

The Grotesque Children's Book

by Roberto Cardano

in a new translation by Matthew Pellinori

Attenzione. Questo libro è responsabile della morte di molte persone.

(Warning. This book killed a bunch of people.)

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Prologue

1.

Things Are Looking Up

Florence, Italy. August 1581.

Aurelio DeSolo was lying on his back, staring directly into the eyes of the great god Jupiter. Jupiter hovered an arm's length above Aurelio, a red lightning bolt cocked next to his left ear, ready to strike Aurelio in the face. One...false...move....*Careful, Aurelio; tell the nice god what he wants to hear, and you'll get out of this alive.*

"Please, almighty Jupiter, spare the life of this humble, aging human! I swear, I didn't go anywhere near that swan! She was the one who looked at *me!*" Aurelio was deaf and mute and could not speak out loud, but this was not an issue for a god, who could hear Aurelio nonetheless.

"Swan!? What swan!!" thundered Jupiter. Then, softer: "Do you mean...Leda?"

"Yes, yes, Leda!" said Aurelio. "I admit she has the most gracious, beautiful contrapposto neck, downy and soft, and her strong powerful beak and webbed feet...such fine exquisite taste you have, almighty Jupiter. But I swear to you I stayed in the boat the whole time. I never touched her!"

Jupiter frowned. "You do recall the myth is 'Leda and the Swan'."

"That's right. I never touched Leda. She's as pure as the day she, well as pure as the after *you*, I mean, I -- not more impure because of me."

"Think about what you're saying," said Jupiter, slowly.

Is that menace I hear? thought Aurelio. *Yes, that's deliberate menace in his voice. These gods, they enjoy taunting us before they kill us. I wonder if I'll feel anything, being*

blasted by a thunderbolt, or whether it's "one moment you're Aurelio DeSolo, painting ceilings for the Duke de' Medici, posing wits with the Greatest of All Gods," then next moment, fzzztrp!, oblivion by lightning....

Jupiter prompted, "Leda *and* the swan."

"Yes? So you're going to kill me just because you're *suspicious*? No proof! Is that how you want to be remembered for all eternity, oh great Jupite --"

"Stop. Listen to me," said Jupiter. "There's Leda, right, she's standing there on the shore. And then, separate...there's a swan. There's Leda. And there's a swan."

Aurelio blinked a few times. *What am I missing here? Why doesn't he just kill me and get it over with? I never raped his damn swan. His...swan....* Oh. I see what you're saying. Leda isn't the one who's the swan. Leda's the girl."

"Leda's the girl. And that makes the swan --?" Jupiter knit up his face, looking oh-so-imperious, all eyebrow and furrowing.

"That makes the swan...that makes the swan --" Aurelio felt he was so close to the truth. "-- dinner?"

"Oh, you stupid, stupid -- man! Leda is the girl on the shore. The swan is *me*, by Jupiter!" shouted Jupiter, losing his patience, pulling his right arm back and hurling the lightning bolt directly into the left eye of Alessandro Aurelio, killing him instantly.

Almost.

Because, of course, Jupiter was only a painting, and the silly conversation about Leda was mere fabrication. He did not *really* believe that Jupiter himself was speaking to him (or Bacchus last week, or Daedalus the week before that); he wasn't insane; no, he knew these conversations were all in his head, and he could stop them at any time he wished. Aurelio

DeSolo often spoke with the characters he painted. It helped him feel a little less alone in the universe, which, as a deaf man, was silent to him and he to it. Jupiter *was* hovering an arm's length away from Aurelio, that much was true. Aurelio, yes, was lying on his back looking directly into the eyes of Jupiter, also, yes, but only for the purposes of painting them. In actuality, Aurelio was on a scaffold which lofted him within an arm's length of the ceiling in the east wing of *I Magistrati*, soon to be renamed the *Uffizi*, the "Offices."

Aurelio knew that Leda was the girl and Jupiter himself was the swan. But it amused him as he lay there on his back, day after day after now year after year, painting, painting, painting, painting...it wouldn't surprise him if one day he *did* go mad and think his frescoes were actually speaking with him, glaring at him, wishing him harm. *Death by thunderbolt. Worse ways to go.*

2.

The book makes its mysterious appearance

When Aurelio came home on the early evening of August 15, 1581, he found a demon sitting in front of his door. The demon had no legs, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say the demon was leaning against his door.

The demon wasn't real. It was painted. It was a watercolor on the cover of a thick folio of many pieces of cheap paper folded in halves and tucked inside each other: a hastily-constructed book.



There were no words on the cover; merely the picture of the demon. There were a number of stories in the folio, apparently, each with an accompanying illustration.

Aurelio knew immediately that this was the work of the young painter Santi del Meglio. There were only two artists in all of Italy who would have painted such an armless feather-footed demon: Aurelio was one of them, and Santi del Meglio was the other. Santi worked with Aurelio on the same backbreaking project: painting the ceilings of the new art museum commissioned by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco de' Medici. Aurelio and Santi were among several

painters working feverishly to complete the frescoes on the ceiling before its opening as a museum in October.

The folio disturbed Aurelio. Santi had not shown up to work all that day at *I Magistrati*, which was unusual for him. Usually Santi was at *I Magistrati* at the crack of dawn, and kept working until the crack of sunset, driven feverishly to finish the day's assignment on time. When it turned mid-morning, Aurelio had begun to suspect that something was wrong. He had intended to go home, have a light supper, and then pay a call on Santi, whose rooms were a few blocks away. But now with the strange appearance of this folio, Aurelio had skipped supper and gone straight to Santi's.

It turned out Aurelio was right to be worried.

Santi's rooms were some twenty minutes away, beyond the poultry markets, near the parish of S. Pietro Buonconsiglio; perhaps you know where that is. The door was slightly ajar. Aurelio rapped at it with his knuckles, but heard no answer. He rapped again. When he heard no sound coming from within, Aurelio pushed the door open and stepped in.

Santi's rooms were a terrible crime scene. There was blood in the floor, long deep scratches where the bed had been dragged for several feet, and Santi's belongings strewn all over the room; drawers emptied, chests overturned, dishes smashed, pots of paint spilled, a mess from wall to wall. And Santi's father lay on the bed, his eyes unstaringly focused on the ceiling, dead.

Aurelio became violently ill, running back outside just in time before vomiting on the stoop. He kept running all the way back home, where once again he saw the illustrated folio. Clearly Santi had put this folio on Aurelio's doorstep. Had Santi known he was about to be killed, and had left this folio for Aurelio for some reason? Or was there a chance that Santi had gotten away miraculously and he was alive somewhere, having left the folio behind as, what, as a

warning? As a message to his whereabouts? Where had Santi gone? Or, who had killed him and his father, and why?

Maybe the demon would tell him. Aurelio picked up the folio, bolted his door, and began to read.

Exhibit A

Exhibit A. Grotesque children's book. Submitted as evidence in the case of Doctor Ludovico Valerius in the poisoning of the Duchess de' Medici on October 19, 1587 at Villa Medici in Poggio a Caiano.

Translator's Note. *The Folio. There are nine stories in the folio. In the original publication, they were scattered throughout the book. I've indicated those places in the text, for those of you who'd you'd like the experience of reading them in their original contexts. Or you might try starting with the novel and then skipping back to the stories when they come up; that's what I did when I first came across it, and I recommend it because there's a certain cat-and-mouse game which Roberto Cardano clearly enjoyed playing with his original Italian readers, prodding them to guess at the meaning of the stories as they make their appearances in the book. Maybe that's fun for you.*

I don't mean to confuse you here. Plenty of readers are content to read just the stories and not bother reading the novel at all. Feel free to do that.

The Folio

(The Grotesque Children's Book)

Story the First:
The Girl Who Refused to Save Fire



It was cold. Bitter cold. Poor Amelia's feet stung, even from inside her thick fur-lined boots, and her fingers had grown stiff inside her thick wool-lined mittens, for the fire in her family hearth had gone out several nights ago, and had refused to re-light.

Father had piled the hearth high with logs, and nested them on a bed of crisp dry moss and straw. He had struck flint after flint to charcloth after charcloth, but each time after an initial *ploomph* in which the charcloth leapt into white flame, flickered once or twice with yellow and red optimism, the fire sunk back, growing lower and lower, without warmth, without brightness, only to extinguish itself with a strange little whimper, followed by a thin, shivering wisp of black smoke. And the fire was out, the straw unburnt and even cool to the touch. "It's as though the fire's afraid," said Amelia to her father.

“Don't be silly,” said her father, “Fire can't be afraid. Fire doesn't have feelings.”

“Well, maybe not afraid, but -- but -- tired. It's been such a long winter. Fire just needs to rest.”

“I've set the straw wrong. Or blown on it too hard. Or too soft. Odd, though, I've been making fires in the hearth with charcloth all my life long, and my father before me, and my father's father.”

“Maybe it's us, Father. Maybe we were too greedy this winter. And maybe we've used up our share of Fire. Maybe there are other people in the world who are colder than we are, and now Fire has left us to be with them. Or maybe --”

“Amelia!” said Father, exasperated, “Stop your foolish tales. It will be all right. I've added some more moss, and some dry pine needles, and given the kindling breathing room. Now stand away. The fire might leap out of the hearth!”

“But not if it's already on its way to --”

“Amelia. Shh.”

Father struck the flint and watched the spark land on the charcloth which ignited as it had always done. Father held the cloth to the dried moss. And as before, a white fire leapt up high and flicked red and yellow. “There! There, you see!” said Father, clasping his daughter to his side. “We'll be warm at last.”

But as before, the flames withdrew, slithering away like water to a drain, and then went out. Amelia leaped away from her father and knelt by the hearth, plunging her hands into the moss, *pfluffing* at it, attempting to coax the fire to ignite.

“Amelia! Don't touch it!” shouted Father, “you'll burn your hands.”

“No I won't,” said Amelia, digging underneath. “The moss is as cold as twigs. So are my fingers. Come back, Signore Fire!” she said, as though trying to coax a kitten out of a hole. “We won't hurt you. Father and I just want to warm our hands and feet just a little.”

A tiny ember, the size of a pin's head, glowed ever so slightly brighter from underneath the moss. Or, or was Amelia just imagining that? “Yes, Signore Fire, yes, do glow for me. Only a few minutes, we promise. Then you can share your wonderful heat with the rest of the world, and we promise we won't ask any more of you. Signore?”

“That's foolish, Amelia, talking to a fire. Stop it.”

“But I saw it glow.”

“No, you just wished that.”

And the glow sizzled out into darkness. If it had ever been there in the first place.

“Oh dear,” said Father, “That was the last charcloth. Here, Amelia, here are three denari. Run right over to Carlo Vendiri in his general store, and buy us a bundle of charcloths. A great big bundle, Amelia! We'll have fire tonight. You just see if we don't.”

And so it was that Amelia walked to the general store in order to ask Signore Vendiri for some charcloth. Oh how cold were her feet and hands, even in her boots and mittens. Oh how hard it was to turn the handle on the door to the general store. And oh, how cold it was inside Signore Vendiri's store! Usually it was so merry-bright, with a nice hot sputtering coming from the foot-stove in the corner. But today, why, it seemed just as cold inside the store as out.

“Ah, hello Amelia, come in, come in!” twittered Signore Vendiri. “What can I sell you today?”

“A bundle of charcloths, please. A nice big bundle.”

“Oh,” said Signore Vendiri, a dark shadow passing over his face. “I'm afraid I have sold the last of my charcloths yesterday morning. Everyone's asking for charcloths this week! Everyone's fires are going out all over the town, and refusing to re-ignite. Mayor Avido bought the last of my cloths this morning. I think there are none left in all the country. Burnt, burnt, but brought no fire.”

“No, that can't be!” said Amelia.”

“I'm afraid it is. Even I myself. Look at my foot-stove. Cold as ice. It seems that fire, on which we have relied for a thousand years -- ten thousand! -- it seems fire no longer burns anything. There is no more heat in fire itself.”

“As though the fire is tired.”

“Exactly!”

“Signore Vendiri, I think I might be able to coax the fire to return. Just for a moment, just enough to warm ourselves. I think we've been greedy, and just need to show some humility and generosity towards others.”

“Fire doesn't work like that, Amelia. If there is even a little of it, there will be plenty for everyone. It will spread and spread.”

“Only if it wants to,” I think. Amelia thought hard, and looked around at Signore Vendiri's foot-stove. “Please, Signore Vendiri. I can't go back to my father without charcloth. Surely you have *some* left. Surely you didn't sell your last bundle.”

“Sold, yes, as soon as I opened the store yesterday morning. To the Mayor. And he won't be sharing, you know he won't. He'll have burnt it all now, without having made fire.”

Amelia didn't want to cry. That would not help. “If I just had one chance. To talk to Fire. What am I going to do?”

Signore Vendiri fingered the pocket of his apron. He frowned, unsure. “Listen, Amelia. I have one square left of my own charcloth. I was going to save it until...until...well, I suppose until the very end, after I had given up all hope, and use it to light a candle in the church just before I go. But, oh my dear, my candlesticks aren't lighting, my oil lamps aren't lighting...so there's no reason to expect that the church votive would light, now is there? So, oh dear, it seems I *have* given up all hope. I'll -- I'll -- here, you take the last square of charcloth, Amelia.” He pulled a single square of cloth out of the apron pocket and held it out to her. A tiny square, about the size of your thumbnail.

“Thank you, Signore Vendiri,” she said, taking the square. “Here are my three denari.”

“No, no, you keep those. For three denari you could buy five boxes of charcloth. No, one single square doesn't have any value.”

“It seems to me that this one single square might be the most valuable thing in all of Italy, Signore. Have my three denari.” But again the kind merchant refused her denari, and shuffled her out the door and on her way.

It had been her intention to run straight home to Father, but as she passed by the church, she heard what sounded like crying. Like the crying of a little boy. *A little girl?* It was coming from around the back of the church. Rather than keep on the path to home, Amelia, frozen though she was, thought “I must help her!” and scurried behind the church.

There, just past the flower garden, now all white for the winter, and the church's black cemetery, there, sitting in the round bowl of a stone bird bath, lay a yellow salamander, about twice the length of Amelia's hand. It was curled round itself, its tail touching its head, and it was moaning, “Mander, mander, poor mander!” it was saying. “None, none will help me out? Mander, mander, poor mander. None will help me out?”

“I'll help you out,” said brave Amelia, stepping up to the bird bath. “You poor thing. How did you get in there?”

“The priest, he lifted me up and put me in here. He said he was going to set fire to me!”

“Oh, how awful!” said Amelia.

“I know. The coward.”

Amelia carefully put her charcloth into the inside of her left boot, then reached down to pick up the salamander. Amelia saw it was an old thing, with crusted eye sockets, and unhealthy-looking brown pocky skin. An old man of a salamander, not the young girl she thought had been crying. “You...wait...you aren't diseased, are you?” she asked. “If I touch you, will I get a pocky disease from you?”

“How would I know? Possibly. Probably. Maybe not. Or, who knows, touching me might just *cure* you of whatever ails you. What would that be? What's ailing you? Let me guess: Trouble sleeping on a tree branch? Fear of bats? Bad breath?”

“No ailments for me, I don't think. Just frozen fingers and toes. I'm cold all the time. Here, let me help you out of that bird bath.” Amelia reached into the stone bird bath to help the poor old thing. But it reared back on its haunches and screeled like a banshee, hissing at her, scuttling to the far rim, facing her at all times, his jaw locked into a hiss like a feral cat.

“What are you doing!!” it seethed.

Amelia startled, pulling back her hands. “I'm rescuing you.”

“Rescuing me? From what?”

“Wasn't that you who was crying just now?”

“I'm not afraid to admit it,” said the Salamander, with a sniff.

“Well,” said Amelia, “I'm setting you free.”

“I am already free.”

“You're stuck in a bird bath because a priest put you there.”

“I'm stuck in a bird bath because the priest didn't set me on fire.”

“Well, of course he didn't set you on fire. Why would he? Now, I need to get back to my father, so come here. Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you. I'll just set you on the ground where --”

“You're as cruel as the priest.”

“What? No. Look, I heard you crying. If you don't want my help, that's fine. But I won't stand here and allow you to call me cruel.”

“Then you'll set me on fire?”

“No, of course I won't set you on fire.”

“Then you *are* just as cruel. You're like all the rest of them. I'm *glad* you're freezing to death. Serves all of you right. Good night: and I hope I never see you again.”

“Same to you!”

Amelia spun on her heels and walked away from the birdbath, when the salamander burst into tears again. “Wait! Please. I'm sorry. Won't you please set me on fire? You'll all be warm again. I promise.”

Amelia stopped. “You -- you *want* me to set you on fire?”

“Of course I do. That coward of a priest! Said he wouldn't be able to bear to hear my screaming. ‘It would remind me of poor brother Teodoris when they burned him as a heretic. Couldn't bear to hear that again, not even from a salamander.’ But you could bear it, couldn't you, Amelia? Brave, strong Amelia....”

“Say...how do you know my name?”

“Oops.”

“Who are you, salamander?”

“I thought you knew.”

“No.”

“I think you do. I’m Fire.”

“That’s your name...it’s Fire?”

“No. I’m actually Fire.”

“No. You’re actually a salamander.”

“Very well. But *The Salamander* then, if you must.”

“What do you mean, *The Salamander*? There are salamanders all over the place, in practically every bush and under every rock. Though I have to admit I haven’t seen one quite so yellow as you, or quite so...so....”

“Old?”

“I might have said ‘crusted.’”

“I’m the Fire Salamander. Without me there would be no fire in the universe. Only I fear I’ve allowed myself to get old. Too old. And now I’ve become incapable of burning anything but charcloth these days. And even then, it’s *whssh! pfloom!* but there’s no heat any more. You were right. I’m so tired.”

“I never said you were tired.”

“Not to me. To your father. Earlier this afternoon. And then again to Signore Vendiri. But no offense. Honest. You’re right. I’m crusted and old. I should have immolated myself when I had the chance.”

“Oh, now, don’t say that! I think you’re perfectly beautiful.”

“And I think you’re a perfect liar. In my day, oh, now I might have agreed with you, but now, oh, *vanitas, vanitas!*, now I’m too old to do it myself, and no one will do it for me.”

“Do what?”

“Set me on fire.”

“You keep saying that.”

“And you keep not doing it.”

“Why -- why do you want to die? It’s awful.”

“Not for a Fire Salamander it isn’t awful. It’s wonderful. Every thousand years, give or take a few, I’m supposed to burst into flames and burn, burn, burn, into nothing but yellow ashes. But then in the ashes, you’ll see a tiny round red egg. And that will be me. I’ll be inside that egg. And when I hatch, I’ll live another thousand years, and you’ll have all the fire you want again. You’re welcome very much.”

“You’re -- thinking of the phoenix.”

“I wasn’t. But I am now. What about the phoenix?”

“Same thing. Burns itself and rises from its own ashes.”

“Well, I’m the one who first thought of doing that.”

“But it isn’t true.”

“Of course it’s true. My first immolation was way back, before the Egyptians. The phoenix didn’t come along and mimic me until well into the First Dynasty, and it’s only because she wanted to make sure *she* had her portrait painted in the hieroglyphics, vain thing. I was too shy to pose. But I was the one who --”

“No, I mean the whole thing isn’t true. You. The Phoenix. Bursting into flame. That’s just a myth. That doesn’t actually happen. She’s just a bird. And you’re just a lizard.”

“Rest assured, I’m no lizard. I *am* fire. And you’re stupid.”

“I’m going.”

“No, wait. I’m sorry. I’m sorry! You’re not stupid. I understand. It’s hard to believe: a salamander being fire. Look, usually I don’t have to convince anyone to help me; every thousand years I just build a nest and get it over with. I don’t have to bother anybody. Just *three, two, one, phloom!, flicker, flame; screaming, screaming rising, agony; sinking; death. But then smolder, smolder, ashes; regathering, ashes closing in, hardening, pulling together, shell, shell, shell; cook, wait.* It seems like an eternity, the waiting. Maybe it’s only a second or a minute, but time is weird inside the shell; it’s all warped, time is, because, you know, all the fire in the world is inside the egg; the whole universe, cooking. Inside the egg, I can see from one end of the universe to the other. I can touch it, all of it. It’s magnificent really. Sometimes I don’t want to come out; I just want to stay inside where everything is safe; everything is *there*; everything is waiting to be born again, to have another go at it and

maybe correct a mistake or two. And oh, the glorious anticipation of making things *warmer!* Inside a stove, in a hearth, or heating up some soup or cooking some legs of mutton for you! Such pleasure I give you humans. How I love to watch you watch me flicker! We love staring at each other, Fire and humans. Nothing like it. You all gathered in a ring around me in an open campfire, telling stories, singing songs, preserving myths. Yes. Yes, that part is glorious. But there's the pain of burning. It frightens me. I remember it, even from a thousand years ago, and two thousand, and three. Seven thousand years ago, that was the worst one! There was a kiln involved that year, I can't quite remember why, but the heat was unbearable. Enough to melt iron! Each time I think I won't survive it. I'd rather gnaw off my own legs than feel the pain of being on fire. It's why I put it off this time. I'm a coward. I don't want to do it again. Though I know I must."

"Well, I couldn't anyway," said Amelia.

"Couldn't what?"

"Set you on fire. Nothing will burn anymore. You've seen that."

"It's because of me. I grew too old. Now I'm too weak. I can't burn anything. I'm sorry. It's not until I'm reborn that I can do you any good."

"But -- if you can't burn anything until after you're born again from ashes, how can you burn you?"

"I'm Fire. I just need you to get me started. I can take it from there."

"But I need -- fire to start fire."

"There's the charcloth in your boot."

“How do you know about that?”

“You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, then I guess I *don’t* know about.”

“Besides,” said Amelia, “I can’t use it up on you. I promised I’d bring charcloth back to my father.”

“Use it on me, and there’ll be fire for everyone! I promise. Use it on me. Use the charcloth on me!” The salamander’s eyes were growing wider and wilder. Amelia started to reach for her booth, but then she stopped.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I see what you’re doing. You’re not the Fire Salamander. You’re just an ordinary, shivering lizard in a bird bath, trying to con a little girl into using her last scrap of charcloth on you for a few seconds of warmth. You’re horrible. I almost did it, too. I almost --” She stared at the salamander. His eyes were moist. “I almost --”

The salamander shrugged. “So sad to hear that’s what you think of me. After all the warmth I’ve given you and your family.” He turned his tail on her, and plodded to the far rim of the bird bath.” “Best of luck to you, humans. I’m sorry I failed you.” He curled up, drawing his tail to his head, nearly a perfect circle.

Amelia stood silently, caught there between the dead white church garden and the black of the graveyard, watching the yellow salamander close his eyes, now barely breathing. She saw him shiver.

“How --” she said, nearly in a whisper, “How, if I wanted to, would I ignite the square of charcloth?” She pulled it out from the top of her boot. “I don’t have a flint or a strike.”

The salamander did not move, nor even open his eyes. “There’s a flint and a strike over there on the bench in the garden. The priest left it there.”

Amelia stood without moving. She looked at the church garden and saw a bench with a few somethings on it. She could not see exactly what they were.

“If you’re going to do it, hurry,” said the salamander, beginning now to quiver. “Not much time left.”

“It’s -- I promised my Father I’d bring him some charcloth.”

“Do you think he’d be angry if you brought him fire instead?”

“But your pain, from the fire....”

“Yes, I know. And now because of my sacrifice and inaction, I too am caught between two equally frightening possibilities: death from cold, or death from fire. The first relieves me of suffering; the second relieves all of us from suffering. But in both there is fear. No getting around that for me. So.”

“Yes, but in only one of those choices am I the one responsible. If I leave you, alone, you’ll die without my having to kill you. By fire, I’d be the one to kill you.”

“You’d save me.”

“I’d hurt you.”

“I will hurt, whether it’s caused by you or not. You can’t prevent my suffering, Amelia. You can only lessen the suffering of others.”

“But...my promise to my father....”

“ -- will mean nothing to all the people who will freeze and starve because you were the girl who refused to save fire.” The salamander his tail completely around his body into a tight, shivering ball, and closed his eyes with a disturbing exhaling sound. “Won’t be long now....”

Amelia didn’t know what to do. A part of her believed this salamander to be a charlatan, just putting on an act to get her to use up her charcloth for a few seconds of selfish warmth. But another part of her believed he actually *was* Fire, and she was letting him slip away, now and forever. *I can’t bear to burn him and watch him writhe in pain. But neither can I face Father, telling him I have burned the last charcloth in the world, falling prey to a smooth-tongued salamander. Besides, Father used up all our charcloth, piece after piece; what makes me think this one last square is going to ignite, when all the others have failed?*

Then she remembered the ember.

That one small spark of glowing heat she saw at the bottom of the moss pile. It *had* flickered brighter, hadn’t it? When she had tried to speak to the fire in her father’s hearth...”That was *you*,” she asked the salamander, “Wasn’t it? Glowing in the hearth. That was you, beckoning to me, leading me to you. Wasn’t it?”

But the salamander had closed his eyes for the last time, and did not answer. He wasn’t breathing any more.

“No!” she shouted. And without any more thinking, Amelia ran to the garden bench, snatched up the strike and flint, and ran back over to the bird bath where the salamander was now quite motionless. She put down the fire making tools so that she could work the nest of moss and twigs into a small mound. She lay her square of charcloth on top of the nest, covered it with more dried moss, and then picked up the salamander and laid him on top of the pyre. He was cold.

“One chance is all you’ll get,” she said. She wasn’t sure whether she meant that for her ears or his. She picked up the flint and strike, pulled a little corner of the charcloth so it stuck out a little from inside the nest. Yellow and red wisps of moss poked out from underneath the little square of charcloth lying on top of the black twigs.

And she struck the flint against the strike.

Now, usually, as you probably know, it takes several strikes, often many strikes, to coax a spark to jump from a flint. But Amelia’s luck was strong and true, and on her very first strike a spark leapt straight from the flint as though shot from a crossbow. It landed just on the very tip of the charcloth and took a short hop, bobbing in a little curve to the left. Amelia knew how to coax a spark, cupping her hands around it, getting ready to blow on it, gently, softly, nurturingly.

But no nurturing was necessary. The spark burrowed a hole through the cloth, and the orange glowing edges of the hole, before Amelia could even get her hands cupped, spread into a cone of flame, igniting both the moss and the

salamander. Amelia heard a gasping sound coming from the salamander. He leapt up with a terrible *screed*, completely engulfed in flames. “Skaa-a-a-!” he shrieked, “It hurts! It hurts! What did you do! I was at peace, I was at rest! Help me -- I’m burning! Put out the fire!” His voice was unearthly, unbearable to listen to.

Amelia looked around for a bucket for dirt or water, but saw only a shovel in the corner of the church garden. She thought she might be able to shovel dirt onto the salamander to douse the flames. She ran to the shovel and started to dig.

But the earth was frozen with winter. She looked back at the salamander, frantic. *Perhaps if I used the shovel to bat down the flames. Or scatter them....*

But no, it was too late. The flames in the bird bath were several hands high now, completely filling the basin. Even if she were to put the flames out with dirt or water or snow, the salamander would not survive. The blaze was so intense she could feel the heat from it all the way over in the garden.

It occurred to Amelia that she had not seen an actual blaze in days. *Maybe....* She didn’t dare to think. She broke off a small but thick branch from a cypress tree in the garden and plunged it into the fire. It was blindingly bright. It had lit! She could see the salamander in the flames, long past resisting and shriveling, curled up in the nest of burning moss, a round ball of flames.

A round ball. Bright with red fire. Round like an egg of fire.

*

When Amelia returned home at last, her father couldn't believe what he saw in his daughter's hands: a crooked stick, glowing with fire.

"D-don't be angry with me, Father," she said with a grin. "I didn't bring any charcloth like you wanted. Instead I brought you...fire itself."

She touched the flaming end of her stick onto the nest which Father had built in the hearth, and instantly it burst into flames. And...it stayed lit.

That night, Amelia and her father were visited first by Signore Vendiri who brought a torch stick, then the neighbors, and even Mayor Avido himself.

Later, after everyone had gone and Amelia was alone by the fire, all by herself, she saw a tiny newborn nymph, crawling out of the hearth and underneath the door, away into the night. "Ouch," she heard it say, "That hurt!"

The End.

Moral: Next time someone comes into your store offering you denari for a worthless thing, take the money.

Story the Second:
The Horses of Helios



If you could stand at the eastern edge of the world just as the night gives way to dawn, you would hear a most glorious, joyous singing. It's coming from the horses pulling Helios' chariot into the morning sky. The Chariot of the Sun! Illuminating earth and field and town and every animal and bird with light and warmth and hope! I urge you to do it one day. Don't put it off just because you think by the time you've walked that far east you're actually now so nearly halfway round the globe that you're coming round again from the West; that's not how it worked back then, when Helios took the reins and started his daily journey round the earth. The earth, back then, was flat, thank you very much, so you *could* drive a chariot across the sky during the

day, then continue back underneath on the backside, and emerge again just in time for the next morning. Flat was good enough for Helios, so when presumptuous Signore Magellan and company thought, no, they knew better about the shapes of things *than a god!*, well, Helios just plain ignored the “facts” and continued on as he had since before Cronos lost his tiff with the Titans (look it up). “Flat! Ha!” said Helios, “I’m the one who is up in the sky looking down on the earth, and if it looks flat to me, then flat it is, now and forever.” For once a god has spoken, there shall be no contradiction. And I suppose, from his perspective, he’s right. Who’s the one with the chariot, getting up at the crack of dawn, literally (it’s Helios’s horsewhip which makes the cracking sound), every morning day in, day out, without fail? Well, with *two* failures, one of which is the subject of this story, and the other is referenced within, but that’s not a bad record, two dawns missed, in all of eternity. I don’t think you could do better. “Still,” you cluck -- I can hear you -- “two dawns missed? Room for improvement.” I ought to warn you to keep your clucking to yourself; there’s a god listening in. And if he’s in denial about the shape of the earth, well, he might just as easily be in denial about *your* existence, and I give you pretty poor odds, you against a god.

Forewarned.

Singing at dawn; what horse wouldn’t be delighted to spend the day flying at great height above the earth, eh? Well, the answer to that seemingly rhetorical question will undoubtedly disturb you. Come with me on a visit to the other side of the chariot’s journey; to the edge of the western sky just at

sunset. The horses are no longer singing. In fact, they're screaming. In terror and pain. They're also begging Helios not to drive over the western edge of the world.

"The other side of the western edge is death!"

"The other side of the western edge is darkness!"

"Please, please, Helios, turn the chariot round. Let us go back to the eastern sky. To the West is blackness. To the West is oblivion."

For what you may not realize is that the horses who drive Helios' chariot today are not the same ones who drive it tomorrow. Helios' horses don't survive the setting of the sun. They die as they fall off the edge of the earth and Helios heads back east to find a fresh set for the morning. You can see the horses die: great brilliant bursts of red, orange and pink. Yes, it is the death of the chariot horses which gives you so much pleasure at day's end. I hope I haven't ruined the experience for you. Sometimes the truth can spoil things so. Just remember the joy of the horses waiting next to pull the chariot in the morning. Weigh their joy against the terror and sorrow of the horses of the evening, and you have yourself a classic solipsistic equilibrium; you cannot have the one without the other. So you may as well enjoy the one and, and...and do what you can to muffle the piteous sounds of the other.

"And Helios's horses --?" you ask. Where do they come from every morning?" Oh you inquisitive equinophile, you. Well may your curiosity be rewarded with knowledge which prevents you from making foolish mistakes. Though your curiosity has such a head start on your laggardly knowledge, the

gap may be, for you and indeed all your fellow mankind, too wide, too wide. Blessed are the ignorant, for they shan't recognize sorrow when it spits in their faces.

Helios's horses are not horses at all. They are stolen children. There's a terrible terrible demigod who makes his living finding mothers and fathers so desperate for the lives of their children that they are willing to sell the weakest and most misshapen of their children for money to feed the others. The demigod's name is Signore Puermutanto. That means "children-changer." Puermutanto has made a bargain with Helios: immortality in exchange for a constant supply of children who are happier as winged horses than they would ever be if they remained weak, misshapen and grotesque as they were destined.

And think about it. It's not a bad trade, actually. I don't mean for Puermutanto; his trade is purely mercenary, and his story does not concern us here once we're past the scene in which we are introduced to the four horses who dared to buck Helios. Oh, don't pretend I have spoiled the ending of the story; you have already peeked at the picture, yes, practically stared at it, trying to guess whether that one horse in the back...does he *escape* by flying downward, or is he plummeting to earth to his death? Ha, to *that* you don't know the answer, do you? Unless of course you are re-reading this story, looking either for symbolism you missed the first time, or, more likely, for a smug satisfaction of knowing all the answers. Imagine your certainty at a *third* reading, finally knowing the answers to what you only guessed were the questions the first and second times through. Would that life worked like that,

eh? A smug second time around, then back for a profound and finally worthwhile third look. At final read, now, that horse in the rear, if you know whether he survives or dies, now you can finally ask yourself what is the meaning of that? What's it all adding up to as far as *you're* concerned? Eh? Who's so smug now, my friend? No wonder the horses weep at the end of the day. What's it all been for? Mere illumination and motion. For what? For...what...?

But the demigod Puermutanto didn't ponder any of those questions each time he exchanged a bag bursting with denari from a sober mother and father for a lame or protesting child. The parents knew the terms of the bargain, and no one suffered, really. Puermutanto had his immortality; the parents had enough money now to take care of *all* the rest of their children (Puermutanto was actually very generous, often much more generous than he needed to be by half, by triple if he were so moved, for he was not a hard-hearted man) -- and the child who got sold to Helios's stables, he or she was almost always delighted, honored even, to become a legendary flying horse. Put yourselves in their horseshoes; what would you give to be a flying horse?, to have no pain or troubles the day after your flight, and again, that joy, that rapturous joy of the Song of the Dawn. Think and compare: What are *you* doing tomorrow morning? Do you get to be a flying horse? No. Who's sorrowful now? As I say, almost every child longed, even begged, to be taken to Helios by Puermutanto.

Almost. Young Bartolomeo didn't want to be taken. He didn't want to be a horse, winged or otherwise. He'd decided he was content being a hobbling

beggar child whose right leg was longer than his left by several inches, and who had some unpleasant lump growing from the side of his right cheekbone, squeezing shut his right eye into a permanent deep socket hole that looked more like a navel than an eye. For Bartolomeo wrote poetry, and his poetry made up for everything else which was rotten in the world.

His parents didn't disagree with Bartolomeo. They didn't mind his misshapeness; that was not the issue. The issue was that Bartolomeo's affliction meant that he was just another mouth to feed without any ability to help pay for it, let alone contribute to the rest of the family's nutritional needs. And poetry? No, that wouldn't feed any of them. So, sorrowfully, with the heaviest of hearts, Bartolomeo's parents sold him to Puermutanto to become one of the great horses of Helios.

The transformation was virtually an immediate thing; you went from human child one day to being a winged horse the next morning. But you weren't immediately strapped up to the chariot and let loose on the sky to die at day's end. There was getting used to the heat, if nothing else. The sun behind you in a basket was not the chilliest thing to be carting around all day. In addition, there was also gallop apace training (which was hard enough to do on your own, let alone in pairs) and navigation (who can see the stars with all that bright light always right behind you?), and the physical training! While, true, most of the horses had been poor physical specimens as human children, upon transformation they each became magnificent, whole, athletic champions. But there was endurance to consider. *You* try galloping all day long from

sunrise to sunset, without stopping. Until, at sunset exactly, you stop forever and ever, never to fly or live again. Bartolomeo started wondering what would happen if, when his day came, he would disobey Helios. *Probably not a good idea, going up against a god. But if the alternative is a fiery death, well, how would that be any worse?*

Bartolomeo had been a smart child, and now he was a smart horse, so he knew better than to say a word to any of the other horses. All day long, every day, he played along, pretending he was just as enthusiastic as all the rest of the enslaved horses, listening to their songs and rapturous poetry in praise of their great fiery demise, feigning to be *transported with delight in anticipation of the Great Immolation which awaited all of Helios's winged children, from air to elementary light and from this one to the fire principle where all finishes by dissolution and from where all emanates anew. Let me rise in the ashes and smoke of my own flames, rise to the glory of the eternal golden morning.* That kind of over-wrought claptrap; I'm sure you've heard plenty of it in your lifetime already.

But Bartolomeo never said a word. He smiled, he listened, he joined in with his fellow horses' games and play and hard training, growing stronger and stronger with each passing day. But he remained silent as a cloud. He wouldn't let on to anyone that he didn't share their allegiance to Helios. Instead, he lay awake at nights, dreaming of being free, of flying the night sky, inventing little scenes and tableaux for the characters who lived in the constellations above his head.

“I see you thinking,” said a fellow horse one night after all the others had gone to sleep, kneeling down beside him. “I see your discontentment.” This was Colpevole, a restless wanderer of a horse who was always trying to take on everyone else’s problems. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Bartolomeo shook his head. Make no friends here, he thought, trust no one. What you whisper in the evening gets sold for favors in the morning.

“It’s all right,” whispered Colpevole, “You can trust me.”

That’s exactly what I can’t do, thought Bartolomeo. You’ll betray me to Helios, or worse, pretend to be my friend and then turn me in for an apple core, for a sugar cube, for a looser knot of the reins.

Colpevole was an impressive horse, entirely of white except for the underside of his wings which were each tipped with a most subtle luminous red, reaching from his shoulders along the outer rims of his wings all the way to the tips. Colpevole was a smart, alert horse; friendly, inquisitive, with a selfless helpfulness which Bartolomeo greatly mistrusted. “Very well,” said Colpevole, “You don’t have to trust me. Just know that I’m a sympathetic ear if you ever feel you need one.” Colpevole nuzzled down inside a semi-circle of his own forelegs and went to sleep. But Bartolomeo didn’t need Colpevole. He didn’t need anyone, and no one needed him, and that was fine, that was just fine.

The next day, after their training and regimens, Colpevole stood near Bartolomeo at the trough, drinking, just as silent as Bartolomeo. Is he waiting for me to make a mistake and say something I’ll regret so he can sell me for an

apple core? wondered Bartolomeo, or is he in fact a kindred spirit? Could I tell him I'm going to bolt? Bah, what good would that do? The chances of our being hitched together on the same day to the chariot are thousands-to-one, so it's not as if we could plan anything together --

But it turned out they were hitched together. The Day of Immolation came at last, and Bartolomeo discovered himself in a team of four, including Colpevole and two other horses.

Bartolomeo was astonished. He'd done it! He'd fooled Helios into thinking he was loyal and obedient. His silence had paid off. He was hitched to the chariot, his loyalty unquestioned. You didn't get hitched to a team if Helios thought you were disobedient. He wouldn't take even the slightest chance of a repeat of what had happened with a colt by the name of Pegasus, the only horse to break free of Helios.

It's a little-known fact that once upon a time Pegasus was indeed one of Helios's slave horses, but he had bolted east. Helios had turned the chariot round in an attempt to chase down Pegasus and re-enslave him. But three be-yoked horses were no match for the powerful legendary Pegasus. The chase had lasted the better part of the day, before Helios finally realized the futility, and worse, how far away he was to the western edge. Helios abandoned pursuit of Pegasus, desperate to make up for the wasted afternoon. Helios was late, far later than he should have been, before his coursers burst into flame at Journey's Edge. By the end of it all, it turned out that Helios had added the length of nearly an entire day, throwing the calendar off for hundreds of years

to come, forcing astrologers to contemplate adding a whole extra day every so often, in the hopes of getting back on track. But it was too late; the damage had been done to earth's annual cycle. Some times of the year Helios's steeds make across the sky in a little faster time than the previous, making for shorter days, or sometimes Helios compensates in other direction and days are longer. You can blame Pegasus for that.

But this is the story of Bartolomeo, the winged horse who had no intention of remaining Helios's slave, not for a day longer, especially not for a day which would end in his fiery demise. He would be patient only a few hours longer. He would wait until noon, until they reached the very apex of their arc across the sky, and then he would --

Hup! grunted the lead horse at Bartolemeo's right flank, and they, the four horses, leapt into the sky and dawn rose over the earth.

"Kick, kick, then beat down our wings!" said the lead horse. A wind rushed below them, a wind of their own making. Their eight wings were more powerful than the mightiest gold, and the air they pushed down with their sinewy, feathered muscles fanned against the face of the earth with a blast of wind and dust. And suddenly the earth was below them, not beside, and trees shrank to very Calabrese broccoli and hillsides became mere disturbances of light and shadow.

"Hup! Hup! Faster, steeds, a day of frenzy, a night of eternal rest!" They hit their stride a moment later, high, high above the earth. "Nothing to do now but fly west, blind to the west, to the Immolation!"

Bartolomeo looked to his right to see the lead horse who was doing all the rallying. *Oh, great*, thought Bartolomeo, *it's Mostro! Il Bruto. The Brute.* The strongest in Bartolomeo's herd. Mostro stood a half-a-span taller than the rest of the horses, even if you take into consideration he had his head down as he was straining, straining, pushing the team to course faster, harder. "Let's break the speed record, *ragazzi!*" he said, "Let's race so hard we'll get to the Western Edge *before* sunset!"

Colpevole said, "Uh, no, Mostro, that's not possible."

Mostro snorted, "Sure it is! We just need to push harder than any team's ever pushed before. Come, let's make history!"

"We can't get to the Western Edge before sunset --"

"We can!"

"--because we're carrying the sun, Mostro. It's right here with us in the chariot."

"It is?"

"You can't feel that heat?"

"I just thought it was me. I sweat, you know. I'm sorry. I apologize in advance. But we're all going to need to sweat, *ragazzi*, if we're going to get there before the sun! Faster! Faster!"

"What did I *just* say about the sun, Mostro?"

"That...it's hot?"

Just hold out until noon, thought Bartolomeo to himself. And then to his astonishment, he heard from behind him Colpevole whisper very quietly such

that only Bartolomeo could hear, “we just need to hold out until noon, then I’ll follow you back East.”

Bartolomeo blinked, and broke stride. The chariot lurched to the left a moment. Helios snapped the whip with a crack across Bartolomeo’s back, but he needn’t have. Bartolomeo was perfectly aware of the malequilibrium, and athletic enough to double-flap his wings and right the stride.

“Careful there, steed!” shouted Mostro, “steady on, stead on.”

Follow me back East? thought Bartolomeo. *What did Colpevole mean by that?* Bartolomeo hadn’t said a word about his plans -- literally hadn’t spoken a word -- how could Colpevole know what he was planning? Had it been that obvious, those nights when everyone was asleep and Bartolomeo had drifted away from the herd, dreaming on the night stars?

Then an even quieter whisper from his rear flank. “I’ll follow you back east as well....”

Bartolomeo turned to look behind him, to his right. It was Allevatore, a young filly. She -- she was -- magnificent. She was at Colpevole’s flank, and the two strode together in aerial unison, their wingtips *just* touching at the top and bottom of their parabolic patterns. Upstroke, tiptouch, downstroke, tiptouch. The underside of her wings were the same subtle luminous red as Colpevole. Except for the luminosity. She, too, was all white. In fact, Bartolomeo noticed, all four of them were all white. But only Colpevole and Allevatore had a tinge of red.

What did she say? Was she talking to me?

“Lead us! Bartolomeo!” she whispered. “At the north, along the Eastern Edge behind us, lies Notto Pascolo, the land of Night Pastures, watched over by Diana of the Night Moon. At noon, at the Apex, we will break away with you. Lead us Notto Pascolo, Bartolomeo, lead us, lead us!”

Remember that Bartolomeo had kept to himself, had not said a word, had not made any attempt to make friends or allegiances. *Or herds!* he thought, *who ever said anything about forming a herd! I’m just heading off on my own. I don’t need anyone. I don’t trust anyone. ‘Lead us!’? ‘We’ll follow you to the East!’? It’s a trap, of course. I see right through it. They want me to think we’re on the same side, in order to...to...so, so they’ll know when I’m going to bolt and they’ll cut me off and force back to the chariot. Or, or, they’re trying to make me trust them and tell them that, yes, I’m planning on bolting. Well, I won’t trust them. They’re trying to trick me into Immolation.* Clouds engulfed them briefly, then released them back into open sky. The ground, far below, was spotted with light and shadow from the clouds and the space between. The morning was beginning to give way to nearly mid-day.

Still. A herd? It had never occurred to Bartolomeo that he might one day have a family of his own. He had always assumed because of the irregular proportions of his legs and the unbearable bulge on the right side of his face that the rest of his body must be equally unfit, and having children of his own was never to be an option for him. Still, it occurred to him only now, the transfiguration from human into horse had given him a new body; a not ill-shapen body. A perfect body, one which might in fact, be perfectly fit to

engender a herd. *Notto Pascolo. Never heard of such a place. She's making it up. Or...is she? Why would she say anything at all to him unless it were true? It they were suspicious of him, all they needed to do was wait for him to bolt, and then chase him down, and Helios would see to the rest. Why would they need to taunt him beforehand with thoughts of paradise and night pastures? So surely it -- must be true. They'd come with me. We'd form a herd --*

"Hup! HUUUP!" shouted Mostro. "Faster steeds, a day in February, a night of eternal rest! Let's get there before the sun! H'gyahh!"

Bartolomeo thought, *We would form a stupid herd.*

"Hsst!" said Colpevole.

"The Apex is approaching. It's now or never, Bartolomeo."

"Are you ready, Mostro?" whispered Allevatore.

"Ready!" Then a brief pause, followed by, "Ready for what?"

"Ready to bolt. Apex straight ahead."

"Bolting straight for the Apex, y'hah!" said Mostro.

"No, no," said Allevatore to Mostro. "We're going to break loose, and follow Bartolomeo back the other way."

"We are?"

"Mostro!" snorted Allevatore, "we talked about this. You agreed."

"I'm beginning to think this isn't going to work," whinnied Colpevole softly. "If Mostro doesn't remember the plan and -- "

"No, no!" said Allevatore, "You can't back out now. Bolt or burn. Don't be afraid, Bartolomeo. We're --"

Bartolomeo wasn't going to wait any longer. If they were lying in wait for him, then the only thing to do was to catch them off-guard and get a head start. So, before Allevatore could finish her sentence to recover Colpevole's waning courage, or before they reached the exact top of the apex and could coordinate a simultaneous maneuver, Bartolomeo slipped out of his harness, and dove downwards, not eastwards.

After only the briefest of hesitations later, Colpevole spun round, heading eastward after Bartolomeo. Allevatore was disoriented, caught off guard, but only for a few seconds, and then she, too, found true east.

The chariot tipped, spilling Helios out of it backwards, plunging him headfirst back through the clouds.

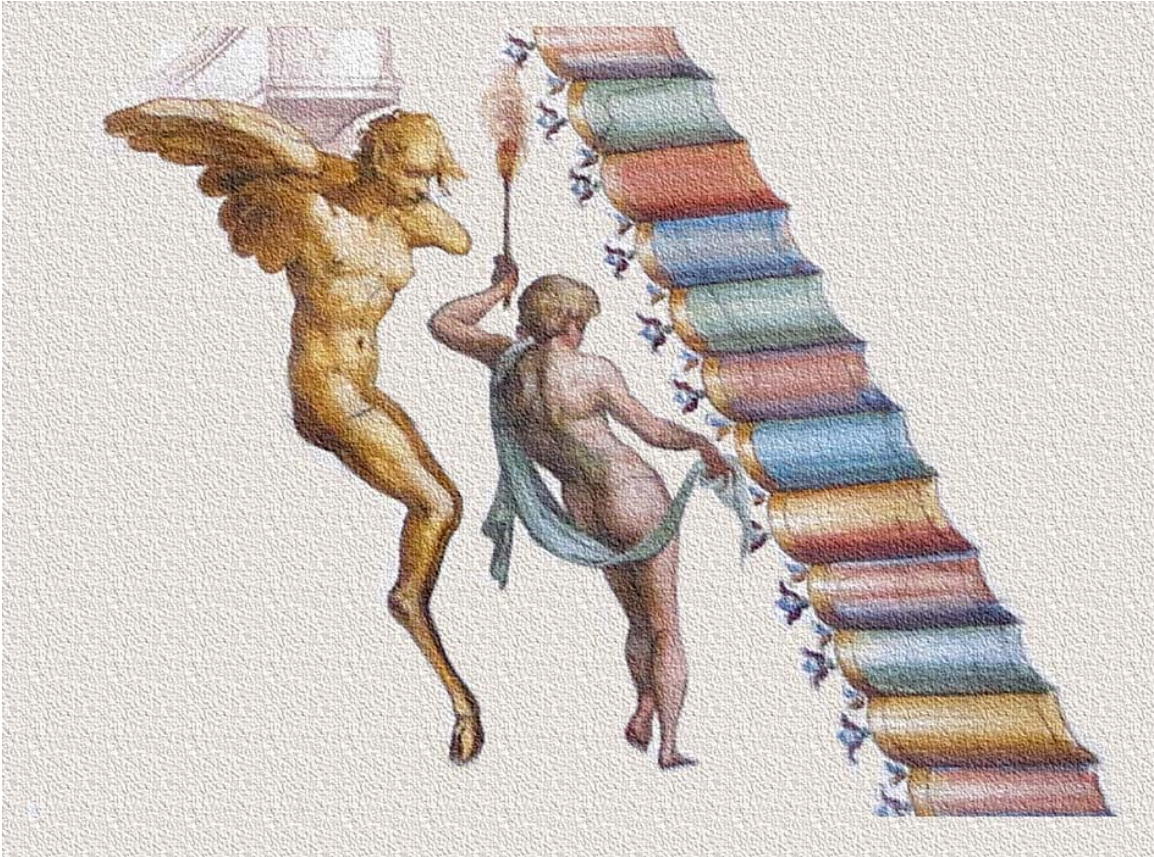
Poor blithe Mostro continued on westward, dragging the sun chariot behind him, empty.

*

Many years later, the goddess Diana of the Night Moon looked down over the cool dark green grasses of Notto Pascolo, watching the happy herd of horses pounce off the meadows, high in the night sky and back again. Some of their wings reflected subtle luminous red; others reflected pure, pure white. And all of the horses whinnied in joyous shouts of laughter and song. *All of them.*

Moral: Do not let your enjoyment of sunsets be marred by the shrieks of dying horses.

Story the Third:
The Demon of Gold



Emperor Aurumius IV was a greedy Emperor. He had used up the lives of thousands of slaves in order to scrape all the gold which was to be had in the hills, mountains, streams and valleys in his empire. He had found all there was to be found.

“Find me more gold!” shouted the Emperor.

“But -- you have found all there is to be f--” protested his one hundred twenty-eighth Minister of the Treasury. The one hundred twenty-eighth

minister was beheaded before he could say "--ound" and a one hundred twenty-ninth put into his place.

"Find me more gold!" bellowed the Emperor, not content with the answers he had received from the previous minister. Emperors are like that. I don't know whether you've ever met an Emperor. You probably wouldn't like him very much. They're so very --

"Gollld!!"

--noisy.

"I have an idea where you might find more gold, your Majesty," said One Hundred Twenty-Nine.

"What!? You do!" said Emperor Aurumius IV, suddenly all jolly and merry. "Well, well, well! Come, minister, let's have a drink together and you'll tell me all about it!" Emperors are like that, too. They can be so --

"And your wife?" asked Emperor Aurumius, "How is she?"

--insincere. You mustn't blame them. They learned their bad habits from their bad parents who learned them from *their* bad parents. Really, there's never been anyone to teach them any better. When you come right down to it, they're just very spoiled grandchildren who've never had to work for their money. All I ask is that if you are ever elected Emperor, that you treat people better than Aurumius IV did.

"Where will I find more gold!?" he demanded of his now longest-reigning minister. "For I've used up all I can find. I've put it into rings and jewelry and cups and lockets and picture frames and chains and tables and candlesticks

and forks and spoons, oh, oh, and just last year, I had the fanciest toilet made, all of gold. Don't tell anyone, Minister,” whispered Aurumius, leaning close to the Minister's ear, “But I really love gold.”

“Your secret is safe with me, your Majesty.”

“Good, good, excellent! So? *Where* can I find more?!” (Back to bellowing.)

“Diavolo d'Oro.”

“What? What's that?”

“Not what. Who. He's a demon. He controls the flow of gold throughout the earth. Diavolo d'Oro. It means the Demon of Gold; the gold Devil.”

“Dia-vo-lo Di-o-ro. It's an awful mouthful. I'll call him Diavolo.”

“Assuming he'll see you.”

“What do you mean, of course, he'll see me. I'm the Emperor! One more crack like that and I'll cut off your head.”

“Cut off my head and I won't be able to tell you how to find Diavolo.”

“Tell me how to find Diavolo or I'll cut off your head.”

“Now, now, your Majesty,” said the Minister. “You and I both know you won't cut off my head, because you'd be too afraid I actually *do* know how to find the Gold Devil who can get you more gold.”

“Well, what makes you think I wouldn't cut off your head after you lead me to the Gold Devil?”

“You'll be too busy making more gold toilets,” said the Minister. “You'll forget all about me.”

The Minister was right, of course. And we, too, will forget about him once the Emperor's met Diavolo d'Oro and our tale really begins. Dispensable things, these ministers, and not only for Emperors; for storytellers as well.

Witness:

The Minister lead Emperor Aurumius to the third hill in the shadow of the fourth mountain where there was an archway through which the Emperor could see, a shimmering desert of gold. Not a treasure trove of gold. Not a mountain of gold. An entire desert of gold as far as Aurumius's eye could see; all the way to the horizon: gold, gold, gold. Aurumius ran through the archway, the Minister forgotten forever. And you -- be truthful now -- are you more interested in staying on this side of the archway and chatting further with the Minister (who doesn't even have a name, but only a mere number), or are you, in fact, more interested in following Emperor Aurumius IV through the archway to meet the Demon of Gold? You see my point. Thus does the Minister vanish forever from the Emperor's wrath, and from literature.

Farewell, Minister, sweet dr --

The desert was no mirage. It was made of gold as deep as the ocean, gold flecks, as far as the edge of the sky. Even farther! For you could travel for days to the horizon and there would only be more horizon of gold, and beyond that, still more horizon. I'm saying it was a lot of gold.

The Emperor fell on his knees and kissed the gold sand, then scooped his arms in it, as though to embrace it. He felt he couldn't breathe, dared not breathe. He was suffocating in his own greed. He had never been happier.

But how to get all the gold back to his palace? How many wagons would he need, how many slaves, how many years, to transport all the gold back through the archway!

Emperor Aurumius IV looked back at the archway. It, too, was made of gold. Standing, stooped, in place of the north column of the archway, was the Devil of Gold himself. Diavolo d'Oro. He was holding up the archway on the hunch of his broad shoulders. He was short and very thin, some four and a half feet tall. He had centaurs' hooves for feet and a short stubby pair of thick wings.

He had no arms.

His shoulders ended in round graceful curves. His face was elongated and came to a point near his chin, which extended into an angular chin-beard. He was made entirely of gold.

He's made entirely of gold! observed the Emperor. *Head to toe! Well, head to cloven foot. He's literally made of gold.*

The Demon of Gold was weeping, with anger. "I give up!" he shouted, at first to no one, but then when he saw Emperor Aurumius, he brightened. "You there! Come over here. Hold up this corner of the roof of my palace. I'll only be a minute."

"Me?" asked Emperor Aurumius IV.

"You see anyone else out here in the desert, amico? Here, come hoist this roof for me a second."

“Hoist? Emperor's don't -- I don't -- with my hands you want me to -- I literally don't know the meaning of the word 'hoist'.”

“I don't have any arms,” said Diavolo d'Oro. “So I can't hold up my palace except on the back of my shoulders.”

“You don't have a palace. That's just an archway.”

“Look again.” If it was a palace, it was so nearly hidden you wouldn't see its towers at first, even if you knew to look for them. But now that he knew to look, sure enough, to Emperor Aurumius's utter astonishment, what once had been the archway through which he had walked, at second glance was but a portion of a corner of a large magnificent palace. Also made all of gold, except for some brightly colored cloths and banners hung high near the tops of porticos.

A thin line of saliva formed at the corner of the Emperor's mouth and dribbled down his chin. “I want that.”

“This? You want this palace? You can't have it! It's mine. It's just I -- I can't keep it standing.”

It was true; the palace was wobbling. Its pillars were too thin for the weight of the roof; too thin almost for wind. Diavolo was literally holding up a corner of the building with his shoulders.

“If I can't have the palace,” ventured the Emperor, wiping his chin, “can I -- can I have your golden sand? I could melt it together to make gold bricks for my own palace. I wouldn't need yours. But I myself, I find I'm just recently run out of gold. What will you give me for your golden desert, Diavolo?”

“Oh. Never had anybody ask me that before. Let me think. Do you know what I need more than anything? Some able bodies to hold up my palace. I need -- let me think -- one, two, three...it's not very easy for me to count as I don't have any fingers...four, five...I see eight, eight corners to my palace. It's an octagon, you see. So give me eight of your finest citizens to hold up my palace, and you shall have all the gold you want.”

“All the gold I want?”

“I have an infinite amount. You can have whatever you want.”

“Deal!” said the Emperor.

“Deal.”

“Let's shake on it.” A pause. “Oh.”

Now, this was back in the days when the promise of a man, even if he were a demon, meant something (don't get me started), and a bargain was made that very day.

The Emperor went back to his empire, and lo and behold, his goldmines were again teeming with gold. His riverbeds, his mountain streams, his gullies and gorges and gulches puked out all the gold he could ever want for.

If you are thinking, “Too easy. The Emperor needs to pay some horrible price for his greet. That Gold Devil has tricked him somehow.” You would be right. Clever you.

It so happened that Emperor Aurumius IV had nine children: two sons and seven daughters. He loved them very much. He loved his children almost as much as he loved his gold. And the demon Diavolo knew this, of course. So

when it came time for him to collect his part of the bargain, Diavolo said, “I want eight of your children. They will be the pillars of my palace.”

“No!” cried the Emperor, “Not my children!”

“Yes!” cried Diavolo in mockery. “Your children. Eight of them! I'll turn them to gold, and they'll hold up my palace for ever and all eternity.”

“No,” whispered the Emperor, “what have I done! I've lost my children, all through greed and selfishness. I let my own lust for gold blind me and make me forget that the greatest pleasure in life, the only reason for living, is for love.” He was saying just what you'd expect him to say near the end of the tale after he's learned his lessons, which was odd, given so much of the tale has yet to unfold. But he's the Emperor, so when he pontificates, he means for the world to believe him. Emperors are like that. They can be so --

“Love of family is the most precious commodity on earth! Nothing is as precious to me as my children.”

--unconvincing.

“I wouldn't have given them up for anything, not even if you were to have offered to pile up all the gold of an infinite desert of gold stretched as far as the eye could see. But I have learned this now too late, too late! Oh, what have I done! What have I done!” And a tear rolled out of the corner of the Emperor's eye, down his cheek and, when it reached the corner of his mouth, followed the very track which his trickle of saliva had followed down his chin. In statues of the Emperor Aurumius IV carved after his death, sculptors are fond of depicting both tracts, from the eye and from the mouth. Look for them.

Now, Diavolo's heart wasn't made of stone. It was made of gold, which is a metal, not a stone. And he actually felt a little sorry for the Emperor. However, he was a demon, so don't imagine he would let Aurumius out of his bargain just like that.

“I'll tell you what,” said Diavolo d'Oro, “I'll give each of your children one chance -- one! -- to guess how it is that I turn things to gold. If any of them guesses correctly, I will release them all, and you, of the terms of this bargain you made with a devil. If, however, after each of your children has had a guess, if none has guessed correctly, then they shall forever be the caryatid pillars on my golden octagonal palace.”

And so it was that each of the Emperor's children was given a chance save their brothers and sisters and father. Diavolo had Aurumius line up his children all in a row so that Diavolo needed to explain only once how the bargain was to work. “I will lead each of you, one at a time, into my Palace,” said Diavolo to the children, “where you can inspect anything and everything as long and as hard as you wish, up until the moment the sun sets. Even the very Transmutation Room itself, I'll show you that as well. However, upon the setting of the sun, you must select one of the eight corners of my palace, hoist it high above your head, and then stipulate in your most loudest and proudest voice your best guess for my method of turning things into gold. As I've promised your father, if you manage to guess, you'll be free, and I'll have to find some other way to keep my palace from collapsing. So! Come! Who shall be first?”

It was decided that the children would make their attempts beginning with the eldest who, it turned out, was tall, stately and somber; practically already a pillar even without the aid of any demonic transformation. Her name was Licia.

Diavolo d'Oro made a sly, slow come-hither gesture with his shoulders, and led the girl into the gold palace which interior, apparently, didn't need pillars to hold it up; very strange that the outside was collapsed in a heap but the inside was held sturdily, it makes you suspicious about the need for caryatids, but such are the workings of demons. He led her down, down, a long, long gold corridor with many small rooms leading off to the left and to the right. The rooms appeared to be offices of some sort. About halfway down the corridor, Diavolo d'Oro stopped and gestured for Licia to enter the room on their left.

“Here's the Transmutation Room I told you about, where I do the actual changing of objects into gold. Come in, look your fill! Try to notice everything. Can you guess the room's secret? Tapestries, sculptures, paintings?”

Licia the Eldest entered the room. She saw it was octagonal in shape, just like the palace itself; an octagon within an octagon. In this room were many objects and curiosities, some gold, some not yet gold; some ordinary objects such as shoes and combs, or candles or books, or thimbles or bells; some extraordinary objects such as mechanical dolls or skeletons of animals and fish. There were shelves and cabinets, tapestries, sculptures and paintings, and an octagonal table upon which were objects not yet

transformed. Above Licia's head she saw a dome at the top of the room with eight small rectangular windows in it near the very ceiling, letting in the light of the sun. There were shelves which ran the perimeter of the room, upon which were objects such as I have just described. There were also some cloth banners of many colors -- red, green, yellow, blue -- the banners were hung from two of their sides, such that they drooped away from the ceiling and back up again like so many inverted colored arches.

“Very well,” said Licia. “I've inspected the room.”

“So are you ready to guess? Are you ready to stipulate your answer?”

“Oh no!” she cried, “You won't trick me into making a quick guess. I'll look through the rest of the palace, too. I don't want to miss a clue. I'll use every minute of the sunlight if I need to!”

“You're free to wonder about the palace, my child,” said the Gold Demon, “wherever you wish. Except, of course, in this room, when I do the actual transforming, as it wouldn't be much sport if I were to let you watch me, and then asked you 'Now how do you think I did that?' Today I am transforming some bird skeletons. They'll look every so beautiful in gold, don't you think? Now, off you go. I'll see you again at sunset!” And with that, he gave the girl a little shove with his cloven hoof, then shut the door to the octagonal room, tightly, with a little bang.

Licia realized almost instantly she should have spent more time in the octagonal room, for there were no useful clues in all the rest of the palace. The palace, and everything in it, was already turned to gold. Gold beds, gold

pillows, gold blankets. Clothes, food, drink. The water and wine ran as liquid gold. Even what once must have been someone's pets: a stiff golden cat frozen in the very act of licking a golden saucer of golden milk. There was nothing to be learned here. Licia went back to the octagonal room, knocked, but received no answer. She put her ear to the door, but she could hear nothing. The sun sank lower and lower in the sky and time was running out, but still Licia had not the slightest guess how the Demon made his transformations. Oh, why had she been in such a hurry to leave the octagonal room when she had been in it? Now all its secrets were hidden from her. Licia realized with a terrible sourness in her stomach that she was not going to come up with a logical guess how the Demon turned objects into gold.

“Time's up! The sun has set,” said Diavolo, appearing suddenly at her shoulder. “Got a guess?”

“Not a good one, no, I'm afraid.”

“What a shame. On the other hand, how terrific for me! You're going to make a very beautiful pillar, my dear.”

“Let me have another look at the octagonal room.”

“Well, now that would be cheating, don't you think?”

“Please.”

A sneer snaked across the demon's lips. “Oh, please, is it? And you think just by adding the word 'please' to your unfair and unreasonable request, that I'm somehow obligated to grant it? While you're at it, why don't you ask me whether you could watch me turn a horse's shoe into gold?”

“Very well, I will. Signore d'Oro, might I watch you turn a horse's shoe into gold?”

“Might you watch me, *wh-what?*”

“Please!?”

“Ah, there it is. Now that you've said please...” He paused for demonic effect, then went on, “No. It turns out that 'please' doesn't change my mind after all. Sorry about that.”

“You're very cruel.”

“Habit. We demons, we don't have the greatest of reputations, do we?”

“No.” She began to weep very quietly, trying not to let him see. Ah, but see it he did, and how he did delight in her sorrow! He loved children's sorrows almost as much as he loved his gold. “Tell you what,” he said, suddenly bright and chipper, “I take it back. I *will* let you watch me turn something into gold.”

“You will!?” she said, daring to hope.

“Yes. In fact, it will give me pleasure. I'll let you watch as I turn *you* into gold.”

“Oh. How awful.”

“All a matter of perspective. Now, come, let's go outside and get you turned into a gold pillar.”

Diavolo led her back outside and had her select a corner of his palace to hold up. He had her place her feet on a small pedestal, and her head right up underneath the corner of the roof.

“Now, child, time for you to stipulate your guess. How do you think I transform objects into gold?”

“I don't...I don't know....”

Diavolo leaned closer to her and said, with an anticipatory grin beginning to spread on his face, “Well, you must guess *something!*”

Licia the Eldest guessed that it had something to with heat? “That,” said Diavolo, “is woefully incorrect!” Diavolo clapped his stubby wings on his back in delight and did a little dance with his cloven feet, and slowly, over the course of several minutes, Licia's skin turned from a happy peach-color to a tangerine color to gold. She lost her flexible joints. Her hair stopped flowing in the breeze and became stiff and golden. And her legs, oh her legs were the most gruesome transformation of all. Licia's legs slapped together suddenly and then as if squeezed by some outside force, pulled tighter and tighter against each other, her supple flesh sucking in towards the bone, and the two leg bones fusing together into a single thin column, like a strong, sturdy, immovable pole of gold. At the bottom where her feet once were now was a curved little spiral, like the end of some golden monkey's tail. Her robe sprouted a whimsical golden tassel in front of her.

“And now for the finishing touch!” said Diavolo, watching in evil delight as Licia's arms, oh her arms, her arms fell off, as though chopped with an axe, just below her shoulder. “You won't be needing those anymore. And now, you're part of my palace; part of my family!” Licia was frozen with a permanent

surprised look on her face. “Aha!” her face read, “I know how you did it!” But those golden lips of hers would speak no more.

Sad to say, the fates of all her other brothers and sisters were the same, and soon Diavolo had eight shiny new surprised-looking caryatid pillars holding up his palace, each limbless and inert.

“What! I feel cheated!” perhaps I hear you saying. “I wanted to see each of the sisters and brothers have their turn. Doesn't one of them save the day somehow?” No, I'm afraid. Pillars, all of them.

Most each did very much precisely what Lidia the Eldest had done, looking briefly at all the objects and clues in the octagonal room, then racing out to the rest of the palace. Some of the siblings were quite diligent and thorough; though, truth be told, both of the brothers were impatient and arrogant sorts and had left the room far more quickly than their sisters. Emperor's sons are rather like their Emperor fathers in this regard, you know. They can be so --

“Surely I, as a man, will do the rescuing when rescuing is what's needed!”

--wrong.

“B-but --” This is you again, pleading with me still not to gloss over the adventures of the brothers and sisters. “At least tell us what they guessed how Diavolo transforms gold.”

Very well. But there's the ninth child still to tell you about.

“Oh, that's right! The Emperor had nine children, didn't he? And the Gold Demon took only eight. What happened to the ninth child? Did *she* save the day?”

I thought you wanted to hear about the guesses from the brothers and sisters.

“Now you're just mocking us.”

Habit. So, which will it be, continue with the story and see what happens with the Youngest Child, a small shy girl by the name of Citia; or stop the action cold in its tracks and list the other siblings' guesses?

“Citia next! Tell us about Citia!”

The second oldest child had done just as her older sister had done, racing out of the octagonal room sooner than it turns out would have been wise, so when Diavolo turned to her and asked “Now child, how do you think I transform objects into gold?”

She replied, “I don't -- I don't know!”

Diavolo leaned closer to her and said, “Well, you must guess *something!*”

The second eldest guessed maybe it had something to do with catching the sun's rays from the windows in the ceiling?

“That,” he said, “is incorrect!” He clapped his stubby wings on his back in delight and did a little dance with his cloven feet.

The third eldest guessed maybe it had something to do with spinning. “Spinning?” had asked Diavolo.

“Yes, like the story with the spinning wheel turning straw into gold.”

“That's a ridiculous idea. What would spinning a wheel have anything to do with -- never mind, no, you're wrong. You're wrong *and* you're gullible. Oh, *and* you're gold!” Whereupon the third eldest sister joined her two older sisters, and three corners of the palace were now steadfast upon their heads.

The fourth sister guessed perhaps Diavolo muttered a little incantation under his breath. It turns out she was the closest to the truth among all her brothers and sisters, but “close” isn't the same thing as “true,” so, alas for the fourth daughter, she became the fourth pillar.

The fifth daughter (are you enjoying this? Are you finding it satisfying after all to hear about the various attempts at truth? You seemed to be so impatient to follow the youngest Citia in her bid to defeat Diavolo d'Oro. Shall I stop telling of the siblings now and finish the story with Citia? You're not answering. I know why. You're pouting. That last time you thought you had some influence over the end of the story because I lead you to believe that was the case. But now you're either, as I say, pouting, or fearful of the truth that you haven't as much influence over your own circumstances as you would like. A bitter lesson, a terrible lesson. Perhaps the most difficult one to accept, and I'm sorry that you are only just now learning it. I wish for your sake that someone kinder and more daring than I had lead you to believe just how powerless and small you are. The world would have you believe otherwise, wanting you to kindle hope and faith, for the stronger you believe in such distracting notions, the easier it is for them to do their jobs. You could stop reading if you were wiser, but that will only postpone the inevitable lessons you

will learn about yourself: as significant as a single fleck of gold in an infinite universe. You are precious and beautiful. We all are. But you are as but a single golden fleck of sand in an infinite universe which will carry on exactly as it always has done, with or without you, from Alpha to Omega, world without end. You're welcome.) guessed the objects hadn't actually transformed at all, but that the Gold Demon had performed some sort of sleight-of-hand and merely substituted gold objects for the real ones. Which, of course, would make no economic sense.

The sixth well-read daughter thought perhaps Diavolo used some sort of secret combination of sulphur and mercury in an enclosed cucurbit. But that answer is, was, and always will be, the stuff of magical fantasy.

The seventh child was the first-born son and he guessed perhaps gold's transformation had something to do with bacon. He was not a bright boy. But he made for a very bright pillar, so there's that at least.

The eighth child was the second born son. He also thought perhaps the transformation had to do with bacon. The two brothers, you see, had decided to compare their answers before the first headed into the palace. And when they each discovered they had reasoned out the same answer, they knew they *must* be correct! As you see, it didn't occur to the eighth child that if his elder brother hadn't returned, it was because bacon was *not* the correct answer and he should not try it himself. He was, perhaps, of all the children, the most surprised to be turned into a pillar. You can see it on his face; he looks so confident, doesn't he?

So now it is that we can at last turn our attention to little Citia, the youngest daughter. “Father,” she said, as you knew she would, “Let me try! Let me try to rescue my brothers and my sisters and visit the Palace of Gold to --”

“Absolutely not!” roared Emperor Aurumius IV, interrupting her, as you knew he would. Emperors can be so --

He literally sneezed with rage.

--gesundheit.

“I have lost eight of my beloved children due to my own follies and failings. You're now all I have left, Citia. I could not bear to lose you as well. You are to me more precious than gold. You are all I live for. I cannot lose you, Citia!” And again the water from his eye and the dual channels down his cheek.

“Are you done?” asked Citia, tapping her foot.

“What's that?”

“That speech. It sounds like you read it somewhere and memorized it.”

“A-and what if I did?” said the Emperor, squeezing a cynical eye at his one remaining child. “I meant every word. You *are* more precious than gold.”

“I'm -- not so convinced,” said Citia.

“How can you say that!”

“You were pretty quick to make a bargain with a demon to get more gold. Did it occur to you to have discussed it with your children?”

“He tricked me. He didn't tell me he was going to take my *children*. He just said 'citizens'. How was I supposed to know he meant you? Citizens? You're not my citizens. You're my family. S-say,” s-said the Emperor, “That's it! I've got him! I'll point out to him that legally you're none of you citizens. You're royalty. That will make null and void the entire agreement. Oh clever me! I'll have his gold palace for this, I will! I'll ask for his palace in retribution for tricking me. It will be mine, mine, mine!” The beginnings of spittle began forming at the Emperor's mouth.

“And...your children will be restored to you,” said Citia.

“What's that?”

“If the agreement is void, your children will be free again.”

“I suppose they will. And when he delivers the palace, I'll have him face the palace to the west rather than the east, I think. Though it's octagonal, so I could choose half-directions as well, such as northwest --”

“But here's the thing, Father. We actually *are* citizens. True, we are royalty, but we are also technically citizens, all of us. You're a citizen, too.”

“So he's got us, has he?”

“He has.”

“I thought for a minute there, maybe I'd caught him in a technicality.”

“No.”

“A shame. Back to where we started.”

“Except that this time you're not stopping me. I'm going to go to the Gold Demon's palace, and I'm going to find out his secret alchemy.”

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I'm your father and I forbid you to go.”

“You're an old man of 46, and you'll drop dead of exertion if you run after me. Goodbye!” she shouted with a giggle, and ran off.

Well, she was wrong about her father's physical prowess, which he had very much kept up over the years by all the lifting he did of heavy gold chains and gold furniture, so Aurelius was still very much an athlete. Citia had also not factored in that he was twice her height, and his strides were twice as long as hers. So that just as she had taken about eighteen strides, he had taken exactly nine, caught up to her, scooped her up and ran her immediately into her bedroom, locking the door with a “You *see* how much I love you, my little nugget, locking you up to keep you near me always and always.”

Now, Emperor Aurumius had seen the cleverness of his youngest child, and knew her entirely capable of hatching some fiendish escape from inside a locked room, so he took the precaution of removing all her clothes, including her shoes, leaving her only a single green scarf to help her cover her indecencies if she wished. He went to bed, flushed with pride at how much proof of love he had demonstrated to her.

Citia was indeed a clever girl, but she didn't really need cleverness to devise a way of escape. (The screen scarf, the window...you had it figured out long before Citia, hadn't you?) Citia also wasn't terribly in need of clothes or shoes. The palace was in the middle of a desert, so she hardly needed clothes

for either modesty or warmth; and as for shoes, the palace was *in the middle of a desert*, and the gold sand actually felt nice between her toes. Poor Emperor Aurumius; not the deepest thinker in the history books.

And so it was that very soon after, Citia made her way to the palace. Did she knock at the gates and demand to be let in? Not she. Instead, she looked all the way round the palace's eight sides, looking for an advantage over the Gold Demon. She was hoping to find a place to spy on him while he did his transformation, so she would *know* the answer. She didn't want to guess.

Just to remind you of the respective height of the palace: You are perhaps visualizing a place as enormous as the Palazzo Vecchio, and while it was as grand as that perhaps, it was not nearly so enormous. The Gold Demon, you might recall, stood only a mere four feet tall, so Citia's brothers and sisters, with their legs fused into single poles perched on pedestals, they held the palace roof respectably high enough.

As you can imagine, it was rather emotional for Citia to see her brothers and sisters standing sentinel at each of the eight corners. *I'll not cry out. I'll not weep. I have a job to do. There will be time for sadness later if I fail, and if I succeed, then there will be no need for sadness. First the task at hand: spying on Diavolo.* *Oh!*, she thought loudly, seeing something high, near the roof. It was a window. It was, in fact, eight windows, on each side of the octagonal room which sat atop the second highest level of the building. *Windows!* she thought.

It wasn't long before Citia had shimmied up to the second level, using her eldest brother's armless torso, shoulders and then head as a stepping-ladder, and sat at one of the windows, looking in and listening. She herself hadn't made any sound louder than her loud thoughts, naked and shoeless as she was.

Well, as luck and storytelling would have it, Diavolo was indeed in the octagonal room, transforming object after object into gold, one after another. Citia pressed her ear to the glass of the window, but she could hear nothing. Her heart sank. How could she learn what his process was if she couldn't hear him? He had the objects lined up on an eight-sided table next to him, predominantly small bird skeletons at the moment...and he was making some gestures with one of his cloven hooves, reaching out a hoof in front of him many times over, then touching the skeleton with his hoof and watching with abject delight as it turned from bone to gold. But how could she hear what he was saying? Could she clamor down, sneak into the palace, find the octagonal room, hope the door was unlocked, slip in unnoticed, listen to Diavolo's words, then slip out, and go innocently knock at the front door? *What could possibly go wrong?* she thought.

But she was a smarter girl than that, and decided to look for alternatives first. *Maybe one of the windows has a crack in it?*, she thought, *and I'd be able to hear what he's saying?* Citia shimmied around the dome to the next window, again thankful she was wearing neither shoes nor clothes which might have made sounds and betrayed her presence on the roof. Fortuitous that her

father's attempt to sabotage her rescue plans was the very thing which was allowing her to plan a rescue. She felt the glass of the next window; no cracks. She put her ear to it, but she could hear no more than could at the first window. The same was true at the third window as well, and she was just about the shimmy to the fourth window when she saw, from the new angle of the third window, what it was that Diavolo d'Oro was reaching for with his hoof.

Near him about waist high was a row of cloth banners on the wall. They each were hung with two sticks, one on the right edge and one on the left, such that they drooped down in U-shapes, one right next to the other:

UUUUUUUUU and so on. There were many colors of banners. *No*, Citia saw more clearly, *four colors of banners: gold, blue, green and red*, in a random pattern. She saw Diavolo reach out one of his long, skinny cloven hooves and touch the banners many times, one after another, and then he touched the object which then turned to gold. Touch the banners, touch the object, touch the banners, touch the object. *Got it!*, squealed Citia to herself.

But, thought Citia, is there more to it than that? Is he touching the banners with his hoof a specific number of times? She watched and counted. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Touch the object. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Touch the object. Yet he wasn't touching the same banner nine times. He was touching, he was touching the same three banners. A red one, a blue one and a green one. Actually, Citia saw now that she was watching very very closely, he was

touching in the same order: blue-red-green, blue-red-green, blue-red-green.
Three sets of three, for a total of nine.

Cilia shimmied down her nearest sibling (fourth eldest, the one who ironically had come the closest to guessing the truth in thinking there was some sort of magic spell involved) ran to the palace front door and knocked its mighty gold knockers with a mighty knock. She noted the knockers were low to the ground, better suited to someone who used hooves to knock at doors.

A few moments later, Diavolo d'Oro opened the door, surprised to see any visitors. "If you're collecting for the Fund to Help the Impoverished, little girl, I'm afraid I'm not quite the benefactor you're seeking."

"Oh, but you are, Signore d'Oro! Those are my brothers and sisters you have strapped to your rooftop, and I want the chance to set them free."

"Ah yes," said the demon, "you must be the ninth daughter."

"Seventh daughter. I have two brothers. But yes."

"Most touching! Not to mention mathematically correcting. What you don't seem to take into your accounting, however, is that you now have no brothers or sisters, and I have eight pillars, which is all I need. Where would I put you, a ninth pillar, when you failed?"

"I don't intend to fail."

"It's not your intention which will cause you fail, it's your lack of ability. You haven't any skill to turn anything into gold."

"Oh, but I have."

"Mmmm...I don't think so."

“Let me show you.”

“Young girl. Tsk, tsk. You silly optimistic unrealistic humans. Just because you want to do something does not mean you are able to do it. Many a life has been ruined by those who do not accept this; many a kingdom has collapsed upon believing this falsehood. You haven't as much influence over your own circumstances as you would like. A bitter lesson, a terrible lesson. Perhaps the most difficult one to accept, and I'm sorry that you are only just now about to learn it. I wish for your sake that someone kinder than I had lead you to believe just how powerless and small you are. You might believe that you are precious and beautiful. But, honestly, you are as but a single golden fleck of sand in an infinite universe which will carry on exactly as it always has done, with or without you, from Alpha to Omega, world without --”

“You're afraid,” interrupted Citia. “You're afraid I'll defeat you!”

“Nice try. But I'm not afraid of you, or anyone.”

Citia's tears started to flow (a trick she'd learned at an early age: you need *some* ammunition when you're the youngest child of nine.) “Oh, Signore,” she said, “I have lost all of my beloved brothers and sisters due to my own follies and failings. They are to me more precious than gold. They are all I live for. I'll do anything to save their lives! For what is the value of my own life if my entire family were to have died? Please give me a chance to save them.”

“V-very well,” said Diavolo, slowly, suddenly suspicious, for he felt somehow that he had heard this child's words before and she were mocking him, “My heart isn't made of stone. Because, you see, it's made of gold, which

a metal, not a stone. And I actually feel a little sorry for you. However, I am a demon, so don't imagine I will let you and your family out your father's bargain just like that. So I'll tell you what," said Diavolo d'Oro, "I'll give you one chance -- one! -- to guess how it is that I turn things to gold. And when you fail, I'll turn you into gold, then have you melted down and re-poured into a nice gold birdbath for my garden. You'll make a wonderful birdbath."

"And if I succeed --"

"You won't."

"If I succeed, you'll change back my brothers and sisters and let them go free."

The demon sighed. "Yes."

"Let's shake hands on it." A pause. "Oh."

"Why does everybody -- ? I can shake your hand with my hoof, you know. Just because I don't have arms doesn't mean I can't shake on a promise. *Harrumph!*" He held out a cloven hoof and Citia shook it.

"Now lead me to my brothers and sisters!" she said.

"Demanding little girl, aren't you?"

"Someone has to stand up to demons like you. Hoarding the secret of transmutation! Shame on you. Knowledge must not be confined to a secret room where none but a privileged few could know Her."

"If I lead you to the Transmutation Room, will you stop your speechifying?"

"I will."

“Let's run, then.”

He led her at a very quick pace to the octagonal room. “Here we are. Pick an object, and let's see you do the work of demons.”

“I will.”

Citia went up to the table on which the objects lay. We've mentioned the skeletons, which didn't interest Citia, nor did the insects, or the daggers, the thimbles, or the cliché straw. But one object did catch her eye: a horseshoe. She like the Omega shape of it. “The end of the Demon of Gold,” she chortled, “this will be your Omega!” She set it apart from the other objects.

“Omega is just a letter,” said the demon. “But I love your enthusiasm for symbols.”

“I'm just beginning,” she said.

“You're just beginning.”

“Yes. This...is...the Alpha of my making symbols. Now stand back and observe.”

He stood back and observed.

It suddenly occurred to Citia that...she didn't know whether she should touch the colored banners with her hands, or whether it required touch by foot. Or...what if it only works if you have a cloven foot? *I didn't. quite. finish. my. scientific. method. Oops. Ah, well, I might become that birdbath after all. Here goes!* She reached out with her hand. And touched three banners. Blue, red, green. Then she touched them a second time. Blue, red, green. And then a third. Blue, red, green.

The demon cackled, “Well I'll be --”

Citia touched the horseshoe. And it turned into pure gold.

“--defeated?”

*

There's not much story left to tell. Diavolo d'Oro, the Demon of Gold, was good to his word, because he had shaken on it. He changed Citia's brothers and sisters back to flesh (gold, red, blue thrice, in case you yourself ever need to change someone back). His palace collapsed and he spent another several hundred years trying to find someone as greedy as Emperor Aurumius IV who would trade children for gold.

As for Licia and the brothers and sisters, they decided to book passage on the next ship to a faraway land across the sea, rather than go back to their horrible father, and they lived happily ever after.

The End.

Moral: Just because you weren't born with hands doesn't mean you can't keep a promise.

Authors' Biographies



Roberto Cardano. 1579-1660. Cardano was the grandson of Gerolamo Cardano, Cardano's father was tried and beheaded in 1560 for poisoning his wife, after he discovered that their three children were not his. Roberto was raised by his grandfather, and inherited his passion for working with the deaf. He was an unsuccessful poet and novelist, but eventually found a modicum of success assisting burgeoning chemist Robert Boyle, until Cardano accused Boyle of plagiarism and the ensuing lawsuits continued for the remainder of Cardano's life. Scholars debate whether this portrait by Parmigianino in the Galleria Borghese is indeed of Cardano or an entirely different man.

Matthew Pellinori is the pseudonym of fictitious translator of *The Grotesque Children's Book*.

He writes travel essays for *Esquire*, *Outside*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. His previous novels include *A*

Fleckless Life, *Chewy Spittle*, and *The Secret Life of Squirrels*. Scholars do not debate the authenticity of his photo: it is inauthentic.



The Ceilings of Santi del Megli

Between February and August of 1581, eighteen-year-old Santi del Megli painted frescoes on at least nine of the ceilings of the Uffizi Gallery's East Wing. The art on these ceilings has been reproduced at www.grotesquechildrensbook.com. An interactive e-book version is available as well.



Contact: Scott Guy

scott@scottguy.biz

818.787.8600