

TIGERSHARK[®] MAGAZINE



ISSUE #5 SUMMER/AUTUMN 2014

MYSTERIES

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MYSTERIES

Editorial

It seems as if there are lots of mysteries around us, from whodunit (and why) to the plaintive cry of "What's going on?" We can't promise to solve any of the great mysteries of life for you, but if you would like to discover the answer to what's in this issue, just keep reading...

Best, **DS Davidson**

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Catalogues of Stars

by Phillip A. Ellis

I have been poring through the catalogues of stars
written of old by ghostly sorcerers of fame,
and, while their mystic names astound my minor mind,
I taste the savour of their beauty, written down
when man remained untutored savages of hate.

Now that the ghosts are whelmed, their kingdoms rotting dust,
their only relics epitomes of knowledge spun
in scripts that we can sound, but never understand,
there's some among us mourning our disgraceful hearts,
who seek atonement in our halls of deeper learning.

UNDERCOVER

by Denny E. Marshall

Slipcover on universe
Removed and revealed
For fraction of a second
Long enough to see
Stars and dreams
Embrace like lovers

Dawn Stars (David Leverton)



HOMOFLORA

by Frederick J. Mayer

Out of flora and terra
A growth from dead fauna
Flowers mysterious
Out of rot, begot us
Homoflora firma

Dedicated to Clark Ashton Smith

Mysterious Flower

by Frederick J. Mayer

There is a flower,
it doesn't grow at night,
it doesn't grow during day,
it grows for the Love
of those in pain;
webs of fear,
freedom encased,
It's truth never lied.

So loving,
the dark and the light
interfaced
so sad

it must be torn
by its own thorns,
with blood tear
it will reflect,
from its hidden smile,
It is caring never died.

It is ever so lovely,
it is the rose
for whom the Pierrot
truly cried.

THE MURDERER SINGS OF THE MURDERED

by Phillip A. Ellis

Her blood sings unto me
with a voice of vengeance and glee—
sings thus her blood, the blood that I see,
sings thus my victim, who's dead to all—
who can hear? Come, and let all consequence fall:
thus does my conscience call—
thus does my conscience speak,
to my haunted heart, and I am weak:
thus does my conscience speak,
thus does my conscience call—
who can hear? Come, and let all consequence fall:
sings thus my victim, who's dead to all—
sings thus her blood, the blood that I see,
with a voice of vengeance and glee—
her blood sings unto me.



The Hemlock Solution

by KT Wagner

When Anne realized the impossibility of sleep, the first pale light of dawn had already silhouetted the birdfeeder outside her window. Of course it's the next day, she thought, the owl stopped hooting at least half an hour ago.

Staring up into the black, she'd listened to the soulful cry and felt kinship with the shy bird. Sometimes when she pattered around the greenhouse, she'd catch sight of a lone Barred Owl huddled on a low branch in one of the hemlocks. It would be wonderful to tame one, to have it ride on her shoulder and coo softly into her ear.

Anne breathed a lonely sigh. Had she made the right decision? The soft sound penetrated the viscous silence of a world hovering between night and day. It was hard not to question herself in the small hours of the morning. She rolled onto her side, listening to the rustling scrape of covers pulling across the empty side of the bed.

The shadowy, familiar shapes of the room gradually took form, accompanied by the rasp of her breath and the faint beat of her heart. Thrushes and sparrows flitted outside her window, trilling and heralding the day.

A small smile curved her lips. Yes. She savoured the anticipation of meeting an infinite number of days free of Steven and his blighting shadow. The darling birds chirped louder. She could almost discern their conversation –

“Goddamn, bloody birds. Indecent hour to be up.” The deep, grumbling voice slid along the floor of her room and shocked Anne into a sitting position.

She clutched her chest, heart pounding in her ears. She gasped for air and stared at the empty side of the bed. Steven? No. Impossible. Her problem was solved. The room shimmered and tilted.

Blinking, she remembered. Scott. How could she have forgotten? Just like his brother, Steven.

Air registers connected her room to the guest bedroom above and funnelled sound between the two floors. She pulled her knees up and clasped her arms around them. The funeral took place a week back; it was past time for Scott to go home.

She listened intently. One minute...five minutes...a toilet flushed and water gurgled through the walls...ten minutes...the birds continued to chirp. Her broody hens joined the ruckus, cackling and cawing at the rising sun. Other than the muffled groaning of bed springs and a couple of curses, all again turned to silence within the house.

Anne wrapped a woolen shawl around her shoulders and padded down the hall to the kitchen. She thought about making breakfast for Scott, perhaps something Steven liked... Frowning, she shook her head and muttered, “Old habits die hard.” She set out a loaf of homemade bread, butter and a jar of preserves.



The coffee maker began to gurgle; she had ten minutes while it brewed. She slipped bare feet into rubber boots and squished her way to the greenhouse. The house, the birds, everything, it had belonged to Steven and now it was hers.

Whistling chirps from just under the shelter of the hemlock trees turned her attention toward the quail cages. When the back door of the house slammed, she'd almost finished singing good morning to the little birds.

Scott stomped across the lawn, unhooked the bird feeder and disappeared through the side gate. It swung shut with a bang. Anne felt like she'd been shot. Just like his brother. She pressed fingers against her temples. What to do?

Her head pounded. She swayed as she pondered. The decision wasn't as easy this time, but she made it.

She stalked over to the greenhouse and retrieved two containers. From one, she sprinkled grain into the larger quail cage. A dozen small birds eagerly pecked at the ground.

She glanced over at the second cage, and her expression softened. The latched door squeaked as it opened, and the tiny occupant jumped into her extended hand. "Poor thing. You're lonely aren't you?" she crooned and hand fed it a breakfast of water hemlock. "Don't worry; you'll see your family again tonight." She kissed the bird's little head and popped it back into its cage. She'd return later and sadly, she'd have to sacrifice one from the other cage, as well. Her heart ached. It was the only solution that made sense, that protected her loved ones, but it tore her apart.

Quail-raising began as one of Steven's projects. Against Anne's protests, he'd built the cages and purchased the chicks. On his instructions, she'd prepared his favourite roasted quail dinner using homegrown ingredients. Afterward, she'd huddled on the back porch and cried. If Steven had noticed, he didn't mention it. The next morning, he'd yelled at her to haul her ass inside and make his breakfast. He'd demanded the same meal the following weekend, and the next. The last time, he'd only picked at his food, instead complaining bitterly of the cold and clutching his stomach.

Poor little quails. They were the last supper she'd prepared for Steven.



Scott seemed pleased when he arrived back, just in time for dinner. The aroma of roasting poultry filled the house. Apparently, quail counted among his favourite meals.

"You're a fine cook, Anne. My brother was a lucky man." Scott pushed away from the table and patted his ample stomach. "I particularly liked the seasoning, a flavour reminiscent of pine trees. Juniper berries, perhaps?"

Anne nodded as she began to tidy the table. She picked up a haphazard stack of china and turned toward the kitchen.

Scott's voice followed her, "I've overstayed my welcome, Anne. There is a train leaving in the morning, and I plan to be on it."

The dishes in Anne's hands rattled. She hastily dumped them on the sideboard. "Tomorrow...oh, that's nice." She felt a little dazed, suddenly unsure. She rarely felt unsure.

"Sorry I didn't tell you earlier. I spent the day down the street in your neighbour's garage. You know Jim? He kindly let me use his tools, and I got rather caught up with the project."

"Oh?" Anne's confusion deepened.

"I wanted to do something for you. I noticed the bird feeder at the side of the house needed a little work." Scott shrugged, a childlike expression on his face. "I hung it back up before dinner. I came in to tell you, but you were working in the kitchen and I didn't want to interrupt."

Anne scurried to the window and pulled back the drapes, knocking over one of her tiny bird statues in her haste. It exploded against the tile. She heard the scrape of chair legs behind her and Scott's worried exclamation as he hurried to her side, but she couldn't take her eyes off the most beautiful bird feeder she'd ever seen.

"It's...it's lovely," she choked out the words. Tears rolled off her cheeks.

Scott gently guided her away from the shards of porcelain littering the floor. "I'm glad you like it. Here, let me clean this up."

She stared at him in shock. Steven never offered to clean anything during his life with her. Shaking, she placed a hand on his arm. "That would be nice. I'll fix you Steven's favourite liqueured coffee with whipped cream."

"You've already gone to too much trouble. I'll just have a whisky, neat, and I'll serve myself." Scott winked. "Would you like one, too?"

Anne's heart pounded so hard, she felt sure Scott could hear it. She swallowed her panic. She could still change her mind, couldn't she? In a strangled whisper said, "Oh please, I'd love to make you Steven's special coffee. As a remembrance..."

Scott patted her shoulder. "Of course, if it makes you happy."

In the kitchen, Anne could barely hold her hands steady enough to gather ingredients. Steven had enjoyed a neat whisky before and after every meal. She had no idea what went into fancy coffees. Dishes rattled and bottles clinked in response to her clumsy movements.

Finally, two steaming mugs of dark brew and a bowl of whipped cream lined the counter. Anne rummaged through a lower cupboard and extracted a miniature, brown-glass bottle labelled Syrup of Ipecac. She opened it and poured the contents into one mug. Carefully, she wrapped the empty bottle in paper towel and shoved it into the bottom of the garbage can.

Scott's voice behind her. "Can I take that out for you?"

Anne shrieked and spun around. "You scared me." She searched his face, but he didn't appear suspicious. "Thanks, but let's drink these while they're hot." Anne carefully topped each mug with cream and passed one to Scott.

Such a shame how sick he'd soon be, but she'd nurse him back to health.

She followed him into the living room, where they both settled into arm chairs. He'd built a fire. He still reminded her of Steven. Maybe...? Anne frowned and then smiled. It would be silly to second-guess or regret an irreversible decision.

Besides, Scott reminded her of the owl in the hemlock. "Please consider extending your stay another week. With Steven gone, I could use a little help around the place."



Taking Mystery To Bed

by Frederick J. Mayer

There is no longer normal you see
everything is such a mystery
sleepy and you take everyone
darkly counting sheepish goats
never be afraid to run from the light

This dark façade ends
tarnished mirrors over heads
bed, the true reflector says go to
dead, only those who stay awake
say you've got no body tonight

She has delicate bodies
decay brings birth day cries
bestially starts worshippers to
be sucklings of Magna Mater
beloved of Great Mother of Mysteries delight

Mystically crude of carnal creativity
all there is isn't all you see
thrills secretive of hidden
frilly fecundity
lace of twilight

Will awaken a thousand dreams
the hybrid young of goddess schemes
a copulate appetites
affectionate Shub-Niggurath
taking mystery to bed this night.





Goat Mother of Haiti's Shub-Niggurath (Frederick J. Mayer)

THE TRACK by Bryn Fortey

HISTORY AS A STATE OF MIND

Cal Hardisty sat atop the rocky tor, hunched against the wind, looking down. Others might see nothing more than farmland. House and barns to the south, railway to the north, fields between. But Cal Hardisty saw his life.

From childhood to the present. Then 'til now. All he had ever known. Had ever wanted.

His elder brother, Tab, had hated the farm as much as Cal loved it. Both hated the father who'd raised them hard with boot and fist and worked their mother to an early grave. As soon as he'd been old enough, Tab up and left. Not a word. One day there, gone the next, and the only comment Abel Hardisty made was: "More damn work for you!" Which Cal accepted as typical of the man who'd sired them both.

The railway line formed the northern boundary to the farm. A long straight stretch that faded into the distance in both directions. The track had been a constant all his life. Sometimes to the forefront, sometimes ignored, but always there. Trains that brought. Trains that took. Left to right. Right to left. Big metal monsters, roaring and moaning. Steam billowing like smoke from an ogre's pipe.

As a youngster, Tab never failed to look up when a train whistle blew. Guess he always knew the track would be his way out, one day, thought Cal. He sometimes wondered what had become of his brother. Usually at times like this, when he stole a little time on his own, away from the old man's company. Most of the time he was battling the stony soil of the harsh and unforgiving land.

His mother was only a distant memory now. A faintly remembered tenderness. Her funeral had been the last time he had cried. Starting to toughen anyway, her death had hardened him and he was able to take his beatings with a dry eye from that day forward, anger replacing fear. Tab had gone, but he'd stayed. Neither his father, nor the antagonism of the ground they worked, could drive him out. The farm was in his blood and he followed the traditions of his forefathers, however much he might sometimes curse the Hardisty name.

Cal stood and stretched. Far to his right, along the raised embankment, rattled an engine and carriages, looking little more than mere toys. That would be the late evening train from the village. A train coming from where he'd never been, going to where he'd never go, and that suited him fine. Sometimes it seemed that nothing else existed. Just the buildings to the south, the track to the north, the farmland between. Had he really had a brother? Or even a mother? Hadn't it only ever been just him and that bastard he called father!

Even when he could picture Tab, it was as his brother had been at the time he'd left, and that seemed an age ago now. So how he imagined him would not be the way he looked today. All of which could give Cal a headache if he thought about it too much.

His mother's face, even at the best of times, was now indistinct. Like an old photograph, fading to a sepia blur. Cal was sure he could remember her diverting the



old man's brutal anger from her sons and onto herself. Protecting Tab and himself as much as she possibly could, until it wore her down and she died an early death. Or was he only remembering it the way he wanted it to have been? Sometimes he wasn't sure either way, whether the feelings he attributed to her were real or imaginary.

Scrambling his way down the tor, he made for the farmhouse. The only home he had ever known. A plate of ham and pickle, a mug of hot tea, then off to bed. Maybe to masterbate, maybe not. Depending on mood and tiredness.

The hard earth would be waiting tomorrow. It always was.



THE LIQUID PROPERTIES OF SPITE

Abel Hardisty banged hard on his son's bedroom door. "Up you lazy sod!" he shouted. "Or you'll feel my belt!"

In reality, the time he could exert physical dominion over Cal was long gone. The last time he'd raised his hand with serious intent, the boy had caught his wrist and held him firm, the older man being unable to break free. "No more, father," Cal had said. "If there's ever a next time, I'll thrash you to a pulp!" And that had been sufficient.

The old man still abused his son verbally. Always would, just as his father had with him, for as long as he was able to spit out the bile that festered within. Cal had always taken his beatings with a stoic acceptance, until the day he'd felt physically able to put a stop to them. Tab though, the older one, had been of a different nature. He had fought back, always, even when losing. He had let the track and the clanking trains get under his skin and into his mind. Had finally beaten his father, besting him with a vengeance, and knew then that the time for him to go had come.

Abel Hardisty tried not to think of his eldest son. Pushed it away when it happened. Did no good. The past was past. Nothing could be changed.

The father saw mainly to the livestock now, leaving the fields and maintenance to Cal, but not on this day. Nor those that followed. It didn't just rain, it poured like a biblical deluge, with high winds compounding the inclemency. "Should 'a built a bloody ark," grumbled the father. "Crops'll fail, see if I'm not right. Ruined and damned, cursed and trapped. I've had offers, you know I have. Should have sold up years ago."

"Shut your blathering," muttered Cal, gearing himself up for yet another trip outside. Since there was little else he could do while the downpour continued, he'd taken on most of the animal chores. Livestock still had to be tended, whatever the conditions.

Apart from the practical damage this sort of violent weather caused, a secondary concern for Cal was being forced to spend more time cooped up with his father. A state of affairs that led to even more bickering and quarrels than usual, which made him look forward to his next trip to the village more than ever. Trips that were ostensibly to replenish supplies, but also provided him the opportunity to spend time with Sarah, barmaid at the village pub.



Their relationship was on going and established. He gave her money, so say to buy a present, and they had sex. Cal liked her well enough and it was at the back of his mind that when his father died he would take her to the farm. Even marry her, if that turned out to be what she wanted. It never occurred to him to wonder whether she had similar understandings with other men, or if she would even want to take on the hard life of a farmer's wife. Though he would never admit it, not even privately to himself, some of his father's hardnosed attitudes had found a home in his way of looking at things too.

"Why won't you take me on a holiday?" Sarah would ask him sometimes. "Or just a weekend? A nice dirty weekend!"

He would shake his head dumbly, not realising she only asked to discomfort him, knowing that he always refused.

"Not even a daytrip?" she would finish with, laughing at the panic in his eyes.

The thought of getting on a train scared Cal. Looking through the window as it passed the farm. Seeing it recede from sight. That might have been all right for Tab. He'd wanted to shake the dirt from his feet. But not for him. Not for the brother who'd stayed.

It rained for two weeks solid. Then stopped.

"Get out and check the damage," snarled old Abel. It might be that his son was younger, stronger, could beat him in a fight, but he was still the master. It was his name on the deeds.

Cal grunted a bad tempered acknowledgement and set out, splashing through surface water and sometimes trudging through ankle deep mud. The crops were a mess, especially the wheat, but he would have a better idea of the full extent if they remained rain free for a few days. The resilience ratios were sometimes surprising, though not always. Some of the hedgerows had been flattened, but the barbed wire fence alongside the track had held up well.

He looked through the wire at the high embankment that carried the lines. It had been an ever present construction the whole of his life. As a child there had been times when he had even thought it sentient, with trains as fire breathing dragons roaring through the night. Tab, on the other hand, never regarded the track with fear. For him it had always been a dream, an ambition, a means of possible escape.

Off to his left, about waist high, a large black rat was gnawing at something. "Bloody thing," he muttered, hitting it with a stone and watching as it quickly disappeared from sight, but he couldn't make out what it was the vermin had been so engrossed with. Vaguely wondering what it might be, he strolled in that direction. Some dead animal, he supposed, thinking more about his planned trip to the village the next day. He could picture Sarah, naked, squirming under his weight.

"What the...!" he exclaimed.

It couldn't be, surely, but as he got closer....

"Bloody hell!"



It really did look like a hand sticking out from the embankment.

Pulling out pliers, he snipped the barbed wire and stepped through. Sure enough, he found, it was a hand. Just skin and bone, wasted, and damaged by the rat, but a hand for all that. The non-stop rain had probably loosened the covering sufficient for the animal to claw and bite and bring it into the open.

Cal started to dig and pull with his bare hands, before suddenly realising that what he ought to be doing was inform the authorities. But by then he had cleared the wrist and most of the forearm.

First it was as if his heart stopped beating.

Then it was racing, fit to burst.

On the dead desiccated wrist was a watch.

Tab's watch, or its double!

For Cal time had rarely consisted of more than sunrise, sundown, and the unfolding seasons. His brother, though, had counted the hours, minutes, seconds, and had been so proud of that watch. So proud he had scratched his name on the back so no-one else could ever claim it. And there it was, easily turned to view on the bony wrist, T A B, just as he had marked it all those years ago.

Cal had sometimes worried that if Tab returned when the old man died, would the farm go to him as the eldest son? Not only would Tab not be returning, he had never even left! His brother was dead, buried beneath the track that he'd hoped would carry him to freedom.



LAST DAYS OF DYNASTY

Cal rushed back to the farmhouse, slamming through the door. "Tab's dead!" he gasped. "Dead and buried! I found him!"

The old man grabbed his arm. "Found him," he echoed. "Where?"

"The embankment. Loosened by rain, I guess. That watch, scratched with his name, hanging on a bony wrist. You remember?" He shook his father off him. "Got to get the police."

"Hold on, boy. Let's think this thing through."

"Think what?" shouted Cal, astonished. "Tab didn't bury himself. This is murder! Must be!"

"That watch, probably lost it!" garbled the old man, taking hold of Cal's arm again. "I remember now. He told me before he left. Just some old tramp or gyppo, found it or stole it. Cover him back up. Let it be."



“You crazy old fool!” Cal pulled himself free a second time. “Even if I believed the rubbish you spout, it’s still murder!”

Abel Hardisty flailed his arms like an erratic windmill. “Don’t need no fuss here on my farm,” he spluttered, “Don’t need no police clogging the place up just ‘cause some no-good tramp got himself shot.”

“Shot?” Cal stood stock still, staring at his father. “I didn’t say nothing about no shooting.”

“You did!” said the old man, wild eyed now and with a note of desperation in his voice. “Said you found a body, shot!”

“Didn’t dig him all out, only an arm. Couldn’t tell how he died. But if it was by gun, then how did you know?” Cal stood there, his hands clenching and unclenching alternately, looking at his father while his mind came to a terrible conclusion. “It is Tab! I know it, you know it, and the police will prove it. You killed my brother. Sweet Jesus, father, you shot your own son!”

“Ay, sweet little Jesus with his namby-pamby turning the other cheek. Mine is the Old Time Religion. The God who helped David kill Goliath, who smashed down the walls of Jericho. Tab should have known better than to push me into a corner!”

Abel Hardisty knew he had no alternative now, but to carry on with the telling.

“Look, son,” he continued. “Things could have been different, but we’ve got to deal with what we’ve got. Tab finally bested me didn’t he? I know you remember, and I bet you were silently cheering him on, and that’s when he decided it was time to jump on a train and head off up the track. If he’d just done that then fine. Goodbye Tab, and you and me would have carried on without him, as we did. But having beaten me once, he couldn’t just leave. He had to try it for a second time.

“You’ve got to believe me, Cal. I didn’t want to kill him, my eldest, but I couldn’t let him give me another hiding either, and the rifle was near my hand. He didn’t think I would use it though. Laughed at me. Sneered. Kept coming.”

Abel Hardisty was calmer now, reconciled to the unfolding chain of events. He knew from the look on his face that Cal was not going to be party to any sort of cover-up, which left him with no alternative. If he could just edge a little closer to the gun cabinet, close enough to grab a weapon before Cal could react.

“Didn’t really think I could do it myself,” he continued, babbling on to cover his surreptitious movements. “Didn’t really mean to either. He kept coming and it just happened. Bang!”

The old man made a sudden dive for the glass cabinet door, wrenching it open, but Cal was there in a flash, throwing his father backwards onto the floor. By the time the old man scrambled back to his feet, his son had a rifle pointed straight at him.

“I’m going rabbiting, father,” said Cal. “And you’re the rabbit.”

The old man leant his head to one side, “Hear that train whistle, boy? Beating along the track. I’ll give you money. Plenty too. Take that Sarah from the village, the one you fancy so much. All the money you’ll ever need, if you just agree to go.”

And true enough, there was a faint whistle blowing all the way from the northern boundary of the farm. “You never did get it,” said Cal, shaking his head. “Tab was the one who cocked a ear to the trains. He was the one who wanted to get away. In spite of you, in spite of everything, I’ve never wanted to leave, and I never will.”

“So what happens now?”

“I’ll phone the police and tell them to come and arrest a murderer.”

Old Abel shrugged slightly and shook his head. “Hard I might have been, and maybe more so than you sometimes deserved,” he admitted, “but we share the Hardisty bloodline. Father to son, working the land.”

“And what about Tab? He was a Hardisty too!”

“Only by name, Cal. He had too much of his mother in him. You are the true Hardisty, and because of that I don’t think you’ll be able to simply hand me over to no policeman.”

Aye, however much you might deserve it, thought Cal bitterly. “No, I don’t suppose I can,” he said, “but the murderer they will be coming for won’t be you. They’ll be coming for me!”

The son was too much like the father, realised Abel Hardisty. He would not be able to hand him over to no authorities, to send him away from the farm, but he would be able to squeeze the trigger. Knowing that the endgame had been reached, he threw himself forward in a desperate attempt to grab the rifle. As he did, so Cal fired, the explosive noise echoing around the farmhouse. The first shot blasted the old man in the chest. Then, after his father had dropped to the floor, he shot him again. This time in the head.



THE MATHEMATICS OF LOSS

After doing what he had to at the farmhouse, Cal went first to the top of the rocky tor, from where he could see the whole of the farm stretched out below. It wasn’t the biggest of spreads. Many of the smaller outfits were being swallowed up by the big conglomerates these days, and they had received offers too. Give old Abel his due there, he thought. The Hardisty Farm had never been for sale.

But time was against him now. So, scrambling back down, he made for the northern boundary. To the part of the embankment where his dead brother’s hand could be seen.

Head bowed, Cal stood in silence, not knowing the right words, but hoping that Tab could rest more easily now that his death had been avenged. Then the distant sounds



of police sirens prompted him to clamber up the embankment until he stood alongside the track. “I’ve lived here all my life,” he muttered, “and this damn railway has always been a part of it.”

A train was coming from the village. He could hear the hum of the vibrating metal lines, and then the distant roar of the engine. Coming closer, closer. Coming ever closer. Drowning out everything else.

Cal Hardisty knelt, facing the farm so that it would be the last thing he would ever see, and placed his head on the track.



End of the Line (David Leverton)

Murder Mystery

by Aeronwy Dafies

Something strange
Inhuman
Creeps deserted corridors
Seeking life
Seeking blood
Driven to kill
A random victim
Police seek a murderer
Of mundane flesh and blood
Not comprehending
This is a killer
They cannot arrest

GHOST FLOWERS

by Frederick J. Mayer

There is a thyme
wizards give
as visions in sync
with godless Time.

Among those flowers without
hills of evening
hauntings —
glades within grave doubt

The phantom flora
of once alive flowers arise,
roaming dark dark daisies
ever greening with
the lecithin plant eye

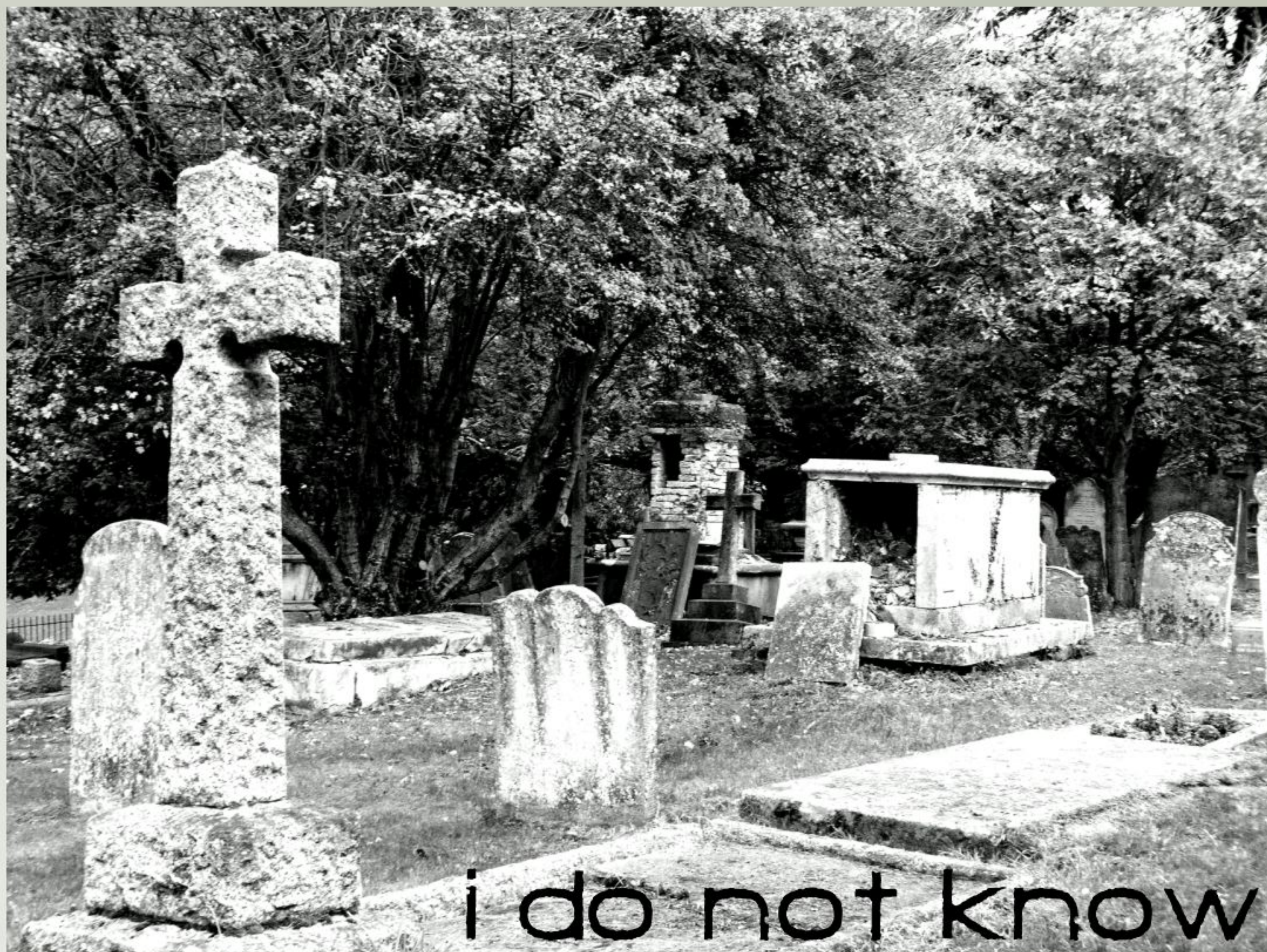
All aglow,
as light at night,
deflowering the blooming
dayeseye in fright.

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

by Celine Rose Mariotti

Yesterday rolls through my mind,
It seems like only a matter of time,
Like it only happened the day before,
But it happened years back,
So coming back to the present,
To today, where I am now,
I remember and then I carry on,
I live for today,
I know you would want me to forge ahead,
Your face is always in front of me,
Your eyes I always see,
You smiling at me,
And then there is tomorrow,
The many dreams I need to make come true,
And always thinking about you,
For life is yesterday, today and tomorrow,
And time on Earth we borrow.





i do not know

by Katie Simpson

the dead are gone,
that is all i know. they've
left their things, the clothes,
the plates, the crumpled receipts,
the half written notes never finished.
they are gone,
i do not know where they go.
and we? we are here.
where the sun rises, where
the sun sets, where the moon
waxes and wanes, where
the tide kisses the shore. we
are here. lucky, or left behind?
i do not know,
but we are here.
wherever they are, we are not.
until we are, until, until,
until we go. where?
i do not know.
but we will be there
together.

Black and White Tombs (David Leverton)



Beast of the Baskervilles

by Andrew Darlington

Waking with thunder in his head and a mouthful of cobwebs. It's happened again. Time Slip. Another lost hour. Brain tumor, it must be. Pressing into the brain tissue.

He's sitting in the Honda Jazz pulled up on the lay-by. This is where it happened. Tatem eases the door open and steps out onto the moist gel of compressed leaves. A faint smell of musky decay in the air. He stomps up and down until feeling returns. Leans up against the curvature of the car to regain his breath. As he's done before. Returning to this same place over and over again. As though through repetition he'll understand. This is where he left Sheena. This is where he saw her for the last time.

A little way beyond the lay-by edge the side road curves lazily away down from the embankment. Not much of a road. Little more than an overgrown track. He trudges with hands thrust deep into his pockets. No whisper of wind to move the dying foliage on the arch of overhanging trees. Halfway down he begins to see the rooftops of the village. The steeple of the church. The roof of the 'Baskerville Arms' pub.

Why would Sheena have come this way? But where else could she have gone? There's nowhere else. He pauses. Had she paced this very spot? Had her sandals squidged onto this muddy verge? Had she been alone? Six months since that last parting. Spring, through to autumn.



'Hound? There never was a hound. It's just a story.' Holly is emphatic.

'But it was a story before Arthur Conan Doyle wrote it. And it's been a story since.'

'I know all this Sherlock stuff. But Conan Doyle is not a reliable witness. He believed in fairies for a start. You know that...? He believed that fairies existed.'

Why go on? Bereavement hurts in a unique way that only other bereaved people can understand. Tatem understands. Doyle knew bereavement. If that determined his need to buy into supernatural elements of life, he's not going to deny him that. This is the way it works. Sometimes the desperation to believe is more powerful than analytical procedural logic.



They make unlikely companions. Tatem had flinched at his reflection in the wing-mirror, more scary gaunt than seems right. Like death, not so much warmed up, as microwaved tepid. Mid-life hair already receding at high temples. While Holly is more Watson than Holmes. Nondescript, that's how they'd describe him. The opposite of a description. A little run to seed. So ordinary, he's invisible in a crowd. Nothing to distinguish him. Yet he knows his stuff. Knows the area, its Sherlockian connections. That makes him a useful ally, and when the occasion arises, he can dress that ordinariness up in a coat and a hat and a chosen air. And immediately becomes somebody, whoever he chooses to be. His personality has the same chameleon quality. He can see the bare, meagre facts of a case in hand, relax his own personality and gradually come to see it as they originally appeared to the quarry he was tracking.

On the face of it, a dozen random facts can be spun in any number of ways to create a variant number of situations. But to Holly, those facts can have only one correct arrangement. They've emerged from one situation, and only one. Therefore, if the correct sequence can be found, the original situation can be replicated. So the task is just that, to find the one correct way in which the facts fall into alignment. A twist this way, and that, until the Rubik planes fall into alignment.

It had been a hot Spring day, travelling through Princetown. Sheena reading her Kindle sprawled across the back seat. Tatem wished she wouldn't read that 'Shades Of Grey' stuff. He finds it a little disturbing. When he mentions a Boyband on the radio, one she likes – surely? She sneers disdainfully. Its Indie guitar-bands now with floppy hair and attitude. Boybands were last year, or the year before. Keep up, Dad, keep up. She's changing. He's losing something of her in the transition. It was then he'd hung a wrong turn, finding them snarled up at the road-works. The lights change, and they only shunt up three car lengths before they change again. Come on! He drums fingers on the steering wheel. The dark hair on the ridge of his knuckles bristling. He spools the window down. The air stinks of exhaust. He spools it back up again. How can you get lost in so small a place? He loses time. Gets increasingly irritable.

By the time they're back on route he's behind schedule. Not that there's any strict schedule to stick with. Carmen will be waiting for the pick-up, but there's built-in flexibility. Nevertheless, punctuality is important. Time is something to be forced into shape. So is this unplanned detour significant? He's been over it times without number. Replayed it in different ways. He should have refueled. But he hadn't. Instead he hung out for the next filling station. And that's when it all began to go wrong. The fuel-gauge ticking into the red. Nudging zero. Driving on fumes.

According to the map this embankment is a by-pass. At one time the road took a leisurely loop through the village. Now the new road bypasses the village, then it goes on for just over a mile towards a roundabout with a services area. If he'd not taken the wrong turning in Princetown...? But he had taken the wrong turning. Burned gas, burned time. So why stop. Why stop here? Because there's a convenient lay-by. Because he can walk from here to the roundabout and back. It was doable. Sheena stays in the car. Don't get out. He'd warned her not to get out. He's sure he could remember telling her that. He must have done.

It was growing dusk by the time he trudged back with the green plastic can of gas. It cost him a deposit. They'd grinned at him when he explained, like he was stupid. Who runs out of gas? There was a full moon rising. Bone-white light, through the arch of trees, along the embankment. There's the car, where he'd left it. The empty car. Sheena had vanished. This was the moment he kept returning to. She'd been there, sprawled on the back seat. Something about the way she sprawls, the way her skirt rides up, that makes him look away. Hot under the collar. There was even the indentation in the upholstery shaped by her weight. But she was no longer there. And the world opened up to swallow him. She's gone.

'How long were you away?' says Holly.

'A mile there. A transaction. A mile back. How long does that take?'

'But you said it was dusk by the time you got back. Full moon. That implies it took you longer.'

He's explained all this before. To the police. To Carmen. But most of all, to himself. Was there anything else? Something he'd missed? He'd tanked the car. He blasted the horn. He'd walked up and down the verge calling her name. Perhaps she's sneaked out to take a piss? Why else would she not stay in the car? At length he'd noticed the side-road sloping down, and followed it until he found her Kindle. She'd come this way. Or been brought here. Dusk thickening. Huge white moon glimpsed through the trees. And something in the stillness.

What exactly was it in the stillness? This is where it gets vague. So much is solid and certain. But the shape moving in the trees is not. Imagination. Something he's conjured or elaborated since. A fox or a badger. But memory says different. It was darker, heavier. And the howling, was that coincidental? A mournful dog in the village? Or something to do with the lurking darkness?

A man. The police had tried to get him to say it was a man, before they lost interest, and filed it 'unsolved'. He wished he'd never mentioned it. It was something so vague that at first it was little more than a shimmer of peripheral vision. But the more he concentrates, the more he tries to force detail onto its shapelessness. Six months of memory replay distorts hints and suggestions out of shape, into monstrous hounds, black dogs, shape-shifter were-beasts teleported through dimensional portals via neolithic Henges and standing stone alignments. Hifalutin words. Symptoms of reality unravelling. Gnawing madness.

'The Baskerville Hound? There never was a hound. It's just a story,' Holly insists.

'But it's a persistent story. There are regular cryptozoological sightings of giant-hounds. That's what they call it, the unexplained reports of unknown non-native predators. They've found spoor, droppings. There are photos of the Beast of Bodmin. There were regular sightings of the Black Beast of Ossett. Conan Doyle researched his Sherlock Holmes story into legends of a supernatural cursed hound on these moors. I've googled this. I know.'

'Do you believe that's what you saw that night?'



Expressions chase themselves across his face. 'Belief is too strong a word. I don't disbelieve.'

'Lycanthropy is a metaphor, nothing more. For the dark primal urges within each of us.'

'Have another drink. Might make it easier for you to swallow those metaphors.'

He allowed time for that to sink in. 'Who's your favourite screen Holmes? I'd go for Basil Rathbone every time.'

'Peter Cushing can do no wrong. He did a very respectable 'The Hound Of The Baskervilles' for Hammer in 1959.'

'What about Bandersnatch Cumberbund?'

He wigwags his hand. Signing give him time. We'll see.

The two men enter the village. The village feels sick. A single twist of road lined with decaying houses. A church at midpoint, its graveyard lost beneath wild brambles and nettles, across the road from the pub, 'The Baskerville Arms'. 'Traffic used to come through here. Travelers would call off at the village store for a newspaper or a sandwich. Or get a drink at the pub. Until they built the by-pass. Now the cars all speed past along the embankment without sparing a second glance at the turn-off sign.'

They keep walking as far as they can go, following the road until it peters out into nothing. A few derelict cottages collapsing into the encroaching mire resembling the bows of doomed ships sinking beneath the slime, which shimmers away in dark corrugations of mud and reeds, slurred by mists of dancing midges that turn like iron filings in a magnetic field. They backtrack a little way towards the pub. There's nowhere else to go. The door creaks as they stoop through the low entrance into the bar. A couple of locals in a conspiratorial huddle beside a big old fireplace. Low dark beams with horse-brasses.

'Bottled only' grunts the landlord. 'No cellar. Not anymore. No-one's got a cellar anymore. It just floods with water. So we got bottled, alright?'

'Budweiser. That'll do fine, thanks.'

If anyone can convey a shrug without moving a muscle, the landlord does it.

They retire to a corner table. 'No cellars. What's that in the 'Shades Of Grey' book about the demon lover with the S&M torture-dungeon. No such luck for the poor pervert here. The embankment did that for him too. Blocked off natural drainage so the trapped water-table just keeps rising. The village is slowly drowning. Most people moved out. Only the most tenacious or peculiar are left now as it all submerges into fen-water.'

'Grimpen Mire.'

'No. There never was a Grimpen Mire either. That was Doyle's invention. When Holmes' adventures happened in London he stuck pretty close to the A-to-Z, or

whatever they used back then, because readers would winkle out any inaccuracy. They still do. In that TV-episode with the terrorist tube-train primed to detonate beneath Westminster they specified Holmes and Watson got on at the wrong station, and were never allowed to forget it. But the further out of town Holmes went the less he bothered with detail. Who cares? Nobody. Nevertheless, Doyle based Grimpen Mire on Fox Tor Mire. So yes, maybe.'

'Ever see that film 'Deliverance'?' says Tatem. 'Check out the few locals left here. Inbreeding's got a lot to answer for. Bet they've got webbed feet too as a result of all that swampy semi-aquatic ooze'

'When did your black-outs begin?'

'What about my black-outs? They've got nothing to do with it.'

'So when did they start?'

'Soon after Sheena went missing.'

'Not before? Not around the same time?'

'Could be. Things get confused. Carmen couldn't deal with it. Not with Sheena's disappearance. Not with my behavior. I wasn't sleeping. I was obsessing. This stuff didn't help' he swills lager around his glass. Trying to swish the thoughts to the back of his mind. 'Time got twisted, bits kept coming loose, lost weekends blur and merge into one another. I was impossible to live with. She went back to her parents. She's still there.'

'Are you two past reconciliation?'

A long pause. 'Nothing can ever be the same. This is the end. My black-outs are a symptom. I've got a brain tumor, it must be that. My own body attacking me, my own cells devouring me. Pressing into the brain-tissue. It's not diagnosed, but I know it's there. So I'm on a short time-fuse. And I need closure first. I need to know the truth before I die. You understand what I'm saying?' He doesn't raise his eyes from the table-top, his hands trembling. Slightly self-conscious about allowing passion to run away with his tongue.

Holly nods. Swallows a big mouthful of lager and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. 'You want to stay here overnight? Give us chance to take a more leisurely look-around.'

'Sure. Why not.'

Holly fixed it up with the landlord. Then they step outside into the gathering gloom. Misty moistness hangs in the night air so rich it splashes over their faces. They retrace their steps up the slope, in a slow erratic plodding gait, back up towards where the lay-by waits. The moon half-glimpsed behind roiling clouds, through sparse overhanging foliage.

'Where was it you found her Kindle?'

‘A little further.’ About halfway between the embankment turn-off and the village itself, he stops and turns around slowly. ‘Here.’ He kicks at the grass verge. ‘It was here I found it.’

Holly allows his eyes to crawl slowly over the dip beneath which half-conceals the village. The misty church spire. The pub roof. A row of phantom cottages in the process of being consumed by tendrils of limp weed. Sinking like slow-motion wrecks into relentless tide, into quicksand. Somewhere here, a girl went missing. Somewhere she’s submerging into memory.

‘You saw this dark figure.’

He feels uncertain. Logic is deceptive. Reason ties you up in knots. Go with it. Follow your intuition. ‘Yes.’

Behind them, the verge slopes steeply upwards. Dandelion clocks, celandines and trash. Then scrubby bushes give way to trees, all the way up to the by-pass road at the very top of the embankment. The wedge of trees tapers the higher the side-road gets, until it intersects the larger road. Conversely, it broadens as it descends down towards the village. A dark wood neglected since the village died.

‘Where, exactly.’

Tatem hesitates. The moon breaks through the clouds. This is the way it was. Ivory white. An ice-white field that freezes his nerves to bare wires. He can smell the dampness in the air. Smell the musk of moist soil and rotting leaves. He climbs the verge, slippery with dew. Hauls himself up. Worms writhe away flexing. Snails draw back into their shells. He grabs the nearest bush for support, to pull himself up. Thorns rip his fingers in bright icicles of stimulating pain. His feet slip-slithering for purchase. From the bush he can reach out and grab the rotting trunk of the nearest tree. It is spongy-soft beneath its crust of breaking bark. There’s a warped shelving of wide white fungus running down its spine like a goblin staircase. Standing with his back braced against the tree he can look down at where Holly stands, looking up at him. As though Holly is himself, on that first terrible night. And he’s the beast.

The trees grow denser here, their tops fingering the sky, the ground underfoot undulating in boggy shoulders and ancient ribs of mossy rock and fallen branches, gradually climbing yet higher. But there’s something that almost resembles a path weaving in and around exposed fingers of arthritic roots. It might be a water channel. When it rains and deluges on the road above, gathering pools of surface-water must sluice through gutters and force a surging course down between the trees, leaving a path of exposed shingle. Or it could be an animal trail. He stumbles higher, struggling on all fours. His hands are bleeding. Spasms of tortured transformation. The moonlight cascades and shivers. He breathes hard. As he grasps from tree to tree the dark hair on the ridge of his knuckles is bristling. Black shapes move ahead of him, flitting through peripheral shadows.

‘Sheena! Sheena! It’s Dad!’ His voice bites in his throat. It comes out in an animal roar. His face is streaked with tears. ‘Sheena. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I couldn’t help myself.’ He stumbles. His ankle explodes in pain. He curls down into the mud. Choked breath cutting his throat. Heart rattling loose. The black beast circles behind



his eyes. His muzzle. His curve of needle-sharp claws. His pelt. He howls with a long animal howl dragged from the depths of his soul...



Waking with sirens in his head and a mouthful of cobwebs. It's happened again. Time Slip. The sheets are clean and white. The bed is luxuriously soft. He sinks deep into it. His ankle throbs, but he's strangely calm. At first he doesn't understand. Then it grows gradually. He's stayed overnight at 'The Baskerville Arms', as they'd planned. He turns over and drowns.

Eventually he gets up, washes and shaves. Then goes down the stairs to where Holly is tucking into a full English. He takes the veggie option, with mushrooms, potato croquettes, and coffee.

'I heard sirens? When she was little, Sheena called them Nee-Naws.'

'I've got news. Don't know quite how to tell you. How to break it to you. I'm sorry Tatem. Last night, after you'd passed out and I brought you back here, I got to thinking. What the landlord had said about there being no cellars here in the village.'

They go outside into the hazy morning. Two police cars are pulled in like chevrons at one of the dilapidated cottages along the road. Yellow-and-black crime-scene tapes strung across its drive-entrance.

'I don't understand.'

'We joked about the local pervert here not having an S&M torture-dungeon. So I got to wondering, what does he do? He builds an S&M torture-attic. Looking out from my room in the pub I could see it, that cottage over there has bars across its loft-window. I called the cops. I was right. Your search for what happened to Sheena is over. I'm truly sorry, Tatem.'

He gulps in a huge lungful of air. Unable to meet Holly's eyes for a long long moment. 'You know, last night in the woods, I was certain that...'

'I know. You don't have to say it. But it's over now. I guarantee you'll get no more black-outs either. No tumour. You're free, Tatem, you're free.'





State of Horror, from Charon Coin Press, is a unique anthology line in that it collects 13 horror stories for each of the 50 US states. Each state gets a book dedicated just to its own legends, folktales, hauntings, and general spookiness. The actual state plays a role, or is a character in the stories. The settings of the State of Horror stories are recognizable even to locals. All of the State of Horror authors take care to not only incorporate the state into their stories, but to create true horror stories to thrill readers of the horror genre.

Many of the State of Horror authors write an original tale of horror they have dreamt up and incorporated into a state. Other authors take local lore or a famous haunt and put their own creative spin on the story. Some authors even incorporate some history into their story and twist it until it terrifies even the hardest horror lover.

State of Horror: Illinois contains stories by Stuart Conover, Eric I. Dean, DJ Tyrer, Della West, Claire C. Riley, Herika R. Raymer, Frank J. Edler, Julianne Snow, A. Lopez, Jr., Armand Rosamilia, Eli Constant, P. David Puffinburger, and Jay Seate.

State of Horror: Illinois is the first of the new states to be brought into the State of Horror anthologies. The story settings range from Chicago all the way to the farmlands of southern Illinois. Again with Illinois there is an eclectic group of authors with veterans branching out into a new area and new authors making their debut. With ghosts, zombies, madmen, and so many other enticing characters, *State of Horror: Illinois* is sure to have something for every fan of horror.

Available in eBook and print format at online distributors like Amazon, Barnes&Noble, iTunes, and Kobo. The cost of the books in print form are \$ 12.99 and eBook \$2.99. Come take a tour of terror around State of Horror.

About State of Horror Anthology Series

State of Horror anthologies are planned to cover all 50 US states as well as some special editions. The series is broken down into regions (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, South, Mountain, and Pacific) with books being released every five months. Upcoming releases will be State of Horror: Louisiana and State of Horror: North Carolina. Currently, submissions are being accepted for State of Horror: Tennessee and upcoming open submission, State of Horror: California. For more information on open submissions, visit the submission page at www.charoncoinpress.com.

About the Publisher

Charon Coin Press – The Journey...Our Specialty

Charon Coin Press is a US based publishing company launched in April 2014, which focuses on publishing speculative fiction with its mission-to produce quality works of speculative fiction with the readers in mind by creating a connection, a relationship if you will, with these fantastic authors. So whether it is a short story collection, novella, or full-length novel, we here at Charon Coin Press, are dedicated to making connections and ferrying you through this enjoyable journey of speculative fiction.

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Justified

by DJ Tyrer

I am writing this to explain why I did what I did, to justify my killing of my lover and former school friend, to put down my reasons before I did. I will be dead soon. I am certain that the autopsies of the bodies will confirm my suspicions, justifying my killing of her, even if the authorities assume that I was insane, as doubtless they will, unable to accept the veracity of what I have discovered; or, they will concoct a halfway-plausible narrative of deceit to satisfy their need to reject the horrific truths gnawing at the fringes of reason.

Mary came into my life just over a year ago, contacting me online. I hadn't seen her in over a decade and, the last time I had seen her, she had been a he; Martin. Martin and I had been at school together and quite good friends. Not best friends, but we had shared interests in philosophy, psychology and the occult. We had gone our separate ways when University beckoned and lost contact. The last I heard of him, a mutual friend said he had dropped out and joined some cult or commune; I hadn't been too surprised at that news. It was a shock when he got back in touch and told me about the sex change. I suppose, looking back, there were clues, but not so as it had seemed a likely outcome. Still, it was no big deal.

We messaged one another for a few weeks and it was clear that Mary had retained Martin's fascination with the occult. Of course, that should have been a warning flag; I had recently purchased the only privately-owned copy of the Krypticon of Silander; with hindsight, it is clear that Mary only wanted to get her hands upon it, but I didn't see that then; she was very careful in drip-feeding hints as to her interest, neither too keen nor too slow, so as to arouse my suspicion. Instead, she aroused me in an entirely different manner.

We had our past connection, of course, but Mary was also almost the perfect woman to me: a pretty, fine-boned brunette with a pale complexion and lovely blue-grey eyes. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised at just how beautiful she was. Too often, none but the earliest transitions get such a perfectly-feminine outcome; my assumption was that she must have spent a fortune on cosmetic surgery to get things so perfect. As I remembered him, Martin had not been so delicate, even if a little fey; the transformation seemed almost miraculous. Another red flag I never spotted.

Naturally, doubtless as she planned, I fell in love with Mary. Her looks, personality and interests all served to entice me in. Our reborn friendship blossomed as we messaged and texted all the more often, began to phone and skype, until we finally agreed to meet in person, arranging a lunch date. By this point, she must have known that she had hooked me.

There was no talk, then, of the occult and musty old tomes, just casual conversation over sautéed chicken breasts and white wine in an upmarket bistro-pub near my office, culminating in our agreeing to see one another again. Not even a kiss; she knew just how to reel me in.



After that, we began to date regularly; lunches, dinners, nightclubs, theatres, exhibitions, all the usual things a couple might enjoy. Few mentions of our past preoccupations, a single philosophy lecture, no more. Naturally, she did not wish to tip her hand until she had guaranteed that I would give her what she wanted. Act too eagerly and I might become suspicious about her reasons for renewing contact after such a long time and in such unusual circumstances.

She did not mention the Krypticon of Silander until I finally could no longer holdout against her charms and asked, somewhat shyly, if she would come home with me; in fact, she never did mention it, I did. Doubtless, this was what Mary had planned all along, or something like it. Like any would-be paramour, I needed to impress the object of my desire and, given the subtle nudging to recall past interests, what better way than to display my rarity to her?

“Look at this,” I said to her, taking her into my library, where the medieval manuscript, illuminated in Bari a millennium ago from a Greek original rescued from Muslim hands, sat in a climatically-controlled glass case.

“Can I take it out?” she had asked, clearly fascinated.

I laughed at the suggestion. The pages were so old and fragile that handling them was asking for trouble. However, I had a reply: “But, I do have a digital copy, if you would like to see it?”

She did. I retrieved a tablet from a shelf beneath the case and switched it on. I had had every page of the manuscript scanned to catalogue the beautiful illuminated volume. I passed the tablet to her and allowed her to examine several of the pages. However, I intended the night to be something other than a book club, so soon asked her to put the tablet down. Mary did so with barely the slightest hint of irritation and I promised her that she would soon have the chance to view the volume in detail.

We made love for the first time that night, with a frantic urgency as if we truly had waited all our lives for this moment. Had I paused to savour our passion, I might have noticed what was to become apparent later. But, I did not; I was enjoying myself too much at the time. I suppose it may be considered unmanly to admit it, but it wounds me, now, to realise that Mary was just using me; using sex to get what she wanted from me. It surprises me that the realisation hurts so much, given all that I have learnt since; there are worse things than the realisation that sex was being dangled as a lure, not offered out of any genuine feeling. Yet, it is that sense of betrayal that hurts the most.

That night, I awoke to discover Mary cradled serenely in my arms. Gently, I stroked her hair. Never when I had known Martin would I ever have imagined us lying together like this, yet, at that moment, it seemed so right, as if it were meant to be. Lying there, Mary betrayed no hint of the horrors that she concealed in her soul. At that moment, I could never have imagined any of what was to follow, what was to bring me to this place of horrendous doom when I must, must, cast my life aside in order, in some perverse paradox, to save it.

That moment of perfection ended with a sudden, yet slight, movement of Mary, the barest twitch as she slept, and the murmur of a word, a sound that was like “shasta” or

“saster”. The word – somehow, I knew it was a word, if perhaps only half formed, not the mere sound of her breath – niggled at my memory, unpleasant, if too nebulous to place. In the end, I assumed she must be dreaming of Mount Shasta, axis mundi of the New Age, and set the thought aside, even if I wasn’t entirely pleased with that deduction; it was only later that I placed the word, realised what it was she was invoking in her sleep. If only I had realised sooner... instead, I drifted back off to sleep, still cradling Mary in my arms. It seems like a bad joke to recall it, now.

When I next awoke, the early light of a new day was filtering in through the curtains. Mary stirred as I did, waking in my arms. She tilted her head to gaze into my eyes with a look that I took to be love, as her words to me proclaimed. I responded in kind and kissed her forehead. How could I be such a fool?

As we lay there in the still of the morning, Mary talked to me of our childhood together. It was peculiar, lying there in the embrace of a gorgeous woman discussing our boyhood together. Naturally, she spoke of our shared interests, adolescent speculations, and, at last, turned the conversation round to the Krypticon. I could not help but crow over my coup in gaining possession of the volume. Who wouldn’t? It was the crowning glory of my collection. If it would further impress my lover, well, who wouldn’t take advantage?

It is a rarity, little studied by even the most erudite of scholars, seldom referenced in other works, and obscure to those who did read it, the Greek of Silander being a rather obtuse dialect, and the wording enigmatic and strange. I had once gained access to a copy of the infamous Necronomicon of the mad Arab, but even that’s strange couplets were as nothing compared to the ramblings of the mysterious Greek philosopher who had penned this most marvellous of tomes. I was happy to expound upon all I had learnt of it. There can be little doubt that she was humouring me as she smiled and nodded and gasped as I talked; Mary already knew what the Krypticon contained, that was why she sought it.

We continued to see one another, our relationship crystallising into one publicly acknowledged. That did, of course, lead to the awkward question of whether to acknowledge our past. On her part, there was no problem as Mary told me that she was estranged from her family. (“They refused to accept my transition,” she told me. I have no idea if Martin’s family know of Mary or not.) Most of my friends and business acquaintances had not known me back when Mary had been Martin, so they could safely be kept in the dark; the remainder were of little importance. It was my family that posed the problem. How do you tell your parents that the woman you are sleeping with was born a boy and that they met him when you were at school? Could they accept it? Some maybe, but mine were very traditional; they found my hobby of collecting mouldy old texts of dubious provenance embarrassing enough without my adding such a transgression to the list. “What will people think?” was their constant refrain. I wanted to tell them that ‘people’ could go fuck themselves, but I dared not. It seemed as if silence must be our watchword; not that it matters any more – they will likely read this or hear of it, and decide that their son was a dangerous lunatic. Is that better or worse than a transsexual lover? “What will people think?” What, indeed!

Such issues side, our relationship was excellent, with amazing sex and plenty of it. I couldn’t get enough of Mary and she couldn’t get enough of me – or, what I could do

for her. In-between bouts of lovemaking, I allowed her access to my scans of the Krypticon and she always seemed most passionate, invigorated, in her attentions after examining it; I, in turn, frequently found myself feeling drained after our most vigorous sessions; I doubt my exhaustion was due merely to the exertions of our energetic sex life.

But, even as I was beginning to entertain thoughts of proposing to her, asking her to become my wife, I was beginning to have doubts about Mary. I was beginning to wonder if she really had been Martin after all.

It is difficult to explain; I suppose it was the cumulation of a myriad of minor doubts, each so negligible, so insignificant, as to be unnoticeable on its own, but building up to an inescapable, if unbelievable, conclusion in the same manner as every grain of sand, each almost too small to see, makes up a vast desert. I was beginning to believe that Mary was an impostor.

It made no sense. Mary knew everything about my friendship with Martin, even those little details it seemed so unlikely for an impostor to learn. Still, such an imposture would not be impossible; had Mary been, perhaps, a girlfriend of Martin's or a stalker of his, it might have been possible to wheedle the information out of him or read it in a diary. But, there were certain mannerisms, little tics, barely noticeable yet integral to my memory of Martin, that she possessed; quirks of thought, turns of phrase. No matter how carefully observed, it seemed impossible that she could not only have memorised every little tic, but managed to deploy them, naturally, unconsciously, even in the frantic heights of our lovemaking. There is not way that an actor could be that good.

Yet, I found it impossible to believe that she could really be Martin: she seemed far too perfect a woman. I admit that I have had little experience of transsexuals, and I know that modern medical procedures can achieve miracles of transformation in the right circumstances, but what I do know is women and Mary just seemed too perfect a woman to have once been a man. As I grew to know her body intimately, it seemed impossible that she was anything but a born woman; I even noticed a monthly pattern to the periods in which she was not amenable for sex. And, looking at old photos of Martin, it seemed our relative heights and certain features didn't tally with the woman who so often shared my bed. Had I not had such evidence of her identity as my old school friend, I would have had no doubt that she truly was a woman all her life.

Of course, no matter how great my doubts at that point, I just couldn't believe the conclusion to which my reasoning had led me; probably lust played its part in blinding me to my doubts for so long, for I wanted nothing more than to have her; Mary had successfully ensnared me, and it was a miracle that I ever escaped her clutches. I rationalised my doubts as evidence of just how successful her transition had been and how dedicated she was to truly becoming a woman, not merely playacting at it, but fully embracing her true nature. I suppose, in a sense, that my rationalisation was correct.

Had our relationship been a genuine one, that is most likely where such concerns would have ended, but it was the Krypticon that Mary wanted, not me, and it was Silander's book that was to prove her undoing.

No matter how much time she spent in my company – and a significant amount of our time together was spent in bed – Mary continued to live in her own apartment, to which she never invited me, always visiting me, which meant that her opportunities for reading the book were limited and frequently supervised by me, limiting her progress in deciphering its contents; already a slow labour as her Greek was poor.

“Oh, honestly,” she would say, “it isn’t as if I am handling the real thing; you needn’t babysit me...”

Eventually, I submitted to her wheedling pleas and agreed that she could take the tablet home with her and examine the scans at her leisure. She was delighted and rewarded me handsomely, as was her way.

I shouldn’t have been surprised, yet was, and emotionally devastated, too, that she ceased all contact with me the moment that she left with the tablet. At first, she responded to my calls and texts by telling me that she was ill; at first, I believed her. But, as I grew more doubtful, she just ceased to respond at all, leaving me desperately wondering what I might have said or done to drive her away until, finally, my earlier doubts resurfaced and I was struck by the very real possibility that I had been set up, that the entirety of our romance had been nothing more than a ploy to gain access to the Krypticon.

Except, that made no sense. The Krypticon was worth a fortune, it was true, but, whilst the scans of its pages were not publicly available, they had little value in comparison. Yes, a collector would have paid good money for what was on the tablet, but they would have paid far more for the tome itself. If Mary had been duping me all along, why take the tablet when she might have taken advantage of me to steal the real book – hell, it was even plausible to imagine that she might have been able to seduce me into gifting it to her, allowing her to vanish with it. Then, there was the way in which she had shown such an interest in it. Thinking back to it, her approach to the Krypticon had been almost reverent. This was no theft for a collector, of that I was certain; Mary had wanted the volume for herself – not as a collectible, a relic of the past, but as a source of knowledge. Martin had always taken the occult more seriously than me; whatever Mary’s connection with him, it seemed that that was a trait which they shared.

I wasn’t sure how to proceed, although I knew that I didn’t want to involve the police, nor any others, such as private detectives. Although I told myself that I wanted to protect Mary, that escalating the issue would only harm her, my real reason for wanting to keep things between us private was a fear of being made to look the fool. “What would people say?” A great deal if I was exposed as the victim of sexual enticement by a transwoman, real or ersatz. People would find it a real joke and I had my pride. Not that any of that matters, now.

So, I resolved to retrieve the volume myself. Although I had never been into Mary’s apartment, I knew where it was, having seen her to her door and picked her up from there several times during our time together. Watching the place, I confirmed that she had not left; clearly she imagined me fooled by her charms or, perhaps, she just didn’t believe I would act against her to recover the tablet (I suppose I could easily have written it off, but I was offended at being used). Whatever the case, I knew that she

had not left and laid my plans to retrieve my property, waiting until she went out before bribing the concierge to allow me access to her home under the pretence of arranging a romantic surprise for her at which I would ‘pop the question’, taking with me flowers, chocolates and balloons as if that really were my purpose.

Once inside, I dumped the items I had carried in with me on the floor by the door and began to search methodically. I had no idea which room lay behind which door and, so, had to open each in turn, even when doing so disappointingly and time-wastingly revealed a cupboard of her bathroom. It was in that latter that I found evidence that convinced me that, no matter what the indications to the contrary, Mary was not Martin: tossed casually into a bin was a used sanitary towel. I had once seen an episode of CSI in which a transwoman faked her period to fool her fiancée that she was a born woman, but I could see no scenario in which Mary, if she had been Martin, would want to give that impression; after all, she had identified herself as him right from the moment she contacted me and had made little effort to hide her alleged status from the world, and she had never invited me in nor had I seen any signs of her having other visitors to her home, rendering any fakery utterly pointless. Of course, the confirmation of my suspicions raised a whole new series of questions about her method and motivation, but I pushed these aside in favour of concentrating on the task in hand. I had to work fast: my observations indicated she would be gone no more than an hour, probably less.

There was no sign of the tablet and I was running out of time; maybe she had hidden it, perhaps she had taken it with her, I had no clue. I knew I was going to have to abandon my attempt – and that raised the question of the stuff I had brought with me; take it or leave it? I decided to leave it, scribbling a quick note in the oversized novelty card telling her just how much I missed her, hoping Mary might be prompted to resume contact, leaving it on her desk. It was then that I noticed a swipecard in a desk tidy, marked with the name of a storage company. It seemed unlikely that the tablet was there – she would have had less access than at mine – but, I couldn’t help but wonder what she had stored there, whether it might offer me some clue to her true identity, just what her plot was.

I took the swipecard and left.

About an hour later, she phoned me, complaining: “You were in my apartment!”

I told her I had intended it to be romantic and hung-up as she began to rant about boundaries; I had arrived at my destination.

The card let me through the outer door of the storage depot and that presented me with a quandary: the card lacked a door number. That left me trying each door in turn and thanking my lucky stars that the starkly-lit place was empty at that time of night. Luckily, it was eighth try successful and I had it, the light on the door lock blinking from red to green.

I rolled the door-shutter up to reveal an almost empty storage space. I didn’t see my tablet, but hadn’t expected to. However, there was a large chest freezer up against the far wall. I approached it with an unpleasant feeling in my stomach, half-expecting what I might find within.



I found it. A body. Martin's body.

Although I hadn't seen him in years, I recognised Martin immediately; I had studied his picture enough times when comparing his face to Mary's. It was a hideous sight: frozen stiff and rimed with frost, his head lolled at an unpleasant angle suggestive of a broken neck and the face was wide-eyed with horror. Even having expected to find his corpse, I was revolted and had to look away. Perhaps what I found most horrific, even more than the hideous, shocked look in the eyes, was the way in which the corpse had been mutilated, brutally and with obvious loathing. The shirt had been pulled open and a livid symbol carved in the pallid flesh, something like a three-legged swastika. But, worse than that, his trousers had been opened and his penis cut off. No, not cut, hacked away. When you see the corpse, you will know what I mean. Mary had castrated Martin with an unconstrained loathing for the man. Then, she had impersonated him. I imagined she had tortured information out of him. I had no idea then what was going on in her mind, but she was clearly crazy!

I'm not entirely certain what happened next. I had to look away, too disgusted by what the freezer contained. I think every man must understand the feelings that churned inside me as I looked down upon Martin's mutilated corpse. I think I shut the place up before stumbling outside. I remember brief flashes as I drove back to Mary's apartment; it is a miracle I wasn't stopped for speeding. If I had been, things would have been very different: I wouldn't be planning to kill myself and I surely would've been damned...

Somehow, I reached her apartment block and got inside – I don't recall if she buzzed me in, if I somehow seemed rational enough to convince the concierge, or just smashed my way in. The next thing I clearly remember is hammering on her door, shouting. For some reason, she chose to open the door, perhaps thinking I was upset over her behaviour, perhaps hoping to reason with me, maybe just attempting to avoid 'a scene'; I barged in past her.

I heard the door slam behind me and she chased after me as I stormed into her lounge and tossed the keycard onto her desk.

"You lost something," I spat, turning to confront her.

Mary had been shrieking something about me overstepping the bounds, but the sight of the keycard silenced her.

"I don't know who you are – but, I know that you killed Martin."

To my surprise, Mary didn't seem concerned. There was a wry sort of smile on her lips that was uniquely Martin. I shivered – whether from the smile or the realisation that she would surely kill me as she had killed my old friend, I'm not sure. Had he been alive when she sliced it off and carved that symbol into his chest? I didn't want to contemplate it.

Someone once wrote that knowing that you will shortly die helps concentrate the mind; I think that may be true. As horrible as it all was, something clicked into place in the back of my mind.



The symbol that had been so brutally engraved into Martin's flesh appeared in the text of the Krypticon. It was the Kitrino Simvolo, the Yellow Symbol or Pale Sign, the emblem of a nebulous, chthonic deity – χαστυρ, Khasteer or, maybe, Hasteer; to someone like Mary, whose Greek was atrocious, it might be mispronounced as if it were 'Xastur'; Zaster or similar – the word she had mumbled in her sleep. A deity whose name was close to 'khaos' in the Greek. I recalled that Silander wrote of this Khasteer as a tripartite God, a trinity similar to that of the Christian deity: Father, Mother and Son; or, King, Queen and Heir. A God that could shift gender with ease and whose feminine form was described, in one passage, as a 'wild Lamia, feasting upon the sceptre of man, devouring her mate.' Mary had clearly adopted 'Xastur' as her own feminist deity, sacrificing my schoolfriend to Her.

I confronted her with my insight.

"Oh, so, I had the pronunciation wrong?" was her immediate reaction to my accusation: no denial, no attempt to justify herself. "Still, it is with the heart and soul that we glorify God, not our voice." There was a certain irony that her error had made me much slower in putting together the clues.

I think I must have uttered some affronted response as she chuckled, then said, "I think you misunderstand..."

"What? That you're a psycho-bitch? You killed Martin!"

If only it had been that simple. "Well, bodily, perhaps," she smirked. "Oh, don't worry, I won't kill you... well, not your body..."

"What are you gibbering about?"

"I am Martin. Well, this body is the vessel for my soul and my soul is his. Just as yours will be. I want the Krypticon and this will guarantee your silence."

"I don't understand..."

"Oh, I think you do," she told me, "I can see it in your eyes...." She was right. She was Martin, in mind and soul. I understood the truth, even if I didn't understand how or why.

She explained, if talk of magic and demons can be called an explanation. Somehow, she had translated her – his – mind into the body of a woman he had seduced especially for the task, imprisoning her mind in the body that had been his, murdering her whilst she was too shocked and confused to react. So, what she had told me, of a sex change, was true in a bizarre sense.

"It is disorientating," she said.

I understood, now, that she planned to do the same thing to me – slip her soul from the vessel that currently held it into my body and send mine into hers. With a horrific sense of irony, I saw how she would excuse her murder of me in her guise – I had discovered that Mary was a sadistic murderer – she, as me, would kill the 'psycho-bitch' in 'self-defence' and the killing would be vindicated. Perfect.

But, there was one thing that didn't ring true. After she had killed the body that had, once, hosted her mind, the one in which Martin's essence had been born, why mutilate it as she had; and why masquerade as Martin?

"Oh, I always wanted to be a woman. The choice of this body was quite deliberate, I assure you. So much more convenient, and far less painful, than surgery and trying to pass."

"But, then, why take my body?" I was slowly moving closer to her as we spoke.

"Convenience. As much as I have enjoyed shagging you, I have no particular desire to own your body. Once I have made use of you, I will find another woman whose body to seize and live my life in comfort; you will commit suicide or die in a 'tragic accident'..."

"No respect..." I muttered, a grim amusement insinuating its way into me as I, literally, stared death in the face.

She opened her mouth to say something caustic and I swung my fist. Her jaw shattered and she fell to the floor, eyes wide with surprise, her lower face a bloody, pulpy mess. I turned away and found a statuette of some squat, toad-like being; I drove the heavy object down onto her head, killing her.

Of course, my hope was that I could use her own plan to justify my killing of her: a misandrist killer slain by her intended victim; I could live with the embarrassment of our relationship. But, then, the words of Silander came back to me: "Even the dead may act from beyond the grave." I began to search through her shelves to see what I could discover about her spell; I was unsuccessful, but still had my fears confirmed as I felt something reminiscent of an oil slick glide across the surface of my mind. If I am right, and I know in my heart I am, the mind that is Martin is seeking a way into my body and it is only a matter of time before my defences fail and Martin seizes my body and casts my soul out into that corpse.

So, I sit here at her desk, mere feet from her bloodied body, writing this to explain why I did what I did, and to justify my killing of my lover and former school friend. It will prove to be true, even if the metaphysical aspects are doubted, and I will be vindicated in killing her.

Even as I write this, I feel my hand twitch outside of my control and my sense of presence dim. If I do not act now, I will be dead and she will be free to kill again in the name of her misandrist deity. I cannot allow that to happen. I would rather die first. And, I will...



MYSTERY LADY

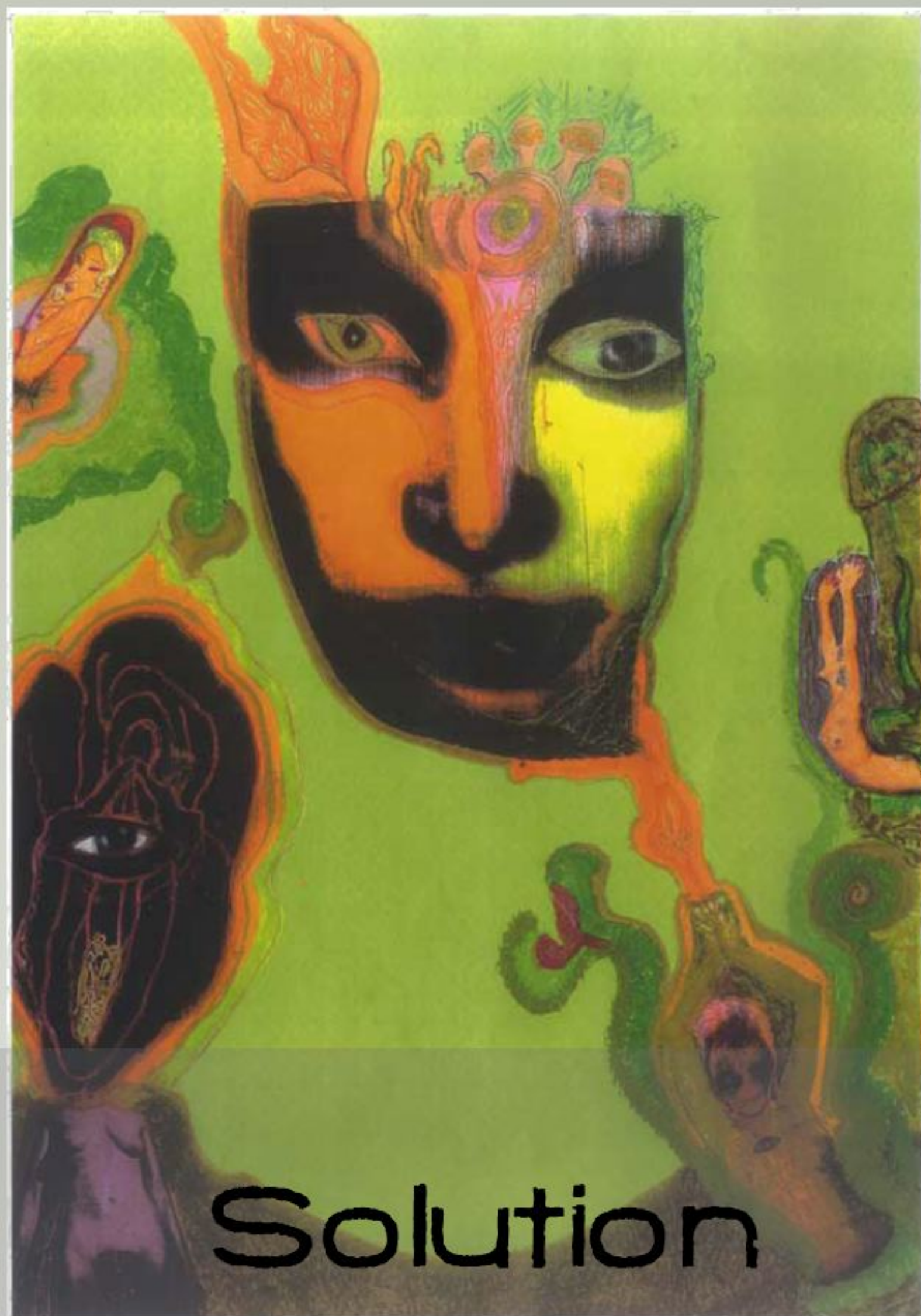
by Denny E. Marshall

She smiles so flashy
Even with her eyes
When she stops her show
It still drags in my mind

Like the sun behind the clouds
She comes and she goes
She'll punch my heart
Until I explode
She is a mystery lady
No one know her name

When she comes around
In a black silk dress
Doesn't need an introduction
She remains anonymous

We'll dance and carry on
In the shadow of the moon
Like Cinderella at midnight
She has to leave in a while
She is a mystery lady



by Frederick J. Mayer

Who brings Death's
Dark
Dreamer's
Soma?
Not Nairatnya
the egoless consort.
In the dark Yoni
they come -
Isis, Persephone,
Hathor, Lakshmi.
What will be puberty
in the Age of Kali?
Harken to Their prophecy
these goddesses all.
Into Death's eyes
vulva,
Pierce darkness Dreamer's look
to recall erotic mysteries.

R'LYEH: TWO SONNETS

THE CITY



by Julio Toro San Martin

THE HIGH PRIEST

Through dim uncounted years the silence rolled,
Through Palaeogean ages fraught with fear;
No light shone, on that colossal bier
Of star-stone quarried steps and turrets old.
The Pacific mightily the wreck concealed
Of Elder Gods and their city, stilled;
None guessed, none from ancient prophecies distilled,
What was to come, what was to be revealed.

Till from the ocean burst the sleeping city,
And nightmare centuries with it to the world.
"R'lyeh!" its acolytes boomed forth, unfurled,
In manic utterance, without tear or pity.
For now the Reign of Man had come to pass
To unimaginable hordes of flabby mass.

All along the star-spawned gods had lain
Within their ghostly city beneath the waves,
Dreaming in their crypts, sepulchers and graves,
In peaceful repose from their former reign.

All was quiet in the murky depths
—This frightful silence of the deep, —and sea-beasts,
Who without voice enjoy in noiseless feasts,
Were there, with brainless secrets to be kept.

One god —Cthulhu —dreamt greater dreams than all.

In delightful darkness was his mind kept
On promises the stars had made, and so slept
More peaceful in those eon-haunted halls.
"Who is your Chief?" he asked. "You," the gods did say.
His kraken-head was pleased and chuckled where it lay.



TIGERSHARK

GRINNING MOON

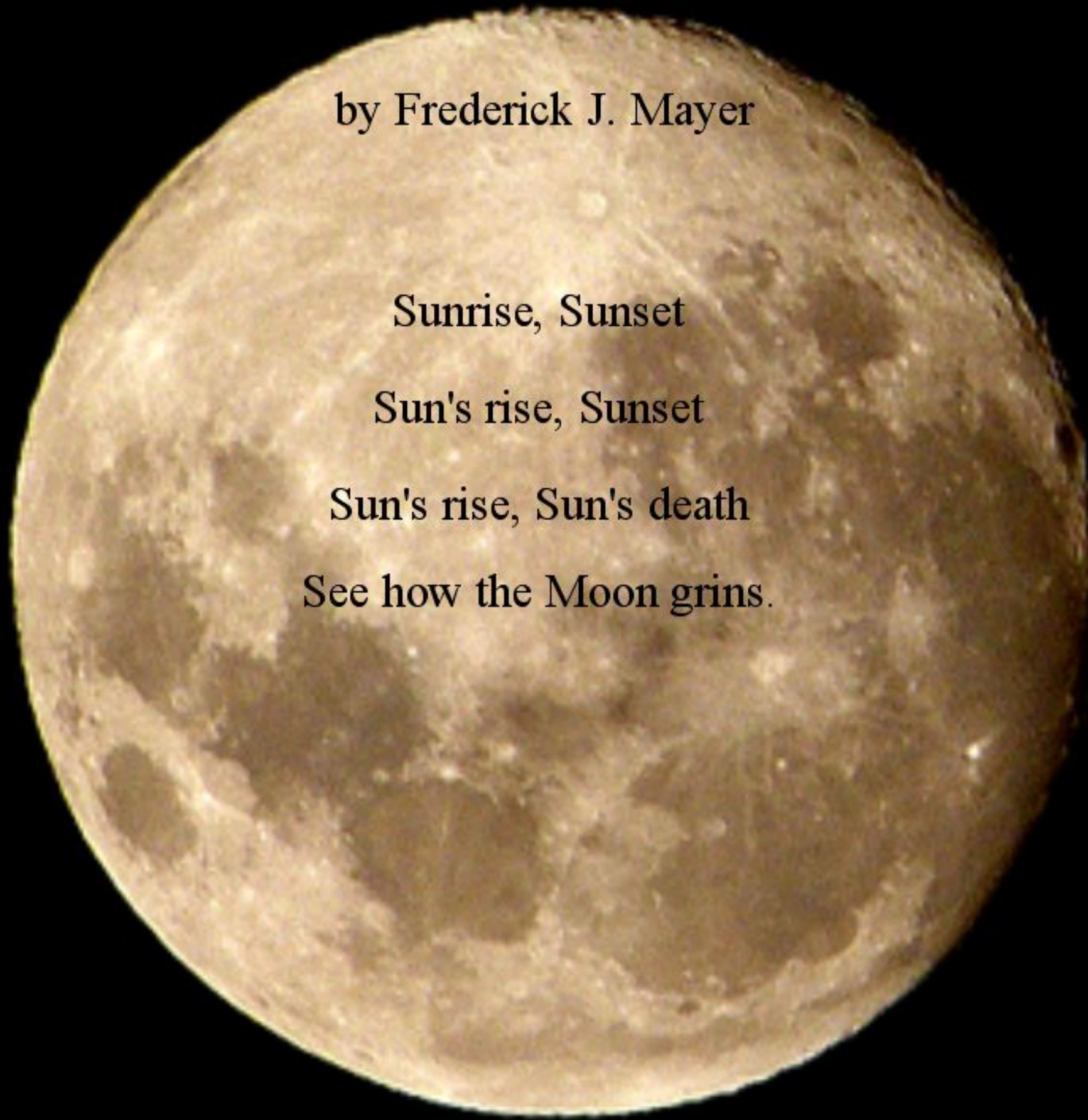
by Frederick J. Mayer

Sunrise, Sunset

Sun's rise, Sunset

Sun's rise, Sun's death

See how the Moon grins.



SPIRIT WAVES IN CUSTODY

by Neil K. Henderson

I am equal in intensity to a moonbeam,
I am equal in intensity to the sky.
I am equal in intensity to all distance—
Looking out beyond equality.

The spirit craves intensity,
Spirit waves in custody.

Pull back the blanket of the night,
I want to see the soul's condition.
Pull back the blanket of the night,
I want to see the naked spark.

Spirit waves in custody,
I am equal in intensity.
Spirit waves in custody,
I am equal to the sky.

Grinning Moon (David Leverton)



Maybe Waldo had Syphilis

by Matt Betts

I never found him. I looked. I did. Hours spent with a magnifying glass in one hand, a Sunny D in the other. Scouring faces, following his trail. It just wasn't my thing. Eventually, I gave up. Now that I'm older, I feel bad about it. I mean, what if Waldo was gravely ill and he didn't even know it. The whole purpose of the game might have been to locate him so a crack medical team could get him life-saving medication. Presumably, he's dead now. If my success was any indication.

But, you know, thinking about it, maybe that emergency medicine thing was a ruse. It sounds like an excuse mobsters would use in order to get me to lead them right to Waldo so they could deliver him a gruesome fate. Did he owe them money because of a terrible gambling problem? Was it a love triangle? I could see a guy like Waldo sleeping with a gangster's girlfriend. Unknowingly, of course.

I'm glad I didn't find him. Maybe he escaped with the young lady and they're living an honest life in Chicago or Orlando or Vegas. If I know Waldo, it's someplace crowded. He probably works in a mall or a fish market, an airport, maybe. Sounds like a decent life.

Unless... Maybe the criminals already got to him. Maybe that's why I couldn't find him in the first place. Dear God.

Suppose, finally, that Waldo was just an ass with no regard for anyone else's feelings. Suppose that he ran and ran for fun. Keeping one step ahead of his pursuers – friends, concerned citizens and well-wishers alike. Mimosas in the Galapagos Islands. A pint in the shadow of Big Ben.

I'm going to try again. Work harder to find Waldo. This time, I'll work day and/or night until I get it right. And when I see him, hidden in plain sight on the beach in Rio de Janeiro, standing between a stall selling umbrellas and an overturned candy cane delivery truck, I'll pull off his silly hat and those black glasses and I'll embrace him firmly.

"It's alright," I'll say. "You can come home. Your girlfriend is pregnant. You're going to be a father." And while he stands, speechless, doing math as to when he last saw his lost love, I'll slip on his disguise and fade into the pages, disappearing in a crowd at a football game or the Mall of America. I'll let anonymity wash over me and begin a game of my own. Find me. Don't find me. Peanut butter and jelly on the Riviera, a Coke at the Kremlin.



THE LAKE

by JC Hartley

Despite our best efforts to emphasise the necessity of this enterprise, the public at large continue to view the members of the local community concerned as victims of an unfeeling authority.

Internal memo: Manchester Corporation (1935)

*I look into the lake (the lacquered water
Black with the sunset), watching my own face*

Norman Nicholson: 'From a Boat at Coniston'

THE ENGLISH LAKE DISTRICT, 1936

Stella writhed uncomfortably in the passenger seat of Donny Flynn's little car.

'How much further is it, Donny?'

'Not far now.' Donny squinted through the windscreen and tried to sound assured. He wished he was more confident. He had only been to the house once before and, despite an evening in London poring over maps, the reality of the territory was proving more complicated to negotiate. It wasn't the lack of signposting. When the signs had indicated the direction of a large town or a significant community all was well, but too often he was coming across junctions where a humble finger-post would suggest the options of obscure and opposite hamlets of which he had never heard. It had been fine at first, an early start, a leisurely journey North over a couple of days, the illicit thrill of booking in as man and wife in a provincial hotel, but Donny had underestimated the journey time. Rural Cumberland in the dead of night had taxed his limited powers of navigation.

'Donny, what is that?'

The lake, the blessed lake; the moon, as near full as need be, shipping like a lifeboat from a vessel of cloud, had caught the water's surface somewhere up ahead, spilling silver across a crescent valley.

'I know where we are now,' said Donny. 'That lake is new, believe it or not.'

The house nestled into the hillside overlooking the lake. Donny and Stella were ushered in.

'You must be exhausted. Some whisky; or something cold? It's so close tonight. Come in, come in; what will you have? Are you hungry, you must be? Soup? A drink first, then something to eat. You found us alright then; I'm so glad.'

The speaker was a large man, bluff, square-shouldered and ruddy-faced; no longer young but with a boyish eagerness to his face.

‘Stella,’ said Donny, ‘Murray Crawford. Murray, this is my friend Stella Maine, the poetess.’

Stella grimaced; poetess like actress seemed such a diminution, like the description of a slightly inferior form of an ideal. As so often in social situations where she was denied the security of her usual circle she adopted an air that bordered on condescension.

‘What an interesting house. Hardly typical I would have thought, out here in the sticks?’

‘Leslie Martin, the architect, converted it for me. Put in these huge windows, to see the lake, even before the lake was here.’ Murray grinned; if any slight had been intended on Stella’s part he had chosen to ignore it. They gravitated towards the glass, almost a whole wall; the disc of silver below, the reflected light of the moon, just as suddenly gone, as the clouds reasserted their domain.

‘Murray,’ said Donny, ‘I’m sorry, you have other guests.’

There were two other men in the room, one by the open fire nursing a tumbler of whisky, and one by the door to the living room. The seated man seemed like a visitor from an earlier time in his tweedy three-piece suit, with a cravat and watch-chain, an appearance enhanced by spectacular mutton-chop whiskers. The man by the door was sober-suited, large, quiet and alert.

‘Oh, this is Bob Turnbull, the poet; you’ll have heard of him Stella my dear. Bob lives not so very far from here. Bob, this is the young man I told you about, the romantic lead of my play. And this is Arthur, my chauffeur and friend.’ Crawford indicated the impressive figure of the man by the door who, in his turn, inclined towards them in greeting but remained silent.

‘Arthur’s wife is in London looking after the house there, the pair of us drove up a few days ago. You know, when things in town get all too much for me I ask Arthur to drive me up here. But after a few days I can’t help wondering what all my friends in London are up to, and what I’m missing. And now of course, with the world situation,’ Murray’s sentence went unfinished. ‘Now Donny, you must tell me about the play; are we really to lose Laughton?’

‘What’s this?’ If Stella’s abrupt change of subject was noticed, if indeed her tacit ignoring of Murray’s question registered at all, there was no sign. She hated to be excluded. She had picked up a little convex mirror, open in an attractive case, from a display table by the window.

‘It’s a Claude Glass,’ said Murray, ‘the landscape painters of the early nineteenth century used them to view their subject, over their shoulders so to speak. The views of the Lake District were sometimes considered too awesome, too awful, to view directly. It was all part of the Romantic era’s notions of the sublime, the Lake Poets y’know, and Byron, and Shelley too of course.’

‘His wife had something to say about the sublime,’ Bob Turnbull’s Cumbrian burr broke in, ‘Shelley’s wife that is. Do you know your Frankenstein, Miss?’

Stella admitted that she did not.

‘Mary Shelley has Victor Frankenstein encounter his Creature on the Mer de Glace, the great glacier. In the midst of the sublime transcendence of nature Frankenstein meets the unnatural thing he has cobbled together from spare parts. She was mocking the whole pretentious romantic twaddle for what it was.’

‘Ha, ha, Bob is not one for the rural idyll,’ said Murray. ‘He grew up in the industrial West of Cumberland, he has little time for tourists, and incomers like me.’ Turnbull grumbled his disagreement with the charge, but everything was a joke to Murray, and the upshot was that Stella, to her embarrassment, must have the Claude Glass as a gift.

When the time to retire arrived, Stella and Donny were allocated separate rooms. Stella was cold, and at some point in the night she got out of bed and, in a wrap, tip-toed barefoot along the landing to Donny’s room. Halfway along the landing, tense and alert with what she felt to be a ridiculous trepidation, she jumped in fright and then froze in horror, at the sound of a piercing scream followed by racking anguished sobs. She spun in alarm where she stood, not certain what she should do, and then jumped in fright again as a figure approached her from the head of the stairs. It was Arthur, Murray’s chauffeur, tying the cord of a tartan dressing-gown over striped pyjamas as he strode towards her.

‘Don’t be alarmed Miss, it’s Mr Crawford, he suffers terribly from nightmares. He had a little too much wine at dinner; I knew we’d have trouble.’ The man passed her and further along the landing turned off, where she heard him tapping at a door and then, speaking softly and indistinctly, open and then close a door behind him. The sobbing continued for a while then subsided, into a pitiful moaning slightly smothered. A sound made Stella turn, and she saw Donny standing in the doorway of his room beckoning to her urgently. She slipped passed him and skipped into his bed where he joined her.

‘I’ve never been so terrified,’ she admitted. ‘My God, what was he dreaming, what possible nightmare could cause that?’

‘Murray was bullied horribly at school,’ said Donny stroking her hair. ‘That’s why there’s always some beastly torture or cruelty in his books; he never got over it do you see?’

If Stella had thought the incident would be ignored or glossed over at breakfast she was to be surprised. Crawford brought it up himself.

‘I was packed off to boarding school as soon as I was old enough,’ he declared, after apologising for the night’s disturbance. ‘My parents loved me well enough but they were always very self-absorbed and I think I proved too much for them. I was a sensitive child, bookish of course, and older boys picked on me for that, and not just me. At my worst school, I won’t tell you the name, there was an hour before bedtime we boys were left to our own devices, and that’s when the older boys devised what they called The Games. There were feats of strength, races around the dorm, obstacle races, wrestling matches, we younger boys pitted against each other. I’m sure it all sounds perfectly harmless but we dreaded that hour,’ he paused, ‘and there were other things. Finally some bright spark had the notion of filling one of the baths, there was a

bathroom at the end of one of the dorms, filling a bath with water and seeing which of us juniors could hold his breath the longest.’ Murray paused, and Stella saw a slight greasy sheen had sprung out upon the speaker’s forehead. ‘I was unlucky I suppose, I was quite good at holding my breath. I shall never forget the water closing over my face, the hand on my chest, holding me under.’

‘They held you under?’ Stella gasped

‘Oh, yes. They thought we needed encouragement you see; they thought we would funk it. And I’ve been funking it ever since. You hold your breath for as long as you can. You think to yourself they’ll let you go. And then the pressure gets too much. And they don’t let you up. You struggle for a bit but you can’t get a purchase to lever yourself up. Then the water breaks in. It floods your mouth, fills your throat, and bursts up out of your nose. Your ears sing, your whole head feels as if it will burst with the huge bubble of pressure.’

He stopped then, looked around the breakfast table, and then gave one short laugh. ‘You should see your faces. I’m afraid my nightmares make me both a difficult house-guest and a worse host. Some nights I’m back there, naked, in that cold room, surrounded by the mocking faces of the other boys, prodded and goaded into the brimming tub, lowered under, and then that weight on my chest, the water filling my nostrils, the hand on my chest holding me under, forcing me down’. He looked up to where Arthur hovered by the door. ‘You hope someone will save you, not just from the drowning but from the peril and the humiliation too. But here’s Arthur, to guide us on our excursion.’

Murray had arranged an outing for that day. They were to walk down to the lake.

‘It’s not a natural feature the larger lake, do you see?’ Murray explained. ‘Manchester needs water, so last year the Corporation raised the level of an existing smaller lake by damming the head of the valley, but there was a village in the valley and that was drowned.’

‘But what about the people; the villagers?’ Stella was genuinely shocked.

‘Swept away; the whole crew!’ Murray paused for a beat and then roared with laughter. ‘Relocated, some moved to family, some had to start again in the towns and villages round about.’

‘A very bitter day, when the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people have to make way for big business,’ said Bob Turnbull.

‘Hardly big business, Bob; and what about the ordinary people of Manchester, shouldn’t they have their drinking water, their water closets and indoor plumbing?’

‘Murray wrote a story about it, didn’t you Murray,’ said Donny.

‘Yes, one of my happier ‘spooks’; an evil landowner plans to drown the valley without giving the villagers time to get away, but in the event the guardian daemons of the valley spirit the inhabitants away to a sort of parallel domain. It’s a horror story without victims; so unlike my usual thing.’

‘Did you see the flooding? Were you here when it happened?’ asked Stella.

‘Now that’s a sore point. I had planned to come up but in the event I had to stay to meet someone in London. Someone I knew, someone I had thought a friend, but who had treated me rather shabbily. Anyway he let me know, through Arthur, that he wanted to come and see me, I like to think it was to apologise. I sent Arthur up here alone in the car and I was to follow by train. In the event my enemy didn’t turn up; I hung about in London but it seemed he had disappeared altogether. After a couple of days I joined Arthur here at the house, the valley was already flooded. It was a disaster all round as it happened, because Arthur had forgotten to pack one of my trunks in the car, so unlike him, I don’t know how he missed that it wasn’t in the car boot. Fortunately I keep a wardrobe here, but there were some books for review in my trunk and a rather nice new dress shirt!’

‘What are we going to see Murray, just the lake?’ asked Donny

‘Well that’s the ironic thing; they flooded the valley to provide more water and then this year we’ve had this blessed drought! The water level has dropped and the village has re-emerged, part of it at least.’

‘How eerie’, said Stella.

Murray looked at Stella. ‘Yes, my dear, eerie indeed. Anyway, it may be our last chance to take a look around, Bob here says the weather’s going to break and he’s never wrong; and next month the Corporation are diverting even more water into the valley.’

The party, having breakfasted, left the house and made their meandering way down to the shores of the lake where already the falling levels had revealed buildings clinging to the valley sides. Donny and Stella in their unsuitable shoes walked together, a little way behind the others.

‘Did you notice that stuff Murray said about his ‘enemy’ paying him a visit?’ Donny asked.

‘Yes, what was that all about? A bit melodramatic I thought.’

‘I bet it was Carrington Clarke.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘God Stella you’re such a chump! Carrington Clarke. He wrote a really vicious character piece on Murray in his last novel *The Third Draught*, everyone knew it was supposed to be Murray, although Carrington denied it. Anyway, all Murray’s friends were very upset and I think the heat got a bit much for Clarke to take socially. It was thought he took off for his estate in the West Indies, and now no one’s heard from him since. The thing is Clarke was generally thought of as one of Murray’s best friends, they were school chums, at least they went to the same school; I think Clarke was a little bit older.’

The little party had reached the outskirts of what had been a substantial hamlet as Donny and Stella caught up with the others. There was a track affording a reasonable

descent into the valley where the diminishing lake waters had found a new level. There was a certain amount of debris, brought down from the valley sides, and the sightseers had paused to consider their options. Murray addressed his party for the benefit of the new arrivals.

‘Arthur thinks we should stay away from the buildings, the cottages and whatever. The army blew some of the dwellings up you know and Arthur says those that are still standing might not be too safe. But we can meander down; it should be quite alright if we stick to these lanes even with the rubble.’

They wandered down, picking their way between the buildings which huddled close together on the valley sides. It was warm and Stella who had worn a jacket began to feel the heat. She paused to take it off, and hoped that Donny would offer to carry it for her, but he was deep in conversation with Murray about their play, and the effect of Charles Laughton’s departure for Alexander Korda’s production of Rembrandt. Separated from the others Stella had the urge to explore on her own, the remaining buildings looked quite sturdy and she felt she was being neglected. Murray Crawford’s milieu was very much a male preserve; Donny was sweet of course but she had nothing in common with Bob Turnbull, who seemed like a refugee from the previous century, and Murray’s chauffeur Arthur unsettled her with his watchful attendance on his employer. She slipped off the path and walked between the buildings, how tiny the cottages were, to think people raised families here. The little dwellings were supplemented by lean-to outbuildings in some cases, fuel stores perhaps, or wash-houses; one of them was open, she thought she would just slip inside and take a look.

The interior was gloomy but as her eyes began to accustom themselves to the dim surroundings she could see something at the back of the cell-like space. Picking her way through the debris she stubbed her toe and lost her balance and for a dreadful moment she realised she was going to fall. Pitching forward she dropped her jacket, before she fell heavily on her forearms, her head butting against something which cracked feebly sending out a spray of dust. Raising her head she choked back a scream, her breath jolted out of her body and her heart hammered against her rib-cage as she fought to master feelings of nausea and revulsion. At the back of the little lean-to building she was exploring were the remains of a skeleton. Immersion in the lake-waters had taken its toll but the bony remains were recognisable for all that. Her appalled gaze took in a hunched figure in a kneeling posture, the skeletal limbs damaged slightly where her head had struck. To her very great horror she could make out the crossed wrists secured to the remains of a wash-stand by a pair of rusty handcuffs. Drawing back her bruised upper body, she got onto her knees and slowly raised herself up. She got to her feet and backed away, leaving her torn and dirty jacket where it was. Edging slowly back she let one hand feel behind her as she made for the door, something grasped her free hand and a rough palm clamped over her mouth.

‘Don’t scream Miss, just nod if you promise not to scream.’

She jerked her head, and the hand slowly removed itself from her mouth, before grasping her shoulder and turning her gently towards her captor. It was Arthur.

‘I’m terribly sorry Miss; I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just knew if you started screaming the others would come running, and well, if Mr Murray saw this, you’ve heard how he is with his nightmares.’

‘But who is it? What happened here? Whoever it was they’ve been tied up, handcuffed so they couldn’t get out.’ In the dim interior she could see Arthur studying her shrewdly.

‘Who can say Miss, suicide maybe, someone who couldn’t bear to leave the place? Mind you I don’t recall any missing persons posted from the village at the time. Maybe someone who heard about the flooding and saw their opportunity, there are some sad damaged souls walking this earth, and taking your own life is a horrid thing.

‘But it’s handcuffed, don’t you see? Why would a suicide be handcuffed?’

‘Just leave it Miss, it was never meant to be seen.’

‘Leave it? How can we leave it? Something horrible has happened here and that’s evidence.’

‘Evidence, Miss? Best step back if you would.’

Stella drew back against the wall of the hovel. Arthur stooped swiftly and picked up a length of broken masonry, a lintel threaded through with twisted metal. He stretched out his free hand and coaxed her behind him then, taking the shard in both hands, took one step forward and swung the makeshift implement against the crouching homunculus in the shadows. There was a shattering, and an explosion of dust and filth as the frame of bones smashed against the wash-stand, in the suddenly fetid atmosphere Stella saw through the powdery clouds the figure of Arthur half-stooped, frantically at work smashing the remains to smithereens. She staggered outside.

Weeping and coughing with the dust, feeling that she had inhaled some horrible essence from the grave, she sank onto her knees on the path to the wash-house. Looking over her shoulder she saw Arthur emerge into the light carrying her crumpled jacket.

‘Let’s get you away from here. Now Miss, I don’t want you to say anything about this to the others. Mr Crawford will only want to see and then it’ll be screaming nightmares to kingdom come. I’ll come back here later and do what I can, if I tidy up I can even give the remains a decent burial on the fells somewhere, such as they are.’

She took his proffered left hand mutely and rose to her feet, then held herself rigid as, still holding one of her hands, he used his right to brush some of the dust from her clothes and hair, before draping her jacket over her shoulders.

‘I’ve some contacts with the local constabulary, I can make some enquiries, leave it to me Miss, but I must insist, mum’s the word.’ He placed a single finger across his lips and stared at her intently. ‘I’ll do anything for Mr Crawford,’ he said. ‘I won’t have him upset or bothered, not by anything or anybody.’ She nodded her understanding timidly. ‘You know you’re honoured Miss, Mr Crawford’s not one for having ladies to stay, I expect it’s out of a kindness to young Mr Flynn.’

They made their way from the cottage to where the others were waiting by the lower shore.

‘Miss Stella has had a fall Murray,’ said Arthur

Murray was all solicitousness. ‘Now Stella we warned you not to wander off, you’re not hurt? Perhaps we should be getting back; now you come with me my dear.’ Murray took her arm and patting her hand led her back up the way they had come. ‘I’m glad my faithful bloodhound found you, Arthur’s a treasure isn’t he?’

‘Why do you call him that, your bloodhound?’

‘Oh, Arthur was a police officer before he came to me, when he swapped his truncheon and handcuffs for a chauffeur’s cap.’

Stella looked back over her shoulder to where Arthur still stood in the middle of the track, he was smiling benignly and nodding to her, his four-square frame filling the horizon against the awful grandeur of the fells and the tilted disc of the lake.



The Lake (David Leverton)

SHENANDOAH, DAUGHTER OF THE STARS

by Joan Leotta

A RETOLD LEGEND

The Great Spirit spoke and the world came to be.
He found it good.
The stars saw the beauty of the earth.
The Great Spirit gave them his blessing to find a place on the earth to meet.
They searched for a place of beauty and found
A silver lake encircled by blue mountains like an azure crown
The lake reflected their own glory.
Each star glided through the sky
To hovered over the quiet waters and dance.
As they danced , their robes of fire lit the mountains
The stars sang songs of joy to celebrate their own beauty and the Great Spirit's gift of this place
They vowed to return each thousand years.
He found it good
At gathering a mighty crash sliced through their songs
The mountains split open.
Silvery lake waters disappeared through the crack into the ground.
The stars were sad
Great Spirit knew it was good for it was all according to His plan
Time passed.
The stars sought out and met in other places.
None approached the beauty of their lake.
At last the Morning Star spotted a green valley below blue mountains.
A shimmering ribbon of river wound through it.
The stars gathered and sang they realized
this was their place.
The green valley was the lake bed.
The silver river , escaped water from the lake flowing out to give life to the Valley.
"These mountains are our blue crown ! This valley is the home of our lake."
Their joyful overflowed and so they plucked at their own robes,
Setting clear, bright jewels in the sky for all time.
Their colored jewels they spread across the valley
As more streams, flowers and trees.
When finished they saw their handiwork
had made the valley even more beautiful than it had been at first
The stars declared the valley to be their child, their daughter
They called her, Shenandoah.
The Great Spirit smiled and said it was good.



BLEEDING ROSE

by Dakota-Luise Wolf

Soft as velvet
Dark as night
Shades of black
Dance around the flame
A drop of blood drips
Down it's petal
Staining the black rose
With fresh, warm blood
Bleeding for pain
Bleeding for mercy
The long stem
Drenched in sadness
Pain of life
Pain of suffering
The petals are plucked away
It must be infected
Kill it
Kill it before it infects you
Pluck
Soft petals fall to the ground
With no nourishment
The petals wither up
And die
As its death approaches
Pain takes over
Pluck
The last petal floats away
The stem falls to the floor
As do I.



Bleeding Rose (David Leverton)

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