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Mythic Circle #10

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Mythic Circle #10

Abstract

Welcome to The Mythic Circle #10. We have a first in this issue: a pair of stories written by father and son. Dan Ryan, a Phoenix, Arizona, high school student, has written a re-telling of the Romeo & Juliet story entitled "The Chain." His father, Charles W. Ryan, provides us with a short story called "Janus Winked." You'll also notice we're running a lot of poetry in this issue, including a series of poems by Jill Solnicki that examine fairy tale heroines from an unusual angle.

Additional Keywords

Mythic Circle; Mythopoeic

THE MYTHIC CIRCLE #10

Fall - 1990



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elfin corner trees by Charles Ramppinside back cover

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MERLUSINE

by Janet P. Reedman

I had been wandering for a year when I stumbled on Castra Castle. The month was Mys Rhagvyr, the Year's Wane, and the weather had been cruel and cold, bringing snow and ice and hail. I had left my post in an outland tavern two months before, after an altercation with a thieving landlord who treated me like a slave and then withheld my pay; but I was regretting my actions now, for my belly was empty and my clothes ragged as a beggar's.

I laughed bitterly as I walked the pinewoods of the lowland hills. I'd gone seeking my Destiny, and found only poverty. My hair was full of burrs, and I hadn't shaved in several weeks. My cheekbones stuck out like swordblades, and my breeks barely stayed up on my hips. I wondered if I'd last the winter -- and then I spied Castra Castle.

It lay in a little hollow, a small place, more a fortified manor than a true castle. Ivy swathed its broken walls, and the crenellations were smashed from the top of the Keep. I hastened gladly towards it. Though a ruin, it would provide some shelter from the elements. Maybe there would even be some herbs left in the garden, so important to all strongholds.

I climbed the wall near the old sallyport; the bar-bican at the entrance had collapsed inwards, its two great drum-towers lying across each other like fallen chessmen. I guessed that they had been broken by undermining, during some Border siege. The Northern wastes had always been violent, troubled lands, and many castles lay shattered like Castra.

Entering the overgrown bailey, I strode toward the Keep -- and then I stepped upon the adder. Hissing, it lunged at me, fangs extended. I tried to slash it with my dagger, but I wasn't quick enough, and its teeth sank into my leg.

The pain was terrible. Even as the snake slithered away, I crumpled to the ground, frightened and confused. I had seen men die of snakebite before, and such deaths were not pleasant. I didn't know what to do. Swelling had already begun to puff my calf and turn it dark. I slashed at the twin incisions with my knife, but I knew the poison could be removed only by sucking -- and my mouth could not reach that part of my leg.

"Gods help me!" I moaned, but it was no god who came to my aid. Out of the keep came a woman, a vision of loveliness in her blue-and-gold raiment. She was tall, fine-boned, pale, with long silver hair caught up with a jet clasp. Her eyes were

dark blue, and full of concern. "Are you hurt?" she asked in a voice thick with a foreign accent. "I heard you cry out."

"A snake..." I gasped, pointing to my leg.

She knelt down, white with consternation. Taking off her corded belt, she wrapped it tightly round my upper leg. Then she took my knife from me, cut a cross on the bite mark, and then began to draw forth the venom into her own fair mouth. When she was done, she spat on the grass and wiped her lips. "You will live," she said simply.

I stared at her, amazed. I had not expected a lady, obviously highborn, to help a filthy wanderer from the wilds in such a manner. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Merlusine is my given name, though few call me that in this land. Here, they call me Merla."

"And you live in this castle?" I gestured to the ruins.

"I do. I -- I am hiding from my husband, Lord Tier-nan. He abused me sorely while we were together." A shadow darkened her face. "I told him I didn't want to marry, but he insisted, and my brother was all too glad to throw me to him."

She glanced away. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear my woes. Let me help you into the Keep, where you may rest and dine. You look half-starved!"

"What about the serpent?" I asked. "Shouldn't we search for it and kill it? It's dangerous ..."

"No." She shook her head. "It may give us some protection against Tieman. He seeks to punish me."

I struggled to my feet, and with Merlusine's strong arm around me, I limped into the castle Keep. The tower was still in fairly good condition, its floors and roof complete, if rotting. Only a few holes broke the sturdy beams of the conical parapet.

Merla ushered me into a chamber still bearing a shabby splendor. She tossed some logs onto the fire that burned on the hearth, and motioned me to a chair. "I'll prepare something for you to eat," she said. "What is your name?"

"Ilmarinen," I replied. "Ilmarinen Ap Ilmater."

She glanced keenly at me. "That's a noble name."

"Well, I'm not noble." I leaned back, stretching my long legs before the hearth. "I'm from Theldry-on-the-Moor, a humble little place ..."

She shrugged. "No matter. Lord or not, you're welcome to stay in Castra Castle as long as you wish. I'd appreciate a man's company -- you can help me with some of the chores."

I was startled. "Aren't you afraid, taking in a stranger from the wilds?"

She looked at me again, a subtle smile on her lips. "I have ways of protecting myself, Ilmarinen," she said, "but I'm sure I won't have to use them on one such as yourself."

Weeks passed in Castra, pleasant weeks. Merla had cultivated herbs and vegetables, and had also stored the meat of coneys and other beasts, so we ate well. I even fashioned myself a bow of yew and went hunting in the nearby forest, where I brought down several deer.

At night, we would sit before the fire and Merla would sing songs of her homeland across the sea, and play on a little golden lyre. I felt content for the first time in years. We were both outcasts, Merla and I -- she a runaway wife, I a free-thinker who was scorned in the village -- and it made a kind of fellowship between us. Gradually, despite our differences in rank, I began to love her ...

However, I was afraid to speak of my feelings to her. Long ago, ere I'd left Theldry to wander, I'd heard a voice in the woods telling me to take none but a lady of rank. Strange and fey as the voice had been, I had obeyed; I was as celibate as a holy man, which few folk understood, for I am, according to the village maidens, quite comely to look upon. I was too shy to tell Merla of my chaste ways lest she laugh at me -- and so our lives went on, together and yet apart.

But then one day things were changed forever. A rider came by night to Castra Castle and rattled on the portcullis, which I'd fixed and put into lowered position in the span of masonry that still stood behind the frontal towers of the ruined barbican. Drawing my dagger, I went to see what the stranger wanted. He was a very daunting figure, huge, armored, his face invisible in his helmet. I almost fancied I could see the gleam of red eyes behind the visor. "Be off with you!" I ordered. "We allow no strangers in Castra after dark!"

He made a disdainful noise. "Go, serf, and fetch the Lady Merlusine at once!"

"I am no serf, and I'll not disturb Merla. She's asleep."

"Know you not that she has abandoned her rightful lord?"

"Yes, I know all about it! And I think she was right to have done so!"

"You are a fool!" growled the knight. "Bring her to me, or I shall smash my way in!"

I made to walk away, fearful, but determined not to allow the knight entry. The knight's hidden eyes bored into my retreating back. Then he raised a mailed fist and shouted words of sorcery. A blinding green flash lit the night, and the bars of the portcullis ripped apart as if they were straws. The knight thundered into the inner ward. He drew his sword. "Where is she?" he growled.

I raised my dagger, willing to die to keep him away from Merla -- but then, to my horror, she came flying out of the keep, her tresses unbound, a thin nightshift frothing about her ankles. "Don't fight him, Ilmarinen!" she cried. "He'll kill you! I know him: he's not even human! My husband's wizards have conjured up a dead man to capture me, because Tiernan's too craven to get me himself!"

"Lady Merlusine." The knight lurched toward her on his dark charger, his attention rivetted on the slender woman before him. Taking advantage of the situation, I leapt up behind him and toppled him to the ground. We rolled in the long grasses, his huge, iron-clad limbs bruising and crushing me.

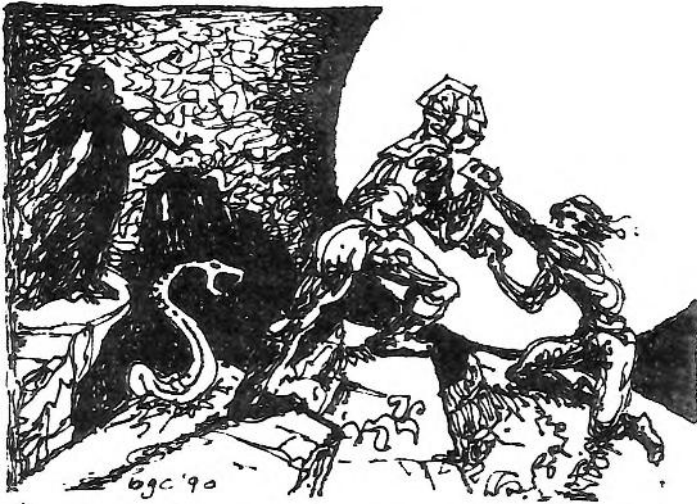
Out of one eye I could see Merla looming above us, hair a wild cloud. Her arms were raised, her eyes wide, reflecting the moon. I struggled with my opponent's visor, seeking to rip at his eyes in a last attempt to survive.

But as I pried the metal away, a serpent, the same miserable adder that had bitten me, darted from the grass and leapt into the knight's helm. A scream echoed through the courtyard, and the knight clawed at his unseen head. I could hear hissing and snapping, as if the serpent in the warrior's helmet had gone absolutely mad. It horrified me to think of anyone, even an enemy, slashed time and time again by those deadly fangs, and I took a faltering step forward.

The knight roared and stabbed at me with his sword, wounding me in the side. Cursing myself as a fool for trying to help him, I collapsed, red and black swirling before my eyes. Merla gave a high, shrill scream, fear and anger combined, and the hissing of the adder increased tenfold. The knight gave one terrible bellow and then toppled onto his back. Angrily, Merla ripped off his helm. His head, whatever it had been like, was now black ash, nothing more. The troublesome adder slithered away without touching Merla, though it passed within an inch of her white hand.

"Merla ..." I clutched at her hem. "Are you hurt ..."

She dropped to her knees beside me. "I'm unharmed. You're the one who has been injured. Oh, Ilmarinen, you were so brave tonight. Here, let me staunch the bleeding, and take you inside the Keep. I'll take good care of you, I promise ..."



I lay sick for many days, no -- weeks -- as the wound in my side festered. Merla tended me as lovingly as a mother tending her child. I watched her leaning over me, and my heart was full of love. Finally, I gained the courage to look into her eyes, and I realized her clear blue gaze mirrored my own desires. I no longer felt shy or embarrassed. I wanted her, and I was determined that when I was well, she would be mine, and I would be hers.

Yet it came to pass that when I was still weak and feverish, she came to me. The chamber was dark, unlit by even a single taper. Merla stood in the doorway, dark against the darkness. I heard the sound of swishing silk as her gown fell to the floor; her feet made no noise as she glided to my bed and leaned over me on my pillows, kissing sweat from my brow. "You must never gaze on me unclad at night," she whispered, running her hands through the length of my dark hair. "Not even by torchlight. Promise me."

"I promise." I would have promised her anything.

"And never question me, if I disappear for a time."

"I won't. I trust you, Merla. Gods, how I love you..."

Her mouth closed over mine, and my arms circled her waist.

A sudden shriek from Merla shattered our bliss. She wrenched away and fell heavily to the floor as the door burst open and shapes filled the room -- shapes of armed men. They rushed around her, circling; I saw the flash of swords ...

I became a screaming madman, thrashing and flailing at the attackers. One pouchy, tired face looked into mine, and then a gauntleted hand slammed across my face and I tumbled down into darkness.

Hours later I woke on cold flagstones. The tired-looking man loomed above me. A torch burned in a bracket on the wall, and I could now see that he was terribly scarred, his face marked by some kind of bite. "Where is Merla?" I cried. "You've killed her, haven't you? You're her husband, Tiernan!"

"I am indeed Tiernan," he said wearily, "but do not glare at me as if I were a demon! I've raised no hand to any woman, save Merlusine. Gods, and how I loved her once -- before I learned the truth."

He dragged me to my feet and hauled me into the chamber where Merla and I had planned to make our love complete. There, to my horror, lay Merla's body, still wrapped in fallen bedclothes. Leaning over, Tiernan turned her on her back, and then I saw that only her torso was a woman's. Her lower half was that of a serpent. Tiernan pushed back her upper lip, and I saw fangs, a snake's deadly teeth.

"No!" I cried, falling down and throwing up.

"Yes!" He grabbed my hair, forced me to gaze at her. "Look what you would have lain with. A Lamia, a serpent-woman! How do you think I came by these scars on my face, boy? I spied on her while she bathed one night, and saw her true form in the light. She attacked me, then fled."

He released my hair and I clambered up, sick at heart. I still loved her, despite the truth. I could not imagine her as a monster -- even though the evidence lay before me. "What would she have done to me?" I gasped, half sobbing. "If you hadn't killed her."

"Kept you as her plaything. Hatched little Lamiae eggs in secret. Then, when she drained you of your strength -- as such creatures always do -- she'd have devoured you, like any other prey."

I gasped. "But she *loved* me!"

"Perhaps. If a snake can love..."

I wept bitterly into my hands, not caring if he thought me unmanly.

He shook his head. "Well, let this be a small comfort -- she couldn't help herself. It was an old family curse. She was driven by instinct, not malice."

"She couldn't help herself." I muttered it over and over again. The thought indeed brought some comfort. I turned to face Tiernan, composure regained.

I looked him in the eye. "She couldn't help herself," I said firmly -- and then I struck him a mighty blow that sent him tumbling onto the beautiful body I had desired so much. "She couldn't help it -- but you killed her anyway."

"I saved your life!" he gasped, but I did not listen. Yanking on my tunic and breeks, throwing a cloak round my shoulders, I left Castra Castle and fled into the wilds.

That winter I lived among the pines like a wild man or a hermit-priest, though by the time the thaw came, I had recovered my sanity and continued on my wanderings. But never in all the years that stretched ahead could I look upon a snake without a shudder of fear -- and a sigh of remembered sorrow.

SEA SPIDERS

by Sue Nevill

Straight from the sea they come,
straight from the mouth of the great bronze god,
sightless Poseidon;
flung from his fingertips to ride the crests of waves,
a soundless, soulless rushing tide.

Bodies of salt crystal, ivory under lemon moon;
eyes of pearl from deadmen's teeth,
legs of living rainbow weed.
In each belly, a sea-spawned jewel to tempt the
prey:
agate, onyx, obsidian;
lapis, amethyst and amber;
chalcedony and serpentine.

They ride in silence, dismount on the shore,
form phalanxes to cross the dangerous flat,
storm the granite bones of land.
Laired in time-worn crevices, they melt into the rock
to spin their webs of silk and steel;
in each web's centre, the perfect stone,
the flower's honey.

There they wait, legs carelessly asplay
like stormcrossed weed,
sunlints in the corner of an eye.
They wait for us, the searchers,
whose hunger for the spectrum stones
leads us far from paths of safety, beyond our depth.

We rise before the sun, our dreams too loud for
sleep.
Each one has heard a call,
a summons from a deep bronze throat,
a lay from lips of shell, the harp song of the sea.
We warm ourselves with smiles, sweet water;
move restlessly about to stir our night-thick blood.
Roke, my brother, shivers in the cold.
"Remember..." says Katan. Doruk cries out, "We
must..."
The others murmur, chatter fragments,
All to talk us upright into dawn.
The light will pull us to our work.

We are well-shod, well-staved.
We carry serpents' skins to wrap the jewelled fire,
gauntlets as shields from crystal fangs.
Our ropes are strong; our nets are woven mermaids'
hair,
beaded with salty tokens.
We take no chances; we are well-prepared.
But still we hesitate - pause at the mark -
and feel the pull of home.

The sun's warm hand against our backs
propels us on our way.

Sun is with us; we are stronger now.
We stride the morning smiling,
will passing milestones into pockets
to bind us to the earth.

The land climbs; we climb the land.
It bears us on its back toward the sea.
We hear it now; its hundred thousand fingers
claw at rock, make play with pebbles,
hurl glass rods to shatter on the cliffs.

And now, descent:
A leap from rib to rib; a drop, a jolt,
a scrabbling in the scree; a breathless slide,
the solid impact of bare bone, and
we have reached another earth.

The boulders curve about us, twisting
to our roundness; flattened by the Tritons,
smoothed by hands of some Colossus.
Their veins stand out in ribbons,
anvil-hard and diamontine.
Their shadows do not offer shade and rest.
They are vacuums, former homes of older gods;
sea-claimed, inviolate.
We tiptoe on the sunline.
The spectres must not wake.

A pool below us, fissures filled and
emptied by the tide.
There. A sheet of silver, strung from
horns of stone. It billows, quivers, glimmers
like lightest lacy filigree.
And at its heart a radiance, a heat;
for us, a magnet.
The first. The beginning.

Dunes of sea grass cushion our approach,
elastic, yielding to each step.
Lazy tremors run ahead. Our presence
does not go unnoticed.

Beneath the creviced lip of stone,
ten argent candles blazing in the sun;
ten shimmering nests, hearts flaming
with our brightest hopes.

We hold our breaths, statues of avarice and fear.
Greed for beauty freezes us, yet urges us to leap.
We are the rock, but our desires are molten.
They stream beyond our bodies
to grasp, to clutch, inhale
the treasures of this light.

We brace our boots against the riddled rock,
each stave a lance, a steel-tipped bolt.
Our nets uncoil into a sudden stillness,
cessation of all sound, a blanket
smothering our heartbeats.

The signal given, ten human nets cascade,
ten human spears flash forth
into the well of sea-ghosts.
And then no more of silence!
As lances fight to dislodge shining stone,
each tip is wreathed in burnished cords,
pulled deeper to the pool
and air splits wide with shrieking, shrilling sound.

A thousand creaking gates,
flints of a million early men drawn crying
across slate; dying cries of a dragon army,
sea cauldrons filled with witches...
our nets enmeshed in theirs, we cannot
stop our ears.
The sound drives spikes into our brains.



The pool seethes, an evil broth
of heat and churning fury, as from each niche and
notch
the spiders come - running to reel their webs,
to grasp our spears, to drown us in disaster.

Salt water boils in movement. The clouds of spray
are blinding. Each struggles for his prize -
and life.

I have one! In my net, a god's eye winks at me.
My lance is theirs, but I am safe
away from the thrashing pool - and now
in hand, the price of a thousand silver spears.

But Roke! Oh Roke, the weed is at your feet!
Take care, take care!

He cannot hear for chaos; engrossed in his
particular quest, he goes too near the edge,
too near the edge!

I step toward him. More tentacles reach out.
A spider's body, fangs enbared,
appears above his knee.

One drop of venom, one wrench of writhing weed -
he plummets to the maelstrom below.

We stand aghast.

(continues)

A sybilance of triumph greets his fall.
Then silence once again except for ebbing tide,
a foreign whispering tide.
They rush to carry off their prize.
We are bereft.
The nine, alone as one.
I alone have won,
and we, alone, are lost.
All is lead, and lost.

Nine stone figures,
We stand upon the shore and cannot
meet each other's gaze.
Not even sun can warm our hearts
and it is fading fast.

Ten we went striding to the sea
And nine return.

Thought is fixed on the women who wait,
one to wait forever.
Our ears shrink from her mourning
and from her uncried blame.
We hurry to the joy of others,
the tear above the smile, the calming of relief.

Ten we strode; nine we return.
Ten who knew the dangers in their minds.
Nine have now engraved them on their hearts:
the sounds and sights of loss and death.

And yet
straight from the sea they will come again,
straight from the hungry mouth of the great bronze
god.
And once again, all again,
we, the nine, will seek them out.
For the price of riches, the prize of pride.
For the chance to walk with death
and live.

THE LITTLE MERMAID

(Hans Christian Anderson's cautionary tale on
becoming a woman)
by Jill Solnicki

I saw the belly of the boat slide by,
silent and seamless
as a whale.

I heard music float on the surface
like the luminous
blue jellyfish.

I touched land. Oh brave new world
that brought me sight of Man!
A prince of a man!

I went to the wise old woman.
She would tell me what to do to
win his love.

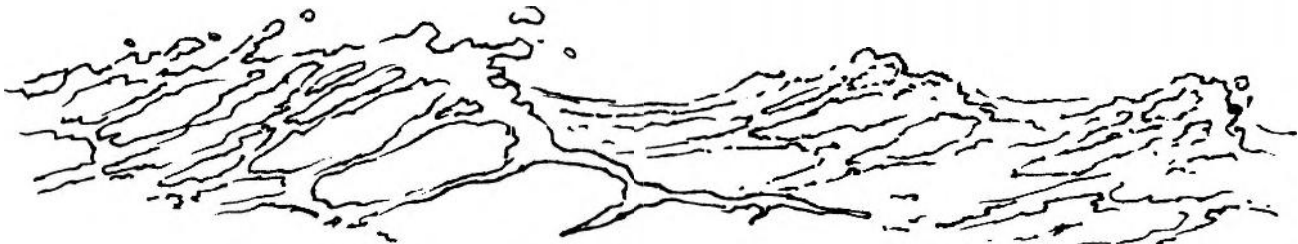
I hurt. Every pretty step stabbed.
My mouth swam with
thick red blood.

I was no one, I was his friend.
Who was I without
my own voice?

I tasted his kiss when he crowned his bride.
I danced death's dance till dawn
Outside their door.

I sat alone on the sand as the sun rose.
The day closed the window,
locked the door.

I hear my sisters singing from the deep.
I do not sing. For I am
only bubbles, foam.



CINDERELLA'S REVENGE

by Jill Solnicki

Sisters,
you shut me by the hearth,
by the broom
and cinders,

to count the days in flame -
the flaring up,
the cooling,
the sifting of white ash,

while you put on
and off
brocade and lace,
paint your faces

that grimace back in glass, and
stuff your fat, spread
toes in slippers,
size ten.

I see the future in the fire:
the coals a carriage,
the sparks minutes,
the embers a midnight moon...

oh, soon you will know
a dirty face
torn dress,
and a small, pretty arch

can earn a prince!

SNOW WHITE SPEAKS OUT

by Jill Solnicki

I see everything through the glass

The tree that forms a roof,
a canopy over my coffin,
the rabbit clasping paws in prayer,
the seven small men
who weep.

Oh, can you hear me speak?

You, my seven small friends:
take back the name that
makes me stay,
a snowdrop under snow
in the cold, white woods,

for the seeds of the apple
are in me now...

and I lie
on this ice bed,
these frigid sheets,
wait for the man who will
kiss me,

wake me.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

by Jill Solnicki

Wake me wake me

I have slept so long

the sun rising falling
leaves uncurling crumbling

O wake me wake me
my mouth is cold
my face frozen

and even the grey cat stalking the mouse
the cricket in the grass
the sparrow on the branch
hold their breath

the bramble rose wraps its fingers
around the iron grille
Stop its twiggy rise this
prison of tendrils

O bring your bright sword
your strong arms
your warm mouth

I am so wanting
the awakening

Maudlin
1980

The Chain

by Dan E. Ryan

Ramón Montaña saw her at the Spring Dance and made his way across the crowded dance floor as the room reverberated with the tape-recorded rhythms of U2. She carelessly tossed her golden blonde hair with her hand. She sat a little apart from the others, and though her eyes were turned toward the dancers, he had the impression that she was caught up in some inner vision. He stood two feet from her and waited. In a moment, her dark blue eyes met his deep brown ones. He loosed his gold chain and moved to place it around her neck, but his trembling fingers had lost the art of the clasp.

"Let me," she said.

Her fingers lightly brushed his hands, and the touch was like an electric shock. The gold chain glowed softly in the dim light as they stared at each other, lost to the world. If that wasn't love at first sight, what is?

"I guess you want to dance," she said at last.

He shook his head. "No. I want to marry you." He grinned. "Not right away -- but someday."

She smiled. "In the meantime, let's dance."

He took her hand, and they moved to the dance floor. For the moment, there was nothing but the beat of the music -- and each other.

The song ended, and they stood looking into each other's eyes. "You're so beautiful," he said.

"Julia!" The shout cut clearly through the sound-laden air, and people turned their heads to stare.

"Oh, no," Julia murmured, stricken with embarrassment. She looked at Ramón. "It's my father. I have to go."

Ramón took her hand to make her stay. "How can I find you again?"

"Greybriar Apartments," she said quickly as the man approached, shoving people out of the way as he strode across the room. "Upstairs. The one nearest the tennis court."

"What number?" Ramón said, but she was looking at her father with a mixture of fear and anger.

She began to move toward the stern-faced man. He was tall, with graying hair and wire-rimmed spectacles and a stomach going to fat. Ramón started after her, but the stranger fixed him with a look that could kill. "Hold it right there," the man said sharply. He jabbed a finger against Ramón's chest. "And stay away from my daughter. She's not your kind."

Mad and partially embarrassed, Ramón left the

dance and went home. The events of the evening kept flashing in Ramón's mind. He had practically asked the girl of his dreams to marry him, and he didn't even know her whole name. The man had called her Julia, but that was all he knew. He took a shower and got into bed. He tried to sleep, but all he could think about was Julia. Wait! He did know where she lived. Without a second thought, he jumped out of bed and got dressed. His father was home, and that meant the car was home, too. Most of the time, Felipe Montaña, Ramón's father, was bartending at La Dama Loca, the bar he owned. Tonight, Felipe had let Chris, a college kid who helped out sometimes, take over. Ramón quietly went into Felipe's room, being careful not to wake him. He took the keys out of his dad's pants pocket and left as silently as he had come in. He put the car in neutral, backed it down the driveway, and started it.

Julia was in her father's bedroom being chewed out -- not only for sneaking to the dance but for dancing with a Hispanic boy.

"But Dad," she argued, "you brought me up to 'love thy neighbor' and now, because my 'neighbor' has a different religion or different skin, you tell me I can't even talk to him."

"You're not to talk to him. You're not to see him. That's final," he reiterated firmly.

"You can be such a hypocrite!" she exclaimed.

She left her father talking and stormed off to her room, where she slammed the door hard enough to make her point. She sat on her bed in the dark cried. She loved her father, but she found herself disagreeing with his views more and more as she got older.

Ramón pulled up to the Greybriar apartments. They all look alike, he mused. Then he remembered that she lived in the apartment next to the tennis court, which turned out to be all the way at the other end of the complex. He found her upstairs apartment and stood looking up at it, trying to figure out which of the two windows marked her bedroom. He decided to take his chances and throw a rock at one of the windows. He picked up a rock, aimed for the window on the left, cocked back his arm, and just when he felt lucky, the window on the right opened.

"Is that you?" Julia called from the window.

"Yeah, it's me," he answered.

Ramón climbed up the tree that (luckily) grew underneath her window so they could talk quietly.

"Now that I know that it's you," Julia said. "Who are you?"

"My name is Ramón Montaña. Yours is Julia, isn't it?"

"Yes. Julia Capehart."

Where had he heard the name Capehart before? Oh, yes. Tyler Capehart. The drug dealer.

"What's wrong with your dad?" Ramón asked, and then he realized that perhaps he should have rephrased the question.

"Nothing is wrong with him," she replied, a little offended. "He just doesn't believe in dancing."

This reminded Ramón of the movie "Footloose," and he thought he'd better get off the subject, so he asked, "What does your dad do for a living?"

"He's the pastor of the West Phoenix Christian Church," she replied, almost adding that he was against drinking and gambling, too. "What does your dad do?"

"He owns a bar not too far from here."

"That's just great," she said sarcastically, more to herself than to Ramón. "My dad doesn't believe in drinking, either."

"Let's forget your dad," Ramón said. "I'd rather talk about you."

"I guess I'd better tell you," she said regretfully. "I'm not allowed to see or talk to you anymore. At least I'd better not get caught."

Insulted, Ramón replied, "Listen, my dad might sell whiskey, and some people might become alcoholics or die of diseased livers, but how about Tyler Capehart? Isn't he related to you?"

"He's my cousin. So what?"

"Nothing, much, except that he pushes drugs. He deals death to kids in the form of crack cocaine, not to mention uppers, downers, and all sorts of junk. Didn't you know that?"

Julia's shoulders slumped. "I knew, but I don't think Dad does. But that's Tyler -- not me." She broke off as she heard a knock on her bedroom door and a muffled voice. "My dad's coming," Julia said. "You've got to go."

Before Ramón had time to argue, the window was shut in his face. He walked back to his car. As he was driving home, he remembered that Julia, like himself, was in track and field. He figured that he would see her tomorrow at the track meet.

Ramón woke up to the loud beep of his alarm clock, something that he was not accustomed to hearing on a Saturday morning. But this wasn't any ordinary Saturday morning, this was the day that his school, Maryvale, was to compete against Carl Hayden and Trevor Browne, Maryvale's rival school. Although Ramón would be good at almost any event, his love was for pole vaulting. Julia, if he remembered correctly, was a distance runner.

Ramón was dropped off at school by his dad, who

wished him good luck. He didn't see Julia, so he got his pole out of the locker room and started practicing.

Strangely, the meet began on time. He went in at 12 feet and kept gaining height until he was ready to try 14 feet. The girls' mile was being run, and he spotted Julia far back in the pack. Because Ramón was thinking of the girl and not his vault, he missed on the first try. Only one other vaulter, a Senior from Carl Hayden, was still in the competition with Ramón. When Ramón's second try came, he saw that Julia had moved up to challenge the lead. It was the third lap, and Ramón cheered Julia on as she gradually closed the distance to the lead runner, a girl from Trevor Browne. Instead of making his vault, Ramón went wild, yelling for Julia as she took the lead and finished first. He was about to start his run when the official told him that his two minutes had expired. He had blown his second try.

Ramón was so filled with joy at Julia's win that he could not concentrate on his third try. Then he noticed that Julia was standing nearby. She gave him a smile, and that was enough to give Ramón the extra drive to clear 14 feet. The Carl Hayden vaulter failed his third attempt, so Ramón won the pole vaulting event. Julia ran over and gave Ramón a big hug.

As they were talking, Julia looked into the bleachers and saw Mike Parrish stand up and start walking to the parking lot. Her mind went back to Friday, when she was eating lunch with her friend, Alicia. Alicia said, "Look who's coming to sit with us." Mike could be spotted at any distance, not only by his height but by his flaming red hair. Julia turned around and saw Mike Parrish walking towards them. Alicia sighed. "Can't he take the hint?"

Mike Parrish was a guy at Julia's church who had been asking her out for about a month. Thorton Capehart, Julia's father, encouraged Mike because Thorton believed him to be "good, clean, and wholesome."

"What's up?" Mike asked as he set his tray on the table next to Julia.

"Nothing," Julia replied mechanically.

"So you want to go to the dance tonight?"

Julia was about to answer when Alicia butted in, "Sure, but not with you."

Julia gave Alicia a look that meant, "Alicia, you're right. But did you have to be so blunt?" But the fact was that Mike wouldn't understand "no" if it was said any other way.

Julia stuck to her guns and said, "Mike, just give it up. You could ask me a million times and my answer wouldn't change. No."

Without another word, Mike got up and left. Julia could see that he was already planning to get back at her somehow.

"Julia?" Ramón said, a little concerned.

"Hunh?," she said as her mind was wrenched back to the present. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else."

"What's your phone number so I can call you to-

night?"

"We don't have a phone."

"What's the matter? You dad doesn't believe in phones either?" Ramón said jokingly.

"We did have a phone, but my dad broke it a week ago when he lost his temper after talking to the pizza man and threw the phone out the window. The pizza never did arrive."

Coach Laurence was yelling something across the field to Ramón about putting the equipment away.

"Well, I guess you gotta go," Julia said with a little smile.

"Not yet." Ramón bent over and kissed her. He could feel the adrenaline rush through his body. At this moment, everything seemed right with the world. Maryvale had won the meet, and he and Julia had each other.

Later, as Ramón was walking home through the parking lot, he heard a voice from behind saying, "Stay away from her." Ramón turned around and, before his eyes could focus, he received a sky-spinning crack to the jaw from Mike's right fist. A bolt of pain shook his brain.

He found himself in push-up position on the ground. Before Mike could think of what to do next, Ramón shot up off the ground and body-slammed Mike into the hood of a Ford truck. Mike started jabbing Mike in the ribs when a strong head lock jerked Ramón away from Mike. Guess who? Mr. Security Guard. The guard wouldn't let Mike explain himself; he simply hauled him into the office. The security guard merely took down Mike's name and told him he'd probably get Saturday detention. Ramón didn't get off that easily; he was suspended. Because Ramón looked like the fighting type and Mike had the appearance of an honor student, the security guard assumed that Ramón had started the whole thing. He hadn't started it, but he sure had finished it.

Later that night, Felipe was packing a bag with ice for Ramón's jaw. Felipe remembered when he was in fights and his dad packed ice for him. These days, as a bartender, Felipe broke up more fights than he started. Felipe asked Ramón the question that every father, at one time or another, asks his son: "So who threw the first punch?"

Ramón couldn't figure out why his dad was smiling. He answered, "He did."

"Did you win?"

"If you could see the other guy, you'd know," Ramón said, returning the smile.

Ramón woke up and thought for sure his clock was wrong: 1:15. His first reaction was that it was in the middle of the night, but he rejected that thought immediately because sunlight filled his room. His muscles were aching from track, his jaw was aching from Mike, and his heart was aching for Julia. Ramón could have caught up his English homework today, but nobody does homework on a Sunday. No. What he really wanted was to see Julia. He quickly showered and dressed. Felipe had already

left. That meant Ramón was going to have to walk. He opened the front door, and a mass of 106-degree air greeted him, almost knocking him back into the house. Summer had arrived. He walked the four or five blocks to Julia's apartment and knocked on her door. He actually knocked on her door! Had he forgotten all about her dad?

The same dad who threw the phone out the window? He was about to run when a thought occurred to him. If Julia answered, he would tell her to meet him in the parking lot. If Julia's big, bad, God-fearing father opened the door, he would simply run. Running wasn't a solution that Ramón particularly liked, but it was the only one he could think of on short notice.

As it turned out, neither Thorton nor Julia answered the door. Where were they? The answer was so obvious. At church. Ramón started the long, hot walk home. He would try her place again later.

Thorton was shaking hands with members of his congregation as they left the church. Mike Parrish was the last one out. Mike couldn't wait to see the look on Thorton's face when he told him that Julia had been talking to Ramón. "I've got some news that I'm sure you don't want to hear," Mike said, knowing it would get Thorton's attention.

"Julia hasn't been talking to that Mexican boy, has she?" Thorton asked, already knowing that the answer would be yes.

"His name is Ramón Montaña. And yes." Mike saw the hell fire build up in Thorton's eyes and the blood rush to his face -- just the reaction he had been hoping for.

Thorton looked over at Julia, who was talking to some other girls from the church. "Julia! Get over here!" Thorton shouted at the top of his lungs. His face looked as if it were going to explode.

Julia saw her dad and Mike standing together and knew at once what was going on. She walked over to her father and just stood there without a word.

"What's Ramón's father's name?" Thorton asked sternly.

"But D --"

"I said what is his father's name!"

Juliet dropped her glance to ground. There was no way out. "Felipe Montaña."

"Where does he work?" Thorton asked more quietly, because he knew that he had gotten his way.

"La Dama Loca."

Thorton grabbed Julia by the arm and dragged her to the car. "Obviously, you don't know who makes the rules in my house. You're grounded until I can make sure that you never see that boy again," Thorton said to her in the same voice that he usually reserved for his sermons.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home, where you can stay out of trouble. I have to come back to church and prepare for evening services. Then I'll take care of Felipe." After Thorton dropped Julia off at the apartment, she began to think of ways that

she could get back at her father. I can't let him get away with this, Julia thought. She had considered suicide, but that would mean she could never see Ramón again. No, she had a better idea. She went over to Tyler's house. Aunt Millie, Thorton's sister and Tyler's mother, opened the door. "What a pleasant surprise!" Aunt Millie said.

"Hi. I need to talk to Tyler about Friday's biology assignment." Julia hated to lie, but she couldn't simply say, "Hi. I need to buy some drugs from Tyler. Oh, you do know he's a drug dealer, don't you?"

"Come on in. I'll go get him." Aunt Millie walked over to the basement stairs and yelled, "Tyler, you have company."

"That's all right," Julia told her, "I'll just go down." Julia went down to Tyler's room and saw him lying on his bed, looking at the ceiling, listening to the radio with his skinny body stretched out.

"What are you doing here, Julia?" Tyler asked, surprised.

"Tyler, I never thought I would tell you this, but I need to buy some drugs."

Tyler started going into hysterics with laughter. "What do you want? Some Flintstone vitamins?"

"I'm serious!"

Tyler got up and shut his door. "How can I be of service?"

"I need some sleeping pills. Strong ones. A lot of them."

"Don't tell me you're gonna kill yourself."

"No, I just want it to look that way."

Tyler pulled out the bottom dresser drawer, and underneath it he had a little of everything. He handed her a bottle of Nembutals. "Take one of these and you'll be sleepin' like a baby."

"How much will it cost?"

"We'll just call this a sampler. If you need anything else, you know where to get it," Tyler said with a big grin.

"Thanks." She went out the back door to avoid Aunt Millie.

Felipe made a margarita for the man in the cowboy hat. The cowboy had come to this same bar, at the same time, and ordered the same drink, every night for the past three years. His presence meant it was 9 p.m. Felipe was cleaning some glasses when Chris, his part-time helper, told him some character wanted to see him outside.

"Why doesn't he come in?" Felipe asked Chris. Chris shrugged. Felipe sighed. "I guess I'll just have to go and find out." He walked out of the bar. A tall man with a bible in his hand was waiting outside.

"You wanted to see me?" Felipe asked the bible-bearing fellow.

"Are you Felipe Montaña?" Thorton asked.

"Yeah. What can I do for you?"

Thorton didn't waste any time with niceties. "Keep your son away from my daughter."

That sounded like an order to Felipe. "My son de-

cides the company he keeps. Who are you?"

"I'm Thorton Capehart, Julia's father. If I see Ramón within a hundred feet of my daughter, I'll kill him."

"Yeah, you will." Felipe said as he turned to walk back in the bar. He didn't take Thorton seriously, but he would call Ramón and tell him what happened anyway. Felipe went to the pay phone and called Ramón.

"Hi," Felipe said when Ramón picked up the phone. "It's Dad. Do you know anything about a Julia Capehart?"

After a short pause, Ramón answered, "Sure, what about her?"

"Well, be careful, Son. Her father just dropped by the bar and told me to keep you away from her. Would you believe it, he said he'd kill you if you didn't. Maybe it would be better if you cooled it for awhile -- let the dust settle." Felipe looked out the door of the bar and saw Thorton preaching to a couple that had just left the bar.

"First him, and now you, too!" Ramón said angrily. "Can't you just leave me alone! I'm not gonna let some old preacher keep me away from Julia! As a matter of fact, I'm going over there right now."

"Don't!" Felipe yelled, but Ramón had already hung up. Felipe looked outside and saw that Thorton was about to leave the parking lot of La Dama Loca. "Chris, take over for me." Felipe had been sure that Ramón didn't run into Thorton. He got into his car and carefully followed Thorton home.

Ramón hung up the phone and ran out of the house. It was a little cooler outside, so he jogged over to Julia's place. When he got there, he used a little more sense than last time. Instead of knocking on the door, he looked at the apartment number, 2032, and found the parking space labeled 2032. He was in luck; Thorton's car wasn't there.

He went back up to her apartment and knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. He tried the door knob and found the door unlocked. He felt a little guilty for just barging in. He walked into Julia's bedroom and was horror-stricken. Julia was lying on her bed, On the bedside table lay a bottle with many capsules spilling out of it and half of them missing. "Julia!" he yelled, but to no avail. He shook her. Nothing. He was sure that she was dead. In his grief, he took a handful of pills and dry-swallowed them. He sat looking at her for a while, and as the capsules began to take effect, he realized that he had not even told Julia goodbye. He stood up, bent over to kiss her, and passed out. He fell on top of her and woke her up.

Julia got out from under the weight of his body. "Oh, no! This is wrong! This is so wrong!" she screamed. She had lost the only thing in this world that she lived for. She looked at the capsules. There were still enough to put her away. She thought that without Ramón, she might as well take the rest. Julia swallowed the capsules and lay down beside Ramón to wait for the eternal sleep.

Thorton arrived home, and Felipe parked out on the street. Felipe followed Thorton right up to the apartment, then stopped. He wasn't sure what move he should make next, so he waited at the bottom of the stairs. He knew Ramón should be there by now.

A scream echoed through the apartment. "Oh my God! They're dead!" Felipe dashed up the stairs and burst into the room. Thorton was sitting in a chair and trembling. He was staring off into space and muttering something. Felipe went into the bedroom and found both Ramón and Julia on the bed asleep, Ramón fully clothed and Julia in her nightgown. He felt at Ramón's wrist for a pulse. At first, nothing. Then: pulse pulse. Ramón's heartbeat was so slow it was a miracle that he was alive at all. Felipe ran over to Thorton and shouted, "Where's your phone?"

Thorton, now a far different man from the one Felipe had seen at the bar, got on his knees at Felipe's feet and clutched his pant leg. "Please," Thorton pleaded, "you've got to save her!"

Felipe lifted him up by the collar and yelled into his ear, "Where's the damn phone?"

"D-D-Downstairs. By the p-pool."

Felipe rushed down half the stairs and jumped over the rest. He found the pay phone and dialed 911.

Felipe and Thorton had waited a half hour in the waiting room before they got any word on Ramón and Julia. Thorton still hadn't come back to reality. The doctor came around the corner with a relieved look on his face. "Mr. Montaña. Mr. Capehart. They're going to be just fine."

Thorton eyes came into focus, and he jumped up and gave Felipe a hug that almost knocked him over.

"We had to pump their stomachs, but they're recovering."

"Thank you, Doctor!" Felipe said and shook the doctor's hand.

"Sure thing," replied the doctor, and then he left.

Thorton calmed down and said, "Mr. Montaña, I can never thank you enough. I'm so sorry for everything I did. At the time, I really believed that I would kill Ramón. But now, I don't know if I could have lived with myself if he had died."

"Apology accepted," Felipe replied sincerely.

"I feel like I've been wrung through a ringer. Let's go get something to eat. Where would you like to go?"

"Some place appropriate."

"You name it."

"How about Shakespeare's?"



JANUS WINKED

by Charles W. Ryan

Jeremiah Sharpe listened to the revelers in the street below, hunched himself against the nagging chill, and listened with grudging envy to the hoots and laughter muted by the dusty, rain-streaked window glass. He briefly considered the long, shuffling trip to the bathroom for the Extra Strength Tylenol and opted instead for the dull ache in his finger joints. He would probably find an empty bottle at the end of his trek, or a capsule laced with cyanide. Maybe he would try a copper bracelet. People swore it helped the arthritis.

Someone was prematurely singing "Auld Lang Syne," and he imagined himself in the midst of the gaily raucous crowd now celebrating the brief reign of Janus.

Now, why would I think of Janus? Sharp thought. The Roman two-faced god that looked to the past and to the future. *Did you ever actually do anything, Janus?* he thought in idle amusement. *If you did, its news to me.*

Almost midnight. Midnight, when the frenzy five stories below his drab apartment would peak in tumultuous celebration of a new beginning.

There would be shouts of "Happy New Year" even to strangers. Handshakes and kisses, confetti, champagne, and laughter. And also -- in this age -- brief, impulsive lovemaking in dark corners removed from the eddies and swirls of innocent merrymaking.

But not all innocence. Coke and angel dust, horse and crystal -- sniffed, injected, and ingested. Bricks crashing through plate-glass windows, punks in garish rebellion, bikers in leather and chains, youthful confrontations in worship of *machismo*, and muggers plying their trade.

And the older ones, braving the crowds and cacophony, remembering another day.

Jeremiah Sharpe remembered and allowed himself a mite of self-pity for the departed years. He twisted his creaking frame about for a better position in the ancient, overstuffed chair and surveyed the too-familiar landmarks of his domain. He found the bookcase and stared with rheumy eyes at the loving cup, sighed as he recalled that bright day at the Franklin County Track Meet where young Jerry Sharpe had been the hero of Bratton High with his easy victory in the hundred-yard dash. He could have been state champion, they said, but he had not gone for it. The gold, real at least for a few microns down, was dull now, but arthritis was hell on polishing. Forty-five years ago. No, forty-seven. Sad, he

thought, that the best he could do in almost half a century was a trophy in a county track meet. After that, his life had gone downhill. Glowing promise unfulfilled. The story of his life.

Sharpe's gaze fell on the painting, the brush strokes strangely luminous. Why had the colors not faded as had the wallpaper and the carpet? The picture was original. No one would make a copy of such a work. But it had intrigued him when he moved into the apartment twenty years before, and it fascinated him still.

The painting was nothing more than a badly drawn building, some trees, a road, and some mountains in the distance. The building looked as if it had been intended as a church, but it held a singularly unchurchlike quality. The structure was hideous, but the trees were -- alive. At times he could have sworn he saw the branches move in some random gust of wind. A trick of failing vision. A dusty road ran in front of the church (*was it a church?*) and disappeared through a group of trees.

Sharpe studied the painting now as he had done so many times before, unconsciously seeking the key to its enchantment. The large elm at the left for a moment seemed to quiver as if in a passing breeze. He blinked and stared harder. The thin formation of clouds appeared to shift a little. His body seemed weightless, of no substance. He was vaguely aware of a knock on his door, but the painting held him entranced.

Sharpe felt a startling sensation, the sudden jolt to wakefulness one sometimes experienced on the edge of sleep.

He was standing in a dirt road. Looking about in confusion, he saw the ugly building that might have been a church. And there, too, the elms swaying gently in the breeze. A cool breeze, welcome in the summer heat, that touched his face even as it caressed the trees.

A dream, he thought, but his instinct said no. Too real. But it had to be a dream. How could it be reality? No matter, he thought. Such a beautiful summer day was to be enjoyed without question.

He looked toward the place where the road led past the church and through the trees. What lay beyond? He began to walk that way.

As he approached the building, he saw that it was indeed a church. But close inspection did not relieve its ugliness. He shuddered and passed it by.

He entered the copse of elms and saw that the road passed out of sight over a hill in the distance. The countryside was a gently rolling green, dotted with trees and completely devoid of human artifacts. As he walked briskly along, drinking in huge gulps of the clean country air, he was pleasantly aware of an unusual lack of fatigue, a new spring to his step. He began to whistle a long-forgotten tune in time to his zestful pace.

Presently he found that the road ran alongside a clear, bubbling stream and still later made its way around a small lake bordered by towering cypresses. The sun, an hour past its zenith, beat down warmly upon his shoulders. The invitation of the cool water was not to be resisted.

As he began leisurely to undress, he noticed for the first time that he wore faded denim trousers and an equally faded chambray shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Tossing his clothes aside, he waded into the lake and paused in shock as he saw his reflection in the clear water. A quick self-examination revealed what he was surprised he had not noticed before. He had the firm, well-muscled body he remembered possessing as a young man.

As he paddled lazily in the cool water, he knew that this was no dream. But if not a dream . . . *what?* No questions, he told himself. Enjoy.

Leaving the lake, he threw himself down on the clean, grassy shore. Idly chewing a blade of grass, he gazed contentedly at the white clouds drifting across the sky. Through half-closed eyes he saw a swallow-tail butterfly flitting among the branches overhead. Somewhere near at hand, a meadow lark called to its mate. Then he slept.

He was awakened by the tickle of an ant on his bare stomach. He stood up, stretched, and pulled on his clothes.

As Sharpe began walking down the road once more, the sun was near the horizon. The clouds had taken on the royal hues of sunset, and he felt a slight twinge of anxiety. The air was growing chill, and now some primitive instinct urged him to seek shelter. Shivering, he rolled down his sleeves and assumed a faster gait.

The sun had dropped below the horizon, and the dull red sky was slowly fading to gray as he approached another group of trees overhanging the road.

He passed through the trees and stopped, surprised. The dusty road was now a highway, and he stood knee-deep in snow. Cars whizzed by, their headlights piercing the darkness as snowflakes wetly touched his face. As he stood shaking with cold, a pickup of ancient vintage rattled to a stop.

"Hey, there, young feller," the driver rasped hospitably. "If y'er goin' into the city, y'd better get in before you catch yer death of pneumonia."

Sharpe climbed in with heartfelt thanks. How would he explain his scant attire? But the garrulous old man did not ask. Sharpe absently acknowledged the driver's remarks from time to time as he concentrated on the enigma in which he found himself.

That was clearly the New York skyline some distance ahead, so how, back beyond the trees, could there be a place of summer? A place where the ugly church was a thing of weathered wood, not patterns of colored oil. A place where he was young? But he was still young. He felt it, then studied himself and knew it.

Hours later he arrived at the apartment where he had lived for two decades. He looked up and saw that a light was on. He felt a stab of fear. What would he find in that apartment?

He pushed through the reveling crush of people -- yes, it was somehow still New Year's Eve -- and caught the entrance door to the apartment building as a laughing couple emerged. He ascended the stairs as his heartbeat quickened with dread.

He stood for a moment on the fifth-floor landing and glanced about the familiar surroundings. He took a deep breath and approached the door of his apartment. He fumbled in his pockets, knowing he would find no key, then lifted his fist and knocked sharply on the aging wood.

Inside the apartment, no sound of movement. He knocked again, waited, then slowly turned the doorknob. The door swung open. Damn! He had forgotten again to lock it. But as he stood in the doorway, he forgot the lock as he reeled with the shock of what he saw.

There, sitting in the overstuffed easy chair and staring at the painting was -- *himself!* Swaying with the impact of the scene, he clutched the door and stared. Overwhelming hatred welled up within him. Hatred for the withered old body sitting there. Fear, too. Fear that the old Sharpe would return to consciousness and this fine, young body would be gone forever. But, he thought with desperate craftiness, if the old man did not regain his senses . . .

He quietly closed the door, slipped home the heavy bolt, and moved silently across the worn carpet. He grasped the gold loving cup, lifted it high above the old man's head . . .

. . . and slowly set it down in its accustomed place.

I am not a murderer, he thought. He shook the old man's shoulder . . .

. . . until he came out of his trance and looked up into his own face, now smooth and handsome, and into his own eyes, now sparkling with the vigor of youth . . .

. . . and looked down into his own wrinkled face, into his own eyes, the light of vitality dimmed and the corneas yellowed with age.

One mind in two bodies, each his own and yet not his own.

"What am I to do?" the young Jerry Sharpe said.

Old Jeremiah Sharpe sighed. "Do what you must."

"But I might die, too," young Jerry protested.

Old Jeremiah laughed harshly and tapped himself on the chest. "You call this living?" He painfully raised himself from the chair and thrust the loving cup into the young man's hands, into *his own* strong, young hands. He lifted his eyes to the painting. "Do it!"

The police, when days later they were finally summoned by an uneasy landlady, broke down the door and retched at the odor of decaying flesh.

The homicide team was baffled. The door was bolted from the inside, and the windows had been locked so long that the fasteners had rusted together.

"How could he have done it?" one officer said.

"He couldn't have," the other replied, "but he *must* have!"

The coroner was adamant. "Look at the back of his skull," he told Inspector Thomas. "Even a strong, young man could not have done that to himself. Facts are facts, Inspector."

"The room was sealed," the Inspector retorted. "I don't give a damn about your facts. *Sharpe killed himself!*"

The coroner prevailed. The result of the inquest, decided by a coroner's jury, was "death at the hands of person or persons unknown."

Young Jerry Sharpe stared at the ugly church in the glare of the summer sun. He studied the stand of elms, kicked his toe into the dust of the road, and turned to look in the other direction. A road has two ends, he thought, or perhaps two beginnings.

He sensed the presence of the church behind him (was it a church?), but he did not look back to confront the unsightly edifice. Instead, he smiled and gazed into the far distance where the dusty road gradually narrowed to a point.

He hummed a few bars of that still-forgotten tune and found that he could remember its name. Straightening his strong, young shoulders, he began to walk.

After a while he stopped, and for the first time he felt afraid. *Am I dead?* he thought. *Is this Heaven? Surely it can't be Hell.*

But perhaps it is, he thought. An endless loop in which I kill the older "me" over and over for eternity. *That would be hell! Or Hell.*

He continued to walk, but somehow he no longer found joy in his new-found youth. All he could think about was his wasted life. He could have done so much, but he had not. He had drifted along, never coming close to his youthful dreams.

He looked up and saw that the sun had passed its zenith. He looked ahead along the dusty road that seemed to disappear into infinity. *I've got to get out of this,* he thought.

He saw the trees through which he had earlier passed to find the highway. *Do I dare?* Would he just find the highway again, return to the apartment, find himself waiting inside?

Perhaps it was nothing more than a matter of will. Last time, he had simply wanted to go home. What about now? No big mystery about that, he thought. He wanted a second chance. Impossible, of course; but then, none of this was possible anyway.

He took a deep breath and walked through the trees, fully expecting to find himself in winter with a highway just beyond the trees.

No. The air still held the warmth of summer. He felt a curious sense of *déjà vu*. He knew this place!

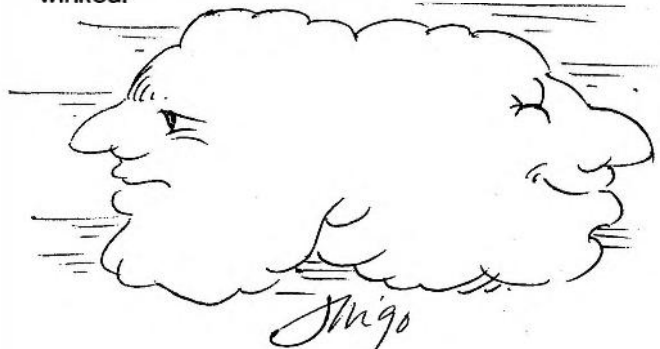
He heard the distant strains of a Sousa march and saw the clump of buildings in the distance. He knew exactly where he was! He began to hurry along, knowing what he would find at Bratton High School.

In a little while he had reached the grandstand. A speaker's platform had been set up at the 50-yard line. On the platform were four or five people of importance -- and an eighteen-year-old boy who grinned as he accepted a gold loving cup.

In the next instant he was there on the platform, and the trophy was in his hands. He was only faintly aware of the cheering crowd. He was too busy trying to accept that he was eighteen again -- but with all the memories of the next half century!

He looked up and saw a large, fluffy cloud that somehow formed itself into a face. No, two faces, each looking in the opposite direction.

One of the faces seemed to smile . . . and Janus winked.



LOHENGRIN

by Owen R. Neill

Knight of the morning swan flowing;
Light of the waters through time mists gleaming;
Earth star twice touched by Helias
When names were sent through mysteries beaming.
Son of the Grail at high Munsalvaesche,
Lohengrin served his generation.

Beauty sat upon his hands
while duty called sweet veneration.
Voices of blue oceans whispered
In his temples when he prayed,
and echoes of his royal bloodline
gave soft awareness of the part he played
as guardian of his father's dream:
the vision of Parsifal, Knight supreme.

Darkness thickens on castle walls,
a moon is hiding in decline;
the chapel sleeps with quiet stalls,
pearl flowers wait upon their vine.
Wild birds rustle in their nesting,
oxen blink the night away;
owls drift in their questing,
Men are dreaming where they stay.
Lohengrin wrestles among his voices.
Chapel bells stir desert sands
And when he rouses to seek direction
he finds them swinging by no man's hands.

Only he could hear, he knew.
Someone needed knightly aid.
He left his home, searched his country through,
brought succor to a troubled maid.
That's the story romancers tell
in their need to soften life,
tales of damsels and their heroes bold
taking pain from an age of strife.

So Lohengrin pursued his history.
His swan-drawn boat struck foreign shore.
He hastened to assault an enemy
and triumphed over battle's roar.
He won a lady* rich and true
and took her hand into his own.

Love bloomed and life began anew
while the seeds of tragedy were sown.

For a secret that no one could share -
not even a loving wife must know -
was destined to break apart the pair,
the champion, the Duchess, like a Mystery show.

His bride and wife in nuptial warning
was never to ask whence he came
or seek his people or their history.
This known, he was bound upon his fame

to depart, never to see her again
and leave behind an uncertain child.
For years the lady kept the pact.
Life flowed in channel undefiled.

But goaded to fatal curiosity
by vicious rival insinuation
the lady at last presumed too much
and lost the flower of love's creation.

Lohengrin was bound by his myth
and vanished in his shadowy barque
beyond the pale of earth's projection
to the setting sun, like a dying spark.

So a duchess grieved for her fatherless son,
and a growing son for his lonely dame.
But time, relentless, healed all breaches.
Passing history sent us Godfrey's flame.**

Lohengrin roams still in the mists of myth.
His swans still tow him to the sun.
His mysteries haunt us to this day.
He knows what heroes know when they've won.

**The Duchess of Bouillon*

***Godfrey de Bouillon, 1061-1100. Count of Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine, King of Jerusalem, Founder of the Order of Sion, 1099*

GIANTS OF AVALON

by Mel Hunnicutt

"Isn't so much the distance," said Sir Ector, "but that giant Galapas is in the way. Have to pass through his country, you understand."

From T.H. White's *The Sword In The Stone*

King Arthur stood in the doorway of his tent, gazing nervously into the valley where the Saxon army camped. His old bones ached as a servant strapped heavy armor across his chest and legs. Beads of sweat trickled down Arthur's trembling chin. His men were outnumbered two to one and the Saxons were headed by three evil giants, the sons of Galapas.

Arthur's tension eased momentarily as the sound of happy voices clamored nearby. Stepping to the doorway, he saw Galahad, the young champion, being congratulated by the bravest soldiers in Arthur's army for winning the javelin contest. They crowded around him, shaking his hand and slapping him on the back.

"Galahad, you are the mightiest soldier in all of England," they said.

Arthur turned from the tent entrance, fuming with jealousy. He knew how much his men respected Galahad. It had been rumored that some of the people wanted to make him king. In the corner, a servant busily polished a large bronze helmet and rusty coat of mail which had belonged to the giant Galapas many years ago. Arthur had stored them with his most treasured possessions ever since that historic victory.

Arthur fell back in his chair and breathed a heavy sigh. He closed his eyes and felt a sudden warm, calm sensation as his mind drifted back to the days of his youth. What priceless days those had been. Working the fields of Sir Ector's farm and tending to the flocks with the shepherds, where sheep bells kept him half awake as he lay in the soft green pasture. Holy images seemed to move above him as he studied the masses of slowly dissolving clouds. He rested on the hillside in the cool of the evening with his body outstretched, waiting for the first star to appear in the heavens. His friend and tutor, Merlin, had given him a sling-shot just like the shepherds carried.

"Oh, Merlin! Shepherding was a good profession," whispered Arthur tenderly, as he remembered it.

His thoughts were interrupted by Galahad.

"Your majesty, it's time for your medicine. The doctors have prepared a special elixir of roots and herbs," said the young knight.

"Away from me!" shouted Arthur in a frenzy. "Am I a feeble old man who needs a nursemaid falling about me? No! I'm Arthur, mighty king of England!" Arthur stood up and called to his captain. "Prepare the men for battle," he said. "We're moving out."

In the flurry of preparations, however, Arthur began to cough deeply, doubling over with sharp chest pains. When the coughing stopped, he paused for a moment, leaning against the arm of the chair to catch his breath. He clutched a leather pouch, hung loosely from his belt. Three stones inside the bag knocked together as he rubbed them.

He stood still, thinking back to another time when Saxons led by the evil giant Galapas marched against Sir Ector's castle. Galapas dwelt by the misty waters of Avalon. He was so terrible, according to village legend, he ate the flesh of little children for Sabbath supper.

Not one of Sir Ector's knights had the courage to face Galapas in battle. But a young boy named Arthur, whom Sir Ector had nicknamed Wart, waded into a stream and bathed his hands in the slow movement of the water. Without haste he picked up six smooth, black stones from the bed, looked at them closely and discarded two.

He had felt a holy presence across his shoulders like the hot noon sun. He romped unhurriedly across the meadow into the valley where a great cliff-shaped man waited for him. Galapas' helmet of brass towered against the clouds and his coat of mail sparkled like the scales of a gigantic fish.

Arthur put three of the stones in a small shepherd's bag, rubbed the remaining stone in his hand, then placed it in the sling. As the giant came forward and shook the frail boy with his footsteps, the sling circled faster and faster, growing heavier with each pull. The twirling thong began to whistle, the pitch rose until it screamed.

The stone leaped from the sling, its speed was such that neither Arthur nor Galapas could see it in the air. The giant jerked his head backwards. As he fell, blood began to well. The boy walked, even strolled, to the fallen giant, drew Galapas' anvil-heavy sword, lifted it slowly, and delivered the final blow. He held up the head to both armies, Sir Ector's men to the north and the Saxon troops to the

south. Arthur's mantle of courage burned like the sun itself while the Saxons ran in fright...

But this time it was Arthur who was afraid. As the trumpets blared, banners were raised and the army of Camelot set out to battle. At the head of the army rode its commander Arthur, with Galahad and the other captains and champions on horseback. Soldiers and camp followers trudged behind on foot.

Arthur brought his troops to a halt fifty yards away from the Saxons. A herald stepped forth from the Saxon ranks and in a loud voice demanded Arthur's surrender. "Give up your arms," the herald cried. "Or we'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field."

The invitation was declined with loud jeers as Arthur signaled for the English troops to charge. Clouds of arrows rose from the ranks of the English bowmen, many to find their mark. The line thundered ahead, reaching the first group of Saxon soldiers. Now the real clash occurred as armor met armor in desperate hand to hand battle. Sunlight flashed on naked steel.

Soon, from behind a nearby grove of trees, the three sons of Galapas appeared, glittering in their armor, brightly colored shields, and shining lances. The long swords of these giant caused great damage to the English soldiers. In fear, many took refuge behind the lines of their own captains and champions.

Arthur leaped upon a rock in the thick of the battle, rallying his troops. His eyes burned with a mysterious light as he ripped through walls of flesh with his blood-red sword. The English fought heroically, but as the battle raged on, Arthur began to tire. Soon he found himself face to face with all three giants.

Arthur tossed aside his heavy sword and reached for his sling, determined to slay these giants in the same way he did their father Galapas. He had been saving these three stones in anticipation of their return. But the most frightening of the three giants, who was a cyclops with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, hurled his javelin, knocking the sling from Arthur's grasp.

The giants closed in, isolating the king from the rest of his army. "Many years have passed since you destroyed our father," snarled the six-fingered creature. "We have waited patiently for this moment, and now we intend to hack you to pieces!"

The fierce giant drew his sword and quickly thrust Arthur through the shoulder. Arthur fell back, helplessly pinned against the rock. The huge giant raised the sword above his head, prepared to deliver the final blow. Suddenly, he let out a mournful groan, his eyes bulged from his head, and he fell to the ground dead, a spear lodged in his back.

His two brothers were dumbfounded as they turned to see young Galahad standing firmly with sword and shield in hand. His tall figure in handsome blue and buffed armor, shone brilliantly in the sunlight.

"I will not allow the light of England to be snuffed out!" cried Galahad. "Today, I will slay you as I have slain your brother!"

The giants moved slowly toward the English champion, prepared to meet his challenge. Galahad's superb skill as a swordsman stood the test as he defended the king. Two aides hurried to Arthur's side, and moved him far from the heat of the battle.

Finally, after hours of combat, hundreds of Saxons lay dead in the valley. Among them were the three mighty giants. The remainder were headlong in flight, leaving behind a few straggling foot soldiers for the victorious English to take as prisoners. The proud banner of the enemy troops fluttered down the staff and Arthur's triumphant flag took its place.

As the battle ended, Arthur's men moved the injured king to the safety of his tent where doctors carefully bandaged his wounds. After a brief rest he was carried outside to greet the waiting English army. In the midst of shouts and cheers a victory wreath was placed upon Arthur's head. His men flocked around him, waving swords and staves high in the air.

"Hail King Arthur, champion and light of England," they shouted. Arthur took off the victory garland and placed it on the head of young Galahad who stood at his side.

"Champions sometimes need champions!" Arthur said as he embraced his loyal friend. The jealousy was forgotten.

Arthur thanked his troops, gave them a great banquet, and sent them home. All that was left of the colorful battle was the Psalmist's victory song.

The bright galley of the sun sank into a sea of purple. In the distance sheep bells could be heard through the crisp evening air. Arthur looked down the ancient road that led toward the pasturelands north of the valley. He could see a young shepherd tending his flock. The boy practiced slinging stones, using a nearby willow tree as his target. Twigs popped and snapped as the nervous sheep bucked with the ricochet of each shot.

King Arthur emptied the stones from his shepherd's bag onto the dusty ground, smiled, turned, and hobbled away.

THE BETRAYED

by Erin Lale

The long hall is hung with festive banners. Many Khuzhar are here, celebrating with us our victory over another Soft Poofie town, and loot was piled high on the cloth-covered table along with the rib roast and steaming plates of multicolored roots. I helped prepare this feast, and am fully accepted now into the Iwarin household allowed to cook and play hostess with the ladies of the house.

For a long time they only let me clean, chop roots and gather berries, and this continued after the beginning of my fifteenth year, when I -- if I had been born to them -- would have received my ceremonial apron. I am still fifteen. I was given my first early on this very morning.

Happy proud, I banish any resentments from my mind choosing to forget that the ladies accepted me only because I was accepted by the men. Polin taught me sword and shield drill. Lord Iwarin said I could ride with them next time. That is an honor; but this is my place.

I am carrying the jug to the head of the table. Lord Khuzhar is laughing gutturally and pounding Lord Iwarin on the back in good-fellowship, braying in his donkey voice, "You really put it to them, Cusper, you showed them a good stick, har!" I serve Lords Khuzhar and Iwarin strong honey mead then move on down the table filling every glass, aware that all Iwarin eyes are on me. The Khuzhar do not know, they do not notice, but Iwarin knows I was not allowed to serve in the hall when they rode away two days ago. Lord Iwarin, that only Khuzhar's lord dares to call Cusper, smiles with the corners of his face nodding just a little bit, showing his appreciation of my coup.

The Khuzhar see them watching me and take it wrong, leer and wink and poke each other in the ribs and whisper out loud obscene things. It is like the Khuzhar. There is a Fey here too, tonight, a young blond one in messenger's garb, his arms exposed to the shoulder, and I think him handsome. I wouldn't mind if he wanted me for a lover, but of course, he is only polite. Fey men are good-mannered, the best of the three in that respect, I think, except, of course, for Polin.

I catch Polin's eye across the table, lock souls for just an instant, tell him with small expressions and maybe something more, how proud I am -- of both of us. I can't wait to hear of Polin's exploits. It's all harmless now, harmless for them, you understand. They do not have the Power; they don't know what it is. Except for Polin.

He saw me use it once, when the great boar's head on the wall came crashing down during a storm that shook the house. That was when I was ten, just two years after I came here. Polin has known since then, but no one else. He thinks I am some kind of witch or fairy, I think; I would not let on that I am an Oddenling. I am of the Fierce Peoples now, Hopeni of House Iwarin, not Sihd of Odden. The boar's head would have fallen on me, and I did not know Polin was there. It did not frighten me, you understand. I am not allowed to fear.

This is not a Fierce Peoples thing, but part of the Laws of Odden. All emotion that might make an Oddenling use the Power to destroy is forbidden. That part of the Laws was ignored, more often than not from what little I recall. Odden was no paradise. We had our petty jealousies and our hatreds, as much as we tried to squelch them. We had our thieves and even a murderer. But even the insane respected the highest Law. At one time even the naming of the word Destruction was taboo but that was before I was born. Our ancestors writ wisely when they made the Laws, for they wrote to prevent us from destroying all that is -- and with a power such as this, this we could do. Anything other, anything less, than using the Power to destroy is permissible. Destroy what you wish. Only see, Oddenling, that you do it with your hands. Everyone has drink and Lord Khuzhar gets up to make a toast. "Fierce Peoples!" he cries, "Let us always find the pickings easy and the treasure-houses full!" They all drink to that. Iwarin and Khuzhar and Fey, they have all joined who once fought. I maybe unnatural; for to a warrior, only the other Fierce Peoples are fit opponents. For now, though, for now ...

"Fierce Peoples!" Lord Iwarin toasts. "To women!"

"Women aye!" echo the men. Iwarin looks at me before they drink, letting me know they drink in appreciation of us. Khuzhar look at me too, thinking something different.

"To you, Lord Iwarin, Conqueror of the Soft Poofies!" calls out the messenger of Fey, next in the protocol because he is the only Fey here tonight. After several toasts everyone will need his cup refilled. The men fall to eating and soon the boasting starts, the tale telling, stories of the pillaging, but Polin says nothing, busy with his beets, so I listen only a little bit. The feast goes on and on. I return to the kitchen three times to refill the jug, and still they eat and talk, happy, glowing, fine-wrought gold piled up on the table with the bones.

Lord Iwarin proposes a toast: "To the unity of the Fierce Peoples" he says, which should have been a neutral thing to say. But Khuzhar drunk, throws down his cup half-full on the floor and the warriors spring to life. Khuzhar knew Iwarin would say that sometime; he always does. The men of Khuzhar House are too ready at that insult to spring up to battle, for after all, it is Iwarin that is insulted. I know when I see their faces it is a prearranged signal. Khuzhar does not look drunk now as he did only a moment before. Khuzhar draw their swords.

I drop the jug and stand wide-eyed at this breach of the peace of the hall, unconcerned with the breaking clay and the mead flowing onto the floor amid the shards. Iwarin has been careless here, our men are unprepared. There will be battle in the hall of my first hostessing, much blood spent, useless, uselessly.

Seat-mates stand and attack each other, Iwarin fumble for their hammers and their axes and their swords, dive across the bench for pikes and shields or fight where they are with the knives from the half eaten roast. My eyes hunt for Polin amid the fray, find him only now looking up from his trencher. "Polin!" I am close to the wall where a big old sword hangs in ceremonial display. When he looks up, I cast it to him, its great weight nothing to my mind, though it would be vain to fling it only with my arm twenty feet away to Polin. He knows I have used the Power. In this battle no one else will notice the slight distortion of sound and sight along the power line.

Polin catches the sword but does not turn quick enough; a Khuzhar knocks him in the back with a club and sends him sprawling across the table, sending food and coinage to the floor. I gasp with him, feeling what he feels.

Reaching out, I am Polin now, I give him strength, speed. With my own eyes I watch the result: one Khuzhar dead, split from pelvis to sternum. Polin gags; so do I. Battle is still joined here.

The man of Fey has crawled on the floor toward my end of the hall and close to me, he gets up and runs for the door, pulls it open, muscles straining, runs out without closing it. He is not a coward, I think, but only a messenger, running for his horse and for Fey. Fey will come to our aid as it was Khuzhar who broke the peace of the hall, but Fey lands are four days' ride from here and they will come only to avenge us, or to share our glory. I hope they come for that.

One of the Khuzhar has a torch from the wall when I look back, and he lights the tablecloth, the hangings. Our hall is made of wood. I must warn the house, get everyone away, but how can I leave this room when Polin is fighting here? Polin is a hero thrice and a veteran of many battles. Caught un-

awares he used my help, but does not need me now. I go.

"Biorki, there is battle and fire in the hall! Khuzhar has attached us!" Biorki is not here. The strong-jawed woman and her cornflower dress are missing from around the countertops. No one turns the spit and the quail are scorching. They have left, found out and left without any warning from me. But I still must run through the hall and find stray children.

Upstairs, through corridors, past rooms, there is no one about. I call and call and no one answers; they must be gone. Now I stand before Ari's door, old crazy Ari who answers to no one. Did they get him out too? "Ari? Ari!" I pound on the door, there is no response. Count one, two, listen to my heartbeat, then push open the door. It creaks loud. A blast of cold air hits my face and I am entangled in spiderwebs. "Ari?" My eyes are closed tight against the clinging silk, I bat it away with my hands, and when it is gone I find I can't open my eyes. From somewhere in the room an old man's voice cackles.

"Ari?" I open my eyes and see. I have never seen Ari, none of us have, only his sister and Lord Iwarin his cousin. Old, wrinkled face, crinkled up in a toothless smile, skin far too tan for a man who never leaves his room. Pale scum-green eyes glow at me, eyes I have seen before.

This is the man who led the raid against my village. I had always thought it was Lord Iwarin; but no. These are the eyes that met mine when my people died. These are the eyes that spared me.

"Ari." A wave of fear comes over me, a physical force beating against the shield inside my brain. I cannot fear him; to fear is to be able to attack, to be able to attack is to be ready to use the Power to destroy. Our Power is too great for that. In a moment of fear, anger, jealousy, we could unmake the continent. We know because it happened once before.

Eyes like these might have stared out of the sinking city and its tended gardens and trodden woods the day the waters washed over it. Eyes like these might have stood on the high peak and proclaimed dominion over all, calling themselves Destroyer and being proud of such a name, casting down the stone of the temple and raising the dark waters unawares, trying only to gain Attilt for their own. Without warning him I run down the stairs and out. The ladies have gone for water but there are not enough buckets, they can only keep the entrance clear. A timber falls behind me as I rush outside, sparks fly in my hair. The sounds of fighting from the Great Hall are drowned out by the whoosh of air going toward the flames. "Why don't they come out?" I shout at no one in particular.

"See what comes of using foundlings in the hall?" Biorki cries. "You're bad luck, Hepeni! A curse on all of us!"

She means that, I see when I look at the set of her jaw, the burning in her eyes, the way she stands to gather in the other women. Without a word I turn and ran back inside the house.

"Polin!" I find him engaged in hacking at the shield of a bearded Khuzhar twice his size. "Come away, the house is burning down!" I call to him, and I know he hears me, but how can he leave when he is fighting? I take a rib off the table and throw it at the Khuzhar, distract him long enough for Polin to run away, but he doesn't run away.

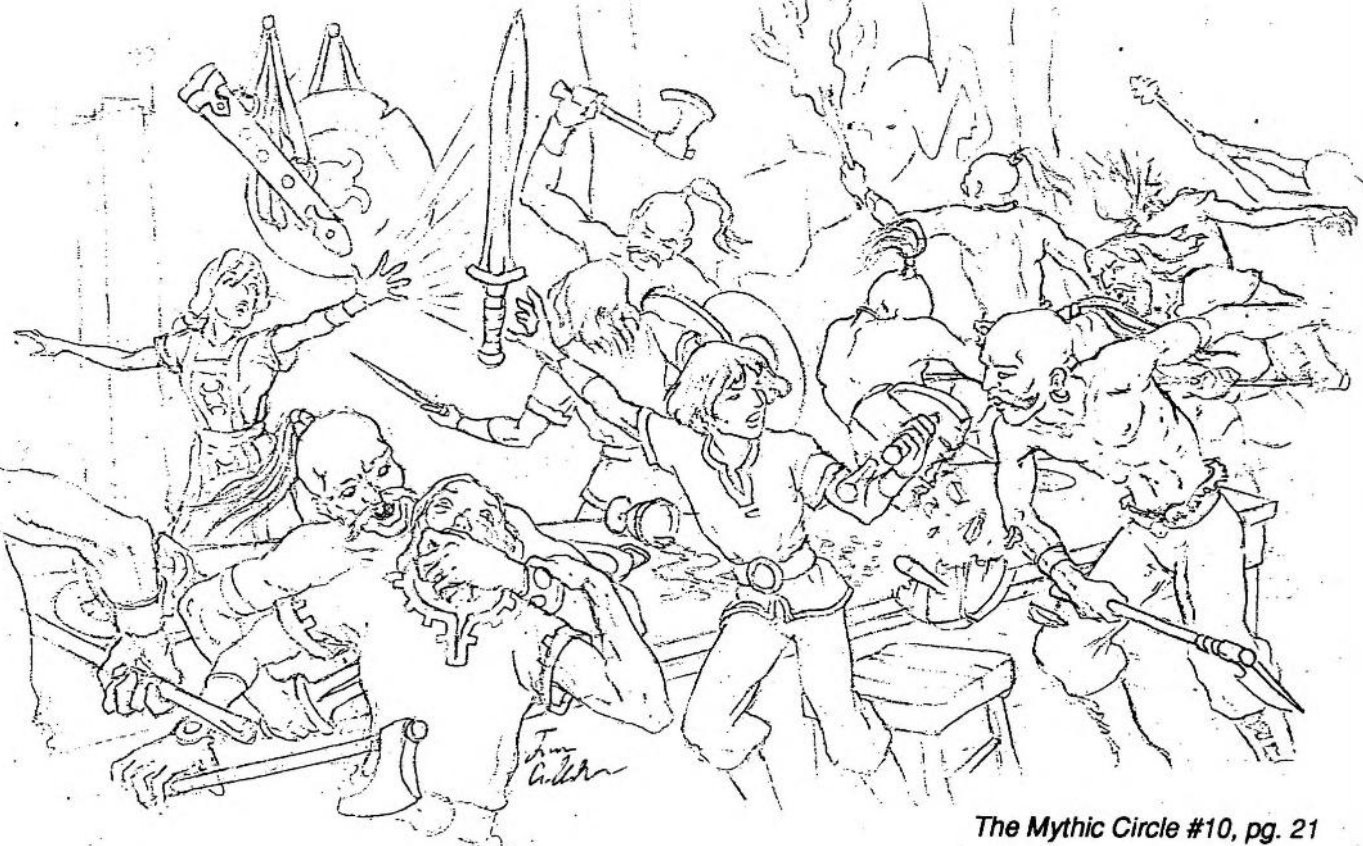
With the huge old sword Polin spits a man who was his ally earlier in the day, and now satisfied, he can leave the hall. His hair is on fire. There is no time now to put it out, we must leave, so I grab his free hand and run for the door again, leap over the rubble and run. At first Polin does not come when I yank on his hand looking over his shoulder at the battle and the battlers. "Don't be a fool!" I shout at him, perhaps the harshest thing I have said to Polin all this year -- but it is because I love him as my brother. He knows this. But he does not want to be called a coward, he, standing there while the fire runs down his hair and scorches his scalp, and he says nothing of it. "Someone must live!" He is Lord Iwarin's youngest child, thirteen, and he has three brothers. To leave now, if no one else does, would make him our new Lord. There is responsibility as a warrior and responsibility as an heir; I only urge him to choose the latter. In the next instant he unplants

his booted feet and lets me pull him toward safety. Outside I take a pan of water from the nearest woman and put out Polin's hair.

We look through each other for a moment, link ourselves somehow. When I look back a part of the wall has come away from the house, Khuzhar are there, stepping outside, and I think, finally, finally they will run, they will leave the fighting and all will come to their senses, Khuzhar will pay reparations and we will rebuild the hall, all will be much as before. But no: Khuzhar are still fighting. They block the exit from the hall! The road Polin and I took is caved in now, burned despite the ladies' attempts at throwing water.

My gaze draws Polin's. He sees, and he must fight. He goes to attack the backs of the Khuzhar, gets one before others turn. One of them butts him with a massive shield and sends him to the ground in the midst of the water chain, knocking over several women and spilling half the water uselessly onto the ground.

I am near him in a single hop, bent down at his side, knowing as I look that he is not injured. The muscles in his arms tense as he starts to lever himself up off the ground and rejoin the fighting, though three Khuzhar now face him with long and sharp-tipped spears, back to back with their fellows fighting those still in the burning house. Then Polin gets another idea, and I see the light of intelligence burn in his eyes. "The roof is about to collapse, Hepeni!" And all our warriors still trapped inside the hall. I know, I tell him with my eyes. "Get them out of there!" His father, his brothers, his cousins,



everyone is inside the burning house. "I know you can!" Sharply I flash my eyes, no Polin, use the Power in from of everyone, so that they can all say I am a witch? "Use it, Hopeni!"

Nothing in the Laws of Odden say I cannot use the Power at all. Polin does not ask me to aid the battle, to kill Khuzhar with my mind. Just get Iwarin out of the house, out of the danger, that is all. But Biorke has already called me a curse and what will they do then? It is for my own life that I fear.

Fear, Hopeni? Sihd? Do you fear Biorke? Biorke, when Polin and Lord Iwarin are your true allies? Fear! Fear, Sihd! To fear anything!

I gather the Power and I close my eyes. In my spirit I see the outline of the crumbling roof, the shapes of the fighting men inside the hall. I see the flame red behind my eyes, I feel the sparks igniting each new section of the roof. Blue, I think. Blue spot in the heart of the fire, growing, spreading, deepening. Moist, wet, drenched, water from the sea over it all, the fire is out.

I open my eyes. "Great! Now save Iwarin, save us, I know you can!" His voice cracks at one word, down almost as deep as his father's. I look at him with uncomprehending eyes. "They're still fighting, Hopeni!" Dimly I am aware of the ladies forming a semicircle around us, forgetting their husbands and sons, staring at us, or just at me. They stare down from the tops of their faded dresses, not saying a word.

"Kill?" This is a different matter, Polin, do you not see, do you not remember how I explained it to you?

"Look!" From the ground where we both were he pointed to the skeleton of the hall. "Most of us were slain in the first seconds, they caught us by surprise!" I know, Polin, I remember. "Hopeni. Look in there. There are twice as many Khuzhar as Iwarin there." In fairness it would not be so. And Khuzhar are larger, and had better weapons ready, and it all. Yes, yes I know, I see. "Help them!"

I live now in a warrior culture, warriors are my only friends, and they will die. Here is Polin who took me in, Polin who understands more than any. But I am still an Oddenling, I cannot use the Power to destroy, to kill. Even for this cause, even for Polin. My people let themselves be killed rather than strike in hatred. Yes, and they all died.

A smile flits across my face as I lock eyes with Polin. Standing up, I draw in my internal energy, summon my Power. A sword and shield materialize before me, flying in their natural element, shimmering, drawn together for a brief time out of the air. I buckle on the shield and grasp the hilts of the slender blade, balanced just for me. With Polin at my back, I walk to where the warriors are.

THE VERNAL QUEEN

by Colleen Anderson

He came to me.

I was still young,
growing like new shoots.

I enraptured him,
rooted a King—

a kingdom.

I coaxed forth his budding purpose—

canopied the Summer King
in his ripe and fecund land.

The fruition of his power,
prosperity.

Unharvested, the decay seeped in.

I was the Fall to the Winter King.

His wisdom, grew past its day.

I passed him by,

consigned Arthur to the dying time—

abandoned the Winter King
to the bone-white realm.

To preserve my Spring

I searched for budding youth.

His strength and perfection, shooting forth,

my love for Laucelot seeded him
toward his summering.

I grew anew with greening life.

In eagerness, in youth

he came to me.

M.I.A.

by Patricia Ellen Flinn

One morning after a long and fitful night of dream-drenched sleep, Helen Blake awoke and discovered to her astonishment that she had been transformed into a large and dazzling butterfly.

Surely this can't be possible, she thought, gazing first to her right and then to her left at what appeared to be two large, multicolored wings. Surely I must be dreaming.

Gone were her arms and legs, her head and torso, her hands and feet.

In their place, fluttering so tenderly upon the pillow where only a few hours before she had laid down her woman's head, was a lightness so lovely, a spirit so translucent, so mysteriously linked with her own as to be almost unbearable.

"Dream or no dream, it sure feels strange," she said, eying the soft patterns of blues, yellows and purples etched like rainbows across her cool, trembling wings. "In fact, it feels as if I could almost fly."

She glanced over at her husband, Harold, who was stretched out and snoring beside her.

"Oh, but that's ridiculous," she said. "I'm a married woman. Of course, I can't fly. And besides, it's nearly seven o'clock. I have to wake Jennie up for school."

Immediately, her three new pair of legs began scurrying across the pillowcase.

"But wait a second," she said nervously, peering up at the two stalk-like antenna quivering above her eyes, "how in the name of God can I do anything in this condition?"

She crept a few inches closer to her husband, hoping that he would wake up and give her a good shake, but he was sound asleep and worlds away.

She tried calling his name but that didn't seem to work. Like her body, her voice too had somehow changed overnight. It was so soft, so low, she could barely hear it herself.

After a few minutes of quiet reflection--something quite new to her--the thought entered her head that perhaps she should try flying onto her husband's face. For several minutes she sat quivering upon the pillow, wondering if such a feat were possible. Finally, she took another peek at her wings.

They certainly seemed capable of flying her through the air: they were large and strong enough. And, they certainly seemed willing, even anxious, to accommodate her, but since she had never really flown before, except in an airplane like everyone

else, she was still just a wee bit hesitant. What if she crashed? How would she ever explain that?

After several more minutes of reflection, however, when nothing else seemed to be happening, she decided to give it a try.

To her surprise, it was quite easy. In fact, it was as if she had been flying for years. With just a few quick flutters, she was off the pillow and sailing through the air like a feather whisked merrily along by a playful summer breeze. In fact, it was so pleasant she was almost sorry when she landed several moments later atop the tip of her husband's long, pointy nose.

"I hope the poor dear doesn't mind," she said, gazing down at him with a smile, her antenna outstretched and trembling.

Gently she began to caress his cheeks with the soft silky ends of her wings. Every so often his nose would twitch and his head would toss from side to side, but like a perfectly graceful sparrow clinging to a twig of a long, swaying branch, she hung on tight, her wings, arched and alert.

Just as she was growing accustomed to his rhythms, however, her husband's eyes flew open, catching sight of her.

"Whoa," he cried, bolting upright and staring cross-eyed in her face. "What the devil--"

Without warning his right hand flew up, swiping the air above her head and barely missing the top of her left wing. Miraculously, Helen danced aside just in time, unscathed, but clearly startled.

Obviously he doesn't recognize me, she thought, hovering a safe distance above his head. I guess I'll have to do something.

But Harry was much too excited for her to do anything.

"Helen," he shouted, leaping out of the bed and looking around the room, "where are you? You must have left the window with the broken screen open again. We got some kind of a bug in here."

His hands kept snapping at her as if she were some nasty mosquito he was determined to crush.

Helen could hardly believe her eyes.

"Good God," she cried, "don't tell me he's never seen a butterfly before? Doesn't he realize butterflies don't hurt people. People hurt us!"

She paused.

What the hell was she saying? She wasn't a butterfly.

She was only dreaming she was a butterfly. Right?

Jesus, she was getting more confused by the minute. And to make matters even worse she could hear her daughter, Jennie, calling from outside the bedroom door.

"Daddy, is--is everything all right in there?"

She watched as the little girl stepped cautiously into the room, staring with wide curious eyes.

"Oh, Daddy," the child said, looking at the ceiling and breaking into a bright smile. "It's so pretty! So very, very pretty!"

"Where's your mother?" Harry asked. "Go get your mother. She's never around when I need her!"

Helen flashed her wings angrily. Harry could be so insensitive at times. There was no need for him to talk to Jennie like that.

"Where did it come from?" Jennie asked, staring up at Helen with rapt attention. "Can we keep it?"

"No," Harry said. "Bugs belong outside the house. Now please, go find your mother."

"But it's not a bug, Daddy," the little girl explained. "It's a butterfly. See? Its got real pretty wings."

"Do as I say," Harry ordered.

Jennie began to cry.

"Oh, the poor child," Helen said, dropping down a few inches from the ceiling and circling the room. "She's so, so sensitive. Why can't Harry see that?"

Almost as if he had heard her, Harry sighed.

"O.K., O.K. honey," he said, walking toward his daughter. "Don't cry. I'm sorry. The nice butterfly will be just fine. We'll open the window and set it free, O.K.?"

Jennie continued to sob.

"I don't want the butterfly to go free," she cried. "I like it. It's pretty. Pretty and nice."

"But, honey, butterflies belong to nature," he shrugged, pointing to the window. "They die when they have to stay locked up inside a house."

Jennie sniffled.

"Really?" she asked, through tear-stained eyes. "Is that true?"

"Cross my heart," her father said, walking to the window and opening it. "See? Now the pretty little butterfly can join all the other pretty little butterflies in the big world outside."

Helen shuddered. Was Harry serious? Did he actually want her to fly through that window?

She hovered fearfully about her daughter's head, wondering what she should do and how she might help her husband to recognize her. Before she could decide, however, she felt Harry coming

toward her, violently shooing her in the direction of the window.

My God, this is awful, Helen thought, feeling suddenly terribly sorry for herself. Can't Harry see what he's doing? Can't he at least sense who I am?

Round and round the room they went, for hours it seemed, sparring like windmills in a dance of shadows, until Helen became so exhausted, her wings so heavy with confusion and sadness, that she found it almost impossible to fly. Like a black cloud brooding with rain, she suddenly broke and dropped to the ground, her legs and antenna limp with sorrow.

Thus, it came as no surprise when Harry finally reached down and picked her up by her left wing.

"See, Jennie?" he said, carrying Helen toward the window. "Why, the poor thing is just miserable inside this house. Of course it wants to be outside."

With that he flung his wife high into the air, slamming the window shut in her face.

As Helen tumbled through the open space, wind licking her wings and face, she managed to catch one last look at her husband who was standing behind the glass gazing out at her.

For some reason she felt very sorry for him. In only an instant, it seemed--the quick flick of a wrist--he had thrown away their love without even knowing it.

It took Helen some time, naturally, but eventually she got rather used to her new world. In fact, in many ways she liked it even better than her old one, although she still missed her daughter, Jennie. For one thing, everything she saw looked fresher, lovelier, more alive with color and texture. Each flower seemed sweeter, brighter, more mysterious than the next. Each day was an invitation, a journey of surprise through sunlight and freedom.

She spent hours clinging lovingly to a blade of grass and whole afternoons breezing casually across sun-drenched meadows. Even when she got lonely at times, remembering her old way of life, there was always something to catch her attention and lighten her spirit--the warm, sweet scent of sticky nectar, the hidden softness of a yellow-tipped flower, the cool smoothness of a crystal dewdrop.

At night, drowsy beneath moon-lit skies, she drifted peacefully among the willow trees, her memories of the day lighter than the wispy tracings of her silken wings.

From time to time there were problems, of course. Little annoyances and frustrations, like the man with the long wispy net who tried to capture her one sunny afternoon as she sat dreaming atop a daisy. And the big black bird with the fierce beak who swooped down from an old oak tree and tried to

swallow her as she lay bathing in a warm pool of sunshine.

But for the most part, she really couldn't complain. Despite all its dangers there was something wonderful and exciting about being a female butterfly. Winging about to her heart's content, she felt much freer than she had ever felt as a female human. Even on those soft spring nights when male butterflies pursued her for hours across long and lonely fields, she was not afraid. In fact, she rather enjoyed it. She had come to know her power, the magic of her splendid wings. She knew how far they would carry her and to what heights, whenever her mood changed. She knew there was nothing else for her to fear ever again. Nothing else for her ever to lose. And so she was happy. Happy as a butterfly, catching every eye.

UNTITLED by Rhea Rose

Cindy lives in the emerald sea
Where water babies tug her hair
Where nerids play among the foam
And sirens keep her close to home

Cindy lives in the sea deep green
Where sea nymphs sing to her
and mermen bring to her
gifts of serendipity

Cindy lives in the green deep sea
Where the water cradles her
Where kelpies rock her to make her
Sleep

Cindy lives in the green green deep
Where the mermaid gathers
And the sea witch scatters
rainbow pearls in her hair

Cindy lives in the deep deep green
In quiet depths, in shadow tides
attended by her folk
unseen

THE FLUTIST

by Jill Solnicki

lifted the silver
shaft of light to his lips
then danced,
head nodding,
feet bobbing,
fingers tapping, tripping,
trilling; and

everywhere the hidden birds:
white wings
throbbing at his throat,
a white head peeking
from his breast pocket,
the pointy pinions
of his vest, the
fluttering dove-
grey tails of his
morning coat...

when, suddenly, he
floated, yes, actually floated
off the floor,
over the head
of the concert-master,
the conductor,
the cellos
and the horns,

and disappeared
into the dome,
singing

the sweetness, the sorrow

of

high

C.

Cairnwoman

by

Rosamund I. Flambard

On a sun-warmed boulder far from the other children in her class, Francie Dunster sat eating her frugal lunch. Every now and then she peered out of the corner of her eye at her classmates who were playing softball, tag, and hide-and-seek in the adjacent field. She wished she could join them but knew that such a thing would be impossible, for she was an outsider, an outcast by reason of a homely face and an obese form that grew constantly fatter due in part to her aversion to gym class. She couldn't bear to face her peers in P.E. shorts and T-shirt, or listen their laughter as she tried, unsuccessfully, to run five laps or do a flexed arm-hang.

Francie was fairly accomplished academically, especially in History and Language Arts, but, friendless and alone, she thought scoring A's was rather unimportant. She would have rather had someone to talk to than a glowing report card! Her intelligence added to her unpopularity, too: pre-teens into rock music and video games weren't terribly impressed by a girl who listened to Mozart and read *Beowulf* for pleasure!

Francie rose as she heard her teacher, Mr. Harvey, shout for the class's attention. Dropping her lunchbox, she hurried toward him, head bowed, hoping no one would notice her. But as she approached Mr. Harvey, who was sitting on the steps of the school bus, she heard a loud giggle and knew that she'd been spotted. Raising her head, she saw Lisa and Kim, two of the most popular girls in school, observing her with spiteful eyes. Francie thought they looked awful, their round, childish faces plastered with makeup, their still-boyish figures draped in gaudy, New Wave gear; but she didn't dare say so, even though they teased her mercilessly. Francie had been taught to accept other's differences, and also that it wasn't nice to fight back.

"Here comes jelly-belly!" Lisa said loudly.

"Wibble-wobble, wibble-wobble!" mocked Kim, rocking from side to side in an exaggerated manner that was supposed to be an imitation of Francie's walk.

Francie hung her head till her hair covered her crimson cheeks. Oh, if only she had the courage to stand up to them!

"Have a nice lunch, Fran?" asked Lisa in a syrupy voice.

"Yes," Francie whispered meekly, not knowing what else to reply.

"Lots of gooey cakes, no doubt."

"No, I'm on...on..."

"A diet?" shrieked Lisa, finishing Francie's sentence for her. "You're on a diet? Kim, did you hear that? Francie's *dieting*!" Kim snickered. "A lot of good it'll do her. *She'd* have to stop eating altogether to get thin!"

At that moment Jason and Rob, Lisa and Kim's 'boyfriends', appeared behind the tittering girls. "What's happening, baby?" asked Jason in his best grown-up imitation, slipping an arm round Lisa's waist.

"Oh, we were just talking to Francie." Lisa gestured to Francie, who arms crossed defensively across her belly, was staring at her toes.

"Fat Fanny Franny? Ugh, why? Who'd want to talk to that dog? She's so ugly, I bet she weighs at least 110 pounds!"

Tears welled up in Francie's eyes. She was *far* heavier than Jason's cruel guess!

"We were discussing her diet," smirked Kim.

"She's on a diet? Big deal! Even if she was skinny, she'd still be a dog. That *thing* couldn't be pretty if she tried."

Fists clenched, choking on sobs, Francie whirled away. If she'd been prone to tantrums, she would have beaten herself with her fists, striking the body that had betrayed her, made her an object of ridicule and scorn. She felt sick, sick with bitterness and hatred towards herself and her classmates.

"Now kids," Mr. Harvey was yelling over the children's clamor, "Settle down and listen! On today's field-trip, we are going to visit the burial cairns and defensive works of the Songhees Indians who lived in this area about 800 years ago. Be prepared to take notes as we go along; you'll be tested on the subject later! Now line up in pairs, please!"

There was a scurry as the children fought to pair up with their friends. Francie was bumped to the end of the line, where she was partnered with Todd, whose usual crony, Jimmy, was absent.

"Yuck; it's Miss Piggy!" Todd exclaimed as she took her place beside him. He began moaning and groaning loudly, pretending Francie's presence was killing him.

Suddenly Lucy, one of the girls standing in front of Todd, whirled about and snapped: "Oh Todd, shut up!"

Francie's eyes widened. Was someone actually defending her?

Todd glowered at Lucy. "Easy for you to say, Lu!

You don't have to stand next to Francie!"

"Neither do you," said Lucy. "If you don't want to walk with her, push her out of the way. It's as simple as that! Just give her a shove!"

Francie's heart sank. Lucy wasn't on her side after all.

Todd turned on Francie. "I'm not walking with you. Stand behind me or something."

Francie shook her head. "Mr. Harvey said . . ."

"I don't *care* what Harvey said; I'm not walking with you! Get lost, Francie!"

"N . . . No," she said haltingly. "I . . . won't."

"I'll make you, you blimp!" he snarled, and he gave her a shove with both hands. Crying out, she overbalanced and tumbled to the ground, her skirt flying up and exposing her great white thighs.

"Oh gross!" exclaimed Todd.

All the other children burst into raucous laughter.

Noticing the disturbance at the end of the line, Mr. Harvey roared: "What's going on back there?"

Francie struggled to her feet, and made to reply, but Todd clutched her arm in a painful grip. "Keep your mouth shut, Dunster," he ordered. "You squeal, and I'll kill you!"

"Yeah, we'll kill you," echoed Lucy, glaring over her shoulder at Francie.

"I . . . I've had *enough* of this!" Words suddenly burst from Francie's lips. "Get your hands off me, Todd!"

"Aren't you fierce," mocked Todd. "I'm so scared!"

Francie's eyes blazed. "I hate you, Todd!" she screamed. "And not just you! I hate the rest of you, too! You're a bunch of rotten little creeps!"

Jerking away from Todd, she fled across the field without glancing back. She heard Mr. Harvey bawling her name, but paid no attention. She couldn't face those kids ever again!

Soon the field ended. Francie clambered over a steep embankment and entered a hoary wood. Panting, she forced her way through dense underbrush and clumps of vines. Maybe there are bears in here, she thought darkly, as she groped her way through the tangle. Perhaps I'll get eaten. I hope so.

Before long the vegetation thinned out, becoming less impassible. The trees were taller and less gnarled, their twined branches forming a leafy canopy through which faint daylight filtered. Francie ceased her flight and stared around her at the gnarled trees, the emerald moss carpeting the ground, the clumps of fungi sticking out like ears from rotting stumps. And she felt as if she were in another world, a world of magic and enchantment, where perhaps, a homely little girl would be accepted.

"Yes," she said out loud, "this is a magic place. *My* place! I am a Princess here!" Yes, a Princess here in her private woodland world, where good Princesses didn't have to be blond and beautiful to win the love of Princes or anyone else.

Francie began to dance, pirouetting gracelessly upon the moss. She had always wanted to learn ballet, but hadn't taken lessons for fear of ridicule. Who'd ever heard of a fat ballerina? She'd have been laughed straight out of dance class. But now, alone, she could dance without fear of criticism.

As she twirled, she heard a strange whistling noise. At first she thought it was the wind blowing through the trees, then she recognized it as pipe music. Francie stopped dancing. Someone else was in the woods! Keeping to the shadows, she crept forward, seeking the unseen piper.

After crawling through a hedge of brambles and a ditch, Francie entered a clearing. In the clearing stood a large cairn of lichenous boulders. The piping came from behind the heap.

That must be one of the cairns the class was supposed to visit, thought Francie. I wonder if the piper is one of the kids? I had better find out, though I'll probably regret it!

"Hey!" she shouted. "Who's playing that music?"

Francie jumped in fright as a strange woman sprang from behind the cairn. Her long grey hair tumbled out of a bright kerchief and her face was brown and wrinkled, much like the faces of the dried-apple dolls Francie had seen for sale at agricultural fairs. She was wearing a dress made of deerskin, and her eyes were black and shiny, resembling a raven's. "Do not fear me, child," she said. "I shan't harm you."

Despite her better judgement, Francie believed the old woman. Although she looked queer, Francie did not think she was a bag-lady or an alcoholic. She could not say why. Perhaps it was the intelligent and somehow magical glitter in the old woman's raven-dark eyes that told Francis she was not a derelict.

"Are you an Indian, or an Indian *ghost*?" Francie asked. She did not know why she said the word "ghost".

The old woman laughed. "No, dear, I'm not a ghost. Nor am I an Indian: I belong to no race of Men. What I am, child, is a spirit."

Francie paled slightly. "A spirit? Then you *are* a ghost!"

"No, for I am not the shade of one long dead. I have always been as I now am. Ah, child, do not recoil from me! I am harmless." The old woman smiled at the girl; it was the most beautiful smile Francie had ever seen. The stranger's smile made the coy smirks of the magazine models Lisa and Kim emulated look positively loathsome.

"What's your name?" Francie asked shyly. "I'm Francie Dunster."

"I am called the Cairnwoman," the old lady replied, "because I live in cairns of stones."

"Cairnwoman isn't a proper name!" said Francie indignantly. "What's your real name?"

"I have no true name. Or, more correctly, I have so many I could not possibly decide which one to use!"

Francie blinked in surprise. "How did you get so many?"

"I am old, child, and one tends to acquire such things with age."

"How old are you?" asked Francie.

"Oh, very, very old. I was old when Stonehenge was raised on Salisbury Plain. I have seen all the great sites of the ancient world: Ur, Babylon, Troy, Thebes . . . I cannot name them all!"

"You've certainly seen some things, haven't you?" said Francie. "What ever brought you to this humble Indian cairn?"

"I am a traveller," said the Cairnwoman. "I never tarry in one place for long. After dwelling in Albion for two millenia, I clothed myself with the shape you now see and headed for new lands. For many days I blew about the wild seas, then I happened on these shores. The natives here mistook me for a goddess, and so I took up residence with them. When they passed away, or changed as all men must, I entered my cairn and went to sleep. I have slept for almost two hundred years."

"Your tale is incredible," said Francie, "but I believe it anyway. But, Cairnwoman, one thing puzzles me. Why have you woken from your sleep to speak to me? I'm no one special!"

"You are so lonely and unhappy," said Cairnwoman. "I could *feel* your sorrow as you approached, and it woke me."

"I'm sorry," muttered Francie, bowing her head.

"Don't be, my dear," said the Cairnwoman. "I'm glad you woke me. Perhaps I can cheer you, ease the the grief and sorrow in your heart."

Francie flushed, embarrassed that the woman knew of her problems. "I'm not lonely," she muttered unconvincedly, shuffling her feet in the dirt and pine needles. "I was just a bit depressed. I . . . uh . . . failed a Math test at school."

"You are lying, Francie," said the Cairnwoman, shaking her head. Grey hair frothed on her shoulders. "Do not be ashamed of your loneliness, Francie. It is not your fault."

"Oh, yes it is!" Francie blurted. "I eat too much and don't exercise enough, and that's why I'm fat. And everyone hates fat kids!"

"You won't always be fat," said the Cairnwoman, "and one day you will realize that physical appearance means little. If one's spirit is fair, the outer shell is of no importance."

"Oh, sure," said Francie, her disbelief evident in her tone of voice. "Tell that to Kim and Lisa, the popular girls at school."

"Unfortunately, neither girl would believe me," said the Cairnwoman with a heavy sigh. "Not at this stage of their lives anyway. Girls who behave like Lisa and Kim can not even see me, Francie. They could walk into this clearing right now and see no one but you."

Francie shrugged moodily. "I'm glad I can see you,

but I also wish I were like Lisa or Kim. Everybody likes them: they go to parties and get Valentines and *everything*. They've even got boyfriends, Cairnwoman. I bet I'll never have a boyfriend. I shall probably end up an old maid like my Aunt Josie."

The Cairnwoman shook her head, then beckoned for Francie to come closer. "Over here, child," she said. "I want to show you something."

Francie strode over to the old woman and sat down on the mossy cairn. The Cairnwoman reached into a pocket on her primitive kirtle and drew out an amber pendant on a leather thong. She dangled it before Francie's upturned face. "Take this," she said, "and look into it."

Francie cupped the amber in her palms and gazed into its heart. She gasped loudly. "I see me!" she cried. "Only I'm older, and I . . . I'm not very fat! Or ugly!"

"I told you you wouldn't always be fat, didn't I?" laughed Cairnwoman. "Things change, child. You must have faith."

"It's so hard," said Francie. "No one even tries to understand . . . Oh gosh, I hear someone coming!"

In the thicket nearby, a girl was shrieking Francie's name.

"It's Lisa!" cried Francie. "Oh Cairnwoman, I don't want to see her! Hide me—or help me against her!"

Cairnwoman grasped Francie's shoulder. "Lisa can't see me, Francie. I can't help you—in that way. You must stand up to Lisa yourself. Tell her how you feel."

"She'll just be mean!" Francie was bordering on tears. "She won't listen."

"If she won't, show her my pendant . . ."

Cairnwoman faded from view as Lisa stumbled into the clearing, red-faced and disheveled. "So *there* you are, Dunster," she snapped. "I could hit you! Mr. Harvey's given us all a detention!"

"Don't blame me. You and your friends were the nasty ones."

"Why should we be nice to *you*?"

"What did I ever do to you, Lisa?" Francie spoke up as Cairnwoman's reassuring hand brushed her elbow.

"Nothing. My only crime was looking different than the other kids. You think you're real grown up, Lisa—but you're not, until you learn to be nice to people who are—different."

"Don't give me that Sunday School crap!" said Lisa. "You're fat, you're ugly, and no one who's popular likes you! No one ever will . . ."

"Stop saying hurtful things!" said Francie. "don't you understand? I don't enjoy being fat! How would *you* like to be fat and made fun of?"

Lisa arrogantly tossed her head. "I'll never be fat . . ."

Cairnwoman's soft breath tickled Francie's ear. "The amber—it may be the only way."

"Lisa, look at this." Striding over, Francie shoved the pendant in front of Lisa's glaring face.

Lisa made to slap the gem to the ground, but then

she paused and snatched the pendant from Francie, staring in horrified fascination into its heart. "No, no," she breathed, her eyes growing glazed as she watched pictures flicking by inside the magic stone.

Francie peered over her shoulder. In the amber, she could see an older Lisa in the hall of a big High School. She had grown very tall, for a girl, and her hair looked lank and dull, the fairness of youth darkened with adolescence. Her thick makeup couldn't hide her bad complexion. And, despite her avowals to Francie, her willowy figure had vanished. If not fat, Lisa was certainly plump.

"I can't believe it," murmured Lisa, but then she fell silent as more people entered the picture. A group of tentrily clad teens clustered about Lisa, hooting and jeering, taking great sport from her crestfallen expression. They called her many of the same hurtful names she had called Francie. One threw a broken pencil, another mimicked her slouching, embarrassed walk.

Lisa's emotions were sucked right into the stone; it was as if she lived that moment in the future and was not merely a spectator. Tears began running down her cheeks. "Oh no!" she cried, throwing the amber on the ground.

She glanced over at Francie, an agonized expression on her face, new realization dawning in her eyes. "I—I—I'm sorry, Francie!" she cried and she fled into the trees, still sobbing.

Francie picked up the pendant as Cairnwoman reappeared.

"Here's your stone," she said. "It really scared Lisa."

Cairnwoman nodded. "She knows now. I hope what she's experienced today will make her think; shock her into realizing that looks are not the most important thing in life—and that they can be deceiving. The fairest spirit may dwell in the homeliest shell. Now, my girl, you had best be going. Your teacher is probably frantic with worry."

Francie nodded. "Thanks for your help I'll try to remember all that you've told me about my future . . . and about people's appearances. Do you think the kids'll still tease me?"

The woman nodded sadly. "For a while, dear. But one day the teasing will end. Your classmates will mature. The next few years might be difficult—but if you continue to grow and don't sink into self-pity and self-hatred, all will turn out well." Then she bent forward and kissed Francie's forehead, and Francie gasped aloud to see the old woman's wrinkles and wiry hair melt away, leaving fair smooth skin, lovelier than any mortal's and gleaming locks that burned like fire in the gloom.

Francie left the clearing feeling strangely elated. She did not look back; she knew the Cairnwoman would be gone. Besides, there was no point in gazing back on the past. Instead Francie would look to the future, a future in which she would dream dreams that no one, no matter what they said or did, would ever take from her.

TAKING OFF

by Jill Solnicki

The ferris wheel
creaks,
shudders,
then lifts off

above the hawkers,
pointing and gawking,
the dizzy carousel horses,
the tired tinsel,

swings over the big city,
towards the forest,
the balding plain,

then rolls on, on,
across the ocean,
past Hong Kong, Chittagong,
towards Tripolitania,

wheeling higher,
higher,
arching up,
heading out,

a new constellation
of spinning lights and
shrieking people,
leaning out, waving
pink cotton candy

at meteors, the moon,
the startled stars,

at small
receding earth,

and the face
of the laughing sun.

THE OLD MILL STREAM

by James Hartley

The old mill stream. Sounds corny, doesn't it? But that's where it was. I've been living in a rural area ever since my, er, "retirement," and I go on long walks a lot. Around here, nobody minds if you walk across their land. So I often walk a mile or so to the little brook, and sit under a willow tree just downstream from the ruins of the old mill.

Some days I get tired, and doze off. The day Lorithan arrived must have been one of those days. Sometimes dreams can seem very real, so real you're not sure if you're dreaming or awake. I was sitting there and this tall fellow walked up to me. Must have been six foot two or three. He had lots of curly golden hair, and eyes the brightest blue I've ever seen. His ears were just a little pointy, and he wore a crown.

"Hello," he said, "I am Lorithan, King of the Elves. I wish you to deliver a message for me."

"Hello, Your Majesty," I answered. Somehow it all seemed very natural. "I'll be happy to be of service. What's the message?"

"The message is that we of the Elves are getting sick of what you humans are doing to the world. If you don't clean things up, we will be forced to take over again and rule, as we did in the Elder Days. Please tell all your world leaders."

"Certainly, Your Majesty. It will be no problem." Now that in itself convinces me it was a dream. Back when I was number two man in a big company and being groomed for the top spot, I could have called the White House, and they would have had the FBI out looking for Elves inside the hour. Now, though, since my nervous breakdown, I wouldn't consider trying to deliver such a message while awake. I have no desire to go back into the hands of the doctors again. But in a dream, of course, I had no qualms about it.

"Good. See that the message is delivered quickly. We will not wait long for your leaders before we take action." He turned and walked off down the stream. Literally down the stream; he was walking on top of the water. But again it didn't seem unusual. After resting a while longer, I woke up and went home.

That was about six months ago, and of course I never even tried to deliver the message. I never mentioned it to anyone, not even my wife. But now, I'm beginning to wonder. It's still a couple of years to the next presidential election, but already a few politicians are starting to throw their hats in the ring.

What's got me worried is that one of the leading contenders is tall, about six foot two, with curly golden hair, blue eyes, and slightly pointy ears.

I was dreaming that day, wasn't I?

SECRET OF THE GOLDEN BOUGH

by Owen R. Neill

Thunder and lightning lie among the branches,
celestial fire sent as pledge on earth,
dark purpose known only to wisdom
secreted among the groves of holy oak.

And whom do we ask to know those secrets
when fear and wonder war behind the eyes?
Who will guide the golden blade long tested
when ignorance defeats the feet that tremble?
How do men handle heaven's emanations
unless the hands that know will work for us?
Where are these priests then? Let them come, now,
forward,
and teach us how to tame death's favours
that we may live in the promise of forever!

Teach us to sorrow for the tragic end of Balder,
beautiful youth and favoured of the gods,
who kept "forever" so deep within his heart
not even he could divine his tragic fate.
His own dear life was stowed away god-safely
within the embrace of holy oak and wind
suspended mystically between the earth and sky.
Yet once that seat of life was torn away
and hurled against the tree that cherished it,
the host was dead and all who there depended.
Thus Balder, child of the golden bough extended,
beloved of heaven and earth, between suspended,
belied perfection in gods on earth descended.

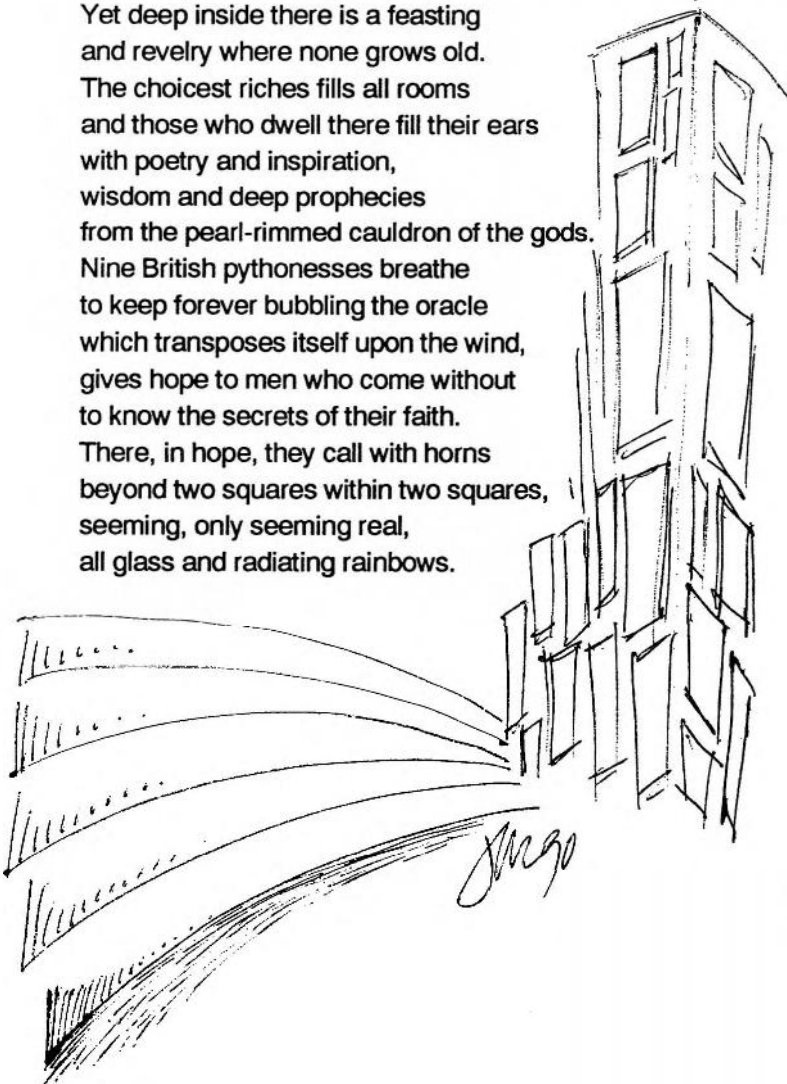
Thunder and lightning lie among the branches,
celestial fire sent as pledge on earth,
dark purpose known only to wisdom
secreted among the groves of holy oak.

ANNWYN CASTLE

by Owen R. Neill

The castle turns and turns
westerly, gleaming westerly,
all glass and radiating rainbows.
Its towers rise into transparency
like the smoking blue of dying fire.
No doors or gates loom landward.
No man purely mortal may enter
Until the gods have touched his eyes
and then god-sight will raise the way.
Sentinels without faces blend
light with light upon the ramparts,
dumb in their never ceasing revolution
as the castle turns and turns
westerly, gleaming westerly,
all glass and radiating rainbows.

Two squares within two squares
seeming, only seeming real,
all glass and radiating rainbows.
Yet deep inside there is a feasting
and revelry where none grows old.
The choicest riches fills all rooms
and those who dwell there fill their ears
with poetry and inspiration,
wisdom and deep prophecies
from the pearl-rimmed cauldron of the gods.
Nine British pythonesses breathe
to keep forever bubbling the oracle
which transposes itself upon the wind,
gives hope to men who come without
to know the secrets of their faith.
There, in hope, they call with horns
beyond two squares within two squares,
seeming, only seeming real,
all glass and radiating rainbows.



DRAGON SOL

by Rhea Rose

the golden blood of gods pounds in your core,
searing sea of molten force
blazing breath
raw licks that scorch and beat
upon our shield

crown sphere of heat
set upon us burning,
your chaotic spotted soul flares and strikes the night
singed, darkness hisses in your path and

borealis born
your spirit shimmers,
the heavens warmly swept

EYE OF MIRANDA

by Rhea Rose

dark shepherdess of epsilon
whose lightless watch and
silent cyclic trek
alludes to clashing eons,
the billion battles wrung and won
to wax with Ariel Umbriel and Oberon

Beyond that black cycloptic gaze
your stone soul
tends to flecks titanic,
ice cliffs the chevron scars
mute scores of chilling song
made colder by deep dark distance

Into *that* night
of tumbled mysteries,
locked in frozen tears, clenched in stone
where tidal heat once thrust
a spark
clandestine flock has passed.

Your dark eye dreams of dark
and rings Uranus unperturbed by sight
but your mysteries, unbound, combine
and in that light you wane and wait
dark shepherdess of epsilon
eternal stare and stir of time

THE MAGUS



by Mel Waldman

"Get out of here, kid!" Buster said to The Magus. "You're finished! Just another Brooklyn bum who made good and blew it."

"You can't get rid of me so fast, Buster. I'm The Magus. The greatest magician who ever lived. The public loves me and so do you. My name is worth a million bucks and more. I'm bigger than Houdini ever was."

"You're nothing, kid. I created you. I named you. Made you who you are. You exist because of me."

"Who are you kidding, Buster? You were a small time agent until you discovered me. I was your million dollar deal. We grew together and we're stuck together."

"You're nothing now but a drunk, kid. The Magus is dead."

"The Magus is alive! The Magus is gonna rewrite history. Wait and see."

"You ain't rewriting nothin, kid."

"I'm going to rewrite history. Wait and see."

"You're Eddie Puskowitz, the kid from Kings Highway-- a once-upon-a-time big shot turned alkie. Eddie Puskowitz, the putz. Beat it, kid. You disgust me."

"Who do you think you are?"

"Paul Buster Delphs, the biggest agent in New York City. Specializing exclusively in winners. Kid, you're a bum. The Magus is finished."

"You'll be sorry, Buster."

"I'm sorry already."

"I'll kill you for this, Buster! I'll kill you!"

"You couldn't kill a fly, putz. Now beat it!"

"You're a dead man, Buster!"

#

Suddenly, Mary Peters strolled into Buster's office and said: "Hey, Boss, anything the matter?"

"Nothing, Mary. The bum's leaving right now. Or I'll call the cops."

"You're a dead man, Buster. Gonna blow you away."

The Magus turned to Mary and said: "See you around, babe. Your boss is living on borrowed time."

"You've got a big mouth, Eddie," Mary said.

"Eddie? Eddie who? I'm The Magus. Fare thee well, Mary. And au revoir."

As The Magus strutted by, Mary cried out: "Sober up, Eddie. It ain't becoming."

"Arriverderci, Roma, my sweet. Arriverderci."

#

When The Magus awakened, the waiting room was deserted except for a gypsy woman with long black hair which covered her face like a mystical veil.

"Who are you?" The Magus asked.

"Jo."

"A lovely name."

"Yes, Magus."

"How do you know my name?"

"It is written in your face."

"What else is written in my face?"

"Destiny."

"And what is my destiny?"

"I don't know. You must ask the Sphinx."

"Who is the Sphinx?"

"She is a wise woman."

"Where can I find her?"

"When the time comes, you will know where to go."

"And who are you?"

"I am Jo," the gypsy woman answered.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

Momentarily looking away from the gypsy woman, The Magus gazed at the vacant waiting room. "Where have they gone?" he asked.

"To Thebes."

"You must be kidding?"

"No."

Suddenly, The Magus laughed uproariously and ceaselessly until the gypsy woman cried out: "They've gone to Thebes! Come! It is time to go!"

"Where?"

"To the Europa Bar on 8th Avenue. You're still thirsty, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, come now. The Europa Bar has fire water which will quench your thirst."

"Fire water? Did you say, fire water? Christ! I must be drunk! But I'll go. Come, Jo! To the Europa! But first, let me see your face."

"Later," the gypsy woman said. "Later."

#

At the Europa Bar, The Magus drank Johnny Walker Red. The gypsy woman drank red wine while studying The Magus.

After drinking incessantly for an hour, The Magus announced: "The Magus is dead! I am Eddie Puskowitz, an ol' time Brooklyn bum. 6'1" and 150 pounds, the blond beauty of Flatbush. My turquoise eyes are lovelier than the sunlit Brighton Beach waters. I'm a pretty bum."

"Hello, Eddie. My name's Jo. An ol' time black beauty. Come with me! It's time to make love."

"Make love? To a faceless woman?"

"Soon you will see my face."

"And your eyes?"

"Yes."

"Fantastic! You may show Eddie Puskowitz to your boudoir."

"Come!"

#

Jo and Eddie walked west to 10th Avenue and then north until they came to the Delphi Hotel.

"That's home!" said Jo to Eddie as she pointed toward the ancient edifice.

They entered the broken down building and when they came to Jo's room, Eddie noticed the small sign on the door which said: "The House of Cadmus."

"Welcome home, Eddie!" Jo cried out.

"What do you mean? I've never been here."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

#

When they got into bed, Eddie Puskowitz said: "Sorry,

Jo. But I'm too drunk to do a thing."

"Don't worry, Eddie. You are about to be reborn." Jo parted her long black hair, pulling it aside to reveal her mystical face.

"Christ!" Eddie cried out. "You've got golden eyes."

"Yes, Eddie. Now look deep into my golden eyes and you will have the strength of a bull."

After looking into Jo's eyes, Eddie made love to her for hours.

#

Just before dawn, Jo said to Eddie: "You must leave now."

"Why?"

"It is time!" Jo whispered.

"When can I see you again?"

"Ask the Sphinx."

"Let me come back later!"

"No!"

"Then you don't wanna see me anymore."

"I wish to see you. We have a rendezvous."

"Where?"

"Ask the Sphinx."

"Who is she? Where can I find her?"

"You'll know where to go. We will meet once more. Goodbye."

#

When Eddie Puskowitz left Jo, he walked the streets of Manhattan for hours. Then he took the D train to Kings Highway. He walked down Kings Highway until he came to Ocean Parkway where he turned right. His house was in the middle of the block.

As he approached his house, he saw a large crowd in front of it. He turned to a stranger and asked: "What's going on?"

"Oh, somebody's been killed."

"Who?"

"A man named Buster. Cops found his body in the middle of the night."

"In that house?"

"Yeah. But the house belongs to some famous guy they call The Magus. Cops think The Magus killed Buster. They're looking for him."

"What were the cops doing in his house?"

"Why, someone called them. Said he saw a man being murdered in the house about 3 A.M."

"An anonymous phone caller?"

"Yeah."

#

Suddenly, Eddie Puskowitz galloped up the block. He flagged a cab on the corner of Kings Highway. "The Delphi Hotel on 10th Avenue in Manhattan. Hurry!" Eddie cried out.

"What street, Jack?"

"Don't know. Somewhere in the 40s or 50s."
"I ain't no magician, Jack."
"Well, I am."
"What's the name of that hotel again?"
"The Delphi Hotel."
"Okay, Jack."

#

The cab crawled up and down 10th Avenue for an hour. Then the driver said: "Listen, Jack. There ain't no Delphi Hotel. Not on 10th Avenue."

"It's here! Right here on 10th Avenue!"
"Sure."
"Keep moving. We're not giving up."
"It's your money, Jack."

An hour later, the driver said: "There ain't no Delphi Hotel in sight."

"Okay, take me to the Europa Bar on 8th Avenue. It's near the Port Authority."

"Yeah, Jack."

Ten minutes later, the cabdriver dropped Eddie Puskowitz in front of the Europa Bar. Eddie went into the bar.

#

Eddie got smashed. Then he asked the bartender about Jo. "I ain't never seen you before," the bartender said. "Ain't never seen this Jo or heard of the Delphi Hotel. Sorry pal."

Eddie asked a dozen strangers if they knew Jo or where the Delphi Hotel was. No one had ever seen or heard of Jo or the Delphi Hotel. So Eddie Puskowitz continued drinking Johnny Walker Red.

About an hour later, he announced: "I'm The Magus, World's Greatest Magician!"

"Yeah, pal," the bartender muttered.

"So make this mysterious lady appear!" a voice cried out. "Right now."

"Who said that?" Eddie asked. "Who's the wise guy?"

Then the guy next to Eddie said: "What kinda magician are you? Ain't the greatest if you can't find this gal named Jo."

Momentarily, the crowd of drinkers laughed uproariously. Eddie stood up and announced: "I am The Magus! Greater than Houdini! And now, I'm off to find the mysterious lady."

"You ain't gonna find her," a voice cried out.

"The Magus will find her. Just you wait and see." Wobbling back and forth, Eddie Puskowitz stumbled out of the Europa Bar.

#

Eddie crawled into the Port Authority waiting room and stretched out on the old wooden bench. A few hours later he awakened. Looking around the room, he noticed the others. "Does anyone know where I may find the Sphinx?" Eddie asked in a loud voice as he rose from the bench.

"The Sphinx? The Jinx? The Sphinx?" an old bag lady cried out.

"Me thinks! No Sphinx! Me thinks!" she sang. Then an old bum announced: "Sounds like a freak to me. Go to the circus. You can find plenty of them there."

"The circus?"

"It's right here in town."

"Yeah. The circus."

"The circus is in town! Don't frown! Come see the clown! The circus is in town!" the bag lady announced.

"It's at Madison Square Garden," the old bum said.

"I'll check it out," Eddie said.

#

Eddie went to Madison Square Garden. When he entered, a guard approached him and said: "We're not selling tickets for another hour."

"I don't want a ticket. Got to see someone who works in the circus."

"Who are you looking for?"

"The Sphinx!"

"What's that?"

"She's a wise woman, I suppose. But in Greek mythology, she had the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle and the chest of a woman."

"Oh, you must mean Europa, The Amazing. Wait here and I'll tell her you wanna see her. What's your name?"

"The Magus."

"Okay, wait here."

#

When the guard returned, he said: "Europa will see you. Follow me." The guard took Eddie to Europa's dressing room. Before entering, Eddie read the sign on the door. "Europa, The Amazing-- The Sphinx of Thebes."

Eddie galloped into the room.

"Stop!" The Sphinx shouted. "What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at evening?"

"Man," Eddie announced.

"Magus, you are the true king of Thebes, I must die, for you have answered the riddle."

"No," Eddie said. "I am The Magus. I've rewritten ancient history. I command you to live. Just answer one question."

"What is the question?"

"Where is the woman named Jo? I must speak to her once more."

"You can't!"

"I must!"

"It is impossible. She is dead."

"Dead? There must be some mistake. She said there'd be one more rendezvous."

"She is dead. Jocasta hanged herself accidentally."

"Jocasta?"

"We all called her Jo. But her name was Jocasta. She

disappeared two nights ago. She returned yesterday morning. When Laius, her husband, asked where she had been, she confessed that she had slept with a stranger. A young man named Eddie Puskowitz."

"I am the stranger."

"Yes. Well, Laius became enraged. He told Jocasta that she had betrayed him and was foolish for telling him of her betrayal. He swore he'd kill the stranger. Jocasta begged Laius not to kill him. She promised she would never see him again. But Laius was unforgiving. And then..."

"What happened?"

"Jocasta warned him that Destiny predicted that Laius would die if he met Eddie Puskowitz. Laius laughed in her face and said: 'I am the king of Thebes. And you are the queen. King Laius and Queen Jocasta. In the twentieth century. In 1989.' Jocasta cried out. 'Ha, ha, ha,' Laius laughed. And so it went."

"He's a cocky fellow," Eddie said.

"He's a lunatic!"

"He's a dead man!" Eddie cried out. "But first, tell me how Jocasta died."

"Last night King Laius and Queen Jocasta did their tightrope act. They had a unique act. Laius would leap from one tightrope high above the ground to a lower tightrope which contained two loops. Laius would grab the two loops and hang from them. Then Laius would swirl about and thrust his legs into the loops, his arms hanging below. Jocasta would leap through the air into the arms of Laius."

"A most difficult act."

"Yes, but last night, they tried a new version. Jocasta leaped first."

"Why?"

"No one knows."

"What happened?"

"Before leaping, she lost her balance. Her head went through one of the loops. She accidentally strangled herself to death."

"How horrible!"

Momentarily, Eddie turned around and cried out to the woman who had just entered the Sphinx's dressing room: "Jo! You're alive!"

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"Jo, don't you remember me? I'm The Magus! I'm Eddie Puskowitz! Don't you remember?"

The gypsy woman's hair covered her face so Eddie could not see her face.

"I'm sorry. My name is Yolanda. We've never met. My sister Jocasta is dead."

"My God! You are so beautiful!"

"As beautiful as Jocasta?"

"Lovelier. Your dark brown eyes rip my heart apart."

"But they are not golden?"

"Jocasta's eyes had heavenly beauty. Yours are magnificently earthy and real."

"Did you love her?"

"Yes. But not as much as I love you."

"Then leave immediately. For Laius has sworn to kill

you."

"Destiny says otherwise," Eddie said.

"Leave now!" Yolanda cried. "I will join you later."

"No! I must confront Laius. Destiny commands!"

"He is out there!" The Sphinx announced. "Go!"

"No! It is a trick. A cosmic trick!" Yolanda cried out.

#

Eddie Puskowitz walked through the door and turned left. An ominous voice cried out: "Where are you, Eddie?"

"I'm coming, Laius. Destiny awaits us!"

Eddie turned left again and then right and then left until he stood in the middle of a big arena. Although Eddie looked around the encircling arena, he did not see Laius. Suddenly, from the tightrope 100 feet above, Laius leaped onto Eddie, catapulting the slender body to the ground. As Eddie looked up into the mad azure eyes of Laius, Laius stabbed Eddie's eyes, twice in each eye.

"Oh, my God!" Eddie screamed. "I'm blind!"

"Yes, Oedipus. You are blind and destiny is fulfilled."

"Kill me! Kill me! What good is life without my eyes?"

"Oedipus! Oedipus! I will be your eyes!" Yolanda cried out.

#

Suddenly, the police arrived. "What's going on here?" the chief of police shouted.

"Destiny has been fulfilled," Laius announced as he dropped his gilded knife to the ground. "I have blinded this man!"

"Who is he?"

"I am The Magus!"

"Christ! We've been looking for you."

"Yeah. I know. You think I killed Buster."

"No! You ain't the killer. Mary Peters confessed six hours ago. Says she stole Buster's key to your house. Made a duplicate. Returned the original to him. Guy never knew the difference. Seems Mary Peters disguised her voice and called Buster from your house. Asked him to come over. When he arrived, she shot him. Called the cops and left before we got there."

"Why?"

"Says she was madly in love with the guy. He jilted her for another woman."

"Who?"

"His wife. Yeah, ain't that somethin. Well, it took a while but she broke down and gave herself up. You ain't wanted for nothin. We'll get you all fixed up. An ambulance is on its way."

Impulsively, Eddie Puskowitz fumbled for the knife which lay beside him and thrust it deep into his heart.

"Hurry!" Laius shouted. "Don't want the bastard to die, I want him to suffer."

"No!" Yolanda cried out. "He's got a rendezvous to keep. Jocasta is waiting. He rewrote history. You should have died, Laius. But The Magus was a man of his word."

the free verse poems were actually better than some of the rhymed ones. But not all.)

Anyway, something to think about, or maybe even start a controversy about (contro-versy: visions of dueling poets... you already know how my mind works).

Thanks for letting me sound off. Keep up the good work, Namarië, and all that.

Donna Farley
Surrey, B.C., Canada

Donna was interviewed in the January 1990 issue of "Christian Vision," a quarterly newsletter she thinks may be of special interest to TMC's Christian writers, published by Skysong Press, RR 1, Washago, Ontario, L0K 2B0 Canada.

So what about it, guys? Do we want to run the J.R.R. Tolkien Memorial Mythopoeetry contest? Hey, this could be a tie-in to the upcoming Tolkien Centenary Conference in Oxford, England, August of 1992 (incorporating Mythcon XXIII; write to me for details - I'm the North American Booking Officer - LM).

Dear Christine, Lynn, Tina, Tom, John, Paul, Miss Hodgell, John, Patrick, Joyce, Owen, Walter, Dwight, Elizabeth, Ann, Laurence, Marjorie, Douglas, Bonnie, Tim, Ari, Nancy-Lou, Cindy, Ron, Nancy, Frances, Gwyneth, Charles, Mary-Edith, Angelee, Kay, Mark, Gerard, Bonnie, Deborah, David, Joann, Janet, Mary Ann, Charles, Bent, C.R. Schabel, Alex, F. Harris, Lawrence, Karen, Evelyn and the (three?) anonymous artists;

I'm sorry I didn't write sooner - I knew I couldn't meet the old September deadline (I had a deadline with a Board of Examiners around the same time and, unlike you, they are not Nice People), and then was not sure *when* MC8 would appear, so put off writing until MC9 appeared.

Back to Editing The Sky (appeared in MC7). As I read it has three parts: firstly an authorial voice observes the homebound train, one girl in particular. In the second scene the (same?) authorial voice observes and interacts with an office, where she is "the new girl." The third part has the (same?) authorial voice describing her homecoming. At this point, she defines herself as "the girl downstairs" - then comes the crux "Tomorrow, I chant to myself, I must remember not to let the new girl meet the girl downstairs" - which I read as an attempt to keep two parts of her life apart. But then, that last line, "I wish I had my Walkman" brings the reader back to the commuter-train scene. The new girl/girl downstairs is thus identified with "the girl with the frizzy hair" - if she is not the same person, she's disturbingly close. Is Editing

The Sky fantasy? No, I don't think so, but I do think it is fiction -- and that's as far as I'll go as a definition of genre would be PhD length, not LOC length.

I found Journeyqueen of Cups a strange and (?)unnecessarily difficult poem. When reading something as concentrated as poetry, I expect to find it inter-woven, that is, I expect, as in a crossword, when you have got a bit right, to have this proved or disproved by the next word that you can get in. That's as far as the analogy goes, for I don't think a poem is to be "solved" like a cross-word. In the way I read this poem, for example: "queen of cups" is from the old pack of cards, but is "journeyqueen" like "journeyman," or something else? I read the first line "Against the road's long dust, she offers" as description, but the word order suggests something ceremonial or symbolic. Have the "cups" in the title a part in this offering - a libation? "Fire and water" suggests two of the four humours, two powerful forces. The "alchemical" confirms "fire and water" as humours, and "tempering" connects with the chemistry/materials science found in alchemy. So is she offering some sort of balancing of humours?

The second stanza commences with the near-cliché "thorn within the flower" as a description of "Her wisdom." But, the poet tells us, her wisdom is not fear of sweetness/flame, paralleling water/fire. I have difficulty in following the construction, but read it 'Her wisdom ...[is] never ... fear of flame [for her wisdom is] quenched cold in golden light.' Quenching is the opposite process to tempering - of what significance is this? Is there any way in which her wisdom could be not-tempering?

In the third stanza, fire is partnered with roses, which refer back to the "thorn within the flower," but I'm afraid I don't understand "burning veils of doubt," or "the heartcup of her hands," except in the cards theme.

So, in this poem I can find/understand a thread of alchemical imagery; find by cannot relate to this some cards imagery, and there are other things going on which lose me.

Two poems which delighted me in entirely different ways in MC8 were Owen R. Neill's Carn Cabal and Elizabeth Hillman's Finality. It is possible to pick at two or three of the lines in Carn Cabal - but the strange thing is, you really don't notice them as the sound and imagery is all-powerful. Tim Callahan's illustration fitted beautifully with it - if this poem *has* to be in print (when its proper place is performance), I cannot imagine better company for it. In contrast, Finality is a poem to be picked over "at the rate of one grain of earth a year" as close scrutiny deepens the feelings produced. It was my favourite of Elizabeth's poems - my breath was taken by the others too.

I like the offprint *Mythic Circle* very much; it is no

better than your work deserves, and reflects the dedication of the editors.

Pat Reynolds
Milton Keynes, England

Well Pat, once again you just blow me out of the water - I print a poem like "Journeyqueen of Cups" because it stirs something in me and I figure that's reason enough. Then you come along and ask all these difficult - and valid - questions! ((You mean poetry is 'sposed to make sense, too?!)) Are you and Ms. Farley in cahoots?

Issue no. 8 was my first view of The Mythic Circle and I found it to be very interesting. Quite a variety of text characters! The artwork was very appropriate although the illustration for "The Gift of Sibyl" seems to be more Assyrian than Greek! Minor detail. Loved the stories and the hard edge commentaries. Do we have some pros out there or just newly graduated college majors? Idealism is admirable - in small doses. Sometimes I rhyme a little myself just to keep in practice!

Meanwhile best wishes for continued success... I'm looking forward to further issues.

Owen R. Neill
Hope, British Columbia

More Assyrian than Greek, eh?! (dare I say it's all Greek to me? Nah - too corny). We do have both some pros and college grads, although most are not so newly-graduated... (we're just opinionated!). Speaking of rhyme, several more of Owen's poems appear in this issue

"All glory, laud, and honour" to those involved in the production of Issue #9 -- it was exceptional.

I might as well begin this LOC by speaking to what was apparently the deep offense I caused Charles Schabel by commenting of him, with reference to his story "A Harpy's Love," that "he or she clearly isn't one for poetry." I apologize to Mr. Schabel and anyone else I may have or may yet hurt by my remarks; the tone of my letters perhaps implies more authority than I really possess, and I advise anyone who finds my criticism unhelpful to ignore it. Tolkien paid almost no attention to criticism and created a masterpiece; and as Charles De Lint points out in his LOC of Issue #9, a real writer will continue writing because he is driven to it whatever anyone thinks or says of him.

To begin with, Schabel evidently does not realize that I would not have written such a long com-

mentary on his work (longer than that on any other piece in the same issue) had I not felt that the story had a great deal of potential; if I feel a story is hopeless, I usually say nothing about it. Furthermore, it is clear that Schabel misunderstood the remark that caused him such consternation. I did not mean to imply that he was a bad writer because his style was not poetic, but that it appeared to me that he was purposefully choosing to write in a simple prose style, and, given that choice, there were still some improvements that could be made. Everyone who has read either my own stories or my LOCs knows that I have a bias toward "poetic" prose, but this does not mean that I think everyone can or ought to write that way. In fact, they will probably stand a better chance of selling if they don't; I am sure that my own decorative, metaphor-laden style is one of the primary reasons that paid publication has thus far eluded me. Neither do I expect everyone to write "pedantic, over-blown epics of moral fantasy," though I hope this comment of Schabel's does not mean that he cannot approve or abide any story with a serious theme.

I would also like to address two further points made by Schabel in his LOC. He admits that his style is "jerky and halting," but seems to think this is necessary in order to say much in a few words. On the contrary, good writing manages to do the latter without creating the side effect he mentions. Dare I say it -- one of the best exercises for learning to handle words economically is to write poetry, particularly the structured variety; in a poem especially, as generally in all good writing, every word should count.

As for Schabel's understanding that "a good writer gets his characters into impossible situations and then devises a clever way to get them out," and that sad endings are to be scorned because they do "only half of this," surely this is a very simplistic and limiting notion of what makes a story, whether fantasy or otherwise, good. While I myself cherish the "Sudden Joyous Turn" element in fantasy, I do not think the ending of a fantasy need be happy in the conventional sense in order to possess a "rightness" or to be uplifting. In *The Lord of the Rings*, though the Ring is against all hope destroyed, Frodo is unable to find healing in the Shire and must pass into the West -- a bittersweet ending if ever there was one -- BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT EARTHLY LIFE IS LIKE. The unalloyed joy in the ending to *The Chronicles of Narnia* is possible because the major characters end up in Heaven.

While on the subject of limiting notions, I trust that the editors of TMC will studiously ignore the comment of one respondent to their survey that their focus should be on "true" fantasy -- i.e. the "sword and magic" kind. But now on to Issue #9's works of art . . .

As usual, John Grey's poem ("Vulture") was effective in its imagery, this one in a quietly sinister sort of way (of course, I would love to see him try structured verse . . .). Lynn's lyric "Pigeons," to which I would like to hear the music, furnished a nice counterpoint in its poignant portrayal of homelessness.

Kay Fortunato's "We Call it North Carolina" had an worthy idea at its heart and was pleasantly atmospheric in its description of "North Carolina." I found its style -- I won't say too prosaic, but -- a little lacking in "pizazz." The ending had the dual problem of not really having arrived anywhere -- I like a story to resolve artistically even if not narratively -- and being too self-congratulatory (i.e. we few elite understand the value of fantasy, unlike all the rest of you dunderheads).

The characters in Mark Andrew Garland's "Anniversary" were convincingly real, especially Erin with his pathetically self-deprecating remarks, and the story successfully surprised me with the fact that he and his wife were ghosts. I felt, however, that more detailed description of the setting would have contributed to the story's haunting premise.

Gerard Daniel Houarner's "Thurenfel's Source" began as a traditional fairy tale with an appealing style and well-constructed progressions (e.g. the King's reference to the "future rule" of his first son, the "probable future rule" of his second, and the "possible future rule" of his third). From the moment that the character of Deirder appeared, though, it turned into something else -- just what I am unsure. Clearly there is symbolism at work here that I do not completely understand, and apart from my understanding of it I find the image of women urinating (and, apparently, menstruating) into the river too repellent to symbolize anything positive -- but perhaps I am too prudish.

Michael Kocik is indeed a fine, fine writer, of real professional quality. "El Patio de los Legartos," besides telling an intriguing story, had that wealth of atmosphere and descriptive detail which I am always wanting more of in stories in TMC and other genre magazines. The descriptions of the settings intoxicated me with that same romance of Spain so headily portrayed in Lord Dunsany's novels *Don Rodriguez: Chronicles of Shadow Valley* and *The Charwoman's Shadow* -- two books I cannot recommend too highly, especially to those who enjoyed Kocik's story. Besides the settings, there were in "El Patio" other marvellous descriptive effects: "your overcoat bundled as tightly about you as newspapers around unsmoked salmon," "the salt air stings your uncovered cheeks like cottonseeds with spikes in them," etc.

Bonnie Kennedy's "An Unearthly Pun" was not badly written, but I perceived two problems with it. The first may be a matter only of personal taste, but

I found the blending of Greek, Roman, Irish, etc. mythical characters unsuccessful -- not that this cannot be done successfully. Also, contrary to the title, the story contained no pun, as Zeus' plan was *literally* to bore the earthlings to death. (If the plan had been to physically bore them through with a spear, this would have been a pun on "bored to death.")

Joe Christopher's "The Planet of Scientists: A Fable" contained an idea of substance and was written with care. I do not think I experienced as profound a reaction to it as the author intended, but I have noticed this lack of an undefinable something in my response to other work by the same author, so perhaps it is simply a failure to connect between his personal means of expression and mine of reception.

As far as I am concerned, Gwentyth Hood cannot write anything but well, and "Sweet as Muscatel" adds one more piece of evidence to the support of that opinion. The tone of the story and its handling of its theme reminded me very much of the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, perhaps particularly "Rappaccini's Daughter" because of the common Italian setting of the two stories (a setting in which Gwentyth seems very much at home).

Deborah Hunt's "The Crimson Berries" had potential, but needs extensive revision. The story line had much to recommend it, though I personally pined for a little stronger resolution, and had problems with the logic of the branch producing good creatures the first, second and fourth time it made contact with the water but an evil creature the third time. Why was this? The story's main problem, though, was in its style. At first I thought it was intended for children (and perhaps it was), then later came to feel it was the product of a not-yet-mature talent. The sentences are too consistently short; an occasional complex sentence would vary the rhythm a little and prevent the present monotony. More precision is needed in the use of pronouns; one cannot always tell to whom "he" is referring, and this could be simply corrected by using Alec's name more often (it only appears once on the story's final page). There is also an occasional awkwardness in choice of words (e.g. "There was no way he was going to give it the berries.") and in the handling of the narrative (I am not sure that the reader needs to be told why the elf had been afraid of the branch, as this was made apparent in the result). I encourage Deborah to continue working with this story and with her writing in general.

David Rubenstein's "Hard Time" was very well told, in a style quite unlike my own which I can nevertheless thoroughly admire. The premise of the story is effectively chilling, cynical, and depressing, and I hope does not reflect Rubenstein's real-life theology.

Lastly of all, I must intone a thousand "Amens"

in response to Tim Callahan's illustration for my "Prince of Thieves" -- it is perfect. Thank you so much to Janet Ewell for her calligraphy of my sonnet, to Lynn for her request for prayers for Stan and I on the death of yet another child, and for the prayers of any TMC readers who have offered them.

Angelee Sailer Anderson
Westminster, CA

I would echo Angelee's point that a long critique of a story is an excellent indication that the reader found it worthwhile, even when the criticism stings a bit, and recommend bearing this in mind to all our writers - particularly when feeling stung!

TC -- We are grateful to Angelee for her willingness, and her ability, to give us detailed, well-analyzed LOCs even at this difficult time.

I just finished reading MC#9 and realized that I still had time to get a LOC in. It's another good issue.

First I want to express sympathy for the Andersons. The death of their son, Greyson, was a shock. It's hard to know what to say to them except I'm sorry and my God be with you. I feel even worse now about an earlier criticism of one of Angelee's stories where I accused her of being fatalistically anti-Christian. She corrected me in a later LOC, explaining that Christianity had a certain kind of fatalism also. I realized (because of the letter) that resignation is a kind of fatalism and Angelee's resignation (and faith) shows strongly in her short note, in her beautiful "Sonnet for a Blessed Son of Grace," and in her "Prince of Thieves." May God bless the Andersons - for what it's worth, I've tried to remember them in my prayers.

Before I write any comments concerning the stories in #9 I would like to respond to C.R. Schabel's LOC in #8. Please, Mr. Schabel, don't take anything I (or anyone else) say too seriously. It's just an opinion. *The Mythic Circle* is a "writers' roundtable," however, and if several people share the same opinion about what they see as a weakness then it might be worth looking into, especially considering that there are some very good writers who take the time to send in LOCs. There are places where you pay good money to have your stories critiqued (check out the ads in *Writer's Digest*).

My favorite poem in #9 was "Sonnet for a Blessed Son of Grace," but I also liked "Pigeons" -- though I'm not sure if the 'pigeon/vultures' were benevolent or slavers. (I think probably benevolent because it is hard to think of "Long-limbed and silver, lithe" beings as evil. But it's nice to wonder -- was the smile sincere?)

My favorite story was Kay Fortunato's "We Call It North Carolina." I've seen two of Kay's stories and I'm already a fan. What was appealing about "North Carolina" was its quiet wonder. It had an almost Tolkien quality. The pace, the dialogue, and mood were all well handled.

The first time I read Mark Garland's "Anniversary" I thought the change in Erin came too quickly -- that it was almost contrived. But reading the story a second time, preparing to write this LOC, I didn't see that problem. I found I liked the story. It had a quiet quality (in some ways like "North Carolina"). (This shows how subjective opinions can be - even the same reader's opinion can change depending on his/her mood).

I found "Thurenfel's Source" distasteful - or at least not to my taste.

"El Patio de los Legartos" seemed well-researched but took too long to get to the point, at least in my opinion. It was also hard for me to feel sympathy for any of the characters.

"Sweet As Muscatel" was an interesting story. The only reservation I had about it (subjectively) was what I considered the theologically murky ending. I can't imagine God becoming an angel of darkness. I did like the changes in Antonio, however.

"The Crimson Berries" was pretty well written, but I had trouble understanding how things as fundamentally good as the branch, the water, and the boy (Alec) could produce the crimson elf. It just didn't seem to follow. Perhaps if Alec had thrown the berry clusters into the water in disgust - or in disobedience- it would have made more sense that evil came from these good things. The pace and the dialogue were well handled, though.

"Hard Time" was disappointing to me. I liked its beginning - the mood, characterization, etc. - but it seemed to bog down in the middle ten turn into a sermon at the end. I was also jarred by the dialogue a couple of times. I can't imagine a Scotsman saying, "that crazy old coot" and "He don't see nobody." This sounds 'southern' to me. It was the ending that bothered me the most. The older MacCaig seems too businesslike when he informs the younger MacCaig about the "Hard Time." I would have liked to see some signs that the old man was weakening as he was dying, and some questions or reactions of some kind from the younger MacCaig.

I liked Tim's and Lynn's art - my favorite was on page 9. Lynn's drawing caught the mood of the story perfectly. I also thought Tim's drawing on page 25 went well with "An Unearthly Pun."

Looking forward to #10. Thanks again for your hard work and good luck Tina with your new job.

Ron Blizzard
Jerome, Idaho

I know the Andersons appreciate your prayers and I'm sure that Angelee wouldn't want you to feel bad about any comments that might, in retrospect, seem inappropriate. The truth is that it's always a risk to express an opinion; we can never know the entire situation either about the author or their intent (the author probably doesn't, either). So while we ask participants not to be cruel with each other, we do encourage real, specific criticism and responses.

I have the advantage here, as the author of "Pigeons," to tell you that I didn't intend the opening line as description of "Them" but setting of place (in my mind it's post-Apocalyptic and yesterday's harmless pigeons have been replaced by today's ravenous vultures) and clearly I didn't do that quite explicitly enough. However, the smile is ambiguous - how do they see us? As children or beasts?

I don't know enough about genuine Scots speech patterns to either validate or dispel your complaint, but I admit that it tends to sound 'southern' to me, too.

There are three red flags that diminish my enjoyment when I read a story: 1) loose-ends 2) credibility assault and 3) misuse of words. When I write, these flags are somehow bleached out, hard to spot, impossible at times to spot, so that the following critique comes from the reader in me, not the "beginning writer". Praise is balm to writers but truthful criticism stretches us to write better. Therefore, I feel a warning is necessary, dear writers, that the following criticisms on your stories are mainly the red flags that popped up at me:

AN UNEARTHLY PUN by Bonnie Kennedy: I found this writing to be charming, light, graceful with a sense of innocence so much missing in the writing of today. Is Bonnie a young authoress? My encouragement of Bonnie to pursue her muse for the benefit of all of us. However, I had trouble with the merging of characters and places from distinctly separate realms. Some questions: Would Thor, a Norse god, take orders from Zeus, a Greek god? Was the senior god senior to Zeus or the other gods? Why was he nameless? Wasn't the earth-shaker of Greek gods Poseidon? Isn't Puck an English character (Midsummer Night's Dream)? And the hole in the ozone, if I'm not mistaken, is somewhere over the South Pole. The writing moves fluidly and that's an art but wait -- How did Puck get to Scotland from the South Pole? And why were the elves in Scotland only able to converse with earthlings of Irish lore? Also, I would have preferred Rumor to simply be an acquaintance of Puck's instead of his girl friend -- that way there would be no questions about his smarts. Despite these red flags, I enjoyed the fast pace and "airy" aspects of the story.

HARD TIME by David Rubenstein: The writing was wonderful, mechanically fine, descriptions very nicely done, airy and moody as one might experience the Scottish Moors. However I could not warm up to the character in the story who simply, after his daughter is murdered, burns mementos, packs up and follows his "pipedreams"... There is not even the slightest hint to the possible rage that you might feel towards your child's murderer nor the overwhelming grief involved in such a loss. It seems that poor Mary is simply a character who, after supplying a book on reincarnation, must be surgically removed from the story (hence the knifing) to free her father up to find his roots. Unfortunately this strands the reader to grieve alone while her father drinks ale in pubs. Perhaps if some time had passed since her death...? I was also a little bit bewildered at the end about the sentence for MacCaig convicts. Was this to mean that members of the MacCaig clan were reincarnated into their ancestors over and over as a punishment for challenging the Church of England? Or for the unidentified heavenly-soul crime committed? I couldn't get this straight. As I understand it though, the reincarnation theory springs from the Hindus and didn't really penetrate the Western World until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, putting MacCaig's ancestors a little ahead of things. But the writing was lovely, well executed. I'd love to hear more about planet Earth being the devil's island, sort of the Alcatraz of heaven. That's a fascinating theory.

ANNIVERSARY by Mark Andrew Garland: Right off, I have to say that this idea is wonderful: the meeting of a predeceased spouse. Perhaps the story disappoints only because its brevity doesn't allow the reader to get a grasp or clear sense of the characters. My impression is that life on earth was not all that terrific for these two. I guess I would be a bit more reluctant myself to eternalize such a union. Perhaps if Erin could have been more resistant -- if Anna Cole could have offered a few intriguing possibilities for a more satisfying (or even more hellish) life in the eternal world??? I didn't get a sense of "undying" love if that's what was meant. Also, I would have found it helpful to know what (year) anniversary was imagined. Certainly a 7th would be quite different from a 45th, etc.

PRINCE OF THIEVES by Angelee Sailer Anderson: Here's some great writing: "He reached to his neck, opened the rune-scored locket, and let something fall from it into the shelter of his hand." He reached, opened, let something fall. Many actions flowing, showing pictures, economized into one little sentence. And that's the way I found it throughout. There are a couple of things I had trouble with, though. 1) There is no mention of water that I can recall -- why in the Autumn do men wish for a pair of seven league boots to carry them to the land of

promise? 2) Why did she not seek another maiden out who had met the "Prince of Thieves?" for more information before allowing the lure to take over? 3) At the end where her ex-betrothed "accosted" her (even though that verb is used correctly, for me it carries a stronger meaning almost of attack) I questioned his passion after twenty-six years. Perhaps if sadness had prevailed in his heart instead of anger, I would have found forgiveness for his abandonment of her and believed her passion more. Any why did he choose this particular Sunday to speak to her? Why did it coincide with her cessation of monthly cycles? Did he know of this? Also, I couldn't put much stock in her betrothal to the chapman in the first place. Had there been more of a struggle against the pull to Gad's Hill, her betrothal would have been more believable. But all in all the writing was lovely, powerful, swirling like the autumn leaves. I took the "Prince of Thieves" to be the angel of death (faithful to many) and taking into consideration the authoress' recent and tragic experiences, my heart was entirely with her.

WE CALL IT NORTH CAROLINA by Kay Fortunato: Passing from one world to another is a fascinating fantasy. My biggest trouble with this piece was on two grounds. First, I had difficulty accepting human traits in Stacy's companion, the python. Not much of a fan of snakes, I found "Zelda" to be a distraction and felt compelled to keep an eye on this creature. It was an interesting idea that Stacy take a possible protector with her into her new world (like taking a hat pin on a train in the old days) although "Zelda" turns out to be somewhat of a "pussycat" after all. But did Stacy, in fact, drive back into her old world with the python around her neck? Would have liked to have had a little background for such an unusual pet. Would have liked the farmer to be a more threatening individual, not the munchkin, to make this plunge more of a challenge, risk. And lastly, why give a name to a new world that carries, for the reader, a predisposed set of facts and assumptions? But perhaps what's important in this story is not the new world so much as the passing into and out of it. A lot of fertile ground here.

SWEET AS MUSCATEL by Gwenyth E. Hood: "Twentieth year of my dark bargain..." I was disappointed that Prospero's put-down had not softened or even been forgotten over twenty years of life. "When Prospero had sent me off and how he robbed me of all chance of love..." Could this have been truly the case? Somehow I get the idea that his breeding or self-esteem were debased not his love life. I would have reveled in a swift, humorous retaliation (it was not as if any great intimate relationship with Celia had existed and wasn't it actually she who had wounded him?) Was it merely a put-down by a thin-faced watery blue-eyed aristocrat with a moth-eaten wig that angered him into a bargain with

the devil? However the ending was a powerful depiction of God, frightening, wonderful, redeeming his lost soul, and was well written.

THE CRIMSON BERRIES by Deborah L. Hunt: Just nettles really but his mother "busy amongst the needlepoint" gave me a vision of a little bitty woman sunken into piles and piles of needlepoint. Was she supposed to be made to look so busy that a nanny was needed to watch over her son? Is the nanny there to establish his approximate age? When I read that his mother would not allow the branch in the house because it was a "dirty outside thing" I mentally buried her under her piles of needlepoint and began to look for the nanny. But what happens to the nanny and her overseeing? Seems he has the run of the place after all. Why introduce a character that has no use in the story? The sentence "At first he clutched it (the branch) far above him, letting the leaves ripple like sails in the breeze..." bothered me. How far above yourself can you clutch something? Otherwise this sentence has great potential for giving the reader a good picture. But at the end I couldn't help but wish someone were around to hear the young boy's tale of the crimson birds and fawn.

THE PLANET OF SCIENTISTS by Joe R. Christopher: I'm sorry but I was hopelessly confused by this piece. I'm not sure who is who or what the theme is. Could the theme be the longing of the soul? Perhaps, if names were given to "one woman...", "a second person, a man...", "three persons..." The name dropping seems only to involve famous books, pieces of music and texts. A reader can't really warm up to these.

COVER by Joann Power Colbert - extraordinary!! wonderful!!!

ILLUSTRATION by Tim Callahan - superb, especially the one on page 5 for "Prince of Thieves" capturing the swirling, sweeping feeling of the story. By Lynn Maudlin, I liked the drawing on page 39 for "Sweet as Muscatel" masking the two men by shadows.

Ruth G. Mortensen
West Hartford, Connecticut

Isn't it the truth that we catch errors in others we can't see in ourselves (I can't proofread anything I've typed, for example). People vary in their ability to "suspend disbelief" so most of those perturbations in "An Unearthly Pun" didn't distract me in the same manner; in fact, I sort of like the incongruity, the "tossed salad of the gods" effect. These things are so subjective! I assumed MacCaig's hollow, all-consuming ache and thus didn't see him as quite the unsympathetic character you did - it makes me curious about all the other "baggage" I bring with me when I read a story... As for "North Carolina" I found

the same name part of its charm (sort of like, "Is this heaven?" "No, Iowa," from the film Field of Dreams.).

Your query of Gwyneth Hood about why Prospero's put-down rankled for so many years seems sort of like asking why Hamlet is so indecisive... Not all characters are healthy, well-balanced, forgiving individuals (neither is the chapman in "Prince of Thieves").

Thanks for an insightful letter, full of specific comments - just the kind an author can use.

I am very impressed with your format and glad I subscribed.

I thought PRINCE OF THIEVES was haunting. The style was too archaic for most genres but in fantasy (especially this story) it was perfect. Instead of saying men long to join a gypsy caravan Ms. Anderson has them wish for seven league boots. I love good metaphor! Also, the title is excellent.

Also enjoyed SWEET AS MUSCATEL. I liked the irony of Prospero's name, and the idea that even in the Jewish-Christian context even forgiveness has a sweet revenge (I am sure that most priests, ministers and rabbis would disagree). I liked the Dumas flavor of it but then cloak and dagger novels have always appealed to me.

Regarding HARD TIME, I agree with Mr. Rubenstein that reincarnation is a valid philosophy. Perhaps it is what Roman Catholics call purgatory; at any rate I remain open-minded on the subject. Mr. Rubenstein perhaps should have told it was the funeral of the protagonist's daughter sooner. I was confused as to who was being buried but the rest was fine writing and a really fascinating story.

Most of the other stories were well written. Congratulations to the editors and authors and good luck!

Anne Valley
Peshtigo, Wisconsin

Welcome to our circle and thanks for your comments. We're also glad you subscribed!

Of the stories in MC issue #9, "Sweet as Muscatel" by Gwyneth Hood was my favorite. A good idea that was well executed by a skillful writer. The plot held my interest, the setting was clear, the characters well-motivated and easy to identify with, and the ending was up-beat with enough ironic twist to be surprising.

I found "Prince of Thieves" deep and metaphoric. Though obviously male, I interpreted the "thieving giver, the giving thief" as symbolizing the feminist movement, thieving from her (the innkeeper's

daughter) the traditional woman's life, and giving her one of self-fulfillment. I realize that reading-between-the-lines runs the risk of putting meaning into a story that the author never intended, but in this case, it can be justified. Consider that the thief-prince never made love to her, that he took away her womanly tears and replaced her heart of flesh with an ever-youthful heart of stone; consider also how the innkeeper's daughter boldly announced that she spent the autumn night on Gad's hill, and only regretted it briefly when, years later, she was confronted by her ex-betrothed and his children. Also, pragmatically thinking, she could inherit her father's or mother's inn, and thus had an independent income.

Though Ms. Anderson details the reaction of the main character's fiance to her stay on Gad's hill, the author never tells anything about her family's reception of this startling news. Was she an only child? If so, then wouldn't her father be upset that his line ended with her? If she had siblings, then she might not inherit the inn, leaving the questions of how a woman in those times could support herself. The fact that Ms. Anderson's story aroused such curiosity bodes well for it. I had no trouble suspending credibility and accepting the innkeeper's daughter as a real person, who made a real choice and stuck, or was stuck, with it.

I found "Hard Times" as grim as the title suggests. It created a mood fit for a Poeish horror story. The most tragic event, the death of MacCaig's daughter, took place before the tale started, therefore reducing the whole plot to an anti-climax. MacCaig already had reasons for going to Scotland, his hallucinations, so there was no need for her to die before the beginning. How much worse a tragedy for MacCaig, if, by searching for the source of his visions, he had caused her death. As it was, the story nearly brought on tears.

I enjoyed the theology discussed at the end of "Hard Times" and believe, much like Mr. Rubenstein's character, that traditional views of heaven and hell are illogical.

"The Crimson Berries" held my interest right through; a brisk tale that can be appreciated on a variety of intellectual levels. I read it to my twelve year old sons (twins) and my four year old niece, and they all enjoyed it.

I was a bit puzzled by the way the berries produced an evil creature the third time Alec used them. Was it because of the number of them he threw in the pool; is numerology another element of the fable? And why a malicious elf; wouldn't a troll be more appropriate? Perhaps I'm too influenced by Tolkien's mythology and should allow more latitude for new authors to develop their own legends.

I think a lot more could be done with Joe R. Christopher's "The Planet of Scientists". It's an en-

lightened idea, reversing the science- religion relationship of earth's history; real social science fiction there. It should be a novel, perhaps a trilogy of novels tracing the effect of such an experiment through several generations. Ideas as good as that one are scarce and should be developed to their utmost; so, hit the keys Joe, you've work to do.

"El Patio De Los Legartos" is a story told within a story, a difficult technique even in a novel where the writer has room to swing; in a short story, the double narrative is almost impossible. Michael Kocik demonstrated impressive skills by almost pulling it off. The difficulty I had reading his story was that each time I began to visualize what was going on, when I started to "dream" into it, the narrator would shift gears back from the story he was hearing to what was going on around him then; this caused blurred, mixed images to pass through my mind, like a sleeper suddenly startled from a pleasant dream. The story-within-a-story also removes the reader one more step from the characters and makes identity with them more difficult for the reader. I think that with a more traditional technique Mr. Kocik's talents would produce a highly enjoyable work.

The snake, Zelda, really floored me in Kay Fortunato's "We Call it North Carolina". It made me wonder why she had such a pet; was she an exotic dancer and used Zelda in her act, did she dislike dogs and cats, did a big snake save her life when she was a child, does the writer, Ms. Fortunato, have a pet snake?

The idea of a common road warping its travelers to and from a parallel world is fascinating. I enjoyed everything about the fable, except that it didn't seem to end. More could have happened when Stacy, Zelda and the hobbit-like Bandyman returned to her dimension (if they did return).

Of the poems, I liked "Pigeons" the best. It invoked the most images, had carefully planned rhythm, and skillfully used alliteration. I particularly enjoyed the fourth stanza.

The illustrations were good, particularly the one advertising your calendar. I enjoyed the issue very much and read it through in one sitting.

C. R. Schabel
Knightdale, North Carolina

Fascinating interpretation of "Prince of Thieves," one I must admit would never occur to me! I love the image of you reading "The Crimson Berries" to your twin sons and four-year-old niece - how nice that we're part of their early story-hearing experience. "El Patio de los Legartos" is definitely challenging, but we hope it is worth the extra effort.

On #9. I was touched and grieved by "Sonnet for a Blessed Son of Grace."

I really admired Angelee Sailer Anderson's "Prince of Thieves." The blend of plot, style and tone is altogether excellent. If it were up to me, I'd consider it professional. But I do recognize that it is (like my own work) out of tune with the requirements of the professional SF magazines of which I am aware, such as *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Isaac Asimov's*. But incidentally, I don't think that all of us are necessarily aiming for those markets, though exactly where we are aiming may not be so clear as of yet.

So far as immediate publishability is concerned, I can't suggest anything I feel very strongly would work. Speaking strictly of my own taste, there was one matter I would have liked to see dealt with more clearly. This is that the Prince of Thieves takes the protagonist's heart, presumably destroying her ability to relate normally to those around her, which does seem a bit hard on her fiancé. Of course, he (the fiancé) loses most of the reader's sympathy when he abandons her without a word and marries someone else in spite. Still, a few more hints as to why this ploy is necessary, some suggestion beyond what you have that the fiancé is wrong-headed to begin with (not simply embittered by the way that he is treated) so that the girl is better off not marrying him, would improve the story, I think.

"Thurenfel's Source," by Gerard Daniel Houarner, is a story with a fresh approach, and I see nothing wrong with the concept. The humorous and somewhat iconoclastic tone is effective. Some points of execution need more touching up, though. The things which bothered me were: I couldn't make out the relationship between the Deirder fruit and the prosperity of the kingdom. I don't mean explaining the origin of the fruit, I mean indicating by some more dramatic means that that's where the prosperity comes from. The matter of relieving oneself in the river after eating the Deirder fruit was good for a laugh, though it was also, to be sure, a bit gross. Also, I didn't understand why the old woman had bloody urine to begin with. And if urinating into the river were necessary, why didn't the Queen simply build a tower over the river with a special commode that emptied into it?

My other problems are stylistic. Houarner opens the story with the execution of a Mage, but does not dramatize the scene. Seems to me that in this context a chief Mage is too important to be dispatched in the background during the first paragraph. The story of the confrontation between the King and Mage and the execution should be told with the same stylistic verve that Houarner displays elsewhere. It wouldn't necessarily make the story longer if he uses the space for other things as well, such as developing the character of Misery and the other

sons. (What is their attitude toward all this?) Surely some of them were present.

"Hard Time," by David Rubenstein -- well, the notion that we are all here expiating sins that we cannot remember, which we committed in forms much more powerful than the ones we have now and presumably more capable of avoiding sins, seems far more depressing to me than the religion in which I believe. It is hard to see how punishment for unremembered sins can have rehabilitative powers. And the story was not well developed enough to change my point of view about that. It was not clear to me why God needed a witness, since the witness had no responsibility either to inflict punishment or remit it, and under the circumstances, I can't see why anyone would seek him out. For the rest, it seemed to me that (despite the gloom of the urban setting with which it began) there was too much good fellowship in the story to fit in with a world as nasty as the central premise makes it, and Rubenstein needs to work harder at making someone or something vividly nasty among the Scottish characters in order for his concept to work. Such nastiness as there was was too petty.

Deborah Hunt's story is also based on an interesting premise. I did think it needed more development. Why would the branch create an evil elf at one time, and then turn it into a group of joyful birds? Surely there must be other forces at work besides the branch if it can produce such opposite effects??

Kocik's "El Patio de los Legartos" had some very strong parts to it. Again, overall, I can't see why a story based on these premises can't be published. On the basis of execution, I can see several problems with it. (1) There is a frame story whose motivation I don't understand. Somebody is visiting someone else who must be fairly rich and powerful and too busy to show him the neighborhood, so he assigns him a poetic but quirky guide to show him the sights of the region. That much I got. The century is unspecified (at least, I didn't catch it) but it must be after Napoleon and presumably before the twentieth. Actually, this frame story helped draw a veil around the central events, thus making them more mysterious and frightening; still, I think a little more clarity would help. Why Salvaridad first brings the protagonist to the patio, tells this elaborate story, drops all kinds of exotic hints and then gets bored is unclear. Maybe this makes the lens through which the story is seen just a little too blurry to work. (2) I'm not sure I understood what happened. I gather that Desmesne somehow kidnaped Godoy and possibly transformed him into some sort of "living sculpture," or several sorts--but it isn't clear just which living sculpture, since there were four lizards sent and Godoy would have only two ears, and if fingers were used there would be ten of them. If we really

are to believe that a carved up and decorative Godoy is gracing the patio, surely he might manifest himself in some more direct way; just some moaning in the wind that seems to have words in it, or an unusually mournful or malignant expression on some of the "sculptures"? Just a suggestion.

I thank everyone who made kind remarks about "The Swan Chariot." It is very heartening. I have got some friendly rejection letters but no publication offers on the book as yet and remarks like yours keep me going. I fell impelled to tell Ron Blizzard, though, that the "Otter-god" of the story isn't really an otter like the kind he has seen playing; it's a different sort of beast, as becomes clearer later in the story; however, warned by a negative reaction in the one (rather nasty) workshop experience I had with the story, I decided to avoid throwing too many strange names at the reader in the first chapter.

Gwenyth E. Hood
Huntington, West Virginia

Regarding "Thurenfel's Source," I suspect (but don't know) that Mr. Houarner was poking a little fun at the general assumption that the source of peace and plenty must somehow be mystical, magical, pure, untouched - and he tossed in a little crude reality. I wonder how much "significance" he meant the act of urination to have.

Mythic Circle #9... I found some of the stories professional or nearly professional in quality, and all of them were readable.

First, though, I have to comment on the issue of Lawrence Schimel and coincidences. I have no difficulty believing that Mr. Schimel produced a poem similar to "Camelot Station" without ever seeing "Camelot Station" because such things have happened to me. For instance, in the late 1970's, I conceived a novel in which the main protagonists would be a swordswoman and a sorceress. I had never read a novel of that kind before, and thought I had a unique idea. Then, after I presented a chapter of my story at our annual "readings of original stories" Rivendell meeting one year, someone asked me if I had read Phyllis Ann Karr's FROSTFIRE AND THORN. I had not, but rushed out, bought it and read it. There was a swordswoman and a sorceress, yes, but the characters were not my characters, the setting and the culture were not the same as mine, and the rules of magic were different. I have finished my novel and sent it out, but I am sure that if it ever gets published someone is going to ask me if I got the idea from Phyllis Ann Karr. I did not, and I can establish that I started writing my book before her book was ever published, but I anticipate being asked, just the same. I can give other instances in

which I had an idea for a story or novel, only to read, later, someone else's story or novel based on the same idea. Fortunately, as I understand it, ideas cannot be copyrighted, only the execution of those ideas. However, to guard against any possible misunderstandings, I keep records of when I write my material, and I read my material to my local writer's workshop, so that I have corroboration as to when I wrote it.

In short, if Lawrence Schimel says he never saw "Camelot Station" before he wrote his poem, I believe him absolutely. Coincidences happen, even in writing.

As to the stories: I thought that "Prince of Thieves" was a professional-quality story. The style might have been a little smoother, but it is quite good as it is.

"We Call It North Carolina" reflected a rather overdone theme, but the execution was fine. Even so, it struck me as being somewhat bland.

I think "Anniversary" could have benefited from a fresher approach or a fresher style as applied to the story. Also, the balance of narration and dialogue was not even: there was too much dialogue, and not enough narration.

"Thurenfel's Source" was an entertaining story of near-professional quality. It could have used a little polish because the style was a bit rough around the edges. Still, the writing is on the right track.

"El Patio De Los Legartos" was well written and entertaining, but I did not understand the ending.

I skipped "An Unearthly Pun" because I am not a fan of puns.

"The Planet of Scientists: A Fable" did not strike me as much of a fable. Yes, I got the point, but it needed to be a little less blunt.

"Sweet as Muscatel" was another professional-level story with an easy-to-read style. I enjoyed it, but did not understand the ending.

"The Crimson Berries" showed beginner's mistakes. For example, "He could already tell that the elf was evil. There was no way he was going to give it the berries," shows two major errors: first, it is an example of "telling" the reader rather than "showing." The reader should be shown the elf is evil, and with a little more subtlety. Also, the phrase "there was no way" is too contemporary and colloquial for this sort of story. Next, there is no reason why the elf should give the boy an hour. This is too convenient. Last, "The branch could give life through the berries in the water, and yet the branch could take that life and transform it" is again telling, not showing.

"Hard Time" by David Rubenstein is a good story, though a little slow getting started. Also, there seemed to be pieces of the story missing, but I suspect this was a transcription error, not something

the author intended.

I look forward to the next issue.

Joan Marie Verba
Minnetonka, Minnesota

I appreciate your sharing the part coincidence has played in your life as a writer but personally I find the similarities between the two "Camelot Station" poems much more telling than the similarities inherent in two novels that both have swordswoman & sorceress protagonists; the fact that "sword & sorcery" is a distinct genre of fantasy fiction makes it not only likely but probable that many authors will come up with major characters that are female practitioners of the sword and sorcery arts (or are they sciences?!). At this writing the marriage of Arthurian legend to the Coast Starlight is not yet a recognized subset of poetic endeavors. But hey, give it time...

TC -- The last comment (regarding "Hard Time"), alas, is true; in #9 one paragraph was dropped between the end of page 49 and the beginning of page 50, and the last two paragraphs at the end of page 50 should not have been (but were) repeated on page 14. The entire correct paragraph is printed below. Our apologies to David Rubenstein, who also noticed the error of our ways.

HARD TIME (missing paragraph)

When what seemed to be the first landmark was found, he became relatively confident of his directions - even more so when a reasonable facsimile of the bartender's next landmark followed some miles further. But after about twenty minutes without coming to the expected lake, the third landmark, he assumed he'd missed it and began to look for a place to turn around. The road threaded between steep embankments for some way, but when it crested a rise, a path of reasonable substance turned off to the right, and he pulled the Morris into it, then began the battle to engage reverse gear. When the grinding gave way with a clunk, he released the clutch too quickly, and the engine died with a lurch. cursing, he reached for the key, when he heard the sound of a bagpipe drifting across the moor.

Let me express my sympathy with Angelee and her husband. Angelee, if you're up to hearing a correction, consider this: Semitic people and other North African people are considered Caucasian, not Asian. The word "Oriental" is no longer acceptable except to describe a style of food.

Erin Lale
UC Santa Cruz

We shall endeavor to be politically correct for the next fourteen seconds... (oh, all right, and the rest of our lives, too. I just read a description of "The Phantom of the Opera" as being predicated on society's mistreatment of a handicapped person and if that's not politically correct, I dunno what is...)

TC -- And now for something completely different:

The Mitten Surplus
Slim Headlumps & Risky Ovensprouts, eds.
Altaweenie, Ca. 91001

Dear Slim & Risky:

First, I would like to point out that my order of 6,743 handcrafted mittens, personally monogrammed and embossed with the logo of every extinct African dialect, has still not arrived, though I phoned it in at least 3 hours ago. If you think I have any intention of sending money to pay for this order when your service is so poor, think again. Where do you get your elves from, anyway? Do they have green (and red) cards, or are you sneaking them in through your bedroom chimneys at all hours of the night? If my order is not shipped in the next 15 seconds, please be advised that I am going next door to tear up all my neighbor's credit cards, one by one, until this matter is resolved to my satisfaction.

Accusingly,
Amos Hufflebinger

P.S. And who do you two think you are, making fun of an elegant name like Spratloins? The Hufflebinger clan dates back several generations (except for a period of 147 years, back in the Puritan days, when we couldn't get any dates at all), and all of us would be proud to have a name like that crawling through our family ivy. Your cheap innuendoes, and snide innuendon'ts, are an affront to people like us everywhere, who take justifiable pride in our heritage. For all you two know, a Spratloins could have been the Father of New Jersey, so lay off...

Actually, Spratloins was the Mother of the Invention of New Jersey and wrote a letter that appeared 'way back in Mythic Circle #6. Obviously Amos here has a long memory (and longer nose...).

FIN

Sunset and Dawn . . .

one remembers -

In Her sadness,
the Mother of All wept.
The rain of tears
fell to Earth at night;
For, the land was bare
as humankind slept,
He unaware of his ensuing plight.

Her children
no longer tread the Earth's face
to shepherd man's innocence
from the wolves.
She weeps for Her beloved Elven race -
Shunned by man
for gods ruling from above.

Blazing across the Earth
in the storm's wake,
One preserves the sacred vow
pledged at Dawn.
From underneath the dark clouds,
The Sun breaks,
Rising from the east -
Come eternal Son!

O glorious Frey!
Pledged since time began -
To raise mighty Hrail'lth
in aid of man!

- E. R. Lifeson

WALKING ON ROYAL CARPETS

by Owen R. Neill

No sun penetrates here,
Holy man-light in these halls of halls,
high, crepuscular, vaulted, secretive,
where whispers never really die
but only hide from present hearing,
echoing from stone to shadowy stone
waiting for some thoughtful soul
to stumble upon their timeless wandering.

This is the Elysium of royal feet
walking happily or doomfully
as history writes the colours of its houses.
But awe bespeaks a softened tone
when words are spoken before true royalty.
Flickering torches in their ancient mystic way
give movement to the static walls
as light weaves historic mysteries
for those who read the stones hanging,
tapestried, along the ancient halls.
The lives and loves, the hates and deaths
of kings and princes, queens and ladies
stretch in the dancing shadows of record,
beginning to end, a continuing romance
If some courtier seeks to ponder all.

Walking on royal carpets is enough
to tenderize the calloused eyes
of stolid war-soiled Templars,
white and crossed in blazing red;
or yet make mush of tender nobles ivoried
by soft tenures and the soft rot of power.
Feet here no longer tap the rhythms
of the flapping heart in stoney anterooms.
The plush of royal carpet accepts
with autocratic forbearance
the hush of royal feet walking royally,
or the push of hat-in-hand nobility,
eyes downcast in awe of crowns.
This royal river of red leads to a throne,
first carved by pagan inspiration
beyond the memory of ink and parchment,
then recarved in desperation
by abrogating Christian chisels.

How many men have sunk their ships
navigating the plush red wake
to where the stone of destiny rises
like the sun before the morning?
How many have come to glory
traversing royal carpets in good heart
to receive benevolence from God's chosen?
How many others know aught of royalty
except as trappings of rollicking imagination?
Only the lowly rustle of forest leaves
and the cold hard snap of hovel doors
hallow their hard pressed coming and going.
Walking on royal carpets, for them,
is walking on dreaming afternoons,
flights of ranging birds in Fall,
laughter of sunshine children running,
love moments secreted under stars.
It has to do with stolen thoughts
in moments stolen from reality.
And so it is, still,
if we ever think about it.

METEORITE

by Jill Solnicki

What news did it bring
crashing
out of the night,

a hurling arrow, its flaming feathers,
searing the fir tree,
settling in the mouse's forest bed?

It slept a long time, blanketed by earth,
this seed the universe spat,
this shell washed up by waves,

but when men finally came,
to put their avid ears
to its cold mouth,

they heard

silence.

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elfin corner trees -

17809 VINEYARD LANE

surprized each dawn,
our morning star and i
as crescent moon pales,
sun's rim-light reveals
elfin dancing places
under great willows.
never are they seen here
and the leaves whisper:
"they won't dance
in numbered yards."

--Charles Rampp



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