

Thomas Ligotti (b. 1959)

NOTES ON THE WRITING OF HORROR:

A STORY

Thomas Ligotti is the most startling and talented horror writer to emerge in recent years. Exclusively a short story writer thus far in his career, he published all of his early stories in semiprofessional and small press genre magazines for several years, remaining obscure. An American writer, his first trade collection of stories, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1990), was published in England, the result of a gradually growing reputation among the avid genre readers. His second collection, *Grimscribe* (1991), was published at the end of 1991. Perhaps the most startling thing about his work, aside from the extraordinary stylistic sophistication (one is reminded of the polished prose and effects of Robert Aickman's strange stories), is his devotion to horror, which is positively Lovecraftian—as is his bent for theory and knowledge of the history of the literature. This present piece selected is his masterpiece to date. "Few other writers," says Ramsey Campbell, "could conceive a horror story in the form of notes on the writing of the genre, and I can't think of any other writer who could have brought it off." It is no less than an instructional essay on the writing of horror, transformed by stylistic magic and artful construction into a powerful work of fiction. Writing students I have taught have found it a revelation. It is included for your delight and instruction.

For much too long I have been promising to formulate my views on the writing of supernatural horror tales. Until now I just haven't had the time. Why not? I was too busy churning out the leetle darlings. But many people, for whatever reasons, would like to be writers of horror tales, I know this. Fortunately, the present moment is a convenient one for me to share my knowledge and experience regarding this special literary vocation. Well, I guess I'm ready as I'll ever be. Let's get it over with.

The way I plan to proceed is quite simple. First, I'm going to sketch out the basic plot, characters, and various other features of a short horror story. Next, I will offer suggestions on how these raw elements may be treated in a few of the major styles which horror writers have exploited over the years. Each style is different and has its own little tricks. This approach will serve as an aid in deciding which style is the right one and for whom. And if all goes well, the novitiate teller of terror tales will be saved much time and agony discovering such things for himself. We'll pause at certain spots along the way to examine specific details, make highly biased evaluations, submit general commentary on the philosophy of horror fiction, and so forth.

At this point it's only fair to state that the following sample story, or rather its rough outline form, is not one that appears in the published works of Gerald K. Riggers, nor will it ever appear. Frankly, for reasons we'll explore a little later, I just couldn't find a way to tell this one that really satisfied me. Such things happen. (Perhaps farther down the line we'll analyze these extreme cases of irreparable failure, perhaps not.) Nevertheless the unfinished state of this story does not preclude using it as a perfectly fit display model to demonstrate how horror writers do what they do. Good. Here it is, then, as told in my own words. A couple-three paragraphs, at most.

The Story

A thirtyish but still quite youthful man, let's name him Nathan, has a date with a girl whom he deeply wishes to impress. Toward this end, a minor role is to be played by an impressive new pair of trousers he intends to find and purchase. A few obstacles materialize along the way, petty but frustrating bad luck, before he finally manages to secure the exact trousers he needs and at an extremely fair price. They are exceptional in their tailoring, this is quite plain. So far, so good. Profoundly good, to be sure, since Nathan intensely believes that one's personal possessions should themselves possess a certain substance, a certain quality. For example, Nathan's winter overcoat is the same one his father wore for thirty winters; Nathan's wristwatch is the same one his grandfather wore going on four decades, in all seasons. For Nathan, peculiar essences inhere in certain items of apparel, not to mention certain other articles small and large, certain happenings in time and space, certain people, and certain notions. In Nathan's view, yes, every facet of one's life should shine with these essences which alone make things really real. What are they? Nathan, over a period of time, has narrowed the essential elements down to three: something magic, something timeless, something profound. Though the world around him is for the most part lacking in these special ingredients, he perceives his own life to contain them in fluctuating but usually acceptable quantities. His new trousers certainly do; and Nathan hopes, for the first time in his life, that a future romance—to be conducted with one Lorna McFickel—will too.

So far, so good. Luckwise. Until the night of Nathan's first date. Miss McFickel resides in a respectable suburb but, in relation to where Nathan lives, she is clear across one of the most dangerous sectors of the city. No problem: Nathan's ten-year-old car is in mint condition,

top form. If he just keeps the doors locked and the windows rolled up, everything will be fine. Worst luck, broken bottles on a broken street, and a flat tire. Nathan curbs the car. He takes off his grandfather's watch and locks it in the glove compartment; he takes off his father's overcoat, folds it up neatly, and snuggles it into the shadows beneath the dashboard. As far as the trousers are concerned, he would simply have to exercise great care while attempting to change his flat tire in record time, and in a part of town known as Hope's Back Door. With any luck, the trousers would retain their triple traits of magicality, timelessness, and profundity. Now, all the while Nathan is fixing the tire, his legs feel stranger and stranger. He could have attributed this to the physical labor he was performing in a pair of trousers not exactly designed for such abuse, but he would have just been fooling himself. For Nathan remembers his legs feeling strange, though less noticeably so, when he first tried on the trousers at home. Strange how? Strange as in a little stiff, and even then some. A little funny. Nonsense, he's just nervous about his date with lovely Lorna McFickel.

To make matters worse, two kids are now standing by and watching Nathan change the tire, two kids who look like they recently popped up from a bottomless ash pit. Nathan tries to ignore them, but he succeeds a little too well in this. Unseen by him, one of the kids edges toward the car and opens the front door. Worst luck, Nathan forgot to lock it. The kid lays his hands on Nathan's father's coat, and then both kids disappear into a run-down apartment house.

Very quickly now. Nathan chases the kids into what turns out to be a condemned building, and he falls down the stairs leading to a lightless basement. It's not that the stairs were rotten, no. It *is* that Nathan's legs have finally given out; they just won't work anywhere. They are very stiff and feel funnier than ever. And not only his legs, but

his entire body below the waist . . . except, for some reason, his ankles and feet. They're fine. For the problem is not with Nathan himself. It's with those pants of his. The following is why. A few days before Nathan purchased the pants, they were returned to the store for a cash refund. The woman returning them claimed that her husband didn't like the way they felt. She lied. Actually, her husband couldn't have cared less how the pants felt, since he'd collapsed from a long-standing heart ailment not long after trying them on. And with no one home to offer him aid, he died. It was only after he had lain several hours dead in those beautiful trousers that his unloving wife came home and, trying to salvage what she could from the tragedy, put her husband into a pair of old dungarees before making another move. Poor Nathan, of course, was not informed of his pants' sordid past. And when the kids see that he is lying helpless in the dust of that basement, they decide to take advantage of the situation and strip this man of his valuables . . . starting with those expensive-looking slacks and whatever treasures they may contain. But after they relieve a protesting, though paralyzed Nathan of his pants, they do not pursue their pillagery any further. Not after they see Nathan's legs, which are the putrid members of a man many days dead. With the lower half of Nathan rapidly rotting away, the upper must also die among the countless shadows of that condemned building. And mingled with the pain and madness of his untimely demise, Nathan abhors and grieves over the thought that, for a while anyway, Miss McFickel will think he has stood her up on the first date of what was supposed to be a long line of dates destined to evolve into a magic and timeless and profound affair of two hearts. . . .

Incidentally, this story was originally intended for publication under my perennial pen name, G.K. Riggers, and entitled: "Romance of a Dead Man."

The Styles

There is more than one way to write a horror story, so much one expects to be told at this point. And such a statement, true or false, is easily demonstrated. In this section we will examine what may be termed three primary techniques of terror. They are: the *realistic* technique, the *traditional Gothic* technique, and the *experimental* technique. Each serves its user in different ways and realizes different ends, there's no question about that. After a little soul-searching, the prospective horror writer may awaken to exactly what his ends are and arrive at the most efficient technique for handling them. Thus . . .

The realistic technique. Since the cracking dawn of consciousness, restless tongues have asked: is the world, and are its people, real? Yes, answers realistic fiction, but only when it is, and they are, normal. The supernatural, and all it represents, is profoundly abnormal, and therefore unreal. Few would argue with these conclusions. Fine. Now the highest aim of the realistic horror writer is to prove, in realistic terms, that the unreal is real. The question is, can this be done? The answer is, of course not: one would look silly attempting such a thing. Consequently the realistic horror writer, wielding the hollow proofs and premises of his art, must settle for merely *seeming* to smooth out the ultimate paradox. In order to achieve this effect, the supernatural realist must really know the normal world, and deeply take for granted its reality. (It helps if he himself is normal and real.) Only then can the unreal, the abnormal, the supernatural be smuggled in as a plain brown package marked Hope, Love, or Fortune Cookies, and post-marked: the Edge of the Unknown. And of the dear reader's seat. Ultimately, of course, the supernatural explanation of a given story depends entirely on some irrational principle which in the real, normal world looks

as awkward and stupid as a rosy-cheeked farmlad in a den of reeking degenerates. (Amend this, possibly, to rosy-cheeked degenerate . . . reeking farmlads.) Nevertheless, the hoax can be pulled off with varying degrees of success, that much is obvious. Just remember to assure the reader, at certain points in the tale and by way of certain signals, that it's now all right to believe the unbelievable. Here's how Nathan's story might be told using the *realistic* technique. Fast forward.

Nathan is a normal and real character, sure. Perhaps not as normal and real as he would like to be, but he does have his sights set on just this goal. He might even be a little too intent on it, though without passing beyond the limits of the normal and the real. His fetish for things "magic, timeless, and profound" may be somewhat unusual, but certainly not abnormal, not unreal. (And to make him a bit more real, one could supply his coat, his car, and grandfather's wristwatch with specific brand names, perhaps autobiographically borrowed from one's own closet, garage, and wrist.) The triple epithet which haunts Nathan's life—similar to the Latinical slogans on family coats-of-arms—also haunts the text of the tale like a song's refrain, possibly in italics as the submerged chanting of Nathan's undermind, possibly not. (Try not to be too artificial, one recalls this is realism.) Nathan wants his romance with Lorna McFickel, along with everything else he considers of value in existence, to be magic, timeless, and the other thing. For, to Nathan, these are attributes that are really normal and really real in an existence ever threatening to go abnormal and unreal on one, anyone, not just him.

Okay. Now Lorna McFickel represents all the virtues of normalcy and reality. She could be played up in the *realistic* version of the story as much more normal and real than Nathan. Maybe Nathan is just a little neurotic, maybe he needs normal and real things too much, I don't know. Whatever, Nathan wants to win a normal, real

love, but he doesn't. He loses, even before he has a chance to play. He loses badly. Why? For the answer we can appeal to a very prominent theme in the story: Luck. Nathan is just unlucky. He had the misfortune to brush up against certain *outside* supernatural forces and they devastated him body and soul. But *how* did they devastate him, this is really what a supernatural horror story, even a realistic one, is all about.

Just how, amid all the realism of Nathan's life, does the supernatural sneak past Inspectors Normal and Real standing guard at the gate? Well, sometimes it goes in disguise. In realistic stories it is often seen impersonating two inseparable figures of impeccable reputation. I'm talking about Dr. Cause and Prof. Effect. Imitating the habits and mannerisms of these two, not to mention taking advantage of their past record of reliability, the supernatural can be accepted in the best of places, be unsuspectingly abandoned on almost any doorstep—not the bastard child of reality but its legitimized heir. Now in Nathan's story the source of the supernatural is somewhere inside those mysterious trousers. They are woven of some fabric which Nathan has never seen the like of; they have no labels to indicate their maker; there is something indefinably alluring in their make-up. When Nathan asks the salesman about them, we introduce our *first cause*: the trousers were made in a foreign land—South America, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia—which fact clarifies many mysteries, while also making them even more mysterious. The realistic horror writer may also allude to well-worn instances of sartorial magic (enchanted slippers, invisible-making jackets), though one probably doesn't want the details of this tale to be overly explicit. Don't risk insulting your gentle reader.

At this point the alert student may ask: but even if the trousers are acknowledged as magic, why do they have the particular effect they eventually have, causing Nathan to rot away below the waist? To answer this question

we need to introduce our *second cause*: the trousers were worn, for several hours, by a dead man. But these “facts” explain nothing, right? Of course they don’t. However, they may seem to explain everything if they are revealed in the right manner. All one has to do is link up the first and second causes (there may even be more) within the scheme of a realistic narrative. For example, Nathan might find something in the trousers leading him to deduce that he is not their original owner. Perhaps he finds a winning lottery ticket of significant, though not too tempting, amount. (This also fits in nicely with the theme of luck.) Being a normally honest type of person, Nathan calls the clothes store, explains the situation, and they give him the name and phone number of the gentleman who originally put those pants on his charge account and, afterward, returned them. Nathan puts in the phone call and finds out that the pants were returned not by a man, but by a woman. The very same woman who explains to Nathan that since her husband has passed on, rest his soul, she could really use the modest winnings from that lottery ticket. By now Nathan’s mind, and the reader’s, is no longer on the lottery ticket at all, but on the revealed fact that Nathan is the owner and future wearer of a pair of pants once owned (and worn? it is interrogatively hinted) by a *dead man*. After a momentary bout with superstitious repellant, Nathan forgets all about the irregular background of his beautiful, almost new trousers. The reader, however, doesn’t forget. And so when almost-real, almost-normal Nathan loses all hope of achieving full normalcy and reality, the reader knows why, and in more ways than one.

The *realistic* technique.

It’s easy. Now try it yourself.

The traditional Gothic technique. Certain kinds of people, and *a fortiori* certain kinds of writers, have always experienced the world around them in the Gothic man-

ner, I'm almost positive. Perhaps there was even some little stump of an apeman who witnessed prehistoric lightning as it parried with prehistoric blackness in a night without rain, and felt his soul rise and fall at the same time to behold this cosmic conflict. Perhaps such displays provided inspiration for those very first imaginings that were not born of the daily life of crude survival, who knows? Could this be why all our primal mythologies are Gothic? I only pose the question, you see. Perhaps the labyrinthine events of triple-volumed shockers passed, in abstract, through the brains of hairy, waddling things as they moved around in moon-trimmed shadows during their angular migrations across lunar landscapes of craggy rock or skeletal wastelands of jagged ice. These ones needed no convincing, for nothing needed to *seem* real to their little minds as long as it *felt* real to their blood. A gullible bunch of creatures, these. And to this day the fantastic, the unbelievable, remains potent and unchallenged by logic when it walks amid the gloom and grandeur of a Gothic world. So much goes without saying, really.

Therefore, the advantages of the *traditional Gothic* technique, even for the contemporary writer, are two. One, isolated supernatural incidents don't look as silly in a Gothic tale as they do in a realistic one, since the latter obeys the hard-knocking school of reality while the former recognizes only the University of Dreams. (Of course the entire Gothic tale itself may look silly to a given reader, but this is a matter of temperament, not technical execution.) Two, a Gothic tale gets under a reader's skin and stays there far more insistently than other kinds of stories. Of course it has to be done right, whatever you take the words *done right* to mean. Do they mean that Nathan has to function within the massive incarceration of a castle in the mysterious fifteenth century? No, but he may function within the massive incarceration of a castlelike skyscraper in the just-as-

mysterious twentieth. Do they mean that Nathan must be a brooding Gothic hero and Miss McFickel an ethereal Gothic heroine? No, but it may mean an extra dose of obsessiveness in Nathan's psychology, and Miss McFickel may seem to him less the ideal of normalcy and reality than the pure Ideal itself. Contrary to the realistic story's allegiance to the normal and the real, the world of the Gothic tale is fundamentally unreal and abnormal, harboring essences which are magic, timeless, and profound in a way the realistic Nathan never dreamed. So, to rightly do a Gothic tale requires, let's be frank, that the author be a bit of a lunatic, at least while he's authoring, if not at all times. Hence, the well-known inflated rhetoric of the Gothic tale can be understood as more than an inflatable raft on which the imagination floats at its leisure upon the waves of bombast. It is actually the sails of the Gothic artist's soul filling up with the winds of ecstatic hysteria. And these winds just won't blow in a soul whose climate is controlled by central air-conditioning. So it's hard to tell someone how to write the Gothic tale, since one really has to be born to the task. Too bad. The most one can do is offer a pertinent example: a Gothic scene from "Romance of a Dead Man," translated from the original Italian of Geraldo Riggerini. This chapter is entitled "The Last Death of Nathan."

Through a partially shattered window, its surface streaked with a blue film of dust and age, the diluted glow of twilight seeped down onto the basement floor where Nathan lay without hope of mobility. In the dark you're not anywhere, he had thought as a child at each and every bedtime; and, in the bluish semiluminescence of that stone cellar, Nathan was truly not anywhere. He raised himself up on one elbow, squinting through tears of confusion into the filthy azure dimness. His grotesque posture resembled the half-anesthetized efforts of a patient who has been left alone for a moment while awaiting

surgery, anxiously looking around to see if he's simply been forgotten on that frigid operating table. If only his legs would move, if only that paralyzing pain would suddenly become cured. Where were those wretched doctors, he asked himself dreamily. Oh, there they were, standing behind the turquoise haze of the surgery lamps. "He's out of it, man," said one of them to his colleague. "We can take everything he's got on him." But after they removed Nathan's trousers, the operation was abruptly terminated and the patient abandoned in the blue shadows of silence. "Jesus, look at his legs, look," they had screamed. Oh, if only he could now scream like that, Nathan thought among all the fatal chaos of his other thoughts. If only he could scream loud enough to be heard by that girl, by way of apologizing for his permanent absence from their magic, timeless, and profound future, which was in fact as defunct as the two legs that now seemed to be glowing glaucous with putrefaction before his eyes. Couldn't he now emit such a scream, now that the tingling agony of his liquifying legs was beginning to spread upwards throughout his whole body and being? But no. It was impossible—to scream that loudly—though he did manage, in no time at all, to scream himself straight to death.

The traditional Gothic technique.

It's easy. Now try it yourself.

The experimental technique. Every story, even a true one, wants to be told in only one single way by its writer, yes? So, really, there's no such thing as experimentalism in its trial-and-error sense. A story is not an experiment, an experiment is an experiment. True. The "experimental" writer, then, is simply following the story's commands to the best of his human ability. The writer is not the story, the story is the story. See? Sometimes this is very hard to accept, and sometimes too easy. On the one hand, there's the writer who can't face his fate: that the

telling of a story has nothing at all to do with him; on the other hand, there's the one who faces it too well: that the telling of the story has nothing at all to do with him. Either way, literary experimentalism is simply the writer's imagination, or lack of it, and feeling, or absence of same, thrashing their chains around in the escape-proof dungeon of the words of the story. One writer is trying to get the whole breathing world into the two dimensions of his airless cell, while the other is adding layers of bricks to keep that world the hell out. But despite the most sincere efforts of each prisoner, the sentence remains the same: to stay exactly where they are, which is where the story is. It's a condition not unlike the world itself, except it doesn't hurt. It doesn't help either, but who cares?

The question we now must ask is: is Nathan's the kind of horror story that demands treatment outside the conventional realistic or Gothic techniques? Well, it may be, depending on whom this story occurred to. Since it occurred to me (and not too many days ago), and since I've pretty much given up on it, I guess there's no harm in giving this narrative screw another turn, even if it's in the wrong direction. Here's the way mad Dr. Riggers would experiment, blasphemously, with his man-made Nathanstein. The secret of life, my ugly Igors, is time . . . time . . . time.

The experimental version of this story could actually be told as two stories happening "simultaneously," each narrated in alternating sections which take place in parallel chronologies. One section begins with the death of Nathan and moves backward in time, while its counterpart story begins with the death of the original owner of the magic pants and moves forward. Needless to say, the facts in the case of Nathan must be juggled around so as to be comprehensible from the beginning, that is to say from the end. (Don't risk confusing your worthy readers.) The stories converge at the crossroads

of the final section where the destinies of their characters also converge, this being the clothes store where Nathan purchases the fateful trousers. On his way into the store he bumps into a woman who is preoccupied with counting a handful of cash, this being the woman who has just returned the trousers.

"Excuse me," says Nathan.

"Look where you're going," says the woman at the same instant.

Of course at this point we have already seen where Nathan is going and, in a way too spooky to explain right now, so has he.

The *experimental* technique. It's easy, now try it yourself.

Another Style

All the styles we have just examined have been simplified for the purposes of instruction, haven't they? Each is a purified example of its kind, let's not kid ourselves. In the real world of horror fiction, however, the above three techniques often get entangled with one another in hopelessly mysterious ways, almost to the point where all previous talk about them is useless for all practical purposes. But an ulterior purpose, which I'm saving for later, may thus be better served. Before we get there, though, I'd like, briefly, to propose still another style.

The story of Nathan is one very close to my heart and I hope, in its basic trauma, to the hearts of many others. I wanted to write this horror tale in such a fashion that its readers would be distressed not by the personal, individual catastrophe of Nathan but by his very existence in a world, even a fictional one, where a catastrophe of this type and magnitude is possible. I wanted to employ a style that would conjure all the primordial powers of the universe independent of the conventional realities of the

Individual, Society, or Art. I aspired toward nothing less than a pure style without style, a style having nothing whatever to do with the normal or abnormal, a style magic, timeless, and profound . . . and one of great horror, the horror of a god. The characters of the story would be Death himself in the flesh, Desire in a new pair of pants, the pretty eyes of Desiderata and the hideous orbs of Loss. And linked hand-in-hand with these terrible powers would be the more terrible ones of Luck, Fate, and all the miscellaneous minions of Doom.

I couldn't do it, my friends. It's not easy, and I don't suggest that you try it yourself.

The Final Style

Dear horror writers of the future, I ask you: what is the style of horror? What is its tone, its *voice*? Is it that of an old storyteller, keeping eyes wide around the tribal campfire; is it that of a documentarian of current or historical happenings, reporting events heard-about and conversations overheard; is it even that of a yarn-spinning god who can see the unseeable and reveal, from viewpoint omniscient, the horrific hearts of man and monster? I have to say that it's none of these, sorry if it's taken so long.

To tell you the truth, I'm not sure myself what the voice of horror really is. But throughout my career of eavesdropping on the dead and the damned, I know I've heard it; and Gerry Riggers, you remember him, has tried to put it on paper. Most often it sounds to me very simply like a voice calling out in the middle of the night, a single voice with no particular qualities. Sometimes it's muffled, like the voice of a tiny insect crying for help from inside a sealed coffin; and other times the coffin shatters, like a brittle exoskeleton, and from within rises a piercing, crystal shriek that lacerates the midnight

blackness. These are approximations, of course, but highly useful in pinning down the sound of the voice of horror, if one still wants to.

In other words, the proper style of horror is really that of the *personal confession*, and nothing but: manuscripts found in lonely places. While some may consider this the height of cornball melodrama, and I grant that it is, it is also the rawhead and bloody bones of true blue grue. It's especially true when the confessing narrator has something he must urgently get off his chest and labors beneath its nightmarish weight all the while he is telling the tale. Nothing could be more obvious, except perhaps that the tale teller, ideally, should himself be a writer of horror fiction by trade. That really is more obvious. Better. But how can the *confessional* technique be applied to the story we've been working with? Its hero isn't a horror writer, at least not that I can see. Clearly some adjustments have to be made.

As the reader may have noticed, Nathan's character can be altered to suit a variety of literary styles. He can lean toward the normal in one and the abnormal in another. He can be transformed from fully fleshed person to disembodied fictional abstraction. He can play any number of basic human and nonhuman roles, representing just about anything a writer could want. Mostly, though, I wanted Nathan, when I first conceived him and his ordeal, to represent none other than my real life self. For behind my pseudonymic mask of Gerald Karloff Riggers, I am no one if not Nathan Jeremy Stein.

So it's not too farfetched that in his story Nathan should be a horror writer, at least an aspiring one. Perhaps he dreams of achieving Gothic glory by writing tales that are nothing less than magic, timeless, and you know what. Perhaps he would sell his soul in order to accomplish this feat, I mean *feat*. But Nathan was not born to be a seller of his soul or anything else, that's why he became a horror writer rather than going into Dad's

(and Granddad's) business. Nathan is, however, a buyer: a haunter of spectral marketplaces, a visitant of discount houses of unreality, a bargain hunter in the deepest basement of the unknown. And in some mysterious way, he comes to procure his dream of horror without even realizing what it is he's bought or with what he has bought it. Like the other Nathan, *this* Nathan eventually finds that what he's bought is not quite what he bargained for—a pig in a poke rather than a nice pair of pants. What? I'll explain.

In the confessional version of Nathan's horror story, the main character must be provided with something horrible to confess, something fitting to his persona as a die-hard horrorist. The solution is quite obvious, which doesn't prevent its also being freakish to the core. Nathan will confess that he's gone too far into FEAR. He's always had a predilection for this particular discipline, but now it's gotten out of hand, out of control, and out of this world.

The turning point in Nathan's biography of horror-seeking is, as in previous accounts, an aborted fling with Lorna McFickel. In the other versions of the story, the character known by this name is a personage of shifting significance, representing at turns the ultra-real or the super-ideal to her would-be romancer. The confessional version of "Romance of a Dead Man," however, gives her a new identity, namely that of Lorna McFickel herself, who lives across the hall from me in a Gothic castle of high-rise apartments, twin-towered and honey-combed with newly carpeted passageways. But otherwise there's not much difference between the female lead in the fictional story and her counterpart in the factual one. While the storybook Lorna will remember Nathan as the creep who spoiled her evening, who disappointed her—Real Lorna, Normal Lorna feels exactly the same way, or rather felt, since I doubt she even thinks about the one she called, and not without good

reason, *the most disgusting creature on the face of the earth*. And although this patent exaggeration was spoken in the heat of a very hot moment, I believe her attitude was basically sincere. Even so, I will never reveal the motivation for this outburst of hers, not even under the throbbing treat of torture. (I meant, of course, to write *threat*. Only a tricky trickle of the pen's ink, nothing more.) Such things as motivation are not important to this horror story anyway, not nearly as important as what happens to Nathan following Lorna's revelatory rejection.

For he now knows, as he never knew before, how weird he really is, how unlike everyone else, how abnormal and unreal fate has made him. He knows that supernatural influences have been governing his life all along, that he is subject only to the rule of demonic forces, which now want this expatriate from the red void back in their bony arms. In brief, Nathan should never have been born a human being, a truth he must accept. Hard. (The most painful words are "never again," or just plain "never!") And he knows that someday the demons will come for him.

The height of the crisis comes one evening when the horror writer's ego is at low ebb, possibly to ebb all the way back to the abyss. He has attempted to express his supernatural tragedy in a short horror story, his last, but he just can't reach a climax of suitable intensity and imagination, one that would do justice to the cosmic scale of his pain. He has failed to embody in words his semi-autobiographical sorrow, and all these games with protective names have only made it more painful. It hurts to hide his heart within pseudonyms of pseudonyms. Finally, the horror writer sits down at his desk and begins whining like a brat all over the manuscript of his unfinished story. This goes on for quite some time, until Nathan's sole desire is to seek a human oblivion in a human bed. Whatever its drawbacks, grief is a great

sleeping draught to drug oneself into a noiseless, lightless paradise far from an agonizing universe. This is so.

Later on there comes a knocking at the door, an impatient rapping, really. Who is it? One must open it to find out.

"Here, you forgot these," a pretty girl said to me, flinging a woolly bundle into my arms. Just as she was about to walk away, she turned and scanned the features of my face a little more scrupulously. I have sometimes pretended to be other people, the odd Norman and even a Nathan or two, but I knew I couldn't get away with it anymore. Never again! "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you were Norman. This is his apartment, right across and one down the hall from mine." She pointed to show me. "Who're you?"

"I'm a friend of Norman's," I answered.

"Oh, I guess I'm sorry then. Well, those're his pants I threw at you."

"Were you mending them or something?" I asked innocently, checking them as if looking for the scars of repair.

"No, he just didn't have time to put them back on the other night when I threw him out, you know what I mean? I'm moving out of this creepy dump just to get away from him, and you can tell him those words."

"Please come in from that drafty hallway and you can tell him yourself."

I smiled my smile and she, not unresponsively, smiled hers. I closed the door behind her.

"So, do you have a name?" she asked.

"Penzance," I replied. "Call me Pete."

"Well, at least you're not Harold Wackers, or whatever the name is on those lousy books of Norman's."

"I believe it's *Wickers*, H.J. Wickers."

"Anyway, you don't seem at all like Norman, or even someone who'd be a friend of his."

"I'm sure that was intended as a compliment, from

what I've gathered about you and Norm. Actually, though, I too write books not unlike those of H.J. Wickers. My apartment across town is being painted, and Norman was kind enough to take me in, even loan me his desk for a while." I manually indicated the cluttered, weeped-upon object of my last remark. "In fact, Norman and I sometimes collaborate under a common pen-name, and right now we're working together on a manuscript." That was an eternity ago, but somehow it seems like the seconds and minutes of those days are still nipping at our heels. What tricks human clocks can play, even on us who are no longer subject to them! But it's a sort of reverse magic, I suppose, to enshackle the timeless with granddaddy's wrist-grips of time, just as it is the most negative of miracles to smother unburdened spirits with the burdensome overcoat of matter.

"That's nice, I'm sure," she replied to what I said a few statements back. "By the way. I'm Laura—"

"O'Finney," I finished. "Norman's spoken quite highly of you." I didn't mention that he had also spoken quite lowly of her too.

"Where is the creep, anyway?" she inquired.

"He's sleeping." I answered, lifting a vague finger toward the rear section of the apartment, where a shadowy indentation led to bathrooms and bedrooms. "He's had a hard night of writing."

The girl's face assumed a disgusted expression.

"Forget it," she said, heading for the door. Then she turned and very slowly walked a little ways back toward me. "Maybe we'll see each other again."

"Anything is possible," I assured her.

"Just do me a favor and keep Norman away from me, if you don't mind."

"I think I can do that very easily. But you have to do something for me."

"What?"

I leaned toward her very confidentially.

"Please die, Desiderata," I whispered in her ear, while gripping her neck with both hands, cutting short a scream along with her life. Then I really went to work.

"Wake up, Norman," I shouted a little later. I was standing at the foot of his bed, my hands positioned behind my back. "You were really dead to the world, you know that?"

A little drama took place on Norman's face in which surprise overcame sleepiness and both were vanquished by anxiety. He had been through a lot the past couple nights, struggling with our "Notes" and other things, and really needed his sleep. I hated to wake him up.

"Who? What do you want?" he said, quickly sitting up in bed.

"Never mind what I want. Right now we are concerned with what *you* want, you know what I mean? Remember what you told that girl the other night, remember what you wanted her to do that got her so upset?"

"If you don't get the hell out of here—"

"That's what *she* said too, remember? And then she said she wished she had *never met you*. And that was the line, wasn't it, that gave you the inspiration for our fictionalized adventure. Poor Nathan never had the chance you had. Oh yes, very fancy rigmarole with the enchanted trousers. Blame it all on some old bitch and her dead husband. Very realistic, I'm sure. When the real reason—"

"Get out of here!" he yelled. But he calmed down somewhat when he saw that ferocity in itself had no effect on me.

"What did you expect from that girl? You did tell her that you wanted to embrace, what was it? Oh yes, a headless woman. A headless woman, for heaven's sake, that's asking a lot. And you did want her to make herself look like one, at least for a little while. Well, I've got the

answer to your prayers. How's this for headless?" I said, holding up the head from behind my back.

He didn't make a sound, though his two eyes screamed a thousand times louder than any single mouth. I tossed the long-haired and bloody noggin in his lap, but he threw the bedcovers over it and frantically pushed the whole business onto the floor with his feet.

"The rest of her is in the bathtub. Go see, if you want. I'll wait."

He didn't make a move or say a word for quite a few moments. But when he finally did speak, each syllable came out so calm and smooth, so free of the vibrations of fear, that I have to say it shook me up a bit.

"Whooo are you?" he asked as if he already knew.

"Do you really need to have a name, and would it even do any good? Should we call that disengaged head down there Laura or Lorna, or just plain Desiderata? And what, in heaven's name, should I call you—Norman or Nathan, Harold or Gerald?"

"I thought so," he said disgustedly. Then he began to speak in an eerily rational voice, but very rapidly. He did not even seem to be talking to anyone in particular. "Since the thing to which I am speaking," he said, "since this thing knows what only I could know, and since it tells me what only I could tell myself, I must therefore be completely alone in this room, or perhaps even dreaming. Yes, dreaming. Otherwise the diagnosis is insanity. Very true. Profoundly certain. Go away now, Mr. Madness. Go away, Dr. Dream. You made your point, now let me sleep. I'm through with you."

Then he lay his head down on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Norman," I said. "Do you always go to bed with your trousers on?"

He opened his eyes and now noticed what he had been too deranged to notice before. He sat up again.

"Very good, Mr. Madness. These look like the real

thing. But that's not possible since Laura still has them, sorry about that. Funny, they won't come off. The imaginary zipper must be stuck. Gee, I guess I'm in trouble now. I'm a dead man if there ever was one, hoo. Always make sure you know what you're buying, that's what I say. Heaven help me, please. You never know what you might be getting into. Come off, damn you! Oh, what grief. Well, so when do I start to rot, Mr. Madness? Are you still there? What happened to the lights?"

The lights had gone out in the room and everything glowed with a bluish luminescence. Lightning began flashing outside the bedroom window, and thunder resounded through a rainless night. The moon shone through an opening in the clouds, a blood-red moon only the damned and the dead can see.

"Rot your way back to us, you freak of creation. Rot your way out of this world. Come home to a pain so great that it is bliss itself. You were born to be bones not flesh. Rot your way free of that skin of mere skin."

"Is this really happening to me? I mean, I'm doing my best, sir. It isn't easy, not at all. Horrible electricity down there. Horrible. Am I bathed in magic acid or something? Oh, it hurts, my love. Ah, ah, ah. It hurts so much. Never let it end. If I have to be like this, then never let me wake up, Dr. Dream. Can you do that, at least?"

I could feel my bony wings rising out of my back and saw them spread gloriously in the blue mirror before me. My eyes were now jewels, hard and radiant. My jaws were a cavern of dripping silver and through my veins ran rivers of putrescent gold. He was writhing on the bed like a wounded insect, making sounds like nothing in human memory. I swept him up and wrapped my sticky arms again and again around his trembling body. He was laughing like a child, the child of another world. And a great wrong was about to be rectified.

I signaled the windows to open onto the night, and, very slowly, they did. His infant's laughter had now

turned to tears, but they would soon run dry, I knew this. At last we would be free of the earth. The windows opened wide over the city below and the profound blackness above welcomed us.

I had never tried this before. But when the time came, I found it all so easy.