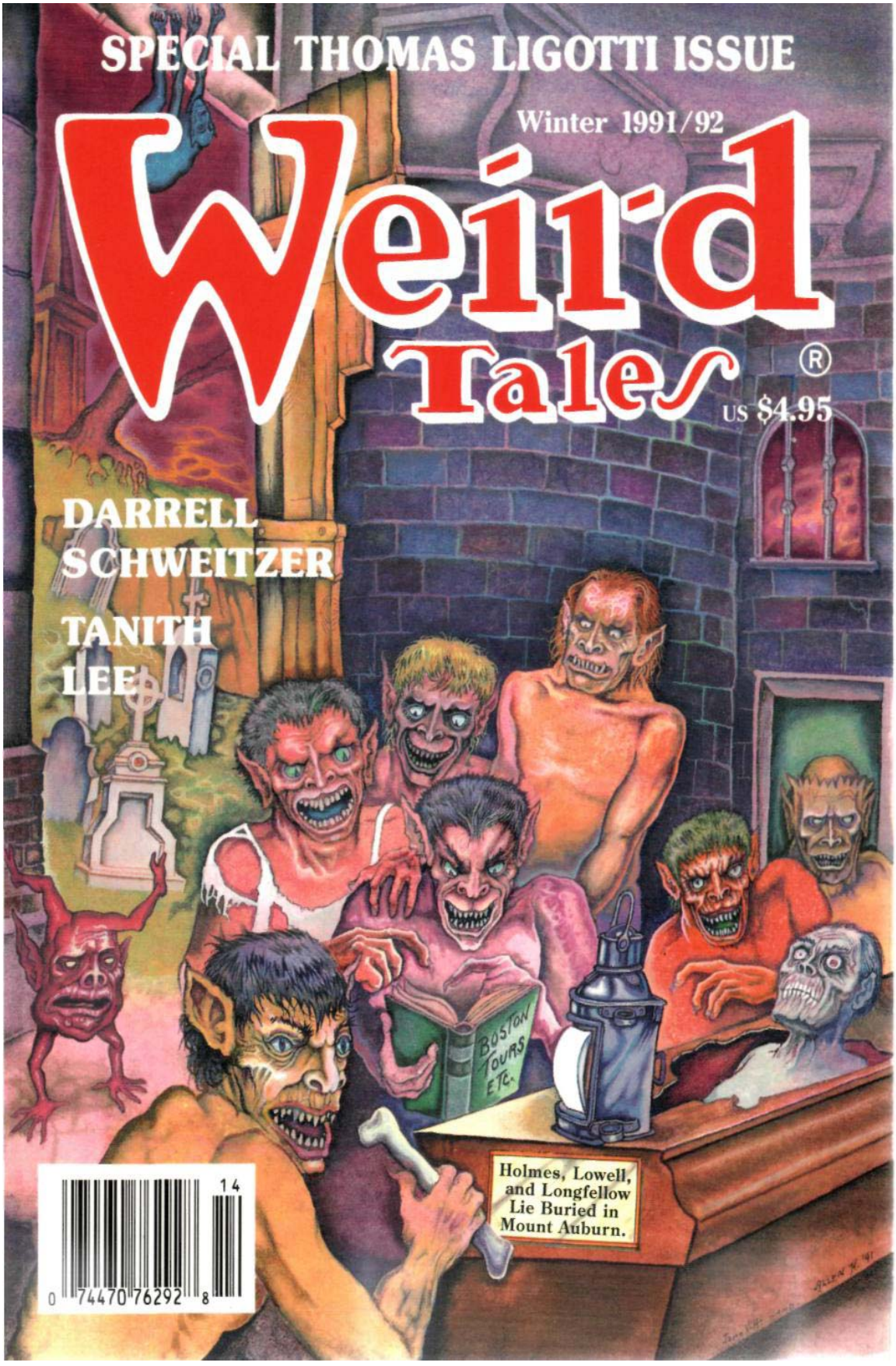
SPECIAL THOMAS LIGOTTI ISSUE
Winter 1991/92
Weird Tales ®
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DARRELL SCHWEITZER
TANITH LEE
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Holmes, Lowell, and Longfellow Lie Buried in Mount Auburn.
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FEATURES

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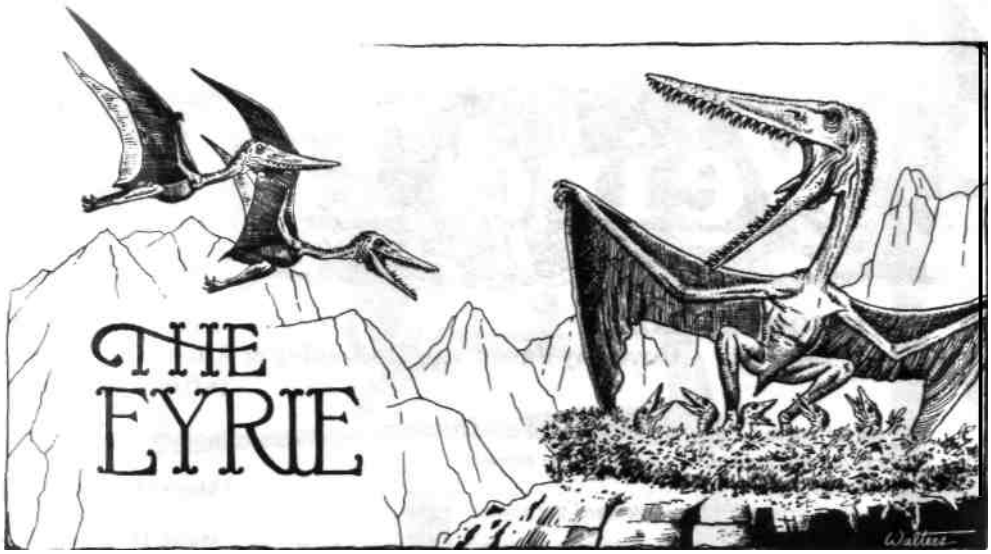


This issue, in one sense, concludes an argument we had a year ago at NECon (Northeast Regional Fantasy Convention, or "Camp NECon" as it is affectionately known, a charming weekend-long affair at a college campus in Rhode Island every July) which then spilled over into the pages of *Weird Tales*®. NECon is good for that. We get a lot of editorial ideas there.

The argument was this: what good is the small press? As many of you already know, there exists a plethora of amateur magazines with titles like *Eldritch Tales* and *Deathrealm,* which are produced out of love rather than profit aforethought, have circulations in the hundreds or low thousands, and pay somewhere between very little and nothing for their material. Some of the fiction in these magazines is a lot better than a quarter of a cent a word would lead you to expect (as opposed to, say, six cents, offered by *Weird Tales*® or, say, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction). A* lot of new writers appear there, and while, undeniably, the *entry level* of quality may be well below professional standards, some of the material published in the little magazines is very interesting indeed. (The controversy centers on whether or not new writers tend to settle in comfortably in such undemanding markets and fail to develop the discipline they'll need to be really successful.)

We think that, if an excuse were required to justify the existence of the small press and no other were available, we could offer this: *Thomas Ligotti,* this issue's feature author, who has been called by one respected editor in our field "the most brilliant horror writer to emerge in the past twenty years," would never have established himself without the small press. His work is just too bizarre, too unconventional in form and content, so that without help from the editors of, most especially, *Nyctalops* and *Crypt of Cthulhu,* we would not have Ligotti here today as featured author in *Weird Tales*®. His novelet, "The Last Feast of the Harlequin" in the April 1990 *F&SF* was, believe it or not, Ligotti's *first* appearance in a professional magazine in this country. (Rapidly followed up by "The Lost Art of Twilight" in *Weird Tales*® 297; actually a reprint from the British small-press magazine *Dagon.)* Apart from a few perceptive anthologists (particularly Karl Edward Wagner and Jessica Amanda Salmonson), the big-time editors remained oblivious to the development of this major talent for entirely too long. Of course *every* unsuccessful would-be author feels that the major magazines are failing to recognize his own unique genius, and much of the time this simply means that the would-be author doesn't write well enough yet, but Ligotti's career goes to show that the other, much rarer scenario, of the professional editors missing something good, actually *does* happen. There's a bit of eldritch pie in a lot of faces just now.

Fortunately, *Weird Tales*® and Carroll & Graf, publishers of Ligotti's *Songs of a Dead Dreamer,* have gone a long way to rectify the situation. We're glad to have Thomas Ligotti aboard, and hope to feature more of his work in the future.

The small press is also the place to turn for much of the best reviewing and criticism. We particularly commend Necronomicon Press (101 Lockwood Street, West Warwick RI 02893) for their many publications devoted to H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, and most recently a very intelligent journal, *Necro-file, The Review of Horror Fiction* ($2.50 per copy), the first issue of which features an essay by none other than Thomas

Ligotti on the element of "enigma" in horror fiction, which "By definition . . . can never be dispelled if it is to be true to weird experience."

We'd like to expound on this ourselves a bit. We recognize the essential *mystery* of the supernatural. If everything is made utterly clear, if we, the readers, and the characters in the story fully understand every macabre twitch and groan that occurs, then, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the story will be unsatisfying. Supernatural horror fiction is about people facing the *incomprehensible*, from which it achieves disquieting effects impossible in any other form, even science fiction, where one always understands that someone, somewhere, if he studies long enough, will make sense out of all this strangeness. Similarly, the sort of crime fiction which has infiltrated the horror field of late — the maniac-with-a-knife stuff — can never have this aura of incomprehensible awe, and well-worn areas of supernatural fiction itself can lose it. ("Oh, brains sucked out. Another manifestation of the minions of Cthulhu. We've seen dozens of 'em before . ..")

The "enigma," as Ligotti calls it, is one of two key ingredients in a horror story. The other, of course, is fear, but not mere fear of the guy with the knife. Instead it is the fear that we do not know the rules of the universe, and that we are not in control of our own destinies. This blends with the more obvious dread of pain and death and loss of identity which all of us feel to make this type of fiction special.

But it is not an excuse to be just plain *murky*. The difference is important. A murky story is one in which, because the sensory, viewpoint, and informational cues are defective or absent, we come away not knowing what we've read. Worse yet, it's one in which we do not know what is going on, either scene by scene or even line by line. Former *Analog* editor Ben Bova has been credited with the useful distinction between "micro-murky," in which the story is impossible to follow on a small scale, and "macro-murky," in which, although we know what the characters are doing and experiencing, the overall pattern or meaning never becomes clear. The reader goes away confused, saying "It just didn't add up to anything."

Ambiguity is quite another matter. It is the lifeblood of our sort of fiction, a technique mastered by writers as diverse as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walter De la Mare, and Robert Aickman (and, yes, also Thomas Ligotti), whereby the story points in the end, not to a resolution, but to further mystery. Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" is a classically ambiguous story, absolutely lucid in its telling, presenting the reader not with answers but with clearly defined questions. Hawthorne's celebrated witchcraft tale, "Young Goodman Brown," is another. Goodman Brown never knows if he actually witnessed a sabbat or just dreamed it, but the result is the same: his life is forever clouded. He is unable to see innocence in people anymore, even in his own wife.

A deliberately ambiguous story, then, has to be even more precisely and clearly written than an ordinary one. Choices must be placed before the reader. We must know what the *question* is, even if the answer is only subtly implied. Otherwise, the result is mere confusion.

That's the *Weird Tales*® standard. Ambiguity is welcome. Murkiness is not.

Russ Ceccola of West Conshohocken PA comments:

I really enjoyed issue 300. It was nice to learn more about Robert Bloch (a name I have mispronounced countless times over the years) through his stories, interviews, and autobiographical memories. "Beetles " is a classic, and I have seen the excellent screenplay you reprinted come to life in an episode of Tales from the Darkside *that I have in my video collection. Other than the Bloch material, "Playing for Keeps" is a great little chiller. I am not very happy with "Wager of Dreams. "As a college graduate with a sizeable vocabulary, Michael Rutherford lost me many times with his verbiage and sometimes obscure words. I needed my dictionary to read that story. Oh, well. . . The concept was interesting, but poorly presented. "Knight of Darkness, Knight of Light" was a lot better.*

What can we say? We're glad you liked the Bloch material. As for the Rutherford, none of us was sent scurrying to the dictionary very often, but if we had been, that would have been fair, if the obscure word was the *right* word and if it had *been there.* As far as we're concerned, anything in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is fair game.

Peter B. Keay of Concord, California writes:

Heartfelt thanks for the attention paid to Ramsey Campbell, a writer who consistently disturbs the mind without the use of Chainsaw, cleaver, or other implements of destruction. With Robert Bloch in attendance (always a pleasure) and some fine short pieces by the supporting cast, issue 301 was indeed noteworthy.

I hate to rain on James T. Hughes's parade, but as a displaced Brit I enjoy the

"foreign colloquialisms" — even though after twenty years in the U.S. I tend to stumble over certain phrases. Denying a writer access to a market, or worse yet forcing that individual to conform to a bastardized form of any language is patently absurd!

We can only agree. Fair's fair. After all, British magazines don't anglicize American writers, at least not in our field. One thinks of the infamous case of the stuffy British editor who "cleaned up" Ring Lardner's grammar, but that, thankfully, was a long time ago!

Has **John Prennis** of Philadelphia caught us (figuratively) with our collective editorial pants down?

One of the neat things about being a friend of Diane Weinstein is that I get to hear what it is like to be a slushpile reader. Such as when some disgusting notion seems to possess all those tiny minds at once, and the slushpile is flooded with vampires-with-AIDS or roadkill-out-for-revenge. And I commiserate and praise the Weird Tales® *staff for their high standards. I don't* like *vampires, especially noble, suffering vampires the writer wants us to sympathise with.*

You can imagine my distaste when I saw the cover of the summer issue. Vampires, yuck. Imagine my further amazement when I found a vampire-with-AIDS story, by Robert Bloch, no less. Does this mean the V-with-A sub-sub genre has now become respectable? Or that Bloch is vulnerable to the same influences that plague the slushpile writers ? Now there's *a seamy thought.*

Let me assure you that I approve of Weird Tales® *and the goals to which it aspires. I see the V-with-A story as a temporary lapse, and you will find my subscription renewal with this letter.*

Well, we wouldn't go so far as to call it a lapse . . . but we don't expect to do it again. The Bloch story has indeed proven controversial, the bare *mention* of vampires and AIDS in the same story being too much for some people. Certainly, having published "The Bedposts of Life," we can now point to the story and say that we've done it and don't need to again. We thought readers would want to see, at least, Bloch's version, and that the story did more than just present this "clever" idea. There is an additional, subtle element: the vampire and the prostitute now bound forever to what they are. It is presumed that the curse is the immortality he gives her, since now she will suffer from AIDS throughout eternity.... Then again, we can't help but wonder if vampires, being dead, *can* suffer from mortal diseases. We don't care to find out in future stories on this subject.

Jeff Leach of Vasby, Sweden, reflects on the editorial in issue 301:

Why are we turning away from the traditional monsters to the monsters within ourselves? The answer to this is surprisingly obvious — horror fiction is just reflecting the identity crisis within Western, particularly American society. With the decline of a naive belief in Christianity, traditional monsters are losing their power to frighten. What good is a vampire if you don't believe in holy water or the power of the cross ? When we do still find these elements in fiction, they are assuming a mutated human aspect instead of a supernatural one. That these creatures are still being used is just confirmation that most people are scared by the thought of a hungry creature with big teeth and claws. Now we are just seeing this hungry creature metamorphosed into a disturbed human with knives, guns, and tools of torture substituting for teeth and claws. For the origin of these creatures, you need to look no further than the local newspaper. They are frightening because they are everywhere and there is no real way to protect ourselves, but most importantly because we can believe in them.

I, as a lover of the supernatural, am also disappointed with all the human psychopaths that are starting to inhabit horror fiction. I find nothing entertaining in the fictional dissection of human bodies, but even more disappointing is the amount of perverse sexual violence directed towards women. Doesn't anyone out there still love their girlfriends or wives, or does everyone equate making love with violence?

Horror fiction is in decline, not because we are abandoning the traditional monster, but because of what we have used to replace it: a sick human being that likes to commit sexual crimes against women. Hopefully this will pass, as the slasher movies of the early '80s did. There is a place for violence and sex in horror fiction, but until writers take them off center stage they will only be offensive instead of shocking or stimulating as they should be.

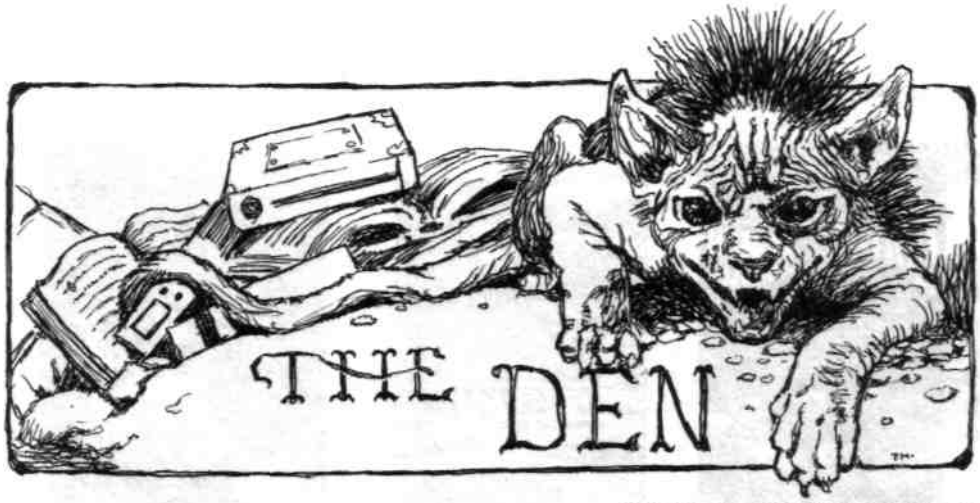
Frankly, we think there is still a future for supernaturalism, simply because the universe has not lost its wonder, and human beings still have a capacity for wonder. As the "cold light of science" revealed more and more, this did not stifle one of our greatest

supernatural-ists, H.P. Lovecraft. Instead, he drew his inspiration from the new universe revealed in the early part of this century by Einstein and others. He never could bring himself to believe in (or write about) ghosts and werewolves, or other traditional spooks, but what he produced instead was much fresher and stranger. The very "identity crisis" in American society you speak of is a source for horror fiction. The crushing anonymity of our huge cities should be very suggestive to the (horrifically) sensitive mind. Imagine, for instance, that all those faces in the New York subway crowd are *masks,* and when you snatch one away, a completely different person will be revealed. There are new ideas everywhere. Editor Schweitzer wrote that particular one as "Peeling It Off" (published in *Borderlands,* edited by Thomas Monteleone, Avon Books, 1990), but you get the point. Much too often, what we call bash-the-broad-with-a-hammer fiction reveals, more than misogyny, sheer lack of imagination.

There *is* a place for sex and violence in horror fiction. One example we particularly like (for all it's a bit too murky in spots for our taste) is Peter Straub's *Mrs. God,* published recently in its unabridged form by Donald Grant. Sexy, violent, yes, but forming a valid artistic whole.

We want your letters. Comments, votes on favorite stories, are all valued. Let us hear from you!

The Most Popular Story: Voting for issue 301 was reassuringly heavy, with a wide spread of opinion. Virtually every story scored some points. Ramsey Campbell's "A Street Was Chosen" is the clear winner, with Bruce Bethke's "The Final Death of the Comeback King" a strong second, and Juleen Brantingham's "Patterns" coming in third. Andrew Seawell's "Something For Amy" garnered a surprising amount of attention for a story so short, received several first-place votes, some strong disapprovals, and ultimately tied with John R. Little's "Growing Up" for fourth place. *Q*



by Darrell Schweitzer

A sudden and unexpected greeting. This is your editor again, here to deny that this is really the special Darrell Schweitzer issue of *Weird Tales*® or that this publication is soon to be retitled *Darrell Schweitzer's Fantasy and Horror Magazine.* This issue I seem to be responsible for *all* the frontmatter, both Eyrie and Den, the Thomas Ligotti interview, a novella, and a poem (which ties in with the novella). Just be glad I wasn't suddenly called upon to do the cover. My drawing is terrifying all right, but not in the desired sense. . . .

Rest assured that next issue's Den will be written less nepotistically by Gahan Wilson, who will alternate every other issue with another columnist. This issue's columnist failed to come through at the last minute due to pressing family matters, and so, as George Scithers likes to point out, in any company it becomes management's job to do *anything* that would otherwise be left undone, whether it is to sweep the floor, answer the telephones, or, in this case, write somebody else's column.

Now, some of my current reading:

Five anthologies:

The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories 2
edited by Richard Dalby
Carroll & Graf, 1991
Trade paperback, 698 pp., $9.95

The Horror Hall of Fame
edited by Robert Silverberg & Martin H. Greenberg
Carroll & Graf, 1991
Hardcover, 416 pp., $21.95

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror Fourth Annual Collection
edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling St. Martin's Press, 1991, Hardcover & trade paperback, pagination unknown, $27.95 (hc), $15.95 (tp).

The Color of Evil
edited by David Hartwell
Tor, 1991
Paperback, 438 pp., $4.99

Walls of Fear
edited by Kathryn Cramer Morrow, 1990 Hardcover, 394 pp., $19.95

No matter how many best-selling novels there might be, somehow the horror story, or the weird story, or the supernatural story — whatever you want to call it—seems still to be a short-fiction field and, perennially, a fertile one for anthologists. Most of us probably developed our taste for this kind of thing through anthologies, whether the initial hook was a Stephen King novel or not. You can tell how old someone is by asking what the

particular anthologies were. Readers of the '40s had Boris Karloff's *And the Darkness Falls* and, most especially, the Fraser & Wise *Great Tales of Terror and the the Supernatural.* In the '50s, it was Donald Wollheim's Ace Books, *Macabre* and *More Macabre,* with their gorgeously ghoulish Ed Emsh-willer covers. In the '60s, the Ballantine series, with their equally gorgeous Richard Powers covers. *(Zacherly's Midnight Snacks, Things with Claws,* etc.)

Someday readers will fondly remember the fat Carroll & Graf anthologies, of which *The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories 2* is but one of many. If only these books were available in hardcover, they could get into libraries and keep patrons shivering for generations. All of them are marvellous mixes of the familiar and the unfamiliar. For the newcomer, old standbys such as M.R. James's "The Rats," but for the rest of us, while the names are recognizable, much of the material is not. For instance, from Charles Dickens, "The Ghost in Master B's Room" rather than the usual "The Signalman." Authors include Kingsley Amis (with a sequel to his recently televised novel, *The Green Man),* Edith Wharton, Rudyard Kipling, Robert W. Chambers, R. Chetwynd-Hayes, H.F. Harvey, E.F. Benson, Robert Arthur, and about fifty more. The book is clearly the product of much research, and is highly recommended.

Hartwell's *The Color of Evil* is the first of (presumably) several volumes derived from his massive *The Dark Descent,* a 1987 bug-crusher of a book which has a serious claim to being *the* definitive anthology of supernatural fiction for the latter half of the 20th century. We begin with an intelligent discussion of the history, theory, and aesthetics of the horror story. Then, since this is a showcase of the most important material in the field, much of the fiction will seem familiar: Stephen King's "The Reach," Robert Bloch's "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper," Fritz Leiber's "Belsen Express," and so on. Only a couple are unfamiliar, and Hartwell makes a case for their historical importance.

So, if you want a quick and definitive introduction to the field, this is your best choice. Find the 1987 Tor hardcover of *The Dark Descent,* or collect the whole series in paperback.

The Horror Hall of Fame has some of the same problems as *The Dark Descent* for the initiated reader — you already have this material — but the selections are less interesting, and certainly form no theoretical model of anything. The contents derive from a poll of the attendees of the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy Conventions. While some of the omissions are startling — nothing by H.P. Lovecraft, for instance — this book is undeniably filled with first-rate stories, ranging from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Machen's "The White People" (Lovecraft's pick for the finest weird story of all time) to Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost," Ray Bradbury's "The Small Assassin," and Harlan Ellison's "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" (which, like several others, also occurs in the Hartwell volume). For the newcomer, it is an excellent collection.

The Datlow-Windling, of course, is an annual of contemporary material. If you read none of the other anthologies or the magazines, it would still be possible to get a good idea of what is going on in the field from this book alone. The two Stoker Award winners are present, Elizabeth Massie's "Stephen" and David Silva's "The Calling," along with, I am sure, the World Fantasy Award winners for this year. *Weird Tales*® does well in the honorable mentions and is otherwise represented by Jonathan Carroll's "The Panic Hand."

The standout story for me is Thomas Ligotti's "The Last Feast of the Harlequin," from *F&SF*. This, more than any other story published in the past fifty years, has truly managed to accomplish what H.P. Lovecraft accomplished in his very best fiction, but there are no monsters from the Cthulhu Mythos or *Necronomicon-like* volumes; instead, a journey into strangeness in a subtly low-key, almost documentary fashion.

Charles de Lint is represented with "Freewheeling," which comes as close as any North American story has to "magic realism," without (again) being a pastiche or borrowing overt mannerisms.

As for the two Stoker-winners, Silva's "The Calling" is harrowing and relentless; Massie's "Stephen" I have problems with. The ending does not work for me. The protagonist, a now-adult child-abuse victim, finds herself drawn to a bizarre act with someone far more victimized than herself. Then she commits suicide, to which I say, what's the point? Far better that she find herself monstrously and transmutively *healed,* so that she has gained something both terrible and perversely *alluring* from the experience. It's as if, having gone where no one has quite gone before, Massie lost her nerve at the last minute.

There are a few stories I couldn't make sense out of (especially Karen Joy Fowler's "Lieserl"), but *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* surely has something for everyone. Other authors present include Angela Carter, David J. Schow, John Brunner, Michael

Bishop, Peter Straub, Joe Lansdale, R.A. Laff-erty, and even Karl Capek, the Czech author of *R.U.R,* with a tale not previously published in English.

Walls of Fear is a sequel to *The Architecture of Fear* and is a collection of new stories on what might be loosely called the "House Horrible" theme. But they are by no means all haunted-house stories. James Morrow even treats us to a haunted telephone booth. Jonathan Carroll describes a dollhouse which reflects the soul of its owner. Karl Edward Wagner, hauntingly (to use an overwrought word in this context), tells of the visitations of the specters of possible futures, all of them snuffed out by nuclear war. Gene Wolfe's contribution, "The Haunted Boardinghouse," is vividly written, in beautiful prose, filled with strange details, as if the story were a subtle Edward Gorey cartoon as filmed by Ingmar Bergman. Richard Lupoff's "The House on Rue Chartres" is based on H.P Lovecraft's meeting with E. Hoffmann Price in New Orleans in the 1930s, manages to work a supernatural adventure in among the historical facts, but — alas — never quite overcomes the sense of contrivance typical of such efforts.

Other contributors include Chet Williamson, Jack Womack, and Gwyneth Jones. *Walls of Fear* was one of the very best original anthologies of 1990. I hope it will be in paperback soon.

Other books:

Borgel
by Daniel Pinkwater
Macmillan, 1990
Hardcover, 170 pp., $12.95

Daniel Pinkwater has become something of a cult among science fiction and fantasy aficionados. Nominally a children's writer, he is widely read by adults for a kind of bleakly gonzo humor not seen since the days of Firesign Theater, and, as any Pinkwater devotee will vociferously insist at this point, not really even then. I can't resist a quote. The title character, a mysterious Uncle who barges into a boy's life, describes his ambition to become a time tourist, back in the Old Country:

> Usually only the children of the extremely wealthy — families that had luxuries like clothing — could get to be time tourists. It was too much to hope for. All a boy like me could hope for was that maybe his father would knock a couple of his teeth out. But my father was too poor even for that.. . When I was eleven years old, my father performed the ritual of throwing me out of the house and shaking his fist at me. This meant it was time for me to begin my life's work, which in my family meant searching the fields for skunks that had been squashed under the hooves of the rich people's cattle. It was satisfying work, and after a year I found a skunk This meant I could get married — but I didn't do that ... I traded the skunk for some Kleenexes, and I traded those for a pickle. It was the first pickle I had ever seen. I traded the pickle, and I traded what I got for the pickle . . . before long I was a prosperous man. . . By the time I was nineteen I had a place to sleep indoors. When I was twenty-five I owned my own hat ... I was going places, but still I was far from my goal of becoming a time tourist

Trust me, it all makes sense. Really. What boy (or reader, for that matter) could resist a trip through time and space ("and the other") with such an uncle? Especially if it involves a quest for the Great Popsicle of cosmic understanding')?

Noteworthy:

The Worm Ouroboros by E.R. Eddi-son. Dell, 1991. Trade paperback, 448 pp. $9.99. A truly great heroic fantasy, origi-nally published in 1926, the inspiration of generations of fantasy writers, now back in print; foreword by Douglas Winter, notes by Paul Edmund Thomas. An epic of war and adventure on the (al-chemical, not astronomical) planet Mer-cury, in suitably epic language. E.R. Eddison had the amazing ability to write in a "high" Elizabethan style and still produce, not unreadable gibberish, but a masterpiece of prose!

Dark Dreamers by Stanley Wiater. Avon, 1990. Trade paperback, 227 pp., $9.95.

Very competently conducted interviews with Clive Barker, Stephen King, Peter Straub, Richard Matheson, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Joe Lansdale, Dean Koontz, Robert McCam-mon, and other popular masters of contemporary horror fiction.

H.P. Lovecraft: Letters to Henry Kuttner edited by David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi. Necronomicon Press, 1990. Pamphlet, 32 pp. $5.95. The five volumes of Lovecraft's *Selected Letters* published by Arkham House only scratched the surface of the extant correspondence of HPL. Here are some more letters, friendly, vastly erudite, brilliant, the kind that most of us can only dream of receiving, from a master of horror who first signs himself, "Yours cordially and sincerely, H.P Lovecraft," but is soon, "Yours by the Nighted Eidolon, E'ch-Pi-El."

The Case Against Satan by Ray Russell. How's this for a novel plot: young girl possessed by the Devil. Strange, obscene manifestations. Roman Catholic priest, undergoing a crisis of faith, must confront the reality of spiritual evil. Sound familiar? Yes, but Ray Russell did it first, in a mere 50,000 words, and much better, back in 1962. Last seen in a British paperback in 1979; still a masterpiece. It is the single most reprint-worthy novel in the field which remains (inexplicably) out of print. Find it where you can.

The Dark Tower HI: The Wastelands by Stephen King, illustrated by Ned Dameron. Donald M. Grant, Publisher, Inc., 1991. Trade hardcover, $38.00. Published so recently that we haven't had time to review it properly, except to report that it's a beautiful book. A limited edition is already sold out; go buy a copy of the trade edition before that's gone too. **Q**

NETHESCURIAL

by Thomas Ligotti illustrated by Harry O. Morris

The Idol and the Island

I have uncovered a rather wonderful manuscript, *the letter began.* It was an entirely fortuitous find, made during my day's dreary labors among some of the older and more decomposed remains entombed in the library archives. If I am any judge of antique documents, and of course I am, these brittle pages date back to the closing decades of the last century. (A more precise estimate of age will follow, along with a photocopy which I fear will not do justice to the delicate, crinkly script, nor to the greenish black discoloration the ink has taken on over the years.) Unfortunately there is no indication of authorship either within the manuscript itself or in the numerous and tedious papers whose company it has been keeping, none of which seem related to the item under discussion. And what an item it is — a real storybook stranger in a crowd of documentary types, and probably destined to remain unknown.

I am almost certain that this invention, though at times it seems to pose as a letter or journal entry, has never appeared in common print. Given the bizarre nature of its content, I would surely have known of it before now. Although it is an untitled "statement" of sorts, the opening lines were more than enough to cause me to put everything else aside and seclude myself in a corner of the library stacks for the rest of the afternoon.

So it begins: "In the rooms of houses and beyond their walls — beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies—below earth mound and above mountain peak — in northern leaf and southern flower — inside each star and the voids between them — within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits — among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds — behind the faces of the living and the dead ..." And there it trails off, a quoted fragment of some more ancient text. But this is certainly not the last we *will hear of* this all-encompassing refrain!

As it happens, the above string of phrases is cited by the narrator in reference to a certain *presence,* more properly an omnipresence, which he encounters on an obscure island located at some unspecified northern latitude. Briefly, he has been summoned to this island, which appears on a local map under the name of Nethescurial, in order to rendezvous with another man, an archaeologist who is designated only as Dr. N— and who will come to know the narrator of the manuscript by the self-admitted alias of "Bartholomew Gray" (they don't call 'em like that anymore). Dr. N—, it seems, has been occupying himself upon that barren, remote, and otherwise uninhabited isle with some peculiar antiquarian rummagings. As Mr. Gray sails toward the island he observes the murky skies above him and the murky waters below. His prose style is somewhat plain for my taste, but it serves well enough once he approaches the island and takes surprisingly scrupulous notice of its eerie aspect: contorted rock formations; pointed pines and spruces of gigantic stature and uncanny movements; the masklike countenance of sea-facing cliffs; and a sickly, stagnant fog clinging to the landscape like a fungus.

From the moment Mr. Gray begins describing the island, a sudden enchantment enters into his account. It is that sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and our fear of it in one sweeping sensation. Too close and we may be reminded of an omnipresent evil in the living world, and threatened with having our sleeping sense of doom awakened into full vigor. Too far away and we become even more incurious and complacent than is our usual state, and ultimately exasperated when an imaginary evil is so poorly evoked that it fails to offer the faintest echo of its real and all-pervasive counterpart. Of course, any number of locales may serve as the setting to reveal ominous truths; evil, beloved and menacing evil, may show itself anywhere precisely because it is everywhere and is as stunningly set off by a foil of sunshine and flowers as it is by darkness and dead leaves. A purely private quirk, nevertheless, sometimes allows the purest essence of life's malignity to be aroused only by sites such as the lonely island of Nethescurial, where the real and the unreal swirl freely and madly about in the same fog.

It seems that in this place, this far-flung realm, Dr. N— has discovered an ancient and long-sought artifact, a marginal but astonishing entry in that unspeakably voluminous journal of creation. Soon after landfall, Mr. Gray finds himself verifying the truth of the archaeologist's claims: that the island has been strangely molded in all its parts, and

within its shores every manifestation of plant or mineral or anything whatever appears to have fallen at the mercy of some shaping force of demonic temperament, a genius loci which has sculpted its nightmares out of the atoms of the local earth. Closer inspection of this insular spot on the map serves to deepen the sense of evil and enchantment that had been lightly sketched earlier in the manuscript. But I refrain from further specifics (it is getting late and I want to wrap up this letter before bedtime) in order to cut straight through the epidermis of this tale and penetrate to its very bones and viscera. Indeed, the manuscript does seem to have an anatomy of its own, its dark green holography rippling over it like veins, and I regret that my paraphrase may not deliver it alive. Enough!

Mr. Gray makes his way inland, lugging along with him a fat little travelling bag. In a clearing he comes upon a large but unadorned, almost primitive house which stands against the fantastic backdrop of the island's wartlike hills and tumorous trees. The outside of the house is encrusted with the motley and leprous stones so abundant in the surrounding landscape. The inside of the house, which the visitor sees upon opening the unlocked door, is spacious as a cathedral but far less ornamented. The walls are white and smoothly surfaced; they also seem to taper inward, pyramid-like, as they rise from floor to lofty ceiling. There are no windows, and numerous oil lamps scattered about fill the interior of the house with a sacral glow. A figure descends a long staircase, crosses the great distance of the room, and solemnly greets his guest at the door. At first wary of each other, they eventually achieve a degree of mutual ease and finally get down to their true business.

Thus far one can see that the drama enacted is a familiar one: the stage is rigidly traditional and the performers upon it are caught up in its style. For these actors are not so much people as they are puppets from the old shows, the ones that have told the same story for centuries, the ones that can still be very strange to us. Traipsing through the same old foggy scene, seeking the same old isolated house, the puppets in these plays always find everything new and unknown, because they have no memories to speak of and can hardly recall making these stilted motions countless times in the past. They struggle through the same gestures, repeat the same lines, although in rare moments they may feel a dim suspicion that this has all happened before. How like they are to the human race itself! This is what makes them our perfect representatives — this and the fact that they are handcarved in the image of maniacal victims who seek to share the secrets of their individual torments as their strings are manipulated by the same master.

The secrets which these two Punchinellos share are rather deviously presented by the author of this confession (for upon consideration this is the genre to which it truly belongs). Indeed, Mr. Gray, or whatever his name might be, appears to know much more than he is telling, especially with respect to his colleague the archaeologist. Nevertheless, he records what Dr. N— knows and, more importantly, what he has found buried on the island. The thing is only a fragment of an object dating from antiquity. Known to be part of a religious idol, it is difficult to say which part. It is a twisted piece of a puzzle, one suggesting that the figure as a whole is intensely unbeautiful. The fragment is also darkened with the verdigris of centuries, causing its substance to resemble something like decomposing jade.

And were the other pieces of this idol also to be found on the same island? The answer is no. The idol seems to have been shattered ages ago, and each broken part of it buried in some remote place so that the whole of it might not easily be joined together again. Although it was a mere representation, the effigy itself was the focus of a great power. The ancient sect which was formed to worship this power seem to have been pantheists of a sort, believing that all created things — appearances to the contrary — were of a single, unified, and transcendent *stuff,* an emanation of a central creative force. Hence the ritual chant which runs "in the rooms of houses," et cetera, and alludes to the all-present nature of this deity — a most primal and pervasive type of god, one that falls into the category of "gods who eclipse all others," territorialist divinities whose claim to the creation purportedly supersedes that of their rivals. (The words of the famous chant, by the way, are the only ones to come down to us from the ancient cult and appeared for the first time in an ethnographical, quasi-esoteric work entitled *Illuminations of the Ancient World,* which was published in the latter part of the nineteenth century, around the same time, I would guess, as this manuscript I am rushing to summarize was written.) At some point in their career as worshipants of the "Great One God," a shadow fell upon the sect. It appears that one day it was revealed to them, in a manner both obscure and hideous, that the power to which they bowed was essentially evil in character and that their religious mode of pantheism was in truth a kind of *pandemonism.* But this revelation was not a surprise to all of the sectarians, since there seems to have been an internecine struggle which ended in slaughter. In any case, the anti-demonists prevailed, and they

immediately rechristened their ex-deity to reflect its newly discovered essence in evil. And the name by which they henceforth called it was Nethescurial.

A nice turn of affairs: this obscure island openly advertises itself as the home of the idol of Nethescurial. Of course, this island is only one of several to which the pieces of the vandalized totem were scattered. The original members of the sect who had treacherously turned against their god knew that the power concentrated in the effigy could not be destroyed, and so they decided to parcel it out to isolated corners of the earth where it could do the least harm. But would they have brought attention to this fact by allowing these widely disseminated burial plots to bear the name of the pandemon-iacal god? This is doubtful, just as it is equally unlikely that it was they who built those crude houses, temples of a fashion, to mark the spot where a particular shard of the old idol might be located by others.

So Dr. N— is forced to postulate a survival of the demonist faction of the sect, a cult that had devoted itself to searching out those places which had been transformed by the presence of the idol and might thus be known by their gruesome features. This quest would require a great deal of time and effort for its completion, given the global reaches where those splinters of evil might be tucked away. Known as the "seeking," it also involved the enlistment of outsiders, who in latter days were often researchers into the ways of bygone cultures, though they remained ignorant that the cause they served was still a living one. Dr. N— therefore warns his "colleague" Mr. Gray that they may be in danger from those who carried on the effort to reassemble the idol and revive its power. The very presence of that great and crude house on the island certainly proved that the cult was already aware of the location of *this* fragment of the idol. In fact, the mysterious Mr. Gray, not unexpectedly, is actually a member of the cult in its modern incarnation; furthermore, he has brought with him to the island — bulky travelling bag, you know— all the other pieces of the idol, which have been recovered through centuries of seeking. Now he only needs the one piece discovered by Dr. N— to make the idol whole again for the first time in a couple millennia.

But he also needs the archaeologist himself as a kind of sacrifice to Nethescurial, a ceremony which takes place late the same night in the upper part of the house. If I may telescope the ending for brevity's sake, the sacrificial ritual holds some horrific surprises for Mr. Gray (these people seem never to realize what they are getting themselves into), who soon repents of his evil practices and is driven to smash the idol to pieces once more. Making his escape from that weird island, he throws these pieces overboard, sowing the cold gray waters with the scraps of an incredible power. Later, fearing an obscure threat to his existence (perhaps the reprisal of his fellow cultists), he composes an account of a horror which is both his own and that of the whole human race. End of manuscript.*

Now, despite my penchant for such wild yarns as I have just attempted to describe, I am not oblivious to their shortcomings. For one thing, whatever emotional impact the narrative may have lost in the foregoing precis, it certainly gained in coherence: the incidents in the manuscript are clumsily developed, important details lack proper emphasis, impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity. I do admire the fantastic principle at the core of this piece. The nature of that pandemoniac entity is very intriguing. Imagine all of creation as a mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things, existing "inside each star and the voids between them — within blood and bone — through all souls and spirits," and so forth. There is even a reference in the manuscript that suggests an analogy between Nethescurial and that beautiful myth of the Australian aborigines known as the Alchera (the Dreamtime, or Dreaming), a superreality which is the source of all we see in the world around us. (And this reference will be useful in dating the manuscript, since it was toward the end of the last century that Australian anthropologists made the aboriginal cosmology known to the general public.) Imagine the universe as the dream, the feverish nightmare of a demonic demiurge, 0 Supreme Nethescurial!

* Except for the concluding line, which reveals the somewhat extravagant, but not entirely uninteresting, conclusion of the narrator himself.

The problem is that such supernatural inventions are indeed quite difficult to imagine. So often they fail to materialize in the mind, to take on a mental texture, and thus remain unfelt as anything but an abstract monster of metaphysics — an elegant or awkward schematic that cannot rise from the paper to touch us. Of course, we do need to keep a certain distance from such specters as Nethescurial, but this is usually provided by the medium of words as such, which ensnare all kinds of fantastic creatures before they can tear us body and soul. (And yet the words of this particular manuscript seem rather weak in this regard, possibly because they are only the drab green scratchings of a human hand and not the heavy mesh of black type.) But we do want to get close enough to feel the foul breath of these beasts, or to see them as prehistoric leviathans circling about the tiny island on which we have taken refuge. Even if we are incapable of a sincere belief in ancient cults and their unheard-of idols, even if these anonymous adventurers and archaeologists appear to be mere shadows on a wall, and even if strange houses on remote islands are of shaky construction, there may still be a power in these things that threaten us like a bad dream. And this power emanates not so much from within the tale as it does from somewhere *behind* it, someplace of infinite darkness and ubiquitous evil in which we may walk unaware.

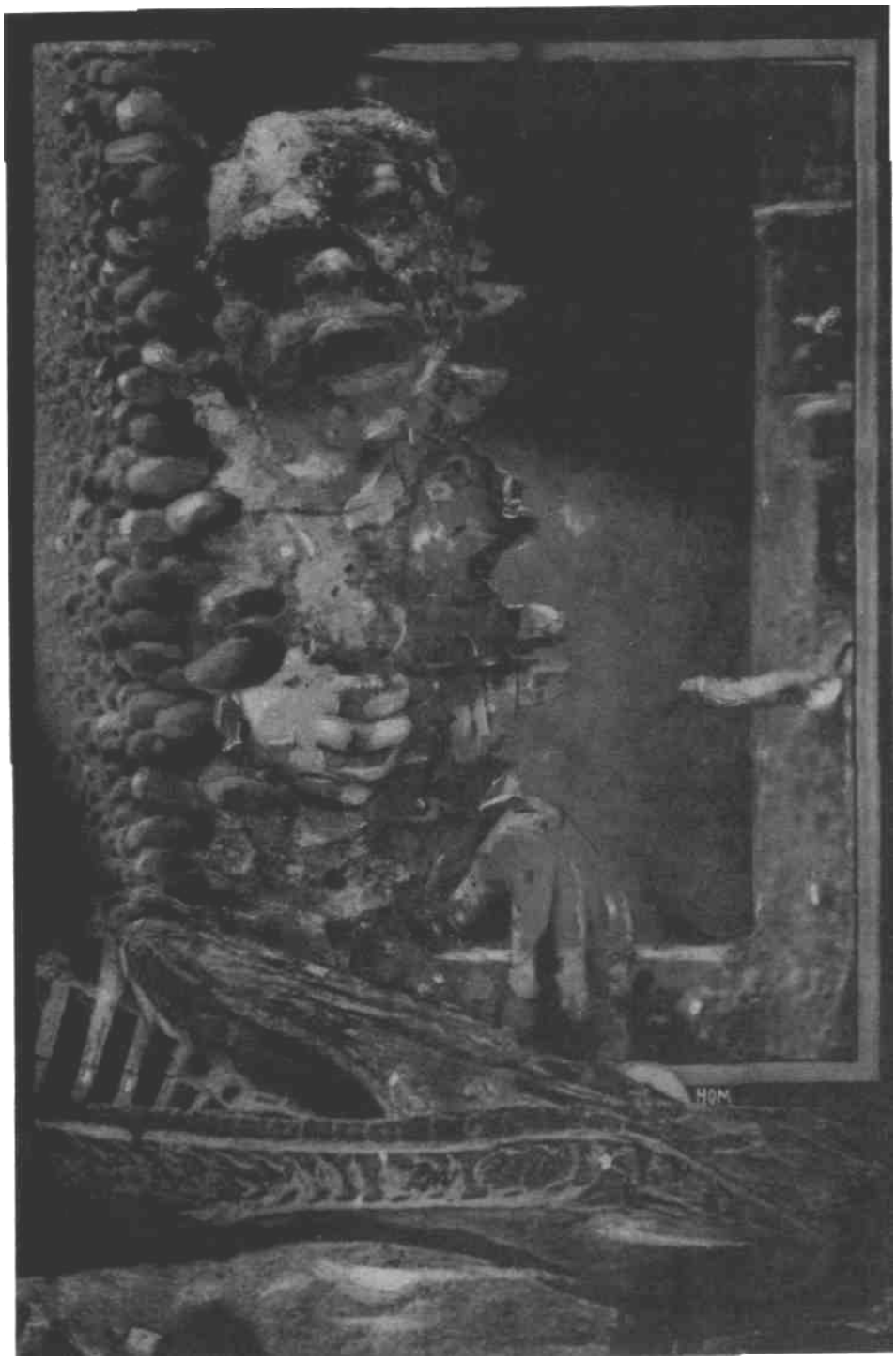
But never mind these night thoughts; it's only to bed that I will walk after closing this letter.

Postscript

Later the same night.

Several hours have passed since I set down the above description and analysis of that manuscript. How naive those words of mine now sound to me. And yet they are still true enough, from a certain perspective. But that perspective was a privileged one which, at least for the moment, I do not enjoy. The distance between me and a devastating evil has lessened considerably. I no longer find it so difficult to imagine the horrors delineated in that manuscript, for I have known them in the most intimate way. What a fool I seem to myself for playing with such visions. How easily a simple dream can destroy one's sense of safety, if only for a few turbulent hours. Certainly I have experienced all this before, but never as acutely as tonight.

I had not been asleep for long but apparently long enough. At the start of the dream I was sitting at a desk in a very dark room. It also seemed to me that the room was very large, though I could see little of it beyond the area of the desktop, at either end of which glowed a lamp of some kind. Spread out before me were many papers varying in size. These I knew to be maps of one sort or another, and I was studying them each in turn. I had become quite absorbed in these maps, which now dominated the dream to the exclusion of all other images. Each of them focused on some concatenation of islands without reference to larger, more familiar land masses. A powerful impression of remoteness and seclusion was conveyed by these irregular daubs of earth fixed in bodies of water that were unnamed. But although the location of the islands was not specific, somehow I was sure that those for whom the maps were meant already had this knowledge. Nevertheless, this secrecy was only superficial, for no esoteric key was required to seek out the greater geography of which these maps were an exaggerated detail: they were all distinguished by some known language in which the islands were named, different languages for different maps. Yet upon closer view (indeed, I felt as if I were actually journeying among those exotic fragments of land, tiny pieces of shattered mystery), I saw that every map had one thing in common: within each group of islands, whatever language was used to name them, there was always one called Nethescurial. It was as if all over the world, this terrible name had been insinuated into diverse locales as the only one suitable for a certain island. Of course there were variant cognate forms and spellings, sometimes transliterations, of the word. (How precisely I saw them!) Yet with the strange conviction that may overcome a dreamer, I knew these places had all been claimed in the name of Nethescurial and that they bore the unique sign of something which had been buried there — the pieces of that dismembered idol.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And with this thought, the dream reshaped itself. The maps dissolved into a kind of mist; the desk before me became something else, an altar of coarse stone, and the two lamps upon it flared up to reveal a strange object now positioned between them. So many visions in the dream were piercingly clear, but this dark object was not. My impression was that it was conglomerate in form, suggesting a monstrous whole. At the same time these outlines which alluded to both man and beast, flower and insect, reptiles, stones, and countless things I could not even name, all seemed to be changing, mingling in a thousand ways that presented any sensible image of the idol.

With the upsurge in illumination offered by the lamps, I could see that the room was truly of unusual dimensions. The four enormous walls slanted toward one another and joined at a point high above the floor, giving the space around me the shape of a perfect pyramid. But now I saw things from an oddly remote perspective: the altar with its idol stood in the middle of the room and I was some distance away, or perhaps not even in the scene. Then, from some dark corner or secret door, there emerged a file of figures walking slowly toward the altar and finally congregating in a half-circle before it. I could see that they were all quite skeletal in shape, for they were identically dressed in a black material which clung tightly to their bodies and made them look like skinny shadows. They seemed to be actually bound in blackness from head to foot, with only their faces exposed. But they were not, in fact, faces — they were pale, expressionless, and identical masks. The masks were without openings and bestowed upon their wearers a terrible anonymity, an ancient anonymity. Behind these smooth and barely contoured faces were spirits beyond all hope or consolation except in the evil to which they would willingly abandon themselves. Yet this abandonment was a highly selective process, a ceremony of the chosen.

One of the white-faced shadows stepped forward from the group, seemingly drawn forth into the proximity of the idol. The figure stood motionless while from within its dark body something began to drift out like luminous smoke. It floated, swirling gently, toward the idol and there was absorbed. And I knew — for was this not my own dream? — that the idol and its sacrifice were becoming one within each other. This spectacle continued until nothing of the glowing, ectoplasmic haze remained to be extracted, and the figure — now shrunken to the size of a marionette — collapsed. But soon it was being lifted, rather tenderly, by another from the group who placed the dwarfish form upon the altar and, taking up a knife, carved deeply into the body, making no sound. Then something oozed upon the altar, something thick and oily and strangely colored, darkly colored though not with any of the shades of blood. Although the strangeness of this color was more an idea than a matter of vision, it began to fill the dream and to determine the final stage of its development.

There was no longer that closed, cavernous room but an open stretch of land: open yet also cluttered with a bric-a-brac topography whose crazed shapes were all of that single and sinister color. The ground was as if covered with an ancient, darkened mold and the things rising up from it were the same. Surrounding me was a landscape that might once have been of stone and earth and trees (such was my impression) but had been transformed entirely into something like petrified slime. I gazed upon it spreading before me, twisting in the way of wrought iron tracery or great overgrown gardens of writhing coral, an intricate latticework of hardened mulch whose surface was overrun with a chaos of little carvings, scabby designs that suggested a world of demonic faces and forms. And it was all composed in that color which somehow makes me think of rotted lichen. But before I exited in panic from my dream, there was one further occurrence of this color: the inkish waters washing upon the shores of the island around me.

As I wrote a few pages ago, I have been awake for some hours now. What I did not mention was the state in which I found myself after waking. Throughout the dream, and particularly in those last moments when I positively identified that foul place, there was an unseen presence, something I could feel was circulating within all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil. I suppose it is nothing unusual that I continued to be under this visionary spell even after I left my bed. I tried to invoke the gods of the ordinary world — calling them with the whistle of a coffee pot and praying before their icon of the electric light — but they were too weak to deliver me from that other whose name I can no longer bring myself to write. It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole of the dark world outside. Yes — lurking among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds. Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was taking its aspect. I could feel it also emerging in myself, growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror.

Nevertheless, these dream-induced illusions now seem to be abating, perhaps driven

off by my writing about them. Like someone who has had too much to drink the night before and swears off liquor for life, I have forsworn any further indulgence in weird reading matter. No doubt this is only a temporary vow, and soon enough my old habits will return. But certainly not before morning!

The Puppets in the Park

Some days later, and quite late at night.

Well, it seems this letter has mutated into a chronicle of my adventures Nethescurialian. See, I can now write that cognomen with ease; furthermore, I feel almost no apprehension in stepping up to my mirror. Soon I may even be able to sleep in the way I once did, without visionary intrusions of any kind. No denying that my experiences of late have tipped the scales of the strange. I found myself just walking restlessly about — impossible to work, you know — and always carrying with me this heavy dread in my solar plexus, as if I had feasted at a banquet of fear and the meal would not digest. Most strange since I have been loath to take nourishment during this time. How could I put anything into my mouth, when everything looked the way it did? Hard enough to touch a doorknob or a pair of shoes, even with the protection of the gloves. I could feel every damn thing squirming, not excluding my own flesh. And I could also see what was squirming beneath every surface, my vision penetrating through the usual armor of objects and discerning the same gushing *stuff* inside whatever I looked upon. It was that dark color from the dream, I could see it clearly now. Dark and greenish. How could I possibly feed myself ? How could I even bring myself to settle very long in one spot? So I kept on the move. And I tried not to look too closely at how everything, *everything* was crawling within itself and making all kinds of shapes inside there, making all kinds of faces at me. (Yet it was really all the same face, everything gorged with that same creeping stuff.) There were also sounds that I heard, voices speaking vague words, voices that came not from the mouths of the people I passed on the street but from the very bottom of their brains, garbled whisperings at first and then so clear, so eloquent.

This rising wave of chaos reached its culmination tonight and then came crashing down. But my timely maneuvering, I trust, has put everything right again.

Here, now, are the terminal events of this nightmare as they occurred. (And how I wish I were not speaking figuratively, that I was in fact only in the world of dreams or back in the pages of books and old manuscripts.) This conclusion had its beginning in the park, a place that is actually some distance from my home, so far had I wandered. It was already late at night, but I was still walking about, treading the narrow asphalt path that winds through that island of grass and trees in the middle of the city. (And somehow it seemed I had already walked in this same place on this same night, that this had all happened to me before.) The path was lit by globes of light balanced upon slim metal poles; another glowing orb was set in the great blackness above. Off the path the grass was darkened by shadows, and the trees swishing overhead were the same color of muddied green.

After walking some indefinite time along some indefinite route, I came upon a clearing where an audience had assembled for some late-night entertainment. Strings of colored lights had been hung around the perimeter of this area and rows of benches had been set up. The people seated in these benches were all watching a tall, illuminated booth. It was the kind of booth used for puppet shows, with wild designs painted across the lower part and a curtained opening at the top. The curtains were now drawn back and two clownish creatures were twisting about in a glary light which emanated from inside the booth. They leaned and squawked and awkwardly batted each other with soft paddles they were hugging in their soft little arms. Suddenly they froze at the height of their battle; slowly they turned about and faced the audience. It seemed the puppets were looking directly at the place where I was standing behind the last row of benches. Their misshapen heads tilted, and their glassy eyes stared straight into mine.

Then I noticed that the others were doing the same: all of them had turned around on the benches and, with expressionless faces and dead puppet eyes, held me to the spot. Although their mouths did move, they were not silent. But the voices I heard were far more numerous than was the gathering before me. These were the voices I had been hearing as they chanted confused words in the depths of everyone's thoughts, fathoms below the level of their awareness. The words still sounded hushed and slow, monotonous phrases mingling like the sequences of a fugue. But now I could understand these words, even as more voices picked up the chant at different points and overlapped one another, saying, "In the rooms of houses—across moonlit skies—through all souls and spirits — behind *the* faces of the living and the dead."

I find it impossible to say how long it was before I was able to move, before I backed up toward the path, all those multitudinous voices chanting everywhere around me and all those many-colored lights bobbing in the windblown trees. Yet it seemed only a single voice I heard, and a single color I saw, as I found my way home, stumbling through the greenish darkness of the night.

I knew what needed to be done. Gathering up some old boards from my basement, I piled them into the fireplace and opened the flue. As soon as they were burning brightly, I added one more thing to the fire: a manuscript whose ink was of a certain color. Blessed with a saving vision, I could now see whose signature was on that manuscript, whose hand had really written those pages and had been hiding in them for a hundred years. The author of that narrative had broken up the idol and drowned it in deep waters, but the stain of its ancient patina had stayed upon him. It had invaded the author's crabbed script of blackish green and survived there, waiting to crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into. How I knew this to be true! And has this not been proved by the color of the smoke that rose from the burning manuscript, and keeps rising from it?

I am writing these words as I sit before the fireplace. But the flames have gone out and still the smoke from the charred paper hovers within the hearth, refusing to ascend the chimney and disperse itself into the night. Perhaps the chimney has become blocked. Yes, this must be the case, this must be true. Those other things are lies, illusions. That mold-colored smoke has not taken on the shape of the idol, the shape that cannot be seen steadily and whole but keeps turning out so many arms and heads, so many eyes, and then pulling them back in and bringing them out again in other configurations. That shape is not drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place, something that seems to be bleeding into the words as I write. And my pen is not growing bigger in my hand, nor is my hand growing smaller, smaller...

See, there is no shape in the fireplace. The smoke is gone, gone up the chimney and out into the sky. And there is nothing in the sky, nothing I can see through the window. There is the moon, of course, high and round. But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth, no shifting cloud of nightmares enveloping moons and suns and stars. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of inky space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all creation. *Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation.* It is not in the rooms of houses and beyond their walls — beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies — below earth mound and above mountain peak—in northern leaf and southern flower — inside each star and the voids between them — within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits — among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds — behind the faces of the living and the dead.

I am not dying in a nightmare. **Q**

THE COCOONS

by Thomas Ligotti

illustrated by Keith Minnion

Early one morning, hours before sunrise, I was awakened by Dr. Dublanc. He was standing at the foot of my bed, lightly tugging on the covers. For a moment I was convinced, in my quasi-somnolent state, that a small animal was prancing about on the mattress, performing some nocturnal ritual unknown to higher forms of life. Then I saw a gloved hand twitching in the glow of the streetlight outside my window. Finally I identified the silhouette, shaped by a hat and overcoat, of Dr. Dublanc.

I switched on the bedside lamp and sat up to face the well-known intruder. "What's wrong?" I asked as if in protest.

"My apologies," he said in a polite yet unapologetic tone. "There is someone I want you to meet. I think it might be beneficial for you."

"If that's what you say. But can't it wait? I haven't been sleeping well as it is. Better than anyone you should know that."

"Of course I know. I also know other things," he asserted, betraying his annoyance. "The gentleman I want to introduce to you will be leaving the country very soon, so there is a question of timing."

"All the same ..."

"Yes, I know — your nervous condition. Here, take these."

Dr. Dublanc placed two egg-shaped pills in the palm of my hand. I put them to my lips and then swallowed a half-glass of water that was on the nightstand. I set down the empty glass next to my alarm clock, which emitted a soft grinding noise due to some unknown mutations of its internal mechanism. My eyes became fixed by the slow even movement of the second hand, but Dr. Dublanc, in a quietly urgent voice, brought me out of my trance.

"We should really be going. I have a taxi waiting outside."

So I hurried, thinking that I would end up being charged for this excursion, cab fare and all.

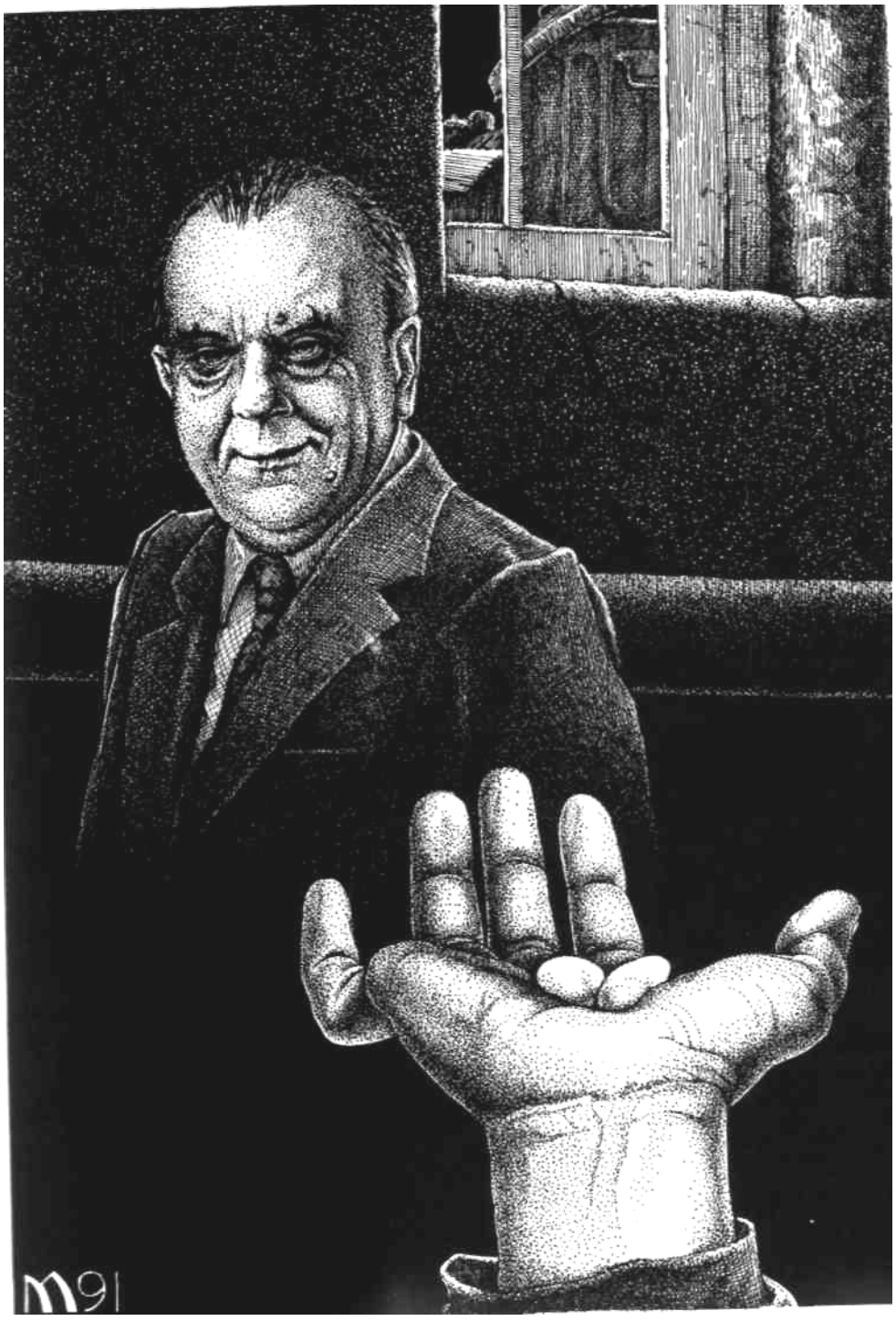
Dr. Dublanc had left the taxi standing in the alley behind my apartment building. Its headlights beamed rather weakly in the blackness, scarcely guiding us as we approached the vehicle. Side by side, the doctor and I proceeded over uneven pavement and through blotched vapors emerging from the fu-maroles of several sewer covers. But I could see the moon shining between the close rooftops, and I thought that it subtly shifted phases before my eyes, bloating a bit into fullness. The doctor caught me staring.

"It's not going haywire up there, if that's what is bothering you."

"But it seems to be changing."

With a growl of exasperation the doctor pulled me after him into the cab.

The driver appeared to have been stilled into a state of dormancy. Yet Dr. Dublanc was able to evoke a response when he called out an address to the hack, who turned his thin rodent face toward the back seat and glared briefly. For a time we sat in silence as the taxi proceeded through a monotonous passage of unpeopled avenues. At that hour the world on the other side of my window seemed to be no more than a mass of shadows wavering at a great distance. The doctor touched my arm and said, "Don't worry if the pills I gave you seem to have no immediate effect." "I trust your judgment," I said, only to receive a doubtful glance from the doctor. In order to revive my credibility, I told him what was actually on my mind: the matter of who I would be meeting, and why.



"A former patient of mine," he answered bluntly, for it was apparent that at this point he was prepared to assume an open manner with me. "Not to say that some unfortunate aspects do not still exist in his case. For certain reasons I will be introducing him to you as 'Mr. Catch,' though he's also a doctor of sorts, a brilliant scientist, in fact. But what I want you to see are just some films he has made in the course of his work. They are quite remarkable. Not to deny those unfortunate aspects I mentioned ... yet very intriguing. And possibly beneficial - to you, I mean. Possibly most beneficial. And that's all I can say at the moment."

I nodded as if in comprehension of this disclosure. Then I noticed how far we had gone, almost to the opposite end of the city, if that was possible in what seemed a relatively short period of time. (I had forgotten to wear my watch, and this negligence somewhat aggravated my lack of orientation.) The district in which we were now travelling was of the lowest order, a landscape without pattern or substance, especially as I viewed it by moonlight.

There might be an open field heaped with debris, a devastated plain where bits of glass and scraps of metal glittered, though perhaps a solitary house remained in this wasteland, an empty skeletal structure scraped of its flesh. And then, turning a corner, one left behind this lunar spaciousness and entered a densely tangled nest of houses, the dwarfish and the great all tightly nestled together and all eaten away, disfigured. Even as I watched them through the taxi's windows they appeared to be carrying on their corruption, mutating in the dull light of the moon. Roofs and chimneys elongated toward the stars, dark bricks multiplied and bulged like tumors upon the facades of houses, entire streets twisted themselves along some unearthly design. Although a few windows were filled with light, however sickly, the only human being I saw was a derelict crumpled at the base of a traffic sign.

"Sorry, doctor, but this may be too much."

"Just hold on to yourself," he said, "we're almost there. Driver, pull into that alley behind those houses."

The taxi joggled as we made our way through the narrow passage. On either side of us were high wooden fences beyond which rose so many houses of such impressive height and bulk, though of course they were still monuments to decay. The cab's headlights were barely up to the task of illuminating the cramped little alley, which seemed to become ever narrower the farther we proceeded. Suddenly the driver jerked us to a stop to avoid running over an old man slouched against the fence, an empty bottle lying at his side.

"This is where we get out," said Dr. Dublanc. "Wait here for us, driver."

As we emerged from the taxi I pulled at the doctor's sleeve, whispering about the expense of the fare. He replied in a loud voice, "You should worry more about getting a taxi to take us back home. They keep their distance from this neighborhood and rarely answer the calls they receive to come in here. Isn't that true, driver?" But the man had returned to that dormant state in which I first saw him. "Come on," said the doctor. "He'll wait for us. This way."

Dr. Dublanc pushed back a section of the fence that formed a kind of loosely hinged gate, closing it carefully behind us after we passed through the opening. On the other side was a small backyard, actually a miniature dumping ground where shadows bulged with refuse. And before us, I assumed, stood the house of Mr. Catch. It seemed very large, with an incredible number of bony peaks and dormers outlined against the sky, and even a weathervane in some vague animal-shape that stood atop a ruined turret grazed by moonlight. But although the moon was as bright as before, it appeared to be considerably thinner, as if it had been worn down just like everything else in that neighborhood.

"It hasn't altered in the least," the doctor assured me. He was holding the back door of the house and gesturing for me to enter.

"Perhaps no one's home," I suggested.

"Not at all — the door's unlocked. You see how he's expecting us?"

"There don't appear to be any lights in use."

"Mr. Catch likes to conserve on certain expenses. A minor mania of his. But in other ways he's quite extravagant. And by no means is he a poor man. Watch yourself as you step up the porch — some of these boards are not what they once were."

As soon as I was standing by the doctor's side he removed a flashlight from the pocket of his overcoat, shining a path into the dark interior of the house. Once inside, that yellowish swatch of illumination began flitting around in the blackness. It settled briefly in a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling, then ran down a blank battered wall and jittered along warped floor moldings. For a moment it revealed two suitcases, quite well used, at the bottom of a stairway. It slid smoothly up the stairway banister and flew straight to the

floors above, where we heard some scraping sounds, as if an animal with long-nailed paws was moving about.

"Does Mr. Catch keep a pet?" I asked in a low voice.

"Why shouldn't he? But I don't think we'll find him up there."

We went deeper into the house, passing through many rooms which fortunately were unobstructed by furniture. Sometimes we crushed bits of broken glass underfoot; once I inadvertently kicked an empty bottle and sent it clanging across a bare floor. Reaching the far side of the house, we entered a long hallway flanked by several doors. All of them were closed and behind some of them we heard sounds similar to those being made on the second floor. We also heard footsteps slowly ascending a stairway. Then the last door at the end of the hallway opened, and a watery light pushed back some of the shadows ahead of us. A round-bodied little man was standing in the light, lazily beckoning to us.

"You're late, you're very late," he chided while leading us down into the cellar. His voice was high-pitched yet also quite raspy. "I was just about to leave."

"My apologies," said Dr. Dublanc, who sounded entirely sincere on this occasion. "Mr. Catch, allow me to introduce —"

"Never mind that Mr. Catch nonsense. You know well enough what things are like for me, don't you, doctor? So let's get started, I'm on a schedule now."

In the cellar we paused amid the quivering light of candles, dozens of them positioned high and low, melting upon a shelf or an old crate or right on the filth-covered floor. Even so, there was a certain lack of definition among the surrounding objects, but I could see that an old-fashioned film projector had been set upon a table toward the center of the room, and a portable movie screen stood by the opposite wall. The projector was plugged into what appeared to be a small electrical generator humming on the floor.

"I think there are some stools or whatnot you can sit on," said Mr. Catch as he threaded the film around the spools of the projector. Then for the first time he spoke to me directly. "I'm not sure how much the doctor has explained about what I'm going to show you. Probably very little."

"Yes, and deliberately so," interrupted Dr. Dublanc. "If you just roll the film I think my purpose will be served, with or without explanations. What harm can it do?"

Mr. Catch made no reply. After blowing out some of the candles to darken the room sufficiently, he switched on the projector, which was a rather noisy mechanism. I worried that whatever dialogue or narration the film might contain would be drowned out between the whirring of the projector and the humming of the generator. But I soon realized that this was a silent film, a cinematic document that in every aspect of its production was thoroughly primitive, from its harsh light and coarse photographic texture to its nearly unintelligible scenario.

It seemed to serve as a visual record of scientific experiment, a laboratory demonstration in fact. The setting, nevertheless, was anything but clinical — a bare wall in a cellar which in some ways resembled, yet was not identical to, the one where I was viewing this film. And the subject was human: a shabby, unshaven, and unconscious derelict who had been propped up against a crude grayish wall. Not too many moments passed before the man began to stir. But his movements were not those of awakening from a deep stupor; they were only spasmodic twitchings of some energy which appeared to *inhabit* the old tramp. A torn pant leg wiggled for a second, then his chest heaved, as if with an incredible sigh. His left arm, no his right arm, flew up in the air and immediately collapsed. Soon his head began to wobble and it kept on wobbling, even though its owner remained in a state of profound obliviousness.

Something was making its way through the derelict's scalp, rustling among the long greasy locks of an unsightly head. Part of it finally poked upwards — a thin sticklike thing. More of them emerged, dark wiry appendages that were bristling and bending and reaching for the outer world. At the end of each was a pair of slender snapping pincers. What ultimately broke through that shattered skull, pulling itself out with a wriggling motion of its many newborn arms, was approximately the size and proportions of a spider monkey. It had tiny translucent wings which fluttered a few times, glistening but useless, and was quite black, as if charred. Actually the creature seemed to be in an emaciated condition. When it turned its head toward the camera, it stared into the lens with malicious eyes and seemed to be chattering with its beaked mouth.

I whispered to Dr. Dublanc: "Please, I'm afraid that —"

"Exactly," he hissed back at me. "You are always afraid of the least upset in the order of things. You need to face certain realities so that you may free yourself of them."

Now it was my turn to give the doctor a skeptical glance. Yet I certainly realized that he was practicing something other than facile therapeutics. And even then our presence in that cellar — that cold swamp of shadows in which candles flickered like fireflies —

seemed to be as much for Dr. Dublanc's benefit as it was for mine, if "benefit" is the proper word in this case.

"Those pills you gave me ..."

"Shhh. Watch the film."

It was almost finished. After the creature had hatched from its strange egg, it proceeded very rapidly to consume the grubby derelict, leaving only a collection of bones attired in cast-off clothes. Picked perfectly clean, the skull leaned wearily to one side. And the creature, which earlier had been so emaciated, had grown rather plump with its feast, becoming bloated and meaty like an overfed dog. In the final sequence, a net was tossed into the scene, capturing the gigantic vermin and dragging it off camera. Then whiteness filled the screen and the film was flapping on its reel.

"Apparently Mr. Catch has left us," said the doctor, noticing that I remained under the spell of what I had just seen. Taking advantage of the moment, he tried to lend a certain focus or coloration to this experience. "You must understand," he continued, "that the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice, at most a point of view. This is not to mention the *substance* of those forms, which is an even more dubious state of affairs. That the so-called anatomy of a human being might burst forth as a fantastic insect should be no cause for consternation. I know that it may seem that in the past I've attempted to actually bolster your prejudices about a clockwork world of sunrise schedules and lunar routines. But this insistence has only had a paradoxical effect, just like certain drugs that in some people induce a reaction quite the opposite of the norm. All of my assurances have made you more confirmed in your suspicions that things are not *bolted down,* so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind. We can both learn a great deal from Mr. Catch. Of course, I still recognize that there remain some unfortunate aspects to his case — there was only so much I could do for him — but nonetheless I think that he has gained rare and invaluable knowledge, the consequences notwithstanding.

"His research had taken him into areas where, how should I say, where the shapes and levels of phenomena, the multiple planes of natural existence, have revealed their ability to establish new relationships with one another . . . to become interconnected, as it were, in ways that were never apparent. At some point everything became a blur for him, a sort of pandemonium of forces, a phantasmagoria of possibilities which he eagerly engaged. We can have no idea of the tastes and temptations that may emerge or develop in the course of such work ... a curious hedonism that could not be controlled. Oh, the vagaries of omnipotence, breeder of indulgence. Well, Mr. Catch retreated in panic from his own powers, yet he could not put the pieces back as they had been: unheard-of habits and responses had already ingrained themselves into his system, seemingly forever. The worst sort of slavery, no doubt, but how persuasively he spoke of the euphorias he had known, the infinitely diverse sensations beyond all common understanding. It was just this understanding that I required in order to free him of a life that, in its own fashion, had become as abysmal and problematic as your own — except he is at the opposite pole. Some middle ground must be established, some balance. How well I understand that now! This is why I have brought you two together. This is the only reason, however it may seem to you."

"It seems to me," I replied, "that Mr. Catch is no longer available."

Dr. Dublanc emitted the shadow of a laugh. "Oh, he's still in the house. You can be sure of that. Let's take a look upstairs."

He was, in fact, not far at all. Stepping into that hallway of closed doors at the top of the cellar stairs, we saw that one of those doors was now partially open and the room beyond it was faintly aglow. Without announcing us, Dr. Dublanc slowly pushed back the door until we could both see what had happened inside.

It was a small unfurnished room with a bare wooden floor upon which a candle had been fixed with its own drippings. The candlelight shone dimly on the full face of Mr. Catch, who seemed to have collapsed in a back corner of the room, lying somewhat askew. He was sweating, though it was cold in the room, and his eyes were half-closed in a kind of languorous exhaustion. But something was wrong with his mouth: it seemed to be muddied and enlarged, sloppily painted into a clown's oversized grin. On the floor beside him were, to all appearances, the freshly ravaged remains of one of those creatures in the film.

"You made me wait too long!" he suddenly shouted, opening his eyes fully and straightening himself up for a moment before his posture crumbled once again. He then repeated this outburst: "You couldn't help me and now you make me wait too long."

"It was in order to help you that I came here," the doctor said to him, yet all the time fixing his eyes on the mutilated carcass on the floor. When he saw that I had observed his

greedy stare he regained himself. "I'm trying to help both of you the only way you can be helped. Show him, Mr. Catch, show him how you breed those amazing individuals."

Mr. Catch groped in his pants pocket, pulled out a large handkerchief, and wiped off his mouth. He was smiling a little idiotically, as if intoxicated, and worked himself to his feet. His body now seemed even more swollen and bulbous than before, really not quite human in its proportions. After replacing his handkerchief in one pocket, he reached down into the other, feeling around for some moments. "It's so simple," he explained in a voice that had become placid. And it was with a kind of giddy pride that he finally said, "Oh, here they are," and held out his open hand toward me. In the thick pad of his palm I could see two tiny objects that were shaped like eggs.

I turned abruptly to the doctor. "The pills you gave me."

"It was the only thing that could be done for you. I've tried so hard to help you both."

"I had a suspicion," said Mr. Catch, now reviving himself from his stupefaction. "I should never have brought you into this. Don't you realize that it's difficult enough without involving your own patients? The derelicts are one thing, but this is quite another. Well, my suitcases are packed. It's your operation now, doctor. Let me by, time to go."

Mr. Catch maneuvered himself from the room, and a few moments later the sound of a door being slammed echoed throughout the house. The doctor kept close watch on me, waiting for some reaction, I suppose. Yet he was also listening very intently to certain sounds emanating from the rooms around us. The noise of restless skittering was everywhere.

"You understand, don't you?" asked the doctor. "Mr. Catch isn't the only one who has waited too long ... far too long. I thought by now the pills would have had their effect."

I went into my pocket and removed the two little eggs which I had failed to swallow earlier. "I can't claim that I ever had much faith in your methods," I said. Then I tossed the pills at Dr. Dublanc who, speechless, caught them. "You won't mind if I return home by myself."

Indeed he was relieved to see me go. As I traced my way back through the house I heard him running about and opening door after door, saying, "There you are, you beauties. There you are."

Although the doctor himself was now hopeless, I think that in some manner he had effected a cure in my case, however ephemeral it may have been. For during those first few moments on that hazy morning, when the taxi edged out of the alley and passed through that neighborhood of gnawed houses, I felt myself attain the middle ground Dr. Dublanc spoke of— the balancing point between an anxious flight from the abyss and the temptation to plunge into it. There was a great sense of escape, as if I could exist serenely outside the grotesque ultimatums of creation, an entranced spectator casting a clinical gaze at the chaotic tumult both around and within me.

But the feeling soon evaporated. "Could you go a little faster?" I said to the driver when it began to seem to me that we were making no progress in leaving that district behind: things again appeared to be changing, ready to burst forth from their sagging cocoons and take on uncertain forms. Even the pale morning sun seemed to be wavering from its proper proportions.

At the end of the ride, I was content to pay the extraordinary fare and return to my bed. The following day I started looking for a new doctor. **Q**

THE SORCERER CONTEMPLATES HIS BEGINNINGS

To think that once I was a child such as these, a tumble of rags in a village street, or a trembling boy barely into his teens, his heart thumping as he runs to meet some sweetheart in the evening air. The boy did not fear the darkness then, nor ponder the mysteries of the Worm, nor speak with thunder among the hills. When did the fire begin to burn?

When he listened to whispers in the night, and learned that death is but a door; when demons raised him to some height, promising kingdoms, gold, and more; when first he walked the shadowed path, quite unknown to most mankind, seduced by sigils of the heart, and inscrutable hieroglyphs of the mind.

Then the fire began to burn, and sorcery sparked to life within.

— **Darrell Schweitzer**

HOMECOMING

by Holly Thomas

Seven o'clock. Well, that was only one hour late.

Carole pushed the worries out of her mind and put the casserole on low. It wasn't that unusual for Jeff to be this late. Out of the office late, stuck in traffic ... It wasn't even time yet to be annoyed that he hadn't called, although she could feel her anger simmering, just like the dish in the oven.

It was his turn to cook anyway — her mind shifted to smaller annoyances — but she'd known that would mean waiting at least another hour after he got home, and probably for something like tuna sandwiches. Carole let irritation replace her other thoughts.

She turned on the living room light. It was getting dark already. It had tried to rain earlier in the day, the kind of rain that was just enough to make the pavement slick.

Enough.

At seven-thirty, she turned on the television, although she hated the stupid game shows that were on at this time of night. The house was too quiet, and she needed to hear a human voice, something to distract her without taking any concentration.

The credits were rolling on the game show. Eight o'clock. Now it was time to worry. As if a part of her brain had been waiting for its cue, the real fear came.

There'd *better* be something wrong at this point. Carole imagined the relief of scolding him when he finally walked in the door. She thought of acceptable reasons: a small accident, minor cuts and bruises, a dented fender. Or he'd stopped to help someone else, broken down on the freeway. She was careful to imagine scenarios without a phone in easy reach.

It was after nine when the phone finally rang. Carole picked it up slowly after the second ring.

"May I please speak to Mrs. Jeff Kenning." The young male voice sounded very serious, and her insides went cold.

An apologetic blond man in a white uniform pulled back the drawer, and she forced herself to take a good long look. The part of her that had been ready for this two hours ago was gone. It was replaced by a part that was sure this must all be a mistake.

And in a way, it didn't look like him at all. The face was far too pale, the features more still than they ever were when he was asleep. But it was Jeff's brown curly hair, and Jeff's crooked nose that he'd broken when he was ten, and the motionless face did form the shape of Jeffs features. He looked much younger than thirty-five. Her eyes moved down toward the rest of the body —

"He lost consciousness immediately," the blond man was saying.

Yes. She believed that. Because otherwise the face would have been as distorted as the body below it.

This was the part where it should become real. But she couldn't cry. The glaring room, the somber attendant, the pale form in front of her — it was all too much like an old nightmare.

The young highway patrolman, the one who'd called her on the phone, spoke from behind her. She'd forgotten he was there. "Do you need someone to drive you home, Mrs. Kenning?"

Ms., she wanted to correct him, as she'd automatically corrected people all of the eight years she'd been married. But she couldn't.

"No," Carole's voice was clear and steady. "I can drive." She wondered if they were waiting for her to burst into tears. But she supposed they'd seen every reaction there was.

At home, she tried to decide what you were supposed to do when something like this really happened. Calling friends or her mother seemed absurd. This wasn't the kind of news you rushed to share. Finally, she got ready for bed, although there seemed to be something wrong with doing something so normal.

Half an hour later, he came home.

If she hadn't been so used to the sound of his shoes coming up the walk, she never would have heard the footsteps. They were followed by the fumbling of keys in the lock, and Carole was out of bed and at the door by the time it opened.

A mistake, her mind sang, it had really been a mistake.

He was standing in front of her, tall and whole, and she flung herself at him, arms tight around his neck. His arms folded around her.

"Jeff, I thought you were —" She stopped, not just because she didn't want to say the word, but because something was wrong. Something in the way he felt. Not stiff exactly, but strange, like someone who'd never hugged her before.

"The rumors," he said, "were greatly exaggerated."

It was his voice, all right.

"What happened?" she said.

"I was thrown from the car," he said.

No. That was a lie. There'd been a body and she'd seen it.

Carole pulled back far enough to look at him. She found herself making the same sort of inspection she'd just made at the morgue: the curly hair, the broken nose, and now, the blue eyes. He looked more like Jeff than the white form she'd just seen in the drawer. But not by much. Like the body she'd seen, something was *missing* — the animation, the expression.

I'm hysterical, she decided.

She tried to think clearly. She'd seen a body in a morgue, mangled. What appeared to be the same body stood in front of her now, unmarked and smiling. They couldn't both be real. Maybe she was dreaming.

"Something's burning," he said, and went toward the kitchen.

The casserole, five hours old. And she'd never noticed. This had to be a dream. Carole followed him into the kitchen.

He opened the oven door. Shaking his head at her like any tolerant husband, he pulled out the casserole dish.

With his bare hands.

Low temperature, on this oven, was two hundred degrees. But he set the dish on top of the stove and turned to her as if nothing was wrong.

Carole reached forward cautiously and touched the dish to be sure. Her hand came away sharply. The sting of the hot dish told her this couldn't be a dream.

She backed away from him. "What do you want?"

"What do you mean? I *live* here." There was a mocking note, so faint she might have imagined it, in his emphasis on the word.

"No, you don't." Carole felt tears in her eyes for the first time. "My husband is dead." She grabbed a knife out of the rack on the counter. It was only a steak knife; the larger ones were in a drawer behind him.

"Carole, what are you talking about?" He looked bewildered, and once again he almost convinced her. But something in his voice was wrong, like an actor who didn't quite have his lines down.

Tears were dangerous. They blurred her view of this thing that looked like her husband. And it was moving toward her.

"Honey, you're upset." He'd botched a line. Jeff never called her honey. "Let's go to bed." Carole shuddered, trying not to imagine what would happen if she went to bed with him — with *it*.

A hand on her shoulder, over the thin strap of her nightgown, drew her toward him. She raised the knife between them, its blade pointed upward, remembering something Jeff had told her once. By stabbing and slicing upward, you could gut someone very efficiently.

But this *was* Jeff, and she'd already seen his body mutilated once tonight.

His free hand closed around Carole's on the knife. His touch wasn't cold, and the fingers were gentle. Her arm lost some of its tension, and he started to push the knife aside as his left hand drew her closer —

—and she felt sharp nails digging into the back of her shoulder. Like an introduction to pain to come.

She tensed her arm again, and with all her resolution she lunged forward.

The knife went in easily. Nails tore into her shoulder. She closed her eyes tight and forced herself to bring the knife up —

— into empty space.

She staggered, off balance, and opened her eyes. She was alone in the kitchen, an unstained knife in her hand, a burnt casserole on the stove. There was hot pain in her right shoulder. She felt blood begin to trickle down her back. All of her nerves and muscles seemed to quit at once, and Carole collapsed against the counter behind her.

At last the tears fell. **Q**

XOBANHALTUN

for the Nicaraguans

Like bones half-buried, tempting as a skull
To the questing shovel, the ruins rise,
Forgotten by the vultures and the flies.
In bas-relief the feathered serpents crawl,
Obscured by moss, eroded by the years.
And even as the corbelled arches fall
In grim neglect, and silence fills the halls,
Through hidden chinks a watchful presence peers.

Dense jungle south of Uxmal hides the way. The
sac be roads that never seem to end Wind
strangely there, forever gone astray. Perhaps it's
just as well that we pretend That nothing human
lives there anymore — Much less the
primogenitor of war.

— **Keith Allen Daniels**

HE KNOWS
IF YOU'VE BEEN BAD OR GOOD

by R.G. Evans

Too many creatures were stirring.

Ricky peered through the shifting jungle of legs, dodging heavy shopping bags, trying to catch another glimpse of his brother. Brian knew Ricky shouldn't be left alone, yet he had darted away *into the hectic mix of shoppers as soon* as their mother had left him in charge.

"Stay with your brother," she had told Brian, glaring down at the boys through eyes already pink from her mid-morning vodka. "I'll meet you back here in fifteen minutes."

Ricky had felt the familiar panic begin as he watched his mother lurch away, swallowed by the ravenous crowd. He turned to look at his older brother, expecting to see him grinning down at him with his usual menace, but Brian had already vanished.

"Bwian," Ricky called, working his way through the onslaught of adults heedless of his frightened cries. For an instant, he glimpsed his brother perched atop one of the plastic cube benches, laughing complacently at his own cleverness. Ricky fought his way to where his brother had been, but Brian was gone. Fighting desperately not to cry, Ricky wandered on, blinded by the salty sting of his tears, the bland carols and the tolling of a single brass bell growing louder, taunting him.

Soon, Ricky noticed a certain change — a cooling of the air, a brightening of light, the ringing louder now close by on his right. Wiping away his tears with tiny clenched fists, he saw the crowd had thinned where he now stood, leaving him trembling, isolated ...

But not alone.

Slowly, sobbing, he turned in the direction of the ringing bell, a sound whose significance he realized too late.

There, not three feet behind him, stood the man. Next to him, a black tripod *strung with a chain supported a* cast iron kettle with a slot for money, as fiery red as the suit worn by its plump, white-haired guardian, his arm keeping up the ominous clanging of the bell.

Ricky froze, his sobs cut off as with an axe. Chill beads of sweat rolled down his back and his eyes stretched wide in terror.

It had been three years since he had been this close to Santa. Since that time in McDonald's (forever captured in a Polaroid snapshot) when his father pulled him screaming from Santa's lap, his mother had mercifully allowed him to keep a wide berth from the jolly old elf whenever they went out near Christmas. Now here he was alone, staring up at the man ringing the bell, without his father to help him.

The old man lowered his sad brown eyes toward Ricky, and suddenly the boy's legs had power again. He began to back slowly away, hoping he would be blessedly consumed by the crowd as his mother had been earlier.

Ricky screamed as a pair of hands fell on his shoulders and a familiar voice shouted, "Not so fast, pal!"

In an instant, Ricky knew that Brian had led him here deliberately, hovering just out of sight until his brother stepped into the trap. Brian grabbed the boy's shoulders firmly and began to push him toward the menacing bell ringer.

"Bwian . . . NO!" Ricky shrieked.

"C'mon, 'Wicky,' " Brian jeered, mocking his brother's speech. "Wet's go see Santa Cwaus."

Screaming, flailing his arms wildly in an attempt to shake free, Ricky struggled against Brian's grip, but his brother was much stronger. The gap between the boys and Santa shrank with every spasmed movement of the grappling brothers. Ricky watched in terror as the old man stopped ringing the bell and began to study them with clinical curiosity — making a list and checking it twice, Ricky thought. The closer they moved, the more intent Santa's gaze became until, in a moment of agonized realization, Ricky saw the old man was about to speak.. . .

"Brian!"

Ricky felt his brother's hands tear free from his shoulders and immediately he cowered away from the old man, falling to the floor from the force of his backward thrust. Their mother had arrived just in time and now loomed over Brian, creating a mildly interesting

diversion for the crowds who slowed to watch.

"Where the Hell did you go?" she bellowed. "Fifteen minutes — that's all I said — fifteen minutes! And how many times have I told you, don't tease your brother? I wish Santa would stuff you both into his bag and take you away to the North Pole!"

"There ain't no Santa Claus!" Brian blurted angrily.

She regarded him coldly. "To some of us there is," she said, glancing down at Ricky. The boy sat on the floor, transfixed by the bearded menace who had resumed the rhythmic ringing of the bell. Ricky trembled at the thought of the old man slipping a sack over his head and spiriting him away to the icy tortures of his North Pole workshop. Then Santa glanced at him one last time, and relief spread over Ricky like a warm blanket. The old man had brown eyes, and Santa's are blue. Everybody knows that.

Brian's right, Ricky thought as their mother dragged them out of the mall. *That* ain't no Santa Claus.

Only one of his helpers.

Later that night, Ricky sat beneath the Christmas tree playing gloomily with his last surviving G.I. Joe.

His father had given him a whole platoon of them two years before — the last Christmas before he went away. Since then, their ranks had dwindled steadily — some stolen by Brian, others crushed beneath the wheels of his mother's car — but he had protected his favorite fiercely, guarding it against the enemies that had claimed all the rest.

Ricky looked at the few meager presents his mother had bought earlier at the mall, wrapped shabbily almost as an afterthought. Then he glanced at the battle-worn G.I. Joe and felt the familiar sadness spread over him.

Without his father at home, it just didn't seem like Christmas Eve.

He remembered last year when his mother had half-interestedly asked him what he wanted for Christmas and how he had told her he wanted Daddy to come home. Ricky remembered the hot tinge of alcohol on her breath when she screamed at him.

"Your father's *never* coming back here! *He's got* his whore to run to!"

Ricky heard something snap. In one hand lay his last G.I. Joe. In the other was the soldier's right arm. He stared at the broken doll without seeing it.

He was remembering the mall. He thought of Brian laughing as he pushed him toward Santa. If his father had been there, he thought, Brian wouldn't have laughed for long.

Snap. Another arm went.

Ricky knew his mother was right: his father would never come back, no matter how hard he wished for it. But surely there was something he could do about Brian.

The answer came with a final snap. Smiling, Ricky tossed down the pieces of the broken soldier, its head rolling out of sight among the pathetic gifts beneath the tree. He ran into the kitchen and rummaged excitedly through drawers till he found paper and a pencil stub. He hurried back into the living room and settled down in front of the flickering fireplace. It was getting late — in five hours it would be Christmas — but this was no ordinary correspondence.

With the faith of a child, Ricky began to write his first letter to Santa Claus.

His hands trembled so badly the stubby pencil nearly tumbled out of his fingers. He had only been writing for a year, and sometimes the letters would come out all jumbled up and backwards. His teacher Mrs.Walden tried to explain his problem to his mother, but she had been either too drunk to understand or else she just didn't care.

But this was a very important letter.

The face of the brown-eyed bell ringer swam up from the blank paper and Ricky's heart began to race like it had in the mall. He could still feel Brian pushing him closer . . . closer . ..

He forced the pencil to the paper, encouraged by the memory of Brian's cruelty. With tongue set firmly in the corner of his mouth, Ricky began forming the magical words he hoped would free him forever.

For nearly half an hour he labored over the crinkling paper, so engrossed he didn't hear Brian enter the room, didn't sense him creep up behind him like a

spy

"Gimme that!" Brian shouted, plucking the letter from Ricky's hand, quickly stealing away to the other side of the room with his prize.

"What's this, Wicky?" he asked with mock curiosity. "A wetter?"

"Don't, Bwian!" Ricky cried.

Brian began to read the brief letter out loud:

"Hmm . . . 'Dear Satan — '" He stopped and reread the awkwardly scrawled salutation.

" 'Dear Satan'? It's S-A-N-T-A, you moron! Geez, you're so stupid, you can't talk *or* write!"

Ricky shook noticeably, his face glowing as red as the fire dying to embers in the fireplace.

Then Brian read the rest of the letter: "Please take Brian."

Ricky charged at him then, unable to control himself any longer. His arms snatched clumsily at the letter, but Brian simply held it out of reach and sent his brother sprawling with a well-placed foot.

" 'Take Brian?' " Brian said. "Take this."

He dropped the letter into the fireplace. A puff of smoke, a flash of flame, and the paper turned to ashes, soaring up the chimney as dry as dead moths' wings.

"No!" Ricky shouted, lunging blindly at Brian. Soon both boys rolled about the floor, both shouting violently as each tried to gain the advantage. Finally, Ricky found himself pinned while Brian repeatedly banged his head against the floor.

His head filled with fog and throbbed painfully before his mother came, roused by their shouts, pulling Brian off him and cursing as her Smirnoff sloshed into the fireplace.

Ricky listened to the sizzle and wished hard.

He sees you when you're sleeping.

He knows when you're awake.

Maybe he didn't need to see it in writing to make your wish come true.

At ten o'clock, while Brian was nestled all snug in his bed — confined there by their mother before she promptly passed out around nine — Ricky sat fighting sleep beneath the twinkling lights of their Christmas tree. His eyelids hung like lead sinkers, their weight pulling his head down until he rallied and jerked himself awake, only to repeat the lolling dance again.

He was trying to watch the cooling fireplace.

Nearly two hours ago, Brian had thrown his letter into the flames which had been dying even then. Now only ashes fluttered about in the draft, all warmth quenched by the chill air from the open flue.

Ricky had opened it himself, long before sleep had threatened to end his vigil. In writing his letter earlier, he had made a commitment, and be wanted to watch his wish come true.

And so he sat waiting for the terrible old man.

At first, he jumped nervously even at the ticking of the clock, nearly crying out once when the house groaned loudly, settling. With every noise, Ricky steeled himself against his greatest fear, the confrontation he had avoided nearly all his life.

Now sleep caressed him, its heavy narcotic causing half-dreams, playing out the scene to come: a pitter-patter of hooves and a jingling of bells from the housetop, a muffled "Ho! Ho! Ho!" and finally the sound of boots scuffing slowly down the inside of the chimney and —

The pop and crackle of logs burning.

In a painful flash of red light, sleep shattered, and even before his eyes were fully open, Ricky realized what had awakened him.

Brian was building a fire in the fireplace.

His body exploded into action. Leaping up from beneath the tree, Ricky raged across the room, a thin, frail cry rising from his throat. His hands just brushed the coarse flannel of Brian's pajama top when the older boy spun around and drove the blunt end of the iron poker deep into Ricky's stomach.

He fell to the ground. Writhing around the floor, both hands clasped around his midsection, Ricky gasped desperately for air. He tried to struggle to his knees, but his legs were useless, and still no breath came.

"Awww," Brian whined, feigning pity. "Wicky can't bweathe?" Then he lashed out with a slippered foot, connecting with Ricky's abdomen so hard the younger boy saw black clouds floating across his field *of* vision.

"I guess you're stuck with me, 'cause there ain't no Santa Claus," Brian gloated. "And even if there was, I'd like to see him get through that."

Brian pivoted to point at the fiercely burning five, but was cut off by a low rumbling, which seemed to come from everywhere at once. Everything trembled: the ceiling, the floors, the walls, the fireplace —

Ricky turned to the fireplace just as a rain of cinders fell from inside the chimney, nearly dousing the fire. Picture frames and knick-knacks tumbled from the mantel, shattering on the stones below. Ricky saw a crack in the chimney's bricks begin somewhere above the ceiling and widen as it moved downward in regular, rhythmic

thrusts, as if something immense were wedging its way down the too-narrow chimney.

Brian turned just as two scaly arms emerged from the fireplace. Massively muscled, two great gnarled oaks, they reached out toward Brian. Ricky watched his brother's face erupt in horror and disbelief as the arms encircled him, their red skin sloughing a fine layer of soot and ashes onto the deep pile carpet. They pulled the struggling boy into the fireplace and up the chimney until Ricky could see nothing but Brian's slippers hanging toes down and limp toward the scattered, dying fire.

And then he was gone.

Ricky lay still, his breath returning in hitching gasps.

The rumbling had stopped, and, aside from his own labored breathing, the only other sound in the house was his mother's deep, drunken snoring from the other room. Tiny specks of light swam before his eyes, and suddenly he felt the need to sleep stronger than ever before.

And so he slept.

Soon he dreamt. His mother's real inebriated snoring became the selfish snortings of a monstrous white hog in his dream. He stood before the swine, white aproned, handing cleavers and glinting knives to his friend who held them delicately in his large, scaly talons, a friendly, helpful butcher.

And it was a good dream, a sugarplum vision of a saint who grants the desperate dreams of the young. A saint who is very, very old.

Old Nick. ***Q***

IN THE SLUMBER OF WOLVES

From the slumber of wolves you hear a storm that
howls across the ridgetops ripping into stands of paw-
paw and Virginia pine batting branches into the lower
canopy you imagine the red-leafed limbs swaying
holding them like stretcher bearers for the dead In the
slumber of wolves lightning stabs in barbs through the
dark knots of cloud there's the smell of ozone

From the slumber of wolves you turn your nose
deep into the cave's drafts and also smell smoke
feel the fur bristle on your back
but it's just the gases from seasoned wood
combusting in the pot-bellied woodstove
at your old familiar homestead in the next hollow
in the slumber of wolves your woods are safe
you lift your voice in a mournful keen
and sing with the winds

From the sleep of man an old woman awakens
moves in pain to fill that stove with more logs
if she too is filled with your legend
of her Great Grandfather and the moon at full
if she hears your call even above the gale
if she dreams of you running with night shadows
From the sleep of man she may sigh a long sigh
and perhaps let go her hold and join you at last
in the slumber of wolves

—**Robert Frazier**

MISS PLARR

by Thomas Ligotti illustrated by Denis Tiani

It was spring, though still quite early in the season, when a young woman came to live with us. Her purpose was to manage the affairs of the household while my mother was suffering some vague ailment, lingering but not serious, and my father was away on business. She arrived on one of those misty, drizzling days which often prevailed during the young months of that particular year and which remain in my memory as the signature of this remarkable time. Since my mother was self-confined to her bed and my father absent, it was left for me to answer those sharp urgent rappings at the front door. How they echoed throughout the many rooms of the house, reverberating in the farthest corners of the upper floors.

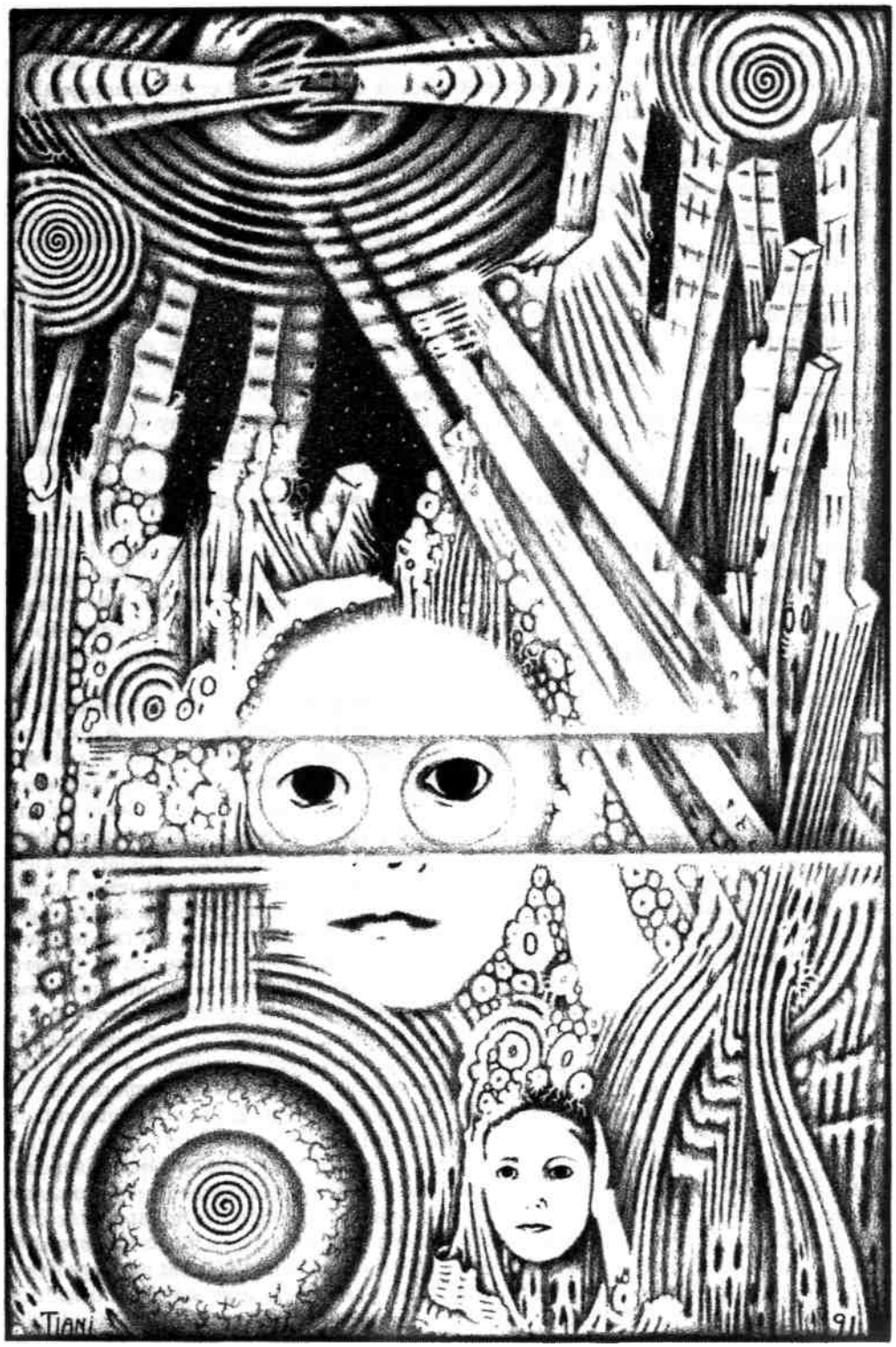
Pulling on the curved metal door handle, so huge in my child's hand, I found her standing with her back to me and staring deep into a world of darkening mist. Her black hair glistened in the light from the vestibule. As she turned slowly around, my eyes were fixed upon that great ebony turban of hair, folded so elaborately into itself again and again yet in some way rebelling against this discipline, with many shiny strands escaping their bonds and bursting out wildly. Indeed, it was through a straggle of mist-covered locks that she first glared down at me, saying: "My name is . . ."

"I know," I said.

But at that moment it was not so much her name that I knew, despite my father's diligent recitations of it to me, as all the unexpected correspondences I sensed in her physical presence. For even after she stepped into the house, she kept her head slightly turned and glanced over her shoulder through the open door, watching the elements outside and listening with intense expectancy. By then this stranger had already gained a precise orientation amid the world's chaos of faces and other phenomena. Quite literally her place was an obscure one, lying somewhere deep within the peculiar mood of that spring afternoon when the natural gestures of the season had been apparently distanced and suppressed by an otherworldly desolation — a seething luxuriance hidden behind dark battlements of clouds looming above a bare, practically hibernal landscape. And the sounds for which she listened also seemed remote and stifled, shut out by a mute and sullen twilight, smothered in that tower of stonegray sky.

However, while Miss Plarr appeared to reflect with exactitude all the signs and mannerisms of those days all shackled in gloom, her place in our household was still an uncertainty.

During the early part of her stay with us, Miss Plarr was more often heard than seen. Her duties, whether by instruction or her own interpretation, had soon engaged her in a routine of wandering throughout the echoing rooms and hallways of the house. Rarely was there an interruption in those footsteps as they sounded upon aged floorboards; day and night these gentle crepitations signaled the whereabouts of our vigilant housekeeper. In the morning I awoke to the movements of Miss Plarr on the floors above or below my bedroom, while late in the afternoon, when I often spent time in the library upon my return from school, I could hear the clip-clopping of her heels on the parquet in the adjacent room. Even late at night, when the structure of the house expressed itself with a fugue of noises, Miss Plarr augmented this decrepit music with her own slow pacing upon the stairs or outside my door.


TIANI

One time I felt myself awakened in the middle of the night, though it was not any disturbing sounds that had broken my sleep. And I was unsure exactly what made it impossible for me to close my eyes again. Finally, I slid out of bed, quietly opened the door of my room a few inches, and peeped down the darkened hallway. At the end of that long passage was a window filled with the livid radiance of moonlight, and within the frame of that window was Miss Plarr, her entire form shaded into a silhouette as black as the blackness of her hair, which was all piled up into the wild shape of some night-blossom. So intently was she staring out the window that she did not seem to detect my observance of her. I, on the other hand, could no longer ignore the force of her presence.

The following day I began a series of sketches. These works first took form as doodles in the margins of my school books, but swiftly evolved into projects of greater size and ambition. Given the enigmas of any variety of creation, I was not entirely surprised that the images I had elaborated did not include the overt portrayal of Miss Plarr herself, nor of other persons who might serve by way of symbolism or association. Instead, my drawings appeared to illustrate scenes from a tale of some strange and cruel kingdom. Possessed by curious moods and visions, I depicted a bleak domain that was obscured by a kind of fog or cloud whose depths brought forth a plethora of incredible structures, all of them somehow twisted into aspects of bizarre savagery. From the matrix of this fertile haze was born a litter of towering edifices that combined the traits of castle and crypt, many-peaked palace and multi-chambered mausoleum. But there were also clusters of smaller buildings, warped offshoots of the greater ones, housing perhaps no more than a single room, an apartment of ominously skewed design, an intimate dungeon cell reserved for the most exclusive captivity. Of course, I betrayed no special genius in my execution of these fantasmal venues: my technique was as barbarous as my subject. And certainly I was unable to introduce into the menacing images any suggestion of certain sounds that seemed integral to their *proper* representation, a kind of aural accompaniment to these operatic stage sets. In fact, I was not able even to imagine these sounds with any degree of clarity. Yet I knew that they belonged in the pictures, and that, like the purely visible dimension of these works, their source could be found in the person of Miss Plarr.

Although I had not intended to show her the sketches, there was evidence that she had indulged in private viewings of them. They lay more or less in the open on the desk in my bedroom; I made no effort to conceal my work. And I began to suspect that their order was being disturbed in my absence, to sense a subtle disarrangement that was vaguely telling but not conclusive. Finally, she gave herself away. One gray afternoon, upon returning from school, I discovered a sure sign of Miss Plarr's investigations. For lying between two of my drawings, pressed like a memento in an old scrapbook, was a long black strand of hair.

I wanted to confront Miss Plarr immediately regarding her intrusion, not because I resented it in any way but solely to seize the occasion to approach this devious eccentric and perhaps draw closer to the strange sights and sounds she had brought into our household. However, at that stage of her term of employment she was no longer so easily located, having ceased her constant, noisy marauding and begun practicing more sedentary, even stealthy rituals.

Since there was no sign of her elsewhere in the house, I went directly to the room which had been set aside for her, and which I had previously respected as her sanctum. But as I slowly stepped up to the open doorway I saw that she was not there. After entering the room and rummaging about, I realized that she was not using it at all and perhaps had never settled in. I turned around to continue my search for Miss Plarr when I found her standing silently in the doorway and gazing into the room without fixing her eyes on anything, or *anyone*, within it. I nevertheless appeared to be in a position of chastisement, losing all the advantage I earlier possessed over this invader of *my* sanctum. Yet there was no mention of either of these transgressions, despite what seemed our mutual understanding of them. We were helplessly drifting into an abyss of unspoken reproaches and suspicions. Finally, Miss Plarr rescued us both by making an announcement she had obviously been saving for the right moment.

"I have spoken with your mother," she declared in a strong voice, "and we have concluded that I should begin tutoring you in some of your . . . weaker school subjects."

I believe that I must have nodded, or moved my head in some way. "Good," she said. "We will start tomorrow."

Then, rather quietly, she walked away, leaving her words to resound in the cavity of that unoccupied room — unoccupied, I may claim, since my own presence now seemed to have been eclipsed by the swelling shadow of Miss Plarr. Nonetheless, this extra-scholastic instruction did prove of immense value in illuminating what, at the time, was

my weakest subject: Miss Plarr in general, with special attention to where she had made accommodations for herself in our household.

My tutelage was conducted in a room which Miss Plarr felt was especially suited to the purpose, though her reasoning may not have been readily apparent. For the place she had selected as her classroom was a small, remote attic located beneath the highest and westernmost roof of the house. The slanted ceiling of that room exposed to us its rotting beams like the ribbing of some ancient seagoing vessel that might carry us to unknown destinations. And there were cold drafts that eddied around us, opposing currents emanating from the warped frame in which a many-paned window softly rattled now and then. The light by which I was schooled was provided by overcast afternoons fading in that window, assisted by an old oil lamp which Miss Plarr had hung upon a nail in one of the attic rafters. (I still wonder where she unearthed this antique.) It was this greasy lamplight that enabled me to glimpse a heap of old rags which had been piled in a corner to form a kind of crude bedding. Nearby stood the suitcase Miss Plarr had arrived with.

The only furniture in this room was a low table, which served as my desk, and a small frail chair, both articles being relics of my early childhood and no doubt rediscovered in the course of my teacher's many expeditions throughout the house. Seated at the center of the room, I submitted to the musty pathos of my surroundings. "In a room such as this," Miss Plarr asserted, "one may learn certain things of the greatest importance." So I listened while Miss Plarr clomped noisily about, wielding a long wooden pointer which had no blackboard to point to. All considered, however, she did deliver a series of quite fascinating lectures.

Without attempting to render the exact rhetoric of her discourse, I remember that Miss Plarr was especially concerned with my development in subjects that often touched upon history or geography, occasionally broaching realms of philosophy and science. She lectured from memory, never once misstepping in her delivery of countless facts that had not reached me by way of the conventional avenues of my education. Yet these talks were nonetheless as meandering as her footsteps upon the cold floor of that attic room, and at first I was breathless trying to follow her from one point to the next. Eventually, though, I began to extract certain themes from her chaotic syllabus. For instance, she returned time and again to the earliest twitchings of human life, portraying a world of only the most rudimentary law but one so intriguingly advanced in what she called "visceral practices." She allowed that much of what she said in this way was speculative, and her discussions of later periods deferred to the restrictions, while also enjoying the ex-plicitness, of accepted records. Hence, I was made intimate with those ancient atrocities which gained renown for a Persian monarch, with a century-old massacre in the Brazilian backlands, and with the curious methods of punishment employed by various societies often relegated to the margins of history. And in other flights of instruction, during which Miss Plarr might flourish her pointer in the air like an artist's paintbrush, I was introduced to lands whose chief feature was a kind of brutality and an air of exile — coarse and torturous terrains, deliriums of earth and sky. These included desolate mist-bound islands in polar seas, countries of barren peaks lacerated by unceasing winds, wastelands that consumed all sense of reality in their vast spaces, shadowed realms Uttered with dead cities, and sweltering hells of jungle where light itself is tinged with a bluish slime. At some point, however, Miss Plarr's specialized curriculum, once so novel and engrossing, dulled with repetition. I started to fidget in my miniature seat; my head would slump over my miniature desk. Then her words suddenly stopped, and she drew close to me, laying her rubber-tipped pointer across my shoulder. When I looked up I saw only those eyes glaring down at me, and that black bundle of hair outlined in the dismal light drifting through the attic like a glowing vapor.

"In a room such as this," she whispered, "one may also learn the *proper* way to behave."

The pointer was then pulled away, grazing my neck, and Miss Plarr walked over to the window. Outside were effervescent clouds of mist which hung down over trees and houses. The scene was held immobile by the mist as if captured within cloudy depths of ice; everything appeared remote or hallucinatory, shadows bound to a misty shore. All was silence, and Miss Plarr gazed out at a world suspended in obscurity. But she was also listening to it.

"Do you know the sound of something that stings the air?" she asked, swinging her pointer lightly against herself. "You will know that sound if you do not act properly. Do you hear me?"

I understood her meaning and nodded my compliance. But at the same time I seemed to hear more than a teacher's switch as it came down upon a pupil's body. Sounds more

serious and more strange intruded upon the hush of the classroom. They were faraway sounds lost in the hissing of rainy afternoons: great blades sweeping over great distances, expansive wings cutting through cold winds, long whips lashing in darkness. I heard other sounds, too, other things that were stinging the air in other places, sounds of things I heard but could never give explanation. These sounds grew increasingly louder. Finally, Miss Plarr dropped her pointer and put her hands over her ears.

"That will be all for today," she shouted.

And neither did she hold class on the following day, nor ever again resume tutoring me.

It seemed, however, that my lessons with Miss Plarr had continued their effect in a different form. Those afternoons in that attic must have exhausted something within me, and for a brief time I was unable to leave my bed. During this period I noticed that Miss Plarr was suffering a decline of her own, allowing the intangible sympathies which had already existed between us to become so much deeper and more entangled. To some extent it might be said that my own process of degeneration was following hers, much as my faculty of hearing, sensitized by illness, followed her echoing footsteps as they moved about the house. For Miss Plarr had reverted to her restless wandering, somehow having failed to settle herself into any kind of repose.

On her visits to my room, which had become frequent and were always unexpected, I could observe the phases of her dissolution on both the material and the psychic level. Her hair now hung loose about her shoulders, twisting itself in the most hideous ways like a dark mesh of nightmares, a foul nest in which her own suspicions were swarming. Moreover, her links to strictly mundane elements had become shockingly decayed, and my relationship with her was conducted at the risk of intimacy with spheres of a highly questionable order.

One afternoon I awoke from a nap to discover that all the drawings she had inspired me to produce had been torn to pieces and lay scattered about my room. But this primitive attempt at exorcism proved to have no effect, for in the late hours of that same night I found her sitting on my bed and leaning close to me, her hair brushing against my face. "Tell me about those sounds," she demanded. "You've been doing this to frighten me, haven't you?" For a while I felt she had slipped away altogether, severing our extraordinary bond and allowing my health to improve. But just as I seemed to be approaching a full recovery, Miss Plarr returned.

"I think you're much better now," she said as she entered my room with a briskness that seemed to be an effort. "You can get dressed today. I have to do some shopping, and I want you to come along and assist me."

I might have protested that to go out on such a day would promise me a relapse, for outside waited a heavy spring dampness and so much fog that I could see nothing beyond my bedroom window. But Miss Plarr was already lost to the world of wholesome practicalities, while her manner betrayed a hypnotic and fateful determination that I could not have resisted.

"As for this fog," she said, even though I had not mentioned it, "I think we shall be able to find our way."

Having a child's weakness for miracles, I followed Miss Plarr into that fog-smothered landscape. After walking only a few steps we lost sight of the house, and even the ground beneath our feet was submerged under layers of a pale, floating web. But she took my hand and marched on as if guided by some peculiar vision.

And it was by her grasp that this vision was conducted into me, setting both of us upon a strange path. Yet as we progressed, I began to recognize certain shapes gradually emerging around us — that brood of dark forms which pushed through the fog, as if their growth could no longer be contained by it. When I tightened my grip on Miss Plarr's hand — which seemed to be losing its strength, fading in its substance — the vision surged toward clarity. With the aspect of some leviathan rising into view from the abyss, a monstrous world defined itself before our eyes, forcing its way through the surface of the fog, which now trailed in wisps about the structures of an immense and awful kingdom.

More expansive and intricate than my earlier, purely artistic imaginings, these structures sprang forth like a patternless conglomerate of crystals, angular and many-faceted monuments clustering in a misty graveyard. It was a dead city indeed, and all residents were entombed within its walls — or they were nowhere. There were streets of a sort which cut through this chaos of architecture, winding among the lopsided buildings, and yet it all retained an interlocking unity, much like a mountain range of wildly carved peaks and chasms and very much like the mountainous and murky thunderheads of a rainy

season. Surely the very essence of a storm inhered in the jagged dynamism of these structures, a pyrotechnics that remained suspended or hidden, its violence a matter of suspicion and conjecture, suggesting a realm of atrocious potential — that infinite country which hovers beyond fogs and mists and gray heaping skies.

But even here something remained obscure, a sense provoked of rites or observances being enacted in concealment. And this peculiar sense was aroused by certain sounds, as of smothered cacophonous echoes lashing out in black cells and scourging the lengths of blind passages. Through the silence of the fog they gradually disseminated.

"Do you hear them?" asked Miss Plarr, though by then they had already risen to a conspicuous stridency. "There are rooms we cannot see where those sounds are being made. Sounds of something that stings the air."

Her eyes seemed to be possessed by the sight of these rooms she spoke of; her hair was mingling with the mist around us. Finally, she released her hold on my hand and drifted onward. There was no struggle: she had known for some time what loomed in the background of her wandering and what waited her approach. Perhaps she thought this was something she could pass on to others, or in which she might gain their company. But her company, her *proper* company, had all the time been preparing for her arrival elsewhere. Nevertheless, she had honored me as the heir of her visions.

The fog swept around her and thickened once again until there was nothing else that could be seen. After a few moments I managed to gain my geographical bearings, finding myself in the middle of the street only a few blocks from home.

Soon after the disappearance of Miss Plarr, our household was again established in its routine: my mother made a strong recovery from her pseudo-illness and my father returned from his business excursion. The hired girl, it seemed, had vacated the house without giving notice, a turn of events that caused little surprise in my mother. "Such a flighty creature," she said about our former housekeeper.

I supported this characterization of Miss Plarr, but offered nothing that might suggest the nature of her flight. In truth, no word of mine could possibly have brought the least clarity to the situation. Nor did I wish to deepen the mysteries of this episode by revealing what Miss Plarr had left behind in that attic room. For me this chamber was now invested with a dour mystique, and I revisited its drafty spaces on several occasions over the years. Especially on afternoons in early spring when I could not close my ears to certain sounds that reached me from beyond a gray mist or from skies of hissing rains, as if somewhere the tenuous forms of spirits were thrashing in a dark and forsaken world. **Q**

WEIRD TALES TALKS WITH THOMAS LIGOTTI

by Darrell Schweitzer

Weird Tales: Tom, your career has followed quite a different trajectory from that of most writers. You have achieved considerable prominence *without* the traditional reliance on novels, or even publication in many major outlets. You seem to be one of the very few writers to become genuinely famous through the small press. Then you jump from special Ligotti issues of *Crypt of Cthulhu* and *Dagon* to having your collection, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, published by a mainstream house, Carroll & Graf. I'm impressed, and so, I am sure, are quite a lot of other people. What's your secret?

Thomas Ligotti: I don't see my situation as unprecedented by any means, especially when you consider the case of someone like T.E.D. Klein, who became a major "presence" in weird fiction-land after the publication of only a few stories. Or Ramsey Campbell, who could have dropped dead after publishing *Demons By Daylight* and still loomed large in the post-Lovecraft era of supernatural horror writing.

Maybe my perspective is a bit insular, but I find it difficult to imagine myself as approaching the stature of early Klein or Campbell, and in any case psychologically unprofitable to do so. Nevertheless, I do feel fortunate in gaining the attention of some hard-core fanatics of horror tales, from Harry 0. Morris, who illustrated and published the original, limited-run, Silver Scarab Press edition of *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, to editors and writers like Douglas Winter, Robert Price, Ramsey Campbell, Stefan Dziemianowicz, Michael Ashley, and some guy named Darrell Schweitzer.

WT: Then where do you fit into the context of weird literature, or literature in general, both as a writer and as a reader?

Ligotti: For my part, I suppose that I managed to find a certain audience in readers who still take seriously, as I do, writers like Poe and Lovecraft as well as a great many other writers whose works are related to the supernatural genre without being strictly demarcated by its conventions. This latter group forms a gallery of eccentric, for the most part grim-minded and occasionally demented figures in world literature, from Aloysius Bertrand to the late 19th century decadents to early 20th century writers like Georg Trakl and Bruno Schulz and more recent masters of the post-modern nightmare, including Samuel Beckett, Dino Buzzati, and Jorge Luis Borges.

In general, my reading tends toward authors of a morbid, negative type. These are really the ones who have perpetuated the tradition of horror in literature, because their works reveal the outrageously strange and terrible as integral to existence, a fascinating turbulence never to be quelled, and not simply a momentary or isolated aberration succeeded by reconciliation with the world, or even its affirmation. Lately I've been reading the melancholy aphorisms of Logan Pearsall Smith and the novels, which are more properly described as multi-hundred page monologues, of Thomas Bernhard.

WT: What got you started writing and when?

Ligotti: I started writing — outside of school assignments, that is — about my third year of college. I found the required writing that I was doing to be very stimulating: it made me high, or at least distracted me from my chronic anxiety, and I wanted to do more of it. This was very like the experience I had with reading — I had read only a few books before college — only more intense. I was very much aware that for me both reading and writing were practiced as a form of escapism, but in a paradoxical way since I usually escaped *into* a sort of imaginary hell. Perhaps you might call this a *confrontational* escapism.

WT: For all your success, you can't possibly be earning a living from short stories and a single collection, no matter how prestigiously it may be published. So, what else do you do?

Ligotti: I've earned my living for the past fourteen years doing editorial work for a reference book company in Detroit called Gale Research. I work in the literary criticism division of the company, which produces several series of books that reprint selected commentary on authors from antiquity to the present day. Many, if not most of the entries we compile represent the first, and probably only, time that anyone has gathered English-language criticism on that author. Where else can you find an assemblage of critical writings on the works of Hans Heinz Ewers, not to mention a picture of the scarred mug

of horror literature's favorite Nazi apologist?

WT: Let's talk about the influence of Lovecraft on your work. It's virtually impossible to come into this field without falling under the shadow of H.P.L. at some point, and I should think it would be completely impossible to do so in the pages of *Nyctalops*, which is where many readers first encountered you. Yet your stories only resemble Lovecraft's in the most tenuous manner, in that you too seem to depict a bleak and uncertain universe in which human assumptions don't apply very far. But the more overt Lovecraftisms, from the adjectives to the tentacular Things From Beyond, are conspicuously absent.

Ligotti: I think your characterization of Lovecraft's literary universe as "bleak and uncertain" is accurate enough, especially with respect to works like "The Music of Erich Zann" and "The Colour Out of Space." The more science-fictiony stories like *At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Shadow Out of Time" are arguably another matter, since they outline metaphysical schemes that are not at all uncertain, perhaps even too simplistic and comprehensible, and certainly depict a universe that is no less "grand" and no more bleak than those of most religious and myth systems. What is missing in Lovecraft are the human relationships that serve as the focus and prime impetus of almost all fiction, horror and otherwise. While such relationships may serve as either a source of fear or a safety net, the bottom line is that they divert attention from the macrocosmic mysteries which may be exalting or dreadful or both, depending on one's mood; but these cosmic mysteries never offer the kind of hope and potential consolation that lurks behind the pages of practically all horror fiction since its beginnings in the gothic novel. So, yes, I would agree that my stories could be called Lovecraftian in having a fairly steady view of the bleak and uncertain cosmos.

WT: You seem to differ from Lovecraft in your lack of scientific realism. Remember how H.P.L. used to say that a story should be put together with all the care of a thorough-going hoax? Yours seem to be more like disturbing dreams. I don't see the realist-hoaxer in you. So, is this a partial rejection of the Lovecraftian method, or just a difference in sensibilities?

Ligotti: As far as Lovecraft's fictional method of "scientific realism" is concerned, I can't believe that Lovecraft ever looked back on any of his works and considered them to be successful realism, though at certain points in his career there were stories partly based on the Poe-instigated intention of pulling off a literary hoax, a strategy Poe himself almost never employed in his horror tales.

Lovecraft always veered off into a highly unrealistic, as well as highly poetic style. He was at his worst when he tried to be "convincing" in the manner derived from the late 19th century realist-naturalist writers. And of course toward the end of his life Lovecraft expressed in his letters quite a bit of confusion concerning the most effective approach to weird fiction, feeling that with few exceptions he had failed to capture in literary form his most powerful sensations and visions. It's no news that he always feared that his exposure to the stories in *Weird Tales* would pervert his ideals and methods as a horror writer, and to an extent this fear seems to have been realized.

WT: What do you think a good horror story should be? Should it raise shrieks, or is disquiet enough?

Ligotti: I can only attempt an answer by stating my biases regarding what a horror story should *not* be. This is very risky, because there are so many impurities in any form of literature, and in fact the essential interest of literature itself may well depend on the impure concoction of the artistic use of language and the human experience that for the most part motivates literary language. If literature as a whole is largely founded on impurity, how can any specialized form such as the horror tale aspire to purity, especially when so many of the impurities are the result of an often quite interesting cross-pollination with other literary forms? It can't, of course; it can only fight the same losing battle of every other human endeavor. This battle, most of all, is against the popular *pull* of the horror genre. As Poe rightly declared, "Terror is not of Germany" — or the United States — "but of the soul." And while that soul may be strolling down the streets of San Francisco or the sidewalks of New York, it ultimately paces in isolation in a realm all its own, a realm that is as claustrophobic as a nightmare and as expansive as ... well, you get the idea. No doubt any form of writing is popular within a certain circle, but if that circle is too wide it remains one-dimensional, lying flat on the earth rather than spinning into a sphere that moves through stranger dimensions.

WT: I don't really understand what you mean by the "impure concoction of the artistic use of language and the human experience that motivates literary language" and forms the essential interest of literature. Do you mean that if somehow we were able to write with absolute and utter clarity and understand the impulses and experiences that went into the writing just as absolutely and clearly, there would be no fruitful ambiguity left

and therefore no further basis for literature?

Ligotti: I probably over-expressed myself. Very simply, I'm referring to the possibility that the fascination of reading may derive neither from the subject portrayed nor from the language that portrays it but from the relationship between the two — that is, a relationship in which literary language does not communicate subject matter but rather *processes* it, a debased intercourse between life and art, the offspring of which is a recombined creature born of experience and expression. A unique little bastard.

WT: To put it another way then, what do you most admire about the stories you do admire?

Ligotti: The technique of delineating a condition of pervasive strangeness and unease is the approach I most admire in horror fiction, and the one that supports the haunting memorableness of such tales as Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" and Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space." Like electroshock therapy, sudden or violent frights of the "pop-up" type may make a strong momentary impression, but overall the effect is to annihilate the emotion and the consciousness that are crucial for a really profound sense of horror, the purest possible sense of horror.

WT: You also write horror fiction *about* horror fiction. Surely that is a delicate act to pull off. What are the strengths and limitations of this approach?

Ligotti: The nature of horror fiction is a subject like any other, though one that probably interests a relatively small faction of the horror-reading public. Then again, the one knowable trait shared by all readers of horror fiction is that they read horror fiction, so why shouldn't they be interested? I imagine that most readers, whatever their taste in fiction, end up reading the same basic story told in the same basic style until the day they die.

WT: *The pull* of horror literature, as I see it, is not toward self-examination of the form, but in the direction of the Stephen King or Dean Koontz type of story, which is easily understood and completely within the reader's frame of everyday reference, *and* very emotionally compelling. In other words, make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, rip their hearts out, but make sure you do it in Suburbia, U.S.A. 1991. My guess is that King has such wide appeal not so much for his monsters as for his ability to depict fathers and sons (and husbands and wives) drawn together by crisis. Common emotions, honestly and clearly presented. That's the way to multimillionaire superstardom.

Ligotti: Your analysis could be extended to best-selling fiction in general. The works that enjoy the most success in the marketplace are naturally those that are the most accessible to the greatest number of people. Hence, Beckett's big hit is *Waiting for Godot,* which is relatively easy to *get* when contrasted with just about any of his other works. Poe is most celebrated for his detective stories and holds an honored place in that genre, but to contemporary readers of horror fiction he's practically invisible, judging from the minimal attention his works receive in horrorzines and the infrequency with which his name arises in interviews with horror writers of today. Why should this be the case? Because his horror stories, when placed beside his detective stories, are poetic and obscure. Most readers have little patience or sympathy with such works. This is perfectly understandable. I'm very much this way when it comes to movies. With few exceptions, I don't care for artistically ambitious, serious films and can only tolerate action extravaganzas or adaptations of blockbuster horror novels.

WT: How about something more about yourself ? Did you have an upbringing which directed you toward writing horror fiction?

Ligotti: Almost certainly, but it's difficult to say just how. For instance, when I was two years old I was operated on for an internal rupture. Now, Bram Stoker also underwent surgery as an infant and there's an article that asserts the effect of this early "surgical trauma" on his writings. I'm told that I was quite alert and cheerful throughout this ordeal, including the truss-wearing aftermath, but I've noticed in the last couple of years that a disproportionate number of my tales feature doctors of one sort or another. But who really knows?

Another for-instance: I was a Catholic until I was eighteen years old, when I unloaded all of the doctrines, but almost none of the fearful superstition, of a gothically devout childhood and youth. This superstitiousness was abetted in a small way by an old woman who used to babysit me and my two younger brothers. Her name was Mrs. Rinaldi and she specialized in telling religious cautionary tales. One of them particularly impressed me. It was about a poor woman who kept finding her laundry pulled from the clothesline outside her house and trampled in the dirt. She thought the Devil was doing this deed when actually it was just the neighborhood kids. In her irrational state of exasperation, she offered to give the Devil anything if he would allow her a clean batch of clothes. Well, the Devil takes care of the pranksters, all right, and then demands the woman

fulfill her part of the bargain by turning over to him her infant son, which she has no choice but to do. Years later the son, who is now a full-grown demon, pays a visit to his mother to show her what she has done to him. There's something very captivating about this atrociously senseless tale. I was reminded of it recently in reading a collection of Eskimo folktales. What nightmares those people dreamed up! *Very* nice.

Probably the most important factor in my taking interest in writing fiction in general was the emotional breakdown I alluded to earlier. This occurred in August 1970, following intense use of drugs and booze, though these intoxicants served only as a catalyst for a fate that my high-strung and mood-swinging self would have encountered at some point. Before that time, I had no interest in reading or writing, though I tested well in these subjects; afterward, they became the only ways I could alter my state of mind without fear, at least without *extreme* fear, of losing my grip entirely. My condition is called agoraphobia; it's part hereditary, and I continue to experience its symptoms, including panic attacks and a general sense of unreality.

WT: Did you ever have any other plans for your life, other than to be a writer?

Ligotti: No. Having an identity as a horror writer is about the closest thing I've come to distinctly *doing* anything with my life. When I was a kid I had a vague ambition to be a baseball player, then a rock-and-roll musician. I still fool around with electric guitar privately, but there's not much to be said for my musical ability. Recreationally, I also attend the local harness-race tracks regularly with my younger brother, who introduced me to the manic-depressive pleasures of this pastime and who is the dedicatee of my second collection of horror stories. You want to know terror? Try waiting for the results of a photofinish between the horse you loaded up on and some other hayburner.

WT: What are you working on for the near future? While we're at it, do you have any thoughts on where your future is as a horror writer?

Ligotti: It's hard to say. I'd like to write more than I have in the past few years, but I'm often too distracted or lack the energy to do anything about it. This is probably just as well.

My new collection, forthcoming from Carroll & Graf in the United States and Robinson in England, is called *Grimscribe: His Lives and Works.* All the stories included are told from the first-person anonymous point of view and may be looked upon as chronicles of an epicure or victim of the weird.

WT: Thanks, Tom. ***Q***

VISITORS

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

"Kill yourself. Go on. I know what I'm talking about. I'm you ten years down the road. Do it tonight, Christmas Eve, when everybody will pay attention. It may be your last chance for that. If you wait till after the holidays, you'll waste your death, just like you've been wasting your life."

She did look a lot like me. Gaunter, though, her hair stringier, her clothes dirtier than I would ever wear them, her nails ragged, with black dirt under them.

Kneeling beside my oven, I suctioned turkey juice into my baster and squirted it over the roasting bird, then lowered the aluminum foil tent, slid the pan back into the oven, and shut the door. The uprush of heat had washed my face in the warm, heavenly smell of turkey well on its way to being done. I found few moments finer than ones like this, when I could bask in the joy of preparing something delicious and healthy for my family.

"I know what you're thinking," said the woman. She had a terrible intensity. The brackets around her mouth, the furrows on her forehead carried an inlay of grime. I wanted to chase her out of my clean kitchen. I rose, laying the baster in the drip-catcher on the stove top and wiping my hands on my apron.

"You think this is all terrific," she said in a tight, grating voice. "The house full of baking smells, Christmas carols on the tape player, the kids about to come in from the cold so you can feed them food to grow on, the husband contented in the living room with his holiday TV, you in here doing for everybody, knowing you've bought and wrapped the perfect presents. Tonight you get to surf on the anticipation and joy for a while longer. By tomorrow night you'll want to kill yourself, but it'll be too late. Nobody will notice or care once the celebration is over."

She leaned closer. "Kill yourself. Do it now! Everybody will notice when the food doesn't get to the table on time. For once in your life, stop being invisible! For once in your life don't answer anybody else's needs."

She smelled the way my mouth tasted that time the dentist drilled for a root canal and opened up the way to rot. Her eyes were my color of gray, but wide and blazing. "If you don't do it now, you'll wish and wish you had. I know. I remember this moment. I remember listening to me and thinking, 'What a filthy, hideous thing she is. How'd she get into my house? What's she doing in my nice clean kitchen? Who is she? What kind of joke is this?' " She looked at the ceiling a moment, a frown puzzling her brows. "But I don't remember hearing me say that. Maybe there is some hope for change. Maybe you'll listen, and you won't stick around to turn into me!"

I moved so that the kitchen table stood between us. "Why would I turn into you?"

"Because everything goes down the drain after tonight — well, in about an hour, actually. That's when Brad does something and for the first time you see it. For the first time you let yourself know what's been happening out here in reality while you were living in the dream in your head, and once you start noticing..." She turned away and I saw the little moon-shaped scar near her eye that I had gotten when I fell off my bike and landed hard on some gravel. It was the third time I had seen that scar on someone else.

"Waking up from the dream hurts," she said. "It means the end of everything good." She leaned on the table. I winced. Her hands looked so filthy against my honey-colored cutting board. "Do you understand? You've been living in a trance, April, and you're going to wake up in Hell."

"My name's not April," I said.

She blinked rapidly, her mouth half-open, soft looking. The tip of her tongue emerged to touch her upper lip. After a moment, she said, "Are you saying you're not me?"

Just then Jordan, my nine-year-old, came in through the swinging door. "Mom, can I have a cookie? Just one? It's still half an hour to dinner."

I smiled at him and got down the canister of Christmas cookies the children and I had baked over the past three days since school let out. I let Jordan choose, even though I knew which one he'd go for, one of the sugar cookies half-dipped in chocolate and then kissed with nuts.

"Hey," said the apparition, "I never let them eat sweets before dinner, and who is that, anyway?"

I looked at her, and remembered Mom saying that over and over: I never let you eat

sweets before dinner. It'll spoil your appetite. It was one of the many parental truths I'd jettisoned on my journey to my present self.

"Thanks, Mom," said Jordan. I leaned down and he kissed me, then ran off.

"Jordan, my oldest," I told April.

"My oldest's name is Sara," she said.

"After Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess*, " I said.

"Yes," she whispered.

"But, of course, I didn't marry Brad. Do you remember Harry Fantino?"

"Harry?" she whispered. She blinked. "Vaguely. I — didn't make it to the last high school reunion. I don't remember what he's doing now."

"He's a psychologist. I only let him practice on me and the kids if it's helpful. What does Brad do now?"

"He —" she said, and took a step back. "He ..." She shook her head. "I don't want to he to myself, but you're not me, are you? What's your name?"

"Well," I said, "it is April. April Diana. Like yours, I suppose. In eighth grade I made everybody switch over to calling me Diana, and they've been doing it ever since."

"I always hated the name April," she said. She crossed her arms, tucking her hands into her armpits. Her hands hadn't left any marks on the table. "You're not like I was when this happened to me. I couldn't even speak to her, that person who was me ten years down the Une. Not at first. She kept yelling at me and yelling at me. I smiled, I just smiled, finally, and thought maybe I'd been having too much medicinal eggnog, and she went away. An hour later..."

"I know," I said.

"I found Brad and Sara ... I keep trying to drown that picture, but it won't go away. I thought if I could just convince you to kill yourself before you ever found out about it, this wouldn't happen to me. I don't know how I got here. It's Christmas Eve again. Ten years from now. I was staring down into an almost empty bottle, and I suddenly remembered that the me I am went back and talked to the me I was. But this —"

I started chopping the salad vegetables. "Do you remember what happened the Christmas Eve right after you turned fourteen?"

She twisted a rope of hair. It was so oily it retained the press of previous twisting. "I.. " she said. "I — I think that was the first time Brad and I went out. It was all snow and bright cold sun that afternoon. Brad had stolen his mother's turkey platter, and we sat on it and slid down Maypole Hill, and we always fell off at the bottom, and got all tangled up and hot. It wasn't a very big tray." Her pale cheeks flushed, the red an echo of ancient joy.

"I never did that," I said. "A woman came to me. In my bedroom, when I was getting dressed to go out. She looked worse than you do, even though she was younger, and she scared me. She said before I went out anywhere with Brad I should watch his sister going home. She made me promise. So I had Mama tell Brad I had a fever and couldn't go sliding with him, and I stayed away from him all vacation, and then when we went back to school in January, I watched his sister going home. I didn't even know what it meant. I just knew she was always scared and miserable. So I thought it must mean something bad. Brad kept leaving me these notes — 'April showers me with love' — and I just got to hating it so much, that's when I changed my name."

"No," she said, "the first time I saw me was your now — the Christmas Eve I was thirty. Not till then. I remember those notes. I kept them pressed between the pages of my favorite book of fairy tales." She paused, seemed to hear her own words. She closed her eyes. A tear oozed from one and ran down her cheek.

"The Green Fairy Book" I said. "Edited by Andrew Lang."

"How did you know!" she cried, peering at me with misted eyes. She shook her head. "Of course, you do know."

"I put flowers in mine. The first flowers — that was later—when I dated Tom in high school, and then my corsage from the senior prom, only it didn't flatten very well. Curt gave me that. I didn't really notice Harry until college." I smiled, thinking about that: how I bumped into Harry, and both our armloads of books cascaded to the sidewalk, and in the process of collecting ourselves he picked up some of my loose papers and I picked up some of his, which gave us a decent reason to get back in touch later. I have never known if he did that deliberately. I would have done it on purpose, if I had thought of it.

"I saw somebody like us one other time," I said, "and that was at one of the college Christmases."

"Did you get out of college with a degree?"

"Yes," I said, "history."

"I was majoring in political science," she muttered, "at least until Sara started

showing."

"I started out in poly sci too, but this me came along — only it was kind of an elegant me, a regal me, older than both of us. She had beautiful white hair, and she looked peaceful and happy. She told me poly sci would never do me any good. She didn't tell me what to switch to or anything, she just said there were better ways to spend my time."

She sighed and said, "So you're not going to be me."

"I wanted to turn into her," I said, "but I don't think I'll do that either." I stopped dicing green peppers and glanced at the gold ring on my left hand. She hadn't been wearing a wedding band.

"I'm glad," said April. She looked away. Her shoulders hunched. She hugged herself, but more like a person who was cold than a person who cared for herself.

I tossed the salad, then covered it with Handi-Wrap and put it in the refrigerator. "Stay," I said, after a moment's silence. If ever there was a wayfaring stranger.. .

"Thanks. No thanks. I got to be getting back. Sara might call. She's twenty-two now, you know, and she got some help somewhere ... she won't talk to me at all if I get too bombed, but I feel sober right now. I better go."

I looked at her and felt the tight trapped twisting inside you get when you want to help someone and there's nothing you can do. My throat closed and my eyes felt hot.

"It's been an education," she said, and gave me a wavery little smile.

Harry breezed in. "Is it carving time yet, Di?" he said. "Sure smells like it. I can't wait to taste that turkey." He was grinning and he looked as gorgeous as anything I had ever seen.

April waved to me and faded away.

After everybody had eaten as much as they could hold, and we were all sitting around waiting for our digestion to work so we could proceed to dessert, I went into the kitchen and sat on the chair by the little telephone table, and thought of all the things I liked about my life.

And then, for the first time, maybe the last, I went visiting. I didn't know what I would tell me when I got there, but I trusted that the right words would come. **Q**

WITCH OF THE MOON

Witch of the moon, of the silver feather,
Witch of the watery mists of light, Once,
two free spirits, we played together As
innocent children of the night.

Your steps were quick where the starlight sprinkled
Over the cusp of my garden wall,
While in your hair the moon dust twinkled
As I waited, breathless, for your call.

But the nights of magic soon lost their splendor, My
days were like pressed and folded leaves; My years
were woven of drear surrender And birds of sorrow
croaked in the eaves.

Free of ambition's relentless driving, Released from
my weary bed of pain, I have cast off the flesh and its
endless striving, Its constant struggle for empty gain.

Witch of the moon, now that human striding Has
marked the crystalline surface there, Have you fled to
the dark side, no more to be riding The crested
currents of earthly air?

I wait by the cusp of my garden wall To
bathe in the swirl of your hair again. Where
are you hiding, mistress of nightfall, Queen
of the forest, witch of the fen?

— Stanley McNail

REVENANT

by Keith Taylor

illustrated by Janet Aulisio

"A ghost, my lord?"

Vivayn didn't laugh aloud, for she was courteous by nature. She even smoothed the skeptical tone from her voice as she considered the old man who was her host, and thus deserved her respect. Lartius Falarius was distressed. Even if his trouble had no basis but empty superstition, perhaps she could remove it for him.

She thought wryly that this explained why Lartius had been willing to take a woman with her reputation for wicked sorcery into his house. He needed help of a kind the local bishop might not approve. Well, it did not matter; he had been kind to her, and now that she knew his motives, Vivayn felt relieved that they were not worse. Neatly finishing the fig she had been eating, she waited for him to tell her more.

"I assure you, it's true." Moving to the edge of the terrace, Lartius leaned on the low marble wall in the shade of the fig tree which grew there, its roots forcing the stones in that corner of the terrace to tilt crookedly. Some of the fruit had fallen, over-ripe, and lay neglected with flies buzzing around it. The vista of gardens, fields, and vineyards beyond the terrace gave sad evidence of a similar decayed condition. In view of that, Lartius's attempt to keep up his dignity by wearing the stately toga — a garment long out of date anyhow — was a little pathetic in a realm where civilization had been so thoroughly taken over by barbarians. Time had passed Lartius Falarius by, and he was unwilling to admit it. The poor fellow was probably haunted by ghosts in more than one sense.

"It's true," he repeated, turning to face her, the afternoon sunlight outlining his white hair with a soft golden light disconcertingly like the aureole of a saint. "Do you think I would pay attention to a babbling kitchen girl, or a porter drunk on stolen wine? My wife saw this ... apparition ... with her own eyes, after others had told her about it. My steward, a trustworthy man, has seen it too."

After others had told them the story, Vivayn thought. Adept herself at creating magical illusions, she knew how little suggestion was sometimes needed to make an entire group of people see visions. A ghost? It sounded puerile. And yet perhaps she should not be too sure.

"Such witnesses carry weight," she agreed diplomatically. "And you, my lord? Have you seen this spirit walk-ing?"

"No!" Lartius moved abruptly away from the wall. As his head passed into shadow, the halo-like effect of the sun on his hair disappeared, and he looked only like himself; a careworn mortal man, a little pretentious, but well-meaning. "No, I have not, though I spent more than one sleepless night walking the house and its environs, watching for any sign. My wife swears the ghost is Salvina, our daughter who disappeared! Do you think I would not have kept any number of vigils after hearing that? I called in the priest, I consulted the bishop, and perhaps to my shame, I talked with a magician whose reputation is powerful. . . but I soon found he was interested in nothing but money, and ordered him to leave. None of them was able to help."

"Then you must know better than to place high hopes in me, my lord," Vivayn said gently. "I may fail too. I have never encountered a ghost before, or even attempted to raise the dead, no matter what you may have heard about me . . . and I've no doubt it was deli-ciously appalling. Betrayal, parricide, evil rituals at the dark of the moon, and all by the time I was twenty, no less," She smiled ironically.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"Rumour," Lartius said with contempt. "My lady, I know what that is worth. Do not even let it enter your mind, I beg you."

Lartius was sincere, hut Vivayn's refutation appeared to be well embedded in the minds of his wife and son. Once a legend began, good or bad, it fed on itself and continued to grow.

The simple truth was that Vivayn's father had been a king, with the bad luck to rule a realm on the southern coast of Britain, vulnerable to the raids of those barbarian sea-wolves Rome's decline had unleashed. In the end they had attacked in force, slain her father and taken the kingdom; not an uncommon thing, and one which had happened in other places on a larger scale. Vivayn, at fifteen, with no choice in the matter, had been married to the son of the invading Jutish chieftain ... and in time she had left him to seek refuge in Gaul, far inland where her affronted husband was not likely to find her.

However, the legend which had formed about her name said that she had betrayed her father to his death for the love of a heathen sea-rover, ruling at his side for years by the power of her sorcery until she had wearied of him and betrayed him as well. That, coloured and embroidered with extravagant richness of detail, was what Lartius's wife believed. She didn't like Vivayn or want her in the house; so much so that Vivayn had wondered from the beginning why Lartius had been prepared to cause domestic strife by having her as his guest at all. Now it was becoming clear.

"I suppose, on this estate of eternally wagging tongues, you have heard about Salvina," Lartius said heavily.

"Only that she disappeared without a trace, half a year since. That no sign of her has been found to this day. I am sorry, my lord."

"No sign until this last month!" Torment looked out of Lartius's eyes. "Not knowing what became of her has been the worst. Now, if her ghost has indeed returned, then of course she must be dead. But how did it happen? We are not lucky in our children," he said bleakly. "Our daughter dead in her virginal youth, our younger son seeking his fortune in unknown parts, the elder . . . no matter. Can you help us?"

Vivayn had long tended to discount stories of ghosts and hauntings. All that she heard of their behaviour had seemed pointless to her, and the sources of information didn't inspire confidence, either. One possible explanation came to her mind at once.

"My lord, you hired a magician when the bishop himself could do nothing, and then you dismissed the man. Can you tell me his name, and where I might find him now?"

"Cornelius?" The landowner frowned, taken aback. "Why, he would be no help. He was a fraud, interested only in the gifts he could obtain from me before I learned his true character, which didn't take long."

"I don't doubt it." Vivayn knew that sort of charlatan. They abounded at every fair. "Yet if this man has any powers at all . . . if he can create illusions, as an example ... it might even be he who is behind the haunting. It's possible that *he* sent a vision of your daughter to walk these grounds, hoping to profit by preying on your grief, and when you dismissed him, Cornelius might have gone on with the deception out of resentment."

Lartius looked at his guest with a certain wonder. Vivayn's beauty had caused men to fall silent in her presence since she had grown into a woman. Hair the colour of red bronze tumbled about an oval face with an exquisite precision of bone structure, and her large grey eyes were disconcertingly clear and direct. Yet she could hide her true thoughts and feelings with practiced skill when she wished. Vivayn gave the impression of inner reserve, of keeping her own ultimate secrets.

Her suggestion disturbed him. "Cornelius? If this is really his doing, I will see him buried alive! And it's the sort of thing he would do. Malediction! I hoped that I could now be sure whether Salvina is living or dead ..."

"And perhaps we can, my lord," Vivayn told him. "Where is Cornelius now?"

"He returned to the city, I believe." Lartius looked angrily across the fertile plain to the great town of Dijon, with its strong walls and thirty-three guardian towers. "He's probably gulling other victims there even as we talk."

Vivayn's dark-red lips curved upward in an anticipatory smile which was not especially gentle. "Send a messenger to him with the suggestion that you have grown desperate, my lord. In the meantime, we will keep watch together for this phantom which has come to trouble your life. Give me complete privacy until this evening to prepare ... and sleep for a few hours yourself if you can, as it's possible that you will need to be well rested."

"That messenger will ride within the hour," Lartius promised grimly, "with orders not to return until he has Cornelius with him."

"And that is pleasant to hear, my lord," Vivayn purred. "I look forward to meeting the man."

With a light, swaying walk she departed to the chamber Lartius had given her. It was salubrious enough, with its walls of green and yellow stucco, a tiled floor generations old, and a moulded frieze of fauns and bacchantes capering near the ceiling. Vivayn had slept in much cruder quarters as the wife of the barbarian princeling, Cynric, although she could not complain of his talents as a lover . . . not with any justice . . .

No. Those days were past. Vivayn had put them behind her by her own free choice and action; even if she wished it, they could never return. And reminiscing formed no part of the task before her.

Vivayn removed her clothes, spreading them swiftly on the bed, garment by garment. Had any been there to witness the sight, they would have seen that her white skin was fine as a child's, while her long-limbed body was decidedly that of a woman, and they would have envied her former husband Cynric.

But none did see. Only two slaves, passing in the corridor outside, heard her voice lifted in a contralto song which summoned in no language they knew, and shivered as they walked on quickly, filled with imaginative new gossip about their master's guest.

Vivayn moved in a free, graceful dance as she sang. With every step she tempted danger, for she spun poised between her own world and any of several Others, with the barriers between them stretched as thin as the skin of a bubble by her sorcery. Half-seen patterns like the endlessly intertwining spirals of Celtic embroidery trailed behind her as she moved. Dancing among daggers would have been safe by comparison; yet she smiled as she sprang lightly high. This gave her joy, and there was no other way to draw to herself the being whose help she required. An air spirit, he could not be compelled by the prescribed ritual or bribed with the fumes of sacrifice. But he might be won with a song.

Zephyrs from a foreign land suddenly caressed her skin, bringing with them the scents of spice and warm green seas.

A creature resembling a white bird strutted on her floor, spreading wings and a tail like exquisite lace. Although the display delighted Vivayn's heart with its beauty, there was something impudent and trifling in the tilt of that crested head, and in the motions of those clawed feet as the sprite joined her dance.

That was the disadvantage in dealing with air elementals; they could not be made dependable. It was like wishing that water could be dry. But at least it was possible to please them with music or perfume. The powers of earth were known to demand ceremonies of blood and lust which did not appeal to Vivayn.

Dewed with fine perspiration and quivering in every limb, Vivayn held out her arm to her visitor. It perched on her wrist, yet she felt no sensation of weight whatever. When she had regained entire control of her breath, she said in a lilting voice, "Welcome, wanderer. What things have you seen since last we met?"

The bird recounted wonders, and Vivayn did not have to pretend to listen. Without leaving her chamber, she travelled around the world, while outside the shadows lengthened as the afternoon turned towards dusk. But Vivayn had allowed for lengthy speech with the sprite, knowing its prolixity.

"Now there is a wonder in this place that is exercising *me,"* she said at last, taking control with firm courtesy. "A ghost haunts it of late; the shade of its master's daughter, so I am told. I'd know if this is true. It could be that some illusion or imp parades in her semblance, to disturb the family's peace of mind. You have the wisdom," she flattered. "Remain here for a time and help me discover the truth, and I will read you the words of Sappho."

"King David as well?" the sprite demanded. It had small use for anything human save the words of poets.

"And the Israelite king," Vivayn agreed.

The bird displayed its glorious plumage in satisfaction. "Then I will aid you once more."

Vivayn waited tensely in the summer night, beneath a sycamore tree. The courtyard of Lartius's house lay before her, filled with a glamour of light from the gibbous moon, restored by the kindness of that wan radiance to the appearance it must have had in the days when this estate had been prosperous. Above her lifted the wall of the terrace where she had spoken with the landowner that very morning. He was there now, waiting in the company of his wife and elder son . . . waiting to see his daughter's spectre walk the house where she had lived her short span.

It was easy to imagine what he must have in his heart.

The son, Paul, was a different matter. He had been like a boulder in his impenetrable conviction that there was no ghost, that it was all a mad fancy which pervaded the house.

"First Cornelius, now you," he had said to her contemptuously. "How determined are

you to spin out your stay here at our expense? My sister is dead, and the dead don't return!"

"Not often, I agree," Vivayn had answered. "But have you no desire to know what is happening, if it is *not* as it appears? Your lady mother saw this sight herself; we cannot doubt her."

His lady mother had twisted her mouth as though she tasted something bad. "I saw it, indeed," Dominica said, "and it might drive me mad to behold it again! No. Let well enough alone." But she had let herself be persuaded to accompany them, all the while complaining querulously, and reversing her position with self-sacrificing airs each time it began to look as though her exasperated husband might order her to stay in her room after all. "Very well, my lord, if you are determined . . . perhaps my prayers will help to keep you safe."

She made Vivayn sick. Yet it was Paul who really troubled her. The son rejected so absolutely any hint, of the notion that Salvina's ghost could be haunting them. He gave the impression of not being able to endure that concept. Maybe it was understandable; he was soon to marry an heiress from the nearby city, and his attention should be concentrated on the things of life, not death. Still, if his own sister's spirit roamed the earth, unquiet, he should at least want to know the reason. His imminent marriage did not fill his mind completely, if Vivayn judged by the advances he had made to *her* since she arrived on the estate!

In itself that was nothing, to a woman who had lived in the halls of Jutish sea-wolves. Paul might be large, powerful, an impetuous brute who believed all women were there for the taking, but none of that was in any way new or astonishing. Vivayn had even thought of bedding him. He was roughly handsome, undoubtedly virile; she missed her lusty nights with Cynric.

But Paul... no. Something about him repelled her too greatly, with a revulsion of the spirit, not the senses. In the cool darkness beneath the tree, with crickets trilling and a horse moving restively in the nearby stables, Vivayn's tongue grew dry. She wished she was not alone.

Turning her head, she looked out through the courtyard entrance towards a white road which twisted among vineyards and olive groves. A light wind wandered through the leaves, raising a susurration which filled the night, and it seemed to blow from a realm of lost souls. The coolly rational side of Vivayn's nature mocked that this was fancy; but her hard-won knowledge of hidden things warned her chillingly that it was true.

Something cried, out there in the blowing dark. At the wordless torment of sorrow contained in that sound, Vivayn's own heart contracted with pain. It was like the first time she had looked at a crucifix, and had a real intimation of what it must mean to suffer. It was like the freezing awareness of death that awakens a child in the night. Again she heard it, that wail of unutterable grief, drawn out past bearing . .. and nearer now.

It wasn't repeated. But Vivayn watched the courtyard entrance with the lids of her grey eyes stretched wide and unblinking, her skin moving as at an adder's touch. On the terrace above her there was only rigid stillness.

The crickets were silent. Nothing moved now but the wind, and an indistinct shape, a paler shadow in a world filled with sliding shadows, walking with a purpose. As it grew more distinct, Vivayn saw the outline of a young woman's slender form . . . but only the outline. It was a blankness, a grey, empty silhouette with streaming hair, wringing its hands together and sobbing with anguish that made Vivayn yearn to block her ears against the sound. It was the weeping of a torn soul for whom there was no solace in the universe.

Vivayn might have reached out to her and spoken her name.

The shade trod silently past her, crossing the courtyard, weeping. With a certainty beyond the detached thought which had always served her so well, Vivayn knew its intention. She did nothing to stop it; Vivayn the sorceress had her own laws.

Halting below the terrace, the ghost of Salvina lifted its head, looking up with that eyeless gaze to confront her family. They stared down, a stricken trio, grotesque in their petrified horror, Lartius and his wife drawn together for mutual protection, shrinking back from the sight in the courtyard. Their son by contrast leaned forward, gripping the terrace wall, his head out-thrust, staring in dreadful fascination, forced now to believe the thing he had rejected in daylight. A thick, choking sound came from his throat, as though he would have forced himself to speak but could not form the words.

It was Dominica who found her voice, in the event. Holding out her arms to the spectre, she cried passionately, "Salvina! What is it? *What can we do?"*

As though in rejection of that pleading call, the shade vanished. The courtyard was

empty. Vivayn wasted no time in blinking about, or in futile, fatuous searches; she watched the three on the terrace with intent, dispassionate eyes, even while her hands trembled.

Dominica turned to her husband and broke down in a choking, moaning storm of tears which Vivayn would not have expected *of* her. Paul sank out *of* sight below the terrace wall, his grip on the stones easing as he slowly collapsed. The disgusting sounds he made led Vivayn to suppose that he had nerved himself with wine for at least an hour before joining his parents in their vigil ... so for all his loudly professed disbelief, he had been afraid.

Vivayn left him there. He would be wholly useless for some time. His parents had touched no wine all day, but when she saw their faces by yellow lamp-light in their dining hall, Vivayn was quick to recommend it, and served it to them herself.

"That was Salvina," her mother whispered, shuddering.

"Yes, my lady. I believe it was." Vivayn spoke gently. Little though she liked Dominica, she would have had to be made of stone not to feel some compassion for her now. "So we must accept that she is indeed dead; and once we know how she died, and where she now lies, we will be nearer to knowing why she walks the night and what it is she wants of her living kindred."

"How can we learn that of her?" Lartius demanded in despair. "She would not even utter words, but only... only . . . only cry like something forever lost. She might have been murdered by any passing vagabond, or even by a peasant in one of my own villages. It was all half a year ago! We searched the countryside and found nothing! What are we likely to discover now?"

"It's difficult, my lord — but I believe not hopeless." Vivayn did not wish to say much more in case she raised false hopes. "There may be more that I can disclose tomorrow. For tonight, my advice to you and your lady is that you finish this flagon, and perhaps another after it, and go to bed. There is really nothing else you can do but lie in wakeful anguish."

"You suggest that we lie drunken instead — like Paul?" Dominica spoke with bitter, righteous contempt. She was already more like her usual self, Vivayn saw with regret.

"Why not?" the sorceress asked reasonably. "There are occasional times when it helps greatly. I would have nothing to say against Paul's turning to the cup, if he had only done it *after* instead of *before*."

But Vivayn touched no wine that night. Wakeful in her chamber, she reviewed all that had happened, each word that had been said, as well as the significance of certain things which had *not* been uttered or asked ... by anybody.

A little before dawn, she slept, to awaken after about three hours, aroused by the awareness of another presence beside her bed. For a frozen, startled moment she thought she beheld her own fetch. The figure resembled her closely in its nude slenderness, save that it was wholly sexless, and the oval, full-lipped face with its clear grey eyes had her features, though stylised to a bloodless ideal. Its hair was the hue of silvery ash. Sweeping feathery wings grew from the shoulders in place of arms.

After the first stab of terror, Vivayn recognised her airy messenger, aping her form because in its fickle, uncaring way, it had grown weary of the bird's. Vivayn cursed it inventively for entire minutes, which had no effect but to amuse it.

"Well!" she said at last, combing bronze-coloured locks back from her forehead with her fingers. "If you would ever enjoy the words of the Jewish king, tell me quickly; did you follow the revenant?"

"Truly I did," the sprite boasted. "She moved on the wings of the wind, but I *am* the wings of the wind. She failed to distance me, O Natanleod's daughter."

"And where does her restless spirit take its refuge when she is not walking the night?"

"Not two miles hence, within a copse of linden trees, where her bones he in the earth," the sprite replied.

Vivayn wasted no passion in gritting her teeth over the callousness. A being of air had neither blood nor heart, only wit, and had to be accepted for what it was.

"This very morning you will lead me there, and her kindred with me," she directed. "It's . . . convenient . . . that she lies so close, though I did not expect it to be far."

They left later than Vivayn had intended. She had forgotten her expressed wish to meet the fraudulent wizard, Cornelius. The man who had been sent to fetch him returned from the city in the same hour Vivayn awakened, with Cornelius himself slung in ignominious terror across his horse's neck.

"And the other end o' the nag 'ud be more fitting for him," the rider growled. A straight-backed rascal of sixty, he had couched a lance in the cavalry ranks of Soissons when he was Vivayn's age. Soissons had vanished now, one of many lost and overthrown

kingdoms surviving chiefly in the memories of aged men, but this one had not forgotten what he learned there. When Cornelius had proved unwilling to answer Lartius's summons, the old soldier had dragged him bodily from his house and ridden through the night with him, never pausing until he reached the villa.

"Thank you, my friend," Vivayn said gravely. "I'm in your debt for bringing my . . . colleague here so expeditiously. There is a stirrup cup of cool wine awaiting you in the kitchen."

"I'll have it in the stable, if it's all the same to you, lady," the old soldier answered. "As for the wizard here . . . you're welcome to him."

"You'll rue this treatment!" Cornelius screamed at him. "I'll have reparations of your master, huge sums! As for you, fellow . . . it's a fool who dares my curse!"

"If you please, *colleague,"* Vivayn said sweetly, "when there is talk of cursing to be done, leave it to me."

He turned to stare balefully at her from red-rimmed, shifty eyes set above sunken cheeks. Dust whitened his straggling beard and dishevelled robe, while the woman confronting him with an enigmatic half-smile looked like the princess she was.

"My name is Vivayn."

Cornelius gaped at her. "Vivayn? The British sorceress? She who called in the waves of the sea to drown her father's kingdom?"

That was a story about herself which even Vivayn had not heard before. Clearly there was no stopping rumour, and her legend continued to grow. Well, if Cornelius was impressed by such rubbish, it might even prove useful, she thought; but then, visibly, behind the narrowed, red-rimmed eyes, his mind began to work in its accustomed ways.

He shook his head. "No. You are not she. Vivayn would never be here. You made a nice thing for yourself with Lartius Falarius, didn't you, by using her name?"

"The name is my own." Her eyes had grown cold and the smile departed from her mouth. "You, Master Cornelius, are a greedy fraud, as we both know; but perhaps you have at least the magician's sight which every apprentice bard in Britain possesses. Yes? Then look behind you."

Slowly, Cornelius turned his narrow head. A gust of wind blew into the sunny courtyard, buffeting him. Before his watering eyes it took the form of a ghostly, rootless tree, a snowy eagle with outspread wings, and finally an ethereal warrior holding a slim-headed spear.

"If I command it," Vivayn said, "he will blow the soul from your body and whirl it nine times around the world."

Cornelius knew too well that it was possible. With a shudder, he knelt before the sorceress, his knees cracking as they bent. "Lady, have pity What do you want from me?"

"That you wash and take some refreshment, before anything else. I do not need the magician's sight to discern that *you* have had a *long hard* ride."

Vivayn would not have denied that much consideration to a dog. Besides, when she faced Cornelius later over a low stone table in a cool alcove of the villa, his nearness was more pleasant for her now that he no longer reeked with the sweat and dirt of travel. His manner was another thing. He had become obsequious, but below that false surface it was easy to sense calculation and *fuming resentment. Vivayn observed* him thoughtfully for a moment before she spoke.

"Master Cornelius, I did not think well of you from the things I was first told. I'll admit that when I asked for you to be brought here, it was in my mind that the haunting of this villa might be your work. Wait, do not puff out with injured dignity! Since then I have seen the ghost of Salvina walking, and I know that it is real, not a conjurer's illusion. You were misjudged."

"Then why am I here?" Cornelius asked resentfully. "Why was I dragged from my house like a slave and done further wrong?"

"Sending a former soldier as a messenger was a mistake," Vivayn admitted diplomatically. "The methods he used are all he understands ... but you know him. Indeed, you must know this whole household better than I." She placed a glittering gold coin on the table between them. "Why has Salvina returned? That remains a mystery. Tell me all that you know of her, Master Cornelius, all that you learned and surmised or even gossiped while you lived in this villa, and I will increase this one coin to three."

Cornelius talked, guardedly at first but then ever more freely, his rheumy gaze forever shifting back to the money. Vivayn spent an enlightening hour with him before sending him to rest in a chamber, unobtrusively watched by the old soldier. Then she attended her host, who waited for her with ebbing patience in the atrium.

"My lord, *we* can *leave now," she said.*

They departed from the villa gates in a small cavalcade led by Lartius Falarius, who sat

his brown gelding with the stiffness of an awkward horseman. Paul rode beside him, younger and more skilled, with a set, gloomy face, and their household priest trotted behind them on a mule.

Dominica and Vivayn travelled in litters that had known better days. The mistress *of* the estate had not *spoken a* word, but her face was like a brittle mask which threatened at any instant to crack from the pain behind it. Two labourers trudged at the rear with digging tools in their hands, while above them the air sprite flew, its wings breaking the hot morning sunlight into flashes of rainbow colour; but only Vivayn with her sorceress's vision could see that.

Outwardly calm, practising the remote, detached confidence she had long since learned to display, Vivayn yet dreaded what was to come. White dust raised by hooves and human feet drifted around her in fine, choking particles as they passed through fields of half-grown grain, and the copse of linden trees which was their destination grew close. With her stomach twisting, Vivayn wished the journey was longer, but it had been inexorably short, and now they were entering the green-gold shadows of the trees.

Among the lindens, one trembling aspen grew, and beneath its delicately quivering leaves she saw the air sprite flaunting in its favourite shape of a fantastically plumed white bird. It minced back and forth on the grass in one particular place while Vivayn watched with morbid fascination, nerving herself to speak.

Moving forward to stand at Lartius's stirrup, she said, "My lord, I am convinced that your daughter lies here."

"Then let's discover," Lartius said harshly, cutting off further words. "If it's true, the sooner she lies at rest in consecrated ground, the better for all."

It wouldn't be so simple, as Vivayn knew; but she stood aside with a certain craven relief while the labourers came forward to open the skin of the earth. They performed their task with the reverence of simple men, and the sod yielded to their spades so easily that anybody could see it had been dug before, in the not-too-distant past.

The silence thickened while the diggers slowly uncovered a pitiful shape wrapped in a mildewed cloak with its original colour still discernible here and there, between the folds. Everybody else stared at the grave; Vivayn watched faces and hands.

"Oh, Salvina," Lartius groaned. His wife turned, shuddering, to hide her face against Paul's chest, and the priest moved forward, ready to fulfill his office.

"Wait," Vivayn said imperatively.

"Wait?" Lartius and the priest said it together. The latter went on to expostulate. "This is an unquiet spirit which must be given rest! Lady, waiting ..."

"I know." Vivayn's voice carried through the grove. "It is her spirit's peace that I am considering; nothing else. She was murdered, so much is clear to us all, and many times she has come back from death to her own family, wailing for justice. Can she receive it if it is not even known who slew her, and why?"

"This is not the time," Lartius began, while his wife and son joined their voices to his in loud agreement. Vivayn, who had expected this, nonetheless felt her heart burn with outrage.

"My lord, it is," she told him. "It is the time. Your daughter did not die at the hands of a stranger; from the beginning I never thought that very likely. She was not active, never travelled without an escort, possessed a father and two brothers, received ever the same guardianship and care as any girl of good family. How then did she come to disappear entirely alone, with none even knowing at what time she left your house? It can be done, yes." Vivayn, who had done it herself, was in a position to enlighten others. "But seldom without collusion of some sort."

Paul lifted his head, which until then had been bent over his mother's. "Not a stranger? What does that mean?"

"Most probably, someone in the villa," Vivayn answered patiently. "I did not know who that might be. However, it was very surprising that not one of Salvina's own family would talk to me about her, even when I had been asked to lay her ghost, except in tepid generalities. You all avoided the subject in your several ways. You, my lord, became abstracted; you, my lady, gushed that she was a pious angel of a daughter and continued unendingly in that vein, but told me nothing real; and Paul could barely hide his anger at the mere sound of his sister's name."

"That's enough from you, witch!" Paul snarled. "You . . . you are speaking beside her open grave ..."

"I know it too well. Listen a little more before you demand *my* silence, for there has been too much silence on this matter, and that is why Salvina haunts you all; why she may continue to walk, even from a consecrated tomb, unless there is speech."

"Continue," Lartius whispered, consternation and pain in his face.

"I shall, my lord. You never spoke of Salvina, even among yourselves, that I witnessed. Another was mentioned even less: your younger son, to such a degree that I never even heard his name from you! Once, in passing, you said that he went seeking his fortune in foreign lands, and that was all.

"So. Two of your children, one a crying ghost, the other an exile, and neither one ever discussed. It was very noticeable, and if you think your servants are as tight-lipped upon these topics as you, you are deceived."

"That is your wisdom and sorcery, is it?" Dominica demanded, her eyes crucibles of hate. "To tattle in the kitchen with slaves! To dribble poison in their presence, suggesting I do not know what, though I suspect something very foul—"

"You do, my lady, indeed. You have suspected that for a long time, until it corroded your soul with disgust, brought you to loathe your lord for not caring enough to see what you had discerned . . . and still you said nothing. I believe that Paul knew, too."

"Knew what?" Paul glared at her with tormented, half-insane bravado. "Say what's in your foul witch's mind, if you dare, but if it reflects on our honour you will pay. I promise you that."

Vivayn said wearily, "Your sister and your younger brother were lovers. They had been so for long. I would surmise that Salvina told him she carried his child, and met him in this place after dark at his urging, and that here he murdered her. How he could tarry on this estate among the rest of you, as he did, for nearly a season afterwards, is more than I'm able to fathom. Why you and your mother never denounced him is more than I know ..."

"Because it is false as the promises of Hell!" Paul roared. "You he, you hag! If you were not a woman and my father's guest, I would strangle you now. And I'll forget that gladly if you stay in my sight any longer!"

"Yes." The shattered disbelief of Lartius's expression hardened into total rejection of what he had heard Vivayn say. "You are right, my son. This ... this is beyond forgiving. Go. Go now! I will denounce you to the church for sorcery tonight. If you are still within reach you will suffer the punishment that crime deserves."

"Whip her down the road!" Dominica screamed. "All of you! Lash her out of my sight!"

"And when I am gone," Vivayn cried inexorably above the hysterical storm, "the haunting will continue. Is that what you want? Look in the grave before you rant of trials and whips. Look! Surely no man but her murderer could have placed Salvina there. Why did he have the hypocrisy or tenderness to wrap her in that long cloak for a shroud, if he was unknown to her? And do you know whose cloak it is?"

The priest had not joined in the family's denunciations. Now, without a word, he reached into the shallow grave and pulled free one end of the rotting mantle. Holding it up, with its folds spread out in the daylight for the first time in five dreadful months, he displayed it in their sight. Formerly peacock blue, faded to the colour of slate, it still showed the pattern of hunting dogs and deer embroidered on its border.

"That was *his,"* Lartius whispered. "Salvina made it for him herself, and he ... he lost it ... at the time she vanished. Heaven and earth, it's true."

"Don't damn yourself by pretending you never guessed!" Dominica spat. "The sorceress is right. You never uttered his name again after he went away . . . any more than I did. You knew from the beginning and never wanted to see. You blinded weakling!"

A weakling indeed, Vivayn thought, to let such things fester among his children. Yet she pitied him for fathering such a brood of vipers . . . including Paul, who she doubted was wholly innocent. Like his parents, he had formed dark inklings of the truth and yet done nothing. Why? Had he perhaps shared the terrible guilt of his brother's incest with Salvina, or at least been jealous? It wouldn't be astounding. Vivayn had suspected him first and most strongly of his sister's murder. At least that much was untrue, and the real murderer absent from among them, unlikely ever to return.

Nor did she regret that he had escaped justice. With what he carried in his heart, he would surely find worse ways to destroy himself than any avenger could devise. As for Salvina, maybe with the truth exposed ...

Before Vivayn could complete that thought, the priest vented a squeal of wild terror as the murderer's mantle blazed in his hands. Dropping it instantly, he lept back from the open grave, while sheets of consuming white flame sprang up between him and the family he served. Shroud and body roared together like the fire that destroyed Gomorrah, and a black pall of smoke rolled through the glade, as foul as the conflagration was pure.

The truth indeed had power. But as she covered her nose and mouth, Vivayn faced the other truth that she would receive small thanks for what she had done. Even Lartius

would not want her, knowing what she knew, in his house any longer, while his family would be furious with hatred against her. Vivayn's welcome was outworn now, and this blinding, choking smoke seemed opportune. . ..

Salvina's funeral pyre blazed like a white star. Coughing, weeping, her father stared at it through the smoke until the brilliant flames sank into her grave, fading from existence. The filthy smoke persisted longer, but at last that too remained only in wisps curling up from the grave, with straight-edged beams of sunlight slanting through it.

Vivayn had departed. Although Lartius called her name, he did so hesitantly, and felt a shameful but profound relief when there was no answer. Nobody else tried to find her at all.

Shaking his head, Lartius stood beside the grave with his wife and heir, feeling old and very tired. The miraculous fire had consumed everything except some ashes as fine as ancient dust. Even they would soon be scattered on the wind, leaving no trace except in his heart.

The haunting was over. **Q**

SCENT OF SANDALWOOD

by William F. Wu

illustrated by George Barr

When he slept, he dreamed.

This time she was walking toward him in the night, her nude body pale and white against the lush broad leaves of untamed growth behind her. Freckles shaded her smiling face and the skin on her arms where they had been exposed to the sun. A tangle of loose, curly orange hair fell in a great triangle to her shoulders, set off by one white flower behind her ear.

She pushed aside a swaying branch of orange and purple birds of paradise and stopped, her toes half-buried in sand. A faint breeze wafted from behind her, bringing him the scent of sandalwood. Her body was not slender, but full as the island was full of life all around her, and she looked at him patiently with blue eyes barely visible in the moonlight.

She was waiting.

The dream blackened and he jerked awake, blinking in the darkness of his hotel room. Dim light entered the room from the sliding glass door to the lanai, probably from some exterior building lamp. The purple and white curtain was fluttering and the rhythmic crash of Pacific waves against the beach came to him on the cool breeze.

Next to him, Vina was sleeping soundly.

He did not want to go back to sleep right away. With a long, deep breath, he threw off the covers and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed in the same motion. He sat still just long enough for his head to clear slightly and then walked to the lanai.

He was nude, but the room was dark and looked out high over Waiohai Bay on the southern coast of Kauai in the state of Hawaii. No one would see him. Still, the breeze was chilly and he drew in a sharp breath at the feel of it. He slid the glass door shut, relieved at the gentle click that cut off the wind.

He was too sleepy to stay up. With a sigh, he went back to bed. When he slept again, he did not dream.

Bright morning sunlight stabbed through his eyelids.

"Rise and shine, Russell," Vina called cheerfully, yanking again on the cord to draw the curtain all the way open. "The Pacific calls! Pineapple, coconut, and poi! Come on, let's go down and get breakfast."

"Yeah, okay, okay." Russ slid up to a sitting position and looked around.

Vina was smiling at him with her straight white teeth, as her black hair framed her fine-boned Cantonese features. She wore a purple and white flowered mini-length wrap that would cover her skimpy matching bikini if she closed it. He still had the image of the unnamed redhead from his dream swimming in his vision. Vina was more slender and slightly less endowed in front, but she threatened to burst out of her suit even so.

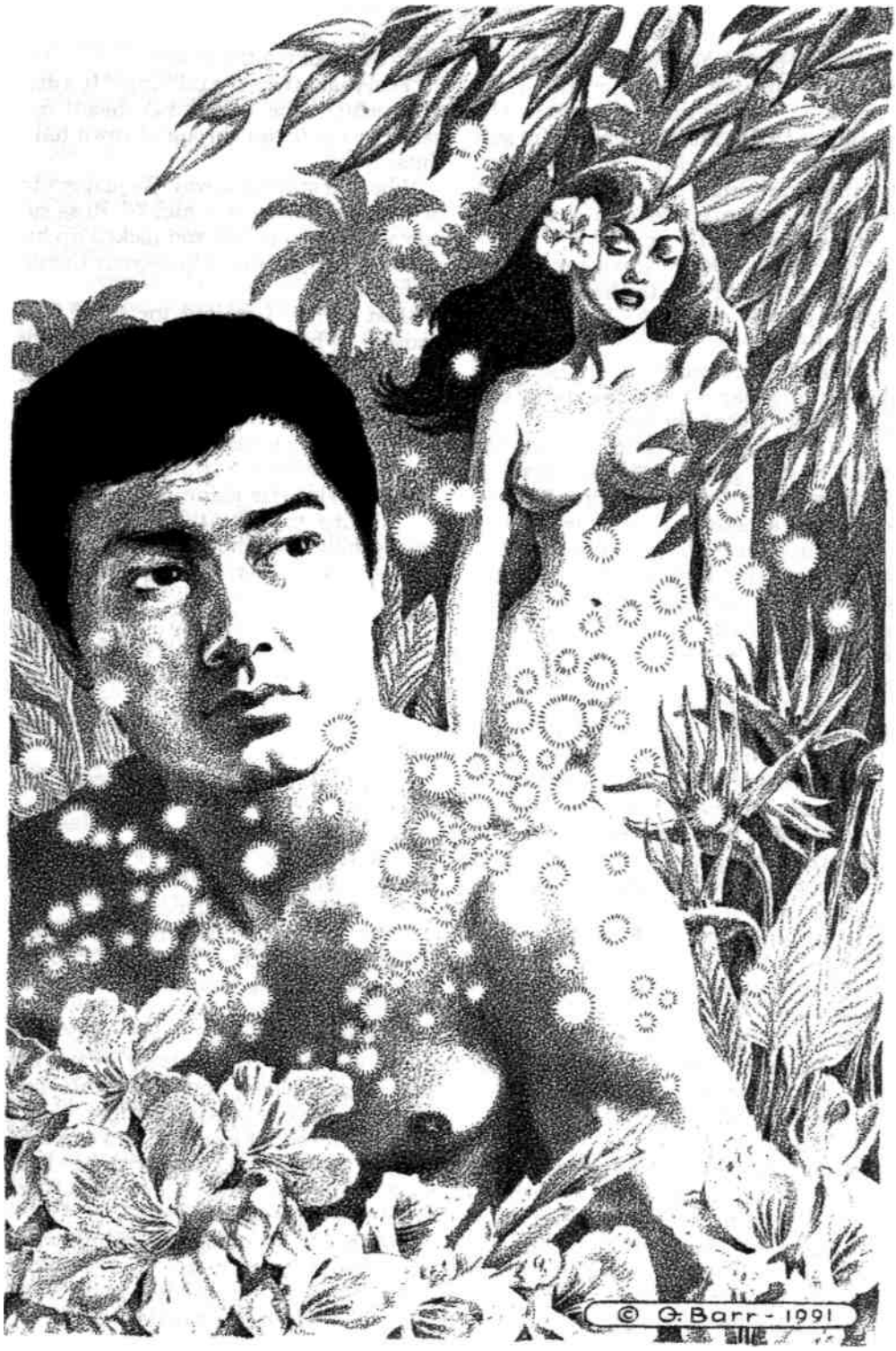
She wiggled her toes in white sandals and the bright red nail polish caught his eye.

He laughed. Vina was vibrant, three-dimensional, in the flesh. His dream faded.

"Okay, so I look like a tourist, hotshot." She threw her arms up, laughing. "I am one. So are you, Mr. Chen. But we could pass as native if we tried."

"Not exactly native. Our names are Chinese, not Polynesian, Ms. Lu."

"Picky, picky. You look the part to me." She started buttoning her wrap. "Come on, hurry up. I can sit in the restaurant like this. Put your swim suit on under your clothes if you want. Bikinis and high-cut one-pieces are waiting for your stares on the beach. I can see them from here."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"You go on down." Russ got up and started unsteadily for the bathroom.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." She gathered up her sunglasses and her straw tote and kissed him lightly before she left.

Russ stepped carefully into the shower, still groggy. As the steaming spray stung his skin and brought him more fully awake, he thought of just how good Vina had looked. Those smiling eyes, that trim, well-toned body, a tan just dark enough to look good without drying her out. Best of all, they had been together two years now and were still going strong.

He knew she was wondering why he had not raised the subject of marriage, but she had never asked. It was a relief. These dreams were not something he was ready to share. They had dogged him, haunted him, for several years now.

He tried to shake off his next thought, but it would not go away: they were getting worse.

Russ stepped out of the bathroom still drying himself. When he had wrapped the towel around his waist, he stepped to the edge of the lanai and looked out again. The Pacific was blue with white surf crashing gently. The beach was already filling up with morning sun-bathers and windsurfers.

It did not interest him, though he normally liked beaches. The island itself seemed more intriguing. He shrugged slightly, turning away. He pulled on the red swim suit Vina had given him as a present for this trip and then dressed quickly.

He found her sitting at a table on a patio overlooking the beach.

"Feel that breeze," said Vina. "It's just wonderful." She raised her head and gazed at the ocean through brown half-tints.

"I hope it stays this way. We just got in at what, midnight last night?" Russ sat down across from her and picked up his menu. "Hey, you don't have your breakfast yet."

"Just coffee. I waited for you." She paused. "What do you mean, you hope it stays this way? This is normal for the season. Why should it change?"

He shrugged. "I didn't sleep too well. It makes me cynical."

A moment later, a waitress appeared at Russ's side. He glanced up and drew in a sharp breath at her long, curly orange hair, though it was tied back.

She looked down at him and smiled slightly.

Her blue eyes, her face . . . He let his gaze drop and saw the familiar well-rounded body and slender waist from his dreams.

"I love you," he heard himself say softly.

Across the table, Vina coughed coffee back into her cup, trying to stifle a laugh.

Russ felt his face grow hot with embarrassment. "I, uh . . ."

She winked and walked away.

"Jeez, Russ, you're crazier than I thought," said Vina, laughing. "You're lucky she didn't pour coffee on your head."

"I have no idea why I said that," said Russ, watching the waitress weave her way quickly among the tables. "Maybe I should apologize or something."

Vina kicked off a sandal and caressed his leg through his pants with her bare foot. "Forget it. Eat hearty and then we'll go lounge on the sand."

Neither of them said anything when another waitress came to the table, behaving as if she did not know what Russ had said to the previous one. Russ ordered tea, eggs, bacon, and pineapple juice. When she had left, he let out a deep breath and grinned helplessly at Vina.

She cocked her head at him in her distinctive way. "You've been funny about this whole trip."

"Yeah, I . . . know." He waved a hand in dismissal.

"No, really. The way you came tearing into the apartment that day and told me how you'd emptied your savings account so we could come here. Making all the reservations without even consulting me. You don't normally try to run both our lives."

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, it was, but don't get me wrong." She smiled indulgently. "It's wonderful to be here. I'm just glad I could get time off, too, on such short notice."

He nodded and set about pouring the tea the waitress brought him. Actually, he had been hoping that she would not be able to come, but he had not been willing to say so. To tell her that he wanted to vacation alone in Hawaii for a week would have been too clear a rejection and he did not really want that.

"How did you happen to pick Kauai?" she asked in a conversational tone. "I hardly know anything about the islands that make up Hawaii. All I've ever heard about, really,

are Waikiki and Diamond Head on Oahu."

"I asked a travel agent for suggestions."

Actually, he had been driven by the name of Kauai, compelled to find it, though he had never been here and had not known it was part of Hawaii until he had mentioned it to the travel agent. He hated lying to her and had rarely done so, if ever, except where his dreams were concerned. They took place here on Kauai, somewhere; he just.. . knew it.

After breakfast, they walked down to the beach. About halfway across the sand toward the water, Vina shucked her wrap, leaned on his shoulder to pull off her sandals, and dropped them all into her straw tote. She tossed in her sunglasses and pushed the tote against Russ, who took it with a grin.

Then she ran off across the beach toward the surf, her black hair swaying and her feet kicking up little sprays of sand. Her snug, narrow bikini bottom barely covered her and a number of lounging tourists looked up as she ran past them. She splashed into the breakers and then dove into the next swell of ocean.

Russ picked out an empty spot to spread the beach towels in Vina's tote. As he stripped down to his swimsuit, he looked out over the water for her. She was now a short distance out, swimming lazily on her back parallel to the shore.

Beyond her, a woman's head rose up out of the water with sea-drenched red hair flowing behind her. She began to walk toward the shore in a neck-deep wave. When the swell of the wave passed her, leaving her momentarily waist-deep in the dip before the next one, he thought she was nude, and pale except for the wash of freckles across her face and shoulders. The next wave rose up to her neck before he was sure.

Did they do that here? He glanced around. Everyone else seemed to be wearing swimsuits. Maybe she was wearing a tan suit. He looked back.

"Come on!" Vina was standing just past the surf, beckoning.

He looked past Vina for the redhead but did not see her anywhere. Other swimmers were in the water near Vina. He started toward her, still looking.

"What's wrong?" Vina asked, as he waded through the splashing surf to reach her.

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Jet lag, maybe."

"You've been working too hard. Come on." She suddenly threw herself against him, grabbing him around the waist, and pushed him under, still holding on.

He suppressed a laugh as they fell into the blue-green, sunlit world under the surface, scraping his back on the sand below the shallow water. His dreams were doing something strange to him, and it had gotten worse here, but he did not doubt his sanity. He could still play if he wanted. When she tried to stand, he clung to her warm, slippery body until the force of the waves threw them up into the crashing surf and then receded, beaching them in the morning sunlight, laughing.

They swam and sunned all morning. Russ kept a nervous lookout, which Vina teased him about as ordinary ogling, but none of the few redheads he saw was the right one. For lunch, they showered and dressed and found bad dim sum at a Chinese restaurant aimed at Coast hao-les.

"Let's do something different," said Russ, as they strolled back into the lobby of their hotel. "I don't think I want to be an ordinary tourist all week."

"I'd like to try this luau tonight," said Vina, stopping in front of a big poster. "That's different."

Russ stopped to read the copy under a big colorful picture. Every couple of nights the hotel sponsored a fancy luau on its back lawn. "It's for tourists again."

"Well, we are tourists, aren't we?"

"Well..." Russ grinned reluctantly.

"Aw, come on." She leaned on his arm, tugging gently.

"Tell you what. Tonight we'll be hotel tourists, then tomorrow we'll rent a car and explore around the island somewhere. Maybe we can find something to do off the beaten track. Okay?"

"Sure!"

That night, Russ and Vina sat with maybe fifty other tourists at a long, low outdoor table. The dinner was good and not really very exotic. As twilight fell, torches were lit and performers stepped up on the long runway set just behind the table.

Young men dressed in what passed for traditional Hawaiian garb began to pound on big drums. A small band was in place on the ground behind the stage. Most of the performers appeared to be at least partly of Hawaiian and Asian descent, but not all. One of them took a microphone and began some light patter.

A line of young women in artificial grass skirts and orchid leis took positions behind him.

"I wonder how they really feel about doing this," said Russ, as a hula began.

"Oh, Russ. It's just a job. Nobody's forcing them, are they?" Vina began to rock sideways with the rhythm of the drums, leaning against his shoulder on alternate beats.

The other tourists seemed to enjoy it. As they began to sway and nod in time, all eyes on the graceful dancing women, Russ felt oddly isolated. He was not sure exactly what he had come to Kauai for, but this was not it.

The sky above the ocean in the distance was indigo darkening to black. The torch flames flickered yellow in the breeze, throwing golden light and ghostly shadows across the dancers on the stage. At the far end of the runway, a toss of long red hair caught his eye.

Russ stiffened and tried to see around the people on his right. They kept moving, however, as did the line of dancers and the shadows they cast. The torchlight was unsteady as the ocean wind caught it.

"Russ?" Vina said in his ear. "What's wrong?"

"I'll be right back." He got up quickly, before she could offer to join him, and scooted out of his spot. Then he walked quickly behind the line of seated tourists watching the performance.

He moved to the end of the runway, where a couple of the drummers in Hawaiian costume gave him curious looks, but no one objected. All the dancers he could see from here had long, flowing black hair set off by flowers behind one ear. Maybe he had seen someone walking by. He glanced around in the darkness beyond the torch light. From what he could see, no one was hurrying away.

Reluctantly, he admitted to himself that maybe the dreams were now triggering his imagination even when he was awake. When the song ended, he returned to his seat.

"Just had to stretch my legs," he said to Vina.

She nodded, searching his face. He began to poke through the leftover bits of his dinner, sliding his other arm around her shoulders. After a moment, she turned her attention back to the show, where it remained.

Late that night, while Vina took her turn in the bathroom, Russ wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped out onto the lanai. The breeze was cool and inviting, but did not draw him toward the ocean from where it came. It also brought, with the scent of salt spray, a sweet fragrance he could not identify.

Flowers were planted all around the hotel grounds; they were probably most of it. Perhaps some of it came from the orchids on every lei he had seen, all mass produced to be seen or worn by tourists who rotated in and out of this part of the island constantly this time of year. Whatever drew him beckoned from the island itself.

He heard the bathroom door open and stepped back inside. As he slid the lanai door shut, it caught his towel and he had to open it again to pull free.

Vina laughed. "Russ, what are you doing?"

"Just getting some air." He wrapped the towel around his waist again. "Want to see what movies are on TV?"

"No, not really." She smiled playfully and walked toward him in the dim light thrown by one of the lamps by the bed.

He stayed where he was, watching. She wore a very short light blue sleep-shirt that was barely translucent. It shimmered slightly as she approached. Her legs were slender and tanned and smooth as they walked forward. Just as she raised one hand slowly to go around his neck, she jerked away his towel with the other. He laughed and bent down to kiss her.

When he slept again, he dreamed again.

Great green stalks stretched along one side of him in endless rows, reaching over his head. They waved in the tropical breeze against a sky blood-red with sunset and darkening fast. On the other side, and in front of him, the stalks had been chopped off close to the ground. Ahead of him, other men were shadowy figures walking away from him, up the rows of stubble.

He swung back a big knife in a hand slick with sweat ... a sword? It was short and stubby. He leaned down and with his other hand bent back the thick stalks of bamboo — no, he realized suddenly. It was sugar cane. He was cutting cane on a sugar plantation.

In the rows ahead, the other field workers were heading out of the fields as darkness came on. None of them was behind him; he had seen to that. Instead of chopping, he straightened up and turned, knowing what he would find.

She peered at him through the tall green stalks in the next row of uncut cane, her wild red hair blowing forward in the rising wind.

He flung the point of his blade into the dirt, where it stuck, and walked toward her. She wore a snug, form-fitted dress of white linen with a line of strained buttons up the front.

Lace tickled her neck over a high collar. He glanced over his shoulder at the other field hands, but they had no reason to look back as they trudged wearily toward their shack quarters.

She smiled, looking up at him with clear blue eyes, as he began to unfasten the tiny white buttons at her throat. His fingers smeared her linen dress with sweat and dirt and green stain. The storm wind blew her hair against his face and the tall cane waved over them. Cool raindrops fell against his eyes as he pulled open the front of her dress to reveal some heavy white piece of underclothing with rigid stays —

Russ awoke suddenly in his hotel room, drenched in sweat, breathing hard. Vina was in a deep sleep with her back to him. Stays? What year had he been dreaming about, anyway?

He sighed, relieved to be out of the dream, and began to relax. Vina's presence was a comfort. So was the thought that he could turn on the TV set if necessary as a distraction.

He was more tired tonight than he had been the night before. Probably all that swimming and sunning this morning accounted for it. He threw off the covers but remained where he was until he drifted back to sleep.

The next morning, Vina was again showered and dressed before he woke up. She roused him cheerfully and, after breakfast, they rented a blue Camaro hatchback. Russ drove while Vina unfolded a tourist map. She had a guidebook on her lap.

"I know, I know," said Russ, as they passed beneath tall hotels and high-rise condos on both sides. "We're still being tourists. At least we can see something besides the hotel."

"We can drive around most of the island in a day," Vina observed on the map. "Depending on how much time we spend stopping. But it's not a complete circle."

"Really?"

"There's a highway that more or less goes around most of the edge. Sometimes it's farther inland than others." She lifted her sunglasses on top of her head to follow the fine print. Today she was wearing that purple and white mini wrap as a dress.

"See anything you want to visit?"

"We have a lot of choices. The site of the first sugar mill on the island is real close. Then the Wailua River is up past the airport. The guide says it's the only navigable river in Hawaii. We can take a little side trip and look at the Wailua Falls."

"Tell you what," said Russ. "Let's just drive for a while. We have all week. Maybe we should look around today and pick places to visit for real later on."

"Okay."

Vina marked the sugar mill and the Falls with her ballpoint pen for future consideration. Russ was driving north and soon they were past the highest concentration of resort hotels and tourist restaurants. They crossed the mouth of the Wailua River just before it poured into the Pacific.

"Fern Grotto," said Vina. "It's upstream. I'll mark it, too. Hmm. Wai-pahee Slide looks interesting, but it may be harder to reach."

Russ said nothing. The waving palms and the lush greenery all around them were beginning to look frighteningly familiar. The back of his neck tickled.

Neither of them spoke for some time. The farther north he drove, the more familiar this island looked. He reminded himself that he had never been here before — not just Kauai, but on any Pacific island.

"It certainly is lovely country here," said Vina after a while, gazing out the window.

Russ nodded, hoping she would not notice the sweat soaking his forehead and temples. His heart was pounding as he drove. He did not recognize anything in particular, but this was the area that had called him — somehow — from across the ocean. Whatever he had come here for must be nearby.

He glanced at his watch. They had been on the road for over half an hour; he was not sure exactly how much more. The road was now curving gradually northwestward.

He wiped the sweat off one palm on his pant leg, then the other. Vina did not notice.

Finally they came to Kalihiwai, a small seaside community. Russ's hands were shaking so much that he could not trust himself to steer. He slowed down and pulled into a parking place with empty spaces on each side.

"What is it?" Vina looked up from the map, which she had been studying again.

He took a deep breath. "I don't feel too good. Maybe if you could drive." The steering wheel was slick under his hands.

"Sure. But why don't you take a minute to walk around? I'll take pictures of the scenery." She pulled a little snapshot camera out of her purse.

Russ got out of the car gasping for the warm, humid air and slammed the door. The ocean breeze was cool on his sweat-soaked face and brought with it more sweet smells.

He walked around the car, squinting in the sunlight.

He was too dizzy to notice Kalihiwai or even the block of shops where they had stopped. His head was spinning and the sweet, fresh scents on the wind drew him in all directions at once. He paced alongside the car, trailing one hand on its finish to keep his bearings.

Vina was watching him with concern, her camera forgotten in her hands.

"I better sit down someplace," Russ muttered, leaning both hands against the car. He closed his eyes.

"I see a place across the street. I'll get coffee and you can just sit if you want."

Russ nodded without looking up. Visions swam before him: the pale nude woman shadowed in near darkness, that flash of red hair among the luau dancers, the sugar cane under the rising night wind — all brought to him now by the sight of this lush island growth and the rich fragrances it gave. He felt Vina take his arm and gently pull him away from the car.

Inside the little air conditioned cafe, insulated from the untamed air outside, Russ began to come around. He ordered jasmine tea and felt his head clear as he sipped it slowly. Its taste and smell, familiar from his childhood, anchored him.

Finally he looked up at Vina with an apologetic smile. "I guess I've lived in California too long. I was raised on exhaust and toxic waste."

She laughed, relieved. "This fresh air can be dangerous, can't it? Take your time and I'll drive us back to the hotel when you're ready."

Russ said very little on the ride home, which passed faster than he expected. He needed some time alone to think. After lunch in the hotel, Vina wanted to sun on the beach again as a prelude to more swimming. He agreed to sit on the sand in his street clothes to keep her company; that suited both of them.

Russ relaxed in a rented folding beach chair, staring at Vina's small form swimming among the waves. The beach was more crowded this afternoon, but he was not really looking for his mysterious redhead. He tried to figure out something, anything, about the dreams that now plagued him both waking and sleeping.

He figured out nothing.

That evening, he lay on the bed in their hotel room, staring at the TV set without seeing the movie flickering on the screen. He had told Vina that she was welcome to amuse herself without him, but she had chosen to stay with him. She rinsed out underwear and her sleepshirt in the sink and put new nail polish on both her fingernails and toenails. Then she stretched out with him, but under the covers, and watched the movie.

Russ was almost afraid to sleep, but he could hardly say so. Still dressed except for his shoes, he continued to stare at the set as the next movie came on. Vina kissed him, and turned out the lights.

The shifting, inconsistent glow from the TV set began to sting his eyes as they grew tired. He thought of caffeine, of going for a walk, of staring out the lanai at the ocean, but discarded them all. No one could avoid sleep.

He fought it as long as he could, leaving his clothes on and the movie running. The set could stay on all night for all he cared. His eyes finally closed-

When he fell asleep, he dreamed.

Moonlight gleamed across a narrow strip of beach from a full moon out of sight above the trees. The ocean was nearly glassy, the waves only ripples. She was already in his arms, nude and ghostly in the dim light that washed out all color.

He, too, was nude and felt the faintest hint of breeze against the sweat on his back.

It was their last time. He could feel it.

"Promise me," she whispered.

I promise. Whatever it is.

"Father is sending me away. He knows but he doesn't know who. I will never tell, no matter what he does."

What have I promised'?

"You told me once that your people believe we live more than once."

Some of my family are Buddhists, yes.-

"If the Reverend's teachings are right, then this promise will not come to anything. If you are right, then promise me that we will meet again."

Again ... in another life?

"Promise me!" She began to weep, and clung to his neck with her soft, fleshy arms as her tangle of hair swept his face.

I promise.

"And that we will know each other when we do." She raised her tear-stained face to search his eyes.

I promise.

"This is how." She pressed something small into his hand and rose up on her toes to kiss him furiously and long; then, just as suddenly, she pulled away and turned to run barefoot into the brush. Her colorless hair danced as she ran; her rear swayed and teased. She snatched up her clothes in a bundle and darted among the trees, out of sight toward the distant plantation house.

He looked down. She had handed him a piece of sandalwood, the fragrant native wood that had been almost entirely exhausted on these islands. It was rare, now that the lumberers had sent it all to East Asia.

The dream became light. Light from the TV

He sat up sharply, his heart pounding. This time he was already wide awake, as though he had never slept. He knew what he had to do and, lest he lose his nerve, he would have to act without thinking.

Vina had not stirred. He put on his shoes, checked his pockets for the room key and car keys, and hurried out, careful to close the room door gently. Moments later, he was driving north on this morning's route for Kalihiwai.

He was tense with excitement yet finally relieved of the terrible feeling of helplessness he had carried these years past. It was the excitement of anticipation. He drove quickly but with careful attention to all the traffic laws. This was no time for more delays.

And for the first time he felt hatred.

He did not know where he was going but he knew he could find it. The darkness outside the car sped by with lights from various buildings and rare traffic. At times the ocean was a black expanse off to his right.

Hatred drove him, and anger, and an incredible rigid tension that began in the muscles of his face, ran down his neck and arms to his death grip on the wheel, stiffened his abdomen, and pained his lower back. He wanted relief, finally, from the nights, the many sleep-tossed nights, the months of nights of teasing and the mounting fear of his dreams. The compulsions that ruled him had to end; he would play them out or destroy them.

At Kalihiwai, he parked the car in the same place as before and started on foot for the shore. The fragrances welcomed him this time, now that he no longer fought them, and he knew them: orchids, violets, ohia, and . .. sandalwood. Of course.

He did not see any. Perhaps he was smelling flowers and plants that had been near this shore over a century ago.

No one was around. He strode quickly toward the water, still glancing about. When he was near it, he walked parallel to it, slowed by uncertainty. He was sweating freely with nervous energy.

The footing was uneven and difficult in the darkness. This was not all wilderness now; he had to avoid wandering into private property and attracting the police. Finally, drenched in sweat and breathing hard, he paused to rest, leaning against a tree.

It was dark here, except for the faint outlines of bushes and trees against the black ocean. Maybe he was crazy. As he gradually caught his breath, he straightened his back against the tree and closed his eyes. What was he doing here, anyway?

"Wenlim," a woman's voice said softly.

He gasped and turned to look.

She was there, finally, behind him — outlined next to another tree, her full body in a contemporary wraparound dress and her hair a wild orange triangle tossed by a rising breeze.

"Maud," he said, wondering at himself. He had recognized the Chinese as his given name and yet it was not his name, not in this life. In that instant he had known her name, where before he had not. "You're . . . real."

She drew closer.

"Do you remember now?" she whispered.

"Some of it. Maybe most of it. I —" He stopped, struck by another flash of memory. "You came back, didn't you?"

"Yes." She even knew what he meant. "After my father sent me away, I married on the mainland. We returned to the island many years later when we inherited the plantation." She paused. "But you and I never spoke again."

"No, but I remember when you returned. You rode in a big carriage. I spent the rest of my life watching you come and go from the big house. When you had children, I watched them grow up. And one day, just one, you looked out your carriage window and saw me watching you."

"Always wondering if you would remember." She moved closer, her voice breaking.

"I'm sorry I pretended to be a waitress at breakfast. I was drawn to this island, maybe even to that hotel, by dreams. The dreams have been horrible, pure torture. When I saw you, I had to find out if it was really you — if you would react."

"What are you doing here? Now? Were you waiting here?"

"No. I bribed the doorman to call me if you left the hotel alone. I followed you in a rented car."

"Why do we look the same?" His voice was nearly a whisper. "We aren't our own descendants or anything like that."

"Part of the promise, I suppose. That we would be able to . . . know." She slid her arms around his neck and began to cry.

He swallowed, fighting back tears himself. Yet another flash of anger surged through him, as well.

"Who are we?" she whispered in horror. "What are we?"

Her father's face came back to him now, lined with age and framed by long white sideburns and a starched white collar; it was stern and haughty. Hating it, as he had hated it for a lifetime before, he grabbed the hair on the back of her head, pulled her head back, and kissed her.

She responded and clung to him hard. Triumphant laughter threatened to rise in him. No lynching, no lash, no banishment could threaten him now; he had no indenture to pay off.

His arms were still tight around her when she reached back and yanked free the cord that held her dress in place. He let her step back to shrug it off; she wore nothing under it in the pale, colorless moonlight. The wind tickled his face with her hair.

With one hand still hooked around his neck, she eased down onto the sand, pulling him after her. Leaves on a branch brushed them both as he followed. The scent of sandalwood rose all around them.

When they lay breathless, side by side, with a sheen of sweat over them, she whispered, "We finally won, didn't we?" Her smile was the faintest shadow on her face.

"We finally won." He smiled at her, comfortable and relaxed.

Her eyes searched his face. He pulled her close again, this time without urgency but with deeper feeling.

"I do love you," he said softly. "Somewhere inside, somewhere I don't even know any more, or understand."

"Someone in me loves you," she whispered.

They embraced for a long time. When they gently eased apart again, he rolled onto his back and stared upward, one arm still cradling her head. The moon was bright and pale above them, a link to the last time they had lain together, like the surf and the scent of sandalwood.

Someone in me, she had said. Somewhere inside, he had said.

Oh, come on. What was he doing here, lying outside in the middle of nowhere next to a total stranger in the middle of the night?

The answer snapped right back: she was no stranger. He had loved her once, maybe as recently as a moment ago. Maybe he still did. She had loved him. Maybe she still did.

He turned his head to look at her. She was still facing him, but her eyes moved to meet his. They looked at each other in the wash of moonlight.

"Who are we?" he whispered, repeating her words of a short time before. "What are we?"

"Two people who loved each other," she said softly, with the faintest of smiles again. "And made a vow."

"And kept it." Tears suddenly flooded his eyes with the words. He did love her, and he had loved her all of this life, and he had never known it.

She reached out and hugged him again, pulling him close to her softness. "And kept it," she repeated. "Both of us."

He wept with the release of tension and she cried quietly with him. When they had both been silent for a while, he pulled away enough to look at her face again.

Her eyes were searching his. The eyes of a woman he loved, the eyes of a stranger.

"What kind of a life do you have?" she whispered.

"Good, I guess. No, I don't guess — I have a pretty good life. Especially . . . without all those haunting, tempting dreams of you."

She smiled her understanding. "Me, too."

"Then . .. what was all this for?" The words were clumsy because he couldn't put his real question into words. He could come no closer than a vague *"Why?"*

"To keep faith." Her soft voice had the calmness of wisdom. "Not just with each other.

With the people we used to be."

"Yeah." Her words struck him deep inside, where he loved her.

He searched himself. The anger and hatred toward her father were gone; the fear of sleep, the mystery, the need to have her ... all had vanished.

"And to free ourselves," she finished. "To live these lives now."

He gazed into her blue eyes. Somehow, some way, he knew her. And he knew she was right.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"The obsession — it's over ... Maud."

"And Wenlim." She smiled gently. "Yes, it's gone. We're free."

"Free," he repeated in a whisper. "Free to go our separate ways by choice, not forced by someone more powerful."

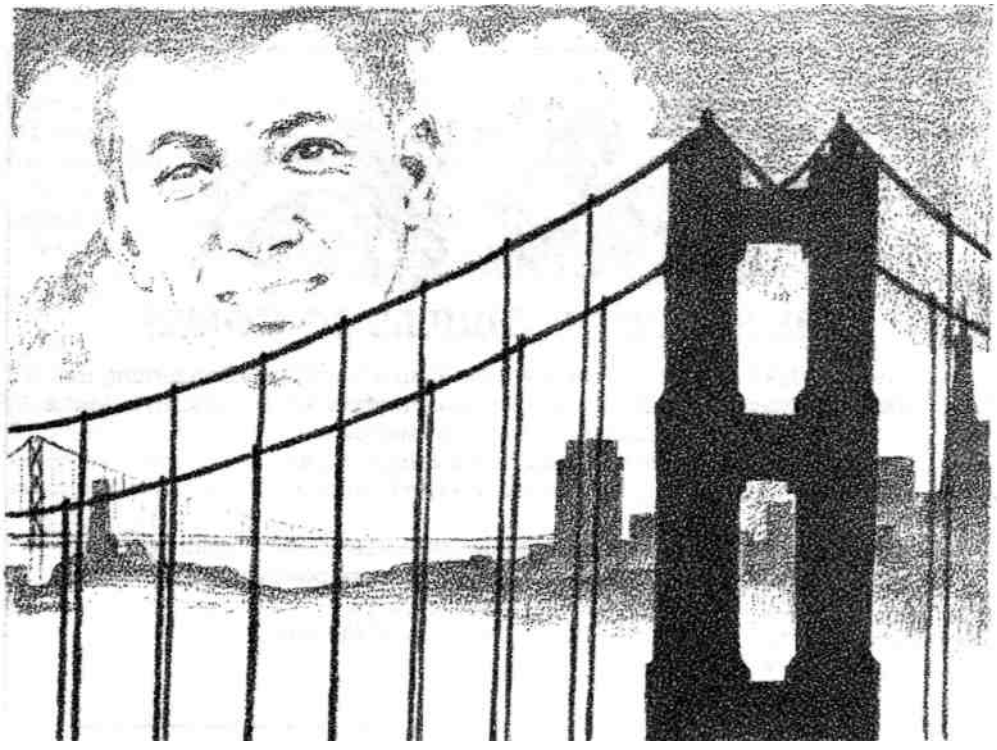
He kissed her again, lightly this time. She responded in kind, with a smile of understanding. Then, still looking into her eyes, he stood up and helped her rise.

The warmth between them remained as he helped her put on her dress. Then he pulled his own clothes back together. He took her hand one last time and squeezed it, feeling the return pressure from her as they found their way to the street.

As they stepped onto the pavement, he gave one final, affectionate glance at her sensuous face. She was still smiling wistfully at him. When she tossed her wild red hair one more time and turned away, he released her hand and walked briskly to his car without looking back.

Russ entered his hotel room quietly enough but he could do nothing about the sound the shower made. When he had dried off and tossed the towel aside, he yanked the sliding door to the lanai ajar to let the breeze enter. Then he turned off the volume on the TV, but let the light flicker over Vina's form under the covers. Only her hair and her peaceful face were visible.

He felt oddly unburdened by guilt as he gently sat down on the bed and looked at her. Slowly, he eased back the covers and slid into bed. Certainly he had no wish to hurt her by making any confession. Just as certainly, he had disrupted his own sense of integrity toward her.



She moved her head up onto his shoulder, not looking at him, but much of the tension had left her. He put his arm around her.

"That's all," she repeated dully.

"That's all."

She lowered her head, looking away. "I think I'd like to leave Kauai. Maybe we could go to San Francisco. We still have the rest of the week left."

"Together? Or do you want to be alone?"

"Together." She eased one hand across his waist. "But I have to do something, too. Russ, I've been having these really weird dreams. That's why I've been awake so early every morning. They've been bothering me for months and I don't think I can go on without dealing with them."

"Dreams?" he asked, as the back of his neck prickled.

"Constant, repetitive dreams. They're always about the same guy and they're always in San Francisco. ..."

Russ lifted his head to breathe in the island breeze. He smelled nothing. **Q**


THE CLASSIC HORRORS
The Thing, he said, would come that night at three...
— H. P. Lovecraft, *The Messenger*

THE WINTER GHOSTS

by Tanith Lee

Winter is a ghost that haunts the world. You know it by its grey transparencies, its crystalline white comings and goings.

It was early in the winter that I went to *the* town to see about some business for my Father, and was told I must call in on my Aunt. I resisted. "She has been good to you, young man," they said. She had paid for my education, and other things. My life was full of obligations, it seemed to me, and nowhere was I free to do what I wanted. I had been the slave of my school, and now was my Father's, working in his shop, where I did not want to be, and trapped in the village of my birth. I had seen and done nothing. But there again, what would I have chosen to do? I had no great driving talents. I liked to read and to lie a-bed, for either of which occupations there was now slight time. Every day I was up at dawn, for on Sunday I must go to church to show my respect to God. At night I ate my supper and fell between my sheets exhausted. What a life. The town and the prospect of visiting it had cheered me a little, despite the winter road and the stubborn old horse, the wayside packed by forest, starving beggars who seemed to signal from every glassy bush, according to rumour, and the first waves of wolves that I hated and feared along with everyone else. But now my sojourn in the town was to be divided between my Father's commission and my Aunt's fancy. It was decided; I was not to stay overnight at the inn, but at my Aunt's house. My heart sank into the floor, it stayed there, and I left it behind.

The ride was not too bad. A faint flurry of snow disturbed the horse, who for a mile kept stopping and shaking his head distractedly. I saw no beggars, and no wolves, though once I heard one howling. I arrived at the town gates before the sun set on a grey thick sky. I should proceed at once to the Aunt's, attending to my Father's wants in the morning.

I had not seen either the town or the Aunt since childhood. Both had been different then, more interesting to me. I had half anticipated some sense of purpose or festivity in the town, and there was none I could perceive, the shops blinkered, the populace running homeward before the cold. Hardly a soul on the streets. The inn looked welcoming with its gold and red sign, but now I was not going there.

What did I remember of the Aunt?

She had been slender and excitable, with a high hot colour in her cheeks. Her dark hair was drawn up with combs, and curled. She wore a dark red gown and was dancing, for it had been a festival — hence my anticipations—memories—of the town.

As a child I had liked her, but she had paid me very slight attention. Her own father was alive then, and had she not been engaged to be married? There was some tragedy or scandal never spoken of to me. Her money had come to her with the town house, at my Grandfather's death; my Father benefitted in other ways. My Aunt was then alone in the world. Having no one on whom to squander the excess of her small riches, she made provision for me and my two sisters. In me a less grateful wretch she could not have hoped to find. Far better I had liked the little drummer doll with his bells, the first gift she gave me indifferentity at the festival. That was fifteen years ago. She would be old now, for she was not young then.

I reached her house, which stood to the side just off from the square. Ancient black trees, already edged with snow, occluded its walls. The shutters were fastened, and not a light showed. The house might have been deserted, the impression it gave. I dismounted, secured my horse, and tried the cumbersome knocker.

I had knocked some six or seven times before I got any answer. And then to my surprise it was the Aunt who had come to the door and opened it.

"Old Ermine died," said she, standing in the dim hall which just barely fluttered at her lamp. "Now I'm my own maid. My own housekeeper, too. You mustn't expect too much," she added, as if we had been speaking for an hour. It seemed she knew me, for who else but the looked-for nephew would call on her? Nevertheless I introduced myself politely, and then she extended her dry powdered cheek for my kiss. She was indeed as aged as I had feared, a skinny old woman in a wrinkled reddish dress, with eardrops of dull pearl which perhaps she had put on to honour my advent. She wore no rings, but her hands had been mutilated by rheumatism. She led me in.

It transpired there was still an antiquated man, Pers, she called him, who would see to my horse, as he saw to the fire in the parlour, and other manly work. I caught a glimpse of

him, about a hundred he looked, but the horse was getting on too, they would be patient with each other.

The parlour was like home: crowded by slabs of the furniture which was all I knew, and that spelled affluence, and entrapment, had I given them names. Crystal and china, perhaps never used, bulged upon a wooden mountain, dully catching the firelight through their dust. The fire was a poor one — what else could you expect of Pers?

"Will you take some tea?"

I doubted there was a drop of spirit in the house, and felt a very real and unjust anger at her, my Aunt, forcing me here to this cage, uncomfortably not equipped to please me in the least.

We had tea, and some thin jam, and she told me I should not smoke, not in the rooms. I had guessed and not tried — truth to tell, I was not much of a smoker, though it was expected in a man, a sort of condoned vice.

By now it was night, these unshuttered back windows very black beyond the rusty curtains. In the town a few panes were alight, but they looked dim and parsimonious. My Aunt had lit two lamps, these windows of hers would have that look.

I forget properly what we spoke of. There were long silences; what could she expect? She asked me of my work, which I disliked, of my school, which she had provided and I hated. She asked of my uninteresting family, and my sisters one of whom was now married to a fat bumpkin very suitable to her.

Finally, in a sort of sneering pity, I said, "I remember you dancing in a red dress. You gave me a doll with bells. I was very young."

"Ah, that was another time." She added, obscurely, "Another woman."

Later we went into the dining room. And I had my first shock.

The long old table was hung with a lace cloth over mulberry velvet, and meticulously laid with china and a silver service. There were ten places, each fully set.

"I thought we dined alone, Aunt?"

"I never dine alone. But then again, you will see no one besides me. I, of course ... I see them all. In my imagination, you understand."

Pers brought in the dishes, there were only three; they had come from an obliging, cook shop, heated up in the kitchen below, but not sufficiently. Water was served with the meal. Very proper I was interested to see Pers pass every plate from the eight other settings. On to each was placed by my Aunt a tiny portion of the frugal meal. Pers filled each goblet from the water jug. I looked on, and tried to picture ghostly fingers raising the glasses, invisible hands plying the knives and forks. Pers left us.

"Who is here, Aunt? Won't you tell me?" I inquired, because I was so very bored, a leadenness had stayed with me compounded of snow, tiredness, inertia. Besides, how could her secret guests be a hidden matter when she paraded them?

But she was reticent.

"People of my past."

"Is Grandfather there?"

"Grandfather? Of course. It is a family table. He is at the table's head."

"Your fiance, too?"

But she lowered her scaly eyes and would not answer. I had been indecorous, probably.

"Why did you never marry, Aunt?" I demanded brutally.

"It was a long time ago."

"I recall everything well. I recall the man —" I did not — "dancing with you downstairs."

"No, no," she said.

But I was irked enough that I did not allow her any rights to pain. She had interfered in my life, it seemed to me, and made things worse. She had forced me here when I might have drunk brandy at the inn. "Surely you can tell me? I've only heard stories of it —"

"What stories?"

"That he jilted you. Left you almost at the altar —"

"Oh the liars! Who said this?" She was inflamed now, surprising me a little.

"Servants — an old nurse I had —"

"None of it is true. He died. He wasn't young. His health wasn't good. The excitement ... He took a chill and was dead in a week."

There was the longest silence yet.

"But you see him here tonight?" I even shocked myself at my grossness. Perhaps the water had made me drunk, I was used to a glass of wine at home.

At last she spoke to me. "Yes. I see them all. I invite them here. Why shouldn't you know? My father, my betrothed. My mother takes her place. And my mother's two

sisters. Then there is my girlhood friend I see, there. She died so young. She is the youngest among us. And there is my tutor, whom I feared and loved, and who darts me terrible stern glances, because he thinks I have forgotten my lessons. And he's right in that, for I have. And old Ermine is with us too, now. I included her a month after her death, for she required her rest before that..."

A nasty but interesting idea came over me that I could see them after all. The Grandfather as I recalled him with his fob watch and high collar, the invented mother I had never myself witnessed and her aged crone sisters in their black and lace and old-fashioned hair. The young friend caught fast forever — perhaps she did not mind — I put her in an antique gown. The mature bridegroom, coughing a touch at his handkerchief. The elderly tutor. And old Ermine, that once or twice I had really seen, for she had been mercilessly sent to the village on my Aunt's errands when only a trace younger. I guessed Ermine was content, to sit at last at her mistress's table, even to the tepid meat and water.

"Pray don't let me prevent you," I said, "conversing with them all, if that's how you usually go on."

"You think me very eccentric," said my Aunt. "But those who are dear to me —those for whom I have a responsibility What else should I do?"

As she had put me through the school, just so she kept these by her, these withered flowers, her ghostly dinner guests. Forever, or until her death, and —why not? — maybe beyond her death, they would sit nightly at this drab table, eat the unpalatable food — I was becoming as foolish as she.

"Well you must do as you think fit, Aunt. And now I thank you for this meal, but ask you to excuse me if I go presently to bed. The long ride tired me greatly, I'm up so early, and must be off early tomorrow, I fear, on my Father's commission."

She was startled a moment, then settled down. The old are early to bed also, she told me, she did not keep late hours. But I must take a cup of tea with her in the parlour, to cheer me for my couch. Out of the kindness of my unkind heart I consented. I spent one further hour with her before escaping to the dusty dark room aloft. There in the great bed, by the poor light of one thin candle, I had meant to read a smuggled book. But my own bane of tiredness came in on me. Soon the lines swam and I blew out the candle and yawned myself to oblivion.

There I dreamed of being a prisoner in my Aunt's house. I could not get out, and was in the act of bribing Pers to open a tiny door in the cellar for me — I think it did not in real life exist — when I woke. It was a milky dawn, and the fine snow blowing, and I had my Father's business to transact before I could start out on my ride home.

My Aunt was not yet risen, so I left my message of gratitude and farewell with Pers.

The business took up half the morning, and when it was done, I gathered myself to the inn and there on top of the bread and stale tea of my hasty breakfast, I put in three brandies against the rigours of the ride home, which truth to tell I was now dreading. I had a sort of presentiment of ill luck, which my drinking the brandy had, rather than dispelling it, brought closer.

Shortly after midday, though it looked more like dusk, I left the town, and the staid old horse and I went down the road, and in among the great stands of the forest.

The snow had stopped, and a freezing was coming on, you felt it approach like a stealthy noise. Now and then a branch cracked in the forest at the cold, but there was no other sound save for the plodding of the horse. A faint smoke hung once in the distance from some charcoal burners. Otherwise there was no hint of any human creature. I might have been alone in the woods at the world's edge out of a legend. And this thought oppressed me, even as I began to have a quite incompatible fear of robbers.

Robbers there were, but not of the mortal type. About an hour after I had got beyond the town, when my home in my Father's house, so despised, had begun to seem to me the dearest place on earth, a small pack of wolves started to follow me.

Despite all that is said, and agreed, on wolves, they are in fact not so much of a foe to a mounted man. But I feared them and disliked them in company with anyone I could think of. My childhood had been spiced by the tales of other children the wolves had carried off and eaten, and only a dead wolf was a pleasure to see, as occasionally I had.

Their eyes were the worst, for their shapes, loping along a few yards behind me, were almost lost in the trees. But out of the afternoon dusk now and then would come a green flash, or I would see an actual eye, fastened on me with a malevolent unique intensity.

I tried a sharp shout or two, which gave them doubts, but then on they loped again. I was the only moving thing of any size for miles. They were curious, and they were hungry.

How I longed for a joint of raw meat I might have brought to throw to them, how I

longed to have drunk more, or less. Or that the old horse might have been pricked to a gallop. But my attempts to hurry him presently confused him — he did not like the wolves either, but was inclined more to congeal to stasis and shiver than to hasten off.

Perhaps they would get tired of me, and let me be.

They did not.

About midafternoon, when I had been followed a good hour, the old horse managed a brief canter, hit us into a low-slung bough that brought snow down on me, and stumbled. Between the bough and the stumble I went out of the saddle and slithered to the ground. As I lay there stunned, the horse, relieved of my slowing weight, gave me a bright whinny, and fled along the road.

I sat up before I was ready, and my head rang. Then I tried to get to my feet and slipped full length again. And then the wolves, there were five of them, came out of the trees and onto the road.

They stood looking at me, and vividly do I recollect their lean black shapes against the snow, each one exactly resembling the model of the others, as if all had been cast from a single mould of wickedness. Their eyes were like the eyes of cruel men, intent and hypnotic, yellow as flames. Was any one less than the others? An entity they were, one thing, and all gazing upon me. I despaired.

In that moment I imagined myself at the gate of death. And this is what I saw: First the terrible rending agony of being eaten alive, and then the mildewed pit of the dead, from which a faint drear voice was calling me. "Come, dear nephew," it said, "sit down. I've laid a place for you."

And out of the teeth of wolves and shadows of the grave I emerged into that cold dining room with its table of mulberry and lace, and sat myself before a setting of dusty china and silver. To my right was an ugly young girl in an outdated gown, and to my left a balding scholar in a shabby coat. All around were old ladies with piled up fake curls, and a coughing man of sixty, and my Grandfather consulting his watch, for I had come late and kept them waiting. And there, opposite his place, sat my Aunt in her red dress and eardrops, nodding and smiling at me, as she helped me to a bobble Of cold steamed food, and Pers filled my glass with water —

"No!" I cried, "you shan't!"

And I flung myself forward at the wolves. I was shouting and roaring, and out of my pocket I had taken my wooden matches, which I struck in panic and nearly set myself alight.

Perhaps it was these brief gusts of fire, or the awful noises I made, and which I myself heard as if from a great distance, but the foremost wolf backed off. As I rushed screaming down at them, all five turned sideways into the bushes, and bolted suddenly away from me between the trees.

They were gone.

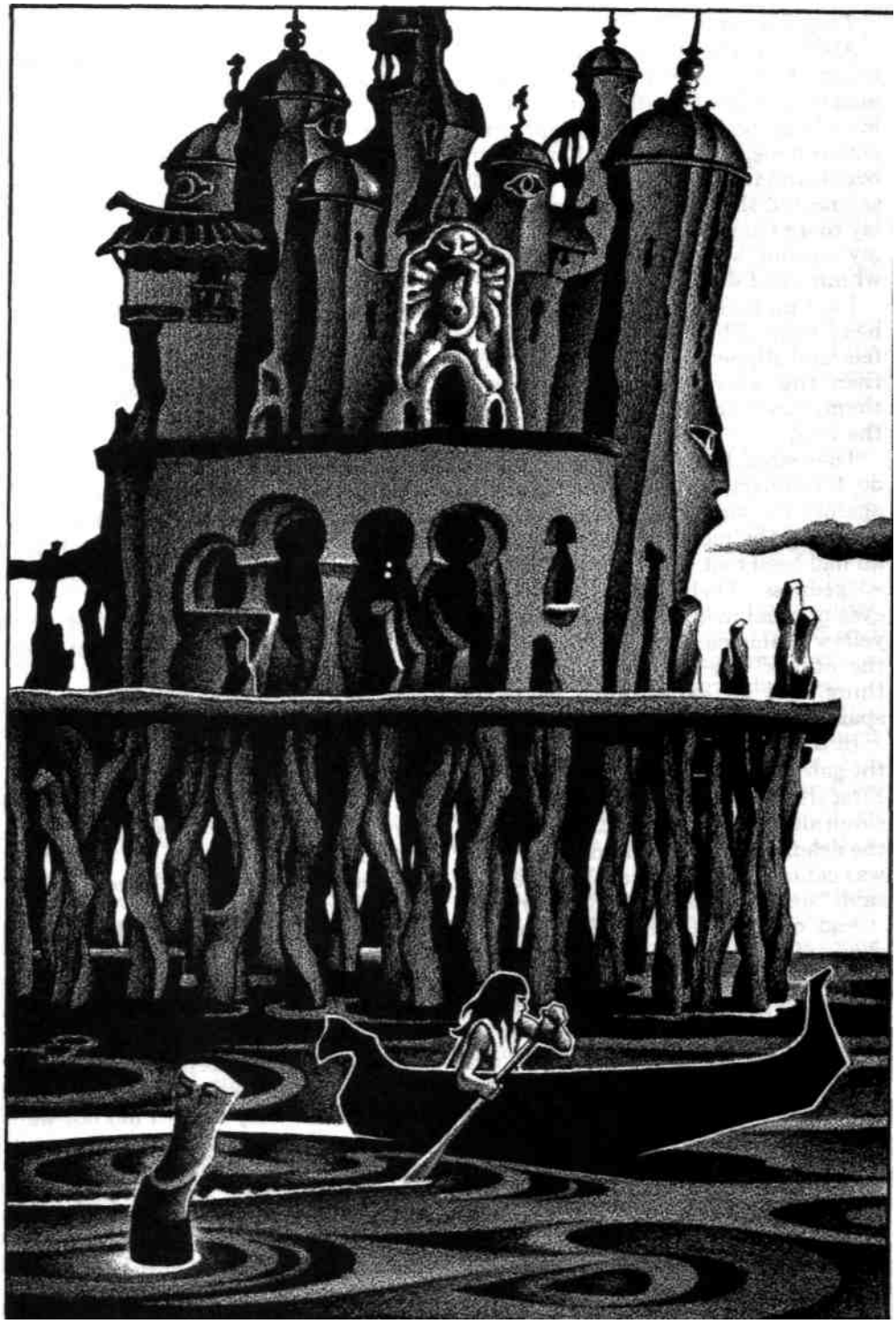
For some minutes I remained, yelling and stamping, jumping up and down in the snow, while burnt matches stuck to my burnt fingers and the hole I had fired in my sleeve.

I recall I howled I would not go, I would not be caught forever, for eternity, in that smothering. No, not I.

When I came back to my wits, no hint of the wolves lingered. A vast emptiness was there, and I was blazing hot inside the great orb of the cold. I went down the road for something to do, and found the horse loitering at the wayside a quarter mile off.

I mounted him in silence, and he walked on.

Who would believe me? I have heard since of men frightening off wolf packs with loud cries and curious behaviour, but that was in other lands, and at another time. For then I knew only I had not been brave and had best keep quiet. More than their eyes and teeth I had feared the dinner table of my Aunt: I did not want to be another of her winter ghosts. It was that cowardice which made me turn against the wolves, and, seven months later, the same cowardice which made me run away for good to another less safe, stranger, and more ordinary life. **Q**



TO BECOME A SORCERER

by Darrell Schweitzer

illustrated by Stephen Fabian

SURELY SURAT-KEMAD is the greatest of the gods, for he is lord of both the living and the dead. The Great River flows from his mouth; the River is the voice and word of Surat-Kemad, and all life arises from the River.

The dead return to Surat-Kemad, upon the waters or beneath them, borne by some secret current, back into the belly of the god.

We are reminded of Surat-Kemad daily, for he made the crocodile in his own image.

I, Sekenre, son of Vashtem the sorcerer, tell you this because it is true.

I

That my father was a magician I knew from earliest childhood. Did he not speak to the winds and the waters? I heard him do so many times, late at night. Could he not make fire leap out of his hands, merely by folding and unfolding them? Yes, and he never burned himself, for the fire was cold, like river water in the winter.

Once he opened his hands to reveal a brilliant, scarlet butterfly, made of paper and wire but alive. It flew around the house for a month. No one could catch it. I cried when it died and the light went out of its wings, leaving it no more than a trace of ash.

He made a different kind of magic with his stories. There was one in particular that went on and on, about a young heron who was cast out of his nest by the other birds because he had short legs, and no beak or feathers. He could pass for human, for all that he wasn't. So he wandered in a lonely exile and had many adventures, in far lands, among the gods, among the ghosts in the land of the dead. Every evening for almost a year, Father whispered more of the story to me as if it were a special secret between the two of us. I never told it to anyone else.

Mother made things too, but not fire out of her hands, nor anything that truly lived. She built *hevats,* those assemblages of wood and wire and paper for which the City of the Reeds is famous, sometimes little figures that dangled from sticks and seemed to come alive when the wind struck them, sometimes great tangles of ships and cities and stars and mountains which hung from the ceiling and turned slowly in a vastly intricate, endless dance.

Then a fever came over her one summer and she spent weeks working on a single, articulated image. No one could *stop her.* Father would put her to bed but she would get up again in her sleep and work on the thing some more, until a vast snaky creature of painted wooden scales writhed throughout every room of the house, suspended on strings just below the ceiling. At last she put a face on it — half a man, half a crocodile — and even I, six years old at the time, knew it to be an image of Surat-Kemad, the God Who Devours.

When the wind blew, the image writhed and spoke. Mother screamed and fell to the floor. Later, the thing was merely gone. No one would tell me what had become of it. When Mother recovered she could not recall anything that had happened to her.

One evening by a late fire, she explained that it had been a kind of prophecy, and when the spirit has departed, the seer is no more than an empty glove cast aside by some god. She had no idea what it meant, merely that a god had spoken through her.

I think even Father was frightened when she said that.

He told me one more installment of the story of the heron boy the same night. Then the spirit of that, too, left him.

Father must have been the greatest magician in all Reedland, for our house was never empty in the early days. People came from all over the city, and from the marshlands; some journeyed for days on the Great River to buy potions and philtres or have their fortunes told. Mother sometimes sold them *hevats,* sacred ones for devotions, or memorials for the dead, or just toys.

I didn't think of myself as any different from other boys. One of my friends was the son of a fisherman, another of a paper-maker. I was the son of a magician, just another child.

But in the story, the bird-boy thought he was a heron —

As I grew older, Father became more secretive, and the customers came no further than the door. Bottles were passed out to them. Then they stopped coming.

Suddenly the house was empty. I heard strange noises in the night. In the earliest hours of the morning, Father began to receive certain visitors again. I think he summoned them against their will. They did not come to buy.

Then Mother, my sister Hamakina, and I were locked in the bedroom, forbidden to emerge.

Once I peeked out between two loose panels in the door and saw a bent, skeletal figure

in the dim lamplight of the hallway outside, a visitor who stank like something long decayed and dripped with the water from the river below our house.

Suddenly the visitor glared directly at me as if he had known I was there all along, and I turned away with a stifled yelp. The memory of that horrible, sunken face stayed with me in my dreams for a long time.

I was ten. Hamakina was just three. Mother's hair was starting to go gray. I think the darkness began that year. Slowly, inexorably, Father became, not a magician who worked wonders, but a sorcerer, to be feared.

Our house stood at the very edge of the City of the Reeds, where the great marsh began. It was a vast place, which had belonged to a priest before Father bought it, a pile of wooden domes and sometimes tilted boxlike rooms and gaping windows fashioned to look like eyes. The house stood on log pilings at the end of a long wharf, otherwise not a part of the city at all. Walk along that wharf the other way and you came to street after street of old houses, some of them empty, then to the square of the fishmongers, then to the street of scribes and paper-makers, and finally to the great docks where the ships of the river rested at their moorings like dozing whales.

Beneath our house was a floating dock where I could sit and gaze underneath the city. The stilts and logs and pilings were like a forest stretched out before me, dark and endlessly mysterious.

Sometimes the other boys and I would paddle our shallow boats into that darkness, and on some forgotten dock or rubbish heap or sandbank we'd play our secret games; and then the others always wanted me to do magic.

If I could, I refused with great and mysterious dignity to divulge awesome mysteries I actually knew no more about than they. Sometimes I did a little trick of sleight-of-hand, but mostly I just disappointed them.

Still, they tolerated me, hoping I would reveal more, and also because they were afraid of Father. Later, when the darkness began, they feared him even more; and when I wandered in the gloom beneath the city, paddling among the endless wooden pillars in my little boat, I was alone.

I could not understand it then, but Father and Mother quarrelled more, until in the end, I think, she too was afraid of him. She made me swear once never to become like my father, "never, never do what he has done," and I swore by the holy name of Surat-Kemad without really knowing what I was promising not to do.

Then one night when I was fourteen, I woke up suddenly and heard my mother screaming and my father's angry shouts. His voice was shrill, distorted, barely human at times, and I thought he was cursing her in some language I did not know. Then came a crash, pottery and loose wood falling, and silence.

Hamakina sat up beside me in bed.

"Oh, Sekenre, what is it?"

"Quiet," I said. "I don't know."

Then we heard heavy footsteps, and the bedroom door swung inward. Father stood in the doorway, his face pale, his eyes wide and strange, a lantern in his upraised hand. Hamakina turned to avoid his gaze.

He remained there for a minute as if he hadn't seen us, and slowly the expression on his face softened. He seemed to be remembering something, as if he were waking up from a trance. Then he spoke, his voice faltering.

"Son, I've had a vision from the gods, but it is *your* vision, by which you will become a man and know what your life is to be."

I was more bewildered than frightened. I got out of bed. The wooden floor was smooth and cold beneath my bare feet.

Father was forcing himself to be calm. He clung to the edge of the doorway and trembled. He was trying to say something more, but no words came, and his eyes were wide and wild again.

"Now?" I asked without realizing what I was saying.

Father strode forward. He seized me roughly by my robe. Hamakina whimpered, but he ignored her.

"The gods don't send visions just when it's convenient. *Now.* You must go into the marshes *right now,* and the vision will come to you. Remain there until dawn."

He dragged me from the room. I glanced back once at my sister, but Father merely closed the door behind me and barred it from the outside, locking her in. He blew out his lantern.

The house was entirely dark and smelled of river mud and worse. There was a trace of something burning, and of corruption.

Father raised a trapdoor. Below floated the dock where all our boats were moored.

"Down you go. *Now."*

I groped my way down, fearfully, shivering. It was early in the spring. The rains were nearly over, but not quite, and the air was cold and full of spray.

Father closed the trapdoor over my head.

I found my boat and got in, and sat there in the darkness cross-legged, my feet drawn up under my robe. Something splashed nearby once, twice. I sat very still, clutching my paddle firmly, ready to strike at I knew not what.

Slowly the darkness lessened. Out beyond the marshes, the moon peered through thinning clouds. The water gleamed silver and black, waves and shadow. And it was then that I made out what seemed to be hundreds of crocodiles drifting in the water around me, their snouts barely breaking the surface, their eyes sparkling in the dim moonlight.

It was all I could do not to scream, to keep silent. It was the beginning of my vision, I knew, for these beasts could easily have tipped over my boat and devoured me. In any case, there were too many of them for them to be natural creatures.

It was as I leaned over to slip off my mooring line that I saw, quite clearly, that they were not even crocodiles. Their bodies were human, their backs and buttocks as pale as the flesh of drowned men. These were the *evatim,* the messengers of the river god. No one ever saw them, I'd always been told, save when he is about to die, or else when the god wishes to speak.

So my father had been telling the truth. There was a vision. Or I was going to die, then and there.

I paddled a short distance off, very carefully. The *evatim* parted before me. The tip of my paddle never touched one.

Behind me, in the darkness, I heard someone coming down the ladder onto the dock. Then something heavy splashed in the water. The *evatim* hissed, all as one. It was like the rising of a great wind.

I paddled for what felt like hours among the posts and pillars and stilts, groping my way with my paddle sometimes, until at last I came to open, deep water. I let the current take me a short distance, and looked back at the City of the Reeds where it crouched amid the marsh like a huge, slumbering beast. Here and there watchlamps flickered, but the city was dark. No one goes outdoors in the city at night: because the mosquitoes swarm in clouds at sunset, thick as smoke; because the marsh is full of ghosts who rise up out of the black mud like mist; but mostly for fear of the *evatim,* the crocodile-headed servants of Surat-Kemad, who crawl out of the water in the darkness and walk like men through the empty streets, their heavy tails dragging.

Where the city reached into deep water, ships lay at anchor, bulging, ornately-painted vessels come upriver from the City of the Delta. Many were ablaze with lights, and from them sounded music and laughter. The foreign sailors do not know our ways or share our fears.

In the City of the Reeds, all men who are not beggars wear trousers and leather shoes. Children wear loose robes and go barefoot. On the very few cold days they either wrap their feet in rags or stay indoors. When a boy becomes a man, his father gives him shoes. It is an ancient custom. No one knows the reason for it.

Father had hurried me out of the house without even a cloak. So I passed the night in quiet misery, my teeth chattering, my hands and feet numb, the cold air burning inside my chest.

As best I could, I steered for the shallows, in among the grasses and reeds, making my way from one patch of open water to the next, ducking low beneath vines, sometimes forcing my way through with my paddle.

A vision of sorts came to me, but all disjointed. I did not understand what the god was trying to say.

The moon seemed to set very suddenly. The river swallowed it, and for an instant moonlight writhed on the water like Mother's thousand-jointed crocodile image somehow glowing with light.

I set my paddle down in the bottom of the boat and leaned over, trying to make out the thing's face. But I only saw muddy water.

Around me, dead reeds towered like iron rods. I let the boat drift. I saw a crocodile once, huge and ancient and sluggish with the cold, drifting like a log. But it was merely a beast and not one of the *evatim.*

A bit later I sat in a stagnant pool surrounded by sleeping white ducks floating like puffs of cotton on the black water.

Night birds cried out, but I had no message from them.

I watched the stars, and by the turning of the heavens I knew it was no more than an hour before dawn. I despaired then and called out to Surat-Kemad to send me my vision. I did not doubt that it would come from him, not from some other god.

At the same time, I was afraid, for I had made no preparation, no sacrifice.

But Surat-Kemad, he of the monstrous jaws, was not angry, and the vision came.

The Light rain had stopped, but the air was colder yet, and, trembling and damp, I huddled in the bottom of my boat, both hands against my chest, clutching my paddle. Perhaps I slept. But, very gingerly, someone touched me on the shoulder.

I sat up in alarm, but the stranger held up a finger, indicating that I should be silent. I could not see his face. He wore a silver mask of the Moon, mottled and rough, with rays around the edges. His white, ankle-length robe flapped gently in the frigid breeze.

He motioned me to follow, and I did, silently dipping my paddle into the water. The stranger walked barefoot on the surface, ripples spreading with every step.

We travelled for a long time through a maze of open pools and tufts of grass, among the dead reeds, until we came to a half-submerged ruin of a tower, no more than a black, empty shell covered with mud and vines.

Then hundreds of other robed, masked figures emerged from the marsh, not walking on the water as had my guide, but *crawling,* their movement a curious waddle, their bodies swaying from side to side as does that of a crocodile when it comes out on land. I watched in amazement as they gathered around us, bowing low at the upright man's feet, as if in supplication.

He merely spread his hands and wept.

Then I recalled one of my father's stories, about a proud king, whose palace was more resplendent than the sun, of whom the gods were jealous. One day a crocodile-headed messenger came into the glittering court and hissed, "My master summons you, 0 King, as he summons all." But the king, in his pride, bade his guards beat the messenger and throw him into the river whence he came, for the king did not fear the gods.

And Surat-Kemad did not care to be feared, only obeyed, so the Great River flooded the land, swallowing the palace of the king.

"That's not much of a story," I'd complained to Father.

"It is merely true," he said.

Now I looked on in awe, desperate to ask so many questions but afraid to speak. But the sky lightened, and the weeping of the standing man became merely the wind rattling in the reeds.

The sun rose, and the supplicants removed their masks and became merely crocodiles. Their robes were somehow gone in the shifting light. I watched their dark bodies sink into the murky water.

I looked to the standing man, but a long-legged bird remained where he had been. It let out a cry and took to the air, wings thundering.

The warm sun revived me. I sat up, coughing, my nose running, and looked around. The sunken tower was still there, a heap of dead stone. But I was alone.

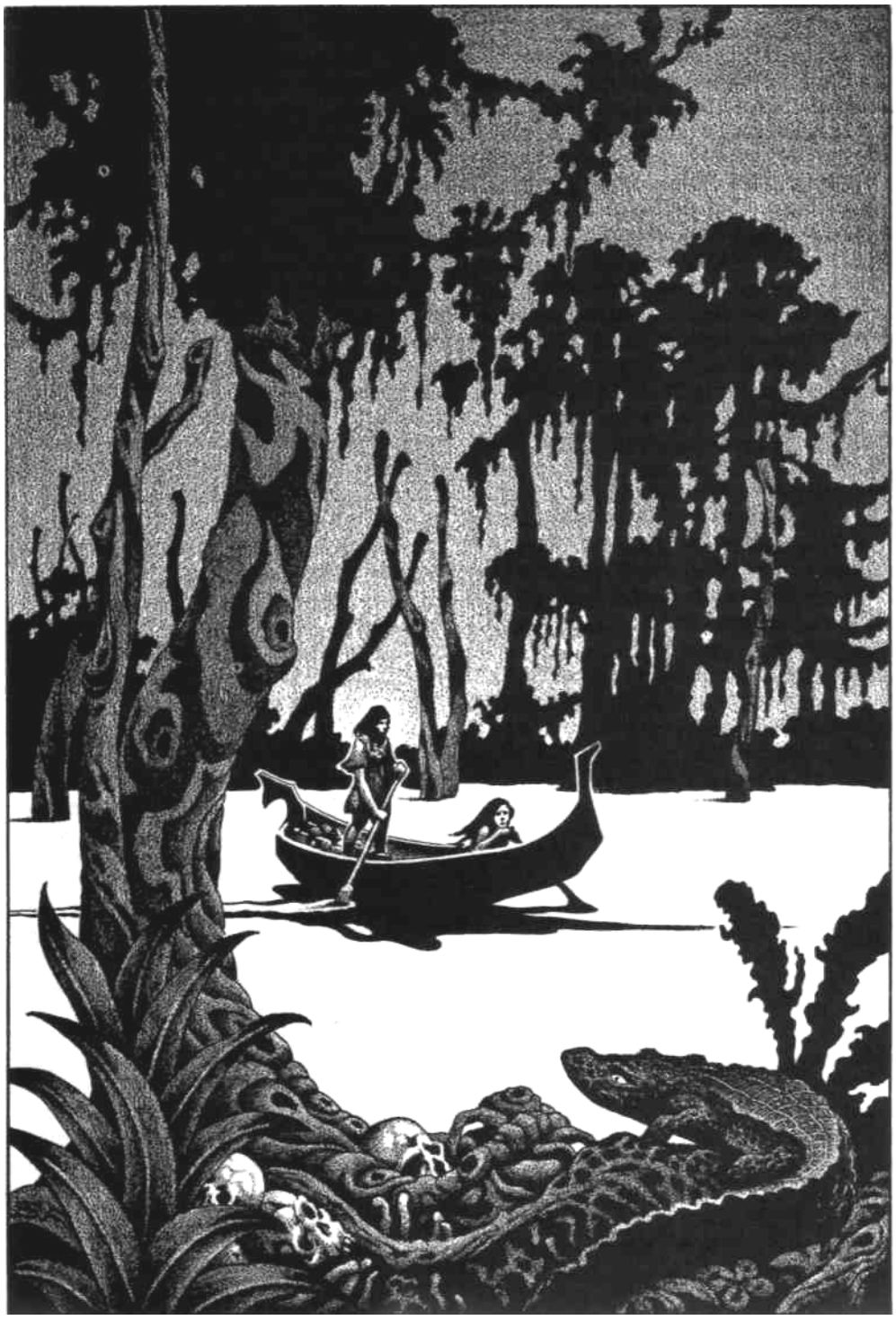
It was midday before I got back to the City of the Reeds.

The city is a different place in the daylight, bright banners waving from towers, houses likewise bright with hangings and with designs painted on walls and roofs. The ships of the river unload by day, and the streets are filled with the babble of tongues, while traders and officials and barbarians and city wives all haggle together.

It is a place of sharp fish smells and strange incense and leather and wet canvas and unwashed rivermen who bring outlandish beasts from the villages high in the mountains, near the birthplace of the river.

By day, too, there are a thousand gods, one for every stranger, for every tradesman, for everyone who has ever passed through or resided or merely dreamed of a new god during an afternoon nap. In the street of carvers one can buy idols of all these gods, or even have new images made if one happens to be divinely inspired at the time.

At night, of course, there is only Surat-Kemad, whose jaws rend the living and the dead, whose body is the black water, whose teeth are the stars.



But it was by day I returned, making my way through the tangle of ships and smaller boats, past the wharves and floating docks, then beneath the city until I came out the other side near my father's house.

Hamakina ran to me when I emerged through the trapdoor, her face streaming with tears. She embraced me, sobbing.

"Oh Sekenre, I'm so afraid!"

"Where is Father?" I asked, but she only screamed and buried her face in my robe. Then I said, "Where is Mother?"

Hamakina looked up into my face and said very softly, "Gone."

"Gone?"

"She has gone to the gods, my son."

I looked up. Father had emerged from his workroom, his sorcerer's robe wrapped loosely over soiled white trousers. He hobbled toward us, dragging himself as if he didn't quite know how to walk. I thought there was something wrong with his legs.

Hamakina screamed and ran out onto the wharf. I heard the front door bang against the outside of the house.

I stood my ground.

"Father, where is Mother?"

"As I said . .. gone to the gods."

"Will she be coming back?" I asked, hopeless as I did.

Father did not answer. He stood there for a moment, staring into space, as if he'd forgotten I was even there. Then he said suddenly, "What did you see, Sekenre?"

I told him.

He was silent again.

"I don't know," I said. "It didn't mean anything. Did I do something wrong?"

For once he spoke to me tenderly, as he had in the old days when I was very small.

"No, faithful child, you did nothing wrong. Remember that the vision of your life goes on as long as your life does; and, like your life, it is a mystery, a maze, with many turnings, many things suddenly revealed, many things forever hidden. The longer you live, the more you will understand what you have seen this night. Each new piece of the vast puzzle changes the meaning of all that has gone before as you draw nearer and nearer the truth ... but you never reach your destination, not entirely."

The cold and the damp had given me a fever. I lay ill for a week, often delirious, sometimes dreaming that the masked figure in the vision stood at my bedside, barefoot on the surface of the black water while dead reeds rattled all around. Sometimes, as the sun rose, he took off his mask and a heron screamed at me, leaping into the air on thunderous wings. Sometimes it was my father beneath the mask. He came to me each dawn, put his hand on my forehead, recited words I couldn't make out, and bade me drink a sweet-tasting syrup.

After the fever had gone, I saw him very little. He retreated to his workroom, noisily barring the door. Hamakina and I were left to care for ourselves. Sometimes it was hard just finding food. We tried to assemble the leftover pieces of Mother's *hevats* but seldom got much for the results.

Meanwhile, lightning and thunder issued from the workroom. The whole house shook. Sometimes there were incredibly foul odors, and my sister and I would spend our nights outdoors, on rooftops among the beggars of the city, despite all the dangers. And once, as I crouched by the workroom door, terrified and holding back tears, Father spoke and I heard him answered by many voices, all of them faint and far away. One sounded like Mother. All were afraid, pleading, babbling, screaming.

At times I wondered where Mother had gone, and tried to comfort Hamakina.

But in my worst fears, I knew perfectly well what had happened to her. I could not tell Hamakina that.

There was no one I could turn to, for now Father was the most feared of all the city's black sorcerers, and even the priests dared not anger him. Demons of the air and of the river regularly convened at our house. I heard them scratching, their wings and tails dragging, while my sister and I huddled in our room, or kept to the rooftops.

In the streets, people turned away when they saw us, made signs and spat.

Then one day Father came to me, moving slowly and painfully, as if he were very old. He sat me down at the kitchen table and stared into my eyes for a long time. I was afraid to turn from his gaze. He had been weeping.

"Sekenre," he said, very gently, "do you love your father still?"

I could not answer.

"You must understand that I love you very much," he said, "and I always will, no matter what happens. I want you to be happy. I want you to do well in your life. Marry a

fine girl. *I don't want you to become what I have become.* Be a friend to everybody. Have no enemies. Hate no one." "

"But. . . how?"

He took me by the hand, firmly. "Come. Now."

I was terribly afraid, but I went.

There was near panic as he came into the city, yanking me along, walking in his strange way with his whole back writhing and rippling beneath his sorcerer's robe like a serpent trying to stagger on heavy legs.

People shouted and ran as we passed. Women snatched up their children. A pair of priests crossed their staves to make a sign against us. But Father ignored them all.

We came to a street of fine houses. Astonished faces stared down at us from high windows. Then Father led me to the end of an alley, down a tunnel, and into a yard behind one of the mansions. He knocked at a door. An old man appeared, by his garb a scholar. He gasped and made a sign to ward off evil.

Father pushed me inside.

"Teach my son what you know," he said to the old man. "I will pay well."

That was how I became an apprentice to Velachronos the historian, scribe, and poet. I knew letters already, but he taught me to make fine ones full of swirls and beautiful colors. Then he taught me something of the history of our city, and of the river and the gods. I sat with him for long hours, helping to transcribe ancient books.

Clearly Father wanted me to become learned, so that I would dwell in honor among the people of the city, and know at least modest comfort, as Velachronos did. The old man remarked on this once, "You seldom see a rich scholar — or a starving one."

But my sister was ignored completely. Once, when I came home after lessons and found Father outside of his workroom, I said, "What about Hamakina?"

He shrugged. "Take her along. It hardly matters."

So Velachronos had two apprentices. I think he accepted us out of fear at first. I tried to convince him we were not monsters. Gradually he acquiesced. Father paid him double. I labored over the books. Hamakina, too, learned to paint beautiful letters, and Velachronos taught her something of music, so she could sing the ancient ballads of the city. Her voice was very beautiful.

He was kind to us. I remember the time with him fondly. He was like a grandfather or a generous uncle. He took us to the children's festival that spring, and rose from his seat to applaud when Hamakina won the prize in the contest of the masks and the sparrow-headed image of the god Haedos-Kemad leaned forward and showered her with candy.

I felt too old for that sort of thing, yet Father had never taken me to the priests to declare me a man. It is a simple rite unless parents want to make it elaborate. There is only a small fee. I had already had my vision from the gods. Yet Father did not take me and I remained a child, either because I was somehow unworthy, or he merely forgot.

Meanwhile his sorceries grew more extreme. At night the sky flickered from horizon to horizon, and sometimes he came out onto the wharf in front of our house to speak with the thunder. It answered back, calling out his name, and, on occasion, my name.

The stenches from the workroom worsened, and there were more voices, more terrifying visitors in the night. But, too, Father would sometimes stagger about the house, pulling at his beard, flailing his arms like a madman, like someone possessed by a frenzied spirit, and he would seize me and shake me so hard it hurt and plead with me, "Do you love me, son? Do you still love your father?"

I could never answer him. It drove me to tears many times. I locked myself in my room and he would stand outside the door, sobbing, whispering, "Do you love me? Do you?"

Then came an evening when I sat studying in my room — Hamakina was off somewhere — and a huge barbarian adventurer climbed in through the window, followed by a little rat-faced man from the City of the Delta.

The barbarian snatched the book from my hands and threw it into the river. He took me by the wrist and jerked. My forearm snapped. I let out a little yelp of pain and the rat-faced man held a long, thin knife like an enormous pin to my face, pressing gently on one cheek, then the other, just below my eyes.

He whispered, flashing filthy teeth. His breath stank.

"Where's yer famous wizard da' who's got all the treasure? Tell us, brat, or I'll make a blind girl out of ye and tie yer guts fer braids —"

The barbarian merely grabbed me by the front of my gown in one huge hand and slammed me against the wall so hard that blood poured out of my nose and mouth.

I could only nod to my left, toward Father's workroom.

Later, when I returned to consciousness, I heard the two of them screaming. The

screaming went on for days behind Father's door, while I lay feverish and Hamakina wiped my forehead but could do nothing more. It was only when the screaming faded to distant murmurs, like the voices I'd heard that one time before, like the voice that might have been Mother's, that Father came and healed me with his magic. His face was ashen. He looked very tired.

I slept and the barefoot man in the silver mask knelt on the surface of the water, sending ripples all around my bed. He whispered to me the story of the heron boy who stood among the flock in the dawn light and was left behind when the birds took flight, standing there, waving his graceless, featherless arms.

A few weeks later, Velachronos threw us out. I don't know what happened with him at the end. Perhaps it was just a rumor, or a culmination of rumors, or he might even have heard the truth about something I did not know, but one day, when Hamakina and I came for our lessons, he stood in the doorway and all but shrieked, "Begone! Get out of my house, devil-spawn!"

He wouldn't explain or say anything more. There was nothing to do but leave.

That night a vast storm came up from the mouth of the river, a black, swirling mass of clouds like a monster huge enough to smother the world, lumbering on a thousand flickering, fiery legs. The river, the very marshes, raged like the frenzied chaos-ocean that existed before the Earth was made, while the sky thundered light and dark; and for an instant you could see for miles across froth-capped waves and reeds lashing in the wind; then there was only utter blackness and stinging rain and the thunder once more, thunder calling out my father's name again and again.

He answered it, from within his secret room, his voice as loud as the thunder, speaking a language that did not sound like human speech at all, but shrieks and grating cackles and whistles like the raging wind.

In the morning, all the ships were scattered and half the city was blasted away. The air was heavy with the cries of mourners. The river ran beneath our house muddy and furious where before it had been mere shallows.

Many people saw the crocodile-headed messengers of the Devouring God that day.

My sister and I sat in our room, almost afraid to speak even to each other. We could not go out.

From Father's workroom there was only silence that went on for so long that, despite everything, I began to fear for him. I met Hamakina's gaze, and she stared back, wide-eyed and dazed. Then she nodded.

I went to the workroom door and knocked.

"Father? Are you all right?"

To my surprise, he opened the door at once and came out. He steadied himself against the doorway with one hand and hung there, breathing heavily. His hands were gnarled, like claws. They looked like they had been burned.

His face was so pale, so wild, that part of me wasn't even sure it was Father until he spoke.

"I am going to die," he said. "It is time for me to go to the gods."

And, again despite everything, I wept for him.

"Now you must be a faithful son for the last time," he said. "Gather reeds and bind them together into a funeral boat. When you are done, I shall be dead. Place me in it and set me adrift, so that I shall come, as all men do, to Surat-Kemad."

"No, Father! It isn't so!"

When I wept, I was remembering him as he had been in my early childhood, not as he had become.

He squeezed my shoulder hard and hissed angrily, "Quite inevitably, it *is*. Go!"

So Hamakina and I went together. Somehow our house had lost only a few shingles in the storm, and the dock below the trapdoor was still there. My boat was too, but sunken and dangling from its line. We struggled to pull it up, dumped it out, and set it afloat. Miraculously, not even the paddles had been lost.

We climbed in and paddled in silence for about an hour, far enough into the marshes that the waters were again shallow and still and reeds as thick as my arm swayed against the sky like trees. With a hatchet I'd brought along for the purpose, I cut down several, and Hamakina and I labored throughout the day to make a crude boat. In the evening, we towed it back to our house.

I ascended the ladder first, while she waited fearfully below.

For the first time I could remember, the door to Father's workroom was left open. He lay inside, on a couch amid shelves of books and bottles, and at a glance I knew that he was dead.

There was little to do that night. Hamakina and I made a cold supper out of what we

could find in the pantry. Then we barred the windows and doors, and pushed a heavy trunk over the trapdoor, lest the *evatim* crawl up and devour the corpse, as they sometimes do.

I explored the workroom only a little, going through Father's books, opening trunks, peering into coffers. If he had any treasure, I didn't find it. Then I picked up a murky bottle and something inside screamed at me with a tiny, faraway voice. I dropped the bottle in fright. It broke and the screaming thing scurried across the floorboards.

The house was full of voices and noises, creakings, whispers, and sighs. Once something heavy, like a huge bird perhaps, flapped and scraped against a shuttered window. My sister and I stayed up most of the night, lanterns in our hands, armed with clubs against whatever terrors the darkness might hold. I sat on the floor outside the workroom, leaning against the door. Hamakina lay with her face in my lap, sobbing softly.

Eventually I fell asleep, and Mother came to me in a dream, leaning over me, dripping water and river mud, shrieking and tearing her hair. I tried to tell her that all would be well, that I would take care of Hamakina, that I would grow up to be a scribe and write letters for people. I promised I wouldn't be like Father.

But still she wept and paced back and forth all night. In the morning, the floor was wet and muddy.

Hamakina and I rose, washed, put on our best clothes, and went to the priests. On the way, some people turned their backs to us while others screamed curses and called us murderers. In the square before the temple, a mob approached with knives and clubs, and I waved my hands and made what I hoped looked like magical gestures until they turned and fled, shouting that I was just as bad as my Father. In that single instant, I almost wished I were.

A whole army of priests followed us back to the house, resplendent in their billowing gold-and-silver trousers, their blue jackets, and their tall, scale-covered hats. Many of them held aloft sacred ikons of Surat-Kemad, and of the other gods too: of Ragun-Kemad, the Lord of Eagles, and Bel-Kemad, god of spring, and of Meliventra, the Lady of the Lantern, who sends forgiveness and mercy. Acolytes chanted and swung smoking incense-pots on golden chains.

But they would not let us back into the house. Two temple matrons stood with us on the wharf, holding Hamakina and me by the hand. The neighbors watched from a distance, fearfully.

The priests emptied out Father's workroom, breaking open the shutters, pouring bottle after bottle of powders and liquids into the river, dumping many of his books in after, then more bottles, then most of the jars, carvings, and strange specimens. Other books, they confiscated. Junior priests carried heaps of them back to the temple in baskets. Then it seemed the exorcisms went on for hours. They used so much incense that I thought the house was on fire.

In the end, the priests marched away as solemnly as they had come, and one of the matrons gave me a sword which had been my father's, a fine weapon, its grip bound in copper wire, its blade inlaid with silver.

"You may need this," was all she would say

Fearfully, my sister and I ventured inside the house. The air was so thick with incense that we ran, choking, our eyes streaming, to open all the windows. Still, the burners hung everywhere and we dared not remove them.

Father lay on the couch in his workroom, bound in gauze. The priests had removed his eyes and placed amulets like huge coins in the empty sockets. I knew this was because they were afraid he would find his way back otherwise.

Hamakina and I had to get him down to the funeral boat. There was no one to help us. It was a terrible struggle. Hamakina was, after all, only eight, and I was fifteen. More than once I was afraid we would accidentally *drop* him.

One of the gold amulets fell out. The empty socket gaped like a dry, red wound. I was almost sick when I had to put the amulet back.

The funeral boat was hung with gauze and charms. Incense rose from a silver cup set in the prow. One of the priests had painted a symbol, a serpent swallowing its tail, only broken, on the stern.

In the twilight of evening, Hamakina and I towed the funeral boat out into the deep water beyond the city, among the crooked masts of the wrecked ships, and beyond.

The sky faded gently from red to black, streaked with the purple tatters of the last few storm clouds. An almost frigid wind blew out of the marshes. The stars gleamed, multiplied upon the rippling water.

I stood in my shallow boat and recited the service for the dead as best as I knew it, for

my father whom I still loved and feared and did not understand. Then Hamakina let loose the line, and the funeral boat began to drift, first downstream toward the delta and the sea; but in the darkness, just before it disappeared, it was clearly going *upstream.* That was a good sign. It meant the boat had caught the black current, which carries the dead out of the world of the living, into the abode of the gods.

I thought, then, that I had time to mourn. When we got back, the house was merely empty. For the first time in many years, I was not afraid. It was almost bewildering.

I slept quietly that night. I did not dream. Hamakina, too, was quiet.

The next morning an old woman who lived in one of the first houses at the other end of the wharf knocked on our door and said, "Children? Are you well? Do you have enough to eat?"

She left a basket of food for us.

That, too, was a good sign. It meant that the neighbors would eventually forgive us. They didn't really think I was as my father had been.

I took the basket inside slowly, weeping half for joy. Life would be better. I remembered my promise to my mother. I would be different. The next day, surely, or the day after, Velachronos would take us back and we could resume our lessons.

Only that night Father came to me in a dream, and he stood before my bed wrapped in gauze, his face terrible behind the golden disks. His voice was — I cannot truly describe it — *oily,* like something dripping, something thick and vile; and the mere fact that such a sound could form itself into words seemed the greatest obscenity of all.

"I have delved too far into the darkness, my son, and my ending can only come with the final mystery. I seek it. My studies are almost complete. It is the culmination of all my labors. But there is one thing I need, one thing I have come back for."

And in my dream I asked him, "Father, what is it?"

"Your sister."

Then I awoke to the sound of Hamakina screaming. She reached for my hand, missed, caught the edge of the bed, and fell with a thump, dragging the covers onto the floor.

I always kept a lit lantern on the stand by the bed. Now I opened the little metal door, flooding the room with light.

"Sekenre! Help me!"

I stared incredulously for just an instant as she hung suspended in the air, dangling, as if an invisible hand had seized her by the hair. Then she screamed once more and seemed to fly through the window. For a second she grabbed hold of the sill. She looked toward me. Our eyes met. But before I could do or say anything she was yanked loose and hauled through.

I ran to the window and leaned out.

There was no splash; the water below rippled gently. The night was still. Hamakina was simply gone.

II

In the morning, the third after Father's death, I went to see the Sybil. There was nothing else to do. Everyone in the City of the Reeds knows that when the great crisis of your life comes, when there is truly no alternative but surrender and death and no risk is too great, then it is time to see the Sybil.

Fortunate is the man who has never called on her goes the old saying. But I was not fortunate.

She is called the Daughter of the River, and the Voice of Surat-Kemad, and the Mother of Death, and many other things. Who she is and what she is, no one has ever known; but she dwelt, fearsomely, the subject of countless terrifying stories, beneath the very heart of the city, among the pilings, where the log posts that hold up the great houses are thick as any forest. I had heard of the terrible price she was reputed to demand for her prophecies, and that those who visited her came away irreparably changed if they came away at all. Yet since time immemorial she had dwelt there, and for as long people went to listen to her words.

I went. For an offering, I had my father's sword, the silver one the temple matron gave me.

It was in the earliest dawn twilight that I slipped once more through the trapdoor beneath our house. To the east, to my right, the sky was just beginning to brighten into gray, but before me, toward the heart of the city, night lingered.

I paddled amid the wreckage left by the recent storm: planks, bobbing barrels and trunks, and, once, a slowly rolling corpse the *evatim* had somehow overlooked. Further in, a huge house had fallen on its supports, now awash and broken, its windows gaping

like black mouths. Later, when the gloom lessened a bit, I came upon a capsized ship jammed among the pillars like a vast, dead fish caught in reeds, its rigging trailing in the black water.

Just beyond it, the dark, irregular mass of the Sybil's dwelling hung suspended, undamaged by the storm, of course.

There's another story they tell about her: that the Sybil was never young, but was born an old hag in the blood of her mother's death, and that she stood up in the pool of her mother's blood, in the darkness at the world's beginning; and she closed her hands together, then opened them, and columns of flame rose up from her palms.

My father used to do that trick, and once he grew terribly angry when I tried it, even though I'd just sat staring at my hands, opening and closing them without understanding or results. It was enough that I had made the attempt. He was perhaps even frightened at first, at the prospect that I might try again and eventually succeed. Then his face shifted from shock to cold fury. That was the only time in my life he ever beat me.

But when the Sybil made fire with her hands she rolled the flames into balls with her fingers. She breathed on one to make it dim, and released them both — the Sun and Moon. Then she drank long and deep of the Great River where her mother's blood flowed into it, stood up by moonlight, and spat out the sparkling stars. And by starlight the multitude of gods awoke along the banks of the river and beheld the Earth for the first time.

As I gazed upon her house, I could almost believe the story. No, I *did* believe it.

The Sybil's house was more of an immense cocoon, like a spider's web filled to overflowing with debris and dead things, spun and accumulated since the beginning of time. It hung from the underside of the city itself, its outer strands a tangle of ropes and netting and vines and fibers stretching out into the darkness in every direction until I could not tell where the enormous nest began or ended.

But the core of it hung down almost to the water, like a monstrous belly. I reached up and tied my boat to it, slipped Father's sword under my belt, bound my robe up to free my legs, and started to climb.

The ropes trembled, whispering like muted thunder. Mud and debris fell in my face, splashing all around me. I hung on desperately, then shook my head to clear my eyes, and continued climbing.

Higher up, in complete darkness, I squeezed along a tunnel of rotting wood, sometimes losing my grip and sliding backwards for a terrifying instant before I found another hold. The darkness was ... *heavy*. I had the impression of an endless mass of debris in all directions, shifting, grinding as I wriggled through it. Sometimes there was an overwelming stench of decay.

I crawled over the upturned hull of a boat. It swayed gently beneath my weight. Something soft fell, then slithered against its side. All the while my hands and bare feet scraped desperately for purchase against the rotting wood.

Then came more rope, more netting, and in the dimmest twilight I was in a chamber where trunks, wicker baskets, and heavy clay jugs all heaved and crashed together as I crawled among them.

Serpents and fishes writhed beneath my touch amid reeking slime.

And yet again in utter darkness I made my way on hands and knees across a seemingly solid, wooden floor. Then the boards snapped beneath me and I tumbled screaming amid ropes and wood and what touch alone told me were hundreds of human bones. I came to rest on heaving netting with a skull in my lap and bones rattling down over my bare legs. I threw the skull away and tried to jump up, but my feet slid through the net and I felt only empty space below.

I dangled there, clinging desperately to the rope netting. It broke and I was left screaming once more, swinging in the darkness while an avalanche of bones splashed into the water far below.

One further story I'd heard came to me just then: that when someone drowns in the river, the *evatim* eat his flesh, but the bones go to the Sybil, who divines fortunes from them.

So it seemed.

At precisely this point she called out to me, and her voice was like an autumn wind rattling in dead reeds.

"Son of Vashtem."

I clung tighter to the remnants of the net, gulped, and called up into the darkness.

"I'm here."

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, I await your coming."

I was so startled I nearly let go.

"But *I'm* not a sorcerer!"

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer."

I started climbing once more, all the while telling her about myself in broken, panting speech. Still a few bones fell, suddenly out of the darkness, striking me on the head as if in sarcastic reply to what I gasped out. But still I told her how I had never done any magic myself, how I had promised my mother *never* to be like my father, how I was apprenticed to the learned Velachronos, how I was going to be a scribe first, then maybe write books of my own, if only Velachronos would take me back when this was all over.

Then the Sybil's face appeared to me suddenly in the darkness above, like a full moon from behind a cloud. Her face was pale and round, her eyes inexpressibly black, and I think her skin *did* glow faintly.

And she said to me, laughing gently, "Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, you're *arguing* with the dread Sybil. Now is that a brave thing to do, or just foolish?"

I stopped, swinging gently from side to side on the ropes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to —"

"What you *mean* is not necessarily what you *do,* Sekenre. Whether or not you're sorry afterwards means nothing at all. There. I have spoken your name once. *Sekenre.* I have spoken it twice. Do you know what happens if I speak it three times?"

I said meekly, "No, Great Sybil."

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, come up and sit before me. Do not be afraid."

I climbed up to where she was. I could barely make out a wooden shelf or ledge, covered with bones and debris. I reached out gingerly with one foot and my toes found, surprisingly, solid, dry planking. I let go of the ropes and sat. The Sybil reached up and opened the door of a box-lantern, then of another, and another. I thought of lazy beasts winking themselves awake.

Now light and shadow flickered in the tiny, low-ceilinged room. The Sybil sat cross-legged, a blanket with gleaming embroidery draped over her knees. A man-headed serpent with scales like silver coins lay curled in her lap. Once it hissed and she leaned low while it whispered in her ear.

Silence followed. She gazed into my eyes for a long time.

I held out my father's sword.

"Lady, this is all I have to offer —"

She hissed, just like the serpent, and for an instant seemed startled, even afraid. She waved the sword away.

"Sekenre, you are interrupting the Sybil. Now, again, is that brave or just foolishness?"

There. She had spoken my name thrice. I felt an instant of sheer terror. But nothing happened.

She laughed again, and her laugh was a human one, almost kindly.

"A most inappropriate gift, sorcerer, son of sorcerer."

"I don't understand . . . I'm sorry, Lady."

"Sekenre, do you know what that sword is?"

"It was my father's."

"It is the sword of a Knight Inquisitor. Your father tried to deny what he was, even to himself. So he joined a holy order, an order of strictest discipline, devoted to the destruction of all things of darkness, all the wild things, witches, sorcerers, even the wild gods. He was like you, boy, at your age. He wanted so much to do the *right* thing. For all the good it did him. In the end, he only had the sword."

"Lady, I have nothing else —"

"Sekenre — there, I said it again. You are very special. The path before you is very special. Your future is not a matter of how many times I speak your name. Keep the sword. You shall need it. I require no payment from you, not yet anyway."

"Will you require it later, Great Sybil?"

She leaned forward, and I saw that her teeth were sharp and pointed. Her breath smelled of river mud.

"Your entire life shall be payment enough. All things come to me in proper time, even as you, I think, come to me now, when your need is greatest."

Then I began to tell her why I had come, about Father, and what had happened to Hamakina.

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, you are lecturing the Sybil. Brave or foolish?"

I wept. "Please, Great Lady ... I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I want to do the right thing. Please don't be angry. Tell me what to do."

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, everything you do is the correct thing, part of the great pattern which I observe, which I weave, which I prophesy. At each new turning of your life the pattern is made anew. All the meanings are changed. Your father understood that,

when he came back from beyond the sea, no longer a Knight Inquisitor because he knew too much of sorcery. He had become a sorcerer by fighting sorcery. He was like a doctor who contracts the patient's disease. His knowledge was like a door that has been opened and can never be closed again. A door. In his mind."

"No," I said softly. "I will not be like him."

"Hear then the prophecy of the Sybil, sorcerer, son of sorcerer. You shall journey into the very belly of the beast, into the mouth of the God Who Devours."

"Lady, we are all on a journey in this life, and when we die —"

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, do you accept the words of the Sybil of your own will, as a gift given?"

I was afraid to ask her what would happen if I refused. It wasn't much of a choice.

"Lady, I accept."

"It is of your will then. If you stray from your path, if you step aside, that, too, changes the weaving of all lives."

"Lady, I only want to get my sister back and —"

"Then accept these too."

She pressed something into my hand. Her touch was cold and hard, like living iron. The serpent thing in her lap hissed, almost forming words.

I held my open hand up to one of the lanterns and saw two grave coins on my palm.

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, on this day you are a man. Your father did not raise you to manhood before he left you. Therefore I must perform the rite."

The serpent thing vanished into her clothing. She rose, her movement fluid as smoke. I could only see her face and hands, like lanterns themselves floating in the half-light. She took a silver band and bound my hair as the men of the city bind it. She gave me a pair of baggy trousers such as the men of the city wear. I put them on. They were much too long. I rolled them up to my knees.

"They used to belong to a pirate," she said. "He won't be needing them now."

She rummaged around among the debris and produced a single boot. I tried to put it on. It was nearly twice the size of my foot.

She sighed. "Always the pattern changes. I'm sure it's portentous. Never mind."

She took the boot from me and threw it aside.

Then she leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. The touch of her lips was so cold it burned.

"Now you are marked by the Sybil, sorcerer, son of sorcerer, and by that mark men will know you. Because you are marked, you may call on me three times, and I shall hear you and reply. But beware. If you ask my favor more than that, I shall own you, like all the things in my house. That is the price I ask of you."

She gave me a water bottle and a leather bag with food in it — cheese, bread, and dried fish — and told me to put the grave coins in the bag too so I wouldn't lose them.

The *bag* had a long cord. I slipped it over my neck. I hung the bottle from the loose belt I wore outside my robe.

My forehead was numb where she had kissed me. I reached up and felt the spot. It was cold as ice.

"Now go, sorcerer, son of sorcerer, into the very jaws of the Devourer, of your own will. Go, as the Sybil has prophesied, *right now* —"

She stamped her foot once. I screamed as the floor swung away beneath me like a trapdoor and I was falling endlessly down amid glowing white bones and debris and the Sybil's tumbling lamps. I saw her face once, far above, streaking away in the darkness like a shooting star.

I hit the water hard and sank deep, but somehow reached the surface again, lungs bursting. I started to swim. The sword cut my legs. The bag choked me. I almost threw them both away, but did not, and slowly, clumsily made my back to where I thought my boat waited. I looked around fearfully for the *evatim*, which surely haunted this place.

Above, the house of the Sybil was silent and dark.

At last my feet touched soft mud and I stood up in the gloom. Faint light filtered among the ten thousand wooden legs of the city.

I waded through thick mud, then into open water and fell in over my head and swam a short distance, struggling toward the light. Then my feet found a sand bank, and I climbed out of the water and rested.

A whole night must have passed then, for I slept through terrible dreams of my father in his sorcerer's robe, stalking back and forth at the water's edge, his face so twisted with rage that he hardly seemed to be my father at all. He would lean over, raise his hand to strike, then pause, startled, even afraid, as if he had seen something in my face he had never seen there before.

I tried to call out to him.

Suddenly I was awake, in total darkness. *A footstep splashed nearby.* Far away, the birds of the marshes sang to announce the dawn.

And my father's voice spoke.

"Sekenre ... do you still love me?"

I could not answer. I only sat terribly still, shivering in the cold air, my knees drawn up to my chest, hands clasped tight to my wrists.

Daylight came as a gray blur. I saw a boat nearby, beached on the same sandbank. It was not my own, but a funeral boat, made of bound reeds.

For an instant I thought I understood fully what the Sybil had prophesied and I froze in terror, but I had known so much of terror in my life already that I had grown indifferent to it. I couldn't bring myself to care. I couldn't think coherently.

Like one bewitched, when the body acts of its own accord without the will of the mind, I pushed the boat out into open water, then climbed in and lay still among the scented corpse-wrappings.

I felt only resignation now. So it had been prophesied.

Almost on a whim, I reached into the leather bag and took out the two grave coins. I placed them over my eyes.

III

For a long time I lay still and listened to the water lapping against the side of the boat. Then even that sound faded, and I felt, very distinctly, the boat reverse direction, and I knew I was drifting with the *black current* now, out of the world of the living, into the land of the dead. The water was silent, as if the boat were gliding along a river of oil. I could hear the pounding of my own heart.

I lay awake and tried to make sense out of my adventure with the Sybil, reviewing every detail in search of some central thread by which all the parts would be connected, like beads on a *necklace,* assuming form and *meaning.* But there was nothing. I had expected as much. It is the way of prophecies: you don't understand them until they're about to come true, and then, suddenly, the whole pattern is revealed.

Even the silence of the river and the thunder of my heart were part of the pattern.

Even my sister's voice.

I thought it was just a ringing in my ears at first, but it formed words, very weak, very far away, at the very threshold of hearing.

"Sekenre," she said. "Help me. I'm lost."

I called back to her, either with my voice or my mind.

"I am coming, little one. Wait for me."

She sobbed hoarsely, sucking in breath as if she had been crying for a long time.

"It's dark here."

"It's dark here, too," I said gently.

She was too brave to say she was afraid.

"Hamakina — is Father with you?"

Something splashed in the water right next to the boat, and my father's voice whispered, inches from my ear.

"Sekenre, if you love me, go back. I command you to go back! Do not come here!"

I let out a yell and sat up. The grave coins fell into my lap. I twisted about, looking all around.

The boat slid past huge, black reeds. In the silent darkness, white herons stood in rows along the river's edge, faintly glowing as the Sybil's face had glowed. And in the water, the *evatim* watched me, rank upon rank of them like dead-white, naked men with crocodile heads, lying motionless in the shallows. But there was no sign of Father.

Above me, the sky was dark and clear, and the stars were not the stars of Earth, but fewer, paler, almost gray, arranged in the constellations of the dead, which are described in the Books of the Dead: the Hand, the Harp, the Jar of Forgetting, the Eye of Surat-Kemad.

Very carefully, I picked up the grave coins and put them back in my bag. I was thirsty and drank a sip from the water bottle. I could not drink river water here, for only the dead may drink of the water of the dead, and only the dead may eat the fruits of the land of the dead. That too is written in the Books of the Dead.

And so I gazed with mortal, uncovered eyes into the darkness that never ends. Far behind me, along the way I had come, there was a faint suggestion of light, a mere paling

of the sky, as if way back there was an opening through which I had already passed. The living world drew farther and farther away with each passing instant.

The white herons rose as one and for a moment the air was filled with the utterly silent passage of their wings. Then they were gone. They too, like the *evatim,* were messengers of the God of the Dark River.

But for me there was no message.

I began to see ghosts among the reeds, sitting up in the mud as I passed, beseeching me to take them aboard my funeral boat so they might go properly into the final land. They were no more than wisps of smoke, suggestions of shapes glimpsed from the corner of the eye. When I looked directly at any one of them, I could not see it.

Some called out in languages I had never heard before. Only a few spoke of places and people I had known. I was afraid of these few. I did not want them to recognize me. I lay back down in the bottom of my boat and put the coins back over my eyes. I slept fitfully after a while and dreamed of my father. He paced back and forth on the surface of the black water, his trailing robe sending ripples as he walked, his face contorted with rage. Once he stopped and seemed to shake me furiously, saying, "No, my son, no. This is not what I wanted for you. I command you. I forbid you.. .. because I love you still. Go back to Reedland. Go!"

But, in my dream, I only answered, "Father, I will go if you let me take Hamakina back with me."

He made no answer but continued to rage and pace, too furious even to ask if I loved him.

I awoke from my dream to the faint sound of singing like many voices carried on the wind from far away. I sat up once more, put the coins in my bag, and saw a vast trireme bearing down on me, its sail bellied full, its oars thrashing the water into foam.

Yet it was an insubstantial thing like the ghosts in the reeds, a shape of smoke. The voices of the oarsmen were muted, the throbbing of the pacesetter's drum like the failing thunder of a distant, dying storm. The stars shone through the hull and sail, and the foam of the oars was a phantom thing, the water around me still black and smooth and silent.

This was a wonder, but no mystery, for the Great River co-exists with the River of the Dead, for all that they flow in different directions. Sometimes the rivermen fleetingly glimpse the traffic of the dark current, faint shapes in the night. When they do, they reckon it a bad omen and make sacrifices to soothe the anger of whatever god might have been offended.

Now I, on the River of the Dead, saw the living as phantoms. The trireme loomed up, and then my boat passed through it. For a moment I was among the oarsmen and I could smell the reek of their laborings. Then a richly-furnished cabin swam around me. A great lord feasted, surrounded by his followers. I think it was the Satrap of Reedland himself. One lady of his company paused, cup in hand. Our eyes met. She looked more startled than afraid. She poured out a little of her wine, as if to make a libation to me.

Then the trireme was gone, and I lay back again, the coins on my eyes, my father's sword clutched against my chest.

I slept once more and dreamt once more, but my dream was only a confusion, shapes in the darkness, and sounds I could not make out. I awoke parched and famished, and took another sip from my water bottle, and ate a little of the food in the leather bag.

It was as I ate that I realized that the river was no longer flowing. The boat lay absolutely motionless in the middle of a black, endless, dead marsh beneath the grey stars. Even the *evatim* and the ghosts were gone.

I was truly afraid. I thought I would be left there forever. No, somehow I was *certain* of it. Somehow the Devouring God had tricked me, and the Land of the Dead would not accept me while I yet lived.

I forced down one last bite of bread, then closed the bag and called out, half sobbing: *"Sybil! Help me! I've lost my way!"*

And the sky began to lighten. I saw not merely reeds, but huge trees rising out of the marsh, stark and barren like ruined stone pillars.

Some of the stars began to fade. I thought the Moon was rising — how strange that I should be able to see the Moon here! — but instead the face of the Sybil drifted into the sky, pale and round and huge as the full Moon. She gazed down on me for a time in silence and I was afraid to speak to her. Then her face rippled, as a reflection does when a pebble is dropped into a still pool, and she was gone, but her voice came rattling through the reeds.

"Sorcerer, son of sorcerer, you have called on me foolishly and have wasted one summoning. You are near to your goal and could have found your own way. Nevertheless, if you think you need a guide, reach down into the water and draw one up."

"Into the *water?"* I said. For an instant I was terrified that I had wasted a second summoning with that question. But the Sybil did not reply.

I reached down into the frigid water, wary of lurking *evatim.* I groped around, swinging my arm from side to side, my fingers outstretched. For an instant I lay there, half out of the boat, wondering if this were another of the Sybil's riddles. Then the water suddenly stirred, as if something were rising, and my fingers closed on something stringy and slippery like an underwater weed, and I pulled.

A hand broke the surface, then another. I let go of what I had been holding and scrambled back. The hands caught hold of the side of the boat and the boat rocked beneath the weight of that which climbed aboard. There was a sudden, overwelming stench of decay, or rotted flesh. Long, muddy hair fell across a face that was more bone than anything else.

I screamed then, and kept on screaming when the thing opened its eyes and began to speak and I knew that it was my mother.

"Sekenre —"

I covered my face with my hands and merely sobbed, trying to remember her as she had been once, so very long ago.

"Sekenre —" She took hold of my wrists and gently drew my hands away from my face. Her touch was as cold as the Sybil's kiss.

I turned from her.

"Mother, I did not expect —" I could not say more, and broke into tears again.

"Son, I did not expect to see you in this place either. Truly, it is a terrible thing."

She pulled me forward and I did not resist, until I lay with my face in her lap, my cheek against her wet, muddy gown, while she gently stroked my forehead with a bony finger. I told her all that had happened then, of Father's own death, and his return for Hamakina.

"I am your father's sin, returning to him at last," she said,

"Did he—?"

"Murder me? Yes, he did. But that is the least part of his offense. He has sinned more against you, Sekenre, and also against the gods."

"I don't think he meant to do wrong," I said. "He says he loves me still."

"He probably does. Nevertheless, he has done great wrong."

"Mother, what shall I do?"

Her cold, sharp finger drew a circle around the mark on my forehead.

"It is time for us to resume our journey. The boat has served its purpose now. You must leave it."

I looked at the black water with ever-increasing dread.

"I don't understand. Are we to . . . *swim?"*

"No, beloved son. We are to walk. Get out of the boat now, and walk."

I slipped one leg over the side, one foot in the frigid water. I looked back at her uncertainly.

"Go on. Do you doubt this one small miracle, after all you have seen?"

"Mother, I—"

"Go on."

I obeyed her and stood upon the water. It felt like cold glass beneath my feet. Then she stood next to me, and the boat drifted slowly away. I turned to watch it go, but she took me by the hand and led me in a different direction.

Her touch was like the Sybil's, a touch of living, frigid iron.

The channel widened, and the *evatim* were waiting for us. Here the water flowed almost swiftly, making silent waves and eddies and whirlpools behind the dead trees. Many ghosts waded in the shallows, but they did not call out to us. They merely stood there, turning as we passed. One of them was a man in full, gleaming armor, holding his severed head in his hands.

Then there were other boats around us, black and solid and silent, not phantoms of the living, but other funeral boats. We came alongside a long, sleek barge, its pointed ends rising high above the water, a lantern flickering inside its square cabin. The *evatim* crawled into this cabin and the barge rocked. I could hear them thrashing in there.

At last something huge and dark loomed before us, like a mountain, blotting out the stars. On every side I saw drifting funeral boats following our course, some of them twisting and turning among reeds. One caught on something, or else the *evatim* tipped it over. A mummy slipped into the water and drifted by, bandages trailing, so close I could have reached out and touched it.

The darkness closed around us very suddenly, shutting out the stars. I heard water rushing, and boats creaking and banging against one another.

"Mother!" I whispered. I reached forward and tugged at her gown. A piece of it came away in my hand. "Is this it? Is this the mouth of Surat-Kemad?"

"No, child," she said softly. "We have been in the belly of the beast for some time now."

And that, somehow, was even more terrifying.

IV

Nothing was clear any more, the whole adventure no more than an endless continuity of dream and waking, stark images and featureless mist, pain and terror and dull discomfort.

I had been on the river I knew not how long — hours, days, weeks — and at times it seemed I was inexpressibly weary, and at others that I was back home in my bed, asleep, that all of this was some crazed nightmare. But then I reached out, turning and stretching as one does when awakening — and I touched my mother's cold, wet, ruined body.

And the stench of decay was gone from her, and she smelled only of the river mud, like some long-sunken bundle of sticks and rags.

Sometimes there were herons all around us, glowing dimly in the utter darkness like smoldering embers, their faces the faces of men and women, all of them whispering to us, imploring, speaking names — and their voices blended together like a gentle, indistinguishable rustle of wind.

Mostly, we just walked in the darkness, alone. I felt the cold surface of the river beneath my feet, but there was no sense of motion, for all my legs moved endlessly.

Mother spoke. Her voice was soft, coming from the darkness like something remembered in a dream.

I don't think she was even addressing me. She was merely talking, her memories, her whole life rising into words like sluggish bubbles: scraps of unfinished conversations from her childhood, and, too, much about my father, and me, and Hamakina. For what might have been a very long time or only a few minutes, she sang a lullaby, as if rocking me — or perhaps Hamakina — to sleep.

Then she was silent. I reached out to assure myself that she was still there, and her bony hand found mine and squeezed gently. I asked her what she had learned about the Land of the Dead since she had come here, and she replied softly, "I have learned that I am forever an exile, without a place prepared for me, since I have come unprepared and unannounced into Surat-Kemad's domain. My place of exile is the river, along which I must wander until the gods die and the worlds are unmade."

I wept for her then, and asked if this was Father's doing, and she said that it was.

Then she asked me suddenly, "Sekenre, do you hate him?"

I had been so confident just then that I did, but I could not find an answer.

"I don't think he meant to do any harm —"

"My son, you must sort out your feelings toward him. That is where you have lost your way, not on the river."

Again we walked for a long time, still in utter darkness, and all the while I thought of my father and remembered my mother as she had once been. What I wanted, more than anything else, was merely for everything to be restored — Father, Mother, Hamakina, and myself, in our house by the edge of the City of Reeds, as all had been when I was small. Yet, if I had learned any lesson in life thus far, it was that you can't go back, that our days flow on as relentlessly as the Great River, and what is lost is never restored. I was not wise. I understood very little. But I knew that much.

The father I longed for was merely gone. Perhaps he, too, longed to be restored. I wondered if he knew it was impossible.

I tried to hate him.

The darkness and the silence of the river gave a sense of being in a tunnel, far underground, but were we not more than underground, deep in the belly of Surat-Kemad? We passed from darkness into darkness, always beginning, as if through countless anterooms without ever finding the main hall.

So with our days. So with our strivings, I thought. Whatever we seek to understand yields only a glimmer, and a vast mystery. So with my father —

Very suddenly, Mother took both my hands in hers and said, "I may only guide you a little way, my son, and we have come that little way. I cannot go where an exile is not welcome, where there is no place prepared —"

"What? I don't understand."

"I am not permitted into the god's house. I must leave you at the doorstep."

"But you said —"

"That we have been deep within his belly for some time. Yet we are at the doorstep of his house —"

She let go of me. I groped frantically for her, then found her again.

"Mother!"

She kissed both my hands very gently, and her lips, like the Sybil's, were so cold they burned.

"But you are a hero, my son, and you may take the next step, and the next. That is what it is to be brave, you know, merely to take the next step. I have always known that you were brave."

"Mother, I —"

Then she sank down into the water. I clung to her. I tried to hold her up, but she sank like a thing of stone, and I lost my grip. At the very last I found myself crawling absurdly about on the cold surface of the river, sliding my hands from side to side like a blind child who has lost marbles on a smooth floor.

I stood up, suddenly shivering, rubbing my arms with my hands.

She was wrong, I told myself. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't brave. I merely had no choice. The Sybil had seen that much.

Yet I never once thought of turning back. The road behind me was impassable, in more ways than one.

I wanted to call on the Sybil again, to tell her I had once more lost my way. In the darkness, without any point of reference except the sensation in my feet to tell me which way was down, I couldn't even tell if I was facing the way I was supposed to be going, or the way I had come.

In the end, it did not matter. I don't think direction is a physical thing in the belly of a god. Instead, it is a matter of degree.

Things began to happen swiftly once more. Lights rose around me, like lanterns drifting up from the surface of the water, then above me like stars. The water itself rippled, frigid, oily waves washing over my feet.

I started to run, afraid that whatever magic had held me up was leaving me, now that Mother had. Nothing, it seemed, could be more horrible than to be immersed in that river, there, in the belly of Surat-Kemad.

I ran, and the points of light moved with me, turning as I turned, swirling about me like burning motes on the wind. There was a sound. I thought it was indeed the wind, but then I realized that it was *breathing,* spittle hissing through teeth, and the lights were *eyes,* not reflecting light as a dog's will by a campfire, but actually glowing, like living coals.

The darkness lessened and I saw that I had indeed emerged from a tunnel. Jagged, fissured cliffs loomed on either side of the river, towering to unknowable heights. Far above, the grey stars of the deadlands shone once more.

And the *evatim* stood around me by the thousands, on the river, scrambling up the cliffs, some of them just standing at the water's edge, staring. By the light of their eyes and by the pale stars, I could see that I had come at last to the place where the Great River ended and truly began, a vast lake where the white-bodied, crocodile-headed ones paced back and forth, ankle-deep in thick grey mist, their long jaws bobbing up and down.

The *evatim* bore long hooks on poles, like boathooks, and as I watched one of them would occasionally pause, then reach down with his hook and draw up a human corpse, heave it onto his shoulder and depart, or just stand there, holding the dead in a lover's embrace.

I realized to my horror that I was standing on a vast sea of corpses. I looked down and I could make them out dimly beneath the water's surface, inches below my feet: faces, arms, bobbing chests and backs and buttocks jostling slowly in the black water like numberless fish in a net. I jumped back in revulsion, but there was nowhere to jump to.

I started to run again. Somehow, miraculously, the *evatim* seemed too busy with their tasks to notice me.

For the first time my footfalls made a sound, a heavy splashing and sucking, as if I were running through mud.

Truly this was the place I had read of in the Books of the Dead that Velachronos and I had copied, where the bodies and souls of the dead and the unborn are sorted out by the *evatim,* who are the thoughts and servants of the terrible god, and each person is judged, and carried to his rightful place, or cast out, or devoured.

I despaired then, for I knew that if Hamakina were *here,* I would surety never find her.

Yet I took the next step, and the next, and the next, slowing to a fast walk. If that is what it is to be brave, then I was. I continued. The mist swirled around my shins.

I seemed to be nearing the shallows. Reeds rose around me like bare iron rods. I passed one sunken funeral boat, then another, then a long stretch of boards and debris but no corpses or *evatim.*

A beach spread before me like a pale band on the horizon, like a white sunrise. The *evatim* struggled across it in an endless procession, dragging their burdens from the water.

I stood among the reeds and watched them for a time. Then I took a step forward, and cold water splashed around my knees. I gasped involuntarily at the sudden shock of no longer walking *on* the water, but in it. There was mud and sand beneath my feet.

I neared the beach, crouched down, trying to conceal myself among the last of the reeds. Gradually I could make out three huge doorways in the cliff-face beyond the end of the white sand. The crocodile-headed ones labored toward them, bearing their burdens through the doorways.

I didn't doubt that each doorway led to a different place, and that here the final judgement of the god was made. Yes, I was on Surat-Kemad's doorstep, in the anteroom of his great hall, forever beginning my quest.

But I didn't know which of the three doors to go through. Surely my Father waited beyond . . . one of them.

I took the next step, and the next, freely mingling with the *evatim*, who took no notice of me. We crowded toward one of the doors. I was hemmed in by cold, hard bodies. I let the movement of the great mass of them determine my direction.

The empty face of an old woman bobbed in front of my face, her corpse slung over the shoulder of her bearer, her open mouth black, frozen as if perpetually about to shout or kiss or devour.

Once more the cliffs rose around me. Once more some of the *evatim* scrambled up the jagged stones, their glowing eyes seeming to rise into the sky like stars. Those who had climbed, I saw, set their burdens down on ledges and began to feast.

I turned away quickly and stared at the ground, and at the almost luminously pale feet and legs of the *evatim.*

The sides of the great doorway were carven smooth, its iron gates flung wide. The gates resembled, more than anything else, enormous, gaping jaws.

I tried to peer ahead again, but I could not see over the mass of the *evatim.* I jumped up. I turned and looked back, but only masses of crocodile-faces stared back at me, like a swirling shifting cloud filled with burning eyes.

"Stop! You are not of the brotherhood of the *evatim!"*

I whirled around again. A pallid, black-bearded face hovered before me, its red eyes unblinking. It rose on the body of a snake, only stiff as a tree trunk and covered with glistening silver scales the size of my outstretched hand. As I watched, another face rose from the ground on such a glittering stalk, and another, bursting out of the sand, out of the stone of the cliff face until a forest of them blocked my way. The *evatim* drew aside.

"You may not pass!" one of them said.

"Blasphemer, you may not enter our master's domain."

I got out my leather bag and struggled desperately with the drawstring, then poured the two grave coins into my hand.

"Wait," I said. "Here. These are for you."

The foremost of the man-headed serpent-things leaned forward and took the coins into its mouth. Its lips, like the Sybil's, like my mother's, were searingly cold.

But the coins burst into flame in the creature's mouth and it spat them out at my feet.

"You are still alive!"

Then all of them shouted in unison, *"This one is still alive!"*

And the *evatim* came writhing through the scaled, shrieking forest, free of their burdens, on all fours now, their great jaws gaping. I drew my father's sword and struck one of them, and another, and another, but one caught me on the right leg and yanked me to my knees. I slashed at the thing again and again. One of the glowing eyes burst, hissed, and went out.

Another reared up, closed its jaws on my back and chest, and pulled me over backwards. That was the end of the struggle. The great mass of them swarmed over me, while still the serpent-things shouted and screamed and babbled, and their voices were like thunder.

Teeth like knives raked me all over, tearing, and I still held the sword, but it seemed very far away and I couldn't move it —

A crocodilian mouth closed over my head, over my shoulders and I called out, my voice

muffled, shouting down the very throat of the monster, "Sybil! Come to me again—!"

I cannot say what actually happened after that. I saw her face again, glowing like a distant lantern in the darkness below me, but rising, racing upward, while the *evatim* tore at me and crushed me slowly in their jaws.

Then I distinctly felt myself splash into water, and the viscous blackness closed around me and the *evatim* were gone. I sank slowly in the cold and the dark, while the Sybil's face floated before me and grew brighter until the darkness was dispelled and my eyes were dazzled.

"This time, you did well to call on me," she said.

I awoke on a bed. As soon as I realized that it was a bed, I lay still with my eyes closed, deliberately dismissing from my mind any thought that this was my familiar bed back home, that my adventures had been no more than a prolonged, horrible dream.

I knew it was not so, and my body knew it, from the many wounds where the *evatim* had held me. And I was nearly naked, my clothing in tatters.

But I still held my father's sword. I moved my right arm stiffly, and scraped the blade along hard wood.

This bed was not my bed. It was made of rough boards and covered not with sheets but with sand.

I started to sit up, eyes still closed, and gentle hands took my by the bare shoulders. The hands were soft and warm.

I was dizzy then. The sword slipped from my grasp. I opened my eyes, but couldn't focus. There was only a blur.

Warm water was being poured over my back. My wounds stung. I let out a cry and fell forward and found myself awkwardly embracing some unknown person, my chin on his shoulder.

I could see, then, that I was in a room stranger than any I had ever imagined, a place once richly furnished but now a wreck, turned on its side like a huge box rolled over, its contents spilled everywhere. Stained glass windows hung open above me, dangling, ornately worked with *designs of glowing Fishes.* Books and bottles lay in heaps amid fallen beams, plaster, and bricks. There was a splintered staircase that coiled out and ended in midair. An image of Surat-Kemad had been fixed to the floor and remained fixed, but now it stuck out horizontally into space. A lantern dangled sideways from the grey-green snout.

My host pushed me gently back onto the bed and I was staring into the face of a grey-bearded man. He squinted in the half-light, his face wrinkling. For a moment the look on his face was one of ineffable joy, but it faded into doubt, then bitter disappointment.

"No," he said. "It is not so. Not yet. . ."

I reached up to touch him, to be sure he was real and alive, but he took my hand in his and pressed it down on my chest. Then he gave me my father's sword, closing my fingers around the grip, and I lay there, the cold blade against my bare skin.

Then he said something completely astonishing.

"I thought you were my son."

I sat up and this time sat steadily. I saw that I was indeed almost naked, my clothing completely shredded, and I was smeared with blood. Suddenly I felt weak again, but I caught hold of a bedpost with my free hand and remained upright.

I blurted, "But you are not my father—"

"Then we are agreed," he said.

"I don't understand."

Wind roared outside. The room swayed and creaked, the walls visibly shifting. More plaster, wood, and a sudden avalanche of human bones clattered around us, filling the air with dust. Tiles rained over my shoulders and back. The window overhead clacked back and forth.

I thought of the Sybil's house. I looked to my companion with growing dread, but *he merely shruqqed.*

"It'll pass. Don't worry."

When all was once again still, I said, "I am Sekenre, son of Vashtem the sorcerer."

He hissed and drew back.

"Then I fear you!"

"No," I said. "I'm not a sorcerer myself." I started to explain, but he waved his hand, bidding me to cease.

"You are a powerful sorcerer indeed. I can tell! I can tell!"

I concluded that the man was mad. What could be more natural, after all I had been through, than to meet someone who was mad? If he thought I was a sorcerer, there was

no sense dissuading him.

I placed my father's sword across my legs, then folded my arms across my chest, and directed toward him what I hoped was a stern gaze.

"Very well. I, a sorcerer, command you to explain yourself."

He spread his hands and looked helpless. "Sorcerer, I don't know where to begin —"

"Why did you think I was your son?"

He moved over to the broken statue of a bird and sat on the flat space where the head had once been. He did not answer my question, but sat still for several minutes. I thought he had forgotten me and had fallen into some sort of reverie. I stared up at the dangling window, then toyed with the sword in my lap.

At last he sighed and said, "What do you know of where you are, sorcerer and son of sorcerer?"

I told him something of my history, and he only sighed again and said that I was a mighty sorcerer for all I was yet an ignorant one.

"Then teach me," I said.

"When your mother left you," he said, "that was because she could not pass beyond *Leshe,* the realm of dreams. Because she had never been prepared for burial, she could not truly enter the land of the dead. There are four realms; you must understand this. Earth is the realm of *Eshe,* the world of living men. But our dreams arise from the mists of the river, from *Leshe,* where the country of sleep borders the country of death. We see unquiet ghosts in our dreams because they linger in *Leshe,* as your mother does. Beyond is *Tashe,* the true domain of the dead, where all dwell in the places the god has appointed for them."

"And the fourth realm?"

"That is *Akimshe* — holiness. At the heart of the god, in the mind of the god, among the fiery fountains where even gods and worlds and the stars are born — that is *Akimshe,* holiness, which may not be described. Not even the greatest of the prophets, not even the sorcerers, not even the very gods may look on the final mystery of *Akimshe."*

"But it's still inside Surat-Kemad," I said. "I don't see how —"

"It is well that you do not understand. Not even Surat-Kemad understands. Not even he may look on it."

I said very quickly, "I have to continue on my way. I have to find my father."

And my companion said one more surprising thing.

"Yes, of course. I know him. He is a mighty lord here."

"You — you — *know* him —?" I couldn't say anything more. My thoughts were all a jumble.

"He dwells here in peculiar honor because he is a sorcerer," the old man said, "but he must remain here, unique among the servants of Surat-Kemad, but a servant nonetheless."

I got to my feet unsteadily. The remains of my trousers dangled. I wrapped them around my belt, trying to make myself at least decent, but there wasn't much to work with. I slid the sword under the belt.

I stood there, breathing hard from the exertion, wincing as the effort stretched my lacerated sides.

"You must take me to my father," I said.

"I can only show you the way." He shook his head sadly.

"Where?"

He pointed up, to the open window.

"There?"

"Yes," he said. "That way."

"But —" I walked across the room to a door now sideways in the wall, and opened it, lowering the door against the wall. I stared through at a dense sideways forest, the forest floor rising vertically to one side, the trees horizontal. There was a glowing mist among the trees, like fog at sunrise before it melts away. Brilliantly-plumed birds cawed and fluttered in the branches. Warm, damp air blew against my face and chest.

The gray-bearded man put his hand on my shoulder and led me away.

"No," he said. "You will never find your father through that door." He pointed to the ceiling again. *"That* way."

I started to climb, clumsly, my muscles aching. My right palm was numb where the guardian-serpent's lips had touched me.

I caught hold of the image of the god, hooking an arm over it. Then pulled myself up and sat there astride Surat-Kemad, my feet dangling.

"You never answered my question. Why did you think I was your son?"

"It is a very old sorrow."

I didn't command him. "Can you . . . tell me?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed and gazed up at me. "I was called Aukin, son of Nevat. I dwelt far beyond any land you ever knew, beyond the mouth of the Great River and across the sea among the people you would call barbarians. I had a wife. I loved her very much. Is that a surprising thing, even for a barbarian? No, it is not. When she died bearing my first son, and my son too was dead in her womb, my grief was without bounds. The gods of my homeland could not comfort me, for they are harsh spirits of the forest and of the hills, and they do not deal in comfort. Therefore I came into your country, first to the City of the Delta, where I prayed long before the image of Bel-Hemad and gave the priests much gold. But he did not answer me, and when I ran out of money, the priests sent me away. So I wandered all along the Great River, in the forests, on the plains, among the marshes. I tarried with holy men in the high mountains. From them I learned to dream. They thought they were teaching me contentment, but no, I clung to my bold scheme. It was this: I would be the mightiest dreamer of all and travel beyond *Leshe* to the lake of *Tashe* and farther, and I would find my son who had tried but failed to enter the world, and I would bring him back with me. The dead have been truly reclaimed by the Devouring God, so there is no hope for my wife, but the *unborn,* I thought — I still think — perhaps will not be missed. So far I have succeeded only with the first part of my plan. I am here. But I have not found my son. When I saw you, *alive,* here, I had hope again, just briefly."

"This is the Sybil's doing," I said.

"Yes, I can tell that it is, by the mark on you."

"The mark on me?"

He got up, rummaged among the debris, and handed me a broken piece of mirrored glass.

"Didn't you know?" he said softly.

I looked at my reflection. The spot on my forehead where the Sybil had kissed me was glowing as brightly as had the eyes of the *evatim.*

I handed the glass back to him, and it was then that I noticed that my hands, too, gave off a faint light where my mother had touched them at the very end. Where the guardian-serpent's lips had touched me when it took the coins, the skin was seared and healed into a smooth white scar.

I sat still, staring at my hands.

"If I really am a sorcerer," I said, "I'll try to help you. You don't have to be afraid of me."

He offered me a cup. "Here, drink this."

"But I can't. If I drink anything here, I'll —"

The old man sighed. "You are still an ignorant sorcerer. *This* water is from *Leshe,* from the river where it is filled with dreams. It will give you many visions. It will truly open your eyes, but it will not bind you to the dead. The waters of *Tashe* will do that, but not those of *Leshe."*

"Do I need to see visions?"

"I think you do, to get where you're going."

"This is the Sybil's doing again," I said.

"Yes, it is. Drink."

I drank. The water was very cold and, surprisingly, sweet. My whole body trembled with it. Only in the aftertaste was it bitter.

"Now go," said Aukin, son of Nevat, who had lost his own son.

I stood up, balancing myself precariously on the image of the god, and caught hold of the window-ledge, then heaved myself up. For a moment I dangled there, looking down at the old man. He waved me on. I heaved again and felt a blast of hot wind against my face and chest, and sand stung me, as if I had crawled out into a sandstorm.

Then I was falling, not back into the room, but *down,* away from the window as directions somehow reversed. The window receded above me and was gone as I tumbled head over heels through hot, blinding, blowing sand.

Visions came to me:

As I fell, I saw the whole of *Tashe* spread out before me. I saw that each dead person there dwelt in a little space formed out of some memory from life, either a pleasant one, or, if some guilty memory tormented him, an endless terror. So the domain of *Tashe* was an incongruous tangle, a jumbled mass like the inside of the Sybil's house.

And as I fell, I was in many places at once. I walked on soft moss to the edge of a pool, deep in a forest suffused with golden light. Three young girls sat by the pool, washing their hair. A young man, scarcely older than myself, sat by them, strumming on a lyre. All around them, the forest seemed to go on forever. Pale white fishes drifted through the

air among the trees.

Then I took one step back from the pool, and the forest was gone.

I ran beneath the pale stars over an endless expanse of bricks so hot that they burned my feet. Bricks stretched glowing to the black horizon. I wept with the pain and began to stagger. It was all I could do not to sit down. Smoke and flame hissed out of fissures. Still I ran on, gasping for breath, streaked with soot and sweat, until I came to a window set horizontally in the ground, in the bricks as if in a wall. The window was open. A curtain blew straight up at me on a searing gust. Still, somehow, I had to look.

I swayed dangerously, then dropped to my hands and knees, screaming aloud at the new pain. I crept to the edge, peered in, and beheld a king and his courtiers below me, all sitting solemnly at a banquet table. Yet there was no feast before them, and each face was contorted in unimaginable agony. Their bodies and clothing were transparent, and I could see that the hearts of these men and women were white hot, like iron in a forge.

And again, I saw a girl in a pleasantly lit room, singing and spinning forever. A man sat at her feet, carving a piece of ivory into a form that was somehow infinitely ornate and beautiful but never complete.

And I lay, naked as I was, in a frigid stream amid snowbanks. A blizzard made the sky featureless white.

And crowds babbled in a marketplace; and I was alone in endless, silent halls thick with dust; and I walked on water to a ruined tower where men in white robes and silver masks awaited my coming; and a resplendent pirate paced back and forth endlessly on a single deck suspended in the middle of the air. He looked up, startled, as I plummeted by.

And I saw into memories, into the lives of all who dwelt in that land of *Tashe*, and I knew what it meant to be a king, and a slave, and in love, and a murderer, and I knew what it was to be old and remember all these things vaguely, as in a fading dream.

And I found my sister, Hamakina.

I fell amid swirling, stinging sand, and suddenly the sand became millions of birds, flapping their soft wings against me to hold me up. All these birds had my sister's face, and they spoke with my sister's voice.

"Sekenre, I am here."

"Where?"

"Brother, you have come for me."

"Yes, I have."

"Brother, it is too late."

I wasn't falling anymore, but lay choking in a heap of cold, soft ashes. I sat up, spitting out ash, trying to wipe ash from my eyes.

In time, tears and spittle gave me enough moisture to clean my face, and I could see. I was in a garden of ash. Fading into the distance in all directions, white, bare trees stood in neat rows, leafless, yet heavy with round, white fruit. Ash rained from the sky, the ash, the sky, and the earth all featureless gray, until I could not tell where earth and sky met.

I stood up amid dead flowers with stalks like winter reeds — huge, yet delicately preserved in every colorless detail.

The ash fell heavily enough that I could feel it striking my shoulders in clumps. I was coated with it, until I too seemed a part of this place. I held my hands over my face, struggling to breathe and to see, while making my way along a path amid sticks that might have been the remains of hedges, the ash cool and soft and knee-deep.

The overwelming smell in the air, the odor of the ash, was intensely sweet, unpleasantly so, strong enough that I felt faint. But I knew I could not stop here, could not rest, and I took one step, and the next, and the next. . .

In an open place, which might have been the center of the garden, a wooden shelter stood half-buried amid drifts, a domed roof atop squat pillars. The roof was shaped into a wide-mouthed, staring face, the mouth already clogged as if the thing were vomiting gray powder.

Hamakina sat waiting for me there, on a bench beneath that strange roof. She too was barefoot and in rags, plastered with ash. But her cheeks were newly streaked with tears.

"Sekenre ..."

"I've come to take you back," I said gently.

"I can't go. Father . . . tricked me. He told me to eat the fruit, and I —"

I waved a hand toward one of the white trees.

"This?"

"It didn't look like this then. The trees were green. The fruit was wonderful. It smelled wonderful. The colors were . . . *shining,* changing all the time, like oil on water when the sun touches it. Father told me to, and he was angry, and I was afraid, so I ate . . . and it

tasted dead, and then suddenly everything was like you see it now."

"Father did this?"

"He said it was part of his plan all along. I didn't understand a lot of what he said."

"Where is he?"

I drew my sword, clutching it tightly, furious and at the same time aware of how ridiculous and helpless I must have seemed. But it was *my* sword now, no longer my father's, given to me by the Sybil for a specific purpose —

"Sekenre, what will you do?"

"Something. Whatever I have to."

She took me by the hand. Her touch was cold. "Come on."

I don't know how long we walked through the ash garden. There was no way to measure time or distance or direction. But Hamakina seemed to know for certain where we were going.

Then the garden was gone and it seemed I was back in the cramped, swaying darkness of the Sybil's house again. I looked around for her luminous face, expectant, but my sister led me without any hesitation across a rope bridge above an abyss, while vast leviathans with idiot, human faces swam up out of a sea of guttering stars, splashing pale foam, each creature opening its mouth to display rotting teeth and a mirrored ball held between them. I gazed down through the swinging, twisting ropes and saw myself reflected there on the curving glass.

Somehow Hamakina was no longer with me, but far away, down below, inside each mirrored sphere, and I saw her running ahead of me across featureless sand beneath a sand-colored sky. Then each monster sank down in turn and she vanished, and another rose, its jaws agape, and I saw her again.

There were black stars in the sky above Hamakina now, and she ran across the sand beneath them, a gray speck against the dead sky, receding into the black points which were the stars.

And each leviathan sank down and another rose to give me a glimpse of her, and from out of the abyss I caught snatches of a song she sang as she ran. Her voice was still her own, but older, filled with pain, and a little mad.

"When I am in the darkness gone, and you 're still in the light, come lie each day upon my grave; I'll lie with you each night. Come bring me gifts of fruit and wine. Bring them from the meadow. I'll bring dust and ash and clay; I'll bring gifts of shadow."

Without any transition I could sense, I was suddenly on that endless expanse of sand beneath the black stars, and I followed her voice over the low dunes toward the horizon and a black shape that huddled there.

At first I thought it was one of the stars fallen from the sky, but as we neared it the thing resolved itself, and I slowed to a terrified walk when I saw the pointed roofs and the windows like eyes and the familiar dock beneath the house, now resting on the sand.

My father's house — no, *my* house — stood on its stilts like a huge, frozen spider. There was no river, no Reedland at all, as if the whole world had been wiped clean but for this one jumble of ancient wood.

When I reached the dock, Hamakina was waiting for me at the base of the ladder.

She turned her head upward.

"He is there."

"Why did he do all this to you and to Mother?" I said. I held onto the sword and onto the ladder, gripping hard, trembling more with sorrow than with fear or even anger.

Her reply startled me far more than anything the dreamer Aukin had said. Once more her voice was older, almost harsh.

"Why did he do all this to *you,* Sekenre?"

I shook my head and started climbing. As I did the ladder shivered, as if it were alive and felt my touch.

And my father's voice called out from the house, thundering:

"Sekenre, I ask you again. Do you still love me?"

I said nothing and kept on climbing. The trapdoor at the top was barred from the inside.

"I want you to love me still," he said. "I only wanted what was best for you. Now I want you to go back. After all you have done against my wishes, it is still possible. Go back. Remember me as I was. Live your life. That is all."

I pounded on the trapdoor with the pommel of my sword. Now the whole house shivered and suddenly burst into white, colorless flame, washing over me, blinding me, roaring in my ears.

I let out a yell and jumped, barely clearing the dock below, landing facedown in the sand.

I sat up, sputtering, still clutching the sword. The house was not harmed by the fire, but the ladder smoldered and fell as I watched.

I slid the sword under my belt again and started climbing one of the wooden stilts. Once more the white flames washed over me, but they gave no heat, and I ignored them.

"Father," I said. "I am coming. Let me in."

I reached the porch outside my own room. I was standing in front of the very window through which Hamakina had been carried away.

All the windows and doors were barred against me, and flickering with white flames.

I thought of calling on the Sybil. It would be my third and last opportunity. Then if I ever did so again — what? Somehow she would claim me.

No, it was not time for that.

"Father," I said, "if you love me as much as you say, open up."

"You are a disobedient son."

"I shall have to disobey you further."

And once more I began to weep as I stood there, as I closed my hands together and opened them again. Father had beaten me once for attempting this act. *Then* I had gotten no results. *Now* I did, and it was as easy as breathing.

Cold blue flames danced on my outstretched palms. I reached up with my burning hands and parted the white fire like a curtain. It flickered and went out. I pressed my palms against the shuttered window. Blue flames streamed from between my fingers. The wood smoked, blackened, and fell inward, giving way so suddenly that I stumbled forward, almost falling into the room.

I climbed over the windowsill and stood there, amazed. The most fantastic thing of all was that I was truly in the house where I had grown up, in the room Mother, Hamakina, and I had shared, and in which I had remained alone for half a night at the very end waiting desperately for the dawn. I saw where I had once carved my initials into the back of a chair. My clothes lay heaped over the edge of an open trunk. My books were on a shelf in the far corner, and a page of papyrus, one of my own illumination projects, was still in place on the desk, with pens and brushes and bottles *of* ink and paint all where I had left them. Hamakina's doll lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. One of Mother's *hevats*, a golden bird, hung from the ceiling, silent and motionless.

More than anything else I wanted to just lie down in that bed, then rise in the morning, get dressed, and resume work at my desk, as if nothing had ever happened.

I think that was my father's last offer to me. He was shaping my thoughts.

I walked out of the room, the floorboards creaking. I knocked on his workroom door. It, too, was locked.

Father spoke from within. He sounded weary.

"Sekenre, what do you want?"

It was a completely astonishing question. All I could say was, "I want in."

"No," he said after a long pause. "What do you truly want, as my son, for yourself."

"I don't know anymore." I drew my sword once more, and pounded on the door with the pommel.

"I think you do. You want to grow to be an ordinary man, to live in the city, to have a wife and family, to be free of ghosts and shadows and sorcery — on this we are agreed. I want that for you too. It is very important."

"Father, I am not sure of anything. I don't know how I feel."

I kept on pounding.

"Then why are you still here?" he said.

"Because I have to be."

"To become a sorcerer is a terrible thing," he said. "It is worse than a disease, worse than any terror, like opening a door into nightmare that can never be closed again. You seek to know. You peer into darkness. There is a certain allure, what seems like unlimited power at first, then glory, then, if you truly delude yourself, vast wisdom. To become a sorcerer is to learn the secrets of all the worlds and of the gods. But sorcery burns you. It disfigures, changes, and the man who becomes a sorcerer is no longer the man he was before he became a sorcerer. He is hated and feared by all. He has countless enemies."

"And you, Father? Do you have countless enemies?"

"My son, I have killed many people in my time, thousands —"

That, once more, astonished me into helplessness. I could only say, "But *why?"*

"A sorcerer must have knowledge, not merely to ward off his enemies, but to *live.* He hungers for more dark spells, more powers. You can only get so much from books. You *need* more. To. truly become a sorcerer, one must kill another sorcerer, and another, and

another, each time stealing what that other sorcerer possesses, which he, in turn, has stolen by murder. There would be few sorcerers left were it not for the temptations, which recruit new ones. Sorcery goes on and on, devouring."

"Surely some magic can be used for good, Father."

I stopped pounding. I looked down at my hands, where they had been marked, where the flames had arisen so effortlessly.

"Sorcery is not magic. Do not confuse the two. Magic comes from the gods. The magician is merely the instrument. Magic passes through him like breath through a reed pipe. Magic can heal. It can satisfy. It is like a candle in the darkness. Sorcery, however, resides in the sorcerer. It is like a blazing sun."

"I don't want to be a sorcerer, Father. Truly. I have . . . other plans."

Now, I think, there was genuine sadness in his voice.

"Beloved Sekenre, my only son, you have looked upon the *evatim* and been marked by them. Throughout your life you will be scarred from their touch. You have conversed with the Sybil and you bear her mark also. You have journeyed among the ghosts, in the company of a corpse, through the realm *of Leshe*, the place of dreams. You have drunk of the waters of vision and have seen all that is in *Tashe*, the land of death. And, at the last, you burned your way into this house with flames summoned from your hands. Now I ask you . . . are these the deeds of a *calligrapher?"*

"No," I said weakly, sobbing. All my resolve drained away. I let the sword drop to the floor and I slid down, my back to the door, and sat there. "No," I whispered. "I just wanted to get Hamakina back."

"Then you are a disappointment to me, son. You are a fool," he said with sudden sharpness. "She does not matter."

"But *she is your child too.* Didn't you love her also? No, you never did. Why? You owe me that much, Father. You have to tell me why ... about a lot of things."

He stirred within the room. Metal clinked. But he did not come to the door or touch the bolt. There was a long silence. I could see my mother's *hevat*, the golden bird, through the open doorway of my own room, and I stared at it with a kind of distracted intensity, as if I could discern all the answers to all my questions in the intricacies of its design.

I felt cold. I clutched my shoulders hard, shivering. The slashes the *evalim* had made in my sides and back pained me again.

After a while, Father resumed speaking.

"Sekenre, how old do you think I was when I married your mother?"

"I — I —"

"I was three hundred and forty-nine years old, my son. I had been a sorcerer for a long time by then. I had wandered through many lands, fleeing death, consumed by the contagion of sorcery, slaughtering my enemies, raging in my madness against the gods, whom I considered to be at best my equals. But I had a lucid interval. I remembered what I had been, long before. I had been ... a man. So I pretended I was one again. I married your mother. I saw in you ... all my hopes for what I had once been. In you, that ordinary man lived again. If I could cling to that hope, I too, in a small way, would remain human. So *you* were special. I loved *you."*

"But *Hamakina* —"

" — is mere baggage, a receptacle and nothing more. When I felt the weight of my death on me at last, when I could no longer hold off my enemies, I planted the seed of Hamakina in her mother's womb, and I raised her as a prize specimen, for a specific purpose. I brought her here *to contain my death.* The seed of her was something wrought in my laboratory. I placed her inside her mother with a metal tube, while her mother lay in a drugged sleep. So, you see, her life did *not* come from the River, from the dreams of Surat-Kemad, but from *me.* I offered this new life to the Devouring God in exchange for my own. It is a bottle, filled with my own death. So I am still a sorcerer, and a great lord in the land of the dead, because I am neither truly living nor truly dead. I am not the slave of Surat-Kemad, but his ally. And so, my son, your father has outwitted all his enemies, evaded all dangers. He alone is not wholly consumed by sorcery. He *continues.* There is a certain beauty to the scheme, you must admit —"

I rose to my feet, numb beyond all sorrow now. I picked up the sword.

"Sekenre," Father said, "now that I have explained everything — you were right; I did owe you an explanation — you must go away. Save yourself. Be what I wanted to be. You are a good boy. When I was your age, I too was good. I only wanted to do what was right. But I changed. If you go now, you can remain as you are —"

"No, Father. I, too, have changed."

He screamed then, not out of fear, but despair. I stood before the door, sword under one arm while I folded my hands together, then opened them.

Once more, it was as easy as breathing.

The flames leapt from my hands, red and orange this time. They touched the door, spreading over it. I heard the metal bolt on the inside fall to the floor. The door swung open.

At first my eyes could not focus. There was only darkness. Then faint stars appeared, then an endless black plain of swirling sand. I saw hundreds of naked men and women dangling from the sky on metal chains, turning slowly in the wind, mutilated, their faces contorted with the idiocy of hate.

The darkness faded. The stars were gone. Father's room was as it had been before the priests had cleaned it out. All the books were there, the bottles, the shelves of jars, the charts, the strange shapes muttering in jars.

He lay on his couch dressed in his sorcerer's robe, as I had last seen him, his eyes gouged out, sockets covered with golden coins.

He sat up. The coins fell into his lap. Fire burned within his eye-sockets, white-hot, like molten iron.

And he said to me, "This is your last *warning, Sekenre. Your very last.*"

"If you are so powerful, Father, where is your power now? You have not resisted me, not really. You only give me . . . warnings."

"What would I have to do then, my son?" he said.

"You would have to kill me. It is too late for anything else."

His voice began to fade, to become garbled, to disintegrate into a series of hisses and grunts. I could barely make out his words.

"Now all my preparations are undone. You disobeyed me to the last. You did not heed my many warnings, sorcerer, son of sorcerer —"

He slid off the couch onto the floor, wriggling toward me on all fours, his whole body swaying from side to side, his terrible eyes blazing.

I almost called on the Sybil then. I wanted to ask simply, *What do I do now ? What now?*

But I didn't. In the end, I alone had to decide what was right, the correct action. Anything I did would please the Sybil. She would weave it into the pattern. Surat-Kemad did not care —

"My son ..." The words seemed to come from deep within him, like a wind from out of a tunnel. "To the very end I have loved you, and it has not been enough."

He opened his huge, hideously elongated mouth. His teeth were like little knives.

At that final moment, I did not fear him, nor hate him, nor did I sorrow. I felt only a hollow, grinding sense of duty.

"No, it was not enough, Father."

I struck him with the sword. His head came off with a single blow. My arm completed the motion almost before I was aware of it.

It was as easy as breathing.

Blood like molten iron spread at my feet. I stepped back. The floorboards burned.

"You are not my father." I said softly. "You cannot *have been* my father."

But I knew that he had been, all the way to the end.

I knelt beside him, then put my arms around his shoulders and lay with my head on his rough, malformed back. I wept long and hard and bitterly.

And as I did, dreams came to me, thoughts, visions, flashes of memories which were not my own, and terrible understanding, the culmination of long study and of longer experience. My mind filled. I knew a thousand deaths and how they had been inflicted, how a single gem of knowledge or power was wrested from each. I knew what every instrument in this room was for, the contents of all the books and charts, and what was in each of those jars and how it could be compelled to speak.

For I had killed a sorcerer, and if you kill a sorcerer you become all that he was.

This was my inheritance from my father.

In the dawn, Hamakina and I buried our father in the sand beneath the house. The black stars were gone. The sky was dark, but it was the familiar sky of *Eshe*, the Earth of the living. Yet the world was still empty, and we dug in the sand with our hands. When we had made a shallow grave, we rolled him into it, placing his head between his feet in the way a sorcerer must be buried. For a time, Mother was with us. She crawled into the grave with him and we covered them both up.

The sky lightened into purple, then azure. Then water flowed beneath the dock and I watched the first birds rise from among the reeds. Hamakina stood among the reeds for a little while, gazing back at me. Then she was gone.

Suddenly I began to shake almost uncontrollably, but merely from cold this time.

Though it was early summer, the night's chill lingered, and I was almost naked. I climbed up into the house by means of a rope ladder I'd dropped through the trapdoor and put on trousers, a heavy shirt, and a cloak.

Later, when I came down again with a jug to get water for washing, I saw a man in a white robe and a silver mask walking toward me across the water. I stood up and waited. He stopped a distance off, but I could hear what he said clearly enough.

At first he spoke with my father's voice.

"I wanted to tell you the rest of the story of the Heron Boy. There is no ending to it, I fear. It just. . . continues. He was not a heron and he was not a boy either, but he looked like a boy. So he dwelt among men pretending to be one of them, yet confiding his secret to those who loved him. Still, he did not belong. He never could. He lived out his days as an impostor. But he had help, because those he confided in did love him. Let me confide in you, then. Sekenre, when a boy becomes a man his father gives him a new name which is known only between the two of them, until the son gives it to his own son in turn. Therefore take the name your father had, which is *Heron."*

And he spoke with the voice of the Sybil.

"Sekenre, you are marked with my mark because you are my instrument. All men know that out of the tangle of the world I divine the secrets of their lives. But do they also know that out of the tangle of their lives I divine the secrets of the world? That I cast them about like bones, like marbles, and read the patterns as they fall? I think not."

And, finally, he spoke with the voice of Surat-Kemad, god of death and of the river, and the thunder was his voice; and he took off the mask and revealed his terrible face, and his jaws gaped wide; and the numberless, fading stars were his teeth; and the sky and the earth were his mouth; and the river disgorged itself from his belly; and his great ribs were the pillars of the world.

He spoke to me in the language of the gods, of *Akimshe,* the burning holiness at the heart of the universe, and he named the gods yet unborn, and he spoke of kings and of nations and of worlds, of things past and things which are to come.

Then he was gone. The city spread before me now. I saw the foreign ships at anchor in the river, and the bright banners waving in the morning breeze.

I took off the robe and sat on the dock, washing. A boatman drifted by and waved, but then he realized who I was, made a sign against evil, and paddled away frantically.

His fear was so trivial it was somehow incredibly funny.

I fell back on the deck, hysterical with laughter, then lay there. Sunlight slanted under the house. The air was warm and felt good.

And I heard my father whisper from his grave, gently, "My son, if you can become *more* than a sorcerer, I will not fear for you."

"Yes, Father. I shall."

Then I folded my hands, and slowly opened them, and the fire that I held cupped there was perfect and pale and still, like a candle's flame on a breezeless summer night. **Q**

THE ZULU LORD

This is the tale the Kaffirs tell as the tints of twilight melt And the jackal jeers from the kopje's stones and the nighttime veils the veldt; As the cooking fires begin to glow and the lounging braves match tales, This is the story the ancients tell in far, fire-lighted kraals:

Chaka sat in his throne of state; no girls that dance or sing
Bent supple forms in the palace hut for Chaka the Zulu king.
For Chaka the king was a man of war and his hands with blood were red
And never a girl could thrill his soul as the sight of the spear-rent dead.

But the idle assagais hung in the rack
And idle the warring horde For the tribes of the
veldt-land bent the back
To Chaka, the Zulu lord.

Then he formed his impis rank upon rank and bid them smite and slay; Three thousand warriors of Zululand fell on that bloody day. Spear clanged on shield and the squadrons reeled under the hot blue skies; From his throne of state King Chaka watched with his gleaming, magical eyes.

And now when the dim stars light their brands
And the night wind brings its musk The
ghosts come out of the Shadowlands
And stalk through the shuddering dusk.

They say, when the night wind stirs the leaves and the starlight gleams and peers, That 'tis the rustle of unseen shields and the glitter of shadow spears. And there in the dim of the ghostly night, far out on the silent plain, The phantom hordes form ranks and charge, retreat, surge on again.

And the moon that rises above the ghosts
And silvers the dusky land Is Chaka,
watching the spectral hosts
That died at his command.

— Robert E. Howard