

Above the Altar, the Turning Moon

by Julian Hall

Over Durham Cathedral, mother church of the diocese of Durham, successor to Viking-sacked Lindisfarne Priory, an early moon waxed queasily against an ice-blue sky. Within the Romanesque bulk lies the shrine of St Cuthbert, whose body, so the story goes, remains uncorrupted by the grinding millstone of passing centuries.

Sam ran towards the cathedral. Train bundled in her arms, clattering across the cobbles with maid of honour and bridesmaids in tow, she swore as the bells rang once, twice, three times. The gothic tower lowered over her, shrouded in scaffold and white plastic sheeting. A bitter wind grasped and battered the cathedral, attempting to rip open this cocoon.

Sam clutched at the oak door as she stumbled to a stop. Beneath the hellmouth of the heavy sanctuary ring stood her father.

"Late," he said, and snapped closed the lid of the gold watch he wore on special occasions. Sam opened her mouth to explain but closed it to force down an upswell of nausea. The maid of honour passed Sam the bouquet. It shed petals of purple carnation and red begonia, filling the narthex with its scent. The bridesmaids, one a daughter from her father's second marriage, the other from her mother's third, gazed at Sam with bored contempt and, wordlessly, picked up the end of her train.

Sam lowered her veil. She was encased in lace and silk, from the crown of her skull to the tips of her gloved fingers. Her nausea grew and burning chills pulsed through her limbs. Sam's father took her by the arm, and they waited in a timeless pause for the signal to enter the nave.

A glistening fanfare summoned them as the organ erupted into *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*. George had commissioned the arrangement. Sam's father marched forward, pulling his daughter with him. Sam could hear her heartbeat pealing against her temples. The candlelight swam, rainbow auraed. Perched in the triforium, one of the photographers cracked sheet after sheet of lightning down upon her. George stood at the end of the aisle. The colours of his kilt kaleidoscoped: scarlet bleeding to heliotrope, ivy green to turquoise, sunflower yellow to unrendered pork fat. The Bishop stood before the altar in golden robes that burned Sam's eyes. She faltered but her father tugged her on. Her skin felt too tight. A numbness seeped from her sternum.

She reached the pews. The guests had risen to their feet. As she passed the third row she cried out and stumbled, falling to the carpet. Her father tripped and landed on his knees. The congregation gasped and muttered, a buzzing counterpoint to the droning organ. Sam lay on her back, swaddled in her dress and veil, kicking her legs in an effort to right herself.

Her father looked on. Perspiration plastered Sam's dress to her body. The chattering faces of the gathered families had splintered into eleven thousand panes of glass,

strung against the splayed ribs of the vaulted ceiling. Sam heaved herself over. She was buried in the dress, lost amid the veil, the train, the skirts. She couldn't rise to her full height and, hunched, crawled down the aisle like a crab. Mortified, she scuttled the remaining distance, a shapeless mound reeling towards the transept.

The music stopped as Sam reached the altar. In the silence, George looked down at her, frown lines crumpling his face. He turned to the Bishop, who nodded. He reached for the veil, thousands of fingers unfurling in Sam's fractured vision. The veil came loose and tumbled to the ground. George stepped backwards. A moan guttered in his throat and a shudder of revulsion swept through the congregation. As Sam looked around in confusion, the first screams started.

She tried to speak, to utter the bridegroom's name, but her mouth would not open. she couldn't feel her lips, her teeth, her tongue. She tried to raise her hands to her face, but her arms were trapped by the dress. She struggled and the dress tore open down the front. Six segmented legs burst from the textile wreckage. It wasn't sweat that had glued the silk to her but a milky ichor. Her skin was dun chitin covered in white hair. She shook her head and two plumes bobbed. The plumes told her of sweat and fear, of rank perfumes evaporating from the women in the front row. Her mother and the mother of the groom shrank back in their pew as she turned to them.

"Mother," she tried to say, but her voice was lost in a tongueless proboscis. Her mother fainted. Something thudded against her slick back. She turned, hurt. A leatherbound prayer book struck a compound eye, bursting it and blinding her on

her left side. George hefted a bible. The audience unleashed their horror in rage, and more joined the castigation. She retreated behind the altar, but the Bishop warded her away with his crozier.

Pulling herself free of the dress, she staggered beneath the weight of a sodden cloak that was stuck to her back and spread for metres around her. The congregation swarmed between Sam and the outside world but a door in the wall of the nave stood ajar. She urged her low, cigar-shaped body towards the opening, chitinous feet clicking against the marble. More books struck her back, and she shouldered through the doorway. A staircase spiralled up and Sam clambered up the first step. She pushed her thorax over each tread with unwieldy, multiply-articulated limbs. Her abdomen bellowed, forcing her breath in and out through her sides. She emerged into biting wind at the top of the tower of Durham Cathedral.

Sam could not hear if she was pursued over the shriek of the wind. Exhausted, she collapsed onto her brown banded belly. The heavy fabric on her back caught the wind and unfurled like sails, shedding pupal liquor. Above her, eleven thousand moons danced, waiting for her wings to dry.