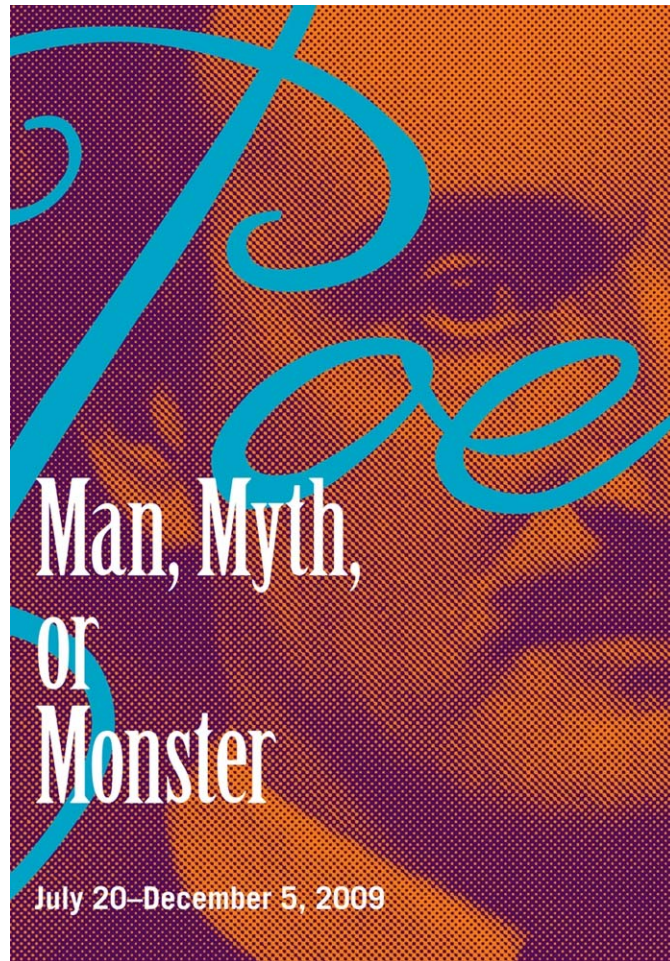


“POE: MAN, MYTH, OR MONSTER”
YOUNG WRITERS’ COMPETITION



SPONSORED BY:
THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA AND THE EDGAR ALLAN POE MUSEUM

THE CONTEST:

Edgar Allan Poe is one of America's most notable literary figures. His poetry and short stories captured the imagination of his generation and have continued to inspire and intrigue reading audiences around the world. Poe is considered to be the founding father of the detective story with the remarkable success of his story "The Gold Bug," and a master of horror and science fiction writing. His classic works of lyric poetry, such as "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee," are haunting masterpieces that were warmly praised by both European and American readers during his lifetime and remain standards of American literary tradition.

In observance of the 200th anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth and the exhibition *Poe: Man, Myth, or Monster* featured at the Library of Virginia from July 20, 2009, through December 5, 2009, the Library and the Poe Museum conducted the "Poe: Man, Myth, or Monster" Young Writers' Competition. Virginia's high school students were invited to submit their poetry and short stories, written in the veins of the genres Poe mastered—mystery, science fiction, and horror.

JUDGES:

Barbara Batson, Exhibitions Coordinator, Library of Virginia

Emyl Jenkins, Author

Fran Lively, Retired Educator

Tracey Robertson, English Coordinator, Virginia Department of Education

Ann Maria Seely, English Supervisor, Henrico County Public Schools

Chris Semtner, Director, Edgar Allan Poe Museum

***Poe Young Writers' Competition
First Place, Poetry Division
Winner, Online "People's Pick" for Poetry***

"No Birds," Bryan Killian, 10th grade, Deep Run High School, Henrico

Gloom, darkness, no leaves on trees, and no birds,
The dead landscape stretched for miles in the cold.
Winter surrounded the old oak tree.
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The oak stood strong for years, but now, no birds,
Wind blew through the leafless, lifeless branches
This oak had a story of its own
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The great tree had a rope, but still no birds,
For years the tree had been on hallowed ground
The rope hung from the highest branch, and still
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The tree would be full of life again, but no birds
For only a moment would the tree support life
Then that same life would be cut short by the tree, still
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The affair took place at dusk, but there were no birds
A man had been accused of horrible deeds, so
Others took justice into their own hands.
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The man is on the platform and people amass, but no birds
He is granted one request before the chair is plucked out.
The deed is done and people depart a scene with
No leaves, no light, no life, no birds.

The man swings in the winter wind, now there are birds,
Only now there is no man, only his skeleton remains
Alas, it's a more joyful time for the oak when there are
No leaves, no light, no life, and no carrion birds.

*Poe Young Writers' Competition
Second Place, Poetry*

"aMuse," by Kirk Roundtree, 11th grade, Kings Fork High School, Suffolk

I'm going to fly towards that ledge
And hope and pray that life does not flee my veins.
This longing is never dissipating and the
Days
Are more frightening with the sun so
Darkened.
Now there's a scarlet star in the sky.

The star is so brilliant that it's painting
The colossal landscape with its deep,
Dim shade of Illumination and Bloodlust.

Have your eyes ever opened this intently
Upon a creature so vulgar?
Neither of us have conversations
But in the light of the star I can
See
Words written in blood that
I
Know to be on the palm of her hand
And are much more Transcending.

I inhabit a universe bereft of any population
Due to a single fire of a synapse unleashing
Hell upon the only perfect creation of God.

I wouldn't find it without her pursuing me.
I haven't spoken but she hears
My breath as if I was right in front of her.
There's more in those Vicious
Eyes
That seem to peer inside of me
Without
Hate or cultivated reasoning.
She craves my flesh and my sanity as a relic
And my sanity evacuates without my flesh.
An empty shell of macabre disfigurations left by an anonymous horror.

~ Now I only pray for the end of it all, the truth, and the Ledge ~

Poe Young Writers' Competition
First Place, Short Story

"Elizabeth's Dream," by Keely Wright, 11th Grade, Hanover High School, Hanover
First Place, Short Story

Her name is Elizabeth.
She lives in the big white house at the end of the street.
She's five and she has wide blue eyes and blond curls.

Every Sunday she has a picnic with her parents on the back porch.
She spends time in the garden with her mother
and helps her father find his keys when he's lost them.
They love her. She is their sunshine.

She wears adorable dresses of vibrant yellow, soft pink, pale blue, and white lace.
She always does her hair up so pretty in ribbons of every color.

Her parents take her out for long walks through the park every Thursday.
Her favorite cookies are sugar cookies with rainbow sprinkles.

She wants a puppy but her parents tell her she's not old enough to take care of it yet.
They get her a fish instead.
She doesn't care, she's happy to be taking care of something.

They call her Lizzy and her name's painted on her bedroom door in red and violet.
The other kids that came to her birthday party called her Liz,
but she likes it when her parents call her Lizzy. It's special then.

Her favorite color depends on the week and the weather.
Her dreams are always sweet and filled with color and music.
All but one.

A long time ago
she woke up in the middle of the night
to a strange noise at her door
like nails scratching the wood.
It startled her so she called out.

No one answered.

She woke up.

The dream stayed on her mind for a few days,

but by the next Sunday picnic it was forgotten.
Little Lizzy learned how to play hide and seek without giving herself away.
She learned how to hold her breath under water.

Life went on as it had before and Elizabeth was happy.

Then a few weeks ago it happened again.
She woke up to a strange noise at her door
like nails dragging across the wood.
It startled her so she called out.

No one answered.
So she went to the door and opened it.
The hallway was empty.

She woke up.

This dream worried her a little more than the first one had.
But she said nothing and just went on.
Time passed and she forgot.

Her first day of school came and passed.
She loved it.
Little Lizzy was the smartest in her class, so her mother told her.

Her father hadn't been home for a while
he was off busy with work, so mother said.

He came back in time for their Thursday walk.
He was tired but made up for it in his loving smiles.

She learned how to help make cookies with Mother.
She learned how to read picture books about playful puppies named Pete.
She discovered the game of Go Fish and set out to master it.
Her life was bliss and sweetness and she was happy.

Then a few days ago it happened again.
She woke up hearing a strange noise at the door
like nails on wood.
She was startled so she called out.

No one answered.
So she went to the door and opened it to an empty hallway.

She stepped out and saw a shadow move at the end of the hall

and she started towards it.

She woke up.

She was a little scared now of this dream and not knowing what it meant.
She asked her father about bad dreams,
he told her that if she had a bad dream she should come find him or Mother
and they would make it go away.
They decorated her room with pretty dream catchers and she dreamed easy again.

She began to hear people talking and she heard her name.
There were quiet whispered words that they thought she couldn't hear.

She heard names she'd never heard of before.
She heard about a mistake that should never have been made,
A wrong done that couldn't be fixed.

But sweet Lizzy didn't understand.
So she went on dreaming of sweet things.
The things of dreams.

Until the night before last.
She woke up to a strange noise at her door
like nails striking the wood.
She was startled and she called out.

No one answered.
She went to the door but when she opened it the hallway was empty.
As she stepped out she saw a moving shadow at the end of the hall.
She started towards it.

She rounded the corner to the hall door that led to the attic stairs
She started to reach for the handle.

She woke up.

The next morning she followed Father's word
and went straight to Mother after breakfast.
She asked mother what was upstairs, upstairs in the attic.
But Mother turned away without answering.

This had never happened so she went to ask Father.
He smiled and said nothing, that afternoon before their walk she looked for him
but he was gone.

Her mother found her and told her he went out for work again
and they would go for a walk tomorrow.
She smiled lovingly and a hug made it all better.

Father came home late last night but still came in to kiss Lizzy goodnight.

By dinner the next day everything was well.
Lizzy, Mother, and Father were happy again.
All was well.

The screws in my door had been tightened.
The shutters over my window were nailed into place tighter.
They haven't come to see me in so long.
I wanted to see them,
and I wanted to see their golden Sunshine, too.
It was last night.
I stood at her door and ran my fingernails,
across her painted name,
down the wood.
I heard her call out but I said nothing.
I was told to be silent.
She came to the door but I was already around the corner,
almost to my sanctuary.
She stood outside of the first door and the stairs up to my door.
I stumbled backwards up my stairs.
I closed the second door and struggled with the nails that held it shut.
I heard her ascend the steps and her fingers come to rest on the handle.
No. She mustn't find out about me.
She cannot know.
She
Cannot
Know.

The doorknob turns and I freeze.

Poe Young Writers' Competition

Second Place, Short Story

"Darkness and Light" by Evelyn Hildebrand, 10th grade, Springfield

Darkness. Cold, black, oily darkness flowed over the boiling, writhing coils of Medusa's tresses. That oily water calmed the boiling hair and down they sank together, one. That is how it always had been with her, at one with the darkness. That is how it had been for me, her other half, her voice, her eyes, her hands. Who was I? No one. So I had been since I stumbled on her cottage in the forest. Snow had been falling then. I was enough of a child to play and dance and sing to the little snow fairies sitting on the snow flakes. Koblods, we Germans called them. That was long ago and far away now. That cottage had drawn me to it with those twin dark windows, glistening and beckoning like the eyes of a tiger. The little laughing sprite I was disappeared between them, never to emerge again. The sprite became an imp, dark and dead, bound by oath to serve that Medusa and her twin eyes. Those eyes and mine were her only openings into the world of light. She had lost her sight through years of looking inward into darkness and needed a window, not to see through, just to know what was passing around her.

Ropes creaked and the pulleys jerked my mistress from beneath the shroud of that icy water. Sheets of water streamed away like the smoke from a dying fire. The executioner's voice grated on the icy air as he shouted to his men to hold the ropes. The bishop was about to speak. Addressing his victim, his voice droned on. Those words of condemnation and reproof could never have been addressed to a worthier victim, yet they fell on dead ears. I could have told him so. I would know. My mistress's face lolled back with a wicked toothless grin. Her one eye was flecked with red and rolled backwards. The bishop turned away, disgusted, red robes flapping away in the wind. Red. The color of blood. But not her blood. Hers was black, black as her hair, as the icy water flowing around her. The chair dropped back into the cold, dark depths. I had seen her bleed once. Once. That fateful day. Her little knife nicked my skin, but I didn't cry out as my blood trickled over my arm. Then that same knife punctured her knotted skin and black slimy liquid oozed forth. Drop by drop that blackness spread on my proffered wrist. My blood running down my arm slowed, thickened, and darkened.

I suppose my head lolled forward. The nailed fists of the guards beside me jerked my head up. Those guards were there to prevent my death, prevent my sudden plunge into the abyss before me, to join my mistress in her grave. Kind, my people are, and generous. Giving me a chance to live—or exist. How could I live without her, dying under the water? How could I live in the dark? I had done so for years, yet always with that guiding darkness, deeper and darker than pitch, almost luminous in its blackness, leading me deeper, into enslavement, but leading me somewhere. Lost in darkness would be worse than seeking deeper darkness. Where could I go, to whom could I turn? . . . Suddenly, my legs and arms jerked, spasmodically, my head lolled back, and screams tore from my parched throat. I knew what was happening. My mistress was dying. Dead perhaps. She could not scream. I had to. She could not move, tied with ropes and heavy chains. I had to. The guards nearly lost their hold and jerked me upright again. Pulleys creaked as the muscles of the executioner's men bulged. The chair came up again, empty. Men gasped, women screamed and covered the curious eyes of children clinging to their skirts. The executioner's devils almost let go the ropes to send the empty chair spinning back towards the water. Anger, surprise, fear; emotion after emotion fled across the bishop's features. With its

passing, his knotted skin turned a deeper shade of green. Collecting himself, he puffed out his swelled chest, crossed his hands over his bulging stomach, miter jerking and swaying—the head of a viper. His beady eyes scanned the surrounding faces. They rested for an instant on mine. I knew what it would be. It would be my condemnation, my turn to sit on that dreadful chair and plunge into that icy water, time after time after time, to drive the spirit of evil away from me. But no, the bishop's stern and piercing gaze finally turned on the water, icy and turbulent, gray breakers dancing on the surface of the sullen rivulets. His hands lifted. The voice lifted along with the hands and his breath came in gusts. His stomach heaved and his squeal was that of a pig on butchering day. I suppose I ought to be struck dead for such thoughts, but no, I live. If this existence can be called life.

Dusk was rapidly falling. The spectacle was over and the horror of that dead body, that evil spirit lurking beneath the bridge sent the superstitious townspeople scurrying to their homes like beetles under the shadow of a bird or the web of a spider. The guards spoke to each other. I didn't hear them. They shuffled their feet and then released their hold. I didn't move. I didn't see them walk towards their barracks and then break into a run. I suppose they thought I was bewitched and had cast spells on them, merely by touching them. Snow scuttered along the rooftops of those little cottages. The bishop had already made his stately departure, waddling back towards safety. The executioner's men pulled up the chains one last time and dragged their grisly charge away. Only I was left, staring at the water.

Finally I turned and slid away, drawing my black rags about me as I went. Snow was falling again, soft and silent, shrouding the little world from my sight—or perhaps shrouding the world from seeing me. My mind could not direct the path of my feet. Habit was too strong. Black branches whipped and curled my hair about them, tearing and scratching, clawing at my face. Briars ripped my unprotected legs and the wind, a strong and revengeful animal, whipped my hair across my face. Lost? No, I could never get lost so near to my past. The snow swirled and danced, whipped to a whitened fury by the insulting wind. A great monster, pushing me forward and back, just another little sprite it had taken a fancy to. The trees melted away into the forest as the clearing came in view, tangled over with creepers and shrouded in perpetual gloom. The wind died away as quickly as it had come, and I lifted my head. There they were, those two twin tiger's eyes blinking and winking like the lights on a ship, caught in a stormy sea, flickering like the fires in that place, deep beneath my feet. Red and orange crept up in those colorless windows. The wind whipped up again, yet this time voices traveled on its cold breath, screams of laughter and shrieks of terrific and horrible pain and torture. Black specks danced before my eyes, then disappeared. The shadows of the trees entwined me in their clinging depths, spinning and spinning, dragging me towards the cold ground. Then, from that chaos that sweet voice, my mistress speaking softly, “Don't desert me. I am your life. Come, come, come.”

The force of habit is strong, and in its vicelike grip I writhed, a tortured animal caught in a trap. Could I do otherwise than obey? Could anyone? Is there not a single person in this interminable earth and life that could have resisted that urging plea, that sweet and sickly voice, that poisonous tone? Nay, tell me there is not and mitigate my sorrow. Give me your pity for my weakness, for my ruined life, for my wasted and lost time upon this earth. Pity me. Condemnations I have had enough. They do not alter my fate. If there is any upon this earth that can show mercy to me, show it! Save me. Alack, these threats and pleadings I shouted to the unforgiving wind, the mirthless and merry wind, the cold wind coming straight from the inferno which would be my end. The darkness danced before my eyes and back I stumbled, that same weary road, those same horrible steps, those same branches and briars. Not even the beasts marked my passing. Just another shadow which will soon disappear. Disappear into interminable

shadow. Not a shade of pity in those mocking voices, they themselves but smaller shadows without the torture of that heavy knowledge.

The town loomed up. Snow had spread itself across the streets, hiding the mud and muck of the many boots which passed across it day in and day out. The dancing darkness led me on. I tore my gaze away from that dreadful sight to peer into those windows, an onlooker from another, lower world, peering into the forbidden gates and pleasures of the other. Frosted with snow and icy reflections, a little family sat about a table: father, strong, manly, calm and handsome. Son, like his father, yet sweet and small. Baby, laughing and kicking held in her brother's arms. Daughter, and mother at the table, serving food to the little family. Oh, the family I had never known. The daughter I was meant to be, laughing, dancing, singing. The mother I should have had, the life that should have been mine. My head fell to the icy windowpane and around my face the black mist of my hair flowed, streaked with the white of snow. None marked my reverie inside or out. Or so I thought. The watchman's steady tramp passed along the lower street. I shrank back against the wall and blackness loomed before me like a cloud. I slid back towards the street's end and saw before me the beaten road. My mistress beckoned. For moments at a time, her face loomed up and smiled, smiled at my misery and yet I followed, an obedient slave even to death. Death. The bridge loomed up before me, stonework glistening in the cold night air, covered with a wealth of snow, misty and clear. Darkness preceded me and covered the sweet snow from sight.

I fell against the railing and the cold stone froze my hands, whiter than snow. Below the water churned. Black. Yet no, the little waves churned by the icy sea glistened in orange and red tints. Again the voices shrieked and howled—welcome. There the black shadow fell and writhed in those waves of fire. Its shadowy hand reached up, a burning brand lay on my cold hand. That face smiled again and called softly. Then darkness fell, only she was left.

I could see my fall. See how the water and the fire would embrace me. Could I make a choice? I was yet a slave. The very water seemed to turn to that black blood I had seen so long ago. "Join with it and make your oath complete. Remember me. Wait for me. I will come for you." That voice returned, dark and deadly once again, sweetness gone, only cold death remained. I screamed. Yet no, this time my mistress did not scream. She tried to clamp my mouth shut, prevent my voice. I shook her off, my heart tearing at the very effort. Then suddenly, the darkness descended into that dark and oily depth. I fell back against those cold stones, light streaming over my face. And I did not turn away. The light was welcome. The darkness was gone and light welled up. Slowly my eyes closed, yet the light remained ever before my sight, even as the cold night took its toll. Freedom at last.

Poe Young Writers' Competition

Winner, Online "People's Pick" for Short Story

"The Man Who Talked to God" by Alex Zuercher, 11th grade, Maggie L. Walker Governor's School, Richmond

"There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."

Oscar Wilde

I had never been a religious man until the day my wife died. That day, I had seen the beautiful and the perfect crushed before me. I was alone, plunged into confusing desolation, so I turned to the grace of God, trusting *him* to save me from my misfortune. But never had absolute faith—I had to see him. I had to see him with my wife. I had to know she was there. I can only wish that the visions I suffered were figments of a sick mind and that my deepest prayers had been utterly ignored.

Life had always seemed so perfect. When we were together, I remember now, the world seemed like a master's palate too large to comprehend. Here we stood in the cyan of the ocean, and there, in the reds of the poppy patch and vibrant green shock of the hills. We did anything and everything, wherever, whenever. We were two birds flying high—as high as we wanted under the golden sun. But as I look back, I feel more and more that it was just an ephemeral dream, and I have only recently awoken into this miserable abyss.

In the hard weeks afterwards, I turned to any dark corner I could hide myself away from the chuckling face of my newfound existence—an existence that has been blanched, it seems, of all color save black and white. I turned to medication, alcohol, and even at the worst moments of my wretchedness, the opium dens. I longed for my Elizabeth like a parched man in the Sahara stumbling across the vast, shifting plain towards any sign of an oasis. The memories of her light laughter barely linger in my mind now as they slip away from me; I hold on to them as any other miser would—cautiously, as if enjoying them might spend them away forever forgotten. I wanted desperately to see her again. Just once.

Several weeks into my depression, I woke up from a headache in half-conscious stupor. An empty bottle rolled out of my grasp, and I saw the vague impression of the cross through my window. The distant bells of the cathedral resonated through the pathetic room and worsened my headache. I hadn't thought of church—it was unfamiliar to me. When was the last time I had gone? Seven? Eight years ago? Still, I had heard of many men finding solace in the comfort of the cross during hard times, and I was willing to do anything. *Anything*. Maybe God himself, I thought, could ease my pain.

I progressed to call upon a good friend of mine, Edward, who happened to be a student in seminary. We had often joked how odd it would be, with me the older of the two, to call him "Father." He resided in the religious school a few blocks away from the cathedral next to the pauper's graveyard. As I walked down the road, momentarily lost in the mirthful thoughts of my friend, the wind suddenly stirred, whispering her name pulling me back into my painful awareness of the wet street and gray faces of the passersby. I pulled my coat closer to my gaunt husk shielding myself from more than the cold.

Since her death, this City has been turned upside down, or maybe I had just never been in the disposition to notice until now. Withered opium addicts lined the sidewalks, smiling bemused grins, unaware that they were cadaverous forms of once-men. But they were *happy*. I could see

my reflection in their dead eyes. Along the sidewalk, two songbirds ate what was left of an old alley cat prostrate in a black puddle. I shivered; the world seemed a twisted playground under the mocking shadow of some intangible visage.

The seminary, now in view, had a particularly strange atmosphere—one of morbid contradictions. The students and to-be priests were all youthful idealists preparing themselves for a holy life within the church. They were all young men just barely come of age and still playing boyish games with each other during the downtime between classes. However, they inhabited a decrepit, ancient building that was held together only by the obscene expanse of vines and ivy. And next to the crumbling ruins lay a large cemetery full of uneven, broken stones. The names had been erased, either by time or by the creeping, black lichen. There were even rumors that the old catacombs ran from the cathedral to the vaults under the seminary school.

My knock echoed back to me several times before a relic of a stooped monk answered the door. He led me to Frank ... slowly. The vaulted stone ceiling hung low over my head, and the old windows played bizarre games on the walls with light and shadow. We finally came to a door with faded red paint at the end of the hall. The monk opened the door for me (I was surprised he could actually reach the door knob), and then somberly walked away. I was left staring at my friend sitting in a rickety chair in the middle of a confined, stone cell. He put down the Bible he was reading and greeted me.

“I haven’t seen you in ages! How are you, old friend?” He grabbed my hand and shook it loosely. His own seemed a dead, limp fish. “I heard about your wife—I’m so sorry. I’ve been praying for you. Here,” he motioned to his near-collapsed chair, “Sit. Sit. Please.”

“I came to talk to you, Father. Is it Father? Well, I’ll call you Father anyway. I came to talk to you about my wife—me, rather. I haven’t been able to let her go. I’ve tried anything, *everything*, but I can barely live without waking into pain every morning. I don’t know what to do. *I don’t know what to do.*” I hung my head in my hands and wept. “I came to you because ... I’ve never been a religious man ... I thought ... I thought you could help me.”

He laid a hand on my back, though I only felt a faint, lethargic presence. Still, I welcomed it. “I can’t imagine what it must be like, but God does, and I can help you find him.” He sat down with me for what seemed like months in that cell, teaching and helping me to find a new hope. If I could just speak with God himself, I could rest assured I would see my love again. And this became my new obsession—*I had to speak with him.*

Over the next few months the cathedral became my home. I spent my days in the silence of the moor of pews and the echoing chanting of the monks, only sleeping in my own pitiful hovel when I had to. Whether God himself was helping me or just the change of environment, my mind was in a different place, away from the past. I suppose I wasn’t actually getting over her death and all the ensuing torture, but I was forgetting, and that is all I could ask for. Still, I did want to see her again—it seemed the only thing holding me awake from some cosmic dream. Every prayer, every kneeling utterance was a desperate provocation serving my own repressed urge.

I will never forget the day that God started to answer my prayers. I had gone to the cathedral as my new custom dictated and it loomed over me, its steeple ascending into the sky belittling me among the crooked tombstones. The gnarled, withered trees in the courtyard were crushed under its cold shadow, struggling to reach their branches upwards. A line of monks, black robed and most of them hunchbacks, walked in silence towards the inner cloister. I decided to walk in the cemetery; there were some beautiful roses that caught my attention—some of the first color I had noticed in a long time. As I walked past weeping angels and cracked crosses, I saw the pale image of a woman wandering through the stone labyrinth. My heart started

pounding—I would have recognized her likeness anywhere. I rushed towards her, nearly tripping over every stray root and crumbling stone. She glided lightly through the necropolis, her white dress floating in the wind like an ethereal mist. She never once looked back to see me—I never did see her face, but I knew, *I knew* it was her. I ran faster than I thought possible, though the leering tombs seemed to grasp my ankles, holding me back. The entrance to the crypt, a monolithic mouth, rose out of the dank, overturned earth engulfing her in shadow. The last I saw was her delicate foot passing over the threshold, disappearing into the dark.

I dove after her, falling down the stairs, screaming her name hysterically. As I thrashed blindly in the black, my hands struck the sides of the walls and recoiled in revulsion. My eyes adjusted to the murk, and staring back at me were thousands of empty sockets of age-old skulls; I had found myself in the old catacombs of the cathedral. An overwhelming insanity seized me and I lost any conscious control over my body as I was torn between ultimate despair and frenzied madness. I began frantically ripping the skulls from the wall, but for every one I wrenched out ten more glared back at me blankly. I tried to loose a scream that was writhing furiously inside me like a lunatic trapped in a padded cell. I only heard a dry, repressed rasp.

I do not remember anything after that moment, nor how I found my way home. All I knew is that I was back at the cathedral, kneeling. I was beginning to lose the distinction between alert consciousness and sleep. I would wake in a carriage, or fall asleep while walking in the middle of the road, though apparently I never stopped walking and I always tipped the driver. And in the end, I would always find myself back at the cathedral, kneeling.

I had heard of out-of-body experiences, but never undergone one. Needless to say, I thought it was a ridiculous superstition shared only by “psychic” gypsies and bored housewives. I knelt among the so-familiar pews and offered up the normal prayer. “*I need* to talk to you. Where is she?” A silent moment passed ... and then God finally answered my prayer. As I knelt by the altar my vision went black, and the floor, the cathedral, reality itself was ripped away from me as if a magician tore away his curtain revealing the emptiness where his assistant had stood. I screamed. I writhed. I floated in psychotic nothingness frantically trying to find any sensible object to grasp—physically or mentally. Then, to my dread, God himself appeared to me. The terrible phantasm appeared to me, and not as the glorified, beautiful, pure salvation, but as a grotesque, deranged phantom of a disturbed mind. Mercy has allowed me to forget its entire horrible image—except its face. The unnatural visage burned into my mind, and I can never forget. It was devoid of all features—without a mouth, nose, eyes—yet it stared into the depths of my being with a painfully penetrating gaze. This was the face of the omniscient God I had put my faith in—the God that had divine mastery over every aspect of my life. It spoke in a thousand shrieking voices:

Do you like what you see?