

Weird Tales[®]

U.S. \$5.95
CAN \$7.50
THE
UNIQUE
MAGAZINE
Issue #335

MICHAEL
BISHOP

IAN
WATSON

TANITH
LEE



Featured Interview:

**TERRY
PRATCHETT**

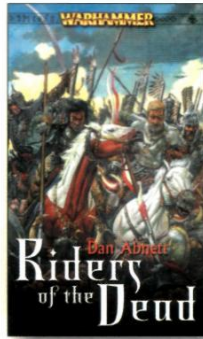
Rovera

LET THE GALAXY BURN!

Storming tales of dark fantasy and future war
from the grim worlds of Warhammer!



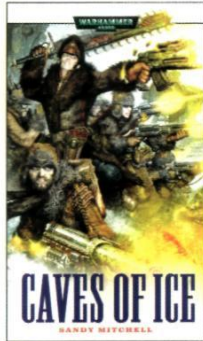
*'Death,
carnage and
war on a
universal
scale!'*
- Starlog



Riders of the Dead
by Dan Abnett • \$7.99



The Bleeding Chalice
by Ben Counter • \$7.99



Caves of Ice
by C. L. Werner • \$6.99



Witch Hunter
by C. L. Werner • \$7.99

Available from all better bookstores
www.blacklibrary.com



Weird Tales



FOR 81 YEARS, THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE
March-April 2004

ISSN 0898-5073
Cover by Rowena Morrell

LAMBERT, LAMBERT	Ian Watson	21
<i>He was peculiar . . . and working up an appetite.</i>		
THE COFFIN MERCHANT	Richard Middleton	25
<i>Somehow he knew who was going to die . . . and when. A weird story classic.</i>		
MIDNIGHT	Tanith Lee	31
<i>At the moment of truth, she didn't run away.</i>		
FIG	Robert Ferrigno	39
<i>"They don't call me the Tree of Knowledge for nothing."</i>		
THE SACERDOTAL OWL	Michael Bishop	40
<i>The horror they were trying to summon might be older than even the gods.</i>		

FEATURES

THE EYRIE	The Editors	6
SHADOWINGS	Douglas E. Winter	17
WEIRD TALES TALKS WITH TERRY PRATCHETT	Joseph McCabe	33

VERSE

WHAT MY BRAIN TELLS MY HANDS	John Grey	24
PATIENTLY WAITING and RETURNS POLICY	Darrell Schweitzer	24
CROWLEY'S VILLA	Lee Clark Zumpe	28
THE SORCERER'S MATE	Jane Rice	29
ILLUSTRATED LIMERICKS	George Barr	30

ILLUSTRATIONS

George Barr	3, 25-28, 30, 40-58
Stephen E. Fabian	6
Bob Eggleton	17
Frank Kelly Freas	20
Allen Koszowski	23

Weird Tales® is published 6 times a year by DNA Publications, Inc., & Wildside Press LLC, in association with Terminus Publishing Co., Inc. Postmaster and others: send all changes of address and other subscription matters to DNA Publications, Inc., PO Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988. Single copies, \$5.95 in U.S.A. & possessions; \$7.00 by mail to Canada, \$10.00 by first class mail elsewhere. Subscriptions: 6 issues (one year) \$24.00 in U.S.A. & possessions; 33.00 in Canada, \$60.00 elsewhere, in U.S. funds. Editorial matters should be addressed to Terminus Publishing Co., Inc., 123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia PA 19406-2570. Publisher is not responsible for loss of manuscripts in publisher's hands or in transit; please see page 8 for more details. Copyright © 2004 by Terminus Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved; reproduction prohibited without prior permission.

Typeset & printed in the United States of America.

Weird Tales® is a registered trademark owned by Weird Tales, Limited.



An Important Book and (At last!) lots of letters.

For once we have received enough letters of comment that we can let you, the Readers, write most of this column, but first we want to talk about a very important book that's just come in the mail. Our esteemed colleague and former columnist **S.T. Joshi** has made many impressive contributions to the field of fantastic literature over the years, but this latest, we think, is one of his greatest. He's gotten **Lord Dunsany** into Penguin Classics. The book in question is *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales* by Lord Dunsany (Penguin, 2004, trade paperback, \$14.00) and it places Dunsany in among the greats of world literature, which is where he belongs. Dunsany has, of course, been admired for decades. He influenced writers as diverse as H.P. Lovecraft, Ursula Le Guin, L. Sprague de Camp, and Fritz Leiber. He was indisputably an all-time giant of fantastic literature, who ranks **with** Poe, Tolkien, and a very **few** others. But he fell out of mainstream awareness sometime in the 1930s, the result being that when one of us (Darrell) was in college in the early 1970s, it was difficult to persuade professors (who had received their training around 1940) that Dunsany was real literature. One had to draw a tenuous link through the Irish Renaissance, the association with Yeats, Lady Gregory, and the Abbey Theatre . . . the result being that the chapter on Dunsany's plays in *Pathways to Elfland* was usable as a term-paper in a drama course, but more students than teachers had ever heard of Lord Dunsany as a fiction writer.

At the time, Dunsany was being revived in popular paperback, in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series edited by Lin Carter, and in an excellent introductory volume, *Gods, Men, and Ghosts* edited by E.F. Bleiler for Dover Books (1972). (Professors would be oblivious to this.) If you frequented used-book stores, Dunsany first editions, including the ones with the gorgeous S.H. Sime illustrations, were still fairly common.

But that was thirty years ago. Now Joshi has edited an excellent, annotated volume containing a sampling of material from every phase of Dunsany's career. It is, most obviously, a replacement for *Gods, Men, and Ghosts*. It is the place to begin the work of this great writer. If you encounter the name Dunsany, in, say, a *Weird Tales*® editorial, or (as most of us do for the first time) in some Lovecraftian context (the same way one first encounters Christopher Marlowe in a Shakespearean context), now there is a single book you can pick up which will make clear why this writer was so important. Here are, among other things, *The Gods of Pegana* complete, such stories as "The Fall of Babbulkund," "The Sword of Welleran," "Idle Days on the Yann," and "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth," plus a selection of the Jorkens club yarns (a much imitated series, easily recognizable by its descendants, such as Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart*), and the famous (or infamous) detective shocker, "Two Bottles of Relish," which, at first, no editor would dare publish, but which later became Dunsany's most reprinted story. One can quibble with the selections (one of our particular favorites, "The Highwayman," is missing), but then, surely, the hardest part of editing such a volume must be deciding what to leave out.

A better introduction to Dunsany's exquisite, fabulously-inventive fantasy would be hard to find. That is the first reason this book is important. If you live long enough, you begin to realize that you can't take for granted that the "standard classics" are actually available. All those not-so-rare early editions in the used-book stores of our youth are now firmly in the clutches of Baby Boomers with taste *and who aren't*

giving them up. What few come on the market these days are very expensive. Even those paperbacks of the 1970s are getting scarce. For a twenty-year-old, coming into the field now, a new writer ready to be influenced by the best fantastic fiction, or someone who will one day be a major critic, the texts have to be made available inexpensively. Now they have been.

And of course for the guardians of academe, who are usually decades behind in the recognition of anything important, Dunsany has once again been published as Real Literature, so those guardians can begin to catch up on what they've been missing for the past half century.

The Most Popular Story in issue 333 was "The Town Manager" by Thomas Ligotti, with a very strong second-place showing for "Maeve" by Lillian Csernica. Third place went to "Kitty Loses Her Faith" by Carrie Vaughn. That the names of the three winners appeared on the cover of the issue in precisely that order is (take your pick) either a dazzlingly precognitive glimpse of the awesome cosmic mysteries of the universe or just a coincidence.

And now some of those letters.

David Hopewell writes: *Issue 333 was superb! The cover was great. It reminded me a little bit of the Lee Brown Coye style.*

My favorite story was "The Town Manager" by Thomas Ligotti. The way the first-person narrator told the story was very Lovecraftian. I love the surprise ending. Hiked the irony of the character looking to find "a way to make an end of it" and then he is offered the job of Town Manager (where it is guaranteed to make an end of him!) This story needs to be in a "best of" anthology and probably will be.

*A very close second was "Kitty Loses Her Faith" by Carrie Vaughn. This is one of the most suspenseful stories I've read in recent issues. And I loved the insightful, indirect criticism of Christianity and its conversion schemes. My favorite part was the line from Elijah Smith who ironically, metaphorically (and unknowingly) sums up the need for Christian faith (as he talks about Estelle's lack of faith in *The Cure*): "The ones who hate themselves, the monsters they are — their belief comes easy. But you — you love the monsters you have become, and that love is what you fear and hate. Your belief comes with great difficulty, because you really don't want to believe." True, but she doesn't need to believe in the cure if she already loves who she is. The above quote is quite similar to one of many critiques that (don't laugh) Anton LaVey wrote about religions in *The Satanic Bible*, p. 60: "The devils of past religions have always, at least in part, had animal characteristics, evidence of man's constant need to deny that he, too, is an animal, for to do so would serve a mighty blow to his impoverished ego." Indeed, religions push upon followers that natural animalistic behaviors are "bad." However, some of us don't think so. So Carrie's bifurcation is an accurate description of faith (in the *Cure* and of Christianity) and is not a fallacy. Under the surface, the first part of Carrie's quote indirectly applies to Christians while the second part applies to guilt-free humanists. Kitty says it best when she says, "Ignore us all! Follow what heart you have left, if any, and leave them." I loved how she brought out the similarities between vampirism and Christianity. I believe this story is not a pro-vampire story as some people might think. Arturo and Elijah are both "vampires" (even though Arturo is in the literal sense) when it comes to feeding off of Estelle. Really, they need her more than she needs them. And it got me to thinking, if I couldn't get away from them I may well have done what Estelle did. She really became a vampire because of the polio diagnosis but soon found out that you have no freedom (another great criticism of Christianity). Not only that, but people want to become vampires (or Christians) to live forever. Who wants to serve someone else forever?*

We will jump in here and comment that in the Judeo-Christian mythos, Satan had problems with that very same question. But before this turns into mere Christianity-bashing, let us opine that Anton LaVey was one more snake-oil salesman, not any apostle of personal freedom, and no anthropologist (or historian) either. Lots of *gods* have animal parts: all the Egyptian ones, or Pan, for instance. What does that say about the denial of the beast in all of us? And Christianity is hardly unique in its forced (or pressured) conversions. Indeed, all religions aside from Buddhism seem to have indulged in this at various times. Think of the military conquests of early Islam or even the forced conversions of surrounding tribes to Judaism in Hasmonean times. (Which came home to roost in the repellent person of Herod the Great, who was Jewish enough to qualify as king but foreign enough to be a willing tool of the Romans.) It seems to be an almost universal attribute of sectarians that as soon as they have discovered the One Right Way, they start imposing this on others, for their own good, of course.

We confess to holding a rather traditionalist view of vampires. When we heard of Anne Rice going on about whether or not she would "accept the dark gift" of vampirism if offered, we wished we'd had the chance to ask, "Isn't that like the gift of being a serial killer?" Think of it: both the vampire and the serial killer are utterly without compassion, viewing themselves as either unique or part of a small elite, and the

rest of mankind as mere cattle. We're rooting for Van Helsing — or Buffy.

Mr. Hopewell goes on at length about many other topics. Here's another bit that seems particularly relevant. He is responding to the Wilum Pugmire letter in *WT* 333: *If he has read only a few issues of the old WT, then how does he know the new WT doesn't feel like them? What exactly would be the point of mimicking the old WT anyway?*

Indeed, what? This is a point we raised at the very beginning of our involvement with *Weird Tales*, when our unofficial slogan was "a resurrection, not an exhumation." Any attempt to mimick precisely the old, classic *Weird Tales* would be inherently self-defeating, because the *Weird Tales* of the 1920s and '30s *was not an imitation of anything*. It presented the best *contemporary* imaginative literature, at a time when the hot contemporary writers were people like H.P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard. What editor Farnsworth Wright most assuredly did *not* do is insist that everybody write like contemporaries of Edgar Allan Poe, who would have been as far removed in time from the early *Weird Tales* as we are in the other direction. Our view has always been that *Weird Tales* should attempt to be what the original magazine might have become if it had survived to the present uninterrupted and continued to evolve.

Joseph M. Marino sent the following short note: *Here's a vote for "The Town Manager" by Thomas Ligotti as best story of the issue. I have come to look forward to Mr. Ligotti's stories. The atmosphere of his world is satisfying and relaxing. This story in particular was enjoyed, as my work is for a municipality and involves deep night shift. Reading this story between midnight and dawn while alone in a large, quiet water-supply control center was just right, just the right flavor.*

Perry Huntoon refers to "The Town Manager" as a "mini-classic," but votes for Lillian Csernica's "Maeve" for first place. Although a faithful *Weird Tales* reader for many years, he reports himself *burned out on Sword & Sorcery and vampire tales*. As for our *diatribes asking whether Sword & Sorcery was still possible. I hope not.*

But simultaneously we received this from **Valdis A. Augstkalns**, who once told us he'd been shot at by every major participant in World War II except the Japanese, and is an old-time contributor to *Amra*, the *Sword & Sorcery* magazine George Scithers edited from the late 1950s into the early '80s: *Sword and sorcery not compatible with the modern age! Stuff and nonsense, sirs! Stuff and nonsense. In this litigious age, maybe even actionable.* He then goes on to remark, *For me the most interesting question about S&S is: Why are the best American practitioners of the art (the Brits appear immune) so inclined to self-destruction? Leiber just escaped his glooms. Howard and Wagner did not.*

Not stuff and nonsense at all, but that does seem to be too small a sample to be statistically significant. Maybe the subject of another editorial. . . ?

Elaine Weaver writes: *My favorite story in this issue is Thomas Ligotti's "The Town Manager." His voice is like nothing else I've ever run across in the horror field. Jason Van Hollander's illustrations added just the right flavor. In second place comes Carrie Vaughn's "Kitty Loses Her Faith," which asked tough questions while delivering a few surprises. I'm glad to see she's continuing the adventures of Kitty Norville. On a different subject, I also saw Dagon about a year and a half ago. I found it to be as vulgar and chaotic as you do. Wouldn't it be nice if some director would take a story like "At the Mountains of Madness" and make it into a film that actually resembled Lovecraft's work? With CGI technology where it is, it shouldn't be that hard for a creative film-wizard to conjure up Cyclopean architecture and the cosmic demons and gods that dwell therein. C'mon Hollywood, you can do better than that!*

Actually, we're not all that sure (though we are willing to be pleasantly surprised) that *Hollywood* can do better. After many "Lovecraft" films, this "brand name" has been firmly associated with what is loud, garish, and vulgar. Anything which *isn't*, Hollywood money-types would argue will miss its audience (and they may even be right!). So if there is to be a quality Lovecraft film, it may have to come from the BBC, or from some foreign "art film" director. Just imagine. . . "Ia! Cthulhu fhtagn!" with subtitles.

April Grant writes, regarding Cthulhu's birthday, as noted a couple issues back: *Congratu-lations to the Tentacled One on his 75th anniversary. The interesting remarks in the latest Eyrie made me wonder about the future of Lovecraftian weird stories. I often hear his whole body of work referred to as "the Cthulhu Mythos," and it seems that when modern authors write with his themes they only want to write SF/horror. I'm not objecting to that; it's turned out a lot of good fiction. But why is Dreamland neglected? Lovecraft wrote many stories which use a much more fantasy-centered style and magical aesthetic. He was influenced by Dunsany, of course, but these tales soon became wildly original. "The Quest of Iranon," "The Cats of Ulthar," and "Celephais" are fine examples. And I can't find any modern writers doing much with this notion at all! Everyone seems to think Lovecraft only wrote about green guys with tentacles. The late Roger Zelazny used Dreamland to good effect in A Night in the Lonesome October. But where are all the other tales of Celephais, Ulthar, the Plateau of Leng, and the army of cats, the ghouls, ghaists, night-gaunts, ruins under the sea?*

Well, for one thing, **Brian Lumley** has written any number of them, in such novels as *Ship of Dreams*, *Mad Moon of Dreams*, etc. His story "Iced on Aran" in WT 296 was set in Lovecraft's Dreamland. But, to be fair, writing "dreamland" stories in a "Lovecraftian" manner is a difficult act to keep up, largely because these dreamland stories are more derivative than you seem to think. You have but to read the first page or so of Dunsany's "Idle Days on the Yann" (in the Penguin volume reviewed above) to see where they all came from. It's ironic that you cite as "wildly original" Lovecraft's "Celephais," which is a fine story, maybe even an improvement on the original (Lovecraft is straight-dramatic where Dunsany is ironic), but virtually a restatement of Dunsany's "The Coronation of Mr. Thomas Shap" (also in the Penguin volume). Lovecraft himself felt that in the Dreamland stories he had not truly found his own voice yet. The influence which might produce a genuine dreamland story, such as, say, "Whom Even Death Might Fear" by Darrell Schweitzer in WT 330, is more directly Dunsanian and doesn't necessarily have to be routed through Lovecraft.

William McCarthy responds to a previous letter from Jul Owings (in WT 332): *I didn't understand her strenuous opposition to American Gods. Apparently Mr. Gaiman's readers disagree. Even so, I think Ms Owings raises an interesting point: ". . . the United States was founded upon an idea straight from myth and legend.. .Norse and Celtic lore appear to substantiate this opinion.*

Icelandic sagas are a complex literary tapestry interweaving history and legend. Sometimes the threads are hard to untangle. Many historians now believe Leif Ericson actually did visit North America circa A.D. 1000. Whether or not he did, the concept of Vinland — the land beyond the sea — was planted in the European mind five hundred years before Columbus.

In an eighth-century Irish text we find the Voyage of Bran — three parts Ulysses and one part Rip Van Winkle. His exploits on the Isle of Women are reminiscent of a later European myth — Spanish explorers mistakenly believed men without beards were women — Amazons. In any event, according to the legend Bran traveled across the Atlantic — heading west. The Irish monk St. Brendan added more chapters to this myth. In later years — when the potato famine precipitated a mass emigration — North America was already entrenched in Irish lore as the Land of Promise.

More recently, we find corroboration in Tolkien's mythic work. If we accept Middle Earth as an analog of Europe — the elves sailing west over the High Sea can only be coming to America.

Or else they are sailing into the sunset, into the land-beyond-life, which is a much older and more purely mythic image. The rest of your assertion may be argued over among archeologists (who have found traces of the Norsemen, but not St. Brendan), Irishmen, and Australians (the many Irish emigrants who sailed east to Australia damages your theory), but we really doubt Tolkien's elves were headed for New York or Miami. Lord Dunsany wrote: "The source of all imagination is here in our fields, and Creation is beautiful enough for the furthest flights of the poets. What is called realism only falls behind these flights because it is too meticulously concerned with the detail of the material; mere inventories of rocks are not poetry; but all the memories of crags and hills and meadows and woods and sky that lie in a sensitive spirit are materials for poetry, only waiting to be taken out, and to be laid before the eyes of such as care to perceive them." This is probably closer to the truth. The concept of the Land in the West (Tir-nan-Og in Celtic lore) is simply an imaginative response to the sky and the sunset and an unreachable horizon. It existed well before anybody suspected there *was* an America, and America only fit into that imagi-i native niche very imperfectly.

Our thanks to all who wrote. Hey, this is starting to feel like a real letters column! You too can participate in the discussion.

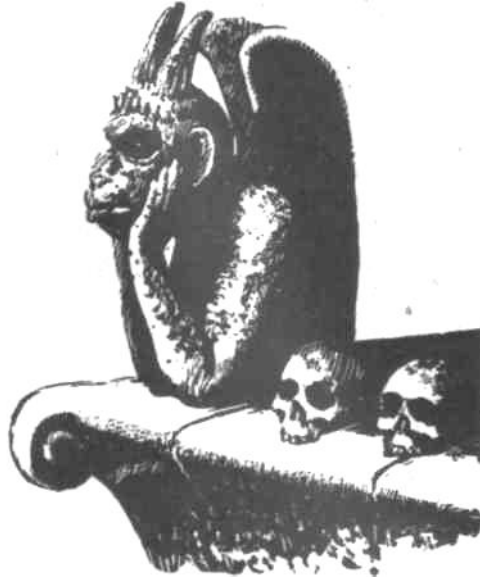
We are happy to publish a poem by Jane Rice. She wrote very distinguished, macabre short stories and novelets which appeared in John W. Campbell's *Unknown Worlds* in the 1940s and in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in the 1950s. A posthumous collection of her work, edited by Stefan Dziemianowicz and Jim Rockhill, *The Idol of the Flies*, is forthcoming from Midnight House. We have another of her poems in inventory.

Coming next issue is our first *serial* since 1941. Look for part 1 (of 2) of "Ripper!" by the perennial favorite, **William F. Nolan**.

Q

SHADOWINGS

By Douglas E. Winter



"I want to know why you killed yourself."

Death, that greatest of mysteries, dominates the fiction of Peter Straub. For thirty years this poet-turned-novelist has defied cliché and categorization, vexing those who would segregate art and entertainment, literature and popular fic-

tion. Although deemed a writer of "horror" because of his commercial breakthrough, *Ghost Story* (1979), and his collaborations with Stephen King, *The Talisman* (1984) and *Black House* (2001), Straub is contemporary fiction's consummate cross-over artist, the Raymond Chandler of ghost stories, reclaiming and redefining a fallen genre with wit and style.

With his new novel, *lost boy lost girl* (Random House, hc, 281 pp., \$24.95), Straub twines gothic traditions with serial murder in an eerie yet elegant meditation on the reality and fiction of homicide and horror.

Sudden death summons Timothy Underhill — Straub's avatar and "collaborator" on the novels *Koko* (1988), *Mystery* (1990), and *The Throat* (1993) — home to Millhaven, a faded dream of childhood (and Milwaukee). By chance and by choice, Underhill is death's diarist, bearing witness to its most violent incarnations; his latest project is a chamber opera about America's first known serial killer, the rapacious blood-letter of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exhibition, Dr. Herman Mudgett aka H.H. Holmes.

Now Underhill must confront fatality firsthand. His sister-in-law, Susan, has committed suicide — "a death like a slap in the face" — leaving two survivors: his embittered brother, Philip, and fifteen-year-old nephew, Mark, whom Underhill thinks of wishfully as his own son. Mark shares his uncle's catlike curiosity and passion for trying to make sense of the senseless. Unwilling to accept mundane explanations for his mother's demise, he grows obsessed with the abandoned house that waits, silent and forgotten, behind the family home.

This "clenched fist" of a building hides an unsavory history. Once owned by Joseph Kalendar, who slaughtered Millhaven women and his own family twenty-five years before, the dwelling now serves a new predator, the child-abducting "Sherman Park Killer." There is no coincidence in these events, or in the ways that Kalendar's grue-stained abode and its hidden rooms, corridors, and chutes echo the infamous "murder castle" of H.H. Holmes.

Mark's adventures inside the house are the novel's centerpiece. Straub brings this cramped and

cobwebbed maze to life with a macabre majesty unseen since Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and King's homage, *The Shining* (1977). There are no false notes, no tired cinematic tricks; Straub entices, then unnerves us by conjuring an atmosphere of dread and decay whose intimations of darkness succumb, in time, to those of light — to the thought that, if evil dwells within this space, so must the divine.

Mark's forced entry into Kalendar's domain up-ends the novel's carefully drawn reality. "The world would no longer run along its old, safe tracks. There had been a rip in the fabric, and bleak, terrible miracles would result." The past, awakened from its restless sleep, returns with vengeance. Haunted — perhaps literally — by the niece she failed to save from Kalendar, Susan Underhill has given up her own life in despair.

When Mark vanishes, the apparent victim of the Sherman Park Killer, Underhill fears the worst — not only for his nephew, but for himself. As mystery begets mystery, his own failure to save a loved one from death challenges our perception of the text, which transforms from a story into a ghost story into a story about ghost stories: "[I]t couldn't be a conventional mystery about a murderer and an empty house." Events are revisited from differing points of view, the narrative is intercut with excerpts from Underbill's journal, and the reader soon doubts the "reality" of the novel, which seems "written" by Underhill, its supernatural elements mere fantasies meant to exorcise his pain and loss. (When, in the novel's closing pages, the question is posed — "Is this real?" — Underbill's reply is echoed by a ghost: "As real as it can be. . . As real as I can make it.")

Straub introduces this magical possibility so subtly that readers may not even notice the turn of the screw. There are no telling contradictions, no explanatory asides, simply two alternative readings of the book. The gardens of forking paths beloved by Jorge Luis Borges are viewed at impossible distances, revealed by Straub's (or Underbill's) vibrant imagination as places of solace, where those we have lost are never truly lost, but alive, if only in our memories . . . and the stories we tell.

In *lost boy lost girl*, Peter Straub and his "collaborator" urge us to look past the surface of things, to question the solidity of the world (and the novel), and to regain our faith in fiction as something that offers more than simple entertainment, but glimpses of the answers that elude us in life.

Books, we've been told time and again, can't be judged by their covers. Peter Straub proves that they're also not to be judged by their genre, or those convenient but often limiting catchwords that booksellers and reviewers — and far too many readers — prefer. This is a horror story, yes, but one to be shelved with those written by Straub's peers: the likes of Borges, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James.

* * *

The specter of H.H. Holmes also haunts a welcome new novel from David J. Schow, *Bullets of Rain* (HarperCollins Dark Alley, tpb, 289 pp., \$13.95). "Far fewer tomes had been written about Holmes than Saucy Jack," laments Schow's edged-out protagonist, Arthur Latimer, an architect imprisoned by choice in a beach house south of San Francisco. Like his preferred serial murderer, Arthur has constructed a dream that becomes a nightmare: The beach house is a bunker meant to withstand the worst of storms, and Arthur, despondent after his wife's death, waits out the mother of all hurricanes in a suicidal test of his designs. But Schow's evocation of Holmes, like Straub's in *lost boy lost girl*, signals his novel's more profound concern with issues of identity. Holmes was not merely a builder and destroyer, but also a man who invented himself, adopting a new name, a new persona; a living myth.

Nothing is as it seems in *Bullets of Rain*, which confronts conscientious reviewers with a dilemma: Its plot should be revealed only with care — and, to my mind, not at all. Arthur's seclusion is shattered by old friends, partygoers, and curious games — realities that soon blur into less dependable realms. Characters drift in and out of focus as the reader adjusts to a provocative vision of the world as a precarious masquerade. (I'm tempted to describe the novel as a remake of *The Masque of the Red Death* as written by Chuck Palahuink and directed by John Cassavetes; but among its many revelations, particularly for those who think of David Schow as a screenwriter, is the fact that *Bullets of Rain* is not filmic, but insistently literary.)

A second, short novel from the busy Mr. Schow come courtesy of the small press. *rock breaks scissors cut* (Subterranean Press, hc, 142 pp., \$40.00 trade, \$100.00 limited) revisits the matter of identity in a Context reminiscent of Schow's beloved *The Outer Limits*. Written with experimental glee — the

chapters count backwards and the three central characters appear in first, second, and third person — the narrative unravels a scientific study of dreams whose participants (a fashion model, a writer, a bookstore employee) find that their dreams — and memories — have become entwined.

Schow, like Straub, challenges conventional perceptions of narrative and narrator by end-running the supposed compact between writer and reader. These are not stories told by an "untrustworthy narrator" whose presence is known from the opening pages — Conrad's Marlowe, Salinger's Holden Caulfield — but stories told by (or about) invisible narrators whose presence and purpose become known as the stories evolve.

Everything that rises must converge . . .

As these inventive novels find talents long-associated with "horror" breaching its generic strictures, "mainstream" bad boy Chuck Palahuink — who gets a shout-out from Schow in *Bullets of Rain* — delivers his second supernatural horror novel, the fierce but flawed *Diary* (Doubleday/Nan Talese, hc, 262 pp., \$24.95). Its dust jacket offers a vivid signal of horror's renewed respectability by its willingness to use the dreaded H-word to describe Palahuink's prose ("his twenty-first century reinvention of the horror novel") and eschews blurbs from the usual literary suspects in favor of Ira Levin.

Unfortunately Palahuink's execution doesn't fulfill his ambition — which, as always, is lofty. *Diary* is the ostensible "coma diary" of unfulfilled artist Misty Kleinman, written for her husband Peter, who wooed her in art school and then brought her home to surreal Waytansea Island (pronounce its name, please). His failed suicide sends Misty to the bottom — working as a maid, fending off Peter's irate customers (whose remodeled homes are missing rooms and sullied with graffiti) — but the island has a secret history, in which Misty, like nineteenth century Waytansea artist Maura Kincaid, has a special place.

Palahuink's vigorous, bittersweet prose is daunting when read sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph; but too often *Diary* seems the work of a trickster rather than a magician — its cleverness offered less in service of story than for its own sake. Imagine a CD collecting Jimmy Page's guitar solos: All that talent and power, but without the greater context of the songs.

More obscure but more intriguing (and satisfying) is Palahuink's *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* (Crown, hc, 176 pp. \$16.00). The latest entry in the "Crown Journeys" series of autobiographical travelogues from writers as diverse as Frank Conroy, Michael Cunningham, Kinky Friedman, and James M. McPherson, *Fugitives and Refugees* brings Palahuink's dark vision to his adopted home (he moved to Portland in 1980, after graduating high school). It's the most surreal and entertaining book on travel (among many other things) that I've read.

For surreal experiences, seek out *Crampton: A Screenplay* by Thomas Ligotti and Brandon Trenz (Durtro Press, tpb, 110 pp., £16.00), which finds Ligotti working outside the short-story form. The script (written originally for *The X-Files*) is accompanied by a twenty-two minute compact disc, "The Unholy City," whose six "dream-texts" were written and performed (with spoken word vocals) by Ligotti. Q

LAMBERT, LAMBERT

by Ian Watson

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

You must be finding your present situation pretty odd, eh? Bear up, pal! Chin up. There's company awaiting you further on inside.

Why *me?*, you're wondering. I took pity on you, see. Yes, pity! I decided to save you.

'Course, once I started doing this trick of mine I developed a certain appetite for it, as you might say. I won't go so far as to call it a craving. If I craved, could I control myself, could I choose my customers? Could I ration myself sensibly? Whatever my girth, I'm no glutton. No addict, me. I feel a definite *relish*; that's about it.

Listen up, lad, and you'll understand. *What's in a name?* asked the Bard. Quite a lot, I do believe. To a greater extent than chance can explain, people's names can be unusually fitting. I'd go so far as to say that in a good many cases the name maketh the man.

Take me, Bert Brown. Blunt and solid, eh? Bert Brown could hardly be a violinist or a philosopher. He could be a bus driver or a postman. In my case, a prison camp guard. Right? You agree? Only my pals inside know differently.

Oh you'll meet them just as soon as I do my trick the next time, and you get squeezed within. Interesting company! Your sort. The people they put in these camps are usually interesting, at least when they arrive and for a few months afterwards. Then they stop being so interesting. Lack of the old brainfood, eh? Gruel and thin soup, scabby veg and stale bread wears them down.

You're still able to peep out. When that stops, you'll meet the others. Oh I can talk to them or just listen to them nattering but you can't yet.

By "inside" I'm not of course referring to the electrified fences, the rows of huts. I'm talking about *me*. This here is my standard orientation lecture. How thoughtful of me to provide one! Well, it calms you down. Otherwise you might thrash around and give me a spot of indigestion, as 'twere. You might unbalance me a bit; though for a fact that would take some doing! I'm carrying ballast, chum. You need to appreciate what a kindness I'm doing you. I'm sure you're catching on, you're getting there.

Where were we? Oh yes, my name. Bert's a useful sort of moniker to have these days. Doesn't attract attention; doesn't mark a fellow out. That's how I see it. It's a name, if you'll excuse my humour, lacking any colour.

But thirty years gone by, my Mum and Dad named me *Lambert*. Lambert Brown. That's what Mum always called me when I was a nipper. "My little lamb, Lambert!" "Lambkin Lambert." "Where are you, Lambkin?" She stopped that caper as soon as I started fattening up. Problem with the glands, right? Soon I became bloated Bert, who got bullied at school. That's what makes me sensitive; that's how I can sympathize with people like you. Then I got a bit too big to bully.

Mum actually took the name from an old encyclopedia that was lying around. Chap called Lambert Simnel attempted to seize the throne of Britain back in the time of Henry the Seventh; he got chopped for his pains. Lambert Simnel was named after a Saint Lambert, a Billy Graham type who also got the chop. Belgium has lots of churches in his honour. Belgium: mayonnaise and chips. I know things, see. It's the company I keep.

Not a very good track record so far for Lamberts? Mum didn't care much about history; it was the little lamb aspect that appealed to her. She was like that: of diminished I.Q. Dad too, I suppose, though he must have been a bit brighter because he pissed off. Presumably I get my brains from him. Simnel's some kind of kraut cake. *Very* fattening. I used to eat a fair whack of rich stodgy cake when I was a kid. I don't now. I'm very stringent about my diet.

Stop twitching, will you? Won't do any good. Think about the word *lam*. Means to thump, to trash. That's what goes on inside the wire. Beatings. My fellow goons like to cut a prisoner out of the herd now

and then and work him over. At random, when the fancy takes them. Nothing systematic. If starving doesn't get you, a thumping might. You're finished after that.

Commander doesn't mind. Relieves the strain. They're all missing persons in there, to begin with. If someone becomes more missing, who cares? He certainly hasn't done a runner. No inmate gets through the high-voltage wire or the auto-guns. So, pal, you won't be missed. No one's looking for you.

I mean, that applies across the board to all the prisoners. They can forget any silly notion of help from some other country — which is where it would need to come from. From America or Russia. But every country's in a mess. Sea level, economic collapse, heat, famine; need I go on? We have this country sewed up tight for a long time to come. Count your blessings. I feel sorry for people like you.

"Lam" also means to escape, to beat it. You're on the lam now. Thanks to me.

All comes down to names, doesn't it?

I was working as a debt collector in Leicester. See, I could intimidate people. That's where I discovered about my namesake and felt such a strong yen to join the penal service. Not surprising, huh? Best job these days. So many nuisances being rounded up. Pinkos. Greens. Poofsters and wogs. Domeheads and arty-farties. All the stirrers. Got to belt up about stuff like freedom and politics and art if this country's going to survive the greenhouse. Doesn't really require as much exertion as sticking one's bod in some pensioner's doorway; not with all the control equipment at our disposal. If goons want to work up a sweat thrashing a detainee, that's their business. I don't join in. Other fish to fry. Not that I'm easily exhausted, by the way. I'm a tireless fellow.

Same as my namesake. My double! Right: chap name of Daniel Lambert. The fat man of Leicester.

Found out about him when a hailstorm chased me into the museum. Hail the size of bloody golf balls, shooting down at machine-gun rate, bouncing as high as a bus. Several people were killed that day. Old folk, babies in prams. Windows shattered all over. The climate's all screwed up and that's a fact. Anyway, the museum was showing Lambert's clothes and other memorabilia.

He was born in the year 1770, and his Dad ran the House of Correction, the Bridewell prison. This Bridewell wasn't for your murderers or forgers or thieves who were bound for the noose and the gibbet. No, it housed people who had committed what you might call moral offences against society. Debts, drunkenness, vagrancy, that type of thing. You ought to know about moral offences against society, hmm? They're what landed you in the camp.

In his earlier days Lambert's Dad was huntsman to the Earl of Stamford. His uncle was gamekeeper to the next Earl and his grandad on his mum's side was a famous cock-fighter. Thus young Daniel grew up real sporty. Swimming, fishing, riding to hounds, hunting otters, fighting cocks. 'Course, the countryside wasn't any distance from the heart of the city back then. Oh he loved the sporting life. Pinkos like you did your damndest to spoil all that. Still, what does it matter nowadays?

With all that exercise, our Dan became a powerful fellow. Could carry quarter of a ton without any fuss. Could kick seven feet high, standing on one leg. Once he thumped a whopping dancing bear owned by some Froggy entertainers. You see, they were performing in the street outside the gaol when the gaol dog went for the bear, and this Froggy in charge unmuzzled Ursa Major to let her kill the dog. Felled her with one blow to the skull, did our Dan. The bear threw in the sponge.

Dan's folks apprenticed him to the button trade in Birmingham. To learn die-sinking and engraving. Must have seemed a bright idea at the time. A few years later, fashion turned topsy-turvy. Out went buckles and fancy buttons. And it was a time of unrest: the factory burned down in a riot. So Dan returned to Leicester, Dad resigned from the Bridewell, and his boy took over as keeper.

Boy, am I saying? Dan started putting on weight at a swingeing pace. (Could it have been the lack of sporty exercise running a prison? Not to mention the glands?) Wasn't too long before he weighed in at nearly fifty-three stone. Measured three feet round each leg, and nine feet round the body. When he was sitting down, his belly buried his thighs to the knees. His legs were pillows almost smothering his feet. The flap of his waistcoat pocket stretched a foot across. Special clothes for him, special chairs more like sofas.

One remarkable fact was how healthy our Dan was. When he finally died, most likely of a heart attack, at the Waggon and Horses in Stamford where he'd gone for the races, they needed to demolish a wall of the inn to get him out in his coffin — he was putrefying fast. But up until then, not a whisper of frailty! Dan could fair trot upstairs. He could outwalk most fellows. He'd teach kids to swim in the river Soar — he could float with two grown men on his back. Never caught a cold in his life, even when he used to

come in soaking wet and sleep with his window open then don the same damp clothes in the morning. He never snored. Never panted. Perfect bronchials. His voice was a sweet, strong tenor.

I'm a lot like our Dan Lambert with regard to health and vigour. Additionally, he was a very *nice* bloke. So am I — as you must agree — saving you from slow starvation! Really considerate to the guests in his lock-up, he was. Humane? Benevolent? Why, he was a byword. Departing prisoners sometimes wept with gratitude.

But in 1805 the magistrates decided that such prisoners as those would be better employed labouring in the town's factories. So Daniel's job came to an end; though not without an annuity of fifty pounds a year for life for him, freely granted as a mark of esteem.

Alas, fifty pounds proved insufficient to his needs. That's why our man-mountain began to exhibit himself to the curious. Either that, or hide in his house! Such was the fame of his bulk, people would knock on the door on any pretext.

In the main, the exhibiting down in London went off really well, since our Dan was such a damn decent fellow. More like a king of men holding gracious court than a freak. Thus there was nothing ludicrous about the occasion when the largest man in the world met the smallest man — a Polish dwarf named Count Borulawski, whose missus used to pop him on the mantelshelf as a punishment when she was feeling peeved with him. A single one of Dan's sleeves' could easily have provided a whole suit of clothes for the Count. This was a meeting of two civilized prodigies. Ah, civilization's taken a downturn since those days, hasn't it just?

Dan's head was perfectly proportioned, by the way. No bloating or grossness about his face! A normal, handsome head was simply dwarfed by a giant body.

Do I hear you enquire as to his diet? Simplicity itself! Quite Spartan. A single dish at a meal, and he only ever drank water. A little like the menu in the camps.

I can tell you, how little he ate came as a revelation to me. Did he convert the whole of his modest intake of food into flesh, a hundred per cent? Didn't he ever crap or pee? Seems as how all of his bodily secretions were quite normal! So where did all of his bulk come from? Out of thin air?

You've heard the old saying as to how inside every fat man there's a thin man crying to get out. Do I hear you crying right now? Don't bother. Wipe your sobs away. Adjust to circumstances, that's the ticket.

Let's put two and two together tentatively. Soon as our Dan becomes boss of the gaol he puts on stones and stones of extra weight without any evidence of gluttony. And he liked his prisoners; he was good to them.

Could he have been so kindly disposed that he *liberated* his favourites — by engulfing them? By absorbing them into himself? Now there's a fine way to solve overcrowding in prisons! The gaoler becomes his own private gaol.

Ah, but magistrates back in those days were finicky. They kept count. Had ledgers and lists. Families enquired after prisoners. Creditors bore them in mind. Prisoners didn't merely disappear, as nowadays. Once you're behind the wire now, it's do-as-you-please.

Let me tell you, it pleased me very much when I absorbed my first prisoner. (Pleased me for his sake too! I was saving him.)

Dan Lambert inspired me. But it was me myself, Bert Brown, who cottoned on to the trick. The cottoning-on was a leap such as bloody Einstein made. Fourth dimension and all that. That's where you all are: stacked behind each other in another dimension inside of me. Soon as I cottoned on, I could do it. Quite a party's going on in here. You're busy debating, arguing, telling your life stories. Making friends and quarrelling. Comforting and entertaining one another. Drawing up manifestos, playing games, composing poems.

And not worrying at all about starving or thumpings. All courtesy of big Bert Brown. Lambert Brown.

Naw, not *you* yet. I've told you, you need to wait till I absorb someone new; that's how it works. I grab one of you spindly types, one that I fancy, take him somewhere quiet. I wrap myself around him, I engulf, I crush. And into me goes the personality — after the ritual. Eating some liver, heart, and brain; right. Fair's fair; gives me a spot of extra nourishment to fuel the procedure, very like what I gather savages in the South Seas used to get up to. Only, I do it properly seeing as how I understand about the fourth dimension I'm putting you into.



I'm sure Dan Lambert didn't do my trick, but I think there must have been *something* a bit four-dimensional about him, don't you? Four dimensions squashed into three. If everything possesses four dimensions the way Einstein said, then that includes food and drink. Your ordinary run of geezer only uses three dimensions; that's all he can take. A Dan Lambert could digest the fourth dimension of food too — that's how he got so big on so little. There's the explanation.

Me, I'm a step beyond our Dan, aren't I? Good thing for you I am! Welcome to the family. I'm really expanding wonderfully within. It's an education, all these new persons inside me. Henry and Crispin and Alec and Mohammed and Rasta and Lucian and Tony, ooh a good thirty lodgers by now with plenty of room for expansion. More customers pouring into the camp every day.

I wouldn't have thought I had it in me! But I do. I can contain multitudes; could be my very own prison camp.

Actually, so as not to keep you on tenterhooks, I think I'll take another stroll inside the wire pretty soon, stomp into a hut, haul out a nice face; then it's off to somewhere special and get down to business. My fellow goons don't know what they're missing.

All this hard graft of *thinking at you* is fair working me up an appetite.

Q

WHAT MY BRAIN TELLS MY HANDS

as commander
of this expedition
I direct you to write poems exclusively

beauty beauty and more beauty

none of this grab and tear
and beat and bludgeon

and by the way
if you're in the neighborhood
please pass on
to the nostrils not to sniff for blood
the fangs not to chomp down feverishly

tell the hunger
it's exclusively
a hunger to communicate

— John Grey

RETURNS POLICY

A dealer, who certainly knew
what Von Junzt and Alhazred could do,
ensorcelled each tome
to find its way home
should the customer's swift doom ensue.

— Darrell Schweitzer

PATIENTLY WAITING

That kitty, who sleeps by my the fire,
may harbor a secret desire
to nibble the heart
or some other part
of the next person due to expire.

— Darrell Schweitzer

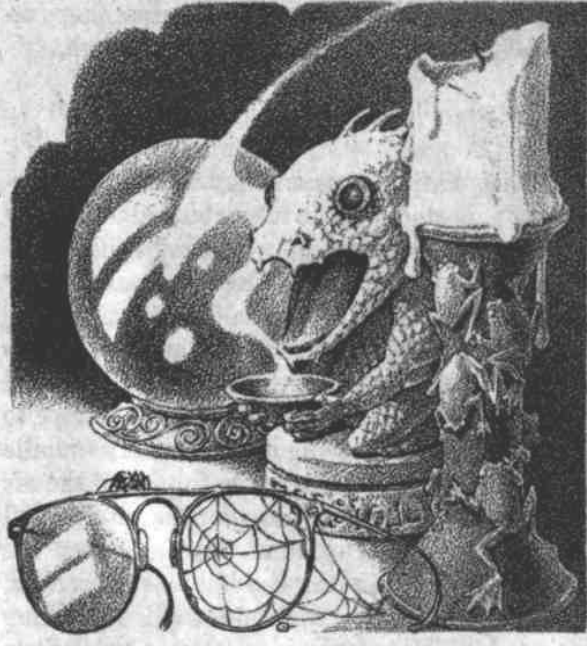
LAMBERT, LAMBERT

Weird Story Reprint

THE COFFIN MERCHANT

by Richard Middleton

illustrated by George Barr



London on a November Sunday inspired Eustace Reynolds with a melancholy too insistent to be ignored and too causeless to be enjoyed. The grey sky overhead between the house-tops, the cold wind round every street-corner, the sad faces of the men and women on the pavements, combined to create an atmosphere of ineloquent misery. Eustace was sensitive to impressions, and in spite of a half-conscious effort to remain a dispassionate spectator of the world's melancholy, he felt the chill of the aimless day creeping over his spirit. Why was there no sun, no warmth, no laughter on the earth? What had become of all the children who keep laughter like a mask on the faces of disillusioned men? The wind blew down Southampton Street, and chilled Eustace to a shiver that passed away in a shudder of disgust at the sombre colour of life. A windy Sunday in London before the lamps are lit, tempts a man to believe in the nobility of work.

At the corner by Charing Cross Telegraph Office a man thrust a handbill under his eyes, but he shook his head impatiently. The blueness of the fingers that offered him the paper was alone sufficient to make him disinclined to remove his hands from his pockets even for an instant. But the man would not be dismissed so lightly.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, following him, "you have not looked to see what my bills are."

"Whatever they are I do not want them."

"That's where you are wrong, sir," the man said earnestly. "You will never find life interesting if you do not lie in wait for the unexpected. As a matter of fact, I believe that my bill contains exactly what you do want."

Eustace looked at the man with quick curiosity. His clothes were ragged, and the visible parts of his flesh were blue with cold, but his eyes were bright with intelligence and his speech was that of an educated man. It seemed to Eustace that he was being regarded with a keen expectancy, as though his decision on the trivial point was of real importance.

"I don't know what you are driving at," he said, "but if it will give you any pleasure I will take one of your bills; though if you argue with all your clients as you have with me, it must take you a long time to get rid of them."

"I only offer them to suitable persons," the man said, folding up one of the handbills while he spoke, "and I'm sure you will not regret taking it," and he slipped the paper into Eustace's hand and walked rapidly away.

Eustace looked after him curiously for a moment, and then opened the paper in his hand. When his eyes comprehended its significance, he gave a low whistle of astonishment. "You will soon be wanting a coffin!" it read. "At 606, Gray's Inn Road, your order will be attended to with civility and despatch. Call and see us!!"

Eustace swung round quickly to look for the man, but he was out of sight. The wind was growing colder, and the lamps were beginning to shine out in the greying streets. Eustace crumpled the paper into his overcoat pocket, and turned homewards. "How silly!" he said to himself, in conscious amusement. The sound of his foot-steps on the pavement rang like an echo to his laugh.

II

Eustace was impressionable but not temperamentally morbid, and he was troubled a little by the fact that the gruesomely bizarre handbill continued to recur to his mind. The thing was so manifestly absurd, he told himself with conviction, that it was not worth a second thought, but this did not prevent him from thinking of it again and again. What manner of undertaker could hope to obtain business by giving away foolish handbills in the street? Really, the whole thing had the air of a brainless practical joke, yet his intellectual fairness forced him to admit that as far as the man who had given him the bill was concerned, brainlessness was out of the question, and joking improbable. There had been depths in those little bright eyes which his glance had not been able to sound, and the man's manner in making him accept the handbill had given the whole transaction a kind of ludicrous significance.

"You will soon be wanting a coffin! —"

Eustace found himself turning the words over and over in his mind. If he had had any near relations he might have construed the thing as an elaborate threat, but he was practically alone in the world, and it seemed to him that he was not likely to want a coffin for any one but himself.

"Oh damn the thing!" he said impatiently, as he opened the door of his flat, "it isn't worth worrying about. I mustn't let the whim of some mad tradesman get on my nerves. I've got no one to bury, anyhow."

Nevertheless the thing lingered with him all the evening, and when his neighbour the doctor came in for a chat at ten o'clock, Eustace was glad to show him the strange handbill. The doctor, who had experienced the queer magics that are practised to this day on the West Coast of Africa, and who, therefore, had no nerves, was delighted with so striking an example of British commercial enterprise.

"Though, mind you," he added gravely, smoothing the crumpled paper on his knee, "this sort of thing might do a lot of harm if it fell into the hands of a nervous subject. I should be inclined to punch the head of the ass who perpetrated it. Have you turned that address up in the Post Office Directory?"

Eustace shook his head, and rose and fetched the fat red book which makes London an English city. Together they found the Gray's Inn Road, and ran their eyes down to No. 606.

"'Harding, G.J., Coffin Merchant and Undertaker.' Not much information there," muttered the doctor.

"Coffin merchant's a bit unusual, isn't it?" queried Eustace.

"I suppose he manufactures coffins wholesale for the trade. Still, I didn't know they called themselves that. Anyhow, it seems as though that handbill is a genuine piece of downright foolishness. The idiot ought to be stopped advertising in that way."

"I'll go and see him myself tomorrow," said Eustace bluntly.

"Well, he's given you an invitation," said the doctor, "so it's only polite of you to go. I'll drop in here in the evening to hear what he's like. I expect that you'll find him as mad as a hatter."

"Something like that," said Eustace, "or he wouldn't give handbills to people like me. I have no one to bury except myself."

"No," said the doctor in the hall, "I suppose you haven't. Don't let him measure you for a coffin, Reynolds!"

Eustace laughed.

"We never know," he said sententiously.

III

Next day was one of those gorgeous blue days of which November gives but few, and Eustace was glad to run out to Wimbledon for a game of golf, or rather for two. It was therefore dusk before he made his way to the Gray's Inn Road in search of the unexpected. His attitude towards his errand despite the doctor's laughter and the prosaic entry in the directory, was a little confused. He could not help reflecting that after all the doctor had not seen the man with the little wise eyes, nor could he forget that Mr. G.J. Harding's description of himself as a coffin merchant, to say the least of it, approached the unusual. Yet

he felt that it would be intolerable to chop the whole business without finding out what it all meant. On the whole he would have preferred not to have discovered the riddle at all; but having found it, he could not rest without an answer.

No. 606, Gray's Inn Road, was not like an ordinary undertaker's shop. The window was heavily draped with black cloth, but was otherwise unadorned. There were no letters from grateful mourners, no little model coffins, no photographs of marble memorials. Even more surprising was the absence of any name over the shop-door, so that the uninformed stranger could not possibly tell what trade was carried on within, or who was responsible for the management of the business. This uncommercial modesty did not tend to remove Eustace's doubts as to the sanity of Mr. G. J. Harding; but he opened the shop-door which started a large bell swinging noisily, and stepped over the threshold. The shop was hardly more expressive inside than out. A broad counter ran across it, cutting it in two, and in the partial gloom overhead a naked gas-burner whistled a noisy song. Beyond this the shop contained no furniture whatever, and no stock-in-trade except a few planks leaning against the wall in one corner. There was a large ink-stand on the counter. Eustace waited patiently for a minute or two, and then as no one came he began stamping on the floor with his foot. This proved efficacious, for soon he heard the sound of footsteps ascending wooden stairs, the door behind the counter opened and a man came into the shop.

He was dressed quite neatly now, and his hands were no longer blue with cold, but Eustace knew at once that it was the man who had given him the handbill. Nevertheless he looked at Eustace without a sign of recognition.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked pleasantly.

Eustace laid the handbill down on the counter.

"I want to know about this," he said. "It strikes me as being in pretty bad taste, and if a nervous person got hold of it, it might be dangerous."

"You think so, sir? Yet our representative," he lingered affectionately on the words, "our representative told you, I believe, that the handbill was only distributed to suitable cases."

"That's where you are wrong," said Eustace sharply, "for I have no one to bury."

"Except yourself," said the coffin merchant suavely.

Eustace looked at him keenly. "I don't see —" he began. But the coffin merchant interrupted him.

"You must know, sir," he said, "that this is no ordinary undertaker's business. We possess information that enables us to defy competition in our special class of trade."

"Information!"

"Well, if you prefer it, you may say intuitions. If our representative handed you that advertisement, it was because he knew you would need it."

"Excuse me," said Eustace, "you appear to be sane, but your words do not convey to me any reasonable significance. You gave me that foolish advertisement yourself, and now you say that you did so because you knew I would need it. I ask you why?"

The coffin merchant shrugged his shoulders. "Ours is a sentimental trade," he said, "I do not know why dead men want coffins, but they do. For my part I would wish to be cremated."

"Dead men?"

"Ah, I was coming to that. You see Mr. — ?"

"Reynolds."

"Thank you, my name is Harding — G.J. Harding. You see, Mr. Reynolds, our intuitions are of a very special character, and if we say that you will need a coffin, it is — probable that you will need one."

"You mean to say that I —"

"Precisely. In twenty-four hours or less, Mr. Reynolds, you will need our services."

The revelation of the coffin merchant's insanity came to Eustace with a certain relief. For the first time in the interview he had a sense of the dark empty shop and the whistling gas-jet over his head.

"Why, it sounds like a threat, Mr. Harding!" he said gaily.

The coffin merchant looked at him oddly, and produced a printed form from his pocket. "If you would fill this up," he said.

Eustace picked it up off the counter and laughed aloud. It was an order for a hundred-guinea funeral.

"I don't know what your game is," he said, "but this has gone on long enough."

"Perhaps it has, Mr. Reynolds," said the coffin merchant, and he leant across the counter and looked Eustace straight in the face.

For a moment Eustace was amused; then he was suddenly afraid. "I think it's time I —" he began slowly, and then he was silent, his whole will intent on fighting the eyes of the coffin merchant. The song of the gas-jet waned to a point in his ears, and then rose steadily till it was like the beating of the world's heart. The eyes of the coffin merchant grew larger and larger, till they blended in one great circle of fire. Then Eustace picked a pen off the counter and filled in the form.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Reynolds," said the coffin merchant, shaking hands with him politely. "I can promise you every civility and despatch. Good-day, sir."



Outside on the pavement Eustace stood for a while trying to recall exactly what had happened. There was a slight scratch on his hand, and when he automatically touched it with his lips, it made them burn. The lit lamps in the Gray's Inn Road seemed to him a little unsteady, and the passersby showed a disposition to blunder into him.

"Queer business," he said to himself dimly; "I'd better have a cab."

He reached home in a dream.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the doctor remembered his promise, and went upstairs to Eustace's flat. The outer door was half-open so that he thought he was expected, and he switched on the light in the little hall, and shut the door behind him with the simplicity of habit. But when he swung round from the door he gave a cry of astonishment. Eustace was lying asleep in a chair before him with his face flushed and drooping on his shoulder, and his breath hissing noisily through his parted lips. The doctor looked at him quizzically, "If I did not know you, my young friend," he remarked, "I should say that you were as drunk as a lord."

And he went up to Eustace and shook him by the shoulder; but Eustace did not wake.

"Queer!" the doctor muttered, sniffing at Eustace's lips; "he hasn't been drinking."

Q

"I would not exchange this short, crazy, enchanting fantasy for a whole wilderness of seemly novels," wrote the great Arthur Machen of Richard Middleton's most famous story, "The Ghost Ship," in the introduction to Middleton's first book, which was, sadly, a memorial volume. The archetype of the romantic poet, mired in despair, poverty, and unrequited love, Middleton killed himself in 1911 at the age of 29. He would have appreciated the irony that immediately he was proclaimed a lost genius by the press. Five books of his collected verse, fiction, and essays appeared within the next two years, and another major collection appeared a generation later. While Middleton remains best known for the humorous "The Ghost Ship," many of his other stories are of a decidedly darker cast. "The Coffin Merchant" is reprinted from *The Ghost Ship and Other Stories* (1912).

CROWLEY'S VILLA

It should stick out like a decomposing sore thumb,
it should,
that hillside villa where the boy from Warwickshire
holed up for three years
before Mussolini excised him.
With its windows boarded
and perimeter skirted by a tangle of uninhibited weeds,
it lingers beneath the rock of Cephaloedium,
seemingly impervious to time and progress,
all but hidden from view.
They come to see his bright murals,
they do,
to re-enact rituals and bathe in his shadow,
or to drink beer by candlelight
challenging the ghost of the poet-occulist.
Perhaps they can hear Frater Perdurabo
whispering to his Scarlet Woman Alostrael,
preaching Thelemic commandments,
or reciting cantos.

— Lee Clark Zumpe

THE SORCERER'S MATE

by Jane Rice

The sorcerer's mate was a handsome thing,
With hair that was black as a raven's wing,
Large, jet dark eyes, and teeth pearl white,
But her heart was cold as an Arctic night. -
The sorcerer, sadly, was hoary and bent,
His beard had grown thin, and his strength was spent,
His step was unsteady, his vision was dim,
Long gone was his vigor, and most of his vim.
But he cared for his mate and had kept her supplied
With a number of goodies he still could provide,
With invisible cloaks, and necklets of gold,
All the bread that she needed (the kind you can fold),
With abracadabra to spruce up the house.
A prancing white horse (that had once been a mouse),
With vanishing creams, elixirs, lotions,
Charms for her bracelets, and all sorts of potions,
And philters to brew, and a broomstick to fide...
But the sorcerer's mate was dissatisfied.
She wanted a man, a muscular male.
With the lyric voice of a nightingale,
And eyes as bright as secret sin,
And golden hair, and milk-white skin,
And lips as sweet as sugar cake,
And hips as slim as a garden snake,
And she needled the sorcerer nine times a minute,
Until he agreed ... but his heart wasn't in it.
The nightingale tongues that he pounded to powder
Sang hillbilly songs, and louder and louder,
The eyes were the dullest things ever begot
In the annals of sin, whether secret or not.
His mate complained, but he couldn't boss her,
And the milk turned to whey in the sorcerer's saucer,
The sugar cake crumbled, the gold turned to brass...
It made the old sorcerer feel like an ass.
His alchemist's cup had a long, zigzag crack,
His *KAZAM* didn't work, and his wand had gone slack.
His beakers were chipped, his saucer was leaky.
And the sorcerer grew just a little bit freaky,
Or
he'd

never

have

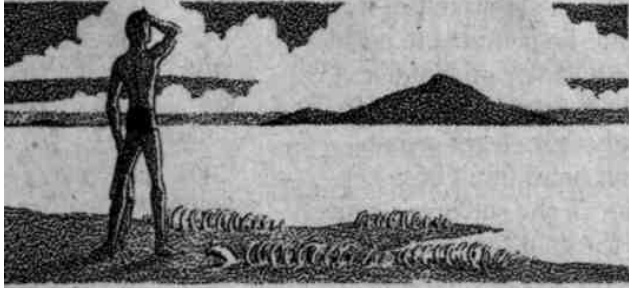
done

what he did.

For, one day,
He removed his tall hat, half filled it with gin,
Took rum, rye, and bourbon and poured them therein,
Applejack followed, lemon juice, cherries,
Banana ice cream, and juniper berries,
Four teaspoons of soot, a saucer of brine,
And the words and the music of 'Sweet Adeline'.
He kept mixing and tasting and when it raised welts
He added three little drops of. . . something else.
He scraped off the foam with the tail of a cock,
Then strained the whole thing through a darn in his sock.
He reduced it precisely 'til it was no bigger
Than what would fill nicely a Texas-size jigger.
His labors complete, he sat down for awhile,
And twiddled his thumbs, with a satisfied smile.
When his mate sashayed in (in her usual stew)
He dangled the bait. Said he, "Here's something new.
Now this will put you right on number nine cloud."
Said the sorcerer's mate, "Oh, for cryin' out loud!"
But she polished it off, with a sarcastic "Cheeeers!"
And he closed both his eyes, and plugged up his ears,
And drew in his neck as she went whizzing past,
Blown straight through the roof by the force of the blast.

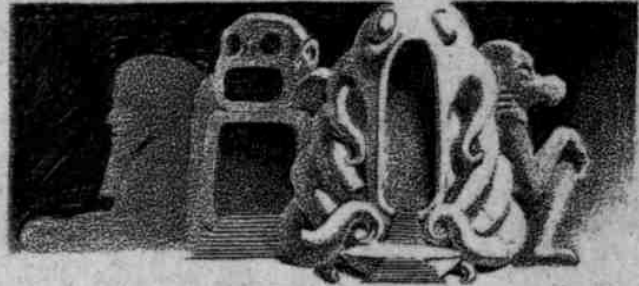
And all in the world that ever was found
Was a most phenomenal hole in the ground,
And an old cracked cup and sorcerer.

ILLUSTRATED LIMERICKS



I swam near the beach in the dawn
Where something has come in to spawn.
I've not seen it yet.
But it's big, I will bet.
It looks like all the sharks are all gone.

Their names we can just barely mumble.
Their curse causes hardly a rumble
The elder gods prove
So old they can't move.
They sit, and they all slowly crumble.



— George Barr —

MIDNIGHT

by Tanith Lee

Above the glittering ballroom, the gilded clock hung like a baleful planet. The hands on the face of it showed ten minutes to midnight.

Only ten minutes more. Then, she must be gone. But the girl — how could she bear to leave? She looked away from the clock, back at the face of the young prince who was dancing with her, over the marble floor.

They fitted together like hand and glove. Both so young, so beautiful, and so wonderfully dressed. For not only the prince was clad as one would expect, in garments of silk and velvet, so was the girl. She too looked like royalty.

How strange it had been. The old woman the girl had sometimes helped, giving her scraps from the kitchen, nice things when possible, though the girl herself got little enough. Then suddenly, this very night, when the evil, tyrannical women of the house had flounced away to the ball, the old woman entered — not by the door, but out of the *fireplace* — shedding her rags, her old age, becoming a shining creature. "Bathe yourself," the being had said to the astonished girl, "wash the soot from your hair. Then you will find there are garments for you, and everything else, to show your beauty as it truly is."

Bemused, indeed under a *spell*, the girl obeyed. Stepping from the tub, she found herself at once both dry and scented, and she was next instant dressed, in the whitest silks, whiter than new-polished stars — her hair plaited with diamonds. And on her feet two shoes of such lovely peculiarity, she stood gazing at them.

Then the being was beside her again. "They are not made of glass — you will be well-able to dance in them."

The girl saw then the shoes were only stitched over, each of them, with a hundred or so tiny sparkling crystals. And taking a step, found she was already gliding — dancing — as if in a dream.

"Outside," said her benefactor, "a carriage awaits you. I made it —" a little, perhaps boastful laugh — "from a pumpkin — but now it is formed of gold. The six white horses are mice, but no one will know — not even they. Go to the palace, and win the heart of the handsome prince. You will find it quite easy, as now you are."

The girl — who in her recent awful years of ill-treated slavery, had been called in mockery, *Ashy* — murmured, "But these are faery gifts. They will vanish away at morning."

"True. The very first moment of morning, which comes when night turns back to day — at midnight. Thus, before the fatal hour strikes, you must depart or be seen in rags and ruin."

"But then," whispered Ashy, turning ashen under all her beauty, "what use is any of this?"

"He will love you. You must trust in that. Love is *never* blind. He will find you, even after midnight has struck. Do you understand?"

"No, Lady," said Ashy. But her own real name came back to her at that second. It was Elvira. She bowed to the one who had been an old beggar woman, and who could walk out of a fire. "But I thank you. Even if this night ends for me in tragedy, to taste the joy of it will be worth any later pain."

Then Elvira went out and found the incredible golden carriage and the white horses, and stepping inside the vehicle, was carried faster almost than light — which she now resembled — to the palace of the prince.

Through all the crowds, he saw her at once. As she saw him.

Like two magnets, one of stellar silver, one of flame-lit steel, they flew together.

"I thought the moon had fallen on the terrace," he said, as he led her out across the gleaming floor. "But it was you."

What had they said to each other, after that? Beginning with courtly phrases, presently the passionate desire, the deep tenderness each had at once conceived for the other, spangled in their brains, more vital than champagne, and sprang from their lips like arrows. There among the host of other dancers, they

spoke of love — shameless, precipitous, sincere.

But, for all their bond of truth, Elvira told him nothing of who she was, of what had happened to her, the jealous wickedness of false family. Nothing of her station now in life, that of a girl smudged with filth and living among grey cinders.

She could not bring herself to do it. She was afraid. Love is *never* blind? Yet he saw her now in a gown of moonlight, with diamonds in her hair and shoes that seemed magically made of glass. He thought her the daughter of a king, just as he was the son of a king.

And so she had arrived with him at ten minutes to midnight.

Yet now — oh now — the hands of the gilded clock had leapt forward impossibly. Eight minutes were *gone*. Only two minutes were left. She must fly — she must run away for her very life.

Let me stay one minute more. Only one —

For after this — no, he would never find her. How could he? She would be hidden again in darkness. And then he would forget her completely. Or else his heart would break as her heart already broke, thinking of the empty desert of despair beyond this night.

A single minute now, all that was left. How slowly the hands of the clock crept — how swiftly.

If only Elvira might freeze time. One *half* minute — all that remained — to make that half minute last another night — another hour — at least ... at least another ten minutes —

"My love," Elvira said to the prince. There on the gleaming floor, among the crowds, they ceased to dance. Seeing this, the other dancers also stopped dancing. The orchestra fell silent in a sudden phantasmal flowing away of sound.

"My love — I must —"

The clock *struck*. The first stroke of the terrible twelve — an axe-blade that cracked asunder the pane of night.

Elvira stared up into the face of her lover. She saw how his laughing delight was altering to bewilderment — dismay.

She drew her hand from his. She drew away from him.

The clock *struck*. The second stroke. Already smashed, the night scattered in bits like black and golden snow.

"I—"she said.

"Never leave me," he said.

The clock *struck*. The third stroke. The palace and the city reeled.

Elvira's feet in the shoes of glass were lead. She must gather up her glimmer of skirts and run — *run* — before the glory of the spell of illusion deserted her.

Four, struck the clock, five, six, *seven* —

Like a statue, Elvira. Turned to stone.

Already it was too late.

The crashing axe-blows had become a thin honed sword, which sliced away the imagery of enchantment. Eviscerated, the white gown, foaming up like feathers, *melted* — the diamonds, shed like rain, dried— even the peerless shoes — for how could they remain, when all else that was sorcerous vanished? The shoes were two puddles of mirror. Then a mirror's double shadow. Then— nothing at all.

Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

Twelve, roared the clock, the voice of judgement: *Twelve-twelve-twelve*. The echo continued forever. But after forever, silence returned.

Elvira had not run away. She stood there in the midst of strangers, three of whom — though she could not see them — she knew to be the enemies from her own house. These people had not lost their finery. They bloomed in it, and bloomed also with eyes stretched wide with shock, disgust or fear.

And there before her, he — her lover, her prince, also changed at last to expressionless pale stone.

The girl wore only her dirty shift. Her hair hung down her back, thick with kitchen grease and cinders. She smelled no more of flowers and essences, but of sweat and toil, ash and agony.

Love is not blind. No, love sees too much. Love sees and becomes a whip with thorns in it. Oh, she had already learned as much, when her stepmother and stepsisters first turned upon her like starving rats.

Elvira waited, her head still raised, too shamed to be ashamed, her tears now the only jewels she wore.

And he, the prince, stretched out one hand, as if to push her away.

Instead, his hand clasped hers. He looked into her face, and suddenly the sun rose behind his eyes. He smiled at her gravely. "Now I understand," he said.

"But," she faltered, "do you still know me — even now?"

"Just as I knew you at first sight," he said. "It is still you. And how courageous you are, to have stayed. How you must love me, Elvira — perhaps even as much as I love you.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the prince, turning to his astounded court, Elvira's dirt-blackened hand clasped firmly in his own, "Here is my future wife."

Q

WEIRD TALES TALKS WITH TERRY PRATCHETT

by Joseph McCabe

Weird Tales: Where are you from originally? Which part of England?

Terry Pratchett: It would probably mean very little to Americans, but I was born in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, which was the town where G.K. Chesterton lived. That was why I started reading him, because my grandparents knew him. They weren't friends of his as such, but he was a guy they saw around the town. My grandmother described him as a big, fat man with a squeaky voice. But because he was a local author, she had some of his books, and I read those in my very, very early teens. That was another way into fantasy, because Chesterton wrote two — I think — of the most influential fantasy novels of the early twentieth century, which were *The Man Who Was Thursday*, from which half the spy movies you ever see eventually derive, and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, which is at the very root of fantasy, I think. Just as an aside, I imagine if you've spoken to Neil Gaiman, he may have mentioned Chesterton as well, because we're both fans of the man.

WT: One of his characters in *Sandman* is based on Chesterton — Fiddler's Green.

Pratchett: And we make a little homage to Chesterton in *Good Omens*.

WT: What were some of the other fantasy authors who influenced you as a youth?

Pratchett: "Influence" is kind of the wrong kind of word, because it's rather like "Ah, did you get such-and-such from so-and-so?" But from my point of view it was the normal ones — James Branch Cabell, Leiber, Tolkien, Vance. But there was a period from about the age of twelve to when I was about seventeen or eighteen where I just read *any* SF I could get my hands on, and I read incredibly fast. I don't read so fast now because I tend to read far more non-fiction; with fiction you can kind of skim

WT: You mentioned Tolkien. He's an author whom a lot of people are now discovering through the recent *Lord of the Rings* films, and you wrote a tribute to Tolkien in the recent tribute book, *Meditations on Middle-Earth*.

Pratchett: There was a snide comment in *Locus* I think; their reviewer seem to think I was writing on automatic when I said that a lot a critics still dislike Tolkien. Maybe the writer doesn't get to the UK often, because 'popular' critics still hate Tolkien. Germaine Greer, in particular, goes absolutely incandescent at any suggestion that he is worthy of attention. No, he is not widely admired among literary critics in the U.K. But equally uncredited was the comment "If you do not think Tolkien is the greatest writer in the universe when you are thirteen there's something wrong with you, and if you still think that when you're fifty-three, there is really something wrong with you." To use that very convenient phrase, Tolkien was "of his time."

WT: It's interesting how, in the United States, *The Lord of the Rings* is considered high art, and *The Hobbit* is occasionally taught to high school students who are thought to be incapable of handling *The Lord of the Rings*.

Pratchett: *The Hobbit* is for nine-year-olds. Go, as they say, figure.

WT: You mentioned some writers that you admired. What made you want to write? Was it reading the work of these people?

Pratchett: One of the very nice things about fandom is there is this tacit encouragement to write: if you go to cons and you're not a complete dork you can hang out with real writers. Certainly in the U.K., where they'll probably be in the bar and thirsty. You can edge into a group, and, again, if you're still not a dork, and you make the occasional intelligent comment, you become part of it, and then suddenly you think, hey, this is me talking to Arthur C. Clarke ... or whatever. And then, without any conscious decision being made, it just kind of creeps up on you that "maybe I can do this stuff as well." I know of no other genre or branch of literature where this sort of thing happens. Romance writers have something equivalent to conventions, and so do western writers, but I don't believe either of them can be attended by the readers as well.

WT: I'd like to talk about Discworld for a moment. When you wrote *The Color of Magic*, the first Discworld novel, did you see in it the potential for a series of books? Were you already thinking several books ahead?

Pratchett: The best answer I can give you is — not consciously. I'm no Tolkien. Tolkien planned a world in minute detail and then wrote the story. I do it the other way around: the stories create the world. Once the world has been created then, fine, other stories must obey the laws, but the characters and the story come first.

WT: As richly developed as Discworld is, the books never become a travelogue. It's always evident that the characters are at the forefront, guiding the story along.

Pratchett: A large proportion of the stories are set in a comparatively small area — Ankh-Morpork, for example — and quite a few of the stories have never gone outside the city. The city itself is now a major character within the series. I think it's a bit too easy just to get a bunch of guys together to make them go on a quest.

WT: Yes, any kid playing a role-playing game can do that.

Pratchett: Oh, "you better have the wizard," you know, "better have the dwarf, better have the elf..."

WT: Discworld works as satire, obviously, and has shown itself to be a flexible milieu, but has there been any subject that you would like to satirize, but that you felt wouldn't quite work in Discworld?

Pratchett: The present-day in Discworld is set in an indeterminate time. I like to think it's sort of very late Georgian, with something like an industrial revolution going on . . . Some things are racing ahead. They already have a kind of mechanical version of the Internet practically, but they don't have steam. They have, in some respects, quite a modern political outlook, but they have no electricity, and some aspects of the society are still quite medieval. On the other hand, Ankh-Morpork has a small condom factory. Something of a first, I feel.

There was a thread on the Internet some time ago about 'sexism' in the books, by which vague term was meant: not enough roles for women. Well, the Witches' books are just full of roles for women, and there's quite a few of them. But if books are set in something which resembles a pre-Victorian England, then the number of roles for women are limited by the very nature of the period. If you try to buck this by applying some kind of modern 'equal opportunities' thinking, then you end up with a medieval southern California run by the Society for Creative Anachronism. It doesn't work. It rings false. But there are ways or making a virtue out of the restrictions, and I think I've done that in the upcoming "Monstrous Regiment."

There have been times when I've considered a subject and thought: "That's a good story, but it wouldn't fit in Discworld. I can't make it fit. It would change too much." Let's think, for example, "Hey, why don't we invent the railways?" Well, yeah, fine, but once you invent the railways, you have seriously changed your civilization and there's no going back. Now you've got the bulk movement of people and materials over long distances, cheaply, and you're beginning a huge upheaval.

You can't have a medieval society with railways *continuing to be a medieval society*, even if you've got dragons heating the boilers. It's too easy for people to run away, news spreads too quickly, it's too easy to derail the Sheriff of Nottingham's train. Your society will change in a major way. Plenty of good stories there, but before long, your world is going to be unrecognizable.

WT: There are many characters that populate Discworld. Who do you most relate to? Who do you wish you were more like? Or who would you not at all want to be like?

Pratchett: I would remind you, young man, that I am real and they are characters! However, Commander Vimes of the City Watch, Granny Weatherwax, and Susan Sto Helit — Death's granddaughter — are interesting characters to write for because they have screwed-up minds.

More importantly, they screw *themselves* up. Granny Weatherwax has all the instincts of a bad witch, but an overriding sort of moral imperative that insists that she does good; she's the classic good gunfighter of half of the western stories. And because those characters are so ill-at-ease in their heads then, a) that makes them more real and b) it sets up all kinds of conflicts which help the story move along.

Now fans like the Librarian, Death, and the Death of Rats, and the Luggage. And, with the exception of Death, who does have an internal monologue of sorts, the rest of them are delightfully free of any sort of questioning aspect of their personalities. The Luggage just chases people, and that's all there is to it. While they're a lot of fun, I could never do a book with the Librarian, say, as the main character, because the moment you start seeing what he's thinking, he will cease to be funny.

WT: I guess in his case the comedy is derived from the mystery.

Pratchett: Well, yes. And the fact that he's an orangutan.

WT: There's a Discworld short story in the *Legends* anthology — "The Sea and Little Fishes" — and some people said it was their favorite story in the collection. It was sort of a welcome break from the other stories in that book. Have there been other Discworld short stories, that have yet to be published in this country?

Pratchett: There was "Troll Bridge" in the *After the King* anthology. There was a very short one, which is now effectively free on the Internet — not public domain, but you know what I mean — called "Theater of Cruelty." I think those are the only three Discworld shorts. I find short stories very . . . well, I was asked if I'd do one for the next *Legends* anthology, and I said no thanks because short stories cost me blood. I did the one for *Legends* because by luck I had the right idea at the right time, and it made a good short story. Who knows if it will happen again?

WT: *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* —

Pratchett: Aha! In England we pronounce it "Maurice" [pronouncing it "Morris"].

WT: I'm sorry. *The Amazing "Morris" and His Educated Rodents*, This was the first Discworld novel targeted towards children. What prompted you to do that book? And now we've seen *The Wee Free Men*, too. Do you see yourself doing more Discworld novels aimed at young adults?

Pratchett: Subject matter defines audience these days. A book whose main characters are a talking cat and talking rats? You just *know* beforehand it's going to end up on the children's shelves whatever you do.

Remember, my first book was a children's book, and I've done six other children's books as well; so I can kind of slip easily across the barrier, which is thin enough in the fantasy genre in any case _____. So I thought, well, I'll do a children's one, just to see if it will work.

The first big difference from a professional's point of view is that you make a lot less money up front. My editor in the U.K. paid the highest she's ever paid for a children's book, but it was a lot, lot less than an adult Discworld book typically gets. On the other hand, you are increasing the size of the market. You're opening up a new front, which is always worth doing. And you have different constraints and different freedoms, which is fun.

Both the books are set in Discworld but written, as it were, from a different angle. I could try a take. In a sense, I was franchising Discworld back to myself. I think *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* turned out to be one of the darkest Discworld books I've ever written.

WT: Yes, it is very dark.

Pratchett: Well, that's because it's for kids. You want to put a little more murder, blood, and cannibalism, that sort of thing, because otherwise they'd be lost wouldn't they? [Laughs.]

WT: Adults just couldn't handle that level of darkness.

Pratchett: Kids can. They remember fairy tales. And they know that the darkness has to be followed by dawn. Anyway, it was a fun book to do, and so was *The Wee Free Men*. What did impress me were the reviews I started getting in the US. After twenty years of Discworld in the UK, where 25 books have all made it to #1, reviewers pretty much know that a book will sell a shitload whether they say, "Another Discworld novel — bah!" or "It's another Discworld novel! Best yet!" and so they end up writing about my fans of "the Discworld Phenomenon." But here in the US I got serious, analytical reviews! Children's books seem to be taken a lot more seriously here. I've been recommended by librarians' associations, all kinds of stuff. I won't say I've been given a new level of respect — because that's going too far, and what would I do with it? — but I've been *taken seriously*. And it sold very well in hardback too. In short, I wonder if I don't do adult books for the money and children's books for . . . the prestige, in a curious kind of way.

It came as a real shock to everyone, not least to me, when *Maurice* got the Carnegie Medal last year. Suddenly it was being reviewed again by papers who'd said "another DW book, yeah, yeah" first time around and suddenly were saying "it's wonderful" a year later. What a difference a medal makes, eh?

WT: There are quite a few medals and awards given to children's literature in this country.

Pratchett: Some of them are only open to American authors, I note. Is it because it would skew things if you let the British children's writers in?

WT: Yes, you guys would definitely crush us every year.

Pratchett: No, I don't think that's necessarily the case. But we are great exporters *of* books. We have a lot of writers per square foot in the U.K.

WT: On the cover of the American editions of many Discworld novels, there is no mention of Discworld. This is unusual for a fantasy series in this country — is this intentional?

Pratchett: I haven't been consciously aware. In any case, while there are story arcs within the Discworld series, as best I can I try to make them separate novels. The best analogy — although I'll never live this down — is with the *Star Trek* movies. They are all separate movies but, nevertheless, a knowledge of what has gone before is helpful.

WT: Yes. The first Discworld novel I picked up was *Interesting Times*, and obviously the characters had long been established by that book, but it was still quite accessible. You picked up on what the characters were all about soon enough.

Pratchett: It helps to be familiar with the general tropes of fantasy.

WT: In writing the Discworld novels, do you ever feel a tug-of-war between writing for the devoted fans and writing for the newcomers?

Pratchett: I never think about it.

WT: You never think about it?

Pratchett: Oh, sometimes I take some special care in the fine details because there are some fans who'll *search* for discrepancies. Even then I don't always get it right, because Discworld is big and I've written a lot of books and frankly it's amazing that it's remained even passably consistent. But, look: there are readers and there are fans. I can only speak for the U.K., but here there may be as many as half-a-million readers, quite possibly more. I bet if you took the membership of the two fan clubs and the mailing lists of the small select group of merchandisers and added up all the names, you wouldn't get ten thousand individuals. I've always been aware that you're writing not just for people who buy the t-shirts; you're writing for people who could pass for normal in the street! They're all around, flying airplanes, running schools, policing cities . . . they'll buy every book, but it'd never occur to them to attend a convention, say.

It's funny who you find who will introduce themselves as a Discworld fan. People without Discworld t-shirts! With a real job, you know! It's amazing! [Laughs.]

WT: Do you foresee an end to any of the various story arcs within the Discworld? Or perhaps Discworld itself? Is there a Discworld apocalypse in the back of your head that you've sketched out as a possibility?

Pratchett: The answers are no, no, and no. [Laughs.] Some story arcs will end, maybe, but others will continue and mutate. Characters may die and other characters may grow up, but certainly I do not plan the official last Discworld book. It'll be the one before I'm dead.

WT: I assume that in England there is a fair amount of Discworld merchandise and memorabilia. Do you ever worry that Discworld may come to suffer from overexposure?

Pratchett: Have you ever *seen* any Discworld memorabilia in England? There's a small company that makes a line of painted Discworld miniatures. And there's a guy who makes models of buildings in Discworld and other rather nice items. And there's a few people who make badges and t-shirts. But there's aren't many people making a living off of all this. Mostly it's like early *Star Trek* merchandising: people making some money but it wasn't really their job, a few small professional organizations venturing into it as part of their product line. It is not pervasive — you don't walk down the street and be *made* aware that it's happening. You only see the books. The only generally-available 'merchandising' is the paper-based stuff, like various diaries and *Nanny Ogg's Cookbook* and the maps, all of which I have a major involvement with, but I suppose doesn't come under the heading of "merchandising" in the usual sense of the word.

There is even less Discworld merchandising than Tolkien merchandising, say, five or six years ago — *Lord of the Rings* was just a book and if you were really interested you could search around and find posters and maybe some figures. I mean now you can get "Aragorn with Amazing Kung-Fu Grip" and all kinds of stuff. There is no way it can take over, not without a movie. I'm in charge, and I know most of the people involved personally. So I can always beat them up.

WT: Fantasy is especially hot in the movies these days. Have you been bombarded with offers from film studios?

Pratchett: Yes and no. A movie of *Mort* has been going in and out of development hell for ten years. One would have thought in the current sort of pro-fantasy-movie market it would be coming out, but it doesn't appear to be. The *Truckers* trilogy has been bought by DreamWorks, but that's not Discworld. I've gotten lots and lots of approaches and generally they're all from middle-men of one sort or another who want to buy the property in the hope of having that property when someone else decides they want that property. And because I haven't just fallen off the Christmas tree, I say, "No, thank you, I'd like to deal with the organ grinder and not with the monkey." To be frank, I'm not sure I'm keen on DW as a movie. I'm not sure it could work. The money? I've got money. What I don't want are problems. As for merchandising, well, if I was really keen on merchandising, there would be a lot more than currently there is. I insist on things being accurate and well-made, and that means they aren't cheap. I see it as a sideshow. An interesting sideshow — and I'm glad the fans like it — but that's what it is.

WT: One of your non-Discworld novels is *Good Omens*. You co-wrote *Good Omens* with Neil Gaiman. I spoke with Neil about that experience. He said working with you was like going to college. He felt like a journeyman, and that you were a master craftsman, a Wedgewood chair-maker, and he said he'd never made a chair before, but that he'd had some experience as a woodworker. What are your feelings about that collaboration?

Pratchett: One person had to carry the book, because Neil still had *Sandman* to produce on a regular basis, whereas I could just put down that book in place of a Discworld novel. So one person had to be, for want of a better word, the "editor," and the custodian of the big pie. Broadly, I suppose you could say I could overrule Neil, on the basis that if it had been a comic he could have overruled me, but there was never any serious disagreement in *Good Omens*. There was never a fight or anything. It's true, though, that our relationship wobbled a little when a movie was first in prospect. I felt that what Sovereign were doing was completely and utterly disemboweling the story; and Neil, God bless him, thought, well, if we hang in there ... if we kind of stay on the train, maybe we can steer it. And I would yell, "It's a train! It's on tracks!" That caused a certain coolness, I think. Anyway, it never happened. It goes on never happening.

There were certain rules. Jesus Christ couldn't appear, for example. And we were clear that no one must die because Adam Young was alive. But what I remember was that we both had tremendous fun. It's a one-off, too. Neil probably said to you that we couldn't possibly do something like that these days, that it would take a year for both of us to maneuver our schedules in such a way so that we would have the same time slot available. And, sadly, that's true.

WT: I read that the book first came about because you were both playing around with your modems and looking for something to do with them.

Pratchett: No, it went like this: Neil wrote about half of a short story, which he showed to me and said, "I don't know how this ends." And I looked at it and I didn't know how it ended, and I put it away somewhere. But I kept thinking about it, and about a year later I phoned him up and said, "I don't know how it ends but I know how it continues." And he said, "Let's write it together." I still had the original copy, but Neil didn't, and it was actually *typed*, on a real typewriter, like your granddad had! I know I typed it out again on the word-processor, with alterations, and that became the baby-swap scene in the beginning. Everything else we just developed together.

WT: How did you first meet Neil?

Pratchett: Neil was the first person that ever interviewed me as an author. A semi-professional magazine sent him to interview me — Neil was a freelance journalist — and we had a Chinese meal in Soho, and we just kind of kept in touch.

WT: How far back was that?

Pratchett: . . . 1985?

WT: You've had a lot of success on both sides of the Atlantic, and so has Neil, though I'm not sure how his work is perceived in England.

Pratchett: I think we are kind of mirror images. I do well in the United States, there's no doubt about it, enough to be invited to cons and so on, and I sell pretty well. But none of my novels have sold as much as *American Gods*, I'm damn sure. In the UK, I'm certainly bigger than him, although he's pretty established. But... so what? What are we counting and why? On *Good Omens*, the deal was that Neil got his name on first in the US and I go first everywhere else. Of course both of us have noticed that Neil's gone after the biggest country but, hey, those small ones add up.

WT: Why do you think Neil has achieved so much success in this country?

Pratchett: I don't think it has specifically to do with the American audience. It's very similar to why I've been successful. It's . . . texture, maybe, is a good word.

Look, when we were writing *Good Omens*, there was seldom a case where one of us came up with an idea, some weird historical fact that the other guy didn't know about. Maybe the other guy hadn't heard so much about it or something like that, but we both had a very similar background, which included absolutely *omnivorous* reading, and a delight in strange trivia. When you've been doing this throughout your late childhood and into your teens, you get a wealth of obscure but valuable material to draw on. And mine gets consumed into Discworld, and Neil brought this knowledge to graphic novels. I mean here's a guy that knows *lots of stuff*. He hasn't just looked it up, he *knows it*. It's the kind of stuff that you've known for so long, that you cannot remember ever not knowing it, and also you believe that everyone else must know it because you know it; you assume it's sleeting through the atmosphere! And it always comes as a shock to me when I find there's people that don't know things which I assume everyone must know, like tulipomania or floral clocks. I think that's got a lot to do with it — that very esoteric knowledge base, and the ability to draw on it. Then, of course, he was working in graphic novels, and brought that knowledge base to graphic novels. But I've always felt kind of against graphic novels because I thought they have the drawback of not being movies and the drawback of not being books. I'm not surprised that Neil is now leaving that and doing other things. I think he'd much rather do a lot more movies.

WT: Why do you think that is?

Pratchett: I don't know, we haven't discussed this . . . because it's a bigger train set. Because you can do everything you can do in a graphic novel, but you've got sound! You've got movement! You've got the actual cadence of the dialogue; you've got this whole extra palette to play with. Now in a book, you've got some of that, because the reader is providing all the sounds in their own head; the comic book, or graphic novel, while it offers the false prospect of giving you more than the book has got, I feel it gives you less. And it gives you less than the movie. My reading of it is "Do books and movies."

WT: I read that Neil was impressed Terry Gilliam had found a way to include your footnotes in his planned film version of *Good Omens*. He felt that Gilliam had "got" it.

Pratchett: I thought the script was great. I was surprised at how much had been left in. We knew he'd got it, when, more than ten years ago, we met him in a club in Soho and he ... well, he'd just *got* it. We know he wants to be involved. I don't think it's a foregone conclusion that it ever gets made, especially since 9/11. We have to assume it will never happen, even when the big stretch limo is pulling up outside the cinema, Assume it's not going to happen, that's the way to stay sane. It's never going to happen. And if you think it will, it won't.

WT: Are there any other people with whom you'd like to collaborate?

Pratchett: I collaborated with Neil because things were exactly right. Neil was getting well-known with comics and graphic novels and I've always done well in books. We were both successful in a field that the other guy wasn't particularly interested in at that point, so jealousy was out the window. It's like working with an artist in a different discipline, you see — I'm the writer, you're the artist, we're not in competition. So if the book's successful, wow, that's great. So the whole thing happened in a very pleasant kind of way. I have, on occasion, discussed collaborations with other authors. In fact, Larry Niven and I discussed one and agreed that, while our working methods probably meant it wouldn't gel, either of us could do anything with all the things we talked about, because there's no copyright on ideas. But our approaches to writing probably wouldn't mix well.

Neil and I spent a lot of time on the phone. One of us would say, "I know how to make this scene work. What we do is ..." We wrote the book, in fact, to see how it would go. But Larry, is more of the school of "write it down and make lots of notes, plan it out, and then write the book." And my take is ... in fact, I'm doing it at the moment — I'm writing draft *zero* of the next book, the one I write to see if it's going to *be* a book. I haven't written the ending, although I know certain bits in the middle. But at this point I'm open to new ideas, and willing to see they help the book move in the direction it wants to go, or whether I should put them aside and maybe save them for another book. I think Neil works the same way. It's less chaotic that it sounds. It's more like trying out riffs in the recording studio until you get the sound right. . . .

We discussed *Good Omens II* when we were on tour. It was a great relief when we finally admitted to one another that we didn't actually want to do it, but we both thought the other guy did. It would have been do-able, if ever we could have got together. (Half the time is second-guessing what the other guy's thinking.) I don't think it'll ever happen now. Any sequel to *Good Omens* that we write wouldn't be as good as the sequel that we *didn't* write. Besides, we're both hard at work on our own projects now.

WT: You mentioned earlier that you read a lot of SF growing up. Neil mentioned the same thing in an interview with Darrell Schweitzer. Why do *you* think so many fantasy writers begin as SF fans? Is it simply because SF was more readily available than fantasy?

Pratchett: Certainly, when I was a kid, there *was* a small amount of fantasy in a lot of SF, and SF won me over first, probably because I was interested in astronomy. Both SF and Fantasy were towards the end of the bookshop. Not for nothing is my view of the classic specialist SF books as one positioned with the tattoo parlor on one side and the porno cinema on the other. That's where you used to find the average SF bookshop. And that's where it belongs!

WT: Back in the ghetto?

Pratchett: You know, it's funny you should say that. I mean it isn't a ghetto anymore, not really. Oh, a lot of critics don't like it, but who cares? There's lots of people out there who have *grandparents* that read fantasy and SF. They're in every bookshop, sometimes even near the front. They're out in the mainstream now. You can tell by the way mainstream literary authors pillage SF while denying they're writing it!

WT: If I may go back to Discworld for a moment — why has it survived for so long?

Pratchett: The reason that Discworld has survived is that it's changed. It began with funny wizards running around. Some of the more recent books have been quite dark and quite serious; and it's kind of grown up. People think "He uses lots of puns." Well, I'm "He" and He uses *very, very* few puns, although there is a fair amount of wordplay. What I do use are paradoxes, which Chesterton loved, and perhaps also skewed but logical ways of looking at a situation. Chesterton said that what fantasy should do is take that which is everyday and therefore unregarded, and pick it up and turn it around one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, and show it to you again from a different direction, so that you see it

with fresh eyes, for the first time — again. He took the view that the 'normal' and 'everyday' are by their very nature fantastic. I think an example he used in one of his stories was a street lamp.

WT: That was in *The Man Who Was Thursday* wasn't it?

Pratchett: I think so, but he used it in one of his essays too — how magical a street lamp was because of the huge number of wonderful things that had to be achieved: the mining of the coal, the smelting of the iron, the cooperation of so many people over a long time.

In order for a street lamp to come into being whole civilizations had to grow, whole ways of thinking had to change. Yet a street lamp — or a penknife, or a box of matches — are perceived as normal, everyday, boring, dull things, when really there are some of the most astonishing things in the world. That was the way Chesterton thought, and that's a good way for a fantasy writer to think.

My last adult book, *Night Watch*, concerns a civil war in the city of Ankh-Morpork, and there's a barricade put up and about a quarter of the city is behind the barricade. I happened to look at my map of the city and thought, well, that means the 'rebels' have the slaughterhouse district and the warehouses and the stockyards. Now rebels don't usually bother to take the slaughterhouse district; they go to the seats of power. But where, in reality, is the power here? I thought, okay, how does the city get fed? And I took the number of people in the city — half-a-million at that point, roughly — and used some tables and got some help from some friends who know about this kind of stuff. I wondered: how much beef, on a daily basis, has to come, into that city? A herd of about eighty cows, probably, given the diet. Then there's the sheep, the goats, the lobsters, the smoked eels, the herring, the pepper, the flour — *everything*. Feeding a city that size is quite a process — stuff has to be pouring in all the time. The mere existence of this barricade . . . well, while it hasn't brought the city to its knees within a day, the shortages are beginning, people are starting to panic ... A city that size is like a modern production-line factory that has no inventory, that is relying on lines coming from the supplier on a daily basis. You know, ". . . and it gets there at four o'clock, and we unload this stuff and then we use it."

There's a limit to what you can store and to how long you can store beef, say, or fresh eggs when there's no refrigeration (oh, you can dry stuff and smoke stuff, but you have to be set up to do it.) If suddenly this process is interrupted, big sticky horrible chaos is going to ensue.

Now that is not classic fantasy thinking, but I introduced it to Ankh-Morpork. (Fantasy thinking about cities is usually about chivalry, and not about sewage or slaughterhouses.) That turned the story around for me and took it in a different direction — the traffic jams, the panic, the disruption that would be caused.

This rebellion is not simply a political thing, it is an *economic* disaster. And all I did was say "Let us assume that this is real, but *really* real, not real within the terms of the fantasy world, but real within the real universe." And out of it came a much better story.

WT: And that element of reality makes it more interesting for the reader.

Pratchett: We don't think about where the food comes from. We just don't think about it, unless we happen to be environmentally active or aware. *It turns up*. We often don't make the connection between the line of trucks on the freeway and the food on the table.

WT: Thank you very much for your time, Terry.

Pratchett: You're quite welcome.

Q

FIG

by Robert Ferrigno

It's time to set the record straight. You know the official version. Now hear the real thing, from the source itself.

Trust me. They don't call me the Tree of Knowledge for nothing.

From the moment I sprang out of the soil, I said to God, This is a bad idea. Why plant a Tree of Knowledge and then forbid its fruit? The surest way to make a human do something, I said, is to tell him not to. That goes for both sexes. I'm an invitation to trouble. I'm an open door marked Party in Progress; Do Not Enter. I'm a cookie jar with the lid off winking at the kid when the parents are out of the house. There's no way they're going to be able to avoid me, I said. One bite and it's over. They'll go dashing for those fig leaves and soon it'll be loincloths, then togas, then three-piece suits and let's go to the mall. It's all over, the grand experiment. The being made in Your Image.

He looked at me gravely and said, I know.

I could not follow his reasoning. But before I could ask, *poof*, He's gone. I was going to suggest he post a sentry of angels around me. They seemed pretty bored anyway, just hovering around. I mean, how many times can they fire up those glow-in-the-dark swords?

Then along comes the human female. She just stares at me. Appraising. Wondering. Ordinarily I might have found that rude except that I was staring right at her.

I could see she wanted to reach out and touch one of my branches, pluck a ripe fresh fruit. But she drew back her hand and put her finger in her mouth instead. She stood pondering.

Up slinks the serpent. I know he's charming, I know he can charm a stone into dancing, but I don't trust him. He suggests she try my fruit. It won't harm her. Just once, he says. She reaches out and tugs a fig.

By the way, let's abolish another fallacy right here. I'm a fig tree, not an apple tree. There were no apple trees in the Garden of Eden. I don't care what those Renaissance painters tell you, I'm the tree. Fig. Which comes in handy, because the first thing she does after swallowing is tug off some of my leaves and start the world's first fashion trend.

You know the rest of the story. God comes back from his evening walk, pissed. Like I hadn't warned him. Thunder, lightning, a curse on thee and on thy offspring, all the days of your life. A flaming eviction notice, and the bored angels suddenly become bouncers. The serpent slithers away.

Finally, when all is quiet again in the Garden, the storm clouds scatter. God sighs a breath of relief. He turns to me and says, Finally got the kids out of my hair! I thought they'd *never* leave!

Q

THE SACERDOTAL OWL

by Michael Bishop

illustrated by George Barr

Lace Kurlansky rode ashore with twelve others from the passenger ship *Novia Rosa*. She had worked before in Mexico and Honduras with her archaeologist fiance Cabot Chessman, but she had never before visited the guerilla-besieged Central American country of Guacamayo, and her anxiety level soared as the tender neared the shabby coastal settlement of Dos Perros, entryway to the jungle in which Cabot directed a team excavating the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Chibal.

Owing to its befuddling civil war, few foreigners landed in Guacamayo, and those who did pretty much clung to the government-controlled eastern coast and its hot white beaches. Dos Perros and the green jungle strangling its terrace-set adobe shops and homes, all with tin, thatch, or terracotta-tile roofs, intensified Lace's foreboding.

A town called Two Dogs, she thought, shaking her head.

Like all her fellow passengers, she had come by sea because, a year ago, a rebel with a shoulder-braced missile launcher had nearly downed an airliner landing outside the Ciudad de Guacamayo airport, the only one in the country with runways long enough for passenger jets. And Cabot wanted her to marry him here — not in the capital, or even in Dos Perros, but in the holy sanctum of a temple atop the highest pyramid in Chibal, as if they were latter-day avatars of long-dead Maya nobles imploring Xaman Ek, god of the North Star, to sanctify their union.

Pressing her hands between her knees, Lace chuckled bleakly. Her folks thought her both daft and unfilial, while her sisters regarded Cabot as an egomaniacal Svengali. Most of her friends called her a self-destructive romantic but wished her well, as did her closest colleagues at Vanderbilt.

Now, with the jungle advancing like an un-appeasably voracious monster, Lace marveled that she had consented to Cabot's ill-advised program and feared that perhaps her family had astutely pegged the whole wonky arrangement.

"Business or pleasure?" said a gray-haired lounge-singer type sitting next to her in the jouncing tender.

"I'm not sure," Lace said.

"Anyone meeting you?"

"My fiance." If that news failed to discourage further talk, she could always show him her silver tongue stud.

The man arched his eyebrows. "Then you should *get* sure as soon as you can." And smiled to soften the rebuke.

Disembarking with the others, Lace wobbled down the pier toward a bald baggy-suited official checking passports. He peremptorily waved her on, but halted a passenger as pot-bellied and swarthy as himself. Cabot was not visible among the family members, business associates, and natives crowding the esplanade, and Lace's uneasiness mounted toward a mild unfocused panic.



"Cabot!" she yelled. "*Cabot!*"

Many people looked, but a slender young Gua-camayan man carrying a strap-on bamboo tray of hand-carved mahogany idols and rain-forest animals stalked along the cordon separating arrivals from locals, never releasing her gaze. She tried glancing aside, but the certainty that *he* had not looked away compelled her to check out his relentless tracking sidle. When they met at the end of the pier, he lifted for her approval a small wooden owl. In less than a minute, he had bridged to her — psychically, anyway — and his classic Indian features and thin sweat-glazed arms impressed themselves indelibly on her awareness.

"You want this," he said. "Only ten dollars, American." He had a musical voice and spoke Spanish with a queer but touching formality.

She shook her head. She wanted Cabot and surcease from worry. Around them, other vendors — importunate peasants, although she did not begrudge them their efforts to earn a living — accosted the arrivals, showed their goods, and in some cases haggled over prices.

Lace, still searching, pushed on. The thin bronze man paced her steps, not with a crude aggression but with a dogged cheerfulness that, despite her anxiety, began to have its effect. She liked his pygmy owl of slick mahogany. One of its wings seemed to hold a shield with a quasi-human face, and a splinterlike dart pierced its body diagonally from ear-horn to claw.

"Lord of the Night," the fellow said, turning the owl in his fist. "Messenger to the spirit world. Eight dollars, U.S. — a marvelous deal."

"Two-fifty," Lace offered. You never paid what the natives first asked, a custom acknowledged in this one's impromptu price cut. When he seized her hand and wrapped her fingers around the owl, she remarked him more closely.

He swayed a little, as if expecting her to run. The top of his head rose only to her chin. His lack of height, along with his back-slanting brow and full berry lips, identified him as a Maya of the regional Tunkuluchu. He was neither mestizo nor pardo, but a full-blooded Mesoamerican of ancient stock. Here in the sun, he exuded no special mystery or nobility (in every society, most citizens are commoners), just a mild desperation in the raw capitalist pursuit of his daily bread. At his throat he wore a frayed string from which dangled an obsidian pendant showing an aged paddler god with a stingray spine through his nose. (Body piercing had long historical roots.)

Lace recognized this fetish as one of the two canoe-paddling gods who carried dead kings to the spirit world. The Old Stingray God symbolized day, while his partner, the Old Jaguar God, represented night — polar opposites framing a fundamental unity. Between the collars of the huckster's well-made but grubby white shirt, this ebony icon shone against his yam-brown skin.

"Five dollars," he said after a moment. "No less."

"What do you want for the pendant?" With the head of his mahogany owl, Lace tapped the stingray-god fetish.

"I don't sell the pendant, ever," he said. "Five dollars for the owl."

"Three," Lace countered.

"Look at the craftsmanship, the delicacy. I implore you, seriorita, five dollars, or you will stab me to my heart."

This phrasing stabbed her to her own. The owl anointed her palm with a sweet-smelling arboreal oil, and it did have delicacy — as well as intricacy and the intercessory agency of a faultless eye. But she had no need for a carven owl, no matter how fine, and Cabot still hadn't showed.

"How do you call yourself?" Lace asked the man.

"Chac," he said.

"Ah, like the rain god."

"Yes. But many visitors mishear and call me Jack."

"And your last name?"

Chac squinted — less in suspicion, Lace thought, than in wonder that she cared to pursue the matter, given her agitation, which she knew he had already noted. At length, though, he said, "Sanudo, seno-rita."

"Ah." Lace did not say aloud that his surname meant "furious." He did not seem furious, only anxious to complete a sale. Clearly, he needed the money. Trawling Dos Perros for sympathetic tourists had no doubt proved harder and harder with the worsening guerrilla conflict.

"Four dollars," Chac Sanudo said. "Four is nothing. Four is mere pennies for hours of tender labor."

But she would not budge. Cabot may have suck-ered her, but this Maya boy — he was barely a man, if a man at all — would *not* do so.

Shrugging, Chac took her three grimy bills, stuffed them into his khaki pants, and moved along to an elderly gringa who might prove more biddable.

Lace looked after him almost regretfully before turning her gaze on the port.

It was bigger than a village, smaller than a city, climbing in ragged terraces away from the miracle of the sea and sprawling at its peripheries toward a jungle that cramped it into a bright isolate bowl. Lace shook a cellular phone from her bag, to call the village near Chibal where Cabot and his team bought supplies and collected mail. The Nokia did not even activate. It showed no power bars and no inclination to trump the technological gap rendering it useless. Only an idiot would have hauled it all the way from Nashville to Guacamayo . . .

"Cabot!" she yelled. "You didn't check your calendar, did you? You went gaga in some stinking tomb and never came up for air!"

Jamming the phone back into her bag, she ignored the glances of passersby — and attuned her ear to the egregious jumpy snarl issuing from a nearby store, a noise like a leaf blower and a lawn-mower engine jockeying for supremacy. Lace crossed the street and entered the shop, where the snarl almost deafened her. The men inside, all with rolled-up shirt-sleeves and sweaty faces, turned to her, one grasping a chainsaw as if about to rip the shop's counter in two.

Other chainsaws hung from the walls or rested on makeshift shelves like so many transmogrified bicycle parts. The emporium specialized in this item, and Lace figured that its owner legally outfitted rogue settlers who would travel inland and illegally attack the rainforest to clear *milpas* — maize fields — both for the timber and the hope of growing crops that would keep their families, and their ambitions, alive. And so they achieved the needful at the expense of tomorrow, a Faustian self-annihilation.

The man holding the chainsaw swung it toward Lace — mock-threateningly, she realized, but she had already reached the street when its snarling ceased and he cried, "*Forgive me, pretty one, come back!*" while the others guffawed.

A pox on you all, Lace thought, and then she remembered Honduran stelae — monuments that the Maya called "tree-stones" — showing death figures with black spots, signifying decomposition, on their two-dimensional faces and bodies. Guacamayo belonged to Guacamayans, and if they wanted to risk government fines or even slaughter by guerillas, or to denude the countryside of mahogany and other precious hardwoods, who was she to gainsay this wish or to lambaste it as selfish or shortsighted? Let Cabot do those things.

And as far as "shortsighted" went, what about Cabot's failure to foresee today's boondoggle? He had his faults, including arrogance, overwork, and bouts of irritating intellectual distraction, but Lace could always count on him to do what he said. Cabot was reliable. He took pride in his reliability.

So why hadn't he shown? And what was she supposed to do, now that he hadn't? His team had no auxiliary personnel or contacts in Dos Perros, and the two of them had not even agreed on a hotel lobby or a bar to meet in if a mix-up derailed their rendezvous. Stupid — unforgivably so.

Lace explored the settlement, eventually hiking up a dirt alley to a terrace given over to ferns, flowers, lopsided shanties, and a five-peseta pension. At this motel-like structure, the Hotel Llama del Bosque ("Call of the Wild"), with cinder-block walls, thatched porticoes, and a rusted tin roof, she rented a room from a mestizo woman whose thirteen-year-old son carried her bag to her threshold. He flirted with* big liquid eyes but succeeded only in cracking her up. Indignantly, then, he stashed away her tip and strode barefoot back to his mama's office-cum-boudoir.

There was nothing to bind Lace to her room — no TV, no mini fridge, no reading material but match-books and a Gideon Bible. The electricity fueling the lights leaked a diluted mustard glow, and the heat was so brain-broiling that even a lobotomized guest would have wanted her skull heaped to the brim with ice cubes.

Lace freshened up with a washcloth and a lipstick re-do and walked back down to the esplanade. At a bar called Macanudo ("magnificent," "the best"), happy hour began at seven, and you could buy beer and Cuba Libres for sixty cents U.S. Even these prices limited the clientele to civil servants, army officers, a few brash tourists, and rain-forest impresarios who had slashed and burned enough of the besieged jungle, through bribery and guile, to bribe and beguile again.

Did any of these people know Cabot? Could any of them tell her how to reach Chibal? Or did her fiance lie wounded, if not dead, somewhere between the domain of the insurgent Tunkuluchuob and the outskirts of Dos Perros?

Lace sat at a table under a groaning ceiling fan nursing a rum and no-name cola — she knew it wasn't Coke — fretting these matters as if fret would fix them.



A barmaid scuttled over to check on her, and Lace dug into her bag for money. "When you're done," the barmaid said and scurried away. Lace's fingers closed not on coins, but on Chac Sanudo's mysterious owl.

As soon as she had it, Chac Sanudo himself appeared at the bar, moving with his goods tray as he had moved along the dock. He showed the patrons clay jaguars, onyx chess pieces, and a figure of Ixtab, goddess of suicide, a noose about her throat and her knotty wooden skin spotted black.

A customer with purple sweat circles under his arms tried to slap this figure from Chac's hand, but Chac pulled it back and edged around a table toward some less irritable patrons. An army officer bought a laughing wide-hipped woman a necklace, but this sale seemed the summit of Chac's luck.

Shoulders slumped, he continued scanning the crowd for buyers. Inevitably, his gaze fell on Lace. She beckoned him over, as if hailing an irksome cousin, and he placed his tray on her table before sitting down.

"Hello, seriorita. Are you here alone?"

"Why are you still working?" Lace rejoined. "Don't you have family?"

"I'm still working *because* I have family — my mother, a young sister, two little brothers. We all must eat."

"A family of five?" She could not nerve up to ask about Chac's father.

"A family of *eight*. I also have a twin and two older brothers, who were drafted seven years ago. They've never returned."

After that, he answered no more questions. Nor did he try to sell her anything from his tray. Instead, he asked questions — about her solitary presence in the Macanudo, her reasons for coming to Guacamayo, her plans to reunite with her no-show American fiance, and what she'd do if something terrible had befallen Senor-Doctor Chessman, the archaeologist. Lace retorted that *nothing* terrible had befallen Cabot, who would surely arrive in the morning to check the guest lists of the hotels and to bring their nightmarish accidental separation to an end.

Chac fingered the stingray-god pendant on his dirty string. Even in this nocturnal temple to booze, dance, and piped-in music (a mind-fucking mix of flamenco and hip-hop), the figure symbolized day. It did not quite hypnotize Lace, but it obsessed her as a talisman of her anxiety and of Chac's allegiance to a strangeness at odds with his daytime normality. She wanted to buy the fetish, but he didn't want to sell it, and she had no right to badger him. After all, he had many other curios there in his tray from which to choose an alternative.

"Don't you have a pendant of the Old Jaguar God?" Lace asked, thinking that the stingray god's partner would do if she could not buy *this* figure; both meant bloodletting, spirit voyage, and death.

"My twin wears it," Chac said.

"And where is he?"

"Among the Tunkuluchu rebels." Chac offered this perilous declaration without lowering his voice or looking about for eavesdroppers. (Lace thought, If Chac's twin has joined the guerillas, why hasn't Chac?) He laid his small hand on her wrist. "If you want to go to Chibal, I will escort you — for a nominal sum."

He actually, quite confidently, said "nominal."

Fifty dollars. Talk about nominal. Lace converted her U.S. money into pesetas and remitted the absurdly low fee in advance.

The next morning, however, in the dining room where the Llama del Bosque's proprietress served breakfast, Lace learned from a CNN broadcast that a regiment of the Tunkuluchuob had captured Chibal. They had taken the archaeologists working there hostage and packed the main pyramid's temple and underground tombs with explosives. They threatened to blow up the whole complex if President

Leopoldo Fuentes did not release a notorious guerilla leader now in custody in Ciudad de Guacamayo. They also demanded an accounting of the country's "disappeared" — priests, anthropologists, social workers, labor leaders, journalists, and the family members of known rebel combatants, including many children.

Such a blast would destroy irreplaceable Maya treasures — a major chunk of the Tunkuluchuob's own heritage — but it would also rob Fuentes of tourist revenues and political face. The rebels conceded their desperation, but stressed that the President's ruthlessness had eclipsed every reasonable peaceful option. They could not possibly lay down their arms before the implementation of even one reform, and they had exhausted all tolerance for Fuentes' intransigent arrogance and cruelty.

Chac picked up Lace on a battered motorcycle, with a jury-rigged sidecar, that looked as if it might have last seen action in Italy during the First World War. He did not say how he had come by this vehicle, but Lace felt sure that he had borrowed it from a local outfitter. At her feet in the sidecar, three gasoline tins (which Chac had filled at her expense) confirmed her in this view. They climbed the hill behind Dos Perros, clattering like a chorus of ill-repaired chainsaws, and raced for hours along a jungle-pent two-rut road that jiggled her eyes, bruised her butt, and squeezed her kidneys like acid-drenched sponges. They passed some peasants walking single file, several coffee plantations, and a rattletrap truck hauling raw new furniture. They could not talk. Lace could scarcely even signal her need to stop.

Finally, Chac pulled over and helped her from the sidecar. After vanishing into the jungle, ruining her folly in undertaking this trip, she clutched her knees to keep from toppling backward as she peed. When she wobbled back to the road, Chac handed her a warm beer and a banana leaf wrapping a bean-filled tortilla. Squatting like natives, they ate and drank. Lace peppered Chac with questions, many of which she had already asked and a few that had occurred to her during their precipitous ride.

How long would the trip to Chibal take? Would government troops or guerillas try to stop them? Would the Tunkuluchu rebels kill them? Could they hope to approach the temple complex if insurgents had indeed captured it? Would news reporters reach the site before them? Could they buy gasoline if they—?

Chac touched her face with a cool fingertip and let it linger on her skin. "You worry too much, Seriorita Kurlansky. Peace."

"I've just realized that I have no idea what I'm doing — what *we're* doing. How does a person summon peace from chaos?"

After setting his beer between his sandaled feet and wiping his hands, Chac took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and carefully opened it. "I would like to read you something. Will you hear?"

"What is it?"

Chac ignored this question. He faced her, the paper at chest level, too close to his body for him to read. Even so, he declared, "The Sacerdotal Owl" by Chac-Xib-Chac Sanudo," and began to recite what Lace soon recognized as a poem of heavy strangeness and heat:

"A white girl in a white waterspout of a blouse whirled across my sight in a hurricane of longings, the reddest of which — like a marlin's gills, or a Mayan sunset, or a harlot's midnight lips, if not vein-true love — I packed into my heart with the invisible hands of my poverty. How, lovely girl, may I long for you?"

"As the owl longs — in his fierce nocturnal melancholy — for his most elusive prey, applying the lustful clairvoyant mirrors of cold orange eyes, the calipers of remorseless legs and talons, the heartfelt focus of untiring wing-borne hunger, and a sense of hearing so acute that the toenails of a vole mincing through a bale of virgin cotton are to him the oceanic bellows of a cyclone."

"Did *a* famous relative of yours write that?" Lace broke in. "It seems to make an oblique reference to our meeting on the pier."

Chac stared at her briefly, unhelpfully, before resuming:

"You bought a fist-sized wooden owl, or, rather, stole it — just as you clawed from me the scarlet chambers of my Tunkuluchu heart, the tempests of longing laved in my hot blood, and all my foolish dread of death."

**"Now, I swear, our messenger to his spirit twin,
flown from my threshold heart to yours,
will bind us in grief-imbued mahogany,**

**pinion and polish us in his sap-fed flesh,
and we will melt, my storm-tormented girl,
to be cherished forever by all the reddest gods of**

**Mayadom, immortal slayers of the little mice of envy — gods together, you and I, in the indignant
memory of the sacerdotal owl."**

Chac, who had never once glanced at the poem in his hands, folded it back up and returned it to his shirt pocket. "*Selah*," he said, like a Hebrew priest marking the end of a transgressive psalm.

"You wrote that," Lace said.

A wistful shadow crossed Chac's lips. Lace experienced alternating strokes of terror and tenderness, but finished eating and climbed back into the sidecar with a sense that Chac Sanudo knew what he was doing, and that she did not.

By evening they had reached Las Orquideas de la Virgen (The Orchids of the Virgin), the village nearest Chibal and so by necessity every tourist's headquarters. This hamlet made Dos Perros look cosmopolitan, but it did have cobblestone streets, a pair of cheap hotels, and a modern plaza with a concrete fountain memorializing the ascension of Leopoldo Fuentes to the presidency. Soldiers wearing shiny patent-leather tricorne hats and carrying submachine guns patrolled the town, and journalists from dozens of news outlets had arrived, although not in the numbers that Lace had expected and feared. Moreover, because most tourists had left, you could get a room without bumping elbows with the news hawks. So, to save time and money, she and Chac took only one room in the Hotel Llovedizo on Xibalba Boulevard.



Privately, Lace acknowledged that she no longer much cared what happened to either Cabot or Chibal. This was shameful. But she had fallen in love with Chac Sanudo. He powered her pulse beats, filled her eyes, and nettled her loins. He had cloaked her in the diaphanous mantilla of his passion and thus ensorcelled her. He had won her with a mahogany owl, a dignified solicitude, and a love poem — no, a *sex* poem — disguised as a paean to the Sacerdotal Owl of Chibal. In short, he had seduced her to a state of sensual dependency, and she had fallen.

In the lounge of the Hotel Llovedizo, they heard that government troops were negotiating with a rebel commander, and that journalists and curiosity seekers alike had no sanction to visit Chibal. They ate roast beef, black beans, salsa-smothered rice, and fried plantains, knocking back — at Chac's bidding, at Chac's expense — shot after shot of a fermented *balche* made from local honeys and philo-dendron bark. Chac assured Lace, who had grown indifferent, that he would get her to Chibal anyway; indeed, no one could stop him from doing so.

The lounge seemed to fill with clear oxygenated water, a breathable medium that supported quetzals, jaguars, emerald tree boas, spider monkeys, electric-green butterflies, and both human diners and apeline Guacamayan troops. Everyone moved as if impeded by a ubiquitous translucent gel.

But I'm not drunk, Lace thought. I'm . . . *lucidly inebriated*.

The food, the *balche*, and the aphrodisiac peril of the hostage situation at Chibal worked both to lull and to arouse Lace. She made Chac recite his poem again, which he did from memory, then asked him to take her to their second-floor room and rock her to sleep. She hoped for a climax that undercut neither her sense of erotic drowning nor her allegiance to this new reality.

"Very well," Chac said. "Come."

They departed the lounge in a series of slow-motion steps that Lace observed as if from overhead. When they climbed the narrow carpeted stairs, they resembled salmon leaping dreamily from one waterfall level to another. And when they entered their room, with its rippled aqua linoleum and its green water-lily-patterned wallpaper, she swam to Chac and pulled off his shirt like a rescuer divesting a

drowning man of his waterlogged garments. Chac returned the favor, and they rolled onto the bed so that his stingray-god fetish slapped her between the breasts as he rowed them on and on, without predictability or relent. His tongue probed her mouth, caressing the silver stud that she had inserted in it after having it pierced both as a gift to Cabot and as another show of independence for her bewildered parents.

At length, Lace slept. Once, she opened her eyes and felt the empty spot beside her, but, after seeing Chac silhouetted naked at the aquarium-like room's one seaweed-draped window, dove into sleep again, releasing the ballast of her anxiousness until she hovered bodilessly in the rich sustaining amnion of her dreams. The stamped-tin ceiling had no dimension, only a horizontal transparency through which the Mesoamerican stars glinted like sunfish scales.

The next time she awoke, this same ceiling eclipsed those stars and she could not move or clearly see. Her body had the weight of limestone. A male figure — Chac, she presumed — knelt above her, stretching the foreskin of his penis out over her belly and repeatedly perforating it with a pinlike instrument. Drops of blood fell from this self-mutilation, scalding her flesh like candle wax. She could neither wipe the drops aside nor cry out in protest.

To be cherished forever by all the reddest gods of Mayadom, she thought.

Finally, Chac thrust the stingray spine — now she recognized the object — into the mattress and leaned forward, still dripping from his figlike member, to gaze at her less like a lover than a surgeon. The coldness of his look half-panicked her. Then he touched her cheek and placed his moist lips on her fretful mouth. Her panic dissolved.

Mama, Daddy, she imagined saying, let me introduce you to the Tunkuluchu poet, Chac Sanudo, my beloved, my betrothed ...

As her betrothed leaned back, the obsidian pendant at his throat caught a ricochet of light, and her fear flooded back. The pendant depicted a paddling figure wearing a jaguar helmet and a jaguar ear — the Old Jaguar God, a night symbol, a ferryman of kings to the death realm of Xibalba.

Unwisely, Lace reached for it. What had happened to the Old Stingray God? Or had Chac changed it from mere ornament to bloodletting tool? Her lover seized her hand and rotated it back to the mattress. "Shhh," he told her. "Sleep."

Helplessly, she obeyed.

As a member of the Vanderbilt swimming team, Cabot Chessman had specialized in the butterfly stroke. With long golden arms and the torso of an obsessive ex-asthmatic (in other words, of a health-freak weightlifter), he had won prizes as a solo swimmer and as a participant in four-part medley relays.

Lace, accompanied by a girlfriend smitten with a teammate of Cabot's, went to a meet in the natatorium and gawked at this youthful blond Abe Lincoln clone. She spent the afternoon ogling his every movement, from his dolphin kick in the events that he so clearly dominated to his towel-flipping shenanigans during the long waits between the echoing-gunshot starts. Afterward, she met him, and he was older than his teammates, a graduate student who still had athletic eligibility, and who had decided to use it despite the rigor of his class work.

What a catch — like a gold-medal Olympian and a Nobel Prize-winning scientist incarnate in the same lanky frame. Lace admired him. She liked that monetary gain figured less prominently in his career aims than did uncovering facts about humanity that would enrich its self-knowledge. Indeed, he had an idealistic naivete akin to hers, for Lace had committed to a social-work major. But Cabot's idealism, along with a single-mindedness bordering on vainglory, did not endear him to the Kurlanskys, who still could not figure out Lace's refusal to go into computer engineering or business administration, much less the idiot defiance implicit in her tongue piercing. What would the newlywed Chessmans use for money? Purloined Mayan artifacts? Huge all-you-can-eat helpings of academic prestige?

But they had dated anyway. After Cabot earned his doctorate and accepted an assistant professorship of Mesoamerican Studies at Southern Methodist University, Lace paid her own way to join him on two archaeological expeditions on which he had served as chief lieutenant, the first in the limestone hills of Yucatan, the Puuc, and the second in Honduras at Copan. Cabot always exuded a quasi-distracted air, as if only the past and its artifacts held any reality for him, but Lace liked even this crotchet in him.

At a cenote (a limestone sinkhole fed by the water table, into which the Maya threw sacrifices ranging from jade ear-flares to stoic royal captives) in the northwestern Yucatan, Lace and Cabot shed their bush clothes and went skinny-dipping like skylarking teenagers. In the crystalline pool, with its inky cobalt bottom, Cabot wrapped Lace in his eel-like arms and pledged eternal fealty.

Eternal, Lace murmurs, lying abed in the Hotel Llovedizo. What does that mean? That you won't abandon me until my first gray hair?

No, Cabot replies, smiling. That you'll *never* be shut of me.

Never?

Cabot says: Like the faithful husband in that Miskito Indian myth, 'The Dead Wife,' I'll cling to you

until you die and then escort your soul to Mother Scorpion. Even in a wasteland of ghosts, I'll protect you.

Wait a minute, Lace says. Who the hell is this Mother Scorpion?

The spirit of the afterlife. For some tribes it was Ah Puch, god of death. For the Maya who lived around Chibal in Guacamayo, that spirit was Tunkuluchu, the Sacerdotal Owl. One day I hope to lead an expedition there.

All the glyphs of Ah Puch I've ever seen, Lace says, depict him as a skeletal old coot with plague spots. And if Mother *Scorpion* presides over death, nobody would ever bother to ask, Death, where is thy sting?

I guess not, Cabot says, holding her tighter in the uncanny blue water.

So if you plan to escort my soul to the afterlife, take me to the Sacerdotal Owl — he sounds like a pussycat in comparison to Ah Puch and Mother Scorpion.

Owls are predators, Lace. Their beaks and talons can ravage.

I don't care, Lace says. Take me to the owl. (After all, she thinks, what can such a silly promise really cost you?)

I promise, Cabot obliges her.

Now ravage — ravish — me yourself, you ruins-fixated galoot.

Now?

Sure. Before Davis and Lundquist show up to wash their sweaty clothes.

Cabot obliges her again, there in the cobalt-blue stillness of both the cenote and her room in the Hotel Llovedizo ...

Chibal was still not really a tourist site. Visitors came only at the sufferance of the Fuentes regime



and the university-based archaeologists working there. Chibal had no paved roads in, no visitor center, no camping areas, and no brochures touting its scenic wonders or its historical-cultural import. You reached it by hiking into the rain forest and using the faux-Mayan stelae set out at half-hidden intervals as landmarks. You packed in your own food and water, and you always left word in Las Orquideas that you planned to return on such-and-such a day.

Given the hostage crisis, the defense minister forbade unauthorized treks to Chibal, and *all* treks were unauthorized. Reporters gathered at the police station, in hotel lobbies, and at a fancy bar called the Maya Royal. Theoretically, armed soldiers kept them from sneaking off into the jungle in quest of scoops, but a persistent rumor held that a famous North American television newsman had already slipped the quarantine.

Chac, who had never heard of this newsman, led Lace half a mile into the jungle before she fully awoke. Golden light streamed through the canopy, the palms, and the orchids cascading from giant ferns like flamboyant alien polyps. Bromeliads with two-gallon reservoirs perched on the rungs of monkey ladders and in the crotches of an *arbol de ajo*, or garlic tree, with a base the size of a small-town bandbox.

In this honey-hued light, Lace grabbed Chac's pendant and studied it. Seeing the Old Stingray God both relieved and puzzled her.

"What?" Chac said, touching her bottom lip.

"Did you forsake me last night?"

"Briefly. To scout the soldiers' positions and our best way in."

"I dreamed your twin with the jaguar-god pendant visited me."

Chac's eyes caught fire. "What did he do?"

"He ravished me. Later, he pierced his foreskin." Lace inhaled. "And dripped blood on my stomach."

Chac mulled her news dispassionately. "This morning, when you got up, did his blood still mark you?"

No, the blood had vanished. Lace asked if his twin had hoped to open a portal to the spirit world via his bloodletting. Chac, said yes, but added that the absence of blood most likely meant that she had dreamed

a harmless dream — not one that would alter her life in the daytime world.

Fear, sharp and cold as an ice-skate blade, slid down Lace's spine. "Chac," she said, "let me see your cock." She had no idea what to do if his foreskin showed signs of piercing, but she could not take another step without knowing if his rebel twin had taken his place, however briefly.

Obligingly, Chac unbuttoned his fly and eased his penis out. It neither shrank from Lace's touch nor engorged, and she admired this literal show of self-possession in so young a man. She also took heart from the organ's lack of puncture wounds. Nothing more palpable than a nightmare had violated her last night.

"What's your brother's name?"

"Ex-Xib-Chac," Chac said, pronouncing the first two names *Esh-Sheeb*.

"Yet another Chac?"

"His name means 'Black Man Chac,' mine 'Red Man Chac' But from our births, everyone called my brother Zafado."

" 'Impudent'? 'Shameless'?"

"Yes. He has always behaved so."

"Then you disapprove of his association with the rebel Tunkuluchuob?"

Chac disapproved of the bringers of premature death, whose number included both the Guacamayan army and the Indian guerillas. He believed in the sacred old gods — most of them — and in the gospel of Christ as embodied in his self-sacrifice on a dwarf version of the World Tree. The Cross and the World Tree linked the natural and the supernatural dimensions, as did physical love. Immediately, his face turned from yam-brown to reddish mahogany, and he cupped Lace's chin in his palm as if touching her might restore his equanimity.

"If you like," he said, "I'll take you back to Las Orquideas."

Lace mulled this offer. If she loved Chac rather than Cabot, and if proceeding might deliver both Chac and her to disaster, why proceed? Well, she had pledged her troth — what a ridiculous word — to Cabot, and a situation beyond his influence, not his bastardly fickleness, had kept him from meeting her in Dos Perros. Besides, if Cabot could vow to escort her soul to the afterlife after she died, how could she deny him the solace of her presence while *he* still lived?

"No," Lace said. "Let's go on."

A harassing drone came through the ferns, lianas, and stiletto-spiked tree boles along their careful inward march. This drone had an insectile quality, but also a vibrato that heightened its irreality.

"Chainsaws," Lace said.

"Yes. More bringers of early death."

"The settlers will burn the trees to grow beans and maize in the soil that the ash has enriched," Lace recited.

Chac grimaced. Slash-and-burn agriculture depleted the soil's fertility in three or four years, but the settlers would simply creep deeper into the rain forest and make new swathes of destruction. Even the location-revealing buzzing of their saws failed to deter them. They posted guards. They terrorized or killed accidental intruder's. They bribed or co-opted officials charged with enforcing the law. The army could send them packing, of course, but the army had the rebel Tunkuluchuob to contend with.

"A person could get rich," Lace said, "by inventing a chainsaw silencer."

At that moment, a patrol of silent men in camouflage (government special forces, Lace concluded) stepped forth pointing submachine-guns. Under cover of the chainsaw snarl and probably with the aid of U.S. Ranger training, they had emerged soundlessly. Not even Chac had heard them. Despite Lace's fear that the soldiers would question and then kill them, the meeting ended peaceably. They were hunting rebels, and once Chac convinced them that, at the behest of the district governor, he was taking the fiancée of W. Cabot Chessman to Chibal for a negotiating session, the patrol leader scratched a map on the laterite floor with a twig, showing a better way in, and vanished with his team into the tangled understory.

Lace and Chac walked on through the jungle corridors and scents, its grotesque growths and beauties, conscious that other creatures —beasts or men — stirred within it and that they must take care not to stumble upon a boa constrictor or a balche-drugged human being with a bad chemical jones for bloodshed. Now and then a helicopter passed over head, clattering. At length, Chac squatted and pointed through the foliage at Chibal's central complex.

A palace, four temples, two rows of tumbled columns, and the notorious Pyramid of the Owl, whose hieroglyphic staircase rivaled that at Copan, seized Lace's eye like the diorama inside a View Master. A host of stelae thrust up among these structures, as if the city's architects had landscaped it with stones

instead of shrubbery.

What a sense of metaphor the ancient Tunkuluchuob had! Every structure had a real-world counterpart. The pyramids stood for mountains, the temples atop them for caves, the history-engraved stelae for trees, and all the various doors for portals — in the Mayas' minds, *real* ones — to the spirit world. Cabot had promised that if they wed in the bloodletting sanctum of the temple atop the Pyramid of the Owl, under the tree growing up through the pyramid from a limestone sinkhole at the center of the structure's rubble-paved base, both God and the mountain-dwelling deities who had presided over Chibal's daily life would bless their union forever.

Armed guerillas in tattered costumes occupied the plaza, huddling in old looters' trenches, behind gravel piles, or between hastily built walls of dirt and sticks. The walls put Lace in mind of the revetments that the Maya of Dos Pilas, in the Petexbatun forest of northern Guatemala, had thrown up circa A.D. 760, just before Dos Pilas fell to warriors from Tamarindito and the whole loose-jointed empire of Ruler 4 collapsed at his default capital of Aguateca.

Maybe *these* rebels were also doomed. Maybe they paid homage to their doom by threatening to blow up Chibal, whose excavation and development might one day lead Guacamayo to prosperity. Or maybe they realized that if prosperity flirted, it would not court them, but instead the right-wing cronies of Fuentes and all the foreign capitalists underwriting his regime. Here, at least, Lace heard no helicopters, for the guerillas had many nasty weapons, including a portable missile launcher.

"Come," Chac said. "Let's find your fiancee."

Lace clutched his shirt. "Won't they kill us?"

"Zafado's brother? And Zafado's brother's friend? No — at least not at first." Downplaying her fear, he pulled her through the tattered ferns to the edge of the clearing. Her heart hammered. In the heavy jungle mugginess, her whole body radiated a shameful sweltering terror.

When they stepped into the clearing, brown wraiths with contraband rifles and submachine-guns surrounded them. Instead of prodding them at gunpoint, however, the rebels put them at the center of a protective ring and walked them across the great plaza toward the Pyramid of the Owl.

Because the ruins of Chibal were too dear to obliterate entirely, the rebels had no realistic worry of an assault from gunships or mortars. But military sharpshooters in the jungle posed a danger (despite Commander Ah Katun's warning that losing even one rebel to sniper fire would trigger the destruction of Chibal), and their guards stayed alert to this threat.

All seven of these rebels had mistaken Chac for his twin Zafado. Nor had Chac tried to disabuse them of the error. Their mistake implied that Chac and Zafado were identical twins, who could lie with Lace without her distinguishing between them, and that Zafado had either left Chibal or hidden himself.

As they neared the Pyramid of the Owl, this puzzle resolved itself. At the top of the broken hieroglyphic stairway, Cabot emerged from a portal in the boxlike limestone temple. Two other men also came out, Commander Ah Katun, whose fatigue hat sported an iridescent blue-green quetzal feather identifying him as the rebels' leader, and Chac's twin, Zafado, who looked so much like Chac that Lace glanced at Chac to make sure that he had not teleported up there.



Like a baroque leafy pagoda, the crown of a huge oak thrust through the temple's roof and spread its canopy, shading the temple, its apron, the men upon it, and the upper third of the stairway. Lace had never seen anything like this lofty growth at any other set of Maya ruins. But, with her lover at her elbow and her fiance on the pyramid's summit, she suffered a frisson of *deja vu*.

Well, why not? Chibal reminded her of Palenque, Yaxchilan, and Copan, all of which she had visited within the past few years. But *Cabot* looked different. He towered over the Indians with him, as she would have expected, but he wore a bamboo breastplate with an obsidian medallion at its center, a loin-cloth, and calf-bands with braided tassels. His body was both tawny and leprous — brown at arms and throat, white everywhere else. He clutched a stave, or spear, and a small circular shield.

"Lace!" he cried. "Come up! Come up!"

Their guards peeled away, leaving Lace **and** Chac exposed at the bottom of the pyramid. The guards split into two groups, advanced to the stairway's outer edges, and began to climb, leaving the middle section open for Chac and Lace's ascent. Both balked at this opportunity.

"Cabot's never dressed ancient-native before," Lace said. "What's going on?"

Chac nodded her upward. "Let's go see."

They mounted the tall steps, each so copiously chiseled with costumed warriors and Maya dates that Lace felt as if she were climbing another *katun*, or twenty-year cycle, into the Chibalec past. Her vulnerability seemed total. She would either lose her balance or a sniper would pick her and Chac off (along with the Tunkuluchuob on either side of them) like a patron in a shooting gallery potting rusty metal ducks. Her folks had warned her this might happen . . . sort of.

The jungle and other nearby pyramids seemed to rise too, as did dark but silver-threaded clouds on the horizon. Near the summit, shade from the oak spiraling up from the city's pyramid-pent cenote began to fringe her shoulders. A breeze cooled her sweat-damp clothing.

Cabot reached down and pulled her up the last two steps. Chac followed, without help, and nodded at Zafado, who mirrored him like a bookend. Commander Ah Katun, whose name derived from one of the Maya gods of war, bowed like a courtier — but his squat body, bristly nose hairs, and rank philodendron-leaf fatigues sabotaged the godly image that he hoped to project. Also, he had painted raccoon-like circles around his eyes and black lightning bolts on his cheeks.

Lace held Cabot off, resisting his efforts to embrace her until he could no longer assume that she wanted to regard him lovingly after their separation.

"Lace, I *couldn't* come to Dos Perros. These guys wouldn't let me."

"Where's Lundquist?" Lace said. "And the rest of your team?"

Cabot gestured at the limestone temple behind them. "I guess they didn't like my throwing in with the rebels. Commander Ah Katun had them bound and marched up here as captives."

Before Lace could internalize the enormity of this news, Chac stepped toward Zafado and said, "Let the hostages go. Disarm the explosives with which you've mined Chibal."

Zafado glanced at Commander Ah Katun, who nodded. Then, swiftly, Zafado seized the fetish at Chac's throat, broke it loose, and shoved Chac down the hieroglyphic stairs.

Chac screamed and fell. He tumbled from step to step, lacerating or bruising his flesh, plunging toward the bottom of the pyramid as if in slow motion — a nightmarish reversal of the dreamy leaping that he had performed with Lace on the stairs in the Hotel Llovedizo.

Lace's mouth opened, and she stepped back from the precipice. Cain and Abel in Guacamayo. The twin with the Old Jaguar God pendant had slain the twin with the Old Stingray God fetish.

Now she, too, would die. She had experienced this gut-scouring certainty twice before — in a Hyundai rolling on a slick Tennessee road, and later in a confrontation with a coked-up mugger in an Atlanta parking lot. She had survived those close calls, but this one — murder just having had its bloody template manufactured before her eyes — she would not escape, and the wisdom of Lane and Melba Kurlansky struck her now with all its prophetic admonitory power.

Lace wet her jeans and fell to her knees, devastated by her disobedience and folly. Aloud, she pled for mercy.

"Be quiet!" Commander Ah Katun barked. "Silence yourself!"

Cabot helped her rise. "It's all right," he told her. "Saving the city demands both ritual and sacrifice."

"Fuck the city," Lace whispered. "A man's just died."

Lightning flashed. Thunder walked. The clouds amassing in every compass quarter fused into a broad slate vault. A cargo of rain cracked this vault and poured out on Chibal. It pelted the temple, the pyramids, the stelae, and the rebels' frail makeshift barricades. It washed down the stairs in leaping crimson-brown combers. It baptized her lover's corpse and rattled the forest. It mocked Lace's tears.

"Now you must wed," Zafado told Cabot. He said other stuff, but Lace, clad in bridal rain and drenched to the marrow, could deduce only that he and Commander Ah Katun believed that her and

Cabot's union — the marriage of two gringos! — would open a portal to the spirit world and impel an irresistible outpouring of Tunkuluchu allies. These zombie warriors would rout the soldiers of Leopoldo Fuentes and restore to Guacamayo the long-forgotten reign of the Sacerdotal Owl.

It was crazy. It reminded Lace of the self-deluding program of the Ghost Dance warriors of the North American Great Plains, who believed that their mad dances would summon vast herds of white buffalo from the Rocky Mountains and stop the juggernaut of European settlement. But Guacamayo had existed as a state for a century and three quarters, and the civilization that the commander proposed to revive had collapsed eleven hundred years ago. Madness.

The rain slackened, but its runoff still plunged from step to step.

"Come with me," Cabot said. He looked stupid in his Maya getup, his blond hair plastered to his brow. He held his shield and his spear in one hand so that his other could draw her into the temple, upon whose sides Death Serpent bas-reliefs and Spirit Monster masks glowered poisonously.

Zafado sidled into their path.

Lace looked into his face — the face of one recently beloved — and said, "You murdered your brother, you treacherous little shit."

"I killed a worthless poet. Chac loved a tyrant more than his own people."

"Not true," Lace said. "And you've slain a part of yourself."

Zafado laughed, as if she were a lobotomy candidate, and turned to Commander Ah Katun, who said, "Bring out the archaeologists."

Under rebel guard, Hap Lundquist and other members of the team limped from the temple, their lips or eyebrows pierced, their bare chests and ragged pants stained a candid reddish-brown. All had scarlet markings — colored ink — on their left breasts, as if a guerilla had prepared them, symbolically, for the surgical removal of their hearts. In fact, Cabot's team had received exactly the sort of treatment, short of heart extraction and beheading, that royal captives could expect in the old Maya wars.

"Hap!" Lace said, reaching toward Lundquist.

Lundquist's gaze flicked over her, but he kept his chin down and trudged to the edge of the high courtyard. He was stifled and demoralized, an enervated husk. The others — Newman, Tapscott, Balcavage, and Villaurrutia, the "rat man" who wriggled through tunnels into the tombs, of Maya kings — had fared no better. Lundquist could not even summon the will to spit in Cabot's face, and his hopelessness meant that he knew as well as Lace that Commander Ah Katun planned to kill them. If anything, her arrival at Chibal had hastened this outcome.

"Let them go!" Lace cried. "Don't hurt them!"

But drizzle continued to slant, and Cabot maneuvered her into the temple much like a cop manhandling a suspect into a patrol car.

Helplessly, Lace glanced back and saw Zafado hurl Hap Lundquist down the stairway of the Pyramid of the Owl. Then Zafado yanked Newman forward. No one screamed, but the sound of Lundquist's body bumping from step to step resonated even in the echo-muffling drizzle . . .

The inside of the temple astonished Lace. It loomed larger in every direction than she figured possible. The Tunkuluchu oak reaching down through its floor to the hidden cenote, and up through the wide-cloven roof, shivered in place, filling the temple with ceaseless leaf music. Even so, a four-sided altar featuring high-relief sculptures of every Chibalec king also bulked inside this sanctuary, enclosing the oak's trunk. There were also censers, benches, flower stands, door panels, priestly implements (including stingray spines and blood-collecting basins), and figure-bearing columns of frangible dirty-saffron plaster — history in hieroglyphs.

Dried blood freckled the paving and the lower portions of the walls. Fresh blood glistened almost everywhere, sickeningly.

Knowing who had shed it, Lace took Cabot's arm.

Zafado entered and said, "You, too, must let blood." He approached her with one of the clay offering bowls, which brimmed with strips of beaten-bark paper, like oversized confetti from a manila packet. He thrust this bowl into her arms. Cabot pushed down on her shoulders until she had knelt in front of the western altar, the towering liana-wrapped oak behind her. Then he, too, knelt.

"You don't need to puncture her tongue," he told Zafado. "Lace, show him."

But Zafado seized Lace's chin, forced her jaw down, and yanked her tongue into view. The silver stud at its center glowed like a tiny Christmas-tree bulb. Chac's brother unscrewed and pocketed this stud.

"I told you she was the one," Cabot said.

Shut up, Lace thought. *Just shut up*. There in the Guacamayan tropics she felt as cold and brittle as an icicle dagger.

Zafado took off his jaguar-god fetish, paired it with Chac's stingray-god fetish, and swung them

crisscrossing before her eyes. Lace's consciousness split and swung, just like the obsidian canoe-paddlers, so that she leapt to a psychic terrace high above her own nerve tips.

"The hole needs enlarging," Zafado said. "Hunab Ku, Itzamna, and Ixchel, bless this new piercing."

He put his own necklace back on, pocketed Chac's pendant, and jabbed a large stingray spine through the slit in her tongue, twisting his wrist as he did so. Blood filled Lace's mouth and dribbled down her chin. But the assault did not hurt, and she raised the bowl in her arms to catch the sacred redness and to stain the brown strips of paper that the Tunkuluchuob would eventually burn in a censer, to create a lovely odor for the Lords of Xibalba. From the bowl containing this paper, Zafado dragged a two-foot length of rope punctuated at intervals with thorns.

"Take this," he said. "Finish your task."

Already entranced, Lace threaded this rope through the bottom of her tongue and pulled it out the upper side, meanwhile feeding the rope back into the bowl and bleeding into the paper

Cabot, she could tell, regarded her slow disgorgement of the thorny rope with an admiring gratitude.

Resentment welled in Lace, but no hatred. Her fear of dying trotted away like a feisty peccary. I'm a mess, she thought, a doomed and apathetic mess. And this thought released a toxin into the waters of her aplomb. Febrile and swaying, she rose anyway and dropped the now dangling rope all the way into the bowl. Zafado pulled it out again and flipped its ends about his wrists so that it seemed to cuff him. With his foot, he nudged a basket full of paper strips toward the kneeling Cabot.

"Now you, Senor Chessman."

Outside the temple, several of the Maya chanted in Tunkuluchu. They had done so throughout her bloodletting, Lace realized, and this eerie song merely continued their earlier chant.

Cabot removed his loincloth. Then, much as in her dream in the Hotel Llovedizo, he squatted, spread his thighs above the basket, and jabbed the upper skin of his penis — once, twice, three times. He slipped a strip of paper from the basket through the hole nearest his groin. Then he did two more piercings, laced them with paper, and let these festoons incarnadine the tan strips in the basket.

Lace hardly bothered to watch. In her mind, if nowhere else, she had eloped to Disney World, Nepal, or Callisto, places more solidly real.

Zafado, still rope-cuffed, picked up both bowl and basket and carried them to a censer. He filled it with stained paper, the bloody rope, and a mixture of maize kernels and tree resin. Commander Ah Katun appeared and lit the censer with a foul-smelling stogie. The paper flared and ignited the other fuel. Smoke rose in sweetly acrid curls through the cenote-rooted oak inside the sanctuary altars. Cabot, wobbling, climbed to his feet. Lace tried to steady him.

"Are we married now?" she asked Zafado.

"Have you seen the owl god Tunkuluchu, gringa?"

"No," Lace confessed.

"Then you're not married yet. Come, both of you." And Zafado led them into a deeper temple room — maybe, Lace realized, to have their hearts sliced out and set before the owl god as an offering.

In the temple's innermost sanctum, beyond the northern altar, a knee-high censer resembling a humanoid owl burned red strips from earlier bloodlettings, probably those of Cabot's team members. Lace and Cabot faced the censer and the upper trunk of the oak whose extruded green crown capped the temple, protecting it from rain but allowing leaf-puzzle glimpses of sky.

Brackish smoke curled upward through the tree and diffused in wisps through the sanctum. Fumes from the smoke assaulted Lace's nostrils and massaged the membranes of her lungs.

Twelve of Commander Ah Katun's soldiers had crowded in, but no longer wore the boots and bandoliers of latter-day guerillas. Along with Zafado and their commander, they wavered on the edges of Lace's vision wearing white capes pinned at the neck with red spondylus shells, flower-patterned skirts with calf-bands, or merely loincloths and high-backed sandals. Arrayed along the walls, they had no more meat than ghosts; their chants sounded like the mewling of starving jaguar babies.

Cabot clutched one end of a fresh thorn-embedded rope, and Lace the other. Her consciousness had fragmented, and in one part of it she recalled the funeral of a friend of Cabot's, a swim-team member who had burned to death in a house fire. A priest at that funeral swung a censer whose bitter miasma drifted into the eyes and lungs of everyone present, a foul evangel of the inescapability of death. And she had floated away on those fumes, into a pocket of her mind where marriage to Cabot plucked Mother Scorpion's sting and garlanded their days with concerts, wines, foreign films, jokes, travel, and well-behaved kids.

Now they were *actually* marrying, and Mother Scorpion had scuttled up the great oak to preside at their exchange of vows. Lace gripped her owl pendant in her free hand and wept — for the fumes in her eyes, for the poor immolated swimmer, for the lost Chac Sanudo, for the slain archaeologists, for Cabot, for

Guacamayo's destruction, and for the standing peril to Chibal.

She floated away on these fumes, and now she saw — not Mother Scorpion, who did not really belong there, but the Sacerdotal Owl, who did.

A conch-shell trumpet sounded, and the chanting of the guerillas both intensified and faded off into inconsequence.

The Sacerdotal Owl — priest, messenger, and lord — clung to the oak in the guise of a man-sized epiphytic orchid, high above the floor where Lace and Cabot gripped the bloodletting rope and peered up in bemused awe. The orchid owl swayed out over their heads, the wide lavender petals of its wings fastened to the liana behind it, its silver breast emitting a vanilla-like fragrance that cut through the censer-smoke stink, annealing Lace and Cabot to their perplexity.

You are all predators, the orchid owl said, parasitic fungi plundering dead and living alike.

Vines twisting about the vine supporting the owl began to spiral slowly about the World Tree's trunk, without dislodging the god. They moved like barber-pole stripes, or the threads of propeller screws. They hauled into view purple or silver fruits the size of basketballs, the enormous meat-colored blossoms of a plant that Lace knew to grow only in northern Sumatra, and the head of Edwin L. Shay, the television anchorman who had gone missing from Las Orquideas de la Virgen. His head moved on an upward left-to-right slant on a liana snaking along under the unmoving Nike-like body of the imperious orchid owl.

"Edwin L. Shay!" Lace said.

"In their five-year insurgency against the regime of President Leopoldo Fuentes," said Shay's head in its rotund broadcaster's voice, "the Tunkuluchu rebels rarely take a backseat, in either sadistic cunning or applied brutality, to the U.S.-advised troops of the government." The head spoke fluently in Spanish.



"You lie!" said Commander Ah Katun.

The head lowered its bruised-looking eyelids. *"Do you really think I don't know who decapitated me?"* And it glided upward, slantwise, on around the trunk of the World Tree. All the other migrating lianas continued to writhe and twine, pulling strange fleshy growths into, and out of, view.

A curse on all your factions, said the orchid owl in a voice like smoke. Descend, Lace Kurlansky, to the waters of Xibalba.

In the smoke of the owl-shaped censer, before the swaying body of the orchid owl, the big jawless head of a Maya warrior — perhaps a Maya king — took changing and changeable shape. Scrolls of smoke, symbolizing blood, poured from its mouth, and the vacant whirlpools of its eyes throbbed with the pinks, indigos, and umbers of unnamable rainforest blossoms.

Go down, said this smoky Maya king.

Descend, Lace Kurlansky, said the owl on the bole of the oak.

Lace pocketed her owl talisman and released her end of the thorny rope. Cabot, wearing only his bloodstained loincloth and tasseled calf bands, looked at her as if he no longer recognized her, which, she realized, he probably did not.

Cabot belonged to a faction that Tunkuluchu, the messenger owl, had cursed, just as Commander Ah Katun and Zafado belonged to another, just as Leopoldo Fuentes and his soldiers belonged to a third, and just as Lace belonged to a fourth. But some quality in Lace, maybe her unaccountable love for Chac Sanudo, had registered in the orchid owl in the ritual of her bloodletting, and so this god, the living spirit of the Tunkuluchu dead, had set her apart for either ruin or salvation.

Bloody of mouth, throat, breast, and arms, Lace jumped onto the carven altar of Chibalec kings. Then, like a gecko spread-eagling itself on an adobe wall, she seized the trunk of the great oak. Her fingers found handholds of bark and vine, her sneakers sought their own footholds, and she shinnied down

through the flue of the four fitted sides of the altar toward the cenote in the abyss.

Tuning forks of lightning crackled overhead, and a columnar draft of cold air rose from the springs over which the Tunkuluchuob of another age — of several other ages — had built the Pyramid of the Owl. As she shinnied, some of the vines wrapping the oak started to corkscrew again, spiraling down rather than up, but without rotating either the orchid owl or the head of Edwin L. Shay back into her ken.

"Lace!" Cabot called. "Lace, wait for me!"

Apparently the smoke in the wedding sanctum had paralyzed everyone but Lace and Cabot, who emulated Lace's jumps. Soon he was descending through the epiphytic blossoms after her, the soles of his feet flopping from bough to bough like pink mullets. Below, reflections of rain-forest lightning scribbled the surface of the cenote inside the base of the pyramid — but only at the pool's far edges, which Lace could barely see while peering down through the blossoms and vines.

"*Lace, wait!*" A distinct note of desperation echoed in this plea.

"Cabot, you signed Hap Lundquist's death warrant — his and Chac Sanudo's and all your unsuspecting friends!"

"I did it to save Chibal!"

"Bullshit," Lace said. "We had to destroy the village to save it.' That's the sort of idiot thinking that kept the Vietnam War running for so long." It had a sad but ironic relevance here in Guacamayo, too, Lace realized. Or it could, if she bought into Cabot's perfidious madness.

Cabot was an athlete, and he could swim like an Olympian, but Lace had more nimbleness out of the water than he, and a sixth sense about tree shinny-ing that allowed her to quickly outdistance him. She passed the second highest level in the pyramid, and then the third, observing that each royal chamber or tomb was filled with stone carvings, priestly paraphernalia, and murals of historic conflicts or the doings of Maya gods. The rirap between strata consisted of rubble from earlier versions of the pyramid — so that the shaft surrounding the World Tree gave vivid glimpses into the sequential architectural approach of the pyramid's builders.

"*Lace, please slow down!*" Cabot's voice sounded like the cry of man trapped high in a prison tower.

Lace pressed her body against the oak's trunk, passing through various thick foliage clusters to keep Cabot from seeing her. Now she glanced up. Twenty feet above her, Cabot hooked his knees over a woody liana and leaned out in the apparent hope of cantilevering a clear view of her. The weight of his own torso yanked his legs from the natural trellis; and — grasping and flailing — he slipped and tumbled through the shaft calling her name: "*Laaaaaaaaaaaaace!*"

His body, white and brown, supple and gangly, flashed past and careened on down to the lightning-scrawled cenote, which it struck with a plop little sharper than that of a ballpoint splashing into a commode.

This echo reverberated, and Lace closed her eyes, having already watched Cabot slice his flesh on the oak's epiphytic growths as he flailed past. Now it seemed likely that, smacking the water at the base of the tree, he had broken his spine.

My God, Lace thought. (And she could not say whether she was apostrophizing Christ or Tunkuluchu.) In a mere hour or less, both her Maya lover and her Anglo-Saxon fiance had fallen to their deaths. It was horrible. It was funny. How often did a gal have a good-looking guy fall head over heels for her? Today, horribly, hilariously, two times too many. Ha-ha.

Lace swallowed a salty clot of her own blood, ground her teeth, and resumed her meticulous descent. She completed it in what she estimated as only twenty-five or thirty minutes and then hung out over the cenote like a kid at a hidden swimming hole reaching for a tire swing.

Now and again, droplets fell into the pool from the bromeliads and liana blossoms scabbed to the World Tree and from the rainy sky miles above, but they dropped without violence or reverberation. As a result, the pool exuded a dim serenity reminiscent of old museums and empty movie theaters.

What now? The vines hugging the great oak had long ago ceased to corkscrew about its trunk, and Tunkuluchu, the orchid-owl god, remained atop the tree, too far away to praise, scold, or instruct her.

Then Lace heard Chac whisper, " 'And we *will melt*, my storm-tormented girl, / to be cherished forever *by all the reddest gods of Mayadom.*' "

She looked about. A peal of thunder, or an explosion, made the cenote tremble, but from so far away — farther away than the orchid owl at the top of the World Tree — that it did not tremble long. However, only twenty feet from the massive base of the oak to which Lace clung, a supine body burst from the waters, arching its back and floating with its arms spread, its legs dangling out of view, and its hair undulating around its head like a spun-gold halo.

Cabot, of course. Kaput. A victim of either impact trauma or drowning. Here in the Chibalec netherworld, his body thrummed with a mythic import that Lace could not readily decode. Did it mean that excavating Chibal was no longer a profitable enterprise? That the rebellion of the Tunkuluchuob had

failed? That Fuentes' soldiers had called off their operations? That her old life was dead?

Holding to a nublike branch, Lace eased into the water, so illusorily like dark plum gelatin. She dog-paddled to Cabot, seized his arm, and pulled him back to the tree. Three red strips of paper still festooned his penis, which bobbed impotently in the blond nest of his groin. The sight moved Lace to a throat-constricting pity. What had happened to him? How had the antique dead grown to mean more to him than his own persnickety comrades?

"He stole their *lives*," Chac said inside her head, "*just as you clawed from me / the scarlet chambers of my Tunkuluchu heart, / the tempests of longing laved in my hot blood, / and all my foolish dread of death.*"

"Chac?" Clinging to the oak and her dead fiance's arm, Lace searched for her dead lover. She extended her t6es, immersing herself to her chin. The cenote's bottom lay deeper than she could reach. How long' could she tread water beside a drowned man and a tree whose roots might stretch to the planet's very core?

"Here," Chac said. "Look to the east."

Frustration clamped Lace like a shrinking garment. "Which way is east?" Dos Perros lay east of Chibal, of course, but the Tunkuluchu netherworld seemed a demesne without compass points or borders.

"Here, seriorita, here."

From the plum-colored darkness beyond Cabot's body, a canoe glided toward Lace over the dark plum waters of the cenote, which she had thought contained by the lower portions of the pyramid's walls. You could not build a pyramid on water, after all, any more than you could throw a shadow without a light source. Whatever the truth of these sup-posings, however, the canoe vectored in, and in it sat two figures with paddles, the nearer a humanoid avatar of the orchid owl that she had seen earlier, and the farther her dead lover Chac.

Gazing across Cabot's leprous belly, Lace gawked at this apparition. The orchid-owl paddler was no doubt an Indian in the mask and plumage of an owl, and the paddler whom she had taken for Chac was surely just a man who resembled him. The costumed paddler dipped and pushed with a lovely ritual grace, and the Chac look-alike behind him aped his actions on the canoe's opposite side.

Reflections of lightning drew fleeting wiring-diagram arabesques in the waters around the canoe, and a series of thunderclaps — if not explosions — shuddered the World Tree, the waters, and the notional inner walls of the pyramid.

Lace feared electrocution, drowning, and being cudgeled to death by dislodged stones. None of these fates befell her, but strange repercussive tides buffeted her body from side to side, as they did Cabot's, and she felt as she imagined Londoners must have felt in subways and basements during the Blitz, if those subways and basements had been flooded by the Thames. Her every nerve had gone numb.



Literally abreast of Cabot, the canoe halted, and the man in the orchid-owl getup spoke in a familiar smoky voice: "Kiss him."

"What?" Lace shook her wet cap of hair. "Who?"

"Your husband. The dead interloper. Kiss him."

"He's not my —"

"Don't quibble with me, gringa. Kiss him."

The owl god's eyes looked real, not like costume-jewelry stand-ins. Meanwhile, his plumage appeared more feathery than floral, and hence more lifelike than that of the orchid owl atop the World Tree. Lace looked past him at the Chac look-alike, who gave her a wincing sort of smile. This smile underscored his identity as the Chac with whom she had fallen in love. It soon reshaped itself and remained on his face as an emblem of bashful favor, even encouragement.

Lace hooked Cabot's neck, pulled him to her, and placed her trembling mouth on his cold one. When he did not respond — and she had not expected him to — she used her tongue to prise his lips apart. Then she fed her tongue into the breathless cavity, like an intrusive oyster, and let it linger until even his corpse could taste the blood spicing it. She withdrew reluctantly, pulling back to the base of the oak, shivering like a shipwreck victim.

Cabot's body swelled at the chest, thrashing from side to side as it had done after the thunderclaps or explosions. Then it ceased thrashing and floated more or less calmly on the shaken pool. Its sightless eyes twitched and shed their milky glaze. Lace had the giddy sense of having resurrected Cabot with her kiss. This feeling intensified when he pulled himself upright with a few instinctive finning motions of his hands. The swimmer in him automatically reactivating.

"Cabot!"

The Sacerdotal Owl spoke over his shoulder to Chac, who eased the canoe about so that he could gaff Cabot harmlessly with his paddle. Cabot lifted a hand in alarm or protest, but did not struggle against this minor indignity — given everything else that had happened — and even seemed to cooperate when Chac reached down to haul him into the canoe, now tilting perilously near the water.

So when the humanoid owl god, whose wings sheathed arms not unlike Cabot's, flapped up out of the canoe, disclosing feathered pantaloons where Lace had expected to see human legs, and talons where she had expected sandals, she coughed in amazement as the spirit of Tunkuluchu gripped Cabot's shoulders, lifted him bodily out of the cenote, and laid him with Chac's help into the center of the canoe.

Cabot got to his knees by himself and vomited twinkling gouts of blood, bile, and water over the vessel's side. The owl flew disciplined circles overhead until Cabot had purged himself of all earthly nourishment and taint. Then it hovered a moment, fanning the 'cenote with lustrous silver-gray wings, before silently peeling off and rocketing into the dark.

Once the owl had flown, Cabot knee-walked to its place in the canoe and took the abandoned paddle. He had not spoken a word since his resurrection, and Lace intuited from his ten-mile stare and his bruised lips that he would not speak again in this region of the netherworld.

"Come," Chac said, reaching out to her. "Let us conduct you the rest of the way. I'll help you in."

"But where would you take me?"

"Someplace better, *mi prometida*."

"Better than this?" Lace punched the cenote with a tightly clenched fist. "Better than immersion in the blood of Chibalec kings?"

"Absolutely." Irony confounded Chac. "Please, Seriorita Lace — take my hand."

What option did she have? Cabot and Chac, working together, bumped the canoe nearer, pinning her between it and the World Tree. One option, of course, was climbing back up the tree to the temple, but she doubted her strength and resolve. She reached for Chac's hand, seeing for the first time that a large stingray spine passed through his head on a sharp diagonal. Its points emerged from his throat and the back of his skull, but he disregarded them. Before she could pull back from him, Chac landed her sprawl in the canoe, although not without cushioning her entry with his arm. The canoe bucked wildly, but Cabot went on sitting stone still, spaced out and unperturbed.

"Go," Chac told him. "Paddle."

Lace righted herself between the two men, •gripping the sides of the canoe as if clinging fast would protect her from any assault. Cabot and Chac began to paddle, in rhythmic alternating tandem, and their canoe surged away from the tree on a downward slant like that of the stingray spine through Chac's head.

The canoe submerged. Dark plum water streamed around Lace's head, shoulders, and back until she had gone totally under, along with the zombie paddlers and the canoe itself. But Lace did not gag on the influx or find her vision either occluded by the purple water or distorted by refraction. Nor, apparently, did Cabot or Chac.

They glided along as if soaring in a crystal vacuum rather than forging through an impeding liquid, and the neon gars and see-through eels finning about them seemed more bird- than fish-like. Water had become air, the cenote an underground cavern, and the pyramid above them an illusion. Water lilies floated at different levels around their canoe, while far below the wraiths of Maya boys and men competed in a vast sunken ball court, their bodies etched by ultraviolet shadow and glowing purple pinstripes identifying their actions as long past, historic, spent.

Lace looked behind her. "For God's sake, Chac, what's going on?"

Chac pointed — not at the water lilies, the airborne fish, or the ball players, but beyond the players at a gateway arch, like one Lace had seen in the Yucatan, opening into a royal garden. Cabot and Chac paddled over the ball court and the sunken city-scape around it as if planning to steer between the arch's hieroglyph-rich walls into an honest-to-God Tunkuluchu paradise. Many of the hieroglyphs represented the Sacerdotal Owl in different stances of authority, and the royal garden through the arch, unlike the

ultraviolet nightmare of the ball court and its players, glistened with the daylight colors of the living world that Lace had always revered.

Thunder walked, the air in Xibalba shuddered, and huge carven stones began to fall. Every gleaming purple and silver player in the ball court looked up. Every player raised the back of his wrist to his brow and held it there in what Lace recognized as the immemorial Maya death gesture. Even the dead enjoyed flashing this gesture. Even the dead, Shakespeare and Donne notwithstanding, could die again. And the stones plunging from the indistinct firmament seemed guided by some doubtful intelligence to make sure that these helpless dead suffered a redundant annihilation.

Lace covered her head while Cabot and Chac paddled harder toward the gateway on a low gray hill now a hundred meters distant. The falling stones, some as large as residential propane tanks, some no bigger than toaster ovens, clattered down, ricocheting off one another like meteorites, striking the spectral city and its ghostly denizens with dust-raising clouts, and whizzing past the three canoeing fugitives from latter-day Chibal in roentgen-charged torrents.

It's only a matter of time before we're hit, Lace thought, cowering away from the implacable barrage. And, of course, she was right.

In the dispensary tent near Las Orquideas de la Virgen, a town too small for a hospital, Delmira Xisto gazed down on her patient with something other than clinical detachment. She had volunteered to track the progress of the wounded and the injured, and this petite but supple American — her body a map of bruises, her face a swollen acorn squash — was finally waking up. Would she first ask, "Where am I?" or "Who are you?" or "When may I go home?" Eventually, she'd ask all these questions, but the *order* in which a patient put them spoke volumes about her state of mind.

"How many people died?" said the American woman, reaching for the hem of her caregiver's white linen jacket.

Delmira took the patient's hand and smoothed its back with her own. "Too many, Miss Kurlansky."

The patient pulled away and scrambled to a sitting position from which to survey the tent and its inhabitants. She squinted at the cots around hers and then into Delmira's face. Obviously, she was surprised to find herself in this tent of makeshift treatment and problematic recovery.

"Did Cabot Chessman die?" she asked. "Did Chac Sanudo?"

"Yes, the North American archaeologist died, and so did all his friends." Delmira consulted a clipboard. "And the second person you named — also dead."

"Thrown down the stairs," Miss Kurlansky said. "Everybody but Cabot — thrown down the stairs. Cabot fell from the World Tree into Xibalba."

Delmira mulled this odd assertion. "You should lie down again. You should rest a while and then eat something."

"How long have you been watching over me?"

"Two and a half days. Rescuers dragged you from the primary Chibalec temple, which had dropped into the plaza."

Miss Kurlansky stared at Delmira as if she had proclaimed President Fuentes an unparalleled world philanthropist, or an adult male jaguar the ideal family pet. "I don't understand," she said.

"When he learned that the Tunkuluchuob were murdering their hostages, Fuentes authorized mortar assaults and sent in gunships. Government forces reduced the ruins to ruins." Delmira chuckled ruefully. What a stupid irony, *reduced the ruins to ruins*. Did powerful men like destroying things so much that the devastation of other men's dreams registered with them as a constructive achievement?

"Chibal is gone?" Miss Kurlansky said.

"Even less extant than before. But its destruction saved you. The guerillas would have killed you had the government's attacks not stopped them."

"If the temple of the Pyramid of the Owl dropped into the plaza, *luck* saved me, senora — sheer unadulterated luck."

"Yes," Delmira admitted. "And Chibal is gone. The ancient Tunkuluchuob have suffered their second death — probably an incurable one." (As if you could cure death, or as if anyone of faith would want to.)

Miss Kurlansky swung her feet to the duckboard floor. "Where's my stuff?"

"You had only your torn clothes, seriorita, and a mahogany charm from one of our native carvers." Delmira fetched this talisman from a cardboard box and handed it to the patient.

The young American woman squeezed the charm — an owl with a dart through its body and a small man-faced shield on one of its wings — and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed it until her knuckles whitened and a teardrop burst from her eye like a faultless organic diamond.

Lace stayed in the dispensary tent another day. Most of those receiving treatment, she learned, were

Guacamayan grunts tagged by friendly fire or falling debris within the old city's plaza. All the guerillas (a young lieutenant with a raffish pencil-thin mustache" like Zorro's told her) had died — including, presumably, Commander Ah Katun and Chac Sanudo's bloodthirsty twin, Zafado.

Fortunately — if you could use that word without incurring the wrath of Yahweh or Hunab Ku — the men in Lace's tent had suffered such serious injuries that they could not even begin to think of ogling, joking with, or propositioning her. In fact, she insisted on helping Delmira Xisto sponge-bathe the hurt soldiers, spoon-feed them banana mash and soft-boiled eggs, and both counsel and encourage them while sitting next to their cots on an upturned ammunition crate.

Lace Kurlansky, the Florence Nightingale of Las Orquideas de la Virgen . . . Nearby tents quartered soldiers less severely wounded and even some smock-clad orderlies in an ever-jovial frame of mind. They had set up a flea market of collapsible tables and oaken folding chairs in a clearing on the edge of the jungle. Here, they traded watches, bracelets, dog-tag necklaces, painkillers, fake-silk fans with bamboo struts, cuts of howler-monkey meat, and caged pygmy owls. The number of people patronizing this market sometimes seemed larger than the population of Las Orquideas, and it was always a raucous affront to the dispensary as a quiet haven for battlefield casualties. Lace hiked through it on the morning of her fourth and last day in Guacamayo, desultorily evaluating the junk on display and ineffectually repressing her pain.

At a distance of thirty feet, near a trestle table made of plywood and two battered sawhorses, she caught sight of Chac — except that it couldn't be Chac, it had to be Zafado, wearing a tray of carved doodads and haranguing the crowd in his singsong hawker's patter to buy from him and to keep his family from starving. The sight of him paralyzed Lace. He threaded his way among the shoppers and the tables, selling items at a healthy clip, and moving ever nearer.

Lace could see the Old Jaguar God pendant hanging from a dirty string around his neck and the bruised-looking hollows under his eyes, which she momentarily assumed he had created with grease paint or mascara. No, they were real, but they did almost nothing to counteract the air of dapper nonchalance, that he projected, an attitude that drew people to him and lightened their pockets.

Then Zafado saw Lace. His eyes flashed, like sparkplugs in a dark adobe garage, and he smiled at her. When he smiled, he parted his lips, and when he parted his lips, a tiny silver beacon lit the surface of his tongue and rayed across the market to dazzle and disorient her.

Lace dropped her gaze and reeled, flailing and half off-balance, toward the haven of her dispensary tent. As she retreated, a familiar growl-and-rattle rose from the jungle, increasing in volume until she could no longer hear the voices of the crowd or the baffled hydraulics of her heart.

Q

