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David C. Kopaska-Merkel

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Licking Clean the Bowl:

Four Poems and Prose Poems

by David C. Kopaska-Merkel

Billy Never Noticed

They would lift the loose
tile near the sink, emerging
each midnight to dance
the rhumba, the cha-cha, even
the twist. Darlene mopped away
the black footprints in the morning before Billy
awoke, but one night
she stayed up to watch. Their dances
reminded her of high school and those hot summer
nights. She had to join in,
swinging each time with a new partner, flaring
her nightgown like a pleated skirt. When the sun
bloomed over the trees they hustled her
away to the displaced tile.
"I'll never fit!"
she wailed, but she did, dwindling
to rat size
before slipping down the hole.
One of the others stayed behind to
mop the floor and make breakfast.

A Voyage To Narulon

Under dawn's bright mist the trees cry out like gulls
searching for a meal. Nothing moves in the upper air save
the boat, drifting southward on the rising wind, the highest
branch-tips grazing its keel. Cottagers drive their herds into
the forest for the letting, anxious to still the hungry voices of
the trees with warm blood. Above, you and I ply the oars,
driving the dinghy south on the rushing air. The hills are
islands crowned with shrubs like shocks of hair, looming
like fiends out of the haze, fiends whose private parts shriek
with the muffled voices of satiation. We pass between the
hills/islands, the current carrying us swiftly towards the
beaches of the nether sea. The groves of hunger behind us,
we come to the vast alluvial plain through which the lower
Ouestry winds, and on whose aerial counterpart we ride.
Nothing of the underworld protrudes from the surface of the
upper Ouestry, but now and again the waters of the air are
disturbed by a flying fish or aerozote, testing the temper of
the interface. Swiftly, now, the current tugs at our little boat

and Ouestry-bas appears, far to the east but winding towards
us like a glittering serpent. Upwards we rush, through the
tidal gap between true aerial islands now, and into the
unquiet lagoon. The waterspout that is its root descends
ponderously to the sea below, pouring the waters of the air
into the waters of the earth. Skillfully, you turn the boat
about, skirting Shipeater's maw, and beach our craft on the
shingle. Out we get, walking awkwardly at first, for the
ground is like jello so close to the lower Earth. South of the
dunes we pause to wipe the gunk from our boots, then stride
firmly into the bush, towards the towers of fabled Narulon,
which floats serene, high above Panthalassa's heart.

We come to the Gates as the Sun reaches its zenith, and
pass within, for the gates are open. The streets are thronged
with folk dressed in diaphanous robes of many colors but all
pastel, all delicate. The inhabitants of the aerial city seem
not to see us, and we are often forced to step aside to avoid
being jostled. Now and again, it seems that one or another
in the hurrying throng glimpses us for just a moment, but
when we speak, does not hear us, and hurries away as if
remembering something momentarily forgotten, or
forgetting something momentarily remembered. We make
our way to the center of the city, where a vast plaza is
surrounded by huge fluted towers. The towers are dotted
with arched windows and graceful balconies, and capped by
domes and cupolas of serpentine, onyx, and chalcedony. The
plaza is floored with a mosaic of painted tiles set with
precious stones, which illustrate the story of the city's
founding. A profusion of fragrant flowers in pots carved
from single gems adorns the plaza in perfect complement to
the tile pattern. At the plaza's center a jade bench is shaded
by a weeping willow, and on the bench sits an ancient
personage, bent and withered. This person looks up as we
approach, and gazes fixedly into our eyes, holding us
spellbound. The figure raises its left hand, and we see
inscribed on its palm the Seven Symbols. A roaring fills my
ears, and above it I hear faintly a harsh, scratchy voice
intoning unknown words in a deadly tongue. Then the aged
figure rises up and hastens forward, its staff raised above its
head. The tip of the staff has the shape of a two-headed
dragon. Its eyes glow carmine. I duck as the oldster swings
the staff; excruciating pain blossoms in my shoulder and I
fall painfully to the tiles. You, struggling with the old one,

fall backward onto the jade bench, cracking it in twain. The coruscating staff falls, sinks through the tiles with a sound like tearing fingernails, and is gone. Now the towers are swaying, cracking, falling in glittering shards through the lazy air. The old one lies broken on the pave under a stick of a dead tree. You, jade-pierced, fountain over the tiles. My shoulder, too, is bleeding. The tiles smoke where our blood touches them. The towers are falling. The tiles are melting. I am falling, falling to the sea far below. You body is limp below me, and I rotate as I plummet towards the Lower Sea. Above me are only wisps of pearly cloud, quickly dispersing in the cold air.

Shark Hunting

I never leave the house. Outside the tall stick people stride stiffly on their wooden legs like commuters arriving early for the train. They are careful not to step on us, but I can't stand to be among them. Hateful things! I was a boy trying desperately to grow when I first encountered them. Shark hunting with the gang I wanted to hang with. Later I found there were no sharks. But while I crouched shivering in a prickly bush at midnight, I watched the stick people. They were building something, I don't know what it was. It reached higher than any of the trees. When it was done the stick people climbed up it and disappeared. I thought they were gone. Turns out they were doing some mysterious stick-people things up there. I was just a kid, trying to grow tall. I thought it would help. So I climbed up their thing. It was a crazy twisted tower of wood and steel. The metal was mostly from cars, I think. The tower was about 30 feet across at the base, narrowing upwards to about 10 feet at something like 50 feet off the ground. There was a stair but I couldn't use it ... the risers were too far apart. I climbed up the framework. Maybe that did it. Anyway, I reached the top of the tower, at least the part I could see, and it seemed to twist into itself and vanish. I tried to follow but the framework got very slick there. Maybe the stairs wouldn't have been so slick. I slipped and fell, *inside the tower*. When I woke up I was lying on the ground. I was like this, and the tower was a half a mile away. I never grew after that, and I never tried any more to follow the stick people where they go when they leave our place. In fact, I never leave the house.

A River's Tale

Many lands feel the river's touch. In the land of the Noceri the river sheds its load of post-apocalyptic debris and takes on a new name. Upstream the river is called Rougerin; after its passage through Nocerland it is the Ouestry.

The Noceri are fisherfolk. This has been their bane. They have a saying that what you eat you become, and certainly what they pull out of the river with their long-

handled hooks and what they strain out with their fantastical nets, is stranger than any tale can tell. Once, struggling man shapes came floating down each spring. They could not have been men, for as the Noceri put it, a river produces fish, and fish is dinner. Nevertheless they were noisy fish, and their lamentations have become some of the best folk songs of the Noceri. The Noceri waste nothing. It is well known that the Noceri speak only truth. The man shapes are gone now, and from July through January the Noceri must live on salt fish, dried fish, pickled fish, hard fish cakes, slippery fish candy, and fish preserves.

It may be the cleansing action of the fisherfolk, or simply the distance from its source, but the river leaves Nocerland in a rarified state, fit for swimming, and those who live where the lazy river winds across the plains of rushes, reeds, horsetails, cattails, lizardtails, goat tails, and mare's tails do just that on a daily basis. They do so, that is, until the river reaches the Plain of Ghoz.

Ghoz was a foolish God. Ghaz angered the river, or so the tale relates, and the river departed his homeland, never to return.

One spring the floods rose until they lapped at the very sill of the hut of Ghaz. On the plains, even a God dwells in a humble hut woven of the strong purple grasses. Ghaz surveyed the devastation wrought on the plain, as even a small god should, and when he returned home his hut was gone, and with it his wife and child. Ghaz was consumed with grief and fury. He tore out his hair, he stabbed himself repeatedly with the sharpened willow stick that was his token, and he cursed the river, forcing it to depart. Some claim that the purification of the river engendered by the fisherfolk of Nocer permits the Ouestry's spirit to leave its body, and they label the tale of Ghaz a falsity. Whatever the case, the river is sundered where it enters Ghazland. The false river remains in the plain, bereft of that life-giving property common to all rivers. Thus the Ghazlings have turned their back on the river, because it is soulless, providing no sustenance, and they graze their cattle far from its desolate banks.

The spirit river rises perilous into the air, and none have dared it, or if they have, they have not returned. Where the two rivers that should be one go after they pass the Land of Ghaz I cannot say. Perhaps one or both still reach the distant sea. Would that our story could tell of the spirit river, its nature, purpose, and destination. If this was a campfire tale of the Noceri, the spirit river's tale would be one of the most truthful. Alas, the Noceri do not know the spirit river. However, one thing is known: the separation between Ouestry above and Ouestry below moves steadily upstream. One day, perhaps, the unravelling of the two rivers will reach Nocerland, and when it does, the Noceri may make tales of its days, its nights, its beginning, and its end. Until then, we must make do with the lies we have.

Only the White Meat

If sharks flew they avoided the mutant forest, where phage-ridden former humans vied with giant pitcher plants for the few morsels that entered there. Out of the forest the red river ran, and you could fish out humanovegetal larvae, drowned and spinose. I spread my nets each morning, seeking not the worthless larvae but the toothsome skipperfish and the rare jack hobblins, highly prized for its medicinal properties. Nevertheless, many a time the loathsome spiny things are stuck in my net when I reel it in at dusk, and are the very devil to get out. I think there is some toxin on the spines, for one evening after a particularly vicious jab, I dreamed I entered the river myself, and swam upstream, into the forest. In my dream I swam to where the river bubbled out of a fuming pit, surrounded by vast pitchers of disturbing hues. I crept silently beneath the giant plants as they swayed in a breeze I could not feel, seeming at times to bend towards me and to strain with open "mouths." I had not gone far when I found a disturbing figure working over a high table. The creature was tall, and seemed at once ungainly and frighteningly graceful, like a preying mantis.

David writes: *I began writing poetry as a holiday tradition started by my mother, though my early efforts were a bit macabre for her taste. I returned to poetry a decade later because I no longer had time to write fiction. Poetry encourages word play and a focus on mood rather than events. This was a challenge for me, because SF and fantasy are often driven by content more than mood. Genre poetry differs from much genre fiction—even when we tell a story, we do it differently.*

Its hair resembled plastic hose, its limbs were shiny like a bug's, and its back was covered with iridescent violet fur. I could hear its breath whistling in and out, accompanied by a faint irregular clicking. Horribly, the creature's odor was the familiar one of wet dog. On the table ... but I could not see what lay on the table. I only saw the hideous creature gouging into something that moved and mewed, and extracting at intervals a struggling larva with wet and reddened spines. The larvae went into a metal basket taller than I am. Occasionally, the creature excavated from what lay on the table a larva limp as a rag; these were thrown over its shoulder into the sullen river. The third time this happened I almost saw what writhed upon the table and I made some small sound. Immediately the creature turned and rushed upon me with scissored limbs. These ... I don't want to call them arms ... fell upon my shoulders, severing my head. The creature picked up my head and tossed it into the basket with the larvae, then turned back to its ghastly harvesting. Somehow my head is still alive but I cannot move. One of the larvae has fastened upon my wounded neck and begun to suck desperately, its spines flailing wildly. I cannot scream. My neck hurts so, I hope that I wake soon.

ON SUNDAY

by David Napolin

There are holes in heaven
When you look through the trees
Especially at morning
When rain in swift descent
Veers from the sky,
When air is asleep
Except for birds,
The murmured drenching of leaves
And rumble
Of a distant train
And articulate six o'clock
With no gold buy grey
And slow heave of foliage.

Why revere a cathedral
When trees in shadow
Spread wider and more varied
Than any church?
And who could not, without an altar
Worship the inscrutable silence of a tree
Or loneliness of early rain?