From ‘Phoenix’ by Bryan Thomas

…He had gnarled old hands. His knuckles looked stiff, and his fist gripped the tall glass of ale with a fierce intensity as he raised it, a little shakily, to his lips. As we started chatting, he told me he had been a monumental mason. He had worked on several of the Wren churches before he had been obliged to retire. On learning about my studies, he mentioned a recurring dream that had puzzled him over recent months.

"It goes somefing like this," he began.

"I'm in this bloody great underground cavern workin' by the light of old sputterin' torches hung on the walls all around. I am there, carvin' nscriptions an' figures on these sarcophaguses - like coffins for dead folks," he explains. "It's bloody 'ard work because the stone is granite an' the tools are funny an' not very sharp, but I seem to 'ave the knack of it."

"What sort of carvings?" I ask him, "sounds fascinating."

"Oh, the carvin' is sort of realistic like, with goats' n cows in a land what looks bloody hot, an' tells the story of ordinary lookin' folks. With their heads at funny angles, the tall figures are like marchin' up an' down with long poles, some of 'em with eagles an' such on top an' with chickens scratchin' away under their feet." He pauses and looks across enquiringly.

"Keep going, "I encourage him.

"Some days, my supervisor lets me carve the creatures that will go along with the dead, as he says, 'to the next world'. I am quite chuffed to be doin' this ‘cos the sandstone is easier to work, 'an in the dream, me ands are no longer stiff an' don't shake. It's sort of artistic; gives me a buzz, kind of, when the birds an' animals look real".

"If you don't mind the stink of them torches an' the piss an' sweat down here, the work is great. More'n you can say for the poor buggers I hear about, beaverin' away on the outside in the heat and dust. They are grindin' the faces of them great blocks, an' when they are done, they ‘ave to break their backs haulin' them into place, day after day, month after month. They stop workin' for a mo', they are whipped; they get ill with the fever, or if the liftin' finally does for them, they are pitched down the long slopes to die an' get to feed the bloody vultures. Rather be down here, I tell myself; just keep your nose clean an' stay out o' bleedin' trouble".

The old man takes a long draught and then grins up at me to see if I am still listening.

"Keep going", I say, fetching him another pint…