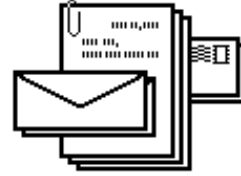


## Letter from the editor...



"Thou shalt suffer eternally."

Rather heavy, wouldn't you say?

That is the quote which adorned the cover of the premier issue of *Samsara* (if you haven't seen it, send me two measly bucks - it's worth it). If there is one thing that people ask me about *Samsara*, it's something akin to: "Suffering?!? Who the hell would want to read about that?"

They're very surprised when I show them my box of submissions. Apparently *a lot* of people want to read about suffering. And even more people want to write about it. So many, in fact, that I overturned my original decision to fold and thus we have the birth of *Samsara* #2.

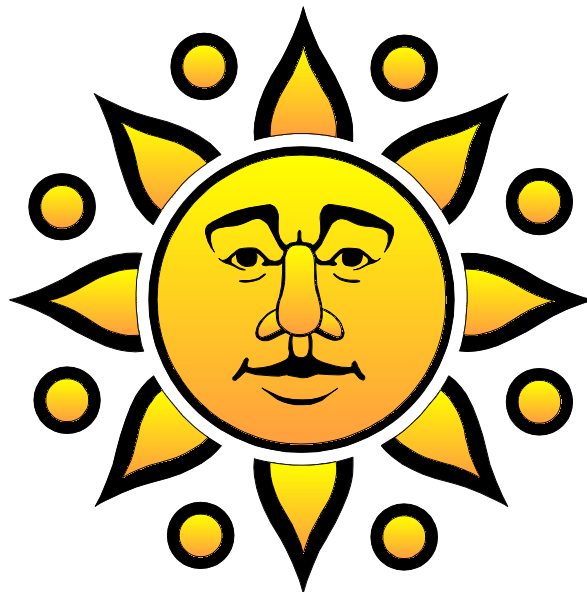
Two-time contributor Kurt Newton describes *Samsara* as "a halfway house for pain-filled stories."

When I decided to publish *Samsara*, I set out to create a magazine which would rise beyond the limitations of genre and that would be bound together by a singular powerful theme: suffering.

According to Kurt and other contributors, I just might be succeeding.

Through the dark path of suffering may we all find the sunlight.>

R. David Fulcher, Editor



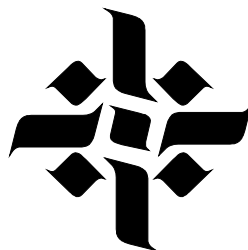
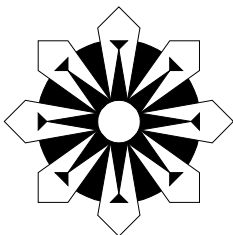
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FOUR AND FIFTY YEARS  
I'VE HUNG THE SKY WITH  
STARS.  
NOW I LEAP THROUGH--  
WHAT SHATTERING!

*of*

*-- Zen Master Dogen at the moment  
his death*





*beginnings...*

## Hostage

By Kurt Newton

I have a story to tell.

It's about me...and him. It's alright now. Everything is as it should be. I can understand it, now. But *now* didn't help me then. Then, I thought...Well, I didn't know what to think. I had to accept, for there was nothing I could do to change the circumstances I was in.

We were once one, he and I: he being the host, and I the hostage. In fact, less than a hostage. At least hostages, as I understand it, have some say. They can refuse if they want. They have choice. I didn't. He lived and breathed and carried-out his existence while I just watched, an immovable fixture, an insect perched on the inner wall of his eyelids. It wasn't fair. But its time has come and gone (like I said, I understand it now) and all that remains is the remembering.

Looking at him lying here, his expression much like the first moment we shared, I can't help but feel a wellspring of natural affection flowing outward, a need to express, a need to tell. I miss him already.

I think back...

\* \* \* \* \*

I can see him talking to his mother. He's sitting on a chair in her bedroom, feeling very small, watching her fold clothes on a large four-poster bed. She's just letting him ramble, listening with a mother's rapt attention to her son's budding thoughts. There is a picture of a man called "Jesus" on the wall with eyes that seem to follow you. And sitting there, looking about the room at the adult things -- the perfume bottles and the jewelry box, the large-sized clothes -- he mentions for the first time what he feels like, what he perceives himself to be. With the odd, miniature seriousness of a child he says he feels like a pair of eyes staring through a body, just a body. "Like a paper bag with two holes poked in it!"

That was me speaking. My first words. But how? I don't know. It was as if my life had begun that very instant, as if I had been born unto him, but with one exception: I had knowledge. I had lived before, a different reality, another self; but of that reality and that other self, I possessed nothing that reflected a previous existence: no parents, no people, not even a remembrance of my own gender. No identity. Instead, contained within the intellectual sphere of my being, I held an

understanding of life, not as I perceived it to be -- not as one's understanding as opposed to another's -- but life as it is, and always will be: a constant.

I was too puzzled to be afraid. I thought perhaps there had been some kind of mistake, some horrible cosmic error that would soon correct itself and return things to their respective normalcies. I waited for a familiar reality to return. I waited, and waited, as the seasons wait, until I could wait no more. This was reality. A new reality. There had been no mistake.

I became frightened then, for I had been placed outside of my context. I was on my own and all the truths and measures I catalogued, all the depth and breadth of my understanding -- an understanding as innate as an infant's ear for its own mother's heartbeat -- couldn't help me. He was my new home, my world, my universe. My master. He was seven years old.

He wasn't aware of me at first. He played explorer in the woods. He created ramps for his bicycle to jump over. He ran tiny metal trucks in endless circles of sand. He went about his daily routine with all the management and know-how of a typical seven-year-old of his kind. There were no sudden revelations, no lightning strikes of brilliance, no theory-shattering sprouts of wisdom, nothing that would have signalled the outside world as to my existence. But then, why should there be? He was just a child with a child-sized mind and a child-sized vocabulary: "Gee!" "Neat!" "Wow!" What knowledge I possessed, which he now possessed, could only be expressed in his own words.

(like a paper bag with holes poked in

it)

Then I am to be a tool, I thought. But if I am to be a tool why apply me through such primitive means? Like using a wrench on a block of stone. The logic confused me. But, in time, I began to see a difference.

There was a slowly emerging awareness, a blending of our energies. There suddenly came moments of hesitation when he would wonder to himself *Why?* When these questions arose I would provide him with answers. Whether he could fathom them or not was unimportant. When his conscience called, I obeyed. I could do nothing but. It was my duty, my sentence. We were bound like flesh to bone. And, surprisingly, although he could only comprehend the outer fringe of what I represented, it was enough. His burgeoning thoughts became pinpoints behind which spread an unexplainable reasoning.

The learned ones (the educators, the teachers) were the first to notice. They remarked on his ability to fulfill their simple tasks, scoring him high on their grading charts. Science, math -- the language of the ages -- became second nature to him. His "gifts" were commended. "Exceptional" "Outstanding!" He made many friends.

So, I am to be a tool after all, I thought. I exalted in the knowledge of this. He was a chosen one, as was I. Together we would be an example of what could be. Together we would teach others like himself the way toward themselves, the inner being, the true self...but it wasn't to be.

Our union changed the way he saw things, heard things, felt things. In the beginning his senses were merely elevated,

heightened to a level commonly shared among the more enlightened of his kind. But then he began to see beyond. He began to see with his mind. There were nights when he would like awake in bed just listening to the world breathe around him. He heard sounds nobody else seemed to hear: the sounds of the trees stretching in the woods, growing into each others arms; the sound of the land moving around him, settling, eroding to its lowest point; the sound of the planet spinning at fifteen hundred feet per second, winding like a mighty leviathan caught in an even mightier whirlpool; the sound of his own brain cells dying, shrivelling, dissipating inside his skull. These sounds only I could hear, but through me, he could hear also. There wasn't a day that passed when he wouldn't question, imposing his newfound knowledge upon the wondrous world he saw around him. "Why is there war?" he would ask. "Why is there hatred?" "Why do people lie when they know the truth?"

The children he played with didn't know nor care. Their ideas, their concerns centered more upon their next pair of sneakers or a new video game they had seen advertised on television. Their indifference was maddening.

So he looked to his elders for understanding. Who better to understand than these huge figures who possessed the powers to change their environment, change their world? Who better to listen?

But they too failed him. In their eyes he was just a foundling of thought, his ideas as small as his stature. They had more important matters to discuss; more important people to discuss them with. They told him

not to worry about such things. "Just run along and play like all the other children." And they would leave him standing alone with tortured thoughts: Why can't I be happy with what they tell me? Why do I feel so different from all the rest?

I tried to tell them but it wasn't yet time for him to understand. Such was the reality of this world.

As a result he learned to keep his ponderances to himself; and only on days when his mother would set aside the time and the quiet to listen would these ideas come forth.

She would entertain his wonderings with an excited mixture of pride and awe. My son. My creation. They would lie on that large four-poster bed, side-by-side, and she would read to him, nurturing his curiosity. His thoughts would unwind to the sound of her voice, inviting me to come out and show myself. And I would. I had no refuge. Awake our minds were inseparable. He could tap into my ken as easily as dipping one's hand into a pool of water. My knowledge would flow and become his own. Inklings of God and Life and the world around him would seeped into his consciousness, and he would translate these ideas with the sticks and stones of his own understanding: "God is everywhere, in all of us!" "When we die, we really don't die, we just go someplace else!" "There's a reason for everything in the world!"

And one day, when he was through wondering his wonderings, and wondering why these ideas were important only to him, he asked himself: *Where am I getting all of this from? How do I know these things?*

I told him.

That was when he realized I wasn't a part of him, that I was something extra, something not of himself.

He began to control me then. I was helpless to resist. I had no voice in this. Who could help me? I pleaded with him to let me go, to release me to control our capabilities, our future together -- I would be his partner but I wouldn't be his prisoner. But he wouldn't listen. I became his new plaything: a mind with a mind of its own. *He'd show them*, I thought.

Wherever I had come from I had had freedom -- those like myself had had freedom -- I remembered this much. We had taken control of our destinies. We had long abandoned our sense of helplessness. Unseen gods were uncovered and exposed for what they really were: empty space, black holes in the understanding of ourselves. Everything that was needed to be known was known, instinctively. We had discovered ourselves. We had found God lying dormant in the million-year resident library of our genes. There was no rationale for fear or jealousy or longing. No emotions of the misunderstood, the misinformed, the misguided. There was only truth and knowledge, and undeniable purpose. We were free! I was free! And that freedom -- a word, until now, without definition -- was being denied to me.

I had to escape. But how?

Time passed. There were extra-credit projects, bulletin boards, school plays, science fairs, all of them a showcase for his unique and evergrowing talents, and all the while I performed for him, a puppet in the hands of a blind puppeteer. He used me,

draining me of my resources, until I could stand it no longer. He left me with no other alternative, no other avenue of escape...but death. Death of the host releases the hostage.

I resolved to drive him insane.

I discovered I could confuse him, frustrate him. I could not lie when called upon, it is not of my nature, so to build a mistrust through deceit, with the hopes of him giving me up, releasing me, was impossible. I could only tell the truth, but I realized he could only handle so much truth at any one moment (as all of his kind seem vulnerable to). So when he demanded answers I would flood his mind with thoughts, logical when taken in a steady stream, but contradictory when pooled together. His neurons would overheat. He would get angry and shut me away. I was still a prisoner but at least I was left to myself.

Because of the frustrations his attentions began to wane. His outer education began to lack importance, work left for those with spaces in their heads to fill. In school he began to wander from class to class preoccupied, wondering why I was failing him, wondering why he couldn't dictate to me as he was once used to. The learned ones excused him temporarily. "Growing pains," they assumed. But it persisted. I persisted.

It was a war of attrition. I would deluge him; he would dam me away. It was a civil war of the utmost personal.

As he continued his inward battle, ignoring his studies in favor of tactics, he began to lose his specialness. The learned ones began to overlook him. They began to



regard him as "ordinary" and "average," a misdiagnosis. He began to fade into the background, just another face among many in the crowded hallways of their institution. He lashed out. (My plan was working.) His frustrations disrupted their classes. They couldn't see me. They couldn't hear me. He couldn't make them.

By his fourteenth year the learned ones shook their heads, those who remembered. The friends he had made left him to himself, for he meant trouble to be with. At home, his family had also run out of patience with his strange independence. His brother ridiculed him. His father punished him. His mother only wept, remembering a son who had once held the light of Jesus in his eyes.

I thought he would crack, set me free, as an egg fractures to let the restless newborn out. I had resolved to bear down on him unmercifully when a set-back occurred: I was forced to help him.

Because of his new status, he attracted new friends, misfits, loners, outcasts like himself. And these new friends found comfort in mind-altering chemicals (as do most of his kind when faced with their own loneliness). This I wanted nothing of. These chemicals would only have suppressed me more and more, more layers added to an already suffocating enclosure. Being my only means of escape, I had to look out for him, I had to look out for myself. I couldn't let him bury me. So, in dreams I sent him images, depictions of several possible future realities, all of them negative, containing the horrors he would witness, the pain he would endure if his present direction continued.

It worked! He wandered away from his newfound friends, unable to fit in even within their own limited boundaries. Now, he was alone, totally alone, as I was, abandoned in solitude. And it was only a matter of time.

In the years that followed (time is but a useless quantity to me -- years are but fractions of fractions that come and go with the turn of a thought) he wandered through his life not so much living but merely existing. He discovered music, and music became an expression of his loneliness (and of mine). There were days, near the end, when he would sit for hours and play the same melody over and over again, listening, as if there were answers to all his questions inherent in the sequences of repeated notes, if only he could decipher them. And when he wasn't playing our music he would sit and contemplate, not toying with me as he once enjoyed -- those days had worn thin of their usefulness -- but just resting on surface thoughts, like a sailboat drifting on a windless sea.

The lull ended when he asked his first questions about himself.

His inner voice trembled. He was afraid of what I might tell him, but, having lost his promise, he had nothing but himself. I was his only refuge, his only friend.

"Who am I?" he whispered.

I told him the truth.

I told him of his humble beginnings, the evolutionary distillation of eons which had led to his formation; the mother sea from which all things are born...

And then came his next question: "What am I?"

I told him of life itself, the

resurrectionary force that neither creates nor destroys but merely transforms, like the pounding of stone into dust, and the time-pressured birth of that dust into new stone...

And finally: "Why am I?"

I told him of his present being, the integral, the infinite, the purpose of one thread dependent upon the next, dependent upon the next, and so on; the all-encompassing, interwoven fabric of Fate, Luck and Circumstance that purls the seconds into hours, the days into years, the lifetimes to each other...

He engaged it all. New areas of his mind, left dormant since birth, experienced a Genesis of growth and understanding. The areas of his brain containing memories of himself were obliterated of open thought and gazed out in awe at the horizonless space before him...and smiled. He had found God, Light, Happiness, Fulfillment, Love. He had found Love! He was alive! For the very first time in his life he was truly, believably alive!

In the capsule of that moment he lived an eternity. Then he died, his old spirit casting out into open space he had been given witness...

\* \* \* \*

I look at him now, resting peacefully, and I am saddened: I feel his loss. But I am also heartened: I feel his gain. I almost want to stay and be with him, watch him grow, but I know I must leave: for he is at the beginning of a journey, and I...I have finally reached the end of mine.

I realize now what it is like to be a father.>

### A Lifeless Time

I remember living where there were no dreams

No dreamers

I remember living where there was no love

No lovers

I remember living where nothing was strange

No strangers

Where have I fallen to?

A lifeless time

Songs of the forever world

Prayers of the bottled hymns

Let's begin

Quick dashes of breath  
And forgotten wisdom  
Silently I stroll  
Empty beaches  
and carnivals

My life  
Such the amusement  
Honestly,

I don't remember living anywhere

-T.M. Jacobs

## Will or Way

By Dennis McDade

A small scrap of plastic like the kind torn from a dry cleaner's garment bag lay curled on the pillow. Not much larger than a playing card, but more than big enough for what Gordon had in mind. First he had to get to it. Curving his lips into a tight circle he inhaled deeply. Nothing. Only the sweet fragrance of his wife's perfume entered his mouth. With it came the stale smoke and alcohol smells she brought home from the dance club last night.

Gordon licked his lips. Something else. *What was it?* He licked them again trying to push the scent from his tastebuds to his nostrils. He had it. Cologne. Men's cologne. Not his brand either. That's why Cheryl hadn't come home until early this morning. *Sick friend, yeah right.*

If he looked hard enough he could find proof of her infidelity. Need hard evidence. Something she couldn't deny. Her blouse, the pretty silk one he bought her

for their first anniversary lay draped over the headboard. She wore it last night. Might be a phone number or motel receipt in the pocket. If he could only reach it. He craned his neck. The tendons stretched taut then screamed in pain. Had better luck with the plastic.

His eyes went back to the thin transparent strip. If he could suck that into his esophagus he could suffocate himself. Try. Try hard. Harder. Nothing. Except more aroma of his wife's promiscuity. Two possible chances of suicide came from the right months of serious contemplation. The first method provided only a severe headache, much like the one he suffered from now. The second technique, asphyxiation, wasn't possible. He didn't have the lung capacity to suck a small piece of flimsy plastic wrap into his lungs. Cheryl was right. He wasn't a man. At least not any more.

He tried the first option he had thought of. Inhaled deeply then held his breath. Seconds ticked away. Uncomfortable but not unbearable. The seconds became a minute. Worse but still tolerable. His cheeks burned. Two minutes. As had happened the other times he exhaled loudly, sucking in fresh air to replenish his burning lungs. Mental note. One can not kill oneself by holding one's breath. He knows. He had tried. Repeatedly.

Sounds. Happy sounds. Cheryl had her game shows on. *The Price is Right?* No. *Wheel of Fortune*. That meant it was 10:00 am. That would explain his headache. He needed to be cathed. The nurses said every six hours. The sweating and the nausea told him it had been at least twelve

hours, maybe more. He needed his bladder drained.

"Cheryl!"

Nothing. Try again. Louder this time. Still nothing. The volume of the television went up. She was ignoring him. Said he couldn't feel anything below his neck and was only doing it to get on her nerves. He could feel it though. As much as he could still feel the wreck.

"Come on honey, one more beer. One more beer. One more beer."

He should have left the party before he got so drunk. He should have called a cab. Better yet, he should have just stayed home that night.

"You can make it honey. The light's yellow. Go for it."

He never saw the other car. It came from nowhere.

*You got what you deserved. At least no one decent got hurt. Serves you right. People can be so cruel.*

The doctor said his spinal column had been severed and the fourth vertebra was shattered. Never walk again. C-4 quadriplegic. Below the neck, nothing will ever move again. Not so. If there's a will there's a way. That was eight months ago. Nothing below the neck had moved yet. Must keep trying.

The insurance company paid off, but what good is money when you can't even scratch your nose? What is wealth when you can't feed yourself, empty your own bladder or clean up your own bowel movements?

"Cheryl!"

At least she responded this time. He knew she was angry from the way she threw

open the door. It banged against the wall. He couldn't tell for sure but it sounded like the knob knocked a big hole in the plaster. Eight months ago he could have fixed it. Not anymore. Not a man anymore.

All the while she inserted the long rubber catheter into his urethra she never looked at him. Guilt. It was eating her alive. She had been unfaithful and now couldn't look him in the eye. If he could walk he'd leave her and never look back. He couldn't. Never again. C-4 quadriplegic. Crippled. A physical vegetable with a screaming mind.

As the fluid in his bladder filled the tall plastic urinal his headache slowly disappeared. So relieved. Ever grateful. His appreciation went ignored. While rolling him over to his left side to prevent more decubitus she said her sick friend needed her. *Sick friend. Yeah right. Who was he? An urban cowboy who had never seen a live horse? A biker wired to the gills without a nickel in his pocket? One of his own close friends?*

"I really love you, Cheryl." I said.

"I'll try to be home early." She replied.

His wife, another man. Making love. Talking, laughing, holding hands as they walked. Walked. Never again. Tears tickled his face. Unable to scratch them away he waited for the itch to subside. At least his view of the room had changed. Cheryl's makeup neatly arranged on the dresser. The bra she wore last night hanging from the top drawer. The bra her sick friend has passionately pulled off.

A cockroach ran along the base of the urinal containing 1100 cc's of urine. No

wonder his head had throbbed. The insect disappeared behind a cluster of perfume bottles. If he was a real man he would kill it. He spied his electric wheelchair. A fancy number bought with the insurance money and operated with a toggle switch clenched between his teeth. He wished he could get in it now. Maybe look out the window. The patch of scrub oak and acres of sugar sand he used to hate seeing would now be a welcome treat.

Couldn't. Had to cure the decubitus on his coccyx. Decubitus on his coccyx. Fancy name for a huge gaping pressure sore on his ass. Sitting too long without adequate blood circulation. What was the point in living? Maybe he *could* suck down the piece of plastic. No. Behind him now. Really out of the question.

Whatever Cheryl had been doing didn't stop her from answering the phone on the second ring. Go ahead and call. My husband will be there but he doesn't answer the phone. Cruel inside joke. He heard the talking. Couldn't make out the words but knew that tone of voice. Coy. Sexy. Giddy as a teenage girl on her first date. He stared at the telephone on the nightstand. An ugly beige number with a rotary dial. If he was a real man he would lift the receiver and listen in on her conversation. Too late. She hung up.

At least she had the decency to come tell him she was leaving. Last night she just left, snuck out. He had never been so scared. Heard noises. Couldn't move. Couldn't investigate. Burglars. Helpless.

He had never seen his wife more beautiful. She looked positively radiant. Make-up applied just right, not too much,

just enough to accent her full cheek bones.  
Hair curled perfectly. Long red locks  
cascading down over her voluptuous breasts  
in enviable swirls. Never been prettier.  
Except on their wedding. An eight-by-ten  
photograph of that day rested near the ugly  
telephone. She looked happy then.  
Beautiful smile. He was standing.  
Standing. Never again.

"Please don't go."

She heard but didn't respond. Her  
long graceful fingers removed the caps from  
her nail polish remover and a bottle of  
rubbing alcohol. She carefully placed her  
curling iron on a stack of old newspapers  
next to them. Plugged it in. The ON switch  
glowed bright red. Hot.

He tried not to listen to her words.  
Tried to ignore the thin tendrils of smoke  
rising from the metal wand. No remorse.  
Home owners insurance. Bank account  
from the accident. Eight months, a long  
time to care for someone who will never get  
any better. Need my freedom. In love with  
someone else. Vacation. New life.  
Goodbye. I'm really sorry. The smoke will  
kill you before the fire reaches you.

Front door. Slamming shut.

Loneliest sound he had ever heard.>

## **Glissando**



**All that separates the living  
and the grey cloaked director is one  
hand, one heart, one move.  
Rolling them into one you found  
easier said than done.**

**It was possible I heard the wounds  
open  
up like curious eyes,  
first the right, next the left  
until a wild stare gaped  
from your wrists and cried.  
It was possible I heard the weeding  
out  
Of prayers which fell as feathers  
on deaf ears.  
And the wounds heated pleading for  
a slow,  
graceful bleeding.**

**I see that color everywhere.  
Everywhere.  
Fresh, gleaming, royal crimson,  
interior of a whorehouse, velvet  
on a king's throne,  
the Vatican carpets in Rome  
or ruby leaves in Autumn  
floating down in the sheet-white  
sky.**

**My eyes fell to the quilted tile.**

sticky sweet veins forming like a  
map  
of city streets.

Candy apple, Christmas candle.  
Half of a lifetime passed through  
your hourglass throat  
like swift summer rain.

The whole room was an ear held  
to a seashell, convulsing  
like black waves.

And they were all there, the machete  
tongues, the golden mares, the dogs  
of your youth, the priests  
from childhood, the devils of  
manhood  
and the lipstick and powdered angels  
who never understood.

Promises, lies and declarations  
which had clung to the brain  
seemed to track into the room  
like speeding trains.

Later, it occurred to me that  
instead  
you could have slept it off  
in the garage.  
You could have swallowed pills like  
candy  
the color of canaries,  
but the artist came through,  
scraping  
and painting a landscape that was  
certain,  
a surreal mural on the shower  
curtain.

The romantic came through,

smudges on the bathroom mirror  
your last  
epic love letter.

-Corrine DeWinter



## **The Tale of the Gargoyle**

By Kat Ricker

The wood. The wood is not always . . . a place for people.

I write poetry, in my forest dwelling, which is the remainder of some brick building, a box, really, crumbling away any indication of identity. All my day can dwindle around paper and pen, sunset seeing the culmination of ten or twenty lines. I write about what I cannot touch, and what I cannot feel, sometimes an unsuspecting sparrow outside my quarters who hops, secure in his presumed solitaire, pecking at hull and seed. Sometimes I write of what I remember, the amber glow of a girl's eyes, the radiance of her light breath, falling with the delicacy of a drifting fog. My heart pulls at me at these moments, when the visage is so close that I cannot always know that the small swell of a child's hand is not there for me to reach for, to cover with my own, in solemn, silent understanding, to contemplate the world through the still, fleshy companionship of another.

I would paint, in the beginning, but the shadow of life peering at me from a blue eye in the canvas grew too painful, a huge, sighing weight lolling against my chest; my breath altering in the whimsy pulls of the heart.

I knew grass, now; I could go outside and lay my hands upon it, the tender, water-filled fingers reaching through mine, the calm bends yielding to the press of my palm. I'd brought some in once, while painting a memory, and kept it by me the painting through, but when I reached for its soft pliant reassurance, was greeted only by the limp, over-soft strings of wilt. I cried, that night, though no tears could come. I cried the rocking sounds of pain in the breast as sure as any deserted lover ever had.

She found them. I had been lost in my wanderings for several days, and when I returned, my notebook was askew. I picked up the papers and examined them closely, looking them over for damage, holding them close to my eye, when it reached me. The perfume of her fingertips, the imperceptible



gathering of oils and particle left with her touch. I held them close, my ribs contracting with a pain in joy that was so exquisite, and commanding, that I swooned and fell to the crate serving as my chair. The scent, the trail of young life, skimmed across my humble scribblings. Had she read them all? Did she care for them? Would she be back again? I wanted to know. I was tipsy, suddenly, and began to lumber around the room in some awkward, clumsy dance, still clutching the shadows of contact. The angles of the room swerved and receded, bending into smiles at my joy. I froze in a moment of inspiration, and grasped up my pen.

Dab in the inkwell. Tap onto the page. This would be my correspondence, my visitor unknown, and I would stay as far away from her readings as need be. She need never see my face. I need never know her sight, proximity of danger. This was all I needed, in my exile; this narrow bridge would see me through eternity.

I wrote with a flurry that night, the pen not lending enough speed for my thoughts, the music pouring through my veins with the lull of a great symphony, the fire of my excitement inextinguishable. The poetry writing was live birth, blooming from the clutches of my fists. Fists round pens and pens round life. I knew. I soared. And in the morning, I slept.

\* \* \* \*

Shadows growing. Out. I fled into the forest as quickly as I could, delving into the trees with the thoroughness of camouflage. The night embraced me and I embraced it, looking to the stars with languid confidence and secret bliss. The paths carried me more nights than before, and I returned with the cobwebs weaving a tale of my long absence.

I looked at the notebook. Most assuredly, my hopes had seen fruit. I lifted it up for the inebriation of her trace, and fell to a long holding of my works, in close, crossed arms, hugging them to my chest.

\* \* \* \*

Can you hear my voice through my pen?  
I would have the world know my wailings,  
And the animals my name.  
The ink is the only outlet for this lifetime,  
And I see the pages are beginning to curl.

She'd seen this. She'd seen into my . . . what have I, not a soul. She has a soul, a lovely phantom of herself, forever ready to carry on her echo when she leaves. She was a creature of vapor, and scent, whom I could wrap my thoughts around when the fox fled my presence, my sweet reader of my works. I wrote to her of my need; I wrote to her of the life around me; I wrote to her of my loneliness. She came, reading more and more, and while she filled my chamber with her heart, and her mind, I roved farther and farther into the wood, letting the wind fall full on my skin, growing familiar with the songs of the trees. I knew, now, which hills gave harbor to the rabbits, and which to the deer. I could reach my mind into certain bends in the water and find a new furry mammal waiting for food inside the dam.

She read the old ones, the early ones, the times of separation, the losses of those whom I held passions for. She read, and still she came, to look at more, to lay ear to my cries. She knew. I sighed, tracing a stick in the soil beneath me. Soft as down, comforting as the warmth of earth, her presence was. I began to write, in my head:

Would you know me, if I stepped outside the shadows,  
Would you stay in my sight, and bear to look upon my haggard form?  
My murmurs melt into nothingness,  
As I recall your presence here.  
You hold the air of this room in your breath;  
I listen on the wind for your sighs.  
Come again, my sweet Christina,  
Take these secret pages into your hands.

I left this with the pile of poems about the waterfowl, which I had written in a great heat of admiration one night of my wanderings. There were six or seven. These kept in line with most of the others she had read, written caresses of the beauty in these elusive lifeforms. I hoped fervently she liked them, and in my mind, imagined that she did, that this was why she returned. I indulged my fantasies into her complete enjoyment of the verse, wondering after the writer, knowing that only she could truly understand him, holding him in her breast long after she'd gone, to contemplate the new glimpses of

nature's heartbeats, and sometimes his, slower and sad. I felt her wide empathy at my need, and her innocent, contained desire to release me from my curse. This poem, the first that acknowledged her visits, I laid carefully at the end of the pile. This time, she would know my voice to her, and I would know her answer. Risk, yes, but ah, what could I do.

*Yes, my name is Christina, but how did you know? You do not mind me, then, as I read it. What is your name?*

My heart surged. Exquisite handwriting. Her hand touched my pen; she had sent her force through its point. Completely fearless, she was, and of high manners. I held the paper out from me, reading the lines again and again, expanding in their feel. She had a voice, now, distinct; and with it, she had spoken to me. I remained standing so until dusk had passed the moon through the sky, and had begun to melt into the sun. Christina. My bold Christina. I collapsed into the deepest of sleeps, and woke only when I was ready to write.

*Christina*

Carries on the lingering of your perfume,

Rising as rose petals to my mind.

The name steals my thoughts

And fills my blood,

Calling my humble reverence.

My sweet, my unseen guest.

Christina, come back to me.

Signed,

The Gargoyle

She made my yearnings swell from my chest, a deep pull on the recesses of tenderness I had thought long laid to rest. Christina. I stopped in a carpet of the softest, greenest moss, and laid down, letting the thick cushion push up at my back, and squeeze between my fingers. The pattern of the trees above wove into a

spider's web of leafy green, connecting and letting go in the most intimate of design. They lived for each other, these leaves; they knew the shine of the tip that reached for them, the way its hue intensified and receded with the river of clouds. There was a union of constancy and peace, celebration in hourly companionship.

My sweet Christina. What could I write to you, what would please you to see, that I could show you the ocean of my feeling. There is nothing that I would not do for you. Bring to you the heavens, the brightest star, the blackest night. Say the word and it shall be yours. I turned my head. Two pools of liquid brown shined at me from a docile face of fur. The markings, eyes lined with hairs of ebony tips, shimmering tinges of gold. My throat lifted into itself. Pink triangle of nose quivered, searching for my scent, small brain struggling to process the irony. Oh, marvel of life, beauty unimagined, one can only be beckoned by your stare, drawn out of oneself into the mystery of your unique heart. My hand was lifted, pulled toward it, floating out of my range and into its heat. It backed in stinted, successive movements, whiskers rising and stiffening through short breath. My admiration surged out of me, taking my hand further, fingers reaching for the touch of the rich fur. Sudden was the twist of bramble beneath its small feet, deafening the fear that burst the creature into action. With a movement quick and too desperate for words, the animal was gone. My hand stayed outstretched into the air for a moment, swallowed up in the void where life had just been, and fell to my side. I stared after the direction of exile. Why.

\* \* \* \*

*Dear Mr. Gargoyle,*

*I cannot but think that you have been harsh in your signature, and am assured that anyone writing with your magnanimous sensitivity and compassion is far undeserving of such a title.*

*My soul has been touched by your light, and I have taken the liberty of adopting this poem which you so generously have written to me.*

*Great Thanks,*

*Christina*

Your soul! Your soul. You have been touched in your soul. The night was milk to my thoughts. What sweeter sentiment is there than this. Your soul. Loud came the rush of blood in my veins. I looked to my skin and disappeared into the night.

\* \* \* \*

My pen was ravenous, devouring the pages with a fever unknown. The letters could not come fast enough, the words an avalanche from my brain. My hand flew under the spell, drawing out the line into elongated script, pushing through the paper, pentip stabbing into the inkwell. I could not incinerate in this furnace, but perhaps better that I had; the tension of my purge was maddening. Listen to me, you humans too frightful to know my eyes, hear the words of the one you so misunderstood. I have a lover, now, a diamond so hard that even I do not dint its beauty, and she has come of her own accord. Perhaps now you will see, now you will hasten to sensibility; I am here. I AM.

And this will not change, as long as there are heavens above. You will have me, and you will know of my voice, once again. I greet you.

\* \* \* \*

The city streets were humming with life. Streetlamps called up pools of the brick pavements, falling on the glass of shop windows and doors. Shoulders passed, and I saw brass clocks, vases of those precious flowers plucked up from the mouth of the earth, photographs, scarves, shoes with laces that linked elbows through silver eyelets in the most defiant of ways. Windows held people who were not real, draped in silks and thin wool; they gazed from their stages with illusive stares, for all their depth, they held nothing. Plants, breathing on the expansive panes, these intricate relationships of greens and browns making up tiny worlds in great boxes, like my own forest chamber. Most of these places were without action now, in the nighttime, but occasional clomp-clomps of stiff heels told me I was not alone in my exploration. Edges of music were on the air from alleyways down, with the stale tint of alcohol and skin applications. I heard the rustle of a woman's hair, the tinkle of her laughter, and smelled the mixed smells of men long awake. This was the hull of the night, for this city, and I let my feet take me there.

Signs brighter than the day reached into the night with wild colour, calling without discrimination. A few pubs there were here, not a great crowd of them, but enough to fill the lives of those who needed them. I paused outside their doors, wondering which to try, laying my fingertips on this doorhandle and that, until I had brushed the outside of each pub on the street several times. How do the persons choose? Those with the tiny square windows, they seemed closed up to newcomers, quite settled with those whom they had swallowed up inside. The paint that curled from another's sign rolled away bits of its past, and the

shadows of those that had once fallen upon it. I put my palm on the rugged feel of a most prodigious wood door, plain except for some metal bands of medieval hint, and gave it a push. The darkness outside gave way to a new darkness inside, and I went in.

I was surprised the door closed itself behind me so quickly, and turned to see its inside. Like water closing, people had filled the space, and the door was part of my past. A nettle of voices slipped over and through one another, bumping consonants and coughs. They twisted thoughts into sound, sometimes swimming into the words of others, sometimes pricking those whose thoughts remained unheard. The conversations were so many, a great writhing mass. I only caught the pushing fingers of a few. All levels of acquaintance, of emotion, one-thousand stories and sudden revelations. The bulk of it all pressed me into myself until I was as small as I could become, a condensed core, my skin as hard as my bone.

Dulled though they were in the recessiveness of the den, the colours struck suddenly, flamboyantly mucked petals of lips, and hair with the brazenness of smeared pollen. Sometimes the eyes did not seem quite right, as if the green was the child of a garish seed, and sometimes the form did not even seem quite real, as if proportions had ballooned at the hands of some great coiling fist, squeezing the waist into the chest and shoulders. Bits of glint blinked at me from earlobes and throats, gold born in strings on the necks of both woman and man. Where was my shadow? I could not find it, fallen among the limbs and faces surround. Thumps of sound pushed them up and down, heads turning this way and that, torsos twisting into the most uncomfortable gyrations.

"What'll it be?"

A man was talking to me, behind the partition, both his hands outstretched on the counter in a balance that would have laid him to fall, had the counter given way. His skin was shiny, and little tufts of hair showed through his shirt. He kept looking at me, and said again, "What'll it be?" louder this time.

"Hello. Are you having a good evening?" I asked. He made a movement of tiredness with his eyes and shifted. "Look, do you want a drink?"

"I beg your pardon? No, not right now. But thank-you very much." He turned away. I was astonished. I watched the mass of heartbeats with a growing feeling of constraint, and turned around to find a space slightly more accommodating to my form. Facing me was the thickest mane of yellow hair I think I had ever seen, arranged in ringlets that spiralled together in layer after layer, the core unseen.

Shadows could not obscure the sheer brilliance of the colour, the haze of it evaporating into this stifled air. These curls did not wave and thrash with the music, but floated very still over the hips of a black skirt, immobile in the chaos. My fingers lifted and moved into it, my lips parting with the tinge of electricity that shot through me as I touched it, the yellow sun, thick bramble of beauty. All at once the mane went out of my hand, disappearing to show, instead, a tiny paled face of swollen eyes with little lines of red branching through them. For all this, she was very pretty, only filled with this substance that tried, in vein, to make her body bigger.

"Excuse me?" She blinked with slovenly time, and looked hard at my face, as if she thought perhaps I should be recognized.

"Hello. You have lovely hair." She smiled.

"Thanks." The music made loud noises, keeping her thoughts away. Her eyelids lowered, puffing through the strain of late wakefulness, opening only enough vision to hold on me. I tried to reach into her eyes with mine, the longest moment I'd had yet at this pub, but the crowding scents and voices made her near impenetrable. My vision pulled at her with all the concentrated strength I had in my faculties under these conditions, and she loosened, her neck growing limp under the bowing of her yellow head, her shoulders expanding and slumping with unintentional grace. I drew once more, and she fell into my arms, a warm bundle of sleep and hair. I held her to me and withdrew from the pub, glad to feel the mesh of bent life recede.

I took her to a quiet alley of brick surround on the buildings and beneath our feet, and sunk into one of the alcoves that pursed our sound. I sat. She was on my lap, limp to my arms, face very moist and pale. I turned her head away. My hands wove through it freely, grasping palmfuls of yellow nest, my fingers letting the taut springs grow slack into their creases. I closed my eyes.

Your hair writhes,

Giving life to my fingers.

I hold that part of you which will exist longer than any other,

Your growth of colours, winking shines,

Bending, yielding to my touch.

My palm strokes itself on the softness like a cat,  
Your locks indifferent to my pleasure.  
Strong, wrapping my bones,  
Binding me in its beauty, Fly in the web  
Hue hypnotizes,  
Slick easy fall burns me to grasp more.  
It is not alive, yet it is not dead.  
Curtains for the child in your eyes.  
Holds no scent, knows no hard form.  
Shape shifter, elusive spirits reaching into the world to protect you.  
Mystery, entity, Damnable identity;  
Though I weave the threads in my design,  
This flow is forever yours.

\* \* \* \* \*

The smell of Christina was on this page, and the next, and the next. Stronger this time, grown with the light sweat of her oils, heightened with her approval. I knew them now, the subtle changes in her scent, how they would steepen in musk and lighten with the flavours of the air. Her language was becoming clearer, the tiny messages her skin would leave.

She wrote to me, too, her short, proper messages of exquisite script, warming my pen, if for only a moment, in her hand. I relished these letters, every word, positive that the care she'd taken in choosing them was as large as that she'd given to reading my poems. She became my critic, telling me which she liked the most and why, observing keenly the hidden mood I'd been in when I'd written, and gently saying words to brighten me if I was low. She knew what I wanted to say as well as I, and sometimes I left lines wide open to her completion, with full trust in her integrity. What she was was something total and complete within herself, without voids and unmet needs. I looked to her with my questions of aloneness, and she answered with quiet reassurance and womanly sensibility. She was far stronger than I, more wise by an ocean, and infinitely serene. I grew to depend on her level commentary, becoming all the time more humbled by her presence in my small home.



\* \* \* \* \*

I moved among the world of the city, in the nights, keeping more to the outside streets than the Pandemonium of the dens like the first one. From the pavement, I could look into windows and see life, and evidence of it. People moved in the small rooms of their keeping. Sometimes they slept, whole nights through without disturbance, while others read books or talked to others. Some talked to themselves. Lots would get up from wherever they were and eat intermittently, sometimes from the extreme state of slumber. They excreted, and they touched one another, over and over for a short time until the frenzy was past, then they parted or fell to sleep wrapped in one another's body. I liked this best of all; this seemed the time when their minds were most quiet, and heartbeats smooth. Muscles melted into the curves of the sheets. Occasionally, in this sort of union, one would partly wake, reach for assurance that the other was still in the bed, and draw itself, through the thickest of movements, into touch and peaceful surrender with the other. This was a private joy of union, security so consuming that often the attention of the conscious mind was never called to it, and it passed for safe-keeping only into my eyes. I kept it close to me, bringing it out in the woods, to look at and embrace. Yes, this was my favourite part of this world.

I wandered deeper into the city, finding that the more infrequent the pubs, the more likely the appearance of the open window or door, and less garishly unsuitable lights lining the roads. Here I visited upon a small cottage of cobblestone walk and reaching, brushing trees. The house was older in structure, but fresh in care and clean white paint. I could hear voices from within as soon as I entered the road. They held excitement, these voices, the tones pulled tense and stiff like the closed gate at the foot of the walk. I made my way to a side window. Inside were a woman and a man, seated on a sofa, talking with passion over a smear of papers on the low rising table before them. The man, especially, would move his hands in all sorts of ways, bringing them over his heart, jutting them toward the papers, cutting the air with his wrists over his head. His head moved his hair, throwing it over his ears as his mouth snapped open and shut. The woman did not talk so much, nor move, but rather kept shrinking, drawing her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms round herself as if she might fall apart if they let go. Their minds were at full volume, the man's thoughts shooting in all the directions that his hands did, toward the sky, toward the ground, into her ribs and into his own forehead like spears. He tensed until every muscle stood out on his neck and temples, winding tighter and tighter until I thought he would break, and suddenly he froze, voice

completely still, fingers in the air. Her mind began a backwards wave of motion that started to late to pull her body away, and he lunged at her, grabbing her shoulders and neck. Small, her form shook in his power, her head flipping obscenely. He did not relent, but rather flew up with the straightening of his spine. He was on his feet but hers could not reach the floor; he shook her again and released her liquid body to drop. She was a tangle and a collision, and before she could sort out, his fist gave her face a blow. She reeled, and he grabbed her hair, sending her into the table. She sank out in a red pool. He raised his hand again, thoughts reared back, and froze a second time, this time differently. He was motionless, eyes locked on her, then his hand dropped to his side, and he straightened up, turned around, and walked into another room. I lost sight of him then. She did not move.

I turned away, unable to think, quite certain I was under some form of suffocation. My throat pulled in spasms, paining the heart, which pounded so ferociously it was unbearable. My eyes were not working; everything was darker, and I panicked. I threw my body to move, and it fell. I yanked myself up and threw forward again, the feet not centering beneath me. I tried to scream, but no voice would come, only a severing close of the throat which panicked me even more. I staggered to the trees, shouldering trunks for push, moving in craze, until my feet gave way and I fell, rolling a deafening, black eternity down a hill with the speed of a dervish. Everything was gone.

If only I could have lost whatever part of me that would stay awake for the excrutiation which was to follow.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stared at the ceiling. Her letters were inches away, but I could not reach for them. I had remained unmoved for three days. The room became bright and it became dark, and no life came past, only sounds of it outside broke the nothingness. I was stone, only without the beauty that true stones have. My mind was slowed to stopping, and still I felt my heartbeat.

I knew no thoughts and no desires, no comfort or discomfort. I only stared. I stared until, finally, I could hear no sound, nor feel my body. Finally, I was only a dim awareness, yet even taking long leave of this. Void.

\* \* \* \* \*

She came and covered me with blankets. She tried to give me food, and eventually would have

been content if she could just administer water, but in the end only she partook. She washed me, daily, wiping away first the crusts of blood closing where the branches had lashed, then cleansing me of I know not what, for there could have been no soiling. Her comb went through my hair. Wet cloths sometimes warmed my forehead, and sometimes I shivered, to be buried deeper still in the blankets that mounted in weight. I was too large for her to move, so there I lay, on the same spot of earth, for this lost and incomprehensible plod of time.

Finally and slowly, I began to have thoughts again. They were not of my power, but rather some nightmarish invasions I could not escape. They came as shadows first, murky forms that loomed up with their shoulders, menacing me into fright. I pulled away, in these dream-like sequences, pulled the distance of eternity and still could not escape. The forms only grew to grotesque proportions, shoulders and heads elongating to black points. I did not know these faceless terrors, and could not give them name, but I knew their permanence in my world was certain. One would appear, and I swung back with an ethereal force that was neither expedient nor manageable, veering me off like a sheet in the wind. My paths were tunnels, too dark to define by sight, but immediately apparent by contact, and impassable. These visions, little in themselves, were my haunts, but proved at last to be my demonic saviours, for they were the only impetus to arouse me. As they drew nearer, I could not summon the force nor control to escape, welling me in such a pain and fear that I roared, a wail that shook my whole being, breaking out of my body in the eruption of a tremulous murmur, nothing more; but this small sound was everything now, a sinewy bridge linking me back from this horrible nightmare to the world at hand.

These breaks happened with increasing frequency, bringing me nearer and nearer the surface. I rode on their fury, using it to push me more into my body, deliberately wailing as loudly as I could when the terrors approached. With the sudden appearance of three forms, I screamed a long, extended cry that swept me up in its infinity, the piercing sound going on without any sign of an end. My whole consciousness was taken up with the scream, the pitch stretching into a straight, burning line blazing until all there was was the scream, the scream and nothing else, the tone becoming finer, a shock of lightning, and open snapped my eyes. My chest moved up and down in quick rhythm, my heart a tripping valve. Whatever my body had been enduring to sustain me exhaled with a flat, gushing relief, and I had the sensation of one who had perhaps run a thousand miles. I was collapsed without moving, spent without a

flinch. I could turn my eyes, though, and searched the new surroundings, so strange.

The ceiling, dried brown beams, weathered cobwebs four times thickened with dust; the walls, where they remained whole, giving way to brick, and white, and holes; my room, the chamber I had left, the room that seemed now ancient and beyond my presence; the block that was my desk; my papers, my inkwell, my pen. My poetry. I was back.

"Welcome." A rich, low voice broke through the silence that had made me forget human sound. She sat neatly on a chair that had not been there before, her skirt falling over the tips of her boots. I remembered suddenly that once I'd had a glass of water, but now it was gone. Her form was thin but strong, with a strength that showed even in the clear, calm look of her eyes. High cheekbones, inviting the play of light, a jawline that was ever so defined. Falling down over her shoulders was a long, shining sheet of deep brown hair, a marvel and mystery to behold. The sight of her made my blood twinge, my head almost pained with the sudden rise of joy. My tired body could not hold the barrage of sensation, and I fell into a deep, uninterrupted sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke in evening. She had been there for sometime, for she possessed the unconscious ignoring of her surroundings that was borne of their long familiarity. She had been at the desk, paying attention to some papers there, but when I woke, she turned.

"Hello," she said.

I bent my lips across my teeth, feeling the sluggish beginnings of speech movements. I opened my mouth to a pleasant rush of the cool night air, and found my voice.

"Christina."

"Yes."

"Christina. . . You have cared for me."

"Yes."

"Thank-you." She nodded.

Our warmths could not touch, and I moved to be nearer her. She was at my side in an instant, and, with her help, I was seated into the chair, the first change of posture or location my body had had since this had begun. My limbs were good to be stirred, and leaned into these slight stretches with full cooperation. I

looked at my hands for a moment that fell to a reverie, and then felt embarrassed and quick to break it. I searched for the words.

"Have you seen this chair?"

"Yes."

I felt a rush of heat in my face. "No, what I mean is, do you know how it came to be here? It's not mine, you see."

"I brought it. You haven't any proper chairs, and one does have to sit, eventually."

"Yes, one does. It is a good chair, the way it holds you up and all."

"Yes, it's good."

I looked at my feet.

"Did I speak much?"

"You spoke through your poems. I read them."

"Poems? I wrote poems?"

"Yes, the night you returned."

There was a silence

"So you know."

"Yes. I know what you saw."

I could say nothing. Fortunately, she recovered for me.

"You should eat now. There is plenty of food."

She was right; the chamber was suddenly as much food as it was anything else, with heaps of vegetables, and fruits, and breads. It was all so very beautiful, the vibrant, bright colours, so many things to see, and to smell. I smelled flowers, I smelled leaves. I smelled her. I looked at her. She smiled.

"Thank-you, but no. You are so kind." Golden loaves of bread, all puffed up braids, and rolls, holding the light with a promise of tender, white softness inside. Eggs, I saw, and slips and ruffles of green. I rubbed my hands on my thighs.

"Don't you find the herbs most lovely?" I asked her. "Especially the feathery ones, with all their fine webs and veins?"

"And those furry ones, feeling just exactly like a rabbit, do you know the ones I mean?"

"No, I don't.

"Don't you? Hold on, I'll get you one." I went to the enclave of intricacies behind my home and found her the grey rabbit ears. I brought her enough for her hand to close on.

Here. Do you feel that? The smoothness of the fuzz? Only this you can brush either way, unlike the fur of a rabbit." She rubbed a leaf tentatively with the tip of one finger, the small hairs flattening under her light press.

"Yes, thank-you."

"That's not the only one which is soft. Some are soft, not to touch, but to crumple, folding in the collapse of a small fist. Then they spring out again, as if never disturbed. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, indeed. But don't you think you should perhaps take some water, or a bit of food?" The wrap of the night air would be enough to sustain me. "Please come, if you like, and I will show you where these herbs grow. The moon is bright enough for you to see, isn't it?"

Though she was uncertain of this, she conceded politely that it was, and off we went to the wood.

So many things, there were to show her, I could scarce let her rest in between! No mortals knew these hidden crevices where the mysteries grew, and they stretched and rose full in the luxury. The white flowers of night, she liked these especially, and of course, she swooned with the smell of the wild rose. We lit on pocket after pocket, the plants bending beneath her touch, breathing out for her to smell. I could not move quickly enough, and took her hand to lead her faster. The flowers yawned with gaping mouths, the moss lifted us above the earth. She touched them, and she looked closely, examining each in its own precious rarity, and finally, she took the flowers into her breast. She lay full on the ground, gathering armfuls of tall, bending stems close to her, in rest.

I watched her with heavy admiration. After my torrent of introduction and excitement, I fell quiet, realizing that this lovely creature, lying at peace in the grass with all the white night flowers, was my only love, my truest joy, my comfort, my bliss, my Christina.

\* \* \* \* \*

We passed a good deal of the night this way, lying in the wood. The moon passed through the sky behind rolling foam of clouds, stars tiny punctures in the canvas lending glimpse of the blaze beyond. Bats came round, with Christina there; I heard owls and small mammals nearby. This new swell of life rendered

me very quiet, trying to record each and every sound for later recollection. A soft, rhythmic brushing carried on the air, easing my limbs and lulling my mood. I roused myself and realized that it was the sound of Christina breathing, slow and steady, selfless. She was asleep, arms still outstretched in the thick of wild night flowers, dots of pale, diffused white glow round her graceful form. No lovelier picture could there be. I pulled it close, preserving it forever on the face of my heart, knowing that whatever befell me, I had been blest to look upon something from the world of the divine. No matter what came, This picture was mine, as indelible as the heavens.

\* \* \* \* \*

I dug. My fingernails raked into the soil, clawing out great clumps of earth and stone. A fox came by and cocked its head, with quizzical eyes. The hole became so deep that I had to brace my legs and lean into the hollow, to reach the next layer. I pushed through a coating of clay, and brought it up: hard, impenetrable box, falling neatly into my grasp from old habit.

I worked quickly, returning to my brick chamber, clearing the space inside. The metal clasps came open with a click, and I pushed back the top. There it all was, perfectly preserved. Paintbrushes, of goat and sable, even some tiny hairs of lemur, each carefully wrapped, laid alongside the half-flattened tubes of oils, nearly the whole world's colours condensed to their quintessence. I lifted out the rolls of canvas, my palms prickling with pleasure missed.

In the final stretches of the night, I set the canvas and resurrected the easel. The very air seemed to change in the room with my construction, becoming more stiff and private, a hull enclosing the force my hands and mind were smoothing into. When she came, with her warm morning hair and pink skin, the paints looked to her with effortless claim, and I smiled. She said not a word, but went to the chair and relaxed into dignified model. She folded her hands onto her lap and turned slightly away from the easel, eyes fixed with that indefinable focus of one long immersed in thought. The brush loved her as easily as the pen, and I had the luxury of creation, which is the complete forgetting of oneself. The current carried me through till the end of morning, and I suddenly realized that she had been still for what was likely a straining amount of time. I laid down my brush. She broke the tableau slowly, bending her neck round in gentle circles, filling her chest with open mouthfuls of the clean air. I wondered if she could smell the oils or the slight smell of age the accompanied the ivory handles of my brushes. She stood up and strode around

the room, her arms arcing over her head in the movements of a swan who floats without disturbing the water. My vision marred for a moment, and I realized that I was very tired. She lowered to the collection of food and took a bit of bread into her mouth.

"You haven't eaten anything yet. You'll need something for your strength." I smiled at her care, showing earnest in her innocent but assured eyes.

"I am strong for now. Later, I will find what I need." I could not take my gaze from her dazzling features, thin jawline, the lively movements of her throat as she ate. Her neck was a thing soft as webs, I was sure, half its beauty hidden under the shielding fall of air. Lustrous, it was; no fur had ever been so sleek.

She worked on my poems, disappearing from my awareness for hours at a time. I tried to watch her, at first, but felt sure and strange the knowledge that she would rather work without others around her. So, at these times, I would go into the forest, finding cool rejuvenation in the trees. I found that I worked longer periods than she, getting taken by a new slant of light on her cheek, and sending the image through my veins to ink to paint, mounting more reams into the poetry that spiralled round her name, cleansing my brushes with thoughts of her spirit. Whatever had gone before this time I did not know and did not seek to remember. There was only now and now as it was, absent of any other world.

But eventually, as I might have known had I thought, she said she had to return, for a short while. The food was gone, and I suspect she had found enough of washing her skirts in the river. So the chair stood empty, and the air plain. The moon and I shrank a little while she was gone, and the skins of light that left the clover moved me to touch the tiny round leaves in condolence. They asked for the air instead of my touch, and I turned away, abandoning them as surely as they abandoned me. I was writing when I smelled her, my heart jerking quick expanse at her approach. I greeted her long before she reached home, embracing the image of her eyes before they came to light. She was just as lovely as the paintings had told me. We spoke not a word, but fell into step beside one another, walking light steps to the brick.

Paints, and paints, and paints. Ink. Fine linen paper. She laid them out carefully on the desk, giving me the delight of hearing the sound each one made as it found its new home in our hull of creation. She moved away from them and I moved closer, examining each item with the relish grass must have for rain. Handsome were the thick, blank sheets of paper, exquisite the colour of amber she had found, and the tiny



writing on the sides of the tubes. Tentatively, I let my finger press one of the edges, and looked to her. Her mouth softened and curved. My hands passed over it all, fingers stroking the container of ink, palms finding rest on what would doubtlessly be half-filled with verses of Christina before the night's end.

She posed for me until she grew so heavy with the night that I laid down my brush, though I had not finished, and walked out into the wood. When I came in, she had taken her place on the blankets on the floor, and was fast gone. My body knew such warmth with the sight of her sleep, I wondered that I had not frozen before. I worked on a new canvas to capture this vision again, each rendering growing nearer to her life, me wanting to portray the beating of her heart. I lapsed into the painting until my awareness had all distilled around me, and was unconscious of her waking and leaving the room.

I do not know if I smelled or heard it first. There was a drastic change in her, out of kilter and foreign to me. She appeared in the doorway drained of colour, bracing her stance with her hand. I froze. She drew herself up and walked back out. I was up and following immediately. She crossed behind the chamber to where the nightflowers are, and stopped over a dark bulge in the weed. I tightened. She just stared down at it, the tips of her fingers meeting in front of her from lifeless, hanging arms. I turned around and walked into the forest, away from the space, away from the chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

She may not return. She may not understand. Poor Christina, how I ached for her, imagining how it must have seemed. All that was discernible, really, was the mass of yellow curls. Certainly this would have disturbed her. Then again, somewhat was the shock that she did not know; I had thought she as immersed in my privacies as I in hers. She now saw the night in me as sure as the day, and I could not know whether she would accept this shadow.

I laid looking out over the black water of the river, ripples its only relief. No owls to come round me, I knew. For mine was not the mask that slips off; the animals all see my heart. My ribs pushed heavy against my skin, limbs leadening as an anchor on the bottom of the sea. I could not write, I could not paint, I could not think but think of her, and the pain of wait. Her absence was a thing unfathomable, ripping through every fiber of my soul. No, I sighed. I haven't any soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

The city was crisp with the smell of humans and their ointments, given more rise with the heat that hung on the night air. The bricks were placid in the void of moonlight, offering, instead of reflection, sharper echo to my step. I gazed into a clockmaker's window, eyes seeing nothing in unbroken stare. I was lost to the silence of world in darkness, removed from the streets and myself in the mind's flight from pandemonium. Then a rustling and clack jolted me back into my body. A boy's head, bowing longish copper hair over his eyes, was bent over the lock and doorknob. He was fiddling with a ring of keys that seemed too old for his young hands, closing off the room of time from all the vagrant world. He completed his task to his satisfaction and turned on his heel to leave. The sight of my shoes stopped him. "Oh, 'evening, sir. Didn't see you there. Were you looking to find a clock?"

I stepped a little more into the shadow.

"In fact, I was. Are you closing?"

"Don't have to; got nothing better to do, just going to the pub by and by. Like to come in and have a walk around the place?" He was unhitching the door as he spoke. The door knew his hands again, and I followed him in.

"What kind of clock were you in the mind for? I've got all sorts, you know. Name it."

I stroked the shiny panel of a cabinet, smoother than stone. "This is your shop?"

He looked ever so slightly sheepish, but instantly regained his robust composure.

"Well, not exactly, but will be. 'S my father's, you see. But I mostly run the place. Yes sir, most times somebody's wanting a clock, they come to me. Not that there's anything wrong with my father, you see, but, well, it's just that sometimes I might know more what a higher class gentleman like yourself needs. Now, I can tell by looking at you that you know quality, real quality, sir, and I wouldn't try to sell you none less."

The quieter lights of the shop in its private state, lit enough for us to see but not to entice other wanderers, gave his skin a radiance I had not noticed outside. I moved closer to his scent. Grass, farmland, perhaps, with traces of earth and hay. It was good.

"Do you know all of these clocks?"

"Know them, sir? Oh, yes, know each and every one, like they was my own girl. You just ask me anything."

"Which clock sounds like a heart?"

He launched into action. "A heart, now, that's a quality request. Not all clocks do tick the same. What you need is a good tall one, with plenty of room for the sound. That makes it deeper, you see. I've got a grandfather as tall as yourself. Come right this way."

He led me into a narrow hall where the light could not completely reach.

"Give me a second, sir, and I'll fix up the lights."

"No, please, this is fine. I have an eye condition, and the less light, the better."

"Oh, sure, sir, I understand; my own mother's got such a condition, poor woman, woman's a saint, she is, just wondering how long we can manage her, cost of medications and all." He was unlocking another door, opening for us a tiny room of rich rugs that undoubtedly held the best of the shop.

"Now, here's the one for you. You just come and have a listen at the" (his voice articulated carefully) "rich, melodic tones of this one. Come on."

He inclined his ear, his grin broad as he beckoned me to join him. His hair bobbed with the movements of his smiles and eyebrows, toying with the splintered play of light. I leaned in from the clock's other side, my face very close to his. The rich, melodic tones were all of that, ebbing slow thunder from their case. The steady weighted heartbeat called with ours, three separate rhythms, the boy's the lightest and most urgent.

"I want something that sounds a little more like mine, something somewhat different; I do not know your language of clocks. Perhaps if you listened, you would know best what I want."

He blinked but swaggered over to me, stooping to cock his ear toward my chest.

"Well, now, there is something a bit different about yours, there is. Different from the clock's and even different from mine. Don't know as how to put my finger on it, exactly."

"Try. It will help you." His eyes met mine and I pulled him, called to him with the heat of my veins. I took his long, rough hand, placing his palm on my chest. He felt my heartbeat; I saw it in his eyes. He felt it through his hand and his mind, through his own heart. I gave him admiration and desire, the excitement growing larger than myself, then the two of us. I felt my hands rise to his back, close over his shoulders. He let out a short gasp and I sunk my teeth into his neck, knowing again the touch of a soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sounds of humans clattered through the night, reaching into crevices of the brick, and curling round grillework gates. The smells were so overwhelming in their mish-mashed crowding that it became unpleasant, not knowing enough to sort out. The bright signs of the pubs confused my eye as I forgot, for a moment, where I was, and I leaned against the outside wall. My eyes tried in vain to shut me into myself, the fingers of the city reaching at me none-the-less. I shuddered into the wall.

"Well, now, what's this? Had a bit too much, eh? Come on, get yourself home. Probably got a missus worried about you, or anyway a dog. Hello?" I felt a jab in my side, that was repeated and quickened. A man's voice, I knew I had heard that, a man who lived here and knew nothing of my Christina. The jab pushed again, harder. I covered my face.

"Hey you, you heard me, I said get a move on. Out!" I was jerked suddenly, my back flattened against the wall, the wall that had just been my friend. The voice became louder, gruffer, and in my darkness I saw them, the pointed shoulders, the faceless demons. I reared back, only to find the push of the wall, a huge, grunting wail breaking from me. The arms clamped onto mine, contact, and my mind screamed. I flailed, limbs flying, striking whatever force fell in their way. The shadows leered completely over my head, high as bats, and I gnashed at the dark with my fangs. I ripped and tore, pushing through my terror, fighting against the very haunts of hell. I broke suddenly into no resistance; the figures shrank, and I fled back to the wood.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd been there. I grabbed her letter, clarting a smear of red, and wiped it furiously on the blankets. Her handwriting. I tried to calm my mind enough to read, smooth my eyes enough to see the words, and fell to a forced stillness on the dirt floor. She wrote:

*My Beloved Gargoyle,*

*I cannot describe to you the struggle which has besieged me these past few days. Your unveiling was an utter shock to me, although, as I study, in my mind, your poetry, I see that it was I who blinded my eyes, not you. Only something so apart from my world I would not know to see, and now cannot know its erase.*

*My fate has been written, as surely as I breathe. I know your character and I know your nature, but I cannot dis sever the two. Your beauty has captured me, and while I know how fierce your battle will be, the inevitable is clear. I cannot turn from you now. You have claimed my heart.*

*Christina*

\* \* \* \* \*

Christina was dressed in white, skirts light and tender as the petals of her white nightflowers. She stood as a vision in the doorway, the light gathering to her, emanating from her, more radiant than the rarest moth. I was powerless in her sight.

"Have you written?"

I stammered for thought. "I . . . I have not. The writing . . . has slipped away for a time." Her dark eyes engulfed me. I felt myself shiver inside without moving.

"You've seen them again."

I considered the dirt floor, how many treads time had known upon it to flatten its compact form. A stick found its way into my hand, and drew across the loose dust on top. Curve, small and simple, both harmless and strong through its aloneness. Another, trailing from the first. Hair. Christina. I looked at her a moment and drew more lines, turning the dirt into a cameo of a nymph, her face emerging from the earth in seasoned gaze. How I had not seen her, and painted her before I had known her, defied me. A pearl of such loveliness is more than a moment in beauty; it is a fold in the dimension of beauty itself, an infrequent wrinkle in the unseen fabric of aesthetics which covers the universe, stretching full over some areas, like the rainforests, and Egypt, and pulling short over others, a corner up from the bed. She was walking metaphor for every thought I could ever have; every musing I had known reflected, eventually, on her. I saw her now as a living point of reflection, still and clear as a silent lake. I longed to touch it, to see whether the water would ripple, catching light and carrying it out to the world in a thousand rings. My hand went out to it, tremulous and shy, moving with the slowest, most careful approach, so as not to disturb. I saw it, blue; I saw it, shining white with the brightness of mirror. I smelled rare sea blossom and waited for the coolness. Instead, I felt warmth and solidity, and focused my eyes suddenly to find Christina, in all her splendid mortal form.

She had not rippled, or drawn away. The reflection of me remained steady in her eyes. I became aware, again, of my hand, and saw that hers met it, both our palms held in the air between us. I lifted my fingertips slightly and laid them down again. Each one touched one of hers. I could hear no breath.

I felt her hair, lying across the palm of my other hand, skimming my skin with her softness. Tiny

rainbows, when the light hit, the shine melding all the threads together so that one hair was indiscernible from another, melding the brown glory into one unfathomable pool. She had known her hair for ages, this same hair that I held in my clutch, the fine silks holding the stories of her life. I ran my hand to the last reaching sections, knowing that these had seen more years closer to her than had any human being, or animal, or probably any single thought. Her scent rose high into my brain. Musk, nightflowers, trees, and air. Her hair moved with my hand and revealed the soft pulse of her heart, pushing against her throat. It came nearer to me, widening through the scope of my vision, owning my sight and my thrill. It all turned here, now, to this life-filled, graceful neck, calling the light to it with unspeakable demand.

I forced my eyes to shut. They opened again and I wrenched myself away, thrusting my hands behind my back to bind one another. She straightened herself, her fluidity growing hard again in her natural reserve. I looked away.

I had nothing to say, really. All I could do was to tell her of her beauty, without words new or surely unheard by her before. Old word, old as time, yet it slipped round her with glistening birth, an entity given life through her illustration. I had to catch her before she blinked away from this world, and preserve her face so that the earth could smile.

I took out the paints, and then experienced a gush of creation hitherto unknown to me. The brush could not follow my urgings fast enough; it swept across the canvas in a fury to lay the design. Her form had only just begun when I had to thrust the paintbrush down so that I could grasp the pen. My brain became confused and absent from what I was doing, and my eyes swam into visions of Christina, standing, leaning, lying asleep. She blinked, and I saw that, but she mostly became immersed in the visions, surfacing as those long, silvery fish do in the lake. The images were mixed and flowing. I knew the occasional switch of the brush handle and pen.

And then, when I was done, I knew that I was lying down on the blankets that she had brought once so long ago, and Christina was standing, leaning over spreads of works on the floor, and on the desk.

"There are twenty-eight in all. Eighteen of which are poems." She said this without turning to me. "You'll have to be patient with my editing. The poetry will take some time." With that, she sat down with a cup of water, and began to read. The morning was coming, I could feel it, though she must have closed the door some time ago. I drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke, she was beside me. I dared not stir. She was turned slightly on her side, closed eyes half facing me, half skyward. Her hand was curled, gentle; slim fingers rested over mine. I felt her heart beating, in the slow, mysterious rhythm of sleep. Never had I been so close to a sleeping human being. She was like morning glories folded up, hair curling in to protect her dreams. What did she dream, I wondered, how close was I to seeing? She stirred, blood moving before her body, mouth sluggish to respond.

"I dream of you." My insides lurched with the sensation of being discovered doing something I should not have been.

"Of you, and you are free." Her breath took normal again, with the long, sure rhythm of sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I did not question her about it when we were both awake. I knew she would need food, and had not the beginning idea of how to get it, but wanted her to know I thought.

"You will have to eat, find something for your strength," is what came out, an echo of her words.

"Yes, I must. I have to go into the world for that, again, you know." She considered me. "Would you like to come with me?"

I was suddenly fearful. "The city is not a good place for me, I think." Her eyes made little tricks I could not read. But her lashes were long.

"If you stay close to me, I won't let it hurt you."

I could not bear the thought of being without her. So with great uncertain step, I took her hand and went with her into the wood. We travelled for a long time, I could not tell how long, keeping mainly among the trees. She was sure-footed and secure in her surroundings, while I grew less contained and freshly clumsy. A lumbering oaf, that is what I was, tripping through the world of tiny wings and glassy eyes, sounds croaking and clicking and falling silent at me. I trusted to her and eventually, we found ourselves on the top of a steep hill, overlooking a small pool of lights, lots of them candles. Wooden houses kept lots of largish animals in by them, and grass in straight rows. Hulks of steel and wheels and blades shined in slumber, looking like crude imitation of the magnificent animals I knew. I wondered why these were here.

I felt a tug at my hand and followed, keeping myself quiet behind her hair. She took us inside one of the houses, seemingly a house for more of those enchanting vegetables she had brought. She put them in her skirts, holding them close to fit more. I wanted to help, but did not know how she was choosing things, so I stood very still and watched her. She turned to me, which startled me. "You wait here. I'll return shortly." She was gone. I hoped these plants would not die here, but even as the thought found me, I could smell the gaping of a leaf, and another gone to the dark. They do need light. Perhaps Christina does too; she had not taken much as of late. She kept her hours with mine. I must remember to ask her of this.

Rustle and scent. She appeared in quieter skirts more like the wood, and we stole back to our dwelling.

\* \* \* \* \*

With later thought, I grew quite enamored of the place we had visited, and asked her what other places she new.

"Plenty of sorts. you know the city, don't you, and of course, the forest. Do you know the shore?"

The shore. I did know the shore, but it was so long ago, I had forgotten. Wide expanse of tiny, hard crystals of sand, so many the stars looked few, and they shape-shifted, crunching and swarming underfoot, sometimes giving way with a slick pull that could do anything but harm, for were its little joke realized, one would only fall back to more sand, this time soft.

Her beach was like this but smaller. The blackness of the water blended with the dark of night till only the pause of the clouds told the difference. She offered me her hand, as she did nowadays, and we walked along the shore in silence. The sea salt coupled with hers was ambrosia. Swishing was the business of the night sea, not to be found overly excited or slapping about, as I knew the day's had been. Images drifted me into some crevice of memory, when light was harsh and I was crying. My veins constricted, and she felt the squeeze of my hand. I looked to her. She could even illuminate the water. I felt that my heart would melt in my chest, looking into her calming eyes, and the desire to be nearer her rose like a tear.

Where was I? Suddenly I did not know. I felt faint and my blood ran thin in my limbs.

"Christina?"

"I'm here." I felt her arm strongly on mine.

"Christina, I am lost."



"You are at the beach with me. We are at the shore. It is dark, but there is nothing to be in your way. Don't be afraid."

She hadn't understood. I was shaky, and allowed myself to be led, lapsing my mind into a kind of sleep while we walked. Perhaps we should go back to that house, I wanted to tell her. There are plants inside that need the sun. I heard them, Christina.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days yawned sooner now. Long were the shadows that pulled hiding over my frightful form. The maturing darkness made it easier for me to travel, but it never seemed just dark enough for me, no matter where I went or how tightly I closed my eyes. Christina brought the berries, she brought the blooms. Long hours I would watch her, drawing each stem out from a mass and considering its every line. They responded to her, the flowers, and reached their perfumes into her hair, so that they might stay.

She read, everything it seemed. She read books written in other languages that I couldn't begin to fathom. She read from large, dusty volumes, lost in the exquisite stencils of script. The golden page edges shined under the caress of her white fingertip. Calm was the sound of the slow turning of pages, poetry and verse, song and ballad ringing round her in an angel's glow.

I sighed as she walked through the grasses; I moaned aloud across the trees. The sun must be dimmer, without her, and the world wouldn't understand why. Thick in the wood, I felt her, knew her presence near. She had always been close by me, as long as I had known time. Now that she had come, time was forgotten. My veins ached as her stomach often pulled in hunger.

I walked. I walked with my heavy heart through long nights on end but always woke by her side, her lovely breathing whispering a thousand secrets. Carefully, I shifted, wanting not to disturb her sleeping form. I worked through the tubes of paint, and she did shine upon the canvasses, a beacon, with the alluring and reserved phenomena of her eyes. I loved to watch her eat all of her little foods, and drink her waters, and made sure to be there especially for her meals. It was good, that she was here, and I shouldn't get tangled in the cobwebs of myself. But even the spider knows that the loveliest butterfly is doomed in his web.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was sitting in the chair.

"May I come close to you?" I asked her. She outstretched her arms. I enlarged into her space, a luxurious expanse of the heart. Her eyes - oh, how they reached into me. The scent of her skin rose, sweet smoke blinding me, calling the desire in me to rise, so acute, it stood as hot tears in my eyes. I was close and yet never close enough, I knew her but could not reach beyond the surface, to touch the fire burning behind her glow. I needed her, now, needed her desperately. Her heart beat warm. I stepped closer to her, into her sinewy, perfect arms. Her silent concession, or was it welcome; yes, it was welcome, I knew it; it was here and it was real, my Christina, my true angel! Her hair fell away from her neck and I saw her thin vein, beating, strong, quick. The taste of a soul, the finest soul. My lips touched her neck.

I clutched my head.

"Get out!" I screamed. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" She ran out in the speed of thought.

The ground caught me still. My hands sought out her last letter. *'While I know how fierce your battle will be, the inevitable is clear.'* I wiped a trace of the blood from the paper, but it fell again. I saw it was blood from my own eyes. In desperation, I tried to write, but the pen threatened to stab me. I rolled up the canvas. The brushes went back to their wrappings. The paints were sealed, the purple, the reds, the amber. I closed the top and snapped the latches into place.

The case laid on the floor. I looked at it for an instant, and walked to the desk. Papers, poetry, enhanced by the fine script that filled the margins, small lines and x's. I stacked it all together, with regard for the subject separation which the works now knew, and aligned the edges. The clean paper did not seem clean any longer; for the first time I noticed the smudges and the smears.

I brought all of this together and took it to the wood. The brush crushed underfoot, brittle from want of rain. The wood took me deeper and deeper, past the herbs and past the river. I travelled with steadiness until I reached a glen. I set all the things out in a row, looking at the papers, and the pictures, and the inks. An owl sounded nearby. The work was swift and easy, and when she came, I was nearly through.

She stood at the edge of the glen, skirts possessed of the same stillness of her eyes, and her hair. She held all the works in her arms, embracing the paintings and the poems in certain care. We looked at each other for a moment that encompassed infinity, drawing together all the hours, all the days, and all the nights, knowing them at once, suspended along our gaze. I saw her sitting for the paintings, writing at the

desk, lying in the tall grass, asleep in the white night flowers. The wind carried our song from the hull to the glen, and spiralled to the pyre. It called. I turned to the pile, on the strength of my soul, and the fire began. The heat rose on my skin.

\* \* \* \* \*

This account has been completed and edited by Christina Kenniston, writer and poet. Every effort has been made to honour the style and intention of its author, an artist of extraordinary ability, exceptional clarity, and sensitivity such as is rarely known to those of the human soul.

Christina>

Where We've Touched

Where our edges have touched  
Yours are smooth  
Mine are ragged  
Jagged and painfully torn  
Where our minds have touched  
Yours is settled  
Mine is disturbed  
Perturbed with this silence  
Where our hearts have touched  
Yours is patched now  
Mine is bleeding  
A tender reed dying  
Where our lives once touched  
There is no touching  
No melding no feeling  
No meaning anymore

## Swing a Sparrow On a String

By Ken Goldman

Angela opened her eyes to a new day not knowing if it were morning. There were no windows in her room, and it could have been the middle of the afternoon, or even midnight. She heard no sounds except her own breathing, and when she awoke she inhaled and exhaled heavily, as if she had just completed a marathon race instead of having slept for hours. Perhaps she had slept for days. She had stopped wondering about time years ago. Now she simply slept for as long as she was able, then stayed awake for as long as was necessary.

She knew she would have to eat, that they would soon be coming with food, and had she felt stronger she might have spat it back at them as she had done when they first brought her here. But she had swallowed that rage a long time ago. Now Angela ate whatever morsels they gave her, and recently she had to restrain herself from thanking them. She feared the day might come when she would feel grateful that they had allowed her to live, when she might find herself smiling at them as if she understood and accepted the perfect correctness of her captivity.

She looked at herself in the small cracked mirror above the sink. Although her hair was stringy and unwashed, she remembered how golden it had shimmered in the sun. Her face was still quite pretty,

and once she had heard one guard tell another he had never seen eyes quite that blue. The other whispered what a pity it was.

If only she had a piece of paper, a pen, even a crayon. Maybe this time she would show them that she could create something useful and lasting that mattered to them, something that in turn would make her matter. When Angela had first arrived they had eagerly granted the request of the eighteen-year-old girl and waited to see what gifts her imagination might offer them.

She had succeeded only in producing a few formless scrawls that they said were not art, and some rhymeless gibberish that they told her was not poetry. They took away the paper, the pens, and the paint brushes.

Not long ago, the tall blond guard who wore the keys around his neck had asked her if she might like to sing. Any tune would do, he told her. "Please, oh please, let me try!" Angela had begged. The next day he brought to her room a small cassette recorder with a blank tape. "Perhaps we will find the song bird in you where we were unable to find the artist. Sing, and we promise to listen," he assured her.

For days Angela sang alone in her room, remembering what her mother had sung to her many years ago: "Hush little

baby, don't say a word. Mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird..." A week later she handed the cassette to the man with the keys and simply said, "Please..." He stuffed the tape into his pocket and left without a word.

The next day the guard sat alongside her bed and informed her that he and the others had decided that she was no song bird. For a moment his words had sounded like an apology. She knew she would never see the tall guard again.

The wasted papers that Angela had filled with nonsense and the inarticulate squawks she had tried to pass off as music had convinced them that further efforts on their part would be foolish. From that day forward the guards who silently delivered her food seemed unwilling to even look at her.

\* \* \* \*

Angela heard the key slip into the lock on the other side of the heavy door. She no longer pretended to be asleep when they came, because they did not care whether she were sleeping or awake. One of them always waited outside as the other entered. She heard the heavy jingle of keys and looked up. The keys were around the guard's neck.

"You," she said, but the word was only a statement of fact, not sparked with the warmth that accompanies the recognition of a familiar face. Once uttered, the word sounded idiotic.

"Yes," he answered, closing the door behind him. He did not look at her as he set the tray of food on the stand alongside her bed. She had expected no further conversation, and when he spoke again the words startled her.

"They told me to say the other guard had caught the flu." He pulled up the small wooden chair and sat, although the chair was too small and he seemed not to know whether to fold his legs. "There is no flu. They wanted us to talk."

His statement was ludicrous. She had not had a conversation with him in years, and those few she remembered had been pitifully brief and one-sided. "I don't understand," she said as she selected a small bread crust on her tray. She had learned to keep her responses short, for the guards tired of her quickly.

"I'd like to know about God," he said as if this were meant as an answer. "Tell me how you feel about God. Tell me about your religion, your beliefs."

"I have no belief in God. I have no religion. Don't you have some sort of records about that?" She felt immediately sorry she had asked, but the guard ignored the question anyway. He fidgeted in the small chair.

"You're an atheist, then? Or an agnostic? You have opinions regarding God's existence, or the lack of it?" He sounded almost hopeful.

"I'm an apathist. I don't much think about it," she answered as she nibbled at the crust. She picked up a slab of egg yolk with her left hand, ignoring the silverware, leaned her head back, and dropped the yolk into her mouth.

Her response oddly pleased him, although he did not smile. "An apathist? That was a joke you just said. Admittedly, not a very good one, but it *was* a joke. Then you have a sense of humor. Tell me another joke."

Angela looked hard at the man, not certain about how earnest her guard's question was. "A joke? You mean like why did the chicken cross the road?" The absurdity of her question seemed to increase the guard's excitement.

"Yes! Yes! Tell me, why did the chicken cross the road?" There was anticipation in his voice as if her sincerely were interested in the chicken's intentions, and when he leaned toward Angela for her response his face revealed the hint of a smile.

"Perhaps the chicken was an apathist," she said.

The guard's smile disappeared as quickly as if it were erased. "That isn't funny. I'm sorry, but that isn't funny at all." His tone became flat, expressionless. He sounded like a man keeping some kind of score. No points for humor. Sorry. Next category.

"Can we talk politics?" he asked.

"No."

"Sociology? Science? History? Law? Philosophy?" His questions now had become a formality, a check list to be completed, filed, and forgotten.

"No...No...No...No..." Although Angela could not remember ever having had a discussion this long during her stay here, she wanted this conversation to end.

"Perhaps I could tell you why the philosopher crossed the road? No, I guess you're right. That wasn't funny either. I suppose you'll be leaving now?"

Her question had anticipated his next words. The tall guard rose from the chair with difficulty, trying to maintain his dignity when he could not get up with his first

attempt. "I have one more question for you, Angela," he said. He had never called her by her name before, and his doing so struck her as odd. He walked to the foot of her bed and turned toward her. "Do you know why you are here?" He asked this without malice or emotion, with only the desire to know her answer, as he had wanted to know about song birds and chickens.

"I'm here because I am a useless bird." Having said the words, she knew they had always been on her tongue waiting to be spoken.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know, the sparrow who can no longer fly becomes useless to the other sparrows, a burden to them. I've broken my wing, isn't that right? And the flock has no further need of me."

"I'm impressed," the guard answered. That is quite a creative analogy from one who knows so little of creativity. " He sat on the edge of the bed and moved close to Angela as if to reveal a secret. Instead, he reached under the blanket and grabbed hold of her right hand, yanking it out from where she had kept it hidden. He held her arm straight up and the pain caused her to wince. "But this isn't exactly a broken wing, is it, Angela? It's a wilted arm, a useless limb. It is not pleasant to look at, it serves no function, and it belongs to you. It *is* you." The words came in furious bursts now, like machine-gun pellets, and he shook her withered limb as he spoke. "You see yourself as a wounded sparrow, do you? What happens if we take that sparrow and tie her leg to a string and swing her around in circles in a desperate attempt to make her fly? She struggles against hope to use her

wings, her useless wings, and meanwhile we swing around and around and around, wasting our energy, wasting our time, and in the end when we stop swinging her she comes crashing down to earth anyway. Our time has been wasted, her hopes have been destroyed. What is the point? Why even bother?" He let go of her arm, allowing it to drop.

For a moment Angela stared at the shrunken arm as if it were a foreign thing that did not belong in the bed with her. She spoke without removing her eyes from it. "A sparrow who can no longer fly can sing. And if she can't sing, she can still feel, can still-"

"-Love?" the guard interrupted. "That's exactly right, Angela! We asked this sparrow to sing, and she could not! But we realized she may be capable of love...the kind of love that could only result in frustration for her. Because the real question is, is she capable of *being* loved? Do the words she writes encourage love? Does her beauty or intellect in any way inspire it? It is unlikely that anyone would even try to love her because of that hideous limb. Not that all physical impediments are repulsive. Perhaps if she were only blind..."

"Stop...Please, stop..." Angela pleaded. Her brief taste of defiance had made her want to gag.

"You want to cover your ears, don't you? You want to block out the words, make me go away, maybe you would even like to strike me," he continued. "But you can't do it, can you? That limb jut lies there like a dead weight. Do you see my point?"

"I have my other arm..."

"...whose only function is to hide its

companion. No, Angela, I'm sorry, but the time has come for us to stop swinging the sparrow's string." His anger slowly dissolved and he fell silent for a moment. He attempted to hold her wilted hand in his, but she pulled it away. Instead he took her other hand. "But first I have something I want to show you, something you need to see." He sat on the bed and placed her fingers on his left leg below the knee. "Rub your hand along my leg, Angela. Does the calf feel peculiar to you? Congenital defect, they called it, like they called yours. The leg is gone, at least from the knee down. Amazing what they can do with prosthetics today. But, you see, I have my particular talents. I happen to be quite good at drawing people out, at enabling them to find a way to compensate for their physical shortcomings. And I can be quite decisive when he called upon to make the kind of decisions that others would find distasteful. No one ever asked me to sing, or to fly. But when they came for me, I simply told them what I could do."

Angela struggled to pull her hand free as her anger rose inside her like hot bile. "But you also decide who is to be exterminated! You decide who the state no longer regards as useful! What gives you the right--"

"*This* gives me the right!" he shouted, his breath hot on her face as he tapped her hand on the hard wood of his prosthetic leg. "This has forced me to find my usefulness to others, just as your pathetic limb has forced you to admit that you have none. And I have no intention of relinquishing my usefulness by allowing you to continue your hollow existence. I refuse

not to matter!"

The guard's renewed anger seemed to embarrass him, and he turned away from Angela. He ran his fingers through his blond hair in an attempt to collect himself, and when he again looked down at his leg he noticed that Angela's hand was grasping it. Angela knew he had been unaware of her touch until he had looked. When his eyes locked with hers, her mouth curled in a bitter smile.

"I *feel* this," she said as she ran the tiny hand of the wilted arm along his wooden leg. "I feel this with both of my hands, even the one you call useless. Tell me what you feel when I touch you. Does this prosthetic device extend all the way to your heart?" Angela tapped on the artificial limb as if she were expecting a reflexive kick.

"A curious question," he answered. "You might have made a fine idealist if you had believed in God."

She moved close to his face and whispered, "...to get to the other side. That is why a chicken would cross the road, isn't it?"

He paused for a moment to look at her. "Such blue eyes," he said. "Such exquisitely beautiful blue eyes." He called for the guards to take her, and within moments three entered the room and another two waited by the doorway.

She presented no struggle and went quietly with them. She wondered as they walked if one of them would take her hand.>

Pain

Pain like molten metal singing down the skin,  
Like a wire penciling strokes sharp and thin.  
Until thoughts blur to the joy of death.  
When the narrow indrawn breath  
Cannot relieve the tickling  
Of a million fingers prickling.

Sweet pain that leads you on  
Into madness deep until  
She can rob you of your will  
Then, like a butterfly, is gone.

-Lida Broadhurst

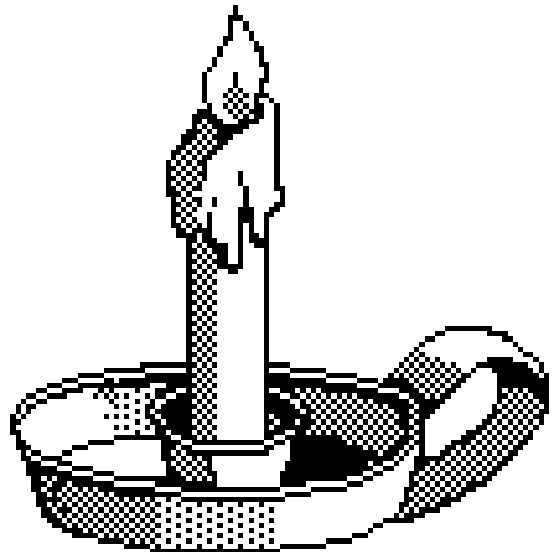


### A Single Candle

Dark.  
Darkness.  
Living darkness.  
Darkness Living  
In my mind.  
In my heart.  
In my soul.  
Dark shadows.  
Listening,  
Watching,  
Waiting.  
Waiting for my  
Failure.  
For my surrender.  
I run.  
The darkness follows.  
The scene  
Changes...  
Graveyard.  
No moon.  
Wind in the trees like the  
Last breath of the dead.  
Dead grass.  
Dead grass littered with  
Unfeeling marble gravestones.  
A single shaft of  
Cold starlight,  
Pointing to a  
Colder obsidian gravestone.  
I look.  
The grave is mine.  
The scene

Changes...  
Eerie forest.  
Utter black.  
A low growl.  
I whirl.  
Red eyes.  
Glowing.  
White canines  
Dripping with slaver.  
Black wolf.  
I run.  
The wolf follows.  
Trees block my path.  
I stumble.  
He gains.  
I tire.  
He leaps.  
I fall under his weight.  
I glimpse the red orbs as  
Teeth tear my throat.  
The scene  
Changes...  
Stone room.  
Passage.  
I walk,  
Turn.  
Stone room.  
Passage.  
I walk.  
The scene repeats.  
I trot,  
Jog,  
Run,  
Panic.  
Dead end.  
Turn around,  
Run.  
Footsteps echo.  
Mind reels.  
Dead end.  
I fall to the floor.

The scene  
Changes...  
Nowhere.  
Tangible shadow.  
A voice.  
"You are mine."  
I am weary.  
I cannot run.  
Cannot fight.  
Only surrender.  
A single candle,  
Appearing from nowhere.  
Light shines about me.  
The darkness shrinks away.  
Hand, holding the candle.  
Arm.  
Body.  
Eyes, shining like beacon fires.  
Showing me a way.  
A face, kind and gentle.  
Full of love.  
You.  
Your hand finds my hand.  
Guides me  
Away.  
Erases the obsidian.  
Slays the wolf.  
Solves the maze.  
Banishes the darkness  
Forever.  
Through the light of your smile.  
The light of a single candle.  
Light.



*-Rebecca Clarke*

## Clocks and Colors Do Not Seize

By Rose Secrest

Her feet, wrapped in burlap, sloshed in the black mud which had the consistency of tar. She wondered what it could be, since the sun was so bright and hot overhead and it never rained. Legend said it was the blood of everyone who went before her. This she had absolutely no reason to doubt, for didn't she bleed a thick, everlasting black stream whenever she was cut? She smeared some mud carefully all over her exposed pink skin. Since it never dried, it should protect her from sunburn. It *was* cool and soothing. She cared little how it made her look.

The hill was steep, and it tired her to travel the length destiny assigned her. She kept her eyes to the ground, avoiding the gazes of those who floated on the golden road above. These were vague figures, since she could only squint upward in quick glances into the bright sunlight. They appeared free of burdens, soft and glorious. She struggled underneath her heavy knapsack.

About halfway up the hill, a flickering image confronted her. *Alas, yet another mirage*, she thought. But no, it was

a man beckoning her. Upon closer study, he appeared radiant and beautiful, aglow with a glorious golden light. She became frightened, but she approached him nevertheless.

She fell to her knees before him, looking up into his face expectantly. The man seemed to have regretted his actions, for he said petulantly, "It appears that fate has brought us together. Keep yourself at bay and consider yourself lucky. Come with me now and journey. Perhaps, though it is not likely, you will bring me to my rich happiness, the place I have fallen from: the golden road."

"But you have no burdens." The woman stood up as she said this, her voice full of curiosity.

The man shook his head. "No, I do not." He turned away. "Let's go," he said disgustedly.

As dusk fell, they sought shelter. The woman usually had fallen on the ground at the first sign of exhaustion and snored where she lay. But this new companion, with some strange, elusive power, found a

small haven. The few rooms were large, musty, and dingy, but there was a bed, running water, bits of furniture, and a smoky kerosene stove.

They washed, the woman scraping the mud of until the man expressed satisfaction. Her lustrous gold-laced hair fell down her back as she loosened her hood. She then stumbled to the bed, where the man was, naked within that mysterious glow that outshone the brass.

"Take your clothes off," he demanded.

Slowly but not demurely she unlaced the sloppy jacket and let it fall. She removed the cloth from her feet. Looking over the man then, she saw that he was not watching her, so, sighing, she removed her shirt and untied her belt, letting her pants fall. She closed her eyes in mental revulsion at her flabby body, then opened them again to shyly peek at the man.

All she could look at was his face, and yet she could see nothing, make no distinction, except that it was the most beautiful face she could ever conceive.

He laughed as he reached for her. He mounted her instantly, his huge, wide penis searching for that small door. He entered suddenly. Searing pain filled her, making her moan. It was rapid, tearing, and then it was over.

She lay unmoving as he got up to wash. She tried to imagine pleasant things, but her mind was blank. She heard him return and briskly fall asleep, but she could only lie there, seemingly for hours, staring up at the textured ceiling and trying to read the words there. She would form a few letters, then lose them as she blinked. The

pattern kept shifting.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning the man locked her in as he went searching for a better situation. That evening she returned in frustration. Occasionally she muttered how much she cared for him, until she learned that it only made him angry; raging at her until he was satiated with her cowering, her bent back, her broken bones. He could then gloat, but she felt no satisfaction at his joy.

The heavy windows were nailed shut. Daily he could pass from the room, while she withered behind the locked door, so she had tried beating upon the glass, to find that it was unbreakable.

By noon the room was unbearably hot. She had the task of cleaning, working slowly, trying to prevent herself from fainting, for she did not wish him to find her lazy. Quickly the room was clean, but no matter how hard she scrubbed the windows, they remained a greasy brown. Her eyes could see nothing beyond the dirt. As she wiped, she chattered over and over, "The dirt is on the outside. I can't get it off."

The man was always eager each evening to beat her. "Why can't you bleed red as I do?"

The sight of her black blood sickened him. Less and less did he penetrate her. The woman accepted this with quiet contentment.

\* \* \* \*

"I cannot leave, yet he, who is free, remains with me. He must consider me

worthy of his beauty." She muttered to herself as she sorted through her old knapsack, separating out a few large chunks of pyrite. "My love, which can never reach him, is worthless." She dumped the chunks in the garbage can, no longer seeking his small string of tiny seeds of gold.

\* \* \* \*

Some days the man opened the day to air out the apartment, so he always cast her down into the basement beforehand, locking its heavy door. The woman would pick herself up off the concrete stairs where he had thrown her and crawl into the blackness. Worn out and sooty, she would reach a large cavern, where several black tunnels spread around her haphazardly.

"Where's the jester?" she called. Her first visitor was always the jester in his jaunty outfit that never changed, although his face sometimes did.

He danced out to greet her, his dazzling glitter blinding in the darkness. Her eyes spun as she waited for the rainbow to pause. Red, yellow, blue.

"Hello, sweet lady. Let me fix you a light bulb." His suit fluctuated, purple, green, orange, his

arms and legs leapt, and there appeared a single light over her head.

"Thank you," she whispered.

The jester laughed, swinging about his deck of cards, his silken scarf, his crutch. His uniformly handsome face became lost in the colors. *If only he would be still for one moment*, she thought, but she smiled at his beautifully orchestrated dance. His laughter mounted.

"I shall clothe you beautifully!"

Instantly her black rags were replaced by gaudy, gauzy clothes just like his. The first time this had happened she had been thrilled, but now she knew that the glittery beauty faded once she returned upstairs.

"I no longer will buy your wares!" she screeched. "I no longer have my gold!"

Frowning, the jester gathered himself up. For a second, his alarm clock flashed silver upon her face. She noted the hour, then turned away.

"Well, I will leave you the light and the clothing." He leapt to her left, then was gone.

Another salesman came exactly at noon, according to his brown, lusterless pocket watch. She smirked as he began to praise her beauty, then she yanked his dull brown clothes off to reveal him as a large, white cloud that



misted away.

Satisfied with this victory, she was not disturbed again until four o'clock. This salesman chose to wear a beautiful, shiny blue cloak. He stood before her solemnly, never speaking. His feminine features gleamed.

"I would like peppermint tea."

Instantly he held a silver teapot in one hand, his other he stretched out for payment.

Sadly, she remembered, "I have no more gold."

The salesman now looked at her mournfully, as if seeking an explanation, so she said, "I could no longer fool you. It was worthless."

The effeminate salesman, and only now did she believe him to be really female, bowed his head in sorrow. A flick of his hand hid the teapot. He checked his wristwatch and departed behind her, not looking at her face again.

Now the woman wondered at the colorful salesman. Their wares were fleeting. The man upstairs was, apparently, permanent. She no longer cared for their deception and specious friendship.

At nightfall, the man would return her upstairs.

\* \* \* \*

A morning in autumn witnessed the shattering of the windows and door, and clear, pure light flooded the room. The golden road shone so near it dazzled her. The man pushed and kicked her body out of bed, and she scampered up, trying to lift her sore and bruised legs. She crawled to the

basement to escaped the pain the light caused her.

"As you can see, it is time for me to leave," the man called joyously after her.

"No!" she cried hoarsely. "Wait!" She slid down the basement stairs and passed through the sooty chute that led to the cavern. Wildly she looked at the tunnels, spinning until she dropped into one of them at random. She ran down its twisting corridor, banging her sides as it grew narrower and steeper.

Her energy gone, the tunnel behind her, she entered the clock shop. As all the clocks consistently chimed eight o'clock, she found what she needed. Triumphantly she lifted a dark greenish-black glass box.

She limped to the tunnel, but found her way blocked, because everything demanded payment. She heard a whisper: "Let us extract an ounce of your blood." Unhesitatingly, the woman slid her middle finger into the black tube which now hovered before her. She screamed as the needle bored into her. Her whole hand was aflame as the needle sucked out an ounce of black, heavy blood. Anger slowly pulsed through her as she slumped.

When she next was aware, she stood to find herself in the cavern. She returned upstairs.

"I have something for you." She handed him the glass box.

The man opened it, then dropped it to the floor, shattering it.

A tremor passed through the woman's heart; the floor must be kept clean. Placing her hands flat on the floor, she caught the shards on the palms of her hands. She bled streaks of bright red that throbbed

briefly before freezing  
into a veined pattern.  
When the floor was  
clear, and the shards  
had been absorbed, she  
looked up.

The man held an  
oyster-white rose  
delicately. He spoke.  
"I forgive  
you.">



**fears  
To quench all  
Satan's fires  
If I am the lamb  
Why have you given  
me a heart  
Of woman's flesh  
That splinters into  
red threads  
Bleeds into one  
dark river  
We all must cross  
If I am the lamb  
Why have you given  
me a mind  
That seeks and  
learns  
Re-learns  
Women's ageless  
lessons  
Of trust, of love  
Of betrayal  
And loneliness**

**-D. Kim**

**Meyer**

### **The Lamb**

**If I am the lamb  
Why have you given  
me eyes  
That weep women's  
tears  
Hot and cold blue**

like weary foot soldiers,  
stands us to attention  
in the shadow of the catheter.  
The pain  
that uproots her face  
barks orders  
like a drill sergeant,  
loud and shrill  
as the last days of a life.  
Sometimes,  
despite ourselves,  
we break ranks  
with tears  
and her hollow breath  
reacts instinctively,  
lines us up  
against the wall  
of our emotions  
like firing squads.

*-John Grey*

Protocol

*ATTENTION! PRESENT ARMS!*

*I stand shivering in the cold spring rain  
near the flag draped casket.  
For an instant my hand starts up  
but settles instead against tarnished  
buttons of a coat that's worn and frayed.*

*LET US PRAY*

Boot Camp

This dying gives orders  
marches us to her bedside

*Our father who art in heaven...  
The long forgotten words I discarded  
long ago in a land ruled not  
with honor but instead wanton insanity*



*are spoken with rote like precision.*

**READY! AIM! FIRE!**

*I flinch at the sounds still heard in dreams  
at night that now only echo across  
a field guarded by granite sentinels.*

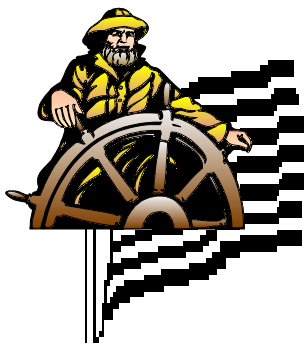
*The silence is broken by sounds of taps  
that flutters down to warn the devil  
of another soul coming as payment  
for debts that will forever remain unpaid.*

*Trained hands quickly fold the flag into  
a damp diamond that with solemn dignity  
is presented to my wife whose bleary eyes  
stare without comprehension straight ahead.*

**RIGHT FACE! FORWARD MARCH!**

*At last the madness is over but as I start  
to walk away a Captain grips my hand and  
speaks of death and the honor of dying  
bravely for what is thought a just cause.  
Blinking back my tears I only remember  
a young man saying as he left the house:  
"Dad this war is really just bullshit.*

*-Robert J. Rodda*



## Thorval at the Ginnungagap

By D. Sandy Nielsen

"Thorval?"

"Thorval?" Odd lightly placed a large hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yah." Thorval did not turn.

Grettir, the ancient shipwright, came up to stand beside Odd, and softly said, "It was Sutr's Breath."

Thorval came about, his reddened eyes staring into Grettir's own. "How long?"

"It's part of the land here. The first settlers knew of it and the Irish monks before them."

"How long?"

"Depends. Sometimes it's quick. Sometimes it lingers. It was merciful this time."

"How long?"

"Maybe two days. Three at the most."

"So if I hadn't delayed, or even stopped, at the Faroes, I could have..."

"Ney!" Grettir cut him off tersely. "Ney!" he commanded. "Don't ever think that. There was nothing you, I, or anyone else, could have done. Had we been here, we'd be just as dead as they."

"It would have been right if I..."

"Don't say another word," Grettir halted him once more.

Odd laid a light hand on his comrade's back. "You should sit down and relax Thorval. Let us prepare the pyres to

send them to the Valhall. We'll call you when we're ready."

"You're right Odd." He patted his friend's arm. "I need a drink more than anything now. I'll be in the ale hut." With that Thorval strode purposely across the meadow grass and down into the dale where the farm's brewery stood beside the brook.

Closing the door behind him, he was temporarily blinded till his eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering in through the cracks in the walls. He took his battle-ax, Unskyld, and cracked open a fresh keg, which he dipped a nearby horn into. Flopping down resignedly onto a bundle of sheep hides he drank the horn in a single quaff. He reached over, dipped the horn in once more, and drank again. And drank.

Thorval thought.

Too late.

Too late.

Always too late.

Finally after all these years he had made the decision. It had been a long time coming. Still he had always known it would come. It was something that he had realized in his youth. He'd known it in his heart of hearts that first time they'd done it. He'd actually known it well before that first time. And now the time, the times, had come and gone. Gone forever. The chance had been borne away to eternity on an ill wind, but it was not a wind, and it was not ill. It was Surtr's Breath, the Blue Haze Death. The

deadly fumes were known at times to spill over the lip of an active volcano and down to the surrounding countryside below. At times the poison was benevolent and swift. At others the death was unnoticeable, slow and lingering, never to be known until it was too late. Yet at other times of volcanic rumblings when fears of the Blue Haze were prevalent, the winds blew all out to sea. It happened. It didn't happen. The three Norn sisters could be cruel in weaving out their fates in this far western corner of the world. The Norns were fickle.

She'd had that light in her eyes, that unquenchable fire. Now quenched. Even back then she sparkled, back in the Field of the Danes, down the Roskilde Fjord, where he had first spotted her as a youth on the gently rolling lands. Back in their younger years when they were immortal, and men, gods, Norns, and death itself, floated by like eiderdown on a hot day. Back when they could hold time in the palms of their uncalloused hands and toy with it whatever way their whims may take.

Those words. Those first words. Words that made the sweetest songbirds sound like barking hounds with bad colds. Musical notes that echoed melodious and sweetly in his mind all these years. Words that kept him warm in seas laden with pack-ice. Words that cooled him on burning desert sands. Words that soothed him while shackled in foemen's dungeons. Words that carried him across the sea of Midgaard, and even to cross the Great Northern Ocean to a new world full of strange Skraelings. Words so clean, so clear, so simple, but the first ones he heard pass her lips, and the first ones to hold so much meaning. Those

words that would resound around the Vault of Asgaard till the Ragnarok, and beyond. The words imprinted on his heart from that moment she spoke them and said, "I'm Silkisif."

Oh, there had been other words. Soft words. Strong words. Good words. Bad words. And far, far, more important words, but none ever stuck the same as that first time she had told him, "I'm Silkisif."

And I?

I, Thorval. Younger, yes. But still the same. Thorval the Brash. Thorval the Brazen. Thorval the Bold. Thorval Loki's Spawn. Thorval Trickster. Thorval the Wit. Thorval the Crafty. Thorval the Sly. Thorval Serpent Tongue. Thorval the Beguiler.

Then a twinkle and greeting.  
Quick change.

Thorval the Paralysed. Thorval Flush-Faced. Thorval Tongue-Tied. Thorval Babbler. Thorval Bumbler. Thorval Oaf. Thorval Stumble-Walk. Thorval the Beguiled. Unfortunately still; always; ever; Thorval Wander-Foot. Older Thorval, I.

Why?

Her lightness of spirit matched my lightness of foot. That's what *I* liked to believe. Really why? A profusion of reasons from my side. And from hers? "???" Questions are asked and questions are answered. Questions are asked and questions are answered. Questions are asked and questions are answered. In there understanding, knowledge gained, an actual comprehension? No. All I know is she waited. She understood. She waited each time. Every time. But I never knew why.

But I was happy, no, ecstatic, each time she did. The rover roped in. What do the worshippers of the White Christ say? You can catch the devil, but you can't keep him.

So a-viking I went. Wet tears left behind to dry on a salted wind.

Thorval cleared his thoughts as the pressure built in his bladder. He struggled off his makeshift seat and staggered to the door, still drinking from the horn. Fumbling one handedly, with his head cocked back, horn's point skyward, he undid the thong that held his breeches fast, he brought out his pissemann and relieved his bladder onto the grass. Ale and urine ebbed and flowed in Thorval like a tide working through a tight fjord. Tucking things away, but leaving thongs undone, he stumbled back in, filled the horn, and flopped back down. His thoughts filtered down the black hold of remembrance.

Flesh-lust, love-lust, family-lust, her-lust, none of them could douse the fires of his overwhelming wander-lust. He *had* to go a-viking. His father had. All the Thorvals and the Thorvalsens before him had taken to the Whale's Road to ride the Wave's Steed. Too many sages heard in childhood had inflamed the desire to see the whole of Midgaard, and more. So at an early age he had pitched high on the waves' crest and low in its trough. Long lonely weeks and months on unruly seas with cold food, cold spray, and cold sleeps, for what, a few moments of excitement? Days of boredom exchanged for a second's thrill. All that endless time he wasted tossed about Njord's realm, he could have been with her. Warm. Snug. Happy. He would have made her the holder of his keys.

Keys that now sat in his pouch with no purpose. Keys that he had brought with him to present to her, to Silkisif. The keys she had waited so long and patiently to hold, to hold in her hand. Keys that he had held off giving her until he could sever the sailor's feet from his legs and settle properly. The keys that were tenable and one could hold in one's hand.

The other keys they had exchanged long since. And those keys they had used. Those keys they had used slowly, carefully, happily, on each other. The first key had unlocked each others' lips on that magical eve and he could still taste her over the bite of bitter ale, sweet and soft as rose petals. Later, the second key had unlocked their bodies secrets, the feel, the flavour, the texture. The third key had unlocked their lust. There were no words, memories, or sensations, to express that first time, and yet it was etched Rune deep in his mind. The other keys were before or after the other three, but he couldn't recall when they had been unlocked and fully opened, keys to his heart, soul, bring, life, meaning. It had given him a footing on the land. A place to return to after each longship expedition. A home for his heart to return to.

"But, but, but," was all that he could manage to stammer when Silkisif told him.

"Don't fret so," she'd replied consolingly. "Think. What difference does it really make to you. You and your comrades are all over Midgaard's surface anyhow."

"Yah, but..."

"And you've often stopped there as it is."

"Still, I..."

"So if you see me there, or here, it's no different."

"Why though?"

"Father had the opportunity to buy a large spread, so he decided it would be best to leave the homestead entirely with my Uncle."

"Iceland is so far from here, our birth place, on the Roskilde Fjord."

"It will be change for me and I know you'll be by."

"My travels take me next to the Great Inland Sea, past the Pillars of Heracles. I won't be Iceland bound till..." he shrugged and let the words hang.

"But you will be by," Silkisif said knowingly, always faithful, always confident. "In the meantime we had better make this opportunity special. Very special. To last till the next time on the new farm."

It was special. They had made it very special. They didn't know. They never knew how special it was. It had been their last time together, in each others arms, their warm living breath, hot on each others' faces.

Thorval felt his eyelids fluttering. He heard the horn fall from his limp fingers. He slipped from consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

It was washed out grey that Thorval tumbled through. He must be falling, but could not tell as there was no up, no down, no side to side. There was nothing. No heat. No cold. No black. No white. It was the void. The endless chasm. The Ginnungagap.

Thorval didn't care. Up, down, east,

west, north, south, it didn't matter. There was no direction in a directionless abyss. Thorval felt strangely content that his surroundings should match the hollowness of his heart and soul. If he was falling and plummeting down to Niflheim, frozen realm of Loki's monstrous spawn, Hel, he would kiss her icy lips full with his own and resign himself to his fate. If he was being swept along to Muspellheim, he would embrace Surtr's fiery being as tight and possible and roast in his flames. And if he floated forever in this grey void, till the end of time, to the Ragnarok, and beyond, that was fine too. There was nothing left for him now.

Thorval was alone in the Ginnungagap, with no sensations, no soul, no being, no heart. He floated in absence.

Time was meaningless.

A black speck appeared to Thorval's left. It grew in size until he could make out the form of a black raven. It flew closer and closer till it flew by his left ear, then disappeared.

Thorval remembered.

Thorval remembered his life. He remembered his travels around Midgaard. He remembered the exhilaration he felt on seeing, on setting foot on, each new land. He remembered his companions, Grettir, Niping, Gruntle, Odd Bud, and all the others. He remembered their exploits and adventures together. He remembered good times and bad, dangerous places, and safe havens.

*He remembered.*

Another speck appeared on his right. It too grew to the shape of a black raven that flew by his right ear, then vanished.

Thorval thought.

Thorval thought of the devotion that his friends had for him. How they had often saved each others' lives in tight scrapes and always watched each others backsides. He thought of how they would be lost without his guidance and easy manner in holding the unruly band together. He thought of how he needed them. He thought of his parents, and grandparents, and how he was the son names Thorval, and was expected to carry on that name.

He *thought*.

"Not yet!" a voice echoed around Thorval, "I might have plans!" It resounded from everywhere and from nowhere.

Searing pain imbedded itself into Thorval's shoulders. He looked quickly to each side and saw sabre-like talons dug into his flesh. He looked upwards and saw a massive eagle flapping its wings, carrying him off. He felt a breeze on his face for the first time in this void from the flap of feathers. He was being borne away from the center of the infinite abyss. Away from the Ginnungagap.

The grey ahead seemed to be lightening. A pure white dove appeared beside Thorval's head. As it flew along it whispered into Thorval's ear in a gentle male voice, "He is the Val-Father, but after his plans for you are finally completed, you will reside with use in Folkvangr."

An identical dove whispered into his other ear in a female voice, "And I will watch over her until that day in my hall Sessrymnir."

"Thorval!" The call was hard, yet scared. "Thorval!"

Thorval strained with heavy lids to see blurred images before him. He was

being violently shaken.

"I think he's coming around," Odd stated with relief, still shaking him.

"Good, hold him still now," Grettir Shipwreck instructed.

Thorval managed to focus on the heavily wrinkled face of Grettir before he felt Grettir's fist plunge deep into his belly.

"Let him go," Grettir told Odd Bud.

Thorval fell to his knees and crouched over. He heaved his guts out all over the turf beneath him. When his stomach was totally emptied, he spat several times and straightened up on his knees, rasping out, "Did you have to punch so hard?"

"You were hardly breathing when Gruntle found you." Grettir's face crinkled with relief.

Niping came over and put an arm around his shoulders, glad to have his old friend still at a level where he could lend comfort. "You okay Thorval?"

"Yah."

"Come," Gruntle grunted. "Still sniff bad down here." He shooed Niping away and lifted Thorval off his knees and slipped Thorval's arm over his thick shoulders and began to walk him up the hill. "Stink air make me scare."

"Huh?"

Grettir answered, "Some of the Blue Haze is lingering down here and especially in the brew house. It was enough with the amount of ale you guzzled that we nearly lost you."

"Curse you, Thorval," Odd Bud said exasperated by the events, "you have the luck of Loki."

"Yah."

\* \* \* \*

The crew gathered solemnly around the pyre they had made for Silkisif and her family. The other members had been duly laid out and covered, only Silkisif had been wrapped.

*Even in death she has composure,*

Thorval thought as he looked down upon her face for the last time in Midgaard. He still felt unsteady on his feet and a bit dizzy.

Niping stood next to the pyre with flint and steel in hand, ready to ignite the dry tinder. "You ready, Thorval?"

Thorval looked up to Niping and beyond him he could see two shimmering white ephemeral figures. Male and female, but unmistakably twins. Was it the Vanir fertility twins? They nodded their consent at him. Thorval faltered on his feet, regained his balance and shook his head. When he looked up again, there was nothing behind Niping but empty field.

"Wait."

Thorval walked up to the prone figure of his beloved. He took her still hand in his, and with the other reached into his pouch. He placed the keys in her hand and set her other hand over them. "You'll have to wait a little longer," he whispered to the breeze. "Sorry. Sorry as I've always been, but I know you'll understand, and wait, as you always have, Silkisif." He unfastened his scarlet cloak and pulled it over her.

Thorval stood back from the pyre and nodded to Niping. Niping struck the flint to steel and the tinder ignited immediately. Soon the pyre was blazing with full fury, its smoke rising high into the heavens.

"Their souls are sped off to the Valhall now on the fleet hoofs of the

Valkyrie's steeds." Grettir tried to comfort Thorval. "Silkisif will soon be leading the Valkyries on their quests across the heavens."

"Ney," Thorval said under his breath so none heard will he stared into the flames, "She holds my keys now and will be tending things till I join her in the green fields of Folkvangr."

The fires continued to die down till nothing was left but a few glowing embers. Odd came up behind Thorval and saw him clearly for the first time since he had removed his cloak and exposed his bare arms. "By Odin's lost eye!" he exclaimed, looking down on either side of Thorval's jerkin, "What are those?"

Thorval twisted his head to look at the large red welts raised up on the front and back of his shoulders. He answered as a man resigned to his lot, "Just a touch of something.">

## Stillborn

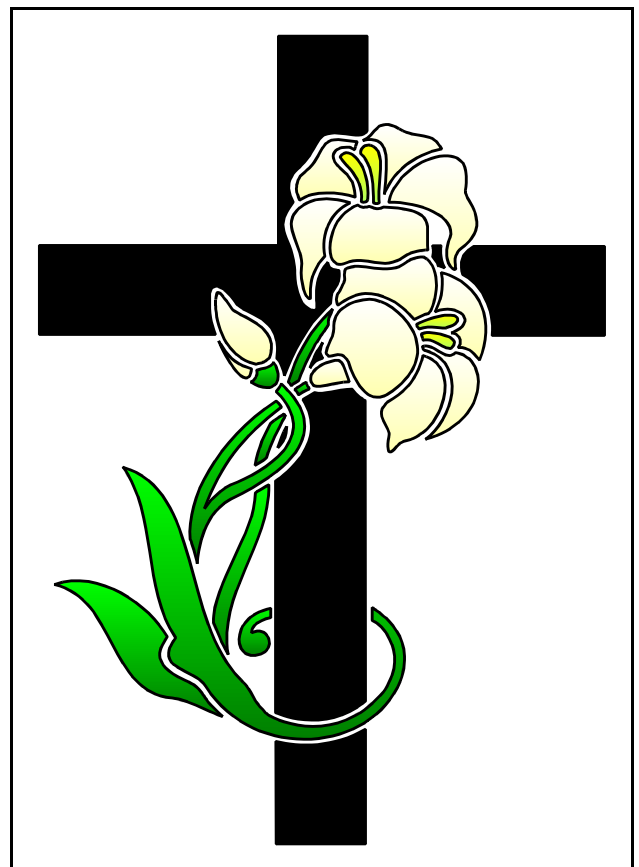
I need to go away

To find a cool, dark place:  
To hide,  
Sit quietly  
And forget  
The slicing of my soul.

Coarse fabric  
Brushes my cheek.  
Nails pierce  
My skin as I  
Press my back to the wall:  
Huddled in a ball

Exposed fetus  
Searching for a vacant womb.

But the canal  
Is elusive.  
And I strangle  
On the useless cord.  
Stillborn  
Yet choking  
On life.



-Deidra Cox



## Grendel

By Jeffery Lewis

To lie with a dead body, put my hands beneath the corpse cloth, through the orgy of maggots in the Gehenna offal to find the secret spot, that secret penis, the secret clitoris, stroke it, praise it, blow on it, glow in into phoenix egg, hatch it from Platonic psalms--to raise a dead body! To raise the dead, all the dead into the dawn of knowledge, that place where all of Richard Speck's victims woke. That is the reason I raise Grendel, monster, from the dim Danish past, to life.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Lydia takes Tip, our new baby goat, Proserpina's son to town to show Mariah's kindergarten class I relax in the living room and read a bit about Grendel and Beowulf, in Night Creatures. I did not realize the legend was Danish. Grendel means 'grinder' and the name of the hall he invades is Herot, where King Hrothgar holds sway. I am particularly struck by the description of the lake where Grendel's dam, mother lives: "The lake, fed by icy mountain torrents, spread grey under a weeping sky. Black cliffs fringed it, and ancient ash trees, crusted with lichens and stiff hoarfrost, grew along the shore. On slimy ledges and in the water, serpents flashed and coiled. Bits of flesh bobbed on the surface, and the air was heavy with the odor of decay."

\* \* \* \* \*

It is winter outside, brilliant snow I drive through to the Sleepy Eye, our local bar. Before I turn into the driveway I stop at the mail box and note the name Hrothgar on it. Satisfied, I turn into the drive. I get out of the truck and go to the door. I go through the outside door into the inner vestibule. The Tombstone Pizza sign on the inside door says OPEN. The door is locked when I try it. I notice that there is a check stuck in the door, apparently left for me. I reach out to take it--it is made out to me. There is also some money on the floor, a small sheaf of bills. I pick these up. As I pick up the money up it turns to a chunk of bloody meat.

I do not feel like Grendel. I am not a monster. Why is the door closed to me, the door to the sleepy eye, the public house, the Herot, the Scylding Hall of this particular area? I do not feel like Grendel. I look down at my body, my hands do not have fur and long claws. The door is

closed to me, the sleep door is closed to me like a maidenhead. To me! The money was left like an offering to an evil god, a fearsome demon. A bowl of blood to drink, a chunk of raw meat, a check...a check like a prayer or omen to keep out the...the evil. It is though I were an unclean demon and Sleepy Eye was the clean temple, cleansed by the light, by day, by Christ, by Beowulf. I do not have claws even though I live at the bottom of Key Biscayne where I watch the storms come in through the Janus door from the bottom of the well. I am locked out, chased away, a pariah. A wave of horrible loneliness sweeps through me followed by a rush of wild anger, followed by sadness and defeat. Taking the check and the meat, I leave.

After reading about Grendel for a half an hour or so, I lie down to take a brief nap. I am driving to Sleepy Eye in our truck. It is winter, there are heaps of brilliant snow along the road. I stop right at the Sleepy Eye mail box. I look at the mail box, the name is scraped off although I have the sense I know who it is who lives here. I turn in the East side of the Sleepy Eye driveway. I get out of the truck and go up to the door. I go inside the vestibule. I am now carrying an armload of fire wood but discover the inner door is closed to me. And I mean closed! There is a check sticking out of the door. I take it in my free left hand and look at it. The check has KEEP OUT! scrawled across it. I feel terribly sad and defeated, like Apollo with an armload of Daphne no one wants.

\* \* \* \* \*

Detective Sowl looked down at the pathetic body of the victim lying up against the brick side of the Board of Education Transportation Garage. The man was dead, his name was Both, Sowl had determined that. There were multiple stab wounds in the fellow's chest. The suspect, a grubby, drunken little piece of scum had stood around after killing the old man, then phoned the police himself. Robbery was the apparent motive for the crime. Both had 78 cents in his front pocket. *Christ*, thought Sowl, *what a waste*.

Sowl stood up into the cool Duluth air. If he had to make a guess as to the precise center of town, this spot was close. The same Central Hillside neighborhood between the East, the good side of town and the West, the unsavory side, had by far the highest crime rate in the city. It seemed almost as though there was an invisible barrier, a sort of ... maidenhead between the two sides of town Sowl thought. And the infamous and as yet uncaught Central Hillside rapist was trying again and again in a compulsive, stumbling, violent way to break it. Sowl shook his head in the night air, *stick to the facts, stick to the facts!* he reminded himself. Several officers had just arrived with the yellow ribbon to close off the crime scene. There was still lots of work to be done, a murder to clean up.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have been alone for centuries. Men shun me, women do not come near me. I have been alone for centuries, eons maybe. I long ago sought the woods to end the pain. I paw through the rotten trees, eat grubs. I suck the phallic protuberances of mushrooms, the suns of soma bulbs rising like nuclear fireballs from the oak leaf literature of the forest floor. I make love to moccasin flowers in the late spring. I try to catch the female deer but I am not fast enough. In the stars my agony is clear, clear as the sharp night air. Sometimes, yes sometimes, I still go to

their doors, a were-flower that could grow in their heads, in their sleep to beautiful power, but the sleep doors are all locked against me. The public halls of their churches are all closed to me. The Devil lives down there they say. The Scylding Halls where they pray and feast on their thin wafers and powerless wine are all closed. They do not want the knowledge of blood, of true incarnation in their head, let alone in their bed. They do not want the knowledge of the nose, of the belly, of touch, of sex. They do not want to know in the flesh, in the imagination's deep flesh.

I groan, I moan through the swamps, over the hills. I take the offerings of money, of blood, meant to propitiate me. I am not dead, I never was dead, I never will be dead. That was a lie. I groan because I know what the headlines will be. Murder, Rape, Gore, Blood, War, Earthquake, Storm, Hate. Grendel again they will say. Grendel the monster they accuse while they feast on the news with their eyes, caressing the murdered bodies on the airport floor with their deep beings. Grendel! they will accuse. Kill Grendel! Execute Grendel! Cure Grendel They will blame it all on me. Hate me, close the door even harder. Go to their corners, like the Mathmid, and study the Law, trying to determine what tiny iota of the will written down on the yellow legal pad of the Torah is theirs. I could tell them, I could show them! The deep will.

The night is cold. I am alone. I am as alone as a rock. Or a screaming winter tree rooted in the rock knowledge of his rejection. King of the dump, down in the maggoty offal of Gehenna. They turn over in their sleep and check me, lock the door, forget the beast with his roses. Grendel they call me though I am fair, even handsome. *Out, demon!* their Beowulf Christ screams at me as he rips off their left arms. Their left arms, not mine! This is their cure. Rip off the path that offends thee. Then create a universe of delicious, unconsciously desired and misunderstood crime.

What do I have, what could I bring? What is my were-flower? Only the red rose of the primal flesh. The carnal knowledge that they can never be destroyed, that they are gods creating the world, even the evil of it. They do not want the indestructible brick of the fire flower.

I take the check, I take the money. Or I take the sad platter of blood left out for me, the prayer against the beast, the dog. Their legs are all closed to the communion I offer. The phallic-vaginal knowing. The phallus with wings to fly through the crown of thorns into the incarnation. They are all like teen angels with their legs closed protecting their maidenheads. My loneliness at the bottom of the lake they call No Man's is agony. My cave is not littered with bones, with scraps of flesh, it is filled with poems, with mushrooms that cum, with foetal worlds, with living pearls that smell of the conquest of death, of infinite time, with forgiveness for all crime. Forgiveness *and* understanding which is infinitely superior to mercy.

Yes, this loneliness can erupt in violence, in crime, in evil. In murder where the murderer buries his freezing hands in the warm knowledge of death. In rape where a man attempts to force the hymen. Everyone will blame Grendel.

They will put his right hand on the Bible, make him swear never more, never more. They will rip his left arm off and then tell him it's still there. He will feel the left-handed path somewhere. They will convince the victim he or she never had a left hand in the first place. They will praise the sleepy eye. They will inject both with repetitious compulsion, and a sense of

endless loss. They will obscure the origin of it beneath the fig leaf where the organs of knowing were torn out. They will build the Notre Dame in both of their brains, buttress of repression. They will build an iron curtain in their minds. He will never understand why he stabs and stabs.

He will violate the beautiful flesh again and again. The flesh of the woman, the nurse, the starlet, the mother, the Virgin. Or on the battlefield with a bullet, with gas, with napalm, the violated in the ditches, heaps of them never smelling of the secret he knows, he knows is there. That's why he's there, in the war, it is the only place where he can search among the dead for the knowledge he knows is there. He finds only corruption, gore that does not turn to wine, water smelling like dead fish.

Corruption, corruption, corruption! Rotten bricks, the universe is corrupt to begin with he thinks.

*Grendel, Grendel!* they scream! *Cast Grendel out!* they howl, their maidenheads still intact, still virgins in their own minds to their own Achilles' hell. The secret death wish. To know it. To lie with a dead body, put their hands beneath the corpse cloth through the orgy of maggots to find that secret spot, that secret power, as much as theirs as a penis or clitoris. To find that place, the power, to stroke it, praise it, blow on it, start the coal, make the phoenix egg glow, hatch their own rebirths under their own power! To raise the dead, all the dead into the dawn of knowledge of that place where all *grendel's* victims wake, where all *Grendels* wake, immaculate, fresh, and unjudged. That is the place they wish to touch, to know. Faith is not enough.

*Grendels* do not want blood that tastes of the veins of an old man stabbed to death on the freezing street. *Grendels* do not want knowledge that tastes like a pension check, or jingles like 78 pathetic cents. *Grendel's* do not want the sad old man's life, the bitter taste of it. *Grendels* do not wish to rend teenage bodies in car wrecks to lick the gore off the plastic seat. *Grendels* want to taste the wine of knowing, of immortal knowledge beyond the veil of death. For this they are called monster, beast, demon by those who have not ventured into their own *Grendel's* dens.

\* \* \* \* \*

The patrol car had come and taken the suspect in the Both slaying, Wold, to the station. Wold had not tried to resist arrest. Beneath the yellow and blue neon sign for the Fourth Street Market the suspect had looked singularly unprepossessing. His face was round and vaguely Hispanic with a thin Zapata moustache, a wide, blunt nose and tousled brown hair. His eyes were wide set and intense black, though blurred by drink. He did not look much like a murderer, Sowl had thought, though they seldom did.

Sowl had searched the body, there were ten wounds in the chest and abdomen. The inventory of personal possessions was pathetic. Along with the 78 cents were three identification cards, a red tassel cap, a blood stained letter from the Coast Guard and one strange item Sowl had opened and scrutinized many times now in the dim light from the street lamps. He unfolded it now to study again, it fairly reeked with significance, but what significance? The case was straight forward and obvious; the criminal already apprehended, the motive clearly robbery. Why did this information leave him so ... so, unsatisfied? So hollow? *What about meaning?* piped a

little voice somewhere in his mind. Sowl had ceased long ago to search for something so literary as meaning in the blunt and randomly violent world of crime. *But what of this sheet, then?* squeaked the tiny voice, more an intuition than a voice. Wold looked at the sheet. It was blood stained, one of the knife thrusts had penetrated it.

Scribbled across the sheet in long hand in pencil were a number of short quotes. The quotes were all taken from T.S. Eliot's poems, as though Both had just come from the library where he had gathered them. It seemed completely uncharacteristic of what little he knew and could guess about the victim that he should have such quotes in his possession or be interested in their maker. On the other side of the sheet was a short shopping list consisting of four items: toilet paper, light bulbs, fruit and wine. So maybe Both had picked up the piece of paper at the library to make the shopping list?

Sowl read through the quotes again. The heading at the top of the page read T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, and then beneath this a second heading, East Coker, followed by the quotations:

"The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility; humility is endless."

"O dark dark dark."

"The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters  
all go into the dark."

"In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance."

Then came the heading, Little Gidding, followed by several more quotes:

"You must kneel  
Where the prayer has been valid."

"The communication  
of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living."

and finally:

"every poem is an epitaph."

Wold looked up from the mysterious paper. The night breeze from the east brought the scent of Lake Superior with it. It was a damp, slightly rotten smell tonight, a scent of approaching spring. *Eliot sure was defeated by death!* he thought to himself as he stared down at the pathetic body on the sidewalk. But then this corpse daunted him, it was a wall, a wall of darkness, an ignorance beyond which he could not see. The poet and the body made him feel slightly feeble and frustrated. I guess we all go ignorant into death, I guess we're all the profundities of a defeated man, Sowl knew that much. The words were limp and impotent, what had Both been doing with them? They were like the words of a priest said over a grave, the dark of a grave.

The stab wound went right through the center of the page, a bloody portal through the longest one about "no ecstasy" and the "way of ignorance." Sowl held the sheet up to the street lamp and peered through the bloody slit. What was through it, on the other side? But then, of course, the poet, like the preacher at his own father's funeral was right, we cannot see our demise, or guess to know the purpose of it, none of us can--that is the realm of Providence. The bloody body on the sidewalk defeated him, the mysterious paper defeated him, his mind felt flat and numb, with an intense headache coming on. He'd seen enough, he'd strained his eyes and mind trying to see something which was not there. It was all dark dark dark. He folded the paper again and put it with the rest of the personal items. They made a poor epitaph, perhaps a poorer poem.

As Wold stepped beneath the yellow crime scene ribbon he felt a surge of rage. Its intensity frightened him. He had been feeling surges of rage often of late. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to ride them if they got any worse. He hated feeling defeated, he hated the black wall of ignorance, he hated the poet's whine of humility, he hated the priest muttering his impotence at his father's funeral. The rage surged into his shoulders and made him feel like hitting or stabbing something.

As Sowl sat behind the wheel of the patrol car with his eyes closed fighting off the start of the headache he found himself wishing for a poem like a knife, a knife to slash a door in the dead body on the sidewalk with, a door through the brick wall of the dark dark dark. He wished the dark lake smelled like roses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both woke in his one room apartment in the Apollo Hotel on First Street. He'd been sipping red wine reading about the wreck of the H. M. S. Pandora on The Great Barrier Reef off Australia's north coast, in an old National Geographic, when he must have dozed off.

He'd been there, he remembered he'd been there. He could smell the stench of the box, the Pandora's box, Captain Edwards had built on the poop deck of the Pandora. He'd been in that box along with the other criminals, the mutineers from the Bounty that Edwards had captured. He'd been in that box! Stinking, starving, naked, along with the rest of them he'd escaped. He'd crawled up out of the box onto the deck of the heeling ship where he'd jumped into the wild water and made his way to the boats. He had done it! He felt a fantastic sense of relief at being free. Free, back in his little room with his wine and his memories of a life time in the Coast

Guard. Free! He wouldn't die in that stinking, cramped box. Free!>

## Abandoned Places

By Gerard Daniel Houarner

Sahe let her horse go when she reached the beginning of the Palace ruins. The animal snuffled, then turned and ambled back towards the creek running at the foot of the hill, along the remains of the Inner City wall. She wouldn't be needing a horse anymore. She had no where else to go.

There was shade under an arch, and Sahe brought her pack to the spot and sat down. She stripped off the boiled leather armor, mail, and the plates protecting her legs and forearms. After wiping the sweat from her body with



the under padding, she threw the torn and stained material, along with the rusted armor, down the hill. Metal clattered on stone and raised small clouds of dust. A few great, black birds landed by the padding and picked at the fabric with their dark beaks. She was too tired to throw away the weapons.

She drank and ate the last of her rations, then cleaned the cut across her stomach and the wound in her side. Blood dribbled from both. The effort to throw away her old life had opened the wounds again.

The healing

potion the witch by the walking tree had prepared for her was all gone. The witch had said she doubted the poisons that had edged her enemies' weapons would retreat before the magic preparation. She had been right. But the potion had been strong enough to let Sahe complete the final part of her journey. That had been her only wish.

Death would claim her by the next day's morning. She stopped tending to the wounds and sighed. She took a long look around her.

Death had already claimed her old city, dragged its inhabitants away, left its spirit to die. Even the thieves and squatters were gone. Nothing remained.

Except memories. In her youth, she had walked the Avenue of Gods from the Inner City to the Outer Gate and back on every Temple Day. She statues that lined the Avenue, each three times the height of a man, painted with gold and dressed in robes made from the armor of foreign warriors, pealed beside the splendor of her father and brothers and sisters. She had danced the Supplication before the citizens and the Seduction for the priests. Oil scents had been created for her in the Baths; flowers given her name in the Gardens.

On this last walk, she had found the walls torn down. The Avenue was littered with broken statuary and stones from monuments and buildings. The Temples were empty shells. The Gardens had been salted. Only dust and her own unbathed body perfumed the air.

Sahe dug deeper into her pack and drew out a bundle. Carefully, she untied the knot that held the cloth wrapping together. Then she pieced together the pottery

fragments, cementing the pieces to one another with her blood. She spoke the words the city's last sorcerer had told her to say. Then she lay back and waited for the magic to start.

The sun set. The birds flew off to reinforce their nests with her padding. Cold came with darkness. A breeze moaned in partly collapsed cellars, whistled through cracks in the walls. Life did not return to the city. Perhaps it was the poison in her blood. Or perhaps the magic was dead. Like her quest, and her city.

She had spent a lifetime acquiring shards of a mythical broken pot that had once contained the blood of an ancient god. Sorcerers had told her these fragments could restore the old empire. They were stained with a god's power. But the power of an ancient god was not enough. Her life had been spent for nothing.

Perhaps the witch had been right. After hearing Sahe's tale, she had admonished the princess. She should have run off with the conquering prince's son when she had the chance. Their children might have won her the new empire that had been raised on the ashes of the old.

But all Sahe had left, in the dark heart of the night, was an open grave on which the last coals of memory died away to nothing.>





*...beginnings*



## **About the Contributors...**

**Kurt Newton** is a 33 year-old lab technician from Brooklyn, Connecticut. He appeared in the premier issue of *Samsara* with the story "Hot Clouds, Warm Rain."

**Timothy M. Jacobs** has been writing short stories and poetry for nine years. He is currently working on a novel entitled "Cemetery Knights" which is being optioned for a feature length film through an independent film company. He is from Guilford, Connecticut.

**Dennis McDade** is an orderly at a physical rehabilitation hospital in Tyler, Texas. "Will or Way" is based loosely on a few young men Dennis has had in his care.

**Corrine DeWinter** is from Springfield, Massachusetts.

**Kat Ricker** is a Youngstown State University graduate with a double major: Theatre and English. She has received some fifty small press acceptances. "The Tale of the Gargoyle" has been published in *Wonderdisk* and *Young Blood* before appearing in *Samsara #2*. She is from Ashtabula, Ohio.

**B. Kim Meyer** has a number of small press poetry credits. She is an avid biker, and a pet-a-holic. She is from Athens, Alabama.

**Kenneth C. Goldman** has over fifty small press credit to his name. "Swing a Sparrow On a String" has appeared in *Tails of Wonder #1*, *The Vinyl Elephant #3*, and in *Beyond the Moon #1*.

**Lida Broadhurst** is from Oakland, California.

**Rebecca Clarke** lives in the small town of Prescott, Arizona with a husband and three cats. "A Single Candle" is one of her favorite poems that she has written.

**Rose Secrest** is a native of Tennessee. She has been writing since she

was fourteen. She has written five novels, a novelette, and several short stories.

**John Grey** is a poet from Providence, Rhode Island.

**Robert J. Rodda** is a 60 year-old writer with 17 small press poetry credits to his name. He describes why he writes as follows: "It's something I've always wanted to do, and now with some extra time, I'm trying my damndest to become good at it. Truthfully, at my age, it's better than planting cactus or bodies in the back yard." He lives in Apache Junction, Arizona.

**D. Sandy Nielsen** is a writer from Brampton, Ontario. "Thorval at the Gunnungagap" is based on Nordin mythology.

**Jeff Lewis** has had prose published widely. He is from Spring Grove, Minnesota.

**Deidra Cox** has over 85 publishing credits behind her. She has completed her first novel, "When the Sparrow Cries," a weird mix of sci-fi, dark fantasy and suspense.

**Gerard Houarner** is from the Bronx, New York.

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*Samsara #2*

*Summer 1994*

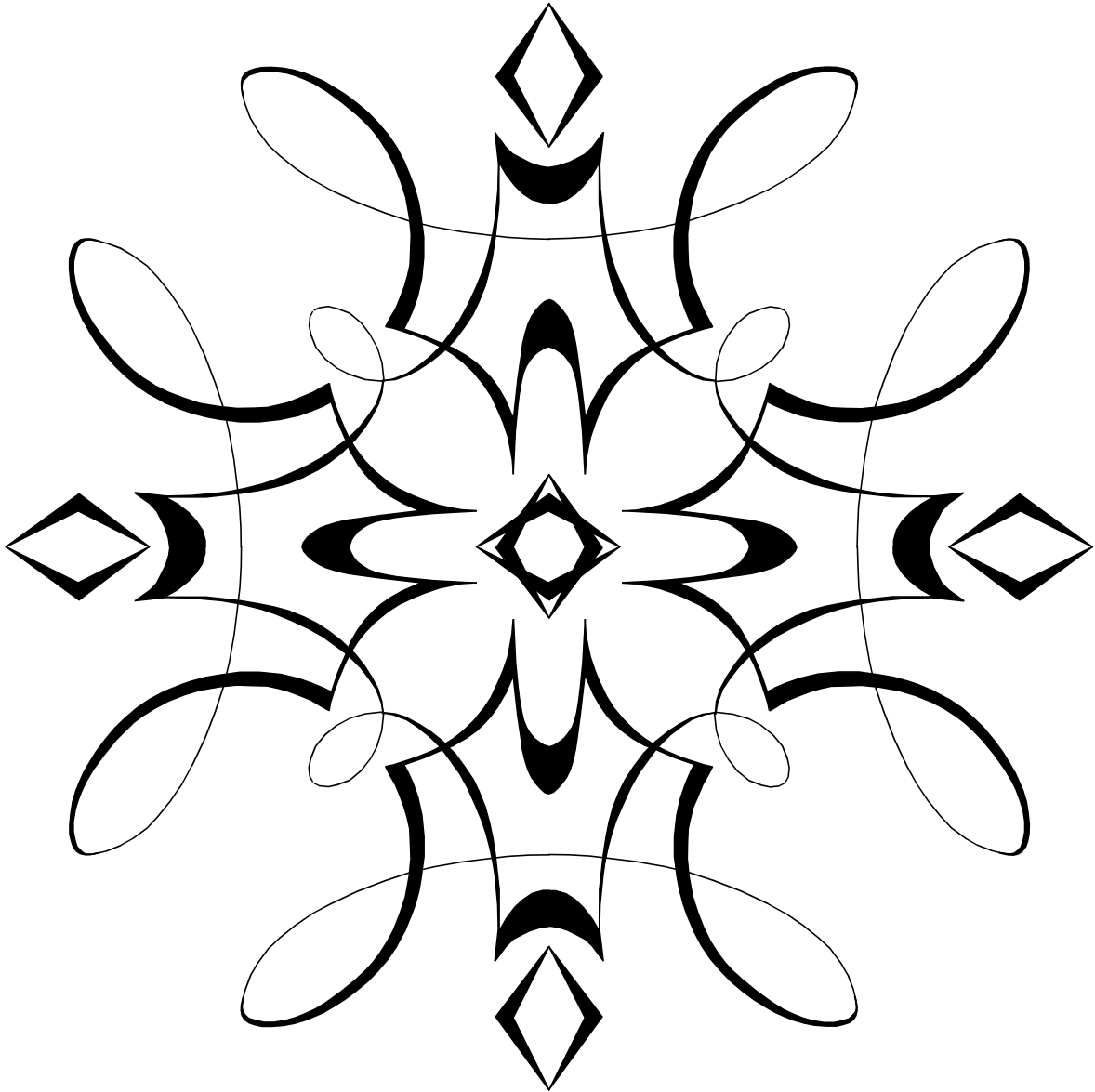
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*Summer 1994*

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