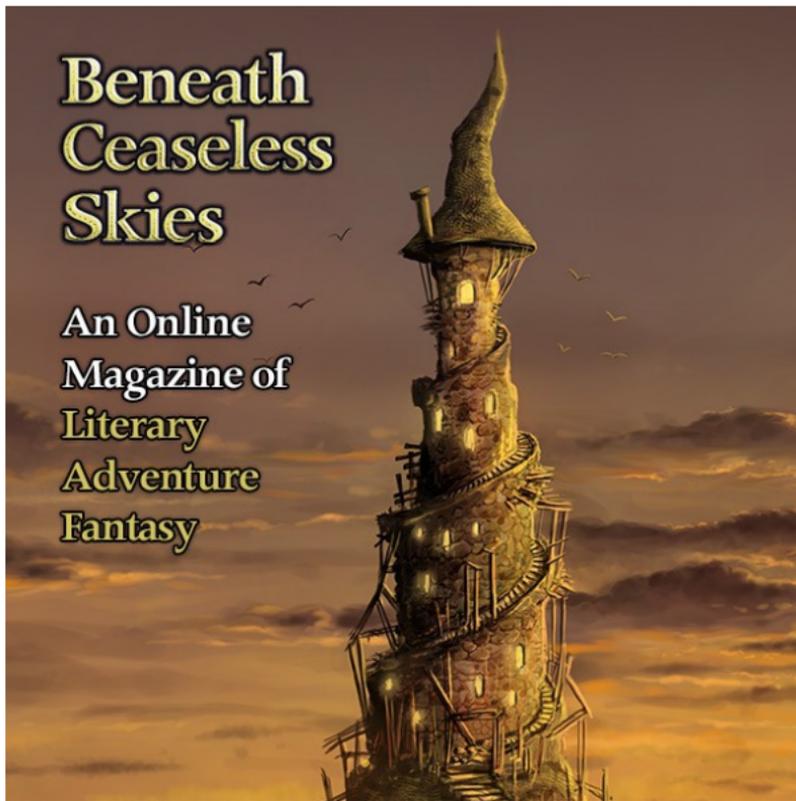


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



Issue #132 • Oct. 17, 2013

[“A Feast for Dust,” by Gemma Files](#)

[“The Adventure of the Pyramid of Bacconyus,” by
Caleb Wilson](#)

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

A FEAST FOR DUST

by Gemma Files

All that summer so far there had been no real hint of precipitation, just drought, flame, and the ash it left behind, cut with intermittent rumors of blood falling from the air.

As the place he'd started off from fell further behind, in every new township that Sheriff Jenkins added to his hastily drafted map of the surrounding territories, he found men and women who prayed for rain ever more desperately, berating first the Injuns who no longer occupied their lands, then whatever strangers were unlucky enough to wander by, then God and the Devil in turn, before finally turning—only at the last—on themselves.

Storm's coming, he'd tell them, once he'd done enough to grab their attention—then find himself constrained to add, after they inevitably greeted such a prediction with hopeful pleasure: *No, not that sort, sad to say; what it's bringin' is something you in no wise want, let alone him who brings it. Which is why you need to look to your sins and own your secret guilts right now, folks, this very instant, 'fore the curse*

of self-deception all but assures the bulk of you end up the way we did, back home....

They cursed him for a false prophet, mostly, and tried to run him off. Sometimes it came to blows, or even bullets, while other times he got off with a few harsh words, weathering them stone-faced, same as the horse-apples they chucked after him. In the end, it was enough to've given his speech, Jenkins reckoned; they were warned now, if nothing else, no matter what-all they might yet choose to do (or not do) with that same grim intelligence. And that least—the *very* least, sparse as it might be—was, frankly, the best he could probably aspire to do, given the circumstances.

Those were the good days. Bad days were when he made a sweep elsewhere, spanning as many compass-directions as he might around his target's last legitimate stopping-point, and found nothing but ruin: homesteads denuded, gore-soaked not from affray but from above, as though some wounded behemoth had floated overhead spraying grue every-which-way; graves exploded outwards and empty. All the now sadly predictable detritus, roster of attendant destruction tabled ever-upwards, with no apparent sort of end—easy, or otherwise—in sight.

For this was the trail of Sartain Stannard Reese which Jenkins followed, as he had since what was left of the man had

passed through his own home, sowing similar awfulness in his wake. Sartain Reese, known as “One-Shot”, with his Bushwhacker locks and his odd-angled pale eyes; Reese, who had ridden with Bartram Haugh in Lincoln and elsewhere, leaving enough far more natural devastation behind them both to sow broadsheets emblazoned with their linked images from here back to Missouri.

Reese, who Jenkins’s predecessor Sheriff Marten had failed to prevent his citizenry-flock from hanging off their single still-viable tree, only to see him come striding back up Main Street a night and a day later, trousers stiff with dirt and piss, to demand the guns Haugh had once gifted him with as a seal on their marriage of sorts—Satan-approved and God-decried, just like in Sodom-town of old—before shooting Reese straight through the heart, treacherously self-loving as always, and leaving him in the desert to die.

That other Sheriff was gone from this world for sure, now; Jenkins had seen full proof of it, more than enough, before prying the man’s tin star free and taking on that charge. But as for Reese, driven hither and yon to do what Jenkins could only assume was God’s judgment on every other blooded creature in his way, while truly seeking retribution on one faithless companion only... though he certainly bore his fair share of a corpse’s qualities, Jenkins somewhat suspected that one could

neither call Reese dead nor alive, at this very moment, and hope to be entirely correct in the verdict. He was a revenant, a harbinger, and where his steps took him blood followed, literally—down from the heavens first, then back up from the earth borne on a tide of hungry ghosts; a fatal crop seeded and brought to sudden bloom by Reese's own execution.

Whose blood was that you had on you, Reese? He remembered asking as they'd sat together in the jailhouse, recalling the sticky red coat Reese had worn on first entrance, before the doctor had cleaned him up enough for Marten to place his face. To which Reese replied, not even looking up, apparently too tired by far to bother being properly sociable: *Oh, somebody from round here's, I expect. Didn't you recognize it?*

Because, as Reese went on to point out—*you and yours seem good people, on the whole, from what I've seen. But there's always a reason I run across places, and you have been unlucky, so might be that's 'cause there's other people here, ones that's just like me.*

I'd know, if there was, Jenkins had maintained, steadfast-foolish, not knowing any better. And Reese had simply laughed, torn mouth bleeding enough to paint his lips, before asking: Would you? How, exactly....

(...excepting the Word of God?)

For himself, Jenkins had listened mightily hard for that Word these many weeks since, both daily and nightly, catching not the barest syllable of a reply. Indeed, he almost began to feel that all his former prayers had been in vain, seeing how the only true miracles he'd ever witnessed were of Reese's pitch-black variety.

Yet still he came on, ever farther from the vales he'd known, plagued by heat and thirst, sore in both heart and belly; he stopped only to rest, to pick stones from his horse's hooves and then walk a while, for what else was he to do? *Someone* had to warn them Reese was coming, giving them at least that slightest of chances in the face of impartial and awful justice, this sanguine Second Deluge. To protect the guilty from their guilt, the sinners from their sins, the weak from the consequence of their own weaknesses...

...thus doing, apparently, what the same absent Lord which Jenkins had been raised to praise no longer cared to.

* * *

The next "town" Jenkins reached, by nightfall, was so small it hadn't found itself a name yet: No farms as such, no real homesteads, just a combined whistle-stop and trading post which specialized in whatever the last transaction'd left behind. The fellow manning it was of origins so indeterminate it almost seemed a puzzle set for unwary travelers by a vaguely amused

and un-benign Nature. He was dressed in badly-cured hides which haloed him with stench and currently deep engaged in cleaning one of a brace of lizards for immediate jerkyfication.

Jenkins introduced himself, while the counter-tender regarded him with disinterested distrust, slopping lizard-guts up over his shirt-cuffs. He allowed as how he was hoping to meet up with a specific local someone, if possible, a concept the man either didn't appear to've ever heard of, or saw to little to approve in.

"Willicks, that was the name they gave me, back at Shortfall. Said he's your Marshal, or close enough."

"Y'huh."

"But you wouldn't know him to look at, I'm takin' it. Or where-all he might best be found at."

"N'huh."

"Cause I've been traveling a piece, sir, and when I told my story up Shortfall way, they said Fred Willicks was him I should make my case to, in *these* parts...."

"Uh," the man behind the counter put in, with some force, like he maybe meant to follow it up with more—but didn't. Jenkins stood there a long moment, waiting for elaboration before sighing and touching his hat.

Then he turned, only to be confronted by another man entirely, abruptly conjured from nothing: Cat-footed and far

more elegant in his motions than his clothes' drab cut would suggest, a luxuriant beard blurring his face, one hand on his gun-butt and the other shading his eyes, themselves hazel with just a light touch of rain-grey.

“Poor Mahershalalhashbaz here's only got half a tongue to work with, sir, thanks to bad Injuns, and that cut sideways,” the man—whose lapel, Jenkins now saw, bore a tin star as well—told him, gaze held steady. “Makes him tough to put questions to, let alone get any useful answers from. But you're in luck nonetheless, turns out: Fred Willicks is *my* name, as it happens. Which makes you?”

“Clarke Jenkins, Mister Willicks. I'm... well, I *was* from Esther, before. Not that there's much left there now.”

“Which wouldn't make you much of a Sheriff at all, then, given you lack a town to watch over.”

Jenkins shrugged, hands held carefully wide and empty, letting his full body allow as how when considered that-a-way, Willicks might have himself a point.

“You want my star, I'll gladly hand it over,” he said, “long as you do me the honor of listening to what I've got to say.”

Willicks contemplated this. “Hell,” he said, at last, “it can wait 'til I've heard out the latter to decide on the former, surely; my wife does like to entertain, not that she gets much cause for it. I'll tell her to set one place more.”

Jenkins felt himself start to relax, as Willicks said it—where he was from, men didn't invite one another to guest if they planned on doing 'em ill, after. But then again, One-Shot Reese had been a guest too, in a way, and the “good” people of Jenkins's home had swung him from a tree; bad manners at best, even if not *quite* worthy of what'd followed, at least under non-Divine law....

I do need food, though, he thought. *And rest.*

So: “Lead on,” he told Willicks, allowing his lips to shape what was probably a singularly unconvincing smile, considering how long he'd fallen out of the habit. To which Willicks merely raised a brow, and did.

* * *

Where Willicks lived, it turned out, was up above the area's sole wilting tree-line, in a cabin that was ramshackle without but snug-made within. His Missus was young, pink-pricked and crumpled like a late rose, with every part of her swelled up tight in anticipation of a second child; their first was a spry little boy of perhaps three years, changeable-eyed like Willicks yet cheerful-industrious as his dam, without even a hint of his father's hidden depths. The meal was salt pork, beans and a slab of flat-bread, which Jenkins—who hadn't eaten well in almost a week—set to with grateful pleasure.

After, with the boy dispatched to bed, Jenkins leaned close to Willicks by the fire and told his tale, in quiet measured tones. Willicks listened without comment, up 'til almost the end.

“This ‘companion’ Reese spoke of,” he began, then. “This man Haugh....”

“Bartram Haugh, yes, sir. Bewelcome’s chief architect.”

“They were in it together, shoulder to shoulder, is what I heard.”

“Maybe so,” Jenkins allowed. “I only have what Reese told me to go on, after all. And his testimony’s—suspect, at best.”

Willicks sat back, sighing. “Well, any rate. You’ve been tracking Reese a while now: what is it you think he’s after, exactly?”

“You’ve already named him, Mister Willicks,” Jenkins replied. “Was Haugh who set this off, far as I can figure—Reese bears the mark of proof right over his heart, or rather *through* it. He won’t stop ‘til he finds this false ‘friend’ of his, and visits the same judgment on Haugh for breaking their... pact as he has on every Haugh-less place he’s sojourned in thus far.”

“Then if you really want to stop him, Sheriff, it’d seem you’re going in the wrong direction entirely. Following Reese won’t help, or even hinder—it’s Haugh you need.”

Such a simple conclusion! The second Willicks let it drop, Jenkins saw his own errors at once laid bare, hideous in their utter inaccuracy. It was a slap to the face that set his ears ringing so, he barely heard what the man said next. “Sorry, again?”

“Do you know where this-all happened—the original shooting?”

“Not as such. But...” Rummaging in a waistcoat pocket, Jenkins withdrew the map he’d annotated, its modifications all shaky lead-pencil scribbles done mostly by firelight. “Here,” he said, pointing; “this came before Esther, by near a month, or so them that was left told me—found it on my initial sweep, when I was still bothering to go backwards, having no clear impression which way Reese might’ve left town by after the storm. Granted, there’s no assurance this was where he reached first, after whatever happened between ‘em... happened, but—”

“—it’s a good enough place to start.” Willicks nodded, gaze immediately drawn to where his wife sat quiet, to all appearances deep-engaged with her knitting, though her own eyes skipped hither and yon whenever she seemed to think they weren’t looking. “How long a ride, you figure?”

Jenkins made calculation. “Ten days’ hard slog, justabout. I’ve been moving slower myself, but that’s on account of

fanning to cover the most ground and knowin' what I tracked went on foot; go straight and we'll get there quick as weather allows, if the horses don't wear out."

Later still, as he sat dozing by the fire, heaped with rugs, Jenkins listened to Willicks cooing the Missus around. Given the few words she'd let drop at table, the two of 'em had met by correspondence with her an old maid already (though she hardly looked it) and Willicks well aware that his choice of job made for slim feminine pickings, entering into alliance long-distance with little hope of much more than mutual compromise. Yet by what he'd witnessed, their gamble seemed to have paid off, in spades. He hated to part such a meeting of true minds, 'specially with Willicks's wife in her gravid state and no doctor handy. So he'd all but made his mind up to beg off my morning, only to have Missus W. herself shake her head *no* at him, adamant—hair high-piled yet sleek, brown as Willicks's own, with only a thread here and there of silver.

"I knew what Fred took on before I met him, Sheriff," she said, packing both their bags with tucker. "Sacrifice is sweet to my Lord, so the Good Book says; if Jephtha gave his own daughter over for righteousness's sake, who am I to retain my man, when similarly called upon?"

"You're a strong woman, Missus."

“It’s God’s strength only, Sheriff, as all true strength is. And I’ll look to see you later, both of you, when this charge of yours is fulfilled.”

Jenkins tipped his hat to her prediction, sending up a brief sketch of a prayer himself—perhaps useful, perhaps not, depending on who might be listening—that the next few days wouldn’t disprove it.

* * *

What might’ve been Reese’s first foothold out the grave had already been mostly dead when Jenkins surveyed it, those months past. Now it was entirely empty, broken like eggshell, a slack rind of itself sucked dry and left open to the wind; dust and weeds had made the streets their home, sand blowing in through shattered shop-windows and doors left careless-open in its few surviving residents’ headlong scramble to vacate the premises, to eddy ‘cross the floors in an aimless devils’ dance.

Jenkins slipped down and went to tether his horse, expecting Willicks to follow him. But the Marshal-by-self-election stayed obdurately mounted, hands slipping to hips as he swung his head, eyeing the place up and down. “Where-all’d they hang this One-Shot Reese of yours, exactly?” he inquired. “Don’t see any trees handy....”

Jenkins wracked his brain. “Uh... from the saloon’s roof-tree, if I recall a’right. Had to haul him up with five volunteers

pulling, then wait for him to go slack before the doc had the town smith jerk on his legs a few times, make sure his neck was good and broke.”

“He must’ve complained though, surely, when he realized what they had in mind as regards his ending—raved some, or cursed, or both. Maybe tried to turn tail, to flee? For it’s a truly heartbreaking sight, when the gallows you’re being drawn to is made by amateurs.”

“No,” Jenkins said, not thinking to wonder how Willicks came by this particular intelligence. “I don’t think so; never heard Sartain Reese to’ve acted the coward, neither behind a gun or in front of one. They told me they found him stone, mostly, right up to the drop... same as in every other place.”

He had his back to Willicks now, still looking up at the building in question, head cocked in memory. Which is why he couldn’t know exactly what might’ve accompanied the little sigh Willicks gave in answer, be it shrug or grimace, contempt or sorrow—an admixture of both, perhaps, those hazel eyes taking on a momentary shine. Yet he did hear the sound of iron clearing leather, if too late, half-turning on the hammer’s cock, so the bullet took him not neatly in the spine (as must’ve been Willicks’s intention) but messily in the side, punching through and through with such force it spun him to fall at his own mount’s hooves. The pain was ferocious, so bad he could barely

breathe, let alone speak; he lay there looking up, and saw his traveling companion—

(friend, my dearest)

(never thought to see you here, sergeant)

—slip from the saddle at last, graceful as sin, to stand there reloading, unhurriedly, with the sun behind him dimming his face to a merest silhouette: Pleasant, well-spoken Fred Willicks simply all at once gone, his wife's joy and his young son's pride extinguished, with nothing left behind but a ruthless, calculating liar, thief, and murderer—candle-snuffed as though he'd never existed, though Jenkins could only assume he *had*, at least up 'til this son-of-a-bitch had played much the same trick on him.

“That does sound like him,” the man who'd taken Willicks's place at some point admitted, clicking onto the spent chamber to reload it, before spinning the replenished cylinder with a showman's flair. “For Sartain's a gentleman first and foremost, you see, immured through long tradition with the idea of striking honor's pose under even the severest sort of duress—to stand fast and take your medicine, setting an example for the rest, no matter how fools around you rage and squall, or let their stupidity-aiding hatred present you with opportunities of escape. Not like me, sad to say.”

Jenkins coughed up blood, then almost strangled on it going back down. “No,” he agreed, finally, once he’d retched his air-pipe clear again. “Not like *you* at all, from what I heard... Bartram Haugh.”

At this, Haugh really did shrug. Pointing out: “And yet, you might well notice—’tween the two’ve us, chivalrous Mister Reese and me, *I*’m the only one that’s still alive.”

“So you... do believe he’s the revenant I... painted him, at least.”

“Oh, stranger things’ve happened, I suppose. Hell, who would have ever thought I’d find some nonentity such as Fred Willicks’s ridiculous little life a fair enough fit to shape myself to? Then again, it was Phyllida who did the trick on that one, really, turning up on the next stage after like she did, all fresh and ready for love; had stars in her eyes the moment she heard his name come out my mouth, so who was I to disappoint?”

“U’huh,” Jenkins managed, unintentionally imitating verbally-truncated storekeep Mister Mahershah-whatsit. “N... then, there’s hers and your... son, too...”

“Simon, yes—he’s mine sure enough, poor mite, no matter his last name. May he never have need to discover his own in-born capacities, in future.”

Haugh put just enough resonant tone of emotion into this last that Jenkins could almost think he meant it, 'til he remembered who he was talking to.

“Truth to tell, I thought you knew already,” he continued, conversationally. “That this quest of yours was some ruse, a protracted wild goose chase, calculated to get *me* out where you could pull a gun and collect the Union’s money. But it took a bare half-day’s ride with you for me to see how lamentably honest a fellow you really are, Sheriff, and that’s when I decided to let our trip here play itself to the full—further away you took me, after all, the less likely anybody’d be to prevent me covering your corpse over, once our business was done.”

“Always meant t’... kill me, then... is what you’re sayin’.”

“Well, *yes*. You’d’ve wrecked what I’ve built, otherwise, and I can’t have that.”

Jenkins coughed yet once more, and murmured something wetly in on top of it—

Haugh leant in, waiting for him to repeat it.

“I...pity you,” Jenkins said, finally, drawing a snort. He rolled his eyes far enough to glimpse something both sudden and surprising, though horribly familiar. And closer by far too boot than he would’ve ever expected, given the softness of its approach—

Haugh, however, noticed none of the above, being far too in love with the sound of his own voice, and continued to muse aloud: “Well, that’s your choice, little good as it’ll do you, or me... for you see, Sheriff, I’m no firm believe in God at all, let alone his mercy, or his judgment either. Christ knows what it was you thought you saw, back there in—Esther, was it?—but Sartain Reese had about as little to do with it as grace has with error: I shot him down, saw the front of his heart pop out from under his breast-bone in a spray, and I’ve killed more than enough men in my time to know the way they fall. Reese could tell you the same, if you was here.”

To this, and with gross effort, Jenkins could conjure only a dull creaking noise—something he himself was surprised to recognize, eventually, as laughter.

“Hysteria, eh? That’s one way to salve the sting. But we’ve chatted long enough, for my money, so... damn, what *are* you lookin’ at, anyhow?”

Said a voice from behind, preternaturally calm: “Always did please you to think me a fool, Bart, just as it pleased me to let you. But that’s over with, now.”

(Much like all else.)

These few words—or just the sound of ‘em, Jenkins didn’t wonder—were enough to turn outlaw Bart Haugh, a man with more sins on his soul than Judas and three thousand-odd

dollars on his head, sheet-white. He turned towards their speaker, slow as river weed current-caught, perhaps unaware he was even doing so; blanched yet further when he saw who stood there, making all the tiny, charm-crinkled lines on his face stand out like scars.

For: it was the man himself, of course—though “man” might no longer be the most accurate term, Jenkins thought, given. “One-Shot” Reese, in whatever he used for flesh, corporeal enough to touch yet inhumanly mutable under pressure; Sartain Stannard Reese, his sandy locks slicked down with the same phantom blood still sticky-coating him from head to toe, skull topped in a buzzing black crown of flies. He cocked his head, regarding Haugh narrowly through almost yellow eyes, and watched that anything-but-gentleman go suddenly all a-tremble, shook juiceless, same as some storm-withered leaf.

“Been quite the spell, Bart,” Reese told him, unhurriedly, like they were chatting over supper. “Yes, I did have myself some rare difficulty, finding you. But then, you always did know how to make us both scarce, when it suited your plans best.”

Haugh gulped, straining for even the smallest measure of his usual sanguine humor. “Sartain—” he began, only to find himself cut off when Reese waved him silent.

“The Sheriff here has a fair idea how long I’ve been at it,” he continued, indicating Jenkins, “not to mention the cost of my quest, to me, and others. Oh, but I walked so far and found so *very* little, ‘sides from a grinding sameness! Delivering judgment on others, yet finding no respite of my own... it was enough, frankly, to drive me to despair. Until, just the other day, I received possible word of my imminent respite, and from the most unlikely of sources—that still, small voice above I catch just a whisper of, I only strain hard enough, letting slip how after all this time, *you* were finally comin’ to meet *me*.”

Haugh shook his head frantically, shoulders hiked like he wanted to back away but couldn’t gather the necessary steam. Instead he stayed fear-rooted while Reese stepped closer, stained boot-soles leaving reddish clumps of print on the street beneath; looked back Jenkins’s way as he did so, watching him spit up a pint or so more of his own blood to keep his airways open, and sighed at the sight.

“Should’ve kept to your own place, Sheriff, ‘specially after I worked so hard to clear it out for you—but I guess you know that, already. Who’d you leave in charge?”

“Good men,” Jenkins half-retched, in reply. “Not... too many left t’make... trouble for ‘em, after you was... done with us.”

“Well. S’pose you can take some consolation, then, knowing they won’t need to rely on your return.” To Haugh: “And what about *you*, sergeant? For I do hear you made a place for yourself on the other side of things, putting your skill at preying on your own kind to good use.”

“I was a marshal, or close as makes no never-mind. Took a wife, made a son. Got another coming.”

Reese nodded, with just a hint of sympathy. “It’s a hard world for those abandoned, and that’s the truth. But it’s hardly their fault the man they call father and husband can’t be trusted to recall how he made his true troth-pledge years back, to *me*.”

“That, between us—that was boys’ foolery, Sartain. Spartan fun, best kept for Army days.”

“Was that all? No, I don’t think so; much as I pity this gal you tricked into bed with you, least she’ll make your children a home and pray for you after, little as you deserve any such thing. You and I, though—we’re shield-brothers sworn, blooded together in battle, now and hereafter. Remember the song you taught me, riding away from Lincoln? That was prophecy, ‘friend’, disguised in tune. Don’t believe I’ve ever let it out of my mind since.”

And here he tipped his gory head back, conjuring a low and moaning refrain—some dour Appalachian holler slowed ‘til

its verses stuck fast in the mid's crevasses, harmfully catching, like lines from a Satan-inspired hymnal.

*Oh the owl, the owl
Is a lonesome bird
It chills my heart
With dread and terror
That's someone's blood
There on its wing
That's someone's blood
There on its feather...*

A pause, followed by this conclusion, with a mindful glance Haugh's way—

*But now I know
That time has come
When you and I
Shall be as one.*

“Not now,” Bart Haugh denied it, in return, his voice like dust. “Oh God, no. Not now, not *now....*”

“As well now as any other time, don't you think—for given all you've done, did you really believe there'd be no consequences to come?” Reese gave a cold sketch of a smile. “If so, consider yourself schooled, for here I stand, a walking object lesson; your destiny's sketch, guilty on every charge, with only the barest fraction of my due payment yet rendered.

And I did nothing at all, Bart, that *you* hadn't done first, or told me to."

"My job, it began as a jest, yes—but I was *good* at it. I've got a *boy*." Hopeless: "Doesn't that count, for anything?"

Reese shrugged. "Should it?"

Maybe not, Jenkins thought, too exhausted to stay even minimally upright. And fell face-down before he could hope to stop it, filling his bloody mouth with dust—dry dust turning pink, then red, becoming mud.

He choked himself to sleep, in fullest expectation of never waking again.

* * *

Much later, after he *did* revive, laid up convalescent in what had been Bart Haugh's bed—or Fred Willicks's, rather, a notion he never could bring himself to disabuse the Widow Willicks of, even once she'd finally agreed to swap her lost spouse's name for Jenkins's own—Jenkins made sure to tell her how "Willicks" had gone down fighting, bravely managing to transpose himself 'tween Jenkins and their supernatural foe, and paying the price for his heroism. He slathered detail on detail, 'till by the fourth repetition, the story ended with "Willicks" throwing his life away gladly by all but grabbing "One-Shot" Reese and dragging that troubled creature single-

handed down to whatever cell awaited him in the Infernal realms, instead of... the opposite, basically.

T'was Phyllida he had to thank for his life, it turned out—said she'd had a dream, or been sent one, and used her God-lent strength to trace his and “Willicks” trail at as high a speed as the ox-cart would support, with little Simon riding literal shotgun. They'd picked up a doctor in one of the towns Reese's route had barely grazed and found Jenkins in dire straits, his wound miraculously glued shut by a fortuitous chemical coincidence of blood-mud trapped 'neath Jenkins's flopped trunk forming a loose poultice which unseasonably fierce overnight frost turned to ice, plugging things deep enough to prevent further infection; he'd suffered through fever and bronchitis before mending yet emerged hale, regaining his strength with surprising rapidity.

Miraculous, his eventual wife called it, and Jenkins didn't disagree, since if there really was nobody up there looking out for him, it seemed bad form to throw that sort of happy synchrony back in the universe's face.

Then again, might be it was less gratitude he felt than respect, reverence, or simple fear. Because, as Phyllida liked to point out, Reese *had* been an instrument of judgment, though a singularly rough and contrary one—which meant that the same force Jenkins credited with his recovery had probably set Reese

in his path, in the first place. Why? To teach a lesson, prove a point?

Reese, who was indubitably gone—laid back down, if not to rest, with Haugh surely traveling alongside him in proverbial double-harness, wherever their eventual destination. Which was probably all the conclusion that dreadful figure'd ever really wanted, in Jenkins's own estimation.

Impossible to discern which of the images he occasionally found himself summoning at odd moments, caught between dream and memory, were actually based in hard experience. Yet sometimes the former sheriff turned let's-call-him-marshal heard voices and shivered to recognize their tones—one wildly pleading, the other coolly certain yet somewhat dead, too tired even for anger. Saying:

Moral deeds mean nothing, when the heart's not in it. That's a good man, right there, with your bullet through his chest—God only knows I'd do my best to save him, if I weren't made for other work entirely. You and I, though... for all that's passed, we're just the same as we ever were.

All I'm asking for's a little mercy, Sartain. Just that.

Oh, but this is a little mercy, Bart. You really don't want to see what no mercy looks like.

What then? Jenkins sometimes wondered. Had Reese pulled Haugh into an embrace and begun to decay? Had the

dirt sucked them both down like a sink-hole, then, while heavy rains and flash-floods—no longer sanguine yet hardly natural, given the way things had gone those last few months weather-wise—scoured it all clean overtop, leaving no trace at all to show they'd ever been there?

One way or t'other, if Reese's misfortunes and Haugh's comeuppance formed any sort of sermon, Jenkins might as well account himself converted. For though his job put him in constant contact with bad men (and some women) doing evil things, he fought hard to keep himself un-blooded, at least by the standards that'd cost Esther township's previous Sheriff his life and—possibly—his salvation. In a world where invisible principalities and harsh recompense were no longer in doubt, in other words, Jenkins thought it better by far to keep his soul's immortality intact, safe, at all costs that didn't endanger the same in others... and let his body, in the main, take care of itself.

Haugh's second child was born as summer turned to fall, a girl, blithe, kind and fair. They named her for Jenkins's former home, and loved her as best life's vicissitudes would allow for.

Copyright © 2013 Gemma Files

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the *BCS* Website

Former film critic and teacher turned award-winning horror author Gemma Files is best-known for her Hexslinger novel series (*A Book of Tongues*, *A Rope of Thorns*, and *A Tree of Bones*). She has also published two collections of short fiction and two chapbooks of poetry, and she is currently hard at work on her fourth novel. The adventures of Jerusalem Parry and Solomon Rusk from “Two Captains,” her previous story in *BCS*, continue in “Trap-Weed” (*Clockwork Phoenix 4*) and “The Salt Wedding” (*Kaleidotrope*, early 2015).

Support BCSBCS on BCS on 

[Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PYRAMID OF BACCONYUS

by Caleb Wilson

The three cousins left the prairie, where their regiment had been massacred, for a landscape like crumpled cloth. Steep ravines made travel even more nightmarish than when the officers' whips had slashed across the bark of their backs. At midday they paused in a glade to drink and rest. Those officers were all dead now. Hickshaw had decided to forgive and forget.

Fawcett rooted his muddy toes into the soil and pulled his wine flask from his pack. He tilted it to his mouth and a single drop came out. "What? Empty?" He turned to Hickshaw. "Your fault. You like us stupid, don't you?"

Hickshaw smiled sadly. "I know, it's not ideal. But would you have deserted otherwise? Or joined the regiment in the first place?"

"I didn't like the regiment," said Fawcett.

"Me neither," said Chawkins.

"They gave us names," said Hickshaw.

"It doesn't matter. Names aren't real. Why would we need names?" Fawcett tucked his empty flask away. Hickshaw

scanned his cousin's eyes—dull as raisins. Hickshaw's would have been dull too, had he not broken into Chawkins's pack last night, before they'd left their guard posts and the regiment had been destroyed, and drunk her flask dry. He also had one last mostly full flask stashed at the bottom of his own pack. Not to be imbibed until they were at the Pyramid. No point wasting wine on just walking.

Chawkins was tugging down the blade-like leaves that grew from the crown of her head and trimming them with a short, hooked knife. Hickshaw, admiring the cracking of the bark around her waist, plucked a flower from a vine and chewed it into a pulp. Sap and the last of Chawkins's wine swirled in his brain. He was thinking of the man who had told him about Bacconyus.

A year ago it was, Hickshaw had come across the man, an "explorer," after the man had explored too incautiously in the vicinity of Hickshaw's rope snares. He was hanging by his ankle from a limb. He must have smashed his nose when springing the trap, for blood dripped down his inverted features, off his hair, and splattered the leaves below. Hickshaw, dry and mean, had slapped the man around a bit to wake him up, and when he awoke, had slapped him around a little bit more. Eventually the man regained his voice.

“You, leaf-head, I’m an explorer, from—” and he produced some combination of syllables that Hickshaw’s desiccated brain couldn’t follow. “If you cut me down from here, I will make it very worth your while.”

“I was going to use your blood,” Hickshaw had said, “to make myself a pudding.”

“Very, very worth your while! If you cut me down from here, right now, I will tell you of treasures, yours to collect, which, if you find even one of them, will let you afford to buy a million puddings!”

Hickshaw had blinked several times, then taken up his flask and swigged a long swallow. “I am an uncomplicated being. Do I look like I need treasures?”

“What is it you want, then? I can offer it exactly. Mechanical maidens carved of geared gemstone? No? Rings to make you invisible, and not at the loss of your soul? No, you probably don’t have a soul. A magic shovel, a magic bird cape, the magic goblet of Bacconyus, which never empties of wine, to wash down your puddings?” This last had been offered in a spirit of desperation, however—

“Wine?” Hickshaw had said. “Tell me about that one.”

The explorer’s blood had made a mediocre batch of pudding. The man had had the stink of excessive travel, undertaken without enough ease. But each time Hickshaw

sampled it, he remembered the man's story, and by the time he finished the last helping, he had decided to find the Pyramid of Bacconyus and plunder it with the help of his cousins.

Wherever it was they were, they began to walk again, away from there. Sunset passed, and midnight, and dawn was approaching out of the frozen stars. At first light, the cousins stood on a bald peak, and Hickshaw scanned the horizons. His head felt filled with chaff, his eyes dry and sore, and yet he didn't dare drink from the hidden flask while the others were watching. Besides...

"There it is," he said. The Pyramid of Bacconyus shimmered in the dawn's haze. It was massive, to be seen from so far away, and incongruous in the woody scrubland.

"Walk," said Hickshaw.

With the last shreds of another red and gold sunset dripping below the horizon, the cousins arrived at the Pyramid. This close, the structure seemed older than the surface of the earth, like some ancient chthonic bone revealed through recent erosion. A deep hum arose from the surrounding soil, resonating in the rocks and trees. Hickshaw decided to ignore it.

"Well, what now?" said Fawcett.

“There’s treasure in there?” asked Chawkins, peering through a narrow doorway under a massive lintel stone carved with bunches of grapes.

“Yes,” said Hickshaw. There had better be, or he would be very disappointed. Perhaps it was just that he liked to drink stronger wine than was traditional, but he had never been willing to spend the rest of his life in the village, in the shade of the fat tree that had birthed all his cousins, planting terraces, trapping and bleeding animals, harvesting berries and fruit and fermenting them, and then, when he was old enough, forgoing all drink and swelling to harden into a sessile giant, content never to move his limbs—boughs now—except with the breeze... well...

“Look,” said Chawkins. A glimmer of yellow chased itself around the dark mouth under the lintel.

“Someone is coming,” said Fawcett.

Footsteps came out, followed by a man, stooping under the stone, obscured at first with glare from a lantern.

Hickshaw curtsied with a rustle of leaves. “Hello.”

“Good evening,” said the man. “You have come to the end of your journey, I think?”

“I hope so,” said Fawcett, “is this the Pyramid of—” He stopped when Hickshaw’s arm wrapped around his woody shoulder, and Hickshaw’s fingers bit into the joint there.

“Can we stay the night?” asked Hickshaw. “We are very tired. We are travelers.”

“Oh; you must,” said the man. He backed away from the doorway and gestured with his lantern. “Precede me inside, and we will get you settled.”

Fawcett and Chawkins immediately set off into the hole beneath the lintel, Hickshaw behind them. They walked through a tunnel low enough that their head leaves brushed and bent on the ceiling. It and the walls were stone, once gilded and now mostly bare, though glittering specks still shone in the crevices. The man behind them, like a cork being pushed firmly back into the neck of a bottle, did not allow them to linger. His lantern’s beams danced ahead between their limbs as they walked, arm-in-arm with an army of shadows.

While they walked Hickshaw tried to remember what the explorer had told him about the layout of the Pyramid. He had claimed the treasure repository was on the lowermost level, at the bottom of a tremendous staircase which rooted into “the guts of the earth.” It should be easy enough to find, Hickshaw supposed—just keep going down until they couldn’t go any further.

Their shadows, venturing out before them, melted away in a wash of light. They emerged into a well-lit square chamber whose walls and floors were covered with brown rugs. “Wait

here,” said the man with the lantern, and then moved off through a door, which he closed, and, to judge by the click, locked behind him.

“What now?” asked Chawkins.

“Now be quiet,” said Hickshaw. “Don’t say anything unless I tell you to. Actually even then be quiet.”

A different door opened and another man came out. He was someone important, to judge by his extravagant white and brown garment that was covered with pronged extrusions like the horns of a stag beetle.

“Welcome to the Lodge,” said the man. “You may call me Professor Varel.”

“Welcome,” said Fawcett.

“We were thinking of it more as a Pyramid,” said Hickshaw.

“It is a pyramid in shape,” said Varel. “But it is a Lodge in function; the Lodge of Xiczarthotep. We are always eager to incorporate new Initiates into our Lodge,” said Varel. “Even ones as... different in appearance as yourselves.”

“Thanks,” said Hickshaw.

There was a long pause. Both Fawcett and Chawkins tried to speak but Hickshaw silenced them with glares that he hoped Varel, being unfamiliar with the facial expressions of their kind, could not read.

“You are here for learning?” asked Varel, stepping closer to Hickshaw. Hickshaw thought the professor looked like he wanted to reach out a hand and touch the leaves of his head. If he did, Hickshaw would reach out and ruffle Varel’s hair in return. “And worship?”

“Yes?” said Hickshaw.

“Very good,” said Varel, and clapped his hands twice. A third man came through a different door. He was dressed in brown and black, with small nubs on his robe’s shoulders where Varel had serrated canes. “Viggins,” said Varel, “dispose of their luggage, please.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Viggins. He moved behind Chawkins and none too gently started to take her pack.

“My knives are in there!” said Chawkins.

Varel’s smile was miles and ages away. “As Initiates you may own nothing.”

Chawkins, mouth agape, let Viggins take her pack, and then Viggins took Fawcett’s and Hickshaw’s too.

Hickshaw almost asked him to wait, to take out his wine, but he didn’t want his cousins to see it and try to share it, so...

Viggins left with their packs, and another robed man came through the same door, carrying three dark bundles in his arms. He handed one to each of the cousins. The bundles unfolded like flags in their hands: smock-like garments with

loose threads at the hems. “Don these. They will be your garments for the next six cycles of the moon, until we have judged your sincerity in joining us for worship of the Sublime Xiczarthotep.”

“But can we—” said Hickshaw.

“Silence,” said Varel, “is now your duty. Only in silence will you be able to absorb the teachings of myself and the other Professors. Don your garments now, Initiates, and then follow Zigmon here to the Initiates’ Dormitory. When it is time for the evening lesson the Prime Initiate will show you the way to the lecture hall, and following that, to the Great Stair for a night of worship.”

“First, though—” said Hickshaw. Chawkins and Fawcett were struggling to pull their ragged smocks over their head leaves.

“Silence is your only duty now,” said Varel. “Am I clear?”

Hickshaw nodded. The three cousins followed Zigmon through one of the doors, which swung shut behind them. They followed him down another hall, which was carpeted in burlap. Zigmon never looked back, plodding onward with his head lowered, from pool to pool of light shed by small round lanterns set in the ceiling.

They were passing doors, turning corners, moving down narrow flights of stairs. At some point Hickshaw thought it

might be a good idea to start counting doors, turns, and steps, but after counting a few, he realized that since he hadn't been counting from the beginning it was useless, and he stopped. They were descending, so that was something.

Eventually Zigmon opened one of the doors and pointed them inside. Hickshaw peered through, keeping his body in the hall. Zigmon shoved him without warning and he stumbled in, milling his arms, his ragged Initiate's garment flapping with the motion. Chawkins and Fawcett strolled through under their own power after a moment, and the door closed behind them.

Hickshaw glanced around the huge dim room. It reminded him of the barracks where the regiment had sometimes overnighted during their campaign. Along each wall was a rank of narrow cots. In the middle of the room were five strips of carpet over the stone, and along each carpet lay rows of what Hickshaw supposed were Initiates of the Lodge. About twenty in number, they lay on their stomachs, with their faces pressed flat onto the ground and their arms held tight to their sides.

One Initiate, lying at the nearest end of the carpets to the door, turned her head when they came in, and after a moment, clambered to her feet. It seemed that her body was stiff from lying in the same odd position for so long, though her stretching, as she walked to greet them, was furtive.

"Welcome," she said in a whisper.

“I thought we were meant to be silent,” said Hickshaw.

Her gaze traveled up and down his body. She looked like she wished to reach out and touch his barky skin. He prepared himself to resist the urge to bat her hand away if she did.

“We may speak here, if we keep our voices low, until you are familiar with our rites and duties,” she said. “My name is Lurdna. I am the Prime Initiate, at least until I advance down to the next Step in three weeks’ time—Xiczarthotep willing, of course, that my learnings have taken root and I can pass the exam.”

“I heard once about a god called Bacconyus I thought lived in a pyramid around here. Does he share this pyramid with Xiczarthotep?”

Lurdna showed her teeth. “This weak godlet you speak of is no more. The Great Devourer Xiczarthotep ate Bacconyus when It took up Its temporary residence in our dimension.”

“Oh,” said Hickshaw. “Well. I guess we’d like to visit this Xiczarthotep anyway, if that’s alright.”

“By no means can you visit It so soon, only after extensive study and worship! Many of Xiczarthotep’s followers have been studying for decades, and have only advanced toward It halfway down the great Stair. Any faster, without preparing and blanking their minds, and they would be driven insane by

the very presence of the Otherworldly One, and Its numerous children who linger on the lower steps.”

Hickshaw waved a frondy hand to take in the carpets and rows of initiates. “What’s happening with all this here?”

“We are meditating prior to the evening lecture. We hope to relax our minds to make us permeable as possible to the knowledge of the Professors.”

“Oh, sure,” said Hickshaw. “And after that we get to worship on the stairs?”

“The uppermost step of the Stair, that’s correct.”

“Well, show us how it’s done!”

Lurdna bowed her head slightly, then led the three cousins to an empty swath of carpet. “First you lay down on your stomach like this.” She demonstrated, craning her head back up at what must have been an uncomfortable angle for someone with an articulated spine. “Then you press your face flat on the floor, like this.” Having done so, her voice took on a muffled quality.

Hickshaw pushed Fawcett and Chawkins down, then lay down himself. He pressed his face to the floor, so that his leaves splayed out sideways.

“Now what?”

“Now breathe deeply, to cleanse the deepest nooks of your soul, concentrate on the hum in the bones of the earth, imagine

the day when your mind has been prepared and you are able to descend the stairs fully and meet Xiczarhotep, and It consumes and digests you and then secretes you out perfected into the next universe.”

Hickshaw snoozed for a while, and eventually the Initiates finished their meditations. They stood and formed a line at the doorway, so the three cousins joined it, at the very end. The Initiates shuffled with a pious lack of speed down another long, sloping hall. Hickshaw was looking around for any loose swords that might be lying in a place where he could grab them. It would be nice to have a sword in case things got tricky. If there was just one sword, he'd keep it for himself, but if there were three, he'd give one to Fawcett and one to Chawkins. If there happened to be just two... he thought for a moment. Definitely he would give it to Chawkins.

All in a long kinked chain the Initiates came into a slanted room with pews tiered down to a small stage. Hickshaw and his cousins followed the other Initiates to the highest tier of pews, which was set behind a brown velvet rope. Senior members of the Lodge began to populate the lower rows, and when they stopped, the rows of seats were about half full.

A door opened on the stage behind the podium, and a man came through who Hickshaw recognized, for it was none other than Professor Zural. Zural stepped up onto the podium, and

the Lodge members raised their arms in some kind of shivering salute. Lurdna looked over and saw that the newest Initiates weren't raising their arms, and she gestured vigorously until Hickshaw raised his arms. He kicked sideways at Fawcett until Fawcett raised his arms, and then Fawcett kicked at Chawkins until she did too.

Professor Zural began to speak, and Hickshaw realized that it was a woman speaking, not Zural—another Professor, perhaps. She wore the same complicated brown and white garment, a knobbed surplice which hung straight to the podium. Her voice was leaden, and it made the stiff and sore Hickshaw even sleepier. The room was warm and moist, and it reminded him of the steamy grove where he'd bloomed and been born, a memory of mist and vapor; he nothing more than a bright taut fruit hanging in a protective nest of thorns. He had bloomed at the midpoint between trunk and open air, the best possible place, because those born too close to the trunk were starved of light, and those too close to the air, prone to being snatched and devoured by birds. But he had grown safe and fat on his stem, behind a shield of thorns.

This Professor, Zourk her name seemed like it might be, was droning about responsibility to Xiczarthotep, and how the Lodge-members' every thought should concern the eventual final gulp when Xiczarthotep would consume the entire world

and pass it through Its ineffable gut into the next higher universe, where, if we are worthy enough, and studious, we might find the next manifestation of Xiczarthotep, and form a community for Its reverence, in whichever deep ravine or cleft of the earth It might have chosen to repose, and thereby continue the chain of being... Hickshaw's eyes popped open. Zourk was talking about legs, Xiczarthotep's uncountable panoply of legs, which were a symbol for something, for walking, maybe. His eyes slid closed again, and then Lurdna was tapping at this shoulder.

In the slow bustle of the audience departing the arena, she must have felt it safe to talk, if only to chastise: "Shame on your inattention, Initiate."

"Whuh?"

"Come with us now to the Stair you were so eagerly awaiting. Or was that all a lie, and you merely wish to nap in the presence of the Holiest One?"

"No," said Hickshaw.

"No," said Fawcett, "we're gonna take—"

Hickshaw stumbled backwards into Chawkins, who fell back against Fawcett, who said no more. "No," said Hickshaw again, and wiped a mess of greenish sap from his mouth with his sleeve.

Through a multitude of carpeted halls the crowd in the lecture hall melted away, and by these private channels trickled downward to the Great Stair. As they came closer to the entrance of the Stair, Hickshaw discovered a reek in the air, a mixture of brine and incense and ancient corruption.

The Initiates moved slowly, in the patient fits and starts of crowded worship spaces, onto their designated uppermost step of the Great Stair. Even on their step the initiates organized themselves by seniority, which meant that the cousins were pushed to the back, but this made it all the easier for them to stare at their surroundings.

The worship step was actually more of a landing, broad enough to easily hold all twenty initiates. More landings were visible below, down a series of narrow staircases with high risers. The steps and landings continued down a huge chute leading into the earth. Billows of air, smelling of smoke, sweat, and mold, a hot, heady mixture, came up from below. The Initiates were swaying, sweating, eyes shut, mouths open.

Along the walls hung brown banners covered with geometric patterns that hurt Hickshaw's eyes to look at—something was wrong with the hideous woven pictures—they seemed to flicker, though motionless, now a left-facing rabbit, now a right-facing duck...

Farther down, where the greater part of the darkness was unbanished by the braziers of coals on each landing, there clustered cliques of Professors in overgrown brown and white vestments, weird limbs and protuberances waving in the shadows. At the very bottom of the Stair the spot where all the landings were facing was a blurred sheen of darkness. There, the explorer had sworn, with Hickshaw's pruning knife at his throat, would be found the treasure house of Bacconyus, stuffed with riches beyond imagining, including the miraculous goblet.

Each landing, with its smaller crowd, swayed in place, each piece in motion, like the hairs on terrified human flesh. Hickshaw thought of the knob of cartilage at the explorer's throat, sliding and bobbing as the man gulped terrified promises. He was sleepy, and his body and limbs felt like they were comfortably swathed in spiderwebs. He saw himself sitting on a mountain top far away from his birth tree, warm rain dripping down his head leaves, soaking into the spongy lump of his scalp. In his sodden dream, his brain raced with all the wine he wanted, and his thoughts chased one another like high black crumple-bottomed clouds during a summer storm.

Time passed in comfortable convulsions. Brown robed stumps all around—he thought of the Initiates as stumps who'd just run out of the energy to keep walking and had sat down to

mumble and tremble in place, all their leaves fallen to the ground, new buds sprouted from their rooted limbs, finally blissful at last...

“It is time to return to the dormitory,” said Lurnda.

“No!” Hickshaw said.

“It is time!” Hickshaw said.

“To go down!” Hickshaw said.

“And take what’s ours!” Hickshaw said.

“We need arms, my cousins!” Hickshaw said.

Heads several landings below craned around in reproach, and Chawkins and Fawcett began rustling around at the waists of the other Initiates looking for weaponry to steal, finding nothing but irritation. Hickshaw, blind stumbling sober, took a moment of support by leaning against the dusty eye-bending tapestry, and felt something hidden behind it. He ripped the cloth down from the wall and revealed three niches containing golden statues. On the left was a naked man holding a bottle in one hand and a corkscrew in the other. On the right was a naked woman raising a garland of grape vines. Between them was the bearded godlet Bacconyus, bearing a bunch of grapes in each of his four hands and a vast erect phallus. To the consternation of the Initiates, Hickshaw began snapping extremities off the statues for the cousins to use as bludgeons.

“Let’s get gone!” Hickshaw’s voice echoed back from below. A gust of hot filthy air rose up as the three charged down. One of the brown-draped stumps whirled when he collided with it. It had a round white flesh mask with bugged eyes, and he swiped out with the male statue’s gold leg, planted a great bloody bruise across its face. Blood flew up like drops of wine, and Hickshaw smiled, throttling his club, clumping down five steps, then five more steps to the next landing. Close enough to rasp his heels came Chawkins and Fawcett.

At the next landing the stumps were more elaborate. The walls were crusted with branches, whorls and knots of leaves. Sapling spines rattling with aggrieved motion. Hickshaw shook his club, shedding bright drops. He bashed a stump in the side, felling it with one blow. It sang shrieks as it rolled down the steps. A few stumps were trailing them, so Hickshaw set Chawkins spinning to guard their backs. She swerved to bash loose gouts of blood and flesh with the female statue’s golden arm, glints of gold in a red spray. To Fawcett: “Smash down front.” “Yaaaaarrrrrhhh—” The gold phallus of Bacconyus fell and rose, dripping gore.

Ten more steps down, there were larger stumps, twice again as tall as the others, with wobbling weak heads. These stumps were scared of the cousins, shrinking back to sit on large chairs with eight legs each. Hickshaw released his

peoples' traditional fear of furniture like a squirrel from a trap. Who's afraid of a skeleton? He smacked a chair with his legclub, producing a hollow note, a foul salty exhalation, a splintery scream that reminded him of the time his great-uncle was eaten by termites. He waved his empty arm forward, and they went down ten more steps.

Here the stumps quaked and shook, rooted. Peaked tables crowded the landing's edges. Hickshaw tested one with his club and it lurched backwards out of his way, its legs bending like articulated stems. A clamor filled the open space, above and below them, mostly above, before and behind them, mostly behind. They charged through the last landing, crowded with asymmetric stepstools and flowery gibbets, and then they were at the bottom of the Stair.

Bulky furniture danced all around, just out of reach of their weapons. The drawers were hissing, threads had come out the front of them, out of keyholes with toothy edges, flicking about, tasting the air. Hickshaw saw before them a shimmering black curtain which stretched from the ceiling and reached almost to the floor. It bellied in and out. He thrust with his legclub and the fabric of it split. "Chop with me!" Fawcett and Chawkins stepped forward, slashing up and down, and soon the curtain was a row of rags, curling guts of cloth, and the three cousins stepped through to the other side.

The clamor behind them faded. The air hummed between its cells, desperate. A tremendous room, long and egg-shaped, stretched away from them, dark but for reflected glimmers and made to seem tiny by the way it was filled almost to the ceiling with a strange item: a sleeping couch, standing on hundreds of thin fussy clawed legs, atop heaps of moldy skulls and gold things like cups and plates and saucers. The couch's legs rose to a waxy rim, layered with scale like a flower about to burst from the bud. Its bulk rose and fell like the breathing of a sleeping beast. The air was fertile with the smell of rot.

Hickshaw walked closer over the clattering treasure and picked up a skull. There was a round hole at the crown. "Look at that." He pegged the skull at Chawkins, and it shattered on her shoulder.

Chawkins and Fawcett staggered around picking up plates and skulls and daggers, but they couldn't hold more than a few items at a time, and they kept dropping the extras, which clattered down off their knees.

"Should have brought some bags or something."

"Looking for a magic goblet..." sang Hickshaw.

The shadows crept close and dense beside and around the massive couch that puffed up to near the ceiling. Hickshaw found himself walking closer to it, staring up at it, trying to

imagine its purpose, or who would build such a thing, but the effort was too great.

Above the rim the couch's legs came out of were billows of stuffed fabric, pink, puffy, wrinkly and shiny, like crushed satin. In vertical rows along the upholstery were sphincters where clusters of long tapes emerged to whip around, lashing the shadows. Broad arms above the clusters of tape, a ring of them like Hickshaw's own crown of leaves, curved, many-jointed arms, which moved in a manner both lewd and predatory. Like an orchid vibrating as it is reamed by a bee, or a sweet blossom that tempts a fly and sucks it into a striped bladder. But Hickshaw's brain was desert dry, immune to the hypnotic humming and resistant to symbolic suggestion.

However, he still took a step back, shattering a skull underfoot. The couch was rocking back and forth. If Hickshaw could have imagined a titanic piece of furniture with unimaginable intelligence he might have thought the couch was mad at him, he might have turned and fled, or he might have collapsed, his mind broken by sheer wrongness. Instead he stepped sideways, then stopped to nudge aside a shattered skeleton.

Under the pelvis was a golden goblet whose thick stem and wide, deep bowl were carved with a pattern of grape vines and a sprawling orgy. He scooped it up, brought it close to his eyes,

sniffed it—was that the smell of the fermented grape? He looked down into the bowl again, his fingers clenched tight around the stem, and found a small purple puddle there. He squeezed harder, the fibers of his fingers creaking, and shimmering wine welled up in the goblet.

A toothed tape fell from the couch's rim, draped across Fawcett's shoulder, and ripped him in half. A cloud of dry splinters, behind it half-Fawcett laughing in shock. Hickshaw's goblet was half full. Fawcett dragged his torso over greenish gold. "Plant me quick, cousin, I can't feel my legs!" The goblet was three-quarters full. Another tape, covered with drooling suckers, spooled down and noosed around Chawkins's neck. It curled tentatively, lifting her up to the ceiling. "Glkk!" she said, then managed to detach her head with her thrashings. The goblet was full. Hickshaw watched his reflection dance for a moment inside the wine, and then he drank.

Copyright © 2013 Caleb Wilson

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the *BCS* Website

Caleb Wilson's fiction has appeared in Weird Tales, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, the Year's Best Fantasy and

Horror anthology series, and most recently D. F. Lewis's anthology Horror Without Victims. He and his wife live in Illinois and work at a public library.

Support *BCS*

BCS on **facebook**

BCS on **twitter**

[Read more *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*](#)

COVER ART

“The Rickety Tower,” by Jeremiah Morelli



Jeremiah Morelli lives in southern Germany and currently works as a middle school teacher for English and Art. He sees his painting mainly as a hobby, though he has been selling prints for several years. Colorful, whimsical scenes are what he likes most, and he hopes to publish a children's book one day.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

Copyright © 2013 Firkin Press



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.