

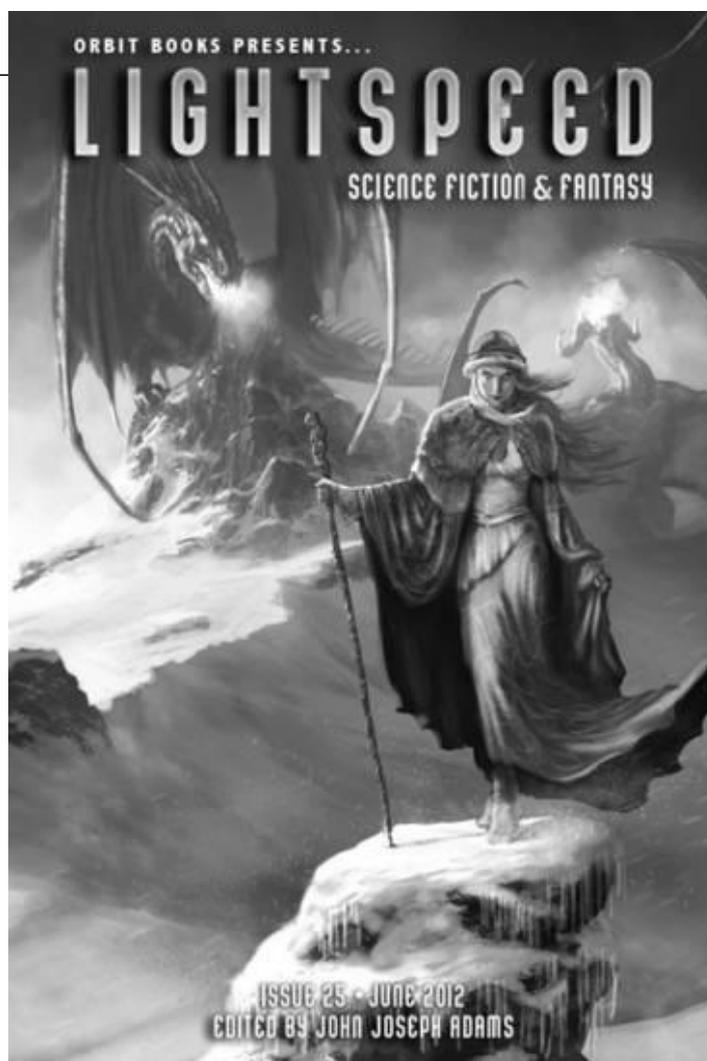
GRIT HOUSE PRESENTS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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LIGHTSPEED



Kindle Edition, 2012 © John Joseph Adams



Editorial, June 2012

John Joseph Adams | 870 words

Welcome to issue twenty-five of *Lightspeed*—our second anniversary issue!

It's hard to believe it's been two whole years already, isn't it? But it's true: We launched *Lightspeed* in June 2010, so this issue marks the start of our third year of publication. We've had a great run so far, including a slew of best-of-the-year reprints and award nominations—including two Hugo Award nominations for *Lightspeed* itself. Thanks to all of our wonderful writers and our ever-vigilant and hardworking staff. And, of course, thanks too to all of you readers who have supported us since our inception; we're glad to see you sticking with us, and to see your ranks growing by leaps and bounds.

Speaking of *Lightspeed*'s launch, we're actually in the process now of launching a new magazine—*Nightmare*, which, as you can probably guess from the title, will be devoted to horror. The publishing model will be very familiar to those of you who regularly read *Lightspeed: Nightmare*—we'll publish four stories a month, two originals and two reprints, along with assorted author spotlights and nonfiction. The first issue will contain all-new, original stories by Laird Barron, Sarah Langan, Jonathan Maberry, and Genevieve Valentine.

We're currently running a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds to launch *Nightmare*. We're attempting to raise \$7500 to fund the first issue and cover other launching costs. Hopefully by the time you read this, we'll have already met our goal. But if we haven't—or even if we have!—I hope you'll consider supporting the magazine. We've got it setup so that the donor rewards are akin to pre-ordering: For \$3 you'll get an ebook edition of issue #1; for \$25 you'll get a one-year ebook subscription, and so on. The Kickstarter ends on June 7, 2012, so if you want to participate, don't delay! To learn more about *Nightmare*, or to donate, visit our Kickstarter page: <http://kck.st/JPr0uu>.

So that's all very exciting, isn't it? But I know you're ready to hear about this month's issue, so without further adieu . . .

This month, we have original fantasy by debut writer Kelsey Ann Barrett (“My Teacher, My Enemy”) and award-winning author John Langan (“Renfrew’s Course”), with fantasy reprints by bestselling author Seanan McGuire (“Lost”) and Hugo-winner Tim Pratt (“Cup and Table”).

We also have original science fiction by Maggie Clark (“A Plague of Zhe”) and Simon McCaffery (“The Cristóbal Effect”), along with SF reprints by Eileen Gunn (“Contact”) and bestselling author George R. R. Martin (“The Way of Cross and Dragon”).

For our ebook readers: Our ebook-exclusive is again not a novella, but the second and final part of the two-part serial novel: *The Cosmology of the Wider World*, by Jeffrey Ford. We also have excerpts from two new novels: David Brin’s *Existence* and N. K. Jemisin’s *The Killing Moon*.

All that plus our usual assortment of author and artist spotlights, and feature interviews with bestselling author Anne Rice and documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock (director of *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan’s Hope*).

Our issue this month is again sponsored by our friends at Orbit Books. This month, look for *Blackout*, the concluding volume of Mira Grant’s Hugo Award-nominated Newsflesh trilogy. You can find more from Orbit—including digital short fiction and monthly ebook deals—on www.orbitbooks.net.

It's another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And remember, there are several ways you can sign up to be notified of new *Lightspeed* content:

- Newsletter: lightspeedmagazine.com/newsletter

- RSS feed: lightspeedmagazine.com/rss-2
 - Twitter: [@lightspeedmag](https://twitter.com/lightspeedmag)
 - Facebook: facebook.com/lightspeedmagazine
 - Google+: plus.google.com/100415462108153087624
 - Subscribe: lightspeedmagazine.com/subscribe
-

And one last bit of news . . . or, really, an apology: We messed up! The May ebook edition of *Lightspeed*, which contains Catherynne M. Valente’s story “A Hole to China,” was somehow finalized with a substantial amount of text missing from the end of Cat’s story’s second section (“The Ox and the Sorrows”). We discovered the error and fixed the web edition before it was published, but our ebook editions had already been sent out into the world. We did fix the ebook edition and upload new versions to all of our vendors, but a number of readers certainly had already downloaded their ebooks, so those folks will have received the version that contained the Valente story with the missing text. You can, of course, read the entire story on our website right now, but since those of you who purchased our ebook editions pay for the convenience of having your stories in ebook format, we wanted to make the full version of Cat’s story available in ePub and Mobi format, so that you can enjoy it as we intended. If you’d like to grab the full version of Cat’s story, please go to lightspeedmagazine.com/valente-ebook and download your preferred ebook edition and enjoy. Again, we’re very sorry about the mixup, and we will endeavor to ensure this kind of thing doesn’t happen again!

Well, that’s all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

About the Author

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Lightspeed*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and a three-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Other Worlds Than These* (July, Night Shade), *Epic* (November, Tachyon), and *The Mad Scientist’s Guide to World Domination* (2013, Tor). He is also the co-host of Wired.com’s *The Geek Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter [@johnjosephadams](https://twitter.com/johnjosephadams).

The Cosmology of the Wider World (Part 2)

Jeffrey Ford | 27516 words

[NOTE: This is the conclusion of a two-part serial; the first part appeared in our May 2012 issue. —e
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On this particular morning near the end of the winter season, Belius finally traveled the ninth and last horrendous circle of Hell, making his way up and then down the hairy length of Satan to emerge beneath the stars. With the last word read, he gave a great sigh and closed the book as not to further torment the already pitiful souls trapped between its covers.

He stood up and stretched his arms. Through the parlor window, he could see that a light snow was falling. Moving over to that window, he stood and stared blankly for a time, considering how much he had learned in so few months. In the beginning it seemed that he would never even memorize the alphabet, but his mother's patience and encouragement gave him the confidence to conquer his initial fear. On the day that he read and understood his first paragraph by himself, he knew that there was nothing to stop him from completing the *Inferno* by winter's end.

The dictionary that had been his Bible for those cold weeks now lay on the table next to the leather-bound epic, its pages hoof worn, torn and scribbled and separated from the binding. Instead of being stymied by each new word he had never before known existed, he would take it as a challenge and dive headlong into that kingdom of words. Every meaning, like a compound of matter, he found to be made up of smaller atoms of meaning that each in their turn had to be looked up. He adopted his mother's patience and laboriously searched out the smaller definitions and then gathered them together in his mind to create the conglomerate that was the word he had originally sought. In a notebook with the design of a black swan stitched into the cover, he would copy down all of his discoveries.

From the very start, Belius was enchanted by the story that Dante told. Although he was more interested in following the action of the tale, merely trying to see it in his mind's eye and recreate the various torments of Hell as best he could, he knew, through an anxiety located between his heart and his head, that the poor lost poet had much in common with himself. It was as if he were reading about his own future, or more his present situation, but seen by a Belius that stood somewhere outside the Belius that was himself.

He read on with intense concentration, struggling to catch up with the words that slowed as he gained, but which refused to relinquish the lead. The exotic Italian place names and surnames that had not been translated were like ruts that twisted the ankle of his concentration and tore him from the dream that their more familiar, domestic counterparts had created.

"I think you would do better to go on by yourself now," his mother had told him after they finished wading through the first few cantos. "I don't think I have ever heard of or seen someone learn to read quite as fast as you have. There's a special gift in that big head of yours."

Her praise elated him, and for a few days he did not read a word, but took walks through the snowy woods, convincing himself that he was a "genius"—a word he had discovered in the Dictionary not four days earlier. Plension and Austina happened to overhear him mumbling to himself about his brilliance one evening while he was pattering around the barn, and it was their combined hooting and ridicule that brought him back to his senses.

When he returned to the poem later that week, he saw that the next chapter contained a description of the mindless minotaur of rage that guards the river of boiling blood, and he understood then why his mother, who was in the habit of reading on ahead, had sent him off on his own.

The snow began to fall harder now, sticking to the ground and leaving a thin layer of white on the roof of the barn. The sky was a uniform gray, except for one small spot of brighter dimness behind which the sun was hiding. He turned away from the window and went in search of his mother to give her the news that he had finished. As he left the parlor, he knew instantly by the deep brown smell of coffee that she was in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

“Guess what?” he asked as he stepped into the kitchen.

She turned around from the stove where she was frying eggs. Taking one look at what someone unused to her son might take to be a grimace, she smiled and said, “You’ve finished.”

He nodded and a none-too-human grunt came from low in his throat.

“And how was it?” she asked.

“Both beautiful and horrible,” he answered with a laugh. By the way she instantly looked back at the eggs on the stove, he knew she was thinking about the scene with the minotaur.

“You’ve done very well, Belius,” was all she said as she set their plates down.

When his mother would look down at her plate, Belius would look up, studying her face. She was old now. He imagined how her looks must have changed drastically when he was born to her. It was a certainty that when his father died, her posture changed as if overnight; the weight of her loss drawing her toward the ground. All of her tears had left erosion lines of wrinkles behind when they had dried and her eyes, themselves, had sunk back into her head, closer to the memories of her husband. The minotaur wondered, in between glances, if his mother, having passed the greater part of her years considering her life to have been a happy one.

Belius shook his head to rid himself of this knot of thoughts and rose from his seat to get another cup of coffee. As he passed by his mother, he touched her on the shoulder. She looked up to him and smiled, placing her hand for a brief second on his hoof. He stood at the counter pouring his second cup and shuddered. When he’d touched her, it was as if she were made from paper. When her hand covered his hoof, it was as light as a page from the book. He took a sip from his cup to steady himself, but the *Inferno* flared up in his mind and the hot coffee burned his tongue.

Before he put on his coat and boot and went out to fetch hay for the cows, he knew that he would have to stop in the parlor where his mother sat sewing and break the silence that had been served with breakfast. As he moved down the hallway, though, he heard a knock at the front door. “Diversion,” he thought. He stopped where he was and waited for his mother to answer the door. The door opened and then he heard talking. When the door closed and the talking continued, he knew they must have a visitor. Very quietly, shuffling his foot along the wooden floor and tapping lightly with his hoof, he snuck down the hall and peeked around the corner into the living room. There was Doctor Gre looking yet more wizened than on their last meeting at his father’s funeral. The old man had his hat in one hand and with the other he brushed snow from the shoulders and sides of an overcoat that was three sizes too large.

Belius burst into the room but stopped short when he saw that his sudden appearance made the doctor back up a step.

“I finished the book today,” he said.

“Well, Belius,” the doctor said and moved forward to shake his left hoof. “So you’ve read the entire thing. Quite an accomplishment for such a short time. I knew you could do it.”

“Did you come for it?” Belius asked. “I can tell you what I think of it.”

“I’d like that, son, but not today. I’m here on another matter.”

“What is it?” Belius’ mother asked, seeming to sense some trouble in the way the doctor played with his hat, twirling it by the brim.

“I need your son’s help, ma’am,” he said.

“For what?” she asked.

“There’s been a pack of wild dogs ranging through the valley, killing livestock. I intend to hunt them down and shoot them.”

“I’m sorry, doctor,” she said. “Belius won’t be going. Besides, he can’t use a gun, he hasn’t any fingers.”

“I see,” he said and put on his hat. “Let me put it this way, I’d go by myself, but I’m too old to go alone. It’s too dangerous. I need someone like Belius, who’s young and strong, to help.”

“Let the other farmers take care of it,” she said curtly.

“I’d very much like to do that, but last night I sat at the bedside of a young girl who was attacked. They ripped her throat almost right off of her neck. She died this morning. This is everybody’s problem now. It’s your son’s duty to help. We’re the only two available to cover this area. The boy should go.”

“And what do these other people care for my boy?” she asked.

“Makes no difference,” he said.

“I’m going,” Belius said. He left the room to put on his boot and get his coat.

His mother ran behind him. “You’re not going, Belius. I won’t have it.”

In his bedroom he slipped his human foot into the boot without laces and took his coat from the closet. When he turned to make his way back to the living room, he saw his mother standing with her arms out, blocking the doorway. “I won’t have you killed by animals like your father,” she screamed. He walked up to her and leaned over so that his head was level with hers. Looking into the depths of her sunken eyes, he made a tremendous mooing noise that rattled every pane of glass in the house. “We’re all animals,” he said.

They went by foot over the snow-covered fields toward the woods. The doctor had given Belius a large sack to carry.

“What’s in it?” the minotaur asked.

“Bait for our friends,” the doctor answered.

“What kind of bait?”

“Just some meat,” said the doctor and then took a flask from his back pocket and drank so that the conversation could not continue.

The wind blew miserably and the storm came harder. The woods were wrapped in a white silence. Occasionally there was the sound of a branch cracking with the cold and the doctor would reach down and rest his hand on the pistol that sat in a holster slung around his waist. Belius saw how the old man grew more fatigued and winded with every hundred yards they traveled, so he didn’t bother to ask any questions. He was pleased just to be there, walking beside Grey, who seemed determined and unafraid.

“If I could only live my life like that,” Belius thought to himself. “There’d be no swerving on the lost paths.”

Then he realized that he was out on the hunt in his father’s stead, and it came to him that he must act as a man would and not a child. The novelty of the adventure gave way to a sense of business and he began peering through the stands of trees in hopes he might catch sight of one of the killers. He decided he would not talk unless spoken to. Never before had he felt so completely human.

When they’d walked for a solid two hours into a part of the woods that Belius had never visited before, the doctor held up his hand and said, “That’s far enough for me. If we keep going, we’ll be in the next county.”

A few yards off to their left they found a clearing. Grey instructed Belius to open the bag he had been carrying over his shoulder and empty its contents on the ground. When the drawstring at the top of the bag had been loosened, a powerful smell wafted up. The minotaur’s head jerked back as if the old physician had passed a vial of smelling salts under his snout. Belius turned the bag over and a mass of bloody meat spilled onto the snow, dyeing it a deep red. A cloud of steam swirled into the air.

He gagged, turning away from the bait. When he looked back, he saw Grey calmly drinking from the flask and studying his reaction.

“No offense, Belius,” he said, nodding toward the mound of carnage. “It’s what they go for.”

Belius shook his head to let the old man know he understood.

“I couldn’t very well have cut up a human now could I?” said the doctor with a crooked smile.

The minotaur mustered a nervous laugh.

They left the clearing and took up a position in a natural blind of saplings and bushes not far off. Belius found a dead log and dragged it behind the cover for them to sit on while they waited. The doctor flipped the bottom of his huge coat over the log and sat down. The minotaur did the same with his tail and also sat.

“I heard you went to town a few months back,” Grey said, staring straight ahead into the clearing at the pile of raw meat.

“I did,” said Belius.

“How’d it go?”

“Not so good.”

“So I heard,” said the doctor with a laugh. “Give ‘em time. They’ll learn.”

“I didn’t mind the children so much, following me and mooing,” said Belius. “It was the old people. I tried to introduce myself to them, get into a conversation, but they either ran away or taunted me. The staring eyes were the worst of it.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s that there are people out there hating you that you don’t even know exist. Not even people, just eyes without faces.”

“Did you get what you went for?” asked the doctor, turning to look at him.

“The man at the grocery was too frightened not to fill my order. After what happened on the street I figured if I was going to get what my mother had sent me for, I’d have to be sterner. I didn’t try to talk about the weather with him, I just gave him the list, told him to gather the items on it, and then I paid him and left. If he only knew I was as frightened as he was. At least I saw how my strangeness could work for me.”

“Did you have to knock that boy over in the street before you left?” Grey asked.

“I suppose I didn’t. But a bunch of them were all around me and somebody threw a rock that hit me on the side of the head. I figured that if my being mean had worked with the grocer, it might be my only chance to gain respect. He was the closest one. He yelled something about my mother and I couldn’t help it. I clipped him on the shoulder. It wasn’t much of a swing. When he fell over, the others backed up and I walked to my wagon. I wanted to run, but I walked slowly.”

“It may not have seemed like much of a swing to somebody your size, Belius,” said Grey, “but I had to treat that boy for a dislocated shoulder that afternoon. His father was all for getting a posse together and hunting you down. Of course, I dissuaded them, but it won’t take as much next time to get them thoroughly riled.”

“Thanks,” Belius said. The word came as cold as the day.

“I understand your frustration. You’ll learn as well as they will,” he said and reached up and gave Belius’ closest horn a tug. “Next time you have to go to town, I’ll go with you.”

The afternoon wore on without incident or further conversation. Belius was sorely tempted to discuss the *Inferno* with the doctor, but he knew it wasn’t the time or place for it. For the most part they just sat and stared at the mound of beef in the clearing. Every now and then the doctor would take a swig from his seemingly bottomless flask. They took turns getting up and going for short walks to keep the cold out of their bones. As the sun began to set, the snow let up and the wind died down, no longer whistling as it cut through the trees. During their vigil some squirrels had come to inspect the

bait, tasted it, and went away uninterested. A deer had passed through the clearing, stopped in the middle, and, getting a whiff of the slaughter, took off as if the lifeless mess was a hungry wolf. There was no sign of the dogs, though; not even the distant sound of barking. Belius tried to picture the pack. He wondered what it was that had made them mad.

After the old man had returned from his tenth trip behind a leafless oak to urinate, he said, “We give it one more hour. After that it will be too dark for us to do any good. I don’t fancy getting lost in the dark.”

“Where do you think the dogs are?” Belius asked.

“What they usually do is stick to the woods by day, hunting for wild animals, but in the evening, it starts to get dark, they go down to the farms and look for livestock; calves or young goats that can protect themselves.”

“And the girl that was killed?”

“She was just a young thing. Probably thought they were somebody’s pets and went up to them. When you get that many of them together, though, and they’re crazy with their freedom and hungry in winter itself, they’ll attack just about anything.”

“How many?” Belius asked.

“Well, Phil Miller, who owns a farm a few miles from here, shot one of them. He said there were about twenty or so. And the woman whose daughter was killed said there must have been thirty. So knowing how people like to exaggerate about things that scare them, I’d say there are probably more than ten.”

They waited out the final hour, but nothing came for the meat. By the time they decided to head back for the house, both Belius and the doctor were shivering. The sun was now only a few minutes over the horizon and still covered by clouds so that night would come quicker than usual. In the gathering darkness the woods took on an eerie aspect with all the bare branches, now black for lack of light, jutting up and out at all angles. A snow owl hooted somewhere over their heads. The surrounding scene reminded Belius of the time he had lain out in the fields all night. Without thinking he raised his snout toward the tree tops and a mournful lowing sound crept out of his throat. He stopped walking and just stood and listened as if for an answer. An odd tingling sensation traveled slowly up from the tip of his tail to the back of his neck, raising hairs to attention as it went. The doctor had also stopped walking when Belius moaned.

“What is it?” Grey whispered. He reached quickly for his flask and took a drink. “Belius, are you all right?”

Belius meant to answer in words, “There’s something nearby,” but his response came in a series of grunts and squeals.

The doctor threw the flask on the ground and drew his gun. He turned quickly to look behind himself, the hem of his long coat spinning with the sudden movement. As Belius watched the bottom of the coat, rippling like wind through a field of wheat, an explosion of red went off in his mind. Without thinking, he turned just in time, lowering his head to impale the leaping dog on his right horn. With a wild jerk of his neck, he threw the whimpering creature to the ground and caught it in the throat with the hoof at the end of his leg. There were three gun shots then and the yelp of another dog.

From behind the trees, Belius heard them saying, “Leave the man, he has a gun. Bring down the bull.” The message was passed around among the pack. “Bring down the bull.” The voices were low and rough. The only thought that traveled the human corridors of Belius’ mind was the doctor’s previous words, “Hungry as winter itself.” He heard another leap and turned back around again to break the ribs of a huge shepherd that had been aiming for his jugular. It fell clear of him but didn’t give up. It struck out again as soon as it hit the ground, clamping its teeth around his human leg. With another blow to the skull, blood seeped from behind the dog’s eyes and it let go with a gurgling cough.

Belius sensed he was out of danger for the moment and looked up to locate the doctor. Darkne surrounded him now as if night had pounced out of the sky. The doctor was nowhere near and all that could be heard was the vicious growling of the pack.

He stood his ground, knowing there was no sense in running. His ears were erect and listening. He waited for the next leap, the next lunging set of jaws and sharp teeth. From somewhere, not too far off, there came the sound of three more gunshots, followed by a scream.

“Doctor,” he yelled into the night, but, again, his language became the language of animals. He was breathing heavily, and his heart pounded with the force of a mallet. Cautiously, he began moving in the direction of the scream. After he had covered no more than five yards, the night materialized into two mongrels that charged at him simultaneously through a whirl of snow. As he crouched to meet their attack with his horns, a searing pain shot up through his body from behind. There was a crunching sound, like a tree being cracked in half by a great wind, and then the tearing of flesh. Agony ripped through his entire body. He bellowed with such force that the charging dogs were knocked off their feet. The blood poured out from the stump that was left of his tail, and the smell of it sent the pack into a frenzy. All sensation left him and he dropped to his knees.

Four of them circled around him now, waiting for him to fall. Their eyes were bright yellow in the night. Their mouths were wide open, displaying froth and fangs. He knew they were taunting him, but he could no longer hear them. They went around and around his slumping form, and on every third orbit one would jump in and bite him on the arm or the leg. He tried to raise his hooves for protection, but they were heavy as stone.

The dogs whirled faster and faster around him, and his mind adopted their motion until the world became a blur. His fear of death was a twister that sucked consciousness into its funnel. Before long he was in the center of the cyclone and it was still and blue. His father handed him the knot. Without thinking, he took one of the loops of the tangled cord and pulled on it. It came apart as if by its own volition, and he fell forward into the snow.

Belius woke with his snout buried in two inches of snow and found a fiery pain waiting for him on the edge of consciousness. He lifted his head to take a deep breath of the cold night air. The freshness of the snow stung his snout, and, when he exhaled, the steam came forth mixed with a moan. He rolled over on his left side. Finding that his arms once again worked, but like rusty machines, he lifted the back of one hand to his eyes and wiped the frost and melted snow from them.

Listening intently over the action of the wind, he heard no growling but instead a wild flapping noise and wondered if it was the owl he had seen earlier in the tree tops. In the time he had been unconscious, the clouds had cleared. Above the swaying branches that clacked together in the wind, the stars and moon shone with frigid clarity. He knew he must get up and try to get away, but there was a ringing in his ears and a weariness in his legs that increased the power of gravity. The ragged stump of tail that was left to him pulsed exquisite pain throughout his spine and flanks as the numerous bites on his arms and legs began to make themselves known, each in turn, blossoming into a new chord of suffering.

“I’m going to die out here,” he thought. The realization made him wild, and fighting his heaviness, he pushed himself up onto his knees. With his arms out in front of him, he managed to crawl a few feet. Every other second, the blackness that he knew he would not awaken from a second time flitted through his head.

He had dragged himself no more than twenty feet, stopping five times in the process, when he again heard the flapping noise. It seemed to be drawing close to him. He lifted his head and squinted to try to see what it was. In the new moonlight, he could make out a shadow rushing toward him. It seemed to have wings at its sides, and it flew just above the ground. In an instant, it was upon him.

Though his mind was completely blank, in his heart he thought, "This is death." He meant his final statement to the world to be a roar, but his bodily weakness diminished the sound to a squeal more fitting for a pig.

The doctor took the opportunity of the minotaur's open mouth to pour the remaining whiskey from his flask into it. The liquor brought summer to Belius' insides. The ringing in his ears was drowned out by near instant inebriation. The pain wilted in the heat, and the blackness that had flitted through his mind lay down and slept.

"You've got to get up, Belius," the doctor said.

"The dogs," Belius whispered harshly.

"I think I got the last of them. I'm out of bullets, though. We've got to get going now."

"Give me a second, just a second."

"No time," said the doctor, slipping his spindled arms beneath the minotaur's. With a strength that could only have come from somewhere outside his thin frame, Grey hoisted Belius to a standing position.

"I'm going to let go of you for just a second. I've got to get my coat around you."

"Keep your coat, you'll freeze," Belius said without conviction.

The doctor let go of him and the minotaur's huge body swayed in standing circles like a top running down. The coat was quickly sloughed and draped over the wide shoulders that were broad enough to actually fill it out. Belius draped one arm around the old man's shoulders, their height difference making Grey's thin body appear a crooked crutch. The two started inching their way back to the farm.

The walk seemed to Belius to take years and years. Grey never stopped talking the whole trip, explaining how he had to run for cover and reload after his first volley. He had made it back to Belius just in time, as the pack was getting ready to move in for the kill. He hit all six of his shots, one right after the other and in the process killed two more of them. The other two took off through the woods seeing the damage the doctor's gun could do. This was the only information that Belius could catch from the incessant monologue. The rest was just a string of words that at times sounded as if the old man were praying or practicing an incantation.

The doctor let go of Belius and moved toward the kitchen door, calling to the old woman to come help with her son. A strong wind came and toppled the minotaur. Then his eyes no longer worked, and he suddenly realized that he had forgotten to remember.

With a scream, he awoke and found himself in a strange bedroom. The windows had been shattered. Knick-knacks lay broken on the floor. A rocking chair was twisted into a knot. There was a large fissure in the plaster of one wall. Wherever he was, he knew he'd been snoring.

The bed he was in was big enough to accommodate his full size, unlike the one at home where his foot and hoof stuck out over the end almost touching the floor. Blankets and comforters were piled five thick on top of him to keep him from freezing in the cold air that blew freely in through the broken windows. The pillows beneath his head had been tattered by his horns.

He peered out over the edge of the impressive mattress at the decimation his snoring had caused and felt like a castaway adrift on a sea of fragments. Through the broken windows, bright morning light poured in and glimmered against pieces of ceramic and glass. With great difficulty caused by the stiffness of his limbs and the pains that tattooed his whole being, he made it to the edge of the bed, threw back the layers of blankets, and sat up. This simple action caused his head to swim, and from somewhere just in front of him, he hallucinated a mad dog, jumping for his throat. He threw his hooves up to protect his face from the attack. With the movement of his arms, the illusion dissipated into nothing.

“I’ve returned from the dead,” he said to himself, and laughed softly so as not to jar any of his wounds. This joy filled him and in it he found the energy to lift himself to a standing position. Slowly he hobbled to the door of the room, trampling even more fully those objects he had sonically destroyed in his sleep. He opened the door and walked out into a long, wide hallway, the new warmth of which made him feel as if he were home in the parlor of his mother’s house.

As he wandered through the halls, passing rooms and alcoves, taking a flight of stairs down another hall, he had every intention of finding Doctor Grey, whose place he surmised he was in. His condition was jittery though, and, when he passed a room, the door of which was opened slightly, and saw a big red leather chair, he decided to enter and sit down for a rest before continuing. When he opened the door to enter, the pain seemed to flee his body.

“My god,” he said under his breath, “a library.” And then in a voice that was much surer, “Yes, of course I know how to read.” He was dizzy with the prospect of such a gold mine of ideas and images remembering the magical effects of just the one book he had read. He ran his hooves along the spine of the leather bindings. Twice, he went around the entire room, tottering and leaning against the shelves as he made his way. His eyes passed over so many wonderful titles that they seemed to make a story in and of themselves. Finally, he came to his senses and chose one volume, reaching with his arm extended to the very top shelf to bring it down. He nudged it out of its place with his hoof and then let it fall the rest of the way into his arms. It was a thick book of more than eight hundred pages entitled *The Collected Writings of Scarfinati*. He didn’t bother to sit down in the chair that had at first attracted him, but stood where he was, swaying unsteadily like a buoy in rough water. He opened the book and began reading the first page. Most of what he read made no sense to him, but he continued lost in a daze that had everything to do with dreaming.

Somewhere in the middle of the twentieth page of the essay, “Evidence of the Almighty Schizophrenia in the Natural Existence of Living Organisms,” he was drawn back from the attraction of the printed words by a noise behind him. He spun around ungracefully, slamming the book closed in case the doctor did not want him hoofing through an expensive volume. Instead of meeting the glance of the old physician, he encountered a young woman. He was as startled as she. Meaning to say something polite as a greeting, his words turned on him and he remained silent. She moved her glance down his figure to stop at a point below his waist. Then putting her hand softly to her cheek, she turned her head away and ran from the room.

“Wait,” Belius called. It was not until he had set the book down on the chair and passed out of the door into the hallway that he realized he was naked.

Back in the room he had awoken in, Belius discovered the camel’s hair overcoat the doctor had sacrificed to him the night in the woods. He slipped it on and buttoned it up the front. Prepared now against any further meetings, he earnestly went in search of the old man. This time, he again passed the library with the red leather chair, but did not enter. Instead, he simply stuck his snout in for a second and took a whiff of the aging paper and leather bindings the way a child might linger in the doorway of a bakery. The only way he could describe the aroma he took deep into his lungs was rich.

He resumed his journey, and in the course of it discovered the enormity of Grey’s house. He knew that perhaps it seemed bigger than it actually was because he had backtracked and gotten lost a few times, but, from his most rational summation, he could say for certain that it had two upper floors and a main floor. The upper floors were defined each by four hallways that formed a square around some central courtyard. These upper passages were lined by rooms as in a hotel. The only difference, though, was that these rooms were not designed for economy, but for spacious living. A quick look in each of them showed that they were for the most part empty and unused. Every fourth or fifth one would have its walls lined with bookshelves and contain a library as impressive as the first that Belius had discovered.

On the second floor of the house, Belius was rounding one of the four corners of the network halls, moving quietly like a ghost without a reason to go haunting, when he heard up ahead a female voice singing. Immediately, he knew from the slight rasp of the voice that it must be the young woman who had seen him naked earlier. To save himself embarrassment, he quickly turned around and headed in the opposite direction. Considering his bulk and the clumsiness his wounds imposed on him, he had to move slowly in order not to make a sound. So when he heard the voice approaching from behind him, he ducked into what he thought to be one of the empty rooms and found instead a staircase. With great haste, he hobbled down the steps and out through another door at the bottom of them. This entrance led directly into the kitchen on the first floor.

Sitting at the kitchen table, drinking from a coffee cup and reading the newspaper, was the doctor. Slung around his neck was a stethoscope. Across the front of his partially unbuttoned white shirt was a large, dark, irregular splotch of dried blood. By the way he lifted the cup with trembling hands and the way he placed it down with placid grace after a long gulp, Belius knew it wasn't filled with coffee.

The old man looked up and saw the minotaur standing in the doorway to his right. His eyes widened with delight. "I'm glad you're finally up and about. Another night of your infernal snoring and I think the rafters would have splintered," he said. With his foot, he pushed one of the chairs off from its place under the table and nodded, inviting Belius to sit down.

"You've been out for a few days, boy. Lost a lot of blood. How do you feel?"

"Very weak," said Belius, easing himself into the chair and leaning his elbows on the table, "but, I remember everything that happened, also lucky to be alive."

"Those dogs did you pretty good. I hate to admit to this, but, for a second time since delivering you, I thought for sure you were going to die. My biggest fear was rabies, but fortunately you escaped that horror."

"What am I doing here, doctor?"

"I had to bring you here where I could keep a constant eye on you. Your mother and I actually lifted you into the back of my wagon that night."

"How is my mother?"

"She's angry with me and worried about you. I've been sending somebody by to check on her every day to see if she needs anything. When I told the people in the town what happened, how you risked your life for them, I had more volunteers to help out than was needed. You can go back home in three days, but not before. I want to make sure you don't get an infection in one of those bites and that your tail is beginning to heal."

"My tail?" asked Belius. He reached behind him under the coat and groped around with his hoof. A look of fear came over his face. "My tail!" he cried and stood up.

"I had to remove what was left of it. They chewed it almost completely through," said the doctor in a voice that was meant to calm the minotaur.

"But, but . . ." Belius threw the coat off and tried to look over his shoulder behind him, but he couldn't. For the first time, he noticed that the usual tug of its weight at the end of his spinal column was missing. Now he felt the loss of its constant gyration and swish. He concentrated and managed to believe there was a fly on his left shoulder blade. Tensing the muscles that had always turned the tail into a whip, he didn't feel the bushy end of it brush the spot.

"No tail," he said and his eyes glazed over. The sudden realization of its loss threw his body off balance, and he fell forward to the floor as if now there was no longer enough of him behind to balance things out.

"Nonsense," said Grey, who got out of his seat and came over to help Belius off the floor. "You don't need a tail to stand up. You're overreacting. It's a vestigial appendage, a useless throwback."

Belius was so upset that he took to moving his arms at his sides in a swimming motion. Instead

interfering, Grey just stood back and watched the minotaur traverse the channel of his loss. After doing three laps around the kitchen floor, he finally came to his senses. He quietly stood up, walked over and picked up the overcoat and put it on. After the two were again seated at the kitchen table, conversation ensued.

Grey told Belius that the enormous house they now sat in was given to him by the town as a lure to bring a physician to the area since the community was growing so fast, and, what with the nature of the local work, all its hazards of spooked plough horses and errant machinery. Grey had been born in the country and done his apprenticeship with a country doctor. Although he had attended medical school in a big city, he never cottoned to the frantic pace of urban life. He missed getting to know his patients and having long conversations that didn't necessarily have to go anywhere or be concerned with business or the pursuit of status. To him, his practice in the city had been just a long string of complaints with no personalities behind them.

The boarding house had once been owned by an old man of great learning, who would take in people and use the money he gained to buy books. Evidently, at one time, this previous owner had been a scientist in a country across the ocean. Many strange stories were told about him. He didn't stop up the boarding house until he was well into his nineties. Still, he supposedly had great vitality for one so ancient. He didn't die, but one day just disappeared, leaving behind all of the books he had collected in the seven years he had lived there. His name was Scarfinati and the libraries upstairs held more than twenty-five works that he had personally authored.

When Grey began discussing the libraries in relation to the previous owner of the house, Belius moved the conversation around to asking Grey if he would mind him looking through the books in the next few days.

"By all means. Someone may as well use them. I find little interest anymore in books. I used to go through them avidly, but not so now," he said shaking his head.

"I hope you don't mind, but I was in one of them today," said Belius.

The doctor waved his hand as if brushing away the thought. "Even when you're well again, I want you to come any time and take what you want. There's just about everything up there. There are ten libraries in all, spaced out in different rooms of the house. If you'll notice, each room contains works on a different subject. By the way, did you happen to see the one with the mummy in it?"

Belius shook his head. He had not seen the mummy, but he had seen the girl and wanted to ask the doctor who she was. He held his questioning, though, knowing that if he mentioned her, he would also have to mention that he had been wandering the hallways naked and was seen by her in that condition. So he let the conversation move on, and they filled each other in on what they had done that winter between the time of Belius' father's death and when Grey had come to call.

When Grey had drained his third coffee cup of whiskey and they had thoroughly discussed everything from the *Inferno* to the weather, the old man rose from his chair and announced that he was going upstairs to lie down until dinner. "Feel free to roam around, Belius," he said with slurred speech. "I'll see you at seven for dinner right here. By then my niece will be back from town with some clothes for you. You scared the daylights out of her today, walking around the place. She can quite make out what the hell you are. She didn't mind taking care of you while you were out cold, but now that you're up and about, I think she thinks you're the devil come to call." Grey laughed as he teetered toward the door through which Belius had entered. There came the sound of him stumbling up the stairs and then perfect country quiet.

Belius remained at the kitchen table. He closed his eyes and rested his head down on the blue and white checkered cloth. The annoyance of his wounds came back to him all at once like a shift of workers returning to their jobs. Mixed in with the ache was a wisp of sleep that grew desperately faint into a thick cloud bank that blotted out even the moaning of his phantom tail. Later that evening, after

finishing a dinner of broccoli and potatoes, the minotaur excused himself from the table and asked the doctor if it would be all right to go up to the libraries to read.

“Certainly,” said Grey. “Nona will make up another room for you since your snoring has devastated the one you were in.”

“No need,” said Belius, waving his hooves to dispel the thought. “I like it very cool when I sleep. Tomorrow I’ll repair the windows and clean up the room. I’m afraid, though, that some of the knickknacks are beyond repair.”

“They were junk,” said the doctor, leaning back in his chair. “Isn’t that right, Nona?”

“Junk,” she said softly, the first word she’d spoken in Belius’ presence. She smiled at the minotaur, but it was a weak smile that seemed more a plea for him not to devour her.

“Before I go to sleep tonight, I’ll step outside and pick up a rock. When I have something hard and sharp in the collar of my nightshirt, I don’t sleep on my back. I don’t snore then. It was my mother’s invention.”

“I bought some clothes for you today. There’s a pair of pajamas with them. I’ll bring them to you after I clean up down here,” said the girl.

“Thanks,” said Belius and bowed toward her. Seeing his horns come down level with her head made her push back her chair a few inches.

Up in the library that held the red leather chair, Belius found a book by Scarfinati, the previous owner of the house. It was entitled *Cosmology*, and was thicker than the unabridged dictionary that sat next to it on the shelf. Instead of taking to the chair to read, he remained in a standing position since the nub of his tail had been agitated by all his hours of sitting.

The house was as calm and quiet as he often imagined the bottom of the pond to be when the thick ice of mid-winter covered it. He paused before opening the book, knowing that once he entered through its black leather door, the voice of the author would begin speaking to him behind his eyes. He concentrated for a moment on Nona. Although the girl had said but few words to him and it was obvious that she was frightened by his strangeness, he knew that his interest in her was something more than plain curiosity. She had not yet given him a genuine smile, but he could tell that if she were to, it would be extraordinary. Nona’s eyes were a light hazel and looked as if they might be luminescent in the night. Beyond her initial distrust for him, he thought he saw a personality whose first inclination would be a move toward friendship. As he sat next to her at dinner her closeness had inspired a sense of calm, and once, as she passed him the salt, the edge of his hoof had lightly grazed her thumb.

For the next two hours, Belius knew nothing but what the words on the page in front of him commanded. The introduction to the massive book was over three hundred pages, and, of this, he only finished a little over a third before the weight of ideas and that of the tome made him slam it shut and place it back on the shelf. All of the ideas he had gathered from his reading began to run through him being like a powerful drug. He was not used to such a great dose of concentration all at once, and the effects of it made him stumble to the red leather chair and sit down. There he sat for yet another hour in a stupor, his big head lying to the side, propped on the tips of one hoof, as he let the wise old man’s theories percolate behind his eyes.

If the minotaur was correct in his reading, he garnered a few basic ideas from the book. The first was that *Cosmology* was the study of man’s perceptions of the creation, perpetuation, and destruction of all that lay outside himself. From here, Scarfinati had gone on to explain that each different epoch in the intellectual history of the human race had its own peculiar view of how the universe operated and that each of these different views was a reflection of that stage of civilization’s perceptions of itself. For instance, during the height of an age where mechanical science is in its greatest stages of discovery and development, the world and surrounding heavens are seen to operate like a mechanism.

None of these epochal Cosmologies, he stated, is any more “correct” than the next. Each is merely a reflection of the face of culture, and each, in its turn, fully captures culture’s imagination like Narcissus hypnotized by his own reflection. All of the implications and outcomes of that ancient myth adhere to each given group of people who stare into the pool of creation. In other words, each civilization’s Cosmology is an intense love affair with itself that nurtures it and allows it to grow, but in the end, is its undoing.

These thoughts spun about like planets thrown from their orbits. The one central idea, though, that shone more brightly than a sun was Scarfinati’s conviction that Cosmology was of the utmost importance in the formation of civilizations. “It gives to men and women a basic something in common, an illusion of certainty in which they can assuage the fear caused by the fact that they are utterly alone unto themselves.”

“Beyond the needs of civilization,” Scarfinati wrote, “each individual must have his or her own Cosmology, a personal set of myths by which to live. For to live only in the greater Cosmology of the civilization, is truly to be a ghost that sees everywhere action and creation, but can participate in neither.”

It was at this point that Belius stopped reading and closed the book. In his excitement, he believed that what he had read was everything, although some thousand or more pages were still left to read. He didn’t even skip to the last page and read Scarfinati’s final paragraph. A vague, shimmering reflection of himself was beginning to form before his eyes as he sat in the chair. Now he believed it was entirely up to him to sharpen the focus of this image; to write a Cosmology for himself and also for the civilization of minotaurs he dreamed he would father.

At the end of his hour of meditation, he rose and stretched. Although the fire of the new ideas was still with him, he was physically exhausted. As he came back to his waking self, he had a distinct urge to gore something; to smash his horns into a tree or the side of a barn. He thought then about the door his father had propped against the willow for him and what had happened the day on which he rammed it into oblivion. Shaking his head, he tried to disrupt the “unnatural” desire. What he needed at the moment, he knew, was to talk to the doctor. There were a thousand questions to ask about Cosmology.

He left the library and made his way quietly down to the lower level of the spacious house. He came first to the kitchen but did not find Grey there. Instead, he found three cold potatoes, left over from dinner, in the refrigerator. He swallowed them like pills.

From there, he wandered out into the corridors that were different from upstairs in that they opened into large rooms and were not lined with doors. These rooms were mostly unlit, and from the light of the hallway he could make out the ghostly figures of furniture draped in bed sheets. Occasionally, he would come across one that appeared to have been in use, but it was easy to see by the layer of dust on the mantles and chandeliers that the doctor rarely, if ever, did any entertaining.

For the entire day he’d worn the old overcoat, buttoned to the neck and strapped tightly at the waist in case of any meetings with Nona. He was finally becoming used to the feel of its unsettling lamb’s wool lining. He made his way quietly along, sneaking like a burglar from place to place, sweating beneath the weight of the wrap.

Passing three corridors of these larger rooms, Belius entered a fourth that had but one door in the middle of it on the left hand side. A dim light seeped out from around the slightly opened door. The hall was darkened and seemed a place he should not go, but, from within the one concealed room, he heard muffled sounds that escaped with the weak light. He crept up to the door and took a position outside of it. Turning his head so that he could spy through the crack with one eye, he held his breath as to make the least amount of noise and squinted to see into the murky room.

Although lit only by a single fluttering gas lamp, he immediately could tell from the sight

instruments and an examination table that it must be the doctor's office. Below the lamp was a big oak desk, highly polished, behind which was a wall of what he assumed to be medical texts. Grey sat at the desk, slumped forward, his arms laying flat out in front of him on the smooth surface. In the strange light he looked, with his thousand wrinkles, as if he were made from beaten leather. His body shook with intermittent spasms, and, after each of these, he made a choking noise as if he were trying to swallow something made of metal. At first Belius thought he was dying, but then he saw the bottle of whiskey at his elbow and the glass tumbler an inch from his hand, and he realized the physician was simply crying.

Sitting also on the desk top was a huge glass jar. The light from the lamp made the almost clear liquid inside the jar glow like a frosted window catching the sunset. Floating inside was a tiny human form. Its arms were out at its sides and its legs were bent slightly at the knees. The head was thrown back as if in the act of screaming. It did not float near the top or bottom but was suspended directly in the middle.

Back at his room, Belius surprised Nona in the act of laying out the new clothes on his bed. He was still very upset with what he had seen in the doctor's office, and the effects of it cancelled out all the decorum he had adopted when in her presence. Before she could flee through the open door, he put his hoof out and touched her shoulder.

"Why does your uncle sit in his office and drink and cry?" he asked her.

"He's a man of great feeling," she said.

Belius nodded, hoping she would continue.

A few more moments passed, and then she looked into his eyes. "He sees all of the suffering around him in the world. He tells me that life is only suffering. He has great pity for others. All the time, he seems to be laughing when he is with people, but when he is alone he lets his true feelings out. He doesn't want to let on to them what he knows about the hardships they'll face. He told me once that he wished he could cure everyone's pain, but that he knows the only cure is death. He drinks to forget his feelings."

"Can't he just accept things the way other people do?"

"I suppose not, after having seen so many people suffer in his life. I remember, from when I was very young, my mother telling my father that his wife had died. It was when he lived in the city. He had tried very hard to cure her, but in the end there was nothing he could do. Perhaps that was when his sorrow began."

"Do you believe these things he told you?" Belius asked.

"What's to believe?" she asked and reached into the pocket of her dress. "Will this do?" She pulled out her hand and in it was a rock she could just about get her fingers around. She handed it to him and left the room. He knew, from the way she had spoken, that she no longer had any fear of him.

As he lay in the dark, shivering and blowing silver clouds of steam, listening to the sound of the wind slipping through the shattered windows, he thought about the word "pity." He recognized it as being that enemy of his which had caused his parents to lie to him in his childhood. He saw that it was simply a ghost of a feeling that, if left to grow unchecked, would finally give birth to depression and deceit. In a moment, he was sleeping.

He dreamed he was outside in the cold, standing in a pasture covered with deep snow. In the moonlight, he was able to discern, at the opposite end of the wide field, a barren tree that was so tall that its branches went up into the night to a point he could not see. The trunk of it was thicker than a house and much of the bark had fallen off. He began running toward it with his head bent for impact. The further he ran, the colder the night became. He continued on though, hugging himself with his arms and trying to bury his snout down into the front of the overcoat. He ran toward it for an hour, and during that time the cold had snuck into his body and formed a thin layer of ice on his face and horns.

and even on the camel's hair of the coat. His joints began to seize and, as he drew close to his target he moved increasingly slowly. Just as his horns made contact with the smooth white wood, he froze solid. Ice covered him. He tried to yell out for help, but his voice was frozen too. In the depths of the shell of ice, after struggling for a long time to make a sound, he found another dream that carried him away in its current.

Three days later, Belius left the doctor's house. He was wearing one of the new outfits he had just gotten—a white shirt, black pants and a coat with a red and black plaid design. Both he and Grey were sitting in the doctor's wagon, ready to pull out onto the road. Just as the doctor was lifting the whip to spur the horse into action, the front door of the boarding house opened and Nona came running out to them. In her arms, she carried the overcoat. When she reached the side of the wagon, she called out, "You almost forgot this." Belius reached down and took it from her. He smiled and, to his surprise, Nona returned the true smile he had been looking for. The doctor laughed, but Belius noticed that the old man's mirth was louder and lasted longer than ever before.

A week passed and, whereas Pezimote still had not come to call, Thip came every day like clockwork. With each feeding he grew bigger until now he stood a full three inches off the table. The wound on Belius' arm was a festering sore. When the flea dipped into it, his enormous head was capable of draining a quarter of a pint of blood. The lurid transfusions were having a marked effect on both donor and recipient. Though Thip was fat and sluggish, his new height and girth could not be equaled by his dot of a brain which remained its original size.

He ranted and raved in spontaneous verse, the topic of which was always his conquest of the Wider World. He told Belius how his beautiful castle had become too small for him, how he had accidentally killed his devoted wife by trying to have sex with her, how he had eaten his pet tapeworms and been fired by Shebeb. His daughters had fled from the castle and refused to see him. Although he lamented the destruction of his previous life, he could not keep himself from Belius' arm. It had become the reason for his waking in the morning.

The minotaur, on the other hand, grew weak and giddy from the loss of blood. The lack of oxygen to his system was starving his reason. He laughed at everything and couldn't concentrate. All day, he would rush from one task to the next, accomplishing nothing. One minute he would be out in the garden, and, the next, he would be at his telescope, looking through the wrong end into the cracked mirror of his study. Whatever he did he found hilarious, but when the fits of fatigue would seize him and make him sit still, he would realize he was dying and that he was alone. Not one of his friends had come to him for days. It was at these times that he wished he hadn't burned *The Cosmology*. "At least it would be something to hold," he would say to himself before passing out.

The work on Soffea had gone exceptionally well. Her nearly-completed form lay next to the riverbank waiting for the life force that would be supplied by a mosquito and a handful of bees. The golden condor had brought the human foot with toe nails painted as had been promised. The teak wood hooves had been secured in place, the open mouth shone with the iridescent splendor of pearls, and the leaf tongue from the blabbering trees was already at work mumbling and jumbling almost words. Even that part of Siftus that always sought after perfection was satisfied with the results of his own labor.

The one thing that troubled the mole was the fact that to this point nothing had been found to fill the empty eye sockets. Many of the creatures had brought reasonable facsimiles for his approval—pairs of small round jelly-fish, bird eggs with pupils painted on, and, probably the worst of all, two circular globs of amber with trilobites trapped in them. Upon sniffing these offerings for "rightness" the mole could tell immediately that they wouldn't convey emotion or take in and hold another's glance. Vashti was getting fed up with his insistence that nothing would do. He knew in a way that she was right in thinking that something had to be settled on before Belius fell deeper into depression, b

he also knew she didn't look on the creation in the same way he did. To her it was a means to an end. To him it was an end in itself. "I don't even care if she's blind," he told the owl, "as long as the eyes are everything that eyes should be."

"Let's just settle on one of the suggestions that's been made. What about the globs of amber? You must admit they have a disarming quality, a certain charm about their strange color."

"You mean disarming in the sense of losing an arm?" he asked.

"You're impossible. Either come up with an alternative, or we're going to have to use what we have. Soffea will walk tomorrow. You have till then, otherwise, her eyes will be amber."

"All right, all right," he said and stormed away along the riverbank, swinging his cane at low hanging branches. He had not slept in days so it was a great effort for him to try to organize his thoughts. "Eyes," he said to himself, but his mind kept returning to an image of his stone bed. He cursed and quibbled with himself for a half mile before, in his near-blindness, he walked into the trunk of a tree and fell onto his back. The snout-first collision jarred everything in his head, allowing an obvious solution to his dilemma to rise to the fore. "That's it," he said and drew the new idea from his mind into his mouth where it was mixed with a wad of spittle. He shot this morsel onto the ground and put his still aching snout to it. The second he smelled its makeup, he knew it was the only answer. He clawed the air once in victory and then, losing no time, set off for Shebeb's cave.

It was a rare few minutes in Shebeb's life when he had no patients to administer to. When Siftus came upon him, he was in the grove of blabbering trees, collecting the long stringy moss from the branches. The trees were high-strung that day, and their usual palaver sounded more like a song of whippoorwills than speech.

"Shebeb," said the mole, "how are you?"

The ape nodded and continued his gathering.

"The female minotaur is almost ready to walk," said Siftus.

"Almost," said Shebeb with a grunt.

"I could tell from your speech the other night that you don't believe it will even be able to twitch an ear."

"That pile of mud will not move of its own volition for a million years. Of that, I'm positive."

"You're wrong," said the mole, taking out a cigarette. He propped his cane against the tree and lit up.

The ape shook his head and then covered his mouth for just a moment with the palm of his hand.

"Would you care to bet?"

"I don't bet," said Shebeb, "there's nothing I want to win."

"There's got to be something," said Siftus.

"Nothing," said the ape.

"Let's say we have a bet and I lose, I will donate my body to you after I'm dead. What about that? Wouldn't you like to get your hairy fingers on a mole corpse?"

"It would be helpful in my studies," said the ape.

He stopped gathering moss now and looked down as if to size up Siftus' carcass.

The mole blew a cloud of smoke upward to obscure the look on Shebeb's face. "Let's make a bet then. You have sole possession of my body, after I'm dead, of course, if Soffea doesn't walk by herself."

Shebeb scratched thoughtfully at his backside for a moment and then agreed to the deal with a quick nod.

"Don't you want to know what I want if I win?" asked Siftus.

"No."

"You're that sure of yourself?"

“I think that what you want to do, help Belius, is a good thing, but the way you’re going about it is all wrong. You’re deluding yourself and, in the process, leading everyone to a grave disappointment. Life can’t be created by slapping together whatever is at hand. You’ll see tomorrow when your statue lays there, a mound of wet clay with things stuck to it.”

“All I hope,” said the mole, “is that you’ll honor your word when the time comes.”

Shebeb turned away and headed for his cave.

Taking a long drag of his cigarette, Siftus considered the possibility that he might have been wrong. If he was, it meant that when he died his body would not be buried deep in the beautiful, loving earth, but, instead, would be scattered about the ape’s cave and slowly, over a period of years, picked away to nothing by sharp instruments. He shuddered at the thought of his poor snout forever forced to smell the wicked odors of Shebeb’s elixirs. His doubt lasted only a few seconds. Right where he stood conversing with the physician, he bent over and quickly dug his way below the surface of the earth. In the past few days he’d spent too much time in the open air, beneath the oppressive yellow sky. Halfway back to his burrow, he stopped to rest and just breathe in the smells of the underground. “Ah, dirt!” he said aloud, frightening an earthworm. He went no further for the time being but closed his eyes and slept.

While Siftus lay asleep underground, the raccoon brothers, although hoping for the best for Belius’ sake, offered odds of acorns and measures of honey, ten to one, that the contrived form would remain on the ground until the rains finally washed it away. They found many a willing bettor, especially among those creatures who had forsaken snatches of fur from their own hides in order that the female minotaur might have a luxuriant mane.

The ants of the tower did not take bets, but, being the communal group that they were, initiated a joint meditation of all their brethren, melding together their combined psychic powers in the attempt to produce a modest spark of good faith. A feather fell from Vashti’s left wing and floated down from where she perched on a tree near the riverbank, overlooking the unknowing form. It twirled in the air and finally came to rest on the sculpted navel of Soffea. As she watched it land, covering the bodily center of the being yet to be, she saw instantly that if everything worked out and she were to introduce the creation to Belius the next day, it had better have some clothes. She was thankful that she now had a project with which to take up the dreadful time of waiting. She left the believers to the non-believers and went in search of Bonita to see what the cat could come up with by way of material in the storage room of Belius’ tower.

Nothing of importance, be it on land or sea, ever escaped the notice of Nosthemus. In one small closet of the vast mansion that was his brain he registered the suspense that had been generated by the possible birth of Soffea and saw it as a prime opportunity to make a prophecy. He swam out from the bay of the coral reef into deep water. Two miles off shore, he sucked in enough oxygen for a bull elephant to breathe recklessly for a lifetime and dove down and down beyond where the sunlight shone, beyond the realm of eatable fish, into the shivering darkness at the bottom of the Wider World. As he thrust himself toward his destination with powerful strokes of his tail, he anticipated the impact a correct prophecy of such importance would have on the creatures of the surface. For one, he knew it would add to his own grand status as the baffling mystic. He would have only five minutes to experiment on questioning the giant worm that lived in the light and heat of the molten fissure. It was from the ancient first-of-creatures that he got all his prophecies, though no living thing for miles above was aware of it.

The fiery gorge that was like the sun to Floridusk ran for miles across the basin of the ocean: a canyon river that meandered among the enormous mountain range that lay three hundred fathoms down and was like a gaping crack in the skull of the Wider World. The molten lava that bubbled up from the very center of things contained the essence of the planet’s dreams and thoughts. It was from

the light thrown off by this liquid blaze that Floridusk assumed the knowledge of what was to happen. ~~The giant worm was a creature, but, in its creation, was blessed with the property of photosynthesis.~~ Its special chlorophyll produced oxygen for it to breathe in its cells the way a plant on the surface would. It drew nutrients from the rich volcanic muck it wallowed in. Once, the worm had told Nosthemus that it believed it had been born from a nightmare the Wider World had once dreamt.

After an hour of swimming through pitch dark, Nosthemus could barely make out a thin line of orange unraveling below him. The closer he drew to it, the more the molten light illuminated the barren landscape. Finally, exhausted, the whale could clearly see the peaks of the undersea mountains looming in the distance. Flying in amongst these crags, he continued to descend. The freezing cold diminished, and the heavy water pressing against his slippery skin began to glow with warmth. He spotted the huge round head of Floridusk and swam up close to announce himself.

“Worm!” he shouted at the full moon of a face that could have incorporated within its circumference a hundred of him.

The pale body of the behemoth quit its digestive undulation and rumbling. Thick, mile long lips parted to show teeth and give the effect of a condescending sneer. Floridusk opened one lid to reveal a jelly eye with lavender cornea and iris the color of old snow. The other eye remained closed. The ancient of the depths had the ability to be both asleep and awake at the same time. Earlier that week the sunken corpse of a great white shark had gotten tangled in the sparse hairs of the worm’s beard. To scratch the itch that the decaying flotsam caused, he pivoted his head to rub his chin against the bottom of the ocean. This movement created a strong current, making it difficult for Nosthemus to remain in the same spot. “Be still, parasite,” Floridusk bellowed in a great release of bubbles, “it’s difficult enough to focus on you when you aren’t squirming around.”

“My apologies,” said Nosthemus.

“What is it this time?”

“Just one thing. Will she be born tomorrow?” The whale did not have to elaborate, knowing that Floridusk must already know why he was there.

“Tell me one thing, my swimming insignificance, do you think it really matters whether she wallows or talks or cures your friend? Do you think that if this were to happen, you would not still die and float down here to the bottom and rot and turn to muck and be assimilated by me? Do you think the Wider World would shed a tear for such a niggling tragedy or lose a moment of night?”

Nosthemus was used to being belittled by the worm. He had quickly learned to simply go along with the pomposity, groveling as much as possible without whining. “No,” he answered, “I suppose it wouldn’t matter one way or the other in the larger scheme of things.”

“Not matter? Well, you’re wrong. Everything matters to this celestial head. I have taken in the light of this matter from the molten glow. I know what will happen. The dream of it bubbled up from the gorge years and years past.”

“And what was the outcome? What did the Wider World dream about this?” Nosthemus grew anxious, feeling the tightening up of his innards that always came as his oxygen was running low.

“I’m afraid the dream was explicit in that I was not to tell you when you came to ask. This is a gift for you and your friends from the planet. The thought is that the suspense of having to wait will make all of your lives more rewarding.”

The whale knew there was no sense in arguing. “Thank you for recognizing me, worm. I will return.”

“That’s a prophecy you can take heed of,” said Floridusk.

Mustering all his strength, Nosthemus whipped his tail and sent himself shooting up through the incredible pressure of the depths. He hurried, knowing he had stayed down too long. The journey to the surface would take hours. The fiery river receded below him and with it the light. He shot past the

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