

**Upon the Silent Shore**  
by Fred Coppersmith

**Author's Note:** A slightly modified version of this story appeared in the 1999 issue of *Kalliope*, the Penn State literary magazine.

*The forces that affect our lives, the influences that mold and shape us, are often like whispers in a distant room, teasingly indistinct, apprehended only with difficulty.*  
- Charles Dickens

The poet awoke, as if from a deep, fathomless sleep, remembering little of his death or the details of his resurrection, knowing only that both had occurred and that he now was here, seemingly alive, in this strange yet somehow familiar place. Whether he owed his life to miracle or medicine he could not say. He recalled only fragments, flashes, vague images and phrases he could not piece together or explain. He knew, somehow, that he had died, was dimly aware that his death and rebirth *must* have occurred, but he did not understand how he knew this or remember precisely what had happened. He knew none of the particulars – not the hows or the whys or the reasoning behind things – knew only that he was here, breathing, seemingly alive. And that he was not alone.

The room was quiet and mostly shadow, but there were eyes watching him from the corners. The poet felt their gaze upon him, sensed them moving in the darkness, staring, sizing him up. They watched from all directions, these silent observers, as if the poet were a caged exhibit, an insect pinned beneath a dissector's scalpel, awaiting scrutiny beneath the blade. He could not see them – could, in fact, see little beyond the length of his own pale, thin arm or the slender column of light that surrounded him – but he felt their proximity, felt the heat of other bodies in the room and the weight of unseen eyes upon him. He shivered, recalling a line of verse he had read once as a boy, a line whose author he could not remember but whose words now haunted him nevertheless: "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before..." The poet watched the shadows and the shadows watched him back.

"Who's there?" he cried. "Name yourself. Show your faces." But the darkness gave no answer, merely echoed his words with its whispers: faint, phantom-like voices, scarcely audible, cold and indifferent like the far off call of the sea. *We are here*, these ghost murmurs seemed to say, *and we are watching, but you, you are alone*. The poet could discern no figure standing in the blackness, no moving shadow besides his own. The silence was unbroken; the room remained deathly still.

He tried to stand, to lift his naked body from the cold sandstone floor, but his legs were weak and they buckled beneath him as if made of water. He lay there, collapsed on the hard gray rock, tired, worn out, surprised at the aches in his body and the dull pain in his legs and knees. He could neither stand nor, he soon discovered, lift his arms without difficulty; they hung limp at his sides like a marionette's arms, as heavy and as useless as dead wood. He *could* manage, but even then only with effort, to sit up, to watch the silent shadows from his lamplit spot upon the floor, to look for movement in the otherwise lightless room, and to lap at the small bowl of water that someone – the shadow watchers no doubt – had placed at his side. Like a mongrel dog, he thought, running through the last of its litany of tricks: sit up, roll over, play dead. Performance for an unseen master. Pavlov, the poet decided – not even sure he remembered who that was – would be proud.

Then he saw the numbers, inked on the blanched skin of his forearm. 131-2. He at first did not recognize them, thought them perhaps a strange cuneiform or hieroglyphic, a sailor's tattoo that would spell out *Mom* or a lover's name if he stared long enough, hard enough. He did not understand their purpose, their meaning, just below his left elbow. They could not actually be...numbers, could they? He had not actually been...branded, had he? The idea seemed impossible, and yet there they were, the miniature numerals neatly stamped into the bare flesh.

There had to be a reason, he thought, some logical explanation. These markings had to hold some answer, some clue. If he could only decipher them, he might be able to fit together the jigsaw puzzle of his mind. He might remember who he was. He very nearly smiled at the thought. But *then* he saw the shackles, felt their presence on his legs, and any hint of a smile faded from his lips. They clung round his ankles, the chain between his feet snapped but the manacles themselves clamped tight around the flesh like the jaws of a beast, the coils of its tail wagging from his right leg into the Stygian darkness. He tugged at the trailing line – with as much effort as his wearied body would allow – its rusted links scraping along the ground, and was surprised when he felt resistance, when he did not see the other end of the chain snake into sight. He pulled but the chain held fast, mooring him to this room of shadows.

Am I a prisoner here? the poet wondered, fingering the russet-colored wrought iron loops at his side, tracing his unsteady hands along the small, interlocking metal curves. I must be...but why? Have I been condemned for a crime I cannot remember, cast in chains for some unknowable offense? Why am I here? He sifted through the debris of his memory, groped for any scintilla, any spark of recognition, but he found nothing apart from that strange sense of familiarity. He knew this place, had been here before, but he did not know how, or when. He did not know why. He remembered this place, the darkness, the fear, remembered voices, questions, whispers – even dimly remembered dying here – but he could not recall the details, the specific events that surrounded these memories and put them in perspective, gave them meaning. They were only pieces now, crumbs of some larger whole that had broken apart in his mind. It was like watching your life through the lens of a camera obscura, he thought – seeing the truth inverted, seeing the periphery but only able to guess at the entirety. Recognizing but not truly remembering, knowing but not understanding. Memory, as seen through a glass, darkly.

Where am I? he wondered. What is this place, this cold, haunted room of stone floors and locked chains, of mute shadows that envelop a man in their silence like thick cobwebs clinging to his face, surround him as a corona encircles a sun? Have I, like Dante, descended to the depths of some strange hell to atone for some forgotten sin, some past transgression from a life I cannot recall? Where, then, is my Virgil, my guide out of this abyss, a fellow poet to watch over me in my descent? Why won't they answer me? he wondered. Why won't they respond? These shadow watchers had bound him here, chained him like an animal, and yet they did not seem to care about him, seemed content to do no more than watch patiently, indifferently, waiting forever if need be – though for what, the poet did not know.

Perhaps, he reasoned, they are waiting for me to die once again.

He tugged again at the chain, half expecting, hoping, that the tether would come loose this time, would unhook him from the shadows, like a puppet being cut from its strings. When it didn't, when it still anchored him, he stared at the links in disbelief and resignation. That all of this was real and not some fevered dream, not a figment of his own imagination or the stuff of smoke and mirrors – that he had indeed died and been reborn, snatched from the grave and death's sharp talons, only to be imprisoned here in this room with not even all his memories to sustain him and only the vaguest sense of what had led to this point – still seemed a sort of cruel joke, the sort of wretched twist ending that a sadistic O. Henry might write. It was maddening, ridiculous, incomprehensible. Lazarus through the looking glass. Surely, he thought, this cannot be real. Surely none of this can actually be real.

And yet there were the leg irons, shut tight against his ankles. There was the chain, his leash, trailing past him across the floor. There, too, were the numbers inscribed on the flesh. Here he was, a poet who could not remember himself, who had come undone and was as blind as the aged Homer to whatever odd Fates now held him in their sway, dangling by a thread, blind to whatever awful mysteries lurked waiting and watching in the shadows, biding their time. He did not want to believe it, did not want to accept this as anything but a delusion or a dream. Madness would be preferable, he thought. Understandable. And yet, this seemed all *too* real.

The air seemed to have grown too dense as well, thickened, almost congealed in his throat like cold porridge, as if he were breathing through dense layers of gauze or had swallowed a sandstorm whole. He coughed – suddenly a chore in itself – feeling the dry ache in his chest. This, he imagined, must be how bedouins feel, bivouacked in the cruel heart of the desert, blistering in the pitiless sun – or what happens to a man lost at sea just before he drowns, in that split second before his panicked lungs gasp their last breath and he sinks like a stone beneath the surface. These are the death throes, he told himself, fighting an urge to laugh hysterically at the sheer absurdity. This is a body seizing up on itself. A life's last legs, a life's last stand. The final act before rigor mortis sets in.

The poet's head throbbed; he felt feverish, weak, strangely disoriented, like he was skirting the shores of delirium, testing the waters, and then drowning in the undertow. His head swam with visions: nightmarish wraiths howling, snarling like rabid dogs, blood and flecks of spittle at their gaping mouths; conjured spirits and demons beyond measure, their inhuman bodies convulsed in paroxysms of mad laughter, their ghastly faces painted in Cheshire grins; vast monstrosities without name; terrible lumbering beasts whose hungers could not be sated – *more devils than vast hell can hold* – like some horrible scene out of Hiëronymus Bosch. Here there be tygers, the poet thought, the din of awful voices pounding, clamoring, in his head. Here there be dragons.

His mind raced, his body trembled. He could not think, he could not breathe. He felt uncomfortable in his own skin. A cold sweat beaded on his forehead. For a moment he imagined he saw a figure standing in the darkness, a man garbed in black deeper than the shadows, watching him intently, knowingly. *And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming.* The man smiled, as if bemused, turned, and then was gone. In his place stood a great Cyclopean eye, glazed with the milky white of cataract, staring sightlessly at the poet. Its blind hatred was palpable in the air. But then it, too, was gone, vanished like a chimera or waking dream.

The poet's mind ached. "No more!" he cried. "None of this is real." Though whether he meant to convince himself or the dark eyes watching he could not say. Nothing made sense. How could any of this – the nightmares, the ghost images, the laughing monsters in the abyss of darkness – truly be real? It didn't seem possible...and yet, it was. He was tired of it, bone-weary. He felt like an automaton whose clockwork gears have run down, teeth rusted and bent, or a golem of soft earth and clay, washed away in the tide or a storm. Atrophy or erosion: slow death all the same.

Had the poet been a chemist or known anything of hallucinogens and their effect – had the words *ergot* or *lysergic acid* meant anything but nonsense to his muddled brain – he might have better absorbed these phantasms, these strange visions. He might even have attributed their cause to the small pewter bowl still half full of water at his side, might have cursed himself for drinking it or railed against whatever unseen specter had placed it within his reach. But he knew more of poetry than of potions, more of muses than of medicines, and he did not understand what was happening. He could not understand it. His mind reeled; the shadows seemed to creep closer; he could not hold it all in his head. And amid all the visions, worse than any demon, beast or terror, one nagging thought persisted, one certainty remained: this had happened before; this would happen again. For all the fires that blazed inside him, all the aches that plagued his body and all the sights that disturbed his mind, what frightened the poet most – terrified him, in fact – was that terrible sense of déjà vu and foreboding. The toxins that even now swam through his bloodstream were not wholly unfamiliar to his body, and while the poet could not remember the details of his past – had had those parts of his memory sealed off – he knew that this was only one step in a cycle, one rung on a ladder that descended ever deeper into hell.

"Where are you, Virgil?" the poet whispered, his body weak and drowsing. The cold floor seemed suddenly quite comfortable and he lay back upon it, shutting his eyes. "Where are your maps of this underworld, old man, your charts of this wonderland maze? Where do I go? Which way do I turn?"

"Why am I here...?"

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The man who emerged from the darkness, who even now stood watching over the poet's fitfully sleeping form, had never heard of Virgil, or of Dante, or of the countless others whose half-remembered verse crawled through the poet's brain or had trembled from his lips. Their words were meaningless to this man, unfamiliar, the voices of long dead forgotten ghosts – or simply the ravings of a madman, delusions he would have had neither the time nor the inclination to interpret. He had not, in fact, listened to the poet's cries, had instead busied himself by preparing for the task at hand. He would have recognized no need to have listened, to have deciphered the words and understood. It was not his place, not part of his job. Everything had been recorded; every spoken syllable would be analyzed, processed, neatly transcribed, indexed and filed for later reference. Should any of it prove useful in his interrogation, the Ministry would let him know. The Ministry would always let him know.

He was a tall man, well over six foot, smartly dressed in the sable vestments of his office, clean shaven, the hair about his temples beginning to thin and gray – but otherwise was quite nondescript, certainly not the sort one might immediately mistake for a demon or nightmarish wraith. He had a plain face, as unremarkable as flat stone, and eyes the color of slate that occasionally watched the poet as he slept.

An inquisitor by trade, he carried with him the tools of his profession: assorted vials and syringes of serums and toxins, each tailored to a certain purpose, each more potent and crippling than the last; a short blade, perhaps only three quarters of an inch long, crude but effective if properly applied; finally, a small tablet, roughly the size of his palm, linked to the Ministry's files and central computer. A bevy of other, less savory implements were also at his disposal should the subject prove uncooperative and should further persuasion be deemed necessary. But the Ministry had confidence in its interrogator's skill and he himself would have foreseen no difficulties in encouraging the poet to speak, no reason to be overly brutal. This, after all, was not a special case.

He watched the poet for a moment, glancing then at the information printed on the tablet's flickering screen. Prisoner thirteen-one stroke two. He scanned the dossier the Ministry had provided – birth date, height, eye color and so on – but found nothing he did not already know, nothing worth his further attention. He tapped the screen and the file vanished, as if erasing the last vestige of the poet's identity.

The inquisitor knelt, syringe in hand, over the thin naked body curled upon the floor. He had no trouble finding the vein; the needle sank into the bloodstream with ease. The poet's body soon began to stir. The interrogation had begun.

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When the poet awoke – he knew not how many hours later – he was not immediately aware of the figure standing over him. He felt like a man almost drowned, long submerged beneath the sea, like a man buried alive, gasping for breath and saved only by chance at the last instant. His head throbbed, his body ached; he could not even sit himself up. All he could think was, I am alive! Somehow, inexplicably, I am still alive. He might have laughed had he the strength.

And then he did see the figure standing over him, the inquisitor, a tower of a man half concealed in shadow. The poet could not see his face, not clearly, but he knew this man – or, at the very least, knew his purpose. He was sure of it, as he had been sure that he knew this place, knew that he had been brought here before. He did not know this man by name, could not remember precisely when they might have met or under what circumstances, but the sense of familiarity was too strong to ignore. I am back in hell, the poet thought, and here is Lucifer's chief lieutenant come to have a word.

For a long moment, though, the man did not speak, seemed almost uninterested in the poet at all. He glanced at something in his hand, obscured from the poet's view by the darkness, and muttered a few unintelligible words. When eventually he turned toward the poet, actually regarded the body lying beneath him on the hard stone floor, it was simply to sigh, "The prisoner will stand."

That this strange and ominous figure was speaking to him, the poet thought only too clear. Yet upon hearing those words – "the prisoner" – actually pronounced, his fears given form, he could scarcely believe it were true. There must be some mistake, the poet thought. He cannot mean me. What have I done wrong? What crime have I committed that I am no longer a name, but only "the prisoner"? No, surely, he cannot mean me.

But again the tall man commanded, "The prisoner will stand."

"I...I can't," the poet finally answered. "My legs...they're too weak. I –"

The inquisitor turned toward the small object held in his palm, tapped its surface twice with his finger, and suddenly the poet's world was awash with pain. He clutched at his chest, screaming aloud. He had never felt physical pain like this before, a terrible blinding pain that seemed to set every nerve ending on fire, that seemed to claw at him from inside. This was worse than seeing demons, worse than going slowly mad – worse still than being dead. This was torture.

"The prisoner," the tall man repeated, leaning over the poet, "will stand. Or the pain will continue."

The poet nodded, as best he could, and began to lift himself from the floor. His entire body seemed to conspire against him, to howl with every inch he tried to move. His legs were indeed weak and felt like tissue paper beneath him, but somehow they held his weight, found some hidden reserve of strength within and used that to prop his pained body up. Somehow, if only because the agony of standing was preferable to that of not, the poet rose to his feet.

"Better," the inquisitor said. He tapped his palm again and the pain subsided – wonderfully, miraculously, the poet thought.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked. "Why am I here? What do you want?"

The inquisitor pressed his thumb to the face of the object in his hand – an object the poet now recognized as a small keypad of some sort – and a hint of the earlier pain crept through the poet's body.

"The prisoner will speak only when spoken to," the inquisitor said. "If the prisoner does not speak, then he will be punished. The prisoner will not ask questions, he will only answer them. If the prisoner ignores these rules, he will, again, be punished." He paused, staring at the poet. They were perhaps only arm's distance apart. "This," he added, "is understood."

It was not a question, the poet realized, not subject to argument, yet the interrogator appeared to expect him to reply.

"This is understood," he said again.

"Yes," the poet answered. "It is understood."

"Good. Then we may continue."

He tapped the keypad in his palm again and the poet winced, expecting the pain to return. But instead, the man simply said, "Name?"

"I...I don't know," replied the poet. "I don't remember...You mean you don't know?"

This time the pain did come and it took all the poet's strength merely not to collapse.

"Name?" he was asked again when finally the burning fires in his body were extinguished.

"I don't know," he said.

"Where were you born?"

"I...I don't know."

"Why are you here?"

"Please...I don't know..."

The inquisitor seemed to think for a moment, as if mulling this over. The poet feared that he might decide not to believe him, might decide he didn't like the poet's answer, might then decide to punish the poet for he what he perceived as a lie. But instead all he said was, "Why do you think you are here?"

The poet wondered. "I don't know," he said.

"You must have some idea," offered the other man. "A guess even." He seemed genuinely interested now, intrigued to hear what the poet thought of this situation, why he thought he was here, naked and chained in a strange room, the subject of interrogation. "Surely you can at least take a guess."

"I..." the poet began, "I am...I am a prisoner...?"

"And why would you think that?" the man asked.

"You...you called me a prisoner. And the chains...I thought –"

"Did I?" the man asked. "Did I call you a prisoner?" He seemed concerned, worried he had said something wrong, something to upset the poet. "Are you sure? When was this?"

"J-just now," the poet stammered, confused. "You...you said 'the prisoner will stand.'"

The inquisitor seemed to think. "I may have said that," he finally replied, "but why would you assume I was speaking to you?"

"I thought...I thought the pain..."

"The pain? What pain? Are you in any pain?"

"You said....no, you said I would be punished. I heard you. You said I was a prisoner here."

"Are you sure?" the tall man asked again. "Are you absolutely sure? There are many prisoners here. But why would you assume I would think you were one?"

"But you said –"

"I may have said – what was it? the prisoner will stand? I may have said that. Or that he will be punished if he does not follow the rules. Prisoners who do not follow the rules *must* be punished. But you don't really think I called you a prisoner, do you? That isn't really what you heard..."

The poet did not know what to think. “No, you’re...you’re twisting everything around. I heard you say it...I know I did...”

“Sometimes we hear what we want to hear. What we need to hear. The mind plays tricks, tells us what the heart already believes. Perhaps you wanted to hear me say that you were a prisoner.”

“No. I... Why? Why would I want to hear that?”

“Who can say? Why does a guilty man do anything? Why does his conscience assert itself when it does, tell him what is true even when he won’t believe it? Especially when he won’t believe it.”

“A...guilty man?”

“Well surely you must be guilty if you are a prisoner. Why else would you be here?”

“But you said – ”

“What? What did I say now? That you were not a prisoner here? Just a moment ago you said the exact opposite, told me yourself that I had called you a prisoner. That I had threatened to punish you if you did not comply, did not follow the rules. As all prisoners must. Which is it? Are you a prisoner or are you not?”

The poet could only stare back. He could not speak. He did not know what he could say.

“If you are a prisoner here,” the tall man continued, as if considering some new revelation, “it would certainly explain the shackles. It would explain why you are here.” He paused, stared at the poet, smiled. “It would make everything easier.”

“But I’m not,” the poet answered. “I’m not a prisoner. I can’t be. I’ve committed no crime.”

“None that you remember.”

“No...no, I would remember. I’d remember, I’m sure of it.”

The inquisitor sighed. “Isn’t it just as likely that that you wouldn’t? That something happened, that you’ve forgotten, blocked it from your memory because it hurts too much? Refused to accept what you know is perfectly true? Prisoners do that, you know. Prisoners lie – even to themselves. But they are always found out. The lie is *always* exposed. Isn’t it just possible, then, that you do in fact belong here?”

“No...there must...there must be...”

“There must have been a mistake? There must be some other explanation?”

“Yes.”

“But you said you were a prisoner. *You* said it yourself. Don’t try to deny it.”

He tapped his keypad once again and the sound of the poet’s voice echoed throughout the room, emanating from some hidden loudspeaker. “I am...I am a prisoner...” the recording said. The words were no longer a question, the poet noticed, the tone no longer hesitant. This was an admission of guilt, the words of a man ashamed of what he was but who could not pretend to be otherwise. These could not be *his* words, the poet thought, and yet obviously they were – different somehow, the cadence not quite the same, but his words nonetheless. How could he argue with someone like this, someone who could twist his words with such ease?

“Perhaps,” the inquisitor said, “we should begin again.”