

THE LION

by Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister's new short story collection from Golden Gryphon, *The Girl Who Loved Animals*, will feature an introduction by Harry Harrison and an afterword by Barry Malzberg. The book, which will include a few stories that first saw publication in Asimov's, will be out later this year. Its stories cover the five decades—"from teenager through guy with more than half a century under his expanding belt"—that Bruce has been writing and publishing SF.

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When the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen created the "Lion of Lucerne," he was inspired, he told friends, by a story he had heard as a child—a story about a lion, a real lion, that had appeared miraculously in battle that terrible day in Paris in 1792 and fought so valiantly alongside the Swiss Guard, but whose body was never found. "That creature has lived inside me," he confessed. "It has haunted my dreams."

—*Mythopoeia*, "The Lion of Lucerne"

In August of that turbulent year, as France underwent its Revolution, the insurrectionaries stormed the Palais des Tuileries where Louis XVI hid with his family; and at this very moment were killing the Swiss Guards who had sworn to protect the royal family with their lives. As the battle raged before the palace, a lion—an actual lion—wounded, blinded by its own blood—dragged itself slowly from the battlefield through the manicured gardens, collapsing in a tiny grotto hidden by hedges and carved from limestone by an artisan whose name was already forgotten.

For an instant, shimmering like a dream, the lion became a man, a big one, the kind who might be a smithy or butcher, blinded by his own blood and dying too; but then the man was a lion again, the nostrils flaring, the mane matted with blood and the chest rattling with a growl it could not help. The change took no more than a tortured moment and was like a spasm, as if God were unsure what the lion should be this day.

The spear that had been driven through his back had broken off, with only a piece remaining, but the pain was so great that man and lion both wondered if it would ever end.

He could barely keep his eyes open, and his legs, heavy with the death of others, sprawled beneath him, the hair on them curled with blood. Though he tried to hold it up, his head dropped to his forepaws; and because blood filled his nostrils, bubbling at each breath he took, he had to breathe through open jaws and could no longer smell the carnage of the battlefield.

Is it right, he wanted to ask, and, by wanting to, did, to kill if you kill for what you love?

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From the day he had had his first vision—of a wounded lion dying in a grotto in a beautiful garden somewhere—Alain Sabatier had become fascinated with all things leonine. He visited more than once the duke's zoo in Arles, which had two lions and was only two days' travel from his village. In Arles's shops he also found charcoal drawings and fine etchings of lions, some anatomically correct, some not, though on a butcher's wages he could afford but the cheapest. At the cathedral in Nance—four days' travel from Pelet—he gazed for hours at a locket made from the hair of a lion's mane which sat beside an urn bearing, so the Bishop said, ashes from the prophet Daniel's bones. And in Limours, only a day away, he could touch an actual necklace of lion's talons, a bottle of alcohol containing a lion's spleen, the tuft from a lion's tail, and a box of lion's teeth—all in an apothecary's shop—until the owner told him to purchase something or leave.

Against the protestations of his wife, to whom he had confessed his visions and who was frightened by them, he sold the figurines and vases they had. With this money, which could have gone to clothing for their two sons, and with the extra money he was now making working hours before dawn for his cousin, a baker, he had enough to purchase a lion's talon, strands of hair and a tooth. When his wife looked as if she might cry, he said, "I have no choice." If he did not purchase these items, how could he make the visions cease? Did the visions not concern her as much as they did him?

The visions did not stop with these purchases; and when, in the middle of one of them, he sliced half a finger off, he went immediately to Hameaux de Cergy to consult the priest Père Meynen, who, upon hearing his story, stepped back, turned pale and told him he must burn all of the items he had acquired, for they were witchcraft. Sabatier burned the hair and talon, but not the lion's tooth, which was too beautiful to burn. After all, the lion came to him in his visions dying, asking that he mourn it because there was no one else to do so. How could he mourn the creature without a piece of a lion's body to hold?

When the burning of the talon and the hair did not stop the visions either, he made plans for a longer trip. He gave his wife the money he had received that month from his cousin and also asked his cousin and his cousin's wife to watch over his family while he was gone. Then he set out on the road north to the abbey of Milly-la-Forêt, where a monk lived that many considered a living saint. Here Sabatier presented his problem; and the monk, who looked at him for a long time with gentle, watery eyes, said at last, "I am sorry, *petit fils de Dieu*, but there is nothing I can do for you—nothing that anyone can do. Your visions are God's private words to you and to you alone."

Sabatier shook his head, feeling despair.

“However,” the old man added, “my own soul—which often hears God’s private words as well—urges me to have you crush the lion’s tooth and then drink it with the milk that a lamb drinks.”

“Why, *Messieur*?”

“You will know when it is time to know.”

“How?”

“By the words of those around you. By rumors from Paris. By the *excitement and fear*.”

Sabatier returned home, not understanding, but did as he was told, crushing the lion’s tooth with an apothecary’s mortar and pestle, mixing it with ewe’s milk, and then drinking it. Though he slept well that night, and though the visions ceased for three days, they did resume and with greater disruption of his life. He did not know when a vision would strike him like a seizure and he would be unable to work for an hour or a day; and the more this happened, the more afraid his wife became and the more the people of the village shunned him, believing him possessed. Only when, months later, word of the insurrections in Paris reached his village and everyone was speaking of them did he remember the monk’s words; and remembering them, felt a great relief and a terrible longing to be in Paris, to be present for—what had the monk said?—*the excitement and fear*.

It was with this very longing one hot night a week later, and for the very first time—in the room where the four of them slept, his wife beside him—that Sabatier *became* the lion.

As he lay on their bed, he found that he could hear what he should not have been able to hear: people snoring in nearby houses, a dog running in the street outside, bats swooping for insects in the night sky. He found that he could see, even in the darkness of the room, what no man should be able to see: The faces of his wife and children, their eyelashes, the trembling of a lip in a dream. He found that he could *smell* them, too—the blood and flesh that made their bodies bodies. His chest was rumbling strangely; and when he touched his own face, it was not with fingers, but with a paw as big as a child’s head; and though it had no fingers, he could feel with it the hair on his face and the muzzle that his mouth had become.

Lest his wife feel the difference and wake, he pulled away from her and remained as still as he could until his hearing became a comfortable deafness, his sight a familiar blindness, his nostrils full of his own sweat and nothing more, and the rumbling gone at last, so that he might sleep.

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The first man he had killed as a lion had taken no planning. He had found the man in a fabric shop in an alley in Provins-Gare, where he had gone to buy a pig and was late returning home. The man was beating his own son, a child of love, an

innocent. Upon seeing the father's attempt to kill within the child a thing God surely loved, he had become the lion again. It had taken only a moment, and he had barely felt it. The lion had snarled once, and then, unable to help itself, had killed the father, pulling his entrails from him and dragging them through the alley as neighbors watched—even as the boy watched. The boy had not screamed, though the neighbors had. The boy had looked on mutely as if understanding: *The duty of love to kill that which might kill love*. It was a miracle, one that the city would speak of for years: A lion appearing from nowhere to kill a man who beat his son every day until the boy could no longer speak.

In the darkness of the alley, far from the boy's neighbors, he had become a man again, just as easily, and returned empty-handed to his village. When his wife asked him about the blood on his hands and face, he had lied, of course, telling her he had been beaten by ruffians—the same ones who had stolen his pig. Accepting his story, she had washed him lovingly, and in bed that night he had wept silently, though he was not certain why.

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Every night Paris had pulled at him with a strange longing, but he had resisted. He did so for the simple reason—one that needed only his obeisance—that other miracles were needed before he could go; that there were other men and women he would need to find first:

A woman who ran a brothel in Monte Cellini, on the southeastern border, who, when her girls were with child, let them die under a doctor's filthy tool and paid the man for each death.

A cousin of the *dauphin* who poisoned the grain of a village simply on a bet, killing everyone.

A captain of the Parisian Cavalry who raped children before he sold them.

And all the others he would need, as a lion, to kill in God's name, and so did.

When in July the longing grew too intense and he could neither eat nor sleep, he left for Paris at last. He would not see his wife and sons again—this he knew—and he fought his tears; but he had no choice. He needed to be in Paris, living on the streets as a man, homeless, waiting.

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The lion pulled itself to the edge of the grotto's floor, into the unbearable heat of day, and, eyes barely seeing, looked into the pool of water by its feet, the water that could have washed so much away were it right to do so. *Would it be right?* He did not know. He tried to see the battlefield, but through the blood could not. He could still hear what no man would—swords slicing quietly through bone, the whispers of torn throats, even the straining hearts of the combatants—but he could not *see*.

He shook his head and blood flew from it; and for a moment he could see the insurrectionaries, some dead, some still standing in a stupor, in street clothes, waving their muskets and pistols and swords. And the bodies of the Guard in their red and white and blue uniforms. These bodies did not move or, if they did, they moved with the same pain that made his own legs so heavy.

Is it enough to kill for what you believe, if what you believe is only a king—while those you kill are willing to die for what may be closer to what a God loves?

He could not hear God's answer, nor did he know whether God heard him, or even whether the question had an answer. Men died. Men killed each other and died, and a lion who was a man and a man who was a lion would die today. Of that there was no doubt. Was it any more than this?

Is it enough to be a lion in the name of God?

He did not know. The battlefield called to him, whispering. It was where he was meant to die, not here in the grotto. Nostrils flaring, he rose slowly on four legs with what breath he had and, stumbling past the pool of water that whispered to him, too, made his way toward the palace, to the first bodies, where he lost his strength and fell. There, on the hands and knees of a man, eyes blind again, he touched a corpse with fingers that had, for most of the battle, been an animal's paw, talons, hair. With his fingers he felt cloth and metal and slick blood, touched another body, one that moved, that made a sound like the word "*Mère!*" and then another, this one still as well; and the next, one that squirmed weakly. For neither the still nor the moving could he do a thing except touch them and mutter a prayer.

Then, with a strength that might have been the lion's or the man's or something else entirely, he got up, steadied himself, and began to walk through the bodies. And this, the sight of a simple man—a blind butcher with a broken spear through his still-beating heart as he walked among the fallen—would, he saw now, be forgotten, even as the lion—the miracle any God would have chosen—would be remembered forever.

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