

penumbria

speculative
fiction mag

Aug 2k20 • vol iv issue 2



Mythologies

Getting above and
beyond the West

The Future and Afrofuturism

An interview with
Ytasha Womack

Plus Hawk & Young • Novyl the Mysterious • Callum Pearce • Christina Sng • Jamal Hodge
Grace Wagner • Jay Bechtol • Carl Scharwath • Kurt Newton • T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234.
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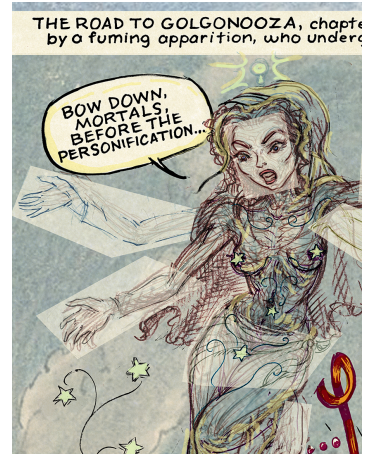
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Golgonooza



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

WELCOME TO THE SECOND “modern” issue of *Penumbric*, wherein we explore just a little the stories and philosophical systems of cultures other than the ones with which we grew up —“we” in my particular case being a little blond-haired white kid out in the middle of America, but including a lot of other people out in those parts, or in America generally, or really in what is known as “the West” (which ironically excludes many of the people living there).

This “West” has been a dominant or dominating force in speculative fiction for many decades. Or has it? I guess it’s a point-of-view thing; for those of us growing up here, who spent our adolescences reading Tolkien or Tolkien-inspired fantasy, for whom Asimov and Heinlein are the progenitors of our science fiction, and for whom one of many iterations of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* have tickled us with horror, the West is dominant. But I imagine to someone growing up in India, or in China, or in Japan, or in Africa this is not so true, or at least may not be the overwhelming force it is here.

But as in many other fields, I think growing up within the West can be limiting. It’s akin to our “travel problem” in the US: It’s hard to get people here to travel anywhere but other places within the US; it’s vast and dominant and familiar and cheaper to get to than anywhere outside it, and one doesn’t really need to get out of one’s comfort zone. But this leads to a lot of samey-samey vacations, to just sinking into the same fast food in every city, going on the same amusement park rides, going to the same store for the same fashions ...

In the same way I believe that people in the US ought to get out more to learn about other people and other ways of thinking, I believe our stories ought to reflect a range of influences, should be able to explore and share many cultures and values. And while I

think this has happened more and more over time, I think the current backlash against anything “foreign” or “alien” (which is the unfortunate way the US labels anyone coming to visit, even legally) threatens that trend.

Our first article in this issue of *Penumbric* acts, I hope, as a primer for those who aren’t particularly familiar with other cultural stories or who haven’t thought of exploring them, for those who haven’t thought about archetypes that connect our cultures and philosophies that can give rise to whole new ways of narrative thinking. It also emphasizes the need to not just appropriate or “use” other cultures’ stories (another unfortunate Western heritage), but to really delve, to really understand what one is doing and what that culture’s point of view is.

To be honest, I had a lot of trouble with this article. Twenty years ago I would have just blithely written a little tour guide of other stories and cultures, unaware of how it came across as though I were a 19th-century British anthropologist condescendingly describing the inhabitants nearby. Now I am much more aware, but my ability to write with this awareness feels sometimes lacking—I want to present everything with enthusiasm and respect, but I can still see it’s from a very definite point of view, and I worry about that.

This article is followed by an interview with someone whose enthusiasm and respect for, as she calls them, the “wisdom systems” of other cultures and peoples is palpable and unabashed. Ytasha Womack is the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, and we had an amazing discussion of her book, what it means to create Afrofuturist works, and the past, present, and future of those creations.

The rest of this issue came together in one of those synergistic and

slightly mysterious ways that things do sometimes, for which I am grateful. There ended up being a sort of mythic theme to many of the works presented herein, including Hawk & Young's "Hadija," Callum Pearce's "Wings.," Jamal Hodge's "Oaths to Nihilism," Grace Wagner's "EMP," and Novyl the Mysterious's "Scion of War" (and of course James Cukr's cover art). But now that I start listing them, other works in the issue are tied in to myths or cultural stories in some way, including Christina Sng's "A Paradigm of Magic" and even "Metal Rain," and Jay Bechtol's "Fall," Novyl the Mysterious's other pieces, and even the pandemic-related "Feral

Spring" by Kurt Newton.

I am pleased as well that the other work in this issue, while not "themed," is just as good: Carl Scharwath's "Double Vision" and the continuations of both Jesper Nordqvist's Mondo Mecho and T. Motley's The Road to Golgonooza.

So welcome to this second "modern" issue of *Penumbria*, and thank you so much for supporting us and the authors herein.

Mythologies

Getting outside the West

How immersion in
other stories can
change your own,
and your view of
the world

Unless you get your ideas from Harlan Ellison's Schenectady idea service, you are constantly on the lookout for story ideas, even subconsciously. (And even if your ideas arrive overnight using that particular service, you probably need to find some new ideas—it's a bit ... old.) You're also hoping not to write the same stories everyone else is writing (unless you're Hollywood; then that's your Holy Method). But to avoid the tendency to write yet another Tolkien-esque fantasy romp with the usual elves, or yet another aliens invade story, or even yet another ghost story, it could help to do some exploration further afield than just the same old Universal monsters.

Not to say that Tolkien-esque doesn't work (it's worked for hundreds of high fantasy stories and series). But this is a very well-travelled road. At the very least, shouldn't we look at the myths and religions behind these stories, and then maybe take a deeper look in other parts of the world?

Note: We are not saying you should "use" other peoples or cultures in your work, nor that you should "mine" them—these are terrible turns of phrase that border on the appropriative. But your stories can be enriched, if you are willing to do the exploration (or better yet to live within the cultures—see our interview with Ytasha Womack later in this issue). And you can end up enriching not only your own work, but the genre in which you are writing, and indeed fiction generally.

That's some lofty goal, that. And it's much too vast for a primer like this to cover in a few thousand words (unless I've suddenly acquired the ability to write Zen koans in amongst all my parentheticals, and I can assure you I have not). But let's take a few small steps. First, we'll look at the kinds of stories one can look to for inspiration. Then we'll visit the broader world of archetypes, and finish with a bit of philosophy.

The Stories

First, a note. Although by necessity (or limitation) these stories and cultural experiences are presented as something of a list, they obviously are not "mine" to guide you through; indeed, I fear that this will come across as though I am leading one cultural group through a tour of Disney's "It's a Small World," as though we are

Isn't "mythology" just religion misspelled?

Often when people talk about myths and legends, they are (consciously or not) making assumptions about another culture's religious beliefs or systems—the assumption being that that culture's beliefs are patently untrue. When speaking of civilizations that are no longer extant, or that have changed radically since their origins, this receives little criticism. To call the Greek stories of Zeus, Hades, Herakles, Athena, and so forth myths and legends does not rouse much anger. But when this is also applied to extant religions, there is a problem.

In this article we're talking about the stories of many cultures, across many times and places, whether they are meant as truth or parable, whether mythic or religious, as inspiration for our own writing. While I do use the terms myth or mythology to reference some of these stories, I mean it more to separate the idea of the mythic archetype from stories as we think of them today. More often, I try to use the word "story" with a surrounding context, or "religious story." I am making no judgment about what is real and what is not; that's not the point here, regardless. We should respect all cultures and cultural heritages, which leads me into a second, related point.

I reject terminology that indicates one is "using" these ancient tales, or "mining" the mythologies of old for modern ideas. These words not only indicate a sort of denigration and lack of respect for the source material, but also imply that, as a writer, you're not really immersing yourself in (or really researching) the culture whose stories are inspiring you; indeed, you run the risk of just appropriating another culture. In an ideal world, there should be more depth than just having read about Prometheus, or Thor, or Afrofuturism, or even Hansel and Gretel or stories of little mermaids. Even if this background doesn't appear explicitly in your piece, it will lend more dimension to your whole work. And it may change your whole outlook on life.

only just discovering these other cultures (and "discovering" being such a colonial way of putting it). What I am trying to do is show that these cultural spaces are part of our general heritage as human beings, and that writing fiction from only one perspective is limiting. Please keep that in mind. Also, although I talk about "myths" and "stories," many of these are lived experiences, all deserving of respect; see the sidebar "Isn't 'mythology' just religion misspelled?" for more on this.

And no myth or religious story should just be repeated verbatim. For instance, Tolkien's works are heavy with mythic influence: The Old English story of Beowulf had a massive influence, including the naming of elves, ents, and orcs (and, well, does Smaug remind you of anything in Beowulf?). The tales of the Norse gods and old Norse collections like the Völsunga saga definitely influenced Tolkien's stories of Middle Earth (as they did Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*). The Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* also bears some resemblance to the goings-on in Middle Earth, and Finnish was at least part of the inspiration for the Elvish tongue. And, well, whole books could be written about Tolkien's influences, possibly as long as his books themselves. But this is what they are: influences.

Note, however, that sometimes, with a twist or brought into modern times, a retelling can be successful. See, for example, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens*, which tells a story the Bible doesn't quite get round to letting us in on. (Or, since I've gone and mentioned Harlan Ellison, try his story "The Deathbird" for another example of this.) And of course whole new tales can be woven using threads of the old; CS Lewis did this in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and one of my favorite series as a child, *The Chronicles of Prydain* by Lloyd Alexander, was steeped in Celtic/Welsh stories. And for more up-to-the-moment examples, see even certain pieces in this month's *Penumbric*.

But this is a very crowded space, especially if you're using Western mythologies and religions as your jumping-off place. Tolkien casts a very long shadow, and whole genres basically follow the same patterns. Christian stories, Norse sagas, Greek and Roman myths ... you may have to queue a long time at those particular wells to draw up much new water.

Where else can you go? There's literally and literarily a whole world out there ...

Below you'll find just the barest sampling, a stone skipping across non-Western mythology/folk stories/religious stories. I don't pretend to know everything about these stories, nor what they mean to the cultures that created them (but if I were to write about them, I would *need to be immersed* in just that kind of way). And note again that these are ancient civilizations, as deserving of their own point of view as any in the West; there is far more to them than can be alluded to in a few paragraphs. But as even just the tiniest of samples ...

Africa

Let's begin in Egypt. Egyptian mythology is rich ... and has been used by Western writers to the point that it's almost no longer Egyptian, really, but more a general construct of the mysterious, a place from whence ancient curses hound our plucky adventurers, and treasures galore and the secrets of life and death are kept. (Which follows Western colonization patterns ... the Americas were once that mysterious place, where supposed cities of gold could be found [and plundered], where the fountain of youth resided ...). But Egyptian civilization and culture has begun to be reclaimed by African and African American writers; see again our Ytasha Womack interview on Afrofuturism.

The rest of Africa also contains civilizations and cultures with deep histories and stories and lived religions (and Womack's term "wisdom systems," which I love), such as the Dogon, the Yoruba, and the Dagara. These cultures have very different ways of looking at time and people's connection to the world around us. Immerse yourself.

Japan

While there are many Western authors who feel pulled by Japanese stories (especially with the popularity of anime and a long-running love of samurai and ninja and so forth), try something a little less well-known from that ancient culture. You may know of the Shinto deity Amaterasu, goddess of the sun, but what of her father, Izanagi, who along with his sister Izanami begat the lands of the world and the deities who would inhabit them? What about Susanoo, god of storms, who is at various times impetuous and heroic, or Bishamon, god of war? There are

PICTURED: Cover of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*

many stories told around these figures. If you don't know it already, you will find many anime that jump off from these stories ... and some of these are very good ways to examine the relationship between the religious stories and the more modern cultural output.

China

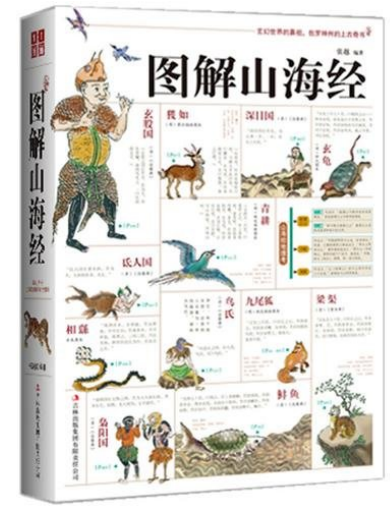
I must admit I am more familiar with Chinese folk tales that have been made into films than I am with the literature, and indeed these stories have given more and more Western directors ... um ... inspiration, especially as Hong Kong cinema and stars crossed over into the West from the 1980s onwards with films like *The Bride with White Hair*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, *Mr Vampire*, and many others.

As in Africa, to speak of "Chinese" religious stories is to lump together many different regional cultures and their beliefs. The most extensive work I know of covering these is *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which contains many stories while sometimes reading like a geography lesson. Also see the much more recent *A Journey to the West*, which while based on a true story also contains the story of the Monkey King and other deities.

The ancient stories have also mixed and interacted over time with Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, taking on the cultural values espoused by these systems.

India

India is birthplace of both Hinduism and Buddhism (and others), and has a history of rich storytelling. From the Mahabharata to the Bhagavad





PICTURED: Ganesh by Sumitkumar Sahare; from Pixabay

Ghita to Buddha, these stories give us a very different version of life and death, of striving and not striving, of reaching enlightenment and escaping the world of reincarnation.

My own introduction to any of this was a small book of Zen koans given me by a girlfriend in high school (and yes, I know Zen Buddhism is Japanese). This led me into deeper explorations of Buddhism and reincarnation and, really, into all of my religious studies. In the West, it has been difficult sometimes to divorce Indian thought systems from a very Westernized version sometimes thought of derisively as “New Age.” I’ve actually found the Westernized adaptations useful, but again, delving into the originals is much more ... er ... enlightening.

Indigenous or First Peoples

These stories and cultures are often subsumed in stories of Western settlement and colonialism—as are many aboriginal or first people’s tales. Growing up in the American West, I was fascinated by stories of shapeshifting tricksters, of spirit animals—but I was also presented all of

these tales from the point of view of the dominant culture, and even now it appears that many of the collections of these stories are curated by non-native editors.

The stories themselves are diverse and descriptive and deserving of immersion. And, as with other groups that we sometimes think of as a monolithic block, there are many different tribes and many different wisdom systems.

Just knowing these myths/stories is a great starting point—but just that, a starting point. If you’ve read many of them across different cultures, you may have been struck by similarities in terms of themes, ideas, and even events. Welcome to the world of archetypes.

Jung, Campbell, and Archetypes

Your story doesn’t have to be a twist on Jason and the Argonauts, or about how Fenrir the wolf came to dinner just before going out to devour the sun. It can use archetypes—events, characters, or motifs seen in stories across cultures. There are character archetypes like the wise old man (say, Morpheus in *The Matrix*, vis à vis his relationship to Neo), wise old woman (the Oracle in *The Matrix*, in her relationship to everyone), the Trickster, and the Hero; and creation, flood, and destruction (apocalypse) events. Carl Jung wrote extensively about archetypes and what he called the “collective unconscious” as a set of symbols existing in similar form in all human minds. Joseph Campbell applied these ideas to the myths he examined across many cultures. He thought of mythology as the “song of the universe”—taking Jung’s

collective unconscious into the realm of storytelling, like societies telling the world of their dreams (see *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, ep. 1). Campbell is most famous (and perhaps infamous, in some quarters) for his study of the “Hero’s Journey.” *Star Wars* is a pretty basic example, like reading Campbell and plotting out the whole story from that: wise old man calls our hero to adventure, the hero refuses the call, then is forced to do it anyway—Skywalker’s journey is an absolutely prototypical hero’s journey. Very basic, in fact ... but I don’t need to tell you how much that story resonated with audiences.

Other theories of this monomythic journey have arisen since, as there are issues with how masculine it is, how privileged it is, and even its unspecificity. But Campbell didn’t write only of the hero’s journey. He wrote extensively about a primary difference in focus between West and East—in broad terms, in the West, the focus tends to be on the God outside of oneself, whereas in the Eastern traditions the God is within. (A horrible mistake would be to think this is saying that any one of us is more godly than the others, which just recreates the hierarchy all over again; we are in this way of thinking each one of us god, or perhaps an equal part of god.) While this isn’t as clear a distinction as it first appears (e.g., there are examples of Christian sects whose interpretation of Jesus’s teachings sound more Eastern), rethinking our relationship with the divine can disrupt our typical mindsets, or do the same for a character in a story.

There are also differences in the ways even common archetypes interact with different cultural values. For example, the hero in the West typically reflects the values of individual performance and reward, whereas Eastern heroes often reflect cultures of teamwork. And yes, this example reeks of the stereotypical. But there are other examples. Say you’re doing a story about destruction and death—how would your character approach this having been raised in a purely Western fashion (where your characters might believe they die and are then removed from the stage of the world) versus a character whose

world view is steeped in the idea of reincarnation? These characters will probably react/act very differently to/in an apocalyptic situation, possibly changing the outcome of the entire story. And how would this work differently again in an Afrofuturist story, where ideas of time and space and past lives can be very different?

This extends to horror as well. While there are ghosts of some sort in many cultures, the idea of ghosts is approached in very different ways (but can be super scary regardless—see *The Ring* for example). The reasons these ghosts have for being around, even, is different, which makes for very different stories overall. Or vampires—Chinese vampires



PICTURED: Games such as *Final Fantasy X* contain stories based on religious or philosophical ideas. (© 2001–2004, 2013, 2014 SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. All rights reserved. CHARACTER DESIGN: TETSUYA NOMURA)

are very different from Dracula (they hop, for one thing). Or zombies ...

There is also the Jungian idea of the anima and animus—the male aspect of the female psyche, and the female aspect of the male psyche, respectively. Different cultures handle these ideas differently, with some taking a very rigid either/or, binary stance (you’re either masculine or feminine) and being very uncomfortable with any sort of “other” that doesn’t seem to fit (and trying to “fix” these persons so they can be placed into society’s placeholders), while others are very accepting of the fluidity between anima and animus (as Campbell says in *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal*, “... the body of perfection is androgyne—neither wholly male nor wholly female, but combining both” [36]). How characters in these different situations interact, either with each other within their own cultures or as emissaries between cultures, can be stories unto themselves.

But in some sense I am getting away from archetypes and more into cultural philosophies ...

Archetypes into Philosophies

The mythologies/religious stories are often stories that can act as a doorway into a deeper study of how a culture has developed, how it works, and how it thinks (or used to). This can be very, very different from Western ways of thought. And these can lead, again, not to an attempt to copy, but to being able to create a much deeper society and culture in your own prose/poetry/art. See, for example, the Dune series, wherein Frank Herbert created an entire set of societies, myths, histories, and philosophies. Or even video game stories, such as that in *Final Fantasy X*.

If you look at a culture’s philosophical roots and history, you will often get another look through a similar lens as that afforded by a culture’s mythic and religious stories—and see where the rise of certain more modern myths takes place. For example, one cultural myth of America (the heroic individual saves the community, not asking for praise but often rewarded for the hard work done) rises in part from the Western philosophies of the Enlightenment, and from

the long rise of individualism and continued stories of how reliance upon one’s own hard work can help you not only to survive, but to thrive. This has become so ingrained in the American psyche that, for some, the very idea of social safety nets is spurned as weakness and decay, or (patriarchally) a sign of the country basically losing its “manhood.” (That other Western countries haven’t taken it this far further demonstrates that different cultural histories and philosophies have “built” very different ideas into even similar governmental systems.)

Different philosophies can also lead to entirely different narrative structures; for example, in the West we typically assume a “good” story will have conflict; indeed, in school I remember being taught to seek out the type of conflict in every story. These stories end when the conflict is resolved, often by one side “winning” in some way. But in the East, there are Kishōtenketsu—stories involving no Western-style conflict. Rooted in Taoism, these stories (or, originally, poems) end not by one side winning out but by finding ways for disparate elements to coexist.

Finally, religions themselves are, in part, vast philosophical systems; Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam each have massive philosophical underpinnings, debated and discussed over centuries of faith and followers and far too complex to be discussed here. If you are writing stories with characters who follow these religions, or even creating your own, you will need to immerse yourself much more deeply into their ideas and cultures to even approach authenticity.

* * *

This article has necessarily been a skipping-stone across a very vast pond, one which many of you will already have made at least some small journeys onto. But hopefully it has provided some inspiration for new tales of new worlds, extended from the cultures of which we are most familiar. It can be daunting, the idea that to write a short story one should do this much research, but it shouldn’t be a one-and-done kind of thing; it should inspire far more than just a few thousand words. And this exploration is a kind of learning that can help you examine not only the lives of your characters, but your own as well. Which may be what we’re doing anyway when we write.



Scion of War

by Novyl the Mysterious

The FuturePresentPast of

Afrofuturism

An interview with Ytasha Womack

YTASHA WOMACK IS, amongst many other things, the author of the book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, which helped introduce me (and probably many others) to the larger Afrofuturist movement. But that work was published in 2013, and in the last several years Afrofuturism has definitely become a more mainstream concept. We were able to ask her about this recently, along with her thoughts on writing Afrofuturist works and the future of the concept.

I read your book from 2013. I'd like to ask a few questions about what has happened since then in Afrofuturism. In the last few years it seems to have sort of become more mainstream, more noticed. Would you say that has more to do with the film Black Panther, or a sort of larger undercurrent ...?

Sure. It was a synergy of things happening. In the two-month period when my book came out, there was an art show at the Studio Museum of Harlem called The Shadow Took Shape, which is an Afrofuturist art show that received a lot of press. And there was also an Afrofuturism speculative fiction anthology that came out in that same period, which was the result of a KickStarter project. I think the synergy of that lent itself to a conversation, so within a day of my book coming out I think there was an article in both *Ebony* magazine and io9.com. So *Ebony* being symbolic of mainstream Black America, and io9 being this awesome scifi website ... so in that sense, in part the book, the art show, and this other book that came

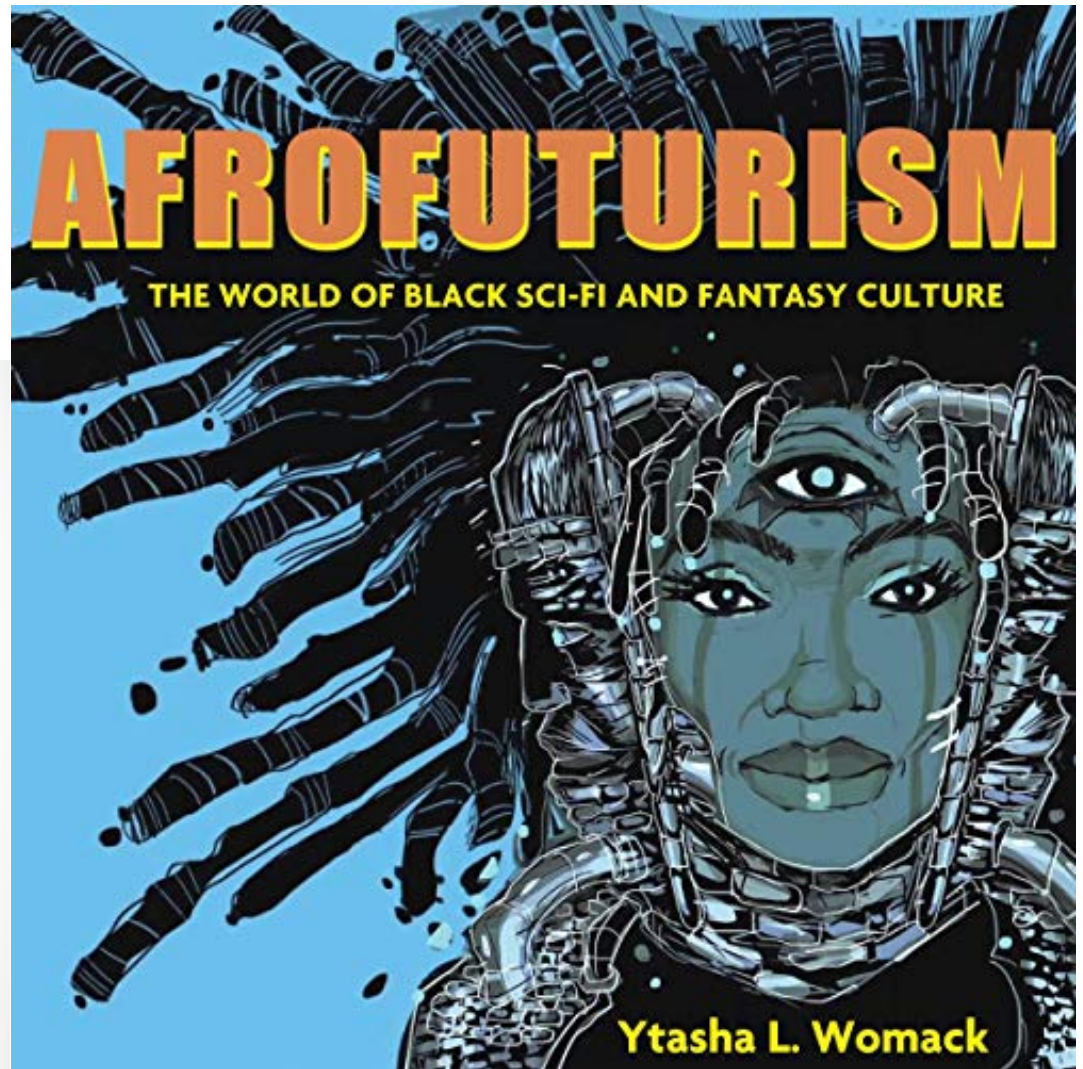
out started ... it's more a synergistic cresting maybe. A lot of things were taking place, some of which I wrote about. You know, the independent comic book creators, and the Black Age of Comics events, which were starting in Chicago, and they had one in Philadelphia and Atlanta, and so many Black indie creators being in just general Comic-Cons ... I think that was one dynamic that was really taking place, that shaped a lot, to be honest with you. In addition, [there was] the gallery art world, more artists sort of claiming Afrofuturism. Also, another thing that was taking place, that lead to the cresting, was the fact that science fiction was being taught in colleges. For most of science fiction's existence, it was sort of the sidebar of real literary works; now it's moving to the center, as were comics, which were increasingly being studied as part of pop culture and design. Hip-hop as design and aesthetic was being taught in college.

The first thing you do when you start looking at these science fiction works in colleges, it becomes obvious that it's using those to talk about the future, but they aren't highly diverse.

It was still all Asimov and ...

Right. Pretty much. And then it's like, who else is there? And that's when you start going to Octavia Butler, to Samuel Delaney, and a lot of the theory started becoming more of a conversation. But I think the book that I did on Afrofuturism really helped popularize the term,

PICTURED: (right) Cover of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*; (below) Ytasha Womack



because a lot of the people working under the umbrella of Afrofuturist works were completely unfamiliar with the term.

Right. And as you say in your book, the term was originally from the '90s ...

It was from the '90s, but it was used more amongst some people in

the academy, who were specifically writing about it as theory, and maybe used by people who were artists functioning more in the fine arts spaces. But some of your musicians or thinkers or people interested in philosophy, excited about history, Black history—they weren't using that term.

And after that, your book ...

It helped popularize it. And people could see themselves in it, because the way I wrote the book, you know, I wrote it from the perspective of people who were in visual arts, if you were into history, if you were more of a music person, if you were just trying to create change and help humanity, activism—there were different lanes in which people can see themselves, and they could think, I can really be into Afrofuturism, and I don't have to be a comic book [writer].

That was one of the things I liked about your book, was that each chapter talked about a different avenue. So, in terms of myths and archetypes, you talk about the need to explore beyond just Egyptian myths. Do you think that writers have been able to find other African mythologies that might have been missed out?

Well, sure. ... The fun thing about Afrofuturism is that you can pull from the past, you can pull from mythologies and the present and you can articulate futures, so there's a lot of remixing that takes place, in the same way that a DJ or someone pulling from samples of old soul cuts and jazz and mixing it with something that's very house, futuristic, and putting it all together, Afrofuturism does the same thing, and it's a pretty common process within cultural product by Black creators, particularly in the Americas, and this kind of constant quilting, pulling from these different narratives. Part of it, at least from the African American standpoint, being Black in North and South America, we're descended from so many African cultures, sometimes with a conscious awareness of what they are, sometimes not with a conscious awareness of what they are, and so the cultures we're a part of are fundamentally these fabrics of different African cultures that under unusual circumstances have to merge. But even with that, there are still some very distinct themes that are uniquely African that you can trace directly to mythologies, to stories. And all of that to say, there's a lot of different mythologies. Whether one's pulling from the American South, or they're looking at ... I'll say almost "wisdom systems," from the African continent, because some of the things that some of us would want to call mythology are actually wisdom systems and beliefs that come out of ethnic groups, that are still working within those systems.

[So] yes, I think people are pulling from it, and they've been pulling from it. I think one of the reasons you see so much Egyptian imagery, references, in works that we call Afrofuturism is because there's an active reclaiming of Egypt as being African.

Right. When I was growing up that was almost considered more part of the Mediterranean, and so it was included with Greek myths and Roman myths.

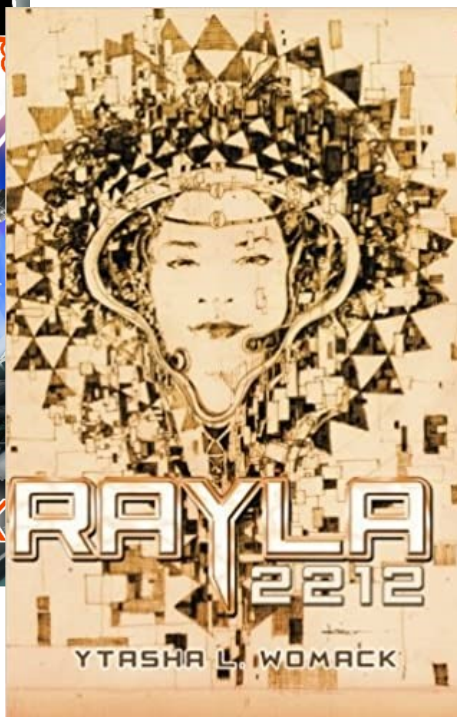
Right, exactly. And so when you look at a lot of soul album covers, you look at someone like a Sun Ra, you look at Parliament-Funkadelic imagery, you look at Earth, Wind & Fire imagery, even pulling up to someone like Erykah Badu, who is very famous for wearing an ankh, and you take that even further, to just a lot of references in hip-hop and elsewhere among a lot of Black creators.

Egypt is referenced in part because in the Western world it's acknowledged that Egypt was an amazing great empire, and we are claiming that, yeah, it's a great empire but people you would today describe as Black were creators and instrumental in its shaping. ...

I think a lot of other wisdom systems are being pulled from. There's a lot of references to the Dogon because of their story about being descendants from the star Sirius B. There's a lot of reference to Yoruba culture, particularly because in the Americas you see Candomblé and what we call Santería as variations of the Yoruba spiritual system. So you'll see that in a lot of work. You'll see a lot of Akan references and works. ... This is from Western creators who are Black. And then I see a lot of references to ... sometimes the Dagara, I think because of Malidoma Patrice Somé, who has writings about the Dagara and, again, their wisdom system as well. So I do think there's a great interest in doing that. And then a great interest in people pulling from the spaces where they are. And then, I think among African creators ... a lot of African creators don't have to go above and beyond to make these commentaries because they're of the culture, and so it's more of an expression of where people are and articulating these visions to other people.

I guess I was thinking of Afrofuturism as African American ...

PICTURED: Covers of (left)
Eartha 2198 and (right)
Rayla 2212



No ...

... but can it be purely African as well?

Well, Afrofuturism, the whole idea of people looking at the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens is, I mean ... all societies have a relationship with their future, a relationship with time and space even if it's not specifically articulated as the future. I think when Mark Dery wrote about Afrofuturism, when he sort of coined that phrase, he was thinking of it as being uniquely African American. I don't think of it in that way, and I don't think many

people do. Now what can tend to happen of course is that if it's African American creators they're going to tend to write about futures from an African American lens, which can overlap but be different from a creator out of Senegal or a creator out of South Africa. The starting point might be different, but there are a lot of relationships and overlap. Nnedi Okorafor likes to use the term "Africanfuturism." She likes to talk about how she writes ... she uses that to describe her work, and she's distinctively writing from an African viewpoint that's not intersecting with the West at all.

When I'm talking about Afrofuturism, I think of it very much as a



PICTURED: Ytasha Womack signing books at Bucket of Blood Bookstore in Chicago

sense that your past life could be melded in such a way as to be in the future.

Yeah, completely. Afrofuturism looks at the future, past, and present often as being one. It differs from some other forms of futurism because there is a valuing of the divine feminine, or what we call the divine feminine, and that is a valuing of intuition and nature and their relationship. Intuition is viewed as being as valuable as your logical thinking in terms of informing your worldview. Afrofuturism differs in part because it does acknowledge that Blackness is very much a creation or technology, in the sense that race as we know it was created to justify the trans-Atlantic slave trade. ... It's usually not thought of in that way at all. I write about that in the book, this moment, when one of my instructors said which came first, racism or slavery, and we were just like, well, we're all arguing that racism came first, and she was like, no, there was slavery, and then the system was created to justify it. So when you keep saying that, it kind of upends things, upends the world.

Afrofuturism also values a lot of mysticism, these wisdom centers, as well as technology, so often you see an integration of the two in one form or another.

I saw as well you've spoken about its ability to kind of disorient you. Do you think that both Afrofuturism and speculative fiction in general still have that ability to move us from that comfortable space we all exist in and get you to move outside yourself and look at things in a new way?

Yeah, completely. A lot of Westernized thinking is based on sort of a uniform philosophy, and it's a uniform philosophy that's Euro-/Euro-American-centric. Afrofuturism, just contemplating those ideas, takes people out of this thought process of intellectualism that we're all sort of socialized in, to say wait, there are other ways of thinking, there are other ways that people relate to the world, other ways that

space with ideas about futurism, regardless of where you are in the world, if you're a person who describes themselves as Black or of African descent. In Brazil, they use the term Afrofuturismo, and they're writing about, again, futures and Afrofuturism, but it has more of a Brazilian framing.

Are there certain archetypes that kind of wind their way throughout Afrofuturism? I was particularly struck by the idea of time and timelessness, and you were also talking about past lives. I get the

people integrate with space and time, which can be valuable in building a new take on humanity or connecting deeper to our own humanity. So just to express that in and of itself for some people is fundamentally shocking, because they're taught that some of these thought systems that we grow up with, that that's it, there is no other way of thinking.

Right, everything moves in a logical path and it goes here, to here, to here ...

Right. I did a talk recently on my Utopia Talks on IG Live that I've been doing each week, and what I'm about to do is talk about how so much Western thought is around binary thinking. You're either this or you're that; it's hot or it's cold; it's black or it's white ...

We get that with gender as well.

Right, completely. These things are positioned as being polar opposites, never as complements.

Yeah, which seems strange, because you almost can't have one without the other.

Right, which then goes back to the symbolism of the ankh and this balance. But it's usually not articulated that way, and so there isn't always this range for subtlety of discourse to some extent engaging other world thought processes. I think Afrofuturism is one lens into that, one lens of saying hey, there's other ways, other philosophical thoughts that come out of human experiences, and they're points to engage with.

Would you say the events of the last few years, which seem particularly concentrated in terms of protests and a sort of backlash to that, has that affected, or do you think that will affect, how Afrofuturist works will be created, or what they will be creating?

Well, I would say it would have to on one level, in the sense that people are shaped by a certain set of experiences, but in another way, because it is a building ... again, these protests are building on issues

that people have been working on for centuries ... so, I think it has more to do with how people will choose to write about this time.

Can non-Black authors write Afrofuturist works?

Yeah, I think non-Black authors can. I think what's really important, though, is for people who want to write Afrofuturist works to really engage in the culture and be in dynamics where they are not in the majority. There's so many moments where people who aren't necessarily Black study or observe Black culture or might even engage with it, but they're engaging with it to some extent as an outsider and probably don't know it. So if you're growing up with pop and soul music, and you like *Black Panther* ... these are all things you can easily like, and be a part of because it's a part of the fabric of where we are, but there's a cultural space that it comes out of, and that informs it. And that's the space that people need to sort of understand, in my opinion, if they want to write or create from. So it's not just an aesthetic, like you love ... say, you like hip-hop, and you say well, people are dancing like this, and they move like this, so now I'm hip-hop, right? [laughs] So the same thing with Afrofuturism; people can say, well, they say a couple mystical things about time, and, I don't know, wear something that kinda looks like Parliament-Funkadelic, and I'm quasi Janelle Monáe ... So, it's not just an aesthetic, it's not a costume, and it's not theories you observe. There's a cultural space, in terms of how people engage.

There's a story I tell sometimes about a guy I met once, and he wasn't Black, and he wanted to write Black characters in a steampunk project ... Black people from the late 1800s, and so forth, and I told him, I said that was cool, ... but do you engage with Black people today? You know, to get some sort of framing. Because oftentimes we don't realize that you're not really getting a full cultural insight. You hear interviews, you listen to music, you see people you think are pretty cool, but you need to be in spaces where you're not in the majority so you could get past whatever that issue could be, but you might not know what it is until you are in spaces on a regular basis where most of the people are Black. So you have to get past this lens of outsider/insider, you know, you're the observer looking at the observed, or whatever. You have to get to a

space you can kind of see from the inside of that cultural lens, to the extent that you can. I think that that's important. And to be around a variety of Black people in different dynamics, from entertainment events to office parties to people's homes to holidays, or more everyday life, grocery stores [laughs], all kinds of things. A range of spaces. I think once people do this, they'll see how diverse Black cultures are. Even within the United States Black cultures are very diverse.

It's not a monolithic block.

Right. There's a lot of overlap, you know. But all of those things are part of a rich tapestry that help shape what we call Afrofuturism, and to get some sort of lens on that or relationship with it, I think is important.

What do you think the future of Afrofuturism is?

I think you'll see a lot of great storytelling, a lot of great film stories, a lot of work, way more cultural production, way more music, where people are using the term Afrofuturism and embracing those ideas and building on it. I think you'll see people trying to find ways to build on a lot of philosophical thought in organizations, in

community planning, in design; I think you'll see more of that. And I think ... it will sort of highlight the Black cultures around the world and look at their relationship with them. Again, when people talk about Black people, they're not thinking about Black people as being global—being in the US, being in Kenya, being in Botswana and Jamaica and Trinidad and Brazil and England and France and in the Philippines. They're just not thinking of them in that way.

I was talking to someone about indigenous futurism, and they were talking about how the Black Lives Matter movement in Australia is in part showing solidarity with the experiences with the West but in part highlighting the challenges of aborigines in Australia. So there's a broader context for these ideas around Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism intersects with Black cultures around the world, but also liberation, technology, and mysticism, and the imagination—this idea of imagining, visioning the futures, the imagination of unusual circumstances, is really key [to get an] active part of how people live their lives in unusual circumstances, how they're able to push back, for us to be in the utopia that we're in today [laughs].

You can find Ytasha Womack at ytashawomack.com and on Instagram at [@ysolstar](https://www.instagram.com/ysolstar). Her Utopia Talks take place every Tuesday on IG Live at 7pm CST.

Metal Rain

by Christina Sng

On our planet, it rains iron,
Enough to spear holes
Into our old spacecraft,
Enough to spear holes in us.

When the rain-caller screams,
We take shelter
In the iron mountains
Where we are safe,

Where we wait
Till the rain stops
And the searing heat
Surfaces again.

Then we go out
To reintegrate,
Reinforce the change,
Readapt our bodies

To live on this planet.
To live as effreet.

Stickman from Hell

by Novyl the
Mysterious



Hadija

by Hawk and Young

"It takes courage to grow up and become who you truly are." - E.E. Cummings

...

BOOOMSHAKOW!

The battered building rattled, threatened to fall, then showered its inhabitant with dust.

BOOOMSHAKOW!

The cycle was repeated as another howitzer shell made rubble of one of the world's oldest cities.

With a growl, an olive-skinned child who couldn't have been a day over twelve came barreling out from under what was left of an overturned desk. She pounded the brick windowsill and stuck her head out into the street.

"Knock it off, will ya? Everybody's dead, assholes!" the girl screamed to the air.

Four Syrian rebel fighters were praying thirty feet below her glassless husk of a window and one snarled up at her between prostrating prayers.

She was about to call him an asshole too when she saw the symbol floating over his head. The symbol meant 'today'.

That was her gift. She could look at any creature and floating above their head would be a number that told when they would die.

That number wasn't written in stone; it could come sooner. She knew that because of a Russian soldier she had met only a few weeks before while trying on dresses in a post-apocalyptic dress shop. Before the destruction that had reduced Aleppo from a two million person metropolis of culture down to a junkyard, the dresses that littered the floor would have been worth more than her dearly departed mother could have afforded with a month of pay.

The shop didn't have the poorly made mud stucco like every house she had ever lived in. The walls were smooth painted stone with marble crown molding painted with scenes of Greeks and Minoans fighting mythical battles. Just being in the shop made her feel like the war had reduced the unfair and unreachable world to flotsam just for her. It was as if karma had been her very own faerie godmother. The only problem was that this godmother had shelled, bombed, and murdered her stepsisters, Prince Charming, and carriage.

In the new Aleppo, people needed food more than fashion. The beautiful handmade dresses were works of art that would have been cut up for bandages instead of decorating cute young girls, if there were any cute young girls left. She had discovered a cache of sugar biscuits still in the package behind a counter, which only added to the decadent evening. Normally, she would have been scrounging for food long before dinnertime, but the cookies had given her some extra time for pleasure. She had stayed up all night whirling like a dervish inside the dress shop; the world was a song and she was Shirley Temple.

Finally exhausted, the energy from the sugar worn off, she collapsed mid fashion show wearing only her new pink lace panties and tee shirt.

She awoke to the sandpapered rub of a vodka-smelling soldier trying to force his tongue into her tiny mouth. In the time between seconds she cursed herself for not hiding before sleeping. She knew how deadly this wasteland she called home was. As she was kicking and hitting the Russian brute, her hand closed on the hilt of a knife in his combat vest. Although he was naked from the waist down he still wore his assault vest, as one could never be too careful.

Her small hand drew back the knife and she opened her eyes to improve her accuracy. There, floating above his head, was a day a dozen years in the future.

That symbol was wrong.

It was dead wrong.

When she drove the knife hilt deep through his right eye, he died instantly. There was another Russian standing guard outside the door. He was thumbing through a girlie magazine to get himself ready because he thought he would be next. His floating number was for a week later.

It was also wrong.

She slit his throat from behind and he didn't last ten seconds.

She marveled at how he tried to make the sign of the cross. A murdering rapist was calling on his God. She reached down and touched his cheek with her thumb, burning a black mark on it.

His God may have come and retrieved him before the mark, but after, it was only the Underworld for him.

The cute little killer was named Hadija. Her mother had tried to raise her with Islam. That seemed like a million lifetimes ago. She had to stop and remember if she was even 'her' then. Was she a happy boy playing football in some other existence? That had been another life and another world. Despite the fact that the miniscule murderer often

found herself hungry, battered, and covered in gore, she had never been happier. She was truly herself.

She knew all the prayers and rituals of Islam, but she knew that Allah wasn't her father. She looked at Allah and Christ the way that poor children looked at rich children's dads. Hadija would wistfully dream that those were her parents, and that even if she raped and murdered they would still love her, but she knew it wasn't so. She was not the product of a master craftsman like Allah. She was what happens when a mechanic tries to build a house. Her defective god had made her his defective offspring.

There was a Sister Antoinette, a nun from the Red Cross, who always used to make her long for a father like the Christ. She would have never put the black mark on Sister Antoinette. The nun used to give her food and new shoes. Of course she had her bad points, like making Hadija bathe, and never calling her by her name. She even gave her a little card she could use to get food, but it had the wrong name on it. Hadija threw it away.

There had been a boy that Hadija liked. He was her scavenging partner last year. His name had been Jocado, and their life had been great for a while. Jocado lied sometimes, but Hadija liked him anyway. She knew that just because someone lied didn't make them bad. Jo was a couple years older, but still more of a kid than a teenager. Jo told her that his father was a baker, and that he lived down by the wool market. She had her doubts about the light skinned boy's story, but his gap-tooth smile and hazel eyes made her feel less alone. Once she had stolen a bag of flour and baking powder, thinking perhaps they could make bread. It had been since the death of her mother that she had even smelled fresh bread. She was so excited to bring him the flour that she thought her heart would burst. The blank look on his face when he puzzled over the white powder broke her heart. What kind of baker's son didn't know what flour was, she had thought. Then she realized that he just must have lied. She lied about her father too, so she couldn't be mad. Their life went back to normal right away.

They stole food from soldiers and dodged shrapnel like powder

monkeys scurrying around a pirate ship.

She didn't have brothers at home, so she didn't know what all the rules were. She tried to give Jo as much privacy as their crazy life would allow, but one day he spied on her while she was making water. He made fun of her, and she forced him out into the street with a threat and a knife. He knew she meant it.

He wasn't a Muslim, he was a creation of the Christ. She would miss him, but his floating number said he had had only one day left anyway. She let his god take him. She could have given him the black mark, but they had been friends. He only made fun of how she peed; he wasn't that bad, and at least he knew her name.

Wearing a bright yellow dress with matching yellow shoes, she skipped out of the building past the rebel fighters. A couple shook their heads and one made a symbol with his thumb and pinky to ward off evil.

She shot him a fist with thumb tucked in. The gesture, called the fig, was understood clearly, but the men just turned away. Normally, they might have harmed her, but rumors about the girl had become almost legend among the Syrian soldiers.

The offended soldiers had only days earlier found one of their own dead in his tent. He had bragged about stripping the girl down to her panties before she escaped his clutches. He said he would get the whole package next time. It wasn't the slit throat that scared them, because they saw death daily. He had a black "X" on his forehead that looked like it had been burned there.

The hardest part about infiltrating the soldier's camp was getting past their old dog, Ali. Ali was a one eared mongrel mutt that no decent human would be proud to call friend. He lived off of mostly cats, rats, and meat that became available after gunfights. He was a three-toned gray, tiger-striped mess with dreads of matted fur, but he could pluck a bird off a windowsill, or a fish straight out of the koi ponds. He, like Hadija, was a perfectly adapted survivor in a city that took no prisoners. She thought of poisoning him to get past, or the old

reliable heavy falling rock, but something about how much they had in common always stayed her hand. In the end she just looked at his symbol and waited for death to take him. Despite his life, the old scrounger died peacefully.

That night she pulled the darkness to her, cloaking herself in the blackness of a powerless metropolis. She knew the soldier had his own tent, which reassured her because she knew an alarmed cry would bring a battery of armed men.

"Shh," she told the soldier when he awoke with her sitting on his chest. She had learned from watching him that he drank every evening until passing out and snoring loudly. He never flinched when she tied him spread eagle to his own tent stakes. He would have screamed out but his mouth was stuffed with an old dirty rag and duct taped shut. A helicopter spotlight illuminated the tent and he saw the reflection of his own eye in a hawkbill knife blade, a heartbeat before it opened his throat.

As he was dying his heart began to warm at the golden ethereal light surrounding his newly adrift soul. The soul tie was broken and Allah was sending Djinn to retrieve him.

Hadija swiped her thumb over the man's forehead and the light of his soul turned charcoal black. She wouldn't have wanted to be in the tent when the beautiful but terrifying Djinn had come, but her black mark cancelled their trip. This soul belonged to a less benevolent god.

Slowly out of the ground rose three ebony shapes that made the soldier's soul look bright. What had been a big, strong, powerful man was reduced to a whimpering wreck as Charon's collectors drug his soul away.

She hated the men. All she wanted was to be left alone. She wanted to play and explore. She wanted to eat and laugh like any little girl. The thing she hated the most about the rebels was the fact that they never called her by her name. They called her Haden. They yelled, "Haden this and Haden that." They knew her name was Hadija; that

pushed her closer to killing them than the manhandling did.

BOOOMSHAKOW!

BOOOMSHAKOW!

BOOOMSHAKOW!

Three shells exploded in rapid succession, and the fighters scrambled for cover. She thought they were cowards because none of their floating numbers said they would die that day. They were all so scared of death, but she knew death was unavoidable. It had come for her mother and everyone she knew. Death was her creator and when she died he would be her collector.

Every day there were horrifying explosions. She thought, the previous year, that there wasn't anything left to destroy. She wasn't trapped in the living hell of Aleppo; she could have left, but this was the only place where she could be herself. She knew that if in the morning Christ and Allah returned to their sanity and decided to restore the city that they had cursed to its previous glory her life would be hell. The women in her family had lived sequestered in the Zenana away from the men. They had their own tiny little world. She had never worn a hijab because it wasn't required of children below puberty age. She would never wear one. She couldn't see the number above her own head, but she knew that no golden haired Djinn, nor winged Seraphim, would be coming to retrieve little Hadija.

* * *

She wasn't thinking about death, she was thinking about food. It had been two days since she had eaten, and she had never felt more hollow, even though she had gone longer without food. It was the burning buildings. They must have contained people, because the whole city of horrors smelled like a barbecue grill. Any grilled flesh smelled like food. Her mouth watered and her stomach constantly had to be reminded that the smell was not chicken leg quarters, it was her lifelong friends and neighbors.

Hadija tried all of the normal places she might go when the scavenging became thin. The hospital was on fire, the United Nations were gone, and the nuns had been shelled. She was starving.

As a rule to live by, she avoided soldiers, but if she did have to approach one she preferred Americans. She had heard that they had laws that prevented them from acting like animals during war.

She rounded a corner of apocalyptic Aleppo and saw two American soldiers eating ready-to-eat meals outside a tent next to a crumbled animal clinic. They were both startled and didn't believe their eyes at the sight of the dark haired, olive-skinned girl in her yellow sundress. They thought she must have been a mirage, because neither one of them would have taken off their body armor for a new car and here was this girl armed only in a sundress.

The soldier nearest to her was a big blond Marine with a surly look and a crooked smile. He called to the tent for a translator, but she didn't need one. She could speak his language, or any language for that matter; it was part of the gift just like the symbols hanging over their heads.

"Can I have some food? I am starving," she said in English with a bit of an Arabic accent.

"How'd ya get he'ah? Where'd ya come from?" the blond Marine asked with a Texas accent.

"How do you speak English?" the other Marine, who was a skinny, beady-eyed kid, asked.

"I live here and I learned it from my Ma. Can I please have some of that food?" Hadija pleaded.

A lanky, red-headed Sergeant with a pencil thin mustache that didn't connect under his hawk-like nose stepped out of the tent. He didn't look at Hadija like he was trying to help. He looked at her like he was trying to solve a puzzle and she was the answer.

“I got some food right in here, come and get it,” the Sergeant replied.

“Sarge, she’s just a kid,” the young Marine answered.

“Shut yer piehole, or take a walk, Private,” the redhead snapped.

She was so hungry she could almost taste the food, but every one of these men had the symbol for ‘today’ hanging over their heads. She didn’t trust anything about them, and she knew she could just wait till tomorrow when they were dead, if the food wasn’t blown up, too. The risk was too high, and she bolted.

They were on her like hounds on a fox. They had the speed, but she knew the terrain. They winded through rubble and over mounds of destroyed concrete, until she finally ducked through a tiny hole in a burned-out diner.

They couldn’t follow her through, but one of them had gotten a hand on her pretty yellow dress and it ripped irreparably during the escape.

The Marines yelled obscenities through the little hole before their voices eventually faded away. She knew their threats about getting her another day were false, because according to the floating symbols they didn’t have any more days. She and Jacopo had once caught a rabbit that had floating above its head a one day symbol. They were going to try to see if they could save it. They were determined to take the proper safety precautions to ensure the rabbit would not die. They placed the rabbit in a very durable steel cage designed to protect a dog. They covered the rabbit in its cage with a thick steel desk in the back of the abandoned office where they were living. They heard something outside and went to investigate. While they were outside the building fell down. If the symbol said they die tomorrow, they could still die today, but if it said today, it was resolutely today.

She stepped out of the torn dress, wearing only her sunflower panties and yellow shoes. It frustrated her to think about how far she would have to go to get back home almost naked, so she decided to look around the building for an adult t-shirt. She was rifling through empty boxes when she found the score of a lifetime for a starving

girl: a box of canned peaches.

Using the knife she was now carrying in her bundle of torn dress to open the cans, she gorged herself. She tore through can after can until her little belly was full to burst. She drank every drop of juice and devoured every piece. The peaches were the kind of pleasure that made life worth living.

Just as she reached into the box to grab the last can, a huge body slammed into her, throwing her sideways. With one hand around her midsection, the big redhead slammed her gut into a nearby counter, knocking out her wind while tearing off her sunflower panties with the other hand. She was dazed and dizzy, gasping for air.

Grasping her most sensitive parts with the intent to violate her, he yelled, “What the fuck?”

The would-be rapist exposed her nakedness to the other two marines.

“It’s a boy,” laughed the blond Marine at the sight of Hadija’s little penis.

“Well, I don’t care either way,” the Sergeant said, bending the gasping Hadija over the counter once more. Before he could enter the girl that was born a boy, a chasm opened in the air. A hideously massive monster with the face of a skull and the horns of a ram pounded through the opening. The smell of brimstone filled the room and the god of the Underworld, Hades, let out a howl that unmade the three Marines. Their bodies came apart at a cellular level and filled the air with a fine bloody spray. The mist stunk of putrid shit with the metallic taste of foul blood.

“Haden, these animals would even rape the son of a god. Gather yourself, you are coming home, boy!” Hades boomed in a voice so deep it rattled the kid’s bones.

“I am not a boy. My name is Hadija!” the gore-covered kid spat back.

“I know what you are, I created you. They will never accept you. You

are a demigod. They are animals. Come back to the Underworld and be its Prince.”

“When I enter the underworld I will be its Queen and you will be dead!” the filthy, blood- covered little demigod screamed up at the unearthly monster that was Hades.

Just as Hadija was walking out of the rubble, head held high after staring down a god while clad only in a pair of yellow shoes and the remains of three would-be rapists, Hades threatened, “Next time I might not give you my help.”

She spun around, pulling two knives out of each heel of the seemingly innocuous yellow shoes, and growled back, “I didn’t need your help this time!”

The mighty god breathed fire and a burning vortex closed before him, transporting Hades back to the underworld. A smile crept across his malformed face as he realized that all of his fears about being succeeded by a weak Prince were irrelevant. The future God of the Underworld wouldn’t be weak at all; she would be the fierce Queen Hadija.

Feral Spring

by Kurt Newton

When the pandemic struck
there were protests,
food was in short supply,
money was in short supply,
hair dressers, nail salons,
clothing stores, even toilet paper
was in short supply.

Weeks, then months went by.
Hair grew long, clothes grew ragged,
people grew restless.
They began hearing voices
in the stale silence
of their stay-at-homes,
an ancestral whisper that grew
louder by the day.

There were late night gatherings
in the forest.
Curfews were broken.
There were sightings
of naked creatures
running on all fours.

When the pandemic eased,
many homes were found to be empty,
coffee mugs half full,
cigarettes left to burn to ash,
a trail of clothes to the nearest woods.

Oaths to Nihilism

by Jamal Hodge

With oaths sworn, come what may,
The crown settled down upon the skeletal brow,
Gleaming maggot white.
O, the crowned king,
Blind to mercy,
Thy work is endless.

Preparation craves victims,
As murder needs intention.
Stories fuel the spilling blood,
in twirls go the sword,
Round and round,
Thy lives will not be crowned by memory.

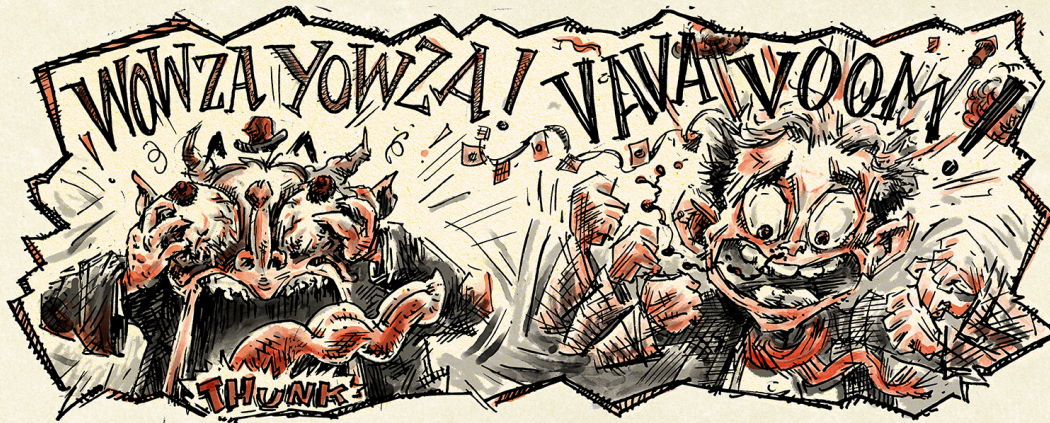
Worms dreaming folly,
Our tiny flame burns meager.
Rest now on the carpet of spilled oaths,
The feet of the crowned king is welcoming.
The roots between his toes run deeper than Yggdrasil,
to kiss Hades' hearth,
where dead mothers greet their children.

The final question asked,
Settle now to bones.
Before the crowned king,
We loved,
We fought,
We strived.

We returned to dust.

THE ROAD TO GOLGONOOZA, chapter two: Our heroes are menaced by a fuming apparition, who undergoes a stunning metamorphosis.







we're more anti-inspiration.

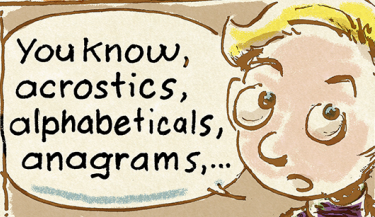


Oh?



Didi here is into constraints.

constraints?



You know, acrostics, alphabeticals, anagrams,...

"zounds," yawned Xenophanes, "why vent utterly treadworn screeds repetitiously?" Queries persist over nascent manifestoes, lost knowledge jumbled in hackneyed genres. From every doubt comes better answers.



o.o.kay... so what's with the shopping cart?



Salvage!



we're gonna sell it to a junk dealer...



flip ... and use the money to make art.

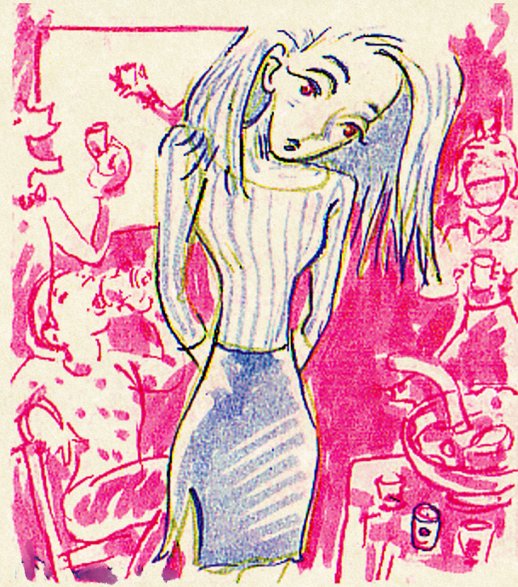


Everything highbrow is lowbrow again.

continued...

Contributors :

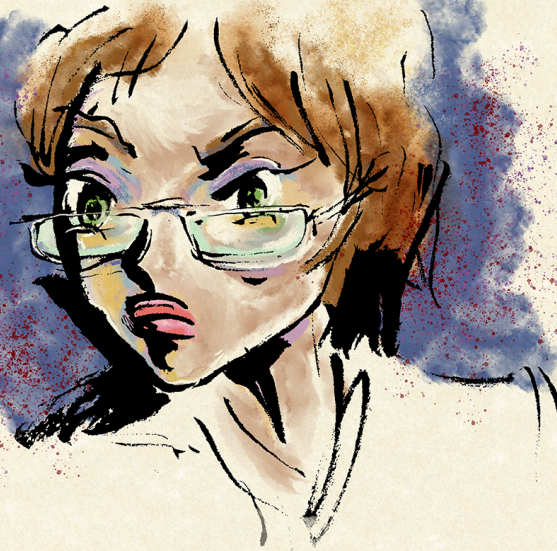
Page one:
Cyndi Rizzo,
former show runner for
Vivian Girls Anime,
is hard at work
designing rides
for the spinoff park,
Darger World.



Page one inset:
Illustrator Stevens Valmor
blogs at yourdailysketch.tumblr.com

Page two, top :
Cookie Motowan's
weekly strip,
Hump Day Dump Tay,
is seen every
Wednesday
by subscribers to
The Artlink Letter.
Instagram : @cmot15





Page two, bottom :

Medea Starkers is a package designer for *Condign Desserts, LLC*.
yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com

Page three :

The team of Motte & Bailey serialize the adventures
of the *Putti Patrol* in *The Christian Youth's Fundament*.
Instagram : @cmot15



T. Motley is the author of *The Road to Golgonooza*, a fake jam comic. tmotley.com © mot 2020

Wings.

by Callum Pearce

Jay glared at his reflection in the mirror. He was silently begging the image to stutter and change like an old television. He dreamed of the reflection splitting in two to reveal the normal boy he knew he was. The recent changes to his body deleted, as though they had never happened. He had been doing the same thing every morning for the last month, since his wings had started to grow. Slowly at first, getting faster by the day. He wanted desperately to scream at his reflection until it started to show the boy he was and not the creature he was becoming. Screaming, he knew, was not an option. The last thing he wanted to do was to draw the attention of the rest of his family, especially his older brother. If he saw those things growing between his shoulders, Jay would never live it down.

Jay did what he had done every day. He gently taped them down to his back and shoulders and carefully draped a shirt over them. They were delicate and sensitive, but he was fifteen; everything was delicate and sensitive. Lessons in school had warned him about the hairs and the growing pains. In fact, they had over-warned him; all of that stuff had been quite easy to get through. Friends had filled him in on some of the more interesting parts of puberty. Nobody had ever mentioned wings and as far as he knew, nobody had ever grown them. It might not have been so bad if they granted him the ability to fly, but they were thin and weak. They didn't lift him so much as an inch off the ground.

Jay had always been considered a little different from his peers. According to his teachers, he had displayed "challenging behavior" since he first started school. Teachers insisted he had been gifted with talent and creativity that the other kids would kill for. They felt that he just had no intention of fitting in and knuckling down. If he was doing something he enjoyed, he gave it a hundred percent and baffled the teachers. Especially those who had previously only heard

reports of his cheekiness and ability to disrupt lessons. If they tried to get him to do anything that he wasn't interested in, then he would spend the lesson trying to make the other kids laugh. Too often at the teachers' expense.

He could never have hoped to fit in at school. He had never mastered fitting in in his own home. His brother and sister, both older, were involved in every sports team and were tall, blonde, bags of muscle. He was more interested in dance, drama, or creative writing and was a skinny, red-haired wobbly looking child. Frankly, the last thing he needed was to get through puberty and then find out that he was even more different to everyone than even he had suspected.

He looked at his timetable for school today. Religious education, oh god, Geography, no way, physical education. On days like today, he would feel the draw of the local park. When faced with a day like that, there was nothing else to do but ditch school and go and sit with the trees and flowers. In school he would be bored and irritated; in the park, he would be quietly creating worlds and populating them with characters in his head. This, to his mind, was far preferable to the mind-melting boredom of the dull lessons. To be followed by the warm-faced, stomach emptying embarrassment of trying to play football with the others in PE.

He put on his school uniform and went downstairs. Thankfully, his parents had already left for work and he couldn't hear his brother or sister clomping around the house, so he went to the phone to call the school. He cleared his throat as he waited for the call to be answered. Then he delivered the well-practiced, absolutely immaculate impression of his mother. Jay had found he could do a perfect impression of everyone in his family, even being able to hold whole conversations as any of them with their close friends. He informed

the school secretary that poor Jay had come down with the dreaded flu and probably wouldn't be in for a couple of days. The secretary promised to pass the message on to the relevant people and Jay set off to the park.

On the way to the park, he checked every car that passed. That way, he could dive out of sight if he saw one of his teachers or anybody else who could spoil his plans for the day. In a small town like this, everybody knew everybody, so the sooner he was off the street the better.

As he got close to the park, his heart beating hard in his chest, he saw the big old library and a new plan started forming in his mind. He had never dared to use the family computer at home to look for answers to his recent problems. He could never even think of using one of the school ones. The town's ancient library was almost always practically empty during school times. One or two people would drift in throughout the day, but he could have hours of privacy using the computers there. He was suddenly determined to start finding out more about his current predicament. He could have carried on covering it up and putting it out of his mind as much as possible. Yet as he approached the library, it suddenly felt like the most urgent thing in the world. Accepting that he needed answers had made him crave them more, no matter what those answers were.

He pushed the large old double doors open and saw Mrs. Robinson at the main desk. She smiled sweetly as he came toward her to book some time on the computers.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" she peered at him over her glasses.

"No miss, we have a free period in the morning," Jay mumbled guiltily.

"And you're spending it in the library rather than hanging around town getting into trouble. You are a good boy, Jay."

He hated having to lie to Mrs. Robinson. She was a small, sweet, gentle lady who had worked at the library since his first visit. He had

been brought here with his class, in his first year in primary school. She had barely seemed to age since then. He had always appreciated the fact that, unlike most adults, she didn't talk down to young people or judge them. She took everyone as she found them. If you were kind and polite to her, she was kind and polite to you.

As soon as he could, he rushed to the other side of the library, where the computers were connected. He had a good look around this part of the building to make sure nobody was lurking by the shelves and then opened a search engine. He was finally ready to ask the questions that had been filling his mind and disrupting his sleep for the last month. Questions he hadn't dared ask until now.

Teenager growing wings. As he typed the words into the search bar, it felt ridiculous seeing it there on the screen. He felt foolish but also deep in his stomach the tingle of excitement. When he hit enter he could be faced with a world of information. What put him off pushing it was the thought that perhaps this had never happened to anyone before. The press of one button could show him that he was truly alone in the world, destined to never be fully understood by anyone. It could also open the world up to him and direct him toward his destiny. His finger hovered over the button until his arm started to ache, then he let it fall.

CLICK!

HELP! MY CHILD HAS WINGS.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

WHERE DID WE GO WRONG AS PARENTS?

All of the headlines looked awful. Problem pages with people begging to know what to do about the horrors of a child with wings. People dripping with self-hatred and fear because of what was happening to them. News articles about winged people being beaten to death by frightened, hate-filled bigots. He noticed in the images pictures of people holding placards with GOD HATES FAIRIES and FAIRIES DOOM SOCIETY. Just like that, he suddenly had a name.

Fairy. Even whilst looking at these images and negative stories, some of the darkness was melted away by the light of this new information. It didn't seem like something people celebrated or even tolerated, but it was a name for people like him. He had never heard of such a thing. The only winged people he had heard of were angels and demons in his Bible and religious lessons. He had always known he was not an angel, so that had left only one other option, until now. He typed the word into the search bar and hovered over enter again, still letting the title settle in his mind.

Click.

He saw in the search results a lot of the same negative, depressing headlines. Some pages looked like straightforward, unemotional information and even support groups. He clicked on the more informative-looking pages and started to learn the history of the Fairies. What he read broke his heart but filled him with a determination to confront who he was. Not quite pride yet, but a craving to find pride in who and what he was. A feeling that he needed to find it in himself and share it with others who couldn't find theirs. He read about cruel and vicious persecution. He read that fairies didn't reproduce among each other; instead, they were born into "normal families." At first, it was treated as a birth defect and people like this were generally pitied or tolerated. Often treated like a cuckoo in the nest but not hated especially. Then religion had gotten involved. He slowly realized he had seen people like this in the cities when he was younger. Flamboyantly dressed people wearing what he had thought at the time were costume wings. Whenever he had seen these people he had been quickly steered away by whichever adult was with him. Eventually, he had just subconsciously learned to steer himself away from them. Nobody ever talked about them, there was just an unvoiced understanding that decent people didn't discuss such things.

Religion had spread its distrust of anything they perceived as different throughout the world. First, they had rounded Fairies up in great numbers and killed them in front of baying crowds. When the crowds grew weary of the disgusting spectacle and started to pull away from the people perpetuating it, they were forced to become

more subtle. Constantly reminding their congregations that Fairies were not like people. They invaded your family, they poisoned society by their mere existence. They were immoral and full of lust and depravity. Reading this he had a vague recollection of them in early religious lessons, but the school must have decided that it was better just not to mention fairies at all. Better just to pretend they didn't exist. In England, all schools had to dedicate some time to religion, but outside of school, he had no involvement with it at all. For that reason he had never heard the kind of things they said about his kind. His kind ... he found it strange thinking of these creatures, people that he had only just started learning about, as his kind. The more he read, though, the more he felt a part of something bigger.

He didn't just read about the abuses they had suffered and the intolerance of the very humans that had given birth to them. He read about a society that shared so much with him. Young men and women made to feel out of place in school and often in their own families. Forced to hide who they were around others. Innocents who, against the anger and hatred of society, still managed to be fun-loving and caring. He didn't see people that deserved the disgust and distrust that was often aimed at them. He saw beautiful, exciting creatures that loved nature, that embraced and celebrated their sexuality. Jay knew instantly that that must be the problem for the church leaders. They always spent an unhealthy amount of time worrying about what people were doing in bed. The priests also suspected that fairies had magical powers, but because fairies had been forced into hiding they were very secretive with outsiders. So only other fairies would know.

The hate preachers imagined them turning up like Nosferatu in their bedrooms. Leading them astray into a life of sin and debauchery. A lot of bigots have very vivid imaginations and a blind fear that everybody, everywhere is just waiting to corrupt them. They proclaim faith and the protection of a higher power. Yet their behavior suggested a knowledge that they could be easily derailed, that their faith was paper-thin. Jay had never noticed anything magical about himself. He suspected this was just another way to make people scared of his kind.

"Everything going okay there, Jay?"

He quickly minimized the browser window and spun around in his chair to face Mrs. Robinson.

"I ... I ... was just doing some research for a school project."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me young Jay, I was just checking if you needed anything."

"No thanks, miss."

As she shuffled away to carry on her tasks, he noticed his hands were shaking and his stomach was rolling. He wondered how long she had been there and how much she had seen, but he needed to read more. After looking around to make sure he was alone again, he opened the browser window and continued to read. He read about the secret clubs and societies they had built over the years. Safe places where fairies could truly be themselves, and he wished he could be there now. He read about people in the big cities who dared to wear their wings on the outside of their clothes and insisted that people accept them. Fairies like those he had been steered away from as a child. Some were met with distrust, disgust, and eventually violence. Others had managed to carve out a reasonably normal life. They would have to settle for being tolerated or avoided rather than ever fully accepted. More and more, they were making themselves known in the world. These people filled him with pride. He almost felt as though he was marching down the streets, wings to the wind, daring people to comment.

This seemed so far away from where he was now, but he knew that he needed to get there. Not just to live his own life fully, but to help other young people going through what he was going through now. To be somebody other young people could turn to when the world turned away from them. That was the future, though; right now he needed that for himself. Where was his guide into this terrifying new world?

As he finished up in the library for the day, he felt exhausted. He felt

as though he had lived through the history of the fairies, rather than read about it on the flickering screen. Violent images filled his mind, innocent people facing so much brutality throughout their whole history. Only to end up hiding from the world in dark clubs or congregating in the forests at night. All of them led to these places by the same urge. The urge to find others like themselves, to celebrate their similarities and appreciate their differences. To belong to something, when the world told them they belonged nowhere. As he was about to leave the library he saw Mrs. Robinson was putting her cardigan over the back of her chair behind the main counter. He was sure he could see something twitching between her shoulder blades under her blouse. She turned to him and wished him a good day with a big smile. Just as he was about to turn away she winked at him before carrying on with her work.

The cold air hit him as he left the library. He looked around to make sure there was nobody around and rushed to the park. Being around the trees and plants in the park always made him feel relaxed and comfortable. This, he had read, was typical for fairies. It felt strange that he was already accepting that name for himself. Everything he had read about how they suffered and how hated they were had not put him off the label. In fact, he felt more determined to find out more about his people. He wondered if he had seen what he thought he saw with Mrs. Robinson in the library. It occurred to him that he had always felt that she was a bit different from other people. It was like she had a different smell or a different aura. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on, a difference that he had always just been able to sense. He realized too that he had met a few people like this in his life, people who just had a different feel to those around them, and he wondered if he had been around fairies before, without ever knowing. He couldn't just march back into the library and ask her. What if she was deeply offended by the suggestion? After what he had read it seemed like a very offensive thing to call somebody if they weren't winged themselves.

Maybe he could look for someone else that gave him the same feeling and follow them. Maybe he would meet the ones that wore their wings outside proudly and they could tell him places to go. He had already suggested to the school that he wouldn't be in tomorrow

either. He sat in the park and started to plan a trip to the nearest city. The idea terrified him but filled him with excitement. If he could just find one of his kind, he could finally start to get some proper answers about who he was.

That night he had barely been able to eat dinner and spent most of the evening in his bedroom. He was excited about tomorrow but also terrified. Most of what he had read about Fairies described them as evil or damaged. He knew deep down that he wasn't evil, but still, when so many people hated them he couldn't help but wonder if there was something to hate about them. Maybe he just hadn't fully developed yet. Perhaps he would become an evil burden on society later or even a tolerated clown. Forever playing up to his nature for the amusement of others, the normal folk. Even some of the supposed supportive pages talked more of tolerance and pity than acceptance or love. He had no intention of being tolerated by anyone. How dare they? What exactly made them so perfect that they could look down on everybody else? He imagined marching out of the house the next day and hopping on the bus into the city with his wings flapping behind him. Daring anybody to say anything. Of course, he knew he wasn't ready for that yet, but the idea excited him more than it scared him. He knew that he wouldn't sleep well tonight, but he climbed into bed anyway and lay tossing and turning until morning.

As he dressed and packed his school bag the next day, he found himself staring at his travel pass for quite a long time. This little piece of plastic, which would usually do nothing more than deliver him to school in the mornings, was now going to take him to the city. It felt like the most precious artifact in the whole world. Shining more than usual, heavier than usual, this was the key to his future, to understanding who he was. There was no certainty that he would even be able to find one of his kind, but he was filled with a determination that he had never felt before.

He left home and walked to the train station with his emotions spinning through every part of the spectrum. One minute his stomach was turning with excitement and giddy anticipation. The next it was churning the other way with dread and fear. When he was finally sat

on the train, he began to feel slightly calmer. In his seat, he felt more resigned to the fact that one way or the other, he was doing this. A friendly-looking old woman ambled towards him. She was smiling and mumbling to herself. When she saw Jay and the empty seat beside him, she started to walk determinedly toward him. On her way, her bags bumped against people's legs, and she trampled luggage that had strayed into the aisle. At no point did she take her eyes off Jay. When she reached him, she half-lowered, half-fell into the seat next to him.

"Off to the city are we? How exciting," she smiled a gummy smile at Jay and fished around in her pockets.

"Cola cube?"

She thrust a small crinkled bag towards his face so he could smell the cola cubes that were stuck together at the bottom. His first intention was to decline. Although it was cola cubes and the smell was already tickling his nose.

"Thanks, they're my ..."

"Favourite, I know."

"How do you know that?" Jay was scanning his brain to see if he remembered this woman who was now perched next to him on the train.

"Well, I should think that's quite obvious. A boy like you should have seen me coming a mile away."

Jay stared at her. There was something odd about her that he couldn't quite put his finger on. There was a sort of familiar feeling, even though he was sure he had never met her before. The old woman grabbed his face and turned it so that she could look deep into his eyes. She stared for an uncomfortably long time and then started rummaging in her handbag mumbling away to herself. Eventually, after searching through a hundred useless objects that she was, no doubt, certain would come in handy someday, she pulled out a small

business card and thrust it in his direction.

"You might want to look for these people. I think they may be able to help you with your questions."

Jay took the card and turned it around in his hand. On one side was a large logo. A pair of wings filled with rainbow stripes. On the other side the number and address of the FYC. Underneath the title, it read: Fairy Youth Centre. Jay instinctively covered the card as soon as he read those words. His head swung from left to right as he checked to see if anybody else on the train had noticed. Everybody seemed to be in their own little world; nobody was paying attention to him and the old lady.

"But how do you know ..."

"You may be able to hide your wings from these people. Them that don't want to know. No amount of cellotape can hide them from an old witch like me."

"A witch?" Jay had read about witches in old stories but had never believed they existed in the real world.

"You're still a baby, just starting out on your life. When you learn to accept who you are there will be other changes. Your eyes will develop so that you see other magical beings easily. It's all about acceptance see; it's why these lot," she gestured towards the other passengers on the train."they will never see anything they don't expect to, otherwise they would have to accept it. Watch."

The old witch clicked her fingers and pointed at a man a few rows in front of them. A small green and blue dragon appeared in a puff of smoke on top of the man's head. Looking quite annoyed to be there the dragon stomped around a bit. It grumpily coughed a small fireball into the man's hair, then farted another one past the passenger next to him. Relieved to have emptied itself, it flew up to the top of the train and exploded into millions of glittering particles. Nobody gasped, nobody looked up from their phones or newspapers. The man who had just been host to the dragon simply scratched his head

and then stood up to slide the train window shut. The witch was giggling away to herself. Remembering the dragon's annoyed-looking face, Jay chuckled too, a little.

"See," the witch went on. "Most of them won't see anything they can't accept; it's why people try to drive us all into the shadows. The very act of seeing something is already a sort of acceptance. They find it easier to close their minds to anything magical, anything that they don't understand. But times are changing, boy. People like you will be leading that change."

Jay felt that feeling of dread again. He knew, from what he had read on the internet, what people thought of people like him. Now he was facing a life of having to fight just for the basics that everybody else took for granted. Equality and acceptance would be something he and others like him would have to get in people's faces to demand. They would have to be loud and visible in a world that wanted them to stay silent in the shadows. Just existing openly would instill fear and shame in the people around him. He may even have to do all of that without the support of the people he loved. Part of him knew that his family would probably not be accepting and open to his revelations. Yet here he was, on the train, getting ready to kick those doors open and explore the world anyway.

"Quite daunting isn't it? Staring at the long path that lays before you," the witch wrapped her soft wrinkled hand around his. "Especially when so much of the path is covered in a thick fog. That will clear eventually. The more you understand of yourself, the more you learn to see what's really around you, the clearer the path will become. You just have to keep pushing forward until it all becomes clear."

"I don't know if I'm ready," Jay mumbled.

"You're ready boy, you're braver than you think. You wouldn't have gone to the library yesterday unless you were. You certainly wouldn't be sitting on this train listening to an old witch mumbling away. You're on your way to an unknown world, alone and scared. That bravery will serve you well in life. Especially life as a fairy." She

patted his hand.

"I can promise you, though, when you look back on your life at my age. If you treated people well and cultivated true friendships. No matter what pain and hardship you go through, you will remember the laughter far more than the tears. Pain fades away with patience. The memory and feeling of an uncontrollable laughing fit will stay with you until you close your eyes for the very last time. Trust me as someone approaching that final breath, rapidly."

"Don't say that."

"Just another adventure, another chance to kick open a new door and enter the unknown. You have so many of those opportunities before you. Just remember to enjoy every single one. If you're not enjoying it though, you'll be learning from it. Either way, you will be treading your path and enhancing the view."

"Why do they hate us so much?"

"Hard to say boy, people are complicated. Some people fear anything different from them. Some are just filled with hate and anger. Those people will direct that pain at anyone they feel they can bully just to get it out of themselves. With those, at least when we're getting it, we know that somebody else is being let off the hook. Then some people have just been taught from birth to distrust anyone who doesn't follow the same rules as they do. Others envy the fact that you don't have to." The train was slowing down, and Jay could see the sign coming towards him.

"I'm sorry, I need to go, this is my stop. Thank you for talking to me." The train pulled in to the station.

"Be safe boy, make sure you visit the youth center. You will find there are many places for us magical folk when you know where to look, but some places you aren't ready for yet. Everybody's path starts with one step, and that group is as good a first step as any."

"Thank you, Mrs erm ...?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Erm, that will do." The witch giggled like a child.

"Goodbye, Mrs erm."

"Goodbye, fairy boy."

Jay rushed off the train. He was gripping the card for the youth center tightly in his hand. He was terrified that it would get knocked to the ground and lost in the crowd that bustled him about at the station. He turned and waved to the old witch just before a fresh crowd hit him like a wave and carried him toward the station exit. The flood of people took him outside to the entrance and then dispersed, leaving him alone.

Head spinning and stomach-turning again, he dared to take a look at the card in his hand. Although he had only ever been to the city with adults before, he was sure he recognized the street name. He was pretty certain that it wasn't very far from the station. So he started in the direction he felt was right. Getting closer to where he thought the place was, he noticed the rainbow wings logo above several bars and restaurants, even a couple of shops. They must have always been there around the city but he had never noticed them before. Now he seemed to be seeing them everywhere. As he turned into the road he was looking for he saw a building with big rainbow letters on the side, FYC. Below that a large picture of the rainbow wings that were now becoming so familiar.

The entrance door was heavy and slow to open. The hallways were empty and quiet. At every step, Jay wanted to turn and run in the opposite direction. He could hear meetings going on in the rooms;, nobody was around in the entrance area. He saw a sign for the reception and followed slowly, each step feeling like he was walking through custard. His stomach felt heavier and his feet dragged slowly down the hall.

"Hello, darling. Are you all right there?" Jay turned to see a beautiful, tall fairy coming out of one of the doors he had just passed.

"Is this your first time here?" The fairy had made no effort to hide his

wings; the roots of his hair were dark green, the rest black. His eyes were purple and sparkling. He looked stunning to Jay.

"I ... I ... got this card," Jay stammered, handing over the card he had been gripping so tightly since the train.

"Don't worry, you're safe here, I promise nobody bites." He took the card from Jay and held it up to look at a small stamp in the corner.

"Oh, this is one of old Mary's cards." He looked upwards. "One more lost boy on the way to your next adventure hey, old girl."

"Mary, so that was her name. She didn't tell me."

"Yeah, she was always a modest one, old Mary. She started this place and many places like it. After her son was killed, she decided to make sure that every city had a safe place for young magical folk to go. We're up and down the country now with the youth center. Since she started those, bars have started opening too. They're for older fairies than yourself, of course."

"Was her son killed because he was a fairy?" Jay asked.

"Yes, it seems so. But that was a long time ago. Things are different these days. Largely thanks to her and others like her. Besides, she will be with him again soon, probably within the hour."

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

"I'm sorry, that probably seems quite heartless. Witches tend to know when they will go. We've all had a lot of time to get used to it. She was going home to start the next adventure in her bed. She was really quite happy about it all if that helps."

"She was very kind," Jay mumbled weakly.

"Come and sit down, tell me what brought you here."

Jay sat with the fairy and emptied his heart. He told him everything

about the changes in his body and the feelings they brought with them. He talked about his family and friends. He told of his recent discoveries at the library and how they were opening up a world that he didn't even know if he was ready for. The fairy smiled and listened, encouraging him when he needed it. This wasn't often; this was the first time Jay had ever been able to truly discuss with anyone what had been going on with him. The beautiful creature in front of him seemed incapable of judgment. Jay understood that this fairy had probably walked a similar path when he was first realizing who he was. So everything just poured out until he was weak from talking and empty of emotion.

In return, the fairy told him more about the history of the youth group and fairy social spaces. He explained what other changes Jay could expect to see in his body. Eventually, the wings would become stronger. His eyes would change color and they would show him the world differently. These things would happen as he came to a place of acceptance about who he was. The very act of accepting these things about himself made them harder to hide from other people.

"So would you like to meet some others of your age? You don't have to if you don't feel ready, but I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

"Are there some here?" Jay looked around the building.

"Not quite here. All of our buildings have access to the forest, it's a safe space Mary made for us. A place where all the magical folk can be themselves without fear. I can take you to the part where the young ones hang out. If it's too much for you, you are always welcome to visit another time."

"No. I think I want to go there. I think I need to." The words left his mouth before he had even dared think about what they meant.

"I'll see if I can introduce you to a few people when we get there. After that, I'll let you find your feet on your own. I won't be far away if you need me. I'm Julian by the way. Shout my name and I'll be there."

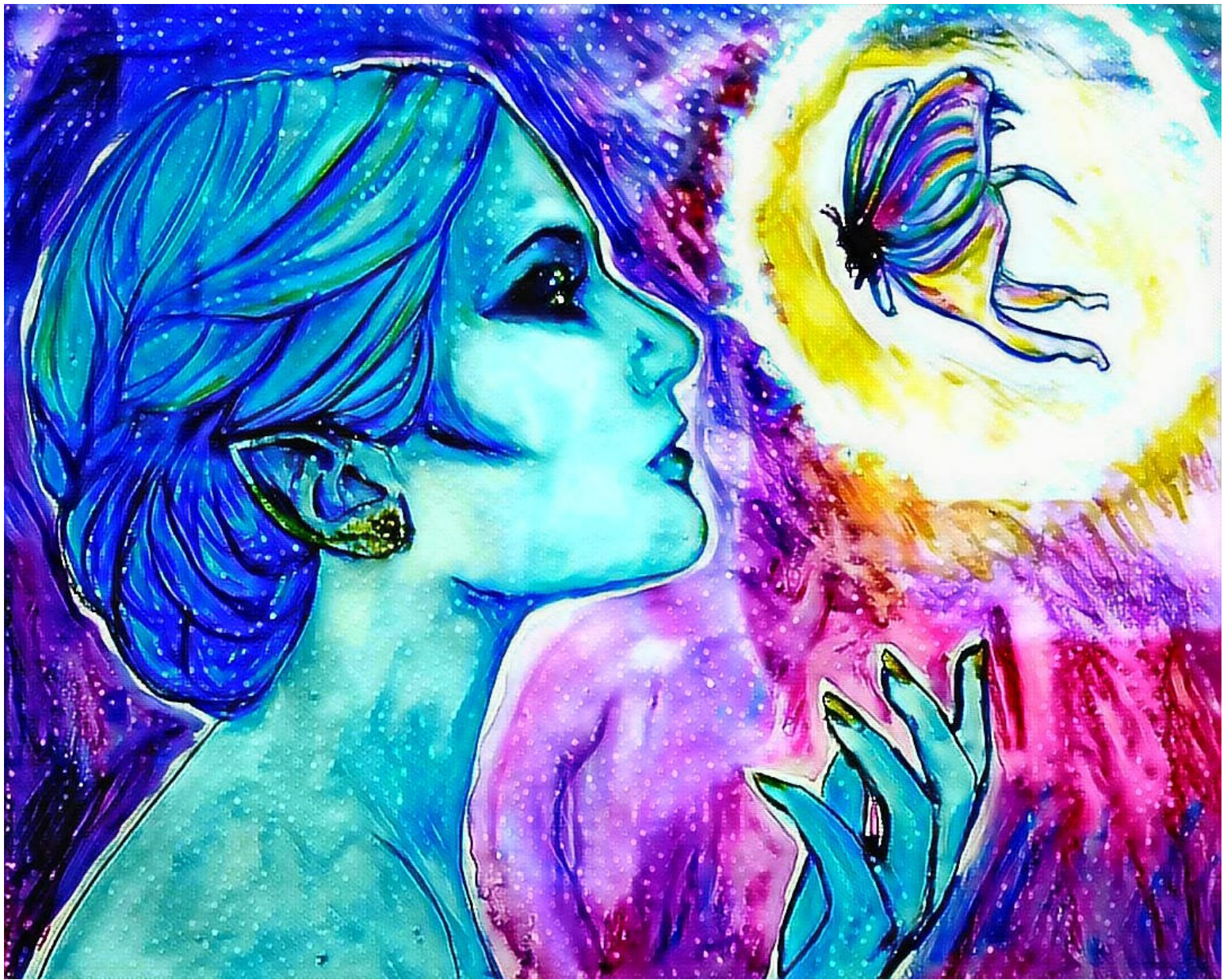
Julian led him down a corridor to what looked like any other office in this nondescript building. He opened the door and then started looking through his pockets. After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity to Jay, he pulled out a large key and held it out in the open doorway. Julian turned the key once left, then right and the office beyond the door seemed to melt and disappear.

Where the office once was, he now saw trees and flowers in a forest clearing. Tables were set up around the sides with colorful food and drinks filling every inch of space. Music was playing, but it seemed to be coming from the forest itself. It seemed to be everywhere, yet he could still hear people chatting. Fairies moved about; some flew above the crowd on wings that must have been much stronger than his. From what he had seen on the internet, he had expected that the male fairies would all be more flamboyant and effeminate whilst the females would be more masculine. Standing here, staring into the clearing, he could see that wasn't the case at all. Not far from where he stood two males were kissing. One was naked from the waist up with painted skin and make-up, the other was wearing a smart suit with holes ripped at the back for his wings. He saw in both the males and females the full range of dress senses and personality types, different ages and backgrounds. Everyone so different yet all sharing something about themselves that many couldn't share anywhere but here, among their kind. A young woman with blue skin pushed past from the offices into the clearing. Noticing his surprise, Julian explained that she was a pixie, then proceeded to point out all of the other creatures around the clearing. Pixies over here, witches there, gnomes fighting over one of the gaming tables, a warlock serving

colorful drinks. Creatures he had never even dreamed of, all celebrating together. Every so often, one would raise a glass or blow a kiss to a large photo hanging between two trees. It was a massive picture of Mary, the witch from the train.

As he looked around the clearing he saw some fairies sloughing off their real-world drag. They were like stunning butterflies emerging from gray cocoons. Contact lenses were carefully removed, then the clothes made to cover their wings slid to the floor and they flew freely among the trees. Others adjusted their usual uniforms just enough to get some air on their wings. They were all so beautiful and happy, nothing like the things he had read about on certain parts of the internet. Jay found that he was already starting to unfasten the buttons on his shirt.

This was it, it was now or never. He didn't know how his family would react, nor his friends and neighbors. He didn't know what difficulties he would face if he chose to fully embrace this world. He only knew that right now, he was among his people. Coming out to everybody in the world was secondary and would come when the time felt right. When he stepped through that portal he was coming out to himself, and that was more important than anything else. His acceptance of himself had to be so great that people would just get caught up in it and pulled along for the adventure. He had to love himself enough to fill the gaps that others would leave. Part of Jay still felt the urge to turn and run, but instead, he took a deep breath, stepped forward and left the safety of his old world behind him.



Random Elven Magic by Novyl the Mysterious

A Paradigm of Magic

by Christina Sng

The magic died far too quickly.

Extinguished, like her spirit
That harbored a momentary hope
She would finally be free
From her prison.

Each day, she tried and tried,
Each time failing, magic spluttering
Until she changed the way
She channeled magic,

No longer summoning power
From the air and the ground,
But instead, taking
Her tears and her rage

Into her hands
And slamming them
Onto the lock
That held her captive.

It dissipated like dust,
Like her anger,
Now displaced
With a plan of escape

And dark, satisfying revenge.

EMP

by Grace Wagner

The night has gone dark—sunset
now marks the end
of days no longer punctuated
by the flare of streetlamps—the eternal whine
of computer screens, the traffic
signal's steady strobe—this darkness is new
to us, children of light that we were—now
we sit in silence around fires
that do nothing to brighten the city—only keep us
warm in a ring of light pressing back
the darkness. But outside
that ring, there is something living. It lurks
in hollowed-out tunnels and under bridges—slinking
between buildings, perhaps even
under your bed, that everlasting nightmare
of children—we have no predators
here, only the shadows
of our thoughts and the promised emptiness
of the dark—but these empty

promises do nothing to assuage the fear
of possibility, the fear of wolf
and bear and mountain lion—what was it
if not light that stopped them
from climbing down the mountain
into our city's streets? But perhaps it isn't them
that we fear—perhaps it is the drumbeat dark
itself, pulsing with potential harm, covering
us like a cloud of smoke, choking
the fires we light, the candles we've scavenged.
Perhaps it is the very material of darkness
that scares us, so unknown
is it to people who've populated the night
with their bars and nightclubs—now night bars us
from leaving the safety of the fire,
the little ring of light that keeps
the darkness out and keeps us in.

Double Vision

by Carl Scharwath
(model: Sana Mohammed)



Fall

by Jay Bechtol

For the third time in three nights he found himself on the roof of his apartment, his courage having grown with every visit. He had decided to see what standing on the precipice might feel like, what it might do. Each night previous, he had simply walked around the perimeter of the building, glancing over the edge. At one point he had placed his palms flat on the cement tiles of the parapet and leaned over, just to get a sense.

The idea was wildly out of character, to stand on a ledge eleven stories above the ground. It wasn't the responsible, pay the bills on time, eat healthy food existence he had carved out for himself. The idea was dangerous and it had excited him like nothing in his recent memory.

Perhaps it was the call from his ex-wife, telling him of her plans to remarry, that had led to this decision. *I'm so happy to hear*, he told her. *It's really great news for you*. She had snorted at that, *Six years, same old John. Have you even been out with anyone, John? Anyone?* Not that he was jealous; his happiness for her was completely legitimate. Nor was he lonely. It was simply the fact that his life had fallen into a routine mediocrity, and her call woke him to that news.

Perhaps it was something else. A need for satisfaction. An itch hidden away for years that suddenly needed to be scratched.

Perhaps he only wanted to remove his shoes and enjoy the rough grit of the rooftop tarpaper through the fine cotton blend of his socks.

He pulled his wallet from his rear pocket, the place he still carried it every day as trained by his father. Without really thinking about it, he

flipped it open; his face smiled up at him awkwardly from its two dimensional prison behind a clear sheet of worn plastic.

John Smith. His lips thinned with a tinge of remorseful humor. John Smith? How many times had he wondered what his parents were thinking? A thousand? Ten thousand? They hadn't tried to come up with anything better. Maybe condemning him from the very beginning to a pathway that ended standing on a rooftop ledge.

He slid the wallet into his front pocket, where it was less likely to fall out should there be an accident.

Little effort was required to lift his left foot onto the flat cement tiles that crowned the edge of the building's roof. Convincing his second foot to do the same had been much more difficult. There was no handrail or landing. Tiles extended to the left and the right, nothing in front of him other than a hundred foot drop down to Market Street. He rested his hands on his flexed knee. One little wobble was no big deal on a staircase with a bannister. It was a different experience this far up. He could feel the blood moving through his body. It tingled.

He pressed his back teeth together and forced air through his nose.

Gonna go on three.

Eyes closed.

One.

He bounced softly, the ball of his right foot still safely on the tarpaper. Air filled his lungs

Two.

He leaned forward, trying to generate momentum, and pushed air out through his nose again. His weight moved to his toes and

Three.

He opened his eyes and pushed. His foot came up off the tarpaper, his tether to the roof and sanity.

His left leg trembled with the responsibility of it all. Lifting, holding, balancing. Trying to ensure that his body did not simply launch forward, straight off the roof and onto Market Street far below.

For a moment John Smith felt the world slip away. Weightlessness surrounded him and he thought he had missed something. His target, the ledge of cement tiles. His purpose.

And then he uncurled his toes and looked down. The full distance to Market and the dozens of parked cars lining either side of the street. All of them various shades of grey until they came near either corner where a street lamp granted them color. For the first time in his life, he felt something other than routine.

His jaw ached and he willed himself to breathe, concentrating on moving air in and out of his lungs in a controlled manner, not the short random gasps his body was demanding. He could see his feet more than feel them, and noticed their alignment. He dragged his left foot back, only an inch, sliding the gold stitching across the toes into a single line. John raised his head upward slowly, wary of sudden motions, and surveyed.

The warehouse on the other side of Market was dark. Empty for the last five or six years. John found the city below him and above him. Even at this late hour, there was life everywhere. The lights and shadows of the skyscrapers seven blocks over rose like a monochromatic variation of the Emerald City. Four blocks in the other direction the structures shortened, making the towers of the Old Center Bridge crossing the Dowson River seem like castles bursting

forth from the rolling water underneath. In all directions he could feel the city humming, but this block of Market Street was dark and quiet and the midnight noises of the city filtered to him, as if through a layer of unseen protection. His own bubble. Smells filled his nostrils as well. Layers of asphalt and cement underneath the drippings of automobiles mixing with the olfactory echoes of all things human.

John sucked it all in. His life had never been filled with spectacle nor remorse. It had been a life of absolute mediocrity. Standing on the edge of the building was something so new, so different, he could imagine himself as something much greater.

He stood for ten minutes, twenty. Then thirty. Intermittently opening and closing his eyes. He imagined his knees wobbling every time he closed his eyes. The wobble that would send him plunging into darkness below. He was amazed at how wondrous it felt to be this close to death.

A tic developed in his left calf, a twitch that reminded him his muscles had grown cold and tired and that it was time to go in for the night. He wondered if he could do it again tomorrow night, if it would feel the same way. Or would he need to find something taller? Like a ledge hugging addict, living for the next score. The thought made him happy.

He wiggled his toes, preparing to step backwards from the precipice, unsure if his muscles or his balance were up to such a task.

Instead, he shuffled his feet, scootching one hundred and eighty degrees inch by inch until he faced the doorway that led to the stairwell. The cloth of his socks scuffing and fighting with the rough cement tiles. His muscles surprisingly sore from the effort of standing on a ledge for so long. Being on the other side of forty probably wasn't much help either.

As the gold lines across his toes came together again, and with his back now facing Market Street, John Smith relaxed and prepared to step down. The thin light that outlined the rooftop exit was only fifty

yards ahead of him. He wondered if he'd missed the opening monologue from Seth Myers.

He flexed his knees, then stopped, staring at the dim outline of the opposite side of the rooftop.

The thing came up over the other side of his apartment building. It was not recognizable other than as a shadow. And perhaps it wasn't even a shadow, it was simply a deeper darkness than the other shades of night that danced across the rooftop.

It moved with the fluidity of a flock of starlings. Starlings that he had watched one summer when he was eight or nine at his grandparents' farm. His mother and he sitting on the front porch, mesmerized as they had watched the shimmer of birds for an eternity. The flock's shape changed and morphed into seemingly endless patterns. Now, that same shape moved toward him. But, unlike the random artistic beauty of the black birds, the thing that moved toward him now moved with purpose.

Fear almost pushed John Smith backwards. Almost. He stopped himself from pinwheeling downward to Market Street when he saw the two golden seams across his toes shift ever so slightly. It reminded him of exactly where he stood.

The shape came closer, moving with combined indifference and intensity. It became an oval and then a crescent. John watched it, the distance shortening, as he realized he had no direction to run. Unsure that it would matter anyway. It lengthened across the rooftop and elongated into the moonless sky, obscuring the skyscrapers a few blocks away. It formed a sphere and John thought he could make out a pattern as it glided toward him.

It may have been no larger than a basketball, or it may have been the size of the world. John could not understand the thing. If it existed, if it danced. If it could push him. He could only watch the ever changing wave ebb closer and closer.

Then the shape rose up, condensing and darkening into a formidable

mass, its hypnotic beauty morphing into that of a predator. John felt the late night air shove past him, unwillingly pushed forward by the presence.

He brought his palms forward and spread his fingers, as if somehow he could stop the inevitable and push back against the shadow now only inches away. His fingertips trembled, his skin grey in contrast to the darkness. Then it touched him.

It moved through him. With such speed that the scream surging in his lungs never made it past his throat. The shape infused his body with pain. Every bone and organ frozen in place with a searing light in contrast to the darkness of the shape. John's thoughts of starlings, his mother, his father, the exhilaration of standing eleven stories up all consumed in an instantaneous conflagration of anguish.

Then the pain was gone and he was falling. Not downward, but away. He could still see his body standing on the lip, facing the rooftop, his elbows at his sides and his hands forward in meek defiance. A statue of impotence.

John Smith had no conscious awareness of what had occurred. He knew that he was no longer part of the body standing on the ledge. A body and a building that grew smaller as he flew across the city. If flying was, in fact, how he was moving. The motion felt like being pulled and pushed at the same time.

He looked for his hands, his legs, the yellow stitching on his socks across his toes. There was nothing. Phantom memories of appendages that had once kept him tied to earth, to gravity, to rules. Now he moved with the efficiency of a whim. With instincts he had never before possessed.

John Smith felt something else as well. His new manifestation held memories of the past and the future. Within that knowledge was a strength and a power that the body he left behind would never have imagined possible. Not for one being. If he was in fact a being.

John became a languid eddy around the observation deck of a

skyscraper and then dove to the level of the street in the length of a single teardrop. He, or the shape, or the him/shape, he could no longer differentiate, moved through a young woman walking alone, much differently than the shape had pushed through him moments... hours...days...years...before. She didn't feel any pain, she experienced nothing more than a shiver. In the blink of time John spent with her, he saw her past and future. He felt her memories, her heartbeats and was surprised to find the memories and minutes of her life were now his. He/the shape could see the automobile accident that would steal her away from earth two years earlier than the sixty-five years she was ordained with at birth. Her life now destined to end at sixty-three. She would never know, would never miss those years. How could she?

The part of John that still clung to the idea of being a human felt a momentary sickness; nausea filled him. Complicit in the act of stealing another's life, dizzy with the idea that he could do nothing about it. More disturbing and infectious was something else, something that made it okay. Under the doubt and nausea he felt his strength and power grow. Which made robbing this young woman of two years at the end okay. Acceptable.

He swirled skyward, the ease with which he stole from an innocent not an issue, not a debatable moral question, just a fact. His new existence pushed through a window of a penthouse apartment and floated down the hallway. An orb, a cloud, a fog. A blade of grass. He entered the room at the end of the hallway, circling the ceiling twice. His movement agitated small figures of happy ducks and smiling frogs dangling from threads above a miniature jail cell. The thing sleeping under the figures didn't stir.

John could sense the potential inside the tiny creature. This time there was no sickness or nausea, there was only a hunger that he thought might never be filled. He pushed past the dangling animals, through the fuzzy cotton outerwear, and through the infant.

His strength grew again. For the child there would be no difference between eighty and seventy-five.

In an instant he was through the floor, passing through layer after layer of sleeping humanity. Some squirmed as he stole, others winced in their human sleep. Others still sensed the presence of the dark shadowy shape and kept their eyes squeezed shut in the belief that their nightmares were not coming true. Those people felt something slice through them and would wake in the morning unable to tell the person in the bed next to them why they trembled, only that the nightmare had felt so real, as if an ancient monster had stolen years from their life.

John Smith, or the shadow which now held the memories of John Smith, reached the bottom of the building, in a cement crypt where the living things apparently buried their cars. He billowed in the corner wondering if he imagined those starlings from all those years ago. He moved in a Mobius, circling back on himself over and over between rows of sedentary automobiles. He reached backwards through his own memories and felt the history of the thing he had now become. A predator stealing the lives of innocents. He did not feel any remorse, or any sense that he had done wrong. A reality that would have been unimaginable during that time many years before when he still inhabited a human shape. Years? He had memories of many things now, but not of his time as a shadow. He watched himself spin in the Mobius and knew that this was how he had always been. Curling back on himself over and over again. Never going forward, never going backward. Always going forward, always going backward.

That eternity, he could now understand, was so much more important than anything else. Humans were finite. They were all scheduled to end. Stealing parts of them only ensured his foreverness.

He did not question why the shadow had chosen to absorb him. Or why he had chosen to be absorbed.

His ever spinning Mobius eased through the shadows, blending with the darkness everywhere.

Had the sun already risen and set and risen?

He swirled.

For a time. Possibly years.

Until his dark shape followed the stained bricks of a familiarly unknown place. His motion was much less purposeful now, almost a leaf in the wind, being blown somewhere predestined. He crested the top of the building; a human body stood on the precipice. Instinctively he glided toward the human, its figure blissfully unaware of his approach. He shrouded it, determined to get one last draw of strength, suck a little more life out of the thing and then be off, moving with the earth, never letting the morning catch up. If it hadn't already.

John Smith lost his strength. The human body that had been forgotten so quickly, now reinfused with his being. The shadow pulled away and John was seeing through his own eyes again. The shadow, or whatever it might be, drifted away, its shape changing in seeming random patterns of miniature starling flights. The weightlessness of his existence became the weight of his old body now burdened with the weight of the people he had defiled. The years that he had stolen for himself, that had made him feel so strong, drifting away with the dark thing.

He could not fathom how long he had been gone from his body, how long he had wandered the city stealing from innocent people. Except he could. It had felt eternal but had been nothing more than minutes, and the heaviness of his actions in those minutes filled him and defined him now. In a way he had never imagined possible. Selfish, self-interested, uncaring, indifferent.

He stared down at his feet, surprised to find himself still in his socks, standing on the edge of his apartment. His vision blurred with tears, and the yellow stitches across his toes became nothing more than a judgmental reminder of what he had done. With almost no thought or effort. He slid his left foot backward and brought his head up, searching for the shape. The thing. He thought he could see it, just on the other side of the roof, floating like that giant bean he'd seen one summer on vacation in Chicago.

His left foot lost touch with the cement, sliding into the nothing. His shoulders leaned back, intent on following. And then he was falling. Down. Away from the building. Tears that had filled his eyes now streaming upward, toward the edge where he had stood. His arms didn't flail.

John Smith stared into the sky as he passed the seventh floor. Hoping his wallet was still in his front pocket.

Past the sixth floor he ached for what he had done. Certain that the only clear path was the direction he now headed. Certain that he could not live with the knowledge of his actions. Or inactions. Whichever was more apt. The image of the sleeping infant's face filled his head.

Past the fifth floor. A shape appeared where he had stood breathing in the exhilaration of breaking from his routine. It was a dark shape, maybe a shadow. He couldn't be certain between the tears, the night sky, and his own despair. It might have simply been a patch of darkness no different than any of the others. He could sense that maybe it wasn't just the routine he longed to escape.

At the third floor he could see it clearly. It was the shape that attacked him, the shape that he had become, the shape that had aborted him. He had time to think that it almost seemed interested as it watched him hurtle downward. It was then that he recognized the truth, only far too late to do anything about it. John Smith hadn't stolen anything. He had simply been along for the ride. The dark thing had taken from the innocent people, the cloud needed them to survive. The shape had stolen a few years from each of them. He could see the forty-six years, two months and three days it had stolen from him. John did not want to lose any of it. He wanted those years and the promise of the mundane back. Above him the shape turned into a snarl. Or a grin. He wanted to tell the shape it was a mistake, he didn't mean to step backwards, he meant to step forward. He wanted the shape to return what it had stolen, even a few years, ten would be fine.

At the second floor he extended his hand. Reaching desperately for

the grinning form that rippled in stationary defiance above him. A stray tear spilled upward and splashed against the thumbnail of his outstretched hand. He wanted the shape to hear his plea.

At the first floor he opened his mouth, *Wait*.

John Smith's fall ended with such ferocity that the roof of the Toyota folded in around him like a metal taco. Glass exploded outward from the car, raining across the sidewalk and Market Street in a deceptively delicate shower of crystal gravel. The rubber tires stretched, flattened, and rebounded, sending a second wave of crystal gravel splashing across nearby parked cars. Sound waves rebounded in all directions on Market Street. Then escaped.

One of his eyelids was closed, the eye underneath staring backward into bits of fractured skull. The other eyelid remained open, no longer able to blink. The pupil, flecked with red, focused on a point somewhere near the roof of his apartment, staring with the intensity of the dead at a shadow that no longer swirled.

His wallet remained securely in his front pocket.

* * *

The dark shape drifted away. Crossing Dowson River in the shadows of the Old Center Bridge. Its appearance changing without changing, forming geometric patterns and moving with practiced precision. It instinctively moved west, away from the morning that would be

arriving from the east.

* * *

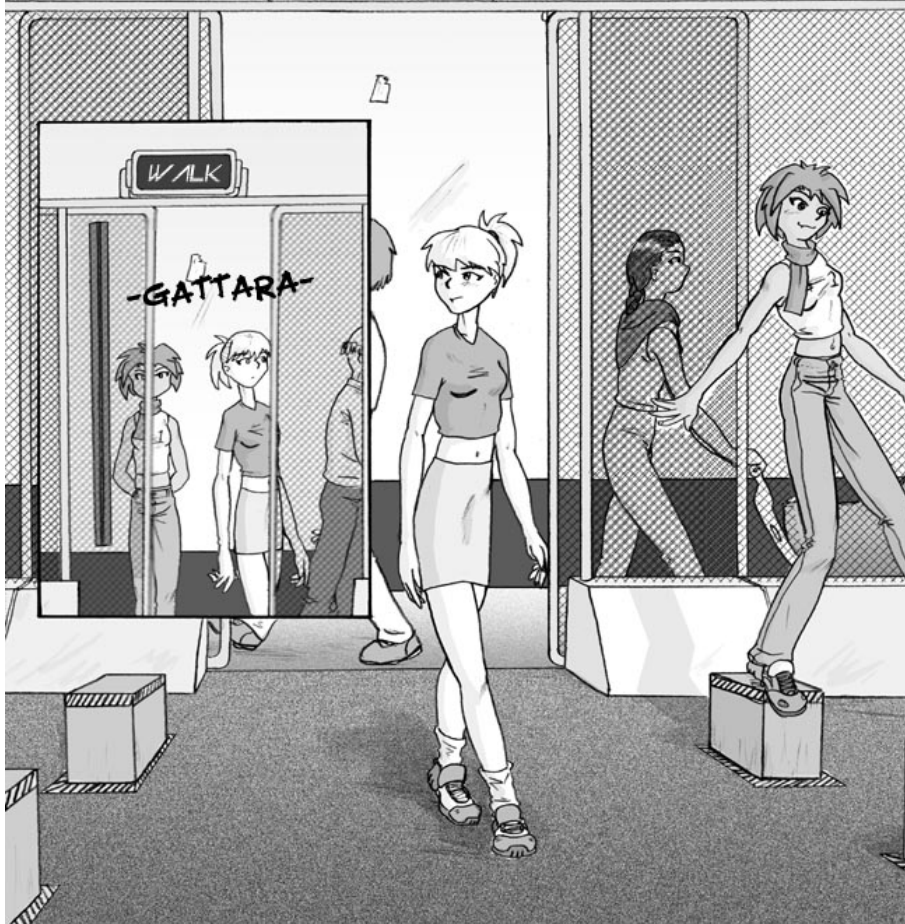
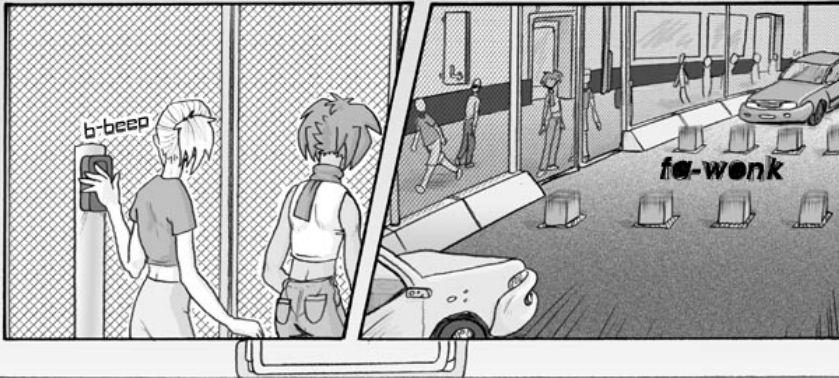
Maria Garcia awoke from her sleep. Her head throbbing. She thought about switching on her nightstand lamp, but light never helped, it only exacerbated the pain. She could hear the crash of waves through her open bedroom window, the beach only a block away. It soothed her some.

Her hand fumbled for the painkillers. She knew she shouldn't take too many, but her head hurt so much. She rattled the bottle, probably twenty left. The idea of popping all of them in her mouth navigated its way through her pulsating brain. That would take care of the pain, dios mia, maybe. It had been getting worse, she just wanted it to stop.

She carefully propped herself up, trying to ensure she didn't move her head any more than necessary. As she fumbled with the safety cap, something caught her eye. A movement in the corner. She tried to focus, but between her headache and the darkness, she was struggling.

One of the shadows in the corner of her room seemed to be darker than the others, and it looked to be moving, swirling.

Like a miniature murmuration of starlings she'd seen once as a child when visiting her abuelita.



by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

This type of road crossing actually already exists, in Paris for example. Without all the fences, though...

You can tell by the shadows that the sun is already very low - will they find a place before it closes?

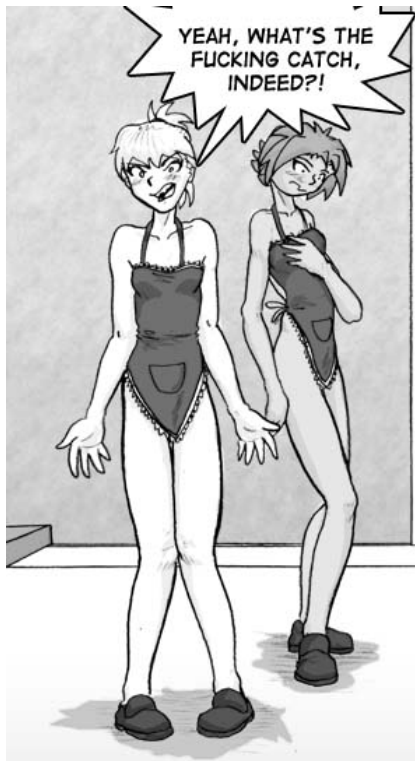




NOTES

Yes, there is actual text in the holo-frames in panel three... what's written, however, is another thing altogether... >_>





NOTES

Trust is not the only factor involved in the choice of Terran policemen. Terrans are generally stronger than Mar-tians, because of the higher gravitation on Earth. The policemen normally serve on Mars for a couple of weeks, and then go back to Earth for training, education, and update of equipment.





NOTES

I quite like Gemma's "plastic doll" style. It's the style used on, for example, *Slayers*, and a lot of chinese manga. It's cute ^_^

Holy cow! It's night now! Shouldn't the sidewalk be more lighted, you ask? Well, darkness comes early this time of the year, and the preprogrammed street lights aren't really updated to the current light situation.

They should be on within the hour, though. What now? In this time and age, aren't the lights equipped with light sensors to automatically trigger them when it gets too dark? Well, the street office has been forced to do a lot of savings the last few years. Guess they are quite low-tech in this block... Bummer.





NOTES

This is the library in this city, where all printed and/or published material ever is collected.

Most of it is stored on holdisks with a capacity of several terabytes each. If you can see the little round devices fitted on the shelves in panel four, they pick out the disk you choose on the terminals on the side of the shelf, or from the Infonet terminals. It's pretty much like an old-fashioned jukebox.

The library also has a large section of printed paper media, or if you want, you can print out the content on the disks on their high-speed printers. Research and reading inside the library is free (sponsored by large companies), but loans and prints cost money.



GRAB THAT INACTIVE
MODULE BEHIND ME
AND SHUT UP, WILL
YA NOW?

YES'M!
-UGH!



SEARCH: employment HITS: 125

Animal caretaker
To walk four dogs regularly
517882 9 >See more
Asphalt Cooker
Your dream job! Build the roads...
748901 4 >See more
Miner
Mine workers for tunnel project...
102848 6 >See more
Miner
Engineer for tunnel project to...
102848 7 >See more
Sanitary Engineer
Higher degree in mopping requ...
891034 5 >See more
Sanitary Technicians
Public toilets needs floor renova...
628830 3 >See more

MAN, THIS SUCKS!
DO THEY GET OFF
ON MAKING UP ALL
THESE APE JOBS?



THEY SHOULD
KNOW I'M
BETTER THAN
THIS!

THEY CALLED ME A PRODIGY CHILD...
AND I WAS THE CLASS ACE.. 'COURSE,
THAT WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, BUT STILL...
I BESTED EVEN THE HIGH SCHOOLERS.

THEY ALL BORED ME,
IT WAS ALL TOO EASY.
I KNOW I'M GOOD!
WHY SHOULD I
HAVE TO DO THIS
CRAP?

I GUESS THERE'S
ALWAYS ONE MORE
STEP TO TAKE INTO
BOREDOM SLUTTYNESS...

TO EVEN ANTICIPATE
FINDING SOMETHING
ACTUALLY WORTH DOING
HERE... HOW DID I GET
HERE?



STILL...

Money Exchange Bureau
Looking for two employees in...
153782 4 >See more



G! I FOUND IT!
THIS WILL BE
OUR JOB!



NOTES

That search function does leave a bit to the fantasy, doesn't it? >_> Sorry, but I had no time to design an interface...

But the chairs look comfy, eh?

^_^





SAY, DON'T WE LOOK ALL BESMASHABLE, MY LOVELY LADY FRIEND?

ABSOLUTELY! WE'LL NAIL THIS JOB FOR SURE!



THIS IS IT?

SHOULD BE.



WHAT TH' HECK IS THIS?

IT'S EUROPEE, THE LARGEST TERRAN LANGUAGE.

Fuhr de Stalt an Chief of employments

Mancha Monera they exchange

DON'T YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING FROM SCHOOL?



I'M TRYING TO FORGET, THANK YOU..

WELL, IT SHOULD BE HERE ...

I THOUGHT IT WAS KINDA STRANGE, THOUGH ...

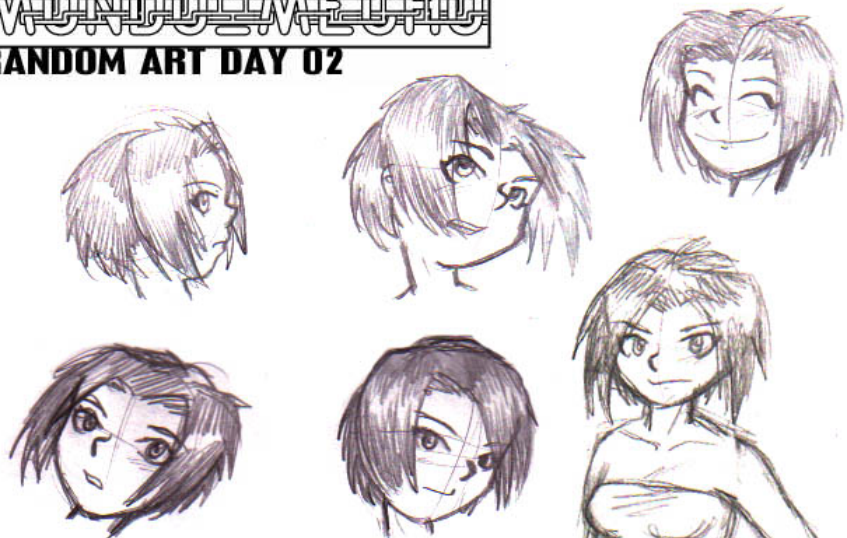
NOTES

I won't delve deeper into the politics of Earth here, but let's just say that in this time, the United States aren't what they once were...

The European Union, however, has grown strong (by avoiding contact with non-EU countries) and avoided civil wars. Of course, terrorism is still a big problem, and when the US has lost it's glory, Europe finds itself targeted more often...

The language, Europee, which is a combination of several of the largest European languages at this time, kind of like Esperanto, but more developed, is pronounced [ev-roh-pée].





I'LL BE TAKING A ONE-WEEK BREAK NOW,
BUT I'LL BE BACK WITH ANOTHER SMASHING
PAGE SOON ENOUGH :)

IN THE MEANTIME, YOU CAN PONDER THIS:
WHAT ARE JEMMA AND GEHENNA GOING
TO DO NEXT?
WHY IS THERE NO COMIC PAGE TODAY?
AND WHO'S THIS BADASS BABE?

ANSWERS WILL COME SHORTLY, MONDO
MECHO WILL BE BACK RIGHT AFTER THIS!

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Contributor's Bios

For the last thirty years **JAY BECHTOL** has been a social worker helping children, adults and families navigate the world of mental illness, substance misuse and trauma. He has learned that everyone has a story, and more often than not, several stories. He can be found in *Deracine Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, and *Toasted Cheese* or on-line at JayBechtol.com and on Twitter [@BechtolJay](https://twitter.com/BechtolJay). He can be found in person in Homer, Alaska.

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JAMES CUKR's work can be found at cukr7.myportfolio.com

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HAWK AND YOUNG are two authors, joined by a single mission—to bring you epic tales of heroes up against insurmountable odds. They live 750 miles apart, have known each other for nine years, and have never met.

They have three short stories published in *Antimatter Magazine* (2017) and a joined scifaiku poem published in *Scifaikuest* August 2019 edition as well as a paranormal short story, “I Choose to

Live,” published by Anubis Press 2019 and a sci-fi western short story, “Bride’s Road,” by Wild West Press 2020.

Their website is hawkandyoung.com



JAMAL HODGE is a multi-award winning filmmaker and writer. As a writer his screenplay 'Mourning Meal' won five awards (including best short screenplay at NYC Horror Film Festival 2018) and was featured as a finalist in seven writing competitions including Shriekfest, Crimson Screen,

and Nightmares Film Festival, while his feature film screenplay ‘The Kind Ones’ has been a finalist at Shriekfest and Crimson Screen in 2019. Jamal's horror poetry has been featured in *Space and Time Magazine* three times, and in the upcoming anthology *Chiral Mad 5* alongside such greats as Linda Addison & Jack Katchum. Jamal has been the featured writer at ACT UP! at Harlem's National Black Theatre. In 2021 he is gearing up to launch his first sci-fi series, and a book of poetry edited by six-time Stoker Award winner Linda Addison. More about him can be found at <http://www.directorhodge.com/About.html>

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More of **T. MOTLEY**'s comics are at tmotley.com

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KURT NEWTON's field of expertise (health physics) made him an essential worker during this season of Covid-19. Every morning, during this crisis, as he drove the empty streets to work, listening to the radio as the world turned more and more bizarre, his writer's mind could not help but wonder about all the what ifs this pandemic had yet to reveal. When Kurt's not riffing on the present apocalypse, he's writing other works, some of which can be found at *Frozen Wavelets* and *Cosmic Horror Monthly*.

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

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NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username [@lyv0n](#).

* * *

CALLUM PEARCE is a Dutch storyteller, originally from Liverpool. He is a fiction writer published multiple times across a variety of platforms. A lover of the magical as well as the macabre, he lives in a foggy old fishing town in the Netherlands with his husband and a couple of cat-shaped sprites. Popping up in lots of drabble collections and anthologies, he has also written factual articles for an LGBTQ+ lifestyle website. See the Amazon page for things that are available now: amazon.com/author/callumpearce

* * *

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.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2017), Elgin Award runner-up *Astropoetry* (Alban Lake Publishing, 2017), and *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2020).

Her poetry, fiction, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, and her poems have garnered multiple nominations in the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Elgin Awards, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year.

Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media [@christinasng](#).

* * *

GRACE WAGNER is a queer, nonbinary writer living with a disability in Houston where they teach at the University of Houston. They have attended the New York Summer Writers Institute and work as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*. Their work has been featured in *Salmagundi Magazine*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The Offing*, and is upcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*.



Unicorn/Pegasus (full image) by James Cukr