

Thomas Ligotti, Jessica Amanda Salmonson and Jeff VanderMeer. This collection assembles some of my shorter works in this vein; others can be found in the Necronomicon Press collection *Fables and Fantasies* (1996). Longer stories in a similar vein include *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires* (Mark Ziesing 1996) and its two sequels, thus far only published in abridged form as “The Black Blood of the Dead” (1997) and “The Gateway of Eternity” (1999)—although I hope that a portmanteau version will one day appear as *The Gateway of Eternity*. Many of my science fiction novels, most obviously *Firefly: A Novel of the Far Future* (Borgo 1994) and *Architects of Emortality* (Tor, 1999), also have significant Decadent elements.

SALOME

When Salome the enchantress danced, she was beloved by all those who watched; she made them drunken captives of her art. Her silken costumes were sewn with crystal shards, which glittered in the light of ruddy lanterns like the scales of many-coloured serpents, and the gliding movements of her body were like the swaying of an asp in thrall. When she leapt up high with her white arms thrown wide, she was like a creature in flight: a lamia with frail wings, or a delicate dragon’s child.

When Salome the enchantress danced, she stirred the fires of Hell in the hearts of those who watched; she made them willing slaves of her passion.

* * *

Salome was never taught to dance; hers was a spontaneous art born of inspiration and nurtured by an altogether natural process of growth. She danced because dancing was the most precious aspect of her nature, and she began to express herself in the rhythms of dance as soon as she began to know who she was.

Her earliest dances were witnessed only by the female slaves into whose charge she had been delivered when her mother died in bearing her. She first danced for her father, who was Herod the Magician King, when she was seven years old. He immediately commanded that the tongues of her slaves should be cut out, so that they could not speak of it, and that their eyes should be scored with thorns, so that they would never again see anything clearly.

In the seven years which followed, only Herod and his brothers in blood were permitted to watch Salome dance, and to watch the magic grow within her as her art grew to perfection. She obeyed her father's command to reserve her gifts for his own delight, and for the seduction of his noble friends.

Herod used the spell which Salome's dancing cast to increase his power over his brothers in blood. He took advantage of the state of intoxication into which she delivered them to bind them to his will, and paid them for their servitude by granting them the privilege of watching Salome dance. The greater privilege, of slaking the lusts which Salome's dancing excited, Herod reserved to himself.

Herod believed that in taking carnal possession of Salome's unripened body he was protecting himself from the kind of sottishness which she inspired in her other admirers, but he was wrong. Although his eyes had never been scored with thorns he saw unclearly, and although he was a Master of Magicians and not a slave, he was captive without knowing it to the magic of his daughter-wife.

* * *

When the mother of Salome had died in bearing her, Herod had used his magic to procure the death of his brother Philip. He did this in order to make a widow of Philip's wife Herodias, so that she would become his property under the law of his people. Herodias was very beautiful then, and well pleased with what Herod had done in order to possess her, for she knew the worth of a Master of Magicians, and was ambitious to be his mistress in every possible way.

Inevitably, with the passing of time, Herod became bored with Herodias, and left her alone in her apartments for months on end. There she played perpetually with her magic mirrors and her cards of fortune, by which means she sought—hopelessly—to discover a way to rescue her ambitions. Herodias never saw Salome dance, nor heard any trustworthy report of the artistry of her dancing, but she divined in the end that it was Herod's infatuation with Salome which had obliterated any trace of affection for herself which had ever lodged in his heart.

For this reason, Herodias grew to hate Salome with a very violent passion. She tried to hurt her niece with curses and maledictions, but her own magic was not powerful enough to prevail against Herod's protec-

tiveness and the armour of Salome's maturing art. She was therefore forced by circumstance to be patient, although she could barely contain her rage against the irresistible pressure of time which leached away her glamour.

Herodias was chafed and teased by her frustration for seven long years, but she never despaired. She knew that there would come a day when Salome ceased to be a child and became a woman, and she knew that when the day came, Salome would be ready to be made captive in her turn by the savage grip of infatuation.

* * *

As the fourteenth year of Salome's life drew to its culmination, there appeared in the borderlands of King Herod's petty empire a man named John the Prophet, who preached to the common people whenever and wherever they could be induced to listen to him.

John the Prophet told his hearers that those whose mastery of men was achieved by command of magic, wealth and privilege were doomed to burn in Hell for all eternity, but that the common people might acquire a kingdom of their own beyond the grave, if only they were virtuous and humble and hopeful. This kingdom beyond the grave was named by John the Prophet Heaven; he told his hearers that there was no suffering there, and that no man had power over another, because all were equal in the eyes of God.

Herod was glad when news of John the Prophet's teachings reached his ears. He was a clever statesman, and knew that it was always to the advantage of rulers when prophets appeared to promise the common people fabulous reparation for their current misery. Such notions helped to make his subjects content with their subjection, by deferring the promised settlement of all their grievances to an imaginary life beyond death, and deflecting their ambitions away from rebellion and revolution.

Like all petty emperors, King Herod loved to see his subjects confirmed in a determination to be virtuous, humble, and hopeful.

Although Herod was very pleased to have John the Prophet wandering in his kingdom, he knew that he would eventually have to destroy the preacher. It was in his interest to make it seem that he feared such men, and that he did not want their message to be heard. For this reason, he followed the methods of all wise rulers, making it his habit to imprison, torture and

ultimately martyr all the prophets who came to his attention.

This way of dealing with prophets invariably brought rewards to all who used it. It lent careful emphasis to the sermons which they preached, and made their teachings all the more precious to those foolish and unlucky persons who had found hope in them.

In his dealings with John the Prophet King Herod was careful and methodical as he usually was. His first move was to have his quarry hunted for a while without actually being caught. He sent out instructions for the arrest of the prophet, but made sure that rumours flew ahead of his instructions, so that John would always be one step ahead of the officers who came to take him. Then, at his leisure, Herod closed in. He issued a public proclamation banning John the Prophet from entering the gates of his Capital City, thus making sure that the preacher would be all the more enthusiastic to carry his message within the walls. Finally, he had the man seized as publicly and as violently as possible, and brought before his fully-assembled court to be mocked, scorned and condemned.

* * *

When John the Prophet was brought to stand before him, Herod deemed it desirable that as many people as possible should be looking on, so as to create a proper sense of occasion. He had summoned all his brothers in blood, and he had invited Herodias to descend from her apartments in order to appear at his left hand. At his right hand he set his beautiful daughter Salome.

When everything was ready, Herod asked John the Prophet to repeat all his heresies, in order that they might be debated by the wise men of the kingdom.

John the Prophet stood up bravely, in spite of the bruises which had been inflicted upon him at the time of his arrest, and stated the items of his faith. All magic, he said, was evil; those who owned and used it were impure and ungodly, and would be condemned to the flames of Hell for all eternity. All men who exercised power over others, whether by right of birth or wealth or strength of arms, would likewise be punished for the abuse of their power. Only the meek, the virtuous and the pure in heart would be rewarded after death; they would be taken into the kingdom of Heaven, where they would dwell eternally in peace and harmony, without want or pain.

Herod's brothers in blood then stood, one by one, to ridicule the preacher. With clever sophistry and cunning logic they demonstrated the fatuity of his claim that there would be a further life beyond death for anyone save those gifted in magic, whose souls were immunized against extinction. Then they charged him with sedition, saying that his ideas were an insult to the honour and station of King Herod. Then they proceeded, each in his turn, to offer suggestions as to the particular way in which the false prophet might best be put to death.

While all this was going on, John the Prophet stood as straight as he was able, apparently quite unafraid. He was a young man, not more than twenty years of age, and very handsome. He had fine dark eyes of an unusual clarity, and neatly-shaped eyebrows. He never looked at his would-be tormentors or answered their gibes; instead, he alternated his gaze between the two women seated on either side of the Magician King who sat in judgment upon him. He looked long and hard at Herodias, and he looked longer and harder at Salome; to them and to them alone did he present the argument of his eyes.

Although it might not have been his intention, what John the Prophet's eyes said to Salome was: I am a better man than any you have ever seen before, and were you to dance with me, we might discover a sweeter rhythm than any you have ever felt before.

And although it certainly was not his intention, what John the Prophet's eyes said to Herodias was: Here is an opportunity to serve your own ends, by persuading Salome to loathe her father-husband.

* * *

When the great debate drew to its close, Herod promised to think upon the matters brought to his attention, and to deliver his verdict the next day. The purpose of this delay was to allow the rumour of what had occurred to spread to every nook and cranny of the city streets, and to take wing even beyond its walls. Thus, everyone who cared to do so might have the leisure to discuss the justice of the case and the deliciously particular cruelties of all the methods of execution which had been proposed.

During the night, however, Herodias tricked one of Salome's half-blind slave-girls into carrying a letter to her, representing it as a message from John the Prophet.

The substance of the message was this: You are the most beautiful

woman in the world. It is not permitted to me to love you, nor can I recant a single word of what I have preached. I am doomed to die for what I believe, but the hours of life which remain to me would be immeasurably enriched by one more sight of your wondrous face. My one regret is that I will never see you dance.

Herodias was careful to express these sentiments as artlessly as she could, in the cause of authenticity. She trusted to the logic of the situation to ensure that Salome, in spite of her own extraordinary artistry, would not see through the deception.

* * *

Salome was not allowed to leave her chambers unsupervised, but it was an easy matter for one of her abilities to dupe her half-blind guardians and the soldiers who stood watch over the prison where John the Prophet was held. She entered his cell without difficulty, and woke him up.

"I can save you," she said to him. "Only do as I instruct, and you will win free of the castle, the city and the nation."

"The truth dare not flee from persecution," John the Prophet told her, "else men would know it for falsehood."

"Do you prefer to die?" she asked him.

"I do," he told her. "Only by dying for his beliefs can a man hope to persuade others that they are worth dying for."

"You can say that," Salome marvelled, "even though you have looked upon my face, and found it the most beautiful in the world? Can you really refuse to love me, now that I am with you?"

"Certainly," said John the Prophet. "I am a virtuous man, and must remain so if I am to persuade others that the highest rewards of all are reserved for the virtuous."

"You will not think so highly of virtue," Salome promised, lewdly, "when you have seen me dance."

There and then, she danced for him.

She danced upon the floor of his cell, despite that it was moist with stinking excrement. The cell was narrow, with walls of filthy stone, and it was illuminated only by the light of a single tallow candle, but Salome did not need a huge space or a polished floor or a bright light in order to display her art. She was full to overflowing with enchantment, and magic radiated from her body as soon as she began to move.

She lost herself in her dance, and was carried away by the tide of its bewitchment; she was as much its captive as she intended him to be, and it held her in perfect thrall as its rhythms thundered in her eager blood.

When it was over, she said to him: "Will you refuse to love me now?"

"I cannot refuse to love you," admitted John the Prophet, not entirely unhappily. "But still I must die, for the sake of what I preach. Even though my soul has been sullied by affection for a witch, I must be a martyr to my cause. My flesh might betray my heart, but my lips cannot betray the truth."

During the hour that she danced for John the Prophet, Salome had ceased to be a child, but she was no wiser now than she had been before. She did not know the real reason why Herod was determined to kill John the Prophet, and could not tell him that the acceptance of his "truth" by the common people was what Herod most devoutly desired.

Even if she had been able to tell him, it might not have changed his mind; he was, after his own silly fashion, an extraordinarily sincere and virtuous man.

"You are a fool," Salome told him, "but that will not prevent my loving you, as you love me."

* * *

On the next day, with all his court assembled before a crowd equal to that of the the previous day, Herod pronounced judgment upon John the Prophet. He found him guilty of sedition, and announced the following plan for his execution: first, his tongue was to be cut out and he was to be castrated with shears; then, he was to be trussed from shoulder to ankle and placed breast-deep in a great urn full of oil, which would be slowly heated to boiling point; then, his head was to be struck from his neck and placed on a spike atop the city gate, so that passers-by might judge from the expression on his face whether or not he had really gone to a more pleasant place.

"Better to be boiled alive," John the Prophet said, before they cut out his tongue, "than to burn in Hell for all eternity."

Salome watched while her lover was ungently castrated, knowing that what he was sacrificing was nothing that he needed. She watched slaves wind the ropes tightly about his body, and lower him into the huge bronze urn whose broad belly was filled with cooking-oil. Only his beautiful head projected from the narrow neck. She listened to the macabre music of his attempted screams, which rose to an ecstatic pitch as the oil, warmed by a

roaring fire set beneath the oil, came gradually to its boiling-point. She watched them detach his head from his body, carefully studying the unspeakably horrid expression which agony had graven upon his features. Then she rose from her place, and went down to take the head from the man who held it; he was too astonished to refuse to part with it.

Herod was also taken by surprise, but when he saw Salome take the head of John the Prophet from the soldier he came swiftly to his feet and ordered her to return to her place.

She ignored him.

Instead of obeying, she began to dance.

* * *

Whenever Salome the enchantress danced, she enraptured all those who watched; it made no difference that thousands watched her now instead of a few. She made them instantly drunk with the sight of her; each and every one—man or woman—was captive to her art.

Her courtly attire was modest enough, though sewn from silken and golden threads, but as she whirled and cavorted across the arena, passing the head of John the Prophet from one hand to the other and back again, she shed her cloak to reveal a filmy chemise decorated with a thousand crystal shards, which glittered in the light of the morning sun like the scales of many-coloured serpents.

Her flowing movements held the whole vast crowd in thrall. No one moved once the dance had begun; only the expressions on the watchers' faces changed.

In the beginning, Herod's eyes were wide with alarm and wrath, and his mouth was wide open in protest; but as the dance continued the alarm and the wrath faded from his eyes and his lips came together in a curiously wistful smile.

In the beginning, Herodias bared her teeth as she permitted herself a mockingly triumphant laugh, and leaned forward in anticipation of satisfaction; but as the dance progressed her lips came together, pursed with anxiety, and she tried unsuccessfully to draw back.

In the beginning, the dead prophet's eyes bulged out of their sockets, bloated by the pain which he had suffered, and the bloodied stump of his tongue was visible inside his mouth; but as the dance went on the eyes softened into an expression of adoration and the mouth relaxed into a curi-

ously ironic yet loving smile.

When she leapt high into the air with her slender arms thrown wide, Salome was like a creature in flight: a lamia with frail wings, or some delicate dragon's child. As she tumbled and soared, she stirred the fires of Hell in the hearts of those who watched; she made them willing slaves of her unleashed passion.

At first, only poor dead John danced with her, but as the dance became wilder and more insistent she drew Herod from his throne and Herodias from her lesser seat, and they moved as though to join her in the paces of a tarantella, partners to one another as John the Prophet was partner to Salome.

Herod and Herodias now opened their mouths again, as though to cry out the gladness of their ecstasy, but their tongues were unkindly ripped out of their mouths and hurled—writhing like earthworms cut by a spade—to the ground.

Then the King and his former mistress reached out to one another as though to embrace in the heat of passion, but their clothes caught fire and the skin came away from their flesh as if it were no more than a kind of clothing itself, and the flesh melted from their bones.

Still they danced. Even when there was nothing left of either of them beneath the neck but a wrack of bone and sinew they danced on, avid with excitement, fervent with the furious ecstasy of Salome's magic.

Meanwhile, Salome drew the head of John the Prophet tenderly to her breast and cradled it there, protectively. She continued to dance, but her arms were no longer flung wide and she slowed in her paces for a little while.

The severed head seemed to melt into her breast and become part of her; it was lost amid the shimmer of tiny sequins. Then the dance grew wild again, and wilder and wilder . . .

In the end, all three of the dancers came together, in a riotous tangle of bleached bones and many-coloured scales, and vanished into a whirlwind from beyond the world, which carried them away.

* * *

All the people who had watched the dance were freed from the spell which had been put upon them.

The commoners went swiftly away, to spread the news of the miracle which they had witnessed. They were convinced that Herod, Herodias and Salome had all been carried away to Hell, but that John the Prophet

was in Heaven.

Herod's brothers in blood fell to fighting among themselves to determine who might take his place, and eventually settled the matter. The Magician King who came after the one who had been taken was every bit as cunning and cruel as his predecessor had been, and there was no perceptible change in the condition of the kingdom.

In time, the new king's wife bore him a daughter, whom he loved very dearly. The careful disposal of her favours helped him to extend his power over his brothers in blood.

In time, another prophet came to the kingdom, to preach to any who would condescend to hear him. This prophet, inspired by the glorious example of his predecessor, told his hearers to be humble and virtuous, to love one another, and to wait with patience for their reward in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The new king was suitably grateful for this gift of circumstance. The new prophet was eventually crucified.

* * *

Meanwhile, in Hell, Salome danced.

While the dauhter of Herod danced, in her peculiarly demonic fashion, before the courtly host of Hell, she delighted all those who watched her. She excited them almost beyond endurance with the magic of her art. Her silky skin was covered now with a million crystal shards, which glistened beneath the fiery sky like the scales of many-coloured serpents. Whenever she leapt up with her lovely arms thrown wide in rapture, she was like a creature in flight: a lamia with frail wings, or a delicate dragon's child.

When Salome the enchantress danced in Hell, she stirred the fires which breathed life in the hearts of all those who watched; she made them willing slaves of her passion. But one and one alone was privileged to dance with her, and share the burning heat of her inmost soul, and that was John the Prophet.

Once, and once only, Salome asked her lover whether he would rather have enjoyed the cool pastures of Heaven, from which he had been excluded by his love for her.

"Only the meek and virtuous and pure in heart," he told her then, "could ever believe that the flames of passion are naught but pain and punishment. Those who know the ecstasy of true enchantment could not possibly endure eternity, were they not perpetually bathed by such fire as ours."

O FOR A FIERY GLOOM AND THEE

La Belle Dame Sans Merci was kin to Jack A-Lantern: a whim o' the wisp alloyed from light and shadow, air and dew. Such contradictory beings cannot long endure; their warring elements long for separation and their fated dissolutions are rarely quiet, never without pain. How should such a being look upon a man, save with wild wild eyes?

La Belle Dame Sans Merci could not stroll upon the mead like any earthbound being for her footfall was far too light, but she had the precious power of touch which earthbound beings take overmuch for granted. She could not be seen by light of noon, but when she did appear—bathed by the baleful moon's unholiness—there was magic in her image.

Salom, the enchantress knew how to dance, and stir the fire of Hell in the hearts of those who watched, but La Belle Dame Sans Merci knew how to lie as still as still could be, and ignite the fire of Purgatory by sight alone.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci was a daughter of the faery folk, but it is not given to the faery folk to know their fathers and their mothers as humans do. It is easy for faery folk to believe that they owe their conception to the fall of the dew from their father the Sky: from the dew which never reaches mother earth but drifts upon the air as wayward mist. That, at least, is the story they tell one another; but what it might mean to them no merely human being could ever understand. Humans are cursed by the twin burdens of belief and unbelief but the faery folk are no more capable of faith than of mass; they have the gift of touch without the leaden heaviness of solidity, and they have the gift of imagination without the parsimonious degradations of accuracy.