

## AT SIXES AND SEVENS

by Carol Emshwiller

**Carol Emshwiller's sixth novel, *The Secret City*, is just out from Tachyon Publications. It shares the same milieu as her first story for Asimov's, "Worlds of No Return," which appeared in our January 2006 issue. In a new story for our slightly spooky October/November issue, she shows us that peril and confusion can reign when one lives next door to a witch, especially if we aren't too clear about which neighbor is the witch.**

\* \* \* \*

Remember when this used to be an orchard? Some of the trees still live and still bear fruit. In the yard, the asparagus patch still pushes up stalks in among the weeds. If you're careful you can still climb the porch steps without breaking your neck.

It used to be a nice farm. The old man worked it—mostly by himself. No sons, only a daughter. She's a strong one, though, small but wiry.

Now that he's dead, she keeps it going by herself but she doesn't grow what we grow. She grows useless crops of nettles and thistles. Though I must admit, her strawberries are wonderful, small and flavorful. In certain seasons, I can smell them from here.

Her Dad was peculiar. Kept to himself.

Poor little motherless child ... she was. My husband and I wanted to help. Her father wouldn't let us. Took her wherever he went in a basket at first. Then made a little harness for her and tied her near him as if she was a dog. That can't be good, especially since we were right here, willing to help.

Later on he put bells on her so he could keep track of where she was. As if she was the bellwether. Once we saw him climb up to take her down from the shed roof. Another time it was that big old cottonwood. Part of it split when he went to rescue her and he nearly broke his neck.

Well, she did grow up, but it's a wonder.

And a wonder she learned to talk. We never heard him say much more than grunts.

He always said he home-schooled her. I'll bet!

Even now that her dad's dead, she never comes to us for anything. All she has for company is that big old dog and her cat. Even when she broke her leg she didn't want our help. You could tell by the way she looked at us, though that time, she couldn't get along without us.

When I take a rest from housework I take my tea up and watch her out my east side upstairs window. I can see her best when she's in her weedy vegetable garden. She talks as she works ... or at least I see her mouth moving. Singing would be one thing, but this looks more like jabber, jabber, jabber. What in the world can she be jabbering about? and who to?

She's done that since she was a little girl—yapping to herself. Jumping about so you'd think she was a baby goat.

I say it's her own fault if everything goes wrong. Though she wouldn't tell us if it did or didn't, and now that there's a drought things are going wrong for everybody.

Though why should we care? I've only talked to her, face to face, a couple of times. She's one of those people that doesn't look you in the eye. All these years, I've lived next door, and I don't even know what color her eyes are. I can guess though. You can't have hair that light and fine and have dark eyes.

We're the ones took her to the clinic to get a cast on her leg. We stayed the night in town and brought her back the next day. She had us ... *let* us, that is, set her up in her so-called living room on the so-called couch. (I wonder how many generations of cats have scratched at it. The one now is a marmalade tabby. A nasty male. He arched his back and spit at me. I can't help thinking that's what she wanted to do to me, too. Iris. Her name, not the cat's.)

She actually did thank us. At least that. Though she didn't even look at me then. I left her with plenty of food and water. I didn't feed the tabby.

I might not have seen her at all, down there behind her lilacs. She'd climbed up to fix an attic window. She didn't yell out for anybody. She just lay there. I went upstairs to my window to see what in the world she was doing *now*, and there she was, her legs sticking out from the bushes. And later that afternoon when I went up to see again, there they still were.

I sort of wanted her to fall but I didn't think somebody like her, who

used to climb everything in sight, ever really would.

When I saw she had, I thought, well, she can't object to me going over to see what's wrong, so I did, and a good thing, too. But, as I keep saying, helping people is a thankless task.

\* \* \* \*

There's something wrong with her. All her dad's fault no doubt. I've been watching her more and more. Daniel says I'm not getting my chores done, but I want to see what she's up to. I tell him it might be important. I say, "What if she's a witch? What if this drought is her fault? What about that she dances in her backyard at midnight when there's a full moon?" (Or maybe even when there isn't except it's too dark to see.)

He looks surprised when I tell him that. Not about the dancing, but as if he wonders why I'm looking out the window in the middle of the night.

"It didn't look like any kind of dance I've ever seen before. Hopping and galumphing. Swinging her arms around. Far as I'm concerned, not much different than a four-year-old would do."

All he says is, "Now that her leg is broke, I doubt she'll be doing much dancing."

As if that would reassure me.

But that broken leg is a good excuse for me keeping an eye on her. I'll bring things to her whether she wants me to or not. It's my Christian duty. Even Daniel can't say I shouldn't. I might be able to snoop around the other rooms some. There's never been a chance like this before. I want to take advantage of it.

Daniel would say, "Let her be," but he doesn't have to know.

I bake a batch of gingerbread. I think of making lemonade, but, no, I'll see if I can pick up something over there. That'll be an excuse to look around. Not that I relish seeing all that scratched up furniture.

Should I knock or just barge in?

I'll barge in.

\* \* \* \*

I yell, "Yoo hoo, anyone to home?"

It's the cat meets me at the door.

Iris is right where I left her, potato chips all eaten, the water drunk. But I see signs that she's been up. There's two of her dad's old canes beside her and a little chair pulled up close by. There's an old army blanket thrown over the couch back. Days are so hot I forgot the nights are cold.

I put the gingerbread down beside her. "Still warm," I say. I unwrap it and the good smell fills the whole dusty, tomcat-smelling house.

She actually looks right at me, and as if she's grateful. Her eyes.... I was wrong. How can such a wispy blond have brown eyes?

"I'll get you something to drink."

I march right into the tiny kitchen.

She can't complain about me rattling around looking for things when it's all for her. Besides, what I find might be for the good of all of us. Maybe the whole village.

I look around as fast as I can.

Devil's claw, squaw tea, wild rose hips.... Acorns! Lots of dried lettuce sort of stuff. Things a witch would have.

I take pinches of several of those things and put them in my apron pocket.

The cat watches.

I swear that nasty Tom looks at me like the Devil himself. Who ever said a witch's cat had to be black? Seems to me a marmalade color is just as bad.

Dishes draining in the sink look clean enough. She's been up. I'm sure of it. Or somebody has.

Cat dish on the floor is empty. I whisper, "Don't expect me to feed you. Go get yourself a mouse."

I let the water run till it's cool so I have more time to snoop. (Not that the water's ever cool this time of year.) I bring her a glass and a pitcher of it.

I say, "I'll get you another blanket and a sweater. Nights are cold." And off I go before she can stop me.

There are two small bedrooms across from each other. The dad's is still clearly his. It's been what? Four, five years since he died? Though why would she change it and who for? It smells odd. That old hound must be sleeping in here. I wouldn't ever let a dog like him inside my house let alone on a bed.

Her room ... There's the oddest picture on the wall. It's a combination diagram and photo. Can't be from around here. Jagged cliffs and such. A waterfall coming right out from the middle of the rocks. A night scene. Moons galore. Or maybe the same moon at different stages. Lines go back and forth across it, with numbers and letters that don't make any sense.

I've a good mind to ask her where her father came from, and if this picture on the wall is where. I always did wonder. He had an accent. But I won't ask yet. I don't want her thinking that I'm thinking things.

I rummage for a sweater. Then I think maybe she wants a clean blouse and underwear, too. I'm not going to help her get any of those on or off over her cast. I'll just bring them. Enough's enough.

Everything else in the room is perfectly ordinary—nothing fancy there at all.

Well, not so ordinary. A normal young woman would have had some posters of movie stars or musicians on the wall, not this odd landscape. A normal girl would have maybe her own artwork. Or pictures of horses, that's the usual around here. She does have some feathers stuck on the wall with push pins. Some big brownish black ones from turkey vultures.

Turkey vultures! It all fits together.

On the way home I pick an apple from one of those old trees. I take a couple of bites—so sweet and juicy—better than most. Wormy of course. Tasty as it is, I toss it away. It's like her. She's a pretty girl, but a menace to all of us.

\* \* \* \*

But Daniel won't pay any attention to me. All he'll say is, "Let her be, for heaven's sake. She's doing the best she can."

"How can I let her be when I'm sure? And look how dry our fields are. And she won't even ever come to church. Isn't that a sign of something? And what about those apples?"

"What about them?"

"Isn't it just like a witch to have the sweetest apples of all and then have them all wormy?"

Daniel just laughs.

I'm not going to "let her be," but I won't tell Daniel. I have to stop her. What could stop a witch? Salt? Vinegar? Maybe you have to fight fire with fire. Maybe I can think up spells of my own to out-spell her. Maybe I could do my own moonlight dance. With her broken leg, I could get way ahead of her spellwise.

All that blah, blah, blah, when I saw her mouth moving. That must have been spells. I should have thought of that before. Where can I find a spell of my own? Or do I have to make one up? And talking in tongues. I've heard of that. Is that from God or the devil? Boolla bomba sitty so, sat satterloopa gluey zit. I can do that without even trying.

Saturday night seems like the right time, and the moon is *almost* full.

I do it. I go out and dance. Actually, it's a nice thing to do. I didn't think it would be. It was hard getting started, but once I do, I enjoy it. You have to forget yourself and not worry about how it might look. Thank goodness Daniel is too sound a sleeper to wake up in the middle of the night and see me.

Of course next morning I'm all worn out. I sleep till eight. Daniel brings me tea and asks me what's wrong. He says I look pale. He's milked the cow and goat for me and he's already been out in the fields for an hour. I guess I danced longer than I thought.

I drink the tea looking out the window in my usual spot. I don't expect to see her but I do. First I see the cat. Swinging his tail in a kind of swagger. He's so self-possessed it makes me angry. But then she comes out on her mismatched canes. She gives up, drops the canes and just crawls dragging her leg behind. It's the strawberries she was after. She sits there

and picks them straight into her mouth. She doesn't look much like a witch now. More like a greedy little kid. But she doesn't fool me.

I can't ask anybody to help me. Daniel certainly won't. And, far as I know, there aren't any books about it. I'll have to find out everything by myself.

But, once I think about it, when I saw her climbing up to fix her window, I wanted her to fall and she did. I wasn't even thinking about a spell. Now what did I do right that time that made it happen?

Next time I see that cat I'm going to stare right back at it no matter how much it stares at me. If anything is evil around here it's that cat. Maybe he's the one in charge of this drought. Maybe he's the one I should get rid of.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon I ask her right out where did her father come from. I bring her a cheese sandwich and pickled green tomatoes, and I pick up some of her own apples on the way over. She thanks me, nice as could be.

She says he was Romanian. It figures. Didn't all sorts of odd people come from Romania? Gypsies and such, and even Dracula?

Her father came out here alone with just that baby girl. Maybe he stole her. Except you could see she was nothing but a big bother to him while he tried to farm. I wonder why he wanted her and took all that trouble to look after her. I guess she must be his real daughter.

Then I ask her, "Where's that old dog of yours?"

"Howie? He's around here someplace. He always is."

"I haven't seen him."

He's no particular kind, just a big, lumpy dog. Almost as red as the cat. There must be a reason why every creature around here is red.

That cat and I stare at each other. I'm the one that looks away first though I vowed not to. He looked me up and down and back and forth. I never saw the like. I felt kind of shaky afterwards.

"What did you say this cat's name is?"

“We just call him Red.”

We? Who does she mean, we? Or did they have him back when her father was still around?

How about I get rid of that cat first? I’ll talk in tongues and make up a dance and a spell.... I won’t do anything like put out poison or set a trap. I’ll dance for a pleasant easy death—in the middle of a happy dream.

\* \* \* \*

I do it. I dance and dance. Actually I haven’t had so much fun since Daniel and I went dancing when we first married. Daniel has been too busy to even think of dancing. Besides, I don’t think he ever liked it. I talk a crazy language all my own. Or maybe it’s Romanian or some sort of gypsy language. How would I know? But whatever it is, it comes easily.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning, everything’s at sixes and sevens. Lunch isn’t even begun and laundry not done. I don’t wake up till around ten ... ten for heaven’s sake! Daniel comes in to see how I am and I’m not even up yet. He thinks I’m really sick. He says, again, how pale I look and that I have circles under my eyes. He brings me toast and chamomile tea and tells me to stay in bed, which I’m happy to do. I lie there and doze and think. Ditties and sayings keep rolling around in my head. Proof of the pudding, Catch as catch can, Cat’s out of the bag, Willy nilly, and such. I think I’m a natural at ... I’m not sure what, spells I guess.

Then I remember the things I pinched off and put in my apron pocket. I get up and check on them. Crumble them. Mix them all together and boil them up. I figure, since I don’t know what I’m doing anyway, might as well use them all. I could tell one was just catnip, but who knows, catnip might be magic. Besides, there’s that cat.

I taste them. Ugh. I put what’s left in the icebox. Strange, but even that little sip made me feel a lot better. I was just dragging myself around. Maybe I’ll keep the brew for when I need energy.

\* \* \* \*

So far nothing has happened to that cat. I went over there special to take a look. I brought some leftover hamburger. There she was, lying there



as usual, and there was that cat. If cats can give the evil eye, that cat is doing it. I don't even try to match it stare-to-stare anymore.

"Have you been up?"

"I've crawled around a little."

"Poor child. What can I do for you before I go?"

I do want to be kind. I always like to help.

"Would you feed the cat? And make sure he has water? Please."

She's asking this deliberately. Is it some kind of a test? She hasn't asked me to do anything before. Not even once. For sure only a witch would ask me to do that, knowing what that cat thinks of me.

Should I do it or not? Or should I poison him right now? But with what?

I won't do it. Neither one, neither feed nor poison.

"I'm afraid I must be off."

I hurry away, all shaky. What am I thinking? A spell is one thing, but poison? Yes, but that look in his eyes. As if he knows all about me.

\* \* \* \*

I dance that night yet again ... even though nothing seems to be happening over there. This time I sing and beat time on an old jar. I have even more fun than the other nights.

And then I look up and see Daniel at the window staring down at me.

I stop and just stand there, breathing hard, and here he comes, out the back door.

"What in the world?" And, "No wonder you're tired." He's angry. "What's got into you? The house is a mess and the cooking is lousy, and here you are enjoying yourself in the middle of the night."

I start to say that I'm *not* enjoying myself, but I realize I am. In lots of ways. I love to dance and I have this purpose ... to save us all from the

drought. I'm helping people.

"Come back to bed." He takes my hand. He doesn't look so angry now. "I'll make you some chamomile tea. You're shaking."

Even with the tea, it takes me a long time to calm down and go back to sleep. I lie there thinking about that cat. Spells and dancing don't seem to be working. I'm going to have to find a better way.

\* \* \* \*

Next day I get up at a reasonable time and make Daniel's breakfast. I decide not to go over to Iris's for a while. She's getting better and I left extra cheese and bread last time. Besides, she's got her strawberry patch. And she probably could get some of her wormy apples, too, without much trouble.

How do you kill a clever cat? I've already done all the spells and dancing I can think of. I need a rest and a chance to think up more things to do. What's a pentacle?

\* \* \* \*

Next time I do go over there, she's lying on the couch again and the cat is sitting on the back of it right over her as if on guard. (Look how he looks at me. Those funny slits of cat's eyes. As bad as a goat's.)

Somebody has left her fresh water and I see the remains of food I didn't bring. There's even apricots from my tree. I was right all along, somebody besides me is helping her. Or some kind of witching is going on. How else could she have gotten five of my apricots?

But she's been crying. At first I think I should have come over before, but my not coming isn't the problem.

"Howie is ... like you said ... off somewhere. I haven't seen him for days. He's so old. I was wondering if you could look for him. See if anything happened to him."

"Me!"

I'm so startled it comes out in a squeak.

"If you wouldn't mind. You've done so much already I hate to ask. And

he is old. He could have just crawled off to be by himself to die.”

I will. No harm in a little walk around. I might learn more about her and her place.

“Yes! Yes, I will,” I say.

I run around to the front of the house. That’s the part I never can see from my window.

What a mess. The front porch is obviously never used. There’s the old swing. I don’t dare sit on it. Its rusty chains would probably pop right out of the ceiling. There’s a wasp nest up there, too. Of course what use has Iris for a porch like this, anyway? Nobody will ever sit here.

I almost forget I’m supposed to be looking for Howie. I lean over and check under the house. As far as I can see it’s empty under there, but I’m not going to crawl in. She can’t expect me to do that.

I go around to the outbuildings. I check under the honeysuckle. I go into—not very far into—the dusty old barn. I go all the way to the edge of her land where the goat shed used to be. And I find him. Dead. Did I do that with my spells? I meant to kill the cat, not this poor old mangy dog. Well, at least my spells worked on something.

I have to go back and tell Iris. I hope she doesn’t want me to bring her the body. I just can’t do that. It already smells. Maybe Daniel will do it for her. I’ll tell her he’ll bury him under the honeysuckle if she wants that.

\* \* \* \*

When I come back to tell her, that cat is still sitting on the back of the couch as if on guard. He stares at me again.

“He’s dead,” I say.

She tries to get up right on her broken leg, but then flops back down.

“He’s out by the goat shed. Daniel’ll bury it if you want him to. Do you have a wheelbarrow?”

\* \* \* \*

Daniel does go over. I didn’t go with him. I figured I’d done enough.

Besides, I wanted to think. I mean if she only has that cat for company I feel sorry for her even though I still think that cat should go. What if I found her a puppy?

\* \* \* \*

Daniel looks shaken when he comes back. "That old dog wasn't worth much except for company. She's going to miss him. He was her father's. Thirteen years old."

Thirteen! Everything is fitting together.

"I'm going to get her some crutches. Why didn't we bring some right away? I know you've been helping her a lot, but she needs to be able to get around more. She wants to make a grave marker. I found her a nice piece of wood. I'll pound it in when she's got it carved."

He shakes his head no, about five times. He's still upset. "We wrapped him in her grandmother's old handsewn quilt."

"But that quilt must be valuable."

"She even had me put flowers in the grave and old bones and a book that belonged to her father. She had an antique necklace, and she put it around the dog's neck. I know how she feels. Remember when little Mitzie died?"

"It's not the same. Mitzie was a big help to you."

"She sure could move cows."

Too bad about that quilt. All that handwork gone for a dog. I don't say it, though. Daniel looks as if he thinks it's perfectly all right. I suppose that's just like a man.

\* \* \* \*

Daniel is so bothered he doesn't eat much supper and drinks too much coffee. And I never saw a person shake their head "no," so much. I don't think I'll be able to dance this night. He won't be sleeping well. And all because of a no-good lumpy dog that didn't even belong to us.

I do sleep well though Daniel doesn't. I hear him get up. I see him standing, looking out the window towards Iris's house. It's a moonless night

so there can't be anything to see. I feel a yearning to be out dancing and chanting but I'll just have to wait for Daniel to stop his worrying. And I'll have to stop dancing so close to the house. Maybe it would be better if I did it nearer to Iris's place. That old orchard in the moonlight! With all those half-dead broken down trees....

\* \* \* \*

Daniel is way ahead of me. He finds a puppy in town. A stray that ended up at the feed store. Nobody knows what kind it is or how big it'll get. He brings it here first and asks me how I think she'll like it. It's been mistreated and needs a good home.

"Look," he says. "Somebody hit him on the head and ruined his eye. See the scar? And his ear is torn."

None of that makes him very nice to look at, but I don't say so.

He bought a big bag of dog food and a bowl that says DOG on it. And he also got her some crutches.

"How much did all this cost?"

"It's maybe too soon for a new dog, but he needs somebody and it'll be good for her to take him in."

Then he looks at me in a odd way as if maybe it would be even better if I took him in. I certainly don't want it—not even for an hour.

"Take it over now. It'll cry all night and I'm not taking it to bed with *us*. Beside, she'll want the company."

\* \* \* \*

Next day I go over with fresh hot cornbread and there's the pup snuggled up beside her. Looks like even the cat has accepted him. He's walking back and forth across the back of the couch swinging his tail as if in charge of everything.

She's been up and around. There's some wash hanging on a new little line over the sink. I wonder if Daniel put that line up. And there's that new dog bowl.

I bring her fresh water and fuss around as if I'm doing something

though it seems Daniel has already done everything that's needed. More than what's needed. For Heaven's sake, he turned down her bed and put a candy bar on her pillow. For that skinny girl?

I go home feeling really bad. I go into the barn but the cow and goat are out to pasture now. There's nothing warm to lean against.

Could she have given him some sort of love potion? What could he see in such a wispy little person who always has her hair falling in front of her eyes? And she hardly has any breasts at all.

\* \* \* \*

I don't know how I did it, but I do it. I kill that cat. Cats don't fall. Or if they do they don't hurt themselves—not from just two stories up, which is all we have around here.

It was hard to do. I danced half the night, not in my yard, but way out in the back of that old orchard.

Iris comes hobbling all the way over here on her new crutches, the puppy running circles around her lickety-split. Even from my kitchen window I can see she's crying. Daniel is out in the fields so it's just me.

I walk out to meet her and get a skirt full of puppy paw prints. If that dog was mine, first thing I'd teach him is not to jump on people. When he gets bigger it's going to be a lot worse.

Right away she says, "Why does everything happen all at once? I know they were both old but why right now, one after the other? Everything is dying."

And I know I did it, finally. I feel such a sense of power.

"Will you help me bury him?"

\* \* \* \*

So we do that. We put him right next to where Howie is. With flowers and half that chocolate bar Daniel left. She wraps him in an old shawl. A flowery one with fringe. Some sort of heirloom I suppose. I don't think she should do that, but I don't say a word. I'm not one to criticize.

Afterwards she thanks me and says I should go on home, she's going

to sit there for a while.

At first that pup tries to follow me but it soon gives up and goes back to Iris.

We're all in trouble if it gets to be the size of Howie and keeps on jumping on people. I'd be doing everybody a favor, yet again, if I got rid of it before it gets up to that size.

\* \* \* \*

The drought goes on. We've never seen it this bad. And hot! I wish I knew if Iris was finding a way to keep on dancing and doing spells even with a broken leg. She is getting better. I should feel sorry for her with just that bouncy puppy out there, and I sort of do but not if she's a witch.

\* \* \* \*

I don't go over there as often as I did and I thought Daniel had stopped going over, too, but then I see him coming home from the wrong direction. He doesn't lie. When I ask he says he was checking on her. That she was up and had cooked apple tarts. He says they were delicious.

I ask if the worms were good.

I can just see them sitting on that smelly old couch gobbling tarts—which are no doubt full of that love potion of hers—one wispy dishwater blond and one dark, not very tall man with hairy arms. I don't see why either one would want the other.

Maybe if I dance all the harder.... Or maybe I shouldn't be enjoying dancing. And what about those herbs I cooked up that make me feel so energetic? I still have some of that tea left. I think I'll go on back to her place and steal some more dried green things.

\* \* \* \*

This time it's easy. There's nobody home. And here are the apple tarts. I shouldn't. Who knows what will happen? But they look so good.

I always bring something as an excuse. This time I brought apple turnovers. Same apples. My turnovers are good, too.

I take my time looking around again. There are some books in a

different language. Those are probably exactly what I need, if only I could read them. I steal a small one. Put it in my pocket. It has diagrams. I might be able to figure something out.

I meet her and the puppy coming in just as I'm leaving. By the looks, she's been out crying over the graves of Red and Howie.

"I left you an apple turnover," I say, "and I ate one of your tarts. I hope you don't mind."

I think, so there, if it's full of love potions then you're in for it from both of us. But she doesn't seem upset, and, anyway, I don't feel any different.

\* \* \* \*

Later Daniel comes home—from the wrong direction again. He looks glum. Or maybe just thoughtful. I feed him a whole batch of cooked up greens from Iris's house. I have no idea what they are.

That night he has really bad diarrhea. He's up and down so much I don't have a chance to go out and dance or do any such thing. And then here he is home all day. He doesn't complain, he never does, but I can see he's feeling terrible. I think of going over to ask Iris if she has any sort of herb that would help him, except that would let her know I was on to her.

I don't very often cook up a mess of greens. Daniel is looking at me with suspicion as if he thinks I was trying to poison him. When I make him tea, I think he gets rid of it on the African violets.

Later, sick as he is, he goes over to Iris's, and not even with food or anything as an excuse. He just goes. He stays a long time, too. At twilight I start over to see what's up but I meet him on his way home. He says he's not hungry for any supper.

All right, that's it then. Tomorrow is Sunday. We don't go to church that much, but I'm going and I'm telling everybody that Iris is, for sure, a witch and that Daniel is in it with her and that this whole drought thing is their fault.

Daniel falls asleep in his easy chair. He's exhausted. I wonder if it's from getting up and down all night long or is there another reason. To think I used to look at that dark, brooding face of his and think it was romantic. Now look at him, hair hanging over his eyes, shirt all sweated up.... I wouldn't want to kiss those cheeks, him badly needing a shave. How could



Iris do that?

I go out under the ghostly gibbous moon. I'm so mad I can think up spells without even trying. Spell after spell after spell. And I can talk in tongues and dance as never before. I go on for hours. Until I see ... First there's smoke and then the twinkle of little fires. Like fireflies and then larger. / did that somehow. Then here come magpies, and all that black and white and screeching! and I'm dancing with them. I take one of the little fires and set fire to our corncrib. I don't need matches. Then I take some of that corncrib fire and set fire to our barn. And those magpies are still flapping around all over the place. And there's mooing and baaing and screeching.

And Daniel, rushing into the barn, freeing the cow and goat, and here's Iris, on crutches, and they're both looking at me and I'm dancing and dancing. Daniel says bad words. "What the hell?" and "Damn." And worse even. And I say, "Neither of you can ever touch me."

It's true, I'm in charge ... of all of it ... I see that now ... of the drought and of them. I say, "Bitty tatty go bo bat zakky yat." And I hear my laughter going on and on and on as the moon hides behind cinders and the ground comes up and welcomes me.