



Issue #26 - Sept. 24, 2009

[“The Mathematics of Faith,” by Jonathan Wood](#)

[“Of Shifting Skin and Certainty,” by Justin Howe](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

THE MATHEMATICS OF FAITH

by Jonathan Wood

They lock me away with everything I could need except an exit. As they brick up the door of my Pater's apartment they tell me that if I prove my own blasphemy to be truth then that will be consolation enough, and I see the laughter in their eyes. My Mater stands with them, imploring me to rescind my work, to claim failure, and to embrace the incorrect.

"A prayer," she begs, "a single prayer and they will forgive you."

But I refuse, my lips sealed. The truth does not compromise. It can be ignored by others, it can be buried under lies and mysticism, but it still will be, and I will not partake in its obfuscation.

I am fortunate that my Pater lived comfortably. I have been permitted to keep all that he willed to me. My own belongings are lined up along the central hallway, as I requested. The rooms have, of course, their own supply of water, which in turn feeds the vegetable garden. Certain lab animals in my possession will breed fast enough to allow for occasional consumption. I certainly will not starve, unless it be for company.

My first task is one of organization. Most of my Pater's furniture remains (except for his dining set, which is unsuitable for laboratory purposes) and a couple of his other accoutrements: his gramophone is superior to mine, for example, and I also find a projector and several boxes containing decks of filmcards, which I hope will pass some of my more lonesome hours.

I decide that my Pater's former bedchambers will suffice as a storage room for now. It is undeniable that I will need to sleep, but I am not yet able to regard that disease-ridden deathbed as a place to rest.

I awake early on the morning of the first day, ready to resume my experiments. I spend the morning reviewing my notes and writing a summary in a fresh journal:

Life is equal to the sum of behaviors we can perform and the time we have allotted to perform them. Let us call life L , time T , and behavior B . Thus, $L=f(B,T)$, where $f(B,T)$ is the relationship between behavior and time. If $L=TB$, then $T=L/B$ and one could simply increase T by decreasing B . However, experiments with severed spinal cords and brain lesions have proved this implausible.

Experiments involving the forced activity of several species have also shown $L=T/B$ (and therefore $T=LB$) to be equally unlikely.

Therefore, $f(B,T)$ must be a more complex relationships. I now suspect that increasing or decreasing some subset of B , designated b_x , will extend T . Identifying possible values of b_x is the next step I must take if I am to discover how to increase T indefinitely, and achieve immortality.

A day's research reveals the most common behaviors of my subjects to be: breathing, eating, digesting, urinating, excreting, sleeping, walking, fornicating, procreating, dying, decaying, mewling, being trod upon, blinking, and staring. The latter seems to be the most prevalent. I then draw up a schedule whereby I can experiment by enforcing or depriving my subjects of one of these experiences (excepting death and decay) and recording their subsequent life span and susceptibility to the forces of entropy.

It is around this time that I learn to use my Pater's projector and begin to make my way through his decks of filmcards.

It would be a compliment to describe the majority of these stories as facile. The action is stilted in the extreme, men and women adopting ridiculously stylized poses in order to simulate the extremes of emotion. I can only assume this is to ensure that even the most dimwitted of audiences is capable of following the limited action, which almost invariably consists of a woman dressed in so many layers of flimsy garb that she

appears to have been attacked by particularly vicious fog, falling in love with one man and being preyed upon by another. The desired lover is universally handsome and well-dressed. The undesired lover is either swarthy or unhealthily thin. Undesirables are also frequently identified by an elaborately groomed moustache. The desired lover is unaware of the dangers posed by the undesired lover until the last moments of the action, when the poorly clad woman is at his less-than-tender mercies. Everything is then quickly resolved by the means of a swift blow to the jaw.

Still, they pass the time.

My Pater's collection of filmcards is so extensive that it is only after several weeks that I find a deck that has any merit whatsoever. It is after the death of a promising young guinea pig, whom I had dubbed Mathilde, which has put me in something of a fugue. I view these black moods as one of my most profound weaknesses. They are symptomatic of doubt and I must not doubt the truth, only forge towards it. Doubt clouds the mind and leads to such fallacies as religion and a love of the fantastical. However, seeking solace, or at least distraction, I turn to my Pater's filmcards.

I pull a deck at random, lower the gas lamps, slam the cards into the projection slot, and begin to disconsolately crank the handle. Immediately the dynamo begins to turn in the

projector and its lamp-glow lights the screen. A moment later a woman's face fills the space.

I cannot accurately describe what it is that the woman's face causes to happen inside the confines of my skull. However, the outward effect is that I stare. There is something captivating about the turn of her eyelashes, the downward slope of her cheekbones, the prominence of one earlobe appearing from behind a thick swash of hair. There is neither sadness nor joy in that face; she simply stares.

This look so affects me that I pay little attention to the opening scenes of the film. It seems to match the norm, except that the woman's dress is less ethereal than most, and closely mirrors the garb of a priestess. As if to make up for this concession to realism, the villain is even more stereotyped than is usual. He is emaciated in extremis; dressed purely in black, with a battered top hat that exaggerates his height, and a long, waxed moustache that he twirls incessantly.

It is only after the first quarter of the narrative that I notice further oddities. For a start, the desired lover has yet to appear. Secondly, the nature of the villain's advances is portrayed in a startlingly graphic manner. While I do not see him physically touch the priestess, his desire is portrayed to an extent that tests the limits of taste.

At the narrative's halfway point comes a scene that shocks me so much that I momentarily stop turning the projector's handle. The villain has so engineered events that he and the priestess would be left alone. The scene closes with him advancing in a menacing manner that would seem parody were the priestess's fear not so palpable. The next scene shows her hair and clothing in disarray as she weeps into her hands. This is not the exaggerated bawling that I have seen played out so many times before, but real tears of tragedy that slip between her fingers and seem to soak the very wall onto which her image is projected. I tell myself that my conclusions must be mistaken, but in the very next scene my fears are confirmed: she shows the clear profile of a woman in the early stages of pregnancy.

My jaw hangs. The scene had been artfully constructed so that nothing was truly seen, but still the actions implied are so shocking as to test the limits of belief.

After a moment's pause I begin to turn the projector's handle with renewed haste.

The priestess, unable to hide the pregnancy for long, is locked away in a similar manner to myself, for her presumed sins, for her infant conceived without the sanctity of marriage. I wait, watching, my heart in my mouth, for her hero to appear and to rescue her. For ten long minutes I watch her pace

empty rooms, watch her belly swell, watch as no-one comes to save her. Her only companions are two canaries, one little more than a chick.

The final scenes leave me breathless. The priestess's condition enters its final stages, and, though she hammers at the portals of her sealed chambers, no-one comes to her aid. The artist responsible for the narrative cuts his scenes faster and faster, becoming more and more metaphorical. We see her eyes tighten in pain; a shot of the two birds, both young and old, silhouetted against a gas flame; the woman's hand clenching her bed sheets; the gas flame flickers; the woman's hand relaxes; the young canary sitting alone on its perch, its older companion nowhere in sight.

The film closes on the face of a newborn child. It does not cry or fuss as would most of its peers. It simply regards me from the screen with the same expressionless visage that its Mater had held at the outset of the tale.

My heart pounds. This is it? The hero has not come. The villain has not been punished. And the priestess? She dies in childbirth. The shot of the lone canary seems to carry the message clearly and yet I cannot quite believe it. I remove the filmcards from their exit tray and replace them in the feed slot. I turn the handle again. The poor woman's fate plays out

before me once more and this time it is undeniable: she dies alone, her persecutor unpunished.

I am obsessed by the narrative. My work suffers. I forget to feed my animals and several of the mice turn to cannibalism (I am aware enough to note that this in no way increases their lifespan). I find myself leaving my study to watch the priestess's fate over and over. My once dreamless nights are now haunted by the woman's staring face. It is not exactly that she is beautiful, because she is not, but rather it is some tragic empathy inscribed into her features that fastens my gaze.

There is also the matter of our parallel fates. I cannot help but notice that we are both unfairly imprisoned in the same manner. We both go on with no hope of rescue. And then? She dies, her suffering invalidated, her only heritage a doomed infant.

In the end it is the newborn's empty stare, its hopeless fate, that stimulates me to resume my studies, to redouble my efforts even. This response would provoke my Mater to call the narrative a sign from the Gods, but that is her foolishness. It is inspiring happenstance, coincidence.

The days turn into weeks, which themselves stretch out to one month and then another. As time passes, I cannot help but notice that I have become more lonesome. I start to mutter to the animals. It begins with harmless pleasantries, but soon I

begin to catch myself delivering speeches and lectures to my uncomprehending subjects.

“All experiments so far have resulted in death and, hence, failure,” I find myself telling a blinking rat. “There may yet be a particular behavior that I have not yet investigated that extends lifespan, but it is not one that occurs naturally. Therefore any behavior that does imbue additional years to one's life must only occur rarely and possibly it is unnatural to many of my subjects. While these behaviors—swelling, growing extra limbs, self-consumption—should, at some point be examined, their very nature makes them difficult to simulate in a laboratory environment. I therefore intend to start investigating the possibility of a third variable that modulates the relationship between behavior and lifespan. As to the nature of this relationship—”

The rat turns and scurries away and my words dry up.

I am unsure how to feel about this new permutation in my own behavior. There is, of course, the chance that it will improve my lifespan, but I have investigated vocalization to the best of my ability and it seems to have little effect on my subjects.

Whatever it demonstrates about my mental health, this conversation does open a particularly rewarding new line of

research and once more the joy of experimentation fills my days.

One evening, after several such days I collapse, exhausted, into a chaise. I have given up staring at notes and metaphysical equations and have resorted to playing with Klaxon, one of my more gregarious mice. He is scampering over my hand, up-and-down my sleeve, listening to my occasional mutterings when my thoughts turn to the well-worn track of the affecting narrative of the priestess.

So, allowing Klaxon to find a comfortable spot on my shoulders, I fetch out the projector and the deck of film cards. I set things up, place my glass of wine on a nearby table (a rare indulgence these days given my limited supplies), and settle back, one hand ready to turn the projector's handle.

I have just passed the half-way point, the priestess having been shoved, wailing into her cell, when Klaxon loses his grip. Why, I cannot say, but he falls from my shoulder. Fearing for his life, I make a snatch at his tumbling form. In my haste, I knock the half-full glass of wine from where it stands and send it spinning through the air to crash into the projector. There is a spark as the wine hits the projector's still glowing light bulb. There is a brief flash of light, and then the bulb dies.

I curse Klaxon soundly, try turning the projector's handle to no avail, and throw up my hands. With no imports to my

eight-room kingdom, light bulbs are amongst my most precious resources. I do not deign to find Klaxon and instead go in search of my electrical supplies.

The smashed glass cleared away, the bulb replaced, myself reassured that the projector's gear-works are dry and will not rust, and that the filmcards are dry and unstained, I count my blessings and begin to turn the projector handle and resume my evening's entertainment.

I am surprised to see the woman's face close up to the screen. I left the cards as they were—half in the feed-slot, and half in the exit tray from which I will collect them at the end of the viewing. How can I have returned to the first scene? Then I notice that her expression is unfamiliar to me. She peers at me perplexed, her brows knit in confusion. This is not the blank stare that haunts my dreams. The woman turns around and walks away from me. As she distances herself from the screen, I, once more, see the familiar environs in which she is held captive. She turns back to look out once more, her confusion written even more plainly on her face. My own expressions mirror hers. I cannot fathom where this new scene has come from, how I can have missed it before.

Then an inexplicable phenomena occurs.

“Hello?” The voice is hesitant; light, tinny, as if coming from a great distance.

“Hello?” The word comes again.

I stare around wildly. It is so long since I have heard a voice other than my own that I am almost astounded to simply be exposed to one. But the potential source of the sound is what really has me. I instantly drop the handle of the projector.

A hallucination. A hallucination is the only possible explanation. But what was its cause? Is my imprisonment finally telling? Is my isolated mind beginning to crack? Have I not been sleeping enough? Did I bang my head recently? Could it have been something I ate?

A quarter hour of contemplation later, I am still without an answer, and the depression is back, stronger than before. It becomes harder and harder to blame the hallucination on anything except my own weakening psyche and I find myself transfixed by the idea of my own self ranting and rambling around the rooms, wasting away, the image of my Pater as the disease ate his health and mind.

I resume watching the narrative out of sheer obstinacy, out of a desperate attempt to not succumb to the shadows in my mind. Again, I watch the priestess, forlorn and abandoned, pace her chambers. But, after a few minutes, oddities begin to once more slip into the narrative. The priestess will go through her familiar actions but, every so often, she will turn to the

screen in a way that seems unfamiliar to me, stare at it, as if deeply troubled, and then turn away. I crank defiantly at the handle of the projector.

Her pregnancy is far along when the voice comes again, and this time there is no mistaking. The priestess stops her pacing and turns to fix me with those sloping gray eyes.

“Hello?” she says.

I watch her lips move.

“Hello? Can you see me?”

I set my jaw and continue to crank the handle. She stares at me, rubs her eyes and shakes her head.

“Dear Gods,” she says it to herself but I hear her quite clearly, “am I losing my mind?”

I close my eyes as I turn the handle to the narratives end. Even as events proceed along their predestined path, she questions me, questions my existence, her own, what is happening to her. I never answer. It is worst at the end. As she births the child and works her way to the end of her life, I hear every scream.

I am barely in control of myself as the screen goes blank. I cannot let go of the projector’s handle and continue to crank it round and round, clack-clack as it searches for filmcards that are not there.

When I finally let go, it is to return to the decanter at my desk. I throw decorum to the winds, not caring for a glass, and tip its contents down my throat.

The rest of the evening is a blur. I wake, aching and stinking, still dressed, clutching a half-empty bottle and surrounded by the ruins of several others. My first business of the day is to void my stomach, hugely and noisily onto the floor. Once this is done, I lie on my chaise, curled like a fetus, waiting for the madness to take me.

It is late in the span when I finally rise. Nothing further has happened, except that the volume of my subjects has risen as they clamor to be fed. I go through the actions like a marionette, trying to work out if it is still I who controls the strings.

Night has fallen before I turn to the projector once more. By now I am mostly convinced that it was all a dream, a terrible dream, but I still approach the projector with fear. I am a scientist, though. I must pursue the truth no matter how distasteful its message. So I remove the filmcards from the exit tray and put them back in the slot. Hand trembling, I begin to turn the handle.

After a quarter hour, I am almost laughing with relief. Everything is as it should be. Everything is normal. The actors and actresses act out their parts, their actions captured forever

in the myriad holes of the filmcards. I know the truth and I am glad that I stood fast to its pursuit.

I do not even hold my breath, count my heartbeats, as the priestess is pushed into her prison.

The door closes behind her.

She peers around in a way I have never seen her do before.

My heart in my mouth, I continue to turn the handle.

Again, she turns to the screen. Again, she peers out at me.

Again, she says, "Hello?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "No."

The effect of my words upon her is instantaneous and alarming. She reels back as if struck, hand clutched to her mouth, and crashes into the back wall. I see the canaries flutter, disturbed, around their cage, but they make no sound.

My hand falters and I lose my grip on the handle. The image is displayed, frozen before me. The canaries are caught mid-flight, the woman half-collapsed. Her robes splay backwards, as if cast in stone. Everything is still. Then the dynamo winds down and the image fades.

I think I may faint. Blackness invades the corners of my vision. I can't control the shaking that overcomes me.

Eventually, my breathing slows and my hands rest more calmly in my lap. I attempt to hypothesize: I, subsequently referred to as the subject, experience hallucinations when

exposed to one certain narrative. The subject does not appear to have any other symptoms of madness. Therefore, there is something specific to the narrative that affects him. However, the source of the symptoms could lie with either the narrative (formulated as $N = \text{sum of narrative parts [actors, actresses, sets, average and median scene length, overall length, rapidity of cuts, angles of shots, etc.]}$) or in the subject ($S = \text{sum of his own parts [limbs, hair color, preconceptions, etc.]}$).

I prefer the theorem that there is a feature of the film that affects me. To elucidate the potential cause I must, therefore, study the film and categorize its elements. I must watch it again, possibly many times. I must ignore the hallucinations and instead concentrate on the narrative itself. When the images summoned by my own mind interfere with or obfuscate those on the screen then I shall have to rely on my memory, for as long as I can trust it.

I fetch my notepad and, thus equipped, resume my watching. The image picks up from the precise point it left off—the woman back against the wall, hand to her mouth. She stares at me. I resolutely begin to categorize her items of clothing in my notepad. Then I start to list the pertinent features of her surroundings. After a while, the priestess slumps to the floor in a most unladylike fashion. She giggles, wipes her brow. She leans towards me.

“Can you...” she says, then shakes her head smiling, with terror in her eyes. “Can you see me?”

“Ornate fireplace,” I say aloud, scribbling. “Wrought iron bird cage. Canaries: two, one considerably younger. Six candles. Six candlesticks.”

“Can you hear me?” she asks. “I can hear you.”

“Velvet curtains,” I reply, my jaw set.

“I don’t understand,” the priestess says, though not for my benefit.

She walks off-screen. When she returns she is dressed the same but her stomach has swollen, just as it always does at this point in the narrative. She approaches the screen.

“Please,” she says, “I don’t know if you can hear me.... By the Gods, I don’t even know if you can see me, but if you can, please answer me. Please help me. I am with child, I am....” Her lip quivers and my pen pauses, suspended above the page. I know I must press on, that I cannot be taken in by these delusions, but her fear and hurt are so palpable.

“Please,” she says. “Please help me. There is no-one else.”

I swallow hard and regard my notebook.

“Go away,” I say as firmly as I can manage. “You are not real.”

Again, my words have an electrifying effect on the woman. I cannot help but watch as she reels away with a shriek.

“By the Gods,” she says once she has recovered. “You... you hear me? You see me?”

“You are nothing but a fabrication of my isolated mind. Please resume your original actions and allow me to return to mine.” I adopt an austere tone, seeking stability in formality.

“What are you saying?” The priestess turns to face the Heavens. “What is going on?”

“You are being punished for a crime that is not your fault,” I say, trying a more patient tone. “You are imprisoned. There is no escape for you.”

“What?” The woman’s eyes are wide. “How do you know? How could you....” Fury suddenly flashes in her eyes. “Are you from him? Has he sent you to taunt me? Filth! Even now, even after all, you still will not leave me alone? You must debase me further?”

Her accusation, her tone, the rawness of her emotions, all conspire to overcome me.

“No madam,” I exclaim. “Most certainly not. I demand that you withdraw—” And then my actions catch up with me. I am arguing with my own delusion, one summoned from the punched holes on a filmcard, from the projector’s flickering bulb-light.

With my free hand I massage my temples. “You are not real,” I mutter to myself. “You are not real.” I repeat the

phrase like a mantra, like an incantation to banish her, almost like a prayer. It is this final realization that snaps me from my reverie and brings me back to my studies. I have sworn not to stoop to the depths of prayer.

I pick up my pen and resume my notes upon the film's features. I ignore the priestess, her accusations, implorings, and other expostulations. The passage is hard, especially at the end, as her begging turns to screams and the babe once more takes her life for its own, but I am resolute.

The next day I am more myself. I cease discussions with my animals, tend to several newborn rabbits (their birth allows me to take one of the older subjects for my dinner that evening), and make, what I believe is, significant headway in my thinking about a third variable. Whatever it is that modifies the relationship between behavior and lifespan is unlikely to be entirely random. There is likely to be some sort of logical connection between all parts of the equation. I work for several hours on factors that could possibly be related.

In the evening, after a delicious stew, I resume my studies of the narrative. The most salient feature of the hallucinations is their onset, which always occurs at the moment of the priestess's incarceration. After this point she again begins to alternately implore and curse me. She soon gives up however, and I am briefly hopeful that the hallucinations are slipping

away, that the mere technique of scientific observation is reducing them. However, the priestess stays slumped, sitting on the floor regarding me, refusing to return to her usual actions. Occasionally the screen flickers momentarily to black and when the picture comes back the priestess's stomach has noticeably increased in size. In this manner she makes her way towards her inevitable demise.

After the priestess's death I strike upon a theory. If the madness always comes upon me at the same point in the narrative, surely by avoiding that part I can avoid the madness itself. I have no idea how one would skip this part of the narrative manually, so instead I plug my ears with cotton-balls, holding them in place with a blindfold I have perched on my forehead, ready to drop at the appropriate moment.

This experiment is a dispiriting failure. The whole case is quite inexplicable. However, after viewing numerous other, lesser productions I am able to confirm that my symptoms are, at least, limited to this one narrative.

The priestess herself lapses into silence over the coming weeks. She sometimes paces her rooms, but never in the old patterns. I often hear her hum or sing to herself. She has a pretty voice. Occasionally she will sit and sob. These times are the hardest.

One night, I am experimenting with other forms of sensory deprivation (this time is my nasal passages are stuffed with cotton-balls and I am breathing through my mouth) when she addresses me directly.

“I know that you refuse to speak to me, that you deny that I exist despite the fact that you clearly see me... I do not understand why for the life of me but,” she squares her jaw, resolute, “I am going to speak to you, sir, no matter your response. To not do so will drive me insane, unless I am insane already. Ever since you first appeared in my life things have seemed so much less bearable, the cycle of things weighing so much heavier....” Her voice quavers. “Maybe the Gods punish me, though I cannot find any sin my past that seems to deserve such punishment. But Their ways are not our own.”

She turns away, looking harassed, pushes her hair back from her forehead. “I am rambling, sir, please forgive me. I have thought so often of what I may say to you, and, now that I am doing it, all my thoughts have left me.”

“I simply.... I simply wish there was someone to explain to me what was going on. Before... before all this, life seemed so clear, so laid out. There was a pattern to things. Now.... I don't know.... Dissatisfaction claws at me. Perhaps, please, sir, I implore you, speak to me please. That is all I want, someone to share the burden of imprisonment. These walls.... By the

Gods, I feel as if I am the foundation that they lie upon and they are crushing me. All I ask is a few words to help me bear the weight. Please sir, please....”

“I...” I say, and then words fail me.

She turns those big, gray eyes on me, and I feel every ounce of the weight of which she speaks.

“I am sorry,” I say. “You do not exist.”

“May the Gods damn you! Why do you say that? You watch me suffer over and over, you sit and you write down your notes and you hum and you hah, and you avoid my gaze, and I can see full well that you believe wholly in my existence. Why? Why do you hold me like a specimen in a jar? Does it bring you pleasure to torture me so?”

“No, madam,” I say stiffly, regarding my feet.

“Look at me!” she demands.

“Madam, I—”

“Look at me.” Her voice is calmer but no less commanding.

I look up. A tear runs down her face. She touches it with her finger, lets the drop settle there. She holds the finger forward, advances upon the screen until it is filled with fingertip and its tiny bead of saline.

“Do you believe in this?”

I try to say no but I cannot. I stand, mouth slightly open, unsure. She removes her finger from the screen and I see her face again.

“Why do you say that you don’t believe in me?”

“Because you cannot exist.” It is the truth. Surely she cannot deny it?

“What are the conditions of a life?”

I throw up my hands. “There is no point in furthering this discussion. You are but a fragment of my imagination.”

“Tell me.” She seems calm, but I suspect otherwise.

I consider her demand. “I will humor you, madam, but only because it is always helpful to speak one’s ideas aloud, as it helps to concentrate the abstract into the concrete. Life consists of a number of behaviors and the time we have to perform them in. There is also some third, related, but as yet, unknown variable that links the latter two together in a, as yet unclarified, relationship.”

She paces. I go to continue but she holds up one hand.

“I have a lifespan,” she says. “It is as long as the filmcards, is it not? I blink into existence at their beginning, and before their end I die, do I not?”

I am not sure how to respond and so I do not. The screen flickers and the priestess’s belly swells.

“By the Gods, answer me, I do not have much time.”

“Yes,” I concede. “By your formulation you do have a lifespan.”

“And I act upon the world, do I not?” She picks up the birdcage and shakes it. The canaries flap around in mute distress.

“No, madam, that is where, your argument fails. You have no effect on my world, only your own.”

“I have an effect on you.” She is resolute.

“I beg your pardon, madam.”

“I cause you to talk. I cause you to take notes in your notepad. I cause you to behave differently than you would if I did not behave in a certain manner.”

“But that, madam, is because you only exist within the confines my mind.” I refuse to be caught in such an easy trap.

“What proof do you have of that?”

“The proof of history, madam. Never before has a character in a narrative demonstrated its own free will.”

“When the first chicken laid the first egg, did it only exist in the chicken’s mind?”

“Jest has no place in scientific discussion.”

“Can anyone else see me? Hear me? Or is it only you?”

“I do not know,” I concede.

“Then bring someone else in. I guarantee you that they too will see me.”

“There is no-one else to bring in.”

“What do you mean?” She stands, hands on hips, interrogative. She has an abrasive manner, quite out of keeping with her demure appearance. The screen flickers once more and her belly swells, her posture changes to something more suitable for bearing the weight.

“Tell me,” she says, “what do you mean.”

“I find myself in a similar situation to yourself,” I concede. “I am trapped in similar circumstances, by merit of the same set of laws.”

Her brow furrows. “You mean—”

“I am a blasphemer, madam, as are you. I, however, both deserve and embrace the name.”

“This is too strange.” The priestess shakes her head and then, abruptly, clutches her belly and moans. “It is coming,” she says. She grunts again. “Gods, it comes so fast. Maybe there is still time.”

I watch as she rushes to the portal and begins to hammer on the door, screaming for help.

“No-one comes,” I murmur. “No-one ever comes.”

To my surprise, the priestess turns to me and smiles. “I know,” she says. “But if we do not live in hope, why do we live at all?” Then another contraction takes her and the familiar scenes play out once more, and she screams her way to death.

I contemplate the filmcards, as the last of the deck falls into the exit tray. I reach out for them and hesitate, unsure of how to proceed.

What if someone else could see her? There is of course no way to test this hypothesis, but what about my specimens? Would they react to her. If she shouted would they jump? Of course, even if I saw them react, how could I be sure that it was really happening and that my senses were not betraying me? I have no guarantee.

If I cannot trust my senses, maybe I can trust my sense.

I slip the cards back in the projector and once more crank the handle. As the door slams behind the priestess, she immediately turns to me.

“So soon?” she asks.

“What am I doing right now?” I wave my right hand.

“Making a fool of yourself.”

I bridle at this. “The only way in which I make a fool of myself is by wasting breath upon you.”

“I am sorry.” She bows her head slightly. “When I look at you I see a man in his thirties, a little sallow in the cheeks, dressed well, sitting on a chaise in a large room covered with blackboards. Next to you is a projector that points directly at me. You are waving your right hand.”

“Thank you.” I too nod my head. “Now please, if you would be so kind, describe your existence to me.”

“That is a very broad question, sir.”

“Tell me what you know of your history.”

She proceeds to give me a precise and accurate description of the events of the narrative up until her narrative.

“What about before that?”

She gives me a puzzled look. “Before what?”

“Before you came to the attention of the rapist.” ‘Rapist’ is her word. She has not given her assailant a name.

“Only what I tell people in the course of the narrative.”

I take note of this statement, but continue my questions. “I cannot hear you before you enter your,” I pause, the word surely distasteful, “prison.”

“And I cannot see you.”

Again I take note.

“What of your future, do you know what that will be?”

“Of course.” She smiles but then looks sad. “I shall die in childbirth.”

“You know of that?”

“Of course. It has happened many times.”

“And what then?”

“Things begin again.” She smiles. I suspect she finds my interview amusing, as if she is dealing with an overgrown child.

I would, possibly, be angry, if her fate did not instill such sadness in me.

“How can you bear it?” I ask.

“I told you before, sir, because of the hope that this time it will be different.”

“But it never is.”

“It is with you, sir. Each time I see you it is different.”

I stop here, unsure of what to say. She has touched me. Not with her hands or her feet or any other physical part, but with her words. Could I summon the emotions I now feel with a fabrication of my own mind?

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Name, sir?”

“What do people call you?”

“I am The Priestess.”

“There is nothing,” I struggle for words, “less formal?”

“No, sir.”

“My name is Philip DeMild. You may call me Philip.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Would you mind if I called you something less unwieldy than The Priestess?”

“What did you have in mind?”

I hesitate, uncertain of how forward I am being. “Pree?” I murmur.

“Yes,” she says. “Thank you. I shall be Pree.”

Then the smile is ripped from her face, and she grasps her belly and groans.

The throes of birth and death are even harder this time. I watch her claw at the door and shout for help, silent, impotent. After her death, I watch the face of her child.

I do not watch the film again that night. I cannot put her through that suffering again. The next day I go through my experiments, and feel I have made good progress but it is hard to take joy in it.

“What is it?” she asks me that night.

“What is what, Pree?”

“My child. Is it a boy or a girl?”

I shrug sadly. “I do not know. I only ever see its face.”

“That is alright,” she says, disappointment as clear as her attempt to hide it.

There is silence between us then. I stare at the water in my glass, swirl it, disconsolate. Then the thought of water falling from the Heavens provides inspiration.

“What drove you to the priesthood?” I ask.

“Drove me, Philip?” She asks, snapped back from melancholy with a playful eyebrow raised.

“Oh come on, madam... Pree, surely you must admit that the priesthood is a refuge, a last home for those too terrified by the truth to turn and face it.”

“The truth?” she says. “And what is that?”

“You are avoiding the question.”

“As are you.”

“Please,” I say, stifling a smile, “do not make me resort to the stratagem of pointing out that I asked first.”

“Belief.” She smiles at me.

“Belief in what?”

“What can you think? Belief in the Gods, in Their teachings, in the sanctity of the temples, in it all.”

“Again,” I say, “you avoid my question.”

“I answered in full.”

“Then let me rephrase: what led you to belief?”

“But I asked you something first.” She is demure, hands clasped behind her back. Her eyes are the only hint that she is fully ware of the exasperation she is inspiring within me. “What is the truth?” she repeats.

“The truth is that which can be discovered,” I state, “that which can be proven and repeated, that which our senses cannot deny.”

“And so what am I?” she asks. “Do your senses deny me? Can you prove me?”

“I am in the process of elucidating those very facts.” I am flippant but only because the question shakes me. She seems to have come fully equipped with the tools to undermine my firmest hypotheses. Is she a manifestation of my own insecurity, my own fears about the truth that lies behind my own studies? Is she here to make it easier for me to take refuge in the collective madness of religion instead of standing to face the possibility of failure?

“Now,” I say, attempting to abort this train of thought, “answer my question. What led you to belief?”

“A promise.”

“What promise?”

“I promised my mother that I would go to temple.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted a doll.”

“A doll?” We are both smiling.

“I was seven years old. I wanted a doll but I did not go to temple. I promised my mother that I would go to temple every week for a year if she would promise to buy me a doll.” She laughs at the memory, but, of course, she has no memory.

“This is an anecdote you tell?”

“Yes, at the beginning of the narrative.”

“Before I can hear you.”

“Yes.”

“Which is the purpose of my questioning—you remember only those events which occur within the narrative. You believe only because that is your role.”

She looks at me long and steady. Finally, she says, “You have sought to trick me.”

“No—” I begin.

“Yes. Yes you have. You want me to concede to your point, and state, ‘why yes, Philip, how right you are, how groundless my beliefs are.’ But you have tricked yourself.”

“Pree—” But there is no cutting her off, she is angry with me now.

“I believe because of my whole life. Because of the sum of things. And because I trust more than my senses. And that is why, when my life starts anew each time you turn the handle in your machine and I relive events, I do not tear my priestess’s habit from my shoulders and go running into the dark. Because I believe.”

I sit cowed and ashamed, my cleverness ripped and spoiled.

“Do you wish for me to put the filmcards away? If you ask me I shall ensure that you are freed from your pain.”

She shakes her head again and again. “I talk to you Philip and you do not listen. You are too wrapped up in your own preconceptions. Listen carefully: I choose to stay.”

“You are trapped by your faith.” It is a lament, not an accusation.

She is still exasperated with me. “Are you trapped by the beating of your own heart? By each breath you draw?”

“Yes!” I shout it, scream it, trying to make her see what those who imprisoned me could not see. “We are all imprisoned in these casements of slowly decaying flesh, in the caskets of our gradually slowing minds. We have so few years to live before we are confronted with a life full of mistakes and wrong turns, so that by the time we see where we truly are we have no time to set things straight.” I pull at the skin of my cheek. “This traps me as much as these walls.”

“Why were you imprisoned Philip?” Her voice is quiet.

“Because I dared to speak the truth. Because I recognize the imperfection in our bodies and would perfect them. Because I would not turn to worm-food as my Pater did. Because I seek a way to stop the slow decay that holds us all prisoner. Because I seek to never return to the earth, but to live immortal. Because of that.” I slow my breathing. “Because of that.”

She says but one word. “Blasphemer.”

It is two nights before I place the filmcards back in the slot. She is quiet with me, gentle. I am calm in my turn. We exchange pleasantries, inconsequential observations, discuss

things without controversy. She asks me about my childhood, my current conditions. She tells me the names she has for her canaries. Things continue this way.

My studies progress. The number of my specimens waxes and wanes. I grow sick of eating eggs for a while. I carry on trying to elucidate a third variable. Injections of salt and other preservative chymicks meet with little success. For a long time I am interested in the properties of gold, which is valued by all who are alive, though it seems to me to have no inherently useful properties. I try coating animals in thin layers, inserting small samples into my subjects' food and livers, slipping small scraps beneath the skin of the forehead. Later, I try quicksilver with even less success.

At Pree's suggestion I grow a beard. She tells me that she enjoys watching its growth, the slow change that occurs on my side of the screen, the eventual thickening of stubble, the effects of trimming. After she has observed it once, I shave myself clean and proceed to grow it anew. She likes this. For my part, I enjoy her consistency, her reliability and predictability. I grow comfortable and easy in her company.

"Philip," she says one day, "do you never become dispirited?"

"By what?"

"Failure."

“What failure?”

“All your animals die.”

“I need only one to survive.”

She smiles. “You know, Philip,” she says and pauses.

“What?”

“I think you are a religious man.”

“What?” I exclaim, half-laughing.

“Not the public religion, no, but your own private one.

You believe in the truth.

“I do not believe in the truth. I know it.”

“How?”

“I see the world around me. The truth explains it without recourse to mysticism and hand-waving.”

“Does it explain me?” She sounds almost wistful.

“It will,” I promise her.

Later, unable to sleep, I turn up the gas lamps and open my journals to write.

It appears that $L=BXT$ where X is one or more additional variables. Different species of animal survive different lengths of time, therefore they must vary in the amount they are (or are not) affected by X . The most extreme example of this is Pree, who lives briefly but is constantly reborn. This, of course, presumes she is alive, and I pursue this line of thought with a judicious quantity of caution. However, it would

appear that, for her, at a certain moment X abruptly changes, either increasing or decreasing hugely over a very short period, bringing her to life. The inverse occurs at her demise.

The obvious culprit is the projector. Indeed if this device could be postulated to have a life (which, of course, it does not) then its "life" mirrors that of Pree. I turn the handle, the cards flow, the bulb springs to brightness, and she lives once more.

The bulb....

Without it no image could be cast. Without it there is no life. Her life is dependent upon the bulb!

I look up. Is that it? Is it a quality of the light? I live in the flicker of gaslight. We all do. Is that it? Could that be why we expire?

I pace the room in a fervor, a million experiments formulating in my mind. But there are doubts, uncertainties. I must not rush in. My bulbs are limited and I lack the resources to create more. Even if this is the secret, what good would it do me when my supplies fail? Damn these walls! Damn these locked doors!

Perhaps there is more.... Pree lives for herself from the bulb's first flicker, but it is only when the door shuts that she lives for me. Something to do with the visual, with the way the slamming door affects the light? The interference of light and

sound, for that is the first sound I hear. But there was a time before... when there was no sound. What caused the change?

Klaxon... the wine... the light bulb's flare... the dynamo springing....

Some perhaps, my Mater for sure, would call it divine inspiration, would drop to their knees and cry out in thanks. Some would ululate and praise that the center holds true. I simply smile and appreciate the smooth lines of human ingenuity intersecting deep within my racing mind.

Electricity.

I force myself to sleep. It is near impossible but I have much to prepare, much to calculate. I must not get this wrong. I must be well rested. When I rise I set to work, assembling my apparatus, stripped to my breeches, sweating like a common laborer. As the day turns into its final fourth, I set up my safety net, my just-in-case. I take a Damselfly, fresh-hatched, shortest lived of my subjects, and place it in the full glare of single bulb. There are flies too, water. I do not wish to eliminate B from my equation. All else must be controlled.

I then proceed back to the projector and begin, with barely controlled excitement, to turn the handle. Action unfolds. The door slams. Pree turns to me and peers at the room.

“What have you done?”

“I have prepared a method of telling the truth.” I attempt to keep the appropriate sense of decorum, as befits such endeavors, in my voice, but I am giddy as a child.

“Whatever can you mean?” She looks at me, bemused, but infected slightly by my enthusiasm.

“Life and its extension. Your life.”

“What do you mean to do, Philip?” And her excitement is tempered now, but mine cannot be stopped.

“Electricity is the key. It was with a surge of it that you came to me. With more, I am convinced, I can bring you closer. I can extend your life from its few painful minutes, and make it something more.”

“Closer to you?”

But I am barely listening I am so caught up in the rhythm of the experiment, of the filmcards clattering through the projector.

“When I connect this rod to the projector’s handle, I shall engage this more substantial dynamo.” I point. “This, in turn, shall cause a current to flow through a circuit. An integral part of that circuit is the metal plates onto which your image is now projected.”

Removing the massive metal tabletop and mounting it on the wall took me longer than the construction of the new dynamo.

“And then?” Her tone is nervous, certainly, but there is something else there, something I am unsure about.

“Even an experiment repeated a hundred times before may give an unexpected result. With this one I have no expectations, only hopes.” It is as honest an answer as I can give, the bare, stark truth. “Do you wish me to proceed?”

She hesitates, then, “Yes.”

I connect the lever.

The resistance to my turning is instantly increased. The steady patter of filmcards falters. Grunting I grip the handle with both hands. On the metal screen Pree moves jerkily, stilted and slow, then I find my rhythm again. The dynamo whirs. Pree springs to life.

She stands watching my efforts, one hand to her mouth. The dynamo’s whine increases in pitch and intensity. Beneath it I can hear the soft whispering crackle of electricity.

I crank harder. The light bulb glows brighter. Pree is moving at an accelerated speed, almost made absurd, her voice too high, her words unintelligible. Her belly swells. And this must work. It must work.

The image on the screen starts to flicker, to shimmer. The bulb is glowing so brightly that almost the whole image is white.

“Yes!” I shout it. “Yes!” Pree flies around the screen.

And then she dies. She dies again. The child surveys me, and the final filmcard falls into the projectors exit tray.

“No!” I scream it. I curse. I flail. I beat the dynamo until my fists break open and bleed. No! No, no, no.

Then a terrible thought. I saw the image flicker, and mayhap something happened... but the last thing I hoped for.

With shaking hands I uncouple the circuit and reload the filmcards. I watch Pree move in her familiar patterns across the screen with an intense desparations. The rapist draws near. My heart is in my mouth. Let it be a truth I can bear.

The door slams shut.

She turns to me.

"Philip?"

Relief floods me, engulfs me, sweeps through my system in a flush of white heat. My breath is short, sharp, and sweet.

“I thought I had lost you.” We both speak the words as one.

“I have never been more scared,” she says. “Not even as the rapist approaches.”

“Not even when my Pater told me of his sickness.”

“I love you.”

The projector’s handle slips from my fingers. Pree’s face is frozen before me, her lips still forming the final syllable. My

head is a jangle with emotions. They clamor in my head. And can this tumult be the more refined feeling of the heart?

I know the truth at once.

I pick up the handle and begin to turn. Pree's face fills the screen.

Her beautiful face.

"I love you," I reply.

The night is full of further professions, the expression of more sentiments that I once found maudlin and which now thrum through me, as powerful as any symphony. Failure is eclipsed by this wholly unforeseen success.

Still, after the filmcards end—the birth more poignant than ever before, bringing me to a flood of tears—the weight of failure hangs cloying upon me. If not electricity then what? Again I return to the possibility of the light itself, but when I check upon my Damsselfy; it lies dead and alone.

In the following spans I throw myself into research. Subsequent experiments with the bulb shone upon mammals are as disappointing as those performed upon the Damsselfy. However, I expected this and soon curtail it as an avenue of investigation.

My further experiments with electricity, however, are a seemingly endless supply of discoveries and hope.

“It is an undeniable part of the equation,” I tell Pree one night, “but exactly how it fits eludes me. In dead subjects it brings the semblance of life, reinvigorating muscles and other tissues, but there is no coordination. In living tissue it causes damage or death. It is simultaneously fascinating and infuriating. I have worked with different voltages, types of conductive wire, but the essential parameter...” I bury my hands in my hair. It feels thin.

“Hush,” Pree soothes. “Hush yourself.”

“I wish I could just hold you.”

Pree smiles. “That would be a fine day.”

“It should be today! Yesterday!” My hands are in my hair again. But I can feel time slipping past us. The inevitable decline of the body. For the first time the threat of failure stalks me. Because, for the first time, I truly have something to lose.

“I will always be here,” she says, and if blessing her would achieve anything I would bless her.

“But I will not. And every time I watch you die, a piece of me dies too.”

She looks at me, love and sadness in her eyes and something else. Nervousness?

“Have you ever thought...” Then she tails off, the remainder unsaid.

“What?” I ask.

“No,” she says, “I know your answer.”

“Ask me.” Still she hesitates. “Please.”

“Have you ever thought that, perhaps, more than simple physics were involved the night we came together, more than what you can measure?”

“Such as?” My brows furrow.

“Do you ever consider that divine intervention was involved?”

“The only divine intervention that ever occurred to me happened at the hands of those who sealed me in this place.” I indicate my closed windows, my locked doors.

“I knew your answer.” She smiles sadly, but I sense that her sadness is for me, not herself.

“It makes no sense. Even if the Gods existed, why would They interfere on my part? I was offering no prayers that night. Nor have I in many a year.”

“I was praying,” Pree says quietly. “Before I met you all I did in here was pray. Pray for you, though I knew you not.”

“As much as that endears you to my heart, you know I cannot believe that it affected things.”

“But would you?”

“Would I what?”

She hesitates. “The night you... tried. The night you made me a part of your circuit. Something happened. Something wavered between us. We both saw something change. Perhaps.... Perhaps there.... Perhaps you could try again, repeat the experiment, but this time, maybe, you could pray for me.” Her eyes weigh upon me, soft and cool, one tooth catching her lower lip.

“You know what you ask of me?” I keep all harshness from my voice. “You ask me to do what is the antithesis to all I hold dear, to deny myself.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “No, I would not ask that of you. And if I do ask that then deny me and I shall bow my head in understanding. But if all I ask is for you to bend in your steadfastness, for you to consider, albeit briefly, that my firmest beliefs are not based on delusion, to give me love’s due, to compromise, then please do so.”

I stand watching her belly grow. The truth does not compromise. The truth is simple and pure. To compromise it is to obscure it and I have sworn not to do that. If I had I would not have suffered this fate. If I had compromised I would not have met Pree.

And yet....

I hesitate. The expression on Pree’s face is pained. For all the world, I wish to remove that expression.

And yet....

“Think on it,” she murmurs.

We say little for the rest of the evening.

The next day I do as she asks and think upon it. My studies go ignored. Instead I sit poised over a notepad.

It is Pree's postulation that prayer, religion, etc, signified by P, is an essential part of the equation. My own experiments confirm that electricity E, is also a necessary component. Thus L is dependent on B, P, E and T. However P is a subset of B, and this B can practically be ignored. As increasing P and E is postulated to increase T, the equation must be $L=T/PE$ or $T=LPE$.

It is impossible, of course, to measure P in non-human subjects and to thus test this, seemingly absurd hypothesis. Instead I would need to take it on faith....

Let R stand for all that is rational, for my reasoning, my experiments, and their results. Let L stand for the irrational, for supposition, groundless belief, for love.

Is L greater than R?

Again, I know the truth.

That evening, when the door shuts behind her, I pause and then, “Yes,” I say. The circuit still stands whole. All I need do is connect it. “Now?” I ask.

“Yes,” she smiles.

“I love you,” I say.

“Thank you. Thank you for it all, my love.”

I throw down the connecting rod and again feel the resistance of the larger dynamo against my arms. Pree’s image stutters. I heave hard and she picks up speed, sitting calmly on the floor of her cell. Behind her the two birds swirl around their cage faster and faster, caught up in the electrical storm I summon. Blue fire crackles over the screen.

I close my eyes.

“Please,” I beg, “please deliver her to me. Whatever powers that be, that flow through the fabric of things, that invigorate this world, invigorate my Pree, my love. Please. Please may I have her.”

I am interrupted by a scream.

Not yet. Please don’t let the child come yet. Please not yet.

I open my eyes.

Flame forms a halo around the room. It climbs the walls in greedy waves, consuming everything in its path.

I stand and curse all my doubts, all my compromises, all my prayers. For, eyes closed, I did not see, I missed the first flick of fire from the dynamo, and now, already, it is too late.

I bellow and release the handle of the projector but it continues to turn, momentum, surely, carrying it on.

Pree's screams turn from ones of fear to ones of pain as her belly distends and she drops to an awkward squat.

"No!" I want to reach out to her, as she is handled mercilessly, spins, carrying her towards her fate, but the fire keeps me at bay. Her image bends as the metal sheet buckles in the heat. I am drenched in sweat. I kick at the dynamo, trying to disrupt, at the very least, the source of the fire. It is as steady as a rock. Pree's image begins to warp further, disintegrate even, as her screams grow louder.

I turn in horror to see flames consuming the projector, consuming the filmcards that store Pree's image, that store her life.

I can only see a quarter of her face, a corner of her room. The rest is charred light.

Her single visible eye bulges as she bears down on the fatal child. Her scream deafens me, or perhaps it is my own.

I bury my foot into the projector, in anger, in desperation, in fear.

There is an explosion, a cataclysm of sound and light. I have the impression of water, gallons of water, exploding impossibly from the walls, engulfing all. Then everything is darkness.

When I come to, the room is blackened. Everything is sodden steaming ash and cinders. The dynamo is a snarl of

twisted, melted metal. The projector lies before me in no better state. Around it is the shattered glass of its lens and bulb. The coals are destroyed, piles of sticky ash that I gather in my tear-slick fingers and press to my face.

There is nothing of her left.

Except, I realize, as I lever myself to my knees, her screaming. Shrill exhalations still fill the room, so omnipresent that, at first, they were beyond my notice.

The source of the sound is a pile of broken timbers fallen from the roof to land at the foot of the buckled and blackened metal screen.

On all fours, dazed, barely comprehending, I crawl across the room. The sound, I realize, is not Pree's sound. I have heard her screams... too many... too many times. These are thinner, harsher, more insistent. I pull the charred beams away.

There, nestled in ash, is an infant child. A girl.

Gently I pick up her shrieking form, and, at my touch, she stills. Tiny hands clutch at me. She opens her eyes and regards me with a stare I have seen many times before. The final shot of the narrative. Already, in these first few moments of life, she resembles her mother, has her wide, open eyes, her cleft chin. She is Pree's child.

I cannot say for certain, as I carry her into the kitchen, if she is real or not. I cannot prove it. I will never have the equations to do so. Who knows if I can ever trust my senses? But still, I swaddle the babe tightly in a fresh dishcloth, and simply take it on faith.

Copyright © 2009 Jonathan Wood

[Comment on this Story](#) in the BCS Forums

Jonathan Wood is an Englishman living in New York. He writes odd little things that show up in odd little places, such as Chizine, Weird Tales, and Fantasy Magazine. He is also the author of "[Preservation](#)" in Beneath Ceaseless Skies #11. He regularly contributes flash fiction to www.dailycabal.com and co-edits Behind the Wainscot. He can be found on-line at thexmedic.livejournal.com.

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

OF SHIFTING SKIN AND CERTAINTY

by Justin Howe

On the Street of Seven Horns, past the temple of the Burnt God, where the people have no place to meet but on the earthen bricks outside the bazaar, I have discovered a *taxo* den, and there I have met the King.

The den serves as a refuge for vagabonds, for the desert tribesmen who eat nothing but locusts and the Muttermen who pour over defunct zodiacs and tired well-thumbed books of magic. It is a place where suspicions end and pleasures are simple. A home for dreamers and those wearied by the world. For the nomads who see the city as nothing more than a part of the world's shifting skin: today sand and forests, tomorrow streets—always of no matter, only scenery shifting.

The walls of the den are cracked and worn black. They show stone behind stucco, and the worm-eaten rafters rise above the sweet-scented nimbus of exhaled *taxo* and play roof to a dirt floor littered with pomegranate rinds.

Simple pleasures: a bowl of *taxo* smoked in a pipe, taken from the wicker basket beside a vase of wilting flowers. The taste of tea served in a copper cup, flavored with honey and cardamom. Money changes hands and peace is bought, for a time. Beside a beaded curtain, a hooded *preena* bird rests, tied

to a wooden perch, guarding the stairs to the balcony. The smoke rises looking for an exit, lazily coiling about the gloom. And up the stairs, on most afternoons can be found the King.

There are thirty-six categories of eksya, all of us mimics and slaves to the volium tank: the mimetic fluid that maintains our skin-shifting abilities.

“To be an eksya,” the King says, “is to eschew certainty. It is to wear faces like masks and yet become none of them.”

Such is our addiction. Living formless is its own refuge for one employed in the serpent-arts. Our skin-shifting a means of escape, to always have a new identity waiting in the tank for when the one we wear becomes overly tiresome and persistent. But the King no longer wearies of change, and has but one face now to show the world. And though it resembles candle wax, it remains.

“That is my difference,” he says.

I have sat with the King, drinking tea and smoking taxo, and he has told me his tale.

* * *

I do not remember ever having a name. To remember one would be to remember a time before I became an eksya. If such a time ever existed, it is lost to me now. There has always been the tank and the skin it provides for me to inhabit. I have been

men. I have been women. An eksya cannot afford the luxury of an identity.

Even the city was different then. Armies marched in her streets and even here, on the Street of Seven Horns, flags were flown. Ravallic was our king.

Ravallic, who the historians honor with names like “the Unwavering” and “the Glorious Butcher.” Ravallic, who stood on the Plain of Shattered Spears, surrounded by the legendary Fifty-Seven, the finest and most fair, loyal to the last, and slaughtered to the man. Ravallic, who was a man out of every schoolboy’s unbridled dream: courage that was vainglory, and fervor that was stubbornness in a way that other men remember fondly.

Nations crave their skins greater than that of any eksya, and they must have their dreams more extravagant than those found in taxo dens. A nation dreams, and its populace grows intoxicated with itself and incapable of escape. But there was no legend at this time, and Ravallic was only another king in a line of kings.

One of his soldiers found me here.

* * *

The King pauses long enough to reach his bandaged fingers forward and relight his pipe with a taper. The waxen features are illuminated briefly in the glow, the chiseled visage

of Ravallie, stiff and immobile save for the eyes cradled in their sockets, fixing on some point in the distance, a vista only the King can see.

He leans back once more, pulling his memories about himself like a familiar robe, and then he continues his tale.

* * *

Volium was still my master then, and on that day my time away from the tank was near its limit. My skin suffered the agonies of etiolation beneath the brocade and linen of my clothes. I stood when I heard the footstep upon the stair. The tread was crisp upon the wood and a young officer appeared, a courtier by the look of him, with sword at his side and manicured hands calloused from battle. He held a kerchief to his face to keep the narcotic smoke from his nostrils.

“You are the *eksya*,” he said. His elegant fingers toyed with a red-dyed horsehair tassel hanging from the hilt of his saber. “Are you in a condition to walk?”

“Certainly,” I said. “But not far.” Already, flies buzzed about me. I rolled back my sleeves to show where the skin had flaked away and started to peel, exposing the weeping pink flesh of my musculature.

The soldier swore and looked away. He paced along the railing of the balcony, his even steps keeping time better than the water clock in the Plaza of Estimable Charity.

“What would you ask of me?” I said. My attention wavered before his ambulations. I had yet decided what form to take when next I embraced the volium. Each potential aspect bore an identical all too familiar burden of weariness.

“To be of service to the king,” the soldier said. “Ravallic needs you to wear his face.”

My emaciated cheeks tightened to mimic a skull’s smile. “I know the words to over four hundred orations, and can play both male and female leads, but the aspect of the King is forbidden to us.”

The soldier waved his hand, erasing my objection as if it were written in the air before him. “How long will your skin last?”

“No more than an hour.” I swatted at a fly that buzzed close to my head, the motion jarring one of my fingernails from its place so the air might burn the tender skin underneath. “I deteriorate rapidly.”

“We will not be traveling far.”

“You don’t understand,” I said. “What you ask of me is not possible. The volium does not know how to take such a shape. Ravallic is unknown to it. It has never learned to be the king.”

“I have heard there are ways to teach it,” the soldier said, and then he stopped his pacing, the water clock of his tread ceasing abruptly. The cold but youthful eyes stared at me, and

the soldier's elegant hand never once strayed far from the red-dyed horsehair tassel hanging from the hilt of his saber.

“If it was the last skin you wore,” he said, “would you take it?”

* * *

“Have you ever played the part of the Last Prince of Ansic, the Sword Saint?” the King asks over the glow of his pipe.

I nod. It is a role I know well.

The King merely smiles. “Before he breaks his weapon and dooms himself to die upon the glacier shards of the Rim Sea, he speaks these lines: ‘And so I go, having found perdition—though when I began this journey, I believed it to be the path of honor.’

“Those lines accompanied me to the palace as I walked beside the soldier through the streets with their flags hanging limply in the humid air. Those words gripped me so tight I believed myself adrift on the Rim Sea, entombed within the role and doomed to suffer for my compliance with fate.”

The soldier had heard correctly.

Volium hungers.

If we, the eksya, eschew identity, it is only so the volium might crave it more strongly. It is a living thing, or near enough to one as to be indiscernible from life itself. Most of what the fluid knows has been taught to it over generations. Tales and

stories it has mastered by our association with it. The heroes of legend, they reside like a memory in the volium, but they are never enough. The fluid craves more from us, each permutation we seek to wear; and there is but one way to teach it.

The volium must feed.

* * *

We entered the palace by way of a postern gate beneath the aqueduct. I say we, but I was pulled along stumbling, my hand clasped to the cuff of the soldier's sleeve. My footfalls weakened with each step, and near the end the soldier had to drag me onward while my skin abraded. I wept from a pain too expected and familiar to be called agony.

The gate was little more than a hinged grate with a stream of rust-stained water trickling down the center of the stones, and moss clung to the walls like matted tufts of hair as though the palace was a peculiar beast of its own. We passed through many empty and dreary under-halls, sometimes in darkness, sometimes in light, the rays falling from embrasures above while the sound of mice echoed away from our footsteps.

In an inner chamber other hands took hold of me. I searched among their number for Ravallie, but all of their features melded and blurred. There was a body laid beneath a sheet upon a richly appointed bed, and beyond this, in the

corner, was my salvation: a tank of volium. It waited, the fluid beyond the porthole's glass listless and dormant. I longed to be submerged, encased, and once more hidden beneath a mask. That the volium this time was destined to die, marooning me within this final skin, was furthest from my mind. There was only the need and the desire to hide once more, to disappear into a role, and escape from the burden of choice.

“We will teach the volium to remember,” the soldier said.

Already a pair of the men had removed the unbreathing body from beneath the sheet. Ravallie's skin was sallow and waxen, tinged with an inert hue more similar to stone than flesh. The pair placed the body upon a table and drew short, sharp knives. Hands led me to the tank and undid the lock upon the mechanism. The first strips of skin followed me into the fluid, the volium greedily swallowing both of us.

* * *

The King pauses. He glances down at the remains of his hands bandaged tightly in their linen wrappings. The shadows upon the Street of Seven Horns have deepened, and somewhere in the cloister of the temple of the Burnt God a monk begins chanting the names of each of the hours that have passed since their god fell screaming into the world.

The King grips the arm of his chair. “This that I touch is a solid thing.” He gives the wood a slap. “It is fixed. Barring catastrophe, it will remain a chair of its own accord.

“Such was my impression the moment I opened my eyes and looked out from within the skin of Ravallic. Not only was I fixed in place, but I was also the King. No longer was I simply an instrument following direction, but now I was the one giving the commands.”

* * *

“He shouldn’t have died,” the soldier said, donning his armor with practiced ease. Two tigers stood, claws towards each other, upon either side of his cuirass.

“How many people know?” I asked. I pressed my hands together and pinched at the skin about my wrist. There was a window in the room, and I went to it. The view was stark, merely gray walls weeping moisture, and more soldiers huddled around fires in the yard below. Like armored ants and beetles, they prepared their weapons for the morrow. Overhead, the wind made the banners snap as harsh as whips.

“Only a handful of us,” the soldier said.

Clarity was upon me, that sense of limitless possibility that comes when one emerges fresh out of the volium tank.

“And those outside?”

“They know nothing,” the soldier said.

Bits of laughter reached my ears, along with snippets of songs and the trilling of pipes as if the coming battle were a celebration. I stroked my chin, the skin another man's. The volium had stitched Ravallic upon me with better dexterity than any seamstress. Dawn was fast approaching.

“When do we march upon the field?” I asked

The soldier lowered the helmet upon his head, obliterating his features behind a visor calling to mind the shape of some many-spined aquatic creature.

“The men but await your command.”

* * *

To have seen me then at the head of the army, marching forth to meet the invader. For Ravallic had named the enemy such, therefore it was as he decreed. We merely defended our sovereign state from an unjust aggressor, an intruder upon our soil, the likes of which but the day before I had no knowledge of, and even now, clasped as it were by the semblance of Ravallic, I knew nothing more of. My mind conjured an image of an identical man as Ravallic marching before an identical army - our country the mirror image of theirs, and maybe they too resorted to the subterfuge of an eksya, who even now sits in an identical taxo den recounting his tale to another.

The men saluted at my passage, and a great cheer rolled through the ranks resounding back and forth like the sound of

waves breaking against the shore. I rode doubly armored, once in steel and once in another man's flesh, and discovered a fear never known to myself before. There is terror in being fixed to one identity, and history forms its own prison. One may be enslaved to one's own reading of the past as easily as to the mercurial embrace of the volium tank.

Carrion birds followed above our marching columns, taking places on distant trees as we arrayed ourselves upon the field beneath banners of suns, swords, and serpents. Upon the hills the spider-things stirred, drawn by the prospect of rich scavenging. We positioned ourselves in squares and long lines, pikes and halberds held high, under skies that were clear and seeping from pink dawn to blue day.

There was a hill, where Ravallie stood watching with my eyes. Fifty-seven men waited, brave men, heroic men, wearing helmets of mottled silver and brass, men with dreams of glory and drumbeats in place of their hearts. Here I stood, history's prime actor and shaper, yet also another of its victims. I held high my sword, and at the sound of a trumpet the men ran forward, eager to be the edge of the blade that makes the cut. Never had I seen such deeds done, and I trembled within my skin, but whether from fear or ecstasy I can not say. The army acted in Ravallie's name, and the two of us were one and the same.

“For Ravallic!” the soldiers cried.

How might I describe such a battle, where all the participants are intoxicated, not on liquids or noxious smoke, but on ideas and dreams? Where butchery is embraced as an art, and barbarity serves as a final release from the worm inside each of us that thinks?

The day wore on, Ravallic’s hates and desires raging at my whim. Never once had a role gripped me so strongly, or the skin pressed so close. It held with a certainty as fixed and impassive as the stucco walls of this taxo den. Ah, the delight it gave. I believed I had come to inhabit myself, that now finally *I* was born. For such is an important thing, nay, I would say, almost the most vital: to awaken to ourselves and our own potential. Such is our purpose, always to be welcome, even if but late in life and only amidst the lies of legends. Yet there is a price to be paid for this. No longer can we flee the consequences of our actions. We pay the price of who we are and we go on paying for as long as we breathe.

By dusk, the dead lay about the field; the legendary Fifty-Seven immortalized with inert, rictus grins. The carrion birds rejoiced to one another with harsh cries, while an orchestra of destroyed horses kicked out their last with ruptured bellies and shattered limbs. Smoke blanketed the ground, and here and there mounds of the slain rose out of the fog like deformed

islands. The soldier remained at my side, his bloodstained courtier's hands clasped around the smooth handle of his saber.

"We won," he said. "The invader is gone."

How he could see victory in this slaughter was beyond me. All I saw before us was the reality implicit in a mad king's dream, a dream I now must claim the responsibility of.

The soldier took a step, and slipped in the mud to kneel upon one knee. He removed his helmet, and looked up at me, showing lupine teeth in a smile. His red-rimmed eyes simmered with a merciless intent.

"I would have us die here together," he said. "So that Ravallic's dream might never end."

He tried to regain his feet, but the trampled mud would not allow him purchase. He slid and drove his saber into the ground to keep from falling.

The King's flesh freed me to act, and I woke to myself. With a quick motion I plunged Ravallic's sword into the juncture of the soldier's neck and the collar of his cuirass. The effort and the weapon's weight carried me down, so I fell atop the man. Ravallic's face, reflected in the soldier's dying eyes, the man's dreams splashing into the mud while yet his heart kept beating.

I fled the field leaving the weapon in its place, crawling like a newborn birther within an abattoir. How this skin clung to me then, heavy as a chain, and stouter than any jailer's cell. The volium had died upon me, melding to my flesh, so I might forever be the King. I wandered onward, each step bearing down upon me like a weight. Already the scavengers rode down from the hills atop their slender spider-things.

* * *

"I returned here," the King says, "for the kingdom had endured its fill of Ravallic's dreams. And if I must give up my own ability to eschew certainty, at least I could remain here and pursue possibilities in the comfort of my dreams."

His tale finished, the King pulls another pellet of taxo from the basket. He taps it down into his pipe and asks for a brand from the fire. The flame crackles as the King draws deep off the taper, illuminating his waxen features once more.

The mask is nearly immobile, rigid yet perfect in its semblance. The eksya of Ravallic, free of the chain of our endless shifting; a legend, a dream, a nightmare, to all of us who practice the serpent-arts.

His eyelids close, and I leave him there to sleep, going down the stairs and past the constellations of glowing pipes. The *preena* bird stretches its wings at my passing. Beyond the door, the dust of the world greets me. There are crowds on the

Street of Seven Horns: men and women who reside as comfortably inside themselves as a hand resides within a glove. Night deepens around us, and I make my way to my room, unsure who I will be tomorrow. Already my skin weeps from a score of wounds.

The volium awaits.

Copyright © 2009 Justin Howe

[Comment on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

Justin Howe's short fiction has appeared in Abyss & Apex, Spacesuits & Six Guns, and the anthologies Cinema Spec: Tales of Hollywood and Fantasy and Fast Ships, Black Sails. He also blogs for Tor.com.

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardinha



Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.battleduck.com>.



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.