

penumbra

speculative
fiction mag

Aug 2k21 • vol v issue 2

Interview with

Novyl Saeed

Visual arts, writing, and physics
are just the beginning

World-Building

Does your epic novel need it?

plus

Steve DuBois • Jade • Elby Rogers • Christina Sng • Anton Cancre •
Lawrence Buentello • Lauren Marrero • Joe Baumann • Carl Scharwath •
Alicia Hilton • Gerri Leen • S P Jenkins • Anatoly Belilovsky • Marge Simon
• Michelle Muenzler • Maxwell I. Gold • Amelia Gorman • Frank Coffman
• T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2021 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

ALL ARTISTS—whether visual arts or prose, poetry or music—create worlds. Every song, every stanza, every story, every canvas or storyboard implies a world behind it, whether the one we know or another invented from an imagination, a world that in our roles as readers/viewers/listeners we come to inhabit during the brief, or long, moments we are immersed in the artist’s vision. So the question that is often asked is ... what is the best way to go about creating these worlds? Do we plan out the intricate details? Do we just fly by the seat of our pants, creating as the vision strikes us?

The internet, as the internet is, is full of opinions.

In this issue we delve into world-building—the whys, the hows, and inevitably my opinion on the best way to go about it (although I do link to a lot of other ideas). Given that my background in storytelling began with being a DM for AD&D games, building whole worlds and weather systems and countries and beings and ... well, you’d think I’d come down squarely in the “plan it” camp. But you’d be surprised. A little, anyway.

But first, we have an amazing interview with Novyl Saeed, well-known to readers of *Penumbria* as “Novyl the Mysterious.” We talk about her visual art, her writing, and physics and science generally, and learn as much as we can about her upcoming *Dunya* epic, which involves a lot of world-building itself.

Unlike past issues, this one isn’t particularly themed, per se. Part of this is that theming everything is difficult, but a larger part is that it can be challenging to theme around “world-building” when one isn’t printing Herbert- or McCaffrey-esque novel series that all take place

in the same milieu. It’s an interesting thought to one day put out a magazine with stories that all take place in the same world, though ... hmhhh ... another theme lol.

As usual, we feature a lot of excellent work, from Steve DuBois’ haunting “The Commander” to the blackout poetry of Anton Cancre (“Restructant#1”), from the springing forth of new life in Joe Baumann’s “The Right Kind of Love, the Wrong Kind of Death” to its opposite in Alicia Hilton’s “April.” Strange religions are the fare in Lawrence Buentello’s “Drivers and Their Fares,” while Lauren Marrero’s “What Good Girls Do” explores the kinds of things perhaps they shouldn’t, and Gerri Leen’s “Amateurs” shows us what pretty much everyone shouldn’t do. We slip over into science fiction in S P Jenkins’ “Content” and slip sideways from there in Maxwell I. Gold’s “The Static and Black Lectures.” And then, really, we’re back to the haunting worlds of Anatoly Belilovsky’s “Mercury Rises” and Michelle Muenzler’s “There can only be one Soul Princess,” and we construct the world in Amelia Gorman’s “The World Needle.” We end by looking forward to October in Frank Coffman’s “The Skald Sings of Samhain” (although *Penumbria*’s October will be full of other things).

Beyond the fantastic art by Novyl that graces not only our cover but also our interview with her, we have haunting work by Jade (*Ghoul*), Christina Sng (*Eva*), and Elby Rogers (*The Dollar Store’s Bottom Bitch*), while also looking outward at whole worlds in Carl Scharwath’s *Planet Gazing* and a bit of the fantastic in Marge Simon’s *Amaranth*. We finish, as usual, with Jesper Nordqvist’s *Mondo Mecho*, and sadly we see the final installment of T. Motley’s *The Road to Golgonooza* (although hopefully not the last of his work

in *Penumbria*!).

Again, thank you so much to all the artists, of whatever medium, who contribute their worlds to *Penumbria*! And we'll be back in October to have a little (or large) update on the state of cyberpunk.

Until then, be well!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbria

Revitalized by Novyl Saeed (full title on back cover)



Portraits by an Artist

From individuals to whole worlds, Novyl Saeed's creative works are always moving forward

NOVYL SAEED, better known in the pages of *Penumbria* as Novyl the Mysterious, comes from a long line of creators and artists—her parents are artists, and, according to her father, her ancestors were engineers on the Taj Mahal. She has been creating, whether in writing, drawing, or otherwise, for as long as she can remember. "It is as natural to me," she says in an interview with Loud Coffee, "as breathing."

It seemed just as natural that we interview Novyl for *Penumbria*—her art has been featured on these pages many times, including on the cover. And she's working on far more than visual arts ...

* * *

You wear many hats—those of us at Penumbria know you as an artist,

but you also have a degree in physics. Did you start off thinking of going into science? Or art? Or something else?

Well, if I think back to my earliest memories and what I wanted to do, the one that sticks out the most, is that I wanted to WRITE.

However, I have memories going much further back than that.

When I was 6yrs old, I performed as Goldilocks in a school play. That was a lot of fun. I was chosen for my long, light brown hair, which had gold glitter sprayed into it. Goldilocks! I really did enjoy performing.

It was around about that time that we also toured Europe and went to all the galleries. I had been exposed to art since the day I was born—

what with my father being an artist and later, my mother as well.

But it was when I was around 9 or 10 that I was first introduced to the concept of reading and books. And that pretty much was where my passion for writing took off. I wanted to tell stories as well.

I had an extremely fertile imagination and was an extremely dreamy child. I'd been known to randomly walk around the entire school, peeking into other classes, on the pretence of taking a bathroom break. Troublemaker. And curious.

I've always had this passion for learning and understanding. That has never stopped.

I had a dream once, when I was 19, where someone reiterated to me that the "Treasure is in the books!" I took it as a sign that I needed to follow knowledge. I needed to learn more, understand better.

My love of books never left though. Even when I got to New Zealand, I was still into reading, and it was my reading habits that led me into science.

In fact, the epiphany to study physics struck me as I was reading Greg Bear's *Eon*. This was when I was around 24, just before I got pregnant with my second child. I was reading all about the asteroid that was bigger on the inside and the thought came to me that I really enjoy this stuff, this science, this physics ... so why am I not studying it, dammit?

I also remembered how I loved looking up at the stars and how homesick I felt when I did so. And my dream to find the treasure in the books.

I was pregnant with my son when I enrolled at university, again, to study physics. Two weeks after my c-section, I was back in classes



full time. I'd study with a baby on my lap. But I never gave up. I knew I was passionate about this and I stuck with it, even though I struggled and failed some courses. I had to take Calculus TWICE before getting an A. I didn't give up. I had my dreams.

Another reason for sticking with it was that I wanted to write better science fiction. I certainly couldn't write techno-babble geek speak

without actually knowing what its all about, now could I?

These were the years where I hardly did any art, because my creative side was battling with differential equations.

But I'm glad I did my degree. Super glad. Because it taught me SO MUCH. SO SO MUCH. I didn't just learn academically. I learned emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I grew as a person.

Art was a springboard I needed to jump into science.

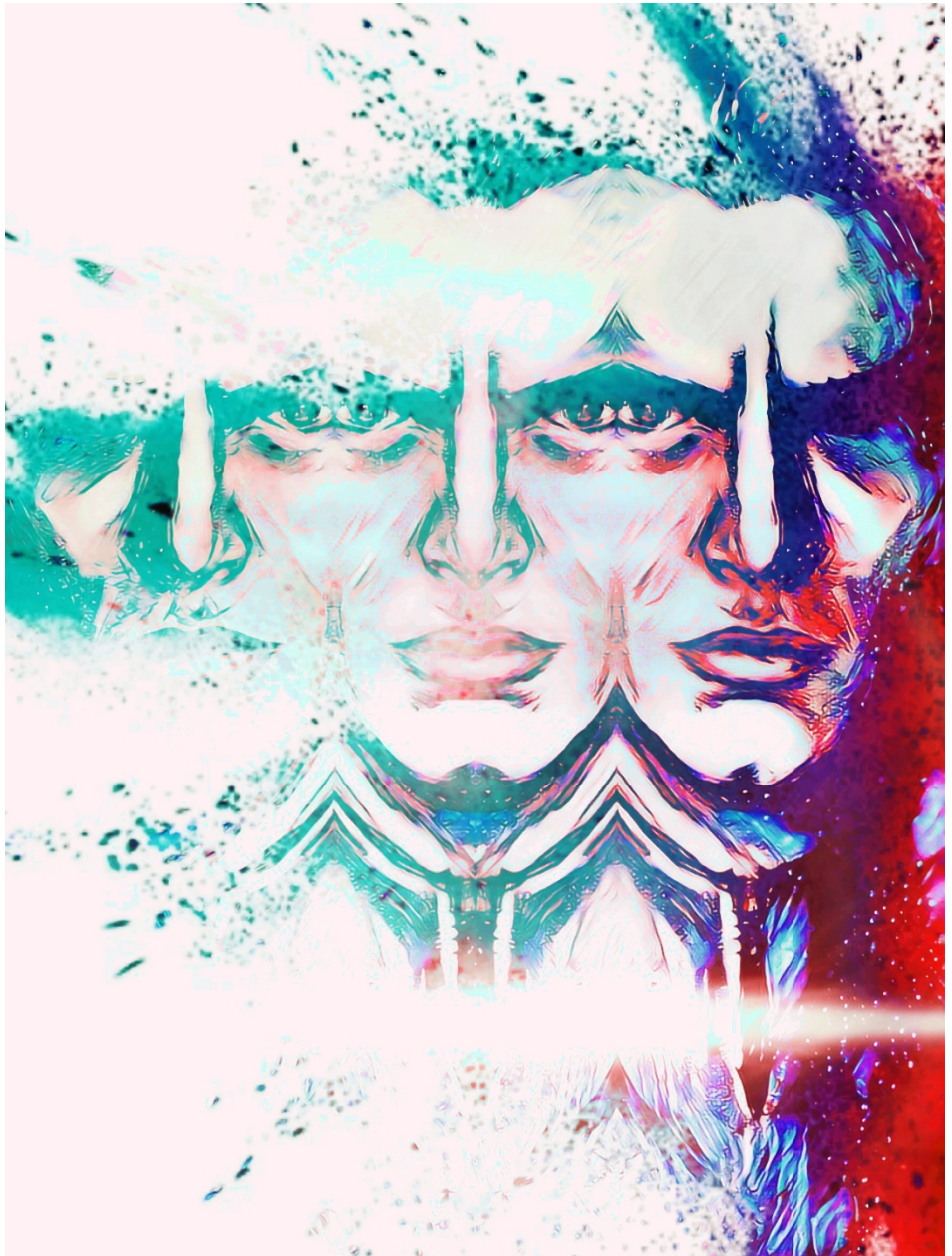
And science was the platform I needed to understand art better.

My own little aside: I started off going into astrophysics, but then, or at the same time, decided I wanted to write science fiction and got a degree in English ... then went back to computer science, and now have ended up somewhere in the "between": a programmer developing AI whilst creating games and running a spec fic magazine. Have you ended up in a similar "between" situation? In what way do you combine all these different elements in your life (if you do)?

Currently, I work as an advisor and analyst with a government agency and I do art and writing on the side, for fun, and sometimes, I take commissions.

I guess it's an in between situation.

You know, I spent the last ten or fifteen years just focussed on getting my degree in Physics and then creating some kind of solid career for myself.



PICTURED: *The Many Faces of Me* by Novyl Saeed

However, the thought of writing a book was never far from my mind. I always told myself I would do it, but later, when I had some kind of foundation for myself. Some security.

Now that later seems to have arrived, I think. And that's what I've been realizing the last couple of years. Which takes me to your next question.

You mention elsewhere (in the Loud Coffee interview) that you only really got back into art a few years ago, and you do a lot of speculative fiction portrait art. What is your favourite kind of art to do? Favourite medium? Favourite subjects?

Yes, I did get back into it a couple of years ago. Started doing some character art, because I love drawing from imagination and letting it take me where it wants.

I love drawing faces. Figures. Humans are my favourite subjects. Fictional humans even more so. There is so much that you can show in a face. Character. Feeling. Emotion. Story.

Why are we here? We are here to understand ourselves better, and art is that medium in which to understand it. Be it drawing or writing.

My favorite medium has to be the humble pencil. Or charcoal. These are basic mediums that humans have been working with for thousands of years. There is something rustic and true about the humble pencil. You can write with it and you can draw with it. I am getting into more watercolors these days and markers and experimenting with different mediums. But the pencil remains my top choice.

My favourite subjects would have to be art and science—which pretty much covers everything! Haha! But seriously—I am curious about the world and the universe—so everything seems interesting. Except golf.

Do you think art influences or enhances speculative fiction writing,

PICTURED [OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT]: Snippet from a sci-fi (main character is James DeVillian); snippet from Dunya; *Desolation Dreams*; and *The Canticles of Zere*

and in what way? And the other way round, of course: How does writing influence/enhance art? Or are they very separate things?

Speculative fiction writing IS art.

Writing is an ART. They are not separate things but two different forms of expression of the same thing.

You can express emotion via a painting or illustration, but you can also do it in words.

If you have words, it's good. If you have words AND pictures, it's even better. So much more for the senses to absorb.

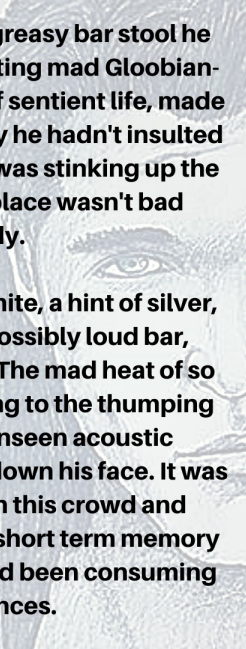
You are writing a novel as well. Can you tell us about that?

My book. My fantasy epic. I've been working on it for years now and I'm nowhere near done. But through the process of writing this book, I have learned so much.

I have learned about characters and how to build them up and break them down. I have learned about pacing and plotting. I have learned how to be authentic in my writing. And there is so much more I am learning still.

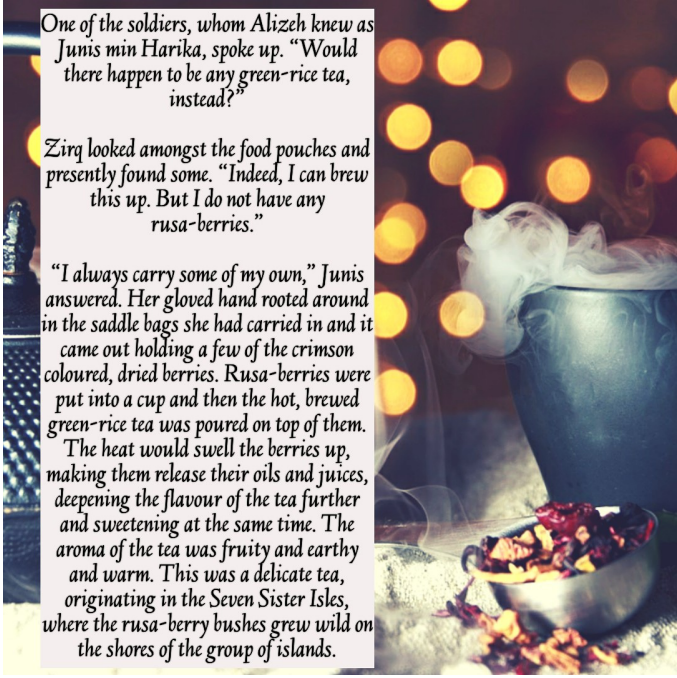
There is so much story in my head that I need to first edit the bits in my brain, before I can write it. Picking out the things that matter to move the story forward. This has been another learning curve for me.

The story revolves around this group of characters living on the fantasy world of Dunya. They are mired in various social and political dramas. While this plays out, there are ancient Titans that are



James jumped lightly off the greasy bar stool he had been sitting on, as the spitting mad Gloobian-sai, a large, hairy monstrosity of sentient life, made a bee line in his direction. If only he hadn't insulted the giant oaf, but the creature was stinking up the place, as if the smell of the place wasn't bad enough already.

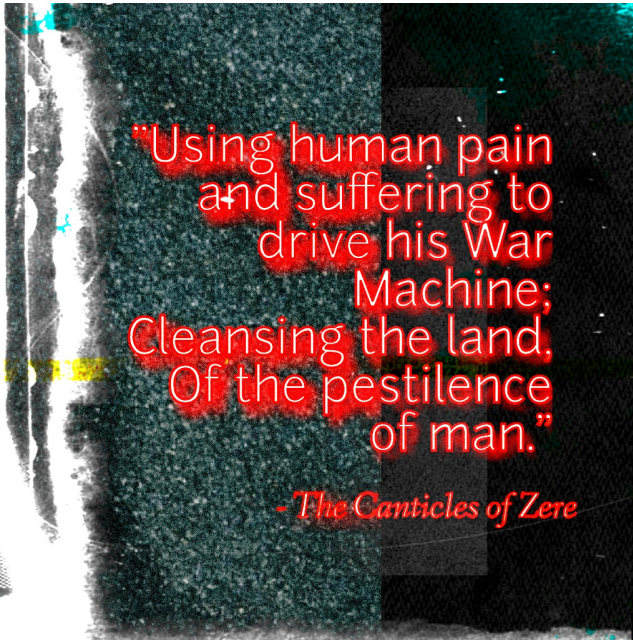
He smiled a little, a gleam of white, a hint of silver, in the dark gloom of the impossibly loud bar, pretending to be a night club. The mad heat of so many sweating bodies, swaying to the thumping alien music, blaring from unseen acoustic modulators, made sweat pour down his face. It was easy to lose the furry giant in this crowd and Gloobian-sais' tended to have short term memory problems, especially if they had been consuming alcoholic substances.



One of the soldiers, whom Alizeh knew as Junis min Harika, spoke up. "Would there happen to be any green-rice tea, instead?"

Zirq looked amongst the food pouches and presently found some. "Indeed, I can brew this up. But I do not have any rusa-berries."

"I always carry some of my own," Junis answered. Her gloved hand rooted around in the saddle bags she had carried in and it came out holding a few of the crimson coloured, dried berries. Rusa-berries were put into a cup and then the hot, brewed green-rice tea was poured on top of them. The heat would swell the berries up, making them release their oils and juices, deepening the flavour of the tea further and sweetening at the same time. The aroma of the tea was fruity and earthy and warm. This was a delicate tea, originating in the Seven Sister Isles, where the rusa-berry bushes grew wild on the shores of the group of islands.



"Using human pain
and suffering to
drive his War
Machine;
Cleansing the land,
Of the pestilence
of man."

- The Canticles of Zere

A stag jumps across my field of vision, startling me a little. There are no forests here. Just frozen, rocky hills and grass and the ugly, utilitarian structures, built by man. I stop and take a breath. I can smell the sea and I can see the blue of it now.

"Have you decided?" Mikhail asks, softly, behind me.

"I don't know," I say, my eyes on the water and the hills beyond. The sun is setting in riot of golds and reds; the light is fading fast. "Some choices are difficult to make."

Mikhail remains silent.

"Can I ask you something, Mikhail?" I turn to him.

"Ofcourse, anything," he answers back, amiably.

He is a handsome man. Dark hair, bronze skin and those smokey, gray eyes. And young. So very young.

"Do you miss this?"

He frowns, an expression of mild confusion. "This...?"

"Yes," I say, gesturing around at the desolation and stark beauty around me. "All this." And then I point to myself.

"And this."

(Inspired by the vistas in Pyramiden, Svalbard - Untitled)



PICTURED: *Lucien mon Korell* (character from *Dunya*)

awakening for the first time and no one knows why. That's another thing our main protagonists' need to figure out.

I've done a lot of world building for this story. There are magic systems, political systems, social-hierarchical systems, and physical sciences. There are some steam-punk elements, as well as a few surprise sci-fi elements.

But what I really want to focus on is the human element. The challenges the characters have to face and how they deal with failure. I think this is the most difficult part of writing stories—figuring out the character development.

How do you create your worlds? Do you picture them in your mind (like character portraits)? Do you create characters first, then the world they live in, or the other way round? Do you think of the plot first, the politics of the world, the architecture, etc? Is it meticulously planned, or is it more an organic process?

That's a good question! I take a lot of inspiration from the world around me and the stories that other people tell.

I'll be inspired by a song, by a video, by a written passage.

For the *Dunya* story ... The world came to me first. The wider world I wanted to create. The larger plot I wanted to write about. The Titans from the story came to me first. But that's not where it actually began.

When I was around 26, I started writing this

fantasy story—just as a lark, nothing serious— about this woman travelling alone, with a magical sword she had been given by the Gods. I only wrote a few pages and then it got relegated to the back of my mind. This would go on to be the basis of my fantasy epic, with a LOT of changes, Dunya. I think I only kept the place names from the original story. Haha.

Then in my early 30s I saw this animated video of racing cars on this insane track (Cool Animated Car Race [The Original] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLK25tv5C3I&ab_channel=wanmei])

THIS TRACK! OMG! It's INSANE!! But it's just soooo cool!

When I saw those flying up in the airoh man!!! (I'd give anything to race like that!!) That was so INSPIRING! It was watching this that I got the inspiration for “RACA MON”—a galactic space epic! This epic about a very ancient, powerful, alien artifact making its way back to the Milky Way galaxy—and all the characters and races are going to go after it!

This artifact is the size of a planet—and it's a RACE planet! It has race tracks all over its surface—but this surface is constantly changing —there is an ENORMOUS inner mechanism in this artifact planet that changes the surface in huge blocks. And it's done while the race is live so participants have to think QUICK! They also have to build their own race machines. The whole point of this artifact was to settle disagreements between galactic species via a race.... A race controlled by the unbiased planetary AI.

This however, happens later. And there is plot, story, and reason behind all this.

And this galactic epic is taking place in the same multiverse as my Dunya (fantasy) story.

So basically how do the awakening Titans tie in with this AI planet returning? Where does this all lead? What is happening?



PICTURED: *TimeSpaceandDarkness*,
TheFundamentalPrinciples

I've been building this multiverse for so long!

At first these were all going to be separate stories—but then I noticed a real interest in cross-overs—like in the Marvel Universe—and I started toying with the ideas of crossing over some of my stories.



PICTURED: *Ate - Goddess*. (Commissioned piece)

What if these medieval type characters from a fantasy world met these high-tech, alien beings from hyper-advanced civilizations?

I mean then where would the saying “Any sufficiently advanced technology would seem like magic” (AC Clarke) be? What if I pitted REAL magic against this technological magic from a Kardashev III

civilization? What then? How would it fit together? Would it make sense?

Would the fantasy magic be magic? Or just more advanced tech misunderstood? Or a bit of both?

Magic and science. Both fascinate me. But both are two sides of the same coin.

And yes! There will be a cross-over between these worlds!!! Woooooooh!!! Oh man! I’m so excited about this whole thing

I actually started the penultimate cross-over scene, which is supposed to come at the very end—and that got me so excited—putting all these characters together.

But it’s such an ENORMOUS story, spanning three universes, with multiple character arcs ... It’s a huge undertaking and I sometimes overwhelm myself. As you can imagine.

In the Loud Coffee Press interview, I also talked about James DeVillian—a character I created in my early 20s. His universe is also a part of all this madness.

Some ideas come as plots—some ideas start with a character. It all depends.

You mention in Loud Coffee that imagining a character is like “water cascading through your fingers” and can be made more concrete through drawing, yet it’s still difficult sometimes. Do you find it easier with your own characters or with commissioned art? (Or are they the same?)

I do find things a lot easier with my own characters of course, because I have the freedom to do as I please!

The reason I used “water cascading through fingers” is because the image comes, but it’s hard to hang onto—it keeps changing.

Developing characters is one of the hardest things I've ever done—especially since it's a conscious creation and I'm trying to think of multiple aspects of the personality.

Now that I've started taking writing a bit more seriously, I have been on a bit of a learning curve. There is so much that goes into a book—a good book.

Commissioned art isn't too hard—but it can be difficult because I have to stick to the brief and not get too wild. But I must admit that it has also taught me restraint and patience.

If I'm being honest though—I wouldn't want to make art commissions a career. I do art because I enjoy it—it's freeing—and the last thing I want is for it to become a source of stress! XD Which is why I don't take on that many or even push it.

Where did you live before New Zealand? Lots of places?

I haven't lived in a lot of places—before NZ I was in Pakistan. I was born and raised in Pakistan.

However, we did spend 3 years living in the Middle East—Doha, Qatar. I was very young at the time, but I do remember it.

We also travelled extensively across Europe for a few months. Again, I was very young, but I do remember bits. I remember spending time in the Louvre—Roy Lichtenstein's artwork left life-long impressions on me. (See the Loud Coffee Press interview where I talk about this!)

Other than that, I pay attention to different cultures, I am passionately curious about them, so I dig deeper and explore and research. The internet is a treasure trove of knowledge. And I've followed where knowledge leads! It's the fun part of life!

I know what it's like to be from a different culture and upbringing, it really does have an impact on the way you look at things. It has to do

with languages ... Languages—I'm fascinated by them and how they shape perceptions and attitudes. I could write a book about it.

But yeah—Pakistan, Middle East, Europe and now NZ and Australia. Those have been my playgrounds. And everywhere has been different but same. It's intriguing!

Could you describe more about the culture/values you grew up with/in?

I grew up with very conservative eastern values (aka patriarchal)—which of course, I rebelled against in my teenage years. It was only when I hit my 30s that I developed an appreciation for conservatism.

Eastern values are quite opposite to Western values—speaking from my own experience and time.

Pakistan is a majority Muslim country, so the religion of Islam played a huge role in my upbringing. I had to learn to read the Quran and I wasn't allowed to talk to boys. Women had to dress modestly. The usual stuff.

However, there is one thing about Eastern values that I really like and that is the importance of FAMILY. Pakistan has a family-oriented culture - extended families live together. And it just builds more connection and community, I think. These are the things I will be bringing into my book.

What has your experience been in terms of gender/ethnicity when working on your art or in other work? What different perspectives do you have as compared to "Western" artists/authors? How does this influence your writing (or does it)?

Honestly, ethnicity and gender have played exactly ZERO role in my work. I ignore such things and focus on what I have to do and what I want to do.

I have had people be racist towards me, but I just ignore it and move

on. Sometimes, I don't even notice it.

I have been greatly influenced by a lot of Western artists and authors but I have not forgotten my own values and the culture I grew up in.

In my book, I am trying to bring together the best and worst of both East and West.

In the end, I let my work speak for itself. That is always best.

Your book sounds very interesting ... can you hint at what's in it, East and West-wise? Do you combine the two, or keep them separate?

Dunya—the major, over-arching plot of the story is about the Titans. These humongous armored statues sit at the four corners of Dunya who are starting to awaken—

North Titan
South Titan
East Titan
West Titan

In the lore, the Titans have been there for as long as the people of Dunya can remember. Most people believe that they hold up the Veil of Mitheras (which is the sky) (Mitheras is a Sun God—who makes his way across the sky of Dunya—like the sun. CF Inspired by Apollo, sun God on his chariot.)

Others believe that the Titans are the protectors of Dunya. Still others believe that the Titans built Dunya. And there are those who think that end of Dunya will be brought about by the Titans.

But no one has any idea why these Titans are awakening now. They were always thought to be inert statues. But not anymore.

And then there are the main players, with their own dramas:

Sateen (main character)—A strong, capable woman, who feels that

something is missing from her life & she will be accused of murdering her father

Zenaya—An alcoholic, lesbian warrior

Rakbir—Captain of the Noxx Inferni—a liar and gambler

Vulpes—Ruler of Kal'Nok, with a dark past

Ustav—Second Prince of Smarta, leading a slave rebellion

These are just a few of the main characters, there are others. I won't go into too many details—suffice to say its an EPIC for a reason!

The empires are Dunya – some of them have Western-type values and some of them have Eastern-type values and one or two are a mixed bag. This story will contain conflicts and misunderstandings that may arise and how these are solved. How the characters interact based on their upbringing – how they perceive the world through the lens of different cultures and philosophical styles. Which is exactly like our own world. That's what I will be examining to some extent in this story.

And that's all I'm gonna say for now. I'm still thinking through a lot of plot elements and character development. There is a lot going on in this story! Lots of interesting things!

Finally, what dreams do you have for the future?

My dream is to finish my book! If I do that, then I can work on the other dreams.

I have so many dreams. And I am still chipping away at them. One day at a time.

I dream of a better world. Is that too cheesy?

Novyl Saeed's work can be found on her website: <https://lyv0nlyv0n.wixsite.com/lyv0n>. She is also on Instagram and Twitter using the handle @lyv0n. Her Loud Coffee Press interview can be found at <https://www.loudcoffeepress.com/post/at-the-corner-of-art-and-writing-an-interview-with-novyl>

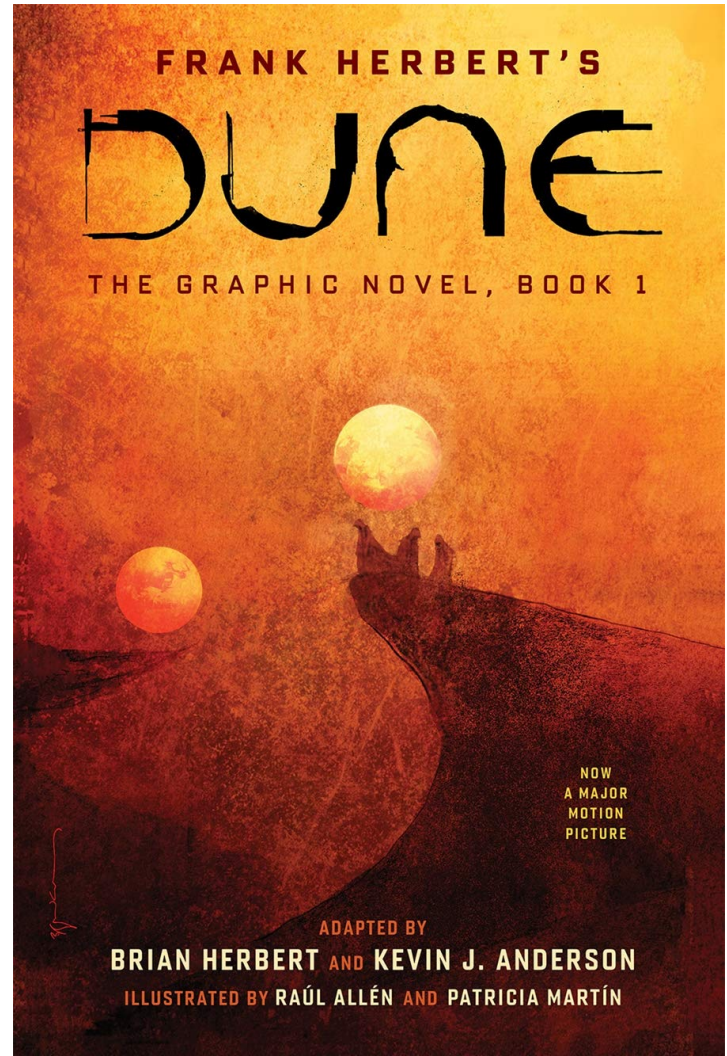
World-building

Plan it or Pants it, you need a world to play in

THE EVIL ONE'S SHIPS HAD LAUNCHED, three-hundred strong, an army headed to wage war upon the world, subjugate it to tyranny. But they had set forth from the northern port of Deridian, risking a surprise attack through the Circle of Cold and down into the peace-loving lands of Faer, where they could trample and ravage the fields of wheat and barley without having to first cross the well-guarded mountain passes to the east (for the Faer were peace-loving, not stupid). And this risky sea voyage proved the salvation of the world ... unusual weather patterns, started accidentally by unwitting low-level wizards far to the south, stirred up a vast storm, and the frothy waves rose and crushed the evil armies, and no one would ever know how close they'd come to facing the death-driven hordes.

Well, no one but me.

I created this world, whose name is lost to the dim reaches of time, but whose hex-paper-drawn landscapes are still burned into my memory, for a D&D campaign that ended up crossing multiple player groups across several years. I mean, why not? I'd spent hundreds of hours building this world, and while my non-player characters sometimes lacked ambition (or even good names—I remember borrowing several from the lists of kings in Tolkien's books), the world itself was very, very detailed. Ports, farms, crops, types of fish, political systems, even weather patterns modeled on real-world meteorology (plus magic) were all a part of the world, even if the players never knew it. I spent entire evenings alone creating weather forecasts for the entire world, chortling with glee whenever the probabilities indicated some kind of major event, a hurricane off the coast of Slee, a major storm galing in from the Arctic ... I mean, the Circle of Cold (OK, again, naming things wasn't my strongest ability). And more than once, events having little to do with the players would change the history of the world—or the players would change it, but have little idea that the Butterfly Effect they created stopped an entire war.



PICTURED: The *Dune* graphic novel. Frank Herbert's was amongst the first thoroughly built worlds I encountered

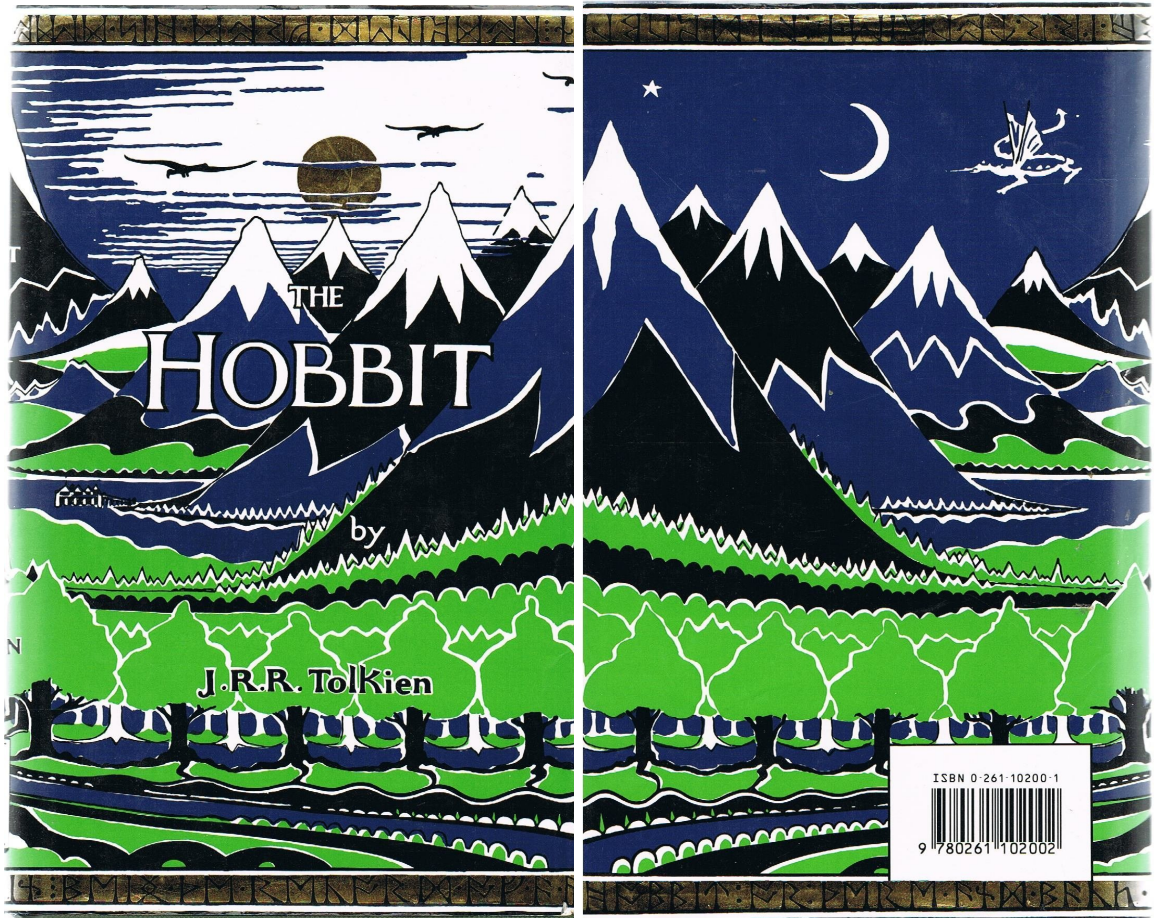
While for the longest time world-building meant, to me, a joyous exercise for role-playing games, it perhaps originates in some of the sci-fi and fantasy worlds created by some of the masters of fiction: Herbert, Asimov, Le Guin, Tolkien ... probably most famously Tolkien, whose detailed descriptions and many volumes of notes both fascinate and beleaguer us even now. And in the last ten years, it's become a favorite topic on the internet, the "in" thing, having reached that critical point where not only can you find dozens of world-building tutorials and tips, but the "why even do it?" anti-world building articles and blogs.

So is it a Good Thing? If so, how do you do it without spending more time on the world than your characters, plot, and novel itself? If not, why not? Or is there some sort of magical "between" space where you write your story but also keep track of the world?

Should I or Shouldn't I?

Let's just start by saying the answer to this is, like so many real-world answers that aren't being filtered by politics or internet firestorms, changeable and on a continuum. There is no hard-wired answer to whether you should spend all your waking hours creating day-by-day air quality metrics for your entire world or just randomly changing the color of the sky depending on how it suits your writing style in this particular chapter (although there are generally strong reasons to avoid both of those).

Some of it is just, honestly, whether you work better after creating all the worldly parameters you can stomach or just blurting your story out onto the page and then going back and fixing continuity errors. Each of these has advantages and drawbacks. Knowing your world in many dimensions as you begin your tale can give you a sense of what living in it is really like—you know that living in Romeland is, for some, to live with a rich sense of history and your importance in it, to have access to the finest museums and technology. You know that others of you are lurking just outside the city, having undergone



PICTURED: Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. No way you avoid this one when talking about built worlds

brutal decades of suppression under the thumbs of oligarch after oligarch. You know that parts of this world are magic-rich, and that it's mined as a resource and brought in heavily guarded caravans into the city, which lies in an area that has long since been mined out. And you know a natural disaster is just waiting to happen, destroying much of the city's harvestable land and blocking the caravans from ever getting home ...

On the other hand, you might spend hours figuring out just how this mined magic works, down to such minutiae as hand gestures and eye winks, and you might know the course of earthquakes and floods for the next 400 years, well beyond the scope of your book. You might have drawn the shape and size of every leaf of every kind of tree and plant on the planet—which is great if one of your characters is a botanist and might figure out a way to use herbs instead of magic to heal people, but not so great if the flora have little to do with your story. You might, in fact, never quite get round to writing your actual story because creating the world is just so damn fascinating.

“Pantsing” it, as going into your story with little to no advance planning is so colorfully called, completely avoids the pitfalls of never getting started; you jump in, maybe with a character in mind, a scene in a pub where your young wizard has been taken by his warrior friends to teach him how to have a night on the town, and of course a brawl breaks out, and the youngster discovers drunkenly that he has more abilities than he'd thought, turning the entire pub into a sort of magical black hole, a tear in the mystical continuum, as it were. You can just dive into that, throwing out character descriptions and making up cool relationships between them as you write at a furious pace, throwing in a tidbit of history here and there as background, maybe leaving a little bit sketchy but with a note to come back to it, zoom, zoom, done!

On the other hand (if hand is the right term when pantsing), your terrific speed at the start is likely to be slowed waaaaay down afterward as you go back and realize that no one will believe that the pub was pulled over some sort of magical event horizon if you don't sort out how that actually happened and stick to that (or maybe it

gives you an idea for how the various Ancient Wizards will argue about it, each with their own explanation ... which sends you off again into the story writing, but then you have to integrate this into the rest of your story, and then rewrite from there, and from there, and from there ...). And you can't say that elves have blonde hair and green eyes in the first chapter and then have them show up near the end with no hair and mystical black eyes (unless, again, there's some cool reason for this, and so you start writing that into the story as well, and three rewrites later ...) Everything that needs to be fixed, whether for continuity reasons, for necessary explanatory purposes, or whatever, will create ripples in the pond, and you'll either have to go through multiple heavy edits or just hope that the hodgepodge works, somehow.

Again, these are extremes. And as is pretty obvious in most things (or so you'd think), the reality is not a binary pants/no pants, but more likely some spot on the continuum between the two where you're most comfortable.

I think the most important thing for me, despite my fascination with my D&D world, is to work outwards from my characters, from my people ... or from my plot. Or both. Maybe it has to do with working outward from whatever drew you into creating this story in the first place. If the plot about rogue AI-driven space stations converging on Earth is your book's *raison d'être*, work from there: How smart is the AI? Who built the space stations? What is the history behind this? If your starting point is the love between a dragon, two humans, and a manticore, go from there: What kind of challenges does such love present in this society/these societies? Does religion play a part? What are the creatures around this situation like? What is the area of the world like? What is the history of these cultures? And so forth.

Do I need to do it for every story I write, in every genre?

God no. But ... well, the right amount of it can certainly help.

Part of the issue is length. A short story is unlikely to need the entire, thorough geography/history of the world behind it. But some would help. Even if you're writing a poem, if you're writing it from the

perspective of an otherworldly being, it'll read as having much more depth and be far more convincing if you know the world behind that being, at least a little.

Once you get into novels, you're definitely in some sort of world-building territory, even if only to keep everything consistent all the way through. You'll end up building at least as much of the world as is necessary for your story to be good; whether you prefer doing that before writing anything else, alternating between the two, or figuring it all out after is up to you.

Genre is important, too (and by genre I'm being really general and including alternate histories or even stories using our own world). In a fantasy or science fiction setting, you're likely to need a lot of world-building to create depth, other/alien races, backgrounds, whole worlds ... and the longer you expect the reader to be a part of that/those worlds, the more depth you should have.

Horror is another beast. If it's horror based in our world (e.g., from *Halloween* or *The Exorcist* all the way through *Get Out* [for some reason I'm shifting to films, but these are stories, too]), then you might only need enough backstory to make the horror believable; in *Halloween*, you just need to make sure we believe in a small town called Haddonfield and a killer filled with so much evil he cannot die, even if you shoot him six times and set him on fire. In fact, you don't even really need much depth to the killer's background, or explain why he cannot die. On the other hand, something like *The Descent* requires some knowledge of caves and how you'd go spelunking, or you won't create a believable world; you can't just use a random cave generator and hope it all seems realistic enough. Horror often deals with much smaller world spaces or with twists on what we already know or believe, though, so you might not have as much world-building to do, and indeed the internet seems to ignore horror when discussing this topic.

However, along with alternate histories/futures based in our own world, you need to be aware of actual history/religion to create a believable jumping-off point, and you'll need to explain anything that

doesn't fit with our knowledge of the world around us. If someone can fly, you'd better be able to explain it (perhaps she's from another world; perhaps she's a devil or angel). If the physics of the world suddenly fail, audiences are likely to be far less forgiving if you're claiming to be representing the "real" world and don't have some sort of explanation for why Neo can walk through walls and dodge bullets.

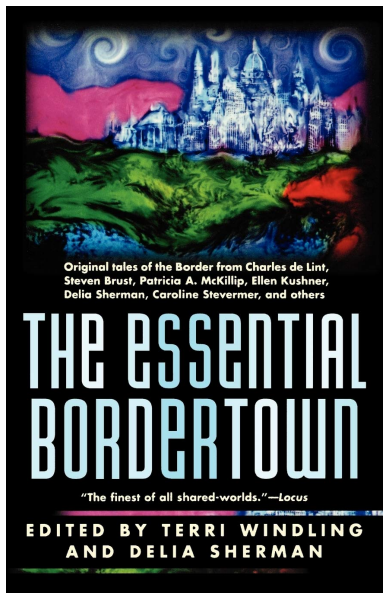
Ultimately, though, again, I'd go from your initial story ideas. Build outward. You're more likely to figure out the parameters of your world-building and not go overboard. But that starts to speak about process.

If I Am World-Building, What Is the Process?

Well, of course there ain't just one way to go about this, as you've gleaned from the above (unless you just skipped to this part, which may indicate something about your world-building process right there).

There are tons of internet resources on this sort of thing, and between those and my own creative druthers I'd say the following:

- If you have a character or situation in mind, start there. Maybe brainstorm everything you know about that young wizard: even things like race and gender. How powerful is she? This will probably lead to at least a general idea about how magic works in this world. Does she have friends? Who are these warriors she's hanging out with? You'll probably end up with at least a sketchy idea of how this particular society works and with a deeper idea of just who this character is and how they got into this position. I'm not saying start writing the story yet; just start building from the idea of your story.
- Or, of course, the opposite might work better for you; you may want to go write some story first, and then start brainstorming and building that world. Whichever works best for you. Whichever keeps you writing, really. It's all good.



PICTURED: (l) One of the Bordertown books and (r) Wild Cards, two anthologies using already-built worlds

- Some people might want to start with a whole chunk of built world, and then have its creation and inner workings suggest stories on its own. In some ways, anthologies of stories that take place in a single world are like this; I remember the Borderland/Bordertown series from about a zillion years ago, and also Wild Cards.
- Some authors start with their favorite thing, almost regardless of whether there's any story idea at the beginning. Some believe Tolkien started his eventual tomes with the Elvish language, working outward from creating beautiful words to the kind of creatures that would use those words, and the kinds of history they'd have, and so forth.

So ... am I saying the process is whatever works for you? Yeah, pretty much. There are some general things to keep track of, though.

Things About Your World to Consider

Again, the internet is full of suggestions ... lists, lists, and more lists. And templates. We'll link to some of these at the end of this article, but here are some of what we think are the most useful ...

Maps Everyone wants to talk about maps! They are probably the first thing every fantasy story is supposed to have. But I have a confession: Most of the time I just skip looking at the map in the frontispiece and get into the story. It's only if the author makes things really confusing that I feel like I need to refer to the map. (And I'm saying this despite my love of creating maps for RPGs!) I know, however, that a lot of readers do like to peruse any maps you provide, perhaps even memorizing them before starting your story—so you need to make sure that if you create a map, you follow it. If “Here there be dragons,” well, there better be dragons or a good reason for not having them there.

Maps are useful in certain situations, especially for the author's own reference: If your story takes place in a specific neighborhood or city, you should know where things are relative to one another (especially for some genres/situations; you can't have a mystery where the killer ran from the butcher's to the candlestick maker's in 20 seconds if these stores are then said to be across town from one another, unless that's part of the mystery). If characters are travelling across the world (via something other than teleportation or airplanes), you'd better know what's next to what. Maps are not so useful if your fiction takes place across worlds, or travel is interplanetary, or you teleport, unless there's a battle across space and we need to know where everyone is. You also don't need maps of the obvious—present-day Earth, for example, or the order of planets in the solar system. However, if you're writing about a city, especially historically, a map might be very useful (say, London in the 1700s)—that is, if your story relies on a sense of place or spatial relations.

Nature: People and Animals and Plants Or aliens and ... well, animals and plants. If your story has anything to do with people (by which I don't necessarily mean humans), which most do, then you'll need to have some idea of what those people are and how their

environment shaped them. You don't have to start at the beginning and work your way up from fish to land animals to dinosaurs and so forth; you can even start with the cool character you want to write and reverse engineer the environment so that it creates what you already have. If this is the Earth, plain and simple, then you already have more books about this than you really need; it's only if you're deviating in some way from what we think we know that you'll need to explore this in depth. If you're somewhere else, either a sci-fi or fantasy world, then we'll need to know a lot more, even potentially down to gravity and the kinds of animals these characters would have befriended/hunted. If they tamed dragons centuries ago that'll mean something in terms of modern society; if they hunted dragons to extinction, well, that's something else. If they domesticated dragons like cows and eat dragon burgers, well, that's something else again.

This is also where you'll first begin to explore science, or scientific principles. How does physics work in this world? Like here on Earth? Great! You're done (but you also better know what you're talking about). Is gravity a lot greater on one of your worlds, but less on another? The creatures from the higher-grav world will find things a lot different on the lower-grav one. The physics (and natural characteristics, like climate and geography) of your world will determine how things evolved and how things work. (They could even affect your map ... maybe rivers run uphill!) It will also have an influence on everything in the next section ...

The Big Three: Social Structures, Magic/Science, Religion

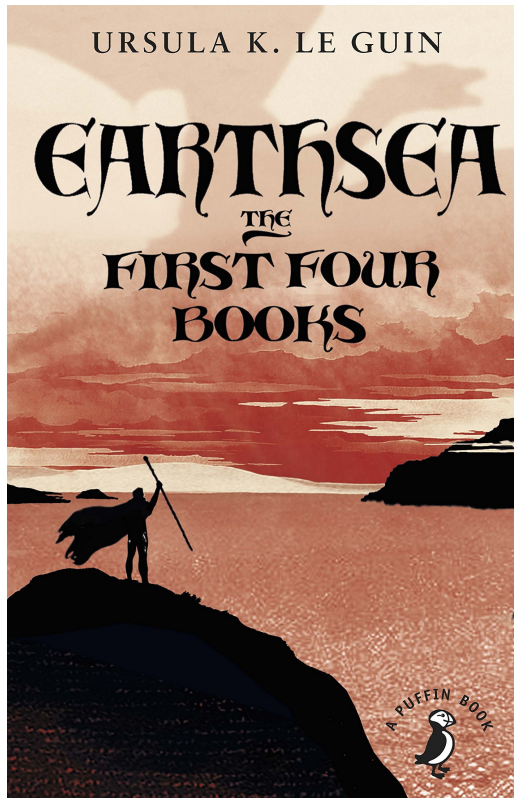
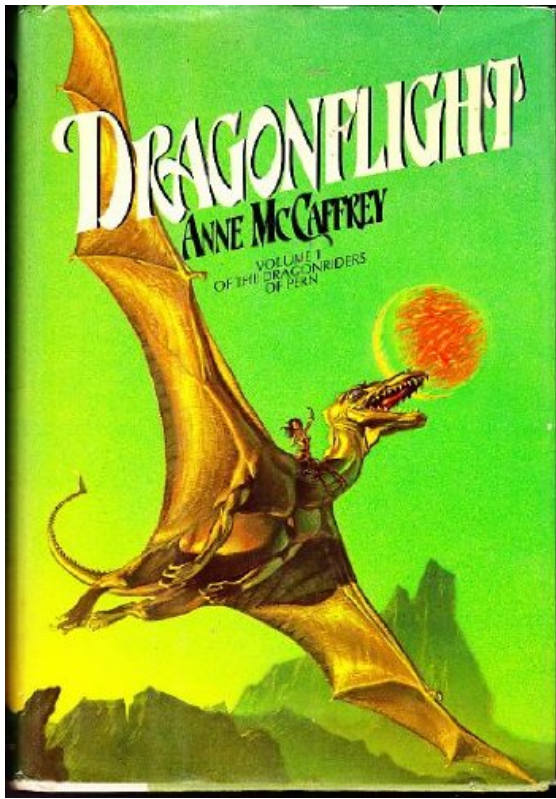
Just exactly the things you're not supposed to talk about in polite company (and you can add politics to "social structures"), but also exactly the kinds of things that will be super important in just about any story you tell, especially anything novel-length, but honestly ... well, most stories. Does this mean you have to know every Space Pope from the very beginning of time? No, but you need to know how the Space Pope and the religion and the policies of that religion affect your societies. Turning to a videogame story for a moment, have a look at *Final Fantasy X*: In this story, religion is the crux of everything that goes on, it has a real effect on day-to-day life, and it is integral to the development of the characters and the discoveries

they make. Someone (or a lot of someones) had to develop this religious system in massive detail in order for the story to make sense, and for the characters to believably live it. And it also affects the social structures, racism, and laws throughout all the lands of the game world.

Your story, even if you begin by pantsing it and developing only a few characters in that pub, will eventually touch on the society in which that pub exists, the ways people interact in pubs (even if inebriated), whether the local religions frown on drinking or absolutely condone it, and even possibly whether it's acceptable to throw magical spells around whilst in them. And it may (helpfully or annoyingly) lead to other questions that change the track of your story: If magic is verboten in pubs, then is there some kind of anti-magic field around it? If not, why not? Why would they even let wizards onto the premises? How does your young wizard manage to drunkenly screw with all this and create a magical black hole?

These big items can be the easiest to lose oneself in, never to find your way back to the lovely little story you began all those eons ago, when the world was simple and consisted of one pub and one wizard and a few of his warrior pals. You could come up with the equivalent of an entire role-playing game system, all just for your story, detailing all the ways magic can work, the ways magic is mined from the ground, the ways science supplants magic, how far science has advanced, every nuance of every religious belief on the planet, every political system and how those interact with the religions, etc and so on. You just have to know when to stop, and stop there.

History Do we gotta learn history? Well, yes and no. Just like everything else, and especially like the "Big Three" above, you have to have enough history that you know the whys and wherefores of your story world, and of your story in particular, but you don't need fifty volumes of everything everywhere everywhen. And again, if you're using the "real" world as your starting point, great! You're done! But, as before, you'd better know what you're doing; using the real world as your base means you have to go learn about it, if you don't know it already. And sometimes that can be as time consuming



PICTURED: (l) *Dragonflight* (the first Dragonriders of Pern book) and (r) a collection of the first four Earthsea books, two absolutely awesome worlds developed over many, many novels and stories.

as creating it (try reading those fifty volumes!)

Even more fun is the fact that different societies are going to write about the same events very differently, and as the creator of all those societies it'll behoove you to know each of those points of view. The German view of World War I in the twenty years after the war (especially as manipulated by the Nazis) was very different from the French view, which was again different from the English view; these viewpoints arguably lead to very different actions at the beginning of World War II. Or even within the same society ... an American history textbook created by the far Right is going to be very different from one created by the left, omitting and focusing on different events in such a way as to play to the ideology of that group. This can lead to the sorts of things that happen in *1984* or other dystopian

fiction, where people grew up with only one “truth” and have been manipulated into a sort of mindless patriotism that promotes authoritarianism (in the guise of remembering a “reality” that existed only in textbooks).

History basically ties everything together, so having a basic outline is probably going to be a good thing regardless of whatever else you're doing on the world-building front.

Most Importantly: See, Touch, Taste, Smell, Feel Your World

Even if you've developed your world perfectly, you have all the religious systems ready to go, all the historical anomalies in place, all the volcanoes temporarily dormant and all the peoples in their towns, waiting for dawn to arrive, you could still end up with a dry, boring,

readily burned bit of parchment if your readers can't sense as much of it as possible. We should be able to smell the incense, taste the roast Christmas dragon, hear the frivolity in the pub just before we see and feel the magical black hole destroying it, even as our mug of ale is pulled from our hands and sucked into mystical singularity. It may not seem like part of world-building (and indeed, I found very little in the way of internet corroboration on this one; just part of “7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding” by Charlie Jane Anders and “Worldbuilding: How to Create a Believable World for Your Fiction Characters” by Emily Wenstrom and Tim Hillebrant), but as you are noting the way magic works, also take note of how it smells, what it does to the air around it, whether it looks like anything in particular. While you are regaling us with the Battle of the Armored Dragons, show us what it looked like from the dragon's point of view, how the human on its back smelled like it hadn't bathed in a month but might still taste like the moistest Christmas goose if properly bathed in dragonfire (if only the dragon could reach it!). Take a page from cooking and travel shows, where they try to describe just how that meal smells and tastes, how damp those castle ruins in the north of England feel, how that little bit of sunlight breaking through the clouds changes everything. Do this, and every other bit of world-building will be magnified tenfold.

Finally, the Broad Advice

After all that, I'm not even sure what to say. I feel exhausted from those final exhortations. But really, it all comes down to this: World-building is neither the be-all, end-all of storytelling, nor is it anathema; you will end up with at least as much world-building as you needed whichever process or route you take through storytelling, if you do your storytelling well. I would think that having more depth than you need is better than having less, certainly, and continuity mistakes will come back to bite you if you aren't careful, but ultimately world-building is about enriching your storytelling and giving depth to your characters, and gifting your reader with a thoroughly enjoying (or terrifying, or whatever –ing, just thorough)

experience that they can take with them. And that's the really amazing thing—that you can create a world your reader can live in, even if just for the time they are immersed between the covers of your book, and that they will fondly remember and deeply wish to visit again, when the time comes for your next book to come out ... and the next ... and the next.

Internet References

Following are some of the many articles with world-building advice on the Internet.

- “Worldbuilding: the Master Guide” by Michael Rowley (<https://blog.reedsy.com/worldbuilding-guide/>)
- “What Is World-Building?” by Moriah Richard (<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/what-is-world-building>)
- “Worldbuilding: How to Create a Believable World for Your Fiction Characters” by Emily Wenstrom and Tim Hillebrant (<https://thewritelife.com/worldbuilding/>)
- “World Building 101” by Ruthanne Reid (<https://thewritepractice.com/world-building-101/>)
- “7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding” by Charlie Jane Anders (<https://gizmodo.com/7-deadly-sins-of-worldbuilding-998817537>)
- “Against Worldbuilding” by Lincoln Michel (<https://electricliterature.com/against-worldbuilding/>)
- “An Impatient Writer's Approach to World Building” by Victoria Strauss (<https://victoriastrauss.com/advice/world-building/>)
- “25 Things You Should Know About Worldbuilding” by Chuck Wendig (<http://terribleminds.com/ramble/2013/09/17/25-things-you-should-know-about-worldbuilding/>)
- “The psychology of world building” by Gabriela Pereira (<https://www.writermag.com/improve-your-writing/fiction/world-building>)

The Commander

by Steve DuBois

It was all in pieces. The bits of Fabrice's weapon were arrayed before him, cleaned and oiled and ready for assembly, each component glinting dully under the tropical sun. But his stomach was growling with hunger, and the buzzing of the flies on the riverbank matched the buzzing in his head, and as he stared down at the pieces, he could not for the life of him remember how to put them back together again.

He *had* been taught how to perform the task. The months—years, now?—under Sergeant Muteba's leadership had taught Fabrice, and the other boys, a great deal. How to assemble and disassemble a weapon. How to scrounge for food in the unlikeliest places, and when necessary, how to make a meal of grubs and grass. The boys had been taught how to hold their nerve when the air filled with screams and hot metal, and when the enemy charged them across the broken fields, bayonets fixed and eyes wild with bloodlust, and how to swallow their fear and raise their rifles and squeeze the trigger, not pull it but *squeeze* it, yes, just so, and how to watch the light go out in the enemy's eyes; and how to think that this was a good thing, yes, a thing well done. They had been taught how to hold to the line next to one another. And on those occasions when the line collapsed, they had been taught how to bury one another. And how also to bury that other life they'd lived, in those now-extinct towns and villages, so long ago. Yes, that above all. The boys had been taught to forget. And now, sure enough, Fabrice had forgotten.

Your weapon is your life, Muteba had shouted at the boys, morning after morning, and here was Fabrice's life, in pieces before him. There was the spring, the bolt, the bolt carrier. There was the receiver, the dust cover, the gas tube. He had taken them apart and put them together a hundred times, but his head spun and today he

could not make them fit. Last night's supper had been only a handful of cassava, and he had given his portion away to Sony, who had been so exhausted after the twenty-kilo hike into the highlands that it had looked like he might never again be able to stand. Perhaps it had done some good, for Sony *had* risen again the next morning and had joined the column. Sony was several boys down the line from him now, sitting cross-legged on the riverbank, reassembling his own weapon. Muteba was coming back up the ranks, fixing each boy in turn in his yellow-eyed glare, and it seemed to Fabrice that Sony was doing well, considering. But Fabrice's own head spun with hunger, and he could not make the pieces fit. *He will beat me*, Fabrice thought, *and I am in no shape to take another beating. He will kill me, and there will be no one left to shield the other boys from him. Eshеле, who loves books ... Malaba, who talks of nothing but girls ... Gaussou, who plays the consummate soldier and shouts his love for war, but who is kind enough when he thinks no one is watching. Even Kama, with his red eyes and white skin, who is the most obvious target in every engagement but who never, ever gets shot, who says he cannot die, because he is a ghost already. They will put me in the ground, and they will move on, but there will be no one to protect them from Muteba.*

Fabrice fumbled with the spring, his hands shaking, and sought to thread it clumsily around the bolt. And that was when he heard the voice. "No, boy!" it said. "This is not how it is done."

Fabrice looked up. The voice had been that of a full-grown man, rich and booming, full of weight and purpose. It was the voice of one who, unlike Muteba, felt no need to shout. Yet when Fabrice looked up, there was no man present. Only the boys, cross-legged on the ground, and Muteba, more beast than man, working his way up the line.

“Look at all the pieces before you,” said the voice, not unkindly. Fabrice looked down, and all the parts were there. “It is a complex task, for one as young as you. A monumental task, even. Like eating an elephant.” There was a loud smack and a cry from down the line; Muteba was disciplining one of the smaller boys for some trivial fault. “Tell me, Fabrice, how does one eat an elephant?”

Fabrice looked up again. There was no man there. The other boys were playing a cruel joke on him, but who among them could pull it off? Who had such a voice? “I ...,” he began. “I don’t”

“One bite at a time,” said the voice. “One eats an elephant one bite at a time. Here. Allow me to assist you.”

Fabrice looked down. There was no act of will on his part; instead, he saw his hands go to work of their own accord. There was none of his boyish clumsiness in them; they did not shake with hunger or fumble with the gun’s components. Every action was strong, sure, and entirely outside of his control. The small end of the bolt slid into the bolt carrier, rotating counter-clockwise to seal with a click. The end of the bolt carrier group then matched up with the hole in the gas piston chamber, notches and openings aligning. As he watched, his hand pushed the carrier down and slid it into place. Next, the spring slid into the rear opening of the bolt carrier group ... and Fabrice was suddenly reminded of an evening in Muteba’s tent, the Sergeant drunk on lotoko mash and calling out to him, beckoning him closer, his face leering, his voice full of false cheer, his belt undone. Fabrice struggled to forget what had followed—but all the while, his hands never paused in their task. The rear end of the spring was already aligned with the notch in the receiver, and his hands had folded the rear sight forward; the front end of the dust cover was in place, and as his hands pressed down it shut with a snap.

“One bite at a time,” the voice repeated, and the strength and surety faded from Fabrice’s hands; they were once again his own, the hands of a boy, not of a man. Muteba was before him now, staring down yellow-eyed at Fabrice’s reassembled weapon; Fabrice stared steadily at the ground. *“I will not countenance eye contact,” Muteba says.*

Do not look up at him. You know what will follow if you do. At length, out of the corner of his eye, Fabrice saw the older man nod sternly, then proceed to the next boy.

Muteba had told them, many times, not to look directly at him. He had also told them not to talk. *“I will not countenance discussion in my presence,” Muteba said. “When you are alone with one another, you may be boys. But in my presence, I countenance only soldiers.” So why am I not being punished? Did Muteba not hear the voice?*

“Of course he cannot hear me,” said the voice, as if in answer. “Nor can the other boys. Only you can hear me, Fabrice. For it is you whom I have chosen.”

“Who ... who are you?” Fabrice whispered. “Are you a demon? And for what have I been chosen? Will you steal my soul?”

There was a brief silence. “No, Fabrice,” said the voice. “I am not a demon. Though some might say I once was one. And though your soul is of interest to me, I am not here to attain it for my own purposes. Who am I? I once had a name, though I scarce remember it. But you and the other boys are soldiers, no? A soldier has no name. A soldier has only a rank. Therefore,” the voice concluded, “let us call me the Commander.”

* * *

It was another engagement. There were no battles in Sergeant Muteba’s world, only “engagements.” Battles were things to be feared. Sergeant Muteba did not countenance fear. Battles were said to be glorious, and these things that happened to them every few days were not glorious in the least. So, yes. Engagements, not battles. Just so.

The routine was well-established. They hunted and tracked the rebels through the bush, or the rebels hunted and tracked them. Sooner or later, they came upon one another, and there followed a sputtering, flickering mess, devoid of tactics or strategy. The boys and their

enemies dove behind logs or into ditches; they took turns spraying bullets randomly into the opposite foliage in the hope that someone would pop their head up at the wrong time. Muteba, leading as always from the rear, would scream at them to advance; occasionally one of the new boys would heed him and, invariably, would be scythed down. The long-termers, survivors such as Fabrice, knew that to obey the order was to die, but to ignore it and pretend not to have heard was acceptable. The Sergeant could not live with the shame of being disobeyed, so if everyone disobeyed, he had to pretend never to have given the order at all. Eventually one side or the other would grow tired of the fiasco and retreat. Then it would be time to bury the bodies—men, occasionally, but usually the corpses on the other end of the fight were those of boys no older than themselves. The men of the nation had long since been used up. And then would come night, and Muteba would cook up the lotoko mash, and whatever boy had fought best in Muteba's eyes would be “invited” to share it, and to share the Sergeant's tent as well.

It was better not to fight too well. Better to keep your head down. And best of all, perhaps, would have been not to fight at all. But that was not an option, and with Muteba at the rear, any boy who fled would be shot down with the sergeant's own weapon.

They fought the rebels over anything or over nothing. Today they were fighting over a forest clearing. The rebels were hunkered down in the opposite trees, which extended rightwards up a gentle slope to a low bluff that commanded the whole battlefield. Fabrice and his comrades were ensconced behind a low rise in the tall grass on the other end of the clearing. It was gradually becoming clear, however, that there was something different about today's enemies; there was a pattern in the bursts from their guns, evidence of a plan, of sorts. Fabrice would have scented the danger even if the voice of the Commander had not suddenly emerged from nowhere. “Fabrice,” it told him, “they are trying to outflank you.”

Fabrice snuck a quick glance over the rise. It was true; there had been distinct movement in the trees off to the center-right. The enemy was seeking to gain a position on the bluff; if they gained it,

they could pour enfilade fire into Muteba's boys, attacking both from the side and from an angle above, rendering their cover useless. They would be massacred.

Muteba was, as always, screaming at them to advance. *That would be even more suicidal than usual*, Fabrice thought. *Advancing a flanked position will leave us entirely surrounded.* “What can I do?” Fabrice whispered. “I cannot retreat. I cannot advance, and I cannot stay where I am.”

“Think, boy!” The sonorous tones of the Commander's voice were somehow clearly audible even over the pop and crackle of the rifle fire. “They seek the bluff. Their attention will be directed at your current position. Prepare properly, and you may pay them back in their own coin.”

Fabrice swallowed and nodded. The next bit would be the hardest part, but if he could carry it off, he would save the whole platoon. *That is, if I can survive Muteba*

Fabrice desperately crawled backwards behind the rise; then, protected from the enemy by the sloping ground in front of him, he popped up into a crouch and raced off to the right at a dead sprint. He heard the Sergeant shouting behind him, heard the hum of bullets close behind as Muteba fired at him, but he managed to dodge and roll into a hollow beside Sony and Pierre, one of the new boys. Pierre's eyes were wide, his rifle preposterously huge in his tiny hands; he had been the youngest boy taken on the latest “recruiting drive,” and was in truth too young even for this battalion. It had taken all of Fabrice's persuasive powers to persuade Muteba to take him on as a soldier rather than to throw him into the burning hut beside his parents.

Quickly, Fabrice explained his plan. He would require covering fire from two directions—one boy would have to hold off the enemy, one would have to hold off their own sergeant. They nodded agreement, and then Fabrice was off again, like a shot, into the trees to the right, the roar and crackle of gunfire behind him.

Slow and silent, Fabrice worked his way deep into the woods, then circled back left. By the time he arrived at the clearing, the bluff now directly in front of him, three of the enemy had already gained command of its heights. They were preparing to pour fire down upon Fabrice's comrades. But it was as the Commander had foreseen. They were used to fighting pigheaded, straight-ahead types like Muteba. It had never occurred to them to think that someone might see them coming and prepare a surprise of his own.

Fabrice raised his weapon to his shoulder. The first shot took one of the enemy, a full-grown man with the look of hard-won experience, cleanly in the back of the head. The second, a man with skin so black it was almost purple in the afternoon light, turned just in time to catch the remainder of the burst full in the chest.

The third man was no man at all; just a boy, no older than Fabrice himself, his skin sallow and pitted with acne. His eyes were wide with terror, his weapon lowered; he knew he was done for. Fabrice raised his rifle again ...

... and suddenly, for the second time, his hands were not his own. He had intended to put a shot cleanly through the boy's forehead, but instead, his burst went skyward. The boy before him screamed, dropped his rifle, and ran, disappearing down the bluff and into the trees beyond.

Fabrice was livid. "Why?" he growled in a hoarse whisper. "They were the enemy! They wanted to kill us! They deserved to die!"

This time, the voice of the Commander was sad. "Fabrice," it intoned, "the first two deaths were necessary, to save your friends, but they were not *deserved*. No one in this war, save those who perpetrate and profit by it, deserves to die. And the third boy ... his death was neither deserved *nor* necessary."

Fabrice scowled and kicked a stone into the underbrush. "I fear, Fabrice, that you have seen too much death. I fear that you have grown too used to it, that you have grown a callus on your soul. Yet I

have also seen you show mercy and wisdom. You, of all these boys, are the only one who can ..."

The voice cut short as, suddenly, Muteba came racing out of the undergrowth and onto the bluff, followed by most of the other boys. "COWARD!" he roared. "TRAITOR! YOU HAVE DENIED US" He suddenly stopped short, staring like a stupid ox at the two corpses on the hilltop, and at the still-smoking barrel of Fabrice's rifle. And slowly, very slowly, a smile spread across his face as he realized exactly how close he had come to disaster, and exactly how that disaster had been prevented.

"Ah!" He shouted with sudden discovery. And then again, "Ah! A cunning stratagem, to be sure! An advance against the enemy, just as I ordered!" Muteba raised a warning finger to the other boys, who all averted their eyes at his yellow glare. "Did I not order you? And here, finally, is a soldier who takes orders!" He suddenly surged towards Fabrice and ensnared him in a monstrous bear hug, laughing wildly; Fabrice fixed his own eyes on the center of the big man's chest, smothered under his attentions. "I am a commander who will *always* countenance cunning and bravery! And Fabrice is cunning and brave, indeed!"

With one of the sergeant's arms still around him, Fabrice was whirled around to face the rest of the company. "A cheer for Fabrice!" The other boys raised their rifles in a ragged cheer, but Fabrice never saw them. His eyes were fixed on two figures in the distance, their backs turned, dragging two corpses towards the assembled battalion. Even from afar, Fabrice could recognize the bodies—Sony and Pierre, each riddled with bullets. Perhaps the bullets of the enemy, perhaps the bullets of Muteba and their comrades; who could say? And from a glance at the eyes of the boys around him, Fabrice knew that they would not say what role they might have played in the deaths of the two boys who had watched his back, that they were already forgetting.

We have all become so good at forgetting.

The entrenching tools were already out, digging a pair of shallow

ditches, but Fabrice was being half-dragged back to camp, Muteba's arm tight around his shoulders. "This calls for a celebration, don't you think? Yes, certainly! Let's have a drink, you and I, my brave boy ..."

* * *

Night had fallen. The firelight glistened off of Muteba's bare, brawny, scarred torso. Fabrice sat before him, eyes averted, as the sergeant scooped up yet another cup of lotoko from the basin. There were cobs floating in it, which meant that this would be a blind-drunk; tomorrow, the sergeant would barely be able to see. Fabrice could empathize. He had his own worries about seeing tomorrow.

"Command is a lonely burden, my boy, and a heavy one." He offered the cup to Fabrice, who shook his head, his eyes downcast. The big man shrugged and raised it to his own lips for a long gulp, then continued. "No man who has not picked up the burden can know its weight. No man can know the pain I feel at the loss of each man under my protection. Did you know that, Fabrice? Did you know that I feel these losses? You can look at me, you know. You have earned the privilege. I will countenance eye contact, under these unique circumstances." Fabrice kept his eyes low, and his face expressionless.

Muteba shrugged again. "As you will. It is true, though. I feel each loss." He shook his head. "But it is not the luxury of the commander to allow himself to feel these deaths as keenly as he might. For if the commander succumbs to grief, who will lead his soldiers? Who will ensure their safety, and the success of the mission? No. To be a commander is to learn to put one's own deepest feelings aside. It is but one of the many sacrifices one must make. One cannot look back. One must advance, my boy. One must always advance."

"Now, you, Fabrice," spoke Muteba, gesturing sloppily at him with the crude wooden cup, "it seems to me that you have the stuff of command in you."

A voice spoke, rich and resonant, a voice only Fabrice could hear. "Indeed."

"But you care too deeply, Fabrice," Muteba said, his words slurring. He shook his head again. "The boys will follow you. You proved that today, with Sony and the other one. They would risk their lives for you. But to allow yourself to care as you do? That is a mistake. To care too much can drive a commander mad."

The voice spoke again. "And you have no idea, fool, just how mad the Commander has become."

Fabrice risked a glance up. Muteba's eyes were already clouded with drink, his reactions slow and unsure, as he reached out an arm, wrapping it around Fabrice's shoulders. "Let me help you, Fabrice," he said. "Let me show you, as one soldier to another, how to cope. I will teach you to go away to a place inside where you cannot be hurt, where one can do that which needs doing without shame. Let us give you some practice." And Muteba's voice hardened for a moment as he reached down to loosen his belt. "That is an order, and I will not countenance dissent."

The voice spoke a third time. "No more than we shall countenance you any longer, Muteba." And when Muteba looked down at Fabrice, he saw a nine millimeter pistol in Fabrice's right hand, pointed directly at his heart. And when Muteba looked at his own belt, he saw his sidearm holster unlatched and empty.

"Your weapon is your life," Fabrice whispered. Muteba's eyes widened for a moment, and then a strange smile creased his face as he understood.

And the voice of the Commander spoke. "Here is a death, Fabrice, which is both deserved *and* necessary."

Muteba grinned at Fabrice. "Ah. But are you *sure*, boy? Have you truly learned the lessons I have tried to teach you? Are you truly ready to be a leader?" And Fabrice found that even now, he could

not look Muteba in the eye. And he knew that, in truth, he was not ready.

But he knew one who was.

“Allow me to assist you,” spoke the voice. And Fabrice’s hands were not his own, and they did not pull the trigger, no, but *squeezed* it, yes, just so, just as Muteba had taught him. There were two shots, surgical in their precision. And when the other boys came running to Muteba’s tent, their rifles at the ready, they found Muteba flat on his back, bleeding out in the dirt, and Fabrice standing over him, the pistol in his hand.

The boys stood in a half-circle, surveying the scene. At length, it was Kama who spoke. “This is not a bad thing you have done, Fabrice. But it *will* end badly for us. Now it will not just be the rebels who want to kill us, but the government as well. Now there is nowhere for us to run or hide. Now there is no one to lead us and tell us what to do. You have saved us, but you have doomed us as well.”

Fabrice opened his mouth to agree, but his voice was not his own. It was the Commander speaking through him, and though Fabrice’s voice was that of a boy, it suddenly held the authority of a man. “You are mistaken, Kama,” he heard himself say. “I have led you into peril, but I will lead you out again. Now you must trust my authority, and obey my orders. For I am the Commander.”

* * *

The journey was long and brutal, upriver and across the highlands and down again into the swampy, verdant, mosquito-infested plains. Kama had not been wrong in his prediction; the sporadic bands of rebels were only half the trouble. At some point the government forces must have worked out what had happened, because the boys were pursued. They travelled for fourteen hours a day, then for eighteen, then for twenty. It seemed to Fabrice that he barely shut his eyes at night before the Commander’s voice woke him, and he was shaking the other boys out of their own slumber and piling them back into the column and onwards.

All along the way there was conflict. And all along the way, there was mystery—for Fabrice had suddenly become a master of trickery and deceit, doubling back across streams to confound the enemy’s dogs, directing the boys to lay snares and rig deadfalls and dig pits to catch their pursuers. Had Muteba once taught them tricks like this? It seemed to some of the boys that he had, but who could remember? What had become of Fabrice? What could explain his transformation?

As for Fabrice, he could no longer converse as one boy to another with his former friends. Now, when they looked upon him, their eyes held not gratitude, but awe. Muteba had not been wrong; command was a heavy burden. But Fabrice refused to allow his duties to harden his heart; whatever he allowed the Commander to do with his hands or with his voice, his heart remained his own.

And finally, one day, they crossed the great western river, on the far bank of which lay another nation. And there the tents with the red cross beckoned, and the men and women in the sky blue helmets waited, with all the food a boy could eat and all the rest a boy could desire. With a chance at a new life, and with a chance to forget.

* * *

But Fabrice was not allowed to forget, because the Commander would not grant him the gift. Instead, the Commander made him remember.

Fabrice struggled to dam the tide, but the Commander’s influence was inexorable. It all came rushing back in upon him—the months of horror and pain, the harsh days and the harsher nights, all of Muteba’s cruelties, all of his fallen friends. All of the unspeakable “recruiting drives,” all of the things he’d been made to do to strangers in order to fill the holes in the platoon. And back further still, to the day he himself had been made a soldier—to the mother and father who’d loved him, and to what had been done to them before his eyes. And Fabrice had thought the pain would crush him utterly. He had curled up into a ball and had cried inconsolably for hours on end. It was a week before he emerged from his cocoon of pain, and

when he was finally able to open his mouth without a sob emerging, it was to ask the Commander, “How can you be so cruel?”

“This cruelty is a kindness,” the Commander told him. “This is a good pain, like the disinfecting of a wound. You must remember it all, Fabrice. You must never forget. It is remembering that will ensure that you never pick up a weapon again. It is remembering that will make you safe when I am gone.”

“But you cannot leave!” Fabrice protested. “I am not strong enough without you!”

“You were always stronger than you knew,” the Commander responded. “And across the river, there are yet boys forced to fight men’s wars. They need my help. They need me, Fabrice. They need us both.”

Fabrice sat on his cot, knees folded under his chin. Outside the medical tent, one of the men in blue helmets gestured towards the tent’s entrance. There were other men with him, men with cameras and with microphones, and also boys: Eshale and Gaussou. Fabrice heard snatches of their conversation, and heard his name mentioned often. “Who are you?” he asked the voice.

“I was a soldier, Fabrice. I led men into battle, and later, to my shame, I led boys. I am one who killed many enemies, and whose actions led to the deaths of many friends. But death came for me, eventually, as is the way of war. And yet I did not die, but live on. And it is my fate, Fabrice, to be one with the children I once led into battle—to share the hardships and suffering that men like me once inflicted upon them. My soul bonds with that of a boy. I share his fate and his experiences. I share his pain. And I must live on in this fashion forever—or until twenty-four hours pass without a single child in this nation firing a weapon in anger. Until that event occurs, I can never rest.”

“But ... that is impossible,” Fabrice said. “You have been set an impossible task.”

“How does one eat an elephant, Fabrice?”

For the first time in weeks, Fabrice smiled. “One bite at a time,” he responded.

“Yes. Just so.”

“How can I help?”

“You may help by becoming a soldier in *my* army, Fabrice. By refusing to take up arms again. By telling your story to all who will listen, for in this new war, your life is your weapon. And you may help by telling them about *me*, Fabrice. Spread the word to every corner of the nation, to every village and every camp. Let the boy soldiers know that the Commander is on the prowl, and that I am coming quickly to their aid, to be their partner and their shield.

“Who can say? It may be that, when my legend becomes known, the rules will change—that I am suddenly everywhere, all at once. That I am whispering simultaneously into the ears of many boys, speaking to them of their true strength, of what it truly is to be a man and to be a soldier. Whispering about who the true enemies are, and at whom the guns are to be pointed. Yes, just so.

“And tell the others, too. Tell the likes of Muteba. Yes. Tell them that the Commander is coming for them, as well.

“Tell them, Fabrice. Tell them the Commander is coming.”

There was no twinkling of the air, no apparition of mist or smoke appeared, to tell Fabrice when the Commander left him. Nor was there any diminution of his own newfound strength. There were only the men with cameras and microphones at his bedside, clicking away and asking their questions, and Fabrice greeted them with a smile.

What, after all, had Fabrice to fear? He was a man with a mission, ready to advance and fully in command.

Ghoul

by Jade



RE ██████████ STRUCT ██████████ ANT ██████████ #1

by Anton Cancre

(blackout poetry derived from Prayer Programme constructed by Dr. Stella Immanuel)

This ██████████ is ██████████
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I take back ██████████ my ██████████
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Drivers and Their Fares

by Lawrence Buentello

You want to know.”

Oncoming headlights flashed briefly in Montero’s eyes and woke him from the meditation into which he’d fallen after picking up his fare.

He regripped the steering wheel, noticing the sweat on his palms, and studied the street traffic. Not much happened after midnight in that part of the city, save for the occasional wreck caused by a drunk driver, but it was nearing the end of the month and surely the local police were anxious to make their quotas for moving violations. He glanced at the speedometer, then into the rearview mirror.

The man—if it was a man—met his gaze as if anticipating the act.

Montero refocused on the street, trying unsuccessfully to subdue the chill rolling across his shoulders. “Excuse me?”

“Everyone does.” The voice emanating from the back seat hovered in the air like an echo. “That is, everyone who doesn’t *already* know.”

I’m going to quit. Montero had told this to himself many times before; his motivation for wanting to do so didn’t come from the spectral reflection in the mirror, though the man’s pale skin and sunken black eyes might have been enough to motivate another driver. He’d been ferrying passengers of similar appearance for the last three months, so he was fairly used to the physical characteristics of his clientele. His dissatisfaction with the job was purely philosophical.

Montero glanced at his passenger in the rearview mirror again, trying

to read the expression on the gaunt face. Hairless, the man’s head seemed artificial, like a mannequin’s. Unnatural shadows disguised his lips and nose, so only his eyes remained in the reflection.

“I have no interest in knowing,” Montero replied as casually as possible. “What makes you think that I do?”

“One doesn’t *think* about these things, my friend. One only follows one’s instincts.”

“And you think all people have an instinctual desire to know?”

“You tell me.” The man sat silently for a moment. Then said, “What did you feel when you were met by those people carrying signs?”

Montero had been met by seven or eight people who were loitering on the sidewalk when he drove up to the man’s house. Some ordinary citizens, some still dressed in the uniforms of their religious office—shouting protests and prayers, waving signs of instruction for repentance and atonement. He’d seen many a priest and imam demanding compliance with religious principles from his fares. He held nothing against these protesters personally, and even respected their determination to demonstrate their convictions in a practical way, though their efforts didn’t seem to be making any impression on the social fabric. And their appearances never actually impeded his business with his clientele, since his clientele were now a protected class.

“I felt nothing,” he said, depressing the brake as they approached a stoplight. “They have their beliefs, just as you have yours. And I have mine.”

“They hate you for being neutral. Sooner or later, every neutral man or woman begins to believe in one philosophy or the other. It’s inevitable.”

“And you believe I’m no longer neutral?”

“That’s for you to decide. But I see a preference in your eyes.”

The light turned green. As Montero shifted his foot to the accelerator, he resisted the urge to glance in the rearview mirror again, irrationally so. It was undoubtedly too dark in the car to see his eyes reflected clearly. Still, the man’s conversation was beginning to unnerve him.

“Why are you a driver for those like me?” the man asked.

“It fits my schedule,” Montero said, anxious to change the subject. “I’m a student. The pay is good, and it’s mostly night work.”

The man laughed drily, and now Montero glanced in the mirror to see the man’s porcelain teeth gleaming in the streetlights.

“Yes, most of our engagements take place after sundown. Not always out of necessity. Atmosphere is an important aspect of our social gatherings.”

Company policy instructed its drivers to refrain from commenting on the interests of their clientele; Montero said nothing.

“What are you studying?”

“Civil Engineering.”

“Then you are a practically minded young man. You wish to live in the material world, is that correct?”

“I *do* live in the material world. Most people do.”

“That is of their choosing. But it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Silence fell between them as the car briefly entered the freeway onramp and Montero concentrated on the night traffic. He’d been a conventional driver before signing on with Corbin—but too often the road was commanded by trucks during the day, imposing more stress than he desired, and his class schedule interfered with a consistent paycheck. In the evening, though, he felt much freer and actually enjoyed sitting behind the steering wheel.

When they left the freeway, meandering through an ugly industrial strip full of shadow-dressed warehouses and disused manufactories, the man apparently decided their silence had endured long enough.

“There are many night jobs you could have taken,” the man said. “You could be working in one of these warehouses driving a forklift or a delivery truck. No, I believe you gravitated toward this occupation for other reasons. Subconscious reasons, perhaps.”

Montero smiled, though nervously. “You aren’t trying to recruit me, are you? I’m afraid my soul is spoken for.”

The man laughed again, obviously enjoying the conversation. “While you’re alive on this earth, your soul is never spoken for.”

Temptation everlasting, as Montero’s father might have said when he was alive. To what realm the man’s soul had flown when he died was still a mystery to his son. His father hadn’t handled his temptations competently.

“For now,” he said, trying to placate his fare, “my soul belongs to the mind and body of a college student pursuing a mundane career and a prosaic life. Things may change for me in the future, but right now that’s my reality.”

“Right now,” the man echoed.

Montero turned onto a side street and guided the car before a building disturbingly left in blackness. Once parked, he turned his head to study the front of the building, now flecked with aberrant light from

the headlights. The parking lot appeared empty, the surroundings abandoned, the building dilapidated. He was glad he'd left the car running.

"This is the address my dispatcher gave me," Montero said, halfway turning. "Are you sure there's someone here?"

"Yes, they're here," the man said, opening the door and stepping out of the car. "Very much so."

Montero thumbed a button and the driver's side window slipped into the door. "I'll wait until you're inside, just to be safe."

The man turned his spectral face to Montero, grinning. "If I wanted to be safe—"

The man said nothing more as he walked through the irregular patches of light from the headlights and approached a large metal door. He knocked confidently with a bony fist, and almost at once the door opened with a cry of rusty hinges. All Montero could discern from where he sat was a blood-red light emanating from a source within the building and the silhouette of the willowy figure that had opened the door. His client stepped across the threshold and became a silhouette himself; then both silhouettes vanished as the door closed on the night.

Montero sat staring at the unmarked building, wondering what activities were transpiring inside. His nerves were beginning to bother him. What little sleep he managed to get was frequently interrupted by unpleasant dreams.

I'm going to quit.

He raised the parking brake and turned out of the lot.

* * *

The garage had been converted from a standard taxi business into a specialized car service. Over time, ordinary taxis began refusing

service to night riders—drivers found themselves too uncomfortable in the presence of those with darker spiritual beliefs to reliably serve their needs. Because of this circumstance, Earl Corbin had transformed a failing taxi service into a solvent enterprise. And he seemed to have no problem serving his clientele.

Montero sat on one of the three plastic chairs in the cramped waiting area inside the garage adjacent to Corbin's office. The old man had silvered the window facing the garage, no doubt so he could monitor his drivers without being seen. In the bright lighting of the garage Montero could see his reflection clearly in the glass, the haggard features of a young man not yet twenty-three—his black hair needed cutting, his sunken cheeks a shave. His eyes were red—he needed sleep.

He'd come to speak to Corbin, despite the late hour, intending to resign.

When the old man finally opened his door, dense cigar smoke drifting from the office aromatically, Montero rose from his chair and shook his supervisor's hand. Corbin, a head shorter than Montero and stooped with age, waved him into the office and directed him to a more comfortable chair. Montero sat. The old man returned to the chair behind his desk before plucking a smoldering cigar from an ashtray and placing it between his lips.

"Now what's so urgent?" Corbin said before taking a puff of the cigar and returning it to the ashtray.

Montero rubbed his face wearily, then said, "I think I need to quit."

Corbin stared at him for a moment, his small, blue eyes gazing intimidatingly from a series of heavy wrinkles. "Why, Gilbert?"

"Personal reasons."

"The money is good, isn't it?"

"Yes, really good."

“Then why quit?”

Montero felt he didn’t need a reason. He wasn’t beholden to Corbin for anything—he was certain he’d been a good driver. But the old man had been generous enough to give him the job when he really needed the money, so he didn’t want to be rude. Still, he wasn’t sure he could put his objections into words.

“I don’t feel as if I should be driving these people around anymore,” he said.

“They’re people like everyone else.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.” Surely Corbin couldn’t have thought of them as just ordinary people, either. “I’ve been having bad dreams.”

“It happens,” Corbin said. He picked up his cigar again, but only gazed at it curiously before replacing it in the ashtray. Then his eyes met Montero’s again. “Are you sure your dreams are a consequence of working for me?”

“No,” Montero said, honestly. “But I *do* know that I’ve been increasingly stressed since I began working for you.”

“And it’s not the pressure from your studies?”

“No, I don’t think so. Knowing these people existed didn’t bother me before I began driving them. I knew they were out there, I knew their numbers were growing all the time, but that didn’t concern me. But after I started working here, I began to think about them, about where they were coming from and where they were going. What they were doing in those places.”

“Exercising their religious freedom,” Corbin said, smiling. “Do you remember our interview before I hired you?”

Montero nodded.

“Don’t you remember me asking you if you had any problem serving people with objectionable religious practices?”

Again, Montero nodded.

“You told me that none of that bothered you. That you didn’t really have religious beliefs of your own and didn’t care how these people conducted their social affairs.”

“I remember,” Montero said. “And I didn’t care, not then. But now I feel a little differently. I can’t help wondering about them. What they do, why they do it. Don’t you ever wonder, Mr. Corbin?”

The old man shrugged. “For me, it’s been purely a matter of free enterprise. I recognized a need and moved to fill it. My association with these people is nearly exclusive, not to mention lucrative, and that’s good for business. They had a need, and I had no objection to fulfilling it. I neither think about them nor about what they do in the privacy of their meeting places. It’s that simple.”

Montero considered this philosophy and wondered how the old man could remain neutral. Perhaps he possessed a stronger mind than Montero initially believed. But he also suspected his own beliefs were problematic. Sometimes he wondered if he’d taken the job for reasons other than the money.

“I think my problem is that I *am* curious,” he said, holding his hands up in faux surrender. “Wouldn’t you like to know what’s so seductive about their way of life? How they convert to it? What they *become*, after they do?”

“They made a simple choice,” Corbin said. “It’s the same choice we all face. You can try to embrace the classical virtues and live a moral life according to a given cultural viewpoint, or you can give yourself over to those beliefs and practices that cultural viewpoint considers corrupt. It just so happens that the version of corruption we’re talking about is now a protected way of life. I, myself, find it desirable to live with one foot in the virtues that were described to me as a child. Or,

at least, I try to live that way. I haven't changed my mind."

"But you're still willing to earn a dollar by associating with the corrupt?"

The old man laughed, his laughter soon transforming into an asthmatic wheeze. "The definition of *corruption* depends on the person giving it, doesn't it?"

Montero smiled in spite of his feelings. "I suppose so, Mr. Corbin."

"It's your choice, Gilbert. I won't try to keep you on if you feel threatened. Just know that if you keep a clear perspective on what you want in life you won't have a problem. Why don't you take a night or two off so you can catch up on your sleep? Then decide whether or not you really want to quit."

Montero sat back in his chair, having lost his resolve. He watched cigar smoke wreath the old man's face, as a sinner or a saint, he wasn't certain. Perhaps Corbin was right; perhaps he needed to clarify his thoughts on the matter. Enough sleep would clear his mind. The money, after all, was very good.

* * *

After two days he returned to work for Corbin.

With sufficient sleep had come a sense of control over his body and mind. Rejuvenated, he dismissed the nagging worry that had been plaguing him over the last few weeks and laughed off his irrational fears. He was young, after all, he felt strong, and a natural curiosity wasn't about to keep him from executing his long-term plans.

At midnight of the third night, Montero drove up to a solitary house in a quiet neighborhood expecting his typical fare—a disillusioned, middle-aged man bereft of hair and youthful ambitions resigned to an ill-advised path to potency. He didn't expect to see *her* stepping out of the house and approaching his car.

Tall, pale, but translucently so, she walked slowly in the moonlight, her long black hair strangely darkened by the streetlights. She wore a sleeveless black evening gown over her thin body, her bare shoulders glowing; a black bib necklace, adorned with shimmering blue stones, hung around her neck, accentuating her breasts. When she came near enough, he noticed her bright green eyes watching him. She wore long black gloves, and opened the door without making a sound. He'd been so preoccupied staring into her eyes that he'd forgotten proper protocol.

"I should have opened the door for you," he said, waiting for her to settle into the back seat before taking the car out of park. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for anything in this life," she said. A small smile met his gaze in the rearview mirror. "I'm a big girl, I can fend for myself."

He had to force himself to look away from her. He pulled the car out into the street and chastised himself for staring. He found her absolutely beautiful, but cautioned himself to remember that she was also a night rider, despite her beauty.

"It's a little chilly tonight," he said after a while. He wanted to hear her voice again; initiating a harmless conversation wouldn't violate any company policies. "Aren't you cold?"

She shook her head. "A little chill is good for a person. It wakes you up to the world around you."

Her voice was deep but feminine, a lovely voice. If she hadn't been his fare for that hour, he was certain he would have made of fool of himself complimenting her with the hope of sparking an acquaintance. Under the circumstances, he forced himself to acknowledge the company's rules of etiquette between drivers and their fares.

"Do you like your job?" she asked.

The question surprised him. He delayed answering while he turned onto the freeway and carefully merged with the late night traffic.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s convenient for my needs.”

“What are your needs?”

He grinned at the question, but remained polite. He told her about his classes and time requirements; he enjoyed telling people that he was a student, hoping to give them the impression that he was constructing a worthwhile life. She didn’t have to know that he often felt like an imposter while doing so; she didn’t have to know his secret feelings.

“So you have your life all planned out?” she said. “You know what you’ll be doing when you’re sixty?”

“I don’t know about sixty, but I’m pretty sure about thirty, possibly forty. I enjoy this job, but I want a career, not just a job.”

“Security is important to you?”

“I suppose.”

“I don’t want security in *my* life.” Her voice assumed a dreamy tone. “I want experience, I want spontaneity. I have no idea what I’ll be doing tomorrow, let alone twenty years from today.”

Montero desperately wanted to ask her about her life, and her reasons for wanting to find herself in *their* company. She wasn’t much older than Montero, perhaps thirty—why had she chosen that life?

“Everyone is different,” he said, glancing at her again in the mirror. He focused on her eyes, then her luminous red lips, and finally the shining necklace suspended above her pale breasts. He looked away, worried that she would be able to read his mind without much effort.

“I’m not sure that’s true,” she said. “The yin and yang of the universe seems to say that you’re either in the light or in the darkness at any

given time. That’s only two places to be. But you don’t sound unintelligent to me, you must know that.”

“Thank you. I try my best.”

She laughed, a sound that warmed his chest and left a fissure in his resistance.

“You’re very good at repartee,” she said. “I’m Alma. What’s your name?”

“Gilbert, but most people call me Gil.”

“I like you, Gil.”

I like you, too, Alma. He left the thought unspoken. Their conversation was becoming decidedly flirtatious, and he was enjoying it too much. She was his fare, nothing more. He had to remember the dangers of temptation.

“May I ask you a question?” she said.

“Sure, Alma.”

“Do you think I’m evil?”

Montero laughed at the impossibility of offering a politic response.

“What are you laughing at?”

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror again. She hadn’t taken offense; she was smiling warmly. “I’m not egotistical enough to think I can judge a person good or evil.”

“But surely you must know the reputation of the people you ferry around the city.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that reputation is deserved?”

He shook his head. “I honestly couldn’t say. I really don’t know your beliefs or activities.”

“So you feel you can’t judge people you don’t understand?”

Montero suspected he was crossing a line unambiguously drawn by Corbin’s policies. Still—he really wanted to know about *her*—

“No. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“But you’ve heard the stories about us.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the stories.”

She leaned forward far enough for him to feel her breath on his neck. “Do you think they’re true?”

Her breath felt like a light kiss on his neck. He forced himself to concentrate on the traffic until he could think clearly again. “I couldn’t say for certain.”

He watched her in the mirror as she leaned back into her seat. Her eyes sparkled in the light of the passing streetlights.

“They say we worship the devil,” she said, her voice still pleasant. “That we participate in blood sacrifices to gain the favor of demons and dark spirits. That we try to influence our social status in the world by martialing the assistance of evil forces, catering to their desires. Mass fornications with the spirits of hell, borrowing out our souls for the desires of demons, cursing all that’s holy and pure for the sake of material gain!”

She laughed enthusiastically, as if overcome by the humor of an absurdity too unnatural to be true.

Montero swallowed down his discomfort. He felt as if he were

walking down a dark, dangerous alley.

“People try to discredit what doesn’t conform to their understanding of morality and grace,” she said. “Don’t you agree?”

“I’m not sure that I do,” he said, trying to regain a neutral position. As beautiful as he found her, he was beginning to suspect her of manipulating his responses. To what end, he couldn’t say. “Is any of that true?”

“I’m sworn to secrecy, Gil. On pain of death.”

She laughed again, and now he felt less victimized. She was only joking, surely.

The car exited the freeway at last and Montero began maneuvering through the surface streets on their way to their destination. She remained silent in the back seat while he considered what she’d said. Or, more to the point, what she’d implied. Perhaps their “culture” was as depraved as the media portrayed. Or perhaps it really was only a lifestyle choice. But if that was the case, why was he still so curious?

No, there was no need for curiosity. He’d already carefully planned his life—an enlightening education, a successful career—and yet, he couldn’t keep his own dark desires from calling out from the secure place in his mind where he kept them locked away.

As if reading his thoughts, she said, “You know, good and evil are only arbitrary judgments, Gil.”

Her sudden interruption of the silence startled him. “I’m not a philosopher,” he said defensively.

“It’s not a matter of philosophy. It’s a matter of judgment. People say that one act is good and another evil, but in different contexts those definitions can be reversed. What is good can be evil, and what is evil can be good.”

“I don’t understand. The virtues are—”

“The law of averages is what the virtues rely on for their good reputation. Let’s say you see a poor man on the street and he begs you for money. You feel charity in your heart and give him every cent in your pocket to ease his suffering. You’d consider your act *good*, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“But what if he buys a gun with the money you gave him and kills other people for *their* money? You’d have to say that your generous act was responsible for the murder of other people. Which is *evil*, right?”

“But I’m only responsible for *my* acts, not the acts of others.”

“Are you? Because of you, evil has manifested. You are the source of this evil. But you deny it because you wish to interpret it differently. Every human act falls into the same category. We can either proclaim it to be a good act, under the circumstances, or an evil act. We justify everything we do that way. Just wars, for example, or doing what’s *good* for others even when they don’t think so. But it’s still oppression.”

“What’s the point then, Alma?”

“Only that what people say about me and others like me is an arbitrary judgment. If you asked me, what I’m doing is very good for me. And that’s enough to justify my participation in it.”

Damn it, why did he get drawn into this conversation? Of course he saw her point, but he also knew he shouldn’t examine that point too closely. Like Corbin, he had to keep one foot in the virtues. At the moment, he had a difficult time explaining to himself why it was important; perhaps he was only recalling his father’s example.

Montero noted the passing street numbers.

“We’re almost there,” he said.

“Pull over for a moment.”

He stared at her in the rearview mirror. “I beg your pardon?”

“Pull over for a moment, Gil. I want to ask you a question.”

“It’s really against company policy—”

“To hell with the rules. Please, Gil.”

He pulled the car over in front of one of the houses on the street, slipped the gear into park, and waited.

He heard her move forward again and turned to look at her. Her eyes held him; her long, black hair settled over her white shoulders like a shroud.

“I would love to have a protegee,” she said. “Someone who could share my experiences with me. I see something in you, Gil, I feel it in my soul. You want to learn new things, you want to break away from your ordinary life. I can’t tell you *how* I know, but I do. I see the desire in your eyes, too.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“Don’t answer me now.” She leaned back, settling in shadows. “Just know that I’m sincere. If you ever wanted to know about our way of life, I’d love to give you that knowledge.”

Montero turned, troubled by his feelings for her.

He pulled away from the curb and drove on to the house to which he was delivering her. They drove in silence, but his mind was full of sounds, impressions, sensations.

Before she opened the passenger door she leaned forward again and

whispered in his ear, “You would have me, too, Gil.”

She gently kissed his ear while he sat frozen in place, then she exited the car and gracefully walked up to the door of the house and knocked. He watched the door open on a painfully red light which engulfed her before closing.

Now alone, he reviewed everything that had transpired that night and wondered why he wasn't driving away. A question lingered in his mind, but it was hazy and unformed. He sat for a long time trying to define it, and when he finally did it emerged in his thoughts as a question: why hadn't he been able to quit his job as a driver?

He sat staring at his own eyes in the rearview mirror, trying to see what she'd seen in them. But all he could see were *her* eyes, green and dazzling, in a face that held the answer to the question of his desire.

Montero waited for her all night.



Eva

by Christina Sng

What Good Girls Do

by Lauren Marrero

I'm a good girl, or at least I try to be, but sometimes life gets in the way, and by "life" I mean gorgeous, half-naked bodybuilders with Australian accents. One minute I was sitting in my favorite café, sipping an insanely overpriced seasonal latte, and the next my ears were ringing with the sound of gunshots and I was being hauled across the shop by said bodybuilding thief.

A robbery.

This was sadly not unheard of in this part of Oakland, California. Being taken hostage was also believable, as was my kidnapper's need to remove his shirt after the altercation to see to his gunshot wound--it wasn't fatal. But what I couldn't wrap my head around was his perfect pectorals glistening with sweat in the wan afternoon sunlight. Those made no sense. Guys like him only exist in action movies or on the covers of magazines, certainly not in ... where the hell was I anyway?

I remembered being used as a human shield, proving definitively that chivalry was dead, before being dragged out the back door and through a confusing warren of alleys. I had no idea where I was, I didn't think the cops did either, and as I stared at his cinnamon-kissed nipples, my brain was slow to decide if that was a good thing or not.

"Oi!" he finally noticed my dazed expression. "Are you alright?"

"Oh yeah," I replied, not knowing what else to say. "I'm fine."

I'm always fine, even when I'm not. That's my superpower: I'm astoundingly fine in all situations. I was fine when my parents told my 18-year-old self that I'd have to pay my own way through

university--I'm currently living in a van as a result. I was fine when my ex told me he was ditching me for a cheerleader. I was even fine when a bird decided the only place to do its business that morning was on my shoulder. I am *always* fine.

A hysterical giggle escaped my lips. Yup. Perfectly fine.

"So, you're a robber," I stated baldly. That certainly wasn't the most impressive observation. "Of coffee shops."

"It's been a slow week."

"I bet."

He stared at me for a moment, genuinely surprised that I was stupid enough to insult a man with a gun.

My fingers itched. All that skin ... All that sweat and I ... Well, what was I supposed to do, let him bleed to death?

Yes, that's *exactly* what I should have done considering the situation. Letting him die would be the perfect way to remove myself from danger. If I was smarter, I wouldn't even consider touching him, but just as I'm not a good girl, I'm apparently not a very smart one either.

"Hold on." I finally touched him, helping to stop the blood seeping from his shoulder. With the bandage he found from ... somewhere.

"You don't have to," he protested, as he shifted away from my touch. "I used you as a human shield."

“Yeah, but this is Oakland. You’re not the first.”

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t think they’d shoot.”

It kind of did. I silently promised to call the mental health crisis hotline after this and work out my bad boy obsession.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” I surmised.

“Is it the accent?”

“That, and any local would know the cops here *always* shoot.”

That remark earned me a dry chuckle from my kidnapper, but instead of easing my discomfort, I felt a pang of anxiety. Despite the physical temptation, I didn’t want my kind of crazy to be compatible with his.

“Does nothing faze you?”

“Ask me again closer to finals.” I blinked weary eyes and turned away to survey our surroundings. We were in some kind of warehouse, but that observation didn’t do much to enlighten me. Outside, all was quiet. Perhaps we were in an abandoned building near the marina. “Can I go home now?”

“Not yet,” he replied as he gingerly replaced his bloody shirt. I tried not to appear too disappointed when all that skin was covered up. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous for whom?” I replied testily.

“For you if you keep asking questions. Just relax.”

In other words, “shut up and don’t make trouble, “ I mentally translated. That was probably why he chose me in the first place. A female of my small stature was definitely easier to control than say, a rugby player. I felt my lips curl in self-loathing. So far, I’d proven his judgment correct.

“Look here, *mate*,” I began, feeling my irritation rise as the adrenaline began to wear off. “I don’t know who you think ...”

“Quiet!” he hissed, and pressed his hand over my mouth. I grimaced at the coppery taste of blood on his fingers, but he wouldn’t let me pull away.

Gradually I became aware of the faint shuffling noises from outside, as if someone was looking around the place and trying to peer into the windows. Surely it was the same officers from the café, diligently combing the area for my oh-so-deserving self.

I began to struggle against my kidnapper, but froze as I felt his warm breath caress my ear with the low-pitched words: “Those aren’t cops.”

I tensed--once the erotic shiver finished traveling along my spine. Who else could they be and how would he even know that?

It didn’t make sense, but strangely, I found myself curious about the hot Aussie that traveled all the way to Oakland to stick up a coffeeshop. This must be some fast-working Stockholm’s, I thought in derision. But so far, he hadn’t been too violent with me, and being a good girl, or even a smart one, didn’t come naturally.

“Okay, talk,” I demanded a few moments later, when he finally removed his hand from my mouth. “What’s going on?”

“Long story, short,” he replied. “I came here looking for someone, stuck my nose where it didn’t belong, made a few enemies, and learned stuff that some folks don’t want to get out.”

“What are you, an undercover cop?” I inquired. “I guess you could be a gangster, but that accent makes me think white collar.”

“Keep an open mind,” he lightly chided.

I turned the full force of my frankly-assessing stare upon him and

after a few moments' consideration announced: "You're not stupid."

"Thank you."

"That leaves crazy or desperate," I finished, and mentally noted that the two weren't mutually exclusive. He didn't reply and I decided that my curiosity was sated enough and it was time to finally get off this crazy train.

"Okay. Well, I hope you find whomever it is you're looking for," I continued, and began inching toward the door. "Umm ... enjoy the rest of your time in the States."

I reached for the doorknob and felt his hand cover mine, cutting off my escape.

"I need you," he softly intoned, and I had to remind myself that he wasn't talking about in the bedroom. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, but maybe we can help each other."

"We can't."

"I could put a gun to your head," he pointed out.

"You already did," I reminded him and then sighed in defeat, for although I didn't think he wanted to kill me, I also didn't think it would bother him too much if he did.

"Like I said, I've made a few enemies. Folks are looking for me, but they're not looking for you, at least not alone. I need you to do something for me."

"Is it dangerous?" I asked, though I could already imagine the answer to that. Of course, it was dangerous, that's why he couldn't do it himself, but my perverse nature wanted him to admit it.

"That sort of thing doesn't faze you, right?" he tried to tease and earned a glare for his levity.

"What do you want?"

His hooded gaze raked up and down my slight frame, covered in baggy jeans and a sweatshirt. I had no illusions about my sex appeal at the moment. I hadn't shaved or showered thanks to a midterm paper I barely managed to submit minutes before the deadline. Yesterday's eyeliner had left racoon smudges around my eyes, and my deodorant had long ago lost its potency. I was delirious with exhaustion, which went a long way to explaining my cavalier attitude. With more sleep this entire encounter might have gone differently.

"You have potential," he announced, zeroing in on my barely-there bosom.

"Potential for what?" I replied, perplexed. He had some peculiar tastes if my funky self was turning him on.

"You're an elf, aren't you?"

To my credit, I barely blinked at his question, but was nonetheless taken aback by his keen eye. Most humans had elaborate Tolkien-esque fantasies about elves as a race of supermodels that lived in forested palaces and danced naked in the moonlight. With my pug nose, freckles, and unruly black curls, I'm nothing close to that. Plus, I'm poor, ill-mannered, and not good for much besides studying mechanics. I'm the tinkering-type, with dreams of becoming a modest, middle-income engineer, and my ears are *always* hidden.

"Beg pardon?" I replied as nonchalantly as possible.

"You are," he maintained. "I knew it as soon as I saw you. I bet all that hair really comes in handy for hiding your ears."

"You're crazy ..." I replied, and backed up a step. There was another reason why I chose that particular coffeeshop. It was a dive, a local hobo hangout that attracted all sorts of sketchy and questionably-groomed individuals--the types that wished to caffeinate with people

that didn't stop and stare. Piercings, tattoos, fangs ... nobody looked twice and nobody cared. But a human shouldn't have known that.

"Don't worry," he tried to assure me, as if he could hear my heart hammering in my chest. I suddenly remembered my mother telling me horror stories of humans coming after our kind with flaming torches and pitchforks. They always believed we had some treasure hidden away, or the power to grant wishes, because humans *always* deserved to be the recipients of another's gifts. "I'm not into the kinky stuff."

"Kinky ..." I dumbly replied, for although I'd heard about the torches and pitchforks, my mother's stories had been short on "kinky stuff." Part of me was more than a bit curious, but a wiser part of me decided I didn't want to know.

I was so confused, I missed his questing hand as it reached for my head, pulled back my curls, and ran a finger along the tips of my ear. Reflexively, I slapped him in the face.

"Don't!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I had that coming," he replied, and actually looked contrite. "I'm just saying, you don't have to pretend with me. I know what you are and I think we can help each other."

"I don't want anything from you except to be let go."

"Look at yourself," he insisted. "Living in squalor, barely getting by with student loans. You're an Exalted Being. You deserve better than this. What if I told you that there was a place where folks like you lived in the open? It's a never-ending party with only the best and the brightest."

"A place which is obviously off-limits to a human like you," I surmised, dryly.

"This place is unlike anything you can imagine," he continued as if I hadn't spoken. His excitement exploded as he got into his story, and

despite my misgivings, I was intrigued. "It makes your café look like a homeless shelter. I'm talking about Shangri-La, and it's in the heart of San Rafael county."

"And what do you need from me?"

"Just look around, and if you see the person I'm looking for, give them a message."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

I didn't like it. The whole thing smelled funny, and after a lifetime of hiding my identity, the idea of going to such a place filled me with dread. Elves aren't the only mystical creatures out there, but we are some of the tamest. There are plenty of other mystical creatures that I had no desire to meet. What if he was sending me into a werewolf hunt with me as the sacrifice?

Even as I thought this, another part of me was intrigued, and knew I just might be dumb enough to go, despite the risks. The real question was: how much did I trust this guy not to get me killed? Not much, but I already said I'm not very smart. Might as well own it.

"And how will this help me?" I wanted to know.

"No offense, but these folks are way out of your league. You could live your whole life in the Bay Area and never hear of them. You're not one of them and never will be, but I can get you in. You'll be in the same room as the richest and most powerful folks in the world. What happens next is up to you."

"And you think I want this?" I couldn't help challenging the quaint notion that everyone was desirous of an advantageous position. My humble major attested that I was not that person.

"If nothing else, you can think of this as a sociological experiment.

Aren't you even a little curious? Plus, I have a gun."

"You said you didn't want to hurt me."

"That doesn't mean I won't," he pointed out. "But I was hoping to convince you without the threat."

"Very well." I sighed in defeat, licked my thumb, and used the saliva to wipe some of the smudged eyeliner from beneath my eyes. "How do I look?"

"It's a start," he chuckled and reached up to smudge the eyeliner a bit more. This time I managed to stop myself from punching him when he touched me. "But we have a long way to go."

He was right about that. Immediately after agreeing, he took me on a whirlwind journey through shops I didn't even know existed. They were mostly hole-in-the-wall establishments, where the patrons didn't bat an eye at our disheveled and blood-stained appearance. In the heart of San Francisco's infamous Castro district, there was a plethora of secondhand boutiques that were used to costuming everyone from drag queens to renaissance faire attendees. For me, he chose a gown previously owned by the San Francisco opera. I just hoped none of the partygoers were theater patrons.

Next came an orgy of plucking, prodding, and *beating* my face with makeup with all the sensitivity of a prizefighter. He seemed to take perverse pleasure in baffling me with the incomprehensible ritual of grooming until I was ready to ignore the gun he still carried and hit him again.

It was with a mixture of horror and relief that we finally sped through the hidden canyons of San Rafael in a purloined Mercedes. He looked as confident as ever, but I was fighting the urge to puke. Despite his best efforts, I felt like a teenager playing dress up for the prom. There was no way anyone would think I belonged at such a place, regardless of my blood.

We pulled up to the gates of a sprawling mansion just as the sun disappeared below the horizon. I was shaking in my seat. No doubt streaks of the liberally-applied makeup were running down my face mixed with sweat.

"You've got this," he tried unsuccessfully to encourage me while dabbing my forehead with a tissue. "If you don't find him in 20 minutes, you can leave and never see me again."

"It'll take them 20 *seconds* to call me out as an imposter."

"Look at yourself," he insisted, and turned the rearview mirror until I could see my face. To my skeptical eyes, I looked like a clown doing a parody of a popstar. "You look gorgeous. Now get out there and make me proud."

"And if I take this opportunity to run away?" I felt the insipid need to challenge.

He smiled and flipped open his jacket pocket where my cell phone, money, and ID resided. "You can try."

"Twenty minutes." I sighed and plastered a bright smile on my face as a valet opened my door from the outside.

"Knock 'em dead."

I hesitantly stepped out of the car, feeling like the biggest imposter in the world. This was exactly the kind of party an international spy would sneak into to tango with a ridiculously-named criminal vixen. In this scenario, I wondered if I was the spy or the criminal.

"All I wanted was a cup of coffee," I muttered as I made my way past the foyer.

The place was indeed lavish, and filled with the rich and famous, who felt no compulsion to hide their true natures. For the first time in my life I tucked my riotous curls behind my ears in front of a crowd.

It felt terrifying, and a bit ... good.

It was inherently dangerous, and yet freeing. Vampires, ogres, and all sorts of creatures mingled freely in the sumptuous ballroom. I caught my fair share of hungry gazes from the predators, but everyone was on their best behavior. There was a tacit agreement that, at least within these walls, we were all friends.

Not for the first time, I wondered about my mysterious kidnapper and how he managed to wrangle an invitation. Had he deliberately stalked my coffee shop, looking for a creature like myself who might pass? I suppose that made more sense than him actually robbing the place. But if that were true, then who were the “cops” that tried to shoot him?

I shook my head in confusion. It wasn't my problem. I just had to deliver a message and get out, and that's exactly what I intended to do. For the first few minutes I had been awed by the pomp and glitter of it all, but it didn't take long before my skin began to crawl. It was too much. This brazen display of power and beauty was too foreign to me. My blood might have gotten me inside, but I didn't belong here, and I couldn't wait to be rid of the place.

All I needed was to find a large man with black hair, one green eye, and one blue. That shouldn't be too difficult, but in this crowd, making eye contact wasn't the smartest idea. It wasn't long before I was avoiding the advances of at least one gentleman who had mistaken my gaze for an invitation.

Exactly 20 minutes after I entered, I turned to leave. I had sincerely tried my best, but there was nothing more I could do. I had looked in every room, but the man wasn't at the party. Unfortunately, just when I thought I was finally out of danger, I caught sight of a particularly lecherous vampire sniffing in my direction. He was big and black, but unfortunately both of his eyes were deep pools of liquid mahogany. He wasn't the one I was looking for, but my searching gaze made me appear open to his advances.

I quickly ducked into a corridor off the main entrance before he

noticed me, but he now stood between me and a quick exit. There was no way past him and I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself with an uncomfortable confrontation. There was no choice but to follow the hallway in the opposite direction and see if it eventually led outside.

Prior to this I didn't think it was possible to get lost inside someone's home, but this maze of a mansion could give the Winchester Mystery House a run for its money. Twisting staircases led into empty rooms. Hallways emptied into other hallways. It was as if this place was deliberately designed to confound people, and perhaps it was, considering the dangerous secrets it housed.

It was so faint I almost didn't notice it. A soft moan, like a wounded animal, rumbled through the air vents. I tried to follow the sound, and wondered as I did if I weren't making a colossal mistake. In a place like this, the noise was bound to lead to something with teeth and claws. But I was hopelessly lost anyway. I figured that if I could identify the location of the noise, at least I'd have a fixed point to know where I should run away from.

It wasn't long before I found it: a large chamber that looked like something from a medieval dungeon. I peered through thick iron bars covering a tiny window into the prison and gasped in shock. The creature locked inside was definitely big and black, but that's where the similarity ended, for though I was told to look for hair, the thing behind the bars was covered in a pelt of thick, black *fur*.

I shook my head in disbelief and hastily backed away.

Nope!

There was no way I was going in there. That thing had been locked up for a reason and I would be the biggest idiot on the planet for going inside. Besides, I couldn't possibly be expected to deliver my message to a beast, right? But everyone in this place was technically a beast, my mind corrected. It was all a matter of type.

I shifted my weight back and forth on my toes in indecision, and finally, after a lengthy internal debate on foolishness, I shuffled back to the door and peeked inside again. This time my gaze was met by one green eye and one blue.

Crud. The heterochromia iridium confirmed this was the fellow I was supposed to find.

Life wasn't fair. Perhaps I could lie and say I couldn't locate him, but I'm a terrible liar. As a child, I hadn't been able to get away with anything. The hot Aussie would definitely see through my ruse, but which was more terrifying, being threatened by a gun or teeth?

The creature was definitely aware of my presence, but so far hadn't uttered so much as a growl in my direction. Somewhat emboldened, I looked around the darkened cell and spied a silver chain anchoring the beast to a wall. A *silver* chain for a werewolf? I suppose Hollywood was right about that at least.

"Excuse me," I whispered through the bars. Not so much as a pointy ear flicked in my direction. Nonetheless, I continued. "I'm supposed to deliver a message to you and I need you to confirm receipt. Could you please change back to human for a minute?"

Nothing.

"Excuse me," I began again, and then stopped with a sigh. That blasted chain probably had some sort of gimmick that kept him in beast form. Either that or he was an asshole.

Greatly daring, I picked the door lock and then tiptoed inside. According to my calculations of the length of the chain, he shouldn't be able to reach me if I stayed near the door, but in my current state, I was likely to do him the favor of dropping dead from fear anyway.

I inched a little closer and studied the chain. Yup. It definitely kept him in fur and teeth. That Aussie was lucky he had snatched the tinkering kind of elf because, despite having no cultural finesse, I was

actually perfect for this job.

"I can get you out of this," I offered, and one piercing green eye finally rolled in my direction. "But I need you to promise not to eat me."

No response.

"Honestly, I'm all bones and gristle anyway. It's much more trouble than it's worth. You should just immediately turn back into a human and confirm receipt so we can both be on our way."

This time he uttered a long-suffering sigh at what I assumed was my lack of intelligence. I was frankly getting sick of being belittled by men today.

"Look asshole," I growled, and finally got him to turn completely in my direction. "I don't want to be here, and from the looks of things, neither do you. Give me 5 minutes of your oh-so-precious time and then you can go back to languishing in peace."

That finally got a single tail thump from the beast, which I took as a sign of agreement.

"It had to be a werewolf," I growled, uncaring if he heard me. "Of all the creatures in Grimm's grimoire it had to be a werewolf. Unbelievable! Next time a hot Australian tries to force me into helping him, I'm gonna let him shoot me."

The chain was a bit trickier than the door, but there wasn't a lock on this planet that I couldn't figure out. The banks of the world were lucky I decided to focus on engineering instead of theft.

When the device came loose, I quickly stepped back, though if this guy wanted to attack me, there was little I could do about it.

"You gave a tail thump," I hastily reminded him as he laboriously climbed to his feet. He must have been chained for quite a while, for

he moved as if all of his limbs had fallen asleep. He gingerly limped back and forth across the cell, thankfully staying as far away from me as the small space allowed. “So that means you won’t eat me.”

He groaned again and finally, painfully began to transform.

I had never seen anything like it--and frankly never wanted to do so again, yet I was transfixed in a mixture of awe and horror. Bones popped and crunched into shape while his fur changed from a thick, luxurious coat to a light sprinkling of hair. Frankly, I didn’t know whether to weep or vomit.

Faster than I thought possible, the strange show was complete and a man stood before me, gloriously and unashamedly nude.

“Pardon me,” he finally spoke when all I did was stare at his penis. “But who are you?”

“Mm ... mmm ... Maggie,” I managed to stutter, though I didn’t raise my eyes. “Wait a sec, you’re Australian, too? What the heck is going on? Is this an invasion?”

“What other Australian are you referring to?” he inquired, and strode past me to the door. As he passed, I switched to watching his firm buttocks. It was a bit small for my tastes, but nicely-shaped.

“An annoying one, though that’s not much of a distinction, is it? He has a message for you. Confirmation required.”

“I’m frankly more concerned with getting out of here. Any chance you could help me get past some locked doors?”

“Any chance you could cover yourself?” I ripped one of the luxurious hangings off the wall and waited for him to wrap it around himself like a toga. “It’s seriously distracting.”

That statement made him finally stop and look at me, and I mean *really* look, as if I was a curiosity on display. Under his intense regard

I felt even more aware of my unsophisticated self. He gazed at me as if I was a broccoli salad when he’d ordered steak. Well, I wasn’t exactly thrilled with the events of this day, either.

“You’re exceptionally honest,” he finally announced, but the words didn’t sound like a compliment. “What are you anyway?”

For the first time in my life I proudly thrust my shoulders back and proclaimed, “Elf.”

“Well, Maggie the Elf,” he replied. “How are we going to get out of here?”

“I’m going to walk out the front door,” I answered truthfully. “Please don’t confuse this for a rescue mission.”

“So, you’re just going to leave me here? Don’t you need confirmation of your message?”

“Not if I say I didn’t find you,” I pointed out. “I mean, I did get you out of that cell. Can’t we just call it even?”

Instead of answering, he once again turned the full force of his luminous eyes upon me. I could lie, I could totally lie, I tried to convince myself, but the only person I had successfully lied to was myself when contemplating a Brazilian-cut bikini.

“Alright,” I grumbled in defeat, and was genuinely perplexed at my newfound charitable nature. “We’ll get out of this together, but if I see even a hint of fangs, I’m ditching you.”

“Mac.” He held out one large, tanned hand. “Lead the way.”

I raked my mind, trying to put together a mental map of this warren. I had a pretty good idea of the size and layout of the exterior of the mansion, and thanks to my confused wanderings, I could sense a vague pattern to the interior construction as well.

I determined that the mansion had been built in phases over time, with major renovations throughout the years to upset anyone that managed to get ahold of the original blueprints, but with careful attention I could just make out subtle changes to the structure. As rooms were divided and enlarged, different materials created variations in shape and texture. Squinting in the dim light of the corridor, I could see the faint gradation of a newly-painted wall where a doorway used to be, or an abnormally-shaped corner where a room had been divided. Not for the first time I wondered what kind of people were paranoid enough to go to such lengths for privacy.

“Okay, Mac. I believe if we continue in this direction, we’ll eventually reach the southwest parking structure,” I replied, pointing in the correct direction. “The difficult part will be to find the path that leads there. How good is your nose in human form?”

“Good enough,” he replied confidently. “Why?”

“There’s some wisteria in bloom there. Can you smell it?”

“Maybe?” He gave an experimental sniff and then grinned. “I got it. Let’s go.”

It was strange to realize, but an elf and a werewolf actually made a pretty good team. I was the analytical side of the partnership and helped to keep us on the right path, while his nose and superhuman strength were invaluable. More than once he was able to rip through a wall where I would have backtracked or taken a detour. And could smell different construction materials that were indistinguishable to my eyes.

We were making steady progress until, right as we reached the parking structure, our luck finally ran out. Five creatures suddenly stepped out of the darkness as we approached the annexed building.

Where the partygoers had been intimidating in their disregard for concealment, they were still clothed in the thin veneer of respectability, if only by their fancy dress and adherence to the house

rules. These animals, however, had no such coverings. They were beasts in the most literal sense of the word: werewolves in animal form with teeth bared and ready to attack.

One man stepped out from the shadows to stand proudly in front. He was also dark and hirsute, but unlike Mac’s heterochromia, this man’s eyes glowed like two shimmering beads of amber.

“Hello cousin,” he addressed Mac. “Going so soon?”

“Marcus,” Mac replied. “I told you I’m not here to fight. Just let me go.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” Marcus spat on the ground. “I bet you couldn’t wait to come back and challenge for alpha.”

“I don’t want it!” Marcus growled. “But if you want to fight, I’m more than willing.”

As the two werewolves growled and traded insults, I decided this was the perfect opportunity to sneak away. Message be damned, I’d more than done my part, and if my kidnapper had a problem with that, then he could come and jump in the middle of this brawl himself.

I began shuffling backward into the shade of a wisteria, hoping the darkness and scent would conceal my movements. It would have worked if one of the werewolves hadn’t been so eager to protect the space. He grabbed the hem of my gown in his teeth, threatening to rip the delicate silk off completely, and tugged me back toward the courtyard.

“Listen,” I tried to reason. “I don’t know who you are or what’s going on, but I’m not part of this. I don’t want to be here, and I’m planning to treat this whole thing as nothing more than a nasty nightmare.”

“An elf?” Marcus sneered derisively, as I caught his attention. “You really are slumming.”

I flared my nostrils at the insult and tossed my curls so that the tips of my ears were more clearly visible. “This elf managed to get through your locks and your maze of a mansion,” I pointed out. “And I managed to free *him*.”

My mouth snapped shut as soon as those provocative words left my mouth, but it was too late. For about the hundredth time that day I wondered why I couldn’t be just a bit smarter. Seriously, what kind of idiot was I to upset the leader of a pack of werewolves, even if he’d insulted me? “I ... I mean ...”

“Where did you even come from?” Marcus demanded. “How did you get in here?”

“She’s with me.”

Just then my kidnapper, and the target of most of my internal cursing, appeared. We were close enough to the parking lot that he must have heard the commotion and decided to investigate. I was miffed to realize that if he had managed to sneak in this way, he could have also snuck into the cell and rescued Mac himself.

“Of course, she is,” Marcus scoffed. “An elf and a human. This gets better and better.”

“I was good enough for your party,” I pointed out.

“Yes, you have your uses,” Marcus gave a lecherous grin. “Dexterous, little fingers.”

“You sonnova ...”

“Maggie, Tom!” Mac interrupted me before I could completely lose my cool and tell this A-hole exactly what I thought of him. “Get out of here. I’ll handle this.”

Tom, so that was the name of my kidnapper. After all that happened, this was my first time hearing it. He’d been deliberately sparse with details,

and I’d been content not to deepen our relationship even that much.

“She’s not going anywhere,” Marcus replied. “Nor is your pet human. I’m going to eliminate you once and for all, and that includes your freaky little harem. It doesn’t matter if you want the title or not, you are of the blood, and no matter where you go or what you do, you’ll always be a threat to me.”

“Then let’s do this,” said Mac, resigned. “Just you and me. Leave them out of it.”

“Gladly.”

With that, Marcus charged across the courtyard. It was my second time witnessing the werewolf transformation, and it was just as fascinating and horrifying as the first. I wasn’t naive enough to think that Mac was fighting for me, yet in freeing him from the cell, I had somehow become part of his crew--at least in Marcus’ eyes. Therefore, Mac’s downfall would also be my own.

For one brief moment of lunacy I wondered if it would be better to be shot by my kidnapper or mauled to death by werewolves. Both scenarios sucked.

Unfortunately, the overzealous wolf still held my dress in its jaws, preventing me from slipping away during the fight, but I wasn’t entirely helpless. In probably my smartest move all day, I had decided to purloin the magic chain while helping Mac escape and now slipped it around the wolf’s neck before he knew what was happening. I honestly had no idea what it would do, but I had the vague impression of Mac being more docile while wearing it, so I decided it couldn’t hurt.

To my great relief, the beast’s shoulders immediately sagged. He shook his head as if his brain had suddenly turned to mush. Whatever the chain had done to him, it probably saved my life.

“Are you going to walk all the way back to Oakland like that?”

whispered Tom beside me. He, too, had taken advantage of the fight to slip away, but unlike me, he didn't look like he was running. Instead he'd found a stout tree branch in case his gun proved ineffective and he had to fight his way out with a club.

"That's safer than staying here with you."

"Here," he pulled out another gun that had been tucked in the waistband of his jeans and handed it to me. "There's no way they'll just let you walk away. If Mac doesn't make it, we'll have to fight our way out. Like it or not, we're in this together."

I definitely didn't like it, but I didn't have much of a choice. I had never fired a gun before, but it looked easy enough in movies. Recalling an old cop drama that I used to watch, I opened the action to look into the chamber and discovered that yes, my kidnapper had indeed given a loaded weapon to a terrified novice like me. With my inexperience and frayed nerves, I was likely to shoot myself just trying to figure out how to use the stupid thing.

The noises from the fight were getting pretty intense. I looked back at the werewolves and saw that both Mac and Marcus were wounded with blood dripping from their teeth. Marcus was definitely the more aggressive fighter. He kept advancing on his opponent, trying to goad him into making a mistake.

Mac was the more cautious of the two. When Marcus attacked, he usually backed away, saving his energy to strike at strategic, soft tissue targets. Mac might have more wounds, but Marcus was beginning to show signs of exhaustion.

I had been careful to stay silent as I backed away from the battle, and Tom had kept his voice down lest we come to the attention of the remaining wolves, but suddenly Marcus was able to grab Mac and throw him painfully to the ground. He looked up in triumph and spotted us far away.

"Get them!" he yelled, before turning back to his opponent.

Immediately the remaining wolves turned to attack.

Aside from a few judo lessons in elementary school, I'd never learned to fight. I certainly had no idea what to do against four charging werewolves. For a second, I even forgot I held a gun in my hand until I heard the loud bang of Tom's second weapon. That small explosion was enough to shake me from my stupor.

"Please stay away!" I raised the weapon with shaky fingers and prayed that I wouldn't have to shoot. I didn't want to hurt anyone, not even a bloodthirsty werewolf, but that didn't mean I was going to let them kill me.

I closed my eyes and fired.

For a full five seconds there was no other sound. I cautiously opened my eyes and saw that although the bullet had clearly missed, the wolf sat placidly nearby. It no longer concerned itself with me and instead stared at the fighters with rapt attention.

Mystified, I looked around and saw Mac once again in his human form, though winded and bleeding profusely from several wounds. At his feet lay the eerily-still body of Marcus.

"Is he ..." I couldn't finish the question. This whole situation was bonkers and I just wanted to go home.

"Yes," Marcus replied. He picked up the discarded length of his toga and used it to dab at his wounds.

"I guess you're Alpha now," Tom announced. "Sorry about that."

"Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?" I demanded. A dead body lay a few feet away, I'd just tamed a werewolf with a magic collar, and the other wolves eyed my freaked-out self as if I was the crazy one in this situation.

"That's my brother," Mac explained with absolutely no fondness in

his voice. “I went lone wolf years ago, but he’s always been worried that I’d come back and try to take over the pack. He lured me here under false pretenses and would have killed me if you hadn’t come along.”

“And the incident in the coffeeshop?” I demanded, turning to my kidnapper.

“They were after me,” Tom replied. “They knew I followed Mac here and wanted to keep me out of the way. I’m sorry to put you in danger, but I needed you. You’re an elf of the tinkering-type. I knew that from the insane textbooks you were reading, and I had to bust Mac out of a cell.”

“You could have told me the truth.”

“That I needed you to rescue a werewolf? What would you have said to that?”

This family drama was too much. I rubbed my hands down my face, uncaring if it smeared my carefully-applied makeup, and called upon my superpower: I was fine in all situations, I mentally repeated the mantra. But there was a big difference between a bird soiling my shoulder and fighting monsters.

“Okay,” I groaned in exhaustion. “So, what now? You’re Alpha? What does that mean?”

“It’s a giant headache,” Mac returned.

“Better than death,” Tom pointed out.

“I’m not so sure ...” Mac’s voice trailed off as he glanced from the dead body of his brother to the surrounding wolves currently eyeing him expectantly. It seemed they were more than willing to trade one leader for another.

I hadn’t known him very long, but I was convinced that Mac would

make a much better Alpha. While Marcus had belittled his friendship with a human, it was the loyalty of that human which allowed his escape and later victory. Plus, Marcus had been a jerk and I was a fan of anyone that disrupted the status quo.

“Don’t worry about the body,” Mac assured me. “We’ll take care of it. None of this will come back to you. I know you were forced into this, but I still owe you my life. If there’s anything I can do ...”

“My tuition,” I immediately replied. It was a lot of money, and I mean a *lot*, but I figured his pockets were deep enough to afford it and having that financial burden lifted from my shoulders would go a long way towards making up for the trauma of this night.

“Done.”

“How about an invitation to our next party?” offered Tom with a grin.

“Not even in my worst nightmare,” I grimaced. With that I turned and began walking toward the exit. All of the partygoers had long since departed. Most of the lights were off, as was the music. If I thought the structure was intimidating before, now it looked like something from a horror movie. There were also several miles of dark roads and forests to pass through before returning to the city. “But I could use a ride home.”

As we sped away, I turned back to capture one last look at the sprawling mansion. From the moment I entered, I had felt out of place. The opulence and ostentation of the inhabitants created a world in which I didn’t belong. And yet I had played an integral part in the drama that unfolded. It had been terrifying, but also kind of exciting. I wondered if I could return to my normal, boring life and pretend like none of this ever happened.

Tom had teased about an invitation to their future events and maybe, just maybe I might reconsider.

The Road to Golgonooza, Chapter seven. Our story: a mysterious object has fallen from the sky smack on top of our Vladimir.

Didi?

dead
dead.

What
struck
him?

Some sort
of space junk,
apparently
knocked
off course
by a meteor.

Looks to be
part of an early
20th century
surveillance
satellite,
pre-GPS

this component
would have
identified
targets and
plotted
locations on a
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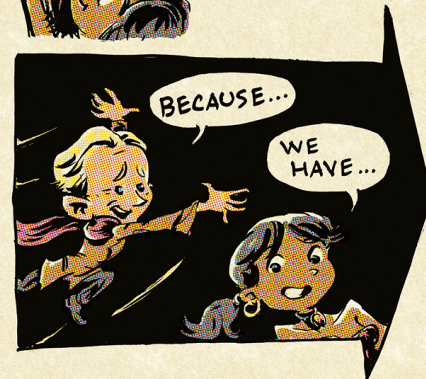
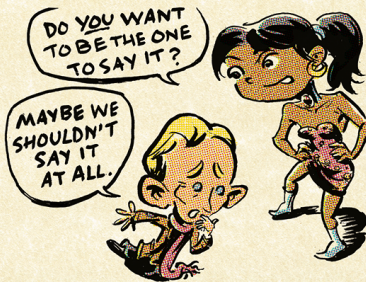
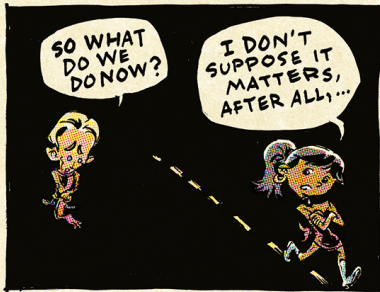
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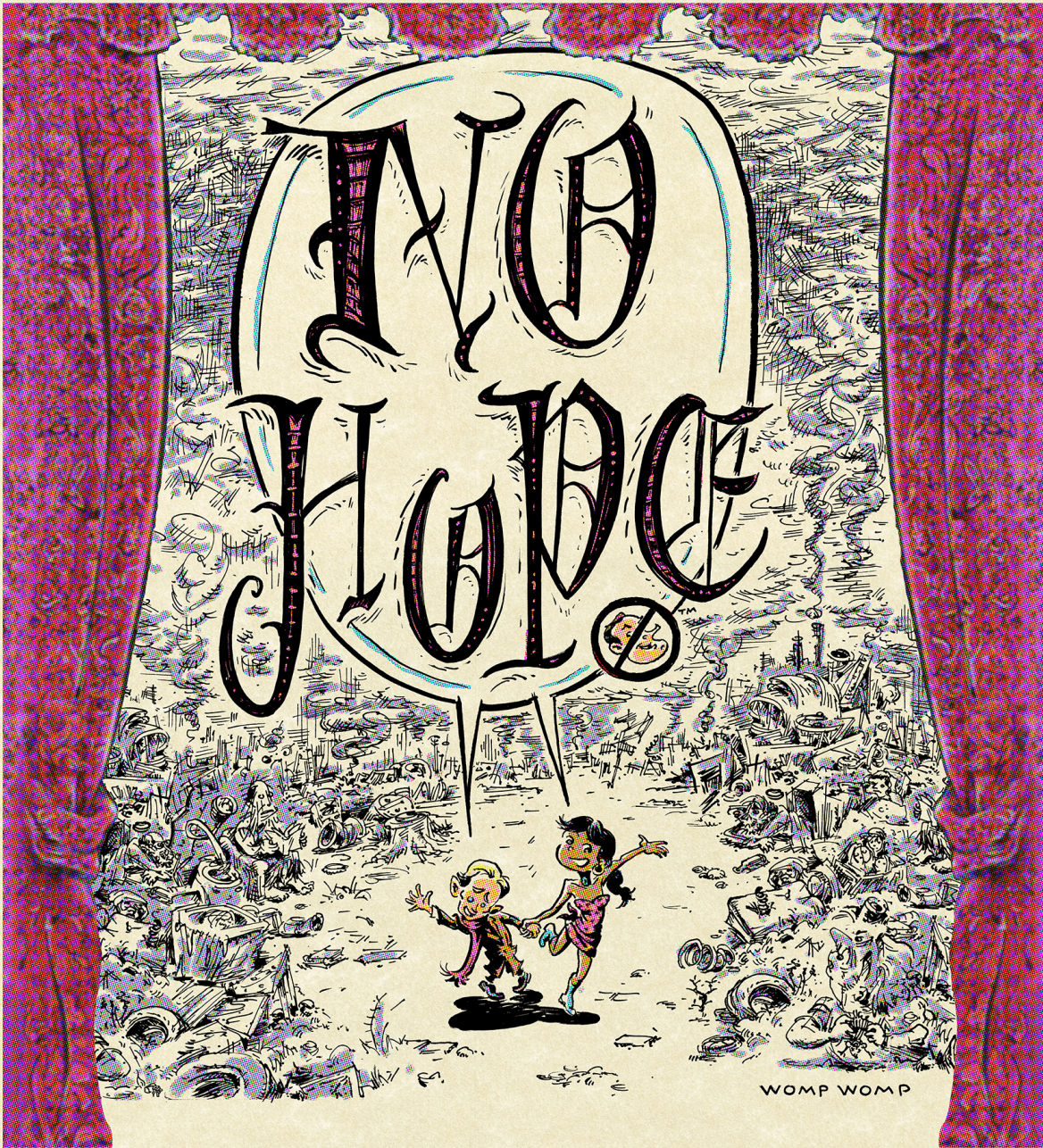


*brained by a
plotting device!*

*what an awful
way to go.*

*though hardly
unheard of,
+bh.*





WOMP WOMP

Contributors :

All these decades later, Jim Pitt, pages 1 & 2, still poops out biweekly webisodes of *Megiddo Mosquito* for his handful of followers.
cartooniologist.blogspot.com



Whereas, Aline Nkik, pages 3 & 4, has just resolved to abandon comics for the more welcoming medium of *handcrafted artisanal urinal cakes*.
yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com



T. Motley is the author of *The Road to Golgonooza*, a fake jam comic. tmotley.com self-examination © MOT 2021

The Right Kind of Love, the Wrong Kind of Death

by Joe Baumann

After my father died, my boyfriend regrew him in our fraternity house's backyard, behind the toolshed where we kept the lawnmower and an inflatable waterslide we hauled out during freshman orientation week. My boyfriend used, as a seed, my father's pocketknife, the only thing I'd taken with me after his funeral. I had bought it for him myself, a gift for his fortieth birthday. A few days before my father was ripe, my boyfriend hauled me outside. The sky blazed a bright tourmaline, the sun radiating warmth and invitation. I had been working on a Latin translation assignment and was annoyed by the interruption. When we reached the toolshed, I stopped and stared. I recognized my father, who was pinkish and rooted to the ground at the ankles, his slack legs slumped so his body leaned against the back of the shed. His eyes were pasted closed, his body smushy like he was made of putty that had melted. I recognized his forehead and the jut of his chin.

"He'll be ready tomorrow," my boyfriend said, rubbing my back.

I'd loved my father; I cried at his funeral. He was kind, if inaccessible, a high school English teacher who'd wanted to be a novelist but couldn't ever find the mental fortitude to string together enough words in the right fashion. He'd preferred reading to playing catch, and he would blink at me with owlish unknowing when I talked about baseball players or tennis matches. The first time they were introduced, my father gobbled up my boyfriend in a backslapping hug and asked him what his favorite book was.

My boyfriend told me that he'd turned the clock back on my father, so that he would be a prime-of-life dad, a pre-cancer dad, the dad who had swum laps each morning at six in our in-ground pool even when the water was stinging cold and breath-sucking, the one who insisted that half of our dinner plates always be loaded with

cruciferous vegetables, the dad whose genes I could thank for my lean, strong torso but also my fears about dying young.

I had trouble sleeping that night, my boyfriend a warm sack of heat next to me. His knees burrowed into the backs of my legs, and his right hand slid along my hip. I was facing the windows overlooking campus. The buildings were dark blurs that I stared at until my eyes drooped. Every time I came close to sleep, though, I would be rocketed by the image of my father firming to completion in the backyard. I wondered if his voice would be his real voice or the one, wheezing and enflamed, that had plagued him in the final weeks of his life. I trusted what my boyfriend had said about him, even if I didn't quite believe. Trust, belief: slivers of difference that I tried to swallow down as the night ticked by.

I turned off my alarm before the clock shrieked at me. Hazy morning light, washed-out Easter colors, seeped into my room. My boyfriend groaned and rolled toward the wall, burying his head under a pillow. When I stood, he sat up and blinked, shaking his head like a dog wriggling off water.

"Right," he said. He blinked at me. "I forgot where I was, for a second. Weird, huh?"

I nodded as I pulled on my shoes. I didn't bother with socks.

Outside, the grass was covered in a slick of dew. As we approached the shed, my stomach contorted. I took loud, shallow breaths, and my boyfriend grabbed my hand, kneading his thumb over the bones.

"Relax," he said. His black hair shimmered like the depths of the ocean in the sunlight, which bounced off his cheekbones like he was

being photographed by a professional. “I know what I’m doing.”

He had brought with him a bottle of water, a towel, and some clothes—his, not mine, because he was taller than me, like my father—which he had slung over his shoulder: a plain white t-shirt and a pair of black shorts. When we reached the shed, my boyfriend didn’t so much as hesitate as he turned the corner to where my father was growing, so I didn’t stop either.

I took in a sharp breath: what had been a pink lump that only vaguely resembled the shape of my dead dad the day before was now a perfect likeness. He was still slumped, and his eyes were closed, his body slippery with morning dew like the grass so that his skin—tan like it had been when he still played beach volleyball and went running without a shirt on—glistened like a cooked slab of beef. I stared at him, the familiar roll of his shoulders, the splatter of his hair. He was naked, and I couldn’t help but looking at his most intimate places, which I had only seen once in my life, when he failed to close his bedroom door when I was six and didn’t yet understand the concept of privacy.

“How do we, you know, wake him up?” I said.

“We excavate.”

“We what?”

My boyfriend pointed to the ground, where my father’s legs were buried up to the ankles.

“It’s like yanking out a root vegetable.”

“I’ve never yanked out a root vegetable.”

He rolled his eyes and, after handing me the towel and water and clothes, bent down in front of my father and started scooping dirt out of the way like a dog lazily digging a hole. I should have helped but I simply watched, first my boyfriend and the muscles of his back

sliding and flexing beneath his t-shirt as he groped at the ground, then at my father who, as his feet slowly came unstuck from the earth, started to stand taller. His eyes rolled beneath their lids. As my boyfriend finished releasing his feet, my father’s arms unfurled themselves from around his body. I felt like I was watching a flower spool out its blooms in high speed.

“The towel,” my boyfriend said. He stood, wiping his hands. I held it out and he shook his head. “No, your dad.”

I started cleaning my father’s face. His lips were still slucked shut and I could hear him taking in raspy breaths through his nostrils; when I got close, I could see the gunk dribbling out of his nose. When the towel bashed against his forehead he leaned back and smacked into the fence separating our house from the property behind it.

“Careful,” my boyfriend said and took over. He cleaned my father up and got him into the shorts and t-shirt. He rubbed my father’s back as he helped him stand, my father’s knees wobbly, his first steps on the grass like the unsure trots of a small child or a foal. He paused when my father paused, bent close to whisper encouragements in his ear. My father hobbled like he was geriatric, and I remembered his wasted body, destroyed by medicine and his own rebelling cells, the way his mouth, cracked and dry, gaped like a fish’s as it yearned for water. His skin had been slucked tight, every vein a tunnel, every bone a mountain.

My boyfriend turned to look at me and raised an eyebrow in my direction to say, *Well?*

I caught up with them as he helped my father onto our back porch. When I took my father’s right arm, I felt a jolt at how warm he was.

My boyfriend saw the look on my face and said, “Well, he has been outside.”

We made our way to the back door, which I pushed open. When we

guided my father inside, we stared up the steps.

“You up to this?” my boyfriend said.

I nodded. As we led my father upstairs, I felt my insides twist and tangle like sheets knotted by a heavy wind.

* * *

Everyone loved my father. In high school, he encouraged me to throw parties, and by the time I was sixteen, he was winking every time he mentioned that he’d bought several cases of beer on his last grocery run. As long as I didn’t let anyone leave who had drunk even a single drop of alcohol, he looked the other way.

“It’s going to happen,” he’d say to me when I asked why he didn’t mind. “I just want it to happen safely.”

My friends adored him; he always tried to stay holed up in his bedroom or the second-floor office of our house, but my friends would go slinking up the stairs, beers sweating in their hands, and cajole him to join us. He would always resist, though minimally, and while he never sat down while we played Circle of Death or Fuck the Dealer, he stood in the periphery and laughed at our bad jokes—sharing, periodically, his own awful bits of comedy that my friends, inexplicably, found hilarious—drinking slowly and carefully from his own single can of Budweiser, his arms crossed over his chest as he observed our goings on. We often caught one another’s eye, and he would usually give me a tiny wink, the slightest tip of his can, and then bark out some silly insult at one of my friends. In the morning, I would wake to the smell of bacon and maple syrup, and after eating gargantuan, greasy breakfasts that settled my stomach, he would help me clean up the messes my friends left behind.

I never knew my mother, who passed away when I was an infant, the misty details always out of reach. I asked questions periodically when I was young, and in response my father would tug photo albums from a bookshelf in the living room and sit with me, poring

through Polaroids tinged orange and purple. She was beautiful, my mother, with long, dark ringlets that curtained her face, which was pointed and shiny.

“She wanted to be an artist,” he said. He would clear his throat and add, “She was an artist.”

She’d been a painter, but my father only had two of her pieces: one that he kept in his bedroom, the last thing she finished, a Picasso-like visage of me as a baby, my eyes bright blue and shiny and both stuck to the right side of my head. The other was an abstraction, like a Jackson Pollock, sprays of yellow and green and blue. It hung over my bed.

“She never really knew what she wanted to be,” he said. “That held her back and also made her great. Sometimes I wish I’d kept more of her work, but then other times even the two we have are too hard to look at.”

By the time I was old enough to understand death, I also understood that asking about my mother hurt my father, and so I stopped. I didn’t feel the achy void of loss that people seemed to expect when I told them my mother was dead. How do you grieve an absence whose presence you’ve never really known? When people fawn-eyed at me with sympathy and pity, I felt a hard hunger rush through me, not for my mother to be alive but for whoever was pumping out their vacuous condolences to vanish.

When my boyfriend and I first met as college freshmen who had chosen to join the same fraternity and I told him about my mother, he didn’t look at me like I was drizzled in sorrow. He said, “That sucks. Wanna get drunk?”

“Because my mother died when I was a baby?” I said.

“No,” he said. “Because it’s Friday.”

* * *

My father came back to life fast. I worried that leaving him in my room while my boyfriend and I went to our classes would somehow damage him, that I'd return to find him curled up in a ball, aching for death. But when I came back after lunch, I found him performing jumping jacks on my throw rug, which he'd vacuumed. All of my dirty clothes, which had a tendency to congregate around rather than in my laundry basket, had been picked up. My bed was made. He'd even tidied my desk, notebooks stacked neatly, pens in their coffee mug.

His face was shiny, but the sludge of rebirth had been replaced with a crown of sweat. He dropped to the floor to do a set of pushups.

My boyfriend came trudging to my bedroom door.

"Is this normal?" I said.

He gave my father a once-over and smiled. "Is it?"

"My father was tidy, but he never cleaned my bedroom, if that's what you mean."

"Well," my boyfriend said, laying his arm over my shoulders, heavy and hot like a boa constrictor, "this is his room now, too, isn't it?"

After my father died, I went home for a week, given unction by all of my professors to skip out on quizzes and homework, to take tests late and turn in papers a week after they were due. Neither of my parents had siblings, and my grandparents had passed away when I was a child. My father had loads of friends, and they crowded into the house and fluttered about during the reception, handling the food and drinks and bereavement cards and flower arrangements, so many that my eyes started watering and I had to sneak out onto the back porch. One of my father's good friends was an attorney, and he found me after most people had slunk home and I'd had too much merlot to still see straight and to fully understand what he was saying, which was that he'd been happy to sort out the estate business, all the mountains of paperwork that appear out of nowhere when someone dies. I

nodded and let him see himself out. My boyfriend stayed with me for two days, ostensibly to help me sort through some of my father's things, but all I could do was lie in my bed. That's where my boyfriend stayed, rubbing my shoulders and back, nudging his fingers against my hips. He tried, one time, to nuzzle at my throat, but when I didn't move, he understood it wasn't the time or place.

Place, I thought then and now while I watched my father move so he could do some sit-ups. Watching my father wending through my personal space made me feel dizzy. I looked at my boyfriend.

"What do we do with him?"

"Have you tried talking to him?"

I set my teeth. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me that my father could speak; he'd been silent as we trugged him into the house, and I imagined it would take him days, weeks even, to master speech again, so I hadn't bothered.

"Hey, Dad," I said.

He was mid-crunch, and he held his position, back hovering at a forty-five-degree angle. He smiled and waved like a giddy child and then collapsed onto his back, massaging his abs with his hands.

A group of guys spent every Friday afternoon playing beer pong in our fraternity house foyer, and people would wander in and out, watching and drinking from their own cases of beer once their classes were over. My boyfriend thought maybe my father should come. We took him downstairs, where he received handshakes and hugs and slaps on the back from everyone who came through the house. When one of the guys standing at the table received a series of angry texts from his girlfriend, he invited my father to take his place.

"Is that a good idea?" I said.

"I don't see why not," my boyfriend said as my father, who'd been

slouched in a folding chair near the action, stood. When he plucked up one of the ping pong balls, he looked at it, slick and white, like it was a foreign object. But then he squared his shoulders to the cups on the other side of the table, his weight on his back foot, and lunged just so like a basketball player shooting a free throw, and sent the ball plunking with a light pillow of noise into the freshly-poured beer at the top of his opponents' triangle. Everyone hooted in approval.

I woke on Saturday morning in my boyfriend's bed, sunlight beating through his window in hard, wide strips because he'd accidentally knocked down the Venetian blinds a few weeks ago when he was drunk. We'd left my father in my bed. He'd played three games of beer pong, winning them all, before shaking his head and backing away from the table, ignoring the desperate wishes of my friends. My boyfriend had gotten to him first, helping him back up the stairs while I trailed behind.

I yawned and stretched; all of my muscles were stiff, my joints like twisted bark. My foot slid against my boyfriend's leg and he groaned. I looked over at him and nearly shrieked.

My boyfriend was athletic, lithe and tan and smooth-skinned, his midsection bumpy with muscle, his arms striated. I liked to run my hands over them and feel what twitched beneath. But the sun streaking over his body revealed something gone sour and aged, his body wrinkled and laden with white fuzz like a peach left to rot. He blinked awake. My boyfriend's face was also fleshy and slack, wrinkles drooping along his eyelids and mouth; his throat was wattled, the skin bunched.

“What happened to you?” I said.

He groaned and sat up, breathing hard. “I was worried about this,” he said.

“What is *this*?”

He let out a sigh and his body shuddered. A roll of skin and fat that

hadn't been there doubled over his belly button. His pubic hair had gone gray and white and wiry. Something squelched in my stomach.

“The price I had to pay.”

“Oh god,” I said, understanding immediately. “This is insane. You shouldn't have done this.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't want you to be like this.”

He patted my back twice. “Let's find your dad. Or maybe you could. I'm a bit stiff.”

I found my father on my bedroom floor, stretched out in downward dog, using my throw rug as a yoga mat. He lifted his head at an unnatural angle, like something out of an exorcism movie, and raised one hand from the floor to wave at me. His body's contortion made me feel ill.

“Can you say something, please?” I said.

“Hi.”

His voice was rich with honey and warmth, a deep shock. Familiar and exact.

I watched my father turn the downward dog pose into a handstand. His arms barely shook and his legs stayed straight. Then he dipped down, an inverted pushup focusing on his shoulders. Effortless.

“When did you learn to do that?” I said.

He let his body topple downward, feet landing with solid strength. He unfurled himself and smiled at me. “Just now.”

My father's face was smooth and bright, like last night's beers had

been slurps from the fountain of youth.

I left him to his stretching and a fresh set of air squats. In his room, my boyfriend was still in his bed, but sitting up, taking in deep breaths. I sat down on the bed.

“Why’d you do this?”

“You were wrecked.”

I ground the heels of my palms against my eyes. “I was grieving.”

He set a hand on my back. His fingers were leathery and cold. I sat up straight.

“It was horrible to see you that way.”

“Well, it’s horrible to see you like this.”

“I had to get this way eventually.”

“Not for, like, forty years.”

He smiled at me. “Did you ever imagine you’d see me like this?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Answer it honestly.”

“Sometimes, maybe. Yes. But not like this. You should have told me what it would cost.”

“But then you wouldn’t have done it. You wouldn’t have let me.”

We both knew this was true. I pictured my father, jocular and lithe, doing burpees or triceps dips on my bedroom floor.

“As much as I missed my father, I didn’t miss him enough for this.” I

looked at my boyfriend, his frazzled, grayed temples, the wither of his arms, the new bulge to his stomach. His jaw was covered in a patchy fuzz, discolored like mange. “You look really bad.”

My boyfriend laughed. “I know.”

“Are you still you?”

He tapped his skull. “Still sharp up here.” He waved at his body. “If not here.”

I leaned my head against the wall and let out a long breath. “What do we do? How do we fix it?”

“You want me to fix it?”

I nodded.

“You’re sure? Your dad.”

“I know,” I said. I couldn’t decide if my heart was beating fast out of relief or fear or sorrow. “I know.”

* * *

We waited until nightfall because some guys who lived off-campus were throwing a kegger and no one would be around the fraternity house. My boyfriend suggested my father and I have a meal alone, so we went to the one decent pizza place in town and built our own pie, ordering half a dozen of my father’s favorite toppings: Canadian bacon, sausage, pepperoni, double green pepper, feta cheese. When the pizza arrived, the dough was barely able to keep the thing together it was so belabored by meats and veggies. I watched him eat three slices until I took one for myself. His mouth was ringed with grease. He slurped from his soda, served in a gargantuan red cup.

I tried to smile at him.

“Don’t be sad,” he said through a mouthful of cheese. “We got so much extra time.”

I leaned back and felt a cold wash on my neck.

He smiled. “I know that I can’t stay. It’s alright.” He leaned forward and patted my hand. “This has been nice, hasn’t it?”

He tried to pay the check when we were finished but I pointed out that my boyfriend had not resurrected his credit cards or any cash, so I forked over a wad of bills to a girl I knew vaguely from a few parties. She waved goodbye to us through the window as we walked back toward campus while she was wiping down our table.

We didn’t say much until we arrived at the house. My boyfriend, as if pre-planned, was waiting on the back deck, his body slumped against the rail. He was breathing hard, like he’d run miles. His clothes barely fit him.

“He doesn’t look so good,” my father said. He tossed an arm over my shoulder and it was only when he made contact with my body that I realized I was shaking. My dad looked at me. “It’s okay, you know.”

We each took my boyfriend under one arm.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“You know,” my father said, but he pointed to the shed anyway.

A crater of displaced dirt and grass was carved out where my father had sprouted from the ground. Still entangled, the three of us stared down at it in silence, as though we were paying our respects at a memorial. Then my father, with delicate ease, leaned my boyfriend’s heft against me. He slid his feet out of the old pair of my sneakers he’d been wearing and peeled off a pair of my socks, tucking each into one of the shoes, which he placed together on the grass as though sliding them into a spot in a closet. Then he started removing his

clothing—my boyfriend’s clothing—and I winced at the sight of his naked back.

“Is this necessary?” I said.

“Yes,” my father said.

“Yes,” my boyfriend said.

“How come?” I said.

“It just is,” they said at the same time.

I watched my father slide his feet into the earth, shocked at the ease and willingness with which he planted himself in the ground. Bent over, he packed the loose soil up around his ankles. My boyfriend squeezed his arm around my neck and I looked at him. His lips were dry and cracked. I could see how his eyes were asking for forgiveness. I pressed my hand against his side, which felt like a half-melted candle.

My father stood up straight, and I tried not to look at him.

“Now what?” I said.

He was holding his pocketknife by the blade, the red sheath pointed at me. I wasn’t surprised that he’d had it this whole time.

“You take this,” he said.

I did.

“And now you need to cut me.”

“I what?”

He drew an invisible line across his throat.

“No. Are you kidding?”

He shook his head.

“This is wrong,” I said. I looked at my boyfriend. This had, after all, been his idea. He’d dragged my father back to life without asking me if I wanted that, and it was thus his fault I was standing here, my father’s knife in my hand, expected to drag it across his throat and spill his blood into the grass.

“You can’t ask this of me,” I said.

“Of course not,” my boyfriend said, and held out his hand, palm up.

None of us spoke. My father stared at me. I stared at my boyfriend’s palm. He looked down at my father’s feet. We were a gruesome triangle.

I gave him the knife.

“I can’t watch whatever is going to happen here,” I said. I looked at my father. “I’m sorry.”

“No apologies,” he said.

We didn’t say goodbye. I didn’t tell him that I loved him. The words hung in the air, invisible and silent. Right before my father died, he’d

sent me back to school, demanding that I not ruin my education on his behalf. He’d promised that he’d be around long enough for me to get in a final goodbye, but that didn’t turn out to be true; his doctor called, told me that I should get on the road as soon as possible, but the three-hour drive to St. Louis turned out to be too long. I’d thought, immediately after, that getting to speak to him one last time would have made everything okay, his death filing itself away into the history of things that had happened to me. That if I’d had one last moment to speak what I felt, everything would have been fine. And now I felt stupid and queasy and angry and incapable of doing anything except turning my back on him and my boyfriend and walking across the grass and the porch and through the door and up the stairs and down the hall and into my bedroom, where I waited. I took a deep breath. The air was tinged with the smell of my father, wisps of his sweat still in the air. When I laid down on my bed, I could feel him there, the weight of his body on the mattress. But I could also smell my boyfriend’s skin, the tart of his underarms, an aroma of cool, wet rocks.

I heard footsteps approaching, could feel a body hovering in the doorway. My eyes were closed, and I wasn’t quite ready to open them up. I pictured what might have happened in the yard, and for the briefest moment I wasn’t sure who I hoped had killed whom. My heart yearned in conflicting directions, and everything in my stomach was blended and confused. Like a boat on choppy waters I bucked and swayed, until I finally opened my eyes and welcomed the future in.

April

by Alicia Hilton

I trudged up the hill.
Too cold to leave
The jacket at home.
The sun lit
Chaste white faces of
Spotted toad lilies.
The rose-breasted grosbeak
Warbled his joy.

Up over the dew-crusting hill,
At the end of the manicured glade.
349 feet from her new
Lemon yellow VW Bug.
Beneath the bobbing heads of her
Purple flowering garlic.
Last week,
My neighbor hid a secret.
I'll bet he wished
He'd never bought her
The shovel.

I should have known
Something was wrong
When she smiled at me.
Garlic smells musky,
Not like rotting meat.
April was wearing
Red and black spotted boots.
Like the wings of a ladybug.

Amateurs

by Gerri Leen

You poor sweet fools
Did you think I wouldn't
Notice your traps?
Lethal little spike-balls
Collapsing walkways
Tripwires and the smell of
Black powder permeating
Everything—who do you`
Think you're dealing with?
And why aren't you running
Instead of putting up
This laughable resistance?
Put down your weapons
Listen to me because you seem
To be missing some vital information
I could crush you like a
Bug, but I'm not what's
Coming, in fact I'm running
Too—let that sink in
A destroyer like me: afraid
Now abandon those toys
And flee while there's still time
But run fast because it's hungry
And if you look appetizing
To me, imagine how tasty
You'll seem to it



The Dollar Store's Bottom Bitch

by Elby Rogers

Content

by S P Jenkins

Upon the death of Philligree Emerson-Proctor III, while his ashes lay smouldering in the crematorium furnace, all those concerned circled nearby for the reading of the will. His sixteen bitter children, whose nearest encounter with work was filing endless lawsuits and countersuits against their father, scoffed, huffed, and tutted as the old oligarch's last testament was read aloud by his faithful lawyer. The brief was a dispassionate nub of a human composed only of what was necessary to exact his duties; all desk and suit topped with a pair of glasses to indicate a face.

Each of the Proctor progeny expected no other mention than insults veiled in legalese, but still, they waited keenly to receive them. The wives fared no better and displayed their disappointment unashamedly; swooning in turn like a team of synchronised swimmers peeling into a pool.

The whole affair was televised because, at this time, the rich were tolerated only for their value as entertainment. Miles Dansk jeered up at the courtroom sport from a leaning position against the bar of 'The Insufferable Boar', his local watering hole-cum-drowning pool. Proctor's wailing wives blared orange light into the gloomy pub from a greasy old colour TV above the spirits and liquors. Miles snarled at them, regurgitating into a disinterested room extracts of manifestos he'd read in his youth. Once biting indictments of society from a young man in a second-hand sweater, now bitter indications of insecurity from a middle-aged middle manager in a loosened tie.

"Werp! lookout, here come Goebbels and Goehring!" he slurred, to nobody in particular, as two stern-looking suited sentinels filled the screen above the bar, their bald red heads shining off the bottles of thinned out liquor.

They were two of the many heads of Proctor Corp (Construction and Media divisions), their positions of elevation within the company aided, like all bodies travelling through space, by a lack of resistance; characterised in this instance by an absence of compassion, shame, and imagination. They were producers only of scarcity, the defining product of the age.

"And to my Senior Vice Presidents of both Media and Construction divisions," decreed the nub. "I, Philligree Emerson-Proctor the third, being of sound body and mind bequeath my final instructions. Exact them precisely as directed for it is to be my magnum opus. My legacy to eclipse all other disappointments, all sixteen of them. And then it says laugh in parentheses." The nub murmured a quavering giggle and adjusted his glasses.

With a solemn nod, Goebbels and Goehring stepped forth, and each retrieved a thick black folder.

"Sprolly love letters," Miles Dansk sniggered into his drink. "Bourgeois pigs."

Dansk was a Regional Implementations Executive, though he told drug dealers and bartenders and prostitutes (who did not ask) that he was a visionary creator of spontaneous public agitprop, more commonly understood as a performance artist.

"A provocateur of Imponderabilia," he yammered through feverish sniffing.

"A sower of sedi...tion," he gulped through stifled gas.

"I was almost arrested for incitement to riot outside the houses of parliament," he hiccupped through a hooker's hair.

"And I was almost a famous singer," she replied with relief as he slipped into unconsciousness in the driver's seat of his mid-range sports car. "So much for almost."

She sneered at his limp body, his trousers undone, shirt transparent with sweat, and watched him snore; vulnerable and pathetic. At that moment, she pitied this man who seemed more desperate than she, and so only robbed him a little.

* * *

Within a week, the giant screens went up. They slotted uncomfortably between plinths and statues, appearing like burnt toast in a twisted rack. There was one for every major city around the world. Great black rectangular slabs grew tall and wide and soon glowered over ostentatious skyscrapers as if the night sky had sent down a piece of its mind. So deeply dark were they that staring at them for too long was reported to induce vertigo. That was until they were illuminated by the misty white mane and ghostly pallor of Philligree Emerson-Proctor. The immense monoliths projected his digital ghost like open gateways from hell. His ancient white leather wrinkled the pavement as his mile-wide grin cracked his face in two.

"Greetings, and welcome to my studio," he wheezed. "My studio and my screens are bound by no laws of decency, no restrictions of content, and no censorship of opinion. Here, I can say whatever I wish, and more importantly, so can you!"

The meaning of the late magnate's words was indecipherable to ears within a five-mile radius of the screens, interpreted by the senses only as a deep, bone-rattling hum. It could, however, be understood by automated sub and surtitles and later in obnoxious pop-ups that smothered the internet.

"I cordially invite you, all of you, to my Island off the coast of Costa

Rica," he continued, "known by the locals as Isla Del Arcangel Raquel. The Island of Archangel Rachel in English."

A satellite image of the island's geographical position captioned with the studio's exact coordinates appeared briefly on the screens, providing the slightest respite from the blinding whiteness of the dusty old tyrant.

"Behind me are two doors. The one to my right is the entrance. When the door is opened and then closed, the camera before me begins to transmit to my magnificent screens across the planet. Anything that happens in here goes directly on air unfiltered and uncut. Once you have completed your business, for which there is no time limit, you must leave through the exit to my left. When that door is opened and then closed the broadcast is repeated until the next broadcaster enters the studio. Please note that if the room is occupied, neither the entrance nor exit can be opened from the outside. Furthermore, once you leave, you may never come back."

The old man glanced wistfully towards the exit and then turned quickly back to the camera and said:

"So, come and shut me up!"

With that, he vacated the studio, and the message was repeated. It was repeated again. And again. And again for hours, booming yet shrill like a baseball bat with a nail in it for days and then weeks and almost a month and then,

"Ohma'god! Is this on?"

It was a tanned young man with bright teeth and a dim expression. He wore a t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Pura Vida" strategically torn to expose his tanned and muscled arms.

"Ohma'god! Can't believe I made it. Right, Ohma'god! Right, here goes. Big love to Big P, Jazzy B, and the rest of the San Rafael crew, big up "Dawgs" for life."

He made three loud whooping sounds like an asthmatic hound.

"Oh yea, Mami? I love you, and Tata, and mi Hermana I guess and... Um, yeah, um... that's it. Peace!"

He then kissed two fingers, held them out towards the camera, and left the little black room. The moment the door closed behind him, the young man's profound message began again, and when it was finished, it started again. And again. And again. And for one whole week, the young San Rafael crew member, friend of Big P and Jazzy B, who had vowed his life-long allegiance to a sports club known colloquially as "Dawgs," was the most famous person ever to have lived. No other human in existence could escape the field of his influence. People everywhere tore their shirts and whitened their teeth, and supermarket magazines professed "Dawgs for Life" in their headlines and then...

"Oh, it's smaller than I'd expected."

A turnip-shaped old lady entered the room. She wore a sweltering assortment of sun protection, an elasticated support bandage on each wrist, and cradled a detailed charcoal etching of a cat set inside an ornamental frame tightly against her considerable breast.

"Hello, I'm Brenda, or Bren is fine. Oh, I'm a little nervous," she said as she waddled timidly towards the camera, spreading like melting ice-cream across the screens.

"This is Mr. Butterworth." She presented her etching. "I mean literally, I had his ashes made into this lovely work of art."

She gazed lovingly at her dead cat and blotted a tear against her wrist.

"I'm here today to talk to you about the devastating consequences of feline pancreatic cancer..."

And so she did, at length, and after three and a half hours in which she opined about the scourge of the age as she saw it, frequently

deviating to recount meandering anecdotes featuring the late Mr. Butterworth, she tottered over to the exit, wiping her eyes on her elasticated wrist supports, and left the studio.

For days Brenda's message repeated, and she quickly usurped the young man with the bright teeth. Feline Pancreatic Cancer became the latest hot topic, and people wore elasticated wrist supports to signal their support for the cause. Others took an opposing stance bemoaning the plight of the canine pancreas, and for nearly a week it was the most important thing ever to have happened until the next broadcaster entered the room.

And so it went, the repetitions of each broadcast decreasing in number as fame-chasers flocked to the island, and soon the messages did not repeat at all. An endless stream of empty content blaring across the planet both day and night. As soon as one left another entered, having waited in a queue that spiralled out from the studio at the centre of the island and ended knee-deep in the unusually choppy waters. Those who had "completed their business," as Proctor had put it, squeezed their way between the lines of people like chyme through the bowel and were secreted into the irritable sea. Eventually, the Costa Rican Government intervened to restore some sense of order to the chaos, but without curtailing the lucrative influx of tourist currency.

* * *

"Prole Sheep!" Miles Dansk muttered into his coffee as the gigantic flapping lips of an exuberant young broadcaster named Vivaria filled his office window.

Her automated captions extolled the virtues of cosmetic surgery as she demonstrated her various adjustments. Dansk adjusted his ear defenders, closed the blinds, and removed his sunglasses. He took another sip of the acrid black liquid and placed his mug on his desk. It teetered obliviously towards the edge, carried by the merry rhythm of Vivaria's voice. Dansk stood in the doorway of his modest box room office and surveyed his subordinates on the call centre floor,

resenting them only for numbering fewer than his superiors. He resented himself for caring and scowled at the worker bees as they strained futilely to hear their callers.

Regional implementation executing or Executive regional implementing, or whatever the verb was for his particular vocational appointment, had never been the plan long term. He had taken a job at the company to appease his wife, who he later discovered was unappeasable even after his third promotion. That was two wives ago.

Suddenly, he felt a tiny vibration against his thigh amidst the great shuddering broadcast frequencies he had become accustomed to. At first, he thought it might be some physiological harbinger of an impending heart attack. What scared him more was the vaguest sense of disappointment at discovering that it was simply a message alert from his smartphone. The message read,

"Hello,

In light of recent developments, we will be dissolving regional implementations in your sector and merging much of the workforce with online fulfillment effective immediately. We regret to inform you that, as such, your services will no longer be required at the company.

Regards,
HR"

The base of the quaking mug scraped across the tipping point. It plummeted and bounced clumsily against the thin blue carpet tiles, spewing its indelible contents across the floor. Dansk gawped at the black pool seeping slowly into the fabric. He stepped into it, splashed it around a little, and let his phone drop onto the toppled mug, assuring their mutual destruction. He went over to the window and opened the blinds, wincing from the light of a screen that was over a mile away. He forced himself to look at it, unfiltered, even as bright spots bloomed across his vision. The words of the merciful call girl returned to him — *I was almost a famous singer.*

"So much for almost," he said.

* * *

Within a week Miles Dansk had chartered a boat from Punta Arenas with a young skipper named Jesús Romero. Dansk had made the faux pas, during their negotiations, of referring to his newly appointed captain only as Jesus.

"Actually, is Jesús Romero," the young man rebuked. "Like the Mexican singer, not the niño Dios. If she sink, we pray to the Jesus, but actually am Jesús Romero. You know what? Jus' call me JR." He was lying topless, arms folded behind his head, on the sunny deck of his little tub.

"Ok, JR it is. How much to the island?"

"Depends, which island you talking about?"

Dansk peered over his shades at the young man's sea hardened smirk.

"Which island do you think?" he said, gesturing emphatically at the thousands of wannabe broadcasters that milled around the dock.

"Oh, you mean La Isla del Arcángel Raquel?"

"Yeah, catchy name, whatever. Proctor's island, with the studio, how much?"

"Actually is no belong to Proctor, is belong to Arcángel Raquel. You know who is he?"

Dansk was in an unusually tolerant mood, aware that he was negotiating within a seller's market. He shifted the duffle bag he was holding from his left shoulder to his right and waited impatiently for an explanation.

"Is the Angel of Vengeance. You want some vengeance, mae?"

Dansk threw his bag onto the boat, sending a flurry of crisp new bills across the deck.

"Will that cover it?"

"Jueputa!" cried the young skipper, leaping to his feet. "In that case call me what you like!"

They approached the shore in a kind of slow decaying orbit, owing to the strange swirling currents that swept around the island. Jesús Romero weaved the little boat between those of other ferrymen and permanently stationed coast guards that jounced upon the frothing waves.

"You really want to be famous huh, mae?" he yelled over his struggling motor.

"Nope!"

Dansk gripped a threadbare slither of plastic rope that was masquerading as a handle, his pale knuckles threatening to burst from his fists.

"Actually, I think you do!" The grinning captain kicked his new duffle bag and the crisp bills rustled inside.

"I'm going to shut the whole thing down."

"Right, how you gonna do that?"

"I'm a performance artist."

"Maybe I'm in the wrong business. Performance artist seems to be very lucrative."

"It's not about money."

"I can see that!" JR cackled.

His laughter sounded to Dansk like a choking buzzard; he did not enjoy being mocked. "You never thought about going to the studio?" he asked.

"I thought about it."

"Last chance, I'll let you go ahead of me."

"What do I need to be famous? I'm rich!" JR kicked the bag once more and performed his choking buzzard impersonation.

A hundred metres from the thin crowded strip of shoreline, Jesús Romero shut off his engine and threw out his anchor. The pistons whirred low with relief as the zealous tide buffeted the flimsy fibreglass hull towards the island.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Dansk stared incredulously at the choppy wash below them.

"You supposed to..." The captain performed a passable mime of wading through water, equipped with his current client's perpetually irritated expression. "But don't worry, believe me, is midday, you gonna get dry."

His passenger squinted at him.

"I'm sorry, mae. She can't go any further without gettin' stuck. I tell you what, I take you back free of charge. I see you back here in about three days?"

"Don't bother. I'm not going back." And with that, Dansk leapt from the boat and into the waist-deep water below. He was almost swept under by the current before JR's rope-strong young fingers clutched at the former exec's white collar from above.

"Careful, mae!" he said as Dansk regained his footing and cringed from his rescuer's grip. "Wait a second, you don't have no food, no water, no nothing?"

"I don't need it."

"The line alone take about two, three days!"

"It doesn't matter. I just need to make it to the studio."

"You won't last a day in this heat with no water! Here..."

JR threw his fare a canteen. Dansk caught it reluctantly.

"Thanks."

"No, thank you, mae! I never forget you. I name my first son after you. Hey, what is your name?"

"Miles Dansk," he announced with haughty pride.

"Well, maybe just the middle name."

With that, the captain left, scored by a symphony of sputtering exhaust and choking buzzard.

At the shore, expectant broadcasters indicated the back of the line with passive-aggressive enthusiasm. For three days he edged towards the unassuming black studio building, sipping sparingly at his water and flatly refusing to interact with the irritatingly gregarious, "brainwashed Proles" that surrounded him.

The vicious Sun bore down like time; it withered his skin and bent his back. The thick, hot night smothered him like poisonous gas and insects drank his thickening blood. As the entrance drew closer, the few remaining drops of water turned to steam on his tongue and his thoughts wandered back through the line, over the sea, in and out of lifetimes, and came to rest at the lap of his first wife. Number one he called her now. Why not change her name? She had changed his, after all.

"Wow! You're beautiful!" he murmured.

"And you're high," she replied.

"Nope, I'm Miles."

"Ok then, Smiles," she laughed. "It's nice to meet you."

She was indeed beautiful, a lucky guess, as from his position, her head eclipsed the sun, obscuring her face in darkness. Strands of her hair danced in the corona-like solar flares, and she looked, to him, like the goddess of black holes.

He was in the prime of his performative powers. As an artist, he felt it his duty to find ways to enhance his perceptive abilities, and he often found them in chemicals. He trusted chemicals because they always knew what to do. They were never clouded by indecision in the way that sobriety was. In this instance, he had taken something that insisted he lay down. He happily complied, allowing his spine to unfurl and planting his head quite naturally into her hemp-lined lap. He had come to the protest for the hippies (hippies always had something on them). *She* had come to enrage her father, and over the years, Miles believed, she had moulded him after the old bastard like a voodoo doll. They *did* work for a while, believing they could change the world with their bodies. Living off of love, art, protest, and resistance, all of which they believed to be synonyms. However, their marriage was their greatest performance; a scathing indictment, indeed.

Suddenly, she cocked her head, sending shards of blinding sunlight into his eyes. A door slammed behind him and he was inside Proctor's studio. One cold white lamp shone behind a single camera. It was like looking at daylight through the blowhole of a whale.

Dansk composed himself, let his canteen fall to the sweaty floor, and stepped up to the shining black lens to begin his performance. His drug dealers and bartenders and whores and former subordinates and children and wives and all the world craned their necks in anticipation, and with a deep breath, he began...

Nothing.

He simply stood before the camera and sent a haughty smirk along its shaft, through its connected wires, into its transmitter, over invisible waves, out through the colossal screens and into the eyes of the world. Minutes passed and people began to remove their ear protection, celebrating with cheers of gratitude at being able to once again hear their thoughts. Minutes approached hours and spectators peeled from the screens and began to resume their lives. Hours stacked up into the next morning and the viewers returned as Dansk began to waver. They made lowing sounds as he faltered and cheered as he stiffened his resolve. When he smacked his lips from thirst, street vendors sold water. When he winced from hunger they sold hotdogs. By the end of the second day, Miles had to bite his lips together to prevent himself from talking to the ghosts that slinked out from behind the brilliant white lamp. Pimps and pushers beckoned him home, Number one scolded him and Jesús Romero mocked him with his peasant's logic — *What do I need to be famous? I'm rich!*

Dansk did not acknowledge them, even as Philligree Emerson-Proctor III himself condescended to make his acquaintance. The timeworn tycoon appeared, leaning nonchalantly, beside the exit. Miles tensed his neck against the impulse to look at him.

"Congratulations, young man. You have performed admirably!" Proctor's reedy voice was like a harsh wind whistling through gravestones.

Dansk's only reply was to bite a little deeper into his shrivelled lips.

"You are, indeed, a formidable opponent, but you know as well as I that you cannot win."

Dansk glowered with indignation at the lens before him, certain that he could see Proctor's mocking ghost reflected in it.

"You're thinking, and I know because I reside inside your mind, that there will be one of two outcomes to this endeavour. Either someone will force the entrance and remove you, rescuing not only your life but your faith in humanity and subsequently putting a stop to this

whole tawdry affair, or... you will die. In which case the world will see themselves reflected in your rotting corpse."

The haughty smirk returned to Miles' face. This was to be his finest performance; his legacy to eclipse all other disappointments.

"A fine and noble endeavour indeed; it would be the dressing down that society deserves. However, your arrogance blinds you to the third possible outcome."

Dansk's head was pounding, his stomach twisting as his ghosts began to swirl into the merciless lens like galaxies into a singularity. He swayed to and fro and his viewers around the world swayed with him; lowing from side to side. Proctor's voice boomed inside his skull.

"The third outcome is that you give up!"

The former Regional Implementations Executive's legs buckled and he crumpled to the floor. The world gasped. He could sense death creeping into the room, its cold fingers stroking his toes. He thought of Number one, her face in shadow, and her crown of sun fire. How he longed for her scorn, to speak with her, to speak at all, to cry, to sweat, to salivate.

"You could go to her. It's not too late to try again. It's not too late to live!" the decrepit old baron hissed.

The exit was open, she was standing in the door way holding a glass of water so clear that it could only be seen in the way it distorted the image of her hand. The glass sent prisms across the room that sang of the outside, of freedom, of salvation. He began to crawl to her.

"If you die in here, they will learn nothing. They will find a way to continue and perhaps they will step over your body. You will become a mascot to the brainwashed Proles."

He clawed at the concrete floor, inching ever closer to the door, and

the world began to cheer him on his way.

“You've made your point. Nothing will ever be the same again.”

He heard billions of people chanting his name.

”Dansk, Dansk, Dansk!”

He saw them hug each other and cry as the scales slid from their eyes.

“The world needs you to live!”

With all of his might, he pulled himself up to a seated position. He saw the people banding together, singing songs of unity and gratitude to their emancipator as they tore down the screens, digital monuments to their oppression.

“The world needs a provocateur of Imponderabilia, a sower of sedition!”

With his last ounce of strength, he pushed the door open and flopped into the outside. The deafening cheers faded as he lay on his back staring up at the burnt sienna of dawn.

* * *

"Hey, mister, you're holding up the queue," said an impatient wannabe broadcaster as she helped him to his feet. She offered her canteen and Dansk absorbed its contents greedily.

"Hey!" she protested and pushed him down the line.

Dansk staggered and crawled and slithered between the concentric lines of broadcasters until he was spewed into the ocean. Quickly, the jealous sea embraced him, pulling him down into its bosom, turning him over and over and smothering him with briny kisses until he felt the relief of unconsciousness wash across him.

Then there was only nothingness, as black as Proctor's panels without a single ounce of content. Blissful stillness and an absence of himself, of his many layers of presentation; father, son, artist, consumer, servant, served, outsider, insider, pleb, rebel, lover, avenger, old, young, thirsty, sated, aggressor, aggrieved; and all of their feelings and consequences fell from him like petals. No, they didn't fall. It was him that was rising. Rising towards a shimmering light. He could feel the wind, rushing into the space where his lungs once were and the sensation of moisture evaporating in hot sun.

"Don't worry, mae. I gotchu'!"

"Jesus?" Miles sighed.

"This time, I guess so!"

Miles was carried back into unconsciousness by the sound of a choking buzzard.

* * *

In his dreams, a chirpy young lady brought him water and chastised him for his cracked, dehydrated skin. She continued to talk at him as he revived, demonstrating the correct way to moisturise the face. He tried and failed to blink her into focus, but her beauty shone through the haze of semi-consciousness. She was on the television. No, not the television, there wasn't one inside his hospital cubicle; he tried to sit but was restrained by hypodermic tubes and agony. The young woman's face was divided by titled blinds. Was she outside?

The cubicle curtain swished open.

"Good, you are awake. I am Dr. Hidalgo." He was a kindly older man whose chest domed into his belly, gaping his white coat and exposing his bright red braces. "You are a very lucky man, Mr..." He consulted his clipboard. "Dansk?"

Dr. Hidalgo adjusted his glasses and peered at his patient over the

mottled brown frames.

"Your friend, he saved your life. Paid for everything, even insisted on giving you the best seat in the house." He indicated the window with a twitch of his chin. "He said, you like the screens. You've been on them. A famous 'performance artist,' he said."

"Screens?" Dansk murmured, peering bleary-eyed between the blinds.

The pretty, young, moisturised woman was bisected by skyline. She was talking to him from a screen sixty miles away in the city of San José.

"But, the screens came down. The people, I saw them, they tore them apart."

"Well, that would be quite something, but no, Mr. Dansk. Love them

or loathe them, the screens are here to stay. And besides," the doctor shrugged, "who even looks at them anymore? As for the noise, I hardly notice these days. It has become the new silence."

"But, but I almost died!"

Despair and indignation pitched battle across Miles' withered face, eliciting an expression of well-practiced sympathy from Dr. Hidalgo. The doctor placed a hand on his patient's shoulder, leaned in close, and in a low, solemn voice he said,

"This is true, but I'll tell you a secret. I almost failed medical school." His plump bottom lip and deep brown brow threatened to meet for a moment in a scowl of sincerity before broadening, once again, into a mischievous grin. "So, so much for almost!"

Mercury Rises

by Anatoly Belilovsky

Mercury rises first, a point of light
between the amber digits of dawn.
The jackal-headed god
having embalmed the night's consignment of the dead
sits, fashionably dressed and groomed,
aloof, watching the morning star dissolve
in sunlight streaming through the window
of the train newly-disgorged from underworld
to get Anubis to his day job.
The souls have taken a roundabout path,
slow, measured, unhurried, yet
they (like the gods) wait for no mere human.

The jackal-headed god
walks among people
makes no sign of recognition
or gesture of familiar greeting
toward where old recycled souls wait
to be decanted
once again
from their embalming fluid
people insist on calling "amniotic."

Amaranth

by Marge Simon



There can only be one Soul Princess

by Michelle Muenzler

I.

There can only be one Soul Princess,
how many times did Mother tell me that?
a hundred, a thousand?
more than I can count, for sure
more than the moons have seen
but if there can be only one
why
why
why must that one be me?

II.

Mother strokes my hair with a silver brush
to keep the souls from straying

Mother spoons thistle-milk down my throat
to keep the souls from straying

Mother whistles out of tune and beats my thighs with birch
to keep the souls from straying

Mother mother mother
every day a different face, every day a different voice

Sometimes I wonder
if she's still my mother
anymore

(continues)

III.

I dreamt
that I dreamt
that I yet dream
and in that dream
a soul rose up and
with its last breath
swallowed me whole
and said to me:

*Stupid girl
what good's a dream?
A true Soul Princess has no use for such wasteful things*

IV.

"Remember," Mother says as she shoves me through the gate
and into the arena, hungry souls crackling in my spine; other
girls cry at their gates, other girls scream; other girls grind their
souls like blades against their meat; but all of us, from the
meanest to the meek, know but this one thing:

There can only be one Soul Princess
come the end

Just the one, just the one

Just the one

The Static and Black Lectures

by Maxwell I. Gold

#1: On Valuations and Voids

Pristine constructs once filled negative spaces and broken ledgers, accounting for a proportionate usage of human thoughts. This transfigured malignancy of consciousness lay in pieces of atomic sadness, strewn across the brain tissue of a dying world. The rotting logic of our time, taxing the minds of millions by way of computerized interactions, brain hackery, and twitter-polluted friendships wrapped together in newsfeeds of photographic amusement.

Any questions? I would ask, only to be answered by blank stares from the faceless crowd of distracted pupils and their little pocket daemons, advising and encouraging by means of a devilish cyber counsel. Billions of glowing eyes melded together to form images, pixelated fantasies of grotesque wonderment that slowly, but surely, contributed to the deteriorating transfer of consciousness from flesh to metal. As I looked further into the expanding blackness of space, humanities' plastic existence. Even the stars, in their terrible grandeur, gathering along the great structures of gravitational webs, pulling vast swathes of dead mass; were unsure how to comprehend such an existential cosmic mutation metastasizing in their wake.

No commentary from the Void. Merely the unnatural light harnessed by ruinous memories. The light grew fainter and more distant as it was never even there. Nothing made sense anymore, like I was trapped in some cosmic fishbowl for the amusement of these juvenile gods of old, toying with my puddled neurons and willowed synapses. Their eyes, billions of tiny cyber pupils, leered from the darkness above as I scurried to my desk, feeling the fingers of entropy closing in on me.

Blink, throb, repeat. Came the only answer from the hungering blackness. Only deep, associative undertones of throbbing infrequent drumbeats against the backdrop of silent shadows, making my chest heavy and cold. Pristine constructs. Valuations and broken ledgers. *Blink, throb, repeat.* The undulating dark seemed to grow ever more as I felt the boundaries around my desk shrink with every flash of light, every twitch from those awful eyes whose colors made the rest of my body ache with a numbing paresthesia. Nothing made sense anymore. Pristine constructs once filled negative spaces and broken ledgers, accounting for a proportionate usage of my thoughts, a transfigured malignancy of consciousness lying in pieces of atomic sadness, strewn across the brain tissue of my world.

#2: Of Quanta and Quarantines

Gliding like shadows on the wall, barely visible, undetectable in the night I knew something was there, lidless and cold. Don't blink, Professor Static would tell me. They move infinitely in the night, incomprehensible to the eye, entropic and immutable, twisting consciousness by the crackling noises of white voids through speckled lunacy. Perverse, contorted, and ruthless, uniquely defining the darkness that crawled underneath mass deceptions in the peripherals of our pathetic greyspaces. Gruesomely so, they slithered along the sewers of reality, undulating in palpable slang the ululations of shadow speech; electric and atomic in nature. He was a mysterious creature, though I found myself entranced by his words. The words of Static.

It was unavoidable, standing in the shadow of a fortress of night, unable to escape the thing that coiled around my mind, with visions

so gripping and a voice so ugly. *Beware the immense the most infinitesimal*, he'd say; the Cyber-quanta which had infected every strata of my machinations down to the insignificant pragmatic microbial core. So, in dreams I confined myself, to the most isolated of worlds, where last night bizarre and wild constructs of color bled through my mind. Blues and greens blended together with pale amber tones, and even some new strains of light that were indescribable to the human eye illuminated my horizons. Surely it was some trickery wrought by the Static. Wandering through an ethereal portal, my body pushing against layers of space and time as if it were some grey electrified paste. I didn't blink, not even once as I pressed onward. Beyond the bubbles of nothingness, where deteriorating structures of gravity sagged against the vacuous dark, quantum memories from my many pasts seemed to smash together in violent entropy as my eyes began to shut.

Gliding like shadows on the wall, barely visible, undetectable in the night, nothing made sense inside the borrowed rooms and old metaphors in my head. I knew what the Professor said, but that was *his* folly; for now, *I* move infinitely throughout loops of doomed histories and compressed singularities, like Static on the walls.

#3: Ruins and Rhizomes

Stellar corpses remained trapped in a graveyard of night, where black worms gnawed on their galactic flesh. Rotting with spark and flame, I saw the skeletal things twitch and fester by the glow of some neutron pulsar, whose blinding luminescence was sealed under an ancient mausoleum of stars. Twitching in my seat, the chalkboard covered in dust, Dr. Black blathered on, filling the place with yet another ignescent platitude about our dull existences. Fingers tapping on the surface of a cold, hollow reality, the wooden borders of my desk dropping off towards the Void where Dr. Black's awful dullness began.

How long had I been here, listening to this? I often wondered to myself, though no true answer ever came. Only zombified notions of time, night, and stardust ground into a fine powder by the hands of an almighty judge, Dr. Black.

He liked to talk, lecture, institutionalize us, or so that was what I imagined it to be. The greyness of his splotchy, sticky voice spilling out into the hall as the dirt and grime of his bifocals, muddied with soot and stardust, slowly filled the air. Maybe that's where they went, the stellar corpses, I mean. Unable to flee, but cowering, liberated under the feeling of some nihilistic truth by Dr. Black's reason.

The wooden border of reality closed in, dullness and chalk blending easily with atoms and matter. Fingers tapping, stairways without end, and graveyards of stars. Dr Black's detestations for those who don't pay attention are truly vast, like shades towering in the night. Dr. Black detests them, me, as black worms gnawed at my flesh.

#4: On Loneliness and Languor

Walls of shadow and doubt masked behind lips and lamentations concealed any fragments of truth I had come to understand in a world where all the music had gone out. Languishing on a miserable bed of loathsome revelations, the pods of a new inquisition crammed in my head, bleeding ears, filled my mind with new thoughts, a new reality as I listened to them. Static and Black, their words and revels.

Pressing fingers against my ears I wondered, "Who else was listening? Were they always listening?"

Metal pods in my ears, plastic wires extrapolated from my chest, filled with the words of a new inquisition, cleansed my languor and bleached my solitude. The music had all gone out. The rhythm was dead, and all that remained were Static and Black, crouched behind

walls of shadow and doubt masked behind lips and lamentations.

#5: Static and Black

Gliding like shadows along the walls, throbbing, blinking, culminating into a singular nightmarish abstraction of thought; two words trembled over bloodshot centers of the milky holes inside my head. Cracks, fuming with unanswered questions, two words, utterances by two grey souls flooded my brain. *'Static and Black. Static and Black,'* they would chant, over and over again, in a tone so foul, the slippery moist sludge oozing from their lips curdled my every sensory perception. The lecture, I knew, would soon come to an end, the revelation, realization, wrought by my curiosities, drawn back into the horrid darkness. Twenty fingers, decrepit and bony, reached out from the shadows, musty and dank.

“Static and Black. Static and Black,” their voices continued to breathe, hungry and wretched.

There was nowhere to run, to hide, or flee as a massive chalkboard burst through the sandy ground, dusty white ash coating my body,

those ancient fingers drawing closer.

“Please, let me alone. I’ve learned my lesson. I swear,” I pleaded as they ignored me.

“Static and Black. Static and Black. We are here, Static and Black,” they moaned, rhythm roiling, bodily terrors gestating under the platitudinous night.

Higher and higher the glassy teal wall rose, thick chalk congealing around my legs, making any movement nearly impossible. Crashing against the wall, broken nails scratched over the cracked teal sky, like bolts of electricity shocking my fractured neurons into submission. Laughter, sinister and cold, followed as if it were the thunder from a terrible storm, one finger after the other, scratching and laughing. Still, there was nowhere to run. Soon, even the dim shadows found their asphyxiation under the guise of Static and Black as the massive fingers coiled tighter around my neck. The fog of the teal sky became cloudier and muddier, where soon, two words trembled over bloodshot centers of the milky holes inside my head. Throbbing, blinking, repeating, “Static and Black. Static and Black. They’re finally here. Static and Black.”

Planet Gazing

by Carl Scharwath



The World Needle

by Amelia Gorman

I will sew with birds instead of thread
porcupine quills instead of needles,
I'll bead berries like pearls, like worms
who eat holes in the shells we beachcomb.

The invention of sewing
starts with pulling birds through an eye
to make the ripples that punish mankind.

The invention of sinning
starts with pushing a hole around birds

I will sew like my grandmothers
I will sew like ancient bones
And what if it wasn't an apple they bit
but a bird, teeth tearing into red
breast, sticky on the chin
that punishes us.

What if she didn't bite the bird
but licked, pared it down with sharp spit
until it was thin enough
to fit through the eye of a needle?

Before there was fabric
we sewed the world.

A covered temptation
is all the less resistible.

The Skald Sings of Samhain

by Frank Coffman

*(a sonnet primarily in the Old Norse form of Dróttkvaett—
with some lines in Hyrnhent and some in Draughtent)*

All Hallows Eve. Hurry, harry the still-living,
Fell foes with Hell's fury, freely roaming, laughing,
As mortal Man, failing, most feebly to resist
Potent attacks prevailing. Powers they might enlist
Are off too long delayed. The Might of great Mages,
Some strong enough, indeed, schooled from the secret pages
Of grand grimoires, able, through lost incantations
When the World is unstable, to win o'er *Mis-creations*.

Terrors, the Veil tearing, travel in our demesne.
Hostile the Host bearing Horrors of Halloween.
Legion of Evil laughing, at the Lost who disbelieve.
Most mortals keep scoffing; for many—no reprieve.
Wicked wights all wending—when that Great Gossamer tatters—
Into Our World, sending such Things our sanity shatters.

DRÓTTKVATT and Variations (short for Dróttkvatt Háttir ["Court Poem"])

The meter used by the Drótt, the retainers of the king, the staple meter of skaldic poetry. Old Norse-Icelandic:

- Each stanza consists of 8 lines
- Each line is 6 syllables long
- Each line has 3 accented and 3 unaccented syllables
- Each line regularly ends with a trochee (/u), often a two-syllable feminine rhyme
- Every two lines are bound by alliteration, which **MUST** fall on the first stressed syllable of the second line—
following at least two alliterations on that sound in the first line
- Heavy use of internal rhyme
- Full rhymes for the even lines
- Slant rhymes (assonance) for the odd lines
- Heavy use of kennings

This is the standard meter for the early ON poems in — DRAPA

Later ON poems used HYRNHENT/HYRNHENDA – same, but with 8-syllable lines.

Also another later variant (according to Snorri) is DRAUGHTENT, the same using 7-syllable lines with the accent in the second line of each pair as the extra-metrical.



SHE'S ADJUSTING THE SEAT. AS THEY HAVE NO USER PROFILES, AND HAVEN'T USED THE CAR BEFORE, THIS HAS TO BE DONE MANUALLY.



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.

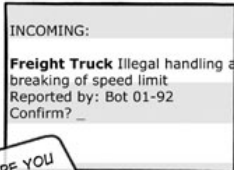
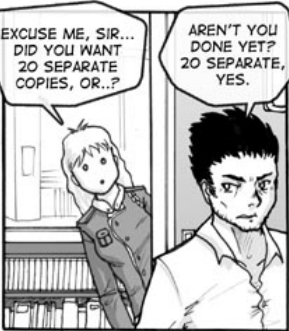
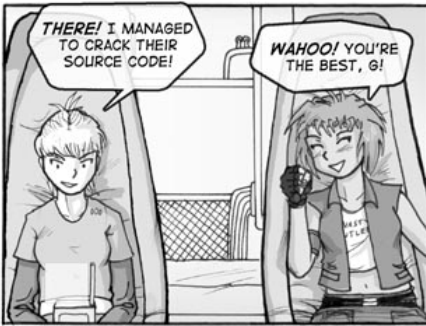
Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank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

If you are a hacker, please don't be mad at me...

This is only fiction...

The "virtual keyboard" is not shown here, but it's quite small and flat as a paper.





NOTES

No, the inspector is not a cameo of Wolverine or Tetsuo...

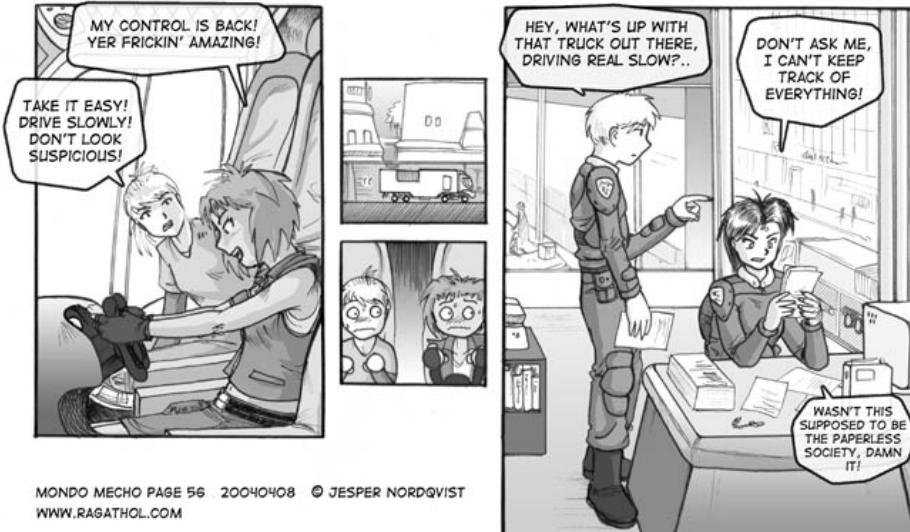
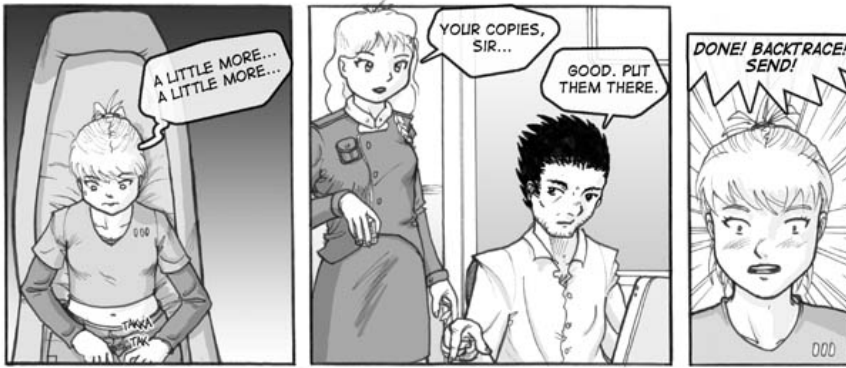
But maybe an older version of Victor from Blue Monday ^_^

I like these police characters, too bad they won't be seen much more..

The copies Annica is making aren't on paper (even if that can be made too, of course), but on small laser discs.

The inspector probably wants them for handouts at a briefing or suchlike.





NOTES

We have a guest in this page
 ^ _ ^

As we have the whole police business here, I couldn't help putting in two of the coolest cops ever, Leona and AI from the Dominion Tank Police Force ^ _ ^

If you look closely, you can even see Leona's ZZ Top tank keychain on the table.

Dominion Š Masamune
 Shirow





NOTES

(No notes this page)

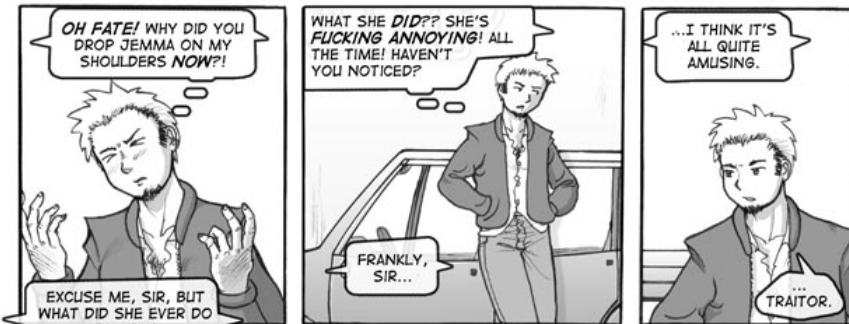
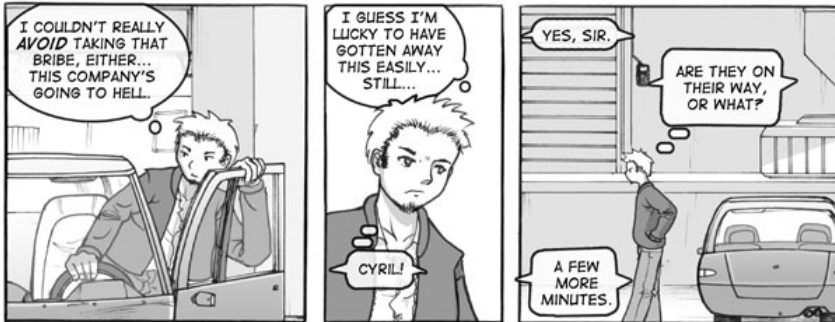
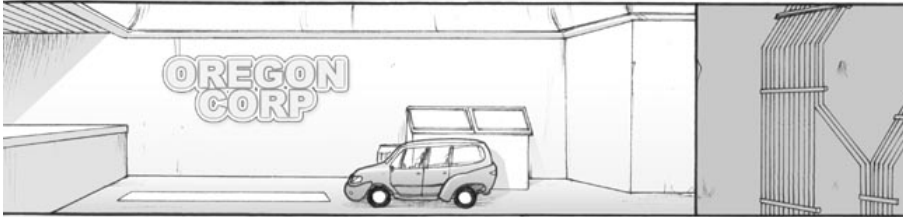
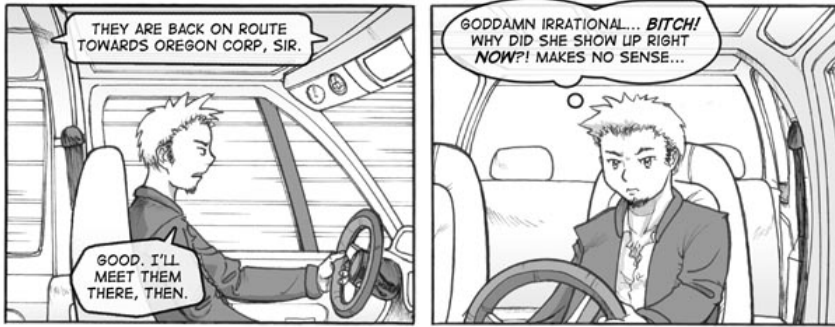




NOTES

What the heck is Cyril doing behind that pillar? o_o'



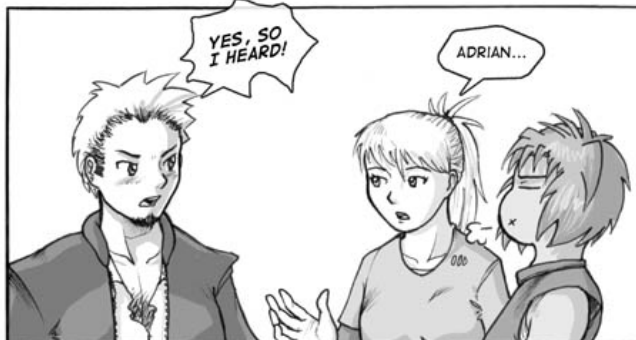
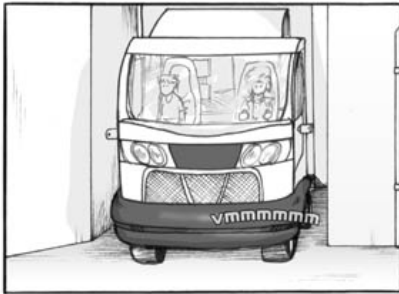


NOTES

The bribe Adrian's talking about does not have anything to do with the current events... It was the reason to his fraud accusations.

That car is ugly, I know.





NOTES

I'm quite happy with how Adrian looks by now :)

That yard is quite small, but it's enough to turn the truck around.

The factory workers takes care of that, though...



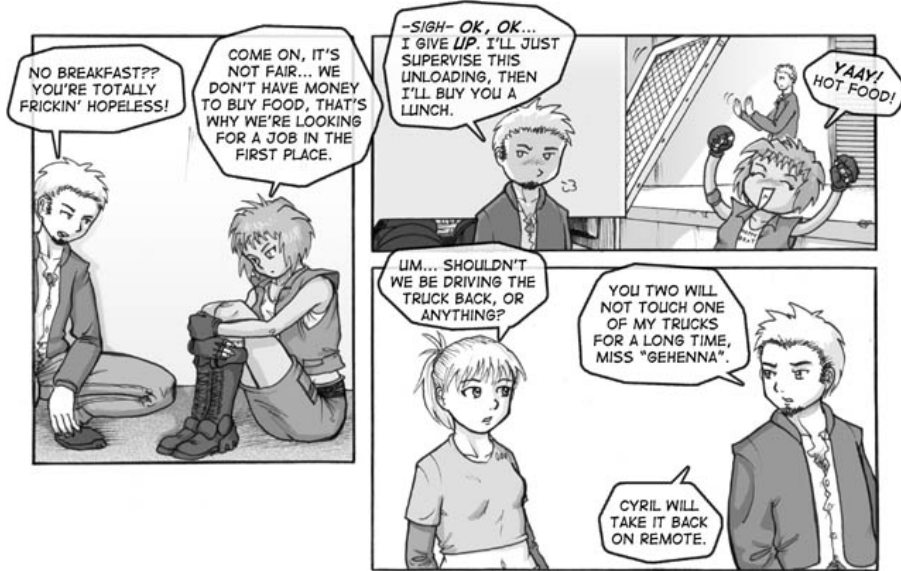


NOTES

At last, you say? Well, me too...

Poor Jemma... Adrian should be more worried about her!





MONDO MECO
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PART 2: END

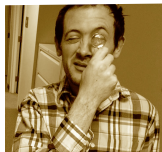
NOTES

Somehow, my characters always end up in burger joints... must be their karma.

Jill looks so tired already..
come on girl, cheer up!



Contributor's Bios



JOE BAUMANN's fiction and essays have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Electric Spec*, *On Spec*, *Barrelhouse*, *Zone 3*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and many others. He is the author of *Ivory Children*, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He

possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was nominated for inclusion in Best American Short Stories 2016 and was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. He can be reached at joebaumann.wordpress.com.

* * *



ANATOLY BELILOVSKY was born in a city that went through six or seven owners in the last century, all of whom used it to do a lot more than drive to church on Sundays; he is old enough to remember tanks rolling through it on their way to Czechoslovakia in 1968. After being traded to the US for a shipload of

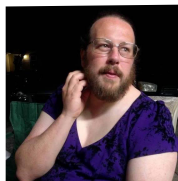
grain and a defector to be named later, he learned English from *Star Trek* reruns, apparently well enough to be admitted into SFWA in spite of chronic cat deficiency. He has sold original and translated stories and poems to *NATURE*, *F&SF*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and other markets.

* * *



LAWRENCE BUENTELLO has published many horror, science fiction, and fantasy short stories in a variety of magazines and anthologies. He lives in San Antonio, Texas.

* * *



ANTON CANCRE's mother wasn't really pregnant with them when she went to see *The Exorcist*, but they tell people that anyways because it sounds cool. Their debut collection of poetry, *Meaningless Cycles in a Vicious Glass Prison: Songs of Death and Love*, is available through

Dragon's Roost Press. They're also a luddite who still has a blogspot website (antoncancre.blogspot.com) and runs the Spec Griot Garage podcast (specgriotgarage.podbean.com) where they get to gush over other people's poems with cool folks.

* * *

FRANK COFFMAN is a retired professor of college English, Creative Writing, and Journalism. He has published speculative poetry and fiction in a variety of magazines and anthologies. His poetic magnum opus, *The Coven's Hornbook & Other Poems* (2019), has been followed by his rendition into English Verse of 327 quatrains of *Khayyám's Rubáiyát* (2019). A second large collection of poetry, *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows*, was published in March of 2020. All are available from Bold Venture Press and on Amazon.

A traditional formalist in his poetic work, he is especially interested in exploring and experimenting with the patterns of verse found across the world's cultures and ethnicities and across time from ancient to modern. His special love of and interest in the sonnet has led to invention of several cross-cultural meldings of various traditions with the 14-line restriction of the sonnet form.

His third poetry collection, *Eclipse of the Moon*, was published in May 2021. A collection of seven of his occult detective stories, *Three Against the Dark*, will be published in late 2021, and a collection of

weird and supernatural short stories, *In Terrorem: Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*, is projected for 2022.

He has published speculative short fiction in *Test Patterns*, *Black Veins I*, *Hell's Empire*, *Eldritch Tales*, and elsewhere

A member of the Horror Writers Association and the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association, he established and moderates the Weird Poets Society Facebook group. See his Writer's Blog at: <https://www.frankcoffman-wordsmith.com>.

* * *



STEVE DUBOIS is a high school teacher from Kansas City. His speculative fiction has appeared in over two dozen periodicals and has been shortlisted for the James White and Baen Fantasy Adventure Awards. His author site is www.stevedubois.net.

* * *



MAXWELL I. GOLD is a gay Jewish Rhysling Award nominated prose poet, focusing on weird fiction. His work has been featured in numerous publications including *Spectral Realms*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Weirdbook Magazine*, *Startling Stories*, and *others*.

He has published over 50 short stories and poems since 2017 and recently released his debut prose poetry collection *Oblivion in Flux: A Collection of Cyber Prose* from Crystal Lake Publishing.

* * *



AMELIA GORMAN is a recent transplant to Eureka, California and you can usually find her walking her dogs or foster dogs in the woods or exploring tide pools. Her fiction has appeared recently in *Nightscript 6* and her poetry in *Liminality* and *Vastarien*. Her first chapbook, *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, is forthcoming in September 2021 from Interstellar Flight Press. Find her online at www.ameliagorman.com.

* * *



ALICIA HILTON is an author, law professor, arbitrator, actor, and former FBI Special Agent. She believes in angels and demons, magic and monsters. Her work has appeared in *Akashic Books*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Demain Publishing UK*, *Departure Mirror*, *DreamForge*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Litro*, *Modern Haiku*, *Sci Phi Journal*, *Space and Time*, *Spectral Realms*, *Vastarien*, *Year's Best Hardcore Horror Volumes 4, 5 & 6*, and elsewhere. Alicia's website is <https://aliciahilton.com>. Follow her on Twitter @aliciahilton01.

* * *

JADE is an artist, traceur, and baker. Her art has been published in *Scifaikuest* and *Star*Line* while her poetry appeared in the *Rattle Young Poets Anthology*.

* * *



S P JENKINS's earliest foray into the world of creative writing was as a songwriter; garnering modest successes through various bands and solo

guises. It wasn't until his move to China three years ago that he was inspired to make another move from lyrics to literature. The first draft of his inaugural novel (currently WIP) was written on an iPhone 6 during his commutes to work on the Shanghai underground. Sam is now back in his home country of England and when he is not writing, he is teaching English online or out walking in the Peak District. Sam writes sci-fi and speculative fiction inspired by zeitgeist and philosophy. His influences include pretty much anything ever dramatised and Narrated by Michael Hanson for WAH radio's *Mindwebs*.

* * *



GERRI LEEN is a Pushcart- and Rhysling-nominated poet from Northern Virginia who's into horse racing, tea, collecting encaustic art and raku pottery, and making weird one-pan meals. She has poetry published in *Strange Horizons*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Polu Texni*, *NewMyths.com* and others.

She also writes fiction in many genres (as Gerri Leen for speculative and mainstream, and Kim Stratford for romance) and is a member of HWA and SFWA. Visit gerrileen.com to see what she's been up to.

* * *



LAUREN MARRERO is the author of *Seducing the Laird*. Born and raised in Pasadena, California, Lauren has always had a passion for writing. After receiving her bachelors of Arts in English from UC Berkeley, she immediately set out on a world

tour looking for adventure, which has taken her everywhere from India to Andalucia in search of interesting stories and experiences. When she is not writing in her favorite coffee shop, Lauren spends most of her reading romance novels and trying new recipes. She currently resides in Tokyo, Japan.

Keep in touch with Lauren via the web:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Lauren.Marrero.Writer/>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/lauglow>

Instagram: <https://instagram.com/lauglow/>

* * *

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

* * *



MICHELLE MUENZLER, known at local science fiction and fantasy conventions as "The Cookie Lady," writes fiction both dark and strange to counterbalance the sweetness of her baking. Her short fiction and poetry can be read in numerous science fiction and fantasy magazines, and she takes immense joy in crinkling words like little foil puppets. Check out her website, michellemuenzler.com, for links to more of her work...as well as recipes for her convention cookies!

* * *

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.

* * *



ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *

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.

* * *



MARGE SIMON lives in Ocala, FL, City of Trees with her husband, poet/writer Bruce Boston and the ghosts of two cats. She edits a column for the HWA Newsletter, "Blood & Spades: Poets of the Dark Side." Marge's poems and stories have appeared in *Pedestal Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Crannog*, *Silver Blade*, *Bete Noire*, *New Myths*, *Daily Science Fiction*. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer and is on the board of the Speculative Literary Foundation. A multiple Bram Stoker award winner, Marge is the second woman to be acknowledged by the SF &F Poetry Association with a Grand Master Award.

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, Elgin Award runner-up *Astropoetry*, and *A Collection of Dreamscapes*. Her poetry, fiction, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, as well as received honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's first novelette, "Fury," was published in 2020's *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women* and her next book of poems, *The Gravity of Existence*, is forthcoming in 2022.



Revitalized. He feels his returning power surge through him. Electrifying. Filling him. Making him whole again. His lover's blood trickling down his chin. He is sated. For now.

by Novyl Saeed
(full image)