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Mythic Circle #30

Gwenyth E. Hood
Marshall University

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Mythic Circle #30

MYTHIC CIRCLE 30



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ILLUSTRATIONS

Tim Callahan: Front Cover: *Ashtart looks down on from Heaven upon Tammuz and his hounds* (from “The Hunter and the Queen of Heaven,” also by Tim Callahan). Also illustrations on pp. 8, 11, 13, 20, 21, 30 and 48.

C. J. Bloomer: Back Cover: *Nidhogg guards Niflheim* (from “The Dragon Seeker” by Dag Rossman). Also illustrations on pp. 31, 32, 33, 40, 55, 58, and 59.

Bonnie Callahan: illustrations on 43 and 46.

Editor: Gwenyth E. Hood

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The Hunter and the Queen of Heaven

by
Tim Callahan

First Invocation

Shudder, O Earth, at her fury;
 she who strides hip-deep in blood.
Fear, O Lands, her wrath;
 she who binds the heads of her foes
 to her naked waist.
Terror goes before her
 and dread follows after.

Beautiful is she in her deadly passion.
 Glorious is she in her lust.
Peril flows from her, the spice of her desire.
 Deadly is she to her foes.
 Perilous is she to her lovers.
For her passions turn on a moment,
 changing from love to wrath

in the narrow glass channel,
 between one grain of sand
 and the next.

Her lovers, like her enemies,
 fall before her,
 before her irresistible power,
She who makes the lion her footstool,
 She who rides high in the heavens
 upon a bright and errant star.
The Queen of Heaven:
 Who can withstand her radiance?
 As it said:
 “Whose beauty is greater than Anath’s?
 Who is fairer than Ashtart?”

Part I The Great Boar

All the youths of Canaan did say:
 “Let us prove our manliness and worth,
 upon the field of battle,
 or upon the wild lands in peace.
Upon the wild lands let us chase
 the great boar with yellowed tusks,
 the greatest of boars, with bloodstained tusks.”

He is the Father of boars, O youths of Canaan:
 The leopard fears him;

Wolves draw back at the scent of his musk.
Can you truly slay him, sons of Canaan?

Will he fall to your lances?
He counts as nothing the barbed and pitiless bronze.
Behold: He gnaws the spear that pierces him!
He charges the one who hurled it.
He plunges upon the one whose thrust impaled him.
He bears him down, though loyal hounds tear
at the hairy flanks.
He gores the hunter and tramples him
and counts the dogs as but gnats and flies.

Will you truly dare the wild lands, O sons of Canaan?
Stay instead in your cities of stone,
inlaid with onyx and jasper,
in the walled cities bright
with beryl and chrysolite,
O, youths of Canaan.
Sport with the maidens in lapis fountains
Court them, not death.
Drink the deep red wine to the dregs
and shun the red flowing blood,
your life-blood
the blood of your life let out by the tearing tusks.
Savor the wine and delight in the maidens' embraces,
in their bodies sleek with oils and spikenard.

Yet, see? One goes forth and dares the wild lands,
One of the sons of Canaan.
One dares the great boar with yellowed tusks,
the Father of Boars with bloodstained tusks;
Bears in his youth a brace of spears,
bears in his heart high courage.
With lean hounds white of tooth
goes he forth;
The baying hounds, lean of flank
with lolling tongues.
He goes forth alone, the handsome youth,
the fairest of youths,
His body is bared to danger,
Covered only with a linen tunic,
his feet shod with leather sandals.

His long hair strays from beneath his cap,
the thick loose curls spilling out
to lie upon his shoulders like clusters of dark grapes.

The maidens sigh to see him go forth.

The maids of the mighty city,
 sigh in melancholy passion
And desert the indolent youths at the lapis fountains,
 the languid sons of Canaan.
They watch the bold hunter with avid eyes.
 A breeze blows the scent of their spikenard to him;
 but he turns not at its fragrance.

The maids of the country pine for his beauty.
 They sigh as he passes,
 sigh at his comely thighs and broad shoulders.
 They sigh at his narrow waist girt with leather.
And milk maids and farm girls sigh to see him go forth.
 They sigh for Tammuz in his reckless youth.

Then the hounds took the scent.
 Their nostrils flared at the gamy musk.
They strained at their leashes,
 The baying hounds, the belling hounds
 with gaping mouths and lolling tongues.
Then Tammuz loosed them and followed after
 the coursing hounds with heaving flanks,
The panting hounds ran ahead
 and Tammuz, fleet of foot, followed after.

Over hills with boulders sown.
 the rocky soil,
 the dry earth of the wild lands,
the baying hounds, the eager hounds,
 followed the spoor, ever stronger.
And Tammuz followed close
 and followed after.
Across grassy glades they followed the spoor,
 the rank scent of the Father of Boars.
And bold Tammuz followed close and followed faster.
Beneath the cedars' spreading arms,
 the tall cedars who spread shade about them
 like the flowing trains of long robes,
the straining hounds, the panting hounds,
 ran down the scent, the cloying musk.
And eager Tammuz ran in the midst of the pack
 following closer and following faster.

The golden chariot of the flaming sun
 drove to the west, casting shadows back behind,
 long streamers of blue and purple,

and lay a blanket of gold on humble grasses,
a red gold coverlet on the grasses of the wild lands.
Behold! The chariot has approached the western gate of the sky,
and all that is not ruddy is a turmoil of blue and dusky violet,
a roiling chaos, a murky shadow.

And out of that gloaming rises the Father of Boars.
He rises from the shadows as though death itself
has risen from the earth.
His eyes are reddened with rage
as he sees the bold youth.
The sturtorous rumble of his fury shakes the earth
as his jaws gape, baring his great curving tusks,
foam-flecked tusks yellow with age.
His spittle stretches in tenuous ropes between his gaping jaws
as he tears the earth before him with sharp and deadly hooves.

The hounds close in, the eager hounds, the foolish hounds
Careless of the curving tusks, careless of death.
A murderous toss of the great shaggy head guts a hound,
Sends its lifeless body hurling through the thickening air,
the darkening air, the vanguard of night.
The others fasten on flank and foreleg,
the ravening hounds with lips curled back and flattened ears,
the worrying hounds, careless of death.

Then Tammuz drew back a spear, a slender javelin,
a hardened spear. tipped with bronze, thirsty for blood.
His muscles rippled as he hurled the spear.
Its head all smooth sank into the flesh,
pierced the hard hide where the great neck
met the shoulder, the slabbed shelf of hard muscle.

Bellowing in rage, the boar surged forth,
Shaking from flank and foreleg
the worrying hounds, the ravening dogs;
Shook them from him like bothersome flies,
like the noisome flies that swarm
from dung heaps and festering wounds,
eager to drink the moisture from our eyes.
Forward he surged on pointed hooves, his head low,
his tusked head low to the ground like a sharpened harrow,
like a bright scythe ready to harvest.

Tammuz grasped his second spear,
tipped with barbed and baleful bronze,

the ruddy bronze thirsty for blood,
the barbed bronze.
A full span back from the flaring head
stood the barbs,
a hand's breadth out stood the curving tines
the sturdy tines meant to hold the raging boar.

Tammuz aimed for the yawning maw,
the red mouth, the steaming mouth
framed in tearing tusks.
The hot breath, like a vent of hell, billowed forth
and spittle flew from the gaping cavern.
Then the boar, the great boar, the Father of Boars
impaled himself on the heartless bronze.
Deep it sank in the roof of his mouth
and burrowing deeper sought the base of his brain.

Then, with a jolt, the barbs caught hold,
tearing into the hot, wet flesh,
jarring the hunter with the sudden shock.
The great jaws snapped shut,
snapping the shaft of the hardened spear.
The maddened boar, the raging beast,
its brain burning
burning from the touch of the brazen head,
bore Tammuz down.
Its cloven hooves, its sharp, tearing hooves
sought the youth's tender flesh;
And the hot breath, spraying blood,
scalded the hunter's cheeks.
Tammuz fended the sharp hooves from him.
His stout arm held them back.

Then Tammuz drew from the leather that girded his loins
a bright blade, a baleful dagger, a full cubit in length.
He thrust up at the hairy hide, thrust to the hilt,
buried the blade in the creature's throat,
Then tore it in a slashing arc,
Shearing through muscle and sinew
Severing artery, vessel and vein.
Bright blood and dark blood sprayed out,
gushed forth in a scalding fountain,
bathed the youth in steaming gore.

The boar stiffened, standing rigid.
Then shuddered and toppled,

As a great cedar falls to the ax,
 groaning as it sways,
 then crashing down with snapping branches;
As a boulder, undercut by rain,
 topples and plunges down a cliff,
 shattering at its base in a thunderous roar.
So the great boar, the Father of Boars
 toppled over. So it fell.
Its shuddering limbs stretched out,
 its quivering limbs in dying spasm,
 its stiffening limbs.

Tammuz rose, drenched in blood, red with gore;
 Stood unscathed over the boar, the dying boar.
And the sun, on the rim of the sky,
 pausing at the western gate,
Painted him in crimson hues,
 red on red in the gathering dusk.

And as the life drained from the great brute,
 as it drained from the Father of Boars,
 As his eye, looking up at Tammuz --
 his baleful eye, brimming with hatred --
 began to glaze over,
The dying mind of the beast
 Swore anathema on the one he saw,
 the bold one who had let out his life,
 Swore his bane with a wordless curse.

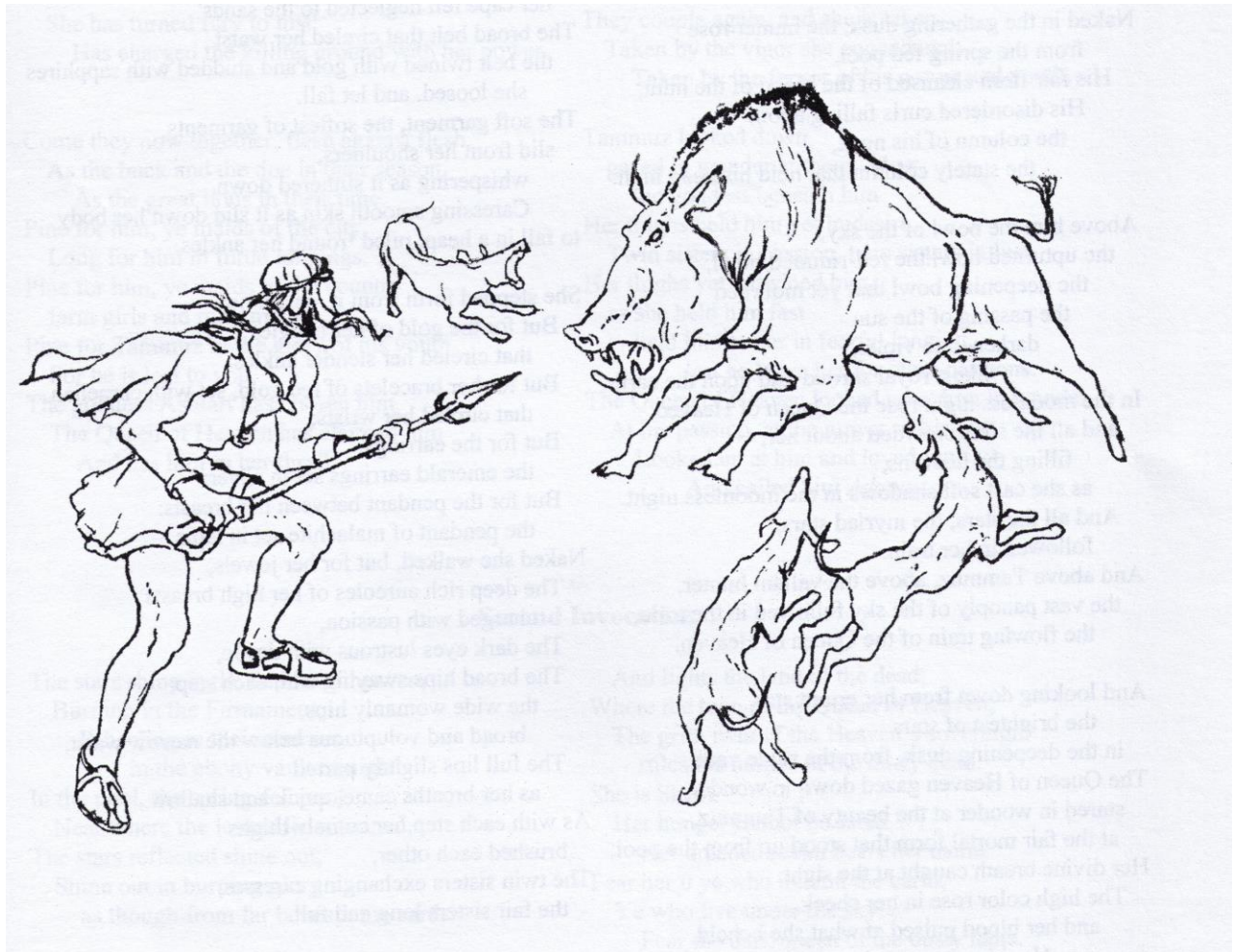
Part II: The Lovers

Tammuz tore from his body the ruined tunic,
 the linen tunic soaked in blood.
The restless hounds worried the corpse,
 the stiffening corpse of the Father of Boars,
 lapped up the pool of the boar's red blood,
 lapped up the thick congealing gore.

A far sweeter drink Tammuz found,
 An upflowing spring that from a rock
 pulsed and spattered, spewing bright water
 spurting and splashing cool torrents.
Tammuz bent down to taste the sweet waters,

the cool waters sparkling in the dusk,
 the chill waters that filled a pool,
 then flowed away under sandy soil.

The lean hounds, the snarling hounds,
 fought over the corpse
 of the greatest of boars,
 mired themselves in its sticky blood
and rolled in the dust, rolled in the gore,
 fouling themselves with the scent of death,
 as buzzing flies, the noisome flies,
 the noxious servants of the demon of death,
 swarmed about them.



But Tammuz plunged into chill clear waters,
the spring-fed waters of the shimmering pool.
From him he washed the thick, dark blood,
the thickening blood of the Father of Boars.
the blood that billowed in polluting clouds
in swirling clouds that filled the pool
then were swiftly borne away,
away from the pool to stain the dry soil.

Naked in the gathering dusk, the hunter rose
from the spring fed pool,
His fair flesh cleansed of the blood of the hunt,
His disordered curls falling about
the column of his neck,
the stately column that held his head high.

Above him the bowl of the sky,
the upturned bowl, the red-rimmed bowl,
the deepening bowl that yet mourned
the passing of the sun
darkened to violet,
like a royal shroud laid upon the earth.

In the moonless night rose the Queen of Heaven,
and all the stars crowded about her,
filling the heavens,
as she cast soft shadows in the moonless night.
And all the stars, the myriad stars,
followed in her train.

And above Tammuz, above the valiant hunter,
the vast panoply of the sky followed in the train,
the flowing train of the Queen of Heaven.

And looking down from her errant star,
the brightest of stars
in the deepening dusk, from the sable vault,
The Queen of Heaven gazed down in wonder
stared in wonder at the beauty of Tammuz,
at the fair mortal form that stood up from the pool.
Her divine breath caught at the sight.

The high color rose in her cheek,
and her blood pulsed at what she beheld.
Her blood coursed as she looked down,
as she gazed upon the naked youth.

And from her bright and errant star
The Queen of Heaven looked down on him,
looked down on him in wonder.
The Queen of Heaven looked down on him
and loved him
and called him *Adonai*.
Then down she swept, putting off

the terror that cloaked her,
Divesting herself of all majesty,
leaving behind weapons of war.
She took from her head the royal crown.
The cape dropped, unclasped, from her shoulders.
As she stepped forward, as she approached
the dazzled youth,
her cape fell neglected to the sands.
The broad belt that circled her waist
the belt twined with gold and studded with sapphires
she loosed, and let fall.
The soft garment, the softest of garments,
slid from her shoulders,
whispering as it slithered down,
Caressing smooth skin as it slid down her body
to fall in a heap, piled 'round her ankles.

She stepped forth from it, naked now
But for the gold of her bangles
that circled her slender ankles;
But for her bracelets of red gold, set with carnelian
that circled her wrists;
But for the earrings,
the emerald earrings set in silver;
But for the pendant between her breasts:
the pendant of malachite set in lapis.
Naked she walked, but for her jewels,
The deep rich aureoles of her high breasts
charged with passion,
The dark eyes lustrous with desire,
The broad hips swaying with each step,
the wide womanly hips,
broad and voluptuous below the narrow waist,
The full lips slightly parted
as her breaths came, quick and shallow.
As with each step her comely thighs
brushed each other,
The twin sisters exchanging caresses,
the fair sisters long and full.

And with each step, with each fair step,
Her feet upon the earth,
upon the hard-packed earth,
the barren earth of the wild lands,
Brought forth life, rich and full,
Brought forth exotic flowers of the heavenly realm,
Flowers unseen on earth before,
Deeply hued and thick with fragrance,
with heady aromas heavy laden.

Spellbound, Tammuz stepped from the pool

Entranced by her beauty.
Dark were his eyes and wide with wonder.
Charged was his flesh with passion.
For she had taken the power of death,
the enchanted death, laden with fate and charged
with a curse,
charged with the fury of the Father of Boars;
She has taken its power and charged it with life.
She has turned fury to lust;
Has charged the killing ground with her power.

Come they now together, flesh against flesh,
As the buck and the doe in their season,
As the great lions in their time.
Pine for him, ye maids of the city.
Long for him in futile longings.
Pine for him, ye maids of the country
farm girls and milk maids,
Pine for Tammuz in the glory of his youth.
For he is lost to you.
The goddess Ashtart has chosen him.
The Queen of Heaven has claimed him
And has him in her thrall.

And she has given him her love:

Her limbs are loosened and powerless
His youth mounts up yet again
Yet again he mounts up,
after she is sated.
He rises renewed.
He lays her upon a carpet of flowers,
the very flowers that sprang from her feet,
that sprang from her touch,
the heavenly flowers heady with musk.
They couple again, and she is taken,
Taken by the vigor she engendered,
Taken by the fervor of his power and youth.

Tammuz looked down,
gazed in wonder at the goddess,
the goddess beneath him.
Her thighs held him yet in desire,
Twin sisters in passion, twin sisters in lust
Her thighs yet entwined him,
as she held him fast
held him to her in fearful longing,
lest he leave her for other passions.
The Queen of Heaven looked up at him in wonder
At his passion, at the power of his lust,
Looked up at him and loved him
And called him *Adonai*.

Second Invocation

The stars shine in the depths of heaven,
Burning in the Firmament,
Wheeling in their courses,
in the ebony vault of night
In the pool, the spring-fed pool,
Near where the lovers lie entwined,
The stars reflected shine out;
Shine out in burning glory
as though from far beneath the earth.

Yet far below the heavens,
Far beneath the earth,
The sun begins its eastward journey

And lights the land of the dead;
Where the twin of the Queen of Heaven,
The grim twin of the Heaven's sovereign,
rules the hordes of the dusty dead.
She is Sheol.
Her hunger cannot be sated.
Her dreaded realm bears her name.
Fear her O ye who inhabit the earth,
Ye who live under the sky.
Fear the dark queen of the dusty halls.
Dread her approach, O ye living,
The queen of deadly silence.
Offer her appeasement,
Lest she raise the lifeless,

the numberless hosts of the dead,
 rousing them from their slumber,
Lest she raise them up in fury
 Covetous again of life.
Lest she raise the dead in their hunger,
 Urging the ravenous dead
 to rise and devour the living.

She is austere in her pallid beauty
 and all will love her sooner or late.
Dreadful is she to her enemies,
 She who shrivels the flesh,
 She who polishes the skulls of the vanquished.

A terror is she to her lovers.
 Visiting them by night.
 Riding them in her passion.
Dangerous is she to all:
 For her passion is unchanging.
 Her hunger is never sated.
 Her passion devours all.

She is implacable in her frozen passion.
 She makes no bargains:
 All who breathe,
 Will be breathless before her,
 Kneeling in silence in her dusty hall



Part III: Covetous Envy

The sun stood at the eastern gate
Ready to enter the sky.
As shadows returned to the halls of Sheol,
As the sun prepared to mount the sky,
When the gates of her realm lay open,
Sheol looked out and saw the lovers.

She saw Ashtart rise naked, rising in the dawn to dress.
She saw the goddess, the Queen of Heaven,
clasp her belt,
her broad belt studded with sapphires.
She saw the goddess retrieve her cape,
Saw her clasp her cape about her;
Saw her don her golden crown,
her golden crown studded with diamonds.

Then Ashtart bent down,
Bent down to caress the sleeping form.
Tammuz stirred, opening his eyes,
Opened his eyes wide in wonder
Wide in wonder at her majestic glory.
And the Queen of Heaven smiled down on him
Fairest Ashtart looked down on him and loved him
and called him *Adonai*.

She gave to him a tunic
Finest linen, sewn with silver
Embroidered with gold.
She gave to him the tunic
and kissed him
and promised to return;
Said that she would come again
when night called forth her star.

And so the lovers parted
As the sun rose in its splendor,
as it mounted the vault of heaven.
And so Ashtart left him
As her star, the Morning Star
Faded from the brightening sky.

And looking out from the underworld,
The Queen of Nether Darkness
Saw Tammuz rising naked,

Saw him don the linen tunic
And measured his manly frame.
Sheol looked up from the underworld,
looked out from her grim domain,
the realm that bore her name.

Her implacable desire was kindled.
She looked upon fair Tammuz
And in her deadly way,
Dreaded Sheol loved him.
She looked on him and loved him
and called him *Adonai*.

Then the Queen of Nether Darkness,
of the darkness that has no stars,
Hated the world of the living
that barred her from his body
that kept her from his soul

Then her voice echoed
in the hollow halls of the dead
“All come to me soon or late.
All come to Sheol’s hand.
All descend to the land of the dead
And I am mostly patient
as a spider at her web.
“But I will have fair Tammuz
in the flower of his youth.
“I will not have the flower faded.
I will not have it dry and sere.
“But Tammuz take I now
in the cold fire of my desire
to sit by me and reign with me
Underneath the earth.
“Ashtart would soon discard him
As is her fickle wont,
As age took his vigor
And took the fire
from his loins.
“But with me he will reign forever,
forever at my side,
His beauty will fade never.
frozen in his youth,
in this cold land preserved.”

Then Sheol called forth a dreaded spirit,
The most restless of all her shades
called one seeking vengeance.
Fear him all ye shades of Sheol.
Draw back from him, O living souls
Fear the shade of the Father of Boars.

Sheol called him forth and with dread spells
Again with life she clothed him, saying,
“Bone to bone be knit again.
Come upon them sinew and flesh.
Upon the dry bones come flesh and blood.

“Assume once more thy living form.
By my power thy terror increase
“Let the blood of thy goring
flow forever.
“Assume the mantle of my awful terror,
upon the wild lands of fertile Canaan.
Encompass the cities. Bind them in fear.
“Draw out thy bane, even fair Tammuz.
Draw out the object of my dread desire.
“Gore him in thy fury.
Drive his soul from the land of the living.
Drive him to my dread embrace.
“Bring to me my love,
Bring to me *Adonai*.”



Part 4: The Encompassed City

All the youths of Canaan did say.
“Let us emulate Tammuz,
thus upon the wild lands to tread
and upon the wild lands prove our worth.
“Let us desert the lapis fountains
and forsake the stone city,
the walls studded with onyx and jasper,
the walls bright with beryl and chrysolite.”

But the languid youths of Canaan
forsook not the lapis fountains
followed not the spoor of the wild lands
but followed the scent
of the maidens’ spikenard.
Nor did Tammuz seek again the wild lands.
The hounds, lean of flank and white of tooth,
grew sleek and fat,
And dozed in the sun.

And as night shrouded the earth,
As stars crowded the sky
the sable vault of the sky,
the Queen of Heaven came down to earth.
At night she walked the streets of the city,
In mortal guise sought her lover,
Pined for him in desolate desire,
until at last she found his door.
Then there was lust and love and laughter.
Then she looked on him and loved him
and in the throes of passion
called him *Adonai*.
And as the day faded her star
as her star paled in the brightness,
as her star fled from the sky,
Ashtart rose up and left her lover.
Anath parted from Tammuz,
Assumed her royal office,
and in deepest sorrow
bade farewell to *Adonai*.

Then a herdsman fled to the city,
wild with fear sought the gates.
Wild with fear he told his story,
babbled his tale wild with fear:
“Out of the cedars,
Out of the forests
Out of the darkness, the home of terror;
“A great boar with yellowed tusks
A thing of shadow,

Its horror spreading
Seeks death for all it meets.
“All the cattle have fled away.
All the sheep have fled their pastures.
“All the vineyards the boar has devoured.
Olive trees he has uprooted.
All the green fields he has trampled and fouled.
“Even the bees have deserted their hives,
Fleeing the beast’s rank smell of death.

“He has eluded armies of huntsmen.
Lone hunters has he slain.
“My master’s tents, pitched near his cattle,
The great boar ravaged,
Coming upon them at the edge of night.
“All died, torn by his tusks, struck by his hooves
And only am I left alive to tell thee.”

No sooner than the herdsman had told his tale
then a merchant fled into the city:
“A great boar, high as the withers of a horse of Egypt
came among us , spreading terror.
“Tore the asses with his curving tusks
or drove them off;
“Scattered the goods
tore and fouled them.
“It slew the traders
as they rose from their tents.
“Of all the caravan, of all the train,
only I am left alive,
only I to tell the tale.”

While the merchant yet was speaking
as he yet told his tale,
a cry came down from the highest tower.
The watchman saw the form of the fatal boar,
Round about the city coursing,
Driving off all who sought the gates.

Straight away the archers fired.
Then the boar faded from sight.
From the gates the army issued.
Then the boar appeared among them,
tearing and goring with his bloody tusks
Fled the soldiers into the city.
the disordered troops terror struck.

And thus the boar,
The greatest of boars,

The Father of Boars,
Clothed now with the terror of Sheol,
Encompassed the city,
Shut up the people within the walls.
Maids could not go out to draw water.
The city's cisterns dropped lower and lower.
Wheat and barley ran low in the city.
The stores were consumed
as if in siege.

But Tammuz by Ashtart enthralled,
By the goddess lost in a glamor,
Heard not the tales of terror.
Each day he slept.
Slept in his chamber,
Worn by the passion,
Consumed be the desire of the Queen of Heaven
Consumed by the ravenous lust of Ashtart.
Each night by her power
his vigor revived. His youth was renewed.
His youth was renewed to feed her passion,
To him was lost the world of men.

Then in council the Prince of the city
Called for the *Urim*,
Called for El's sacred stones.
He bid the priests, he bid the augers
Cast the stones to find what power
imperiled the city.
To find what god in righteous anger
punished the city,
To find what god or goddess
his people had wronged
To find what power he need appease.

Then the spirit of the Father of Boars.
Wrapped in the mantle of Sheol's power.
Shaped the fall of the sacred stones:
No answer gave he to the prince's entreaties.
Only a cryptic demand he gave.
By a demand he answered all pleadings
"Bring to me the one I came for.

Bring to me *Adonai*."

"Who is this one?" asked the Prince.
"Who is this lord you seek?"
Yet, though they cast the sacred stones
Or divined the flight of ravens
Or read the innards of hapless slaves
Or sought signs in the starry sky,
Though they begged which god or goddess
their impiety had wronged;
Only one answer came.
Only one demand:
"Bring to me the one I seek.
Bring to me him I came for.
Bring to me *Adonai*."

Then the prince called for sages
to plum the meaning of the ultimatum.
But none could tell him who this lord was.
None could fathom *Adonai*.
Then the prince in stern command
drew the youths from the lapis fountains
and demanded on pain of death
who was called *Adonai*.

The youths of Canaan all did say
the sons of the city gathered together,
"Let us seek out Tammuz.
From his slumber let us rouse him.
"Let us bid him once again
to go upon the wild lands,
To fight the wild boar
Or to seek for *Adonai*."

Then was Tammuz roused from slumber.
Then the sons of Canaan woke him.
Then was he shaken from the hold of the goddess.
Tammuz heard of the depredations,
Heard of the terror wrought by the boar.
Shaken was he by name they mentioned,
Knowing that he was *Adonai*.

Part 5: Jealousy and the Fatal Battle

In the night when the Queen of Heaven
came down to seek the bed of Tammuz,
When Ashtart consumed with longing
Put off her power and wandered the city,
 When she called for *Adonai*.
Tammuz she found, his spear points honing,
 girding himself to meet in battle
 the fatal boar that encompassed the city.

“Go not against this deadly creature,” she pleaded,
 “Go not against this beast of Sheol.
“Leave this city and live with me.
 In heavenly indolence live in my favor.”
“How can I leave my people in need?
 Why should I not bring down this boar?
“How did it know that thou had named me?
 That thou calleth me *Adonai*?”

Distressed was the goddess that another knew
 the name she called him.
Feared she then that Tammuz would leave her,
 leave her in sorrow for other passions.
 Jealous was she of the lure of the hunt.
And so she took his manly hand
 And pressed it to her breast.
The spear and the whetstone
 fell from his grip:
 All thoughts of the hunt were lost and forgotten.

All that night she drew out his vigor.
 All night she kindled his lust
 Putting forth the torch of her passion
 Snaring him in her desire.
Then in the dawn as he lay beneath her
 as he lay spent by sating her lust,
Ashtart, thinking that she had won,
 Had driven all other passions away,
 Caressed his cheek and whispered,
And called him *Adonai*.

At the sound of the name in haste he rose,
 Remembering the Boar’s demand:
“Bring to me the one I came for.
 Bring to me the one I seek.

Bring to me *Adonai*.”

In alarm the goddess clasped him.

Yet he thrust her away.

From her entreaties he turned in wrath.

Unsteady and weak, yet he grasped his spear.

Fury bloomed in the heart of the goddess.

Love turned to wrath in the breast of Ashtart:

“Go then, “ she shouted, “since thou prefer death,

Prefer death to my love, my love and caresses.

But go without my power about thee.”

Then flying up in hurt and rage

the Queen of Heaven deserted Tammuz.

The jealous goddess abandoned her lower,
the one she had called *Adonai*.

Behold! He goes forth, this noble son of Canaan.

He goes forth from the city

whose walls are set with onyx and jasper.

He leaves the walls of stone,

the walls bright with beryl and chrysolite.

He has set his feet on the wild lands.

His hounds have found the spoor.

Yet slowly they move,

the hounds fat and breathless,

the hunter weakened, of uncertain step.

Before him lay a hollow

Dark with shadow in the midst of day.

And out of that gloom rose the new-fleshed shade of the Father of Boars

He rose from the shadows: Death itself rising from Sheol.

His eyes gleamed with uncanny fire and cold rage

As he saw the bold youth.

His hollow roar, the horn of Sheol, scattered the hounds.

They ran in confusion

And left the way open

open to Tammuz where he gripped his spear

Then the beast, the phantom of Sheol, charged the lone hunter.

As his jaws gaped, baring his sharp and curving tusks,

Tammuz aimed for the maw, the cavernous darkness,

The hollow emptiness framed by great tusks.

Then the boar by Sheol’s craft,

swinging his head from side to side,

evaded the spear, the pitiless bronze,

the gleaming point framed by barbs.

Then a sweep of the massive head
Caught the lone hunter,
sweeping his feet from beneath him;
Caught the falling body of Tammuz
and tossed him high with the tearing tusks.
And as the youth's body fell back,
the boar caught it and tossed him again,
Let out his life's blood,
Let it out on the dusty ground.

The great boar, the Father of Boars,
The shade new-fleshed by Sheol's art
Gripped the corpse of the youthful hunter;
Clamped the bloody corpse of Tammuz
between the awful rending jaws;
Bore the body down to Sheol,
down to the welcome of the austere goddess.

In the hollow halls of the dead,
The great boar, The Father of Boars
his burning vengeance fully glutted,
dropped the body at the feet of Sheol.
Then the substance with which she had clothed him,
The phantom flesh that had sheathed his soul,
Faded now with the animal's fury,
Vanished as a mist dispelled.

Part 6: Tammuz in the Land of the Dead

Then Sheol pressed her lips to the lips of Tammuz,
and breathing out a cold vapor,
Brought him to a semblance of life.
"Arise, Tammuz," she commanded.
"Rise and reign at my side.
Rule with me and be my beloved.
"Rise and eat. Eat at my table, beloved of Sheol;
Take from my table the bread I have made thee.
"Sip the dark wine that I set before thee.
Drink deeply and feel thy wounds close and heal."

And Tammuz obeyed the words of the goddess.
She led him to her bed of darkness
Her cold passion constant and unchanging
drew from him a cold fire of lust.
And in her way the goddess loved him:
She looked on him in her desire

She drew him down in her bed darkness
and loved him
and called him *Adonai*.

And now as shadows cover the earth
And now as the sun has left the sky,
the Queen of Heaven has repented her fury
Divesting herself of her power,
she comes once more to the city.
She roams again the streets of the city
afire with desire,
Calling for Tammuz,
calling aloud her lover's name.

The hounds of Tammuz have returned from the hunt.
Confused, they wander in search of their master.
The prince of the city fearing evil,

in dread of the power that encompassed the city
has decreed that no person shall utter the name,
The name of he who went forth
and never came back. . .
The prince has commanded that the name of Tammuz
never be uttered within the city,
Lest the great boar in its fury return.

And in the night the city watchmen
hear the voice of a woman calling,
a woman weeping in desolation.
They find a woman calling for Tammuz,
the distracted woman,
the love-sick female.
No sign bears she of her godly status,
No sign at all she is divine.
But a mere mortal is all they see.
They drive her forth in fear from the city.
They beat her with rods and drive her forth.
They bar her return at the city gate.

And without the city Ashtart called out
Called out in the night to the maids of the city
She turned and called out
to the maids of the country
to farm girls and milk maids
to shearers and gleaners.
“Charge my beloved to answer my call,
O maids I command you by love and desire.
“Pine with me O maids of Canaan,
Who sigh for Tammuz
in the flower of his youth.”

Yet no answer was she given
Only silence greeted her voice.
Then the goddess, assuming her power
Commanded the earth to yield up her lover,
Ordered the land to submit to her power
But silence alone greeted her voice,
Until a place in the wild lands answered
that spot of earth that swallowed his blood.
That place in the wild lands that drank his blood
answered in flowers, that sprang from his gore.
The anemone bright, with petals of scarlet
rose from the ground where Tammuz had died.

Then in wailing the Queen of Heaven
Rent the night in desolate sorrow.
“Weep with me O maidens,
Maids of the city,
Farm girls and milk maids,

Weep for Tammuz,
Slain in his youth.”

Then the goddess, her eyes red with weeping,
Battered at the black gates of Sheol
Struck the iron portals of Sheol
the resounding gates of the underworld;
Demanded that Sheol yield up her lover.
Raging, the goddess, The Queen of Heaven,
tried to break through the iron boundary,
the locked gates of the land of the dead.

Sheol then in answer to the fury,
the futile fury of the Queen of Heaven,
Taunted her sister, taunted Ashtart
from behind her gates,
the gates of iron that shut out the living.
“Rail away, inconstant sister
Fickle goddess, inconstant lover!
“Shriek in thy frenzy, thy deranged tumult.
Futile and foolish is thy rage.
“Tammuz is mine in his youth and his beauty
Forever mine in the land of the Dead.”

Then Ashtart, her fists bloody,
Her knuckles scraped raw by the iron door,
Her nails torn from clawing the gate,
Slumped against the metal barrier,
Sagged down weeping,
Weeping for Tammuz, lost in his youth.
And from behind the iron portal
Her sister's laughter mocked her sorrow.
Sheol mocked her in exultation.

Desolate, the goddess, the Queen of Heaven,
fled from the iron portal of Sheol
Desolate and remote, she kept to the heavens,
Remote from the world on her errant star.
The earth knew not the power of her passion.
The world knew not the quickening life,
the life that from her powers sprang.
No fruit came forth from date palm or olive.
Grapes withered on yellowing vines.
No seed would sprout in fields turned by the harrow.
No wheat came up, nor lentils, nor barely.
No bull mounted a cow, and rams knew not their ewes.
No calf was born, no sheep in the sheepfold.
No man had strength at all in his loins.

No maids of the city nor girls of the country
felt at all the pangs of desire.

No man knew a woman.

No woman conceived in all the earth.

All wombs were closed.

Libations poured out roused not Ashtart's favor.

Nor did the savor of fat burned on the altar.

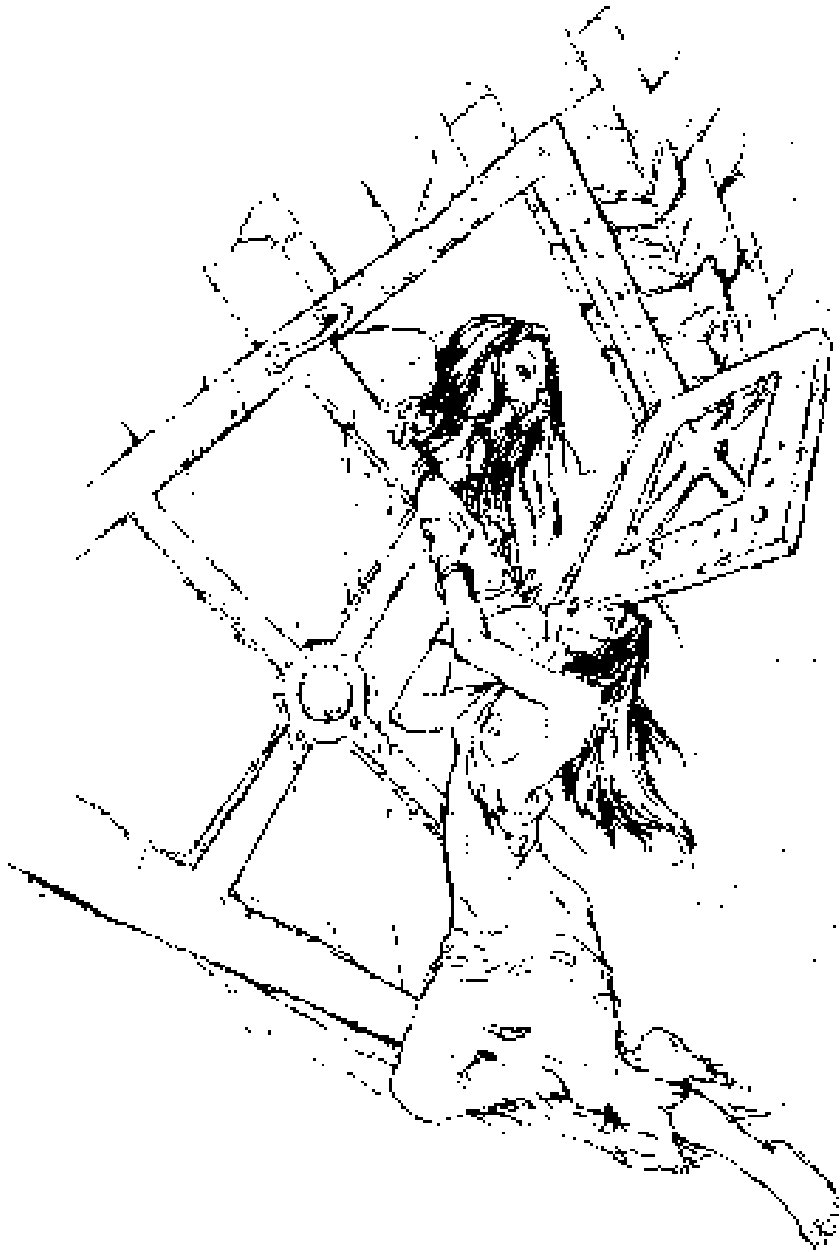
No entreaties were answered.

No burning of incense her countenance could turn.

No answer came from casting the *Urim*.

No answer came from reading the signs.

No answer came from the desolate goddess.



Third Invocation

Extol him, all who dwell in the earth
Praise him, all who dwell in the heavens.
Remote and ancient is he,
Enthroned on the firmament
His beard is gray; his eyes are wise,
Wise with the wisdom of his years.
Quiet is his realm.
Calm and sage he sits, astride the heavens.
Great El, father of all the gods,
Sits serene, aloof from the earth.
Unmoved is he by tears and raging.

Awful is he in his grandeur.
Blinding is his visage,
Bringing death to mortals who see his face.
Like a molten mask is his countenance,

His eyes like molten bronze.
The sound of his voice is like thunder
Like the roaring of the sea.
Fear him ye of unjust heart.
For he weighs all in his scales,
And the wanting are purged in the refiners furnace.

Hear us, great El!
The earth languishes.
Let the cry of our affliction rise up.
Forsake us not, lest we perish.
Will the Father of All let his children wane and wither?
Will not Asherah, divine mother,
intercede for us in our sufferings?
Shall not the Judge restore to us justice?



Part 7: The Judgment

Great El shifts on his golden throne,
Disturbed at the outcry that comes up from the earth.
With a thundering roar, a roar of command,
He dispatches a cherub to summon Ashtart.
The winged beast with the face of a man
Summons Ashtart to the court of El;
to stand before the glittering throne,
before El Shaddai,
before the awful Lord of Creation.

With a voice of great waters
Bull El demanded:
“Why hast thou deserted the earth,
Withholding from life thy vital power?
“The seedling sprouts not. Trees bear no fruit.
The vine withers before its time.
“The beasts mate not.
They know not their seasons
No beast gives birth.
“Men have no strength at all in their loins.
Women feel not the pangs of desire.
No woman conceives.
In all the earth no child is born.
In all the earth life is ebbing.
“Why has Ashtart shirked her office?
Why does she leave the earth to languish?”

Astride the great cherub
the unwilling goddess
rode through the waters above highest heaven
Up through a window,
through which rain poured down,
piercing the shell, the thin beaten shell
the shield of the firmament,
The cherub bore the underworld goddess
into the realm of mighty El,
the realm that lies above the stars.

Ashtart accused her dreaded sister,
Demanded that Sheol release her lover,
Swore to make Tammuz hers forever
Free and immortal in the realm of heaven,
hers forever among the stars.
Then El demanded that Sheol comply,

No answer gave the desolate goddess.
Still as stone she stood before him.
Her breast heaved as she choked back her grief.
Then suddenly, burst it forth from her,
As a flood escapes the river’s channel,
overflowing its banks in a raging tide.
“Tammuz, ah Tammuz, is lost to me!
Lost to me is *Adonai*!
Lost to me forever my Love!”

Then great El questioned her closely,
Heard how Tammuz died in his youth,
Taken by Sheol before his time.
In wrath sent he forth once more a cherub,
Sent it down to the gates of Sheol,
Sent it down to summon the goddess,
Dreaded Sheol, twin of Ashtart.

The winged cherub, with leonine forelegs,
Flanks of a bull and face of a man
Stood at the iron portal of Sheol,
Spake in a voice like the roar of great waters,
By the power of El the gates fell open,
The groaning gates, the iron portal.
By El’s command the mighty angel
brought forth Sheol, bade her ride;
bade her come to the court of El.
That Ashtart might give forth her power,
That the earth might regain its ardor;
That life again in vital power
might flow across the land.

Then Sheol spake; her cold lips were smiling:
“Not so, not so, my inconstant sister.
Tammuz is mine by the power of Chaos,
By mighty oaths from ancient days,
0 From the days before the world was formed.
“Not so, not so, Mighty Father, ruler of all.
Even thou are bound to the oath,
The oath thou swore at the world’s beginning,
When thou allotted us each our realms.
“Pledged thee to me that all who taste of the dead,
All who taste the fruits of Sheol,
Never again can stray from my keeping.

“Behold: Tammuz has eaten the bread of Sheol.
Tammuz has tasted the food of the dead.
“Tammuz has drunk the wine of the underworld.
He has drunk the draught of death.
He has tasted of the cup of Sheol.
Bound is he to Sheol’s realm.”

Mighty El bowed to Sheol.
The Lord of All was bound to his oath.
Mighty El bowed to Ashtart.
The Judge of All was bound to Justice.
Mighty El delivered his verdict:
Demanded that Sheol yield up fair Tammuz,
Once again to walk in the sun,
Once again to Ashtart’s caresses;

Demanded that Sheol’s claim be honored,
That Ashtart yield up Tammuz,
Once again to walk in Darkness,
Once again to Sheol’s embraces.
For half the year with the Queen of Heaven;
For half the year with the Queen of the Dead.

Thus upon earth came its seasons.
Thus the anemone blooms ever in springtime.
Thus half the year is dry and sere
and void of promise.
And Tammuz ever is loved by each goddess.
Each in her passion
Looks on him and Loves him
. . . and calls him *Adonai*.

VISION QUEST

by
David Sparenberg

Shekhinah
maiden of midnight
mothering side
of the God of life
descend now
to this troubled heart
this garden soul
lift me
as if on eagles’ wings
to wear the fiery
robes of lightning

let my thunder roll

let me sit
in luminal darkness
meditating prayers
in the shapes of light
let me dream
dream beneath the breathing
rainbow
of your love.

There is a place
that place is nowhere
and a time
pierced by eternity
known to pilgrims
as the rest of God.
There
the man of roads and
child of his returning
bow together
in everlasting peace.

Tropic of Dystopia

by

R.W. Miller

Larson K. Sideman took his debit card out of his pocket and stuck it into the Chinese fortune telling machine. It had been a satisfying Chinese meal and he was interested in a fortune for kicks. The screen lit up and a beautiful Asian woman came on the screen. She had red lips, dark eyes and well groomed straight black hair.

"What type of fortune do you desire tonight? Should it be about business, family or romance?" she said seductively.

When am I going to meet a woman like you, Sideman thought. He was alone tonight, as he had been every night since he moved to this city by the Estuary five years ago.

"Romance," he said nervously and impatiently.

"We will need to know more about you. Do you mind if we perform a physical and mood test?" asked the lady on the screen with a smile.

"Go ahead," said Sideman, but he didn't know what to expect because this was the first time he had used one of the new fortune machines. Fortune cookies had gone out of style since all the new interactive machines had been put into circulation.

A soft gong went off and Sideman felt a warm breeze flow over him. He felt adored and his genitals tingled. The warmth floated away and the woman came back on screen.

"You are going to have a successful erotic encounter tonight with a woman of the opposite sex. The time it will occur is printed on the bill," said the lady with a sly grin. "Have a good night and a good time sexy! Visit again soon."

The image faded and a receipt rolled out of the machine.

This is too expensive thought Sideman, but he was smiling because he may be doing the wild thing in a few hours. Eleven thirty the receipt said. He was sad that he did not have the chance to meet her. He had seen her image on other Fortune Telling machines. He had idolized her, but she was only an image. He enjoyed looking at her, and she was programmed to charm, but things would be different if he met her. Sideman knew that he was hardly ideal and she would have noticed. There may be a whole self improvement regime. He had grown used to being alone, but being alone was not always enough. Tonight something special was going to happen, but that made Sideman worry. He knew how to live alone. It was still legal, also recommended, that individuals lived alone. But tonight there was prophecy. He was surprised by what shape it had taken. Reproduction was necessary, but for some reason it was no longer encouraged. Maybe it had to do with the extraterrestrial "invasion" which had been played down recently. The government had liked the extraterrestrial Healers. They were wise and all knowing, but they did not have a lot of time to stay on the planet. Their few suggestions were absorbed by the powers that be.

Sideman mulled over the bad luck he had been having in the romance department in this City by the Estuary. It was originally called San Francisco but a lot of people were afraid to say that they lived there, so they changed the name every couple of years. It also served as a means to hide the city from people who weren't welcome. For many years he had been alone and unable to find the right person. His

heterosexual orientation was not accepted in the city. Actually it was against local municipal laws. The rest of the country didn't approve of the city, and the local laws were usually ignored, but the dominant local culture took them to heart. If you had heterosexual sex there had to be a guilty party, usually a third party involved to take the blame or "responsibility." They had built a prison for the incorrigibles who would not obey the laws. This was the latest chapter for Alcatraz Island out in the Estuary. For a while it was a tourist destination which highlighted the history of the famous Federal Penitentiary. But then for a while it served a dual purpose as a historic sight and a nature site where you could see populations of ocean and seashore birds. But now it was a prison again for irresponsible and indiscreet heterosexual fornicators. In other parts of the country the laws were reversed, i.e. it was against the law to be a homosexual. The City by the Estuary honored the invaders, but many of the citizens were resentful of the new laws that made it difficult to reproduce.

The news that he was going to have sex tonight may not have been good news at all. There was a really good chance that other people would say that they were having sex with his equipment, i.e. he wouldn't really be having the sex, but people would say he was. It was somewhat comforting to think that he was having more sex than he noticed. To some people he could brag that he was a "Stud" and someday he could say that he has to be "very experienced" and maybe even have to be "very skilled." But for the meantime he had the whole night to worry about the risk. Later in the evening he would probably be having illegal sex and not be able to notice with whom. Things could be worse. There were worse cities. Places where people were stupid and there were outlaws who were violent. In other parts of the country there were natural disasters and an uncontrolled code of violence. Testosterone was banned from the City by the Estuary. Every male had to undergo an operation so that they

would not produce testosterone. There was also a female equivalent, a medical procedure which disabled women from seeking revenge and working out their rage on innocent people. Sidemen would realize later in life that they were just teaching lessons, trying to let the other know what they were going through, but some did not understand and felt compelled to complain. They may be kicking a gift horse in the mouth in some way, but that may not be clear. It was no longer needed to hen peck the males to keep them all in check. There were testosterone sensors on the buses, at night clubs, and places of work, to make sure there weren't dangerous amounts of testosterone in any members of the populace. This was the law over most of the world since the benign aliens had convinced the leaders of the planet by force of argument fifty years ago. Sideman wondered if it was all for the better.

The mysterious aliens decreed that there would be no more war and forced the governments of the world to take steps to stamp out violence. The weapons were collected, the armies abolished, and the testosterone was made illegal. Most men had to take shots to reduce their testosterone. It usually turned out that woman would end up having more of something, it may not be testosterone, then the men. There were a few rebels and by and large the plan worked. Once the aliens achieved their objectives they left, leaving questions. They translated their efforts into the word "humanitarian" and said they had other worlds to help heal. They weren't going to share their technology with us until we were "older" or more in control. Sideman thought the alien humanoids were pricks because they didn't tell us much about themselves. The government did not tell the people everything they knew about them, but they did go along with their ideas for planetary improvement. But a lot of people missed testosterone. Athletics suffered and there was an increase in artificial insemination. Their effect on the world was not overt. It was not easy to know what they had done, but

interactions between men and women had become a lot more stressful since they arrived. They also left some of their Artificial Intelligence machines.

Sideman went to the phone to call his friend and former co-worker Jason. They hadn't talked for a long time because Jason had come into some money and he wasn't as friendly as he had once been. But Sideman was hoping to borrow his Action Recorder. It was a new device that recorded all of your actions while the batteries lasted, and you could replace the batteries. But they were very expensive and only the wealthy could afford them. With the Action Recorder he could prove that he was not having an encounter with the opposite sex that evening. He could prove that he was not breaking the new municipal code laws.

Sideman went to the phone and put in his debit card. The phone rang and then Jason came to the phone.

"Hello."

"Hey Jason, it's me Sideman. Can you lend me an Action Recorder tonight?"

"Hey Sideman, how have you been? Actually I can't, but do you want to meet? I am going out for Red Herrings tonight. Do you want to meet for a drink?" said Jason reacting quickly.

Red Herrings was a code word for a bar and Sideman knew what place Jason would be going to, but he couldn't commit over the phone in case anybody was listening.

"Not sure what I am doing tonight, but let's meet soon," said Sideman.

"You know the place," said Jack.

"Let's talk then," said Sideman.

Sideman was bummed because an Action Recorder would give him the proof. It was going to be an interesting night. Here was an opportunity to get his hands on a woman, something he had wanted to do for a long time, but was not legally allowed to do so anymore. But maybe the woman he was going to get his hands on was going to be with another woman

and they would say that he was involved and he had no proof to argue otherwise? Or maybe someone was going to have hetero sex and blame it on him? Or maybe two guys would say that he was intimately involved? What if he had to move somewhere where people wouldn't understand or approve? But eleven thirty was coming soon and he would like to have a witness. Maybe Jason would serve as one? He would have proof on his Action Recorder.

This had to all change, but Sideman did not know who could change it. Sideman did not know if prophecy and myth could exist in this mechanized and controlled future. The computers kept everybody accounted for. Everybody needed a code to work, pay rent, communicate, and shop. Since the "invasion" it sure seemed as if there were a lot more machines around keeping tabs on things. There sure seemed as if there was a lot less freedom and a lot more surveillance. Sideman had decided to take things on a day by day basis, but the days were more worrisome, especially if you did not have a lot of contact with others who knew you. It would take a hero to change or rectify these things. Sideman was not sure if he even understood the goals of the galactic visitors, and he did not trust all the new machines.

Sideman decided to take the bus to the bar: The Cattlyst. Jason would probably be there pretty soon. He hadn't had a Red Herring in a while and this was a nice place where you could find a great loose woman who was willing and often wanted to do some hetero under the right conditions. They were more flexible with the rules down there. That is anyway what he had heard. But it never seemed to work out that way for Sideman. He would go to these lively bars and have nothing to say.

The modern dating devices were all programmed for the majority sexuality and sometimes would even help incarcerate people with the minority sexuality. The Matchmaker Machine would help you pick out the best person who was also hooked up, but it didn't

respect “undesirable preferences.” The Learning Chapter Machine treated heteros as an infantile stage that had to be grown out of. Heterosexuality was only for the physically needy was the argument. This had always seemed strange to Sideman, but he did not know how to disagree.

But Sideman dreamed of a woman who would break the rules and do the wild thing with him. A woman who didn’t care about what the machines told them to do. But he didn’t know how to apprise this dream woman, this woman who no woman could possibly be, of what he was going through tonight. He wanted a woman who would ignore the machines, but the fortune said at what time things would start happening. He wondered if dating scene was different elsewhere.

Sideman waited by the bus stop sweating and perplexed. The Bus Stop Companion Television Machine was broadcasting the Mayors new plans for the city. The city was trying to seek alliances with other cities which also had the “correct” sexual patterning.

“You are not alone out there. We understand and we want to form friendships,” the Mayor was saying.

The bus came quickly and Sideman rode it to the neighborhood where the bar was. The bus also had a video screen which broadcasted The Bus Stop Television Companion.

The Mayor was saying, “Let’s be friends. Let’s join forces together. Let’s hold hands across this country.”

Sideman was not happy with the thought that things could possibly be the same elsewhere, but he was also afraid that they may be worse. Dating may be more risky elsewhere. Things may just be abnormal now all over, and he had learned how to live in the City by the Estuary. He would not move until something better presented itself elsewhere. For now he decided to count his blessings if he could. The City by the Estuary had nice weather, less violence, and its share of surrounding territory.

Sideman stopped paying attention, but the

television documentary ended and some music came on. But soon Sideman was off the bus and on the way to the bar. It was a quiet night for the Cattlyst, but there were still all types of folks there. There were still some hippie types from the 1960’s, but of course the neo hippies from the 2030’s: those who embraced the alien invading Healers. There were X’ers and Punks and Y’ers, Z’ers and X-cubed-ers. Some people were nude and others wore their Sexual Protocol Announcers which listed the steps you should take with them if you were interested in a sexual encounter with them. One thing that was great about the Cattlyst was that they had booths, saunas and private rooms for rental. It was eleven and he was in the mood for a drink. Sideman ordered a Red Herring at the bar and turned around in his chair so he could look at the crowd.

“Do you want any of these,” a man said letting him know that he had testosterone pills for sale. Sideman chose to refuse even though they would improve his sexual performance if he had a chance to perform that evening as prophesized by the Fortune Telling Machines.

The Red Herring was juicy but salty. They were a popular drink to talk about at work at the City by the Estuary Tourism Company where he used to work with Jason. There was a high turnover rate there, and efforts were always made to weed away the new employees. They liked Jason and he had moved upward in the company.

And speaking of the devil there was Boughta, a coworker from the company. He didn’t see Boughta anymore because she transferred to a different department. And there walking behind her through the crowd was Jason. Jason had a noirish suit on and Boughta wore a neo hippie dress with a flap that could be opened to expose her belly.

“Hey Larson, how are you doing,” said Jason.

“Lucky man tonight,” said Boughta.

“Would you like to join me for a drink?” asked Sideman.

"We would but we already had a few," said Boughta.

"How are you two doing in the big office?" asked Sideman.

"You know, knowing the city, sharing the city," said Jason.

"It is a grand city. I am afraid to move anywhere else," said Sideman.

"Yes it is a beautiful city," said Boughta.

"It brings out the emotions in people," said Jason.

They stood there without anything to say for a moment. Sideman drank taking a sip from the Red Herring.

"Hey you should check the job listings. There is a new opening upstairs for an executive sales trainee. I can put in a good word for you," said Jason.

"I would like to give it a try," said Sideman.

"We will hook you up," said Boughta.

"We have plans upstairs with a third party if you know what I mean, but let me get you another drink. What are you having?" said Jason.

Sideman looked at his watch and it was eleven fifteen.

"How about another Red Herring?" said Jason.

"Sounds good to me," said Sideman.

"Another Red Herring it will be," said Jason to the bartender and he put down the money.

"We have to run," said Boughta as she playfully tugged on Jason's coat.

"Thanks for the drink," said Sideman.

The bartender asked if he wanted mood enhancers with the drink, but Sideman indicated that he just wanted the regular.

Jason waved and Boughta followed him upstairs to where they had the private booths. Boughta waved and smiled.

Sideman was happy to get the extra drink

because he needed to save some money. With the new job he would probably be better off. He looked around the bar and most people were in couples or groups. He didn't see an opening or an opportunity to talk with anybody, but he was enjoying the drink. He ordered an appetizer and went to a table to watch the video display on the ceiling.

Sideman looked at his watch and it was eleven thirty. He had to work the next day so he couldn't stay too much later. He was sad that he couldn't talk to Jason at that moment. Boughta was lovely as usual. He was willing to bet the Action Recorder was turned off. At least it wasn't a mystery to Sideman tonight.

But Sideman realized that things had to change. There was something wrong with this future. Things had not worked out the way they should have. Maybe in the new position he would have the power or opportunity to change things. There was something wrong with all these machines controlling things. There were machines at home, at work, and on the bus. They were the gifts of the mysterious Healers, but Sideman worried about them. One could usually escape some of them at nightclubs, but they were also there if necessary or desired. Sideman realized that he was probably up there tonight with Jason and Boughta in "some way," but things needed to change. Things probably would not get too bad because they were co-workers; this was a risk that people had to take to have sex now. Someday it may be his turn.

Maybe he was the one to change things, but he did not yet know how. Maybe someday Jason would return the favor or help. Sideman finished his Red Herring and made his way sadly towards the bus. The Healers may have changed things, but not necessarily better for everyone. Tomorrow there may be another prophecy about someone making life better for everyone.

Achilles Nearing the Walls of Troy

by

Berrien C. Henderson

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

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

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

"I smell your fear, Trojan cubs!"

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

The dust of combat may choke others,

But to me--incense for dark-stalking Ares.

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

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

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

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

And today, I seek song.

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

This poem was published in MC #29 with some verses missing and out of order. We now print the version the author intended.

THE LOVE LETTER

by
Lala Heine-Koehn

My Lady, you wrote, forgive me for the disobedience
of the turtledove, mockingbird, merle and skylark
I had sent to greet your morning your face
resplendent the eternal day.
The whimpering sound of the near-by rill tainted my
dawn-prayers to grant my eyes if only a fragment
of your shadow, yet hoping, you will hear the soft air
of lute and *psaltery** weaving in and out between
the alabaster balustrade of your balcony.
This letter I wrote on the skin of *Khawi*,* finer
than parchment of a new-born lamb,
the ink is ultramarine, the colour of the sky
and sea, the mirror of your eyes.



**psaltery*: an ancient musical instrument, similar to a dulcimer

**Khawi*: animal whose skin is of yellow colour

Swimming

by

SD Williams



One bright day when had they had rowed out on the sound, Astrid laughed and leapt across the gunwale. Henry watched her turn with flutter kicks and glide beneath the skiff. She surfaced off the port bow and sang “come with me.” Her wet hair hung like kelp across her smile.

“I’m in my best suit,” Henry replied, not taking his hands from the oars. “I’m going to be the president of a bank, you know. It’s dangerous, and I have an appointment in half an hour.”

With a wave Astrid dove again, kicking the rolling surface with her small feet, and swam out of sight. Henry lit a cigarette and waited. He turned on the radio they had brought with them and listened thoughtfully to weather reports. At one moment he decided to join her and stood in the boat as if to dive, but he didn’t. He sat and put his hands on the oars

again. “She knows I have an appointment,” he said to himself. “She’ll have to find her own way back.”

He pretended callousness. He had feared losing Astrid since the moment he’d been drawn to her. His mother had warned him not to become involved with her after she had left home to run with the dogs in the hills above the village, but it was this that drew him. The other young women of the village painted their eyelids mauve and avoided the hills.

Henry was late for his appointment because he waited too long in the little rocking boat, fearing and longing for Astrid, whom he nonetheless abandoned. When he arrived at the bank he was told he wasn’t punctual enough to be a banker. The vice president mockingly offered him the opportunity to work as janitor. Afterward, outside the imposing building, Henry put his hands over his face and lied to himself that he hadn’t wanted to wear a gray suit. He alternately blamed Astrid and himself for his failure and

ran to the shore to look for her and to tell her the sad news. But she was nowhere to be seen.

Astrid swam in the sea. She liked the slippery feeling and enjoyed the caress of the kelp that had felt so horrible around her feet when she was a girl. Even the sharks appeared content, not the menacing protagonists of stories. Sometimes she missed things such as her telephone. It took weeks to learn to communicate with the undersea animals, and some she never did reach. Schools of fish engulfed her, and she jostled to swim at their center and liked the touch of their cat-tongue bodies against hers.

One wind-torn day she was caught in a fishing net. Fortunately for her it hung not from a large trawler but from a little boat that belonged to an old fisherman. His eyes widened in surprise and pleasure when he saw what he had caught, for, of course, her clothing had long since disintegrated, and she was young and very pretty. Perhaps fearing the vision would disappear if he hesitated, he jumped upon her and wrestled to undo his foul-weather gear.

"Leave me alone," she cried, and thinking quickly she added, "I can bring you pearls from giant oysters and gold from sunken ships."



The fisherman held her by her slippery arms and considered what she said. He wasn't sure he could trust her, and he knew the bird in hand is worth two elsewhere. And she was lovely. But he was wary, too.

"Will you curse me if I don't release you?" he asked, feeling smart to have thought of it.

Astrid had no power to place curses on

people and did not believe such things existed. She could see, however, that the fisherman's apprehension was genuine.

"If you believe so," she replied.

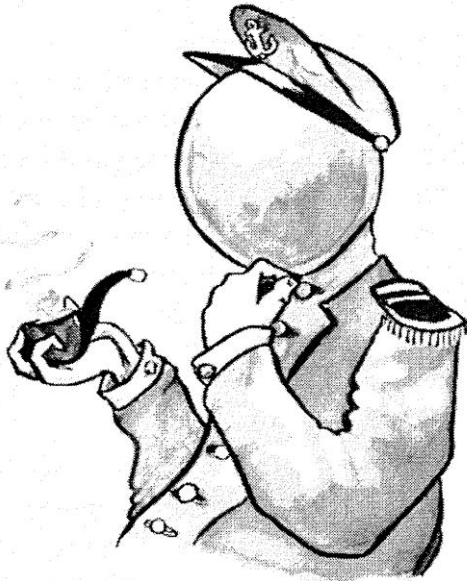
He let her go. Astrid did not lie or commit treachery, and so although she would rather have swum away, she dove to find what she had promised. She located a giant oyster in a deep canyon of the ocean and struggled to carry it to the surface. Inside was a huge pearl. She put the mollusk into the man's net and signaled him to haul it aboard. He was so excited by his good fortune that he immediately pried into the oyster when he'd pulled it over the gunwale and onto the decking. But in his greediness he was careless. He leaned inside the half open shell to claim his prize, and the halves closed, severing his head from his body. Astrid closed her eyes and dove back into the blue water.

The fisherman's boat drifted to shore after several days. His stout wife had kept a lookout for him. When the boat beached on a jumble of rocks she saw the giant oyster and her husband's body and head and began to keen, but she stopped when the head began to talk.

"Eyes like a dolphin, more lithe than the fish of the sea, a creature of dreams, bounteous . . ." and so on.

The head rhapsodized for hours. In the late night it began to invent poems. Having lost her husband to death and to another love on the same day, the fisherman's wife was overcome with sorrow and madness and struck the head with a large shovel until it stopped. She then smashed the oyster shell and placed the large pearl on her husband's shoulders, hoping no one would notice a difference about him—change was not greeted cheerfully in their small community. The ruse worked for a very long time, but eventually word about the mermaid spread through the village, and the men went to find her. Day after day they were

out on the sound in their boats, gesturing with their crotches and telling wishful jokes.



One day a man did see her. Astrid surfaced now and then to sunbathe at a secluded beach on a small rocky island. Sheer cliffs prevented anyone from reaching her by land, and of course she could see if anyone approached by water. She rested there on Saturday afternoons, a time she and Henry often used to swim or row together. Astrid hoped that he would find her there one day. Although she loved the sea, she was lonely for him and often called messages into the drain pipes that entered the sound from the village.

The man who saw Astrid knew he couldn't reach her. Instead he took photographs with a telephoto lens and sold them to magazines. The man made a great deal of money, and the photographs, though indistinct, intensified the search for Astrid. Men from the village looked among the coves and islands constantly in their small boats, drinking from the bottle and telling crude jokes to each other. Numerous false and drunken sightings were reported, and many men lost their lives due to carelessness on the

sea. The hunt incensed the women of the village, most of whom had grown passive and vengeful in body and spirit. Even the young and pretty women were ignored by the searchers in the sound. At homes in beds at night, couples lay awake thinking mutually exclusive thoughts. Finally, Astrid swam far out into the ocean, broken hearted that she had never seen Henry again but too exhilarated by life in water to return to land.

Henry had not been able to row or swim

on Saturdays because it was the day he mopped and waxed at the bank. He had sunk into deep melancholy several weeks after Astrid had jumped into the sound. He had finally sunk so low that he accepted the bank supervisor's employment offer. He turned into a lonely and foolish figure. The women of the village believed their problems were his fault, and they made obscene gestures at him with their wide hips when they passed him on streets otherwise devoid of men. Henry knew the men searched for Astrid, and it only made him sadder. Often he went into the bathroom of his cramped apartment and closed the door and filled the tub with warm water. Soaking, he would imagine himself with Astrid beneath the waves and sometimes thought he could hear her voice coming from the drain pipe of the tub, but he told himself it was just the hallucination of a depressed man. He would put the razor back in the medicine cabinet and dress in his green custodian uniform. Love, he mistakenly thought, had destroyed him.

After many years he realized he preferred the hallucinations to his life, and soon thereafter he discovered the freedom of madness. He walked about the village giving unsolicited commentary, dressed in rags and laughing sarcastically. Eventually he walked up into the hills. Some say he went to live with the wild dogs, who also lamented Astrid's departure. They were also more than a little

insulted that she apparently preferred fish to them. Henry found a cave in the hills one day and went down into it, never to emerge. He found a cold mountain stream there and paddled in it night and day.

Legend has it that Henry followed his stream underground until it reached the sea and that he met Astrid there. No one knows this for certain, however. The only valid historical source was the fisherman with the pearl head. He lived a very long time and seemed to have a deep knowledge of these events. He was the only person to have had a conversation with and to touch Astrid during that period, and it was thought by some that he had never given a full account of their meeting. He cherished his memory of Astrid even though their encounter had been brief and he had not acted with dignity. He did nothing to counter rumors over the years that he engaged in a supernatural correspondence

with her. Whether it truly occurred or he simply enjoyed being the subject of such speculation was never known. He lived longer than even the last child born in the village. The villagers had stopped making them, and the streets grew lonely. After many years the village was abandoned altogether, and except for the fisherman, anyone who had been a contemporary of Henry and Astrid had died. Now living in not unsatisfying isolation, the fisherman would grudgingly declare to his rare visitors, when asked, that it would have been nice if Henry and Astrid really had met again, but he was not impressed with Henry and always said of him, "He threw his chance away." But this was merely the idle opinion of a man impugning his rival. At any rate, whatever remained of the truth passed with the fisherman, who left no record of himself and died shortly before the interstate highway was extended to the seaside.

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When Pachelbel Went To Sea

by
David Sparenberg

It was a lovely day in the mid of May, when the crazy-free musicians went out to play. They set up out of doors on a bulbous ledge overhanging the constant sea and played Pachelbel—the ethereal, spiritually teasing and delicate Canon D—to the accompanying surf; the tide curling in and curling out along the stout and bartered shore. The underscore of percussive sand and pungent salt-foam breathed long and low a whoosing sound.

Costumed clouds moved on the sky like rowboats manned by lazy crews. The musicians smiled

amid disciplined strings that exercised like slow fire, weaving soulful dreams on sun and ocean driven breeze. The star peeked in and out of layers of purple haze, spreading, on the ocean's rocking bed, a kingdom's profusion of liquid gold. Ah! Surely a miracle was happening, as fire and water wed!

The slender sailboats' sails were down, as the western horizon ignited. Boatmen dragged their scudding hulls ashore; the roll of tide washing their naked, encrusted feet. Their bronze arms gilded as they met

the sky force face to face. How sweet the blindness of that brilliant grace!

And angels—astonishingly revealed—danced with agile abandonment on the bubbles of Baroque. Even the dark and brooding shark, alienated and self-hating, in sulking rings around a sacrifice of blood, heard, from afar, echoes of that harmony, and wondered what it was to smile.

The whales already knew...The day that Pachelbel went to sea.

The Kerynæan Hind

by

Joe R. Christopher

I. A Meeting with Apollo

Apollo stopped the man who carried the deer;
a golden-horned but female hind it was—
“My sister’s loved and sacred beast, that is,
so set her down, and gently—else, you should fear.”

The fearless man replied, “For ‘most a year
this beast I’ve chased throughout Arkadia’s
fair fields, now take her to Eurystheus;
obliged beyond your threat or sister’s tear.”

Apollo in anger cried, “No obligation
beyond my word, beyond my sister’s love,
applies; that hind is never yours to take.”
The man in lion skin replied, “My station
will change, for labors laid by One Above:
the Queen of High Olympos these deeds bespake.”

II. A Meeting with Apollo (II)

“Where go you with golden-hornēd hind,
carrying her so carefully and wise?
I know you well, half-brother, so tell no lies—
Don’t claim you found her, that deer so hard to find.
I know my sister’s beast, I am not blind;
your taking her is like you—it’s no surprise,
no wonder is it for astonished eyes;
so where do you now go with doe that’s tined?”

“Half-brother, yes, I know the deer’s your twin’s;
I chased her down aft many a weary mile,
for I must do twelve labors set for me;
this curse I must endure. For all my sins,
however, your presence, no. Take hence your guile;
I do that which I must until I’m free.”

III. Moral Decisions

Likeas an oracle has said,
To pay for shameful actions dread,
You'll do twelve labors publicly:
Your guilt you'll purge 'fore you are free.

But then you find the rules are mixed—
A purging action's also nixed.
Likeas a deer that you would hunt
Is not in season for your stunt.

As if two laws were straight opposed,
And you must do them both as glozed;
Either you choose which way to act—
Or choose them both, so kilter-whacked!

IV. A Meeting with Artemis

"O hero, why carry you the hind,
Her body 'round your neck,
Holding still those swiftest hooves—
Yes, holding them in check?"

"O daughter born of Leto fair,
And fair yourself in truth,
I do the task I was assigned,
Nor mean you any ruth."

"O hero clad in lion's skin,
Will not you harm the hind?
You killed the cat whose pelt you wear—
Why with the deer be kind?"

"O goddess, I know your arrows sharp—
I do not seek your wrath;
The hind with golden horns I'll loose,
When finish I my path."

"O hero, be sure your word is kept,
For I can hunt at length—
The boar and stag will weary out
While I'm in my first strength."

"O huntress, I have no quarrel with you,
And I will keep my word—
The hind will wander free at last,
To rejoin your sacred herd."

V. The Hunting of the Dear

The game of hunting takes a plan,
a tracking when the game began,
since long and leisurely it's done
until at last the dear's outrun
and she is captured by the man.

Does she resist and fight at last
with hooves most sharp or words that blast?—
then one has not true gently done

the hunting and the lengthy run,
that she should be at taked aghast.

The dear is noble game, it's true,
and must be nobly sought with coup,
but one that is most gently done
so hunter and hunttee are won
to think that taking's overdue.

VI. A Meeting with Eurystheus

Two cousins, once removed, were most ill matched,
the human ruling, the demigod obeying—
and when remet, then was the human saying,
“Good, good, you’ve brought the hind! How deerly caught!”
He smiled most broadly. “Now that the hind you’ve snatched,
prepare the fire! Lay wood without delaying!
Slaughter this beast! with careful pelt in flaying!
for I like venison, hot taste attached!”

Replied his cousin, “Greetings, O polished king,
gourmet and guide—your thoughts are nicely whirled;
but Artemis might take amiss your breezing,
might lift her strongest bow, draw back its string.”
The human then looked thwarted, and almost snarled,
“Surely she knows when I am only teasing.”

VII. A Question of Honor

In Hades, Heracles was still upset
that he had served a lesser man than he;
the Greeks’ shame culture counted that a loss,
embarrassment, and blot.

But later, entering Olympos’ bounds,
he found strange rules that Greeks had never known—
“The last is first, the first is settled last,”
reversal from all the world.

He learned that his twelve years there counted more
than all heroic deeds in other times;
he served as Delphi’s priestess ordered him,
and so was raised at last.

VIII. What Happened to the Hind?

Euripides has said that Heracles
Did slay the dappled hind with golden horns,
The doe that ravaged crops, escaped with ease
From all but him, from all the high-fenced bourns;

And then he offered unto Artemis
The sacrifice; he burnt the proper parts.
But no one else has this strange emphasis
On the hind's death, on sacrificial arts:

Surely the deer was loosed to self return
To Kerynæa Mount; and there to graze.
To climb on rocky slopes, lowlands to spurn,
Neath moon of Artemis or sun ablaze.

Afterword

The labor of Herakles in capturing the Kerynæan hind is a supernatural episode in that the doe (in some versions a stag) is described as having horns—and, in some descriptions, both golden horns and brazen hooves. (I have not worried about the distinction between horns and antlers in my poetic sequence, although I know that male deer have antlers and male antelope have horns. I have referred to this mythological hind as a deer with horns.) The old interpretation of Herakles as a sun-god viewed the hind as a symbol of the gold-tinted cloud (emphasizing the color of the horns) chased by—so to speak—the sun. But the original myth has two versions. In the more literal, the sacred animal grazes in the area of Kerynæa Mountain in Greece. In the other, told by Pindar in his third Olympian ode, the hind is found far to the north, in the land of the Hyperboreans—in other words, in a version of the land of the dead. (However, a touch of a literal source material for the northern version may lie in the fact that female reindeer do have antlers.) Several of Herakles' labors touch on the theme of immortality, not just the bringing of Kerberos (Cerberus) from Hades. In this sequence of poems, I begin after the capture of the hind with two versions of a meeting with Apollo (suggested by an Etruscan. artwork). I have offered various "readings" of the myth in the third, fifth, and seventh poems.

Three Sonnets

by
Donald T. Williams

SCENE Sonnet LXXXVII

The rain comes driving, slanting through the mist.
The trees and sky, a blur of grey and green:
Impressionistic brush-strokes on the screen
By a Chinese artisan with dancing wrist.
And there, beneath a sheltering tree, the tryst.
Oblivious to the weather, they are keen
On what from words and glances one may glean:
She lifts her face up to her knight, is kissed.

The raindrop and the teardrop on the cheek
Are mingled, flowing in the self-same track.
And are they tears of joy? The sky is bleak.
It seems the kiss has sealed a solemn pact.
He lifts her to his steed; away they streak;
They fade into the mist, do not look back.

SOME REAL MAGIC Sonnet XCVIII

Within the cadences of human speech
Attentive listeners can sometimes hear
The rhythm of the wave upon the beach
Or contemplate the music of the spheres.
Within the small sphere of the human eye
The watcher who knows how to look can see
A spirit that's as lofty as the sky
Or humble as the lover on his knee.
When in the alembic of the human mind
Imagination boils with memory,
Such vision with such sound can be combined,
Far more mysterious than alchemy.
The Philosopher's Stone we vainly sought of old
Could never have made such rare and costly gold.



TALIESSIN REMEMBERETH THE PAST
Sonnet CVI

It was not the heathen pirates that annoyed us.
 Our own propensity to play the fool,
 Our inability to resist, destroyed us,
 Caught in a self-willed trap of dire misrule.
Then Arthur came and took the stone-kept sword
 And wielded it with such nobility
 The flower of knighthood took him as their lord,
 And with their help he taught us chivalry.
We couldn't keep the lesson, and it closed,
 That door through which we'd briefly glimpsed the Good.
 So Pelles bleeds through lack of a question posed,
 The realm through lack of an answer understood.
A greater King must bring the time when we
 May learn in bowing truly to be free.

THE ICE BIRD

by

Lala Heine-Koehn

Between two mountains larger than forever,
an icebird lived inside a black crevice.
Though the sun shunned him for some mysterious
reason and he has never
seen the light, his eyes could pierce
the darkest of dark.

Asleep one time, with his eyes open,
(his eyelids were frozen, never came down)
his breath shook an avalanche, collapsed
into the crevice a man and a woman
much in love, who were trying to climb
to the summit. Both of them were dead.

The icebird woke, fluttered first to the woman,
then the man, sat upon their chests.
For the first time, his feet grew warm.

He felt comforted. After a while, his feet became
chilled again. He left the man
and the woman and went on with his cold living.

He had a dream one time. He saw a white bird.
(Though he had never seen anything but black,
he knew the bird was white.) It was pecking
its way into the bowels of one of the mountains.
And suddenly everything became sunny
and bright. He could even hear the mountain
sing. This made him very sad. What of the other
mountain, silent and dark? He began to cry.

I cannot tell you any more. Only that I did
hear the icebird crying when I was little.
I do not hear him anymore.

Shpuch and Shtaj

by
Joe R. Christopher

The elders of the pueblo wished to gain gifts from the gods. They knew where a river broadened out for a brief distance and that often three gods came there to bathe. The place was called Tohil's Bath. One said: Let us choose three beautiful maidens and send them to Tohil's Bath. Another said: They can take off their clothes and pretend to be washing laundry. A third said: Surely the gods will reward them for their sexual surrender. So they chose the three most beautiful maidens in the pueblo, told them to go to Tohil's Bath and to bring back gifts from the gods, and threatened them and their families if they failed the elders' purposes. These three maidens were named Shpuch, Shtaj, and Kibatsunja.

*Where are my children? Where have they vanished?
Where are their bodies? Where are their corpses?
Drowned in the river, lost in the waters,
carried by the currents, eaten by catfish.
Where have I lost them? Where are their bodies?*

The three maidens were in the river's edge when the gods came. The gods' names were Tohil, Aulish, and Hacauts. Aulish said: We are coming after you. And Shtaj said: Yes. But Tohil said: Where do you come from? Whose daughters are you? Shpuch said: We are the daughters of importance in the pueblo, so give us gifts to return with afterwards. Then Hacauts said: Why are you here, where you have not done washing before? And Kibatsunja said: The elders told us to come here.

*Where are the siblings? Where have they vanished?
Bloated and swollen, why aren't they rising?
On the deep currents, why aren't they floating?
Why can't I see them, vanished forever?
Where are the babies? Where are their bodies?*

After the sexual surrenders, the gods gave the women their cloaks. That of Tohil had a figure of a mountain lion on it, and that of Aulish had the figure of an owl on it. Both of these were well received by the elders when they were brought back to the pueblo. But the cloak of Hacauts had the figures of bees and hornets inside it. Hacauts said to Kibatsunja, who alone of the three women had knelt down and kissed her lover's feet afterwards: Can you take this cloak to your village without pausing to put it on on the way? She said: I will not try it on. He said: See to it, then. And when she brought it to the pueblo, the elder who tried it on was stung by the bees and the hornets, and could not remove the cloak.

*Where are the twosome, brother and sister?
Where can I find them, whither locate them?
Lost in the river, lost in the waters,*

*lost in the currents, lost in the darkness—
deep in the river, tangled in coldness.*



The elders of the pueblo said: Shpuch and Shtaj have done well, and we will honor them. But Kibatsunja brought death to an elder, so we will have her killed. But one elder said: No, for she may have the protection of Hacauits and we would not bring more disaster to the pueblo. After much discussion, they agreed she would have a small adobe house on the edge of the village and some land on which to raise her food. They also agreed: Her name shall be anathema, no more to be spoken in the pueblo—we can say it is because she has been set aside by being the lover of a god.

*Where are the corpses? When can I find them?
Twins at their birthing, less than a year old,
lost in the currents, lost in the river:
Bones on the bottom, lost in the mosses—
skeletons broken, tiny the fragments.*

Kibatsunja found herself pregnant and in due time gave birth to a boy. Some women of the village quietly helped her, despite the interdiction. And Kibatsunja worked her ground and cared for her baby. Hacauits visited her when the boy was three lunar months old to see his son. He also lay with her and, in deference to the god, she afterwards knelt and kissed his feet. Soon thereafter she found herself pregnant again. And so it went. She had seven children, four boys and three girls. She turned down all advances from men of the pueblo who thought her lonely in her house. Hacauits visited her to see his children and to lie with her even after she no longer became pregnant. And her children, the demigods, grew up to be important in the pueblo. The boys became handsome men who were good warriors and hunters. Three of them survived warfare and recovered from their wounds. They had many children and did not die until they were in their nineties. The girls became beautiful women. None died in childbirth, and they did not die until they were in their eighties. But the name of Kibatsunja was forgotten in the village although handed down secretly among some of her descendants to the fifth generation.

*Wailing by marshes, crying by streamlets,
searching the rivers, fountains to deltas,
hunting for corpses, bodies long vanished—
where can I find them? Where are the fragments?
Were the remainders eaten by turtles?*

When they met the first time, before she left with the cloak, Shtaj asked of Auilish: When do you return here? When can I meet you again? He named a time, half a lunar month away. And she met him then, waiting naked, and lay with him again. Again she asked: When can I meet with you again? He named a time, a lunar month away. And she said: No sooner than that? He said: No sooner—for I have other obligations. So they met again and again, sometimes in a month, sometimes in half a month, once in three months. During the colder months, she wore a bear skin for warmth until he came. She turned down a gift at the second meeting: All I want is you as a lover. But she did not become pregnant, and she became bolder in asking for new sexual practices. After three years and some months, he replied to her request for a new meeting: I think not. He grasped her by her shoulders, as she stood naked before him, and said: I give you a final gift—and a curse. I give you immortality, but any man you touch with your cold, cold touch shall die. In later years, she haunted the pools and streams where men bathe, showing herself naked, calling to the men to come to her, to enjoy her. And those that did, died in her embrace.

*Silent the babies, silent their cryings;
 long is their silence, quiet unbroken.
 Noisy my callings, noisy my weepings.
 Where are my babies? Where are their bodies?
 Why can't I find them, fruitlessly searching?*

Before Shpuch left with Tohil's cloak, she asked the god: Will I see you again? He said: I will visit you three lunar months after you give birth to my twins. Nine months and some days later she did give birth to twins, a boy and a girl. And two months after that, she took her twins and went with some relatives to a near-by pueblo with which their pueblo was, at the time, at peace. A major festival was being held with drums and rattles and flutes and some costumed dancers in the central plaza. As Shpuch watched and nursed a baby, she saw a dancer in a skin like a mountain lion and a head dress like a mountain lion's head above his own. She was certain it was Tohil and cried out to him, but he did not seem to hear her. When the dance was finished, he was across the dancing area from her, and he put his hand on the shoulder of a young woman—perhaps a maiden—and she left with him. Shpuch wept, and, carrying her babies, she fled from her relatives. Crying and screaming she fled, and her babies, disturbed by the jolting and the noise, cried also. She came to a river not far from the pueblo she had been visiting, and there she drowned her babies. She left their bodies in the river. A lunar month later, Tohil came to her in her village. He asked: Where are my twins? She said: They are lost. He did not ask her where or when or under what happenchance. Tohil said: Then you will seek them—seek until you find them. Go forth crying out for them. Search the river sides. Only when you have found them and brought them to me to admire, may you rest.

*Where are his children? Where are the siblings?
 Where have they wandered? Where are they straying?
 Lost in the river, buried in waters,
 where are the bodies? Where have they washed to?
 Why can't I find them, endlessly hidden?*

###

A NOTE BY THE AUTHOR. ““Shpuch and Shtaj” is an adaptation of an episode told in the fourth section of the *Popol Vuh*. Four examples will illustrate some of the changes. (1) In the original the two titular maidens are named Xpuch' (the apostrophe is for a glottal stop) and Xtaj and one of the gods is named Aulix. Since in the transcription of Mayan, *x* is used for the *sh* sound, and since in English *x* is pronounced *ks* or *eks* (as in *extra* and *X-ray*) or *z* (as in *xenophobe*), an adaptation for English speakers was to spell the names Shpuch, Shtaj, and Aulish. Likewise, the *tz* in the names of Hacauitz and Kibatzunja becomes *ts*. (2) For the author's own reasons, the setting was shifted from Central America to a vaguely described New Mexico (cf. *pueblo*, *adobe*, *plaza*); in connection with this, the animal on the first cloak was changed from a jaguar to a mountain lion. (The animal on the second cloak was changed from an eagle to an owl, but that was because Jaguar Night decorated the cloak in the original version.) (3) Only two maidens appear in the *Popol Vuh*. The third maiden—K'ib'atz'unja (more glottal stops)—is named in *The Title of the Lords of Totonicapán*. (4) The refrains and the last two prose passages are shaped to tie to the later Hispanic legend of *La Llorona*, since some scholars believe this

episode was the origin of that legend. The author has two translations of the *Popol Vuh* on his shelves: That by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, based on the Spanish version of Adrián Recinos (1950), and that by Dennis Tedlock (rev., 1996). No substantial differences appear in their versions of the episode, but the introduction and notes of Tedlock have been influential in some details of this adaptation. (The references to the two maidens—with and without the third—may be traced through his index, checking under the listing for “Lust Woman,” his translation of *Xtaj*.)



Song of Kaikeyi

by
Randy Hoyt

The Demons with their fortresses on high
Looked down from there with jealousy and rage.
Conspiring how to inflict¹ their wrath on Men.
They locked the heavens, pushed away the clouds,
Consuming fields and flocks in stifling drought,
Destroying joy and hope throughout the land.

Stirred up by hunger, thirst, and fear the Men
Decided it was time to take a stand.
A massive force came from the neighboring towns
From Sindh, Kekaya, Mithila, and more,
Fully arrayed across the parched plain
To rally around the standard of the King.

Assembled thus they implored² the Gods for aide,
To join their side and fight with them for rain.
Their prayer was heard and answered and came forth
The mighty Indra, warrior of the Gods
For battle armed from his heavenly throne
With all the heavenly host following³ behind.

Dasaratha the first-born of the King
Among all Men most fearless, brave, and strong
(After this war a mighty king he'd make)
Arrayed himself with armor made of bronze
Received by his ancestors from the Gods
And gathered up his arrows, bow, and spear.

A girl inside his chariot⁴ he found
With hands upon the reins, prepared for war
She'd stowed away with men from Kekaya
Though young already beautiful and strong
In shimmering armor woven of green silk
She was Kaikeyi the princess nine years old.

She drove the chariot to the sky with skill
And mastery over⁵ those horses fiery red
From steady car Dasaratha let fly
His arrows that struck down the enemy⁶ hoardes
With javelin, with arrow, sword, and spear
The Demons tried but failed to harm these two.

A star fell from the heavens which they caught
And hurled it at the car, knocked loose a wheel
And brought great pain upon that mighty lord
Kaikeyi caught him, rescued him from death
With one hand kept the chariot upright
Retreating from the fray safely to land.

She bandaged up his wounds, stayed by his side
Night after night and nursed him back to health.
On waking he proposed and she agreed.
The future couple embraced.⁷ He granted her
Two of her heart's desires knowing not
Years later those desires would cause his death.

¹ *to inflict*. Pronounced as two syllables, *tin-flíct*.

² *they implored*. Pronounced as two syllables, *thaim-plóred*.

³ *following*. Pronounced as two syllables, *fall-*

wíng.

⁴ *chariot*. Pronounced as two syllables, *chair-yot*.

⁵ *over*. Pronounced as one syllable, *ór*.

⁶ *enemy*. Pronounced as two syllables, *én-mee*.

⁷ *couple embraced*. Pronounced as three syllables, *cúp-lem-bráced*.



Hill of Kings

by

Sørina Higgins

I wish that mountain were mine by naming it.
That hill, that rock-burdened fairy hill
That rises so sudden up into the sun:
What sound shall you set in my mouth?
Noises heavy and damp as mist on hard stone:
Knocknarea.

I wish that mountain were mine by painting it.
That mound, that time-burdened burial mound
That holds up its myths without breath under clouds:
What light is too rare and too swift?
Daylight fleeting and cold as dawn on a tomb:
Queen Medb's cairn.

I wish that mountain were mine by climbing it.
That path, that hoof-burdened farmer's trail
That twists among whin bushes brambled with wool:
What feet and what time are enough?
Come through moments as dear as sun through the rain:
Eire calls.

I wish that mountain were mine by writing it.
That tale, that truth-burdened warrior's song
That echoes its anger in dry empty years:
What words have the ages to tell?
Stories live beyond speech in the Land of the Young:
Tir na n-Og.

EDITORIAL

Readers will notice that MC #30 has some new authors and some who are returning. With us for the first time are Sørina Higgins, Randy Hoyt, SD Williams. The first two explore traditional tales from different corners of the globe, while the latter experiments with a postmodern approach. Ryder Miller is with us for the second time, with a different perspective. In MC#29, he experimented with (anti)heroic fantasy; now tries his hand at Utopian Science Fiction.

Some faithful contributors are also returning. Joe Christopher offers another a witty and erudite sequence based Greek mythology. Also—a departure for him—he also gives us a tale with a New World setting, “Shpuch and Shtaj.” Was he perhaps inspired by Bonnie Callahan’s cover design in #29? Dag Rossman is also back, with a rich and vivid story from the ancient North. Lala Heine-Koene, David Sparenberg and Don Williams also present their short lyrics, each eloquent in different ways. Tim Callahan offers us a masterpiece in his narrative poem, “The Hunter and the Queen of Heaven,” which clearly evokes the Babylonian Ishtar and Tammuz as well as the Graeco-Roman Venus and Adonis.

C. J. Bloomer appears with us the first time, with his arresting depictions of dragons, trolls, mermaids and chivalrous love. As an illustrator also, Bonnie Callahan brings us wonderfully spooky depictions of the setting and characters for Joe Christopher’s Amerindian tale. Letters are always greatly appreciated in *The Mythic Circle*, especially constructive criticism to help these writers improve their craft and advance their careers.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Gwenyth:

Sharon and I were delighted with the way “The Tree-Woman” and its illustration turned out, and we were also surprised and pleased to see an illustration for “Mist by Moonlight” gracing the back cover.

Hope your summer is going well. . . . [T]omorrow begins Nordic Fest here in Decorah, which will focus our attention on happier things. Sharon is giving two children’s presentations on the Saami people of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and I will be resuming my role as resident Viking storyteller for the 19th time. . . .

Dag [Rossman]

Dear Ms Hood,

Got the latest issue a couple weeks ago. Let me say, I loved the illustrations Mr. Callahan has done for the story -- he really got the feeling of it! A nice issue all in all; some

lovely poetry. . . . It was David Sparenberg’s “Glimmer Man” that I especially liked; he has managed to capture the essence of beauty combined with a little creepiness. It was amazing. “Tattooed” was another gorgeous one. Sincerely,
JA Howe

Dear Editor:

. . . .(1) Nat While is not C. S. Lewis’s pseudonym for his early poetry--*Spirits in Bondage and Dymmer*--because he used Clive Hamilton for those. Lewis used Nat While (Anglo-Saxon for “not whom”—in other words, [I know] not whom) for his later poems, mainly for those in *Punch*, and of course he used N. W. Clerk for the first edition of *A Grief Observed*.

(2) Therefore, a reader should be able to realize that a pseudo-serious game is being played in my “World War I Poems of Nathaniel

While”[published in *MC* 28]: Lewis at the time of WWI was in love with Norse mythology, but only a few references appear in *Spirits in Bondage*, which collected (among other verse) his relatively few war poems. I wondered what the result would be if Lewis really had used Norse myth in his poems.

(3) The introduction, to quote Pooh-Bah, was “Merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.” Or, in other words, it is part of the way the game is played.

--Joe R. Christopher

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, #31 is scheduled to appear in the summer of 2009. Copies of previous issues are available through the Mythopoeic Society Orders Department. The prepaid price for the next annual issue is \$8.00. For preorders and the purchase of past issues, write to: Mythopoeic Society Orders Department, 920 N. Atlantic Blvd. #E, Alhambra, CA 91801, USA. This information and more can be accessed conveniently at the website for the Mythopoeic Society, <www.mythsoc.org>, where it is also possible to join the society, subscribe to publications and order back issues through PayPal.

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

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

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

C. J. Bloomer grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of South-Western Virginia where he encountered myth and the fantastic every day. Intent on becoming a professional artist and illustrator, C.J. apprenticed under the infamous Charles Vess while attending Berea College in Kentucky. There he gained an education in various methods of traditional art; graduating with a B.A. degree in Studio Art. He now resides in downtown Lexington, Kentucky creating mytho-

fantastical art and illustration from his own working studio *Nydwyn Green Dragon Studio*. You can visit him on his webpage at: <www.nydwyngreendragon.com>

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

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

Joe R. Christopher, Professor emeritus of English at Tarleton State University, has published well over a hundred poems, two plays (including “Retirement: A Masque,” which appeared in *The Mythic Circle*), and eleven short stories (including two in *The Mythic Circle*). Twice he has won a Inklings Scholarship Award (from the Mythopoeic Society) for academic books. He serves on the editorial boards of *The Mythopoeic Press* and of *Windhover: A Journal of Christian Literature*. He is nearing publication of an edited collection of 1946 radio dramas (mysteries but not fantasies) by Anthony Boucher and Denis Green. He has edited two previous books, edited one issue of a journal, published over a hundred essays and short bibliographies, and published approximately two hundred reviews. One of his dramas--*A Foretaste of Blood to Come*--achieved academic production.

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

Sorina Higgins lives in Allentown, PA, and is an English teacher and Drama director at Lehigh Valley Christian High School. She holds an M.A. from Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf School of English and a B.A. in English and Music from Gordon College. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Radix*, *Sehnsucht*, *Stillpoint*, *Relief*, *Innisfree*, *Studio*, *Perspectives*, *Alive Now*, *Windhover*, *Bible & Spade*, and *idiom*. She is the author of the entry on Charles Williams in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Christian Literature* and co-writer of a blog on the arts and faith, <[http:// iambicadmonit.blogspot.com](http://iambicadmonit.blogspot.com)>.

Randy Hoyt lives with his wife and son in Dallas, Texas, where he works as a web developer for a large retail company. “Song of Kaikeyi” is his first published work of fiction. He writes about mythology and fantasy, which first captivated him as a child, for the online magazine *Journey to the Sea*. You can find an audio version of this poem there at

<<http://journeytothesea.com/poem>> or learn more about Randy at his personal web site, <<http://www.randyhoyt.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/>>.

Donald T. Williams holds a B.A. in English from Taylor University, an M.Div. From Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a Doctorate in Medieval and Renaissance Literature from the University of Georgia. He has authored six books and written numerous essays and poems which have appeared in such publications as *Christianity and Literature*, *Mythlore*, and *VII*. His most recent books include *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), and *Credo: Meditations on the Nicene Creed* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007). He serves as Professor of English and Director of the School of Arts and Sciences at Toccoa Falls College in the hills of Northeast Georgia.

SD Williams lives and writes in a small blue house in Durham, North Carolina, and on a sloping piece of land leading to water an hour distant but impossible to find. The writing of “Swimming in the Sea” was inspired by the Henry Badowski song, “Swimming with the Fish in the Sea” from the 1981 album *Life Is a Grand*: “Although it’s nice down here / I miss my telephone / I’d like to tell them all / I’ve found a home from home / Watching the sharks that swim around my head / Down here they all seem so remarkably well fed.” (Partial lyrics reprinted with permission.) Williams’s blog, “Space between Things,” may be found at <http://sdwilliams.blogspot.com/>. “Swimming in the Sea” is one of a series of stories set at the shore of a vaguely remembered sea.

DRAGONSEEKER

by

Dag Rossman

In the ignorance of my youth, I longed so fervently to meet a dragon that the yearning almost broke my heart. Then, when finally I did meet one, I wished to all the gods in Asgard that I had not—and my heart did break!

I came by my fascination with dragons and other magical beings honestly, for my mother was a swan maiden and my father a man of mystery. I say “mystery” because I had never seen him—and mother refused to talk about him. Eventually, I learned from my Uncle Ragnar that one day—after my parents had been together for more than eight years—Mother felt an irresistible compulsion to fly. So off she went, soaring southward over the vast and eerie forest of Myrkvid, back to the home where she had been born and grew up. And there in Sorlandet she gave birth to an infant son, me!

Uncle Ragnar told me that after I was born, Mother begged my grandfather, King Hlodver, to send messengers to seek out my father and bring him to us. So I suppose that Mother must have really loved him after all—surely it was that cursed swan cloak that made her fly off and leave him. At any rate, the messengers weren’t able to find him, and some of them never came back. After a time, Grandfather wasn’t willing to risk losing any more men.

You may be wondering why—once I’d been weaned or provided with a wet-nurse—Mother didn’t simply fly back to where they had lived and look for Father herself. But dealing with magical objects often isn’t as simple as most people think. Apparently one peculiarity of a swan cloak is that its owner can only use the

cloak every ninth year—and then she has no choice but to put it on, whether she wishes to or not. I wish I fully believed that. It would make it easier for me to forgive her for depriving me of a father—and then abandoning me in the same way when I was eight years old.

Once the first heartbreak of Mother’s disappearance had dulled, I actually began to enjoy living with Uncle Ragnar, to whom she had fostered me in a letter she left behind telling him she was off to seek Father. Ragnar was a wizard of considerable skill, and a wonderful storyteller! I could sit and listen for hours to his tales about the gods and heroes, but my favorites were always those about elves or dragons. And it wasn’t too long before he actually took me with him into Alfheim to meet some of the Light Elves. There I was able to hear their stories right from their own mouths. I soaked up all the lore I could, treasured it, and mentally poked at each story like a kitten does a mouse as I tried to uncover the deeper meanings.

The quest to acquire this lore became the focus of my life, and this compulsion—combined with my natural aptitude for learning—soon made me knowledgeable far beyond my years. Unfortunately, knowledge and wisdom are not the same . . . and as rich as I had become in the former, I was still lacking in the latter. Thus I grew arrogant. From time to time, if Uncle Ragnar felt I had become too full of myself, he would chide me in his gentle way. In the earlier years I usually heeded his admonitions, but as I grew into young manhood, I fear his remonstrances often fell on almost deaf

ears. After all, didn't I know almost as much lore as he? Blind was I then to how much he had not yet shared with me, and how much more there was still to learn.

And it was in that mood that I pressed my uncle to show me a dragon. Not that I had tired of the elves—far from it—but the lure of the unknown is always strongest, especially to the young.

"You tell me all these wonderful tales about dragons, but you've never taken me any place where I could actually see one. And I do want to see one for myself—I'm sure they must be even more awesome than I am able to imagine."

"Hmm, well," mused Uncle Ragnar, "some things are better enthroned in our imaginations, my boy, than met with in the claw-slashing, venom-spewing, fang-piercing flesh. Dragons really are quite dangerous, you know, and never, ever to be taken lightly."

"Well, you've always told me that there is no substitute for first-hand experience, and I want to learn everything I can about dragons. That way I'll be able to tell really exciting and convincing stories about them when I go out on my own as a wandering skald."

"That's a worthy aspiration, Dag, and I'm pleased that you want to give your audience full measure, but you'll do them no good if a dragon picks its teeth with your bones!" He paused and, seeing my crestfallen expression, placed a kindly hand on my shoulder. "Now, now, don't look so crushed. I didn't say we wouldn't ever look for a dragon—I just want you to realize that such a quest requires a most cautious approach. Now, it just so happens that my old friend Ketil Arnesson, the king of Ormerdal, has been urging me to pay him an extended visit. And, as I recall, there probably still are more dragons in Ormerdal than anywhere else in the Nine Worlds save Niflheim. So it seems to me that Ormerdal would be just the place to begin our quest. What do you think?"

"Oh, Uncle Ragnar," I cried, giving him a quick bear hug, "you are always so good to me. And I won't be afraid of any dragon as long as you are with me."

Holding me at arm's length, Uncle Ragnar

looked into my eyes. "You've been like a true son to me—not just a fosterling—and I will always try to protect you, but you would do well to remember that even a wizard's magic may not be proof against the power of one of the greater orms. Let us hope that we'll never need to put mine to the test!"

At the time, I thought my uncle was just being modest. Only later would I discover he had meant exactly what he said.



We were nearly a month in reaching Ormsby, the chief city of Ormerdal, because Uncle Ragnar had insisted on making the journey in relatively short stages. Since we were travelling afoot, he said that there was no point in arriving exhausted and footsore. The dragons had been around for eons, he reminded me, and another month was hardly likely to make them harder to find. Often we slept beneath the stars, but whenever we stopped at a human habitation, we were greeted with warmth and hospitality. Everyone seemed to know Ragnar Rune-Wise from previous visits, and they looked forward to hearing the news he brought—and, of course, the stories he gladly shared. He even let me tell a tale or two—to gain experience, he said—and the listeners were generous in their praise of the "apprentice skald," as they called me. This was heady fare, and it did little to help check my already rather inflated sense of self-worth.

Once we reached Ormsby and met King Ketil, my uncle and I were given quarters in his great hall for the duration of our visit. For one who was used to spending a great deal of time outdoors, the hall seemed close and dark. But I never tired of seeing the dragon-adorned wall hangings, nor of sharing meals with the most colorful and hardy assemblage of warriors I had

ever met. It was more than enough to excite any young man's heart, and it certainly did mine.

Not surprisingly, whenever I could catch the king's attention, I pestered him with dragon questions: how did Ormerdal, the Valley of Dragons, get its name; what stories did he know about Ormerdal's dragons; and—most importantly—where could I go to find one? And, yes, I'm afraid I preened a bit about the quest on which Uncle Ragnar had promised to take me.

At first I don't think King Ketil knew quite what to make of me. "By the black scales of Nidhögg! It's dragons this, and dragons that. You've got dragons under your hood, young ormseeker. Would that my son, Solvenn, had half your curiosity and ambition. Still, he's a good lad and of a more sensible bent than you. I fear that your curiosity about dragons is going to cost you dearly one day." He shook his shaggy head sagely, but I have to admit that I had faded out on his later comments, fascinated as I was by what he had named me.

"'Ormseeker' you called me, your Highness, and gladly I accept the name. Dag Ormseeker I shall be from now on. And what shall be my naming-gift?"

The king looked startled, though not angry, at my presumption, for such was the custom in the Nine Worlds that a namer always presented a name-gift to the one named.

"Hmmp. Well, with a name such as yours, it would seem only right to find something more fitting than the usual arm-ring or sword. Ah, I know just the thing. Give me a moment to find it." King Ketil unlocked a large ornate chest that sat over along the wall, threw back the slightly domed lid, and began to rummage through the contents.

"Yes, here it is. Right from the home of the dragons, or so I'm told." The king turned to me, holding in his right hand a small amulet attached to a silver chain. Uncle Ragnar drew closer to get a better look, then interposed his hand between the king's and mine.

"A moment, Ketil. Do you mind if I take a look at that trinket before you bestow it upon my nephew? A gift from the dragon realm could

prove to be a double-edged sword."

The king handed the amulet to my uncle, who held it up in such a way that it dangled from the end of the chain connected to the amulet by what appeared to be a finely wrought representation of a dragon's claw. As Uncle Ragnar peered at the amulet from all sides, I could see that it was a thin, polished, roughly rectangular piece of stone that seemed to contain within its depths a flickering, bluish-white light.

"So this is where it's been hiding all these years! Ketil, you old fox, do you know what you've got here? This is Firefrost, a chip from the original Ormerstein in Niflheim that bears the laws governing all of dragonkind. Some mages wise in dragon lore even insist that the Ormerstein itself is a slab of petrified dragon venom."

Ragnar continued: "None knows all that Firefrost can do, but it is said that the stone will grow ever brighter the closer it approaches one of the greater orms. Are you sure you want to part with it?"

King Ketil looked quizzically at his friend, with a sideways glance at the expression on my face. "I had no idea this little thing was so famous, and some might think it amiss for me to part with a family heirloom. But since I don't care to have my heir encountering any dragons—and your foster son would like nothing better—I think this 'dragon lodestone' is better off in Dag's hands than in Solvenn's." Turning to face me, he queried: "There now, does that relieve your mind, young Ormseeker?"

Kneeling, I thanked the king profusely, then excused myself so I could examine my prize, consider the implications of my new name, and let my uncle and King Ketil enjoy some private conversation.

* * *

Now that I possessed an amulet that would actually point the way to a dragon, I was increasingly anxious that Uncle Ragnar and I resume our quest. He, on the other hand, seemed to be in no hurry to set off. In fact, when I broached the matter—which I did several times each day—he seemed distracted and quickly changed the subject. On the evening of the third

day following my naming, I refused to be put off any longer.

“Uncle Ragnar, when are we going to head out on our quest? You have put it off—and put me off, too—and I just don’t understand why. Do you really think it is fair to keep me in the dark?”

My uncle grimaced and tugged at his beard. “No, Dag, I don’t suppose it is. You’re a young man now—no longer just a lad—and you deserve to be treated like a man.” His eyes twinkled as he added: “But you’ll have to be patient with me, my boy. You’ve been with me ever since you were a child, and sometimes it’s hard for me to realize that you’ve grown up.”

A wave of affection for my foster-father swept over me. “Oh, Uncle, you’ll have to be patient with me, too. I know I’ve been pestering you about leaving Ormsby for the past three days, but I really don’t understand what is keeping us here.”

Uncle Ragnar looked rather somber. “The truth is, Dag, that I have been casting the runes each evening . . . and each time I have done so, the reading was not favorable.”

“Do you mean that the runes said we won’t find a dragon—even with the help of Firefrost?”

“No, they said that we will, and that the encounter is likely to end badly. That’s why I have delayed our departure. You know the old saying: ‘The wise man knows not to seek trouble—more than enough trouble will find him on its own.’”

“That’s as may be,” I countered, “but we’re also told that a faint heart never won a battle, a great treasure, a fair lady, or anything else that brings honor and makes life worth living. I have to seek out a dragon. For what other purpose was I given my name and the amulet Firefrost?”

“You are still determined to do this, despite the advice of the runes?”

“I am determined. It is my wyrd—my destiny—and how often have you told me that a man cannot avoid his wyrd?”

“So I have, but I also tell you: ‘Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy.’” Uncle Ragnar paused, then shrugged and sighed with resignation: “Still, if your mind is made up, we’ll leave

tomorrow. I only hope that your wyrd doesn’t lead to your death—or to mine.”

* * *

Determined to make full use of Firefrost’s powers, I proposed that we circle the perimeter of Ormsby to determine the most promising direction in which to begin our search. Our readings to the south and the west revealed only faint flickerings within the depths of the stone, but when we turned to the north, Firefrost flared with such dazzling brilliance that there seemed to be no need to check the eastern quadrant. And so we commenced our journey northward, a journey I will never forget.

From the first, Firefrost led us in a bee-line toward Odin’s Eye, the pole star, though our actual path was not so straight, for we had to wend our way around or through the obstacles that nature placed before us. For a time we walked through rich woodlands, but as our path led higher, even the stunted birches became fewer and more widely scattered, finally giving way to dense thickets of dwarf birches, willows, and junipers that scarcely reached our knees. Before the novelty wore off, there were times when I felt as if Uncle Ragnar and I had been transformed into giants who were striding above the forests that grew on the roof of the world. Covering the ground between the thickets of dwarf trees was a sea of short grasses and endless clumps of greyish reindeer moss. And, in the depressions still wet with snow melt, the bright white tufts of myrull, bog wool, fluffed in the gentle breeze. Across the hoyfjell, the high plateau, we wandered for many days, drinking in its stark beauty and breathing its clean, cold air.

Boulders there were aplenty, all of them lichen-encrusted . . . and some disturbingly humanlike in form, though much larger than human in size. Could these be trolls that had failed to reach their caves before the sun rose and petrified them? When I asked my uncle, he peered closely at one of the boulders, ran his hands lightly over the surface of the rock, and muttered: “Perhaps, perhaps.”

Maybe Uncle Ragnar wasn’t entirely convinced about the presence of trolls, but each night thereafter we took pains to be as

inconspicuous as possible. We lit no fires after dark, and were careful to camp well away from the beaten path—as well as from any rock wall that might conceal cave openings. He seemed to feel that these precautions would be adequate, inasmuch as trolls on the prowl are usually fairly noisy and slow-moving. “Moreover, my boy, if you are downwind from one of them, you can’t possibly miss the odor. In a word, they stink!” And, as it turned out, my uncle was right—trolls were not to be our bane on that



journey. As each day passed, he became ever more talkative; it was as if he sensed that our time together might be limited, and he wanted to impart as much lore as possible. Foolishly, I had thought that I knew nearly as much lore as he. I soon learned that I had but scratched the surface.

One night the northern sky came alive with dancing, shimmering lights of red and green and frosty white. I was entranced, and more than a little apprehensive.

“What is that, Uncle Ragnar?”

“Well, Dag, nobody is altogether certain,” my uncle replied, pursing his lips, “but some say that those are the spirits of dead elves dancing across the sky.”

“Really? Why, I thought the Light Elves were immortal!”

“No one knows that for certain, either. They surely are long-lived, but even immortals can be killed through mishap or intent. Still, the elves

themselves have a different story about those lights. They say the lights are the breath of First Maker’s children, the dragons of Hvergelmir, during their great mating ritual—and that, if you listen very carefully, you can sometimes hear their trumpeting calls off in the distance.”

“Those are both beautiful stories, Uncle, regardless of which is true. But who is this First Maker you just mentioned? I’ve never heard of him before.”

“Actually, First Maker is—or was—a her. I know that you have learned that Ask and Embla, the first humans, were created from trees by Odin and his brothers, Vili and Ve.”

I nodded agreement.

“But have you never wondered where the other beings came from? The gods and giants, elves, dwarves, and dragons?”

“Well, I know that the first giant, Ymir, was said to have been formed by congealing meltwater flowing out of Hvergelmir, the Well of Creation, and that the first god, Buri, was licked out of a block of ice by Audumla, the cosmic cow. And I also heard that the gods created the dwarves from maggots they found in Ymir’s corpse. But I can’t say I ever heard anything about the origin of the elves or the dragons.”

“Indeed, my boy, few people have, for the elves tend to be pretty close-mouthed, that story being at the heart of their most sacred lore. Let’s see, now. That nonsense about the dwarves is just that, outsider’s nonsense. The dwarves’ own lore tells that they are kin to the Light Elves, but became as they are through an act of Odin.” Uncle Ragnar nodded, smiling to himself. “And Audumla, the Great Cow, didn’t actually create the first god—she licked him free from the ice block in which he was encased. So where did Buri come from? And Ymir and the elves and the dragons—and Audumla herself, for that matter? Why, that’s where First Maker comes into the story.

“At any rate, the core of the story exists in the form of an ancient elvish poem that goes like this.” Clearing his throat, Uncle Ragnar proceeded to chant:

“In the time before Time began,
In the space beyond Space,
Lay the cosmic coils of First Maker.

First Maker’s form was that of a dragon,
A dragon with scales so black
They might have absorbed all light
Had there been any light to absorb.

For countless eons First Maker slept.
A dreamless sleep? Perhaps, yet perhaps not--
For who is to know the mind of a dragon?

Then, in an instant, First Maker awoke.
Her shuttered eyes slid open . . . and there was light,
Light so piercing not even the dragon’s scales
Could possibly absorb it all.

First Maker saw the emptiness around Her
And breathed out from Her nostrils
The essence of Her own being
In billowing clouds of life-force.

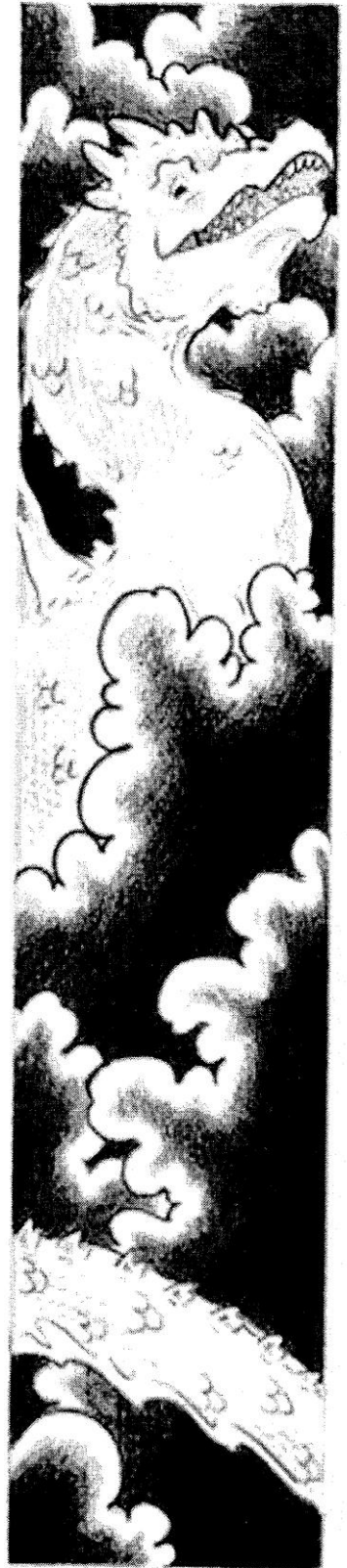
Then First Maker threw back Her head
And uttered a long, bugling call,
A song of such unutterable beauty and power
That the motes of life-force began
To vibrate and draw closer together.

First Maker cupped Her claw-tipped hands,
And in each a swirling mass of life-force
Condensed into a ball; in Her left hand
Lay a darkly brooding ball of ice,
In Her right a raging, radiant ball of fire.

First Maker paused for one endless moment,
Then slammed the balls together,
Joining the opposites in Unity
For an instant before the cosmic egg exploded.

First Maker faded as the motes of Her being
Hurtled outward, ever outward,
To seek that elusive Unity again,
And yet again, for all Eternity.

It was the Beginning . . .



We remained silent for a time, my mind full of the grandeur of the dazzling images the poem had evoked. Finally, Uncle Ragnar spoke again, quietly: “So you see, according to the Light Elves, the Nine Worlds and everything in them—living and non-living—ultimately came from the very being of First Maker, who is—or was—a dragon. The waters of Hvergelmir must have contained an enormous amount of her life-force . . . and perhaps they still do.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding. “That really gives me a lot to think about.”

“As well you should . . . and to make thinking easier, why don’t we call an end to our storytelling for this night, and turn in?”

* * *

The next day we reached the northern edge of the plateau, and looking into the distance, we could see nothing beyond the trail descending into swirling mist. Uncle Ragnar slowly shook his head and confided: “It’s as I feared, Dag. This trail can only lead us down into Niflheim, and the trail’s end must lie at the verge of Hvergelmir, the Well of Creation. That ancient home of dragonkind is a most perilous place to visit—and I plead with you again, if you must go forward, for Odin’s sake go ever so carefully! I understand your need to follow what you think to be your *wyrd*—which it may well be, for there is much the runes have not revealed—but remember that your *wyrd* may not protect you from the dragons we are likely to encounter.

“Knowing now who they are—Goin and Moin, Grabak and Grafvollud, Ofnir and Svafnir, and perhaps even Nidhögg—I also know for a certainty that my powers are no match for theirs. These great orms have dwelt in Hvergelmir since before the creation of the Nine Worlds. They are unimaginably old, incredibly wise, and immeasurably powerful. They feed upon the corpses of our dead, and

gnaw upon the great root of the World Tree—for what reasons I cannot begin to fathom.”

Speechless up to this point, I blurted out indignantly: “Feeding on human corpses and attacking the World Tree? Surely these must be the most evil creatures in the Nine Worlds!”

“Evil by human standards, perhaps, but who are we to judge the great orms? We cannot begin to see the universe through their eyes. Is a wolf evil because it kills and eats a deer? Or is the wolf simply following its *wyrd* and doing what it must to survive? And, to the extent that dragons think about humans at all, surely they must see us chiefly as prey! So let us be wise and conceal ourselves with great care when we approach Hvergelmir. And once you have gazed your fill, let us depart as quickly and quietly as possible. Do you understand?”

My uncle’s revelations had succeeded in shaking my confidence about the outcome of our journey more than I wanted to admit. If I had used any common sense at all, I would have agreed to turn back there and then—but I was still more stubborn than wise.

* * *

I remember little of our descent into Niflheim save that the farther we went, the thicker grew the mist and the stronger blew the winds, which threatened to tear us from the narrow trail that clung to the rocky escarpment we were descending. And as bad as were the days, so much worse were the nights. There was no shelter to be had, and we must needs sleep on the trail itself when darkness came. Sleep? Finally, when overcome by exhaustion, we slept—for the unabated howling of the winds was no soothing lullaby.

At last we reached the bottom of the great barrier wall and found ourselves in Niflheim. We were still surrounded by mist, but at least the swirling winds had diminished somewhat in their intensity. It was such a relief to be able to hear oneself think, and to carry on a conversation without having to shout. At Uncle Ragnar’s suggestion, we set out to find one of the Elivagar—the eleven frosty streams

that flow out of Hvergelmir—so we could follow it upstream to its source. As it turned out, we would have had a difficult time missing the stream we did encounter, for it exited Hvergelmir with such force and volume that the river churned through its channel with a roar that could be heard several bowshots distant.

Once we had the river in sight, Uncle Ragnar and I slowly moved upstream, slipping from the cover of one huge boulder to another, always remaining in the open as little as possible. In this way we came at last to the very brink of Hvergelmir and cautiously peered over its rocky rim. A well—or spring—it had been named, but such words had ill-prepared my mind to encompass the vast body of water that my eyes beheld. More like an ice-rimmed, mist-shrouded lake it was, but with its milky blue water bubbling and churning up from its depths—coming whence only the gods knew.

“Behold the very essence of First Maker’s being,” my uncle breathed softly. And, for once, I was too stunned to say anything.

Then the mists cleared, and I saw the dragons! ‘Til my dying day I’ll not forget that moment, when my heart’s desire was at last fulfilled. Magnificent creatures they were, and far larger than Uncle Ragnar’s tales had led me to expect. They cavorted in the roiling water, diving from time to time near the center of Hvergelmir, only to be carried forcefully to the surface by the spring’s surge. Breaching, they rose into the air on leathery, batlike wings and circled once or twice before plunging back into the icy waters.

So fascinated was I by the sight, that slowly, involuntarily, I rose to my feet to get a better view. Uncle Ragnar tugged at my cloak and hissed a warning, but it was too late. In rising, my tunic had fallen open at the neck exposing Firefrost, which, with so many great orms close at hand, was glowing like the sun! And Firefrost had not gone unnoticed. One huge beast, his black scales gleaming like burnished iron, lazily glided toward us and alit on a

massive stone outcropping nearby.

“S-s-so, what have we here? Human intruders-s-s, it would s-s-seem.”

Feeling naked and exposed in the presence of this ominous creature—and startled to hear it speak, although I had been told that they could—I remained silent. Uncle Ragnar took it upon himself to try to salvage the situation.

“Humans, indeed, your magnificent scaleyness, but hopefully not intruders. You see, I had filled my nephew’s head with tales of the wondrousness of dragonkind and, as an apprentice storyteller, he simply had to see it for himself. The impetuosity of youth, you know. We were just going to watch for a few minutes, then quietly leave.”

“The youth is-s-s not the only impetuous-s-s one, it s-s-seems-s-s. You, at leas-st, should have known better, graybeard. Humans-s-s are not allowed in Niflheim unless bidden—which you were not. If you are the youth’s-s-s mentor, you have not s-s-served him well.”

The dragon’s words stung my sense of justice. “Don’t blame Uncle Ragnar, dragon. He wouldn’t have come here at all if I hadn’t insisted. I am called Dag Ormseeker, and Firefrost here”—I drew out the amulet and showed it to him—“was my naming gift. Can’t you see it is my wyrd to seek dragons and learn as much lore about them as I can?”

“Very impres-sive, I’m sure,” hissed the ebon orm, “but you should have s-s-sought wis-sdom rather than knowledge. Now, when it is-s-s too late, perhaps-s-s you shall gain both.”

“T-too late?” I stammered. “What do you mean, ‘too late’?”

The dragon inclined his head toward me. “A moment ago you addres-sed me as-s-s ‘dragon,’ as-s-s if one orm is-s-s jus-st like any other. Know then, you ins-significant little worm, that I am called Nidhögg, the Destroyer . . . and in your ignorant arrogance you have brought your doom upon you. Under dragon law, tres-spas-s-s is-s-s punishable by

death . . . and I, Nidhögg, am the enforcer of that law.”

Opening his gaping maw, the dragon forcefully expelled a stream of venom at me. Uncle Ragnar threw himself in front of me and received nearly the full brunt of the Cold Fire. The exposed hand I had thrown up to protect my face was the only part of my body to be touched.

Nidhögg rasped: “You may have s-s-spared him for the moment, old man, but you have only prolonged his-s-s death. My venom will s-s-slowly work its-s-s way up his-s-s arm—when it reaches-s-s the heart, he will die. By then, of cours-se, you will be long gone. S-s-say your goodbyes-s-s while you can . . . I shall return s-s-soon for your corps-ses-s-s.”

The dragon left us then, but I was so full of anxiety and guilt—not to mention the excruciating pain in my hand—that I really didn’t notice. I fell to my knees beside Uncle Ragnar as he writhed in agony on the ground.

“Oh, Uncle Ragnar, I am so very sorry. You warned me, but I was the young fool who had to have his own way. Nidhögg was right about that.” Tears of shame and grief came coursing down my cheeks. “Can’t your magic do anything to save us?”

“Too . . . late . . . for me,” he gasped. “Not enough . . . time. One chance . . . for you . . . though. Quick freeze . . . to stop . . . venom. Hope someone . . . will find . . . heal you . . . someday.” Despite his pain, my uncle raised himself on one arm and forced himself to draw a gleaming rune in the air between us. With his last dying spark, he completed the ice rune, and giving me a wan smile whispered his final benediction: “See . . . you . . . in . . . Valhalla.”

And he was gone.

As the icy coating Uncle Ragnar had conjured up started to spread over me from head to toe, my mental processes began to slow, along with all my body’s other functions. I could have sworn I saw a beautiful maiden ride down out of Niflheim’s misty sky, dismount, gather the body of Uncle Ragnar up in her arms, leap lightly astride her steed, and ride back up into the sky. Was she a valkyrie . . . or an illusion? I can’t say for sure, but I do know that my uncle’s corpse was nowhere to be seen.

Then Nidhögg returned. “What’s-s-s this-s-s?” he hissed angrily. “One tidbit carried off, and the other in no condition to be eaten? I’m not going to ris-sk my fangs-s-s on that block of ice.” He watched me silently for a moment. “Nor will I have it s-s-sitting here forever as-s-s a cons-stant reminder of how my will was-s-s thwarted.” Nidhögg swept his long tail like a whip, striking me such a blow that I spun through the air and landed in the midst of the icy stream my uncle and I had followed in approaching Hvergelmir.

So filled with guilt and remorse was I that I actually welcomed the rapid numbing of my thoughts. To be alone with them for all eternity would surely lead to madness, a fate that perhaps I had earned. So much for following my *wyrd*! It had led Uncle Ragnar to his death—and he deserved far better from the nephew he had cared for so long and lovingly. As for me, bobbing and spinning in the torrent, I began a journey of which I would have no awareness . . . and whose ending I could not even begin to foresee.

