

Fickle Muses

Volume 2, October-December 2008



“Vortex 1” by Lindsey Terrell

Ileana

by Jeanne Shannon

She would walk into the house and see ghosts. She would catch the merest glimpse of them as they dissolved into the white flowers, the white arum lilies in the garden beyond the French windows.

It was spring always, or summer, light falling in diamond shards on the flagstones, on the lucent marble of the birdbath, on the arrow-shaped leaves of the lilies. “Arum,” she would murmur to herself. “Small flowers on a spadix surrounded by or enclosed within a spathe.” She would think of angels clustered inside the lily cups.

In the foyer, a small mauve dragon would watch her from his perch on the whatnot shelf. His glossy black eyes would follow her as she gazed at the lilies, trying to see the ghosts once more. His little wings were always spread, as if he might take flight at any moment. “Where do you fly?” she would whisper, half to him, half to the spirits.

In starlight, the ghosts came into the house, drifting through shadowy corners, floating above the rich, polished oak of the hallway floors. They were not spirits of the dead, lingering in some restless limbo between Earth and another plane. Rather, they were the spirits whose lives are usually invisible to human sight: angels, elementals, the spirits of water and rose, of agate and emerald and the hearts of volcanoes. Spirits of harp and oboe, of oriole and wood-bird, of the red-eyed vireo that winters in Ecuador. They were frog-cry and rainstorm and blue winds from the north.

She saw them as she sat at her dressing table in her bride-white peignoir, luminous satin, and brushed the luminous satin of her black hair. She heard them, watery notes of harp, throat-cry of oboe, silvery music of frogs on creek banks far to the north, beyond Mexico. Sometimes they called her name. . . “Ileana. . . Ileana Rosalinda.”

When the great round stone of the full Moon appeared, white, silent, floating, shining through the long glass doors that opened onto the veranda, they grew louder, larger, became great breathing presences. The night air would hum, would glow like rose quartz, like ruby. Something unseen would begin to play “Clair de Lune” on the piano; she would watch the keys sink down, rise up, under invisible fingers. Little fires would come out of the dragon’s mouth.

In the alizarin glow of the night she would fall asleep and dream of wild cattle in Argentina, of trains going north to the green creek banks of early spring. She would breathe in the fragrance of coriander and musk and the violet odor of lavender. She would see madder root afire in the Earth, yielding crimson.

In the morning, refreshed, she would walk out into the rain-gray garden, or into the sun-glint, the light-spray on fountains. Beyond the wall and the lace of the grillwork, zinc music of traffic on the boulevards. Within the garden, faint music, faëry singing. She would linger a long time, listening, and gathering bouquets of vivid, intangible flowers.

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A Poet Meets The Lost Queen of Egypt

by Nicole Hanna

Hatshepsut. Have a seat. Take
a load off your browned linen. It's important
you know we share an interest. I mean,
I know you're Egyptian and I'm Polish.
I know you're dead and I'm not.
But we're women, though
you've been discovered
and I haven't.

You stole the throne
from your stepson, right?
Dressed like a man and cried
"Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" and your power
stretched across Egypt, right?
Maybe if I had a stepson or lived in Egypt,
maybe if nothing went wrong
I'd have my own canopic jars
and my organs would flail
the angry words of my end.
Maybe not.

The point is, Your Highness—
it's Your Highness, right? Or Your Honor,
or something more exalted like
Sweet Daughter Who Art King—
the point is I can't have men
watching my womb so close.

You had a great womb, I hear,
and mine hasn't done too bad, but it's
stone-filled now and unpeopled.
So anyway, you took the throne as a man,
wore a beard and everything.
Do you think I could have a house of my own,
my own strong arms and chest, live deep
in the jungle disrobed every day?
Do you think it's possible without the beard?
You must have felt like
your own jungle all the time.

Underworld

by John Grey

By the way. Eurydice called. She didn't leave a number.
She merely said, "I've been bitten by a snake,
died, am somewhere in the Underworld... .bummer...
and will try again later." Big mistake.
Because what do you do, ridiculous man,
but leap down the fiery rabbit hole after her.
As if a golden lyre wasn't enough, you can
rejoice, the way clear now to not only be enchanter
of beast and tree and rocks, smooth and tough,
but every lovely not named Eurydice.
And Hades was bewitched by you, enough.
Three notes, I'm convinced, veni vidi, vici.
You can have her back, bloody snake-bite and all.
But Hell has a rider in its contract, you can ill afford
To look back one last time, your call,
which is as good as saying to you, don't play a G chord
on that stringed instrument of yours, sublime.
You looked back. And your wife is dead as a sausage.
Blame your twitchy neck muscles this time.
By the way. Eurydice called. She didn't leave a message.

The Wind, The Sea and The Thief

by Dave Siddall

The boy threw his cigarette to the ground and raised his head. Once he'd seen it, but that was long hours ago and now it was gone, hidden by a layer of ragged cloud that obscured even the moon's maternal brilliance. For a moment the curtain peeled back and like a bejewelled bauble Polaris, friend to sailors and the lost alike, appeared in all her immovable glory. Thankful at last for a sign in the bleakest of skies, he headed south.

Away from the mountain's ridge the air was denser. Heady and laden with moisture, it held its breath ready to vent its frustration in a torrent of invective that would drown the land.

And this night, the gods were angry.

Thunder stalked the hills rolling in percussive waves until the storm finally broke and the vomit of heaven spewed forth in a deluge that hammered the earth.

In the shelter of an olive grove, the boy bowed his head. He paid little heed to the rain flowing from his cap in a waterfall of sorrow, but he hoped it might absolve his guilt, and wipe away the bitterness flowing through his soul.

* * *

It should have been easy, that's what the man with one eye had said as he leered across the bar and flashed the white orb of his useless eye in the boy's face—and if he could, he would have winked. Instead, he tapped the side of his nose with a nicotine stained finger and told him to stay awhile, at least until the others had gone. He stubbed a thumb towards the room's far end, where his booze fuelled clientele again demanded his attention. He shrugged helplessly and returned to their jostling voices.

On his own again, the boy appraised his situation. It wasn't good. A small pile of coins stacked into narrow columns faced him. He drew deeply on the cigarette that dangled from his mouth and decided to see if the vaguely mentioned opportunity would be worth the wait

Time wore on. Content in his solitude and the free shots of ouzo that occasionally came his way, the boy kept himself to himself. And when the last customers had poured themselves through the door and the final echo of laughter coalesced with the night, he was introduced to Louis Argestes—and at that precise moment, he should have walked away.

It wasn't the wheelchair, nor the plastic tubes that fed the nostrils of his would be employer that unnerved the boy; it was his cold, cold eyes, and it made him wary.

Wheeled over to his table, Argestes stroked a wisp of grey beard. The boy was used to it, being assessed was all part of the game. Finally Argestes broke the silence. He nodded to the one-eyed man who poured two glasses of Metaxa and passing one to the boy told him of Neireida, the mountain and the house by the sea. His words came in short, sharp strokes, each one uttered before the next had been fully formed, his determination to finish commensurate with the anger seething behind eyes of slate until he could contain himself no longer and he banged his fist on the table.

“Pay the bitch back,” is what he said, “pay the bitch back for all she'd done,” and he ran a hand through hair that curled like horsetail clouds in a storm locked sky.

The boy sipped his brandy and smiled, for he knew the game was his. He waited till Argestes' anger subsided then softly spoke.

"What *exactly*, is it you want?" he asked and Argestes' feverous eyes lit with a hope unseen until that very moment.

"A bag," he said, "a green canvas bag with silver drawstrings. *She* took it but it's mine, mine by rights. All you have to do is get it!"

The boy shrugged. "And me?"

Argestes magnanimously opened his hands to encompass the room. "Her house," he said, "is filled with the most wonderful things. Strange, intriguing," he leant closer, "*invaluable*." He held up a finger in warning, "But be careful what you take," he said smirking, "you may get more than you wish."

The boy snorted, he'd heard these myths before. No, if he were to do the 'job,' he wanted something more substantial, a guarantee.

Argestes turned to the one-eyed man, his hope falling in ruins at the boy's churlish manner, but before he could remonstrate the boy grabbed his wrist and pushed back the sleeve. He pointed to his watch.

"I'll have that," he said, "I'll take the Rolex!"

There was a brief moment of silence before Argestes smiled. The pact was sealed, on his return the watch would be his. There was one other thing.

"On no account," Argestes told the boy, "are you to open the bag." If he was foolish enough to do so, the contract was void and payment forfeit.

They shook hands on the deal.

Argestes began to wheel himself away then stopped and pointed to the one-eyed man, he would take him to the foot of the mountain. "There's a path," he said, "an old goat-herder's trail leads over the mountain to the sea beyond. You'll find her there."

The boy nodded. Just as Argestes was about to disappear, he called him back. "How is it," he wanted to know, "you know so much about Neireida?"

Argestes laughed, "I must have forgotten to tell you. Neireida," he said and shrugged apologetically, "is my wife."

* * *

The one-eyed man drove the boy to the mountain and pointed to a series of steps cut into the rock. For a moment the boy hesitated, then his mind made up, set off into the unknown.

He ranged through olive groves and forests of pine, across empty steams baked dry by unrelenting heat, over a parched country worn thin for want of rain. But always up, always towards that star-spangled rectangle hanging above the peak. When he reached the top he turned and faced his destination, and the wide expanse of horizon rose to greet him with a vista that swelled his imagination. Untouched by any hand, the canvas of night stretched above and beyond his vision. Driven by cosmic winds and washed by

the sea of heaven, stars glittered like shells on a celestial beach whilst around him the primeval void was a Hades that infiltrated his very soul. Despite the warm Mediterranean night, he shivered.

The descent was easier. Though once he had to leave the path to avoid a rock-fall and a narrow ravine meant an undignified scramble, he completed it quickly. Where the land meets the sea, the trail ended.

He stood upon a precipice. Opposite, and aflame with the first whisperings of dawn, a rugged headland sailed amid the ocean's dark waters. Between the two stood a horseshoe beach and on its far side, a house. He nodded in satisfaction. Just as Argestes had promised, the path had brought him to his goal. The boy climbed down and picked his way to the shore.

And then he saw her.

She was on the strand staring at the sea and though her presence was physical, her mind lay elsewhere, drifting on some hidden current far from the eyes of men.

How long the boy stood transfixed by her nearness, he never knew, but of a sudden she turned and held him with eyes that caressed then broke his senses. Pearls from the deepest ocean could not compare, and when he gazed upon her face, he saw an ambient beauty that would shame the Queen of Egypt. The sun's burnished rays spun threads of gold in hair that rippled like the retreating tide and when she smiled and took his hand, he fell to his knees bewitched by her beauty. Beneath a simple cotton gown her body shimmered with forbidden pleasure. He wanted to reach out and touch but dared not, he wanted to scream with lust and desire, but a finger held against his lips shamed him to silence.

She led him to her garden and there, in the shade of trees heavy with fruit and alive with the scent of rosemary and jasmine, she gave him drink from a clear-water spring and in words unspoken, offered him her heart. But even as he fell beneath her spell, he could not forget the true nature of his purpose.

Later, as the sun kissed the high peak of the mountain and danced in a sky of exquisite blue, she led him to her chamber.

She poured herself on him like quicksilver. Almost liquid she moved like a ship upon the sea, gathering her strength until the tempest broke and a tide of emotion swept them to a torrent of ecstasy.

Faster, her thrusts ever deeper, she penetrated the dark morass of his feelings until at last she threw back her head and like storm tossed Petrels adrift on the southern ocean, they cried together.

And in that moment all he wanted was to hold the sweet curves of her body next to his and murmur her name for ever.

* * *

The sun had long reached its apex and begun its steep downward spiral when the boy finally awoke. Free of the trance woven around him and bereft of the passion that had overwhelmed his mind, he swept the bed for his companion.

She had gone.

He raised himself on one elbow and shook himself awake. Through an open door the sound of surf breaking on an uneven shore, flirted with his mind. He rose and pushed the curtain aside. Finding him-

self on a balcony overlooking the sea, he gazed into the sun's yellow orb. Dazzled by its brilliance he turned away and there on the beach, just as he'd first seen her, stood Neireida.

Should he go to her?

He felt the heat prick his nakedness and dropped the curtain. He shook his head. He had an agreement to keep.

The boy dressed quickly. He crept from the room and along the corridor. He knew where to go, Argestes had given precise instructions. As expected the room was unlocked. Inside he found Neireida's treasure. Sailcloth and rope, florets of coral, stones worn smooth by deepwater currents lay jumbled with the assorted flotsam scoured from the seas. Yet for all his wonder, the boy could not find one item that would yield enough for a bottle of Argestes' brandy.

Then he saw the sea-chest.

Battle scarred, its wood cracked and corroded lock green, there was something in its aspect that quickened the boy's pulse. He took a knife from his pocket and slipped the blade between lid and body. Twisting it sharply, the wood splintered. He peered into the recess. Empty. But in one corner, set against the consummate void, a darker shadow emerged. He pushed his hand through the gap and grabbed the piece. It was no bigger than a cigar box. No hinge or joint marred its perfect symmetry and when he held it to the window, the light fused with its ebony surface leaving no trace of reflection. He brought it to his ear and shook it. Whatever lay within, pulsed against the side. Startled by the sensation, he dropped it. Curious, he went to retrieve it, thought again, then left it where it lay. Instead he went in search of Argestes' booty.

It wasn't hard to find, carelessly tossed to one side it sat amid an array of forgotten paraphernalia. Surprised at its lightness, he started to unloosen the draw strings before remembering Argestes' orders. He laughed at himself—what sort of a thief was he?

He pulled the bag apart.

The room blackened, a gale howled as a storm fell through the opening. Round and round, spinning and turning the cyclonic force whirled about the boy's head like a spiteful harpy. The dam burst. From end to end, corner to corner, Neireida's treasure was hurled against him until he could no longer stand. Beaten to the floor the boy closed his eyes and hoped for salvation. On the point where he cared little if he should live or die, the window blew outwards and the vortex escaped.

Like a fish pulled from the sea, he lay gasping for breath. Convulsed by the madness of his decision to ignore Argestes' advice, he rocked back and forth bemoaning his fate before instinct took over. He had no wish to confront Neireida with the nature of his betrayal and the longer he remained, the more certain that confrontation. He rushed to the broken window. The drop was manageable. About to fall through, he spied a corner of the ebony box peeping from beneath the room's broken residue. He snatched his reward, placed it in his backpack, and ran.

The boy never stopped till he reached the distant rocks. As he started to climb he glanced above. Dark clouds began to smear the evening sky and a cool breeze blew from the north. Only when he'd set foot on the trail that would take him to the rendezvous with Argestes, did he dare look back.

He squinted. Was that her—amongst the white horses of the surf, the salt spray dancing on her cheeks as

a heathen moon cleaved the headland and silvered the water between them? Or was it a mirage, shackled to a dream of freedom he refused to surrender?

Whatever it was, he climbed away and dismissed his thoughts as those of a fool.

* * *

Though rain still trickled from his cap and fell lightly in the olive grove where he sheltered, the storm had passed. Somewhere in the dark he'd lost his torch and the trees, silhouetted in the moonlight, loomed like Titans barring his path. He paid little heed, other thoughts swept his mind. Could he have stayed, could he have lived by the sea in a fantasy he hardly deserved or dare believe in? Could he have loved her?

He held his head, angry with himself for allowing such sentiments to penetrate the armour of his existence. He picked up his pack and headed down the slope.

Tired and wet, he sat on the steps where his journey had begun. He didn't have long to wait. In the distance a car climbed the slope and soon its bouncing headlights swung his way. It growled to a halt. A door opened and Argestes walked unaided towards him. His face was full of joy. He greeted the boy like a lost son but his attempt at an embrace brought little response. Argestes stood to one side unbuttoning his jacket.

"Well you did it boy." He shrugged. "Not quite the way I envisaged," he broke into a grin, "but you did it anyway." He clapped him on the shoulder and laughed in his face. Stepping away, he inhaled a deep lungful of the storm fresh air and banged his chest. "Smell that?"

The boy lit his last cigarette.

Argestes looked down on the disinterested youth. "Perhaps not." He closed his eyes and exhaled a precise, even stream of air. The trees rustled. He laughed again and in a mocking undertone lost on the boy said, "You don't know what you're missing."

The boy didn't reply.

About to chide him for his churlishness, Argestes stopped and with a mildly sympathetic eye looked again at his companion. "Ah, the deliberations of youth." He shook his head and sniffed the broken air. Suffused with the nectar of pine and the ambrosia of the wet earth, he filled his lungs.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Well boy, you broke our contract."

The boy dashed his cigarette to the ground and swung his head to face Argestes, but before he could protest Argestes held his hands before him, placating, calming the anger in the young man's eyes.

"But never let it be said Louis Argestes is not a man of honour." He slipped off his watch and dangled it before the boy's face. Seeing his indifference, he registered disappointment, but dropped it in his lap anyway. "For you." He opened his hands, bestowing his benevolence like a father to a child. He nodded satisfaction. "And now I must go, there is much that needs attending too." He bent a finger towards the Rolex. "You may find that useful, there will be many hours to think on what has occurred this night."

He turned away.

As he neared his car, the one-eyed man stepped from the driver's side and opened the door. Argestes paused and looking back, shouted to the boy. "I believe you have an item in your bag. Open it," he gestured with his hands to show him how. "You may find it of interest." The door slammed, the engine gunned and the lights swung in a wide circle before Argestes, the one-eyed man and their car was lost to the dark.

The boy waited until he was alone with the night. At the bottom of his pack he found the ebony box and as he slid back the top, the moon's phosphorescent brilliance shone into the cavity. He stared upon the living, beating organ he feared had been there all along. Then he looked at the watch Argestes had given him and counted the hours before dawn.

For this would be his last night amongst mortal men—he had stolen the sea's heart and until it could be returned, he must be keeper and its guardian.

Two poems by Cynthia Belmont

Valentine

The call of death is a call of love.

—Hermann Hesse

The Grim Reaper waits at the bar,
ice cubes cracking in his glass,
scythe curving across the counter
like a fake nail he might tap if he
was ever bored. See his thin
floppy sleeves? His shoulders are

more hunched than in the pictures.
Neither god nor lord, harvesting
nothing he can keep, he's a tagalong,
a pulled shade. When he shifts
in his seat, a soft wind stirring silently
under his cloak, when he turns

so you can look into his hood,
think of the lone walk he's taken
between setting suns, the millennia
of locked doors and reluctant hugs.
When he pulls the shiny red heart
from your pocket, remember: he's in love.

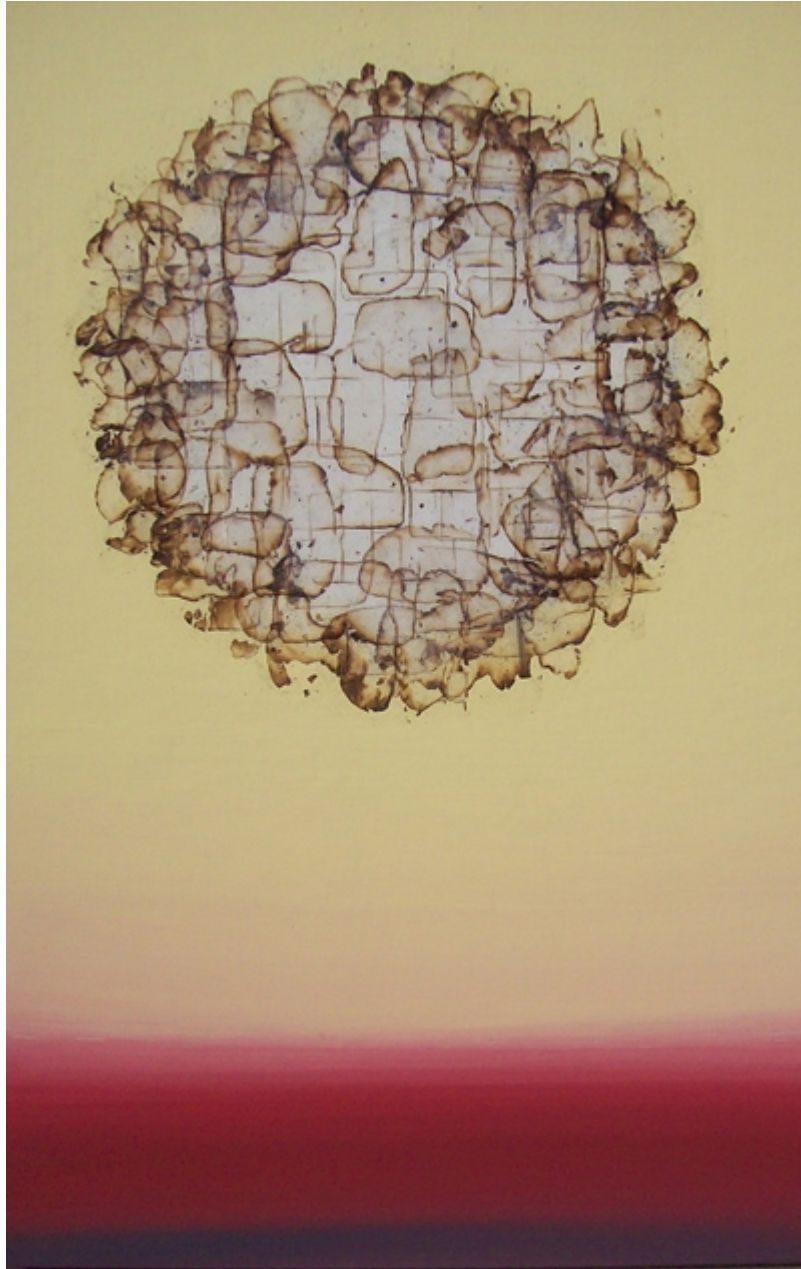
Lady Godiva, Twenty Years Later

Leofric's snore plunders the dark.
She rises from the bed, white
nightdress twisted between her legs,
walks toward the image of the eye—
blue flame lingering in the night air.
She knows it's just a dream,

the bareback ride she takes
every night, yet somewhere
in the valley a man struck blind
by the sight of her knows the future.
She remembers little, the heat
of her thick yellow braid in sunlight,
the horse's hair scratching her thighs,

a blur of closed shutters.
The eye. And now, touching her
loosening skin, she does not
understand whatever this body
was meant to teach. Holding her
breasts' soft weight in her palms,
she does not feel wise.

What is the secret of the eye?
What did it see through the hole
in the sill as she rode that white horse
through Coventry? Peeping Tom,
called Prophet, what visions
gallop through his nights?



“Hovering” by Kimo Pokini

Reverse Persephone

This morning,
for the sake of a metaphor,

I got out of bed
with you and the cat

and “the warm thing”
(which we say the cat calls the hot-water bottle)

and went back to work
for the notebook I’d left on my desk.

Winter is coming,
but of course it wasn’t as cold as I thought.

The leaves were on fire.
On the bus I found myself sweating

and smiling, taking the coins
from my fellow passengers’ eyes

and handing them back
with interest.

Too many have died;
the underworld is overcrowded.

The bus driver didn’t know he was Charon,
and Charon didn’t know it was a return trip,

or did he? Pulling away from my stop
he honked; I looked back; and he waved.

Anyway, love, I’ve got my notebook back
and it’s time to go home

after I get pencils for me, and for you
the 2% lowfat milk of paradise.

Clotho

Thrice upon a time,
there's these weird sisters.
They're the daughters of Night
with no father.
And Night, as you can imagine,
isn't much of a mother.

As the middle child, Lachesis
tries way too hard
to take up the slack:
Measures everything twice,
knows what everything costs,
has to be everyone's mother
and father, too,
hates being called bossy.

Atropos, the oldest,
mostly ignores Lachesis
or cuts her off in mid-nag
with a tongue as sharp
as her shears.
She wears socks that don't match
and never starts anything
that she can't finish:
just another old crone
who talks to herself
and the holy spirit,
not giving a damn
who calls her a bitch.

So Clotho gets most of the flak.
Lachesis is constantly telling her
she doesn't know how long things last.
Atropos, when she notices her,
says she doesn't know when to stop,
or just tells her to sit on something and spin.
So she does.
She spins all the stories
we tell ourselves.
She's a maiden,
still mostly a child
who doesn't know everyone says
she's a bimbo.

She knows she's the heroine,
the natural daughter,
the princess in disguise.
The others are her ugly stepsisters,
or Lachesis is the wicked stepmother
betrayed by the mirror,
which will tell her someday soon
who's really the fairest;
and Atropos is just an old hag
who keeps saying the end won't be happy.
Clotho wants her ever-after.
She's eager to suffer
and get on with the story.

She feeds birds and small animals.
She French-kisses frogs
and gets her tongue tangled.
She's polite to any lady old enough
to be her fairy godmother
(except, of course, Atropos,
who's no lady anyway).
She's sweet to any old man
who might be the King—her true father;
and she humors all the foot fetishists
who could be the Prince—her true love.
She doesn't know the difference,
not having had either.

The prick is inevitable.
She gives a little shriek and bleeds
three drops like pomegranate seeds.
She sings "Someday My Prince Will Come"
until he does at last. The spell is cast.
He falls asleep, and so does she.

That is, she falls for, and sleeps with,
the first guy who kisses her
and says he's a prince.
The first time,
she asks him to be gentle.
He isn't,
because he wants her so much.
However, he's hurt that she asked,
which shows that he's sensitive,
so she stops asking.
He's not handsome, either.

That proves that she loves him.
She puts the right spin on everything.
She calls it fate
(hey, that's one of her names).

She believes he's rescued her,
and now it's her turn.
She believes she's awake,
and his heart
is just sleeping.
She sees all the thorns
around his high castle.
She sees all the birds
and knows that they chose
to impale themselves.
She sees the thorns watered
by tears and by blood:
Because some of it is his,
she believes he didn't plant them.
She believes he's enchanted
by the wicked witch, his wife.
Clotho believes in him,
and in herself.
She believes that her kiss
can wake him and make him
all better.

It happens every once in a lifetime or so:
the youngest is the one who falls in love;
the one caught in the middle loves and hates;
the oldest doesn't care much either way.
Nobody can help Clotho up.
Lachesis rages, helpless, while she waits.
Atropos just watches, and plays with the scissors.

Water Sprite

(Powfoot, Portrack and The Nith)

by Vivien Jones

The worst thing was that the stream was muddy. She, who had been born into a cold bubbling torrent, now felt her way through narrow channels of silted water. Even at high tides when the salt estuary waters crept high up the stream and climbed the alder trunks flushing the bank-side creatures out of their holes, the murk only became thinner. Once or twice she had moved downstream to the shore but the salt stung her eyes and left crusts on her skin and she had felt herself drying. Her companions, the ducks and herons and small fish, gave her a wide berth. She was neither fish, fowl nor human so they closed their eyes to her. But she was safe.

She saw the man every day. He walked with open eyes, drinking in the woodland as he went. Sometimes he touched the tree trunks, bent to smell the woodbine, kicked heaps of leaves into the air, smiled at the summer butterfly clouds above his head, but always he stared into the stream as if searching for something. She knew she should not, but she so wanted to speak to him, to ask him what he was looking for. She might help him find it, unless he was looking for her. As well as afraid, she was lonely.

She knew she couldn't be seen unless she showed herself. Her bank brown and reed green skin and hair cut her body to invisible fragments and she could move in the reeds or the water without ripples or wake. So she watched the man with impunity, liking the way he picked his way through the undergrowth without stamping plants down. He could not be one of those who sought her, nor a helper even. There was no urgency in his tread.

One day, after heavy rain, when she was lying in the downstream current loving its speedy rush and bubbles, she heard his slow approach and rolled over to watch him. He was walking amongst the grasses close to the bank trailing his fingers up the grass stalks and spraying the seed-heads behind him. The sun blazed over the rim of a cloud and outlined her in vapour. He gasped and from his widening eyes she knew that he had seen her but instead of sliding away and leaving him with a notion of delusion, she let the sun stay on her body. He took a step back but his eyes never left her. Perhaps his intimacy with woodland dulled his natural caution.

“Why do you look into the stream?” Her voice was a new thing, unused. It trickled from her mouth.

He cleared his throat.

“Why do you look into the stream?” she repeated.

“I...I have sometimes seen movement in the water. I thought it might be a large fish. Or an otter perhaps.”

His voice was calm. A slight tremor of incredulity rimmed his words.

She laughed, another new thing.

“There are no otters here and the fish are small,” she told him. “Do you want to come in the water?”

He looked puzzled, but it was a clear invitation. How could he not?

“It's not very deep, even with the rain,” she assured him.

He didn't wait to take his boots and socks off, he slid down the bank until he was under the water to the waist, sitting opposite but beside her. He shuddered and he saw something flicker across her face.

"It's the cold water," he explained.

"Not me?" she asked, moving a little away.

"You're beautiful," he said. "And pregnant," looking at the rise of her streaked belly.

"That's my business," she said sharply, but she was not afraid of him. His eyes were all over her, she could see he was committing her to his memory, her colours and textures, her voice and her otherness. Perhaps he was a singer. Her people were singers. She was examining him likewise for a song she might sing sometime.

"Do you have a name?" he asked.

"Yes."

He waited.

"I don't tell it to strangers."

He laughed at something incongruous, something outlandish.

"I am David."

"I am Meriel."

If people in the village wondered why he came back from his daily walks wet to the waist, they never asked. He was not a gregarious man, did not visit the hotel where he might have told them his fisherman's tale and he did not own a tape recorder or a camera that might have verified it. As the summer weeks went by and she grew rounder, she spent longer each day floating in the shallows to take the weight off her back and he went to her and talked with her about his different world and all the things strange to her in it. She offered nothing of her world to him, but he saw she was afraid of something upstream, the sea seeming merely unpleasant. She was particularly nervous at flood times when she would watch the rushing water very carefully from the cover of the reeds.

Then one day, at the end of the summer, he went to meet her and found her half sleeping with three soft water-forms writhing around her body under the water. He was touched that she would let him see her when so vulnerable and trust him to be un-shocked at the sight of her offspring. By now he knew that he could only see her when she allowed it to happen. He was not shocked but amazed.

Their semi-transparent bodies moved with a motion near to swimming, but their orbit stayed close to her resting body. Their limbs lay close to their bodies as they wove around her, and she trailed her fingertips across their backs as they passed by her hands. Apart from the motion nothing about them suggested fish, but little suggested human being either other than the tendrils that flowed from their heads.

"Are you well?" he asked shyly, thinking he should be bearing flowers. She raised her head from the water. She smiled.

"Fine now." Her voice became reedy, urgent.

“David, is there clear water near here? I need... we need clear water if they are to thrive. Could you find a clean stream for us?”

His mind, already full of unasked questions, filled with concern for her. How had she come here? What was she afraid of? Why had she let him see her? He had never touched her but he reached for her hand now. She flinched but did not withdraw her cool fingers from his grip. He said nothing for a while but held her fingers gently, thinking that she would leave him soon to a resumption of the emptiness that was his life before her.

“How would you get there?” was all he asked.

“I can swim in the sea for a short while. If you find the estuary. They can ride on my back out of the salt water. But you must walk the river first, see there are no others like me. I have shown you how to see.”

Thinking of his own state he asked her. “But do you not long for others like you?”

Her voice was grim.

“They will kill me.”

He dropped her hand.

“And my children.”

She seemed resigned.

“No. That mustn’t happen. How could that happen?”

She stared into the laburnum branches above them. Some small rebellion underlay her voice.

“I mated with the dominant male. It is not allowed.”

“But that’s animal! No, sorry...no, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes you did. We are not animal but that’s how we live. It’s how we survive.”

“Do you mean you can never go back?”

“Yes.”

“And you cannot stay here?”

“It dries up too often. It’s silted up. They need clear water. I could manage here but they might not.”

“Well then, we must find you some clear water...”

“Thank you, I thought you would.”

Imperceptibly he felt her squeeze his hand.

His heart was beating hard as he turned away from her, knowing he would find her a clear, safe stream, somewhere upland perhaps. He would pour over his maps, find not only a possible place but a good place, a beautiful place. In his mind a whirlpool of possibilities swirled. Some nights he woke up

through the night sweating with dreams of disaster, other nights trembling with joy at the task accomplished, always with the cut of losing sight of her, aching through his body. Then he remembered. The Garden of Cosmic Speculation. He had visited on its Open Day, wandered amongst puzzled gardeners and open-mouthed tourists, enjoying its humour and playfulness with space. What he remembered most sharply were the streams that cut through from the Nith, diverted to play for a while before returning to the river and the serious business of making for the sea. It could be perfect.

When he told her she looked at him with such trust he felt afraid, doubtful of his motives. What if he failed her?

He waited until after midnight when the last house lights in the village were off then he drove the pickup slowly to the silent bridge above the stream. In the back was wedged a child's swimming pool, brimming with cold water. He tramped upstream to where the water was close to the path and waited. Very soon she flowed up out of the water, her children's bodies waving in the water behind her.

"I shall have to carry you," he said. "Will they be frightened?"

"I will carry them and you will carry me." She spoke firmly but there was a tremor in her voice.

She lay under the water and gathered her children into her arms, nuzzling them into a single tessellated form on her breast. He thought she sang softly to them until they seemed mesmerised and calm. She nodded to him. He got into the water and slipped his arms beneath her and lifted her clear in one quick sweep. It was twenty paces to the pickup, and though he knew he should be quick he didn't want to jerk the children from their trance, or relinquish the feeling of her small damp weight in his arms, so he walked slowly. She was breathing fast. The sight of the pickup alarmed her and he found himself singing softly to her as he lifted her into the water. She curled round her children in the center of the pool, trying to avoid contact with the plastic sides. He wished he could have sat with her. She was shivering, not with cold.

"I'll try to drive slowly, but it might be uncomfortable for a while. Think of Portrack. Think of the clear water."

He pulled the tarpaulin across the pool.

He drove so slowly he feared being reported to the police, but the road was clear and only lit as he crossed Dumfries. Twice he stopped to check his passengers but after the second time she was so distressed that there was further to go, he decided to finish the journey as soon as he could. He cut the engine where the drive left the road and allowed the slope to carry them silently past the gardener's house and estate buildings. Nothing stirred. The pickup stopped by a huge chequerboard. He threw the tarpaulin back joyfully.

"We are here," he announced.

She uncurled slowly, still soothing the children.

"Water." She sniffed the air.

He gathered her up once more and walked towards the red bridge that curved over the stream. He knelt on the grass and slid her into the water where she rolled, tipping the children into clean wetness and wakefulness, before immersing herself. He watched her swim upstream shadowed by watery forms,

rising half out of the water to examine the bank sides, her head turning from side to side. Then she swam back.

“It is strange,” she said.

“But safe? Does it feel safe?”

“I don’t think there will be others here.”

“And clear. Is it clear enough?”

“Yes. The stream is strange though. There are no plants, no stones, and it does not wander.”

“It is a made place.”

“If I stay here, can you come to talk to me still?”

His heart churned.

“No—well, once a year perhaps, but there will be other people, many other people.”

“I don’t show myself to other people.”

She turned away without saying more and swam strongly away upstream. He sat on the bank in the quiet of the small hours and listened to the rustling of hedgehogs and small creatures and the fierce cry of a hunting owl. The angular forms of the sculptures and mounds around him seemed huge and alien. He was thinking he would not see her again when there was a splash nearby and she surged towards him with a smile on her face.

“There is a river further on, a real river, with stones and plants. I smelt others but not my group, they will let us live there. Come, walk behind me.”

He followed her undulating body past bridges and walkways, circles of trees and log piles until he found himself crossing a farm fence onto the river bank where the wide dark waters of the Nith moved swiftly under old willows and alders. He could scarcely keep her in view amongst the foam and tumble of the flow, but he sensed her excitement and could see now that she had her children close to her, and they were all rolling and circling round her body. There was no moon so he could not be sure, but now and then he thought he caught the gleam of other bodies in the water moving in the same ecstatic way. He smiled. He could leave her here.

“Water Sprite” was previously published in the Crichton Writers 2007 anthology, “Windfall.”

Two poetry chapbooks by Vivien Jones are available:

“Something in the Blood,” Selkirk Lapwing Press, Borders, <http://www.selkirklapwingpress.webs.com/>

“Hare,” Erbacce Press, Liverpool, <http://erbacce-press.webeden.co.uk/>

SLEEPING BEAUTY: in three acts

by Annette Basalyga

1. The curse was caught upon the needle's point.
The brocade stiffened into marbled folds.
But the palace seamstress who could design
décolletage sure to secure an ancillary throne,
or at least allay a royal boredom,
held to her purpose with a nimble rage.
Still tugging on the thread, she fell asleep.

While below the turret an apprentice crow
hazarded a hasty prophecy,
was stoned by the gardener whose concerns
were never more than weariness
and backache. In drowsy truce,
the two waived differences,
rolled over in the hedge, and fell asleep.

As the king and queen, their modest retinue,
the lean prime minister, the upstairs maids,
the scullions and the scullion mouse
suspended domesticity and without a moment
to enjoy their unexpected holiday,
they turned to tapestry and fell asleep.

But the princess herself, tidy and provident,
given to adolescent habits of expectancy
withdrew to a small sleeping porch, (sheltered
yet accessible) she had prepared against the hour.
With calm alacrity, she spread the cunning coverlet
and counted sheep.

2. Whatever she dreamed was nothing to the weather,
ever the ripe and windless end of summer.
The garden, like a moist presentiment,
abjured geometry and with mossy intuition
redefined the flagstones and the plaster art.
Roots in conspiracy, intersecting boughs,
intricacies of stem and bud sent every trellis
sagging into blossom. Thickening, convoluted,
intertwined, fig tree and quince, vetch and filaree,
the garden was a vine. All fruits were tropical,
as crumbling fountains tumbled
in the still interstices of time.

3. The story spread throughout the realm, through yeomanry
and royalty whose princes galloped straight away to dreams

of chivalrous acclaim. But without code to cover finding
such eccentric shuteye, they reined up at the thicket and discreetly
left their cards.

After a while the tale was lost to greater dragons,
larger grails, became the province of some few
desultory grandsons who remained aloof from politics,
longed for grand endeavors. But they passed, too.
Soon nobody came.

Until a climbing civil servant (anticipating the Baconian attitude)
was commissioned to survey the prodigal garden and incidentally
record the symptoms of the household there. And as he kneeled
in that last weedy place, he could not say what bid him
do unscientific homage to the cobwebs and uneasy bedding.
Which done,

the princess woke, propped on her elbow, pushed back
her dusty hair, began the gramercy so long ago prepared,
paused in the middle, then forgot the closing courtesy.
As the scheduled worm dropped a leaf upon the troubled sheets,
a little flag, in scalloped toothy stitches,
no sharper than the sound of trimming shears
or the now distant shrieking of a crow:
happily, happily, happily
ever after.

Read Annette Basalyga's blog at <http://abasalyga.blogspot.com>

*Learn about the Robert Frost Poetry Festival in Key West, Florida next April, where Basalyga will be a
guest poet: <http://www.robertfrostpoetryfestival.com/workshop.htm>*

Waiting to Cross

by **Kenneth P. Gurney**

Jesus sits in the garden
pen in hand, New York Times
crossword half filled in,
his mind on forty-seven down:
Departure.

He likes this alone time,
this slight diversion
as events catch up with him:
the machinations of a scheming
father take time to play out.

Five across: "Well Done!"

Jesus thinks about this awhile,
scratches his chin. Four letters.
No idea.

He takes a break for a moment,
listens to the sparrows talk,
the hum of bees as they enter
and exit daffodils.

Twenty Across: Domain, nine letters.

He thinks of a thousand URLs,
how in physics a domain
is a discrete region of magnetism
in ferromagnetic material
or how in mathematics it is
the set of possible values
of the independent variable
or variables of a function.

He'll come back to that one,
like the others. It might be a while.

Footsteps.

He folds the page up, tucks it
under a rock for someone else to find.
Slides the pen back into his shirt pocket.

Judas arrives with the soldiers, finally.

Read and listen to more of Kenneth Gurney's poetry at <http://web.mac.com/kpgurney/iWeb/10PP/Home.html>



“Bast Temple” by Clyde Grauke

Purchase Clyde Grauke’s artwork at <http://clydegrauke.imagekind.com>

The Magician

by Vicki Kimmins

“Watch the ball, watch it closely,” the magician moved his nimble fingers, switching the rainbow coloured cups to conceal the wooden ball. Clara followed the ball with her eyes, ignoring the magician’s banter.

“You, the young lady with the blonde curls, care to take a guess?” The Magician offered. Clara glanced to her right at a blonde woman who was at least twenty years her senior. She blushed under her heavy make-up.

“The middle cup,” she pointed to the red cup. The magician smiled, pulling scarred lips back from gleaming white teeth. He lifted the cup.

“I’m afraid not young lady,” he replaced the cup and turned to Clara. “What about you?”

Clara smiled. She hated street magicians normally but she had been drawn to Mr. Trick with his brightly decorated stall gracing the streets of Covent Garden. Mr. Trick himself was tall and spare, with reddish, slightly curling hair. He had fair skin, sharp cheekbones and eyes the colour of an Icelandic sky. The effect was pleasing, but his mouth was odd. Clara could not decide what had caused the scars on both his top and bottom lips.

“I choose the left,” Clara said. She had a loud, clear voice, and it rang out in the street. Mr. Trick smiled again and lifted up the blue cup. A wooden ball sat underneath.

“The lovely brunette wins the prize,” he said

“And the prize is?” Clara quirked an eyebrow, resisting the impulse to check her watch. She had missed her train back to Cambridge so instead had hopped on another train to go exploring around the city, and had wound up in Covent Garden. The streets were crowded with late Christmas shoppers and the sky above was blue shading to black. No stars shone over London. The light pollution had obliterated them, leaving a yellow corona over all.

“The prize is coffee, with me.” Mr. Trick gave her another dazzling smile. There was a grunt behind him and his face showed a flicker of irritation.

“And my unglamorous assistant of course,” he added. Clara turned to the other figure, hunched behind the magician’s stall. She had never seen a man so large or so powerful looking. His face was almost hidden by a huge red beard, the colour of fiery embers. Intelligent brown eyes peered out of the thicket. He wore a heavy coat and workmen’s boots. Clara found his presence reassuring, if puzzling. She assumed he was a body guard for the handsome magician.

“We’re new to this city, can you recommend a fine eatery that sells strong coffee?” Mr. Trick asked. Clara shrugged. She wouldn’t normally run off into the night with two strangers, no matter how handsome or charming, but tonight was different. Tonight she could feel the magic in the air as the year drew to its close. She found herself smiling, pleased at the attention.

“I’m sure we will find somewhere,” Mr. Trick folded down the table and passed it to his assistant, who carried it as if it weighed no more than the evening newspaper.

Clara fell into step beside Mr. Trick with his unusual smile and his long stride. Clara was tall for a woman, nearly six foot, but both her companions towered over her. The night was cold and brittle, and Clara watched her breath cloud in the air as she walked. They stopped outside a bistro. Clara peered through the misted glass at the red and white chequered table cloths.

“A tad quaint, but it will have to do,” Mr. Trick apologized, pushing open the door. There was a lull in conversation as he entered, then voices struck up again, filling the air with laughter. They were ushered to a table in the corner and Mr. Trick sprawled into his seat, a grin painted on his face.

Coffee was ordered and Mr. Trick exchanged terse words with his assistant, who still hadn’t spoken to Clara. She was beginning to regret coming here, but why shouldn’t she do as she pleased? She had no commitments, no responsibilities. She was a stranger in a strange town and the freedom made her giddy.

The coffee was bitter and dark, but it warmed Clara to the bone. She felt herself unwinding and began to study her companions.

“What happened to your mouth?” she hadn’t meant to ask but the words just came out and there was nothing Clara could do to call them back. Mr. Trick’s smile faltered and then widened.

“Someone objected to what I had to say,” he said.

“Someone wanted to close his mouth for good,” rumbled the bearded man. Clara shot him a glance.

“They sewed my mouth shut,” Mr. Trick mimed threading a needle through his lips.

“That’s barbaric! Didn’t you call the police?”

Mr. Trick laughed. It was an infectious but grating laugh that made Clara’s hair stand on end. He leant across the table, letting Clara look into his too blue eyes.

“There were no police then little one. We were the only authority that mattered,” he sat back in the chair and tossed back the coffee. “But that’s another story,”

“I like stories,” said Clara. She spun her cup around on the table idly. “I always liked them when I was younger.” That was true, although it had been years since she’d thought of her father’s stories. She could remember sitting up in bed, waiting for him to climb the stairs with the fairy tales book clasped in his hand. She remembered his voice, and the voices he used for the characters, and she remembered laughing with delight. But that was a long time ago.

“You won’t like this one,” Mr. Trick smiled cheerfully and beckoned to the waitress.

“Club sandwiches all round,” he announced, “my treat of course.” He winked at Clara.

“Why are you doing this?” Clara gestured to take in the Bistro. “Buying me dinner, trying to charm me? What do you want?”

Mr. Trick took a mouthful of coffee and swilled it around in his mouth as if he were tasting fine wine.

“Why must I want something?” he asked. “Can’t a man take an attractive lady out to dinner without there being an ulterior motive?”

“Not when you’re the man taking someone to dinner,” rumbled the bearded man.

“If I wanted your opinion Mr. Donar, I’d give it to you, you dumb ox,” Mr. Trick slumped back in his chair and started at Clara for long enough for her to feel uncomfortable.

“I am trying to be polite,” he said, “that is all.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not often polite?” Clara asked. She looked up as the waitress approached, baring a tray of sandwiches. Clara waited until she had left before she spoke again.

“Go on then, tell me a story, entertain me.”

Mr. Trick picked up his sandwich between long thin fingers and bit into it. Slowly, he licked his scarred lips and Clara wondered what the pain would have been like, as the needle was pushed through his skin. She wondered how that had felt, and it made her skin prickle with sympathetic pain.

“I shall tell you a story of a young,” he paused, “well, youngish woman who was very, *very* beautiful, and very, *very* vain.” Clara snorted.

“I don’t think I like her much,” she said. Mr. Trick smiled his strange smile and his eyes flashed.

“I’m so glad you said that,” he said. “You’d be amazed how many people liked her, how many people *loved* and *worshipped* her. My tale begins on a cold night, not unlike this one. The young woman in question lies awake in her bedroom, listening to the wind whistling past the window. She tosses and turns, but she is restless. She feels that something is missing.” Mr. Trick stopped for a second to drain his coffee cup and signal for more to be poured.

“This woman is vain, and conceited, and jealous lest anyone have something which she craves.”

“You lie! She was never like that!” Donar leant forward, his face reddening in anger. Mr. Trick merely smiled and waved a dismissive hand.

“In any case,” he continued, “as she could not sleep she decided to take a walk around the town, and so she slipped from her room and tiptoed out into the dark streets, heading for the famed jewelers of this fair city.”

“Our heroine, if such we can call her, stumbles upon the only jewelers still open at such a late hour. Golden light spills out onto the street from a large window, and she is attracted to gold. It is the colour of her hair, and the colour of the flecks in her eyes. She steps up to the door and pushes on it gently. It swings to, and she finds herself in a place of wonders. Crystals cast rainbows over the plush carpet, gold gleams under yellowed light, silver shines from every angle, platinum casts white light which dazzles the eye—”

“Get on with it,” Clara and Donar growled in unison. Mr. Trick cleared his throat.

“Anyway. The young woman is attracted by voices from the back of the shop, behind a store room door. She goes to investigate, pressing her ear against the door, listening to nervous chatter and excited squeals of greed. Even though it is wrong, even though she feels a pang of guilt, she tests the handle and flinches as the door creaks inwards.

“She finds herself at the top of a stone staircase leading down into the cellar. Chill air floats up from below, bringing with it a smell of smelted metal. Cautiously, she advances down the steps, picking her

way with care. She can see a light glowing from a doorway around the bend and her heartbeat quickens. The voices are loud and full of anticipation. She notices that the voices are male, at least four men talking and boasting. When she rounds the corner she finds herself facing a large, almost cavernous room, dominated by a forge. Around the forge stand four stumpy figures, none of them much bigger than a child. The faces of these men are cast in hard yellow light and are twisted by greed and plain ugliness into something grotesque.”

“Stop embellishing, lie-smith,” Donar complained. Mr. Trick rolled his eyes.

“How can one tell a story without embellishment, my bearded friend? The details are like the jewels on a fine necklace, they add to the value.” Mr. Trick frowned as if trying to remember his place.

“Ah yes,” he began again. “Yes, the woman stands at the door and, strange though the scene is, she barely notices these details, so focused is she on the magnificent necklace laid out before her on a stone slab. It is a golden band, heavy and thick, carved with the most intricate designs. The gold glows in the light of the forge, like a slice of the sun itself.” Mr. Trick held up a hand to forestall an interruption from Donar.

“Do not criticize me for embellishing details, because this is no embellishment. This is the truth. This band was the most beautiful thing our golden haired heroine had ever seen. As it lies there, she feels a desperate urge to reach out and touch the necklace, to feel the gold beneath her fingers. At this point, one of those ugly little men turns around and sees her in the doorway.

“How much for this?” the woman asks, gesturing to the necklace. The little man sneers, nudging his companions so that they too turn around to stare at their beautiful visitor.

“It’s not for sale,” one whines. Another licks his lips, staring at the golden woman with open longing.

“I will give you silver,” she offers, “silver enough to line this room.” She needs the necklace now. It has gone beyond mere want. It is the most beautiful piece of jewelry ever made, and so she must have it, because she is the most beautiful woman that ever existed.

“We have no need of silver, we have all the silver we need,” says the little man nearest her. He appears to be in charge of the others. The woman frowns. She is unwilling to give up more money than she needs to, but you cannot set a price on such a beautiful object.

“Gold then,” she offers, “I will give you more gold than you can carry, more gold than you could spend in a lifetime. It’s a fair offer,” she adds.

“The men go into a huddle and she waits, staring at the necklace, feeling a twinge of nervousness. What if they refuse her offer? What then? She can’t bear to leave here, not without the necklace.

“Now, this woman isn’t alone in the cellar. Not only are there four dwarves with her, there is also someone else, someone skulking in the shadows behind her. He is dashing handsome: high cheek bones, brilliant sapphire eyes, pale skin like snow, hair like flames—”

“You, in other words,” Carla commented sourly. She nibbled at her sandwich, enraptured by this strange tale. It reminded her of a fairy story from long ago.

“Yes me,” that flick of annoyance had returned to Mr. Trick’s face and Carla drew back, feeling a pang

of fear. "In any case, I was there to witness what happened next."

"Which was?" Carla prompted.

"I'm getting to that!" Mr. Trick's eyes flashed with momentary anger and then his face settled into a serene expression.

"The dwarves break out of their huddle and push the leader forward.

"'We don't need gold,' he announces, 'why should we? We own this shop, and gold is plentiful. Our price is higher.'

"If our heroine feels anxious at this announcement she does not show it. She holds her head high and stares down at the four dwarves, knowing that the price will be steep, but worth it for such a prize.

"'Name your price,' she challenges. 'I can afford it. Whether it is gold, or diamonds, or other riches, I can supply them.'

"The dwarf grins at this, and it is not a nice grin. He turns back to the others and there is a badly disguised snigger and yet more whispering. The woman feels her face grow hot with nerves and embarrassment. She wishes she had simply taken the necklace, stolen it, rather than get involved in these negotiations.

"The lead dwarf turns back, takes a step forward. He is leering at her.

"'The price is you, my lady,' he says.

"The woman is shocked into silence. She cannot believe her ears.

"'Me?'

"'Yes. Your beauty is equal to the beauty of our creation. We put in several nights of toil to create this,' and here he picks up the necklace between his stumpy fingers and twirls it to catch the light, 'and to buy it you must undergo a night of toil as payment. We each helped to make this jewel, so you will pay each of us in turn.'

"She is shocked and appalled of course, but she can't quite believe what she is hearing. Perhaps she mistakes their meaning, or perhaps this is a joke?

"'I don't understand,' she falters, 'are you saying that you want me to...to lie with each of you, for this?' The grins on their faces are all the answer she needs. She shudders with disgust, turning her face away. In the darkness by the stairs, I snigger.

"'I can't,' she whispers. 'I can't, I'm not a whore! I will give you gold, jewels, wealth, anything but that!' The dwarves are impassive. She paces the floor, torn between her revulsion at the price and her desire for the necklace. This is no mere bauble you understand. I can scarcely describe its beauty without resorting to hyperbole, and my good companion would object to that. Ahem, to continue. The woman stops her pacing and decides that her dignity, and her respectability, are commodities she can afford to lose. Why not? After all, they are hers to bargain with.

"'I'll do it,' she says.

“And so she does. I will not relay here the exact details, mainly because I was not privy to them, alas, but also because there is a lady present.”

“Since when have you ever worried about ladies being present?” Donar finished the last of his sandwich with a mighty bite and glared balefully at Mr. Trick.

“Tell the girl the end of the tale,” he commanded.

“By all means,” Mr. Trick leant forward, bringing his face so close to Clara’s that she could feel his breath tickling against her skin.

“When she snuck back to her husband, for the golden girl was married, she believed that she had gotten away with her deed. Of course her hubby asked questions, she’d been missing for four days after all, and he was fascinated by the appearance of her new pretty bauble, but she felt that the matter had been laid to rest. But of course it hadn’t. Her enterprising, cunning and devilishly good looking observer—”

“You,” interrupted Clara with a smile. Mr. Trick preened.

“Yes, me. I went to her husband and told him what his wife had been up to, these past few nights. Needless to say, he was not best pleased. Harsh words were exchanged. He called me a liar. I am, indeed, a liar. I am famed for it, you could say that it’s in my nature, but on this occasion, I was not lying. I may have embellished the tale somewhat, to illustrate the point,” here Mr. Trick smiled impishly, “but I told him the truth of it. And so, he gave me a mission, for I was a gifted thief, and still am.”

“What did you have to do?” Despite herself, Clara was intrigued. She couldn’t help but be interested in the story, as far fetched as it was.

“Well, I snuck into the lady’s bedroom, with hubby’s permission of course, as she slept. It was dark and silent but for her breathing. She wore the necklace even at night. I had to wait for her to turn over, to allow me to reach the clasp. Then, carefully, I undid the necklace and let it slither off of her neck, into my hands.

“Oh, it was a fine thing, make no mistake, the greatest craftsmanship I have ever seen. I was tempted to pocket it and make off, but I don’t think her husband would have let me get away with it. He probably would have dangled me out of the window by my tongue if I’d tried. At any rate, I crept away with the necklace and gave it to her husband. The next morning, the golden lady awakes in a panic, unable to find her necklace. She searches everywhere for it, turning the house upside down, asking everyone if they have seen it. I admit to cackling with pleasure over her distress, who wouldn’t? Eventually, she realized that it was I, the most gifted of thieves, who had taken the necklace, and we had a disagreement.” Mr. Trick paused and massaged his throat thoughtfully. “A painful disagreement,” he added, “and I was forced to take her to her husband.

“What ensued was the usual domestic fight, and her husband ordered that she make amends. His price was that she stir up trouble between rivals, leading to fighting and death and lots of unpleasantness.” He waved a hand airily, suggesting that such matters were trivial.

“What happened after that?” Clara demanded. “Was there a fight?”

Mr. Trick laughed. “Of course there was! There was a terrible war! But that was a long time ago, and both sides are a long time dead.”

“Then how can you be alive?” Clara said. Mr. Trick leant further forward, pinning her to her chair with his cold eyes. There was something malevolent behind them that made Clara shudder.

“I am the master of lies,” Mr. Trick whispered, “deceit is my personal art. I could be lying, how would you tell? Perhaps I really did follow the woman, and watch her greed take her over when she saw that golden band? Or perhaps this is a pretty tale for a pretty lady? But you and I both know the truth, don’t we?” He reached out and took a handful of Clara’s hair, twisting the strands around his long thin fingers.

“Ah, but you were prettier then,” he murmured, “when your hair was the colour of the sun.” He smiled again, brittle and cruel and inhuman.

“And no doubt you were much more pleasant when your mouth was sewn closed Loki,” Clara hissed. Mr. Trick drew back sharply, then he stood in one fluid movement, slipping his arms into his flowing coat.

“I must thank you for your company miss, and I hope that should we meet again, you will see through my tricks a little less easily.”

With that he swept from the bistro, trailed by Donar, and was gone into the night.

The Delphic Oracle

by Anna Alexandra Isacson

There she is stoned again.
Sitting on her diaphanous gown
rocking over the edge of the world
on a three legged stool.

The breath of this place poisons her,
spews from the navel of the earth.
She coughs and spits some blood
dreams of falling into an embrace
of some phantom who would love her.
She knows she will suffer certain death
just like all the others who gave
themselves in service of this state.

Meanwhile,
that young fuck, Alexander
with mane of curls and lion eyes
bewitched, straddles his horse
clasps his snake headed woman
chained around his neck,
like the many aspirations of his mother.

The oracle and he meet.

She strikes a pose
strums her fingers through
the harp of her undulating hair.
She takes a deep cleansing breath
eyes rolled back in her head
like the Madame Blavatsky,
after an evening of hashish.

Smoke billows and she burns a goat,
throws on some herbs
and smacks laurel leaf like gum.
Dinner for two on the mountaintop,
beneath the stars and columns.

They give the priest the slip.
“I don’t get out much,” she says,
sipping wine from cut crystal.
The oracle throws some dice.
Everything is carved in stone.
They go through the ritual.
“I am God

I want Persia and the world.”
Such a man!
Her throat becomes Apollo’s,
she spasmodically spells.
She is spent and falls deeper
into a state beyond consciousness.
A priest behind some dark
curtain interprets and lays out the cards
“Thou art invincible my son.”
With eyes closed she sees waves crash
on the shore a boy runs in the distance out of time.

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Virgo

by Donna Lewis Cowan

She bundles in speechless layers of white,
each curve an afterthought. Her hem
bobbing at her ankles, she holds a shaft of wheat,
an ear of corn, between thin-boned fingers.

She will not raise eyelids, skirts, issues.

Her last cry may be from the belly of a volcano.
She pleases gods.

Her mind wears a scarlet alphabet,
spells out all the names, the midnight harvests,
her body closes with a ring.

She may marry late.
She may never marry.

The lion always comes before her.

Night upon night,
that stiff position
is pinned in the stars.

The Patience of Griselda

by Tinney S. Heath

She's howling mad, you know. Griselda, my mother. I pray daily, sometimes hourly, to Our Lady that no mad blood runs in my veins, to show itself when I am older. Everyone thinks her story is over, losses restored, all well at last. For myself, I know there is yet a chapter to be written, and I know too that some losses can never be made good. We shall see very soon what new turns and twists are to be added to the tale. Tonight it ends.

Tonight's wedding feast will see me away from this palace and beyond their reach forever, one way or another. I believe that is why she waited until now. This night I'll be wed, at 14, to a man half a century older, whose greed for my dowry overrules his revulsion for my family. If the revulsion extends to me, it will make it all the easier to bear no hapless babes myself, for others to use as pawns. If his revulsion is not enough, I have some herbs in my wedding chest that should suffice. My nurse did me that much kindness. Would that she had done the same for my mother.

Everyone knows the tale of patient Griselda, so I will sketch it briefly, for completeness. Gualtieri, Marquess of Saluzzo, had been urged by his courtiers for years to take a bride. He was riding one day and saw a beautiful peasant girl toiling in her father's garden. Seeing a chance to silence his advisers, he demanded the girl's hand of her craven, servile father Giannucolo. He extracted a promise of perfect obedience from her as a condition of the marriage, a condition her eager panderer granted on her behalf. She came dowerless, in rags, and Gualtieri raised her up to greatness. The nobles resented her at first for her humble birth, but they came in time to love her for her goodness. She bore Gualtieri a daughter.

Two years passed. Gualtieri decided to test his wife, spiriting the child away and telling its mother the little one had been killed, by his order, because she was only a girl child. Griselda continued obedient and spoke no word against him, though some did say she exhibited a passing sadness. It is true that from the moment they told her the child's body rested in the ground, she would eat no vegetable that is pulled from the soil.

She next bore him a son, and the same thing happened, this time when the child was newborn and put down to the child's—Griselda's—peasant blood. Had there been any more, I suppose there would have been no end of repetitions, sleepy-eyed children yanked away in the night, lies, tears, acquiescence. Loss upon loss.

Some years later Gualtieri chose to test her still further, harshly telling her she was to be put aside so that he could wed a younger woman, one with noble blood. Uncomplaining, she returned to her father's hovel, leaving her rich garments behind and wearing only the shift she had arrived in. Soon she was summoned back to the palace as a servant, to prepare her lord's wedding feast.

The daughter and son, not dead at all but fostered, returned, bearing other names. The daughter was presented to ragged Griselda as Gualtieri's bride, yet Griselda had nothing but praise for the bewildered woman-child. The entire travesty was grandly revealed at last, Griselda was restored to her place, and her husband finally acknowledged her unwavering loyalty and devotion, declaring that she had passed his test. She was dressed once again in her old finery and at last allowed to greet her son and daughter. She was incoherent, some said with joy. (We shall pass over the effects of this spectacular denouement on a frightened twelve-year-old and her little brother.)

Now she wears her beautiful robes again, the robes of a gentlewoman, and sits in a place of honor. What a fine tale it makes, unless you notice that she spends her days singing softly to a rag doll, and that she still will eat no food that has touched the earth, and that she looks through her son and daughter as if we were not here.

Of course, the tale says nothing of the rest of us. Nothing of Giannucole, still eking out a living from the soil, raising those plants that Griselda will not eat, still poor, dirty, and devoid of dignity. If she made no complaint, he more than compensated, railing endlessly and bemoaning his fate. There was nothing in all of her earlier grandeur for him. She did not visit. She does not see him now.

Nothing of Griselda's fierce husband, said to be cruel but wise, except by those few religious who doubt that those two qualities can inhabit the same man. They are understandably reluctant to voice that opinion here. Nothing of the pampered son, who is dutifully kind to his vague, uninterested mother but mostly loves his hounds and horses, and to be called "young Lord."

And certainly nothing of me, that daughter, brought back with no knowledge of my own origins, thinking I was to wed (at twelve! my courses barely upon me) the man so swiftly revealed to be my father. Then those two nightmarish years in the palace with strangers for parents, and now a merciful marriage, to an old man who at least has the good sense to be embarrassed by his in-laws. And for those two years, not a word from the woman who was my mother. I have both longed for her attention and feared it, watching her surreptitiously whenever I got a chance, searching for the madness. Searching for myself.

She scarcely knew me when I was taken away. I was handed over at birth to a wet nurse, an impoverished gentlewoman, so that I could feed on nobler qualities than my mother possessed, or so my father said. That woman lives here still, the only one who shows me real warmth. She will not tell me what became of her own babe, that she had all her milk for me. When I first returned, I hoped that perhaps I really was her child, and that Griselda's unfortunate daughter had indeed been slaughtered at the crossroads, as the original story had it, but my nurse swears by all that is holy that I am none of her own. A pity. I would trade my rank in a moment for the promise of sanity.

Our foster parents profited handsomely for their troubles in raising first me and then both of us. They seemed to believe that we were some noble's by-blows. They treated us with a sort of distant courtesy smacking of contempt, turning over our education and care to servants. They are here now, for the wedding. Ever since they learned the truth about my parentage, they have been the most devoted of family to me. I am having none of it; this distresses them. They brought extravagant wedding gifts, for which I failed to thank them. They could, after all, hardly blame my upbringing.

And my noble father seems suddenly to have realized that I exist, at least to the extent of equipping me with a trousseau befitting his rank. The dowry was no mean offering, either. My new lord is of lower rank than us, but my father probably thinks himself fortunate to have placed me at all. Tales of my mother's madness rumble just below the surface, here in the palace and much more openly on the outside. My father goes to great lengths to hide her peculiarities, but some things cannot be hidden. At my wedding feast, for example, the menu has been carefully chosen to omit the vegetables Griselda will not eat. Fruits of the vine, salad leaves, meats, bread, fish, and eggs abound, but there will be no foods that lay under or upon the earth, lest my mother confirm the rumors by refusing them.

Now you will understand why I was startled this morning when my mother suddenly appeared at the door of my chamber. I did not know she even knew which rooms were mine. She glided past me, lovely and remote in her soft crimson gown, and walked to the bed. She picked up the hem of my wedding

dress, which was spread out in all its elaborately embroidered glory. I watched her, fascinated, as her long fingers traced a silken vine. She did not look at me.

I wanted some reaction from this maddening woman who had invaded my chamber and behaved as if I was not there. In two years I had had none, and I would have one now. “Do you like it?” I asked, willing her to meet my eyes. She did look up at me then, as if she had only just noticed I was there. Her hand stroked the fine rose-colored fabric of my dress while she studied my face. Her large grey eyes were bright.

“It’s very lovely,” she said finally, her voice small and hoarse from lack of use. “It will suit you.”

There was another garment she had not yet seen. On the clothing pole hung the tattered shift she wore when she returned to her father’s home those years ago, now yellowed with time. I had sent to my grandfather’s house for it when first I learned her story from a chattering servant. Neither my nurse nor my father had been able to dissuade me from wearing it this night. They finally gave up, deciding that it would be well enough covered by my magnificent dress. No one would see it except for my husband, by which time it would be too late. Thus do we hide all our shames, until they can be hidden no more.

“And this?” I said, reaching behind her to the pole and pulling it down. “This is what I will wear underneath. Does it please you?”

I heard her sharp intake of breath. Her eyes filled with tears, and she struggled to control herself. She reached out and grasped the brittle fabric in her right hand, not gently.

“I think now I can say to you that which I came to say,” she whispered.

Something in her face frightened me. I saw no madness there, and I could not place that which I did see. Yet I felt the flicker of a connection between us for the first time. I had yearned for such a connection all of my life, during my exile and back at home, and I was not going to break it now. This woman who had lost so much, my mother, finally saw me.

“Mother, say what you will,” I said. I, too, was whispering.

“I want mushrooms at tonight’s feast.” My mouth fell open. I was expecting contrition, explanation, apology, justification. I was not expecting mushrooms.

“Mother, you don’t eat mushrooms,” I said, confused. “And if you did want them, all you have to do is tell the kitchen folk.”

“I can’t do that,” she said, her voice a little stronger. “They know I don’t eat them. You have to tell them. Tell them your husband loves them. Tell them your foster parents want them. Tell them you want them yourself, and tell them that you have spoken to me and that I swear I will simply quietly ignore them. There will be no scene, nothing to embarrass your father.” Her voice grew insistent. “I need you to do this, daughter. You need to do it, too. For your honor. For mine. A fine mushroom sauce for the roast. Daughter, will you do this?”

I stared at her. “Mother, will you tell me why?”

She actually smiled. In fact, I think she came close to chuckling. In two years I had not seen her smile. “No, I will not. As my wedding gift to you, I withhold the answer to that question.” Her eyes searched mine. I felt a last flutter in my stomach before I found myself growing deadly calm. I looked back at her.

“Who, Mother?”

She shrugged, just a tiny lift of her slender shoulders. “Your father. Beyond that, I don’t care. It can be your decision. There will be an old man in green among the kitchen workers hired for the feast. He can control who, and he will do as I command. He has a debt to pay.”

In some distant part of my mind I registered that I had never known my mother to command anyone. “Will there be sauce for the others?” She nodded, watching me closely. “It will be best if I can eat some. Then there will be no questions.”

Griselda smiled, more broadly this time. Her face was particularly lovely then, and particularly terrifying. I could finally understand the tales I had heard of her great beauty. I look like neither of my parents, but I think any girl would love to inherit that smile. Not, however, that which lay behind it.

“Daughter, I am grateful. I must go and make my arrangements while you speak to the kitchen staff. I will not have a chance to see you again before tonight, so let me wish you happiness in your marriage. Or,” she added matter-of-factly, “if this marriage is not to your liking, you have only to let me know.” She stood on tiptoe (she was very small) and kissed me, and then she was gone.

The next two hours passed quickly. I went to the kitchen and bullied and begged the head cook. I handed him a full purse for his trouble, thus ensuring the necessary menu changes. As I haggled with him, I noticed a little man in green over by the hearth, but his back was to me. He held a covered basket.

When I returned to my chamber I sat heavily on the bed, crushing my dress, and I do not know how long I stayed there before my ladies came to help me dress. They were horrified, of course, and hurried to rescue my gown, fussing over it and brushing it with their hands. Through it all I was silent, and I expect they thought me fearful of my wedding night, for they spoke to me gently and forbore to tease and make bawdy jokes.

I am now wearing that rose dress. I have dismissed my ladies for a while, pleading a need to pray alone, and have filled these sheets of paper with my shaky writing. In a few minutes my ladies will return to take me to the hall, and whatever will happen next, I will try to play my part. Pray for me. Do it now, while I still merit it.

* * *

It is over. I am back in my chamber, quill in hand once more. I have blotted my fine embroidered sleeve with ink, and I do not care.

She was a marvel! She was all graciousness, all ladylike courtesy and fair words. She greeted guests and played the lady of the hall with more life and charm than she has shown in the past two years altogether. Yet only I saw how in that petite, gentle lady, capricious Death glided around the hall.

Only I saw how, when she paused to speak to my foster parents, she looked over at me as I sat awkwardly at the head table next to my new husband. She raised one perfect eyebrow in inquiry. I shook my head, an almost imperceptible movement. She shrugged slightly and made a small sign with her hand to the little man in green, who wore a server’s tabard and bore two sauce boats upon a silver tray as he leaned against the wall, waiting for the fanfare to announce the next remove. His stare made me shiver.

I knew him. I remembered that ugly, twisted face from the night I was ripped from my small bed in the

warm room and carried out into the cold, and away. But it was a very long time ago, and perhaps he is only very like that terrible man.

I was not surprised when she turned that dazzling smile on my husband, or that when he bowed to kiss her hand a similar exchange took place. Again I shook my head. I would not stop her; neither would I assist. But there were other tiny signals, taking no cue from me, as she spoke with different guests, neighboring nobles who had known her both before her fall and after her redemption.

I was taken aback, however, when she placed a slender arm around my seated younger brother's shoulders, looked at me over his head, and asked me again, with that delicate raised eyebrow, to decide. I shook my head so violently this time that both my new husband and my father looked at me with considerable concern. Pleading faintness, I excused myself, hurrying from the hall to a cool, deserted corridor away from the blaze of candles, the cacophony of chattering voices, the hovering spectre of Death.

I gulped cool air and tried to slow my racing heart. I do not know how long I stayed, crouched in the corridor with my back to the wall, until my nurse came looking for me to lead me back to the table, but as I lowered myself obediently onto the bench beside my elderly husband, I saw that the diners had very nearly finished with the roast meat course. My father's ornate pewter trencher held only a scrap of gristle and the remains of his mushroom sauce, slowly congealing. He was boasting to his new son-in-law, a man almost his own age, of his hunting prowess. Both were flushed with wine, laughing easily.

I looked down at my own plate. My portion of roast, served while I was away from the table, had been neatly and precisely cut into bite-sized pieces and slathered generously with sauce. I looked at my mother's plate and saw it half filled with a similar mixture.

Mother smiled at me. "You must eat your roast, Daughter. The sauce is exquisite. I find I am fond of mushrooms, after all." She looked at me calmly, waiting. I looked down at my plate, suddenly feeling sick.

"It's cold," I whispered.

"It's best that way, Daughter," she said, and daintily picked up a well-sauced bite from her own plate and ate it. She continued to watch me, a little smile playing about her lips. Her grey eyes were opaque, her cheeks flushed.

"Why now, Mother?" I asked her, too quietly for anyone else to hear, though the others at our head table were all involved by now in noisy, drunken conversations of their own.

She touched my hand gently for an instant. Her own hand was cool. "I wanted to make you safe," she said simply.

I felt a wave of purest joy, so powerful I swayed a little as I sat. I had a mother at last. She loved me, cared for me, made her plans for me. It was enough. I beamed at her and fell to, eating my sauced roast quickly until every bite was gone. The flavor was strong, but not unpleasant.

Abruptly I got up, mumbling something about feeling faint again, and retreated to this chamber. I have only been here long enough to write these words, hastily, but already I hear cries and a clamor coming from the hall. I do not want to know what has happened there.

All that matters is that my mother loves me. She has done what is best for me, finally, after all these

years. She may be no mother to my brother, but I am hers.

It only remains to see what it was she chose for me. Could Griselda, of all people, have believed that marriage would make a woman safe? Or did she make a different choice? For that, I defer to her judgment. Which sauce did I eat? Which did she? I feel a little breathless, not unwell. But I was the last to eat.

I do not know what will happen. But whatever happens, I have a mother.

For the rest, I wait.