

# Theaker's

## Quarterly Fiction #29

### Madame Mortadore & the Clouds

Douglas  
Thompson

Foundling

Nick Sansone

Imaginary Prisons

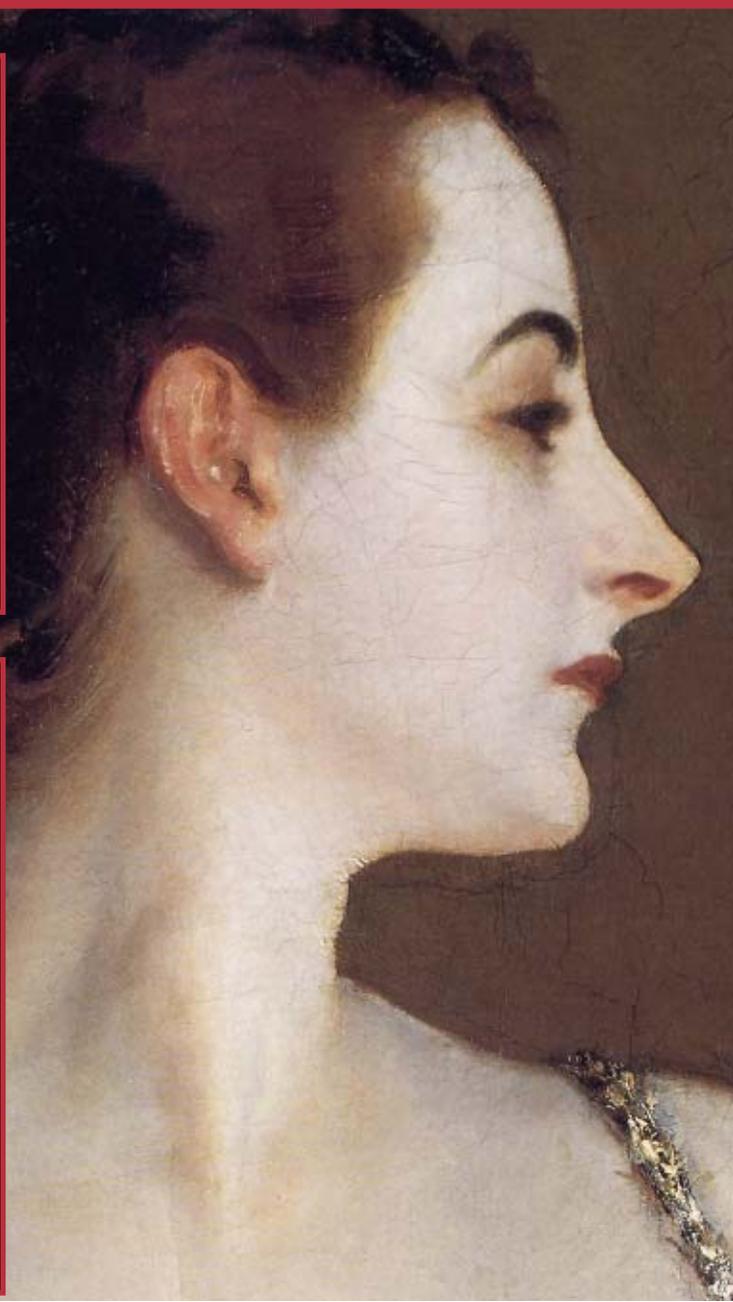
David Tallerman

The Feaster  
from the Stars

John Hall

An Exile in  
Loungewear

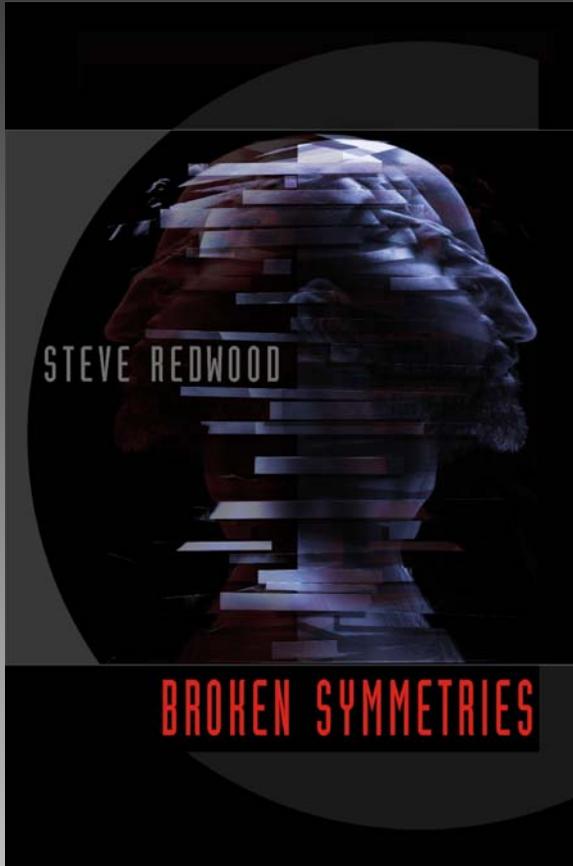
John Greenwood



Steve Redwood's best short fiction brought together for the first time.

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—John Grant

“Bubbles of darkness trapped in fluid humour, like hashish suspended in golden wine, a heady and often disturbing brew.” —Rhys Hughes



Steve Redwood is author of BFS award-nominated *Fisher of Devils* (“one of the funniest books I've read in a very long time”, Michael Moorcock) and *Who Needs Cleopatra?* (“an irresistible combination”, Interzone).

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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 29

Summer 2009

## Editors

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John Greenwood

## Cover Art

John Singer Sargent

## Contributors

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Nick Sansone  
Steve Redwood  
Rafe McGregor  
David Tallerman  
John Greenwood  
Douglas Thompson

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From the well-meaning people who bring you TQF every two months comes the first book in Theaker's Paperback Library.

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*Submissions*

Fantasy, sf and horror fiction, no word limits. See website for full guidelines and terms.

*Mission Statement*

The main goal of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is to keep going. Our other goals are to get a little bit better every year and to catch up with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*.

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Published by Silver Age Books on 4 June 2009

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## EDITORIAL

# No Essays This Time

## Stephen Theaker

There's only room for the tiniest of editorials – we're trying to keep each issue down to eighty pages for the rest of the year and we've got seven fantastic stories and lots of reviews to fit in. Have a great time in here!

### Contributors

JOHN HALL's collection of Lovecraftian tales, probably to be called *Five Forgotten Stories*, will be published by Theaker's Paperback Library.

STEVE REDWOOD's short story collection, *Broken Symmetries*, will be published in August by Doghorn Press.

NICK SANSONE has worked as a wildland firefighter and environmental do-gooder in the National Forests of the western United States. He typically spends his summers in the UK, working as an academic administrator for a theater program at Oxford College.

JOHN SINGER SARGENT was the painter of *Madame X*, a detail from which appears on this issue's cover.

DAVID TALLERMAN can be found online at <http://davidtallerman.net>. His fiction has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Pseudopod*, *Hub* and *Dark Horizons*.

DOUGLAS THOMPSON's short story collection/mosaic novel *Ultrameta* will be out in August. His stories have previously appeared in TQF28 and *Dark Horizons* 54, with another to appear in *Dark Horizons* 55.

RAFE MCGREGOR recently celebrated the publication of his historical thriller, *The Architect of Murder*. See [www.rafemcgregor.co.uk](http://www.rafemcgregor.co.uk).

JOHN GREENWOOD is everything you wish you were, and a tiny bit more!

STEPHEN THEAKER is smaller than the garden of your uncle, but larger than the pen of your aunt. He wrote many of this issue's reviews.

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## FANTASY

# Madame Mortadore & the Clouds

Douglas Thompson

The eyes opening. Again, again, the light breaks in and binds us to its demented dance before we can pause or choose. And without choice, everything is tyranny, reality entraps us. But how to catch it and hold it in your hand, and see it before it sees you? Blinded instantly by the familiar, we can only grapple like fools, crippled from that moment forward. I roll out of bed, a flowerbed as it happens, and there we are: this time I am standing in the middle of a pedestrian precinct, brushing soil and litter from my clothes. Some dazzled passers-by seem almost ready to applaud this debut, my emergence from cotoneaster bushes like stage curtains, before they hurry away in trepidation.

I move shakily across the street, and look for a café to revive me. I find a seat where I can see the sky, and keep my eyes up there as the hot caffeine pours down my throat and re-connects me to my body. So many memories in that sky, fragments drifting like clouds, like the strangers that flicker by, grey and gossamer-like, my eyes not focused on them. My discussion is with the clouds.

And the clouds seem to say:

*Remember us, we are the guardians of your dreams, the scouts of your future, the memorials of your regrets. Remember how we first awoke you as you became aware, a child in your cot on summer evenings, laughing, smiling at the honey flavour of life's light, it was us your eyes first looked up to. Or later on bored windy afternoons; you watched grey storm-clouds racing in battle formation and prepared for the world's end. Or going on holiday, looking from car windows, you watched our white galleons drifting in the ocean of blue up ahead, dancing with distant peaks; like ice cubes in lemonade, we sang of summer and glamour.*

It's hard to believe that there was once enough time to look at clouds all day, but there was and I did, and now I stop and remember and won-

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der if my clouds, discarded childhood toys, old friends; have missed me. Do they blame me for it, are they spurned, twisted with envy of all the things I have wasted my attention on since?

Here they are, those wasteful things right in front of me now: people. I swig my coffee again and focus on the passing strangers hurrying this way and that. It's possible to love them you know, or to hate them, or to think that you do, to become drawn in, to become like them, and then there is no escape. Then you are a cloud among clouds, part of bigger weather. Then you have no concept of the sky. Then it is easy to die, to fade away, your little white puff of life evaporating, like an unheard SOS, an unobserved smoke-signal, lost in the drudgery of the endless parade towards nothingness. How easy a thing it is then, to die.

But now one of them breaks off: a passing stranger rushes in, and throws leaflets onto every table, thrusts one into my hands, then departs. Surprised, I lift it to my eyes, and begin reading...

*Have you heard Madame Mortadore sing?* In a basement bar not far from here, she appears every night about nine and rips the air to ribbons with her voice. The bar is an underground vault, perhaps it is the remnant of an old railway tunnel; it still shakes every quarter hour as the trains go by. The curve of the stone vault overhead seems to sigh and sweat with all the weight of the weariness and sorrow of this old city. It seems to shake and weep even before she takes the stage, and then her voice just picks it up and keeps going with it, carrying it and nursing it a little further, sailing down the river of night, before abandoning it again in the small and smoky hours when everyone is drunk or tired and every eye is closing, and the band are packing up their instruments.

*Have you heard Madame Mortadore sing?* She's not from around here of course, as you'd guess from her name. And she sings mostly in some other language, whose sentiments seem purer and more intense than anything we could express in ours. And even when she sings in English, it is never a song you have heard before in your life, and the way she says the words in her broken accent: it is as if your language is just being invented at that moment, or never used before in that way. It is like hearing a blessing or a curse, it leaves you both healed and wounded.

*Have you heard Madame Mortadore sing?* Sometimes she splits the air into rectangular segments: some light, some dark, in patterns like chromatic keys, and they fan out and spiral from her mouth. The room distorts, the walls implode, the windows melt and weep until their muted sunlight pours like twisted tears of gold: dribbling onto the floor and

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splashing as it lands on the tables. The customers cover their faces as the sparks of hot wax gnaw into their eyes, bringing them to tears.

Then the violins soothe the room again with a sweet reprise, sawing the air until it reassembles in horizontal segments of orange and lemon, that swing from side to side, like the bow on the strings, slowing and easing and healing, until the room and the scene return to sanity as you wipe your forehead or put your glass back on the table from where you were using it to shield your eyes.

*Have you heard Madame Mortadore sing?* Long after you have left her club and returned to the world above and are pacing the old pavements again: you find they are not the same pavements anymore. You feel they are haunted by some melody, perhaps the last one you heard her singing, and that it continues to vibrate and resonate, at a pitch too low to evaluate, moving through the concrete and steel of every building and its foundations, moving through your shoes and toes.

And no matter what you do for the rest of the evening or sometimes the day after it, it is as if Madame Mortadore is on your shoulder, or weeping inside your heart. You look at your lover or your friend or your children and suddenly their hair or their posture has the sadness and dignity of one of the doomed heroines of her songs. Your every action is like another verse you are writing for her, your life has the gravitas and drama of a ballad or an elegy. And although you know it must always end badly and sadly, you're damned if you won't just stick around a while to hear it all out, enjoying the beauty and inevitability of its pattern, the sweetness of despair.

She sings every night in her club, every single night without exception throughout the year. And mostly every song seems to be a new one, only occasionally is a familiar one repeated, and then never the one you expect. No one dares to call out for a favourite or an encore. Madame Mortadore is unreachable, her obscure language is like a glass screen. Her face is lined, her age and dress make her too old to be your lover, but too young to be your mother, and too dignified to be anything in between. Her beauty is haunting because you wish that you could have known her ten or fifteen years ago in Lisbon or Lima, Krakow or Sebastopol or wherever it was you once overheard someone say that they thought she was from. She always dresses in black.

There is a rumour that she was widowed in a civil war. That her lover wrote some of the songs she still sings, that she is still broken-hearted without him, that she only goes on living because he made her promise to keep singing until the end of the world. Sometimes she is tired and she

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wants to stop. But her love, the memory of her lover's love for her, won't let her go. She keeps singing even though sometimes it is killing her.

Sometimes her voice makes the drinks on every table, in every hand, vibrate and froth up and erupt, pouring over like the foaming waves of melancholy oceans, the waves of the last beach she walked along on the last night with her lover. And the drinks taste of salt and sand, and everyone's faces drip with spray and fog. Then the lights all turn crimson as the setting sun in her song sinks into the water, and turns red as the blood-stained shirt of her lover; which she brings to the ocean to wash the next day, her eyes blinded by tears, her hands wringing and wringing.

And this is the most dangerous part in one of her performances, when the guitars play flamenco and the snare drums take up a warlike beat. Because if anyone is wearing buttons or zips then the buttons start to clatter together like boots, like the marching phalanx of soldiers, and the zips start to rattle back and forth like ammunition belts. The buttons fire off across the room and glasses get smashed and men have been known to emerge from the premises with fragments of glass lodged into their bleeding vests and tunics and to run home to their wives like wailing babies only to discover that the fragments have magically turned into rose petals.

*Have you heard Madame Mortadore sing?* When she lets you go, the tinkling, twinkling triplets of her octaves lead you up the old worn stone stairs, returning you softly to the world above, the notes cascading the scale like your feet on each tread, until she releases you into some summer square with church bells ringing and birds diving and twittering. And every yellow and green leaf is like a note that plays, and your head is a forest of music. Your body is a sonorous serious old tree-trunk that resonates you and holds you to the ground. And your thoughts: are the birds and the leaves and the wind and the music they all make together with their tongues and fingers and feathers, crafted and gilded and glittering as jewellery. And looking up at the sky again after all that, you know that the clouds can only applaud...

I finish my coffee and croissant and pay up, and set out into the streets again, clutching the street-vendor's leaflet, intrigued and invigorated by the prospect of finding the cellar of Madame Mortadore. I look up at my clouds in their sky again and see them wince, preparing to weep again. *I know, I know, I say; Later, later.*

I searched for the next ten years, wandering the streets at night, listening intently in back alleys, asking questions and directions in every bar and club I could find. Sometimes I thought I was getting close, then I

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would come upon a notice on a doorway saying that Madame Mortadore had moved on, her band *The Clouds* would be playing at such a place and such a date but always, when I got there, the information was out of date or changed.

Sometimes on quiet summer nights, I imagine that I can hear the muted notes of some of her music, as if playing from a distant room or basement with the window open, and I stand perfectly still on a street corner listening and listening, but always the wind direction changes or traffic noise distracts me and the trail goes cold again.

Sometimes I wonder if I might have imagined the existence of Madame Mortadore, or if she might just be a character in some surrealist novel I have stumbled into, by an unknown author. But then again, maybe we are all characters in just such a novel, if only we could read it.

Sometimes I almost lose faith for a moment, but then I reach for the tattered flyer folded in my pocket, worn but still legible, and I turn it over and read the lyric printed there, an English translation of one of her songs, and I remember why I will always search for her, imagining her voice:

*I like my trees naked  
in winter I see them just as they are  
free of leaves and the panic of summer's display  
all diversion and pretence stripped away.*

*Trees are like hands, like life's blackened fingers  
reaching and searching up to the sky  
pursuing the light like seeking out meaning  
with patience and wisdom too slow for the eye.*

*They suffer their hardship and wear it discreetly  
their skins are a map of the world they encrust  
freezing then burning with each season turning  
all of their fruits and seeds back to dust.*

*They climb to the future by facing it blindly  
ready to change and adapt on a whim  
untroubled by sight, learning only from feeling  
severed or broken they just re-begin.*

*I like my trees naked  
in winter I see them just as they are  
their lives have a pattern whose beauty depends  
on endurance, more than hope or despair.*

## FANTASY

# Foundling

Nick Sansone

The storm rages outside and cobwebs of moisture glide and twist over my windowpanes, creating distorted streaks that crystallise the view of the overgrown courtyard beneath. Thunder grumbles from the furrowed sea-storm sky above. Its voice restrains itself from a full-scale roar, opting instead to murmur in accusation behind the smothering, portentous clouds. I lie still, my eyeballs twitching with each fleck of rain that patters upon my slate-shingled roof. My hands are drawn up in fleshy claws, white tendons standing at attention, strung between fingers and arms like the cords of a marionette. I find my thoughts to be simple, comforting, sobering. The rainwater that has so fogged my windows has washed clear my inner eye of all the silt and grit that had obscured its plain view. I see her now, as she lies below – that poor murdered child whose bones will yellow and decay beneath my floorboards until earth's end.

When I was in the early days of my boyhood, I never dreamed of greatness. The main road into town bloomed with vibrant orange flowers and I followed this primrose path, fancying myself to be a courier before the king – delivering imperative secrets by day, by night dodging the musty palace life to compose haikus by moonlit ponds. Amidst these fantastical oranges, dollops of yellow spurted unapologetically – fresh butter being continually churned from the soil's rich milk. Birds fluttered and founced before me, gaily making light of these foolish men who remain tethered to the ground. One might even lead me off the path, flirting so coyly with its brash green chest and lilting, infectious song that the temptation to follow it off to whatever land it called home was no longer worth resisting. So my mornings passed.

My baskets were always full with the most sumptuous of my family's wares: nectarines, freshly-baked soda bread, figs whose intoxicating sweetness made my head spin, little green olives soaked in sea brine, cranberries and dates, walnuts, apricots, chocolates and cinnamon sticks. I was the treasurer, and these my gems – my rubies, sapphires, topaz and pearl, all polished to gleaming perfection and arrayed according to size,

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shape, and cut. I pulled behind me a clunky wooden cart filled with eggs and farmer's cheese and the thickest milk I'd ever seen, with rich butterfat floating in a glaze across its surface. I threw a heavy woollen blanket over the cart so that the sun might not beat down on these goods and make them sweat.

I grew very strong pulling my cart. My load became lighter throughout the day, as people began to stir, and as the slowly rising sun made them rash with desire for the finer things in life. I sweated along, pausing often to wipe my brow and drink from the horn I had hooked to my belt. By mid-afternoon, my muscles were usually sore and pounding with blood. I sometimes took a break to rest under the wise old willow whose leafy appendages shielded me from the sun's onslaughts. A brook ran through the area, and there was an orchard beyond. I could keep the jugs of milk cool in the stream, while I dozed lazily under the protection of the tree's shade. Deep, bruise-coloured butterflies gathered around me before flapping off to the orchard to drink the nectar that awaited them there. By the first signs of dusk, I was always ready to start again, refreshed by the cool kiss of night's certain chill.

This is how I remember my earliest years. The days passed slowly and sweetly, like honey poured from a thin-necked bottle. I had no worries then—no entanglements to keep me from drinking deeply of the lavender-scented fountain of youth. Foul impulses of death and treachery had not yet made their roost in the dank creases of my brain.

My earliest distinct memory occurred in the autumn of my sixteenth year. The ongoing battle between daytime and night-time was beginning to turn tide, and longer and longer stretches of sunlight were quickly being devoured by evening's greedy gullet. Even those hours that remained of day were besieged by armies of clouds and fog, making afternoon's weary progression into dusk nearly imperceptible. Leaves dropped periodically from the tree limbs and crunched loudly beneath the wheels of my cart in their final throes and death rattles. I always arrived at the battlefield after the fighting was done. There were never any more thundering cannon shots or frenzied rallying cries – just the ashen, barren solitude of a dead land over which the gunsmoke still lingered.

On this particular autumn day, I was picking my way through the orchard. The dizzying stench of surplus apples, which lay rotting and swollen with infection, twisted its sticky fingers deep into my throat. The husks of withered trees grabbed at me. The mournful wind cautioned me hopelessly against the fate that awaited me amidst these desolate skeletons. My cart creaked and complained behind me obstinately. It had

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grown to be a part of my body; an old, arthritic ache whose pain aged me.

As I dragged along my burden, mirthless in the tinder-dry chill, my mind was drawn into memory of a plaintive liturgical chant that I had heard echo in the lonely walls of the old cathedral in the city:

“Lorde, my God, Shepherd and King, watch over me now that in death I may know peace.”

This simple harmony unfolded itself in my mind, naked and barren before the unmoved emptiness of the air. At some great distance, a small flock of geese wailed out a haunting descant. Together, we composed a tacit requiem for the youthful days of summertime.

I was discouraged because I had but three copper coins in my empty leather satchel, and twilight was already creeping steadily on. I could not look at my unsold goods without seeing them as dead weight that pulled and strained at my burning arms. Even the red- and brown-flecked ears of corn, the hearty squash and pumpkin, and the sack full of small beans of all shapes and colours – begging to be put into a thick, warming stew – appeared to me as bland as firewood. My exhaustion neared its peak and I looked for a cozy place amidst the leaves to snuggle down with my moth-eaten, barley-stuffed quilt to restore some of the colour to my cheeks. Momentarily safe and at rest, I allowed the warm and gentle goddess of sleep to wrap her arms around me and breathe a soft lullaby into my ear. The wars of November may have raged around me, but I had cried sanctuary and could not be touched by bleakness.

In this midday slumber, I caught my first glimpse of her – the one whose life ran parallel to my own, and who cared not for the boundaries between sleep and wakefulness, between death and life, between past and present. The one who began to walk in all the dark, cobbled alleys of my consciousness, chipping and consuming more and more of myself, seducing and metastasising in equal measure. The one whose cool and tender kiss sent out tendrils of icy shock that gripped my bones and held them immobile. The one who had no age.

In my dream, she was seated beneath the willow on the banks of the brook. Her deft fingers plucked idly on a weather-worn lute that had settled in her lap. Her voice wafted towards me, slurring the notes of her old folk air until they were connected as one flowing, gentle stream.

“If you see them, Father, please tell them I’m a poor, mourning pilgrim, bound for Canaan land.”

The words were round and full and smooth like the yolk of an egg, and so soft that I could not determine whether I was hearing them or composing them in my mind. Her breath sent out tiny crystals of ice that

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gleamed for a moment in the muted sunlight before falling to the grasses below as dewdrops. Her lips, moving nearly imperceptibly to her song, met and parted, met and parted, echoing the whispering flutter of Spanish moss caught in a summer's breeze.

The jade-coloured dress she wore pooled beneath her like the coils of a charmed cobra. At first it appeared plain, but, as I neared her, I could perceive pinpricks of light radiating out from it and making her image shimmer slightly. Aside from a translucent aqua silk that flowed over her shoulders as gently as sea foam, she was without further adornment.

Emerging from this pond of fabrics was a lithe and slender torso and, of course, her face.

The face – her face – was like nothing I had ever seen. Her dusky cheeks faded elegantly into her skin, which was the colour of moonlight. Her eyes were still, cold, and precise – two rough emeralds set deeply into the unmoved face of a marble Minerva. From her head sprang a Vesuvius of feral scarlet tangles. They raced about in the wind, snapping and snarling at one another, heedless of the tranquillity of the body beneath them. A handful of tamer strands wrapped themselves defensibly around her frosty face and collected casually in the corners of her mouth. The entire picture was a jarring one – I felt this enchantress to embody the worlds of both fire and ice. Little did I realise that her incantations were already stirring me slowly and deliberately.

With one finger, she beckoned to me sternly. Her fingernail was long, curved, and immaculately polished like a scimitar. Her eyes flashed cruelly – two baby snakes snapping out their poisonous tongues to gain a taste of their imminent meal. Her magnetism drew me, physically, mentally, entirely. She cocked her head slightly in curious impatience and, with that one subtle, isolated gesture, shattered the murky air between us, casting me into a cool, sudden vacuum. I felt my heart constrict at the sudden rush of air emanating from her gaze. She had laid a latticework of eroticism into me, and, like a surreptitious cancer, it was already working to demolish me from the inside out.

“How came you here, witch?” I demanded.

Her song stopped, and the laughter fell loosely from her voice like sand slipping through the hourglass. The lute momentarily disappeared into the folds of her skirt.

“Why, if I be a witch, I need not have ‘come’ at all.”

Though her voice was soft, her words impaled me with their shrewd precision. Her eyes continued to hold me in an iron vice.

“Should I be a witch, you might find me anywhere else just as simply, at this same moment. Should I be a witch, I may have sat here placidly

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since the beginning of all time, undisturbed until now. What means 'coming' or 'going' to a witch?"

"Hold me in your confidence," I faltered. "Be you one?"

"A witch?" she prompted, urging me to make my accusation plainly. A hint of a cruel smile danced lithely over her polished eyes.

"Aye, lady, a witch."

The smile spread now, like butter melting upon an oversweet ear of corn. Her white, well-arrayed teeth flashed like needles. "Think you so, young man?" she replied with maddening condescension.

"I do not trust you," I gathered the strength to say. "You speak only in questions."

Again, her laughter, light and clear as angel chimes. For a long time, she said nothing more. She sat, her head slightly to an angle, her eyes watching me deeply, so as to understand every ridge and valley of my being. The silence that passed between us was searing and impatient. Despite the ice in her gaze, molten globules of sweat began to bubble up on my skin. A flash fire kindled in my bowels and radiated heat through me.

Just when I began to fear that her smirking silence would incinerate me, she let out a puff of cold breath and smoothly took hold of an ivory-hilted dagger that was sitting next to her. With precision, she slipped the point of the blade into the tip of her right index finger and drew out a glistening treasury of pure, red blood drops. They fell carelessly to the ground below and let off dainty wisps of steam when they hit the frosted-over earth.

Wiping off her weapon with a white silk that appeared to have come from nowhere, she said to me: "There need be no fear for witches here."

"Aye, lady, 'tis clear you are no witch. What mean you, then, by your charming me? Be you sent by Satan?" I spat quickly after I said the name of that Hated One to clear my mouth of the sinister sibilance that takes root wherever He is mentioned.

Her mouth shifted into a perfect "o" of pretended surprise. Her eyebrows eased their way up her forehead until they sat on high in feline indolence. Her voice became sleek and serpentine as she cooed out in mock horror: "Such a man to so offend such a woman. What means you by making heedless accusations?"

"Such a woman to lead such a man into offense. I can yet see the fangs in your words."

At my speech, she dropped the carelessly forged expression from her face, leaving behind only her coy mask of erotic superiority. "So insist you, stranger, and yet I can see your mind plainly. Is it not *you* who wish

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to inject your venom into *I*? What good be the fangs without the snake to bring the poison home to bear?"

She had seen the weakness in me, and had punctured me directly. The blood poured into my face, scalding me with its lustful ignominy. Now that my interior had been sliced open and my very guts spilled onto the dirt, there no longer remained any place for me to hide from exposure. Frightened by my own sudden visibility, I tried in vain to shield myself with a confidence I did not feel.

"What do you want with me, then?" I demanded. "I charge you, speak, if you be able to do so without further spinning your shroud of incoherence."

"You order me about so, but what great wrong have I wrought upon you?" she bit out. "I want nothing with you. Remember I neither bade you speak nor approached you. You came of your will, so go of your will. Leave me to my music."

Her eyes challenged me to break my gaze. However, I could not. My muscles had been paralyzed by her fearsome poison and were frozen into a statuesque immobility. Without changing her tone, she continued to unravel me:

"So, then, you see you are powerless to go. You have no right to demand aught of me. *I* hold the power over you. So why make you appeals when nothing compels me to comply? I shall make known to you what I choose and when I choose it. Do not presume to impose upon a lady's discretion."

With the last of her chilling admonitions, the calm which she had layered over herself cracked and splintered like a frosted ale mug when thrown into the too-hot dishwasher. In one swooping movement, she swiped up her lute and leaped to her feet. She began to strum her instrument wildly and stomp heavily in a mad dance. All I could see was a mesmerising cyclone of green silk and blazing shocks of hair swirling about each other and bringing up clouds of unsettled dust that billowed about her in opaque cushions.

"Hallelu, Hallelu, my Lorde God is come! My Lorde God is come to take me home to pasture!"

Her voice was no longer soothing and melodious. It was now emanating from deep within her belly – low, growling, and husky. This woman was surely mad.

"I tell you this," she sneered. "I shall visit you three times, more, but you cannot reach me. You will not know when I am coming until I have already arrived. With this, I make my vow unbreakable:"

She toed a circle around herself in the dust and spit four times – north,

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west, south, and east. I felt a sick sense of despair at this. I wasn't sure what she meant by her devilry, but I knew that I had entered into something irrevocable.

The last I saw was a flare-up of her hair as she threw her head back in what was, once again, light, innocent laughter. "Wake, child, wake," she soothed as the dust whirled up around me. "Do let your thoughts of me bring you pleasure."

I woke into dampness. The weary autumn sun had given up its struggle and bedded down, and the clammy dew of night had sprung up around me. Some moisture had seeped in through the seams of my knickers and had collected on my upper thigh. My cart lay draped in shadow. The entire world had been blackened.

In the years that followed, I was unable to return to my youthful wonder at the earth's majesty. Though I saw no more of the witch, her image was fused to the back of my eyelids, her voice was barbed into my ear, and the chill of her breath had launched spores into my gut. My simple life bored me. I fidgeted awake on my straw heap most nights, wishing for a visit from her and terrified that my wishes might be granted. I longed for my blood to simmer and rage once more.

In the summer of my eighteenth year, my village went to war with the North. All of the capable young men were enlisted to fight, but many fled to the grasslands in the West. The Northerners were known to be vicious, bloodthirsty predators who took no prisoners. Most boys ventured that a traitor's death on the gallows was better than the gory fate that awaited them if they went into battle. I allowed myself to be swept up in the raging current of wartime fervour. I no longer had any attachment to this world and the thought of death was too abstract to frighten me. My cart, however, aged and splintering and wearing on my body day after day, was real, and I could no longer bear the pulsing fire that ripped through my arteries. I found vent in war.

In the first days, I saw no combat. We marched steadily northwards, into the jagged bed of mountains. The passes were thin and pitted with large rock deposits, so we split up to take various routes over the highlands. My partner in war was a shaggy man, just older than me. His long chestnut hair clotted limply on his wide shoulders. He had the first beginnings of a beard on and occasional wisps of roan traced the outline of his jaw. Black slabs of teeth jutted at irregular angles inside his cavernous mouth. When he spoke, he roared.

"I know the byways and hidden crevices of this place, Friend," he screamed jovially to me. "I was birthed in these mountains years ago."

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“Let’s be on, then,” I urged. “The enemies run strong numbers in these passes.”

“You’re safe, as you’re with me, Friend,” he assured, pounding me on the back with a deep laugh. A sudden respectful quiet blinked into him as he threw his arms to heaven. “Lorde, my God, Shepherd and King, watch over me now that in death I may know peace,” he cried.

We wended our way along the high mountain trails, keeping low to the earth and checking our breathing at a sub-audible level. I had a short broadsword strapped against my leg and its cool, inflexible metal rubbed against me with every step. The sword’s bronze grip had been forged into a seductive dragonhead, whose forked, ribbon-thin tongue was forever frozen into a winding “S.” From time to time, I grasped the hilt and felt the dragon feeding me with feral aggression. Every muscle in my body quivered with tense readiness.

On the third day of our mission, scattered droplets of water began to mist from the soft, blue sky. Lukewarm globules of summer rain patted my dirty face and ran down the back of my neck. My partner turned to me with a craggy grin and confided: “Light rains bring good luck, Friend.”

The rains did not stay light for long, however. Flat, slate-coloured clouds rolled in from seemingly nowhere, growling lowly in sinister tones. Rain streamed down from the sky and washed over my face. Deluges of water flooded the path we were following and created swampy vortexes of mud that gripped us at our ankles and splattered up into our eyes. Occasional explosions of lightning sparked the air around us, making the hairs on my body stand on end and tingle in electrified anticipation. My heart began to constrict furiously, blasting my blood through me in giddy waves. As my partner struggled ahead of me to get a grip on the slippery earth, I thought I could feel the icy, gentle breath of a witch on the back of my shoulder. When I turned to look, however, I could see nothing but a perpetual cascade of fresh summer rainwater.

“Mind your step,” hollered my partner over the throbbing pulse of the storm.

“Mind your volume,” I hissed, grabbing his ankle and pulling him to the ground. We had nearly reached the mountain’s peak and little other than scrubby brush and periodic rock outcroppings shielded us.

With a good-natured chortle, he shook off my hand and groped upwards to an alert crouch. The moment his head popped out of the sparse vegetation lining the forgotten trail, his body tumbled backwards with a sudden twitch. He let out a sickly wet howl and his muddied hands

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clawed towards the sky. I cautiously allowed myself to glance at him. Thick canals of blood cut across his face like slimy night crawlers. The feathery shaft of a long, wooden arrow protruded from his right eye socket and the tarnished metal barb was peeking subtly from the back of his convulsing head. An opaque white jellied substance was smeared across his cheek, being quickly diluted by the still-flowing rain.

The dragon on the hilt of my sword hissed hypnotically at me. I thought that for a brief moment its golden tongue flashed an overwhelming vermilion – the colour of my witch's hair – but it may well have been a trick of the eye. My rapid heartbeat roaring behind my ears, I soundlessly slid onto my belly. My head was but half a foot away from the gory mask of my transfigured partner's face. Blood stopped pulsing from his wound and the last vestiges of life had drained from him. I heard stealthy footsteps nearby. I ground my breathing to a tense halt in the back of my throat and felt dizzy with fear.

Flowing mud slipped beneath me as the rainstorm continued. I raked my hands through the liquid earth and watched them create canals that quickly filled in with water. I knew that I needed to stay still, but the electricity that filled me from my boots to the crown of my head would not be contained. Fighting the impulse to sit bolt upright and face my partner's murderer, I plunged my hands deeper and deeper into the muck, grabbing fists of mud and feeling them trickle through my quaking fingers. The footsteps had stopped, but I heard breath above me being heavily sucked in and out.

"Lorde, my God," I began, noiselessly mouthing the familiar prayer, "Shepherd and King..."

"Perhaps I can help," buzzed a small voice near my right ear.

I slowly eyed the source of the voice and discovered that a fat, black horsefly had landed on my shoulder and was rubbing its front legs together in wicked playfulness. My mouth sat open and I couldn't will myself to move. A warm trail of urine snaked down my thigh.

"Come, now, you don't mean by this that you fail to recognise me?" the voice continued. The fly glided off my shoulder and hovered directly in front of my face, staring at me with its multifaceted eyes. "Ought I to take a form you might know me by?"

A sudden certainty came into me that this was the very witch who had haunted my earlier dreams. Before I could react, the menacing face of a Northern soldier plunged into my vision. His hair was matted down with blood and cracking dirt clung to his body like snakeskin. A twisted iron helmet obscured his features. His mouth was pulled open in a fierce war cry as he swung a rusty battleaxe high above his head.

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“Let us abscond so that we may peacefully discuss your safety,” the fly reasoned with maddening calm. “Close your eyes upon this waking world. Quickly.”

Frantically, I followed the witch’s order and plunged into an amorphous haze of pastel vapours. I was floating free in space and all I could see was peppermint green and lavender. Out of the gentle void, a sudden bright point of light sparked with a loud popping noise. My witch appeared, floating lazily in front of me. She was the same as when I had first seen her, except that she had retained her insect eyes. When I looked at them, I saw infinite reflections of myself, as though I was staring into the depths of two finely cut diamonds. She spoke and her eyes began to spin slowly, creating kaleidoscopic patterns of refracted light.

“This seems to be the second of our four meetings, mortal.” Her tone was more officious this time and the coy flirtatiousness she had presented on our first acquaintance was replaced with a stern demeanour.

“Then I am not to die at the hand of the Northern barbarian?”

She snorted laughter and fine curls of orange flame steamed from her nostrils. Her teeth gleamed in a vicious, white grin.

“Nay, mortal, I shall see to it that you not end your days here. In exchange, I require something of you.”

With her words, her diamond eyes exploded and dressed our surroundings in flakes of glittering starlight. The serpentine green eyes that had transfixed me years ago returned, more vulnerable and magnetic than before. Her features softened with her eyes and her beauty stunned me. She wordlessly pushed down the shimmering green dress that disguised her body and floated naked before me. Her physique was perfectly in proportion. The curves of her breasts melded smoothly into her unmarred abdomen, which flowed in turn into her graceful hips and legs. I began to sweat with frenzied lust. The ungodly web she had ensnared me in was tightening around my neck, cutting off my breathing and making my head buzz from lack of oxygen.

“Become mine,” she cooed, drifting towards me.

I reached out and touched her delicate arm. A tingling pillar of icy fire shot through me, making me shiver and quake. Her green eyes exuded a soft warmth that melted me slightly as she pulled me to her. Flickering stars danced beneath my eyes and I suddenly felt complete. Her face registered no show of emotion, but a faintly wise smile crept across her moist red lips. My vision began to blur and heat swelled up around me as I blacked out. The act was over almost before I realised it had begun.

When my sight had returned, I saw that I was once again levitating

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with the witch in our cloudy half-world. I was out of breath, but she was calmly replacing her dress and drifting slowly away from me.

“Mortal, you must go now,” she called out. “I shall keep my promise to you. You shall be safe from enemy soldiers so that you may see me twice more.”

“Mean you to leave me now?” I desperately cried.

She turned to me and winked. Her eyes were once again crystallised and a hint of eerie condescension crept over her face. “Wake, child. Wake.”

I blinked and once again found myself clawing at the muddy earth with rain washing over me and the Northern barbarian standing with his axe above his head. Before I could move, a gnarled old man appeared behind the soldier and rammed a slim dagger into his back. A look of pained surprise crossed the barbarian’s face and he coughed up a wheezy clot of blood before falling to his knees. He dropped the battleaxe, which landed dangerously close to my head and sank into the rain-soaked ground. His eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed on top of his axe. The old man who had wielded the knife gravely shuffled over to the body, pulled out the dagger, and wiped it off on his sleeve.

I stared at the man, dumbfounded. The top of his head was completely bald, but a coarse red beard sprouted from his wrinkled chin. His skin was folded and draped over his bones like an elegant tapestry and he was simply cloaked in a brown muslin robe. He moved slowly but directly and his short stature and humped back made him look like a gnome. A large wart sprouted from the side of his bulbous red nose.

“Come to your feet, my boy,” he croaked, his voice crackling and sputtering like a dying campfire. He held out a wide claw of a hand and I grasped it tremblingly. “You nearly met your end. Follow me home and get out of the rain.”

“Thank you, my good sir,” I stammered, slipping in the mud as I tried to stand.

“Not a word of thanks,” he dismissed. “Only come to my hovel and you shall be as a son to me.”

I bent against the rain and grasped the man’s hand. It felt rough and callused, but he kept a tight grip on me as we slowly crept along the mountain pass. It was only a few minutes before we came to a small wooden cabin, set about twenty yards off of the main trail. The back half of the structure was sagging pathetically and there were bird’s nests tightly squeezed under the eaves. As we stepped through the doorless entryway, I noticed that the floor was lined with dirt and straw. The peculiar smell of rotten mulch and goose droppings met us. My companion

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didn't seem to mind. He carefully set his dagger down on a table in the front area of the cabin's only room. A small, yellowed bedroll lay unobtrusively in the far corner. Aside from a fireplace and a few roughly hewn stools, there was little else in the room.

"My home is a modest one, but you are welcome to my few small luxuries," the man told me. "I need the bedroll for my demanding back, but there is straw in abundance for you to sleep on."

I wanted to know more about where I was, but I was suddenly seized by an unforeseen exhaustion. I thanked the man once more, had my thanks brushed away, and fell immediately into a dreamless slumber.

In the days and weeks that followed, I pieced together small bits of the man's history as he taught me his trade. Grandfather, as I took to calling him, lived in the Northern city until he was twenty-five years old. He fell in love with a girl from the Midlands, but their people were at war at that time. They ran away together into the hills and Grandfather built his cabin and learned to crush pigments. Once a week he returned to the city to sell his paint and wooden knickknacks. He was happy because he had his true love and there was nothing else he could have wanted. Their idyllic bliss lasted for several years and their modest family grew when his lover gave birth to a baby boy. One day, however, their baby grew very ill and needed to be taken into the city for medicines. Grandfather had been out selling until very late the night before and did not have the strength to make the journey again. Instead, he sent his lover and child into the city on their own. That was the last he ever saw of them, forty long years ago. He had been continuing his routine ever since, still making his weekly pilgrimages into town. The first few years he held out hope that he might find news of his family, but he had long since resigned himself to a solitary life that would constantly be plagued with the memory of what he had lost.

I became Grandfather's child and, in exchange, he taught me the secret paths of the hills and all his knowledge of paint grinding and woodworking. He showed me how to carve a bed for myself out of felled trees and boughs. I made the trips into the city so that he wouldn't have to walk the five miles into town and back and he split his earnings with me. We grew very close and when I wasn't busy gathering indigo, bloodberries, or saffron, I painted. My paintings started out as crudely eked out replicas of my surroundings, but, as I developed more experience, I was able to tap into that electrical charge I had gotten from the witch and allow the passion buzzing through my veins to come out onto my canvas. I mixed reds as hazy as the setting sun, blue-greens as murky as the briny depths of the ocean, and yellows as muted as the shaft of light that

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streamed onto my bed through my window each morning. I mixed colours as sharp and bold as the edge of a knife and as phosphorescent as swarms of fireflies. I developed what Grandfather called "talent", but I didn't see it as such. After all, I was just letting my natural fire out through my fingertips. I painted effervescent ponds covered in lily blossoms, sprightly summer nights festooned with starbursts and lunar radiance, cherry orchards impregnated with natural bounty, and witches. Many witches.

One morning, during the summer of my third year with Grandfather, he approached me as I was sitting on my bed and putting the finishing touches on a cool green pasture scene. The calm of the canvas was interrupted only by a stark red slash I had put through it in a fit of destructive fervour.

"Son," he said, laboriously stooping onto one of the stools I had built for him, "sit with me."

I obeyed readily. "What means you, Grandfather, by your returning home so early? The sun is not but low still." I noticed that the typically childish glint in his lucid hazel eyes was washed over with dull pink weariness.

"My son, I have watched your talents grow and your body with them. You are no longer in childhood and I see that you will leave me soon."

"I never hope to leave this place, Grandfather."

"I have seen these canvases of yours. I once had that selfsame passion in my hands, though I never had your talent. These broad brush strokes," he indicated the audacious red in my current project, "are the symptoms of a lovelorn heart. I have provided you as I could, but you are at the age where the company of old men will not content you."

He tried to hide his sadness behind the artifice of a rueful smile, but his voice shook more than usual and he couldn't look me straight in the eye. I was almost ashamed to admit that he was right. The days were slow and easy but the insatiable sparking in my guts required a more thorough release than painting.

"You'll come with me," I reassured.

A lone tear trickled down the wrinkled canals of Grandfather's ancient face. "My place is here among the rocks and shrubs, young man. I must be here in case of another lost boy like yourself. My true son may yet return to me."

I gathered several glass phials of pigments and dyes into a small rucksack and, several days later, said goodbye to Grandfather. He traced his old, sunken thumb along my forehead and murmured an emotional blessing over me as I knelt before him.

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“Lorde, my God, Shepherd and King, watch over this boy now that in death he may know peace.”

He threw his bony arms around me in a frail embrace and watched me as I clambered onto the mountain trail and crested our familiar hill for the last time.

The sorrow of leaving Grandfather was balanced by my anxious excitement over what awaited me in the city. I took out a room in a shabby boarding house on the edge of town and spent all my hours mixing paints and selling them on the crowded street corners. For many weeks, I was able to make just enough money to keep my rent coming. I often had to beg for food and the hunger in my belly gnawed at my guts and slowly devoured my passion. On some level, however, I knew that I had two visits remaining from the witch. She had saved me last time and I knew that she wouldn't let me pass out of existence before she had fulfilled her promises to me. This kept me mixing day after day, night after night.

I soon discovered that I could sell more paint if I displayed some of my own work behind me. People could see for themselves the shocking effects that could be wrought by lovingly crafted colours and a young artist's temper. I usually set up shop directly across from the haberdasher. He was an enthusiastic, well-groomed young man who kept up with all the latest fashions. His clients were upscale young dilettantes who came to market attired in sharp suits and scandalously extravagant dresses. They came out of his store with cylindrical pink hatboxes piled in their arms and luxurious leisure in their gaits.

One day, a lanky middle-aged man with a bristle of a moustache and a gold-rimmed monocle approached me with the officious deliberation of a businessman.

“Now, son, how much for that painting there?” The picture he was talking about was one of the first I had done since coming to the city. It showed my witch, nestled in a grove of rosebushes. Her scarlet hair was splayed over her shoulders and chest and just barely covered the peaks of her gently sloped breasts. Tongues of lime green phosphorescence frayed the outsides of the canvas, setting the scene aflame with envious heat.

“The green, sir,” I began, “is four gold pieces for a phial this size.” I pulled out one of my flasks to demonstrate. “You can see for yourself the magnetic power it draws when put into the right hands.”

“You misunderstand.” The man twitched his moustache and pulled out a rawhide wallet. “I hoped to purchase your painting.”

I stared at him in a slight fog of confusion. Nobody had ever offered

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to buy my paintings before and it had never occurred to me to sell. I had always done the designs for my own amusement and as a way to demonstrate the magic qualities of the paint I mixed. However, years of patrolling the streets in search of markets had instilled in me the ability to make the most of any deal.

"The painting is very dear to me," I began, "and I can think of no sum that would lead me to part with it."

"A pity," clucked the man, "for I was prepared to give you four hundred and fifty gold pieces."

"If you offer but fifty more, I might hear you, honoured sir."

And so it was that I made my first significant amount of money. With the five hundred gold pieces, I moved into a nicer part of town, closer to the haberdashery, and invested in fresher materials from the apothecary. My yellows blossomed, my oranges smouldered, my reds seduced, my greens wailed, and my blues ensnared. My blacks and whites screamed off the canvas, and they all coalesced within the bubbling cauldron of my fitful passion.

Where one customer goes, so come others. I spent all my waking hours painting and selling in fevered productivity. Gold was pouring in to me so quickly that I found myself wanting for things to spend it on. Every day the crowd that awaited me when I arrived to set up shop grew and grew and the outrageous bids for my canvases strove higher and higher. Before long, I could afford to purchase a stone dwelling on a small hill just outside the city's gates. As my worth expanded, my home did the same. I built a veranda and an enclosed portico and stables in the surrounding pastureland. I knocked down one of the walls and extended the house by almost a quarter of a mile. Every new space I conquered, I filled with carpets and imported furniture and golden figurines. My ceilings arced overhead like the prayerful hands of children and my floors sprawled beneath like verdant meadow straits. I surrounded myself with beauty, but the more I had, the more I grew used to. I needed to continually excite my eye with new objects and rooms and frenziedly build up my stockpile of luxury.

With everything I bought, I hoped to simulate the fleeting perfection of that female form I had beheld but once. My mind, no longer distracted by the day-to-day problems of base survival, dwelt more and more on the moment of ecstasy I had shared with the witch. For all of my worldly possessions, I could never possess the one shred of beauty that I longed to hold. My trips to market grew less frequent and, soon, I was only going out to sell once or twice a month. I spent the remainder of my time muddying canvases and pacing restlessly amidst the many rooms of my

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mansion. The company of no mortal man or woman held excitement for me, and my rapidly growing museum of pristine objects fell short of the full-blooded eternity of the immortal soul. Five years passed, each bringing with it the same tired cycle of the seasons and the same redundant vibrations in my heart. I grew desperate for change.

The foundling arrived on the first day of my sixth spring in the city. It happened upon her when I stepped outside in the morning to drink in the pastel champagne of the sun coming up over the city, as was my habit. She had been placed on the stone slab of my doorstep and was wrapped tightly in turquoise swaddling. Insubstantial wisps of red hair, as dark as the skin of an autumn apple, framed her squat, unlined face. When I found her, she was peacefully asleep, a thin bubble of spittle rising and falling at her lips with her breath. I foolishly looked around, as though I expected to find clues nearby as to who this child was and why I had found her outside my house. Of course, all of the lands within a two mile radius were mine and I had no servants – nobody ever saw my mansion, which was set back a considerable distance from the main road into town. There was no note or sign in her blankets. She had silently risen from the ground during the night like the dew that dotted my pastures. It was too early to go into town, so I picked the foundling up in my arms and stood in my doorframe, watching the early morning light lazily steam into the sky.

The girl still had not stirred by the time the bloated sun had climbed above the horizon, so I took her inside. If it hadn't been for the steady pulse of her breathing, I would have taken her for a surprisingly lifelike baby doll. I imagined that I would let her sleep through the morning and then take her to the orphanage in the city in the afternoon. As I didn't have a crib, I found a tarnished old silver soup tureen in the kitchen and set her in it. She was the perfect size for it and she nestled into it with a blissful sigh.

I turned to head out to the easel I kept behind the house, but, as I lifted my rough hand off of the child, she instinctively grasped my right index finger with both hands. I looked back at her and saw that she had opened her eyes. They were deep, trusting green – the colour of rain-kissed broadleaf pines. She opened her fat lips and exhaled loudly, pulling my finger against her soft face.

The baby's touch set my bones humming with vibrancy. While the touch of the great witch had excited my lust, this child had excited my love. I chose to forgo the landscape I planned to paint that morning. Instead, I painted the portrait of my little foundling, carefree and secure in her tureen. I mixed a special set of colours for her picture. These

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colours were subdued and blended, caressing one another and running together like estuaries. The painting showed none of my usual bold colours and ruthless angles. It was a cloudy, soft representation reflecting the quiet tranquillity that had just fallen over me, soothing my previous passion. I painted through the entire day, trying to capture the essence of this beautiful child. All thoughts of the orphanage went out of my head. I was too preoccupied with my new craft.

When night-time crept its shadowy fingers into the house, I brought her into my bedroom, still contentedly tucked into her tureen. As days and weeks passed, I painted numerous pictures of and inspired by my foundling. I finally went into the city to buy a crib for her and to have her blessed at the old stone cathedral. She consistently held herself with inhuman calm. Every tiny motion she made was specific and full of intention. She was still and observant and I never heard her make any noise apart from the sounds of her deep breath. Her smiles were broad, her frowns were short-lived, and her peace was an aura that buzzed around her. My wealth was no longer important to me, as I didn't have to attempt to fashion beauty from manmade objects anymore – when I brought Foundling into town, I held the utmost manifestation of beauty in my proud, fatherly arms.

As Foundling grew up, she also grew into me. When a bee stung her, I could feel the venom in my blood; when she laughed, I knew that the humour was not far from my own lips; when she looked, I saw; when she thought, I knew. Nonetheless, there was something markedly odd in her development. The calm she had shown as a baby followed her into her childhood. She did not act without being told to; she could sit still as a stone indefinitely; she had perfect posture, skin, and hair; she reacted to nobody but me; she made no mistakes and conformed too seamlessly to my vision of beauty. Each time I left her to go into town, I would return home to find her in the same position as when I had gone. Moreover, she never started speaking. She could hug me and smile and do whatever I asked of her, but the only part of her body that ever showed evidence of independent motion was her eyes. Her bright green eyes followed me always, even when her body was rigid. They were filled to the depths with love, innocence, and complete dependence. When I looked into her eyes, I was so affected that her supernatural peculiarities no longer bothered me. In her eyes I found the honesty and peace that made their way into my paintings.

When she was five years old, I took her into town with me twice a week. She followed about three feet behind me and kept a smooth, effortless gait, her feet padding noiselessly on the dirt path. I always held

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out my hand to her and she obediently took it. I loved the feel of her warm skin against mine. I knew that every time I looked back at her, she would meet my glance and fill her face with a wide, faithful smile. Her hair had sprouted into a voracious nest of red curls, but her skin remained as placid and white as fine porcelain. Her smile dimpled her cheeks, which were flushed with a slight hint of pink. Whenever we went into town, people would stop in their tracks to look at Foundling, proving that her beauty was not simply a phantom of fatherly pride. Of course, she never acknowledged these outsiders. Her world consisted of the two of us.

As she became known around town, there were stories told about her. Some called her a blessed child, some called her haunted. To some, she displayed the infinite grace of God our Father, and to others she displayed an unspeakable devilry. They called her “daemon”, “angel” and “wraith.” Some people stopped coming to my corner; others made it a point to come every week. In the midst of this controversy, Foundling and I maintained our prudence. I spoke to nobody and allowed the mystery to bubble around us. I had my daughter and I needed nothing else.

It was the priest who finally came to me at my home to speak on behalf of the townspeople. He was a strange, malformed old man whose shoulders slanted up at acute angles. His eyes were bulging and rimmed with black shadow. A heavy mane of white hair fell onto his back like the scruff of a vulture. He wore a large wooden cross around his neck that probably weighed as much as he did.

When he made his unexpected arrival, I was seated at my easel in the meadows outside my mansion. Foundling was seated on a bench nearby, staring at the summer afternoon in her trance-like state. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. I stood to greet the father, but he shakily planted himself and would not come to shake my hand. He was trembling a bit, both with fear and high emotion.

“Send the girl off,” he stuttered at me, maintaining his distance.

“You may speak freely,” I said, fearing his intent. “The girl hears none but me.”

“’Tis a telling mark,” he mused. “Think you not that she is affected?”

“Affected only by the love of a father.” I knew that Foundling was not of this earth, but I could not imagine a life that did not have her as its centre.

“I pray you, then, let the child be exorcised. If it be not necessary, she shall be all the more blessed.”

Foundling continued to sit, immobile. Her eyes met mine and she

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smiled. I couldn't tell whether or not she was aware of the priest's presence.

"Nay, good father," I responded. "There need be no fear of this sprite. If she be no human, she be no devil, neither."

"There's talk in town of witchcraft. You keep no company but your child. Think you not that it comes across but strangely?"

"I care not for the company of men," I snapped curtly. A strange, familiar tingling filled me. The hands of my witch ran themselves up and down my body, sending charges of electrical power through my blood.

The priest looked in my eyes and his mouth opened suddenly in a gaping chasm of horror. "You nothing human are!" he exclaimed and crossed himself. "Lorde, King, Father Almighty, send your blessing on this house and leach out the talons of the devilish spirit herein!"

The energy churned inside me and steamed out of my nose and eyes. I could see sparks shooting beneath my fingernails. The palms of my hands began to glow with supernatural iridescence. Webs of streaming light flashed across my vision. The last thing I clearly saw was the priest spitting four times around himself – north, east, south, and west – and melting into my rapidly clouding consciousness. Plumes of purple smoke coiled around my head, parted suddenly by a familiar face with flowing red tresses.

"I trust you remember my promise, mortal," glided the witch's low voice. "This is your third visit. You have something that belongs to me and I intend to claim it."

The mists cleared and I saw that she had seated herself next to Foundling. The priest was gone and the storm clouds had encroached further into the troubled sky. My daughter – our daughter – held the witch in a tight embrace. Tears were running down Foundling's face. It was the first and last time I saw her cry.

"Nay, witch!" I screamed. "You may have what you wish of me, but leave me my daughter."

"But you have pledged yourself to me, mortal!" she quickly returned, with pretended outrage. "What right have you to demand aught of me?"

"Know only that I love her."

"And yet you loved me, once."

"I was under your devilish witchcraft."

She smiled broadly and pulled Foundling closer into her. She blinked her emerald eyes and a chill ran through me, from my toes to my head and back again. Suddenly, she had me in the same snares that she used to.

"You assume that our daughter is devoid of witchcraft?" she

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exclaimed. "She has beguiled you more than I have. The love you feel for her is but an echo in your cavernous soul. The smallest pebble makes an echo when thrown into an empty can."

I met Foundling's young eyes. They gripped me with a power that equalled that of the witch. Four green eyes bored into me, laying their roots. One pull was icy and burning and nibbled my intestines with stubborn ferocity; the other was empowering and light and was like a bouquet of wildflowers blooming behind my eyes. Allowing the flowers to fill my head and push the ice down into my feet, I turned to the witch.

"I cannot give you that which you ask for," I apologised. With no warning, I ran to the godless witch, grasped the thin dagger from my belt, and plunged it into her heart four times. She let out no sound and no blood pulsed from the wound. She simply closed her eyes, smiled faintly, and shimmered out of view. I turned to look at Foundling, but she had also vanished. Before I could wonder what had happened to her, inky blackness flooded my vision.

The witch's voice filled my ear as I drifted into unconsciousness: "You have one visit remaining, mortal. It shall not be so far away as you imagine."

The sound of thunder awoke me. The sky had lost all its light and the meadow grasses were whipping against each other from the high winds. A body was slumped near me, outlined in the murky drear. I got up to look at it and saw that Foundling was lying in a pool of blood. The colour precisely matched her hair. Her dead eyes were frozen in hateful slivers of mistrust. My dagger had been dropped next to her.

As the first drops of rain came down, I bent over and expelled a stream of bilious yellow vomit onto the ground. My vision swam with tears. I picked up Foundling's lifeless hand and let it drop back on her chest. I stroked her limp hair, and howled ferociously against the storm. Though my grip on her slipped because of the sheen of blood that covered her, I managed to hoist her body over my shoulder and carry her into my mansion.

With the thunder bellowing outside and the rain thrumming frantically on the walls, I brought Foundling down to the root cellar, dug her a shallow grave by candlelight, and laid her to rest. When I had said my last goodbyes, I tremblingly groped my way upstairs to my bedroom. On the way, I smashed every mirror in the house. The cracked glass reminded me of the witch's bug eyes.

I do not know how long I have been lying awake. It seems like it has been days. There have been many short breaks in the rain, but it has kept up fairly consistently. I have neither eaten nor drunk, but the even the

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dull, insistent pains of hunger have not yet chipped away at my numbness. Every thought that passes through my desperate mind is of my child – my only Foundling. Sometimes I think I see her eyes watching me, but then I realise that they are my own milky blue eyes being reflected in the glass of the window. If she was the reverberation of something active in the inner chambers of my heart, her echoes have dwindled from audibility. I am left but a casing of flesh, bone, and rapidly deteriorating muscle. My breath is shallow and laboured and I no longer have enough water left in my body for tears.

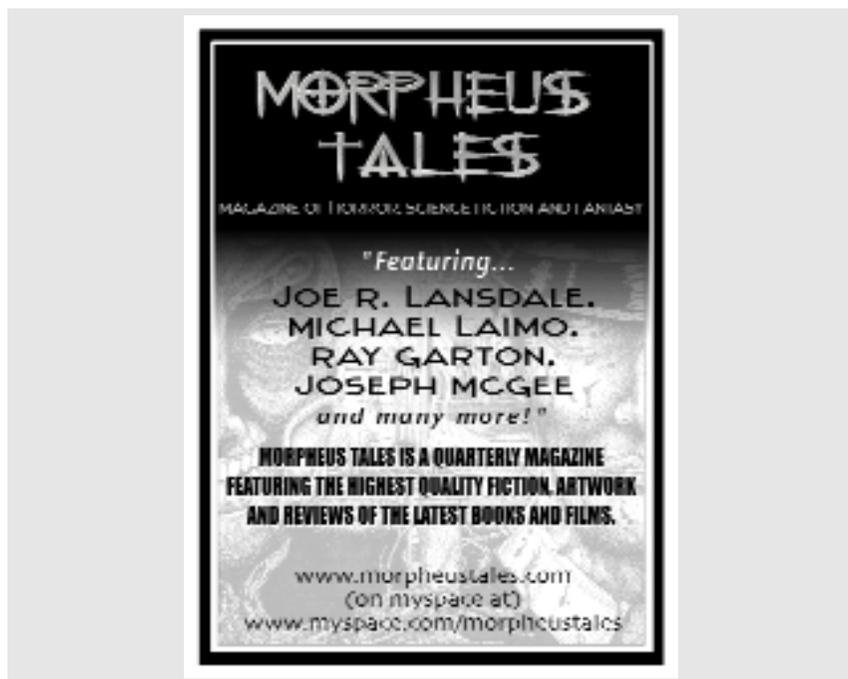
Over and over, making itself just barely heard over the raging storm outside, a self-amused voice reiterates the same assurance:

“I shall not break my promise, mortal. You shall see me once more before you die.”

At some point soon, I will close my eyes, never to open them again. I expect her hot breath to be on my shoulder as I do, blasting me into the fiery torments of whatever world lies beyond this.

I stick my tongue out in an effort to moisten my chapped lips. My voice trembling, I start to croak out the only prayer that has stuck with me since childhood:

“Lorde, my God, Shepherd and King, watch over me now that in death I may know peace.”



## FANTASY

# Imaginary Prisons

David Tallerman

His sword arced up from the body of the second goblin, ending its trajectory in a feeble blow upon the third. There was hardly any strength behind it, but somehow the blade found flesh, slipping beneath the lip of the creature's helmet, slicing neatly through its throat.

Corin nearly dropped the weapon, fatigue compounded by surprise. It had been an improbably lucky blow; he should be dead now. Then, as his breath began to return and his sides to stop heaving, he thought, *no, not luck*. For how could he die, here and now?

Having checked the bodies of the three goblins, Corin started again up the rough trail that diagonally traversed the foothills. It wasn't long before the way became more difficult: by mid-afternoon the pines and wild foliage of the low ground were thinning into brush and tangled grasses and by evening the path served only to join one mound of boulders to another. By the time night fell there was no path at all.

He had been travelling for fifteen days, he was exhausted, and it was disheartening when he finally had to fall on hands and knees. Before him Torbeth reared up, inconceivably high, and as the last light faded and the way became ever harder he considered making camp. Then he remembered – *he shall journey for fifteen days and fifteen nights* – and he knew that he couldn't stop, that it was impossible. Steadfastly he crawled from ledge to ledge, finding his way by touch alone, trying to drive the fatigue from his mind.

Corin had lost any track of time when, drawing his aching body over a jut of rock, he glanced up to see light glittering far off in the darkness. Then the fog shifted, and the light became indistinct, only to be obscured altogether an instant later. It had seemed to be the flicker of a campfire, though he couldn't be sure. Crouching on the projection, shoulders hunched against the bitter-cold winds sweeping from above, he found that he wanted nothing more than to seek the distant fire out. But such a moment of weakness was nowhere to be found in the predictions that had guided him here.

Finally, as the stupefying weariness let go a little, it occurred to him that it was a cave he sought, and that high on a gale-torn mountainside,

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where else could a fire burn? This logic was so convincing that he immediately stumbled to his feet, and set out again in the direction he thought the light to have come from.

Sure enough, as the mist lifted for an instant he saw it again, nearer now. A little strength returned to his aching muscles and he clambered with new vigour, keeping his eyes upon the spark of shivering fire. It was a hard ascent, and obstructions frequently blocked his view and made him doubt his course. But the thought of warmth and comfort, and even the slight hope of having found his object, drove him on.

Eventually, after a tortuous climb up a particularly steep chimney, he collapsed onto the overhang above. And there it was, the hectic dance of firelight reflected from the wall of a cave-mouth ahead. Corin leaped to his feet, and in something between a run and a stagger made his way there and all but fell through the wide opening.

Inside he came to an abrupt halt. Sure enough there was a fire burning, uncannily bright in the darkness, and hot enough that he could feel its luxuriant warmth the moment he entered. But, as he turned a corner into the heart of the grotto, he was alarmed to find something other than the blazing pile of brands that had brought him here.

Beside the fire there stood an old man.

Corin could only stare.

He wore a long robe of deep crimson, which covered all but his hands and feet, was of fine silken cloth, and glimmered with reflected luminescence. His face was skeletally thin, with the brittle skin stretched taut around the skull, and his expression showed no surprise whatsoever; in fact, it was closer to impatience.

"Prince Corin, I presume?" he asked, as though it were the most natural thing in the world that they should be meeting here in this hidden cave, high upon the face of Torbeth. His voice was fragile with age, but there was a resonance in it that suggested authority. Corin nodded hesitantly, while fighting the urge to bow.

"You took your time, boy. It's nearly morning you know. Do you always have such a lackadaisical approach to your destiny?"

A little of Corin's self-possession was beginning to return. "Who are you? And how do you know my name?"

"I am the sage Calaphile, of the Grand Ziggurat."

"That means nothing to me, and you've only answered my first question. Have you been sent here to try me? Are you a servant of the goblins?"

Calaphile gave a wheezing laugh, which sounded to Corin like two plates of rusted armour grating against each other. Eventually the self-proclaimed sage composed himself enough to reply, "You may be certain

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that I'm not a servant to anyone. As to whether I'm here to try you – well when you reach my age, should you be careful and fortunate enough to do so, you'll find that most things in life are a trial of one sort or another. But I ask for only a little of your time. I choose to view it as a lesson, and if you think of it likewise it may pass quite amicably.”

“I've no time for lessons, old man!” exploded Corin, who was beginning to find the whole situation unbearably irritating.

“Then you'd prefer to consider it as a test?”

“I've overcome enough tests!”

“There's always another test, my boy; that's something else you learn at my age. But really, all I wish is to read you a few passages from the book I have here.” Saying this, he drew a tome from within the folds of his cloak, bound in red leather that matched the garment. “Perhaps you could humour one who has seen more than his share of life? You might even learn something, and that's always worthwhile, is it not?”

His anger beginning to give way to tiredness and the lure of the fire, Corin leaned against the rough cave wall. As one final protest, he exclaimed, “I have a destiny to complete, old man. There's a prophecy that must be fulfilled!”

At this, his companion began to leaf through the book. “Ah yes, I have it here.”

“What do you have?”

“Prince Corin, the twenty-first to bear that name – da da da – it shall fall upon him to defeat, once and for all time, the goblinish foe – da da – fifteen days and fifteen nights – da da – shall seek out the sword Cymerion, left by his ancestors upon the mountainside of Torbeth, that he may unite the people before it... yes, that's the one.”

Corin stood aghast. He had heard these phrases three times before, read on each occasion by the most venerable priest of the temple of Corinil, in utmost secrecy. “How do you –”

“Rather prosaic, isn't it? The goblin version is far more entertaining.”

“The goblin –?”

“It's only short, I can read it all if you'd like. Only a rough translation of course, they have such an erratic approach to grammar... ah, here we are:

*Thinking he can beat wise and mighty goblins, foolish boy-man goes looking for rusty trinket-sword lost by grandfather after much ale. Fifteen suns and moons he goes, getting lost and falling over often, until he is lucky and finds cave where useless sword is. Greatly I've done, he thinks, but just as he is picking up blunted pig-sticker,*

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*stupid man-child stumbles over own feet, falling on arse and smashing puny head into many pieces.*

Not the most literary people, are they? But it's always nice to see a sense of humour exhibited in these things."

Bewildered, Corin sat down on the rough stone floor. He had been prepared for many trials, had trained long and hard so that he might best any man or beast in combat. But he'd never expected anything like this. He felt sure that his best course would be simply to seek out his prize and be gone. But a seed of doubt had been sown, and he couldn't bring himself to do anything except sit and listen.

Seeing he had a rapt audience, the old man continued cheerfully, "Now, the account told by the high priests of Zor-Tola is quite similar to your own. You succeed in recovering the sword and make it home in one piece. The only difference is that you still lose the war, Corinil is put to fire and the sword, and your people are wiped out. But other than that the details are largely identical."

Corin had never heard of the high priests of Zor-Tola and had no idea why they might have seen fit to prophesise upon his fate. However there seemed no point in asking, and in any case the old man had only paused for breath.

"A tale kept in the Grand Library of Forpoth is basically the same, until the point where you return to find that in your absence the goblins have invaded your home and all your friends and family are dead. Understandably, you're driven mad by grief. It dwells at great length upon this part, to a rather depressing degree."

Finding he could keep silent no longer, Corin cried, "What's your point, old man? That the prophesy of Corinil is a lie? That I'm doomed to failure or madness? Do you seek to dissuade me with your stories?"

Calaphile appeared a little hurt by this outburst. "Nothing of the sort, my boy. Why, in the manuscript held by the king of Far Brinth you actually succeed in repelling the goblin invasion, and single-handedly end the war. You do then become rather crazed with power, only to be assassinated by your own most trusted advisor and recorded by posterity as Corin the Cruel. But if I've given the impression that all versions purport an unsuccessful end to your venture –"

"How many are there," Corin interrupted, "how many versions?"

"Well, no more than a dozen."

Corin sighed deeply. For as long as he could remember his destiny had been the sole certainty in his life; the prophecy had guided and moulded his every thought and action. That it should be nothing more than a tale

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amongst a dozen others, a possibility not a certainty – the thought filled him with despair. Finally, he looked up wearily, and said, “It’s clear that you know more about my fate than I ever will. So tell me, what do I do now?”

“Well you might as well take the prize you’ve come all this way for. You’ll find it over in the back of the cave.”

Corin looked past the ancient scholar. Sure enough, sunk into a recess in the rock face was a long, ornate box of dark wood. He could just make out his family crest glittering above the latch. He stood hesitantly. “Will any good come of it?”

“My boy, don’t be so pessimistic. You may be surprised. It may even be that you’ll surprise yourself.”

“Perhaps,” said Corin, “and perhaps I have no choice in the matter. Either way, I’ve dallied here long enough.”

He walked over to the alcove. The box was handsomely carved, an elegant piece of craftsmanship hardly diminished by age or weathering. If the container is so impressive, he thought, what must its contents be like? And a shiver of hope returned to his heart.

There was no sign of lock or keyhole so he placed a hand on the clasp and drew it up, and with his other hand tried to raise the lid. Sure enough, it opened freely. Using both hands now, he strained to draw it wider. Finally it fell back with a dull thud against the stone, and he gazed with awe into the shadows inside.

The box was completely empty.

Corin didn’t even have time to be taken aback before something struck the back of his head, at the exposed point where his helmet met the hem of his chain-mail. He found himself collapsing forward helplessly. His last dazed thought, before he lost consciousness completely, was that perhaps the goblin prophesy had been right after all.

When Corin awoke, daylight was filtering into the mouth of the cave and the fire had burned down to ash and glowing brands. As his head began to clear he struggled to a kneeling position and strained to look around. He wasn’t surprised to find that his antiquated assailant had vanished. What did startle him was that where he’d stood and proselytized there was now a scroll of old paper, bound with a strip of red cloth that must have been torn from his robe. Not feeling ready to stand quite yet, Corin crawled over to the parchment, curious despite himself. He was groggy, his fingers felt numb and bloated, and it took a few minutes to unravel the scroll. But by the time he’d done so the agony in his head had faded to a steady throb. Feeling capable of standing, he walked to the cave-

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mouth where the light was better. He saw then that the paper was actually a torn page, presumably ripped from the same tome that the old man had carried with him. There was a title followed by three short paragraphs:

*The Prophecy of Calaphile of the Grand Ziggurat*

*In his hundredth year, it shall fall to the sage Calaphile that he shall seek out a sword named Cymerion, hidden treasure of Corinil, which he shall find upon the mountainside of great Torbeth.*

*Another will also hunt this prize; Prince Corin shall come seeking his inheritance, that he may end the war between his people and the goblin hordes. But he shall be easily overcome, for he is a slave of his destiny and cannot see beyond it. Then Calaphile shall secure Cymerion, and it shall serve as the capstone to his Grand Ziggurat. He shall die in peace, and his spirit shall pass safely beyond the bounds of this world.*

*As for the Prince Corin, in his undoing will be found his greatest victory, for on his return he shall craft a peace between the races that will benefit both peoples for a hundred generations.*

Corin found that he was laughing, despite himself. He wasn't sure exactly what he found so funny. Nevertheless he continued to laugh, long and loud, until his sides ached to match his head. When he finally calmed himself he read through the scroll again, with a broad smile on his face.

It struck him that he held no resentment towards the old sage, who had toyed with him and beaten him and had given him a new future as recompense. And suddenly it occurred to him that he had little grudge against his goblin enemies, either. In retrospect it had been his own father who'd sparked off this latest fracas between the two races, when he'd encroached upon goblin lands. It had never occurred to Corin that they were anything more than dumb brutes; certainly he'd never imagined they might be reasoned with except by the blade. But then nor had it crossed his mind that they might write prophecies, indeed that they could write at all, or that they were astute enough to use satire as a weapon. In any case, the war had been at a stalemate almost since it began. Perhaps an attempt at peace wouldn't be such a bad alternative to rallying his people behind some antique sword.

Corin hoisted his pack onto his shoulder. In the daylight he could see now that there was a trail down the mountainside; a rough one, certainly, but far preferable to the climb of last night.

He began towards it – his eyes set on the far silver towers of Corinil, his thoughts upon the terrifying wonder of an uncertain future.

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## HORROR

# The Feaster from the Stars

## John Hall

James Layton was on his way home from work, a stockbroker on the East Coast, when he paused by the window of a shop. He'd passed by many times before, but the place had changed in the last few days – a not unusual occurrence as retailers felt the bite of the Depression in the winter of 1929. James's eye was caught by the window display, vastly different from the fur coats and expensive shoes he had previously seen behind the glass. Most of what was in there now was, frankly, junk. Old tins and posters from forgotten brands of pipe tobacco, framed prints discoloured with age, and antiquated domestic appliances. James glanced up at the board over the window. The name of the ladies' wear shop, "*Maison Valerie*", had been painted out, but not replaced. He was something of an eclectic collector, and had filled three walls in each of his four rooms with books before he'd married Amy. At least, he *had* been a collector, because Amy didn't much like dust, or the old books which attracted it.

But James didn't collect junk and he had just started to move off when the shop door opened.

A man of about James's own age, mid-twenties, looked out. "I've lots more inside, you know, if you've five minutes to spare."

He looked so forlorn that James couldn't help taking pity on him. "Alright, then," he said, making a great play of looking at his watch to indicate how valuable his time was. It was a deceptive gesture, for James was only too eager for an excuse to arrive home late, in order to delay the inevitable argument with Amy. It had all been perfect when they'd first met, but now, after only a few weeks of marriage... James decided to have a good look around inside.

Sadly, there was little improvement on the tawdry window display. A squat little book with a vellum cover caught his eye, and he picked it up. It was the *Historica Belgica* of Nicholas Burgundus, of which James already had a copy. Still, it might be worth a closer look. No, it wasn't. Not only was the binding loose, but half the pages were missing, there

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was what booksellers refer to as “abundant evidence of old worm”, and a child had scribbled over the margins with a coloured crayon. James replaced the sad, ruined little book with a sigh. He looked at the proprietor, who gave a sort of half-shrug. James was about to leave, when he saw a curious object on the shelf opposite him.

He lifted the thing down.

It was a wooden carving, almost a cube a foot or so each way, of the sort of gargoyle one saw on the outside of any self-respecting gothic cathedral. Some dark wood, made darker with age; oak, perhaps. It was half-human, a naked male body that reminded him of a wrestler or weightlifter; muscular, solid, squatting on its haunches. The hands and feet weren't human, though, nor was the head. There were claws instead of fingers and toes, and the skull was a cross between a wolf and a lion. The ears were pointed, and the hands – or paws – were held over where the mouth should have been. It looked like something from a medieval woodcut, part wild animal and part wild imagination. Whoever carved it, however, had been extremely skilful; the muscles almost rippled under the black skin, and the eyes seemed to glow with life.

“How much was this?” James asked casually.

“Oh. Twenty?” James was taken aback, and it must have showed in his face, for the proprietor hastily added: “Perhaps eighteen?”

“Twelve.”

“I might let it go for fifteen?”

James took out his wallet.

He carried the thing back to his apartment and unlocked his door. From the kitchen he heard Amy bustling about, louder than strictly necessary, and he wondered what the matter was this time.

She emerged from the kitchen and looked inquisitively at the bag.

“Just an ornament, kind of...” James mumbled.

“More old rubbish?”

“I thought it looked rather nice.”

Amy stiffened as James took the carving from the bag, and then stalked back into the kitchen. “You know we haven't got the money for such nonsense!”

James hadn't noticed in the perpetual gloom of the shop, but he could now see that the figure wasn't as skilfully carved as he'd first thought. The mouth was completely out of proportion. The carver had attempted to show an upper lip in its proper place, then came the clawed hands covering the mouth, and then – way below the hands – came a row of fangs and a thin lower lip. Had the hands not been in place, the mouth would have gaped open a good six or seven inches. Still, unless one was a stu-

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dent of anatomy, it was good fun. It reminded James vaguely of one of the three wise monkeys, and he wondered if it wasn't perhaps oriental in origin, or even part of a set. He smiled as he placed the figure on a shelf.

James had limited success in trying to placate Amy – so limited that she flounced out the door saying she might not return.

Left alone, he considered his present and future, both of which looked bleak. He loved Amy, and he was sure that she loved him; the real problem was the economic situation. There was nothing he could do but sit it out, and wait until the market picked up. *If* it ever did. James's eye fell upon the carving, sitting on its shelf like a heathen idol. "Well, old chap," he mused, "if you could happen to see your way clear to lifting the stock-market off the floor, I for one, will be eternally grateful!"

Amy returned shortly. James was delighted to see her and there was a predictable reconciliation, during which James promised that if she still disapproved of the carving in a few days, he would dispose of it.

The following day the market drifted a few points lower.

It was thus without surprise that James received the news that he was required for a short interview with Mr Vanderboom, the senior partner.

"Ah, James, do sit down."

"Thank you, sir."

"Seen the tickertape today? Yes, of course you have." The older man appeared a touch mortified, but went on. "You'll be aware, my boy, that most of our rival firms are having to – ah, retrench."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, James, we are no exception to the rule." Mr Vanderboom cleared his throat ostentatiously. "I'm very sorry to have to say that we are obliged to make some economies in that direction today."

"Is that so, sir?"

"It is. It is my sad duty to have to tell Messrs Harris and Price that the firm must dispense with their services. I shall be seeing them as soon as our meeting is over."

"Harris and Price?" James couldn't believe it.

"I fear so." Mr Vanderboom frowned. "But it is an ill wind that blows no good. With Harris and Price gone, you will take over their various accounts – not that they are exactly lucrative at the moment, but never mind. Things will improve soon, I'm sure of it! You'll receive a modest raise – very modest, I'm afraid – and the extra commission." James was lost for words. "We'll talk it over at greater length later. Now send in poor old Harris, would you?"

Notwithstanding his heartfelt sympathy for Harris and Price, James was elated at this unexpected turn of events. A modest raise, the prospect

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of extra commission when the market eventually turned, and – most important of all – the knowledge that his position was safe and his immediate future secure. He stopped at more than one store on his way home that evening, and took wine, flowers, and chocolates back to Amy, who was every bit as thrilled as he was at the news. James didn't forget to thank his carving for its help when she was out the room. He was not by nature superstitious, but he believed the thing as effective a good luck charm as a sprig of white heather or a four-leafed clover.

The next few weeks went well, and financial security seemed to improve relations between husband and wife to the extent James had hoped.

"Remember what you said about that carving?" Amy asked one evening.

"What was that, dear?"

"You said you'd get rid of it if I wanted."

"Oh, yes. Why do you ask?"

"It really is very ugly – repulsive, even. I've decided I don't like it at all."

"Oh. I thought you'd grown used to it."

"No. Now that we have a little more money, I'll go out and buy something more suitable tomorrow. I'll leave it to you to remove it. You did promise me, James." She smiled seductively as she disappeared into the bedroom.

"Yes, alright."

James looked up at the ornament. He didn't want to upset Amy, especially after a fortnight of marital bliss, but he was reluctant to part with the object he associated with his recent change of fortune. "Well, old fellow," he reflected, "I don't really want to get rid of you. You helped me out once before, I fancy, care to try again?"

James came home directly the next day, eager to bring Amy news of the first commission from his new accounts. When he arrived the apartment was in darkness, however, and his first thought was that she had gone out. He switched on the electric light and took a fleeting look round. The silence was total, and he wondered where she could have gone. Amy always made sure she was home before him, had even done so before their newfound happiness. James's unease grew to the extent that he did not feel comfortable calling her name. Instead, he shut the door behind him and examined the room more closely.

He noticed the carving was gone from the shelf, and cursed under his breath. Amy must have decided to throw it out herself, although there was nothing in its place, so that too was peculiar.

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The bedroom door was ajar.

James pushed it open, switched on the light... then stopped still, unable to move. The last thing James thought before he fainted was that the carver hadn't made any mistake with the proportions of the face.

His wife was on the bed.

So was the carving.

Its mouth gaped open, cavernous and full.

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## SCIENCE FICTION

# Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown

John Greenwood

## An Exile in Loungewear

"Our stocks have been depleting at an alarming rate," said the other Cithallian, a gangly, bearded man with a pinched face and ascetic expression who held up a sheet of paper as evidence. I assumed he had some responsibility for the upkeep of the stores.

"This is an outrageous fiction!" said Yewtree, folding his arms across his fleshy stomach.

"Do you deny it then?" Orchard asked me.

"First of all, let me explain that I have some difficulties with your cutlery," I began, but the mousy-haired woman cut me off with a short, bitter laugh. A small crowd of onlookers had begun to gather around us, and some joined in the laughter.

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"I believe that a redesign would be beneficial..." I continued, but was interrupted again by the woman's bark of a laugh.

"And you were ready to believe the alien instead of me!" she said to Mr Orchard.

"Captain Braddell, can this be true?" asked Miss Lavender. "Are you the one who has been stealing our food?"

"It's not just me!" I objected. "There are plenty of others doing the same thing, skulking about at night in the food tents..."

"So you admit to the theft," said Orchard, looking grave.

"Well, it's not quite as simple as that," I began. "As I was trying to explain, I am unused to your customs. I'm sure that were any of you forced to use the knife and fork, or the chopsticks of Earth, then you would appreciate my difficulties, and understand the necessity of my admittedly rather secretive behaviour."

"What is this blather?" shouted a voice from the back of the swelling crowd. "Chopping sticks and forking knives? Are you mentally deficient?"

There was a collective mutter of approval from the crowd at this impertinent remark.

"Yes," replied Mr Orchard. "He's a very sick man indeed."

"If he's a man at all," said the woman who had first accused me. "I never saw any man with one of those sticking out of the back of his head."

"That isn't really the issue," said Orchard, trying to take charge of the increasingly unruly gathering. "We are here to discuss Mr Braddell's irrationally self-interested behaviour."

"Is it irrational to want to eat a decent meal?" I asked, exasperated by Orchard's jargon, although I knew he was employing it to protect me.

"No, surely not!" shouted Yewtree from behind me, unable to contain himself. As I have stated previously, he cut a rather portly figure, and mealtimes were the highlights of his day.

His remark was followed by a hubbub of debate on this question, as those in the crowd argued with one another, or barracked me with insults and accusations.

The bearded man began to read out his list. "Three hundred rolls of flat bread, sixty barrels of pickled vegetables, twenty four bottles of cooking oil, nineteen extra-large protein blocks, thirty cases of wine..."

"Alright!" I said at last, once he had reached the end of his recitation. "I admit that I took some food! But I'm not alone! You can't blame all these thefts on me! How can one man have consumed such a quantity?"

"He's right!" said Yewtree, once again coming to my defence. "To

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drink twenty four bottles of cooking oil? Why, it'd be enough to kill a man!"

"How do we know it's a man we're dealing with here?" said the mousy-haired woman.

"There were others too," I insisted. "Lots of them. Probably some of them are amongst us here!" I pointed to the crowd.

It was a tactical error and my remark won me few friends in an audience on the verge of becoming a angry mob. I decided to change tack – what was the worst they could do to me, after all? City Hall, so Orchard had explained to me so many times, had no punitive judicial system. In those rare instances where the law was infringed, the perpetrators were rehabilitated through intensive psychotherapy. I had prior experience of Cithallian therapy: it was tedious, but easily tolerable.

"Mr Orchard was right," I said, bowing my head. "I am not a well man. It's true: I took the food. I don't even know why I did it. Clearly I need help."

I had caught the crowd off guard, and they took a collective pause while they considered my plea of insanity.

The mousy woman was the first to speak. "You've had all the help you're going to get from us," she said in a low voice.

"But my program of therapy has already started," I protested. "I thought City Hall was a society dedicated to human rationality!"

"Exactly," said a voice from the back of the crowd. "To *human* rationality."

That was all it took. Suddenly the lofty goal of rationality seemed the furthest thing from the minds of the assembled Cithallians. Imprecations and threats were hurled at me by the crowd. Mr Orchard tried to quell the uproar, but without success. His companions, the mousy woman and the ascetic, bearded fellow, seemed to have more authority than he, and they were firmly on the side of the mob.

"My advice would be to get out of here as quickly as possible," Yewtree muttered from behind me.

I looked at him. Had he too turned against me? But there was no betrayal in Yewtree's eyes. Very quickly and quietly he said, "Don't worry about any of your belongings – just go! Wait for me at the fishpond."

Stirred to action, I turned and with a heavy heart and gritted teeth, forced a path through the jeering, pointing crowd. One of my detractors even had the temerity to grab hold of the end of the creeper that grew from the back of my head, and give it a vicious tug. The pain was tremendous, and I roared blindly at my attacker. My cry shocked the

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Citihallians, and for a moment they drew back, cowed by my outburst, offering me the opportunity to make good my escape. I jogged away across the campsite. Other Citihallians, unaware of the unpleasantness that had taken place, stared to see me hoofing it across the bare earth in my dressing gown and slippers.

I looked back just once to see Miss Lavender's lovely, sad face gazing after me.

The rendezvous point Yewtree had suggested was a few hours away, the small tarn hidden in the hills above the campsite, shielded from view on three sides by wooded slopes. I had not planned to spend the morning toiling up shale inclines to the fishpond, and I was hardly equipped for the terrain, but the weather stayed fine, and it was a good chance to clear my head. I worried that I might be followed by angry Citihallians seeking justice or revenge, and once or twice I fancied I heard rustling in the trees behind me, but it was probably only local critters disturbed by my presence.

Would my former friends really be so desperate to bring me to justice that they would send out a posse? It seemed unlike them, but then the whole episode had been out of character. I could only assume that City Hall was a civilisation undergoing a radical cultural shift, but the direction of this change was as unclear to me as the direction of their so-called homeland.

I was not short of time to mull over these questions, as Yewtree did not arrive until just after sunset, well after I had begun to lose hope. To my great relief, Miss Lavender's tent fabric garment proved more wind-resistant than any ordinary dressing gown, and was both insulating and, I discovered, waterproof. When Yewtree finally did arrive, he found me squatting in a rocky hollow on the leeward slope of a hillock, almost entirely enveloped by the dressing gown, apart from a small eye-slit beneath the hood.

"Argh!" he shouted as I stood to greet him. He stumbled backwards and almost fell into the pebbly shallows of the tarn.

"What's the matter?" I asked, pulling back the hood.

"I thought you were a mossy boulder," he explained.

His words reminded me that the tent fabric had been designed to offer some form of camouflage, but I had hitherto failed to see how such a vibrant green would fool even the most inobservant onlooker. Perhaps the tent's designers were cannier than I gave them credit for, and this suspicion was confirmed later when Yewtree and I looked down on the camp from a higher vantage point, and only with difficulty managed to pinpoint the location of the camp, though it spread out over several

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square miles, and housed fifty thousand souls. There was something about the way the sunlight reflected off those green rectangles, as though the solid blocks of colour were shattered into a dozen irregular patches in different shades of green, so that where we expected to see a regular grid of tents and grassy avenues, we saw only random hummocks of vegetation.

There would be time enough later to consider the implications of this discovery. For now, survival was our priority. Yewtree had arrived laden with as many supplies as he could physically carry. I was both astonished and gratified at the sheer weight of equipment he had dragged up the slope to our fishpond. Even so, it was not enough to keep us fed and comfortable for longer than a few days.

"We'll manage, I'm sure," said Yewtree. "There's endless fish in this pond, and for the rest – we can grow vegetables, over there." He waved vaguely towards a patch of boggy, peaty earth dotted with tough grasses.

I thought that an unlikely prospect. It struck me as foolhardy to tarry too long in this spot, lest the Citihallians take it into their heads to send a lynch mob after us. Yewtree laughed at my concerns. "They'll all be gone in a couple of days," he told me. "They've got bigger worries than you and I, let me assure you. The homeland is calling them."

We were sitting by the water's edge, the lines from our makeshift fishing rods trailing in the water.

"And what about you?" I asked.

"What about me?" Yewtree twitched his line this way and that. He had only recently begun to learn the art of angling, and baulked at the patience and immobility that the pursuit required.

"Don't you want to see the homeland too?" I asked.

"I've seen it. It's a bunch of lines on a map. You can't live off lines on a map. But if the rest of them want to, that's fine by me. Believe me, they won't bother coming after us. They didn't bother going after the other deserters."

"Others?" I said. "What others?"

"Oh, there have been plenty of others who decided to strike out on their own," said Yewtree. "Once or twice I was even tempted to join them."

"What stopped you?"

"I didn't want to leave my friends behind," he replied. "And I guess I needed a bit of a push."

"You never mentioned this to me before," I said.

Yewtree looked a little embarrassed. "Sworn to secrecy, old chap," he said. "I didn't think you'd be interested anyway."

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I was nonplussed. "I'm sorry, I don't follow you."

"Well, you know, I'm a free agent. My parents are both dead, and I have no other family here. I never married, so in my case there were no other attachments to consider."

The penny dropped. Yewtree was obliquely referring to my unrequited love for Miss Lavender. We had never discussed my futile infatuation, but I suppose I should not have been surprised that he read the signals.

"Well, I don't suppose it matters now," I replied. "I wonder how many others have absconded?"

Yewtree shrugged. "Hard to say. A few hundred, I'd guess. That's probably where most of the missing food went."

"Why didn't you bring that up earlier, when I was being interrogated by those officials?" I asked.

"Sorry. Like I said, it was all very hush hush. I didn't want to get anybody else into trouble. Anyway, I didn't like the way things were going down there. We're better off out of it."

"How long do you think we can survive on the food you brought?"

"Oh, three or four days, if we're careful," said Yewtree. "But we won't need to worry about that if we can get some of these fish to bite."

As it transpired, the fish had other plans, so we hatched a plot to sneak back into camp under cover of darkness to take more supplies.

"What if they catch me stealing their food again?" I worried. "I doubt they'll let me walk free."

"It's not stealing," said Yewtree. "As I see it, a portion of that food store is rightfully mine as a citizen of City Hall. They always used to tell us that we had enough emergency rations put aside to keep the whole city alive for a whole year. Well, we've been on the road for six months, so I'm within my rights if I take the other six months' worth in advance. Not that we'll be able to carry that much, but you take my point."

"I do, but I don't think the camp watch would."

"Nor do I," he said. "And you're right: if they find you sneaking about again, things could get nasty. Best if I go on my own tonight."

I argued with him, but he would not be dissuaded. "This is a solo mission," he insisted. "They may not have even noticed that I've skipped out on them. And if I'm caught, well, it'll be a bit awkward of course, but I reckon I can talk my way out of it."

I could not deny the logic of his argument, but I had an ulterior motive for wanting to return to the camp. That Yewtree had decided to go alone made my next question deeply uncomfortable for us both.

In that case, I wonder whether you would do me a favour?"

"Name it," said Yewtree.

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“Could you deliver a letter for me?”

Yewtree didn't need to ask who the intended recipient was, but merely nodded and turned back to our small fire, where we were attempting to liven up our meagre supper of flat bread by cooking it stuffed with some very small fish we had managed to scoop up in a net.

“I have some work to do, then,” I said, rising and stumbling through the dusk to my tent, where I had pen and paper and a flashlight already prepared.

I cannot exactly recall the content of the letter I wrote to Miss Lavender that evening. I did not go as far as to reveal the real extent of my feelings towards her, but it was a franker expression of my thoughts than I had ever managed to convey in conversation with her. I was emboldened by the possibility, nay the probability, that she would never have the opportunity to respond. I tried my best to expiate myself from the crimes I had been accused of. Even if we never met again, I could not bear the thought that her lasting impression of me might be of a kleptomaniacal glutton.

While my letter was written on the assumption that Miss Lavender and I would not meet again, the full force of that loss had not yet struck me. It was only once I had handed over the sealed missive to Yewtree, and he had set off back to the camp, flashlight in hand and an empty rucksack on his back, that I tasted the full bitterness of our separation. Miss Lavender was gone forever, and insurmountable obstacles stood between us. I cursed Mr Orchard, along with his nameless companions, the officious bigots who had sent me into exile. I cursed the whole of City Hall. I cursed Eunors for abandoning me to this fate. I even cursed Raffles who, as always, had managed to hitch a ride in the pocket of my dressing-gown. He had suffered no privations from City Hall's rationing system, or from its ridiculous, impractical cutlery. I wondered why he had bothered to accompany me into exile – he would have been better assured of a full stomach had he chosen to remain in camp. But I was probably over-estimating the intelligence of the snake-mouse. More than likely he had formed some sort of instinctive attachment to me, and would follow me even to the brink of starvation. That was an unlikely prospect for a creature with as indiscriminating an appetite as Raffles demonstrated. That same evening I found the half-eaten remains of a slug-like invertebrate in my dressing-gown pocket. I flung away the foul-smelling goo in disgust, while at the same time morosely wondering how long it would be before I was reduced to such meals myself.

Most of all I cursed myself, and my insatiable appetite, and incompetence with the cutlery-wheel, and my lack of will-power. If I had only

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resisted the temptation of those clandestine midnight snacks, I would not have found myself stranded and alone, on a dark hilltop with little more than loungewear to protect me against the night air.

I hoped that Yewtree would return, but I was not counting on it, nor would I have blamed him had he decided to return to his community. In my present mood of self-recrimination, I felt that this would be no more than I deserved.

But it was not in Yewtree's nature to abandon his friends. He returned at dawn, exhausted and empty-handed.

"They've doubled the watch," he explained, collapsing into his own tent without even taking his boots off. "They've got bands of volunteers guarding all the food tents. It's close to hysteria down there."

"You mean you couldn't get anything at all?"

"I couldn't even get close to the stores," he said. "But don't worry: I did manage to deliver your note."

I am not proud of myself for thinking it, but at that moment I wished that he had succeeded in bringing us more supplies, and forgotten about the letter.

Nobody came looking for us that night, or the next, and in a surprisingly short space of time, the whole of City Hall packed up and moved on. From a rocky outcrop we watched the long caravan of trucks, their roofs crowded with people lounging around, making its slow way through the valley. The trucks were strange, modular vehicles with several sets of caterpillar tracks on each side. In the event of impassable terrain, they could be quickly disassembled into parts small enough to carry on the backs of the Citihallians. A great deal of my time since the evacuation had been spent sitting idly by while more skilled hands than mine stripped these vehicles down or built them up again. The convoy had no such difficulties today: the valley floor was a broad grassland without even rivers to bar their way. Yewtree and I watched until the last group of stragglers had disappeared behind the green curve of a hill. It was a sobering moment.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

Strange to say, we had not discussed our future plans until now. Yewtree was not a man who liked to plan his life too far ahead, preferring to trust his gut instincts.

"Should we follow them?" I wondered aloud. "Sooner or later they'll let their guard down."

Once again, I am ashamed to say, I was thinking about my stomach.

Yewtree said, "Pshaw!"

"I beg your pardon?" I looked to my Dover and Somerset to make sure

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it was functioning correctly. Over the last few weeks it had been subject to the occasional unexplained malfunction, emitting unintelligible electronic burps and whistles. While these glitches never lasted more than a few moments, they were a source of worry. Were the translation device ever to stop working, I would find myself entirely helpless, unable to communicate with a single soul on Kadaloor.

"I said 'Pshaw!'" explained Yewtree. "Forget them! We don't need their food, or their help! There must be other groups of runaways living in this area. It can only be a matter of time before we run across them. But our ultimate goal is very clear."

"Is it?"

"Of course," said Yewtree. "We are bound for Romundli, land of my ancestors, and of the Red Hill Clementi!"

## The Man in the Tree

We survived, Yewtree and I. We were always hungry, but we didn't starve. We were usually cold and often wet, but we were not freezing nor feverish.

And we did not despair. I don't know if Yewtree was capable of despair, so antithetical was that emotion to his fundamental mindset. Things would turn out alright in the long run, and as for those things that were not going so well in the short run, well there was always something we could do about them. I had met people like this, back on Earth, and their unrelieved cheeriness had grated on my nerves. Things do not always turn out for the best, no matter how often one asserts that they will. Contrary to popular belief, not all clouds have a silver lining. Many harbour only dull or stormy weather. But in our current circumstances a man of Yewtree's temperament was as invaluable as any gadget one could imagine, and I did not find his unfailingly positive outlook irritating in the least. On the contrary, he was an essential counterbalance to my own tendency to melancholy and inaction.

That is not to say that Mr Yewtree did not suffer the same frustrations that I did as we struggled to make a living in the Kadaloorian wilderness. He frequently lost his temper, swore and yelled, and on one testing occasion, when my foot slipped on a mossy rock, causing me to drop the landing net and thereby liberating the only fish we had caught that day, he snapped his fishing rod into small pieces, flung them into the water, and refused to speak to me for the rest of the day.

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But these storms were quick to pass and Yewtree was not a man to hold grudges. On several occasions, during trivial arguments best forgotten, he did call me a “maniac”, an “empty headed buffoon” and a “useless dunderbrain” – at least these were the phrases employed by my Dover and Somerset to translate his insults. The original terms of abuse may have been more severe, but I knew him better than to take such remarks to heart, and once our disputes were resolved I promptly forgot all about them.

My understanding of the Citihallian tongue was rudimentary. Concerns about the malfunctioning of the Dover and Somerset device had prompted me to take a greater interest in the language of City Hall, and Yewtree had enthusiastically agreed to be my tutor. Progress was slow: I was not naturally gifted with a facility for languages, nor was Yewtree a particularly insightful or patient teacher. He was more at home with practical tasks, showing me how to gut and bone a fish for example, than he was with theoretical issues such as the structure of his mother tongue. As a consequence, we both found the process frustrating, and a source of friction between us, and while Yewtree would not abandon his attempt to teach me Citihallian, our formal lessons soon lapsed.

“Why don’t you just turn that damned box off for a while?” was Yewtree’s suggestion on more than one occasion. “You’ll pick the language up in no time. Total immersion, you know?”

What Yewtree forgot was that there was precious little to immerse myself in: we spent most of our days in companionable silence, walking in the hills or busying about our various camps. In addition, and this was something I did not try to explain to my friend, I developed a superstitious belief that if the Dover and Somerset were ever switched off, it might never function properly again. I had no rational reason to believe this, and understood next to nothing about the internal workings of the machine, but it had been in constant operation ever since I crash-landed on Kadaloor, and I dared not take the risk. I confess to a growing anxiety, paranoia even, about the welfare of the Dover and Somerset, and slept with it by my pillow, lest Yewtree take it into his head to tinker with it for what he imagined was my own good.

I would not like the reader to form the impression that Yewtree and I were continually at loggerheads. In fact we rubbed along well enough, and our contre-temps were infrequent and minor. We had more in common than I would have expected or thought possible, considering that we were natives of two worlds separated by many light-years, and what was more important, we had a common purpose: to reach Romundli. The Red Hill Clementi was reputed to grow on that island alone, and it was still

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my only hope of a cure to the parasitical growth whose roots were lodged deep within my brain.

Mr Yewtree wanted to help me too of course, as my physician and my friend, but he had an additional motive in seeking Romundli. His parents had been Romundlian, and for Yewtree the journey became a pilgrimage to the land of his forefathers. In voluntary exile from the civilisation he had been born into, he was a man in search of his ancestral identity. In Yewtree's mind, as well as in his conversation, our quest assumed a mythic status. Though he had never once set eyes on Romundli, he began to speak of himself as a Romundlian, and to recount half-remembered anecdotes his parents had told him about their birthplace. Privately I wondered whether Yewtree had rejected one notion of a homeland only to be seduced by another.

But where was Romundli? Yewtree was convinced he knew; I was less confident. Coincidentally, Kadaloor had its own analogue of Earth's four directions, although of course their names were different in Citihallian. This fact led me to suspect that the interior of Kadaloor was similar to the constitution of my own home planet, in so far as a metallic core was, at least in theory, responsible for the magnetic field. I was heartily thankful when I learned that the Citihallians believed their world spherical. Had Yewtree adhered to some other peculiar notion, such as the doughnut-shape beloved of the Punggol, I would have despaired of us ever reaching our destination.

As it was, my faith in Yewtree's geography was less than total. While Kadaloor had magnetic poles, it lacked the Pole Star, or anything resembling it. The Kadaloorian night sky looked onto a very different galactic neighbourhood. Having spent almost his whole life underground, Yewtree had only recently been able to admire and study the firmament, nor were the constellations above Kadaloor any more familiar to me. Between us we cobbled together a system by which we could identify north, or something approximating it. We invented our own constellations to aid us in this task, and this became a source of great interest. North we estimated to lie about midway between a faint cluster of galaxies I dubbed the Great Smudge, resembling the smeary thumbprint of a careless Creator, and a constellation we knew as the Frowning Donkey.

But our home grown system of navigation by the stars was not in itself enough to lead us to the island of Romundli. For that we had but one slender clue.

"When my father told me stories about his childhood," explained Yewtree, "he would always begin by saying, 'Back in the Northland'."

"That's hardly conclusive. North of where, or what? Surely you can't

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believe that we just need to keep heading North, and eventually we'll get to Romundli?"

Yewtree held up his fleshy palms. "That's the only information we have," he said. "Unless you have a better idea?"

He knew very well that I did not, but that did not make me any happier about following his absurd plan. If we ever managed to reach Romundli it would be an extraordinary coincidence. I hoped that before too long we would encounter other settled communities, human or otherwise, who might be able to supply us with better directions.

"I imagine it'll be obvious when we're in the right neck of the woods," said Yewtree.

"Why's that?"

"Well, it'll be quite densely populated for a start. Lots of towns and villages, that sort of thing. That's the main reason my parents emigrated to City Hall: overcrowding. And the nearer we get to Romundli, the more people will resemble me. Don't forget, I'm a Romundlian by birth."

I didn't dispute that fact, but the rest of his argument struck me as deeply dubious. Personally I could see no striking differences of appearance between Yewtree and the other Citihallians of my acquaintance: all fitted the general pattern of European physiognomy. Certainly there was not the marked contrast I had noted between the population of City Hall and Marsiling and Eunos's oriental features. But it had been so long since I had set eyes on any Earthling's face (bar my own reflection) that I could no longer trust my own judgement on the matter. It was entirely possible that Yewtree saw subtler distinctions between himself and his fellow Citihallians than I was capable of detecting.

But this was not the meat of my objection: Romundli might have been overcrowded once, generations ago, but who was to say whether Punggol onslaughts had left any alive? Or were the Thanggam responsible for the empty landscapes we trudged across? We had not witnessed any tremors since leaving the volcano, but the spores of the telepathic mushroom might yet lie buried, awaiting the right conditions to bloom.

I have tried to convey that these were, on the whole, happy times. The threats that had plagued me thus far in my travels across Kadaloor, from the Punggol, the Thanggam, from angry Citihallians and my own psychosis, seemed to have receded. It was not to last long. After a too brief interlude of careless wandering, during which Yewtree and I grew our beards, washed infrequently in icy streams, and ate with our hands like savages, something happened that made me strongly suspect that my madness was beginning to wax once more.

We were crossing a steep ridge, and Yewtree had chosen our path, and

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chosen poorly. We found ourselves in a dry riverbed, enclosed on both sides by steep, natural walls covered in slimy, unscalable moss. I left my companion in charge of our packs while I scrambled up a side gully in search of a way out. It was a narrow gap, and I was not sure whether it would allow a man of Yewtree's girth to pass through, but I continued to explore the route.

I believe I possess a reasonable sense of direction, but after a strenuous half hour's scrambling over boulders, I confess that I was thoroughly lost, and could not confidently determine even the direction back to where Yewtree sat on his pack, waiting for me. Hollering and whistling only brought responses from unseen birds in the gnarled trees that resembled giant junipers and lent me their shade. Their thick leaves blocked my view of the hillside below, but I could not gain any higher ground without scaling a near-vertical rock face that offered few footholds.

There was another possibility. It had been a long time since I had climbed a tree – not since boyhood in fact – and I had forgotten the exhilaration of finding a route up through the branches, exploring the tree's secret, cool interior.

A little breathless, I hauled myself up as high as I dared, onto a solid, horizontal branch where I could sit comfortably and peer out through a gap in the leaves at the wooded slopes opposite. There was no sign of Yewtree. I would have to go higher, but for now I closed my eyes and listened to the wind rustling the leaves, and the ominous creak of wood as the tree swayed slightly. We were at the height of summer in this region of Kadaloor, and the cool air was a relief after my exertions. A familiar smell – or rather a mixture of familiar smells – made me open my eyes. Was that tobacco smoke? And patchouli oil? I looked around: another man now shared my seat, and was edging along the branch towards me.

"Cool," he said, raising his eyebrows in a vaguely comical way.

"What is?" I asked, staring. The first thing I noticed was that he was wearing Earth-style clothes, but of an antique design. I recognised the jacket from old photos: leather, I guessed, actually made from the flayed skin of a dead cow. It didn't look particularly like dead skin – in fact, it had a glossy black sheen. Two oval glass lenses were suspended across the bridge of his nose by a thin metal frame that extended back to his ears, the two arms lost beneath his unkempt black hair. I remembered from school history lessons that such devices had been used to correct defects in eyesight during Earth's previous millennium.

"Don't fall off!" the man suddenly yelled. I started, the redoubled my grip on the branch.

"I said '*don't* fall off,'" cackled the man. "Weren't you listening?"

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“This is a hallucination,” I said to myself out loud. “Just be patient and it will disappear.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in and out slowly ten times. When I opened them again, the man said, “Well? Did it work?”

“No,” I reluctantly replied. “It did not. You’re still here.”

“I usually am,” said the man.

“I thought I was over all that.”

“Don’t worry, this isn’t you going mental,” said the man, grinning inexplicably.

“Mental?” I asked, puzzled by his choice of words.

“Oh, I think you forgot this,” he said, holding up my Dover and Somerset device by its strap.

I stared. “Where did you get that?”

“You left it hanging on one of the lower branches. You’re lucky it didn’t fall off. It looks delicate. Here – catch!”

He tossed the metal box over to me, and in my panic I fumbled and nearly dropped it.

“It’s been switched off!” I exclaimed in dismay, reaching for the power switch before realising that I had understood almost every word the strange man had said.

“Yeah, it was making some weird noises, so I thought I’d better turn it off. Sounds like the battery’s almost dead.”

To my great relief a small green bulb began to glow on the side of the Dover and Somerset, telling me that it was still functional. “It runs on solar power,” I began. “You speak English.”

“Quick on the uptake,” said the man.

Well, it was certainly a dialect of English.

“Who are you? Have you been following me? How did you get here? I mean, how did you get to Kadaloor? How long have you been here?”

“So many questions,” said the man. He took out a small, black pouch from his pocket, and began to fiddle with some small squares of paper.

“Are you making a cigarette?” I asked.

He began to rub shreds of brown stuff between his fingers. “The word is rolling,” he said. “I’m *rolling* a cigarette. Running low on the real ones.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

He shrugged. “Here? I doubt it. Maybe. Who knows? Anyway, fuck it.”

On the Earth I had left behind, smoking tobacco had been outlawed for almost a century, but there were still a few persistent underground smokers who hit the headlines now and then when their warehouses and

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greenhouses were discovered by the authorities. I remembered something I had once read in a newspaper, and said, "I see! You've had artificial lungs fitted."

"Eh? Nah, not me. I'm seen that done though, back in the 2030s. Not for me. The way I look at it, you might get hit by a bus tomorrow. So fuck it."

"A bus?" I asked, ignoring his coarse language.

"Well maybe not out here. A hovercar then. Or one of those Punggol warships."

"You know about the Punggol?" I said urgently. "Are they in the area?"

"Not round here." He shook his head. "Actually that reminds me. There are some people nearby. I mean people people. Humans, just about."

"Just about? What does that mean?"

"It means watch your fucking back," said the uncouth stranger. "Just down there, in the next valley. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He poked the little paper tube he had constructed into the corner of his mouth, then pointed to a rocky ridge where I suddenly noticed the rough outline of a path worn in the grass.

"Well, I'd better be going," he said, knitting his brows into a frown. "I've got a feeling there's somewhere I'm supposed to be, only I don't want to be there. See you around."

With that he slipped off the branch and fell through the leaves with a faint rustle. I looked down but did not see him hit the ground, thirty feet below, nor did I hear any sound of an impact. It was as though the encounter had never taken place.

When I got back to Yewtree, several hours later, he had gone to sleep, lying on the ground using his pack as a pillow.

"Where've you been?" he asked blearily, when I woke him up.

"I've found a path," I said, relieved that my Dover and Somerset was still working. "I think we should investigate it."

Despite the stranger's warning, his use of English had convinced me that he was an Earthman, even if I was not convinced that he really existed. I was determined to root out any evidence of human settlements on Kadaloor.

My plan was to observe from a distance. If the humans appeared as dangerous as the Earthling had warned, then there would be no need to introduce ourselves. Secretly I doubted that we would find ourselves in any real danger, but my own deep-seated desire for more human company was clouding my judgment. Why should I take fright, I asked

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myself, at the words of a hallucination, an imaginary friend? The most reasonable explanation of the encounter was that I had already spotted the path's faint outline before my Earthling had popped into existence.

To Yewtree I breathed not a word about the man in the tree. The only sensible explanation was that I had discovered the path myself, and the prospect of another descent into madness and terror was too unpleasant to contemplate. I prayed that the episode was an isolated psychological glitch.

Yewtree was as enthusiastic as me about investigating possible signs of human settlement.

"If there are people there, there's no doubt they'll be glad to see us," he said as he shouldered his pack in readiness for the ascent.

"I wouldn't be too certain," I warned him. "It's best to be careful."

"They can give us directions to Romundli. And we might be able to trade with them for food."

"There's no guarantee the path was made by people," I said. "It might be an animal track."

"No, no, it'll be people," insisted Yewtree. "I've got a hunch about it, and my hunches are rarely wrong."

As it turned out, we were both right, and so was my imaginary Earthling.

It took us the rest of the day to find them. As I had anticipated, the narrow gaps I had squeezed through to reach the top of the ridge caused Yewtree no small effort, and on one occasion I thought he might be stuck fast, his stomach wedged between two boulders. But after much sweating and cursing, we found our way back to the path, just before dusk. I argued that we should wait until morning: whoever or whatever had made this path, I would prefer our first encounter with them to take place in daylight. Besides which, the climb had been exhausting, doubly so for me as I had done it twice. Yewtree, on the other hand, believed that whoever we met at the end of the path would naturally invite us to stay the night as their guests.

Even as we stood there in the gathering gloom debating the question, the matter was settled for us: I heard footsteps approaching. I dragged Yewtree off the path into the undergrowth.

"What? Are you mad?" began Yewtree as I pulled him down behind a low shrub. The footsteps grew closer and I motioned him to be silent, but apparently my hand signal had no meaning for the Citihallian, as he lost his footing amongst the spongy hummocks of grass and came down rather heavily on his behind, crying out, "My buttock!", just as a column of hooded figures passed us by.

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Furiously I clamped my hand over Yewtree's mouth, and watched in horror as the group came to an abrupt halt. There were around a dozen of them, and although their faces were hidden in deep hoods, their general shape and gait was human enough. They stood in a huddle and conversed in a low voices. Thankfully I had the foresight to turn the volume down on my Dover and Somerset, lest the machine's synthetic voice give us away. It was not difficult to guess the gist of their conversation. I looked to Yewtree, but he merely shrugged, uncomprehending. Even I could tell that the speech of these hooded figures was utterly unlike the language of City Hall. In fact it resembled more the grunting of a wild animal than any human tongue I had heard on this world or on Earth. Even so, there was something disquietingly familiar about it. It was only when one of the party turned to face me directly that I understood why, and cried out in horror. For the face framed in that hood was the furred, snarling snout of a wolf!

## In the Valley of the Speakers

Clearly Yewtree saw no point in trying to conceal our presence any longer, for without consulting me he stood up and with a friendly wave called out, "Good evening!"

Even my rudimentary Citihallian was enough to understand his greeting unaided, but it was lost on the hooded beasts, who leapt on us with murderous cries. It was as though I were suffering from a recurring nightmare. I had already escaped from these monstrous creations of my unconscious once before, only to find myself assailed in similar circumstances – the difference was that this time I was awake, or so I supposed. Would I emerge from this fit of lunacy to again find my companion slain, and his blood on my hands? The prospect made me cry out loud.

"No, not again!" I wailed, as rough hands held me down.

I was surprised to hear a guttural voice emerge, very loud, from the speaker of the Dover and Somerset. In the scuffle, the volume control on the device must have been knocked up to its maximum setting. My surprise was nothing in comparison to that of my assailants. Immediately the beating ceased, and the hooded wolves drew back, and looked at one another uncertainly. I sat up, rubbing my bruised limbs, and looked for

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Yewtree. He stood with his back against the trunk of a tree, still grappling with one of the lupine mob. I scrambled to assist him.

“Unhand him!” I bellowed, as I grabbed the creature by the shoulder, and tried to wrench him away from the beleaguered Yewtree. The wolf span around, but the blow I had been expecting never came. The hooded figure froze, and I seized the moment, or rather, a fold of his cloak. In retrospect I am not certain what my intentions were. Did I plan to head butt my foe, or merely drag him to the ground? The question is academic. My efforts succeeded only in dislodging the cloak, along with the snarling wolf face, both of which flew to the ground, revealing a rather baffled-looking man with close-cropped grey hair.

“What madness is this?” asked Yewtree loudly enough for his voice to be picked up by the Dover and Somerset’s microphone.

“I’m terribly sorry,” replied the unmasked wolf-man. “I had no idea.”

The rest of the gang, all now unmasked, stepped forward gingerly.

“Please accept our deepest apologies,” said a younger man, shamefaced. “What can we do to make amends for our offence?”

Yewtree’s expression mirrored my own mystification. I was heartily relieved that my friend had not suffered the same fate as Marsiling. It seemed my earlier hallucinations may have been flesh and blood after all, if not all they first appeared. But I would have time to reflect on the implications of this later. For now, Yewtree and I had to come to an agreement about our next move.

Before I could even open my mouth, Yewtree said, “Well, something to eat and a bed for the night would be a start.”

I was on the point of remonstrating with him, but the suggestion had already been translated into the speech of our would-be assailants, and had been accepted by the younger man.

“That is the very least we could offer,” he said with apparently genuine humility.

“Looks like we’ve landed on our feet here,” Yewtree muttered to me with a sly wink. “A good job we didn’t follow your advice and wait until morning. There’s a bit of a nip in the air this evening. I didn’t much fancy spending the night on this frigid rock. Well then!” he said, addressing our new hosts. “Lead on, lead on! I hope you’ve got some warm beds and a decent bit of grub waiting for us!”

“Without question,” said the young wolf-man who appeared to lead the pack. “It’s this way.”

Our strange procession set off back along the footpath that had first drawn us here.

Yewtree’s sanguinity was not in my nature. I did not spend the remain-

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der of our brief journey, as I imagine he did, anticipating the domestic comforts and hearty pleasures that might lie ahead. Instead, quite uselessly, I spent the time worrying. As we were to learn later, my worry was far from misplaced, but that did not make it any more useful. On the face of it there was a great deal to worry about, and I was not a little vexed with Yewtree for his blithe optimism when confronted with such stark warnings. Naturally my friend could not have suspected anything of my previous encounter with the wolf-people (or Bugis, to give them their proper name, a word which my Dover and Somerset rendered as "the Speakers"). But even without that knowledge, a large measure of caution was only sensible. The men in whose hospitality we had placed our blind trust had only moments before set upon us with a savagery that matched their grotesque headgear.

Their animosity was not mystifying. Territorialism, fear of the outsider, inter-tribal vendettas: all were sufficient to explain their violent reaction on discovering our hiding place, and it had been my apprehension of just such problems that had led me to argue on the side of patience, caution, and daylight. It was the sudden transformation of attitude, from blood thirst to humility, that I could not fathom, and it continued to pester me as we made our way down a zigzag path into a darkening valley.

"There! You can see our fires!" said the young leader of the party, who had introduced himself to me as Kangkar. "We'll be back at the village soon."

The night breeze was beginning to bite, and my legs to complain after a long day's slog. Still, I was unsure whether to feel relieved or nervous at this news.

"Tell me," said Yewtree, turning to Kangkar. "What's all this business with the masks, then?"

But he was a few too many steps ahead of me for his voice to register on the Dover and Somerset. Kangkar stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me. His expression was a mixture of puzzlement and rage.

"What? What's that?" he demanded.

I repeated Yewtree's question, as best I could, through the translator for Kangkar's benefit. This seemed to mollify the man, and he replied with less heat, "We're a hunting party. The Bugis have always hunted this way."

Yewtree drew back a few steps, so he could speak directly into the Dover and Somerset. "Hunting wolves?" he asked.

Something about the Dover and Somerset was clearly bothering Kangkar. "Sometimes," he answered warily.

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Yewtree was not to be put off, and ignored my signals to stop asking so many pointed questions. "Are they a big problem round here?" he asked. "Wolves, I mean."

"Not especially," said Kangkar, once again eyeing the Dover and Somerset with suspicion.

"The wolf does not give good meat," explained Kangkar. "Too tough for us Bugis. But we must hunt them for their faces, you see?"

He held the grisly article out for me to examine. I took the mask reluctantly between thumb and forefinger, and turned it over, making small noises that I hoped would convey an appreciation of the craftsmanship that had gone into its construction. I half-expected the inside of the mask to be a ragged, stinking pulp of flesh, but was relieved to find it neatly lined with padded soft leather.

I was infinitely more relieved, in a very different sense, to be able to hold the thing in my hand and know that it was just an object, mundane and quite without mystery. It added weight to my theory that my previous encounter with the wolf-faced men had been more than dream-stuff, and even allowed me the barest hope that I could yet prove myself innocent of Marsiling's murder.

"Tell me," I asked Kangkar, "are there other groups of Bugis? I mean, elsewhere on Kadaloor?"

Kangkar frowned. "No," he said firmly. "No other Bugis. We are the only ones."

Well, he might have been mistaken.

The Bugis village was a ramshackle and squalid affair, and a great disappointment to Yewtree. The Bugis dwelt in squat, circular, thatched buildings whose construction may have been based on the principles of wattle and daub. I cannot claim to have investigated the matter in any great detail. The time we spent as guests of the Bugis was too short to allow any thorough research into their culture, such as it was.

The food we had been promised was no less disappointing, consisting as it did exclusively of various cuts of meat of uncertain provenance and vintage. The Bugis preferred their meat very rare. In the flickering light of the campfire, it was no easy matter to examine the morsels that were being generously heaped onto our plates before we tasted them, a predicament I have always found unnerving. At least the Bugis had no use for the hated Citihallian cutlery wheel, and Yewtree and I, having long since abandoned such formalities, aped the Bugis by eating with our hands without embarrassment.

"So you were saying," began Yewtree as he struggled to master a piece

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of gristle. "Um, you were saying that you don't usually hunt wolves for their meat. If you don't mind me asking, what is it that you do hunt?"

"Oh, lots of things," said Kangkar. "We eat pretty much anything that isn't poisonous."

We were all sat round the fire like scouts on a jamboree, the hunting party, Yewtree and I. Several others, all men, had come over to join us, curious to see who the newcomers were, but the rest of the village was going about its business, oblivious to our presence, stamping out fires, emptying buckets of water and getting ready for bed. I saw a gang of children aged between five and ten, ordered back to their respective family huts. Thankfully the presence of two strangers was not enough to cause either mass panic or a stampede of gawkers, just a few bored, shy onlookers who sat on the outskirts of our little circle and listened politely, rarely meeting our eyes. From this I inferred that there must be other human settlements in the area, with whom the Bugis were on reasonable terms.

Their general conditions of life were, on first inspection, wretched. Clothing consisted entirely of leather and furs, and food almost exclusively of meat. There was no sign of any agriculture or even animal husbandry. These Kadaloorians were hunter-gatherers who had apparently forgotten how to gather. No berries, fruits or shoots broke the monotony of our meal. Course after course of unidentifiable offal appeared, accompanied by polite smiles from our hosts.

Even Yewtree, who prided himself on his indiscriminating appetite, began to flag. "Very decent of you, but I don't think I could fit in another thing," he said, waving away a kind of primitive kebab, the blackened corpses of various small amphibians skewered onto a stick. "It's been super though, don't get me wrong. Really top class."

Kangkar said, "Don't thank us. We only hope that you can forgive us. Our actions tonight were inexcusable, and as hunt leader, I take personal responsibility for it."

"Ah, don't blame yourself," said Yewtree. "What was all that about? That earlier misunderstanding, I mean."

Another member of the hunting party, the older man who I had unmasked in the tussle, and who went by the name of Boonkeng, spoke up. "We thought you were non-Bugis at first. You were making such strange sounds. Then we heard you talking."

"Thank the gods you spoke up in time," said Kangkar. "What were you doing hiding there?"

Rather than answer his question directly, I introduced the subject of Romundli, my search for the Red Hill Clementi, and the reasons why it

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was so urgent. I omitted to explain about the creeper growing out of the back of my skull: I did not yet trust the Bugis, and could not predict how they would react to the sight of my disfigurement. My head remained tightly wrapped in an untidy turban of my own design. I confined my remarks to explaining that I had contracted a brain disease from drinking infected water.

To no great surprise, the Bugis had never heard of either Romundli or the Clementi, and they shrugged sympathetically at my ailment, but had no suggestions for treatment.

It was very late by the time Yewtree and I retired to our separate huts, and I was forced to don my night-vision spectacles to locate the hut that had been allotted to me – I had no wish to burst in upon some unsuspecting family of terrified villagers. I slept poorly, plagued both by indigestion and nagging doubts about the intentions of our hosts. In spite of their apologetic tone and attentive hospitality, I found it very hard to trust the Bugis. Was it just the Earthman's warning that had set my mind on edge, or was there something wolfish that remained in these primitive men, even without their masks? I replayed some of their remarks in my head, and they still bothered me. "We thought you were non-Bugis," Boonkeng had said. Did that mean the tribe had now accepted us as one of its own? If so, it was an extraordinary stroke of luck, for the Bugis seemed to be at war with the rest of the planet. Yewtree and I had accepted an invitation from Kangkar to stay in the village for a few more days, but I would not be easy until we had left their valley far behind.

I was also kept awake by a series of crackles and buzzes emitted by my Dover and Somerset. The device was still a source of concern, and around dawn I reluctantly switched it off, so desperate was I to snatch a few hours sleep.

By daylight the Bugis village looked even more dismal than it had the previous evening. Now that we could see the full extent of the settlement, I estimated that the place was home to no more than five hundred. There was a distinct gender imbalance: women, especially those of child-bearing age, were almost entirely absent from the village, although there was no shortage of unwashed children, who ran around in large gangs, screeching at one another and paying little heed to the wizened old lady apparently charged with their care. Muddy tracks criss-crossed the village, which had no formal boundary, although a series of foul-smelling middens full of burnt bones and worse, marked the outer reaches of the Bugis settlement. As I had feared, our hosts were without proper washing or toilet facilities, and the same shallow, muddy river served the Bugis for both purposes. A more squalid existence I had not

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yet encountered on Earth or Kadaloor, and I could not imagine that Marsiling's native community lived in conditions anywhere near as bad.

"Let's get out of here as soon as we can," I muttered to Yewtree over a breakfast that consisted of leftovers from the previous night's barbeque of entrails.

"Well, we don't want to appear rude, do we?" he replied.

"I hardly think that matters. They did try to kill us, after all. I still don't trust them."

Yewtree said, "I know what you mean. Bit of a queer bunch."

We were left to our own devices for the morning, while Kangkar disappeared on a mysterious errand to what he called "the other village". When he returned he invited us to take a walk around the full extent of Bugis territory. Apparently this was a daily task for the hunters, perhaps to deter encroachments from neighbouring tribes. Whatever the purpose, Yewtree and I readily accepted, having seen more than enough of Bugis village and its inhabitants.

While we walked, we continued to question Kangkar about the Bugis way of life, and it was only now that we learned the awful truth. Kangkar answered us frankly and unselfconsciously, and seemed not to notice our horrified reactions. The plain fact was that the Bugis were cannibals. They did not feed exclusively on human flesh, but hunted animals for their meat too. Even in their depravity the Bugis had boundaries of a sort. Their guiding principle stated that only those who had language, or more precisely only those who spoke the language of the Bugis, had a soul. All others, regardless of species, were fair game, no more than articulated arrangements of meat on the move. According to his principle, Yewtree and I were spared from the Bugis barbeque only by the grace of my Dover and Somerset, and that gadget was now malfunctioning with alarming frequency. The previous night I had been woken by the device suddenly enunciating the word "muffin" with unusual clarity, though there was no source of noise in the vicinity save the whine of insects. These new revelations about the Bugis way of life provided a new and urgent perspective on the problem. I hardly dared think how our relations with our hosts might rapidly deteriorate were the interpreting machine to suffer a total breakdown. I realised that I would need to keep Raffles, the snake-like mammal whom I had adopted as a pet, strictly out of sight while we were in the presence of the Bugis, if I did not want him to end up on the end of one of their roasting sticks.

Yewtree and I quickly realised that we could not afford to be parted, even for a few moments, and the Dover and Somerset was our only life-line. Yewtree suggested that we could overcome this difficulty by going

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to the trouble of learning the Bugis tongue, but it was not a project I could subscribe to. Under normal circumstances the Dover and Somerset would have been an invaluable learning aid, but of course it would only speak the Bugis language in the presence of a native Bugis speaker, and we could not afford to let our hosts suspect that we were not already fluent in what they believed the only legitimate language. Besides, I did not plan to hang around in Bugis country for that long. Were it my decision alone, I would have quit the Bugis village that very night, but Yewtree refused to believe that our hosts posed any real threat to our safety, an oversight I put down to his unflagging and sometimes stupidly stubborn optimism.

"Alright, so they're a little rough around the edges," he said to me when we found ourselves alone for a few moments, while Kangkar scouted on ahead.

"They would have cooked and eaten us if we hadn't made ourselves understood!" I objected.

"I doubt that," said Yewtree. "They were just defending their patch. All that cannibalism stuff is probably made up to keep their enemies scared."

"Just wait until the Dover and Somerset stops working," I warned him. "Then you'll see just how rough around the edges they can get. The Earthman was right: we should watch our backs."

Yewtree frowned. "Earthman? What's that?"

"Nothing," I said, embarrassed that I had mentioned my vision in the treetops. "That's just the Dover and Somerset malfunctioning again. You see? It's getting worse by the day!"

"You worry too much," was Yewtree's verdict. "That's probably what's causing that thing to grow out of your head. It's feeding on your worry."

It was just that sort of pat reply of Yewtree's that infuriated me, but I made no answer, as Kangkar was returning, crashing through waist-high vegetation. Something was obviously puzzling him.

"May I ask you a question?" he said.

"Of course," I answered.

"Are you gods?"

I almost laughed out loud with amazement, but stopped myself. "Of course not!" I replied. "What sort of a question is that?"

"Then are you messengers from the gods?"

"Look, why don't you tell us what all this is about?" said Yewtree.

Kangkar said nothing, but beckoned us to follow him through a thick patch of spiny bracken whence he had emerged. In a little covered clear-

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ing, surrounded by thick, twisting black roots, Kangkar crouched down and pointed to something small and white in the leaf litter. He seemed afraid to touch it, so I picked it up.

“What is it?” asked Yewtree.

I knew exactly what it was.

“Looks like a little roll of paper,” said Yewtree. “Look, is that writing on the side? I don’t recognise the script.” He asked Kangkar, “Is this Bugis writing?”

Kangkar looked at us uncomprehendingly. “It is not of our making,” he said. “This is a message from the gods.”

Yewtree was right: there was something written on the side of the tiny paper cylinder. Printed in very small, gold letters were the words, REGAL KING SIZE.

## REVIEWS

# The Quarterly Review

## BOOKS

### One

Conrad Williams

Virgin Books, pb, 364pp

The superb movie-style cover of this book tells you all you need to know about the plot going in: a man walks to London through a devastated Britain. Despite the tagline – This is you. This is now. And your number is up. – the book isn’t written in the second person, which was a relief.

In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Peter Nicholls notes in the entry “Holocaust and After” that: “Many of the authors cited have not been closely associated with Genre SF. The post-holocaust theme, particularly in the UK, has had a strong attraction for mainstream writers...” Like those cosy catastrophes of the 1950s, *One* presents a very literary apocalypse. It’s not a novel concerned with investigating the problems and solving them – answers are thin on the ground – it’s about the feelings they engender and the relationships they rupture. It’s written in

fine style, with expressive touches of flair throughout, but at times this felt rather like a literary author doing his level best to write the most commercial novel possible – a widescreen horror novel – but partially thwarted by his own sensibilities. And so the novel is packed with interesting character moments and striking images, but frustratingly skips past much of the action. We're never in any doubt as to exactly how Richard Jane feels, but we're often left rather foggy about what's actually going on. That makes sense, since Jane himself is often in that same situation, but it's frustrating for the reader.

But then this isn't really a book about the apocalypse – it's a book about a father's love for his son. Though that side of it had a lasting impact on me – I find myself saying no to my children much less since reading *One* – it did get a little bit dull. The author shows how difficult Jane's obsession with his lost son is for other people to cope with, but he may have underestimated how tiresome it would become for readers: by the end of the book the reader comes to fear the mention of Stanley as much as any of the horrors of this nightmarish world.

As usual I'm complaining about minor problems rather than focusing on what was good. This was on the whole a thrilling book, and one I found hard to put down (not that I tried): I read the last 250 pages in more or less one go. I was at all times desperate to find out what would happen next (which probably

explains my frustration when the novel slowed for an emotional bit). The apocalyptic opening was nothing short of brilliant, and if the subsequent long walk went on a bit, things really picked up in the second half, in ways I wouldn't want to reveal in a review.

In another publishing era the two halves of the book – “Births, Deaths and Marriages” and “Lazarus Taxon” would have been two short novels in themselves. I would have rated the second of them much more highly than the first.

Overall, a fine novel, but just a bit too ruminatory and elliptical to be the effective mainstream entertainment I was hoping for. In post-apocalyptic movie terms I'd place it just ahead of Neil Marshall's *Doomsday*, but just behind *28 Days Later*. 7 – *SWT*

## Peckinpah: an Ultraviolet Romance

D. Harlan Wilson  
Shroud Books, 120pp

Bad, strange people come to an American town and start killing people in lots of little chapters.

An unusual book! It's impossible for me to say whether it's good or not; I've read nothing similar to judge it against. By the end it made a kind of sense, but pictures would have helped; it was rather like reading a transcript of a Grant Morrison comic like *The Filth*.

Like the Rhys Hughes book I've been reading recently (*The Smell of Telescopes*), this is a book where every word counts – it's more like a prose poem than a novel – and since I do most of my reading at bedtime I tend to struggle with such books. So this was quite hard work, but by the end I felt the effort had been worthwhile. 6 – *SWT*

## On Basilisk Station

David Weber

Baen, pb, 464pp

Honor Harrington is given a new ship and assigned to Basilisk Station. It's a poisoned chalice, but she's going to do her duty, whatever it costs her.

Anyone who enjoyed *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, especially the cat-and-mouse battle at its conclusion – and who didn't? – will thoroughly enjoy this; it's very much more of the same. Later *Trek* series were probably influenced in turn by this book.

This is old-fashioned stuff in some ways. The idea of villains being motivated by a desire to pay unemployment benefits is almost charming in its 1980s-style silliness. The set-up is rather like Thatcherite Britain at threat from a European Union gone bad. Or are the aggressors more like Argentina, trying to relieve internal pressures with expansionist policies, making a quick grab for territory? Basilisk Station is as distant from its owners

as the Falklands, but much more strategically important.

Less charming is the unreconstructed colonialism that sees the heroes threatened by a native uprising... The conclusion of that storyline is especially stomach-churning, and not quite in the way the author intended. It's notable that not one of the natives gets a speaking role in the book (unless I missed it), but by gum we get to see their blood.

But though it can be criticised for being old-fashioned in that way, it can also be praised for its progressive feminism. Here we have a female captain who can hold her own with the best of them, and what's more a crew evenly divided between men and women. To a degree critics could argue that this isn't true feminism: being a woman is to some extent still a handicap she has to surmount. It's not something that simply goes unmentioned, or that's considered irrelevant to the performance of her duties, it's a problem that's there to create drama. But I think in the end such considerations are outweighed by her repeated demonstrations of utmost competence.

The influence of *Hornblower* is acknowledged by the author in an afterword, and readers of C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brian may see this as a shallow, clumsily-written imitation. However, I only got through those books by pretending the ships were flying around in space, so that was fine by me. Weber shows particular ingenuity in finding ways to make naval-style tactics

relevant to space battles. And where the battles here score above any iteration of Star Trek, for example, is that anything can happen: nobody, except Honor herself, is safe. None of the actors have got a contract in hand for series two...

One of the other pleasures of the book is a simple one: someone doing their job really well. Watching how Honor manages to handle everything thrown at her is very enjoyable, and you can't help but root for her to come through. She's an expert in man-management: she displays exceptional tact and understanding to gain the trust of her crew. The way she slowly wins them over is nothing we haven't seen before, but it never gets old. (Season one of *The Closer*, for example, featured an almost identical plotline.)

So: highly recommended for anyone who ever wished Patrick O'Brian was a science fiction writer. Note that *On Basilisk Station* (what a great title, by the way) is available to read for free in a variety of formats from the Baen Books free library, which has definitely done its job here: there's no doubt that I'll be reading further volumes in the series. **6** – *SWT*

## The Wailing Asteroid

Murray Leinster  
Feedbooks

A signal from space is received, a signal that's meaningless to every-

one on Earth – everyone except the man who's been dreaming of it since childhood! He starts to build a spaceship to go and investigate, while the girl who'd be his girlfriend does her best to catch his eye.

Most of this book is a science fiction screwball comedy along the lines of *Monkey Business*, which is a good thing. More sf novels should star Cary Grant! Very entertaining!

Things get more serious as the stakes rise, but it's still an enjoyable read. The book quickly sets up a number of intriguing mysteries, and pays off handsomely and cleverly on them all. **7** – *SWT*

## Halo

Tom Maddox  
Feedbooks

Interesting and short, but more cyberprog than cyberpunk with its flowery descriptions, magic mushrooms and Buddhism. Good, but not great. **6** – *SWT*

## Tom Swift and the Visitor From Planet X Victor Appleton II Project Gutenberg

Good, silly fun. If these had been in Keighley library when I was a kid I would have loved them. I enjoyed the free-wheeling, anything goes quality of it, but this must have seemed old-fashioned even in the

1960s. I love the idea of Victor Appleton II writing the adventures of Tom Swift Jr. **5** – *SWT*

## COMICS

**100 Bullets, Vol. 1:  
First Shot, Last Call**  
Brian Azzarello,  
Eduardo Risso  
Vertigo, tpb, 128pp

Two people get offered a gun and bullets by Agent Graves, in the first five issues of the comic. It was okay, but I'm not a huge fan of straight crime comics; it didn't knock my socks off. It felt a bit like a sub-par episode of *The Shield*. I had volume two to read as well, so would that convince me? See below! **6** – *SWT*

**100 Bullets, Vol. 2:  
Split Second Chance**  
Brian Azzarello,  
Eduardo Risso  
Vertigo, tpb, 224pp

This volume (collecting issues 6 to 14) has three main stories: one about a gambler, one about an ice cream man, and one in which Shepherd sends Dizzy (from volume one) to Paris to meet a previous recipient of the briefcase. There's also an issue focusing on Graves and an apparent standalone about a waitress with a missing daughter.

I found this book much more engaging than the first, mainly because the ongoing plot has started to bubble – the individual crime stories are still leaving me fairly cold, but I think that's just down to my genre preferences. If the book was exactly the same but with aliens instead of crimes I'd probably love it. After all, *The Shield* was pretty much the same show as *Angel* in terms of plot and structure, but I'm always more easily entertained by monsters of the non-human kind. **6** – *SWT*

**The Hound of the  
Baskervilles:  
a Sherlock Holmes  
Graphic Novel**  
Arthur Conan Doyle,  
Ian Edginton (adaptor),  
and I.N.J. Culbard  
(illustrator), published by  
Self Made Hero, 2009

I've long considered graphic novels an excellent medium for adapting the classics. If works from previous centuries are to survive, then they need to be made available and accessible in a way that will attract contemporary readers. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was originally published a hundred and eight years ago, serialised in a family magazine that no longer exists, and aimed at an audience that no longer exists. It is less a case of dumbing down, and more a case of providing a bridge between the modern reader and the

historical author, and – hopefully – bringing new readers to the great works of English literature.

Self Made Hero have wisely started with the most successful of Conan Doyle's four long Sherlock Holmes stories, which is also the best known of the entire Canon. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is tense, atmospheric, and intriguing, and the graphic format sacrifices none of these qualities. If you're lucky enough to be coming to the story for the first time (and don't know who the villain is), you'll also find a very clever mystery, which was of course one of Doyle's great strengths as a writer. The original novella is reproduced chapter by chapter, ever faithful to the dark mood which made it what Doyle himself called "a real creeper". The artwork is outstanding and supported by an equally strong script.

This volume contains several extras as well: a short foreword from no less than Daniel Stashower, a respected biographer of Doyle and the editor of several collections of Sherlockian pastiche; a small sketchbook section which includes a bird's eye view of the rooms at 221B Baker Street; and a preview of the forthcoming *A Study in Scarlet* (not be missed, by the look of it).

One the many elements of the adaptation I enjoyed was its pulp fiction feel, which was precisely the type of tale the novella was intended to be when it was published in 1901. Classics don't have to be boring; this one certainly isn't, and this graphic novel is a great way to intro-

duce *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to a new generation of readers, and bring an older generation back to one of the best detective stories ever written.

First class. – *Rafe McGregor*

## Be a Nose!

Art Spiegelman

McSweeney's, hb, 192pp

Contains three sketchbooks, from 1979, 1983 and 2007 (the one that formed part of *McSweeney's* 27). I flicked through it all with mild interest, but my wife was enraptured by each page. For Spiegelman fans and artists keen to learn about his process this is probably essential, but everyone else should just flick through it in the shop.

Rather upset that this sees the end of my membership of the McSweeney's Book Club, and I can't afford to renew. Fingers crossed for an economic upturn! 6 – *SWT*

## MAGAZINES

### Midnight Street #12

Trevor Denyer (ed.)

*Midnight Street #12* keeps to the same format as earlier issues, a mixture of fiction (and a pretty eclectic mix too, this time), interviews, reviews, and two regular bar eccentrics, the querulous Dodo wobbling on his stool (his annual clock

has just advanced with an ominous “tick”) and Mystic Meg transmogrified into Mystic Michael.

For me (and, I suspect, for most readers) the fiction’s the main dish, but the scattered side plates are a definite plus, an advantage a magazine has over a book of short stories, a break from and contrast to the tales. In this particular case, I have to admit, the interviews did not exactly excite me: Guy N. Smith comes across as eminently unreadable – disaster scenarios, especially mutant animals/plants, unless in superbly capable hands (like Wells’ *Food of the Gods*) do not usually make for engrossing reading (like-wise disaster films) – and the introduction to the interview has far too many punctuation and other mistakes (OK, I confess, I’m after the Dodo’s stool if he should slide off!); but the writer obviously has a legion of fans, and I still found the interview interesting, and the man himself likeable. But devoting six whole precious pages to a self-confessed “psychic vampire”, Michelle Belanger, seems to me a bit unbalanced: surely it is precisely horror and fantasy readers and writers who have a strong core of realism, and are least likely to swallow that sort of nonsense; what’s wrong with Byron simply being extremely charismatic? That space could have been more excitingly filled with my own shudderingly frightening story about giant mutant motile vampiric carrots. (Ever wonder why parsnips are so pale?)

Other extras include, as already

mentioned, the Dodo’s coming of age (the ageism he talks about depresses me every time I return to the UK; in Spain, or at least in the central parts not colonised by Brits as ancient as me, it is noticeably absent), and his terrifying image of “pissheads with droopy trousers who will one day inherit the Earth”; Michael Lohr’s little article on Ambrose Bierce; and various book reviews, always valuable for bringing new authors to the attention of potential readers. One of those new authors, by the way (new, in terms of a first collection) is a certain Trevor Denyer, a couple of whose stories I have read in the past and found satisfyingly subtle and intriguing. (Bet the cad and all-round bad egg feels guilty now about rejecting my carrot-parsnip story!)

Right! The main dish. Not a weak story in sight. It occurs to me this is possibly the one beneficial effect of the otherwise sad demise of all those “independent” press mags that flourished a decade ago, some of which published stories so bad (mine, for instance) they are the print version of Plan Nine from Outer Space. In the last couple of years, the few that are left (and a few new ones, such as *Murky Depths* or *Polluto*) have had the pick of the many good writers who have not enjoyed commercial success, and even some who have.

Although, not to be misunderstood, *Midnight Street* and its predecessor, *Roadworks*, have always had a high proportion of good writing.

I escaped from the Morlock-like atmosphere of central Birmingham when I was around twenty, the first chance I got, but poor old Joel Lane stayed there, and this shows in his writing, which, while highly competent, is from what I have read unrelentingly grim and depressing, as shown in his story here, "The Last Gallery", set, possibly, in a very near future, or a bad-hair-day version of the present. I see the point of the story, the aptness of what goes on in the "Gallery" at the end, the wonderful line "Perhaps there were as many reasons as scars", but I simply cannot relate to the characters, whose self-mutilation as a reaction to a bad situation (even when they have each other) I find hard to accept. But other readers who haven't been away from grim English city life for forty years will no doubt be more moved by the story and its creation of a dramatic symbol of inner-city despair.

Allen Ashley's "Waving Not Drowning" is an even stranger kettle of almost-fish! Forget everything you thought you knew about sirens and/or mermaids. "Cheapskate landlubbers! Sling their 'ooks" is not quite Homeric. But when someone's skin holds "the lustre of the interior of an oyster shell", delicate language may not be of prime importance. Apart from these ladies lounging around on rocks near what I suppose is Yarmouth, we have a social situation where a PM King (Parliamentary Monarch) is determined to make everyone eat vegetables, and all-night kebab stalls have

been replaced by all-night broccoli stalls (at least it wasn't cauliflower!). A third major element is that the narrator is forced to wear a painful electronic tag for a "crime" of carelessness once committed, and a fourth a probation officer who sleeps with him. I found this all very entertaining, although I'm not quite sure if these elements, a mix of surreal and day-to-day, presumably a satire on health fads, over-zealous PC and media-arselicking, all fuse well enough, despite an attempt at the end to give some kind of moral to the story and draw out the mythical meaning of the siren song.

Quite different is Carl Barker's "The Man who Came to Dinner". It's pretty clear from the beginning who this "man" is – he's about as gauche in human company as the Queen would be at a Goth party – but the story is carefully constructed, with two main protagonists, one on the point of death, who act always in character, and an ending, if not exactly uplifting, at least comforting. This is apparently the writer's first published story, and a very worthy one too.

You thought the *Twa Corbies* were a sinister pair? "The Crows" gathered by Tony Richards have much bigger game in mind than a slain knight. It's always difficult to do justice to a story without revealing too much, but let's say there is a superb build-up here from a single crow sitting on a fence to tens of thousands of them all heading in a certain direction. The story is all the more effective as the viewpoint

character is a retired man with little knowledge of (or interest in) politics or world affairs, who only very slowly begins to realise the significance of what is happening around his quiet country retreat. Because his reactions are similar to what ours would probably be, we have no difficulty accepting what he finally comes to accept.

All these stories are fine and entertaining, but for me there are three stand-out ones, each very different from the others. First, "The Turning of the Screw", by William Mitchell. If written from a present-day POV, one could criticise it for unnecessary and irrelevant detail at the beginning, and a delay in getting to the main story. But it purports to have been written by a young Victorian gentleman, and (from the vague wisps of memory from my MA studies in Victorian Literature – oh yes, we have all had our crosses to bear!) it catches the tone and style immediately. Moreover, we soon see how the early details serve to characterise the two friends who witness the horrific events of the story, which concerns a sword-swallowing act where something goes horribly wrong. I mean, really horribly. Horror stuff like Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> or Nightmare on Elm Street is for me unutterably boring (even with the delicious Jamie Lee herself as mitigation), but this story manages to become pure horror, and work! I think I've managed to analyse why, but I can't tell you without revealing the plot, sorry! Just imagine you had a grudge against a sword-swallow-

lower... but I still don't think you would anticipate this marvellous story and its masterly climax.

I would have to give top prize in the magazine to Marion Arnott's "The Persistence of Memory", which is very different, dealing obliquely with a more modern horror, that of the Nazi regime of terror. This story may possibly be based on what happened at Aradour-sur-Glane in central France in 1944, but any wartime act of reprisal (not only Nazi) against civilians would have served. It is by far the most moving story in this issue. Of course, one could claim that a writer who deals with real horror, real atrocities, has a lot of their work done for them; simply describing the acts of savagery actually committed is horrific enough. But just compare, for instance, a factual only (if the word "only" isn't meaningless in this context) account of the German massacre of their Italian ex-allies in the Acqui Division in Cephalonia with the fictionalised (meaning adding fictional characters to a real event) account in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*: the difference screams out at us. Arnott's skill here has been in slowly unfolding the story, focusing it not only through the memories of an old lady who believes she should have died and plans to do something about it, but also through the exasperation of a self-serving young relative of hers who is fed up with her old stories, and can't see their relevance today. The details are exquisitely chosen (the tree stump, a bloodied green ribbon, Jacob flap-

ping at the flies with his newspaper to keep them off the bodies), the timing perfect, and a detail within the text itself gives the *raison d'être* of such stories as this: Courcelette insists on sending for the memorial plaques one by one instead of in a bunch because the victims "had been remembered collectively for too long, she said".

But a second top prize has to be for one of the strangest stories I have read for some time, "The Cabaret at the World's End" by David Gullen. Grab yourself a bunch of drag queens, some extremely randy and violent walruses (but with a strong sense of what is right and proper), some Haitians in a boat exporting a problem for which their island is notorious, plonk them all in a bar in exotic Alaska together with two very efficient Inuit and two Eiffel Towers – and From Dusk Till Dawn becomes staid by comparison. And "that gorgeous tube of juice and wobble" is *not* Salma Hayek! It was only on re-reading that I noticed, despite the wildness of the ingredients, how carefully the whole story is developed; even the main (human) character's drawing on his Marlboro (which put me on edge in the very first paragraph, as it seemed like a typical "filler" by a bad writer) is really a part of the story, and a natural lead-in to its weirder part. A lot of what proves to be vital information is presented as if almost in passing (even the outcome for Valdez and Anchorage), not a whiff of dreaded info-dump. A real humdinger of a story, with moments

of surprising tenderness where least expected, and superbly constructed. "Who is the Walrus? Form a queue, ladies. Form a queue!"

So you all know what you have to do now if you haven't already done it. Details at: <http://www.midnightstreet.co.uk>. – *Steve Redwood*

### Morpheus Tales #3 Adam Bradley (ed.)

Perhaps I am not the ideal reviewer for a small press horror zine. My taste in horror fiction runs about as far as Lovecraft but hardly further, and I quickly lose patience with his tortuously elaborate prose style.

Having said that, there is nothing tortuously elaborate about most of the stories in *Morpheus Tales*. They are on the whole succinct little vignettes, competently written and reasonably engaging. The highlight for me was "Tabiniday", Michael Sellars' tale of schizophrenic revenge fantasies, graced with some evocative and rather beautiful little illustrations by matlocktheartist that would not have looked out of place in any expensively bound art house graphic novel.

Then there's "Snow Like Lonely Ghosts", an account of one man's struggle with obesity and grief, but spoiled by a trite last line, and a first paragraph that simply cries out for an editor: "And if one is moved emotionally, or their actions easily swayed by memory, by history – because everything that has come before is history, or memory, thus

ghosts – then the dead are busy at work in our living world.”

Bunny Dees’ “Don’t Listen to Your Heart” follows a couple of slovenly guards as they trade meaningless, depressing stories about life before the apocalypse, before something terrible happened to the world, something that neither character can quite remember. It has an authentic dream-like quality: as a reader I felt myself wading against a grey current of forgetfulness and confusion as the narratives blended into one another, repeated themselves, or trailed off into silence.

There is some run-of-the-mill zombie and werewolf fare that I struggled through, and a couple of speculative tales that unwittingly become rather silly. In “Alone in the Cataloochee Valley” by Lee Clarke Zumpe, subterranean demons kidnap first world war conscripts by dragging them down from their trenches into a worldwide labyrinth of tunnels, where they slave. “Execution Day” by Spencer Wendleton offers the conceit of death row prisoners being executed as many times as the number of lives they took. An unspecified “recuperating drug” brings the culprits back from the dead every time, but they start to lose any memory of their crimes.

There are two interviews, both with people I haven’t heard of, and both too long. I could not imagine even an ardent fan of horror writer Michael Laimo riveted by some of the exchanges:

*“Do you write for a particular*

*audience or for yourself? Really I write for myself. I love horror, and if in turn I end up writing for the horror audience, then it makes my efforts twice as rewarding.”*

It sounds very much like the literary equivalent of that old mantra of the proudly underachieving indie band – “We just make music for ourselves, and if anyone else likes it, that’s a bonus.”

One final observation, apropos nothing at all: no less than three of the stories here are introduced by quotations from the Bible. And I suspect that this is no fluke, nor a peccadillo of the editor, but a genre-wide habit. If so, it’s a lazy one: tacking a line from Revelations to the beginning of a story does not add any cosmic significance to the zombie-hacking that follows. But it does make me wonder whether any horror writers have thought about branching out into other faiths, and taking their quotes from the Koran, the Upanishads, or the Dhammapada. The only scary story I can think of right now that exploits the apocalyptic visions of religions other than Christianity is Arthur C. Clarke’s “The Nine Billion Names of God”. – *John Greenwood*

## Phobia #1

Darren Randle (ed.)

In some ways reviewing this is unfair to everyone involved. It’s a magazine that’s been put together for fun but without any real talent. As a writing group’s internal maga-

zine it would be fine, but thanks to the internet it's been published in full view of the world, and it doesn't stand up to such scrutiny.

The stories range from the more or less passable, such as "The Piece" by William J. Piovano, to the Vogonically awful.

For example, "Monday" by Mary C. White is probably the worst story I've ever read. I can't help but feel guilty for criticising it, since it's really the editor's fault for putting it out there for people to read – the poor writer should have been left in unhumiliated obscurity – but on the other hand it would be dishonest to let something so appalling pass without comment in a review. Here's an example of the prose: "The usual Monday morning call took to the tape on the answering machine, the voice giving birth to the last words quivering in pain. Another bridged pass day, and another last Monday of the month absence would never be removed from a personal file." Mary's bio says that she has several novels set for publication in 2009.

The magazine is filled with mistakes from start to finish. It's hard to believe anyone has even read this material before publication, let alone edited or proofread it. Story titles include "The Mostquito Woman" and "Echos", and typesetting errors abound (paragraphs mistakenly centred, tab spaces in the middle of sentences, etc). The writers involved seem to share a complete ignorance regarding the use of apostrophes. Some dispense with

them entirely, others add them in the strangest places. For example in "The Lake" Stuart Twyman writes: "The creature cocks its' head ... opens its' mouth & its' slavering lips engulf the mans' face." Note that he uses ampersands instead of "and" throughout.

Overall, despite some moody artwork from Bob Veon, and a striking cover design, *Phobia* #1 is a mess. It's a shame, since Darren Randle is a really nice guy. He's just, on this evidence, a totally hopeless editor. 2 – SWT

## MOVIES

### Star Trek

JJ Abrams (dir.), Paramount

Let's not be too harsh on recent generations of Star Trek. Sure, after Doctor Who and Battlestar Galactica it's difficult to sit through an entire episode. The pacing is glacial, the humour damn gentle and sex is concealed behind head-to-toe grey jumpsuits. There are way too many scenes of people chatting at desks, and the productions are as set-bound as Tim Burton. But let's not forget that The Next Generation was brilliant for its time. Its competition wasn't BSG or new Who, or even Farscape or B5 – in 1987 it was up against crud like ALF and Airwolf, and in comparison it shone.

Later series like Voyager and Enterprise failed to move with the times, and stuck to the same old for-

mula – dreary office chats, a small primary crew whose safety was assured, and story arcs that were half-hearted at best and hopelessly disorganised at worst. Season three of *Enterprise* upped the ante with a 24-style terrorist hunt, but it was too late, and with death on the horizon a bargain-basement season four devoted itself to out-and-out fan service, leading to some of the most entertaining, *Trekky Trek* in years – the place to look if you've ever wondered why Klingons once had smooth foreheads.

*Enterprise*'s biggest flaw, though, was its safety. It was about the first *Enterprise* sent out into a hostile universe – and even though Kirk and Spock, years later, would find themselves encountering the unknown on a weekly basis, Archer's crew did nothing but visit planets already discovered by the Vulcans. And hardly anyone ever died.

On the big screen, the last two films were crippled (just like *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*) by the palpable need to give its stars "scenes" at the expense of story. The last *Star Trek* film, *Nemesis*, was diabolically dull, essentially two hours of two spaceships floating in space and pointing at each other.

This movie puts right everything that had gone wrong with *Star Trek*. It's beautiful, sexy, cool and dangerous. Sex, spaceships, fist-fights and death are restored to their proper places at the heart of the franchise: the girls are wearing mini-skirts, the men have permanently bruised knuckles, the spaceships smash each

other to pieces, and redshirts regularly bite the dust.

For the first forty minutes or so I was convinced it was the best movie I'd ever seen, that I'd be sending my wife and child home on their own so that I could watch it again. It didn't quite live up to that early promise, dropping off slightly somewhere around the point that Kirk runs around with big rubber hands, but was nevertheless extremely entertaining, and easily my favourite film of the year so far.

There are flaws. *Nero*'s big scary spaceship looks pretty much the same as the big scary spaceship in *Nemesis*, and while its industrial interior makes sense for a mining ship, it's nothing we haven't seen dozens of times before during *Voyager*'s journey across the Delta Quadrant. It would have benefited from the same level of invention and TLC evidently lavished on the *Enterprise*. Also, time-travelling *Nero*'s attempt to destroy the nascent Federation is an unwelcome reminder of *Enterprise*'s abysmal Temporal Cold War storyline. But those are minor issues, and after all there have been hundreds of episodes of the various programmes – the film couldn't have been entirely original without jettisoning everything that makes it *Star Trek*.

The cast is excellent: Chris Pine as Kirk gets everything right. At 29 I think he's the first *Star Trek* captain (except maybe Kate Mulgrew) under 40 since Shatner himself (both character and actor are about six years younger than the origi-

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nals). Zachary Quinto as Spock was note-perfect, though it was hard to forget how sick I am of seeing his face in *Heroes*. Zoe Saldana as Uhura (now the most important character after Kirk and Spock) is convincingly smart and capable. Karl Urban is fantastic as Bones. Bruce Greenwood is a brilliant, brave Captain Pike. Simon Pegg makes a great engineer, while John Cho makes me wish they'd found room on the bridge for Kal Penn too. The only actor to come out of the film less than well is Eric Bana – he struggles to make any kind of impact, with little screen time and little to do.

This is the Star Trek film for any-

one who saw *Galaxy Quest* and wondered why they couldn't do it for real. Now, what happens next? In the original continuity, this film would take place between Captain Pike's two five year missions. This time around, Kirk's got his hands on the ship a good six years early, but he's got six years' less experience. He hasn't served on the *Farragut*, he hasn't had time to make mistakes, and by the end of the film, the galaxy is a much less hospitable place. The measure of this film's success isn't just its box office receipts (gratifyingly huge though they are), but also how much everyone will be looking forward to the next one. **8** – *SWT*

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## ALSO RECEIVED

### But Not Yet Reviewed

There are always a few things in for review that we don't get around to reading on time, or sometimes that we don't manage to finish. Here's a quick round-up. As I think they say at *Interzone*, a mention here doesn't preclude a full review later on.

As ever, PS Publishing have sent lots of marvellous goodies, including *Postscripts 18* and *The Very Best of Gene Wolfe*, and (just this morning) *Impossible Stories 2* by Zoran Zivkovic, *Billy's Book* by Terry Bisson, and *Grazing the Long Acre* by Gwyneth Jones.

I'm about half-way through Steve Redwood's *Broken Symmetries*, full

of the kind of stories that make being a small press editor so rewarding. He read the entirety of TQF17 and reviewed it (poor man!) so nothing will get in the way of my quest to finish and review his book in turn. The same publisher (Dog Horn) has also sent *Crashin' the Real* by Deb Hoag, though it begins with two strikes against it: that missing "g" and Steven Tyler being mentioned in its subtitle!

*The Kult* by Shaun Jeffrey should be good (I've just accepted one of his short stories for *Dark Horizons*).

Barry Eysman's *Candles for November* seems a bit romantic for my taste, but is good so far.

In addition to *Peckinpah*, reviewed above, we have D. Harlan Wilson's *Blankety Blank* and *Technologized Desire* to read.

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