

**"Ghosts of Gryphons"** (working title)  
Brian Smith, English 384 B, Spring 2004

"In our last session, you started talking about . . . mystical slavery." The old man flipped a page in the notebook he was reading from, and then looked at the couch across from him. "Would you mind explaining what you mean by that?"

The girl sitting on the couch sighed, looking away, paying an inordinate amount of attention to the fish swimming in the tank near the window. "I don't know if I can. For years now, I've been haunted by these images. It's all sensory detail and emotion." One hand began absently toying with the string of beads around her neck as she spoke; her eyes continued staring off into space. "Mostly, it's at night, in my dreams. Sometimes, the feelings or the images continue throughout the day . . ."

*Frankincense. Always the smell of frankincense . . . Wispy smoke floats along the ceiling, from braziers built into stone walls. Frankincense, omnipresent, never overpowering, simply there. Scratching on the skin; a coarseness, a roughness. Muslin. Scratching, light, flowing at the edges, tight at the waist. The incense is joined with the muslin, masking worse, deeper smells. Almost masking perfectly. More itch, this time from hair, scratching down the back. A coldness at the limbs. All merges together in, and is momentarily forgotten in, the frankincense.*

She looks around the room, as best she can in the darkness of night. Everything is as she expects it; everything is as she left it. Her throat is sore, dry; she gets up, gets a glass of water, and stares in the mirror as she drinks it. Her hair, cut short, falls just above her neck, almost touching the string of beads resting there, the only adornment on her

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body other than the white terry-cloth bathrobe she wears.

The glass empty, she sets it down on the sink with a sigh before climbing back into bed. She gathers the blankets around her, wishing only for dreamless sleep.

*Walking. Somewhere; I know not where. Footsteps on the ground, sounding an even rhythm; not only mine, but others, as well. The stone walls move, and the muslin flows. My hands do not move; I am holding something cold, smooth. Glass or crystal, perhaps. I dare not look; my eyes remain focused on nothing, looking straight ahead. Two men behind me speak to each other in a language I do not understand. The incense is weaker here, replaced only by confusion.*

"I'm not really sure where to begin," she says, still staring at the fish. "Originally, I created her. She was something for a story, a series of stories, I wanted to write when I was young. Fourteen, I think."

"Did you ever write them?"

"No, I didn't. The more I delved into her persona, the more I found myself enthralled by the character, by the world in which she lived. I never felt I could put the words onto paper; every time I tried, I was simply frustrated. I could never do it justice. I would always just give up, and then a few months later, try again."

"When did the dreams begin?"

"Not long after. After a while, I had spent so much time trying to write that frustration turned to obsession, and she moved from a character to a living person, even if only in my head." She sighs and shakes her head. "I know how silly that sounds, but I

don't know how else to say it. I used to think, if I could just write the story, that I could exorcise this demon. It doesn't seem that simple anymore."

*The pitcher sits on the table, now. It's filled with a crimson liquid; it could be wine, it could be blood, it's hard to tell. Everything is still somewhat fuzzy, as if lost in a thin fog. The incense is stronger here, strong enough that I suppress a cough. It's warmer, as well; sweat begins to bead on my forehead, seeping into the cloth backing of the golden mask I wear. And then . . . I wait.*

This time, the sun was shining through her blinds. It was morning, and she had to get up, go to school, do the things that made up her normal life. She didn't remember it ever getting past the waiting. On the nights she didn't wake up immediately after, the waiting just stretched on. The dream restarted itself, or played a variation on the theme, but always ended the same: waiting.

*The stone walls are different, now. Instead of being solid, unbroken, dark, the walls of an underground dungeon or cavern, they now contain windows of stained glass. Bizarre, grotesque figures are represented in shaped panes of various colors. Exact details are impossible to discern in the darkness of night, except for the one directly above the table: a gryphon, silver-maned with a gilded beak, standing rampant, flickering in the light of the candles behind it.*

"Did you ever learn what happens?"

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She looked up with a start, realizing where she was. "Excuse me?"

He sighed, making a sort of low, growling noise. "Amanda, I really need to you focus. Did you ever decide what happens?"

"No. It seems like she would die, killed by the forces driving her along. But I could never bring myself to do it."

"Why not?"

"A part of me would die with her."

*The golden-beaked gryphon is gone—or, perhaps, its stained-glass representation is. The simple underground cavern has returned. Across the table from me, looking down at the pitcher, stands a figure, hidden underneath a cloak. The forest green cloak covers his head and flows down his body; all that is visible underneath are his hands, outstretched from long, black sleeves. Embroidered at the edge of each sleeve is a stylized gryphon, again with the silver mane and golden beak. The embroidered gryphons face each other when his hands reach for the pitcher.*

A bookshelf next to her desk contains a series of old notebooks, filled with sketches, ideas, and images dating back several years. She takes a specific one off the shelf, one of the notebooks from her fourteenth year, and flips through it, eventually finding what she is looking for:

#### CULT OF THE SILVER GRYPHON

Peaked in the late 15th century in central Italy (specifically, Florence). Evidence traces back to northern Italy, early 14th c., possibly from Milan, more likely Venice/the northeastern part of the country. Heretical sect that represented God as a silver gryphon (myth. beast, head of eagle, body of lion, Greek origin), with a beak and eyes of gold. Extremely creative

interpretations of the Bible and other period texts led the followers to believe in an angry God that demanded regular sacrifice.

Lone travellers, or those easily led astray, were kidnapped and enslaved as "acolytes" for the cult, trained to perform in their own sacrifice. Young adults (age 13-20 or so) were preferred when available.

Symbols: Silver gryphon, shining mane, golden eyes and beak; black robe and forest green cloak for priests, including embroidery of the gryphon symbol on the sleeves and the back of the cloak; silver collar and golden headdress for sacrifices.

Members: Rumors of the involvement of the Medici family are greatly overstated; while possible, the cult declined with the Medici family's rise to power. It was always an underground movement; it lasted as long as it did only because it managed to avoid what authorities existed at the time.

Status: Declared a heretical sect by Pope Alexander VI, 1495, during Alexander's purge of the lawlessness of Rome, after the cult had started to surface there. Over the next few decades, a series of "forcible conversions" of various congregations throughout Italy brought the movement to a standstill.

After reshelving the notebook, she turned her attention back to the blank pieces of paper on her desk. As she idly toyed with one of the beads around her neck, she picked up a pen with her other hand and began attempting to write.

*"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"*

*The words echo throughout the corridor. I don't know where I am; I don't know what's happened to me. The last thing I remember was our caravan being attacked by bandits on the road from Florence; I ran into the forest until I fell.*

*My noble gown is in tatters. I am in a small room. There's a bed in the corner, and a door of bars on one wall. Two items lie on the bed: a plain gown of muslin, and a silver band of some kind.*

*I've been calling out for hours. Nobody is answering. All I have left is fear. Why have you abandoned me, God?*

The old man sat down at his desk, looking at the girl sitting on the couch. "Any

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progress yet, Amanda?"

"Some. I'm trying to write, now. The dreams . . . they're more vivid now. I'm afraid of continuing."

"I think you're going to have to see this through to the end."

*More Latin. I don't speak Latin; I don't know what the men are chanting. Latin and frankincense. It's as if I'm in a cathedral, except everything else about this is some perversion.*

*Two years have passed since the incident with the bandits. Two years of frankincense, of Latin, of muslin, of the silver band. Two years of searching for some way, for any way to escape. Two years of nothing but serving in . . . whatever this is.*

*Something is different today. I was given a golden mask to put on, and a pitcher to carry. I was then left with only my thoughts—only these thoughts—until now.*

*Apparently, Mass is beginning.*

*I suppose it must be Sunday.*

She sat straight up in bed, leaving her dreams with a start. "This time," she said out loud to herself, "this is the time." She walked over to her desk, picked up the pen, and began writing.

*Warmth. At the altar, it's warm enough that I'm sweating through this thin layer of muslin. From behind the mask, I watch as the man in black and green performs some blessing over the pitcher. The men behind me continue to chant in Latin. The*

*frankincense continues to seep into everything.*

*More enter the room, standing on the outer edges. None are robed like these men; a few look like nobles, but for the most part, they look like peasants. They kneel, watching.*

She sets the pen down and puts her head in her hands. She tries to slow down the images, but they flow like a river in her mind, rushing up a dam at the breaking point.

*I don't know what's going to become of me. I'm praying to God, to the saints, to Mary. To anyone who might hear me. I beg forgiveness. I beg deliverance. I beg to know what I did to deserve this.*

Her left hand strays again to the beads around her neck, tugging at the strands that bind them together. The pen scratches across the paper in a fervor.

*Some words are familiar from the Mass. It's the Eucharistic Prayer. Except there is no bread.*

*Another robed man approaches the altar, genuflects, and places a dagger on the altar. I try to run, to escape, but I feel frozen in place; my fear has won.*

She turns to a clean page, shivering as she does so.

*The two men grab me from behind, one holding each arm. I see the priest approaching with the dagger, and I turn away. I struggle, but to no use. He continues chanting as he raises the dagger, and the two men holding me join in the chant.*

She's pale, and her body is still shivering; the writing has turned to a scrawl, but she forces herself to continue.

*I whisper one last prayer to God, to Mary, to all the saints. I close my eyes and pray.*

Her left hand has grasped the necklace with the same strength that her right hand grabs the pen.

*The priest stabs me through the heart, saying something about a blessed sacrifice.  
I no longer care; it is over.*

The necklace tears, and beads fall to the floor, sprinkling like rain as they bounce away. Exhausted, drained, she puts her head in her hands and falls asleep on top of the manuscript.

The old man looks across the desk to the person on the couch. "And how are the dreams this week?"

"They're . . . gone. But . . ."

"But what?"

She sighs and shakes her head. "I can't help but feel like a part of me went with it."

"Did you finish the story?"

She takes a printed copy from her backpack and sets it on his desk. "There it is, in all its melodramatic glory. Have fun analyzing it. I don't even know what it means." With a smile, she puts her backpack on her back, and heads for the door. "But to be honest, right now, I'm sleeping at night, and I just want to be free of all of this."

"What are your plans, then?"

"My plans? My plans are to never create again."