so the others have more time."

A score did, but most in the crowd shuddered.

"There still may be time for help to arrive."

"But from where? Those who stay will be doomed as well, but we will sacrifice so those who escape will have life," said Carlsbad angrily.

"We will show them we are the light," someone yelled in the crowd.

"Emper may have survived. Emper may have been right. He has been right before, even if he has not been heeded," said another.

"He did help us make peace with the Five Kingdoms," said another.

Carlsbad shrugged, "Maybe he was right. We do live in strange and magical times. But I do not think peace with the Telring is possible."

Carlsbad look at his wife Daba and there was a sadness in his face that none had seen before. Then his disposition changed to anger.

"Go, I tell you. Go while you still can. I have failed you, but I will help ensure your escape. Don't make me say so again. I command you. My queen Daba will lead you to the Five Kingdoms. We will send for you to return if we can make peace with the Telring, but that is not likely."

"Thank you liege for what you have done. We have really prospered for a generation at the Hold," said a woman in the crowd.

Carlsbad tried to smile in gratitude, but said instead, "Thank you, but I have failed you."

#

It took a day for most of the residents of the Hold to gather to depart. A few left on horseback, but most pushed carts or wagons. Most were woman and children, but there were also the lame, sick, and young. There were also a few warriors with them, but most of the warriors, only a score now, stayed with Carlsbad.

In the morning light the king watched the procession leave. He looked dour and perturbed as they made their way into the hills. They would need travel for a week before they entered the protection of the Five Kingdoms. The Kingdoms would need children who would grow into soldiers and mothers to replenish their kingdoms.

The Telring would not dare attack The Five Kingdoms directly. There would be all matters of reprisal. The Five Kingdoms never really like Carlsbad, an illegitimate son of one of their nobility. He dreamed of a freer world. He dreamed of peace through compromise. He thought there was too much conflict with the Telring and that peace was possible. That was why he had struck it alone out in these contested areas. He wanted to bring the light out here to the crossroads.

But even among the Telring there were those who were unaccounted for also. There were those who would commit vandalism to The Hold. The Telring had eventually decided to occupy the disputed areas. They would reclaim these areas and The Hold would cease to exist in the process.

Carlsbad and his people did not belong with either The Five Kingdoms, of which they were viewed as an offshoot, or the Telring who they found very foreign. His dream of a Utopian peace was realized for a time. Many were happy and strived at The Hold. There were marriages, children, alliances, and friendships.

The Five Kingdoms was like a military

state, but it had survived. Every man need be a warrior there and every woman a mother producing more warriors. The Telring did not dare challenge it and it did not know what to make of The Hold which it treated as an offshoot that for a time should be left alone and studied.

But the Telring had left The Hold alone for almost a generation. It had been a time of an uncertain peace. And then there was mad and silly Emper to chronicled the time. Emper was the child of a farmer and as a kid he reveled in games of warfare. He was so skilled that most knew to leave him alone. He could win duels he did not want to be in or he did not start. Since a child he had not started any contest. But then he went mad. He stopped cutting his hair, drank too much Mead, and smoked the Burrely Weed. He would rave on.

Carlsbad remembered his early days when he had also drank too much Mead and occasionally smoked the Burrely Weed. There were those moments where The Dream seemed like it was achieved. It was the idea that mankind could be at peace with each other. That happiness and peace were possible. Those were high and enjoyable times. One could believe that life could be enjoyed. That people could be happy. That there could be hope for a better world.

The Hold for a time was a fulfillment of that dream, and Emper was its spokesman. Many thought Emper was wild and crazy, but he had a way with people and words. Though he was part of the joke, he was telling the joke. He made people smile, sometimes cry, but usually reflect.

One night at a party where people were reading poetry Emper stood before the crowd laughing.

“We will survive. We will be appreciated. We can make peace.”

There was a smile on his face that few others there could match. It would have

seemed mad in The Five Kingdoms, but here in this Utopia by the riverside it seemed almost magical, for some even divine. There was a bemused look on his face, almost angelic. Emper had said that The Hold would be protected because it changed the world.

Emper had said a lot of things, especially after some Burrely Weed and Mead, but this was remembered. Many had taken it to heart. Emper tried to give up being a warrior, but he conceded that the world was what it was.

“Out of the sky they will come to help us,” Emper said in a stupor before a crowd on a night of a party.

Carlsbad often smiled when Emper’s name was mentioned. “It took all kinds,” he would say. He was too inspirational to be merely a town fool.

There had not been any attacks on The Hold, but if one traveled too far into the areas of the Telring there was the occasional reprisal. Things had changed in Telring with there new leaders who wanted The Hold.

On those party nights this seemed inconceivable to Carlsbad and Emper while reveling in the festivities.

Carlsbad for now had given up hope. Mad Emper had ridden out with the troops to see if an arrangement could be possible. It had been weeks before any of the scouts had returned. There were not big numbers involved here. The Telring could only muster a few thousand. The Hold had only a quarter of that.

The Five Kingdoms had a dozen thousand at their disposal, but they never really liked the residents of The Hold. They viewed it as a political protest. Some even saw it as a thorn in their side. Here they were arguing that peace could be made with the Telring, that a permanent army was not necessary. That a constant state of warfare could be avoided. But in this new generation the dream had disappeared. The wild Telring now attacked

members of the Hold if they homestead in the west.

When he thought of Emper, he could not forget those high times when The Hold was gathered in revelry and the dream of peace was realized, at least for a time. But now it seemed as if those times were over.

The Hold had grown quiet. There were only a score of men assembled waiting for direction. In what had been a market place filled with produce, there were only piles of food with no vendors. There were no screams of playing children. There were no women talking. The Hold was not completely silent, but the life that they all cherished was no longer there.

Carlsbad decided to hold a meeting to strategize. He was not sure how to hold the keep, but that was not really their goal either. They just needed to delay the onslaught so the women and children could make it to The Five Kingdoms. But there was still the hope that Emper would return with the forces necessary or be able to make the peace.

“What are our options Carlsbad?” asked one of the king.

“I don’t know yet. They should be able to hold them for sometime at the Tunnel,” said the King.

“But what about when they break through?”

“They will be happy with just taking The Hold. We will greet them and surrender. Their lusts should stop here,” said Carlsbad.

“Surrender?”

“If we fight them here they will go forward to catch the woman and children. If they think the battle is over they will leave the others alone. If necessary I will challenge their leader to a duel,” said Carlsbad who had declining gray hair.

“I will do so in your place,” said a stout

soldier.

“No it will be I,” said Carlsbad.

“Why not just join them in arms?” said another in the group.

“There are not enough of us. We must delay them here. We will have them wait here. But there is still hope yet. Maybe our forces have driven them back at The Tunnel. We still have to wait to hear from them,” said Carlsbad.

A few men took up posts to keep a look out for the scouts to return, but The Hold had grown silent. The pigeons had returned in force to the Hold, eating debris off the streets. There was no one to chase them away. A few of the domestic dogs had been abandoned, but the soldiers, when they could, shared their food with them.

Often Carlsbad could be seen at the high lookout himself waiting for the scouts to arrive. There was sadness about him, but also a deeply felt anger. His powerful silhouette could be easily recognized from a distance on the battlement.

It had been three days since the members of the Hold had left for The Five Kingdoms that a few of the scouts had arrived. There was great cheer among the new guardians of the Hold. Emper was among them, but though saddened to see the Hold empty there was a bright light about him. Though there were losses, somehow there were good tidings. Emper carried a large pack on his shoulders, but he did not seem burdened. Carlsbad asked them if there was time for a feast.

“At dinner we will hear your tidings,” he said to them giving them time to rest and prepare for what may be their last feast.

“We have good tidings and they can wait until dinner,” said Emper, though bedraggled as usual, but now there was a look of optimistic certainty in his face.

“We lost many, but we prevailed through

providence and assistance,” he said. “But the story could wait until dinner. We have traveled far and fast these three days to tell you these good tidings.”

Those still assembled at the Hold, all men, prepared a meal baking a lamb. The food was modest, but all were prepared for the good tidings that Emper would share. Carlsbad sat at one end of the table, while the seat of honor at the other side was left for Emper. It was decided that Emper would tell the tale before they ate. He moved to the middle of the table, finding a chair closer to The King, to tell his tale.

“The other men are on the way, we received help and we were victorious. They are on foot so they will still be a couple of days,” said Emper.

“How were you victorious?” asked the Carlsbad.

Emper began, “Our forces were joined at The Tunnel. Our prayers were answered. On the heights, above the canyon, we could see the Telring forces approaching from a distance. They were a few days away when we could see their dust. We knew that we could not defeat them, but in the crevices of the tunnel we could restrict them and hold them back if necessary. We could also clog up The Tunnel so they would not be able to make their way through.

“We had men on the cliffs and forces to block their way in the tunnel, but their numbers were larger than we were prepared for. As they had threatened, they had the forces necessary to destroy the Hold. We had hoped that we could hold them off at the Tunnel and maybe convince them to go back. We were successful because men had arrived.”

“Where they of The Five Kingdoms?”

Emper continued “No. We were not sure where they were from. But they came out of the sky. There was a tear in the sky. There was

a hole in the sky that they came through.”

“Magic!” said Carlsbad.

“Our prayers were answered. There were not many of them, maybe a thousand, but they were fierce to behold. They came with long poles, poleaxes of sorts, and metal hammers. We could never make such things. They wore heavy black “fabric”,” said Emper who put some their “cloth” on the table.

“What manner of cloth is this? It is tougher than any fabric I have ever seen.”

After trying to tear it, Carlsbad took out a knife and tried to cut the black shiny material, but unsuccessful at first he held the blade at a sharp angle and using his strength pierced the material.

“Not as strong as armor, but one cannot tear it with one’s hand. One could travel light with it and it shines. I bet it would keep one dry,” said Carlsbad.

“Yes it would,” agreed Emper.

“Tell me more,” said Carlsbad.

“They ran out to meet the Telring in the field before The Tunnel. They did not wish to wait in the Tunnel to ambush them. With these extra numbers we decided to start the battle in the field. If we needed to we could retreat to The Tunnel to hold them off.”

“Where they were from?” asked Carlsbad.

“They said they were from ‘N’Yauk.’ They were a thousand strong and ready for battle. The strange gear they wore disturbed the Telring. They came out of the sky and the Telring fled before them. They were impressive to look upon, but if you ask me not fully prepared for what was likely to transpire. They did not have swords or shields, only poleaxes and hammers as I have said.”

“Where are they now?”

“They returned from whence they had come through the sky. They ate a meal and

they returned. They didn't say much, but they ate a lot. They talked kind of strange, but did not say a lot. From 'N'Yauk' they said, but they said it with a strange accent. One said he was from 'Brook Land.' Some said 'The Island.' They did not want to build a fire, but they did so carefully. We ate 'Foul' and 'Stake' and they told us their story. They were men who died putting out a great fire. They actually put out fires. That was their original mission."

"I would have liked to have met them," said Carlsbad.

"We even said so, but they said they did not have time to rest. When they died in the big fire defending the "Two Towers" they were given a choice. They could rest or go forward to help others. Most chose not to rest. These were the men who decided to go forward. These were the men who went on to fight the good fight, our fight."

"I wish they could have stayed," said Carlsbad sadly.

"I do not think we will be hearing from the Telring for some time. There was thunder and lightning when the men from 'N'Yauk' and "The Island" arrived. I do not think they all will be returning either. There are other

battles for them to fight. They said there was no time for them to rest. There were other fires. There were other battles."

Carlsbad was silent for a moment and then he began with a pronouncement, "We will send for our people and invite those from The Five Kingdoms to come and join us. We will become an annex of The Five Kingdoms again and send word to The Telring. There are those that one cannot negotiate with. Those who join us from the Five Kingdoms will enjoy our freedoms for a while. Let us feast now. There are magical forces who care about our freedoms and struggles."

There was now merriment in the hall because the men were tired and hungry.

"One of them forgot this," said Emper giving a helmet to Carlsbad.

"What is this?" he said before they began to eat. "It is of one color and flexible, but it does not break easily. Strong enough, but not of metal. I have not seen this material before. Such foreign lettering as well. I wonder what it means?"

"NY FD."

--END--

WATERSTONE

by

David Sparenberg

The peerless attainment of the great work of alchemy is called lapis or philosopher's stone; or yet again "waterstone of the wise." I am, fortuitously, in possession of such a stone; although my waterstone is not a product of the alchemical alembic. Unless, that is to say, we can conceive the whole of Earth—consisting of atmosphere, land and water—as living alchemy.

I discovered my stone; if indeed it did not wait patiently and discover me; found, that is, at the outer tip of the Dungeness Spit, along Puget Sound in the state of Washington. An artifact of organic crafting, refined by the iodized perpetual motion of the Pacific Ocean, my waterstone is of solid weight, elliptical in shape, and of a size to fill an adult human palm. In coloration, it is gray, with tints and scattered patches of egg shell white, and rings that range from charcoal to black. The alteration of these colors in patterns-concentric gives to the surface an appearance of waves being viewed from a far distance, as if looked down upon from heaven. In the middle of these wavelike circles is an elevated mass that seems as if an island centered in a surrounding but petrified sea. Because this is the beauty of the stone, and in that beauty the stone's mystery, I take it to be an act of magic, inscribed with oceanographic-geography and geophysical history.

Since I now reside, in voluntary exile, in a desert place, my plant-companions here—consisting of coleus, Mexican petunia and thriving aloe vera—are frequently in need of liquid comforting and the gentle libations of rain like prayers. Because of this, I have introduced them each to my precious waterstone, and enjoy the delightful fantasy that while I sleep and sometimes dream—as one whose slumbering odyssey must cross through storms and sail, nocturnal, upon the flowing breath of shore directed crests—that while I am removed to my other life in dreaming, my waterstone; a friend this now two decades and more; tells tales to moonlighted greenery of places that do not know of dryness, being oceans vast and restless with the pulse of mythic dance.

The Lord of All He Surveyed

by JA Howe

Ian Katapoulis was out in his boat in the Mediterranean. He had a route that he generally followed, going around the islands. The water wasn't as clear as it might have been once, but he still found it lovely. A hazy sun shone down on his face, as greenish-gray waves rippled in the deep blue waters. A school of fish jumped playfully in the waters up ahead, near one of the reefs. He could hear the fishermen calling to one another as they sat in the water, and yelling at motorists and tourists who just wanted to fool around.

Every day, the merchant had left more and more of his work to his children. Ian, when asked what he did out on the Med, used to say he was keeping an eye on it for the gods -- actually he was making sure nobody stole any of the treasure that had sunk with boats during the Peloponnesian and Aegean wars, and the countless other battles and skirmishes that had happened in the country's history. At least, they couldn't -- Ian, being Greek, was of course entitled to the treasures of his land.

He swore loudly when something banged into the side of the boat. He whirled, fist raised, and stopped cold.

A pair of stingrays had jumped into his boat.

Ian didn't have a large craft. He liked to be close to the water -- but not this close!

The small rays -- for their kind they were small, anyway -- were flopping silently around on the deck of the twelve-foot boat. Their tails slashed against the mast and one of them hit a sail.

Thwop.

Tiny eyes stared at him.

Ian gave it no other thought: he jumped

into the water.

No life-vest; he had them but rarely wore them on good days.

He dove very far towards the bottom of the Mediterranean, trying to calm down. To jump from a ship in panic is one thing, to suffocate because of it is another. *Concentrate on the pretty water*, he said to himself. *Look at the fish!*

He was right near one of the prettiest islands, one known well to tourists. He saw a diver some ways off, taking pictures.

Swimming on, his heartbeat slowed a bit now, Ian was startled again when he turned. Something glinted in the water.

Swimming closer, he found a golden anchor. He wasn't sure whether he was hallucinating or not.

He made note of the spot, which was near the edge of a rock face, and a school of brightly-colored fish swam there. The two rays were thankfully not on his boat when he returned to it. He watched the sun set brilliant pink and gold, and headed in as the other fishermen brought in the day's catch.

"It's a sign from Athena, you shouldn't touch it," said one of his friends.

"I think it's a sign from Poseidon," said another, "and definitely you shouldn't touch it. The rays were obviously guardians."

"Be very wary of that god," said the first friend, who was a fisherman himself.

"Remember that storm that came up off the coast of Sicily without warning. . . ?"

He went to the temple of Poseidon. Offered the god a bit of dried fish hide he'd made into a vest, which was his hobby.

The god appeared. "I see you have found

an anchor," he boomed. "You are a fisherman, a sailor by trade, and I do not know where it comes from. You may take it." He waved a barrel-thick arm carelessly.

Fickle as the wind is Poseidon Earthmaker, Ian thought but did not say so. He bowed. "Thank you, Great Poseidon," he said.

That night when he went to sleep an owl appeared to him. "I am the Owl of Athena," it said. "She asked me to send her greetings and her wisdom: those who take something from the sea always must give something back. Be careful what you take."

He woke up thinking about the stingrays again, and went to the temple of Athena, made an offering. This time, he gave her a bowl of fine olives he'd picked that morning.

She appeared to him.

"You had a dream last night about me, didn't you?" she said. "Think on what that could possibly mean." And with that she disappeared.

He sighed, and left. *As cryptic as a raven*, he thought.

That day, he went out again.

One of the stingrays jumped into his boat again.

Ian had to think fast; if the ray came near him he'd die. Even if it didn't intend to do so, the barb on the tail would kill him. On the other hand –

"O Poseidon," he said to the waters around him, "if I am meant to have this golden thing, let the rays leave me alone."

There was silence. The stingray in his boat stared impassively at him.

It isn't bothering me, he thought.

Ian decided to go down. Then he remembered the other message. "O Athena, I promise to give something back!" he cried as he dove. *That should help*.

The waters were dark this time, few of the pretty fish out. He caught sight of some of the golden ones swimming nearby, but he was on the wrong side. *There must be sharks out*

today, he thought, un-worried; the sharks of this area were small and relatively harmless.

His goal was still there, the anchor. It gleamed as if beckoning to him in the waters nearby. He could almost taste the riches it would bring him. He had brought up things before, but not like this.

Who uses a golden anchor, he wondered? Surely it would be too soft a metal -- which probably meant it had simply been decorative.

Silently, he thanked Poseidon for this great opportunity. The anchor came out easily, sliding from a place where it had seemed wedged, like a square of butter.

It truly is a gift of the gods, then, he thought.

He began to bring up the anchor when an eel came up behind him. It got his arm and he screamed underwater. Bubbles rose toward the surface -- not a good idea.

Ian swam off hurriedly, just a little ways-- still holding the chain of the golden anchor. It bit at his hands, but he'd not let this go!

The eel came at him again. He fought with it, and it got him again. The pain in his arm was dreadful.

He realized, as bubbles formed in his mouth and his head felt like it was being squeezed like a grapefruit, that he could have just stayed on the surface in his boat and died fast there, instead of this horror. So he let go the anchor and fought for his life, at least.

The chain had wrapped itself around one of his legs though. It had snapped off something, and the anchor didn't weigh too much, but it was dragging at him.

No, I don't want it -- keep your anchor! he cried silently to the gods, to the sea, to anything that might be listening.

The anchor remained attached to his leg, but it seemed to weigh less. He found himself rising, his vision maroon and black.

Just as he realized that was the bottom of his boat he was seeing, it was too late. He slammed right into it and gasping, swallowed water. He choked, the reflexive coughing

drowning him.

When he got to the Elysian Fields, the gods said to him, "why did you take the anchor?"

"Because I was a fool," he replied. "I was greedy. I thought my offerings would be enough. I thought, because the stingray stayed, I must be meant to have the anchor."

Poseidon, an eel on each side of him, laughed heartily. "The fickle delights of man! You did not even ask about it!"

You told me I could take it; you didn't say your guards were about it!

An owl flew down and cocked its head at him. Slowly it became the vision of the Goddess Athena.

She smiled sadly at him. "You did not think hard on my words. When taking something from the gods, there is always a price to pay. It is not up to you to name that price."

Ian simply nodded.

--END--

Acting Out Among The Ferae Naturae

by Colin James

I'm expecting a parcel.
It will contain
refurbished sandals,
hazelnuts from
Tolkien's garden
and some decent tea.
Neither vernacularisms
nor generic abstractions
can prevent my
beseeching me.

MADONNA

by

David Sparenberg

Fruited Madonna of the Earth
lays naked in a meadow of wild flowers.
A thousand and one honey bees
have alighted on her swollen abdomen.
Like fuzzy, pollinated angels
they gather in droning chant
to celebrate the coming of life.
(Her child will inherit sweetness
as a power over death.)

First milk, miniaturized to resemble rivers of light,
is hotly sucked from heavy breasts
by a smiling sun. Her
lips part, in panting breath, as
her womb, in mantic rapture, opens.

Another dream of God contracts, is pained with revelation,
and moistens the virgin beauty
of her fire-brown eyes.
Fingers dig and fists clench tight
compressing threads of grass. Here
will grow an altar of vines. And there
in leafy mounds
a pilgrim-shrine to venerate Our Lady
of purple grapes and gold-red apples.

BREKKA

by

Dag Rossman¹

My first conscious sensation was of my face being gently, but firmly licked by a huge tongue. At the time I was not struck by the incongruity of the experience, but my mind was still numbed by the cold that embraced me. Unable to move my limbs—or any other part of my body—I forced open my eyelids, thus discovering I was encased in a block of ice and that the tongue periodically caressing my head was wielded by a gigantic cow.

I puzzled over my icy casing for a time, then—in an instant—I remembered everything that had brought me to this pass: the terrifying encounter with Nidhögg, the great black dragon of Niflheim; the agonizing death of my uncle and mentor, Ragnar Rune-Wise; and the numbing ice-rune that Ragnar had used to freeze me into a block of ice, thus stopping the spread of the dragon's venom and deferring my fate. But of the great cow, I had no memory at all.

I opened my mouth to speak, but frozen as I was—and my vocal cords unused for Odin only knows how long—all I could manage was a squeaky little: “H-hello, cow. W—who are you?”

“So you’re alive then?” a warm, deep voice queried. “I’d almost given up on you.”

“I-I didn’t know c-cows could talk,” I

stammered befuddled.

“And so they can’t,” the voice giggled. “The ice must have addled your brains, indeed, if you can’t tell a girl from a cow.”

Then, apparently realizing for the first time that she was seated outside my range of vision, the speaker knelt beside me—and I looked up into the full face and lake-blue eyes of a young giantess. In all my travels with Uncle Ragnar, we had never wandered into Jötunheim, thus I knew of the giantfolk only by repute and was ill-prepared to encounter the reality. And, numbed as my brain still was, I could do no better than burble: “But you’re no girl . . . you’re a giant!”

“Well, I like that,” she retorted and rose to her feet. “First you think I’m a cow, and now you can’t tell a female giant from a male. Are you really trying to insult me, or are you just easily confused?” She frowned down at me, but the teasing tone of her voice and the crinkling at the corner of her eyes led me to believe she wasn’t really angry.

As for my being confused, I may well have been—but if so, it wasn’t about her gender. Though still rather young by giant standards—for they are a long-lived kindred—she was unquestionably, magnificently female. Accustomed as I was to meeting human-sized

¹ “Brekkā” is the chronological sequel to “Dragonseeker” (Mythic Circle #30) and the second of ten stories making up Dag Rossman’s *THE DRAGONSEEKER SAGA: NEW TALES OF THE NINE WORLDS* (Skandisk, Inc., Bloomington, MN), which is hot off the press.

females during my travels with Uncle Ragnar—not to mention seeing the even shorter elf-maids—I was completely awestruck by this giantess. Her face and figure were like those of a human maiden, only writ large—nearly twice as large—but in such a way as to render her more statuesque and regal. There was no coarseness about her features despite her great size, and her fine white-gold hair hung down in two long braids. Is it any wonder that an inexperienced and lonely young man such as I, was smitten by this lovely creature?

I called out: “Wait, please. Don’t go. I didn’t intend any insult. My tongue is still so frozen I can’t talk straight.”

“Oh, I wasn’t planning on leaving,” she said. “I just stood up so you could see me better.” Then, kneeling again by my side, she asked: “How did you ever get frozen in a block of ice to begin with?”

“It’s a long tale,” I sighed. And I proceeded to tell her my life story, or at least as much of it as I could remember. She listened patiently, asking only an occasional question, expressing horror and sympathy when I related my uncle’s death, and being gratifyingly indignant about Nidhögg’s treatment of me.

“Well, he’d just better not show his scaly snout around here . . .,” she muttered.

“I thank you for your concern about me,” I said. “But who are you, who is this remarkable cow that is licking the ice off my body, and where in the Nine Worlds are we?”

“Oh, those are easy questions to answer, Dag.” I had told her my name during the rendering of my tale, but it sounded so pleasant to hear it tumbling from her lips. “I am called Brekka, and I am the daughter of the giantess Skadi and the Vanir god Njörd.”

“But that makes you a goddess!” I blurted.

“Why, I suppose it does, in a way, but my parents parted long before I was born--and because my mother raised me among her people here in Jötunheim, I usually think of myself as a giantess.”

I interrupted: “You said ‘here in Jötunheim,’ Brekka. I thought Giant Home was mountainous.”

“And so it is—in the interior—but there are stretches of rich meadowland along the coast that are ideal for grazing. That’s why we are here, Audumla and I.” Brekka paused, then went on: “And I do so love the sight and sound and smell of the sea. I must have gotten that from my father.”

“Audumla and you? You are talking about this cow, aren’t you?”

Brekka nodded, and watched comprehension dawning on my face.

“By the missing eye of Odin! Do you mean to tell me that this is the Cow, the same Audumla whose milk sustained the First Giant, Ymir, and who licked Odin’s grandfather, Buri, free from a block of ice, way back when the Nine Worlds were created?”

Brekka grinned from ear to ear, and on a giantess that is a huge smile to behold. “The very same cow, and I am her milkmaid.” She went on: “And it won’t be long before Audumla licks you free from the ice, too.”

The prospect of being able to move again—and to find a place where I could get warm—gladdened my heart, and I told Brekka so. But then I had an awful thought: “Uncle Ragnar froze me to keep Nidhögg’s venom from reaching my heart. What’s to stop it from doing just that once Audumla has freed me from the ice?”

Brekka turned to the great cow and lowed inquiringly. Audumla mooed a response, and I’d swear she wrinkled her soft brown nose.

“You needn’t worry about that,” Brekka reassured me. “Audumla says she licked all the nasty-tasting stuff from your arm, so it won’t spread any farther.”

“Oh, thank her for me,” I said, choked with relief. “It will be so good to get back to normal.” While Brekka was translating my words into bovine, I tried to flex my now-freed upper limbs. “Brekka,” I gasped, panic stricken, “something is wrong. My right arm

moves normally, but I can't even feel my left arm below the elbow, let alone move it!"

Brekka and Audumla both looked at me sadly with compassionate eyes—one pair blue, the other brown—as they conversed briefly.

"Audumla says she is terribly sorry about your arm, but she could only stop the spread of the venom, not heal the damage it had already caused."

I stared in disbelief at my gnarled left hand, realized that I would be crippled for life, and wept. How soon the gratitude I should have felt for my life being miraculously spared gave way to despair over the lesser loss that I was forced to suffer. But I was young—and my loss so fresh—that perhaps I can be forgiven for not accepting it more philosophically.

Brekka put a comforting arm around my shoulders as she helped me sit up. Audumla gave my lower limbs a final licking to remove the last remnants of their icy covering, then nudged me gently with her nose. Steadying myself against Brekka, I tried to stand—but I was dizzy from sitting up, and my legs too weak from disuse. Now that I was no longer protected from the sea breeze by the barrier of ice, the wind cut me to the bone . . . and I began to shiver uncontrollably.

"This will never do," Brekka declared and, standing, she swept me up into her strong arms and carried me, as lightly as a mother carries her small child, along a grassy track until we reached her cabin on the headland overlooking the sea.

Despite her illustrious ancestry, the sod-roofed cabin was small—by giant standards—and very simply furnished. But I had little eye for such details at that moment, being more concerned to stop my violent shivering.

Unaccustomed as she must have been to non-bovine company, Brekka seemed to know just what to do for my frozen condition. Setting me down atop the only bed in the cabin, she proceeded to divest me of my clammy clothing, then tumbled me beneath the

covers and—pausing only long enough to slip off her own clothes—wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close against her own warm body.

Not having shared a bed with a woman since my mother weaned me, I found the situation quite awkward and embarrassing—and through my chattering teeth I tried to convey this to Brekka.

"Don't be silly," she hissed. "This is the only way I can warm you up quickly enough to save you. By the time I could build up a big enough fire to be useful, you would have already slipped into the Cold Sleep that ends in death."

That ended my protests. And, as I began to shiver less and less, I had to admit that there were far worse places I could be than nestled snug in Brekka's embrace—for she was soft and warm, oh, so deliciously warm.

* * *

I don't know if Audumla's milk contained magical properties or if there was something special about the ingredients Brekka added to it in preparing the rich porridge that was the staple of our diet, but whatever it was . . . I thrived. Not only did I regain my strength and stamina—which I sorely needed to keep up with Brekka as we wandered through the meadowlands, beachcombed and fished along the seashore, and even explored the foothills of the great mountains that lay inland of Audumla's Lea—I actually gained weight. But, what with the almost unrelenting sea breeze and the cold, glacier-born air flowing down from the mountains, Audumla's Lea remained perpetually chilly, and if Brekka hadn't cut down her spare sheep's hide overtunic to provide me with protective leggings, boots, mittens, and a jacket and cap, I should never have survived in that land.

Brekka remained concerned about my health and, even after I regained my strength, she insisted each night that we share the one

bed so that she could keep me warm. Well, she certainly did that, though whether or not I would have frozen had one of us slept wrapped in a bear skin robe by the firepit is impossible to say—for it was never put to the test. We had come to enjoy each other's companionship so much during our daytime wanderings, that snuggling together as we drifted off to sleep seemed the most natural thing in the Nine Worlds to do.

And so the weeks passed, and I was happy—except for my crippled left arm. There were so many simple things I could no longer do for myself that at times I brooded and felt that I was less than a man. Not that Brekka ever gave any sign that she thought less of me for my limitations. No, she actually seemed to enjoy being able to help me when I had problems—though she wisely always let me try first, then ask for her help. I've often wondered if she were born with her caring nature—and thus was asked to look after Audumla—or if tending to the cow's needs had brought out that nature in Brekka.

One day my moodiness threatened to spoil our outing. Brekka tried to cheer me up but, when I persisted in feeling sorry for myself, she left me to my own devices—which mostly consisted of staring at the sea. She said that she was heading back to milk Audumla, which she did twice each day, and that she would see me at supper. I felt guilty about upsetting her—she who deserved nothing from me but my gratitude and affection—and that just added to my feelings of worthlessness. It was a bad afternoon.

As I approached Brekka's cabin, I was jarred out of my apathy by the sight of a golden-maned horse grazing contentedly in the meadow. Pausing by the door, I could hear the murmur of voices. Brekka's voice didn't sound upset, so the newcomer apparently posed no threat. It did no good to stand outside and wonder, so I pushed open the door and entered the room. Brekka sat by our small wooden table talking with a tall, cloaked man who was

warming himself by the firepit.

Brekka looked up with a smile on her face: "Look, Dag, we have a visitor! And he's come all the way from Asgard especially to see you."

Turning his full attention on me, the man flashed a golden smile, and spoke out: "So you're Dag Ormseeker, the young man who journeyed all the way to Niflheim, and rebuked Nidhögg at the verge of Hvergelmir. That was boldly—if not wisely—done."

Thus was I both praised and chided by the stranger in the same breath. Who was he? From Asgard, Brekka had said, so most likely he was one of the Aesir gods. And which of them has teeth of gold? Heimdall, if the stories tell us true. By the Nine Worlds, this was Heimdall, guardian of the Rainbow Bridge . . . but what could he possibly want with me?

"Has a troll got your tongue?" he teased, then relented. "No, that's all right. Sometimes keeping your own counsel in the presence of a stranger can be the wisest course until you know the direction the current is running . . . though I'm hardly the threat that Nidhögg was."

"But why do you want to see me? How did you even know I existed?"

"Oh, we've been hearing all about you and your exploits from Ragnar Rune-Wise ever since his spirit arrived in Valhalla."

"Uncle Ragnar is in Valhalla? How is he? Is he happy? I wouldn't think he'd like to be spending all his days fighting—he was always a peaceable man at heart."

"He still is," Heimdall assured me. "He entertains the restored warriors each evening with his storytelling, then spends most of his days swapping lore with Odin, Freyja, or me—though from time to time he just likes to explore Asgard on his own."

"That's a great comfort to know," I replied. "I have been carrying a heavy burden of guilt and shame for having led him to his death."

"And now it's time to lay down that burden, my boy. Your uncle has long since

forgiven you for your part in that tragic episode—after all, he knows full well that he also made some flawed choices—so you also need to forgive yourself. Ragnar worries about you still, so it would give him peace of mind, too.”

Brekka knelt beside me, clasped me in her arms, and murmured fervently: “Oh, listen to him, Dag. Listen to him.”

“I’ll try, but that’s all I can promise,” I said simply. “It’s easier said than done.”

“That’s very true, Dag,” responded Heimdall, “but perhaps it will be easier once you’ve dealt with the other problem that has been troubling you so sorely.”

“Do you mean . . . my arm?”

“Exactly,” said Heimdall. “How would you like to have your arm working as good as new . . . or even better?”

I gasped, and Brekka exclaimed: “Can you really do that?”

“I can’t do it myself, but there’s a remarkable smith living in Asgard who repairs damaged weapons and armor each night for the warriors who feast in Valhalla, so they can fight with each other again the next day. He’s heard your story from Ragnar, and he thinks he could fashion a new arm for you from living metal.”

“Living metal?” Brekka and I gasped simultaneously. “Is that possible?”

“Well,” Heimdall replied with another of his blinding smiles. “We know that the dwarves fashioned a new head of hair for Thor’s wife Sif from living gold, so it surely can be done. But the smith—who’s no dwarf, by the way—isn’t planning to use gold. He says it’s too soft for the prolonged hard use a forearm would get.”

“But, by the burning breath of Nidhögg, what other living metal is there?” I demanded.

“Iron, my boy, living iron from one of the trees that grow in the Ironwood. If you can bring him a tree limb from the Ironwood, he seems confident that he can forge a new limb for you.”

“Oh, Dag, how wonderful!” breathed Brekka. “I know how much it would mean to you to have the full use of both arms again.”

Actually, my first thought was how strange—and even a bit scary—it would seem to have an iron hand and wrist. But then, I reflected, it couldn’t have any less feeling than what I had now and it would be a lot more useful.

“Well, it’s bound to be an improvement, that’s for sure,” I conceded, less than graciously. “Just exactly how do I find the Ironwood, Heimdall? It’s somewhere in Jötunheim, isn’t it?”

Brekka clapped her hands gleefully. “Of course it is, silly. And I can guide you right to it.”

“Guide me? But don’t you have to look after Audumla? She’d get awfully uncomfortable if she weren’t milked on schedule.”

“Oh, dear, I’d forgotten all about Audumla, poor thing.” Brekka looked perplexed.

“That should be no problem,” Heimdall assured her. “I’m due to return to Asgard tomorrow, so I’ll see about having one of the valkyries sent down to relieve you of your duties for as long as it takes to help Dag complete his quest. As soon as she arrives, you’ll be free to go.”

Brekka clasped her hands. “Oh, thank you, Heimdall, thank you. I would have felt awful abandoning either Dag or Audumla.”

“I quite understand,” responded Heimdall. “Ragnar and I would have been less than easy at the thought of Dag wandering through Jötunheim without having a giant to vouch for him, and to protect him at need. He’s a fine young fellow, no doubt, but he has shown a certain knack for getting himself into trouble.”

It’s never much fun having your faults pointed out—especially in front of someone you want very much to think well of you—but Heimdall did it so gently that I simply bit my tongue and looked sheepish. Nothing was to

be gained by losing my temper and behaving like a churl.

His message delivered, Heimdall paid his respects to Audumla, mounted his steed, then rode off about his business. But, before departing, he told Brekka and me that, once we had secured a limb of living iron, he would meet us at a certain meadow on the slopes of Fornfjell, a great mountain that lay not many leagues beyond the Ironwood. When I asked how he would know when to meet us, he just laughed and said he would come when we called his name. And before I could say anything further, he galloped off. I had forgotten that the god whose hearing is so keen it was said he could hear grass grow, could surely hear his name being shouted across the Nine Worlds.

* * *

Three mornings later, the valkyrie Hild arrived in dramatic fashion, swooping down on her great horse, who scarcely allowed Hild time to dismount before beginning to graze contentedly on the rich grass of Audumla's Lea. The giantess and valkyrie greeted each other warmly, but, strangers that we were, Hild and I merely exchanged polite and formal greetings. I had the sense that she didn't entirely approve of me and, for my part, I felt rather shy around her. Perhaps it was because of the circumstances under which I last met one of her band, or it may have been because the only time one usually sees a valkyrie is when you are about to die . . . or just after you have done so! An uncomfortable feeling, in any event.

We introduced Hild to Audumla, and bid the great cow our farewells. When we saw tears welling up in Audumla's big brown eyes, we tried to assure her we would return. Shouldering the packs we had kept ready since Heimdall left (and our blanket roll, which Brekka tied across one shoulder), we began our trek to the Ironwood.

Of that journey I remember few details, for it was mostly uneventful. I do remember the stark beauty of the land, and Brekka's sheer pleasure at being able to point out places she knew and describe events that had taken place there. It became increasingly obvious to me that despite the huge size differences that exist between giants and humans, the way they relate to their surroundings—both the physical landscape and the cultural history that permeates it—is the same.

We wandered free from cares and responsibilities—save for needing to reach the Ironwood—and I sometimes found myself wishing that we might never arrive. I feared that once we had the iron branch in hand and carried it to Asgard, our lives would never be quite the same . . . and I was truly immersed in being with my Brekka in the eternal present. How I wish I had heeded my instincts!

Then, one day, we emerged from a mountain pass to see lying before us a vast gray, mist-enshrouded forest, which covered the valley floor and lower foothills. At the foot of the pass, serving almost as a boundary marker between forest and mountain, was a huge burial mound, which Brekka told me was called Eggther's Howe, named for the giant who lives there and guards the forest from intruders.

As we drew closer to Eggther's Howe, Brekka and I began to hear the sound of a harp issuing from the mound. It was quite a lively air, so we were grinning at each other by the time we caught sight of the harper, who had been lying atop the grassy mound, and who rolled over into a sitting position when he became aware of our presence.

"Well, if it isn't a young giantess and her human companion! It's not often I get visitors. No-o," he drawled reflectively and pointed his harp at a red rooster perched on a tree limb overhanging the mound, "usually it's just old Fjalar here to keep me company . . . and me to entertain the both of us. Whatever brings the two of you to Eggther's Howe?"

Brekka introduced us and started to explain our quest, but nothing would do for Eggther save he hear the whole story from me—all the way back to the beginning. As he said, visitors were few and far between, so any new tales were to be savored . . . and stored up in memory against the long period of drought before the next newcomer wandered by.

“So you need a limb from one of the trees in the Ironwood, eh? Well, that shouldn’t prove an impossible feat.” Eggther paused when he saw the expressions of delight on our faces. “But you mustn’t assume it’s as simple as walking into the forest and breaking off the first limb that takes your fancy. Oh my, no. Before you remove anything, you must get permission from the Queen of the Ironwood.”

“What queen is that, Eggther?” asked Brekka. “I had never heard there was a queen in the Ironwood.”

Eggther coughed and looked embarrassed. “Well, most other folk do refer to Angrboda as the Hag of the Ironwood—she is half troll, half giantess, after all—but ever since she paired off with Loki and bore him those three famous children, Angrboda has felt she deserved to be made a queen, even if she had to do it herself. That way, I guess, it makes it much easier for her to lord it over the Jarnvidjur, the band of troll-women who share the Ironwood with her.” Eggther sighed: “At any rate, since she and I are neighbors, so to speak, I long ago decided things would be a lot more peaceful in these parts if I just went along with whatever Angrboda wanted to call herself.” He slowly shook his head and reflected: “That woman really does have a temper!”

“She does sound formidable,” Brekka opined.

“Oh, she is that. But if you remember to bow and scrape and flatter her—and avoid staring at her nose, which is pretty formidable, too—she may well decide to grant your wish. It all depends what kind of mood she’s in.”

“How do we go about finding Angrboda in such a vast forest?” Brekka asked.

“Why you just follow the trail that leads north from my howe until you reach the very center of the Ironwood—don’t take any side tracks—and there she’ll be. If you don’t find her right away, don’t worry—she’ll soon find you. She has a nose for anything or anybody strange or different that enters her forest. She’d be much harder to avoid than to find.” Eggther paused and observed the dimming light. “But the day is rapidly waning, so if you don’t mind sharing my simple fare and are willing to sleep beneath the stars, you’re welcome to spend the night here on my howe. Then you can be fresh and rested when you meet Angrboda, which wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Besides,” he admitted almost sheepishly, “I am enjoying your company so much that I am reluctant to let you go. You said that you are an apprentice storyteller, Dag, so I’m sure we could while away an enjoyable evening swapping tales. Over the years I’ve heard some really strange ones I’ve been wanting to share.”

Eggther’s last comments removed any lingering doubts I might have had about the wisdom of accepting his overnight hospitality. Since Brekka seemed content with the idea, we agreed to stay. As it turned out, we were very glad we did. Eggther was a most genial host, a skilled harpist, and a wonderful storyteller. I learned more that evening about the foibles and farings of kings and commoners throughout Jötunheim than I would have believed possible . . . and thus my store of giant lore expanded many times over.

The next morning after breakfast, we bid farewell to Eggther after promising we would return someday to show him my new arm and tell him “how the story turned out.” Brekka and I walked slowly but steadily along the trail Eggther had pointed out. We had easy going for the most part, since the trail was well-worn from centuries of use by Angrboda and the troll-women. But I think we would not have paid much more attention to a rugged path, so rapt was our focus on the forest itself.

How can I describe the Ironwood in a way that would convey some sense of its strangeness and unearthly beauty? Everything we saw was some shade of gray—not only the ever-present mist, but every limb, every leaf, every flower. At first the unrelenting grayness seemed oppressive—until the first light breeze slid sinuously through the forest, gently shaking every leaf in its path. Then the woodland sang, in a thousand chiming voices. Brekka and I were enchanted by that sound, which haunts my dreams to this very day. The breeze passed and the voices muted—for a time—then a deeper ringing voice sounded from ahead of us, and the leaves took up the song again, resonating to that unknown voice.

Holding hands—both for closeness and to buoy up each other’s courage—Brekka and I advanced upon the source of the deeper voice, which soon led us to a clearing in the forest. At its center was an ill-constructed timbered hall, but we could spare only a glance for the ramshackle dwelling, our attention being caught by the strange creature straddling a bench in front of the hall. In her hand she clutched a padded wooden club, with which she stroked a large bronze gong suspended in a wooden frame, whenever the vibrations from her previous stroke had faded away. She was so focused on using the gong to coax the whole forest to sing, that we had a few moments to observe her, before a gentle breeze carried our odors into the clearing and made her aware of our presence.

I had heard many stories about trolls, but this was my first encounter with one . . . and I can only say that the tales didn’t do them justice. Angrboda was probably taller than Brekka—though slouched on her bench as she was, I couldn’t be sure—but her over-sized head looked to be too heavy for her humped shoulders to support. And Eggther had been right about her nose; broad it was at the base, from which it tapered some three feet to its pole like tip, and it was covered with huge, hairy warts. Her complexion was dusky,

though whether more green or purple I could not say—not even when I beheld her up close. Her lank gray hair was matted and tangled with leaves or moss—and later I even saw a mushroom or two poking up from her scalp. All in all, she was by far the most grotesquely unappetizing-looking woman I had ever seen.

Angrboda wore a shapeless gray robe which, even at that distance, looked as if it hadn’t been washed in years. When we drew closer, the odor emanating from her suggested that she hadn’t bathed herself any more recently than the robe, although the nauseating stench of decaying earth may have been simply the odor that I had been told was characteristic of trolls.

The knowledge that Loki had fathered three of her children filled me with awe of the Trickster—either at the strength of his stomach, or the quirkiness of his taste. There is an old saying: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but that day I learned that the believability of old sayings can sometimes be stretched beyond the breaking point.

Angrboda beckoned Brekka and me to approach her and, once we had introduced ourselves, she had us sit on either side of her on the bench. Like Eggther, Angrboda wanted to know why we had come to the Ironwood, and I was required to recite the whole story once again. When I reached the part about the crippling of my left forearm by dragon venom, she insisted that I show her the injured appendage.

Clasping my gnarled hand in hers, Angrboda stroked it with two fingers and exclaimed: “Poor lad, poor lad. Such an awful thing to happen to such a nice young man.”

“I thank your highness for your sympathy and good will,” I replied. “Dare I hope then that you would be willing to let me have a branch from one of your trees, so I can have a new arm made?”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you, to have a new arm? And I do want to please such a handsome young fellow . . . but you know,

we can't just let everyone in the Nine Worlds wander in here and walk off with all our trees and bushes. Oh, my, no. Soon there wouldn't be any Ironwood at all, and then where would I live?

I was at a loss for words, but the disappointment on my face said it all.

"Still, I don't suppose it would hurt to let you have one itty-bitty tree limb . . . for a price," Angrboda looked at me coyly, then squeezed my thigh. "Umm, you look almost good enough to eat, but all things considered, I'm more inclined to pop you into my bed than into my cooking pot. Why don't you give me a little kiss to help me make up my mind?"

"Now you just wait a minute," Brekka snapped indignantly. "Dag isn't for your pot or your bed. He's mine . . . and I won't let you have him." Despite the menacing circumstances I was thrilled to hear Brekka's declaration. I had become increasingly aware of how much this beautiful, warm-hearted giantess meant to me, but—despite our closeness—we had never talked directly of love, so I had not been sure until then of the depth of her feelings for me.

"Well, if that's the way you feel," huffed Angrboda, folding her arms, "you can keep him. But I will have that kiss, at least, if he wants to remove a limb from any of my trees."

"I guess that sounds reasonable," I said, and I was about to screw up my courage for the deed when Brekka intervened.

"No, Dag, don't do it! She's trying to trick you. They say that if your lips ever meet a troll-woman's, you'll be under her spell forever."

"They say, they say," Angrboda mocked Brekka, then turned to me. "Are you going to listen to old wives' tales? Make up your mind, boy, whether you want a branch or not, 'cause I haven't got all day. Well, do I get a kiss or don't I?"

"Let me just be sure I understand our bargain here. If I give you a kiss, we get to take a limb from one of these trees and leave

the Ironwood without any interference . . . from you or any of your subjects. Is that right?"

"Yes, yes," Angrboda agreed impatiently. "Now let's get on with it." And she leaned toward me with closed eyes and puckered lips.

"No, Dag, no!" gasped Brekka, as I stood up and kissed the troll-queen . . . right on the tip of her warty nose.

Angrboda opened one eye, and huffed: "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm not waiting for anything, except my tree limb," I replied. "I just gave you your kiss."

"What!" shrieked the troll-queen. "You call that a kiss? You never touched my lips."

"Our agreement never said where I was to kiss you, just that I would do so. And I have. So I've kept my part of our bargain, and now it's time for you to keep yours."

Behind Angrboda's back, Brekka beamed and blew me a kiss.

"Think you're clever, don't you, sonny? But let me tell you something." Angrboda wagged a menacing forefinger in my face. "There's not many folks enjoying old age who've tried to trick Angrboda. Nossir! Oh, I'll keep our agreement, never fear, but this doesn't finish matters between us. You just wait and see. Now get out of my sight, both of you." And she turned her back on us.

Brekka and I hastened to take the trail on the opposite side of the clearing from our entry point, for that, Eggther had assured us, was the shortest way out of the Ironwood that would lead to our meeting place with Heimdall. Once we had passed out of Angrboda's sight, we paused long enough for Brekka to break off and trim a likely looking limb from a large sapling—a stout branch as long as I was tall. Then we resumed our rapid pace, for we didn't entirely trust Angrboda's promise not to interfere with us. Besides, we didn't want to run into any of the other troll-women who haunted the Ironwood, for they had made no promises.



At last the mist began to thin, and soon we emerged from the forest into afternoon sunlight and caught sight of the great snow-capped mountain Fornfjell, where we were to meet Heimdall. We judged that by evening we might be able to reach the meadow, where we could spend the night before summoning our friend the next morning.

The route we had chosen led us along a long slope on the flank of the mountain just at tree line, and across the base of a steep snow field. Brekka cautioned me to whisper, if I must speak at all, for almost any loud noise could trigger an avalanche in such a place. Alas, her words proved prophetic. We had proceeded most of the way across the snow field when a strange clangorous sound began to build from the direction of the Ironwood. In an instant I recognized the tremor for what it was—Angrboda was striking her great bronze gong harder and harder with each stroke, and the Ironwood was groaning in response.

With a rumble, the crest of the snow field broke loose and began to tumble down the slope, burying everything that the avalanche could not carry along with it. We ran as fast as we could, and perhaps Brekka's longer legs might have carried her to safety, but my shorter ones could not. Ignoring my cries for her to save herself, Brekka turned back, seized me in her powerful arms, and with a last cry of "I love you," she hurled me as far toward the edge of the avalanche as her strength would avail. The last sight I had before I crashed into a clump of gnarled birches, and was knocked unconscious, was of my Brekka being struck down by tumbling boulders and buried beneath a blanket of snow.

When I awoke, all was silent, my vision seemed blurred, and I was totally disoriented. Then, gradually, I recalled where I was, remembered what had happened, and realized that I lay beneath who knew how much snow. Fortunately, the birches that had stopped my flight also had prevented the snow from

settling evenly and smothering me. I had no idea how deep my prison was, but the need to get out and help Brekka, if help was still possible, spurred me to a greater physical effort than I would have thought possible. Forcing myself to my knees, I grasped the trunk of a birch and pulled myself upright. Fortunately, the snow cover was more shallow at the edge of the avalanche's path, and my head and shoulders burst through into sunlight like a ptarmigan exploding from a drift where it had taken refuge.

With considerable difficulty, I managed to drag myself out of my snow cocoon and crawl across the treacherous surface to the last place I had seen Brekka. I shouted her name, scraped away at the snow with my one good arm, then cried out again and again until my voice grew hoarse . . . but all to no avail. My strength gave out at last, and as I lay there sobbing, a new arrival confirmed my worst fears. A mounted valkyrie descended from the sky and pointed her spear at the snow field some yards downslope from where I had been frantically pawing. The tip of her spear began to glow and, in what seemed like almost no time at all, the snow pack at which it was aimed melted away, revealing the broken corpse of my beloved Brekka. The valkyrie dismounted, tenderly lifted Brekka, and lay her across the horse's neck. Remounting, the valkyrie shook her head at me pityingly, sighed, then flew off to Asgard with her precious burden . . . followed by my last feeble cry of "Brekka!"

The sun sank in the west and the dark of evening began to extend its chill grip on the land. And still I lay there, my will and desire to live growing as cold and numb as my skin. For with my Brekka dead, why should I want to go on? Better to return to the ice in which she had found me.

A crunching footstep in the snow and a hand upon my shoulder aroused me. I turned my head to look up into the concerned, kindly face of Heimdall.

"Heimdall," I moaned, "B-Brekka's dead,

she's d-dead. An avalanche k-killed her."

"I was afraid that something horrible had happened when I heard you yelling her name. I got here as fast as Gulltopp could carry me." He looked at the hoofprints and the melted crater in the snow. "I see that a valkyrie has already come for her."

I nodded wordlessly.

"Well, that should provide you at least some consolation. It means that Brekka's spirit will dwell in Asgard for all eternity rather than down in Hel's dank domain . . . and that is certainly something to be thankful for."

"I am happy for her, of course . . . but she's lost to me, Heimdall, lost forever. What is there left to live for!"

"Get hold of yourself, Dag," snapped Heimdall as he lifted me to my feet. "It's all well and good to mourn your loss, but to deny your own life is to dishonor her memory. She loved life as much as anyone I've ever known. And, loving you as she did, she would want you to go on and live your life to the fullest—to live it for both of you."

Still in shock, I responded: "I know

you're right, Heimdall, but going on just seems to require more courage than I've got right now. What am I to do?"

"Do?" he queried. "Why, carry out the quest that you and Brekka began at Audumla's Lea—and for which Brekka gave her life. What finer monument to her memory could you hope to erect? And you won't be alone, Dag. The quest is yours to achieve, but I will stay with you until it is done."

I could feel my mental backbone stiffening in response to the god's encouragement. "Thank you, Heimdall, I begin to feel there is a reason to go on living."

Clapping me on the shoulder, he grinned and said: "Good man! Now pick up the iron branch I see sticking out of the side of the snow crater, and let's be on our way."

Fetching the tree limb that had been bought at such great cost, I mounted behind Heimdall on Gulltopp's broad back and offered a silent vow to Brekka's spirit that I would complete our quest . . . and that I would never stop loving her.

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The Five Blows

by

Mary Johnson

In the days when the city was founded, a couple lived by the gate. Though freeborn, they were poor, and had no children. So they rejoiced when, after many years, the woman became pregnant. But when their son was born, he was small and weak, and blue about the lips, and one leg was twisted under him. Seeing him, the midwife said, "This child cannot be named." The wife went pale, but answered, "Leave the child with us for five days, and then return, and we will do whatever is needed."

"You should do it now," the midwife answered. "What will change in five days?" But a child is always named on the fifth day, so after saying this, she left. When the door closed behind her, the man and woman looked at each other in silence. Then the child whimpered. He was not strong enough to cry aloud, but his mother heard and held him to her breast. The man looked again into his wife's eyes. Then he strapped on his sword and walked out their door and through the gate.

He left the road and walked downhill, into the desert. It was early in the morning when he began walking, and he walked on till the sun set, and the moons rose and set behind him. He walked till he came to a barren plain where no plant had ever grown. As the sun stood overhead, he stopped, like one waking from a dream, and saw a man

coming toward him. The stranger was hooded, so that his face was shadowed. His clothes were a laborer's, with nothing fine about them, except for one thing. He wore a sword at his belt.

As the man watched, the stranger pulled the sword from its sheath and rushed at him. He heard himself shouting out and raised his own sword, just in time. The blades clashed above his head, and he felt a shock like lightning travel through his body to the soles of his feet. He knew then that he must fight for his life.

And fight he did, with all his strength and skill, but, no matter how he strove, he could not vanquish his opponent. The stranger met him with a skill and power that exactly matched his own. They fought until the sun was setting, when the man, exhausted, began to despair. Stopping to gasp for breath, he lowered his sword, and saw his enemy do the same. Then he thought, "Now! Seize your chance; you can defeat him now!" He lunged at his enemy and struck five blows, each of which should have killed him. But it was as if he struck at smoke. Though his sword pierced the stranger, no wound appeared. Instead, with each blow, he felt a fine, cold touch on his own body. "I am dead," he thought, "I have killed myself, and what will my wife do now?" For he realized he had fought a god.



He dropped his sword, knelt, and bowed his head. "My lord," he said, "my life is yours. Take it, if you must, but spare my wife and son." Then he waited for the death blow. But it never came. When he raised his head, night had fallen, and he was alone. He got up, turned his face to the rising moons, and began walking back to the city.

He walked as if in a daze, and could never remember any part of that journey or what sustained him on the way. But he survived, though the desert gave him neither food, nor water, nor shelter. On the third morning after his battle, he walked again through his own door.

His wife embraced him and brought him water. When he had refreshed himself, she spoke. "My husband," she said, "on the third day after you left, a strange thing happened."

"What thing?"

"I was alone with the child, who slept. Suddenly a woman appeared near his cradle, and I saw her reaching out to steal him. So I

called for help, and gripped her shoulder to pull her away. But no one came to help me. We struggled a long time, but, though I fought her with all my strength, I could not overcome her. She had a veil over her face, and, as we fought, it slipped away, and I saw that she looked at me from my own eyes. Then I realized she was a goddess. I knelt before her and said, "Kill me, but spare my husband and son."

"And then?"

"I was alone," his wife answered. "And see!" She lifted the child from his cradle and showed him to his father. His color was good and he breathed easily, as a child should. And all his limbs were straight.

This happened so long ago that no one remembers the names of that couple. But they called their child Kelest. And some say that the name means "friend," but others know it truly means "friend of the gods." For all of us must struggle with heaven, and all of us will suffer defeat. But the gods know that to fight them is to give them honor.

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Eggzactly

by

Joe R. Christopher and Donald H. Hinkle

He was either asleep and dreaming or he was mad, he thought. Henry Fields stepped over the small stream that gargled through the rocks, and went on, pushing the evergreen branches from his face and heading for his goal—a white ellipse painted on the background ahead.

He remembered going to bed, and then there was this. Henry also had a vague memory of talking with someone in white . . .

But what has that to do with the price of eggs?

There was something about eggs and one costing more than two . . .

Only you must eat them both, if you buy two.

Henry Field, after watching the ellipse up ahead grow more like an egg with every step he took, remember what was itching at the back of his skull. It was from *Alice in Wonderland*—no, it was that *Looking-Glass* thing. He remembered it from TV back when he was a teenager. Alice bought an egg from either a Queen, a sheep, or a porcupine—in his mind they seemed to change back and forth, and the egg turned into Humpty Dumpty.

Henry thought of something new as he came closer. How did one start a conversation with an egg? Was it a chicken egg? Did it make any difference if it was? Maybe, from its size, an ostrich egg. He couldn't remember how Alice had tackled the conversation. For a moment he wished he had actually read the book. Or paid more attention to the TV set.

Well, here he was. Now what to say? *O egg*, perhaps? Was that right? *Hail, O egg?*

He stopped walking near the six-foot wall on which Humpty Dumpty was seated. “Hello,” said Henry. Not formal enough, he thought. Should I add *sir*? If not, what then? This is all foolish, he thought—but I can't say that. “Hello”—making it twice in case he hadn't been heard the first time.

Humpty Dumpty scowled. “And just exactly what do you mean?”

“Why . . . it's just a greeting . . .”

“When I say a word, there's a purpose to it. It means what I say it to mean,” he said, “not what usage suggests.”

“That's sensible,” said Henry. This is *damn* foolish; I won't stand another minute of it, he thought. I'll get out of here.

“How old did you say you are?” asked Humpty Dumpty, starting a new topic.

“I didn't,” said Henry, feeling he had won a point. “But if you want to know, I'm a little over twenty-seven.”

“And if I don't want to know,” Humpty Dumpty trumped, “what then?”

Perhaps it was the verbal sparring, or card-playing—his mind struggled with mixed metaphors—but yet the glade he was in was surrounded by darker, more gnarled woods than the TV show had suggested. It didn't seem gay and carefree. Henry looked at the trees—someone could be watching from them.

There was a long silence. Humpty Dumpty smirked. “I suppose you have only one birthday a year?”

“Yes.” Henry wished he could think of

something to say, some topic to discuss. He disliked being forced into a monosyllabic answer. He shifted his feet nervously.

"That seems to be the general rule. How many days are there in a year?" asked Humpty.

"Three hundred and sixty-five."

"And how many un-birthdays do you have a year?"

"What? Oh—three hundred and sixty-four." He laughed as he thought about un-birthdays and Alice and the crazy tea party. "Skoopy-diddle," Henry said. His nervous mood had abruptly shifted to a heightened awareness of the ludicrousness of it all. He's going to fall off that wall, Henry thought.

"You take one from three hundred sixty five and get three hundred sixty four? Ridiculous? When I subtract it, it get at least six hundred seventy eight." Humpty Dumpty paused for a breath, and then explained kindly. "More un-birthdays that way, you see.

"Whose method of logic do you use?" he continued.

"I don't know," said Henry. "I don't particularly care." He smiled broadly.

"I use my own. Superior logic, that's what I always say. You should hear me call for enthymemes sometime, or watch me dig up square roots. There's glory for you!

"Alice liked it," Humpty Dumpty added. "She admired me greatly."

"That wasn't the way I remember it," said Henry, wondering what the book had said.

"Of course not," replied. Humpty. "I don't give away all my secrets to the first nincompoop who comes along."

Was Alice a nincompoop? But Henry stopped listening to the egg and started thinking. A crazy logic—non-Euclidian, was what it was called. All the characters here use it, and the chess game—he remembered by now that the *Looking-Glass* dealt with a chess game—was based on it.

Something like that fairy chess. You invent your own players—the grasshopper,

the double—and you make up your own rules, like a circular board. He had been dragged by a girl friend to some sort of meeting once where he had seen such things.

Lewis Carroll had substituted Alice for a white pawn.

Use x for Alice; all the other pieces are known. Solve the equations by substitution.

Alice—a piece that could be on the same square with another piece, that could not take and could not be taken, that seemed only to move directly to the eighth row, be queened, and then be removed from the chess board. What good is a chess piece like that?

Non-Euclidian logic, he thought, as if the term explained the significance. But, after all, I'm really not much of a chess player, thought Henry. His girl friend told him in chess he was a fish.

Humpty Dumpty said something in a loud voice.

"Huh?" Henry was startled; he had forgotten the egg.

"What did you mean that to mean?" asked Humpty, watching him carefully.

"Just 'huh,'" said Henry.

Humpty Dumpty squinted up at the sky: "Idiom's delight," he murmured. After a few moments he went on, "I said that you have not been paying attention. Just before that—*à propos* of 'a little over twenty seven'—I remarked that, if I were you, I would have stopped growing at twenty seven exactly."

"But you can't help growing older."

Henry answered quickly. He wondered if he himself were a chess piece. He was growing more disdainful of Humpty Dumpty and his "topics."

"Perhaps one can't, but two can. Do you want to stop growing older?"

Eternal youth! Henry suddenly plunged from his thoughts on chess into the promise before him like a cool, clear pool.

"Yes!"

So Henry Fields stopped growing older.

*And, in another world, a landlord was
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shaking the shoulder of a tenant who had not answered his employer's phone call. "Mr. Fields, Mr. Fields, wake up! Wake up!" The body was still warm, in the hot summer without air conditioning. The curtains hung straight. "Oh damn, Marge," the landlord said, after feeling for a pulse, "he's gone. We'll have to phone the police."

From the doorway, his wife asked, "What do you think it was—a heart attack?"

He checked Field's wallet on the night stand, and took out all the dollar bills.

"Who knows? Maybe." He crossed to the door, stepped outside with his wife, shut

the door, and locked it. "I guess they'll have an autopsy. . . . I wonder," he added, as they started downstairs, "if he left any way to get hold of his relatives."

His wife said, "Probably at work."

Elsewhere, somewhere behind a mirror, all the king's horses and all the king's men were giving Henry Field's body (or what passed for his body in their world) an elaborate funeral. The drums were beaten slowly. Black banners waved in the air. The funeral cortège made its way down a winding road.

--END--

The Third Mercy

by

William H. Wandless

The Mayawari were a hard people, which is why the mercy of the ocean almost broke them.

Over centuries they had learned to bear the yoke that fell to them as a consequence of their great ancestor's ingratitude. At the dawn of all things, when earth and sea and sky still honored one another, the sea had gifted its loveliest child to the earth, heaving up the willful boy on the island's splendid shores. The earth had welcomed the sea's son warmly, arraying all the delights of seed and soil before him, but Mayawi had scorned her embrace, wishing only to drowse once more in the arms of his father. Ashamed of his scion's behavior, the sea vowed never again to receive him, and the spurned earth nursed evermore a mother's grudge against him. He cried to the heavens for help, but sister sky, impartial as always, offered

Mayawi neither succor nor solace.

Mayawi's pride and folly left the soil sour and the ocean unforgiving. The sea still yielded fish, as it must, but they were hard to catch and their flesh was foul; the earth still yielded fruit, as it must, but the crop was small and the best were bitter. Mayawi toiled day and night to earn a scant subsistence, and when he slept he dreamed of only toil yet to come.

The first mercy was an act of concerted compassion: the earth and sea agreed to yield up young to share Mayawi's labor. He fashioned crude figures from soil and salt water and set them to their tasks as they writhed on the sun-bleached shore. Mayawi did not love them, nor did the Mayawari love their father. Theirs was a slender bond of debt and grim dependence, sullen service rendered for the gift of borrowed breath.

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Thus they labored all together for a barren, aching age until the weight of days at last bowed down the shoulders of the father. When Mayawi died his children cast his body back into the sea and returned to their work. They shed no tears and sang no songs, said no words to send him to his rest.

The ocean, however, foamed and roared, gave vent to its immortal grief. It drew down the broken body of its boy unto its breast, and it raged in waves that drove the surf to lash against the land. In those early days the seething deeps claimed every third canoe, stirring the currents to haul the luckless headlong out to sea. Monsters came to haunt the pale beyond the shallow waters, claiming limbs and lives to teach the ingrates how to feel a father's loss. The Mayawari knew all too well the cruelty of creators, and they faced the wrath of fathoms with the same resolve they called upon to weather every other undeserved curse.

Denied the welcome of the water, the Mayawari chose to dedicate their days to the service of the earth. They plied it with prayer and the stroke of crude tools, and centuries of diligent devotion began to soothe the pride their ancestor had wounded. At the end of an arduous age the earth requited the work of its orphaned wards with the gift of the second mercy.

Every twenty generations the earth blessed the Mayawari with a white-haired child who would grow to be versed in the lore of sand and soil. Before the first could talk she taught the tribe how to find and stew edible roots to stead them in times of unusual dearth. The next, a boy with hair the color of clouds, showed them how to strand savory fish in circles of stone filled up by rising tides. Still others taught them the ways of whetting, netting, and weaving, the arts of salt and spice and fire. Forever beset by the sea the Mayawari never truly flourished, but the insight of every ivory child eased and enlightened their lives. If the weight of days steadily dimmed and diminished their wisdom, their wild whiteness fading into

shades of dismal gray, the children confirmed the worth of prayer and the earth's maternal mercy.

The latest display of this mercy was greeted with riot and revel: a young mother bore a beautiful girl with hair the color of pearl, and the Mayawari danced and drank and spat into the sea. The fathom-father foamed and roared and crashed against the shore, but the earth blunted the rage of waves with shoals and shelves and banks of sand. The young Mayawari caroused and rejoiced, singing hymns to the liberal earth, cooing and clucking and clapping around the crib of the newborn babe. For their part the dutiful elders burst and burned the first and finest fruits of the season, eager to prove Mayawi's heirs had finally grown into gratitude.

They named her Amaya, and when she could walk she wandered the isle, exploring and learning the lore of the land. Sand and soil yielded their secrets to her freely, and the sight of her scouring the shoreline made the hearts of the hardest and hoariest tribesmen light. Even the sea seemed willing to suffer her presence; its native fury abated wherever Amaya went to wade or bathe. The Mayawari regarded this forbearance as a hopeful omen, a token that meant the ocean might someday relent.

As if to announce the advent of such long-awaited grace, in Amaya's seventh year the third mercy crept up from the depths.

Amaya discovered the strange little thing in a tidal pool in the course of a morning meander. She prodded, poked, and finally stroked its supple, gummy skin as it shivered atop a sea-green stone. She thought it a wounded medusa at first, a jelly bereft of its tentacles, but it was rounder than any she had formerly found and it gurgled and purred at her touch. Delighted by the swirling iridescence of the glistening globe, she cupped its wobbly body in her palms and brought it before the elders.

They initially scolded and chided Amaya, rinsing her fingers and checking for stings, but the scintillating surface of the

sphere from the sea soon gripped and engrossed their notice. The wiser among them vied for the right to study the shimmering globe, and they examined it in morning mist, by noonday sun, by firelight. The longer they lingered the more fully the orb absorbed their attention.

On the second day a greater group gathered. They huddled around the shuddering sphere, tracing the course of the colors that stirred in its flickering skin. Some claimed they made out patterns in the spooling liquid hues, while others, lost in lucid reveries, stood by still and silent. The bravest made bold to cradle the quavering globe, and with glazed eyes they gaped vacantly as the visitor burbled and purled. Little work was done that day, but those that gazed long and late felt neither heat nor hunger. Amaya and her playmates made their own meals, skirting the verge of the circle and binging on breadfruit and berries.

A third day might have passed in the selfsame way had a maiden not tasted the stranger. After pressing the globe to her breast and caressing its clammy skin she furtively licked her sticky fingers. Her subsequent cries and sudden collapse distracted her vigilant kinsmen; they stood thunderstruck as a fitful fever seized her. She trembled, thrashed, and writhed, her body wracked with spasms, her eyes fixed on the sky. In ecstatic, gasping intervals she jabbered and babbled, screaming of sweetness and pleasure so keen that she could barely breathe. One by one the Mayawari followed her example, and each bowed to the throes of an exquisite bliss that none had known before.

The tribe indulged for days. Some halfheartedly started to resume their duties and set the children to tasks small hands could manage, but the promise of pleasure haunted their labors and dependably ended them early. They built a concave altar, a vessel they respectfully refreshed with ocean water, but fruit ripened, dropped, and rotted while the tribesmen attended their guest.

Whenever the children came home from their chores they found their parents spent and breathless, curled up on the earth.

Despite their careful ministrations, the skin of the visitor soon ceased to exude its soothing ooze so freely. Although they yearned for the delicate taste and the euphoria that followed, they found themselves forced to ration their raptures. Some searched the shores for other glistening globes; some gingerly licked the skin of other creatures of the sea. Every experiment failed, and the distraught Mayawari wept and complained as they impatiently waited their turn.

At last the anxious elders called the troubled tribe to council. Many ventured selfish measures to secure a greater share of the sweet slime they all prized, but the most sober among them readily settled the source of their misfortune: the ocean had conferred unto them an undeserved mercy, and they had neglected to render back the tribute it was due. Several raced to freight a canoe with the first yield of the season, but with horror they found that their stores were depleted, that the new fruit had fallen and burst.

With deference the eldest tribal teller was led to their tremulous guest. She knelt and kissed its gummy skin, licked her lips, and collapsed to the ground in a ragged, fanatical spasm. The heedful Mayawari hearkened to her hoarse, prophetic cries, eager to learn how they might renew or redeem the honeyed savor of the sphere. Though it grieved them at heart to hear what she screamed, they all could not help but agree: they had only one treasure to equal the luminous gift of the merciful sea.

The next morning they shouldered a laden canoe and mournfully bore it down to the shore. The boldest escorted it into the waves and warily urged it as far as they dared, wading out into the churning surf until a strong current snatched the craft from their grasp. When they were safe on the sand they joined hands with their kin and prayed that

the vessel would purchase the favor they craved.

Eager to learn if their work had served its turn, most of those assembled hastened home. Only a few loitered long enough to confirm that the earth's pearlescent mercy was accepted by the sea, the vessel and its

treasure guided by the tides toward some harbor beyond the horizon.

Amaya gaily waved until the distance dimmed the vision of her kin, her silver tresses shivering in the lambent sunshine loosed by sister sky.

October's Showers

by

Joel Zartman

In fairyland bright showers fall
while the sun shines
and colors all
in fluttering light descend.
And no one in those rains
is ever wet
or goes to any pains
of cover, shelter, or delay.
I went in an October wood.
Bright showers fell
where the trees stood,
and color filled the air.
The showers that fell
were dry and bright
and glad, to tell
the simple truth of it.
But unlike fairyland's fair trees
my trees did not
retain their leaves,
but sent them spinning all away.
How bright mortality
is beckoning,
and drawing me
in showers to another world!

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. Her illustrations have often appeared in *The Mythic Circle*, but this year she could not contribute due to other commitments, including the back cover for the *Mythcon 40* program.

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, a retired college teacher, when he was in junior high school (now known as middle school), was asked to list his three favorite authors. He put down Lewis Carroll, Lewis Padgett (pseudonym of Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore), and one other he has forgotten--but it was not C. S. Lewis, unfortunately for the Lewis parallelism. Lewis Carroll (that is, the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), at least, has remained with him through the years. Christopher has published four essays on Carroll, including a two-part essay in *Mythlore* on Lewis Carroll's science fiction (there was some). He also has published five pieces of light verse on Carroll's life or fiction. Currently, he is in the process of giving his Lewis Carroll collection of books (over a hundred volumes, both primary and secondary works) to Tarleton State University. (A connection exists between Lewis Carroll and Lewis Padgett, for those who are interested. One of Lewis Padgett's short stories was titled "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," based on Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky"--or, for the scholarly, on his earlier quatrain titled "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Also, the recent movie *The Last Mimzy* was based--loosely--on Padgett's story, and hence even more loosely on Carroll's verse.)

Donald Henry Hinkle grew up in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, going with Joe Christopher (his collaborator in this issue) to the 10th World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago between their junior and senior years, in 1952. Hinkle followed that up with a story, "Research Team," in the May 1958 *Original Science Fiction Stories*. They both went to the University of Oklahoma, where Hinkle majored in journalism, subsequently working on accompany magazine in Texas and then in New York City for Time-Life Books where he met Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick while working on the book *Man and Space*. Later he and his wife became free-lance writers and editors in New Jersey, Don writing a biography of Ronald Reagan and a history of Oklahoma for an educational publisher in addition to many other things. He and his wife now live on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts where Don is working on a graphic novel.

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*.

Randy Hoyt lives with his wife and son in Dallas, Texas, where he works as a freelance web developer. He edits and writes articles for *Journey to the Sea*, an online magazine devoted to

mythology and fantasy. This magazine can be found at <<http://journeytothesea.com>>. You can learn more about Randy at his personal web site, <<http://www.randyhoyt.com>>.

Colin James works in Energy Conservation and is a great admirer of the Scottish landscape painter, John Mackenzie. Also, he is a member of the Brothers of the Endemic, a philosophical society based in Blacon, Cheshire, England. His poems have been published recently in *Sage Trail* and *Tresspass*. More are forthcoming in *Sakura Review*, *Calliope Nerve* and *The Stray Branch*.

Mary Johnson has loved stories since she knew they existed, and has written to entertain friends and family since she was about 8 years old. However, she has not been published before. From the age of 6, when her father first read the story to his children, she loved *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and she became a Tolkien fan at the age of 10. At present she is the young adult/teen librarian at the North Castle Public Library in Armonk, New York. She also has a blog where the first chapter of the novel-in-progress, *Honor*, for which this story is a background myth, can be found. Her blog is at <mary-j-59.livejournal.com>.

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

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.”

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://thediologueofbecominghuman.blogspot.com>>.

William Wandless is assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University. His research focuses primarily on eighteenth-century British fiction and contemporary American popular culture, but he returned to writing poetry and speculative fiction in 2006. His critical work appears in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* and *Literature and Medicine*; his verse appears in *The Cincinnati Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Pearl*, and other literary journals; and his fiction appears in *Dark Realms*, *Shroud*, and *Realms of Fantasy*.

Joel Zartman is a student of literature and theology who enjoys Minnesota and attempts Fantasy, Science Fiction, Children’s stories, poetry and a blog.

EDITORIAL AND COMMENTARY

(continued from p. 3)

literary critic Squidgeboodle. We haven't heard from Squidgeboodle for a while, but apparently he is up to his old tricks. As before, I'm not certain how the drafted minutes of his committee meeting reached my laptop, but in the spirit of giving the devil his due, I print them here, trusting my wise readers to make all necessary allowances for the diabolic viewpoint expressed there.

#

Moldiwhether's Minutes

To: Moldiwhether, Secretary
From: Squidgeboodle, Director
Center for Art, Literature and Other
Pretentious Diversions
Re: Draft, Minutes of April 1 Steering
Committee Meeting

Cagily yours,
Squidgeboodle

#####

My dear Moldiwhether,

Having read your document (with much snickering) I now anticipate weeks of tantalizing rumors about the bribes you will demand from whom to suppress what. Do you actually expect to get something from me? I'm tickled. I can reserve a slot for your blackmail spiel this Monday. Get your notes together, rehearse once or twice, and you may go professional one day.

Sending your draft to the whole committee was a shrewd choice. Should it be leaked before proper redaction, everyone will be a suspect. Not that it would produce a millionth of the infernal *frisson* Beelzebub got when he slipped the minutes of the First Diabolic Congress into John Milton's study and it became Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*. But certain fallen cherubs might gnash their teeth more than usual.

I have added clarifying comments in square brackets and am sending the copy only to you. If it leaks in this form, we will know exactly whom to blame. Or will we?

Dear Diabolic colleagues and members of the Steering Committee, here are the drafted minutes from April 1. It is only a draft. What are your thoughts? Any corrections, emendations, or omissions?
---Moldiwhether, Secretary

#

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT²
--Minutes – 1 April 2009

Members Present: Allecto, Astaroth, Belial, Legion, Mammom, Moldiwhether (Secretary), Saturnion, Squidgeboodle (Chair).

Guests: Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Moloch.

The meeting was called to order at midnight. The Chair announced the agenda: "To coordinate the committee's activities with the tactics of the Supreme Infernal

² Per usual procedure, the meeting was recorded; those wishing to review the audio files must request separate passwords from the Chair, the General Infernal Inspector and the Infernal Regency.

Regency during this phase of the Secular Operation.” He introduced our distinguished guests, namely Beelzebub and Moloch, insiders on the Regency council, and their senior staff member, Mephistopheles, who spoke first. “We have come because the Regency fears that your committee’s tactics are not well synchronized with its own.”

The Chair replied, “Of course, at a word from the Supreme Infernal Regency, we would rework our tactics completely.” [If I may so, old Mephisto and I delivered our remarks in the best Infernal deadpan, rather like the recorded voices on automated telephone commercials.]

Beelzebub said, “The Supreme Infernal Regency prefers obedience without instruction.” [He dramatically interrupted his spokesman, to emphasize the gravity of the situation, his tone a classy blend of menace and suavity.— *Squ.*]

“Quite so,” said Squidgeboodle, “and the Regency can dismiss any Chair who is too dull-witted to understand its unstated instructions.” [I aimed midway between obsequiousness and burlesque.— *Squ.*]

“Dull-witted or disobedient?” Moloch burst out. [I rolled my eyes a full 360 degrees, but before I could say anything, he rushed on.— *Squ.*] “Why was *Mythic Circle* 31 allowed publication?”

Squidgeboodle affected great surprise. [Damned straight, Moldiwhether. I rolled my eyes another 360 degrees.— *Squ.*]

“*Mythic Circle* 31?” he said. “Why not? It is a tiny low-budget literary publication, not on the Regency’s proscribed list. In that category, all harassment is determined by random drawing. Even under those limitations, we did arrange some incidents. Would you like to hear--”

“No!” Moloch declared. “Whatever you did, the issue has still appeared. How could you ignore so many complaints of counter-infernal activity?” He gestured to Mephistopheles, who displayed a sheaf of

letters.

Squidgeboodle chuckled. “That doesn’t look like an unusual number for a small literary magazine. Unfortunately, most such publications provide opportunities for growth in literacy, in facility with words, in various styles and modes, along with possibilities for camaraderie. They even inspire acquaintance with poems, stories and fables of enduring value. And none of it motivated by greed.” He nodded to Mammon, who wept and gnashed his teeth. “But as your chief staffer, the honorable Mephistopheles pointed out in the latest *Annual Zeitgeist*, this is generally balanced out by other factors. While some artists, having honed their skills, deplorably go on to rewarding careers, and some whose talents happen to be unfashionable, gain some measure of happiness and fulfillment in sharing their gifts with a small group, some talented people remain content with such small outlets and never go further—which is often to Hell’s advantage. Even better for us, we find that publication, even in these small venues, inspires artists to indulge in celebrity behavior quite as obnoxious and self-destructive as anything a Hollywood star could do, and at a much lower cost to the Regency.”

“Glib answers,” said Moloch.

“If the number of complaints is not unusual,” Mephistopheles intoned censoriously, “perhaps your rating system needs tweaking. *Mythic Circle* 31 contains a poem by Joe Christopher, a man published in Mythopoeic circles long enough to have a reputation of his own. He titles his poem ‘A Suburb of the City of Dis,’ and it evokes C. S. Lewis’s *Great Divorce* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a few short lines. To make matters worse, it is written in *terza rima*. If all that didn’t set off a quintuple alarm, there’s something wrong with your algorithm. Young people might be inspired to study and imitate older poetic forms which,

at the very least, would absorb their minds and distract them from lust and violence. Worse, they might read Lewis and Dante.”

Squidgeboodle shrugged. “Given the Regency’s successful interventions in American education, such effects will not be statistically significant. To be sure, if you wish to audit our algo--”

“Forget it. Christopher has another piece in the issue. A collaboration, in fact.”

“You mean ‘Eggzactly,’ written with his friend Donald Hinkle? The pastiche of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, featuring the return of Humpty Dumpty? That can’t have caused all the fuss, surely. We have posthumously reduced Lewis Carroll’s counter-infernal qualities by making him a laughing-stock. Thanks to us, mainstream opinion now holds that grown men can have no uncontroversial attachments to children not their own.”

“You forget that the fragrance—or the stench—of long term friendship is itself counter-infernal.”

“My friend Mephistopheles, knowing your talent, I don’t doubt that you could expand the list of counter-infernal qualities indefinitely, but much can be said on the other side as well. Belial can report on that, if you want specifics.”

[Mephistopheles fell silent and Moloch glared ruddily, but Beelzebub intervened with calm like the eye of a hurricane—*Squ.*] “Let Belial, do so, then,” said Beelzebub.

Belial said, “Some stories and poems in this issue celebrate pagan pantheons.”

“What of it?” Mephistopheles scoffed. “As the *Zeitgeist* says, we have little interest in pagan pantheons for their own sake just now. It’s too much like what Tolkien did. Besides, multiples in one issue undoes any favorable effect. They help us no more than fairy-tales or allegories about moral qualities. Take JA Howe’s story, ‘The Lord of All He Surveyed.’ So Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is wise, but her allure is balanced

by the treachery of Poseidon, and the story contains a message, memorably expressed, which people are all too likely to heed, to beware of hidden costs.”

“You ably argue the negative. But consider Dag Rossman’s story, ‘Brekka.’ Monsters and hags triumph with their overwhelming power. Terror of the supernatural will increase.”

“Hardly, when the protagonist survives and still remembers his love.”

“Love? The main character is a troublemaker who always needs help and gets rescued by the generous sacrifice of someone else. If only the story inspires emulation. That more than makes up for any demerits.”

“As always, my friend Belial, you make the best possible case, but it isn’t good enough. The protagonist, Dag Ormseeker, is only weak as humans must be among immortals. Perhaps he represents, better than an invincible hero could, the position of modern humanity, in the midst of irresistibly expanding knowledge and technology. Yet where he chooses, he chooses counter-infernally. He values his love above all things, and honors great deeds done by others. He doesn’t despair, and he doesn’t seek to fill his empty life with gold, jewels and material possessions, tendencies which were well pronounced in the original Northern mythology (we saw to that) which Rossman adapts. Why didn’t you send someone to nudge Rossman closer to his material? Mammon I see, is gnashing his teeth again.”

“Well said, Mephisto, though beyond the grasp of most human readers without your prompting. But what about the William Wandless story, ‘The Third Mercy’? The Mayawari give up the wise child Amaya, gift of the Earth, in order to keep a sort of drug addiction. They prefer to appease a vengeful god rather than keep faith with a generous and loving one. Choices much to

be encouraged.”

“You read it that way? The loving earth might just as well have called Amaya away to find her some more appreciative companions. She seemed happy enough to go.

“You can’t explain away the vigor, charm and wit of Tim Callahan’s illustrations, bringing the material to life and providing windows into other times?”

“They might cause people to forget their appointments.”

“They might just as well distract them from their misdeeds.”

“Very well. We could go on like this forever, balancing pro-Infernal and counter-Infernal aspects. That is what our Chair said. Need I go further?”

Silence fell. Beelzebub and Moloch dithered.

At last Mephistopheles said, “What do you make of the Ryder Miller piece, ‘A Tear in the Sky’?”

“Another mixture. Deplorable in a way. Likeable characters, courageous warriors fighting for their people. Patience, resourcefulness and self-sacrifice under pressure. Unfortunately, a happy ending. But some mitigating factors: Emper smokes the Burrely weed, and he announces the coming rescuers. Readers might think they can smoke something to get true visions.”

“You’re grasping at smoke—I mean, straws. The rescuers come; they’re not a vision. And what rescuers! The members of the New York City Fire Department, lost when they came to the rescue of the terrorists’ victims on September 11, 2001, still traveling through eddies in time, continuing their errand of mercy forever!”

“So? Humans tell many such tales, special units of the company of Saints, continuing with the work of the One we never name willingly. Why such alarm at this one?”

Silence again.

[Mephistopheles doodled a pit bull with a vivid case of mange. — *Squ.*]

Astaroth, who had grown increasingly excited, burst out. “You don’t mean-- You’re not saying-- It couldn’t *be* that there actually *is* a contingent of the heroic lost New York Fire Department, still moving through the currents and eddies of time, helping the unfortunate, putting out fires, disrupting Satan’s plans?”

Beelzebub put away his cell phone. “That’s classified!” he growled.

Squidgeboodle chuckled. “Classified? Then how were we to know?”

“What does it matter if *you* know?” Moloch spat and started a hurricane in the gulf of Mexico. “Why are humans allowed to imagine such things?”

Squidgeboodle coughed. “In this phase of the Secular Conflict, as the latest *Zeitgeist* explains, we tolerate such stories. Saints gathered in heaven, waiting under the divine altar before the one whose name we hate, crying ‘How long, o lord, how long?’ as they wait for the final battle.”

“*Revelation 6:10*,” said Astaroth helpfully.

Squidgeboodle continued. “At first, I know, the Infernal Regency tried to suppress *that* tale utterly and destroy every scroll and leaf on which it was written. But though the details are, I think, classified, the Infernal Regency apparently couldn’t—I mean, the Regency issued milder commands. Is the phase changing?”

Beelzebub stroked his chin thoughtfully. Moloch turned his back. Belial bit his fingernails. “So, Moloch, have you got your way at last?” he said. “Has Satan adopted the plan you urged at the First Demonic Congress, to make open war on Heaven again? Does he now hope, like you, that Heaven’s hateful tyrant will annihilate us completely, and end our sufferings, as you see it?”

Moloch turned. “Do you still think this

degraded, existence is worth dragging on?"

Unexpectedly, Mephistopheles spoke. "I hold with Belial. '[F]or who would lose/ Though full of pain, this intellectual being, / These thoughts that wander through eternity . . . ?' A very fine sentiment, brought to human ears in *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, lines 146-148. If the demonic records were not classified, I'd quote them instead of Milton.

"Of course, Lord Moloch, your speech was also grand. Our great leader, Satan, won us over with his counter-proposal to corrupt Adam and Eve and bring the human world under our sway. We still taste the benefits of his victory."

"But not forever," Moloch warned. "Another battle looms. We have the same choices as before."

"Lord Moloch's methods have produced remarkable success in the last years," Beelzebub mused. "He has brought us the suicide bombers who think it a joy to annihilate themselves, if only they can destroy many others too. And we read in a recent book that the Heavenly tyrant will grant their wish. Those impudent writers, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, published another book this year, which they dare to call *Escape from Hell*. It seems that some do escape from Hell. Some go to a better place, some are reduced to nothing. If that is what they really wish."

"They don't wish it," said someone. "No one does. Moloch will change his mind like all the rest, when the time comes. Any bets? I'll take odds."

[No one saw the speaker or heard quite where the voice came from. It sounded something like Beelzebub mimicking Astaroth, or Astaroth parroting Mephistopheles, or perhaps Mephistophiles aping Belial. — *§qu.*]

"Who said that? Who's making bets?" Moloch glared up and down into every corner of the room.

Keypads clicked as committee members

texted bets to one another.

Mephistopheles spoke diplomatically. "Moloch and Belial are, I am sure, the least likely of us to change their minds about annihilation, the one seeking and the other fleeing it, but each has a little of the other's opinion, enough to torture him with inner strife, as our tyrant in Heaven decrees.

Astaroth spoke. "Here I have an article claiming that a spirit who has once existed can never fully become as if it had not been. It may shrink to near nothingness, as the detestable C. S. Lewis wrote in the Great Divorce, but the closer it comes, the more what is left strives with a desperate will to reverse its course. And though the Heavenly tyrant counsels us to 'abandon hope,' in the words written on the gates of Hell, no one ever does; everyone keeps enough to struggle forever, with inner torment like a fiery lake."

"Indeed. Who published that one?" Beelzebub asked.

Squidgeboodle smiled. "No one, Lord Beelzebub. We arranged an unfortunate accident for the author. When it comes to the proscribed list, you will find us quite efficient."

"Not efficient enough," Moloch said. "We must have more of this."

"Does Moloch speak for the Infernal Regency?" Squidgeboodle asked. "Is the committee to understand that Secular Conflict has changed to open war?"

Silence.

"No," said Beelzebub.

Moloch sneered, "Then what do you intend to do? What is your plan?"

Astaroth answered. "We must continue what the First Demonic Congress began. Given a situation which allows no real victory, we must invent actions which we will (Humpty Dumpty-like) call victory, carry them out and pretend that we have won. As our supreme leader has said (quoted by Milton in *Paradise Lost*), 'The mind is its

own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven' (1.254-255)."

Squidgeboodle said, "It has been one of our notable successes to induce most of the American and European academics to take this approach, not to mention the politicians."

Moloch suddenly roared. "Who can

listen to this counter-infernal nonsense?"

He threw himself upon Astaroth, who ran toward the door with a shriek. The rest of the committee followed, texting bets to each other on their cell phones.

The cock crowed, the committee dispersed, and the meeting was adjourned.

--END--

Ravana Questions Hanuman

by

Randy Hoyt

Vibishana hurried to Ravana's throne room after he heard the destruction of the Asoka Vana. What could have caused this? Had the Gods launched an attack on Lanka? Vibishana had to push his way through the gathering crowd.

"And who sent you?!" he heard Ravana shout angrily, though he could not yet see at whom.

"Rama, the Holy One who has been sent to earth to destroy you," came the soft reply of the creature. It was not a human or a rakshasa voice, he could tell.

"Rama! So he can find no one to help

him in his war against me but monkeys!" He burst out laughing hysterically, and the entire mob joined in his laughter. So it was a monkey that Vibishana had heard. That sent a cold chill down his spine. Why was that? He searched his mind for some reference to monkeys ... and then he realized: Nandi had cursed Ravana, saying that his end would come through a monkey.

"You can laugh all you want at me and at my lord Rama, but you will be destroyed if you do not hand over Sita to me. She is the Holy One's eternal bride."

More laughter erupted throughout the

chamber.

“Is that what you have come to tell me?” asked Ravana. “That if I do not give back this whore, then you will destroy me?”

“No, I will not destroy you,” said the monkey. “My master Rama has forbidden me, or I would have done so already. *He* will destroy you, and it will be soon.”

“Rama did not even have the power to keep his own wife,” replied Ravana. “She came with me willingly: blame her for what has happened! She practically *begged* me to take her away from her misery in the forest. She wanted a queenly lifestyle, though she is just a common whore. She pleases me, so I provide her what she wants.”

Vibishana had never fully believed this story Ravana had told, and he sensed that no else believed it either. But the others did not seem to care about the truth. Something about this monkey struck Vibishana and made him care. Maybe this Rama was truly God incarnate. This monkey had an air about him—was it the air of one who has seen God?

“I conclude from your statements that you will not release Sita, so I will take my leave,” said the monkey. “Consider yourself warned: Rama will destroy you and everything you hold dear. You once received favor from the Gods; you could have lived in harmony with the world and enjoyed peace and prosperity throughout all the ages. But you have forsaken the Gods and all goodness, and so now you will suffer. Rama will cleanse the world of your filth.”

The monkey’s words were powerful and forceful; a hush fell over the crowd.

Everyone looked at Ravana. The demon king was taken aback, but he quickly recovered.

“You think you can just march in here, speak contemptuously, and then stroll out?” said Ravana, rising from his throne and walking towards the monkey. “You are sadly mistaken. You will pay for your insolence with your life!” He grabbed the monkey by the throat and began to strangle him.

“Stop brother!” cried Vibishana, pushing his way to the center of the room. “Stop! Would you stoop so low as to kill this monkey, you who have battled with even the Gods and won? Let this monkey go. It is not he who has challenged and harmed you—it is Rama.”

Ravana glared at Vibishana, and then back at the monkey. The monkey was not struggling to get free; he just stared back at Ravana intently. Ravana chuckled to himself. “So my own brother is a monkey-lover.” He threw the monkey to the floor. He ordered his guards to let the monkey go, but only after having a bit of fun torturing him.

Vibishana was relieved. The guards took the monkey outside and the crowd cleared out of the throne room. Only the top generals in Ravana’s army remained with Ravana and Vibishana. The tension in the room was great, and no one spoke; Ravana sat on his throne deep in thought. The silence was broken when a guard ran into the throne room and declared, “The monkey has caught the whole city on fire!”

