

Fickle Muses

Volume 3.2, April-June 2009



“Circus Cave Drawing” by Stephen Mead

“Circus Cave Drawing” is part of a short art film, “Sketches of Glory.” Watch it on [YouTube](#).

Shrift

Shiva—
my stepdaughter paid
a hefty price for you
in Park City
at the Yoga center
where she learned techniques
of balance and peace.

Traveling together
in a rental car
through Mormon country to Montana
photos show you riding shotgun
safe in your seatbelt
or posed
brass flame fanned and gleaming
on the hood.

In the Bitterroot Mountains
did you remember
your ancient self—
Rudra—
god of wind and death—
when you forgave nothing
as you razed the world to ashes
with arrows and
flames?

Shiva—
sacred hitchhiker,
passing through the western bible belt
where Jesus forgives
radio hosts, mortgage bankers
the carnal sins of Christian pastors
who are then reborn
again—just as you,
are always

born again.

I ask you Shiva,
what draws this girl
who will not forgive our trespasses,
to you?

Do you not Shiva,
as you tread
upon the hapless demon,
lift your other graceful foot
high in joyous dance,
and signal us
shrouded in the ashes
of our transgressions
to make the world anew?

Teiresias

The queen and her handmaid have gone tragically to the girls' bathroom—
keening—eyes streaming

Today is Jessica's turn to be queen; next week she will be an attendant.
Then it might be my Courtney, Ashley or Jennifer who plays the monarch betrayed.
I teach Oedipus right after lunch.

The crowd is not moved by his suffering—they are merely impatient
with a man forewarned who would kill his father, marry his mother
(who must have been by their calculations at least 40)
and produce four children—by—mistake—how gross!
I entice them—pander to them—conjure images
of gouged-out eyeballs hanging in strings from bloody sockets.

But Crystal and Jessica have gone to the bathroom.
Their script is all about love betrayed—while destiny
drifts like fog in the halls.

When they are gone, the other girls look knowingly at one another.
Gravely, one speaks for the chorus—a strophe:
“Jessica has personal problems.”
Then another: “Her boyfriend dumped her—”
The boys look away or down, fearing reprisal—accusations of complicity.
“I see,” I say.
They think me totally blind.
The chorus goes berserk with shrill sounds
anatomizing the queen—antistrophe.

Clearly we are studying the wrong play.
What flaming garment will be woven in the bathroom
for this witless Jason's new queen?

“Stop!” I speak imperiously—I am curious of course.
I always want to hear their stories
even though I know how they will end.
But my role in this play is merely prophetic—
my fate
to go unheeded.
I glare into the restive crowd

with eyes wide as the entrance to Hades.
“Ladies, Gentlemen, open your books
to Jocasta’s desperate speech
“Tis best to live at random, as one can...”

A Thing of Many Facets

by Lillian Wheeler

When Guinevere came to her seeking guidance, Morgana concealed her amusement. The queen's news was no shock to her; she'd long since sensed the tension and currents between the King of all Britain and his best knight. It didn't take any magic art, just an astute eye and a clever ear. A hand held a moment too long. Eyes that searched the other out, and then dropped their gaze once contact was made, fearful of the connection they found there. A tone that ran through their speech like a thread, hinting at something dangerous, repressed and threatening to break out into the open.

She'd seen it in Tristan and white Iseult, too, a long time before poor King Mark suspected anything.

Now it was Arthur. Arthur, the young boy she'd guided through his initiation with the land, bonding in a ceremony of such wild power that even now it changed her inside to think of it, and it was hard to remain entirely in the mortal realm.

That boy had become a man, that man married to frail, lovely Guinevere. So beautiful that men sang her praises all across the islands. So pious that they extolled her virtues throughout the continent. So queenly that her fame had reached to far off Rome itself. Morgana didn't see that when she looked at Guinevere. She saw a woman who was still little more than a girl. She saw a weak, timid creature, who latched onto anyone she considered a lifeline for her agoraphobia. Her husband, unfortunately, was not one such person. Morgana, for some reason, was.

Mostly, she didn't mind. Granted, she often wanted to pick her up and shake her, until that beautiful fair hair fell from its clasps and she managed to force some spine into the girl. But mostly, Morgana pitied her. Guinevere's fear of the world annoyed her, but she also had to admire the bravery Guinevere showed every time she faced her husband's court, every time she faced the poorly concealed jealousy of girls her age, while knowing that Arthur cared first for his sword, and then his spear, and then for her.

Yes, Morgana pitied her.

So today, she was kind. Guinevere was worried she would never conceive. Arthur was a distant lord to her, as a husband patient but aloof. And after what she'd seen, she assumed he would become even more so.

Morgana could imagine the scene from what Guinevere had told her. Lancelot kneeling down in front of his king as he'd done so many times, blue eyes intense. Arthur's hands on his head in a sort of benediction; Lancelot's hands gripping

Arthur's hips. So much pent up passion that there was no choice but for it to explode. And then, Guinevere, walking in to her lord's chambers only to hastily leave again, blushing. Guinevere, going back to her own rooms to sit alone, unable to wipe from her mind the image of her husband with the knight from France, the knight she'd been half mad for since his arrival at court.

She wanted to laugh, but she was being kind, so Morgana reassured Guinevere. With an optimism she didn't feel, she told the young queen that everything would be alright. She would give her a philtre to ensure conception. It was little more than some herbs that had soothing properties and a mild aphrodisiac, but knowledge was power and Morgana was going to keep that power for herself.

Especially since she guessed her assurances of conception were false, though she couldn't know for sure. Unlike the stories that were told of her, she couldn't see into the future. But she could judge the actions of king, queen and knight, from what she knew of each. She could see the way her son looked at his uncle's wife, only slightly older than him, and she could laugh, a bitter, ironic laugh, that it should come to her to mother Arthur's wife, years after she mothered him.

Morgana felt old. Old and barren, giving away her fertility secrets to the young. Such was life, so she accepted it, adopting the role of crone before her time, and she mixed the potion for Guinevere.

As she passed it to Guinevere, worn, capable hands enfolding soft, pliable ones around the round belly of the cup, Morgana was again in the forest glade with the boy she'd helped raise, passing him the cup filled with the blood of his hunt, watching him transition from boy to man, and consummating that transition with him.

Not so strange after all, for everything in life is circular. Round like the womb, round like the moon and the earth and the sun. Interlaced and vastly complicated. Arthur understood this that night. Guinevere might understand this in time.

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That autumn, the crops failed. It was a long, hard winter, and on midwinter's night Arthur came to see his half-sister.

He sat by her just as he had so many times as a boy, when around the firelight Taliesin would tell stories to them both. Now, though, it was Arthur who talked. He came to his sister Morgana to confess because he saw how she observed the world of the court. Arthur alone of all the handsome knights and glittering ladies saw how she watched and learned, and so to Arthur alone her ideas were not magical. He had sought her advice before.

He told her now of Guinevere, and how he didn't understand her. He loved her, but

couldn't show it in a way she could understand. And he told his sister of Lancelot, of how admiration had morphed into passion and then love. He hadn't been strong enough to resist the love and devotion Lancelot had unhesitatingly given him, hadn't been strong enough to deny the forces that were pulling them together.

Morgana nodded, and didn't respond at all when Arthur added that she had probably guessed what would follow before either of the three players in this drama were aware of their parts.

And because she didn't respond, Arthur continued. He told Morgana about one particular night when he and Lancelot had gone to his chambers late after feasting, intending to peruse some maps, but instead had been unable to resist each other in the candlelight. Guinevere had surprised them, but vanished as quickly and silently as she'd come, so much so that Lancelot had noticed nothing at all, and even Arthur doubted his own eyes.

He told her also of another night. As he and Lancelot were enjoying some wine in his chambers, Guinevere had entered, a cup smelling of herbs in her hands. He and Lancelot watched as she drank it, then advanced on them both, kissing first one and then the other. And before they quite knew what was happening, she was drawing them both towards his bed until they all three collapsed in a heady tangle, and then it didn't matter who was who.

For one night, they could admit to everything, and nothing was wrong.

But after that night, all three struggled with continuing to hide their loves. The court had noticed, and rumours were spreading about Lancelot and Guinevere. Some must have noticed Lancelot and Arthur's increased closeness.

Kay was sulky, Galahad and Gawain uncomfortable.

Morgana had to admit that, though she hadn't known about the new understandings between the three, she had noticed the results. And when the king is unwell, the land is also.

Arthur had not forgotten. That was why he came. The land was barren, and his failures as a king and as a husband to Guinevere must be the cause. As his sister, Morgana always had advice.

This time was no exception. She'd given it much thought since the end of the summer, when it was clear that the harvest was going to fail. And she suggested now, to her brother the King of all Britain, that he glorify all of his knights so much that the wellness of the realm rested on them also. She couldn't be sure it would work, but she could instantly see a spark in Arthur's eyes. He would send his best knights on quests to prove their worth and bring glory to his reign and prosperity to his country.

The king was tied to the land, and would do whatever he must to maintain its wealth. Morgana knew that Arthur could not escape that, as she watched him leave in a swirl of purpose.

###

Events of the next years passed quietly for Morgana, though great deeds were done. She had a feeling she would be called on to act one last time before their story was over. But Morgana was tired, so for now she left the plotting and persuading to her sister. She observed as always, but avoided becoming involved. Instead, she watched as even during their own time the truth was perceived differently by everyone. It was as though their lives formed a story that was a gem, and each person took one of that gem's many facets as Truth. But life is not so simple. Nothing is ever quite what it appears.

Read [Lillian Wheeler's blog](#).

Tereus in Texas

by Paul McCann

A broken man steps
 between posturing peasants,
his hawk eyes
 seeking relief in local dives spies
a Procne swallow. Sallow sickly yellow.
A bird of prey, shameless in his suffering,
 left muttering,
“I have within me him who I want.”

A chorus greets from seats
 leather broken beats
a country rhythm. They shout, cry, shy
 and pose in Ego’s shadow.
A favorite haunt for half men,
phony Texans eat breaded strips of Ityeus,
 gobbling, devouring,
and Tereus stuttering,
“I have within me him who I want.”

No curious chorus for shame
 the victors, garlanded with spit,
chew on children and childhood.
The buffet a banquet
 and boys know
Tereus will not stomach
 so much insult
as Procne weaves a broken narrative,
 a token affection and loss
still offers a terror and Tereus suffering:
“But I have already eaten,
 already eaten,
 already eaten,
and I have within me him who I want.”

Will the Furies fall upon the chorus,
 their smacking lips and greasy fingers

feign no guilty hand
(though their thumbs point earthward)
take pleasure in any shame
other than their own
celebrate deceit and devastation
severed tongues and severed hands
philomel fucking in the back of a Ford
cowboy style.

His hollow bones batter
the headlight stars in feathered rage
as evening's children scatter and pray
that they all turn to birds
and they all fly away.

Epic Lies

Penelope—Honey—please listen to me.
It is all due to that bitch Calypso, who
got me enslaved in her apartment in Gonzo Island.
Lost & tired, I was stalking in a park
near the all-female-dorm where
this dame and her nymph buddies live.
You have to take my word for what it's worth
since I have no witnesses to prove how
I got myself into such a mess in the first place.

Well, she came forward and offered help which
I took because I had to. I had very little choice
but to get into her bed since the couch in her apartment
was already taken and there was no spare room where
I could sleep. It was such a torment to spend those nights
in her company: her bed was narrow, only one pillow

and I have to admit the moon was bright
through the window and the ocean was stormy
and how do I say, whatever I did I did
because I had to?

Extreme Makeover

Hera ends up in a Hollywood reality show
where she discovers the magic
of modern-day plastic surgery.
Through some creative hairdressing,
resourceful wardrobing and ultimate exercising,
she becomes one of those dames

that her husband is always after.
She even changes her name.
Holding a pomegranate on her palm,
when she meets Zeus on the valley of Mount Olympus.
Zeus cannot take his eyes off her.

Wed-locked ladies trapped with husbands in their mid-life crisis, Listen up—
No need to transform Lamia into a fiend
or Gerana into a crane. Simply chop off
the snake's head and move on.

Land of Lotus Eaters

Latophagis, you're a savage race,
deemed to be preserved for posterity,
poisonous but always effervescent
& always glossy. But I feel sad and cold,
so rescue me into your divine grotto.

Hold me tight like a kitten
and whisper a valium-song
into my medulla-oblongata.
I badly need some of your serotonin punch. Buddy-Love,
give me some liturgical allegro opium,
teach me how to laud the Creator Magnificato.



“Santa Monica Pylon” by Amy Bernays

The Cobbler of Buttercup

by Sean C. Hayden

The Earl of Buttercup, inspecting his shoes, sighed. The black leather, once polished to a gleam, was now worn and scuffed. The shiny brass buckles had dulled, and the soles felt as though they were thinner than they'd once been. "These shoes sour my stomach," the Earl grumbled. "They make me sick!" he shouted, poking his carriage driver in the back with his cane.

"We're to detour by that decrepit old cobbler on our way to the Lady Nettlebottom," the Earl said, still poking his cane through the small window in the front of the enclosed carriage and jabbing it into his driver's back.

"Of course, my Lord," the carriage driver replied, whipping the horse into animation.

As they traveled along the mud-choked lanes, the carriage driver imagined himself murdering the Earl in increasingly disgusting ways, the great black horse imagined himself trampling the carriage driver beneath his shod hoofs, and the Earl of Buttercup lost himself in a fantasy involving the Lady Nettlebottom, shackles, creamed milk, and a horse whip.

The cobbler awoke in his usual way—hands shaking violently, nauseous, weak in the knees, and twitching with nervousness. He reached immediately for his jug of distilled potato water and took a long draught. As soon as the fiery distillation touched his lips, he felt the trembling in his hands begin to ease. He then settled himself on the edge of the bed and began a long coughing fit. The cobbler hadn't cobbled any shoes for quite some time. These days he supported himself selling his distilled potato water. He had once been a very good cobbler. In fact, he'd been a far better cobbler than he was a distiller, but even with the potato water's poor quality, people seemed to have a greater appetite for it than they'd ever had for his shoes. He found the income quite sufficient.

The Earl's carriage made its way into the small township of Buttercup. The huge wooden wheels cut deep trenches into narrow, twisting, muddy streets. Chickens and children scattered when the big black horse came bearing down on them, churning up chunks of earth with its heavy hoofs. The beast, carriage, and occupants came to a halt in front of the cobbler's cottage. "Cobbler! Cobbler!" shouted the Earl before the carriage door had even been opened. The driver jumped to the ground and rushed to the Earl's door. Placing his hand on the gold-plated handle, he cleared his throat. "Good people of Buttercup," he began in a smooth deep voice. "Make way for the Earl of Buttercup." When the door was opened, the Earl looked out and paused. "Well, where is the damn cobbler?" he asked. "Cobbler! Cobbler! Cobbler!" the Earl began

shouting, his huge jowls jiggling.

“My Lord,” the driver said. “We have yet to go and knock upon the cobbler’s cottage door.”

“Ah yes, yes of course, the cottage door. I shall dismount from the carriage, and you shall go and knock upon the cottage door, fetch the cobbler, and bring him here, agreed?”

“Agreed, my Lord.”

The cobbler had heard the shouting, despite his door being closed. He considered hiding, but then thought he’d better not. The Earl would only have his premises searched, which would no doubt result in the discovery of his still, leading to an awkward question of taxes. Instead he took a few more pulls from his jug and made his way to the door. He waited for the knock, arranged a pleasant smile on his face, and swung the door open.

“Greetings, greetings, good sir. To what do I owe this surprise?” the cobbler asked with as much forced enthusiasm as he could muster.

“You are to speak with the Earl of Buttercup, good citizen,” the driver said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh my, a great honor indeed,” said the cobbler.

“Ya ya, a great honor,” the driver muttered. As the two men approached the portly figure of the Earl who stood impatiently by the huge black carriage, the cobbler’s knees buckled and he fell forward, landing face-down in the mud at the Earl of Buttercup’s feet. The carriage driver shook his head and wrinkled his nose. He’d been able to smell the distilled potato water fumes wafting on the cobbler’s breath from the moment he’d opened his mouth.

“Perhaps, my Lord,” the driver said, “you should chose a different cobbler.”

“Treachery! Treachery! You spider-legged horse-buggerer,” shouted the Earl, whacking the carriage driver on the head with his cane. “You half-breed, potato-sucking, garment-sniffing cross-dresser. You...” The Earl leaned back against the carriage, panting, his face red and his forehead damp with sweat. Struggling to catch his breath, he continued his rant. “You...onanist...shit...stinking...self...flagellator.” The Earl, quite winded with the effort, remained silent for several minutes. After he had composed himself, he straightened up again. “I will decide who cobbles my shoes. I will, I alone. If I’d wanted the advice of a feces-flinging monkey, I would have gone to the royal zoo, would I not have? Oh yes, oh yes I would have, yes yes.”

“Of course, My Lord,” the driver said, pretending to yawn.

The cobbler lifted his face from the mud and found himself staring directly at the Earl's black shoes.

"Dreadful, aren't they?" The Earl asked. "Don't be polite, you can say it. They are catastrophes." He lifted one foot and brought it nearer to the cobbler's face, offering him a better view. "It will be a wonder if the Lady Nettlebottom doesn't see fit to punish me for arriving in such disgraceful shape."

The cobbler, struggling with every fiber of his being not to vomit, scarcely heard a word the Earl was saying. "You will craft for me a pair of perfect shoes," the Earl went on. "Exactly like these," once more lifting his foot and pushing it towards the cobbler's upturned face, "only better."

"But my Lord," the cobbler stammered, struggling to lift himself onto his knees. "I am retired. I no longer possess the skill I once did. I cannot see well, My Lord, I go cross-eyed. My back is crooked and my hands tremble with the aching sickness."

"He means the drinking sickness, he does," muttered the driver under his breath.

"Nonsense!" shouted the Earl. "I won't have you speaking ill of yourself. They'll be picked up tomorrow first thing."

With that, the Earl turned and lifted his leg up to the step beneath the carriage door. "Driver! Driver!" he shouted. The driver gave the mud-covered cobbler a pitying look. "If you don't make them," he whispered, "he'll have you killed." He then turned and placed his hands on the Earl's massive buttocks. "Here we go, my Lord. One, two, three," and pushed the Earl up into the carriage.

"Wait!" the cobbler said. "I must measure your feet!"

"Nonsense," the Earl replied. "You are a maker of shoes, not a measurer of things." The driver closed the door and mounted the carriage. "Tomorrow!" the Earl shouted. The driver's long whip cracked, and the big black horse pulled the carriage away down the narrow mud-choked lane. On his knees, filthy and trembling, the cobbler watched them go.

For the remainder of the day, the cobbler sat in his cottage drinking from his jug. He first thought that he would find another cobbler and commission him to make the shoes, but he couldn't even do that. He had no measurements, nor did he remember what the Earl's shoes had looked like. He took some scraps of leather, his hole punchers and hammer, and spread them out on his workbench. He began working and drinking, the second more than the first, and eventually passed out.

At some point late in the night when the sickle moon was high in the sky, the cobbler was awoken by a knock on the door. His heart thumped in his chest, thinking it must

be the Earl looking for his shoes, but noticing the darkness and hence the late hour, he realized with relief that he was mistaken. The cobbler looked about himself in confusion and groped for his potato water in the dark. The knocking came again. Normally, the cobbler would not open his door to strangers in the dead of night, but he was still quite drunk and felt as though he now had nothing to lose. He opened the door and looked out. No one was there. Fearing wandering spirits, he began to pull the door shut when he heard a small voice sound from his feet. There, standing before him, was a tiny man, no taller than the cobbler's hand was long.

"Cobbler, the hour is late and time is short, so I will be brief. I and my four brothers are in danger. If you help us, we can help you. If you agree to take us in as your charges, if you offer us room and board, we will cobble shoes for you. Shoes of exquisite quality. There are some other terms to the arrangement, but we'll explain them to you tomorrow. Do you agree?" The cobbler, swaying from side to side, quite certain that he was hallucinating, agreed.

The next morning there was a pounding at the door; the cobbler jumped up. His trembling hands closed around the potato water jug's cork and pulled it free.

"Oh dear, oh dear, this is it," he stammered. "Perhaps if I beg for mercy, the Earl will spare me. What if it wasn't my fault? What if I were injured? I know, I know, I'll cut off my hand, then the Earl couldn't possibly blame me for not making his shoes." The cobbler stumbled about the cottage, looking for something he could use to cut off his hand. The pounding on the door grew louder. All of a sudden, the cobbler stopped dead in his tracks. There on his workbench sat a pair of shiny new shoes, expertly cobbled, and adorned with beautiful brass buckles. "Dear God in heaven," the cobbler said. "That strange dream I had. Could it have been real?"

"Cobbler! Open this door or I shall kick it in!"

The cobbler rushed to the door and opened it. A young boy was standing outside, accompanied by a soldier.

"I'm to collect the Earl of Buttercup's new shoes," the boy said. "Give them to me now." The cobbler, having no time to consider what else to do, handed the boy the mysterious shoes from his workbench.

"Here you are, young master," the cobbler said. The boy took the shoes without even looking at them and dropped a half-silver piece into the cobbler's hand. After the boy and the soldier departed, the cobbler returned to his work bench, sat down, and looked dumbfounded at the space where the shoes had been.

"Well," said a shrill voice from somewhere below the cobbler's knees. "I hope the fat deviant is happy with his shoes. He won't find a better pair in all the land."

Underneath the cobbler's workbench stood five tiny men. One was pink, one yellow, one blue, one lavender, and one green. They all had beautiful multicolored wings like butterflies, were completely naked, and had no visible genitals. One by one the tiny sprites fluttered up from the floor and lit upon the workbench.

"By all that's holy, I've never seen the like," the cobbler said, astounded. "How shall I ever repay you good fairies? You've saved my life."

"Fairies," the blue-skinned man replied, "are obscene creatures who can't stop fornicating long enough to say hello. We are elves, and you shall repay us by doing whatever we tell you to do, whenever we want." The other four broke up with giggles.

The cobbler laughed. "And what would you fine elves have me do for you?"

"Bring us mushrooms!" the yellow elf shrieked.

"No, bring us walnuts!" shouted the pink one, shooting a tiny ball of pink light from his fingertips. The yellow elf dodged the light and returned fire, shooting several darts of yellow light in quick succession, missing the pink elf completely, but hitting the blue, green, and lavender elves. They all began shouting at each other, firing balls of colored light all over the cottage. Where the lights hit the cottage wall, they left little bursts of colored powder. But each time one hit the cobbler, it burned his skin and raised a large red welt.

"Enough, enough," cried the cobbler. "You're causing me terrible pain. Look how you are burning me." All at once the elves stopped and glared at him. The blue elf stepped forward and pointed his finger at the trembling cobbler.

"Go and bring us a mushroom salad on a bed of rose petals. If you are not back here in one hour, we shall cast a spell and infect you with an itching foot fungus."

The cobbler was silent, not sure if he had heard correctly. To show the cobbler that he was serious, the elf snapped his fingers several times, and as he did so, painful red welts sprang up on the cobbler's forehead.

"Oh, oh please stop!" the cobbler cried, stumbling out the door. "I'll bring it, I'll bring it!"

Starting up the lane toward the hillside where the wild mushrooms grow, the cobbler tried to piece together his foggy fragments of memory from the previous night. He recalled having spoken with a rather diminutive person on the doorstep, but that fellow had been alone and had been a normal color, or at least he thought so. It was dark, and the man had been wearing a tiny hooded traveler's cloak. The cobbler was worried. He'd heard stories of magic elves and began to fear that he might be in real

danger.

When he finally reached the hillside, he had to travel all the way back into town, realizing that he didn't have a basket. Upon returning with his basket, he spent at least two hours scouring the hillside for mushrooms. He moved slow, often stumbling. His hands were trembling fiercely. Knowing that he would find no wild roses, the cobbler decided to buy some from the florist.

At last the cobbler returned to his cottage. Inside he found that the elves had been drinking his potato water. Fluttering about the cottage like moths, they laughed and called to one another, sending tiny balls of colored light whizzing through the air like shooting stars. They had broken all of the cobbler's cups and bowls and destroyed his cobbling tools. The cottage walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with splotches of colored powder.

"Here you are, little masters, I did what you asked of me. A mushroom salad on a bed of rose petals. Please, please, take it and go," the cobbler said. He tried to sound casual, but his teeth were chattering with fear. "I thank you for the shoes, but I can manage from here."

The elves broke up with laughter. "You can never be rid of us, old man," cried the blue elf. "We have a deal, a deal bound with a spell which you agreed to, you drunken old fool. We will make shoes for you, and you will give us everything we ask for."

"Unless of course, we get bored and decide to eat you," the yellow elf sang out in a high-pitched nasally twang. At that, the elves laughed so hard they could barely stand. They stumbled about, pushing and kicking each other, giggling like lunatics. Suddenly the green-skinned elf began dancing and chanting. "A rabbit! A rabbit! Caught in a snare. Crack its teeth and pull out its hair. Break its legs and see if it walks. Pull out its tongue and see if it talks. We'll be the hunting dogs, he'll be the prey. Let's see if the rabbit can scamper away." The green elf laughed so hard, he doubled over choking and coughing until he vomited bright green powder. The cobbler shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot, not sure what to say or do next.

"And you were not back in an hour," said the blue elf with a wicked grin. He clapped his hands and the cobbler fell to the floor, tearing off his shoes and howling out in pain. His feet were swollen, red, and covered with sores, as though his shoes had been stuffed with poison ivy.

Over the following weeks, more and more noblemen arrived at the cobbler's door, placing orders for shoes. At first the cobbler tried to decline the orders, not wanting to be further indebted to the elves. But when he opened his mouth to say that he'd retired, it was as though someone else were speaking. "Yes of course," he'd say.

“They’ll be ready tomorrow.” Realizing that he was under the control of a spell, he gave up. There was no limit to the number of orders he would take. Sometimes up to five pairs of shoes were to be made in a single night. The elves always delivered, and the money poured in, but the cobbler could scarcely keep up. He was forced to work the still at all hours, making potato water for the elves. He was lucky if they let him have three hours of sleep per night, and if he tarried, the elves would blight him with terrible skin rashes from head to toe. The cobbler himself was drinking more than ever, and had almost stopped eating completely.

As the cobbler’s physical appearance deteriorated, the local folk were less and less inclined to buy their distilled potato water from him. “Sampling a bit too much of his product,” they whispered. People began making the journey to West Tuckersville for their potato water. The noblemen, feeling more themselves when speaking down to the poor and the crippled, continued placing orders for ever-fancier shoes: purple-brushed leather with yellow bows, shiny black high-heeled boots, soft-soled slippers covered in colored glass beads. Soon, shoes became his primary income, and the still operated solely in service of the elves.

The cobbler’s still was kept in a cellar beneath the cottage floor. It was a marvelous machine. He’d spent the better part of five years building it. It stood two heads higher than he did and was twice as wide as he was with his arm stretched out from side to side. To the unlearned eye it was a helter-skelter of pipes, cauldrons, and furnaces, but its construction was masterly. The cobbler possessed the mind of an engineer, but not the art of a distiller. His potato water had a reputation for wide swings in quality from batch to batch. But, it had been popular enough until recently. Trudging up the stairs from the still cellar, the cobbler carried fresh jugs of potato water for the elves.

“Where have you been, slowpoke?” the pink elf demanded. “I have a task for you. It’s very important.”

“Oh what do you want now, you horrible little monsters?” the cobbler said. “Why don’t you just kill me and be done with it? Filthy imps!”

The elves fell all over themselves giggling and kicking the floor.

“You could be rid of us, you know,” the blue elf said. “There is a spell that would do it, but you wouldn’t be able to pull it off. Besides, it requires some very specific ingredients, and it’s not sanitary.”

“Not sanitary?” asked the cobbler, his interest piqued.

“Well, first you need to collect the menses rags of a seven-hundred-year-old witch. Then you need to stitch them up inside of a dead goat’s urinary bladder on a full moon’s night. From then on it gets a bit unpleasant.”

“Okay, okay, spare me the details,” the cobbler said.

“Since you’re useless at spells and you can’t make shoes, why don’t you go and cut us some flowers,” spat the blue elf.

“But before he goes, let’s make him pretty,” chirped the yellow elf. All of the elves began snapping their fingers and clusters of fever blisters erupted on the cobbler’s lips.

“What do we want to eat? Bluebells or daffodils?” shouted the blue elf.

“Bluebells, bluebells, bluebells, bluebells,” the other four cried in unison. “Bring us six silver kettles, and five bluebell petals. Bring us four stocks of heather, and three raven’s feathers. Bring us two creeping vines, and one jug of wine.”

“I can’t get those things,” the cobbler shouted. “You know I can’t, this has gone too far. Do to me what you will, I’ll bring you nothing at all!”

“Bring it all here right now, and dance while we dine, or we’ll cut off a finger and leave you with nine,” the elves sang.

“I’ll do nothing! Filthy imps!” the cobbler said.

“Oh bother,” the blue elf sighed. “Well, I’ll have your silly old finger then. Just to teach you a lesson, I’ll take your right thumb.” With that the elf clapped his hands and the cobbler’s right thumb severed itself and fell to the floor. The elves ran over, laughing hysterically, picked up the thumb, and tossed it back and forth between them. The cobbler’s hand sang out in pain. He wrapped his shirt around the small stump, trying to staunch the bleeding. “Monsters! Monsters!” he cried. The elves laughed as though it were the funniest thing they’d ever seen.

Day in and day out it was the same. The elves would spend all day drinking his distilled potato water, giggling and wrestling each other. They’d order him to dance a jig or sing a ballad. They would afflict him with all kinds of ailments: explosive diarrhea one day, toothaches the next day, any number of rashes and poxes. And every day they would send him out for a mushroom salad on a bed of rose petals.

He was becoming such a regular at the florist, his roses were already prepared for him when he arrived. Finally the florist pulled the cobbler aside.

“How many times have you showered her with roses? Will you continue to do so forever? Give her up, man. Turn your attentions elsewhere. Do not fret over your afflictions of the skin. You have money! There are many girls who’d have you.”

“I am hopelessly smitten,” the cobbler replied wearily. “Hopelessly smitten.”

Early one morning, the elves sent the cobbler down to the still for fresh jugs of potato

water, but not before covering his feet with weeping blisters. The elves laughed hysterically, watching as the cobbler limped down the stairs.

On one of his trips out collecting mushrooms, buying flowers, and restocking supplies for the still, the cobbler purchased a length of rope. He kept it coiled up on the floor of the still cellar. Looking at the rope now, he made up his mind. He'd known when he was buying it what it would be for, but refused at the time to admit it to himself. Now, however, he felt no doubt at all. He threw the rope over a ceiling beam and set to the task of tying a noose. Without his right thumb, it was slow and difficult work. His arm ached and throbbed horribly in the elbow and shoulder. He assumed it was an infection spreading up his arm from the thumb, but he didn't care. Suddenly an idea struck him.

The cobbler jumped up and ran to the still. He fastened down all the clamps as tight as he could, stoked the furnaces, and closed the steam vents. He opened all the pipes to let in as much pressure as they could deliver and scurried up the stairs carrying two full jugs for the elves.

"Shall I bring you a salad, little masters?" he asked cheerily, placing the jugs on the table.

"A salad, a salad, a salad, a salad," they all began chanting. "Mushrooms and rose, or we'll blight your toes. Bring us our meat, or we'll hobble your feet." The elves joined hands and danced in a ring on the tabletop. "Cut us some flowers, be back in an hour, if you're late coming back it's you we'll devour." The elves then fell on the tabletop, overcome with a fit of giggles.

The cobbler hastened out the door, bowing and scraping, all smiles as he went. He made his way down the road to what he considered to be a safe distance and sat down in the mud. Looking at his cottage, rocking back and forth, muttering to himself, the cobbler waited. Buttercup was quiet. A soft wind rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees. Chickens clucked in the distance. And then, a sound like a thunderclap burst open the quiet day. The cobbler's cottage roof blew off completely, breaking into hundreds of pieces as it rose into the sky. The cottage door exploded outward, sailed across the road, and shattered against the wall of a cottage on the opposite side.

The cobbler danced, cackling like a madman in the muddy streets, while a mishmash of debris and expertly cobbled shoes rained down on the township of Buttercup.

Visit Sean C. Hayden's [MySpace page](#) and [Web site](#).

The legend of unJim

The story goes this way
This is how they tell it
It's an old story
Now it's starting

There was a poet
Or maybe he was a painter
This was a long time ago
He drove everybody crazy
Yakkety-yak with his poems all the time
Or maybe it was splashing paint all over everything
It made everybody nuts
They didn't like it
All those poems keeping them awake half the night
Or maybe it was pictures every place
Even on their furniture and their dogs
At least that's what they say
That's the story
And everybody said, Stop it!
Just cut it out! Don't do it anymore!
All the yakkety-yakking
All the paint flying around
Stop it! they said. Get a job! Do something useful!
Beat your word processor—
Or maybe it was paintbrushes—
Into plowshares!
Grow wheat!
But did that poet (or maybe it was a painter) stop?
You already know the answer
Nope Nein Nyet unh-unh No way

The story goes on
It continues
Here's what happens next

They grab that poet

It could have been a painter
They grab that guy by every arm and leg he's got
And probably some other parts
They grab him and pick him up
About which he is not happy
About which he feels his personal space is being rudely violated
Invaded, trespassed upon
About which he is pissed off
Notwithstanding and nevertheless
The crowd, the throng, the as-it-were mob
Continues the grabbing and lugging and hauling away of this guy
Jim could have been his name
But I doubt it
And they tossed him in a hole in the ground
Threw him down a well
A deep one, really deep
How deep?
A thousand turtles at least
Maybe more
That deep
You should have heard him as he fell
What a racket!

Now the story is about half-way through
More or less
Although as far as that poet who could actually have been a painter is
concerned
He's probably thinking at this point that the end is right around the
corner

And he's singing
All the way down
Singing The Waltz of the Sugar Plum Valkyries
He just belted it out
And the Grand Inquisitor's Aria
All the goddamn way down
To the bottom of the well
A thousand turtles deep
Maybe more
Oh and by the way
They threw his wife down with him

You can call her Estelle
Although her name is Debbie
What'd she ever do to those folks up there
So they'd throw her down a thousand turtle well?
Marry a poet? Marry a painter? Invent Phenomenology?
Tell the Assistant Chief of Protocol and Conventional Morality
To go fuck a watermelon?
She doesn't sing down the well
She's pondering Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre
Being and your basic nothingness

Thump! They land
Surprise! They're not dead
They put their bones back where they belong
And look around
Could this be Hell? the poet/painter reputed to be unJim but not bloody
likely asked
Hell, said Debbie, is an elevator full of existentialists
Not half bad, says nonJim, unJim
Nosing around the place
A guy could get used to it here
See, there were fruit trees everywhere
And cellos and brooks and tame gazelles
And plenty of naked people
Oh, you bet, there was nakedness and downright nudity
Just all over the place
In every nook and cranny
And a kind of rosy-fingered light
Just suffusing and suffusing
And those naked people
Oh it was hard to take your eyes off them
Getting to know each other better
Whoopee! howls notJim
And ungarments himself post haste
While Debbie begins deconstructing Jacques Lacan
And wouldn't you think our purported Jim
Would mix it up with the other naked?
Hump a little
Bump a little
Fondle someone's rump a little?
Not him

Hard to believe
But that's how the story goes
That's the way it's always been told
Since the beginning

We're getting close to the end now
It's almost over

So naked Jim he just yakkety-haks
Well, he's a poet, what can you do?
Or maybe a painter Hieronymous Bosching the whole damned place
People included
And you know it drives those naked people nuts
Stop it! Just cut it out!
Don't do it anymore!
All the yakkety-yak all the flying paint
But did he stop?
You guessed it
So then all the naked people grabbed that guy
And his metaphysical ontological wife
By their various and sundries
And 1-2-3
Tossed them up that well
A thousand turtles high
Maybe higher, who knows
They fell up and up
Imagine that
Up and up they fell
You wouldn't think anybody could fall that far
Up
So-called Jim he's singing up a storm
The Internationale and the Victory March of the Swans
And Debbie does zen koans
You know, like Does a dime have Buddha nature?
And Nanquan cuts the cheese
Things like that
Then
Thump!
They land on the ground
Right back up there where all this started.
Let that be a lesson to you

Now they story's over
It's finished
There's no more to tell
What'd you expect?

In the myths of parrots

In the myths of parrots it isn't clear whether God created parrots or the other way around.

The name of the first parrot was All-Over-the-Place, because there was nowhere that parrot wasn't. All-Over-the-Place has feathers of every color and was not male or female—that came later.

One day All-Over-the-Place thought, "I want to go somewhere." But since the parrot was already everywhere, there was nowhere else to go. Still, All-Over-the-Place couldn't get rid of that thought—"I want to go somewhere."

Then All-Over-the-Place got another thought: "I'll make a place to go." So All-Over-the-Place pulled out great clumps of blue and brown and green and gray feathers and bunched them up and threw them away. And those feathers became the world. The blue feathers were the waters and the gray and brown feathers were the land and the green feathers were the trees and grasses and all the other plants.

"Terrific!" All-Over-the-Place exclaimed. "Now I have somewhere to go!" On the way to the new world, All-Over-the-Place noticed something. "Hey, I'm smaller." It was still a vast parrot, to be sure, but no longer an endless one.

Standing in the very middle of the world, All-Over-the-Place looked around and said, "Not bad. But it needs something more." Now the parrot pulled out a mass of bright yellow feathers and threw them far above the world, where they became the sun. A smaller bunch of pale yellow feathers thrown in the opposite direction became the moon. Thousands of little white downy feathers became the stars.

"Better," said All-Over-the-Place, flying around the shiny and shimmer world from east to west, from north to south, from day to night and back to day, admiring the place. And as it flew, All-Over-the-Place noticed that it had grown smaller still.

Days and nights came and went—too many to count. All-Over-the-Place started to get a little bored. "Isn't this a dazzlingly beautiful world I've made?" the parrot asked itself. "Yes, of course," it answered. "Then why am I feeling so out of sorts, so blues and blah?" it asked. "It's because... well...I imagine it's ah... Wait! I know! I know! It's because I'm the only one here! There's nobody else to enjoy this with me!"

All-Over-the-Place got busy right away thinking up creatures to fill the world with. That's when the parrot got the idea for males and females. "I'll make the first ones, but if they want any more, they'll have to take care of it themselves." With its marvelous feathers, All-Over-the-Place began making creatures of every sort. To each one the parrot gave a name and a task.

“Your name is Giraffe,” All-Over-the-Place told the giraffe, “and your job is to rise quietly into the trees.”

“Your name is Human.” All-Over-the-Place said to the human, “and your job is to pay attention.”

“Your name is Starfish,” All-Over-the-Place said to the starfish, “and your job is to live in the sea and to move as slowly as the great constellations.”

“Your name is Heron,” All-Over-the-Place told the heron, “and your job is to know the shape of water.”

All-Over-the-Place created thousands upon thousand upon thousands of beings and gave every one of them a name and a life’s work. And each time it made a new creature, All-Over-the-Place grew a bit smaller.

In the myths of parrots, it is not clear what All-Over-the-Place did when it could not imagine any more creatures. Some parrots believe that that is when All-Over-the-Place created God and said, “Your name is God and your job is to remember.”

Finally, All-Over-the-Place chose to be female, because she had given birth to the world and everything in it. After she created a mate for herself she saw that she had become the size of an ordinary parrot and she knew that her great powers were spent. All-Over-the-Place changed her name to Just Here and with her mate flew deep into the rain forest to live and die the way everything does.

In the myths of parrots, the humans do not pay attention.

In the myths of parrots, the world breaks and flies apart.

In the myths of parrots, it all becomes parrot again.

A Tale From Old Iona

by Dorie LaRue

The priest found her
on the rain-beaten beach.
His cloak flopped austerely
in the wind, his lengthy address
took its starting point from Columba's
copybook, bleeding Boethius,
ah, sweet heaven.
And she snapped—
I don't know what—
some colloquial utterance,
ran away in a polyphonic
movement of wind and sea.
She'd missed Mass and he'd
ransacked the morning for her,
saw evil in her spine
so scrupulously disguised
by the unlinear and soft.
Left, he stood excessively
disposing of his mood,
fighting unwritten stones,
weighted down by the cross.
Later she told her mother
she would die soon
and in two months
she disappeared.
By day the mother saw
nothing but black cowed
priests trailing on the beach
upwards to the abbey.
By night, space and sea,
the moon on the water
like footlights.
Perhaps she'd called her own death,
hung like a scarecrow
in a shady place, or buried,
injuring the silence

of a crumbling, ruinous cairn.
Or perhaps she lived
on the other side of the island,
rain-kissed, then weather-beaten,
her epos outliving her.
She grew frumpy and ran to fat, took
to too much drink, toppled into the sea.

Gold and Straw

by Harry R. Champion

She knows. I can see it from my first moment in the chamber. I fix the smile on my face, but an icy drop falls into the still pool of my heart and ripples of despair march outward. The door I've made closes soundlessly behind me and vanishes as she turns without a greeting.

Her features are as blank and schooled as ever, but her eyes, when they meet mine, are steady and do not slide away in shame and confusion. Her hand, smoothing a wrinkle from the sky blue blanket in the cradle, is steady and her shoulders, shoulders I'd last seen bowed as though under the weight of the sky, are squared and level.

I incline my head and body. "How are you this evening, my lady?"

"Shall we begin?" Elation, a rude eagerness in her voice she has not allowed herself these last two moons. She knows.

"If you wish."

She draws a rolled sheet of foolscap from her sleeve and consults it. I'm not deceived for a moment.

"Aloysius? Bartolomay?" She raises her eyebrows.

I shake my head. "No, my lady."

She looks at me sharply, but I do not correct myself. I will not call her Highness.

"Crispengill? Dungarry?"

"No, my lady."

"Ephraim? Ferdinand?"

No. Golliwall? Horatio? No. Igenwall? Jasper? No, my lady...

Does it occur to her, I wonder, that I saved her life? Her father's life as well? Does she remember that she was threatened with imprisonment, torture, death by the man she now calls husband? Does she like being queen so much that she forgets that that same king and loving husband's loins were more bestirred by the sight of gold than her beauty?

Kiirkenny? No. Lemuel? No. Murgatroyed? No, my lady...

Does she guess that every night for a year, I have lain in my jeweled bed beneath a silken canopy and seen only the perfection of her face before my eyes? Would she

believe me if I told her that in four hundred and eighty-seven years, she is the first woman I've ever loved for her challenging laugh and ready wit? Can I even hope that as she lies beside or beneath that tyrannical bastard that she thinks of my clever hands and skilful touch? Does she know how much the boy means to me?

"Nicodemus? Obadiah? Peregrine?"

"No...my lady. None of them is he."

I will not have the chance to teach the lad the True Songs, the music of the Tuatha that can make water into wine, leaves into songbirds, straw into gold. He will never see the inside of the great hills, feel the jeweled depths of the seas on his skin, or taste the wind from atop the thundering clouds. I will never take him in my arms and whisper in his ear a name of power and mystery.

"Quentin?" she asks, her rich voice swelling, her cruel game nearing its end.

"Nay, my lady," I answer, my voice suddenly quiet, miserable, that of a stranger. A monster. She thinks me an unnatural creature.

"Can it, perhaps...be..."

Her eyes meet mine and whatever she sees there gives her pause; I see her falter.

It isn't too late. I can rescue you both if you will let me. I will clothe you in raiment greater than mortal woman e'er dreamt. For the sake of love, I will move the stars to spell your name in the eldest language. I will raise him to be hero and savior, peacebringer to the mortal race. I will fill your hands and those of the boy with secrets more precious than the treasures of man. Do not say his—

"Rumplestiltskin."

Gone. Never to be regained. Each *geis* is unique, never to be recreated.

"That is his name...my lady."

"No longer." She stands protectively before the cradle.

She has chosen for them both. Shameless whore. I will go. Foolish mortal bitch. I will summon my power with my dignity and open a new door in the floor of this tower room. Leave the doomed wretch and plaything. To her I will vanish as if swallowed by the stone. The boy is condemned by the loss of the true name I gave him. He will be given a mortal name, an earthly destiny and believe a human monarch his father, live and die with and like his mother.

I will not know my son.

Visit Harry R. Campion's Web site, <http://yangandcampion.googlepages.com>.

Two poems by Donna Vorreyer

Your Mind Wanders During the MRI

They tell you to remove your valuables,
your metal, settle you with music, tell
you to remain perfectly still, relax.

But the music disappears with the hum
and rattle of the machinery, rhythmic,
like waves, and you are tucked so tightly

into the bed that you feel as if you are
already dead, arranged for burial in
some Norse ritual – the mad pounding

of hammers, the laying of offerings,
your clan on the shore. Then the fire
engulfs you, and you are set afloat in

the dim light of dawn, strapped in for
the afterlife, alone with the wind,
the sea, the broad boat of your body.

Reprieve

The myth has gotten it wrong.
Narcissus loved the water, not
himself, loved the blur and swirl
of the rippling river where any
face can change, one expression
eclipsing another until it is almost
unrecognizable. Poor Narcissus –

how easily I have fallen prey to
the sway of waves upon a shore,
lost myself in the rhythmic
whispers of small streams over
stones, forgotten the whole solid
world and dunked my head beneath
the surface of the water filling up

the bath, listened to the uterine roar
of its flow in my ears and then
emerged reborn, dripping, naked,
blinking at my alien surroundings,
resisting the gravity that wants to
force me upright onto dry land when
all I want to do is gaze and float.

Visit Donna Vorreyer Web site at <http://djvorreyer.wordpress.com>.



Christopher Woods, “Dawn Abstract 1”

View Christopher Woods' and his wife Linda's online gallery, [MOONBIRD HILL ARTS](#).

Turbulence

by Susan Koefod

We were en route from Minneapolis to Orlando,
nine weeks post 9/11, a couple of coworkers
on a half-empty airplane.

Loosened up by an airport cocktail or two
I asked many questions which you patiently answered though
I sounded impertinent, I'm sure.
Perhaps you understood in my earnest uncertainty,
a secret desire for faith
that even the most impassioned non-believer keeps alive.

You told me you first felt the hand of God when you'd
been adrift, a seventeen-year-old river-brat,
the son of a town official who'd caused a scandal
and disgraced the family.

I asked what that hand of God felt like?
when Jesus first touched you
was it like being lifted in flight?
And how was it, years later,
you pushed that hand away,
rejecting everything you'd believed
for so long.
Somewhere around the time
you divorced an unfaithful wife,
you divorced God, too.

She remained a believer while
you fell away,
not like Adam falling out of paradise
after trying to cover up his wife's sin,
but like Dædalus trying to catch his only son,
the boy he'd equipped with wings held together by wax,
You plummeted after your liquefying faith
as your once feathered hopes drifted away.

Somewhere over Kentucky
turbulence struck and my eyes widened.
“I don’t like turbulence,” I told you.
You eyed me with amused conviction,
and began to bounce in motion with the plane.
“See,” you said.
“Turbulence is fun.”

You seemed so convinced it was true
that I bounced, too.
I felt the fear loosen
and had a moment when I thought I understood.
Perhaps faith is built on faith:
on an earnest belief that says it’s best just to smile
and help others through the chaos.

We started our descent into Orlando
and looked down to see
the glittering lights of a half-deserted Disneyworld.
The tourists, still shaken from 9/11,
had not returned in force.
No one was ready to believe again in America.

Visit Susan Koefod's [artist Web site](#).

First Love

by Fran Walker

My joints creak as I lie back on the furs. Around her bed, stone statues silently watch me. I remove my headscarf and tie it in a blindfold over my eyes.

I quiver with a mixture of fear, rebellious excitement, and anticipation. For the first time in my life, I made a decision, all by myself. I came to this island, all by myself.

And why not?

I was demure and obedient, as befitted a plain, dowerless woman. I was grateful to be taken into my cousin's household after my parents died. I covered my hair, served his wife, bathed his children, wove the cloth for his household, cooked his meals, pressed and stored his olive oil, and grew older and plainer and poorer and more unloved.

But I also heard the whispers. *A monster*, they call her, that strange woman on the island. *Monstrous appetites, monstrous desires. Old women are safe, but she hates the young pretty ones. And as for men!—Well, if looks could kill....* And someone always added with a darkling look, *Maybe they can.*

Now my cousin is dead, and his children long since moved away to Nemia, Thebes, Sparta, Macedon. His widow has gone back to her own family. I am alone. I have no dreams of a husband or fine clothes or servants of my own.

But I find myself dreaming of love. Of being loved.

I promise myself I won't join her collection of statues. I won't look at her, not even once. But maybe, just maybe, she will love me. And if not—well, my life is worth little, and she is welcome to it.

I close my eyes and wait.

I hear footsteps. They sound like hooves against the flagstones. Then a long silence.

Something gently touches my face. I keep my eyes shut, my body still.

Medusa's mouth presses against mine. My first kiss. Thick, ropy saliva coats my lips. I taste blood, and pus, and venom.

My hair, coarse and gray, feels like silk as it catches on her rough skin, on her claws, on her scales. My pendulous breasts become succulent as a talon flicks across them. Delicate forked tongues lick away the burning pain left in its wake. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut behind the blindfold.

She bends lower and traces her lips across my belly, murmuring words of praise. No

longer am I old, bloated, sagging, hideous. I am beautiful, and I am loved.

The slime from her mouth drips over my warts and fills the wrinkles in my skin. It feels as slippery as the growing wetness between my thighs. I block out the hiss, the stench, the chill of her flesh against mine.

Medusa slithers down my body. If I were to look, I might only see the crown of her head. I dare not look.

Her thick tongue rasps my flesh. My thighs tremble against her head. The snakes twine around my legs. Something in me grows, pulses, explodes.

I am loved. I am home.

A Tale of a Tree

by Barbara J. Williams

In a far distant place at a long distant time, men, all at once, without warning, without worry, knew where God had buried Truth. The excited men gathered, spoke among themselves and made their plan to go deep, deep into the woods.

After a long time, the men reached the tree, the very tree, where God had interred all of Truth.

The tree was very old, very large, a majestic tree, So apt, the men thought, a resting place for Truth.

The roots of the old tree were tangled, thick and strong, creating a labyrinth where men sought fruitlessly for at least the meatless bones of Truth.

Meanwhile, the fragile women were left behind to tend the children and the vegetables, to stoke the fire and clear the hearth, to fetch the water and spin the thread, to clear the path and keep the wild wolves apart from the pretty meadow where they stayed.

The women grew weary of tasks unshared, grew lonely for the deep dark voices of the men. And, after brief and cautious consultation, the women set off, too, deep, deep into the woods. To that place in the forbidding woods where men sought Truth, the women would seek also.

The women packed the soft skins to lie upon. They packed the children and the vegetables. They even packed the fire. Because the women carried their lives, their homes, their futures, the journey was slow and arduous. The women grew painfully weary on the long, long trek to find the seekers of truth.

After much pain and cost to themselves, far, far away from the sweet meadow, at long last, the women found the men. Although they tried and tried, not even one woman could catch the eye of even one man.

The men, of course, were deeply engrossed in the elaborate puzzle of the roots of the tree, where Truth's bones were buried.

The men had no time to see the women, to see the soft skins to lie on, to see the vegetables and the children, to see the fire. Nor did they notice the angry stalking of the wild wolves around the giant tree.

Then, all at once, without speaking among themselves, all the women began to cry. The women wailed and sobbed and hiccupped their anguish, there, beside the

magnificent Truth tree.

Seeing the women so unhappy, the children, too, began to cry. Deep in the forbidding forest, women and children sang sad cries to the men who only wanted to find truth.

The distant moon rose and set on the cold music of the tears of both the women and the children, while the men, enchanted with the fine question of exactly where God might have hidden Truth, were deaf to the chilling noise.

Many moons changed from black to white then black again. Stars died and fell. New stars exploded into being, while the men studied the tree. And the tears of the women and children watered the leafy carpet of the forbidding wood.

Then, magic happened. The men found a mystic way to uproot the ancient tree, to carry Truth with them back to the pretty meadow.

At home in the meadow, the men sought the secrets of Truth within the mighty limbs and gnarled roots. The men pounded and pummeled and washed and bleached bits of the tree until the once mighty tree was reduced to piles and piles of flat, colorless paper.

Upon these relics of their holy tree, the men, using sharp twigs dipped in the juice of sugary berries and other things, drew signs and symbols, tokens for all they knew, of Truth.

And, back in their sweet meadow, the women continued to tend the children and the vegetables and the fire. Sometimes they used bits of the Truth to feed the fire, to stave off the snarling wild wolves.

And sometimes the women and sometimes the children and sometimes both at once sobbed and hiccupped and wailed, vainly trying to catch the eyes of the so serious men who, among the remains of the Truth tree, sought to learn its secrets.

Fairy Tales Simply Put

by J.V. Foerster

As you get older you realize
there are things that really happen
like maybe Red Riding Hood did spend
some time in the belly of a wolf.

She was young and naïve but felt safe pinned
to the inside of the intestine near a kidney.
at first it had to hurt the biting
the chewing and the swallow,
but then the respite from responsibility
had to be nice.

I was captured once by a man
whose balls moved like an animal
in their hairy pouch all night long.
I know this because he pinned me
to his pelvis and there I stayed unable to
look up into his yellow eyes.

I was a Rapunzal looking down at her freedom
with hapless sorrowful eyes
with so little to drop for redemption.
At night the old dwarf of my crackled anger
of my fever and prayers
spun kind words out of my tears which each morning

I offered to the wolf
as penance for being still so alive.