YEAR'S BEST FANTASY 3

EDITED BY DAVID G. HARTWELL AND KATHRYN CRAMER

TO ELIZABETH CONSTANCE CRAMER HARTWELL, TO WHOM EVERYTHING IS NEW

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Introduction

It was an especially good year for fantasy short fiction in 2002, and we wish this book could have been twice as long so we could have fit in a bunch of longer stories that are just as good as the ones collected here. It was an exceptional year for children's and young adult fiction, as well. The publishers had geared up for a year in which there would be no new *Harry Potter* novel (and to follow up on the huge success of the film of *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Everyone knew there is an audience for good

children's/young adult fantasy, and many tried to satisfy it, including a goodly number of successful writers, from Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman to Isabel Allende and Michael Chabon, as well as less familiar names such as Nancy Farmer and Cornelia Funke. Readers are going to be catching up on 2002 for some time to come because there was so much that was so good, and in such unusual places. Perhaps the best anthology of original stories was *The Green Man*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, also a young adult publication.

So welcome to the third volume of the *Year's Best Fantasy*, representing the best of 2002. Like the earlier volumes in this series, this book provides some insight into the fantasy field now, who is writing some of the best short fiction published as fantasy, and where. But it is fundamentally a collection of excellent stories for your reading pleasure. We follow one general principle for selection: this book is full of fantasy—every story in the book is clearly that and not primarily something else. We (Kathryn Cramer and David G. Hartwell) edit the *Year's Best Science Fiction* in paperback from Eos as a companion volume to this one—look for it if you enjoy short science fiction, too.

In this book, and this anthology series, we use the broadest definition of fantasy (to include wonder stories, adventure fantasy, supernatural fantasy, satirical and humorous fantasy). We believe that the best-written fantasy can stand up in the long run by any useful literary standard in comparison to fiction published out of category or genre, and furthermore, that out of respect for the genre at its best we ought to stand by genre fantasy and promote it in this book. Also, we believe that writers publishing their work specifically as fantasy are up to this task, so we set out to find these stories, and we looked for them in the genre anthologies, magazines, and small press pamphlets. Some fine fantasy writers will still be missing. A fair number of the best fantasy writers these days write only novels, or if they do write short fiction, do so only infrequently, and sometimes it is not their best work.

This was a notable year for short fiction anthologies, as well as for the magazines both large and small. The last SF and fantasy magazines that are widely distributed are *Analog, Asimov's, F&SF*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. And the electronic publishers kept publishing, sometimes fiction of high quality, in spite of the fact that none of them broke even or made money at it. We are grateful for the hard work and editorial acumen of the better electronic fiction sites, such as SciFiction, Strange Horizons, Fantastic Metropolis, and Infinite Matrix, and hope they survive.

The small presses remained a vigorous presence this year. We have a strong short fiction field today because the small presses, semiprofessional magazines (such as *Fantastic, Weird Tales*, and *Horror Garage*), and anthologies are printing and circulating a majority of the high-quality short stories published in fantasy, science fiction, and horror. The U.S. is the only English-language country that still has any professional, large-circulation magazines, though Canada, Australia, and the UK have several excellent magazines. The semi-prozines of our field mirror the "little magazines" of the mainstream in function, holding to professional editorial standards and publishing the next generation of writers, along with some of the present masters. We encourage you to subscribe to a few of your choice. You will find the names of many of the most prominent ones in our story notes.

In January of 2003, as we write, professional fantasy and science fiction publishing as we have always known it is still concentrated in nine mass market and hardcover publishing lines (Ace, Bantam, Baen, DAW, Del Rey, Eos, Roc, Tor, and Warner), and those lines are publishing fewer titles in paperback. But they do publish a significant number of hardcovers and trade paperbacks, and all the established name writers at least appear in hardcover first. The Print-on-Demand field is beginning to sort itself out, and Wild-side Press and its many imprints look to be the umbrella for many of the better publications, including original novels and story collections.

This was a very strong year for original anthologies. Among the very best were *The Green Man*, edited

by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling; *Leviathan 3*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre; *Conjunctions 39*, edited by Peter Straub; *Embrace the Mutation*, edited by Bill Sheehan; *Dark Terrors 6*, edited by Stephen R. Jones, and the *DAW 35th Anniversary Anthology: Fantasy*, edited by Sheila Gilbert and Betsy Wollheim. One noticeable trend evident in some of these is toward non-genre, or genre-bending, or slipstream fantastic fiction. There were a number of quite good original anthologies and little magazines devoted to stories located outside familiar genre boundaries, yet more related to genre than to ordinary contemporary fiction—and marketed to a genre readership.

It was also a good year for novellas and novelettes in the genre, though, sadly, we do not have the space in this book to include more than a couple. There were dozens of good ones, and we would have liked to include many of them.

We repeat, for readers new to this series, our usual disclaimer: this selection of fantasy stories represents the best that was published during the year 2002. It would take two or three more volumes this size to have nearly all of the best—though even then, not all the best novellas.

We try to represent the varieties of tones and voices and attitudes that keep the genre vigorous and responsive to the changing realities out of which it emerges. This is a book about what's going on now in fantasy. The stories that follow show, and the story notes point out, the strengths of the evolving genre in the year 2002.

David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer
Pleasantville, NY

Her Father's Eyes

Kage Baker

Kage Baker [http://members.tripod.com/~MrsCheckerfield/] lives in Pismo Beach, California. She is known primarily as a science fiction writer, especially for her series of stories and novels about The Company, an organization from the future that sends agents back in time to retrieve lost artifacts, such as priceless art treasures. Her collection of stories in that setting— Black Projects, White Knights: The Company Dossiers *—was published to substantial critical acclaim in 2002. She has attracted additional notice in the last few years for fantasy stories. Last year her story "What the Tyger Told Her" appeared in our* Year's Best Fantasy 2. *Her first fantasy novel*, The Anvil of the World, *is published in 2003. She worked for some years for the Living History Centre and says, "Twenty years of total immersion research in Elizabethan as well as other historical periods has paid off handsomely in a working knowledge of period speech and details".*

Her attention to period detail in certainly evident in "Her Father's Eyes." This story was published in Asimov's, *where most of her short fiction has appeared. A girl child and her parents—her father just back from military service—are riding a train in the late 1940s, and she sits next to a little boy who is in the custody of an evil couple who are not really his parents. There are perhaps echoes of Hans Christian Andersen's great fairy tale "The Snow Queen."*

It was so long ago that fathers were still gaunt from the war, their awful scars still livid; so long ago that mothers wore frocks, made fancy Jell-O desserts in ring molds. And that summer, there was enough money to go for a trip on the train. She was taken along because she had been so sick she had almost died, so it was a reward for surviving.

She was hurried along between her parents, holding their hands, wondering what a *dome coach* was and why it was supposed to be special. Then there was a gap in the sea of adult legs, and the high silver cars of the train shone out at her. She stared up at the row of windows in the coach roof, and thought it looked like the cockpits in the bombers her father was always pointing out.

Inside it was nicer, and much bigger, and there was no possible way any German or Japanese fighter pilots could spray the passengers with bullets; so she settled into the seat she had all for herself. There she watched the people moving down on the platform, until the train pulled out of the station.

Then her parents exclaimed, and told her to look out the wonderful dome windows at the scenery. That was interesting for a while, especially the sight of the highway far down there with its Oldsmobiles and DeSotos floating along in eerie silence, and then, as they moved out into the country, the occasional field with a real horse or cow.

The change in her parents was more interesting. Out of uniform her father looked younger, was neither gloomy nor sarcastic but raucously happy. All dressed up, her mother was today as serene and cheerful as a housewife in a magazine advertisement. They held hands, like newlyweds, cried out in rapture at each change in the landscape, and told her repeatedly what a lucky little girl she was, to get to ride in a dome coach.

She had to admit they seemed to be right, though her gaze kept tracking nervously to the blue sky framed by the dome, expecting any minute steeply banking wings there, fire or smoke. How could people turn on happiness like a tap, and pretend the world was a bright and shiny place when they knew it wasn't at all?

The candy butcher came up the aisle, and her father bought her a bag of mint jellies. She didn't like mint jellies but ate them anyway, amazed at his good mood. Then her mother took her down the car to wash the sugar from her face and hands, and the tiny steel lavatory astonished and fascinated her.

From time to time the train stopped in strange towns to let people off or on. Old neon signs winked from brick hotels, and pointed forests like Christmas trees ran along the crests of hills, stood black against the skyline. The sun set round and red. While it still lit the undersides of the clouds, her parents took her down to the dining car.

What silent terror, at the roaring spaces between the cars where anyone might fall out and die instantly; and people sat in the long room beyond, and sipped coffee and ate breaded veal cutlets as calmly as though there were no yawning gulf rushing along under them. She watched the diners in awe, and pushed the green peas round and round the margin of her plate, while her parents were chatting together so happily they didn't even scold her.

When they climbed the narrow steel stair again, night had fallen. The whole of the coach had the half-lit gloom of an aquarium, and stars burned down through the glass. She was led through little islands of light, back to her seat. Taking her place again she saw that there were now people occupying the seats across the aisle, that had been vacant before.

The man and the lady looked as though they had stepped out of the movies, so elegant they were. The lady wore a white fur coat, had perfect red nails; the man wore a long coat, with a silk scarf around his neck. His eyes were like black water. He was very pale. So was the lady, and so was their little boy who sat stiffly in the seat in front of them. He wore a long coat too, and gloves, like a miniature grownup. She decided they must be rich people.

Presently the Coach Hostess climbed up, and smilingly informed them all that there would be a meteor shower tonight. The elegant couple winked at each other. The little girl scrambled around in her seat, and peering over the back, asked her parents to explain what a meteor was. When she understood, she pressed her face against the cold window glass, watching eagerly as the night miles swam by. Distant lights floated in the darkness; but she saw no falling stars.

Disappointed, cranky and bored, she threw herself back from the window at last, and saw that the little boy across the aisle was staring at her. She ignored him and addressed her parents over the back of the seat:

“There aren’t either any meteors,” she complained.

“You’re not looking hard enough,” said her father, while at the same time her mother said,

“Hush,” and drew from her big purse a tablet of lined paper and a brand-new box of crayons, the giant box with rows and rows of colors. She handed them over the seat back and added, “Draw some pictures of what you saw from the windows, and you can show them to Auntie when we get there.”

Wide-eyed, the little girl took the offerings and slid back into her seat. For a while she admired the pristine green-and-yellow box, the staggered regiments of pure color. All her crayons at home lived in an old coffee can, in a chaos of nub ends and peeled paper.

At last she selected an Olive Green crayon and opened the tablet. She drew a cigar shape and added flat wings. She colored in the airplane, and then took the Sky Blue and drew on a glass cockpit. With the Black, she added stars on the wings and dots flying out the front to signify bullets.

She looked up. The little boy was staring at her again. She scowled at him.

“Those are nice,” he said. “That’s a lot of colors.”

“This is the really big box,” she said.

“Can I draw too?” he asked her, very quietly, so quietly something strange pulled at her heart. Was he so quiet because he was scared? And the elegant man said:

“Daniel, don’t bother the little girl,” in a strange resonant voice that had something just the slightest bit wrong about it. He sounded as though he were in the movies.

“You can share,” she told the little boy, deciding suddenly. “But you have to come sit here, because I don’t want to tear the paper out.”

“Okay,” he said, and pushed himself out of his seat as she moved over. The elegant couple watched closely, but as the children opened the tablet out between them and each took a crayon, they seemed to relax and turned their smiling attention to the night once more. The boy kept his gloves on while coloring.

“Don’t you have crayons at home?” she asked him, drawing black doughnut-tires under the plane. He shook his head, pressing his lips together in a line as he examined the Green crayon he had taken.

“How can you not have crayons? You’re rich,” she said, and then was sorry she had said it, because he looked as though he were about to cry. But he shrugged and said in a careless voice,

“I have paints and things.”

“Oh,” she said. She studied him. He had fair hair and blue eyes, a deep twilight blue. “How come you don’t look like your mommy and daddy?” she inquired. “I have my daddy’s eyes. But you don’t have their eyes.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the elegant couple and then leaned close to whisper, “I’m adopted.”

“Oh. You were in the War?” she said, gesturing at her airplane. “Like a bomb was dropped on your house, and you were an orphan, and the soldiers took you away?”

“No,” he said. He put back the Green crayon, took a Brick Red one instead and drew a house: a square, a triangle on top, a chimney with a spiral of smoke coming out of it. He drew well. “I don’t think that’s what happened.”

She drew black jagged lines under the plane, bombed-out wreckage. She drew little balloon heads protruding from the rubble, drew faces with teardrops flying from the eyes. “This is what happened to the war orphans,” she explained. “My daddy told me all about them, and I could see it when he told me. So that didn’t happen to you?”

“Nope,” he replied, drawing a window in the house. It was a huge window, wide open. It took up the whole wall. He put the Brick Red crayon back in its tier carefully, and selected the Gray crayon. “The War is over now, anyway.”

“Everybody thinks so,” she replied, glancing uneasily up at the dome. “But my daddy says it isn’t really. It could come back any time. There are a lot of bad people. Maybe those people got you from an orphanage.”

The boy opened his mouth, closed it, glanced over his shoulder. “No,” he whispered. “Something else happened to me. Now I’m their little boy. We came tonight so they could see the meteors from a train. They never did that before. They like trying out new things, you see.”

With the Gray crayon, he drew the figure of a stick-man who towered over the house, walking away from the window. He gave it a long coat. He drew its arms up like Frankenstein’s monster, and then he drew something in its arms: a white bundle. He put away the Gray crayon, took out the Pink and added a little blob of a face to the bundle.

“See,” he said, “That’s—”

“What are you drawing, Daniel?” said the elegant lady sharply. The little boy cringed, and the little girl felt like cringing too.

“That’s a man carrying wood into his house for the fire-place, Mother,” said the little boy, and grabbing the Brown crayon he drew hastily over the bundle in the man’s arms, turning it into a log of wood. The little girl looked at it and hoped the lady wouldn’t notice that the man in the picture was walking *away* from the house.

“I’m going to be an artist when I grow up,” the little boy said. “I go to a studio and they make me take lessons. A famous painter teaches me.” He sketched in a row of cylinders in brown, then took the Green crayon and drew green circles above the cylinders. “That’s the forest,” he added in an undertone. He took the Dark Blue and drew a cold shadow within the forest, and sharp-edged stars above it.

“Is he taking the baby to the forest?” she whispered. He just nodded. When he had drawn the last star he folded the page over, and since she had used up all the room on her page she did not complain, but took the Olive Green crayon again. She laboriously drew in stick-figure soldiers while he watched.

“What are you going to be when you grow up?” he asked.

“A waitress at the dinette,” she replied. “If I don’t die. And a ballerina.”

“I might be a dancer too, if I don’t die,” he said, reaching for the Gray crayon. He began to draw cylinders like oatmeal boxes, with crenellations: a castle. She took the Black crayon and drew bayonets in the soldiers’ hands, remarking:

“Boys aren’t ballerinas.”

“Some boys have to be,” he said morosely, drawing windows in the castle walls. “They have to wear black leotards and the girls wear pink ones. Madame hits her stick on the ground and counts in French. Madame has a hoof on one foot, but nobody ever says anything about it.”

“That’s strange,” she said, frowning as she drew the soldiers bayoneting one another. She glanced over at his picture and asked: “Where’s the king and queen?”

He sighed and took the Blue Violet crayon. On the top of one tower he drew an immense crowned figure, leaving the face blank. He drew another crowned figure on the other battlement. “May I have the Black, please?”

“You’re *polite*,” she said, handing it to him. He drew faces with black eyes on the crowned figures while she took the Red crayon and drew a flag on the ground. She drew a red circle with rays coming off it to the edges of the rectangle, and then drew red dots all over the flag.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“That’s the blood,” she explained. “My daddy has that flag at home. He killed somebody for it. When he told me about it I could see that, too. What did your daddy, I mean, that man, do in the War?”

“He sold guns to the soldiers,” said the boy. He drew bars across the windows in the castle and then, down in the bottommost one, drew a tiny round face looking out, with teardrops coming from its eyes.

The little girl looked over at his picture.

“Can’t he get away?” she whispered. He shook his head, and gulped for breath before he went on in a light voice:

“Or I might be a poet, you know. Or play the violin. I have lessons in that too. But I have to be very, very good at something, because next year I’m seven and—”

“Have you drawn another picture, Daniel?” said the elegant man with a faint warning intonation, rising in his seat. Outside the night rolled by, the pale lights floated, and the rhythm of the iron wheels sounded faint and far away.

“Yes, Father,” said the boy in a bright voice, holding it up, but with his thumb obscuring the window with the face.

“It’s two people playing chess. See?”

“That’s nice,” said the man, and sat down again.

“What happens when you’re seven?” the little girl murmured. The boy looked at her with terror in his eyes.

“They might get another baby,” he whispered back. She stared at him, thinking that over. She took the tablet and opened it out: new fresh pages.

“That’s not so bad,” she told him. “We’ve had two babies. They break things. But they had to stay with Grandma; they’re too little to come on the train. If you don’t leave your books where they can tear the pages, it’s okay.”

The boy bowed his head and reached for the Red Orange crayon. He began to scribble in a great swirling mass. The girl whispered on:

“And you’re rich, not like us, so I bet you can have your own room away from the new baby. It’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

She took the Sky Blue crayon again and drew in what looked at first like ice cream cones all over her page, before she got the Olive Green out and added soldiers hanging from them. “See? These are the parachute men, coming to the rescue.”

“They can’t help,” said the little boy.

She bit her lip at that, because she knew he was right. She thought it was sad that he had figured it out too.

The boy put back the Red Orange, took both Red and Yellow and scribbled forcefully, a crayon in either fist. He filled the page with flame. Then he drew Midnight Blue darkness above it all and more sharp stars. He took the Black and drew a little stick figure with limbs outstretched just above the fire. Flying? Falling in?

“I’m almost seven,” he reiterated, under his breath. “And they only like new things.”

“What are you drawing now, Daniel?” asked the lady, and both children started and looked up in horror, for they had not heard her rise.

“It’s a nice big pile of autumn leaves, Mother,” said the little boy, holding up the tablet with shaking hands. “See? And there’s a little boy playing, jumping in the leaves.”

“What a creative boy you are,” she said throatily, tousling his hair. “But you must remember Mr. Picasso’s lessons. Don’t be mediocre. Perhaps you could do some abstract drawings now. Entertain us.”

“Yes, Mother,” said the little boy, and the girl thought he looked as though he were going to throw up. When the lady had returned to her seat she reached over and squeezed his hand, surprising herself, for she did not ordinarily like to touch people.

“Don’t be scared,” she whispered.

In silence, he turned to a fresh pair of pages. He took out a Green crayon and began to draw interlocking patterns of squares, shading them carefully.

She watched him for a while before she took the Silver and Gold crayons and drew a house, with a little stick figure standing inside. Then she took the Olive Green and drew several objects next to the figure.

“That’s my bomb shelter, where I’m safe from the War,” she explained. “But you can be in it. And that’s your knapsack, see it? I made it with big straps for you. And that’s your canteen so you can be safe afterward. They’re colored like what soldiers have, so you can hide. And this is the most important thing of all.” She pointed. “See that? That’s a map. So you can escape.”

“I can’t take it,” he said in a doomed voice.

“That’s all right; I’ll give it to you,” she said, and tore the page out. Folding it up small, she put it into his coat pocket.

Moving with leisurely slowness, he put back the Green crayon. Then, holding his hands close to his chest, he pulled off one of his gloves and took the folded paper out. He thrust it into an inner pocket, glancing over his shoulder as he did so. Nobody had noticed. Hastily he pulled the glove back on.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she replied.

At that moment gravity shifted, the steady racketing sound altered and became louder, and there were three distinct bumps. Nobody in the car seemed to notice. Many of the grownups were asleep and snoring, in fact, and did no more than grunt or shift in their seats as the train slowed, as the nearest of the lights swam close and paused outside the window. It was a red blinking light.

“Ah! This is our stop,” said the elegant man. “Summerland. Come along, Daniel. I think we’ve seen enough of the Dome Car, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Father,” said the boy, buttoning his coat. The elegant lady yawned gracefully.

“Not nearly as much fun as I thought it would be,” she drawled. “God, I hate being disappointed. And bored.”

“And you bore so easily,” said the man, and she gave him a quick venomous glance. The little boy shivered, climbing out of his seat.

“I have to go now,” he explained, looking miserable.

“Good luck,” said the little girl. The lady glanced at her.

“I’m sure it’s past your bedtime, little girl,” she said. “And it’s rude to stare at people.”

She reached down her hand with its long scarlet nails as though to caress, and the little girl dodged. Two fingertips just grazed her eyelid, and with them came a wave of perfume so intense it made her eyes water. She was preoccupied with blinking and sneezing for the next minute, unable to watch as the family walked to the front of the silent car and descended the stair.

But she held her palm tight over her weeping eye and got up on her knees to peek out the window. She looked down onto no platform, no station, but only the verge of the embankment where trees came close to the tracks.

There was a long black car waiting there, under a lamp that swung unsteadily from a low bough. The elegant couple was just getting into the front seat. The little boy was already in the car. She could see his pale face through the windows. He looked up at her and gave a hopeless kind of smile. She was impressed at how brave he was. She thought to herself that he would have made a good soldier. Would he be able to escape?

The train began to move again. People woke up and talked, laughed, commented on the meteor shower. She sat clutching her eye, sniffling, until her mother got up to see if she had fallen asleep.

“Did you get something in your eye?” her mother asked, her voice going sharp with worry.

The little girl thought a moment before answering.

“The rich lady’s perfume got in it,” she said.

“What rich lady, honey? Don’t rub it like that! Bill, hand me a Kleenex. Oh, what have you done to yourself now?”

“The lady with the little boy. They sat there. They just got off the train.”

“Don’t lie to your mother,” said her daddy, scowling. “Those seats have been empty the whole trip.”

She considered her parents out of her good eye, and decided to say nothing else about it. By the time she was bundled off the train, wrapped against the dark and cold in her daddy’s coat, her eye had swollen shut.

It was red and weeping for days, even after they’d come home again, and her vision in that eye remained blurred. She was taken to an eye doctor, who prescribed an eyepatch for a while. The eyepatch was useful for pretending she was a pirate but did not help, and made her walk into walls besides.

She knew better than to tell anyone about the things she saw out of the other eye, but she understood now why the boy had wanted so badly to escape. She thought about him sometimes, late at night when she couldn’t sleep and the long lights of passing cars sent leaf-shadows crawling along her wall.

She always imagined him running through a black night country, finding his way somehow through the maze of wet cobbled alleys, hiding from the Nazis, hiding from worse things, looking for the dome coach so he could escape; and he became clearer in her head as she thought about him, though that always made the headaches come. She would pull the covers over her head and try to hold on to the picture long enough to make the train arrive for him.

But somehow, before he could slip into the safety of the station, bright morning would blind her awake. Sick and crying, she would scream at her mother and knock her head against the wall to make the pain go away.

In the end the doctor prescribed glasses for her. She started kindergarten glaring at the world through thick pink plastic frames, and no one could persuade her she was not hideous in them.

Want’s Master

Patricia Bowne

Patricia Bowne, who published this story under the nomde-plume A. B. Ming, lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and is a zoologist and an associate professor at Alverno College. She says, “My writing career has centered around academia, my first adult exercise in fiction being an undergraduate term paper in which I tried to convince my World Literature professor that The Pirates of Penzance *was a parody of* Hamlet. *My interest in fiction continued into graduate school, where I wrote much of a never-to-be-assembled science fiction novel on the backs of ATM*

receipts. It wasn't until I left university and realized how much I missed its excitement, its diversity, and its sheer silliness that I was motivated to create the Royal Academy of Osyth, a setting that has kept me interested enough to write multiple stories and two novels. My academic career centers around fish, and ichthyologically inclined readers will find fish names in my fiction (mainly as the names of demons)." Her first story, "A World They Never Made," appeared in 2002 in The Leading Edge, *with her real name in the table of contents.*

"Want's Master," her second published story, appeared in Tales of the Unanticipated. *It is a tale of love and magic, in a university setting.*

When William Harrison Gracile came in to work at four-thirty in the afternoon looking as if he had aged twenty years overnight, his suit hanging loose on a wizened frame, his secretary wished him good day and went back to her typing. Gracile was offended. He had never been late to work before; he had never come in with a hair out of place. He deserved better from his secretary, he thought. She should make shocked noises, ask after his health, give unsought advice; she should stop him, as he went into his office. "I'm sorry," she should say, "I don't want to intrude, but…"

"Oh, by the way," said his secretary, "a package came for you. I put it on your desk."

A package was exciting, even to someone of an age and station that begged for unsolicited, meaningless packages. This could be the one from someone who mattered, the one filled with treasure rather than with advertising information. Indeed, it was too small a box to contain flyers. The package was the size to hold jewelry, perhaps a tie tack with some charity's logo on it or a refrigerator magnet…but it was wrapped in brown paper and addressed by hand in a clear, old-fashioned, feminine script. When Gracile opened it he found a sheet of paper wrapped around the box within.

"A thank-you for last night," was written on it in the same hand. "I'm sure you'll know what to do with it." The note was unsigned. Gracile opened the box and it was a tie tack, indeed; a silver tie tack, with a moonstone set in it. A muted rainbow swirled through the stone, restless and demanding. He looked the paper over for watermarks or clues and examined the box carefully, and then he leaned over the tie tack—absurd, such caution for a tiny piece of silver—and touched it with one finger. And if his secretary had been there, even she must have been perturbed to see her employer become in an instant twenty years younger, thirty pounds heavier. When Gracile turned to look out the window he saw his outline reflected over the Royal Academy's buildings and fall leaves, the outline of a man in his prime. He closed the box and put it in his pocket.

When William Harrison Gracile had joined the Royal Academy of the Arcane Arts and Sciences as Development Officer, he had insisted on an office overlooking the campus. He had told the president that an enchanter couldn't work without an eyrie. "What the eye doesn't see," Gracile had said, "the heart doesn't yearn after." And as yearning after things was his job, that had been argument enough.

When Gracile stood at the window with his back turned to the City and the suburbs behind it, he looked north into the past. Far to his left lay the undeveloped part of the ley-line, the river of magic that tumbled down a chasm at each end of the Osyth plateau and filled the valleys below with mists and wonder. Built squarely on the ley-line, to west and east of Gracile's gaze, the two great castles of the Academy—Magic's fairy-tale palace and Wizardry's squat gray towers—glared at one another with arrow-slit eyes, remembering the magewars of old. Outbuildings clustered around them, clambered up their walls, pushing to get near the line. Between the castles rose the gargantuan modern complex of Sorcery's towers and teaching hospital. The three schools lay in a narrow band along the line, piled high over its power, and beyond them Gracile could see the tops of trees and the tiniest bit of roof of the low Alchemy building.

When he looked across the quad to that reef of buildings, Gracile did not see the modern Academy and its staff. He saw the magicians of old, sallying forth down the ley-line with staff and pack. Wizards in their red gowns clustered around half-finished buildings, girders lifting into place at their command; black-clad sorcerers slipped past, their satchels full of nameless items…it was easy for him to believe, then, that the Academy needed a new Wizardry Center. A field station for Celestial Mechanics. Six dozen dryad traps. New gold plating in the pentarium, and the moat around the Magic Building dredged. He could believe these things so much that his very longing for the perfect Academy would cast its spell over alumnae, donors, legislators. That was enchantment.

When it was dark, the window turned into a mirror. Gracile could check himself and do touch-ups, making sure his nose was as straight and his eyes as gray as they should be, that he was still the picture of a successful administrator in his early forties. He could spy on whoever was entering his office and know their names before he turned around. Even in June, it was dark enough by eight for him to see the Vice President for Finance come through the door and turn to close it. The VP Finance was a sturdy man, red-faced and white-haired, with a great beak of a nose. His reflection looked more solid than Gracile's own.

"Are you ready?" Gracile asked.

"No. Well, I am, but you're not. The Dean of Wizardry wants to see you before the meeting."

"No," said Gracile, in dismay. "Are you letting him talk to the trustees?"

"The only way I can keep him out of the trustees' meeting is to let him talk with you," said the VP Finance.

Gracile refocused his eyes and looked across campus at the Magic Building's towers. "The more I see of him, the less I want to get him a building," he said. "You know that."

"Don't get temperamental on me, Bill. You have to have all the arguments before you see the trustees. They have to be able to say you presented them with evidence. I can't have the Dean of Wizardry going around telling people you never heard the arguments in favor of this building, but you convinced the trustees anyway."

"Yeah, I'm only supposed to do that to donors," said Gracile. "Well, show him in. Get it over with."

The Dean of Wizardry was nothing like the red-robed powers of Gracile's fancy. Talking to him was like being eaten by a long slow snake, the kind that moved you down its throat with infinitesimal sideways motions of its jaws, so that your head was swallowed and dissolved while your feet still dangled outside. In less than ten minutes, Gracile had to convince the board of trustees that he could raise millions for the man's building project; yet with every word the Dean of Wizardry inflicted on him, Gracile's enthusiasm for the task dwindled. He looked out the window, therefore, and thought about how much he wanted the

Dean of Wizardry to be quiet, to go away, to fall off the tower to a flat and silent death. He thought about how much he wanted to go home and sit under the tree in his back yard, drink a beer and read the evening paper. He fortified himself with these images, and when he finally left for the board meeting there was all about him the glamour of unfulfilled desire, the slightly haunted beauty that made people associate him with high and noble causes.

The trustees met in a warded boardroom. They wore personal wards as well, and these always amused Gracile. No ward was proof against enchantment, which drew its strength from human longings; and the trustees had plenty of these, after five hours of meetings.

"We agree, the old Wizardry Building is out of date," said the President of the Board. "But even if the wizards built it themselves, we can't commit the Academy to this kind of outlay for materials without a significant initial donation. Even a challenge grant would give us something to start with."

"A silent fund-raising campaign," said Gracile. "Then we can start a general drive in the fall."

"That soon? Do you have any donors in mind?"

"Always," smiled Gracile, a man who knew what he was doing. A man to be trusted. "Just say the word, and I can have a meeting with one before the week's out." How straightforward! Trust me, said Gracile's steady gaze, his businesslike gray suit. It was Gracile's job to make magic seem respectable, and he did it well. He looked just enough younger than the trustees to make them feel pleasantly superior, inclined to let the boy try his hand. Trust me, said his posture, his patience, his eager silence. Trust me, so I can go home and read my paper. So I can put my briefcase down in the hall, hang my coat up, take off my shoes and loosen my tie. Pour a beer into a tall cool glass and take that first sip, feel it foam across my tongue…

"Ahh," said the president of the Board of Trustees, "I think that's reasonable, don't you?"

"Don't try to charm a charmer," said Mrs. Szince. "I've studied enchantment since you were a gleam in your father's eye, young man. Sugar or lemon?"

"Sugar, of course." Gracile had never been in Mrs. Szince's home before. The house built of dreams, people called it—at least, people who'd never been invited in. While she poured tea he scanned the room, looking for any signs of illusion. The Szinces were the richest family in Osyth; dreams from the Szince factory were in every drugstore, next to the sleep aids, but it was a questionable industry. Selling dreams was rather like selling narcotics. Gracile had expected the house to betray some lapse of taste.

The room was coral-colored, full of sunlight, its colors and fabrics worn soft. Tall windows looked into a garden glowing with roses. A fire burned in the fireplace beside them, its flames almost transparent in the light. It all set off Mrs. Szince perfectly, making her look twenty years younger than she really was, a gentle and dignified lady. Her hair was silver, her skin soft and pale and powdery. What did it feel like? Gracile wondered. Was her glamour strong enough to fool touch as well as sight?

"I wouldn't think of trying any cheap tricks on you," said Gracile. "I know when I'm outclassed." He smiled an honest smile and thought his hair into just the suggestion of a forelock, his head into just the suggestion of a bashful nod, his tweeds into just the suggestion of a loyal outdoors-man, rough and honest. Mrs. Szince gave him a sharp look.

“You may think I don’t know what you’re up to, but I do,” she said. “Not that I’m not enjoying it—while you’re at it, flatter my looks and tell me why I should buy bricks and boards for these low-class wizards, who aren’t even intelligent enough to recognize how low-class they are. That dean did not impress me at all.” She bent forward confidentially. Her eyes sparkled.

The room’s colors looked even softer through the steam from Gracile’s teacup; it was a calm place, a place where one could lie at ease and listen to the wind in the garden. Looking at the fire, he could imagine the best of fall outside, leaves the color of those flames blowing past the glass on a wind the color of steam. He would like to see that, and to see cold spring rains beating against the windows and turn away from them to this warm corner.

“While you’re at it,” said Mrs. Szince, “tell me why you’ve taken up with those people at the Academy. You can’t make me believe they appreciate you.”

“I’d prefer it if you told me why you’re asking,” said Gracile, leaning back. “Do I detect an offer?”

“Indeed you do. My late husband’s company needs a lobbyist. Besides myself, of course.”

“I’ve never considered it,” said Gracile. “I’ve never thought about selling dreams.” This was a time-honored enchanter’s technique, the lie direct, and Gracile knew he did it beautifully; the statement and the look, both serious enough to be taken as true but a little more intense than truth warranted. Done properly, it left the hearer no choice but to believe or to join the enchanter in a closed circle of the People Who Knew what was being said. Trust me, it said. Only you and I know what’s really going on here.

Mrs. Szince looked back at him through the steam, and her white hair gleamed. She was erect and slender in her old-fashioned green gown, such as enchanters wore when they were creatures of mystery, Gracile thought. The clothing of a time when people asked enchantment to carry them out of themselves, to show them something they would remember and long for all the rest of their lives. If he only reached out, that skin would feel like velvet, or something even finer. Her eyes were the color of dark honey.

“What a lovely liar you are,” she said. “Does anyone at the Academy respect you for it? Well, charm me, young man. Charm me out of my money, for a bunch of silly wizards who think charming donors is beneath them. You’ll get them the money, and they’ll say ‘Thank goodness he’s willing to do it, because I could never lower myself; but then, enchanters have no standards.’ ”

The fire made a whispering sound, and a bird sang. I can’t hear any engines, Gracile thought—a miracle, here in the city. This was what it sounded like a hundred years ago. Here in this room, a hundred years ago, enchanters would have gathered. They would have spun marvels. They would not have made enchantment respectable. They would not have worn suits, or flattered businessmen.

“Do you think modern enchanters have no standards?”

“I think modern enchanters have no imagination,” said Mrs. Szince. “People as a group have no imagination. It’s small loss for most of them. But enchanters are meant for greater things. What a pity, that we let people like that dean of wizardry dream for us. What do you dream of, Mr. Gracile?”

“I would never set my dreams up against a professional’s,” Gracile said smoothly. Mrs. Szince sat back and watched him, and he watched the fire and thought about answering her question.

I dream of momentary things, he might have said to her. Of things seen in a flash and gone when you turn around; the golden bird, flown out of sight before you can quite see it. Sparks, flying upward through twilight air; the green flash you might see cross the sky, once in a lifetime, just at that moment when the sun sets into the sea. Gracile dreamed of falling stars, and the smooth circles on water after a fish has

jumped, and all the beautiful things that go away. It isn't restful, to dream such dreams. A night spent chasing them is wasted.

"We all dream of home," said Mrs. Szince. "We dream of a place where what we are is right, where what we can do is the right thing. Don't think it's easy, making dreams. People come to me for what they can't imagine about themselves—people who've been told they're wrong so often, they can't even imagine being right."

"People can be fools, even in dreams," said Gracile.

"Not in my dreams," said Mrs. Szince. "It's a big world, Mr. Gracile. There's room in it for all of us. We can all find our place in it, if we can once see ourselves truly." And this, too, was an enchanter's trick, though it could only be used when the victim was already mazed, confused. This rhetorical assertion, that only a churl could protest against but that only a fool could believe. Manners demanded that the listener submit to the enchanter's will, join the circle of those who agreed to be agreeable…

"No," said Gracile, struggling to his feet. "There are people without a place in the world. But you and I are not among them. You have your company, and I have the Academy."

Mrs. Szince smiled. "My," she said. "What a very complicated statement." But Gracile knew better than to explore himself under her guidance. The old lady's spell was thick around him, here in her home. The room's soft colors, the whispering flames, Mrs. Szince herself, were like dreams of color and flame and woman as they ought to be. Gracile stood in front of the fire and it was all he could do to keep himself calm and unafraid and respectable.

"You're too good for me," he said. "I was a fool to think I could cozen you. But they're expecting me back at the Academy for a lunch meeting, to tell them how much money I got from the philanthropic Mrs. Szince."

"Oh, must you go? A pity," said Mrs. Szince. "I'd so like to see what's under that glamour. Come again, Mr. Gracile. I'll go easier on you, next time. Perhaps you'll have something happier to tell them at the Academy."

Gracile found he could walk away, more firmly with every step. The room behind him would become another flash of memory, to be longed for but never possessed, to be thought of when he needed to face the trustees again…but lying to himself was not Gracile's talent, and with every step he felt Mrs. Szince behind him, ready to welcome him if he would only turn, go to her, bury his face in that soft skin and hair, and want no more.

"We need to talk about the new building fund," said the VP Finance.

"Oh, don't," sighed Gracile. The VP Finance opened his eyes wide.

"I thought I was going to have to tell you it was that bad," he said.

"I know my job," said Gracile. "It may not seem like it at the moment, but I do."

He liked the VP Finance and never tried to charm him. A man needed someone he could go out for a drink with. Gracile and the VP Finance went downtown, far away from the Academy and the Faculty Club. Gracile liked being surrounded by businessmen, grownups. He liked the thick linen and heavy

silver, the way men's faces were reflected in crystal and china.

"Unless you have something up your sleeve, we're not going to be able to start the general campaign on schedule," said the VP Finance. He looked around the room as though one of its inhabitants might be the ace up Gracile's sleeve. "If you're planning a surprise announcement at the Donor's Ball, do my ulcers a favor and tell me now."

"No surprises," said Gracile. The VP Finance sighed.

"I don't want to tell you your business—"

"But you're going to anyway."

They drank in silence for a while.

"What made you so sure you could get the money this fast?"

"Mrs. Szince," said Gracile. "I thought I could get it all from Mrs. Szince. Go ahead, laugh."

"Why should I laugh? She gives away lots of money."

"Because she's an enchantress," said Gracile. "Why do you think I kept away from her last year? She's better than I am. I got cocky."

"So she turned you down?"

"She was charming. Too charming. If I go back into that house, I won't come out."

"Ohh," said the VP Finance, and grinned. "A magewar!"

"You can't have a war with only two people," Gracile pointed out. "And this one's already been fought and lost."

The VP Finance looked across the room with a dreamy expression. "I'm amazed," he said. "Who'd ever have thought Mrs. Szince was dangerous? That sweet old woman." Gracile looked at his friend and sighed. Mrs. Szince hosted large parties. Probably every man in the room had been in her house, was in her thrall.

"She wants me to help her sell dreams," he said.

"Oh, I can imagine! The legislature's within an inch of declaring her stuff an addictive drug," said the VP Finance. "But if she can enchant you, she should be able to handle the legislators." He shook himself. "Well, so she's out. You'll just have to work the other donors."

"I don't know what I want to do," said Gracile.

"You want to raise the money for this building. After that, you can go work for Mrs. Szince, if that's what—"

"I could work for her now, if that's what I wanted! It's not that simple."

The VP Finance spread his hands and creased his round face into a question. "So tell me," he said.

"I want to work for her," said Gracile. "But when I am working for her, what's there for me to want? When you've gotten what you want, you're not much of an enchanter anymore."

The VP Finance frowned. “You get what you want all the time.”

“No, I get what you want.” Gracile swept his arm out in a gesture that meant the VP Finance, the Academy, Osyth, the world. “What I want—I don’t go there. I steer clear of that.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’d be much use to Mrs. Szince, then.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I’d want to please her…she’d want me to keep enchanting people…it could become very complicated,” said Gracile. He finished his drink and put the glass down hard. They sat for a few moments looking at the table, and then the VP Finance pushed his own drink over to Gracile. Gracile drank it.

“Who’s the girl in gold?” Gracile didn’t really want to know. But she was striking, a girl in a champagne-colored frock, with a head full of gold curls. She stood by the window in the Hotel Eleuthra’s penthouse ballroom, looking out into the evening light. Was she a donor, growing disgusted with the Academy as she stood there alone? Or was she from the Academy, neglecting her duties? Gracile didn’t care. It was just restful to look at something all gold against a calm autumn evening, all blue. The sun poured in the windows beside her, blocks of glowing air leaning through the glass.

“Who’s the girl in gold?” he asked the Alumnae Officer. She craned her neck.

“Faculty,” she said. “Magister Hoth, from Demonology. Not doing very well, is she?”

“Perhaps I should go talk to her,” said Gracile. If faculty came to fund-raisers, they were supposed to help raise funds. One demonologist looking superior could undo a lot of Gracile’s charm. Although this evening, Gracile had charm to spare. He’d raised a lot of money this evening. People who’d already given to the Academy; people who’d already given all they thought they could afford; people who’d already given all they really could afford, he raised money from them all. The man running the cloakroom had given him a few bills, just to be a part of whatever it was that Gracile wanted so much.

What Gracile wanted so much was dancing with the VP Finance at the other end of the room. Mrs. Szince was silver and gray, mysterious as moonlight. He’d thought she might lose power outside her home, but she was at her most beautiful, and she was flirting with the VP Finance. She whispered to him and laughed a low, charming laugh at his replies. She rested her hand on his sleeve, on his lapel; she leaned her silver head on his bosom when they danced, and the VP Finance gazed over it into the distance with a rapt expression, noble and protective.

Gracile looked at the pair and felt his glamour flame. He was beautiful, passionate, inconsolable. What could the donors do, any of them, except give him what little they had?

“She’s a lecher,” said the Alumnae Officer.

“What?”

“Magister Hoth. I suppose mere donors are small beer to her, after spending her days with incubi.”

“Meow,” said Gracile, and they both laughed. Purple shadows were darkening behind the girl in gold, and the last rays of sunlight slanted across the corner of the ballroom to gild her an avid, brazen flame-yellow. She turned and looked straight into the light, her eyes wide and un-afraid.

“I thought I should let you know—no, I shouldn’t. Forget it.”

A remark like that is effective, even for gaining the attention of a Development Officer in the middle of a fund-raising event. Gracile turned all his glamour toward the speaker. It was Magister Hoth, not as golden as she had been in the sunset. Late at night, under the ballroom’s lights, she was the color of pale champagne.

“What?”

“This is conflict of interest,” she said. “Damn.”

“How can we have a conflict of interest? We’re here for the same thing.” Gracile looked closer and discovered she was very angry. Some drunken donor had probably groped her or made rude jokes about lechery. He gave her his full attention, the kind that made hardened businessmen reach for their checkbooks. “If anything unsuitable has happened, I want it dealt with as much as you do,” he said.

“You can trust me.”

“It doesn’t matter whether I can trust you or not,” she said. “I’ve called the police.”

Gracile’s habit, whenever moved to shout “WHAT!”, was to stand perfectly still for a moment and then take two steps back while looking mild and thoughtful. “I see,” he said gently. “What have you called them to do, and why?”

“One of your guests is carrying an illegal incubus. I saw it in the washroom.”

“Oh, my goodness,” said Gracile. “First, are you sure it’s illegal?”

“I know what I’m talking about,” she said sharply. “I’m Vice-President and a founding member of the Alliance for Ethical Lechery. Keeping an incubus is nothing less than sexual slavery. I’m only telling you about this so we can get this woman arrested with the least disruption.”

“Which woman would that be?” asked Gracile, but he already knew. He stood taller as Magister Hoth searched the room. I knew I was as good as any enchanter living, he thought. It took an incubus to charm me. They were among the most powerful demons, those spirits of lust. An enchantress holding an incubus captive, drawing strength from its longings—what would be her limits? And I walked away from her, thought Gracile. She had all that going for her, and I was still able to walk away.

“Over there,” said Hoth. “The woman in silver.”

Gracile looked across the room at the woman in silver. Mrs. Szince, so beautiful, so powerful, so seductive. He stared for a minute, cataloguing her strengths. They made this triumph all the greater.

“Are the police coming up here?” he asked.

“No. I told them I’d get her down to the front lobby.”

“That will be my job,” said Gracile. “You did the right thing. I can get her down there without causing a fuss, and we’ll have this taken care of before the other guests start to leave. You go down and talk with the police. Give me five minutes.” Hoth had barely walked away when Gracile was doing what he’d wanted to all evening. He cut in on the VP Finance and took Mrs. Szince away.

She laughed, a low sound of triumph, shaking in his arms.

"You never came back," she said.

"You were entirely too much for me, ma'am," said Gracile. "May we speak in private?"

"Of course."

"Not here," said Gracile. "Not even on this floor."

Mrs. Szince laughed again. "I like you," she said. "You don't waste my time."

"I don't have any time to waste, myself," said Gracile. He stopped dancing; she took his arm and swayed, slender against his side. She was like a tree in moonlight. When she smiled up at him she could have been fifty, or fifteen. And Gracile could have taken her down the East elevator to the lobby and the police or the West one, that led to the back parts of the hotel and out into the alley…he walked east and saw all the donors they passed take that catch of breath you take when your everyday life snags for a second on something wondrous. Romance didn't end with youth, he saw them thinking. They would have given Gracile more money, just for showing them this.

"Where are we going?" Mrs. Szince murmured.

"To the lobby," said Gracile. He watched the numbers change, and felt her leaning on his arm. At floor twenty-five, he had to speak.

"The police are in the lobby," he said. "They're doing some kind of sweep of the district for illegal incubi."

Floor twenty—floor eighteen—

"How interesting," said Mrs. Szince. "Do you know, I fear I've forgotten my wrap." Floor ten—

"I thought it was an interesting coincidence," said Gracile. "Given that you'd called me about it. In fact, I invited the academy's lecher to this party so we could deal with it properly. You'll be glad to know that she's an expert on illegal incubi."

Mrs. Szince was very still, as still as moonlight. "Excuse me?"

"It must be very distressing to pay so much for something and then find out it's illegal," he said. "You did the right thing in coming to me. The police will have to take your statement about who sold it to you, but you can hand the incubus over to us. I know you wouldn't want to remain in possession of it any longer than you have to." The floors chimed—floor three, mezzanine—

"My dear boy! You are a challenge, after all," said Mrs. Szince. "You can't imagine how much I appreciate that. It's lonely to think one is the last. The field has so declined from the days of the great dreamlords. Too many of us are mere hirelings, nowadays. We waste our talents on the mundane things." The door chimed.

"Perhaps we can start over," said Gracile. "I fear we began on uneven ground."

"What an intriguing concept," said Mrs. Szince. "As if it were a game…I've always viewed enchantment as an art, myself. One does the best one can, with whatever comes to hand." The lobby was before them, two men in the black uniforms of Osyth Police talking to Hoth, and Mrs. Szince was opening her purse and smiling at them all. "Mr. Gracile," she said, "has been so helpful. I believe this is what you've

been looking for?"

Gracile had his first look at the incubus, swirling in a moonstone two inches across. It was beautifully set in silver, an art nouveau brooch of sinuous naked bodies and water plants. Both policemen looked at it with respect and apprehension as Patsy Hoth reached out to take it. She closed her hand over the gem, and Gracile realized that she was more beautiful than Mrs. Szince had ever been.

"I'll have to take it back to the Academy," she told the police. "The standard procedure is to let it out into a rabbit colony so it can feed. After that, it'll be able to get away on its own."

"Yeah, I know the drill," said the shorter policeman. He had blond hair in a ponytail, and a loop of gold chain through one ear. "What about this lady?"—indicating Mrs. Szince in a way she could not have often been indicated. He might as well have said, "this old bag."

"Mrs. Szince brought the incubus here tonight to hand it over to us," Gracile said. "You're just here to witness the formalities; we hardly want to be possessing an illegal incubus ourselves, after all."

"What?" said Hoth, looking up. Gracile turned all his attention toward Mrs. Szince.

"I'll have them call your car," he said. "Excuse me for a moment." Hoth was at his elbow as soon as he walked toward the bellman's desk.

"You're letting her go!"

"You heard her story," he said. "You saw her give up the incubus. We don't have a leg to stand on."

"Oh, sure. And she has enough money to buy the academy."

"If you don't like donors, keep out of development. Your car's coming around," said Gracile, turning back to Mrs. Szince. The open door sucked all three of them out into the night, toward the waiting car. He didn't want to see her go, to have this victory ended. Mrs. Szince smiled at him, gracious in defeat.

"Never imagine," she said, "that I don't appreciate what you've done for me tonight." She reached out to pat his sleeve in farewell. She still was a lovely old lady, a wise woman, silk and velvet, even without the incubus—something shone in the air in front of him, a sparkle of powder, and he heard Hoth yell, saw her drop the gem as it burst into a dazzle. When his vision cleared Mrs. Szince was gone. Taillights at the corner might have been her car, might not.

"What is it?" Gracile picked up the brooch. Its stone was moon-colored, the rainbow glints gone. He offered it to Hoth, but she ignored him and clutched her hands to her middle.

"She let it out," she groaned. She doubled over and cried out, a harsh sound he had never heard before.

"Are you all right? How far is the hospital?" Gracile asked.

"No," gasped Hoth. "No hospital. I'm fine." Gracile put a hand on her arm and gasped himself. It was nothing he had ever felt before, when they touched; pure desire, that almost shut off the mind. He felt his glamour flare again. He was beautiful, powerful, invincible. If I'd felt like this a minute ago, Mrs. Szince would have funded the whole building, he thought, and at that moment a cab pulled up.

"Get in," he said, pushing Hoth down into the cab's back seat, and she pulled him after her, clutched his coat, rubbed against him.

"Where to?" asked the cab driver, turning half around. "You just want me to drive?"

“Get out of here,” said Gracile. “Around the block. Anywhere.” He turned back to Hoth, and she pulled his head down and kissed him. He kissed back, but the cab turned a sharp corner and they slipped apart. The desire diluted as quickly as it had come. “What is this?” he asked, and Hoth laughed up at him. She was a pale blur, half-lying across the seat. They passed a streetlight and it lit up her face, excited and shining.

“Sex,” she said. “It’s called sex.”

“But it isn’t real,” said Gracile, bracing himself against the back of the driver’s seat. Hoth laughed again and reached up, putting a hand on the back of his neck. He felt her fingernails brush the short ends of hair, her fingers opening and the warm part of her hand touching his skin, and then that power was filling him again and the delight of using it was the only thing that mattered.

It must have been twenty years since Gracile had looked at his true face. He knew he had done it when his last classmate retired. He had looked at the beginning of old age, then, and sworn at it, and thought about things he wanted until his glamour was strong enough to cover that face. Ever since, he had put the glamour on in bed before getting up. But this morning he was in bed with a woman, a golden woman lying too close for him to see her clearly, and he could not call up any longing, could not think of anything he wanted to change.

He felt his sunken cheeks, pinched them up into bristly folds. She’ll never sleep with you again if she sees your real face, he thought. She’ll hate you. But the folds didn’t tighten under his fingers, and then he was afraid, cold-sweat afraid, of—he didn’t know what.

Gracile snuck out of his own bed, silent as a schoolboy creeping out before breakfast. His bare feet knew every crack in the floor and every shift in the pattern of sunlight and shadow that carpeted the hall under the window. He looked out into the golden elm, his heart bouncing in his chest, just as a swirl of leaves spun down from it. They said you could see the dryad of the tree in such a whirlwind of leaves. They said you could rush into the eddy and clasp it to yourself…Gracile watched it fall to the ground, choking down thought and panic, and went on to the bathroom.

This was himself, this stranger looking out of his mirror. Beneath his glamour, he had grown old. Gray hair and stubble. Lines—the deep creases around eyes and mouth that puzzle whoever looks at the old man. What expressions do they echo? Was this a man who smiled or scowled? Impossible to tell what this face had been doing, hidden away by itself. Its eyes were washed out, its skin tough and bristly. And as he squinted at himself in the mirror, wondering whether it was blurred by mist or farsightedness, the bathroom door opened. Living alone, he never locked it. Patsy Hoth walked in.

“I—Oh!” she said, shocked twice—by walking in on someone, and by what she had walked in on. “Excuse me,” and she was gone.

“Wait!” said Gracile, and looked into the mirror again, just for a second, seeing what she must have seen in that second. Old. Decrepit. A geezer. He pulled the door open, acting faster than he could think, and what he said almost surprised him. “You must be Will’s friend,” he said, and Hoth’s retreating back stopped. “I’m his father,” said Gracile. “Bill, senior.”

“He doesn’t usually bring women home,” said Gracile. “You’re the first in—oh, years. I was still living with his mother, then. She was still alive.” He had never said such a thing before. The public Gracile was a bachelor, with a hint of mysterious heartbreak in his past.

“I’m sorry,” said Hoth.

“Don’t be. That was a long time ago. But how about you—are you and Will serious?”

“Us? No,” said Hoth. “It was an accident. An incubus.” She looked into her coffee. “It was my own fault,” she said. “If I’d had my field kit, I could have let it out with no harm done.”

“You didn’t take your field kit to a donors’ ball? What were you thinking of?” chaffed Gracile. It was morning outside, bright and merry, slipping carelessly away into day. He ate bacon and eggs and to hell with his cholesterol.

“Is your family from Osyth?” she asked, and again Gracile had that strange feeling, the disorientation of having to make up a new life.

“No,” he said. “I was born in the country outside Selanto. We moved here after the war.” He said this delicately, not sure it would hold his weight, but it did. It was the truth, after all. The truth! He could tell her about his real life, he thought suddenly. The things that had meant so much to him—the farm, the family. Growing up. The war, his wife. All the things that had never happened to Will, that a man in his forties could never admit to knowing. He found himself talking, babbling like any lonely old man. Like an old man who had jumped off a cliff, who needed to say all he knew before he hit bottom. She listened, drinking coffee, and he couldn’t tell whether she was interested or polite, and he didn’t care.

“You remind me of a girl I met in the war,” he said. “She had a head of curls like that—and I think she was magic, as well, because she never got hurt. The whole village was bombed away, except their one house.” He sighed. “I’ve had a full life. It’s Will I worry about. He hardly ever meets a nice girl.”

“I’m a lecher,” said Hoth. “I have to be a nice girl. If you give them an inch, the lab gets out of control. So I don’t carry on affairs.”

“It’s too bad…”

“We hardly even know each other. It was just an accident.”

“Most magicians,” said Gracile, “won’t hang around with enchanters.”

“I don’t see why not. These distinctions are stupid…”

“But.”

“Well—I would always wonder if I was being charmed.”

Gracile leaned forward, propped his bristly chin in his shaky hands. “D’you drink? D’you worry you might get intoxicated?”

“It’s not quite the same.”

“It is. The world—it’s always moving,” said Gracile. “You can hold on and and try to keep everything under control, or you can let go and fly with it. You kids have never had a war. Things pick you up and take you with ’em. That’s what life really is, not this sitting in one spot like a barnacle.”

“What happened to the girl in the house?” asked Hoth, changing the subject.

"Eh?"

"You were just telling me. The house that didn't get bombed." Gracile told her the rest of his story about war, cold and muddy, and one house standing untouched among ruins. He told her about how warmth and light feel to a man coming in from war, and about the way song can rise up around a blue plate on the mantelpiece, and how beautiful a woman is when she gets up barefoot at midnight, wrapped in a ragged sheet. When she leans against a door frame and looks at a dead land and says, "Nothing ever really ends. The important things go on." Hoth listened like a child, forgetting her coffee.

"But what happened to her?"

"I told you. The important things don't end."

Hoth sighed, and then sharpened. "Was that enchantment? Are you putting a spell on me?"

"Not that I know of," said Gracile dryly. "And I think I would know."

He had meant to send her off by herself in a cab, but they were friends by then. They rode downtown together and said goodbye at the Hotel Eleuthra. He put his thin old arms around her, and gave her a father's kiss on the hair.

"Will should be home by midnight," he said. "Call him."

"Don't get your hopes up," she said. "He didn't even leave a note."

"I'll give him hell!" said Gracile. "I didn't bring him up to act like that." As soon as she was gone into the parking garage, he went into a florist's. He had roses and a note sent to her office. I must want something to come of this, he thought; but the face that looked back from the cooler doors was still an old man's.

Gracile spent the day in open spaces around Osyth, not afraid of being recognized. He watched birds and beasts, sat in Westpark looking out over the edge of the plateau, walked along the ley-line where it ran toward the Academy, overgrown with hawthorn, alder, fairy rings and mandrake. He walked for miles, until he wanted to sit down. Wanted dinner. Wanted a beer, and to go home and find someone waiting for him, waiting to hear his stories…at the outskirts of the Academy he looked into a window and saw an echo of his younger self, and headed in to his office.

"A package came for you," said his secretary.

A package too small for flyers or promotional videotapes, a package the size to hold jewelry; and even before he touched it, he felt Mrs. Szince's breath on it. A package full of wonders. A package of treasure, of longings…for what greater treasure is there, Gracile thought as he stood over the open box, what greater treasure is there than the dream of treasure? He touched it with one finger—absurd, such caution for a tiny piece of silver—and felt the trapped spirit's hunger surge through him. And in that instant, the old man was gone. He had spent one day in the open, one day looking at the world without longing and letting it look at him, and now he was gone. He was put away, with all his memories, closed away as firmly as the box in Gracile's pocket.

Gracile stood at the window looking at the Academy lit from one side, shadows pooling between the buildings, with his own silhouette laid over them all, as solid and unchanging as any of them. He looked for a long time, until the campus lights came on below and he could see himself clearly in the glass,

watching unchanged as suns and seasons faded away, and then he went back to his desk. He set the box on his blotter and put away the note and wrapping paper in a desk drawer, and then he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Magister Hoth's lab," said a student voice. "She's not in—may I take a message?"

"This is William Harrison Gracile," he said. "Tell her Mrs. Szince has sent me another incubus for her to release. And tell her—tell her my father would like to see her again."

October in the Chair

Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman [www.neilgaiman.com], who lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a world-famous comics writer, and an excellent writer of fantastic fiction whose popularity has been growing in recent years. His comic book Sandman *is the primary basis for his reputation to date. According to his website,"* Sandman *the comic sold over a million copies a year. The collections have sold several million copies in paperback and hardback, and remain in print."* The Los Angeles Times *described it as "The greatest epic in the history of comic books" and "the best monthly comic book in the world." He is a charismatic public figure in the fantasy and horror fields, and a snappy dresser. However, 2002 was the year that he blossomed as a fiction writer, after years of moderate success, with the bestselling novel* American Gods *and the distinguished young adult novel* Coraline. *His previous complicated publishing history includes* Angels and Visitations *(1993), a hardcover small press collection of his short fiction, prose, and journalism, issued to celebrate ten years as a professional writer. Before that, he was co-author, with Terry Pratchett, of* Good Omens, *a humorous fantasy novel, and was best known for his humorous works,* Ghastly Beyond Belief *(1985) and* Don't Panic *(1987), and, as editor, a book of poetry,* Now We Are Sick *(1991).*

"October in the Chair" appeared in Conjunctions: 39 *(see also the stories by Hopkinson and Miéville later in this book). It is an homage to Ray Bradbury's fantasy stories and quite engaging in its own right.*

—For Ray Bradbury

October was in the chair, so it was chilly that evening, and the leaves were red and orange and tumbled from the trees that circled the grove. The twelve of them sat around a campfire roasting huge sausages on sticks, which spat and crackled as the fat dripped onto the burning applewood, and drinking fresh apple cider, tangy and tart in their mouths.

April took a dainty bite from her sausage, which burst open as she bit into it, spilling hot juice down her

chin. “Beshrew and suck-ordure on it,” she said.

Squat March, sitting next to her, laughed, low and dirty, and then pulled out a huge, filthy handkerchief. “Here you go,” he said.

April wiped her chin. “Thanks,” she said. “The cursed bag-of-innards burned me. I’ll have a blister there tomorrow.”

September yawned. “You are *such* a hypochondriac,” he said, across the fire. “And such *lan*guage.” He had a pencil-thin mustache, and was balding in the front, which made his forehead seem high, and wise.

“Lay off her,” said May. Her dark hair was cropped short against her skull and she wore sensible boots. She smoked a small brown cigarillo, which smelled heavily of cloves. “She’s sensitive.”

“Oh puhlease,” said September. “Spare me.”

October, conscious of his position in the chair, sipped his apple cider, cleared his throat, and said, “Okay. Who wants to begin?” The chair he sat in was carved from one large block of oak wood, inlaid with ash, with cedar, and with cherrywood. The other eleven sat on tree stumps equally spaced about the small bonfire. The tree stumps had been worn smooth and comfortable by years of use.

“What about the minutes?” asked January. “We always do minutes when I’m in the chair.”

“But you aren’t in the chair now, are you, dear?” said September, an elegant creature of mock solicitude.

“What about the minutes?” repeated January. “You can’t ignore them.”

“Let the little buggers take care of themselves,” said April, one hand running through her long blond hair. “And I think September should go first.”

September preened and nodded. “Delighted,” he said.

“Hey,” said February. “Hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-hey. I didn’t hear the chairman ratify that. Nobody starts till October says who starts, and then nobody else talks. Can we have maybe the tiniest semblance of order here?” He peered at them, small, pale, dressed entirely in blues and grays.

“It’s fine,” said October. His beard was all colors, a grove of trees in autumn, deep brown and fire orange and wine red, an untrimmed tangle across the lower half of his face. His cheeks were apple red. He looked like a friend, like someone you had known all your life. “September can go first. Let’s just get it rolling.”

September placed the end of his sausage into his mouth, chewed daintily, and drained his cider mug. Then he stood up and bowed to the company and began to speak.

“Laurent DeLisle was the finest chef in all of Seattle; at least, Laurent DeLisle thought so, and the Michelin stars on his door confirmed him in his opinion. He was a remarkable chef, it is true—his minced lamb brioche had won several awards, his smoked quail and white truffle ravioli had been described in the *Gastronome* as ‘the tenth wonder of the world.’ But it was his wine cellar…ah, his wine cellar…that was his source of pride and his passion.

“I understand that. The last of the white grapes are harvested in me, and the bulk of the reds: I appreciate fine wines, the aroma, the taste, the aftertaste as well.

“Laurent DeLisle bought his wines at auctions, from private wine lovers, from reputable dealers: he would insist on a pedigree for each wine, for wine frauds are, alas, too common, when the bottle is selling for perhaps five, ten, a hundred thousand dollars, or pounds, or euros.

“The treasure—the jewel—the rarest of the rare and the *ne plus ultra* of his temperature-controlled wine cellar was a bottle of 1902 Château Lafitte. It was on the wine list at $120,000, although it was, in true terms, priceless, for it was the last bottle of its kind.”

“Excuse me,” said August politely. He was the fattest of them all, his thin hair combed in golden wisps across his pink pate.

September glared down at his neighbor. “Yes?”

“Is this the one where some rich dude buys the wine to go with the dinner, and the chef decides that the dinner the rich dude ordered isn’t good enough for the wine, so he sends out a different dinner, and the guy takes one mouthful, and he’s got, like, some rare allergy and he just dies like that, and the wine never gets drunk after all?”

September said nothing. He looked a great deal.

“Because if it is, you told it before. Years ago. Dumb story then. Dumb story now.” August smiled. His pink cheeks shone in the firelight.

September said, “Obviously pathos and culture are not to everyone’s taste. Some people prefer their barbecues and beer, and some of us like—”

February said, “Well, I hate to say this, but he kind of does have a point. It has to be a new story.”

September raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips. “I’m done,” he said abruptly. He sat down on his stump.

They looked at each other across the fire, the months of the year.

June, hesitant and clean, raised her hand and said, “I have one about a guard on the X-ray machines at La Guardia Airport, who could read all about people from the outlines of their luggage on the screen, and one day she saw a luggage X ray so beautiful that she fell in love with the person, and she had to figure out which person in the line it was, and she couldn’t, and she pined for months and months. And when the person came through again she knew it this time, and it was the man, and he was a wizened old Indian man and she was pretty and black and, like twenty-five, and she knew it would never work out and she let him go, because she could also see from the shapes of his bags on the screen that he was going to die soon.”

October said, “Fair enough, young June. Tell that one.”

June stared at him, like a spooked animal. “I just did,” she said.

October nodded. “So you did,” he said, before any of the others could say anything. And then he said, “Shall we proceed to my story, then?”

February sniffed. “Out of order there, big fella. The man in the chair only tells his story when the rest of us are through. Can’t go straight to the main event.”

May was placing a dozen chestnuts on the grate above the fire, deploying them into patterns with her tongs. “Let him tell his story if he wants to,” she said. “God knows it can’t be worse than the one about

the wine. And I have things to be getting back to. Flowers don't bloom by themselves. All in favor?"

"You're taking this to a formal vote?" February said. "I cannot believe this. I cannot believe this is happening." He mopped his brow with a handful of tissues, which he pulled from his sleeve.

Seven hands were raised. Four people kept their hands down—February, September, January, and July. ("I don't have anything personal on this," said July apologetically. "It's purely procedural. We shouldn't be setting precedents.")

"It's settled then," said October. "Is there anything anyone would like to say before I begin?"

"Um. Yes. Sometimes," said June, "sometimes I think somebody's watching us from the woods and then I look and there isn't anybody there. But I still think it."

April said, "That's because you're crazy."

"Mm," said September, to everybody. "She's sensitive but she's still the cruelest."

"Enough," said October. He stretched in his chair. He cracked a cobnut with his teeth, pulled out the kernel, and threw the fragments of shell into the fire, where they hissed and spat and popped, and he began.

There was a boy, October said, who was miserable at home, although they did not beat him. He did not fit well, not his family, not his town, nor even his life. He had two older brothers, who were twins, older than he was, and who hurt him or ignored him, and were popular. They played football: some games one twin would score more and be the hero, and some games the other would. Their little brother did not play football. They had a name for their brother. They called him the Runt.

They had called him the Runt since he was a baby, and at first their mother and father had chided them for it.

The twins said, "But he *is* the runt of the litter. Look at *him* . Look at *us* ." The boys were six when they said this. Their parents thought it was cute. A name like "the Runt" can be infectious, so pretty soon the only person who called him Donald was his grandmother, when she telephoned him on his birthday, and people who did not know him.

Now, perhaps because names have power, he was a runt: skinny and small and nervous. He had been born with a runny nose, and it had not stopped running in a decade. At mealtimes, if the twins liked the food they would steal his; if they did not, they would contrive to place their food on his plate and he would find himself in trouble for leaving good food uneaten.

Their father never missed a football game, and would buy an ice cream afterward for the twin who had scored the most, and a consolation ice cream for the other twin, who hadn't. Their mother described herself as a newspaper-woman, although she mostly sold advertising space and subscriptions: she had gone back to work full-time once the twins were capable of taking care of themselves.

The other kids in the boy's class admired the twins. They had called him Donald for several weeks in first grade, until the word trickled down that his brothers called him the Runt. His teachers rarely called him anything at all, although among themselves they could sometimes be heard to say that it was a pity the youngest Covay boy didn't have the pluck or the imagination or the life of his brothers.

The Runt could not have told you when he first decided to run away, nor when his daydreams crossed the border and became plans. By the time he admitted to himself that he was leaving he had a large Tupperware container hidden beneath a plastic sheet behind the garage, containing three Mars bars, two

Milky Ways, a bag of nuts, a small bag of licorice, a flashlight, several comics, an unopened packet of beef jerky, and thirty-seven dollars, most of it in quarters. He did not like the taste of beef jerky, but he had read that explorers had survived for weeks on nothing else, and it was when he put the packet of beef jerky into the Tupper-ware box and pressed the lid down with a pop that he knew he was going to have to run away.

He had read books, newspapers, and magazines. He knew that if you ran away you sometimes met bad people who did bad things to you; but he had also read fairy tales, so he knew that there were kind people out there, side by side with the monsters.

The Runt was a thin ten-year-old, with a runny nose, and a blank expression. If you were to try to pick him out of a group of boys, you'd be wrong. He'd be the other one. Over at the side. The one your eye slipped over.

All through September he put off leaving. It took a really bad Friday, during the course of which both of his brothers sat on him (and the one who sat on his face broke wind, and laughed uproariously) to decide that whatever monsters were waiting out in the world would be bearable, perhaps even preferable.

Saturday, his brothers were meant to be looking after him, but soon they went into town to see a girl they liked. The Runt went around the back of the garage and took the Tupperware container out from beneath the plastic sheeting. He took it up to his bedroom. He emptied his school-bag onto his bed, filled it with his candies and comics and quarters and the beef jerky. He filled an empty soda bottle with water.

The Runt walked into the town and got on the bus. He rode west, ten-dollars-in-quarters worth of west, to a place he didn't know, which he thought was a good start, then he got off the bus and walked. There was no sidewalk now, so when cars came past he would edge over into the ditch, to safety.

The sun was high. He was hungry, so he rummaged in his bag and pulled out a Mars bar. After he ate it he found he was thirsty, and he drank almost half of the water from his soda bottle before he realized he was going to have to ration it. He had thought that once he got out of the town he would see springs of fresh water everywhere, but there were none to be found. There was a river, though, that ran beneath a wide bridge.

The Runt stopped halfway across the bridge to stare down at the brown water. He remembered something he had been told in school: that, in the end, all rivers flowed into the sea. He had never been to the seashore. He clambered down the bank and followed the river. There was a muddy path along the side of the riverbank, and an occasional beer can or plastic snack packet to show that people had been that way before, but he saw no one as he walked.

He finished his water.

He wondered if they were looking for him yet. He imagined police cars and helicopters and dogs, all trying to find him. He would evade them. He would make it to the sea.

The river ran over some rocks, and it splashed. He saw a blue heron, its wings wide, glide past him, and he saw solitary end-of-season dragonflies, and sometimes small clusters of midges, enjoying the Indian summer. The blue sky became dusk gray, and a bat swung down to snatch insects from the air. The Runt wondered where he would sleep that night.

Soon the path divided, and he took the branch that led away from the river, hoping it would lead to a house, or to a farm with an empty barn. He walked for some time, as the dusk deepened, until, at the end of the path, he found a farmhouse, half tumbled down and unpleasant-looking. The Runt walked around

it, becoming increasingly certain as he walked that nothing could make him go inside, and then he climbed over a broken fence to an abandoned pasture, and settled down to sleep in the long grass with his schoolbag for his pillow.

He lay on his back, fully dressed, staring up at the sky. He was not in the slightest bit sleepy.

"They'll be missing me by now," he told himself. "They'll be worried."

He imagined himself coming home in a few years' time. The delight on his family's faces as he walked up the path to home. Their welcome. Their love….

He woke some hours later, with the bright moonlight in his face. He could see the whole world—as bright as day, like in the nursery rhyme, but pale and without colors. Above him, the moon was full, or almost, and he imagined a face looking down at him, not unkindly, in the shadows and shapes of the moon's surface.

A voice said, "Where do you come from?"

He sat up, not scared, not yet, and looked around him. Trees. Long grass. "Where are you? I don't see you."

Something he had taken for a shadow moved, beside a tree on the edge of the pasture, and he saw a boy of his own age.

"I'm running away from home," said the Runt.

"Whoa," said the boy. "That must have taken a whole lot of guts."

The Runt grinned with pride. He didn't know what to say.

"You want to walk a bit?" said the boy.

"Sure," said the Runt. He moved his schoolbag, so it was next to the fence post, so he could always find it again.

They walked down the slope, giving a wide berth to the old farmhouse.

"Does anyone live there?" asked the Runt.

"Not really," said the other boy. He had fair, fine hair that was almost white in the moonlight. "Some people tried a long time back, but they didn't like it, and they left. Then other folk moved in. But nobody lives there now. What's your name?"

"Donald," said the Runt. And then, "But they call me the Runt. What do they call you?"

The boy hesitated. "Dearly," he said.

"That's a cool name."

Dearly said, "I used to have another name, but I can't read it anymore."

They squeezed through a huge iron gateway, rusted part open, part closed into position, and they were in the little meadow at the bottom of the slope.

"This place is cool," said the Runt.

There were dozens of stones of all sizes in the small meadow. Tall stones, bigger than either of the boys, and small ones, just the right size for sitting on. There were some broken stones. The Runt knew what sort of a place this was, but it did not scare him. It was a loved place.

“Who’s buried here?” he asked.

“Mostly okay people,” said Dearly. “There used to be a town over there. Past those trees. Then the railroad came and they built a stop in the next town over, and our town sort of dried up and fell in and blew away. There’s bushes and trees now, where the town was. You can hide in the trees and go into the old houses and jump out.”

The Runt said, “Are they like that farmhouse up there? The houses?” He didn’t want to go in them, if they were.

“No,” said Dearly. “Nobody goes in them, except for me. And some animals, sometimes. I’m the only kid around here.”

“I figured,” said the Runt.

“Maybe we can go down and play in them,” said Dearly.

“That would be pretty cool,” said the Runt.

It was a perfect early October night: almost as warm as summer, and the harvest moon dominated the sky. You could see everything.

“Which one of these is yours?” asked the Runt.

Dearly straightened up proudly, and took the Runt by the hand. He pulled him over to an overgrown corner of the field. The two boys pushed aside the long grass. The stone was set flat into the ground, and it had dates carved into it from a hundred years before. Much of it was worn away, but beneath the dates it was possible to make out the words DEARLY DEPARTED WILL NEVER BE FORG.

“Forgotten, I’d wager,” said Dearly.

“Yeah, that’s what I’d say too,” said the Runt.

They went out of the gate, down a gully, and into what remained of the old town. Trees grew through houses, and buildings had fallen in on themselves, but it wasn’t scary. They played hide-and-seek. They explored. Dearly showed the Runt some pretty cool places, including a one-room cottage that he said was the oldest building in that whole part of the country. It was in pretty good shape, too, considering how old it was.

“I can see pretty good by moonlight,” said the Runt. “Even inside. I didn’t know that it was so easy.”

“Yeah,” said Dearly. “And after a while you get good at seeing even when there ain’t any moonlight.”

The Runt was envious.

“I got to go to the bathroom,” said the Runt. “Is there somewhere around here?”

Dearly thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t do that stuff anymore. There are a few out-houses still standing, but they may not be safe. Best just to do it in the woods.”

“Like a bear,” said the Runt.

He went out the back, into the woods which pushed up against the wall of the cottage, and went behind a tree. He'd never done that before, in the open air. He felt like a wild animal. When he was done he wiped himself with fallen leaves. Then he went back out the front. Dearly was sitting in a pool of moonlight, waiting for him.

"How did you die?" asked the Runt.

"I got sick," said Dearly. "My maw cried and carried on something fierce. Then I died."

"If I stayed here with you," said the Runt, "would I have to be dead too?"

"Maybe," said Dearly. "Well, yeah. I guess."

"What's it like? Being dead."

"I don't mind it," admitted Dearly. "Worst thing is not having anyone to play with."

"But there must be lots of people up in that meadow," said the Runt. "Don't they ever play with you?"

"Nope," said Dearly. "Mostly, they sleep. And even when they walk, they can't be bothered to just go and see stuff and do things. They can't be bothered with me. You see that tree?"

It was a beech tree, its smooth gray bark cracked with age. It sat in what must once have been the town square, ninety years before.

"Yeah," said the Runt.

"You want to climb it?"

"It looks kind of high."

"It is. Real high. But it's easy to climb. I'll show you."

It was easy to climb. There were handholds in the bark, and the boys went up the big beech tree like a couple of monkeys, like pirates, like warriors. From the top of the tree one could see the whole world. The sky was starting to lighten, just a hair, in the east.

Everything waited. The night was ending. The world was holding its breath, preparing to begin again.

"This was the best day I ever had," said the Runt.

"Me too," said Dearly. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," said the Runt.

He imagined himself going on, walking across the world, all the way to the sea. He imagined himself growing up and growing older, bringing himself up by his bootstraps. Somewhere in there he would become fabulously wealthy. And then he would go back to the house with the twins in it, and he would drive up to their door in his wonderful car, or perhaps he would turn up at a football game (in his imagination the twins had neither aged nor grown) and look down at them, in a kindly way. He would buy them all—the twins, his parents—a meal at the finest restaurant in the city, and they would tell him how badly they had misunderstood him and mistreated him. They would apologize and weep, and through it all he would say nothing. He would let their apologies wash over him. And then he would give each of them a gift, and afterward he would leave their lives once more, this time for good.

It was a fine dream.

In reality, he knew, he would keep walking, and be found tomorrow, or the day after that, and go home and be yelled at and everything would be the same as it ever was, and day after day, hour after hour, until the end of time he'd still be the Runt, only they'd be mad at him for leaving.

"I have to go to bed soon," said Dearly. He started to climb down the big beech tree.

Climbing down the tree was harder, the Runt found. You couldn't see where you were putting your feet, and had to feel around for somewhere to put them. Several times he slipped and slid, but Dearly went down ahead of him, and would say things like "Just a little to the right now," and they both made it down just fine.

The sky continued to lighten, and the moon was fading, and it was harder to see. They clambered back through the gully. Sometimes the Runt wasn't sure that Dearly was there at all, but when he got to the top, he saw the boy waiting for him.

They didn't say much as they walked up to the meadow filled with stones. The Runt put his arm over Dearly's shoulder, and they walked in step up the hill.

"Well," said Dearly. "Thanks for stopping by."

"I had a good time," said the Runt.

"Yeah," said Dearly. "Me too."

Down in the woods somewhere a bird began to sing.

"If I wanted to stay—?" said the Runt, all in a burst. Then he stopped. *I might never get another chance to change it* , thought the Runt. He'd never get to the sea. They'd never let him.

Dearly didn't say anything, not for a long time. The world was gray. More birds joined the first.

"I can't do it," said Dearly eventually. "But *they* might."

"Who?"

"The ones in there." The fair boy pointed up the slope to the tumbledown farmhouse with the jagged broken windows, silhouetted against the dawn. The gray light had not changed it.

The Runt shivered. "There's people in there?" he said. "I thought you said it was empty."

"It ain't empty," said Dearly. "I said nobody lives there. Different things." He looked up at the sky. "I got to go now," he added. He squeezed the Runt's hand. And then he just wasn't there any longer.

The Runt stood in the little graveyard all on his own, listening to the birdsong on the morning air. Then he made his way up the hill. It was harder by himself.

He picked up his schoolbag from the place he had left it. He ate his last Milky Way and stared at the tumbledown building. The empty windows of the farmhouse were like eyes, watching him.

It was darker inside there. Darker than anything.

He pushed his way through the weed-choked yard. The door to the farmhouse was mostly crumbled away. He stopped at the doorway, hesitating, wondering if this was wise. He could smell damp, and rot,

and something else underneath. He thought he heard something move, deep in the house, in the cellar, maybe, or the attic. A shuffle, maybe. Or a hop. It was hard to tell.

Eventually, he went inside.

Nobody said anything. October filled his wooden mug with apple cider when he was done, and drained it, and filled it again.

"It was a story," said December. "I'll say that for it." He rubbed his pale blue eyes with a fist. The fire was almost out.

"What happened next?" asked June nervously. "After he went into the house?"

May, sitting next to her, put her hand on June's arm. "Better not to think about it," she said.

"Anyone else want a turn?" asked August. There was no reply. "Then I think we're done."

"That needs to be an official motion," pointed out February.

"All in favor?" said October. There was a chorus of "Ayes." "All against?" Silence. "Then I declare this meeting adjourned."

They got up from the fireside, stretching and yawning, and walked away into the wood, in ones and twos and threes, until only October and his neighbor remained.

"Your turn in the chair next time," said October.

"I know," said November. He was pale, and thin lipped. He helped October out of the wooden chair. "I like your stories. Mine are always too dark."

"I don't think so," said October. "It's just that your nights are longer. And you aren't as warm."

"Put it like that," said November, "and I feel better. I suppose we can't help who we are."

"That's the spirit," said his brother. And they touched hands as they walked away from the fire's orange embers, taking their stories with them back into the dark.

Greaves, This Is Serious

William Mingin

William Mingin lives in central New Jersey, where he runs a small book-exporting company. He has published poetry and fiction in the small press, and over 70 essays, articles, and book reviews (reviews for the St. Petersburg [Fl] Times, The Annual Review of Science Fiction and Fantasy, *and* Publishers Weekly*). He attended Clarion West and writing courses taught by Carol Emshwiller and Shawna McCarthy. "I've got English degrees from Yale and Princeton, if you want to go back that far," he says. But he has published only a few short stories to date. From what we have read, we hope for more, soon. His works are literate and embedded in a deep knowledge of fantastic*

literature, as well as literature in general.

"Greaves, This Is Serious" appeared in Tales of the Unanticipated. *It is number seven in a series of short short stories called* 1001 Deaths, *others of which have been published there. It is a short literary parody of the Jeeves stories of P. G. Wodehouse, and a fantasy with the effect of a neat shot of whiskey.*

Greaves oozed into the bedchamber bearing what I took to be that tonic for the nerves of which, with his uncanny brain-power, he knew the young master had a desperate need. The man is little shy of genius. He *lives* on fish.

"Greaves," the selfsame young master—I—croaked out, "is it day again already?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, we are well into the post meridian, sir."

"And is that which you hold the precious restorative cup of your concoction?"

"Yes, sir. I was sure that you would want it, sir."

"I do. Bring it 'round."

He brought the odd mixture—egg, tomato juice, Worcestershire sauce, and Heaven knows what else—ambrosia, eye of newt, and butterscotch pudd, for all I, young Ferdinand Brewster, cared—and I downed it. There followed a sudden, threatening stillness; the next moment the Fellow Upstairs was back at the old stand, and all was right with the world—or at least, with long-suffering self.

"Greaves, in the depths of my painful hibernation, did I hear someone ringing for entry?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Dodgson, sir."

"Aunt Adele? And you kept her from the Inner Sanctum? Stout work, Greaves."

"Indeed, sir, I can take only partial credit for the happy result; most belongs to the intense disgust which Mrs. Dodgson presently holds for you. She would not see you at present, she said, if you crawled to her domicile on your knees, sir."

"Right ho! How did I work this magic, Greaves?"

"Perhaps her errand would enlighten you, sir. Mrs. Dodgson requested me to remind you when, as she put it, 'he finally rouses himself from his alcoholic stupor,' that you owe her £20 for standing your bail."

"Bail? As bad as all that, eh?"

"Yes, sir. Evidently, sir, you—as you put it last night—'chucked biggish stones' at the window of a government ministry while singing songs that were not, perhaps, suitable for all listeners."

"I say! Dashed sticky business, that, eh, what? I'm jolly well out of it."

“I am afraid, sir, that you will have to appear before a tribunal at some juncture. Although I am sure that someone in your position, and with a clean record, will merely have a fine to pay, sir.”

“You don’t mean to tell me I gave them *my* name, do you?”

“Evidently you could not remember any name, sir, including your own, so that the constabulary was forced to—ahem—go through your pockets to ascertain it.”

“Distinctly rummy! Speaking of which—what was in those drinks you provided yestereve?”

“In the drinks of most of the company, sir, a light mixture of champagne and various liqueurs. In yours, a mixture of champagne and, as you so aptly say, rum, containing alcohol in a proportion of slightly higher than 75%.”

“150 proof?”

“151, sir, to be precise.”

“That was a bit much on your part, Greaves, I must say. Were you trying to render the young master *non compos* ? I’ll have a devil of a time now trying to carry on the wretched political career Aunt Adele was trying to construct for me.”

“Yes, sir. I believe you now have no future in politics. Mrs. Dodgson seemed also of this persuasion, and instructed me to convey her sentiment that you are, and I quote, ‘a worthless idler, a waste of a human form, a trifler, a blood-sucker, a drone.’ ”

“All rather ripe,” I said, reflecting gloomily. And then came the light. “Wait—you say my political career is finished, and my Aunt says she will shun me, for the foreseeable f., like the proverbial p.?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And all I have to pay for this excellent result is a fine and a rapidly vanishing badness of the head?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Greaves, you *are* a genius! An unmitigated wonder! I must say, I can’t see why you shouldn’t go down in legend and song!”

“Thank you, sir. I am most gratified to hear you say so.”

“Send the £20 round to my Aunt, and when you do—take another twenty for yourself. You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, sir.” Greaves went to the dresser to find the required sums among the bills scattered thereon and

I set my teacup down. “Good of you to rally round, Greaves,” I said, with the frank appreciation that, when all is said and done, *noblesse oblige* . “Awfully, sportingly Feudal. Imagine Aunt Adele setting me up to run that charity wheeze—I mean, unwed mothers! I blush to think! Hundreds of droopy, weepy females, giving yours truly the old fish eye, I’m sure. The look of silent reproach, don’t you know, and so undeserved! To say nothing of the squalling offspring!”

“I’m sure Mrs. Dodgson had in mind only an administrative position, sir, and not actual—ahem—‘hands-on-care.’ ”

“What then? Just another job, wouldn’t you say?”

“Precisely why I thought it unsuitable, sir.”

“Well, good thing the place was all wood. I suppose the insurance will let them build again, what?”

“Unfortunately, sir, the edifice in question, being located in rather—ahem—questionable environs, was uninsurable.”

“Ah, well. I suppose they’ll find someplace else to run that blighted hole. Hmm, Greaves….”

“Yes, sir?”

“What *is* holding up the eggs and b.?”

“I am going just now to collect them, sir.”

“Good job,” I said, finishing the day’s first Bohea. I had hardly set down the cup before Greaves bowed his thanks. I went on: “Your protuberant brain has sized up the situation, engineered the solution, and carried it through with the executive skill of a generalissimo.”

He bowed again. “Thank you, sir. One does one’s best to give satisfaction, sir.”

“Satisfaction isn’t the half of it; life-saving, I call it. If it hadn’t been for the master plan, deftly executed, I might before the end of the coming June have been forced to tread the strewn orange blossoms, or the rose petals, or whatever it is one strews at weddings, with Catalina Glimpet”—one of the soupiest young females, I must say, of whom I ever had the misfortune to make the acquaintance. She had the perpetual look of a mollusk bearing a burden of unspoken sorrow. “Do you realize, Greaves, that she wanted a brood of six? Or *eight* ? And that I was to work in Daddy’s business—leather tanning, or import-export, or banana ripening rooms, or whatever wheeze they prosecute at the family stand—taking on more and more responsibility, until yours truly would have been running the whole ignoble enterprise?”

We Brewsters are of unimpeachable courage and resource, but the linkage of “responsibility” with “more and more” gave this scion of the old tree absolute chattering chills.

“Yes, sir. I thought it most unsuitable, sir.”

“How did you come up with the idea? So simple, so effective! Just took the handbrake off?”

“Yes, sir. I knew the young lady in question was given to a swim at that particular hour of the day. The happy position of the motorcar, the gentle but unimpeded slope, the vehicle’s inertia, sure to carry it across the dock—”

“Thank Heaven for your knowledge of practical physics! Well, given the happy outcome, I suggest an invigorating and celebratory ‘whiskey and,’ Greaves, rather lightish on the ‘and.’ ”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

I took the glass from Greaves and raised it to the lips with a “God bless Catalina Glimpet, the poor blister, wherever she may be!,” downed it, then turned and

“I say, Greaves,” I began as he brought me the day’s first revivifying cup of Oolong, to be followed in not too tardy a fash, one hoped, by the matutinal eggs and b., “I say—”

Which I had said once already. I paused to marshal the thoughts. We Brewsters are nothing if not the Field Marshals, as it were, of our thoughts, disciplined troops of logic and ratty-o—ratial—erm—what was the word that Poe chappie used?

“I say, Greaves,” I said for the third and, one hopes, final time in this narrative, plunging ahead now, into the breach, my marshaled thoughts doing double-time to keep up, “do we ever do anything—erm—else?”

“Else, sir?”

“Else—different—other?”

“In what way, sir?”

I tsked at the fellow. I mean, I hauled off and *tsked* at him—and I meant it to *sting* . Could a fellow with such a bulge of brainy matter really fail to understand even *one* of these three simple terms?

But no matter. I marshaled the aforementioned thoughts where he could review the troops. “Different, Greaves, don’t you see? Other than what we have been doing. Oh, you know what I mean—something useful—perhaps getting a job—marriage—raising children—as an adult person does. If not a paying job, then perhaps running some worthy philanthropic institution. All the activities we’ve been trying to avoid.”

Greaves, in the true Feudal spirit, does not lightly gainsay the Master, so he shook his head with some regret and said, “No, sir. In that sense, we do not do anything ‘different,’ as you say. Things will always remain just as they are.”

I suppose for the moment I didn’t pay full attention to the man, as I was pursuing the vaguest of thoughts, like the memory of a dream brought to mind by seeing someone sporting the same color spats they’d worn in the dream *op.cit* . “Dash it all, Greaves, but sometimes I could swear by my dear Aunt Penelope that I did things like that once—or I was supposed to, anyhow, wanted to, perhaps, sloughed them off a bit and all that—wasted the precious shining hours. Well, now, here’s a ripe bit of flapdoodle—mustn’t laugh at the young master—”

“Not at all, sir.”

“But I could swear I once was someone else, before I came here and did these damned silly things we do, over and over and over.”

Greaves waited in respectful s. The Brewster brain was humming on—no, damn the Brewster brain. I had a thought and spat it out before it could vanish.

“Greaves,” I said, going chill all over, despite the warmth of the breakfast beverage, which was served, of course, at the perfect temp., “have I died? And is being this”—I motioned, judiciously, with the cup toward Self—“my punishment? To be this trifling silly ass forever? To never—never *touch* anyone again?”

The fellow nodded slightly, if gravely, and said, “Yes, sir. Very good, sir. The punishment is not fully

consummated until one comes to realize it, sir." Then, finally, something *was* different. Despite his word, Greaves laughed—and kept on laughing.

"Enough to give one the absolute pip," I muttered—not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't utter anything else. Then, at the full realization of my predicament, I emitted a hollow g.

Shift

Nalo Hopkinson

Nalo Hopkinson [www.sff.net/people/nalo] was born in the Caribbean and lives in Toronto. She studied with Judith Merril in Canada, and attended the Clarion East writing workshop in 1995. She is on the steering committee of the Carl Brandon Society, which promotes the involvement of people of color in speculative fiction. After publishing a few short stories, her first novel, Brown Girl in the Ring *(1998), established her reputation as an important new fantasy writer. Her second novel,* Midnight Robber, *was published in 2000, and her short story collection,* Skin Folk, *in 2002. Her third novel,* The Salt Roads, *will appear in 2003. Hopkinson edited the anthologies* Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction *(2000) and* Mojo: Conjure Stories *(2003). She says, "I write speculative fiction. For anyone who doesn't know the term, it's fiction in which impossible things happen. It includes magic realism, fantasy, science fiction and horror."*

"Shift" appeared in Conjunctions: 39, *the large special issue of that distinguished literary quarterly, edited by Peter Straub and devoted to "the New Fabulists." The Neil Gaiman story, above, and the China Miéville story later in this book are also from that fine collection. Hopkinson here plays sophisticated fantastic games with Shakespeare's characters from* The Tempest *—Ariel, Caliban, and Sycorax.*

Down,

Down,

Down,

To the deep and shady,

Pretty mermaidy,

Take me down.

—AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLK SONG

"Did you sleep well?" she asks, and you make sure that your face is fixed into a dreamy smile as you open your eyes into the morning after. It had been an awkward third date; a clumsy fumbling in her bed, both of you apologizing and then fleeing gratefully into sleep.

"I dreamed that you kissed me," you say. That line's worked before.

She's lovely as she was the first time you met her, particularly seen through eyes with color vision. "You said you wanted me to be your frog." *Say it, say it* , you think.

She laughs. "Isn't that kind of backward?"

"Well, it'd be a way to start over, right?" You ignore the way that her eyes narrow. "You could kiss me," you tell her, as playfully as you can manage, "and make me your prince again."

She looks thoughtful at that. You reach for her, pull her close. She comes willingly, a fall of little blonde plaits brushing your face like fingers. Her hair's too straight to hold the plaits; they're already feathered all along their lengths. "Will you be my slimy little frog?" she whispers, a gleam of amusement in her eyes, and your heart double-times, but she kisses you on the forehead instead of the mouth. You could scream with frustration.

"I've got morning breath," she says apologetically. She means that you do.

"I'll go and brush my teeth," you tell her. You try not to sound grumpy. You linger in the bathroom, staring at the whimsical shells she keeps in the little woven basket on the counter, flaunting their salty pink cores. You wait for anger and pique to subside.

"You hungry?" she calls from the kitchen. "I thought I'd make some oatmeal porridge."

So much for kissing games. She's decided it's time for breakfast instead. "Yes," you say. "Porridge is fine."

Ban…Ban…ca-ca-Caliban…

You know who the real tempest is, don't it? The real storm? Is our mother Sycorax; his and mine. If you ever see her hair flying around her head when she dash at you in anger; like a whirlwind, like a lightning, like a deadly whirlpool. Wheeling and turning round her scalp like if it ever catch you, it going to drag you in, pull you down, swallow you in pieces. If you ever hear how she gnash her teeth in her head like tiger shark; if you ever hear the crack of her voice or feel the crack of her hand on your backside like a bolt out of thunder, then you would know is where the real storm there.

She tell me say I must call her Scylla, or Charybdis.

Say it don't make no matter which, for she could never remember one different from the other, but she know one of them is her real name. She say never mind the name most people know her by; is a name some Englishman give her by scraping a feather quill on paper.

White people magic.

Her people magic, for all that she will box you if you ever remind her of that, and flash her blue, blue y'eye-them at you. Lightning *braps* from out of blue sky. But me and Brother, when she not there, is that

Englishman name we call her by.

When she hold you on her breast, you must take care never to relax, never to close your y'eye, for you might wake up with your nose hole-them filling up with the salt sea. Salt sea rushing into your lungs to drown you with her mother love.

Imagine what is like to be the son of that mother.

Now imagine what is like to be the sister of that son, to be sister to that there brother.

There was a time they called porridge "gruel." A time when you lived in castle moats and fetched beautiful golden balls for beautiful golden girls. When the fetching was a game, and you knew yourself to be lord of the land and the veins of water that ran through it, and you could graciously allow petty kings to build their palaces on the land, in which to raise up their avid young daughters.

Ban…ban…ca-ca-Caliban…

When I was small, I hear that blasted name so plenty I thought it was me own.

In her bathroom, you find a new toothbrush, still in its plastic package. She was thinking of you then, of you staying overnight. You smile, mollified. You crack the plastic open, brush your teeth, looking around at the friendly messiness of her bathroom. Cotton, silk, and polyester panties hanging on the shower-curtain rod to dry, their crotches permanently honey-stained. Three different types of deodorant on the counter, two of them lidless, dried out. A small bottle of perfume oil, lid off so that it weeps its sweetness into the air. A fine dusting of baby powder covers everything, its innocent odor making you sneeze. Someone *lives* here. Your own apartment—the one you found when you came on land—is as crisp and dull as a hotel room, a stop along the way. Everything is tidy there, except for the wastepaper basket in your bedroom, which is crammed with empty pill bottles: marine algae capsules; iodine pills. You remind yourself that you need to buy more, to keep the cravings at bay.

Caliban have a sickness. Is a sickness any of you could get. In him it manifest as a weakness; a weakness for cream. He fancy himself a prince of Africa, a mannish Cleopatra, bathing in mother's milk. Him believe say it would make him pretty. Him never had mirrors to look in, and with the mother we had, the surface of the sea never calm enough that him could see him face in it. Him would never believe me say that him pretty already. Him fancy if cream would only touch him, if him could only submerge himself entirely in it, it would redeem him.

Me woulda try it too, you know, but me have that feature you find among so many brown-skin people; cream make me belly gripe.

Truth to tell, Brother have the same problem, but him would gladly suffer the stomach pangs and the belly-running for the chance to drink in cream, to bathe in cream, to have it dripping off him and running

into him mouth. Such a different taste from the bitter salt sea milk of Sycorax.

That beautiful woman making breakfast in her kitchen dives better than you do. You've seen her knifing so sharply through waves that you wondered they didn't bleed in her wake.

You fill the sink, wave your hands through the water. It's bliss, the way it resists you. You wonder if you have time for a bath. It's a pity that this isn't one of those apartment buildings with a pool. You miss swimming.

You wash your face. You pull the plug, watch the water spiral down the drain. It looks wild, like a mother's mad hair. Then you remember that you have to be cautious around water now, even the tame, caged water of swimming pools and bathrooms. Quickly, you sink the plug back into the mouth of the drain. You'd forgotten; anywhere there's water, especially rioting water, it can tattle tales to your mother.

Your face feels cool and squeaky now. You mouth is wild cherry-flavored from the toothpaste. You're kissable. You can hear humming from the kitchen, and the scraping of a spoon against a pot. There's a smell of cinnamon and nutmeg. Island smells. You square your shoulders, put on a smile, walk to the kitchen. Your feet are floppy, reluctant. You wish you could pay attention to what they're telling you. When they plash around like this, when they slip and slide and don't want to carry you upright, it's always been a bad sign. The kisses of golden girls are chancy things. Once, after the touch of other pale lips, you looked into the eyes of a golden girl, one Miranda, and saw yourself reflected back in her moist, breathless stare. In her eyes you were tall, handsome, your shoulders powerful and your jaw square. You carried yourself with the arrogance of a prince. You held a spear in one hand. The spotted, tawny pelt of an animal that had never existed was knotted around your waist. You wore something's teeth on a string around your neck and you spoke in grunts, imperious. In her eyes, your bright copper skin was dark and loamy as cocoa. She had sighed and leaped upon you, kissing and biting, begging to be taken. You had let her have what she wanted. When her father stumbled upon the two of you, writhing on the ground, she had leaped to her feet and changed you again; called you monster, attacker. She'd clasped her bodice closed with one hand, carefully leaving bare enough pitiful juddering bosom to spark a father's ire. She'd looked at you regretfully, sobbed crocodile tears, and spoken the lies that had made you her father's slave for an interminable length of years.

You haven't seen yourself in this one's eyes yet. You need her to kiss you, to change you, to hide you from your dam. That's what you've always needed. You are always awed by the ones who can work this magic. You could love one of them forever and a day. You just have to find the right one.

You stay a second in the kitchen doorway. She looks up from where she stands at the little table, briskly setting two different-sized spoons beside two mismatched bowls. She smiles. "Come on in," she says.

You do, on your slippery feet. You sit at the table. She's still standing. "I'm sorry," she says. She quirks a regretful smile at you. "I don't think my cold sore is quite healed yet." She runs a tongue tip over the corner of her lip, where you can no longer see the crusty scab.

You sigh. "It's all right. Forget it."

She goes over to the stove. You don't pay any attention. You're staring at the thready crack in your bowl.

She says, "Brown sugar or white?"

"Brown," you tell her. "And lots of milk." Your gut gripes at the mere thought, but milk will taint the water in which she cooked the oats. It will cloud the whisperings that water carries to your mother.

Nowadays people would say that me and my mooncalf brother, we is "lactose intolerant." But me think say them misname the thing. Me think say is milk can't tolerate we, not we can't tolerate it.

So: he find himself another creamy one. Just watch at the two of them there, in that pretty domestic scene.

I enter, invisible.

Brother eat off most of him porridge already. Him always had a large appetite. The white lady, she only passa-passaing with hers, dipping the spoon in, tasting little bit, turning the spoon over and watching at it, dipping it in. She glance at him and say, "Would you like to go to the beach today?"

"No!" You almost shout it. You're not going to the beach, not to any large body of water ever again. Your very cells keen from the loss of it, but She is in the water, looking for you.

"A true. Mummy in the water, and I in the wind, Brother," I whisper to him, so sweet. By my choice, him never hear me yet. Don't want him to know that me find him. Plenty time for that. Plenty time to fly and carry the news to Mama. Maybe I can find a way to be free if I do this one last thing for her. Bring her beloved son back. Is him she want, not me. Never me. "Ban, ban, ca-ca-Caliban!" I scream in him face, silently.

"There's no need to shout," she says with an offended look. "That's where we first saw each other, and you swam so strongly. You were beautiful in the water. So I just thought you might like to go back there."

You had been swimming for your life, but she didn't knowthat. The surf tossing you crashing against the rocks, the undertow pulling you back in deeper, the waves singing their triumphant song: *She's coming*.

Sycorax is coming for you. Can you feel the tips of her tentacles now? Can you feel them sticking to your skin, bringing you back? She's coming. We've got you now. We'll hold you for her. Oh, there'll be so much fun when she has you again!

And you had hit out at the water, stroked through it, kicked through it, fleeing for shore. One desperate pull of your arms had taken you through foaming surf. You crashed into another body, heard a surprised "Oh," and then a wave tumbled you. As you fought in its depths, searching for the air and dry land, you saw her, this woman, slim as an eel, her body parting the water, her hair glowing golden. She'd extended a hand to you, like reaching for a bobbing ball. You took her hand, held on tightly to the warmth of it. She stood, and you stood, and you realized you'd been only feet from shore. "Are you all right?" she'd asked.

The water had tried to suck you back in, but it was only at thigh height now. You ignored it. You kept hold of her hand, started moving with her, your savior, to the land. You felt your heart swelling. She was perfect. "I'm doing just fine," you'd said. "I'm sorry I startled you. What's your name?"

Behind you, you could hear the surf shouting for you to come back. But the sun was warm on your shoulders now, and you knew that you'd stay on land. As you came up out of the water, she glanced at you and smiled, and you could feel the change begin.

She's sitting at her table, still with that hurt look on her face.

"I'm sorry, darling," you say, and she brightens at the endearment, the first you've used with her. Under the table, your feet are trying to paddle away, away. You ignore them. "Why don't we go for a walk?" you ask her. She smiles, nods. The many plaits of her hair sway with the rhythm. You must ask her not to wear her hair like that. Once you know her a little better. They look like tentacles. Besides, her hair's so pale that her pink scalp shows through.

Chuh. *I'm sorry, darling* . Him is sorry, is true. A sorry sight. I follow them out on them little walk, them Sunday perambulation. Down her street and round the corner into the district where the trendy people-them live. Where those cunning little shops are, you know the kind, yes? Wildflowers selling at this one, half your wages for one so-so blossom. Cheese from Greece at that one, and wine from Algiers. (Mama S. say she don't miss Algiers one bit.) Tropical fruit selling at another store, imported from the Indies, from the hot sun places where people work them finger to the bone to pick them and box them and send them, but not to eat them. Brother and him new woman meander through those streets, making sure people look at them good. She turn her moon face to him, give him that fuck-me look, and take him hand. I see him melt. Going to be easy to change him now that she melt him. And then him will be gone from we again. I blow a grieving breeze oo-oo-oo through the leaves of the crab apple trees lining that street.

She looks around, her face bright and open. "Isn't it a lovely day?" she says. "Feel the air on your skin."

She releases your hand. The sweat of your mingled touch evaporates and you mourn its passing. She opens her arms to the sun, drinking in light.

Of course, that white man, him only write down part of the story. Him say how our mother was a witch. How she did consort with monsters. But you know the real story? You know why them exile her from Algiers, with a baby in her belly and one at her breast?

She spins and laughs, her print dress opening like a flower above her scuffed army boots. Her strong legs are revealed to midthigh.

Them send my mother from her home because of the monster she consort with. The lord with sable eyes and skin like rich earth. My daddy.

An old man sitting on a bench smiles, indulgent at her joy, but then he sees her reach for your hand again. He scowls at you, spits to one side.

My daddy. A man who went for a swim one day, down, down, down, and when he see the fair maid flowing toward him, her long hair just a-swirl like weeds in the water, her skin like milk, him never 'fraid.

As you both pass the old man, he shakes his head, his face clenched. She doesn't seem to notice. You hold her hand tighter, reach to pull her warmth closer to you. But you're going down, and you know it.

When my mother who wasn't my mother yet approach the man who wasn't my father yet, when she ask him, "Man, you eat salt, or you eat fresh?" him did know what fe say. Of course him did know. After his tutors teach him courtly ways from since he was small. After his father teach him how to woo. After his own mother teach him how to address the Wata Lady with respect. Sycorax ask him, "Man, you eat salt, or you eat fresh?"

And proper proper, him respond, “Me prefer the taste of salt, thank you please.”

That was the right answer. For them that does eat fresh, them going to be fresh with your business. But this man show her that he know how fe have respect. For that, she give him breath and take him down, she take him down even farther.

You pass another beautiful golden girl, luxuriantly blond. She glances at you, casts her eyes down demurely, where they just happen to rest at your crotch. You feel her burgeoning gaze there, your helpless response. Quickly you lean and kiss the shoulder of the woman you’re with. The other one’s look turns to resentful longing. You hurry on.

She take him down into her own castle, and she feed him the salt foods she keep in there, the fish and oysters and clams, and him eat of them till him belly full, and him talk to her sweet, and him never get fresh with her. Not even one time. Not until she ask him to. Mama wouldn’t tell me what happen after that, but true she have two pickney, and both of we shine copper, even though she is alabaster, so me think me know is what went on.

There’s a young black woman sitting on a bench, her hair tight peppercorns against her scalp. Her feet are crossed beneath her. She’s alone, reading a book. She’s pretty, but she looks too much like your sister. She could never be a golden girl. She looks up as you go by, distracted from her reading by the chattering of the woman beside you. She looks at you. Smiles. Nods a greeting. Burning up with guilt, you make your face stone. You move on.

In my mother and father, salt meet with sweet. Milk meet with chocolate. No one could touch her while he was alive and ruler of his lands, but the minute him dead, her family and his get together and exile her to that little island to starve to death. Send her away with two sweet-and-sour, milk chocolate pickney; me in her belly and Caliban at her breast. Is nuh that turn her bitter? When you confine the sea, it don’t stagnate? You put milk to stand, and it nuh curdle?

Chuh. Watch at my brother, there, making himself fool-fool. Is time. Time to end this, to take him back down. “Mama,” I whisper. I blow one puff of wind, then another. The puffs tear a balloon out from a little girl’s hand. The balloon have a fish painted on it. I like that. The little girl cry out and run after her toy. Her father dash after her. I puff and blow, make the little metallic balloon skitter just out of the child reach. As she run, she knock over a case of fancy bottled water, the expensive fizzy kind in blue glass

bottles, from a display. The bottles explode when them hit the ground, the water escaping with a shout of glee. The little girl just dance out of the way of broken glass and spilled water and keep running for her balloon, reaching for it. I make it bob like a bubble in the air. Her daddy jump to one side, away from the glass. He try to snatch the back of her dress, but he too big and slow. Caliban step forward and grasp her balloon by the string. He give it back to her. She look at him, her y'eye-them big. She clutch the balloon to her bosom and smile at her daddy as he sweep her up into him arms.

The storekeeper just a-wait outside her shop, to talk to the man about who going to refund her goods.

"Mother," I call. "Him is here. I find him."

The water from out the bottles start to flow together in a spiral.

You hear her first in the dancing breeze that's toying with that little girl's balloon. You fetch the balloon for the child before you deal with what's coming. Her father mumbles a suspicious thanks at you. You step away from them. You narrow your eyes, look around. "You're here, aren't you?" you say to the air.

"Who's here?" asks the woman at your side.

"My sister," you tell her. You say "sister" like you're spitting out spoiled milk.

"I don't see anyone," the woman tells you.

"El!" you call out.

I don't pay him no mind. I summon up one of them hot, gusty winds. I blow over glasses of water on café tables. I grab Popsicles *swips!* out from the hands and mouths of children. The Popsicles fall down and melt, all the bright colors; melt and run like that brother of mine.

Popsicle juice, café table water, spring water that break free from bottles; them all rolling together now, crashing and splashing and calling to our mother. I call up the whirling devils. Them twirl sand into everybody eyes. Hats and baseball caps flying off heads, dancing along with me. An umbrella galloping down the road, end over end, with an old lady chasing it. All the trendy Sunday people squealing and running everywhere.

"Ariel, stop it!" you say.

So I run up his girlfriend skirt, make it fly high in the air. "Oh!" she cry out, trying to hold the frock down.

She wearing a panty with a tear in one leg and a knot in the waistband. That make me laugh out loud. “Mama!” I shout, loud so Brother can hear me this time. “You seeing this? Look him here so!” I blow one rassclaat cluster of rain clouds over the scene, them bellies black and heavy with water. “So me see that you get a new master!” I screech at Brother.

The street is empty now, but for the three of you. Everyone else has found shelter. Your girl is cowering down beside the trunk of a tree, hugging her skirt about her knees. Her hair has come loose from most of its plaits, is whipping in a tangled mess about her head. She’s shielding her face from blowing sand, but trying to look up at the sky above her, where this attack is coming from. You punch at the air, furious. You know you can’t hurt your sister, but you need to lash out anyway. “Fuck you!” you yell. “You always do this! Why can’t the two of you leave me alone!”

I chuckle, “Your face favor jackass when him sick. Why you can’t leave white woman alone? You don’t see what them do to you?”

“You are our mother’s creature,” you hiss at her. In your anger, your speech slips into the same rhythms as hers. “Look at you, trying so hard to be ‘island,’ talking like you just come off the boat.”

“At least me nah try fe chat like something out of some Englishman book.” I make the wind howl it back at him. “At least me remember is boat me come off from!” I burst open the clouds overhead and drench the two of them in mother water. She squeals. Good.

“Ariel, Caliban; stop that squabbling or I’ll bind you both up in a split tree forever.” The voice is a wintry runnel, fast-freezing.

You both turn. It’s Sycorax. Your sister has manifested, has pushed a trembling bottom lip out. Dread runs cold along your limbs. “Yes, Mother,” you both say, standing sheepishly shoulder to shoulder. “Sorry, Mother.”

Sycorax is sitting in a sticky puddle of water and melted Popsicles, but a queen on her throne could not be more regal. She has wrapped an ocean wave about her like a shawl. Her eyes are open-water blue. Her writhing hair foams white over her shoulders and the marble swells of her vast breasts. Her belly is a mounded salt lick, rising from the weedy tangle of her pubic hair, a marine jungle in and out of which flit tiny blennies. The tsunami of Sycorax’s hips overflows her watery seat. Her myriad split tails are flicking,

the way they do when she's irritated. With one of them, she scratches around her navel. You think you can see the sullen head of a moray eel, lurking in the cave those hydra tails make. You don't want to think about it. You never have.

"Ariel," says Sycorax, "have you been up to your tricks again?"

"But he," splutters your sister, "he…"

" *He* never ceases with *his* tricks," your mother pronounces. "Running home to Mama, leaving me with the mess he's made." She looks at you, and your watery legs weaken. "Caliban," she says, "I'm getting too old to play surrogate mother to your spawn. That last school of your offspring all had poisonous stings."

"I know, Mother. I'm sorry."

"How did that happen?" she asks.

You risk a glance at the woman you've dragged into this, the golden girl. She's standing now, a look of interest and curiosity on her face. "It's your fault," you say to her. "If you had kissed me, told me what you wanted me to be, she and Ariel couldn't have found us."

She looks at you, measuring. "First tell me about the poison babies," she says. She's got more iron in her than you'd thought, this one. The last fairy-tale princess who'd met your family hadn't stopped screaming for two days.

Ariel sniggers. "That was from his last ooman," she says. "The two of them always quarreling. For her, Caliban had a poison tongue."

"And spat out biting words, no doubt," Sycorax says. "He became what she saw, and it affected the children they made. Of course she didn't want them, of course she left; so Grannie gets to do the honors. He has brought me frog children and dog children, baby mack daddies and crack babies. Brings his offspring to me, then runs away again. And I'm getting tired of it." Sycorax's shawl whirls itself up into a waterspout. "And I'm more than tired of his sister's tale tattling."

"But Mama…!" Ariel says.

" 'But Mama' nothing. I want you to stop pestering your brother."

Ariel puffs up till it looks as though she might burst. Her face goes anvil-cloud dark, but she says nothing.

"And you," says Sycorax, pointing at you with a suckered tentacle, "you need to stop bringing me the fallout from your sorry love life."

"I can't help it, Mama," you say. "That's how women see me."

Sycorax towers forward, her voice crashing upon your ears. "Do you want to know how *I* see you?" A cluster of her tentacle tails whips around your shoulders, immobilizes you. That *is* a moray eel under there, its fanged mouth hanging hungrily open. You are frozen in Sycorax's gaze, a hapless, irresponsible little boy. You feel the sickening metamorphosis begin. You are changing, shrinking. The last time Sycorax did this to you, it took you forever to become man enough again to escape. You try to twist in her arms, to look away from her eyes. She pulls you forward, puckering her mouth for the kiss she will give you.

"Well, yeah, I'm beginning to get a picture here," says a voice. It's the golden girl, shivering in her

flower-print dress that's plastered to her skinny body. She steps closer. Her boots squelch. She points at Ariel. "You says he's color-struck. You're his sister, you should know. And yeah, I can see that in him. You'd think I was the sun itself, the way he looks at me."

She takes your face in her hands, turns your eyes away from your mother's. Finally, she kisses you full on the mouth. In her eyes, you become a sunflower, helplessly turning wherever she goes. You stand rooted, waiting for her direction.

She looks at your terrible mother. "You get to clean up the messes he makes." And now you're a baby, soiling your diapers and waiting for Mama to come and fix it. Oh, please, end this.

She looks down at you, wriggling and helpless on the ground. "And I guess all those other women saw big, black dick."

So familiar, the change that wreaks on you. You're an adult again, heavy-muscled and horny with a thick, swelling erection. You reach for her. She backs away. "But," she says, "there's one thing I don't see."

You don't care. She smells like vanilla and her skin is smooth and cool as ice cream and you want to push your tongue inside. You grab her thin, unresisting arms. She's shaking, but she looks into your eyes. And hers are empty. You aren't there. Shocked, you let her go. In a trembling voice, she says, "Who do you think you are?"

It could be an accusation: *Who* do you *think* you are? It might be a question: Who do *you* think you are? You search her face for the answer. Nothing. Your mother and your sib both look as shocked as you feel.

"Hey," says the golden girl, opening her hands wide. Her voice is getting less shaky. "Clearly, this is family business, and I know better than to mess with that." She gathers her little picky plaits together, squeezes water out of them. "It's been really…interesting, meeting you all." She looks at you, and her eyes are empty, open, friendly. You don't know what to make of them. "Um," she says, "maybe you can give me a call sometime." She starts walking away. Turns back. "It's not a brush-off; I mean it. But only call when you can tell me who you really are. Who you think you're going to become."

And she leaves you standing there. In the silence, there's only a faint sound of whispering water and wind in the trees. You turn to look at your mother and sister. "I," you say.

A Book, by Its Cover

P.D. Cacek

P.D. Cacek[www.pdcacek.com] lives in Pennsylvania. The winner of awards for her short fiction, P.D. Cacek is the author of a collection, Leavings, *two humorous vampire novels,* Night Prayers, *and its sequel,*Night Players, *and a contemporary werewolf novel set in Denver, Colorado,* Canyons. *A lifelong lover of the supernatural, Cacek has begun work on what she calls her New Hope Quartet—a series of nontraditional gothic ghost novels set in New Hope, Pennsylvania. She is currently working on the second in the series, entitled* Reflections through Beveled Glass. *Cacek's nonfiction articles on New Hope, and its ghosts, can be seen on-line at www.newhopepa.com.*

"A Book, by Its Cover" was published in Shelf Life, *a $75 limited-edition fantasy anthology on the theme of books and bookselling that was one of the best anthologies of the year, though not*

widely circulated. It is the story of a bookstore owner, Reb Shendelman, and his young neighbor, Yavin. Yavin suspects him of something evil in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, that night in Nazi Germany in the 1930s when violent anti-semitic riots swept the country, windows were broken and property destroyed or looted, many books were burned, and many Jews were beaten or killed.

A cloud passed in front of the sun and the already pale light faded to the color of bone. Snow was coming, but not one of the people scurrying along the street, bundled against the cold as they hurried from one shop to another, seemed to notice. Or care. All of them acted as if the day and the light and the approaching snow was normal, part of the ordinary.

And he hated them, all of them, for that—for not noticing what the world had become.

He couldn't understand why they didn't see and how they could continue to shop and pray and go on with the day to day business of living, as if the future still existed.

Because he knew better. He had seen the end of the future the day his grandfather had sewn the two yellow triangles together to make the star on his coat. The future was finite now and he seemed to be the only one who knew it.

Yavin Landauer pulled the old frock coat's collar tighter against his neck and watched a man in a fedora and camel-hair overcoat, the color of honey, walk hand-in-hand with a boy of nine or ten in knickers and jacket and cap all of soft gray wool. The cheap cotton stars looked out of place on the expensive material, material that Yavin could almost feel the texture of even from across the street. His grandfather had obtained a few bolts of wool much like that just a few weeks before….

He shook the memory away before it could take root and glared at the man and boy. They were laughing as they walked, the man pointing at things in those shop windows that had somehow, miraculously, escaped the bricks and bullets and bats of the brown-shirted Wulf packs. But even if a window or two had been spared, each building in the ghetto had been marked by the pack. *Juden*. In yellow paint across each lentil, instead of lamb's blood—insurance that the Angel of Death would not pass over them this time.

Yavin let his hand drop from the collar to trace the edge of the star. His grandfather had been careful, the star's center was directly over his heart. When the future ended for Yavin, it would be quick.

Not like the little boy across the street. His future would end in shock and surprise because his father, like so many others, didn't notice the change in the light of the world. It was cruel and a part of Yavin wanted to shout at the man, but he didn't. He huddled deeper in the fire-blackened doorway of what had been his grandfather's tailor shop as the man and boy entered Reb Shendelman's bookshop. He closed his eyes. Took a deep breath and smelled snow riding the back of charred wood.

It had been almost three months since *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, and still the stench of the fire was as strong as the memory of his grandfather running out into the street when the first torch shattered the shop's front window. Yavin had stayed inside, hidden and safe, he thought, until the fire

began to consume the bolts of cloth. It was only then, when the fire came at him, that he fled—out the small window at the back of the shop and down the narrow alley until he could circle back to the main street.

And by then his grandfather was dead, a sacrifice to the new god who ruled Germany.

Yavin had hidden in the shadows and watched the pack of brown-shirted Wulfs as they laughed and clapped each other on the shoulders. One of the boys, Karl, had been his best friend…once…when only the night sky wore stars.

Once. Upon a time.

The sunlight brightened suddenly and Yavin opened his eyes, blinking as the first fat flakes of snow began to fall. There were fewer people on the street—finally, they noticed.

Yavin leaned back against the only home he'd ever known and rubbed the cold out of his nose as the man in the honey-colored coat left the bookstore. His hat was pulled low over his eyes and he was clutching a brownpaper wrapped parcel to his chest. A book, what else would one buy at a bookshop?

Except from a bookshop that had no books?

Rolling his shoulders under the coat, Yavin stared at the object in the man's hands. It was square and *looked* like a book wrapped in paper…but it couldn't be, he'd seen what the Wulfs had done that night. The fire that had gorged itself on the bolts of cloth in his grandfather's shop was nothing more than a small camp fire compared to the inferno that brightened the night sky in front of the book-shop. Hundreds, maybe thousands of books were fed to the flames while Reb Shendelman, ancient for as long as Yavin had known him, howled and cried and tore at his clothes.

The old man had wept for his books, but not once so much as glanced at the body that was sprawled on the ground only a few feet away. And when he finally said Kaddish, it was for the books alone.

Karl and the others had thought that was funny, that an old man should become so distraught over a few words and ideas, so they let him live.

With only a small beating.

The man in the honey-colored coat stumbled on a patch of ice and dropped the paper-wrapped bundle into the snow. The sound that came from his lips sent a chill up Yavin's spine that had nothing to do with the cold. Whatever it was, he thought as he watched the man brush the damp snow off the wrapping, it had to be very valuable. Reb Shendelman could have managed to hide some of the more expensive and rare volumes. That would make sense…and explain why the man seemed so upset.

Where was the boy?

Yavin frowned as he glanced up and down the street. He'd forgotten the boy as he watched the father, but there was no sign of the child on the street. A gust of wind swirled into the doorway, powdering him with snow. The little boy was probably already home by now, his father sending him ahead so he wouldn't be caught in the storm. Telling him to stay warm and not catch cold…lying to him by pretending there was a future that wanted them.

Shivering, Yavin reached up and touched the charred remains of the mezuzah that had done nothing to protect them from the Wulfs.

The man in the honey-colored coat came back just before sunset, holding the hand of a little girl. Dressed all in white, the yellow star on her coat dancing as she skipped through the unswept drifts, she looked like an angel made of snow.

Yavin nibbled along one edge of the roll he had begged from a neighbor and watched the little girl giggle up at the man. She didn't look hungry and Yavin hated her, a little, for that. Food had always been provided for him without thought, now it had become something that was always in his mind and belly.

Just like the future, or, rather, the lack of it…always there, always grumbling. Always.

For some.

Hand in hand, the man walked the little girl into the bookshop.

The roll was a memory on Yavin's tongue and his stomach was still grumbling when the door of the bookshop opened again and the man in the honey-colored coat left. The brim of his fedora was pulled low over his eyes and, like the day before, he clutched a brown-paper wrapped bundle to his chest. The little girl in white wasn't with him.

Yesterday there had been a boy, today a girl.

Something besides hunger growled in Yavin's belly as he left the protection of the soot-covered shadows and crossed the icy cobblestones. And only fell twice.

The man looked up from beneath the hat's brim when Yavin stepped onto the sidewalk directly in front of him. There were tears frozen on the man's lower lashes and a look on his face that almost made Yavin stumble again. It was a book. Yavin could see one corner of it through a tear in the brown wrapping, a book bound in white satin, the thick pages edged in gold. It was the sort of book that would cost a great deal of money, especially now, even for a man in a camel-hair coat, the color of honey.

Yavin felt his shrunken stomach turn over as he looked up at the man.

"What have you done?"

The man blinked as if waking from a deep sleep and shook his head, stepped to one side, tightening his grip on the book.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone."

"What have you done with the little girl?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The man said. "There's no little girl here."

Yavin pointed to the walk behind the man. There were two sets of footprints in the snow—one large, one small. Both sets led to the bookshop, but only one set, the one belonging to the man, left.

"She is safe," the man's voice was almost as silent as the falling snow. "Please, I must get this onto the train. A woman has promised to take this to England for me. Please, I have to hurry."

He was talking about the book, not the little girl. Yavin stepped back, the soles of his shoes almost sliding out from under him again as the man rushed past. He could hear the man mumbling to himself.

"Why didn't I listen before this? She will be safe, dear Gott, please…with her brother, please. I should

have come sooner, but who thought…who would have thought…Mein gott, bitter, let me get there in time."

Yavin felt his heart stop when the man looked back—but not at him. At the bookshop.

"Hurry, there's not much time left."

When the momentary death passed, Yavin made himself turn and look at the shop. It was so quiet the sound of his own breathing pounded against the inside of his brain.

The bookstore sat hunched and still at the end of the street, aloof but miserable like a once pampered cat that had been forgotten and left out in the snow. Anyone passing would think the building was deserted, just another shop that had been abandoned. Or left ownerless. There were no lights showing through the cracks in the boards that covered the broken front window and the snow had already covered the scorched spot on the street. In an hour or less, there'd be no evidence that anyone had visited the shop that day. Or the day before that.

Would a man sell his children for books? No…no…

One book, one child.

One child that no longer needed to be cared for or fed, for one book, hollowed out and filled with what? Forged documents? Money? A pair of scissors to cut yellow stars from coats?

The future, without limits.

A man might offer anything for that.

The flesh on Yavin's fingers stung as he curled his hands into fists and followed the shallow tracks back to the book-shop. He only stumbled once and that was when he reached for the doorknob and looked up. There had been a brass marker there, generations old, that once read *Shendelman's Books* in Hebrew and German. Now it was unreadable. Yavin had watched Karl in the glow of the fire, strike the sign again and again with a hammer while the other Wulfs chanted: *Juden*. *Juden*. *Juden*.

There used to be a small brass bell that jingled every time the door opened—he remembered that, remembered the sound of it echoing through the huge room filled with books as Karl raced him to see who would be first into the shop. Karl always won and now the bell was gone and only the squeal of unoiled hinges announced him.

To the room of empty shelves.

Yavin tried not to listen to the hollow thud of his shoes against the dust-streaked floor.

His grandfather had always encouraged him to be a scholar, and so only saw merit in those obscure volumes of archaic text that were the size of a crate of whitefish. Each night, for an hour, Yavin would wade through the didactic mire…and each day, with Karl, tucked into a corner out of the way of customers, he would rediscover old friends.

Don Quixote. The plays of Shakespeare. Jules Verne. Shelly. Stoker.

Gone forever.

"I've wondered when you'd decide to come across the street, Yavin Landauer."

The soles of Yavin's shoes squeaked as he whirled toward the pale shape that hovered near the back

wall. Yavin was no longer a child, so the first images in his mind were not of ghosts or Dybbuks, but of brown-shirts and black swastikas.

"What is it? Are you all right?"

Yavin's heart was pounding against his ribs, like a prisoner trying to escape a cell, when Reb Shendelman stepped out of the shadows. The old man was thinner than Yavin remembered and his feet dragged across the floor as if lifting them was too much effort. He was still wearing the coat he'd had on the night of the fire—the torn pocket fluttered like a broken bird's wing with each shambling step.

"Yavin, what is it? Come, let me get you something to eat."

Drool filled his mouth and his belly rumbled so loudly it sounded like thunder at the mention of food. "No! I won't take anything from you."

"What take? I give it. Besides, we're friends, no?"

Yavin looked down at the floor and saw the outline of a child's shoe in the dust. "No."

"No?" Reb Shendelman asked. "Then we are enemies?"

Yavin nodded.

"Ah." The old man mimicked his nod. "Can I ask why? No? Then all right. It will be strange after so many years, but if we are enemies, then we are enemies. So, enemy, come and eat. I have potato and cabbage soup and some black bread. Come. We can discuss being enemies later."

"What was inside the book, Reb Shendelman?"

Confusion flickered over the old man's face as he lifted his arms toward the empty shelves. "What book? I have no books, Yavin. You saw what they did."

"I saw…but I also saw the man and the little girl today," Yavin said, wanting to shout but barely able to whis per. "And the man and boy yesterday. I know what you're doing, Reb Shendelman. I know."

"No," the old man said as he waved Yavin toward the small back room, "you don't, but you will. Come, I'll explain while you eat."

It took three bowls of the thin, but wonderful soup before Yavin stopped shivering and his belly remembered what it felt like to be full. And through it all, Reb Shendelman kept quiet.

…which, now that Yavin was finished, was a good thing. If the old man had tried to tell him the…fairy tale while he'd been eating, Yavin might have laughed so hard the soup would have come back up.

A child might have believed what the old man was saying, but Yavin didn't. He *was* a man, after all.

"I think it was because this building has always been a bookshop. With that many books, it almost makes

sense, doesn't it? That the thoughts and ideas of those books could become something…real, no?"

Yavin stopped mopping up the dregs of the soup with a narrow crust of black bread to shrug, not that it was noticed. Reb Shendelman was looking out into the empty shop, rocking slowly back and forth over his clasped hands.

"Men can die, Yavin, but not ideas, never ideas. Do you understand?"

Yavin stuffed the softened crust into his mouth to avoid answering. Again the old man didn't notice, he kept talking as though the silence was an answer in itself.

"It isn't that hard a thing to accept…not when you think of all the thoughts and ideas and words contained in those books. Generations of books, lining these very shelves. How do we learn, Yavin, do you know? How is what we read transformed into a memory that we can keep forever, huh? There was so much knowledge here on these shelves for so long it must have been easy for some of it to seep into the wood…to become part of the store itself. Such an easy thing, when you stop and wonder about it. Thoughts and ideas can't die, but they can build, one upon the other until all the knowledge of the universe creates a life of its own.

"Wasn't Adam begun as just a thought in the All Mighty's mind? Adam became a man from a single thought…so what is it for a building, within whose walls contained so many thoughts, to become a shapeless thing endowed with life, but not body?"

The bread caught in Yavin's throat and almost choked him.

"A Golem?" he squeaked when he was finally able to draw breath. "You're saying that this building is a Golem?"

"Yoh, a Golem…one constructed of thoughts and ideas, housed in a body of stone and mortar and wooden shelves. A Golem of creation, not destruction."

"And fed with the blood of children?"

"What are you talking about?"

Yavin tossed the empty bowl back onto the small table between them and shook his head. He'd seen his grandfather shake his head like that whenever the truth was stretched too far and about to unravel.

"The children who are bartered for those very special books you sell, Reb Shendelman. Do you keep them for the Nazis or do you kill them yourself so your invisible Golem can live? One book per child seems fair…but you'll give me a book without payment, won't you? Unless you want everyone to know what you've been doing."

Again, the old man's reaction was not what Yavin expected. Reb Shendelman stood up and walked to the empty shelves, ran his hands gently against the worn wood and nodded.

"One book per child…or one man or one woman."

"What?"

"Emmanuel Wiesel was the first. You remember Reb Wiesel, yoh?"

Yavin leaned back in his chair and hoped he looked apathetic. Of course he remembered the fishmonger. Who inside the ghetto didn't know the man who worked from before dawn to after dark, hauling fish,

cleaning fish, selling fish…and who smelled so much of fish he was the beloved of every cat within a five-mile radius? Yavin also remembered the day his shop failed to open. The ghetto cats had been mourning him for almost a year now.

Reb Shendelman sighed as he turned around.

"They were waiting for him in his shop, three soldiers with guns for one man who smelled of herring. Someone warned him, so he came here. To hide or maybe just to say good-bye. When soldiers come, few of us have the luxury to say good-bye. But instead he started talking about his favorite book. *Ethics* , by Spinoza. Can you believe that? But what do I know from philosophers?"

"Here," he said, spreading his hands out in front of him. "This is where it happened.

"It was Friday, late, just before Shabbos and I was about to close when Wiesel rushed in. I had turned off the lights and I couldn't light a candle, so we just stood there, in the dark, and I listened while he talked about Spinoza. One minute he was explaining the philosopher's idea that evil was only part of the Lord God's perfection and the next?"

Yavin saw Reb Shendelman's hands begin to shake and felt a similar vibration roll across his shoulders.

"It was dark, so at first, I thought he had fallen or passed out, but when I ran to where he'd been standing all I found was a book. *Ethics* , by Baruch Spinoza. A beautiful book, bound in leather with thick parchment pages edged in gold, the title embossed in gold leaf. But the thing is, Yavin," the old man said, "I had no such book in the shop and I couldn't even have produced a thing of such beauty even if I had the materials. It was warm to the touch, like living flesh against my hands. Do you understand what I am saying, Yavin?"

Yavin felt his head shake slowly back and forth without any effort on his part.

"No, that is the problem with miracles…they are usually too miraculous for man to understand. I didn't believe it either, so I stand there, with this wondrous book in my hand and suddenly I remember Wiesel and I call out to him, 'Emmanuel Wiesel,' and then he is standing in front of me as if he'd never moved with my hands on his arms. He looked startled and rubbed his eyes, told me that he had been dreaming about sitting in Spinoza's workshop, watching the man grind lenses while they discussed monistic theory."

Reb Shendelman suddenly clapped his hands and Yavin jumped. "But it wasn't a dream, Yavin. The Golem of the shop had somehow transformed Wiesel the fishmonger into the book he loved the best. You see?

"I thought about the soldiers who had come for him and thought, in my ignorance, that I had been shown the way to save him, so we spoke more about Spinoza and this time I watched the miracle happen. There was no sound, Yavin, no stirring of the air. It was so peaceful. I placed him on the shelf with the other books and that night I spoke to the Golem over the Shabbos candles and not the All Mighty. I thought I could save them. A word here, a whisper there…people disappear from the ghetto all the time."

The smile faded from the old man's face.

"I never thought they would burn my books."

"That's why you were saying Kaddish that night," Yavin asked. "Wasn't it?"

Reb Shendelman nodded and Yavin couldn't hold the laughter in any longer. He could hear the soup

slosh and gurgle inside his belly, which made him laugh even harder. The old man shrugged and began moving along the rows of empty shelves.

"Of course," he said, "you don't believe me, why should you? I know how impossible it sounds, Yavin, but all miracles are unless you see them first-hand."

Reb Shendelman stopped when he came to the far corner of the room, his hands dabbing at the still air. "This is where you two liked to sit, isn't it? Right here, yes? Yes…there used to be a chair here, and an old ottoman where my wife used to sit when she sewed. You and your friend, Karl…I remember. The two of you would sit here reading for hours. Let me think. What was your favorite book? I know it wasn't the work of Spinoza…what was it?"

Reb Shendelman's hands stopped moving and Yavin found himself leaning forward, hoping the old man would remember and hating himself for hoping that. What did it matter if the old man could remember which book had been his favorite? That was a lifetime ago, in a different world. To think about it or anything now seemed pointless, more than pointless…it was evil.

But even so, when the old man smiled and clapped his hands, Yavin felt his heart flutter.

" *Around the World in Eighty Days.* Yes?"

And Yavin nodded his head, ashamed and relieved that someone, at least, would remember that about him.

"Your grandfather, may he find everlasting peace, used to ask what you read…so I told him books on kashruth law. A small lie, but it made him happy." Reb Shendelman nodded as he walked toward Yavin. "He was a good man, but one of narrow imagination. You, on the other hand—"

The old man stopped when he was still an arm's length away and took a deep breath.

"You had the imagination of a true dreamer who could see beyond the hardness of this world and into what might be. Can you still do that, Yavin? Can you see Professor Phileas Fogg in his beautiful London flat? Can you see him accepting the challenge to go around the world…the entire world, Yavin, in only eighty days? Can you see him, Yavin? Can you see the world as Mr. Jules Verne wrote it? You can, if you try. Try, Yavin…see it…see…it…."

"Monsieur Passepartout."

Yavin staggered and grabbed the gangplank's rope handrail as he caught his breath. The air was hot and thick with the scent of brine. Water sprayed against his cheek and Yavin looked down to see the ocean lapped calmly against the barnacle-bedecked hull of a ship that had seen better days. He could see where someone had tried to patch the worm-holes and painted over them with tar. It was a miracle that the ship still floated, let alone that its captain could think it still sea-worthy enough to take out of port.

"Monsieur Passepartout!"

A gull cried and Yavin jerked his head up to follow its passage—stark white against the pale lavender twilight sky—over the lines of the bowsprit. There was a name on the bow, blocky wooden letters, faded by sun and wind and sea: General Grant.

It was the name of the ship…the large sea-going paddlewheel steamer bound from Yokohama to San Francisco with Phileas Fogg, Jean Passepartout and—

“Monsieur Passepartout, do you ignore me purposely?”

“What?”

Yavin clung to the rope as he turned toward the slightly shrewish tone. A woman, lovely and young, glared down at him. One hand grasped the ivory knob of a lace parasol, the other was tucked daintily against the tiny waist of her cream-colored traveling dress. A large hat, with ostrich plumes of a color Yavin had never seen in nature, sat firmly upon the mass of black curls. Towering above her hat and plumes and lovely face was the main of the three masts, rigged for full sail, that would aid the General Grant *in maintaining the breakneck speed of twelve miles an hour and so cross the great Pacific Ocean in only twenty-one days.*

Just like in the book.

Yavin laughed out loud. Until he saw the look on the woman’s face.

And remembered who she was.

“You’re Aouda. The girl who was going to be burned alive when the old rajah of Bundelcund died. I know you. Phileas Fogg saved you from the ‘suttee’ because he’d been early getting through the Indian forest and had time. That’s what he said to Sir Francis Cromarty, he said he had the time to save you. You are Aouda, aren’t you?”

“I am,” the woman said with a heave of her fashionably confined bosom, “and you, Monsieur Passepartout, are impudent! I shall complain most earnestly to Mr. Fogg about your lack of courtesy.”

“I’m afraid,” a soft voice said behind Yavin, “that we don’t have the time for any reprimands at this moment. It will have to wait until after we have sailed, but rest assured, Passepartout, we shall discuss this matter. When there is time, of course.”

Yavin turned around and gazed into the bearded, tranquil and enigmatic face of Phileas Fogg. He was just as Jules Verne had described him.

“Passepartout,” Phileas Fogg said, “why do you look at me like that?”

“I’m Passepartout?” Yavin asked, giggling as if his belly was filled by a million tiny bubbles. “I’m Jean Passepartout?”

Phileas Fogg raised one perfectly arched eyebrow. “Passepartout, are you quite—”

“—all right, Yavin?”

Yavin found himself on the floor, staring up at Reb Shendelman.

“What did you do?” Yavin yelled as he scooted away from the old man until his spine encountered an empty bookshelf. “Leave me alone! You’re some kind of mesmerist.”

But the old man shook his head. “No, I’m just the seller of books, Yavin. It was the Golem that transformed you. Did you enjoy it?”

“There was nothing to enjoy!” His fear kept him shouting and Yavin could hear his voice echo back and forth through the empty store. “It was a dream…an illusion. It can’t happen. It didn’t happen!”

“What didn’t happen, Jew?”

Karl came out of the darkness at the front of the store like the marauding Wulf-cub he'd become, silent and gray. His hungry, bright blue eyes never left Yavin's face as he crossed the room. Standing equal distance between Yavin and the old man, Karl snapped to attention and raised his right arm in stiff salute to his new god. Against the white of his armband, the black swastika looked like a giant spider.

"Heil Hitler!"

"Not in this shop, boy," Reb Shendelman said and was rewarded with a slap across his face. *For his impudence,* Yavin thought, remembering the word Aouda had used in his dream.

Karl…his one-time friend…was sneering at Reb Shendelman and wiping his hand against one leg of his uniform shorts, as if it had become corrupted by the mere touch of Jewish flesh.

"You think just because we let you live the last time, old man, that your life is somehow sacred?" Karl chuckled with a sound Yavin remembered from the times they sat, huddled together, in the bookstore. "You're only alive because you made us laugh when we burned your books. Poor old Jew, crying over all those stupid books. We laughed about it for days and days."

"Stop it, Karl," Yavin said, forgetting for a moment, but only a moment, that they were no longer friends. He remembered the moment Karl's sneer found him.

"You dare tell me to stop, Landauer?" His lost friend asked. "You have gotten brave since I last saw you…hiding in the shadows while your grandfather tried to be a hero. He was as stupid as this old man here, but he didn't make us laugh. Are you going to make me laugh, Landauer, or can I just shoot you like a dog and put you out of your misery?"

The spider on Karl's arm twitched as he pulled a gun, bright and shiny and too big for his hand, from the holster hanging from his waist.

"I only came in here to see if there were any more books to burn," Karl said as he leveled the muzzle at Yavin's face. "They made such a fine fire last time, but now I think this will be more fun."

"What was your favorite book, Karl?"

Yavin turned and looked at the old man at the same time Karl did. There was a drop of blood in one corner of his mouth that glistened like a dusty ruby in the dim light when he spoke.

"What was your favorite book," Reb Shendelman asked again before Karl could answer. "I can't remember which book it was, but I remember it frightened you."

"It did not!" The gun twitched in Karl's hand as he swung it toward the old man. "Books don't frighten me."

But the old man nodded. "This one did. I remember how you jumped once when I came with a plate of cookies for you and Yavin. You remember, don't you, Yavin?"

Yavin didn't remember anything at the moment.

"Yes," Reb Shendelman nodded, "now I remember. It was *Dracula* , by Bram Stoker. That is a very frightening book. Even I couldn't read it."

"What are you talking about?" Karl lifted his head as the muzzle of the gun drooped toward the floor. "That silly book didn't scare me at all. I read it a dozen times."

“What’s your favorite part, Karl?” The old man asked and Yavin felt his stomach clench. “I was also so frightened when Jonathan Harker was in the coach along the Borgo Pass…I almost put the book down. Mein Gott, when he looks up and notices how excited the other passengers are because night is falling. Do you remember that part, Karl? Do you remember how the coach must have felt—how Harker described it as swaying like a boat on a stormy sea? Do you remember how the passengers offered him gifts and blessings and how they made the sign of the cross to guard against the evil to come? Do you see it, Karl? Do you? Yes, you do, I know you do. See it…see the Carpathians rising against the twilight sky…see it…see it, Karl.”

The scream that had built in Yavin’s throat as Karl’s body began to shrink and fold in on itself—over and over and over—left his mouth as a soft hushing of air as he watched the old man bend down and slowly pick up the thick, black leather-bound volume from the floor. It didn’t have gold leaf or gild edges, but the title was embossed in red, the color of fresh blood.

“He’s…” Yavin licked his lips and tasted salt. “He’s dead?”

Reb Shendelman shook his head and gently brushed his hand along one edge of the book before placing it on a shelf. It looked very lonely there all by itself.

“No, he’s…only dreaming the story. We can’t stay here, Yavin. His friends will come looking for him and I don’t want you to be here when they burn this book.”

“Reb Shendelman, you can’t let them!”

“I can’t stop them, Yavin. But what I can do, is get you out of this hell…”

“Reb Shendelman, please.”

“Sha, Yavin. Listen to me. Do you know what my favorite part is in *Around the World in Eighty Days* ? It’s when they are all going up the Hudson River in America on that little boat. I have family in America…someplace called Upstate New York along that same river. What was the name of that boat, Yavin?”

“The *Henrietta* , Yavin answered and felt a numbing warmth began to grow in his belly.

“Ah, yoh, the little ‘Henrietta’ sailing past the lighthouse that marked the beginning of the river and the end of the ocean…the end of one world and the beginning of another. Do you see the lighthouse, Yavin? Do you see him, Phileas Fogg, walking up to the bridge because the captain is nowhere to be found? Do you see him? See it, Yavin…see it…see…it…”

“Passepartout,” Phileas Fogg said to Yavin as he took the boat’s wheel. “I fear Captain Speedy is still not enthusiastic about this diversion to Liverpool, so I ask that you keep him well tended…but, above all, well kept in his quarters.”

“Of course, sir,” Yavin said while carefully pouring the amber-colored tea into three dainty china cups—one for Mr. Phileas Fogg, one for Mademoiselle Aouda and the last for himself. “I shall see to his needs, have no fear.”

“I never fear,” Phileas Fogg said with a nod, “it is too time consuming. Now, if my calculations are correct, and there is nothing to say they aren’t, the Henrietta *should be more than able to make the three thousand mile crossing from New York to Liverpool in nine days, which would put us on good English soil again on the 21st of December—the Solstice, I believe.”*

Hanukkah, Yavin thought, but didn’t say anything except, “One lump or two?”

“Wake up, Yavin.”

Yavin opened his eyes, rubbing them against the bright yellow light that filled the small room. The room only looked small because it was filled with books—wall-to-wall and floor to ceiling, and encircling a narrow window through which Yavin saw a wide river bordered by high, rocky cliffs. A lighthouse, like the one the *Henrietta* had passed on her way to the sea, blinked at him from a high overlook across the river.

Reb Shendelman was standing over him, smiling in the bright yellow light.

“I was…dreaming.”

“I know,” Reb Shendelman said, “and now those dreams can come true.”

Somewhere in My Mind There Is a Painting Box

Charles de Lint

Charles de Lint [www.charlesdelint.com] lives in Ottawa, Ontario, with his wife Mary Ann Harris, an artist and musician. Together they perform Celtic and traditional music. De Lint popularized urban fantasy—fantasy set in the real world rather than an invented otherworld—in the 1980s with such books as Moonheart, *and continues to tell tales of his trademark city, Newford. He’s been a full-time writer for eighteen years. He has also written a monthly book review column for* F&SF, *and is a perceptive advocate of good fantasy fiction. His collections,* Waifs and Strays *(2002), his first Young Adult collection, and* Tapping the Dream Tree, *his fourth Newford collection and fiftieth book, came out in 2002.* A Handful of Coppers *is forthcoming in 2003, and is the first of a projected series collecting all his early stories.* Spirits in the Wires *is his next novel, and* A Circle of Cats *will be a hardcover picture book for children.*

“Somewhere in My Mind There Is a Painting Box” is from the Young Adult fantasy anthology The Green Man, *which is possibly the best anthology of the year, in a very strong year for fantasy anthologies. It is the story of landscape painters who accidentally find the way into fairyland, told from the point of view of a girl who finds one of their painting boxes twenty years later.*

Such a thing to find, so deep in the forest: A painter’s box nested in ferns and a tangle of sprucey-pine roots, almost buried by the leaves and pine needles drifted up against the trunk of the tree. Later, Lily would learn that it was called a pochade box, but for now she sat bouncing lightly on her ankles admiring

her find.

It was impossible to say how long the box had been hidden here. The wood panels weren't rotting, but the hasps were rusted shut and it took her a while to get them open. She lifted the lid and then, and then…

Treasure.

Stored in the lid, held apart from each other by slots, were three 8 × 10 wooden panels, each with a painting on it. For all their quick and loose rendering, she had no trouble recognizing the subjects. There was something familiar about them, too—beyond the subject matter that she easily recognized.

The first was of the staircase waterfall where the creek took a sudden tumble before continuing on again at a more level pace. She had to fill in detail from her own memory and imagination, but she knew it was that place.

The second was of a long-deserted homestead up a side valley of the hollow, the tin roof sagging, the rotting walls falling inward. It was nothing like Aunt's cabin on its sunny slopes, surrounded by wild roses, old beehives, and an apple orchard that she and Aunt were slowly reclaiming from the wild. This was a place that would only get sun from midmorning through the early afternoon, a dark and damp hollow, where the dew never had a chance to burn off completely.

The last one could have been painted anywhere in this forest but she imagined it had been done down by the creek, looking up a slope into a view of yellow birches, beech, and sprucey-pines growing dense and thick as the stars overhead, with a burst of light coming through a break in the canopy.

Lily studied each painting, then carefully set them aside on the ground beside her. There was the hint of another picture on the inside lid itself, but she couldn't make out what it was supposed to be.

The palette was covered in dried paint that, like the inside lid, almost had the look of a painting itself, and lifted from the box to reveal a compartment underneath. In the bottom of the box were tubes of oil paint, brushes, and a palette knife, a small bottle of turpentine and a rag stained with all the colors the artist had been using.

Lily turned the palette over and there she found what she'd been looking for. An identifying mark. She ran a finger over the letters that spelled out an impossible name.

Milo Johnson.

Treasure.

"Milo Johnson," Aunt repeated, trying to understand Lily's excitement. At seventeen, Lily could still get as wound up about a new thing as she had when she was a child. "Should I know that name?"

Lily gave her a "you never pay attention, do you?" look and went to get a book from her bookshelf. She didn't have many, but those she did have had been read over and over again. The one she brought back to the kitchen table was called *The Newford Naturalists: Redefining the Landscape* . Opening it to the first artist profiled, she underlined his name with her finger.

Aunt read silently along with her, mouthing the words, then studied the black-and-white photo of Johnson

that accompanied the profile.

“I remember seeing him a time or two,” she said. “Tramping through the woods with an old canvas knapsack on his back. But that was a long time ago.”

“It would have to have been.”

Aunt read a little more, then looked up.

“So he’s famous then,” she asked.

“Very. He went painting all through these hills and he’s got pictures in galleries all over the world.”

“Imagine that. And you reckon this is his box?”

Lily nodded.

“Well, we’d better see about returning it to him.”

“We can’t,” Lily told her. “He’s dead. Or at least they say he’s dead. He and Frank Spain went out into the hills on a painting expedition and were never heard from again.”

She flipped toward the back of the book until she came to the smaller section devoted to Spain’s work. Johnson had been the giant among the Newford Naturalists, his bold, dynamic style instantly recognizable, even to those who might not know him by name, while Spain had been one of a group of younger artists that Johnson and his fellow Naturalists had been mentoring. He wasn’t as well known as Johnson or the others, but he’d already been showing the potential to become a leader in his own right before he and Johnson had taken that last fateful trip.

It was all in the book which Lily had practically memorized by now, she’d read it so often.

Ever since Harlene Welch had given it to her a few years ago, Lily had wanted to grow up to be like the Naturalists—especially Johnson. Not to paint exactly the way they did, necessarily, but to have her own individual vision the way that they did. To be able to take the world of her beloved hills and forest and portray it in such a way that others would see it through her eyes, that they would see it in a new way and so understand her love for it and would want to protect it the way that she did.

“That was twenty years ago,” Lily added, “and their bodies weren’t ever recovered.”

Twenty years ago. Imagine. The box had been lying lost in the woods for all that time.

“Never thought of painting pictures as being something dangerous,” Aunt said.

“Anything can be dangerous,” Lily replied. “That’s what Beau says.”

Aunt nodded. She reached across the table to turn the box toward her.

“So you plan on keeping it?” she asked.

“I guess.”

“He must have kin. Don’t you think it should go to them?”

Lily shook her head. “He was an orphan, just like me. The only people we could give it to would be in the museum and they’d just stick it away in some drawer somewhere.”

“Even the pictures?”

“Well, probably not them. But the painting box for sure…”

Lily hungered to try the paints and brushes she’d found in the box. There was never enough money for her to think of being able to buy either.

“Well,” Aunt said. “You found it, so I guess you get to decide what you do with it.”

“I guess.”

Finder’s keepers, after all. But she couldn’t help feeling that this find of hers—especially the paintings—belonged to everyone, not just some gangly backwoods girl who happened to come upon them while out on a ramble.

“I’ll have to think on it,” she added.

Aunt nodded, then got up to put on the kettle.

The next morning Lily went about her chores. She fed the chickens, sparing a few handfuls of feed for the sparrows and other birds that were waiting expectantly in the trees nearby. She milked the cow and poured some milk into a saucer for the cats that came out of the woods when she was done, purring and winding in between her legs until she set the saucer down. By the time she’d finished weeding the garden and filling the woodbox, it was midmorning.

She packed herself a lunch and stowed it in her shoulder satchel along with some carpenter’s pencils and a pad of sketching paper she’d made from cutting up brown grocery bags.

“Off again, are you?” Aunt asked.

“I’ll be home for dinner.”

“You’re not going to bring that box with you?”

She was tempted. The tubes of paint were rusted shut, but she’d squeezed the thin metal of their bodies and found that the paint inside was still pliable. The brushes were good, too. But her using them didn’t seem right. Not yet, anyways.

“Not today,” she told Aunt.

As she left the house she looked up to see a pair of dogs coming tearing up the slope toward her. They were the Shaffers’ dogs, Max and Kiki, the one dark brown, the other white with black markings, the pair of them bundles of short-haired energy. The Shaffers lived beside the Welchs, who owned the farm at the end of the trail that ran from the county road to Aunt’s cabin—an hour’s walk through the woods as you followed the creek. Their dogs were a friendly pair, good at not chasing cows or game, and showed up every few days to accompany Lily on her rambles.

The dogs danced around her now as she set off through the orchard. When she got to the Apple Tree Man’s tree—that’s what Aunt called the oldest tree of the orchard—she pulled out a biscuit she’d saved from breakfast and set it down at its roots. It was a habit she’d had since she was a little girl, like feeding the birds and the cats while doing her morning chores. Aunt used to tease her about it, telling her what a

good provider she was for the mice and raccoons.

“Shoo,” she said as Kiki went for the biscuit. “That’s not for you. You’ll have to wait for lunch to get yours.”

They climbed up to the top of the hill and then went into the woods, the dogs chasing each other in circles while Lily kept stopping to investigate some interesting seed pod or cluster of weeds. They had lunch a couple of miles further on, sitting on a stone outcrop that overlooked the Big Sinkhole, a two- or three-acre depression with the entrance to a cave at the bottom.

Most of the mountains around Aunt’s cabin were riddled with caves of all shapes and sizes. There were entrances everywhere, though most only went a few yards in before they ended. But some said you could walk from one end of the Kickaha Hills to the other, all underground, if you knew the way.

Lunch finished, Lily slid down from the rock. She didn’t feel like drawing today. Instead she kept thinking about the painting box, how odd it had been to find it after its having been lost for so many years, so she led the dogs back to that part of the woods to see what else she might find. A shiver went up her spine. What if she found their bones?

The dogs grew more playful as she neared the spot where she’d come upon the box. They nipped at her sleeves or crouched ahead of her, butts and tails in the air, growling so fiercely they made her laugh. Finally Max bumped her leg with his head just as she was in midstep. She lost her balance and fell into a pile of leaves, her satchel tumbling to the ground, spilling drawings.

She sat up. A smile kept twitching at the corner of her mouth but she managed to give them a pretty fierce glare.

“Two against one?” she said. “Well, come on, you bullies. I’m ready for you.”

She jumped on Kiki and wrestled her to the ground, the dog squirming with delight in her grip. Max joined the tussle and soon the three of them were rolling about in the leaves like the puppies the dogs no longer were and Lily had never been. They were having such fun that at first none of them heard the shouting. When they did, they stopped their rough-housing to find a man standing nearby, holding a stick in his upraised hand.

“Get away from her!” he cried, waving the stick.

Lily sat up, so many leaves tangled in her hair and caught in her sweater that she had more on her than did some of the autumned trees around them. She put a hand on the collar of either dog, but, curiously, neither seemed inclined to bark or chase the stranger off. They stayed by her side, staring at him.

Lily studied him for a long moment, too, as quiet as the dogs. He wasn’t a big man, but he seemed solid, dressed in a fraying broadcloth suit with a white shirt underneath and worn leather boots on his feet. His hair was roughly trimmed and he looked as if he hadn’t shaved for a few days. But he had a good face—strong features, laugh lines around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. She didn’t think he was much older than her.

“It’s all right,” she told the man. “We were just funning.”

There was something familiar about him, but she couldn’t place it immediately.

“Of course,” he said, dropping the stick. “How stupid can I be? What animal in this forest would harm its Lady?” He went down on his knees. “Forgive my impertinence.”

This was too odd for words, from the strange behavior of the dogs to the man's even stranger behavior. She couldn't speak. Then something changed in the man's eyes. There'd been a lost look in them a moment ago, but also hope. Now there was only resignation.

"You're just a girl," he said.

Lily found her voice at that indignity.

"I'm seventeen," she told him. "In these parts, there's some would think I'm already an old maid."

He shook his head. "Your pardon. I meant no insult."

Lily relaxed a little. "That's all right."

He reached over to where her drawings had spilled from her satchel and put them back in, looking at each one for a moment before he did.

"These are good," he said. "Better than good."

For those few moments while he looked through her drawings, while he looked at them carefully, one by one, before replacing them in her satchel, he seemed different once more. Not so lost. Not so sad.

"Thank you," she said.

She waited a moment, thinking it might be rude of her to follow a compliment with a question that might be considered prying. She waited until the last drawing was back in her satchel and he sat there holding the leather bag on his lap, his gaze gone she didn't know where.

"What are you doing here in the woods?" she finally asked.

It took a moment before his gaze returned to her. He closed the satchel and laid it on the grass between them.

"I took you for someone else," he said, which wasn't an answer at all. "It was the wild tangle of your red hair—the leaves in it and on your sweater. But you're too young and your skin's not a coppery brown."

"And this explains what?" she asked.

"I thought you were Her," he said.

Lily could hear the emphasis he put on the word, but it still didn't clear up her confusion.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

She started to pluck the leaves out of her hair and brush them from her sweater. The dogs lay down, one on either side of her, still curiously subdued.

"I thought you were the Lady of the Wood," he explained. "She who stepped out of a tree and welcomed us when we came out of the cave between the worlds. She wears a cloak of leaves and has moonlight in Her eyes."

A strange feeling came over Lily when he said "stepped out of a tree." She found herself remembering a fever dream she'd once had—five years ago when she'd been snake bit. It had been so odd. She'd dreamed that she'd been changed into a kitten to save her from the snake bite, met Aunt's Apple Tree Man and another wood spirit called the Father of Cats. She'd even seen the fairies she'd tried to find for

so long: foxfired shapes, bobbing in the meadow like fireflies.

That dream had seemed so real.

She blinked away the memory of it and focused on the stranger again. He'd gotten off his knees and was sitting cross-legged on the ground, a half dozen feet from where she and the dogs were.

"What did you mean when you said 'us'?" she asked.

Now it was his turn to look confused.

"You said this lady showed 'us' some cave."

He nodded. "I was out painting with Milo when—"

As soon as he mentioned that name, the earlier sense of familiarity collided with her memory of a photo in her book on the Newford Naturalists.

"You're Frank Spain!" Lily cried.

He nodded in agreement.

"But that can't be," she said. "You don't look any older than you do in the picture in my book."

"What book?"

"The one about Milo Johnson and the rest of the Newford Naturalists that's back at the cabin."

"There's a book about us?"

"You're famous," Lily told him with a grin. "The book says you and Mr. Johnson disappeared twenty years ago while you were out painting in these very hills."

Frank shook his head, the shock plain in his features.

"Twenty…years?" he said slowly. "How's that even possible? We've only been gone for a few days…"

"What happened to you?" Lily asked.

"I don't really know," he said. "We'd come here after a winter of being cooped up in the studio, longing to paint in the landscape itself. We meant to stay until the black flies drove us back to the city but then…" He shook his head. "Then we found the cave and met the Lady…."

He seemed so lost and confused that Lily took him home.

Aunt greeted his arrival and introduction with a raised eyebrow. Lily knew what she was thinking. First a painting box, now a painter. What would be next?

But Aunt had never turned anyone away from her cabin before and she wasn't about to start now. She had Lily show Frank to where he could draw some water from the well and clean up, then set a third plate for supper. It wasn't until later when they were sitting out on the porch drinking tea and watching the night fall that Frank told them his story. He spoke of how he and Milo had found the cave that led

them through darkness into another world. How they'd met the Lady there, with Her cloak of leaves and Her coppery skin, Her dark, dark eyes and Her fox-red hair.

"So there is an underground way through these mountains," Aunt said. "I always reckoned there was some truth to that story."

Frank shook his head. "The cave didn't take us to the other side of the mountains. It took us out of this world and into another."

Aunt smiled. "Next thing you're going to tell me is you've been to Fairyland."

"Look at him," Lily said. She went inside and got her book, opening it to the photograph of Frank Spain. "He doesn't look any older than he did when this picture was taken."

Aunt nodded. "Some people do age well."

"Not this well," Lily said.

Aunt turned to Frank. "So what is it that you're asking us to believe?"

"I'm not asking anything," he said. "I don't believe it myself."

Lily sighed and took the book over to him. She showed him the copyright date, put her finger on the paragraph that described how he and Milo Johnson had gone missing some fifteen years earlier.

"The book's five years old," she said. "But I think we've got a newspaper that's no more than a month old. I could show you the date on it."

But Frank was already shaking his head. He'd gone pale reading the paragraph about the mystery of his and his mentor's disappearance. He lifted his gaze to meet Aunt's.

"I guess maybe we were in Fairyland," he said, his voice gone soft.

Aunt looked from Lily's face to that of her guest.

"How's that possible?" she said.

"I truly don't know," he told her.

He turned the pages of the book, stopping to read the section on himself. Lily knew what he was reading. His father had died in a mining accident when he was still a boy, but his mother had been alive when he'd disappeared. She'd died five years later.

"My parents are gone, too," she told him.

He nodded, his eyes shiny.

Lily shot Aunt a look, but Aunt sat in her chair, staring out into the gathering dusk, an unreadable expression in her features. Lily supposed it was one thing to appreciate a fairy tale but quite another to find yourself smack dab in the middle of one.

Lily was taking it the best of either of them. Maybe it was because of that snake bite fever dream she'd had. In the past five years she still woke from dreams in which she'd been a kitten.

"Why did you come back?" she asked Frank.

“I didn’t know I was coming back,” he said. “That world…” He flipped a few pages back to show them reproductions of Johnson’s paintings. “That’s what this other world’s like. You don’t have to imagine everything being more of itself than it seems to be here like Milo’s done in these paintings. Over there it’s really like that. You can’t imagine the colors, the intensity, the rich wash that fills your heart as much as it does your eyes. We haven’t painted at all since we got over there. We didn’t need to.” He laughed. “I know Milo abandoned his paints before we crossed over and to tell you the truth, I don’t even know where mine are.”

“I found Mr. Johnson’s box,” Lily said. “Yesterday—not far from where you came upon me and the dogs.”

He nodded, but she didn’t think he’d heard her.

“I was walking,” he said. “Looking for the Lady. We hadn’t seen Her for a day or so and I wanted to talk to Her again. To ask Her about that place. I remember I came to this grove of sycamore and beech where we’d seen Her a time or two. I stepped in between the trees, out of the sun and into the shade. The next thing I knew I was walking in these hills and I was back here where everything seems…paler. Subdued.”

He looked at them.

“I’ve got to go back,” he said. “There’s no place for me here. Ma’s gone and everybody I knew’ll be dead like her or too changed for me to know them anymore.” He tapped the book. “Just like me, according to what it says here.”

“You don’t want to go rushing into anything,” Aunt said. “Surely you’ve got other kin, and they’ll be wanting to see you.”

“There’s no one. Me and Ma, we were the last of the Spains that I know.”

Aunt nodded in a way that Lily recognized. It was her way of making you think she agreed with you, but she was really just waiting for common sense to take hold of you so that you didn’t go off half-cocked and get yourself in some kind of trouble you didn’t need to get into.

“You’ll want to rest up,” she said. “You can sleep in the barn. Lily will show you where. Come morning, everything’ll make a lot more sense.”

He just looked at her. “How do you make sense out of something like this?”

“You trust me on this,” she said. “A good night’s sleep does a body wonders.”

So he followed her advice—most people did when Aunt had decided what was best for them.

He let Lily take him down to the barn where they made a bed for him in the straw. She wondered if he’d try to kiss her, and how she’d feel if he did, but she never got the chance to find out.

“Thank you,” he said and then he lay down on the blankets.

He was already asleep by the time she was closing the door.

And in the morning he was gone.

That night Lily had one of what she thought of as her storybook dreams. She wasn't a kitten this time. Instead she was sitting under the Apple Tree Man's tree and he stepped out of the trunk of his tree just like she remembered him doing five years ago. He looked the same, too, a raggedy man, gnarled and twisty, like the boughs of his tree.

"You," she only said and looked away.

"That's a fine welcome for an old friend."

"You're not my friend. Friends aren't magical men who live in a tree and then make you feel like you're crazy because they never show up in your life again."

"And yet I helped you when you were a kitten."

"In the fever dream when I *thought* I was a kitten."

He came around and sat on his haunches in front of her, all long gangly limbs and tattered clothes and bird's nest hair. His face was wrinkled like the dried fruit from his tree.

He sighed. "It was better for you to only remember it as a dream."

"So it wasn't a dream?" she asked, unable to keep the eagerness from her voice. "You're real? You and the Father of Cats and the fairies in the field?"

"Someplace we're real."

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, disappointment taking the place of her momentary happiness.

"This is just a dream, too, isn't it?" she said.

"This is. What happened before wasn't."

She poked at the dirt with her finger, looking away from him again.

"Why would it be better for me to remember it as a dream?" she asked.

"Our worlds aren't meant to mix—not anymore. They've grown too far apart. When you spend too much time in ours, you become like your painter foundling, forever restless and unhappy in the world where you belong. Instead of living your life, you lose yourself in dreams and fancies."

"Maybe for some, dreams and fancies are better than what they have here."

"Maybe," he said, but she knew he didn't agree. "Is that true for you?"

"No," she had to admit. "But I still don't understand why I was allowed that one night and then no more."

She looked at him. His dark eyes were warm and kind, but there was a mystery in them, too. Something secret and daunting that she wasn't sure she could ever understand. That perhaps she shouldn't want to understand.

"What you do is important," he said after a long moment, which wasn't much of an answer at all.

She laughed. "What *I* do? Whatever do I do that could be so important?"

“Perhaps it’s not what you do now so much as what you will do if you continue with your drawing and painting.”

She shook her head. “I’m not really that good.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

She remembered what Frank Spain had said after looking at her drawings.

These are good. Better than good .

She remembered how the drawings had, if only for a moment, taken him away from the sadness that lay so heavy in his heart.

“But I’m only drawing the woods,” she said. “I’m drawing what I see, not fairies and fancies.”

The Apple Tree Man nodded. “Sometimes people need fairies and fancies to wake them up to what they already have. But sometimes a good drawing of a real thing does it better.”

“So is that why you came to me tonight?” she asked. “To tell me to keep doing something I’m going to go on doing anyway?”

He shook his head.

“Then why did you come?”

“To ask you not to look for that cave,” he said. “To not go in. If you do, you’ll carry the yearning of what you find inside yourself forever.”

What the Apple Tree Man had told her all seemed to make perfect sense in last night’s dream. But when she woke to find Frank gone, what had made sense then didn’t seem to be nearly enough now. Knowing she’d once experienced a real glimpse into a storybook world, she only found herself wanting more.

“Well, it seems like a lot of trouble to go through,” Aunt said when Lily came back from the barn with the news that their guest was gone. “To cadge a meal and a roof over your head for the night, I mean.”

“I don’t think he was lying.”

Aunt shrugged.

“But he looked *just* like the picture in my book.”

“There was a resemblance,” Aunt said. “But really. The story he told—it’s too hard to believe.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

Aunt thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“Can’t say that I can,” she admitted.

“I think he’s gone to look for the cave. He wants to go back.”

“And I suppose you want to go looking for him.”

Lily nodded.

“Are you sweet on him?” Aunt asked.

“I don’t think I am.”

“Can’t say’s I’d blame you. He was a good-looking man.”

“I’m just worried about him,” Lily said. “He’s all lost and alone and out of his own time.”

“And say you find him. Say you find the cave. What then?”

The Apple Tree Man’s warning and Aunt’s obvious concern struggled against her own desire to find the cave, to see the magical land that lay beyond it.

“I’d have the chance to say good-bye,” she said.

There. She hadn’t exactly lied. She hadn’t said everything she could have, but she hadn’t lied.

Aunt studied her for a long moment.

“You just be careful,” she said. “See to the cow and chickens, but the garden can wait till you get back.”

Lily grinned. She gave Aunt a quick kiss, then packed herself a lunch. She was almost out the door when she turned back and took Milo Johnson’s painting box out from under her bed.

“Going to try those paints?” Aunt asked.

“I think so.”

And she did, but it wasn’t nearly the success she’d hoped it would be.

The morning started fine, but then walking in these woods of hers was a sure cure for any ailment, especially when it was in your heart or head. The dogs hadn’t come to join her today, but that was all right. She could be just as happy on her own here.

She made her way down to that part of the wood where she’d first found the box, and then later Frank, but he was nowhere about. Either he’d found his way back into fairy land, or he was just ignoring her voice. Finally she gave up and spent a while looking for this cave of his, but there were too many in this part of the forest and none of them looked—no, none of them *felt* right.

After lunch, she sat down and opened the painting box.

The drawing she did on the back of one of Johnson’s three paintings turned out well, though it was odd using her pencil on a wood panel. But she’d gotten the image she wanted: the sweeping boughs of an old beech tree, smooth-barked and tall, the thick crush of underbrush around it, the forest behind. It was the colors that proved to be a problem. The paints wouldn’t do what she wanted. It was hard enough to get each tube open, they were stuck so tight, but once she had a squirt of the various colors on the palette it all went downhill from there.

The colors were wonderfully bright—pure pigments that had their own inner glow. At least they did until she started messing with them and then everything turned to mud. When she tried to mix them she got either outlandish hues or colors so dull they all might as well have been the same. The harder she tried, the worse it got.

Sighing, she finally wiped off the palette and the panel she'd been working on, then cleaned the brushes, dipping them in the little jar of turpentine, working the paint out of the hairs with a rag. She studied Johnson's paintings as she worked, trying to figure out how he'd gotten the colors he had. This was his box, after all. These were the same colors he'd used to paint these three amazing paintings. Everything she needed was just lying there in the box, waiting to be used. So why was she so hopeless?

It was because painting was no different than looking for fairies, she supposed. No different than trying to find that cave entrance into some magic elsewhere. Some people just weren't any good at that sort of thing.

They were both magic, after all. Art as well as fairies. Magic. What else could you call how Johnson was able to bring the forest to life with no more than a few colors on a flat surface?

She could practice, of course. And she would. She hadn't been any good when she'd first started drawing either. But she wasn't sure that she'd ever feel as…inspired as Johnson must have felt.

She studied the inside lid of the box. Even this abstract pattern where he'd probably only been testing his color mixes had so much vibrancy and passion. She leaned closer for a better look and found herself thinking about her Newford Naturalists book, about something Milo Johnson was supposed to have said. "It's not just a matter of painting *en plein air* as the Impressionists taught us," the author quoted Johnson. "It's just as important to simply *be* in the wilds. Many times the only painting box I take is in my head. You don't have to be an artist to bring something back from your wilderness experiences. My best paintings don't hang in galleries. They hang somewhere in between my ears—an endless private showing that I can only attempt to share with others through a more physical medium."

That must be why he'd abandoned this painting box she'd found. He'd gone into fairyland only bringing the one in his head. She didn't know if she could ever learn to do that.

She sighed and was about to get up and go when she thought she heard something—an almost-music. It was like listening to ravens in the woods when their rough, deep-throated croaks and cries all but seemed like human language. It wasn't, of course, but still, you felt *so* close to understanding it.

She lifted her head to look around. It wasn't ravens she heard. It wasn't anything she knew, but it still seemed familiar. Faint, but insistent. Almost like wind chimes or distant bells, but not quite. Almost like birdsong, trills and warbling melodies, but not quite. Almost like an old fiddle tune, played on a pipe or a flute, the rhythm a little ragged, or simply a little out of time like the curious jumps and extra beats in a Kickaha tune. But not quite.

Closing the painting box, she stood. She slung her satchel from her shoulder, picked up the box, and turned in a slow circle. The sound was stronger to the west, away from the creek and deeper into the forest. A ravine cut off to the left and she followed it, pushing her way through the thick shrub layer of rhododendrons and mountain laurel. Hemlocks and tulip trees rose up the slopes on either side with a thick understory of redbud, magnolia, and dogwood.

The almost-music continued to pull her along—distant, near, distant, near, like a radio signal that couldn't quite hang on to a station. It was only when she broke through into a small clearing, a wall of granite rising above her, that she saw the mouth of the cave.

She knew immediately that this had to be the cave Frank had been looking for, the one into which he and Milo Johnson had stepped and so disappeared from the world for twenty years. The almost-music was clearer than ever here, but it was the bas-relief worked into the stone above the entrance that made her sure. Here was Frank's Lady, a rough carving of a woman's face. Her hair was thick with leaves and more leaves came spilling out of her mouth, bearding her chin.

Aunt's general warnings, as well as the Apple Tree Man's more specific ones, returned to her as she moved closer. She lifted a hand to trace the contours of the carving. As soon as she touched it, the almost-music stopped.

She dropped her hand, starting back as though she'd put a finger on a hot stove. She looked around herself with quick, nervous glances. Now that the almost-music was gone, she found herself standing in an eerie pocket of silence. The sounds of the forest were muted, as the music had been earlier. She could still hear the insects and bird-song, but they seemed to come from far away.

She turned back to the cave, uneasy now. In the back of her mind she could hear the Apple Tree Man's voice.

Don't go in.

I won't. Not all the way.

But now that she was here, how could she not at least have a look?

She went as far as the entrance, ducking her head because the top of the hole was only as high as her shoulder. It was dark inside, too dark to see in the beginning. But slowly her eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting.

The first thing she really saw were the paintings.

They were like her own initial attempts at drawing—crude, stick figures and shapes that she'd drawn on scraps of paper and the walls of the barn with the charred ends of sticks. Except, where hers had been simple because she could do no better, these, she realized as she studied them more closely, were more like stylized abbreviations. Where her drawings had been tentative, these held power. The paint or chalk had been applied with bold, knowing strokes. Nothing wasted. Complex images distilled to their primal essences.

An antlered man. A turtle. A bear with a sun on its chest, radiating squiggles of light. A leaping stag. A bird of some sort with enormous wings. A woman, cloaked in leaves. Trees of every shape and size. Lightning bolts. A toad. A spiral with the face of the woman on the entrance outside in its center. A fox with an enormous striped tail. A hare with drooping ears and small deer horns.

And more. So many more. Some easily recognizable, others only geometric shapes that seemed to hold whole books of stories in their few lines.

Her gaze traveled over the walls, studying the paintings with growing wonder and admiration. The cave was one of the larger ones she'd found—easily three or four times the size of Aunt's cabin. There were paintings everywhere, many too hard to make out because they were lost in deeper shadows. She wished she had a corn shuck or lantern to throw more light than what came from the opening behind her. She longed to move closer, but still didn't dare abandon the safety of the entranceway.

She might have left it like that, drunk her fill of the paintings and then gone home, if her gaze hadn't fallen upon a figure sitting hunched in a corner of the cave, holding what looked like a small bark whistle. She'd

made the same kind herself from the straight smooth branches of a chestnut or a sourwood tree.

But the whistle was quiet now. Frank sat so still, enveloped in the shadows, that she might never have noticed him except as she had, by chance.

“Frank…?” she said.

He lifted his head to look at her.

“It’s gone,” he said. “I can’t call it back.”

“The other world?”

He nodded.

“That was you making that…music?”

“It was me doing something,” he said. “I don’t know that I’d go so far as to call it music.”

Lily hesitated a long moment, then finally stepped through the entrance, into the cave itself. She flinched as she crossed the threshhold, but nothing happened. There were no flaring lights or sudden sounds. No door opened into another world, sucking her in.

She set the painting box down and sat on her ankles in front of Frank.

“I didn’t know you were a musician,” she said.

“I’m not.”

He held up his reed whistle—obviously something he’d made himself.

“But I used to play as a boy,” he said. “And there was always music there, on the other side. I thought I could wake something. Call me to it, or it to me.”

Lily raised her eyes to the paintings on the wall.

“How did you cross over the first time?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. That was Milo’s doing. I was only tagging along.”

“Did he…did he make a painting?”

Frank’s gaze settled on hers.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

She pointed to the walls. “Look around you. This is *the* cave, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

“What do you think these paintings are for?” she asked. When he still didn’t seem to get it, she added, “Perhaps it’s the paintings that open a door between the worlds. Maybe this Lady of yours likes pictures more than She does music.”

Frank scrambled to his feet and studied the walls as though he was seeing the paintings for the first time. Lily was slower to rise.

“If I had paint, I could try it,” he said.

“There’s the painting box I found,” Lily told him. “It’s still full of paints.”

He grinned. Grabbing her arms, he gave her a kiss, right on her lips, full of passion and fire, then bent down to open the box.

“I remember this box,” he said as he rummaged through the paint tubes. “We were out painting, scouting a good location—though for Milo, any location was a good one. Anyway, there we were, out in these woods, when suddenly Milo stuffs this box of his into a tangle of tree roots and starts walking. I called after him, but he never said a word, never even turned around to see if I was coming.

“So I followed, hurrying along behind him until we finally came to this cave. And then…then…”

He looked up at Lily. “I’m not sure what happened. One moment we were walking into the cave and the next we had crossed over into that other place.”

“So Milo didn’t paint on the wall.”

“I just don’t remember. But he might not have had to. Milo could create whole paintings in his head without ever putting brush to canvas. And he could describe that painting to you, stroke for stroke—even years later.”

“I read about that in the book.”

“Hmm.”

Frank had returned his attention to the paints.

“It’ll have to be a specific image,” he said, talking as much to himself as to Lily. “Something simple that still manages to encompass everything a person is or feels.”

“An icon,” Lily said, remembering the word from another of her books.

He nodded in agreement as he continued to sort through the tubes of paint, finally choosing a color: a burnt umber, rich and dark.

“And then?” Lily asked, remembering what the Apple Tree Man had told her in her dream. “Just saying you find the right image. You paint it on the wall and some kind of door opens up. Then what do you do?”

He looked up at her, puzzled.

“I’ll step through it,” he said. “I’ll go back to the other side.”

“But why?” Lily asked. “Why’s over there so much better than the way the world is here?”

“I…”

“When you cross over to there,” Lily said, echoing the Apple Tree man’s words to her, “you give up all the things you could be here.”

“We do that every time we make any change in our lives,” Frank said. “It’s like moving from one town to another, though this is a little more drastic, I suppose.” He considered it for a moment, then added, “It’s not so much *better* over there as different. I’ve never fit in here the way I do over there. And now I

don't have anything left for me here except for this burn inside—a yearning for the Lady and that land of Hers that lies somewhere on the other side of these fields we know."

"I've had that feeling," Lily said, thinking of her endless search for fairies as a child.

"You can't begin to imagine what it's like over there," Frank went on. "Everything glows with its own inner light."

He paused and regarded her for a long moment.

"You could come," he said finally. "You could come with me and see for yourself. Then you'd understand."

Lily shook her head. "No, I couldn't. I couldn't walk out on Aunt, not like this, without a word. Not after she took me in when no one else would. She wasn't even real family, though she's family now." She waited a beat, remembering the strength of his arms, the hard kiss he'd given her, then added. "You could stay."

Now it was his turn to shake his head.

"I can't."

Lily nodded. She understood. It wasn't like she didn't have the desire to go herself.

She watched him unscrew the paint tube and squeeze a long worm of dark brown pigment into his palm. He turned to a clear spot on the wall, dipped a finger into the paint and raised his hand. But then he hesitated.

"You can do it," Lily told him.

Maybe she couldn't go. Maybe she wanted him to stay. But she knew enough not to try to hold him back if he had to go. It was no different than making friends with a wild creature. You could catch them and tie them up and make them stay with you, but their heart would never be yours. Their wild heart, the thing you loved about them…it would wither and die. So why would you want to do such a thing?

"I can," Frank agreed, his voice soft. He gave her a smile. "That's part of the magic, isn't it? You have to believe that it will work."

Lily had no idea if that was true or not, but she gave him an encouraging nod all the same.

He hummed something under his breath as he lifted his hand again. Lily recognized it as the almost-music she'd heard before, but now she could make out the tune. She didn't know its name, but the pick-up band at the grange dances played it from time to time. She thought it might have the word "fairy" in it.

Frank's finger moved decisively, smearing paint on the rock. It took Lily a moment to see that he was painting a stylized oak leaf. He finished the last line and took his finger away, stepped back.

Neither knew what to expect, if anything. As the moments dragged by, Frank stopped humming. He cleaned his hands against the legs of his trousers, smearing paint onto the cloth. His shoulders began to slump and he turned to her.

"Look," Lily said before he could speak.

She pointed to the wall. The center of the oak leaf he'd painted had started to glow with a warm, green-gold light. They watched the light spread across the wall of the cave, moving out from the central

point like ripples from a stone tossed into a still pool of water. Other colors appeared, blues and reds and deeper greens. The colors shimmered, like they were painted on cloth touched by some unseen wind, and then the wall was gone and they were looking through an opening in the rock. Through a door into another world.

There was a forest over there, not much different than the one they'd left behind except that, as Frank had said, every tree, every leaf, every branch and blade of grass, pulsed with its own inner light. It was so bright it almost hurt the eyes, and not simply because they'd been standing in this dim cave for so long.

Everything had a light and a song and it was almost too much to bear. But at the same time, Lily felt the draw of that world like a tightening in her heart. It wasn't so much a wanting, as a need.

"Come with me," Frank said again.

She had never wanted to do something more in her life. It was not just going to that magical place, it was the idea of being there with this man with his wonderfully creative mind and talent. This man who'd given her her first real kiss.

But slowly she shook her head.

"Have you ever stood on a mountaintop," she asked, "and watched the sun set in a bed of feathery clouds? Have you ever watched the monarchs settled on a field of milk-weed or listened to the spring chorus after the long winter's done?"

Frank nodded.

"This world has magic, too," Lily said.

"But not enough for me," Frank said. "Not after having been over there."

"I know."

She stepped up to him and gave him a kiss. He held her for a moment, returning the kiss, then they stepped back from each other.

"Go," Lily said, giving him a little push. "Go before I change my mind."

She saw he understood that, for her, going would be as much a mistake as staying would be for him. He nodded and turned, walked out into that other world.

Lily stood watching him go. She watched him step in among the trees. She heard him call out and heard another man's voice reply. She watched as the doorway became a swirl of colors once more. Just before the light faded, it seemed to take the shape of a woman's face—the same woman whose features had been carved into the stone outside the cave, leaves in her hair, leaves spilling from her mouth. Then it was all gone. The cave was dim once more and she was alone.

Lily knelt down by Milo Johnson's paint box and closed the lid, fastened the snaps. Holding it by its handle, she stood up and walked slowly out of the cave.

"Are you there?" she asked later, standing by the Apple Tree Man's tree. "Can you hear me?"

She took a biscuit from her pocket—the one she hadn't left earlier in the day because she'd still been angry for his appearing in her dream last night when he'd been absent from her life for five years. When he'd let her think that her night of magic had been nothing more than a fever dream brought on by a snake bite.

She put the biscuit down among his roots.

"I just wanted you to know that you were probably right," she said. "About my going over to that other place, I mean. Not about how I can't have magic here."

She sat down on the grass and laid the paint box down beside her, her satchel on top of it. Plucking a leaf from the ground, she began to shred it.

"I know, I know," she said. "There's plenty of everyday magic all around me. And I do appreciate it. But I don't know what's so wrong about having a magical friend as well."

There was no reply. No gnarled Apple Tree Man stepping out of his tree. No voice as she'd heard in her dream last night. She hadn't really been expecting anything.

"I'm going to ask Aunt if I can have an acre or so for my own garden," she said. "I'll try growing cane there and sell the molasses at the harvest fair. Maybe put in some berries and make preserves and pies, too. I'll need some real money to buy more paints."

She smiled and looked up into the tree's boughs.

"So you see, I can take advice. Maybe you should give it a try."

She stood up and dusted off her knees, picked up the painting box and her satchel.

"I'll bring you another biscuit tomorrow morning," she said.

Then she started down the hill to Aunt's cabin.

"Thank you," a soft, familiar voice said.

She turned. There was no one there, but the biscuit was gone.

She grinned. "Well, that's a start," she said and continued on home.

The Pyramid of Amirah

James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly [www.jimkelly.net] is well known and an award winner for his science fiction stories, but in fact he has written novels, short stories, essays, reviews, poetry, plays, and planetarium shows. He writes a column on the Internet for Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *with which his fiction is closely associated, and his audio plays are a regular feature on Scifi.com's Seeing Ear Theater. He informs us that he is currently one of fourteen councilors appointed to the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts and also serves on the board of directors of the New England Foundation for the Arts. His collections include* Strange But Not a Stranger *(2002) and* Think Like a Dinosaur and Other Stories *(1997), and his novels include* Wildlife *(1994) and* Look Into

the Sun *(1989).*

"The Pyramid of Amirah" appeared in F&SF, *and is one of Kelly's occasional fantasy stories. Kelly said in an interview (at www.SCIFI.com), "Whenever I write a story that supposes that God exists, I have to imagine that Her ways are mysterious—and therefore scary—indeed. God is the ultimate alien." This story is about a teenage girl who has been chosen as a human sacrifice. It reminds us that there are many stories in scripture that are scary and disturbing.*

Sometimes Amirah thinks she can sense the weight of the pyramid that entombs her house. The huge limestone blocks seem to crush the air and squeeze light. When she carries the table lamp onto the porch and holds it up to the blank stone, shadows ooze across the rough-cut inner face. If she is in the right mood, they make cars and squirrels and flowers and Mom's face.

Time passes.

Amirah will never see the outside of her pyramid, but she likes to imagine different looks for it. It's like trying on new jeans. They said that the limestone would be cased in some kind of marble they called Rosa Portagallo. She hopes it will be like Betty's Pyramid, red as sunset, glossy as her fingernails. Are they setting it yet? Amirah thinks not. She can still hear the dull, distant *chock* as the believers lower each structural stone into place—twenty a day. Dust wisps from the cracks between the stones and settles through the thick air onto every horizontal surface of her house: the floor, Dad's desk, windowsills and the tops of the kitchen cabinets. Amirah doesn't mind; she goes over the entire house periodically with vacuum and rag. She wants to be ready when the meaning comes.

Time passes.

The only thing she really misses is the sun. Well, that isn't true. She misses her Mom and her Dad and her friends on the swim team, especially Janet. She and Janet offered themselves to the meaning at Blessed Finger Sanctuary on Janet's twelfth birthday. Neither of them expected to be chosen pyramid girl. They thought maybe they would be throwing flowers off a float in the Monkey Day parade or collecting door to door for the Lost Brothers. Janet shrieked with joy and hugged her when Mrs. Munro told them the news. If her friend hadn't held her up, Amirah might have collapsed.

Amirah keeps all the lights on, even when she goes to bed. She knows this is a waste of electricity, but it's easier to be brave when the house is bright. Besides, there is nobody to scold her now.

"Is there?" Amirah says, and then she walks into the kitchen to listen. Sometimes the house makes whispery noises when she talks to it. "Is there anyone here who cares what I do?" Her voice sounds like the hinges of the basement door.

Time passes.

They took all the clocks, and she has lost track of day and night. She sleeps when she is tired and eats when she is hungry. That's all there is to do, except wait for the meaning to come. Mom and Dad's bedroom is filled to the ceiling with cartons of Goody-goody Bars: Nut Raisin, Cherry Date, Chocolate

Banana, and Cinnamon Apple, which is not her favorite. Mrs. Munro said there were enough to last her for years. At first that was a comfort. Now Amirah tries not to think about it.

Time passes.

Amirah's pyramid is the first in the Tri-City area. They said it would be twenty meters tall. She had worked it out afterward that twenty meters was almost seventy feet. Mom said that if the meaning had first come to Memphis, Tennessee, instead of Memphis, Egypt, then maybe everything would have been in American instead of metric. Dad had laughed at that and said then Elvis would have been the First Brother. Mom didn't like him making fun of the meaning. If she wanted to laugh, she would have him tell one of the Holy Jokes.

"What's the first law of religion?" Amirah says in her best imitation of Dad's voice.

"For every religion, there exists an equal and opposite religion," she says in Mom's voice.

"What's the second law of religion?" says Dad's voice.

"They're both wrong." Mom always laughs at that.

The silence goes all breathy, like Amirah is holding seashells up to both ears. "I don't get it," she says.

She can't hear building sounds anymore. The dust has stopped falling.

Time passes.

When Amirah was seven, her parents took her to Boston to visit Betty's Pyramid. The bus driver said that the believers had torn down a hundred and fifty houses to make room for it. Amirah could feel Betty long before she could see her pyramid; Mom said the meaning was very strong in Boston.

Amirah didn't understand much about the meaning back then. While the bus was stopped at a light, she had a vision of her heart swelling up inside her like a balloon and lifting her out the window and into the bluest part of the sky where she could see everything there was to see. The whole bus was feeling Betty by then. Dad told the Holy Joke about the chicken and the Bible in a loud voice and soon everyone was laughing so hard that the bus driver had to pull over. She and Mom and Dad walked the last three blocks and the way Amirah remembered it, her feet only touched the ground a couple of times. The pyramid was huge in a way that no skyscraper could ever be. She heard Dad tell Mom it was more like geography than architecture. Amirah was going to ask him what that meant, only she realized that *she* knew because *Betty* knew. The marble of Betty's pyramid was incredibly smooth but it was cold to the touch. Amirah spread the fingers of both hands against it and thought very hard about Betty.

"Are you there, Betty?" Amirah sits up in bed. "What's it like?" All the lights are on in the house. "Betty?" Amirah can't sleep because her stomach hurts. She gets up and goes to the bathroom to pee. When she wipes herself, there is a pinkish stain on the toilet paper.

Time passes.

Amirah also misses Juicy Fruit gum and Onion Taste Tots and 3DV and music. She hasn't seen her shows since Dad shut the door behind him and led Mom down the front walk. Neither of them looked back, but she thought Mom might have been crying. Did Mom have doubts? This still bothers Amirah. She wonders what Janet is listening to these days on her earstone. Have the Stiffies released any new songs? When Amirah sings, she practically has to scream or else the pyramid swallows her voice.

"Go, go away, go-go away from me.

Had fun, we're done, whyo-why can't you see?"

Whenever she finishes a Goody-goody bar, she throws the wrapper out the front door. The walk has long since been covered. In the darkness, the wrappers look like fallen leaves.

Time passes.

Both Janet and Amirah had been trying to get Han Biletnikov to notice them before Amirah became pyramid girl. Han had wiry red hair and freckles and played midfield on the soccer team. He was the first boy in their school to wear his pants inside out. On her last day in school, there had been an assembly in her honor and Han had come to the stage and told a Holy Joke about her.

Amirah cups her hands to make her voice sound like it's coming out of a microphone. "What did Amirah say to the guy at the hot dog stand?"

She twists her head to one side to give the audience response. "I don't know, what?"

Han speaks again into the microphone. "Make me one with everything." She can see him now, even though she is sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water and an unopened Cherry Date Goody-goody bar in front of her. His cheeks are flushed as she strides across the stage to him. He isn't expecting her to do this. The believers go quiet as if someone has thrown a blanket over them. She holds out her hand to shake his and he stares at it. When their eyes finally meet, she can see his awe; she's turned into President Huong, or maybe Billy Tiger, the forward for the Boston Flash. His hand is warm, a little sweaty. Her fingertips brush the hollow of his palm.

"Thank you," says Amirah.

Han doesn't say anything. He isn't there. Amirah unwraps the Goody-goody bar.

Time passes.

Amirah never gets used to having her period. She thinks she isn't doing it right. Mom never told her how it worked and she didn't leave pads or tampons or anything. Amirah wads toilet paper into her panties, which makes her feel like she's walking around with a sofa cushion between her legs. The menstrual blood smells like vinegar. She takes a lot of baths. Sometimes she touches herself as the water cools and then she feels better for a while.

Time passes.

Amirah wants to imagine herself kissing Han Biletnikov, but she can't. She keeps seeing Janet's lips on his, her tongue darting into his mouth. At least, that's how Janet said people kiss. She wonders if she would have better luck if she weren't in the kitchen. She climbs the stairs to her bedroom and opens the door. It's dark. The light has burned out. She pulls down the diffuser and unscrews the bulb. It's clear and about the size of a walnut. It says: