

The 504

Jennifer Walker
John Laue
Alex Valdiers
Jordan Zuniga
Thomas Elson
Paul Ballard



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The Old Woman in the Woods
by Jennifer Walker

There was an old woman who lived deep in the woods at a time, if you can imagine, where being old, and a woman, and alone was even harder than it is today. And on one winter's night, after the snow had stopped falling and everything outside was silent and silver and crystalline, she heard a distant crunch of hooves over her crackling fire. They grew loud enough even the folk song she always sang to make the big pot of water boil faster could not drown them out. The horse's steps echoed through the frozen trees until it was clear they'd entered the front yard. But the old woman never stopped singing or peeling the cloves of garlic she'd plucked from a string alongside the hearth; and she didn't look surprised when the sound stopped next to the house, or when a different set of footsteps led right to the front door, or even when there was such a stern rapping against the door a dozen icicles the size of saplings fell from the eaves with the sound of a hundred shattered glasses.

It was only then the woman put aside her garlic, and wiped her hands on her burlap apron, and opened the door. For an instant her stout frame blocked the firelight and she saw just the coldness and blackness of the night and how every snow etched branch stretched like bones against the sky. But then she stepped aside and let the light flicker across a tall figure in silver-plated armor and a horse, tethered to a tree, rearing in fright from the terrible noise of the icicles. The knight was unsteady, swaying back and forth, and from all the ice shards at his feet it was clear he would not be standing if he had not been dressed for battle.

The old woman, in her sweetest voice, the one she always used with lost children, said, "Good evening Sir Knight. Please come and warm yourself by my fire."

The knight muttered something unintelligible and managed to stagger inside. The old woman guided him into a chair and gently pulled off his helmet before he could get a firm grasp of it with either hand. One side of it was badly dented and the woman clucked her tongue as a trickle of blood ran down his temple and onto his cheek.

As she busied herself pulling down jars of dried roots and herbs and flowers from shelves that lined all four walls and reached nearly to the roof of the tiny room, the knight sputtered a few times and then finally spoke.

"Now see...now see here," he said holding his head with one hand and squinting his eyes, "I've been sent here, um, on the authority, um, of his...of his majesty..." The young man struggled, lolling in the seat, as he tried to remember the great majesty who'd sent him searching, likely for days, deep into a forest none but the most courageous, or most foolish, or most desperate would ever dare enter, to find this insignificant hovel and its aged crone.

Anyone could see he was an exceptionally handsome young man, even with his dazed expression and blinking eyes. Underneath his armor were broad shoulders that sat on his straight spine like a mighty yoke. His hands were large and calloused from wielding the heavy sword that scraped in its sheath against the dirt floor as he reeled. His hair was thick and lustrous and freed from the helmet fell down his back in cascading curls. His chin was cleft, his cheekbones broad, his eyebrows dark and commanding. Even injured he still radiated strength and danger. The squat old woman, with her arthritic hands and waddling gait, was dwarfed by her guest in every way.

Still her wrinkled face folded in on itself in a smile when the knight shouted out, “King Archibald the VII,” like an overeager student in a history lesson. “I am here on the direct authority of King Archibald the VII to arrest you on the charge of...” But he floundered again, lost, and then pounded his fist on the table in such fierce irritation all the wooden plates and bowls on top of it went clattering to the floor.

“Now, now,” the old woman soothed. She placed a cup of steaming liquid in front of him that filled the room with the smell of fresh peat, and blue spruce, and night blooming jasmine. Then she bent down to pick up the dishware. “That strength of yours is what got you in this trouble. You can’t just go around trying to knock the world to pieces with your fists. You’ve a nasty blow to your head. Go ahead. Drink up. That’s right, that’s right. You’ll feel better in a jiff.”

Before he’d even finished the cup the change was remarkable. The blood stopped dripping from his head, his eyes stopped rolling, he sat up straight and still. His well formed features sharpened and he rose from the table and pulled a parchment from the small leather bag strapped to his chest.

“By the power vested in me by his majesty—yes, well, you know—I arrest you for the kidnap and murder of the brother and sister known as Hansel and Gretel, son and daughter of Stephen the woodcutter, who were known to frequent this, um, house, and have not been seen since the last full moon.” The knight paused then, parchment still open. He looked toward the front door closed snugly against the vicious chill as if he was supposed to have delivered this speech outside it and then dragged the old woman away. But instead he was already standing before the comfort of her fire, and had been healed by her potion, and she was sitting patiently next to him with nothing but kindness on her face. His uncertainty was palpable.

“Oh, sit down dear. Sit down,” the old woman said as she, grunting slightly, got up and fussed over him like an adoring grandmother, patting his girded arm with a metallic twang and smoothing the hair she could reach until, looking bewildered, he did. She felt his forehead with the back of her hand then and patted his cheek. “Now don’t get yourself too worked up my lovely. Your head’s only just healed and I can’t work miracles. Now what did you say the little boy and girl’s name were?”

The knight cleared his throat and tried to look imperious but it was too ridiculous to do while the old woman stroked his head and held his hand. He peeked back at his parchment. "Hansel and Gretel. And now, good lady, really, yes, no, I really do feel alright now. Perfectly fine, yes. And thank you. But really, by the power vested in me—"

"Oh yes, yes dear. So you've said," the woman waved the words away like she was gently swatting a fly. "Now we'll talk about the children in just a minute. First, would you like something to eat? You must be famished after coming all this way in that frightful cold. Why, it must be at least a three days ride from the great King's court, and that's if you don't get lost, which is nearly impossible in this wild forest! Yes, you look absolutely starved. I've just made some stew and it should be ready right about now."

And just then the most delicious smell of roasted meats and glazed apricots and spiced carrots filled the cottage as if they were sitting in the royal kitchens themselves. The young knight's jaw tightened with hunger and outside in the yard his horse fell over and died in the snow. But the knight didn't notice. He was too busy trying to hide his ravenousness as the old woman struggled to ladle two portions from the boiling pot into gigantic wooden bowls. He was still trying to protest as she carried them the short distance to the table, but once the bowl was before him he lit into it like a wolf into prey.

The old woman watched approvingly while slowly stirring her food.

"Now then," she said after he'd eaten a full bowl in silence and she'd refilled it, "are you speaking of Stephen the woodcutter who lives at the edge of the wood? I seem to recall he had a son named Hansel and a daughter named Gretel."

"Aye." The knight barely looked up from eating, his words slurred with food. "The very same."

"Well then," the old woman continued carefully, still stirring her bowl, "if memory serves they weren't happy children. No, in fact, they were always quite sad. It seems their mother was always telling Gretel she was too big and fat and the father hated Hansel for being so slight and pretty."

The knight leaned back then and watched the old woman. He looked sleepy now he'd eaten so much food and his face was flushed with the warmth of the fire. Suddenly there was something childlike underneath the firm lines of his face too, a rounded softening that seemed open and exposed. He scratched his chin and sighed.

"Then it is true you know these children?"

"Oh yes, I met them not long ago."

“Well then, and I’m sorry,” and the knight truly did look sorry as he made to push himself out of his chair, “but by the power—”

“Ah, there’s nothing to be sorry about dear. I meet children like them all the time. Sit down, sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it. It’s lonely for an old woman way out in the woods and it’s nice to have some company by the fire. Now, more stew?”

The knight shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. But before he could speak the old woman started again.

“Yes, yes, I’ve met quite a number of lost and wandering children in all my years, years beyond counting, in the wood. And they’re all too fat, or too thin, or too pretty, or too ugly, or too smart, or too dull, or too weak, or too slow, or too boyish, or too girlish, or too destined to love someone their parents forbid. So they run away to save themselves, and they all find their way to my door. Don’t look so shocked dear. Children are devoured by their parents every day.”

The knight did look shocked, at first, but then his face changed and it took on the look of someone remembering. Perhaps he remembered his own childhood and a father who, no matter how many dragons he slayed or princesses he saved, would never, truly, be satisfied.

“My dear,” the old woman took the knight’s hand in her own and patted it, “you look exhausted. If you still must arrest me and take me back to court then you’ll need a good night’s rest. The wood’s no place to be on such a cold winter’s night. Perhaps, in the morning’s light, we might find proof the children left here alive after I fed them, and clothed them, and gave them provisions for their long journey. Children can be careless, as you know, and they often leave things behind. But for now the hour grows too late and it’s time for sleep.”

The knight was already having trouble keeping his eyes from closing and the old woman was right. Only a madman would consider starting back through the frigid woods at that time of night. He even forgot to check on his horse as if there was something about the heat of the fire, and the taste of the stew, and the consideration of the old woman that made him forget there was anything left in the world but the inside of her house. The old woman set about piling up her small cot in the corner with thick wool blankets that smelled of dried lavender and a comforter stuffed with goose down. With relief the knight started to take off his armor and as he carefully laid each piece on the table he grew more and more boyish until, unbuckling his shin guards and finally loose of the whole ensemble, he resembled nothing more than a large lad come to pay his dear grandma a visit. He even let her lead him to the cot by the hand and sighed with content as she tucked him in.

Of course, as soon as he was asleep, the old woman stabbed him through the heart. But you expected that. What you really want to know is what happened to Hansel and Gretel and if the old woman is a witch who eats children or just an intrepid lady trying to make her way in the world without conforming to it. What a silly question. Why should she want to eat children when she can dine on the finest, bravest knights in the land?

John Laue
A Mosaic of Virtual Masks

A Mosaic of Virtual Masks

My Friend Lucy's mask pictures purple turds.

Harry has one with a pistol and a hypodermic needle.

Jackie's boosts her I.Q but eliminates her sex drive.

Farmer John has a biometric one that grows asparagus only when viewed.

Harold has a pillbox in his mask with a butter knife attached.

Jennifer's mask has a saying, "God Knows What?"

Don has a mask with a blue thumb jutting out of it.

Daniel's and Doreen's are machines that parse realities.

Dara has one that manufactures helium and makes her sound like a duck.

Docile Dan's doubles as a seat cushion.

Jack's has all the colors of the rainbow and makes it rain on alternate Sundays.

Donna's has a call center's switchboard.

Jeffrey's travels in and out of unknown dimensions.

Sonny Jim has a plastic one that makes caffeinated yogurt.

Fat Alfred has nonfat ones he consumes on feast days with pickle relish.

Eunice has one of Victorian lace doilies.

Gene's tolerates all religions but hates Antidisestablishmentarianism.

Jan's features a calculator and computer.

Artful Aaron's continually displays his weight and measurements.

Martha's is made of discarded radio parts.

Amos the Shamus has one with a plowshare and chirping canary.

Paul's projects naked men and women on any available wall.

Slick Lester's finds lost items of questionable impramature.

Arthur's are milky and dissolve after every use.

Andy's has a biometric side that attaches to his eyebrows and grows edible posies.

Proud Mary's has a penis, scrotum and dedicated vagina.

Danny's produces fertilizer and makes mustard crops grow.

Clever Trevor's can be planted and will supply a week's worth of diversions.

Doris's creates visions and criticizes coming out decisions.

Bob's manufactures bones.

Silent Garth's speaks for him so he doesn't have to make pronouncements.

Arnold's gives him stronger wrists for virtual survival contests.

Plain Winnie's transforms her and her blond twin sister to raven haired beauties.

Nervous Ann's cooks and sews exotic fans.

Iris's makes big money and cries all the way to the bank.

Anselm's tells jokes and does impressions of deceased comedians.

Katie's bites anyone who comes near.

Smart Lem's plays video games and usually wins.

Old Josie's mimics her voice and tells children to go to bed.

Mother Rush's collects delusions of grandeur.

Delia's does the same but in spandex.

Rapid Rod's plays a radio theme song Blues for Jews over and over.

Maggie's is surprisingly mute.

Short Suzy's controls the tv and picks only programs she's addicted to.

Sandra's tells time and gives spatial coordinates wherever she goes.

Amy's boosts her arguments and elevates her status in the Space Makers.

Sad Lannie's brings him down.

Fred's fathers independent children.

Ludwig's enables him to tune in on stray cosmic rays.

Henry's puts him to sleep and wakes him up on time.

Steve's gives him a busy sex life, then takes it away.

Diane's carries a sword that fights battles for neighborhood honors.

Helen's has super powers but refuses to use them.

Gentle Glen's looks like it's there when it isn't.

Lean Lizzy's is invisible.

Silly Bill's spills his milk and crumbles his cookies.

Serena's keeps her dizzy and out of mainstream media.

Luz's dies perpetually and is restored to life by lesbian energy.

Lana's lets people sit on it and gooses them.

Inga's stands tall and emits an air of rare omnipotence.

Lanny's is a god but poses as a commoner.

Flatbush Flint's is a commoner that poses as a cartoon figure.

Axle's holds him down and keeps him out of bad mechanical hands.

Adroit Anna's helps her fly to forbidden planets.

Joker Jan's is from a happier space and yearns to return.

Marcella's is so proper it does what's right no matter if that's wrong.

Lynn's makes her beautiful but rejects handy suitors.

Gene's guides the creation of rhyming selves.

Holy Pat's has a lilac scent and is handed to her grandchildren.

Jevon's grows ersatz nuts and fruits.

Dana's sings lullabies to chickens.

Instant Inga's tries to breath but fails.

Maisie's manufactures medals for believers in magenta.

Tough Tommie's exudes energy and increases coffee trees' vitality.

Jennie's isn't a mask at all.

Bent Trent's advocates the end of all masks.

Hack Jackson's attacks other masks and defeats them.

Donald's drinks too much and makes him spit tacks.

Lonnie's does the same with a rainbow aura.

Brave Hettie's makes her a transsexual.

Gertrude's changes their sexes then changes them back again.

Stacy's refuses to go wherever she races.

Daniel's rises at sunrise and falls with inclement weather.

Stanley's aids his quest for aural dynamics.

Smart Art's controls quarks.

Big Belinda's gives her a bright new body.

Inga's, pale and sensitive, cries when the sky turns purple.

Precious Jewel's draws and paints and makes her famous.

Cloe's composes dramatic odes to saintly ugliness.

Lewd Lennie's is a clown.

Maud's talks loudly and makes certain she's received as royalty.

Flirty Gertie's has a mouth that eats for her.

Rapid Ray's has a belly and a painful anus.

Blair's puts on airs and ignores civilian discourse.

Johnny's sends messages by esoteric channels to goddesses and goblins.

Pam's third mask is thrown to determine players' batting order.

Raul's features a brown-faced warbler that perpetually calls for a mate.

Maddie's has an African frog that exudes rancid smoke.

Curt Carl's alternately smells like irises and offal.

Davis's makes and trades assorted bits of bric-a-brac.

Joanna's has done everything and keeps her from considering prurient dangers.

Dick's picnics loudly.

Aurelio's speaks so fast no one can comprehend his quick equations.

Virgil's kills mosquitos and eats ants.

Mad Washington's eschews politics and offers red and yellow fevers.

Doyle's is fragrant and oily.

Brant's creates spells and opens secret legends.

Glenna's deals with conundrums before they stick in her throat.

Theodore's generates electricity and releases fake war bulletins.

Solemn Saul's controls imaginary helicopters.

Louise's draws indelicate cartoons.

Seth's covers him from head to toe with bits of information.

Dax's hates facts.

Fern's makes her a mathematician and a respected lichen scholar.

Baron's advocates for sons and daughters galore.

Ted's plays dead.

Lena's is an arm with eleven stubby fingers.

Anton's does multiple jobs so he doesn't have to work.

James's explains things so clearly even sugarplum fairies understand.

Joe's is a fool that makes fun of sellers and truth tellers.

Gentle Josie's buys and sells pieces of eight and patches of used underwear.

Slim Jimmy's plays a great game of golf and streaks sporting events.

Lucille's is for real.

Prudence's takes nothing for granted, even favorable news flashes.

Liz's forgets to forgive.

Randy's dominates poker games and practices karmic wrestling.

Jacko's cheats on his taxes and gets him in trouble.

Nan's shakes hands.

Barry's plays guitar and croons natural food blues.

Mark's captures quarks and plays with protons.

Elaine's projects an aura of unrequited nuisance,

Marie's, a ruler and belated suiter, wins beer drinking contests.

Philo's is queer, but not weird.

Wright's, incurably quixotic, sees the world in bits and pixels.

Rap's acts tough and roughs up happy drifters,

Chris's lists kitchen stores from dishes to doilies.

Addie's feels perpetually rejected and lashes out at enemies.

Fran's resembles a bird that resembles a wolf.

Davy's conjures wolves that fly like birds.

Otto's is a null hypothesis.

Ronald's lets him fart but keeps him from stinking.

Sebastian's gives him one last chance.

Win's is wise, but not nice.

Lance's is nice but entices children.

Corrina's apologizes again and again with loud hand gestures.

Jerod's studies people, then rejects them.

Senna's juggles Bundt cakes and sews surrender flags.

Jukebox Jackson's changes from wicked to woolly and back again.

Joe's turns whatever color his mother prefers.

Clyde's builds birds' nests and lays eggs on his tongue.

Bernie's freezes metaphors so they won't spoil.

Poor Prentice's is an unrepentant star purveyor.

Augie's keeps a log of everyone's eccentricities.

Ernie's accurately predicts the future but can't abide the past.

Agatha's, of spider webs, lives in her hair.

Mavie's defends righteousness and refuses to break her silence.

Angel's compensates for his name and conjures devils.

Dianne's is demonic in all darkroom situations..

June's broadcasts sports and fashion tidbits.

Reina's isn't religious but takes time off every seventh day.

Emil's is pedantic and obsessed with camels.

Clark's obsesses about the meaning of darkness.

William's, a tax fraud, bilks people out of imaginary savings.

Connie's hands out peanut butter and pea soup to travelers from extreme dimensions.

Oscar's has a watch that tells time only when near migrating whales.

Sheila's reaches out and touches people but shies away from oral compromise.

Linc's controls drones that takes photos of suspicious homecomings.

Hard Henry's pities other masks.

Charlie's mask, sprayed on, must be removed by moonlight.

Lou's is an old shoe that grows on his nose

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Debbie's is a rebel.

Inga's causes tingles in nearby kitchen workers.

Maureen's gives off steam as she twerks to entertain her sailor queens.

Nellie's rearranges realities to order.

Wendy's peddles frosty foibles.

Everett's names his children Upward and Downward.

Anderson's advocates pensions for flowers.

Rank Russel's wields a cudgel that attacks butlers and bankers.

Wayne's came from a bordello and must be returned.

Roland's solves past and future physics dilemmas.

Marc's sees only in darkness.

Alouisha's smells like baked herring.

Adolf's lays around till he wakes to a brighter day.

Horrid Hans's falls to five hundred BC.

Javier's searches nearby mountains for nonexistent jaguars.

Antonio's blows up roses.

Levi's becomes a girl who becomes a bower bird.

Ellis's is voted by other masks into the mask hall of infamy.

Alphonse's fails to distinguish between birds, planes, and mosquitos.

Howard's sweats profusely as he runs word gauntlets.

Emily's pretends to be a stuck record that plays "Life is But a Dream" .over and over.

Malcolm's writes haiku and believes he was Japanese in a previous existence.

Vladimir's hovers above his head sneering.

Rude Riley's cries for revolution.

Belva's mask sings with hoary velvet tones.

Noel's, nonsensical, greets the world with groaning tentacles.

Merle's goes round and round pretending to be a squirrel being drowned.

Travis's has magic that comes from a tear in the time being.

Annie's mask plays softball while she trolls for futures and flashes.

Francine's don't know what sex they are and don't care.

Tara's puts flowers in her mouth and vagina.

Pierre's floats in tepid air and bestows distempered kisses.

Rene's is forgiven of sins by two chimeric religions.

Ham's is brother to a schizophrenic super matchmaker.

Alfie's is spiritual and makes miracles disappear.

Broad Belen's is alien to all things harsh and hurried.

Little Lollie's mask looks like it's moot, but says, Watch out, she'll shoot!

Rollo's calls masks tools for fools.

Tak's says people should hold their peace and brush their teeth.

Elvia's has a sombrero with calipers to measure angel penises.

Ching's gives him white ghost dreams.

Paddy's is mad.

Chantel's informs her of the best black hotels.

Caesar's features prehistoric preachers.

Loud Louie's explodes when anyone contradicts him.

Betty's, from black dirt, generates many flirty whistles.

Eva's, stuffed with leaves, rolls in forbidden grievance notes.

Dawn's offers powder and yawns.

Dangerous Dale's communicates with puzzles and guides missile sales.

Dac's projects a California movie extra aura.

Tammie's helps her dispose of estranged embryos.

Guy's rides a motorcycle and blows a klaxon horn at nightfall.

Jasper's laughs and laughs all Saturdays and Sundays.

Ichabod's pictures wingless cormorants.

Ludmilla's imitates eagles and frees captured dingoes.

Edgar's plays dead until threats overwhelm him.

Alfred's is a well-heeled detective dog.

Renee's beats all masks at being masculine, feminine, and neutral.

Excellent Emma's inserts commas between disparate spiritual planes.

Gerardo's is hard and made of carpet fibers.

Osgood's saws wood and shoots marbles with ignorant intensity.

Tod's is a wrestler's jock.

Arial's, quite ethereal, lights votive candles for delivered dinners.

Ollie's is tolerated only because he apologizes.

Matty's loves teddy bears, bats' noses and primroses.

Nate's maintains he's great at blessing alien cemeteries.

Ardis's drives from the back seat of a long live Cadillac.

Burt's hurts people, then runs to his worthy conspirators.

Aunt Ansel's slings arrows and slays dragons' time accomplishments.

Hal's tends black sheep, often assaulting needy ewes.

Mamie's drains her finances.

Hector's loves cold turkeys and mystic meals.

Brett's sets up camp with facts and practices plastic survival modes.

Kate's visits every other virtual state.

Karen's loves erratic bombardiers and lethal teasers.

Cookie's writes hieroglyphic recipes.

Roger's is a fine postmodern failure.

Rhoda's transforms coded images to surreal masterpieces.

Reggie's adds unconscious memes to smart displays.

Weird Wanda's follows forest fires and wades across uncharted waste waters.

Hunter's keeps anyone from spotting his misshapen buns.

Glib Gunter's sells deliriums to highest bidders.

Gretchen's is the last of a wretched Chechen breed.

Hot Hettie's stays first in line for the greenest gasolines.

Bruce's is trite but always right.

Phil's, angelic, aids poets, priests, and politicians in red bathrobes.

Daffodil's resents her name and changes it to Codicil.

Myrtle's catches turtles and leaves them in deserted playgrounds.

Marta's awaits an important letter cast ashore tomorrow.

Tall Teven's anticipates the end of evil.

Eve's recycles people.

Irma's makes currency from discarded perfume bottles.

Mohsin's remarks again and again about drole Catholicism.

Ari's offers meals to attention grabbers.

Adam's features planetary action themes with green solutions.

Angus's pardons moral compasses.

Thomas's loves llamas or the Dalai Lama.

Tim's sells balloons to soccer hooligans.

Toni's likes satyrs and craters because they rhyme.

Ishmael's, an electrician, loves a mood transition scholar.

Stewart's writes model memes and croons eclectic dirges.

Al's is a mystic, sadistic game master.

Smart Wally's loves tacos and feathers but draws the line at steaks and snakes.

Brian's tries for transcendence and becomes dependent.

Igor's, sore loser, has a head full of newsprint.

Gayle's, an eighteenth angel, collects spiritual taxes.

Max's sees angles on everything and owns carloads of triangles.

Roland's goes naked on alternate days and eats flavored daisies.

Ellis's time travels and unties gordian knots.

Ignatz's washes dishes and keeps civet cats.

Idris's does difficult tasks to make his masters happy.

Gabriel's gathers existential crises.

Mason's captures several truth levels and keeps them in a water cooler.

Angelo, A Proper Fellow's, asks, Here a mask, there a mask, on your faces, in your hair, crude, rude, stealing, dealing, hiding, sliding. Can a mask become enlightened? Could we survive without our masks?

Bubble Tally Sally's, adds: Do your masks hang tight or loose? Are they polite, uncouth, colored, dullard, loving, shoving, keeping times or seeking rhymes?

Timely Terrie's queries, Are you citizens of unruly cores, confused by multiple gates and doors? Are your masks noted, bloated, dealing visions, sealing missions, smirking, jerking, darkling, sparkling, racial, facial, winning, spinning?

Are they truth tellers, sooth sellers, lending means, bending scenes, living, giving, striving, riving?

Is your mask collection actioned, fractioned, toying, cloying, pounding, sounding, large, little, hard, brittle, masks, masks, crazy, lazy, high to low, above, below, slow or fast, first to last?

A Magician In The Land Of Witches
By Alex Valdiers

It is hard to call oneself a wizard when one's magic is so ridiculously useless, laughable. I see myself as a clown, rather than a real wizard. Can I weave magic? Yes. Is it useful? Absolutely not. Lying under the protective arms of a willow tree by the Seion river, I was having one of these 'why me' moments, despising my magic, cursing what it did to my life, to the world, when three valkyrie birds flying above the river stream bewitched me. I watched them dove, grazing the current, then rising high above the willow trees, in perfect formation, in perfect unison, tweeting to one another.

A mullet fish jumped out of the water and the three Valkyrie birds broke their stride to raid the spot where the fish had dove into. I watched them with my amused and admiring eye until the admiration turned to horror, lightning struck from the other side of the river and hit one of the Valkyrie birds, sending it crashing a foot away from the hanging arms of my willow tree. The disagreeable smell of burned feathers invaded my nostrils. I watched spasms running through that once graceful bird. Its eyes were red and tumescent. Its beak opened, but no sound came out, instead, its body convulsed under the pain. I wanted to help it, to rescue it, but the voice behind this insidious attack petrified me.

A strange woman dressed in a herbalist robe with multiple pockets crossed the river stream. Lightning rode her body like an electric pole. I recognized her as a witch. She came right up to my willow tree, seemingly unaware of my presence, and kneeled by the Valkyrie bird. She spoke in a malicious tongue foreign to my ears, then lightning sparked out her fingernails. Fearing she would do more hurt to this innocent animal, I came out of hiding and made a loud, humorous cry to capture the witch's attention. The witch pricked and the electricity out of her hands died out. I spoke out, pleading for her to spare the Valkyrie, but my words were as foreign to her ears as hers were to mine.

And then... I remembered my ridiculous powers.

My magic was laughable; the witch killed an animal for fun; fine, let's amuse her, I thought. Hopping on one leg like a clown, I sprayed my lips in a wide and stupid smile and locked it. Then I put my right hand in my right pocket, shook it once, shook it twice, shook it thrice, and took it out. Nothing. I did the same with my left hand, shook it once, twice, thrice, and pulled out nothing. Then I made a mullet fish appear in the witch right pocket, because it was all I could think of, and, without speaking, because I knew then by experience that it would cancel the spell, I gestured for her to put her right hand in her pocket. She laughed, hesitated, sent a cutting remark down my way, and then gave

in. The witch plucked out the mullet out of her pocket and rejoiced as if she was holding a lump of gold.

Like a circus performer, I saluted, still smiling, and waved her off. It worked. My little trick succeeded at distracting her attention from the Valkyrie bird she had fatally injured. I heaved of relief as I watched her cross the river back from where she hailed, and I didn't see, or hear, the other two Valkyrie birds falling from the sky to attack me as if I was the one who had armed their partner. They struck me on the head and on my left shoulder, then they came back for more and struck me in the back. I had a reflex to protect myself.

"It's not me", I yelled out. But, of course, those words were alien to their volatile ears. They kept hitting me, hurting me, slicing my flesh open, yet I did not fight back. No. I even lowered my guard and invited them to do with me as they pleased. I was suddenly very conscious that, for Valkyrie birds, us humanoids must look all the same.

The two Valkyrie birds hurt me and bled me until I fell inert to the ground, my right arm falling inches away from the Valkyrie bird that a bolt of lightning had struck. I saw now that it was dead. The birds must have seen it too. They stopped flying at me with their piercing beaks and sharp claws. For a moment, I thought they were preparing the fatal blow. I closed my eyes and got ready for the hurt. But the blow never came. They flew away, high above the willow tree, exchanging sad tweets along the way.

My head fell towards the dead Valkyrie bird. Its blue plumage had turned to gray, almost black in patches, its red feathers had all burned out. Its tiny black tongue hanged out of its opened beak. It must have felt tremendous pain before dying.

I wept at the unnecessary evil that fell upon that bird, and a flurry of mixed emotions invaded my mind, anger at the witch, anger at myself for my inability to protect and save the Valkyrie. Then anger gave way to sadness, and I cried audibly, now patting my bleeding body where the cuts were deeper. Physical pain overtook my emotional rage and the crazy idea of revenge invaded me. But how could I, Maeterlink, a clown, a useless magician, could ever take revenge over such powerful magic? My powers were only good to amuse criminals. Useless. Laughable. A Magician in the lands of Witches.

The Inevitable Portion
By Jordan Zuniga

The realm of death was wrought with crookedness and uncertainty, with the touch of doom and the sound of despair. The scent of rotted decay of all that once was in life, now festered and flowed with the chilling wind of gloom that passed by the flailing souls of the damned. The spirits of those that were sentenced to perdition continued to wail and gnash with teeth as the incoming day of judgment only lingered before it came.

Though it lingered, it would certainly come to pass. Though delayed, it would inevitably be. Neither hope was to be cultivated, nor faith for what could be as there was neither knowledge to gain, nor wisdom to apply for either reward or the pursuit to then obtain any reward in the place of the dead. There was nothing to be sought to those subject to judgment, and all that could be sought was obtained in life. So as the human heart became crooked in its ways, catching innocent souls to trap and destroy to obtain all that the human heart coveted.

So it was for they themselves fell prey to the condemnation with he who fell from his high position in the courts of heaven, and the judgement of he who is Lord of all. The vexation of their torn spirits, with the woes and sorrows of guilt and remorse from all that they had wrought, and their inability to redeem themselves from their eternal destiny. Desire, what a fleeting thing, a temporary thing. Something that fades away into dust and ash.

As the wind continued its eerie sway all throughout the realm of the dead, a fortress resided in the best part of the land itself. It's mighty stronghold of dark bricks and gothic-like formation rooted firmly in the ground as many doors throughout the different layers were all throughout the exterior of the building. Black tar bubbled under a decaying bridge, the creaking of the fortress door continued while the breeze passed by. The constant twists and turns within the keep with many doors that could potentially be entered, all with a declaration of a painful death. As one door reached the end of a crooked hallway, an opening without a door revealed a blood stained cloth that led to a throne with an old man sitting on it. With decaying, silver hair with stains of grey and white that flowed down a rich black cloak and cloth, and a deep voice that boomed like thunder. His hands gripping on two skulls to reinforce his authority over the dead, and all that were subjects to die. The king of death, the lord of the damned, sat uprightly upon his throne while he considered all that was, and all that is, and all that inevitably would be. Considering all that would come to pass, for the events that had transpired from days prior.

“Since the formation of creation and everything with all things and every activity that is performed under the sun throughout the seasons, souls come and die, reaping the fruits of their carnal desires and are judged with destruction and death. The human heart, is a

curious thing, a fleeting thing. It yearns and seeks and then obtains, but it never has enough of the very thing it has sought. It desires, it covets, it wants, it tries to obtain and if it perceives it cannot or it actually is incapable of obtaining it, it wages war to take and kill from those that have, only to find it a meaningless effort, and a futile transgression. Thus, my realm is filled with souls who are sentenced with the discovery of all their sins. Just as the human heart is never satisfied, neither is my portion it would seem. Just as my dominion is laid bare in the sight of the Lord of all, so the human heart is laid bare and judged by its intent, regardless if it be righteous, or wicked. A constant seeking, and searching, and striving, a mere chasing after the wind itself," the King of the dead considered.

Death blinked for a moment, as he considered all that was in his heart. He pondered all that he had, only to discover nothing was truly gained. "The irony of all that I have gained from the sins of mankind and the judgment of mankind is this, there is nothing to truly gain from my portion. There is nothing, in my realm. How ironic that despite all the striving and vain efforts of mankind, it all becomes hollow and dead. Such works were dead to begin with, as the dead have nothing to gain after they die. Death entered by desire, and with desires the dead find it all fruitless and vain. A fitting end for the fools of mankind, and those who pursue death, rather than eternal life," the King of the dead muttered.

The flow of the eerie breeze began to raise a sound as death closed his eyes to consider. "From dust they came, and dust they return, through fear and constant dread. For neither reward nor inheritance can come from death instead. For when they seek, and what they sought, for all their sins and they had wrought, neither hope to gain from any cry, from those who are doomed to die," the King of the dead whispered under his breath.

Old Stuff
By Thomas Elson

“Have the movers box everything up,” my daughter told my grandsons a few days before we left. “We’ll take care of it at our house. I’m going back to the hotel and clean up. And make sure they label the boxes.”

Three days later and I’m waiting alongside those boxes crammed into a moving van on my daughter’s driveway amongst old stuff that had filled our family’s houses in multiple countries for generations. Cumbersome stuff, an obligation really, wedged into bookshelves, jammed in corners, or forgotten within months behind newer boxes in basements with settling odors and resident mildew.

Boxes of books from the nineteenth century including a biography of George Washington in High German and several pre-Spanish Flu pandemic textbooks with my mother and aunt’s schoolgirl scrawls. Other books - with three-digit phone numbers I had written in green ink - carefully wrapped with what looks like a flowered cookie jar destined to sit atop a bookcase.

Snuggled inside boxes of clothes that my grandsons will cart off to a homeless shelter is a brittle plastic Santa on broken green skis, made shortly after V-J Day - my first toy; and a metal chestnut-colored horse, my grandfather’s bedroom door stop, that I, as a young boy, struggled to convert into Gene Autry’s Champion. Collages of family photos dating back to the 1880’s. Two small bells: One my father used when confined to the house with pre-antibiotic pneumonia. Another my grandparents’ maid, Bee, rang just before she served dinner. Crystal beverage glasses and gold rimmed China, consigned to padded boxes my grandsons will carry to the unfinished basement - beautiful dinnerware once used for daily meals but now too old and too fragile to place on any contemporary dinner table.

Leaning against the wall of the moving van is the walnut bookcase my mother had a neighbor build for me when my interests turned to reading. And a smaller one I made in Shop class.

Near the front of the van, covered with heavy furniture pads are two bedroom suites. The dark one my great-grandparents acquired from a territorial governor’s mansion. The other, an ornate, blond bedroom set, my grandmother’s wedding gift from her grandparents. Both sets carry family tales of trysts, conceptions, and births. Nearby is my great grandfather’s round marble coffee table where four generations balanced themselves while learning to walk, and an oval cherry table from my grandfather’s hotel.

Two other items, each only a little over eighty years old: A beautiful mirror with a hand-carved frame – my mother’s wedding gift from her parents. And, inside one of the boxes, next to the books, in what looks like a cookie jar, my ashes destined to sit atop a bookcase.

City of Soot and the Desert
(Part I of III
in "*The Reflection of Glass*")

by Paul Ballard

As the knight rode closer to the city, he was anticipating hearing the buckling of rolling carts and the characteristic negotiations of the markets but instead he heard nothing. He abruptly stopped his horse in the middle of the road. He sat in the saddle for a moment and listened. Silence.

Come on now, only a bit further, he thought, reaching down from the saddle to pet his horses' chest. The City of Soot, as it was known, was looming ahead singing its siren song.

He reached to feel the hilt of his short sword by his right hip and unbuckled the strap, making a quick draw easier, expecting an ambush. He heard a plethora of stories as a young boy, told to him by his mother, of ghost cities on the outskirts of the world. He believed even as a boy that they were falsehoods, but now potentially approaching one, he was not certain.

The contrast of landscapes was stark. He looked behind him for an instant and glimpsed the lush greenery from where he had just come. In front of him was a substantial city which appeared to the eye to be made from precious obsidian.

Appearances can be deceiving because it wasn't, the once glistening silver city was simply caked in a heavy black soot, but how that came to be not even historians were certain. Beyond the legendary city was a vast desert that was rumored to have no end and no explorer had ever ventured far enough to even leave the cities view. The desert was cursed.

The outer-most wall of the city was short, and he wanted to be on his feet if they were going to be attacked. He dismounted the horse and led it to an entrance that stood where a gate ought to be but oddly there was none. It was rumored across many lands that the gate had once been torn down in a war, millennia ago, and had never been replaced. He walked slowly into the city passing buildings on both sides of him in the narrow alleys, keeping his hand all the while on the hilt of his long sword on his left hip. His horse whined.

The narrow alley gave way as he instantly came upon a square with hundreds of people occupying it. As they heard the buckling of his horses' hooves, all froze at once. Every one of them, men, women, and children stopped in their tracks and looked in his

direction. The knight dressed in the black armor was as legendary as the desert. He moved his hand close to the short sword. It would be no use against this many. This was not a ghost town as reported, it was full of living, breathing people, in the city of soot at the edge of the world.

As he made his way through the city people stopped whatever they were doing to get a look at him. Many watched him until he was far ahead of them, they had to squint to make out his black armor. The Black Knight had never been seen in this part of the world before.

He stopped his horse outside of a quiet tavern. He looked for a hitching post and made quick work with it. He could hear whispers all around him. It was difficult to make out exactly what they were saying but he knew by the tones in their harsh voices that what was being said was not welcoming, perhaps even damning.

He strapped down all his valuable possessions and weapons on his horse, covered them the best he could with a blanket he threw over the saddle and went inside. He knew they would be far too afraid to steal his items, let alone touch his already nervous horse.

He went inside the dark tavern; the entire bar was lit up by three torches while the corners of the room were as dark as the abyss. The tavern smelt from the party that took place the night before.

Appropriate, he thought.

He took a seat at the bar in his full armor and ordered a drink. The bartender seemingly ignored him but came back just a minute later with it in hand. The bartender was too afraid to make eye contact and continued to clean a mug and stare at the ground. He lifted his helmet up just enough so his lips could touch the glass. He sipped his crude beer and then turned around in his chair to view the other occupants of the tavern.

Two men passed out at a table with loose tobacco poured all over it. It was apparent that they had many drinks, with the last few still toppled on the table.

A man in a bright green hooded cloak apparently asleep over his half-empty drink. A young woman playing a card game alone. She was so enthralled in the game she never looked up the entire time he observed her, constantly moving cards around in her hands and on the table.

Quite a crowd for the early morning.

*

The knight watched a short young woman in a red silk dress enter through the open

door. Her skin was an olive complexion and her hair black as the city itself. The silk was so thin, it was possible that it was spun not long ago. Her green eyes looked nervously around the bar and then she sprinted over to the table with the young woman playing cards. They exchanged a few words in low voices with the woman still never looking up from the cards. The woman in the red dress put her hands on her hips, not moving for a time and then eventually made her way to the door. As she was on her way, she saw the Knight watching her from the bar. She halted and they stared at one another, he through his helmet. Apparently frightened, the woman in the red dress ran the rest of the way to the door. The knight turned around and finished his drink.

The knight attempted to ask the bartender about the city, curious to know if the childhood stories were true, but he ignored him. He was unsure if the bartender didn't like the type of questions he was asking or was too afraid to answer to him. The knight sat there in silence for a bit longer, paid for the beer, and made his way to the exit. The heat hit him instantly. The desert sand kicked upon his armored feet in a fury. He went and unhitched his horse and led it once again through the city. He stopped and kindly asked directions for the quickest way to the edge of the city. Some young girls screamed; some men ran away.

Finally, he saw a water station. The shop keeper out front was nervous when he approached but kept his head up when speaking.

"How... how can I help you?" stammered the shop keeper.

"Water," said the knight.

"Yes, how much?"

The knight went to his horse and lifted one of the blankets exposing five water skins. "Enough to fill these."

The shop keeper smiled and agreed. He was happy for the business.

As the shop keeper was filling the skins the knight tried again to ask what way was quickest to the edge of the city.

The shop keeper happily told him, pointed, and even offered him a clumsily drawn map. "What is your name?" asked the knight.

"Boris."

The knight took his coin purse of his horse and flipped Boris a single gold piece. Boris was elated. "Say, sir, are you going to the edge of the city to sight-see The Great Vast? Is that why you've come all this way"

"No."

*

The knight made his way to the edge of the city in good time. At the edge of the city stood a massive black gate with two heavily armed guards by it.

The knight approached them and requested that they open it. The two responded by bursting out laughing and cursing him.

“Let me through,” urged the knight.

They continued to laugh and told him to move along.

The knight put his hand on the hilt of his sword and the guards did the same. A circle of civilians quickly formed around the knight and guards. The Knight assumed if he were to draw on these guards, he would also have to fight the civilians as well.

Realizing that this strategy would not end well for him, the knight took his hand off the hilt and held both of his hands in the air, palms up, showing a want for peace.

He then slowly took his hands and moved them to his helmet and removed it, dropping it on the sand in front of him.

The guards gasped, the one on the right fell to his knees and began praying, then screaming. The one on the left wanted to ask questions but couldn't get any out over his tears. The civilians immediately disbursed, running in all directions.

“Open the gate.”

The guard on the left rushed to the gate while the guard on the right remained on his knees screaming to the sky. The Knight saw the guard was having difficulty doing this alone, so he helped him open it enough to get through.

The knight grabbed his helmet from the ground, emptied it of sand and put it back on while mounting his horse.

Before him was laid The Great Vast. It was a desert as far as the eye could see. Entry was strictly forbidden.

The knight reached into his coin purse and pulled out four gold pieces for the guard who opened the gate.

“For your troubles.”

“Fare? No. You'll pay, you'll see, trust me,” he laughed, his voice still shaking from his tears.

The knight led his horse forward with a low, soothing voice and a pat on the neck. "Wait!" came a scream from behind him.

He turned his head and saw the woman in the red dress. The knight did not answer her call he just stared at her. She did not say anything else, and he continued forward.

*

He rode for hours in as straight a line he could. He didn't see anything besides thick, dark yellow sand in every direction. The sand was deep, but the horse was strong and kept making progress.

He stopped and dismounted his horse. He lifted the blanket on the horse and grabbed one of the water skins. He drowned it almost instantly.

Grabbing the reins of the horse, he looked out at the desert. There was a peculiar beauty to the emptiness. His imagination raced as he thought about what this desert looked like a million years ago.

Lush? Lakes? Jungle? Life?

Or perhaps always destined to be barren wasteland.

"Don't worry boy, I think we are getting close," he said to his horse. "We've been a long way, Buckskin. An entire world away."

He grabbed another skin and sipped it this time.

"Thirsty?"

He overturned the skin and dumped it into his hands. Buckskin lapped it up.

He took the brush out of the saddle and combed the horse. He studied for a moment. "You're an ashen horse, Buckskin. You know what they say about us?"

Buckskin did not answer.

"We should be back by nightfall," he reassured him, putting more water into his hands. He put the almost empty skin back and mounted up.

They were off again.

*

He rode for an unknown period. He glanced back at the looming, massive black city

behind them. It was barely visible with the blowing sand and kept growing slightly smaller with each step. He did his best to keep on that straight path, but it was getting harder with the winds picking up. He had to lower his head, making sure his helmet was sealed tight at the neck. Buckskin slowed his pace, and he began to doze off in the gentle sway.

*

The sands blew harshly on his face. He had lost his helmet; it was out there in the ocean of sands.

The sandstorm was alive and singing a slow, sad, rhythmic piano playing low keys in a beautifully arranged procession, just as his father ritually did.

He turned his head and saw the shadow of something of considerable size moving within the blowing sandstorm. He was drawn towards it, reaching his hand out. Out of the sand wall emerged a tarantula with eight legs and eight human heads, each sprouting from each base of the legs, wailing. Between the sobs they mumbled "save us." He screamed and stumbled backwards, tripping over his feet. The sandstorm winds began picking up speed and thunder filled the air. Lightning struck the ground and for an instant he saw a monstrous phoenix with white wings, the tips soaked with a crimson, flying over a graveyard of corpses. The bolt ceased and gave way to thunder again, and the vision was gone.

*

He awoke on horseback in a fright, looking around frantically. There was a lone rock wedged deep into the sand to their right. He led Buckskin towards it, dismounted and observed it. After he investigated enough to confirm that it wasn't a trap he sat and took off his helmet. The wind had stopped blowing.

He rested for a time; they were off again but he dismounted instantly when he saw a small underground opening close to the rock.

It would have been easy to miss it and he thought himself lucky to have seen it. The underground cave had only a small opening which revealed nothing below. Buckskin was nervous, stomping his feet constantly. He tried to calm him but found it fruitless. He grabbed his weapons from the horse and strapped them to his armor.

"This is why I've come," he said to Buckskin while thinking of Boris' question. He looked behind him for the black city, but it wasn't there. Buckskin shuffled as if agreeing.

He had a sword on his back and his left hip. He put his knife on and right hip. He took a thick piece of wood from the saddle bag, then took out the jar of captured fire and poured it over the end of the wood. He put the jar back in the saddle bag, some fire still remaining.

Well-armed and torch in hand, he descended into the darkness.

*

There were clean-picked, old and new bones completely covering the initial decline of the cave entrance. The cave didn't go deep but it was long.

The summon of the devil dwelt here in this dank, dark cave in the middle of the sea of seemingly endless gold sand gathered from an imagined once great sea teeming with civilization.

He felt an evil presence here.

A snarl came from deep into the cave, echoing off the walls, he ensued to investigate. Suddenly, he saw a beam of light that came from the roof of the cave that illuminated a central point. In that spot was a crucifixion. Seeing this it confirmed everything he needed to know.

From his right, jumped a demon-spawn and he instinctively unsheathed his sword and struck all in one smooth motion, cutting it down midair making a deep cut in its midsection. It howled in pain while bleeding out.

He inspected it writhing on the ground. Its skin was light brown, its scrawny arms and legs were covered in thick black hair. Its enormous horns were a decaying yellow same as its teeth, which seemed to be longer than his own arm. He took his sword, now covered in its blood, turned it over and saws its hideous face. The red eyes seemed to pierce through his soul. It was the face of hell. It let out one last scream and died.

Deep growls and cries came from the darkness. One of the demon-spawns crossed over into the light beam over the crucifix, getting a good look at it. He was not afraid. He threw his torch into one of the dark corners, revealing six more pairs red eyes. He took his sword and put in his right hand and taking the knife and putting it in his left, he charged towards the crucifix while screaming for vengeance.

He cut the one down in front of the crucifix and then the three behind him encircled him.

He swung his sword at the closest one and it jumped back just in time. Walking in a circle, he kept swinging and missing. There followed a tense moment after many swings and misses where he wasn't sure what their strategy was. He knew from the one on the ground that they were hungry, perhaps dying even. As if they read his mind in that moment, they stood upright and charged him.

*

Buckskin sat loyally outside of the underground cave opening bouncing back and forth on his hooves waiting for his master to return.

Bloody and donning now broken armor at the left shoulder, he emerged from the cave holding the crucified body in his arms. He put the body down very gently near Buckskin. He went into one of the pockets of the saddle and took out a short spade which was folded in half. He walked about twenty paces from the horse and body and dug a deep hole. He called the horse over to him while he was in the process so he could give them both water.

It was past mid-day, but he still felt as if he was running behind schedule. After the grave was as deep and wide as a grown man is tall, he went and gently grabbed the body once again. He put it down next to the dug grave, climbed in himself and then grabbed the corpse and slowly lowered it down.

He put the hands on the chest and the legs together crossed at the ankles.

He removed the helmet. It was a woman.

“Mother...” he whispered.

He got down on his knees, took off his helmet, kissed her forehead, and said the Knight’s prayer. He wept over the body for a long time then emerged from the grave and buried her proper.

To mark the grave, he went back into Buckskin’s saddle and grabbed two sticks he brought for this. He shortened them with his now blood drenched knife. Reaching back into the saddle, bringing out twine and a single rose. In proper Knight tradition he fastened the sticks into an ‘X’ shape and put the rose in the middle of the sticks and tied them together with the twine.

He poured the rest of the fire from the jar over the sticks and rose and watched it burn while on his knees in front of the grave. He grabbed a handful of sand and clenched it hard as he could in his fist, with tears streaming down his face he loosened his grip and let the sand fall between his fingers.

*

The sun was beginning to fall when he made it back to the gates of the city. He called for them to open the gate only a single time and then they did so, awestruck in his return. Several gathered around him as he made his way through the city, some even dropping to their knees to worship him.

*

He made his way easily through the city this time, they parted for him. He was showered with gifts, many he refused but accepted only water and small bits of food. He made a point to stop at Boris' shop again to refill his skins.

At the end of the city, he came upon the gate that he had first saw, knowing that he had completed his journey here, at the Black City at the godforsaken end of the world. From the corner of the gate emerged the woman in the red dress. He halted Buckskin. They looked at each other. He waited for her to say something, wishing she would. She didn't.

He picked his head up, looked forward and rode on out back onto the unforgiving road. "Wait!" came a familiar cry from behind.

He stopped Buckskin again and turned him around. It was the woman in the red dress riding towards him on a chestnut horse of her own.

"Wait, please!"

He did, taking a moment to make sure all his weapons were in the correct location before his long journey ahead.

"Where will you go? What will you do now?"

He thought for a moment but never taking his eyes off her.

"To conquer the world."

He turned Buckskin around and rode hard.

She followed, riding even harder.