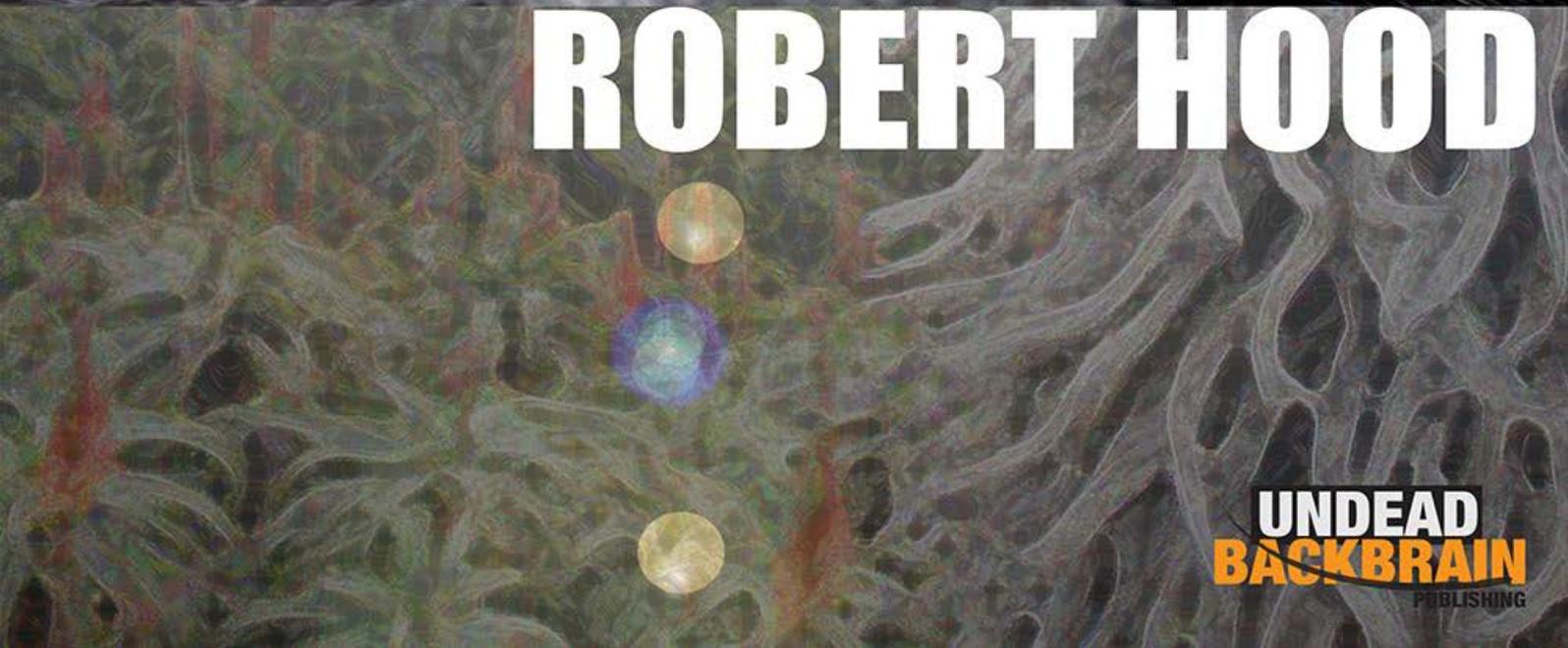


TAMED

A SHORT STORY



ROBERT HOOD



**UNDEAD
BACKBRAIN**
PUBLISHING

TAMED

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A Tale of Tharenweyr

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Author's Note

The short story 'Tamed' is set in the same world as my novel *Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead* (Borgo Press, 2012), taking place very soon after the events recounted in that book.

It was originally published in the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *Dreaming Downunder*, edited by Jack Dann and Janeen Webb (Voyager Australia, 1998; Tor Books, 2001).

Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead
by Robert Hood (Borgo Press, 2012)
<http://fragmentsnovel.undeadbackbrain.com/>

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Tamed

A Short Story by Robert Hood

S*SOMETIMES, at night, I hear screaming. Low and full of pain. It comes when I drift off to sleep and the noise wakes me again. Then it's gone. Imagination, I suppose.*

I've asked others about it. My brother, Bryalt, shakes his head and smiles at my foolishness. 'Some animal,' he says. But no animal sounds so desolate.

At times I sense an anticipation in the screaming that may be fear or may be glee. If I could hear it clearly, perhaps I could understand. But it's always skirting the edge of awareness, like a blemish on the periphery of vision that moves away when you try to study it.

I force myself to sleep. Sometimes hours pass, restless with unease, before I manage it.

And the sound is there again. Waiting.

Wind blowing over the escarpment disturbed him. Torm pur Nathal could detect significance in that wind. No smell. No vision. No sound. But whatever it was that nagged at his heart, it heralded a disruption of great importance, and he needed to understand it. The need was like a knife at his throat.

He turned and stared at the sea. Was the wind's message meant for something out there?

'You! Nathal! Pull you head from your arse and give me a hand.' The thick-set, balding man, whose authority owed as much to his volume as it did to his position as property foreman, was red-faced under the burden of a large crate. His scowl was intimidating.

Torm walked towards him. 'You should call me *pur Nathal*,' he said. '*Nathal* by itself means nothing.'

Lawke Yarl wasn't impressed by this distinction. 'Call you *arsehole* more like,' he mock-growled. Torm could hear the contempt that lay

beneath the man's tenuous joviality. On the lower coastal fringe of Tenen, so far from the more cosmopolitan areas of the Rheateeshan continent, there existed a mere façade of racial tolerance—here, existing at all only because the region's economic decline made any worker valuable. The intolerance didn't offend Torm. He understood the social isolation of strangers—and how such isolation could offer scapegoats and ease fear.

'Drag this to the wagon!' the foreman demanded.

Collecting the crate from Lawke's burly shoulders with an ease that belied his slight build, Torm hauled it towards a wagon waiting atop the jetty road. It was a good three hundred metres distant. He hadn't been able to get it transported any closer—the road surface was too pitted, desperately in need of repair. Such maintenance would not be undertaken, of course—not in the near future. Forethought was gone from this place—perhaps from the whole country.

Lawke was close behind him with two large sacks, having paid the trader and seen off his barge. A black seabird hovered above them briefly, checking out the possibilities. Torm watched as it wheeled about, cawed stridently and flapped away among the cliffs. He shivered with chill.

'Damn trader was late,' Lawke commented, though only by default was it directed at Torm. 'It'll be falling dark soon.' As he spoke his eyes scanned the distance. They did not yet hold terror, but the potential for it was strongly visible to Torm in his features.

Torm reflected how ironic it was that this man so feared the night. His master tamed monsters, and he knew how rarely deformed creatures came their way at all, let alone randomly. Yet he had a superstitious reverence for darkness. The wooden sides of the wagon were carved with totems designed to ward off the demons and to act as a surety against evil.

'We'd best hurry,' Torm said, thinking of more mundane dangers—potholes, invisible in the dusk, that could cripple horses and snap axles.

They loaded the wagon, tying down the goods with hide-cloth and ropes. By the time they were ready to leave, evening discoloration had crept into the sky. Torm clambered onto the seat at the front, leaving the foreman to control the reins. Anticipating departure, the horses stirred restlessly. 'Damn traders,' muttered Lawke, for no immediate reason.

'We'll be safe,' Torm offered.

The way back was rough, seemingly rougher than the way there. The wheels found rocks and holes everywhere. Curving upward slightly, the track wound over a rise, then down through crevasses and out over dry, abandoned fields. An animal skull watched them from a patch of quivering weeds. Torm could feel the twilight thickening.

My brother is always so sad, these days. The process of dying can be wearing, yes, but Bryalt's mood relates to more than that. His weariness is deep. The doctor says our mother will not last out the month. Strange and disturbing that I cannot feel more than a distant sorrow, and I think, too, that my brother is similarly unable to dread her passing. Our inheritance is cold, as cold as the stones out there on the hillside. When our mother dies, I think the farm will die with her.

What Bryalt needs is to be loved. I love him, of course, but it's not enough. There must be fire. In all his years, there has been no fire. How can someone with his power be so cold and distant? It's the power that keeps him that way, I'm sure, denying him humanity even while it defines him. I wish he would confide in me.

There was a time when he was a hero to me, someone beyond the normal rules, almost a god. Not now. I'm older. So is he. And as much as I honour him for his skill and his devotion to the family, I more often look at him and feel anxiety.

I fear for him.

And am afraid for myself.

Yesterday mother called me in to see her. Her room was drab and close in anticipation of her passing. The doctor—so gaunt it seemed his body had absorbed the ills he cured—pulled me aside as I entered. 'She may not make sense,' he warned. 'Her mind is drying out and is full of mischievous spirits. But do not contend with her. You mustn't argue. It will only speed her dying.'

I gave my bewildered agreement and went to stand at her side. She looked dead, already mummified. When her shrivelled hand reached for mine, it was all I could do not to cry out. 'Eisha, the darkness is singing to me,' she wheezed. I expected more, but she said nothing further and I began to fear she wanted some response.

'It's late,' I managed.

She smiled vacantly. 'Your father will take care of you.'

I turned away at those words, angered by them but remembering the doctor's injunction. Mother's bedroom mirror threw back my image: a slight, unfashionably boyish girl, stricken by memories so painful that she stood hunched into herself.

'He's a good man.'

'He's dead, mother,' I replied, feeling the legacy of his drunken assaults in my bones. 'He threw himself into the sea over a year ago.'

Seen in the mirror, my mother seemed to shrink further into her blankets. 'He was a good man once, Eisha. He sang to me.'

'Sang to you? Is that supposed to make up for what he did?'

The doctor scowled and, guilty, I tried to tame my anger. Now was not the time for recriminations. 'He will sing to you, too, if you ask him,'

mother continued.

‘Mother,’ I said, more kindly I hoped, ‘he’s passed on. He’s at peace.’

For a moment she stared into a dark corner of the room as though she suspected he might be hiding there. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said with a slow nod. ‘I’d forgotten.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered. I was suddenly ashamed of my outburst, which must have seemed so wanton to her. She didn’t reply. Perhaps she hadn’t heard.

Several minutes passed. Her sunken eyes closed, so that I thought she’d fallen asleep. Yet I couldn’t leave; her hand was clutching my arm. ‘I’m afraid,’ she said.

I nodded, not knowing how to respond. ‘I fear for Bryalt.’ Her lips trembled. ‘His heart is stony.’

‘He’s tired, mother. He works hard.’

‘He does what he does—but the evil doesn’t go away. I never cared for his magic.’

‘It has saved the property.’

I almost cringed at my own words. The property has been everything, always—a substitute for human love and caring. A god that demands endless sacrifice—and mother was always willing to offer up anything necessary to maintain it. Yet, as always, I defend it. I speak of it as something more important than life. The property consumed my father. Has all but taken my brother.

Mother looked worn now. She was not an old woman, nowhere near the age of other old women I have met in surrounding villages. But nor did she have their vigour. She looked wasted, skin clinging to her bones reluctantly, eyes hollow and dark. Even when she smiled, the darkness remained. As I watched, she lowered herself into the blankets and allowed saliva to leak from the left side of her mouth. Her head slumped. ‘It might have been better to let it go,’ she muttered.

Torm became convinced that something was shadowing them, flitting from rock to rock as the wagon jogged and thudded against his spine. Unexpected rushings at the edge of sight would startle him. He’d concentrate in that direction, only to discover that the movement was in fact bushes rustling or his own flickering shadow. The lowering Wave of Day, its dazzling energies fading southward now, was sporting with his perceptions. Strange, though, that he spied no wild animals, no birds, wherever he looked. The world was silent and waiting.

Lawke stared ahead with a sort of determined anxiety, urging the horses to go as fast as the state of the track would allow. The animals seemed calm enough—even indifferent. But their attitude was unnaturally deliberate. As though they, too, were waiting.

While they travelled, anticipating grim possibilities, Torm's mind threw up an image of the first 'tamed' monster he had ever encountered—one of master Bryalt's. He didn't know why that moment came into his head now, as they careened along a darkening track, but he suspected. Fate was catching up with him.

It was nearly a year ago that Torm had come to Tenen from the southern continent. The ship had docked at the port of Stren-Halg, a ramshackled town on the northern Tenenian coastline, and on embarking, Torm had immediately ventured along the main street, seeking the *Seabed* guesthouse. The ship's purser had recommended it as a possible lodging for the night, and being alone and friendless in this foreign place, Torm keenly anticipated the possibility. He had no better plan. He'd stumbled from the wharf with his bag, past produce carts and wagons lined up to receive goods ordered months before, but had failed to notice the large creature that suddenly stepped into his path. It was taller than a man, with a thick body covered in gnarled flesh and skin like a snake's, legs massive, like hardwood trunks, and four serpentine arms sprouting from its chest that each ended in heavy, three-fingered claws. Its head was small and insect-like, with slitted mouth and five or six growths that might have been eyes. Whether any of them saw the world that Torm saw, he couldn't tell. A carved yoke was strapped to its shoulders; it pulled a cart large enough to exhaust a full team of heavy horses.

Torm took in all this detail instantly and recoiled, expecting a warping perceptual rush—a bending of the mind evoked by the monster's deformity. But there was nothing, only a grey fog where the thing's spiritual presence should have raged with fire, scalding, threatening.

'It's been tamed,' someone whispered in Torm's ear.

Tamed? The word entered Torm's mind uneasily, sitting ill with his knowledge of such beasts and the metaphysical processes that created them. How could a monster be made safe? By definition they were unnatural, their distorted forms and warped spirits arising from the dark currents of Creator Junsar's ancient error. Their evil could not be domesticated. Lowering his mental barriers, he allowed himself to 'read' the qualities of the monster before him, evaluating its implications.

Tamed? No. It was empty rather than broken.

Torm backed against the wall and let it pass, breathing deeply to calm his own panic. Whoever had spoken to him had moved on, but now Torm wanted to question him. He rushed after the figure closest, a heavy-set man in a knee-length leather coat, grabbing at his shoulder.

The man hissed, drawing a dagger.

'That creature,' Torm said, ignoring the weapon, 'how has it come about?'

The man's weather-lined face snarled. 'How should I know? I'm no priest. It's *drontagis*—a monster.'

'But its anima is so quiescent.'

'*Du'hon*, we call them. Visiting workers.' He shoved Torm. 'Like you. They work—and we hope they'll die of it before too long.'

No lodgings were available at the *Seabed*, nor was Torm offered a place in any other establishment where he made enquiries. Eventually he slept in the shadows behind a storage barn, alone until discovered by a street whore happy to share his warmth. They huddled together sexlessly and, at his insistence, she told him about the *du'hon*.

'Quieted by deviant magic, they are,' she explained, 'though local priests have given their approval to it. I think they weren't always so agreeable. But the *du'hon* are worth something—at least to the larger landowners. Their deformities can be put to use.' She ran her hand over Torm's bald head. 'It's wrong ... forbidden elsewhere I've been told. Too dangerous. But the Weller family does the Rites.'

'Rites?'

'Of Purification, they call them. The son has a power. People here say the family's inbred with a demon. Superstition. But you can never tell in these times.'

Her words cemented his purpose, and in the morning, Torm set off along the coast toward the isolated Weller freehold.

'You asleep?' Lawke was leaning toward him, one hand shaking his arm, the other still clutching the reins. He glanced left, right, ahead.

'Thinking,' Torm said. He was suddenly sensitive to a disturbance in the air and fought back bone-chill that for a moment threatened to cause uncontrollable trembling in his limbs.

'There's something,' Lawke gestured, though there was no knowledge in it. 'Out there.'

'Bandits?'

'Something.'

Torm could feel Deformity now, a growing ache that plucked at his skin. Darkness was more than the absence of light—it seemed to deny memory of it. Ghostly tracings twitched across the sky.

'How far to the farm?'

‘Half an hour maybe.’

Indistinct in the night, something that wasn’t hill or bush surged up to their right. Beneath its own movement, the wagon trembled.

The horses screamed, pulling away in blind terror—it was a weird sound that Torm had never heard before and it made his stomach muscles tighten in fear. Lawke fought to control the horses, dragging them back to a trot. Torm watched as the outline of a boulder grew long, spindly legs and raised itself like a monstrous spider. It disappeared into the night. Trees snapped and squirmed in a sudden wind.

‘Nathal, what’s happening?’

Why was Lawke crying out to Torm so earnestly? Independent, contemptuous, yet he sensed the purpose in this stranger, despite himself. Torm gripped the man’s shoulder, to give him reassurance. Lawke didn’t turn to look but remained intent on controlling the horses as best he could. Amazingly, he kept them on the track.

Around the wagon, night heaved.

I sit on the edge of my bed, listening. Wind is battering the walls, forcing unnatural movement into the joints of the building. It has always seemed solid enough, but now it’s as frail as straw. My head swims.

I lie down again, thinking nothing, trying to ease my panic. The darkness behind my eyes squirms with a thousand half-formed images. Sounds hiss in my ears. They’re almost like voices. I concentrate on them, but the voices, if they are voices, speak only nonsense. Aborted words that mimic speech. Some of them clarify.

*‘Truth ... a clenched fist
pounds on the Body of Life.
Form that cannot decay;
Form that is not, but will be again;
Form reformed by Power unending ...’*

From the litany of Purification. I hear the chant and know that it’s Bryalt’s mouth that says the words. I see him, there in my doorway, looking in at me; hear the song again, though his lips do not move in time with the sound now. He is naked.

Fingers emerge from his chest. He looks on calmly as a hand forces itself through his skin. Then another. The hands tear his body apart, tossing off the useless shreds and stepping out into the room. My mother. She wears nothing but the wrinkled skin hanging from her almost-visible skeleton. I

stare at her distended belly, realizing that she's pregnant. Soundlessly she screams, bending backward as an arm and then a head push out from between her legs. The figure struggling to emerge from her tears her apart as it comes into the world.

My father stands bloody and silent before me. After a moment, he steps closer, snarling like a beast.

I wake, gasping and afraid.

Bryalt was standing alone by the northern fence, staring up along the ragged escarpment as though waiting for a sign. He didn't turn as I approached, though he must have heard my shoes crunching on twigs and dry grass. I followed his gaze—it was focused across arid fields toward Jar'ut Road and the Land's Breach Pass, which offered a clear route to the coast.

'Bryalt?'

'Leave me, Eisha.'

The earnestness of his dismissal hurt me, but I contained my sadness. 'It's mother. She's dying.'

'I know.'

'Now, brother. You should go to her now.'

His indifference startled me. I grabbed at him to make him face me. He could have flung me aside, for compared to him I'm small and weak, even though his posture had become increasingly lax and his torso thick—but instead he allowed himself to be drawn away from whatever thoughts obsessed him. Dark hair, peppered with premature grey, fell limply over his face. His eyes squinted, especially the right one, though not against glare. He looked like he'd slept in his clothes and had been ingesting *twan*; I could smell the tang of the drug.

'You're a mess,' I said.

'You're not my mother, Eisha.'

'Your mother's dying.'

Some emotion passed over his features—grief or fear, I couldn't tell. 'Bryalt, please, don't be so distant. I know what you're feeling ... I'm confused myself. She makes me angry and I don't even know how I can love her. She's been so cruel. But she is our mother. She wants to see you.'

'It's ending. Seeing her would only ... confuse me more.' He glanced up suddenly, looking toward the house. A tremor shook the ground, a relaxation of the earth that threatened to open it up beneath my feet. Thunder rumbled along the distant escarpment.

Bryalt seemed to collapse internally, shadows crossing his face. 'She's dead.'

'What do you mean?'

'She died. Just then. I no longer need to see her.'

Confusion turned to anger. I grabbed at him. 'Bryant, for god's sake, tell me what's going on? I can't stand you like this.'

Firmly he loosed my grip and held me away from him. Tears gathered in my eyes. He softened. 'You must be prepared, Eisha.'

'How can I be prepared? You won't be honest with me.'

He gazed at me, as though the movement of my lips mesmerized him—yet at the same time I knew he was already looking beyond.

'Bryalt!'

'She held me here, Eisha. She held the reins tightly.'

I shook my head, bewildered.

'It was her will. She wouldn't let go. I knew it was wrong, but she was determined—and now it's freed.'

'What's freed?'

He pushed me away. 'I tamed nothing, don't you understand? Nothing. All I did was repress the wildness, divert it. It soaked into the land, into us. Why did our father become violent and wanton? Why was our mother so determined, yet so dried up and loveless?'

'Because that's what they were like. They let themselves be that way. You're not responsible.'

He laughed derisively, dismissing my words. 'Well, now she's gone, there's nothing left of Family to keep the darkness from me.'

I tried to touch him gently, though he withdrew from my fingers. 'What of me, Bryalt? I'm your sister. I'm family.'

He scoffed. 'You don't want to be here. You never have. I've felt you straining against the need.'

I protested, but even as I did I knew he was right. I couldn't remember when I first grew restless here, felt the smothering dryness of this place, the bondage. I had drifted into it. Now, confronted by his words, I could see the truth clearly. Yet there had been no question that I could ever leave. No hope of it. It was a need that could only take form as futile discontent and pointless anger, emotion increasingly warped and spoiled. I was a Weller. This was my place.

'There's a sickness in the soil, Eisha. We can try to heal it, but it will never be cured. We made it worse, in fact, because we're tainted and we found a way to add our own illness to the evil of this place.'

The light had faded, so that Bryalt was a dark silhouette against the sky. I could no longer see his lips.

The Family wanted to control everything. It fought floods and droughts, feral tribes that obeyed no law but their own, wild animals

and harsh flora. With no support from anyone, it tamed the land, and eventually made some kind of living from it.

‘Yet the land was never welcoming. It existed too close to the edge. By the time I was born, decay was stronger than renewal. For a while, I staved off the inevitable, but it was a deception, all of it. I merely hid the corruption.’

I hadn’t been able to interrupt him. Hadn’t wanted to. I knew something was seriously wrong and was hoping he would tell me what it was. But this made no sense—our Family history as a sickness of the land. What did it explain?

‘Bryalt, come back with me,’ I pleaded. ‘See mother this last time, before she goes.’

‘I told you. She’s already dead.’

A scream lanced through the twilight, so loud and startling I stumbled away from Bryalt, as though he’d made the noise. But it came from behind, from outbuildings on the other side of the compound. The scream was overtaken by an animal keening.

‘My god, what’s happened?’ I strained to see; the gloom was thick, but I could make out rushing figures and a dark pall of rising dust. A gust of wind churned over the roofs.

‘*Drontagis*,’ Bryalt whispered.

‘Monsters? Has one escaped from the cages?’

‘The cages were all empty. This is something that has been buried for too long.’ He took my hand. ‘You must run, Eisha. Take the Breach Road.’

‘You’ve got to help. You can quell them.’

‘There’s no will for it in me any more. This is a returning—it won’t be tamed again.’

Wind swirled around us, fetid and stinking. It carried cries and pleadings.

‘Do what I say, Eisha,’ Bryalt said, pointing toward the escarpment. ‘Run, now!’

‘Into the wild? Alone? How can I do that?’

‘Use the road. Torm pur Nathal and Lawke Yarl will be along soon, returning from the Supply Jetty. Pur Nathal will know what to do.’

‘But the farm. My friends. How can I leave them? How can I leave you?’

Bryalt looked old and tired. His eyes seemed to bleed black tears, but his manner was almost uncaring. ‘You can’t save them, Eisha. If you don’t leave now, you can only die as well.’ More cries. Shouts. Fire swelled here and there in the darkness; I saw desperate figures stark against the glow. Impressions of grotesque shapes came and went. Dust and smoke churned across the hard outlines of walls and fences, blurring and bending them so that nothing was clear. The wind melted the land and the whole world

seemed to be shifting.

‘I don’t understand,’ I cried. ‘I can’t just run.’

‘Go!’ he ordered. ‘None of it matters. Dust and waste.’

I was breathing raggedly. Panic gnawed on the edges of my consciousness. ‘I didn’t think you could be so cold.’

He grimaced and for the first time I sensed not just his despair, but a deep embittered submission to the darkness that was overwhelming him.

Pulling out of his grip, I ran towards the homestead. It was burning.

Bryalt’s footfalls pounded behind me, and he yelled something, but I ignored him. He couldn’t catch me—I was young and fleet-footed. Smoky air swirled around me, shredded by a wind that turned normal sight-images into phantoms and then fled with them out towards the escarpment.

I had no idea what I intended to do. I wasn’t thinking, just reacting. Blinded, I stumbled through the murky air, shouting the names of workers I knew, friends. Cries of despair and pain—mingled with dark snarling from throats I could barely imagine—returned to me from the chaos. A man, nameless in the gloom, crashed across my path, flailing wildly. Before he disappeared into the shadows, I caught a glimpse of red flesh, spine, ribs ... something fibrous that moved in him, tearing at his belly. At the same time one of the shadows above me became a knot of sinew and bone, roaring through a maw filled with teeth and bloody remnants. It ducked away without noticing me, leaving scarlet ripples in the smoke.

Horror stopped me short. I stood, gasping.

‘Eisha?’ Bryalt had caught up with me. He held my shoulders. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘My head ...’ I groaned. ‘Throbbing. I saw—’

‘*Drontagis*.’ He began dragging me back the way I’d come. The night was a complex fabric of sounds and emotions, terrible images half-seen, elusive—an amorphous beast clawing in through eyes, ears, the pores of my skin. I staggered.

‘You must leave,’ Bryalt said.

I nodded dumbly, no longer able to resist. Not wanting to.

‘You can’t help,’ he persisted. ‘You can only save yourself.’

‘What about you? Are you coming—?’

He silenced me with a gesture. ‘I’ll stay. Help who I can. Tell pur Nathal I’ll come to the base of the Pass with survivors. By dawn. If I’m not there by dawn, you must leave. Quickly.’

I could barely hold on to what he was saying. The words were breaking apart.

He lifted me and carried me toward the periphery of the farm.

Lawke Yarl was screaming. Before Torm could defend him, the foreman was taken by something that came out of nowhere and squeezed his heart.

Yowling like a kicked dog, Lawke dropped the reins and began compulsively clutching at the air. His eyes bulged. Grasping the reins in one hand, Torm struggled to steady Lawke with the other. He felt the *drontagis* power coursing through Lawke's muscles—sensed his own blood responding to it, calling. 'Fight it, Lawke Yarl,' he cried. 'Drive it out of you.'

But the foreman had no resistance; his cringing superstitions had already paved the way for the evil to enter him. He began beating and clawing his chest, while his eyes glazed over and parts of his body bulged and knotted. Torm took a moment to ensure that the wagon was not in immediate danger, then tried to lend his aid to Lawke's struggle. His fingers probed for the pulse at the base of the man's neck, seeking a conduit. When he sensed an opening, he concentrated his will along the pathway. The Deformity within Lawke howled in recognition, and Torm prepared for struggle.

But it was too late. A violent tremor quaked through Lawke's bone and tissue; he spasmed and went limp. Like a leaden net, the dark chill of dead matter encased Torm's spirit, forcing him to pull away, hard. The foreman's corpse tilted back off the driver's bench, collapsing against crates in the rear of the wagon.

Torm sucked in breath like a drowning man. His head throbbed, so he let his mind drift into a semi-conscious state where it was peaceful. At last, dragged back to awareness by the pull of the reins, he glanced forward. Land's Breach Pass rose in jagged spires on either side. In the distance, beyond the escarpment foothills and the arid plainland at their base, fiery spectres rose into the night-sky.

Rocks to his right snarled at him from the shadows.

The homestead and most of the outbuildings were burning as Torm drove toward them across cornfields on the eastern side of the Weller freehold. Plumes of smoke spiraled into grotesque shapes in the sky above. Even from this distance he was aware of monstrous things that lurched, snapped, tore through the smoke. Could anyone human survive in that pandemonium? Surely Bryalt Weller had resisted the chaos. He was the one with Power, the one Torm had come here to find. He must have had the strength.

But it was a slight, disheveled figure that staggered toward him a

few hundred paces from the eastern gate. Torm dragged the horses to a halt. Fetid air swirled around him, carrying traces of torment deep within it, so that Torm felt as though he heard screams from a buried torture chamber through thick stone walls. 'Eisha, you escaped it,' he said. He asked nothing about the nature of the attack; he knew what it was.

'Bryalt?' Her eyes were dazed, her manner numbed.

Torm leapt off the wagon and held her. 'No, Eisha. Torm pur Nathal.'

'Oh, yes,' she replied. 'And Lawke Yarl. Bryalt said you'd come.'

'Foreman Yarl didn't survive.' Torm helped her towards the wagon. 'What of your brother?' he asked gently.

She half-glanced in the direction of the homestead. The area was a perceptual miasma—splintering, contorting, quickened only by the processes of dying. Monstrous shapes within the smoke-shadows fed upon themselves. 'He went back,' she whispered.

'To rescue those he could?'

She looked at Torm, her eyes wet. 'So he said.' She turned away. 'But he wanted to die there. That's all. He wanted to die.'

Torm understood it all then. His coming here, his belief that in Bryalt Weller there existed a strength and will to fight the Darkness that was coming upon the world ... it was a false hope, born of ignorance. His prescience had betrayed him, so that all he could be was a witness to self-destruction. There had been no companionship here, no offering from an Otherworld that desperately wanted this one to survive. He felt his isolation more strongly than ever—and feared the possibility of despair.

Nearby movement and a sudden nauseous surge shoved him from his reverie. Eisha clutched his arm. A foul wind thudded against his back.

On the wagon, Lawke Yarl was drunkenly climbing to his feet. Torm felt the force of the Deformity emanating from him. His own flesh ached with its proximity, forcing him into a renewed effort to suppress the *drontagis* power that whispered in his mind like an old friend. Lawke's body twitched and spasmed wildly; before Torm could find the will to act, the foreman began to change. His face elongated, jaw twisting into a stretched-out, fanged parody of itself; his arms and legs warped, sprouting muscular offshoots that then re-joined the main limb, thickening it like the trunk of an ancient mangrove. From his chest, shoulders and abdomen, knotted pustules of flesh and bone tore through his clothes—an excrescence that finally destroyed any semblance of humanity he might have retained. A long, fibrous root with a slaver's dog's head on its tip reached toward Eisha, shedding bloody mucus in streams through the wind.

Torm cried out a warning and leapt to intercept the appendage. It slammed into him, and he held it with his right hand, digging his fingers into the tumorous mass. His inner strength rose to repel the decay blossoming throughout Lawke's corpse—but he was too slow. Excruciating

pain enflamed, then paralyzed the right side of his body. His arm, torn away, spun into a stream of foggy air. Spraying blood like a benediction for his death, Torm fell from the monster, crashing to the earth at Eisha's feet.

From his prone position, he looked up as the monster, knowing him defeated, turned to Eisha. Strangely, she seemed calm and purposeful. She held up her hands.

'No,' she said gently. 'No.'

Consciousness returned to Torm slowly. He was surprised when it did. Eisha was wrapping soiled cloth around the bloody wreck of his shoulder.

'Your arm,' she said. 'I think you might bleed to death.'

Torm considered his injury and, for a moment, concentrated on easing the pain. 'The flow's stopped. Don't worry. The arm will grow back.'

She stared at him blankly. Clearly she was suffering from shock.

'I have no race,' Torm continued, knowing now that she was the one he had come for, not her brother. 'No people. My bones, my flesh, have been touched by *drontagis* corruption. It is part of me. I control it.'

There was so much to know, so many questions to ask, but Eisha asked none of them. She simply nodded, as though what he had said was both obvious and acceptable.

'Where I come from, far south,' Torm continued, 'the plague is deeply ingrained in the lives of the surviving inhabitants. We have absorbed it. What happened here, today, is a common occurrence there. But it worsens, and now it's spreading.'

She said nothing.

'What happened to Lawke?' Torm asked, seeing the human corpse draped over the side of the wagon.

'I told him to be still,' she said.

Screams still echo around me, though the fires died out long ago. Dawn comes to light a world that is grey and cold. We wait at the base of the Pass. Bryalt hasn't arrived. I knew he wouldn't. This destruction is his and he wanted it to claim him.

Torm says I have my brother's Power, but it is purer, untainted by despair. I wonder about that. Right now, everything seems dim and

threatening to me. He says it will not consume me.

‘How long will it take us to reach Stren-Halg?’ I ask.

‘A day or two, if the horses can make the distance.’ Torm glances worriedly southward as lightning blanches dark clouds along the horizon.

‘We’d better go,’ I say.

Torm rests his hand gently on my arm. ‘And after Stren-Halg? Where then, Eisha?’

‘Away from here. Away from these poisons. Away.’

He looks sorrowful, as though he suspects there is no escape, and I smile to reassure him. But the plague will follow us—I know that, for the knowledge aches in my bones. It’s like a song, a dark, violent song I will carry with me wherever I go.

Perhaps the clamour of the world beyond this place will drown it out.

Critical Comment

from a review of *Dreaming Downunder* on Eidolon.net: Australian SF Online (1999)

Robert Hood's "Tamed" develops even further the concept that our own imagination creates the monsters that bedevil and threaten us. Torm is searching for the one who can help rid the world of these manifestations—the "drontagis corruption". He attaches himself to the household of Bryalt, someone Torm believes has the ability to resist, even influence, the corruption and the metamorphosed humans and devils it creates. In reality Bryalt is barely holding back the corruption, and when his mother dies, worn out from hard work and fear, the evil on their farm breaks out in full force. Torm's hopes, however, are kept alive by Bryalt's sister, Eisha, who reveals she too has influence over the drontagis.

Hood's fantasy world is only partially realised in this story, but there is enough there to keep the reader intrigued, wanting to learn more. Most effective, is the corruption itself and how it is manifested, by twisting and changing the dead into a form both horrifying and psychologically atavistic. Torm and the others are confronted with the darker sides of their own psyches.

Simon Brown