

Assemblages · Katherine D. Hamann

FOR WEEKS PILAO has been shelling out money to God and the saints, but they aren't doing their bit. If they don't get her out of here soon, she'll break open her offering box and take it all back. She's done so much for the Holy Host already, selling the women statues and medals and teaching them to build the Stations of the Cross out of colored toothpicks, that she's not sure they deserve her money anyway. Jesus really needs a friend with all the heathen gods out here; there are crates and crates of little god statues in the storage shed and a circle of giant statues around a cement fountain out on the construction site. Rachac and Zexlani and Maru. Earth gods, sun goddesses, fire, water, and hurricane spirits. They war at night; every morning the workers find one of the big stones on its side or cracked or crumbling and after dark there are often earth tremors.

The gods even have priests, an old witch who lives by herself out in the rocks and a shaman who has his own temple tent and wears a wig with beads in it and copper earrings. They worried Pilao at first as possible competition, but now she hardly ever thinks about them. The witch does a good business with creams and mascara and condoms, but no one buys her charms anymore; they stink and gave one woman a hideous rash. And everyone says the shaman is just an actor picked up in some bar. He's a seedy young man who stays in his tent most of the time and comes out once in a while with his wig on crooked and goes to the bar or the whores on the edge of camp. No one's ever heard him say anything, wise or foolish.

While the men are on the museum site all day Pilao considers herself in charge of the women. It takes them all morning to make breakfast over the cooking fires and clean up and get water from the well and bake bread in the clay ovens, but Pilao has them all afternoon. They meet in the canteen and she soothes them with smuggled candy and movie magazines. Pilao has been a midwife for thirty years and her brother was a hairdresser, so, after she's passed around the latest shipment of religious jewelry and wax saints and votive candleholders, she tells them stories about monstrous births and gives tips on cutting hair. Two of the young girls are pregnant by an incubus (or, cynics say, their fathers and brothers); and they come sometimes and sit apart from everyone else. When they don't come it's better because everyone can talk about them. Pilao doesn't think their babies will be antichrists because her religious magazine says the Antichrist was born three years ago in Belgium, but she's curious to see if they have claws and tails.

Still, even the chance of two devil births doesn't tempt her. She wants out of this place now. The women all complain about their clothes and the heat and the smell of the latrines and the red dust and the flies, and Pilao is bored

with these things too and is bored by the constant discussion of them. The dust has got into her throat and she has to carry around a paper cup and spit into it every few minutes. Faar, the museum director, has put all the men in loinclothes but the women have to wear long, blue cotton robes and white burlap headpieces that soak up the sweat all day and are stiff and scratchy when they put them on every morning. Pilao has heat sores and is losing her hair; she would trade her only living relative for a glass of cold beer and a front-row seat at the movies. There is only one thing left to try. She must make a novena to St. Mary of Egypt.

Faar is something like a vampire, he supposes, sealed in his air-conditioned trailer until sunset, and out exploring the site alone by starlight when his gods-fearing underlings have given themselves over to sleep. He feels a thrill at the sight of their distant campfires. Sometimes there is the sound of singing, muted by the distance. The floor of his main pavilion is up, thousands of square yards of black marble. It is still warm from the sun and he sits at the exact center of it, like a god in a black mirror. If the next earth tremor cracks this floor, Faar thinks his soul will crack.

But his architects were supposed to take the climate into account. They worry about such details and he devises ways to spend the money, all from the government except for a United Nations grant. These encamped people are not just building a museum; they are a life-sized diorama of the ancient culture he is counterfeiting here, last remnant (he will say) of the culture whose artifacts the museum will display. He has hired people from the back streets of haggard little towns. Their folklore is nothing more than movielore. They are flawed certainly, but these faults are venial. Yes, in their costumes, following their appointed tasks, from a distance, at night, they begin to convince him. He has just finished a rough draft of their ancient history. Tomorrow he will begin inventing their superstitions, their songs, their religious ceremonies, their names, their forms of gambling. The ones who catch on the fastest will stay on as a living exhibit after the museum opens. New dwellings for them must be provided as soon as Faar decides what a traditional Blanzei home looks like; in the daylight these army surplus tents dispel any suggestion of an ancient civilization and the government can't hold tourists back forever.

Faar strokes the marble floor. Red flowers in black marble pots will be beautiful here, he thinks. What is a hardy plant? He wants continual blossoms to . . . to . . . why? Red and black are basic colors, of course, black for the earth, red for fire, like red mouths . . . yes. This is a brutal landscape, why conceal it? He will say that the red on black is symbolic of the heat in a drought area and of the red fiery gaps that sometimes open in the earth. That's it. The pavilion is done in a traditional color scheme to honor the people's main god, the god of pestilence and earthquake. Faar begins to feverishly catalogue their

burial customs; above-ground burial in urns along the fault lines, use of the dry atmosphere to preserve the bodies (as in Egypt), burial without grave furniture or accouterments, etc. Soon he is mentally exhausted, but his body is tense. These workers share with the people of his imaginary culture an ability to conform their bodies to any surface. He has often watched them through the trailer windows, moving steadily through heavy tasks and then throwing themselves onto the ground to rest. The curves of their spines fit right into the hollows in the dirt. God, he envies that. Already the muscles in his thighs and buttocks are cramping. Then he looks at the stars and night clouds reflected in the marble and is awed. Without thinking, he removes his clothes and arranges them in a circle around him. He begins to chant nonsense syllables. He is filled with power.

There is a scuffling noise in the underbrush. Probably a dog from camp; nonetheless, he dresses with discomfort, a man leaving an assignation. Back in the trailer he pries open crates of artifacts. One packing case has ten skulls in it and he sets them in a row on his bookshelf. "How did you die, comrades?" he asks. He switches on a tape recorder and begins talking.

Today is Blue Hawaii Day. Not that that generates any excitement around here. Joe Vosco and the other architects are always stirred up about something and they say Faar is enthusiastic about everything, but who would know? His wife? Whatever she knew about him she took with her when she vanished several years ago (with child or with lover, depending on who tells you the story). The patrons of The Sunrise Club sit on their orange crates after work and soak up the scotch and tequila and bourbon and whiskey and never even twitch. It just runs through them like water. So the Blue Hawaiis are for me, seven, lined up on the top refrigerator shelf. Pink Lady Day, Grasshopper Day, Black Russian Day, and Frozen Daiquiri Day were unobserved by all but me. My bar follows the liturgical canon strictly as laid down by *Happy's Drinking Year—A Bartender's Guide*. It's not my fault if the customers are backsliders; the only semi-orthodox members are the architects and they never go farther than rum and coke or screwdrivers.

One thing breaks my heart. I cannot get a jukebox. The records I order all arrive; for today we have Tiny Bubbles and the Hawaiian Wedding Song by Don Ho. But the jukebox itself never comes. Somewhere between here and civilization is my jukebox, playing nothing but flashing lights to a group of farmers and their sheep.

Each dawn, after a few hours of real sleep and a day of half-sleep, I compose several pages of propaganda on the Blanzei culture, based on Faar's tape-recorded notes. His voice is that of a person dying inside a refrigerator. I add touches of my own and some classy rhetoric and send him my manuscript by messenger; then go to the bar.

“The Blanzei people were temperate in their use of alcohol. Only twice a year, at the beginning of their first month (Cumbra) and on the fifth day of their fifth month (Matu), was excessive drinking encouraged and even solicited by elaborate drinking games. The liquor present on these occasions (Salchlo) was three times higher in alcoholic content than the ordinary variety used in daily consumption. On the fifth level at the Starchralsa excavation ceremonial vessels were found which may have been used in these drinking rituals (see Fig. 3).” This copy will actually appear in Faar’s history of the Blanzei civilization and some has already turned up in scholarly journals. The newspaper and tourist bulletin version is more like this: “‘The Blanzei people liked to drink too,’ says Dr. L. N. Faar, eminent archaeologist and Director of the Museum, ‘but they were social drinkers. Only twice a year did they allow themselves to lose control and indulge in mad orgies of drinking.’” For this I receive a salary second only to those of Faar and his architects.

The rest of the day I spend in the bar by myself, until the cook and customers come in the late afternoon. The character who owns this place shows up once in a while, but I’ve poured so much money into the stock and am around so often that he’s abdicated in my favor.

When it’s quiet in here I read the only two books I’ve been able to hunt up—a mutilated Bible someone stole from a motel and a children’s encyclopedia of animals. So many pages are missing from the Bible that the stories left are apocryphal. I’ve thought about pasting in pages from the animal book but probably won’t bother, although the results would be entertaining. Anyway, most of the time I make up life stories and tell them to myself aloud. I must have done a couple hundred by now but I only remember my favorites.

1. A woman wakes up in a desert. She is tall and sand-colored and does not know anything about herself. She is naked, but under her head is a folded t-shirt that says Britha on it. So she christens herself Britha. She puts on the shirt and starts walking. Eventually she reaches a highway, is picked up by a jeep full of soldiers. They assume she is a lost whore and drop her off at a brothel near the base. Madame Clarvoy takes her in, giving her a dead girl’s room and perfume. Soon Britha is the pride of generals. When she makes love to a man, he wants to devour her, but her vocation is mixing drinks in the house bar. Markel, the bartender, takes her on as a disciple. Eventually her skill surpasses his and she makes cocktails that explode like fireworks in a customer’s head or wash through him like baby tears or play cantatas only he can hear or make him believe in God. Soldiers occupy the bar and queue up in the street outside, waiting for Britha. Only she can work the magic. While they are waiting they drink the old-fashioned combinations of

Markel, but they do not frequent the whores because they need every ounce of energy to appreciate one of Britha's concoctions. Madame Clarvoy is ecstatic because she is finally making money. The other whores hate Britha and deliberately wake her up when she is catching a few hours of sleep. None of this disturbs Britha. She is consumed with her quest for perfection. Finally she reaches the apex of skill with a vodka-based drink that brings her mind and body to exquisite balance. When she has finished drinking and left only one drop in the bottom of her glass, she strips, carries her t-shirt for a pillow, walks out into the desert and goes to sleep.

2. A young graduate student named Britha is being interviewed for a job on an archeological excavation. "Your skin is very fair," says the director, Dr. Nier, "and most of this work will be in the sun. Don't you burn easily?" Britha is silent. "I can't take anyone along who is not in perfect physical condition. You understand, I'm sure," says Dr. Nier. "I think you have a very long penis," says Britha. "I do," says Dr. Nier. He puts her interview card in the acceptance pile. She works outside with the others on the dig for several days and gets severe sunstroke. After a week in the infirmary, she begins work in Dr. Nier's office. She types his wife's notes on each day's progress in the field and types reports to the different funding groups and watches the professor's three children. The children act like child ghosts. They never make noise or smear peanut butter on her papers. Britha is slightly afraid of them. At night the professor takes Britha on walks and tells her stories about the people whose city they are digging up. Often they make love on the site, squeezed in among potsherds and partial skeletons. Britha grows fond of the touch of cold bone.

One morning she hears that a well has been uncovered. It takes months to excavate and is abandoned when the walls start to collapse. On the last night of the dig, Dr. Nier gives his wife and children a thorough tour of the city. They come at last to the well where Britha is waiting. At a signal from the professor, Britha pushes the wife over the edge. Nier kisses each child and hands it to Britha to toss in. The wife screams a few times as Nier and Britha drop the first stones, but the children never make a sound.

3. "All right," says Britha. "I've had enough of this messing around. Did any of you look through this Christmas catalogue? Forty-two pages of biographies and how-to-care-for-your-plant books. Forty-two pages! And only three pages of novels, half of which are

reprints. We have our work cut out for us. Today we're hitting the big one."

The gang looks nervous. "Not the National Library?" asks Stash, their microfilm expert.

"Yes, the National Library," snaps Britha. "Did you think we were going to spend the rest of our lives holding up rummage sales and Christian bookstores?"

No one says anything. Britha gives some orders and they move quickly. Fifteen will go and five will stay behind. "Get back downstairs now," she says to the five. "We want this to look like a normal business day." When the others leave their hideout in disguises, the bindery on the first floor is in full swing. Britha stops a moment to catch a fragrant whiff of glue, as if she knows it will be the last time.

They approach the library in separate vans. Britha browses in the political science section waiting for everyone to show. As an ex-political speech writer this is her department and in a very few minutes she has estimated how many sticks it will take to blow the whole collection. She strolls casually through the first and second floors making sure everyone is at the right station. "I think reference is more than you can handle alone," she tells one person. "I'm putting Stash in your section." At fiction she pauses. "We'll never liberate it all," says Ransa, her second in command, "but I think we can save most of these cases near the elevators." "Not good enough," says Britha. "We've got to get it all or our point will never be made. We'll have to use the librarians."

In a few minutes closing time is announced. When most of the outsiders have left, the gang moves in. Britha, dressed as a nun, hands the librarian a copy of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. In the computer card pocket is a note, "Keep calm and do what we say and nobody will get hurt." The librarian gasps, "What do you want? Are you one of them?" "That's it, sister," says Britha in a low voice. "We're Illusionists and we intend to blow your non-fiction sky-high." Before long the doors are all sealed and the librarians and a few stray readers have been mobilized. Ransa and Britha stand over them with machine guns, pulled out from under their habits, and watch them move shelves of novels and collections of poems and plays and deposit them in the elevators. As soon as they've planted sticks of dynamite and small bombs in the rest of the library, the other members of the gang help. The vans are quickly loaded and most of the shelves in Ransa's section are emptied; the prisoners are released and told to clear the area. The vans take off.

Britha checks the building for stray readers or library workers. Before she can set off a single timing device she is jumped and disarmed. Police close in.

“Britha Burgoyne, head of the Illusionists?”

“Yeah yeah.”

“I’ve been looking a long time for you. It’ll be easier if you talk.”

“I’ll never rat on my friends.”

They subject her to mental torture, piping into her cell voices reading physics textbooks, sociology dissertations, car manuals, and cookbooks. Slips of paper like cookie fortunes are glued to her spoons and tea bags and the bottoms of plates: “Imagination doesn’t count,” and “Have you hugged your slide rule today?” One morning her pillow even has a bumper sticker on it: “Keypunch operators touch the right buttons.” She doesn’t crack. Finally, they give up on her and she is tried and gets ninety years in the tightest security prison, where she is happy and forms a book club. She hears from her friends but tells them not to rescue her.

Evening conversation at The Sunrise Club: grunts by way of greeting, not possible to transcribe. “You see the dead dog out there?” “Yeah. He’s a stiff one all right.” “Think the worms got him?” “Worms? You mean the flies. No worms in this dustbowl.” “Well, the flies. Think they got him?” They both drink, having given me their orders without words. “Nah. Probably still a lot of meat on those bones. You going to eat it?” “My sister cooks fine dog with onions and pepper.” “She skins them too?” “Sure she skins them. You don’t eat the hair.” “I know. But my wife, she’d never skin a dog.” “My sister has a good knife.” “Well, let’s get that dog before someone else. If I help carry it, I get some stew?” “Sure.” They pay and leave, a couple of giant depraved babies with their loincloths and hammers. Faar has the workmen carry around their sledgehammers and chisels and shovels and anything else that could be called “traditional” since one of our press releases says, “The Blanzei workmen are using their traditional tools to construct this masterwork of architectural design. These people have a great kinship with nature and their own structures blend harmoniously with the environment.” The men at the next table are discussing the inroads of lice.

The screenless door bangs and the camp messenger boy comes in with my daily tapes from Faar and a basket for the cook. “Ah, the lizards at last,” says the cook. “Six tables have asked for them already.” He hustles over to the grill and starts chopping.

“You want something for cramps?” says the child. At six years old he looks like a tiny drag queen with his sere face and frosted curls. “Out of here,” I

say. But he walks slowly enough to catch coins and cigarettes from some of the men.

After dark, flying insect density increases about fifty percent inside The Sunrise Club and I start thinking about moving everyone to the outside tables. "Hah," says Faar. I am surprised to see him in here but offer him a drink. "Why are you following me, Britha?" he asks.

When he's hungry, the women stick out their nipples and Burk picks and feeds. It's a game. Now he knows that only a few of them have milk, but he still likes to feel them all first. The men give him gum and trinkets from the folds of their loincloths and sometimes little slugs of whiskey.

There are only a few other kids on the site and they play in the dust with rocks and pieces of wood broken off storm fences.

Burk goes everywhere and no one stops him. He tries to be inside when it's hottest, so he ends up in the canteen most afternoons like today. His grandmother, Pilao, is fixing his hair to look like the hair of a girl in a picture. She does this a lot and he thinks it's nice because she washes his hair first. She even puts in gold plastic barrettes or plaid bows. Kids laugh but *Burk* has no lice.

"The secret to this bouffant is the backcombing," says Pilao. "You see, ladies, just a gentle teasing here gives all the body you could ask for. Back home I was on the altar committee and we gave Our Lady a hairstyle just like this. It looked so sweet with a little blue ribbon right here. I wanted to put in a touch of frost, but Father thought it would make her look too old."

"Our Virgin had painted hair. But we did some fabulous things with her robes. You getting something from the machine, Rufin? Oh, get me a soda, will you? I could just die for a soda right now," says a woman.

"Oh, wait up," says another woman, "I've just got to have something cold."

"Now, the final touch is the spray. Don't put on too much or you have a problem with stickiness," says Pilao.

"What about flies? Sometimes I wake up in the morning and there's a million flies stuck to my head," someone says.

"Let me see the flies," says Burk.

His grandmother shuts him up. She has a lot to say about spray and she's all done with his hair, so Burk heads for Dr. Faar's place. On the way he checks out his lizard traps. All empty and unsprung. But he finds a couple of cockroaches running around the dump and puts them in a box under his sleeping bag. Later he wants to try some magic with them.

He goes by the tent where one of the pregnant girls lives and peeks in. He has never seen her move anything but her eyes. Even those are closed now. He crawls in and touches her belly. She wakes up. "Don't be mad," says Burk, "I was feeling the baby's head. Pilao says he has two heads or maybe three feet." He squeezes her breasts. "They're big now. Can you give me milk?"

She pushes him away and points to the doorflap. "Can't you talk?" he asks. "I don't want to," she says, closing her eyes. He pinches her and goes away. He wishes she would feed him because she is much softer and rounder than the others; he would like to bite her very hard.

Burk doesn't have to knock at Dr. Faar's; he just walks in. "Ah, there you are, baby androgyne," says Dr. Faar. "Keep still for a few minutes and I'll have something for you." He puts Burk on top of a high crate with a piece of moldy cake and a stack of *National Geographics*. Burk eats around the mold. He rips out some pictures of a volcano erupting and children feeding deer in Japan and hides them in his clothes.

"You're a complete failure as a child, Burk, but just drop your sophistication for now. Pretend you're a Blanzei child, listening to his father tell this story," says Dr. Faar.

"Oh, okay,"

"Many many years ago the world was a strange place. People lived under the ground in caves and gods walked around on the surface."

"I hate God stories," says Burk.

"Hush up now. Blanzei children never interrupt their elders. Anyway, gods lived on the surface of the earth and the people hid underground . . ."

The story goes on for a long time. Burk doesn't listen but it's cool in here and not too many flies. Dr. Faar waves his hands a lot and keeps putting one on Burk's knee, but Burk doesn't think he really sees him. He is talking to himself, thinks Burk.

"And so gods and men were finally in their places," says Dr. Faar. "Now doesn't that sound just like a story your grandmother might tell you?"

"No. She says all about the saints and how they died and about Mary when she was a little girl and how she got the sheep and the birds to talk."

"Bloody little heathen. Go over to the canteen and see if my mail's in, will you?"

Two kids follow Burk. He throws rocks at them but they won't turn away. They just duck. The mailman has candy for Burk but gives some of it to the other two kids. "Who are your friends?" he asks. "Just kids," says Burk.

They follow him back to Dr. Faar's, teasing about the way Burk keeps dropping packages. Dr. Faar lets only Burk in but the others stay talking right outside. Burk waits until they go away, then he takes the secret path to the old woman's tent in the rocks. It is getting dark now; he walks very fast because he's scared of snakes.

The woman is lying on a cot reading an old newspaper. "You didn't bring my mail, girl," she says. She thinks Burk is a girl. "I forgot," says Burk, in a squeaky voice. "But look what I got!" He gives her the *National Geographic* pictures and she likes the volcano ones.

"These make good medicine labels," she says, "but I wish you got the mail.

That Ardis' face cream should have come today and she'll be asking. I'll have to tell her I'm still looking for one of the herbs in it."

"I got two cockroaches today," says Burk.

"That's nice."

"For the death spell, you know. You said you'd show me."

"Oh, I guess I did." She tells Burk about nine knots and dog piss and cockroach legs and nights without moon and shoes and holes in the ground. He takes it all in. Tomorrow night when everyone in his tent is asleep, he will begin. Soon all the kids will die.

Her grandson dashes into her tent in the middle of her evening prayers. "God will not be happy about this," says Pilao.

"There was a big fight with knives and hammers," Burk tells her.

"Where?"

"Down by the shed. Come see. Two of them look like deaders for sure." He runs out again.

Pilao follows, then stops and gathers a few things. There is only one doctor and he's never had more than one patient at a time before; her medical skill may be needed or she may get a chance to give last rites. She starts to leave again, then hesitates; this whole thing could be the result of her devotions. She unearths a box of money and empties her offering box too, putting it all into a leather bag around her neck.

The whole camp is crowded around the injured men and their families, except Faar who is impossible to find. The wounds are gory and everyone is shoving to see. Pilao kicks and scratches her way to the doctor's side and offers her help. Soon she has a couple of wives boiling rags and making bandages. One man seems to be barely alive and another is crushed and bleeding severely; a third man has a broken arm and a fourth has some deep cuts. The doctor gives them all shots of morphine and makes tourniquets but is afraid to tangle with broken bones or take any stitches; he just can't perform in front of so many people. "Healing is a personal affair," he says. While he argues with Joe Vosco, the head architect, and the wives and friends of the wounded, Pilao sprinkles holy water over the two helpless men (the other two won't allow it) and gulps some of it down herself because she's thirsty. One of the worst injured comes to and starts screaming. Pilao puts a rag over his mouth to calm him but he chokes so she decides she'd better take it off.

Joe Vosco and the other architects have jeeps and they decide to drive the men to the nearest hospital, several hundred miles away, as Pilao had hoped they would. Everyone continues to mill around and get in the way and a woman's foot is run over by a jeep and she has to come along too. One of the prostitutes is a trained nurse who has been trying to squeeze through the crowd. The doctor gets into a jeep with the dying man and his wife and orders the

nurse into another jeep with the other worst victim and his wife, who looks at the nurse's green silk dress and frowns. Pilao, who has been exulting at the thought of a trip to the city, is suddenly panic-stricken. She's being left behind. The third jeep is filling up with the two men who can still move about and their relatives. Pilao runs to the fourth jeep, hoping still to make her escape. The woman with the broken foot is in it yelling and crying. "Let me comfort you my child," says Pilao. "Out of the way," says the woman's brother as he climbs in. "I'm going with you," says Pilao. "I might be able to help." "No room." "But I can sit in front." "No room. My mother's coming." The older woman appears a minute later and the last jeep drives away.

Pilao is too furious to move. She feels her head seething and steaming like an old kettle. Then she spits a few times and laughs. The laugh settles into a quiet smile. They have left on a three hundred mile trip through the desert and no one has thought of extra gas or water.

No gaps are left in the circle of gods. This very day has seen the raising of Faar's newest acquisition and he is content. The new statue is so old and smooth that its face exudes a quiet affability. This is a mild god, thinks Faar, perhaps a peacemaking god? He doesn't remember the names of any of the statues or their original functions. That sort of detail only clutters the mind, he thinks. Now that he has freed himself from the stodginess of the scientific method, all of the artifacts and archaeological data that pour in daily from all over the country can be fit into a pattern that is lovely and sensible.

He walks around the circle, stopping to study each statue and consider its potential. He needed this last god to complete his pantheon and now he can write the entire Blanzei cosmology. One huge boulder with a lumpy face and body will be the fertility goddess, Faar decides. He strikes a match on her stomach and lights a cigarette.

There must be more Blanzei children; he must try again to reproduce with a young Blanzei woman. His first two experiments in that line promise success, but he shouldn't let that make him complacent. He hopes that there will soon be a birth, murder, or death so he can test the Blanzei customs he has created for these eventualities. It depresses him that all the men involved in the fight were hauled off to the city before he could experiment with the Blanzei system of justice.

Otherwise, things are working splendidly and the transplanted culture is taking hold. He likes to walk around the camp late at night and count his sleeping people as a shepherd his sheep. They have provided all by themselves the outcasts, the drunks, the sick, the old, and the unsightly of a real society. Sometimes he leans over to catch the smell of a workman's breath or touch the stretchmarks of an old woman. But tonight he is counting his inanimate flock.

A noise in the underbrush. He's heard this noise night after night and dives toward it with his flashlight switched on. It is not a dog or a spirit, merely Burk. "You never sleep," Faar says. "What are you guarding, Cerberus? Or are you a Fury?"

"Do you really talk to the gods?" asks Burk. "Pilao says you are an idol-kisser."

"Ha. The gods talk to me, my friend; the idols kiss me."

Faar puts Burk in the dry fountain at the center of the circle and talks to him, not noticing that his audience has curled up and gone to sleep. Eventually, he does notice and is so tired that he climbs in next to Burk and rests his head on the child's stomach. A slight earth tremor wakes him up just after dawn but nothing is harmed.

They still need me. Soldiers are rougher and louder but they drink more than the construction workers ever did. And now that Faar and his crew have cleared out, I have the whole day to myself and time to compose new life stories instead of an exhaustive history of the bastardly Blanzei. New workmen (ex-revolutionaries?) will be coming to put up more barracks on the other side of the museum; Faar's building is okay for a temporary headquarters, but only the first floor is completed and they say the walls keep cracking in odd places. By next month I hope to have the owner of this dump convinced to move it into a deserted garage over by the new site. With a little money, I could create a splendid atmosphere; the car lift turned into a slowly-moving piano bar, the pumps cleaned out and filled with scotch and bourbon, and those little map racks holding napkins and menus. This new government is a lot more realistic than the last one, so I imagine people will appreciate some whimsy. In fact, I would appreciate the change of decor most of all. Since the day I received my last check I've been in a stupor and no matter how hard I try to vary them, my stories all sound like this one:

4. A young widow works at a piano bar. She wears black satin suits with her name, Britha, embroidered on the lapels in rhinestones. As she is playing old show tunes, she thinks sadly of her days on the concert circuit and an occasional tear just adds a little glitter to her frosted makeup. She ignores rude "play it again" jokes and drunken pinches because she knows that the patrons don't really see her through their midnight blue cocktail glasses. Then, one night, a young soldier sits down at the bar. He has one arm and seems self-conscious about it, as if he's newly disabled. Britha feels sorry for him and asks him what he'd like to hear. "Don't suppose you know any Rachmaninoff," he says. She plays Rachmaninoff. Soon they are standing in a wedding-chapel, reciting their vows.

They are both very poor but the soldier insists that Britha quit her degrading job and live at home like a civilized wife. They find cheap rooms in an abandoned museum and move in right away. Their neighbors are mummies.