

BRIAN STABLEFORD'S STARTLING VAMPIRE STORY . . .

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#314

Weird Tales®

S.P. SONTOW:
Story & Interview

TANITH LEE

DAVID J. SCHOW



FOR SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS: THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE ISSN 0898-5073
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We get letters, but not nearly enough of them. There was a time when writing letters to the professional science-fiction and fantasy magazines was a major activity for fans. Before there was an internet, when fanzines were mimeographed and had circulations in the low hundreds, the way to make yourself known was to have a letter in every issue of *Startling Stories*. This excellent pulp magazine of the 1940s and '50s not only printed a novel in every issue (some of them, like Jack Vance's *Big Planet* and Arthur C. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night*, now classics) and about the same wordage again in short fiction (making for a magazine about twice the size of a modern genre publication) but also had room for twenty pages or so of readers' letters in type of the size otherwise used for phone books.

It was, for some of the readers at least, great fun. The letter columns were the precursors of specialized newsgroups on the 'net and the on-line chat-rooms where fans and writers meet and exchange ideas. Personalities developed. "Letterhacks" became celebrities. Looking through old issues of *Startling Stories* (or its companion *Thrilling Wonder Stories*), a modern editor cannot help but feel envy and frustration. Most of those letters were good, and there were *so many* of them. It's been *our* experience that one gets about one publishable letter per thousand readers each issue; in the old days, how the mailbags must have bulged. (Then again, some readers found the letterhacking antics tiresome. When *Galaxy Science Fiction* started in 1950, the editor asked his readers if they wanted a letter column. He got *six thousand* negative replies.)

Times have simply changed. Maybe we're not as epistolary a society anymore. *Weird Tales*® in its grand old days never ran twenty pages of letters in tiny type, but it did run letters. Personalities emerged. Robert Bloch, then a teenaged fan, railed famously against Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian, "May he be sent to Valhalla to cut out paper dolls!" and editor Farnsworth Wright then suggested that readers sharpen their axes because Bloch's own first story was about to appear; but Bloch's story ("The Feast in the Abbey") proved so popular that even Conan, in Valhalla, may have paused to commend him.

Letter columns give a magazine a sense of personality and continuity. That's one reason why we, the present editors of *Weird Tales*, continue to encourage them.

But it's like pulling teeth sometimes.

We actually *have* extracted a letter which raises some interesting points; but, for reasons which should be obvious, we have chosen not to give the writer's name. This came back in reply to a rejection written by assistant editor Kyle Phillips. (Arguing back after you've been rejected, we hasten to add, is one thing a writer should *never* do. There is much to be lost and nothing to be gained from it.) Writes our rejectee of the wounded ego:

The problem with readers, and indeed with editors such as yourself these days, is that we are now in a society of "fast food" (analogy of course) service. That is to say that we have become so on the go that we no longer have the time, or even the desire to sit down and be entertained by a good piece of prose. This letter is in response to your rejection of my "yarn" [title given]. And before you believe this to be your average writer pissed about another rejection think you hard on *the* words that you read herein. [sic throughout] You will

no doubt agree that your publication is not the magazine it once was in the hey day of pulp fiction. *Weird Tales* published fine stories by GREAT writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and so, you know this already.

The point I mean to make is that once your magazine was the standard by which other magazines were published. Today that is not the case, and do not take this personally. Of course readers want action, action, ACTION! Hell, that's all the crap box is feeding them — and it's all fast pace. Forget the setup and execution, just give us a few hours of senseless non-stop action and we'll be happy! So goes the outcry at the box office. [. . .]

All this brings me to this, sir; my works, even the shortest, will take time to appreciate, I speak in terms of actual reading. The reader sees it coming. There must be something lurking at the climax for this setup to pay off. And it always does where my prose are concerned. Furthermore, even more important with my yams is the fact that they are poetic, Your remark, "if something sounds nice but doesn't further the action, cut it out and get on with things," may indeed be true, as you went on to say, ... otherwise readers will lose interest. However, I must justify my words as they are. "Art for art's sake," my friend. [. . .] Take a chance that at least a few of your readers would care to read poetic prose. If not my own, then someone else's. [. . .] I do so hope for the return of classic prose. Give me Robert E. Howard over Steven King any day!

Well, after invoking Schweitzer's Law of Poetic Prose ("If you have to tell us it's poetic, it isn't.") and quoting Ezra Pound's dictum that poetry must be at least as well written as prose, the above letter does give us quite a bit to chew on.

Start with Pound, then turn him around: poetic prose should be as well written as poetry. What is the most salient feature of good poetry? Compression. An extreme economy of words. A poetry editor might advise the writer that if a single word or even punctuation mark doesn't contribute to the overall effect of the poem, then throw it out and get on with the poem. Edgar Allen Poe voiced similar sentiments about the short story, and he was one of the great masters of poetic prose. There are no wasted words in "The Masque of the Red Death" or "Shadow: a Parable." Poe did not "take time out" to be poetic; he merely *was*. Schweitzer's Second Law of Poetic Prose is that as soon as you notice the writer stopping the story for poetic effects, that's just padding. Good poetic prose, such as Poe's, or Dunsany's, is as seamless as a sonnet. We thought that the rejected manuscript in question wasn't.

Otherwise the writer's complaints curiously echo those found in H.P. Lovecraft's letters. H.P.L. was enormously critical of *Weird Tales* in its heyday, for precisely the reason our correspondent is dissatisfied with our version of the magazine. Pulp fiction emphasized action, often to the exclusion of all else. Lovecraft wrote for *Weird Tales* reluctantly, regarding it as the least bad of a bad lot, where there was at least a little bit of breathing-room for literary artistry. In some of the other magazines of the day, there was none.

Actually we think Lovecraft's view of *Weird Tales* was a trifle unfair. *Weird Tales* (hardly "the standard by which all other magazines were published") was an extremely marginal enterprise in the '20s and '30s, barely able to survive from issue to issue, often years behind in its payment of authors. Editor Farnsworth Wright performed a delicate balancing act by mixing some genuinely literary fiction by Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, or Henry S. Whitehead with, well, pulp trash of the pulpiest and trashiest sort, one of the trashiest of which was the serial "Skull-Face" by none other than Robert E. Howard, which actually does manage occasional flashes of color or atmosphere, but is mostly a second-rate Fu Manchu imitation paced as breathlessly and brainlessly as a silent-movie serial. *Weird Tales* used its serials in particular to reach for the low-brow, action audience. There were imitations of Edgar Rice Burroughs by Otis Adelbert Kline, featured prominently, often with several cover paintings, and stretched out over as many issues as possible, in a time when Burroughs books (or Burroughs serials, in much better-paying and better-circulated magazines like *Argosy*) sold the way Stephen King does today.

Not surprisingly, very few old-time *Weird Tales* serials are remembered as classics. But, dare we suggest that the old *Weird Tales* is sometimes viewed through rosy glasses? The magazine lasted a very long time (1923-54). It published a good deal of excellent material which has stood the test of time. But if you go back and examine the actual issues (at today's prices, a very expensive enterprise), you may be surprised to find that sometimes the classic (or even good) stories only occur at the rate of two or three per issue, and that the actual concentration of first-rate material was nowhere near as high as it was in *Unknown* or in the early years of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

If Farnsworth Wright (and his successor, Dorothy McIlwraith) managed to put out a magazine of, say, 50% worthwhile material, and they had to publish 50% trash to keep that magazine alive decade after decade, then their efforts were certainly justified. That's a lot of good stuff, over time.

We are well aware that our *Weird Tales* is not the *Weird Tales* of the 1930s. It was our basic premise

from the founding of Terminus Publishing Company, Inc., that our *Weird Tales* would not be an imitation of the past, but an approximation of what *Weird Tales* would have been if it had survived uninterrupted until now.

We think it would have grown up. It might have evolved beyond the need to pander so obviously. We don't want to seem too full of ourselves, and we're well aware that it will take time to determine if what we've published will prove classic; but, frankly, we think that in some ways our *Weird Tales* is better than the old one, only in the sense that we don't have to publish Otis Adelbert Kline serials or the equivalent of "Skull-Face" or the Dr. Satan series when "weird criminal" stories became popular (think of it as cramming the magazine full of serial-killer stories to cash in on *The Silence of the Lambs*). We're glad we don't have to go to some of the ridiculous lengths the original *Weird Tales* did to get another issue out. Not that we have anything against action stories — or Robert E. Howard for that matter, most of whose work for *Weird Tales* was a lot better than "Skull-Face" — but we are beginning to suspect that our correspondent has not actually read the magazine very much, if he thinks that, after all the Tanith Lee and Thomas Ligotti stories that we've published, not to mention such delicately-textured works as Ian Watson's "The Coming of Vertumnus" (in *WT* #307), or even Darrell Schweitzer's Sekenre series, we are coming down on the side of non-stop action at the expense of atmosphere, character development, or, yes, even poetic prose.

We would really like to see more letters that we can quote and can put the correspondent's name on them. We got a nice one from **Christopher Dunn**, who comments:

You picked the right name in your new publisher; a publication in its 7th [8th, but who's counting?] decade or so must have survival coded into its genes.

Mr. Dunn rates some stories, picking "The Bible in Blood" for its tightly controlled tour of real horror as well as fantastic in first place, and gives a favorable nod to "The Renfields" by Christopher Lee Walters. He also asks about the mysterious disappearance of the ad for Paula Guran's magazine *Wetbones*, mentioned in the editorial. Alas, that promising publication folded about the time our issue went to press. It is a real loss to the horror field, which could do with two or three strong and varied magazines right now, we think. So the ad got pulled and we missed the mention in the editorial. Sorry.

Nils Hedglin rates stories, then notes:

In the Eyrie, you discussed what horror is today and what it is not. If #313 is any indication of horror today, horror is child-abuse. Almost half of your stories had some aspect of child-abuse in them. From the parent/child relationship of "The Game," to the sadistic (albeit possibly deserved) bedtime story in "Beddy-Bye," to the revenge for the victims in "Ring! Ring!," to the supernatural abuse of "The Stepmother." Three of your other stories had significant abuse aspects to them too ("The Renfields," "The Bible in Blood," and the abandoned lover of the sorcerer in "On the Last Night of the Festival of the Dead"). Maybe horror in general is just the abuse of some power taken to an extreme.

We can certainly agree that lots of classic horror is about people doing bad things to other people. Maybe you're stretching it a bit to include "On the Last Night of the Festival of the Dead" on the child-abuse list, since it's about a grown man paying for the consequences of what he did in his callow post-adolescence; but we will admit that the preponderance of child-abuse stories in the last issue did leave us a little uneasy. It is *not* a message to writers that we want more stories about child-abuse. Rather, it's an almost unforeseen consequence of the magazine's prolonged ill-health before DNA Publications came riding to our rescue. We hadn't published an issue in a year. Issues before that were widely spaced. Our backlog was starting to get old. It is unfair to the writer when we buy a story and then sit on it for five years or so. *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* #3 was a deliberate attempt to clear out the oldest stories in our inventory, and became, Coincidentally, something of a Special Religion Issue. *Weird Tales* #313 was also put together largely out of stories we could not, in good conscience, keep unpublished any longer. It led to a somewhat unbalanced issue. We don't apologize for the *quality* one bit, but we do hope to have a little more variety in future issues.

Jack Williamson, who is one of the great grandmasters of imaginative fiction, and who wrote one of the few really good (and subsequently reprinted) serials in the old *Weird Tales*, sent his good wishes:

I'm happy to find *Weird Tales* still alive. The magazine was an important part of my own life

back in the '30s. Farnsworth Wright was a great editor, admirable for his able dedication and the will to carry on so long in spite of the tremors and rigidity of Parkinson's disease. It

was the only magazine market for fantasy — there was almost no book market. I recall it fondly. My favorite of all pulp covers is the wonderful painting of the golden tiger in the sky, done by J. Allan St. John for my serial "Golden Blood."

The writers, as we felt ourselves, were a tiny group of aliens lost in a world where nobody else understood or cared. I never met two of the best-known stars, H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, but Edmond Hamilton and E. Hoffman Price became life-long friends. I once drove with them to Auburn, California, to spend a memorable day with Clark Ashton Smith. I met a few others. All remarkable people, exciting to a farm boy from New Mexico. I was happy to be welcomed among them.

Never a huge success, the magazine was able to pay a penny a word, the equivalent of perhaps fifteen cents today, good money to me then. It survived in its first incarnation from 1923 to 1954, though times grew harder toward the end. Really "the unique magazine" in those early years, it was vital to its readers and deserves revival.

Kevin Filan writes (while in the course of submitting a story):

First, I should say "Good to see you again!" I was a voracious reader of *Weird Tales* back in the late '80s and early '90s. I still have *Weird Tales* #290 (the Gene Wolfe issue? Memory fades after all these years) packed away in my sister's garage. Now, almost a decade later, I picked up a copy of *WT* #313 and it was like I never went away! Back then you truly lived up to your name; I can remember horror, fantasy, science fiction, and more than one story that was simply "unclassifiable" but nonetheless wonderful. Maybe everything else has gone to Hell in a handbasket, but *WT* is still a reliable good read. Congratulations and thank you.

WT #313 was uniformly excellent. I am not usually a "Swords & Sorcery" or "High Fantasy" fan, but Mr. Schweitzer's story was great fun and left me eager to read more of his work. (And I'm not just saying that because I sent a story along with this letter ...) "The Bible in Blood" took a second read, but proved well worth it; Ian Watson is an excellent writer who obviously did his research. (As a onetime regular Nazi-basher on the newsgroup <alt.revisionism>, I've studied the Holocaust in some detail; his descriptions of "Herzwalde" are chillingly accurate.)

Most impressive, though, was Christopher Lee Walters's "The Renfields." He managed to pull off the damn-near-impossible feat of creating a new spin on the "Goth/punk-vampire-clan story" — a quintessential vampire tale without a single vampire. "The Renfields" is the best piece of psychological horror I've read since Dennis Etchison's "The Dark Country"; I look forward to seeing more from him in your magazine and elsewhere.

So do we. Believe it or not, "The Renfields" was a first sale. We were *enormously* impressed. So was Teresa Nielsen-Hayden of Tor Books. And, thank you for welcoming us back, but we hope that you were (or could become through purchase of back issues) an equally voracious reader of the four issues of *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror*, which we now think of as *Weird Tales* #309, #310, #311, and #312 in all but name.

The Most Popular Story is a feature we hope to continue in every issue of *Weird Tales*, but that depends on those of you who write in and tell us which stories you liked or didn't. For #314, we received a scad of congratulations, but received so few comments on the actual stories that the voting was completely inconclusive.

Ah to have *but a fraction* of one of those bulging *Startling Stories* mailbags!

Editorial Book Reviews

by Darrell Schweitzer

Pulp Culture: The Art of Fiction Magazines

by Frank M. Robinson & Lawrence Davidson Collector's Press, Inc. (PO. Box 230986, Portland OR 97281) 1998, cloth, 204 pp. \$39.95

Frank M. Robinson is the author of distinguished novels in various fields (*The Power*, *The Glass Inferno*, this latter with Thomas Scortia).

Lawrence Davidson has interviewed hundreds of fiction writers on his radio program, including many pulpsters.

Together, drawing largely from Robinson's legendary collection of pulp magazines, they have here provided us with a glorious, nostalgic journey through the lurid delights of yesteryear.

There have been other books of pulp-magazine artwork, but this one is special. Technically, it is the finest yet done, with computer-mediated repairs to some of the covers, which have cleaned up rips and wrinkles, and brought out the colors until they glow like new.

Sometimes, admittedly, the covers of pulp magazines were better than the contents. I don't know that anyone wants to read very much of the contents of, say, *Terror Tales* (a "sex-and-sadism" pulp which superficially resembled *Weird Tales* but had the ridiculous formula that all the supernatural menaces had to turn out to be fakes); but the covers are kind of fun, in the way that the posters to '50s exploitation films are fun. And what about *Zeppelin Stories*, purveyor of that immortal classic, "The Gorilla of the Gasbags" or, for that matter, *Harlem Stories*, which attempted to appeal to black readers without transcending stereotypes? Then there were *Saucy Movie Stories* and *Spicy Mystery Stories* and several others of, let us say, dubious reader appeal today. To be fair, one wishes one could read some of the issues of *Black Mask* and *Oriental Stories* and the first issue of *Weird Tales* or that legendary rarity, *The Thrill Book*, which was almost a weird/fantasy magazine until the publisher chickened out and diluted it with straight adventure.

This book is a pictorial history of the entire pulp era, from its beginnings at the turn of the century (when covers were pure as the driven snow and often of high aesthetic merit) down through the pulp magazines' heyday of the '20s, then into the '30s and '40s when a kind of decadence set in, as pulps over-specialized (and H.P. Lovecraft commented that the next thing he expected would be a pulp called *New England Newsboy Adventures*) and the covers became more cluttered. There was a strange sidestep into soft-core pornography in the '30s, with all those "*Spicy*," "*Saucy*," and such titles — though there was not, alas, ever a *Spicy Zeppelin Stories*, the authors quickly point out.

You will see many, very famous covers: Jack Williamson's favorite tiger-in-the-sky painting for the *Weird Tales* serialization is reproduced in all its glory on page 5. The *Tarzan of the Apes* issue of *All-Story* is present, of course, as are many, many rarities most of us are never going to see in the (so to speak) flesh.

The book also includes pricing information of these pulp magazines, and for this we have our only quibble: the prices strike us as a little high and must apply only to the very finest copies. The Williamson *Weird Tales* (April 1933) is listed as being worth in excess of a hundred dollars. In our experience, you can find one a lot cheaper if you hunt around at conventions a bit. Perhaps not as fine a copy as depicted here, but you can find it. As for *Zeppelin Stories*, maybe not.

Arthur Clarke & Lord Dunsany: A Correspondence

edited by Keith Allen Daniels Anamnesis Press

(PO. Box 51115, Palo Alto CA 94303) 1998, 84pp., \$19.95

This is a book for the specialist, a bit pricey for a trade paperback of its size; but there will be specialists (your editor among them) who will just have to have it.

Sir Arthur Clarke is, of course, one of the greatest living science-fiction writers, and a leading visionary of the space age.

Lord Dunsany was one of the century's great fantasy writers, who has also been (posthumously) a regular contributor to *Weird Tales*. It is because of this connection that we're reviewing the present book.

Clarke struck up a correspondence with Dunsany in 1944, when Clarke was 30 and Dunsany 66. Dunsany was still actively writing, though his greatest works, *The Book of Wonder*, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, etc. were decades behind him. But Dunsany wasn't living in the past. What attracted Clarke to him was Dunsany's poetry about outer space. The early correspondence is largely about the dawning space age, which Clarke could see clearly. Dunsany's grasp of technical matters was less sure, but he too looked outward beyond the Earth. Both of them appreciated the aesthetics. Later letters move on to other topics, of considerable literary interest. Here we see Dunsany's first reaction to Lovecraft ("I see Lovecraft borrowed my style, and I don't grudge it to him.") and his responses to Clarke's own fiction.

The two discuss chess. They touch on numerous matters, literary and scientific. Clarke fishes for a Dunsanian blurb for his soon-to-be bestseller *The Exploration of Space* (and is a trifle embarrassed about his boldness in the afterword.)

An extremely worthwhile volume. Recommended.

The Boss in the Walls

by Avram Davidson and Grania Davis Tachyon Publications

(1459 18th St. #139, San Francisco CA 94107)
1998, 122 pp., \$50 (limited hardcover), \$12.00 (trade
paperback).

Both of your editors confess we are too much involved in Davidsonian affairs to review this volume, but we thought our readers would like to know that it has been published.

Avram Davidson was one of the all-time great . fantasy writers. He was the subject of a special issue of *Weird Tales* in 1989 and graced our pages many times thereafter. He was the author of *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, *The Adventures of Dr. Eszterhazy*, and numerous other classics.

This posthumous novella, completed by his some time collaborator and former wife from extensive scenes, fragments, and outlines, is as erudite as any thing Avram wrote, scarier than most, and of interest to his many fans, or just to anybody who enjoys imagination and good writing.

Q



by S.T. Joshi

The recent departure of James Turner as managing editor of Arkham House allows us to reflect upon his achievements during his more than twenty years as editorial director of the leading small press in the field of weird fiction, and also to consider whether any legitimate successors to Arkham House's position are in the offing.

To contemporary readers, all too many of whom are unaware that horror fiction did indeed flourish before the advent of Stephen King, the mystique that Arkham House continues to hold may perhaps be puzzling. Certainly, the fact that this publishing firm was founded by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei initially for the sole purpose of preserving H.P. Lovecraft's work in hardcover made Arkham House a monument to the devotion that friendship can inspire. The uniformity of design that Arkham House preserved under Derleth's editorship (with the celebrated "Holliston Black Novelex" covers and their gold spine stamping) lent an added distinctiveness to its publications. But Arkham House gained its devotees chiefly by being the principal hardcover publisher of such pulp legends as Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and Seabury Quinn, along with such of their disciples as Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, and Brian Lumley. Let it pass that much of what Arkham House published would probably never have been published by other hardcover firms on the basis of its actual quality: Arkham House's line nurtured a nostalgia for the pulp magazines even among those who had never lived during the pulp era.

Arkham House itself, of course, is by no means *passé*, although it was quiescent for much of 1996 and 1997. But over the last decade a number of other small presses have emerged to take up the slack in the wake of Arkham House's relative paucity of publications and its shift to "cutting edge" science fiction.

That shift — a significant point of criticism on the part of Arkham House loyalists and devotees of weird fiction in general — was in fact never as complete as many have believed. To be sure, books by Michael Bishop, Greg Bear, Lucius Shepard, Bruce Sterling, and other young science-fiction writers represented an increasing number of the two or three books that Arkham House annually published; some of these volumes did indeed have a significant horror content, but by and large they belonged in the realm of science fiction. We tend to forget, however, that Turner also arranged for the republication of Clark Ashton Smith's best work (*A Rendezvous in Averaigne* [1988]), and issued landmark collections of the fantasy tales of Tanith Lee (*Dreams of Dark and Light* [1986]) and the horror fiction of Ramsey Campbell (*Alone with the Horrors* [1993]). And, of course, there were the textually corrected editions of H.P. Lovecraft's work produced under my editorship, along with such Lovecraft-ian anthologies as the revised *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (1990) and *Cthulhu 2000* (1995). Even if some of Turner's other selections in the horror/fantasy field were suspect (David Case's *The Third Grave* [1981], David Kesterton's *The Darkling* [1982]), his continued nurturing of Russell Kirk and Basil Copper is noteworthy.

And yet, the gradual but inexorable shift from horror and fantasy to science fiction, under Turner's aegis, had some interesting and perhaps unexpected consequences. While each of the Arkham House publications remained impeccable both in design and in intrinsic literary quality, it is somewhat ironic that Arkham House had almost no impact upon the horror "boom" of the late 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps, indeed, it could not have; for with horror becoming a spectacularly commercial phenomenon with such best-selling writers as Stephen King, Peter Straub, Clive Barker, and Anne Rice, a small press could not possibly compete with the million-dollar advances offered by major publishers.

There is perhaps a still further irony: that "boom," now finally dying of inanition, has produced relatively little work of lasting literary merit; and now that the horror market is contracting in the commercial arena, perhaps it is once again time that small-press publishers in the field take their rightful position as both the preservers of the heritage of weird fiction and the vanguards of new and pioneering work.

Have any such publishers emerged? Several candidates are certainly putting themselves forward. Ash-Tree Press (P.O. Box 1360, Ashcroft, BC, Canada V0K 1A0) has in the last few years published a surprising number of reprints of classic ghost stories, and deserves the admiration of weird fiction devotees for its resurrection of the work of A.M. Burrage, H.R. Wakefield, E.G. Swain, and others. These reprints might be seen as analogous to Arkham House's reprints of the best work from the pulp magazines; but of course Arkham House was not content merely to revive older work, but actively fostered newer writing, something Ash-Tree has not done to any great extent. Moreover, the Ash-Tree Press books have extremely small print runs and are very expensive (something that does not seem to have changed even with the proprietors' move from England to Canada).

These same virtues and drawbacks also affect R.B. Russell's Tartarus Press (5 Birch Terrace, Hanging-birch Lane, Hiram, East Sussex TN21 0PA, England), which — similar to August Derleth's founding of Arkham House initially for the purpose of publishing Lovecraft's work in hardcover — began life devoted to the salvaging of Arthur Machen's fugitive writings. Russell has done outstanding work in gathering Machen's uncollected or unreprinted fiction (*Ritual and Other Stories* [1992; rev. ed. 1997]; *Ornaments in Jade* [1997]), issuing some of his immense body of essays and journalism (*The Secret of the Sangraal and Other Writings* [1995]), and even promoting criticism of Machen's life and work (*Machenalia* [1990]). Lately Russell has ventured into other realms, issuing the work of the modern Welsh writer Rhys Hughes (*Worming the Harpy and Other Bitter Pills*) and editing a volume of previously unpublished stories, *Tales from Tartarus* [1995]). He has also published my edition of the selected writings of the obscure nineteenth-century Irish writer Henry Ferris (*A Night with Mephistopheles* [1997]). But, as with Ash-Tree, the extremely limited print runs of Tartarus Press books (sometimes as few as 200 copies) make Russell's enterprise virtually invisible.

Necronomicon Press (P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893) has recently engaged in reissuing Clark Ashton Smith's work in thematically arranged volumes (*Tales of Zothique* [1995]; *The Book of Hyper-borea* [1996]), not to mention such curiosities as Ramsey Campbell's sword-&-sorcery tales (*Far Away & Never* [1996]) and the round-robin novel *Ghor, Kin-Slayer* (1997), based on a fragment by Robert E. Howard; but its series of chapbooks of original fiction has regrettably gone into abeyance. Instead, it continues to focus on Lovecraft's own work (*The Ancient Track* [1998], an edition of his complete poetry) or criticism of his life and work (my biography [1996], the first Necronomicon Press hardcover).

There are many other worthy small presses in our field, ranging from Kenneth Abner's Terminal Fright Publications (P.O. Box 100, Black River, NY 13612), which should be remembered if it issues nothing other than Brian McNaughton's scintillating collection of fantasy tales, *The Throne of Bones* [1997]) to Sam Gafford's Hobgoblin Press (P.O. Box 806, Bristol, RI 02809), which is about to embark on the ambitious enterprise of issuing the complete works of William Hope Hodgson in thirteen or so volumes, to Perry M. Grayson's Tsathoggua Press (6442 Pat Avenue, West Hills, CA 91307), devoted to works by or about Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, and others of the Lovecraft circle. But perhaps the most notable small press of recent years is Fedogan & Bremer (3721 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406).

This company began existence in the late 1980s on a somewhat curious premise: it was consciously determined to succeed Arkham House by publishing those works which August Derleth or Donald Wandrei had, as early as the 1960s, announced for publication but never in fact issued. And yet, F&B's first "publication" was not a book but a tape recording of Lovecraft's sonnet cycle *Fungi from Yuggoth* (1986), capably read by John Arthur, although the musical background by Michael Olson is a little too obtrusive and "New Age" for my taste. Another three years passed before F&B actually issued a volume: Donald Wandrei's *Colossus* (1989; out of print). This book had indeed been announced for publication in various Arkham House catalogues, but the finished book does not duplicate Wandrei's conception for it. He had envisioned it to contain nothing more than the long story "Colossus" (1934), its even longer sequel "Colossus Eternal" (1934), and a lengthy introduction. (Wandrei had told

Richard L. Tierney that there was to be a third, unpublished story as well, but whether this story was ever written is in doubt; if it was, it was not found among Wandrei's effects after his death on October 15, 1987.) Evidently the editors of the F&B *Colossus*, Philip J. Rahman and Dennis E. Weiler; found this idea too constricting, so they chose to issue a large volume containing the entirety of Wandrei's science-fiction tales, gathered from his previous Arkham House volumes (*The Eye and the Finger* [1944] and *Strange Harvest* [1965]) and containing several uncollected tales as well. It was not until eight years later that F&B got around to issuing the tales of horror and fantasy for which Wandrei is best known, but that volume has now finally emerged: *Don't Dream* (1997).

These two volumes allow, for perhaps the first time, a comprehensive study of Wandrei's work as a writer of imaginative fiction. While I do not have the space here to conduct such a study, I can at least suggest some avenues for exploration. In the first place, the distinction between "horror" and "science fiction" is pretty tenuous in Wandrei's work; like his mentor Lovecraft, Wandrei was a pioneer in the fusion of these two realms. The editors of these two volumes acknowledge that in some cases the distinction is merely a matter of emphasis.

Wandrei's earliest fictional works were sketches or prose poems in the *Minnesota Quarterly*, the student magazine at the University of Minnesota. Several of these (mostly gathered in a separate section of "Prose Poems, Essays, and Marginalia" in *Don't Dream*) are uncommonly fine, revealing a verbal witchery that would endure throughout Wandrei's literary career. But as early as 1927, when he was nineteen, Wandrei had broken into *Weird Tales* with "The Red Brain," and for the next half-dozen years that magazine would be his chief market. But when *Astounding Stories* revived under Street & Smith's ownership in 1933, Wandrei quickly switched gears and wrote a substantial number of science-fiction tales that made him one of the luminaries of the pre-John W Campbell era. These latter stories are, of course, chiefly gathered in *Colossus*, although a fair number appear in *Don't Dream*. Along the way Wandrei also broke into such rarefied markets as *Esquire* and *Argosy*.

Lovecraft believed that Wandrei possessed one of the most genuinely cosmic imaginations of any writer he knew, and certainly this is his chief distinguishing characteristic. "The Red Brain" (originally titled "The Twilight of Time") is perhaps a somewhat juvenile expression of the idea, but the tale still works for me. Even now I get a kick in reading the story's conclusion, when the only hope of halting the spread of the "Cosmic Dust" that is overwhelming all entity seems to reside in the brain of the title: "The hope of the universe had lain with the Red Brain. And the Red Brain was mad."

Then there is "Colossus," recognized as a landmark of science fiction even though it seems to raise more chuckles than thrills today. But I remain capable of suspending my disbelief at the thought of a spaceship that can "reach a maximum velocity of thousands of light-years, *per second!*" and thereby break through the known space-time continuum into another realm in which our own universe is itself but an atom. (At the same time, of course, the inhabitants of the spacecraft become as large as our universe, rendering it impossible for them ever to return to it.) "Colossus" is a story whose breadth of scope is such that it could not be encompassed within a single story, and its sequel — although no doubt inspired also by commercial considerations — thereby became a necessity.

In both his science-fiction and his horror tales, Wandrei is capable of achieving certain moments of utterly unnerving terror or awe that go far in redeeming his several deficiencies — occasionally slipshod writing, clumsiness in the handling of plot sequences, wooden or unconvincing characters, and poor dialogue. Perhaps his best weird tale is "The Eye and the Finger" (*Esquire*, December 1936), a madly irrational tale in which an ordinary man returns to his cheerless apartment to find a disembodied eye on the top of his bureau and, later, a hand hanging in midair with its finger pointed directly at him. No explanation is made to account for these bizarre events; they simply occur, and the diction is so matter-of-fact that we are compelled to believe it. "The Tree-Men of M'Bwa" (*Weird Tales*, February 1932) is not far behind in its depiction of individuals who have become living trees.

Wandrei's literary career was largely over by 1940. Why this is the case has never been satisfactorily explained. Richard L. Tierney's long and detailed introduction to *Colossus* offers some hints, but no more. Certainly, Wandrei's induction into the army in 1942 would not have allowed much time for creative work; but even upon his discharge in 1945 he made no effort to renew his literary career with the exception of preparing his novel *The Web of Easter Island* for publication in 1948. Of course, Wandrei was spending a great deal of time editing Lovecraft's letters (and it should be noted that the final two volumes of *Selected Letters*, appearing in 1976, seem largely to be based upon compilations by Wandrei even though they do not bear his name as coeditor), and Tierney asserts that it was Wandrei who did the bulk of the selection and editing of Derleth's fine anthology of macabre poetry, *Dark of the Moon* (1947). Over the next several years he engaged in brief stints at comic-book writing and songwriting, but only a few stories were produced.

By the 1950s, however, fortunes took a marked turn for the worse for Wandrei's family, and he was forced to spend more and more time taking care of his ailing mother and sister. The death of his brother Howard in 1956 did not help matters. In letters to Derleth, Wandrei frequently announced that he was at work on a variety of massive philosophical or aesthetic treatises, none of which were published and may not have been completed or even begun. His last work of fiction appears to have been the poignant end-of-the-world story, "Requiem for Mankind," published in Derleth's final anthology, *Dark Things* (1971).

I may note here that in 1932 and 1933 Wandrei wrote two novels in quick succession. One of them — whose original title was *Dead Titans, Waken!* — is what we know as *The Web of Easter Island*. The other — long thought to be lost — survives in manuscript as *Invisible Sun*. This latter is a mainstream novel, although with occasional fantastic elements, and contains some of Wandrei's finest and most daring writing. The manuscript for *Dead Titans, Waken!* also survives, and is markedly different from its later revision; a case could be made that it is somewhat more effective in its original form. These two novels will be published by F&B in one volume under my editorship.

F&B's most significant contribution to weird fiction to date is the publication of two volumes of Howard Wandrei's fiction, *Time Burial* (1995) and *The Last Pin* (1997); the first contains his horror and fantasy fiction, the second some of his detective tales. I had previously known next to nothing of Howard Wandrei aside from the fact that he was a superlatively brilliant artist and illustrator; as for his fiction, I could recall nothing save for Lovecraft's quip when he heard the title of Wandrei's "The Hand of the O'Mecca": "It sounds like an Irish Arab." Later, when Lovecraft actually read that story, he remarked in a letter to R.H. Barlow (April 20, 1935): "I'm hang'd if I don't think the kid is, all apart from his pictorial genius, getting to be a better *writer* than big bwuvver!" There is good reason to believe that Lovecraft was right.

I actually wish to consider Wandrei's detective stories first, even though they are obviously outside the purview of the weird tale. Although Wandrei initially attempted to duplicate his brother Donald's success in horror fiction, and had a few items published in *Weird Tales*, by the 1930s he seemed to sense that hard-boiled mystery was where his strengths lay.

He quickly gained a foothold in both the "spicy" pulps issued by Culture Publications and the various magazines of the Trojan Publishing Corporation chain. These latter, like the spices, wanted a lacing of sex and nudity — which also seems to have come naturally to Howard, as it rarely did to his more strait-laced brother Donald — but, unlike the spices, wanted no incursion of the supernatural. The result was a really admirable series of substantial novelettes written under a variety of pseudonyms. Perhaps they are not quite up to the Raymond Chandler standard — but then, whose are?

Two of the most piquant are "The Man with the Molten Face" and "League of Bald Men," which both feature a unique detective — Ferris Gerard, the mayor of the small town of Niles Park, who had suffered a horrible accident in which much of his face was mutilated. A remarkable surgical operation, using some sort of resin to take the place of his destroyed jaw, allows Gerard literally to remold his face at will and thereby conceal his identity. Implausible as this may be, Wandrei manages to pull it off. "League of Bald Men" is to my mind one of the most enthralling tales ever to come out of the detective pulps; with little alteration it could be adapted today into an exciting action film. Many of the other tales in *The Last Pin* are not far behind.

Wandrei was apparently forced by magazine requirements to throw in a certain amount of sex or sexual situations beyond the requirements of the narrative; but it is interesting to note that, according to a note by D.H. Olson, editor of the two Howard Wandrei books, "the versions of [some of the] stories reprinted here . . . are appreciably more risqué than those which were actually printed" in the magazines. Wandrei had a particular flair for describing women's costumes and overall appearance; he displays far more knowledge than most male writers do in points of clothing, makeup, and the like.

The interesting thing is that many of the stories in *Time Burial* are also of the hard-boiled type, but of course they cross the line into the supernatural. Perhaps this would not have been a surprise to the original readers of the magazines (notably *Spicy Mystery Stories*), since this mingling of detection and the weird was the premise on which these magazines were based. But reading these stories now, we gain an added thrill when we find some crime scenario veering off insidiously into the supernatural.

I do not find any moments of that clutching fear that distinguishes a few of Donald Wandrei's tales; but on the whole there can be no question that Howard Wandrei was a notably more polished and skillful writer than his brother.

D.H. Olson's lengthy introductions to both *Time Burial* and *The Last Pin* should be singled out for praise. Although they in part cover the same ground (understandably so, since the books are designed for different audiences), they tell a compelling story of Howard Wandrei's strange life —

a life that included an arrest for burglary at the age of seventeen and several years spent in a reformatory, a turbulent marriage, suspicion of wrongdoing in the later 1940s when some members of Trojan Publications were indicted for embezzlement, and an early death of cirrhosis of the liver.

Two more volumes of Howard Wandrei's mystery tales are promised, along with at least one volume of Donald's detective tales. If F&B had done nothing but issue these books by the Wandrei brothers, they would deserve the gratitude of lovers of the weird.

I have not left myself much space to discuss F&B's several other publications, even though these other titles are somewhat uneven. Robert M. Price has produced two volumes of "Cthulhu Mythos" barrel-scrappings in *Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos* and *The New Lovecraft Circle*, and F&B has made another error in publishing Richard L. Tierney's disappointing Mythos novel, *The House of the Toad*. But they are to be commended for issuing Karl Edward Wagner's last story collection, *Exorcisms and Ecstasies*, two collections of Hugh B. Cave's work, *The Door Below* and *Death Stalks the Night*, and books by Robert Bloch, Basil Copper, Carl Jacobi, and other standbys. On the whole, the F&B line shows careful judgment in the publication of old-time pulp material as well as newer work. It and other small presses may well be leaving commercial firms behind in perpetuating the best that our field has to offer. Q

THE MAD ARAB RETURNS

Higgeldy piggeldy, Abdul Alhazred came
Back from the Darkness to pen something new.
His agent had told him, "Your readers are raving.
Sequels are hot, Ab; write *Al Azif II*"

— Lawrence Barker

STARS ABOVE, STARS BELOW

by Tanith Lee

illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

When the dust-storm had ended, Taira walked out into the desert. A court woman, she could not travel quite unattended. But she left her guard at the Temple of the Gate, pretending she was going in to pray. And her little slave, Aspa, she left in the last oasis by the road. By now, used to her whims, Aspa did not scold her; he was ten years old, at eight he had been impossible.

Taira walked along the road, then off the road into the rust-coloured desert, which was, in the sunfall, the soft shade of a fading, browning rose.

One final palm tree stood up from the dunes. A huge red palm, with beneath it a small altar to the desert God. Votary offerings left there had been covered with fine pink sand from the storm-breath of the God, who was savage, thankless, and unkind.

Taira's feet were bare, for court women went barefoot in the palace and city, whose floors and upper streets were kept as smooth as glass. Warmth remained in the sand like a caress. She found this comforting, yet the comfort was useless. Everything had been tinged by utter loss. It was so enormous that she scarcely felt it as anything separate. The loss had become like breathing, or even awareness. Loss was not a condition of life. Since the age of fourteen, Taira had served the priestess-queen Het-Ambaret. And this month, Het-Ambaret had died. Already the death ritual had been spoken. There was one line of it which said: *The lamp of my heart has been put out. Though it may again be lighted, never again will it burn with the same flame of love.*

Tonight, when the Lion Moon rose, the death barge would set sail upon the river. Taira would stand in the barge behind the sarcophagus of Het-Ambaret. It was a journey of three nights and two days, to reach the Tomb.

Taira, the chief maiden of a priestess-queen, was proud. She did not want anyone to see her weep. So she walked into the desert of Kumr Ar to do it. And here she was, a mile from the marble city, a mile from the cool river.

Dimly on the sky, the city lights glimmered, and Taira caught the strands of some music, teased out by the last wind-breath of the desert God. Above, the stars had unveiled themselves; and the little moon, the Kid, was coming up, tiny and almost opaque; but later the smallest of all, the Blue Moon, would rise, glowing, the Virgin.

Peace lay in the cup of the desert, as well as terror and violence. For this Taira had come here. But as she stood alone, and composed herself for grief, no tears rushed from her eyes. She felt their pain, their scald, but no release.

She thought that she, a being of red amber like the planet, must now be growing dry like the planet, barren of water. But the planet was old, and she was young.

Taira thought deeply of Het-Ambaret. Her grace and beauty, her playfulness, her serenity, her gentleness. She had never struck Taira, or any of her women. And once, when Taira had been sad, over some love-affair, Het-Ambaret had singled her out, and come to console her, staying with her a whole afternoon. A Skilled huntress, Het-Ambaret had even once brought Taira a portion of the kill, a sign of high favour, at which the surrounding court clapped, laughing, praising Taira and wishing her good fortune.

And now Het-Ambaret lay in her gilded coffin-box, which showed on its painted lid the image of the priestess-queen as she had been in life.

Thinking still, Taira could not weep.

So she thought of Het-Ambaret divining in the temple of her Goddess, moving among the sacred things, pausing, selecting, while the priests wrote her findings on their slates. She had seldom been wrong, even in great age. As, in age, she had never lost her beauty, becoming only thinner, and more inclined to meditate and to sleep. At last she slept and did not wake. It was Taira who found her, in her gilded chair on the terrace. The moons were high in the sky, all three, the Blue Virgin the smallest and lowest and brightest of them, giving her lucency to the night like water.

Long ago, Het-Ambaret would have gone up to the highest roof, and sat there, all her ladies about her, if she had the energy to climb so far up the palace steps; sometimes Taira followed alone. And then quite

often Het-Ambaret would vanish away. The cool of night would grow chilly even in summer. The women often walked down again without their queen, knowing that she had sought solitude, and was communing with the heavens.

Thinking, thinking, still, still Taira could not weep. She gazed up into the sky. The little pale-grey moon had moved some way, and already she should turn back.

She had not shed her tears. They lay inside her like drops of hot iron. Dry like the planet, dry with sorrow, Taira returned across the desert.

At the oasis, Aspa came out without a word, and pattered after her, carrying her folded wooden parasol. At the Temple of the Gate, the guardsman, not knowing where Taira had gone, complacently fell in behind the boy.

Along the glass-smooth marble streets they went, towards the palace of columns, the stair, the quay where the barge waited on the river.



Gongs sounded from the temples and all the high places of the city, to mark the rising of the Lion Moon, which was white, like lions of the desert.

The death barge of Het-Ambaret slid from the quay, itself a phantom.

The women sang: "She will go up . . ."

Ten rowers dipped and stirred with their oars, making hardly any sound start from the thick, shining waters of the river. Above, against the darkness, lit by all its red and rosy lights, the polished sandstone columns railed the facades of slender buildings, the great open windows, hung each one with a fretted golden or silver lamp. To the river's edge descended terraced gardens, planted with palms and traceried tinsel trees, where night birds called in wild moon-voices. But all these things swam by, and were soon gone. The lesser, more sombre fringes of the city soon appeared, and wharfs lit by fire-baskets, where soldiers stood, raising their spears to salute the barge. Then the wharfs gave way to vineyards and to fields, pierced by canals, until everything melted into the desert. Presently, on the farthest inland horizon, three tall, volcanic mountains were visible, and farthest of all a volcano called the Torch, on which a blush of flame faintly flickered always.

The river grew wider then, opening out, and the desert, and its intermittent garland of palms, moved to a distance. Now there were predominantly only night and water.

It became cold. The river flowed here from the Mountains of Ice. All rivers flowed from these mountains. All rivers flowed from these mountains, crossing by and through the cities built mathematically on their banks, and so on down to the abstract Sea of Smokes. But the Place of the Tombs was not so far away as that.

The Kid was low in the sky now, and the Blue Virgin smouldered between the volcanoes. Around the white Lion, stars burned in clusters. The river shone, but nothing reflected in its movement save in fragments, not even stars or moons.

In an arbor at the boat's centre, the painted case lay, with the queen in it. How small the coffin looked.

Two ladies sat on either side, and two at the front. But Taira must stand behind the coffin, a sentinel. It was her duty, and the honour shown her.

Over her head hung the veil of mourning.

The women sang, sobbing sometimes, the death hymn. Taira listened. But the hymn seemed remote, not even sorrowful. The barge was ghostly; and the passing of the city, the threads of land now unravelling on either side, here and there set with an oasis, or some monument or statue, interested her but vaguely, so her mind wandered.

She will go up among the stars.

Like a star she will live among the stars.

She will be winged as the stars

Are winged, with light.

The soft drum beat in the stern, making the stroke for the rowers.

If one looked carefully, on a clear night, a lion's face might be made out on the surface of the Lion Moon. But Taira could not see it. After an hour or so, another dust-storm, rising elsewhere on the land, obscured the lion's face with a tawny veil like Taira's own.

The colouring of Taira's people was inside one spectrum. The hair, if undyed, mahogany red, the eyes reddish bronze, jasper, amber, the skin all the tones of reddish tan, from shades like powder to the depth of a copper mirror. But Het-Ambaret had been of another kind. She was generally black, and her eyes gold, freckled with shadow.

This the painting on the cask-lid showed exactly.

As the barge continued downriver, sometimes people came by day to the banks, and threw flowers into the water. Or, at certain points, where temples of the Goddess had been built, a privileged few might row out, and be permitted, while the barge was at anchor, to step on board.

Children stared at the painting of Het-Ambaret in wonder

There were others of the queen's kind, but in this region only seven, and now she was gone.

"Was she truly black?" the children asked Taira.

"As black as night," said Taira.

"But her eyes were golden stars," said a little boy, prophetically. Taira thought of Aspa, who was not prophetic at all.

The other women were moved. They cried openly. But Taira's tears stayed locked inside, hurting against her.

"She was the loveliest and best," said Taira, in a calm voice.

This was on the first day, and in the purple sky the sun blazed.

At noon, the barge again put down anchor. Under an awning, the women slept, as the rowers slept at their oars. Taira did not sleep. This was part of the ritual, and a herbal wine had been prepared, to help

her stay wakeful. But Taira felt no need to sleep, had forgotten sleep.

The women had begun to tell her, from a few days after the queen's death, that they saw Het-Ambaret in their dreams. The priestess-queen was alive then, and spoke to them in her own magical language, which they had partially come over the years to understand. Her voice, as they recalled, was like a pale golden chime.

In the dreams, she was as she had been in her youth, plumper, and silken haired; but also she now, of course, had wings.

From Taira alone, pain apparently excluded such a visitation. Not once had she dreamed of the priestess-queen, though during Het-Ambaret's life, Taira had often dreamed of her. And as the post-mortem dreams failed Taira, so she had gradually given up sleep. In a way, it was similar with her tears; she would not, then could not shed them.

Today as the rest slept, she sat by the coffin-cask, and leaned her cheek against the planed wood. She spoke to Het-Ambaret in her mind. There were no reproaches — Why did you leave me? — mortal things had little choice.

Instead Taira thought, *Do you remember all those years ago, when we were so young, and we played the ball game in court? Or, Remember how happy we were when you first predicted the end of the drought, and the rain came, the first in two years . . . But then, Oh, where are you ?*

In the ancient time of myth there had been a Flood, which covered all things. But before that time, the stories said, people had been winged even in life, and had flown out to the moons, even to a place on the tiny Blue Moon, and built cities there. This country of the Blue Moon was like Kmur Ar, the Red Land, also a desert, with one vast river.

Myth told too how the Land of Life beyond life had its entrance in the skies between the planet and the Blue Moon. Here the planet's river flowed up mysteriously into the purple sky. At first there was sunset, and then night, black night sown thick with stars. But one would know it was not the night of the land of mortal life. Because all at once the river, though it still flowed onwards, turned also to utter black, and was set with stars. So you drifted in your boat of death, between the star-gilded banks, where silver palm trees grew, and stars shone bright above, and just as bright and fixed they shone below in the river, and there was the sound of mystical sweet pure singing, beyond all physical voices ever heard.

At last, a sunrise would commence at the end of the river of stars, and here the Afterlife began.

The Afterlife held no censure, no punishment for any, and even for the worst transgression there was merely teaching, grief, empathic penitence and expiation. Which would at last fade away into the delight and freedom of eternity. But no one had described, even in myth, the nature of the Afterlife, beyond its indescribable bliss. They told only of the river of stars above and stars below which led serenely into it.

Het-Ambaret was supposedly there.

I must recollect that she is, thought Taira. I must hope that she is.

And she was, if so, glad for Het-Ambaret. So glad. But she thought too that never again in ordinary life would she, Taira, be able to see or hear Het-Ambaret, or softly smooth and comb her hair, or feel the warmth of her touch, or smell the fragrance of her — not once. This was as if it had been said to Taira, *Summer will never return* — or worse — *Summer never was real.*

They passed three more cities. At the third a great ceremony was held, and hundreds of voices soared in the hymn to the dead. Gold and silver and jewels flashed, and flocks of birds clouded from the trees, while the sacred Ibu dipped their beaks in the river. The scaled river serpents which had legs, padded up to the bank. They were thrown bread soaked in wine and red honey. They snapped the loaves up, jaws clashing, and the Ibu drew back, offended.

Taira, many nights and days now without sleep, her blood full of unshed tears, felt pain like a spike driven through her. So much *life* — and this little death that filled the world. She seemed herself so light her feet did not meet the deck of the boat.

She drank some of the herbal wine. Not to keep from slumber—for surely she would never sleep again — but to stop her thirst — her dryness, her drought.

They poured honey before Het-Ambaret's cask, and put down dishes of baked meat and river fish, and beer and milk, for her Goddess liked all these things, and she had liked some of them.

A handsome man from a high family leant over the coffin and laid on it a pink lily, the kind that grew tail among the reeds. Het-Ambaret's women fluttered, even in their sadness. On his long dark hair the sun found streams of brilliant copper red; his eyes and skin were very dark.

That evening, just before the barge departed on the last stretch of the journey, this man came aboard again, and bowed to Taira.

"Lady, may I hope to see you again, in happier times?"

"You are kind," she said, "to wish me happier times."

"At the great city below the Torch, in a month, might I visit you? Meanwhile, may your sorrow leave you and joy return."

She saw in his dark eyes a promise of sexual desire, and perhaps more, perhaps the ember of love. Only these had made him precipitate. He was not unsympathetic. At any other hour she would have quickened.

But not now.

She smiled sadly at him. She was too courteous to say, *Do not trouble*.

The rowers rowed them away.

The swift sunset poured out like red honey into moments of lilac twilight. The night rose, with all the stars above.

Taira thought of Het-Ambaret, her body held firm and pristine by the embalming of the priests.

Taira thought of kissing for the last time the soft brow of the priestess-queen, which had grown cold, and hollow and doll-like with death. And of her shut eyes, the suns of which would never be revealed again.

Taira's tears moved behind her whole face, a wall of water, a Flood, the inundation. But all her doors were locked against them. She had lost the key.

On the third night, they came to the City of the Dead, which lay far downriver, but still many miles from the Sea of Smokes, where all the planet's waters finally perished in boiling steam — so travelers declared.

The drum had stopped beating. The rowers raised their oars. The barge rocked mildly, and the current alone moved it.

They drifted in among rows of towering tombs, which ran for miles beside the river and out into the dunes, and even went down into the water itself, like marble and sandstone animals which had come there to drink.

Reeds grew here taller than a palace guard, whose head must always at least touch the lintel of each city's Soldiers House. The pink lilies had gathered in nets, and the purple irises which matched the sky. But now the lilies were simply pale, and the iris black.

There was a colonnade of pillars that led away from the river. The river ran off in a canal there, between them. The barge went into the canal without any guidance.

A current existed in the canal, perhaps natural, quite swift.

The rowers sat silent at their oars, and the women sat silent. But Taira raised her head and saw the stars above the columns, and under her hands she felt the wood of the painted box. She thought, *Now they will take even this from me*.

The death temple of Het-Ambaret's Goddess came from the night at the end of the canal. Before it had been made a great statue of the Goddess. Thought a giant, she was formed like any woman of Taira's people, but from the way her face had been carved, her nose and ears and mouth, one saw she was really of Het-Ambaret's kind.

She had a collar of skeins of colored precious stones, and earrings of gold. In her carven skirt was a door. Which, as the barge approached, moved slowly open without a sound.

The barge slipped in through the door, and dropped anchor.

Steps ascended from the water, to a terrace, where priests and priestesses were gathering now. They carried tapers, which burned like a thousand golden eyes of the dead.

The painted casket of the queen was taken up, and carried among the priesthood, and Taira walked after, her head held high. They were singing in the voices of life, the praises of Het-Ambaret. And Taira sang with them.

Suddenly, without shame or fear, without thought, the tears flooded easily from Taira's eyes, and dropped like heavy rain, striking her feet in hot, wet, unhurtful blows. It was so easy to weep, after all. It was so easy, so simple.

The light of the tapers glittered on her tears.

The hymn said now: *Her body is here, her body held in memory, The memorial of our respect and honour, The avowal of her beauty and virtue. But she is in the land of life, Where for ever she is living, As in the heart, forever she is loved.*

All Het-Ambaret's women wept, loudly now, sobbing, and holding each other's hands. Taira with them.

The voices of the priesthood sang high up, sweet and pure, the prologue of supernatural songs to come.

For the beauty of the world was only an echo of a higher world.

All things must die, every man and woman, every beast, every tree and reed. Even the planet, Kmur Ar, the Red Land, one day would be a husk that lay empty upon the shore of a dusty sky. But the river of stars would remain.

Taira thought, I could not weep, it was impossible, and now I weep. It is so simple to weep. I could not love any other, but now I can, it is so simple to love. And I have thought it is impossible to live beyond death. But I shall live beyond death, and I shall see her again, and hold her in my arms, my queen, who lives beyond death now. And this too will be simple and easy. As easy as weeping.

For a moment, neither a vision nor a dream, only a thought, Taira saw Het-Ambaret flying, winged, with a star on her forehead. And Taira's tears in the taper

light made the stone roof above sparkle, as if with stars, and where her tears had fallen on the stone floor, they sparkled too like the stars below.

Author's note:

To speculate an ancient race might once have lived? on the planet we call Mars, is fanciful, but not entirely ridiculous. More fanciful is, perhaps, the notion that at one time the 'Martians' reached the planet called by us Earth, and validated our own species. That a younger Mars generated water-courses seems to be a fact. But if so, fancy again conjures a recognizable resemblance between a waning desert Mars, her civilization clinging to the banks of yet-fertile rivers, and the Black Land of Egypt, a desert quenched only by the nurturing Nile.

In Egypt, certainly, the cat — whose kind may well have originated there — was loved and revered. Used in temples as diviners, and worshipped directly in the person of the cat goddess Bastet (Bast, Pasht), cats had servants and slaves allocated to them, and lived royally. If anyone killed a cat, the sentence was death — if the crowd had not already stoned the murderers or torn them in pieces. After their lives, sacred cats, like high-caste humans, were mummified, and buried, sometimes with regal and priestly rites, as the cat necropolis at Bubastis on the Nile bears witness.

As for the mysteries of true love and true loss, they have many forms, and are surely universal among any race, human or otherwise, which possesses imagination, compassion, and emotion.

Q

THE MONODON MONOCEROS

*"The little whale with rare and giant horn,
The narwhal is one type of unicorn."*

— Anonymous Rime

As grand as any fierce rhinoceros,
Archaic and majestic and uncouth,
Behold the *Monodon monoceros*!
His own straight horn is nothing more, in truth,
And nothing less than one long, huge, front tooth,
Evolved through time from need by nature's law:
Once prized for oil and ivory horn, forsooth,
As well as for those ivories in his jaw
The narwhal yet lives on! — a thing of miracle and awe:

Into what further stars, beyond all earthly care,
Might he, like other species past, himself withdraw,
With all his kind, to seek the seas of Otherwhere?

No fancy lingo can disguise that everything is linked:
His gain to Otherwhere means . . . here he would become
extinct!

— Donald Sidney-Fryer

I MET A BEAST WITH CLOVEN THOUGHTS

I visited the wivern. It began as a whim, on summer nights when Splinters of Stars passed near enough to touch.	<i>I've lost myself. the muted wings of the fiend spread across my mind; into memories echoing madly.</i>
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In the tabloids I had read of people who disembark and wander an astral plane. Those nights I tried to be like them. I floated, or so I thought, above myself, and tried to find my cat who'd wandered off beneath the moon.	<i>wayward thoughts themselves burgeoning mime-like silent, feeling utterly alien with eyes like ice this disjointed terror of prey. let me think.</i>
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I found instead this wivern, soaring above a land of barren cliffs. This creature thinks two thoughts at once. It makes me feel a bit unhinged.	<i>a desperate worm sodden, stranger still lost and cold possesses me, it truly does.</i>
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— Steven Rogers

UNTIL TIME CRACKS

by John B. Rosenman

illustrated by Fredrik King

Speers, the manager, didn't notice the figure until he was locking the theater doors. He watched it glide across the darkened stage, thinking that something in its manner was strangely familiar. After a moment he turned, waddled down the aisle, and stood directly before the stage.

"Here now, you'll have to leave!"

The figure froze, then turned toward him.

"The king my father! Dost thy spirit speak?"

Speers moved closer. "You're not supposed to be here, Mister. You have to go!"

An arm rose, thrust out at him. "Where wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further." "

Speers frowned, recognizing the line. Could this fool think he was Hamlet, meeting the ghost of his murdered father? Or maybe he was just drunk. Either way, Speers was not about to let an incident mar the play's successful run.

"If you don't leave, I'll call the police!"

"Say'st thou so, poor ghost? And dost thou *truly* see me?" The figure leapt forward and knelt at the front of the stage, window light bisecting its face.

Speers felt stunned. So quick, and spoken with such conviction! Now this nut knelt above him with half his face in darkness, half in moonlight. Speers rubbed his eyes as if to break a spell.

"Look," he faltered, "you can't —"

"Thy hand, my lord, and a leap of faith awaits!"

Speers blinked at the hand held down to him and reached up without thinking. Before he knew it, he was hoisted into the air, swung about, and deposited on stage. As he landed, a coin fell from his pocket and rolled across the boards.

"You must be mad!"

A dim smile. "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." "

"Stop quoting from the play!"

"How shall I address thee, then? In the vulgar parlance of the times?"

"Yes!" Speers started to add something when he noticed how the man was dressed. Cloak, ruffs, doublet, hose, medallion . . . yep, the whole bit. As if it weren't enough to have a crazy who thought he was Hamlet, he had to *dress* like him as well!

Speers started to edge around the man, thinking that if he reached the control panel, he could shed enough sanity on the situation to dispel a hundred nut cases. Let him try reciting the bard in the glare of klieg lights!

But as he moved around him, the man majestically raised his hand. "Stay."

And Speers stayed. As if transfixed, he could go no farther.

"I'm not mistaken? You really *do* see me?" the man said, his language becoming more like that of the twentieth century.

Speers swallowed, wishing he had sent this lunatic flying through the door by now. But then, despite the poor light, he could tell that the man was far taller and more athletic than he. Not that it would be hard, for Speers, who had never married, was a squat man who had often heard himself called a 'fat little runt.' More than physical fear, though, there was something about this man that... held him.

"Yes," he said, "I really do see you."

"Praise the stars!" The man pressed his hand to his forehead in what should have been a ham actor's gesture but instead conveyed vast and compelling relief. Speers squinted, seeing the man's features more clearly. So sensitive and intelligent they were, so brooding and tormented.

The man dropped his hand and whirled, his elegant, patterned cloak swirling. Strange. Hadn't Hamlet worn a plain "inky cloak" to "denote" he was grieving for his father, the dead king? But then the play was so vast and Hamlet wore different costumes and displayed countless facets. Prince, philosopher, mourner, madman, lover and learned swordsman: these and others denoted but did not exhaust the role's limitless range.

The man swung gracefully back. "When you first spoke and I turned, methought I saw my father 'In my mind's eye.' So 'tis not strange that I addressed you as if you *were* my father's ghost. Indeed, for a moment I thought it so. But even if it were, the truth about myself is stranger. You see, I am ..."

Speers waited, wondering if the man was an escaped mental patient.

"Well, what are you?" he finally said. "An intruder? A deranged spectator who's seen this play once too often and actually thinks he's Hamlet? Who *are* you, man? If you tell me, maybe I can get you some help."

The other slowly raised a long, tapered finger. It wove in the air like a succulently baited hook and caught Speers's attention despite himself. He watched the finger turn and end up pointing at its owner.

"I," the man intoned, "am Hamlet's ghost."

"Come again?"

A sigh, prolonged and heartfelt. "I am Hamlet's spirit, doomed forever to walk these boards. Sometime after the first few performances, I found myself alive, speaking lines through an actor, then wandering alone afterward on the empty stage. It was as if I'd been suddenly just summoned into being."

" 'Summoned into being'?"

"Alas, yes. That first night I even beheld Shakespeare, my glorious creator! And for nearly four centuries now, wherever *Hamlet* has been performed, there too I must abide. Whether 'tis a professional troupe, or the rankest and most foul, I am conjured without my consent and must accompany the actor who assumes my name."

Slowly, he turned and gazed out at the dark and empty theater. "Ere you laugh, know'st that the play is now being performed on stages in nineteen different countries on this ancient globe, and that I exist in multiple guises upon them all. Such is my fate!"

Speers stared at the shadowy presence, forgetting his fears that the 'intruder' was a dangerous psychotic. The man spoke with such a compelling mixture of modern and outdated English that he seemed indeed to be the historical embodiment of the role. If Hamlet had trod the boards of a million stages in the past four hundred years, he might very well speak and act this way.

No, *he* was the one acting crazy now! This man was a fruitcake pure and simple, as cracked and demented as they came. He'd better get help fast.

But before he could do anything, the man skipped toward him and lightly touched his shoulder. "O'er the centuries, I've seen thousands of actors 'drown the stage with tears' and strive to capture my essence. From Booth to Burton, Burbage to Barrymore, all have failed. Sometimes, perchance, they have come nigh. But all have been found wanting. Garrick was too bombastic, Olivier too dreamy, Chamberlain too Hollywood. Oh, their names are legion! Suffice it to say that a thousand times I've hoped, nay, ten thousand times I've prayed, but always, *always*, I've seen my dearest wish dashed. 'Swounds, I've endured it, knowing always, though I know not how, that if just *once* an actor succeeded in becoming me, that at last, I would be set free!"

Rapt, ethereal, cursed — so did the face appear in the shadows. Speers tore his gaze away to the dim, barely seen reaches beyond the stage. In infinite distance, perhaps, the mezzanine and the upper balcony rose. Or perhaps it was the sixteenth century again, and it was an open-aired, three-galleried playhouse of Shakespeare's own time....

His eyes returned, as if drawn by a magnet, to Hamlet. But that was insane. This . . . apparition wasn't Hamlet! Hamlet was a fiction, a character in a play who never even existed . . . and the play was a fiction too! As manager of this theater, he had dealt with actors and actresses before, seen them backstage with all their illusions and finery stripped bare. They were pot-bellied, droop-breasted, sallow-skinned, painted-up and be-costumed lies. Sometimes they even had dentures and bad breath! For him to actually believe such a concoction was . . . well, it was crazy, that's all!

He opened his mouth, determined again to order the man to leave, but all he could say was one word. "Free."

"Aye, verily!" The man removed his hand from Speers's shoulder — had he held it there all this time? — and turned sideways, displaying a profile of profound and sensitive suffering. "To escape 'The slings and arrows' of this eternal bondage ... 'Tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wish'd'!"



Something stirred within Speers. Hamlet — he had just spoken phrases from his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, the most famous words in all of drama! How could he not recognize them, having failed so miserably himself in auditioning for the role in college? "Stiff and inept," the director had called him, and everyone had laughed. No, he was not likely to forget either their scorn or the director's wounding words, not if he lived forever!

Speers wet his lips. "But if you're set free, what will become of you?"

For a second time, the man smiled. "Ah, if even once an actor speaks my very soul and pronounces it 'trippingly on the tongue' as its great creator ordained it, why then I'd be set free forever."

"But you'd die!"

"To sleep: perchance to dream." "

"'Ay, there's the rub,' " Speers countered. "But doesn't it bother you that there might be no 'undiscover'd country from whose bourn' you could return? That you might pass forever into darkness?"

A whisper from the shadows answered him. "May God grant me such a boon. Despite the play's grandeur, I have become so unspeakably weary of my eternal indecisiveness and inability to act. Look you, should I avenge my father and kill Claudius, or is his ghost a lying demon that seeks to deceive and damn me? I've been so 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,' that for four centuries I have been a mere 'John-a-dreams' who dawdles and does nothing until it is almost too late. Oh, I am tired beyond telling of assuming an 'antic disposition' and acting like a bedlam inmate with brilliant but blasted wits who tricks such 'arrant knaves' as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And Ophelia, whom I love! A million times she has drowned and closed her fair eyes for my sake!" He sighed. "To pass forever into oblivion and escape such tedium, would be a sweet consummation indeed."

Speers stiffened, trying to throw off the hypnotic net this visitor had cast about him, but it seemed woven of his own desires. Did he really want to believe such a lunatic? Whether the man was mad or not, Speers actually had to force himself to move away.

"You tell a good story, Ham—... uh, Mister. But you haven't explained how such a thing happened. What 'summoned you,' as you put it? Surely other roles don't create their own ghosts or alter egos. Did Claudius or Ophelia? Or Dr. Faustus? What about Hedda Gabler or Willie Loman? Or—"

"Methinks not," Hamlet said. "I alone have been chosen."

"And why is that?" Speers said, trying—but fading
—to sound mocking.

Hamlet moved toward him and caught his hand before he could retreat. "Mayhap for the same reason. *you* attempted the role in college, Mr. Speers. Because it is the greatest part ever written, 'mythic' and 'archetypal' as some critics call it. Mark you well: Is it not a role which can be endlessly and variously interpreted according to one's mood and whimsy? Is it not a tabernacle with countless rooms for the imagination? A peerless and endlessly faceted gem?" Taking Speers's other hand, he pulled him so close that their breaths mingled and Speers felt his heart surge into his throat. "And because it *is* the supreme and ultimate role, Hamlet has acquired its own life, its own undying spirit that must endlessly suffer in it."

Speers strained but could not break the other's grip. For a ghost, he seemed so solid and real! And Hamlet — no, this *man*, who was so young — claimed to have actually observed him, Speers, try to perform the role in college over thirty years ago! How could he know such a thing when he wouldn't even have been born yet? Though it was impossible, Speers felt a dagger's thrust of shame.

"If. . . If you *were* there, you must have seen how pathetic I was. They all *laughed* at me! I was a wretched Hamlet."

"Nay, you were not so wretched."

"*I wasn't?*"

Hamlet shook his regal head. "It was your director, that prattling villain of turgid bombast who was at fault. E'en then I was a close cousin to your thoughts and beheld your promise."

"My ... promise?"

The face moved even closer, so close it was barely an inch away.

"I was e'en more a twin to your reflection than I am now," Hamlet whispered. "I dwelled within your deep but unripe heart, sensed the inspired construction you wished to give my story. E'en then I saw your vast promise and hoped that you might some day be the one to fully capture my spirit and give me rest."

"You must be mad," Speers said, though he did not mean it. His wavering and vacillation were gone, and he now believed everything. This man... this being... was Hamlet! "I .. I'm only five feet four inches tall, weigh a hundred and ninety-seven pounds. Plus, I'm fifty-four years old and .. . and *bald!* Surely, I can't be Hamlet!"

"Ah, but these are but 'the trappings and the suits of woe'," the other said, "for you 'have that within which passeth show.' "

Speers recognized the lines, although they were turned around. In them, Hamlet had told his mother for four hundred years that he was more than what he appeared to be.

"I pray you listen," Hamlet said. "Why do you think that you alone in the past four hundred years have been permitted to see me? Is it because you are my successor, the only one who is worthy? Or because you share Hamlet's pain and confusion, his disillusionment with a corrupt and fallen world, his inability to act constructively and reform his life? Could it be because you alone share his soul?"

Speers trembled. "No."

"Listen," Hamlet continued. " 'God's bodykins,' man, you can *be* each and every Hamlet who strides across the stage and meets his father's ghost, or urges his mother to reclaim her virtue, or fights Laertes to the death in a tragic duel. As close as their thoughts and very souls you can be, and you can drink in the applause and acclaim of a thousand and more audiences! Come, have you not endlessly *longed* for such fulfillment, such a . . . consummation?"

Tears trickled down Speers's cheeks. "No."

"Oh fie! Even now your eyes, like portals of your soul, betray you. Why else have you lingered as a mere merchant in the profession that cast such scorn and calumny upon your head? Was it not to be as close as you could to what you loved by whatever means possible?"

Speers looked at his hands, clasped in Hamlet's. Could such a miracle be possible? *Could* it?

"You say I can be all these actors, the ones who play you?"

A nod. "The good, the bad, the indifferent. You can possess them all, on a million stages. I offer you the greatest role of all time."

"But... what will become of me? After a century or two, I mean. After I become as weary and tired of it as you? Who will save *me*?"

Hamlet smiled. "Mayhap a successor like yourself. One among all the others who is worthy."

"But what do I do if he *never* comes?"

Hamlet stepped back and adjusted his cloak, then touched his medallion. For the first time, Speers saw it was engraved with the seal of Denmark, the prince's realm. "Then you will be Hamlet forever," he whispered, "as well as an endless host of actors who play him." He smiled gently, then shook his head. "But I think not. Your appearance makes me feel that my creator was right when he had me finally learn that there's a purpose in providence and an ultimate peace for the soul, 'a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will.' " He sighed. "Even if I'm wrong, and you toil until time itself cracks in the joints, you must decide."

Decide. Soundlessly, Speers repeated the word. He had no family, and no one who loved him. And the only thing he loved himself. . .

Did he really have any choice? Even if he risked playing Hamlet forever, wasn't it worth it?

As close as the actors' thoughts and souls . . . isn't that what he'd said? Yes! He could bathe in endless applause and adulation, embrace his dream by holding audiences spellbound on a multitude of stages.

Yes, Oh yes! Of *course* it was worth it. He would risk eternal damnation and hell itself for such a chance.

Ancient eyes read his decision. "To speak lines I wish the bard himself had written in my play: 'You know what you must do/ 'fore you can bid me adieu.' "

Speers found that he did know. Slain by Laertes' poisoned, traitorous sword, he sank to the stage and gazed up at the face that no longer looked so haunted and weary. As Speers spoke, Hamlet began to fade like a ghost.

O I die, Horatio; The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit; I cannot live to hear the news from England; But I do prophesy th' election lights On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice; So tell him, with th' occurrents, more and less, ' Which have solicited. The rest is silence.

. Above, the visitor had become the merest shade, his face now that of Horatio, Hamlet's dearest friend. As Speers's senses faded and he slipped toward oblivion, he waited for Horatio's benediction. And when it came, his heart sang.

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night,
sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

A moment later, when Hamlet rose, he was alone.
" 'Good night, sweet prince,' " he whispered.
And all the stages in the world awaited him.

Q

THE POCKET WITCH

Such a convenience,
Near at hand, until she grew
Too big for his britches.

— Catherine Mintz

GILLS

by David J. Schow

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

There had never been a lagoon, brown or black or otherwise; never *really*. Even without the help of civilized humans, the topography of the Amazon Basin both vanished and changed on an hourly basis. Soon only handfuls would remain — pressed leaves and desiccated insects on view in some museum.

Manphibian sat cross-legged in a mesh recliner, on a teak deck which surrounded a pool shaped like Brazil, working his way through a tumbler of iced coffee as the sky over the Valley slowly shaded to nicotine. He thought calmly about his place in this world. Out here, the lung part of his dual-purpose breathing system had to labor thirty percent harder just to sort oxygen from the particulates and feed it to his body's aeration network. He killed the coffee, slurping it through a straw since his fishy lips had never been able to close all the way.

"*Burrrraacck*," he said. He looked close at the webbing between his claws. Mites again. Dammit.

Manphibian had the coolest bathroom in all of Hollywood. Stainless steel fixtures; porcelain trim in aqua.

The pool outside had a specially constructed tributary that could feed right into the jacuzzi when the little steel security hatch was raised. The jacuzzi seated four, the shower, ditto, and the in-name-only tub was actually a large bronze dish set into mosaic tile. It looked like the world's biggest birdbath, but Manphibian could extend his arms and legs and do a horizontal cartwheel-revolve inside without ever bumping the rim.

Manphibian stripped away his sunglasses and worked himself over with bug spray and a toothbrush. He did not have teeth, but had found toothbrushes to be excellent tools for cleaning his eusuchian scalework. Then he showered off. The taps were for hot, cold, fresh, or salt. He usually did not bother to dry; lack of moisture was bad for his armored skin and his scale ridges could rip towels to ribbons by the truckload. Besides, his entire house was more or less waterproofed, the most obvious evidence being the layer of hardball rubber that covered the floor everywhere except in his "swamp room."

"*Arroooogh*," he said, with satisfaction.

A studio guy was coming up here for a meeting today. Some new newt from Production. Manphibian felt sure it was to discuss not *a* project, but *the* project — a remake/update of his debut feature film, buzzed and rumored for about a decade now, and counting. The movie that would reinvigorate the franchise and put Manphibian back in the Monster Top Ten of all time.

It excited him.

On the far side of the deck, Sofia was sunning her bush. The very concept of pubic hair was another potent turn-on for Manphibian, whose fluted penis had already telescoped from beneath its protective sheath-plate, self-lubricated with electrolytic secretions. The head and shaft featured Croataline tessellations which kept the penis anchored during underwater mating; Sofia called them "pleasure ridges." Women wanted Manphibian because his unique metabolism destroys pesky viruses and invasive micro-organisms — one of the reasons he can regenerate missing parts and live so long. They also wanted him because he was different, and almost never needed to come up for air.

Before wandering back to the deck, Manphibian put his shades back on. They were special goggles, custom-ground to keep the sun from hurting his delicate metallic eyes, and fashioned to overcome his lack of external ears. He checked himself in the bathroom mirror. Smooth.

Manphibian flipped Sofia to hands and knees and mounted her. The species concept of foreplay was unknown and irrelevant to him, although Bryce the agent had mentioned it. Once. The act was finished inside of forty-five minutes.

Manphibian had met Sofia at a film retrospective of his work. Her favorite novel was *Mrs. Caliban*, by Rachel Ingalls, and her curiosity was predictable but honest. The amazing thing was that she had stayed with Manphibian even after the gloss of the new or the spice of the different had dissipated. She could have had any weightlifter on Venice Beach. She was possessed of long, tawny legs, small feet, about ten pounds of rail-straight, burnished brown hair and perhaps the only pair of 38-Ds in Los Angeles that were real breasts. Most importantly to Manphibian, she read books. He would sit in his bronze tub and she would share books with him, reading aloud by the antique glow of oil-fed hurricane lamps, her eyes a color Manphibian had never seen before in any creature of the sea — an arid brown, almost tan, like fossilized sandstone beneath a sheen of oil.

One of Manphibian's favorite short stories was about a Japanese man catapulted back to 1745 by the Hiroshima mega-blast, to be mistaken for a sea monster by the Scots who net him. His skin color is "yellow like a slug's belly" and "covered from throat to ankle with brilliantly colored images of strange monsters." Communication is attempted but there is no common ground . . . hence, obvious monster. Manphibian can relate. That beleaguered Japanese in the story had lacked the benefit of professional representation.

Sofia orgasmed like a broiling thunderhead, pla-teauing into a weird sort of Zen state. When Manphibian disengaged, she kissed him and jumped into the pool to paddle around. The way human beings swim amused Manphibian; like dogs trying to fly. The way Sofia swam just aroused him. Sometimes he stroked up from beneath, to penetrate her as she floated. He had to remember not to hold her under too long.

The pool was always clean. In the matter of the elimination of bodily waste, Manphibian did not suffer what Bryce unfortunately refers to as the "goldfish syndrome."

Manphibian's backstory was pretty much a rags-to-riches thing. En route from South America, he did bayou time, making friends with the water witches and the Peremalfait. His nostalgia was for python jerky, alligator wine, and mocha native girls by the village-full. In California, he could live like a king. Down in the Amazonas, he could be a god.

So why was he still here, outmoded by decades? The ongoing mutation that was his life force had vacu-formed him into an antique. Today, sitting by his anti-linear pool, Manphibian had himself become nostalgia. So . . . why?

Manphibian knew "why" the day he had met Sofia at the seminar. The day a crowded auditorium had stood and applauded his old black-and-white adventures in 3-D. Perhaps that was the day that he admitted he was hooked. It was the reason he was waiting around, today, right now, for some chinless VP of Production to toss him a table scrap.

Sometimes, when Manphibian got depressed, he drove his Dodge Marlin all the way out Mulholland to the sea. The last time he did this, he was mugged by bangers who stole his Platinum Card. Now Bryce, the agent, wanted him to have a bodyguard.

Dixie Kay Snow, Manphibian's very first cinematic leading lady, had called to ask if he could help her get a new agent. Not many parts were being cast for ingenues whose prime had slipped past the spoilage date decades ago. Then she asked if she could borrow ten grand. Manphibian sent her a check for three, knowing he'll never see *that* money again, even though his tax bracket still hovered at 48%, due mostly to his participation in merchandising.

Overall, Manphibian did not go out as much as he used to. While he enjoyed celebrity in cautious doses, he resented being asked to stand in the koi pond at the French Quarter Restaurant while snickering people snapped stupid photos with cheap, idiot-proof cameras. Every fucking time.

"I think my client was seeking more of an ecological feel," Bryce told the studio guy. "You know — a save-the-rainforests sort of vibe."



The enemy, whose name was Shelby something, nodded importantly. His college major must have been "nod." Manphibian already hated Shelby's suctorial mouth.

Bryce was sitting on the waterproof sofa, dramatically framed by a floor-to-ceiling aquarium stocked with outrageously-colored exotics. Manphibian's actual snack tank was back near the pantry because it was not built for ostentation. Bryce was backlit, the room light falling to place Shelby in the interrogation hot spot. All this negotiative strategy had been mapped for Manphibian earlier; now Bryce expounded, for Shelby's benefit:

"Tens of thousands of acres are getting cleared down there, day to day, for three reasons — timber, fuel, and agriculture. As a metaphor, it's irresistible in terms of plot: the bad guys, in messing with Manphibian, are jeopardizing a one-of-a-kind intelligent creature in the process."

Just a week ago, Manphibian had read the latest hopeless attempt at a screenplay. No meat to it. Just by-rote formulaic monster vomitus. If there had been any meat to the story, or characters, or plot, then the writing would have classed as butchery . . . but it lacked any emotion so strong.

But Shelby the Development Nod had a blank, puzzled expression marring his soft face.

Bryce pressed dutifully on: "Manphibian stands for everything that is ancient and enduring and on the verge of being lost. For this story to get up and walk, it's got to evolve some legs. It needs a subtext. Some depth."

Shelby the Nod moved his head around. "See, the major problem is, I think we need a *new* version of Manphibian. A kinda Nineties version."

Manphibian and Bryce stared at each other. It was as if the proposal had been to update the title of Poe's "City Beneath the Sea" to "Bite the Brown Bubbles."

The Nod expanded on his brilliant creative epiphany: "See, I showed the original Manphibian flick to my kid. He's thirteen. And he *wasn't scared*."

They waited. Scary was easy. Put a claw-tip right on the wet surface of someone's eyeball and you got *scary*.

"See, we think the — uh — monster needs a redesign." He unveiled a Xerox of a sketch.

Scary? thought Manphibian. *Shelby's teen bratling should get a glimpse of his dad, naked with a hard-on.*

The critter on the paper had a humanoid torso with extra abs and the muscle cut of a comic-book superhero. The legs were backward-jointed, like those of a dog. The head was snaky, blunt as a lead bullet, and hanging off the end of a neck straight out of Loch Ness. Its hands were too Goddamned big. It had great big scary teeth and no pupils in its eyes.

"See, the artist is going to stab at another draft, 'cos this is basically what *we* like, except, of course, that women have got to want to — uh — fuck it."

Human women had to be sexually attracted by this ostrich-legged, peeny-headed slime worm. Kids would yowl, *let's get TWO of the action figure with Real Kung-Fu Stupidity and Glow-in-the-Dark Agenda!*

"*Aarrrraaaaccck!*" Manphibian frowned. Suddenly the room smelled like anchovies. Perhaps marinated in arrack.

"You're dead wrong, Shelby, and I'll tell you why," said Bryce. "If you say the name Manphibian, everybody knows what you're talking about — even people who've never seen the movies. You're messing with an icon."

"Every other monster we own, we've remade," said Shelby. "Updated them and redressed them and kept them parallel with the times. Didn't hurt a one."

"None of those remakes were hits."

Manphibian noticed that the drawing vanished as quickly as it had been produced. It was awkward and grotesque, not gracile, not logical; a bogey to be crudely Frankensteined from liquid rubber and toxic catalysts. Inside this soulless fake would be a wage-scale guy who hated his job.

"Doesn't matter. The originals were B-featured Bottom of the double bill."

"They're B-features with enough time behind them to resonate. You weren't even around when they premiered."

No, in fact, Shelby the Nod had not been even a concept back then, let alone a pitch. To Manphibian, Shelby looked about 35 human years old, max. i

"And we're not talking about an aged actor, either," Bryce kept on, flinging both syllables of *ag-ed* at Shelby like daggers. "Manphibian doesn't age like humans, He'll be ready for action when we're dust. He could certainly kick your ass around the court, right now."

Manphibian crossed his legs and folded his claws over his knee, flexing the fins on his forearms so the

stiletto spines fanned aggressively out. It would be wonderful to kick Shelby's ass. Or to maybe vise one butt cheek in each claw and split Shelby up the dotted line like a zip strip.

"Do you know who wrote the draft of the script you have?" Bryce was confident of Shelby's answer.

"You know I inherited this project when Allan Arnold Whitner left the studio," said Shelby, crunching the ice in his already-depleted coffee cooler.

"Not exactly factual," said Bryce. "You're here to fish, because Allan Arnold Whitner was fired by Samantha Coltrane, who paid half a million for a *Jaws* retread scooped up by her two favorite comedy writers. Samantha doesn't want the investment to sit on the shelf. You don't want Manphibian, so clearly you're here to lube up our rear ends before darling Sam rugs the franchise out from underneath us. You want us to sign off on the licensing rights. You want to own Manphibian the way Universal Studios owns Bela Lugosi's face."

Manphibian had heard two stories about old Bela's visage, and the images and tie-ins it represented. One was that Bela's heirs had sued and lost the right to a cut of the franchise. The other was that they had won, then lost their right to a cut on appeal. Of course, old Bela had not *really* been Dracula — maybe that had been the big boobytrap of his life.

Shelby was cornered, black eyes darting for escape routes. He employed the usual desperation move, which was to shift the spotlight of blame onto the writers. "Now, those guys Cangrejo and Lampree' are not just comedy writers. They're good writers. They wrote three in a row for Samantha that yanked a hundred-mil-plus each. Their stuff is tank-proof. You shouldn't judge —"

"I bear them absolutely no malice," said Bryce. "They took a pay gig offered by their producer. I probably would have done the same. But all you have to do, to tell their hearts weren't in it, is read the script."

Manphibian nodded in agreement. "*Orrrrrrpp!*"

Sofia drifted through with most of her R rating covered and distracted Shelby the Nod by recharging his glass. Playing hostess interested her for about five minutes at a time in real life, but it permitted Bryce and Manphibian a vital huddle. Before Sofia poured, Manphibian made sure there were burst mites in the coffee. She winked at him like a child playing spy.

"It's a railroad, and we're on it, and the tracks go straight off the cliff into the nearest and most convenient abyss." Bryce had a knack for summation.

"*Graaaaaah,*" said Manphibian.

"But you have a power old Bela didn't have. We can't stop their moronic idea for a movie. We can't stop the movie. But we *can* stop them from calling it you-know-what. And if they can't say the magic name, they *have* no remake of anything. Because all the merchandising is shackled to it. They can't have any 'Manphibian'-trademarked toys and snacks and CD-ROMs on the racks in time for Exmas — because *you're* Manphibian, and they can't touch your name and cut you out without us swooping in piranha-style."

Manphibian liked that. *Piranha style.*

"I mean, I guess they *could* call it *Manphibian-LIKE Creature from a Darkish, Not Totally Dissimilar Lagoonal Pond...*"

Manphibian *urrrrrped* his approval. Bryce could be a funny guy. He could make monsters laugh.

"The trade-off is this. You can't let them know how badly you want to be in this movie, because they'll just use your desire to do things right to leverage you out. But if you tell me you can live without it, just for now, I'll fucking rip them wide on merchandising and in two years we'll have enough money to make our own version. James Bond did it and Frankenstein's Monster did it and we can do it for you. Because you've got the time on them. You can wait forever and they'll be gone tomorrow. This asshole Shelby will be a memory by the time we manage to get three people into the same room together for a new meeting. There'll be some other big butt warming his useless desk. Hell, at that point, maybe Samantha Coltrane will have moved on and maybe we'll get a person who has some respect for what you do. So what do you say, Man?"

Manphibian ruminated Bryce's proposal, bobbing his knobby forehead at the key points. The time angle was particularly interesting. American moviemakers really needed to take a more Asian view of long-term cycles instead of using the next two weeks as their event horizon.

Shelby was slurping his third mite-laden iced coffee and trying to see Sofia's tits at every opportunity. Manphibian sucked several deep breaths, the delicate lamellae below his jaw flowering to grab air to oxygenate his attack systems. When he was pissed off he could literally swell to a size even more intimidating than his normal seven-foot-three. His spines extended and his eyes went that peculiar flat silver color which indicated he was not in the jolliest of moods. He glided up behind Shelby as silent as a mime. He opened his massive webbed claws; at full flex, fifteen inches from thumb to pinky talon. He thrust out his chest like a Ray Harryhausen dinosaur and cut loose with a window-rattling

"Hoorraaaaar."

Shelby the Nod blew a fan of coffee and crushed ice out of his nose, urinated in his pants, and was out the door inside of ten seconds, stumbling three times and losing a shoe as he fled.

He looked pretty damned scared.

Manphibian thought that later tonight he should pay Shelby's slacker brat a visit, too.

During the time absorbed by the meeting, seventeen square miles of Amazon rain-forest had been consumed. The paper used for the injunctions filed at Bryce's behest could easily have covered the Ponderosa — twice — while rare species of birds and insects skipped the "endangered" phase and did a smash cut straight to extinction.



Cattle now grazed on the clear-cut acreage not used for the manufacture of cocaine. Intrepid explorers seeking backwaters threaded with subterranean cavern networks which concealed ageless monsters would be disappointed by the wasteland awaiting them.

There was only one lasting way to make a proper lagoon, one that could engird and hold the slippery ghosts of myth: One third stock footage, one third backlot, and one third location shooting.

The notice in the *Hollywood Reporter* bespoke the commencement of principal photography on something called *Gills* — a hasty retitling of Shelby the Nod's beloved no-brainchild. It still depressed Manphibian, who tore out the page, crumpled it, and consigned the wad to his low-flush toilet. Advance heat on the underwater creature-feature had nonetheless caused Manphibian merchandising to come to a rapid boil.

Dark, sinister, foreboding, beautiful lagoons — the only place they could last is in the collective memory of the people whose imaginations have been enchanted by them. Manphibian knew that in the jungle, he could be a god, accepting forbidden sacrifices and watching tribal dancers shake virgin booty. And when the tribe had no further retreat, when their native land ran out, it would all crash and burn. Past that life there would be nothing. The wilds are always conquered, and are thus impermanent. ..

. . . unlike Manphibian, who swam in powerful, meditative strokes through filtered, clear water, thinking that it is better to make a movie commemorating such loss than to actually suffer it.

He thought about forbidden ceremonies. Erotic rituals. Hollywood bullshit. Goldfish Syndrome, in terms of guys like Shelby the Nod.

Manphibian relaxed by his pool in the hills, pondering his place in this world. Perhaps he will have the pool repainted to a jungle theme — reeds and weeds.

His thoughts were about the fear people feel when their windshields are shattered on the freeway by imbeciles armed with marbles and Wrist Rockets. Fear of drive-bys and psychos and the random quake that could kill you with a piece of your own home. Fear that ran the gamut from getting your mail dipped to

losing your sense of identity.

Manphibian thought about fear. About squandered natural resources. About lotus, and laurels.

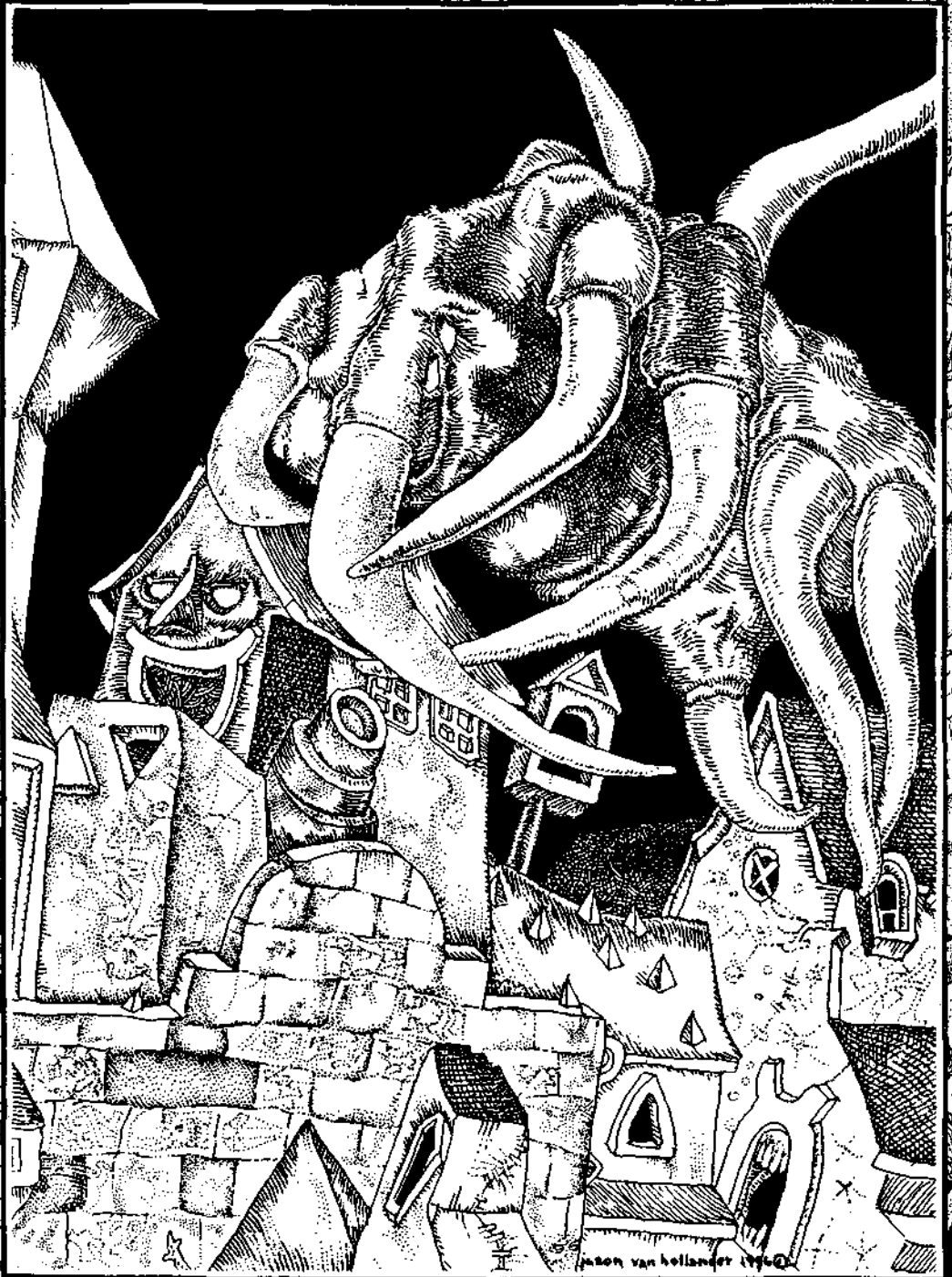
That reservoir haven for joggers and make-out duos, the Lake Hollywood Reservoir, was so close, he could walk from here. And even though his mouth was not built to do so, Manphibian smiled.

hell book

DEVOURER OF THE NEWLY DAMNED:

When the
bronze-colored
night settles
over Hell, the
mountainous
Vhyhinnom
flutter out of
their hiding
places to seek
the souls of the
newly damned.

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O TANNENBAUM

by James Van Pelt

Christmas is about friends. You have to believe this and not get discouraged. Look around you. Everyone here is poor — some poorer than you — some are crazy, but look at them, eating donated turkey, opening baskets full of clothes that are meant for them. All gifts of love. All symbols of human kindness. Today, of all days, you can't give up.

Here, pull up a chair. You look hungry. Grab a plate of turkey. Go ahead. Fill it up with dressing too. Everybody always shares. As long as I've lived, people have been kind. Maybe today I can give you a little in return for all that's been given me.

So there won't be any surprises, let me tell you something straight up front about me as an explanation. This Christmas day, I turned twenty-one — it's my birthday, I think, but not for sure. It's different for me. Lots of people don't know for certain when they're born. They're abandoned at birth, so a birthday is assigned to them, probably one pretty close too. A baby, you can tell within a month or two how old they are, but that doesn't work for me. See, I have to count days, because for me, it's always Christmas.

Well, that's not exactly true. Lately it's been Christmas — the last five years ago or so, and for the five years before that, it was the last day of the Saturnalia. And before that, one kind of winter solstice celebration or another as far back as I can remember. My years, of course. Not your years. Really, for me, it's always Christmas.

Like this morning, I woke up in this shelter. The cot felt solid under my back, and the bed roll was worn but clean. Smelled old, you know, but not bad. Some folks were already stirring.

Guy next to me sat up coughing. Young looking fellow like yourself. Maybe my age, but a real dry cough that doesn't bring up anything, and he kept going for a couple of minutes.

"Got to quit these coffin nails," he finally said, lighting one up, tears still streaming down his cheeks. He took a deep drag. "Gonna be a good one today. I can tell." He offered me a smoke. See, first thing that happened to me today was an act of generosity.

I shook my head. People moving all around. Elderly ones, or the touched ones, talking to themselves. Bundled up, mostly. Like that guy over there — three trashed coats and two grimy scarves. Hat pulled over the ears. It's warm in here, but homeless folk hold their clothes tight.

Gina entered my head then. I hadn't thought of her at first, and that made me sad, you know, 'cause every time we talk now it's probably the last. Without a miss for two-and-a-half months I've called her in the morning to say hi, to see how she is.

My months, that is, not yours. Like I said, everyday is Christmas for me, and for me, two-and-one half months ago was 1914 when this soldier I met, Humphrey, asked me to call Gina. He sat next to me in the trench; I'd found out earlier in the day that we were twenty miles from Yrpes. German trenches weren't a hundred yards away, but you couldn't see them. Bro-ken spirals of barbed wire, torn up dirt, a busted ambulance were all I could see. Night had fallen, and it had gotten very cold. A sentry walking by, head low, broke through a layer of fresh ice that had formed over the mud, so every step crackled, then squished. We had to pull our feet back to let him pass. The soldier's boots made a silly little squeaking sound when they pulled free.

Humphrey laughed. He was tired and scared, an eighteen year old Brit with a downy, blonde moustache and blood-shot eyes. He laughed at the ridiculous sound though, and then he started telling me about his family and his girl friend, Gina. He talked for an hour, low and passionate and non-stop. He made me swear to contact her if he didn't make it home.

"It's Christmas," he said, and he didn't say anything about where we were or what we were doing. He leaned his head against his gun and shut his eyes and by the light of the winter moon told me about Christmas in Lancashire, where he was born. I wish you could have heard his voice, kind of low and broken. He was a lot more down than you. "They're roasting chestnuts," he said. "And eating quince pudding, and telling each other stories. My Uncle Charles will bring out a cask of stout — he makes it himself — and they'll tap it open. He'll pour pints all around. Charles and Aunt Edna will be pie-eyed and toasting to the King's good health. Gina will be with them." Humphrey paused for a long time at that. No other sounds up and down the trenches, just cold, milky light pouring down on us, and the air like ice razors pressed against our cheeks. Finally, he breathed, "Oh, Gina, my good girl, my black eyed girl."

"Do they sing carols?" I asked. It had been a good day for me. Everyone clapped me on the shoulder. Ruddy faced fellows, mostly young, like myself, like you. "Merry Christmas, old sport," they'd say. "Separated from your company, are you? Good thing you Yanks are in it now," and they'd offer me stiff shots of warm brandy from hip flasks that suddenly appeared.

"Yes," said Humphrey. "They sing 'O Christmas Tree.'" and he started to sing it, very softly, and I could tell he was crying. His voice, clean and clear, carried in that icy air, and it seemed like the only sound in the world, all tied up in the night sky and the moon and the barbed wire, and when he got to the part that goes, *They're green when summer days are bright; they're green when winter snow is white*, his voice cracked and he could go no further.

It was the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life: Humphrey slumped down in the bottom of the trench, lost and far from his home, from his Gina, the marvelous dark-eyed Gina who was hanging popcorn strings on a Christmas tree in a fire-lit room surrounded by Humphrey's parents and sisters and brothers and Uncle Charles and the homemade stout a million miles away.

And the echo of Humphrey's Christmas carol still rang in my ears, and I realized it wasn't an echo. It was the same tune, but the words had changed. Humphrey looked up too. He canted his head to one side and listened. Clear, so clear, as if the singer was in the trench with us, we heard a voice singing Humphrey's song in lovely baritone. It sang, "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum ..."

Humphrey hopped up then, and so did I, and looked across the no man's land. A face looked back. A German face under a pointy helmet, and he waved a tiny, white handkerchief at us. Humphrey dug into his back pocket and waved his own handkerchief. I don't know who climbed out of the trench first, the German or Humphrey, but I followed Humphrey across the cratered ground to the broken lines of barb wire in the middle.

Humphrey didn't even pause at the wire. He stepped over it, his hand out, "Merry Christmas, old chap," he said.

"Frohliche Weihnachten mein Freund," the German said back, and they shook hands.

I stood behind them, arms wrapped around me against the cold. The moon, bright as any flare. All the way up and down the lines, as far as I could see, men were tentatively climbing out of trenches, walking toward the enemy, embracing, pulling out pictures to show each other.

Humphrey handed me a flask, his eyes shiny, his face alive with merriment. "It's Schnapps," he said. "It's Christmas Schnapps."

I fell asleep that night in the trenches, and I woke up the next day, a year later on Christmas in a hospital in London. Called Gina on the telephone. Told her I was a friend of Humphrey's. Found out he had died in January, but she was so glad to hear from me. Asked me if I was the "Yank" Humphrey had written to her about.

We talked a long time. It was another good day. In the hospital they brought in big baked hams. Cut them up in the wards. Even the sickest of the sick. Even the amputees and fellows who'd been gassed in the battle who couldn't hardly breathe, were happy. I made sure they sang "O Christmas Tree," because I knew I'd made a friend. For the first time in my life I could talk to one person from day to day. Gina told me to keep in touch. With the telephone, I could. No matter where I was on Christmas day, I could call her.

So when I woke this morning, the man in the cot next to me offered me a smoke. A fellow from the kitchen told me that they'd be serving turkey and all the fixings in a couple of hours. Some kids from the high school are coming over later to carol with us. I asked him where the phone was. Yesterday — last year — Gina wasn't doing so good. Her heart, she said, was weak. "But you're sounding good," she had said.

"Yeah," I said. "The years have treated me well."

I made the call. She's in a nursing home in San Francisco. Moved to America in '57. I was afraid. The phone rang for a long time. Not many nurses on Christmas morning, and then someone answered.

I asked for Gina. Gina who, she said, and I told her. "I'm new here," she said. "I don't know that patient." Papers shuffled around on her end. She put the phone down, and someone mumbled to her in the background.

You've got to understand. I've never known anyone for more than a day. A day is all I get. I don't understand why. When the morning comes, I wake up, and it's Christmas. Sometimes I won't sleep for a couple of days, but everyone sleeps. It can't be avoided. Maybe I vanish in the night. Maybe a year later I appear when no one is looking. Who can tell? I always wake up in a place where a stranger could go unremarked, an army, a hospital, a festival, a flop house and soup kitchen like this one. I don't know if it's a curse — there's lots I don't know — but all I get is a day a year, and I'm a stranger that no one knows.

Then Gina came on the line. It was her voice. I've heard her grow old. "Hello, old friend," she said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I said.

Each year she's been there. Each year. She's ninety-six now. I'm twenty-one today. It's my birthday. In three-hundred and sixty-five years for you, I'll be twenty-two, but I want to tell you something. It's important I think.

I hear rumors of bad things in the world. I hear about wars; I've even seen some, but in my experience, human beings are good. They're generous. They share with strangers, and they reach out to someone they've only talked to on the phone once a year for eighty years. If you could just see things from my perspective, you'd understand, even without friends, people are good. There are reasons to hope.

You shouldn't give up. People will help, like you've helped me by listening like a friend.

And you know what else? I wonder if you could do me a favor. You could? Great. I wonder — would you mind if I phoned you next year, here? Do you think you could find your way back here on Christmas to take my phone call? It would mean a lot to me.

Q

RENT

by Brian Stableford

illustrated by George Barr

At first, Jez thought that the vamp was just another freak, just another weirdo, just another shit with a screwed-up soul.

Jez knew lots of freaks. Some people — including the female whores who strutted their stuff on the King's Cross meatrack with the rent boys — would have said that *all* his johns were freaks, but that was just naked prejudice. Jez was a liberal, and he didn't give a damn where his johns wanted to squirt their semen, as long as they paid the going rate for the location in question; but even he had to concede that more than a few of the guys were seriously weird and definitely freaky.

At first, he thought the vamp was one of *those*.

The vamp drove a black BMW, polished so assiduously that it gleamed. Jez couldn't imagine the neatly-manicured vamp labouring over the machine with an old rag and an ozone-friendly can of Mr. Sheen, so he assumed that the job was contracted out. The first time he ever saw the BMW kerb-crawling the rack he noticed the girls edging out with a little more enthusiasm than usual, not just because they smelled the money but because they smelled *the pride* behind that polish. But the vamp wasn't interested in girls, and they soon learned to turn away in disgust when it came nosing up from the station.

That first night, Jez thought the vamp just *had* to be crazy. For one thing, he took Jez home to a brand-new glass-faced block in the Docklands, to the place where he actually lived. Not many johns did that, certainly not on a first date; even the ones who lived alone and only wanted hand relief, were nervous of the neighbours and scared half to death of becoming blackmail targets. The vamp ought to have been twice as scared, given the nature of his nasty little habits, but he wasn't. The vamp didn't seem to be scared of *anything*. He had nerves of steel.

Even that seemed like one more symptom of serious weirdness, in the beginning.

The vamp didn't have fangs, of course — not Christopher Lee-type extended canines, anyhow. Nor did he go straight for the jugular; the way vampires were supposed to do. He looked for veins in the same places the regular mainliners did, in the soft white flesh of the arms and the legs. He'd break into them very carefully, nibbling away with his pearly-white front teeth, then suck for twenty or thirty minutes at a stretch. It took the vamp far longer to take his drink than it did to shoot his wad, which he always did afterwards, into Jez's mouth, but he paid well enough for the time he used. It hurt, of course, but so did lots of other things, and hurt was just one more thing that got added on to the rent.

The bites certainly didn't look like the little round holes that Christopher Lee left; they were more like ragged love-bites. They healed very quickly, though, and they never got infected, and Jez soon decided that the horror stories which passed up and down the rack about the things you could catch from human bites must be exaggerated. Most of the horror stories that passed up and down the rack were exaggerated, though some weren't; it was difficult to figure out which were which but Jez was fifteen years old and learning fast.

The first couple of times with the vamp, Jez found the business moderately sickening, but for that sort of rent he was always prepared to swallow his pride, along with everything else if necessary. After the first couple of times, it got much easier. He got used to it. He had plenty of opportunity, because the vamp was a man of regular habits, and the BMW always made straight for his spot; one of the other kids told him that if the car came cruising when Jez was otherwise occupied, it just went straight on through and out the other side.

Jez wasn't stupid enough to reckon that the vamp used him regularly out of affection; he figured that it was probably because his veins were easy to get at, because he was strictly a snorter and a dragon-chaser and never used a needle. Even so, he began to award the vamp a leading role in his fantasies of making a big enough score to skip the rack altogether and go independent. Like all the boys, he resented having to hand over so much of his take to the management — after all, he was the one renting out his tender young flesh to be poked and chewed; all *they* were renting to him was a square yard of pavement that they didn't even own. They supplied the junk too, of course, and an eight-by-twelve in a converted Victorian semi,

but Jez knew how easily replaceable *those* services were, as long as you could come up with enough pictures of the queen.

It was only natural, in the circumstances, that Jez was able to think positively about the possibility of being taken on permanently by the vamp, in spite of the ragged lovebites. It was, after all, far less blood than the usual kind of donor was required to give, and the vamp never asked any awkward questions about HIV. Jez had never been tested and didn't intend to be; he couldn't afford to care, or even to try to figure out the odds as to whether the junk he smoked and sniffed would kill him before his immune system's season ticket finally expired.

Apparently the vamp didn't care either, maybe because he already had it, maybe because he had nerves of steel. Either way, he qualified for a starring role in Jez's dreamland — for a while. In fact, the vamp didn't stop being a prominent figure in Jez's dreams even when Jez started wondering whether he might, after all, be something other than one more freak, something more ominous than one more shit with a screwed-up soul, in a world where shits with screwed-up souls were by no means scarce.

Their conversation mostly consisted of mocking jokes. The vamp had a great line in deadpan answers to teasing questions.

"Will I become a vampire after I die?" Jez asked, once. "That's what's supposed to happen, right? — a vampire's victims generally become vampires themselves."

"You don't have to wait until you die, Jez," the vamp told him, serenely. "You could start right away, if you saved your money the way I do instead of blowing it all on synthetic endorphins and ersatz ecstasy. You could buy your own place and pick up some kid fresh off the train, and bleed him to your heart's content — or even her, if your fancy goes that way. If you really want to be a vampire, that's the only way to do it. There's no way to extend a lease on a body."

By degrees they built up quite a double act.

"Hey, Vamp," said Jez, when he felt entitled to be a little more familiar, "I bet I know what you do for a living — you're in the city, right? You're a bloodsuckin' capitalist who got filthy rich by exploitin' the toilin' masses, right?"

"Got it in one," the vamp conceded. "I'm the sole proprietor of one of the oldest and most respected firms in the Golden Square Mile. My family have been managing investments since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution."

"Bullshit," said Jez. "You don't expect me to believe you got a *family*, do you? I bet you've been doin' it all yourself since day one — except you sometimes have to disappear for a while and then come back pretendin' to be your own son, so that nobody gets suspicious."

"Alas," the vamp replied, wistfully, "even vampires aren't immortal. I only wish we were."

Jez enjoyed the conversations, at first. It made a change — most johns were too paranoid to say much more than "How much?" and "This'll do." Most johns wouldn't look Jez in the eye, but the vamp did, without the least trace of embarrassment or shame or shiftiness. Nor was his stare at all mesmeric, as might have been expected if he'd been a *real* vampire — "real" meaning, in this paradoxical instance, the kind you could watch at work for a couple of quid on a rented video. The vamp had a gaze much softer and infinitely less haunted than Klaus Kinski's, though he was sexy enough in a dignified kind of way. Jez figured that if the vamp had girls working at his offices in the city the air was probably heavy with unrequited lust.

"How come you got garlic in the kitchen, vamp?" Jez asked him once, after he'd done a bit of snooping. "Not to mention mirrors all over the place. Ain't you got no sense of *propriety*? Why don't y' hang a crucifix on the wall, f'Christ's sake?"

"Like every other species, vampires are subject to the rigours of natural selection," the vamp assured him, calmly. "All the ones who could only go out at night, or who couldn't be seen in mirrors, or got frightened half to death by the sight of a crucifix, ended up with sharpened stakes through their hearts. My kind are the only ones left. But I don't go in for crucifixes — one ought to show a *little* respect for the lost undead, don't you think?"

"Great," said Jez, laughing. "All the true blue Draculas got impaled, and only the harmless ones survive. With us normals, it's always been t'other way around."

"Oh, we're not *harmless*," the vamp corrected him, in a voice as mild as milk. "We're civilized, discreet, modest,... but not *harmless*. Only the fittest survive, Jez — only the cleverest, and the strongest, and the best."

It was good fun, for a while. It might have been a fraction sicker than talking about what the greenhouse effect was doing to the weather or why England's batting had collapsed in the test match, but it certainly wasn't as sick as exchanging merry quips about the first signs of Karposi's sarcoma, or what you get when you cross a green monkey with a traffic warden, or any of the other contributions which the

great gay plague had made to the oral cultural inter-course of the London Underworld. Jez was tempted once or twice to ask whether vampires were doomed to extinction now that AIDS was here to stay, but he never did; he figured that if anything were to qualify as overstepping the mark, that would probably be it.

There was no particular point in time when Jez's attitude to the vamp began to change. There was no sinister clue to catch his attention and make him shiver with unease, let alone a ghastly revelation. In fact, it didn't seem to be anything to do with the vamp's behaviour at all; Jez thought that the change was purely in himself and didn't make much sense. It took the form of a creeping paranoia which stole up on him like a wasting disease. If there was a single starting point, it must have been some fugitive dream which he had forgotten completely by the time he woke up, or came down.

Logically, the relationship ought to have continued to become more comfortable; the two of them might even have learned to trust one another. As the weeks of their acquaintance turned into months, Jez found out more and more about the vamp. He knew not only the vamp's real name and his real address, but which



bank and credit cards he used, where he got his groceries, where he had been to school, what kind of music he liked ... all the little data which fleshed him out into the perfect image of a human being. But the more Jez found out — the more intimately he came to know the innocence of the image — the more the suspicion stole upon him that it really was all *image*, all sham, and all disguise, and that the only real and true thing about the vamp was the particular way he used his teeth and his prick, in that order, in the course of their expensive rituals.

At first, Jez was happy enough to construe his suspicions about the vamp's fundamental unhumanity as a natural extension of their joking relationship — was it not the case, after all, that such suspicions were a tacit assumption of all their humorous banter? But in time, although Jez and the vamp did not cease to joke with one another, the comedy wore thin. The idea that the vamp was just another freak seemed to shrivel up inside Jez's head, of its own accord, soon to be reborn as an anxiety that the vamp might in fact be thoroughly and utterly *normal* — by his own alien, unhuman, diabolical standards.

That anxiety was all the more pernicious, and all the more persistent, because Jez did not know exactly what it implied. He became gradually afraid, without quite knowing what it was that he was afraid of.

That was when his questions gradually became more pointed — and, inevitably, when the answers

became gradually more evasive.

"Who'd you put the bite on before you took up with me?" Jez asked. "The old-timers on the rack say they never saw you before."

"Does it matter?" the vamp countered. "It was no one special — I paid him the way I pay you, and at much the same rate, allowing for inflation. Rents are cheaper up north, I hear, but that's because no one wants to live there."

Jez was from the north himself; the rack was full of northerners, put there by the state of the nation.

On another occasion, Jez asked whether everybody's blood tasted the same, and whether the fact that he was so often coked up to the eyeballs made his blood more addictive than the blood of a non-user.

"A connoisseur gets to notice subtle differences after a while," the vamp informed him, punctiliously. "But it's not as obvious as the difference between burgundy and claret. As to the hypothesis that my compulsion might have intensified by virtue of drinking the nectar of too many drug-addicts, I can only say that it sounds just a little far-fetched."

Later still, Jez asked what would happen to the vamp's considerable personal fortune, given that he had no son and heir to leave it to, adding the sarcastic suggestion that he might care to leave it to the Blood Transfusion Service.

"Oh, I intend to have an heir," the vamp assured him, blandly. "There's plenty of time for that, dear boy . . . plenty of time."

The vamp looked to be well on the downside of fifty; he kept Grecian-2000 in his bathroom as well as a mirror, and there was not one jot of evidence to suggest that he ever kept company with members of the opposite sex. Maybe that was the crucial incongruity which finally sowed the seed of something crazy in Jez's addled brain — though the crack through which it crept was, of course, already there.

Truth to tell, it wasn't just the vamp who had begun to seem a little less sick and freaky to Jez; the whole world was beginning to appear ordinary by its own implicit and thoroughly unhuman standards.

Jez wasn't particularly worried when he first began to feel the movement in his guts. It didn't seem to be painful, even when he hit dirt after a high; to begin with it was just *there*, disturbing simply by virtue of its presence. But it got steadily worse.

As time went by, he found it more and more difficult to sleep. Every time he lay down — whether he was drunk or sober, high or low — the quietness of his own limbs showed up by contrast the activity of whatever was inside him. Sometimes, he watched his own stomach, trying to see the skin bulge and stretch where the thing was shifting in its restless fashion. He began to run a tape measure around his waist every day, worried about the possibility that he was expanding from within; but he wasn't — in fact, he was getting thinner.

He thought that he was getting paler too, but it was difficult to tell. The rack was full of pallid faces which grew gradually whiter as careers progressed along their customary trajectories. No one else on the rack saw anything in his face or his gait or his manner that seemed worthy of comment, and if ever he mentioned to one of the other boys or one of the more maternal whores that his guts felt as if they were practising their boy-scout knots they would just laugh, and tell him he ought to have *their* problems.

Jez was no wimp, and he would have ignored the feeling if he could, waiting patiently for it to go away, but the nature of the feeling simply wouldn't permit that. It was too intrusive, too consistent, too close to the core of his being. He couldn't help but worry about it, and he couldn't help his anxiety transforming itself by inexorable degrees into an obsession.

Though he never actually *saw* the thing shifting under the skin of his belly he became absolutely certain that something was in there, that it was alive, and that it was feeding off him. He knew it wasn't a tapeworm or a tumour, but imagined it instead as something resembling a newborn rat or a blind mole, with massive jaws filled with tiny teeth, which it used to clamp on to his intestine in order to draw out the best of his blood — blood newly-enriched by the products of digestion.

It didn't take long to guess what the entity might be — to "formulate an hypothesis" about the thing, as the vamp would undoubtedly have phrased it. At first, the idea that came into his mind seemed too way-out, and Jez knew that even the vamp, despite his love of understatement, would have found a dismissive description far more colourful and contemptuous than "just a little far-fetched." But he couldn't shake the idea loose, and the longer it stayed with him, the more its incredibility was eaten away by familiarity. Every night, while he took his place on the rack, waiting and waiting while the creepy-crawlies inched past in their Astras and Cortinas and Volvos and Datsuns, the thing would gnaw away at his entrails — gently and painlessly enough, but no less horrid for that — and the idea would gnaw at his mind, gently and painlessly but no less horrid in its turn.

As the creature in his belly grew, so did the idea in his brain. They grew together, like shadowy twins, until the one was a mature homunculus, as sleek as strong as any fond parent could wish for, and the other

was a full-grown fantasy, as vivid and venturesome as anything that morphine or magic mushrooms could ever hope to compose.

The fantasy which possessed Jez's mind took off from the supposition that the vamp *wasn't* just a shit with a screwed-up soul, like every other city gent who liked a bit of rough from the rack, but that his taste for blood was merely a matter of the routine nourishment of his species. Perhaps, Jez somehow could not help but think, this was one john who wasn't even queer, because he belonged to a kind which didn't have two sexes at all, but only one. Perhaps, Jez somehow could not help but fear, this was one john who was only doing exactly what came naturally, for the proper purpose which nature intended. Perhaps, Jez somehow could not help but believe, the heir which the vamp fondly intended to have had already been conceived, after the fashion of his alien kind.

When Jez first wondered whether the strange stirring in his belly might have something to do with the vamp his immediate inclination was to share the joke, but he couldn't. He didn't see the vamp that week, and by the time the black BMW came cruising again he was well past the point where he could think the churning in his gut was anything trivial and temporary. He didn't want to mention it to the vamp, because he didn't want to see the vamp's reaction. It was like the blood test he'd never taken — one of those moments of possible confirmation which were best postponed forever. He was scared that if he told the vamp that something was eating away at his guts, the vamp would smile — not an amused smile, but a *proud* smile; the smile of an expectant father.

Jez thought — and *believed*, despite one or two brave attempts to doubt it — that the vamp had shot an alien spore into his fertile gut, where it had taken root and begun to grow after its alien fashion, and whence it would in the fullness of time emerge, the moment of its birth a baptism of blood.

In time, it became a little more painful, but never unbearable. Without hurting him unduly, the thing simply wore him down. By the time the creature in his abdomen had been gnawing at him for two months, Jez was so listless and so starved of sleep that simply taking his place on the rack became an ordeal. The intervals between enquiries began to get longer, and the management began to quiz him about the decline of his takings. If it hadn't been for the vamp, the management might have decided that he wasn't worth his spot, given that more fresh meat arrived just around the corner with every inter-city 125, but the vamp was still a regular, and one well-used to meeting sky-high city rents without a murmur.

The vamp never commented on the way Jez looked, or enquired after the state of his health. The blood, it seemed, was still good — and the vamp, in any case, had other reasons for keeping in touch. Those reasons didn't have to be spelled out; their relationship had reached that magical pitch at which they no longer seemed to need words to help them understand one another's motives and desires.

It still went on, day by day and week by week. Jez lost twenty kilos, and became as weak as a kitten. Eventually, after one more quiz administered more in sorrow than in anger, he lost his place on the rack, and knew that he couldn't complain. The management had had no choice, in the end; they were men of business, after all. The vamp hadn't been around for a while, and no one except Jez could be certain that he wasn't gone forever.

The management even overrode his strenuous objections and sent him to the hospital, but the hospital couldn't make a bed available and the doctors sent him back to the eight-by-twelve after leeching a generous helping of his blood in order to carry out tests. Jez didn't tell them about the creature inside him, because he could tell that they didn't want to know, and would refuse to see it on an X-ray. He could tell that the doctors didn't want to take him in—that they'd rather he simply vanished, or at least had the elementary courtesy to die somewhere else instead of wasting time that they would far rather devote to the deserving sick.

By this time, Jez was in bad trouble. The worst of it wasn't that he was playing host to the vamp's offspring but that he was cut off from his connection.

If the hospital had admitted him, they'd have been obliged to feed his habit after some sort of fashion, rather than see him shrivel up to nothing at all, but the management worked on a strictly cash basis. They had done their bit, and owed him nothing; he'd never taken the trouble to pay into any kind of pension fund. He didn't have any friends among the other rent boys, and although some of the older whores sometimes seemed to experience a ghostly maternal affection for the prettier boys, there was no way that sort of pantomime affection was going to be convertible into any kind of supply.

Even so, Jez was home for two whole days, in bed but not sleeping, before he called the vamp and begged for help.

Any run-of-the-mill freak or weirdo would have put the phone down on him, but the vamp didn't. The vamp listened. Jez wasn't particularly glad about that, but he wouldn't have been glad if the vamp *had* cut him off either; he knew that there was no way out.

The vamp brought the black BMW to the semi, and came upstairs to Jez's room. He didn't waste any

time; he just picked Jez up in his arms, all wrapped up in a blanket, and carried him down to the car. He laid Jez out on the back seat and he drove home to the brave new world of the half-reconstructed Docklands. He installed Jez in the spare room, and brought him a cup of hot, sweet tea.

"That's no good," Jez pointed out, politely. "I need some stuff — white and pure. I can't feed your lousy kid unless you can feed my head as well as my guts."

The vamp only held the cup to Jez's lips, patiently but insistently, and in spite of what he'd said, Jez drank it. He knew, somehow, that the vamp wasn't going to get him any hard stuff, or give him any money so that he could get it himself. Now Jez was in the spare bedroom, it was Jez who owed rent, in cash or in kind — and Jez knew that if it was to be paid in kind, it wouldn't be paid in the *usual* kind.

"Why me?" asked Jez, when he'd finished the tea. "Why'd you pick me?"

"Why anybody?" countered the vamp, with a shrug. "We can't even pick and choose our own selves with any degree of rationality or any semblance of good aesthetic judgment, so why should we be any better at picking the others on whom we elect to inflict ourselves?"

He was a philosopher to the bitter end, was the vamp. Jez might have admired him for it, if he hadn't been so desperately in need of a hit.

When the vamp left him alone, Jez thought that it would soon be all over. In fact, he felt so close to the end that he was certain that the vamp had misjudged it, and would be too late returning to witness the birth of his son and heir — but he didn't know whether or not that would matter to the vamp, who was, after all, unhuman.

As things turned out, though, Jez had longer to wait than he thought, and the vamp *had* come back.

It was night-time when the moment finally came, but the light was on. The vamp was sitting by the bed, patiently waiting. When Jez began to retch and gasp, the vamp unhurriedly pulled the duvet back, and unbuttoned Jez's shirt to expose the pale white belly within. Then he stood back to watch while the thing inside chewed its way out, ripping and slashing and tearing with its tiny clawed fingers and its tinier teeth.

The vamp could have brought a razor or a carving-knife to help it on its way, but he didn't. His kind obviously didn't believe in cossetting their young; the ones who couldn't make it on their own must simply be deemed unfit to live. The vamp just stood and watched, his face devoid of any expression, while his son and heir fought his messy way out through the surprisingly resilient flesh of the host who had carried him to term.

Jez watched too, though he would rather have been shocked into insensibility. He watched the rip in his belly from the moment it first appeared until the much later moment when the thing which was so laboriously making it was ready to squeeze through, stained top to toe with blood and flushed with the triumph of its first success in the harsh and hazardous game of life.

The pain had always been muted before, but it was given free rein while the thing was extracting itself, and the agony increased steadily all the while. Jez would have given anything for a hit powerful enough to blast him into orbit, but he was down at ground level, flat in the gutter without a shooting-star in sight. There was nothing he could do to fight the pain except stuff his knuckles into his mouth and bite down hard, as if the self-inflicted pain might somehow exorcise the other. Strangely enough, it did help.

Eventually, though, the creature was free. It didn't look much like an ordinary baby, but there wasn't any particular reason to expect it to.

The vamp picked it up.

Jez looked down at the bloody wreck of his abdomen, and slowly unclamped his teeth from his bloody hand. He realised, pathetically, that he was not going to die. In spite of everything, he was not going to die.

He didn't immediately understand *why* he wasn't going to die, but in the end he looked up from his rapidly-healing wound to stare at the vamp. Then he saw that father and son were looking down at him with earnest concern, sincerely glad to see that he was getting better.

Jez's mouth was full of the taste of his own blood, and as the pain gradually ebbed away, he realised for the first time how supremely sweet and nourishing that blood must be, in the mouths of those who were that way inclined.

THE HAUNTING OF H.M.S. DRYAD

by Reginald Bretnor

illustrated by Denis Tiani

I had always felt there was something strange about my friend Captain Edmund Casebolt Crankshaw, who owns and manages the Dryad Hotel on San Francisco's Embarcadero, so I really wasn't too surprised when he told me the place was haunted. After all, it's been there for much more than a hundred years, built over the hulk of H.M.S. *Dryad*, which sank at her moorings like so many other ships when her crew deserted her for the promised riches of the Gold Rush in 1850. Her mizzen mast still stands in the middle of the lobby, and the saloon bar, The Bilge Pump, still occupies her after cabins, which her officers thoughtfully waterproofed before she went down. Still, the haunting puzzled me, for — though he's always a perfect gentleman — the Captain was no man to trifle with, which I felt sure even a ghost would realize. His card says *Master Mariner*, but it always seemed to me that he'd be more at home on the quarterdeck of a man-of-war.

I had joined him at his table at the end of the bar; just under the partly draped Dryad figurehead which had once graced the ship's prow, and Mickey, his huge Fijian bartender with the filed teeth, had brought me my first bourbon and water on the house. It was a Friday night, and there was the usual Friday crowd of other students and junior faculty members from U.C., arguing as always about whether science fiction should or should not be called speculative fiction — as though the word science might put a hex on it. The oil lamps in their brass gimbals — the only illumination allowed — cast a soft light on the mellow panelling. The Captain usually began by asking me how my work was progressing — I was hoping to become an undersea archaeologist, and naturally he was interested — but tonight he obviously had something else in mind.

"Captain," I said, "you look sort of worried."

He frowned thoughtfully, sipping his Pusser's Rum. "Andrew," he answered, "I am, and I might as well tell you as anyone. Truth is, this bloody old place has a ghost. Doesn't really bother me — just the guests, and especially young couples who have something else very much in mind. He—I'm sure it's a he — hangs around two or three weeks at a time, sighing and moaning and groaning distressfully, usually when they are just going to it, and of course he manages to ruin it for them. Sometimes they pack up and move out immediately, and naturally I refund their money if they've paid in advance. But then he'll go away for months — once it was actually a couple of years — but invariably he returns."

I looked over at a group just two tables off: Jean-Pierre Danziger from the French Department, who was into all sorts of New Age stuff, a tall, stringy stranger in late middle age, who looked annoyed about something, a couple of grad students I didn't know, and a weird woman called Ludmilla Gooch, a very large woman wearing heavy braids, a sort of cross between a monk's habit and a holoku made of corduroy, and all sorts of heavy charms and beads. I'd heard that she'd taken up channeling, was writing a book about it, and had attracted quite a circle of followers. I saw that their conversation had lapsed, and that they were doing their best to listen to ours.

I alerted the Captain. "From what I know of her, if she hears about this spook of yours she'll start pestering you and insisting she can get through to him, and she'll make enough noise to have the whole place wondering what cooks."

"Well, *that* we don't want, but I know her type. The species is indigenous to Berkeley, and seems to recur generation after generation. But — well, thunder! I've tried everything else. I even had Father Halloran, the police chaplain, down here trying to exorcise him. Who knows? Do you suppose . . .!"

"Uh-uh!" I shook my head. "Would you believe anyone who claims that a Phoenician sailor who died about seven hundred B.C. speaks through her with the Wisdom of the Ages, and does it in *English*? To say nothing of French and all sorts of unknown languages?"

The set of his jaw told me he had come to a decision. "Andrew," he said, "I think I'll give it a try. It's that Phoenician seaman who's convinced me. If she's faking him, I should know in a minute. Would you be kind enough to ask her for me? Don't tell her why. Just say I'm interested and that I'd appreciate it if she and her party joined us in that little cuddy behind the bar. Besides, that way we'll keep her from noising it all around."

"Well, if you say so," I replied dubiously, "but don't say I didn't warn you."

I rose and went over to their table. "Dr. Danziger" I said, all politeness. "You may remember me — Andrew Lohead? I took a course from you three or four years ago. Perhaps you'll introduce me to your company? Captain Crankshaw has heard a great deal about Mrs. Gooch, and he's extremely interested in her research. He asked me to invite all of you to join him in his private room behind the bar. He's already

told Mickey to bring you another round and we'll be able to talk without being disturbed.

"Bah!" exclaimed the stranger, "Research indeed!"

Danziger cleared his throat. "Well, er — well, that'll be up to Ludmilla," he said, "as she seems to be the center of attention. Um — this gentleman, Mr. Homer McWhinney, is a friend of hers. But I myself regrettably cannot attend. Actually, I am with some other people," and he pointed to an even odder group three tables away.

I could hear Ludmilla shuffling her feet back into her sandals under the table, and knew that the invitation was accepted.

"I can see by looking at him that the Captain's a very old soul," said she. "I'll be happy to channel for him."

She stood up, holding a poisonous-looking drink in one hand, swaying her braids and clanking her beads and things. The two grad students, male and female, agog at the prospect of free drinks, declared they were delighted to meet me, even though Danziger never did formalize the introduction, and Mr. McWhinney grunted disgustedly but did not abandon us. I saw the Captain rise, smile a gracious smile that immediately dissolved the severity of his countenance, and, bowing to the lot of them, led the way past Mickey and the figurehead to the cuddy behind the bar.

Mickey had already set their drinks out before their assigned chairs, and Ludmilla gratefully took both her glass and the recliner which unprotestingly accepted her more than ample weight. She kicked off her sandals, sighed, and wiggled her toes.

"Do make yourselves comfortable," said the Captain, a bit redundantly, and I made the introductions.

Rather to my astonishment, Ludmilla came right to the point. "Captain," she declared, "as I told our young friend here, you're an old soul, and these days I don't get to meet too many of 'em. So I won't beat around the bush. You've got problems on the Other Side? Right?"

"Rather," replied the Captain.

"I thought so. I can feel it all around us. Two-three more of these —" She looked thirstily at the greenish fluid in her glass. "— and I'll go into a trance and let Marduk come in. "He'll help you if anyone can."

She was, I'm afraid, an unattractive woman. Her nose had a porous look about it. Her eyes were muddy. But somehow I knew that over the years she almost certainly had had any number of lovers, of whom the obnoxious McWhinney was probably the latest; and oddly enough I began to wonder whether her channeling was as fraudulent as I had believed.

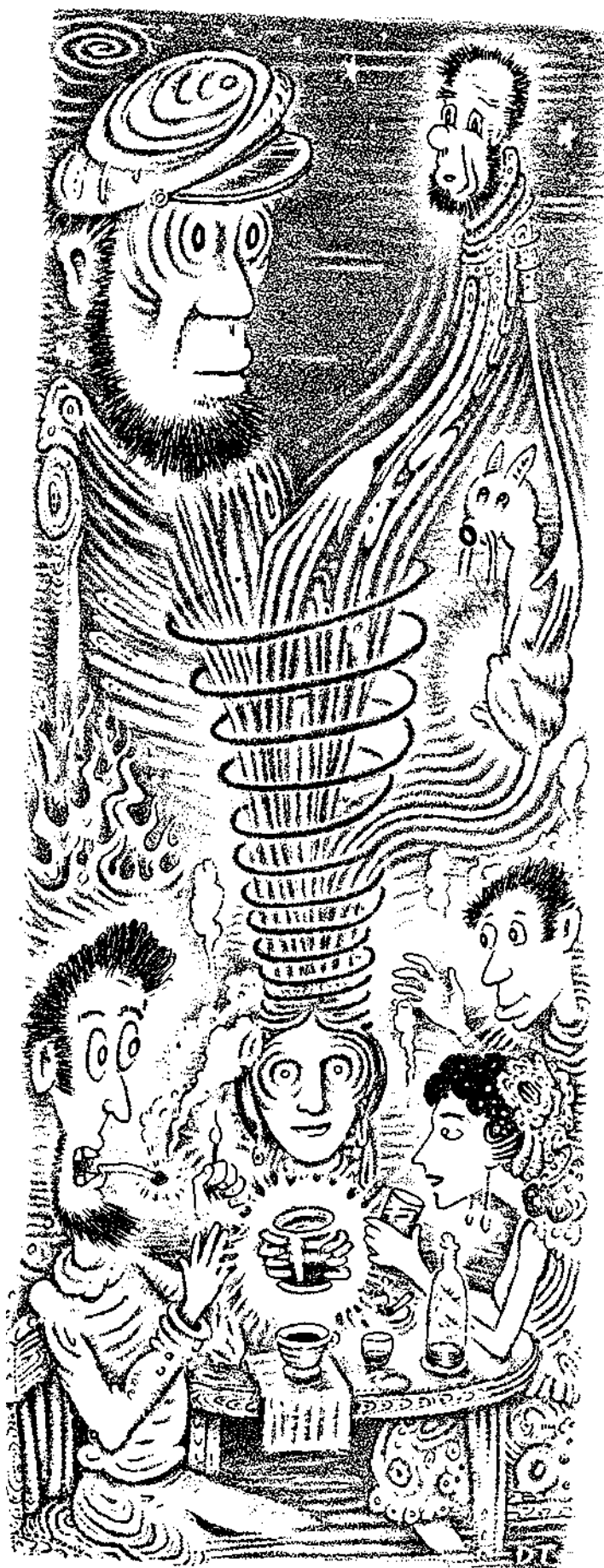
We had three rounds of drinks, Captain Crankshaw sipping his Pusser's Rum, I myself going easy with my usual, McWhinney hypocritically guzzling expensive Scotch, and the grad students eagerly ordering drinks they'd read about but couldn't afford.

The Captain sat there very patiently, making small talk about the Dryad Hotel, H.M.S. *Dryad*, the Gold Rush, and the California Historical Society.

Finally Ludmilla tossed off what remained in her glass, belched delicately, and announced that she was ready. The two students looked at their own glasses disappointedly; so did Mr. McWhinney, who started from his seat, muttering something about not putting up with a lot of drivel.

"Dammit, Homer, *shut up!*" snapped Ludmilla.

"Surely," murmured the Captain, "you will not abandon us after putting up with our company and my Scotch?"



McWhinney sat down again.

Now Ludmilla was lying back in the recliner. Her eyes were open, but they had lost something of their muddy look and whatever they were focused on did not seem to be in the room with us.

There was a long silence. Then, abruptly, a voice issued from her throat. It was not her voice. It was male, harsh and deep and powerful. "I am Marduk!" it proclaimed. "Marduk the Admiral, Marduk who conquered the sea, who explored the vast waters of the world. What do you want with Marduk?"

The voice was unbelievable. Its English, grammatically correct and clearly understandable, was spoken with an accent — or rather a melange of accents — so strange that I was at a loss to place it. It evoked images of Carthaginian soldiers prodding reluctant elephants over the Alps, of Honest Abdul's Used Camel Mart in Beirut, of shouted orders along a hundred far-flung waterfronts.

"I, Marduk, greet you — especially you, Captain Crankshaw, master of this unfortunate vessel, sunk in this Bay very much like my own so many years ago...

"Are you trying to tell me Phoenician spooks speak English?" snorted McWhinney. "I can't understand why Ludmilla allows herself to —"

"Who in Baal's name is this old fart?" shouted Marduk. "*Throw him out!*"

"I'm afraid I'll have to," said the Captain, just as Mickey stuck his head in the door, showing all his teeth. "Or Mickey will."

Ludmilla's lover subsided.

"Admiral Marduk," the Captain said. "Your knowledge of our language astounds me. Forgive me, but how the devil did you learn it?"

Marduk's laughter roared throughout the cellar. "Captain, I have had two thousand, six hundred, and some odd years to learn languages. Because of my mistakes — some might call them sins — I have been forbidden to reincarnate, and my destiny has been to follow the sea. I have been in battle on I know not how many men-of-war — *Revenge*, *Bonhomme Richard*, *Victory*. I have listened in their wardrooms in fair weather and foul. At Lepanto, the Armada, the Battle of the Saints, Trafalgar, Jutland. I have paced the quarterdecks of merchantmen, and listened to their sailors' yarns in ten thousand fo'castles. And almost never have I been able to manifest myself, to join them in their chatter.

"Only when there have been Finns aboard, because in the sailing ship days so many of them were wizards, carrying their bags of wind. And when I have, I've usually been taken for Davy Jones or the Flying Dutchman — do I *sound* like a Dutchman? — and once even for your own Ancient Mariner, but at least they didn't ask me to prophesy, or tell them about their past lives, or reveal the Secrets of the Universe like most landlubbers would. That is why I am so grateful to this lady for making it possible for me to converse with a fellow shipmaster.

"Captain Crankshaw, I shall do anything I can to help you. I know your vessel's history, and yours too. Often I have admired how you have done your duty despite all difficulties. Ah, how I wish I had had you, with me when I discovered this glorious bay so long ago. Had you been, my stout ship never would have sunk when my wretched crew ran off, tempted by the native women."

At that, my ears pricked up. A Phoenician galley sunk in San Francisco Bay — what a subject for my dissertation! And with photographs of what remained of her, of the artifacts!

I looked at the Captain. "M-may I ask him?" I whispered. All my doubts had vanished.

"Presently, Andrew. I know what you're thinking of. After a bit, I'll ask him myself. But first I have my own problem to consider."

"Ha-ha-har!" roared Marduk. "You have indeed. The matter of your Chief Bo'sun's mate, the good, devoted William 'Opkins."

"You mean —" The Captain leaned forward eagerly. "You mean *he's* the ghost who's been bothering my guests?"

"That is right," replied Marduk. "Would like me to bring him in? I'm sure our good hostess wouldn't mind."

"Please do."

There was a long silence, during which the Captain whispered in my ear. "Hopkins," he said, "was one of those who let greed for gold tempt them from their duty. It astonished me — that is, years later, when I finally heard about it. He not only deserted. He took the ship's cat with him to the gold fields. Her name was Emma, so the crew always called her 'Lydy 'Amilton.' You know, after Nelson's mistress."

Abruptly, a new voice broke in, a masculine voice but neither as deep nor as authoritative as Marduk's.

"Ow, Capting, Capting!" it cried out. "All these bloody years I been lookin' fer yer, and now — now —"

The voice broke into horrendous sobbing. "Now, at larst, I can tell yer 'ow sorry I am. You wouldn't believe 'ow I've suffered, me and Lydy 'Amilton. It was in a plyce called Second Garotte where they

killed me, them Yankee brutes, and arf of 'em Irishmen, and Lydy 'Amilton too. I do believe they et 'er, poor creature!" He broke off once more, overcome by sobbing, and a new voice piped up.

"Meow," it said.

"There she goes, sir!" exclaimed Hopkins. "Remember 'er? She's rubbin' agynst yer 'ind leg, she is, purrin' up a storm. Can't yer feel 'er, sir?"

"I can't, Hopkins," said the Captain. "But I'm touched by her devotion. It's a shame the whole crew couldn't have shared her dedication to duty."

There were more tragic sobs as Hopkins poured out the story of his almost century-and-a-half-long search for someone who could explain his contrition to the Lords of the Admiralty, and to 'Er Majesty the Queen. First, it 'ad tyken 'im years just to find 'is wye back to *Dryad*, only to find 'er sunk, and 'e styed around a bit but not even the Capting could 'ear 'im ...

"Meow!" said Lydy 'Amilton.

"Well, now you've finally been able to make yourself heard, thanks to Admiral Marduk and this lady here, so what can I do for you?"

"Oh, sir, If yer please, Capting sir, you can discharge me from 'Er Majesty's service, so I'll be free to go on to where this 'ere Admiral Marduk says I ought to be."

"Very well, Hopkins," said Captain Crankshaw. "In my opinon, you've pretty much paid for your crime, disgraceful as it was, and there's certainly no way even the Admiralty could have you hanged from the yardarm. So consider yourself, as of this moment, discharged from the Royal Navy, I suppose without prejudice."

"God love yer, Capting! Oh, thank yer, thank yer. Oh, sir, ayn't there nothin' I can do to repye yer? I could sty on a while and 'aunt anyone yer sye —"

"That," said the Captain hastily, "will not be necessary."

"Then, sir, I'll be on me wye — and, sir —" He hesitated. "— can I tyke Lydy 'Amilton with me? I know she's Crown property, but we've been together ever so long —"

"By all means take her, Hopkins. And the best of luck to both of you. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, sir, and when yer time comes I'll be lookin' forward to seein' yer agyne."

I thought I felt a tiny wisp of cold air pass my face. Then Marduk was back again, laughing his head off. "My friend," he bellowed, "I'd not have let the man off so lightly. I'd have at least persuaded him I'd found a way to keelhaul ghosts! And now would you like to hear the story of my mighty voyage and its sad ending?"

"We should be delighted." The Captain signalled to Mickey for a refill all around, and McWhinney quelled some sort of derogatory comment he had been on the point of uttering. And it *was* a mighty voyage, so much so that I actually found myself listening eagerly, not even really impatient for the sad ending, when I hoped to learn where the remains of his vessel might be found.

After they cleared the Pillars of Hercules, a great storm had blown them north and west, so that they almost touched the tip of Greenland; they fought Indians in what were to become Quebec and New England; they traded for rich furs, which served them well along the coast of Mexico, traded in turn for gold and slaves, some female for their delectation, some male to do hard labor and serve as sacrifices when the weather threatened.

Down the coast of South America they sailed, rounded the Horn at the cost of several slaves, beat out into the Pacific, and apparently reached what was to become Polynesia, then were blown to the continent's west coast, where they had dealings with the remote ancestors of the Incas, and on past Mexico to California.

Finally they reached the Bay. They had run out of female slaves, and the natives in the locality turned out to be very friendly and hospitable — so much so that Marduk's ship suffered the same fate as *Dryad*, with the one difference that she sank completely.

At this point Marduk heaved a great sigh. "I often suspected," he said, "that I was being punished because I did not sacrifice enough slaves to the gods, but in recent centuries I have started to wonder whether it was because I sacrificed too many. Ah, a man grows soft and sentimental in his old age ..."

And then I could restrain my own eager curiosity no longer. "Admiral Marduk," I said respectfully, "exactly *where* in the Bay did your ship go down?"

"Ha-ha!" he exclaimed. "Boy, do you think to get her treasure? By the time she sank, there was precious little left that my scoundrelly crew had not absconded with."

"You misunderstand my friend Andrew," said the Captain, and he went on to explain my interest in undersea archaeology.

"Hah! That is different," said Marduk. "Bring me a chart and I will point out the exact spot."

"A chart?" The Captain frowned. "I'm afraid we don't have one, but I'm sure there's an auto club map of the area somewhere — that ought to do it."

"What absolute crap!" sneered McWhinney, who had just downed his drink. "Everyone knows Columbus discovered America, and he didn't get anywhere near the Bay. Anyhow, what's all this Marduk garbage? Marduk was a Babylonian god, and he'd have been long out of date by the time this character came along."

"*Indeenaq!*" Marduk yelled. "You — you turtle's anus! My *father* named me Marduk. You are named after a Greek poet who, if he ever lived, has been dead longer than I have, and it was not your unknown father who named you!"

"Well, you've got no business pestering my Ludmilla. Hell, she could be channeling somebody useful, like what's-her-name Shirley MacLaine's gang and just raking the dough in!"

Marduk started to say what he would do to him if only he was in the flesh, but as he finished in an unknown tongue we could only guess at the gory details.

In the meantime, the Captain had risen, called Mickey to the door, given him whispered instructions, and returned with a large-scale map of the upper bay and a fresh drink for McWhinney, who accepted it ungraciously. He winked at me. "An Embarcadero Special," he said, *sotto voce*.

He spread out the map, oriented it carefully, and pointed out salient points to the Phoenician. They commented on minor changes in the topography over the centuries, and he started moving his finger like a Ouija board pointer. Suddenly Marduk cried, "*There!* There is where those eels' turds scuttled my ship, my beautiful ship."

The Captain's finger stabbed down, and he used a felt pen to mark the spot with a large red X.

It was well up the delta of the Sacramento River, and I realized, dismally, that the wreck was, after all these centuries, undoubtedly under forty or fifty feet of silt.

Either my expression gave me away or the Captain read my mind. "Andy, Andy," he said, "do not despair. Remember modern technology—but just be very, very careful who you let in on it."

Having had some experience with what can happen to original discoveries too carelessly broadcast by eager graduate students, I knew that his point was well taken.

"The Captain is your friend," declared Marduk. "He will help you, and I too shall be there — I promise you! You will make sure that I, Admiral Marduk, will get full credit in today's world for first discovering this magnificent harbor?"

"We'll do our damndest," promised the Captain, and I echoed him.

"You can always get in touch with me through this lovely lady," Marduk asserted. "No matter where I am — Bremen, Capetown, Cap Finisterre — I will come immediately."

McWhinney, having swilled his drink almost in a gulp, started to say something offensive, but couldn't quite manage it. He dropped his glass, and his chin fell forward on his chest. He started to snore.

"A very reliable compound," said the Captain. "It was used in the sailing-ship days to shanghai sailors when a ship was short handed."

"Throw the turd overboard!" advised Marduk. "I wish I could stay and watch, but I've been here too long already. I have other duties to perform."

We bade him good night, and a moment later Ludmilla came awake, orienting herself and reaching for her glass, which Mickey had thoughtfully refilled.

"Hey, did he show?" she asked.

The Captain informed her that he had indeed, that they had had a most interesting and informative session, and that both he and I couldn't thank her enough.

She looked at McWhinney, now sprawled face-down over the table. "Oh balls!" she exclaimed. "Here's old lover boy drunk again. Somebody help me get him in the car and I'll roll him home to bed — the useless bastard. Would you believe he's a high school history teacher? Would you believe there's a high school in Oakland where they *teach* history?"

She stayed for three more of her green drinks, which I must admit she held admirably. Then Mickey and the Captain and I helped her load him into her car after we carried him to the parking lot, and we watched her drive away. The two grad students had disappeared.

"Well, Andrew," said the Captain, "now aren't you glad I took her seriously? Just think, poor 'Opkins and Lydy 'Amilton, free after all these years to go on to wherever. And up the Bay, there's that galley waiting for you. Now will you be going directly home to Berkeley, or would you rather come back in and chat for a bit? I've a feeling you've got a few questions you'd like to ask me."

Once more, I was amazed at his perceptiveness. The session with Marduk and la Gooch had intensified the feeling I'd had about there being something strange about him.

"Captain, I'd like very much to — and you're right about the questions — that is, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all, my boy, not at all," he said, "and my Juliana — she's Javanese but that's her Dutch name — will probably join us there. She speaks only Dutch and her native language, so she won't contribute much to the conversation, but most people are content just to look at her."

I followed him back into the cuddy, where Mickey had our drinks ready for us; and presently we were joined by an absolutely gorgeous Javanese girl. She looked like an idealized dream of Bah, and instantly I found myself undressing her in my imagination. I'm afraid I blushed.

"Don't worry, Andy," he said. "She won't be offended. She knows just about everyone does it."

He stood, seated her; and Mickey served her what looked like a glass of dry sherry.

The Captain smiled. "And now, Andy," he said, "what about those questions?"

"Well sir —" I hesitated, then went on as he nodded encouragingly. "Captain, there were several things this evening. That Phoenician admiral acted as though he'd known you a long time. So did Hopkins. And you yourself acted as if you'd known both Hopkins and that cat, Lady Hamilton. And I've met several people who say they've known you for years and you never seem to get any older. I hope you won't mind my saying so, but — well, it is kind of weird."

"You're quite right," he said. "You have no idea just how strange it is. I'll tell you about it — I know you won't repeat anything I say, and anyhow nobody's believe you if you did. The truth of the matter, Andrew, is that I did know poor 'Opkins. I knew him because I was in command of the *Dryad* when she put into San Francisco Bay, so I was held responsible for the crew's desertion and for the fact that some of them managed to get back into her and scuttle her when they heard that our Consul and I had sent to the Admiralty for a replacement crew by the fastest means then available. In the meantime, some of my officers, and the ship's carpenter, who'd remained loyal, had done their best to waterproof her aftercabin, just in case, which was fortunate, because the city was starting to fill in the waterfront as fast as possible, covering up the sunken and sinking hulks with thousands of wagonloads of earth.

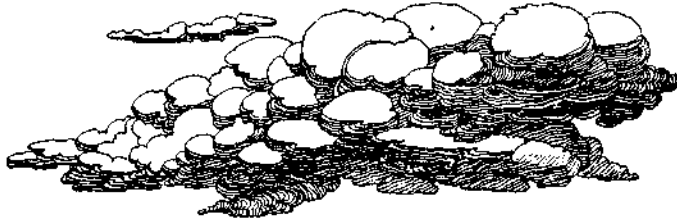
"There was nothing we could do to stop them. By the time another Royal Naval vessel brought us the crew I'd asked for, the *Dryad* was as you see here now."

He sighed heavily. "Unhappily," he said, "the report had been brought directly to the attention of Her Majesty the Queen, who — as you may remember from your history books — was *not* amused. Her order came to me directly — by a Queen's Messenger and written in her own hand. *Dryad* was to remain on the active list, and I was ordered to remain in command "until such a time as the crew could be returned, properly punished, and the ship made ready for sea service," all of which was, of course, patently impossible. I imagine that, what with other matters, the Crimean War and whatever, she probably forgot about me; but my pay kept coming in, first through our Consulate, then less formally through one of the banks, and always in golden sovereigns — they must have a lot of them still stowed away. Well, I made the best of it. I had some family money, so I bought up the new bit of land they'd filled in and put up the hotel, which at least has been interesting."

"But Captain Crankshaw, I — I'm still puzzled. How — how on earth? — after all, *everybody* ages."

His face hardened. His gray eyes looked out to a horizon I couldn't see. "Andrew," he declared, "Her Majesty the Queen was no ordinary woman. Do you realize that, at the age of barely eighteen, she ascended an imperiled throne, totally unprepared either by training or experience, and during her more than sixty-year reign brought us to our pinnacle of power and prosperity? Consider her Ministers — Wellington, Disraeli who crowned her Empress of India, even Gladstone. Andrew, she had those mysterious *powers* royalty was always believed to possess. Even George III, in his madness, wandered the streets of London curing the King's Evil, as one of your historians — Davidson, I think his name was — discussed in detail. In short, her orders were to be *obeyed*. If I aged, I could not have obeyed them. If I had been a young man, more people would have noticed that I grew no older and made more of it, but I was already in my middle years, when no one really notices. In any case, most people's memories are short and muddled. Nowadays they'd probably say my subconscious had something to do with it."

He was silent for a moment. Then he smiled. "There are times, Andy, when I regret not having gone on to be an Admiral and finally retire to Norfolk and write my memoirs. But in many ways I've had a rewarding and interesting life." He and Juliana smiled at each other and I began to feel like an intruder. "I've had adventures I otherwise never would have had, and met people I never would have met. And there's more ahead. I can hardly wait till you dig up that galley of Marduk's — I'm sure you will. That'll really set those Columbus people on their ear, though I do feel a bit sorry for those who claimed the honor of the Bay's discovery for Sir Francis Drake." Q



THE EXPECTANT FATHER TO HIS UNBORN CHILD

My Jewish friends have told me that a child,
Before it slides its way to being born,
Possesses these: The secret names of God;
The hidden sources of Heaven; All the wild
Fulfilling wisdom that its parents mourn
Their foolish loss of. It is not the rod
Of education nor the chains of work
That rob us of the Marvellous, but the spite
Of Angels: For a stroking finger seals
The child's mouth into silence. Thus some clerk,
Some Bureaucrat of God, denies out right
To Wonder; as around us life congeals.
Sweet child, resist. Deny that curtain's fall:
Bite the Angel's finger. Tell me all.

— Peter Atkins

AGAINST THE GRACE OF FIRE

by Batya Swift Yagur

Three men and a boy, three boys and a man, and who the hell cares? There were four of them, man-boys, the youngest still with downy growth on his upper lip and slim grace in his thighs and hips, the oldest grimly bulging above and below, his bushy mustache stout and loud. Brothers, no question. Four.

And they held me down in that wooded patch, once a halcyon scrap of untrammelled nature, between the library and Main Street. Ripped and ripped, till shreds and tatters and threads hung here and there over my shivering body, a quivering snail with shattered shell, a tiny white pupa whose cocoon has been rent. Rip, then stab, as they tore and stabbed and burned their way into my secret and holy passage. Thrust and stab, pouring the scum of shame into what was once innocent and inquiring, once a pristine and loving space of intimacy and trust. Tearing, thrashing, beating against its numb and pleading walls.

Until they left me, tears mingled with their sweat on my face, red and white fluids oozing, congealing, drying in sticky puddles between my legs

And inside, in my gut, in my ruptured and violated loins, a furnace, flames of blood and smoke sizzling and rising in sustaining fury. Rage, driving my knees to crawl, my hands to clear bramble and brush, my shaking form to rise, rise after collapse, rise through exhaustion, rise through my own screams which still roared in my ears. Rise and walk, stumble, grope through night *calls of owl and cricket, rise and walk*. Until Main Street and the Police Station at last.

Indignities.

Police procedures. Police doctors, scraping and peering into my lacerated and humiliated once private spot, now public property, display of the state, as specula and slides were inserted. DNA, semen samples, blood types. Yes, yes, I said wearily, do what you have to do. As I heard her — once my most intimate and privileged friend — crying in outrage, haven't they done enough?

Mug shots. Grim faces, baleful eyes, contemptuous glares in album after dreary album. Nothing.

Rumbles and mutters. Investigations, more interviews, more questions. Leads. Similar to crimes elsewhere — more leads. Then nothing.

Nothing.

Support groups and counselors, earnest and well-intentioned, throwing shiny pennies into my screaming abyss. Nights of sleepless darkness, the television puddling its feeble light, parading its tinsel comfort across the hollow spaces, as sleep treacherously smiled, hiding under pillows, only to bounce downy lips and bushy mustaches, prying hands and searing thrusts against my drooping eyelids. One month. Two, then three.

It was clear, it became as clear as the fire which had sustained me. I needed help: Rosita.

Rosita. Onyx-eyed, onyx-haired, ruby lipped, childhood neighbor and best friend. In whose kitchen I had passed hours of awe and delight with her mother, Senora Garcia. A family where curses and demonic influences were taken for granted, as germs are accepted in the modern hospital or classroom. Where las almas and los spiritos visited and dropped in like friendly or officious neighbors. To Rosita and Senora Garcia, then, and their bruja.

"Bah!" Senora Garcia spat. "Los policias. Ain't worth nada, believe me. I give you Senora Carmen's number. She will fix everything for you."

And so, nervously — because here I was, a modern, rational woman with a degree from Barnard College and an MBA from Wharton — clutching a scrap of paper with scrawled directions, seeking out a magician. A medicine woman. A shamaness. A bruja.

Ah, this must be the place. My knees announcing their skepticism with a series of trembles, I knocked on the door, expecting a stream of Spanish words. "Come in, it's open!" a voice called in utterly Barnardian English.

I pushed the door, expecting to see a gypsy fortune teller's booth — mysterious and eerie drapes, crystal balls, incense, perhaps crosses or pentagrams or whatever magicians use, and a raven-haired woman with darkened eyelashes, long red fingernails and scarlet robes, muttering incantations over a candle.

But the woman who came to the door was slight and sandy-haired, dimpled and denim-jeaned. "Expected some old witch, huh?"

"Forget it. Sit, sit, and tell me what I can do."

"I want revenge. Four men, they raped me like animals. No —" I glanced down at a cat which had slunk out of the kitchen and was rubbing against my leg. "Not like animals. Animals mate. Maybe they copulate. They don't violate. These guys did, and I want to do it all back to them. And worse."

She regarded me with steady hazel eyes. "OK. I see that this is true. But you have to do everything I tell you."

There was something about this woman that inspired trust. Maybe it was the complete absence of magical trappings and pretensions, maybe the clarity and depth of those eyes, there was kindness and mystery and impenetrability there, levels of power I had never encountered. "OK. Anything."

"Good. Do you have any object of theirs?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then, how about the clothing you were wearing?"

"I threw it all out." I shuddered, remembering how I had carried what was left of my skirt and blouse to the incinerator.

She shook her head and sighed. "This isn't going to be easy. You'll have to take me to the spot where it happened."

I blanched. "But —"

"You said you'd be willing to do anything." Her eyes burrowed, drills of crystal, and I nodded slowly.

Back to the wooded patch, then, my cries still echoing, bouncing off trees and moss, witnesses to ravagement and violation, my blood screaming from the soil. Senora Carmen, her nose quivering, was sniffing the ground, gathering bits of grass and bark and dirt into a container. I gasped as she pulled a large pearl-handled knife. "I'm sorry —" her voice wavered for the first time — "You've already been through so much—" And with a flash of her wrist she had my skirt up, the knife had whisked under my panties, and she was holding a lock of pubic hair. Her arms were steady and cooling on my neck as I leaned over and vomited chunks of foulness pouring on land already defiled. "It was necessary," she said, handing me a handkerchief. "Now we can move ahead."

"You will find them," she told me a week later, "at Ed's Eatery in Hoboken." She handed me a piece of paper with the address, then she pulled out a box. "Here. Open it."

A mundane cardboard box, a box that could hold potatoes or photocopy papers or stored toys in someone's attic. I opened it and there were four small dolls inside. They were made out of some kind of clayey substance, clad in the moss and leaves Senora Carmen had collected, and their hair I recognized, too, with another heave of the belly. Four dolls, four plunderers.

"You will take these." Her voice was emerald, hypnotic, I was nodding. "You will go to the diner, you will look at them, you will watch them, you will walk over to them, you will stand before them, you will look at them, you will take this —" she handed me a long pin, it could have been one of my mother's hatpins, but it had an odd symbol on top, something that could have been a cross but had squiggly lines — "and you will stick it in any part of the body you want, and you will watch what happens."

And the heat inside surged and leaped and the fire smiled and sizzled and beckoned.

And there they were.

Three men and a boy, three boys and a man, and who the hell cared? There were my four man-boys, fingers sticky with ketchup and mustard (hands of blood and semen), shoveling cheese burgers into their mouths (those mouths, raven caves of yawning lust).

Clutching my box, the fire ready to leap, I looked at them, I watched them. Watched their faces — faces that had seen me in rawness and humiliation — heard their laughter, coarse and porcine.

Hugging my box, the fire coursing now through veins of rag and scar, I crossed the room and stood before them.

They gasped when they saw me. The biggest, his mustache still quivering with ketchup, dropped his burger, the youngest's eyes skittered to and fro. Then a leer spread over the mustached face, a slow sweep of the lip into a curl, a sneer of power, of knowledge, of ownership.

The sneer did it. The fire burst forth, I whipped the doll out of its box, the biggest doll, and drove the pin into its groin.

He stood up, then, clutched his groin, doubled over, writhing, strangled pain spewing from his mouth, together with his dinner.

The murmur of restaurant conversation ceased, faces turned to us, three horrified brothers, one stricken screamer, one blazing woman.

I pulled out the pin and shoved it in again, right into the center point between the legs.

His eyes bulged, the scream that tore from this throat sent the other diners shrieking to safety, he clutched at himself, screaming and screaming. Blood was pouring forth as I withdrew the pin and stabbed, again, this time at the heart.

And as he slumped to the floor, the next brother got it in the eyes. Eyes that had beheld my degradation, had violated my sacredness. And the next brother in the ears. Stone ears that had ignored my screams.

Then there was one left.

The youngest. He trembled before me, cowered and shook before my gaze.

And then I remembered. Twice she had said it, hadn't she? You will look at them, you will walk over to them, you will look at them. Look at them not just once, but twice.

I had done it all, but had not looked at them. Not really. Not that second time. There was one brother left, and I must look at him, must force myself to see whatever I would see. And watch what would happen.

I must look at the peachiness still clinging to his lip, bridge to years of innocence. Look at the slimness of hips and thighs, the shaking of hands. Look at his eyes. Look, look, look.

And see, suddenly, his eyes, powder blue like the carpet in my bedroom when I was a child, reflected off the dresser mirror, and through those eyes, into his childhood bedroom. Drawn into those eyes, through those eyes, I found myself in a sorry concatenation of four chests and four beds, walls resounding with blows and screams, four boys cowering under flimsy sheets as a monstrous lout lugged his massive form to their bedsides, their butts red and weeping, their maleness hiding, tiny and shy, from his searching, sausagelike fingers. In the caverns of his still boyish eyes, the black coils of molten memory, the childface of dew and light retreating, pushing into the foreground a mask of claw and darkness.

And remember — then — my classmate Minnie, scrawny, pimply Minnie whose name was a natural invitation to the razor of fifth grade derision, "Skinny Minnie." And remember Randy and Maureen, glowering over me. "You either say you hate her, or we're going to hate you." And my voice, wavering as I hurled the ultimate insult, the name that swam her through rivers of tears, until eighth grade when her parents moved away: "Skinny Pinny Minnie." Basking in their approval, but hating them, hating Minnie for her sniveling victimhood, hating myself most of all.

This man-boy, younger than the others, eager for their approval, for the solidarity and protection of brotherly Unity in Hatred — he was no different from me. What he had done, I had done. I shivered in the inner prison of his terror, his past and his present, and I knew I had to give him his future because it was mine too.

She had told me to look at them again, Senora Carmen, and I hadn't. Now I looked, and I saw myself.

I held up the doll, water battling fire, my tears falling on the hatpin in searing drops. I advanced, step by step, as he shrank back into his chair. I held the doll in front of me, a torch of heat and light.

"Go." Then louder. "Go, I won't — I can't — harm you. Let there be one person in your life who hasn't violated you." His pupils were dilated, enormous black holes in the blue sky, his mouth opened slightly as if he were trying to say something. "I'm going to hold onto this." I thrust the doll in front of his face and he flinched. "You rape anyone else and I will set this doll on fire."

Back, then, to the wooded patch, the fire smoldering but quieter now, three dismembered dolls and a hatpin in my hand.

To bury the dolls, under that ground of desecration, allow green to grow from the ruins of memory, allow the sprigs and shoots of delicate Spring to grow from the staff of winter. Standing there, standing there in that strange and curious glade torn into the forest like a pit of memory; odd shafts of light, pincers of memory, coming in and out of that secret place. Placing the dolls in the ground and slowly, piece by piece, covering them with clumps of dirt, then backing away from that place in those odd shafts of light, staring, dreaming. And from that place over my heart where the fourth doll nestled warm as ice, a coldness as deep as fire lancing through me. Carrying, trundling that doll through all of the eaves and spaces of my life to come. Carrying thus, until that clear and questing moment, that redemptive moment, when it would be time to wrench that ice and fire from me and place it in that oldest and deepest of places, that final place, that place from which all creation must come.

And to which it must go.

Q

NIGHT

What if the sounds outside my bedroom window were
not the gently scraping of the bare tree limb on the cool glass,
but the desperate scratch of one long dead,
wanting in to warm his bare bones.

What if the sounds outside my bedroom window were
not the night song of the insects and the reptiles
harmonizing on the still country air
but the low humming cries of those disappeared.

What if the sounds outside my bedroom window were
not the thunder rolling like boulders on hard ground,
but my own dimension shifting slowly
out from under me.

To leave me hanging

in the thin air.

— **Donna Taylor Burgess**

A TALK WITH S.P. SOMTOW

by Darrell Schweitzer

S.P. Somtow, whose real name is Somtow Papinian Sucharitkul, is a native of Thailand, who began writing science fiction while living in the Washington D.C. area in the middle 1970's. Some of his science fiction books are *Starship and Haiku*, *Mallworld*, and the "Inquestor" and "Aquilad" sequences. He won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 1981. But this was only one of his many careers. He has also been a leading composer of Thai avant-garde music, a musical ghost-writer, a seminal horror writer (*Vampire Junction* and sequels and *Moon Dance*), and he has directed two films, *The Laughing Dead* and *III Met By Moonlight*.

Worlds of Fantasy & Horror: So, you are not merely a well-established fantasy and horror writer, but, I understand, virtually an ancestral figure.

Somtow: Yes, it was Philip Nutman who first said in *The Twilight Zone* magazine that I was one of the four ancestral figures of the Splatterpunk genre. Frankly, although I didn't know it at the time, I've exploited it. I admit it. I've used "Grandfather of Splatterpunk" on numerous blurbs. It's amazing to me that such a label is necessary, because actually my work hasn't that much in common with Splatterpunk, except of course for large amounts of gore. And even that — I've mellowed a lot, as far as the large amounts of gore are concerned.

WoF&H: We're talking about *Vampire Junction*, which was a 1984 book. Twelve years ago and you're the *grandfather* of a literary movement that's already passed its peak?

Somtow: Yes, I would consider the entire movement to be dying in its infancy, probably because there is a limit to what one can achieve in such a narrow interpretation of the horror genre. But many of the things that I tried to do in *Vampire Junction*, like writing a novel that's structurally based on MTV videos — which is really how the novel is put together — those are things that were new to horror writing and were taken up by many people, whether they used that label or not. I think that this is now a common feature of horror writing.

WoF&H: It seems to me that the inherent limitation in the Splatterpunk aesthetic, if we may call it that, is that once you've shown everything, you've *shown everything*, so there is nothing left to show. It's like bringing on the monster in the first reel, so there are no more shocks later on.

Somtow: Yes, that's why I've stopped showing things. I've shifted from the showing-everything bit to my mainstream novels, because it's a little more new there. In the book that I'm writing now, *Bluebeard's Castle*, which sounds like a horror novel but isn't, there are a couple of very intense serial-killing scenes that are just passed by in a couple of pages. The whole novel is not like that.

WoF&H: Here again you have encompassed an entire trend in a couple of pages.

Somtow: [Laughs]. Well, yeah . . . One of the reasons that I had to do that is this is a novel being published in weekly installments, and so one doesn't have more than a couple of pages to encapsulate entire trends in.

WoF&H: Are you writing this like a 19th-century novel, in that you turn each installment in a week before it appears?

Somtow: No, I fax it in two days before it appears, which gives them no chance to change anything. So I've managed to be really out there, and they haven't been able to do anything about it. So it's very exciting. The first novel I wrote in that way was *Jasmine Nights*, and I found myself becoming more and more daring because of the knowledge that they would print it, no matter how daring I was. So it was a real watershed for me in terms of what I dared to write about.

WoP&H: Where is *Bluebeard's Castle* being serialized?

Somtow: It's being serialized in *The Nation*, an English-language newspaper in Bangkok. Now the English-speaking community in Bangkok is small, but it's frightfully cultural, so I can put in references to really obscure things and it doesn't faze them, which is one of the best things about it.

WoF&H: You could probably slip a horror novel in on them and they'd never know the difference.

Somtow: Well, there are scenes which appear to be horror. The odd thing is that the editor at Hamish Hamilton, who originally bought *Jasmine Nights* after it had been rejected by thirty publishers, had never heard of me, because she didn't read horror or any other genre. She said to me, "I was able to read your novel with an unprejudiced eye because, of course, I don't read genre."

Now that the editors at Hamish Hamilton know that I'm a genre writer, they've rejected *Bluebeard's*

Castle. They're seeing all these tiny little genre clues in it, which were also present in *Jasmine Nights*, only they didn't know that I was a genre writer. So it's a double-edged sword.

WoF&H: Have you got a publisher yet?

Somtow: Not yet. I'm going to do what my agent did with *Jasmine Nights*, which is wait until it's finished. I seem to do a lot better that way, financially at least.

WoF&H: It sounds like a book someone could publish as horror anyway if they wanted to, like that last Tom Tryon novel, which wasn't really a horror novel at all, but was packaged as one.

Somtow: It was a Boy Scout Camp coming-of-age horror novel. It *is* horror, but not what you'd think of as horror.

Yes, they may decide that *Bluebeard's Castle* is horror, and if that's the way I have to go in order to pay the mortgage, then so be it. But it really isn't.

WoF&H: Apparently horror is absolutely dead as a commercial category right now. So they'll call it "dark suspense" or something like that.

Somtow: The only problem with calling it horror is that this book is hideously funny. All these awful things happen in it, like the heroine has RU-486 administered to her secretly, so her fetus can be aborted and made into a voodoo fetish without her knowledge, and so on and so forth. But she has this cynical sense of humor and is always saying things like, "Yes, it was terrifying, but I was starting to get turned on by it all." This tone is something that might make it a hard sell as a straight horror novel.

WoF&H: Maybe the horror readership is sufficiently jaded that they'll go for it, in the same way that, on one level, Ramsey Campbell's *The Count of Eleven* is a successfully funny serial-killer novel.

Somtow: Yes. That's what I am hoping will happen that people will approach it already jaded, or else it will reach a completely fresh audience that likes to be cynical and likes to satirize itself.

WoF&H: Do you think in terms of being a horror writer or of your work being horror fiction, or do you just let it fly where it may and then let someone else figure this out?

Somtow: I never have thought of myself as a horror writer, and it was only the fact when I did *Vampire Junction* they made me change my name that sort of split me off into a new genre.

WoF&H: Tell the story of why you changed your name.

Somtow: It's a very simple story. Berkley books said that if I changed my name, they'd make me a star. I did and they didn't. But I didn't want to change it too much. It's been a cumulative thing, because, although each edition of *Vampire Junction* has never sold that well, all together it has been quite a large best-seller. It's pretty steady.

WoF&H: I could see it and its sequels as a series of movies. An immortal twelve-year-old vampire rock star has a certain appeal. What a wonderful role for Macaulay Culkin at one point...

Somtow: [Makes sound of distaste.] Mary Lambert, who directed Madonna videos, and then went on to do Stephen King movies, *Pet Sematary* and so on, is very interested in doing the book. We pitched it to Paramount at one point, and the producer there was an ex-starlet. In the middle of the pitching session, she actually asked us if it had vampires in it. So this is about intelligent Hollywood can be at times. She said, "Oh. This book has vampires?" She also asked Mary Lambert who she was. It was very odd. But it seemed to me that someone who had done MTV videos — she is very famous for doing the Madonna videos, which are very erotic and dark at the same time — and was able to infuse eroticism into it, would be perfect. She really wanted to do it. She wanted to have Leonardo DiCaprio play the role of Timmy Valentine — he's a little old, but it might work quite well.

WoF&H: There may be times when it's more important to get a good actor than to get the age precisely right. It would be very difficult to find a twelve-year-old who could play that part, and if you could get a sixteen-year-old instead, who's good, or somebody who just looks sixteen, then go for it.

Somtow: I agree completely. I've done three *Vampire Junction* books, and I am a little worried that it may be my fate to have to produce another, because sometimes I can go to a publisher and say "I have all these great ideas for books," and I start reeling them off, and they're kind of ho-humming, and then I say, "Then I'll just do you a sequel to *Vampire Junction*." Then they just send a contract. This is frightening to me.

WoF&H: If you're successful enough, you could meet the fate of Edgar Rice Burroughs. You could end up writing twenty-five of them, and readers can predict whole chapters in advance. So I guess you need to reinvent yourself every once in a while.

Somtow: As you know, I really hate to repeat myself that much, and this has gotten me into really bad trouble as a writer. I could have written five hundred *Aquiliads* or five hundred *Mallworlds*. Or maybe five hundred Inquestor novels. I could have been as big as Stephen R. Donaldson if I'd written five hundred Inquestor novels, for example. Or I could be like Douglas Adams if I had written five hundred Mallworld books. What can I say? I just can't bring myself to do it. There is always a strong temptation to do so, because it's the only way to make money.

WoF&H: Well, you've had your own flirtations with the movie industry.

Somtow: [Laughs.] You could call them flirtations if you like. *The Laughing Dead*, even though it has never been released in this country, has acquired quite a reputation as a cult item, because of the various well-known science-fiction writers who appear in it having their heads crushed, and so on. It seems to show up regularly at every science-fiction convention in the video room. In fact it got a rave review from Michael Weldon of *Psychotronic Film Guide*, which is the imprimatur of greatness among bad horror movies. Then I did the Shakespeare film, because I decided that at that budget I might as well do something relentlessly intellectual instead of just another slasher film, to see what would happen. They didn't go for that either, you know. I made the film and I am still looking for a distributor for it.

WoF&H: You refer to the genre you're working in as "bad horror films," not just horror films.

Somtow: Yes, I have not been working in horror films, *per se*. I have been working in bad horror films, which is a completely different genre from horror films, okay?

Bad horror films contain certain elements which are very important. For example, a mysterious villain who speaks in a British accent. There are certain tropes that are required. Therefore, even though my character in *The Laughing Dead* was a Mayan death god, I still had to speak in a British accent because it was a tradition in the bad horror film that this must occur.

WoF&H: Then we're defining the bad horror film as one which is self-aware and campy, with its own aesthetic, like underground art which may be deliberately ugly and crude. All this is different from the merely inept.

Somtow: Absolutely. I am not using "bad horror film" as a pejorative in any way. It is merely a genre with its own tropes, its own sensibilities. I've tried very hard to make my Roger Corman film a bad horror film. But unfortunately it wasn't quite bad enough when it came out, because they had tinkered with the screenplay too much.

Roger asked me to do an adaptation of Bram Stoker's "The Burial of the Rats" as a film, and he just gave me a list of sets that he had acquired the use of in Moscow. They had things like the Bastille, Versailles, these huge historical sets. He said, "Well you can write anything you want as long as it has this title, and I have to have the first draft next week." This was my job interview. "You must use every single one of the sets on this list."

I thought I would create the ultimate bad horror movie in my script, but it didn't work out that way. For one thing, Roger told me that he wanted it to be really wild. But I didn't know that that was a code Roger Corman word for having a lot of tits. I thought he *really* wanted to be really wild. The script is about the young Bram Stoker being abducted in France by lesbian highway women who are controlled by a mad queen who plays a magic flute and thinks she's Marie Antoinette, played by Andrienne Barbeau. The lesbian highway women induct him into the ways of feminism, while sitting around being scantily-clad at the same time. We have both left-wing liberal indoctrination and hideous male-chauvinism at the same time, which is kind of cool.

WoP&H: But in a self-aware, parodic way.

Somtow: However, most of the hilarious, pseudo-19th-century dialog that I created as been replaced by rather stodgy dialog. Only a few lines, like "I am the Pied Piper's twisted sister" remain.

WoF&H: Do you think you could move into the related genre of good horror films?

Somtow: I don't think I'd want to. I think I'd rather move from bad horror films to a completely different genre, like a mainstream film. Well, that's a silly word too. But the film that I just set up was an art film of the most owing caliber. It a cross between *Sleepless in Seattle* and *The Crying Game*, set in Bangkok. Unfortunately for me, Margaux Hemingway was one of the three stars attached to the film, so, because she committed suicide, I was kind of fucked. I'm still hoping to get it back together again somehow. But this was a film that didn't have a taint of horror to it at all, although it does have a shaman who gets possessed by the god Shiva.

WoF&H: There you go. That's enough. But how to you go about getting a film together. A lot of people would like to be movie moguls and make their own films, but you actually got to do it. So what's the difference?

Somtow: The first time, we were subsidized by Lex Nakashima, a well-known science-fiction fan. He simply had the money, so that was great. The second time we did it, I sold five-thousand-dollar shares to my relatives and to many other people, who are now breathing down my neck, so I'd better sell the film fast. I got a \$100,000 grant from Mr. Sondhi who owns *Buzz* magazine in L.A.. He's a Thai guy. Because it was culture, Shakespeare and all that, we were able to get a lot of people who wouldn't otherwise do a hideous low-budget film to work for us. Timothy Bottoms, who is definitely an A-list actor, signed up to do it. Other actors, like Robert Z'dar, who is only known for being the Maniac Cop and other monsters in horror movies, wanted to do it so he can say he's done Shakespeare. So we had actors from both sides agreeing to do it.

WoF&H: To get back to horror fiction, we're talking about all these campy, self-aware horror films, but

surely you have to control such tendencies in fiction. I don't think there's such a thing as the bad horror novel.

Somtow: Not at all. I think that my horror novels are about as different from my horror film projects as it is possible for two things with the word "horror" in them to be. But there is one thing that they have in common, in a way, is that both the bad horror film and my novels rely a great deal on the hipness of the viewer or reader to catch numerous references. But in my B-movies, those references are to other bad horror films, but in my novels, they're references to works of literature. So it's a different audience.

WoF&H: What do you think makes good horror fiction?

Somtow: I don't know. At first one ought to say that all fiction deals with love and death, and horror, of course, deals with love and death in a very more visceral way. But I haven't been scared by a horror novel in some time, so that's probably not it anymore. If it brings me even a slight flutter of how I felt as a child reading *Some of Your Blood* or something like that, then I feel that I am reading a really good horror novel.

WoF&H: Can you get this feeling while writing something?

Somtow: I aim for that. It's happened only a few times in my writing, when I've actually become absolutely terrified. It's happening less now, I confess. That's why I'm trying to reach out to something even darker, in some ways. I have been doing a series of extremely blasphemous stories lately. I thought maybe that would work.

WoF&H: It would to believers in whatever you're blaspheming.

Somtow: [Laughs] That's true. But even though I am sort of pan-religious these days, I was still brought up in a strict Buddhist/Anglican environment. Therefore I have two very powerful sets of traditional values working on me.

WoF&H: The readers would be interested, so why don't you say something about your background?

Somtow: When I was six months old, my parents and I left Thailand. My Dad was in the middle of doing his Ph.D. at Oxford, so I grew up in a very dissociative way, because I actually thought I was English. One of my famous statements from my childhood was, "I'm English and you're foreigners," which I said to my parents once. [Laughs.] Then, when I was seven years old, we moved back to Thailand. I spent five years there. I had a tremendous case of culture shock, and I got out of that by retreating into a study of the Greek myths and the classics, and so on. All that is narrated in my semi-autobiographical novel, *Jasmine Nights*. Everything in the book is sort of true, although not in that order or to that extent. Things like the fellating grandmother who removes her false teeth before the act, that for example, is true.

WoF&H: I know you were educated in Britain, but you have lived in the United States off and on for many years.

Somtow: I grew up in four different countries, but after I started going to school in England, I pretty much stayed there until I was in my twenties. Then I went to Thailand to try to become the Harlan Ellison of avant-garde Thai music. But I got so burned out by that that I came to America and accidentally became a science-fiction writer. I actually stayed in America without going anywhere much for about five or six years, but now I have a double life and actually spend a lot of time in Bangkok.

WoF&H: What this must give you is a genuinely unique perspective, by virtue of being an outsider in several cultures at once.

Somtow: Yes, that's right. Wherever I've gone I've always been an alien, which is very frightening, perhaps the most frightening thing about my life. Even when I am with my most intimate family members, I am still culturally a little off from them. I'm the black sheep in both cultures. It's rather scary.

WoF&H: Doesn't this make you observe more, because you take less for granted.

Somtow: Absolutely. I've always said that this is the reason that I've ever acquired skills as a writer at all. I'm spending more time in Thailand, which is really a wild place right now, and which has caused me to see many more things. As you probably know, Thailand has gone from sort of 1920 to the 21st century in the last ten years. It's amazingly wrenching to see the transformation occur. When I was a child, my house was at the edge of a paddy field, and right now Bangkok is the city with the highest pollution and noise rate in the world, and skyscrapers go up everywhere you look. It's got the world's largest shopping mall, strangely enough. Not only does this mall have a roller-coaster in it, but there's a little water park where you can get into bumper boats — on the eighth floor of the shopping mall. It also has the biggest bookstore in the world, by the way. I believe it is like five hundred thousand square feet.

WoF&H: This has also given you a great sense of the absurd.

Somtow: Very much so. Let me give you an example. The last time I was in Thailand, a woman jumped off a building that my family owned in Bangkok. She jumped off and committed suicide, which is very tragic. So then my family had to have the building exorcized. So they sent a fax to the local shaman. That's how things work there. Of course they had to have a religious ceremony right away, to

appease the spirit of the woman who had jumped off the building, so it wouldn't jinx the building. But these are people going around in their Armadi suits and acting very modern, and yet they do these things as a matter of course. It wasn't a special deal to them. Of course shamans have beepers and fax machines. There are astrologers in shopping malls.

WoF&H: Just like in the United States.

Somtow: Yes and no. These astrologers actually do your whole chart. They have all the figures in their heads. They're like idiot savants of astrology.

WoF&H: I see how you can get very powerful horror fiction this way, from the fear of never fitting in anywhere. Do you feel this?

Somtow: I do fear it and I live with it every day, so it provides an undercurrent of unease in my life wherever I am, certainly. Do we have enough material now?

WoF&H: Just about. We have a few minutes of tape left, so we might as well use it. I could ask you the meaning of life. Or is that passe now?

Somtow: Well, it's not forty-two. In my new *River-run* trilogy, I try to answer the question of what is truth, which is pretty deep. The hero is writing an essay about truth. Since it goes through lots of alternate universes, the same essay is shown again and again in terms of the latest universe the characters have fallen into. And the answer he comes up with is that everything is true simultaneously.

WoF&H: I suppose the ultimate question then for the writer is how do you write about truth and horror and your deepest fears without laughing? Is it a good idea not to laugh?

Somtow: I always laugh. As you know, Darrell, I've dealt with some of the most profound questions of life by means of comedy in my works, even in my darkest works. Ed Bryant pointed out that scene in *Vampire Junction* where the kid's entire family has been killed and turned into vampires, and they're sitting around feasting on the blood of a corpse in a video arcade, and they say "You must become one of us now." And the kid realizes that this is the first time he's seen his family have a meal together in years. [Laughs.]

WoF&H: Are there also things which are too uncomfortable to be dealt with in any other way except by laughing?

Somtow: Absolutely. Just because you laugh does not mean it's funny. Just because you're terrified doesn't mean it's not funny either. The interface between humor and horror is something that *Bluebeard's Castle* really deals with. So I'm afraid nobody is going to buy it because no one will be able to make up their minds as to whether it's a satire or a novel of suspenseful terror.

WoF&H: It could be both.

Somtow: That's what I'm saying. It is both. But they're going to have to decide what it is before they can sell it. Maybe they'll make a funny cover and a scary cover and have them both out at the same time. That would be good.

WoF&H: One cover could have a laughing face and the other could have embossed entrails.

Somtow: Yeah. I could see that. Or they could do it front and back, and it could be one of those display dumps where the books are facing both ways.

WoF&H: Ultimately everything dissolves down to marketing.

Somtow: I hate to think that, but I've become pretty cynical about marketing. I've decided that I'm just going to write whatever I want to and let them decide how to package it. My work seems to be better since I have stopped worrying about what it's going to have on the cover!

WoF&H: That's probably a good place to stop.

Thank you, Somtow.

Q



ARGUMENT:

*No thing hates me.
Au clair de la lune
Faceless evil cuddling other sheets
Than mine, would have me
For its own.
A pricked balloon, clair audient,
Telling visions, can own naught.
My creed my touchstone:
Nothing is not sacred.*

*I may get something from nothing,
But I reserve the right
To choose what.*

— Virginia Kidd

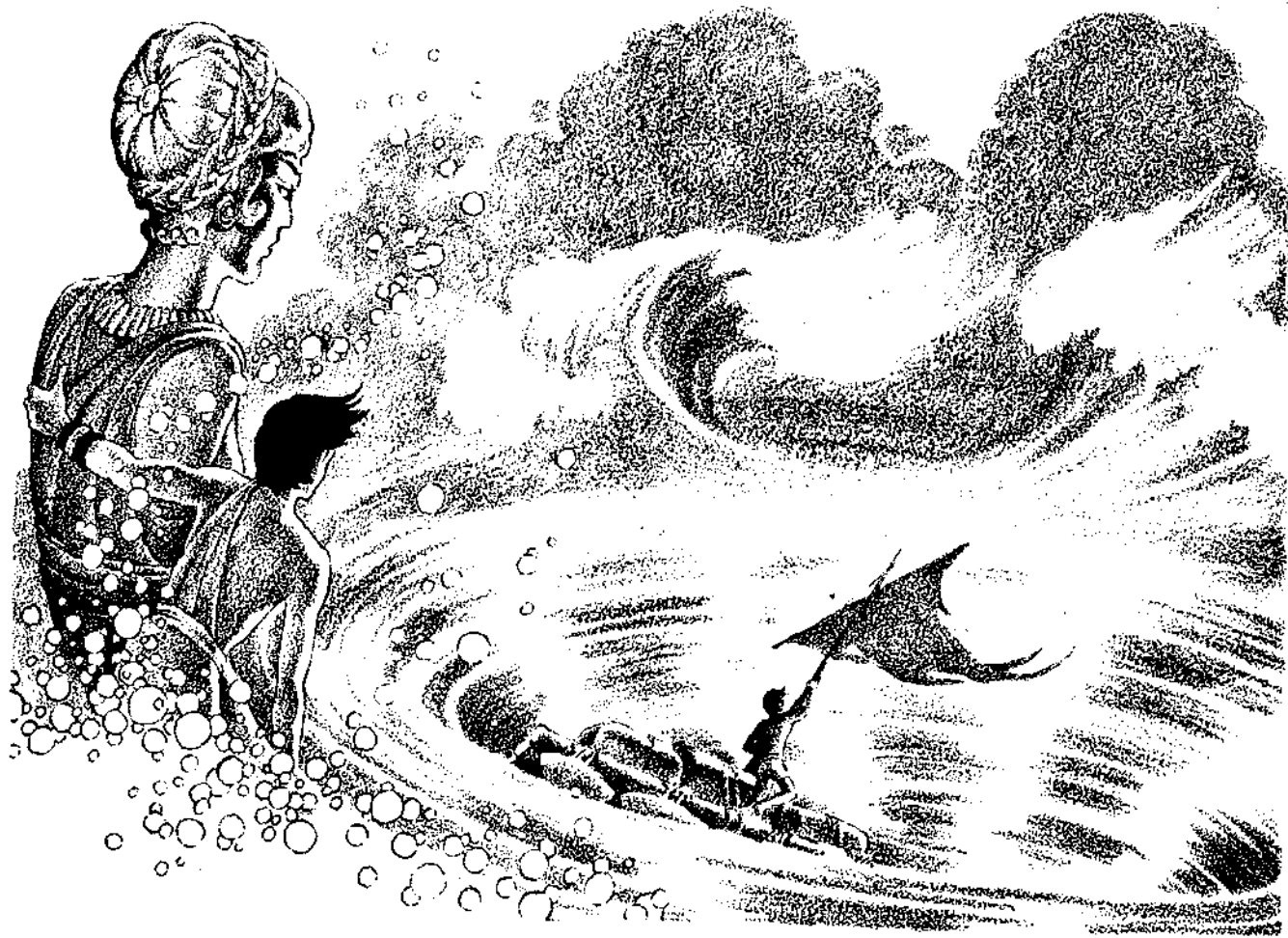
THE HERO'S CELLULOID JOURNEY

by S.P. SOMTOW

illustrated by George Barr

The first time I saw the Lady of the Lake was at the Steinfelds' party. A lavish do, they have it every year; the extravagance of the bash is directly proportional to the tax write-off their accountant has told them they need to bring them down one bracket. Hate their parties, I really do; they rarely have anyone useful at them, just your usual Z-grade starlets, predatory agents, out-of-work screenwriters, dealers, pimps, and parasites. Not my kind of people. The only thing the Steinfelds and I have in common is the support group. Matilda Steinfeld (maybe you saw her on *Oprah*) is recovering from persistent memories, perhaps falsely implanted by her previous therapist, of Satanic childhood abuse; I am recovering from something far more mundane — my wife was hacked to pieces by a serial killer while I, tied to a chair, did nothing.

The Steinfelds' gazebo was hidden behind a wall of oleander; unless you knew your way around the estate, there was tendency to miss it. I had every reason to believe I was alone — alone, that is, save for my double Black Label on the rocks — when I hung up my shorts and lowered my shopworn, ample body into the hot tub. I just wanted to get away from these loathsome people long enough to clear my head. The cocktail canapes had not agreed with me. At first, I mistook the tickling sensation in my abdomen for some incipient digestive problem. Then, looking down into the water, tastelessly illuminated as it was by a shaft of pink light and a shaft of blue, I saw a mass of some kelp-like growth undulating somewhere in the depths. Perhaps the pool man hadn't been in that week? But that was so unlike the Steinfelds — each of their house's fourteen bathrooms had color-coordinated toilet paper, for God's sake! — and it occurred to me that perhaps I should be getting frightened. Perhaps I should even scream.





But I couldn't, you see. That's why I'm in the support group. I don't feel terror anymore. I freeze up. I just flash back to being tied up in that chair, the *Three Stooges* necktie cutting into my wrists, my wife's wadded-up bra rammed into my mouth, choking me . . . and that madman slicing her, slowly, methodically, like a deli chef... like a slow-motion ginsu infomercial . . . grinning from ear to ear.

In any case, it was just as well I didn't. The mass of reddish seaweed churned about in the bubbles for a while; then — as the timer buzzed and the water went suddenly clear — I saw that it was human hair — a lot of human hair. It was attached to one of those pale, pre-Raphaelite faces: a thin, delicate nose, lips red as a coral snake; her hair was so long it formed a kind of robe around her nude body, though now and then a plump, firm breast went peek-a-boo; but I have not yet mentioned the eyes. They were as wide and vacuous as a Japanese cartoon's; they lent her a dreamlike quality which, had I been capable of fear, should have exacerbated it. Instead, I got out of it by cracking jokes, as usual.

"Well, well," I said, "if it isn't the Lady of the Lake. Got a sword for me, babe?"

She sat up, looked me over, and said, "Indeed, you're not quite the way I imagined you."

"Like the accent. . . what is it, Irish?"

"No, it's more Welsh than Irish; something in between, indeed." Now that she was sitting up, I realized she was startlingly beautiful — wet-dream beautiful, in fact. I was glad that I was no longer prone to penile embarrassments.

"The Steinfelds sent you over, didn't they?" I said. "But you know, I'm not much in the business anymore. I seem to have a sort of negative Midas touch. You wouldn't believe that *Home Alone* meets *Jurassic Park* could bomb, would you? But mine did. Sure, they still let me keep an office on the lot . . . I'm down the hall from Harry Gittes . . . but nobody takes me seriously anymore. I go in one day a week. The rest of the time I'm down at USC, teaching *The Hero's Celluloid Journey: Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and the Contemporary Filmmaker* to first-year film students. It's a wildly popular course. I like to think it's because I'm a grand old man, I mean, middle-aged of course, who used to hang out with all those '60s legends, but really I know it's because I'm the Greg Hoffman who was falsely imprisoned for the axe-murder of his own wife in the big scandal that was on *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair*; it's *that* that makes me an icon, not a few second-rate thrillers from the '70s."

Mostly, by the time I'm about halfway through this speech, my audience has begun to twiddle its thumbs. I've perfected the spiel as a way of keeping my distance from people. It usually takes about five minutes to alienate a total stranger; but this woman listened to me raptly, her gaze never leaving my face. Was it the hair weave? No, she was staring straight into my eyes, seeing past the barriers, past the bullshit, into places I myself no longer dared look. And because she would not look away from me, I could not look away from her; and the more I looked, the more I knew she could not be real; beauty such as hers is a virtual beauty, spawned by persistence of vision in the dark gaps between the lit frames of a motion picture.

I said, "What's your name?"

"Bridget," she said, which is the name of a Celtic goddess.

"You don't look like a Bridget. You ought to have some poetic, foreign-sounding name like, I don't know, Anastasia, Arabella, Antigone."

"We'll never get to the Bs at this rate, Greg."

"Wait! You know my name! The Steinfelds *did* send you after all. Haven't I seen you before somewhere? Cover of *Vanity Fair*? Or dancing with Madonna, cheek to cheek, tongue to tongue, that raunchy new video, can't remember the title? Bridget *who*? Oh, but of course, that's not your stage name."

Steam hung in the air. She shook her head, clouding the water. "There's no need to talk," she said. "You're not really saying anything."

I took a deep slug of the Black Label, then reached behind me to hit the timer switch again; leaned back to receive the full pressure of the jets against my back.

"You know why I'm here," she said.

"No idea. Some kind of casting couch deal, maybe."

"No, you *do* know. You said it when you first laid eyes on me, indeed. I've come to give you that sword."

"Yeah, right. Excalibur."

She laughed. "You are the one! Thank the Old Ones; I've been searching right long enough, let me tell you. You've named the quest, you've named the sword."

"Well, of course I have. I have to teach this shit to freshmen who all think they're going to be the next Martin Scorsese."

"You are the hero who does not know the meaning of fear."

Well, that was true enough, in a way. If being so traumatized that you can't feel any emotion whatso-

ever qualifies as not knowing the meaning of fear, she had me there.

"And you've kept yourself pure for seven years."

"Pure? I'm impotent. I haven't been able to get it up since, you know, the . . ."

And I still couldn't bring myself to say it aloud.

"Others have wronged you grievously, yet you have not spoken ill of them."

"You're just like that fucking state prosecutor," I said. "You've already made up your mind. Now you're twisting everything about me into your crackpot theory that I'm the next King Arthur."

She smiled at me. In the water, I could see the glint of metal. The pink and blue lights lanced the clouds of steam. A pommel was rising from the froth. I looked away. "I think I should be getting back to the party," I said. "It's been good talking to you."

"But I have to give you this sword."

"Hey, give me a break. I do the Arthurian mythos three days a week, 4 to 6 P.M. The rest of the time, it's strictly reality. If you find your fantasy world bleeding into real life, I know a good support group you can join."

I got dressed and waddled through the crowd that thronged the lanai, staggered over to the valet parking without even bothering to say goodbye to the Steinfelds. The place was madness. They let *anyone* here. I even noticed one of my pupils, Angel Serafino, a pre-med who was just doing my class for kicks. "Hi, Mr. Hoffman," he said, and waved at me. He was one of the bronzed young Californians who belong on the covers of cheap romance novels; his date, bedraggled and bespectacled, seemed an improbable match. They were both bearing down on me, but I was in no mood to discuss movies, and I knew that that was all Angel ever thought about. Horror in particular. Ordinarily I would have exchanged a word or two, but there was something in the air — some fragrance — that just made me want to flee.

Not now, I gestured, and managed to sneak through some French doors, down a corridor, and out toward the valet parking.

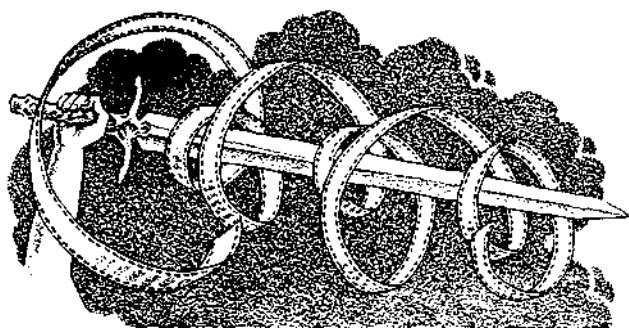
I climbed into my Ferrari — I'd been thinking of having it altered to accommodate my girth — and whizzed back over the hill to Tarzana. I can't afford Bel Air anymore, but I don't give out my new address much.

At home, I poured myself another drink, and then another. But I still couldn't stop thinking about Bridget. It was hard to escape the notion that I had had some kind of archetypal encounter. It all made perfect sense. From a Jungian point of view, Bridget would have been the earth-mother in her positive, nurturing aspect; a Freudian could easily see that the proffering of the sword referred to the possibility of curing my impotence, though my refusal to accept it might point to some, ah, bone of contention between my Superego and my Id.

The psychiatric resonances were so perfect that by my third Scotch I knew that the whole thing had been a dream. In fact, I was looking forward to telling a suitably embroidered version of it at the next support group.

Presented for your consideration: Gregory Hoffman, producer without a past, neuroses in the rath degree. Aspects of my emotional dysfunction: no pictures of my children to be found anywhere in the condo, (I knew, of course, that I had two grown children, Roseanne and Mortimer; but I had no memory of them.) Moreover, I had forgotten what my brother Joshua looked like. (Surely not like me. We were adopted.) There were no pictures of family members at all. Especially not Jennifer.

Looked at from the mythopoeic viewpoint, I certainly fit the profile of the lonely hero who did not know his origins.



I curled up on the sofa, turned on the gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Menendez trial, and slugged down another double shot.

It occurred to me that my two-bedroom condo in Tarzana was not substantially different from my cell on death row — the one they'd kept me in until somebody bothered to analyze the sperm stains on

Jennifer's shredded pantyhouse. Of course, by then, the serial killer had done away with a few more women, and *Hard Copy* had done that episode that showed me sobbing, protesting my innocence, and one of those true crime writers — not Ann Rule, some second-string clone — had already churned out a big fat fantasy novel characterizable as nonfiction only by dint of its 2,647 uses of the word *allegedly*.

I mean, I was in jail. I counted them. Nothing else to do.

The studio had to give me my old job back, of course. It was the right thing to do. Even when *Me and My Velociraptor* bombed, they were kind. I got to keep the secretary from Brooklyn with the *faux* North London accent.

I couldn't remember that much about Jennifer's death, or the trial, or the months on death row. I had a lot of time to think about it all — seven years in all — five since they took me off Xanax and got me on Prozac. In the support group, I sometimes made up whole incidents — worked myself into a good cry — I was one of the group's star performers, second only to Matilda Steinfeld. But you know, that evening after my encounter with the naked woman who claimed to be a Celtic goddess, sitting in a near-fetal position on a Southwestern-style sofa in an unassuming condominium, with too much alcohol in my bloodstream and too much bewilderment in my brain, I realized that I only had three clear memories of that entire year, and this is what they were:

One. The serial killer had a certain smell. Sometimes, in my memories, he had a chainsaw, sometimes an axe, sometimes some sci-fi contraption; sometimes he had a hockey mask, like Jason, sometimes a red-and-green-striped shirt like Freddy, and sometimes, like Mrs. Bates, he appeared in my memory as the drag queen from hell. But he always had that smell — it was a particular cologne. The cologne was called *Os-curidad*. Darkness. It smelled of autumn leaves — bittersweet and with a hint of decay, mortality. All right. It was *my* cologne. I used to mail-order it from Honduras. The lab said it was all over the body. Coincidence? In court, I swore I had no memory of killing my wife.

Two. I remember my brother Joshua calling me up in jail. He said, "You're free. I'm coming down to pick you up. By the way, Dad's dead and you've been disinherited — he shot himself before we found out you didn't do it. And Mom's Alzheimer's is a lot worse. I've had her put away. Oh, and they gave me and Morgan custody of your kids. You're not allowed to see them. I know the governor's signed the pardon and all that, but it's gonna take a while for the paperwork to go through on those kids, and ... well... you know. They went through a lot of teasing at school. They're both in therapy now. I think you'd better stay away from them at least for now. So as far as family's concerned, it's just you and me for the time being. But hey, I'm here for you."

That was when I realized for the first time that everyone, even my closest relatives, thought that I'd actually done it. Since the day my brother picked me up and dropped me off in front of the Beverly Hills Hotel, I had still not spoken to any of them. I could tell that they thought that this whole semen sample thing had been some brilliant legalistic sleight of hand by that Halperin guy, my attorney. And who could blame them? Because — and this was the third thing that was crystal-clear in my mind, drugs or no drugs — I hated Jennifer's guts. She was an insatiable, controlling, petty, gold-digging, vacuous, self-centered whore. I had married her for her beauty, which was legendary; I could not divorce her for fear of losing the house, which I lost anyway.

I had always wanted her dead.

When her throat was slit and that noise like a broken air conditioner came whistling through her severed windpipe and I knew for sure she was going to die, I came in my pants.

Seven years later, I had still not had another orgasm.

Four-thirty or so in the morning: I had the worst hangover imaginable, but I was used to that. I staggered to the bathroom to take a leak. I had barely unzipped my fly, though, when the mist began roiling up from the Stygian depths of the toilet bowl. Anxiously, I searched for my asthma medication.

The pommel thrust up through the tendriling fog. I recognized the hand that clasped it, but I was really too far gone to care, I began to piss, noisily and carelessly, not even bothering to lift up the seat. By now the entire hilt had come through, and I saw that it was cunningly sculpted in the shape of a many-coiled dragon whose eyes were cabochon star sapphires. It was all some kind of strange metal, too, not steel or bronze but something weirdly iridescent, like that titanium costume jewelry they sell down in Venice along the beach ... it looked like the work of some second-rate optical effects house. It's virtual reality! I told myself. The studio had been doing a top-secret VR project. Maybe I was the guinea-pig or the butt of some executive prank. Or — yes! a diabolical plot to drive me insane so that I would voluntarily void my contract and check into Cedars Sinai for observation! — but I was all too familiar with that plot. I had even produced it once. Even so, it did explain things in an almost rational way.

Then the toilet bowl shattered and *she* emerged. Carrying the sword, her hands raised above her head, clasp the hilt, the sword point hovering strategically over that zone which, if exposed, would have

reduced the vision from art to pornography. As she moved to proffer the sword, she shook her head and her fiery hair fell across those unseen pubes; it was clear that the entrance to her womb was a thing of unimaginable power, that it was not vouchsafed a man like me to gaze upon it and live.

"But this isn't very dignified," I said. "Somehow one doesn't expect Goddesses to come busting up out of toilets."

"This is the '90s, Greg," she said. "And you know as well as I do that Los Angeles is a desert, and all its water brought here from distant reservoirs; this city is an artificial flower."

"Well, I didn't mean to, uh ..." I found myself more sober than I wanted to be. Why couldn't the hangover come back? But my head seemed clear, preternaturally clear.

"I don't mind being pissed on, really I don't," said Bridget. "You have to understand that I don't share your civilized repudiation of bodily functions. Once, men shat directly into the earth; now, there is a porcelain conduit that hides from you the fact that you are earth; what you eat is of the earth; what you void — even that final voiding into wormy oblivion — goes into the earth to be reborn. I am the mother, I am the earth; I swallow your shit and transform it into new life; I am woman, that greatest mystery of the universe; I am one, I am many, I am all creation, creatrix, the self-created."

Wow. She sure knew her Joseph Campbell.

"Care for a drink?"

"Indeed! Grasshopper. Frappe, if you've got a blender."

"Okay. But put that thing away; it makes me nervous."

"How can I? *You* must take it from me. It is your destiny."

"But first, I must agonize." I knew that from my own course material. "I have to come to terms with my hero's nature. You know how it is." I knew she couldn't argue with that.

"All right," she said, wandering out into the living room as I followed her (I had an irrational fear that she might try to steal something, like my stereo or my soul) and staring with undisguised curiosity at the trophies of my past lives — the David Hockney over the fake fireplace, my dead wife's Oscar, my leatherbound, unopened complete works of C.G. Jung — "I'll leave it someplace where only you can get it." She cast about the room for a suitable hiding spot.

"There's a broom closet right by the hallway," I said, "right next to the teakwood elephants."

But she made straight for the Southwestern three-seater — and then, with a Valkyriesque screech, plunged the whole thing, all the way up to the hilt, into the plump pink-and-gray sofa back.

"Jesus, take that thing out — you know how much that thing cost? Don't expect me to have industry parties with a great big sword stuck in my sofa."

"You haven't entertained in years, Greg. And anyway, I can't take it out; only you can."

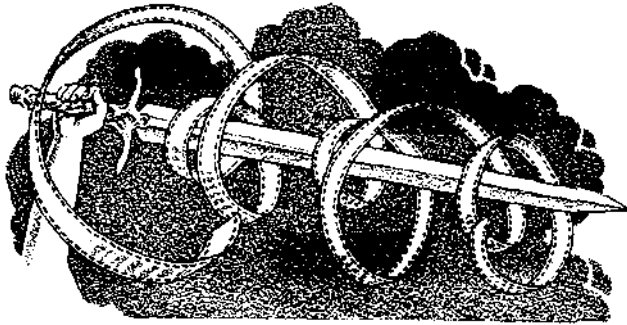
"I see. *The Sword in the Sofa*. I love it. Classic Disney meets *The Big Chill*. It's a winner."

"Don't be flippant, Greg. You can joke all you want, but you know as well as I do that all men are fated to live out some low-budget remake of the hero's quest. You're not exempt from that. You think you're not a man; you think there's no emotion left inside you, no fear, no grief; you think you can get rid of all your inner longings by slugging down Scotch and barfing up your silly little witticisms. Well, you're not just a shell of a man. There's no such thing as that. Inside every paunchy, mediocre studio executive with a dark past there's always a real human being crying to be set free. Do you think I'd really come to you if you were really the nonentity you say you are? And I'm still waiting for that grasshopper."

She followed me to the bar. My hands were shaking as I poured the creme de menthe. I could see, past the etagere with the Hopi vases, that sword buried in my couch. I turned on the blender and stared at Excalibur. Well, anyone could see that pulling that thing out of there would be no challenge except maybe to an eight-year old. But it did look mighty hip, in a way; the jewel in the pommel gave a soft, pinkish glow that was quite color-coordinated with the rose, flesh and earth-tones of the couch. That three-seater needed something anyway. Of course, I'd had it reupholstered after it became clear that it would be impossible to extract every molecule of Jennifer from the fabric; the killer had done a very thorough job.

We sat down with our drinks — I sorely missed my hangover and felt impelled to try to reinstate it — and watched Court TV for a while; they were replaying a bit of Lyle Menendez's testimony while two experts argued about childhood traumas. It was getting on to five-thirty now. I gazed at the hypnotic *verismo* on the little screen.

My trial had been televised too, but that was before Court TV; it had aired on CNN, midnight to five, interspersed with excerpts from the New Bedford rape trial. Watching Lyle, weeping and carrying on, I wished I had had my trial to do over. I wished I had been able to weep. I wished I had remembered those vivid details that could make television more real than the world. Then, perhaps, I would not have been on the cover of *People* magazine with the caption, THE STONE-FACED KILLER.



"You should get some sleep," said Bridget. "You've a lot of work ahead of you."

"What about you? Is this going to be one of those 'just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water' situations? Am I going to be looking behind my shoulder every time I try to take a shower?"

"You movie people," she said, sighing, "you always think about how it's going to look on the trailer . . . but you are right. I'm going to have to stick around for a bit, until you grasp your destiny firmly in your hands and hold it up high and go charging off against the armies of darkness. But I'm a nurturing goddess."

"Which is another way of telling me you're the yenta from Hell."

"Go to bed."

"See what I mean?"

But I was tired ... it was an almost supernatural kind of drowsiness, as though a sleeping spell had been spoken over me. I found myself lumbering in the direction of the bedroom. As I flopped down on the waterbed, however, I realized she had beat me to it. She was sprawled all over the left side, her thigh-length hair wrapped firmly about her hips. "Why are you in here?" I said.

"Any *other* large bodies of water in this dump?"

"You can't sleep here! Aren't you some kind of mother goddess? It's incest!"

"So what are you going to do about it?" she said, arching her back and clasping one of the bedposts between her fingers much as one might grip a sword handle, or an erect penis.

I knew the traditional answer to that one. Siegfried, sent by Gunther to capture Brunnhilde from the cave surrounded by impenetrable fire, had placed his magic sword Nothung between them as they slept so as not to violate the ex-Valkyrie's chastity. There was a sword stuck in a sofa right in the next room. All I had to do was —

"That's a trick question," I said. "I'm not pulling that thing out of the couch. Because if I do —"

"It means you accept everything I've been telling you; that you, indeed, are some kind of hero with some kind of destiny; that you're going to have to mate with your anima and wrestle with your shadow; that you're going to have to set out on a quest, slay dragons, salve the honor of beautiful princesses, perhaps even glimpse the holy grail; and you're going to have to accept that these things are possible, not in some Jungian never-never-land, but in a place as false and feelingless as Tarzana, in a milieu as hollow as Hollywood, in a time as tawdry as today."

Okay. The things she said were all commonplaces of the course I teach; in fact, my last lecture had used some of those very phrases. Perhaps it was their familiarity; perhaps it was the lilt and resonance of her voice; perhaps, after all these years, I still longed to be sung to sleep. But I began to drift; and in my slumber I floated through half-remembered images of childhood; I suckled at some mountainous breast that oozed forth blood and gall.

I got up mid-morning to take a piss, and the toilet was once more whole, and again I began to entertain the thought that I was having the acid flashback to end all flashbacks, thirty years too late. But the sword was still stuck in the couch, and Bridget was in the kitchen fixing eggs, lox, and bagels.

And the sword was still stuck in the sofa.

Stuck in the sofa.

I put my hand on the hilt. Gave it a little tug, enough to realize that there was nothing to it at all; it would glide out as smoothly as a well-lubricated penis. Then I saw her coming, so I hastily pushed it back in.

"Temptation?" she said. She had a demitasse of espresso and no clothes. In the daylight I saw that there was about her person a delicate mist, through which a school of tasseled rainbows darted; even in the concrete desert she could not be too far from water, she wrung what little moisture there was out of the air. Sipping the coffee, I watched her dancelike movements as she brought in the tray of bagels; the lox, like

the ruby in the pommel, matched her hair. Uncanny. I bit into the fish. The sensation was indescribable. Yes, there was something of a woman's scent about that salmon. For a moment, I almost thought that my long-lost manhood was beginning to stiffen. Then I remembered. I was a self-made eunuch.

I also remembered something else. "You can't stay," I said. "Really, you can't, this time. It's the support group. They're meeting here this afternoon. Barbecue first, then therapy."

"Indeed, I'm sure I'll like your friends very much."

"But you haven't got any clothes!"

"I'm a size 8," she told me.

I went to the Galleria, told the sales clerk at the Benetton store to pick out something nice — managed to get away with under four figures for three items — and when I returned to the condo, Bridget was already hard at work cleaning trout. There was a basin of peeled, de-veined scampi in the sink, and a bucket of oysters waiting to be shucked. Clearly, she had not gone to the store—at least, I hoped she had not, in her current state of deshabelle—and it occurred to me that I hadn't had any smoked salmon in the 'fridge the previous night, either.

I fetched myself a Bacardi and Diet Coke, and she pulled a plump, wriggling sea bass out of the disposal.

Oh yes. Though the weather report had put the humidity at less than one percent, the air in the condo was positively lubricious with feminine moisture.

"Are you becoming at least a *little* convinced," she asked me, "that I am nothing more or less than who I say I am?"

I didn't answer. I just took a couple of Valium and sacked out in an armchair in front of the Menendez trial, waiting for my fellow journeyers to arrive.

When I came to, they had all eaten, and the support group was in full swing. In fact, the Lady of the Lake appeared to be the life of the party, and she still hadn't put on any clothes.

Matilda Steinfeld was holding forth at the moment. "I was in sort of an iron cage," she said, "suspended from the roof. Well, it was more like a cave, not a room. There was an altar and there was a man with horns and a great big dildo with metal spikes. They made me kill my little brother, you know. I had to eat his heart. And he was screaming the whole time."

"Screaming?" It was a voice I didn't recognize. Still bleary-eyed, I thought it was Jennifer for a moment, but it was someone considerably younger. She wasn't extravagantly overdressed like the others. She had on a pair of stupefying spectacles. After a moment, I remembered where I'd last seen her — at the Steinfelds party, coming at me with that Serafino boy. "Your little brother was screaming *while you were eating his heart*? Oh, Matilda, surely you must realize that there's an element of fantasy here."

"Not at all," Bridget said. "I do it all the time."

She got a big laugh. I realized that the reason no one minded her nakedness was twofold; first, it fit in perfectly with the purpose of the support group; second, it became her.

But the plain-looking woman persisted. "But surely you've checked the hospital records ... you've figured out by now that you never had a little brother."

"I know you're new here —" I began.

"Rachel," she said. "Rachel Goldberg."

"Rachel, but they must have told you the rules. When you're within the circle of this support group, you are allowed to state any fantasy you wish as fact. You are allowed to live your fantasy, without restrictions, without boundaries, and absolutely without any judgmental comments."

"Sorry," Rachel said.

"No need," said Mike Lazar, our therapist, who did not generally interrupt, "I should perhaps explain, Greg, since you've *finally* woken up, that the particular fantasy that Rachel is seeking help with is the delusion that everything in the universe has a rational explanation."

More applause. Was I being made the butt of some joke? What had been going on while they slept? What was in that trout? Had my fellow travelers ingested the Christian *ichthys*, which every mythographer knows is actually the lost phallus of the dead-and-resurrected Osiris, for which the mother-goddess Isis nightly scours the depths of the Nile ... and was not Isis but a somewhat more exotic manifestation of Bridget, who had come to me out of the waters of the Steinfelds' Jacuzzi? I turned to Mike Lazar, who was still basking in the others' applause. Only the mousy Rachel wasn't buying it. Suddenly I realized that I liked her.

And now they were raptly listening to Bridget's fantasy, which was, of course, that she was the Lady of the Lake who had planted Excalibur within the rocky confines of my sofa, who was now daring them all to draw out the sword and prove that they, not I, were the *kvisatz ha-derach* of the week. Lazar was the first. Laughing, he tugged, and tugged, and tugged, and then he shrugged, as if to say, Well, well, I've

played along enough already, back to reality now! Then, of course, Matilda had to have a go, even though she found the whole thing ineffably Satanic; her husband, not strictly speaking a member of the group, tried it and actually budged it a notch or so, being the long-suffering saint that he was; Celestine, the lesbian transsexual, refused to try at all, citing silly machismo rituals, the Brady Bill, and political correctness; and as for Rachel, she really did try; I could tell; she was straining every muscle in her body, and I caught, mingled with the sweat odor of her efforts, a whiff of *Oscuridad* . . . and then Bridget turned to me with a sort of *voila* gesture and I said, "Oh no. You're not getting me this way. I'm not into peer pressure."

But that *Oscuridad* —

Oh, it opened the floodgates. Those fucking memories came welling up. Not the killing of Jennifer so much, but God, there were details, nauseating details ... I distinctly remembered now that her trachea had taken three hacks of the razor blade to slit all the way through . . . remembered the spritzing blood ... remembered a lot more of the killer, too, remembered him muttering, "Love, death, love, death, love, death" with each swing of the ginsu knife, remembered the way he laughed. It was a curiously high-pitched laugh, like a teenager playing at villainy.

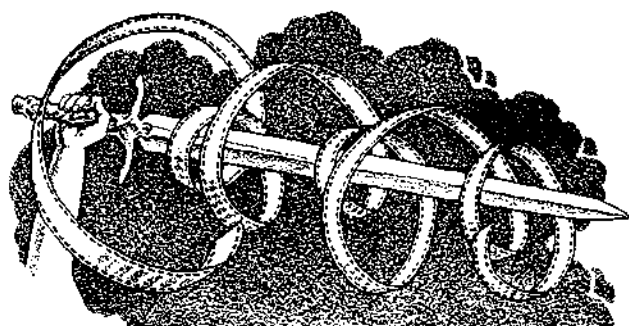
Then I suddenly remembered the first time I had ever met Jennifer. I had come upon her and my brother Joshua *en flagrante* behind the oleander bushes... not at the Steinfelds' gazebo. I believe it was the Rabin-oviches' cabana.

"Hey, Greg," Joshua had shouted to me. "Come and join us."

I always envied Josh his ability to copulate with women in odd locations, and in those days we always shared everything. I wasn't fat then, either. "Are you sure?" I said.

"Puck yeah," he said. "She's just a shikseh any-way."

Jennifer giggled. She was a good giggler, one of those "'cause I'm a blonde" kind of girls. We all had sex. It was uninhibited, '70s-style pre-AIDS sex. We never thought we'd see her again. But a year later, she was an Oscar nominee. That made being a shikseh acceptable.



It was, come to think of it, Thanksgiving, and it was the Rabinoviches' turn, and Jennifer was junior scream queen over at Stupendous Studios, having just debuted in *East of Amityville*—hardly Oscar material. Rabinovich is every three years, so that would have made it the year before we were married, which . . . suddenly I realized why Josh had wanted custody of my kids so badly, even before the family decided I was a serial killer. "That fucker," I said softly. "I'm a cuckold!"

"Not a word one hears much these days," Lazar said.

"So I read books," I said. "Not every producer is illiterate."

"That's good, that's very good, you venting your hostility like that; you're making great progress today, Greg. Maybe next week, at the Ben Davids, we can actually begin your descent into the private darkness that you fear so much."

Darkness! *Oscuridad*!

I caught another lungful of that cologne, and I started to go *really* wild. The scene of the crime ... it was *true*, the hockey mask, the Freddy sweater, the Mrs. Bates wig... I hadn't made up any of those things ... I could see the killer right in front of me, an amalgam of every slasher in the celluloid world ... I heard that curious high-pitched laugh, could almost imitate it, knew it for a parody of my own laugh . . . knew that the killer was drenched in *my* Honduras cologne . . . had it been me after all? . . . no, no . . . "Who gave you *Oscuridad*?" I screamed. "Someone with a high-pitched laugh, who traipses around in a dress and wears a hockey mask and slices women in two?"

"Well," Rachel said, "my friend does sometimes borrow my pantyhose, but I hardly think —"

"God almighty, woman, your life is in danger! They never caught him, you know. The trail got cold after they put *me* away. Now I know what I'm supposed to use this sword for." I grabbed the hilt and it

slid out easily. I brandished it as my guests dived under coffee tables and behind utility carts. "Finally I understand! I'm the one who's got to go after the man who stalked and killed my wife. I'm the one who —" The sword felt good in my hands. Somehow the gnarled hilt seemed molded to the rills and indentations of my fists. "That's the quest that's going to restore my manhood . . . you're the princess I'm supposed to rescue ... and the faceless killer is the dragon that's lusting to devour your — wait. I bet you're a virgin, aren't you?"

Hesitantly, Rachel nodded. I guess that maybe she thought the others would laugh at her, but no one did.

In fact, the whole group was in shock. It washed in as though they had sat through the entire *Ring* cycle. I put the sword down gingerly and they crawled back to their places. Then they started clapping. In our support group, it was traditional to applaud a good self-revelation.

Afterwards, they all clustered around Bridget like fireflies; perhaps it was the glamour of what Lazar called "the most sophisticated Autotheistic-Delusional Disorder I've ever encountered." This "ADD" was the good doctor's personal contribution to the jargon of the neurosis-of-the-month club, and he was proud to have prime specimen on hand.

I found myself alone with Rachel, in the kitchen, rinsing off the fish bones and stacking the dishwasher. My nostrils were full of that autumnal odor. It was the one scent capable of drowning out the fishy smell left by Bridget's conjurations. "Listen, Rachel," I said, "we can't fuck around. When I said you were in danger I meant it. Who gave you that Honduran *eau de toilette*? I'm obviously meant to track this guy down and kill him with Excalibur." It was just as I had feared. I had pulled the sword out of the sofa and now I had bought into the whole damn fantasy.

"A friend," she told me.

"What sort of friend?"

"Obviously not *that* intimate, since you were kind enough to broadcast my virginity in front of the whole gang."

"Can I meet him?"

"You see him every week. He's in that class of yours."

"He's in *The Hero's Celluloid Journey: Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and the Contemporary Filmmaker*?"

"That's the one."

"Which one is he?" Was it the pustulant-faced, beady-browed Elan Rosenberg, or the swarthy Levon Jihanian? Or was I succumbing too much to cinematic stereotyping? Perhaps it was someone who looked completely trustworthy . . . the leading man type . . . like the Matt Dillonesque Angel Serafino who always sat in the front row, taking copious notes and asking intelligent questions. The one who always reminded me of me as a young man. "It's not Serafino, is it?"

Rachel smiled. "Serendipity," she said, "*another* Jungian concept."

"But if Angel Serafino is the dragon, and you're the maiden to be rescued, shouldn't I be attracted to you?"

"You mean you're not?"

"Well... perhaps in a platonic sense... but... well, I'm incapable of, you know."

"Yeah. I read about that in *People*. I was little, then, though."

Alone with her in the kitchen, breathing in the fragrance that brought back not only the horror that held me captive but also the last outpouring of my last manhood, I realized that I did feel something. Not lust as such. It was the lust for lust. Lust in the second degree. "I don't know if it's you," I said. "Maybe it's just the scent of love and death that you exude."

"I'm told that impotence is all in the mind."

"That's all very well, but that's also true of reality."

"Screw this! Can't we just fuck?"

"In the kitchen? Surrounded by the carcasses of trout?"

She flung her arms around me. "I need you," she said. "I need to be filled up with something larger than myself. I need passion. I need enchantment." She thrust her tongue into my mouth and I attempted to respond in kind despite the limpness of my sword. She placed my hand upon her left breast and I gave it a tentative squeeze, at which she shuddered all over; she began shaking, and weeping, and she was forced to withdraw her tongue so that I could wipe her tears away with a paper towel. "Oh, I love you, I love you, I've always loved you," she said, which was hard for me to believe since I had just met her; then, as if worried that she had said too much, she retreated to the far corner of the kitchen, next to the electric pasta maker, and stared into the wall.

I felt an overwhelming need to love her; to protect her, a feeling so powerful it seemed to derive from some forgotten wellspring of my past.

"All right," I said. "I *do* love you. I *think* that's what this is."

"Thank you," she said, and kissed me on the cheek. But chastely, so chastely. Then, Helen Keller fashion, she wrote her phone number on my hand.

That night I lay down on a waterbed that held a slumbering goddess. Bridget's snores made tidal waves; the pillows pitched and yawed; the air conditioner squalled and howled; gradually it began to seem that I was thrashing on some intemperate sea, and that the goddess's form had become a piece of driftwood to which I clung in desperation — perhaps the sculpted prow of my wrecked ship.

I don't know how awake I was. I think this was one of those lucid dreams that I had often alluded to in the Jungian portion of my class, a sending from the collective unconscious. I was surprised that an ordinary person like me could be visited by such a dream. The sky was black and the water brackish. Excalibur, wedged between the timbers, served merely as a clothes horse for my rusted armor. From cloud to cloud, a dove flitted, and I wondered whether I had fallen overboard from Noah's ark. A voice cried, "*This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased,*" but was it referring to me? Was it proper to take up arms against a sea of troubles, or would that be mixing my metaphors?

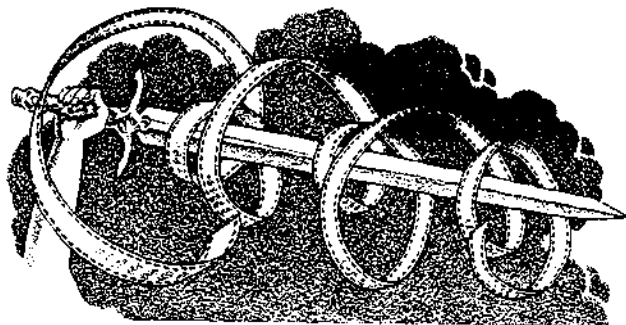
Then, in the distance, I saw the maelstrom. My raft was coming apart. We had gone from *Jason and the Argonauts* to *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. What movie was next? Would the Kraken wake? Would *Jaws 3-D* come hurtling through the waves?

Get a grip! I told myself. These celluloid allusions were just my fevered conscious mind desperately trying to trivialize the sending. I stood up, breasted the big wind, ignored the fact that we were swirling down the toilet bowl at the end of the universe. I took the armor from its stand. It fitted easily over my jockey shorts and yellowing undershirt. The tempest began to sand away the rust. I gleamed. In the ocean without sunlight, I myself became the sun-king that must die and be reborn to redeem the world. I seized the sword-hilt in both hands. The sword made a bright arc in the air. Lightning lanced the darkness.

But was that land I glimpsed on the far horizon, a black ribbon betwixt sea and sky? I plunged my sword into the waters like an oar. The swordpoint struck something hard. The waters parted. The naked-goddess/wooden-prow I clung to began plummeting into an abyss, a well whose walls were the ocean; we had gone from epic fantasy to the opening of *Alice in Wonderland*. As we fell, Bridget grew. At first it was only in the hips; they widened and widened until she resembled one of those Neolithic fertility-icons. Then her breasts began to bloat; rivulets of milk burst from the nipples; she sighed and she heaved and her skin began to buckle into mountain ranges, and her red hair was now the red of autumn, a billowing mass of dead leaves, and still she grew and grew and grew until I saw that she was the sea bed walled by towering water, that every pore of her was a volcano or a sulfurous geyser; that the earth was young and bursting with reproductive energy.

In the midst of the goddess, who now stretched from horizon to horizon, the goddess who had been the prow who had been the raft who had been the woman who had sprung from the spa at the Steinfelds' annual bash, there was me: Gregory Hoffman, decrepit studio executive and sometime college professor, my wrists bound to a kitchen chair by a *Three Stooges* necktie, and a bra crammed into my mouth.

On the sofa — the custom sofa which was the only link between my Beverly Hills past and my Tarzana present — there was my wife; above her, the ginsu-brandishing killer. The air was full of smells: the Oscuridad, the fresh blood, the fear — I was choking — straining against the necktie. The killer was raping and slicing. A shredded aureola whistled through the air. Yes, I watched it all with a certain detachment. He wore the hockey mask over the Freddy mask (they advertise them in *Fangoria* magazine) and topped it all with the Mrs. Bates wig.



Every inch of him was covered — he even wore white gloves, like a cartoon animal — except for the penis that, glistening, protruded from a pair of oversized Bugle Boys. Softly he murmured, "Bitch, bitch,

bitch," and his voice, distorted by some kind of electronic thing strapped to his Adam's apple, sounded so oddly familiar — and there was a kind of love in the way he said it — and it put me in mind of the things I wished I'd done to Jennifer, the things I should have done, because of the things she did to the children and —

I fell into a dream within a dream now, strapped to the same chair, restrained not with a necktie but with my own terror, saw my wife, hair in disarray, storming through the kitchen, popping pills with one hand and gripping the lit cigarette with the other, stabbing first Mort's left palm then Mort's right, and the two-year-old screaming from the smoking stigmata and Jennifer's yelling, "*Christ killer Christ killer I want to be a Christ killer too,*" and little Roseanne is shrieking at the top of her lungs and —

Now a dream within a dream within a dream and it's my wife and Matilda Steinfeld laughing together at the kitchen table exchanging anecdotes about fake Satanic child abuse and comparing notes on the HBO special they'd had, debunking it all and —

And a dream within a dream within a dream within a dream and I'm making love to my wife on an inflatable raft, drifting along in the pool beneath the dry California sky, and she herself is the goddess, she herself is the dragon, she herself is the earth, and —

Snap! Matilda and Jennifer, coupling in the king-sized waterbed, with the children, hold hands at the bed's edge, watching *Bart Simpson* on the forty-inch monitor and —

Snap! Trying to get up out of the chair, shrieking at my wife to stop this witchery, and she smiles and me and sends me flying back into my seat and —

Snap! She's dead. Her windpipe whistles. Her killer's come dribbles across the sofa's custom fabric. He turns to look at me. My wife's blood isn't seeping in thanks to the Scotch Guard; it's in small puddles on the sofa and the carpet, and it's already starting to congeal.

My jockey shorts are stained with the piss of terror and the semen of arousal. I rip the *Three Stooges* tie, bound up from the chair, hurl myself on my lady's murderer. My wife is the earth I'm standing on. The earth is spilling its blood into the sea. I have Excalibur. I slash at the air. My enemy, *the enemy*, the personification of darkness, runs at me with his ginsu-chainsaw-axe upraised. Weapon clangs against weapon. My enemy taunts me with his high-pitched laugh. He roars, he breathes flame; mother earth arches her back and fills the sky with fiery strands of hair.

He chases me. Trapped against the wall of water, I have to turn and fight. I thrust. He parries. From behind the hockey mask, his eyes glow. The chainsaw buzzes and I see woman after woman chained to the wall of ocean, every one dead or dying. I know I should be frightened, but am I not the hero who knows no fear? Suddenly I hear Rachel call out to me. "Daddy, Daddy," she says. I see her chained to the water-wall beside me.

"I'm not your father," I whisper.

We fight some more. Finally I stab him and he stabs me. He's weakened, maybe even dying. I stagger towards him. I strip away his mask. He is the person I knew it would be.

At last the fear, which I have kept frozen in place like the wall of water that surrounds me, visits me at last.. .just a few pinpricks of terror, then, all at once, deluging me with the explosive force of an orgasm, as the waters themselves crash down over the ocean floor, as the land contracts once more into the mortal form of Bridget, mutating back and forth from timber-prow to flesh . . . and now I'm adrift again . . . and the sea is calm . . . once more I'm clinging to the wood, swallowing great gulps of brine, gasping for air . . . and the sunlight is streaming down. I am bleeding from a deep cut in my side. I am mortally wounded.

I see my enemy bobbing up and down nearby. I paddle toward him with my sword. "Help me," he cries. "I think you've killed me."

"Help you?" I managed to croak. "You've killed me too."

"Yes," said the enemy, "but it's not my fault, it's neither of us's fault ... we were just fulfilling our various destinies . . . c'mon, man, give me a break . . . hold my hand or something, man."

In the distance, now fettered to a phallic mast, I see Rachel; behind her, the white sail is unfurling; she seems to have transformed from a geek to something very like an angel.

"Gimme a hand, man," the killer says, "I don't want to die, not right away."

I hold out the sword; he grasps the honed edge, though it cuts his hands and the salt water makes him wince. He climbs on board the raft that is also the goddess, and we float on the sea that is also the goddess, catching the goddess's breath in our sails.

Our goddess-ship drifts toward Rachel. Behind Rachel is the sun, and above her head there hovers the dove of peace.

* * *

When I woke up from the seven-tiered dream, I realized I had become sober. It was an unfamiliar

sensation. I had not experienced it for many years.

I lay on the waterbed with the sword between myself and the sleeping goddess. I got out of bed carefully, afraid that Excalibur would cause the bed to spring a leak.

I went to the bathroom to check for wounds. My side bore a faint, jagged bruise, hardly the death wound from the dream. I turned my palms over, searching for stigmata. There were none.

Then I went into the kitchen and poured myself coffee from the auto-timer espresso machine.

The first person I called that morning was my brother Joshua. The phone rang and rang; I barely recognized his voice when he finally picked up. "I'm taking back my life," I said.

"What life?" said Joshua.

"The life that's starting to come back to me, piece by piece."

"So! That support group of yours has finally gotten to you. What reeking dirty linen have you managed to dredge up out of your childhood? I saw Matilda on *Oprah* last year, hear she's doing a book; the buzz is Meryl Streep wants to play her."

"Don't change the subject."

"But I'm not. I've heard that satantic child abuse memories come in clusters; one person in the support group infects the others; pretty soon they've all come down with it. Saw the HBO special."

I said, "Joshua, you screwed my wife!"

He said, "Of course I did. You were there."

"But afterwards. You went on doing it, behind my back."

"Of course I did. You hated her. Remember?"

"Of course I hated her. She was cheating on me."

"No, no, she was cheating on you because you hated her. Who cares anyway? You killed her. Enjoyed it too, judging by the wad in your BVDs."

"You know as well as I do that I'm innocent."

"But in your heart, you killed her. That's the same thing."

"In my *heart*? What, you convert to Catholicism while I wasn't looking?"

"I had to. My latest shikseh is a stickler. Besides, one can always use more guilt."

"Yeah, Joshua, yeah. But there's one thing you have to tell me. It's true, you're right, I've been having these dreams, memories maybe. About Jennifer and the children. You know, violent stuff."

"Serves you right for falling asleep in front of the Menendez trial every night."

"I do *not* —" But he was right, of course. Even though I hadn't spoken to him in seven years, he still knew me inside out. "I don't know if the memories are real, Joshua," I said. "My past is in bits and pieces. I need an independent observer. What about *our* childhood? Why don't I seem to remember any of it? I know we were adopted, but why? Were we babies? Were we like, abused kids from an orphanage? Was I a changeling, deposited on the Hoffmans' doorstep by a horde of gothic-punk fairies? I need a childhood desperately, any childhood."

"Maybe you didn't have one."

He hung up abruptly.

With searing clarity I saw that my life had been, not a steady progression of events, birth, self-awareness, childhood, puberty, youthful exuberance, middle-aged mediocrity ... it had not had this algebraic arc I had always assumed it must have. It had been more like a series of unedited film clips. There were sequences that implied other sequences, scenes that promised dozens of possible outcomes. Sometimes there was more than one take; sometimes, where logic demanded that piece of exposition or a plot point, there was just blackness. That was why I did not feel like a whole person. That was why I could still receive visitations from mythic figures. It was part of the editing process. I had to take the jumbled fragments, pick out the shots, make a life out of the pieces.

It was the dream within the dream within the dream within the dream within the dream that made me realize that what I had thought of as my life might in fact be the final dream from which it was still necessary to wake before I could surface in the real world.

Of course, if I finally forced myself awake, there would be no more magic. No more goddesses. No more swords. I had to consider whether it was worth giving up those things.

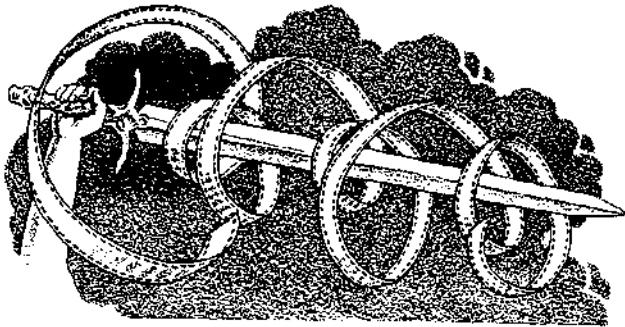
I delivered my last lecture of the semester.

"Let's talk about good and evil today," I said. "Today, in the '90s, they are not fashionable concepts. We suffer from a collective delusion of rationality. We know that there is a *how* for everything and because of that we have come to believe that there must also be a *why*. If someone is depressed, they must have a chemical imbalance, or they must have been incorrectly potty-trained at the age of two; if someone is a brilliant artist, or a malevolent criminal, or even a second-rate, aging, balding studio executive such as myself, he must be that way because of a myriad variables that can be known and

quantified: I mean his genes, his education, the traumas of his childhood, the chemistry of his blood. And even if we don't know why yet, we feel that if only we had an infinite amount of time, and an infinite number of books, CD-Roms, and therapist records, we could ultimately solve every equation, unravel every enigma.

"But is this true? "Just because the rational universe is *our* universe, does that make it the *real* universe?"

I get to this point every year in the course. Then I usually pause for a while, allow the students to try to grasp these cosmic notions. Some of the students are shrooming, stoned, or on acid. There used to be many more like that; today there was just the stoner's corner, the upper left-hand segment of the lecture hall, which was perpetually shrouded in shadow. The acidheads were usually the only ones who could fully grasp the transcendent nature of what I was saying.



I noticed, though, that Angel Serafino, sitting in the front row, also seemed to understand. He watched me intently. It was as though no one else was present in the class; as though all the others were but props, computer-generated extras seamlessly matted into our private scene to lend it verisimilitude. And so, speaking directly to him, I said: "What if the question *why* were not only unanswerable — as we all know it must be — be also irrelevant? What if the archetypal situations we've explored in all the films we've covered this semester—*Chinatown*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Shane*, and *The Seventh Seal* — are simply the way things are, the irreducible building blocks of reality, the up, down, strange, charmed quarks of our existence? What if a madman is a madman simply because he is mad? What if a hero kills dragons and rescues virgins simply because a hero kills dragons and rescues virgins? What if the word 'because' is simply a crutch, a delusional clothes hanger for the hollow raiment of reality?"

"That, my friends, is the final question we must ponder as we recall the celluloid journeys we have taken. What if the very fabric of reason were as fabricated as a schizophrenic's delusions? What if the truth is simply this: that knights are pure, that dragons breathe fire, that for each of us a sword lies buried in a stone . . . and that to the degree that each of us, inside his individual consciousnesses, deviates from these ancient truths, to that degree he is but a shadow, reflection, afterimage of that truth?"

"For my next trick. . . ."

Huffing and puffing, two freshmen lugged in the sofa from my condominium. Excalibur, buried once more in the upholstery, glowed like a Hollywood neon sign.

"This," I said, "is Excalibur, brought to me by the Lady of the Lake a few nights ago while I was trying to enjoy a late-night soak in the Steinfelds' hot tub. Anyone who can pull the sword out of the couch will receive an automatic A+ even if they don't hand in their *Citizen Kane* and *Oedipus Rex* comparison sheet."

For the rest of the lecture hour, the undergraduates heaved, grunted, sweated, murmured mantras and yelled karate power words. I only took it for about ten minutes; I left them at it and went down the hall for a Clearly Canadian and a bagel. It came as not too much of a shock when, out of the frosted glass I removed from the refrigerator in the lounge, the image of a red-haired woman started to form. She was very small, no bigger than an ice-cube, but she was perfectly formed, and still draped in her hair. She looked up at me with those cartoony eyes, and she said, "Well done, my child, it's all coming to a climax; you're starting to find yourself again."

"Your child?" I said, incredulous at being so addressed by this R-rated Thumbelina.

Solemnly, she said to me, "The lake is the mother of all things."

I poured the Clearly Canadian (peach, I believe) over the shag carpeting as though it were a blood-libation to the earth; but before the liquid hit the floor it blurred, shuddered, grew into the familiar Bridget.

"That's better," I said, never having liked *I Dream of Jeannie*.

"I'm glad you've figured it all out," she said at last. "We will only meet once more, in the place where

the waters meet the sky, in the place where the sun dissolves into the mist. You've been a good king, really; no complaints."

"What about Rachel?" I asked her. It was the piece of the puzzle whose solution I didn't want to accept. "Can't I — I mean, I'm not even going to get to —"

"Oh, indeed you'll screw, Greg," said Bridget. "You know the golden rule of cinematic art: if there's a loaded penis on the wall in Act One, it had damn well better go off in Act Three."

When I returned, the class was over; the room was empty save for Angel Serafino, who had not, apparently, stirred from his seat at the front of the class, had not even attempted to pull the sword from the sofa. Angel was wearing the Honduran Oscuridad. The reek of it was overpowering. More bitter and less sweet, less fragrant, more putrescent. It was the smell of love and death.

It was late afternoon now. In fifteen minutes, the traffic over the hill would become unbearable, and I would be stuck downtown until after dinner. How typically Angeleno of me to worry about the freeways when the entire universe was at stake! I sat down on the couch. Slugged down the dregs of the Clearly Canadian, put down the glass.

I knew who Angel Serafino was; I knew who Rachel Goldberg was; I no longer turned their pictures to the wall of memory.

"Hi, Dad," said Angel Serafino.

I waited.

"You do remember me now, don't you?"

I did. I had ripped the hockey mask from his face.

"You took the rap for me, didn't you?" he said. "You let them think you'd killed her. Why, Dad, why?"

"Because there had to be a reason for you to turn into a monster. I loved you, Mort ... I can't bring myself to call you Angel ... I never hurt you, never reproached you, never molested you, never warped your mind with cults or politics . . . there *had* to be something. You know. Bizarre rituals in the basement with your mother in black robes and a spiked dildo. Look at Matilda Steinfeld. All the things that happened to her. In the *Enquirer*, on *Oprah*."

"Dad, you know she made that stuff up. You think reality is like the Menendez trial, but it's not. There is absolutely nothing you could have done to prevent me from wanting to rape and kill women who happen to remind me of my mother. The fact is, I'm just another axe-murdering motherfucker."

I supposed that double-entendre to be deliberate, but I didn't find it funny.

"Why didn't you tell, Dad? You could have stopped me, man. Had me put away. I was only a boy. I had only killed one mother. I never quite got it right, and I could never quite find another mother to try it out on; oh, they looked a lot like her, even smelled like her sometimes, but the high just got less and less compelling. I murdered a woman in Houston a year later. I killed another one in Greece; no one ever found out, though; it was on one of those tourist islands. I got her good. Did you see on CNN, the one with the meathooks in the caves at Lascaux? That was me. And I'm going to keep doing it. I'm even going to kill Rachel — Roseanne — one of these days, when she starts to sag a little, like Mom was starting to; women are like balloons; if they start to sag you have to pop them, or the bang won't be as big."

"Does your sister know?" I said.

"Dunno. This meeting was her idea, really. She's the one who missed you desperately, tried to kill herself four times; she fucked some lawyer on your case so he'd give her access to the psych files, and that's how she knew you'd completely blocked us from your memory. Then she thought of the cologne I always used to steal from your bathroom . . . she wondered if the smell might be able to trigger, you know, all the repressed bullshit in your life."

"You're saying I couldn't face the fact that my son was a serial killer ... so I repressed it . . . and that's how I ended up on fucking death row?"

"Hey, Dad, you *love* me. You couldn't reconcile your love with the idea that I'd sprung from your loins. Right? But you shouldn't have looked for a *because*. Enough *because*s. You say so yourself. I don't belong here. I don't see things in the 16.7 million half-tones that the rest of the world sees. I see things in black and white. I am evil. You should have killed me. And now that you have the sword, you will."

Now I knew why he had listened so raptly in my classes. For years I had harangued these college kids about other universes, other perceptual systems, but I had only been playing games, juggling with words. My son understood. He had always belonged to the world of absolutes. And now I too belonged, and I could not go back.

I pulled the sword from the couch, knowing full well that in slaying my son I also slew myself.

He stood up from the desk. He knelt down in front of me, like Isaac before Abraham. We were about to step irrevocably into that world of absolutes.

But there was something pulling me back. It was seductive, this world where reason ruled and where nothing was eternal. I hesitated. "Before we go through with this," I said, "isn't there something we could

have done together, father and son ... you know, quality time?" I had searched through the raw footage of his childhood and found only a few fleeting scenes.

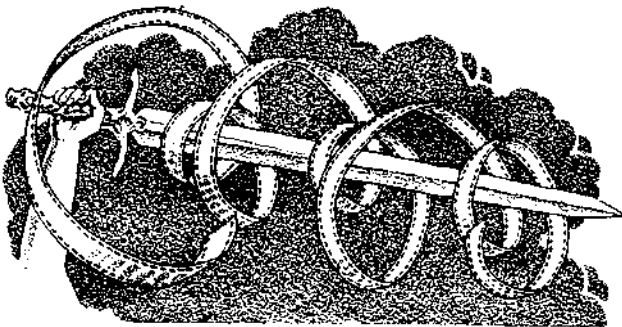
"You could have taken me places. Lunch at the Hard Rock Cafe, dinner at Dominicks, the roller coasters at Magic Mountain, even the Universal tour,"

I knew that I would kill him by sunset. But I wanted to savor the last few hours of our relationship in some human way. I didn't want to just act out the timeless sitcom of our destinies like a robot, like a shadow puppet. So I said, "All right; we'll go cruising for a while, then I'll do it."

Around sunset, we did end up at Universal Studios. It was off-season, so the tours had ended for the day; luckily, one of the older guards still recognized me from the time I produced *Stranded in Eternity*, and we snuck into the back lot. I drove the Ferrari along the tramway in the gathering twilight; Mort and I shared the frisson of the *Psycho* house. We stood in silent awe in before the *Leave it to Beaver* residence; we couldn't get into the *Battlestar Galactica* and *Earthquake* and all the mechanical stuff, of course, but at length I parked on a side street, in front of a building (in which Jennifer had been murdered, not once but three times, in the film *Three Times a Zombie*) — and we walked along, past deserted brownstone shells, through ghost towns and Mediaeval villages, seemingly without aim . . . though I knew where we were headed. It was the Martha's Vineyard set, with the little lake that had often stood in for the Atlantic Ocean in *Jaws*.

We stood at the edge of the tramway, watching the sun set on the artificial sea. We pretended we were a loving father and son with genuine lives that stretched in non-disjunctive lines from birth to death. Because we'd grown up in show business, we knew all about the method; we convinced even ourselves, I held in my hand the hand that had dismembered the woman I both loved and hated. The simulated warmth between us was so poignant, so puissant, I almost wanted to turn back; yet I could not. There was still a final dream to awaken from.

We shared a strawberry ice cream cone, and then I plunged Excalibur deep into my son's chest. He did not groan. He slid forward along the sword as though to embrace me, drenching my Armani suit with gore. As he died, I felt a searing pain in my own side; blood gushed from wounds that tore spontaneously through my two palms; and I knew that I too would be leaving this universe, that I would wake up for the final time.



I drew the sword from my son's heart, and flung it into the celluloid ocean. To the grinding music of double-basses, a shark fin rose from the water; it was Bruce, the tourist shark, somehow still circling even though the power had been turned off. When the shark had gone by, there was a woman walking on the waves; it was Rachel Goldberg. She was transformed. She was all woman, and still my little girl. She came to me across the water until she stood right next to me. The air was ripe with the autumnal scent of Darkness. Her feet floated an inch or two above the water, and she reached out and touched my wounded side. I winced.

"Daddy," she said.

"I can't," I said, and tried to push her away. Pictures flooded my mind: the naked little girl in the bathtub, giggling, the coy thirteen-year-old at her high society bat mitzvah, the adolescent who screamed "It wasn't my Dad" at Connie Chung before they dragged her away. Could these be buried memories? And yet they were still frames from a montage . . . there was no thread of a relationship running through those images.

She tossed her glasses onto the pavement and they shattered, and then she put her arms around me, across the body of her dead brother, and murmured, "Love you, love you, love you."

"But you're my daughter," I said.

"Oh, bullshit," she said, "you know as well as I do that I'm really Uncle Joshua's daughter, that you're

both adopted, that I'm no real kin to you; but you can have all the titillation of breaking the incest taboo that you want..."

"You mean, like Woody and Soon Yi?"

"Oh, Daddy, forget all that nonsense. It isn't real. When the gods mate, it is always incest." And she pulled me over the edge. My feet slid over the pool of blood and the corpse that was already starting to melt into thin air. In fact, the corpse was slowly melding into the naked body of my daughter. Perhaps they had always been one, their binary quality another figment of a dishonest memory.

As my shoes hit the lake, both they and the blood began to swirl away from my feet, marbling the water with liquid red and black.

I looked back at the WELCOME TO AMITY sign with its alluring, bikinied sunbather and the row of quaint New England shop facades. I knew at last that the world and all its denizens are facades, celluloid within celluloid. I was a shadow who loved another shadow. Those lips, breasts, hips, eyes, skin, hair, hands were all as substanceless as thought; but is not thought the source of all creation? We made love. In the darkling water, under the smog-streaked twilight. First she was Rachel-Roseanne, my daughter, a virgin, her mother's lipstick smudging her soft cheeks; slowly the woman in her awakened, and she was the Jennifer of my deepest dream, like the time we made love on the inflatable raft in the Olympic-sized pool in a Bangkok hotel at midnight; it seemed as though the water itself had become my wife, and I, a man-sized dildo, lanced the lubricious lake with the strength of a god; I hated her, I loved her, I killed her, I brought her back to life; and then, at last, she became Bridget, the source of all the waters, the great mother, the dragon, the world; and thus it was, at the heart of a kingdom of illusion that was itself the heart of a kingdom of illusion that was itself the heart of a kingdom of illusion, that the sword grown flaccid seven years before was given back to me at last; I found my lost manhood.

Would I have to awaken now? Must every human being be roused from shadowland? Were there only a few seconds of blissful madness left to me? Did it matter? I was loving the triple goddess, daughter; wife, mother; I was piercing the moon with my silver sword. The ocean was love itself. My seed burst forth not only from my penis but from my palms, my feet, and my wounded side. With the coming of manhood, fear returned to me at last. I trembled. I shuddered. I exulted in the feeling of this fear: the pounding heartbeat and the racing blood, the last, most vibrant colors of this transient world.

Any moment now would come the snap of final wakefulness.

Perhaps the last seven years of my life had been but a series of reveries, that when the snap came I would still be in that living room in Beverly Hills, about to twist free from my bonds and lunge toward the murderer of my wife. Perhaps I would find that it was *I* who killed her, and that the brother, son, and daughter were merely different personalities trapped inside my head. Perhaps I would find that even Jennifer was one such personality, and that the person I was stabbing to death was, after all, myself.

Perhaps even that would prove to be a dream. If so, then all that a man can ever learn is that the one true journey ends in Oscuridad, and that darkness is an other word for love. Q

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