

Minnesota Gothic

by Thomas M. Disch

Gretel was caught in the bright net of autumn—wandering vaguely in the golden, dying woods, vaguely uncertain where she was but not yet frightened, vaguely disobedient. Ripe gooseberries piled in her basket; the long grass drying. Autumn. She was seven years old.

The woods opened onto a vegetable garden. A scarecrow waved the raggedy stumps of his denim arms at the crows rustling in the cornstalk sheaves. Pumpkins and squash dotted the spent earth, as plump and self-sufficient as a convention of slum landlords. Further down the row, an old woman was rooting in the ground, mumbling to herself.

Gretel backed toward the wood. She was afraid. A strand of rusted barbwire snagged at her dress. The crows took to the air with graceless to-do. The woman pushed herself up and brushed back a tangle of greasy white hair. She squinted at Gretel, who began to cry.

"Little girl?" Her voice crackled like sticks of dry wood burning. "Little girl, come here. I give you some water, eh? You get lost in the woods."

Gretel tore her dress loose from the barb and stepped nervously around the fat pumpkins, tripping on their vines. Her fear, as is often the way with fear, made her go to the old woman, to the thing she feared.

"Yes, I know you," the old woman grated. "You live two houses down the road. I know your mother when she is little." She winked, as though they had shared an amusing secret. "How old are you?"

Gretel opened her mouth but couldn't speak.

"You're only a *little* girl," the old woman went on, with a trace of contempt. "You know how old I am? A hundred years old!" She nodded her head vigorously. "I'm Minnie Haeckel."

Gretel had known who the woman was, although she had never seen her before. Whenever Gretel was especially bad or muddied her Sunday frock or wouldn't eat dinner, her mother would tell her what terrible things Old Minnie Haeckel did to naughty piglets who didn't eat cauliflower. Mother always concluded these revelations with the same warning: "You do it *once more*, and I'm going to take you to live with that old Minnie. It's just what you deserve." Now too, Gretel recognized the clapboard house with the peeling paint and, around it, the sheds—omens of a more thorough disintegration. The house was not as formidable viewed across the vegetable garden as it had seemed in brief glimpses from the car window, the white hulk looming behind a veil of dusty lilacs. It looked rather like the other old farmhouses along the gravel road—the Brandts', the Andersons'.

Minnie took Gretel by the hand and led her to an iron pump. The pump groaned in time to the woman's slow heave and stagger and a trickle of water spilt over its gray lip, blackening it.

"Silly girl!" Minnie gasped. "Use the dipper."

Gretel put the enamel dipper under the lip of the pump to catch the first gush of cold water. She drank greedily.

From inside the house, there was the bellow of a man's voice. "Minnie! Minnie, is that you?"

Minnie jerked the dipper out of Gretel's hand and bent over the little girl. "That's my brother," she whispered, her dry voice edged with fear. "You must go. First, I give you something." Minnie took Gretel to a sagging wooden platform at the back of the house, where there was a pile of heavy, dirt-crusting tubers the color of bacon grease. Minnie put one of these in Gretel's basket on top of the tiny green gooseberries.

"Minnie!" the voice roared.

"Yeah, yeah!" Minnie returned. "Now then, that's for you. You give it to your mother, understand? And walk home down the road. It's not far. You know how?"

Gretel nodded. She backed away from Minnie and, when she was far enough, turned and ran to the road, clutching the basket with its terrible vegetable to her chest.

Mother was outside the house, collapsed in a lawn chair. The radio was turned on full-volume. Mother flexed her polished toes to the slow, urban beat of the music.

"Did you bring in the mail, love?" Mother asked. Gretel shook her head and stood at a distance from her mother, waiting to recover her breath.

"I tore my dress," she brought out at last. But Mother was not in a mood to be upset by small things. It was a very old dress, and it had been torn before.

"What's in your basket, love?" she asked. Gretel glanced down guiltily at the hard, ominous vegetable. She handed it to her mother.

"I was picking gooseberries."

"This isn't a gooseberry, though," Mother explained gently. "It's a rutabaga. Where did you get it?"

Gretel told about Minnie.

"Isn't that nice of her. She's such a sweet old lady. We'll have the rutabaga for dinner. Did you thank her, I hope?"

Gretel blushed. "I was afraid."

"There was nothing to be afraid of, love. Minnie is a harmless old woman. She does the sweetest things sometimes, and she's had a hard time of it, living all alone in that firetrap of a house that really should be torn down ..."

"But she's not alone, Mommie. Her brother lives there with her."

"Nonsense, Gretel. Minnie doesn't have any brother, not any more. Now, put the rutabaga and the gooseberries in the kitchen and go back and see if there's any mail."

At dinner Gretel ate everything on her plate but the diced rutabagas. She sat staring at the yellowish lumps morosely, while her mother cleared away the dishes.

"You're not to leave the table until you've eaten every one of them, so take all the time you need."

Finally, at eight o'clock, Gretel bolted down the cold, foul-tasting lumps of rutabaga, fighting against her reflex to gag. When she had quite finished, Mother brought in her dessert, but Gretel couldn't eat it.

"Really, Gretel darling, there's no reason to *cry*."

The next day, Gretel was sick. Purely for spite, her mother was convinced. But, of course, that wasn't it at all. It was only the spell beginning its work.

Left to her own devices, Gretel would not have renewed her acquaintance with Minnie Haeckel. Unfortunately, late in October, Grandfather Bricks died; her mother's father, who had built the farmhouse they were living in. Mother was to meet Daddy in the city and then fly to California, where the Bricks had retired. Gretel, who was too young to attend a cremation, was deposited at Minnie Haeckel's doorstep with a canvas bag of playthings and a parting kiss. She watched her mother drive down the gravel road until there was nothing to be seen but a cloud of dust and a glint of chrome from the last hill of the horizon. Minnie was hunched over a swaybacked chair on the front stoop.

"Your old grandfather is dead, eh? He used to bring Minnie a fruitcake at Christmas." Minnie sucked in her cheeks and made a sound of regret. "People are always dying. What do you think of that?" Gretel noticed with distaste that the old woman's mouth contained, instead of proper teeth, brown stumps, at irregular intervals, that Gretel surmised were snuff. Her mother had told her once that Minnie chewed snuff.

"Come into the parlor, child. You can play there. Nobody uses the parlor nowadays."

The creaking pine floor was covered with a rag rug. There was a huge leather chair that rocked on hidden springs and a handsome mahogany table with a lace cloth. The bay window was hung with curtains that had once been feedbags, their red check now a sunbleached, dusty pink. On the walls, decades of calendars advertised the First Commercial Bank of Onamia. They pictured a perpetual January of wintry woods and snowy roads, ponds and icebound houses.

"Can you read?"

"A little."

Minnie opened a tin box that lay on the table and handed Gretel a small bundle of cards and envelopes. They smelled of decayed spices. Minnie shook the box. A gritty black ball rolled into Gretel's lap.

"You take an apple," Minnie explained, "and you stick it full of cloves and let it dry for a whole year. It shrinks up like this. Doesn't it smell nice?" Minnie picked up the black ball and held it under her nostrils, smelling it noisily. "You read the letters now, eh?"

The first was a postcard showing a ship. "*Dear All,*" she read. "*I am in France. It gets cold at night, but I don't mind it. How is everyone? They say the war is almost over.*" The signature, like the text, was printed in crude, black letters—"Lew."

"My daddy was in the war, too. He flew a plane."

"This is a different war, a long time ago."

The next postcard had no picture. GREETINGS FROM NEW YORK, it said in front. On the back there was only Lew's clumsy signature.

"Who is Lew?" Gretel asked. "Does he live upstairs?"

"Yes, but you can't see him. He can't walk now, and he doesn't like little girls. Read some more, eh? The big one."

Gretel took the largest envelope and opened it. The letter was typewritten and crinkly with age. "*Dear Miss ... is that how you spell Haeckel?*" She giggled at the vagaries of spelling. "*We re—gret to inform*

you that your brother, Lew Haeckel, has been ... "

"Go on," Minnie prodded.

"The words are too hard."

"You can't read very well."

"I'm only in first grade. Read them yourself."

"This letter is from the hospital. He was there for weeks. Then they sent him home. It cost me a lot of money."

"What happened?" Gretel asked, although she was not terribly interested.

"He used to drink." Minnie looked at Gretel narrowly. "Your mother drinks too, eh?" Gretel thought so. "He was in a car accident. That's what happens to drinkers. You stay in here while I work outside, eh? Then we eat?"

Gretel promised to be good. Minnie replaced the letters in their box carefully and went out through the kitchen. Gretel climbed into the largest leather rocker and pumped it with her body, like a swing, until she had filled the room comfortably with its creaking. The corners of the parlor sank into shadow and the deep colors of the room deepened with dusk. Gretel rocked the chair harder, but it was a poor defense against the encroaching darkness. And there was no light switch on the wall. She went to find Minnie.

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The hall was even darker, and darker yet the staircase to the second floor. Piles of mail-order catalogues and old magazines formed a sort of banister on the stairs.

"Hey—you!" He had a smooth, urgent voice. Gretel peeked up the stairs at him shyly. He was fat, and he could hardly stand up. In the dark, Gretel could make out few details. He was leaning against the wall for support with one hand. With the other, he waved a cane at Gretel, as though he would catch her in its crook. "Come up here. I want to talk to you. Don't be afraid. C'mon, sugar."

"I'm not supposed to see you." Gretel liked to tease.

"Don't pay attention to Minnie. She's crazy, you know. I'll tell you a thing or two about *her*." Then his voice hushed so that Gretel couldn't understand his words. She advanced up two of the steps.

"That's right. C'mon in to my room. In here." He vanished from the top of the stairs, and Gretel listened to him shuffle along the corridor. She followed him and was relieved to see a shaft of light in the corridor.

His room was a sty of cast-off clothes, out-of-date magazines, and tins full of cigar ashes and butts. These—and Lew—were all piled on the double bed at the center of the room; there was no other furniture except a dresser without drawers upon which a kerosene lamp was burning. Lew, collapsed in the debris of the bed, was breathing heavily—pale cheeks billowed and slacked like a mechanical toy. His belly sagged out of a blue navy-issue knit sweater, and his thighs had split through the seams of his trousers, which were fouled with weeks, months of use.

"She keeps me prisoner here. I can't get downstairs by myself. She won't let me go anywhere, see my friends."

Gretel stared in amazement—not at this confidence—at him.

"And she tries to starve me, too. C'mere, sugar. What's your name?"

"Gretel."

"Forty years! I've been a cripple in this leg for forty years. She doesn't let me out of her sight. Come over here and sit on the bed, why doncha? I don't bite."

Gretel didn't move from the doorway. Lew picked up his cane again and tried to hook her around the neck, playfully.

"You afraid of your old Uncle Lew?"

Gretel pursed her lips at what she knew to be a lie.

"You know why she does all this? You wanna know? She's a witch. That's what it is, honest to God. When she was a kid, she could take off warts. She's put her name down in the devil's book, and she'll never get any older now. And if she has a mind to, she can turn you into a mouse. You'll have to hop on her thumb and beg for crumbs of bread. You can hear her mumbling all the time, all sorts of crazy things. Charms and such. And cursing, oh, she can curse." He stopped for breath again and struggled to his feet. Gretel backed further away.

"She hexed me. I was a thousand miles away, I was in New York. But that don't matter one iota to *her*. She made my leg go bum." He staggered forward angrily. "*It's all her fault!*" he shouted after Gretel as she clambered down the stairs and out of the house. Minnie was nowhere to be seen.

Gretel found her in one of the lean-to sheds shoveling corncobs into a tin bucket. "It's dark inside," she complained. She had decided not to mention Uncle Lew.

"There are rats in the sheds as big as you are," Minnie said between shovelful. "You only see them at night. Big rats."

"What are those?" Gretel pointed.

"Corncobs. I burn them up, and they never get used. Every day I burn some more." She laughed, although Gretel did not recognize it as such. "Now we go inside. I turn on a lamp."

The kitchen table and the cupboards were stacked with unwashed dishes and pans. Minnie, apparently, had as little use for soap as Lew. Minnie lighted the kerosene lamp and made a fire in the stove. They ate dinner in silence: vegetables from Minnie's garden and canned meat from Mother's larder. Minnie ate with a spoon, but she offered Gretel a fork as well.

"Nibble, nibble, little mouse," Minnie chortled.

Gretel looked up at Minnie with delight, for she remembered the line. "Who is nibbling at my house?" she concluded. Minnie looked at her suspiciously. "Mommie read me that story lots of times. My name is in it—Gretel."

"What are you talking about? You want some cake, eh?"

The cake tasted nothing at all like the ones Mother took from boxes, but it wasn't bad. Gretel had two

pieces.

"I take you home now. I come and get you in the morning. You can't sleep here."

Gretel kept close to Minnie on the gravel road, but she wouldn't hold the old woman's hand. Even with a sweater, it was cold. Owls hooted in the dark woods, and there were other, less definite noises.

"You're afraid of the dark, eh?"

"It's scary at night."

"I like the night best of all. I build a fire in the stove and sit down and warm my old bones. When you go back to the city?"

"Daddy has to find a new apartment. I'm studying my lessons at home. I can read anyhow. Most first-graders can't read at all."

"Here you are. You want me to put you to bed?"

"No. We have electric lights, so I won't be afraid by myself. Minnie?"

"Eh?"

"Are you really a witch?"

Minnie choked on her phlegm and spat and choked again. This time Gretel knew her laughter for what it was. She went into the house angrily and locked the door behind her. Even upstairs in her chintz bedroom she could hear Minnie, as she walked back along the road, rasping with glee and mumbling—something—loudly.

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The morning drizzled—cold, a clothes-damping mist that did not fall but hung, filmed the house and leafless trees but would not wet the earth. Gretel was awakened by a tattoo of pebbles on the clouded window. She dressed herself, sleepily, in the warmest clothes she could find and joined Minnie outside, wishing that her mother were there with the Buick. While they trudged down the road, Minnie interrupted her grumbling long enough to ask Gretel if she had been with her brother the day before.

"Yes. He told me to. And he said you were a witch. Can you take off warts?"

"I stop the toothache, too—and measles. Once, I am at every lying-in, but no more. They come to Old Minnie for a love-doll, for a sick horse. For everything."

Gretel considered this in silence. She did not quite dare to ask if Minnie could turn children into mice. She remembered, with grave suspicion, the rats in the corncrib that only came out at night—rats as big as herself. She felt serious and wary but no longer afraid. And she felt, too, though she could not have said why, a touch of contempt for the old woman shuffling through the mist, bent under the oversized pea-jacket.

"Aren't we going to your house?" Gretel asked as they walked past the dripping lilac bushes.

"Not now. You are warm enough, eh?"

"Is it far?"

"Not far." Half a mile didn't seem far to Minnie. A dirt track led from the road to the Onamia Township Cemetery. Minnie paced in a circle about a small stone that rose bare inches above the clovered grass. There was an inscription on it which read simply:

HAECKEL

1898-1923

Three times she circled it, crooning anxiously, and then three times again, but in the other direction.

"Who's inside?" Gretel asked, but Minnie wasn't listening to her ward. "My grandfather," she persisted, "is going to be burned. Mommie is bringing the ashes home in a jar. Is that your brother?"

Minnie finished her pacing and started back to the road, still oblivious of Gretel. Gretel was piqued. She considered hiding from her unresponsive guardian, as she had often hid from her mother when she (her mother) needed to be punished, but it was too cold and wet a day to go into the woods. Gretel would remember not to forget.

Minnie's stove was already crackling; the kitchen was soaked in a warmth that drew a history of odors from the cracks in the woodwork: smells of last year's apples and this summer's onions, of nutmeg and cinnamon, the scrapings of stews, the coffee burnt on the iron stove, the musk of drying wood in the orange crate by the stove, of snuff, and, strangely, of cigars. There was a wooden sign above the porch door, painted in crude, black letters. Gretel sounded them out—CIGAR FACTORY NO. 4.

"Is this a cigar factory?"

"Not any more. My brother makes cigars before he is too sick. It makes a little money. It is a good thing to make some money. I sell vegetables in town. And go to the sick people. It isn't much. He makes them just to smoke nowadays. I have to sell the land sometimes."

"Has your brother lived here a long time?"

"Oh, a long time. Can you cook?"

"Mommie won't let me. I'm too little."

"I teach you to make cookies, eh? Little cookies—just for you."

"Okay. Is he as old as you are?"

"We don't talk about him now. What is this, eh?"

Gretel shrugged at the handful of white powder Minnie had taken from a glass cannister.

"Silly girl. It's flour. Everyone knows flour." Minnie put three more handfuls of flour into a mixing bowl. "First, you put the sugar with the lard. Then, the flour."

"Ich."

Undaunted, Minnie detailed all the rest of the steps in making the dough. Without cups and measuring spoons, Gretel was doubtful if the results would be edible. "What *is* it?" she asked, losing all patience.

"It's gingerbread. You don't know anything."

Gretel gasped. Gingerbread. She stuck her finger into the magic brown dough and tasted it. Like swan or mermaids, like nighttime or a candy cottage with panes of sugar. She gloated at the forbidden, old sweetness.

"You don't eat it yet. We roll it out on the table and you can cut out the people. Little gingerbread girls, eh? Then we bake it: *Then* we eat."

"Aren't *you* going to make anything?" Gretel asked cautiously.

"I have a cutter. I show you." Minnie dug through a drawer of unfamiliar-looking utensils and drew forth a cookie-cutter in triumph.

"What is it?"

"It's a rabbit."

Gretel examined it closely, first on the outside, then its cutting edge. "*It's a toad!*"

Minnie backed away from the little girl. She cocked her head to one side.

"Tell me about the rats," Gretel said anxiously. She came over to Minnie and took her hand. "Are they *very* big? As big as me? Are there a lot of them? *Tell me!*"

"I don't know what you're saying." Minnie began to cough. It was not a laughing cough.

"You don't want to tell me, do you?" The old woman lowered herself onto a stool, bent double with the pain that spread across her chest and into her stomach. Gretel put her hands on Minnie's shoulders and pushed her back up to stare intently into her rheumy eyes. "Why is he alive? How did you make him come alive again?"

"Devil's child!" Minnie screamed. "Leave me be!"

"He died. A long time ago. I know. You showed me the letter. It said he died. Killed—I read it."

Minnie pushed Gretel away from her and ran out the kitchen door. For a moment she stood, uncertain, in the mist, then walked at a quick hobble to the road, turned toward the cemetery.

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It had happened months before, in spring, while she helped Mother in the flower garden. Squeezing the clods of earth between her hands until, sudden as the pop of a balloon, they broke between her fingers in a sift of loam—enjoyable. Then, one, as she squeezed, squished. Dried mud flaked from back and belly, and Gretel had found, locked tight in her two hands, the toad. Her fear was not of warts; she had not

heard that a toad's touch bred warts. Gretel had been spared many of the old wives' tales: her mother's urbane imagination fed on cancer, heart disease, and, more recently, thalidomide. Gretel's fear was greater and less definite—without specific remedy. Through the summer, it sank malignant roots in the country soil, hung like pollen in the air, infected the water in the pumps. She seeded the countryside with her fear, subdued but ready to spring to her pale blue eyes, like a rabbit started from its hole, at the slightest provocation. Diffuse, private, echoing the bedtime legends—the Grimms and Andersens—that then composited their several horrors in her own dreams: an enchantment.

Yet, she was not helpless. She had a natural talent for exorcism. She was thorough, and she could be ruthless. And if fear could not be circumvented, it could be joined.

Without haste or bravado then, Gretel climbed the stairs once more. She tiptoed through the hall and inched open the door to Lew Haeckel's room. He was there, sleeping. A thread of brown saliva rolled out the side of his mouth. Gretel raised the blind, and a hazy, gray light spilled into the room, across the double bed, beneath his eyelids.

"Whadaya want?" He raised himself on one elbow, blinking. "Why, hello sugar."

"Minnie's making gingerbread," Gretel announced.

"Well, she's not making any for *me*." Lew looked at Gretel cannily. "What's wrong, kid?"

"Is she a witch, really?"

"You bet your life she is."

"And the mouse ..."

Slowly, Lew began to understand. His fat lips curled into a smile, showing brown teeth like Minnie's. "Oh, she can do that, too. You think she's up to something?" He looked around nervously. "Where is she?"

"She went ... outside." Gretel did not dare mention the cemetery. "She made dough, but she hasn't made the cookies yet. She's going to make a *toad*."

"With the gingerbread, huh? A gingerbread toad?"

Gretel nodded.

"And you're afraid. Well, you can beat her at witching. She's pretty dumb, you know. For a witch." He began to speak more softly. "You think she'll turn you into a toad? Is that it, honey?" Gretel crept closer to the bed to hear what he was whispering. "She can do that. A black toad hopping in the mud. You wouldn't like that, a pretty girl like you." A chuckle, soft and lewd. "You've got to watch out for that gingerbread. I'll tell you what ..." His voice was a wisp of sound. Gretel stood at his bedside, frozen with attention. "You go downstairs and take that dough, and make a cookie like Minnie ..." His hand snaked out to circle her waist. She was too horrified at his implications to notice.

"*And eat it!*" she exclaimed.

"That's right, sugar. Then you won't have to worry about any old gingerbread toad. You'll take the wind out of her sails, all right."

He held her firmly now, pulled her closer to him.

"You're a pretty little girl, you know that? How about a kiss for your old Uncle Lew, seeing as how he's helped you out?"

"Let go." She tried to pull his hand away. His face bent toward hers, smiling. "Let me go! I know about you. Stop it!"

"Whadaya know, huh?"

"You're *dead*," Gretel screamed. "They buried you. Minnie is there now. You were killed. Dead."

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The man's hulk shook with something like laughter. His grip loosened. Gretel broke away and retreated to the doorway. He quieted suddenly, although his body continued to tremble like a tree in a light breeze. He pulled himself up in his bed and spat into one of the tin cans.

"You're great, kid. You'll be the greatest witch yet. No fooling." When Gretel was halfway down the stairs, he called out after her—"We'll get along, sugar. You and me. Just wait." A drop of blood fell from Gretel's lip where she had been biting it. It made a blot on her jumper, the size of a pea.

In the kitchen, she rolled out the dough, according to Minnie's instructions, and cut out a five-inch witch with a greasy knife. The gingerbread witch stuck to the table. She scraped it free with the knife and reassembled it on the cookie sheet, which Minnie had already prepared. She took three raisins from the bag on the table and gave the gingerbread figure eyes and a black mouth—like Minnie's. She put the cookie sheet in the oven and nibbled fingers of the raw dough while she waited.

She brought the cookie sheet out of the oven. The witch was a rich brown on top, but crisp and black underneath. She had still to wait for it to cool. She was afraid Minnie would return, and sat at the parlor window to watch the road. Upstairs, Gretel could hear Lew shuffling about.

And, then, in the kitchen. The gingerbread witch was warm but—Gretel touched her tongue to it—not too warm to eat, easier, too, if you closed your eyes. One bite beheaded her. The three raisins were cinders, too dry to chew. She rinsed down the rest of it with water.

Outside the window, Gretel could see a wind spring out of the wood, tearing through the corn sheaves, striking the sodden clothes of the scarecrow, tumbling his hat into a furrow, lifting it into the air. Higher.

Lew was standing in the doorway, holding to the frame. Except for a week's stubble of beard, his face was white as his shirt collar. He was wearing a suit that was moderately clean.

"You done it, sure as hell, sugar." He spoke in short bursts of breath. "As good as roast on her spit and serve her up at a church supper with whipped potatoes and green peas."

"You told me to."

"I needed to get away from her, get some fresh blood. Run with the tide. Minnie was old-fashioned. She kept me prisoned here." He pointed out the window to the scarecrow. "But the spell's broke." He inhaled deeply; his belly lifted and fell. A spate of blood darkened his cheeks and ebbed away. "You and me, sugar, we're going places. You gonna kiss me *now*, for old time's?"

Gretel wrinkled her nose. "You're fat and ugly."

"That's how she wanted me. A witch always keeps something beside her—a cat, a mouse, a cricket maybe."

"Rats?"

"Rats, too. Or a black toad." He grinned. Gretel shuddered. "But Minnie had to have something that looked like her brother—so she dug him up. I had to do all the work, dragging this hulk around."

"Go away."

"Not any more, sugar. I'm yours now. You outwitted her, but you've still got a lot to learn ... and a lot of time to learn it. You're stuck with me, like it or not. And I like it."

"I don't want you." He shrugged and sat beside her at the table. The chair creaked under his weight. He wrapped his paw about her forearm. "You're ugly. You stink!" It was the harshest word she knew, but since it was, in this case, accurate, it seemed, like coffee made from used grounds, to lack full strength.

"If you don't like me the way I am, just say the word."

Gretel's eyes widened. "You mean ..."

"Gary Cooper," he suggested. "Fabian."

"No."

He leered. "—Bobby Kennedy?"

"No," Gretel said. "I want ..."

Gretel, for the sake of propriety, bundled into her warm clothes and set off for the cemetery to find Minnie. The clouds had cleared away, but the sun they revealed was feeble, an invalid's sun.

"Come along, Hansel," she called to the lovely cocker spaniel pup. He ran to her with an obedient yip. A bead of saliva glistened on the tip of his distended black-pink tongue.

Gretel glanced back once at the clapboard house that a grateful township would soon—and at long last—have an opportunity to raze. It seemed to take forever to get to the cemetery.

Minnie was there under the poplar, where Gretel had expected her to be. The used-up body was draped indecorously over the stone. The half hour of sunlight had dried the grass, but Minnie's wool dress was still damp and clinging. Her fingernails were caked with mud and shredded grass from digging around the stone. Hansel began to whine.

"Oh, shut up!" Gretel commanded.

He sat back on his haunches and watched a powerful, slow smile spread across his mistress's face.

The End

Author Biography and Bibliography

Thomas M. Disch was the theater critic for *The Nation* from 1987 through 1992, and later reviewed theater for the *New York Daily News*.

His book reviews and critical essays have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Parnassus*, *Playboy*, *Poetry*, *Times Literary Supplement* (UK), *Washington Post Book World*, and many others. He has served on the board of the National Book Critics Circle as Vice-President and Secretary.

He has taught at Wesleyan University, the University of Minnesota, the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and in 1996 he was Artist-in-Residence at the College of William and Mary.

In 1999 he received the Michael Braude Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

His papers are held at Yale University's Beineke Library.

Novels

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The M. D.: A Horror Story (1991)

The Priest: A Gothic Romance (1994)

The Sub: A Study in Witchcraft (1999)

Short Story Collections

102 H-Bombs (1967)

Fun with Your New Head (1968)

Getting into Death (1976)

Fundamental Disch (1980)

The Man Who Had No Idea (1982)

Poetry

The Right Way to Figure Plumbing (1972)

ABCDEFGH IJKLMNOPQRST UVWXYZ (1981)

Burn This (1982)

Orders of the Retina (1982)

Here I Am, There You Are, Where Were We (1984)

Yes, Let's: New and Selected Poems (1989)

Dark Verses and Light (1991)

Nonfiction

The Castle of Indolence: American Poetry Today (1995)

The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World (1998)

The Castle of Perseverance: Job Opportunities in Contemporary Poetry (forthcoming)

Children's Books

The Brave Little Toaster (1986)

The Tale of Dan de Lion (1986)

The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars (1988)

A Child's Garden of Grammar (1997)

Libretti and Plays

The Fall of the House of Usher (composer, Gregory Sandow; 1979)

Frankenstein (composer, Gregory Sandow; 1982)

Ben Hur (1989)

The Cardinal Detoxes (1990)

Interactive Software

Amnesia (1986)