

Fickle Muses

Volume 2, July-September 2008



“Locust” by Jeff Foster

Bedtime Story

Baba Yaga wraps her bony fingers around the pole and climbs. She tugs her body over bumps and scaly chicken skin, crawls between the teeth of the door, drops the basket of berries, shoves stringy black hair behind a pointed ear, and fans the coals.

The stairs outside my room moan under my stepfather's feet.

Ashy hoof prints cover the floor. A ragged wolf pelt cures over the hearth. Crumbs scatter. A petitioner's blue rose wilts on the floor. In the corner, the mortar smeared with mud. The pestle's crack keeps it from steering her through the forest.

A crash on the stairs and a beery curse.

She glares at the broken broom, mutters about walking *like any old hag*. The silver straws: plucked by pig brothers who swore to clean for a night's board. Vasilissa crouches in the corner combing her doll's hair and begging to go home.

A chapped hand slips around the edge of my door.

Baba Yaga polishes the teeth in her keyhole's mouth and mumbles under her breath. Strangers enter her hut too often. First the girl seeking light, then three porcine brothers. She's witch of the woods, not fairy godmother. Time the chicken legs scuttled to a new marsh.

His grinning face hovers in the hall.

Vasilissa glances out the window and nods a greeting to the Night horseman. He spurs the horse past the gate. Baba Yaga pinches the girl's arm, shoves a glowing skull into her hands and points to the door. The girl races away.

He's leaning over me now and the room shrinks.

Baba Yaga bolts the door and her three hands shimmer into view. The pigs spoiled the place then tried to sneak off at dawn. At least the girl said please. Baba Yaga plucks the ruined flower from the floor, checks three pork roasts, and adds more coal.

His hand slithers up my shirt.

Ivan the Sweet

His brothers approach me first,
according to birth order.
My long blue nose
startles them.
They call me Hag.

Last, the unloved
superfluous heir.
Often he has titles:
Ivan the Lazy, Foolish Ivan.
He approaches my hut
after his brothers
and calls me Mother.
Sometimes, Grandmother.

He chants pretty rhymes
and I offer him advice
and seven league boots.
Later, his brothers strip
away these treasures
and bludgeon him
until even his chest stills.

No one ever counts on Koshchei,
an ogre on ogrish business
grumbling through the woods.
He rends the brothers
limb from spoiled limb,
dribbles water on Ivan's brow
and the boy wakes.
We let him escape
though he returns. And stays.

Later Koshchei drops by my hut.
I pour tea and grind bones
into flour for bread. We dip
the toast in our mugs and wonder
how sweet Ivan's bones
would be if only
he wasn't so polite.

Baba Yaga Gets a Student

I sleep in my hut
my feet pressed
in the doorjamb,
a breast on each shelf,
my head resting
against the chimney.

The gate creaks
and the skulls jaw
their greeting.

My hut spins round.
Its claws scrape
the dirt. A girl
stares without blinking
past my blue nose
and into my eyes.

I order the house
to kneel
and sweep the girl over
my threshold.

I take her basket of belladonna blooms.
She weaves spider webs into my hair
and my crooked fingers
draw words from her lips:
a cure for her father.

I stare into the dish of oil
and see his arms paddle
the sheets, his feet kick
air as he swims his bed
across a river.

His wife's skin caverns
around her mouth.
When she was younger there were dimples
but now her hollow cheeks frame sharp teeth.
She counts the coins spilling out of the mattress.
and strokes his smoldering brow.
She spoons poison between his flaking lips.

*You came too late, girl.
Once he bathes in the river*

I cannot call him.

I shrink my body and the girl
slides onto the bench beside me
to gaze into the oil.

His limbs twist under the sheets—burning scraps
of paper coiling into ash.
We see behind his lids
what plagues the retinas:

A beak sifts through loam,
snaps up bloated bodies.

He slogs through the muck. Slip-sliding one step
ahead of the piercing beak.

The mud rises up his thighs,
creeps over his groin.

His feet tangle in twisted roots.

Bronze light flares along a tree limb,
flays the orbs of his eyes.

The fever ulcers through his skull.

The oil sizzles in the bowl.

The girl and I choke on the splatters.

My apprentice slithers off the bench
and hangs the kettle over the fire.

A Four Star Spicy Curry At the Edge of the World

by Darcy Bruce

The first time she kissed me the taste of her breath was like curry, spicy—left red behind my eyes. Her lips on mine, her tongue a strong and driving force—powerful—she knew exactly what she wanted. She left the taste of chili peppers in my mouth.

The first time we slept together we twisted ourselves in the sheets, so exhilarated—tired but calm—a warmth you can't get by starting a fire, it takes more—technique.

Her legs were so smooth, “just shaved them this morning,” hands, firm but gentle. Her hair was like silk on my cheek and I was only too happy to learn a few new tricks. She was fresh as any homegrown fruit and just as soft. We lay in bed that night, folded into each other underneath the soft green glow of a plastic universe. *Tappattappat* on the skylight above us the rain slung one last lullaby over our heads—our eyelids heavy as our breath grew thick—we relinquished our waking lives and drifted into Slumber, standing barefoot together on a lonely wooden pier.

This was an entirely new place.

This was an overture.

The air smelled sweet, like almond paste and French lilacs. One of her hands reached out to grab mine, the other buried deep inside her shirt, searching for a cigarette. She was a woman of great wisdom and strength and I was a girl with some knowledge of the smaller things and a few of the older kinds of books. The two of us fit well together, but sometimes I wondered if she needed me as much as I needed her. The whole time I was wishing I'd eaten dinner, and I could've done well for a coffee. But she found her cigarette and functioned for the both of us. We stood patiently on the dock—the smoke from her ash curling like jazz—the way time passed seemed like forever and not long enough.

The boat came then. Waves knocking against it, silver mist rising from everywhere as it bumped up against the pier. She inhaled—exhaled—and pulled me, leading me towards the boat as she let her cigarette butt fall through the cracks to be eaten by the surf. We stepped into our vessel, carefully, bare feet on hard wood. It creaked like old age.

She smelled like orange peels and whiskey, shampoo and unfiltered cigarettes.

I can't remember a time when I didn't know her. Can't remember a time when I wasn't craving for some kind of affection from her. Even in dreaming I was by her side.

Underneath our boat the ocean flowed, deep and strange was the water of Slumber. Cold and dark, clear and warm. Sometimes the water would envelope me, and it would feel like I was in bed, with my blankets wrapped tightly around me. Sometimes it would crash against my face and fill my mouth and nostrils, making me choke—waking up, my face wet with salty tears.

She didn't dream as often as I, but still she knew the place better. She was like that. Confidence built comfort. She lounged at the bow of the boat as I peered over the side. The bottom of the sea was covered in copper pennies. Wishes. They gleamed in the afternoon sunlight.

The light in dreaming changed often, sometimes dark and overcast, other times bright, sunny, and warm.

My favorite was when the day was like a cave with a sky that stretched out and upwards towards infinity. I've always loved the smell of caves, like water with a secret. It was strange how even in darkness, we could still see. And we never questioned where we were going, what we were doing. We may have done it all before.

My thoughts became words and hung above my head.

“We have—” she said to me. “we’ve done it all before.”

There was no wind to push our boat along, but it was clear we were moving with a purpose, or as much purpose as we can have when dreaming. The moon hung low over us now and I let my fingers trail in the water.

I felt something bump against my hand, gently at first, and then more demanding. A glance revealed it to be a red teapot, steam pouring out of its spout with urgent panic. I scooped it out of the water and cradled it, watching other items float by.

A rusty bicycle.

A bookshelf with most of its books remaining.

An old Victorian styled house, with ivy running up and down its sides.

The teapot whistled in my arms as it came to a boil.

She looked at me expectantly, but I didn't have any cups.

“Well.” Said she, and reached under her seat to pull out a tray set for tea, complete with china teacups and plates, serving spoons, bowls for sugar and cream, and cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off. She leaned over and placed it in the middle of the boat, and I set the teapot at the center of it all. It seemed very pleased with itself, having procured an entire company in just several seconds.

I reminded it that it had been she who found the tray, and I who had rescued it from the ocean, and that I didn't even really like cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off, I would have preferred egg salad, and I wasn't a tea person, but I really could have done very well for a coffee.

Its shine seemed to dull a bit, and she reprimanded me for my tantrum.

“All due things in time.” She made sure to rub the teapot before she poured herself a drink.

I ate sugar cubes and thought about the density of collapsed stars as we floated towards shore. There were several dark figures waiting for us as the boat bumped against the sand. She got out, her bare feet splashing in the shallow water, the train of her wedding dress trailing behind her as she walked towards them. When had she put on the dress? I looked under the seats, trying to find one of my own, but instead all I discovered was a small parcel wrapped in brown paper, my name scrawled into the upper left hand corner. I hugged it to myself and climbed out, splashing after her. She looked back at me, eyebrows raised, and I stopped, standing quietly, the current flowing around me, feeling the cool sides of copper coins against the soles of my feet.

She blew me a kiss over her shoulder, and it fluttered silently in the air as she climbed onto the back of one of the dark shapes. Elephants. That's what they were. They encircled her protectively with their

trunks.

I tried to shout to her, but they were gone, silently—and I was alone on the beach. Her kiss flew to my lips and rested there, filling my mouth with spice—so hot, it made my eyes water. I stood there for a while waiting, thinking maybe she'd come back. But soon it became apparent I'd have to go after her myself. She was always doing this to me. Running off and making me retrieve her. I turned to climb back into the boat, but it was gone.

Why was I surprised?

I walked along the shore, following the water line. The thing about dreaming is that even when you don't know where you're going you have an idea, so that eventually you'll wind up where you're meant to be. That's how I knew I'd find her. Thirteen black crows flew over my head and reminded me about the parcel I was carrying. I thanked them and replied that one never really knows the right time to open a package from no-one, and they circled for a while before coming to land at my feet.

“CAW-CACAW.” One of them wanted to know where I'd found it.

I told him that I'd found it on the boat.

“CAW. CAWCAW.”

I told her that I'd really like to open it, because it might turn out to be helpful, but that I wasn't really sure if that was the best thing to do.

“CAW!” They all flew at me, pulling at my hair and flapping their wings in my face.

I remained adamant that I would not open it, and soon they got bored and left me to continue my journey. Crows can be like that. One minute utterly passionate about something that doesn't concern them, the next minute completely disinterested and flying off to find some other means of entertainment.

I walked until I saw a small lake in which the water was clear and crystalline and the fish were made of gold. The pool had no bottom, instead it went on into an underwater city, with towers and rooftops that gleamed in the lazy afternoon sunlight. I asked the fish if they had seen any elephants in their city. They couldn't really say, not knowing what elephants were. I walked around the lake a few times, taking it all in, and soon discovered that the entire thing had been birthed from an elephant footprint.

Slumber is a scary place when you're alone. It becomes harder to find your way, and lonelier somehow. Without her I was alone inside my own imagination. Without her I was lost inside my own mind. That was why I was searching. That was why I had to find her.

I couldn't be alone any more.

The sun rose and set like breathing. Soon it felt as though I'd been walking for years, and even in dreaming I was weary. I'd been following the shoreline for a long time and then, as soon as I could turn to look for it, it was gone—to be replaced by a village of bamboo huts and people riding giant oxen-like creatures.

Mambüza. The name for them hissed inside my head like water on hot rocks. *Mambüza*. I wanted to touch one. The village was not so far away, although farther than it looked at first, and the people seemed surprised to see me. Their skin was the deep color of wet mud and they wore jewelry like the

night wore stars. Their hair was beaded, and when they spoke it sounded like dropping small stones on a hard floor.

I asked them first if they had seen any elephants walk through their village.

They replied that they had not. Elephants were long extinct, they laughed. Deep, laughs, like beating a drum, they laughed.

I asked about the *mambüza*.

They asked if I wanted one.

I said yes.

They said, equal trade—what did I have to offer?

I had nothing but my own perseverance, the clothes on my back, and the parcel. I offered them that, but they refused, pointing to the name in the center saying it belonged to me. I offered them my nightshirt, but they had no need for clothes. I offered them my will—they thought it over.

They said that in exchange for some, but not all, of my spirit, I could have a beast large enough to carry myself and one other person.

I asked how I could give it to them.

One woman came forward, and asked me why I was who I was.

I replied that I had nothing to be ashamed of.

One man came forward and asked me why I followed the path that I followed.

I replied that it was what I had to do.

A small girl came up to me and took my hand in hers.

“Please—” she wanted to know, “please, who are you?”

I thought for a while, and then I gave the best answer I could. I told her that, I was, myself.

She smiled up at me, and then I was no longer holding her hand, but instead the long woolen coat of a *mambüza*. My *mambüza*.

When I looked up, the village and its people were gone. The *mambüza* shook its great horned head and gave me a meaningful stare. Time was running short. I’d have to find her soon or else risk waking up without her. I climbed onto the beast’s back and we took off, running across the night. We ran through forests and oceans, skies and mountains, we ran until we came to the edge of the world. The end of my realm of dreaming. At the edge of the world, there was an old Victorian house, long forgotten and covered in ivy.

“I remember you!” I said, shocked to hear words from my own lips, shocked to see something solidly familiar in a place that shouldn’t exist. I climbed down from the back of my beast and walked to the front door, old wood, peeling paint, creaky steps. I used to play on these steps, as a child I used to knock

on this door. Peering in through the rusty metal mail slot I saw sunlight pouring through picture windows. Hardwood floors and wicker furniture. All of it familiar, bringing a sense of nostalgia. I turned from the door and sat on the front steps. My package sat next to me, and for the first time, I was tempted to open it.

The paper was rough, like the brown bags you get in grocery stores. Once opened the gift lay in my lap, gently, like new birth.

It was a conch, thin shelled and vibrantly red and orange. As I held it the sun set in my hands. Behind me the door clicked, and then creaked open. Soft footsteps padded softly across to where I was sitting, and the smell of almond paste and French lilacs surrounded me as she sat down.

“It’s spiraling clockwise.” She said to me, her finger tracing the shell’s rim. “That’s rare.”

When she leaned over to kiss me the taste of her breath was like a four star spicy curry. Strong, exciting, and omnipotent.

Read Darcy Bruce’s current works in progress at her blog, http://www.xanga.com/ma_malai.

Rape Crisis Center: A Myth

A nice dead lady asked me my name:
Persephone, from up there, I said, pointing.
Hell being what it is, the waiting room was packed
with mortals and goddesses alike, shamed.
She led me to a room where a swab
took DNA to confirm Hades the repeat offender
who hot-rodded his chariot and stallions
to snatch me to the underworld.
When I talked about how the ground opened up
I sobbed but did not mention my mother
running after us with greedy fingers.
All of a sudden everyone wanted me;
now what I wanted was a pill to cast his seed
into perpetual winter. The next time
he wouldn't have to come get me
nor would there be a report to file.
I'd be a girl used to justify seasons,
a reason for why there's never enough bread.
I'm okay, I said, skittering off the table.
Oh yes, someone's here to pick me up.
He's out in the parking lot having a smoke.
Call my mom, tell her not to worry.

Demeter's Deal

If I get only half,
I'll make sure everyone else gets less.
That Hades creep has napped my girl,
and Zeus expects me to be happy
to have her part-time,
a lousy custody truce.
So if Persephone with her butterscotch hair
can't be here picking flowers,
I'll twirl my ragged gray coat
through your world, add snow to May
and sleet to October, let you enjoy
four months of bounty at best
knowing all the while how quickly it will leave,
earth's harvest sucked away.
Don't whine: I have little enough to share.
For now that she enjoys those chariot rides,
she comes into my arms without a smile,
her garland of blossoms wilting.

Ariadne

by James B. Nicola

Remember, if you've come upon this note
And wish to work the maze to claim the prize,
That there's a monster girded by this moat
Who's slain about a hundred other guys.

But if you will not fight, and even die
For me, although I much prefer you kill,
Then I would just as soon you pass me by—
But pass this on to someone else who will.



“As This Lay Burning” by Kimo Pokini

After Vespers

by Joanna Gardner

Brother Mathis's outstretched hand touched the door at the end of the unlit passage. In his other hand he held a wooden box pressed against his chest.

He lifted the latch, and the door swung out onto the sound of rushing water and the smell of suspended droplets. His dark-adjusted eyes dazzled at the moonlit waterfall across from him. High overhead, the stream leaped over the lip of the ravine then skidded and swept down the rock face before churning into the pool below. The steps at his feet led into that pool, where the water gathered its composure before becoming a stream again and winding through the gully.

The oval of night sky at the top of the ravine glowed, too bright for stars. He pulled the door closed, stepped into the pool and waded downstream. The water numbed his feet and ankles until he stepped onto the bank and walked through the trees. Silence replaced the roar of water as the forest breathed him in and the scent of earth soaked his lungs.

He followed the gully until it opened onto the shore of the lake. The regent's rider was already there, as arranged, standing with his back to the gully. The moon spilled down from the eastern sky across the lake, a lake of light on a lake of water.

"Hello," Brother Mathis said.

The rider didn't turn. His leather coat moved in the breeze. He wore a sword on his back.

"Friar," he answered. "Have you got it?"

Brother Mathis regarded the box he carried. Wind rose from across the lake, from the direction of the moon, as though carried on that viscous light. "Yes, right here. And you?"

The rider turned and lifted his hands to show that he held a cat. Brother Mathis's skin rippled, that close to the animal. He opened the varnished box and tilted it so the rider could see inside. A stub of bone lay on a bed of black velvet—a piece of the master's thumb.

The rider stepped closer and handed the cat over with one hand without looking away from the relic. Brother Mathis scooped the cat from the air where the rider let go, and at the same time released the box to the rider.

Still staring at the bone, the rider spoke quietly. "You've been gone from the world too long, to trade a treasure like this for a cat."

Brother Mathis held the animal with both arms, its tiny heart beating faster than his own. Its pulse tugged at him like a current.

"Could be."

The rider snapped the box closed. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I want a blessing.”

Brother Mathis’s scalp prickled, and the cat’s fur rose along its spine. How could he bless someone without betraying the order’s secret? The truth would make itself plain, even to a layman like the rider. Wouldn’t it?

“I think your own bishop would want to perform that service.”

The rider shook his head. “There’s no privacy at court. Especially in the confessional.”

“But I’m not a priest.”

“You’re close enough. Now bless me, for I have surely sinned.” The rider dropped to one knee.

“Really, I can’t—”

Faster than breath, the rider’s free hand snapped to his shoulder, drew the sword and had the blade at Brother Mathis’s neck. The air hummed where it had been sliced. The cat squirmed and clawed at Brother Mathis’s robe, its agitation churning around him.

“Please,” the rider said. “Bless me.”

Brother Mathis felt the metal’s edge on his neck and thought of the monastery, of all the species of souls that found shelter there, of the punishment that would rain down like knives if the superiors discovered how the brothers were using the sanctuary. He closed his eyes and allowed himself the luxury of leaning into the blade.

The rider whipped the sword away and leaped to his feet.

“What is the matter with you?” His legs were bent now, flexed. “You aren’t fallen, are you? Have you lost your faith?”

Faith. The word startled Brother Mathis. It had been a long time since he had thought about things in terms like that, but they still worked, after a fashion. Mist rose off the lake as though dreaming itself into existence, and the cat went still in his arms.

“No. I haven’t. I’ll bless you.”

He cradled the cat with one hand, and held the other out to the rider. The rider sheathed his sword and knelt again, but cautiously this time, eyes narrowed at Brother Mathis.

“Don’t you need my name? To tell God?”

“Certainly not.”

Brother Mathis rested his palm on the man’s warm head and held the cat to his chest exactly as he had held the box. The cat’s claws pricked his wrist, and the animal’s essence rose with a rushing sound like floodwater. Vertigo and potential filled him as he opened his mouth to speak, a sensation like what the stream must feel at the top of the ravine just before it plunged over the edge.

Visit Joanna Gardner’s personal website at <http://joannagardner.com>.

Rip Van Winkle

By Romana Iorga

In the evening she sits on the couch.
The sunset starts a fire around her head,
like a halo. She reads and her hair
streams down in black coils
past her waist, past her knees.
It hesitates when it reaches the floor,
but then there are no obstacles.
It runs farther, faster.

When her husband comes home
the room is a jungle. Small birds
chirp among black tresses. A boa
lowers its sleepy head on his shoulder.
On a bed of fresh palm leaves
his son pounds a coconut with his fists,
mouth and eyes wide open with hunger.

He packs the jungle away, feeds the baby.
In the black forest, where he goes
to sleep for the next ten years,
he dreams himself awake in her book.
He watches her turn page after page,
time slipping between her fingers
like water, like sand. He dreams the end
near, waits for that last page to turn
and release him. He can only hope
it will be to his world.

Rhapsode

Years before he would sing in Ionic Greek
of the brave souls fallen as carrion for the dogs,
of the bloody siege of Ilion, of the sirens
and the Lotus-Eaters, Homer was a blind banger
in south Chicago. It was discouraging.
He longed for epic stories of *timae* or *keleos*,
but instead there was one about the ghetto star
whose durag slipped so far across his eyes

he shot his own cousin in the calf.
And the hoot rat who fell from a first-floor
window and broke her clavicle. And everyone
drinking 40's and getting sucked on
by some strawberry. Or that BG doing a bomb
and ending up in the Academy for pissing
on a PoPo's shoe. It was all MSB this
or FTW that. It was still another toss up

or saggin to the point it was nearly impossible
to walk. And everyone kept asking him to tell
that one about the fugly so fat you couldn't
find the spot amid her folds. Sometimes
there were days when he would go out on a g-ride
or would be working curb service when all
he could think about was how bleak
the Chicago streets felt in the cold.

And even though he flew the flag, was always
and forever, and was selected once as a joke
to be the blow man, he dreamed some day of finding
a leather bag containing all the winds, of Achilles'
strength and wrath, of dead Patroclus, of dactylic
hexameter, of hubris, of a young Nausicaa or the Cyclops
or the spirit of Tiresias or Circe or the cannibal Laestrygon
or the monster Scylla—then finally home to Ithaca.

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- <http://www.lima.ohio-state.edu/hogcreekreview/HS/Current.html> (*Open to high school students in Allen County, Ohio. Publishes poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction and art.*)
- <http://www.lima.ohio-state.edu/hogcreekreview/Current.html> (*Open to Ohio State University at Lima students. Publishes poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, academic essays, art and videos.*)

Shiva and Uma

by Anna Bennetts

The Gods directed the God of Love, Kama, to fire an arrow of desire at Shiva to rouse him from timeless contemplation on the top of the mountain. When the flower shaft found its mark a lightening flash of anger broke from Shiva's middle eye scorching Kama to cinders. Kama was allowed to be reborn but Shiva insisted that he be recognised as the son of delusion (Maya).

From the Saura Purana

Then the Lord created anger as the assistant of desire, and all creatures, falling into the power of desire and anger, began to be attached to women.

From the Mahabharata

There once was a man called Shiva who lived as an ex-patriot in a strange and far-away land. He worked very hard at the top of a multi-storied office tower. He worked for many years with single-minded concentration. He had no time or energy for love. He had relationships but they usually meant very little to him. He had no time for anything but his work. His apartment held no food or luxuries. His robe, no casual clothes, just suits and ties, briefcase and cufflinks. He rarely saw or spoke to his family. He had few friends as he didn't have the time or energy friendships demanded. All his energy was devoted to work. Because Shiva was so honest, so generous and good, the Goddess Lakshmi stayed near him and shared with him the wealth of the world. He had accumulated great amounts of gold and money.

He had many employees in the tower. They all respected and admired him but like most, they did not get close to him. Nevertheless he would sometimes go out drinking after work with his favourite employee, Kama. Kama was known and loved by everyone, particularly his female friends. Shiva and Kama would go out drinking and Kama would introduce Shiva to his girlfriends. One night Kama introduced Shiva to his good friend, Uma, the lady with the beautiful eyes. When Shiva saw Uma he thought that she was very attractive. When he talked to her his attraction grew. She seemed to have values similar to his, she was smart and she made him laugh. He felt very comfortable and happy when he was with her.

The Gods saw that Shiva liked Uma and thought it would be interesting and amusing to see what would happen if Shiva and Uma got together. The Gods knew that Shiva was capable of passion but they also knew that this trait was deeply embedded within his controlled defenses. The Gods thought it would be intriguing to see what would happen if Shiva let down his defenses in a relationship with Uma. They knew that with Uma Shiva would have to lose control because Uma was a very strong and independent woman.

Kama passed Uma's telephone number to Shiva who immediately called her. The first time he called, Shiva and Uma talked for two hours. It seemed there were endless things they could talk about. Shiva asked Uma out and they had dinner in a beautiful restaurant. He felt so much happiness when he was with her. They grew closer and closer and felt happier and happier to be together. Shiva had never actually felt this before, he had had relationships but not real relationships where the two people share their innermost secrets and fears and those secrets and fears find space and solace in each others' hearts and souls. More than anything Shiva and Uma were friends and within that friendship a love grew, a love unlike any love that Shiva had experienced. Deep down he had always believed that such feelings would interfere with his work in the tower. He had always avoided women like Uma. But now, being with her just seemed so right and he felt that she was the woman for him.

Uma's love for Shiva grew deeper and stronger. At first she thought that it was his love for her that fuelled her passion, but as time went on and she got to know him she realized that she loved him for his honesty, his integrity, his generosity and his kind heart. She actually loved him for all the same reasons that the Goddess Lakshmi loved him. As her love for Shiva grew Uma began to see him as the man for her. She became more deeply attached to him and committed to the relationship.

As their intimacy grew both Shiva and Uma confided in each other more and more. Uma found it very hard to constrain her feelings and she expressed them freely with Shiva. Uma felt safe and secure in Shiva's love for her and she rarely censored the things that she said or thought. There were times when Shiva seemed very distant from Uma, especially when he was busy working in the tower. At these times he would treat her in the same way that he had treated all his other lovers. He needed single-minded focus to conduct his work and Uma distracted him. When Uma felt neglected she would tell Shiva, she shared all her feelings with him. She thought that he had been up in the tower, away from the world for so long that he didn't know how to have a relationship, he didn't know how to share his life with her. When she said these things to Shiva he saw them as criticism and felt angry with Uma. Because Shiva shared more of himself with Uma than he had with anyone and because Shiva cared for Uma so much, he began to feel vulnerable. As Shiva had been very careful in the past to avoid such feelings they were unfamiliar to him and they made him uncomfortable. His love for Uma and his anger intertwined and produced an emotional state very similar to fire.

Shiva and Uma started to have arguments. These arguments were very angry and would end with Uma in tears. This upset Shiva further because he was unused to seeing people display emotions like that. He was unhappy. He felt that he was making Uma unhappy yet he felt powerless to do anything to prevent it. He didn't realise that he had far more power over Uma than he thought and that a single kind word or a flower could make her walk on sunshine for days later, while a cutting remark could sting like salt in a wound. Shiva's work began to suffer. He tried but it seemed the more he tried the more unhappy Uma became. Uma thought that if they just talked about things, that everything would be okay, but the more she talked to Shiva about her feelings, the less interested he seemed. As Shiva felt that Uma's feelings were outside his control he decided that he would ignore them, as he did with other things that he could not control. Uma saw Shiva's dismissal of her feelings as a form of neglect. Because of this, Uma was blind to the other things that Shiva did to try and make her happy, she thought that Shiva wasn't trying. She wanted to feel close to Shiva like she had in the beginning and she kept feeling more and more distant from him. The arguments became more frequent. As it appeared that the whole situation was out of his control, Shiva decided that he must let go, he must stop feeling love for Uma because feeling love and care for her took his focus from his work and it was just too difficult. The less love he showed for Uma the more upset she became until one day she went away.

Later they talked on the telephone but by this time Shiva had moved on. He had convinced himself that he had stopped caring for Uma. Both Shiva and Uma knew deep down that Shiva still cared, but somehow he had become unable to show it. He felt unable to care about anything that was outside his control. He was unable to let himself be that vulnerable. Uma longed to be with Shiva but she longed to be with the Shiva that she knew was deep within, not the defended angry Shiva that he had become. She was tired of trying to make Shiva see her reality, of trying to make Shiva care like he used to, when it was clear that he had given up long ago.

Uma cried and cried for several days and several nights. She could not sleep and she could not eat. As time went on she slowly got better and eventually began to love people again. She knew deep within that she would always look for the kind of love that Shiva had given her in the beginning, that deep and

boundless love that made her feel so strong and free. She also knew that she would look for good honest men like Shiva. Somehow she knew that she would never find someone else like that.

Shiva was not upset when they split, it was true that he had given up a long time ago. He had decided right or wrong that this kind of love was a bad thing. He longed for the easy relationships he had had before, where his heart had not been open, where he had not been vulnerable and where the woman would keep secret her dark fears and demand things only indirectly. He now knew what real love involved, a loss of power and an inevitable vulnerability. This insight was the fire that made him angry at love and anybody who would inspire those feelings in him.

Later Shiva met Maya. Maya fell in love with Shiva but it was not a love like Uma's. Maya loved Shiva *because* the goddess Lakshmi loved him not for the same reasons that the goddess Lakshmi loved him, as had Uma. Because Maya loved not Shiva but what riches Shiva could give her, she didn't mind when Shiva stayed in the tower and didn't call her, she didn't mind when Shiva stopped romancing her, she didn't mind that she was not a priority in Shiva's life. Shiva felt comfortable with Maya and they married and lived together forever. They had a life. It was not happy, it was not sad. It was a life.

Teenage Atlas, in the Kitchen

His cereal spoon is a hundred pound weight.
The mug is resentful. His arms hang limp,
gravity yanking him like a leash.
He's been sinking slowly ever since
he realized we're not all safe;
the chair legs splinter under him.
He leaves footprints in the tile.
The other Titans have outgrown their heroics
and gone off somewhere to have a beer,
talk about TV and inevitability.
They leave him behind, the last kid at the table,
chewing his cold food with patient bites.
He swallows the soggy hunger of others,
tumid stomachs of children and gap-ribbed dogs
whose faces bloom like mold in his mind.
High school would be much easier
without them clinging to his shoulders,
his scrawny neck dangling with their mass grave.

Life through a Black Net Veil

Each morning is a rusted keyhole.
The air parts resentfully,
cold crawling to the dustless corners.
On the pale wallpaper
hyacinths bloom ceaselessly;
polyester amaranths
furl from crystal bowls.
Life is bottled here,
its frantic static
stilled to silence.
For years it has been the same.
She walks the white carpet,
erasing her own footprints.
She fears that she is followed.
Even in this stale garden,
a dark breath
stirs the paper petals.
In nightmares,
she pulls wide the door
and daylight crashes like a wave,
Pandora's horrors filtering in
upon the too-bold sun.
For years it has been the same—
always a death about to turn up
like a white root on a spade.

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Jacqueline West's writing Web site, with links to and listings of her published/forthcoming work, is <http://www.jacquelinewest.net>.



“The Silent Witness” by Clyde Grauke

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

The Minotaur Salesman

by Alan Price

(After Picasso's The Blind Minotaur etchings in The Vollard Suite)

A bullish salesman cornered the Pyrenees;
selling oriental rugs to the bourgeoisie.

One day the razor dropped. The bathroom mirror cracked.
Another bull emerged. Horns ripping the carpet.

Desiring freedom from his family, that
unending maze of debit and credit,
a former chic resident of the city of Pau
became an unshaven minotaur.

Two boys, two girls and a severed wife
were his mental snacks inside the labyrinth.
When Theseus came, in the guise of a reluctant daughter,
we wrongly imagined him yielding an axe to kill you,
when all along it was Ariadne (with her gentle string)
vacillating over the right way out.

When you pulled her against your body,
on that aimless sullen afternoon,
innocence was cleaved.
Sales targets – now hard, erect and profitable.
The old bull redeemed his catchment area.

After violation, Ariadne, at fifteen,
had no other choice but to blind you.

Lost girl, with a fluttering dove,
now leads the bull with white stick,
fearfully, at night, through the border country.

He arrives at Biarritz harbour
never to see the fishermen,
the sail of the ship
or view the stars from the river.
Minotaur salesman blocked
from the voyage back
to carpet a waiting floor
or furnish a simpler home.

Waking the Beast

by Angela Maria Williams

Every night since our wedding, we lay
on opposite sides of the bed, backs to each other.
This is after his heavy weight sinks me
into the mattress and my silence grates over
his throaty growls. This is when I dream about the first
transformation. The look on his face as he realizes
he is damned. His fingers not yet turned to claws,
his teeth to fangs and fur rippling everywhere.
The second before all that. When the witch judges him
wanting. I hold my hand between my thighs, clench
down as I imagine his jaw go slack, his cheek muscles soften,
his blue eyes widen in horror. I relish his moment
of helplessness, replay it over and over
until I shake in my own pleasure.

Cartesian Kangaroos

by James C. Burbank

We have to stop thinking
of ourselves as
any different from marsupials.

There never has been
a Cartesian plane, an infinite,
two-dimensional surface.

There never has been a
line that has only one dimension
connecting points A and B.

If you think these thingies exist,
I have a two-dimensional bridge
in two-dimensional Brooklyn

I can sell you for an imaginary
fifty billion two-dimensional dollars.

This is where being a kangaroo
provides great advantage.

One can hop from point A to B.
Hopping gives us conceptual
echolocation in our two dimensional minds.

Achilles shoots an arrow at a two-dimensional
portrait of Rene Descartes. The arrow never
arrives because two-dimensional Descartes

keeps halving the distance of its two-dimensional
flight between points A and B.

The ghost of Descartes, which hovers
over us, has become infinitely heavy
and infinitely compressed into a
single non-dimensional point.

That's a good thing for the
kangaroos who are hopping
around like crazy making
dodecahedrons all over the place.

It's a good thing they are two-dimensional
kangaroos.

We can observe them through
our reticulating goggles. We can write
about them in passive voice.

We can dream about them.
We can make up stories about
them the next day based on our dreams.

Achilles has materialized
out of thin air on the front porch
with our lattes and cheese danishes.

But we wait and wait.
Achilles never makes it to the
living room, where we are chanting,
“I am, therefore I think,” as our mantra.

We will never drink the coffee.
We will never savor the cheese danishes.

We should have asked our fellow
kangaroos who have been reduced
to hopping out polygons. We should

have known better than to trust
Achilles with our two-dimensional order.

Dionysus On Park Avenue

an essay by Ronald Pies, M.D.

An odd feature ran in the *New York Times* recently (4/22/06), describing how Raymond W. Kelly—New York City’s police commissioner—returned the head of an ancient statue to the Italian government. The head was that of the Greek god, Dionysus, but Kelly also used the god’s Roman name, Bacchus. “It’s fitting now we bring Bacchus to where it belongs,” Kelly said to the Italian consular official, in a ceremony held on Park Avenue.

But just who was Dionysus? And how might an understanding of the Dionysian archetype have implications for the perilous state of our nation?

Some readers will recognize Dionysus as one of the two mythic pillars of Western archetypal consciousness, the other being the god Apollo. In Nietzsche’s classic work, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), a fusion of the irrational Dionysian and rational Apollonian principles was seen as fundamental to the development of Greek tragedy. In a more debased form, we know Dionysus as *Bacchus*, the Roman god of wine and revelry. But this conflation has stripped Dionysus of his tragic layers, and relegated him to the realm of drunken debauchery. There is a darker side to this mythic figure, who appears in the form of Dionysus-Zagreus. In various legends, Zagreus is portrayed as a hunter, a hermit, and in some accounts, even a vampire. It is this darker Dionysus who is worshipped by the *maenads*—those female devotees who tear apart and devour young animals. Ultimately, at the instigation of Zeus’s wife, Hera, the Titans attack Zagreus. In the ensuing struggle, the god is torn apart and consumed by these giants.

This myth is much more than a scary folk-tale. It reminds us of an archetype that is alive and well in our own time. We learn from the death of Zagreus that those who live by the sword shall die by it, and that those who hunt and kill shall themselves be hunted and killed. A similar teaching is found in Talmudic Judaism, when Hillel tells us “Because you drowned others, they have drowned you; and in the end, they, too, shall be drowned.” [Pirke Avot 2:7]). The rending of Zagreus at the hands of the Titans also tells us that, *unconstrained*, the demonic leads us to self-destruction.

There is, of course, a positive side to the Dionysian archetype. In many versions of his myth, Dionysus is linked with the blessings of music, dance, and even prophecy. Paradoxically, we find evidence in Greek culture that Dionysus embodies an element of restraint and order. For example, a common motif in ancient Greek coinage was the “dolphin-riding boy”. This motif was closely associated with Dionysus, for whom the dolphin was sacred, and suggests the taming and mastery of Nature. But on a psychological level, the dolphin-riding boy also suggests the *taming of the self*. For without such self-mastery, the boy “rider” could never bring himself into harmony with the dolphin.

American culture has always maintained a creative tension between the Apollonian the Dionysian—between the restraint of law, and the dynamism of impulse; between the Enlightenment *philosophe* and the high-plains drifter. In many ways, this has been our glory as a society: our ability to balance thoughtful and measured reflection against headstrong, hell-bent action. De Toqueville observed that even during the American revolution, Americans “...did not contract an alliance with the turbulent passions of anarchy...” but favored “...a love of order and law.” I believe that in our current political mind-set, this country has lost its archetypal balance—and that, like Zagreus, we are paying the price. Our foreign policy has cast us, like Zagreus, in the role of predator, no matter how we may have rationalized our intentions. The current administration’s domestic policies, too, have drawn us away from the rule of law

and toward the rule of the lone hunter. The sovereignty of human rights has given way to the rights of unchecked sovereignty. If we do not draw the proper lesson from the fate of Dionysus Zagreus, this country may be torn apart by forces we cannot restrain or understand. The image of the dolphin-riding boy should serve as a pointed reminder: those who seek vainly to master others should first master themselves.