

Esther M. Friesner

Hallowmass

Esther Friesner reports that her recent efforts include a collaborative novel with Mercedes Lackey, as yet untitled, and that her fourth "Chick" anthology, *The Chick Is in the Mail*, will be out in January.

This new fantasy story was inspired by a trip to Chartres cathedral. At one point, Esther heard "beautiful, silvery threads of music that seemed to spiral down from no visible source in the shadows above." Further examination, however, revealed a young man playing a flute, in front of the cathedral and some trick of acoustics obviously drew the melody into the building.

Read on and see how our Connecticut bard transmuted this small scene into a lovely yarn.

MASTER, THE HEART OF THESE things came to pass in the autumn of the year that the great cathedral neared completion. Beyond the town walls the fields were nearly bare and the forest put on splendor. Bright leaf crowns of bronze and purple, scarlet and gold flung themselves over the secret fastnesses of the wood where terrors crouched. In the shorn fields asters winked blue among the stubble. And everywhere, in the streets and on the narrow track slipping between the hills to the outlying villages, there was song.

The countryfolk sang because their harvest was done and the war had slithered its huge, armored body far into the south that year. Mothers sang cradle songs to cradles where for once no spectral hand of famine or illness or whetted steel had crept to touch and take their babes. Farmers bellowed drinking songs in the taverns because singing drowned out the noise of backbones that creaked and snapped when honest working men at last unbent their spines from the labor of reaping and stacking, threshing and winnowing the grain.

Giles was a man who made his songs with stone. He was well past the middle years of Adam's sons, his raven hair streaked and stippled with gray, his beard blazed silver like the back of a badger. When he first arrived, over fifteen Easters ago, no one in the town knew where he came from or who paid out his wages. He presented himself to the widow Agnes who had a small house hard by the

cathedral's growing shadow and offered her a fair price for the rental of a room, food to fill his belly, and the free use of her modest yard. The yard stood behind the house and was supposed to contain the widow's humble garden, but the plastered walls of the house itself hoarded sunlight from what few plants struggled their way out of the sour soil, and in time the cathedral's rising walls shouldered aside almost everything but shadows.

The widow Agnes therefore did not complain too loudly when the nature of Giles's intent for her property was made known. The very next day after his arrival, a dust-faced man named Paul the Brown presented himself at her door driving a cart with a load of fresh timber. She recognized him as one of the bishop's lowest-ranked servants and kept her thoughts to herself when Giles rushed out to greet him eagerly. Together the two men transported the lumber into the widow's yard and from it built a spacious, slant-roofed shed on ground where flowers often had been planted but never had lived to bloom.

In the days that followed, the widow Agnes witnessed more strange shipments arrive on her doorstep for her new boarder. There was a small, sturdy table, a stool standing on four fat legs, a coarse hempen sack that clanked demons out of the widow's white cat Belle, and lengths of sailcloth, thick with pale dust and neatly folded. All of these effects were trundled out to the shed in the yard where some were put in place and others put into ironbound chests of wood that locked with a snick-clack sound like jackdaws laughing. Last of all came the stones.

A squadron of servants showed their yellowed teeth to the widow when she answered their thunderous summons on the day the first more-than-man-size block of stone arrived. As with the first servant, Paul the Brown, their faces were all familiar to her--work-creased vizards of skin glimpsed in passing on market day, or when the widow's curious eye wandered during mass, or in the shadow of the tavern sign.

The leader of that burly crew doffed a cap frosty with dust and asked, "Where'll Master Giles have it?" He gestured to the block of raw-hewn stone on the cart behind him.

"Master Giles?" the widow echoed. Her commerce with the man until this had been scant and small (and she a woman whose inquisitive tongue could winkle out a fellow's life history in the time it takes to break a tinker's promise!). She knew him by that name but not that title.

"Aye, this is the first of 'em," the servant said. He might have said more, but Master Giles was there, white Belle a mewling ghost at his ankles. He spoke with brief courtesy to his landlady, begging her pardon for not having forewarned her of this visitation while at the same time telling her no more about it. Then he hustled forward to direct the men to move the block of stone into the widow's yard, under the shelter of the shed.

Some days later the widow Agnes found the form of a man emerging from the great stone. Crude as God's first tentative pinchings in the red clay that would be Adam, Master Giles's man lacked the features of a face (unless the first hint of

a high-bridged nose could be reckoned to that credit) and could be said to possess human hands only as a courtesy to the lumpy mass of rock at the ends of what might have been arms.

Master Giles saw the widow staring at his work and grinned. His thick hair and beard were now all white with the breath of chiseled rock, as if the stone were sucking away his allotted lifespan, but he worked bare-armed and bare-chested in the pleasant summer weather and the knotted muscles moving sleekly beneath the skin cried liar! to any who dared to call him old.

"Good day to you, goodwife," he said, still swinging the hammer, still holding the steel-edged cutting tool to its task. The tapping blows and the chinking sound of the stone's thousand small surrenders underlay his words in a smooth, steady rhythm. "What do you think of my Saint Clement?" He lowered the hammer and gestured at a protruding lump of rock with the chisel. "Here's the anchor that dragged him to a glorious martyr's death. I would have given him a stonemason's tools, but my lord bishop would discover my vanity all the earlier then." His hearty laugh was for himself and for all the petty conceits of a fragile world.

The widow crept nearer, but she could see neither the offered anchor nor the stonemason's point. His smile did not mock her when she confessed herself either bewildered by the light or merely bewitched by her own ignorance.

"You will see the anchor in time," Master Giles said kindly, setting his tools down on the worktable and taking her plump hand in his calloused palm. "The saint is still being born. You see, my lord bishop has brought me here for the cathedral's sake. I am to adorn the south porch below the great rose window with twelve figures in stone, and since Master Martin whose province is the north porch has already laid claim to the Twelve Apostles, I have a free hand in the choice of my saints. I thought to begin well by invoking the protection of Saint Clement. He has always been a friend to those of my trade. The Emperor Trajan tore him from the papal throne and sent him as a slave to the marble quarries of Russia, but even there he made conversions and worked miracles. Once, they say, his faith called forth water from a rock for the sake of his fellow-slaves' thirst. Soon after, he was flung into a great sea, the anchor around his neck. The angels themselves built him a stone tomb beneath the waves. That is beyond me, so I do this, to his glory."

The widow Agnes bobbed her head. She loved the tales of saints' lives, for she was a devout woman--all the more so since her husband had gone to sleep in a churchyard bed. He took with him to eternal rest the staff with which he used to beat his bride, but he forbore to fetch away his money. If this was not proof of divine grace, it would do for the widow Agnes. "Which saints will you choose for the other--" She did a quick tally"--eleven?"

"I don't know," said Master Giles. "Saint Barbara, perhaps, to keep the peril of fire far from the holy place, and Saint George to aid the farmer and protect good horses. Who can say?" His smile was whiter than the fresh-cut stone as he glimpsed Belle's pointed face staring boldly out at him from behind the widow's skirts. "I might even carve a likeness of Saint Anthony to mind the fortunes of

some small animals in need of watching."

The widow Agnes laughed out loud and told him he was a sorry rogue, and that she would warn my lord bishop of the jackanapes he'd hired for the adornment of the south porch. Then she brought Master Giles the good wine from the cellar and when the sun's setting cheated the eyes of gossips everywhere, she took him to her bed.

The years ran and the cathedral grew. The shapes of saints blossomed in the widow's yard and were duly bundled away to their places in the niches of the south porch. The widow and Master Giles lay down together many times with only simple human comfort in mind and awoke one morning startled to find love had slipped between the sheets. They did not marry, for the talk would crumble Master Giles's favor with the bishop as surely as it would destroy the widow's fame for piety and prayer. There did come a time in that first mad year when the widow had cause to travel south to settle a matter of inheritance among her distant kin, but she returned within a six-month and all was as before.

The little white cat Belle birthed many litters and died, leaving the wardship of the widow's house to her daughter Candida, who was also furred with snow. And one hot August day the widow died of a sweating fever that carried off many souls besides her own, leaving the care of her house to a distant relative and the care of Candida to Master Giles.

The distant relative turned out to be a spinster of the breed that seem born crones from their mothers' wombs. She was called Margaret, dead Agnes's far-removed cousin, a woman who had never married and therefore begrudged the joy of any woman who had. She was able, for charity, to forgive those who found themselves bound in miserable, loveless matches, and so for a time she had made Agnes her favorite. But when Agnes's husband died leaving the lady young enough and rich enough to live on sweetly content, Margaret came near to choking on the injustice of it all. Or perhaps it was only her own bile that rose to fill her throat.

Margaret lived with her parents in a village whose chief product was stink. After they died, Agnes sent her cousin plentiful support, the only fact which allowed Margaret to reconcile herself somewhat to Agnes's good fortune. She had less trouble reconciling herself to her own when the news reached her of Agnes's death and her own inheritance.

She arrived on a raw December day when Master Giles was just finishing work on his ninth saint. She came mounted on a fat donkey, purchased with the first portion of Agnes's bequest. (A clerk of the cathedral was guardian and messenger of the widow's estate. He it was who took word of Agnes's death and final testament to Margaret, along with a sum of money to finance the spinster's journey to her new demesne. Agnes had made a sizable gift to the cathedral as well as to her cousin, and so it was plain courtesy to see that good woman's affairs well settled.)

Margaret drove the donkey on to the timpani of her bony heels against the animal's heaving sides, a stout stick in her hand playing counterpoint on his

rump. The poor beast's brayed petition of mercy to heaven roused every street through which they passed. So loud was her advent, and so well heralded by the urchins running along beside her, that Master Giles himself was lured from his beloved stone to see what nine-days' wonder was invading his emptied life.

When she drew up abreast of the late widow Agnes's house, the spinster Margaret jerked on the donkey's rope bridle and slid from the saddle-blanket with poor grace. The throng of merrymaking children who had joined in her processional swarmed around her, offering to guide her, to hold the donkey's bridle, to perform any of a dozen needless errands to justify their continued presence underfoot. Master Giles saw with horror how the woman raised her stick, threatening to treat the children after a fashion that was unfit to treat a donkey.

"Go home, children," he said gently, stepping into their midst and placing his towering body as a shield between them and Margaret's stick. "Off with you now, you're wanted home." The children giggled and darted away, all save one.

"Who are you?" Margaret demanded of the stonecutter, her lips thin as meat cut at a poor man's table.

"I am Master Giles, in the service of my lord bishop."

"Oh." Her mouth was small and hard as a prunepit. "You. The clerk said you pay rent and you work to finish the cathedral. My lord bishop would rather not have you moved."

"My lord bishop is kind," said Master Giles in such a way that he let her know how alien he thought kindness was to her heart.

"My lord bishop may command me," Margaret said drily. "So you are to stay, then, since it does nothing to inconvenience him. How much longer must you live here?"

"Until I have finished birthing my saints."

"Birthing? How dare you speak so of the holy ones?" Margaret squawked like a goose caught under a style. "As if they were slimed with the foulness of a sinful woman's blood? Ugh! I will report this blasphemy to the bishop and you will be made to leave my house before another sun sets."

Master Giles's eyes lost their tolerant warmth. "You may say what you like into whatever ears will hear it. I will deny it all. Do you think my lord bishop will risk the promised beauty of his cathedral for the sake of a lone woman's rantings?"

"I have truth to speak for me," Margaret said, stiffer than the carven draperies that clothed Master Giles's stone children.

"That's as may be," he replied. "But I have my saints, and my saints have my lord bishop's ear." He turned from her proudly and almost sprawled over the huddled body of the boy who crouched against the doorframe of dead Agnes's

house.

"Go home, child," Master Giles told him. "Why do you linger here?" The boy looked up at the stonecutter with eyes as stony and unseeing as those of the master's carved saints and a face as beautiful as heaven. A blind man's staff leaned against his hollow shoulder but he did not have the shabby air of a beggar. His garb was well worn, simple, sufficient, and there was a bundle of belongings at his feet.

Margaret gave a harsh sniff. "This is Benedict," she said, and she seized the boy roughly by the wrist and thrust the lead-rope of her donkey into his hand. She barged into the widow Agnes's house without another word, leaving Master Giles to stare at the boy as blankly as if he himself were the sightless one.

The boy leaned on his staff and got to his feet, holding fast to the donkey's rope. "Is there a stable?" he asked, stooping to juggle rope and staff so that he might hold these and still take up his bundle.

"I will take care of the beast," Master Giles said, his tongue stumbling over the words as a score of unasked questions struggled for precedence. He tried to disengage the boy's hand from the donkey's lead, but Benedict refused to relinquish it.

"This is my work," he said. "I am always the one with the beasts."

Master Giles considered the boy's reply as no stranger than his bearing. He did not seem a servant, yet Margaret did not treat him as kin. "This way, then," he said at last, and set his hand on the boy's shoulder to guide him to the shack that served dead Agnes's house for a stable.

The house that once had warmed itself with love now steeped itself in ice. The house that once had rung with the sweet tempo of iron on stone, keeping time to a well-loved woman's morning song, now sheltered only silence. Margaret provided Master Giles with food and shelter and free use of the yard in accordance, to the letter, with dead Agnes's first agreement with the man. No less. Certainly no more. The stonecutter could find no matter for complaint in the quality and quantity of his victuals, and yet he rose from the table empty, burning with a hunger of the heart, a thirst of the soul.

As promised, the boy Benedict was the one with the beasts. He took care of the donkey and later, when Margaret purchased a family of chickens and a brown milk-goat, he looked after these too. He was up early each day, leading his charges off to graze on what few mouthfuls of dry grass the town green afforded in the harsh weather. Master Giles heard his staff tap across the paving stones, falling into its own cadence somewhere between the quicktime of the goat's hooves and the steady clop of the donkey's feet.

Winter closed over the town. It was a cruel season. Work on the cathedral slowed, with labor limited to only those artisans whose hands touched the interior of the sanctuary. Unfinished walls put on a penitent's shirt of thatch to keep the bitter weather from setting its teeth into the stone. Master Giles

set up canvas walls around his shed and worked on in all weathers, so long as the frost did not grow deep enough to affect the fiber of the rock.

One morning soon after Candlemas, before even the whisper of dawn had touched the sky, he was roused from his lonely sleep by the voice of the stone. The hour was too early even for country-bred Margaret to be padding about. Master Giles tossed aside his blankets, did up his hose, and pulled on a woollen smock over his tunic. His bones cried out for a cloak, but he hushed them with the reminder that work would warm them soon enough.

He loped silently down the stairs and came into the kitchen. A breath of light from the fading moon silvered the edges of the shutters. Master Giles fetched a small iron pot and filled it with coals plucked from the hearth's neatly banked ashes. This would be all the heat he'd have in the shed, for a greater fire might cause the stone to split. It was enough to keep his hands from stiffening at his art, and that was all he asked.

The house was very still. He felt as if he were Lazarus leaving the tomb. Margaret kept the place clean as boiled bones, yet she did not speak with Master Giles except to return his perfunctory salutations, to summon him at mealtimes, to give him messages from the cathedral, and to answer any questions he might ask. But while she tithed her words to him, the boy Benedict paid out none at all.

There was frost on the earth. Master Giles stood in the yard with his back to the house and raised his eyes to the great cathedral. "Five years or six and it will be done," he said, weaving white veils with his breath on the darkness. "Two years or three and it may be consecrated to use while the last touches are made on the outside. Had you lived to see it, Agnes--!" And his leathery thumb brushed the tears away before they could freeze into stars against the gray and black cloud of his beard.

It was then he heard the song. Thin and reedy, borne on a voice wobbling over words and music like a newborn calf trying its legs, it came so softly to the sculptor's ear that he almost doubted he heard it. But it was there. It was coming from the shed.

Master Giles felt something brush his leg. He looked down into Candida's flower-face. The white cat mewed inquisitively and he, feeling only a little foolish, motioned for her to keep still. He moved with the cat's own stealth to where the canvas walls were pierced by a loose-hung flap of sailcloth that kept out the wind. The song praised God for His all-sheltering love as the stonecutter crept through the doorway.

The boy Benedict sat on a heap of straw that warmed the feet of Master Giles's newest saint. The carven lamb that pressed itself against the carven lady's robes permitted thin young arms to wreath its rocky neck, made no objection to a dark head pillowed on its curlicued flank, did not protest the tears staining its gray fleece like the tracks of the rain. The boy sang through tears, his voice leaping and falling, trembling on a cusp of music and slipping from the precarious perch of a high note not quite grasped.

Master Giles held the music in his mouth and let the lovely, imperfect taste of it melt sweetly over his tongue. He could not take his eyes from the boy. His mind did not want to know the things his eyes finally told his heart. The stone face of the saintly virgin Agnes smiled down on the bowed head of a child whose face was the image of her own.

The white cat was not enthralled by human music. She ambled past the stonecutter, bright eyes of gold on the small, gray, squeaking temptations which all that straw might hide. Seeing a tuft tremble, she crouched, haunches bunched, tail stiffly twitching, lips silently writhing over her race's ceremonial curse upon the whole tribe of vermin. Then she sprang.

If there had been a mouse in hiding there, he escaped her, but the boy's foot did not. Benedict shouted with surprise and flung himself backward as Candida's paws captured his ankle. His whole weight struck the statue.

Master Giles shot through the doorway, throwing himself forward to embrace the boy with one arm and to steady the statue with the other. Straw flew up in a sunburst of golden dust. The boy yelled again to feel Master Giles's strong hand on his arm. He flailed his limbs wildly, fingers groping for his staff.

"Ouch!" cried the stonecutter as the boy's heel struck his thigh. "Hush, hush, don't be afraid, it's only me." His words worked. The boy was still. Empty eyes could yet hold questions. Master Giles replied, "I couldn't sleep, so I came out here to work. When I saw the cat pounce on you, and you hit the statue, I was afraid you were going to knock...it...o " Realization stole over him as he spoke, and he saw the same dawn on the boy's face as a smile.

The statue was nine feet of solid rock, Benedict a scant five feet of flimsy flesh and bone. "Me knock her over?" the boy asked lightly, dimples showing in a smile that belonged to the beloved phantom of the house.

"Why, yes," Master Giles said, falling gladly into the straight-faced fool's part. "With all your muscle, my poor saint would never have a chance to stand against you." And they both laughed.

He could tell the boy what he knew, then; what he had just then come to know. Shared laughter made shared hearts easier. The evidence of Master Giles's eyes did not come as much news to Benedict.

"I never knew you were my father, but I knew she was my mother," the boy said. "Margaret called me bastard so often when I was small that I grew up thinking it was my name. But when I knew the difference and heard her call her cousin Agnes whore, I knew that must be another way for Margaret to say that Agnes was the bastard's mother."

"I'll kill her." Master Giles forced the words out between gritted teeth. Benedict could not hope to see his father's knuckles whiten, but he could not help feel the stonecutter's corded arms tense with cold rage.

"Let her be," said Benedict softly, and his voice held the peace of Christ. It was then that Master Giles knew there would never be anything he could refuse his son.

"She never told me she was with child," the stonecutter said, stroking the last of the tears from Benedict's cheeks. "If she had--" He shook his head regretfully for all things small and lost and loveless. The two of them sat in the straw at the feet of the stone Saint Agnes. Her arms reached out, turning her cloak to sheltering wings above them. The irreverent cat bounded onto the table and thence up to perch on the saint's crown of martyrdom. Cold dawn paled the canvas walls.

The boy ran his hand over the lamb's petrified curls. "You are carving this for her."

Master Giles nodded, then realized such silent signs were useless with his son. "Yes," he said. "This saint is hers. She will stand with Saint Clement and Saint George, Barbara and Anthony, Martin for my good friend Master Martin, Giles in thanks to my patron saint for his many blessings, Mathurin for all the fools of this world and sweet Saint Cecilia for music."

"Music," breathed the boy.

"You sing--you sing well." Master Giles was in at ease with compliments. Even in dead Agnes's arms he could not put his tongue to lovers' words but let moans and kisses and the touch of hands speak her praises for him. "I heard you when I came out here this morning. I did not know the song."

"She taught it to me," said Benedict.

"Margaret?" He could not fathom that dry stick teaching a child anything but a catechism of bitterness.

Benedict laughed. "Can you really think such a thing? No, no, I mean the other."

"Your...mother?" Master Giles cudged his brains, trying to recall another time besides the secret months of Benedict's awaited birth when his lost love had left the town. He could bring none to mind.

The boy said, "No. I mean the lady." And he said no more, as if having said this was enough.

Master Giles felt like one of good Saint Mathurin's protected fools. "What lady is this? The wife of the lord of Margaret's old village? His daughter? A kinswoman?"

Benedict snorted all of these away. "If you could hear her sing, you would know. I met her in the woods, when Margaret sent me there to pasture the pigs. There were tumbled stones, and the broken tooth of a ridged column. In springtime I could feel tiny chips of rock like little slick scales under my bare feet, and places between them where the mortar had cracked and violets grew."

"A ruin," said Master Giles, who had passed many such places as he moved from town to town, following his calling. One time he had thought to spend the night in the shelter of half-vanished walls, sleeping on a mosaic of dolphins and vines, until his eye fell upon a toppled statue in the empty basin of a fountain. Lichens crawled across enameled eyes, moss clothed wanton nakedness, and still this work of a dead man's hands outshone Master Giles's finest endeavors. He fled the place, ashamed and aching with envy.

"She was there," the boy said. "I didn't know, at first. Then I heard the music. The words praised God, yet sounded...I cannot say how they sounded, not truly. Can praise hold sorrow? I called out, 'Who's there?' The music stilled. All I could hear was the snuffle and grunt of Margaret's pigs. I thought I'd frightened the lady away."

"How could you tell she was a lady?" Master Giles asked. "She might have been a peasant's daughter sent, like you, on an errand."

"You would not say so if you'd heard the daintiness of her song. A voice like that never called pigs home or shooed chickens," Benedict countered. "Besides, I caught her scent, all flowers, dewy and clean. When she returned, she gave me reason not to doubt, proof of what I already knew."

"She returned?"

"That very day. The wood was growing cooler; it must have been near sunset. I was whistling up my pigs--they're bright, obedient beasts or Margaret never would have trusted them to me--when I heard her song again. This time it was a different one, a hymn to the Virgin. I'd never heard the like. There was a year when the pigs bred so well, Margaret allowed me to accompany her to a fair at Saint Jerome's abbey. I heard the monks in choir and stood captured by the sound until Margaret gave me a knock on the head to hurry me along. I thought then that there could be nothing more beautiful in all the world than the sound of so many voices interwoven so perfectly." A wistful look crossed his face. "I was wrong."

There was something in his son's expression that troubled Master Giles to the heart. Blind, his boy must keep company with fancies more than most. Some fancies fevered the brain, bringing madness. What was all this talk of ladies met in the wildwood? The forest was no haven for the gently bred. It welcomed none.

The woods around this town were shrouded in dark legends, tales of the Fey with their cold immortal beauty who begrudged men their frail immortal souls. Their chief delight was robbery, pure and simple, snatching away the precious few comforts mortals could claim. With their deceiving ghost-lights they robbed the weary workman of his way home to rest when he crossed their lands by night. Their heartless swains led maidens to believe themselves beloved, let them wake to find themselves abandoned. Not even the innocent babe in the cradle was safe from their malice, their schemes at once bereaving mother of child and child of human love.

Was stealing a poor blind boy's sanity beyond them?

"My boy," said the stonecutter, trying to hold his voice as steady as he held his chisel. "My boy, think. What would a lady do in such a place, so late, so lone? Are you sure of what you heard? Perhaps it was the wind."

"Does the wind sing Christ's hosannas?" The saintly stone children born of Master Giles's hand had faces less set and stern than Benedict's.

"I mean, perhaps the wind brought you the sound of human voices from a distance," the man suggested. "There are convents in the wood, and the holy sisters-"

"I touched her sleeve. It flowed over my fingertips like water. I touched her hand. It was softer than the muzzle of a newborn foal."

"How did she come to permit these liberties?"

"The second time I heard her song, I rushed forward calling on her to reveal herself, in Christ's name. I couldn't bear to have that sound taken from me again. I imagined that if she was a Christian, she must heed my plea, and if she was not then the power of Our Lord's name would break her glamour and hold her where she stood." His look was rueful as he added: "When I ran, I tripped over a pig."

The agitation of Master Giles's spirit almost broke free as laughter. He smothered it. "She came to your aid, then?" The boy confirmed this. "And was that when you learned who this lady was?"

"She said she was called the lady Oudhalise." The boy pronounced the outlandish name as easily as if it were plain Mary. "She told me that her kin lived nearby, but that I had found her at home."

"At home! In a ruin? A place with no stone left atop another? She must have been mad." The stonecutter was aghast at the thought of his son in such company.

Fresh tears trembled in the boy's milky eyes. "Then I wish I were as mad as she."

Master Giles cast his arms around Benedict and held him tight. "Don't speak so! For the sake of your soul, don't."

The boy was stiff in his father's embrace. "For the sake of my soul, she taught me her songs. We sat there until the night was cold around us and she sang for me until I had them all by heart. She told me, 'The women here once heard a man who told them that they could not enter heaven except as children. I can never be a child, but I long for the promise of your heaven. My songs are my offering to the Lord I seek, though the lord I serve would destroy me if he knew I give them to you. Take them into your heart. Take me with you to the gates of paradise.'"

Master Giles shook his head. Madness, he thought, but all he said was: "Poor lady."

"Yes," the boy agreed. "I have her face here, in my hands. She let me touch her face and left me after. I came back to that same place in the forest many times, but I never met with her again. All I have left is what she gave me." And now he loosed the longing of his tears.

Later that day Margaret could do nothing but mutter "Lackwit, madman, fool," when Master Giles announced he'd taken the blind boy to be his apprentice. Others said the same when the news went 'round.

"How can you do this thing?" Master Martin demanded as the two stonecutters sat in the tavern over wine. Outside the wind howled early March's chill damnation and blew away lost souls' last grasp on their graves. "He can't see the stone. How will he shape it?"

"You mind your Apostles and leave me to mind my saints," was all Master Giles replied.

All that he knew was the need to shelter his son from a world that would destroy him if it heard his tale of the lady in the wood. The only way he could see to prevent this was to take the boy into his care, and the one path open to him there was to name him apprentice.

In time, it might have been forgotten, but for Margaret.

The bishop did not care if Master Giles apprenticed himself a wild dog so long as his chisel continued to shape saints for the glorification of the cathedral. He praised the sweetness of Master Giles's Saint Agnes and could not commend the sculptor's skill highly enough when his next creation, the beautiful Saint Sebastian, drew the hearts as well as the eyes of all who saw it. (And if the saint's face was the image of the man's apprentice lad, what of that? Time enough to inquire into such matters after all twelve niches of the south porch held their treasures.)

It was Margaret kept things on the boil, Margaret whose tongue wagged free in the marketplace, the tavern, the church, the street. When Master Giles took Benedict for his apprentice, he stole away not only that woman's unpaid servant but the butt at which she shot her wormwood-tipped barbs. How could the loveless woman feel superior to the beloved dead if she could no longer hurl abuse at love's living proof? Her tongue had lost its whetstone and its target. All that remained to her was to hound Master Giles with a madman's reputation as punishment for his having taken away her sport.

"Let him be as mad as Nebuchadnezzar," said the bishop. "But let him give me saints." So Master Giles gave him next Saint Catherine of Alexandria. "That face!" the bishop cried when the sculptor and his workmen brought the finished statue to the cathedral grounds. "Twisted as an old grapevine's root. The holy legends rated her a beauty, but this is a shrew."

"Ah well...." Master Giles shrugged. "So many centuries, looking after the affairs of spinsters--" He patted the spiked wheel of her martyrdom. "That would turn nectar to vinegar, my lord, given the temperament of some of her congregation."

The bishop squinted up at the saint. "That face...Do I know it?" And weeks later, when his processional happened to pass Margaret in the street, the way he stared at her became her shame and the talk of the town for days.

Saint Catherine was Master Giles's eleventh saint. There was now only one niche below the great rose window of the south porch that wanted its tenant.

How strangely it all turned out! One day the boy who could not see to swing a hammer against a chisel's head came across a lump of raw clay on his father's workbench. It was Master Giles's habit to mold his creatures out of clay before giving them their bodies of stone. Benedict felt the cool, pliable earth beneath his fingers and began to work it. As he worked, he sang one of his alien songs. His voice had mellowed with the years, learned steadiness, could hold to a tune the way a good hound held to a trail. It was a pleasure to hear him so melodiously praising all things holy, even if the music that fell from his lips was like nothing that ever rang out beneath the church rafters nor in the taverns nor in the distant fields.

"What's this?" cried Master Giles, coming up behind his boy and seeing the red mass under his hands. He reached over Benedict's shoulder and plucked the nearly finished figure from its creator's grasp. The stonecutter sucked in his breath in awe. The face of an infant angel dimpled up at him.

It was perfection. He had never seen the like. That cherub's countenance contained just enough of the earthly child's essence to give a man hope that even his stained soul might someday soar with the hosts of heaven.

"Is it good, Father?" Benedict asked softly.

"Is it good...." Master Giles could only stare at his son's handmade marvel while tears of wonder brimmed his eyes. "I will copy it out in stone, my boy, and lay it before my lord bishop himself."

So he did. The bishop was a canny man who knew the work of each of his cathedral worker's hands the way a falconer knows each of his birds by flight, when they are no more than specks against the sun. The bishop knew this angel was not Master Giles's work.

Master Giles said, "It was made by my apprentice, who is blind. He worked it in clay. All I did was give it a body of stone."

"The Lord closes only the eyes of the body," the bishop replied. "In His mercy, He has opened for this lad the eyes of the soul. Bring him to me. I am minded to see this miracle."

Master Giles did as he was bidden, his heart light. He knew, you see, that soon enough his work on the great cathedral would be done. Already he was considering the final saint he must carve, and once that was accomplished there would be no further call for him in this town. If it fell out that another town had use for his skills, all would be well, but if not -- He had gone the roads in idleness before this, sometimes for weeks, sometimes for months, once for over a year. When there was only himself to think of, the roads held no terror, but now --

Now the devil's fork held him: He could not subject a blind boy to the road. He could not abandon his son to the absent mercies of Margaret.

A miracle, my lord bishop calls him, he thought. Let it be so! What churchman would not be proud to keep a tame miracle in his court, especially now that there is a great cathedral to support? The relics of the saints will bring some pilgrims, but many more will flock to see beauty spring from the hands of the blind. Then and there he resolved to do everything he could to advance Benedict in favor with my lord bishop.

The first thing that he did was to bring the lad before the bishop, as the bishop had commanded.

"Well, my child, you must tell me how you did it," the bishop said, seated on his great chair of state while Master Giles helped his son to kneel and kiss the ring and rise again.

"What would you have me tell?" Benedict asked.

"Why, how you came to do this." The bishop held up the cherub's head. Then he realized that the lad could not know his meaning, lacking sight. "How you knew to make so exquisite a thing as this angel," he amended.

"Oh," said Benedict, nodding. "That was easy. She sang him for me."

The bishop sat a little straighter in his chair. "She?" he asked, and also: "Sang?"

Master Giles's hands tightened on his son's shoulders. "It is a true miracle, my lord bishop," he said hastily. "The lad himself told me of it. The Virgin Mary appeared to him in a vision of the soul, for which no man needs eyes, and sang of the glories of heaven. Thus he was divinely inspired."

"Ah." It was the bishop's turn to nod. He was a man willing to understand miracles, but not wonders. "And do you think this was a solitary vision, or might we expect more?"

"More," said Master Giles emphatically. "God willing," he added, seeing the bishop's eye turn hard and cold and narrow as the chisel's blade.

"Let us pray that so it may be," the bishop said drily, and laid aside the angel. "It were a pity to spend all the inspiration of a vision on grasping so small a portion of heaven."

Later, as they were walking home, Master Giles asked his son, "What rubble was that you gave the bishop? 'She sang him for me'? He will think you a lunatic."

"She did." The boy was sullen. "My lady of the forest. I slept and saw her. It's happened before this, only I never had cause to speak of it. She was seated at a fountainside, singing praise to God. Oh Father, the colors! How sweetly they sounded on my ear!" His sulky look melted in the bliss of his remembered vision. "With her voice alone she built a stair of silver and gold to the very throne of glory, and up and down its length the angels climbed. Father, I think that I saw my mother among the blest. My lady sang her face for me so that I could feel it to my heart!" He embraced himself as if wings of joy had enfolded him. Then his shoulders sagged, his head drooped. "But she is dead, my poor lady of the forest, and kept from hope of heaven. Her songs of praise and her salvation are locked away from her Redeemer as deeply as if they were encased in stone."

Master Giles pressed his calloused hand to the boy's brow. "Have you fever?" he asked, feeling his heart drum panic. "This is no holy vision, but a sending from the damned. Don't speak of it! Not before any, man or woman!"

"But you asked," the boy replied simply. "And so did the bishop. I tell you, that is how I came to make the angel. Her song opened the vault of heaven to my eyes and left the shapes of all the saints and angels in my hands. I cannot forget them. I cannot forget her, or her pain, or her song."

"I am your father," Master Giles said severely. "I command you to forget." They walked the rest of the way home in silence.

Like most parents, Master Giles mistook silence for consent. So it was that by the time they reached dead Agnes's house he was convinced that his child was in no further danger of being branded mad for the indiscretions of his tongue. Indeed, the stonecutter felt secure enough in his dominion over the boy to revert to planning for Benedict's future.

"My son," he said the next day, "here is clay." He placed the boy's hands on a lump of the stuff that was at least five times as big as the quantity he was used to employ to make his models. "Make a saint."

"Father...?" Benedict turned toward Master Giles's voice.

"The twelfth saint for the south porch," Master Giles went on. "I want it to be of your design, just as you made the angel. Then I will carve it. You can do this, my boy." You must do this, for your life's sake, his heart implored silently.

Benedict sighed and rested his hands on the clay. "I can try," he said. And he began.

There passed a shiftless several weeks for Master Giles. Unable to work until he had Benedict's model before him, he roamed the town, fidgety as a dog with a skinful of fleas. He was not used to idleness, and so made himself a pest on the

cathedral site, diverting the workmen with japes and stories, discussing problems in design with the master architect that had not been problems until he suggested otherwise. Mostly he knew the tavern.

But at last there came a morning when Benedict shyly asked his father to see what it was that lay hidden beneath the damp rag on the worktable in the shed. Master Giles removed the clay-stained cloth with the reverence a lover might accord the last veil between himself and the enjoyment of his lady's favors.

And then he stood as one taken by the immanence of angels.

Words flew through the town streets, darting from house to house like a flight of swallows. Rumor soared and dipped beneath a hundred roofs, coming at last to nest in the bishop's palace: The last saint was more than stone, more than flesh. The last saint of Master Giles's carving was the beauty of a blessed soul made visible.

Oh, how many came to see her, this incredible apparition! Hard Margaret stood ward at the gates of the house and used her broom to shoo away all comers save the highest as if they had been poultry. The bishop's grace she admitted, of course, though that churchman still had the tendency to steal shuddersome sideways looks at her in a way that got beneath her skin and itched.

"Magnificent!" the bishop breathed when Master Giles swept aside the cloth he'd used to shroud the last saint from prying eyes. "Is it Magdalen you've chosen to bless our final vacancy?"

"My apprentice chose her," Master Giles replied, growing fat with pride in his son's accomplishment and the bishop's obvious approval. But had that worthy of the church been paying any sort of heed, he might have heard that Master Giles did not truly answer his inquiry as to the identity of this wonder caught in stone.

And so the bishop's servants came to carry off the last of the twelve statues and set her in her place along with all the rest, above the south porch of the cathedral. With her came the news that the holy place might now be consecrated, and all the town rejoiced with preparations for the great day.

Master Giles sat with his son in the now-empty shed. "The bishop is much taken with your work, Benedict," he said. A bowl of blushing grapes and shiny apples sat on the table between them, the first fruits of the coming harvest. "He would have you move into his palace and work for him."

"How shall I do that, Father?" Benedict asked, his fingers wandering over the boards until they encountered a plump grape and popped it into his mouth. "I can only work the clay."

"There are plenty of men who can copy out in stone what others make in clay," Master Giles replied. "There are precious few who can copy out in clay what exists only in visions. My lord bishop knows talent and has the power to shape the world around you into a most comfortable place indeed, if you will simply

place that talent in his service. Your saint has stolen his heart."

"As she stole mine," the boy murmured. His father bit into an apple then, and the crisp report of teeth in white flesh kept him from hearing Benedict's words.

So it came to be, in that harvest season, that the countryside buzzed louder than a hundred hives with the great doings of the town. (The highborn must be called purposely, but the poor always hear the chink of alms and follow.) Peddlars and mountebanks and wandering priests carried the news out of the gates, into the fields. (Who would not come who could? Which farmer's dreary nights and drudging days would not be enlivened for his being able to boast, in after years, I was there!) Word spread from the stone walls over the ploughlands and into the darkest recesses of the wildwood, where once a blind boy had pastured pigs among ruins. (In the twilight of a day that saw the town roads thick with travelers bound to witness the next dawn's consecration rites, a tall figure of inhuman slenderness and grace rose from his place beside a shallow, harebell-covered grave and called his vassals home.)

On the day of the consecration, Margaret rose grumpily from her bed and stumbled to the window, scrubbing the smut of sour-hearted dreams from her eyes. She pushed the shutters open and gave a cross look down into the street where already the populace was flooding the narrow thoroughfare, heading for the cathedral. Somewhere the bell of a smaller church was ringing. Water sloshed over stone. Roosters stretched their necks to the blade of the rising sun and crowded mortality's defiance of death.

Margaret tossed her woolen gown over her head and went downstairs without the formality of a face-wash.

Master Giles and Benedict were already up and about their business. Margaret's chill eye swallowed the boy's beauty as an insult to all her fixed ideas of sin and punishment. Not even his blindness could assuage her offended sense of morality this day. He was going to live in the bishop's palace-- a bastard to live in luxury and ease who should have suffered and died for his mother's sins! Was this fair? Was this the reward her stale virginity had earned in this world? Only by setting her thoughts on the pious hope of fiery eternal torment awaiting the child hereafter was she able to enjoy her breakfast.

The three ill-sorted souls, whose only common ground was the shelter of dead Agnes's roof, walked out that morning in company. Together they made their way to the open space before the cathedral where the ceremonies would commence. There was a special place set aside for certain of the bishop's favored ones-- Master Giles and Benedict among them. For this reason alone Margaret consorted with them, sticking so close they could not hope to escape her. She smiled grimly, knowing that a real man would have sent her on her way with a cuff, but that this great fool of a Master Giles never would do, because he was weak and silly.

It was as splendid a spectacle as ever any townsman could have hoped. The villeins who had come to gawp were well content with all there was to gawp at. Highborn men were there, and ladies so white they looked like milk poured into

samite skins. Faces like painted eggs nodded beneath headdresses of terrifying weight and unpredictable balance. Gusts of musk and spiced orange puffed from tight-laced bosoms, little cloth-caged breasts seeming hard as cobblestones.

There was to be a procession, it was said. Sweet-voiced children garbed in white would march with pure beeswax tapers in their chubby pink hands, singing hymns and anthems. The bishop would come gowned in music, every glint of his jeweled robes tossing a garland of notes against the sky. Or so the whispers ran.

There were many whispers, many murmurings. The crowd bumped and jostled all along the route the bishop and his suite were supposed to follow. The nobles and the peasantry alike would not be still for fear that they might miss the chance to pass along the all-important cry of "There they are!"

As it happened, they need never have worried.

Where did it come from, that uncanny hush that fell so suddenly over all the town, like the stillness before a thunderstorm? The ripe, red-gold sunlight of October drained to gray. Men looked up and could not tell the stone bastions of the cathedral from the sky that stood behind. Even the rooks who had haunted the cathedral since its inception were quiet. A lady dropped her rosary. Pearls clattered over the stones like the bones of martyrs tossed out of their tombs.

And then, a lone, sharp cry to shatter the stillness: "There they are!"

There were horses. There were never supposed to be horses. The bishop's procession was supposed to be afoot, a show of humility for the people to remember. Yet here were horses! Indeed, for an instant those who saw the tall, proud mounts doubted their eyes, for the beasts made no sound at all as their silver-shod hooves passed over the pavement. The open space before the cathedral filled with them -- black and smoke and roan -- and the richness of their trappings would have left the bishop's robes looking like a beggar's rags had my lord bishop been anywhere in sight.

Where was he? No one thought to ask; no one cared to answer. The eyes of all present were devoured by the sight before them, for if the mounts of that eerie parade were worth noting, the riders were impossible to ignore.

High and haughty the lords of elven sat their gemmed and lacquered saddles. Hair like hoarfrost streamed down in gossamer fails that overlay their horses' trappings with a mantle more glorious than any weaving from a mortal loom. Lords and ladies of the Fey came riding, tiny winged dragons perched on their slim wrists as ordinary men might sport a favorite falcon. They rode up to the very steps of the cathedral and there they stopped and stayed.

"What blasphemy is this?" boomed the bishop. He seemed to have come out of nowhere, all his splendor made invisible by the awe which the Fey had conjured so casually from the people. He was not a man who relished being overlooked. He stood between the elven host and the bulky fortress of his faith, gilded crozier in hand, as if to offer them battle. "Begone, you soulless rabble! May the devil claim his own!"

"May we all claim our own this day," said the foremost elvenlord, and his soft words lilted with such melody that the bishop's promised childchoir would have sounded like a clash of copper pans beside him.

"What do you seek here?" the bishop demanded, eyeing the elvenlord with the narrow mind's suspicion of beauty.

"We know our quarry," came the cool reply. And the elvenlord flicked the bridle of his mount just enough to make it resume its leisurely pace around to the south porch of the cathedral.

The crowd did not seem to move, and yet somehow the passage of the Faerie host drew mortals along with it the way a stream in flood will carry all manner of oddments along in its course. Master Giles certainly did not know how he came to be there, yet there he was, in full sight of the south porch with his son's shoulder under his guiding hand and even Margaret's stack-o'-sticks body a comforting presence at his side.

The elvenlord was pointing up. His slender hand made bright with diamonds, blue and white, was pointing at the row of saints above the porch, below the rose window.

"Give her back to us," he said, "and we will go."

They knew whom he meant, mortals and elves alike. There was no need for him to stipulate. She stood apart from her eleven companions as a dove among jackdaws. Her lips were parted as if her stony body were a spell that had overcome her at her prayers, freezing on her tongue all her pleas for divine clemency, her petitions for heaven's compassion.

Not for herself, that mercy she implored, no, much as she might require it. There was that in her face to tell any with heart (if not eyes) to see that all her unsaid, unsung prayers were for the outcast, the helpless, the one who does not even know he stands in need.

"Do you know," the bishop was heard to remark, "on second glance I don't think that's the Magdalen after all."

"She is my sister, the lady Oudhalise," said the elvenlord. "A fool, but still a lady of the Fey. She broke her heart with hankering after your mortal talk of heaven. There was no need for her to perish. We are immortal, when we own the wit to enjoy immortality. Still, she died, she pined and died, fading from our court like a frost-struck flower. She lies buried in woodland earth, poor witling, and there let her lie. This likeness is an insult and a desecration."

"I never thought I'd stand in agreement with an elf," the bishop muttered.

"Give her back," repeated the elvenlord.

"Take her, then," the bishop spat. But his venom was all in his eyes, and these

were aimed elsewhere. Master Giles saw the poisonous look he and his son received from my lord bishop, and he felt his bowels go cold.

"I may not," the lady's lordly brother replied. "If it were so easy, would I have troubled your petty rites? She may not be taken unless she is freely given."

"Well, then, consider it so. I give her back to you more than freely gladly!" The bishop used his crozier in the same style that Margaret had used her broom to shoo away unwanted visitors. A child in the mob giggled.

Still the elvenlord demurred. "She is not yours to give." His eyes scanned the press and met eyes that could not tell that they were sought. "She is his. Let him give her up and we will go."

They tore Benedict from his father's grasp and hustled the lad before the bishop, before the Faerie host. The boy's unseeing gaze rose as the elf-lord uttered his demand again: "Release her, boy, and we may yet depart leaving you as we found you."

Master Giles wrung his hands, for he knew his son's response even before the words left Benedict's lips: "That I will not. I can't give what isn't any man's to hold."

They fell upon him with words at first -- both sides of the quarrel, elven and mortal. The bishop and all his suite exhorted the lad not to be a fool, to speak sense, to give this unholy congregation of visitants whatever it took to effect their banishment. Only do that, they told him, and his insane blasphemy (Whoever heard of an elvenlady in the company of saints? Merciful God above!) might in time be absolved. On their side the elves spoke less and said more. Would he choose to give them what they asked or did he want to die? It was that simple.

Then all fell silent again, and Benedict replied, "I've already said all I can say: I can't give what isn't mine. Her soul is her own, God have it in keeping. I have only offered it a haven, a shell of stone it must outgrow, soon or late, as surely as the flower breaks the seed that holds it safely through the winter."

The elvenlord's laughter was like perfect music with the heart torn from it, all a fair seeming, but meaningless. "You speak of souls in the same breath with our kind, boy? Are you so ignorant, or do you play some idiot game? I am in no sportive mood, I would be gone quickly. I tell you, it is like an agony of cold iron in my eyes to have to remain in your midst, seeing the crudeness of your mortal cities, the ugliness of your mortal faces. I have not come here for pleasure; I have come for my own."

"If she were your own, you'd have her," the boy replied mildly.

"Come now!" the bishop cried, thumping Benedict smartly on the shoulder with his square-fingered hand. "It's common knowledge that these creatures of fire and air are soulless as stone!"

The boy turned his face toward the bishop's voice and said, "Then this knowledge is very common, but knows nothing at all, either of souls or stones." His head swung back vaguely in the direction of the elvenlord. "You were her kin, yet you never knew her. If you dreamed you loved her at all, you loved her as a mirror of yourself. But I -- I have no use for mirrors. I held her image not before my eyes, but in my heart. She knew love, forgiveness, mercy, prayer. Knowing all these, could she help but know God? Could she do other than own a soul? I have heard it preached how the rich man Dives turned the beggar Lazarus from his palace gate and burned in hell for his sins. Will the same God who judged Dives thus for uncharity lack charity Himself? Will He turn her from the gate of His cathedral now?"

"Boy, you walk dangerous ground," the bishop said harshly. "Who taught you it was your place to speak of Scripture? Your elven woman is of no importance to our Lord. How can He even be aware of her presence, when it takes a human soul to call upon His mercy and be seen?"

"I do not ask Him to see," said Benedict. "Nor did she. Only to listen." And he closed his sightless eyes, pressed his hands together, and opened his mouth in song.

It was the song that Master Giles had heard the boy sing while his fingers worked the clay. It entered his body not by the ears but by the bones, the blood, the pulsing of the heart. Note by tremulous note, it was a song meant to ascend the golden steps of Paradise.

And then it was gone, sharply, abruptly, with no warning. Benedict sprawled face-down on the stones before the south porch of the cathedral, a little trickle of blood running from his head. Over him stood Margaret.

"Damn you, you bastard limb of Satan, give this creature what it wants and let it be gone!" she shrieked, waving the cudgel with which she'd struck the boy. It was a piece of wood garnered from the trash of the street, bristling with splinters. Master Giles stood as one lightning-struck, unable to believe the brutality he'd just witnessed. Margaret ranted on at the unconscious boy: "You'll have us all killed by faerie magic, else turned over to the Church courts for harboring a heretic like you!" She whirled to face the elvenlord. "Take your sister! Take her! Have no more dealings with the boy -- he's mad! I am his guardian and I speak for him. Take her! She is freely given!"

The paralysis left Master Giles's limbs in a rush of red hate. He leaped forward with a roar, hands hungering for Margaret's skinny neck. She shrieked and threw herself for the bridle of the elf-lord's steed, hoping perhaps to merit his protection as his good and faithful servant. The elf-lord merely tugged at the reins and caused his mount to step primly back, out of the way between Master Giles and Margaret. The stonecutter's hands met the woman's papery flesh and closed tightly around her windpipe. The egg-faced highborn ladies chirped and twittered, fine hands fluttering like doves in delight over the unexpected treat of spectacle and death.

And then the miracle.

They could not tell -- none of them who stood there in the great cathedral's shadow that day -- they could not say just when they first heard the music. It was simply there, like the air and the sunlight and the smells of the town. Some claimed it fell from heaven, a shower of angelic voices. Some raised work-hardened hands to thick, ungainly lips and dreamed that the voices they heard were their own, transformed by some greater power, raised in a song whose words and music they had never been taught but had always known.

It was a healing, that music. It stole Master Giles's hands from around Margaret's neck and set them to raise up the body of his son instead. It set the bishop's heart and not just the words of his mouth on forgiveness, love, salvation. It was a song kin and child of many songs: A mother's voice rejoicing over a blessed cradle; a husbandman's rough cheer over a day's work done and well done; a virgin lass weaving dreams of love into the melody that springs unbidden to her lips when she first sees a young man's smile that is meant for her alone; an old woman crooning a low, contented tune by the fireside where even her dwindling life is beloved and welcomed by those around her.

Master Giles was the first to recognize the true source of that song. "The statue!" he cried. "The statue is singing!" He held his son's limp body to his breast with one strong arm and with his free hand gestured wildly at the stone he had carved to match his son's clay model, the saint who was called soulless sister to a lord of Faerie.

His words said all and said far too little. More than a single miracle had put on a skin of music there that day. More than the single statue molded prayer into melody as a blind boy molds beauty into clay. The lady's image did not sing alone. All the stone saints sang together with her, and all the people of the town, and all the stones of the cathedral too until the heavens could not help but hear the sweet, pious petition of one yearning heart.

All the people of the town? No. Margaret stood cold and still as any stone, unmoved by the chorus of life and love surging up around her. "Fools!" she bellowed, red-faced, into the faces of the noblewomen. "Idiots!" she roared into my lord bishop's own enraptured gaze and moving lips. "Break this spell, shatter this glamour, burst this evil enchantment into a thousand pieces!"

But all that broke was the twelfth statue in its niche. It burst from the inside out, like a bubble, and something small and pure and brilliant flew from its shattered core and soared into the waiting smile of heaven.

Silence held the square before the great cathedral, silence and all its awesome host, flourishing their smoke-streaked banners. Neither elf nor mortal dared to break the holy reign of that innumerable army that laid ghostly swords to living lips and stole away all chance of speech.

But all sounds are not speech, and often it is the unarmed scout who steals from the city gates and breaks the encircling army's hold. A sob rang out in the bright fall air, and the sound of a man falling to his knees on stone, in his

arms the still, pale body of his son.

It seemed like such a little hurt, the blow cold Margaret dealt blind Benedict. Yet who has the eyes capable of seeing beneath the skin? Whose sight can discern the tracings of mortality's doorways on the smiling skull? Who among us can tell at which of these gates of blood and bone a single knock will open a wide way for the dark-winged angel of death?

Benedict sagged in his father's arms, the warmth fast leaving those thin limbs, his lips still parted in a song he would never finish. Master Giles cradled him close and let his tears water eyes now sightless forever.

At length his raw grief eased and he became aware of a slim, strong hand on his shoulder. Reluctantly he lifted his face from his boy's stone visage and turned to meet the gaze of the elvenlord.

"Mortal man," said the master of the Fey, holding his wondrous steed by its golden bridle, "I do not pretend to understand your miracles. As I am soulless, I have no need of your heaven, no fear of your hell, and all your past and future are a single summer's day to me. I have never tried to understand your kind any more than your kind have tried to see the world through the eyes of the cow you drive to the slaughter, or the donkey whose back you break with burdens, or the stray dog you kick away from the fire. And yet --" His voice, so flawless, caught itself upon the bramble of a sob. "And yet this -- this I think I understand."

Master Giles, voice rasped over the elvenlord's words. "What good is all your understanding when I have lost my son?"

They gathered around him then, all the lords and ladies of Faerie, all the masters of the Church, the people of the town. Some kissed his cheek, some only touched his hand, some begged blessing of dead Benedict's fragile corpse, others stared at the little body with the relic-hunter's apacious hunger, biding time and opportunity. Those mortals who could not find a way through the press to reach the body looked angrily about for the hand that had struck down the child. Not because to take so small a life was horror enough; for them such losses were a common thing, an immutable face of life's harsh rule, to be clucked over and tidily forgotten when they raised a stick against their own younglings. No, these good folk wanted Margaret's blood because she had robbed them of a living saint, of fresh miracles his song might have made their due, of the chance for their own reflected glory. A great clamor arose from the crowd, a cry of hounds.

It was a very lucky thing for Margaret that the bishop's entourage ringed her first, or she would have been raw strands of flesh and bloody bone by the time the mob was through with her. She stood between two men-at-arms -- shaking with fear, weeping for her own fate -- until the stronger of the two dealt her a backhand blow to buckle her knees and make her keep still.

The bishop called for peace, but all he got was silence. His robes, stiff with their fine embroidery of gold and silver and pearl, cut a furrow through the mob like a plough's wooden tooth tearing up the soil. He stood over Master Giles and

said, "God's mercy is great, His judgments beyond question. For your son's life, we have purchased sight of a miracle."

"Sight...." The word rang hollow in Master Giles's throat and the laughter that followed left many men thinking of the echoing grave.

The bishop was not one to be belittled by his servant's inattention. He meant to do a great thing here, before his new cathedral, so that ever afterward his action might be linked to the miracle and his name remembered. "Life is God's to give," he said with proper solemnity. "We cannot restore what He, in His wisdom, has chosen to take. Yet this much I can do. You shall cut me a new statue to stand in the twelfth niche and it shall be the image of your son." He beamed down on the desolation of Master Giles's heart as if further tears from the stonecutter would be an act of basest ingratitude.

Ingrate that he was, Master Giles wept on.

The bishop's smile shriveled. "What ails you, man? What more would you have of us? I tell you, life lies beyond my power to restore! The woman who has done this shall be punished, be assured of it. We will hold her imprisoned until your son's image has been raised to its proper place, then carry out her sentence on these very stones, so that her death may be under his eyes!"

The ruler of the Fey, once more astride the saddle, moved his steed a few steps nearer to my lord bishop's bejeweled person. The churchman's blazing splendor dwindled to an ailing firefly's light beside the elf's cool beauty. "I too would make a remembrance of this day," he said.

The elven lord spoke words like the sounding of glass chimes and a cold, silvery mist fell over the square.

Master Giles gave a small, sharp cry and rose to his feet, his arms empty. The mist drew in, gathering itself over Benedict's dead body like a winding sheet of frost-struck churchyard moss, molding itself to breathless flesh until all the child's seeming was gray and cold.

And then the mist was gone, and Master Giles knelt again beside his lost love's child to touch his fingers to a smile now forever set. "Stone," he breathed. "He is stone."

He only half-heard the Faerie spell that next touched the image. The stone figure of the blind boy rose upon the hands of a thousand airy servants to settle itself at last into the embrace of the vacant niche below the great rose window. So lovingly did they bear the boy's frozen shape that they barely stirred the shining rubble that remained from that other, shattered statue. In truth, only a single fragment of stone fell when they set Benedict in his final resting place.

It was very small, that bit of rock, but it had far to fall. Some say it fell. Some say it flew, guided by a ghostly hand, to strike its only proper target: Margaret. Fallen or flung, it struck her hard enough, where she stood between

the bishop's men. It brought her down.

At first they thought she was dead, but that might have been because her heart had hardened itself pulseless long ago. Then someone felt her breath against his skin and cried out, "She lives!" There was a murmur from the crowd then, a confused grumble of voices. They did not know whether to be disappointed that she had not died outright or pleased that she was still theirs to hold for the burning.

Then she opened her eyes. They were stone. Not blind, my lord -- I mean no clever jongleur's trick of words and meaning-- but stone as hard and gray and smooth as a carved saint's hand. Here was another miracle, but one the people fled, even the hosts of the Fey, even my lord bishop's men, whose swords had known the taste of blood in Christ's name.

Only Master Giles remained behind with Margaret. None know what he said to her, or if words passed between them at all. All know that when the next day's dawning came, she crept out of dead Agnes's house, her hand on the stonecutter's arm. And so it was each day until he died.

She begs before the cathedral now, a clump of rags and sorrow seated beneath the niche that holds blind Benedict's image. Bereft of Master Giles's aid she was soon the prey of every passing rogue, every marketplace sharper, a summer sheep swiftly shorn of all she had. No man or woman of this city ever raised a hand to prevent this, piously pointing out that it would be wrong to interfere in heaven's manifest judgment against the woman.

There are always too many, Master, who will harp readily to no other verse than God's vengeance. And yet these are the same who stood before the great cathedral and witnessed proof of His unbounded mercy! Ah, me.

Some say her punishment came as holy penitence, others whisper how it was a shifty trick of the Faerie host, done more by way of mischief than morality. Who knows? Give her some coins, Master, if your heart is not made of the same stuff as her eyes, and listen to the ringing sound the coppers make when they drop into her begging bowl. And then, as she is blind, be blind yourself and let your charity also fall into the empty bowls of all who huddle in the shadow of God's house for mercy's sake.

There. Do you hear it? Some say it comes from the dead child's image, that sweet song, the soul's own, the melody that breaks open the hard shells that hold us here, that shatters the stone that forms around our hearts, that anchors us to earth when we yearn for heaven: The song of the soulless who truly know the value of a soul.

Or do you not hear it yet? Will you ever hear it at all? I have heard the wise men teach that in the Gospel's tongue charity is but another word for love. More coins, my lord-- an open hand, an open heart. Let them fall like angel voices, let them chime out the hope of a full belly, a warm cloak, a roof against the rain. From those few notes must arise that wondrous melody that rises from us all whenever we give the poor more than a rag or a dish of scraps or the cold

lecture that they are themselves to blame for their poverty. More love, my lord,
more kindness, more music of the soul redeemed!

And that is all my song.