

"Madstones" is a collection including six never-before-seen works of fantasy and science fiction: three short stories, a play in one act, a screenplay, and a prose poem. Six zircons in the rough, hair of the dog that bit you for the psyche.

Madstones

By Donald Huffman Graff

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Donald Huffman Graff

MADSTONES



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Rama with the Ax

The drums rolled to a crescendo of cymbals as Fortunato, his black eyes blazing, plunged the sword through the neck of the beautiful blonde.

The crowd of watching people, horror-struck, drew in and held their breath as one. Fortunato drew out the blade. The woman stood unharmed, unscathed, without a drop of blood on her neck or upon the sword, and no trace of any wound, her ice-blue eyes fixed on the awed spectators.

A silent moment passed and then a roar of applause filled the house.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Petra!" Fortunato said, extending his hand toward the miraculously still-living beauty, who took a bow as the prolonged round of applause rose louder, echoing through the smoky nightclub.

"If you stare at that blonde any harder, Ed, your eyes are gonna pop out," said one man watching from the wings to the man beside him.

Behind them, in through the stage door, came a man carrying a battered saxophone case, his coat collar turned up against the rainy Seattle night. He looked worn, older than his forty-four years, with graying, tight-curved black hair beneath his pork-pie hat, creased features that might have been carved from dark-stained, weather-beaten wood, a man with one more gig to play tonight.

Ben Blue and his Big Band Featuring Beulah Summers was the name in big letters at the top of the marquee at Chester's. That of the Amazing Fortunato and Petra had been added just that day, below that of Bishop and Byrnes and above that of the Ladybugs, all three acts listed in smaller type than the band, which was really only an octet, and short the trombonist it would have needed, at the very least, to be a true big band. Chester's was a rundown vaudeville showcase, the last one left in town, just a couple of blocks from the original Skid Row. You couldn't even call it a variety theater, it was really a bar, and vaudeville was twenty years dead and everyone knew it, but Mordecai thought he could pack the customers in with a revue that was barely half a notch above burlesque.

Mordecai Weiss was the owner, even though the place was called Chester's. When anybody asked about what had happened to Chester, the bartender, Ziff, explained that he was staying at a state-run bed and breakfast. Mordecai had bought the joint at a fire sale price just as Chester was headed up the river and had legal expenses to cover.

Now Mordecai was as much taken with the band's singer, Beulah Summers, as Ed Bishop, straight man of the comedy team of Bishop and Byrnes, was with Petra. Had it not been so, they would probably never have gotten the gig; it being so, they were the house band.

"Mordecai takes me to a deli to talk business and Beulah has to come along, because her name is going on the marquee too," Ben Blue (it had been Golubetz back in the old country) was telling Yancey Doyle, cornet player from Frisco and newcomer to the band after auditioning with a "Three-Fingered Jack" that had knocked everyone's socks off. He along with Ben on clarinet and Slade Granger on tenor sax were the band's main soloists. Yancey could smoke Ben and Slade could smoke either of them, but Ben was the leader; he had a head for business, made up the playlist, made peace when artistic temperaments flared, did the jive talk between numbers and sang the odd duet with

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Beulah. A born showman, he wore an electric blue suit that hurt your eyes to look at.

They were talking in the dressing room. The sax player entered and, setting down his instrument case to remove his damp, threadbare coat and hat, joined his band-mates getting ready to go on after the comedy act. Both gave Slade a nod and continued talking.

"So Beulah goes to powder her nose while we're waiting for our orders," Ben went on, "and Mordecai says to me, all down at the mouth, 'Now I know she's not Jewish because she goes to a delicatessen and orders a BLT.' 'She's not Jewish,' I tell him, 'she's black.' 'She could pass,' he says, 'she could pass. All the other shvartzers in your band are clearly that!'"

But a deal was a deal, and Ben's band remained the headline act in the revue, even though Beulah would not, it seemed, become Mrs. Weiss, at least not with a Jewish wedding.

The band's drum kit and piano had been set up at rear stage before the show, where a sheer curtain separated them from the spotlighted front stage acts and a heavy curtain hung behind them. On first were the dancers, the Ladybugs, as Mordecai had renamed them, their former moniker having been the Cartwright Sisters, which he had decided was too wholesome, and he put them in the skimpiest costumes they would wear.

The band did a set backing up the Ladybugs and then took a break, except for the drummer, Jamarr Jackson Jones, who stayed to do rim shots for the Bishop and Byrnes comedy team. The band played their own set last. "None of that bebop," Mordecai had told Ben. "That'll close down a club quicker than anything. Give 'em big band swing, standards, stuff everybody knows and likes."

So they gave them standards. They played "Summertime," "Limehouse Blues," "Take the A Train," they played "Evenin'," "Round Midnight," "Afro Blue," "Egyptian Fantasy," they played "I Cover the Waterfront," "On Green Dolphin Street," they played

"Straight, No Chaser," and they did a jam to Rhythm changes if they got called for an encore. Ben saw that everybody got to take a solo, not just horns and reed, but drums, piano, guitar, bass too.

And the place was packed tonight, so Mordecai and Ben seemed vindicated. But maybe it was the last-minute addition of The Amazing Fortunato and Petra to the bill that had done the trick. No one knew much about them; they had arrived just before show time in a hulking, black, brand new '59 Cadillac, puttering into the space next to the year-old Edsel of Mordecai's that he was trying to sell. After suitcases, hatbox, and footlocker, the stagehands had removed a large, heavy, oblong box from the trunk, bringing the last item in just as a flash of lightning and clap of thunder had ushered in the night rain, momentarily illuminating the Cadillac's fins, jutting like the folded wings of some monstrous bat.

There were two regular dressing rooms at Chester's, a women's and a men's, both doubling as storerooms for items too heavy or uninteresting to be lifted by any light-fingered aspiring show biz types. The Ladybugs, Hortense, Lourdes, and Madeleine, occupied the women's dressing room as the stagehands bumpily lugged the last big box down the stairs into the basement, followed by a man in a black cape and top hat and a woman in a sable coat, bare-headed: a stunning, blue-eyed blonde.

"Did you see that?" Beulah, who had been hanging outside in the hallway, said as Hortense Cartwright poked her red-headed mug out the dressing room door, apparently to see what all the racket was.

"Yeah, how about that?" Hortense said, catching sight of the descending duo. "They got their own dressing room, down in the basement."

"Where Mordecai keeps the booze?" Beulah began, but the Ladybug had already shut the door, so she quipped instead to Ed Bishop, who she'd been shooting the breeze with: "I guess they don't drink or nothing."

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Ed, unperceiving, gazed after the blonde and took out his pocket comb to dapper his slicked brown hair.

The show began at eight. The Ladybugs' routine went over well enough, and when the curtain fell the stagehands got the props for the magic show ready. Fortunato and Petra shortly made their appearance in the alcove adjoining backstage that served as a green room, emerging from their subterranean dressing room like a hierophant and his hierodule from some dark crypt.

Fortunato was of medium height, compact, dark in a vaguely Mediterranean way, though it was impossible to guess his origin, and clean-shaven, with black eyes and hair. He seemed to be in middle years, though his age too was hard to guess. He was impeccably dressed in a black dinner jacket, slacks, and tie, white gloves, shirt, and spats, these over shiny black patent leather shoes. His straight ebony cane tapered from an ivory grip to a nickel end piece, a larger version of the trademark wand of his profession. He carried it in his left hand, top hat in his right.

Petra's knock-'em-dead costume consisted of a low cut, steel-spangled one-piece swimsuitish thing, cut low at the top and high at the bottom, fishnet hose, and similarly spangled stiletto heels. She seated herself on the sofa while Fortunato remained standing; neither spoke.

Soon they got their cue to go on, the curtain rose, and they stepped out into the spotlight to a round of welcoming applause.

"Man, will ya look at the crowd in that balcony!" Phil Byrnes (Birnbbaum on his driver's license) said from the corner of his mouth to his partner, Ed Bishop, as they looked out onstage from the wings.

When Ed didn't come back with a line, the fireplug of a comic glanced up sidelong at the taller straight man, catching him riveted to

Petra's plunging neckline. "At least gimme a 'va-va-voom!,' huh?" Phil muttered finally.

"Awww..." Ed grumbled, still staring at Fortunato's assistant as the duo began their act.

They started with a couple of numbers that any third-rate act could have equaled, a chain of silk handkerchiefs from Fortunato's pocket, some ping pong balls from Petra's mouth. Cheap carnny tricks that would have barely impressed the rubes in East Podunk, if that, these were nothing to a big city crowd. If the crowd didn't start to leave, the guys at least, it was solely because of Petra. Then the act warmed up when Fortunato, revealing his cane as a sword-cane as he drew a long, thin blade from it, did the sword through the neck trick.

As the clapping died down, Fortunato sheathed the sword-cane and approached a prop, which had come in the big box and had been placed onstage beneath a dust cover. He pulled the cover off, revealing a piece of statuary about two and a half feet tall, carved from dark basalt. The workmanship was exquisite, the subject repulsive. Bulbous, all rolls of fat, it resembled nothing so much as an overstuffed bag of offal, but seemed to be intended to be taken for the image of some living being, or a travesty of one, bloated to nausea yet never sated. From its bulk peeped a tiny head with an imbecilic yet callous expression on its flabby face: the embodiment of utter infantile selfishness.

The audience sat hushed. Fortunato, eyes closed, held his cane toward the statue and inclined his head slightly, as in a subtle, momentary act of supplication. Then he waved the cane at it, and it rose into the air and levitated.

The backstage spectators had seen the stagehands straining under its weight as they had set up. It was equally clear to them that no wires had been attached then or were now being manipulated from above to hoist it.

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Fortunato took his cane and, drawing the sword again from it, slashed below and above the hovering sculpture to demonstrate that there was nothing holding it up.

"The same can be done with a person," Fortunato declared, after lowering the statue to rest upon the stage again, guiding it with a smaller wand that seemed to the audience to have appeared miraculously in his hand, though from backstage it could be seen that he had produced it from his sleeve. He spoke in perfect English that suggested education without the distinctiveness of either Oxbridge or Ivy League, and with perhaps a hint of an accent as difficult to place as his appearance.

"Petra, stand here and prepare yourself!" he went on, indicating the spot with a gesture.

Before the awestruck audience, the magician waved the small wand back and forth before his assistant's eyes and soon she stood gazing blankly into the distance.

"She is in a trance," Fortunato pronounced in a stentorian stage whisper. He made further passes with the wand. Petra began to lean backward, and it seemed as though she would fall, but her feet lifted off the ground, she pivoted, remaining rigid, and was soon floating on her back three feet above the stage.

Applause resounded through the house. Fortunato took the sword again and swept it above and below Petra. Then he turned to the audience and declaimed: "We need a volunteer!"

Beulah had taken advantage of the chance to have the dressing room to herself while the Ladybugs had been on, and with their return was now getting the full lowdown on their performance and tonight's audience. Meanwhile, the band was in the men's dressing room, getting ready to go on after the comedy act.

"You should listen to classical, even if you play jazz," César Alba, the piano player, was telling Baptiste du Monde, the bassist. "Check out the way those cats vary their tempos..."

Baptiste, a New Orleans Creole of color and jazz purist who played his stand-up bass with elegant grace, listened with a smile of tolerant amusement. He wouldn't argue with César's taste for classical music, didn't look down on César, Slade, Jamarr, or Detroit Slim, the guitarist, for having played rhythm and blues; they had but wandered from the true path.

At that point Mordecai poked his nose through the door, and told César to join Jamarr onstage, to add "some silent-film-style suspense piano embellishments to the magic act," as Mordecai put it, and for a flourish at the act's finale the horn section was to join them. That meant Yancey and Slade, and horns in hand they took their places on cue, just as Fortunato turned to the audience and made his request for a volunteer.

"I'm your man," Ed called out immediately, elbowing another guy out of the way as he climbed onstage from the spot where he had stationed himself a few minutes before, in anticipation of just such an opportunity.

"Now, if you please," Fortunato told Ed, "I want you push the lovely Petra by the soles of her feet, gently, in that direction." He indicated the curtain behind the stage, toward which her head was pointed. Ed did so and Petra floated easily away.

Fortunato made another closed-eye nod to the statue, holding his wand toward it, and then flourished the wand at Petra. Then, as she got about ten feet from the curtain, she vanished, head first, the rest of her following as her body moved away.

The audience gasped and then applauded. Ed's jaw dropped too — he was clearly as astounded as anybody.

"Do we have a damsel in distress?" Fortunato asked at large, adding to Ed: "You should go and try to find her, my friend."

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Ed stepped tentatively the way Petra had gone, and, as he got to the same spot and Fortunato made another motion with the wand, he too disappeared, vanishing front to back, again to a round of applause.

"I cannot lose both my assistant and our brave volunteer," Fortunato declared. "I shall go and have a look myself." With another a wave of the wand he strode after the others and vanished in the same manner.

That was how it looked to the audience in front of the stage, but from where Phil stood backstage, things looked a little different. A black spot had appeared in midair when Fortunato had brandished his wand at the drifting Petra after Ed's push. The spot had grown quickly, like a jammed celluloid film strip melting before a hot projector bulb, black and bubbly around the edges, but where the bright spot in the center would have been, a strange vista had appeared instead, as though a hole had opened into a bizarre landscape of unearthly colors. By the time Petra reached it, it had become a circle that almost touched the floor, about seven feet in diameter, like a window opening into some other world.

And into this alien world Phil saw first Petra float swiftly, then his friend and partner Ed walk, followed by the Amazing Fortunato at a brisk stride. Each disappeared from the theater as they crossed the face of the circle away from Phil. At that moment they reappeared in the landscape within, but as tiny figures, far away, in a perspective that was oddly skewed. The figures zipped across it over a twisting network of pale bridges and out of Phil's field of view. He stood in shock, stunned.

Ed was unfamiliar with M. C. Escher and the word "topology" meant nothing to him, but he knew what he was seeing was all wrong. Petra still levitated a short distance ahead of him, but now she floated three feet above a white walkway that twisted and curved in defiance

of all the rules of geometry that he couldn't really recall from school but intuitively knew from everyday experience. The surface he and Petra were on seemed to be part of a system of pathways somehow suspended in space, a space lit by no sun or moon, nor by any apparent artificial lighting, but suffused by a sourceless glow of its own. The shifting colors would have been difficult for him to describe; the best anyone might do would be to call them sallow yellows and sickly pale greens, with spatters of febrile vermilion. How far that space extended was impossible to guess.

"Quite a view," came a voice behind him and Ed almost jumped, a jump that would have sent him plunging into the lambent void. He turned and saw Fortunato strolling behind him, at perfect ease, sword-cane sheathed and serving as a walking stick, wand presumably secreted again in his sleeve.

Too startled and disoriented to even ask the where they were or what was going on, Ed just gawked at the magician, who motioned to him with his free hand.

"Stay with Petra," Fortunato said. Ed turned again and saw her drifting along the glassy path, which luckily here was a straightaway. Ed hurried after her with Fortunato coming briskly behind. Ahead Ed now saw that the path widened into a platform, whereupon stood a telescope-like instrument and a group of masked and goggled human-like figures in white.

"I want to go home!" Ed's voice broke, but this was more to the point than any question.

"This won't take long," Fortunato said, taking him by the elbow. "Time flows more quickly here."

Petra reached the platform and stopped, hovering, her momentum suddenly spent. Ed hesitated as he caught up, but Fortunato ushered him insistently along. Now they stood facing the masked figures, Petra floating beside them.

"All is ready?" Fortunato addressed the white-clad figures, who replied with buzzing, clicking sounds incomprehensible to Ed.

Two of the beings went to one of the instruments and, standing on either side, adjusted knobs and levers. Between them and where Ed stood another bright blister appeared and grew into another hole hovering in midair. This one opened to an even more appalling view — the mouth of an immense creature like the one depicted by Fortunato's statue.

Ed gawked. His expression quickly changed to one of revulsion, and he wheeled to face Fortunato, Petra floating between them.

"You want to feed her to this thing, don't you?!" he croaked, shaking; he'd seen enough B-movies and serials to guess this.

"No," Fortunato said, nonplussed. "You see, Petra is no longer — has not for a long time been — among the living. She is, really, in a kind of trance. If she weren't — well, I'll show you." The magician passed his hand over his assistant's sightless eyes. Instantly she began to putrefy, decaying before Ed's horrified eyes into a stinking mass of dead flesh, sagging from her bones. "But she would hardly be useful to me thus, would she?" With a reverse motion Fortunato restored Petra to her former appearance.

"The image of this being you saw before was not actually to scale," He indicated the great quavering orifice before them. "The entity now fills the entirety of its own universe; hence its servitors must perforce occupy this other one, from which they tend to its needs. Our own it has no use for, except as a source of food. It lends some of its power to those who help it feed, enabling me to complete the project I conceived when I exhausted the possibilities of the urning."

Ed was lost, Fortunato unconcerned. "There is a purity to be found only in extremes," the magician continued. "The pleasure of destruction is the supreme one, the *summum bonum*; only in destroying all can I know it, and what more is there to know? When all life has been consumed the entity will consume itself. I alone will remain to

experience life's most sublime sensation, nothing. Now to get on with it I shall prime the pump, as they say. First one, then two, then many and all. And the entity likes its food live."

Ed stared in mute incomprehension. Fortunato smiled on him... Ed reeled backward and into the great devouring maw... And it fed, a gourmand savoring a first hors d'oeuvre...

Phil hadn't seen or heard all through the vortex, but he had glimpsed enough. His angle on the hole had been oblique, compared to that of the four musicians, but it had been just right for him to see Petra's putrefaction and his partner's awful fate in rapid, pixilated motion, about which there had been nothing funny.

He ran to find Mordecai and found him leaving his office after an inconclusive phone conversation with an out-of-work hooper.

Tap, a little soft shoe, it might go over, Mordecai had been musing, but he already had one dance act. What the hooper wanted was reasonable and his lack of professional representation wasn't an issue; he'd dropped the names of venues Mordecai knew, so he could call around and find out if the guy was okay. Now Fortunato had been booked by a top theatrical talent concern Mordecai had done business with before, though the agent who'd phoned him had not been anyone he knew personally, and the voice had had an odd buzzing, clicking quality to it.

"Mordecai!" Phil gasped, out of breath, "Ed's dead!"

"Oh come on, you two have a viable act with many good years ahead — but I guess that explains why you're off already," the owner said, glancing at his watch. "Did they throw eggs and stuff at him?"

"We haven't been on yet!" Phil cried, nearly hysterical. "That magician you hired did him in!"

"So you guys don't want to follow him on, is that it? Well — wait a minute, this is a new routine you're working on, isn't it? That's my Crazy Phil," Mordecai said, patting the distraught comic on the back.

"I'm not crazy!" Phil exclaimed, shaking loose. "Ed got into their act as an audience volunteer 'cause he was hot for the lady assistant, and the magician sent him off to this other weird place —"

Phil told the whole story while Mordecai listened with patient condescension. "It's time for you guys to go on," he said when Phil was out of steam.

"Ed's gone and I'm not going on!" Phil practically screamed.

"Don't raise your voice with me," Mordecai warned him, then led him back into the office. Mordecai hit the intercom button on his phone. "Wally?" he growled into the receiver. Wally was the bouncer, a big loogan from Chicago. "Find Ed. Right away."

Meanwhile, onstage, just enough time had elapsed since the three had disappeared for tension to reach a peak. Just before the spectators' attention might have wavered, they reappeared: Fortunato first, then Petra floating, and last, apparently, Ed.

All were moving in the same direction as before their disappearance. Just before Petra's head touched the gauzy back curtain Fortunato pivoted, caught her by the heel, and stopped her. Handing his cane to Ed he again produced the wand and, like an orchestra conductor, guided Petra back onto her feet. With a snap of his fingers he woke her. Deftly secreting the wand, he took his cane back, and Petra took a bow. The audience roared as they saw Ed leave the stage.

Fortunato continued to perform, requesting more volunteers from the audience. But the musicians behind him were distracted, not by his legerdemain, but by Ed; or not by Ed, for as soon as he passed out of view of the audience he vanished again, this time simply winking out.

"Did you see that?" Yancey said, stunned.

"I saw," answered Slade, who had been standing closest to Phil, with much the same vantage on what had transpired.

Jamarr and César sat speechless. César had intended to play some tremolo chords — his interpretation of Mordecai's instructions — to accompany the drum roll he'd anticipated from Jamarr during the disappearing act. But the sight of the bizarre rift and the nightmarish vista within, though from his angle he hadn't been able to witness the atrocity Phil had seen, followed by the second disappearance of the straight man, had rendered him bereft. Jamarr was in the same state.

"Damn, man," was all the drummer could say.

Ben had just then come up with Beulah, Detroit, and Baptiste, in anticipation of going on next. The guitarist and the bassist, laden with their instrument cases, had trailed, but the leader and the singer had seen Ed's final disappearance too, could see the floating rift, and by the time the two stragglers reached the wings to join Beulah, Ben was already gone.

Phil sat in Mordecai's office sipping a cup of coffee fortified with a generous jigger of brandy. Mordecai spoke with Wally the bouncer, who had just come in, his search of the place having found no trace of Ed. Mordecai meanwhile had heard Phil's whole disjointed account, and if he couldn't believe it literally, neither did he know quite what to think.

"Ed was a good straight man... not the best, but good... And what a guy! Going fifty-fifty with Phil when he could have asked for sixty-forty..." But Mordecai's maudlin moment was quickly over. "We've got to do something."

"Call the cops?"

Mordecai gave Wally a withering look. "And what are they going to do?"

"You think I can do something they can't?"

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"I'm not saying that! But it's way too soon to file a missing person —"

Just then Ben burst in without knocking. "Have you seen what's going on out there?" he blurted.

"We know," Mordecai said. "Phil can't go on, so you have to go on next —"

"How the hell are we gonna go on?!" Ben cut him off. "Come take a look!"

"Stay with Phil," Mordecai told Wally, and left with Ben.

When the two reached backstage, Fortunato had two more volunteers onstage, both in deep trance and levitating as Petra had been before; this time, it seemed, Petra would be steering the victims to their fate. The rift had become a festering wound in the fabric of space-time, bleeding a miasma of its strange spectra into the theater, accompanied by a sound of howling winds. The audience may have taken it for startling stage effects; no one backstage could.

"What do we do?" Bapiste's question was directed generally, though only those nearest could hear it — Jamarr, César, and Slade.

"We're going to play a set," Slade said, calm amid the storm.

The three other musicians looked to Mordecai. His eyes were glassy, blank, but he seemed to understand Slade and nodded. The gauzy back curtain went up, revealing the four musicians.

The audience was visible through the smoky haze, pale faces, dark faces, a scattering of black berets who had showed up late to hear the band, never imagining what they were in for.

Detroit, hurrying on last, pulled his black Gibson ES-335 out of its case and plugged it in to the amp. "I'm on!" he called, looking to his band mates.

Beulah, Yancy and Ben stood offstage, too shocked and stunned to perform, together with Mordecai. It was going to be Detroit, César, Jamarr, Baptiste — the rhythm section — and Slade.

Slade Granger stood like a statue of black iron, now coming to animated life to fulfill its duty as guardian of the temple precinct. Fortunato caught sight of him, and froze, in the midst of his act; he seemed to recognize a challenge, and fixed a hard gaze on Slade.

Then in their minds' eyes, everyone saw Slade Granger coughing and spitting in the junk-sick morning... Nothing but an old shmecker existing only for more heroin... Arms, legs, any accessible part of the body covered with needle tracks... At any moment, a needle hole might pop open to emit a gout of blood...

Where Parker, Holliday, Davis, Coltrane, Pass, Getz, and so many — too many — others had been, he had been, and survived, somehow. Survived and beaten the addiction, but the damage was done, and he would not last much longer. He knew it, knew that he had been sent back for a time only, because he had something to do, and now was the time to do it.

The vision of Slade the junkie evaporated, Fortunato's preemptive first strike deflected. Suddenly Petra stood in a cold blinding light before Slade.

"I have borne an unendurable torment," Petra's voice belled in hollow tones of brass.

"Me too, sister, me too," Slade said, checking the reed on his saxophone, and Petra faded into the shadows.

Slade hit a note, chosen almost at random, first tentatively, then playing it again, more forcefully, and then a third time, sustaining it. The band seemed confused, at first, only Jamarr staying with him, generating an understated rhythm. Then César picked up on what they were doing, echoing the same note, trying it at different octaves, and then Baptiste got it too, incorporating the drone into a walking bass line. César built harmonies around it, constructing chords first in thirds,

then in fourths, in fifths, experimenting with different voicings. Detroit tentatively hit harmonics on different strings, found what worked, and began adding fretted notes, alternately embellishing César's chords and Slade's lead line.

Slade played a simple scale-based blues line, bringing them up-tempo as he did. Jamarr played ride rhythms on the cymbals, even eighths. The rest of the band stayed with him, together in a hard bop groove.

Suddenly a cold wave of hate struck the musicians, Fortunato blasting them with the full force of his mastery, his contempt for all but himself, anything expressive of life. The wave interacted with the wailing winds and phantasmal spectra out of the otherworld and coalesced, reinforcing one another into a deadly psychic pattern. The players wavered in the face of it; surely it would overwhelm them — no human being could stand against a force that strained the foundation of existence itself.

Slade hit a high seventh, wrenching a field holler filled with the yearnings of all the fellahin peoples of the world out of his horn, and led the band into some other blues, moving back and forth between two full chords.

Slade began to vary the scale, raising or flattening tones, creating new modes out of his imagination as new ideas came to him. Working his horn to the utmost, he played intervals above the octave, coaxed microtones out of it. The sound, incredible, unearthly, beautiful, sent out waves of interference, disrupting Fortunato's death waves, and constructive interference, shoring up and supporting the tottering structure of the universe.

Fortunato sent another, greater wave, a pure manifestation of his will, total determination to gratify the self in utter defiance, utter disregard for the very existence of others, raised to the state of cosmic law. The audience and everyone watching backstage quailed; surely

they must perish. Mordecai and Beulah took each other in their arms, awaiting their final moment.

Again it seemed the musicians would fail, must fail, in the face of Fortunato's onslaught. Who could withstand it? But once again Slade took the lead, and the jam, in a minor tonality full of sorrow, of unrequited love, of all the paths that never quite link, a lament for every Mordecai and Beulah, slowly built, singing too of life and hope, and reached a peak, Slade playing long passages of sixteenth notes, laying down sheets of sound, working the keys of his sax so fast that he seemed to have many arms.

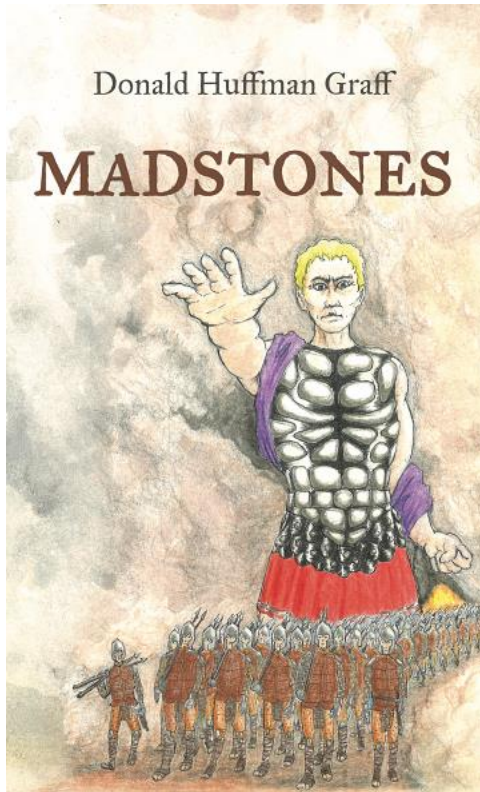
The notes moaned, laughed, cried, sang, howled; and in the face of Fortunato's adamant will to power, Slade *was* freedom. No, not him, not even the band, more: the music itself, the human spark, the wellspring of creativity at its intersection with the nature of sound, exhorting all hearers to believe the truth told in this universal language, not Fortunato's deceptions.

Then as it seemed the crossfire of music and magic would degenerate into chaos, Slade took the horn from his mouth, signaled to the band, and resumed playing as their raga modulated to a major chord built around the tone that had been with them all along. The tempo slowed, and the music spoke of resignation, acceptance, and ultimate affirmation, and resolved on the first note Slade had played, returning to the goal, one, the most important thing.

The rift rotated, revealing the second rift within rushing up to fit into it. Under a momentary black eclipse, the circle swept toward Fortunato. The gross, greedy mouth became visible as from within, palpitating and pulling him in, as a glutton snatches a parting morsel while getting the bum's rush from an all-you-can-eat buffet. The rift shrank to nothing and was gone. And where Fortunato had been standing, there was nothing but a pair of shiny, black, patent leather shoes...

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Petra has not been seen since either, and their stuff is locked up in the basement still, including that hideous statue. Mordecai may try and hock it all at some point, like he will the Cadillac before the city tows it. Ben's band is still headlining at Chester's, Phil is doing solo stand-up for now, maybe that hooper will get the open spot in the line-up, and the word is that Mordecai and Beulah have become an item. It just goes to show, you never know what's going to happen. Got a light?



"Madstones" is a collection including six never-before-seen works of fantasy and science fiction: three short stories, a play in one act, a screenplay, and a prose poem. Six zircons in the rough, hair of the dog that bit you for the psyche.

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