

THE BIBLE REPAIRMAN

TIM POWERS

Scanned from The Best SF and Fantasy of the Year Vol. 1, edited by Jonathan Strahan
Night Shade Books
Trade Paperback 978-1-59780-068-6
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Tim Power's first novels, *The Skies Discrowned* and *Epitaph in Rust*, appeared in 1976, but his first major novel was *The Drawing of the Dark* in 1979. It was followed by *The Anubis Gates*, *Dinner at Deviant's Palace*, *The Stress of Her Re-gard*, *Last Call*, *Expiration Date*, *Earthquake Weather*, and supernatural "secret history" *Declare*. His most recent books are collection *Strange Itineraries* and novel *Three Days to Never*.

This subtle tale of loss, sin, and sacrifice, where everything comes at a cost, is Powers at his best.

* * *

"It'll do to kiss the book on still, won't it?" growled Dick, who was evidently uneasy at the curse he had brought on himself.

"A Bible with a bit cut out!" returned Silver derisively. "Not it.

It don't bind no more'n a ballad-book."

"Don't it, though?" cried Dick, with a sort of joy. "Well I reckon that's worth having, too."

Treasure Island,
by Robert Louis Stevenson

Across the highway was old Humberto, a dark spot against the tan field between the railroad tracks and the freeway fence, pushing a stripped-down shopping cart along the cracked sidewalk. His shadow still stretched halfway to the center-divider line in the early morning sunlight, but he was apparently already very drunk, and he was using the shopping cart as a walker, bracing his weight on it as he shuffled along. Probably he never slept at all, not that he was ever really awake either.

Humberto had done a lot of work in his time, and the people he talked and gestured to were, at best, long gone and probably existed now only in his cannibalized memory but this morning as Torrez watched him the old man clearly looked across the street straight at Torrez and waved. He was just a silhouette against the bright eastern daylight his camouflage pants, white beard and Daniel Boone coonskin cap were all one raggedly backlit outline but he might have been smiling too.

After a moment's hesitation Torrez waved and nodded. Torrez was not drunk in the morning, nor unable to walk without leaning on something, nor surrounded by imaginary acquaintances, and he meant to sustain those differences between them but he supposed that he and Humberto were brothers in the trades, and he should show some respect to a player who simply had not known when to retire.

Torrez pocketed his Camels and his change and turned his back on the old man, and trudged across the parking lot toward the path that led across a weedy field to home.

He was retired, at least from the big-stakes dives. Nowadays he just waded a little ways out he worked on cars and Bibles and second-hand eyeglasses and clothes people bought at thrift stores, and half of that work was just convincing the customers that work had been done. He always had to use holy water real holy water, from gallon jugs he filled from the silver urn at St. Anne's but though it impressed the customers, all he could see that it actually did was get stuff wet. Still, it was better to err on the side of thoroughness.

His garage door was open, and several goats stood up with their hoofs on the fence rail of the lot next door. Torrez paused to pull up some of the tall, furry, sagelike weeds that sprang up in every stretch of unattended dirt in the county, and he held them out and let the goats chew them up. Sometimes when customers arrived at times like this, Torrez would whisper to the goats and then pause and nod.

Torrez's Toyota stood at the curb because a white Dodge Dart was parked in the driveway. Torrez had already installed a "pain button" on the Dodge's dashboard, so that when the car wouldn't start, the owner could give the car a couple of jabs *Oh yeah? How do you like this, eh?* On the other side of the firewall the button was connected to a wire that was screwed to the carburetor housing; nonsense, but the stuff had to look convincing.

Torrez had also used a can of Staples compressed air and a couple of magnets to try to draw a babbling ghost out of the car's stereo system, and this had not been nonsense if he had properly opposed the magnets to the magnets in the speakers, and got the Bernoulli effect with the compressed air sprayed over the speaker diaphragm, then at speeds over forty there would no longer be a droning imbecile monologue faintly going on behind whatever music was playing. Torrez would take the Dodge out onto the freeway today, assuming the old car would get up to freeway speeds, and try it out driving north, east, south and west. Two hundred dollars if the voice was gone, and a hundred in any case for the pain button.

And he had a couple of Bibles in need of customized repair, and those were an easy fifty dollars apiece just brace the page against a piece of plywood in a frame and scorch out the verses the customers found intolerable, with a wood-burning stylus; a plain old razor wouldn't have the authority that hot iron did.

And then of course drench the defaced book in holy water to validate the

edited text. Matthew 19:5-6 and Mark 10:7-12 were bits he was often asked to burn out, since they condemned re-marriage after divorce, but he also got a lot of requests to lose Matthew 25:41 through 46, with Jesus's promise of Hell to stingy people. And he offered a special deal to eradicate all thirty or so mentions of adultery. Some of these customized Bibles ended up after a few years with hardly any weight besides the binding.

He pushed open the front door of the house he never locked it and made his way to the kitchen to get a beer out of the cold spot in the sink. The light was blinking on the telephone answering machine, and when he had popped the can of Budweiser he pushed the play button.

"Give Mr. Torrez this message," said a recorded voice. "Write down the number I give you! It is important, make sure he gets it!" The voice recited a number then, and Torrez wrote it down. His answering machine had come with a pre-recorded message on it in a woman's voice *No one is available to take your call right now* and many callers assumed the voice was that of a woman he was living with. Apparently she sounded unreliable, for they often insisted several times that she convey their messages to him.

He punched in the number, and a few moments later a man at the other end of the line was saying to him, "Mr. Torrez? We need your help, like you helped out the Fotas four years ago. Our daughter was stolen, and now we've got a ransom note she was in a coffee pot with roses tied around it"

"I don't do that work anymore," Torrez interrupted, "I'm sorry. Mr. Seaweed in Corona still does she's younger I could give you his number."

"I called him already a week ago, but then I heard you were back in business. You're better than Seaweed"

Poor old Humberto had kept on doing deep dives. Torrez had done them longer than he should have, and nowadays couldn't understand a lot of the books he had loved when he'd been younger.

"I'm not back in that business," he said. "I'm very sorry." He hung up the phone.

He had not even done the ransom negotiations when it had been his own daughter that had been stolen, three years ago and his wife had left him over it, not understanding that she would probably have had to be changing her mentally retarded husband's diapers forever afterward if he had done it.

Torrez's daughter Amelia had died at the age of eight, of a fever. Her grave was in the dirt lot behind the Catholic cemetery, and on most Sundays Torrez and his wife had visited the grave and made sure there were lots of little stuffed animals and silver foil pinwheels arranged on the dirt, and for a marker they had set into the ground a black plastic box with a clear top, with her death-certificate displayed in it to show that she had died in a hospital. And her soul had surely gone to Heaven, but they had caught her ghost to keep it from wandering in the noisy cold half-world, and Torrez had bound it into one of Amelia's cloth dolls. Every Sunday night they had put candy and cigarettes and a shot-glass of rum in front of the doll hardly appropriate fare for a little girl, but ghosts were somehow all the same age. Torrez had always lit the cigarettes and stubbed them out before laying them in front of the doll, and bitten the candies: ghosts needed somebody to have started such things for them.

And then one day the house had been broken into, and the little shrine and the doll were gone, replaced with a ransom note: *If you want your daughter's ghost back, Mr. Torrez, give me some of your blood.* And there had been a phone number.

Usually these ransom notes asked the recipient to get a specific tattoo that corresponded to a tattoo on the kidnapper's body and afterward whichever family member complied would have lost a lot of memories, and be unable to feel affection, and never again dream at night. The kidnapper would have taken those things. But a kidnapper would always settle instead for the blood of a person whose soul was broken in the way that Torrez's was, and so the robbed families would often come to Torrez and offer him a lot of money to step in and give up some of his blood, and save them the fearful obligation of the vampiric tattoo.

Sometimes the kidnapper was the divorced father or mother of the ghost courts never considered custody of a dead child or a suitor who had been rejected long before, and in these cases there would be no ransom demand; but then it had sometimes been possible for Torrez to trace the thief and steal the ghost back, in whatever pot or box or liquor bottle it had been confined in.

But in most cases he had had to go through with the deal, meet the kidnapper somewhere and give up a cupful or so of blood to retrieve the stolen ghost; and each time, along with the blood, he had lost a piece of his soul.

The phone began ringing again as Torrez tipped up the can for the last sip of beer; he ignored it.

Ten years ago it had been an abstract consideration when he had thought about it at all, he had supposed that he could lose a lot of his soul without missing it, and he'd told himself that his soul was bound for Hell anyway, since he had deliberately broken it when he was eighteen, and so dispersing it had just seemed like hiding money from the IRS. But by the time he was thirty-five his hair had gone white and he had lost most of the sight in his left eye because of ruptured blood-vessels behind the retina, and he could no longer understand the plots of long novels he tried to read. Apparently some sort of physical and mental integrity was lost too, along with the blood and the bits of his hypothetical soul.

But what the kidnappers wanted from Torrez's blood was not vicarious integrity it was nearly the opposite. Torrez thought of it as spiritual botox.

The men and women who stole ghosts for ransom were generally mediums, fortune-tellers, psychics always clairvoyant. And even more than the escape that could be got from extorted dreams and memories and the ability to feel affection, they needed to be able to selectively blunt the psychic noise of humans living and dead.

Torrez imagined it as a hundred radios going at once all the time, and half the announcers moronically drunk crying, giggling, trying to start fights.

He would never know. He had broken all the antennae in his own soul when he was eighteen, by killing a man who attacked him in a parking lot with a knife one midnight. Torrez had wrestled the knife away from the drunken assailant and had knocked the man unconscious by slamming his head into the bumper of a car but then Torrez had picked up the man's knife and, just because he could, had driven it into the unconscious man's chest. The District Attorney had eventually called it self-defense, a justifiable homicide, and no charges were brought against Torrez, but his soul was broken.

The answering machine clicked on, but only the dial tone followed the recorded

message. Torrez dropped the Budweiser can into the trash basket and walked into the living room, which over the years had become his workshop.

Murder seemed to be the crime that broke souls most effectively, and Torrez had done his first ghost-ransom job for free that same year, in 1983, just to see if his soul was now a source of the temporary disconnection-from-humanity that the psychics valued so highly. And he had tested out fine.

He had been doing Bible repair for twenty years, but his reputation in that cottage industry had been made only a couple of years ago, by accident. Three Jehovah's Witnesses had come to his door one summer day, wearing suits and ties, and he had stepped outside to debate scripture with them. "Let me see your Bible," he had said, "and I'll show you right in there why you're wrong," and when they handed him the book he had flipped to the first chapter of John's gospel and started reading. This was after his vision had begun to go bad, though, and he'd had to read it with a magnifying glass, and it had been a sunny day and he had inadvertently set their Bible on fire. They had left hurriedly, and apparently told everyone in the neighborhood that Torrez could burn a Bible just by touching it.

* * *

He was bracing a tattered old Bible in the frame on the marble-topped table, ready to scorch out St. Paul's adverse remarks about homosexuality for a customer, when he heard three knocks at his front door, the first one loud and the next two just glancing scuffs, and he realized he had not closed the door and the knocks had pushed it open. He made sure his woodburning stylus was lying in the ashtray, then hurried to the entry hall.

Framed in the bright doorway was a short stocky man with a moustache, holding a shoe-box and shifting from one foot to the other.

"Mr. Torrez," the man said. He smiled, and a moment later looked as if he'd never smile again. He waved the shoe-box toward Torrez and said, "A man has stolen my daughter."

Perhaps the shoe-box was the shrine he had kept his daughter's ghost in, in some jelly jar or perfume bottle. Probably there were ribbons and candy hearts around the empty space where the daughter's ghost-container had lain. Still a shoe-box was a pretty nondescript shrine; but maybe it was just for traveling, like a cat-carrier box.

"I just called," the man said, "and got your woman. I hoped she was wrong, and you were here."

"I don't do that work anymore," said Torrez patiently, "ransoming ghosts. You want to call Seaweed in Corona."

"I don't want you to ransom a ghost," the man said, holding the box toward Torrez. "I already had old Humberto do that, yesterday. This is for you."

"If Humberto ransomed your daughter," Torrez said carefully, nodding toward the box but not taking it, "then why are you here?"

"My daughter is *not* a ghost. My daughter is twelve years old, and this man took her when she was walking home from school. I can pay you fifteen hundred dollars to get her back this is extra, a gift for you, from me, with the help of Humberto."

Torrez had stepped back. "Your daughter was kidnapped? Alive? Good God, man, call the police right now! The FBI! You don't come to *me* with"

"The police would not take the ransom note seriously," the man said, shaking his head. "They would think he wants money really, they would not think of his terms being sincerely meant, as he wrote them!" He took a deep breath and let it out. "Here," he said, extending the box again.

Torrez took the box it was light and cautiously lifted the lid.

Inside, in a nest of rosemary sprigs and Catholic holy cards, lay a little cloth doll that Torrez recognized.

"Amelia," he said softly.

He lifted it out of the box, and he could feel the quiver of his own daughter's long-lost ghost in it.

"Humberto bought this back for you?" Torrez asked. Three years after her kidnapping, he thought. No wonder Humberto waved to me this morning! I hope he didn't have to spend much of his soul on her; he's got no more than a mouse's worth left.

"For you," the man said. "She is a gift. Save my daughter."

Torrez didn't want to invite the man into the house. "What did the ransom note for your daughter say?"

"It said, Juan-Manuel Ortega that's me I have Elizabeth, and I will kill her and take all her blood unless you *induce* Terry Torrez to come to me and him give me the ransom blood instead."

"Call the police," Torrez said. "That's a bluff, about taking her blood. Why would he want a little girl's blood? When did this happen? Every minute"

Juan-Manuel Ortega opened his mouth very wide, as if to pronounce some big syllable, then closed it. "My Elizabeth," he said, "she killed her sister last year. My rifle was in the closet she didn't know, she's a child, she didn't know it was loaded"

Torrez could feel that his eyebrows were raised. Yes she did, he thought; she killed her sister deliberately, and broke her own soul doing it, and the kidnapper knows it even if you truly don't.

Your daughter's a murderer. She's like me.

Still, her blood her broken, blunting soul wouldn't be accessible to the kidnapper, the way Torrez's would be, unless...

"Has your daughter" He had spoken too harshly, and tried again. "Has she ever used magic?" Or is her soul still virginal, he thought.

Ortega bared his teeth and shrugged. "Maybe! She said she caught her sister's ghost in my electric shaver. I think she did. I don't use it anymore, but think I hear it in the nights."

Then her blood will do for the kidnapper what mine would, Torrez thought. Not quite as well, since my soul is surely more opaque older and more stained by the use of magic but hers will do if he can't get mine.

"Here is my phone number," said Ortega, now shoving a business card at Torrez and talking too rapidly to interrupt, "and the kidnapper has your number. He wants only you. I am leaving it in your hands. Save my daughter, please."

Then he turned around and ran down the walkway to a van parked behind Torrez's Toyota. Torrez started after him, but the sun-glare in his bad left eye made him

uncertain of his footing, and he stopped when he heard the van shift into gear and start away. The man's wife must have been waiting behind the wheel.

I should call the police myself, Torrez thought as he lost sight of the van in the brightness. But he's right, the police would take the kidnapping seriously, but not the ransom. The kidnapper doesn't want money he wants my blood, me.

A living girl! he thought. I don't save living people, I save ghosts. And I don't even do that anymore.

She's like me.

He shuffled back into the house, and set the cloth doll on the kitchen counter, sitting up against the toaster. Almost without thinking about it, he took the pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket and lit one with his Bic lighter, then stubbed it out on the stove-top and laid it on the tile beside the doll.

The tip of the cigarette glowed again, and the telephone rang. He just kept staring at the doll and the smoldering cigarette and let the phone ring.

The answering machine clicked in, and he heard the woman's recorded voice say, "No one is available to take your call, he had me on his TV, Daddy, so I could change channels for him. 'Two, four, eleven,' and I'd change them."

Torrez became aware that he had sat down on the linoleum floor. Her ghost had never found a way to speak when he and his ex-wife had had possession of it. "I'm sorry, Amelia," he said hoarsely. "It would have killed me to buy you back. They don't want money, they"

"What?" said the voice of the caller. "Is Mr. Torrez there?"

"Rum he gave me, at least," said Amelia's voice. "It wouldn't have killed you, not really."

Torrez got to his feet, feeling much older than his actual forty years. He opened the high cupboard and saw her bottle of 151-proof rum still standing up there beside the stacked china dishes he never used. He hoisted the bottle down and wiped dust off it.

"I'm going to tell him how rude you are," said the voice on the phone, "this isn't very funny." The line clicked.

"No," Torrez said as he poured a couple of ounces of rum into a coffee cup. "It wouldn't have killed me. But it would have made a mindless ... it would have made an idiot of me. I wouldn't have been able to ... work, talk, think." Even now I can hardly make sense of the comics in the newspaper, he thought.

"He had me on his TV, Daddy," said Amelia's voice from the answering machine. "I was his channel-changer."

Torrez set the coffee cup near the doll, and felt it vibrate faintly just as he let go of the handle. The sharp alcohol smell became stronger, as if some of the rum had been vaporized.

"And he gave me candy."

"I'm sorry," said Torrez absently, "I don't have any candy."

"Sugar Babies are better than Reese's Pieces." Torrez had always given her Reese's Pieces, but before now she had not been able to tell him what she preferred.

"How can you talk?"

"The people that nobody paid for, he would put all of us, all our jars and boxes and dolls on the TV and make us change what the TV people said. We made them say bad prayers."

The phone rang again, and Amelia's voice out of the answering machine speaker said,

"Sheesh," and broke right in. "What, what?"

"I've got a message for Terry Torrez," said a woman's voice, "make sure he gets it, write this number down!" The woman recited a number, which Torrez auto-matically memorized. "My husband is in an alarm clock, but he's fading; I don't hardly dream about him even with the clock under the pillow anymore, and the mint patties, it's like a year he takes to even get halfway through one! He needs a booster shot, tell Terry Torrez that, and I'll pay a thousand dollars for it."

I'll want more than a thousand, Torrez thought, and she'll pay more, too. Booster shot! The only way to boost a fading ghost and they all faded sooner or later was to add to the container a second ghost, the ghost of a newly deceased infant, which would have vitality but no personality to interfere with the original ghost.

Torrez had done that a few times, and though these were only ghosts, not souls, not actual people! it had always felt like putting feeder mice into an aquarium with an old, blind snake.

"That'll buy a lot of Sugar Babies," remarked Amelia's ghost.

"What? Just make sure he gets the message!"

The phone clicked off, and Amelia said, "I remember the number."

"So do I."

Midwives sold newborn ghosts. The thought of looking one of them up nauseated him.

"Mom's dead," said Amelia.

Torrez opened his mouth, then just exhaled. He took a sip of Amelia's rum and said, "She is?"

"Sure. We all know, when someone is. I guess they figured you wouldn't bleed for her, if you wouldn't bleed for me. Sugar Babies are better than Reese's Pieces."

"Right, you said."

"Can I have her rings? They'd fit on my head like crowns."

"I don't know what became of her," he said. It's true, he realized, I don't. I don't even know what there was of her.

He looked at the doll and wondered why anyone kept such things.

His own Bible, on the mantel in the living room workshop, was relatively intact, though of course it was warped from having been soaked in holy water. He had burned out half a dozen verses from the Old Testament that had to do with witchcraft and wizards; and he had thought about excising "thou shalt not kill" from Exodus, but decided that if the commandment was gone, his career might be too.

After he had refused to ransom Amelia's ghost, he had cut out Ezekiel 44:25 "And they shall come at no dead person to defile themselves: but for father, or for mother, or for son, or for daughter, for brother, or for sister that hath had no husband, they may defile themselves."

He had refused to defile himself any further, at least for his own dead daughter. And so she had wound up helping to voice "bad prayers" out of a TV set somewhere.

The phone rang again, and this time he snatched up the receiver before the answering machine could come on. "Yes?"

"Mr. Torrez," said a man's voice. "I have a beaker of silence here, she's twelve years old

and she's not in any jar or bottle."

"Her father has been here," Torrez said.

"I'd rather have the beaker that's you. For all her virtues, her soul's a bit thin still, and noises would get through."

Torrez remembered stories he'd heard about clairvoyants driven to insanity by the constant din of thoughts.

"My daddy doesn't play that anymore," said Amelia. "He has me back now."

Torrez remembered Humberto's wave this morning. Torrez had waved back.

Torrez looked into the living room, at the current Bible in the burning rack, and at the books he still kept on a shelf over the cold fireplacepaperbacks, hardcovers with gold-stamped titles, books in battered dust-jackets. He had foundwhat?a connection with other people's lives, in them, which since the age of eighteen he had not been able to have in any other way. But these days their pages might as well all be blank. When he occasionally pulled one down and opened it, squinting through his magnifying glass to be able to see the print clearly, he could understand individual words but the sentences didn't cohere anymore.

She's like me.

I wonder if I could have found my way back, if I'd tried. I could tell her father to ask her to try.

"Bring the girl to where we meet," Torrez said. He leaned against the kitchen counter. In spite of his resolve, he was dizzy. "I'll have her parents with me to drive her away."

I'm dead already, he thought. Her father came to me, but the book says he may do that for a daughter. And for me, the dead person, this is the only way left to have a vital connection with other people's lives, even if they are strangers.

"And you'll come away with me," said the man's voice.

"No," said Amelia, "he won't. He brings me rum and candy."

The living girl who had been Amelia would have been at least somewhat concerned about the kidnapped girl. We each owe God our mind, Torrez thought, and he that gives it up today is paid off for tomorrow.

"Yes," said Torrez. He lifted the coffee cup; his hand was shaky, but he carefully poured the rum over the cloth head of the doll; the rum soaked into its fabric and puddled on the counter.

"How much is the ransom?" he asked.

"Only a reasonable amount," the voice assured him blandly.

Torrez was relieved; he was sure a reasonable amount was all that was left, and the kidnapper was likely to take it all anyway. He flicked his lighter over the doll, and then the doll was in a teardrop-shaped blue glare on the counter. Torrez stepped back, ready to wipe a wet towel over the cabinets if they should start to smolder. The doll turned black and began to come apart.

Amelia's voice didn't speak from the answering machine, though he thought he might have heard a long sighof release, he hoped.

"I want something," Torrez said. "A condition."

"What?"

"Do you have a Bible? Not a repaired one, a whole one?"

"I can get one."

"Yes, get one. And bring it for me."

"Okay. So we have a deal?"

The rum had burned out and the doll was a black pile, still glowing red here and there. He filled the cup with water from the tap and poured it over the ashes, and then there was no more red glow.

Torrez sighed, seeming to empty his lungs. "Yes. Where do we meet?"