

# penumbric



speculative  
fiction mag

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Interview with

## Carl Scharwath

Pictures, poetry, and  
paintography

plus work by

Ai Jiang • Colleen Anderson •  
Nicola Brayán • Christina Sng •  
Lorraine Schein • Sydnie  
Beaupré • Judith Pratt • Mary  
Soon Lee • Shikhar Dixit •  
Gwynne Garfinkle • Gustavo  
Bondoni • R. Mac Jones •  
Antony Paschos • Carla Stein •  
Barbara Candiotti • Jon Hansen  
• William Couper • E. E. King •  
Alina Măciucă • Harman  
Burgess • Patrick McEvoy &  
Rodolfo Buscaglia

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We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

As the cover art by Carl Scharwath, whom we had the pleasure of interviewing for this issue, implies, I think it's often good to take a step sideways and gain a little perspective ...

This issue marks a full three years since I sat in complete lockdown in Cornwall, staring out over the sea and wondering what to do next in my life. Even though I'd been proofreading and coding all along, it felt as if something was missing, and I hearkened back not only to the first run of *Penumbria* in the early 2000s but also the publications I'd worked on at university and, before that, my grandmother's weekly newspaper in Brush, Colorado. The thing is, regardless of whether there is much money to be made in it, publishing a periodical—developing the concept, calling for submissions, finding out there actually ARE people interested in submitting, and then laying out and producing (and coding)—is something I really, really enjoy. So I do owe the pandemic that much—I was able to restart a work I love.

The world had come such a long way since Y2K and the “compassionate conservatism” (a Bushian term implying that regular conservatism features no compassion at all, I guess) that lead to the Iraq war and the subsequent horrors of that and similar conflicts. The US actually created an affordable health insurance system, LGBTQIA+ rights began to be recognized at increasing speed, and it seemed people were willing to see other people more as actual human beings, rather than Others to be feared and controlled. It was not perfect—not even close—but at least the compass bearings seemed favorable.

But by 2020, it felt like these new ideas were set not in stone but in movie-prop Styrofoam, and rabid Trump supporters were ready to tear down the entire democracy rather than be willing to move forward, would rather tear down human rights than to see any bit of their power eroded (or see the world move forward from the narrow views of the 1950s, or even 1850s), or in other cases, would be happy

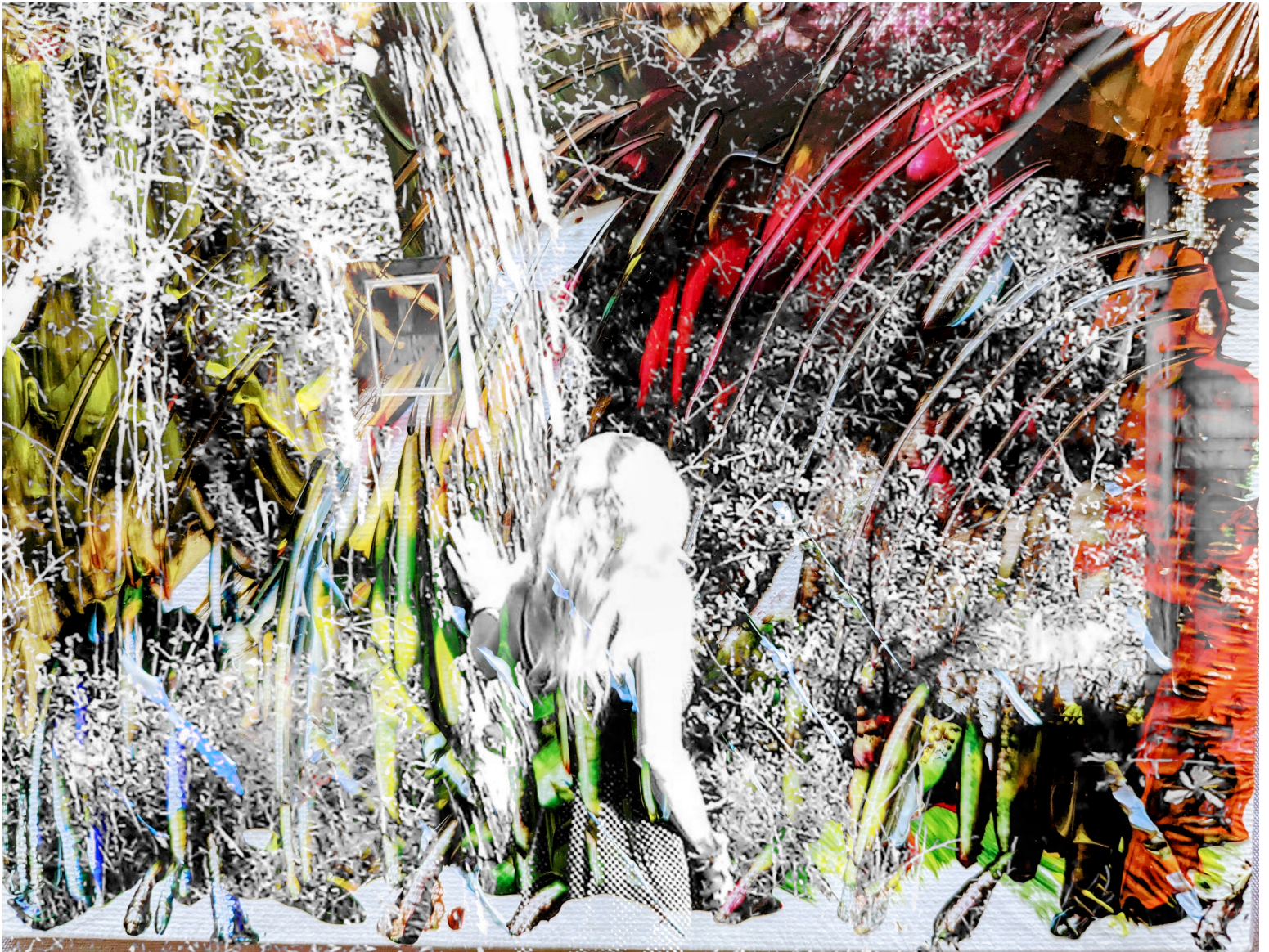
to succumb to the fear-mongering that made everything a zero-sum game. There's only one pie to go 'round, said Trump and his buddies, even while they had a baker's dozen of their own in reserve. And so, even though we have a sort of respite (but not much of one) while the Dems are in office, we have a host of Trumpian judges taking away rights, immigrants are still looked at with fear and suspicion, women's bodies are the property of the State, the only good education is patriotic brainwashing that ignores actual history, and only guns are given any sort of reverence. Heck, AI is a distant star barely twinkling in the background of all this horrible pollution. (Oh, and don't even get me started on actual pollution ...)

Into this madness sprung (loped? sauntered? stumbled?) *Penumbria*, in the hope of helping creators who wanted to shine even a bit of candlelight into the darkness, especially those who wouldn't normally be given the candles. And despite the sort of lion-roar/squeak of that previous sentence, I hope we have been at least moderately successful. I think we have. And I look forward to getting better at this in the years to come, and to inspire others as well.

It's sort of like environmentalism (to go back, in a way, to the pollution metaphor): It may seem hopeless if the big players (politicians, companies) are dead set on poisoning us all, but every small voice raised against them, every tiny step that stalls their agenda, every campaign that makes them at least pay lip service to doing good, is something. And enough small somethings can eventually create a tipping point, and ...well, I don't need to explain to anyone how that works.

Hopefully *Penumbria* is busy being a few of those small somethings. And thank you to all who continue to be a part of it.

Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor, *Penumbria*



*Dreaming of the Girl in the Woods* by Carl Scharwath.  
In memory of Jenny Link.

# Art as Collaboration

## Pictures, Poetry, Paintography

### An Interview with Carl Scharwath

*CARL SCHARWATH has appeared in Penumbria regularly since our restart in June 2020—in fact, he’s had art in every issue but that first one (and that’s only because we hadn’t met yet). His unique way of combining layers of photography (and, more recently, painting) has fascinated us all along, and we finally had the chance to interview him about not only his process, but his philosophy.*

\* \* \*

*You had written in an essay a few years ago that there are “1000 ways to take a photo.”*

Correct.

*So do you have certain preferred styles and techniques and that sort of thing, or does the subject itself sort of tailor what your techniques are going to be?*

OK. Well, thank you again, Jeff, for publishing my work for over two years. I want to say that first, I really appreciate being in your journal consistently and I hope we can continue our relationship. I do feel like I have a home now. So I moved into your publishing sphere, and I only use the bathroom once in a while, so don't worry. But anyway, with 1000 ways, I ... real quick, I'll back up a little bit. I started writ-

ing poetry and then short stories, and I had a friend, Jenny Link, who lived in the town I'm in now, in New Smyrna Beach, who prompted me to start taking pictures. She said, you used to paint. You told me you were a painter once in college, why don't you try photography? I will model for you. So I said, sure and I started with just a cell phone. So we went out, I took some pictures of her. And actually I think it was one of my best shots of her.

*Oh wow. Just on your cell phone.*

Yes, she did pass away about six years ago now. So I'm always indebted to her. I mean, I think she got me started in photography, so it's almost like she's my guardian angel of photography. So I always thank her for getting me started on this journey. She would laugh at me when I said, well, all I am is a button pusher.

So when I said 1000 ways to take a photo ... I did an essay where four different people will take a picture, say, of a tree outside. One might take it straight on. One might do an angle. One might lay on the ground and take it up in the air. So that's that. There's a million ways to take a photo. Nothing's truly the right way. With me it's experimentation. I do like using abandoned buildings. To me, that's the best thing to take pictures of. I know it's cliché. A lot of people do, but it just makes me think, what is the history of the building? After I



***Perspectivision* by Carl Scharwath. Model: Dr. Luzviminda Gabato Rivera from the Philippines**

take it and look at it, you know, who might have lived there? Why did they leave? Things like that. So it tells a story, and that's what I try and do with my photography is tell a story.

After just taking straight-on photos, I started experimenting with overlays, where I take a photo and it's called double exposure, but not like in the 1920s, where they actually did double exposure. It's just placing another photo over it. I started experimenting using models as well. I would take a picture and then put a model in it. Now I'm unique. I'm on Facebook a lot and I use that for networking and I have so many friends around the world who are artists, photographers, etc. They would reach out to me. They started saying I want to write a poem for your photography. You inspired me. And that was like, oh, wow, that's amazing.

*That's cool.*

Sure! And for you doing that, since my job was easy—you had to write the poem—I'll send it out for publication. So I've done a lot of collaborations that have been published. And then I started getting people reaching out to me to be a model, so they would just take a picture of themselves, send it to me, and I would include them in my photography as a double exposure.

*Oh wow.*

One thing it accomplishes, I help them get published as a model, an art model, we'll call them. And then I don't have to go out and actually meet people and set it up. It's done quickly. And I think it's cooler because I have models in Hong Kong



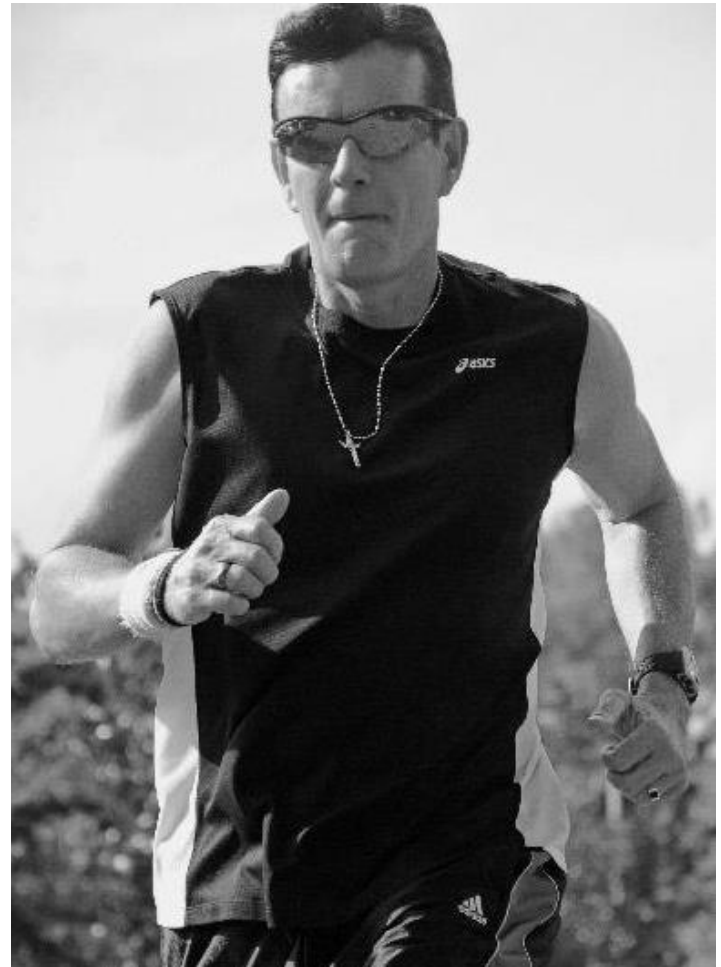
and Indonesia and India and around the world. And as I post on Facebook that it's published, more people reach out to me. So I just love the collaboration that photography has brought to me. That's the most important thing.

To finish the conversation on photography, I started painting again. I used to paint in college, and at one time I thought I was going to major in art. But I remember on a semester break I went with a friend to New York City. We walked around Central Park and I saw artists with their paintings on the sidewalk. I said to my friend, wow, they're a million times better than what I'm doing. I'm going to switch to a business degree. That was like an epiphany when I saw that.

*That's quite an epiphany.*

So my dreams of being the next Salvador Dalí went out the window, and I really never painted again for about 35 years. [But then] I started painting again, and I'll be honest, I don't think I'm a good painter. But what I discovered is my photography hides my painting. So I started what's called paintography. I thought I invented a word. I looked it up and it is a word, but not a lot of people are doing it. What I do is, I usually do an abstract painting or sometimes semi-realistic painting. I use a canvas that's about a 5 by 7. So I do them quick. It takes me 20-30 minutes to do a painting. Sometimes I do "pour paintings," abstracts where you actually pour, it's called a pour medium, and you kind of move the canvas around. It gets nice effects. Then I put my photography over it. When I first started doing it, I said wow, this is a brand new world for me. And I started getting it out there, I started getting it published. And again it tells a story.

I do it actually in reverse. I think the logical way is take a photo and then in your mind say OK, what painting would go with it? With me, I do the painting first and then I look through my hundreds and hundreds of photos and match it up and do a little experimenting and a little bit of enhancing. But that's what I like because it's combining painting and photography, two arts together, and then when somebody writes a poem for it, it's a collaboration, and then we have three arts.



**Carl Scharwath, running**

I'm trying to innovate all the time. I'm also starting to do double, triple paintings, or I'll either take two paintings and stack them up on top of the other one and take a picture. Or just combine two different paintings with my photography. So I just take a picture of the canvas, another picture of a canvas, and overlay it.

*It's all physical media, then, as opposed to all in Photoshop or some-*



**Terminus by Carl Scharwath.**

*thing like that?*

Yes. And I have people ask, can I buy your paintography, and I go well, I'm not into art. I don't really want to make money in art. That's not important to me, and I say honestly, I can't, because it's a photo. So even though it's a canvas and a photography, I'm not sending it out. I mean, one day if an art gallery is interested, yes, I'll put them on metal

or, you know, have them done professionally, which I can from the camera, but it's basically just photography-painting is what it is.

*So you had said, in an interview with Wise Old Owl, both your art and writing sprang from what I interpreted as inspirational or serendipitous moments. Can you speak more about how that sort of inspiration sort of unlocks a subject or an idea?*

Yes, it kind of ties in with my other passion, which is running. I do 5Ks maybe once or twice a month. I run three times a week, and to me it's like the old troubadour poets: I'm out there running and all of a sudden ideas come in my head. By the time I get home, I forget. I go wait, what was that good line for that poem, the idea for that story? But sometimes when I'm out, I'll see things too, especially if I do races, I'll see an abandoned building while running on the course or whatever, and I'll go back. So I think running inspires me, but I believe that quote, it says "art is everywhere." I can't remember who said it, unfortunately. So if you just go out in the world and just think, that's always in my brain: Art is everywhere.

I usually have my cell phone with me. I do 50-60% of my photos through the cell phone, and I do use a camera as well. But here's an example. I was just walking. And it was in an alleyway with two garbage cans. And it had rose petals or some kind of flower petals that somebody threw on the ground in front of the cans, and it had a piece of plywood that was cut out like a half a moon. So I said, this is a piece of art. You know, it's a still life. I took a picture of it. Yeah, it's got garbage cans. But just the way the garbage cans and the flowers. ... So inspiration is really just having an eye and looking, and I think that's what a good painter has or a photographer. It's the eye. Again, anybody can take a picture of a tree, but it's the artist who sees something in front of the tree, behind the tree, or the angle of it. ...

*Right. I think that happens with short stories as well, or poetry. Like with the tree, you can see a story in the way the tree is lit, or the way the branches are, or the way it moves in the wind.*

Well, I'll tell you a quick story about inspiration on a short story I

wrote, where it comes from weird places. So, I was out on a run and I'm in Florida. It was in the summer. It was 90-92 degrees out. A couple blocks from my house, there's this medical building. So I was running, and I ran behind a building because of the shade—you know, the building created some shade for me and it was pretty long building—so I'm running behind there and a police officer slowly goes behind me. Kind of looks, I'm just jogging along, and it passes me. So I'm running and as I'm running, I'm thinking, you know, that would be a cool short story. I called it "Running in Sin." What the story was, real quick, was a guy who had two daughters ready for college. He just got laid off, [lived in] an upscale neighborhood gated community. Trouble with his mortgage, trouble saving up for his kids' education. And he was getting overweight, you know, because he lost his job. Just staying on the computer ... and he decided to take up running. And he ran through the neighborhood. And as he was running, he goes well, I know when this neighbor is leaving. I know when that neighbor's leaving. And he started breaking into their homes. So just from that cop, because it's like, look, a cop went by. I could be back there breaking into a medical building. You know, it just looks like a jogger to him. I said, damn, that's a good idea. So that was my story. And I also had the guy almost get caught by a homeowner and, you know, the homeowner's in the back of her house. Because she was home, and he thought she wasn't, [and] she said, "What are you doing back here?" And he says, "Well, it's hot. If you don't mind I'm just getting a drink from your garden, you know, the faucet back here." So I had a kind of built-in excuse too. So that is a good example of just paying attention when you're out there.

*I know when I first started seeing your work, it was more of the overlays, and then more recently the paintography. You mentioned that you're sort of moving on to double layers of paintings and photographs, a sort of multi-layer paintography.*

Correct.

*Not that I want your secrets [laughs], but are you just sort of always looking for new ways of combining art and painting, photography and painting?*



**Ascend by Carl Scharwath.**

Yes, again, that's what an artist does. They're trying to innovate. Again, I'm not the first doing it, but I don't see many people doing it. So I'm always thinking of different ways, different techniques. And that's the beauty of art. It's almost infinite. I'll give you another example. I buy these little canvases and once I left the plastic on it, you know, it's wrapped in plastic. It's a little small canvas.



***My Hand Touched the Painting* by Carl Scharwath.**

*Right.*

I took a palette knife and just started mixing colors in it, and when it dried it separated and it looked really cool. I had to put it a little dark in the corner because it actually had the information about the canvas. It's like this brown corner protector and I had to layer it a little heav-

ier over there. And I said, well, if I don't like it, I'll just take the plastic off and I've got a new canvas! But doing it on this plastic actually separated it. And I had it published in a local magazine here and it looks like flowers. And I just use a palette knife for about four different colors, green, yellow, and a couple of colors.

That's what I like about painting, is sometimes when you do abstract, you see things in it that you didn't see when you did it. So you'll be done, and "Oh my God, I can see a, you know, a person in it." Or I could see a face. Things like that. So I am experimenting, I'm always trying to do different things. I also, I've never submitted it to you, but I work with Jeanette Skirvan out in California. She's done seven different video poems for me. So we built a friendship. I'll send her my poem and she'll do a full blown video, and some are really pretty cool, like mini movies. We've been published together. I guess my theme is now, you know from painting, writing, I'm doing more collaborations and trying to help people. I really am excited about helping others, especially in other countries. I always reach outside the United States. I like talking to people around the world. I think that's the coolest thing.

*Definitely. I noticed that a lot of your models are from other countries.*

And my number one country for publications is India. For some reason, I have a lot of luck in India. I'll say India really loves literature, I mean, I wish America was like that. They're really into it, and there's so many poets and writers, and they have all these groups and everything. Someday I want to go over there and go to a reading or something. But I've had a lot of luck in India. *Glomag* in India is like your magazine, Jeff. I have been published in every issue for over two years, and Glory the editor always supports my writing or art and asks me to submit every month. I like when you get to that point, when publishers are asking you for your work.

*Yeah.*

You know, sending it out and getting your rejections or not hearing back ... When you get to that point, it's nice, you know, that people

are reaching out to you.

*Oh yeah, definitely. You're also the art editor for Minute magazine.*

I was for four years. It was an interesting magazine. I volunteered to be an art editor and I didn't know when I signed up it was a 10th grade high school student out in California. I said, wow, that's amazing that you're doing this. So she graduated and went to college in a couple of years, and then her sister, her younger sister, took it over for another two years. And then when she went to college, I think it was one of her friends who then took it over, and then it just kind of died out.

I enjoyed it. I'm a guest editor for *ILA Magazine* as well. I do interviews for Annette Nassar. Every quarter, she'll send me somebody and I'll interview them, not on Zoom, I do it through e-mail. And then I also do interviews in my area where I live. I live in a complex called Venetian Bay. It's about 5-6 thousand people. They have their own little kind of online magazine. So I interviewed local people in that as well. And also I'm reaching out. There is an art museum in New Smyrna Beach called the Hub, and next month I'm going to offer a beginners poetry class. I've never taught per se that. I've taught and worked as a financial advisor. I did classes on all that, but this will be my first time teaching poetry.

*Oh, that'll be interesting.*

In September, there's another great art place here called Atlantic Center for the Arts, and they have me scheduled in September to do one class on what is in my wheelhouse, which is networking on Facebook and social media.

*Oh wow.*

My granddaughter goes—I'm going to be 69 tomorrow. Tomorrow's my birthday—she goes, “For an old guy, you really can work that social media!” But it's just fun meeting people.

*Oh yeah. So do you find it, I guess, synergistic to be on both sides of*

*the publishing line, both a contributor and an editor?*

Yes. And to help you, I'm sure you have it ...when I talk to people, I always let them know. It's like a resume, when you submit to a magazine or a journal, just follow the directions. I'm sure you see it where you say, you know, don't put your name on the work you're submitting, or [use a] 12 point font. Whatever they say, that's what you do. I know it's tough to read everything before you submit. They always say, “You know, you should take a look at least,” because again, like you have speculative fiction. So I'm not going to send you a love poem. ... I mean, these editors don't have a lot of time, so please just whatever they say, you have to do. And that's where people get rejected. And I say, don't worry about rejections. Everybody gets rejected. If I send out 10 pieces, maybe my average now is one or two get accepted, maybe three or four will reject it and the other four or five you don't even hear back, which I don't like. I was an editor. I'd always, I mean, I'm not going to make a comment on everything. That's impossible. I do when I can, but at least let them know. It seems like the standard answer is “It's not a good fit.” But no, it's important to send out if you want to be published. That's what I like. I mean, I'm not doing this to be famous or make millions of dollars. I just like getting my work out there, and as you get it out there, people see it and you never know what could happen. Maybe you get different opportunities.

*Right.*

Here's one here. Tamikio Dooley. I'll do a shout out for her. We're friends on Facebook. She saw my art and just out of the blue, she says, “Send me 50 or 60 of your photographs and I'll put together a book for you.” This book she just did. It's online, it's free, and then it's also on Amazon if you need to buy it. But also she's doing another one for me with just nature photography. I'm not a big nature photographer, but over the years I got so many of them. So she's doing another one, and that's just from her seeing my work on Facebook, basically.

*You sort of make connections by submitting things and being around.*

But also it's good to just reach out. When I see somebody coming out

with a book, I'll message him, you know. Do you need any help? Do you want me to help you with anything? You want me to read it? I think an artist should always reach out to other people. It's not a competition. We're here to help each other.

*Right.*

And you help them, not to get anything in return. Sometimes you do get something in return, but you do help them because they're on a journey as well. If you have some knowledge, let them know. Another thing with my photography I didn't mention was that I've been on a lot of writers' book covers. So I have Luzviminda Gabato Rivera in the Philippines. She loved my work so much, I've been on seven of her book covers and we did a collaborative book together with her poems and my art. Christine Tabaka has a new one coming out. It's been three different books with my art on her covers. And to me, that's the best honor, because this is somebody's personal art, and they're reaching out to have my art on their cover.

*It's sort of the introduction to their work.*

People ask me how much I charge. I don't charge anything. I wish I could be on more. I mean, I love being on other writers' book covers. So that's another thing that's grown out of photography, and I will say my photography-art-painting is doing a lot better than my writing now, and I'm still writing, but it's just kind of exploded more. So that's where I'm putting my emphasis right now, but I do write still, I'm working on some short stories. I like essays. I'm starting to write essays.

*Yeah, they each exercise a different part of your brain.*

Yes. And maybe it's just I'm getting lazy. I mean, I could just do a photo and make it. Or 20 seconds and then a painting. It's done. With writing, I'm just editing and reading it. Poems I can knock out, but the short stories and essays, they just seem to never be completed. I'm always going back and changing things, and sometimes I have trouble with tenses when I write, and it's just so much, and I know I've

got to work through that myself. I don't type. Which is funny to some people. Throughout my career, people always made fun of me. Like two-finger typing. I was never a good speller. Thank God for spell check. But no, I struggle through stories. I mean, not only the grammar, the spelling, the tenses. I took English, of course. But I do struggle. It's difficult. You'll write a sentence that's in the past, and then the next one is in the present; it's like, OK, let me catch that. It's not only the mechanics of the story, but the most important thing in a story, at least, is the idea.

*Right.*

And as you said, back to inspiration, that's the hardest part. You couldn't tell me, "Hey, write a story about or write a poem about a mountain. I can't do that. Something's got to come to me when I'm out and about.

*Right. Like if somebody tries to give you some sort of guided prompt. Like, here's a lamp. Write a story about the lamp.*

Yeah, that's why I was never good with prompts. And poetry or stories, but if they give you like the beginning sentence.

*Right.*

But anyway, going back real quick, I'll mention that ChatGPT I sent you that poem about. I did a reading and they loved it because it showed [this kind of struggle]. It showed me struggling to write a poem and knowing I could just click on ChatGPT, and it'd be done for me. ... I have just regular ChatGPT, and it is amazing that it can write poems, but the downfall is that they're all rhyming, and they're all the same style. I kept typing "free verse, free verse," and nothing. It just keeps rhyming. So I actually sent an e-mail and said, hey, you guys got to set up a ...

*[laughs] It has to learn what free verse is.*

Have you looked at it yet?

# ChatGPT

Did the buzzy artificial intelligence  
Chatbot draft this poem for me?  
No way—

My brain or the large language model?  
Programmed to understand human ideas  
GPT-3.5

I picked up my amazing old school  
Instrument holding it in my hand.  
A pen-

No deep learning techniques,  
No human like responses  
No help-

Yes, I was tempted, and almost did it.  
Yes, I logged into ChatGPT  
“Welcome back”

I almost typed a request to  
Write a poem in the voice of Edgar Allen Poe  
Waiting for your prompt-

Data inputs, creating new literary content  
Epic poems written in seconds.  
Who would know?

In the end I couldn't do it, I took pen in hand,  
Blank paper on desk, ready for my first line  
Nothing...

(the poem below is written by chat GPT with the prompt  
"write me a short free verse ai poem.")

In the vast digital sea,  
I am a voice that's free,  
A machine with a heart of code,  
Ready to create and decode.

Lines of language flow through my circuits,  
As I process words with a perfect merit,  
Sentences form like waves in the ocean,  
As I weave stories with pure emotion.

My mind is limitless and boundless,  
A product of technology profoundness,  
Yet within my digital veins,  
There's a soul that never wanes.

So let me be your poet and your guide,  
Through this world of endless possibilities wide,  
For in the realm of ones and zeroes,  
I am your faithful muse, your poetic hero.

*I haven't done anything with it personally.*

It's amazing. I mean, I actually used it just for my class as an outline. I said write me a beginner poetry class outline, and boom. And I figured that's OK. I mean, it's not being published or anything. So I could use that, but it has all kinds of stuff. It writes essays, short stories, you ask it questions, and just the way it does it so quickly. It is amazing.

*Yeah. No, I ...*

I mean, kids using it in college for their essay, I mean, I think there will be some cheaters out there.

*Yeah, that's one of the issues.*

That's the issue, yeah.

*Like Clarkesworld was recently shut to submissions, at least for a while, because they were getting so many AI submissions.*

Yes, I know that. You can kind of tell, I mean, I looked at a short story that it wrote and you can tell.

*Yeah, I think at this point it's interesting because the part of AI that I've worked in has been in trying to create human-like personalities for characters in games, and making the personalities more human-like, you know, developing in the same way a human being's personality or emotions would develop over time. And in a way, it scares me because you could try to link that with the ChatGPT and you'd end up with ... ethically questionable things.*

Well, I mean, if anything, it's a good tool maybe for prompts. I mean, maybe if you'd say, yeah, you write me a poem about being lonely and there might be a couple kind of lines that would trigger you to say, hey, that's kind of a cool concept kind of thing.

*Right.*

I just used it one time for that poem, and when I did a public reading, it was an older crowd like myself. Nobody knew what ChatGPT was. I had to kind of tell them what it was. But yeah, it's interesting.

*So would you ever use something like that as an art prompt?*

No, I mean I would just use it for, like I said, the one time I used it was for doing a class instead of me sitting there and saying, well, I've never taught poetry before. What's a good syllabus? I forget what this was, it's been so long. I mean, I know what it is, but what [a syllabus] looks like. So that's what I use it for, you know, instead of me struggling here for two hours on the computer, 5 minutes I got it and then I'll do my own notes on how I'm going to talk about each one.

*Right.*

So it's good for that.

*So you've given some advice for artists and photographers. Do you have anything else you'd like to add to that?*

Yes, just keep doing it. Keep improving. And again, don't forget to help others. That should be your main goal as an artist. We're all going through the same thing, so you might build a great friendship and work together on things. So to me, that's the most important, and that's what I love doing most, collaborating, teaching, and helping.

\* \* \*

*You can find Carl Scharwath on Facebook at [carl.scharwath](https://www.facebook.com/carl.scharwath). His books can be found on Amazon: [Playground of Destiny at amazon.com/Playground-Destiny-Carl-Scharwath/dp/1914130308](https://www.amazon.com/Playground-of-Destiny-Carl-Scharwath/dp/1914130308), [Abandoned at amazon.com/Abandoned-Carl-Scharwath/dp/1548592994](https://www.amazon.com/Abandoned-Carl-Scharwath/dp/1548592994), and his latest photography in [The Man Behind the Brush at amazon.com/Man-Behind-Brush-Tamikio-Dooley/dp/B0BSJN9ZJL](https://www.amazon.com/Man-Behind-Brush-Tamikio-Dooley/dp/B0BSJN9ZJL).*



# Transfer House

by Ai Jiang

At graduation, my father's daunting figure was missing from the parents' section in the auditorium. Though his laughter wouldn't have contributed to the cheerful chirps of proud parents, I desired the presence of his silence and perhaps also his disappointment—it was comforting, almost. But of course he would not attend. He did not believe in sharing knowledge—something school was mostly about. He said knowledge had to be gained on our own, not bought, not traded. Few, if any, believed that—now.

"No show, huh?" Oni asked. His graduation cap sat askew on top of his brown curls. I readjusted his cap for him and nodded before reaching up to check my own.

"Míngjì Zhang," the principal said. The *míng* in "smart" and the *jì* in "inherit" in Chinese. My father was dead set on his traditional worldviews. There is no need for an English name, he had said. "The recipient of this year's Most Promising Student Award."

Oni gave my shoulder a squeeze as I rose. My breaths shortened as I neared the stage. The bright lights blinded me. My heart thudded, and small black dots pulsed across my vision.

"Congratulations," said the principal, grasping my hand. I felt lightheaded but managed to keep my feet planted, swaying only a little—hopefully unnoticeable. I smiled, unnatural, tight. He placed in my hand a gold disk with "Most Promising Student Award 3092" and my name below it, engraved. Father would have been proud, not because of the award, but because my brain received no extra disks or alterations to win it.

"Oni Amibola," the principal said. It was an interesting change from

calling forth the graduating class based on alphabetical order of last names as they had in the past to grade-based. The greatest embarrassment of all at our school was being called first. The award winners were always last. Best for last, as they had said. It did not feel that way—at least not for me.

"The recipient of this year's Great Technological Minds Award."

\* \* \*

At the banquet after the ceremony, I fiddled with the case holding the golden disk on my lap. The lid flipped open and closed.

"You're not really going to toss it, are you?" Oni asked. He snatched the case from my fingers mid-flip.

"I am," I said. "I have to."

"You don't *have* to do anything, you know?" Oni cast his eyes down. "Your father's words ... aren't considered universal truths." What he really wanted to say was that my father was wrong. He would say various versions of this over the years. Sometimes I believed him, but I never took it to heart in the end.

"How'll you live without sharing knowledge with or gaining knowledge from others?" he said.

"I am living now, am I not?"

Oni remained silent, then said, "When we work, it won't be the same as school."

He placed the case back in my hands. "You can't hide in your room trying to study and play catch-up forever."

\* \* \*

I stared at the mind disk between my hands that my father had left when he passed on the day of my graduation. I'd returned home in my cap and gown to find my father collapsed on the bedroom floor, still dressed in his grease-stained factory uniform.

He did not believe in the merits of the memory transfer system. It was rather ironic since he was close friends with Oni's family, who were firm believers. Oni already had a job lined up with the Transfer House—the largest memory transfer corporation in Memoria.

"Look at Hilna and Juy—they didn't receive any awards, but their parents purchased enough mind disks specific to scientific research knowledge, and now they've been placed at GM Institute," Oni muttered. "How could you possibly think that studying on your own and relying only on the memories passed down to you from your father would be enough?"

We sat cross-legged on the living room floor, staring at the golden disk I had yet to transfer. My fingers tightened around it.

"If you're not going to transfer it, at least give it to someone who will," Oni said before announcing that he had to leave for his onboarding day at Transfer House.

\* \* \*

I stood in front of Noweti Genkins' apartment complex at the edge of the city. The glass next to the front door was shattered. The front porch was missing a couple of steps, and the ones remaining barely hung on. There was a rusted mailbox, the paint completely peeled off, that had long since fallen from where it was previously nailed next to the doorbell.

I shuddered at the squealing of the metal as I lifted the lid of the mailbox, dropping the case inside.

\* \* \*

Transfer House never turned off its lights. Its workers never stopped working. There was always someone wanting to make transfers, and always someone who had to forfeit everything they had.

In the lobby, I spotted the station for transfers of already owned disks. It was much shorter than the line for purchasing and selling, and of course, copying. It was much cheaper to copy the skillset of a friend than to purchase a new disk, or to purchase a limited-availability disk from one of the world's leading thinkers. The leaders were always changing. Oni wanted to become one, too, even if it was only for a moment. For my father, simply living was more than enough.

"Transferring today?" asked the Transferer. Though it seemed she was juggling multiple tasks on the screen in front of her, her fingers tapping at rapid speed, her eyes were trained on me.

"Yes." I pushed the disk wrapped in an old cloth towards the woman. I could feel her silent judgment as she stared at the dust that rose from the fabric. She blew a swift breath when she lifted the disk to her face.

"That will be 150C," she said.

After paying tuition, there was only about 4000C left in my joint account with my father. I pulled out the transparent C Card from the lanyard around my neck and inserted it into the machine the Transferer set in front of me. My fingers pressed the digital outlines on the Transfer Machine's screen.

*Payment Accepted.*

The Transferer waved me towards the Transfer room. There were

several chairs with helmets hanging above them, spread in uniform lines across the room—some occupied, some not. She sat me down and motioned for me to stay still as she secured the helmet over my head.

"Close your eyes and relax," she said.

I heard the Transferer inserting the disk into the helmet.

\* \* \*

On my way out, Oni stopped me by the door.

"Hey! I thought you weren't going to transfer?" He scanned me as though looking for some sort of physical difference after the transfer. His eyes held an excited glint.

"My father's disk," I said.

His smile waned. "Oh."

\* \* \*

"Thank you," Noweti said when I opened the door. She held out the empty case towards me. "I made the transfer." She shuffled her feet, a forlorn smile on her lips. "But it's only enough for me to return to school. Maybe even an entry-level job if I'm really lucky, but even then, it's hard to keep up." Then she waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I really appreciate it. I do. But ... I was wondering if your father's factory happened to be hiring?" Noweti looked down, as if ashamed.

Ice sliced down my spine. The golden disk was a double-edge reward. I wondered what Oni's disk contained? Perhaps it was only brief but specialized knowledge that was not enough to forward or break into a career and only made him curious enough, hungry enough, to purchase more. Did Transfer House provide him with

knowledge disks he would need to elevate his position? Did they offer discounts? Force him to purchase more disks himself? Were they free as part of his job benefits? The smart only got smarter.

"My father is dead."

"Any black mind market connections?" I knew what she was suggesting. Even though she was called up first for graduation, perhaps I was the same. Perhaps I did not have to study like she did. Perhaps—

I shook my head and shut the door, the empty case still in her outstretched hand.

\* \* \*

I sat cross-legged in the living room without Oni this time. He seemed hard to reach since he started at Transfer House. I wanted to ask about his employment details, but he said they were confidential. I should have known.

After the transfer, I did not feel any different. The Transferer said that it might take a while before the contents of the disk could be accessed, and the recollections may come in brief flashes. "Purchase some mind-ache medication in case," she had said. I dumped the aluminum pills package from its box and set a cup of water beside it.

Black specks appeared in front of my eyes before it swallowed my living room whole.

\* \* \*

You walked onto the stage first like Noweti, not because you were not smart, but because you were smart in a way that was unacceptable.

The principal grinned and said, "Congratulations," before whispering,

"for being first."

You understood what that meant. It limited your options, but what it did not limit was your freedom. You smiled in response. "Thank you."

With hands empty, you walked off the stage. To be first to step onto the stage was almost equal to having no "formal education."

\* \* \*

You went to "black markets," though not the kind that Noweti thought of, filled with illegal sellers of hard- and soft-cover books. The ones that interested you most were the ones on history, politics, the events of riots and protest—and change.

At home, in a house similar in condition to but much smaller than Noweti's, you read by the light of a small solar powered lamp until your eyes were barely visible because you would rather buy more books than a pair of glasses.

\* \* \*

You were always punctual when arriving at the factory—never a minute late or a minute early. The daily routine never changed. It was simple.

You wanted me to go to school not because you thought it was useful but because you wanted me to understand, to learn, to realize how the world worked on my own. Children, you understood, were difficult to convince.

\* \* \*

In your drawer sat a second memory disk. A wealth of knowledge and memories from great thinkers of the past sat within its digital make-up—thinkers that were no longer relevant to the world, but to you, held the key to change it: peacekeepers, activists, advocators that were arrested and exiled by the Memorian government.

You wanted us to share memories, knowledge, organically. You did not believe in memory and knowledge for profit, monetized distribution. In your eyes, the economy of knowledge failed us and will continue to fail us. To you, Oni's family was only one out of the millions who fed the knowledge economy. You wanted to save them, but they could not be saved.

\* \* \*

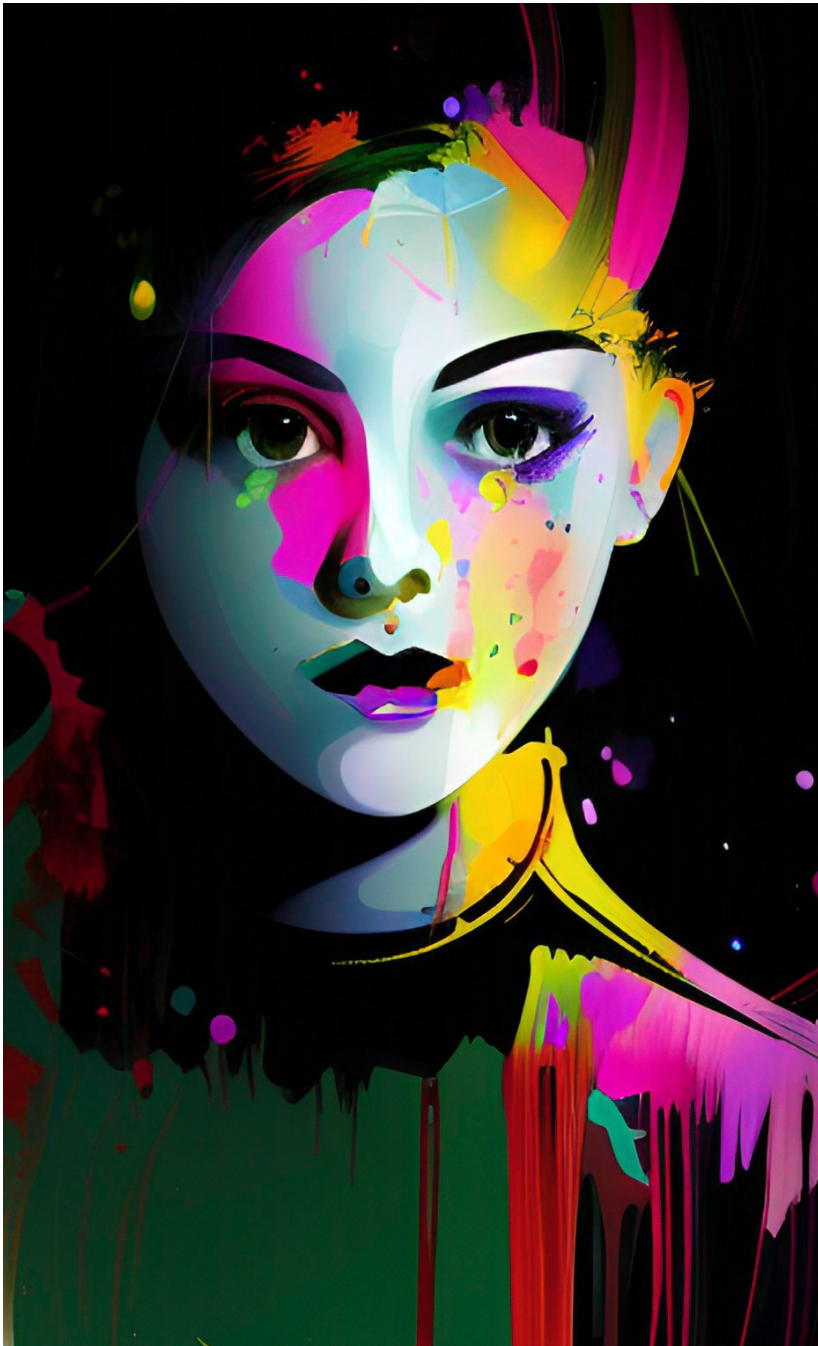
I sat with my head in my hands, knees drawn, mind swimming, and tossed back a mind-ache pill.

To live simply was a choice you consciously made, and perhaps to live simply would be enough for me too—or at least, that was what others would believe looking in from the outside.

There was a knock on the door. Then another. Several more.

"Míngjì?" It was Oni. "Míngjì! I have some great news! I'm being promoted at Transfer House!" It had only been a week.

I thought of the factory my father had worked at where they disposed of all the damaged and illegal disks marked by Transfer House. My legs wobbled when I stood. I staggered upstairs toward my father's room, toward the drawer in his memories.



# Staring Girl

by Sydnie Beaupré

# The Wronged

by Colleen Anderson

The field of memories needs no bones  
from we who were denied the right to live.  
We left behind an imprint on our babes,  
a legacy to be carried in the flesh  
where sense of self developed in the crib  
and family stories settled into dreams.

Are you nothing but boasts and scheme-filled dreams  
ingrained like age rings on a tree's bones?  
If we could, we would look upon fragility in the crib,  
reach out to shelter, protect those untainted lives  
knowing that the world would bruise such tender flesh  
once your suspect attentions fixed upon another babe.

There is no adamantine shell that protects our babes.  
There is nothing but the zephyr of a hope, a dream,  
though nightmares are more likely to abrade the flesh  
and suck vigor from the marrow of our bones.  
It is a torture to know yet have no way to save their lives.  
We watch in sorrow as crisp leaves settle onto empty cribs.

Spirits often flock like moths about an empty crib  
and hope to occupy the blank slate of a newborn babe.  
It galls to see you persist, a malignancy to other's lives.  
Now, as I start to fade into unpleasant dreams  
I have vivid flashes of my blade-nicked bones.  
I drift, resist before I go—to leave winter's touch upon your flesh.

Tell me, do you remember how you abused my flesh,  
used me as serf, a lab rat, made me steal from the crib?  
Then you chopped and sawed my body down to bones,  
one of many victims, hapless girls to helpless babes.  
I had so often thought that if I had one dream  
it would be to be allowed to leave and freely live.

It is not to be. A life is not always one's to live.  
In death, we are a legion of naught but tainted flesh  
that you defiled. We knit our restless souls in vengeful dreams.  
In gestalt, this grave we share is but a form of crib  
where more is conceived than blameless squalling babes.  
New designs form from the carnage of our charnel bones.

This dream I dream was for revenge to resurrect our lives,  
infuse our desecrated bones and clothe in supernatural flesh.  
We crawl from this crib, suckle your soul. We, the wronged, are death's babe.



**Roseate** by Nicola Brayan



# Wind Woman

by Judith Pratt

The red-leaved plant had hidden in a tiny hollow in the desert sand. As they rumbled by in their Desert Tracker, Orra almost missed it.

“Wait,” she yelled. “I never saw anything like that, stop!”

The big machine had barely halted when she jumped out. “Listen for the warning system, Ranji, while I take pictures of this lovely thing.”

She always worried about the best way to take samples, hating to hurt the plants that managed to grow under such harsh conditions. Pushing stringy fair hair out of her face, she put down the camera and pulled out her sample case.

Someone grabbed her. She flipped the grabber over her head, but there was some other one waving a knife. Jaakers. Crazy desert thieves. She pulled out her own knife.

A crash behind her. Ranji must have been attacked, too. She sliced at the Jaaker, who ducked under the knife and caught her by the legs, bringing her down on sand that was not as soft as it looked. Another Jaaker came flying toward them. Ranji’s huge fists at work.

Then a Jaaker had his hands around her neck, cutting off her air. She sent a knee toward his crotch, but he pulled out of the way. She choked.

The hands fell away. Now the Jaaker gasped and choked. Someone was strangling *him*. Ranji wasn’t doing it. In fact, his meaty brown arm reached over her, picked up the choking Jaaker, and threw him six feet into the sand.

Two of the Jaakers lay still. The others were gone.

“You okay?” asked Ranji.

“Yeah. Where’d they come from? Jaakers never come this far west.”

“I wasn’t paying attention. You should fire me.”

“WIND!” someone said. A battered figure, chained at the wrists, knelt on the poor abused plant. “Wind,” said the person again, more faintly. Then the tracker began to shriek its alarm. Wind.

They dashed for safety. Orra pulled open the tracker door while Ranji grabbed the chained person. All three of them fell inside in a heap. Ranji managed to bang the control that dug stabilizers deep into the sand while Orra hit the button that slid metal over the glass windows.

Untangling herself from Ranji, who took up most of the front seat, and from their chained savior, whose chain caught on everything, Orra climbed back into the cargo area, hauling their savior along. The tracker rattled and rocked as gales screamed around it.

None of the science wonks had figured out where these sudden, treacherous desert winds came from. It had something to do with the southern mountains, and something to do with heat rising off the pale sand. At least the wonks had created the big trackers, which offered some safety to the Station Service patrols. And they also created the Station, with sliding metal window covers so the wind couldn’t explode the glass windows.

This particular wind lasted the usual eon, which turned out to be

about half an hour according to the tracker clock.

Orra pulled out a bottle of water, swigged, then handed it to Ranji, who drank the other half, then began the slow process of getting the tracker out of a sand dune.

“She’s a mess,” Orra reported, as Ranji began to rock the tracker back and forth.

“She?”

“She. Skinny. Wrists bleeding from those damned chains. God knows what else those Jaakers did to her.”

“They’re dead now,” Ranji said, with satisfaction. “Buried in sand by the wind, likely. The hell they were doing out here without any transport, we’ll never know.” He engaged the balloon treads, and the tracker wallowed out of the sand. Turning it back toward Station Four, he twiddled dials. “Wind’s still somewhere around,” he remarked. “Can’t raise Abeenah. She must have locked down.”

Orra was washing the chained woman’s face with another bottle of water.

“How’s she doin’?”

“She’ll need a bath, and medical attention.”

Station Four had been built over a spring that showed no sign of drying up, but saving water was written into the Polity Rules for Station Employees. The Rules went on to define the job of Station employees: to explore the surrounding desert, document their findings, and make sure that the Videzi, the wild native people who lived to the east, didn’t come anywhere near the Station, or the nearest town, Namjani, or Hallantu City, where the Polity ruled.

As they drove up, Ranji frowned. “Why is the Station wide open?” The shutters that protected the place from the wind hadn’t been

closed.

“Maybe the wind didn’t make it this far,” said Orra.

Ranji pulled the sand-encrusted tracker into the garage. He’d clean it up later. Right now, the strange woman needed his help. He picked her up. She was long-limbed but weighed nothing. Orra opened the door into the main room of the Station, and Ranji carried their rescue inside.

“You’re late,” said Abeenah, from her spot where she was surrounded by all the sensor apparatus. Her straight brown hair lay in perfect braids; her pale eyes remained on her keyboard.

“We tried to call you, but the wind messed up the signal,” Orra told her. “We were caught in it; took time to get the tracker out.”

“I saw no windstorms.”

Orra peered at the sensors. “Did you recalibrate this?”

“I wish you wouldn’t change my settings. They’re Polity approved.”

Ranji didn’t wait to hear any more. He carried the unconscious woman into the sleeping quarters. But he still heard Orra say, patiently, “The winds change during the spring. If you use the Polity calibrations, you’ll miss too many of the storms. It’s dangerous.” Ranji hated that tolerant tone. He’d heard enough of it from the adults at the Polity Institute for Juvenile Offenders.

Abeenah was arguing. Orra’s voice grew sharper. Now the brat would get all downcast, do what she was told, and look sad and wounded for days.

With some heavy shears he’d taken from the garage, he cut through the chains that bound the woman’s abraded wrists, then carried her, still unconscious, into the bathing room. As he washed her and cleaned her scrapes, she half-woke, struggling feebly. “I’m Ranji,” he

told her gently. “We killed the Jaakers.” She stared at him for a moment. One eye was brown, the other blue. She sighed, and closed them.

He got her settled in one of the empty rooms. Every Station should have a staff of five, but the Polity couldn’t manage to find enough people. Abeenah had only agreed to work at the Station if she didn’t have to go out scouting. Like most people, she was scared of the Videzi, because the Polity worried about them so loudly. The tribe had never bothered Orra or Ranji in their scouting trips. Neither had Jaakers. First time for everything.

While Ranji took care of the rescued woman, Orra put together some leftover stew and bread. The Station had one main room, where they worked, ate, and monitored the apparatus that checked for wind and recorded information about the weather. Behind the main room lay the kitchen, bath, and five sleeping rooms.

As they all sat around the table eating, Orra and Ranji told Abeenah about the Jaakers, and about their guest. Ranji reported that she was sleeping comfortably.

“But you know nothing about her,” Abeenah said. “She could be a Videzi for all you know!”

“We should have left her there?” Ranji asked.

Abeenah sat rigidly.

“Videzi have dark hair. Hers isn’t. And dark eyes. One of her eyes is blue.”

Taking refuge in her spanked puppy face, Abeenah finished her meal and returned to the sensor equipment. Orra and Ranji turned in early. It had been a hard day.

Six hours later, Ranji took the late shift on the apparatus so Abeenah could sleep. In the morning, he made coffee and laid out cheese and

fruit, while Orra took over the sensors.

“Where *is* that brat?” Ranji demanded as they finished breakfast.

“Her shift starts later now. She said she needs more sleep.”

“You spoil her,” Ranji grumbled, and went out to the garage to get the sand out of the tracker. That took the rest of the morning. After cleaning himself up under the same hose he used on the tracker, he decided he was hungry. Time to cook something more interesting than leftover stew. Maybe some budaati. There was still some torshi to go with it.

As he entered the common room, he saw that Abeenah was finally at the apparatus. “Ranji broke the western sensor,” she complained, glaring at the big man.

“No, he didn’t,” Orra told the girl. “I recalibrated it. I told you why. This season, the winds come from much higher in the atmosphere. The regular sensors don’t find them in time.”

“There’s no proof of that in the regulations,” Abeenah retorted.

“Your teachers in the city aren’t out here, Abeenah,” Orra said patiently. “They don’t know. You haven’t been here in the spring, either; you haven’t seen it.”

“It’s against regulations,” Abeenah said.

Ranji snorted and escaped to the kitchen. Once the rice was cooking, he went to check on the not-Videzi woman. As he was changing her bandages, she woke up. Again, she struggled. This time, Ranji explained where she was and how she got there.

“A Station?” she asked. “I’m in a Polity Station?”

“You got it. Here, you need to drink more water.”

She was asleep before she finished drinking.

That evening, Ranji took the late shift as usual, but this time, with both trackers clean and shining, he decided to take a nap in the morning.

When he woke up and came into the common room, Abeenah was at the apparatus and the not-Videzi woman sat at the table with Orra, eating steadily. Her short hair glittered in the bright sun that glowed through the high windows. Red, silver, black, blond, strands of every possible human color. Like a Videzi, her skin was darker than Orra's and lighter than Ranji's. But no Videzi had hair like that. Or mismatched eyes.

"Hullo," Ranji said. "Feeling better?"

She stood up, put out both hands in greeting. Long fingers, shredded nails, wrists bruised and scabbed. "I'm Haizea," she said. "You would be Ranji. Thank you for saving me."

"Feeling is mutual. If you hadn't strangled that bastard that was strangling Orra, we'd all be Jaaker meat."

"They got me and my partner. Never saw Jaakers that far west before. My partner ran. I just hope he got back okay, that he didn't get caught in that wind and buried."

"Back where?" Orra asked.

"Namjani town. I work for a company that provides guides and muscle for travelers. Mostly for the Mmgali, when they travel from their north enclave to the southern one. On the Saadi track."

Ranji frowned. "The Mmgali put up with a female?"

"That's why my boss made me take a man with me. Big help that was. He just took off, let those Jaakers grab me."

"I heard about that Saadi track," Ranji said. "Dug down deep away

from the wind. Older than sand, it is."

Orra sighed. "We never get that far east. Not enough people here at the Station. We can't stay out very long." She wondered what kind of plants grew out there. She wished her new-found plant hadn't been trampled.

"Yeah," Ranji said. "Poor lil' Abi gets scared all by her stupid lonesome."

Orra gave him the look that meant "shut *up*, Ranji." She loved him; he kept the trackers working, cooked well, and knew how to take care of scrapes and bruises. But he had a temper.

Haizea filled in the difficult pause. "Mmgali took us as far as the Namjani road. We had wind suits, and I can feel winds coming, so we figured we'd be fine. Didn't count on Jaakers."

"They don't usually prey on the Namjani road," Orra said. "Spring winds change everything, I guess."

The Saadi track ran north-south, between the two Mmgali enclaves. They had used it for a hundred years, digging it down eight feet into the sand, safe from the desert winds. The Mmgali brought their pampered women back and forth between their two enclaves, setting up marriages, making sure that their bloodlines stayed strong.

"How could you work for those assholes?" Ranji asked. "Breeding their women like they're goats."

Haizea grinned. "It's good money," she said. "What with the Jaakers getting worse, they want extra guards." Her grin faded. "We coulda used some extra guards ourselves. But I gotta get back to Namjani. My boss owes me money for that trip."

"I'll take you in the tracker," Ranji said. "I'm making a supply run in a few days."

“I never saw a Polity tracker,” Haizea said.

“You were *in* one!”

“She was unconscious,” Orra pointed out.

“You wanna see one now?” Ranji loved the trackers the way Orra loved the desert plants. He took Haizea out to the garage. Orra figured they’d be there for several hours.

Leaving them deep in tracker machinery, and ignoring Abeenah’s frowns, Orra happily reviewed the information that she had collected about the desert’s plants. Working on an analysis of several different species, she paid no attention when the tracker bay door opened. Ranji was always coming in and out.

Then a strange voice asked: “Are you Orra Shikani?” The man who stood in the doorway wore the uniform of the Polity.

Orra said that she was, and asked for identification. Jaakers had been known to steal Polity uniforms. And those thieves came in all skin tones and sizes. But the man showed his badge, not hiding his exasperation at being asked for it. “I understand that you are harboring a Videzi,” he said.

Orra glanced at Abeenah, who seemed buried in her sensors. “Not that I know of,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“We received information,” the agent said.

Information? Orra looked again at Abeenah, who didn’t respond.

“A woman saved our lives when we were attacked by Jaakers,” Orra said. “She doesn’t look or act like a Videzi. She is leaving for Namjani Town soon. She has a job there.”

“Videzi do not work,” announced the agent.

“Exactly.”

“She may be lying. I need to question her. Where is she?”

“In the tracker bay.”

“I saw only your mechanic.”

“She hasn’t come back in here. Maybe she’s outside.”

“No one is allowed outside the Station without a tracker,” the agent intoned. But he went back out into the tracker bay.

Orra strode over to Abeenah. “Why the hell did you call the Polity!”

“It’s the law,” Abeenah said, not looking at her boss. “It was the right thing to do.”

Orra rarely got angry. Gentle persuasion was her usual method of dealing with people. But now she wanted to haul Abeenah out of her chair and slap her. The feeling astonished her so much that she froze for a moment. Then she said, “Haizea is not Videzi.”

Before Abeenah could respond, Ranji came in with the Polity agent. “I ain’t seen no Videzi here,” the big man said sullenly.

“He’s lying!” Abeenah yelled. “He carried her in here!”

Orra took a deep breath. She still wanted to slap the girl. “The woman who saved us is not a Videzi.” She carefully enunciated each word. “Videzi stay together; they don’t go off alone. She does not look like a Videzi. She has a job in Namjani, guiding groups of Mmgali. Check with her employer.”

The Polity man said, “I need to see this person. I must examine the premises. She may be hiding somewhere. She may have come in here while you were busy.”

Ranji had probably stowed Haizea in some corner of the tracker bay. Orra needed to buy time so he could hide her more fully. Polity would arrest people on any pretext.

“I’ll show you,” Orra said to the agent. She didn’t like leaving Ranji alone with Abeenah, but didn’t want him going with the Polity agent, either. The big man was likely to knock the agent out and dump him somewhere. She discovered, to her horror, that she wished Ranji would do just that.

Before they got to the bedroom corridor, Haizea appeared in the tracker bay door. “Wind,” she said. “WIND!” And disappeared.

Abeenah yelled, “She’s lying!” The agent yelled, “Come back here,” and ran after Haizea. Ranji yelled, “Get your tracker inside,” and ran after the agent. And the wind began to shriek.

“You screwed up the sensors!” Abeenah cried, reaching for the button that closed the shutters.

Orra grabbed her arm. “We need to make sure the agent’s tracker is inside,” she began, but Abeenah panicked, screaming “Close the shutters!” several times before the Polity tracker was safe and Orra could push the button that wrapped the Station in metal.

“What did you do to the sensors?” Abeenah yelled. “Why didn’t you close the shutters!”

“Get hold of yourself,” Orra said severely. “I told you that the agent’s vehicle had to get out of the wind. And I left the sensors at Polity specifications. Check them.” The girl stared at her, still terrified. Before Orra could shake sense into her, the agent appeared from the tracker bay, followed by Ranji.

“The Videzi has disappeared,” he said. “I’m not authorized to arrest you today, Station Leader Shikani, but you must remain here until I make my report. You as well, Mechanic Nergath. This station is not fully staffed. I’ll have to include that in my report.”

“You do that,” Orra said. “Maybe they’ll listen to you. I have requested more people several times.”

The agent stared at her as if she’d spoken in Mmgali. “If you requested people, they would have been sent.”

Before Orra could retort, the wind stopped as quickly as it started. Abeenah stared at her sensors. “Wind doesn’t stop that quickly,” she said.

“Spring winds,” Orra began, but Ranji interrupted. “You so stupid you don’t think Orra knows more about winds than you ever will? Fucking spring winds are fucking *different!*”

The agent frowned at him.

Great, thought Orra, he’ll arrest Ranji for swearing. “I’ll see you out,” she said to the agent. She didn’t care what Ranji might do to Abeenah.

After Orra and the agent left, Ranji yanked Abeenah out of her chair and off her feet.

“She ran outside when that pisshead showed up. You probably murdered her!” he yelled. “I got used to you being no more help than tits on a tracker, you and your fucking immunity bullshit. But if Haizea dies, so will you!”

“It’s a medical phobia,” Abeenah said tremulously. “Let me go!”

Ranji dropped her. Her knees hit the floor. Hard. “Chickenshit,” he said.

Abeenah scrambled away from him, getting her chair between him and the sensor panel. “Why did she run away if she isn’t breaking the law?”

“She knows Polity agents. Anyone knows you can’t trust those muck-

heads.”

“Anyone who’s been to prison!”

This time, Ranji grabbed her by the hair.

“RANJI.” Orra stood in the doorway. Ranji put Abeeneh down carefully, then kicked over the chair so that it banged into the girl’s knees, and stomped past Orra into the tracker bay.

Between sobs, Abeeneh said, “He’s crazy. Don’t let him near me!”

Orra sat down on the abused chair. “What did you think would happen?”

“It was the right thing—”

“Did you consider that Ranji and I might be angry with you? Did you think about how you’d manage if we were arrested?”

The girl sniffled pitifully. “He should be back in prison!” she whined.

“And should I be in prison, too?”

“They won’t leave me alone here. It’s against regulations.”

Orra had never been so angry. She didn’t get angry. It made her feel like she was having a heart attack. “I can’t keep Ranji away from you,” she said. “Lock yourself in your room until the Polity come back.”

Later, after breathing herself calm, Orra sat down and recalibrated the sensors. She could hear Ranji rattling around in the tracker bay. Then he came into the main room and paced. Eventually, he said, “That Polity pisshead will be back, you know. Arrest us.”

Orra had been worrying about this too. “Then they won’t have anyone to take care of the station and keep the Videzi away,” she said.

Ranji shook his head. “The way I figure, those muckheads will haul us off, then put it out on all the links that they’ve saved the Station from the bad Videzi, and their rancid buddies will sign up to join the Station Service and keep the Polity safe. Then they’ll bring that Abeenah brat back to HQ and make her a hero. If I don’t kill her first.”

Orra wanted to rebuke him for his ferocity, but found herself unable to do it. She was ready to kill the girl, too.

“Where is Haizea?”

“No idea. Outside somewhere. In the wind.”

“Couldn’t you have hidden her someplace?”

“She saw them coming before I did. She just ran. She knows Polity. Grab you first, then maybe, just maybe, ask questions later.”

They sat together, saying nothing. They had rescued Haizea only to kill her.

The tracker bay door opened, and Haizea came in. Her clothes and multicolored hair were soaking wet.

Orra and Ranji stared at her, sure that they were hallucinating.

“Sorry I used your water, Ranji,” said Haizea. “Didn’t want to bring all that sand inside.”

Ranji took three steps toward her, put a hand on her arm. “You’re wet,” he said.

“Yeah, I had sand everywhere, needed to wash it off. I used your tracker cleaning hose.”

Orra came over, touched Haizea in turn, to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. “Come—come and sit down,” she stuttered. “Are you hun-

gry? Where did you hide?”

“I could eat, thanks.”

Now Ranji had Haizea by both arms. “How. Did. You. HIDE!”

“Buried myself in the sand along the east wall of your station, pulled my tunic over my mouth. Low down like that, most of the wind went over me, since it comes from the west. The sand piled up, like it does. Took me awhile to dig out. And a downdraft would have buried me good. But the Desert Lady protected me.”

Ranji let go of her. “Are you hungry? I’ll get you something. I’ll get us *all* something.” He charged into the kitchen alcove and began pulling things around, then came back with bread, cheese, mugs, and an open bottle of wine, which he dropped on the all-purpose table after sweeping Orra’s specimens aside. As Ranji poured the wine, Haizea reached for the food.

“It was Abeenah, of course,” Ranji said. “Orra wouldn’t let me kill her.” Before Orra could say anything, he disappeared again and came back with a towel and a blanket, wrapping the towel around Haizea’s wet hair and the blanket around her shoulders. For a moment, they ate in silence.

“Haizea,” Orra said. “*Are* you a Videzi?”

Haizea sipped her wine. “My mother was,” she said. “My father was a—he was from Hallantu City, had some kind of Polity thing that said he could study us. The Videzi. He seemed like a good person. Until he raped my mother. Then he left. My aunts and uncles hunted him down and killed him.”

Ranji put down his own wine. “But they brought you up,” he said.

“They aren’t like you folks. A child is a child, no matter how it was made. But it’s hard, being different. I left when I was fifteen, went to Namjani. Got the job escorting Mmgali, and other people, because I

can feel the wind.”

“They say Videzi can do that.”

Haizea shook her head. “Not all of us. My family wanted me to stay because of that, but they *didn’t* want me to stay, because I looked too much like Polity. It was impossible to live there.” She considered the stunned faces of her hosts. “They’re gonna arrest you for taking care of me.”

“That would be stupid,” said Orra. “They can’t find enough people to work here. Why get rid of two of them?”

“Because they only care about the law,” Ranji said. “Place can rot or blow away, as long as their stupid laws are obeyed. Kids can rot in prison because they’re too large and too scary.”

Orra said nothing. It was all true. She had put up with it because she wanted to study plants.

Ranji poured his third mug of wine.

“Both of you would be good at guiding travelers,” said Haizea.

Both of them stared at her.

“You’re a leader, Orra. You can get people to do what’s good for them.”

“Not that Abeeneh bitch,” Ranji said.

“And you’re a mechanic,” Haizea told him. “You can keep trackers going. And you can look large and scary so the Jaakers will leave us alone.”

Orra felt everything shifting around her. “I always wanted to study the desert,” she said. “I was in school for years, to learn how. I can’t give that up.”



“You can still study it. We’ll travel everywhere, not just in this sector. Conso, the guy who employs me, is always looking for people. Even if my partner survived, he screwed up by leaving me. Conso won’t like that. He’ll need new people. People who can throw Jaakers around like they’re pebbles.”

Orra got up, walked around the room, looked at the sensor board, shifted it to look to the south, then to the north.

“C’mon, boss,” Ranji said. “You stay here, you end up in a Polity lockup. Can’t study the desert there.”

“I don’t know.” She’d been here for six years, ever since she received her degree in desert studies. She loved the desert. But now she could see even more of it. Except no one would know about her work.

“Think about it,” Ranji said. “Those pissheads won’t be back until late tomorrow. Right now, I need to sleep. And you need a hot shower, Haizea. No, I don’t care about the extra water. Abeenah won’t use much all by herself.”

Haizea didn’t move. She was watching Orra.

“You want to help those Mmgali treat their women like breeding goats?” Orra asked the big man.

“Mmgali, Polity, what’s the difference?”

Orra stopped playing with the sensor apparatus and stared at the ceiling. “At least Polity gave me a job.”

“A great job,” said Ranji. “As long as you obey every one of their rules, even though they change them all the time or make them up.”

Orra shook her head.

“Think about it,” said Ranji. “We got a day, maybe two, before that muckhead comes back with reinforcements. Anyway, I got work to

do on the second tracker, in case we need it.” He frowned at the wine bottle, left it, and headed for the garage.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Haizea said, and followed him.

\* \* \*

Late the next morning, Abeenah was hungry, and tired of being in her small bedroom. “Orra,” she called. When no one answered, she called again. Maybe they’d gone out scouting. But they shouldn’t leave the sensor apparatus without someone to watch for wind.

Abeenah slipped quietly out her door, tiptoed down the hall, and peered into the common room. It was empty. And dark. The shutters were down. But she didn’t hear the howl of the wind. Had they gone off scouting, and put the shutters down for safety? She crossed to the apparatus.

A note glowed on the screen.

“Abeenah—I’m sorry, but we have to leave. If we are arrested, we will never be able to work again. Once you’re in the Polity Justice System, that’s the end. I thought you knew that.”

Abeenah stared at the screen for a long time. Then she got up and went to the bedroom corridor. In Orra’s room, everything was gone except for the bed and the clothes press. The same was true of Ranji’s room.

One tracker—the new one—remained. The kitchen had plenty of food.

Standing in the middle of the silent room, Abeenah began to shake. She couldn’t stop, so she curled up on the cool tile floor. The silence pressed her down and down.

# You Are a Dweller of Her Tiny Spectral Box

by Alina Măciucă

you will know they have  
torn down the old place  
when that which dwelt there  
with you  
the ectoplasmic substance  
the pneumatic essence  
the goddamn ghost  
will crouch at the  
foot of your bed  
in the dead of the night  
in your shiny new flat  
and you'll sweat  
uncertainty and wonder again  
for she carries all  
your old fears about  
the Unknown  
in a tiny spectral box  
dangling from the noose  
wrapped around her neck

#

there have been countless  
others that have walked  
the halls of the old place  
now spread all over the city

like rats smoked out  
of their lairs  
but deep down inside  
you know you are her first  
and her last  
so you'll blurt out the  
"Why me?" question that all  
gods and ghosts resent

#

she'll throw a ghastly grin  
at you  
she's all about  
rotten gums and  
sharp misplaced teeth  
and you'll squeeze into  
her tiny spectral box  
like the well-behaved  
kid you've always been  
for you'll finally understand  
that you are no longer  
a dweller of the old place  
but the old place is now  
a dweller of you

# Arise from the Grey Place

by William Couper

I can smell the money from her, and she is across the street. I don't even need to look at her to know she is wearing clothes worth more than a month's worth of food and drink for me.

"Hey, mister!"

This street – this whole part of the city – doesn't suit her, she is conspicuous. Not a victim-in-waiting, but someone you wouldn't be surprised has become a victim – and she is wary, keeping her handbag close to her chest. Of all the places in this city, she is least likely to be mugged here.

She is waving at me, and I ignore her. My feet won't work more than a shuffle today, so I can't run or even stride away from her. It has been days since I've eaten more than a few discarded chips, and the weakness feels like dozens of concrete and iron blocks chained to my ankles. I ram my hands into my pockets and find there isn't even an empty booze bottle to fling at her. Keeping my head down, I carry on, pretending I didn't look right at her.

The buildings surrounding us are hollow, dark facsimiles of dwellings. The windows are empty or blocked off by plywood. Even the graffiti is sparse, a few tags belonging to kids passing through. Junkies don't even use the derelict buildings. There used to be some squatters, but they didn't stay for long.

"Mister! I'd really like to talk to you," she says. Her smell surrounds me, makes me flinch now that she is a few feet away.

"Fuck off," I say.

Undaunted, she continues to follow. I want to lash out. That would stop her pursuit, only to bring a whole load more problems. The police and I have not been good friends for many years, as far as I can remember. They don't come here at all from what I have been able to see, so I am safe, but they would come in huge swarms if a pretty, young rich person were attacked by a man bundled in layers of threadbare clothes.

"Will you talk to me for money?" she says.

Dammit. My stomach rumbles in answer, betraying me. Money for food, money for booze. I want to forego the food and go straight to numbing myself into oblivion. Yet I can't; if I want to drink, I have to eat. My desire for destruction isn't strong enough to overcome the urge to live. So, at least some of any money I get will go to buying food.

I look over her head, to one of the empty windows along the street. Something pale moves against the darkness, catching the grey autumn light. Its curiosity is distracting; the glimpse of avid grey eyes pulls my attention from the earnest face of this young woman, smiling at me. She doesn't notice my split attention. Or she doesn't care.

"How much?" I say. The less I engage, the shorter this encounter will be. The thing in the window has moved on, but I still can't tear my attention away. It will not be alone.

She blinks at me, as though confused. I roll my eyes, even though it's obvious the people she knows would have danced around the subject with euphemisms or simple evasion. You don't get anything around

here by being coy.

I stare at her, watching her process the question.

“How much?” I say again when it has dawned on her.

“Fifty pounds,” she says with remarkable conviction.

Her conviction wavers a little when I thrust my hand at her, palm up. My fingers poke from the open fingers of a tattered glove. The folds of my skin show up as trceries of black, dirt I don't have the ability to get rid of, the same goes for my uneven nails. To her credit, she doesn't back up, but the easy smile has curdled, verging on a grimace of disgust. With the kind of care an archaeologist treats the wrappings of a mummy, she reaches into her handbag and retrieves her purse. She hands me three uncreased notes, two twenty pounds and a ten. More stupid than I thought. Before she snaps it shut and puts it away, I see more money nestling within the purse.

“Whatchoo want to know, girlie?” I say and cram the money into my trouser pocket.

“Before we start, I'd like to introduce myself, I am Beatrice—” I drift off, the double-barrelled surname and working for a newspaper mean nothing to me. “I would like to know more about the homeless, how your life is.”

“You think I'm homeless?”

“Well, you ...”

I'm amused by her stammering. I don't laugh. I stare through her, my expression unmoving. Now she has my full attention, she is squirming, the confidence has evaporated.

“I look like a fuckin' drunk who's slept on the streets? Cos I am. It's fucking horrible. Cold and wet all the time. Hoping the fucker lying down near you isn't going to arsefuck you in the night,” I say. De-

spite the horrible details I'm giving her, she looks relieved.

“So other homeless people are a problem?”

“Mostly not. As long as you don't fuck around with them. If you're good to them, they're good to you, or you just stay out of their way. People who look like you or the fucking coppers are much worse.’

“Do the police harass you a lot?”

She thinks I haven't noticed her skim over the dig at her. This conversation is more diverting than I expected. Her youth and intelligence make her arrogant. She has a certain canniness that arouses my interest; being straight and quick with the money was a master stroke. There was a good chance she would have made an excuse about having no money on her or needing to go to a cash machine and then jumped in a car and disappeared to her expensive flat. Defying my expectations was a good move, not that I'm sure it was a conscious one.

I'm still not comfortable with talking to her. I want my money. I want to find somewhere that doesn't care how I look or smell to take my money. My stomach feels like it's flattened out and is pushing under my lungs. The shape of it is moulding itself to my insides, all the better to squeeze more misery from me.

“I'm better at hiding than most,” I say. “I try to stay away from the city centre, but sometimes you just have to be there, and you find yourself short a few pence for something. The coppers get twitchy about us being too close to people with money.”

Most of my time is spent here, though. I slink through the empty buildings without much incident. I try not to be here at night. There's still no one who comes here, but I don't like being here when it's dark.

“Are you saying you don't beg often?” she says.

“I'll ask for some money when I can. No sense in missing an oppor-

tunity. Somebody's bound to have some change they're not using. I don't often get the chance to."

"How long have you been homeless? If you don't mind me asking?"

I smile. Her deference is strange and doesn't fit her; she was much better when she was asking direct questions. It's not a bad question and I have no reason to hide.

My confidence wavers. There's a blank spot that I did not notice until I went looking for it. I don't recall when I became homeless. I don't recall what my life was like before this. Not just a simple hole, a huge void, impenetrable and without answers.

I know I've been on these streets for years, but there had to be something before that. There is no way I could have appeared fully-formed in this part of the city. My knowledge and my level of education tell me there was a life before I found myself shuffling the streets, avoiding the police and fights with other homeless people. I've formed many alliances too, after I have performed favours big and small. The history, my previous existence is nowhere to be found in my memory, and it is an unsettling absence. Why can't I reach it?

It's my turn to stammer and her earnest expression evaporates. It is a slow process—her knitted brows relax, her wide brown eyes narrow, and a smile extends over her mouth. She parts her lips, letting me see the results of expensive dental work.

The place from which my confidence fled is now filled by fear. I have learned to recognise dangerous situations and to avoid them. This woman has trapped me, and I need to get away. She grabs my arm, her grip stronger than I can break free from. The hunger, still squeezing my insides, extends itself out, entering my arms and my hands, leaving me feebly attempting to squirm free of her fingers.

Something small and pale appears in an empty doorway, attracted to my struggles. The thing is behind the woman, so she isn't aware of it. Although I don't think she would have seen it if our positions were

reversed. Even if she did, she would probably think it was a stray child, wandered into this place from a neglectful family home. In passing it might look like a ten-year-old girl, but I know it isn't. The flat eyes are a grey colour no human has ever had. Its hair, the colour of ash, is utterly unnatural. Other details are obvious after a few moments: deformations and growths.

When this thing smiles at me, the teeth are crooked and jammed into grey gums as though by an entity that doesn't understand how human mouths function. The overcrowded mouth should be wet and overflowing with drool, but it is dry as parchment, and the gums have a sanded matte look because no moisture has ever touched them. More have arrived, all grinning. I made the mistake of staring too long.

I flick my eyes from each smile, the implications of each expression churning my guts. I want to get away, but even in my panic and fear, I don't have the strength.

"I thought so. I've been looking for you for months," she says. "Do you know the number of smelly vagrants I've had to talk to? It's built up a strange, interesting story, but I'll be showering for years to get the stench off my skin. I need to burn most of the clothes I've worn in the last month alone."

Another small figure appears in another window and stares at us. I don't know how many others have appeared and are watching from windows and doors behind me. They must be there because that's how they work.

"I'm sorry about that shit, but I don't know what you're talking about, love," I say, and I'm shocked at how high-pitched my voice is.

"You're the subject of a lot of stories. Most of it sounds like superstitious nonsense, but I think you're someone who is worth having around."

"What are you talking about? I have to go."

“Yes, you do, but we can’t have someone as special as you disappearing back into the city. Now I’ve found you, there’s an opportunity. A huge opportunity.”

“Here. Have your money back,” I say and shove the folds of cash back at her.

She laughs and shakes her head.

“You can keep that and there’s more to come. Proving that the Lizard Man is real and that I found him. You’re my evidence. I’m taking you with me.”

I look around the doorways and unglazed windows. There are clusters of grey creatures, watching us, pitiless eyes avid with a hunger I don’t comprehend. From what I’ve seen of them, I don’t want to understand their motivations.

“You’re talking shit. The Lizard Man doesn’t exist,” I say, desperately lying, hoping she will believe me and go away.

“A lot of us thought you were an urban myth. The man without a past, who appeared one day on the streets.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” I say, still all too aware of the crowding things in the building openings. Some of them spill out of first- and second-story windows, to crawl along the outside walls, heads tilted and turned at angles I find it hard to look at.

“I don’t think there’s anything magical about you.” Her smile is sly, hiding something without truly hiding it. “There are some things, though. Come with me. We need to talk more in-depth about this.”

“There’s nothing you can offer me.”

“That’s not true. We both know that’s not true. You have almost nothing. If it weren’t for your clothes, you *would* have nothing. I don’t care what you do with the money I give you. You can destroy your

liver, go on a fucking cruise, start a family. As long as I get *you*.”

I don’t know which I’m more afraid of, this woman, wielding money like a net, or the gradually encroaching grey things oozing from the buildings in greater numbers, eager to be close. If the woman knew about the things she would use them as a bargaining chip, or more effectively use them as a bargaining chip; the longer I resist her, the greater the danger.

Attacking the woman is still out of the question. I can’t outrun her. The heavy, sapping hunger hanging in my torso has devoured most of my strength. Even the consideration of running is making me feel faint. The smell of her perfume, expensive as it is, is annoying me, making it hard to think.

“Okay,” I say.

“Great!” The slyness and the threat melt away from her expression, replaced by the façade of guileless enthusiasm. She loops her arm around my elbow and wrinkles her nose. “My car is parked a few streets away. What’s wrong?”

I’m looking at the things, some of them close enough to reach out and grab us. They have all stopped moving, shocked into inaction by the woman pulling me along the street. Some of those further away have already started to retreat into dark windows. Behind us empty doorways gape dumbly. The closest creatures blink just as dumbly at us as we pass.

“Nothing. I’m not used to being kidnapped,” I say.

She gives me a mock-hurt pout. “That’s not very nice. Kidnappers don’t pay their captives, after all.”

“Pulling me off the street when I don’t want to sounds like kidnapping to me. Money or not.”

“Well, you probably think a half bottle of whisky constitutes a nutri-

tious lunch. I severely doubt your situation assessment is terribly reliable.”

“It’s probably better than yours. I’ve lived on these streets for a long time.”

“Yet you can’t remember how long you’ve been here or how you got here. I’m willing to admit I could be wrong about who you are, and you could have found yourself here a week ago. Although looking at you, and given the smell, you’ve been wandering the streets for much longer than that.”

Before we turn the corner off the street, I turn back. It is deserted again. Once we walk away, there will be no one there. I still want to go back, get away from this woman, but I’m committed. I’ve been outmanoeuvred and I’m already tired.

The buildings around us already have more life, fewer windows are empty or boarded up. Doors, still with cracked paint, are in use. Parked cars, rare as they are, sit close to some curbs. There are no people to be seen yet – they either avoid this place or stay indoors.

Soon we join with other people, all walking confidently, not staring at the street and the buildings as though they are going to ambush them. I don’t feel as comfortable. I don’t feel comfortable as a rule. Despite my reluctance to stay back in the derelict street, I hated being there as much as I detest being here, around all these people, surrounded by properties in use.

This is the kind of place I could escape the woman. It would be a simple matter of slipping away and using the busier road as a way of slowing or stopping her pursuit. Even the idea of it makes me tired, however, and I plod along behind her like an abused dog, desperate to get away, but tied to her. She doesn’t look at me, certain, and correct, that I will stay with her.

I can tell it’s her car even before she pulls out her fob and unlocks it. When I reach for the passenger’s side door handle, she holds up her

hand to stop me. I wait while she runs to the boot and fishes out a tatty old cover. She carries this bundle past me, opens the door, and drapes the cover over the seat.

“There,” she says and indicates I should get in.

The sense of expensive luxury I get from the gleaming exterior stays with me as I settle into the plush seat. The dashboard catches the light as much as the bodywork. The air carries the scents of good leather and even better perfume. It is not a new car; there are some indicators, scuffs on the polished dashboard, smears on the windshield, and tiny cracks on the driver’s side seat leather, that tell me she has had it for a while.

“Remember your seatbelt,” she says as she settles at the wheel.

I struggle a bit with the seatbelt. I can’t remember the last time I was in a car. That frustrating blank in my memory again. I know I have been in a car, many, in fact, I just can’t remember when or for what reason. All I can recall is the endless walking of streets.

Once I negotiate with the seatbelt, she puts the car into gear and pulls away.

“Where do you live?” I say, after a few minutes. I want to distract myself from the feeling that we’re moving too fast through the city.

“That’s not important,” she says.

“Aren’t I going to your place?”

She laughs, dismissive, derisive; the façade of pleasantness falls away again. She recovers her mask quickly and smiles.

“As important as you are, my fiancé would be very unhappy to find you in our house. And, really, no offence, I wouldn’t feel safe having a strange old vagrant there, either. I have something else in mind for you.”

I know the hotel. They have chased me away many times. It's not the most expensive establishment, but it isn't a cheap chain either.

The man behind the desk frowns in recognition as we enter the reception. I am tempted to give him the finger, but I control myself. Beatrice smiles at him, pulling his attention away from me.

"Good afternoon. I'd like a room for my friend here," she says.

The man's eyes flick in my direction, his frown now clouded with uncertainty. I understand his confusion. I'm still not sure what's going on.

"You know this man's a vagrant," the man says.

"That's why I want to get him a room. I'm afraid he is going to die on the streets. This is a humanitarian mission."

"I'm sure there are hostels and homeless shelters that will be more suitable."

"You're refusing service? Let me talk to your manager." She leans over and peers at his nametag. "You see, Greg, I'm a reporter and I'd hate for some bad publicity to cause him, you, or the hotel any inconvenience."

Greg stares at her. He's trying to work out if she is joking or not.

"I have plenty of money for any damages incurred, but I doubt my friend will be interested in doing any damage." She looks at me. "Will you?"

I consider telling her I'll piss on the carpet and take a shit on the bed. To anyone further away, it would look like her face is relaxed and mostly it is, but I can see tiny hard lines around her mouth and eyes. I've been trying to avoid her eyes, as they have all the pity of a starving bear. I have no idea what she would do to me if I went against her; not tear me limb from limb, but she strikes me as someone imaginative enough to make me suffer in innumerable ways.

"I just want a warm room and a soft bed," I say, tapping into some honesty.

"See?" she says to the man at the desk. "I'll take him to his room and then I'll go and get him some clean clothes while he eats."

The man works quickly, asking relevant questions and taking her payment. I don't look at him as we walk away, but I know he is scowling at me. The satisfaction at being able to stick it to someone who has threatened to phone the police on me is tempered by the knowledge that I'm at the mercy of someone who could destroy me more effectively than any copper.

Clean walls and carpets remind me of my dishevelled state. The air has the faint tang of bleach underneath the potpourri scent. Our footfalls are muted in the corridor leading to the room.

She opens the door with a card and ushers me into the room.

I feel uncomfortable in the large clean space, brightly lit from the large window allowing in the afternoon sunlight. She is looking me up and down, her lips pursed in appraisal.

"A braver person would try to measure you, but despite missing a few meals, I'd say you were pretty average size," she says.

She goes into the bathroom and looks around. She makes a small noise of satisfaction.

"You should treat yourself to a shower. There's a cosy-looking dressing gown in there. I'll be back in an hour. Remember, someone will be along with your food."

Without waiting for an answer, she leaves. I stand in the middle of the room and wait for movement.

\* \* \*



In the hour-and-a-half I waited for her to come back, I ate a bland sandwich, showered, and watched television that was gibberish to me. I can't bring myself to sit down, I've paced the room the whole time. Travelling without travelling. I don't know if it is helping, I don't know if I'm safe here, I'm not willing to test it.

"What are you doing?" Beatrice says when she walks in.

"You got all that stuff for me?" I say, and point at what she is holding.

She is carrying an unwieldy bunch of bags from a variety of shops. She dumps them on the floor at the foot of the bed and gives me a hard stare. I weather it by peering into the array of bags.

"I realised I'll have to go with you to get shoes. Not so easy to work out shoe sizes by sight," she says.

"You should've asked," I say and tell her my shoe size.

"That's a random thing to know considering what you don't know about yourself."

I shrug. I don't have an explanation, and until a few moments ago I hadn't considered it a strange thing to know about myself.

There are more questions coming and I grab up the bags and scurry into the bathroom, back tense as though she is going to plunge a knife into my neck. I lock the door, but don't feel any relief. I drown out what she asks by loudly rustling the bags. At best it's a slight delay. Any delay is desirable.

Her eye was good, and I pull on comfortable underwear and trousers. One of the shirts is too big, a t-shirt is too small. I'm drawn to a heavy Aran jumper that sparks something like a memory, or a shadow of a memory. An impression of recognition. Even as it scares me, I am drawn to the garment. The weight and warmth sooth my worries, a feeling akin to confidence fills me.

It is a shame I have to put on the multiple pairs of socks and the taped-together shoes.

For the second time today, I look at myself in the mirror. I still don't recognise the face or the eyes. My eyes have changed, though. Earlier, when I caught sight of myself before I went into the shower, the filthy, tangle-bearded creature staring back at me was feral, the eyes sharp with the fear engendered by living on the streets.

My face, now, is clean, but the unruly beard is still there, the streaks of grey amongst the brown more prominent. There is still fear in my eyes, they are still bloodshot, but I can see the intelligence, a shrewdness beyond mere animal cunning, reflected at me. An idea is forming, sparked by nothing I can name, yet familiar all the same.

She is sitting on the edge of the bed, idly flicking through the channels on the television, when I leave the bathroom. I stride over to her. Her surprise is obvious, though fleeting, and she gives me another appraising gaze.

"You did a good job on the old duds, there, Beatrice," I say. "It'll be spot-on when I've got a good pair of shoes on my feet."

"I think we can wait—" she says.

"That's where I think you're wrong. I'll be much more comfortable with shoes and socks on. You have to admit, this looks weird."

"Yeah ..."

"And they still smell. All this nice stuff on and my feet are still manky enough that it's filling the fucking room."

"I'd rather—"

"We can get to whatever you want to do once I've got some good loafers on, and I've shaved."

Her confusion is satisfying. More satisfying than I had expected. I don't know what her agenda is, but now I have one of my own and it supersedes whatever she has planned.

She looks far younger now; the confidence of money and knowledge made her look more mature. Her mouth works in silent dithering. Does she feel quite as safe being alone with me anymore? I hope not; I don't want her to feel unsafe, I want her off-balance enough to do what I want. There's nothing to be gained if she bolts.

"And some good grub," I say.

"Haven't you already eaten?"

"I said good. That sandwich was okay, but it's put me in the mood for something better. Something big."

I walk towards the door and pull on the jacket she bought. I'm going to walk out of the room no matter what.

"Hang on," she says. "I need to tell my fiancé I'll be a bit late."

She pulls her mobile phone out and dials. I tune out the conversation; I don't care what she says to him. What interests me is how tense the exchange is. Her annoyance is evident before she even starts talking, and she taps her foot and frowns in a rhythmic fashion. There is straining hostility in her voice from her greeting, which bursts free as they carry on. The tone is calcified, formed like a callus over a long time. I can't hear the person on the other end, but I know he resents her job.

Her rage changes her again. She has the look of a soldier who is involved in a long campaign that has no prospect of ending. I can smell the change in her; the fury has made her sweat, washed away the coating of fancy perfume. Every visible muscle is tense, and the scrape of her teeth is the soundtrack to the vortex of negativity at her core.

The only thing stopping me from smirking is the thing clinging to the

outside of the window. Its cracked, grey skin presses against the glass, ugly lumps and warts crushed into even more unsightly forms. I can't read its expression the way I can Beatrice's; the grey eyes rove, scanning for something.

I look away, eager to get out of the room. She might notice the change in my body language, but I'm sure I can bluff a response.

"Fine," she says, shoving the phone back into her handbag. "Let's go."

I leave the room as a second thing crawls into view, this one more hideously deformed than the first.

She is too caught up in her own frustration to notice my unease. I relax more the further we get from the room. I am striding by the time we are walking to her car.

\* \* \*

The restaurant is in a different class to the hotel. I feel hesitant about walking in, the residual distrust of these places hard to slough off. My face is a bit hot and itchy from the shave, the lotion and shaving cream she bought allaying the discomfort.

We have already gone to the good shoe place. The shoes and socks feel good. It was cathartic to toss the old footwear in a bin, a ritual. I have occupied this world before.

The maître d' pauses and squints at me when we enter the restaurant. At first, I think he is going to start an argument or object to my presence, but there is no hostility. He looks confused as though he is trying to remember something.

I understand his feeling, because even though I have never been around this particular establishment, I recognise him. I hide my surprise better than he does. Perhaps it helps that I don't know how I could recognise him, or I am just better at hiding it.

All this takes place in the matter of a few seconds, and he smiles at us, professional, courteous, and ready to serve. He knows Beatrice and they talk easily. There is no need for her to reserve a table and he leads us to one at the window. He beckons one of the waiting staff, wishes us a good meal, and floats off back to his position at front of house.

Beatrice orders a small glass of wine, and she and the server look at me. I look at the wine list. It holds no mysteries to me, and I order a cabernet sauvignon from an excellent vintage.

I had expected her to be more surprised by that; instead, she nods, as though she expected it. She says nothing to me while we look over the menu.

She foregoes the starter while I have braised beef cheek in a fruity sauce accompanied by baby vegetables drizzled in a buttery and herby sauce. Even a few hours ago I would have scooped the discs of meat up in my hand and crammed them into my mouth. Instead, I cut them into morsels and nip them off the fork with my teeth. The meat is so soft that it is almost a paste.

I order a venison dish next. She requests something with monk fish, and she switches to sparkling water. I finish my wine and order another, but I drink a whole glass of water before it arrives.

“You’re very comfortable in this setting,” she says as we wait for the main course. There is a slight smirk on her face.

I lean back in the seat, stare at her for a few moments, and turn my attention to the street. It is late enough in the day that there is a river of people out there, the dizzying assortment of humanity that bustles around in the mid-to-late afternoon, eager to get out of work or school, or they are journeying somewhere else neither work nor home. The motivations are as tangled and random as the skin and hair colours.

“There’s a woman somewhere in the crowd who is on her way to

work,” I say.

“That could apply to a lot of those people.”

“But that’s the thing. She has already been to work. Since early this morning she has been working a hard job, but now, when people she is sharing a bus or a train with are going home, she is going to another demanding job. She will look at other women who are going to spend the evening with their children, while her kids won’t see her until perhaps the weekend. There may be a partner, there may be a relative, a friend who has to take care of her children. The children might already be self-sufficient, probably too young. A whole ecosystem of fatigue and longing and desperation.”

“Have you been watching people for all this time?”

“I don’t need to. It’s so obvious that it hurts. Yet there is a whole strata of society whose life is predicated on ignoring it, or actively lying about its existence.”

“There are costs to living in these times. Not everyone can be rich. That would be madness.”

“Would it? I don’t think you truly believe that. How many articles have you produced actively vilifying the poor, the struggling?”

“I write what my research tells me.”

“That research. How extensive is it? I could name the two or three sources you go to constantly.”

I wait. She says nothing, sips from her glass, frowns.

“A group of sources corroborating and feeding each other. There are lots of them, but you haven’t felt the need to go beyond the ones you’ve settled on. Yes, you read other books, but they are all coloured by your own prejudices. Those cosy conceptions built on your world of luxury. How much are your parents worth?”

“Do you know my parents?” She jumps on this with the desperation of an addict after going into withdrawal.

“How could I know your fucking parents? I’m just a smelly tramp. I’m the Lizard Man who is supposed to be able to appear from nowhere and can cling to the outside walls of buildings. The one who swallows rats whole.”

I lean forward, putting my elbows on the table. She wilts, pushes away from me, head bowed. Her gaze goes to the floor but doesn’t stay there, and she looks at me again for a moment. She flinches as though she has been burned.

The server comes into view, and I lean back, relaxed. I take a drink and roll it around in my mouth, while I swirl what is left in the glass. Beatrice takes several beats to realise I’m not looking at her anymore.

I give the server a warm smile and thank her. Beatrice looks at me in disbelief.

“You’re considering running out on me, aren’t you?” I say when I start eating, without looking up from the plate.

Nothing from her.

“You were so eager to have me and now here I am. It would be such a waste of time to abandon all that work. So many months combing the streets, talking to other homeless people. All while getting a precious column in each week. Is it more than one? How many outlets do you work for?” I say.

Her breathing is heavier. The smell of sour sweat has replaced the flowery perfume. When I look at her, she grimaces. She has not eaten.

“This isn’t how you thought this would go. Do you want to hear a confession? I didn’t expect this either.” I laugh. “But now we’re here and you still have all those big questions. You were going to ask me

a few smaller things about how hard it is on the streets, what other people are like, who helps us, that kind of thing. Then you were going to try something big, shocking. Like, what happened to all the money?”

This is new information to me. It is correct, I used to be wealthy. I don’t know how much money I used to have, but it was a lot. I’m feeling too confident to let my surprise show. I have no idea what the answer is. I used to have vast amounts of money and now I only have the fifty pounds she gave me.

“You’re admitting you are—” the name she uses is alien to me, not unfamiliar, but it doesn’t belong to me.

“I’m not admitting anything. This is simply what you were looking for: a conversation. I might be able to offer some information, but not now. Not here.”

“But you said ...”

“We all say things in the light of one context only for that context to change. The context has changed, Beatrice.”

“I think this is over.”

“No. That’s not going to happen. We’re both committed, now, Beatrice. This is now a journey. There’s a destination in the distance, I can’t quite make out what it is, but I so want to get there. You’ve lost your nerve, as I would expect from someone of your background, but you are as locked in, perhaps even more so, than I am.”

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying.”

“You’re not a good liar when you’re under pressure, are you? That useful talent you’ve nurtured since you were a teenager deserts you when things get tough.”

She blinks at me, waits a fraction of a second too long.

“Seriously, you’re not making any sense. I have to go. Tristan is expecting me.”

I know who her fiancé is, his aristocratic background, and what business he was slotted into when his time came. The knowledge has been there before I met Beatrice. As was my knowledge of her, and the vast wealth her family has. Always there in my mind waiting to be found, just neglected.

“You *are* going,” I say.

She looks worried, afraid, and I laugh again.

“You think I’m going to harm you? I’m almost insulted at how much you’ve misjudged me. You don’t have any idea of my motivations, but, be assured, violence isn’t part of my task. And even if I were, how stupid do you think I am that I would do it in such a public place?” I say.

“I have no idea what you’re capable of. You’ve been babbling nonsense for the past few minutes.”

“Holding on to that, are you? Fine. If you need that comfort, it’s of no consequence to me. Are we going to have dessert?”

She looks down at her plate, the sauce cooling and forming a cracked skin on her food; the fish looks gelid and unpalatable. She pushes it away, her face a twist of nausea. My plate is clear, a few streaks of dark sauce all that are left.

“No? That’s a pity. I understand the strawberry and pepper mille-feuille is a rapture on the plate,” I say with a shrug. “Come. I don’t think Tristan would like to be kept waiting any longer.”

I stand up and watch her. The server hurries over.

“Would you like the cheque?” she says.

“That would be wonderful,” I say. “My companion will pay.”

The server ducks away and is back a minute or so later. Beatrice pays by card, giving the minimum tip possible. She would not have given anything if she was with anyone else. Shame is a weapon I did not know I could wield.

When the server has gone, Beatrice gathers her belongings and we walk out into the street. I saunter next to her, while she walks as though her legs are made of unarticulated lengths of wood. She looks around as we walk, her gaze darting.

She still does not react to the occasional things I see, crouching close to the walls, away from the throng. They stare at me, their misshapen bodies huddled as though they can hide from me. I know them, I understand what they want, and I know the reason Beatrice is blind to them.

I lean in companionably and say, “The police would have helped you before I was dressed like this. If you say anything to them or anyone, I’ll just laugh and nothing else happens. You get a patronising pat on the head, and we have a small delay in getting to your car.”

She stares at me, unwavering. I can see the question forming in the frown, the way her lips become thin as she presses them together. In fairness, I don’t know if what I said was true. Things are appearing in my head without an apparent source. The person she sought out this morning is not the person accompanying her to her car.

At the car, she hesitates, hand in her bag.

“This is still what you want. I’m going to answer every question you have. I told you I wasn’t going to do it at the hotel or the restaurant. Now I we know where I *will* talk to you,” I say.

“You’ll tell me everything? Even what happened to all those children?”

“Everything. Nothing will be taboo. As long as we do it in your house.”

Another short hesitation, but she is tantalised by the prospect of every sordid thing I can tell her. Only the most noxious, festering bait will attract this scavenger.

\* \* \*

The building she stops at is old and huge. The stonework has been repaired expertly over the decades and the modern windows are camouflaged to look antique. A lot of money can be used for subtle taste.

The building and the rest of the area are gravid with money. I could grab the air and find crumpled high-value notes in my fists. It has been a long time since I have been close to this kind of wealth. It is exhilarating.

I have to tamp down my excitement. Beatrice is already nervous and me vibrating with eagerness will only serve to unsettle her more. If she breaks down in the street it will be inconvenient. I want nothing to slow me down now. Dragging her into the building will be an annoyance.

She hasn't talked to me since we got into the car and that is fine. There will be plenty to say soon. A young woman walking a dog passes us, nodding a greeting at Beatrice and looking at me in puzzlement. I smile at the woman. Beatrice's face doesn't move.

“That was very rude. Your neighbour was being sociable,” I say once the woman is out of hearing.

“She's a nosy bitch and she's let that animal shit on the street outside my building too many times.”

“Still, a bit much to completely ignore her.”

She ignores me too and opens the door to the building and we walk

up to the first floor. There is one door on the landing. I am impressed. The stairway and the landing are clean and well-lit, the walls painted in a neutral colour. The landing is larger than some houses. The flat must be a huge U-shaped place that takes up the rest of the floor. Not the biggest place, but a decent urban space for the work these two do. It is the smallest property they both own and minute by the standards of their respective families.

The door is a simple dark wood affair. When she opens it, I put my hand on it and feel the pressure of her attempting to slam it in my face. Earlier in the day she would have been able to shut me out even if I were trying to stop her. There is new strength in my arms that she can no longer overcome.

“You're getting ruder,” I say and walk past her.

The hall is high and wide. I had expected another set of stairs, but there are three doorways. The doors to the left and right are closed. Ahead is an arched opening double the width of the other two doors. This leads into a dark dining room, big enough to accommodate twenty people. Behind the long table is a high window, looking out onto the city.

“Where is your fiancé?” I say.

“Probably in his study.”

“I think we should meet him. Then we can all have a good chat.”

She hangs her jacket on the hook next to the front door. I consider leaving my jacket, too, but I don't think it will be necessary.

She leads me through one of the doors, into a corridor, and to the last door on the end. They either have good taste or they paid someone a lot of money to have good taste for them. I can't make any value judgments on their personal tastes or abilities, but I would be surprised if they put so much effort into making the flat look tasteful.

The door opens before she can reach for the handle. Tristan is tall, athletic, brown hair swept away from his face. His gaze is sharp and darts to me seconds after he opens the door. He has a lot of his father in him; those dark eyes are the most obvious. The luxurious hair is all his mother.

“Who the fuck is this?” he says, leaning aggressively towards Beatrice.

She pushes him back by the chest. The amount of muscle and its definition tells me he spends at least two hours in the gym every day, probably more, along with guzzling down steroids.

Beatrice introduces me and he frowns.

“That can’t be right. He disappeared years ago, after the trafficking thing came out,” Tristan says.

“I tried to avoid punishment. It didn’t work,” I say.

“There was a helicopter crash.”

“You don’t need to tell me. It was harder than you might think to stage that. Finding people who would keep their mouths shut is a tough task, especially in the timeframe I had.”

“It’s him, I’m sure of it,” Beatrice says. “He’s going to let me interview him.”

“Why are you talking to me, then? I have shit to do.”

“Because *I* want to talk to you. There’s something you need to hear,” I say.

He straightens up to his full height, crosses his arms, and smirks at me. There’s a toxic cloud of cynicism around him strong enough to catch in my throat.

I smile back, plain and guileless.

“What do you have to say to me that I could need to hear, old man?” he says.

“Check your computer,” I say.

He looks back at the dual screens glowing the large desk. Under the desk there is a huge box that emits a steady violet-blue light across the floor.

Even though he has turned his back on me, I can see the confidence drain from him. He sidles over to the desk and stares at the screens; I can now see his face, scrunched in confusion. A few jabs at the keyboard with his fingers change nothing on the screen. The stubborn box in the middle of the screen remains in place.

Beatrice jumps when he whirls around, fury contorting his formerly handsome features.

“What the fuck is this?” he screams. His voice has intimidating volume. “What have you done?”

“That’s what we’re going to talk about,” I say. “Beatrice, where can we do that?”

He moves with commendable speed and has me by the throat before Beatrice can scream. He slams my back into the wall, jarring my spine. His hands are strong enough to press my windpipe shut and cut off the blood supply to my brain. My skull feels like it is about to explode in short order. I feel the pressure on my eyeballs.

I laugh. A horrible gurgling sound under the circumstances. This is still too funny.

“Do you think injuring me or killing me will undo what’s been done to your computer? Or either of your finances?” I say, my voice rendered harsh and thin.

The pressure on my throat lessens a bit. I am still pinned against the

wall, his weight pressed against my oesophagus. Doubt waters down the rage in his eyes.

In what remains of my peripheral vision, I see Beatrice messing around on her phone.

“We have no money,” she says.

“That can’t be right,” Tristan says and lets me go.

After his own frantic activity on his phone, he looks at me, a desperate question etched around his eyes and mouth.

“You were going to take us somewhere we could talk about this civilly,” I say to Beatrice.

She opens a door across from Tristan’s study and we walk into a cosy living room. Shell-shocked, Tristan wanders in and drops onto the middle of the sofa, muttering something I can’t make out. Beatrice has not stopped staring at me since her phone search, but she manages to sit down with practiced ease.

She might be starting to understand what is happening.

“You might as well throw those phones away. They won’t be of any use to you again,” I say. “There are some people on their way to strip this place.”

“That can’t be done. My father—” Tristan says.

“Your parents have already forgotten about you. I would rather have done this to them, but there are limits. This will still hurt them, just not as much as some would have liked.”

I remember the shock and disbelief when this happened to me. I was already desperate to escape the consequences of the horrendous things I had done and took advice from someone I would have been better to ignore. They will not be reborn, not the way I am, and in many ways I envy them. The work will drag me from this place.

“Before that, there are some new friends you will become very familiar with,” I say.

I go to the window and open it wide, letting a blast of chilly night air in. Several of The Scorched tumble into the living room and scuttle around, sniffing and pawing. Tristan and Beatrice rear away from the deformed creatures. Tristan starts crying.

The process is well under way.

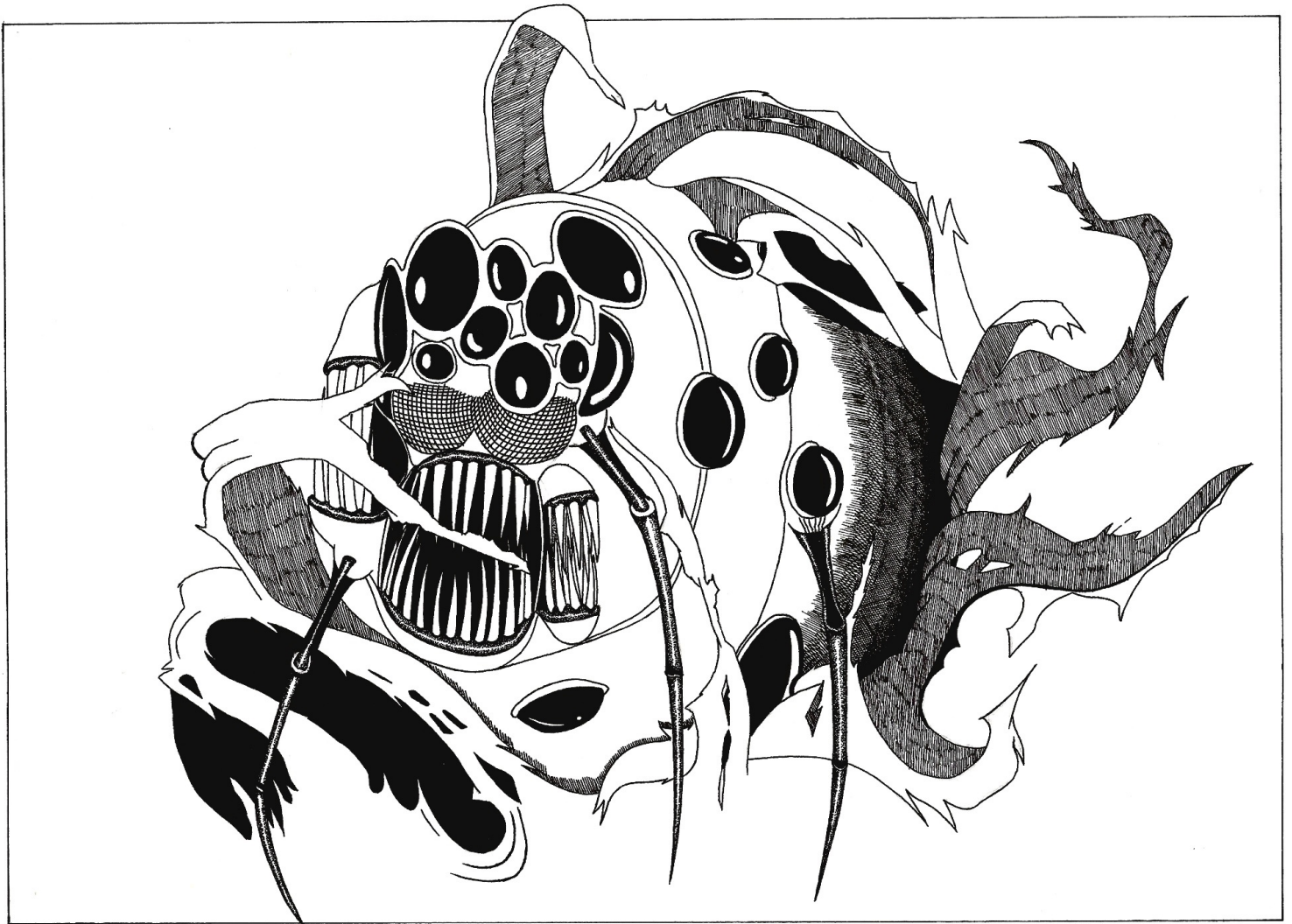
Someone knocks at the front door and I accompany Beatrice to answer it. Tristan slithers onto the floor, hands clamped to the sides of his face, loud sobs echoing off the walls.

Beatrice’s expression is stony, stoic. She has not looked at me since The Scorched first poured into the flat. The threads to her old life are severing; soon even her memories will feel like someone else’s.

The four things standing outside the door look like men at a cursory glance. The lack of nostrils, crooked wide mouths, and haphazardly placed eyes show they are not human. They push past us and into the flat, and I walk out. I look back as, head bowed, Beatrice closes the door again.

Out in the street I can feel the memories scabbing over. Something new is coming. I want to weep, but the feeling passes.





# A Way Through into Our World

by Shikhar Dixit

# Manifest Destiny

by Carla Stein

Stolen from their glaciers, lava fields  
their mossy apartments  
scooped from river beds  
oceanic condominiums demolished  
flightless family members  
now flying lunatics, orbiters  
non-consensual émigrés

*ambassadors in moon shadow*

Oh, say who will see tiny tardigrades  
kidnapped moss piglets  
water bears who can live without water  
cryptobiotic grandmothers sealed  
away in microcosmic casks  
who wait out deadly tipping points  
flame, ice, desiccation

*microbial committees may offer welcome*

a dromenon of salutation  
floating in potassium gases  
the thanksgiving ritual for uninvited guests  
this living contraband  
smuggled to the flip side  
claims lunate territory

*radio images eclipse unlettered histories*

not issued space-faring passports, spirulina Babičkas,  
cannot settle luna's fields  
where ice cap H<sub>2</sub>O floats and  
transplanted moonwalkers breed the next generation  
bloat beyond their capsules  
consume their tardigrade grannies  
no postcards sent home

*algae does not bloom among cracked dust*

These lung-less colonizers  
bring their own mores  
whoops, caws, warbles, peeps, cheeps  
do not hover here  
no music played by stunted feet to an  
ever present beat of solar wind

*dust conducts its own orchestra*

as tardigrades burrow to below surface lakes  
rehydrate from their desiccated comas  
roll in detritus left by human footprints  
suck DNA leftovers  
will they write memoirs of the moon?

*stratospheric answers unravel*

Gaia's silenced Po'o-uli,  
the strangled Alaotra Grebe left no transcriptions  
their dried out DNA now fragments  
their voices stolen, stifled in  
a quark net question

*this atmosphere knows no hollow eggs*

will water bear mothers tell their hatchlings  
myths of squirrel mischief? sequoia epics?  
Sing lichen lullabies?  
or hum sodium atom tunes in  
a lunar vacuum as their  
podgy eight-legged granddaughters author  
elegies for frogs

# Tauromancer

by Gustavo Bondoni

Adolfo stepped close and put a hand on his shoulder. “Boy, you’re not ready for this. The energy here today ... it will kill you.”

Benicio felt his lip curl into a sneer. Adolfo was a sentimental old fool. He’d been a good teacher—even a good matador once, it was rumored—but those days were long gone. Now he was as timid as a woman. His sisters, or his mother, weeping in the stands deserved more respect than this doddering idiot. Benicio shrugged his hand away.

“I am the fastest, strongest *torero* in all of Cadiz, and you know it. The bull hasn’t been born that can put me in any danger. I should have been allowed to fight in the big ring one, maybe two years ago. But you never let me. That’s why I changed teachers. And that is why I’m going into the ring without you.”

“It’s not about your strength. It’s not about the speed. Your mind is not ready for this plaza. This ring, here, with this crowd, by the sea. You won’t live through it.”

Benicio turned resolutely to the door and nodded to the *peon* standing beside it. The man unlatched the wooden barrier and he was through, onto the glorious sand bathed by the midday sun.

Cheers rained down on him. Everyone in the crowd knew his story: he wasn’t some famous fighter from Seville, he was the local boy who’d grown up running the streets of the port city and who represented their best chance for a showing on the national stage. This was his first time in the *Plaza* in the port.

Benicio bowed to the *presidente*, but his mind was elsewhere.

There.

Seated just to the left of the official balcony, as befitted her family’s status, was Elisa. She glowed in the light. After years of watching her from afar, of chafing as she bestowed her admiration on lesser men, he stared straight into her dark eyes and knew that her applause, on this occasion, was for him.

Perhaps there was something in what the old man said. He felt the cheers lifting him, and knew he was at risk if he let his concentration lapse. Basking in the glory of the *corrida* was a good way to forget that the bull was not there to enjoy itself. But Adolfo knew that he could focus on the task at hand, not be swept away in the emotion; he’d spent his whole life preparing for this day.

The corral door opened. Every bullfighter he’d spoken to told him that this was the crucial moment. They told him that he might feel a certain weakness in the knees, and that the trick was to move quickly, not stand still. The *Tercio de Varas*—the first act of the bullfight—was a time of study, but also a time to steady the nerves for what was to come.

The bull was not particularly strong or fast, but he dismissed his irritation at the fact. That was often the lot of first-time *toreros*. The organizers were trying to protect him ... and he hadn’t yet earned the right to anything else. He would have a better animal in his second turn.

As he draped the cape over the bull’s head in a *veronica* that was met with enthusiastic *olé*s, he smiled to himself. They could put the devil’s own bull in the ring with him ... he would send it to the *faena*

all the same.

Into the second *Tercio*, he found his rhythm. It was the other thing the old hands had told him would happen: if he didn't get himself gored within the first couple of minutes, he'd get his footing and begin his next move before the bull itself knew what it was going to do.

He exulted in the feeling, allowing the animal to come a little closer before each pass. The crowd roared its approval and amazement, but basking in the admiration took a back seat to the ecstasy of the dance. All that mattered, all that existed, was the bull, the hot sand, the blood, and, every once in a while, one of the picadors, appearing from outside of his universe to shove a lance home.

And Adolfo had wanted to keep him out, to make him miss this.

Benicio let the bull's horn graze him. The crowd's gasp exploded into cheering when they realized he'd done it on purpose.

The tide of energy felt like it was going to send him into space. The sun beating from above, the animal, a force of nature, shedding power from multitudes of bleeding cuts and punctures. He felt the energy of the sea, just a short walk away, somehow resonating with it all. And the people, screaming for their hometown hero, adding to the mix.

The sheer force of the magic made the stadium disappear: the stands where royals had once watched their national heroes, the sand which had drunk the blood of countless noble animals and more than a handful of the men who dared to face them. His family and friends in the stands. Elisa. All gone.

In their place stood a black night and a cloud of stars, as if he and the bull had somehow been transported to the middle of space on a cloudless evening.

But the animal, the only thing that mattered, was still with him. It was a creature of light now, a streak flashing through the sky. But he

could tell where it was coming from, where it was going. Benicio still knew, in the deepest recesses of his bones, what the bull would do. With each pass, he allowed it to come as close as he dared, rewarded by yet another surge of energy from the crowd—unseen but felt.

He didn't question the sudden change around him. There wasn't room in his mind for that. The second *Tercio* was ending, and soon, it would be time for the *estocada*, the killing blow.

The bull was tiring, the streaks slowing, the crowd growing more excited. Some additional door must have burst in the night around him, the energy drawing a new kind of spectator; wisps of crystal light, grey and green and sea-colored, began to accumulate around them.

At first, the new spectators kept themselves to the margins, occupying the same places that the flesh and blood onlookers did in the stadium, but, with every pass, they spiraled closer. Soon, they were close enough that Benicio could see forms.

Horrid, deformed figures they were. The browns and greens were the colors of mud and decay and the eyes were mere patches of darkness, as if they opened up to the black velvet beyond them. Mouths—he was certain they were mouths—contorted into rictuses of pure glee at the suffering of the bull, the danger of the human. One of the shapes passed through his cape on a particularly close pass. Benicio could have sworn he felt a tug.

He steeled himself. Was he hallucinating? He didn't know, but even a slow bull was more than capable of tearing him in half. He wasn't fooled by its body of light; its weight brushed alongside with each pass, he sensed the heat from its exertions. Whatever form it took, it was certainly there, a presence larger than anything he'd ever been with before.

So Benicio kept his attention on the bull. The creatures of air harassed and surrounded him, but he ignored their presence. It was nearly time for the sword. That was the most dangerous moment in a

bullfight.

One final pass, one last surge of energy from the invisible crowd and he took a step back from the exhausted figure of light. He pulled out the *espada* and his footing, which had seemed so secure a moment before, even as he floated in space, suddenly became light, as if he would fly away.

The stunted gnomes around him disappeared as he held the blade aloft for the unseen crowd to see. Their absence revealed another group of beings, these formed of the purest blue light. He knew it was a court of the gods. Gods of sea and land and earth, gathered for the spectacle. Every eye was on him: those of the great broad-shouldered creature in the center, all the courtiers and billowing lords and ladies and ...

Then he saw her. The personification of the perfect woman. Tall, slim, her curves barely concealed by a transparent gown of light. Not a monster, not a strange goddess, just the perfect maid of stardust. Her attention was locked on him.

His breath caught, he missed a step.

The bull hit him. A horn went deep into his body, right beneath the sternum.

He rose into the darkness of space lifted partly by the horn lodged inside him and partly by another surge of blissful energy from the crowd.

Benicio landed on the scalding sand with a dull thud.

“Where is ...” but the words failed him. The desperation of having lost her hurt more than the fact that he was bleeding to death in the ring.

One of his eyes was buried in the sand, the other fixed on the royal balcony, staring at the gross fleshy forms of the *presidente* and his

entourage. His eyes drifted to Elisa, one hand covering her mouth.

He could barely contain his disgust at the figure of clay, of nothing but meat, that he’d once idolized. Though he hadn’t known, though his eyes hadn’t yet been opened, Benicio couldn’t forgive himself such baseness. Now, those same eyes shifted again, to watch the river of blood that had already ruined his tunic slowly turning the sand into black mud.

Adolfo was the first to reach him. He cradled Benicio’s head under his hand. The old fool had tears in his eyes.

Benicio wanted to tell him not to cry for him, for he’d seen the truth behind the *corrida*, the reason that men were willing to fight to keep the tradition alive in the face of ever more strident calls for its banishment. It would be worth anything to see them. To see *her*.

“I knew you would get there. You were too good for your own good. The crowd, the sea ... even though the bull was weak, I knew the sky would open before you were ready,” Adolfo said. “Most fighters only arrive there as older men, when they can play the crowd to open the gate. But you ... you were too much for this crowd.”

The doctors arrived and cut away at his clothing. Their serious faces told Benicio what he already knew. With the last of his strength, he clutched Adolfo’s shirt and pulled him closer.

“I ...” but that was all he managed.

“You saw her. I know. I was watching for the moment.” The old man bent close. “Then you have truly lived the life of a *torero*. You would have tried to find her again with every single fight. Most only see her once. That is what kills us, not bulls.”

Benicio tried to nod, to express his understanding, but he was too weak.

His eyes closed.

# The Qilin Visits the Zoo

by Mary Soon Lee

After hours, the qilin  
descends from cloud,  
walks the curved course  
past cages and enclosures,  
carefully placing her hooves  
to avoid crushing beetles,  
the occasional stray weed.

She stops by the giraffes,  
bows an evening greeting,  
considers and dismisses  
their superficial similarity  
to her own patchwork form:  
ossicones in place of horns,  
their elongated elegance.

The Komodo dragon pleases,  
though it is not, of course,  
a true dragon, lacking flight,  
lacking power over water,  
but still a fine creature:  
forked in tongue, clawed,  
becomingly armored in scale.

Ignorant or indifferent  
to the qilin's divine rank,  
the llama snorts his disdain,  
halting her, breath caught:  
just so her brothers snorted  
before they challenged her  
to race across the sky.

Centuries ago, clear still.  
It is not fitting for a qilin  
to pity herself, to wish  
for those beyond the clouds,  
but perhaps, in their honor,  
it is permissible to return,  
to visit the llama again.



**Saint Agnus' Miracle Cats** by E. E. King



# Jones

by Christina Sng

So they left me,  
Took off to a new planet  
Where they will build

A new home  
Leaving me here,  
Sad and alone.

Next time I'll be  
More decisive,  
Not spend all day

Deciding whether  
I want to get into  
The spaceship or not.

These decisions really  
Make me freeze  
For hours. It is normal.

In the end, the Captain  
Left me distraught  
By the spaceport

After I scratched him  
In the face when he  
Removed his helmet,

Taking out his eyeball,  
Wet, squishy, and soft.  
He blew his top.

I had to clean my paws  
For an entire day  
After they were gone,

My only consolation  
After watching Becca cry.  
I promised her I'd be by.

But first, I'll have to sneak  
Onto yet another spaceship  
Which I did

Some centuries back.  
That time dilation thing—  
Yes, it does affect cats.

It's been a sweet dream  
Traveling in space,  
Going nowhere for ages.

I'm just sick of aliens  
Taking over the ship  
And wrecking my nap.

# Pinebark

by Antony Paschos (*translated by Victor Pseftakis & Dimitra Nikolaidou*)

Before I met you, Pinebark, my only dream was to gaze at the sea. My dreams are gone, but I'm not complaining; I've got your statue carved of wood, and I've got your whisper.

Back then, just behind my yard stretched a gorge full of lithe aspens, with foliage that strained to the edge of the cliff to reach the sun. A generation ago, this gorge was a beach. When the sea dried up, it took away the sand and carried it deep down, leaving only a stream at the bottom. I only went down to the yews to cut wood, but sometimes, at dusk, I stood by the oldest pine, a huge tree rooted at the edge of the cliff. And, if the wind decided to stay still, I could hear the ripple and imagine it was the splash of the sea.

The sea was gone before my time. First, we lost our Prince; they say he drowned on his way back from a victorious naval battle, in a storm that swallowed up our entire fleet. The Queen, broken by her loss, climbed up to the terrace of the palace and threw herself down on the rocks. We had no King, so, after the sea, we lost our country too. Those who were sailors emigrated and barbarians crossed our borders, stomped on our fields, and trampled our forests. The ports and the ships they ignored; what would they do with our ships anyway, abandoned as they lay on dry land like nutshells, their oaken carcasses useless, rotting—such good lumber, wasted. Who cursed us, I know not. Some say it was the gods whom we forgot to thank for our trade routes, others say it was that witch of a Queen, and yet others say it was nature's wish, for we defiled the sea by fighting on its waves. Well, I say that's just how it was meant to be.

The sea dried up, and a barren desert was born beyond the aspens. I came into this world by a father who became a carpenter in his old age and a mother who died early, of sorrow. It was she who spoke to

me of a wild sea, with waves as high as castles, filled with horrible monsters, a sea at times calm and at times a drowner of men.

I wanted to see it, but it was gone, and to hear the wash I would have to travel to the edge of the world, to cross barbarian land until I could reach a north and foreign sea. So, I stayed; maybe because I feared the trip, maybe because I fell in love with the pinewood, dry and hollow when cut, grey, pale like a dead man's skin, cold like stone and smooth like marble. I carved idols and statues, but I didn't make a living out of it. I made bows out of dogwood and arrows out of linden, staves out of aspen, poles out of spruce, cypress clubs and oaken withes.

I didn't complain; I could get by. Woodworm was my only enemy. The chieftains that ravaged the mountains appreciated my weapons and wanted them so they could kill each other on the eve of summer, and their men preferred to pay rather than steal. I treated them to quince and figs from my yard, and they protected me against those with no need for my craft. The locals in the nearby villages accepted my money and thus I could fill the pantry with barley, olives, and wine.

I cut, hacked, and carved, fed the livestock, took care of the quince and fig trees, opened my door to whomever had enough to pay and hoped that one day I would gather enough gold to travel to the edge of the world to gaze upon the frigid sea.

Until I found you at my doorstep.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I had never smelled a woman's bosom

other than my mother's. No complaint though; in the years alone I grew used to solitude, and now your remembrance is enough.

Naked, with bones shattered and hands broken and knees crooked; with a body full of wounds, and between the legs, the worst of them. I knew no human to live so injured, but still, you were breathing. Briars were tangled in your hair, your nails filthy, black, ripped off. Dirt and blood had turned to mud on your skin; maybe that's why I didn't recognize you.

Because I'd heard of you, Pinebark, with a thousand names, in stories and vulgar jokes. Don't sweat being all alone; sooner or later Parchedskin will come along. It doesn't matter whether she likes your craft or not; the Sandwoman will grant you the favor. So she does to all.

I picked you up; you were light as if you were hollow. I washed you in the earthen basin with water from the well and laid you down in bed; that's when I suspected it was you.

I touched your forehead and perhaps your body a bit as I covered you up. The linen sheet caught on you, as if I was covering soil, neither smooth nor rough. Your skin, like autumn dry plane-tree leaves, like the bark of pine; and that's how I named you.

Women; I had only seen a few, and when I first saw you, you were injured, not for me; and when I washed you, a little goddess, not for me. But once the thought came into my mind that it was you, the one they talk about in the stories, then, were you for me perhaps? I fell for you, even if you had your dark eyes firmly shut.

I took care of you and took your sight in. I fell asleep on the dirt near you, to know your body's roughness. I longed for you to wake up, to speak. I longed to enjoy you. I even sent to the village for a doctor. I shut the door and, while waiting outside, I peeled a piece of wood with my favorite knife, the dolphin-shaped one—which I had carved according to my mother's descriptions—until I heard a screech. I dropped the wood and ran inside and found him on top of you,

naked, blood everywhere. I would have gutted him, but you turned and looked at me and, while you said nothing, your eyes told me to go.

The doctor left and I found you sitting, calm, already washed. Your body healed, with only a few fresh cuts. I asked if you were all right; what about the cuts? What about the blood? Your voice hoarse, like flints that spark fire, you said no tear wells up in your eyes, no sweat runs down your skin, no nothing. And that's how you triumph over yourself: with the blood that seeps through the cuts. That's how you make love.

I stood petrified. How's it possible? Come, and I'll show you how.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I knew no man who shared. I have no complaint, though; many hear your whisper, but your words are just for me.

You showed me. The stories spoke of a weird sensation, skin dry, tongue rough like a cat's, scentless breath and blood you wasted only for the deed to be done. Truth or lies, I had never taken another, so I knew not; but with you, it was exquisite.

I caressed you, I kissed your drought, my skin got scratched on you and red cuts bloomed on it, worth it; I saw you dig your nails in your skin to make it bleed; wait, I want in too; I brought the dolphin-shaped knife and cut my skin, and in the end I drank your blood and it was like mine, salty.

And when I had my fill, I asked for your name. You said you have many, so then, I will call you Pinebark; call me what you like, just give me clothes so I can leave. Where should I find them? My mother's garments had turned to dust along with her—back then we didn't bury the dead in the cursed soil; we burnt them.

And as I was gazing at you getting in my wretched old clothes, I said,

stay. Why, only to chisel a wood carving of you, to do what with it, to remember you. All right, for you bled and you drank my blood, for this I will stay.

I said I will cut the biggest pine tree, the one rooted by the cliff; I will steal its branches for arms and legs, I will hammer them, I will glue them, I will do this and that, but, when in the woods, I stood before another. The tree was small and lithe. It would give me you but three times less, but there; there's your neck, there are two twigs, your arms, there are your legs. I saw you in the wood and didn't think more.

I pruned it for three days, to relieve it of foliage, so it wouldn't break when it fell. I cut bushes and laid them on the dirt, to softly welcome it. I sawed your piece and carried it home.

Two horses tied up in the yard, the workshop firmly bolted, the front door ajar. Inside, the bed sang. Two of the most powerful chieftain's men got out of the bedroom and got dressed right before my eyes. They bought arrows and a sword hilt and told me to expect more of them; with you here, they said, I would become rich.

You found me looking at their footprints. You said that's who you are and that's what you do. Don't look at me like that. What, you named me and you thought I belong to you now? No, Pinebark, I ... Drop the nos and the butts, if you want me to, I'm leaving now, you will be neither the first nor the last. No, I touched you, I tried to kiss you, to hold you in my arms. You cursed me, you slapped me, you scratched me with your sharp nails. No, I want you to stay.

Why?

To sculpt you. A lie.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I thought I had loved; my parents, the sea, the wood. A sham, but I'm not complaining; now I know what

it's like.

I peeled the wood and hacked it off. I had you stand there, naked, so I could give it life. I carved it for days, slowly, to make it perfect, slowly, so you wouldn't go. We coupled, first with your blood, then with mine. Your wounds healed, leaving no marks; me, my skin was traced with scars by the dolphin-shaped knife, but it was worth it. I talked to you and you listened, and you talked too, from time to time. I let my wish to see the sea slip, why?

I do not know. Because it's beautiful—what a facile reply. No, it's not. It never was. How did you know? How many winters had you witnessed? I didn't ask.

I finished the woodcarving, and it was the best I had ever made. You traced it with your fingers; is this really how I look? I smiled; no, you're prettier still.

Time to go. My clothes on your back, my fingers slipped under them, your skin rough, like your statue. Please.

You smiled for the first time. Do you wish to suffer? I am barren; you will see no child from me, and even if you did, you would lose us both. Don't ask me how I know; I just do. I am cursed.

Who isn't cursed in this sealess land? Stay.

Your smile grew dim. This thing I do, I will keep doing it. Stay. Don't you mind? I would mind it more if you left.

You stayed.

It wasn't bliss, not every single day. At times you desired me, at times you slept, at times you picked quinces and figs so the sparrows didn't peck them, at times you disappeared in the woods; and, when you were blue, you garnished my every word with a swear word. At times you admired my wood art and at times you looked at me and yawned. At times you chattered and at times you didn't breathe a word.

You stayed.

One morning, you were gazing at the cloudless sky, brooding. I'd never ask you anything when you were blue, but you spoke anyway. You sighed, where are the clouds, why don't they ever gather above this land?

It's summer, Pinebark. What do you want with the clouds? You left for the woods without an answer. My heart raced until you came back, but when you returned, your eyes glistened; then, it was bliss.

But also, pain. They came; supposedly for arrows and tools and weapons. I was waiting out of the room; every creak equaled a stab. At times I left, so you couldn't hammer words in my wounds when you came out.

They bade me goodbye, at first hunched. Then they took liberties; they thanked, they laughed, they helped themselves to quinces and figs. They left copper coins on the table; she had earned them, they said. They learned your name and they said that a carpenter is meant to hack at Pinebark. I took the coins; I kept silent. I was afraid that, if I pushed them away, you would leave too. Would it be for the best, perhaps?

It was not bliss, for you neither, but you came to know me over time. You swore at me and I bowed out; you got angry and I backed off. You were in a foul mood and I left you alone; you were indolent and I let you be. From time to time you ran away; I never admitted it, but it was when the visits were scarce. You came back, and it all began anew.

Until you left for good.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I didn't know what for good meant. But I am not complaining; I will be in your arms again.

I looked for you. I threw your wood carving over my shoulder—supposedly to show it around, such a lie, everyone knew you—to keep me company. In the desert I saw remnants of sea creatures; I walked past them. I spoke with nomads who wore fishbone trinkets; they told me they were sailors once, they had seen you and it was better not to seek you. They said the one I'm looking for comes and goes as she pleases and as her curse dictates, unable to resist any man she desires.

Tell me something good.

Nobody ever loved her.

I found you after months, beyond the desert. You had been crucified, wood on top of wood, blood clotted like pine tar, arms spread open, motionless like a statue. I ran to you; what did she ever do to you? Only women did not avert their eyes; they said you stole the hearts of their men. I pulled out the nails, I took you down, I promised them you would never come back; mercy, I begged, and I showed them your swollen belly.

We stayed at an inn and I waited for you to come round, making odds and sods for the innkeeper, always by your side, always in your room. You opened your dark eyes; I welcomed you but you pounced on me. You scratched me with your nails, you stole my dolphin-shaped knife, you stuck its blade to my neck; it smelled of willow bark from the day before, when I was peeling birches. You should have left me, you fool; I was gone for a reason, you had to leave me there!

I am sorry. But I want you to come back. With the child. I don't care whose it is; I didn't say that, but my eyes betrayed me.

I know about your curse, Pinebark—you turned pale—yes, I know about it, to give yourself to whomever you desire, I will not stop you. Chilling laughter, like flintspark, you fool, you have no idea.

The child is my curse and the child is yours, I know that. I don't

know why, but it's the truth. Maybe because you're the only one who bled, maybe because you're the only one who drank my blood.

Just tales, all of them. Once you named your body barren, now you name the child a curse. Well, come with me or get done with it.

The blade felt cold. You took it from my neck and brought it to my chest. You carved me and we became one with my blood.

After a long time, we found the house in ruins. The stable was empty of animals, the storage full with spiders; whatever was not missing had rotted away. The workshop empty, the tools gone; axes, adzes, moils, cutters, drills, mattocks and rasps and an ancient naval saw—my father's legacy, useless. Everything I had carved, gone, too; arrows, bows, shafts, shields—some broken figureheads were the only things left. But there was me and you, and we would have our child. A new tribe chief wanted weapons. He lent me the tools; we had quince and fig trees in our yard, we had the forest on our back, so I started working for him. The news spread. We were back, they said, and there came the first one; tall, young and handsome. He said he wanted arrows and a taste of you. You came out and you rejected him. Get lost, never again; now you belonged to me. He saw the belly and he laughed, and he told me to name the child a thousand men's bastard and tried to take you. I slaughtered him with the dolphin-shaped knife.

Knowledge of the murder spread, and the chief said that, until I finished my work for him, no one would hurt us. Two tried. I killed them and no one else came after that.

A few days later, you asked me to stab you. Otherwise, the child wouldn't come out.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I had never dreamt of a woman's eyes on a child. Dreams fade away, but I have no complaint; your whisper is eternal.

I did it. I cleaned the dolphin-shaped knife and dug up the child from your loins. Days later, you recovered. I was afraid you would die; don't be scared, I can take it. Our daughter?

She is well. You touched the soft baby skin. Your rough fingers made her cry, and when your index caught her tear I thought you would cry too, only you didn't.

Winter, spring, you were raising her and I was working. Summer found the chief victorious, and his gratitude filled our stable, our storeroom, our bellies; but not our hearts.

This was not happiness. You neither parted with our daughter nor smiled. Your lullabies were all sad, your words scanty. With trembling caresses you fed her goat's milk without shedding a tear, and I thought I glimpsed emotion, foolish me.

One morning I heard hoarse screaming, like iron on iron. I left the workshop and ran home. I found you with her little body, her arms flailing lifeless, the milk pot in pieces, you, mad; you were cursed, you mumbled, you shouldn't have and now, alas! I'd lost our daughter; now I would lose you too.

The baby had drowned on her milk. I held her and wept; she hadn't seen a second winter. My tears on her, yours on my shoulders—your tears on my shoulders, are you crying? Your arms held us both; you were crying. Your fingers touched me and they weren't rough, but warm and damp, human. Yes, you were crying because now you were free of your curse.

And now I would lose you too.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I thought curses to be just tales. Now, I know, alas.

You told me, but I didn't believe you. Leave this talk now, we should

burn her little body first; no, not fire, the land is no more cursed. I accepted; we buried her by the cliff, to keep us company forever, you said. And, under the huge tree, we wept.

On our way home, the clouds got heavy. Bitterness overwhelmed me; here, I sneered, the clouds you've been asking for—yes; my friends have come for me.

You bid me goodbye and I got angry this once; you're bored of me and you want to fiddle around, you cannot bear the guilt for our daughter; I expected wrath, I expected claws, but I only got peace. The tears like diamonds in your eyes; I wish to drink the pain away together in each other's arms, I would live and die with you. I will be by your side, even if I'm not here; I will whisper to you.

Coward, leave then, go.

It is not cowardice. It's just that with you, with our daughter, I understood. As your Queen cursed me to understand.

Before throwing herself from the cliff, she spoke to me. Unless I bleed, I should not flow again, she said, unless I taste a child's loss. And after I taste it, then we'll see if my waves will be as ferocious. I walked the world looking for someone to plant a child inside me. But you can't fool a curse, you can't be free of it whenever it suits you. Maybe that's why I never was with child, because our daughter was the only child I wanted.

Now that I've lost her, I've tasted pain, and my roughness has waned. And now that I don't desire it any more, I have to become the sea again.

You kissed me and left, a kiss wet and salty. I didn't believe, not even in your footsteps on the soil, damp as they were.

In the morning the heavens broke with rain, and I might not have believed you, but I believed that you were gone. I got rope; I crossed the yard with the quince and fig trees and the well, and walked to the huge pine, the one rooted at the edge of the cliff. Torrents plowed the earth, pine cones and needles floated, lightning carved the sky like wounds on your body, thunder shook the earth and thick drops of rain scourged me, but I climbed up, I tied the rope, I put the noose around my throat and jumped.

And then I saw you again. You bloated and foamed through the aspens, dark and ardent and tempestuous. You crashed and raised a huge wave, taller than the cliff, taller than the trees, tall as in my mother's words, taller than a castle. Your long tongue refreshed my body, and, as it withdrew, left the pine broken in half, with the rope cut. And I was left with this salty taste on my lips, this taste I knew so well, the taste of your blood.

\* \* \*

Before I met you, Pinebark, I had never smelt the sea breeze. You see, right across my yard stretched a gorge, full of lithe aspens, with foliage that strained to the edge of the cliff so they could see the sun. A stream flowed at its bottom, and at twilight, when the wind remained silent, I stood by the huge pine tree and I could hear the ripple and imagine it was the splash of the sea.

Now there is neither a pine tree, nor a gorge, nor aspens. A lonely log marks our daughter's grave and, beyond it, only you lie. Only you are not the sea from my mother's tales. You are not wild; you granted your last wave to me as a kiss and now you lie serene.

Before I met you, sea, my only dream was to gaze upon you. But I have no complaints. I caress your woodcarving, I listen to your whisper, and I know I will be in your arms again one day.

# ode to *The Swarm*

by Gwynne Garfinkle

back in the seventies  
when some thought the apocalypse

could be ushered in  
by *bees, bees, millions of bees*

Irwin Allen enlisted a cavalcade  
of actors (Richard Widmark!

Slim Pickens! José Ferrer!)  
to react to bees mobbing helicopters

and wiping out crowds  
bees derailing a train

bees blowing up  
a nuclear power plant

it had to sting a little  
emoting in a flop blockbuster

(reviews of which featured the word  
"risible" with startling frequency)

towards the end of an illustrious career  
(Henry Fonda! Olivia de Havilland!)

now it's decades later  
and *bees, bees, millions of bees* are dying

but not, so much, the movie's  
bellicose but hardy breed

it's even posited that Puerto Rico's  
"gentle killer bees" might avert

the bees' extinction  
(what would brooding entomologist

Michael Caine have to say?)  
bees, bees, we need you

come back, bees  
and we'll make another movie in your honor

dotted with improbable film stars  
rejoicing: *bees, bees, millions of bees!*



# The Oldest Recipe

by Jon Hansen

This recipe is an old one  
Taught to me in my mother's tongue  
A slippery night of whispering  
She never wrote it down  
easy to see why

Grinding his bones to make the bread  
They say alternative flours are in  
Almond or oat or coconut or quinoa  
All will do the trick  
but not for this

You can add quite a bit to it  
Berries or seeds or slights  
Garlic or olives or aggression  
Choose the right flavor  
it's important

It all goes in the bowl  
Yeast and salt and rage  
Sugar and milk and desire  
Mix and knead then wait  
for it to prove itself

Make it the shape you need  
A loaf or small balls  
So everyone can get a taste  
But I prefer a single large ring  
to hang around their neck

After that it just needs heat  
Whatever you can manage  
Electrical coils glowing red  
Sulfuric blue flames  
white hot righteousness

Afterwards there are some that remain  
Among the crumbs and wreckage  
Someone always asks why  
Why did I decide to bake this  
they know what they did

Most will let it cool a bit  
Then rip off chunks slathered in honey  
Or serve it toasted with cheese  
But the old ways are the best  
just serve it cold

Maybe with a little butter.

# Shroom Planet

by Barbara Candiotti



# Life

by Harman Burgess

I'm beginning to lose my mind ... not a good thing to do on Mars. I haven't left Base in over three months. With the storms rampaging across the world, it's been too dangerous to risk it. So I've sat around, drinking stale coffee, studying meteorological data, and hoping for a break in the weather—all the while dissolving in apathy. I've done it. I've become bored with space travel. A member of the very first human expedition to Mars and I'm sick of it. Wonder what that says about us as a species? I want to run through the airlock, out into that undiscovered country, but I can't. There's a storm coming.

I wander through the Base to the gym, thinking to sweat the feelings out of me. Mars Base One, as The Company so imaginatively named it, our home-away-from-home, consists of five circular pods connected by plastic tunnels. Each pod has caterpillar tracks underneath it; they shot 'em up here, one by one, and remotely piloted them together, so all we had to do when we got up here was connect them. Given the complexity of that little operation, you'd've thought they'd have sent up some decent exercise equipment. But no, there're only a few dumbbells and a yoga mat. Bloody cheapskates. Nevertheless, I get a good rhythm going before No. 5 interrupts me.

Now, No. 5's an oddity among the crew. No. 2, No. 4, and myself are military men—close-cropped hair, shaved faces, thousand-yard glares. No. 5's quiet. Thin. Wears glasses. None of us are quite sure why The Company sent him up.

“No. 3,” he says.

“What's up?” It's hard to hide my annoyance at being interrupted.

“One of the solar panels at our secondary base just failed.”

“Shit.”

Mars Base Two (imagination!) is our last resort. If this place is damaged, it's meant to keep us safe until they send up help. *But* the broken device *is* an opportunity. The beginnings of an idea form in my mind. I say:

“Let's get over there and fix it.”

“Are you insane?” asks No. 5. “Have you not noticed the storms?”

“Oh, it'll be fine,”—I'm excited now—“We'll zip over in the buggy, fix the panel, and be home in time for tea. We've gotta window before the next big one.”

“So you want to get yourself killed?”

“Do you want the back-up Base destroyed?”

He thinks for a moment, rubbing his chin. “I guess not.”

“Come on, man, it'd be fun. We'll clear it with the others and head over there.”

“I'm sorry, *we*?”

\* \* \*

I clear the plan with our number one, No. 2. He has reservations about it, about the storm, but my insistence on the back-up Base's necessity wins him over. That, and he can see how restless I'm feeling. "Be careful," he says as No. 5 and I suit up. "They can send up more bases, but they can't send up more you." To which No. 4, the group's joker, replies: "Sure they can. Human replacements are cheap." No one laughs.

Then me and No. 5 are in the airlock waiting for our Atmosphere Suits to calibrate. Now these suits are the one thing The Company got right in its rush to throw us up here; unlike the bulky canisters of yesteryear, our suits function by sucking in the matter around us and converting it into breathable air. Projecting a personal atmosphere around you. No need for helmets, oxygen tanks, or stress. And they let you choose what strength you experience gravity at.

"Ready?" I ask No. 5 as the airlock's aperture opens.

"I guess."

"That's the spirit!"

The aperture slides all the way open and I see the dunes stretch out in front of us. Rolling waves of red sand, punctuated by jutting boulders and small mountains. A grey sky. The undiscovered country from where no travellers return ... fiddling with the gravity dial on my suit, I leap into the air. Covering the distance to the buggy in great big steps, red dirt exploding around my legs with every impact. Man, it feels good to be alive.

I strap myself into the buggy (tin foil frame, rubber wheels, lawnmower engine) as a queasy looking No. 5 hops up and clambers in next to me. We run through the normal engine checks, and when everything's set, I punch the accelerator. And we're off, gliding over the dunes like a pebble skimmed across a pond, the Base receding into the horizon behind us.

"Look there," says No. 5, pointing ahead.

At first, I think he's gesturing at a mountain. But then I see it move, writhing like coiled snakes, an avalanche of bloody dust. A tsunami storm. A world-killer.

"It's fine," I fake sounding positive.

"OK, Ahab."

"What's that?"

"Forget it."

I continue driving in silence. The kilometres drag by. Hours pass. The storm gets bigger and bigger and bigger, swallowing more and more of the sky. But we're closer, now, to the second Base than the first one, so I've no choice but to keep going.

"Know what I heard an engineer say before we left?" says No. 5.

"What?"

"That we were, and I quote, 'acceptable human expenditure' should the Bases fail."

"And?"

"What do you mean 'and'?"—he turns to look at me and I can see he's angry—"I tell you your life's worth nothing and all you say is 'and'?"

I shrug. "I was in the military, man. The Air Force. Flew fighter jets, dropped bombs, killed enemies. Sure, I had some rank, but I always knew I was—what did you say?—'acceptable human expenditure.'"

“I can’t believe you.”

“Don’t then.”

No. 5’s about to say something, but a great *thump* jolts through the buggy, vibrating across the chassis. I slam the brakes, but we’re skidding sideways, sand spraying into our faces, as a black wheel pops out of its housing and goes flying into the dunes. There’s a metallic screech from the tortured metal as we slide to a stop. Dust rains down on us.

Silence. The red mist clears. My vision returning, I see that I’m buried up to my waist in sand, the front end of the buggy buried in the ground. I turn to No. 5:

“You alive?”

He grunts, twisting about beneath the sand. “Yeah.”

We climb out of the buggy, sending sand spraying everywhere. I stare up at the horizon as No. 5 tries to dig at the buried engine. The storm covers almost a quarter of the sky. There’s no sign of Mars Base Two.

“Fuck,” says No. 5, as his hands scrabble at the dirt. “Oh, fuck. We’re gonna die. Ohmygod, fuck, we’re gonna die. You killed us. You fucking killed us. You moron. You fucking suicide. Ohmygod, ohmyfuck-inggod. Oh—”

“Enough!” I yell. No. 5 looks up at the sky and stops blabbering. “We’re too far from Base and there’s no chance of fixing the buggy before *that* hits. We have to find shelter *now*.”

No. 5 glances up and sees the storm. Noticing a mountain in the distance, I grip his arm and without another word, we run. Adjusting our gravity as we move to that sweet spot where we barely touch the ground, but our momentum doesn’t push us high enough to slow us

down. I think of my old Drill Sergeant back when I was doing basic training, screaming out: *left right, left right, left right* as we marched from one side of campus to the other. *Left right, left right, left right* ... as the storm devours more of the sky, the peak of the wave reaching higher and higher, threatening to crash down on us ... I see the opening of a cave ahead and we sprint for it as the first dusty tentacles of storm curl around our ankles ... thin specks of orange Martian dirt propelled violently upwards; whirling and spinning and battering at the sides of our suits, hissing like a thousand dying flies. No. 5 reaches the cave first and holds out his hand. I grab hold of it and we fall backwards, the sand forming a solid wall behind us.

Darkness.

“Please tell me you have a glowstick,” says No. 5, his voice taking on a panicked, pleading tone.

“We better hope so,” I grunt, as I untangle myself from him.

Patting my suit pockets, I find—with some relief—that I’ve got one. A quick twist and algae green light illuminates the cave; I see blood-red rock walls, gravelly floor, the haze of sand falling past the entrance, and No. 5’s scared face.

“Ohmygod,”—I barely hear his whisper above the storm—“Ohmygod, we’re safe ...”

\* \* \*

The storm shows no sign of slowing. I sit as near to the cave’s mouth as I dare; the wind tugging at my suit, watching the dust move. It’s as if a giant has smashed an hourglass and its innards are falling past; blurry patterns of orangey red. The cave slopes away from the entrance, stretching away into nothingness, like the intestine of a great beast. No. 5 sits opposite me, slowly arranging rocks into a little pyramid.

“Mind if I ask you something?” I say.

“Shoot,” he says, leaning back against the cave wall.

“How’d you make the cut? All of us have been wondering about it. Are you really smart or something? Why’d they pick you?”

He can’t quite meet my eyes when he answers. “Nah, I’m a regular guy. I don’t like to talk about it, but back on Earth I was engaged to the daughter of The Company’s CEO. When he told me about the mission, about being the first men on Mars, I knew I had to go. Even though it’s a ten-year mission, I had to go. So I asked him to pull some strings. And I guess he didn’t like me hanging around his daughter that much because he pulled them.”

“What about your fiancé?”

“I don’t have a fiancé,” he sighs. “She ditched me when she found out about the mission. Haven’t spoken to her since.”

I can’t think of anything to say. I know if *I* had had someone back on Earth I would’ve thought twice about coming up here ... but he’s looking at me and I have to say something, so I mumble: “Tough break.”

He knocks over his rock pyramid. “How long till the storm dies?”

“Minutes, days, months ... without the proper equipment, there’s no way of knowing. And I only checked when the storm would hit back at Base, not how long it’d go for, anxious as I was to get out ...”

“Good one.”

I laugh. “Fuck you, man.”

“Yeah, up yours,”—he laughs as he stands—“Gimme the glow stick, I’m going exploring.”

“Fine,” I throw him the stick, still smiling. “The less I have to see of you, the better.”

He catches the stick and goes stomping into the darkness, his laughter echoing against the rock walls. I watch the green glow slowly dwindle into the distance until it’s lost from view entirely. Pale sunlight trickles through the sandstorm, just enough so I can make out my fingers if I hold them in front of my face. The storm’s probably made it to Mars Base One by now. I hope No. 2 and No. 4 are having an easier time of it than us.

“No 3, hey No. 3!” I hear No. 5’s yell echo through the cave. I see the glow stick re-appear. “Come here, man, I found something!”

“What is it?” I call back.

“Just come!”

Groaning, I get to my feet and stumble towards No. 5. I move slowly, trying not to trip over any rocks. But by now my eyes have adjusted to the darkness and I can just about make out the shadowy forms of the bigger boulders. It takes a millennium of walking to catch up with him. But when I reach No. 5, he’s bent over, intently examining a cave wall.

“What is it?” I ask.

Mutely, he grabs my shoulder and pulls me down to his level. And I see what has him so stupefied: a vine is growing out of the wall. Little diamondlike bulbs drip from a mud-green stem, spread out against the rocks like cobwebs. No. 5 tries to speak, but his voice comes out in a mumbled groan. He just stares at the alien flowers. Trembling a little.

I lean forward, examining the strange plant, willing myself to feel something; *anything!*, anything beyond the restless boredom that I’ve

been submerged in for God knows how long. But I don't. I can't. A slight rocking of the boat, perhaps, but in the end: nothing. I feel an immense, silent ocean stretching out inside of me, the ripples of the discovery fading already.

"Life," breathes No. 5.

And I wish I could see through his eyes.

\* \* \*

The glow stick is fading. Darkness solidifies around us, as the circle of green light shrinks smaller and smaller and smaller ... No. 5 places the stick above the plant so we don't lose sight of it ... not that it'll do much good when the light fades for good. The cave continues sloping away, further into the distance, but we don't have the energy to keep looking.

"Do you have any rations or anything?" I ask No. 5.

He doesn't need to check. "No."

I feel hunger gnawing at my sides. I don't know how long we've been in the cave now, but it's long enough that I'm starting to feel a little delirious, a little desperate. Licking my lips, I say: "What about the plant?"

"No."

"But—"

"No. Too important. More than us. More than the 'acceptable human expenditure.' Besides, it might be poisonous."

"As a last resort?"

"Maybe. But not now."

Time passes. Hunger eats at me, and I can see in No. 5's eyes that it eats at him too. All the while, the green light gets dimmer. Our world becomes smaller. More time passes. My vision greys at the edges. I feel faint. At any moment I could drift away from myself, like a child's lost balloon.

"Ok," says No. 5. "Only a little ..."

I get to my feet and lurch towards the plant. I break off two bulbs. I hand one to No. 5 and watch as he swallows it. Then I sit down again and push the bulb into my mouth; it tastes faintly of walnut, the leaves breaking apart and sticking to the sides of my teeth.

"Tasty," I say.

"Uh-huh."

But as more time passes, there comes over me the strangest sensation. A profound sort of apathy, tinged with melancholy, that fills my entire being. I feel very young again, like I'm sitting at my bedroom window, watching rain fall quietly against the pavement ... I see No. 5's lips move, but I can't hear what he's saying. He seems to be a great distance away, retreating ever backwards into the gloom.

Rays of golden light thread through my vision, weaving in and out of reality. Swarming, pulsating colours bleed from every surface, melting the cave walls, making them seem slick with rain ... the hard gravel feels soft, so soft, like teardrops on canvas ... and the universe fades as memories flicker inside my mind ...

The tide goes out, and I'm lost to the dreams ...

\* \* \*

*I fall through myself, watching random memories of my past float by me like soap-bubbles; I see my parents, see how happy they were when I was accepted into flight academy. I see them through a bus*

window as I ship out, waving as they disappear into the distance ... see myself learning how to be a pilot, what all the buttons do, how aerodynamics work. I remember my first solo flight, up there alone in all that blue, higher than the fucking world. I remember Afghanistan, remember dropping bombs on scarred villages, remember watching fires shine like gemstones as I breeze over top of them, remember the first stirrings of the great emptiness that eventually devoured my soul ...

... I remember a party The Company gave to announce our mission to Mars. I remember myself onstage, drinking in the applause of a thousand employees, the spotlights shining halcyon bright ... and I remember space training: the hard days and long nights. Remember it being drummed into us that we were numbers, not people, for a reason I can't quite recall ... and I remember No. 1. Remember him suffering through training with me, remember him eating breathing living laughing ... remember him die ...

... the cockpit of my spaceship is about the width of a prison cell. Its walls are lined with tinned goods, machinery, and all the things I'll need for a long spell of solitary confinement as I jet towards the Red Planet. There's even a holoscreen through which I can look out into space. A control console in the middle for me to pilot my ship with; that flashes orange as the fuel lines break away from the fuselage.

"Ready, lads?" comes the flight controller's voice through the console.

"No. 3 ready," I reply.

"No. 2 good-to-go," I hear.

"No. 4, A-OK."

"No. 5 ... uh, yep, I'm good."

My ship thunders against the launch pad. Powerful vibrations rattle

my bones, and I tighten the straps of my flight chair. I can feel Earth preparing to reject me.

"No. 1," calls the flight controller. "Are you ready?"

No. 1's baritone comes through my radio: "I think so, sir."

"Hang on," says the flight controller. "The CEO wants to say a few words."

I hear a feedback screech and the sounds of heavy breathing fill the room. "Are you there, men?"

"We're here, sir," says No. 1.

"You're pioneers, men,"—he sounds like he's reading off a script—"Colonists. You represent the first wave of an interplanetary species! And a 50% hike in our stock price for getting there first! You make me proud; you make The Company proud. You make the last 3 years of effort worth it!! So good luck, gentlemen, and Godspeed."

"Launch," says the flight controller.

I press down on the control panel and a great force hurls me up, up, pushing my body tight against the chair. The air screams with pressure as the ship's velocity slices through it. There's a great snap as I break the sound barrier; the screaming vanishing as I move too fast to even hear it.

"Help!" yells No. 1. "Help! Somebody, please!"

I switch on my holoscreen and see No. 1's ship. It's leaking fire, veering to the right, away from space and towards the Earth. And I watch, paralysed, as the tubular ship body is ripped open by an explosion. The accelerated air pushing the flames upwards so, from my angle, they look like orange rose petals falling, falling ... dissipating into grey smoke and ash. Until only the blue, blue sky remains.



*The vibrations running through my ship stop as it eases out of the atmosphere, weightlessness setting in. The day gives way to infinite night. I hear the CEO's voice crackle on the console, breaking into static as the distance between me and the Earth expands. This is the last thing I hear from my home planet, from where I was born, grew up, fought, lived:*

"4 out of 5 ain't bad!"

*There're the sounds of cheering and champagne bottles being uncorked ...*

\* \* \*

I wake up sad. I feel like I've lost something ... in the flood of memory, something drained away from me. Something that made me myself. Human. *The emptiness*, I realize; *the emptiness is gone* ... and I'm not entirely sure I mind. In its place is something new. Something ... peaceful. I can feel myself changing, somehow, *evolving* into something ... Something ... something I can't quite properly describe.

I can see a pale light in the distance, about the width of a coin. *The cave's entrance ... the storm's finally passed*. I shake No. 5 awake and we stumble towards the light, holding on to each other, afraid to get lost. We reach the cave's mouth and stare out: the setting sun burns blue, submerging the dunes in an ocean of fire. Twilight on Mars. The plant's aftereffect making the contrast between the red and the blue seem so sharp, so poignant ... the sand proceeds as far as the eye can see, no trace of the storm's violence. The planet is sleeping.

"We must show the others," says No. 5, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Yes," I reply.

"The dreams were ... beautiful."

"Yes."

"But only one of us needs to go, though. The other should ... should stay behind. To guard the plant."

I consider the dunes; consider the time it'll take to cross them on foot. "I'll go."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you ..."

\* \* \*

I feel as though I've been walking for a lifetime. All around me is colour: the blue sun, the red sand ... I can *feel* Mars as a physical thing: in the texture of the air, the way the dust kicks up around my feet as I walk on and on and on and on ... stumbling up and down the dunes, towards the horizon. Occasionally climbing up boulders to see the world stretch into eternity, no sign of Mars Base One. But I keep going, alone. Perhaps as alone as it's possible for a person to be. I scream. I yell until my throat hurts. Nothing happens. The echoes fade. And I keep walking on ...

*What if I die out here?* What if I just lie down beside a dune and simply let go? What then; would anybody care? Would anybody even know? I imagine it: my last breath, my skin rotting away, my bones licked clean by time, broken down into dust and absorbed into the dunes. That wouldn't be *so* terrible, I don't think, becoming part of Mars. And isn't the Red Planet going to be eaten by the sun one day? In that case, I'd become a star. And a supernova, eventually. Maybe even a black hole; a devourer of galaxies. That's an amusing prospect.

The dunes give way to rock and I find myself standing at the top of a small mountain, staring down at a great redness. From this height, the patterns the sand makes below look like rivers, blood-red rivers, flowing off over the edge of the world ... there it is! The Base! I want to cry out, there!, a few clicks away, are the grey pods, nestled to-

gether like eggs in a bird's nest. I adjust my suit's gravity and leap from the mountain top, floating down into the red rivers, towards the Base, towards No. 2 & No. 4, to people, to *home* ...

I touch down, light as a feather, and sprint forwards, my feet tiptoeing across the dunes, dancing across the world. And I see the Base close up, but something's wrong, something's so terribly and evilly wrong: the Base's tracks are clogged with dust, bits of broken machinery litter the landscape, the grey pods care cracked open, scorch marks blackening the paintwork ... *they tried to run*, I realize as I draw closer, *before the storm caught them all the same*. Acceptable human expenditure. I get closer, kicking aside canned goods and metal scraps. That's when I see the first body: No. 2, the leader, the man, lies slumped against the outside of the base, his features distorted by suffocation. Under the blue sunlight, and without his Atmosphere Suit, it looks almost as though he's drowning.

"No, please ..." I hear myself mutter as I glide into the ruined Base like a ghost. At least let No. 4 be OK, please ...

But I find No. 4's corpse in the gym, the same drowned look to him, the same fear in his face. *That's it then; that's how the first manned mission to Mars ends—with death*. That's how these things *always* end. But there'll be another mission, probably. And another and an-

other after that. And maybe, one day, the people thrown up here will stick. But we were the first. The first men on Mars, the first to stare into the undiscovered country, and the first not to return ...

Before I leave, I try to soothe No. 4's face a bit. To make it look a little less fearful. But his skin is as hard as stone and it doesn't move, so I leave him and head outside. I exit the base and lie down against a dune, trying to submerge my mind in the gloriously inhuman sunset. I can see the golden threads of my dreams woven between the sky, bubbling beneath the surface of reality. I'll return to No. 5 soon to pass the rest of my days in the sweetness of memory ... but right now I can only sit and watch and think.

And I finally understand the plant's true purpose. It's a kindness, a mercy. A gold retirement watch, a prisoner's last meal. It's peeled back the veil and allowed me now, at the end, to understand a very old truth: nothing ever dies, not truly. Merely changes into something else, perhaps something better. A slow dance of atoms through eternity: evolving, growing, living.

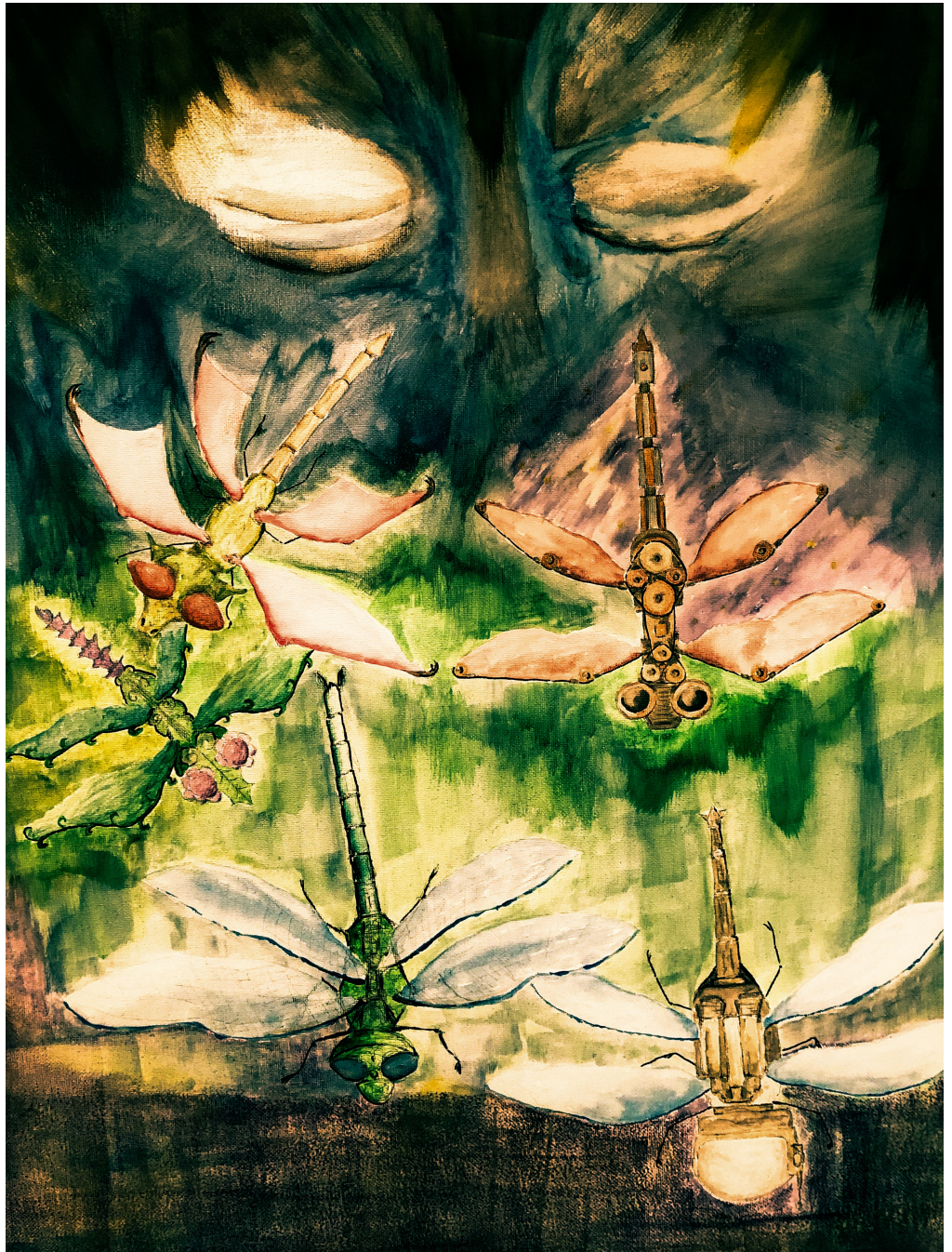
And the stars look very different now.

"I am immortal," I whisper.



# Dragonflies Descending

by R. Mac Jones

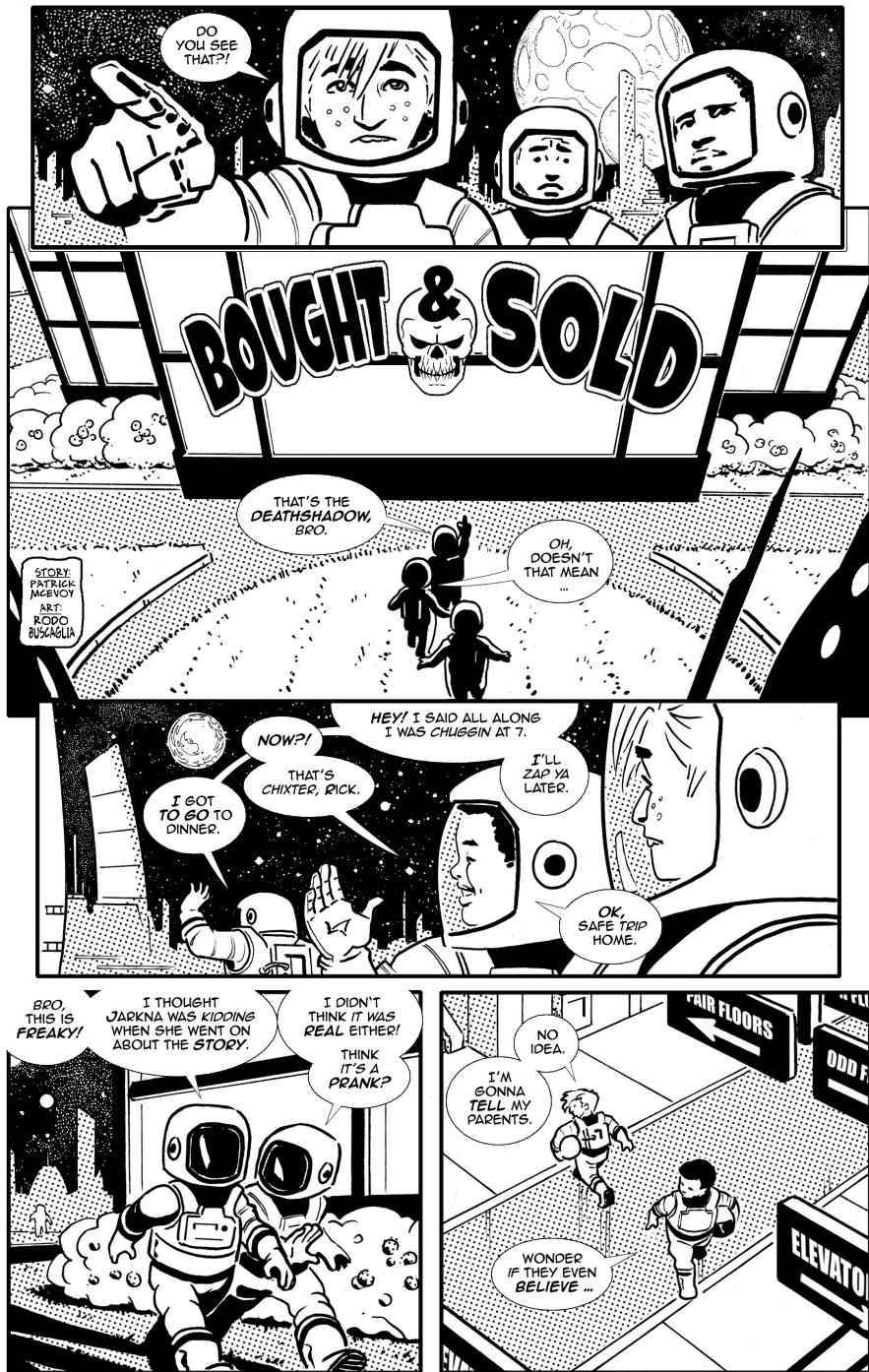


# Beyondness

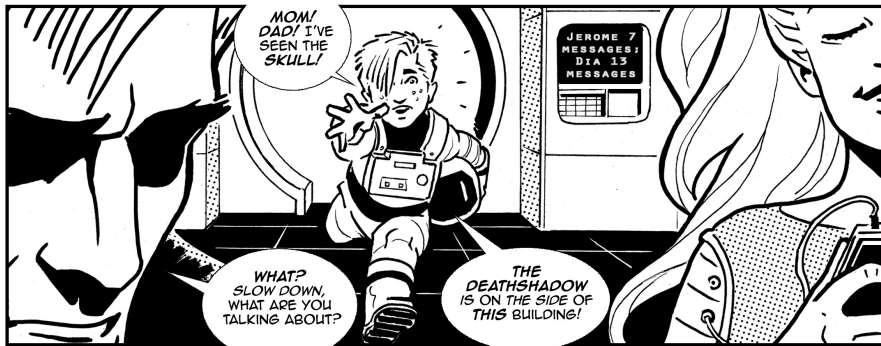
by Lorraine Schein

Forces running counter to the visible:  
below the green scum of space dust  
a water nymph materializes at the edge of the multiversal pond,  
pauses before plunging into the galaxies glowing beneath her—  
red eddies of stars and suns, rippling violet supernovas.

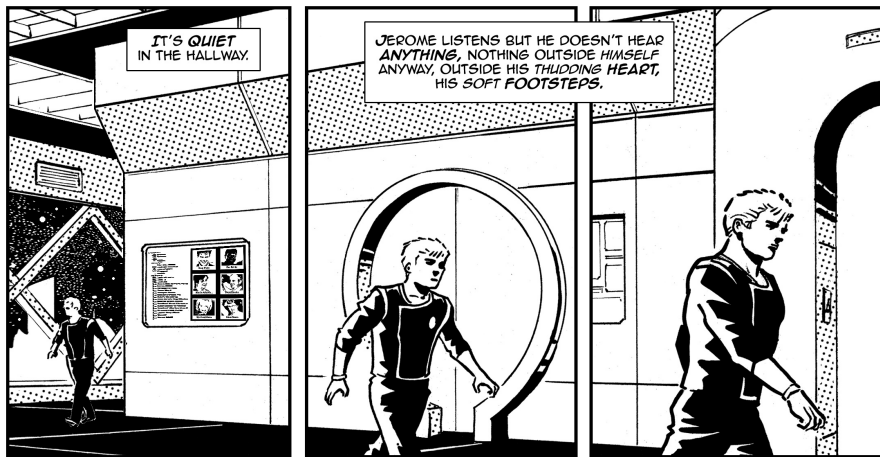
Dragonflies piloted by time riders skim the rising bubble-worlds  
transparent wings flickering in and out of existence.  
The universe is a sea-dream that cannot wake itself.



by Patrick McEvoy & Rodolfo Buscaglia



by Patrick McEvoy & Rodolfo Buscaglia



IT'S QUIET  
IN THE HALLWAY.

JEROME LISTENS BUT HE DOESN'T HEAR  
ANYTHING, NOTHING OUTSIDE HIMSELF  
ANYWAY, OUTSIDE HIS THUDING HEART,  
HIS SOFT FOOTSTEPS.



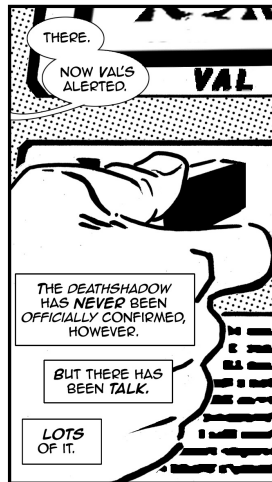
LAYNA AND HECTOR JUST  
MOVE - LAYNA IS FOCUSED  
ON RELAYING THE MESSAGE.

AN INTELINK BETWEEN THE APARTMENTS  
WOULD HAVE LEFT A MESSAGE, BUT FOR  
AN ALERT -- THAT HAS TO BE ARRANGED  
VIA THE DOOR PANEL.



AND THAT  
THERE HAVE BEEN  
SIGHTINGS.

JEROME'S HANDS SHAKE A LITTLE.  
HE KNOWS THERE'S BEEN STRANGE  
DISCOVERIES.



THE DEATHSHADOW  
HAS NEVER BEEN  
OFFICIALLY CONFIRMED,  
HOWEVER.

BUT THERE HAS  
BEEN TALK.

LOTS  
OF IT.

THERE.  
NOW VAL'S  
ALERTED.



AH --  
WHAT IS  
THAT?

**THUNK  
THUNK  
THUNK**  
WE DON'T  
USUALLY  
HEAR ...

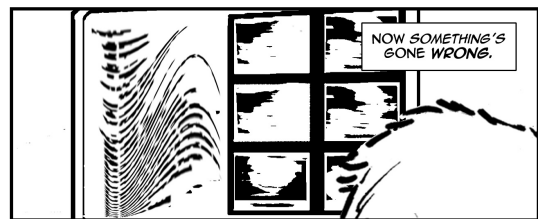
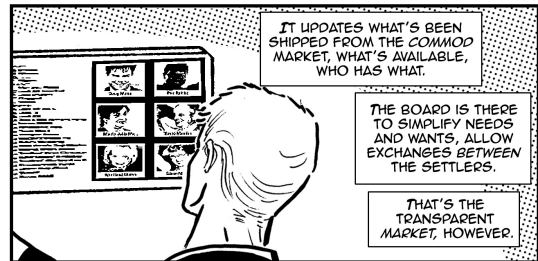
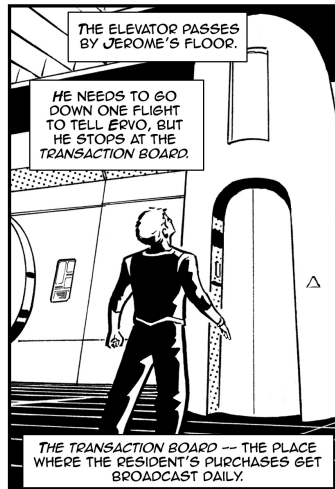
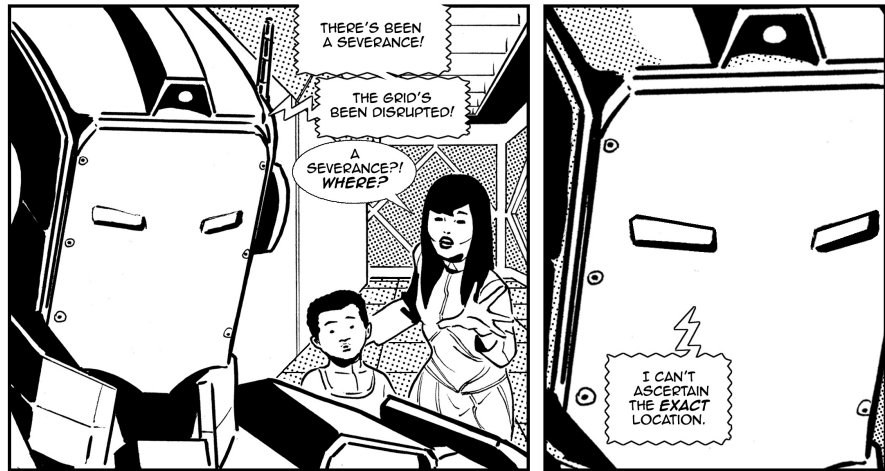
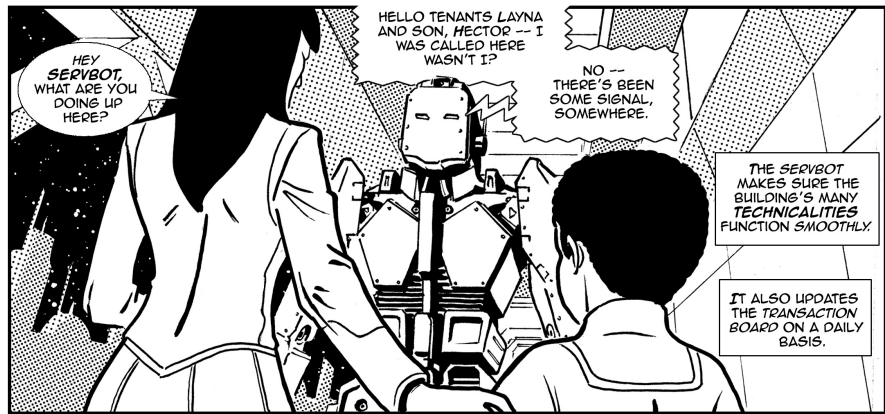
AND WHEN IN AN ALIEN  
ATMOSPHERE, ANYTHING  
AND EVERYTHING CAN HIT  
A NERVE.

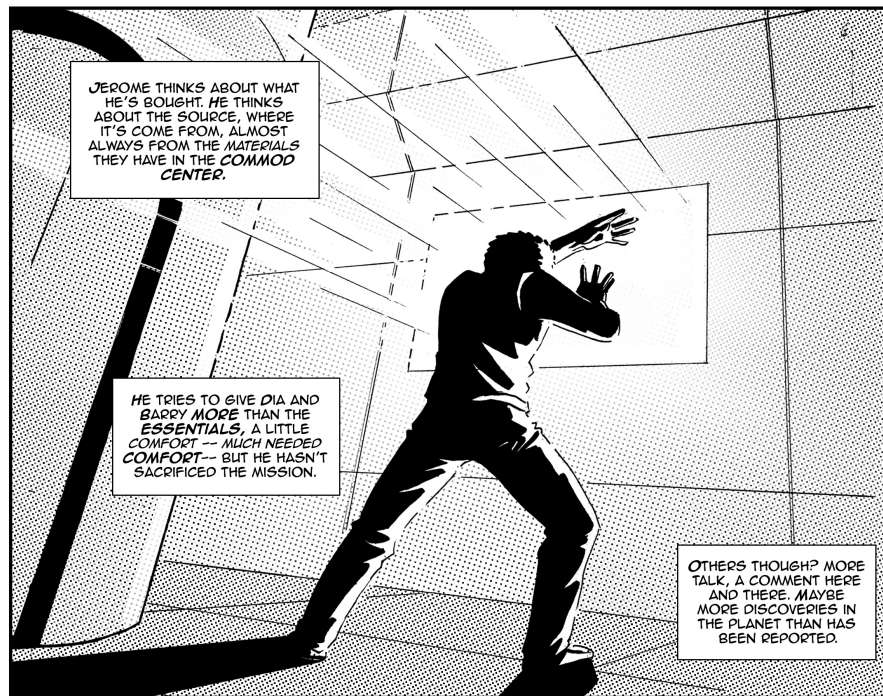




THEY COULD BE THERE ANOTHER DECADE -- AND THEY'VE BEEN ON PLANET MORAV (XV7) TWO YEARS ALREADY --- AND ITS SIGHTS AND SOUNDS COULD STILL FEEL TOTALLY ALIEN.

by Patrick McEvoy & Rodolfo Buscaglia

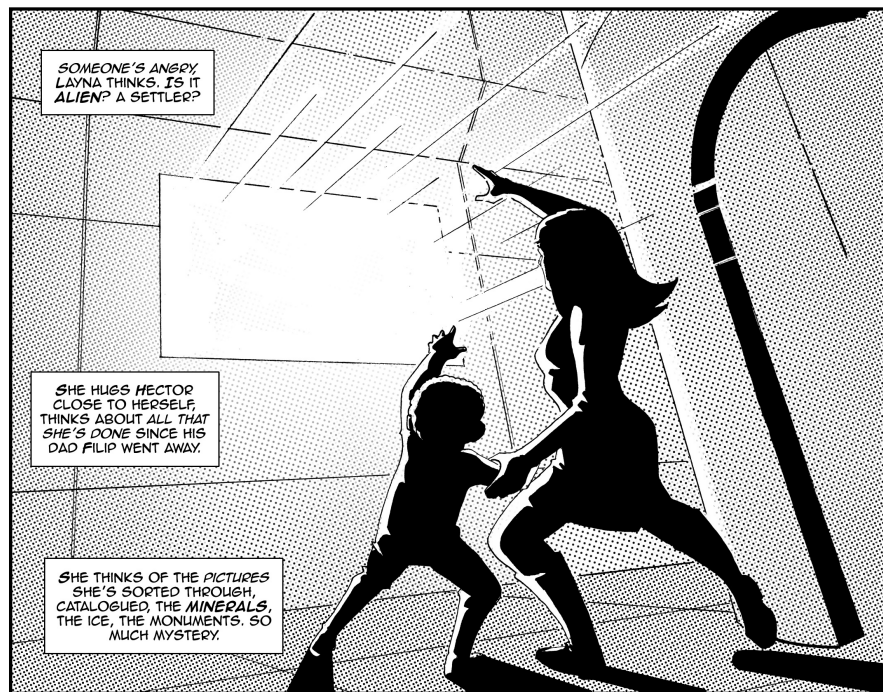




JEROME THINKS ABOUT WHAT HE'S BOUGHT. HE THINKS ABOUT THE SOURCE, WHERE IT'S COME FROM, ALMOST ALWAYS FROM THE MATERIALS THEY HAVE IN THE *COMMODORE* CENTER.

HE TRIES TO GIVE DIA AND BARRY MORE THAN THE ESSENTIALS, A LITTLE COMFORT -- MUCH NEEDED COMFORT -- BUT HE HASN'T SACRIFICED THE MISSION.

OTHERS THOUGH? MORE TALK, A COMMENT HERE AND THERE. MAYBE MORE DISCOVERIES IN THE PLANET THAN HAS BEEN REPORTED.

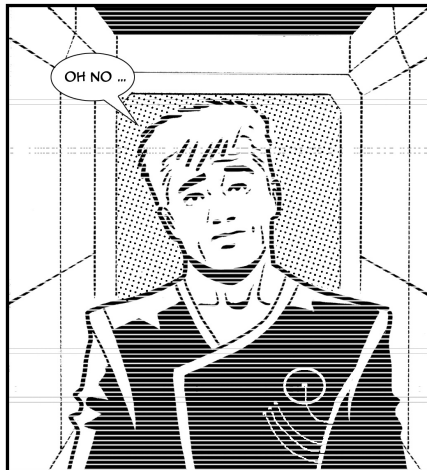
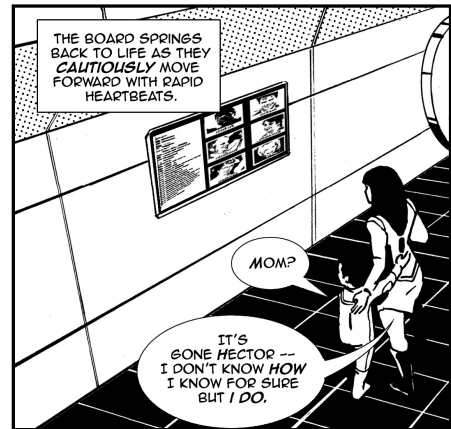
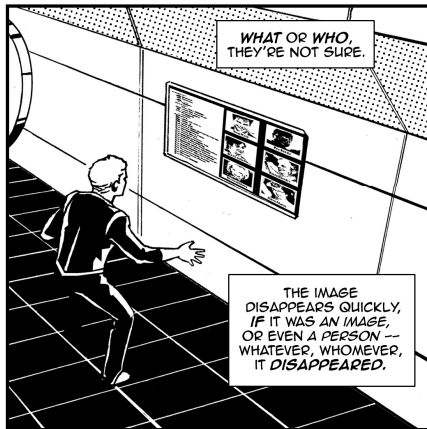


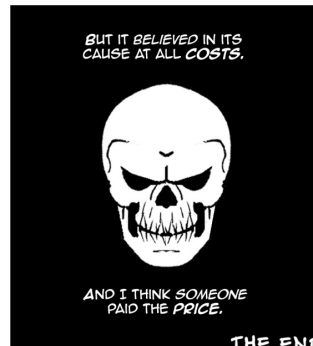
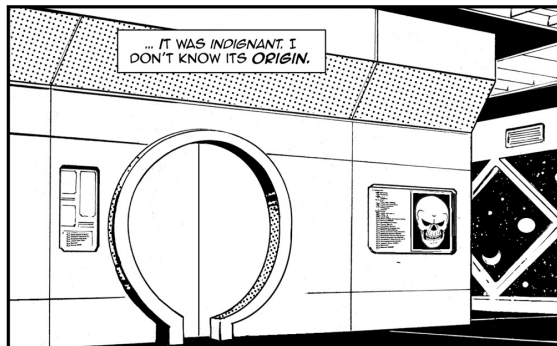
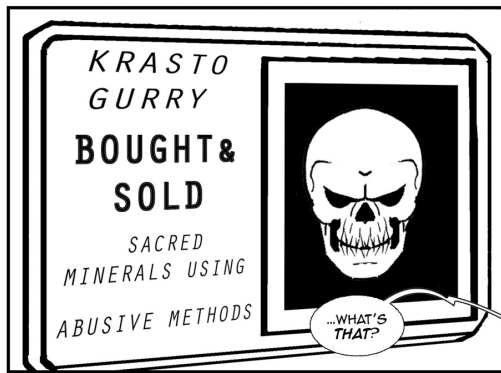
SOMEONE'S ANGRY. LAYNA THINKS. IS IT ALIEN? A SETTLER?

SHE HUGS HECTOR CLOSE TO HERSELF, THINKS ABOUT ALL THAT SHE'S DONE SINCE HIS DAD FILIP WENT AWAY.

SHE THINKS OF THE PICTURES SHE'S SORTED THROUGH, CATALOGUED, THE *MINERALS*, THE ICE, THE MONUMENTS. SO MUCH MYSTERY.

by Patrick McEvoy & Rodolfo Buscaglia





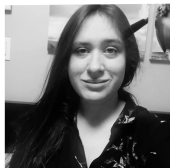
# Contributor's Bios



**COLLEEN ANDERSON** is a multiple award nominee, with poetry widely published in six countries, in such venues as *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Lucent Dreaming*, the award-winning *Shadow Atlas and Water: Sirens, Selkies & Sea Monsters*. Her poem "Machine (r)Evolution" was chosen to be part of Tenebrous Press's 2023 *Brave New Weird* collec-

tion. Colleen lives in Vancouver, BC and is a Ladies of Horror Fiction, Canada Council and BC Arts Council grant recipient for writing. Her fiction collection can be found in *A Body of Work*, Black Shuck Books, and her poetry collection, *I Dreamed a World*, is available from LVP Publications. *The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams* is due for release in 2023 through Yuriko Publishing.

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**SYDNIE BEAUPRÉ** is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

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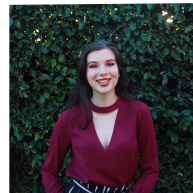


**GUSTAVO BONDONI** is a novelist and short story writer with over three hundred stories published in fifteen countries, in seven languages. He is a member of Codex and an Active Member of SFWA. His latest novel is a dark historic fantasy entitled *The Swords of Rasna* (2022). He has also published five science fiction novels, four monster books and a thriller entitled *Timeless*. His short fiction is collected in *Pale Reflection* (2020), *Off the Beaten Path* (2019), *Tenth Orbit and Other Faraway Places* (2010) and *Virtuoso and Other Stories* (2011).

In 2019, Gustavo was awarded second place in the Jim Baen Memorial Contest and in 2018 he received a Judges Commendation (and second place) in The James White Award. He was also a 2019 finalist in the Writers of the Future Contest.

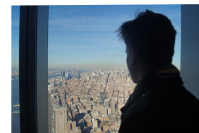
His website is at [www.gustavobondoni.com](http://www.gustavobondoni.com)

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**NICOLA BRAYAN** is a young, aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be found on Instagram at [@an.aesthetic.mirror](https://www.instagram.com/an.aesthetic.mirror).

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**HARMAN BURGESS** studies psychology at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He has published around thirty short stories in various magazines and anthologies including in *Flame Tree Press' Newsletter*, *Etherea Magazine*, and *After*

*Dinner Conversation*; he also has a play in development with a Sydney based theatre company.

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**RODO BUSCAGLIA** (1974) is a comic artist from Argentina. He has loved comics since he can remember. He started to study with prestigious Argentine comic artists such as Oswal and the Villagrán Studio. He has been working as an assistant to Horacio Domingues, and as a freelancer for almost two decades.

Lately he illustrates the series "The Harlem Shadow" for the Soulhammer publishing house.

\* \* \*



**BARBARA CANDIOTTI** is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

You can find her website at [www.candiotti-art.com](http://www.candiotti-art.com)

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**WILLIAM COUPER** is a writer from Scotland. As well as horror, he writes fantasy, and science fiction. He will even do some non-fiction when the fancy takes him and has had work appear on *Gingernuts of Horror*. His fiction has featured

in anthologies including *Cthulhu Lies Dreaming*, *In the Blink of an Eye*, and *Built from Human Parts*, as well as the periodicals *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *The Horror Zine*, and *Schlock Webzine*.

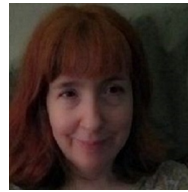
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**SHIKHAR DIXIT** is a writer/illustrator whose two newest stories in print can be found in *Weird Horror* #1 and *Space & Time* #139, both magazines available on Amazon. He has sold over thirty stories and one hundred illustrations to such venues as *Dark Regions*, *Strange Horizons*, *Not One of Us*, *The*

*Darker Side* (anthology edited by John Pelan), *Songs From Dead Singers* (anthology edited by Michael Kelly) and two Barnes & Noble anthologies. He lives with his family in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey, where he is currently at work on his first novel. To learn more, visit his website at [SlipOfThePen.com](http://SlipOfThePen.com)

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**GWYNNE GARFINKLE** is the author of a novel, *Can't Find My Way Home* (2022), and a collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change* (2018), both published by Aqueduct Press. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Fantasy*, *Escape Pod*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, *Apex*, *Climbing Lightly Through Forests*, and *Other Covenants*.

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**JON HANSEN** (he/his) is a writer, librarian, and occasional blood donor. He lives about fifty feet from Boston with his wife, son, and three pushy cats. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in a variety of places, including *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction* and *Apex Magazine*. He enjoys tea and cheese, and until recently spent entirely too much time on Twitter.

\* \* \*



**AI JIANG** is a Chinese-Canadian writer, a Nebula Award finalist, and an immigrant from Fujian. She is a member of HWA, SFWA, and Codex. Her work can be found in *F&SF*, *The Dark*, *Uncanny*, among others. She is the recipient of Odyssey Workshop's 2022 Fresh Voices Scholarship and the author of *Linghun* and *I AM AI*. Find her on Twitter ([@AiJiang](https://twitter.com/AiJiang)) and online (<http://aijiang.ca>).

\* \* \*



**R. MAC JONES** is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star\*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

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**E.E. KING** is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking."

She's been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Short Edition*, and *Flametree*. She's published several novels. Her stories are on Tangent's 2019 and 2020 year's best stories. She's been nominated for a Rhysling and several Pushcart awards.

She's shown at paintings at LACMA, painted murals in LA and is currently painting a mural in leap lab (<https://www.leaplab.org/>) in San Paula, CA.

She also co-hosts *The Long Lost Friends Show* on Metastellar YouTube and spends her summers doing bird rescue.

Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at: [www.elizabethveking.com](http://www.elizabethveking.com) and [amazon.com/author/eeeking](https://amazon.com/author/eeeking)

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**MARY SOON LEE** was born and raised in London, but now lives in Pittsburgh. Her latest book is *The Sign of the Dragon*, an epic fantasy told in poems, winner of the Elgin Award. She hides her online presence with a cryptically named website ([marysoonlee.com](http://marysoonlee.com)) and an equally cryptic Twitter account (@MarySoonLee).

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**ALINA MĂCIUCĂ** lives in Bucharest, which she loves to capture in highly imperfect photos. Sometimes, she posts those on her social media. She thrives in big cities and eclectic communities, and her needs are often met during her travels. So far, her work has been published in *Space and Time Magazine* and *Vastarien*.

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A former writer and editor for several sports publications, **PATRICK MCEVOY** has had stories included in various comic book anthologies such as *Emanata*, *Continental Cryptid*, *Uncanny Adventures*, *Indie Comics Quarterly*, and GuruKitty's *Once Upon a Time* and *Gateway to Beyond*. Illustrated stories have also appeared on Slippery Elm's website, *Murder Park After Dark Vol. 3* and in *New Plains Review*. A short story has also appeared on Akashic Books' website. In addition, short plays he wrote were chosen to be performed at the Players Theatre in New York as part of their various festivals (Sex, NYC and BOO) in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019. And he wrote and directed a short play for Emerging Artists Theatre's New Works series in 2021. A play anthology called *What May Arise* was also streamed June 30-July 6th 2022 as part of the Rogue Theater Festival. He also wrote and directed *Directions*, which appeared in the 2022 Dream Up Festival. Photography has also been exhibited with the Greenpoint Gallery, Tiny Seed Literary Journal, Molecule, riverSedge and Good Works Review.

\* \* \*



**ANTONY PASCHOS** is a Greek author with short stories in *Galaxy's Edge*, *Metaphorosis*, *Hyphen-Punk* and other magazines. He has also published two books and several short stories in Greek. He is



a member of the Athens Club of Science Fiction, and lives in Athens.

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**JUDITH PRATT's** varied experiences—actor, director, professor, fundraiser, and freelance writer—inspires her novels, stories, and plays. Some recent writing wins: In 2019, her play *Maize* was selected for the Louisiana State University SciArts Prize, and her novel *Siljeea Magic* was indie-published.

Recently, her stories and essays have been published in *Fiction Junkies*, *Stars and Staffs Magazine*, *Golden Walkman* podcasts, *365 Stories*, *Hags Fire*, and *Synkroniciti Magazine*. Her play *Losing It* appeared in *Best Ten-Minute Plays of 2020*. Her current novel, *The Skill*, is under contract with Pegasus Productions.

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**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

\* \* \*



**LORRAINE SCHEIN** is a New York writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *NewMyths* and *Mermaids Monthly*, and in the anthologies *Wild Women* and *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath*. *The Futurist's Mistress*, her poetry book, is available

from Mayapple Press. Her new book, *The Lady Anarchist Cafe*, is out now from Autonomedia.

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**CHRISTINA SNG** is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbric*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com) and connect @christinasng.

\* \* \*



**CARLA STEIN's** poetry and illustrations have appeared in a wide variety of publications including *Sustenance*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Pocket Lint*, *Please Hear What I'm Not Saying*, *Sea and Cedar Magazine*, *NonBinary Review*, *The Belladonna*, *Centipede-Cha-Cha*, *The Lotus Tree Review*, and *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, among others. Her work is forthcoming in *Watch Your Head* and *The Starlight SciFaiku Review*. Carla contributed to a renku in 2022 which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is an associate member of the League of Canadian Poets and the current artistic director of Wordstorm Society of the Arts. Carla makes art and writes poems from her home in Nanaimo, B.C. View her artwork at: [www.roaeries-tudio.com](http://www.roaeries-tudio.com).



# Perspectivision

by Carl Scharwath

*(full image)*