

HELIOTROPE



THE SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE

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THEY PLAY IN
THE PALACE OF MY
DREAMING

• by *Gerard Houarner*

A GODMOTHER'S GIFT

• by *January Mortimer*

GALATEA

• by *Vylar Kaftan*

WITH A POEM FROM
Sonya Taaffe



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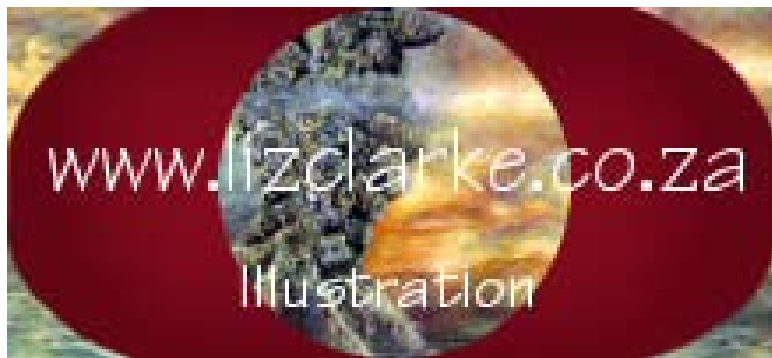
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They Play in the Palace of My Dreaming

by Gerard Houarner

Never leave your place unguarded, the totem of the unborn fetus said.

Carlos woke, startled, from the dream. He turned on the bedside lamp, stared into the murky fluid of the jars containing the fetuses of two girls taken from mothers killed in traffic accidents. What are you saying? he asked, stroking each jar's cool glass of each jar. He searched for the glimmer of a response in their tightly-shut eyes, a twitch of curled fingers indicating a direction to take, a pulse in their visible hearts stuttering a secret in code. But those were tricks for the dreaming world. In the waking world, they remained dead flesh.

My body, Carlos decided. I must guard my body.

He opened his dream journal and hastily scribbled his thoughts.

The totem warns me. Someone is coming for my body. Must be careful. Who? Clarisse, angry bitch. Who else. Is she going to break into the apartment while I'm in trance? Does she suspect what I'm doing? Is she going to send someone after me?

Carlos put the book down, hands shaking, no longer able to write. He turned off the lamp and closed his eyes, but could not sleep. His mind raced past the dreams he had to dream, the risky flights to be taken and the nightmare depths to be scraped, beyond all the work he had yet to do, to the promised land of his own paradise he was so close to completing. He wandered the halls of his future palace, frustrated by imperfections, but finding comfort in the certainty that it what he imagined and what he was would become one.

Soon, he crooned, comforting himself, soon.

“I have no intention of asking for visitation rights,” Carlos told Clarisse, who sat across from him at the restaurant table, mouth hanging open. “I don’t want or need any contact with them, and the less I have to do with the whole lot of you, the better.”

“Now that’s not necessarily what you want—” his lawyer began, but Carlos cut him off with an abrupt hand gesture.

“You wanted an informal setting?” he told both his and Clarisse’s lawyer, sitting across from each other. Their fingers twitched, as if eager to jot down notes, to take down names of waiters and nearby-diners as witnesses to an accident. “You got it. Lay it all out on the table. I don’t know how much simpler I can make it.”

A busboy appeared to remove their salad plates. The lawyers downed their drinks. Carlos finished his tequila and waved for another. Through the background murmur, distant shouts from the kitchen and the clink of cutlery sounded, like a crew working on a ship skirting a fog-bound coast. A waiter served a plate of steaming lasagna at a nearby table and hurried off.

After taking a deep breath, further expanding her already enormous belly, Clarisse responded. “It doesn’t matter what you want or need. It’s what the twins want and need that’s important. You’re the father. They need their father.”


“You mean, they need his money,” he said, laying on the ice in his voice.

“At the very least,” she replied, matching his tone. “But they also need the man who wanted them in the first place, the man who couldn’t stop talking about his twin girls, his angels, his saviors, how they were going to change his life, make his dreams come true—”

“Please, Clarisse, it’s too early for a sweet dessert,” he said with sarcasm.

“You made me have them, you son of a bitch,” she said, leaning forward, hand on a water glass. Her lawyer raised his hand, ready to grab her wrist. “You put your voodoo shit in our food, you made this thing happen, and now you walk away? You think you can sweep into my life, change it all around to suit your particular fantasy, and then just walk away? I don’t even





care why you're doing it, Carlos. I'm just telling you it's not going to happen."

"I'm sure we can arrive at a suitable figure for child support and alimony," his lawyer said, giving Carlos a hard glance to silence him.

"Yes, I'm willing to write the checks," Carlos said, "isn't that all that really matters?"

"And what happens if you disappear on one of those jungle drug-hunting expeditions of yours?" she said. "What happens if you have an aneurysm during your favorite pastime, a mind trip up your own ass?" She picked up the glass, giving her lawyer a slight smile, took a sip and set it down.

"I'll agree to automatic child care payments deducted from my pharmaceutical dividend account, and I'll even lock myself into gaining prior approval from your lawyer for any stock sales affecting that fund. As for alimony, well, you'll just have to trust me on that. But I am willing to pay for the life insurance your lawyer proposed I take, payable to you." He accepted the tequila a waiter brought to the table and downed it in one gulp.

"So you really do want to buy me off, shut me up, send me off," Clarisse said, sitting back. "And what are those girls going to do for a father? Am I supposed to wave your books and videos in front of them? See, this is your father, great white hunter of universal truths, shaman to the corporations, provider of herbs and roots that'll cure cancer and heart attacks and will let you live forever. Yes, he promised us safaris and adventure, he said he'd show us miracles in the desert and paradise in the jungles, but I guess he wanted to keep it all to himself and he left us. Sorry."

"Why don't you spread your legs for the bartender," Carlos said. "I think he has the hots for you, and he looks like somebody who loves kids."

Clarisse screamed, picked up a bread-basket and tossed it Carlos. Rolls and sticks went flying past his head. The lawyers leaned to their respective clients, casting protective arms around their charges. Waiters and busboys rushed to their table. Diners turned, some stood. One young man advanced, face set like stone, until the staff deflected him to the bar. The Maitre'D headed for their table.

"You bastard," Clarisse shouted as her lawyer shushed her. "I believed you. I believed in your dreams. I loved you. I wanted our children. I still do. Nothing's wrong with them, the tests are all fine. I haven't changed. Why did you?"

For a moment, as Clarisse held the line against tears and stared at him with the feral defiance and power that had drawn him to her in the first place, he regretted casting her aside. In other circumstances, she would have made a perfect partner in his life. With her managing his finances and pharmaceutical contracts, he might have doubled his already comfortable wealth. But she had given him what he needed. Anything more was excess. And there was no surer way to spoil paradise than with excess, as so many stories from Adam and Eve to Coyote tales proved.

Carlos shrugged off his lawyer's embrace and stood. "I haven't, either," he said, then nodded to his lawyer, brushed past the Maitre'D and left.

"Am I a bad man?" Carlos asked Grandfather as the old man took out his drum from the carrying bag.

"You ain't a good one" Grandfather answered. He pulled down a cushion from the couch, threw it in a corner of Carlos' living room, and sat down, back sinking into the angle the walls joining. "What've you done now?"

Carlos took off his shirt, dipped his finger in the jar of home-made blue body paint. Pushing his hand under his trouser waist, he drew his meditation line from crotch to skull, the curves and curls describing his particular journey's path. His skin prickled. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Already, he was slipping into his trance. He smiled, shook his head, sat down in the middle of the living room. Sacrifices were never good or bad, only necessary. He was only being true to his own nature, and there was nothing more important than being true.

"Nothing, old man. Start drumming."

"I believe that." He began tapping the skin, his rhythm reaching into Carlos' waiting heart. "But if you trust that dream, and you're worried about your wife getting to you, why are you pissing her off?"

"I got locks, a gun. I even hired a private dick after that dream to keep an eye on her, in case she hires someone to get to me. She's covered. She doesn't matter. She never did, except as a womb to make what I need."

Grandfather's drumming picked up. Another beat insinuated itself into his initial offering, subtle, like a second drummer joining the song just a thousandth of a second off the established cadence. Carlos felt himself sinking, losing contact with the bare confines of his apartment.

"I remember that drumming," Grandfather said. "Broke a stick and two drums on that one."

Carlos suspended himself, fighting against the fall into deeper states of consciousness, to fix an eye on Grandfather. "You got the medicine you wanted."

"Did some good, too," Grandfather said. "Hell of a thing, a white man carrying a medicine bag from one Indian to give to another."

"You two were just on the wrong continents. Takes a white man to travel in the white man's world separating you two. Takes a man like me to see the big picture, to even know what people like you need from each other."



“Takes an Indian to travel in an Indian’s world, like the way you’ve been doing. And you ain’t no Indian.” The drum beat remained steady, hovering between waking and dreaming.

“The worlds I travel in aren’t all Indian, Grandfather. They’re from all over - Australian, Africa, South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Himalayas, and more. Some of these worlds haven’t even been traveled through for centuries. Millennia.”

“Yeah, you learned a lot from books.”

“And more from people like you. Wise men who didn’t like sharing all they had, who held things back. But I found out what I needed. Watched, even when I wasn’t near enough to see with my eyes. You know how far I can fly, Grandfather? Farther than your eagle self has ever been. Deeper into myself than any fish can swim in the ocean. And I can see into souls, Grandfather. Into the spirits of the sheep around me, into the cramped little worldly creature that is my wife, into the old, regretful sack of shit that pretends to be an Indian shaman, a guide and leader for his people, only his people hardly exist anymore, and what’s left are running a casino upstate.” Carlos felt a rush of adrenaline accelerate his heart beat, and he focused on calming himself, staying within the boundaries of his meditative purpose. He remained on guard, deciding whether Grandfather was goading him for a purpose, or simply out of his nature.

“You sure talk a lot, even for a white man,” Grandfather said, never changing rhythm, keeping the heart-line of sound strong and steady, offering it without threat or rancor.

“You’ve got something to tell me, Grandfather?” Carlos visualized where he had hidden the gun, and tried to anticipate the kind of attack an old man might launch against him. Poison dart, perhaps.

“No, not really. You got what you promised?”

“After we’re through, you’ll get your sacred stones and more of those South American seeds.”

“I appreciate that. Glad to see you kept your promises. Helps keep the culture alive. But this’ll be the last drumming I do for you.”

Carlos dragged himself out of the trance, letting Grandfather’s thread slip through him, though he remained still. With the old man still drumming, he was certain he could reach his gun before Grandfather could pull any weapons against him. Out of his meditative trance, he was less vulnerable to any of the old man’s magic. “Why?”

“Because you’re not living in this world. You live in a big, fancy building with doormen and security, but you got nothing in your place. Nothing of yourself. You live in a desert. You find a woman perfect for yourself, plant your seed in her and then throw her away. You’re using things that don’t belong to you, going places you’re not welcome, taking things that don’t belong to you. For what? I see blood coming from you. I don’t like your totem. I don’t like you.”

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“But you like what I’m able to get you,” Carlos said, waiting for Grandfather to crack.

“Not after today. I won’t have a part of anything you do after today.”

Carlos relaxed. Grandfather was not an assassin. He was just a tired old man from a vanishing tribe, gatekeeper to dead traditions. He just wanted a final word.

“I’m close,” Carlos said, catching Grandfather’s rhythm once again, falling slowly into the places he needed to go. “I’ll be closer after we’re through. My wife never really meant anything to me. Neither did you.”

Grandfather grunted, then winced as the sound added an extra, unintended beat to his drumming. “You got gifts, you worked them hard, you’ve gone far. You see things without the peyote, you hear the powers of the world without fasting or sitting in the sweat lodge. But you don’t see what you’ve given up, where you’re heading, what’s coming for you. You’re crazy with this power. Drunk. “

“That’s pretty funny coming from an Indian. Drum, old man. Start the chant. Take me to the place where the world’s roots grow. I have foundations to sink.” Carlos’ head lolled back as Grandfather added another layer, and then another, with drum and then with chanting words, to the delicate pattern he was weaving. The bland sensations and concerns of the material world began to fade. Thought and action merged. Carlos lost touch with the floor. He was flying.

“Don’t matter how far down you go to sink your foundation,” Grandfather said, interrupting the chant, as if unable to surrender the last word to Carlos, “if the ground they’re in ain’t solid. You’re not a part of any world, white man. Ain’t no world going to take you in if you can’t even belong to the one you’re in.”

Carlos flew through Grandfather’s words like a bird through clouds.

He flew and he fell, going higher and sinking deeper. The old man’s drumming guided him, and he learned the path he needed to take so he would no longer need Grandfather to show him the way. The universe expanded around him as senses that existed only in his dream state awakened, connecting him to the layers of reality inside and outside of him. He was alive once more, as he only knew to be in this heightened state of awareness.

His totem, the unborn fetus, appeared by his side to note the way.

“Tell me, is what I’m doing wrong?” Carlos asked.

The fetus opened its mouth and vomited blood. The trail of its discharge arced across the sky like an umbilical cord. Carlos looked, letting his vision bring to the here and now the time of his birth, the place of his womb. He watched himself emerge bloody and then blue from his mother, the doctor and nurses huddling around him. He heard his first cry, watched his tiny legs kick and arms wave.

“Alive,” he said. “Yes, that’s what I’ll be at last. Alive.”

The dead fetus turned, breaking the stream of blood. The vision faded. Carlos continued on his journey.

Early on, he had taken one of his teachers to the Palace. So soon after the discovery that he could do such a thing through his facility for attaining deep trance states and voyaging out of his body, the Palace was still only a crude construction, drawn from comic book and fantasy movie images, a Baroque set for a costume drama rather than a living extension of himself. But it was a start, and he was proud of what he had accomplished: constructing an out-of-body extension of his self, a separate and distinct aspect of his self, like his totem. But unlike the totem, which arose spontaneously in his first initiatory rites into the world’s mysteries, the Palace was designed by him, and he left parts of his self there to sustain it, give it life. Already, he was building coruscating walls from memories, glowing ceilings from dreams. Fountains gushed with his desires, and every song he ever loved echoed in its endless halls.

The teacher, an ancient Laotian hill tribesman, cried out in revulsion at the sight.

“Where do you take me?” he asked, pulling away from Carlos as they traveled in spirit form. “That is the place you must keep to yourself. Never show me, anyone else, that place again. And stay away from it yourself. Are you mad? Is that all I taught you? To journey into mind, but not into the world? To forget the universe around you and dwell only in yourself? Give up this madness. It will kill you.”

Wounded by his teacher’s words, Carlos gave up his studies with the Laotian shaman, instead. But he took one piece of advice from the encounter: he never shared the secret harbor of his soul with anyone else again.

He passed the secret, sacred place again, the Palace of his Dreaming, as he followed Grandfather’s voice and drumming into the deepest root of his self. His paradise moved now, like water flowing restlessly, ceaselessly, through structures rising, falling, curving, and shifting through a geometric maze of shapes in a kaleidoscopic dance. The scents of his mother’s perfume rose from its towers, and the smell of baked cookies promised him hearty satisfaction in the Palace’s deeper reaches. His nipples rose along with his sex at the thought of his bedrooms, playrooms where thighs parted like grass to reveal warm, welcoming burrows in which he could nestle, and thrust, and lose himself in explosive exultation. His haven pulsed with its own life, with his spirit. It was almost ready. His dead fetus totem veered towards the Palace, eager to fly through archways and corridors, to taste and feel and hear the pleasures he had hoarded and scavenged and saved for himself. It wanted to play, to live, as if it had been truly born and set on path free from his service.

“Deeper,” he told the totem. “The Palace must be bound deeper in my soul, or else it will

fade away when my body dies.” And then where would I live, he thought, not daring to ask the totem such a question.

Under the Palace he dove, following the tree-like roots springing in wild profusion from his perfect place’s belly, which twined with Grandfather’s pattern, a tribal road map through inner realities, to reveal new depths he had never before been able to reach. Neither he nor his Palace had been ready. He forged into the primal darkness beyond his birth, into the formative soup of his gestation, to the moment of his conception. In this void, where distant echoes of his mother’s life came to him, the flavors of her nourishment, the smell of the air she breathed, the music she listened to, Carlos found the spark that was his father’s seed and his mother’s egg: a cellular memory, passed on with growth, with the formation of organs, bone, muscle, and spirit; a fragment of the universe’s afterbirth; a shadow waiting for light in the darkness.

“Here is where I began,” Carlos said, and made the moment real and true inside him, an image that was more than illusion if not quite material reality. And in that metaphysical realm of shaping his own universe, Carlos sank a root from his Palace. “Here is where I will live forever.”

Here is where you’ve been running away from, his totem said. Here is the perfection from which the pain of your birth came.

“This is where I was whole,” Carlos said, agreeing with what he believed his totem said. “From this I will heal.”

But the totem dead fetus turned black and decayed, opened its eyes to reveal empty sockets, peeled back skin to release loose muscle and droplets of thick, greenish-white liquid. A breath echoed through the void in which Carlos floated. An exhalation. Like his mother’s, dying of cancer in the middle of the night, letting loose the air in her lungs through dry lips, her mouth and eyes, the doors to her empty husk, remaining wide open.

Carlos snatched at the line of Grandfather’s drumming and scurried back up to more familiar territories of his spirit.

“Fuck,” Carlos cried out, jumping to wakefulness. He was up on one knee before he oriented himself to the hotel-Spartan glamour of his own apartment. Grandfather had already packed his drum and was standing at door, talking on Carlos’ phone.

“It’s your wife,” the old man said. “She’s in labor. She wants to know if you can take her to the hospital.” Putting a hand over the microphone, he said, “Your detective called a few minutes ago and left a message saying the same thing.”

“Damn.” Carlos smiled, feeling relieved as he shed elaborate plans for a discrete hospital visit. Human nature sometimes did simplify things. She still wanted him. “Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Grandfather stared at Carlos. Frowned. "Tell her your own damned self," he said, tossed the phone to him and left.

"I knew you'd come around," Clarisse said, sitting in the passenger seat of Carlos' Lexus. Her hospital bag was in the back seat, and her Sade CD had filled the awkward silence between them since he picked her up at their old house. Hands resting on her belly as she leaned back on the head rest, seat pulled all the way back to accommodate her size, she appeared at ease, in control of herself, her life, her world. And his place in it.

"Of course." He offered her nothing more than his profile. He wondered if he should have checked her bag and jacket for a gun, in case his totem's warning was still relevant.

"These are your kids," she said, patting her belly and beaming. "Your blood."

"I know." She was feeling more comfortable with him. More confident. The time was coming for him to make his move.

"And I knew when the time came, whatever her name was or whatever deal you got involved with was going to come in second. I know how much these kids meant to you. You could never abandon them. Or me."

"They'll be with me forever."

She glanced at him, sucked in her breath, turned a shade more pale. "Damn these contractions." After a few breaths, she laughed and pointed at his hand hanging loose from the wrist as he leaned his elbow out car door's open window. "I'm the one who's going giving birth to twins, but you're the one who's nervous."

He noticed he was shaking and balled his hand into a fist. Time, he told himself.

Clarisse's smile faded and she turned, opened her mouth, then winced. She breathed deeply to deal with pain, then said, "Right. I forgot. You get the shakes when you spend too much time out of your body. Or in your head. Or wherever you go when you're not in this world. Well, that'll stop once the twins get here, you better believe it."

With his free, shaking, hand, Carlos took the pin-sized thigh bone of a fetal child, sharpened at one end, out of his jacket pocket. He put his hand against his chest, pointing the stick at her. In his mind, the road to the hospital continued to reel in under the car; superimposed on this moving picture of the material world was his vision of her womb, ripe with spirits eager to be born. For a moment, he wondered if he should pull over. But the possibility of Clarisse getting out and making a scene on the highway kept him juggling two realities at the same time. He called up his own meditative gumbo of Australian, African and Asian soul-stealing trance states and settled into a floating state of consciousness between his two perceptions of reality.

As good as he knew he was, Carlos decided he could never try such a tactic with a mature,

or even a freshly born, spirit. The fact that the souls of his twin daughters were innocent, without the experience of any assault or trauma to place them on guard, was the only way he could hope to complete the ritual while safely negotiating the material world.

He smiled to himself, admiring his audacity. It was what had made him conceive the notion of his Palace of Dreaming to begin with: sanctum in life, destination in death.

“What are you doing?” Clarisse asked, between moans. “What is that thing in your hand?”

“I was going to call it a blessing stick, in case someone saw me doing this in the hospital,” Carlos said, breaking into a grin as he juggled his reply with the road, thickening with traffic as they approached town and the hospital, as well as his self-projection into her womb. The souls of his children responded to his touch, instinctively reacted to him as a guardian spirit and leapt into the circle of his psychic embrace.

Slowly, carefully, he led them away from their bodies. Having so little experience in them, they were easily lured away by his strong, confident presence.

“Well, I hate to tell you, but I’m not feeling particularly blessed right now.”

“You’re not being blessed.”

In the moment of Clarisse’s stunned silence, Carlos broke the twins away from their bodies, led them out of their mother’s womb and into the ether all around them. He let out his breath, relaxed back into his seat and dropped the focusing bone.

“What?” Clarisse asked, giving him a weak slap on the arm. “What kind of game are you playing? Are you trying to scare me? Distract me from the pain?”

“I’m just getting what I wanted,” he mumbled, the Palace of his Dreaming filling his vision. He struggled to maintain contact with the material world, to keep his foot on the brake, watch his speed, check the other cars. The Palace loomed, full with his every possible self, pleasures delayed and not consciously imagined, journeys yet to be taken. It tugged at him, enticed him with its endless possibilities for his fulfillment.

Carlos fought to resist the allure of his own creation and led the souls of his twin daughters down along paths already taken, to the foundations of his Palace, where living souls were needed to sustain its reality. Here, he told the twins, as he bound them to his creation with tricks and spells and all the spirit-discipline he had gained in his years of experience and study. Here you will stay. With me. Forever.

He hesitated when he realized that, since they had never been born, the moment of their birth could not be tied to his, as he had originally intended. Even better, he thought, that they were never born. Their souls are pure. They know nothing of any life, other than the womb’s dreaming. They are ignorant of birth’s pain, of the agony of separation.

Let my dreaming be yours, he told them. Stay with me forever, and you will never suffer. He tied them to him through the power of his conception and theirs, through the

bond they shared in blood, in their mutual knowing of the all-encompassing, all-comforting world of the womb. They reached out for the Palace, and he let them, wanting the raw energy of their life to infuse his domain with fresh power.

“YOU’RE GOING TO KILL US,” Clarisse screamed.

Carlos snapped back to the car, realized the highway had gone from express to local and he had just passed through an intersection against a red light. Blaring horns faded as the car sped on, rushing towards the back end of a tractor trailer.

Never leave your place unguarded, his totem dead fetus said, swimming urgently into his vision, obscuring his second-sight view of his Palace.

Of course, Carlos thought. To Clarisse, he said, “That’s the best idea you’ve had since we met,” and drove his foot down on the accelerator.

What better way to guard the place of his body than to kill it, bury it, put it beyond the reach of any enemies? All he had to do was shut the door on the material world, where he was vulnerable, and commit himself to the land he had built for himself, the universe of his making where he was an immortal spirit, untouchable, and happy.

As the back of the tractor trailer rushed up and Clarisse screamed and pummeled his arms trying to shake his grip on the steering wheel, Carlos touched on the only regret his change of plans would leave him. He would never set dead fetus twins free from their jars, never release the totem of the dead fetus from his service. He had not planned on keeping the totem. He would not need it in the self-sustaining perfection of his own, self-enclosed world.

But perhaps it would make a nice souvenir.

He banged on the gate to his Palace once more, but no one answered. He walked back to where the dead fetus rested under a dead tree with pale, white bark and maggots boiling among its roots. Beyond the tree, the road to the gate faded into nothingness. All there was to see was the Palace, ever-shifting, each moment of its existence an act of rich creation.

An infinite monument to perfection, forever out of his reach.


“They won’t let me in,” he said, sitting by the tree. The maggots chewed on his insubstantial flesh. He welcomed the hint of sensation.

“There’s no reason for them to do so,” the dead fetus told him. “I warned you.”

“Stupid warning. Obscure. Easily misunderstood.”

“Only by the deluded.”

“You’re not so obscure now.”



“You’re dead. We speak the same tongue.”

He looked in through the Palace windows, caught a glimpse of his twins – vague, insubstantial forms, not married to the limitations of a material self-awareness. He noted some of the interior color schemes had been changed, and the lighting dimmed as if mimicking the pre-natal environment.

“They’re playing in the Palace of my dreaming,” Carlos protested.

“You let them. You bound them to the place, then abandoned them.”

“It was only for a moment.”

“Enough for them to look for you, and find their own way in.”

“They shouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“You shouldn’t have been able to create such a place. But you were blessed, you had gifts, and they are your children. Why shouldn’t they also share your gifts? Why shouldn’t their gifts be even greater than yours?”

“They should respect me. I’m their father.”

“You’re their creator.”

“I created you. You respect me.”

“I have no choice. I have no power.”

“It’s not right. It’s not fair. The Palace is mine. It is all that I am.”

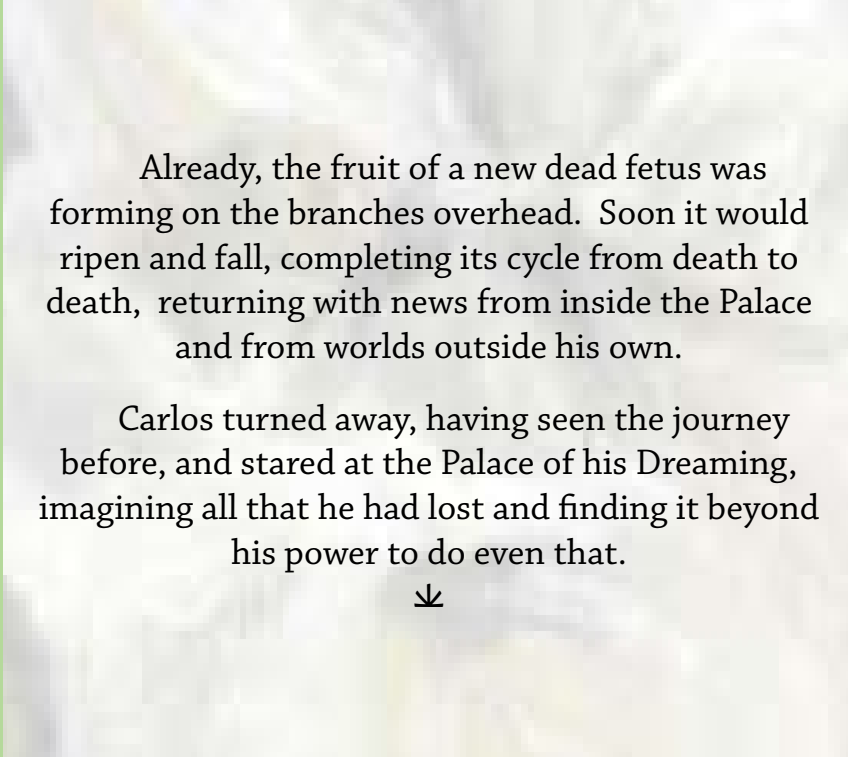
“They must find it very comforting. They must believe it is you, and that a ghostly imposter knocks on their door wanting to share their comfort and pleasures.”

“They should be generous with their gifts.”

“They only follow their nature.”

“Look, now they’re dancing.”

“Yes, the music must be very beautiful. Very beautiful, indeed.” The dead fetus totem turned on its back. Skin fell away. The maggots leaped on to the raw, exposed tissue, burrowing into barely formed organs. Within moments, the carcass sank between the tree’s roots, consumed by the frothing pool of dead flesh eaters.



Already, the fruit of a new dead fetus was forming on the branches overhead. Soon it would ripen and fall, completing its cycle from death to death, returning with news from inside the Palace and from worlds outside his own.

Carlos turned away, having seen the journey before, and stared at the Palace of his Dreaming, imagining all that he had lost and finding it beyond his power to do even that.



Galatea

by Vylar Kaftan

Since I moved to the city, I've been dying piece by piece. It's not really the smog, or the crowds, or my tiny apartment above the Arabic bookstore, or any of the things that bother most people. It's the way people hurry around, their faces to the sidewalk, darting through the streets like ants swarming over a dead lizard. City life is fractured into thousands of pieces--faceted like the view from insect eyes. Maybe it makes sense to ants. To a small-town girl like me, it's overwhelming.

The problem is that I've been here long enough to start dying. I lost two fingers last week. They fell off while I was sleeping. I found them next to my pillow in the morning, and put them in a shoebox with my big toe.

Riding home on the bus each night, I see other people who are dying. Not all of them are losing body parts like I am. There's one guy, an old man who shaves badly--looks like a war vet or maybe an ex-cop. He smells like mothballs. He's got a patch of dead gray skin on his cheek. It looks like frostbite. It's spreading; yesterday it stretched across his broad nose. There's a girl about my age with blood dripping from her ears. I try not to sit by her because she bleeds on the bus seats. There's a black drag queen who's fading. Last time I saw her, she was nearly transparent. The streetlights flickered behind her as we rode together. She caught my gaze and winked with a diamond-edged eyelid, then got off at the next stop. I haven't seen her since. I think she's gone.

One Friday night, after I'd been working late typing up a deposition, I took a later bus than usual. When I got on, the driver stared at me with empty sockets. His eyes had rotted away. But his hands and feet remembered the route, and they controlled the steering wheel and gas pedal. I sat in the handicapped seats so I could watch him. The bus crept through city traffic, so slowly it couldn't hurt anyone. Traffic signals turned green for us, and stayed that way for three minutes as we crossed the intersection. It was on this bus--watching this driver--that I realized if I stayed in the city I'd lose myself completely.

When I got home, I raced up the outside steps. I caught my boot on the metal stairs as I fumbled my keys out. Kicking the stairs, I pushed the key at the door. The sound of a power drill caught my attention. I glanced across the landing at the other apartment above the bookstore. I hadn't met my neighbor, but I'd seen the guy--tall, shaggy-haired, usually covered in paint. An artist, for sure. This city was full of them.

As I set my purse on the kitchen counter, I heard a knock on the door. I remembered my big-city training: don't open the door, not in the city. You're not in a small town now. Through the peephole I saw the artist from next door. He was standing on the porch we shared, his hand raised to knock again. I opened the door.

He was taller than I'd realized--well over six feet. His hair was curly and wild, sort of ginger-colored. He wore a Free Tibet tie-dye shirt with a green streak across the front, like he'd wiped a hand there once. He was picking at something on his hands. "Hi," he said. "I'm your neighbor."

"I know," I said. I extended my right hand.

"I'm Trent. I'd shake your hand, but I've got glue on mine."

He was whole, with nothing dead that I could see on him. I wondered how long he'd been here. "Julie," I said, tucking my left hand behind my back. I didn't want him to see the missing fingers.

"Listen, I was wondering... could I borrow a cup of something? One cup."

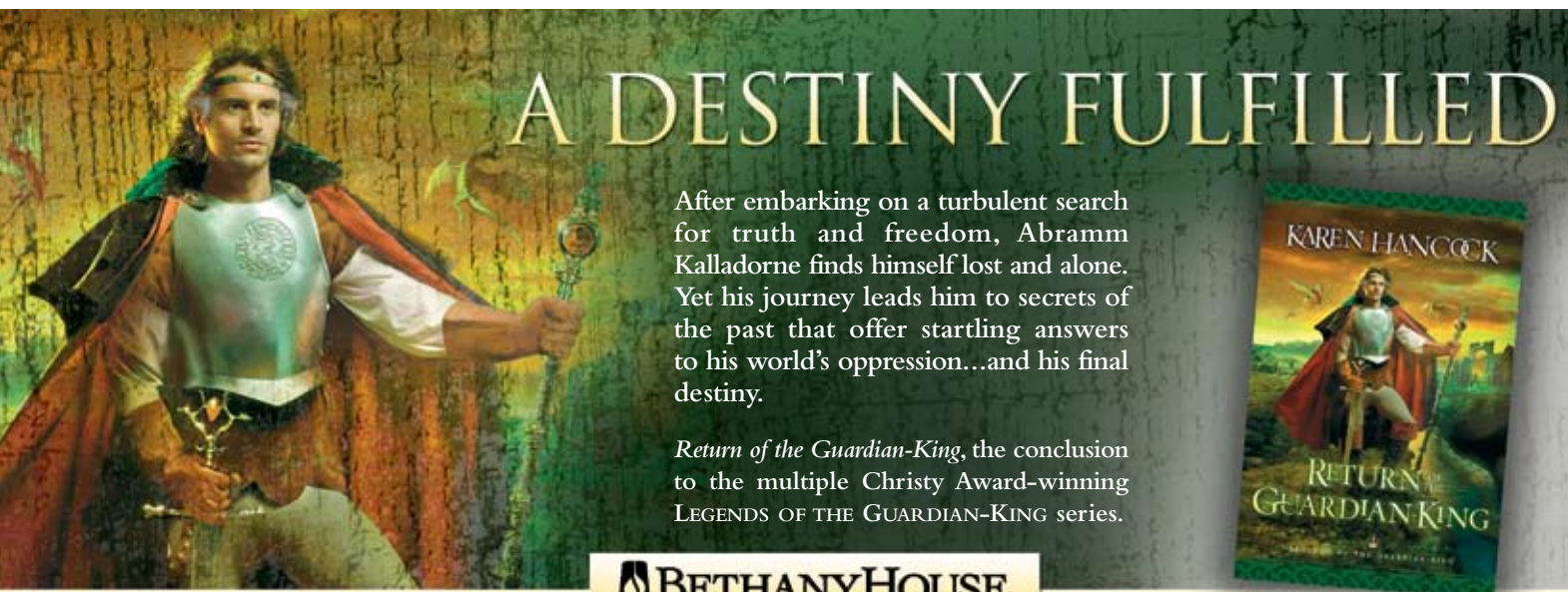
"Of...?" I figured I'd misheard him. "Of what? Sunshine? Roaches?"

"Oh, brown sugar, I guess."

I noticed his eyes were pale green and large, like a frog's. "Sure," I said, turning toward the kitchen. It was the kind of request that neighbors made all the time, where I was from. Too late I realized I shouldn't leave the door open behind me, in case he meant some sort of harm. Too many years in a small town; all the ways of being in the city were foreign to me. They were things I'd learned from brochures, travel guides, the Internet. All the ways to keep the city off me, to stop it from hurting me.

"Thanks. You're awesome," he said.

I pulled a plastic measuring cup off its ring and packed it with brown sugar. He watched me carefully. I saw his eyes shift toward my bad hand. "Here you go," I said, offering him the sugar.



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“Can I keep the cup?”

I paused. “My measuring cup?”

“Yeah. Can I have it?”

“You gonna buy me a new one?”

“No,” he said, “but I’ll tell you why your fingers fell off, and why half this city is dying.”

I looked at him, outlined by my doorframe and the cement wall behind him. “Okay,” I said. “Keep it.”

“Thanks,” he said, walking across the porch.

I stepped outside. “Wait, you said you were going to explain it.”

“I will,” he said as he opened his door and stepped inside. “Come over tomorrow morning and I’ll show you.”

That night, I lost my hair. It lay on my pillow in the morning, long and straight and pale, like dead grass. I picked it up and tied a black ribbon around one end, then put it in the box with the other things I’d lost. I looked at myself in the mirror, thinking I looked like a cancer patient. I had to get out of the city. I’d start packing tomorrow afternoon.

First thing in the morning, I knocked on Trent’s door. The cold night-time winds were still blowing, and it was only day because the sun was up. An orange leaf fluttered past my face. I pulled my jacket closer to me, feeling the wind on my bare head.

Trent opened the door. He was still wearing the same shirt, and I wondered if he’d slept in it or just stayed up all night. His apartment smelled like patchouli. His eyes flickered over my head, but he just said, “Julie. Come on in.”

I stepped through the doorway into a chaotic front room. The walls were covered with peculiar painted items--large-nosed dolphins, giant paper carrots, portraits of impossibly-built people. In the corner stood a plush green couch with fish-shaped pillows. A nearby end table had five legs, each bent at a similar angle, skewing the table sideways. There were no books, no TV, no stereo. Nothing to show that time was spent here; only the result of time, which was artwork.

He saw me looking around. “Sorry,” he said, “This room doesn’t get cleaned much. I stay in the bedroom mostly. I wanted you to meet her.”

“Who?”

“I don’t think I can explain. Just come see.”

I followed him past the kitchen nook and the small half-bathroom into the bedroom. The

room was dark. In the light from the hallway, I saw stacks of paint cans, power tools, tubes, and various junk items I couldn't identify. They were piled in the corners, making the place look like one of the crazy-old-cat-lady rooms--the places where they hoard Social Security stubs and empty Tupperwares until someone calls about the smell. But this room smelled more like paint thinner than anything else, and I suspected Trent could find anything he needed without a moment's thought.

Trent pushed through the dark room. "Hang on, I'll get the light. It's on the wrong side of the room. Cheaply built, you know. Haven't had a chance to rewire it."

My eyes were adjusting to the dark when the light came on, fluorescent and awkward. I blinked a few times before I saw her. She was shining in the light before me, a body built of metal and plastic and paint and wood, and assembled with love. She was shaped like a woman, but composed of thousands of different pieces: bus tokens, pencils, paper bags, everything I could think of. For a moment I thought it was trash, but then I realized that every part of her was in good condition, and some things weren't what people would have thrown away--like the hundred-dollar bill papier-mâché to her neck. She had a remote control in one of her feet, and a well-polished antique table leg for a spine. Part of her left breast was my measuring cup, the one I'd given him last night. Her eyes were sparkling gemstones, one brown and one blue. She was pieces of everything, and yet whole unto herself.

She reclined on the bed, on a red quilt like an empress. She was beautiful, and I found myself feeling more alive than I had since I came to the city.



"Her name is Galatea," he said, moving towards me. "After Pygmalion's sculpture."

"She's incredible," I whispered, reaching a hand forward. I paused. "May I?"

"Please," he said. "She's meant for touching."

I touched her, only noticing after I'd done it that I'd used my damaged left hand. I withdrew it carefully. "Did you build her all by yourself?" I envisioned her coming to life with a kiss, embracing her creator. I glanced at Trent, imagining Galatea's body wrapped around his, in a tangle of metal with tie-dye.

"That's the thing," he said, sitting down heavily on the bed. "I didn't build her."

I felt myself cooling off, like someone had

dumped water on my head. “Oh,” I said. “So you bought her like this. At an art show?”

“No,” he said sharply, “I built her in that sense. I added every nail, every drop of glue, every touch of paint--all by myself. She’s all my artwork, every piece of her.”

“Sorry,” I said, and meant it. “I just thought--”

“No, I assure you she’s my project. I wanted to build a sculpture made of objects I had to persuade someone to give me. All things from this city.” Trent sighed and rubbed his temples. “I mean I didn’t build her. I think she built me.”

I looked at him, his wild hair sticking up like a scrub-brush, and thought for a moment he’d gone insane. A crazy artist, talking to his projects. “How could she build you?”

“Originally, I added everything I got from people. I tried to be as outrageous as I could, seeing what people would give me. There’s actually an expired security badge from the Pentagon buried inside her. And a placenta--dried out, of course--and a 1900 penny that’s worth a lot of money, or it was until I glued it to a doll’s head and stuck it in her stomach. But sometime after I’d built her torso and head... that was probably six months ago or so. Sometime around then, she started rejecting parts.”

“What?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” he said apologetically, and with those words and the way he said them, I felt embarrassed for having thought it. “But yeah. She rejected them. I’d glue something down at night, and then in the morning when I came back, the piece wouldn’t be attached. It was like I’d never stuck it down. Sometimes I’d even find a piece on the floor, like it had been cast off or something. It creeped me out. I hooked up a webcam to try and watch it, but there was nothing. The picture was blank no matter what I did with it.”

I ran my hand over my bare scalp, marveling at the way I could feel the texture of my fingers. “And she built you?”

“She’s certainly trained me to bring her what she needs,” he said.

“What does this have to do with my lost fingers?”

Trent stood up and walked to the window. He looked out at the grayness and tapped his fingers on the glass. A few leaves fluttered across the sky. “It’s just a theory, now. I don’t know more than you do.”

I wove my fingers together and stared at the gap they created. “Okay. A theory’s more than I’ve got.”

He turned and looked at me. “I think this city is like that too.”

“Like what?”

“Building itself. Making itself into what it wants to be.”

I looked at him. “The way Galatea builds herself?”

“Yeah. The city chooses what it wants to be here, and what it doesn’t. If it accepts something, it cements it in so deeply that sometimes it gets lost there, like the 1900 penny. If it rejects something--I had this girlfriend once--” He didn’t finish the thought.

I sat down on the bed next to Galatea. “You think the city rejected me?”

“Are you happy here?”

I shook my head. The pit of my stomach ached. “Maybe you’re right. It doesn’t matter--I’m leaving. I decided that last night. I’m leaving before I lose anything else.”

He sighed. “I’m not sure it’ll help. I don’t know, but...”

I stared at him. I wanted to scream, but no one but Trent would hear. The sun moved from behind a cloud and lit the room, incongruous with the despair I felt. “So what can I do?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know why it happens or what to do. I just see it.”

“I don’t *want* to leave. I want to belong. But I don’t know how.”

“It’s not something to know,” he said. “It’s just something you do. Something you are.”

“Maybe I can become someone else,” I said. “That’s what I wanted to do when I got here. I didn’t really want to come, but I’m a first-gen college grad. My mom said I should come here. She said I was too smart for the town I was in--I needed to be somewhere where I could help people, and do something with myself.” I shook my head. “It’s a lot of pressure. Everyone’s counting on me to become someone.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re dying,” he said gently. “Because you wanted to be someone else.”

I didn’t answer. I was thinking of my hometown, where I wasn’t afraid. Trent sat down next to me. “Sometimes when I try to put something on Galatea, I just need to find the right spot. Sometimes she rejects something just because I placed it wrong. Maybe you need to find where you fit.”

“Maybe,” I echoed. I imagined myself as a piece of this city, a small bit of scrap to something so massive. “I’m scared, Trent.”

“Me too. I’m frightened all the time by the things I see around me.”

“What do you do?”

“The same things I’d do if I weren’t.”

That afternoon, I went for a walk to the tiny park I’d never visited before. It was just one city block--with a low fence, a dozen trees, and a picnic bench. There was a wire garbage can,

where someone had tossed a stack of old magazines and a broken broom. I threw my granola bar wrapper away, sat on the picnic bench, and tried to remember who I'd been before I came to this city.

I was generous, I remembered--I always made time for friends and family. I threw a surprise birthday party for my mom, just before I came here. I spent hours making paper decorations, to save some money. It had all been worth it, to hear my mom's laughter when she saw all her friends together in the same place. When was the last time I'd called my mom? I couldn't remember. I'd done it regularly when I'd gotten here, but I'd fallen out of the habit. I was trusting; I never locked a door, not until I moved here. At home I liked to talk to the mail carrier and ask about what she'd seen lately. But in the city I had to build these walls, to keep danger out.

I glanced down at my feet, where the maples had dropped their helicopter seeds into a brown carpet. I picked one up and threw it in the air. It spun around and fluttered slowly to



the ground. I scooped up a handful and threw them, watching the wind take them into a pile of maple leaves someone had raked nearby.

If the city was rejecting me, then either I had to find where I fit or just give up. And I didn't want to just give up.

I stood up from the park bench and my right leg remained behind. I glanced down at it curiously. The leg remained bent at the knee, as if my body were still attached. It could have been a sculpture there, a stray leg piece someone had left as design. There was no blood, just a cauterized stump at my hip. I looked at the stump, feeling a phantom sensation of having a leg there. I shivered and felt my armpits sweating. Fear rushed through me, like blood in my veins, pushing toward the limb that it could no longer reach. I saw myself scattered across this city, with no core left to me at all. I had to make the city accept me--to believe that I belonged

here.

I fished the broken broom out of the garbage to use as a crutch. My granola bar wrapper fluttered to the ground and into the pile of maple leaves. I called a cab to take me home, and then I knocked on Trent's door.

I didn't see him at first. I looked over the balcony's edge and saw him standing in front of the bookstore, talking to the owner. I'd never spoken to the man--he was very tall, and always felt threatening to me. The man handed Trent a brown headscarf and said something in Arabic. Trent smiled and repeated the words back to him, slowly and poorly accented. The owner laughed. I watched them clasp hands, then embrace briefly, their left hands on each other's shoulders. The owner went back inside. Trent glanced toward his door and saw me, leaning on my crutch, and his face went sober.



He came upstairs, helped me inside, and poured me a glass of Coke. I sat on the green couch and studied the fish pillow. He'd painted it to look like a rainbow trout.

"How much time do I have, Trent? How long do I have to stop this?"

He held the glass out to me. The ice crackled in the carbonation. "I don't know," he said. "You're being rejected so quickly."

I took the Coke, drank some, and set the glass on the end table. A thought occurred to me. "When will I lose consciousness? Can my head fall off? Or is it when my torso falls off? I don't know which one falls off from the other."

"I don't know either."

I laughed, because it was less painful than thinking about what was happening. "Maybe I can do something to appease the city, like a sacrifice to an angry god or something. I saw people kill pigs when I was growing up. I could manage, if someone held the pig down."

"My girlfriend tried planting flowers along Main Street," Trent said as he sat down next to me. "To make the city look nicer. Before she--well."

The thought was like an ice cube pressing on my heart. "I guess that's not enough, then."

"I don't know. I don't know at all, Julie. I'm so sorry."

I reached for the Coke and grasped the glass in my hand. "There's got to be something I can do. I'm not going to give up. I have too many people counting on me, even if none of them are here right now." I took a deep breath. "I wish I'd gotten to know you more in the last few

months. I was kind of hiding in my apartment.”

“A lot of people do that when they’re new in a city,” said Trent. “They’re scared. Afraid to make connections and set down roots, when they’re not sure they’re staying.” He paused and looked at me. “Do you feel scared now?”

“Not really,” I said. “Well, yeah. A bit. I’m scared of dying. Who isn’t?”

“Galatea,” he said.

Neither of us said anything for a minute. I tried to bring the Coke to my lips again, but I realized my arm wasn’t responding. I glanced to my left. My hand held the glass. My arm rested on the side of the couch, separated from my shoulder.

My toes curled up inside my boot, and I gritted my teeth. I looked at Trent. His eyes were wet as he took my hand. The pressure of his grip was comforting. “Julie,” he said, his voice wavering.

“I want to fight this thing. I want to make the city understand that I belong here. I may be from a small town, but that doesn’t mean the city gets to kill me. I’m not going to let it, Trent. I won’t.”

Even if I wanted to fight, I couldn’t move on my own anymore--not very easily. It’s hard to fight something you can’t see, especially when it strips away your body. All that’s left is your mind, and you have to hope that’s enough.

Trent carried me back to the bedroom and lay me down next to Galatea. “I’m sorry, Julie,” he said as he wrapped the brown scarf on Galatea’s head. “I wish I could do more.”

“You’re doing a lot,” I said. “Just being here.” It was true; this was the most human contact I’d had in months.

He paused at the door. “Do you need anything more?”

“Got any glue strong enough to fix me?”

He smiled a bit. “I wish. Anything I can do to help you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

I thought about it, but said, “No. I’d rather have some space, but thanks. This is my fight. I’ve got to do it on my own. But... it helps, knowing you’re nearby. It helps a lot.”

I felt like Trent understood what I meant, even if I couldn’t say it. I would have known him in my hometown--would have known everything about him, and all his secrets. I was surprised to realize that here I hadn’t even tried. Trent nodded. “I haven’t slept all night. I

was napping on the couch when you knocked earlier. I think I'll nap again."

"Okay."

"I'm a light sleeper. Call if you need something?"

"Yeah."

He stepped into the living room. After a moment, I heard him snoring. Restlessly, I looked at Galatea. She was tilted slightly towards me, her eyes glinting in the gray light from the window. I watched her for what seemed like hours, although it was probably only minutes.

I tried imagination; I visualized the city accepting me as part of itself. I tried reason, by listing all of my best qualities I could give the city if it'd let me.

How do you fight something you can't touch?

I felt my body changing; my ears fell off, which stopped the sound of snoring. My right arm separated at some point, and lay solemnly next to me on the bed, like a spray of flowers at a funeral. I was afraid, but I fought it down.

"Galatea," I whispered, "Where do I go when this is done?"

She didn't answer. Or if she did, I couldn't hear her. She lay silently next me, a collection of pieces that had become her own. The light through the window shifted from afternoon to evening, then into twilight. Trent hadn't returned. I felt cold, but couldn't shiver. I was falling into pieces, into isolated fragments, just like the city itself.

Just like the city. I wondered if I could convince the city I loved it. I tried to view my childhood in fragments, like an outsider would see it. A certain crack in the sidewalk, a silent layer of snow on the trees, the way the town's only traffic light became colored stripes when you squinted at it. These were all things I could find in the city too. Why were they connected at home, but fragmented here?

Maybe my job was the problem. I could find a different job, something where I felt like I was helping people. Something where I could talk to people. I went to school to be a paralegal; maybe I could volunteer somewhere in the evenings. Maybe I could do something for the war vets who were suffering, or the drag queens, or someone else. *Can you hear me?* I asked the city. *Do you see that I'm trying?*

I couldn't tell if the city understood me. Galatea watched me with a steady gaze. She was eclectic and strange, yet familiar. I wondered who'd given Trent the yo-yo for her shoulder, the eraser for her nipple. The last light passed through the room, shining across Galatea's figure. I blinked, and my eyes fell out.

"I can't see," I whispered in the darkness, and then shouted. "I can't see!"

In a moment I felt Trent's hands stroking my cheeks. His fingers were calloused, and rough

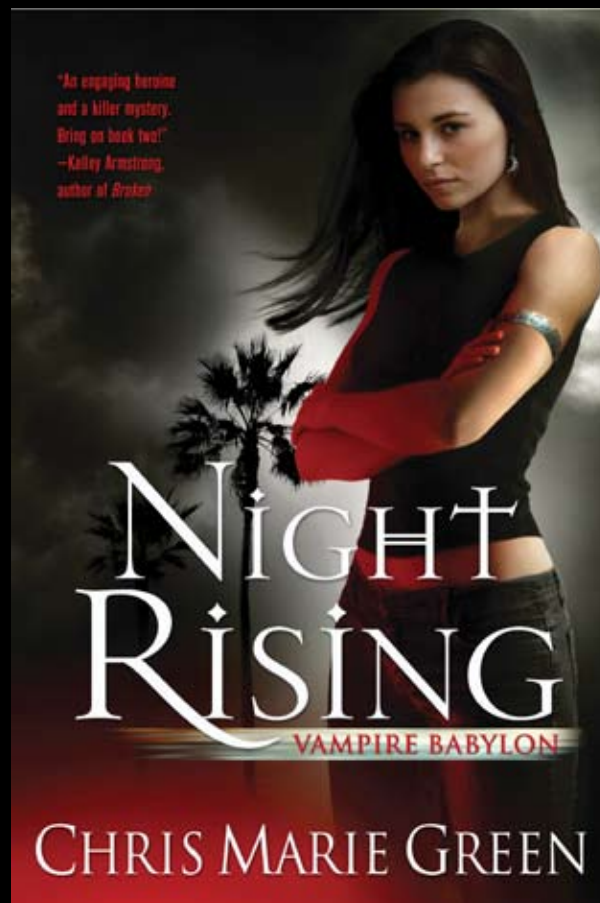
with dried glue. Without my eyes and ears, all I could do was feel; the heat of Trent's fingers warmed my skin. He smelled like oil paints and iron tools. I wanted to touch him, to hold onto the only connection I had, but my hands were gone. I extended my tongue, letting it slide against the knots of his knuckles, tasting the chemicals of creation on his skin.

The taste changes me. I can only feel each finger where it touches me, but I know those fingers connect to a hand, which is part of Trent. The fragments of my life touch those of the people around me--if I let them, if I open up to them. Trent was right. There's nothing to fight.

I open my faceted eyes--one brown, one blue. I feel the 1900 penny inside me, pressed against a doll's head. I am the drag queen, the war vet, the girl who bleeds from her ears. I embrace them as I embrace myself, my creator, my creation. I stretch from the bed, reaching for Trent as I reach for anyone who dreams, anyone who has hopes in this city. I press my whole body against him, feeling him for the first time. He welcomes me with warmth against the measuring cup of my breast. I have never been alone.

"Do you see now?" asks Galatea, the city, my companion in this body.

Yes. I do.



A Godmother's Gift

by January Mortimer

Announcement of a Birth

I set out the offerings and the homages and wrote the ten secret names of the Dark-That-Comes-After in blood. At midnight, I sliced the proud cox-combed head from a black cockerel and I read the entrails of a dove.

All the portents were the same.

The babe would be born wrong.

But Maddy, sweet, guileless Maddy, would not listen.

Invitation

Autumn visited my basement apartment with a smell of dried tomatoes and mushrooms and magic. Mellow light slipped in through the high-up window and coiled about like Pipistrelle, stealthy-footed and purring.

I loved autumn: loved the season's slow winding down before the sun kissed the earth goodnight.

But that year I was afraid.

Clients visited, too -- to beg charms, healings or curses -- standing awkward-stiff and wary and leaving in a rush of relief. Fleeing the witch's den.

And Maddy came. Maddy who wanted nothing but to sit at my table, chatting and laughing at my worrying.

"Your more of a fuss than Paul," she said, and, "You brood like a hen, Ma Jenkins!" And then, on a late October afternoon, "Ma Jenkins, I know it's not regular, but there's no one else I'd rather -- I mean -- we wondered if you'd be our baby's godmama." She spoke the last words in a rush, racing to get them out and finding them said, smiled. The light of expectant motherhood shone in her eyes.

"Oh, sweetie. . . ." *The babe's not right, sweetie. Not right and getting worse. You're twenty-four: there's time for others. Just let this one go.* I couldn't say it, not to all that glowing joy.

She squeezed my hand. Her china doll's hand smooth and perfect against mine: wrinkled and calloused like rough-hewn wood. "Ma, don't worry! Even if something does go wrong, we've doctors, and the Lord wouldn't give us anything we couldn't handle!"



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Pipistrelle's purr hummed in my bones as he begged for a petting. Green eyes watched my face, innocent of all evil. Just like Maddy's happy, human-brown ones.

She said, "And if something was wrong, you'd love the baby anyway, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would, Princess," I said. It was a promise.

I kissed her goodbye, waved her up the stairs to the sunny afternoon.

Poor sweetie, I thought. I'll be strong for you.

And, with stricken shame, I prayed to the Powers and the Dark for a babe to be born dead.

Witch In Waiting

Days and months slid by. Sleet slithered from the wintery skies and collected in ugly, dirty heaps: corrupted beauty.

Uglier still were the words I had been too much of a coward to say.

In Maddy's apartment, baby shower gifts lay like bits of broken rainbow: milk bottles and elephant-print blankets and mobiles in bright primary colours. Maddy curled on a sofa, chattering and laughing, telling me of names and paint and parenting manuals. Her belly rose rounded and ripe under her cotton blouse; she rested a hand upon its curve, as if to cup the child within.

The Darkness peered from the shadows. *Wrong, it warned. Death. Misery. Despair.*

So much pain. All from one unborn infant.

"I'd love the babe anyway," I said. *"No matter what."*

The Darkness muttered and was silent.

The tragic face of a painted Christ gazed from a wall. Gentle brush strokes made his hair look soft, as if you would reach into the picture and run fingers through the tangled locks. Maddy and Paul had Faith, kept religion not as a cripple's crutch but as a blind man's cane: a guide to keep them safe in dark places.

Maddy trusted in something good and great and beautiful and strong, and I, unbelieving -- with only the stealthy Darkness-On-The-Edge-Of-Everything -- almost envied her.

You should have taken care of her, I told the Christ.

Maddy broke off her chatter, lips a surprised 'O'.

"Are you all right, Princess?"

She beamed. "I think it's time!"

I locked their apartment as Paul whisked her away. Then, I returned to the basement -- to

my cat and the phone -- and waited.

A Summoning Call

“Ma. . .It’s Paul. . . . Can you come? I think. . .I think Maddy’s going to need someone.”

Cursed Child

White coat, white mask, white rubbery gloves, white floors, ceilings, doors: the hospital bathed itself in sterile white, as if banish death with the brilliance. Paul stumbled through the corridors and wards as if snow-blinded; above the mask, his eyes blinked red and wet.

I followed.

Tiny babies lay in plastic domes like dolls, brand new and still tied to their packing with tubes and wires, waiting to be unwrapped. Monitors chirped electronic noises and hummed electronic lullabies.

And there it was. Maddy’s offspring.

Wrong.

Wrong like a nightmare. Wrong like a cursed thing out of a tale.

The babe had two heads. Two heads and only one with a body. The second grew out of her sister’s scalp, like an image reflected in a broken mirror -- perfect brow, cheekbones, puckered mouth, chin -- ending in a confusion of unshaped flesh. One twin had grown, the other. . . hadn’t.

I had expected something. But not this. Worst fears are never terrible enough.

“Ah me,” I said. “That’s...that’s difficult.”

In the incubator, it -- she -- *they* -- blinked, opened their mouths to wail. . . .

A single reedy cry drifted up. The unformed child had no lungs to cry with.

Maddy’s husband gazed at his babies, his face frozen, horror and those red, unshed tears in his eyes. “They call it conjoined twins craniopagus parasiticus. It’s rare. Only a few born since--” Paul covered his face, inhaling a sharp, wounded breath. “Maddy doesn’t know yet.”

Then he fled, ashamed of his pain.

I watched the rise and fall of a single chest.

“Your godmamma’s here now,” I said.

In stories, the godmother bestows gifts -- beauty, wealth, good fortune -- but she’s always a fairy. An ethereal spirit, while I was an old, worn-out witch.

In those same stories, the witch has her role, too. She lays curses where others lay gifts.

The unformed twin grimaced and slept, leaving her more fortunate twin blinking birth-blue eyes. Then the second sister, too, slept.

Verdict of the King and Queen

It was lonely in the Dark beneath the earth. Four months as a godmother, and my basement apartment filled with “what-if’s” and “maybe’s”.

Was it my fault? Something I did? Punishment for a transgression forgotten?

No, I told myself. Just bad luck. Bad things hurting good people. You’re old enough to know that. The world is not black or white, good or evil, and there is no reward for either.

But what if--

Grey rain sidled out of a greyer sky: autumn had come and gone again, and all the world was painted in the hazy shades of winter.

The hospital released Maddy as a fragile waif with a bassinet and eyes too big for her face. The laughter was dead on her lips, the innocence and joy had dried up and withered, as if left too long in a blazing heat or a cold so deep it froze the soul.

“Ma Jenkins,” she said. “Thank you for the cake. Paul and I really enjoyed it.”

We stood in the parking lot, one going, the other arriving. Maddy’s arms were locked over her breast, hugging her coat. Grocery bags hunched at her feet, the plastic snapping in the wind.

“You having a party, sweetie?” The bags were filled to bursting.

Maddy said, “No! No, I mean... my parents are coming.”

“That’s fine, honey. You have a good time.” I understood: I was not invited.

There was talk of a Christening. Witches do their worst at Christenings, isn’t that what the stories tell us?

The sad urban trees stood naked and ashamed, the rain lingering on their branches like captured tears. I watched Maddy haul her bags to the apartment lobby, moving slow and wearily, as if she were older than I.

“What-if”, the traitorous voice in my head murmured. Maybe things would be different.

When I returned to my basement, Pipistrelle jumped into my arms and cuddled under my chin, a warm bundle of trust and love; he didn’t care about the ‘maybe’s’.

Maddy’s parents arrived; I eavesdropped, keyhole-peered, looked out of shadows with the eyes of the Dark.

The babes rested in the bassinet. The fortunate twin had discovered hands can grasp and

rattles can shake and she crooned wet baby delight; her sister smiled too, making soundless goldfish-faces. An oxygen cylinder and a mask made for a baby's face waited nearby, along with Post-it notes of doctors' home-phone numbers and instructions in the care of a seriously unwell child.

The mounds of baby-shower gifts were long gone.

Maddy's parents sat poker-backed, pursing their lips as if the air tasted of lemons.

Paul tried. "These are your granddaughters."

Grandmother looked away.

"When will it die?" Grandfather wore the collar of a minister and the righteous of a Good Man. In the Dark, I could hear the words he wasn't saying, "*The Lord is punishing you, Madeline. Whatever you've done, God knows.*"

A hiccup sound escaped Maddy's lips. She stood and left the room, escaping to the kitchen to cry.

A boy -- boys -- in the 1790s lived together as one for four years. Their skulls still sit in a London museum, gathering dust and horrified stares: the two-headed Boy of Bengal, dead of a viper bite so many years ago.

Grandfather knew this. He was not ignorant. He was also not sorry.

Grandmother looked at him -- Queen to his King -- the follower despite her rogue-cheeked majesty and pride.

There was no love lost between them.

She followed their daughter.

Maddy leaned over the sink; steam rose from the dishwater and stroked her face with damp, warm fingers. Grandmother picked up a drying cloth and took a plate from Maddy's fingers. She said, "I assume you are considering medical procedures?"

Maddy nodded. She inhaled the soap-scented steam, swallowing her tearless, hiccupping sobs.

Cut away the "parasitic" twin. The plans were already in order, awaiting Maddy and Paul's signatures.

I looked out of the Dark and saw, for once, that Godmother and Grandmother agreed. Medical Procedures: the murder of our less-fortunate little girl. And we loved her, despite it all, despite the curse neither she nor I could lift.

Grandmother let out a breath; the steam fluttered then continued rising. "You wash," she said. "I'll dry."

Rose thorns

Summer rain slid down Maddy's window, making the world outside blurred and soft. Cut flowers wilted in a vase, their petals falling, drenching the window sill in red: dead roses, nothing more than sticks covered in thorns.

I had nothing to say.

The rain pelted, the wind cried, and Maddy watched, sitting with her knees tucked up. Her gold chain hung without its crucifix.

"The surgery's next month," Maddy said. "Dr. Sanchess says. . . says there's. . . every chance of success." She spoke as if the wind was stealing the words from her lips. Pipistrelle jumped onto the sofa and rubbed his cheek on her folded hands.

"We're going to call her Emily, if she. . . if she doesn't die."

I held a plastic bag of home-baked goodies; I set them aside. Sugared things can only solve so much. "That's a nice name, princess."

Emily's sister wouldn't get a name.

Maddy smiled a worn smile; it faded too quickly. "I wish there was something I could do. But there isn't. There's nothing at all."

Emily squalled; Maddy closed her eyes and pulled Pipistrelle close.

"Go lie down, sweetie. You let Ma Jenkins do some godmothering."

Maddy wandered away like a sleepwalker, cuddling my cat. She hadn't slept a full night in weeks, Paul had told me. Too much guilt and fear and crying babe.

Emily's sobs trailed into snuffles. She sucked on a balled fist, face screwed up in continued misery. She couldn't lift her head, I noticed, her sister's weight held her down, and the breaths she sucked were ragged. Breathing for two, and struggling.

I rocked the twins and listened to the unhappy weather.

A Pound of Flesh and Bone

I went where the Darkness led me.

"You know why I'm here." I said the words on doorsteps, in floral-scented funeral homes, in neat sitting rooms cradling hot coffee. Different places, same words, same expression on my listeners' faces. "It's time to pay the piper."

Magic, true magic, that linger in wild places, is neither good nor evil. Like the Darkness, it simply is, waiting silent until you close your eyes and see it. A love charm, an evicting of

illness, a spell to ease pain, to harm, to balm; whatever the clients demanded, it was all the same to the Dark. And all of it had a price. Eventually.

I collected the payment. "Why now?" a grieving father asked. He sat with his hands in his lap, a shell of a man, a living ghost. "Damn you! Why?"

But the Dark has no answers. It takes as it gives, one as frequently as the other. Death had come in the night, though it was not my doing.

I merely took my pound of flesh and bone.

The Witch Comes

At the appointed hour, I was there. Uninvited. I watched as Maddy kissed the babes one last time and then locked herself in the ladies' room, leaving Paul helplessly alone; watched as the gurney -- so large for a burden so small -- trundled away.

Though the operating theatre was white-white-white, the taste of old Death hovered like a spectre.

A New Age witch in a nurse's white regalia, her silver and crystal pentagram mass-produced in an Eastern European factory, waited at the surgeon's elbow, murmuring old charms she could not hope to understand. Her world was purified into a warped reflection of the real one: Life without the Death, Life purged into false existence.

How ironic it was that it would be I, and not her, defying the right of Death.

Neither nurse nor surgeons saw me.

Knives danced, blood leaked, knives danced again. With slow precision they cut my goddaughters apart.

I wet my fingers in the unformed babe's blood. Dabbed it my lips and breast and wrists where blue-veins pulsed under the skin, giving her my breath, my heartbeat, a little more time. And I spoke to the Darkness-on-the-Edge-of-Everything. The-Darkness-That-Comes-After.

It stirred. *This is what you want?* it asked. *This is all?*

"No," I told it.

The Darkness quoted the cost and it was a terrible one. *This is what you want?* it repeated.

I too, must pay a pound of flesh. I looked at the blood and the glitter of the dancing knives and refused to look away. "Yes"

Flesh parted, severed under unrelenting scalpels and the single child was divided into one wounded child and a bundle of dying meat and bone: my goddaughters.

I gathered the unformed child to my breast; the other -- Emily -- did not require my care.



There I stood, in a coat of Darkness and jewellery of bone, blood upon my lip and a bodiless child in my arms, and only one saw me: the nurse with her diluted power and ideals of perfection. Around us, doctors whirled, blind to the little old woman and her grim baggage.

“Who are you?” she said, her eyes wide windows.

“The Godmother.” I walked on.

The unformed babe opened her mouth and soundlessly wailed.

The Price of Pain

The woodland wore a perfume of smoke and leaf litter and healthy, wet decay. Beneath my feet, Life and Death moved in their circuits, overlapping in the realm of roots and worms. I could feel them: Life, Death and Worms.

“Not far now, darling.”

The unformed babe was silent.

I had left the sack in the back-seat of a burnt-our Volkswagen. Abandoned years ago, it sat rusting into the forest floor, dreaming of open roads and speed. The paint-less hood became my surgeon’s table.

Pipistrelle wound round my legs, stalking the hem of my skirt as it swirled just out of reach.

I opened the sack, and removed its grim content.

Children. Laura Mulligan, Andrew Jones, Fran Heinz: a car crash, a flight of stairs and a fall, and a faulty heart. They would not need their legs and arms, nor the ripe, red organs nestled inside. They were gone into the Darkness, and that which they left behind could be put to use.

For my goddaughter.

I cut and sewed ‘til my fingers bled. As the cool stars twinkled, I stroked the downy remnants of my goddaughter’s hair and fitted the mangled flesh that, in a kinder world, would have been her body onto the sewn construct.

The Darkness waited like loan shark for payment.

Pipistrelle leapt onto the roof of the car, sniffing at the unfinished construction laid out there. He meowed a plaintive query, innocent and loving.

I scratched his chin.

“Good kitty,” I said.

And I brought the knife down.

A Godmother's Gift

"Your Godmother's supposed to give you beauty or wisdom. Ma Jenkins must be a poor excuse for a godmamma. She can't even give herself those things." I spoke to her as I sewed, because if I didn't, I would weep. Pipistrelle, my beautiful, darling Pipistrelle, lay curled on a bed of fallen leaves. He could have been sleeping because, in the dark, you couldn't see that he had been skinned.

I bound my nameless goddaughter to her new body with sutures of the only creature that had ever loved me completely, despite all sins.

"Even if something was wrong, you'd love the baby anyway?"

"Of course I would, sweetie."

All things have a price.

I couldn't give her beauty. All I had to offer was a monestrous, enchantment-stitched body made of dead children and grief, a forest for a playground and a life, hidden. I re-threaded the needle one last time.

"But Ma Jenkins can love you. Just like Ma Jenkins promised your mama she would--"

A single stitch.

And a soul found it had lungs and breath and voice and it wailed a reedy newborn cry to the dark.

"--that's all your godmama can give."



Shadefast: The Feast of Saint Libitine

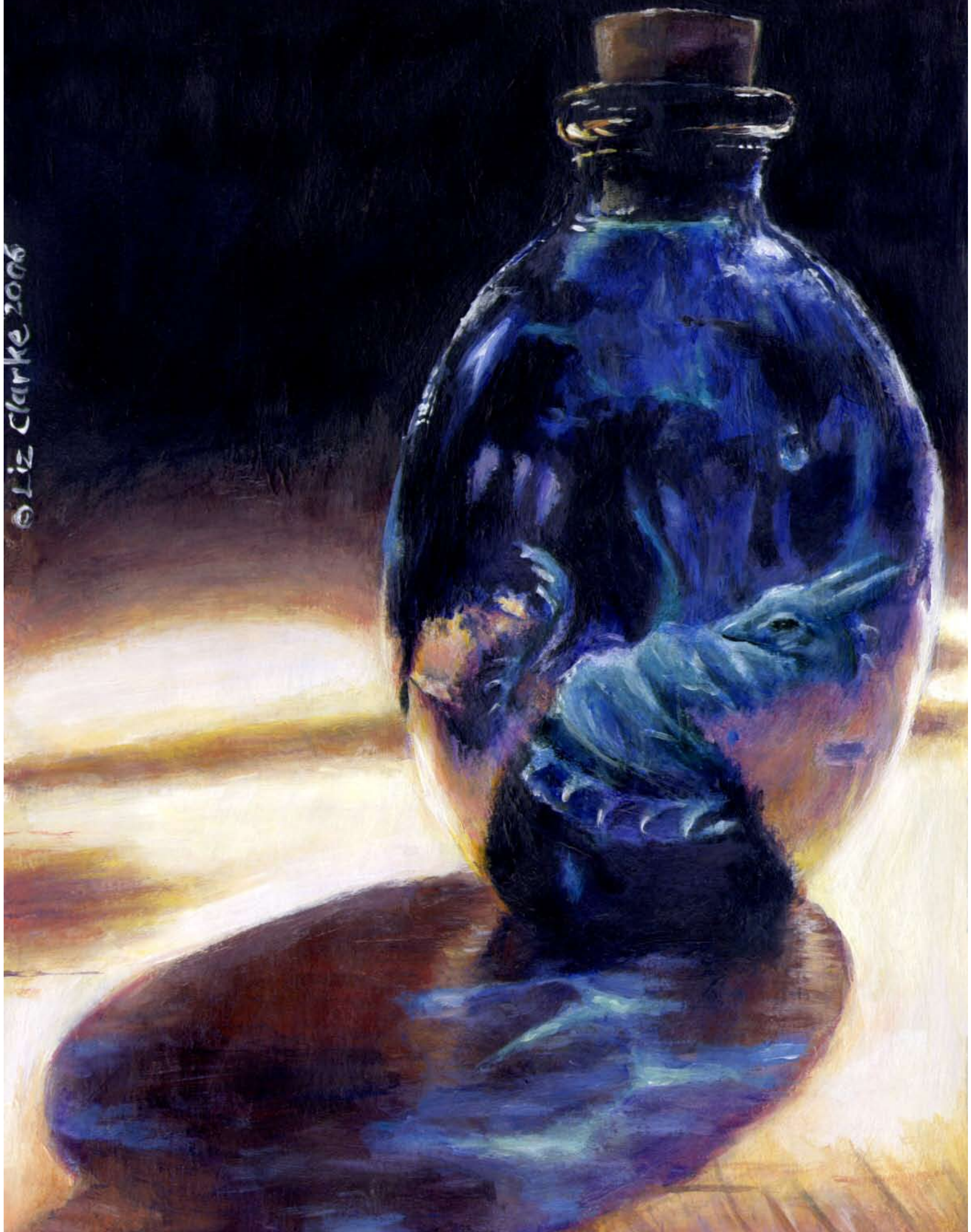
Beyond the city wall, a black dog
is running in the frost and stubble,
nine times under the cradling moon
like the sickles that sheared the last
of the harvest down. Who hears her
howl from the hearth-side will lose
a loved one before the longest night,
sooner if she whines from the sun-
swallowing west, the sky of strangers
and the guest who never sleeps: tonight
the casters throw bones, not cards,
to read the coming year. By gaslight,
their shadows tumble like loaded dice
toward the grave, gambling—whose ships
will creak with spices and spermaceti,
whose fortunes climb like the roses
of Sophia? who huddle on canal-corners
in a beggar's coat, flayed of rings
and pennies, broken on her wheel?
Who will sain first grandchildren
with bull's blood and white barley?
Who take the leaf-road into the dark?

The *sortes libitinae*, the dead fates
speaking from the Tree's unleaving
fire, and in the ikons no one prays to
she is hooded with rags of summer
ripped down like sacking, leaf-must,
grape-mast; the winter-whetted Thorns
are robed no more gauntly than she,
who between her pale and dark hands
holds her own death mask, ghosts
curling from its lips like a candle
blown out. Past her, the Sun slants
only downward, each shortening day
another lintel deeper into the earth,
the granite-roofed sky. She will lay
the Moon's dead petals at its feet.
Gather up milk-teeth and astragals,
lighter of the shades that sleighted
the future in their drystone gleanings;
the naphtha flares are hissing out
in the basilica, the cornhusks on
their doorposts rotted grey as rats.
In the rime-light before dawn, only
autumn leaves haunt the cobblestones,
whispering their own way into the day.

Solmas: The Sun and the Thorns

The oldest of the frescoes have flaked with time like lichen from the travertine, butterfly-scales, pollen-grains, so many suppliants knelt here—warm bodies in the dark—in wait for holiness, the bright returning or the inalienable cold. The same midwinter grips up from the tiles that ferns the quartered window like grisaille, flashed with the moon, each station of the year star-shot across the benches: the goat-fish, the water-drawer, the blue-mantled maid distant in the vaulting, a pauper's pack of fates; old blood in the mouth tangs of rain and rust, the sweetness of beeswax is summer drowned like a mirage in a single candle, blackening out. *Tu verus mundi Lucifer. O Fortuna velut Luna.* Gold thread caught in tatters on a dust-barked branch, dry needles and deadwood, a kindling heap. The altar streaked darkly over marble flourishing with prickly-holly and acanthus, pomegranates paler than frost that round into the chill-struck palm: hold onto death. Brighter than such broken flesh and seeds bleeds the dying Sun transfixed on the Thorns in lime plaster and orpiment, breath-corroded, shrike-pierced, a berry of flame among unturning stars; the saints of winter with vine-black eyes, wind-tousled Hazinthe, Tiennot whose wrists are chained with laurel, shadowy Veive's arrow-lightnings, arching away into the dark. The heron-headed torch-bearer, upending a cup of light. All spills beneath the threshold for the serpent-starved roots. Touch, and mystery sifts down like leaves, like snow, the flint-strike of prayer and the heart's blood flares like a hekatomb offering up the night—Round and round, Sophia rings her wheel.

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Thorntide: Ribbons for Mari

They wake early, hammering before dawn on any door that opens to their clamor with sword-hilts, drumsticks, fistsful of violets and red-dyed wool, as ragged with greenery as the paving-stones their boots pound over, splashing up the last sallies of old winter's rain. Hoarse from studying until sunrise or drinking, half-leaned out windows with broadsheets and bottles of wine, medical treatises and nib-spattered auguries pitched like flowering may into the wind that warms off the river, the willows yellowing by the bridge— assignments discarded in their branches like handwritten wishes, like the ribbons tossing out behind spring's hounds as they harry away whatever chill clings in the air, nipping at the heels of death sleepless and steadfast, hungover and hallowed, all the same hieratic camouflage beneath their masks of bark. Saint Silvian with a garland of green onions snaps a gilt-stitched pennant into the pale mid-morning, proudly striding though the Serpent slinks up behind, its bleached horse's skull scissor-scraping its slaty jaws, champing for the greenstick splinter of bones. Crown, scepter, and wickerwork orb are in the Emperor's hands, last year's



rushes so brittle a father's grief
will shiver them like a stricken lance;
parchments and powders up the Magician's
black sleeves, nothing the Fool brings
but palms turned to the sky, brimless cap
tilted back on his head, wheat-chaff
in his pockets, glinting on the breeze.
Whether a woman carries the spinning-top
or a slender man, white roses plait
over Sophia's shoulders and she alone
will not speak, closed within the hum
of time, the sure axis of the fickle
world. The rainers and the walkers
throng them, the patterns they trace
from back streets to the tyche's court
as sudden and certain as catkins
bursting, bantering rhymes to shake
the Sun from its winding-sheet of leaves.
Their faces flash up to its new-sprung
height, freed from the Thorns as the Tree
gentles toward summer: the days ascending,
stretching into heat. The soldier-saint
sprawled where the painted eyes of fortune
gaze out forever from the sea, the Magician
is rummaging through crib-notes, name-seals,
a hip flask, exasperatedly fishing for
a miracle—only one would stop them now.

Meridian: The Sun and the Tree

There is no rain on this day.
The sun is everywhere—
in the heat glazing on the water,
rippling from brick curbs
onto marmorino facades,
in the bridges scaled under
with the reflections the city
polishes in, soaking up sky,
the drench of honey-light
over the tyche balancing
the Sun spiked with Thorns
and the rose-rayed Moon
on her palms, the marble
weight of a man for each.
The sun makes incense
of the loosened hair of girls
who last night left basins
of water on unshuttered sills
for the dawn to draw on,
one lightstruck glimpse of love,
the boys who insinuated
oak-leaf sprays between the panes,
silver-backed invitations
of olive onto the doorstep,
already sweating beneath linen
and leather as though they leapt
across bonfires before noon,
spark-sanctified into the season.

The banners that glitter back,
silken, the city's pride, the sun
sews up against white slates
and the bells sing *gratias*,
kyrie, anikete, humming
like a hive in summer pasture,
one gold-combed note rounding
all the curve of the sky.
Past the fitful shoots and spurts
of burgeoning spring,
not yet the locust-days
when even the stars stick
in the parching swelter,
the Sun in all its splendor
beams above the flaunting Tree
in hymns and lovemaking,
the lazy midday of the year.
In the furrows, after dark,
the night will be no less praised.

And the moon sheds its petals again.





Thank You

