

The Lament of Stewmull

By: Douglas Bain

I am Stewmull, the god of words. I ran the race to the Blackened Nevers and I lost. I imagine you think you understand those words I have just written—‘I lost.’ I thought I did when I first gave birth to them. But they don’t come close to expressing what happened to me.

But before we turn to my tragedy, let us start with a sense of the heavy labor required to make you mortuants articulate. Like methane from swamp water, words speak their first in shock, as the *pop* of the bubble burst. By the time they've crawled out of the soup, they may be long enough to be a *wee* or fat enough to be a *tunk*. Others I have to pluck floating in the muck. Lazy, little things. Those are the *awws* and the *dunnos*.

I point, and they clamber up as instructed, up through the soft airs flowing through your windpipe. I meant this procedure to dry your words and smooth their edges, and for some of you that might suffice for clarity of thought. It doesn't for me, so I bark at them to crawl on.

You see, I always envisioned my words knitted together. It is not enough for you to simply hack one up from your throat and dump it at the feet of your interlocutor. If you prefer a simpler communication, direct your praises to Fook, the god of gestures. What he has done with your middle finger is proof enough of the capabilities of an artless god. I aimed for something higher. And so it was that I found myself in need of an organ to assign the penultimate work.

You might think the ears would have been the natural selection. They were occupied. And the moment I spied the potential lying in your tongue, other gods equally desperate to see their dreams given form in mortuants, poured into the corporation of that organ along with me.

The goddess of taste barged in and virtually took it over. The god of breath also staked a claim, as did the goddess of love. Even Giulia, the goddess of peace, insisted on having a say on its heft. She feared what evil might arise if it grew too powerful. The result? A withered tool, and nothing but calamity for my words.

Let breath have the nose. And why can't taste have the teeth? Those white fences do the chewing, can't they extract flavor as well as render the pulp? And who is peace to have any say?

The result was entirely predictable. Because of this crowding of the tongue, there was no strength left for it to achieve the heights I had intended. And what do you think happens when misshapen words arrive on a tongue too tired to form them? They tumble off your lips *as they are*. And the result of that? A chasm opens up between what you say and what you mean. And this chasm grew wider by the day. Thus were lies born.

When the other gods saw what had become of my words, they mocked me. I was a failure; a god who had cheapened his domain. I was condemned and banished. With no one to speak to, I didn't. When my tongue went still, my words turned feral. A rabid species grew in my throat. My palate became a den for savage, untamed lies. And those deceits prowled well beyond my tongue.

The result? While you won the ability to lie, I lost the ability to distinguish one from the truth.

But I did not stop hearing. On the contrary, I grew adept at it. I learned that my words had spread much farther than the mortuant tongues I had intended to wield them. I discovered that everything around me had learned to speak: the leaves, the wind, the stars, the sunlight. And so it was that, as I bent to drink from a stream, I was informed of the feast the gods had planned for the Lomhar Pass.

What a gift! If I could creep close, if I dared to part my lips, these new feral words would unleash upon them vitriols and scorns the likes of which they had never heard. It would be a small measure of revenge gladly taken. So I crept toward the Lomhar Pass and found the gods seated at their feast table. As I readied myself to spring forth and unleash that pack of snarling insults, I watched in disbelief as the race burst into life.

I ran after them, keeping to the bushes and trees. As I took in the route they were taking, I quickly realized that they were as intent on calamity as they were victory. Let me explain with my most precise words.

They were barreling toward a cave not wider than a tavern, and the path took them over a narrow ridge of mountain rock like the back plate of an ancient lizard. To either side was nothing but sky and the sharp fall to the ground below.

I was not the only one who saw the calamity brewing. Giulia, the goddess of peace—that sweet, saccharine wrecker of my tongue—also saw it. Her nauseating benevolence was kindled. She fought through the crowd, her hands raised in protest, but she held no sway; they ran on. She fell to her knees and shielded her eyes as god after god slammed into the bottleneck. With each runner joining the jam, one had to fall. It seemed to me that more fell than slipped into the cave.

I felt no sympathy for her, if that's what you think, or for any of the fallen. Instead, I delighted in watching the misery unfold and saw in it the necessity for a brand new word—a word for when gods impact the hard earth after a long fall and send the entrails of their busted brethren into the air as a fog of gore. The world needs a word for that, doesn't it?

I was not long in contemplation of this new arrangement from the syllabary, when the feral words prowling my tongue sensed her tears. They brayed and howled to have at her. They threw themselves against my lips, rattling my teeth. One, in particular: *payback* was the loudest among them.

I crept up behind that goddess. I bent to her ear and pulled back my lips. Those wild words charged at the first glimpse of light. A ferocious pack of purest contempt, disdain, and malevolence poured out.

She was pained and horrified. But the goddess of peace was cunning. She closed her eyes and settled the surrounding winds. She dropped the snow from the air, deadened the hum of the earth, even the birds descended to silence the rustle of their wings. All of existence could hear those vulgar barbs now, and I fell instantly ashamed. Clamping my hand over my mouth, I rushed forward to pull that pack of lies off of her, scattering them with kicks.

It was then she let loose her own venom. But it was not black like mine. It was white, clean, and pure, but no less corrosive. She asked me one simple, astonishing question: how could I say things I knew to be false?

I was dumbfounded. How dare she? After what she and her kind did to my tongue. I moaned and howled at her—formless sounds, to be sure, but far more expressive of my anger and grief than any string of words. The color faded from her face, and she produced another of her odious, innocent questions inquiring as to what had produced in me such pain?

I fell to my knees utterly unable to speak. It was then that the wind and the leaves and the grasses began to whisper. They related to her my misfortune and her role in it. She sobbed as they spoke and looked upon me with such pity and grace I haven't a word to express it. But I do have a word for the other emotion I saw in her eyes: *guilt*, the guilt at having aided such a flood of chaos into the world.

The whispers done, her tears wiped away, she drew me to my feet. “Help me then,” she said. “Help me win the race so I can rid the world of races, wars, and strife. And with peace reigning over creation, I promise you, Stewmull, I will wipe lies from the face of the world as well.”

I sputtered with incredulity a moment then established, in short, crisp, precise words, my own desire to win the race. But the goddess of peace cut me off. She took my hand in hers and whispered, “You lie again, Stewmull. And this time it is to yourself.”

I do not know if what she said was true—that capacity having left me long ago—but I know what I *felt* at her words. It was as if light had cleaved me in two. Her words melted me and my own flood of tears was unleashed. I bowed my head and submitted the whole of my body and soul to her right then and there. Our partnership affirmed, off we ran over that cold mountain range, into the cave, and back into the race of the gods.

We ran to exhaustion each day, and spent our nights huddled around a fire. I amused her with the panoply of my words. She delighted in onomatopoeias and laughed at exclamations. I produced a bouquet of neologisms from the sound of her giggles alone. But every night she brought me back to my lies, asking to see the most feral of them. I invariably said no, but she insisted. And so I would let them loose and watch as the goddess of peace would reach up and

catch them. She would hold her fist before my eye and open it with a smile. And to my constant astonishment, the touch of peace would render those snarling words tame as lambs.

How we raced during the light of day! We passed the rest of those gods as if they were standing still. For many days and many nights, we shared a glorious union. That is, until we reached the outskirts of Bedlam's Thicket.

We arrived at the river running beside it. Giulia dipped her hand into the water and drank. I was wary, knowing that strange things hid in the tangles of Bedlam's Thicket not twenty yards from us. But I soon approached, and she lifted her hand, cupped with water, to my lips.

As I bent my head to drink, Aelic suddenly arrived on the bank of the river, followed by Rawl and Dhoorval. Bragnal then emerged from the Thicket and strode forward. "What do we have here?" he said. "The banished god of lies has joined with the goddess of peace? What a scandal!"

I was scared when he said it, scared and somehow ashamed. I knew what that word *joined* meant. I had created it, after all. It carried many meanings, and I could tell Bragnal meant them all. I let Giulia's hand go, more roughly than I meant to, sending the water splashing to the ground.

“I do believe the liar is in love,” Bragnal pressed. I stumbled back from him. “Are you, Stewmull? Are you in love?” I could hear Aelic and Dhoorval snickering at me. “Does the god of words really have nothing to say?”

I tried with all my heart to answer, to make my lips craft what I thought—no, what I *knew*—was the truth. But my tongue could not do it, so thick were the lies that crawled over it.

“N-no,” I whispered. Bragnal roared with laughter and turned his mockery to Giulia.

“The goddess of peace swoons before yet another liar, only to be rejected, as she has by every despot and tyrant since the dawn of time. They whisper for her on their climb to power, only to turn their back on her when it has been achieved. Will she never learn?”

I tried again, harder now, to let the right words escape, the true ones. But only more lies sprang from my lips, dark lies, lies that hurt Giulia, lies that added to her pains.

Rawl threw me to my knees. When he wrenched my head back, Bragnal reached down my throat and pulled out a fistful of my clotted, feral words. He shook his fist, dripping with my spit, before Giulia’s face, then picked through the wet words with his finger.

“Do you want to know what he *truly* thinks, goddess of peace?” He held up a gruesome foursome of words that snapped at the air. “He seduced you to lull you into a false trust, so he could betray you at the finish line.”

I shook my head. Bless Fook, bless him for his gestures! I tried again to plead my case, but what came out of my mouth was not the true reflection of how I felt. It was the pure opposite of what was true. You may ask how I know it wasn't true. *I know!* I know because somehow, someway, Giulia saw through it. She must have drawn on stores of magnanimity and charity beyond imagining, for she shook her head and whispered, “That is a lie, Bragnal.”

My heart surged. But Bragnal sneered at her. He placed my dripping words on his scale. “Don't believe me, goddess?” he snarled. “Then let my scale show you the truth.”

He slammed his bicep down onto the other weighing pan. At first, my words outweighed him. His arm rose, mocking his declarations. Then he strained on his pan, forcing his bicep down, bringing beads of sweat onto his forehead. The scale leveled, and he forced my whispers up until the weighing pan clattered at the end of the mechanism.

Bragnal grinned at Giulia, though his face was tight with effort, then let the scales go. They crashed to the ground, and he stamped my words into the earth.

Giulia looked at me full of dread now. Rawl and Aelic drew her back, but she waived them off. “Liar!” she whispered, then the pack of them slipped into the dark tangles of Bedlam’s Thicket. I was left on the bank of that river, broken and alone once again.

There are words for what happened to me in this race, but they are not, “I lost.” I have come to craft new ones to express my tragedy, but I refuse you knowledge of them. I fear that, were I to tell you, your mortuant failings would overwhelm you. The temptation to speak these new words of bottomless loss and heartache would be too strong. And I have no doubt you would see in them inspiration and not lament.



The Lament of Stewmull is a bonus chapter to *The Woeful Wager*, the first book in the dark fantasy series *The Race to the Blackened Nevers* by Douglas Bain. For more information, please visit www.blackenednevers.com.