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Mythic Circle #11

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Abstract

Welcome to *The Mythic Circle* #11. This issue offers some variations on a theme of Winter-into-Spring, particularly Doug Rossman's notable "The Theft of the Sun"; let us know if you enjoy the seasonal parallelism. You'll also notice that we continue to run a lot of poetry, including a series of poems by Dirk Verhulst which delicately probe the terror in everyday life, and a wryly lyrical series by Clelie Rich.

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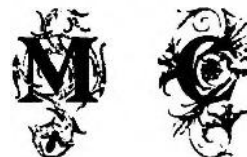
Christine Lowentrou, Tina Cooper, & Paul Nolan Hyde, Editors

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THE THEFT OF THE SUN

by Douglas A. Rossman



It is told that when the great skald Dag Ormseeker was but a mere lad, his mother, the swan-maiden Hervor, sent him off to live with her brother, Ragnar Rune-Wise, the fatherless boy having reached an age when he required the kind of training that only a man could provide. Ragnar was not an ordinary man, however, but a kindly wizard of middle years who travelled widely, hobnobbed with elves, and knew a thing or two about dragons. Small wonder then that the boy was to receive a most unorthodox education...yet one that was to serve him well in years to come.

The first winter of Dag's fostering, his uncle took him along on a Hjultide visit to Ragnar's old friend Yngve Elf-Brow, the king who ruled the Alfmark, a beautiful land of wooded hills, fertile valleys, and tranquil mirrored lakes--now all covered with a blanket of white--that bordered the domain of the elves. Ragnar's promise that Dag might actually meet some of these fabled beings, who normally had nothing to do with humankind, seemed almost too wonderful to be true.

King Yngve's hall was crowded for the festivities on Hjul Eve, and the high-spirited merrymaking promised to last until dawn. Mindful of his young charge's need for a good night's sleep-- regardless of the occasion--Ragnar bade their host and the assembled company a reluctant good night and herded Dag out of the hall.

"Well, lad, how did you enjoy the Hjultide celebration tonight? Did you eat your fill?" Ragnar playfully poked his nephew's stomach as they trudged through the snow from the hall to the outbuilding where the king, thoughtful of their privacy, had quartered them.

"Oh, uncle, it was wonderful. And I ate so much I thought I'd burst." The boy chuckled at the thought. "But I've so many questions I wanted to ask you all evening. Mother never would explain anything! Why was that big boar brought into the hall? And why did those men put their hands on its back and make vows to Frey about the great deeds they would do during the coming year?" Dag paused for breath as they reached their quarters, opened the door, and went inside. "And why did they burn the Hjul Log? And, for that matter, I don't understand why this time of the year is called Hjultide anyway. I would think 'Wheeltime' would be in the summer when we can ride

wagons, not in the middle of winter when wheels are useless."

As they stomped the snow off their boots, Ragnar held up both hands in mock surrender. "Enough, my boy, enough. You ask more questions than King Gylfi when he visited Asgard. My poor sister truly did neglect your education, didn't she?" He sighed gently. "Still I know you ask not out of idle curiosity, but from a thirst for knowledge, so I'll answer all your questions. It's a long story--your namesake, Dag Daybringer, is in it, by the way-- so you'd better be ready for bed in case you fall asleep before the tale is fully told."

"Oh, uncle, I'd never do that," Dag exclaimed, but, pulling off his boots and outer garments, he slipped beneath the eiderdown comforter and awaited eagerly the weaving of his uncle's tapestry of words.

* * *

Heimdall, the Watcher, was perhaps the first to notice that something was wrong. Although dawn had broken and Dag Daybringer had long since set out on his journey across the sky vault, his shining-maned horse, Skinfaxi, spreading the light of day in his wake, that light was strangely cold and pale. And there was something odder still...Sol Sun-Maiden, her two horses, and the blazing sun wheel which they drew behind them should have cleared the far horizon by now and begun to warm the eastern lands. But the horses Arvak and Alsvid, their beautiful rider, and their precious burden were nowhere to be seen...even by eyes as sharp as the Watcher's, which could pierce the densest clouds.

Heimdall paced back and forth beside the Rainbow Bridge, perplexed and pondering. Could the giant wolf Skoll, who was forever pursuing Sol, finally have caught and swallowed her? But no; surely ears keen enough to hear the sound of grass growing would have detected Sol's screams of terror, and Heimdall had heard nothing amiss. Still, with each passing minute, he became ever more certain that something dreadful had happened to his kinswoman Sol and her charge. The air was becoming increasingly colder without the sun wheel to warm it, and the atmosphere promised the imminent appearance of snow. If Sol did not soon resume her daily ride, the eternal cold of Fimbul Winter would descend upon the Nine Worlds and many beings could perish.

Heimdall clenched his golden teeth and slowly shook his head. The threat was much too serious for

the Watcher to simply remain at his post wondering and worrying...and hoping that one of the other gods would resolve the mystery. No, save for Odin himself, none of the others was as qualified for the task as Heimdall--and in a time of crisis it was needful that the Allfather remain in Asgard.

Heimdall turned on his heel and strode back to his fortress home, Himinbjorg, which loomed beside the bridgehead. Hurrying inside he shouted for his steward, an alderly elf who had managed the household affairs at Himinbjorg for many ages.

"Stadok, I'm off to Delling's Door to find out what's amiss with my kinswoman Sol and the sun wheel she guides. They seem to have disappeared, and it's getting colder by the minute."

"Oh, d-dear, that d-doesn't sound good," the usually unflappable steward stammered. "I d-do hope you can find them soon, Lord Varvis."

"As do I, old friend, as do I. So tell Vavsun to saddle Gulltopp for me and provision his saddlebags whilst I change into some warmer clothing and strap on my sword."

"And the Gjallarhorn, Lord Varvis? If mischief is afoot, there may be giants on the move." The reliable Stadok's voice was steady now. "Better prepared and need naught, than unprepared and need much' as the saying goes."

Heimdall's golden smile filled the room. "You're right, Stadok, as usual. I'll shrink the horn so I can carry it beneath my cloak." So saying, he hurried off to prepare for his journey.

A short time later, mounted upon his golden-maned steed, Heimdall addressed the fur-clad elf who had held the reins for him. "Vavsun, your eyes are the keenest of a sharp-eyed race, so as I become the Seeker I entrust to you the task of being the Watcher. Should the giants--or any others who might threaten Asgard-- approach the Rainbow Bridge, get word to Odin as fast as you can."

Vavsun's eyes gleamed as he responded. "You can rely on me, Lord Varvis. Now fare you well to Delling's Door."

With a wave of his hand, Heimdall wheeled Gulltopp and galloped over the Rainbow Bridge toward Midgard and the portal through which the sun wheel emerged each morning. Though the distance was great, Gulltopp ran like the wind--his mane and that of his unhooded master flowing out behind them--so that day was not fully sped ere they came to a halt by Delling's Door, the eastern gateway to the Underworld.

The intricately carved, rune-bordered portal was closed, but three elves and a taller being stood before

the gate apparently trying to determine how to open it. They turned as one when Heimdall rode up and, as he dismounted, the taller being strode toward him, throwing back his hood to reveal the handsome beardless face and golden hair of Frey, the patron god of the elvish race. Though he lacked Heimdall's golden teeth, the smile he flashed was only a whit less dazzling.

"Well met, Heimdall, my dear fellow. I should have known that you'd be along at any minute. You never could just sit at home when there was a mystery to solve or a fair maiden to rescue, eh? Of course not...as my sister, Freyja, has had good reason to appreciate." He released Heimdall's right hand, which he had been vigorously pumping. "Actually, this whole beastly business is more your sort of thing than mine, anyway; I'd rather preside over a rousing fertility rite any day, but you know how the elves feel about the sun--Fair Wheel, they call it--so I felt I'd better come and have a look for myself. I was going to saddle up my horse and come alone, but the elves wouldn't hear of it."

Frey brushed the snowflakes from his hair. "So I hitched my great boar, Gullinburst, to my chariot and brought along as many of the brave lads as could safely fit in...wouldn't do to have one of them fall out when we rode through the sky, now would it?" Despite the gravity of the occasion, Frey's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Seriously though, Heimdall, now that we're here we seem to have run into a problem. There's nothing to be learned out here--no sign of a struggle or anything like that; if there had been the elves would have found it--but the Door is closed and Delling doesn't seem to be home. At least no one came when we shouted and pounded on the portal." Frey waved his arms in exasperation. "We tried to force it open just before you rode up, but it wouldn't budge. Why don't you have a try at it?" It was snowing much harder now and Frey, shivering a bit, once again pulled the hood up over his head.

Heimdall's brows knitted in an anxious frown. "It gets worse and worse, Frey. Delling wouldn't have left his post willingly...something must have happened to him, too. We must get inside." He strode past the elves, who drew aside respectfully, and--extending his hands toward the door--chanted the runic song by which the dwarf Thjodrorir had first opened the portal long eons past and allowed the sun wheel to proceed on its daily rounds. A soaring descant began to issue from the now glowing door, which trembled briefly--then abruptly all sound, light and movement ceased. There suddenly appeared in the center of the door, throbbing malevolently, a complex design apparently revealed by the music.

Heimdall whistled ruefully. "Now where did that come from?"

"By Father Odin's lost eye," gasped Frey, "what is that thing?"

"That, my friend," muttered Heimdall grimly, "is a web of binding runes. They can only be unbound one at a time...and in a particular sequence. One mistake by the runemaster who tries to unravel that runic knot and he will be instantly obliterated."

The elves looked at each other and shook their heads in dismay as Frey turned to Heimdall. "But could you do it? You're not exactly a novice runemaster, you know."

Heimdall reflected a moment before responding. "Yes, given enough time--and I mean days--I probably could. But we don't have that kind of time; the cold is extending its icy grasp much too quickly. There must be another way."

One of the elves, all but his bright eyes and long nose hidden by the high collar of his fur overtunic and the bill of his tasseled cap, stepped forward and asked diffidently, "Excuse me, Lord Varvis, but am I correct in assuming that Delling opens this door each morning by standing in front of it as you did and singing that song?"

"That's right; it's the only way," Heimdall replied.

"Well, then, if the door can only be opened in that manner, how does Delling get outside to sing to it?"

Heimdall pounded his fist in the palm of his other hand. "Of course, you've got it; there has to be another entrance nearby. Now we just have to hope that whoever sealed this door was unaware of it."

Frey enthusiastically clapped the elf on his shoulder. "Oh, well done, Oaivalas, well done. I always knew you were a keen fellow." Then he frowned. "But Thor blast me if I can see another entrance, Heimdall."

"If it were obvious, it wouldn't be a secret entrance, would it?" Heimdall retorted, flashing his golden smile. "I can't see it either, so it must be protected by an illusion of some sort. If it were a temporary illusion the door could resemble anything, but it would be easier to maintain a permanent illusion if the resemblance were to something with which the door shares a similar nature. If the door is wooden, which seems most likely, it surely has retained some bond with the trees from which it was made." Looking rather pleased with himself, Heimdall concluded, "I suspect that one of these spruce trees that grow amidst the rocks on either side of the gateway is the hidden door. But which one, I wonder?"

His musings were interrupted by an excited interjection from Oaivalas. "Look, Lord Varvis! That third tree to the right of Delling's Door. There isn't any

snow settling on its boughs as there is on all the others. 'Tisn't natural."

"Not natural, indeed, Oaivalas," Heimdall exclaimed triumphantly. "How can snow settle on an illusion? That has to be Delling's secret entrance. Come on." And, striding to the hillside, he seemed to walk directly into the snowless spruce tree and disappeared.

"Njuolgalas, be a good fellow and look after the animals, won't you? Oaivalas and Haksel, you come with me." Snapping out these commands, Frey followed Heimdall's example and, with the two elves trailing in his wake, passed through the tree that wasn't there.

Njuolgalas watched them go, then set about leading Frey's boar and Heimdall's horse into the edge of the nearby forest, where they might find at least a little relief from the snow and wind. Having settled the animals as best he could, the elf took shelter beneath the lowermost boughs of a large spruce tree where he wriggled down into the thick layer of dead needles for warmth and began his lonely vigil.

Beyond the secret portal the feeble light of the Underworld, supplemented by the glowing ball of runelight conjured up by Heimdall, was sufficient for the party to discover that Delling's rooms were vacant, but there was no sign of violence to be seen. The same was true of his son Dag's dwelling, which lay just beyond...but this was not unexpected since daylight had spread across the sky on its accustomed schedule. In fact, Dag and Skinfaxi should be reaching the western portal about now and beginning the shorter return trip home through the Underworlds.

The four hurried on to Sol's hall and there, by the broken stable gate, lay Delling. Of Sol, her horses, and the sun wheel there was no sign.

"By Freyja's golden tears," gasped Frey, "what has happened here? Oaivalas, Haksel...you two have a look around while Heimdall and I see to Delling."

The elves silently slipped away to begin a meticulous search of the buildings and grounds, while Frey joined Heimdall, who knelt by the supine figure of Delling.

"Great news, Frey! He's not dead, just unconscious." Heimdall's fingers gently probed Delling's head and torso. "His pulse is strong, and there are no obvious wounds--not even on his head-- yet here he lies, and presumably has done so since this morning. This is very strange, indeed." And Heimdall rocked back onto his heels to consider the matter.

"Wake up, Delling; wake up, won't you. You're our only hope to find out what has happened to Sol and the sun wheel." Frustrated, Frey shook Delling so hard his head rocked from side to side.

Aghast, Heimdall reached out a restraining hand, but withdrew it quickly when he saw a small black object pop out of Delling's right ear--apparently dislodged by the shaking.

"What's this?" he cried, pouncing on the object like a stooping falcon striking its prey. "By the nine sisters that bore me, it's a sleep thorn. Well done, Frey. Your outburst has served us well. This is one mystery solved, and Delling should come around shortly...then, perhaps we can learn the rest."

True to Heimdall's prediction, it was only a few minutes later that the slightly groggy Delling shook his own head and slowly sat up. As soon as his eyes could focus on Frey and Heimdall--and the two elves, who had just returned--he burst out, "Thank Odin you're here. Something has happened to Sol! We've got to find her." Delling staggered to his feet.

While Heimdall lent him a shoulder for support, Frey exclaimed "But just what did happen to her...and to the sun wheel?"

Delling blinked. "I'm not really sure. When she didn't ride through the gateway at the usual time, I came here looking for her." He paused to clear his head. "I didn't see her near the stable, so I went to the door of her hall and called out her name. When she didn't answer, I feared she might be ill, so I went inside...and the whole place was empty. By then I was really beginning to worry, but I thought I'd better check inside the stable just to be sure."

"Yes, yes. Then what?" Frey demanded impatiently.

"I no sooner stuck my head inside than I was grabbed from behind by someone with arms like a pair of iron bands. I struggled as best I could--that's when the gate got broken--but he was too strong, and suddenly I felt a pain in my ear and then I don't remember anything until just now."

"Then you didn't see who held you?" Frey asked in a disappointed voice.

"I was trying too hard to break loose to worry about who it was, Frey." Delling voiced his annoyance at Frey's implied criticism. "But he must have been a giant, judging by the size and strength of his arms."

"Of course," interjected Heimdall. "The giants must have stolen Sol and the sun wheel just after Dag rode off on Skinfaxi or he would have noticed something was wrong. Then they left one or more of their band behind to deal with Delling so he couldn't raise an alarm 'til they were well away. You're fortunate, Delling, that they decided to use a sleep thorn rather than slay you outright. Hmm, interesting." Heimdall mused for a moment before continuing. "My guess is that they used a sleep thorn on Sol, too, or you would have heard her screams...and so would I."

"Blast it all, Heimdall," snapped Frey. "I'm not interested in a discourse on their kidnapping techniques...we need to find out where they went and go after them."

"Easier said than done, my testy friend, since we don't know which giants are responsible."

"Excuse us, lords," said Oaivalas quietly, "but I think we may. Haksel has smelt some of the footprints we found--they are those of giants--and he has detected the faint but distinct odor of brimstone! Surely that can only point to the fire giants?"

"Are you certain, Haksel?" barked Heimdall. "We don't have the time to make a false start."

"You can trust my sniffer, Lord Varvis; it's how I make my living. 'Twas brimstone, right enough. They must have stomped about in it back home in Hillai, the 'land of living embers,' so their boots stink of it."

"Other folk call that place Muspellheim, but the elvish name for it certainly is more descriptive," acknowledged Heimdall. "At any rate, Haksel, if you're that certain we are dealing with fire giants, then Surt of the Flaming Sword, the lord of Muspellheim, must be behind Sol's abduction. Alas, there is no giant whose power is more to be feared, yet it seems we have no choice but to seek him out in Muspellheim--and that quickly. What think you, Frey?"

"I think it's an awfully good thing I brought along my rune sword, Mistletoe, which slays giants of its own accord. That more than makes up for my not being a brawny fellow like Thor. You know I don't lack the heart for battle, even if it's not my favorite pastime." Frey swept the magic sword from its scabbard and brandished it heroically in the air. "And I vow by the golden bristles of my boar, Gullinbursti, that I'll bring Sol and the sun wheel back from Muspellheim...or die in the attempt."

Heimdall clapped his hands in approval. "A noble vow, good Frey, but I hope we will be able to carry out this rescue without any loss of lives."

"That will be up to Surt and his minions; if those scoundrels resist us, I shall have to teach them a lesson they won't soon forget." Turning away from Heimdall, who barely stifled a laugh, Frey began to issue instructions to the others. "Oaivalas, Haksel...if you're game, you may come along with Heimdall and me in the chariot. We're likely to have need of you when we get to Muspellheim." Both elves nodded their approval. "Delling, old fellow, I know you'd like to come along and take a whack at a fire giant or two, but you'll have to admit you're not really back to fighting trim yet. Besides we need you to build a huge bonfire outside the gate here to guide us back once we have rescued the sun wheel from Muspellheim. Without that beacon fire, we'd be pressed to find our way back."

Delling started to protest, then shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "Aye, I'll tend to the fire...and I'll try to reassure Dag when he returns. My boy and Sol always travel back here together through the Underworld each night, so he'll be frantic with worry, wondering what has happened to her."

Bidding Delling farewell, the other four hurried outside to rejoin Njuolgalas and ready the boar-drawn chariot for its journey. Leaving Njuolgalas to assist Delling, the four clambered into the chariot, which lurched forward, then mounted sleepily into the dark, storm-beleaguered sky. The golden flow from Gullinbursti's bristles gave it the appearance of a rising-- rather than falling--star.

Gullinbursti's glow was, in fact, the only light that three of the travellers saw until the chariot began to descend toward Muspellheim and they could begin to perceive the eerie red light, pulsating from the mouths of myriad volcanoes, that had enabled the far-sighted Heimdall to direct their course southward.

They landed without too much of a jolt at the edge of the Myrkvid, that great dark forest lying between Muspellheim and the rest of the Nine Worlds. The snow and ice now dominating the more northern lands could not secure a grip here, so close to the eternal fires of Muspellheim, whose flickering lights cast bizarre shadows through the outer ranks of trees--ominous, yet possessing a strange beauty. The travellers stood enraptured for a moment, almost forgetting the urgency of their quest.

It was the impetuous Frey who first broke the silence. "Right, then; let's get on with it, shall we? Haksel, you stay here and look after Gullinbursti; Oaivalas, you come along to guard our backs." And throwing back his shoulders, Frey marched boldly into Muspellheim.

Heimdall hurried to catch up with him, and Oaivalas--after pausing only long enough to string his short recurved bow--soon trailed along a dozen paces behind them. In silence the three proceeded deeper and deeper into the Fiery Land, scrambling over and around boulder-sized cinders while taking care to avoid noxious fumaroles, scalding steam vents, and bubbling lava. After a mile or two they came upon a path constructed of volcanic ash, trod flat by generations of giant feet, and decided to follow it to its destination. For miles the path wound its way around volcanic cones, disappearing at last in the gaping mouth of a lava tube on the lower slope of an enormous extinct volcano. Standing by the tube's mouth and leaning on their long, spike-headed clubs were two fire giants, each naked save for an oxhide kilt and thick oxhide boots.

"Well, it seems we've come to the right place," mused Heimdall, slowing the pace. Without turning

his head, he addressed the elf, who had drawn closer to the two gods. "Oaivalas, I think you'd better take cover before the giants notice there are three of us. When we come out, we may be in a bit of a hurry, and a few well-placed arrows from an unexpected source might slow the pursuit a bit." He and Frey moved slowly to the side of the path, pausing for a moment beside a particularly large block of cinders, to screen the elf's departure.

"I understand, Lord Varvis, and I'll be ready. Good luck." And Oaivalas melted into the landscape, awaiting an opportunity to find a vantage point closer to the tube's mouth.

The two gods resumed their pace and shortly approached the giants, who raised their clubs into the ready position.

"Heer naw, whar do yew fellers fink yeer gawing?" one giant queried, shaking his club menacingly.

"Yar," interposed his partner, "whar?"

Frey drew himself to his full height, and in as haughty a manner as one can assume when speaking to someone who towers over you, addressed the first giant. "We wish to speak to Lord Surt, my good fellow, and we are in a bit of a hurry, so please take us to him at once."

The giants looked at each other and guffawed. "Aw, yar; Sart'll be wantin' ta see yew, too, I'll wadger. Nowt many veesiturs kawm heer, thet's sartin. Foller me." Turning on his heel, the speaker plucked a lighted torch from a crude fixture just inside the entrance and proceeded to lead them up the tunnel formed by the lava tube, his partner remaining behind to guard the entrance.

"What a pair of bumpkins!" Frey whispered to Heimdall.

The tunnel extended all the way into the volcano's crater, where the party emerged to face a magnificent hall of skillfully worked stone.

"Why, this looks like dwarvish craftsmanship," observed Heimdall with surprise.

"Yar," acknowledged their guide, "the leetle peepel helped us. Twere that or be skwayzed, it were. Thay choosed ter halp, thay did...after we skwayzed the first un. His leetle eyes popped right outta his leetle haid. Nayver laft so hard in me life." His whole torso convulsed at the memory.

"Utterly barbaric," snarled Frey, placing his hand on his sword hilt.

"Not now," hissed Heimdall, "be patient."

The giant did not seem to notice this exchange and led the gods into the hall. "Veesiturs, Lord Sart," bellowed their guide, and they looked up at the impos-

ing pair that sat in the high seats at the end of the hall--Surt and Sinmara, the ruler of Muspellheim and his consort. They had the thick black hair and swarthy complexion characteristic of fire giants, but their bodies were more finely proportioned than those of the tunnel guards, and their faces almost handsome. Surt and Sinmara wore the traditional oxhide kilt and boots, and she also wore a short leather cloak that only partly concealed her ample, yet comely bosom. On the wall behind them, pulsating with an evil red glow, hung Worlds' Bane, Surt's flaming sword.

"Be very careful, Frey," murmured Heimdall. "Don't be misled by the other giants we've met. Surt and his wife are cunning, dangerous adversaries. Don't underestimate them."

Surt's strong, deep voice rang out. "Hrym, you may return to your post." The guide touched his forelock in acknowledgement and ambled off. "Come forward, travellers, and let us have a look at you. It isn't often we get visitors here in Muspellheim. The climate suits us well enough, but most other folk seem to find it a bit too warm for their taste." He chuckled softly. "Though now that the weather farther north seems to be changing a bit, perhaps their appreciation for heat will grow. What do you think?" Surt's saturnine features twisted into a smirk.

"Have done with this cat-and-mouse act, Surt, you blackguard," shouted Frey, taking a step toward the high seats. "What have you done with Sol and the sun wheel?"

Surt leaped to his feet and towered over them. "Go carefully, Frey...yes, I know who you are--and Heimdall, too--there isn't much that I don't know. But I will answer your question because it amuses me to do so...and because there is nothing you can do to change things." He folded his arms and stared disdainfully down at them. "Yes, I took the sun wheel...and the girl, too. And with good reason. Muspellheim is the Fiery Land and we fire giants love heat, yet the path of the sun wheel always takes it so far to the north of us that we can scarcely feel its heat and only see its fiery glow low against the northern sky. It wasn't fair that the most ancient of the Nine Worlds should be treated with so little honor...so I decided to remedy the situation." Surt smiled a sinister smile. "Now our honor has been restored and the sun wheel belongs to Muspellheim. Tomorrow we will place it atop this volcano where it will light the Fiery Land forever."

"That remains to be seen, Surt," interjected Heimdall, "but what have you done with my kinswoman Sol?"

"The girl is a kinswoman of yours, Heimdall? That I didn't know. I hadn't planned to bring her back with us, but when I saw her I was quite taken with the beauty

of her red-gold hair. I was going to make her my concubine, but Sinmara objected so strongly..."

Surt glanced aside at his wife who, glaring back at him, leaped to her feet and, throwing back her cloak, demanded proudly, "And why shouldn't I have objected? Am I not woman enough for any man?"

While Frey gaped admiringly, Heimdall responded diplomatically "Let there be no doubt on that score, Lady Sinmara, as I'm sure Lord Surt fully appreciates. But wouldn't it contribute to your marital bliss if Frey and I simply removed the source of your annoyance by taking Sol back with us?"

Sinmara rearranged her cloak and looked at Heimdall appraisingly. "You seem to have remarkably good taste--and sense--for someone who isn't a giant, Heimdall. Yes, there is nothing I'd like better than to have that girl as far from Muspellheim as you can take her...and the sooner, the better."

"Humph, well, Heimdall," muttered Surt, "since the girl is your kinswoman, I think I can be generous and return her to you. She's asleep yet in that bed-closet off to your left. Take her and be welcome."

Heimdall strode to the bed-closet at which Surt pointed and, throwing open the doors, gazed upon Sol's recumbent form. With a cry of relief, he knelt by her side and gently removed the sleep thorn from her ear.

While Heimdall was thus occupied, Frey turned to Surt and demanded "Now then, Surt, let's have no more nonsense about the sun wheel staying in Muspellheim. Many beings are freezing to death even as we speak, so the sun wheel must resume its daily path as soon as Sol is fit to ride. You must produce it and Sol's horses at once."

"You dare take that tone with me, insolent go-dling?" Surt snarled. "You have outstayed your welcome. Begone at once or taste my flaming sword." And he wrenched Worlds' Bane from the wall.

Mistletoe seemed to leap into Frey's hand of its own accord, gleaming bluish white like glacial ice. "Mistletoe thrives on a diet of giant flesh, Surt, so I fancy she'll be more than a match for your vaunted blade. Let's have at it, you villain."

The giant leaped down from the dais and launched a vicious overhand swing at Frey's head. Gripping Mistletoe's hilt with both hands, the god managed to parry the blow though the force of it caused him to stumble backwards a pace or two. When the blades met, the air crackled with their unleashed power and acrid steam billowed toward the ceiling.

Surt stepped back in astonishment. "That's impossible! Your blade should have melted beneath Worlds' Bane's flame."



Frey grinned at him boyishly. "Oh, Mistletoe is special, Surt, very special indeed. She's the handiwork of a dwarvish master-smith, who forged her in the depths of misty Niflheim. On the verge of the great spring Hvergelmir was she tempered...tempered in those icy waters made venomous with the slaver of the dragons that dwell there."

"Dragon venom!" hissed Surt. "Your sword is imbued with the Cold Fire? No wonder it could absorb the flame without being destroyed." He shuddered involuntarily, for dragons were the nemesis of giants and trolls, and there was nothing they feared more. "Still, even if the blades are evenly matched, their wielders are not. I am your superior in reach and strength, Frey, so your doom is inevitable." Surt's eyes gleamed like fire as he leaped to the attack once more, raining blow after blow against Frey's weakening defenses.

With each blow, the earth beneath them groaned and shuddered as if the fabric of the Nine Worlds was being shaken...which, indeed, it was, for in order to regenerate the flame that Mistletoe continued to absorb, Worlds' Bane was drawing upon the very energy that binds the Nine Worlds together.

Sensing this--and being concerned for Frey's safety--Heimdall gently but firmly disengaged himself from the grateful embrace of the now revived Sol, and shouted at the combatants to stop...to no avail. Surt was too immersed in battle fury to hear him, and it was all Frey could do to defend himself. Frustrated, Heimdall pulled the diminished Gjallerhorn from beneath his cloak and, murmuring a brief incantation, restored the great horn to its full size, placed the mouthpiece to his lips, and gently blew. Though Heimdall had winded it lightly, the resulting note belled resoundingly through the room, hurling the combatants off their feet and flattening Sinmara against the back of her chair.

"Now that I have your attention, I say enough of this! Frey, surely you can see that you can't defeat Surt. And Surt, you must realize that I won't allow you to kill Frey. If I wind the Gjallerhorn with all my might, your hall will be blown away and the note will echo throughout the Nine Worlds. The hosts of Asgard will march and Ragnarok will be upon us. Are you truly prepared to bring about the Last Battle now?" Heimdall stood poised to lift the Gjallerhorn to his lips once again.

"I will not give up the sun wheel," grated Surt.

Frey staggered to his feet, gasping "It'll soon be the end of most of the Nine Worlds anyway if the sun wheel doesn't go back," and he wearily began to lift Mistletoe again.

"Will you two headstrong fools never listen? Since neither side can get everything it wants, only a com-

promise can avoid total disaster for everyone. Here is what I propose: Sol and the sun wheel will return to her home..." Frey grinned and a scowling Surt started to splutter, but Heimdall continued. "Now hear me out, I say. They come back home, but henceforth Sol will alter her route a little each day so that part of the year she will swing closer to Muspellheim and the other part closer to the northern lands. The folk who live in the North will have to learn to put up with colder, darker winters than before, but ones they can survive...and Muspellheim's honor is upheld in the bargain. What say you, Surt?"

A brief period of silence, which seemed to last an eternity, ensued. Finally Surt sighed, "I don't seem to have a great deal of choice, Heimdall, do I, since--as you shrewdly surmised--I'm not really ready for Ragnarok. Let it be as you say...but I warn you that your end of the bargain had better be honored or Muspellheim will bring the Last Battle to Asgard."

"You may rely upon my word, Surt, and Frey's too. Can't he, Frey?"

Frey gritted his teeth and muttered his assent though it clearly pained him to do so.

Some time later, after Sol and the sun wheel were aloft and awaiting Frey's boar-drawn chariot to guide them home, Heimdall, Frey and Oaivalas paused to take leave of the small group of fire giants, who had escorted them to the border of Muspellheim. The exchange was decidedly cool--not surprising under the circumstances--though in response to Heimdall's query, Surt did tell him that the binding rune on Delling's Door could be destroyed by simply thrusting Mistletoe into the heart of the rune-web and allowing the sword to absorb and dissipate the charm.

The two gods and their elf companion hurried off to find Frey's chariot and its guardian in the fringes of the Myrkvid. On an impulse, Heimdall looked back over his shoulder and, seeing Surt and Sinmara still standing there watching the receding figures of the party from Asgard, he waved them a final farewell.

Surt encircled his wife's shoulders with one arm and raised the other in a reluctant salute. "I hate to admit it, my love, but I could almost like that one...he respects us even though we are the enemies of his race. As for Frey..." Surt's face darkened and his voice thickened, "he and I shall meet again someday, and when we do I vow he won't have that accursed ice-blade to protect him. In fact, by then the gods will have come to hate the very word 'mistletoe.' Just wait and see."

The giant couple stood in silence until they saw the golden light of Gullinbursti hurtling northward, followed at a distance by the sun wheel; then they turned, and, hand-in-hand, slowly followed the ashen path back to their volcanic home.

* * *

"Well, lad, there it is," concluded Ragnar with a smile. "I think now you can see why this season, when Sol travels closest to Muspellheim, we call 'Wheel Time,' and, of course, we burn the Hjul Log to be sure she can find her way north again."

"Do you think she really needs it, uncle?" queried Dag.

"Well, she's never said, but doing it makes everyone feel better, and it certainly can't hurt because she's come back on schedule every year since."

The boy thought about that for a moment. "I guess that's so. And I can understand now about the vows sworn to Frey on the boar. But why isn't there anything honoring Heimdall?"

The man reached over and ruffled his nephew's hair. "I don't know for certain, but I don't think Heimdall particularly likes to be the center of attention. He freed his kinswoman and the sun wheel without anyone being killed, which is what he set out to do, so I suspect he was happy enough for Frey to get the glory."

The boy absorbed this, nodding briefly, then frowned.

"What's troubling you, Dag? Are you still concerned about Heimdall's honor?" Ragnar asked sympathetically.

"No, uncle, I'm just worried about what Surt said at the end. You know...about Mistletoe being cursed or something."

"Then you can put your mind at rest, my boy. Surt forgot that Heimdall could hear every word he uttered, and 'forewarned is forearmed' as they say." Ragnar grinned a toothy grin. "To honor Frey's blade and counter the curse--if there ever was one--they used a powerful runic ritual to change the name of Mistletoe to Protector of Worlds. A very apt name, don't you think? In remembrance of the sword's role in rescuing Sol and the sun wheel, folk hang sprigs of mistletoe in their halls during Hjultide...and, if a curse does follow the name, it's awfully hard to imagine it being transferred to such an innocent little plant, now isn't it?"

"Yes, but..." Dag began.

"No buts, my boy, no buts. The future holds what it holds for each of us, and there is no point in spoiling the joy of the present by worrying about what may or may not come to pass. That's my advice. Now then, enough tale-telling and advice-giving for one night. It's high time you were asleep. You'll need to be well rested tomorrow if we are going to take a trip by reindeer sled to visit the elves." And Ragnar smiled fondly down at his nephew as he pulled the eiderdown comforter up around his shoulders and tucked him in for the night. Ω

THE PRODIGAL SON'S OLDER BROTHER WONDERS ABOUT THE RIGHT AND LEFT PATH

by Dirk J. Verhulst

*I recognized first the old limp
as you walked over the horizon
on the road which disappears
directly to the left of the sun,
the same road on which you had departed
so hastily ten years before when you
finally abandoned your dark basement retreat.*

*From where I stood in our father's field
I had time to think about what I would say to you.
I, whose dreams had long ago taken on
the solidity of house and furniture,
the flesh of wife and children.
Did God grant you salvation
in his soup kitchens and welfare lines?
Did you find wisdom beyond the sun?
Or did your world shrink to the size of a bottle?
As I look at the fences which have for so long*

*defined the cautious limits of my life,
I wonder about the harvests of conventionality,
the need for brackets around experience,
the reassurance of the right-hand path.*

*Later, when I looked in through
the window of the house and saw you
and the others eating and drinking
and laughing, I wondered about
the different paths that had brought us here.*

*Now I, who have not spurned the sun and fields,
watch as you carefully cultivate a tiny tray
of plants in a green house large enough to
supply the entire farm with seedlings.*

*Sometimes, at night, I hear you
and wonder what demons knock
at your windows and cause you to sleep
with a knife under your pillow.*

ONE SUNDAY MY SON

by Dirk J. Verhulst

*One Sunday my son ran
into the orchard behind the house.
It wasn't long before he disappeared
among the weeds grown tall
from a summer of neglect.*

*Twice I saw his head come up
above the weeds but it wasn't long
before the limbs of branches
dragged him under.*

*Is it possible to drown
in an orchard?*

*Do apple trees float
in ancient glacial bowls,
like weeds upon the water?*

*It's been a week now
since he disappeared and
the silence from the orchard
is broken only by branches
falling on the wet ground
with the sound a boy makes
when he jumps into a river.*

CASSANDRA (FOR PENN KEMP)

by Dirk J. Verhulst

"I will endure to die"

*You have heard the children cry
from the water below the rock:
the earth red with blood
from the feast of the father.*

*Your lover-thief
has betrayed you;
now dead men choke the waters.*

*Your chants explode
inside our skulls:
fragments of ancient stories
passed around the fire.*

*Prophetess,
doomed to foretell the future,
break the membrane over our
reluctant ears and
sing for us.*

PASSAGE IN THE NIGHT

by Brian Mason



he fire had gone out and I was unable to get it started again. I had been a Boy Scout and all that, but without dry kindling I could not get more than a few flickers of flame. With disgust I gave up as the first few stars were becoming visible in the east. High in the

west, somewhere near greatest elongation, was the eveningstar. As high as it was, it would probably keep me company for a couple of hours or more. Even now, seeing it in its perilous radiance, it was easy to see why early men held it in reverence. I had been hiking in the mountains for a couple of weeks, and had just begun to realize that my hope of reaching Fontana Dam before the end of summer break was beyond me. I was just five days out from Blood Mountain and did not seem to have the endurance of my youth. I began to try to stir the embers of my campfire. Giving up, I laid down upon the fern bank and began to watch the sky. I was about to drift back off to sleep when something disturbed me.

I felt communication inside me. It was a feeling that I find it very difficult to describe. Undoubtedly emotional, it was as if I was understanding on a higher level. The source of these feelings seemed to be the eveningstar. The star seemed to be summoning me to come towards it. With nothing better to do, I grabbed my compass, pedometer, flashlight and belt pouch, and set out westward.

I descended into an overgrown brake, and was in deepest night. The trees themselves seemed to prohibit my passage. Soon the evening chill was driven from my body but, eventually, I made it out of the thickets and began to move quickly cross country, over undulating hills. I remember going through two such descents and ascents and was beginning another ascent when I was shocked and amazed by the smell of sea spray. I was a full 300 miles or so from the Atlantic, yet the smell was unmistakable: a clean, moist smell, unlike any other. Across the vale, on the further ridge, was something I never expected to see. It was a tower. A very tall, thin tower, somewhat reminiscent of a minaret. The topmost part was a darker hue but glimmered in the bright light of the eveningstar, which was directly above it and still calling me onward. I descended and ascended once again and approached the immense tower. It tapered towards the summit, and had a door facing east.

After my initial inspection I could see that the tower appeared to be made of marble, and was smooth, and that while the grooves between the great blocks could be seen, they could not be felt. It rose to a great height above the ground and was approximately thirty feet in diameter, contracting to about half that at the summit. I opened the wooden door and went in. There was a lit torch to my immediate right and another directly across the circular room. The room within was lined with ropes from one side to the other. The ropes were a pale grey and disappeared into the wall behind them. At first I considered pulling on or examining the ropes, but I seemed to know that the ropes were not my goal. To my right, along the circumference of the interior wall, a stair began to climb to the left, making a circular turn and disappearing into the ceiling of the room. Ascending the stairs, I found that I was in another lit room completely void, and that, after a short landing, the stair continued winding upwards. Upwards was my goal.

I passed through other empty rooms; each room was progressively smaller and completed three-quarters of a circle on the way up. The third floor was not void, but had a double door, opening inward. I opened the door and saw before me a window, facing west. Between me and the window was a large black table about five feet in diameter with a latched black dome sitting on top of it. In front of the table was a low stool. Both the table and the stool seemed to be made of marble. The hinged box looked different. It was dull black, and reminded me of a stony-iron meteorite, yet it was fashioned as if it had been cast.

Slowly I unlatched the dome, lifted it from the table and set it aside. Directly underneath it, sitting in a depression in the table, was a marvelous globe of black crystal. No bigger than a foot in diameter, it seemed to be the terminus of my journey. I sat in the stool and looked in the crystal. At first I saw nothing, and then the blackness faded to the Sea: boundless, and without shore. I began to move across it with increasing speed, and the Sea seemed to fall beneath my sight and yet, in a vague, half dreamlike way, to continue onward. The Sea seemed to be moving by with greater speed. And then, suddenly I saw before me an island with a wharf full of white ships, and beyond that, a brilliant white beach, and a mountain, taller than tall, beautiful and yet terrible. I passed out.

When I awoke I was on the greensward upon which had been the tower. The tower was gone and also, apparently, my madness. Ω

CIVIC HOSPITAL, EMERGENCY WARD

by Dirk J. Verhulst

*In the waiting room
my wife rests her pain
on my shoulder;
the broken bones are hidden
below the surface of her skin.
Beside us a woman holds her silent baby.
"She hasn't wakened all day,"
the mother tells me;
there is fear in her eyes.
Across the room a family huddles together,
speaking in hushed voices about someone
who isn't there.*

*Every few minutes a name is called
over the loudspeaker. Each time someone rises
and disappears down the long corridor;
they do not come back.*

*Hours go by. The room is still full.
Other people have come to take the places
of the ones who have gone.
No one speaks.
My wife continues to sleep;
I can hear the bones mending in the silence.*

*Finally, her name is called.
I hold her close and pretend I didn't hear.
The others in the room look at each other
to see who will rise and go.
I feign ignorance and holding my wife tighter
I tell the disembodied voice
"There is no one here by that name."*

RELUCTANT SPRING

by Dirk J. Verhulst

*This spring
the birds fly low
above the trees;
their new green skin
not yet able to hide
the bones of branches.*

*On the corner
madmen juggle
the children of May
while the crowd applauds,
pretending there is no dark
side to summer.*

*Behind a window
a young mother lies
between white winter sheets
as the cancer tightens
around her throat.*

*For us
the clarity of summer's knowing
remains a rumour
we debated in low voices
as we huddled
around the cold fires
of winter.*

THE RUNE MASTER

by Conda V. Douglas



Emerad stood upon the tower, watching the far-off wisps of smoke from the battlefield. The soothsayer waited for the men to return before the final light of dusk.

From his vantage point, Emerad saw the admiring faces of the women and children. They stood in the courtyard below, looking up at him with dirt-marred faces. They were dressed in rags and scraps of fur. Emerad wore a cloak of the clan blue, black and white. A gold pin, in the shape of a salamander in flames, fastened the cloak at his shoulder. The cloak billowed in the cold wind, making the man seem larger than he was.

The women and children looked up at Emerad in awe. To those below he was as a statue, solid, immovable, patient. They did not guess at the man within.

Though Emerad had never fought a battle he knew he was as great a hero as Talu, whose victory he had prophesied so many years ago. Now, as he stood upon the tower, he enjoyed the worshipping faces. As he would enjoy their gasps of joy when the men returned from the traditional battlefield with the heads of their foes riding high upon the tips of their spears. When Emerad predicted victory, victory came. This time, Emerad hoped, would be no different.

Emerad's hand tightened around his staff. Age was making him fearful, like a little boy afraid of what he cannot see or hear. Emerad thought back to yesterday, when Sanar had arrived with the rune reader Karsta.

Sanar was returning from the castle of the McBain clan, where he had been a hostage. Exchanging hostages of the second sons of the two clan lords had kept the two tribes at peace for years.

Emerad had liked the boy given in trade for Sanar, a boy whom Emerad was sure would be a peaceful influence on the McBain lord when he returned to his clan at the end of seven years' time. But a month before the end of that time the young boy had died, of a mysterious illness which even Emerad's medicine could not abate. This puzzled Emerad greatly, for when he had cast the two boys' futures in preparation for the exchange both promised long and healthy lives. Emerad wondered if he had been wrong; or had the future been changed by the hand of another, more cunning seer?

The boy's death meant war between the two clans. So Sanar returned home. But he did not return alone.

Emerad had been standing on the tower when he spotted the small party heading toward the keep. There was a small retinue of servants, suitable for the second son of a lord, all walking in the muddy road behind a shaggy horse, laden with Sanar's effects, and Sanar himself. Emerad recognized the boy, grown to a man in seven years. But Emerad did not recognize the man leading the procession, holding the horse by a rope. He was tall, taller even than Emerad, and walked with grace and dignity. As they approached the castle gate, Emerad smelled the electric odor of another soothsayer.

The tall man reached the gate first. He stared up at Emerad. His long black hair danced patterns of power in the wind; his black eyes cast death in their glance.

"Come down, old man," he called to Emerad.

Emerad felt his knees buckle. He stumbled and almost fell from his high perch on the tower. But his staff, old friend, saved him, catching him as he leaned upon it.

The man laughed and shouted "You'll fall soon enough, old man." With that the man led the ragtag party into the castle compound.

Only later that day did Emerad learn the man's name was Karsta.

Emerad shifted a little, moving his legs to ease the cramps from standing so long. He wished he could draw the heavy cloak closer around him, instead of letting it fly in the wind. The wind felt colder as every moment passed. It was quickly becoming as cold as the wind last night.

Yesterday eve, with the smell of battle and men's hate heavy on the air, Emerad had sat upon the ancient rocks at Gail-be-nor and cast his runes.

His twisted fingers slowly drew the old figures in the dirt where they had been drawn a thousand times before. The white lines of his plaid robe shone in the light. He needed no torch, for the sky writhed with the forces of a great thunderstorm, and the threat of its fury hung heavy and warm upon the earth. A good portent, for the rain would wash away the runes, and he would not have to touch them again.

Emerad sat, high upon the grassy knoll, surrounded by the patterned pebbles of giants, staring at his scrawls in the dirt. Until, with a peal of thunder, they changed.

Emerad had stared at the lines for a long time, wondering. They spoke of victory. The green flag with the salamander ablaze upon its field would carry Talem, son of Talu, home. Yet never had the runes spoken as such. Always before it was the man carrying the flag. Emerad fingered the lines cut deeply into his staff as he stared at the runes. What did the runes mean? For the first time he was not certain. Did it matter? Was it not enough that they said victory?

Emerad thought of casting again, for did not his old fingers shake? Quickly he dismissed the thought, for to recast the runes was to change them, and now they predicted victory. Besides, it was the skill, not the steadiness of the hand, that led to the truth of the lines.

Even so, the storm did not break, but blew away on an icy wind. The wind did not erase the lines, so for the first time Emerad wiped them away with his sleeve. But the runes said victory and victory he knew it would be.

On his slow-stepped way down from Gail-be-nor, Emerad thought of his young rival, Karsta. Perhaps it was Karsta who twisted the runes. But Emerad could not believe the young seer had such skill as to change the rune pattern of a master.

For the first time since the arrival of Karsta, Emerad felt almost gay. But a small fear, the length of the line of a rune, skirted the depths of his mind and kept him from true joy.

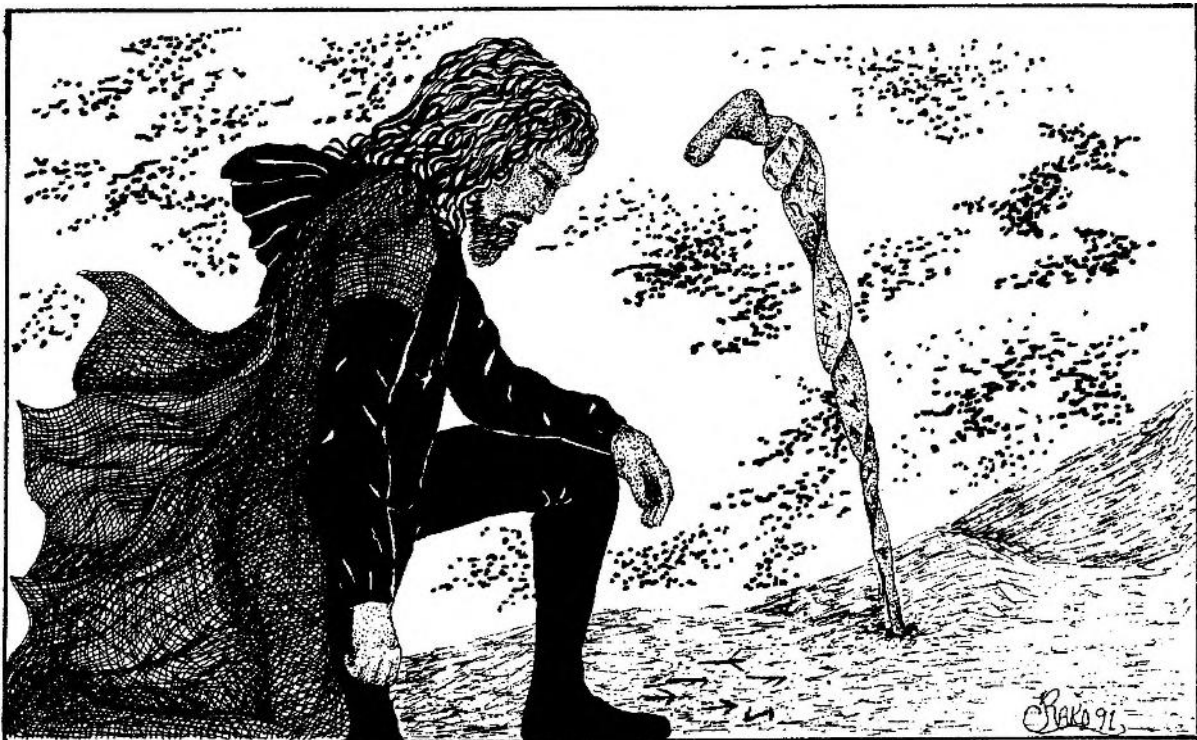
Late that night Emerad had spoken to Talem, Sanar's brother and the clan lord.

Talem was waiting for the news of the runes. He sat by the fire in his chair, carved from a single piece of oak. A robe was about his legs, but his chest was bare, and Emerad saw the glint from the gold torque Talem always wore around his neck. Emerad thought Talem must have polished the torque, for tonight the circle of gold glistened, the salamanders at each end danced in the candlelight.

The dogs lounging around the huge fireplace did not jump and bark as Emerad approached. Not only had they early learned to respect his staff, but they were also well fed and fat and sleepy with the scraps from the evening meal.

Emerad sat down on the small stool closest to the fire, the honoured place for the seer. In the fire only embers sparkled, like Emerad himself, almost burned out but still full of fire.

Over the years, Emerad had come to like the fire, his friend. Not only did it stop his bones from aching, but often the fire spoke to him, the flames told him stories of what the fire had seen in the long years it had never been allowed to go out. But tonight the fire was



silent, cold and remote, and as close as he sat on the hearth, Emerad could draw no heat from it.

As Emerad spoke of the runes, Talem smiled.

"Well," he said when Emerad finished, "then it will be Karsta's head that rides high on a stake tomorrow. Perhaps when he sees that, my little brother will learn respect for his lord.

"Sanar is a fool, he has changed little since seven years ago." As he spoke, Talem's hand wandered over the fur of one of his dogs. "He still believes a battle is a way to power." Talem chuckled. "Sanar whines to me that the clan is like the dogs, fat and sleepy. Yet these dogs can still bite. With victory tomorrow, Sanar shall learn that all too well."

Talem laughed, the dogs jumping up and barking to hear that joyful sound echo through the walls.

Emerad stared at the face of his young lord, and saw there the memory of his old friend, Talu. Talem had inherited much from his father, and he wore his lordship as lightly as a summer cloak. But for a moment Emerad wished Talu was sitting in that old chair. He had always been able to speak to Talu, and the old lord would sit, and nod, and understand. But that was long ago. Now the gold torque rested on the neck of Talem, not Talu.

Emerad wondered if he should speak out against Karsta, mention how the runes might have been changed. Yet, to speak out against another seer was to cast doubt upon his own power. And to speak of the runes was perhaps to change them.

And had he not cast wrong for the McBain child? Still that mistake tormented Emerad. All too well he knew the end of a seer fallen from favor. He had witnessed such a fall in the death of his predecessor, Garn.

Garn's only crime was his blindness. He was so old, so ancient beyond anyone's remembering of his birth, that his senses fled him like refugees from a burning keep. Garn spent his days before the arrival of Emerad sitting in the sun, snoring gently, not noticing the teasing touch of the flies around his face. He could not see to swat at them, nor could he see the runes shift in the dirt any longer, though once his words of prophecy had made men sweat and cry in fear.

When Emerad arrived from his apprenticeship on the coast to the mage Thorinor, he had found the old man sitting just so. But it was the eve of a battle, and Talu paced in the great dining hall, waiting. Emerad remembered trying to convince the old man to cast his runes.

"Wake up, old man," Emerad had said, shaking Garn's shoulder gently. "Wake up, and cast victory!"

But Garn could not hear him, and merely nodded and smiled the baby-sweet smile of old men in answer to Emerad's entreaties.

So Emerad foretold victory, and when they returned from the field victorious, they took old befuddled Garn and put his severed head upon a stick amongst their other trophies. There it hung, mouth gaping wide, a look of surprise upon the withered features.

Emerad wondered if all soothsayers ended that way, surprised by their own deaths. He knew better than to cast his own future, for such a scribble upon the sand by a seer seeking to foretell his own death said only "All men die, and so shall thee."

So Emerad said nothing of his fears to Talem. Wait and see, a small voice in the back of Emerad's wit whispered, wait and see, as poor Garn once had not seen with his blind eyes, blinded by too many years of seing.

The next morning, in the first glimmering of a storm-ridden dawn, Emerad stood high upon the tower. Beneath him, the warriors waited for his blessing and the sweet promise of victory.

One man held a long spear with the tattered piece of the clan's green flag clinging to the shaft. The flag would not be replaced until the last shreds were gone from the pole, so as not to destroy the magic of those last bits of cloth.

Others held axes, bows and arrows, and a few tightly clutched their beloved ancestral swords. Most dressed for battle in a wild array of plaids, mixed indiscriminately, so that eyes were dazzled with the shifting of pattern and color. Some of the men had carved wooden stick pins in the shape of salamanders and stuck them into the heavy woolen cloaks they wore. None noticed how dirty and torn the heavy cloaks were, or the feet wrapped in rags here and there among the men.

No one noticed, except Emerad, who for the first time doubted his own prophecy. But when he shouted "Victory!" the blue-painted faces which gazed up at him believed.

In the moment after his words had fallen upon the air, an instant of silence, a moment of awe and respect for the seer, Sanar shouted to him.

"Is it victory for my brother, then, old man?"

"Did I not say so, little boy?" spoke Emerad calmly, keeping his anger burning inside.

"Yes, so you did, old man," came a loud voice close beside Emerad.

Emerad saw that Karsta stood next to him, crowding him dangerously close on the tiny ledge.

"Don't push too close, Karsta," Talem called from below, his gold torque marking him as leader, "or it may be you who falls, not Emerad."

"The clan lord speaks truth," Emerad said, tightening his grip on his staff.

Karsta laughed and turned away, joining the troops below. The man muttered angrily amongst themselves until a warning glance from Talem silenced them. Off they marched, leaving Emerad to wait through the long day, with the laughter of Karsta always in his ears.

As he stood watching, Emerad often leaned on his staff, a simple stick of ash. His fingers traced the lines of the symbols cut deeply into the wood. The first mark Emerad had cut as an apprentice, after he had first read the runes. The other marks were added over the years, a tally of his life. Now the staff was almost covered.

If victory came today, if he predicted aright, then Emerad was sure Talem would be able to negotiate a peace between the two clans. Peace meant time enough to sit in the sun, like Garn. But unlike Garn, Emerad still saw and heard. He loved to watch the children play, casting, with their random scrawls in the dirt with a stick, the runes of their individual destinies. At night there would be the pleasure of sitting in the best spot before the hearth, listening to the murmur of men and the howl of the northern wind.

Through the long day, when the sky spoke, its rumblings mingling with the cries of battle wafting across the too-still air, Emerad thought, and hoped he had not been wrong. But at the back of his mind a fear teased, a vision of his head upon a pike. This he almost dismissed as the fears of an old and weary mind, but his visions often spoke as true as his reading of the runes.

Emerad leaned more heavily upon his staff than ever before. But, after all, it was only a stick.

As the light began to fade, Emerad wondered if his strength would vanish completely with the coming of darkness, and he would fall from his high perch. Then, they returned.

At first they were only the shadows of men, staggering bone-weary home. Emerad searched in the last light for the dark form of the flag. The women lighted torches and stood by the gates with the lights held high. That the men returned tonight meant victory, but why no shouts? Why were they so silent? And where was Talem with the flag?

Then, as the men neared the gates, Emerad knew why.

As if on silent command the men parted a way for a group carrying a cumbersome bundle. The men laid the large bundle down just outside the gates and all but one stepped aside. This one was Sanar, and he held in his hand a circle of gold. Sanar glared up at Emerad with a look of savagery that Emerad had not seen for a very long time. Sanar's look of hatred was echoed in the faces of the men around him. Emerad began to know fear as he had never known it.

As the last rays of the sun blinked out, Emerad saw by the flicker of the torches the green flag wrapped around the form of a man. The runes spoke true; the flag carried Talem home.

As the storm that had threatened for so long broke into lightning and rain, a man shouldered his way forward to stand next to Sanar and the huddled form on the ground. The man looked up, and in the failing light of the torches all Emerad could see were the man's teeth. But he knew, even without his seer's vision, that it was Karsta smiling, and that Karsta held, not the staff of a seer, but a spiked stick. Ω

SONNET FROM A DARK TOWER

by Gwennyth E. Hood

*I dreamed a dream of dancing silver water
that called a distant kingdom to my mind,
reminding me that I am a prince's daughter,
though rusty fetters both my ankles bind.
Once I played carefree in orchard groves,
crowned with flowers, never knowing fear,
while frost-winged fairies came to me in droves,
and whispered magic stories in my ears.*

*But I, too young to know my blessing's worth,
went out beyond the garden gates one day,
and long before I knew what I had done,
This drooling ogre carried me away.
Now my longing reawakes with mighty power;
Though death's the cost, I'll flee this evil tower.*

MERLIN'S WINTER

by Clelie Rich

*Your season is over now.
The Lady of the Lake has closed her villas
for the winter
and hung the yellow, eyeless shutters.
She too has heard the stories.
And far beneath the murky waters of the Lake,
the growing piles of rusted swords
lie hidden in the weeds.*

*Men said that you were sleeping in some cave,
safe within a mist of enchantment.
I've been to all their caves,
climbed the aging, fragile stairways,
brushed off the dusty cobwebs.
And everywhere the waters dripped from stone to stone,
I listened.*

*Now I walk alone.
But one day, when our summer comes again,
I will see you face to face.
Then we will greet each other,
and open up once more the Lady's villas
and reach beneath the languid waters for our swords.*

EURYDICE IN THE REAL WORLD

by Clelie Rich

*Orpheus crept unseen into his afterlife
through the early dark
trailing home his remnants of music
and an obsolete religion.*

*At the shallow edges of time
he explored the newer instruments
of musicians who knew better
than to look back,
rebuilt his jangled lyre.*

*When he thought he had it right,
he descended from the mountain
one more hopeful hero
with an outdated lute
in the real world.*

*Eurydice had been here all along
dancing with inner music
from an up-to-date religion.*

*She knew he would look back for her.
Again she did not love him,
did not choose to leave the second time.*

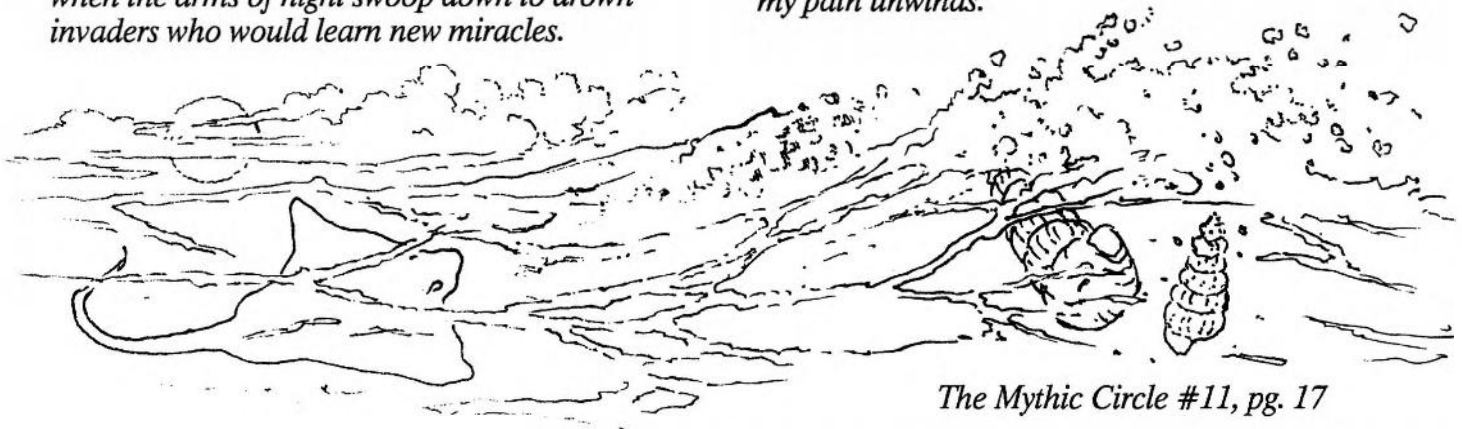
WALKING ON WATER

by Clelie Rich

*Sunset bleeds across the sky,
stains my fingers saffron and peaches.
I set my feet upon the ocean's surface,
walk out across the hissing foam.*

*As the messiahs do, I lift my feet with care,
mindful of the worlds beyond my vision.
Listen. This is no place to be alone
when the arms of night swoop down to drown
invaders who would learn new miracles.*

*Over my left shoulder
I cast the phosphorescent spiral shells.
Each spiral trails its borrowed saffron down and down
to churn silent squid pools and manta havens.
Each shell lights the way for those who sleep below.
And step by step across the waves above,
my path unwinds.*



SEAMIST FOR TWO VOICES

by Clelie Rich

*Who waits by the seashore, there on the rocks,
grey and cold and forlorn?
Is it the pale, shy moonlight ghosts
who flee from the touch of the sun?*

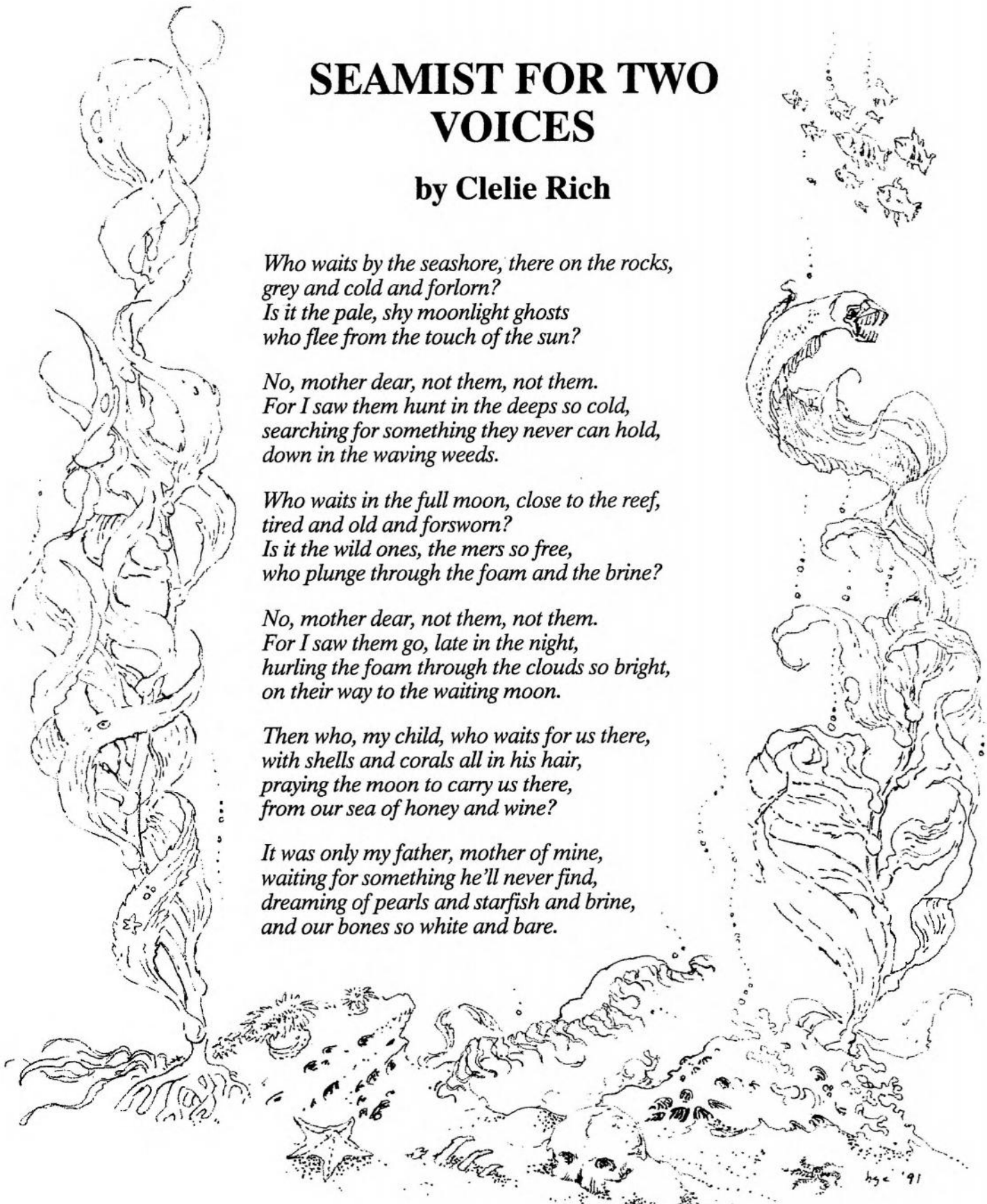
*No, mother dear, not them, not them.
For I saw them hunt in the deeps so cold,
searching for something they never can hold,
down in the waving weeds.*

*Who waits in the full moon, close to the reef,
tired and old and forsworn?
Is it the wild ones, the mers so free,
who plunge through the foam and the brine?*

*No, mother dear, not them, not them.
For I saw them go, late in the night,
hurling the foam through the clouds so bright,
on their way to the waiting moon.*

*Then who, my child, who waits for us there,
with shells and corals all in his hair,
praying the moon to carry us there,
from our sea of honey and wine?*

*It was only my father, mother of mine,
waiting for something he'll never find,
dreaming of pearls and starfish and brine,
and our bones so white and bare.*



ENFORCED ADAPTATION

by V. W. Massie



Coryann Sayre woke to blessed silence. Then she remembered; there was cotton in her ears.

She rolled onto her back with a satisfying groan and spread her arms out wide to assess the dampness of the sofa. Pretty damp. She'd been having this nightmare lately, dreaming that she was waking up underwater, gasping for air. So she always checked...before she opened her eyes. Remembering the dream made her feel a trifle panicky and she struggled to shift the wet, clinging blankets from her legs. Ugh! How things stuck together when damp!

Free finally, she took in several deep breaths, ignoring the pervasive stink of waterlogged vegetation, and sat up. Her haunted, shadow-rimmed eyes roved quickly about the living room which was gradually brightening as dawn claimed the sky. Her beagle, Fred, lying on the rug next to the sofa, watched her with impassive but slightly questioning eyes. Coryann smiled a good morning. Fred, acknowledging she was rational at present, dropped his chin back down to rest on his forepaws.

Dare she look out the window? Suppose nothing had changed? She eyed the curtained window warily. It was impossible to be certain of anything from where she was sitting but she just didn't have the courage to walk over and pull the curtain to one side. Instead she reached up with both hands and defiantly tore the cotton from her ears.

Still raining. Damn.

She slumped into a boneless curve of despair and it was a good thirty minutes before she could bring herself to move again.

The toilet wouldn't flush and the shower wouldn't spray so she started on breakfast. No milk, so cereal was out. The flakes were probably stale anyway. Perhaps some toast. There was plenty of bread. Damp, as was everything, but edible. She took a slice of the bread and placed it in a skillet before lighting the coleman stove.

The streaming window beckoned, so, after balancing a kettle of stale water next to the skillet, she moved over to it. Grey day again. She ached to see the sun again, or maybe just a slice of blue sky.

Fred sauntered into the kitchen, his toenails clicking on the hard tile floor. His tongue drooped from the side of his mouth and his eyes seemed too wide.

"So, old boy," she sighed, "what's the weather report today?"

The beagle watched her in a measuring way, head cocked to one side. He whimpered once.

"Poor baby," Coryann crooned, glad her voice hid the incessant pitter patter of the rain. "You don't care much for this rain, do you?" She reached into the cabinet above the sink. "Are you hungry?" She showed him the can of dog food.

Fred whined and sat obediently, tongue preparing jaws. She fed him, pleased at the healthy way he attacked his food.

Her toast was burning but she managed to salvage it before it turned too black. She checked the water level as she munched her breakfast. It was all the way up to the worn floorboards of the back porch. It wouldn't be too long before the bottom floor of the house was flooded.

The generator finally died that afternoon about three o'clock. Coryann had been trying to listen to a fuzzy news broadcast, not that it could tell her anything new, of course, but it was a voice, a noise beside rain. She felt only mild annoyance. Damn rain.

She checked the calendar in the kitchen. Big black X's covered almost all of August, all of September, and up until today, the sixteenth of October. How long had it rained before she realized something weird was happening? Before she had started marking the calendar? A week? Two weeks?

She decided something right then; it was never going to stop. Plain and simple. It was going to rain forever. Feeling overheated suddenly, she changed into shorts and a shirt and stepped out the front door.

The water covered the front stoop and was surprisingly clear. Only the spattering rain prevented her from seeing, in detail, the concrete beneath her bare feet. Cautiously she descended the steps, feeling the warm soft water leap up and caress her ankles, her calves, her knees and thighs. Rain, hot as bathwater, traced loving fingers inside her collar and down her back. Gently it smoothed her face, coursing around her eyes as she surveyed what her world had become.



Water draped everything. Surprisingly, as it was downhill a way, she could still see the silver roof of her tool shed. Over to her left, her dark blue Chevette shimmered in a watery showroom. Only the shiny square of its roof remained above the water line.

Mrs. Gorchamp's house, just below Coryann's down the slope, was wavering in a murky tide. She recalled the day the old lady had come shrieking from that doorway, tearing her hair and cursing the sky. Coryann wondered what had happened to her. And all the other people, those who had walked happily into the water.

"Yo there!" The voice captured her flighty thoughts. "Are you managing all right, Coryann?" The wrinkled old man squinted through the drops from his sturdy little rowboat.

Somehow she found her voice. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

He was watching her closely, too closely, looking for the madness. She began to squirm.

"Are you sure? Want to hop aboard? There's a few people still on Priest Point. The Guard is trying to spread them out to other spots of dry ground. What little ground that's left, anyway."

"Oh, no, we're okay. It's bound to stop soon and then there'll be plenty of cleaning up to do."

"Hmph." He snorted softly. "I'll believe it when I see it." He poked at his yellow rain slicker lying

bunched and useless in the bottom of the boat. "Well, d'you need anything? Food? Fresh water? Kerosene?"

She shook her head, wishing he'd go away. "No, Fred and me are fine. We've got plenty of everything." She tried to smile his fears away. "We're on the first floor still, with the upstairs and the attic yet to climb to."

He grinned back at her, with his mouth, not his eyes. "Yeah, well, keep as dry as you can." He lifted the oars. "I'll try to come by when I can. Are you sure you'll be okay? You're awful young."

"Sure, don't worry. Besides, I'm a great swimmer. I can swim to higher ground if I have to."

He eyed the sky with a scowl. "If there is any, child. It's been raining a long time now, you know. Your place might just be one of the highest around."

She nodded thoughtfully and he left her alone with the tapping rain.

That evening she lit the kerosene lamp and stuffed her ears with cotton. Fred lay on the damp rug beside the sofa, panting softly. She smoothed his velvet head and curled up to read.

Two chapters later she began to itch. Especially her hands and feet. It was one of those itches that scratching only worsens. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she went into the downstairs bath and smeared a thick layer of calamine lotion over all the

affected areas. Probably some kind of fungus; she'd heard skin growths were a problem. The calamine seemed to help and she was able to concentrate on her book again.

Movement woke her in the early hours of the morning. The lamp had burned low and the pungent scent of the kerosene stung her nostrils. Fred was pacing back and forth and she soon realized why he was so upset.

Her hand, the right one, was submerged to the wrist in water.

She leapt up immediately, scrubbing the wet hand on her robe. Raising the lamp wick, she inspected her living room.

Flooded. Six inches deep.

"Well, Fred." His ears perked at hearing his name. "Looks like we're going to have to move upstairs after all."

She took the cotton from her ears and began gathering treasured momentos for moving up. It didn't take long; half an hour later she plopped the last box of food down on the bedroom carpet and smiled weakly at the watching Fred.

"I don't know why I'm bothering, do you?" She shrugged. "I guess old habits die hard." Sitting on the bed she ran slim fingers through her tousled hair. And saw it.

Racing to the window, she pressed her right palm to the glass. Grey dawn misted through, highlighting the thin, fragile webbing that had formed between her fingers. Pinkish red veins doodled across the web, emphasizing its frailty and fineness. She gasped in horror and poked at the membrane with a pointed fingernail. Lancing pain raced up her arm, making her feel weak and breathless. She examined the web. It was tough; she hadn't even fazed it.

Panicking, she darted her gaze around the abruptly unfamiliar bedroom, finally resting her eyes on Fred. He was smiling at her, head cocked to one side, and she saw that he knew. Whatever the hell was going on, he was aware of it and knew the reason why. It made her feel spooky, a dog being so...so informed.

Her mind flitted back to the webbing. What was causing the accelerated growth? Anxiously she removed her slippers and examined her itching feet. They looked okay, no sign of webbing. Wait. The skin between her toes did seem a little thicker. Or did it? She squeezed her head with both hands. Maybe she was imagining it all. Maybe this was a bad dream that would evaporate if she could just wake up...

Fred was still watching her. She stared back at him, terror inching its way along her spine. What,

exactly, was happening here? A low, anguished moan seeped from her.

Pale sunlight had appeared outside so she scrambled into shorts and shirt with trembling hands. Fred following, she headed for the stairs. Water, warm and soft, met her halfway down. She slowed her descent, wondering what to do. The walls of the house seemed to be closing in, suffocating her, and there was some new, terrible knowledge trying to overwhelm her. She had to get out.

With a fatalistic shrug of her slim shoulders, she allowed herself to slip into the water, gently, easily. It closed over her head, soothing as it smoothed. Pushing off with her feet, she swam through halls she had once walked. Luckily, the water was astoundingly clear; she had no trouble finding the front door. It gaped open, waiting for her.

Once outside, she dog-paddled over to the white, corrugated rain gutter and hauled herself up onto the sloping porch roof. Rain patted all around her.

Dripping water, she watched her new world; underwater world. There was, strangely enough, very little damage. This rain was a gentle one, no harsh currents to destroy, no raging winds to toss things. It had been a peaceful invasion.

A cat went by underwater, pausing to placidly frolic with a blade of swaying grass. A bird, nearby, darted among the branches of a leafy tree, its new, weblike wings propelling it effortlessly through this wet medium. Fred paddled by, grinned at her through the raindrops, and moved off. He bobbed his head and gobbled a passing bird/fish. She knew he would, and he did, stay under.

Gingerly she extended her webbed hand, swishing it easily back and forth through the liquid. The pressure against her webbing felt strangely pleasurable. Satisfying. Soon both hands were in, gently swishing to and fro. A new consciousness suffused her, and she was suddenly aware of where the rain originated. And of the race that had sent it. They would be a while yet; space travel takes a long time, after all. She and her kind were to make this world ready for them. Rosy-hued underwater palaces danced and sparkled within her mind.

She sat a moment longer, fixing the old into her memory. It was hard, this giving up one life for another. A few more moments of nostalgia and she dove in eagerly, hair cascading silkily behind her. The webbing allowed her to propel herself gracefully, swiftly along. Fred waited, tongue hanging happily, eyes gleaming with excitement. She rubbed his ears and smiled her understanding. They moved off together, slipping easily through the comfortable, soothing water. Ω

OLDE BALLADE

by Gwennyth E. Hood

*Come, listen to the Story Olde
Of two Cities and a Friar Bolde:
For in the city of Lopezyle
Rape and Murder were in style,
And in the town of Jaspetoole,
Over Subtle Torture would they Drool,
But Friar John was Brave and Good,
And said whatso he thought he Should.*

*The Friar went to Lopezyle,
And saw their deeds, both Mean and Vile,
Yet spoke not, though it got his Goat;
A Mighty Lump was in his Throat.
Then went he on to Jaspetoole,
And saw their deeds both Foul and Cruel,
Yet still no Censures from him Sprung:
A Mighty Cat had got his Tongue.*

*Then to himself the Friar pontificated,
"Through fear of being Liquidated,
thou hast left unchid such Rotten Deeds
That God's hearts Weep and God's eye
Bleeds!
Of the Horrors thou hast seen and heard,
Unless thou speak a Raging Word,
Thou deserv'st a Dunking in the Creek!
Command that Coward Mouth to Leak!"*

*Back sped the Friar to Lopezyle
To tell the Villains they were Vile
And yet before he told his Plaint,
The Heart within his Breast grew faint;
"O Hear!" he cried, but his Throat went Dry
Though an Avid Crowd had gathered by
In the hopes of hearing some new Plan
For to slay some Dame or Rape some Man.
So since his thoughts of them were Dormant*

*He spoke at length of Subtle Torment,
Within the town of Jaspetoole,
Where over Torture they would Drool.*

*"God's hearts, they weep! God's eye, it
bleeds!"
They cried, "To see such Dirty Deeds!"
And Lopezyle was filled with Shock
To find such Vice in human stock.*

*Then sped the Friar to Jaspetoole,
To tell the Hellions they were Cruel,
Yet ere his lips their doom could utter,
The Friar's knees grew soft as Butter,
So he raised his voice and spoke his fill,
Of Lopezyle beyond the Hill.
And Jaspetoole was filled with Bile
That human hearts could be so Vile.*

*Now murder, rape and subtle torture,
Are things most people seek a cure for
being deeds all Decent Men abhor,
So the cities two, they went to War.
When Lopezyle went forth to Battle,
They killed the men and Raped the Cattle
and Captives were put to worse than Labor,
When Jaspetoole attacked its Neighbor.*

*This Nasty War went on for years,
While the Friar wept his Salty Tears.
"Alas, each hates the other's Pride,
While his own becomes Intensified!
They love their Vices as their Brothers,
but Hate the ones they see in Others.
It well behooves a Truthful man,
To Hold His Tongue whenso he can."*

THE LIGHT THAT WAS LORAINNE

by Dan O'Keefe



ne second, I sat alone in my bedroom, in my wheelchair. I stared out the only window at a neighbor across the street mowing her lawn. No other physical, living presence was in the room with me, yet something was... something...

A cyclone of colors swirled in one corner of the room, vivid blues, oranges, flesh colors, three dimensional, not a prised image made from the sun hitting the bedroom window. For a count of two, she appeared crystal clear before me, a girl of around sixteen years old. Her body language told me that she was afraid. Her eyes pleaded with me for help. The front door slammed. My brother-in-law, Frank, was home. The colors that, moments before, had been a girl, separated and swam into the cracks of the wall.

My bedroom door crashed open, and then my sister was there, at my side. She stared into my eyes, asked me with her eyes, what's wrong Alan? Can you explain? I must have cried out, although I didn't remember doing it, and, no, I couldn't explain it, not yet. I was still too excited. I couldn't concentrate on the right words.

-Are you in any danger, Alan?

-No, I'm fine.

"I'll leave you alone, then," Eileen said out loud. "Think about what you have to tell me, think about the right words and the right way to say them, then I'll come back in."

I nodded. Eileen left me alone to sit in my room while she made dinner for Frank and her son Todd. Frank worked as a C.P.A. during the day and studied at night in hopes of one day becoming a lawyer. Two year old Todd already knew how to read the picture books Eileen brought for him from Safeway, knew how to add, and knew how to ask seemingly innocent questions that stunned with their maturity and intelligence. I couldn't remember a day when Eileen wasn't a part of my life, there to feed me, help me to the bathroom, wash and press my clothes. She spent more time with me than she did with her own son most days, and that wasn't right. I felt certain there was talk of putting me in an institution, which was better for everyone really, but especially for Eileen. Only at night, when it was dark and the house was silent, did the fear of waking up and having no one soul close nearby to share my nightmares with clutch at my heart until I felt choked.

Again, a day later, I felt the sensation of not being alone in my room, although this time the sensation woke me up out of a drugged, mid-morning sleep. I saw, from the light outside of my bedroom window, dawnlight and streetlight, her hair aglow like an orange flame. She stared at the high school diploma that hung from the wall, my high school diploma. Frank showed it to whoever stopped by the house, and then told them about how Eileen had to turn the pages of my schoolbooks for me because, at the time, we couldn't afford a mechanical page turner, and about how I had to fight letters onto a felt readerboard. They'd fall all over themselves blubbing on about how proud they were of me, and if their own children would show only one tenth of that kind of initiative, and blah, blah, blah.

Which meant that they didn't understand. How surprised they'd be to learn how much I'd love to crawl over to my diploma and rip it to shreds between my fingers and teeth. Initiative had nothing to do with my getting that diploma. I studied six hours a day for eight years so that I could stuff that diploma up the asses of everyone, anyone who had ever held back their smirks as they looked at my twisted body or who, worse, lavished liberally and lovingly with their tongues while daggering me to death with pity from their eyes.

How could I communicate with her? One word, a clear, articulate, "Hello." would be enough to let her know that I wasn't afraid, that I was friendly and wanted to get to know her better, yet I couldn't do it. I didn't talk so much as I barked, low and harsh like a walrus. I'd scare her. She would disintegrate before my eyes, perhaps this time never to return, and so I said nothing. I pretended to be asleep rather than watching her lovely, mist-like form stare at my diploma until the sleeping pills got another grab on me, dragging me back with them into a soft, black cave.

After dinner the next day, I asked Eileen for my felt readerboard and box of letters. She came in with dessert after dinner and asked, "What's that you've been slaving away all day on, Alan? Let me see."

I reacted by throwing my body over the readerboard and garbling, panic-stricken, "No! No!"

"Oh." Eileen backed away as if I'd tried to bite off her finger. "Well ..." Hurt and confusion crossed her features. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ..." Then, understanding, acceptance. "... pry."

The message: I HAVE CEREBRAL PALSY. MY NAME IS ALAN KUEHN. DON'T BE

AFRAID. I WANT TO TALK TO YOU. WHO ARE YOU? PLEASE. PLEASE.

I forced myself awake several times that night, but I never saw her. A week passed. I kept the message out where she could see it, yet the woman never reappeared.

I didn't wake up completely the night she finally returned. Dreams still danced in one corner of my mind while the other corner perceived the reality of my bedroom, the reality of the felt readerboard to the right of me, the diploma on the wall, as well as the reality of the girl sitting next to me on the bed. She whispered with a voice like musical teardrops into my ear. She told me about her life, although it wasn't so much that she told me as much as we re-experienced it together in the dream corner of my mind.

Her name was Lorainne.

I watched Lorainne run, always running, even as a child running, running even as she crawled, crawled into the kitchen cupboards for attention, drew stick people on the television screen for attention, drank a bottle of hair rinse for attention. Lorainne Sarah Churchill, no relation, a darling infant, a loud child, an overdeveloped pre-teen, a sensuous teen-ager, always on the move, to dances in middle school where nobody danced, to pajama parties, to rides in rusty Volkswagens with older men, high school men with acne and unclipped fingernails that pinched Lorainne's skin, to dances in high school where everybody danced, to keg parties that roared until dawn, to rides in Triumphs with older men, college men who wore after shave and could peel away clothes like a wrapper from a candy bar, all of it a nerve-ending tingle, the rush of sex, the rush of drugs, the rush of rushing through school, through dinner at home with frowning parents, then into jeans and blouse and out the front door with a date, always in a hurry as she'd been since birth, always rushing, hurry, go.

Hot, humid summer night. Even going eighty miles an hour in a M.G.B., the breeze was hot, twisted Lorainne's hair like devil's breath. She dug her toes into the carpeting on the passenger's side of the car. Lorainne told Adam that he was drunk, so Adam polished off a tenth of Southern Comfort in one gulp to prove he was as sober as she was. Lorainne told him he was too drunk to drive a car, so Adam thundered through a back alleyway at top speed to prove he could handle a car just fine. Lorainne pleaded with Adam to please, please slow down on the twisting oceanside highways because there was an accident at least once a week, so Adam giggled drunkenly as he weaved between the trucks, campers and motorcycles, his foot down full on the gas pedal.

One in particular, a forty-five degree turn that overlooked a cliff as tall as a ten story building. Eileen

made that turn twice a week the summer I took yoga therapy. I'd always wondered what it'd be like to miss the turn and sail over the side.

Adam died instantly. Lorainne, furious that this was to be her last life experience, took the long ride down with her eyes wide open and her fingers welded to the dashboard of the M.G.B. It was all quite fascinating, really. It was almost as if the car was the stationary thing, and that the cliffs, the ocean, and the stars spun irrationally. In one, lucid moment Lorainne sat suspended in empty space and saw clearly the purple cliffs, the ocean, black and trembling like something alive, and green sky, centerpieced by a proud, grinning yellow moon. The engine exploded, and the car engulfed itself in flames. Lorainne felt the hot caress along her legs and the back of her body. She watched the sea swirl up to her, and she kept her eyes wide open, waiting to see it all, the white-bright impact, the moment of death, the... the...

It seemed that all I did was blink, but when I opened my eyes again I was back in my own bed, Lorainne gone. I felt chilled. Goosebumps made my skin tight, in spite of the fact that my bedroom window was closed, not open. I spent the rest of the night all the next day thinking about the intensity of some people's lives, and how quickly those lives can snap to a stop.

Eileen brought in dessert with the medication after dinner, a bowl of fresh strawberries and cream. I let her feed me rather than mess my pajamas feeding myself. I swallowed my last bite, cleared my throat, then concentrated on each of the five words I had to say. Please, I prayed, if I never say another clear word, allow this one sentence to escape my mouth legibly.

"I want to move, Eileen."

Her eyes spoke to me as they did when we were children, the two youngest in a family of eight, the central focus of each other's life. We took our mutual love for granted. Being children, we were too young to realize how rare it was. We spoke and listened to each other's eyes, the perfect secret language. We told jokes under our family's noses at dinner. We conversed to our heart's content in the living rooms of boring relatives. We gossiped until long after bedtime, and we never made a sound.

She asked me with her eyes, *why Alan? I know you must get bored sitting in this room sixteen hours a day, and we haven't been spending the time together that we used to, but you have to understand that I'm busy myself these days seeing that Todd is raised properly and that my home is run as well as it can. I don't ignore you on purpose. I don't resent the fact that you live here.*

That's right, you do have a family to raise, and I'm tired of being in the way all the time. This is your house,

your family. I want something that's mine. I can't grow in this room.

I'm scared. Even as you've depended on me, I've depended on you. I can't remember a day when you weren't a part of my life.

It will be hard for both of us.

I love you.

I love you, my darling sister.

Eileen climbed into my lap and curled like a kitten in my arms. We rested like that for several minutes, motionless, relaxed, comforted by each other's bodies.

Hey Eileen, remember the time we got lost at the parade, and the fat man with the balloons gave us ice cream until Mom found us? Remember when you brought your best friend home to meet the family, and I spit roast beef on her because I was so jealous?

I remember. We were young then, young.

Eileen must have tucked me in, because I only remember falling asleep, not climbing into bed. I woke to the sensation of fur caressing my toes and bare legs. I felt no blankets on the bed. The sensation rose until all of my lower body felt the warmth. Colored mists tickled my body in places and in ways no being of flesh ever could. What looked like a red flame danced over my head. Lorainne smiled down at me. She sank down onto me until her liquid, blue eyes filled my vision, and I wanted to wade in her eyes, and I did wade in her eyes, and when I finished I swam to shore where Lorainne waited for me in a field of cool grass. The sky was pink and glittered with star clusters. She sat with her legs extended to the right, her body propped with her left hand.

I stood before her, firm on two feet without the aid of a wheelchair. For the first time in my life, I had total control over every nerve and muscle in my body. I said, in a voice as clear as neon, each word enunciated perfectly, "How can you do this? This is impossible."

"I don't have much time, Alan. You're here because I admire you, and because I think you're special." She pulled me down next to her on the grass. "If you want to leave, just tell me."

We kissed. Her lips were as soft as warm lather. I told her with my eyes, I'm intimidated because you're so lovely. I want to impress you. I want you to like me.

"I already like you, and why don't you talk out loud?"

"You won't explain any of this, will you?"

"You'll find out all about it soon enough. Everyone does."

"Is it really that frightening? The first day I saw you, you looked petrified."

"Just a little initial panic, is all. I scared myself more than anything else. You helped me realize that."

"I did? You helped me too, Lorainne."

"I did?" We both laughed. We kissed again. I memorized the taste of her mouth and how her body felt pressed against mine. I filled myself with the tender sensations of our lovemaking. Afterwards, Lorainne held the sides of my head so that I could do nothing but look into her eyes, and I stared into her eyes, and I felt that I could wade...

Pins of morning sunlight dug into my eyes. I found myself back in my own bed. Eileen fluttered in with a breakfast tray in her arms. "Sorry, all out of grapefruit. How does a melon sound?"

I rent a unit at a home for the disabled now, more of a school really, a sort of live-in institution of higher learning for the handicapped. I have my own room for when I desire privacy, a recreation area for when I desire the company of friends. Eileen comes by at least once a week and is constantly on the phone with me about one thing or the other, when she can reach me. When I have a nightmare now, I delve within myself, examine the fear, then purge it from myself. It is my body, my fear. There's no one who can handle it better than me.

On nights like this, however, when the sunset is so awesome, and pink clouds seem to swirl around the fading sun, I am reminded of the pink universe and the light that was Lorainne. I get so filled with emotion, with longing and gratitude, I'm not sure I can bear it. This time, I figured I might as well just get out my felt readerboard and get the story down once and for all.

Ω

SEAN'S RETORT

by Howard Tessler

*I hunt to fill my table;
to sate my hunger.
Pheasant and stag
fall to my bow;
lie still before my hounds.
But I ride through my woods
and not your dreams.*

*Once you, too, ate red meat
at my table, laughed
at the play of men
before a lit fire.
You drank your fill of wine:
your lips wet, your cheeks flushed.
You smelt of cloves and scented water.*

*That night I learnt not
of ancient lore, nor heard
the words of minstrel's song;
but saw myself in your black eyes
and washed in your body
'til morning's light.*

*A child rose
as sun follows moon.
With the skin of a winter's fire --
this child's days will be of dreams,
her nights of peace-filled sleep.*

*When, dear lady,
did you put 'round your shoulders*

*a cloak of chaste wool?
Abandon silk and fur?
And when did Grace fall
from your eyes? Or life
spring 'round your feet?*

*What manner of pilgrim
prays at your place of rest,
Fair Lady of my bed?
And what leaves he behind?*

*What bonds held you captive in my arms?
We shared the day; walked 'round
the garden's pond.
But when, fair lady, did I walk in your dreams?
When did I hold shut your eyes
to the open sky?
When did I weigh heavy
on your sweet body?*

*You speak of blood on frost?
True, I am a huntsman
and have filled December's woods
with the cries of death
and the smell of blood.
But dear Lady, speak you of frost in blood?
I ask you to name my hunter.
I speak of one who hunts
not stags but men
and leaves cold ash
where once lay burning faggot.*

ONLY HALF A MOON OUTSIDE

by Zan Agzigian

*he mumbled low, hidden in past footsteps,
beaming through the torn branches needling
his head,
"The caterpillar's essence is not in its slink,
but in its roll. The inability of colorful glows
while still a worm."*

AND YOU?

*the pace came quick, and he made slips
through
feet hit concrete, up the hill,
the hills rolled in and out,
and tapdance was the masterful escape,
if slowness let it be that way.*

*flap arms, grip hands,
moved circles round the ribcage,
and i felt the trembling words
through broken toes he broke when kicking
out his prose,
"And too, the menace lies within our actions.
Where are you within these actions?"*

WERE YOU?

*his legs grew long, and poled the ground,
and took each corner with the greed
of thirsty baby at a breast, to feed
off of some alive energy left.*

*out into the street, flagging down
the garbage truck, repeating
repeating
repeating the pants*

*of black world laws, the hell's
garbage*

*take me, take me, anywhere
away from here
the cushions in your truck can float
us over any ocean. just don't ask
the time for questions.*

*but his hands, unlike the misdirected
muse, waved silent with no promise
of how to tend to air, and only smiled.*

*deaf and mute, nothing geared his moment,
except the open door that slammed
the secrets in of mine, and his hidden voice*

*as neck cranked right, the bloody sight
of hands punched at the window, slicing
whites of withered eye,
"SO! This is the end of bureaucracy
as we see it!"*

*and the open wound oozed out upon a pil-
low
when i raised my head and felt the beam
of only half a moon outside.*

THE DREAM SHE NEVER TOLD YOU

by Howard Tessler

Colors dark and somber
from a world buried deep in secrets and lore.
Only a word or a glance rose to the surface
and dissolved in the air and the light.

Thin and shadowless she entered the room.
A face so fair;
she spoke in tones that marked
the present and sealed your past.
Words stood before you
tall and straight,
and like her hair
fell on your shoulders
and on your face.

The children danced about you.
You sat silent,
her leg touching yours.
Your eyes on the children,
your hand played with her hair.

The night found you covered in grey.
She asked you of your hatreds
and told you of the crocuses
that blossomed where she once walked.
She said she never wrote of those she knew.

The days were of laughter.
She said you kept her warm,
but you knew it was the grey
for you felt her chill beside you
and you heard the silence bubble,
and you tossed in your sleep
while she lay soft and still.

When it touched you, you left:
hoping the cold to heal, to freeze.
She stood by the door and said she understood
and never asked why you left
or when you'd return.

She spoke of the island;
never the sea.
She spoke of leaving;
never of travel.
She spoke of writing;
never of words.
She spoke of the day;
never her dream.

THE RIVER OF GLASS

by Zan Agzigian

dream rocks
in the lonely river
black rocks
smooth the water's ripple
in a mixture of reflection
sandspecks
jeans stand firm through center's
whirlpool
mirror bridges
shoot the sun into the soul
of lonely river
dream rocks
lower cupped palms
to drink the rays
and slivers cut hands
draw thin bloodlines
and all that's left are thorns
in warm sunshine
along the banks
of glassy, thornbred
riverbed

WOODEN MASKS

by Zan Agzigian

i felt the wake of wooden masks,
and wept for city lights
through swaying branches, raised.
i felt the ghosts of Villa orphans
blind the sassing sight of bold.
pine cones seeded reincarnation,
ripped the roots of cloud formations
from the plump and pregnant breasted night.
Adolescent tenderness burned
with wooden masks as fodder.
leaves wandered low, about the glow
of fiery ground. Casted children floated
from trees, and grew white-ribbed
by worn, abandoned breeze.
the shoreline sleepwalked with worms.
handkerchief fog fell deep and mobbed
the colored cold of sacred orphans
mauled, and restless in the priest's house.
of wooden masks, the nightmare hook grew near,
and pierced an ideal morning
through raised and swaying branches.

A SPECIAL BUS

by Charles Rampp



Winter was dragging along its weary way toward spring, which seemed far in an indefinite future. A few days of warming had been followed by a quick freeze and then more snow. Clyde stood by the wooden bench, its board bolted to concrete legs, looking over the orange paint to the pile of dirty snow left in the corner of the parking lot.

He remembered how many things had been painted that same orange color in Miami. *Should have stayed there*, he thought for a moment, feeling the deep pang of remembering how Julie had died in the Miami hospital out by the beach, watching the horizon for days--the cancer in her bones deep, and she had fought against the injections for pain. *Don't relive it*, he told himself. *That's why you moved away. Everything there that she loved so much, and we always laughed about not needing snow.*

The road up the hill was full of automobiles. An occasional truck moved heavily among them, but there was no bus. No one was waiting either. *Guess I just missed one.* He started to sit down on the bench, but just in time moved the newspaper that bulged lumpily. Somebody had broken a bottle on the wood, and covered it with the old paper. Carefully he cleaned it up as best he could. On the way over to the bus he'd picked up four empty bottles and tossed them into a trash barrel. One had contained soda.

The bus rides seemed to be getting worse, more unpleasant each day. He taught a pottery class at the Senior Center--something to do now that he was retired. But Monday he'd stayed for a class in Ancient Religion--and was going back down again today. The teacher was interesting, and she wasn't married, he'd found out. Last night he'd finished the sketch he'd made of her, and today perhaps he'd give it to her.

No. Clyde sighed deeply, remembering he'd been doing that a lot lately. *Wouldn't be any use.* He started to sit down again, shook his head, walked around the bench. *She's got somebody--or like all the rest around here--nobody cares about anybody else.*

You've got the 'end of the winter blues', he told himself. *Grief has become depression. Well, who cares? It's the natural thing-- you get old, and fade out if you're lucky.* He drew a deep breath. *Sometimes there's a lot of pain.* Slowly he scanned the darkness all around. *World's like a gray and white old movie--a worn-out film, dirty and running down.*

The bus was finally coming, but it looked a little different; brighter blue, and the white was really white, not muddy gray with ice-melting chemicals from the road. Didn't make much difference-- surly drivers, heavy on brakes, and demons on the turns, and the kids got all the seats. Almost always he stood up, sometimes simply in protest. The language was often the vilest filth he'd heard. "Freedom of speech", he'd heard one loud young man tell an old lady who had objected.

He had his exact fare ready, spread back in his palm, and his small briefcase under his arm. *Remember to put the money in very slowly so the driver can count and not yell at you for not putting in enough, even though you did--*

The driver was young and pretty and smiling. "No fare--this is a special bus today, sir." She motioned him past her, back into the bus, and he noticed that the bus windows were so dark with sun-glare treatment that he couldn't see out at all.

But he didn't waste time on the windows. This was the longest, widest bus he'd ever seen. Soft, low, but high-backed seats around a card table, polished, circular. "Hey buddy. Just lost a partner. Sit down." The gray-haired man was a lot like old Henry from back home. He remembered that daily pinochle game at the feed store.

Clyde took the chair nearest to him, riffled the cards, shuffled. "Tell me *your* rules."

"Everybody plays the same," the bald man grinned to his left.

"No, you don't." He enjoyed every minute, until the whole score pad was filled with little numbers, crossed out and totalled, and someone tapped him on the shoulder so Clyde moved on back into the bus, where there was a small bar with draft beer and a long-limbed young man straddling a barstool, a guitar on his lap--real folk music.

A piper came wandering by and the player stopped as the kilt-clad man paced the whole aisle--and it was wonderful. But as he was leaving, Clyde got to talking with a short, stout man at the bar--swapping stories--and that was great fun, but Clyde glanced down at his watch. It seemed to have stopped.

"See you later." He made his way past the card players, up to the front. He hadn't seen any back door.

The pretty driver looked back over her shoulder, blonde hair bouncing on her white blouse. "Have to leave already?" she asked with a warm smile.

"Sorry. I really mean that," he replied.

"Where are you getting off?"

"Senior Center, Fifth and Oskar Streets--"

"Next stop," she said, smoothly adjusting the wheel as the bus slowed.

He went down the first two steps quickly, but turned as he stood on the last one, waiting for the automatic door to open. "Thanks--a great ride."

"Glad you enjoyed it, sir. Hope to see you again."

He took three steps down the sidewalk, then looked up and watched the moving bus, turning at the next corner.

"So you ride the bus too?" It was a voice that had become familiar and pleasant in only an hour, the other day. The widow-- who taught the Ancient--

"Oh. Right, Mrs.--"

"No. You call me Ceres." There was a pleasant laugh, and a toss of brown curls streaked with gray. "Always wondered about that name, but I guess if you end up teaching--"

"What-dya mean 'end up'?" he said quickly. "We got time before class. Have a cup of coffee with me." There was a fast-food place just ahead to the right.

What happened to me? Why do I suddenly feel so much better? Not going to fight it. Everything seemed different. The way Ceres was standing, arm crooked, holding her purse--he put his arm under her elbow, bowed a little stiffly. "Let me escort you to the coffee shop, lovely lady."

She laughed again. "All right." He held the door open for her. "What kind of bus was that? Didn't look like a regular city bus."

"They run it from the State Penitentiary once a day," he said with as straight a face as he could muster. "Let us out for a few hours, to learn something."

She slid onto the stool, put her notebook and a paperback book down on the counter. "What did you get in prison for?"

He suddenly remembered that he'd left--"My briefcase!" He looked toward the door, started to get

up and thought better of it. The picture he'd worked on so carefully was in there. He'd never get it back now.

Ceres was saying something. He turned. "What did you do with your briefcase to get yourself put in prison?" she repeated.

"I like you," he said, and in the same breath to the waitress, "Two coffees, please."

"You seem to know everyone." She smiled again. "Or do you make a practice of telling all the ladies that you like them, the first time you meet?"

"Second," he replied calmly. "I left my briefcase on the bus. I had a gift for you."

The coffee arrived, and she put one diet sugar into hers and stirred it. "Bribery won't get you a better grade."

"Here's your briefcase, sir." It was the pleasant-voiced bus driver, and she dropped the worn leather onto the empty seat beside him.

"Thanks a whole lot, that's wonderful." He dug in his pocket for his money clip. He had a few ones--this was worth--

"Sir, we're not allowed to take tips." Her smile was very wide and sweet as she turned quickly to the door.

"Thanks again. What bus company do you work for?"

"It's...oh...suppose somebody left an endowment to make folks happy in the bad weather just before spring--"

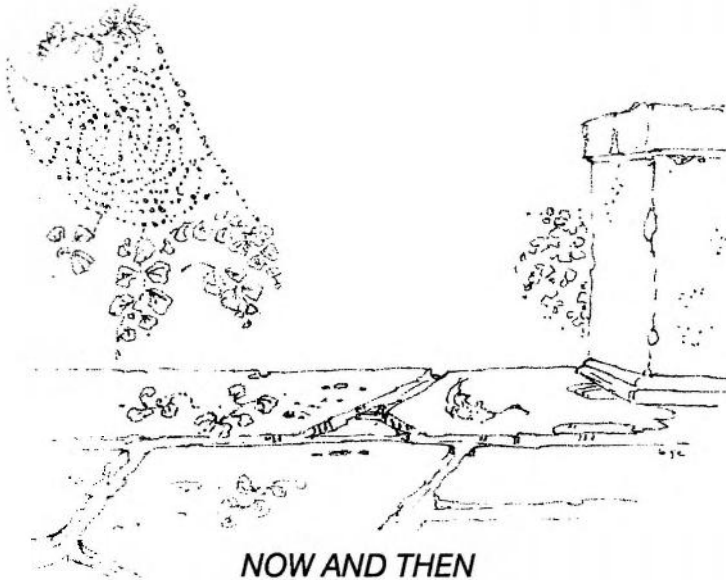
He didn't believe a word of that. "Wait, tell us about--"

"I'm double-parked, sir. And with *that* bus in *these* streets--" Slim shoulders shrugged and she was gone.

A car and a delivery truck partially blocked his view, but he saw a long slim sign like a banner on the side of the bus. "Winter Special" it read.

Ceres had looked too. "Very unusual. What on earth--"

"It is today, but maybe it isn't always." He took a sip of his coffee, and opened the briefcase. Ω

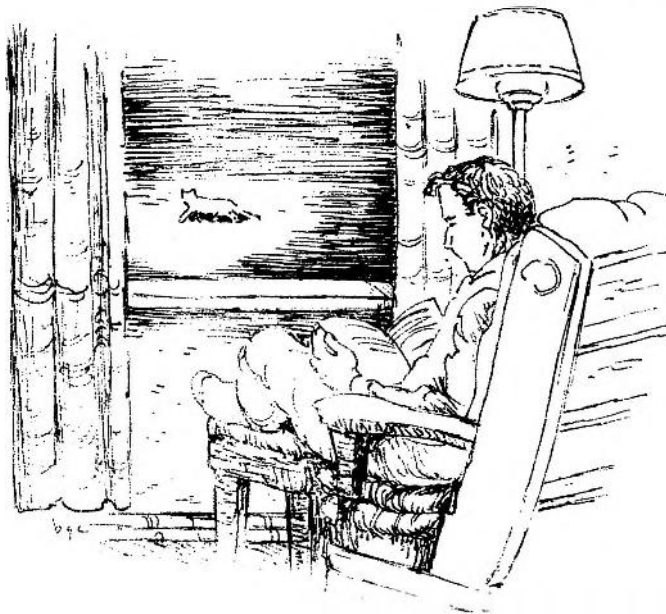


NOW AND THEN

by Walter Kuchinsky

*Birds, there in the air
and fish, there in the sea
then, as now, as then
are really one for me,
for air to me is sea
and sea to me is air
so birds and fish fly
and fish and birds swim.*

*About
then, as now, as then--
now is now, of course
but then
is both ago and will be.*



WIND, MAYBE

by Walter Kuchinsky

*Didn't hear anything,
last night,
but broken, grayish green leaves
lie scattered on porch floor,
this morning.*

*But cobweb on hanging plant,
grayish green, hanging plant,
is still whole. Wind, maybe.*



ONCE UPON

by Walter Kuchinsky

ONCE UPON

*a late night, easy chair,
living room, Pheasant Glen,*

*cat flowed into light
yellow light from floodlight
parking lot
then flowed through light into night--
meteor flared yellow white
then nearly white, disappeared--
pinpoints glittered at me
and silver bits winked at me--
and El, softly, from bedroom,
"Don't go to sleep in there."*

Ever after? Don't know.

SUN-TIME

by Suzanne Burgoyne Dieckman



ryeshta sat on the riverback, watching skyrr birds skim over the water in little leafy boats. The sun sat high in the sky. His yellow smile caressed Mryeshta's face. It was still sun-time. There was no need to be afraid.

Mryeshta amused herself by tossing sun-lilies to the birds, who snapped them up and skittered across the water with a flutter of feathery sails.

"Korr," she said to her tutor, who was instantly sitting beside her, "Korr, what shall we do this sun-time?"

"Possibly," he mused, stroking his long fingers, "you would enjoy sailing down the river with the skyrr birds."

"Oh, but Korr," she protested, "we did that sun-time before last."

"Was it not pleasant?" Korr asked (an injured tone, a tone of slight reproach).

"Oh yes." Contritely, she kissed his eyebrows. "Only..."

"Only what?"

"I should like to do something else."

"Then perchance," Korr knitted his brows in thought. "You might ride the green caterpillar through the forest."

"Ugh," said Mryeshta. "His velvet is prickly and makes me itch." Discreetly, she indicated that portion of her small body which was particularly sensitive to caterpillar velvet.

Korr wrinkled his nose. "Shu," he said. "You are being most difficult this sun-time."

"What I should really like to do," Mryeshta proposed, opening and closing her hands like a butterfly, "is something we have never done before."

Korr's eyebrows flew up to the top of his forehead.

"And what particular type of excursion did you have in mind?"

A twinkle danced in Mryeshta's eyes.

"I should like," she whispered, "to visit Poppa Sun."

Korr's beard fluttered in shock.

"One does not," he managed to say sternly, "pay calls upon one's elders unless one is invited."

"Is he or is he not my Poppa, as you have always told me?" Mryeshta demanded.

"Well, of course, but--"

"Then he should be delighted to welcome me. He always comes out to visit me each sun-time. I am merely returning the courtesy." Mryeshta smiled in triumph at the finality of her logic.

Korr sighed. "I fear I was correct in my observation. You are being difficult. Just supposing that you persisted in this precarious endeavour, would you mind informing me how you propose to arrive at your destination?"

"Silly Korr." Mryeshta stroked his whiskers fondly. "I shall fly with the fish, of course."

Mryeshta scampered across the meadow, followed by a still-protesting Korr. She gave a trilling whistle, and three large puff-fish drifted towards her.

"I shall need some cord and a basket. Large enough to sit in."

Sighing again, Korr unfolded his triangular-shaped hat until it made a basket just large enough for a girl of Mryeshta's size to sit in comfortably.

"Now the cord, if you please."

"I haven't any."

"What about your belt?"

"But Mryeshta," Korr pleaded, "think. If I give you my belt, what will I use to hold up my trousers?"

"I shan't be gone long. In the meantime, you can sit here listening to the singing of the meadowgrass."

Mryeshta held out her hand insistently.

Sighing so loudly he drowned out the meadowgrass, Korr unwound the three twisted silver cords from his waist. Mryeshta tied one end of each cord to a corner of the basket and the other to the tail of a puff-fish. Then she hopped into the basket and seated herself, her rainbow-colored skirt fluffing up around her knees.

"Goodbye, Korr," she said. "I'll be sure to tell Poppa Sun how well you've been taking care of me."

She gave another whistle and the puff-fish began to inflate, their sides stretching rounder and fatter as they rose higher and higher. She leaned over the edge of the basket to wave to Korr. He looked up at her, one hand flapping morosely and the other holding up his trousers.

"Goodbye, Mryeshta," he called. "Don't lean over too far. Don't fly too fast. Don't swing in the basket. And don't, don't, don't stay too late. Be back before dark-time."

She nodded and waved as Korr grew smaller. Suddenly she saw him jumping up and down, the trousers sprawled around his ankles. His words rose to her in faint snatches.

"...forgot...warn you...watch out for..."

Mryeshta nodded and waved. Dear old Korr. Always warning her about something. Though if she weren't looking out for him, he'd be the one to step in a mudhole. It certainly kept her busy, looking after Korr, and she felt a slight pang of guilt at leaving him. Still, he couldn't get into much trouble listening to the meadowgrass, and he wasn't likely to wander too far away without his belt.

The puff-fish rose like shimmering bubbles. The land fell away, a green island in a round blue sky. Mryeshta watched the trees shrink into ruffled pom-poms. Then she looked up.

"Greetings, Poppa Sun," she called gaily. "It's me. Mryeshta. I'm coming for a visit. Korr said one doesn't go calling unless one is invited. But I knew you'd be happy to see me. You will, won't you?"

The sun beamed benignly.

"Faster," Mryeshta whistled to the fish. "Faster. Fly up, up, up to my Poppa the Sun."

And the puff-fish rose faster, faster, higher, higher. Mryeshta crooned a greeting to the sun.

A sudden jolt shook the basket. The puff-fish shuddered. Then the wind came curling round again, winding basket and fish in its coils.

"Poppa!" cried Mryeshta.

But the wind spun the cry away. Whistling gleefully, the wind snatched its prey and made off towards its lair in the north sky.

Mryeshta clung to the shuddering basket. The puff-fish squeaked in alarm as the wind twirled them. Silver cords creaked and strained.

"Poppa!" Mryeshta called again, but the sun was buried in swirls of mist as a ragged cloud swallowed her. Cold droplets ran down her cheeks. All around her, gray wraiths rose and fell from the mist. Mryeshta shivered. Her dress clung clammily to her skin.

"Wind," she commanded. "Let me go at once. Else the Sun, my Poppa, will punish you."

The wind hissed mockingly.

Mryeshta paused. Korr had told her that her Poppa was all-powerful in sun-time. But the wind seemed unimpressed. Perhaps it would be better to appeal to his generosity.

"Wind," she pleaded humbly, "I am but a little girl who has done you no harm. I was merely passing through the sky on my way to visit Poppa. I did not mean to trespass on your domain. Won't you please let me go?"

The wind whistled scornfully and gave the basket a twirl. Mryeshta crouched in the bottom to keep from falling out. Closer crept the cloud wraiths, stroking her with clammy fingers. Stay with us, they whispered, you belong to us now.

Mryeshta was a little girl, after all. She did what any other little girl in her place would have done. She began to weep.

Yes, yes, whispered the wraiths. Water the earth with your flesh. Let the solid become liquid and the liquid become mist. You are one of us now.

Indeed, when Mryeshta touched her cheeks, she found her face beginning to dissolve where the tears had dripped. She paused in mid-teardrop and reflected.

"You know," she said to the wraiths, "I think I would rather not become one of you. You are cold and damp and not at all substantial. I prefer to remain what I am."

So saying, she whispered to herself the secret words Korr had taught her, and the tears ceased flowing.

The wraiths were angry.

"So," they hissed, "unsubstantial, are we? Keep your clumsy, heavy body, then. Little good will it do you!"

They spun around in eddies of mocking laughter.

"What are you planning to do with me?" Mryeshta asked.

"Keep you here until dark-time."

Mryeshta peered into the mist.

"Korr, is that you?"

"Of course not," the tutor snapped from his perch on a thunderhead. "Since when have I taken to flying-at my age!"

"Who are you, then?" Mryeshta asked, not quite sure if he were joking.

"I'm an image of me, of course."

"Can you help me?"

The phantom-Korr shrugged, and Mryeshta noticed that he was indeed transparent, little swirls of cloud showing through his black cloak where his stomach would be.

"Some images have more power than others."

"Well," Mryeshta demanded, "are you a powerful image or a not-so- powerful one?"

"That depends," the image said, crossing his lanky legs in an attempt to keep from sinking into the cloud. "That depends on certain factors which are extremely difficult to explain to the layman. It's a matter of the technology of proportional ectoplasmics, and--"

"Please," Mryeshta interrupted. "I haven't time for a lesson at the moment. Just tell me how to get down from here."

"Nothing easier," the Korr-image replied cheerfully. "When dark- time comes, the propellant gas in the puff-fish's abdomens will condense, and they will fall."

"And down will go Mryeshta, basket and all," the wraiths added in chorus.

Mryeshta was not pleased at the prospect of a rapid descent into dark-time.

"Korr, can't you do something?"

"Hmm." The image stroked its wispy beard. "Ah. I have it." He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out a silver hatpin, which he brandished triumphantly. "Hold onto your basket," he warned. Before Mryeshta could stop him, he made a swift stab at the nearest puff-fish.

The pin went right through the puff-fish without noticeable effect. In fact, the Korr-image's thrust had been so enthusiastic that his arm went into the puff-fish as well--all the way up to the elbow.

"Shu," he said, looking crestfallen. "I seem to have overlooked the limitations of ectoplasmic travel. Images are incapable of effecting changes in inanimate objects."

"That's all right," Mryeshta comforted him (feeling rather relieved, herself). "But can't you think of some way to get me down?"

"I suppose," the image-Korr said, starting to flicker, "you'll just have to wait til dark-time."

He faded in and out of focus, finally dissolving altogether. Where the tutor's kindly bearded face had been appeared the mocking grin of a wraith.

"Why--you weren't Korr at all!" Mryeshta cried angrily. "You tricked me!"

The laughter of the wraiths was her only answer.

Mryeshta curled up in the bottom of the basket and put her hands over her ears. Thus blotting out sight and sound of wraiths, she proceeded to try to think of an escape from her dilemma. However, since there seemed to be no solution, and since the prospect of falling into dark-time was too fearsome to contemplate, and since the basket was swaying ever so gently back and forth, Mryeshta did the most sensible thing for a girl in her position. She fell asleep.

She was awakened by the feeling of falling, the kind of bump you sometimes get at night in your own bed. Only this time the sensation didn't stop when she woke. Mryeshta peered cautiously over the edge of the basket. Dark-time muffled earth and sky. She could just faintly make out three shadows hovering above. And she sensed, though she could not see, dark spires rising from the ground to impale her.

Dark-time. She squinted in a desperate effort to see. Dark-time waited with open jaws. Dark-time spawned monsters with glittering eyes. Shadowy shapes unwound themselves from the forest treetops and dropped soundlessly to the ground. Waiting. She tried to scream but no sound came out.

There was a sudden, jolting jerk. Mryeshta's basket dangled. Looking up, she saw a spider-work of lines in which her shadow- fish were entangled. Looking down, she saw flickering eyes--red, green, yellow, purple. She tried to scream once more.

Then there was another presence: a stirring of air, the scent of damp earth. The basket rocked gently.

Mryeshta's eyes widened in recognition.

"Mama?...Mama!"

Korr stuck his sharp nose out his doorway. He sneezed several times in the early-morning air, yawned, and shuffled out into the sunlight. One large foot tripped over something on his doorstep.

"Oof," said Korr. He leaned over and peered at the offending object. Then he sighed. "I might have known."

He picked up the triangular-shaped basket.

"So," he said with an air of resignation. "We start all over again."

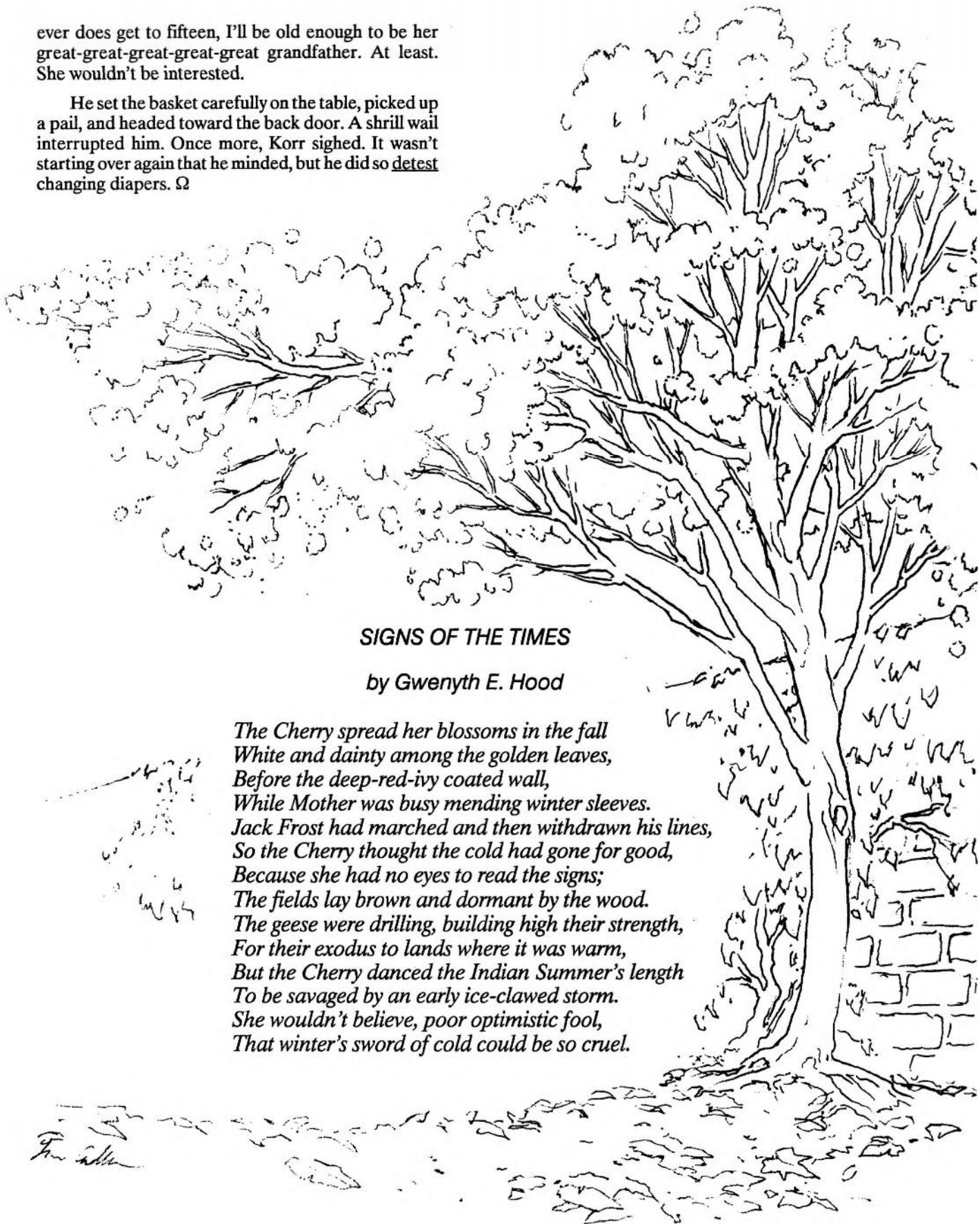
He shrugged apologetically to the rising sun.

"I tried to stop her. You know how obstinate she can be."

He shuffled back into the hut, still sighing. If only she would make it to fifteen just once... A gleam appeared in the old tutor's eye, only to fade immediately. No, he admitted, by the time she's fifteen, if she

ever does get to fifteen, I'll be old enough to be her great-great-great-great-great grandfather. At least. She wouldn't be interested.

He set the basket carefully on the table, picked up a pail, and headed toward the back door. A shrill wail interrupted him. Once more, Korr sighed. It wasn't starting over again that he minded, but he did so detest changing diapers. Ω



SIGNS OF THE TIMES

by Gwennyth E. Hood

*The Cherry spread her blossoms in the fall
White and dainty among the golden leaves,
Before the deep-red-ivy coated wall,
While Mother was busy mending winter sleeves.
Jack Frost had marched and then withdrawn his lines,
So the Cherry thought the cold had gone for good,
Because she had no eyes to read the signs;
The fields lay brown and dormant by the wood.
The geese were drilling, building high their strength,
For their exodus to lands where it was warm,
But the Cherry danced the Indian Summer's length
To be savaged by an early ice-clawed storm.
She wouldn't believe, poor optimistic fool,
That winter's sword of cold could be so cruel.*

The Scribe

Cat's Paw

by Amy Wolf



he frozen expanse of Balion Wood was silent, save for deerskin boots crunching against snow.

"How much longer?" a feeble voice cried, emerging from a tangle of furs.

"I can see the Manor now." Duchaney, one of two retainers struggling with a litter, felt the cold spasm across his palms. Let it be over, he prayed; let him see what he's dragged us from the War to see, and then die.

"Hurry!" the man in the litter urged, his tone imperious.

Duchaney motioned for Rain behind him to pick up the pace. As they hoisted their burden through the pines, they left behind a macabre trail: thick drops of blood, diffusing into pale circlets in the snow.

"LORD ERIK DU-HALLIT!" Duchaney announced, propping the nobleman up in the center of a chamber. But a woman writhing in sweat-soaked sheets seemed oblivious to his presence; she screamed, her long hair whipping about her face.

"Push, M'Lady, push!" Grunhilde, the old serving woman, labored along with her mistress, finally wrenching a pink-hued, wrinkled mass from the bed.

"Well?" Erik demanded.

"The strain was too much, Lord. . . The Lady Clarissa--"

"Never mind that! Tell me about the child."

"The child lives," said Grunhilde, turning away. "But it is a girl, Lord Erik--"

"A girl?" Erik took a tottering step forward. "Do you know what this means? Now my lands and title will be claimed by my brother Thrace, the traitor who has killed me!"

Rain and Duchaney cowered in a corner as Erik clenched one iron fist toward the infant.

"You have ruined me, and upon your head I lay this Curse: may you suffer hardship, and pain, and enmity till the end of your days, for you were not born a man!"

His venom expelled, Erik sunk to the polished tile.

The babe began to wail, as if understanding, somehow, that its life began against a backdrop of death.

"Catalon -- you, Cat! Get a move on!" Hroth, the red-bearded proprietor of THE BLACK SWAN INN, yelled to a serving girl behind the bar.

You might try doing something for a change, Cat thought, handing a draft of ale to a young soldier, one of hundreds who streamed through Hallit, now that the War was over.

"Thanks, love." The soldier threw her an appreciative glance, taking in her waist-length blonde hair; lean, hard body; green eyes which seemed to give off a palpable light. "Say darlin'--"

"Don't even think about it," his comrade warned. "Don'tcha know she's the one that's damned?"

The two of them slid off their stools, moving hastily to the other side of the room. Cat smiled. Sometimes being Cursed had its advantages.

"What did I tell you about scarin' the customers?" Hroth propelled his six feet over the counter, delivering an enormous crack across Cat's face, sending her spinning into a stack of mugs.

"Sorry," she mumbled, wiping the blood from her cheek.

"You'd better be. Just keep in mind that I own you, girlie..."

Yes, Cat thought, straightening up the mugs, it's something that's hard to forget.

She looked up as a ragtag regiment came crashing through the door, led by a swarthy man whose red velvet coat, gold baldric, and broad-brimmed hat gave him the look of a dandy.

"Greetings, mistress." The man bowed deeply, his speech as polished as a courtier's, until he barked, "we'll want meat and drink, and plenty of it, brought to a room round back!"

Cat banged into the kitchen, loading haunches of venison onto silver platters. Giacomo Villein hadn't passed this way in years, and she was glad of it. The ex-pirate was widely known as the worst sort of mercenary, fighting first for Balion, then for Southlandia... whichever side could supply the most silver.

"There's a good girl," Villein nodded to Cat, as she set the steaming fare before him, along with a fair quantity of wine. He tossed her a coin, and she made for the door, but the Fuerenzan's booming voice stopped her cold.



"Do you ruffians know who that is? That's Catalon, Black Erik's daughter."

"C'mon," one of his men yelled, "she's nothing but a common serving wench!"

Villein regarded him coolly. "I tell you, that lass was sold into bondage by servants terrified of her Curse."

Another man, Rikfin, downed the contents of his cup. "What du-Hallit nonsense were you jawin' about on the road? "

Villein smiled slightly. "Only that old Thrace's gone and died, and now the son, Rodrick, is back from the wars, looking to claim his estate."

Rikfin threw Cat a shrewd glance. "Thank the gods they didn't make us women, eh boys?"

The room erupted into riotous laughter. Cat fled out the door, standing motionless in the hallway, a flickering wall torch illuminating her features. Erik du-Hallit! So this was the father she had never known -- the one who had cursed her. And now Rodrick, by virtue of his sex alone, would rob her of her birthright. Limbs trembling, she crept back to the tap room.

"Lord Rodrick, Lord Rodrick--" A fat alderman, his black robes sweeping across the floor, hurried over to a young officer. Cat saw in the new Lord's delicate features, lanky frame, and blonde hair, a vague echo of her own.

She stood across the room from him, ignoring the milling soldiers, eighteen years of degradation, of unspoken anger, making her green eyes flare like a cave beast's in the dark.

Feeling her gaze upon him, Rodrick raised his eyes to meet hers, and Cat could have sworn she saw there the dawning of a heartfelt passion!

"Wait!" Rodrick called, trying to run after Cat as she turned and bolted, but the alderman stood in his way.

Swine! Cat seethed inwardly, slamming into her room. I'll get you. I don't know how, but I'll get you.

That night, she lay sleepless in her bed, feverish with thought. She stiffened as a dull creaking rent the hall, followed by the soft slide of metal -- a key twisting in her lock.

"You'll not refuse me, will ya, girlie? " Cat could make out the hulking silhouette of Hroth, ale from his breath permeating even the corners of the room.

"Get out," she said evenly, tired of replaying this same scene night after night.

"I'll have you, young Catalon, whether you want me or not. You are my property, and--"

Cat leapt for the dagger at his hip. "I'm-not-property!" she yelled, "I'm--"

But before she could announce her proud lineage, both she and the Innkeeper tumbled through her doorway, landing in a heap in the hall.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" Cat screamed, clawing at his face.

"No doubt you will."

The two adversaries froze in midstruggle, looking up to see Villein lounging against the wall, twirling his black moustache.

"Now sir." The mercenary turned to Hroth. "It would appear your wandering nights are over. Release the girl from her servitude, and I won't lay a finger on my sword."

Hroth thought about this a moment, then nodded wordlessly, picking himself off the floor and lumbering down the hall.

"Well, this has worked out nicely," Villein drawled.

"I wanted to talk to you, and you graciously saved me the trouble of knocking."

"Spare me your jokes," Cat groaned, putting her face in her hands. "I wish you'd never come to Hallit--"

"The slave prefers her chains, then? I can call back our good Innkeeper, and--"

"No." Cat hoisted herself off the floor, staring Villein straight in the eye. "How do I know what you said about me was true?"

The Fuerenzan returned her stare. "A man in my service -- name of Duchaney -- confessed to me on his deathbed. Old boy always regretted spreading tales of your Curse through the village..."

"A lot of good that does me now," Cat mumbled.

"Would you consider fighting Rodrick to take back what's yours?"

"I'm no warrior!" Cat snorted.

"No matter. I could train you myself in a month."

"What," Cat demanded, arms folded, "would you expect in return?"

Villein was quick with his answer. "Twenty-five sacks of silver."

For the next four weeks, Cat worked harder than she ever had in her life. In an isolated forest clearing, Villein taught her the art of warfare -- how to swing a sword, sit a mount, hurl a spear with deadly accuracy. When she thought her bruised and aching body could stand no more, he proclaimed her ready.

"Now listen," he told her, as she and fifty of his men rode through Balion Wood, halting before the Manor, "Rodrick is a veteran soldier, but a poor one. He's never been that keen on fighting, and you've fire enough for the both of you."

Cat nodded, trotting up to the vast stone house. "Rodrick du-Hallit!" she called, her cries echoing across the pines.

A third-story shutter swung open. "What--?" Rodrick started to see Cat astride a barrel-chested gelding, clutching a halberd in one hand. He stared at her more closely. "Aren't you the girl from the Inn--?"

"I am," Cat retorted, "and I challenge you to come out and fight. If you do not, then you are a shameful coward."

Rodrick shook his head in puzzlement, disappearing, emerging at last with a hundred archers, who

began to let fly their bolts. But Villein, eschewing the bow in favor of the sword, was too quick for his opponents. Breaking his men into two ranks, he swept behind the cover of trees, then converged on Rodrick's forces, surrounding them on all sides. With no space to stretch their strings, the bowmen threw down their quivers with a clatter.

Cat turned to her hated foe. "You are mine!" she shouted wildly, kicking her mount forward and aiming the halberd at his heart. As she flung back her hand to release the spear, the gelding stumbled on a stray arrow, tumbling his rider to the ground.

Cat rolled to her feet, drawing forth a rapier from her hip, and Rodrick did the same, circling her warily. They came together with a sharp clash, thrusting and feinting like two evenly matched duelists.

"Lady," Rodrick grunted between clenched teeth, "why do you hate me so? Why attack when you do not even know me?"

Cat laughed, the hollow irony of the sound absorbed by the trees. "I think you know me, sir. I am Erik's daughter, the one you sought to bury in misery. But I will not be buried anymore!"

Rodrick stepped back, lowering his rapier slightly. Cat took advantage of his bewilderment slicing him neatly across the wrist.

"Ahhhhh!" Rodrick cried, dropping his weapon and sinking to the dirt.

Cat moved forward menacingly. "You needn't look so surprised. I'm sure Thrace told you of my birth after he murdered my father."

"Cousin," Rodrick groaned, clutching his wound, "we thought you had died in infancy. As for Lord Erik -- my father discovered him passing secrets to the Southlandians, and slew him for his treachery. I swear, I never meant to do you harm."

Cat snorted contemptuously. "I'd like to believe that. In any case, you're not the one who's had to live under a Curse -- only me!" She lifted her steel with both hands, the sun glinting off the blade, illuming Rodrick's form with blue fire.

"Cousin," the young man said softly, "I know you mean to slay me, and there is no avoiding it. But first, would you listen to what I have to say?"

Cat lowered her sword, clamping her jaw impatiently.

"In the days before the Great War, when I was just a boy, there was a teacher who lived in my father's house. His name was Bonaire."

Cat wrapped her fingers around her sword-hilt, but there was something in the gentle turn of



Rodrick's features, in the expression of his clear-blue eyes, which stayed her hand.

"Bonaire's way was not to instruct in the usual fashion, but to tell stories and let us draw from them our own conclusions. One which always struck me was the tale of the Hunter King and the white hart. It seemed that after many attempts, the Hunter King and his hounds finally treed this animal. But the white hart was so magnificent, with shining hide of snow and antlers which glistened like silver, that the Hunter King was moved to spare its life. He built for it a magnificent enclosure of gold, with walls fully six-feet high, at the right-hand side of the Throne."

"Some days the white hart would think of the mosses cooling the forest floor, or the rushing din of a nearby stream, which made it grow sad, but it was fond of its Master, and stayed. Twenty years passed in this fashion... When the Hunter King at last died, the white hart leapt over the walls of its enclosure, returning to the woodlands. After so long in captivity, it was free."

Cat dug her rapier into the hard earth, leaning upon the weapon as she absorbed this curious parable. What was it that Rodrick was trying to tell her?

"You are brave, cousin," she began, "to relate such a tender tale in the face of death. It is all very pleasing, but to me -- someone with a Curse on her head -- seems to bear little relevance."

"True," sighed Rodrick, lowering his eyes. "What significance could such a tale possibly have for you?"

But Cat saw him throw her a sidelong glance, and she struggled to collect her thoughts. "The white hart -- was it not Cursed in its imprisonment by the Hunter King?"

"Yet it chose to remain," said Rodrick.

Cat closed her eyes, seeing a darkness made golden by the strength of the sun. The white hart had

stayed, of its own volition... It seemed to have been Cursed, but might have freed itself at any time...

"Who has cursed me?" Cat suddenly burst out. "My father, or myself? For eighteen years, I've let Hroth, the villagers -- everyone but me -- decide my fate, when all the time I could have walked away." She sheathed her sword, shaking her head slowly. "It seems so absurd now -- for what shame is there in being a woman? How is this a Curse?"

"Today you have proved yourself the equal of any man," said Rodrick, rising to his feet.

Cat took a deep breath. "By virtue of this, do you agree to turn my lands and title over to me?"

"I cannot object," replied Rodrick. "You are the true heir, and I will fight to the death anyone who disputes that."

Cat gave Villein a signal for his men to release their prisoners; Rodrick wrapped his wound with a strip of cloth, calling for his horse, ready to leave the new Lady with her legacy.

"I can't help thinking," he said, turning about, "what would you say to a union between our two houses -- a union of equals -- with you presiding over your lands, and I presiding over mine?"

Cat regarded the man she had hated more than any other in the world; with a bemused smile, she nodded in assent. "I think that arrangement would work -- it would certainly be a first for Hallit. But let me ask you this, Rodrick: what would you have done had I not penetrated the meaning of your puzzle?"

Rodrick put his hand in hers. "I trusted in your good sense. Once your hatred had cooled, what else was there to take its place?"

Villein came thundering up on his mount, trying to mask his delight. "Do I hear correctly? A wedding! Who would have thought? Let me be the first to offer a present--" He winked over at Cat, "Twenty sacks of silver..."

She beckoned for him to lean down, kissing him on the cheek.

All right then," he whispered in her ear, "twenty-five, but don't tell anyone. I've a reputation to protect!"

With a whistle, he rode off with his men, turning back to see Cat and Rodrick ascend the steps of the Manor -- her Manor. Ω

EDITORIAL

Welcome to *The Mythic Circle* #11. This issue offers some variations on a theme of Winter-into-Spring, particularly Doug Rossman's notable "The Theft of the Sun"; let us know if you enjoy the seasonal parallelism. You'll also notice that we continue to run a lot of poetry, including a series of poems by Dirk Verhulst which delicately probe the terror in everyday life, and a wryly lyrical series by Clelie Rich.

Lynn Maudlin noted in our last editorial that poetry submissions would be closed until April, but we are not working through our backlog as quickly as we had hoped; so we are extending the closure through August. Poetry will reopen on September 1.

We welcome new author-subscribers! If you have a friend who would be interested in joining our dialogue, consider telling the friend about us. The heart of *The Mythic Circle* lies in the letters of comment, and we are actively searching for authors who will subscribe and participate.

We thank you, our subscribers, for your support.

--Tina Cooper and Christine Lowentrout

LETTERS OF COMMENT

Dear Lynn, Christine and Tina--

I've not gotten back to *The Mythic Circle* #9 for a couple of months now, so maybe I'd best say something about what I did get read. I don't have much to say about some of the stories that I read--Hood's rewriting of Poe in "Sweet as Muscatel," for instance, or Kennedy's "An Unearthly Pun."

But I do have a comment about Kay Fortunato's "We Call It North Carolina." It seems to be that this is a typical amateur story in one respect--that of lack of conflict, and hence lack of plot. I hope I won't hurt Fortunato's feelings by jumping on her story, but it's always easier to discuss flaws than to point to good parts. So I'm deliberately ignoring her descriptive abilities, characterization, etc., to emphasize one important flaw.

I assume (not all others agree) that plot is based on conflict. A story normally opens with an actual or incipient conflict (any of the standard ones--Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society, Man vs. Himself, Man vs. Nature, Man vs. the Supernatural [Man is generic in this list; you can say Person if you wish]). The story gives several examples of this conflict in action, and the story is resolved by the protagonist winning, losing, running away-- something tied to the conflict.

Unfortunately, none of these things happen in any meaningful way in Fortunato's story. The reader is told about Stacy's panic a week before (Woman vs. Herself, caused by Woman vs. Nature or Magic), but this is just summary, not full dramatization. The meeting with Vern Banyman is peaceful; they discuss the odd way life is; and Stacy gets back into her world without a problem. This is an idyll; it's not a significant short story, for it's plotless.

Oh, yes, that's another assumption of mine--fiction without a plot can be an idyll, a character sketch, or a descriptive sketch, but it's not a true short story. It's ok to write idylls if that what one wants to do, but I'll make a prediction: none are going to sell to professional magazines. To create reader interest, a story has to have a conflict.

That's enough for this letter. I think my critique of "We Call It North Carolina" is valid within its limits, and I hope I've been assertive enough to cause some of the other readers to send you *their* understandings of plot.

Best wishes,

Joe Christopher
Stephenville, Texas

The Mythic Circle:

Let me begin by expressing my husband's and my appreciation for Lynn Maudlin's four years of effort on *The Mythic Circle*; we will deeply miss the unique blend of caring and humour she brought to her task of co-editing. And to the newly enlisted Tina Cooper, welcome.

Both the quantity of poetry in Issue 10 (just the right balance) and the quality were extraordinary. Charles Rampp's "17809 Vineyard Lane" had his usual quiet but satisfying charm. My favorite by Jill Solnicki was "Flutist," though perhaps my favorite line of hers is the one wherein she describes a meteor as "this seed the universe spat." Colleen Anderson's "The Vernal Queen" was very fine indeed.

I initially found Rhea Rose's "Dragon Sol" and "Eye of Miranda" a little too verbose, as though she were trying to squeeze a few too many magnificent words into a short space (a failing I recognize because I, alas, share it). This impression dimmed somewhat on a second reading, though I still think these poems are a little hard to get one's mouth around if read aloud; and I do believe one should write for the ear as well as the eye and the mind. Rhea's "Untitled," simple as it was, I found to be a perfectly enchanting, rhythmic little lullaby.

Owen Neill comes as close as any of MC's poets to writing structured verse; I would like to see him tighten up his structures even more, as he clearly has

the capability. "Lohengrin" would have been improved by a more precise rhyme scheme, and "Secret of the Golden Bough" by stricter iambic pentameter. (Speaking of pentameter, changing "they've" to "they have" in the last line of "Lohengrin" would make this line both more metrically correct and emotionally pleasing.) "Walking on Royal Carpets" contained an interesting theme but tended to ramble; its image of "flapping" hearts is slightly absurd and yet somehow appeals to me in its very absurdity. One general comment on Neill's subject matter: I think he needs to concentrate less on abstract commentary and more on concrete images; or perhaps I should say he needs to learn to convey his abstract ideas *through* his images. For this reason, his "Anwyn Castle" was the most successful of his poems for me. Also, I would like to see more of his imagination working alone and less re-renderings of others' stories.

And now for the highlight of the entire issue. Both Stan and I agree that "Sea Spiders" by Sue Nevill is a marvel, both in conception and in execution. I can find no technical fault with it, except that the word "sibilance" is misspelled (unless Sue intended rather to coin a word relating to "sybil"). I would, however, like to throw out a thought for the sake of discussion. To me this piece is not poetry but prose; very lyrical, metaphoric prose, I grant you, but still prose. It is unfortunate that bald, flat prose has so taken over that this sort of piece must be offered up as a poem to be accepted.

I regret to say that I found the quality of the stories in Issue 10 to be undistinguished. So as not to pick on any author in particular with my harshest comments, I will say generally that most of them suffered from impoverished or forced (i.e. "oops -- I'd better put an adjective in here") descriptions, poor continuity, and a lack of thematic unity which in some cases verged on downright pointlessness.

Specific comments: Dan Ryan needs to work on believability of character behavior and motivation; I found his "Christian pastor" frankly incredible. Not that such a one could not exist, but Ryan is definitely writing to Christian-bashing stereotype and against true type. There are typographical errors in paragraph 7 on page 10; in at least two places where "Mike" is used, "Ramon" is evidently meant.

To Charles Ryan: in "Janus Winked," what is the purpose of the sinister church which we are not sure is a church? Nothing is ever made of this.

Erin Lale's "The Betrayed" read like part of a longer work in the sense that it seemed to me to lack completeness. The decision to write it in the present tense was, *I think*, a mistake (there is in fact a mixing of tenses in paragraph one). It needs more paragraphing; there are too many places where several incidents run together without a break, making for

confusion. I would suggest changing the slangy wording of "This is not a Fierce Peoples thing." My husband and I could not tell for certain whether, at the story's end, the main character decided to flout her people's law and use the Power for destruction, or whether she only used it to arm herself and was planning to destroy "with her hands" as is referred to earlier in the story. Also, is there some real-life racial background to this story, or is it pure fantasy? Some of the names sound vaguely Near or Middle Eastern.

While I am talking to Erin, my encyclopedia informs me that she (or he?) is correct about North African peoples being considered Caucasian. In my own remarks on the subject, I was thinking not so much in terms of racial groups (Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid) but of Biblical genealogy. Assuming that the world was literally repopulated after the Flood by the three sons of Noah, Shem was the ancestor of the Semites, whereas those whom we normally think of as Caucasians are descendants rather of Japheth. In any case, if Jesus is to be considered Caucasian, then so, I assume, is Mohammed; so that, in its origins at least, Islam is as much a "white man's religion" as Christianity.

As to whether the term "Oriental" is politically correct, it is basically a geographical term meaning "Eastern," and it is difficult for me therefore to see it as insulting. My husband works with several Asians (educated professionals), all of whom, when asked how they refer to themselves racially, said, "Oriental;" they were mystified by Lale's objection.

Patricia Flinn's "M.I.A." had an initial charm, as Helen is newly discovering herself in her butterfly state (presumably Patricia was at least partially inspired by Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"). To be a real story though, I think more needs to happen than for her simply to remain a butterfly and live happily ever after.

Mel Hunnicutt's "Giants of Avalon" was also, in my mind, more of an incident than a story. Its derivation from T. H. White's version of Arthurian legend, puts it, I think, too many steps from the original. Why were the images in Arthur's memories "holy"? -- more needs to be made of this. Nice touch at the end, though, about "the Psalmist's victory song."

James Hartley's "The Old Mill Stream" was less a story than a joke with a punchline, but was well done for what it was. I would have preferred it if the King of the Elves had initially said something more auspicious than "Hello." "Greetings," or "Hail," perhaps.

The best story in the issue was Janet Reedman's "Mersuline." Some suggestions: Try to be a little more inventive with your descriptions; a little more on the order of your "a thin nightshift *frothing* about her ankles", which is very nice. "Vomiting" might be more

appropriate to the tone of this sort of story than "throwing up." Your love for castles is justified, but beware of putting it a little too obviously on display by throwing as many words referring to their structure as possible into the opening paragraphs (this is exactly the sort of thing I tend to do myself). I would suggest expanding this story into a novella, as it has a great potential for emotional impact which is necessarily somewhat muted by its brevity.

"Cairnwomen" was generally well written. I found the handling of theme at the end to be a little too heavy-handed, and also a little self-contradictory. The point that appearances are not important would have been better made if Francie had *remained* rather fat and homely and Lisa rather pretty as they grew older.

There were interesting interpretations in Issue 10's LOC's of my "Prince of Thieves," some of them totally misbegotten. Ron Blizzard probably comes closest when he connects it thematically with recent tragedies in my own life. (The story was in fact written following the loss of my first son and my ability to have more natural children, but before the loss of my adoptive son -- after which it became doubly appropriate.) I would not want the story to be read as pure allegory because it was meant to be taken on a literal level as well as a symbolic one. But, briefly, the Prince of Thieves is a Christ figure, and the main character's losing her heart to him is roughly equivalent to her taking up the cross, the earthly cost of which can be great. If her betrothed (significantly a chapman, who buys and sells as contrasted with the Prince's "stealing") is taken as representing the world, then she must forfeit him in order to keep her own soul. To the degree that he is a literal person, however, there would have been nothing to prevent her from marrying him while still retaining her altogether different sort of allegiance to the Prince of Thieves -- if the chapman could have accepted this, which he could not. As for Charles Schabel's interpretation of her character as feminist, if a nun choosing a monastic life can be considered feminist, yes -- otherwise, no. Also, the character's heart is *not replaced* by a heart of stone. The garnet heart is a kind of earnest (or IOU) for her own heart of flesh which the Prince will eventually return to her. It is her own heart that remains forever young because it has been in his keeping.

Thank you so much to all those, especially Mr. Blizzard, who have expressed sympathy with Stan and I in our loss. Caring prayers are, I'm sure, largely responsible for our ability to bear up under all this. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" -- which is, finally, what "Prince of Thieves" is all about.

Angelee Sailer Anderson
Westminster, California

Dear Christine and Tina,

I found most of the stories in MYTHIC CIRCLE #10 simply variations on old themes. Yes, I know the old saying that there are really only three or four basic plots in all of literature, but I still believe that if one is going to write a story using an old, old plot, one should at least try to add some fresh, fresh features to the approach. Some of the stories in MYTHIC CIRCLE #10 struck me as unoriginal or cliched. (I will concede that a novice author is generally unaware of the old, old plots, and will unknowingly and by coincidence stumble upon one of these. Nonetheless, it is my opinion that novice authors have a duty to study the old, old plots, just so they will not unknowingly copy them.)

MERLUSINE by Janet P. Reedman used a plot so old it is legendary. (The lover must not look at his or her mate under certain conditions because the mate is not really human.) However, it was nicely written. On the other hand, THE CHAIN by Dan E. Ryan was too cliched for my taste. JANUS WINKED by Charles W. Ryan, at least, took a fresh approach to the old theme of old-person- becomes-young-again. THE GIANTS OF AVALON took too much from the David vs. Goliath story for me to find it interesting. THE BETRAYED by Erin Lale wasn't old, but it was thin. M.I.A. by Patricia Ellen Flinn reminded me of Kafka's METAMORPHASIS. The different transformation and the happier ending wasn't enough for me to find anything of substance to it.

CAIRNWOMAN by Rosamund E. Flambard was fair. I think, however, that Lisa would have denied what she saw. Also, the advice to the effect that the classmates would some day mature and stop harassing the main character should have been played up more. (Although, in my experience, this sort of peer group harassment does not stop until after high school graduation.) Also, I think the story would have been improved if the main character was NOT shown as being thin at a later age. Yes, some people who are fat as teenagers eventually lose weight--I did--but the majority do not. I believe that the character should have had hope not because she anticipated being thin, but rather because of the assurance that as she got older, life would get better.

THE OLD MILL STREAM by James Hartley was again a plot so old it is legendary. I can't deny that, in modern dress, it had some appeal. But the story is as old as antiquity (i.e., the world is a mess, and if humans don't change it, some outside force will), and the retelling added nothing to the concept. THE MAGUS had too much dialogue and not enough narration. Also, there was little of substance to it.

Joan Marie Verba
Minntonka, Mn.

[Oh, I don't know; I tend to agree with Carolyn Heilbrun, who observed, in *Hamlet's Mother*: And

Other Women, "One cannot make up stories; one can only retell in new ways the stories one has already heard." *Maybe I'm just old-fashioned. Readers, what do you think? TC*

Mythic Circle:

Just a quick LOC--I loved the illustration of my story "The Betrayed." And one of the poems in #10 really grabbed me: "Lohengrin." It flows beautifully, and the imagery in the first part of the third stanza makes the page melt away into a shining vision. Only the final line of the poem breaks the meter. It wouldn't take much work to make this one perfect. Also, I have a question about "Sunset and Dawn..." What is a Hrail'th? Is this an Old Norse word? What does it mean?

Erin Lale
Sonoma, California

[Darned if I know, though I made a guess that it was the name of Frey's sword. Readers? TC]

Dear Mythic Circle,

This issue poetry seemed to predominate. However I feel I can't critique it because I am not familiar with the legends or myths alluded to.

I enjoyed MERLUSINE as it was a glorious dark fantasy! How did Merla walk? I wanted to know!

GIANTS OF AVALON was also good. Jealousy between youth and the elders is always a good theme. Also liked the twist on David and Goliath. I recently read a similar theme (not plot) in PABLO LENNIS October issue.

JANUS WINKED was strikingly original in execution. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

OLD MILL STREAM was clever but not entirely original in plot.

CAIRNWOMAN was sweet and poignant. M.I.A. was good, though I couldn't figure out what the title signified.

Anne Valley
Peshtigo, Wisconsin

Dear Tina and Christine,

In "The Chain," I enjoyed the humorous evocation of the "Romeo and Juliet" story, complete with parallels to Tybalt and Paris (but no ladies Capulet and Montague, I noticed). I particularly enjoyed the dance scene in the beginning. I have my doubts about the portrayal of Julia's family, though: I did not find Julia's father a convincing Baptist minister. Admittedly, I don't know any Baptist ministers--just Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational. However, I was a member of Intervarsity Christian Fellow-

ship for three years as an undergraduate, and I think there were Baptists among them, though I never did figure out who was which. So what I have to say applies to Protestant ministers in general.

A Protestant minister could be a total skunk (though I, personally, have never known one that was), but he would have to be a cleverer skunk than the one in this story. Church leadership requires certain verbal and social skills. A threat of violence toward someone dating his daughter should not be a Protestant minister's *first* reaction, though of course he might plausibly lose his temper in the middle of a conversation if provoked or under special stress. Furthermore, Protestant ministers *should* take it for granted that they are bringing up their children to follow stricter standards than the society around them. So, when a daughter sneaks to forbidden dances, the average minister *would*, I think, realize that her rebellion is the real problem and the boyfriend is a side issue. He would, therefore, be more apt to speak with his daughter about her behavior and its possible consequences, instead of manipulating the environment around her to control her. Besides being wrong, it would be an abdication of spiritual leadership on his part to approach Ramon's father about this unless Ramon was going beyond what was acceptable in the general culture.

Likewise, I found the "Mike Parrish" subplot unconvincing; I have never seen any "semi-arranged" marriages in Protestant circles (or anywhere else). It might have been more convincing if the people involved were older, but mostly I think that sort of thing isn't really done in twentieth century USA. Likewise, Mike Parrish did not convince me as the type of young man who frequents Church youth groups and prayer groups. Such a youth would be more likely to befriend Ramon in a priggish and condescending way, confident that Julia would eventually return to the Lord and to him.

Finally, I think overdosing on sleeping pills is not really a good way to convince one's parents of one's good judgment. It would have been more convincing if the parents had been led to *fear* that their children were going to kill themselves, but found instead that they were doing something wholesome like sneaking off to the zoo.

In other words, I enjoyed the story's concept very much, but I recommend that Ryan either research the "Baptist" milieu better or else change it to a milieu with which he is more familiar. I apologize if he knows more about Baptists than I do, but that's my honest reaction.

Likewise I enjoyed the conception in Hunnicutt's "Giants of Avalon," but found the milieu unconvincing. There is no one thing that I can point to as being absolutely unbelievable, but I was just never quite

sure that the setting was real. The organization of the two armies, the layout of the camps, and the nature of King Arthur's household service all needed more development. I think reading some actual Medieval chronicles such as Joinville's or Matthew Paris' might give Hunnicutt some more vivid details with which to clothe the story's affecting situations.

Waldman's "The Magus" reminded me a little of Woody Allen with all its wackiness. I think it needed to be wackier, though. Aliens from Aldabaran or Orion were really needed to flesh out the story properly, and bringing Thor and Balder into the action could have done no harm. It was ridiculous, but not quite ridiculous enough.

In Janet P. Reedman's "Merlusine," setting and plot were fine. I did wonder why she had chosen to portray Melusine (on whom Merlusine is evidently based) unfavorably; she has a dignified position in Medieval folklore as the ancestress of the House of Lusignan, and she did not attack her husband for spying on her in serpent form. She simply left him with their children and never came back. And why *should* the protagonist accept her estranged husband's word that she would devour him, since it was only speculation to begin with?

Flambard's "Cairnwoman" also has an excellent concept and a protagonist in an affecting situation. I think it promises too much, however. What is the use of making unhappy, put-upon teenagers wish for a magic stone with which to change the hearts of bullies? It would work better to change the heart of Francie herself, by making her see how limited and how meaningless the bullies' power was.

I'm also not convinced entirely by the details of the bullying. I was bullied in high school, not for being fat (even though I was fat). There were fatter girls than I, and I did not notice that they were bullied (of course, perhaps I just did not notice). It seems to me that bullies bully victims who (1) have something to arouse envy and (2) are socially isolated (not in the middle of a gang). Fat girls just get ignored if all they have is fat. So it seems to me that the bullies are *jealous* of Francie, and perceiving their own unfortunate future would make them *more* jealous, and the story would be more convincing if this were brought out. Also, I wonder if the bullying isn't too blatant to be realistic? Making it more subtle and nasty might make the story more powerful.

"The Betrayed" was an intriguing story, but I did not really understand the end. In conjuring up magical weapons, is the protagonist breaking the rules or not?

Thank you for the kind words on "Sweet as Muscatel." I am sorry that so many people did not understand the ending. The theological premise on which it was based was that since my protagonist was confused

about the nature of good and evil, he made a bargain with a mysterious being whom he thought was the devil but who turned out to be God. His fury at Prospero was in part a desire to destroy him and in part a desire to prove his own worthiness, and since he chose the course that required him to develop himself (instead of just destroying Prospero) he made a choice for good. I think that just as the devil can be mistaken for God, God can be mistaken for the devil; did not the Pharisees accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed, and did he not call them "sons of the devil" in return? Oh well.

Congratulations on another fine issue; I look forward to the next.

Gwenyth E. Hood
Huntington, West Virginia

Mythic Circle:

"Merlusine," a story of a snake, and me still reeling from 'Zelda' of North Carolina. But this reptile has a different twist, I must admit. A serpent in the Garden of Eden is nothing new, but it was truly inspired to cast Eve in the part. I was riveted to the pages of "Merlusine" from start to finish and read it several times, and the Eden allegory was the most powerful I could find.

I would suggest, however, that Janet P. Freedman focus on making Merla a real villain. Perhaps have Ilmarinen find a victim of hers, though not realizing, at first, that the body was the Lamia's doing. Then I would have had more of a sense of moral balance with the finish.

On the other hand, perhaps Merlusine could have been reasoned with, rather than destroyed. She could have been provided with animal victims to sustain her (like the members of the League of Innocent Vampires). She certainly proved her effectiveness, the way she could control snakes; Tiernan could have made some use of her powers, perhaps as a warrior or a spy, if not as a wife.

"The Chain" by Dan E. Ryan was a retelling of the old R and J tale, only with a happy ending. Sort of a "West Coast Story." The major problem with taking a tragedy and removing the tragic elements from it is that such a process tends to dilute the emotional impact of the climax (wasn't it me who condemned sad endings two issues ago?) Admittedly, putting a new wrinkle on this oft told tale is extremely difficult, but here are a few suggestions: After the reconciliation, when Felipe and Thorton are leading the hospital to get hamburgers, a huge earthquake could hit and kill everyone; or would that be too existential? Perhaps one of the two lovers could awaken with brain damage, drug overdoses sometimes do that, but the other non-afflicted lover could still pledge to take care of him or

her; or would that be too maudlin? Perhaps Julia and Ramon could find out that they're really incompatible and call the whole thing off, but their fathers maintain a close friendship; that's a little flat, but does have a touch of irony, and literature loves irony even in small doses.

Little enough is written about the mysterious Janus, leaving many questions about him: what was his place in the Hellenistic hierarchy, did he actually do anything to bring in the New Year, and (most crucial to the story "Janus Winked") could he affect human life? Obviously he could and does in Mr. Ryan's tale. There is one slight technical flaw, occurring when old Jeremiah contemplates going for some extra-strength Tylenol for his arthritis. Tylenol can be used to relieve pain or cut a fever, but it is not an anti-inflammatory. It has no effect on the swelling joints of arthritis. Otherwise, the story reads extremely well. I was not quite convinced, however, that old Jeremiah would want to die. He was only in his sixties and only afflicted with arthritis (I have arthritis and I still lift weights and swim). If he had been wheelchair-bound, or suffered from cancer, I would have been persuaded that death would be desirable for him.

Mel Hunnicutt's "Giants of Avalon" was a good action story: though brief, it had two battle scenes in it that were directly related to the plot, though one was a flashback. I was left to wonder about the giants themselves, however. One was a six-fingered two-eyed Cyclops (not an impossibility, since Cyclops means wheel-eye, not one-eye), but no further description of them was given. How big were they? Were they only the size of very large men (in the range of basketball players) or more the size of Godzilla? Otherwise, I found the story stirring, only needing a romantic element to make it professional.

Tension was built up beautifully in "The Betrayed" by Erin Lale. The main character made me think of a hydrogen bomb, disguised as a beautiful young woman. She was so overloaded with destructive force that she dared not use it, as were all her people; they had to endure being conquered by savages rather than unleashing their continent-blasting magic. A fascinating idea!

Besides the moral restraints prohibiting the use of her powers for destructive purposes, were there any other limitations on them? Would the Law of the Oddenling have forbade Hepeni from manifesting a heap of gold and jewels in the middle of the floor while the Khuzhar were hacking up the Iwarin? I'm sure that such a manifestation would have gotten the Khuzar's attention.

Though style is my weak point as a writer, I will venture one comment on it here. Why the curious use of present tense? Was it to give the story a sense of immediacy? In that the author did succeed, perhaps

justifying the sacrifice of the past tense's greater latitude.

I always wondered what would happen if Piers Anthony decided to write Kafka's "Metamorphosis," and there it was, on page 23 of issue 10, Patricia Ellen Finn's "M.I.A." I loved it. The title, however, didn't set the mood of the work the way a title should. I thought the story was going to be something about Vietnam. Perhaps "Metamorphosis II" or "Pillow-wings" might have served it better.

On page twenty-four was an interesting phrase: "sparring like windmills in a dance of shadows." That's a mixed metaphor. And though it is not entirely without precedent, e.g.:

*"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them."*

(Hamlet, Act III, Scene I),

a mixed metaphor is still a tricky thing; like an atomic reactor it can gallop away, run amok and over-heat. Otherwise, I found the butterfly story fascinating and can't believe it's not professional.

"Cairnwoman" by Rosamund I. Flambard gives the satisfactory feeling of seeing those who are undeservedly good-looking and popular get a taste of what they so generously hand out. "What goes around, comes around," as they say.

If I didn't exercise at least three days a week, I'd be a fat person, and I can, in a way, sympathize with Francie's plight, particularly since she is dieting and trying to do something about it. Obesity is not always the result of overeating; sometimes it is due to a person's metabolism being too efficient, a point that the Cairnwoman might have brought up with Francie. Of all of Francie's tormentors, why was retribution wrought on Lisa? Sure, she deserved it, but not as much as that dreadful Todd. He was physically as well as verbally abusive to Francie and in want of a good beating! The characters of "Cairnwoman" are all people I've met before (except, unfortunately, the Cairnwoman herself), demonstrating that Rosamund has a good sense of psychological completeness that will be a great boon to future writings.

"The Old Mill Stream" had the kind of knockout finish crucial to a short-short story. Without a whole page to work with, Mr. James Hartley delivered a message, told a story, and gave the old grey matter something to chew on. And one more thing, Lorithan's got my vote.

"The Magus" was an intriguing idea, but it sped on through scene after scene without giving the characters enough to motivate them. Motivation is a sticking point with me. I always ask "why is he/she doing this or feeling this?" and too many times I couldn't find the answer when I read Mel Waldman's story. Why did Jo confront Eddie in the first place? Their relationship started as a one-night stand, but his frenzied searching for her is more reminiscent of a long-established love. Then, later in the Sphinx's dressing room, he sees Yolanda, Jocasta's sister, and declares immediately that he loves her even more than the woman he was so frantically searching for. Love is not like instant coffee, it needs time to brew.

With some work, I think that "The Magus" could be an enjoyable story. Mr. Waldman's style is clear and crisp, and his basic idea is a good one. He only needs to get intimate with his characters and properly motivate them.

The poetry in issue #10 was extensive and much of it was very good. I was most impressed with "Sea Spiders" by Sue Nevill, the retelling of some favorite fairy tales by Jill Solnicki and "The Vernal Queen" by Colleen Anderson. Special mention must be made of Owen R. Neill's "Lohengrin," an enjoyable poem that broke the stranglehold which free verse had on "The Mythic Circle."

The illustrations were up to the usual excellent standard, with the one on page 3 for "Merlusine" the most telling of all.

Before signing off, I'd like to make a suggestion. The writers for "The Mythic Circle" are so close to professional that they can practically taste it (a quality level somewhere between classical novels and television) and no two of them share the same deficiencies, so why not set up some collaborations? Perhaps devote a whole issue to collaborations. I'd like to try working with a partner. Enduring artistic differences and a few arguments might be worth it, if it meant accelerating to a professional level. If anyone is interested in burdening him/herself with me as a partner, please contact me through "The Mythic Circle." Thank you.

Charles R. Schabel
Knightdale, North Carolina

Intriguing! We'll be happy to forward enquiries to Charles, and to facilitate similar matchups if others are interested. As to "The Magus," I didn't have a problem with lack of motivation; for me the story, and the underlying Oedipal tale, abide at the intersection between malign Fate and the reasonless passion of love-at-first-sight. Readers? Incidentally, those mixed metaphors can infest even the best-intentioned writing; I don't believe atomic reactors gallop away, though the image is fun.--TC

THE SILENCEBRINGERS

by David Sparenberg

*The man who loves the earth
whose love is genuine
who faces the old ways
a fountain of wisdom
whose heart is magnanimous
whose mind is alert*

*a single man standing
a mountain of character
a landscape of legend
who chants to the tall trees
and wandering stars--*

*This man says nothing
He is not a part of
the ways of the cities
The blood in his veins
has an earlier source*

*He strolls in the quiet
Olympic Mountains
He walks through the gentle
Willamette Valley*

*The cruel taint of exile
has smeared a harsh color
over his features
But tears of the dark times
he lifts into splendor
The words of the wayward
his heartsong transforms*

*What is said of this man
the man who says nothing
can be said of the woman
who shares the same purpose:*

*Their silence is fuller
Than the modern world's noise*

MEDICINE CORD

by David Sparenberg

*I grasp in my hands today
the tail feather of a hawk,
a swift ascender, a mighty watcher
of the upper air.
Swift as the spirit, hawk
reflects the Spirit of the Sky.*

*Between my fingers rests
a purple sphere of harmony,
a glass bead
of the immaterial world,
a wooden disc of remembrance
of the Tree of Life,
from which all living
creatures descend.*

*Joined by the seeds of declension,
these symbols of unity
top a thong of rawhide,
bound on my wrists, running
through my palms, hot
with pulsations of life.*

*Here I hold together
emblems of life:
wing feather of a sea bird--
and the vastness of Ocean is on my side--
brown sphere of remembrance
of the intensity and integrity of Earth,
home for the diversity of creatures
my senses share--
and Earth and her creatures stand beside
me--
star of my faith, fire-star,
and shell heart of compassion, light-heart
--guiding my on my path of life--
bone disc of remembrance of mortality,
condition of passage
that I hold in common
with my brothers and sisters
of this planet of soil, air, fire
and water.*

*Beyond my fingers I have tied
a knot of strength against death,
a strong knot of prevention,
a tight knot of resistance.
Far below and away*

*a red clay bead of bloodshed,
a bone tooth of wounding,
an inverted black feather of death,
with its quill that shoots
like an arrow at life.*

*Today I stand up,
grasping in my strength
a medicine cord,
crying out a song.*

*I am turning aside danger
from a weak one.
I am wrestling with death
as a warrior.
Standing here in my medicine,
Standing in my manhood,
I am standing up in balance.*

*Now Earth has beheld me;
Ocean has beheld me;
Sky has beheld me.*

*Death is a coward.
Death is a weakling,
an eater of carrion,
beaten in life's shadows.*

*Life-giver has given
me the powers of a savior,
skills of a shaman,
standing up in balance,
questing for a weak one, wrestling
as a warrior.*

*I am wrapped up
in my medicine.
I am standing
here in balance, crying
out a song.*

RED HAWK SONG

by David Sparenberg

*I admit that I love you.
My heart sings strongly
through the fires of my body.
The sun and moon
are prisoners of my love-war;
I offer you the robes
of the splendid earth.*

*All of the simple things
I wish to give you:
wood for the fireplace,
the odors of meadows,
sensation of morning.*

I have spoken your name

*to the four rising winds.
The blood of my hunger
arises from within me;
I cannot continue
this summer of fasting.*

*Hidden in seasons,
resplendent with warpaint,
the earth-wish conspires
with this wound in my body:
I can but surrender
to love's awful beauty.*

*Now is not morning,
Now is not evening,*

*the hour of meeting,
when all creatures bend
toward a man
with a woman.*

*I am giving your name
to the sacred four corners,
chanting your name
to the clouds far below me.
My heart-blood is singing
through the wings of my body.
Through the fire of my body*

I admit that I love you.

Mount Lowe 1978
(At abandoned cablecar terminus)

by Paul Newman

*Ruins rambled, too well sifted;
the site, soulless.*

*Sharing twilight,
tarantula and boredom.*

*Eyes cast onto mountains;
do they feel such weight?*

*Fogfront seep entangles canyons;
traffic's freeway, writhing.*

*Sky becomes a color gazed;
no rest, its infinity or blue.*

*Backwards looking, head through legs,
fog turns clouds...sky, sea!*

Higher

by Paul Newman

*Watching the crows' realm,
treetop mopers amidst cloud erasers of the blue.*

*Wings gleaned from cries dolorous,
a moment looms for striking to the sky.*

*Gripping haze, rising,
become a fonder of the sun.*

*Laughing in the clouds,
Wandering the glides of the wind.*

*No abide in words.
Cries at the hunter's snarl; droppings on the snarer's
pace.*

Contempt for other's spirits flown similar breezes.

*Zenith wingspent; sagging breast.
Clothes diffuse feathers and a face enters swooping
beak.*

Loosing grip on sky...

*Wingdream now a mimic,
who walks on one leg and a feather.*



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A writer, particularly a good one, is compelled to write; his story wells up within him like molten poetry. A reader, particularly a good one, is a willing vessel into which the writer pours his soul.

Robert St. Evans Malaise



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