

GREAT READING
FOR SLEEPLESS NIGHTS



VOL. 4 ■ ISSUE 1 ■ NO. 13 ■ E-ZINE

Crow Toes Quarterly

The new face of children's lit

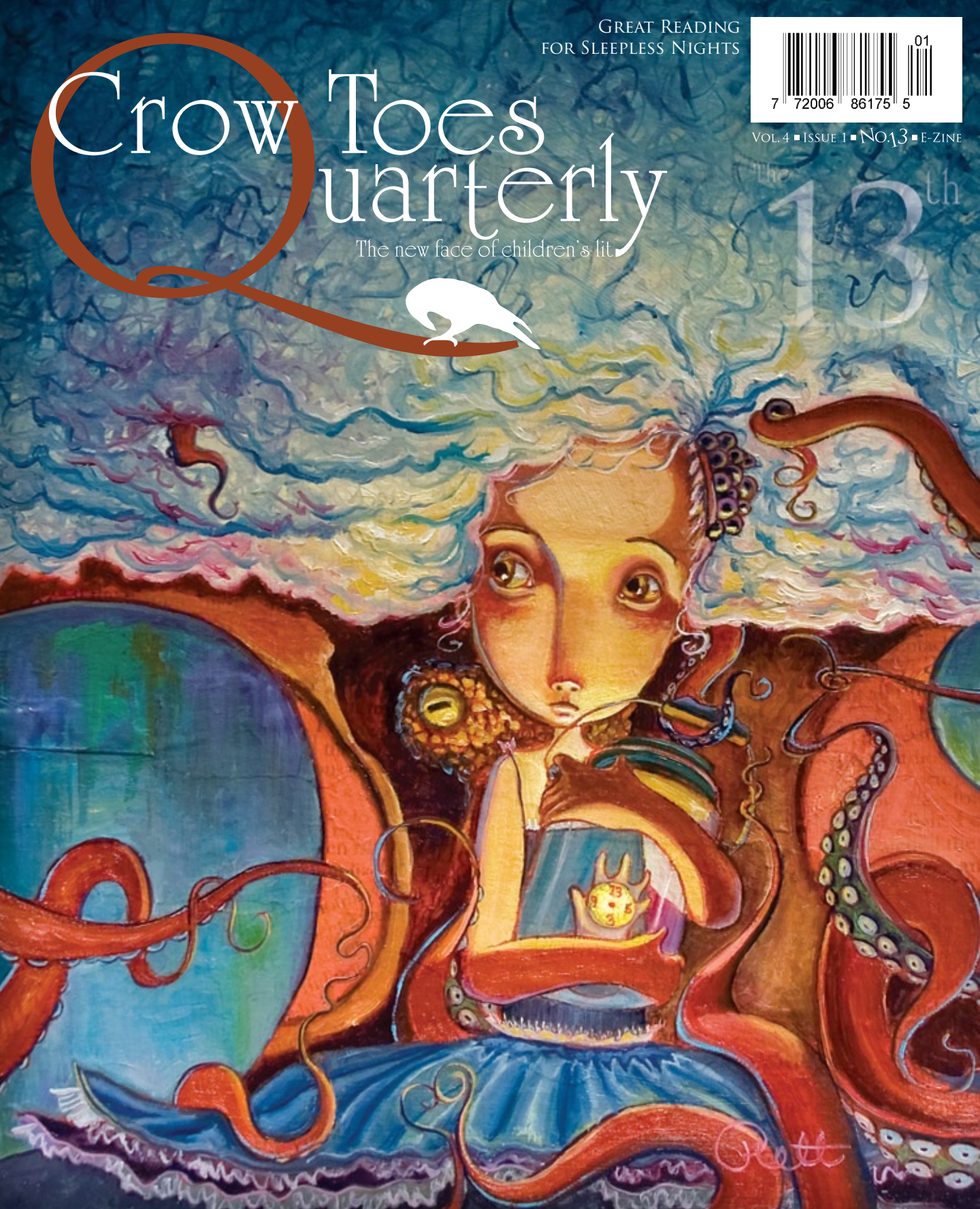




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A Word From Your Humble Narrator

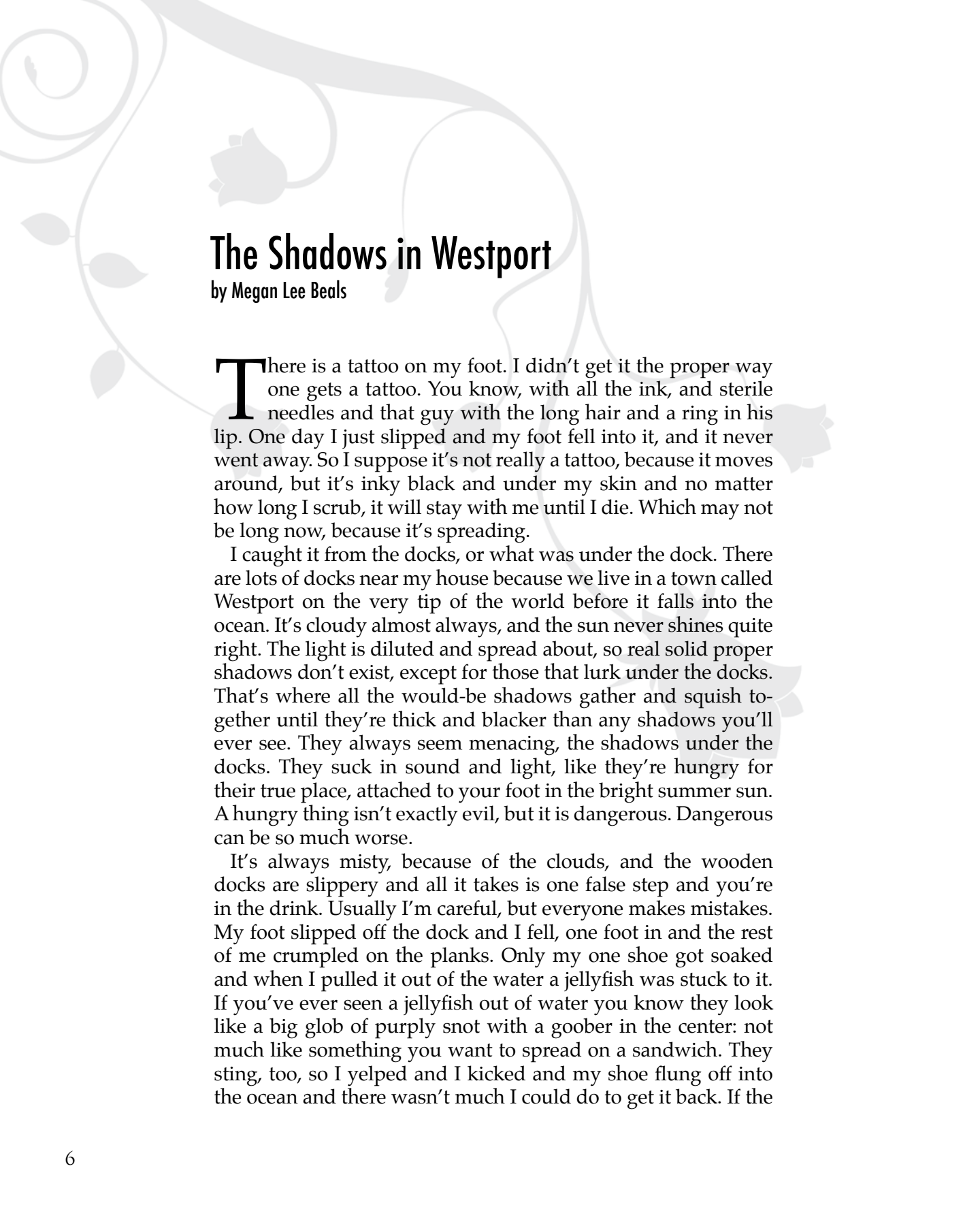


Have you been in a high-rise building lately? When you got in the elevator, did you notice there was a floor missing? There are a lot of folks out there who believe the number thirteen is bad luck. Hence, no thirteenth floor. Some folks are even afraid of the number. They suffer from something called triskaidekaphobia. This funny word is derived from the Greek words *tris*, *kai*, *deka* and *phobia* (derived from the word *phobos*) which respectively mean *three*, *and*, *ten* and *fear*. A fear of three and ten.

At CTQ, we are the exact opposite of those poor folks who are afraid of 13, or think the number 13 is bad luck. Admittedly, we've had a few bad Friday the 13ths in our short history, and one time 13 different salespeople showed up in one day, trying to sell us a faster Internet service, but that doesn't stop us from embracing the number 13. Ogilvy wears it on his soccer jersey. Our Staff Villain keeps 13 piranha in his fish tank at home. Poinsettia wears a bracelet with 13 dangling jewels and I have a fascination with any property that has the number 13 in its address (see above photo). So you can only imagine that when we set out on this little magazine-making journey all those years ago, we could hardly wait to reach our 13th issue. And when we did, we knew that the special occasion would call for a special issue, and that's just what we've delivered.

Welcome to the thirteenth issue of Crow Toes Quarterly, where 13 isn't just a number...it's a prevailing theme. We've loaded this issue with tales about bad luck and the consequences suffered because of that bad luck. The number 13 invokes so much terror and so much misconception in everyday life, how could we not devote an issue to it? If you're suddenly feeling nervous about what lies ahead, then maybe you should put this issue away and wait for our next one.

Read always and always enjoy! – The Narrator



The Shadows in Westport

by Megan Lee Beals

There is a tattoo on my foot. I didn't get it the proper way one gets a tattoo. You know, with all the ink, and sterile needles and that guy with the long hair and a ring in his lip. One day I just slipped and my foot fell into it, and it never went away. So I suppose it's not really a tattoo, because it moves around, but it's inky black and under my skin and no matter how long I scrub, it will stay with me until I die. Which may not be long now, because it's spreading.

I caught it from the docks, or what was under the dock. There are lots of docks near my house because we live in a town called Westport on the very tip of the world before it falls into the ocean. It's cloudy almost always, and the sun never shines quite right. The light is diluted and spread about, so real solid proper shadows don't exist, except for those that lurk under the docks. That's where all the would-be shadows gather and squish together until they're thick and blacker than any shadows you'll ever see. They always seem menacing, the shadows under the docks. They suck in sound and light, like they're hungry for their true place, attached to your foot in the bright summer sun. A hungry thing isn't exactly evil, but it is dangerous. Dangerous can be so much worse.

It's always misty, because of the clouds, and the wooden docks are slippery and all it takes is one false step and you're in the drink. Usually I'm careful, but everyone makes mistakes. My foot slipped off the dock and I fell, one foot in and the rest of me crumpled on the planks. Only my one shoe got soaked and when I pulled it out of the water a jellyfish was stuck to it. If you've ever seen a jellyfish out of water you know they look like a big glob of purple snot with a goober in the center: not much like something you want to spread on a sandwich. They sting, too, so I yelled and I kicked and my shoe flung off into the ocean and there wasn't much I could do to get it back. If the

ocean takes your shoe you just cut your losses and walk home with a naked foot. So I pulled off my sock and my foot was covered in inky black shadows. Even my little toes had so much black stuck to them that the nails I polished a bright key lime green shone like shards of obsidian. I clapped my hands over the shadows; a sudden and thoughtless motion. They ran through my fingers like cool syrup, and pooled together like mercury on the dock. I watched the pool of shadows slip through the planks, still clutching my foot. I shuddered as the last drop disappeared. I felt like someone had drawn a thread right through my heart and sewn it to my stomach, and I dropped my foot to keep from falling over. There, under the skin, was a bit of the black left over, in a stark unmistakable pattern of a rose flower. It was stupid, the thing I thought next. Sometimes all that's left after crazy is stupid. I thought, *My mom is going to kill me for getting a tattoo*, and I ran back home to get a new pair of shoes.

I showed my brother. He's five years older than me, and in the Marines. He's got a tattoo. It spells U.S.M.C. on his forearm. My mom nearly disowned him for it, but he's always calm and cool and she'll listen to him. So I showed him the flower on my foot. He said:

"Roses are stupid. Why'd you get that?"

"I didn't!" I said. "It just got there. What do I do?"

He just waved me off of his car. "Beats me, Sport. I don't even know how you found an artist who would do it without the adult consent form. Now scram. I've only got a week here before I'm due back and I'm not going to waste it on your stupid mistakes."

He's usually nicer. But only a week home and anyone would be rushed. I decided to hide the tattoo. It's only four years until I can move out. And it's almost always cold living this close to the ocean. I can wear socks for four years.

The next morning the flower tattoo put down roots in my foot. They were thick like worms, and so dense that my toes and the complete underside of my foot was black. I scrubbed my foot so hard it bled, but nothing took away the dense black roots under my skin. I wiped away the blood that bloomed above the black flower, then wrapped my foot in bandages, sobbing silently all the while. I could think of only one thing worse than an infectious tattoo made of shadows: to be scolded for having one. I left the bathroom shaking, with red eyes, but my family suspected nothing. I probably should have told them, but I thought I could handle it.

I visited the docks again, to see if I could find the black ink that covered my foot the day before. Nothing was there. I couldn't even find a jellyfish. The docks were dead like they were in winter, even though it was the middle of spring. As I bent over the planks to inspect the barnacle-encrusted pilings, a strange pinprick traveled up my leg, like someone shoved baking soda under my skin and it was fizzing from the contact with my blood. I pulled up the leg of my pants to see the ink shift and grow in a twisted thorny vine. I jilted in the vain attempt to run from my foot, and nearly fell in the water for my stupidity. The roots under my skin pressed against the sole of my shoe. The laces strained and tightened on my leg: the tattoo was trying to rejoin the shadows under the dock. I screamed. I couldn't help it. And when I finally stopped screaming, I was up on the hill where most of Westport's little gray buildings sit; the docks small in the distance. My arms were covered in tattooed vines with little black rose buds starting to bloom on my knuckles. I held them close to my chest, afraid to look further. But I didn't need to see it. The tattoo was a warm pinprick, stretching all over my limbs and growing in a thick trunk around my torso. It reached up in twin vines along my neck, daring to intrude upon my ears. I was afraid of what would happen if it got into my brain.

I couldn't go home like that. Not covered in tattoos. I could tell my parents that I drew it on with a Sharpie, but I'd be forced to wash it off, and when I scrubbed and scrubbed and nothing happened, my mother would die of shame. So I'd stay out all day, far from the docks, and any dark places, and go home only at night to gather a few necessities, and leave a ransom note. I'd let them think of me as a tragic hero, instead of just a tragedy. I could join a circus, and years later make my triumphant return: put through torment, tattooed by the Yakuza who captured me, but through perseverance and luck I'd one day escape my unhappy lot and make my way back to the loving arms of my family. Anything can make sense when you're desperate. So I stayed out all day, with my sleeves rolled down over my hands, and my hair pulled over my ears. So long as I stayed away from the shadows under the docks, the tattoo wouldn't grow. I was safe. Then my brother found me at the playground outside the school.

"Hey, Sport. What's that mark on your cheek?"

I didn't know the vines had intruded so far. The tattoo burned as I moved to pull my hair further over my face. "Nothing. Dirt, maybe."

He bent down to look, but I turned away from him. "And here you were supposed to be the clean one. Hey, I'm sorry about

yesterday. I had someone to meet. Did you really get a tattoo? Can I see it?"

"No!" I moved too quickly, and the hair fell away, revealing the vine snaking up from under my ear.

"Whoa. Is that pen?" He licked his thumb and ran it across my cheek, hard and fast, before I could dodge away. "Jeez, kiddo. What did you do?"

"Nothing. I told you, it just got there on its own. It's growing."

He looked at me like he wasn't sure who I was. Like someone had replaced his sister with a tattooed freak.

"Don't tell mom." I said. Pledaded.

"Don't tell her? God, what am I supposed to say? It's not like you can hide this!"

"Just don't tell her yet, okay? Let me. You can say you never saw me. She'll believe you."

"I guess. Wow. I don't know why you did it. Usually you're smarter than this."

"Yeah." I spat the word at him and looked away. It wasn't my fault, but he'd never believe it. I barely believed it. He lingered there for a moment. I could feel him staring at my marred face, then he left. I stayed there on the swings to contemplate my future as an illustrated woman.

I don't know why I never thought of it until it was too late... perhaps it was too late for me the second I fell in. Somehow I thought the tattoo wouldn't grow once I left the thick black shadows under the docks. In a bright, sunless day, it's easy to forget the shadow of night. Then the sun went away and the ground grew dark, the windswept trees collected the black in their boughs, and the tattoo etched further up on my face to wrap around my eyes. I ran. Have you ever tried to outrun the night? I ran with all the fury I had collected from all my fourteen years, and a bit borrowed from places unknown. I ran to my house. I flew to my bedroom before I knew where I was, and there in the room sat my brother, waiting for me. Waiting to make sure I was okay. I saw the contortions of horror wreck his face until he was no longer my brother, but a cartoon of himself, his eyes bugged out and his jaw distended. Then I felt the black wrap around the back of my eyeballs, enveloping the whites, and pulling me by its thorny tendrils back into the night. I fought, but I had nothing left to fight with. The last part of me left unmarked was my mouth, and I screamed until the black found its way inside and silenced me.

I'm under the docks now. And hungry. 🐉

Ghostly Chanter

by Craig W. Steele

A headless piper first appears,
Congealed from mist both thick and pale.
Then high-pitched skirling strikes the ears—
His bagpipe's mournful, keening wail.

Enchanted by this chilling sound,
The village children gather round.
None can resist the chanter's charm;
All heed its haunting call-to-arms.

This lonely piper's song of woe
Transforms the parents into stone,
Their children dancing to-and-fro,
Consumed by joy they'd never known.

Then the piper, kilt a-whirling,
Leads the children, laughing, twirling,
Through a pulsing, blood-red door,
To dance with him forever more.



illustration by Anita K. Olsen

IT WASN'T MY FAULT, IT WAS MY POSSESSED HAND

by Tara Lee Baxter

illustrations by Jackie Duhard

"Welcome to the Museum of Exceptionally Dangerous Weaponry and History of Murderous Mayhem." The tour guide had to stop and take a deep breath before continuing to greet the class of students gathered around her. "At the Museum of Exceptionally Dangerous Weaponry and History of Murderous Mayhem we invite questions during the tour, but please do not touch..."

"Excuse me?" Jeremy raised his hand, wiggling his fingers about.

The tour guide made a pained face. "Yes?"

"Don't you have a shorter name for this place?" Jeremy asked. He did not seem to care that his teacher, Mrs. Murduck, was glaring at him.

"No," the tour guide explained. "Because M.E.D.W.H.M.M. sounds rather silly. Now, before we proceed I have one rule..."

Jeremy raised his hand for a second time. Now he bounced up and down as the tour guide tried to ignore him. When Jeremy began waving his hand around and making 'oh, oh, oh' noises, the tour guide turned back to him.

"Yes?"

"When do we get to play with the swords?"

"You don't get to play with the swords," the tour guide snapped. "Don't touch anything!"

The class was standing in a cluttered, dark room of an old mansion. The windows were blacked out with red velvet curtains and it smelled musty. Each of the walls was covered from floor to ceiling with swords, broadswords, rapiers, sabres, katanas, battle axes, and unusual weaponry of all sorts. The museum had once been the home of an eccentric old man who had more money than common sense. Apparently, he had liked to use his fortune to collect pointy objects and some of them were rumoured to be haunted.

It had been Jeremy's idea to visit this bizarre place on a field trip. After rolling her eyes, their teacher had put the suggestion to a vote in a class of equal numbers of boys and girls. The boys always voted with the other boys and the girls stuck out their tongues, voting the

exact opposite. That had been the routine all year until one of the girls dared to vote with the boys to visit the museum.

That girl was Cecelia Reekes and she was now being ignored by all of the girls for her dreadful betrayal. As far as she was concerned, it gave her more time to study the weaponry and ignore the whispered jokes about her last name. When they were younger the other girls had read fairy tales about princesses, but Cecelia had preferred to look at the pictures of knights fighting dragons.

Jeremy did not seem to like being told that they would not be playing with the swords and argued with the tour guide that he should be allowed to demonstrate his incredible skill. Cecelia knew the closest Jeremy had ever come to a sword was hitting his little brother with a hockey stick. Mrs. Murduck was busy dragging Jeremy and the rest of the class to the next gallery. They never noticed that they left Cecelia behind.

She wandered around the gallery in awe of all of the weapons and did not know where to start. Cecelia was pondering a sword with a curved blade when she backed into a display case, stumbled and knocked it over. She whirled around expecting alarms to go off, but nothing happened. On the floor Cecelia found a weird metal glove that the sign on the display stand said was a gauntlet. She picked it up and upon closer inspection, found it to be a piece of knight's armour.

Cecelia meant to put the gauntlet right back, but it was simply too tempting not to try it on. If she had read the sign on the display case more carefully, she probably would have reconsidered that hasty



decision. The sign proclaimed, "*The Cursed Gauntlet of Wormelow Tump* was supposedly worn by Amyr, son of King Arthur." If she had read that sign, she might have agreed with the wisdom of the tour guide's rule to not touch anything.

As Cecelia slipped her hand into the gauntlet, she felt a sharp pain on her thumb. She dropped the gauntlet onto her foot.

"Ow!"

Cecelia stuck her thumb into her mouth and was about to kick the gauntlet when she heard Mrs. Murduck calling her from down the hallway. She scrambled to pick up the gauntlet and managed to get it back on the display stand when her teacher found her.

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing," Cecelia answered. She winced when she saw the gauntlet was upside down, but Mrs. Murduck did not seem to notice.

Her teacher scowled at her, sensing with her mysterious teacher power that something was amiss.

"I'm keeping my eye on you, young lady."

"Can anyone tell me why the Arthurian legend says the magical sword was stuck in the stone?" Mrs. Murduck asked.

Cecelia first noticed something was wrong when her left arm shot up. Her eyes widened when Mrs. Murduck raised her eyebrow in anticipation of Cecelia's response. She looked at her left arm in confusion because it was still raised above her head. The weird thing was that Cecelia did not know the answer and certainly had not planned on raising her hand.

"I don't know," she blurted out.

"Then why did you raise your hand?"

Cecelia tried to will her left hand down, but it stubbornly kept its position above her head. "I really don't know."

She grabbed her left wrist with her right hand, forcing it down. She could feel her left arm fighting to shoot up again and she sat on her hand. Mrs. Murduck rolled her eyes at Cecelia's antics and continued on with her lesson.

"Legend says the sword was lodged in the stone waiting for the rightful ruler of England to claim it." Mrs. Murduck motioned to the tacky plastic recreation of a broadsword stuck in a fake stone. "Can anyone tell me..."

Cecelia's left hand shot up once more.

"Miss Reekes, I didn't even get a chance to ask my question," Mrs. Murduck scolded.

Her hand was high above her head mocking her. Cecelia had to think fast because she doubted Mrs. Murduck would believe her if she said her hand was possessed.

"When's lunch?"

"I suppose everyone is hungry." Mrs. Murduck did not look pleased, but she sighed and clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "Please, get your lunches. We'll eat here."

Cecelia managed to wrestle her hand down to her chest. Like in her worst nightmare where she showed up to school in her underwear, she realized that everyone was staring at her. She hung her head down, hiding behind her bangs waiting for everyone to let hunger win over curiosity. When she heard backpacks unzipping, Cecelia decided the best course of action was to ignore everything and hope it went away.

She struggled with her left hand, forcing it down and sitting on it again. Using her cooperating right hand, Cecelia shrugged off her backpack and opened it one-handed. Pulling out her lunch kit, she realized how hungry she was. Possessed hand or not, she intended to eat. Cecelia had her lunch kit open and had to shift her weight to reach her bagel. That was a mistake because her left hand escaped its prison. Cecelia's hand grabbed her apple and before she could grab it back, her left hand threw it. The apple sailed over most of the class, hitting Mrs. Murduck in the back of the head.

Her teacher turned and yelled, "Who did that?"

Cecelia's left hand shot up straightaway in confession and Jeremy laughed so hard milk came out of his nose.

"Cecelia Meredith Reekes! What's wrong with you?" demanded Mrs. Murduck. Her face turned a blotchy shade of red.

"It wasn't my fault, it was my possessed hand!"

"That's enough funny business! Detention for one week and I'm calling your parents."

Cecelia felt like crying with her arm still waving around stupidly. All of her classmates were gawking at her and she had never been in this kind of trouble before. She grabbed her left hand, trying to control it, but then it turned on her.

Cecelia's possessed hand smacked her in the forehead. When she tried to swat at it, the contrary body part managed to sneak in and pull hard on her right ear. Cecelia squawked in pain as her left hand began to slap the top of her head. Her classmates scattered, leaving

her in the middle of a large semicircle. Soon she was rolling around on the floor, trying to stop her own hand from attacking her.

"Cecelia, stop hitting yourself!" Mrs. Murduck shouted.

Cecelia lay on her stomach with her left hand pinned under her body. There was a pair of red high heels right in front of her face.

"You are in so much trouble."

Thoughts of expulsion, grounding, and trying to explain her possessed hand to her parents rushed through Cecelia's mind. They would think she was crazy.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Cecelia mumbled. "I don't feel well."

She kept her mutinous hand pinned to her chest and scrambled up, running away from the group. The bathroom was close and Cecelia was forced to let go of her defiant hand to open the door. Her left hand spread its fingers and latched onto her face like an alien from a bad movie.

Cecelia got the door locked behind her and with her eyes crossed, she yelled, "Would you stop that!"

Her hand stopped and let go of her face. Its four fingers came together, thumb underneath and it paused in front of her nose. It reminded Cecelia of a sock puppet, except there was no sock, only a troublemaking possessed hand with an attitude problem.

"You can understand me?"

Her left hand moved up and down in the motion of a nod.

"Then stop hitting me!"

Her hand moved side to side this time, clearly saying, "No."

"Stop hitting me, please?"

Her hand's fingers and thumb clapped together as if her hand was attempting to talk. Then a moment of brilliance came to Cecelia. She dug into her pocket, pulling out a crumbled fill-in-the-blank assignment and a pencil. Cecelia smoothed out the paper and laid it out on the bathroom counter.

"I'll give you this pencil if you don't stab me with it..." Her left hand nodded and she warily handed the pencil over, pointing at the paper. "Tell me how to get rid of you."

It was odd to feel her left hand begin to draw when she was right handed. With quick strokes her hand wrote in neat, block letters.

"I AM HERE TO STAY THANKS TO THE CURSED GAUNTLET."

"If I say I'm sorry for trying the gauntlet on, will you go away?"

"NO," her hand wrote.

"I could go back and destroy the gauntlet..." Cecelia threatened.



"UNBREAKABLE CURSE. IT WILL ONLY GET WORSE IF YOU TRY TO DESTROY THE GAUNTLET."

"So, we're stuck together?"

"YES."

"For now at least," Cecelia grumbled.

She was trying to think of ways to trick her hand when Mrs. Murduck started to pound on the door.

"Unlock this door!"

"In a minute!" Cecelia shouted and then hissed at her hand. "This is a stupid curse. Listen, I'm sure it was aimed at a knight, but you do realize I'm not a knight? I'm just a kid and this was all an accident. What happened to the last person who was cursed?"

Cecelia's hand hesitated for a moment, then wrote, "THEY CUT THEIR HAND OFF."

"Ew." Cecelia scrunched up her face in disgust. "Forget that. I'm not cutting my hand off, even to spite you. What do you want? Because, I really doubt you want to be cut off."

Her left hand froze in mid-air and then scrawled on the paper. "NO ONE EVER ASKED THAT BEFORE."

"I'm asking now."

"I AM A PART OF YOU."

"Well, duh, you're my hand. We're sort of attached. Until I can get rid of you, you're simply going to have to learn to share. If you don't behave, you'll get us both in trouble and I'll tie you behind my back. If you behave, I'll get you a nice warm glove, or maybe paint your nails whatever colour you want."

The pounding on the door got louder and Cecelia was about ready to stuff her left hand down the toilet when it nodded in agreement. It dropped the pencil and her arm settled at her side. Cecelia had the good sense to grab the paper and throw it in the garbage can.

She unlocked and inched the door open, offering her teacher what she hoped was an innocent smile. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Murduck. I think I was sick, but I feel better now."

Mrs. Murduck's face had gone from blotchy red to positively purple. "What exactly was the problem?"

Cecelia shrugged her shoulders. "My right hand didn't know what my left hand was doing."

"For lying to me you're going to write two hundred lines when we get back to school," Mrs. Murduck told her and grabbed her by the ear, hauling her towards the group of her gawking classmates.

Cecelia did not dare to speak another word as her teacher herded the class onto the bus, cutting the field trip short. Mrs. Murduck put her alone in the back of the bus and told her to think about what she had done.

Cecelia opened her backpack and slipped out a notebook, writing her left hand a message. "I'm not very happy with you right now."

Her left hand took the pencil and answered, "CURSES ARE NOT MEANT TO BE FUN. THEY ARE MEANT TO TEACH YOU A LESSON."

"If I ever run across another cursed gauntlet, I promise not to try it on."

Her left hand grabbed the pencil away. "YOU ARE NOT FUNNY."

"It's a stupid curse," she wrote back in response as the pencil tug-o-war continued.

"YOU ARE A STUPID GIRL."

Cecelia slapped her own hand for the insult and then winced when she felt the pain.

"I COULD BE USEFUL. I CAN DO THE THINGS YOU ARE TOO AFRAID TO DO."

Cecelia knew her hand was trying to bribe her. She had thought about going back to the museum and figuring out a way to get rid of the curse. The curse was supposed to teach her a lesson, but maybe it was really a blessing in disguise.

"I COULD WRITE YOUR NEXT MATH TEST," her hand offered.

That settled the deal. Cecelia hated math and was willing to do just about anything to avoid the pain of numbers.

"What harm can it do?" Cecelia muttered under her breath. "Deal? Shake on it."

She shook her left hand with her right hand to seal the deal. For several minutes her left hand behaved itself, doodling weird symbols and she yawned. Cecelia was tired and almost always dozed off on long car trips. Her eyes drifted shut and as she slipped into sleep, her hand quietly set the pencil down. Her breathing evened out and Cecelia never knew the agreement with her possessed hand allowed the curse to spread throughout her body, slowly taking control. Cecelia's possessed left hand had plans that had nothing to do with taking a math test. 🐉

Landscape

by Katharine E. Wright

She slipped; she almost drowned.
The ropey river carried her down,
she waved her arms and tried to call—
cows stood in the shallows, watching,
heard her tinkly voice, the brittle
cries that made them sigh and
bat their ears: ever after,
when she saw such pastoral scenes,
they were less lovely; she saw slow beasts
drinking at the brink of death,
neither helping nor hurting,
watching her life reduced to a moo.



illustration by Anita K. Olsen

Sister Betsy and the Chimney Imp

by Clyde K. Elsie

Sister Betsy's monastery had an imp in its chimney. She suspected that the imp snuck into the chimney through the cat door. Come to think of it, she had not seen the cat for a while.

The imp brought with him an unpleasant odor, like burnt cabbage blended with sour milk. Not only did he stink, he was also annoying. He began his occupancy by cackling and clawing his sharp nails against the chimney stones, but lately he had progressed to calling Sister Betsy mean names, such as "Sister Fatsy." Most imps lack creativity but excel in cruelty.

Sister Betsy knew she was a little overweight, but she didn't appreciate hearing about it from a chimney imp. She attempted a variety of things to remove the imp. She used a long broomstick to try to poke him down. The imp simply flew up higher. She made a large fire in the fireplace to smoke him out. The imp seemed to enjoy the smoke and heat. She brought in a dog to scare the imp. The dog ran away yelping. She even sought the help of an exorcist to cast out the imp. The exorcist said that imps were not his specialty. Nothing worked. The imp's screeching and scratching only grew louder and its insults nastier. The imp's smell also became more putrid and vile. Despite only dwelling in the chimney, the imp's taunts and smell seemed to pervade throughout the entire monastery.

At first, Sister Betsy tolerated the imp's malicious insults, incessant cackling, and foul stench. But one night, the imp scared off the pilgrims that Sister Betsy was hosting. Before the imp came, Sister Betsy's monastery enjoyed a very holy reputation. Pilgrims from all over the world would journey there for a quiet place to pray. Since the imp moved in, however, the pilgrims stopped traveling to the monastery. Sister Betsy became desperate to rid the monastery of the imp. She sought the council of her dear friend, Rabbi Lowenstein. Rabbi Lowenstein was the wisest man that Sister Betsy knew. Surely he knew how to remove the pest.

"Rabbi," she said, "I would tolerate this imp if he was just laughing, scratching, and calling me names, but now he's scared away all the pilgrims from the monastery. How do I drive out this trouble-maker?"

The Rabbi thought for a moment, while stroking his long grey beard, "It sounds like this rascal has worn out his welcome." He continued to think and stroke his beard. "Sister, there is a way to deport your intruder." Sister Betsy listened intently. "If you can get the imp to spell out his own name for you, you will have power over him to expel him."

The idea did not excite Sister Betsy. "I don't even know the imp's name? How can I get him to spell it?"

The rabbi curled his earlocks around his pointer finger and thought some more. "Imps are stupid creatures. They are adept at trickery and mischief, but most can be outsmarted with a little cunning and chutzpah."

While walking back from the synagogue, Sister Betsy formulated a plan to trick the imp into revealing his name.

"Imp?" asked Sister Betsy sweetly when she returned to the monastery carrying a small sack. "I wanted to commend you on your occupation of this chimney."

The imp laughed with glee. Sister Betsy continued to apply flattery. She knew that imps were prideful creatures and very susceptible to praise. "In fact," She said, "I was just visiting with my dear friend, Rabbi Lowenstein. The good Rebbe tells me that he has never heard of an imp inhabiting a chimney for as long as you have. You've broken the world record!" She danced around the room and clapped her hands with enthusiasm. "I met with the council of elders, and we purchased a trophy for you." She produced a polished goblet from a burlap sack. "It's not every day that a world-record is broken. We're going to engrave the trophy." Sister Betsy paused for a moment and approached the chimney's fireplace. "But I'd hate to misspell your name. Can you spell it for me?" She took a quill and parchment from her pocket.

The imp coughed to clear its throat. "B-E-K-U-S," The imp began. "E-Y-E." Sister Betsy held back a grin as she wrote down the letters

of the imp's name. The imp would soon be gone, and she could live in peace without being called, "Sister Fatsy."

"P-H-A-R-T-U-D." The imp finished his spelling. "Now where is my trophy?" The imp said with smugness.

"Ah-hah!" Sister Betsy exclaimed and raised her hands. She then took a deep breath and with a great voice said, "I know your name, and I command you to leave this chimney, *Bekus-Eye-Phartud!*"

Sister Betsy paused listening to hear the imp to fly away. There was no sound. Sister Betsy approached the fireplace and looked up to see if the imp had vanished or disappeared in a puff of smoke.

She tried again, this time putting her head in the fireplace and shouted even louder. "I command you to leave this chimney, *BEKUS-EYE-PHARTUD!*"

The echo from Sister Betsy's voice faded, and a large heap of soot from the chimney fell on her face, covering her clean white habit in black ash. A large cloud of soot spread into the room, and a maniacal cackling boomed from the chimney.

"Your farts are rank, Sister, but that's the way I like 'em!"

Sister Betsy ran to the bathroom to wash the soot out of her habit.

The imp was still laughing when Sister Betsy came back from the bathroom.

"Okay, okay, I surrender you win," he said. "I, the mighty imp, *Bekus-Eye-Phartud*, have been defeated by Sister Fatsy!" The imp's laughing kept Sister Betsy up all night.

The next day, Sister Betsy again sought the advice of Rabbi Lowenstein. When he asked why her habit was grey, she explained the whole story while the Rabbi stroked his long beard. "This imp sounds smarter than most," the Rabbi said. "We will have to be smarter as well." Sister Betsy and Rabbi Lowenstein thought and talked until they devised a plan. Sister Betsy walked slowly back to the monastery. She was in no hurry to get back to her imp-infested monastery. She smiled a big smile as she entered the room, and skipped across the monastery kitchen towards the chimney.

"Impy-dear, you know you've really done a marvelous job pestering the pilgrims away. I realized today that you really show a great deal of promise, and I don't want you to leave. I enjoy your company, and I think I can make you a better imp. What can I get

for you to make you more comfortable? Something to eat? Roasted cat? Or maybe a cup of goat's milk?" Sister Betsy smiled, "Kakophonos, this chimney's previous occupant, loved goat's milk."

The imp paused. "Kakophonos was here?" The imp said in a dark scratchy voice. He sounded surprised. "I thought I was the first imp to live in this chimney."

"Heavens, no! Dozens of imps have launched many miserable careers from this very chimney. In a way, this chimney is a proving ground for amateur chimney imps." Sister Betsy tapped the chimney with her rosary beads. "Imps arrive here smelling like roses, but by the time they leave they reek of manure." She fanned her nose. "It's remarkable to see the transformation."

"Maybe you know some of the chimney's other alumni." She placed a wooden cup of warm goat's milk by the fireplace. "One imp was a sweetheart when she first came to this monastery, but by the time she left she was unbearably dreadful. Do you happen to know Malofacta? I'm very proud of her," she said with a sigh of nostalgia.

When the imp heard the name, he yelped. "Malofacta stayed in this chimney? She's the chair-imp of the Nuisance Guild. I went to Imp-school with her brother until her family moved to Jersey." A bony webbed hand reached from the chimney and grabbed the cup of goat's milk. Sister Betsy heard a slurping sound followed by a belch.

"Malofacta is viler than Kakophonos, but both pretty despicable. I'd be lucky to be mentioned in the same sentence as those two," the imp admitted.

"Both learned much while they were here, but the most miserable imp I've ever encountered was... Todd." The imp dropped his wooden cup and spilled the milk on the ashes in the fireplace. Sister Betsy calmly picked the cup up and refilled it.

"Todd lived in this chimney?" For the first time, there was a reverence in the imp's voice. "Todd was here long ago," Sister Betsy explained. "I used to be thin back then. Todd earned his wings in this very chimney."

The imp was silent. Sister Betsy heard him scuffling down the chimney rocks. He slipped and landed in the ash creating a small cloud. He dusted off his bald grey head and tucked his wings behind his gaunt frame. His large protruding eyes looked up at her. He seemed on the verge of tears. "Do you really think one day I could be as wretched as Todd?"

"No," Sister Betsy said. "You're too cute, but you're annoying in your own little way." The monastery bells rang signaling that it was time for prayer.

"Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you. I'm off to pray *compline* before bedtime."

"Wait!" the imp shouted. "Do you think you could teach me to be miserable and unbearable?"

Sister Betsy sighed. "I was afraid this might happen. If I train you, you'll leave me like Kakophonos, Malofacta, and Todd did after I trained them. I miss them all dearly." She turned to leave.

"Please," the imp begged tugging gently on her rosary beads. "I want so badly to be miserable." Sister Betsy repressed a giggle before she turned around to face the imp. He looked rather pathetic.

Sister Betsy rubbed her head like she was thinking. "I'm not going to make any promises, but if I get up tomorrow and the cows are already milked, I might consider showing you some of the tricks that I taught Malofacta, Kakophonos, and Todd." The imp smiled revealing a mouth filled with brown jagged teeth.

The next morning Sister Betsy woke up with a bucket of fresh milk on the table. 🐮

Art Interlude by James Julian



Little April's Fool

By Nicole Faucher

April was given a plush doll for Christmas from her Aunt Wanda. This had been a surprise because Aunt Wanda was not one who gave anything to anybody, even at Christmas. She was known to be a rather mean character who gloated over other people's misfortunes, so she had been left out of many a family gathering of late. So when this package arrived by mail two days earlier, April's mother placed the large, prettily wrapped gift beneath the tree to be opened Christmas morning.

When all the family — cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts, except mean Aunt Wanda since she was not invited — gathered around the tree to open the wonderful number of presents, everyone was amazed by the nice doll for April. It was a gay Court Jester in purple, green and red with bells on the ends of its three-pronged hat and a sweet, seemingly secretive smile. The family 'ooed' and 'aaahed' over it — all but April. A couple of the younger cousins were subtly jealous that April received something from mean Aunt Wanda, whereas they did not.

Young April simply sat in her flannel pink pajamas and stared disdainfully at the clownish Court Jester. She did not like its benefactor nor did she like the colour green, so she decided she

did not like 'it.' In fact, typical of some children, April had a bad feeling about it, so much so, that she tossed it back into the box from whence it came.

She suddenly burst into tears. "Mama, I don't like it! It's mean as Aunt Wanda!"

April's mother picked her up consolingly and said, "Little April's Fool." But nothing that her mother, father, her Aunt Maggie, nor her Uncle Peter did would really soothe her for the rest of the day. The Court Jester, now dubbed 'April's Fool' silently and sweetly continued to smile at everyone who looked in its direction. In fact, even after the lovely Christmas Dinner, April refused to retrieve the doll from beneath the tree.

The young girl was terrified to sleep that night after she and her cousins went to bed. Her mother expressed concern to her husband about her daughter's worried frown before she traipsed into her bedroom. Her husband reassured her that their daughter was merely associating the personality of mean Aunt Wanda with 'Little April's Fool.'

After everyone was sleeping that night, the brightly coloured Court Jester came alive and stealthily ate up the entire family, one by one like chocolate bonbons, with dear April being the last, dreaming happy dreams of 'Little April's Fool.' 🐉

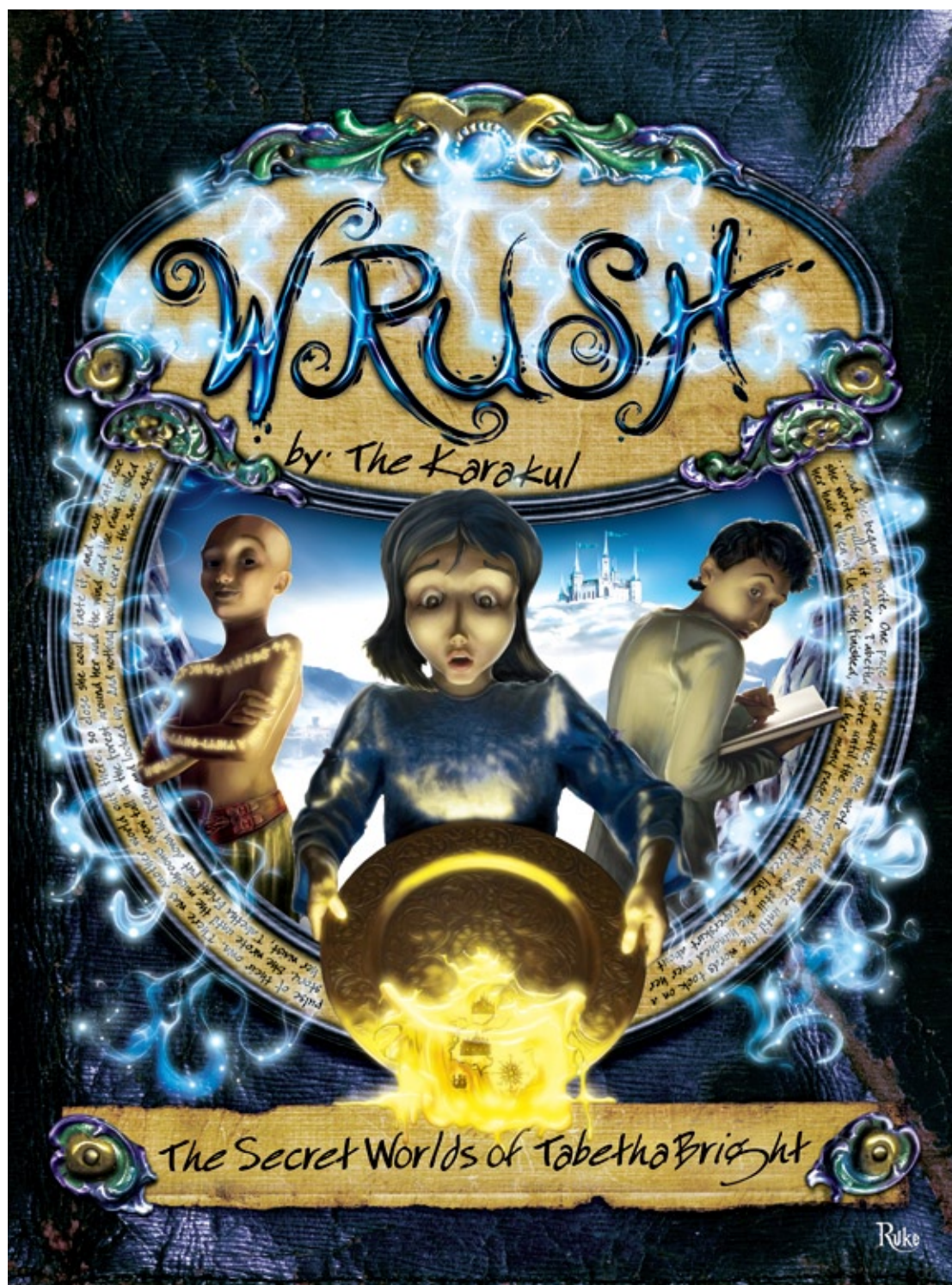


illustration by Daniel Ruke (www.RukeStudios.com)

an excerpt from

Wrush: The Secret Worlds Of Tabetha Bright

by The Karakul

Bridge of Riddles

There was once a time, I am told, when the Woodland River flowed fresh. When the goodfolk of Wrush fished from its shores. Then down from the mountains a new evil appeared and turned the river foul with old magic. This evil was a Thwork, which is the proper name for a dragon when it has declared itself Master of the Bridge.

And it was just such a dragon Tabetha, riding atop her new friend the Mungling, was about to meet.

"What's that?" she cried, as they approached the bridge. The sound of three magic horns warbled and pierced the night air, bending the darkness like water before them.

"A Thwork!" the Mungling gasped and Tabetha's eyes flew wide. She gripped her saddle hard in pure fright. Rising before her was the heaving bulk of some beast. A three-headed dragon on errand from nightmares.

The Thwork had scales red as fire and they clicked when he moved. He stretched out across the foot of the bridge. His muscles were steel cords, his eyes were dark rubies. Three heads writhed at the end of long furry necks and his wings folded flat against his back.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmh," the dragon thrummed from deep in his throat. Tabetha felt the ground tremble beneath her. Again the dragon raised up the enchanted horns and released their strange call, a sound like voices pressed through the black throat of space.

Barr-r-roooooOOOOO!

"We are the guardians of the Bridge of Riddles!" The three heads spoke as one, their voices like hissing steam. "No one may cross this river without our permission!" Slaver dripped from their talon-like teeth and Tabetha turned her eyes away in fear.

Then she remembered her promise to help save the empire, and how all would be lost if she gave up now.

She turned back to the Thwork and urged the Mungling forward. "My name is Tabetha Bright," she explained from atop her saddle. "My friend here is a Mungling who has come to take me to your capital. And if we don't arrive soon an evil sorcerer may destroy the empire. So if you don't mind," she said, "we would be very grateful if you let us pass."

There was silence.

The Thwork studied Tabetha long and hard. She wasn't sure if he meant to swallow her whole or sample her bit by bit.

"Destroy the empire, huh?" the meanest-looking of the three heads spat. "Now that wouldn't bother us a bit." He let out a low growl. "But because you're an enemy of the sorcery, we will let you pass. You and your Mungling may cross the Bridge of Riddles."

"Oh! That's very kind of you!" said Tabetha, sharing a smile with the Mungling. "We really don't know how to thank you."

"Oh, but *we do*," all three heads said at once. "You can thank us by paying the toll." The Thwork's mouths twisted into wide hungry smiles. Their talon-like teeth clacked together like sheers.

"A toll?" said Tabetha. "You mean I have to pay you to cross the bridge?" She patted her pockets to show they were empty. "But I haven't got any money. Nothing at all really, to offer you. Except maybe this pen." She held it up for them to see.

"A pen!" the Thwork roared, blowing hot steam from his snouts. "What would a Thwork do with a child's filthy toy? Bah! There is no greedier creature in all this kingdom than a Thwork! Now, you must bring three gifts. One for each of us," he demanded. "Since you have nothing to offer now, you must go and find whatever we ask."

Tabetha looked to the Mungling, who was shaking his head. "No!" he whispered in warning. "Never trust a Thwork. They're tricky as can be, and smart!"

But Tabetha felt the strong need to hurry and could see no other choice. Tricky or not, the Thwork blocked their only passage across the river. Tabetha took a deep breath, sitting up straight in her saddle. "We'll do it," she said in her bravest voice. "Whatever you ask. Name your three gifts and we'll bring them."

The Thwork grinned hungrily. The Mungling scuttled back. "Oh yes! And one more thing before you agree," the dragon added as he hunched near. "If you fail, little Tabetha, we will devour you piece by piece!"

"Now you've done it," said the Mungling to Tabetha. "No one can out-trick a Thwork. How do you hope to get past him?" He shook his chubby head in dismay.

Before Tabetha could answer, the first of the Thwork's three heads bent low, staring Tabetha straight in the eye. "So! You think you're brave, do you? Think you can bring me what I ask?"

Tabetha met his gaze. She nodded.

"Very well then," the first head replied as he straightened his long neck. He stroked his wispy white beard in thought. "I happen to have a special gift in mind already. Ever since I was a young Thworkling I've wanted one thing."

He looked to the sky where tiny points twinkled yellow and white.

"The stars!" he hissed. "Of course no one has ever managed to bring them to me. Still, this is my request. Bring me the stars in the palm of your hand, little Tabetha. Or I shall start on your ears for supper!"

The Mungling gasped. "But that's impossible!"

"Nonetheless, I want them," said the Thwork.

Tabetha fell quiet. She chewed her lip in thought. "So he wants the stars in the palm of my hand," she muttered to herself. Her legs were so weak she couldn't climb out of her own bed, let alone climb up to the stars. So how would she ever capture one?

Tabetha found herself going deep inside, toward that magic place where her stories were born. A fountain waited there, a shining spout of creativity. To touch it was to let it in. She felt it climb up through her chest. Across the long fields of her mind. It poured out through her eyes into the world around her, suddenly latching upon a glowing idea.

"Mungling," she called. "Do you see that puddle beside the bridge?"

The Mungling nodded eagerly.

"Please take me there."

The Mungling did as he was asked, clucking to himself in excitement. When he reached the puddle, Tabetha leaned over her friend's side. She scooped up a handful of water between the palms of her two hands.

"There you are," she said to the Thwork with a smile. "The stars you asked for. Three of them, actually."

"What!" the first head roared. "What's this you say?" He bent over the water pooled in Tabetha's hands and sure enough, the reflection of three stars twinkled back at him.

"Hold out your claws and I'll give them to you," Tabetha offered. Very carefully, the Thwork did just that, and as Tabetha passed him the stars she saw the faintest smile ripple across his toothy lips. He said nothing, but stared in wonder.

"Ha!" the second head piped up. "So you are both brave and clever! But it will take more than that, little Tabetha, to bring me the gift I'm about to ask for."

*

"All of my life," the Thwork's second head explained, "I've searched and I've searched for one single treasure. Never has it been found. If you can bring this one thing to me now, I will be satisfied. But I warn you. If you fail, little Tabetha, I will snack on your toes for breakfast!"

"I can't promise you anything," said Tabetha. "But I will do my very best."

The Thwork grunted. "Then bring me a song."

Did he say a song? Well that would be easy, Tabetha thought. She knew lots of songs already.

"Bring me a song," the Thwork repeated, "that is sung by neither mouth nor lips."

Oh, thought Tabetha. That sounded quite a bit harder. Still, she had agreed to do her very best and that's exactly what she meant to do.

"He must mean the river," said the Mungling, and at those words the Thwork sneered.

"I do not mean the river!" he snapped. "For the river is already mine! If you wish to cross it, then go now! Return only when my gift is found."

Tabetha agreed she would, pulling the Mungling back from the bridge. "So this Thwork wants a song that has no singer," she murmured aloud, gripping the reins. But did such a thing even exist?

"This second head looks much hungrier than the first," the Mungling commented. "This riddle is much harder too. How exactly did you solve the last one, Tabetha?"

"By accident," she said. "I just went deep inside, and suddenly I had the answer."

"Well, can't you just *'by accident'* again?" said the Mungling.

Tabetha knew that she couldn't. But perhaps she could find that fountain again, deep inside, and then let creativity lead the way. It had worked the first time. Maybe it could work again.

Tabetha relaxed. She felt all her muscles go loose as jelly. Her breathing slowed as she sunk deep within, creativity spreading broad as a lake. She noticed the chirping of crickets and the cool of night against skin. She noticed the perfume of moist earth, the perfect brushstrokes on a moth and the way dewdrops shone like diamonds in the moonlight.

Then Tabetha noticed something else.

"Do you see how the fireflies gather high on that ledge?" She pointed so the Mungling could see. "Up there," she said, "where that tall cliff overlooks the river."

The Mungling nodded.

"Take me there," she whispered.

At once they were off, the Mungling climbing the steep path. When they reached the top of the cliff, the Mungling peered over the edge. "I don't know what you plan to do," he said, offering Tabetha a bright grin. "But I'm beginning to think that if anyone could outsmart a Thwork, it just might be you."

Tabetha held up her hands. Fireflies danced circles about them, winking like sparks between her fingers. The mountains around her were tall and dark. The wind blew lightly. Somewhere far away, thunder rolled through silvery clouds. Tabetha began to sing...

The crumpled old man with a heart of gold
He gives it away and so never grows old
For ninety-nine years his stories are told
And the children enjoy them all day.

The crumpled old man who plants a tree
The fruit that it bears he'll never see
But he doesn't cry for you and me
Will eat of his gift one day.

On and on she sang, lifting her voice to the mountains. The fireflies twirled and flashed and the moment Tabetha stopped, all the forest fell silent with her. Every fox and bat went still as can be. The owls left off from their hooting. And down on the

bridge below, even the Thwork stood quiet. Watching, and waiting for his gift.

Then it came.

Slowly at first, it rolled back down from icy peaks. It was so quiet Tabetha could barely hear it. But soon it grew louder. And louder. And then louder still until all the valley was alive with her echo:

*The crumpled old man with a heart of gold!
He gives it away and so never grows old!
For ninety-nine years his stories are told!
And the children enjoy them all day!*

Again and again the mountains repeated her song. The Thwork's bearded jaw fell open in amazement.

"You did it!" cheered the Mungling. "You found him the song that has no singer!"

"I guess I did," said Tabetha, feeling quite surprised herself. She peered over the cliff's edge. "But we better hurry back down to the Thwork," she said. "Don't forget, time is running out and we still have one more gift left to bring him before we can cross the Bridge of Riddles." She glanced down at the bridge, her stomach roiling with dread. "And that last Thwork looks the meanest of all."

*

Tabetha and the Mungling halted at the foot of the bridge. She glanced up at the dragon, who was now a towering shadow with the moon like a great yellow disk behind. Tabetha opened her mouth to speak, when suddenly the Thwork reared back on his hind legs and threw wide his red wings. He pumped them until dust swirled like a cyclone. Tabetha gasped. She squinted against the wind. She had never seen such an angry creature!

The Thwork huffed and he roared and he blew his great horn until at last the third— and the meanest— of the three heads leaned in close to Tabetha. Her hair lifted in puffs as he snorted in her ear.

"So little Tabetha!" the dragon hissed. "It seems you are not just brave and clever, but talented too! Yet it will take something more to please me. Much more, in fact. You see, I am the

greediest Thwork in all this kingdom and I already have at least one of everything."

"Everything?" asked Tabetha. "Then you must be a very sad, sad creature that you still need something more."

"Enough!" the Thwork bellowed, and Tabetha's cheeks stung from his breath. "I have been given the seeds to a mountain and a zebra's bold stripes! I've been given lightning in a shimmering white egg. I possess the black tears of a Mud Fairy and an emperor's jeweled sword, but if you wish to cross this bridge, little Tabetha, then you must find and bring to me one thing. The one thing in all of this kingdom I have never been given."

Tabetha looked up at the Thwork. Behind the anger in his eyes she saw his sadness. How terrible it must be, she thought, to have everything and still not be satisfied. Without saying a word, Tabetha waved the Thwork closer.

"What is it?" he sneered as he bent down low. "Do you think you can give me what no one else can?"

"Come closer," was all Tabetha said, and suddenly the Thwork looked nervous. His eyes went big, and darted side to side.

"Closer still," whispered Tabetha, and when the dragon's beard was so near that it swished at her cheek, Tabetha stretched up high in her saddle.

And gave
the dragon
a kiss.

Bridge Of Riddles is an excerpt from the soon-to-be released fantasy novel, *Wrush: The Secret Worlds Of Tabetha Bright*. Written by a mysterious author known only as The Karakul, we know little of him— except that he is reportedly the custodian of a great and secret library, quite possibly hidden in a cave. For more info on The Karakul and his award-winning *Wrush*, visit him at: www.TheSecretWorlds.com

ConTributors

Megan Lee Beals lives in Tacoma, Washington, where the sun rarely breaks through the clouds. When she isn't writing or working in a bookstore, she knits to calm her nerves. However, her nerves have yet to respond positively to knitting, resulting in jumpy sweaters and gloves that won't stop twiddling their thumbs.

Tara Lee Baxter grew up in, and still calls home, places with excessive amounts of snow and more mosquitoes than people. She has learned through experience that writing, an overactive imagination, and mischief can be a lot of fun. Her husband and pugs continually make her smile. Tara has a Master's degree in Sociology and writes fiction for a variety of audiences. www.taraleebaxter.com

Craig W. Steele is a biology professor at Edinboro University in Edinboro, PA, USA. He has a poem ("The Power of Sour") and a short story ("Emily's New Nightlight") in the October 2009 issue of *Stories for Children Magazine*, a short story ("The Gift") at *StoriesThatLift.com*, and two poems in a forthcoming (July 15, 2010) anthology from Marshall Cavendish Children's Books titled, *An Eyeball in My Garden — And Other Spine-Tingling Poems*. He's a member of the SCBWI.

In his life, **Br. Clyde K. Elsie** has held five of these six positions: park ranger, math teacher, youth minister, tennis coach, West Point cadet, Franciscan Friar, and Prince of Monaco. Currently he resides outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in studies for the priesthood.

Katharine E. Wright lives in Berkeley, California now (where it never snows), but she's also lived in Canada: in Vancouver (where it snowed a little) and in Prince George (where it snowed a lot). She teaches literature now, but she's also had a job selling books to rude people on cell phones, and a job where a variety of animals, from boa constrictors to coatis, bit her. She can show you the scars someday. She keeps killing off her family in poems, which is the only polite way to do it.

Nicole Faucher was born in Vancouver. She has work published in several journals, including *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *Inscribed*, *Island Writer* and *blue skies poetry*. She can be seen haunting Spiral Cafe and Black Stilt Cafe in Victoria with her occasional poetry readings. "Little April's Fool" is inspired by her daughter's phobia of Court Jesters and is her first stab at writing children's lit.

Rebekah Joy Plett sleeps under a croaking old bridge between Here and There. She lives off of fallen apples and icefish which inhabit the reservoir. She believes in people helping people and being thankful. You can visit her at www.catchtheredballoon.com.

As a child, **Jackie Duhard** spent most of her time daydreaming, doodling, and trying to get permanent marker off her skin. With an honours degree in Fine Arts she discovered the communications field where she continues to pursue illustration and design, while exploring other creative caverns. Despite Jackie's years of drawing experience, she still hasn't figured out how to get off permanent marker. www.jackieduhard.com

Graeme Maitland is a Toronto based illustrator/artist. He is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design and has been exhibiting his artwork in the Toronto area for a few years. Graeme recently began his illustration career and can think of nothing he would rather be doing than sitting in his studio drawing pictures and occasionally pushing his cat off the desk. See more of Graeme's work at www.grammajones.com

Anita K. Olsen, also known under the pseudonym Anita Night is a Norwegian freelance illustrator and student who enjoys creating artwork with a slightly gothic influence. Preferred mediums are acrylic paint, black pen and ink. You can find samples of her artwork and additional information at www.anitaolsen.daportfolio.com

James Julian has been drawing for nearly twelve years and won a prize for the Crow Toes Quarterly Scary Monster Contest 2009, along with a multitude of accolades for many other art competitions.

Justin Julian has been winning art prizes for four years, drawing for many more, and was a winner of the Crow Toes Quarterly Scary Monster Contest in 2009.

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art ending by Justin Julian