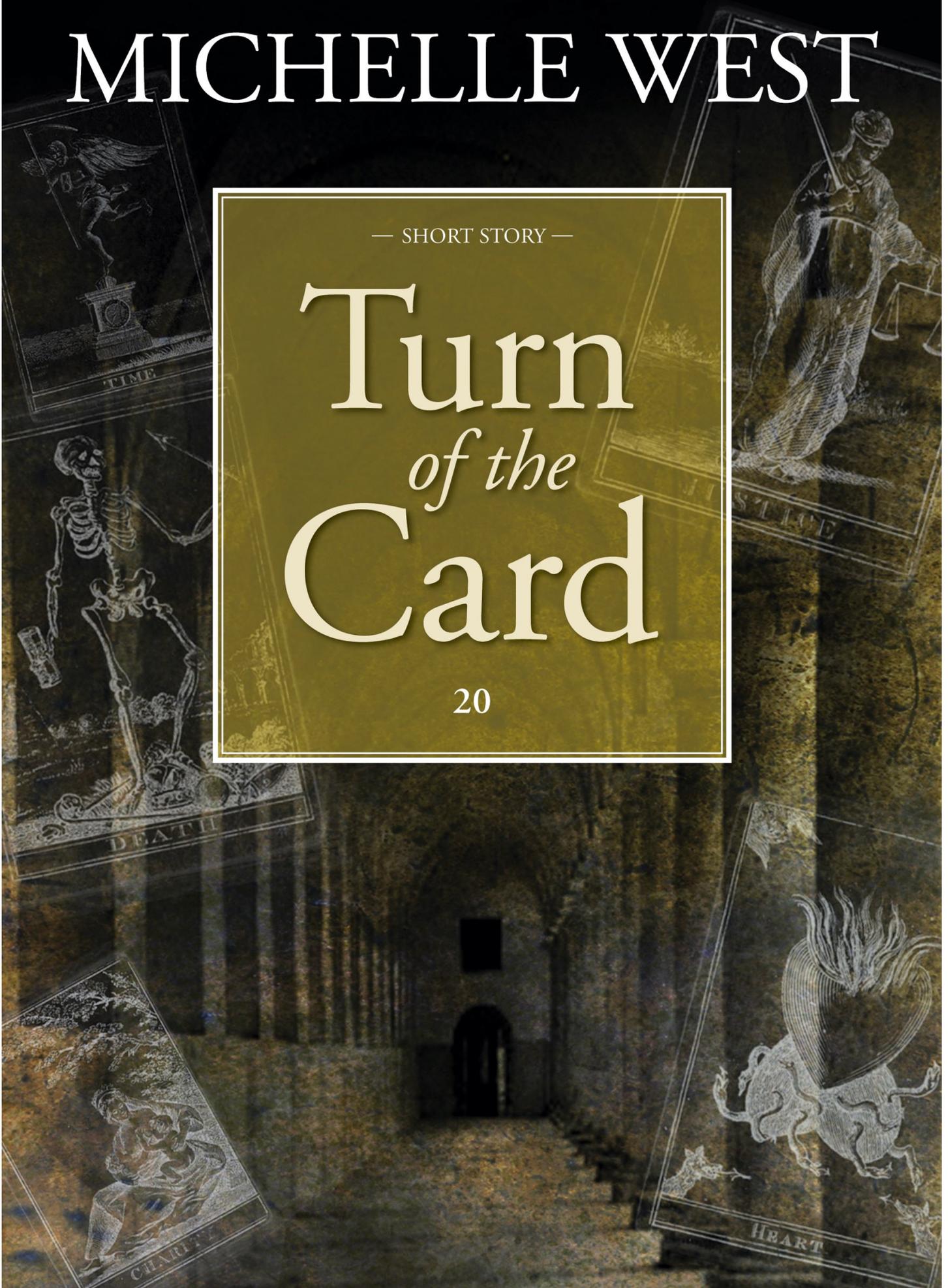


MICHELLE WEST

— SHORT STORY —

Turn *of the* Card

20



TURN OF THE CARD

MICHELLE WEST

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INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Schimel asked me to write a story for his Tarot anthology. This is the story he got. I like it, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is its theme. It, like so many of my works, long or short, deals with grief.

I think our society gives grief such short shrift. This wasn't always the case, and I'm not sure why it's become so, but there you have it. Death is an event, but it's an event that is marked by a funeral, a wake or post-funeral gathering, and then a lot of careful silence, as if life now just moves on past this milestone.

And in a fashion, it does.

I have never been afraid to die. I have always, on the other hand, feared death, because death means loss. All of my earliest nightmares involved the deaths of my parents, for instance, and while this can be seen psychologically as the fear of abandonment, in the waking world, I saw it differently. It's final. There is no arguing with it. A door closes and pounding on it makes no difference, because no one's home.

I could write about death and its consequences for

pages, and I will — but later; this is not the only story informed by its shadow.

A friend in Toronto who is also a writer read the story and remarked that it was, in his opinion, truly horrific. As he writes horror, I thought this was surprising, because I don't write it, and don't often read it; I find it too unnerving. He said, "My horror is like a roller coaster. This is grimmer — this is the type of horror you face in real life, and you often don't recover from." He added that he almost didn't finish the story.

But he did.

The funny thing is: it wasn't horror *to me*. I wasn't trying to write horror; I was trying to write fantasy. I'm not sure what that says about me.

I

She made those cards.

Watching them as he turns them and places them precisely into their proper position, she sees their frayed edges, their cracked and worn pictures; major arcana now sun-bleached and sweat-damaged beyond all repair. The deck was a naive attempt at a work of art, but as with many a naive attempt, was the vessel for the whole of her heart while she worked to make a gift.

For him.

It is so hard to look at him.

The cards tell a story as they lay before her, a work in progress, the end of which will be an inverted Celtic cross. At fifteen, at sixteen, at seventeen, she would slip into the comfort of her darkened basement, dimming the lights and clearing off the round-edged teak table that had been, like so many things, banished from the upper world when something better could be afforded.

She had a deck of cards, some store bought affair, the Waite deck that everyone used. A Crowley deck in pristine perfection remained in its box; she couldn't master the

reading of it, couldn't quite see how the one card could influence the other, forming a chain, a link of chains.

Younger, then.

The Celtic cross was easy, and she liked it; she made of it a personal talisman. To it, she would come, shuffling and cutting the cards with care and trepidation, finding the significator, the card that represented either herself, or the heart of her question — as if, at fifteen, she truly understood that heart — and then she would seek Answers.

She remembers the fear and the hope and the self-deception; the way she turned from the answers she didn't like, reframing the question again and again until it at last satisfied her sense of desire, if it cheated her sense of fate. Mystery. There was mystery then. Profound, unknowable, hallowed by the privacy of a basement in isolation.

And that mystery was as nothing to this one.

This is not the man she married. Not the man she knew. She misses him terribly.

The nurse comes to stand by her elbow. "Mrs. Brentwood?" she says softly. "Dr. Brevin is waiting."

But she cannot rise; her husband has not yet finished his reading. As compulsive, as silent, as he, she waits, bound by more than the stiff arms of the chair, the gleaming edge of the table. She holds her breath, as he does, laying out the cards. She cannot see what he has chosen as the significator, and because she can't, she doesn't know who he thinks he is, or what question he hopes to answer.

But the answer comes. He lays out the first card; the second — one to cover, and one to cross, and then the rest unfolds as naturally, as painfully, as a life.

Hands shaking, he turns the last card. It is Death, of course. Stricken, he folds; he is not the man that she married; hardly a man at all.

It's a card of change, she wants to say. *Death doesn't mean death*. But this once she would be lying, and she's certain he would know it. Even though he never responds to a single thing she says, she knows it's important to offer him nothing but the truth.

And so she often offers him nothing at all.

The nurse frowns and leaves her side; there's a curious screech of rubber as she lifts the brake arm and begins to wheel this man away. His hands flail; his arms shoot out. In one swift motion he gathers the fallen cards in a pile in his lap; the nurse barely waits.

And Shelagh knows that she hasn't really touched him at all.



"I'M SORRY, MRS. BRENTWOOD," Dr. Brevin says. He doesn't smile, and she's grateful for that particular mercy.

She says nothing, waiting.

After a moment, he shifts in his chair, lowering his eyes to the paper on his desk. "We can't be certain when he'll recover from the shock. The damage isn't physical. There is no reason whatever we can discern that prevents him from walking. Or speaking."

Dr. Brevin raises his hands, massages his forehead. Shelagh knows that she's being difficult, but she's beyond caring. "We both know it's guilt," the older man says at last, speaking a 'we' not of doctor and patient, but of doctor and patient's wife. "It's the guilt that's killing him."

Her lips are a tight line, a terrible line; thin and sharp. They have to be, to stop the words from coming. She likes Dr. Brevin as much as one can like a doctor, but she will not

share her ambivalence with him, and he should know it by now.

“Mrs. Brentwood, if you could bring yourself to —”

Scraping the chair against hardwood that’s seen better days, Shelagh Brentwood rises and flees the room, moving deliberately and gracefully through the open door. After all, it’s her husband, not her. It’s her husband who’s trapped here in this terrible, would-be sterile world.

#

She doesn’t remember what the cards mean anymore. Individually, they’ve blurred and smudged. She doesn’t know what pentacles signify, or wands, although she remembers that cups are emotional fonts. If she were to do a reading now — for herself, or for anyone else, she would have to have a book, some sort of guide to remind her of all that she’s lost.

Sitting in the back of a cab whose driver has been forced to surrender his illegal cigarette to the wind, she stares at her left hand, at the two rings that adorn her finger, one on top of the other: the diamond promise and the band without end. Thinking of symbols, of what the symbols mean, of how they can remain, depleted of life, as if they were always merely vessels.

She used to drive, but her license has expired.

They don’t own a car anymore.

The summer is hot; she lives in it, thinking that she should have dressed for the weather. Thinking that her arms will burn if she doesn’t take care.

Wondering how to care about something so stupid, so petty, as a little blistering of the skin, the glancing kiss of fire.

She hates the car. She hates this cab.

“Driver,” she says, “stop here.”

And he stops without a single word. Of course he insists on breaking the silence to ask for money; she pays him and leaves. When she can breathe again, she'll find another cab. This is Toronto. They litter the roads.



ROBERT BRENTWOOD IS LIFTED out of his chair by two able-bodied orderlies and settled into bed. He senses their pity, but they've little enough time for it, which is just as well; he wants them gone.

The night is coming. He lifts his hand, his shaking hand. They've gathered his cards, all but five, and he spreads them across the surface of the table they put his food on. The Moon. The Devil. Death. The Tower.

And the High Priestess. The other four cards he sets aside; he knows them better than he knows himself; he's lived them, lived with them, for the harvest and the cold, cold winter. Spring did not come to the Essex Manor Special Care unit, and although the sun shone high through the glassed-in walls, its light was just that: light. No warmth there. No warmth.

Will she come? Will she return tonight?



IN THE EARLY EVENING, Shelagh Brentwood remembers that she is not fifty. Not forty. Not yet thirty. The Essex Manor Special Care unit ages her decades every time she steps through the doors that lead to the wing. As she walks down the asphalt, she lifts her head higher; her hair, which is long and dark, if a bit too fine, swirls down her shoulders at the touch of a brisk breeze. She picks up the remnants of her

youth, wraps them about her face, lets the dourness and the grimness bleach away from her expression until she looks like a young woman. Like any other young woman, dressed in reverse-fit jeans and a white turtle-neck with no sleeves, who comes alone to the Canadian National Exhibition, the great grandfather of fairs in the city of Toronto.

What are you doing, Shelagh?

She stops at the gate and then reaches, self-consciously, for her purse; pulls out her wallet, fumbles a moment with the bills, dry and leaf-like, as they pass between her hands and the hands of a bored attendant.

And then she is gone, passing through the arch and the stiff turn-stile into the moving press of bodies that carries her, like a river, in its own direction. She doesn't have to think. It's easiest not to think.

Until she reaches the midway.

This, like the cards, was a magical place less than half her life ago. The dirt and the loud cries of employed summer students wasn't as obvious as the freedom of a first venture into such a big world without parental interference. Of course it was only a day trip, and of course she had had little money. But neither of these things mattered as much as the sense that she stood on the brink of a world that was so much larger — and so much more wonderful — than the world her parents lived in, and wanted her to live in, for all of their lives.

For just a minute, she is fifteen again.

Just a moment, and that moment, the passing of a cloud over the face of the ever-present summer sun.

It was at the CNE that she first had her fortune told. Or rather, had her cards read. It was one and the same to her then. She'd hoped for magic, the mysterious old lady in a tent or a wagon, her face painted, ears ringed, face wreathed

in smoke that was dear as breath. What she'd got instead was a girl little older than she, standing behind a tall counter, holding a stapled booklet in which she could check off each of the meanings of each of the cards, or their reverse, as she laid them out.

That girl didn't understand what a querent was. That girl didn't know what significator to choose, choosing the fool as a symbol of youth, when in fact Shelagh's question had been about — what else — the fate of her heart, and heart's romance.

So the outcome itself should have yielded little, as it answered nothing clear. Queen of Pentacles.

Reversed.

The stapled booklet was pink; the young woman had two piles — pink ones for girls and blue ones for boys. Incongruous and ridiculous, as if fate could be girdled in gender convention. Ridiculous or no, she'd paid for that booklet, and after the girl had finished, she'd clutched it tightly to herself, half-afraid that her friends would see it and know what it meant.

Because she knew. Checked there, in red letters against the pink background, the one, the telling, passage: *Greatness of soul, a dark woman who is powerful, intelligent, and uses these traits with generosity and good purpose; if the card is reversed, these traits are used for selfish, petty and malicious ends.*

This is a face card; the court cards imply choice, not absolute fate.

Choice. She'd grasped that word for all she was worth, standing at the tacky counter, her hopes for greatness dashed. Not one of the major arcana appeared in the reading; not a single one. Swords abounded; the three of swords, the two of swords, the eight, the nine — she could not honestly remember the rest. But the memory of the Queen

of Pentacles was enough, even handled as she was by a girl who just needed the hourly minimum wage that checking off passages in a pre-printed booklet could provide.

Because Shelagh *knew* that she was the Queen of Pentacles, standing on the edge of an adult life that she herself — that she *alone* — could define. Power, yes. But generosity or selfishness? Kindness or cruelty?

Reversed.

The cards had offered her a warning, that day. Unchecked, unhindered, undisciplined, she was to become everything that she had thought, until that moment, she despised. And what was left, once one despised oneself and *knew* it?

The shadow passed, the memory lingered.

Because if cards could do that, could give her that momentary understanding, that knife-sharp, necessary as breath-and-blood clarity of vision, they were better than mirrors. Better than self-help books and the advice of strangers or friends that one couldn't quite trust.

The noise of the midway returned. Thirteen years fled in an instant. A coke spill, half-dried, released the underside of her sandal with the sound of tape being pulled up too quickly. There was no freedom here anymore, just mechanical rides and children who thought they knew everything about the world.

Just as she had, until that day.



II

Robert Brentwood is not a young man. And he is not an old man. He is not a man anymore; he is barely a name. He sits in front of the silvered mirror, thinking these things, knowing them to be true. If he were a man, he could speak. If he were a man, he could walk. If he were a man, he could drive a car.

But he does none of these things.

The moon is in the mirror. It comes through the shears; he doesn't have the curtains pulled. It's the one thing he can do — keep the curtains open. The nurse thinks that he needs the sun, and she knows that if the curtains are drawn someone less observant might not notice this, so she leaves them open, always. Because he wants it.

But it's not the sun he needs. The moon, baleful, glares down at him with Her face. It is almost time. Hand trembling, he turns the face of the High Priestess to the window.

And the moon disgorges her whole.

“Robert,” she says, as she steps from her throne.

He sits in his, as if he were her equal; it's why she stands;

the height gives her the advantage. But she is not displeased; she is never displeased.

That she is never happy has not really occurred to him. Her black hair hidden by the fall of her midnight blue veil, her white shimmering robes concealed, in part, by a cloak, she offers him a benediction.

"I was watching," she tells him softly. "Do you know what Death means?"

He nods.

"You are coming closer to your truth, Robert. The only truth. Are you afraid of it?"

He nods again. There is no point in lying to the High Priestess; she sees beyond the lie, above and beneath it, and she knows how to sting him with the truth she extracts.

"Why?"

He doesn't know. He doesn't know, and because he doesn't know, he can't answer. She speaks for him, as always.

"Death is change," she says. "You have reached the end of this road. You have lost what remained to you in it. She will not speak the words that will free you."

Oh, the High Priestess is perceptive. Stung, he retreats, his face becoming a mask, a thing of flesh that more resembles latex than it does his true self. Buried, his true self winces, because it knows that if he has just five cards, *she* has the deck.

She will bring the Empress.

And the Empress is cruelty defined to those who have disappointed her.

If he could speak, he would beg. He does not.

"Robert," the High Priestess says, her voice serene, "you must let go of your fear. The Empress hurts you because you wish her to hurt you; she pains you because you fear her. What harm can she do you? What greater harm can be

done?" But although her words are serene, her eyes are the silver of the moon's light in the mirror, and when she unfurls her left hand, the Empress comes from the shadows.

And he whimpers.



IN THE MORNING, he is alone. The scars have healed; they heal, with the passage of the night, but they hurt and they ache and he is growing tired of the pain. It's Wednesday, and Shelagh doesn't come on Wednesdays. Faithful Dr. Brevin does, offering him words and questions, as if they can somehow be of help.

He has all the help he needs, if he can only see his way clear to understanding it; she was always more intuitive than he could ever be. But perhaps she knows this. She brought him the cards, after all, brought them and passed them over the wall where they fell in a fan of perfect, aged colour, of memory, of time.

He sorts through the deck in his lap, occasionally pulling out a card or two after he's cut and shuffled, shuffled and cut. None of them catch his attention until one sticks to his hand. In this ward, in this room, at this time, he knows what that means, and he takes the card out, studies it carefully, lays it upon the table his meals grace.

The nine of Swords. He shows the card to the doctor, and the doctor smiles uneasily.

"That's a very interesting image, Robert."

She made it for him, painting the black too pale and the swords too silver, but catching, perfectly, the sense of utter loss and desolation. It's one of her better cards. He hates it. He would give it away if he could, but it clings to him; clings

to them both. Maybe — maybe if the doctor pulled hard enough —

But the doctor doesn't touch the card, and no surprise.



“I DON'T KNOW why you brought him those cards,” Dr. Brevin says, and pauses.

She lets him have his pause, meeting his eyes with the quiet, perfect composure that he finds — that they all find — so unnerving. The odd thing is, she would answer the question he's not quite asking if she knew the answer herself. But she doesn't.

She just knows that when she was cleaning out the room, boxing things, putting things that she could no longer bear to look at — but is still not certain she could ever bear to part with — into the basement, she found the cards in their hand embroidered linen bag, string half-rotted with time and sweat.

He hadn't spoken a word to her since the night of the accident. Hadn't spoken a word to anyone, not even the father that he so respected. Months had passed, and the hopes of his loved ones had dwindled.

Hope.

She sees the rings around her finger, unbroken, unbreakable, and wonders, in the bright light, if the alloy that hardens the gold is iron, or platinum; she knows nothing at all about the process it takes to make a band. Remembers little about the process of wearing one.

“Mrs. Brentwood?”

“I'm sorry; my attention must have wandered.”

He is used to this, but worn by it; worn by her, by the care of her husband, by this place — a mansion of little

rooms, the madwomen and madmen poured free from their attic confines like ghosts raging and silent in the face of their pasts, and their helplessness to change or alter them.

"I said, I think your decision to bring those cards was a good one. They seem to be having an effect on Mr. Brentwood." He pauses. "I'm not familiar with the cards themselves, but I was wondering if you could tell me what a few of them mean?"

"Out of context?" She snorts; old habit. "They don't have meaning out of context."

"Then look at them," he says, his voice suddenly thin and sharp, "In the context of your *husband*."

She doesn't like that at all. "Have you forgotten, Dr. Brevin, who the patient is?" And she rises.

"No." He rises, but heavily, pushing himself up by the flat of both hands. "The High Priestess," he says. "The Devil. The Tower. The Moon." He pauses. "Justice."

She shrugs, wondering if the last word is the name of a card, or the doctor's demand. "It's been a long time since I touched those cards. I was a teenager. I don't remember."



BUT SHE DOES.

She takes the subway home; she leaves the manor behind. She does not stop to speak with her husband because the time for words has long since passed and she doesn't really know how to speak to him anymore.

Doesn't want to see him, mute and stunned and hidden, his hands turning card after card, as if to force the words from her. From her. Why does it always come back to her?

Her home is far too large for her needs, but it's his home as well. Almost a year ago, she thought he would

come back to it, but time has passed; he lives in this house in photographs and memory. She has put so much else away.

Twisting the ring around her finger, she thinks about age, about how he ages her; about how she wants — for just a moment — to be held and to be loved and to be trusted. She is twenty-eight years old but she feels, as she stands in the arch that leads to the kitchen, that she has a winter heart, a heart as heavy as his mother's heart, as blistered, cracked, broken.

And thinking about his mother always reminds her of herself, and it comes back to this, time and again: She mounts the stairs, wide and bent and cushioned by thick carpet so a fall won't be so dangerous; her hand grips the rail, whiter and whiter with each step she takes; she crests the last step as if it were the unexpected peak of a mountain that has no plateau. Stumbles. Rights herself.

And then she walks to the closed door that no longer has a tacky name-plate. And she thinks as she opens the door, that she is dead.

But she isn't; it's only desire, and the desire is momentary.



HE CAN SEE HER; in the waters at the foot of the woman who holds the Star, he scries like a madman, fascinated, horrified. The High Priestess stands at his side, cloaked in moonlight, a presence not unlike a judgmental mother, one calm and serene in her implacability. She has opened this window to Shelagh's world, and if he could speak, he would tell her to close it. He would beg her to close it.

But he cannot speak.

Wrapping his flannel-draped arms round himself, he rocks back and forth in his chair.



SHE ROCKS BACK in forth in the room.

In the darkness, she can pretend for a moment that she is a mother, like any other mother, come to check on her sleeping child. The bed is there, flat and narrow and low to the ground; the dresser, chipped and damaged by temper and time, stands beside it. There is a small mirror on the wall, a single large picture. Of herself, and her husband, on their wedding day.

Kara loved that picture because her practical mother looked like a princess, wearing a dress that cost far too much for the conceit and the hope of a single bright day. Robert — Robert took it down from their room and put it up in hers, at the foot of her bed. So that, he said, she would know they would always watch over her.

She walks to the picture and stares at it; it is dark in the room; she is a pale white shape within the confines of the ornate frame, and he is almost invisible. Lifting her hand, she touches the textured surface of the print, her fingers hovering a moment before her hands fall stiffly to her side. Her lips move.



HE HEARS HER BITTER LAUGHTER, her angry laughter, and he cringes. The Empress is better than this, and he turns his face to the High Priestess, but she is remote; her eyes, as his, are caught by his wife. His almost wife.

Till Death do us part.

And it has parted them.

But she will not let go. And he will not. He sees her, for a moment, as she sees herself: A young woman. A lonely woman. Knowing what she suffers, and seeing it, are very, very different.



THE BED IS EMPTY, of course. The sheets are not Kara's sheets, and the drawers have not held her clothing for two months. Two months ago, she found the courage and the strength to admit that her daughter was never — could never — come back. Not even in her dreams, and she desires those dreams more than she desires the comfort of being loved. Desires the ability to hold, to love and to comfort more than even the desire to be held. Her arms are empty.

She never understood that phrase until the police came and took her to the hospital. Until she saw her child's body. Her brother had offered to identify it, to spare her the pain of seeing it — but she *had* to see it. She had to know. And of course, it was what it was: her daughter's death, writ in flesh.

She remembers that the only thing she said to the technician who waited in sombre silence was thank you. Just thank you.

After seeing the dead, she went quickly, numbly, to see to the living: Her husband, attached to tubes and machines. His clothing was being removed from the corner of the room, and she'd offered to clean it — to *clean it* — as if, somehow, that would give her purpose, function. But it was a terrible mess, torn and bloodied. She'd let them take it, as she let them take her daughter.

She couldn't wait for him, for the funeral.

He would forgive her, she felt certain of that. But she couldn't wait. It wouldn't be right. But she feels, now, that she is still waiting for him, for an ending. He has not come home.

Lying down on the bed, her hair a spill across a cool pillow, she closes her eyes, trying desperately to remember what her daughter smelled like. What she looked like, in motion, not in the flat confines of the photographs that line her walls. Even the sound of her voice.

Nothing returns except loss, and there is no one to share it with.



“DO YOU SEE?” The High Priestess says, as she stands in front of the moon and the image of his wife in the darkness gives way to the ripple of water. “You have been here too long.”

He nods, holding his tears.

“You are the earth,” she tells him softly, “that is laid across her brow.” She hands him a scythe, then, swinging it gently; from its crescent the breeze comes to disturb the curtain's fall. He watches the neutral fabric sway in the shadows a moment, and then turns to look at the weight in his hands.

The scythe has become a shovel.

He knows what she is telling him.



III

She has lived in terror of the phone since the day she picked it up a mother, and in a short sentence became childless and almost-widow both. Its ring is jarring and no matter what she is doing, it disturbs her stillness, shatters the silence, brings back, for however small a fraction of time, the memory that she is driven by.

During the day it's not so bad; the sun and the sky and the presence of traffic in the road beyond her walls do much to dispel the shadows. No, it's at night, always at night, that the fear is worst; she is waiting for an emergency. Another death.

Because death still has the power to diminish her, to hurt her, where so little else does. Oh, the pain wouldn't be as great, the loss as complete — but loss is loss and pain is pain, and she would feel them both. Her parents are here. Her friends.

But when the phone rings — and it does ring on this night, summer's heat forcing the windows open as surely as if it had possessed her body and moved her hands — it

peals, tolling electronically, no depth or grandeur to the sound.

“Mrs. Brentwood?”

The voice is familiar, and it is unwelcome, and she recognizes both before the last syllable of her name has reached her ears. “Dr. Brevin.” Not a question.

He doesn’t pause, doesn’t wait to hear her greeting; he plunges into the conversation as if — as if it weren’t one. “There’s been some trouble at Essex Manor,” he says. “Your husband has — has injured himself.”

She hears herself telling him that she’ll come right away. She sees her hand put the receiver back into its cradle. She feels the weight of the phone book as she takes it down from its shelf and flips it open. To call a cab.

But she doesn’t feel anything at all.



IN THE DARKNESS, the road is empty. The driver is smoking; he asked her permission, and she couldn’t quite bring herself to say no. Even though she knows it’s bad for his health, and for hers. It comes back to that — what she knows, what she’s willing to do in spite of it. Because it’s easier. Because it will make someone else happy.

Was she always this much of a coward?

She hates the thought; hates the man who brings it to her; hates the cab. She hates cars, and she’ll always hate them; it’s a truth, and it’s her truth, and god knows she’s tried to accept her truths.

All of them.

What else can she do but accept?

The road brings her closer to the Manor, farther from

home, but there's no safety in either, so she doesn't resent the journey.

Dr. Brevin is waiting for her on the front steps. He sits; if he stood, she thinks he would be pacing, and pacing offers no comfort. He's a trained professional; he knows how to take control of a situation.

Pity that she doesn't know how to give it up.

Because if she knew how — if she remembered how for even a minute — she would. She would let him tell her what to do, just as she let the cab-driver smoke. As she let so many things happen, for so many years, each of them small and insignificant.

But nothing ever went wrong when I did it. Nothing ever went wrong. I knew when to give in.

Oh, she's close to the edge, to think that, to think that here. She pulls herself in, standing stiff and tight, her hands clenched behind her back as if they might, with a will of their own, reach out to touch someone for support.

Even if that someone is Dr. Brevin.

He can read her face; he's good at it, even though it gives so little away. "Mrs. Brentwood," he says, and it seems to be he, and not her, who relaxes.

"Take me," she says quietly, "to him."



HE SEES her enter his room.

They have taken his chair away; they have removed his table; they have added a strap to his bed. A strap that restrains his arms, that holds him down, that takes away even his minimal choices. The cards, he knows, are in the dresser by the bed; they have left him that.

Arms buried in blankets, straps holding him down, he

looks less like a prisoner than a baby. And he knows it; he sees it a moment in the lines of her brow.

How old is he? He can't remember. He has been in this place so long, time must move differently for him; she is so young. His hair is grey, his face lined, his skin whitened by sun's lack.

"Robert," she says, as she crosses the threshold. The first time she's used his name in as long as he can remember. Because all memory that's real starts here, waking up to the short ceilings and blank walls of the Essex Manor. Trapped, just as surely as if death had already brought him to hell.

Does she think he can just answer her? He opens his mouth, but the words don't come. And he can't lift his arms. They've taken that away.

"Dr. Brevin says — Dr. Brevin says you tried — tried to kill yourself."

Accusation, there.

Anger.

But at what? Failure? Incompetence to do *even that* well enough that it gets the job done?

She is the Empress; he never saw it before, or he might have known better than to marry her. He closes his eyes, accepting the punishment she has to offer, but she withholds even that. Instead, she turns to Dr. Brevin.

"Is he restrained?"

The doctor's reply isn't framed in words, but he knows what the answer is, even though he isn't watching; Dr. Brevin is an honest man.

"At least let him sit up."

Make him sit up.

He sits. Opens his eyes. Watches as she searches his drawers, wondering what she's looking for. Wondering if he can help, if it's important that he help. He nods in the direc-

tion of the bedside table. She doesn't notice. He throws his head back, tossing it sideways like an angry horse. Sweating with effort, he repeats the motion; it's always this way, the work and the struggle just to make himself understood.

But she understands, this time, and she circumnavigates the bed, taking great care not to touch him at all, he the land-mass, the room the ocean in which he would like to be lost. The drawer squeals open; the cards come up in her hands.

In her hands, in the day, they shone like gold. Or silver.
 "Where is the table?"

"It's being cleaned."

"Can I have another?"

Dr. Brevin leaves.

Leaves them alone.



SHE TAKES the cards in shaking hands and stares at them because they are brightly coloured, vibrant, strong images — everything that he is not. She can't remember what she wanted to say anymore. Can't remember if she wanted to say a thing, although she wouldn't say it in front of Dr. Brevin in any case.

What is it? What is it about these goddamned cards that you can spend your whole life looking at them?

She made them.

For him.

Her hands are shaking again; she is angry. She has tried so *hard* not be angry at him. He is injured, he is crippled, he is driven by his own guilt — by his own damned guilt — he is weak and she is —

She is strong.

And she will not give in to this impulse.

But she wants to rage. She wants to shout. She wants to scream, and it's been so long since she screamed her throat aches at the restriction.

If she had a table, she would seat herself behind it, use it as a shield wall. She doesn't. She has the cards. The cards are flimsy, too flimsy for such a task. Or maybe — maybe not.

She sits on the floor by the foot of his bed, crossing her legs, feeling, beneath her thighs, the cool of linoleum tile. Hears his laboured breath, and raises her head, eyes slowly cresting the end-board of fake veneer cut through with metallic handles — three — until she meets his eyes. They are dark, a brown so deep they seem black surrounded by white. He tosses his head to the side like a maddened beast, and she knows what he's asking.

That she sit on the floor by his side, where he can see her.

She shuffles the cards again, unexpectedly angry at the request. Angry at herself for the anger, for the selfish desire to have privacy when he's trapped here, and she's free.

Free?

She compromises, choosing to sit where he can see her but to sit in such a way that he cannot see the Celtic cross that she lays out against the pale grey floor. Because it's hers. Because it might tell him something that she doesn't want him to know: Her anger, her deep and abiding anger, her grief, her guilt, her — say it — No. No, she will not say that to him. And because she cannot even think the words, pronounce them in the silence of her thoughts, she must hide a moment, willing them away.

She cuts the deck, left handed, although she can't remember if the need to cut the deck left handed is founded

on superstition, false memory, or truth. The cards come down in three piles, three obsessively even piles, spaced a half-tile apart. She picks them up, right to left, making out of the three a single whole.

And then she remembers that she's forgotten the signifier. The question. The querent. The cards have to cover something. Have to ask something. But she doesn't want to reveal herself, put too much of herself into this task; Dr. Brevin will be back, and her husband is waiting.

She looks for the Queen of Pentacles, because she is the Queen of Pentacles — dark-haired, powerful, a woman past the bloom of youth and in the prime of experience, of wisdom. Looks for the Queen of Pentacles because she's been trapped once by that card, changed once by it, forced once to give up the life that she had been quietly leading — and she's not to be trapped that way again, in this room, with this man. If the Queen is the querent, she can't be the result. It can't come down to her, again. It can't always be her that's forced to choose, to choose, to choose.

He tried to kill himself.

Card after card falls into her lap as she searches for the Queen of Pentacles. The pile in her hand grows slimmer, the weight in her lap greater. There is no Queen. He's lost it. She made these cards. For him. And there was no card that she put more of herself into than that Queen.

And he's lost it.

She would ask him where it was, if she could speak at all, but she can't speak, she won't speak. And she will not rise to face him until she is certain that she can.

So she chooses a different card instead. Something suitably insipid, something that won't tell her anything she doesn't want to know. The Three of Cups. Three happy women holding their golden chalices in union, in agree-

ment. Happiness. Fulfillment. No, wait — that's not quite what it meant. She starts to think; the seriousness of the moment takes her in, as if she were fifteen again; anger rescues her. That's what it bloody well *will* mean. There's no one here to judge how well she handles the cards, how good her memory is, how keen her sense of intuition; there's no one here to impress.

Easy question. *When will I be happy again?*

And it's a cheat, and she knows it because she used to cheat all the time, and it doesn't matter anyway because they're just cards, *just* cards, but she needs to have something to do while he watches her.

The light in the room is poor. She could stand and move the lamp across the floor, but she'd have to stand, and she doesn't want to now that she's here.

She turns the first card over. Thinking, remembering that this is the card that covers the question; the atmosphere that pervades it, that holds it. Three of swords; stark, no matter how it's done; shaft of metal, three times, through a red heart. It doesn't surprise her at all.

The card that crosses does: The four of wands. Domestic tranquillity. A peaceful home. Home. She tries to think of what it means, even though she doesn't want to put that much of herself into the cards. She shouldn't have started, but like so many things, once started, she cannot pull back. How does this cross her? What does it mean? Is she trapped somehow by the memory of a better time? By the desire for it?

Desire, yes. She looks up, meets her husband's eyes, and wonders why she hasn't let go of him yet.

The third card, now; her ideal hope, the best that she might achieve in the future of the question — but what question? What question lies beneath the formal words?

She lays it down gently and smiles, feels a little jump. Major arcana. The Sun. Almost, she feels its warmth, the passage between this night and that day.

When she lays the fourth card down, she places it carefully beneath the signifier. At the heart of the question she's asked is the nine of swords, a woman, sitting in bed, weeping against a background of swords and darkness. She does not need to remember the cards to understand what this one means; does not need to look beneath the surface of the picture to see the heart beneath. It is hers.

But if she doesn't need to look, she can't look away either, not immediately; the reading of the cards is a thing that can't be rushed if they are to tell their story. And why shouldn't they?

The Knight of wands is the fifth card that comes off the top of the deck. In armour, he is obviously a man in flight; he holds a staff of living wood. *He is leaving*, she thinks, and then, *he tried to kill himself*.

But he is in the past, and the signifier looks towards the future; towards the influences of the future. She places the sixth card down. Queen of Swords. Did she draw this woman? Paint her expression? Did she turn the woman's lips down in that expression of distance and pain? She sees no happiness here, and she understands well why the Queen wields the sword: it is for her own protection. She has so little left, she cannot afford to be careless.

She cannot remember, anymore, what the next three cards mean; how they relate either to her, or to themselves. But she knows that they lead to the outcome, to the answer. Self-conscious, she looks up, sees her husband's eyes and turns away again, all in a single motion.

Ten of Swords.

Ace of Swords.

The Star.

Loss and desolation. Will and power to conquer. Hope.

She takes a deep breath, takes the last card from the deck and holds it a moment, thinking neither too clearly nor too deeply. Afraid, although why, when everything she has ever feared has already come and gone and she has survived it all, she doesn't know.



AND AS HE WATCHES HER, the moon grows brighter through the window; the wind comes in, carrying within the folds of its breeze an ancient melody, a song of reeds and brooks and wild, wild water.

It is, he thinks, a lovely song.

So much better than the words that he often hears, left alone in the dark of the night. So much kinder than his dreams — the shards of a previous life, the echoes of past greatness.

She rises from the floor, sliding out from the deck in silence as his wife lays another card down. Hair the colour of midnight, skin the colour of moonlight, the book held against her chest as if it were a child.

“Let go, Robert.”

He doesn't know what she means.

“Don't you? Let go. You cling to this place as if it birthed you.” Lifting a hand, she gestures; the straps slide clear of his body, falling into shadow and away. “And perhaps it will, now. *Let go.*”



HE REMEMBERS, through a haze that never, never clears, that Kara was tired. That she wanted to ride with Daddy. That her seat was too small and the straps hurt her neck — and they did; she was tall and too slender. He remembers that.

And he remembers that she was crying, and her tears were not the near-tantrum that he so disliked; they were quiet, hurt, bewildered. Her hair was matted to her forehead and the sides of her cheeks, dark curls, fine and soft.

He can feel the key in the ignition; the car thrumming like a living thing beneath him; he can see, if he turns to look at the side mirror, the exhaust rising and drifting in the still evening.

He can think: *It's only fifteen minutes. We aren't going near a highway.*

He can think: *It's late, we're both tired, we don't need a fight right now.*

He can think: *I rode in a car from the time I was born without a seat belt and nothing ever happened to me.*

Nothing ever happened to me.

Close his eyes and he can see the lights flailing against the windshield in the darkness. He can see the car, the other car, the green light; he can feel the pedal beneath his feet, the weight of his reflexes, the plastic beneath his hands.

He opens his eyes before he can see the rest; he does not want to see the rest.



SHE TURNS the card over and lays it down, to have an ending. A poorly proportioned skeleton stares up at her, riding on a red-eyed steed over a field of bodies. In the distance, beyond his implacable form, the sun is rising.

The breath leaves her lungs in a rush, and with it, her

heart. She is cold, sitting in the shadows made by poor light and the midnight sky. She starts to gather the cards, her hands almost numb, when she realizes that there's something clinging to Death, something stuck beneath the card's back. With care, she slides her fingernails between the cards and gently levers them apart.

Queen of Pentacles.

Reversed.

She stares at it for a long moment, and then she starts to laugh. It is a quiet laugh, at first. But as it grows louder, she loses it, the laugh becomes a wail, a cry of anger, of the terrible anger that grips her and will not let go.

She gathers her cards in a furious rush, betrayed by them, forced by them to make some choice, any choice — as if there *were* a choice to be made.

And what choice? What bloody choice?

She was not the one who was driving the car.

She was not the one who chose to let Kara sit in the front seat.

She was not the one who *killed their daughter*.

She turns, rising, her hands clenched in fists; she turns to face this half-man, this cringing, terrible *coward*, and she steps across the line that she has drawn, for herself, across her life.

“How-could-you-let-her-drive-like-*that*?” She strikes the baseboard with her fist, punctuating each word. Waits a half minute for a reply, some answer, some proof that he's even there at all. “You *killed her*, you selfish bastard, and then you just went into hiding, you crawled off into your own little world, you played guilty, you played hurt —”

Her eyes are full of tears now; she can't even see his face, and she doesn't care if she never sees it again. But she can't stop talking, and the breaths that she needs to throw words

at him come between those words themselves, awkward and poorly timed. "You killed her, and *I* had to clean up. I had to clean up her death, I had to clean up my life — I had to clean up your life because you couldn't even face me!"

She shakes the baseboard; shakes it as hard as she possibly can with a single hand. "Say something."

Silence, of course.

"Say something."

He won't. She doesn't care if he can't, or he thinks he can't. She doesn't care. She leaves the foot of the bed, throwing the cards behind her in a fan of terrible colour.

Touching him isn't hard at all.



SHE SHAKES HIM; he expected that. Worse will follow. And he's grateful for it, for what he no longer sees lurking behind the pale surface of her eyes. It's out now; finally, after a year: Judgment. Truth.

He would offer her anything, if he had it to offer. He had something that she wanted, once. That she even loved. He doesn't remember what it was.

She slaps him; she slaps him twice and then grabs the collar of his night shirt and yanks him up; her arms are strong enough to bear the weight a moment.

You killed our daughter, she says.

Do you understand? You killed her and then you left me to deal with it, she says.

I hate you, she says.

And this is what he was afraid of; he knows it once he hears it; he feels something click into place.

She hits him again, just once, open-palmed slap that resounds in the sudden silence. And then, just as suddenly

as it came, it is gone. Her eyes widen, her face pales; she looks down at her hands as if they aren't, and can't be, her own.

The cards form an arch above her. She doesn't see them; he can tell by the way she retreats. But they glow like a scintillating rainbow in the mystery of the night.

The High Priestess is waiting for him; her face is impassive, and she, like he, is silent.

I hate you. He sits up. *I hate you.*

And he thinks, as he repeats it, that it doesn't play right. It should have been definitive. It should have been cold and final.

But across the room, Shelagh is weeping as if her heart has been broken. As if she still had a heart that could be broken. She stumbles back until she hits the room's sharp corner, and then her knees give way, she falls.

This is not the way he envisioned her: knees against her chest, body curled against the cradle of wall and floor.

"Robert," the High Priestess says, and her face is luminous, "this is the only door that you will ever have. Take it, or reject it, but understand it for what it is." And she points to the arch through which his wife has passed.

He is confused; by the night, by the memory, by the Priestess. She wanted him to die.

"Did I?" She smiles again, and he realizes that the luminescence is a haze; she is vanishing, as the night does, to light. "*You* wanted," she tells him. "We are not separate." And the arch, like the Priestess, begins to fade.

He turns, quickly, bringing the dead weight of his legs round. Urgent now, filled with a kind of purpose that he has not had since the night of his daughter's death. For the first time in a year, Robert Brentwood walks. He does not stumble; he knows that tonight he cannot take a single false step.

She rests against wall and floor and her tears are a bridge that he knows he can cross. The only one.

He takes it, becoming, as he crosses the room, Robert Brentwood. Becoming, for a moment, the man that married Shelagh Caverson seven years ago. He reaches out to touch her; touches her; enfolds her in both of his arms. She spins there like a trapped animal, and then snarls in rage.

He doesn't let go.

She hits him, beats at his shoulders and the side of his head with white-edged fists.

He doesn't let go.

She screams at him, almost incoherent, and when that does not shake him, she bites.

He doesn't let go. She is Tam Lin, and he is her lover, and he holds her because he knows, now, that he *must* hold her. That he *can* hold her. He was afraid of her anger, paralyzed by it; he'd forgotten how much of her anger came from a deeper place. Hurt. Loss. Pain.

He holds her until she cannot fight him anymore, and then, when she slumps against his chest, he tightens his arms, and he offers her a place of safety that he'd forgotten — until he saw her curled like a child in the corner — she ever needed.

"I'm sorry," he tells her, his chin in her hair, his hands stroking her back. She hits him again, but feebly, and he continues to speak; he has a year's worth of words to say and he will not stop saying them until she is safe.

"You left me," she tells him, although he can barely hear the words, her voice is so child-soft. Spent, the anger has left her vulnerable. And all vulnerability is a child's vulnerability.

"Yes. I won't leave again."

"Why did you leave?"

“It doesn’t matter,” he tells her gently. “I’m not going anywhere now.”

She doesn’t believe him, and she wants to believe him, and he knows that he could spend a life trying to convince her that this time he’s speaking the truth. He wonders, as he holds her, if it will work, but he knows he’s going to try. Feels almost hallowed by the knowledge.

Looking over her hair, he sees the sun come up across the surface of the cards; shakes his head, thinking of the illusion and the madness by which he’s been both trapped — and freed.

He lifts her, knowing how his arms will ache in the afternoon, but wanting, for a few minutes, to carry her. To carry her completely.



DR. BREVIN STANDS JUST OUTSIDE of the doorway, breath held, movement stilled, because otherwise he might disturb this perfect moment. He watches, as Shelagh slowly relaxes in the arms of a Robert Brentwood that he only barely suspected existed at all. That man lays her down, reluctantly, upon the room’s single bed. His lips brush her forehead, her cheek; they hover a hair’s breadth above her mouth before he pulls back, perhaps unwilling to take what must be offered again, anew. Wise man.

He kisses her sleeping lids instead, brushes her wet hair from her forehead, and then, kneeling in the dawn-touched room, he quietly begins to gather the cards.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle writes as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West; she is also published as Michelle Sagara West (although the Sundered books were originally published under the name Michelle Sagara).

She lives in Toronto with her long-suffering husband and her two children, and to her regret has no dogs.

Reading is one of her life-long passions, and she is paid for her opinions about what she's read by the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. No matter how many book shelves she buys, there is Never Enough Shelf space. Ever.

Although she doesn't have a newsletter, if you subscribe to her blog, you will get everything that's posted there—book news, cover reveals, random answers to questions, etc.

If you would like news about new books as they're published—with no other clutter—sign up for my news only mailing list.

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OTHER SHORT STORIES

The first six stories released are connected to the Essalieyan Universe of the novels I write for DAW as Michelle West. Since those are my most asked-for short stories, those are the ones I wanted to make available first. The rest of the stories will be released in chronological order from the date of their first appearance, which are listed in brackets beside the titles, along with the anthology in which they first appeared. All of the stories have introductions (which will probably come through in the samples if you've already read the stories but want to read those.)

In the Essalieyan universe:

1. Echoes (2001, *Assassin Fantastic*)
2. Huntbrother (2004, *Sirius, the Dog Star*)
3. The Black Ospreys (2005, *Women of War*)
4. The Weapon (2005, *Shadow of Evil*)
5. Warlord (1998, *Battle Magic*)
6. The Memory of Stone (2002, *30th Anniversary DAW Fantasy*)



7. Birthnight (1992, *Christmas Bestiary*)
 8. Gifted (1992, *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*)
 9. Shadow of a Change (1993, *Dinosaur Fantastic*)
 10. For Love of God (1993, *Alternate Warriors*)
 11. Hunger (1993, *Christmas Ghosts*)
 12. Four Attempts at a Letter (1994, *By Any Other Fame*)
 13. Winter (1994, *Deals with the Devil*)
 14. What She Won't Remember (1994, *Alternate Outlaws*)
 15. The Hidden Grove (1995, *Witch Fantastic*)
 16. Ghostwood (1995, *Enchanted Forests*)
 17. When a Child Cries (1996, *Phantoms of the Night*)
 18. The Sword in the Stone (1997, *Alternate Tyrants*)
 19. Choice (1997, *Sword of Ice: Friends of Valdemar*)
 20. Turn of the Card (1997, *Tarot Fantastic*)
 21. The Law of Man (1997, *Elf Fantastic*)
 22. Flight (1997, *Return of the Dinosaurs*)
 23. The Vision of Men (1997, *The Fortune Teller*)
 24. By the Work, One Knows (1997, *Zodiac Fantastic*)
 25. Under the Skin (1997, *Elf Magic*)
 26. The Dead that Sow (1997, *Wizard Fantastic*)
 27. Kin (1998, *Olympus*)
 28. Step on the Crack (1998, *Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*)
 29. Diamonds (1998, *Alien Pets*)
 30. Sunrise (1999, *A Dangerous Magic*)
 31. Elegy (1999, *Moon Shots*)
 32. Return of the King (1999, *Merlin*)
 33. Work in Progress (1999, *Alien Abductions*)
 34. Water Baby (1999, *Earth, Air, Fire and Water*)
 35. Faces Made of Clay (2000, *Mardi Gras Madness*)
 36. Sacrifice (2000, *Spell Fantastic*)

37. Shelter (2000, *Perchance to Dream*)
38. Pas de Deux (2000, *Guardian Angels*)
39. Déjà Vu (2001, *Single White Vampire Seeks Same*)
40. To Speak With Angels (2001, *Villains Victorious*)
41. Lady of the Lake (2001, *Out of Avalon*)
42. Truth (2001, *The Mutant Files*)
43. The Last Flight (2001, *Creature Fantastic*)
44. The Knight of the Hydan Athe (2002, *Knight Fantastic*)
45. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
46. The Nightingale (2002, *Once Upon a Galaxy*)
47. A Quiet Justice (2002, *Vengeance Fantastic*)
48. The Augustine Painters (2002, *Apprentice Fantastic*)
49. How to Kill an Immortal (2002, *The Bakka Anthology*)
50. Fat Girl (2002, *Oceans of the Mind VI, ezine*)
51. Diary (2003, *The Sorcerer's Academy*)
52. Winter Death* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)
53. Dime Store Rings (2004, *The Magic Shop*)
54. To The Gods Their Due (2004, *Conqueror Fantastic*)
55. The Stolen Child (2004, *Faerie Tales*)
56. The Rose Garden (2004, *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*)
57. The Colors of Augustine (2004, *Summoned to Destiny*)
58. Unicorn Hunt (2005, *Maiden, Mother Crone*)
59. The Snow Queen (2005, *Magic Tails*; with Debbie Ohi)
60. Shahira (2006, *Children of Magic*)

*Set in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar, as the anthology titles suggest

