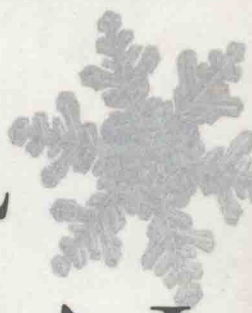
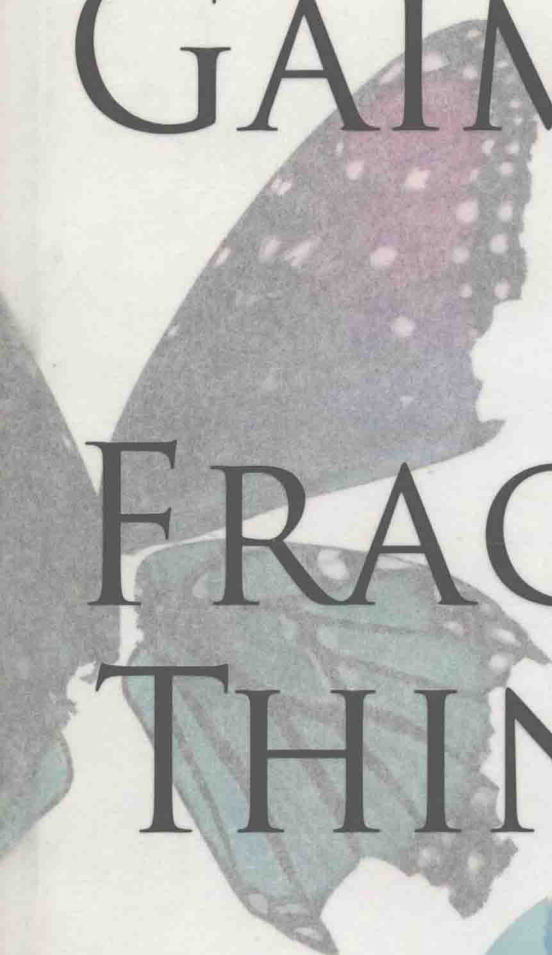


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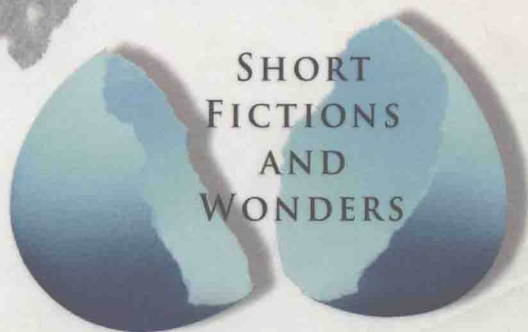
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FRAGILE
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SHORT
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WONDERS



FRAGILE THINGS

SHORT FICTIONS AND WONDERS

NEIL GAIMAN

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THESE PEO-
PLE OUGHT TO
KNOW WHO
WE ARE AND
TELL THAT WE
ARE HERE!

For Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison,
and the late Robert Sheckley,
masters of the craft

INTRODUCTION

“I think . . . that I would rather recollect a life mis-spent on fragile things than spent avoiding moral debt.” The words turned up in a dream and I wrote them down upon waking, uncertain what they meant or to whom they applied.

My original plan for this book of tales and imaginings, some eight years ago, was to create a short story collection that I would call *These People Ought to Know Who We Are and Tell That We Were Here*, after a word balloon in a panel from a *Little Nemo* Sunday page (you can now find a beautiful color reproduction of the page in Art Spiegelman’s book *In the Shadow of No Towers*), and every story would be told by one of a variety of dodgy and unreliable narrators as each explained their life, told us who they were and that, once, they too were here. A dozen people, a dozen stories. That was the idea; and then real life came along and spoiled it, as I began to write the short stories you’ll find in here, and they took on the form they needed to be told in, and while some were told in the first person and were slices of lives, others simply weren’t. One story refused to take shape until I gave it to the months of the year to tell, while another did small, efficient things with identity that meant it had to be told in the third person.

Eventually I began to gather together the material of this book, puzzling over what I should call it now that the previous title seemed no longer to apply. It was then that the One Ring Zero CD *As Smart as We Are* arrived, and I heard them sing the lines I had brought

back from a dream, and I wondered just what I had meant by “fragile things.”

It seemed like a fine title for a book of short stories. There are so many fragile things, after all. People break so easily, and so do dreams and hearts.

“A STUDY IN EMERALD”

This was written for the anthology my friend Michael Reaves edited with John Pelan, *Shadows Over Baker Street*. The brief from Michael was “I want a story in which Sherlock Holmes meets the world of H. P. Lovecraft.” I agreed to write a story but suspected there was something deeply unpromising about the setup: the world of Sherlock Holmes is so utterly rational, after all, celebrating solutions, while Lovecraft’s fictional creations were deeply, utterly irrational, and mysteries were vital to keep humanity sane. If I was going to tell a story that combined both elements there had to be an interesting way to do it that played fair with both Lovecraft and with the creations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

As a boy I had loved Philip José Farmer’s Wold Newton stories, in which dozens of characters from fiction were incorporated into one coherent world, and I had greatly enjoyed watching my friends Kim Newman and Alan Moore build their own Wold Newton—descended worlds in the *Anno Dracula* sequence and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, respectively. It looked like fun. I wondered if I could try something like that.

The ingredients of the story I had in the back of my head combined in ways that were better than I had hoped when I began. (Writing’s a lot like cooking. Sometimes the cake won’t rise, no matter what you do, and every now and again the cake tastes better than you ever could have dreamed it would.)

“A Study in Emerald” won the Hugo Award in August 2004 as Best Short Story, something that still makes me intensely proud. It also played its part in my finding myself, the following year, mysteriously inducted into the Baker Street Irregulars.

“THE FAIRY REEL”

Not much of a poem, really, but enormous fun to read aloud.

“OCTOBER IN THE CHAIR”

Written for Peter Straub, for the remarkable volume of *Conjunctions* that he guest-edited. It began some years earlier, at a convention in Madison, Wisconsin, at which Harlan Ellison had asked me to collaborate with him on a short story. We were placed inside a rope barrier, Harlan at his typewriter, me at my laptop. But before we could start the short story, Harlan had an introduction to finish, so while he finished his introduction I started this story and showed it to him. “Nope. It reads like a Neil Gaiman story,” he said. (So I put it aside and started another story, which Harlan and I have now been collaborating on ever since. Bizarrely, whenever we get together and work on it, it gets shorter.) So I had part of a story sitting on my hard drive. Peter invited me into *Conjunctions* a couple of years later. I wanted to write a story about a dead boy and a living one, as a sort of dry run for a book for children I had decided to write (it’s called *The Graveyard Book*, and I am writing it right now). It took me a little while to figure out how the story worked, and when it was done, I dedicated it to Ray Bradbury, who would have written it much better than I did.

It won the 2003 Locus Award for Best Short Story.

“THE HIDDEN CHAMBER”

Began with a request from two editors, the Nancys Kilpatrick and Holder, to write something “gothic” for their anthology, *Outsiders*. It seems to me that the story of Bluebeard and its variants is the most gothic of all stories, so I wrote a Bluebeard poem set in the almost empty house I was staying in at the time. *Upsettling* is what Humpty Dumpty called “a portmanteau word,” occupying the territory between *upsetting* and *unsettling*.

“FORBIDDEN BRIDES OF THE FACELESS SLAVES IN THE SECRET HOUSE OF THE NIGHT OF DREAD DESIRE”

I started writing this story in pencil one windy winter’s night in the waiting room between platforms five and six of East Croydon railway station. I was twenty-two, going on twenty-three. When it was done I typed it up and showed it to a couple of editors I knew. One sniffed, told me it wasn’t his kind of thing and he didn’t honestly think it was actually anybody’s kind of thing, while the other read it, looked sympathetic, and gave it back explaining that the reason it would never be printed was that it was facetious nonsense. I put it away, glad to have been saved the public embarrassment of having more people read it and dislike it.

The story stayed unread, wandering from folder to box to tub, from office to basement to attic, for another twenty years, and when I thought of it, it was only with relief that it had not been printed. One day I was asked for a story for an anthology called *Gothic!* and I remembered the manuscript in the attic and went up to find it, to see if there was anything in it that I could rescue.

I started reading “Forbidden Brides,” and as I read it I smiled. Actually, I decided, it *was* pretty funny, and it was smart, too; a good little story—the clumsinesses were mostly the sort of things you’d find in journeyman work, and all of them seemed easily fixable. I

got out the computer and did another draft of the story, twenty years after the first, shortened the title to its present form, and sent it off to the editor. At least one reviewer felt it was facetious nonsense, but that seemed to be a minority opinion, as “Forbidden Brides” was picked up by several “best-of-the-year” anthologies and was voted Best Short Story in the 2005 Locus Awards.

I’m not sure what we can learn from that. Sometimes you just show stories to the wrong people, and nobody’s going to like everything. From time to time I wonder what else there is in the boxes in the attic.

“GOOD BOYS DESERVE FAVORS,” “THE FLINTS OF MEMORY LANE”

One story was inspired by a Lisa Snellings-Clark statue of a man holding a double bass, just as I did when I was a child; the other was written for an anthology of real-life ghost stories. Most of the other authors managed tales that were rather more satisfying than mine, although mine had the unsatisfying advantage of being perfectly true. These stories were first collected in *Adventures in the Dream Trade*, a miscellany published by NESFA Press in 2002, which collected lots of introductions and oddments and such.

“CLOSING TIME”

Michael Chabon was editing a book of genre stories to demonstrate how much fun stories are and to raise funds for 826 Valencia, which helps children to write. (The book was published as *McSweeney’s Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*.) He asked me for a story, and I asked if there was any particular genre he was missing. There was—he wanted an M. R. James-style ghost story.

So I set out to write a proper ghost story, but the finished tale

owes much more to my love of the “strange stories” of Robert Aickman than it does to James (however, it also, once it was done, turned out to be a club story, thus managing two genres for the price of one). The story was picked up by some “best-of-the-year” anthologies, and took the Locus Award for Best Short Story in 2004.

All the places in this story are true places, although I have changed a few names—the Diogenes Club was really the Troy Club in Hanway Street, for example. Some of the people and events are true as well, truer than one might imagine. As I write this I find myself wondering whether that little playhouse still exists, or if they knocked it down and built houses on the ground where it waited, but I confess I have no desire actually to go and find out.

“GOING WODWO”

A *wodwo*, or *wodwose*, was a wild man of the woods. This was written for Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow’s anthology *The Green Man*.

“BITTER GROUNDS”

I wrote four short stories in 2002, and this was, I suspect, the best of the lot, although it won no awards. It was written for my friend Nalo Hopkinson’s anthology *Mojo: Conjure Stories*.

“OTHER PEOPLE”

I don’t remember where I was or when on the day I came up with this little Mobius story. I remember jotting down the idea and the first line, and then wondering if it was original—was I half remembering a story I’d read as a boy, something by Fredric Brown or Henry Kuttner? It felt like someone else’s story, too elegant and edgy and complete an idea, and I was suspicious of it.

A year or so later, bored on a plane, I ran across my note about the story and, having finished the magazine I was reading, I simply wrote it—it was finished before the plane landed. Then I called a handful of knowledgeable friends and read it to them, asking if it seemed familiar, if anyone had read it before. They said no. Normally I write short stories because someone has asked me to write a short story, but for once in my life I had a short story nobody was waiting for. I sent it to Gordon Van Gelder at the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and he accepted and retitled it, which was fine by me. (I'd called it "Afterlife.")

I do a lot of writing on planes. When I began writing *American Gods* I wrote a story on a plane to New York that would, I was certain, wind up somewhere in the fabric of the book, but I could never find anywhere in the book it wanted to go. Eventually, when the book was finished and the story wasn't in it, I made it into a Christmas card and sent it out and forgot about it. A couple of years later Hill House Press, who publish extremely nice limited editions of my books, sent it out to subscribers as a Christmas card of their own.

It never had a title. Let's call it,

THE MAPMAKER

One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless.

The tale is the map which is the territory.

You must remember this.

There was an emperor of China almost two thousand years ago

who became obsessed by the notion of mapping the land that he ruled. He had China re-created in miniature on an island which he had constructed at great expense and, incidentally, a certain amount of loss of life (for the waters were deep and cold) in a lake in the imperial estates. On this island each mountain was become a molehill, and each river the smallest rivulet. It took fully half an hour for the emperor to walk around the perimeter of his island.

Every morning, in the pale light before dawn, a hundred men would wade and swim out to the island and would carefully repair and reconstruct any feature of the landscape which had been damaged by the weather or by wild birds, or taken by the lake; and they would remove and remodel any of the imperial lands that had been damaged in actuality by floods or earthquakes or landslides, to better reflect the world as it was.

The emperor was contented by this, for the better part of a year, and then he noticed within himself a growing dissatisfaction with his island, and he began, in the time before he slept, to plan another map, fully one one-hundredth the size of his dominions. Every hut and house and hall, every tree and hill and beast would be reproduced at one one-hundredth of its height.

It was a grand plan, which would have taxed the imperial treasury to its limits to accomplish. It would have needed more men than the mind can encompass, men to map and men to measure, surveyors, census-takers, painters; it would have taken model-makers, potters, builders, and craftsmen. Six hundred professional dreamers would have been needed to reveal the nature of things hidden beneath the roots of trees, and in the deepest mountain caverns, and in the depths of the sea, for the map, to be worth anything, needed to contain both the visible empire and the invisible.

This was the emperor's plan.

His minister of the right hand remonstrated with him one night, as they walked in the palace gardens, under a huge, golden moon.

"You must know, Imperial Majesty," said the minister of the right hand, "that what you intend is. . . ."

And then, courage failing him, he paused. A pale carp broke the surface of the water, shattering the reflection of the golden moon into a hundred dancing fragments, each a tiny moon in its own right, and then the moons coalesced into one unbroken circle of reflected light, hanging golden in water the color of the night sky, which was so rich a purple that it could never have been mistaken for black.

"Impossible?" asked the emperor, mildly. It is when emperors and kings are at their mildest that they are at their most dangerous.

"Nothing that the emperor wishes could ever conceivably be impossible," said the minister of the right hand. "It will, however, be costly. You will drain the imperial treasury to produce this map. You will empty cities and farms to make the land to place your map upon. You will leave behind you a country that your heirs will be too poor to govern. As your advisor, I would be failing in my duties if I did not advise you of this."

"Perhaps you are right," said the emperor. "Perhaps. But if I were to listen to you and to forget my map world, to leave it unconsummated, it would haunt my world and my mind, and it would spoil the taste of the food on my tongue and of the wine in my mouth."

And then he paused. Far away in the gardens they could hear the sound of a nightingale. "But this map land," confided the emperor, "is still only the beginning. For even as it is being constructed, I shall already be pining for and planning my masterpiece."

"And what would that be?" asked the minister of the right hand, mildly.

"A map," said the emperor, "of the Imperial Dominions, in which each house shall be represented by a life-sized house, every mountain shall be depicted by a mountain, every tree by a tree of the same size and type, every river by a river, and every man by a man."

The minister of the right hand bowed low in the moonlight, and he

walked back to the Imperial Palace several respectful paces behind the emperor, deep in thought.

It is recorded that the emperor died in his sleep, and that is true, as far as it goes—although it could be remarked that his death was not entirely unassisted; and his oldest son, who became emperor in his turn, had little interest in maps or mapmaking.

The island in the lake became a haven for wild birds and all kinds of waterfowl, with no man to drive them away. They pecked down the tiny mud mountains to build their nests, and the lake eroded the shore of the island, and in time it was forgotten entirely, and only the lake remained.

The map was gone, and the mapmaker, but the land lived on.

“KEEPSAKES AND TREASURES”

This story, subtitled “A Love Story,” began life as a comic, or part of it did, written for Oscar Zarate’s noir collection, *It’s Dark in London*, illustrated by Warren Pleece. Warren did an excellent job, but I was dissatisfied with the story, and I wondered what had made the man who called himself Smith what he was. Al Sarrantonio asked me for a story for his 999 anthology, and I decided it would be interesting to revisit Smith and Mr. Alice and their story. They also turn up in another tale in this collection.

I think there are more stories about the unpleasant Mr. Smith to be told, particularly the one in which he and Mr. Alice come to a parting of the ways.

“THE FACTS IN THE CASE OF THE DEPARTURE OF MISS FINCH”

This story began when I was shown a Frank Frazetta painting of a savage woman flanked by tigers and asked to write a story to