

The Disinterred
by Mark W. Tiedemann

Thomas Auerbach stepped unsteadily from the carriage and waited for the ghost to follow him. After a few moments, he turned around and saw only an empty seat where for the entire ride from the landing at Newburgh on the Hudson the specter of his dead son had kept him silent company. Thomas blinked, unsure whether he felt relief or disappointment.

"Will that be all, sir?"

Thomas looked up at the coachman. "Yes, I ... forgive me." He fumbled in his waistcoat for coins and handed them uninspected to the driver. "Thank you." The man touched a finger to his aging tricorne and flicked the reins. The pair of sweat-sleeked horses broke into a lazy canter. Dust billowed, obscuring the coach as it rumbled down the road.

Thomas looked up at the house. Heavily whitewashed, it seemed to glow in the morning glare. The window shutters were a fading spring green, but it was otherwise plain.

Sweat traced a ticklish path down his face and he swallowed around the lump in his throat. He wanted a drink from the pocket flask in his coat. Instead, giving the road a last quick look for his son, he went to the front door. He raised his cane to rap when it opened.

A tall woman with small, dark eyes regarded him critically.

"Yes?" she said sharply. "You here for the diggin'?"

"Mrs. Masten?"

She dipped her head once, economically. Flour dusted her dark dress in patches. Her shoulders were broad and the one hand Thomas could see, pressed against the frame, was veined and thick-fingered, powerful.

"I've come looking for someone," Thomas said. "I've been told I might find her here."

"We've no guests, no lodgers—"

"I meant at Mr. Peale's enterprise."

Her eyebrows shifted skeptically.

"I'm an attorney-at-law with the firm representing Mr. Peale ..." The lie troubled Thomas; he valued truth above all.

Skepticism turned now to suspicion.

"The truth is," Thomas continued, relieved, "I was told my wife would be there."

"Are you thirsty? It's a long walk to the marsh."

She led him down a long central hallway. The hardwood floor creaked like new leather. The air smelled of smoke and linseed and felt oppressive.

Mrs. Masten took him out the back door, onto a small porch. The kitchen shed stood several yards away, separated from the main house by a patch of grassless grey dirt. A hogshead of water stood at the left end of the porch, near a stone well. Beyond that, Thomas saw a large barn, sided by a fenced area in which chickens meandered. He could smell alfalfa-tinged dung.

"Here," Mrs. Masten raised the lid on the hogshead and offered him a tin cup from a hook on the porch.

"Thank you." Thomas dipped a cupful of cold water. It tasted faintly of iron.

"Thank you very much. It's ungodly hot for this time of year."

"Hasn't rained since April. Will soon." She nodded westward. Thomas looked toward a ridge in the distance, but the sky above was clear. "You say you're lookin' for your wife?"

Self-consciously, Thomas pulled a letter from within his coat. "This may explain it more clearly than I," he said, offering it to her.

She shook her head. "I don't have any letters."

"Oh. Well, then." Thomas drained the cup and returned it to the hook. He fumbled open the sheet of paper. "It's, uh, from my sister in Philadelphia.. She wrote to tell me she had heard from my wife last year—"

"Last year? She's been gone a time."

"Sometimes it seems longer ..." Thomas caught a movement at the edge of his

vision and looked across at the barn. It seemed someone moved within the shadows just inside. "Sometimes it seems like no more than a month." He shook his head and looked down at the letter. "But it's been two years." When Mrs. Masten said nothing, he cleared his throat and read. "'My Dear Brother Thomas, it is with some reluctance that I write you about a matter which has caused you suffering and, before it is seen to a conclusion, will continue to pain you. Last May, soon after receiving the news of your Abigail's abrupt disappearance, a group of pilgrims passed through the city on its way south to the Kentuckys. At the time I made no association between your troubles and this event, but they have come north again and I chanced to discover your Abigail among them. Upon inquiring, I learned that it was a band of Methodists under the Reverend Abner Bennington, who is said to be one of Bishop Asbury's first converts in New York. We had all heard news of a great gathering in Kentucky of such folk in a place called Cane Ridge, whence I must assume your Abigail is returning north. I approached her, but she did not seem to know me, so caught by the fever of camp meeting religiosity was she, though she blessed me and talked of continuing on with Reverend Bennington as far as Maine. I write you to let you know with whom she is traveling, and give you some hope of finding her again, though I lost track of her after the band left Philadelphia in the wake of the riotous meeting which they held-' And so on. You see the problem."

"How did you come to figure that she was here?"

"I made my own inquiries among friends more familiar with the rustic faiths. Reverend Bennington's group isn't very difficult to find. I learned last week that he was coming here, to your farm, to attend Mr. Peale's ... whatever it is Mr. Peale is doing on your property. I came by ferry up the Hudson from New York."

He folded the letter and tucked it back inside his coat. His pulse raced; he had yet to read the letter calmly.

"Methodists," Mrs. Masten said, looking away. "Well, there's a group of them out there. I wouldn't have them in my house. We're Deists ourselves." She squinted at him. "Honestly, though, I can't see why your Mr. Peale is diggin' out there."

"I understood he was undertaking a scientific investigation."

"Scientific?"

"A search for truth."

"Hm. As if he could find it at the bottom of a marsh." She gestured west.

"Over there. Hard to miss the trail now, all the coaches and wagons and boots gone up there these last weeks."

She closed the lid on the water barrel and went inside her house. After a few minutes, Thomas realized that he had been given permission to go see for himself.

He stepped out of the shade of the small yard onto the beaten dirt expanse of the barnyard. He looked toward the ridge Mrs. Masten had indicated. As she had said, tracks etched a wide road from the end of the farm proper all the way to the top of the rise.

Thomas came abreast the entrance to the granary and stopped. A small boy stood just within, watching him. Thomas's ears began to ring faintly and he felt warm and cool at the same time. Slowly, he approached.

"Richard ..." he whispered.

The boy gestured for him to follow and walked back into the granary.

A canvas-covered shape lay on the floor. Sweat ran into Thomas's eyes. He wiped at his face and stepped to the edge of the sheet. He prodded the shape with his cane, the tip finding a hard surface. He knelt and pulled the canvas back.

Two enormous bones lay side by side, crusted with dried mud.

"My God," he breathed.

"They're digging up the rest in the marsh."

Thomas looked up. Standing on the opposite side of the bones, the young boy watched him, eyes large and wetly intent.

"So you haven't left me," Thomas said. "I thought maybe ..."

"They shouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Dig it up." Richard frowned. "It's not right to dig things up after they're dead."

Thomas sat down. Richard rarely spoke to him. Usually, the ghost chose to sit in the same room, watching him or playing with unseen toys on the floor. Most times Richard did not even seem to hear Thomas's words or his crying. In fact, for the first several months, since Richard's first appearance after Abigail's sudden departure, that had been the pattern: the specter came, stayed for a time, then, when Thomas slept or distracted himself or simply left the house, it would be gone. Nothing had prompted a response—shouting, weeping, long arguments, reasonable discourse—until Thomas had begun rummaging through Abigail's bureau. He did not know what he had expected to find—he had been very drunk—but when he found a packet of letters and began to clumsily unwrap it, Richard had appeared beside him, quite suddenly, and said very clearly, "You shouldn't do that."

Thereafter, Richard's visitations changed. The ghost began to notice him, sometimes even exchanged a few sentences. Not every time, but more frequently lately.

Thomas believed he had gone mad. He had prided himself on his rationality, his freedom from the superstitions of so much of the world. He had seen himself as a member in good standing of the Enlightenment, one with the Philosophes, like President Jefferson. Specters and demons were on the level of popery and discredited ignorance. What could he say now that the ghost of his only child continued to visit him and would not vanish in the light of reasoned argument that he should not, could not exist.

He had continued his law practice, spoke no word of the visitation to his friends, and kept to his house and the comfort of his scotch at night, waiting for the company of his dead child.

When he had left New York for Newburgh, Richard accompanied him, the first time the ghost had ever left the house.

"Why are you here?" Thomas asked now. "You've never come with me before." Richard shrugged, then walked out of the granary, into the bright summer light.

Thomas replaced the canvas over the bones and hurried after.

Richard was gone.

Thomas shrugged out of his coat as he reached the crest. A breeze cooled him briefly. Insects leapt and swirled above the grasses that twitched in the irregular winds, their wings catching the sunlight, gold and silver.

In the distance, he saw clusters of trees surrounding a broad open area. The clusters grew closer together toward the northwest until, even further away, they seemed to close up and become regular forest. Smoke rose from various points among the oaks, elms, and maples. Thomas estimated a good mile to a mile-and-a-half walk.

Reaching the first clump of trees, Thomas heard the sounds of voices and hammering. To his left a stream flowed into the thickets of thigh-high grasses, thistles, and ivy. Thomas followed it through a line of elms.

He emerged into a camp ground. Tents of various pale colors billowed in the breeze and people moved in thick clots among them. The air was noticeably cooler here and Thomas slipped on his coat. A thick bacon aroma enveloped him, cut occasionally by a faint fetid odor from the marsh beyond. The clamor of speech, of horses complaining, of creaking and hammering, all rolled into a seamless murmur. It reminded Thomas of New York harbor, the docks, with its improbable mix of people—workmen in homespun, men in elegant suits and ladies in fine dresses, soldiers, backwoodsmen—and the constant moil of activity. Beneath one large tent, tables held maps and diagrams over which men with compasses and angles and squares bent. Smoke poured through a hole cut above cookfires in another. The canvas snapped in the wind. Tarps covered stacks of lumber. Light faded the further in he went, in proportion, it seemed, to the

sound of wood groaning under weight and a chorus joined in hymn. The stench of the bog overwhelmed all other odors as he came through the last stand of dogwood. He stopped at the edge of a depression and stared up at a giant wooden waterwheel that rose up out of the pit.

Wide leather buckets scooped out sludge and haled it high up to be emptied into a sluice that carried the liquid thickly through another copse of trees, out of sight. Ladders extended down into the excavation and Thomas saw men, moving slowly, with shovels and picks and more buckets, through the black water and slime.

A crane on the far rim was lifting a leather sling filled with mudcaked objects that might have been logs. Or bones.

Beyond the crane stood another array of tents. Thomas circled the edge of the pit. Smoke drifted from campfires, filling the woods around the edges of the marsh with a thick haze. Near where the contents of the crane were being laid out on the ground, a man in shirtsleeves and waistcoat stood at the center of several other well-dressed men, lecturing, his arms gesturing like a magician over the sodden pieces.

Thomas hesitated, unsure where to go next. The singing he had heard earlier had ended and the activity around him made no immediate sense.

A man climbed up a ladder from the pit. His boots were caked with mud and his pants wet to the knees. He gave a backward glance across to the giant wheel, then started walking in Thomas's direction.

"Excuse me, sir," Thomas said. "Who ... who's in charge here?"

The man frowned, his long face creasing. "I didn't think no one didn't know." He aimed a thick, calloused finger at the tent just by the crane. Workmen were now carrying the newly disinterred pieces from the ground to a table beneath the canvas. The man in shirtsleeves led his group after them. "That be Mr. Peale. This is his doin'."

"Charles Peale?" Thomas asked to be certain. His firm represented Peale, but Thomas had never met the man.

"You know him, then?"

"I know of him. I've been to his museum in Philadelphia." Thomas pointed at the wheel with his cane. "What is he doing?"

"He's drainin' my bog, what he's doin'. Diggin' up bones."

"You're Mr. Masten?"

"Aye." He nodded and gave the excavation a long, almost proud look. "Man's got pockets, I'll say that. He wanted the bones I found and the right to dig up the rest of the beast. I figured it to be a good bargain, havin' someone pay me to drain a marsh. I never expected this--this--" He shook his head. "I'll tell you, sir, I won't be unhappy when it's done and they leave."

"Perhaps you can help me. I'm not here about Mr. Peale's excavation. I'm looking for someone. Is there a group of Methodists here--?"

Mr. Masten hacked loudly and spit an enormous gob. "Devil's work, this here, you ask me. I never thought I'd say somethin' like that, but some of what they've pulled out of the muck ..." He blinked at Thomas. "Methodists? Back behind there," he said, pointing again toward Peale's tent. "Them especially I won't mind seein' gone. They been singin' and prayin' since they got here, tellin' anyone who listens that what's happenin' here is evil. What does that make me, then? I allowed Mr. Peale to do this. Am I evil, then?" He grunted, spun around, and strode off.

A shadow passed over the site. Thomas looked up at a cloud bank; the mass was heavy and dark grey. He did not care for the idea of being caught here in a downpour, but it would be better than being caught halfway back to the Masten house.

Thomas followed a hardpacked path around the edge of the pit. Beneath the creaking of the great wheel, he now heard the wet sucking of men pulling their legs from mud, the slosh of water against dirt, the dull roar and gentle patter of water as the big buckets troweled up slime and ooze and lifted it, dripping, out of the pit. Voices mingled in, words muffled in the jumble of sounds, grumbling and shouts and occasional laughter.

As he neared the main tent, Thomas saw broad canvas sheets stretched across the ground, caked in drying mud from the huge fragments laid on them. He recognized the pieces as kindred to those huge bones he had seen in the Masten granary. Besides roughly straight sections, there were curved shard like ribs and short, truncated segments, like vertebrae. He studied them, trying to sort them into a shape in his mind. He knelt and reached for one small fragment.

"If you please!"

Thomas stood, startled. A stout man in shirtsleeves and a waistcoat came toward him, his face slightly flushed. A fine brown crust coated his wrists and knuckles, and dirt speckled his boots. His hair was thickly streaked with grey and beginning to recede from a high forehead.

"I am Charles Willson Peale," he declared, stopping barely an arm's length from Thomas. "This is my excavation, those are my discoveries, and you are unknown to me, sir."

"Mr. Peale of Philadelphia?"

"The same."

"I've heard of you, sir. I've seen your paintings."

Peale's demeanor changed immediately. A slight, indulgent smile tugged his wide mouth and one eyebrow twitched, amused.

"Indeed."

"Yes, a portrait you did for Mrs. Bascombe."

"Ah, yes! I remember it quite well."

"Your pardon, sir, I didn't mean to trespass. I am Thomas Auerbach."

Peale's eyes narrowed. "Auerbach. I don't know the name. Are you attached to a university?"

"No, sir, I'm a lawyer."

"A lawyer! Sent by whom? I assure you, sir, my claim here is perfectly legal. I have a good contract with Mr. Masten—"

Thomas held up his hands. "Please, sir, you understand me too quickly. I'm not here about, uh ..." he waved a hand at the bones, "this. I'm here on an entirely personal matter."

"Personal."

"Yes, sir. I'm ..." He looked past Peale and noticed several people watching. Thomas leaned closer to Peale and said quietly, "I'm looking for my wife."

"Your—" Peale caught himself and looked around. Lowering his voice to match Thomas's, he said, "Your wife, sir? Aside from a few ladies who have accompanied the curious, there are no women here. None attached to my enterprise, I assure you."

"She's not. Attached to your enterprise, that is. She's with a group of Methodists."

Peale's face twisted. "Oh! Those damned fools!" He flung an arm out impatiently. "They're over there, huddling together like a company of terrified children, praying! All day and half the night, praying! They came here and began preaching at my workers, preaching at my friends, my family, my admirers! I'm digging up Satan, they say, unearthing the Beast of the last days! Pah!" He lowered his voice again. "Frankly, sir, if you have any influence with them at all I would be willing to compensate you if you could get them to leave. They're a constant irritant and disruptive. I had to increase my day wages to keep some of my better men. They kept listening to that old firebreather and fearing the worst."

"I just came for my wife ..."

"Of course, of course. Well, even if you lessen their number by one, I'd be grateful. Now, please excuse me."

Peale marched back to his audience. As Thomas watched, earthen hands emerged from the ground at Peale's feet, groping for his ankles. Peale did not seem to notice.

Thomas squeezed shut his eyes and turned away. When he opened them again he saw torsos half-emerged from the ground, pocked skin eaten through, faces stretched in fear, and gradually sinking back into the solid dirt. In the middle of the field of trapped corpses, Richard stood, hands clasped behind

his back, staring at Thomas.

"It's only a vision," he hissed. "A dream ..."

Richard shook his small head and pointed at the wheel.

As Thomas looked up at it he saw the darkening sky beyond and a flash of distant lightning. He smelled rain on the air now. But the wheel reclaimed his attention with its slow, inexorable motion and its noise. The entire structure glistened wetly.

"Faster!" someone shouted. "Faster! As much as we can afore it breaks!"

Thomas searched for the speaker but he stopped when he saw inside the wheel. The inner circumference had been planked over and on the bottom a gang of boys trotted doggedly, turning the entire structure. More boys rested a short distance away, some clearly exhausted.

"Things are changing."

Richard stood beside him now, gazing at the wheel.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked.

"They shouldn't do this."

"Sir!" a man shouted. "We found somethin' big!"

Men scrambled suddenly from beneath tents to the edge of the pit, across the ephemeral bodies only Thomas could see. He was shoved aside. Peale pushed through them to the edge.

"Careful!" Peale bellowed. "Get some buckets over there, let them wash it off! We need another sling!"

Thomas walked away, legs trembling, in the direction of the dogwoods lining the edge of the marsh. After several paces he risked a backward glance. The struggling dead were gone and he saw no sign of his son.

He reached the trees and heard singing again. He picked his way through the grasses and underbrush and emerged into a small clearing. To the left stood a row of wagons. Thomas heard the chuff and whinny of horses nearby. At the far end of the wagons, tripods stood supporting cookpots and the aroma of stew cut the air.

The group of pilgrims gathered before one wagon that had been pulled up to serve as a stage. A man stood in its bed, facing his audience, arms raised, a psalter clasped in his right hand. He was tall and thin, dirty grey hair curling in long trails to his shoulders and mingling with an unruly tuft of beard. Though his mouth moved, Thomas could not make out his words.

"Bennington ..." Thomas murmured.

The congregation pressed together tightly. They moved in small twitches and jerks, a few swaying slightly, heads bobbing. A number of them raised their arms toward Bennington.

Thomas skirted the edge of the gathering, trying to glimpse his wife among the rapt faces. But for the solid flesh they could have been more of the dead struggling up from the ground. Thomas felt the hairs on his neck stir; the humid air pressed close. He wanted to call his wife's name, but they seemed sealed together into a privacy he could not bring himself to disturb.

"If ye've come to pray ye should be humble!"

Bennington glared at him from the wagon.

"I've come to find my wife," Thomas blurted out. A few heads turned in his direction. The seal broken, he called, "Abigail!"

Heads swiveled, frowning, as if searching for the person named to blame her for Thomas's intrusion. One face remained motionless, eyes fixed on him. For a moment he did not recognize her—she had lost weight and her skin was browned from sun.

"Abigail!" he called and waded into the crowd.

He stepped on feet, kicked a few knees; hands groped at him but he shoved through, his cane raised. Abigail turned away just as he reached her. He caught her arm before she could flee.

"Abigail!"

"Sir!" Bennington snapped. "Sister Abigail is one of this congregation and has our sanction!"

"Abigail, sir, is my wife, and I caution you not to interfere. There are laws,

sir, that even you may not disregard."

"Thomas, please," Abigail said quietly. She looked frightened and anxious. Please what? he wanted to ask. Instead, angry and silent, he led her from the crowd.

When they reached the trees he looked back. She walked with her head bowed, as if ashamed. No one followed them. He went a few yards further, till he could not longer see the congregation, then drew her into an awkward embrace. He held her for a time, eyes shut, waiting, hoping that she would speak first, offer an explanation or apology or something that would take from him the responsibility for what might happen next.

But she said nothing, only stood passively in his arms. After a time, he stepped back.

"I—" he said, "—come home, Abigail. I've come to bring you home."

"I belong here."

"For God's sake, why?"

She nodded. "That. God's sake."

"You can find God anywhere, you don't have to tramp all over the country with a vagabond group of ecstasies!" She flinched and he raised a hand to grab her if she tried to run. He took a deep breath and wrestled with his impatience.

"I miss you."

She gave him an excited look. "Then come with us!"

"What?"

"Be saved, Thomas! Join us! We can be together in God's purpose!"

He shook his head. "I have obligations, Abigail, I can't just pick up and leave. I have clients, I have—"

She scowled. "You have things, Thomas. You've always had ... things. I have nothing but this."

Thomas stared at her, stunned. When Richard lay gripped in the fever that eventually killed him, Abigail had stayed in his room, murmuring prayers and the words "This is all I have" over and over. Thomas had feared she would become sick herself. She had slept short periods, ate little, and refused to come out of the room even to empty the chamber pot she kept beside her chair. Thomas continued working through the prolonged illness, unable to simply stand by and wait. It was the only way he knew to maintain his sanity and manage his terror and his sense of helplessness, by doing, and doing that which he had always done well. Abigail never said that she resented his absences, but after Richard had died she moved into the child's room. Thomas had thought it was only an expression of grief that would pass eventually and perhaps, afterward, they could start again. He worked harder still, finding inadequate comfort in the effort, but comfort in any case. One day he discovered that Abigail had left. He had been confused and when he had learned that she had gone off with a group of Methodists, the confusion deepened. Understanding of any kind would have been a relief. Instead, the visitations had begun.

"I always thought you had me," he said.

"So did I. But other things had you first. Continue to have you."

Thomas waved his cane in the direction of the congregation. "This is better than what we might have if we worked for something new?"

"Reverend Bennington preaches from gospel that there are no new things. There is only the past. That is where truth is found."

"And the truth you've found is that nothing can be different?"

"Please, Thomas—"

"I love you."

Abigail turned her back to him. Thomas waited for the response he expected. I told her I loved her, he thought, she should agree, concede, repent ...

But she had gone to Reverend Bennington to repent, for things which Thomas had no power to forgive.

Through the trees he heard Bennington's voice, though the words remained unclear. More railing against the world, Thomas imagined.

"If there is only the past," Thomas said, "and that is where the truth is found, then was our time together a lie?"

"No," Abigail said quickly, facing him. She blushed. "It was what it was. No lie, just ..."

"Just different than we thought? So we lied to ourselves."

He laughed sharply. "God knows I have no argument against the possibility. These last two years I've lost the ability to tell real from false. Even the evidence of my own eyes has become undependable. I see what cannot be there. And now, when I had thought it was only an hallucination prompted by painful associations with place, the impossible follows me all the way from New York to this. It speaks to me now as well, so I no longer trust my hearing. For all I know you've just told me that you still love me and will come home now, but I've misheard everything and will end up going back alone."

"What hallucination?"

"I see him, Abigail. He ... comes ... odd times, unpredictably. I'll enter a room and find him playing with his soldiers or blocks, or sitting by the window where he used to read and watch the carriages go by on the street. I never know when or why. Sometimes I wake from sleep to find him watching me. I thought at first it was a fever, that I was ill. But I'm physically unaffected. Nor, as far as I can tell, has it damaged any other part of my life. When I work, I work well, and do as competent a job as ever! Only when I'm home ... alone ..."

"We must all ..." she began.

Abigail stared at him, eyes red and frightened, mouth open. Finally she shook her head and looked away as if embarrassed at what she almost said.

"Do you see him, too?" Thomas asked.

"No. But I wish I did."

He reached for her, but she stepped away and glared at him.

"I hated you," she said. "God forgive me, but I did. My husband, my protector, my—you left me there, alone, watching him die while you went about your life. I hated you up until Richard exhaled his last breath. And then there was nothing. No love, no hatred. I wasn't even angry anymore, just empty. I'd given everything. To you, to Richard, to our friends and family, to the trappings of a modern life. It was almost all used up when Richard fell ill and he took what was left when he died." She scowled. "And now you tell me you see him, that he visits you. He took what I had left to give and brought it back to you. How am I supposed to sympathize, Thomas? You still have him, real or imagined. If anything I envy you."

"Is that why you ran off with these people? Because you thought I'd taken what is yours?"

"I want something that won't change or go away! I want something that stands still for me! I want something that won't die when I love it!"

Thomas had no reply. He shook his head, saddened and angry, and looked off in the direction of the Methodists. He listened to their murmurs, mingled with the sounds of workmen shouting and the creak and slosh of the giant waterwheel.

"Is that why Bennington is here?" he asked. "To keep the past from changing?"

"The past is what it is, it never changes."

"Then why is he afraid of what Peale might dig up?"

"It should be left alone, not dragged into our lives."

"A pity the past doesn't give us the same respect."

A drop of water struck his hand, then another splashed on his cheek. He looked up at the ponderous clouds. The sun still shone brightly from the west, but within minutes, Thomas guessed, the thunderhead would hide it. He turned back to Abigail.

"Your answer is no?"

"What would I be saying yes to?"

"A new beginning. Something ... other ... than what we had."

"And your ghosts?"

Thomas shrugged. He wanted to believe that if Abigail came home, Richard would go away. He did not know if he wanted that; the specter was all he had of Richard beyond a few articles of clothing. But the ghost was poor company and

reminder of his own neglect.

A peal of thunder snapped his attention around. Rain began to patter through the leaves in a steady, growing pour. When Thomas looked back, Abigail was gone.

He hurried into the clearing. Some of the congregation was climbing into their wagons, but he saw a number of them heading in the direction of the pit.

"Abigail!" he called. He followed.

As he neared the tents and the ring of works and workmen and sightseers, someone grabbed his arm. He spun, raising his cane. Reverend Bennington glowered at him.

"Leave her be, sir," he said. "I've no quarrel with you, but Sister Abigail came to us of her own accord."

"How dare you—" Thomas began.

Bennington clutched his jacket and pulled him close. "She wishes to be done with the past. I offer her sanctuary."

"From what? Her own husband?"

"From the lies of the world!"

"You wouldn't know a lie if you told it yourself."

The sky rumbled again. The light filling the air around them was flat, dull, ivory.

" 'The hearts of men' " Bennington hissed, " 'are full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more forever any share in all that is done under the sun.' "

Thomas jerked Bennington's hands from his coat and shoved him back. "Are you talking about my son or me?"

Bennington pointed at the pit. "Why do you think we're here? Look at what they're trying to resurrect! It's the Beast itself and this land will be the new Babylon! Look!"

Despite himself, Thomas looked. People gathered around the edge of the hole, jostling each other to peer down into it. For the moment the great wheel was still. Thomas heard the sounds of men grunting with effort through the drumming of rain, their voices magnified by the walls of the pit. It sounded like the wail of torment rising from one of Dante's rings and Thomas shuddered.

" 'He who digs a pit will fall into it!' " Bennington shouted, as much to the spectators gathered at the edge as to Thomas. " 'He who digs a pit will fall into it! And a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall!' " He ran to the crowd and shoved his way in. "You'll destroy everything, looking into all the earth's dark places! Stop this before you murder the present with the dead and damn yourselves to lives with no mystery!"

Then he disappeared. Thomas wiped rain from his face. People packed against the lip of the pit. Thomas scurried around the outskirts of the spectators, looking for an opening, shouting for Abigail.

A heavy pellet of rain slapped his coat. Then another. Thomas looked skyward and saw a dense, charcoal dark thunderhead bending over the excavation. Water splashed his face and he looked away, wiping at his eyes. When he opened them he found the ghost of his child gazing up at him, patiently, mutely waiting. Thomas felt himself go rigid, unable to look away. He had never noticed before how perfect this false image was—blemishless, smooth skin, hair lustrous and unruffled, mouth the exact shape and color of the infant ideal—the way Abigail had always wanted him, had always seen him, had always worked to keep him, even in death. Thomas's hands curled into fists. Of all Abigail's traits, her stubborn rejection of reality had always infuriated him. Her ideas about a prolonged mourning for Richard ended when Thomas returned to work. He had been convinced that a resumption of normal life was the best remedy; she evidently had seen it as a final betrayal of everything she wanted from life.

"You want something that won't change," he said to the specter. Thomas flinched as the rain increased. "Everything changes, good or bad, and I'll

take my chances on losing a little good if the bad also is lost."
The ghost shook its head, then, as if it had heard something, it looked toward the pit.

"Careful there!" shouted a voice. "Careful!"

"Secure that rope!" Thomas recognized Charles Peale, standing at the edge of the dig, calling orders down. "Damn it, man, be mindful!"

Umbrellas snapped open all around. People moved ponderously in two directions, one group closer to the edge of the pit, the rest away, under cover of tents. A flash of lightning arced across the sky, followed quickly by dense thunder. People collided with Thomas. He staggered, and lost sight of the ghost. He shoved back at the retreating spectators, searching now for both Abigail and Richard. For a few seconds he felt carried backward. He dug in his heels and leaned into the throng. Suddenly he burst free and plunged.

Thomas fell at the edge of the pit, scraping his hands on gravel and stone, mud splashing into his face. He spit out dirt and groped for his handkerchief. He wiped his eyes and blinked.

Below, a huddle of men stood thigh-deep in the brackish water, gathered around a large, bulbous object slowly rising from the murky bog, trapped within a loose cage of rope. The men worked feverishly with shovels and poles, trying to free the mass from whatever held it from beneath, churning the waters around them. As he watched, Thomas saw what first appeared to be a bull's horn swing up between two of the workers. One of them grasped the horn and tried to lever the rest out.

"Be careful!" Peale raged.

Thomas screamed as a boot came down hard on his right hand. He jerked reflexively to pull free and felt a rock tear at his palm.

"Will you—!" he began, twisting to look up.

Reverend Bennington stood there, eyes wide and furious, oblivious to rain and Thomas's pain.

"Stop!" he cried. He raised a hand. Thomas yanked once more.

Bennington pitched over into the pit. He lost his footing on the steep slope and fell face down into the water.

The mass came loose, rolling around in its ropes. One horn caught a workman in the face, spinning him around. It rode up, dripping muck, several feet above the workers, and bounced. Even in the heavy rain Thomas heard a crack like snapping bone. He looked at it where it hung, directly across from him.

Two massive horns swept up from a ruin of face—nose gone, two enormous eye sockets staring at him. He could see no mouth, but Thomas saw a grin. Despite himself, the only image that came to mind was the medievalist's rendering of the Beast. Drenched by rain, his hand aching and bleeding, Thomas shuddered.

"I don't believe in you!" he said.

Deep within the eyeholes an orange glow ignited.

Then why did you come looking for me?

"What?"

The head swayed and the eyes glowed brightly.

Why have I been disinterred?

The voice did not seem to come from anywhere. Perhaps the rain confused Thomas's hearing, perhaps he only imagined it, but he felt compelled by it, by a profound authority inherent within its timber.

"We seek the truth," Thomas said, his teeth chattering.

Do you? But I am the master of lies.

"You're a set of bones! A fossil! You are not real! We have no use for lies!"

No?

"Careful! Get that man away from there!"

Thomas jerked his head around. Peale was pointing down into the pit again, his face red and puffy even through the veil of rain. Below, workmen struggled with someone in their midst.

"Bennington ..." Thomas hissed.

The Reverend was stretching a hand upward and shouting, his words only a mumble to Thomas. He twisted amid his captors. For a moment it seemed they had

him subdued. But then he was free, struggling through the rising muck toward the huge skull dangling above him. He flexed and managed to jump. He fell a few feet short of the fossil, landing heavily in the hole from which it had been pulled.

Waist-deep, he flailed. Workmen converged on him.

Thomas pushed himself to his knees.

As you wish it, then. The truth is all you'll have now. But you may come to miss me.

The intense chill Thomas felt came from within. The rain felt warm to him. He blinked furiously in the downpour.

A gust of wind pushed the horned skull in a wide arc. On its return swing, a rope gave and the entire mass spilled out. Helplessly, Thomas watched it crush Reverend Bennington, still stuck in the hole.

People screamed and shouted, more men climbed back down the walls of the pit to work at moving the giant head. Thomas crawled backward from the edge until he felt safely distant.

He climbed to his feet.

The ghost had changed. The smooth beauty of its skin was gone, replaced by a tatter of decayed flesh through which maggot-cleaned bone was visible. The clothes lay in torn and filthy strips on its bloated body. Blood vessels traced paths in the parts of the face and neck still intact and the eyes gazed at him with cataract dullness. Thomas choked at a brief smell of putrefaction.

"Richard ..."

Abigail walked up behind the ghost. She stared, clearly able to see it now. Her eyes shimmered with tears.

She looked up at Thomas. "Let me have him."

"What? Like this?"

Abigail's gaze seemed to caress the specter. She nodded. "He's beautiful."

"He—"

Thomas swallowed. He closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them again, Abigail was gone, along with the ghost.

He stood there till the rain abated, wondering what he had just done. The excited shouts of workers and spectators finally drew him back to the pit. Bennington's body was being dragged up the steep slope with a rope tied to his ankles. The skull, now inverted, was rising up smoothly. From this angle, it appeared to be a kind of elephant's head. One side was caved in now, the eyehole collapsed. It looked nothing like it had when Thomas first saw it. Seeing it now, it was just a skull, empty and unexciting.

He wondered why so many people looked so delighted to see it.

The End