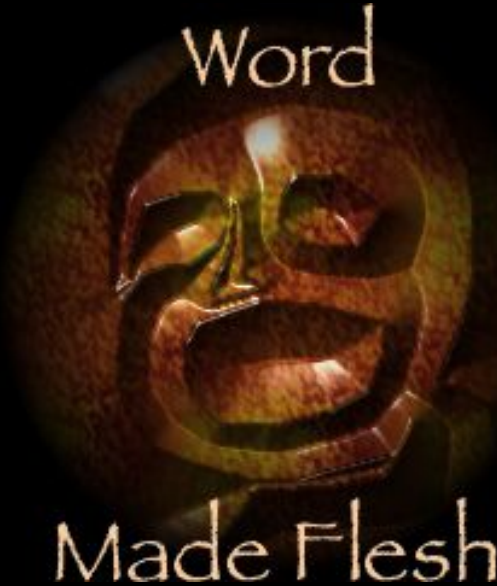




Word Made Flesh

Ben Kowalski

Secrets...we all have them, some worth keeping, some worth never knowing. What is the real secret of humanity? Where do we come from, where are we going? But the one secret that promises to drive us insane is simply what are we...really?



Septimus enters his tent and removes a stick from his sleeve. Carved on the stick is a sequence of the runes that the Gothic tribes use as an alphabet. He unpacks calfskin, quill, and ink, and lays them out on the

ground. With excruciating cure, he begins copying the rough, linear symbols. For some timeless interval, nothing exists except the runes and quill in his moving hand. Then he is done, and the outside world flows back into his awareness: first the bitter cold, then his headache and the cramp in his hand. Carefully, he blows on the skin to dry it, then rolls it up and returns it to its leather sheath. With a grunt, he rises and carries the stick out of his tent. The sky is dimming, with a hint of sunset showing above the sharpened logs that form the walls of the camp. By now many of the Roman legionaries have lit fires and are huddling around them. He walks by one of the fires and tosses the stick into it. He is pained by the necessity of concealing and destroying such precious knowledge, and curses again the willful ignorance of his contemporaries.

He has been single-minded in pursuit of his researches ever since he read, as a boy, the memoirs of one Caius Tullus, a missionary to the Gothic tribes. Tullus had served the famous Goth Ulfilas, who was the leader of the movement to convert his tribe. Among the accomplishments of Ulfilas was the creation of a new alphabet to replace the Gothic runes with their pagan connotations. But the pagan faction was still powerful, and Tullus had died in a violent purge. His unfinished memoirs had somehow found their way back to civilization. Septimus, in reading them, was struck by a description of a certain ancient ritual performed on the winter solstice. Its purpose, related Tullus, was to summon and bind a supernatural entity of some sort. Septimus seized on this scrap of information as a confirmation of his own theories about the pagan gods. The Christians had eradicated the practice of other religions within the Empire, but Septimus speculated that the old gods were perhaps not dead but only dormant. Now it seemed that the barbarians on the fringes of the Empire had preserved the lore necessary to awaken the pagan gods.

When he came of age, Septimus traveled to the great city of Ravenna, where he supported himself as a scribe and devoted his free time to research on this topic. He found that a great deal had been written about the customs of the Goths, but among the half-dozen volumes he found only a few oblique references to this particular ritual. One author claimed that the entity which was summoned was a manifestation of the *Logos* of Greek philosophy. Septimus researched this new lead, and found that *Logos* was usually translated as "Word," although it could also mean "order" or "pattern." The doctrines of the Gnostic sect

paired the concept of *Logos* with the concept of Life. Yet none of these meanings seemed to fit, and Septimus could find no other information.

In frustration, Septimus then turned to more exotic sources. After much futile reading, he finally came upon a book of arcane Eastern lore, which described a ritual of antiquity which was strikingly similar to the one mentioned in Tullus' memoirs. This book gave few details, however, save that a blood sacrifice was involved. A fuller description, it said, could be found in the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*. Septimus devoted months to searching for information about these manuscripts, but found nothing. In desperation, he had resolved to go to the Goths themselves.

Now he has reached a Roman outpost in farthest Germania and has procured the runes used in the ceremony. Tonight, the winter solstice, he will observe its actual performance. Then he will record for posterity the means by which the old, slumbering gods can be roused. He is rescuing priceless information from oblivion. What greater reward can men desire than to be immortalized in the annals of human knowledge?

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It is the chill that wakes him the next morning. Sleepily, he opens his eyes, wondering if the fire has gone out. Then he realizes that he is not in his tent, but lying on the cold hard earth of the forest. How has he gotten here? He tries to recall the events of the night before. He had been planning to attend the ceremony. Did something go wrong? He remembers leaving the camp at twilight...

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The bare oaks formed a lacework of twigs against the darkening sky. The ground was frozen, but there was little snow. He was wearing his heaviest furs and cloaks, but they did nothing to keep out the keening wind. A faint path took him through strips of shadow and deeper shadow. At last he caught sight of a line of torches weaving through the oaks ahead of him. Shivering, he hastened closer and hailed the procession. The nearest barbarians put their hands on their weapons. A gray-haired, scowling old man at the head of

the line stepped forward to talk to him. This man held some authority, and Septimus had made arrangements with him to witness the ritual. But now he seemed reluctant to allow it. Finally, Septimus' offer of a gold trinket overcame the old man's misgivings, and Septimus took his place at the end of the line.

The procession trudged on for some time, then stopped at a clearing. The barbarians solemnly arrayed themselves in a circle around a shapeless lump in the center. Septimus hung back, trying to make out the lump in the wavering torchlight. It was about the size of a man, a shapeless mass of some slick brownish-gray substance that looked like clay. The old man hobbled toward it, carrying a torch, and inscribed something in the clay. It was, Septimus saw, one of the Gothic runes. He drew more runes, forming a ring in the center of the lump. Then he produced an iron knife and a wooden chalice from the folds of his furs. He knelt and set the chalice on the ground before him, then held his free hand over it. Impassively, he held the knife blade to his palm. The others began to chant in their harsh barbarian tongue. The words seemed to be a grotesque parody of the Scriptures: "The Word is God, and we are the Word made flesh!" It occurred to Septimus that "Word" might be the closest Gothic translation of *Logos*.

A dark line appeared under the blade, then lengthened. The chant went on: "The Word lives on within every drop of our blood!" The dark fluid was coursing down between the old man's fingers and spattering in the chalice. Septimus looked on, enthralled, seeing every detail. He felt horror, but it was somehow detached, confined to some small corner of his mind. The chanting resumed, this time in an unfamiliar tongue. Now the gray-haired man had picked up the chalice and was holding it above his head and walking toward the mass of clay. He tilted his head back and howled a single phrase at the stars, over and over: "Ubbo-Sathla! Ubbo-Sathla!" Abruptly, he upended the chalice, and the blood poured out onto the clay. The men fell silent, their faces showing awe and fear.

The clay must have been unusually porous, for the blood was absorbed as soon as it hit the clay. The old Goth shook the last few drops out of the chalice, then stepped back. At first nothing seemed to be happening, but then it became apparent that the clay was gradually contracting, flowing in on itself. Eventually it assumed the shape of a rough sphere. The men fell to their knees in an attitude of reverence.

Septimus stifled a laugh. All his wild speculations and fears had come to this! A handful of barbarians cowering in awe before a... *ball of clay!*

Then he noticed that the clay was moving again, in a manner somehow suggestive of tensing muscles. It erupted into a roiling column, then resolved itself into the shape of a man. Septimus fought down shock and terror, forcing his eyes to remain fixed on the thing in the center. It was facing the opposite side of the circle, where the old man was now kneeling. Its body remained motionless for the span of a few breaths, then folded in on itself until it was once again a sphere. Awestruck, the old man clambered to his feet.

Then a younger man with a jutting nose and a mane of brown hair stepped forward and picked up the knife and chalice. He repeated the ritual of drawing blood and pouring it onto the clay. Again the mass roiled and shaped itself into a vaguely human form, like a rough-hewn statue. This time Septimus could see its face. On the forehead was the circle of runes, somehow still intact. The face itself was a grotesque distortion of the man's own features. The eyes were smooth bulges, blank and sightless, yet the head seemed to follow the man as he knelt reverently. Then the slack, obscene lips began mutely to shape words. Then the face seemed to melt as the clay collapsed back into a sphere...

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Now, in the harsh dawn light, his memories of the rest of the night are confused and disjointed, a fevered parade of leering statues. He remembers that each of the barbarians poured his blood on the clay and knelt before the inhuman form that arose. The torches were burning low when the last man finished the ceremony...

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The gray-haired man stepped back from the circle, but the others stayed where they were. He wondered idly what rites were left to perform, then he noticed that the old man was walking toward him. Apprehensive, he stepped back, but two other barbarians appeared from the shadows and gripped his arms, dragging him into the circle. A moment of consuming panic: would they kill him, torture him?

Then the old man held out the iron knife and wooden chalice, and Septimus accepted them with a flood of comprehension and relief. He slashed his left palm, not noticing the pain, and held it over the chalice. Confidently, he stepped up to the clay sphere and poured out the blood. Then he stepped back. Just a few moments more, and the ceremony would be over, his undying fame assured.

The sphere began to bulge and writhe, flowing upward with agonizing slowness into a human form. A face blossomed on the blank head, and Septimus recoiled involuntarily. It was unmistakably his own face, and yet not his own, with warped features, bulging idiot eyes, fat rubbery lips contorted into a demoniacal rictus. Cold wet hands reached out and gripped his head, pulling him closer so that he was staring into its blank eyes, devoid of sight or thought. Then the mouth began to move, soundlessly to shape words, and he was on the verge of understanding the blasphemous syllables...

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Mercifully, he can remember nothing more.

Steam rises from the ground as the sun creeps above the horizon. He begins walking, headed for the Roman camp. Some primeval instinct urges him not even to think about the events of last night, but he cannot help himself. All the cryptic references are now clear: the Word is somehow contained in the blood, passed on from father to son in an unbroken chain stretching to posterity. But it is inert, slumbering, and can only manifest itself when the proper rituals are performed. He thinks again of that repulsive face, both him and not-him, leering idiotically at him in the torchlight. The knowledge that it is still within him, as close as his pulsing heart, is almost unbearable.

Then he remembers what it was that the thing said, and he is convulsing on the ground, clawing impotently at his face and neck, struggling to open the veins so that the abhorrent fluid is no longer part of him.