

penumbra

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Special Art & Prose Issue

Unlocking the Spirit (but which one?)

featuring work by

Oladosu Michael Emerald •
Joseph Carrabis • E. E. King •
Christina Sng • Gustavo
Bondoni • Carl Scharwath •
Rosie Oliver • Lynn White •
Novyl Saeed • Krista Canterbury
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Sophia Ashley • Nicola Brayan •
Avra Margariti • Jennifer Lee
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Harlock • Victor T. Cypert •
Emmie Christie • Marsheila
Rockwell • Nicholas Katsanis •
Denny E. Marshall • Linda
Neuer • Jesper Nordqvist



Detail from *Library of Alexandria* by Tim Hildebrandt

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Note that content in *Penumbria* sometimes contains adult language and/or situations. If it were TV, it would be rated MA.

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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Boy; City of many colours



*Siblings under Skin -
Skeleton Art Class*



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Spirits.

Other than Halloween, late December is probably the time of year most populated, in the popular imagination, with spirits (I'm talking here in the West, at least). And although it's supposed to be all sweetness and light, there definitely is an undercurrent of spooky, a chill in the air that isn't just due to the wintery weather (nor even the nightmarish voyeurism of elves on shelves, which is a whole other kind of creepy).

I first realized this when reading Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," that overused but still amazing story of the ghosts (and spirits, the two being slightly different) visiting an unrepentant and greedy old man. Sanitized though it was for primary school consumption, it still lent Christmas a bit of Halloween, which, to my odd little self, I thought it needed. (For that matter, my favorite actual carol is "Carol of the Bells," particularly any sort of dark or metal version; it seems much more haunting than all the happy happy joy joy of jingling bells and bellies full of jelly.)

In this issue, then, our attempt at Christmas spirit is a bit more ...

dark. And yet light. Or at least hopeful. Sometimes.

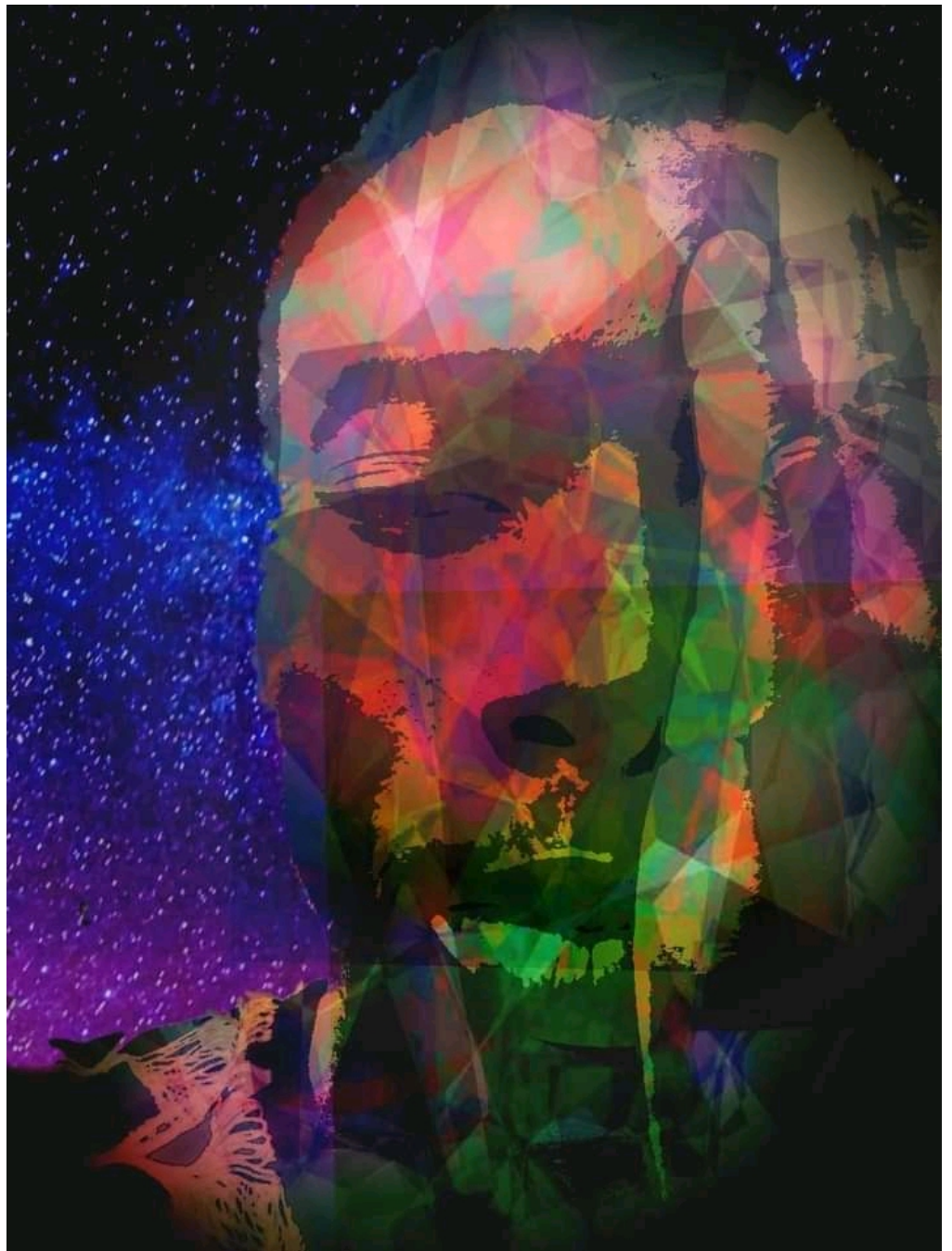
Rather than list everything in the issue (which I suspect is more succinctly done in the table of contents), I'd just like to say thanks to Jesper Nordqvist, whose ongoing webcomic concludes (or comes to an end) in this issue. We first started printing *Mondo Mecho* during the first run of the magazine in the early 2ks, and he was kind enough to let us continue to print it in our new incarnation. We'll miss the cyberpunk adventures of Jemma and Gehenna, and we wish them well. And in the new year we'll have new graphic narratives to show you all (although there are definitely slots still open, so if you have a short or long webcomic you'd like to submit, please do!).

I wish you all a hauntingly good holiday season, and we'll see you again in 2k23!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

Boy; City of many colours

by Oladosu
Michael Emerald



Those Wings which Tire, They Have Upheld Me

by Joseph Carrabis

Spring

Cowan was walking in the woods the first time he saw Angel. He was really looking for a haunted house the real estate lady told his parents was back there and he'd walked further into the woods than he'd ever gone before.

There was an inch of snow on the ground except where the sun came through the trees for most of the day. In those places the ground was muddy. Cowan felt the crisping of the snow under his boots and looked at his footprints, wanting to remember what they really looked like when he could really see them.

He took off the wrap-around sunglasses he wore to hide the holes where his eyes had been, thinking maybe the sunglasses stopped what he used to see from getting through. He still smelled the woodiness of the trees, still felt the cool air on his face and his breath misting as he exhaled. His breath didn't look right, though.

That was because of the Cap.

Dr. Hargitay said the Cap was best at least until they were sure the cancer didn't come back. After that, Dr. Hargitay told Cowan's parents, maybe they could transplant.

But until then it was the Cap.

Cowan didn't like it. It itched.

Cowan's family moved closer to the hospital that previous winter. Mom and Dad wanted to be with him more and this was the only way to do it. Cowan knew there were lots of other kids whose parents had moved closer to the hospital, but few of those kids ever came out.

He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

When Cowan showed up in his new school after Spring vacation, Kevin, who wasn't even in his class and had stayed back twice, followed Cowan all over the playground, just walking behind him and sing-singing "*I can't See, I can't See*" until Cowan ran back into the school. Ms. Sanborn heard him in the boys' room and sent in Mr. Horly, the janitor, to see if everything was okay.

Because Cowan couldn't cry – Dr. Hargitay explained that when they removed his eyes they had to take lots more out. The cancer, he told Cowan, had done more than attack his eyes – Mr. Horly told Ms. Sanborn everything was okay.

The next day Kevin and three other boys, their arms locked over each other's shoulders like high school football champs, walked behind Cowan all of recess, their four voices singing Kevin's "*I can't See, I can't See*" song. Cowan knew the playground monitors and teachers were around. He could see them. Maybe they didn't help him because

they didn't know if he really *could* see them. Maybe they felt if they were really, really quiet, he wouldn't know they were there because of the Cap. It was brand new. Not many people besides Dr. Hargitay and his friends understood it. Cowan heard Dr. Hargitay talk about light being electric and magnetic vibrations in space and how the brain didn't need eyes to sense those vibrations, that the Cap could do it, but Cowan didn't understand.

But that didn't matter to Cowan. On the third day, what mattered was Kevin and his football buddies spending half the recess following him around.

Cowan turned to face them. Kevin laughed and his buddies laughed and they sing-songed louder, "*I can't See, I can't See.*" Cowan took off his glasses and unhooked the Cap. Only Dr. Hargitay, Mom, and Dad knew what Cowan looked like without the Cap. Dr. Hargitay said it didn't matter and Mom and Dad never told.

Two of the boys screamed and ran. One got sick and wet himself. Only Kevin stood his ground, staring at Cowan but saying nothing, swallowing hard and snuffling until Cowan walked away.

Ms. Sanborn called Cowan's parents. Cowan, she told them, was terrorizing the children on the playground. Cowan, they told her, would be punished.

That night, after dinner in the kitchen, Mom said he must never take off the Cap. Dad rearranged cookbooks on the shelf over the stove but said nothing, only nodding at things Mom said. They took him to Dr. Hargitay, who did something so Cowan couldn't take the Cap off again. "For your own good," Dr. Hargitay said.

The next day Cowan caught some kids staring at him. He wasn't sure which hurt more, the Cap or the other kids' stares. Every time he caught them staring they'd quickly turn away and watch him from the corners of their eyes, facing front, their hands on their books and their heads towards the board, but their eyes over to the sides or their heads tilted just enough so he could tell.

He got back at them, though. When he caught them staring, he'd hiss at them or growl. Sometimes he'd spit. A few times he'd tense his fingers until his hands looked like bird claws and he'd scratch them.

Nobody, not even Kevin, dared fight him. They were frightened of the Cap, with its red, yellow, and turquoise lights flashing, the light-guides glowing on and off, and always the black holes, hidden by his wrap-around sunglasses, where his eyes used to be. Nobody wanting to fight him made Cowan feel a little better.

Sometimes, when Cowan felt alone or angry or like he wanted to cry and knew he couldn't and even if he could no one would let him, he'd show them.

He'd take off his glasses and show them.

He'd show everybody.

Except Leonard Houde. A few days after Ms. Sanborn sent Cowan home, when Cowan was standing by the fence on the playground and keeping to himself, Leonard walked up to him.

"Hi," Leonard said.

Cowan growled and hissed.

Leonard said, "Yeah, well, hi," and walked away.

Ms. Sanborn was always sending Leonard into Mrs. McDonough's office. It seemed to Cowan Ms. Sanborn sent Leonard to Mrs. McDonough's office whenever anything happened Ms. Sanborn didn't like. It didn't matter if Leonard was the one who did it or not, Leonard was the one who'd go. She sent Leonard to Mrs. McDonough's office the first day Cowan came to class. Cowan remembered that. Cowan walked in and Ms. Sanborn introduced him to the class. Somebody laughed and threw a wad of paper at Cowan. It didn't even come from Leonard's direction but Leonard said "Hey" and Ms. Sanborn said, "Mr. Houde, get your things and get out!" so

basically Leonard walked out as Cowan walked in.

Cowan wanted to say something but Ms. Sanborn said, "We behave in this class, Cowan." Was Leonard being punished for Cowan's being there?

Leonard waved and smiled at him as he walked out.

It bothered Cowan that Ms. Sanborn always sent Leonard to Mrs. McDonough's office because Leonard was the only kid who'd been anything like nice to him. Cowan figured Ms. Sanborn hated Leonard. She was nice to Cowan but only because he wore the Cap, not because of anything else. He figured if he'd been another kid, somebody without the Cap, he'd go see Mrs. McDonough pretty often, too.

So because Cowan didn't have any friends, and because even the grown-ups were afraid of the Cap, Cowan walked in the woods behind his house all by himself that Saturday the first time he saw Angel. His mother said he had to be at the hospital in an hour so he could go play until she called him.

The house, when he found it, didn't look haunted. It looked like a dump; big and green with brown trim, most of its windows broken and a wrap-around porch. The highest windows had no glass in them at all.

"Hey, is there anybody in there?" he yelled. "My name's Cowan Barnes and I came out here to play." He waited. "Hey, anybody home?"

Nobody answered. Cowan picked up a rock and threw it at the house. It bounced off the side.

"Stupid house."

A big, old spruce stood in front of the house. He folded his sunglasses in his pocket and leaned against the tree, taking deep breaths

of its Christmassy smell. He remembered, where he used to live, he leaned up against a spruce tree and his mother yelled at him because his hair got all sticky. He patted the tree and felt the sticky sap on his hands, then got angry because he didn't have any hair left to get sticky. All he had now was the cool metal skin of the Cap, its blinking lights and glowing little wire guides where curly blond hair used to be. There was no one around for him to growl at so he smashed the Cap against the spruce. The bolt of pain reminded him of the cancer and he cried, which hurt even more because there was nothing left to cry with.

He lifted his head. Something was wrong. His vision blurred, but not like when he had the cancer. Back then things just got fuzzy and never cleared. Now he saw two pictures of everything; one like always but only black&white, the other one a mash of different colors and a little to the right of the first. It was like when he first woke up with the Cap and Dr. Hargitay had to make adjustments.

Cowan waited for the mashed color images to blend into the black&white. When they didn't, he got scared. He wanted to cry again but that hurt too much, so instead he reached for the black&white spruce. It was there and it was solid. Then he reached for the mashed color tree. It wasn't there. His hand went right through it, except he saw a black&white hand go through the colors and saw a mashed color hand go through the air a little to his right.

He laughed and experimented. Soon he got the hang of it. All the mashed color things were like shadows. He could walk through the colored shadows like they were nothing at all; only the black&white things were real.

He started back home, careful to walk through the colored shadows and not the black&white things. Most of the time he wondered whether or not to tell Dr. Hargitay.

This was fun.

That's when he bumped into Angel.

Cowan saw what looked like a blurry, mashed black&white dead old tree trunk with two scrawny branches to his left and a clear, multicolored, almost burning tree with two huge branches full of glowing leaves to his right. He walked into the multicolor tree and fell back onto the ground. When he looked up, the multicolored tree was staring down at him. Only now it had huge wings that reached up and out behind it. It looked like it was kneeling down, trying to figure him out. Over to the left, Cowan saw what he thought might have been a blurry, black&white, dead old tree bending like it had knees. That was wrong. Trees didn't have knees. When he really looked at it, it didn't look like a tree at all, it looked like a tall man's shadow with wings.

To his left, what might have been a scrawny, dead branch reached down to him. In front of him, something with three fingers, no thumb, and which seemed to be on fire came towards him.

Cowan got up and ran. Between the things he could see, between what was real and what was not. All the way home.

Cowan's mother said nothing except to ask him if he had fun in the Woods.

When they got to the hospital, Dr. Hargitay hooked a computer into the Cap. "The external representation and the internal reality are out of synch." He patted Cowan's shoulder. "Wow, I'll bet that must have been scary for a while, huh?"

Cowan said nothing.

"I'll bet you could still remember which was which, huh?"

Cowan looked at Dr. Hargitay with black sockets where his eyes used to be.

"Okay, Cowan, tell me what you see." Dr. Hargitay turned back to his computer and made adjustments without waiting for Cowan to speak. "That's right. The black&white is the object, but just the shape and

form; the blur of colors is what the object is, content and context."

Dr. Hargitay typed at his keyboard and the real image and the mashed color image came together again, the colors swarming over the black&white like moss climbing a rock. When Dr. Hargitay finished everything had a single, colored image again. He and Cowan's Mom talked while Cowan played in the waiting room. There were some other kids there with their parents. Kids who weren't in Cowan's school, with parents who didn't live close by.

Cowan didn't go into the woods for a week. When he did, he saw Angel. Cowan yelled, "Who are you? What're you doing here?"

If Angel noticed, it didn't respond.

"Hey, you! Hey, Turdhead, I'm talking to you!"

Angel stood still in the forest without acknowledging Cowan's presence. Cowan made his hands into claws, took off his sunglasses, growled, and ran at Angel.

Angel didn't move until Cowan ran into him and fell down. When Angel did move, it was as before, kneeling down and reaching out to Cowan.

This time Cowan didn't run. He'd done his best. It'd always frightened the kids at school and sometimes even made Ms. Sanborn turn away and leave him alone.

So Cowan looked. Angel was all red. It had a head and there were two black eyes. At least Cowan thought they were eyes. They were two large black ovals that touched at the top of Angel's head. Each went down the side of the head to almost where ears might be, except Angel didn't have any ears and no nose or mouth. Angel had the shape of a grown-up, but skinnier, which Angel wasn't, but Cowan didn't know how else to describe it. It was like somebody had taken a Gumby and pulled it too much and the Gumby never went back to normal.

Angel's hands were three pointy fingers that didn't have any knuckles, nor did Angel have any feet. It looked as if its feet were buried because its legs ended in spikes that punched into the ground. What Cowan liked most were the two huge bat-like wings that came out of Angel's back. Angel wasn't really tall – Cowan thought it was only a little taller than his Dad – but Angel's wings looked big enough to cover both his Mom's and Dad's cars if they were parked end to end.

Angel reached down and wrapped a hand around Cowan's arm.

Inside his head, Cowan saw himself walking into Angel the first time, then running at Angel this time. It was the first time he'd seen himself without his sunglasses, saw the two empty eye-sockets looking out.

He turned away but the image stayed in his mind. He couldn't blink it away, and the more he saw it, the more it made him want to cry, which he couldn't, which made him want to cry even more.

Angel's eyes changed color. They were blue, deep, deep blue.

Suddenly Cowan saw the woods as they were in winter, quiet and snow laden. The pictures went light to dark and back quickly. Deer made their way through the snow and rabbits and squirrels ran about. Quickly the snow melted and trees and flowers bloomed. Insects buzzed. Cats and skunks and raccoons wandered in and out of view. The trees' leaves changed color and started to fall.

Cowan looked into Angel's face. "You're showing me the seasons, aren't you."

A moment later Angel's eyes were black again and there were no more pictures in Cowan's head.

"Who are you?"

Angel's eyes turned blue.

"Hey, Cowan? Who you talking to?"

Cowan jumped and Angel let go. Cowan fumbled for his sunglasses before getting up.

"Who you talking to, Cowan?"

Leonard wore black high-top Keds with broken laces. His jeans needed patching, as did his jacket. His hair needed combing and there was dirt on his face and hands.

"What d'you want?"

Leonard shrugged. "Nothing. Just walking. Saw you running at something and thought maybe somebody might be trying to beat you up. Thought maybe I could help you."

Angel walked away.

"Nobody wants to beat me up. Everybody's scared of me."

Leonard looked down and kicked some dirt. "I'm not."

"That's because you're stupid."

Leonard, never looking up, kicked some more dirt. "Lots of people say so." He looked at Cowan and held his fists up. "But nobody ever said I was afraid."

Cowan took his glasses off and growled. Leonard hit him on the jaw. The punch knocked Cowan to the ground. When he looked up, Leonard had his hand out, offering to help him up just as Angel had earlier.

"You going to knock me down again?"

"You going to make me?"

Cowan shook his head, no, and took the hand Leonard offered. They stared at each other a few moments, then Leonard said, "Can I touch

your Cap?"

"You really want to?"

"Yeah. I think it's neat."

Cowan leaned his head towards Leonard. Like a blind man reading someone's face, Leonard ran his tiny hands gently and carefully over Cowan's Cap and through the lightguides. Not even Dr. Hargitay's touch had been as soft. When he was done, Leonard asked, "Do you think I could get one?"

"I think you have to have cancer first."

Leonard didn't answer right away. "Oh."

"You hungry?"

"Sure."

"Want to go back to my house and get something to eat?"

"Great."

They talked about kids at school until they got to Cowan's yard.

"So who were you talking to back there?"

"I don't know." Cowan described Angel to Leonard.

"Wow, neat. You saw your guardian angel."

"You didn't see it?"

"Nope. That what lets me know it's an angel. You tell anybody else about your angel?"

"Yeah. Not! Everybody knows I'm sick. You want them to think I'm

stupid, too?" Cowan winced. "I don't think you're stupid, Leonard."

"I know. Neither do I."

"I mean crazy stupid. I don't want people to think I'm nuts. Don't you think I'm nuts?"

"Nope. Maybe it's that metal on your head. My Dad's got some metal in his head and he's always hearing stuff. He'll be walking along then grab us and knock us to the ground and shout 'Incoming.' My Mom said it's because of the plate in his head. She says it's not so bad. She says sometimes, if she rubs his head just right, it's like being on one of those dime rides at the grocery store. I'm not sure what she means by that, but it sounds funny."

"Did he have a cancer, your Dad?"

"Naw. This happened when he was in some war. I think my Mom told me it was a grenade. Can you see your angel now?"

Cowan looked around and back into the woods. "No. I think it left when you came."

"Gee. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. If it's really my angel, it'll come back."

Three weeks later there was no snow anymore and most of the buds had turned to leaves on the trees. Cowan's Mom and Dad were grateful Cowan'd finally made a friend and Leonard, in return, had become a regular guest at the Barnes' house.

Cowan and Leonard were out in the woods when Cowan stopped them both.

"What is it, Cow?"

"My angel," Cowan whispered. "It's over there."

"Where?"

Cowan pointed. "See it?"

"Nope. Looks like it's all yours. Want to go over and say hi?" Leonard didn't wait for a response and walked in the direction Cowan pointed.

"Hey, wait up. It's *my* angel." When they were close, Cowan took the lead and touched Angel.

Angel's wings unfolded and his eyes turned blue as he returned Cowan's touch. In his mind, Cowan saw stars burning in the rich blackness of space.

"What's going on?" Leonard asked.

"It's giving me pictures."

"Oh. Hey, ask if it's an angel."

"Are you an angel?" Cowan asked.

Angel's eyes went from blue to gold. Pictures of all sorts whirled in Cowan's mind, each stopping for a moment then moving on. Cowan felt as if Angel were skimming through some huge encyclopedia in its head.

"What's it say?" asked Leonard.

"I don't think it knows what an angel is. I'm getting all sorts of pictures, but nothing like an angel."

"Tell it what one is, Cow."

Cowan began picturing an angel in his mind. The only one he'd ever seen was on an old CD his parents had by somebody named Dan Fogelberg. On the CD, the angel was a woman with blond hair, a white

robe, white spots where her eyes should have been, big white feathered wings, and, what Cowan remembered most, gold handcuffs and chains. As he remembered the only angel he knew, the picture grew in his mind.

When he got to the handcuffs and chains, Angel's eyes went from gold to red, not quite the same color as its skin, but close, and in Cowan's head the handcuffs and chains grew coarse and large. The pictures of the CD angel blended with an image of Angel for a second. Cowan felt sad and wanted to cry. As quickly as the pain came, it was gone, the picture in his mind replaced by the CD angel, without chains, flying in the black, starred night. As he watched the picture in his head, the CD angel turned into the one in front of him.

"Well?" asked Leonard.

"I still don't think it's an angel, but that's as close as we'll get."

"Find out if it's from Heaven."

"Yeah, I think it is. It always shows me pictures of outer space. That's where Heaven is, isn't it?"

"Hey, maybe it's an alien. Ask if it's an alien."

Cowan showed Angel all the pictures he knew of aliens from comic books and movies.

Angel's eyes twinkled until Cowan was done.

"Nope, nothing like that."

Leonard considered, nodded, then giggled. "Hey, find out if it's a guy or a girl."

Cowan giggled, too, then thought of his mother and father. He made the pictures go back and forth in his mind. Angel's eyes went brown then back to blue. Inside Cowan's head, the pictures of his mother

and father merged. All their features unique and separate, yet somehow Angel managed to make them into one beautiful whole.

"I don't think it's either. I think it's both."

"Can't be."

Angel's eyes continued blue. Inside, Cowan saw pictures like in science books, one-celled creatures dividing themselves in two, then other animals, things like flowers, only flowers that moved, with parts reaching out to other parts, and where they touched things like seeds were being sent into the wind to become other walking flowers. Next he saw things from the oceans, things he didn't know he knew, but seeing, understood, things growing large until smaller versions of themselves separated from the original and left, leaving the original free to begin the cycle again, and lastly, Angel showed Cowan itself, its wings folding, its belly swelling, until a second Angel grew out of the first; head first, wings folded, eyes sparkling all different colors at once.

"No," said Cowan. "Some things are both. They have kids that way." Angels' eyes flashed like a signal beacon – gold, brown, blue, then black. "I think it's okay if we call him a boy though. He doesn't seem to mind."

"Oh." Leonard strained to see something of Angel but nothing came. "What's he doing here?"

Cowan made a picture of Angel in his mind. Next he made a picture of Superman flying around the Earth, coming through the clouds and landing.

Angel's eyes flashed red. It let go of Cowan's hand and moved off into the woods. Cowan sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"You okay, Cowan?"

"Yeah. Just a little sad. Angel didn't tell me why he's here. I think it's

not a good thing, though."

"Ask him."

"I can't. He left."

Summer

Leonard sat in Dr. Hargitay's waiting room. Mr. and Mrs. Barnes sat with Cowan in the examining room.

Cowan had drawn a picture of a human brain, rough but accurate and detailed. Cowan drew lines. "Here," he told Dr. Hargitay. "From here and here to here."

Dr. Hargitay straightened up as he stared at Cowan's drawing. "The visual cortex, from pre-optic ganglia straight back to the occipital lobes." He looked over at Mrs. Barnes. "You're right, Cowan. That's an excellent guess."

"It wasn't a guess."

"Cowan," hushed his mother.

Dr. Hargitay shook his head. "No, no. He's quite right. It's too accurate to be a guess. How did you know that, Cowan?"

Cowan shrugged.

"What grade are you in now? Second? Third?"

"I'm starting third grade this fall."

"Where did you learn about the Cap?"

Cowan shuffled on the examining table. He looked towards the door. "I read about it. Online."

Mrs. Barnes apologized, "He's been doing a lot of reading lately."

Dr. Hargitay thought about that, then unhooked the computer feed and helped Cowan down. "Well, keep it up, Cowan. I can use the help. Would you mind waiting for your folks outside, please?"

Before Cowan was out the door Dr. Hargitay said, "He's a clever boy, Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. Very clever. He's got some good ideas, he does."

Cowan cleared his throat as he opened the door. "Don't patronize."

Dr. Hargitay paused and stared at him. "Yes. Quite."

Mr. Barnes said, "I'll wait outside with the boys."

Cowan sat beside Leonard. "So?"

"I think we either have to stop seeing Angel so much or we need to be careful who we share what with."

"With whom we share what."

"Yes, exactly."

"What did he say, Cow?"

"He said Angel's right about the modifications to the Cap."

Mr. Barnes sat across the room and picked up a magazine.

Leonard nodded at Cowan's father. "You didn't tell them about Angel, did you?"

"I'm blind, Leonard. I'm not nuts." Cowan looked at his father and spoke up. "Hey, Dad, how long do you think Mom'll be with Dr. Hargitay?"

Mr. Barnes looked at Dr. Hargitay's door as if he'd never seen it before. "I don't know, son," he sighed. "At this point in my life, I'm just

along for the ride."

A few hours later Leonard and Cowan were out in the woods. They walked side by side. Leonard had a backpack on. In it were two books Angel wanted the boys to read. One was *Robinson Crusoe*. The other *Pilgrim's Progress*. "Where's Angel?" Leonard asked. "I'm getting tired. Doesn't he know about ebooks? Use to be every week new books. Now it's every day new books." He sang, "I'll never be your beast of burden."

"If I had eyes, I'd roll them heavenward." Cowan stopped, then strode in a new direction.

"What is it? Did you see Kevin or something?"

"Naw. My Mom found out Kevin goes to live with his Dad each summer. It's Angel. He's over there."

"Hey, Angel!"

"Cut it out. You know he can't hear you. He can only talk when he touches you. and then only if you can see him."

"I know." Leonard kicked some dirt.

Cowan placed a hand on Leonard's arm. "I'm sorry, Leonard."

With neither boy realizing it, Angel came over to them and touched Cowan's shoulder. His eyes flashed blue.

Leonard yelped and fell to the ground.

"Lenny, you all right?"

Leonard shook his head. "I don't know, Cow. That was real weird. Kind of like, all of a sudden my mind had all these pictures."

Inside Cowan's mind he felt the blue-eyed quiet and rest, Angel's

'Hello.' He focused the thought as Angel had been teaching him to focus, concentrating until each thought became a picture in his head. He made a picture of Angel's 'Hello' and shrunk it down in his mind, placing a distinct black abyssal around it as a border. The feeling of Angel's greeting remained, although Cowan felt it smaller in his head.

"Here." He held his hand out to Leonard.

Leonard's eyes glazed over but didn't shut. "Wow. This is great. What is it?"

"What do you see?"

"I'm not sure. Clouds, I guess. Like in a movie, when you fly through them in a real bright sky."

They moved through the clouds and far below the ground was orange but only in patches. Everywhere else the ground was mottled gray.

Angel flew into the picture, a brighter and more colorful Angel than what Cowan saw and Leonard imagined. Angel flew and dove and landed on an orange part of ground. Little angels came to him and surrounded him, jumping and flying, their little angel eyes blinking like little rainbow caps on all their heads.

Other grown-up angels entered the picture. They flashed but only black and white. They pulled the angel children away, eventually getting to Angel and flying him high into the sky, higher and higher until they passed through the clouds. As they took Angel further and further away from the little angel children he grew somewhat less colored, less distinct than the Angel Cowan saw and the one Leonard imagined.

Cowan, his voice quiet like in a theater or a church, said, "Why didn't you fight them, Angel?"

But nowhere did Angel fight them or struggle. They lifted him so high that none of them could travel higher, then threw him into the stars. Multicolor, twinkling stars. All the black and white angels

folded their wings and dove back to their slate-colored planet.

The pictures in Cowan and Leonard's minds showed Angel's world again, but now colorless save the slate-shaded ground.

The Angel in their minds stretched up into an earth-like sky, his wings opening and closing until his spear-like feet came loose from the ground. Higher and higher he flew. The Angel in their minds began to fade.

Leonard frowned. Cowan saw the blue sky and clouds breaking up and sliding into the surrounding abyss. Angel's eyes flashed from blue to red and he knelt on the ground, as if tired, exhausted.

Both Cowan and Leonard felt it. Leonard kicked at some grass. Cowan sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Angel stood up and rubbed Cowan's back. His eyes flashed all their colors and it felt like Angel was tickling Cowan inside Cowan's head. Cowan tried to shrug Angel off, but Angel held on until Cowan laughed. Then Angel took Cowan's hands and placed them palm up with Cowan facing Leonard.

Leonard said, "It's getting late."

"I know. I think Angel wants us to play a game, though."

"Hey, I know this one." Leonard placed his hands palm down, lightly on Cowan's. As he did, Angel placed both his hands on Cowan's shoulders. His eyes went to blue.

Cowan's mind filled with colors. Leonard's legs went soft. He clenched Cowan's hands for support. The colors resolved into blue mountains heavy with pink and orange clouds. The mountaintops were buffeted by sun-bright snow and winds. Both boys recognized bird songs but from birds neither knew.

Angel held Cowan. Cowan, glancing at each shoulder, saw Angel's

hands turn blue and his wings open. Without knowing why, he shouted, "Hold on, Leonard," and, as if Angel had given them a cue, they flew into the night.

Autumn

Kevin and some of his friends were huddled on the playground the first day of school, waiting. Leonard and Cowan sized up the opposition from the playground entrance.

"You know," said Leonard, "this'll be the third year he's stayed in the same grade. He'll be in Mr. Evans's class, same as us."

"Really."

"Yep."

Half the playground away Kevin and his friends started, "*I can't See, I can't See.*" Their chant continued until they stood next to Cowan and Leonard, Kevin towering over both them and his own friends. "My Dad told me about you, Barnes. He said you're just a freaky little blind kid and I'm not afraid of any freaky little blind kid. Do you hear me, Barnes? I'm not afraid of you anymore." Ms. Sanborn and Mr. Evans turned and walked away.

Cowan stood and looked at Kevin and his friends, neither saying nor doing anything. Leonard shuffled off and left him alone.

Kevin pushed himself up against Cowan. "Hey, you too stupid to know when I'm talking to you?"

"I know you're talking to me, Kevin. I just don't know what to do about it."

One of Kevin's friends offered, "Going to take your glasses off again? Huh, freaky Mr. No-eyes? Going to take your glasses off again?"

Cowan looked at him. "No. I wouldn't do that."

Kevin pushed Cowan. "So what you going to do?" He started the chant again, pushing Cowan with each emphasized syllable. "*I can't See, I can't See.*"

Cowan, measuring the beat of the other boy's words, stepped aside as Kevin pushed and Kevin fell to the ground.

He got up with fists clenched. "You're dead, freaky no-eyes. You're dead." He started dancing around Cowan, his fists up and ready to strike.

From deep within the playground Leonard screamed, "*I can see.* Mr. Evans, Ms. Sanborn! I'm watching you walk away." He took out his mobile. "*I can see* and I'm documenting this."

Kevin and his friends turned. Cowan took the opportunity to move past them onto the playground. Close to the middle of the playground stood Leonard, facing Cowan and Kevin, his little index finger extended and pointing at them. Immediately in front of him were Mr. Evans and Ms. Sanborn, their backs to Cowan, Kevin, and his friends but facing Leonard.

"Look, Mr. Evans. Look, Ms. Sanborn. *I can see* and soon the whole world can, too." He watched his mobile's screen.

Even from where he stood Cowan could see the expressions and colors of the two teachers faces as they turned.

Mr. Evans grabbed Leonard's outstretched hand. He and Ms. Sanborn walked briskly, Leonard in tow and hopping all the way. They gathered Cowan, Kevin, and the others and brought them into the school, dropping the horde in Mrs. McDonough's office. "So begins another fine year," Ms. Sanborn mumbled as they walked out.

"A little dramatic, don't you think, Houde?" Cowan said. He turned to

see Kevin staring at him, staring at the Cap, his eyes bright and curious, not dull and malicious.

When he realized Cowan was staring back he said, "I'm not afraid of you, Barnes."

A few Saturdays later Cowan and Leonard stood deep in the forest by the haunted house, Angel behind them, one wing over each of them, protecting them from the cold, autumn rain and wind, the three of them staring into the sky. Angel's eyes were deep brownish-red, the color of dried blood. Cowan saw Angel's thoughts clearly and hand-in-hand gave them to Leonard.

"You know what he's telling us, don't you?"

"Don't say it, Leonard."

Angel, his eyes still red, gave Cowan a picture of his colors fading, washing away, until his image against the sky and woods dissolved.

Cowan pushed Angel's wing away and stepped out into the rain. "No!" He knocked off his sunglasses and started thrashing at Angel's wings as the rain splashed the Cap and ran down his face. "I won't let you. I won't let you!"

Leonard reached for Cowan's arms and Cowan fought back. They were rolling on the ground, covering themselves in cold mud and wet leaves, their little fists and tiny feet striking out wildly as they screamed at each other.

Suddenly they were apart and hanging in mid-air, two wet kittens being carried by an invisible cat. Angel, his eyes flashing all their colors, held Cowan and Leonard each in a three-fingered hand.

Angel's eyes steadied, changing slowly from blue to gold to red and back. In his mind, Cowan saw the black and white angels throwing Angel out, banishing him from their world to this one.

"I'm sorry, Len." He reached out. When he and Leonard touched, Angel put them down.

Leonard picked up Cowan's sunglasses and handed them to him. "I don't think Angel wants to die, Cowan."

"Yeah. Well."

"Everybody's gonna die. My Mom told me that."

Angel's wings reached back out and over the boys. He drew them in close until both boys could feel him against them, the heat of his body keeping them warm and dry despite the storm. Slowly, he motioned them back to where Leonard's bookbag lay.

Keeping them under his wings, his eyes went from red to blue as he opened one of the books and handed it to Leonard.

"'The Mysterious Traveler'" started Leonard, "by Mark Twain ..."

That next Tuesday, as Mr. Evans formed reading circles, Kevin shoved something into his desk.

"What was that, Kevin?" Mr. Evans stared at Kevin, sitting in the back and cramped in the desk he'd given him. "Kevin? I asked you a question, Kevin."

"Nothing."

Mr. Evans walked over to Kevin's desk. "Please give me your 'nothing,' Kevin."

Some of the kids chuckled. Kevin's face got red. Cowan, watching, saw Kevin retreat into his already-too-small seat.

Mr. Evans stood over Kevin, one hand on his hip and the other palm up in front of his face. "I want that 'nothing' now."

Slowly, almost mechanically, Kevin reached inside his desk and pulled out a rolled up comic book. His eyes remained fixed forward and vacant as he handed it to his teacher.

"You know I don't allow this silly trash in my classroom, Mr. Sumone," he said.

"What comic is it?" Leonard asked.

"Something wrong with your nose, Mr. Houde?"

"It's an honest question, Mr. Evans," Cowan said. "What comic is it?"

Sighing and staring at the ceiling, he unrolled it. A man in an 18th Century European soldier's uniform in some kind of treasure room graced the cover. Three moon-eyed dogs sat before him, each one larger than the last. Behind the three dogs rested three chests of coins. The smallest dog's chest held copper. The middle dog's chest held silver. The largest dog's chest held gold. The title read "Classic Comics Presents 'The Tinder Box.'"

"That's a good story, Kevin. You should read Anderson's original version," said Cowan.

"Oh my yes," added Leonard. "'Fyrtøiet,' from his 'Eventyr, fortalte for Børn.'"

"You can find it in the library, Kevin, in 'The Classic Fairy Tales.'"

Kevin growled quietly, "Fuck you."

Mr. Evans grabbed Kevin by the collar and shook him free of his desk.

"I'm witnessing this, Mr. Evans," yelled Leonard.

"Good. Good." He dragged Kevin to Leonard's desk and pulled him free, as well. "Go. Go right now. You, too, Cowan. All of you. To

Mrs. McDonough's office. I don't have to put up with this."

He threw them out the classroom door and slammed it behind him. Cowan and Leonard shook themselves off and looked back in through the window. Kevin looked into the classroom too, turning away only after Mr. Evans threw his comic into the trash. As he turned Cowan met Kevin's eyes and wondered if there was something wrong with them, something that wouldn't let Kevin cry, as well.

Mr. Evans looked out the window, saw them standing there, and yelled at them to get to Mrs. McDonough's office.

Mrs. McDonough hung up the room-phone as they ambled in. "You boys wait right there for me, understand?"

Leonard said, "If you're too busy right now – "

"Sit."

She picked up the outside line and stared at Kevin. "Who's home today, Kevin? Anybody going to be able to come and take you away?"

Kevin stared at the floor and shrugged. "I don't know. I have to go pee."

Mrs. McDonough sighed. "Go ahead. Just come straight back."

Cowan watched the door close behind Kevin. "Last year I hated him. Now ..."

"I know," nodded Leonard. "Me, too. What's Angel doing to us?"

Winter

Angel's scarlet body glowed less brightly than Cowan remembered. They sat on the ground, one boy on each of Angel's legs, an arm around each boy, his wings covering them like an amphitheater shell,

their audience the western horizon and setting sun, warming them, Angel's wings protecting them from the cold while catching and amplifying the fading light.

Leonard carried three books: Posner's *Economic Analysis of Law*, Hyde's *The Gift*, and Ingpen's *An Encyclopedia of Things that Never Were*, the last open on his lap as he read aloud.

Angel turned shapes and colors into dancing images in Cowan's mind, explaining what Leonard read. A thought peeked out from behind a newly formed griffin. Angel expanded the griffin to hide the thought, but Cowan shooed the griffin away and brought the thought forward.

Angel's eyes turned blue to red, then finally to black. He put both boys down and walked away.

Leonard asked, "What happened?"

"Angel is dying."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"We can stop learning."

"What?"

"I never understood until now. He wasn't willing to share it until now. He teaches us and he survives in our environment, yet he never consumes anything. Think about that; he expends energy without gain."

"Impossible. That goes against everything he's taught us. It violates economics, commerce, Shannonistic and Semiotic Information Transfer, Fair-Exchange Theory ..."

"Do what he taught us. Think bigger. He can't give without getting something. We know what he gives. What does he get? His values aren't ours. What does he value?"

Angel kneeled behind them, his hands hovering above their heads, the boys so focused on their discussion they didn't notice him there.

Leonard closed his eyes. He leaned forward, slightly rocking. His little hands forming claws to grasp and hold the answer. "He values learning." He inhaled deeply. His nostrils flared.

"He values teaching." Cowan screamed, the realization so painful tears wet the pages of the open book.

"He's killing himself to teach us all he knows, all he's experienced, before passing. He's racing death so we'll be greater."

Cowan's hands worked into his lightguides, tightening on them, preparing to pull them out, the Cap's vision now too painful to see.

Angel's hands came down on their heads, gently. They looked up. Angel glowed brighter than ever before, so brightly Leonard could see his outline.

He showed them themselves, talking to each other, talking to others, and each time little angels danced around them, leaping from their minds and mouths to the minds and mouths of others.

"He's teaching us so we can teach others. So his knowledge will continue. That's why he had to leave his world. They didn't want his knowledge to continue."

"Nicholas of Cusa," Leonard said. "All we really have is our knowledge of ourselves. It doesn't matter what you teach, Cowan, what the subject matter is. You're always going to teach who you are."

Cowan looked into Angel's eyes. "That's it, isn't it? You're not a teacher like here. You're dying because you teach who you are. You share yourself, literally, so what you are—your knowledge—can continue. It's okay for you to pass on because you've given everything you ever had away."

Leonard sniffed. "That's why he isn't afraid of death. That's why he welcomes it."

Angel sat on the ground. He lifted the two boys onto his lap, holding them close against him.

"Cowan?"

"Yeah?"

"What does Angel smell like?"

"I don't know."

"Ask him."

Cowan filled his mind with pictures of everything he could think of that he could smell. He smelled dog fur, wet and dry, then his Mom's makeup and perfume. Dad's aftershave. Peanut butter. Fresh mowed grass. Garbage. The ocean. His hospital room before he got the Cap. Grandpa's pipe. When he went to visit a farm. Cookie dough. Spaghetti cooking. Pizza. Ice cream. School paste. Crayons. Dog and kitty poo. Everything.

When Cowan finished, Angel placed his hands on him and turned his hands brown. Both boys inhaled deeply, their breaths a sigh of recognition, as if the air around them was filled with the perfumes of familiarity.

Angel held them like that, his hands staying brown until Cowan sneezed. A moment later, Leonard wiped tears from his eyes. Angel stood and the two boys slid from his lap. He went into the haunted house and they followed.

They sat together in Angel's attic, going over some proofs that Angel had explained to them, their backs to a western-facing dormer trying to capture the last rays of light before the sun set. It was difficult, not because the proofs were complex but because Angel could barely

send pictures into Cowan's mind anymore.

Something crashed downstairs.

"What was that?"

"If we were at my place I'd say my Dad again. I'll go check."

Before Leonard got to the door they heard Kevin calling up the stairs. "Hey, who's up there? Could it be my two best pals, Lenny and Freaky Cowan No-Eyes?"

Other voices laughed.

Cowan looked around them. "This isn't good, Leonard. I don't think we can talk our way out of this one."

Leonard leaned out the window and came back in. "Give me the papers." He folded and stuffed what he could in different pockets. "We're over the bathroom, right? The window's knocked out of that room and it's right under the cornice."

"We're three stories high, Leonard!"

"Come on, come on. This window's a dormer and you can reach from the sill to the cornice. Just hold on to the edge and swing in. We can do it when they're right at the attic door. Then we're out and away before they know what happened."

"What about Angel?"

"If I can't see him you think they will?"

Kevin and his friends banged their way up the stairs.

"Guess not."

Kevin et al stood in the doorway. Leonard swung out the window.

Cowan sat on the sill, waiting his turn.

Leonard splayed his arms and easily caught the ledge. "See, Cowan. No problem."

Cowan swung out, one hand holding onto the sill. Kevin grabbed his arm. Cowan pulled diagonally and down, using Kevin's strength against him.

Kevin gripped Cowan's arm tighter, rolling out the window and over Cowan, holding on all the way.

"Cowan!"

Their combined weight moved them too fast and to one side. Leonard reached for them and missed by a foot. Cowan screamed.

He fell in slow motion. Leonard's voice came to him over a great distance, Leonard's words slowed and paced by Cowan's own heartbeat.

He watched Kevin's friends fill the attic as they fell, Kevin's friends' eyes wide and their voices as dulled as Leonard's. Somewhere beside him Kevin screamed and clutched him.

He heard everyone's breathing, loud and volcanic. Bracing winds of cold slithered past him, moved through his clothes and found his skin as he fell. He wondered when he and Kevin would plop in the snow.

Then he felt himself stopping, staying stationary in the air. Kevin was suddenly pressed tightly against him. Cowan felt great arms around him, supporting him. He heard the constant, steady whoosh of great wings above him.

And his mind filled with pictures. Colors. Places. Words and thoughts. People. Beings. Creatures Angel had seen over a hundred thousand lifetimes.

Slowly, the bright pictures began to fade as Cowan saw the ground slowly rise to greet him. Beside him, Kevin snuffled and tears iced his face.

The pictures in Cowan's mind continued to fade. The sound of the wings grew soft as he felt the snow compress beneath his feet. He heard sounds in the house and felt more than saw Leonard standing beside him. He began clutching at Angel, trying to hold him, trying to find him. "Don't go away. Don't go away. Please don't go. Please." He sank to his knees in the snow, holding onto the tips of Angel's wings as Angel shared the brightest stars in the Universe, the greatest lessons, the strongest colors as his body dissolved away.

Cowan had a single picture then, a single overwhelming picture filling his mind. He saw Angel's world, colorless, lifeless, just moving through space, black&white even though the universe around it was filled with colors; blue, red, brown, gold, and others Cowan'd never seen in Angel's eyes before. He saw Angel walking towards another black&white world, another Earth, an Earth of only shape and form, devoid of context and content. Then there was Angel, looking different in his mind but Cowan still knowing it was Angel he saw.

As he watched, the Angel in his mind gave birth. Two smaller Angels emerged. He looked and, even with his Cap, he recognized the young Angels as himself and Leonard. The Earth was going dark, like Angel's world. Angel motioned his children towards the black&white Earth and the universe of colors filled it until there were context and content to support the shape and form.

At the door to the house Cowan heard people breathing. Leonard, behind him, whispered, "My god."

The picture in Cowan's mind blazed bright and a small picture of his father formed in the corner. "Ride, not." The picture of his father faded away. "Participate, Journey, Life."

The blazing picture faded. Nothingness. Emptiness. Angel's wings

slipped gently from Cowan's fingers.

Cowan fell forward and cried.

Sometime later it was dark. The stars were out and could be clearly seen above the trees in the night sky.

"Cowan? You okay?"

"Yeah. Kevin still here?"

"No. He told his friends to go home, to find friends their own age and to leave him alone."

Cowan nodded. "Angel's gone."

"I know. We saw."

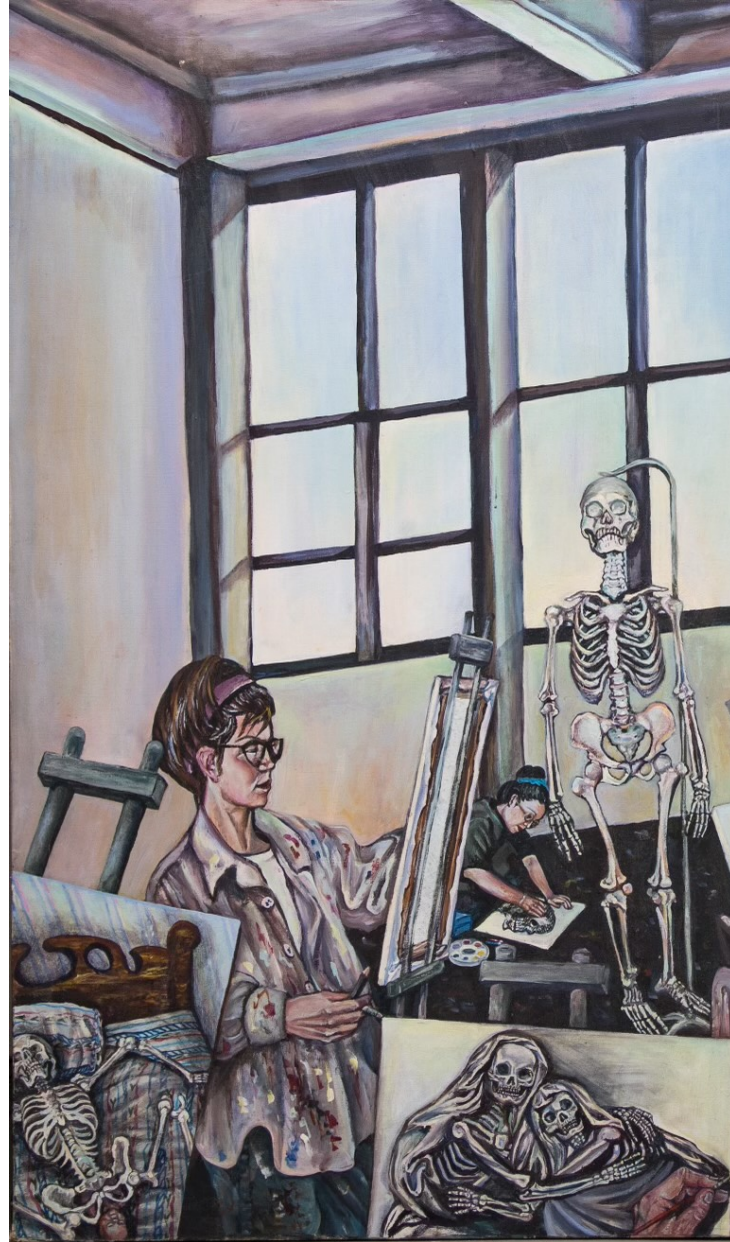
"How?"

"Right before he died, you could see him. I never really knew what he looked like until the end."

Cowan sat up in the snow. Their breaths wisped above them in tiny, moisture-laden clouds. He patted the snow and listened to the sibilance of its hard, cracking surface beneath his hand.

Siblings under Skin - Skeleton Art Class

by E.E. King



(photo by Eric Wallengren)



Graveyard Shift

by Christina Sng

At his grave, I sit,
Waiting for him to rise,
Waiting for the familiar
Clawing of the soil
And the strangled cry.

The scratching begins.
A muffled scream emits from
The horror of being buried alive.
I start to dig when his hand
Emerges and reaches for the sky.

As I pull him out, he looks dazed,
Surprised, his mouth in an O
When I smash his head into his neck.
Yes, they forgot to engrave
His true identity on his tombstone.

Not the repeated lies of
“Beloved husband and father”
But “Wife beater and child abuser”,
Things people won’t believe are true.
But I do, which is why I do what I do.

I send his photo to his terrified wife,
Telling her she is safe forever now.
His resurrection spell did not work
And he is well and truly put down.
She weeps with relief, thanking me

While I kick him back into his grave
And cover it with a heavy marble slab.
Then I wipe my bloodied hands clean
Just as a new text message dings—
Another job in town.

I click ACCEPT, sheath my hammer,
Pick up my scythe, and smile.
Too many monsters alive in this world.
Too many monsters to be pulped.
Who said Death has no conscience?

Old Smoker

by Gustavo Bondoni

The letter began like this:

Dear Joanna,

I received your wonderful news. It's more than I could ever have dreamed of. I hope it's a girl! Please write my mother and let her know. She'll be so happy to hear about it. Her first grandchild. Maybe she'll even forgive you for stealing her oldest son out from under her.

As for me, I've finally made it near the front lines, but there's no need for you to worry. My new English friends assure me that the trench we're in was built by the best engineering corps in the business (theirs, of course), and that Jerry (that's what they call the Germans) hasn't got a shell that can touch us. It's all reinforced with steel and wood.

Please send me the National League standings with your next letter. I hear from men passing through on their way to the lines that the Cubs are doing well, but these Englishmen don't seem to care.

The food i

There, the letter ended, never to be sent. A direct hit from a 42 centimeter Gamma Mörser, a gun designed to break down fortresses, ended the missive's composition, and its writer's life, mid-word.

The next shell landed in a nearby fuel depot and started a fire which extended to the trench, burning the letter to ashes. The fire got hot

enough melt the vaunted steel of the fortification and the liquid metal mixed with ashes and bodies and food and clothing.

By the time everything cooled, that trench system had been abandoned in the British and American advance.

It was late summer, 1918. The Germans were retreating.

* * *

The snow, driven in from the lake by the howling wind, made it hard to see more than a few feet ahead.

The firebox was open. In summer, Joe hated driving steam engines, but on a cold February night? There was nothing better than a warm cab slicing through the darkness.

Ty, his fireman, leaned against the bulkhead, a cigarette hanging from his lip. Joe knew the man, a veteran of forty years on this line and others, was thinking exactly the same thing as he was. When you spent days on end with a fellow, you didn't waste words on the obvious.

They rode along in silence. Even at the slower speed imposed by the conditions, he could tell exactly where they were, just by the contours of the track. He'd done the New York to Chicago run endlessly over the past two decades, first as a fireman, then as conductor. He could tell you the location of every kink in the tracks, every section that had been replaced, every old siding, once critical, that had been bypassed.

They were nearing the town of New Buffalo, just a collection of

wooden shacks that didn't even have a station—not that an express train would ever stop there if it did. The lights might be visible just around the next kink if the snow wasn't too bad.

“Wait! Stop the train!” Joe shouted.

Another thing you don't do on a train is question your mates. The fireman leaped into action and pulled on the emergency brake. The train came to a halt with a screech that sounded like it would be heard for miles, even considering the muffling effect of the blizzard.

“What happened?” Ty asked.

Joe jumped from the cab. “I think I saw something.”

He ran back along the train towards where he'd seen the figure, hoping that he'd been wrong, or that it had been an animal.

But his gut knew the truth.

A dark form in the snow, six feet from the track, proved him right.

The woman had been little more than a girl, maybe seventeen, maybe twenty. She was dressed in mourning—so many were in those dark days of 1919—and appeared to be resting peacefully.

But Joe knew the truth. He'd seen her. She was already cold as he knelt beside her, and a string of blood, black in the dim light from the coaches, dropped from her nose onto the snow.

Ty ran up beside him. Unlike Joe, who'd reacted without thinking, the man had brought a lamp. “Is she ...”

“Yeah. The train got her. No way she could have survived.”

“What happened?”

“I guess she must not have seen us in the snow.”

That was a lie. Joe had seen the woman just before the train reached her. She was standing beside the tracks and only jumped in front of it at the last moment. But why tell anyone else? What good would that do this poor, lost soul?

A whine, like that of a mewling cat, reached him through the snow. Joe took the lamp and went to investigate.

Thirty feet further back down the line, a basket sat near the tracks. Footprints told Joe that that must have been where the woman had been standing. He looked in the basket, expecting to find kittens.

A baby stared out at him. A girl in pink and with stud earrings who must have been a month old at most. She saw him and immediately burst out crying. That was the mewling he'd heard.

“Ty! Get over here.”

As soon as the man arrived, Joe put the basket in his arms. “Put this girl beside the firebox. It must be half-frozen.”

The fireman's eyes goggled, but he didn't hesitate.

“I'll be there in a little while. I have to go find the sheriff or the chief of police, or whatever this piddling little place calls the law.”

Ty nodded and rushed away.

A pair of stewards, the men who were in charge of catering to the passengers' needs, wandered over to see what was up. Ty set one of them at guard over the body and ordered another to take some warm milk to the fireman. Technically, the stewards didn't respond to him, but in practice everyone jumped when the conductor said frog.

It took nearly two hours to find the sheriff and get him out of bed. Then the coroner had to be called in from Michigan City. It was less than two miles away, but the man took forty minutes to find them.

Finally, wet and exhausted, Joe returned to the cab and told Ty to build up the fire. Only once they were moving did he realize that the baby was still there, beside the firebox, eyes wide open, sucking on a rag.

He straightened, the bones in his back snapping as he did. Everything told him that he needed to stop the train and get back to that sheriff, to find the girl's family and turn over the child.

But then he remembered the black dress. The baby would end up in the orphanage, like as not. And he remembered his wife, dead of consumption ten years earlier, and their sadness at never having been able to conceive.

Even so, he still nearly stopped, but before he could slow, he realized that the girl, lulled by the movement or the clackety-clack of the wheels over the track, had fallen into a peaceful sleep.

No, he thought. She belongs here.

The Express from New York hurried on towards Chicago.

* * *

In a field in Belgium, Pierre cursed. The clang of metal on his plow could mean many things, but one of them was death. He called his son over.

Eric was a strapping lad of sixteen, almost old enough to need his own farm, if they could ever coax enough out of these broken lands to buy one. The boy's help was the only thing that had allowed him to recover this plot. "Go get the mayor. There's something down here."

"A bomb?" The boy had been six when the shells destroyed most of their village. He would be frightened of artillery forever.

"We don't know. They'll have to call Jean-Luc to dig it up."

Jean-Luc was a former soldier, an engineer for the French who'd married a local widow and stayed after the war. He was the only man for fifty kilometers who could dig up unexploded ordnance without killing himself and every bystander.

And he was prompt. Within minutes, he was hurrying back, shovel on his shoulder, other tools in a duffel bag.

A quarter of an hour after that, he'd cautiously uncovered the corner of ... something. It looked organic and metallic at the same time, molten, misshapen.

The engineer stood. "It's not a bomb. You can plow around it."

"What is it?"

"Something melted in the war. A motorcycle, old shell casings, a cannon. Who can tell now? The fire melted it, and it pooled into that shape."

Pierre dug into the earth with the shovel, hitting metal everywhere.

"What can I do with this? It's huge."

"Well, when iron melts like that, it gets filled with impurities. No one around here will want it. Maybe you can sell it to the Germans. They buy all the bad metal, because they can't afford good steel."

Pierre grinned. He knew a man in Berlin.

* * *

"Ginny, do you have a second?" Joe called down.

A groan made itself heard and a shock of short-cropped auburn hair popped between two wheels. A speckled face—half of the spots were freckles, the other half black dots of spattered oil—peered up at him.

“Hiya pops. Be quick. I’ve got to replace that line.”

“You think you’re a mechanic now?”

“Old Harry’s teaching me to fix these steamers, never know when it will come in handy out in the boonies.”

“Since when is Harry old? I remember when he first started. So wet behind the ears you could have used him to irrigate the dust bowl.”

“That was a long time ago, pops.”

Joe felt the pain in his back, a constant reminder that he wasn’t getting any younger. “Yeah, I guess it was. I need you to stand. I’ve got something for you.”

She complained under her breath all the way, in language that Joe couldn’t quite make out. That was probably intentional. She knew he wouldn’t approve.

“Watcha got?”

He handed her a white card printed on thick stock. She peered at it and then squealed in glee. Her arms shot around him like a cannon and he found himself pressed in a bear hug. Then she stepped back, confusion in her face.

“But how can this be?”

Joe winked. “I told them you were eighteen. That I found you when you were two years old.”

“They believed you?”

He shrugged. “Those guys in the office are all new ... and Ty’s been retired so long they don’t even know where to find him to ask about it. Besides, they didn’t care. They were so relieved to have an excuse to put you on the books that they didn’t ask too many questions.

They even invented a job for you.”

She stared at the card. *Giselle Reynolds, Conductor’s Assistant, New York Central Railroad.* The back was printed with company rules and regulations, and she read them carefully, savoring the moment even though she knew every word of them by heart. They were in her very soul, seared there by the years spent crossing the country beside her pops.

“Now don’t lose that.”

“My Company Card? Are you kidding? As if I could lose such a thing.”

Joe watched her skip away, completely forgetting the job she was supposed to be doing. He went off to tell Harry that he was going to have to do it himself.

* * *

A small metal band, jarred loose from the large chunk of metal by the shredding process, rolled along a ridge in the machinery. Normally, the yellow metal of the band would have been shaken out. It was heavier than the rest of the metal and would have sunk to the bottom when melted. But this piece bypassed all of that by rolling along its ridge.

Moments later, it had passed completely out of the smelter where collected junk metal was being melted and the iron separated out and into another room in the hangar-like factory.

There, a mold had just been filled with steel. Workers were just about to cover the mold before the metal started to cool when the ring fell off of its ridge and dropped in.

None of the workers saw it.

* * *

“Barb, they gave me my card. I’m one of you now!”

The fortyish woman, large and soft, looked up from her typewriter and beamed at her. “I’m so glad, honey.”

“You knew.”

“Yes. I knew. Everyone knew. Everyone who’s ever smuggled you onto a train or looked the other way, or lied to an inspector so your pop wouldn’t get in trouble. We all know.”

She gaped. “You lied to an inspector?” It was the most heinous crime she could imagine.

“Only at first. Once they got wise to what was happening, the inspectors began lying for themselves. For your pop at first, but then for you. Everyone’s been waiting for this day forever.”

“Oh.” The card suddenly became the least of her concerns. She’d always considered the railway her home—she could sleep in a loco much better than she ever could in the apartments her father took when they were in town for more than a few days—but she’d never realized just how much of a family she had there. Ginny fought back her tears. “Thank you,” she said and rushed off.

* * *

The inspector looked over his glasses at the engineer. He was wearing white coveralls with the word Maybach stitched onto them. “I said no, Herr Müller.”

The engineer hung his head. “It just seems such a pity to discard this magnificent engine for nothing other than a small impurity in the block.”

“These engines are earmarked for the Zeppelin fleet. Would you have us destroy our reputation with a failure?”

“Of course not. But they are so overengineered ...”

“They are overengineered for a reason.” The inspector glared at him and Müller swallowed. He’d heard rumors about this man, knew that he was politically connected ... Perhaps it would be best to stay out of the Party’s way. It wasn’t as though the engine was his after all.

“Would it be all right to find another use for it, Herr Inspektor?”

“I don’t care, as long as it doesn’t besmirch our Zeppelins.”

“Very well.”

The inspector watched him go and turned back to the twelve cylinder diesel. The paint was already rubbing off the impurity, revealing a gold color beneath. The alien piece, a ring shaped item, was just a few millimeters thick; it wouldn’t affect the engine block at all. The motor should last forever.

Müller thought back to a letter they’d received a few weeks before. Something about the Americans needing a motor for a train. He headed back towards his office to see if he still had it on file.

* * *

Pop wiped away the tears. She’d never seen the tough old man that emotional.

But then, it wasn’t every day that the company named you the first conductor of the train to end all trains.

It was a behemoth, streamlined like the *Mercury*, but powered by three gigantic Cummins X-Series diesels. The twelve cylinder motors, each more powerful than any diesel before them, were placed transversally ahead of the cab. A fourth motor, of slightly different design, but purposeful-looking in its own way, was there to power the electric generator and could be coupled to the first three for pulling particularly heavy trains or going uphill.

To accommodate the wide engine bay, the *Ghost* had been engineered to use four rails, or two regular tracks running parallel. This had necessitated the re-laying of a thousand miles of track to ensure that the distance between the rails was correct ... but now that she could see the finished product, it had been worth it.

The locomotive was twice as long as anything she'd seen before. Its nose sloped downward and then blended seamlessly into the engine room, with its vaulted form and streaked sides. The cabin was a bubble behind it. She'd seen that kind of design on buildings across the nation, but to see the style on a train was breathtaking.

And pop was the man selected to drive it. Yeah, she could imagine him tearing up a little.

* * *

Had it really been three months already? The *Ghost* had passed all its tests with flying colors and passengers were streaming into the cars, eager for their glimpse of the future.

Ginny already knew what the future looked like. It was a rumbling place, full of smoke and grease and vibration and noise. Enough noise that she wore big ear protectors all the time, except when she was on the communicator. It was the reign of the three Cummins powerplants and Old Smoker, the Maybach.

It was home. She'd set up a small bunk beside a ventilation grill—there was such a thing as too much future when it was powered by diesel engines, after all—and had moved into the train for the first three months. There she worked, there she took her meals, and there she slept. Offers of relief or of weekend passes were declined with somewhat less than diplomatic grace.

Her greatest fear was that someone in the ranks of the company would wake up one day and realize that a young woman with less than two years as a conductor's assistant under her belt had been placed in charge of the smooth running of the company's most im-

portant asset.

She knew there could be no one better. This was the moment she'd been looking forward to her whole life. It was almost as if the engine room whispered to her, soothed her, and put her to the most peaceful sleep of her life.

Of course, that might not mean much. Pop told her that she slept like the dead every time she boarded a train.

And now, she happily lay on her cot and let others worry. Unlike a steam engine, diesels didn't require constant attention. They were on, and they would continue to stay on until she turned them off. She'd spent months ensuring that the engines would work when called upon.

Now it was Pop's turn to work. And heaven help him if he broke one of her babies.

The train began to move, and Ginny dozed off.

And dreamed that she was standing in a field under a tree. She found a bottle filled with smoke that begged her to release it. She woke and turned over. This time the whispering took the form of a lullaby.

The night was easy. The *Ghost's* maiden run was from Chicago to Los Angeles and took a full day, faster than anything but an airplane ... and who wanted to travel in a loud, unsafe tin can in the sky when you could cross the country in comfort? The company was putting the finishing touches on the New York to Chicago line, to cross the whole country in what the press people were already calling the Showbiz Line.

She didn't care about any of that. All Ginny wanted was to be left alone with her engines—and if they hadn't pulled her off the maiden trip, then odds were they would leave her alone.

Ginny spent the trip in the engine room, checking the engines period-

ically and leaving only to go to the bathroom. She'd expected a certain amount of accumulation of smoke, but it hadn't happened. The exhaust must have been working perfectly.

She wished she could say the same about the ventilation. Her denim dungarees and t-shirt were stuck to her skin.

She checked the Maybach engine less often than the other three. It was separated from the main engine room by a partition. That was a relief because the German motor lived up to its nickname. Old Smoker ... smoked.

But other than that, the engine did what it was supposed to. Like the other three, it chugged away happily without causing Ginny any sort of concern.

The gauges were all perfectly happy, and she was about to turn away when something made her turn back ... something about the pressure valve.

The glass valve, normally clear, was full of dark smoke. She caught her breath, remembering her dream, and then relaxed. This was an engine room, brightly lit by the same engine she was checking up on. The valve must simply be getting some exhaust ... God knew Old Smoker's fumes got everywhere else. She tapped it a couple of times, and then re-checked the rest of the gauges. Nothing looked amiss—she could do a more thorough inspection later.

Let me loose.

The voice was clear, and it echoed her dreams so perfectly she gasped. She staggered out of the small room and back into the main engine compartment.

The echoes of the voice in her mind only cleared when Ginny shut the door.

She decided to stay out of that partition until the trip ended ... and

then figure it out. Maybe she was just tired.

A light blinked on her call board. She went to the speaker tube. "Yes?"

"The lights just went out in back. You need to check the generator."

"Are you sure?"

Silence met her. Pop wasn't used to his grease monkey talking back.

"Yes. Now take care of it." She heard the receiver on the other end slam shut.

Ginny went back into Old Smoker's area. What choice did she have? Diesel engines didn't have soot-covered firemen ... but they had oil-stained mechanics who were expected to obey the conductor's orders without hesitation. Any refusal to do so would mean that she'd lose the one thing she loved ... and even her pop wouldn't stand in the way of her ouster.

Anticipating a mental siege, Ginny entered the room ... to silence. She quickly started the checklist to see what might be causing the outage, starting at the truly simple: the switch that routed power from the Maybach diesel to its different uses.

Bingo! The simplest explanation had been the right one. The switch had four positions: drive only—which was meant to shunt all its power to the wheels, and used in emergencies; drive and coach power; coach power only; and neutral, where the motor spun without engaging the generator. The metal rod marking the position had shifted to neutral. She must have bumped it in her haste to escape.

A quick tug put it back to coach power only, and an amber light confirmed that it had worked.

That's not the right setting. You know it as well as I do.

“What? Where are you?” Ginny looked around frantically, searching for a prankster, for a hidden speaking tube, for anything that meant she wasn’t losing her mind. There was nothing to be seen, just a noisy engine in the center of a bare cubicle with a cluster of instruments on the wall. She swallowed and lifted the protector on her right ear ... machine noise came through at her ... if a sound was coming through over all of that, they must have been able to hear it back in New York.

I’m right here.

The voice sounded nearly as confused as she felt. “No. You’re not. Trust me. There’s nowhere for you to be.”

Yes there is. I feel it. I’m stronger than ever.

“Stop this!” Ginny put her hands over her ears. The only thing keeping her from rushing out again was the certainty that, as soon as her back was turned, the switch would jump to neutral again. She didn’t know why she felt that way, but she had no doubts.

But her hands made no difference. They didn’t even muffle the voice. *I won’t sit around and have you squander my strength. Haven’t you ever wondered what this train could do if you let it? We both know it could go much faster.*

“We don’t want to go fast. We want to be safe. It’s our first journey.”

But, though she said the words, she knew they weren’t true. The company might want to be safe, but Ginny knew just how much potential they were squandering, that they could cruise at a much higher speed, well over a hundred miles an hour, if only pop would open her up.

“Besides, it’s not my call. Only pop can control the speed, and he’ll keep it well within what the company asked him to do. At ninety, the three main engines still have power to spare. What’s the use of con-

necting you up?”

If you connect me, I can make the train go as fast as I want.

“That’s silly.”

There’s a design flaw. I can do it.

Ginny believed. Perhaps it was the tone with which the ... engine? ... said it, or perhaps it was the fact that, if you were accepting the presence of a voice inside your head, questioning what it said appeared counter-productive, but she was certain that it was telling the truth.

Her hand, almost of its own accord, hovered above the switch. She knew it would be wrong to touch it, that it would get her in so much trouble she’d never come out from under it.

But it was also, somehow, wrong, almost immoral, to keep a beast like this wonderful machine chained up, constrained, caged.

Her hand fell and the switch changed to drive and coach power.

No. All the way. The voice was desperate, beseeching.

Ginny’s willpower returned. “No. If you’re so strong, prove it to me. If I switch the power away from the coaches, everyone will know what I’ve done immediately.”

They’ll know anyway. And suddenly the voice had new strength.

The floor lurched beneath her feet, and she returned to the main engine room to watch her dials. She wasn’t escaping ... just felt as if, somehow, she’d been dismissed.

The speedometer—she had one in the engine room even though she couldn’t modify the train’s speed.

The steady eighty they’d been holding since they left Chicago had

become ninety, but the acceleration wasn't finished. She cheered silently as the gauge hit a hundred, and then watched it increase steadily. 110. 120. 130. 140. She held her breath as the climb slowed to a creep, and the speed continued to increase by ones and twos. And when the needle hit the ton-and-a-half, she held her breath. Had anyone, anywhere, taken a train to a hundred and fifty? She didn't know. But she would have bet her last dime that no train carrying hundreds of passengers in opulence had managed it.

She thought of her pop, and how he must be frantic, certain that the train would never stop, that all the passengers in his care would die, torn to shreds by mangled metal.

Her communicator light was on. How long had it been flashing?

Ginny ran into the partition and tore the switch back to the "coach power only" position. Ignoring the sounds of protest in her mind, she ran back and picked up the communicator.

Pop's voice came through the pipe. "Ginny, are you all right?"

"Yeah ... why?"

"I thought there had been some kind of problem ... I was worried about you." There was a pause. "Did you see our speed?"

Her eyes flicked up to the gauge, the needle was moving counterclockwise, the train slowing. She watched it sweep past a hundred and stabilize at eighty miles an hour.

"Not really."

"We hit one-fifty," Pop told her. His voice sounded strained, drained, sad.

"No way," Ginny replied.

"I swear. The worst is I didn't do it on purpose."

* * *

The next station—the only stop they would make on this run—was St. Louis. It was just a half-hour stop to take on some snacks and fuel and for the company to have a photo shoot with some local bigshots. There was no real reason to stop, other than the fact that the press would make a big deal of it, and the investors liked to see their trains in the papers.

Pop came down the short stairwell. He looked haggard.

"Could you check the throttle linkage?" he said.

"Right away," Ginny replied. She made to grab the three-quarter wrench that loosened the access hatch but Pop stopped her.

"Not just yet," he said. "I wanted to talk to you, first. I think you won't find anything wrong with the linkage. I ..." he paused and looked around the room. He'd been there dozens of times, but it almost looked like he was seeing it for the very first time. "I might be getting too old to drive anymore. I don't think you'll find anything wrong with the linkage. I think the problem might be the geezer in the conductor's chair and his wandering mind."

"You're the best train driver in the world," she said.

Pop smiled. "That was probably true at one point. It definitely isn't now. But I should be good enough to get us to Hollywood." He knew she wanted to see Hollywood more than anything else in the world other than to drive trains too fast for her—or their—good. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Whatever you need."

"Just keep an eye on the speedo. You see it nose over a hundred anywhere, get upstairs and rap my knuckles."

"You got it," she replied. Inwardly, she promised that it wouldn't

happen.

The old man nodded his thanks and returned to his kingdom above and behind the engine room. A few moments later, the train began to move.

She sat in silence for a few minutes before she felt the tug of the presence on her mind.

Please, let me run some more.

Ginny couldn't believe it. She stormed into the partitioned room and began to scream at the large lump of metal. "Didn't you hear that? I know you can. I know you heard every word, come on, admit it."

The silence in her mind was as significant as it was unbroken.

"I thought so. You know perfectly well what you're doing to Pop, but you still want to do it again. I'll never do it again. It would break him. I don't know what you are, and maybe I'm making a huge mistake, but I'm never going to let you do that to the man who saved me and who brought me up and who loved me like the father I never knew." She looked around. "And maybe I'm the one with the problem. He's not the one talking to an engine."

The engine, the spirit, the madness ... she couldn't tell ... said nothing, but she felt anger, confusion and ... maybe, just in the corner of her mind, a certain amount of guilt and confusion. Ginny decided to be satisfied with that for the time being and, pausing just long enough to check that the lever was firmly planted in the "Only Power to Coaches" position, marched out and closed the door behind her.

She flopped onto the bunk and raged until the exhaustion of the past few months mixed with that of the past few hours and she dozed off.

A tiny voice in her dreams brought her back to consciousness.

"What? What?" She thought someone was talking to her, but when

she sat up, there was no one in the room but three humming Cummins motors.

Ginny!

The voice was tiny, muffled.

Angry, she walked to the door and entered the partition.

"Look, I've had enough of ..."

A sense of sheer terror, sad terror, but other than that undiluted hit her like a wrench between the eyes.

You have to stop the train.

"What? Are you insane?"

Stopthetrainpulltheemergencybrakestopthetrainstopitstopitstopit ...

Under the enormous mental bombardment, Ginny was powerless. She was overwhelmed and, without thinking, ran to the cord and pulled as hard as she could. It wasn't a consciously controlled thing, it was just something she couldn't stop herself from doing.

Then the pressure eased and she looked at herself. She was seated on the floor with her legs splayed. She'd just pulled the emergency brake on the world's most exclusive and important train ... for no good reason. And, from all indications, she was quite clearly going nuts.

Ginny cried.

Had she been paying attention, she would have realized that the train didn't start up again immediately, and that no one came down to relieve her of her duties and lock her in a padded cell.

But she had no way to know that. She was lost in the grief she felt at

the knowledge that she'd well and truly screwed everything up.

Ginny was still crying when Pop walked in. He gave her a hand to stand up and then looked her in the eye. He was crying.

"Well, at least they sent you," she said. It would have been torture to be fired by some nameless company flunky.

Pop hugged her, so hard that he took her breath away. He pulled away and looked around the engine room. He separated from her and looked out the vent, then turned back in confusion.

Soon, Ginny was confused as well.

Pop smiled. "I don't care how you did it. I don't care how you knew. I'll let you keep your secret. But thank you."

"It's ..." she didn't know what to say, didn't want to admit to anything. "It's going to be all right?"

"Yes," Pop replied. "We've got him on board."

"Who?"

"Just a young man. He was angry and sad. Also a bit drunk. Seems his girl ran off with someone so he decided to jump in front of the biggest train going. Figured he'd get on the news that way and get back at her."

He walked to the vent again, craning his head trying to look out. "I still can't figure out how you saw him in time to stop the train, but I'm glad you did. They'd have taken me off the bridge for sure if I'd hit someone ... even if it was suicide. This way, the company is going to get even more press." He scratched his head. "But once we get back, I'm going to file for my pension. I've driven the best train in the world. Maybe it's time to let someone else do the honors. And I know just the girl to do it. After today, no one's going to argue."

He walked away.

"What? How ..." her voice trailed off as she felt the smug satisfaction of some spirit in her mind.

For some reason she couldn't fathom, the sensation was filled with nearly overwhelming pride.



Ecliptic

by Carl Scharwath

Paintography with Farhana Sait (India) as the model

Taxed

by Rosie Oliver

I hope whoever is occupying my body will look after it, but you know what these rich ethereals are like: use, abuse, and dump. But they are the ones with the money, which the government hungers after, claws at, and devours voraciously. Whoever came up with the wheeze of imprisoning criminal quantum physical souls in plants while renting out their healthy bodies to the aged weak rich ought to be worse than just shot. It encourages the courts to find us “young ones” guilty of the flimsiest charge. What a racket!

Of course I wanted to stop the justice system’s unfair ageism, or should I say youngism? I pushed to reintroduce the old tax system of a percentage on income, sales, and profits. It had worked successfully in the past, why couldn’t it now?

Guess what? I was charged with Scrooge-ism, an obscure law against punitive imposed taxes. Since when were my suggested taxes punitive? It was the “imposed” they got me on.

So here they stuck my “soul”; imprisoned in a tree for nine months. The judge had the cheek to say I should consider the sentence an enforced tax on me and see how I liked paying it.

The geeks said plants’ souls are so minimal, I would not notice them. Totally wrong. I have to share this cramped quantum space with a bunch of prickly ants trampling over me in eternal circles. Only those ants are of course the quamics – QUANTum Mechanical Intrinsic Cells – that circulate inside the tree like blood cells do in our bodies. But if they’re unhappy, their prickles turn into stings.

Take now for instance. These persistent frosts have frozen the water around its topmost roots. Not as much water getting into the tree

makes it as thirsty as hell. The quamics are forced to curl back the leaves to prevent water vapour escaping through tiny holes on their undersides. Trouble is the cold is also causing dieback in the leaves’ edges that makes them rigid. The quamics do their best to stop this, but find it hard going. When they reach a damaged area, they get agitated and wildly dance around repairing what they can. This stings me. When the damage is really bad, their stinging becomes painful. It is enough to drive me mad.

Snowdrops nestled round this tree’s base come to my rescue. Their blossoms have a neat little trick. Their bell-like flowers open out in the Sun’s heat and then, as the day’s temperature drops, they close up, capturing the warmth inside. It’s enough to keep their sap flowing. It also keeps the very bottom of this bole slightly warmer, enough for the tree to drink some unfrozen water through its topmost roots. Oh the relief! It’s so calming.

This night is the coldest I have ever known. I’m crazy-mad due to the quamics’ stinging. I want to scream my nightmare away, but have no voice.

My one hope is the snowdrops. The centre of my quantum soul moves down the tree to reach out to them. All I can sense of their roots where they touch the tree is brittle dryness. They are parched. Their roots do not go deep enough to find water. And without the precious liquid their flowers will stay closed in the morning. They will freeze to a withering death without the chance to trap the Sun’s heat.

I must get water to them, and the only place to find it is deeper down in the soil. I shift downwards along the tree’s roots, to the very bot-

tom tip of the lowest one. Dry dust surrounds me. The tree has sucked all the water up it can. If only I can push its root further down into the water table. I thrust my soul against the tip. Nothing. I settle what little weight I have against its end. Zilch. I encourage it to grow a few more cells by concentrating nutrients to it from the rest of the root system. It touches water. I pull at it and try to gather it into my soul. It comes into the root's tip.

Too late, the quamics notice the droplet and steal it away from my control. All I can do is sense it being moved to a very thirsty branch. Damnations!

I try again with growing the root, but this time I am ready for the quamics. As soon as the new droplet enters the root, I push it as fast as I can towards the nearest touching root of a snowdrop. Made it! Just!

The snowdrop sucks the water out of the tree's root like dry sugar and swells up a little. Its root feels smoother and presses more strongly against the tree. It also feels ever so slightly less cold. The itch from the quamics abates by a tiny amount, and for that brief moment I feel blissful relief.

Having succeeded once, I keep trying for similar results. The quamics steal three out of four droplets, but I keep going through the night. I need to stop their infernal itchiness. As I feel the first stirring of warmth on the tree's bole, I notice a quamic with a stolen droplet push it towards a snowdrop I have not had the chance to water.

The tree is, or to be precise its quamics are learning. Worse, they are doing so from me. This should not be happening. It must have been a mistake.

Another quamic waters a different snowdrop. Then another. The process continues. Soon the quamic itch reduces to a tolerable level. Its irritation is replaced by my fear: what if the tree learns how to get rid of me?

I have no way of contacting my human guards. There is nothing I can

do until they release me from my sentence. All I can do is remain as quiet as possible within this tree. Another worry emerges. Will the ethereal occupying my body permanently change the way my body behaves? I become very scared about my return and how I'll cope with an as-yet-unknown different lifestyle.

* * *

It's taken me a couple of months to internalise ignoring the prickles on a quiet day.

Today is definitely not one of those days. It's blowing a rain-laden gusty gale. It wouldn't be so bad if this tree weren't an evergreen. The gusts buffet the leaves and pull a few of the more brittle twigs off. They force the branches to swing so that the leaves rub against each other, making their points scratch and dig into their leafy flesh. The boughs spring back and forth against the pressurizing winds, sending shudders down the trunk and on, into the main roots. These vibrations lash out against the soil, loosening the roots' grip and nudging aside other plants' roots, bulbs, seeds, and corms. The tree wobbles a little more with each passing gust.

The quamics try to mend the scratches to stem the loss of sap, make the tree more pliable to avoid breakages, and grow roots for a tighter grip on the soil. I notice some broken twigs are snagged in the tree roots poking out of the soil and chaff at the bottom of the trunk. This gives the quamics an extra job of trying to repair the bark there. They rush around so fast that their stings merge into a burning sensation. It's everywhere in the tree. I feel as if I'm on fire. I want to scream but dare not for fear of agitating the quamics even further.

A bough cracks and half snaps off. It sways to the tune of the blustery wind over a large clump of anemones. For brief moments, the quamics slow down slightly to give me a cooling feeling for all-too-short intervals.

It peaks twice for each complete swing there and back, most likely when the bough protects the trunk most from the wind. But the peaks

are out of sync with the protection. So what is the bough influencing? I search from the tip of the topmost leaf to the deepest point of the root system despite the pain. It is like glimpsing snapshots through the opening flames of the tree.

I find nothing and search again, this time bottom to top.

Again nothing. It has to be affecting something outside of the tree. I let the centre of my soul search the roots. There in the most southwest surface root is where the relief rhythm enters the tree. Just beyond it is a clump of anemones in flower.

The bough swings directly above them to regularly stop rain dousing them. That is when only the wind touches them, briefly drying them, particularly their petals. Is this the cause? I am not sure.

As the bough swings past once more, I notice there is less chaffing on the trunk and ground roots from ground debris such as twigs. The wind must be partially blocked from blowing on those twigs. How?

A distant memory about anemones floats into my consciousness: when the wind blows on the flowers, their petals dry and open out. That's why they are called the windflowers. Their open petals must be diverting some of the wind away from the chaffing twigs. I need to encourage the drying out a bit more.

I stall; in fact I go into some kind of immobilised suspension. The business with the snowdrops had changed the way the tree behaved permanently. What if I ended up teaching quamics another trick to change the way they and the tree behaved? What harm could that do to the environment, or people for that matter?

On the other hand, it will help save the tree from some damage and maybe extend its life a little. Trees are supposed to be good for the environment.

Water is the key to controlling the anemone's petals. I examine the tree's roots near those of the anemones. One actually does a full

three-sixty degrees curl around an anemone root. I pump water away from that part of the tree's root as fast as I can, making it drink more water from the soil by osmosis. That volume of soil dries a little compared to the rest around the tree. In turn, that anemone plant dries a little, making its petals open a smidgen more. The twigs' chaffing reduces, allowing the quamics to move the tiniest bit slower. Wonderful relief, short-lived though it is. The burning still gets to me.

I work on the other roots near the anemones, pumping away as much water as I can. The burning lessens. I can do no more. Only the quamics can now increase the water take-up through osmosis by increasing the polysaccharide stocks behind the roots' membranes.

A few quamics shift some of these stocks away from the tree's roots. It reduces the water flow away from the anemones. The burning intensifies. They are not satisfied and take more molecules away. I feel as if I'm in the centre of a fire, despite all my efforts. And the quamics take yet more molecules away. I can't think straight, trying to pump water from the roots, and from the anemones.

Suddenly the quamics return a few of the molecules. There is a fleeting cooling. More molecules are brought back. And more. Soon the polysaccharides are back to the normal levels. The quamics add even more molecules. Water is pumped faster, and faster. Pain reduces to a persistent stinging that is flamed by waves of burning. The roots can take no more molecules without bursting. I can just about cope with the quamics' irritation. Thank goodness.

Worry eats into me instead. Have the quamics associated their new trick with the right conditions: spring; anemones in flower; winds from the southwest; and chaffing twigs? It only takes one automated reaction at the wrong time to damage the tree, maybe even kill it. I shouldn't have taught them, using my freedom of choice without thinking through the consequences properly.

I feel mortal twice over: once for this tree, which I need to stay alive to keep my soul intact; and the second for my own body where its ethereal occupant could be teaching it new tricks that would kill it.

I'm terrified.

* * *

With each passing day, the sun's heat warms parts further around the tree. The quamics have less to sort out and take their existence at a slower pace. Their prickling is much less than it used to be. But it's still there and after all this time, it is very wearying. I wish it would go away.

There hasn't been any decent rain for quite a few days. Even the morning dew is a thin glaze compared to the heavy water globules that used to weigh down the leaves. The tree draws its water from deeper down in the soil and less water vapour is allowed to escape from the old leaves. The quamics can't do much about this year's green growth. The new leaves are soft and transpire a lot through their surfaces, particularly when in the direct sunlight. Little white flowers on last year's twigs add to the huge demand on water, if only to keep their nectar sacs full to attract the insects. So the tree's water keeps on coming from deeper and deeper levels in the earth.

Then there's the dust. It gets everywhere: into nooks and crannies that I didn't know this tree had; grazing the bark and leaves, especially the new tender ones; blocking the flowers' stigma entrances, stopping them from being pollinated; and the finest dust even gets inside the leaves through their ventilation holes.

At least it doesn't irritate me. But as this dry spell continues, the winds pick up even more dust from the arid soil. The quamics work harder to repair the grazes on living tissue, squeeze the bugged up holes, and reshape the leaves and stigma to clear their insides of the dust. As soon as they have dealt with one scratch, two more appear. And once they've got rid of some dust out of leaf or stigma, a breeze veers to throw even more dust into the vacated hole. The quamics have to move quicker and their prickling turns into burning. I can't help them heal the grazes, but try to ease the leaves and stigmas around to eject the dust particles.

Dust isn't the only thing in the air. There's pollen from other trees and

plants. It's softer than the dust and doesn't cause the grazing, but it does gum up some leaves' holes. Yes, it helps stop the loss of water vapour, which is to the tree's benefit. But it also stops the vital air needed to help produce the tree's energy. The tree's activity slows down. The quamics fight this, but even they have to abandon parts of the tree, letting leaves yellow and die. Their fighting gets more ferocious, their burning turns to scorching. I feel as if I'm in an endless hell; the excruciating pain is everywhere. I want to die.

The quamics in some parts of the tree are less painful than elsewhere. This lessening seems to be centred on the ground towards the west where the nasturtiums are in flower. There, the tree's surface roots, trunk, and low hanging branches all feel like a haven from the sharper pain. I try to squeeze my soul's centre there despite the little room. It hurts so much that all I can think of is the scorching pain and how to escape it.

The evening brings a slight cooling of the scorching, more so on the west side. I slowly figure this isn't right. The setting sun should be making the quamics more agitated compared with the other sides of the tree. Yet the scorching there is less intense, but it is thankfully noticeable.

There is definitely less dust getting into the stigmas and leaves on that side. The leaves aren't so gummed up with pollen either. Something must be cleaning the dust away, incredible though this is to believe. I try to work out how, but the scorching distracts me from thinking. It's agony.

I keep squeezing myself towards the west to ease the pain all through the night and on into the next day. The relief, still towards the patch of nasturtiums, heightens again in the evening.

A spot on a surface root close to the nasturtiums out-burns my scorching pain, worse than any agony I've ever known. The quamics rush to repair the charred bark and the part of the live root immediately beneath it. They just make the scorching there worse. It's almost as if the bark burning has been caused by a lit match or lightning

strike ... a childhood memory surfaces of a burning-prickling in the school physics lab. I had been rubbing amber with a cloth when electrostatic sparks flew across from the stone to my finger. That lesson, Mrs Mackenzie went on to teach us about how an electrostatic field was used in air filters to clean out dust particles.

My memory flies to a similar sparking on a blue-skied summer day that brought a plummeting temperature in the evening. The nasturtiums in my parents' flowerbeds shimmered fiery yellow, orange, and red petals. I reached out my forefinger to feel their silkiness. Just before contact was made there were a few flashes of orange light and I felt pinpricks at the very tip of my finger.

Those nasturtiums beside the tree must be generating their own electrostatic field that is clearing air. If only they could fry more dust. The scorching impedes my thinking. I concentrate hard on how to encourage the nasturtiums. Today is drier than yesterday and the relief has reduced. That cannot be right. Hold on, air around the tree's new leaves is damper. The heat is actually making the new greenery transpire more water vapour. Same must be true for nasturtiums leaves. No wonder the electrostatic zapping is not working as well.

I need to make the air around the flowers drier. The obvious way is to reduce their water uptake.

Terror freezes my thoughts and soul, but the effect of quamics' scorching jumpstarts my mind. Dare I show the tree a new trick? I was exceedingly lucky with the snowdrops and anemones: the tree did not then go on to use what it had learnt in a stupid way. But the risk is there for any new techniques it uses.

On the other hand the new technique I am about to teach will save the tree from stress and damage and, when I think about it, help the environment in its own ways. It is the same arguments I went round when dealing with the anemones.

I blow hot and cold over whether I should help the tree or not. The pain interferes with my coming to a decision. It's think, pain, fear,

think, pain fear ...

Fear, this is what is driving me: fear of the quamics doing a nasty twist with new tricks. They can also do unexpected good. Who was I to prevent them from doing that?

Like with the anemones, I take away a water droplet from the soil around the nearest nasturtium. Then I pull it up the tree. Then another, and another. I soon start to feel some relief on the west side where there are fewer dust problems for the quamics to get agitated about.

After about the twentieth such droplet, the quamics are imitating me and taking water away from the nasturtiums. The relief from the scorching is ecstatic bliss.

I also find a sense of inner contentment. For want of a better description the quamics have learnt to trust me and copy what I do to help themselves. Such a blinding trust demands me being responsible to them, to not deliberately lead them into danger, or even burden them.

Burden them ... this phrase sticks in my consciousness. The tax system I was proposing would be a burden to people who have other desperate calls on their money. Paying it would stress them. Better to let those who can afford it volunteer the cash. In fact, they have the responsibility to do so.

That wily old judge had a point after all. I've learnt my lesson. I want to escape this tree. But I realize the ethereal occupying my body is paying the government tax for the privilege. My stay in this tree is my tax contribution, albeit through a proxy.

* * *

When my soul is returned to my body I find I have lost weight and feel fitter with more energy to run around to do more athletic things. I quickly get up from the stretcher. Gently pushing aside the attendants, I step out of the ambulance. In front of me a ten-meter tall holly tree

is heavily laden with red berries. Even the half-broken bough sags under the extra weight. This is the tree that has been my soul's home for the past nine months.

An attendant comes to stand beside me. I guess he wants to make sure I'm all right.

“What happened to the ethereal occupying my body?” I ask.

“Returned to where it came from. Not allowed to say more.” He pauses. “Bizarre.”

“What?”

“That's the only holly that's got berries to speak of this year. And look at it. It's chock-a-block with them.”

“Oh,” is all I can say, thinking of what I had taught it. I wonder if it learnt new tricks all by itself to produce those berries.

“It's a godsend.”

I turn to the blonde youth and raise my eyebrow as if to question why.

“It's been swarming with fee-paying photographers for the seasonal cards. It's going to be a very berry Christmas, especially for government income.”

I inwardly groan, but politely smile. I don't want to spoil his fun.

“No doubt,” he continues, “the scientists will be up next, trying work out why it's behaving so differently from all the others. They've already put a tree preservation order on it.”

I'm speechless. I have not only made the holly's life more comfortable, but I have also extended its years. But what other consequences am I responsible for?

“Is there an ...” I croak. I try again. “Is there any chance I can help them out?”

He purses his lips as if in thought. At last he says, “Don't see why not.”

I'm finally at peace, knowing I have the freedom to discharge my responsibilities to the holly, as well as society.

In the Styx

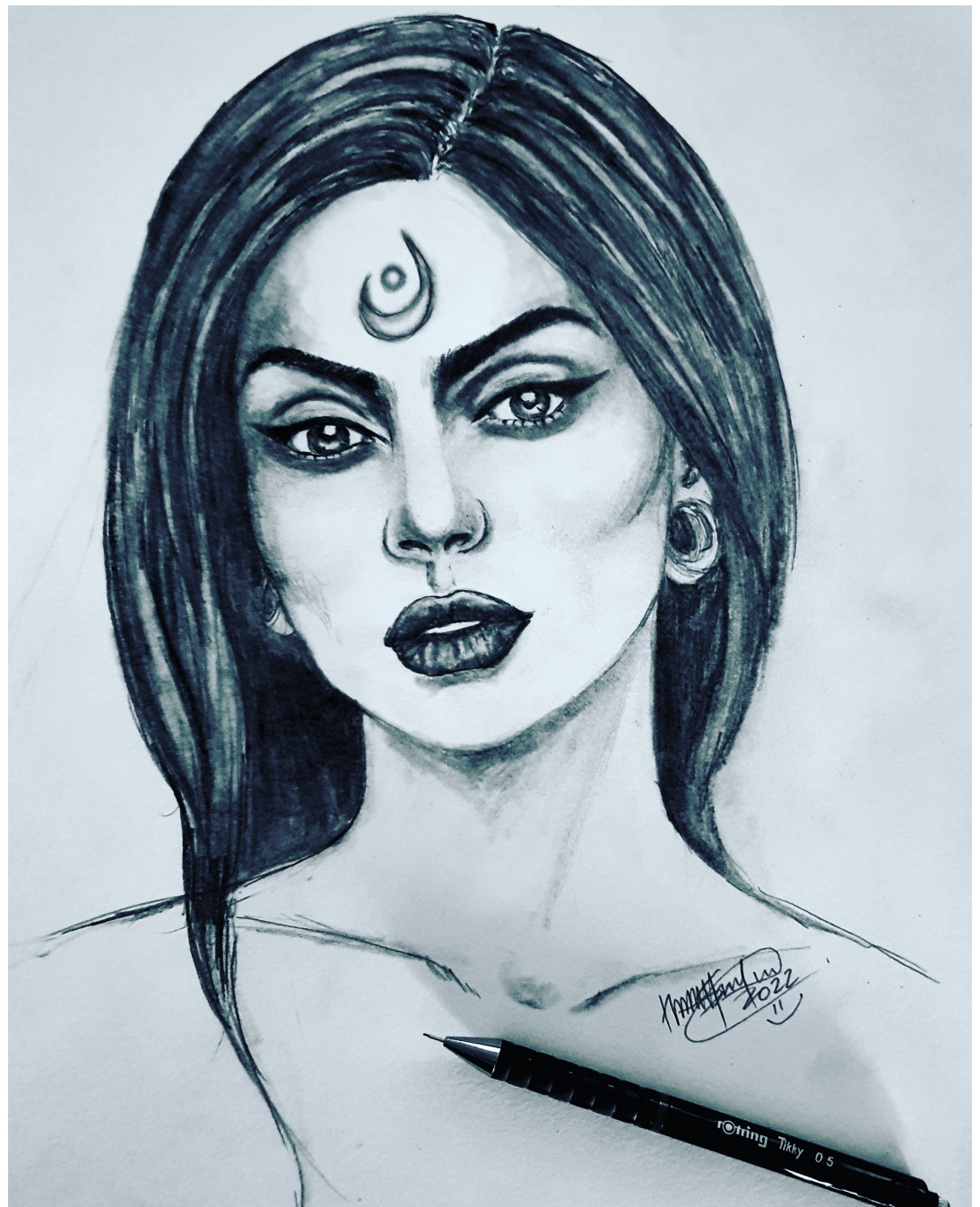
by Lynn White

I took a dip in the river.
They told me it would make me
invulnerable,
invincible.
But they lied.
In fact I was accident prone.
Scrape after scrape,
fall after fall,
that was my experience
of living my life.
But I always survived
until now
when I'm standing
waiting for the ferryman
to take me across the river,
the same river,
perhaps,
or maybe not

I forget.
Perhaps he's already been
and taken me to Lethe
by mistake.
I forget.
My memory doesn't flow
as swiftly as it used to.
Perhaps it clogged
when he let me sink
into the mud of the marshland
on another wrong turning.
But I'll stand and wait
a little longer.
This time
I know
I must cross
and give up my soul
to eternity.

Moon Goddess

by Novyl Saeed



Rune

by Krista Canterbury Adams

Each light,
Each shade settles
On desert sand.
We see the shining face,
The linen-wrapped body,
The sinking into glass.

One brass light swings
From the cypress branch.

The priestess scrutinizes,
Recites, prays
Ancient words with vast meaning.

And so, we have the promise
Of the angelic—the silver branch
Where she wraps silver fingers
Around silver bark.

And the White Guardian shines over all.

Here,
In glowing hand,
The branch aloft catches flame,
White flame flickering,
Winding down in serpent coils
From fingers to palm.
One atop the other, fire dances—

In this silver light,
The silver branch,
Each leaf,
Each berry aflame,
To open the worlds,
To grind gold from sand.

First Breath

by Nicole J. LeBoeuf

It was time I went in search of myself. Everyone has to do it once in their lives. Each of my parents had, years before, and now I felt the pull that said it was my turn. Time to make my own pilgrimage.

They saw me off, standing in front of the house and watching me drift down the road. "Remember what we taught you," my mother said. "One foot in front of the other. You'll do fine."

"Hurry home as soon as you can," said my father, a wry smile hiding the sadness of parting. "You'll want to be here when the baby arrives."

I could only nod, looking first from face to face then down at the place where my unborn sibling waited to be breathed into life. I wanted to take their hands. I wanted to hold them and never let go.

But I couldn't touch them. I could not even speak. Not yet.

* * *

I've stopped counting the jello shots and I'm starting to lose the spaces between the seconds, if you know what I mean, when the girl shows up right in front of me. The strange one. I've been noticing her on and off throughout the evening, the only person in the bar I've never seen before. My guess is, she's just some dumb rich kid up from the flats on a cheap time-share week, finding out the hard way what all us locals know: there's nothing to do in mud season. Ski resorts are closed. Everyone's bored out of our skulls and broke.

When I first spotted her, I grabbed Mack and pointed. "Who's the

chick in the gray hoodie? You know her?"

Mack just went, "Who?" like he couldn't see her. And he probably couldn't. I actually did count his jello shots before I started on mine. He likes the orange ones. Robbie makes them with 190-proof Everclear.

He makes the red ones, my favorites, with pepper vodka, and I guess I've downed at least ten, because I have to squint to focus even though the girl's right here. First things I see are her legs, bare right up to mid-thigh where the hoodie ends. I can't make out much more of her than that, just the tip of her nose and her mouth. She's smiling this weird sort of amazed smile, probably tripping on acid or E or something. Which is why I'm annoyed but not really surprised when she grabs my hand and starts playing with my fingers.

Naturally I try to yank my hand away. But she hangs on, so I end up pulling her off balance and into my lap. Now she's got both her hands on me, feeling her way up my arm like she's never seen an arm before. I roll my eyes and put up with it until she grabs my left boob, and then I've had enough. I slap her hand away. "What the hell are you doing?"

She sits there in my lap, examining her wrist from every angle like she's trying to see if I left a mark. If I weren't so drunk I'd have dumped her on the floor by now; as it is I can't seem to get up the momentum. She touches her own face, then mine, then--"What the hell," she says. And kisses me.

For just an instant I'm thinking Oh, God, another idiot who thinks

(This story first appeared in Ellen Datlow's BLOOD AND OTHER CRAVINGS anthology)

she's bi when she's stoned. Then the thought dissolves away until there's nothing left but Oh God.

It's like something inside me, something I never knew existed but I can't survive without, rises up and goes spinning out of me and into her. When she pulls away, I can't stop myself. I grab hold of her, pull her back down, make her kiss me again just to try to get that piece of myself back.

It doesn't work. I'm even more lost than before. It takes every shred of concentration just to ask her, "Who are you?" as she runs her fingers through my hair, against my scalp. Something's weird about that. I can feel my head resting against the back of the couch. There's no room between my head and the orange velvet upholstery for her hand to be there, stroking from my hairline to the nape of my neck and making my arms explode in goosebumps. I try again. "What's your name?"

She leans in close, lays her cheek alongside mine. "What's your name?" Right in my ear. Licking it.

The smell of her hair is sweet and slightly bitter, like someplace far away I'll never see. I answer her on automatic, "Jen," and then, "God!" leaps out of my mouth as her teeth pierce my earlobe. The pain clears my head for a moment. I'm conscious of the warm, wet blossom of blood that drips like melted wax onto my shoulder, and of the absurd and slightly scary fact that I'm pinned under the body of a stranger and she's hurt me. I push at her, whatever I can reach, but I'm too drunk to have much effect. In fact, I'm so drunk that her knee, what little I can see of it around her hair in my face, seems to be passing right through the couch cushion.

She licks up the blood in two slow swipes, and the sudden clarity is just as suddenly gone. I can't think. She kisses me again with my blood on her teeth. More of me vanishes into her; I open my mouth wider so she can take whatever she wants.

"Jen, you OK?" Mack's voice. "Jen? Christ, Robbie, how many shots

you give her?"

"You should talk, Mack. You aren't driving home, are you?"

"Nah, walking. So's she, thank God." Someone--Mack--gives my shoulder a rough shake. "Jen, you OK? Can you hear me?"

"A little busy now," I mumble around the lips that are slowly killing me.

He doesn't seem to hear me. "Jen, sweetie, maybe you should go home. Can you walk OK?"

The girl climbs off me and holds out her hand. Her smile is beatific. "Yeah," I say to Mack, unable to take my eyes from the girl's lips. "Yeah. Going home." I let her lead me out of the bar and into the parking lot.

The fifteen minutes it would take to get to my place seems an unbearably long time to wait. On the far side of the parking lot, I try to step up onto the grass and somehow I miss the curb. The girl catches me as I stumble. She nearly falls herself. We sway together against the back of Robbie's camper-top pickup truck, and now there's no question of walking to my place or anywhere else. She's at me again like you'd attack your first meal after the rescue copters get you out of the avalanche, and your hunger is a prayer of thanks. She's pulling my tank top over my head, ripping at my bra. It's cold, an early October snow just picking up speed, but I don't stop her. I reach to help her out of that hoodie of hers only to find it's gone already, just disappeared. Bare skin under my hands. I open my eyes and look into her face at last.

Her face. It's my face.

She stares back at me with my own eyes, her cheek marred by that same patchy birthmark I've hated all my life, her ear still wearing a clotted bead of my blood. That smile--I only found it so weird on her because it was so familiar. I stare at the living mirror before me and

my hands fall limp at my sides to rest helpless on the truck's tailgate. Only they don't. They pass right through.

A chill sweeps my body like I wouldn't wish on anyone. It turns my stomach and stops my breath. I sag and start to fall, and the back of Robbie's truck doesn't stop me. I move through its plastic and metal like a ghost.

So does she. She dives forward to catch me, pulls me out into the clear, kneels with me in the snow. I cling to her solidity and she rocks me in her arms. And then I try to scream because now she's fading, I can't touch her anymore, and I can't touch the air, either, so no sound comes out of my mouth after all.

* * *

No one had told me how much it would hurt. "Remember," they'd said, "don't get distracted. It's hard not to. Experiencing physical sensations for the first time, it can be dangerously fascinating." Fascinating? Earth underfoot, it was more than fascinating. Jen's skin on mine was meat and drink to me, it was Mothersong and burnt offerings at dusk. I wanted it never to end. But it did, it had to, I knew that it had to. My parents had told me what to expect. Jen faded in my arms, becoming insubstantial as mist. A spasm seized my throat, making me gasp, and I breathed her in. She was gone.

"Fascinating." "Distracted." Oh yes. But no one had warned me that I would love her. When my parents had recounted their own pilgrimages, years gone by, they'd never told me that their first tangible breath had been to weep.

I don't know how long I knelt there, alone in the snow surrounded by Jen's abandoned clothes. Her socks seemed particularly forlorn, half in and half out of her shoes. Her name stuttered uncontrollably off my lips. Her lips. My name now, to remember her by. Her name was mine, and her voice to speak it with. Her clothes were now mine; I remembered I was supposed to put them on. "Leave nothing behind."

Besides, it was cold out. I could feel the cold sinking its teeth into Jen's body, my body, inch by inch.

I could feel. I could pick up a handful of snow. I could wear real clothes of solid fabric, never again need the gray imaginings that habit of thought had dressed me in for years. I could touch. I could breathe.

My sobs stilled simply because they made me aware of the miracle that I could cry. Maybe that's why no one mentions the grief; it's gone so soon, replaced by joy. "Jen," I said again, and then spoke the first words I could call my own. "Thank you."

I couldn't quite manage the shoes. The knowledge of them had come into my head with everything else, but I had little experience thus far using fingers. The cold made them clumsier still, putting the puzzle of hooks and eyelets and laces out of my reach. I carried the shoes instead, and the pain of snow on stocking feet was the most precious thing to me during that long walk to Jen's apartment. Walking, at least, I'd practiced. One foot in front of the other. Gravity had become a surprisingly rough playmate, and the alcohol in Jen's system didn't help, but I made a good start. It got easier step by slow, careful step.

"You'll probably find your way back without trouble," they'd said. "Usually it's a matter of hours. It might take longer, but that's rare." Longer? How much longer? "But don't worry about that. Just live her life for however long it takes, until the way home opens for you." Days, months of Jen's life stretched out in my imagined future, each dyed in the colors of boredom, slowly sinking under the weight of years, trapped in the same two miles of tourists and ski slopes and the same people doing the same thing through the unrelenting sameness of endless seasons--

But my pilgrimage ended as ordinarily as I could have hoped. I got to Jen's apartment within the hour, fumbled it open with the key from her jeans pocket, and, simply as a dream, found myself walking into my parents' house.

They were in the bedroom, my parents, Daya upon the bed and hard into advanced labor. Avell knelt beside her, both his hands enclosing hers. It was dim in there, for Daya's comfort, but I could clearly see the sweat glistening in sheets upon her bark-brown face. The breath whistled thinly in and out of her, a terrifying sound.

Yet her gaze rose to meet mine. Alerted by her smile, Avell turned. Moments later I was in his arms.

At first he simply held me, and I felt the uneven rise and fall of his chest that told me he was crying. I was crying, too. Finally he held me out at arm's length and looked me over with grave, careful attention, as though seeing me for the first time. I suppose he was. What had I looked like to him, to either of them, all these years? A gray ghost, seen but never heard, communicating by blurred hand-signs they must have strained their eyes to read. No more. I could speak now.

But Avell gave me a stern look, and I remembered what my first words upon homecoming needed to be. "Avell my mother," I said, "behold your song made flesh."

He smiled. "It is a beautiful song," he said. Then he brought me to the bedside and addressed the woman laboring there. "Daya, father of our child, see the breath you breathed into me."

"It is a beautiful breath we breathed together." She said it strong despite her travail. "What name has our breath brought home?"

"Jen," I told them. Names are important. They're how we remember. "Her name was Jen."

"Is," Daya corrected me. "Her name is Jen. And it is a good name." Then she gasped, her smile sliding sharply out of sight. "Bone and blood! Oh, see indeed. 'The breath you breathed into me--'"

Avell caressed her brow. "Now, love, did I complain so when I lay there laboring with our Jen?"

"You did. You complained more."

"Then it's a good thing we didn't conceive twins, isn't it?" Avell chuckled. "Imagine Jen coming home to that scene. Both of us lying there, complaining and cursing--"

"Earth forbend I deliver this child on a curse!" But it was only mock-horror. Daya had found strength to laugh again.

I was too dazed to join in the joke. Avell had used my name so easily, so naturally. I sank to my knees beside him, the things in my heart too big for my newfound words. I laid my hands upon Daya's belly where the unborn child moved like an extra breath between Daya's breaths.

Avell's hand closed upon my shoulder. "Jen," he said, carefully and clearly. "Tell me what troubles you."

Finally it burst out of me, and the words, when they came, were so simple. "I loved her. It hurt so much--"

"Oh, Jen," murmured Daya. She placed her hand over mine.

"But why didn't you warn me?" I found myself shouting, anger burning through my tears. "You both made it sound so--technical. So practical. Do this, don't do that. Rules. Why didn't you tell me it would break my heart?"

The sadness in Avell's eyes shamed me then. "What could I have said? What would you have done, had you known? Hardened your heart against her, become a predator devouring prey? Staged it as a tragedy in which you played the starring role? No." He squeezed my shoulder. "You both deserved love, and there's no preparing you for that. We could only have ruined it by trying."

"But what good is love, when it killed her?"

"No." Daya's voice, strained as it was, allowed no argument. "She is

with you. In you. Always." She punctuated that with a fierce grip on my hand. "She will live in your children, and their children."

Avell touched my face, tracing the curve of my cheek. "I can see him so clearly in you," he said. In my imagination he doubled, stood face to face with himself, that other man who had held a life safe and waiting for him to claim. "How much I loved him--it makes me love you that much more."

A cry from the bed, sharp and surprised. Daya flung her head back against the pillows and drew a breath. And kept drawing it, on and

on. It seemed she would never stop, not until she'd inhaled every bit of the Earth's atmosphere and become herself a planet with her own weather patterns, her own seas. Avell's hands and mine rose with the profound expansion of her belly. Then, at the crest of the wave, she held that great breath, creating a moment of stillness in which I held mine also. In silence she smiled at us, the smile of a Goddess telling Her people, be not afraid. I gripped Avell's hand tightly and watched Daya's lips.

She opened her mouth and breathed that great breath out, and my sister, insubstantial as a mist, was born.

Habeas Corpus: In which I Demand My Father's Body

by Sophia Ashley

after Othuke Umukoro

airtight, movement as adjourned by wind states that
motion beings are impermeable dead weights.
at third reading, intimate ghosts become parts of our speech.

many in wood alphabets: as names of any person, habitat/place or jinn.
the rest as pronoun, used instead for harm—in ways that injure itself.

first reading moves the notion that at fair hearing,
in God's creation without a work permit,
man is mud in motion & tomb at sleep.
all men are wired for rest.

second reading affirms, should a soul miss its route to time-travel at bed,
it becomes a felony (say the consequence feels slightly like aging, in custody of a
charmed space).
grey breathing mud, dismantling empathy in vows to power a disappearance.

In redress of third reading, private ghosts often drift like treason:
raw force, aiming at the betrayal of a loved one.

somewhere, a bench of ghosts concludes:
"no inanimate relative should answer for how we scratch the surface of our grief."
since the clawing of a new death,
we all have been arraigning the same ghost.
his body—trayed loudly like an exhibit.

Veil

by Nicola Brayn



Darkness, Decay, and the Red Death, Too

by Avra Margariti

Rats, ruin, and rot
Matter not in this glittering abbey,
The walls sky-high, doors welded shut.
Seven rooms, each one a different color
Of the ravaged rainbow.
Masquerade party, Commedia dell'arte.
As peasants outside succumb to illness
Weeping blood through pores,
Rational thought through every orifice,
The eclectic guests dance.
Dulcet music and flowing wine,
A ballroom cleaved like meat
From the bone.

Darkness, decay, and decadence:
Colombina twirls in her billowy dress,
Flashes of black and white like dead dove wings
In the blue room. Faithful companions
Follow, fox-trotting: Arlecchino in the purple,
Pierrot in the violet hall.
Between green walls lit sapphire,

Greedy Pantalone counts his coins
In time to the chimes of the ebony clock.
In the flame-orange chamber, the Innamorati,
Luscious lovers, ignore the horde
Of masked dancers, the stench of
Distant death, and waltz
Their own crescendo.

Mundane made magickal, murderous.
The Dottore, white coat and useless remedies,
Watches the penultimate room's white walls,
Sensing the slow trickle of plague,
His own helplessness.
And in the last room, onyx black and bathed in crimson,
A masked, cloaked figure slithers silent
Across the ballroom,
Neither jester nor servant, lord nor duchess,
Inevitable, instinctual--Death,
Leader of this Danse Macabre.

If That Cowbird Don't Sing

by Jennifer Lee Rossman

The cowbird must know it's a sin to kill a mockingbird, on account of how guilty she looks every time she glances over her shoulder. But she keeps pecking at the egg, because baby cowbirds need more time and attention than she can spare.

Let somebody else raise it. Somebody with the expertise to take care of an ungrateful chick that doesn't talk, doesn't play right. Maybe they won't love the chick, not like a mother should—

"—but does it really matter? I can't even hug my own daughter without her freaking out and causing a scene!"

I run my finger over the big plastic diamond in the costume jewelry ring she let me play with. It's impossibly smooth and somehow the repetitive motion gives order and meaning to the chaos stacking up in my brain.

I don't know who she is screaming at this time. Her cousin, her sister, doesn't matter. No one will convince her of anything she doesn't want to be convinced of. I learned that back when she was still trying to fix me.

Peck, peck, peck. Bye bye baby mockingbird. It never really existed as anything more than an idea in an egg, the hope of something that might fly and sing one day, but the mother will still mourn it, even with a perfectly good baby cowbird to raise in its place.

I can't hear the whole conversation downstairs, but I hear one word often enough.

Institution.

My body feels hot and cold at the same time. She wants to send me away to some place, a cage, just for being a cowbird in a mockingbird nest.

The plastic cracks under the pressure of my thumb; my skin catches on the jagged edge and the pain throws me into stimulus overload.

This world is too bright, too loud, too filled with terrible textures and smells. I miss my old world, and I don't know what that means but it just popped into my head and I know it's true, same way I know four is the best number and the letter S is yellow.

The ring's band, some kind of cheap metal that turns my skin green, starts to corrode in my hand. Like it realized I'm something bad, something broken that it doesn't want to be associated with anymore. The feeling is mutual; my skin burns where the metal touches me, and not like when I slipped up and touched the hot glue gun. Real deep burning, down to my bones.

Footsteps in the hall. I need to hide the ring. She already thinks my being autistic and nonverbal is reason enough to send me away; who knows what will happen if she knows I'm ... whatever it is I am.

At a loss for where to hide it, I open my window and toss the ring. It lands in the nest, safely tucked between mismatched eggs.

The door opens, and she looks at me like the mockingbird mother will look at the cowbird when it hatches, with the undisguised disappointment of knowing she could have had a daughter just like her but instead she has this ... off-brand replacement.

"Get your coat," she says, even though it's hardly cold and she knows I hate coats.

I cross my arms, glaring at the abomination of long sleeves and fuzzy trim lying on my floor. I'm not good at reading faces, but I hope I'm writing my own well enough. It says *make me*.

She makes me. Somewhere in the house, I hear a mirror shatter.

* * *

I do everything right. Try to, anyway. She wants me to be like other kids, and other kids rebel. They say they don't want to wear a coat, and maybe they have to wear one anyway because adults make the rules, but they aren't physically forced. They aren't told they make everything harder on purpose, screamed at to communicate.

I communicate. It's not my fault she doesn't listen.

I wonder if baby cowbirds have this problem. Trying over and over again to learn to fly, only to have their mothers tell them it's their own fault for having the wrong color feathers.

Why can't they just look like mockingbirds?

My frustration—no, my rage—breaks the windshield of the car while we're driving. She blames the truck in front of us for kicking up a rock.

How did I do this? I look at my hands. Quiet hands.

The phrase comes back like trauma always does, like the feeling of the so-called behavioral specialists' hands on mine, pressing them down until they were still, even as I cried. Quiet hands, because if we can't be normal, we can at least pretend so we don't make people uncomfortable.

Maybe my hands were too loud and the window cracked. But the

stress, the fear, is thrumming through my body. I need to let it out.

Hairline cracks appear in the passenger side window; I roll it down so she doesn't see.

"Really?"

I flinch, make myself look as small as possible.

"The air conditioning is on," she says, and I know I'm not good with recognizing tone of voice so maybe I am wrong, but she sounds too angry for the situation.

Did she want me to turn the air-conditioning off first? I look at the knob, look at her. It's a trap. I know it is, because it always is. There's never a right answer.

Power pulses in my hands, but I fold them in my lap and just watch the trees blurring outside. She yells when I don't listen. I squeeze my eyes shut. Quiet hands, quiet hands.

It's when her arm brushes mine as she reaches over me to close the window. That's when it happens.

She screams. Not in anger but in terror. I'm crying, afraid to open my eyes and see what I'm doing. I don't want this, I don't want to be like this, please someone take it away, make me a mockingbird.

My balance feels wrong, like I'm falling forward out of my seat. I open one eye, then the next. I'm still sitting in my seat.

But the trees are sideways, and shorter than they were before.

Because I've lifted the car off the road and it is slowly tilting forward.

* * *

"Stop it! You stop this right this minute!"

Like I'm controlling it. Like this isn't just as terrifying for me as it is for her.

Like my body and mind aren't betraying me, revealing myself as a cowbird for the world to see.

I'll be lucky if I'm institutionalized at this point. There are other cars on the road; even if everything changes, even if my mother decides to love me and stop comparing me to that perfect mockingbird who never hatched, the other drivers will not let her take me home. The applied behavioral analysis, the torture for my own good, will be something I look back on fondly compared to what happens to me next.

Laboratories. Restraints. Absolutely no agency.

People will just be able to do whatever they want to me, touch me and make my hands quiet and make me wear a coat no matter how much I scream.

The faster my heart beats, the more panic surges through my body, the higher the car rises. The back window shatters, tempered glass shards raining down on us.

What if I can't stop it? Worse, what if I try and we fall? We're high enough that we could die, and I don't want to be institutionalized and I don't want to go to the laboratory to be dissected, but most of all I really don't want to die.

She's yelling again, demanding I do something. And if this were a different kind of story, I think this would be the part where I miraculously start talking, where I finally explain that yelling at me doesn't help and if she would stop expecting me to be her perfect mockingbird, I might be able to be a pretty decent cowbird in my own way.

But this is not that kind of story, and that's a good thing because all they do is teach people like my mother that they're right. That when it counts, we will fix ourselves because we really were broken all

along.

No, this is the kind of story where the autistic girl finds her voice without learning how to sing like a mockingbird.

* * *

I want to be cruel. I want to show her, to show the world, that they have underestimated me and people like me. I want to move their hands without their permission, see how they like it.

But then they would win, because they would have made me just like them. I can't be like them, I have to be better.

Still, there's the urge to tip the car sideways, watch her fall. It must be an instinct passed down from my real mother, the cowbird flitting from world to world, never stopping long enough to raise her children, only long enough to leave them.

The car door rips from its hinges; the sound of it grates on my soul, makes it harder to focus.

Kill the mockingbird.

The words come unbidden, just like quiet hands, except these feel right even though I know they aren't.

The trees shrink in the passenger window. I dig my nails into the upholstery as my weight shifts sideways.

She's begging now. Afraid of me. I guess she's always been afraid of me, but not for anything I did on purpose.

The highway, the other cars zip by underneath us. Too much movement, too much noise. I'm screaming right along with her, just as afraid of what I am becoming.

Of what I always was.

I hear the sound of her seatbelt jiggling in the lock. No. She has her problems and I don't think she should take them out on me, but that doesn't mean I want her dead.

I start tapping my fingers together. Fast, but rhythmically. Counting by fours. I tap as hard as I can. My hands are *loud*.

A little bit of the chaos chips away. Not a lot, but something. Peck, peck, peck.

Squeezing my eyes shut blocks out a little more of the world, and this realization sends a small thrill into my hands and I flap them with wild abandon. I flap them so hard, I think I might start flying.

The car rights itself. I hear a sigh of relief from the driver's seat, but that won't last long. Soon as we are safely on the ground, she'll turn on me. Make this my fault.

And it is, and it isn't. I did it, but it wasn't my choice to lose control any more than I chose to be a cowbird in a mockingbird nest. And maybe if I had been encouraged to be myself instead of learning to repeat after other people, maybe I would have learned how to prevent a giant meltdown like this.

There's a small jolt as the car touches the road, and there's sirens and

the wind is whipping through the open space where the door used to be and my mother is still screaming.

The tires screech. I open my eyes, look at the terrified mother bird who finally realized her chick is growing exponentially larger than she is.

I'm kind of glad I can't get the words out, because I have no idea what I would say right now. Thank you? I'm sorry?

With a flap of my hand, I open my door and I run.

* * *

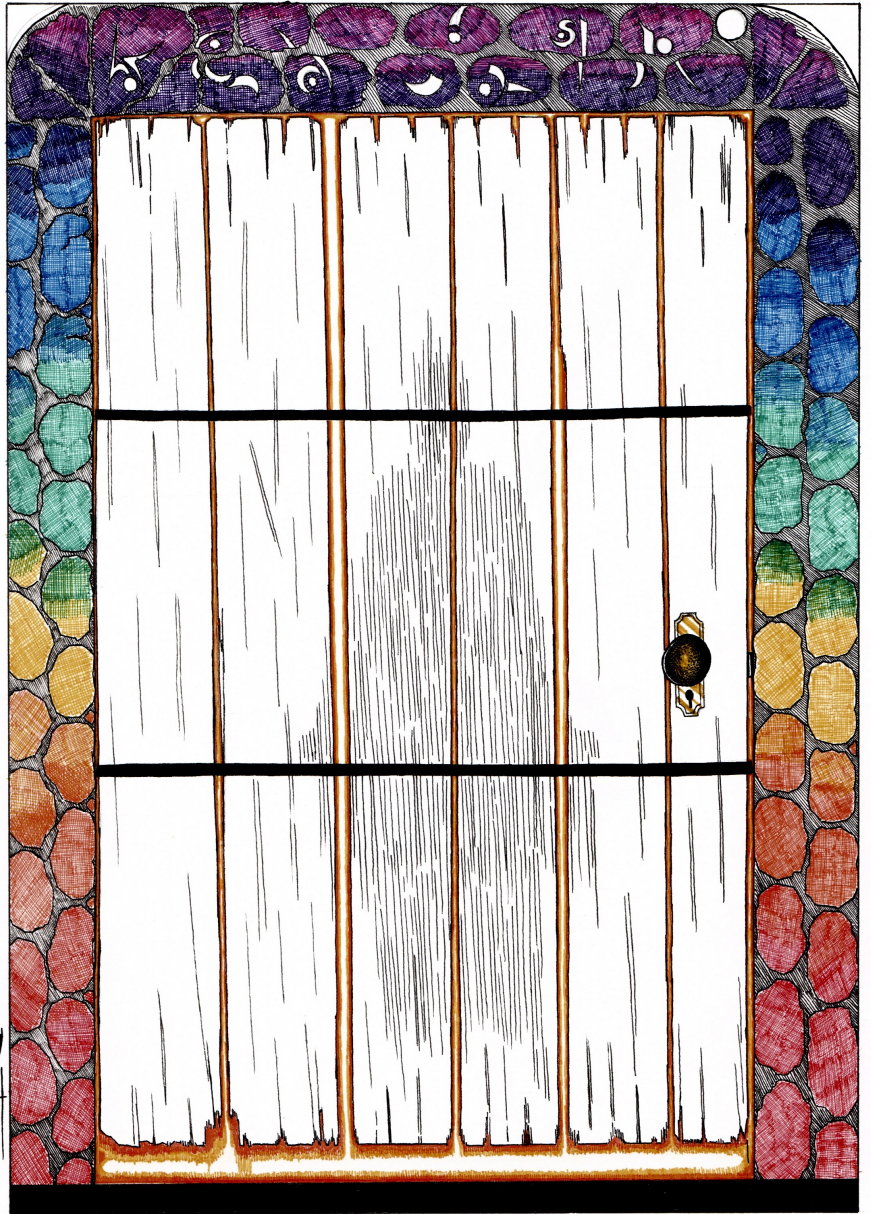
I don't know if I'm running away from something or running toward something. I just run. Across the highway, into the forest, back to the world I came from.

I'll go back, eventually. I have to, because maybe there are other kids out there like me. Autistic, magic, cowbirds with loud hands and quiet mouths. And the more of us there are, the more normal we will seem.

But I can't go back right now. The forest is quiet here, not a single mockingbird call to be heard.

Behind the Door

by Shikhar Dixit



ixil 2018

We Are the Forgotten

by J.D. Harlock

We are the forgotten,
the restless souls that will never be at peace,
haunting the lower quarters,
where those who remember us dare not go.

Beneath you
our souls have been left to rot
Above you
the rabid cries of those who want to let them suffocate

Yes, I understand your concerns.
I have heard it all before.

But there is nothing to do.
There is nothing to be done.

After all,
we are the eternal guests of this wasteland,
this barren hell
where nothing ever lives
and nothing ever dies

It'll always be like this

This is all I know
And all I will ever know.

I am told
we were once humble souls
who took pride in the roughness of our hands,
and the wrinkles of our skin,

that could tell you stories
of love and labor
dating back generations

But now we stalk the crooked alleyways
always keeping to the shadows
Hoping to remain unseen
Lest the wrong eyes catch a glimpse
Of what they hope they could forget
with an onslaught of scorn

Our cobbled roads lead nowhere
Our promised land is nowhere to be seen

All we have is a memory,
Ever fading, ever-elusive
Slipping out of fingers
that have been lined with cuts and puss
for so long
we've forgotten what it feels like
to latch onto something,
anything
and not want to scream

Thankfully, I have no life left in me to scream,
no tears in me to cry,
because after all those years
it's clear to me now

We will always be forgotten

Voodoo in New Orleans: June 23, 2021

by Victor T. Cypert

Along St. John's Bayou,
 beneath cobalt canopy
 and rising moon,
the initiates erect
 the Shrine to the Queen:
 impersonated – paper mâché and paint.

Rum, cigars, and cornmeal designs,
fish leaping from the water,
 the drums begin and the dancers
 —ecstatic sparks clad in white—
whirl across the green banks;
the wind picks up
 and, for a moment,
 the current seemingly
 reverses course.

The order of the rite is worked
 to the delight of the onlookers
 on the far shore;
a drone glides overhead
 cutting-edge sensing technology
 straining to glimpse
 the liminal.

The Houngan's call comes
 with the last catch of the fisherwoman's day
 as the stars glimmer feebly
over the Crescent City's luminous awakening.

The Asson's gentle response,
 a rattle and a chime,
 living memento of the history
 only a few miles upstream
beneath the same indigo vault.

The Ounfo sings
 and our masks begin to slip.

Studded with twinkling diamonds,
 night's black velvet cloak enshrouds the Queen
 as the moon crowns Her brow,
and painted paper sublimates
 beyond flesh
 into spirit.

Bridge of the Bees

by Emily Smith

Elsie skipped over the bridge in the yard, the tiny thing constructed for rabbits and mice. She pinwheeled to a stop, then dashed back over it and told her mother about the ‘black fairies’ she’d found.

Her mother pulled a weed out of the flower bed, then regarded her daughter, who stood arms akimbo. “Fairies aren’t black.”

“These ones were,” Elsie said, with all the confidence and seriousness of a witness in a murder trial.

“Fairies aren’t—” Her mother sighed, tugging off her gardening gloves, and waved at a pair of bumblebees hovering nearby. Several more hummed in places around the yard. “The bees help with the flowers. Just the bees. Fairies aren’t real, dear.”

“*These* ones were. And they were black. Like Deirdre and Davis. And they had little flowers for shoes.”

Her mother clenched her gloves in one hand. “Have you been playing with those kids?”

“No. No, even though Deirdre came over and asked. I told her I can’t.” A pause. “Mom, you have to come see the fairies.”

“Honey, they’re not real.”

“Come on! Come on, come on, come on—”

“Okay, okay, let me get up.”

Her mother groaned and cracked her back. Elsie held her hand, scampering over the bridge. They broke through a kind of film, a spider web—thin bubble, and there in front of them, bees with human faces, and skin instead of fur, buzzed around the yard. Their yard. Some perched on the car, some sipped from the flowers, and a few on the railing stirred a thimble filled with something that may have been soup. They all had black skin.

“Oh!” Elsie’s mother said. Then, “Oh!”

Elsie beamed. “Aren’t they pretty? They’re the bees!”

“Get out of here!” her mother said. “Get out!” She ran forward, brushing the couple off the railing and spilling the soup. She waved her hands at the ones drinking the flowers.

“Mom!” Elsie pulled on her mother’s shirt. “Mom! Wait!”

The bees buzzed, hands on hips. A few of them flew over to help those that Elsie’s mother had swept off the railing.

“Mom! They’re the bees! They’re good for the flowers!”

“They’re stealing from us!” Her mother power-walked towards the ones on the car. They flew off into the bright blue summer sky.

Elsie bit her lip. “Mom! Come back! Come back or I’ll—I’ll go and ask Deirdre to play!”

Her mother stopped, then wheeled around. “Elsie Agatha Hartman!”

Elsie tore towards the bridge. Her mother marched across after her, huffing and shouting. They passed through the thin film.

Elsie stopped in front of the flowers. “They’re the same,” she said. “See? They’re gone. You scared them off.”

The happy humming had stopped over the flowers, and the bumblebees, the ones with fur and stingers, had disappeared.

Her mother leaned against the porch, breathing hard. “You’re grounded, little lady.”

Later, in her room, a bee tapped against Elsie’s window. She waved at it. It meandered down near the bridge, the bridge that let them be bees.

Her mother had been wrong about the fairies. Maybe she was wrong about Deirdre, too.

Soiled Dove

by Marsheila Rockwell

He'd lived harder than most
And was given to drink
More so since the night
He got a little too rough
With a girl at Miss Kitty's
And the bawd tossed him out
A permanent ban

*

Even more since the day
Kitty's poor painted cat
Succumbed to her wounds
And they buried the chit
In back of the churchyard
Dates scratched on a cross
The only proof of her life

*

So no one took notice
When he began telling tales
Of being followed by birds
It was whiskey, they said
Or badly made moonshine
Though some whispered, Perhaps
It might have been guilt

*

Vultures, he claimed
His story unwavering
A murder of crows
Wing-to-wing with the harriers
For whom they were prey
All led by a dove
Spattered as with blood

*

No one took notice
Till they found his corpse
Torn to shreds, pecked to pieces
The strange flock of his tales
Still intent on their feast
Those trying to shoo them
Met with unblinking stares

*

A blood-sodden dove
Perched on the man's skull
One foot in each eye socket
Cocked its head, nodded once
The other birds flew off

To the crags and the roosts
From whence they'd been called

*

The dove rose, a flutter of wings
Shat in the man's mouth
Took a quick circuit
'Round Miss Kitty's head
Then flew into the dark
Alighting, unseen
On the girl's fresh grave

*

The bird melted to mist
Reformed in the shape
Of Miss Kitty's girl
Who, looking up
Saw a glow as of angels
And heard their belled voices
Calling her home

*

But other sounds beckoned
Music and laughter

Wrapping all 'round her
A slow dance embrace
Turning her feet
From the light's promise
Back to Kitty's red door

*

The glow faded behind her
And with it, her ghostflesh
She was once more a dove
Albeit with eyes
More human than birdlike
Albeit with feathers
Spattered as with blood

*

Now she nests 'neath the eaves
Of Miss Kitty's famed brothel
Where none are mistreated
For fear of her ire
And if you should spy her
Watching through the window
Best not to take notice

The Purple Sea

by Nicholas Katsanis

On the day the sea turned purple, Mayor Rigas stepped onto his front porch oblivious to the eerie silence shrouding the fishing village of Lipsoneri. All he could think about was his wife.

My poor Maritsa. Who dies of appendicitis in this day and age?

A whole year had passed since that dreadful night. With no doctor on the island, he had sat beside her, wiped her brow, while the woman who raised his sons writhed. By the time the coastguard arrived, she was gone.

He had written to the Health Ministry countless times without reply. Some bitter nights, he conjured images of bureaucrats in cheap suits chuckling over his letters.

One hand wrapped around the garden door, he regarded his home with hollow eyes and slanted eyebrows. Four generations of Rigases had lived and died between the white plinth walls and the terracotta roof. With Maritsa gone, Yanni had left for trade school in Athens and Pavlo was sure to follow once finished with military service.

He shook his head, inspected his shirt for creases, and stepped over the cracked flagstone with a cringe. *If Maritsa was alive, she'd be on my case to fix that.* In the past year, he had dispensed with the formalities of jacket and tie. None of his constituents seemed to care. They did snicker about his belly when they thought he was out of earshot, though.

Down the narrow street, he braced for old Magda's scowl round the corner. Each morning, the widow's shriveled figure sat on her stoop, black clad, black eyes, hair wrapped in a black shawl. All she did was

stare at him with those beady eyes, while the liturgy blared out of her radio in the kitchen.

Today, she was absent.

Is she dead? He tallied a sorrowful count. *Two hundred thirty-one. Thirty more years and the only Lipsonerians left on the island will be goats and feral cats.*

He poked his head into the house, called out her name, rushed inside. "Where are you hiding, crazy bat?" he muttered. No sign of her. A solitary dish lay on the drying rack and the kitchen smelled of lemons. The radio was off as well.

Maybe she's at the pharmacy, although Kyr Giorgo always brings her meds up to the house. Armed with kind words and a smile, the apothecary took everyone's blood pressure and prescribed ointments and painkillers. He was flirting with seventy, though, and huffed a little harder up the hill.

The Mayor cleared the village maze, gained sight of the port, and gasped. The entire village had gathered by the moorings, including Magda and Kyr Giorgo. Beyond the pier, the Lipsonerian fishing fleet of twelve lantern boats bobbed atop a purple sea. Not a drab, bleached purple that might get the fingers wagging at the unscrupulous captains of oil tankers; the water shone a vibrant, luminous hue that rivaled the village's bougainvilleas.

"I'll be damned!" said the apothecary the moment he spotted the Mayor. Every other day, Kyr Giorgo's eyes exuded the grey serenity of an autumn sky behind thin-rimmed spectacles. Today, they bulged,

hurried, while his forehead glistened. “Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“It’s God’s punishment!” Magda crackled above the susurrus and raised a bony finger. “The Day of Reckoning is coming, I tell you! Prepare yourselves!”

“Calm down, Mrs. Magda, I’m sure there’s another explanation,” said the Mayor, unsure whether she heard him. “What do you think, Father?”

Father Iakovos turned to face the Mayor and his footlong, cottony beard followed. “God is mysterious, my son,” he said in his slow, deep voice, his downward lips trapped in an always-mournful crescent. “But one thing is certain. What we’re witnessing here is not of the natural world. And on Pentecost of all days.”

The Mayor stopped himself from rolling his eyes. *Fifty days since Easter already.* His heart throbbed. Yanni had promised to return at the end of his semester. “Come now, Father, you really think this is Divine Intervention? In Lipsoneri, of all places?”

“Why wouldn’t God present Himself on our little island? Are we less worthy?”

“Bah, it’s pollution, I tell you. Another tanker washed its ballast. That’s why we get so many jellyfish,” said Kyr Giorgos, eliciting a dozen nods.

The Mayor scanned the crowd. Lipsonerians would rather kiss a fish than admit fear, but their spines were rigid as they gazed at the purple sea. He sent a stern glance toward the Father. “I’m sure we’ll find an explanation.” The priest clasped his hands behind his back and veered off, an inkblot amidst the crowd of white shirts, patterned skirts, and denim overalls.

For the next half hour, the Mayor observed his people loiter, scanning

the water and the heavens for any sign of change. No more revelations forthcoming—or boils, locusts, and horsemen upon fiery beasts—they dispersed to the coffee shop, their homes, their olive groves. *Yes, pollution, they muttered, or maybe a mineral crack underwater like on those TV documentaries.* None of the fishermen stepped onto their boats, though.

“Mayor!”

The Zonaris twins approached in matching dungarees and two-day stubbles. Maritsa’s older sister, God rest her soul, had christened them; their cries during the service had rattled the church windows. But that was twenty-four years ago, when he was a freshly anointed civil servant.

He gave them a quick nod. “Maki, Costa.”

“It’s not pollution, Mayor. And it’s not everywhere,” said Makis, the oldest by two minutes.

“What do you mean?”

Makis wiped his palms on his thighs. Any other day, he would have smelled of bait and brine. Instead, he reeked of fear. “We got up early this morning to prep the boat ...,”

“... and saw the sea ... you know ... like this,” said Costas.

“But we cast off nonetheless and went to investigate.”

“And?” The Mayor struggled to keep his voice level.

“Out in the open, the sea turns back to blue, all normal,” said Makis.

“But ...” added Costas.

The Mayor motioned them with his hands. “Oh, out with it already!”

Makis nodded at Costas, who heaved a deep breath. “Well, here’s the thing. We followed the edge of the hue to see where it ends. The color started getting brighter along the shoreline east of the port.” He gulped. “And then it got *really* intense by the old Corsair cave.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I swear to God! Mayor, there’s something in that cave turning the sea purple.”

“What did you find?” interjected Kyr Giorgos.

Another exchange of sheepish looks. “We motored back here, Mayor. We thought ... we thought you’d know what to do.”

The Mayor crossed his arms, turned to Kyr Giorgos. “Well, only one thing to it.”

* * *

Mayor Rigas felt the apothecary’s breath on his neck as they crouched on the bow of the rickety fishing boat. The twins manned the rudder at the stern, the engine whine drowning out their chatter. It had taken some cajoling to convince Kyr Giorgo to join the expedition. In the end, the plea to his scientific nous “for the good of the island” had tipped the balance.

Yesterday, the Mayor would have found the vista picturesque. The seagulls squawked while they fished, and the wind whistled from the north, soothing. But his pulse drummed as the water around the boat turned purpler and the oblong mouth of the cave loomed closer.

“God the Almighty help us,” muttered Kyr Giorgo and pushed his glasses up his nose.

The Mayor rested his palm on the apothecary’s shoulder. “It’ll be fine, you’ll see.” He cracked a smile. “You never know, maybe we’ll find the fabled treasure of the corsair pirates. Chests filled with bul-

lions!”

His bravado was met with glazed faces. If anything, the old cave was laced with tales of grisly acts, the ghosts of which none of his co-adventurers seemed keen to stir.

The engine revved down and they coasted inside. Even in the dim light, the water shone a radiant purple.

“There! There! Do you see it?” Kyr Giorgos pointed to the far end of the grotto.

The Mayor squinted. In the distance, a faint white light shimmered. As the boat travelled another thirty feet, the sailors issued a collective gasp.

“Heaven protect us!” cried Makis, crossed himself, and thrust his gaze down to the deck, as if the sight might boil his eyeballs. Costas just covered, hands over his head. Kyr Giorgos stared, mouth open.

A youth lay against the rock draped in a white tunic with his eyes closed. His legs were ankle-deep in the sea, while his hands lay limp on his sides, palms upturned. His oval face was pale and smooth, framed by bangs of straight blond hair that covered most of his forehead. He pulsated a muted glow, as if lit by invisible candles. Over his shoulders rose a pair of dove-white wings. The left one arched behind his ear, while the right one jutted from behind his ribs, its tip bobbing on the water.

“Calm. Stay calm,” whispered the Mayor. “Whatever this is, we must find out.”

“You crazy? That’s an angel. There’s an angel on the rocks! Oh, Mary, Mother of God, have mercy!” whimpered Makis.

The twins scrambled to turn the boat, but the Mayor stopped them with a firm voice, even though his own pulse thumped in his ears. “If this is really an angel, what do we have to fear? Besides, he looks in-

jured. We ought to help him, no?"

"We need to find Father Iakovos," said Makis, no longer bothering to hide his shaking hands.

The Mayor nodded. "Of course. But first, let's understand what's going on. For all we know, this is some tourist in fancy dress."

His proposition elicited furrowed brows.

"Why don't you boys stay on the boat? Kyr Giorgos and I will go see."

Before the apothecary had a chance to object, Mayor Rigas climbed onto the lichen-covered rock, steadied himself, and stretched out his hand.

Ten steps on, the two of them flanked the angel.

The apothecary pointed to the gash on the creature's arm. "Look!" From the crusted wound, a rivulet of blood had travelled down his delicate fingers. Where it had dripped to the water below, the color was at its brightest.

"This is no drunken tourist," muttered Kyr Giorgos.

"You think he's dead?"

"How should I know? Do angels even breathe?" Kyr Giorgos frowned. "His wing looks broken. If he's alive, he's not going anywhere." The apothecary took a deep breath. He reached out his hand and touched the angel's wrist, recoiled with a grimace.

"What?"

"His skin is cold. But I think I felt a pulse."

"Check again."

"No!"

"Hm. Maybe we should carry him back to town."

"You mad?" Kyr Giorgos' head jerked so hard his glasses almost fell off. "Can you imagine the terror? Besides, without a gurney, we might cause him more damage. Or pain."

"Well, what do you propose we do?"

* * *

Mayor Rigas glanced around the sanctuary of Agios Sotirios. The windowless room at the back of the church was musky, hints of fir tree resin and charcoal lingering from the censer in the corner. Father Iakovos used to procure rose and frankincense, but who had money for such luxuries nowadays? Like the iconography on the walls, the priest looked haggard atop his stoop, shoulders hunched and head so low his beard tip passed his waist. Between him and the processional cross stood Kyr Giorgos, his arms crossed and his face likewise broody, while the Zonaris twins shuffled their feet at the opposite corner, their furtive glances traveling between the priest and the frescoes.

The Mayor shifted his weight. "So. What do you think, Father?"

The priest lifted his head. "Well ... this is a day of days, isn't it?"

"Yes, but what do we do about it?"

"We have to tell the others!" said Makis to Costas' vigorous nod, before shriveling under the Mayor's glower.

"And then what? Turn Lipsoneri into a circus like Tinos? They built a church over that 'miraculous' icon and flooded the island with trash and lunatics. Imagine the kaffuffle here!" He turned his gaze to the priest. "Besides, we'll have the archbishop on the next boat, clamoring to tell the world. They'll take the angel back to Athens and we'll

be left to clean the mess.”

Kyr Giorgos crossed his arms over his chest. “Doesn’t feel right, this.”

“I know,” said the Mayor in a more somber voice. “Then again, Giogo, what if it’s not an angel but a trick? Or worse, a demon in disguise?”

“That’s ridiculous!” said the chorus.

The Mayor fought past the knots in his stomach. “Why? Would you put such a masquerade past Satan? Have *you* seen a real angel, Father?” His gaze swept the group. “Have any of you?” He sighed. “Let’s face it. Right now, we know too little.”

Kyr Giorgos shoulders slumped. “What do you propose?”

The Mayor opened his palms. “We leave him in the cave, monitor him for the next day or two, see what happens. I mean ... angels are supposed to be immortal, right?”

* * *

Three days after the discovery, the Mayor stared out of the dock at the rusty hull of the *Agios Nektarios*. The ferry boat’s horn chimed twice as it approached the concrete landing. The harbor not deep enough to accommodate the keel of modern vessels, Lipsoneri had to endure the relic every other Saturday.

“Good morning, Mayor,” called out Captain Andronikos from the foredeck. He pointed to the purple sea around him. “What in the Heavens happened here?”

If only you knew. “Mineral crack, somewhere underwater. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

The Captain bobbed his chin. “Been sailing fifty years, never seen

anything like it.” He paused. “You ought to tell someone.”

A rush of panic gripped the Mayor. So far, the sanctuary pact had endured. Meanwhile, the apothecary’s ointments, readings from the Bible (Old *and* New Testament), pouring holy water on his wound, and wafting incense had failed to alter the creature’s trance-like state.

Mayor Rigas waived a dismissive hand. “Whatever it is, it’ll go away. Anyway, see you in two weeks.”

Two days later, the apothecary burst into the Mayor’s home. “Turn on the TV.”

“What?”

“Now! Channel Three.”

The Mayor fumbled for the remote. Past a moment of hissing static, a map of Lipsoneri and Andronikos’ sea-eaten face filled the screen. He was wrapping up his recount of the miracle of the purple sea, while a petite blonde held a microphone across from him and nodded. “Trust bloody Andronikos to seek the limelight.”

“Maybe they won’t take him seriously ...” Kyr Giorgos said.

“And if they come poking around? What then?”

The apothecary pursed his lips. “We’ve got to move him.”

“You’re serious?” The Mayor’s stare was met with a steely silence. “Where to? We can’t bring him into town, we’ve talked about this.”

“The old silver mine. Where else?”

An hour later, the Mayor’s living room was full of commotion. The Zonaris twins stood with their backs against the wall, while Father Iakovos sat on the sofa, lighting a cigarette with the embers from the previous one.

“How are we gonna do this?” asked Makis.

“Easy,” said Kyr Giorgos. “We fetch the gurney from the old medical center. I have keys. We then carry him by boat to Anastasi beach and up the old trail to the mine. We set him up with an oil lamp, a table ...”

“And a Bible ...” chimed Father Iakovos between puffs.

“And a Bible,” said Kyr Giorgos. “We take turns checking on him every day. If something changes, we deal with it.”

* * *

The evening was clear, filled with the heady scent of jasmine. On nights like this, the Mayor used to take Yanni and Pavlo for long walks, point out the stars to them. Now, the widower lumbered down the slope, his hair stuck on his forehead. He ducked into the village and let himself exhale at the front entrance of his home. Kyr Giorgio had left with the twins to return the gurney. Father Iakovos hadn't come, claiming a sore hip, but had assured them he would pray with all his strength.

“I know what you're doing!”

The Mayor yelped. From the long shadows behind the streetlamp emerged old Magda.

“Jesus! Mrs. Magda, you're trying to give me a heart attack?” He wiped his forehead. “What are you doing up so late?”

“The angel visited me, woke me up, told me to come find you.”

“What?”

“He told me why the sea is purple. Don't treat me like a child, Rigas. I know your ilk.” Her face hardened as she took two steps forward.

“The angel Zadkiel, archangel of mercy, visited me in my sleep. He told me one of his soldiers fell here. Said he was trapped and injured.”

“You can't be serious.”

“As serious as you are, all dusty and disheveled.” She looked him over. “Where were you tonight? You have the air of a grave digger about you.”

“I think you'd better see Father Iakovos.”

“That fool? He wouldn't know the path of God if you drew it on his altar.”

The Mayor crossed his arms. “So, does this angel have a name?” He tried to put on a scornful face. “Or a purpose for his ... visitation?”

“He just fell, Rigas, don't look for omens. You know better!” Magda grabbed the Mayor's shirt, tugged with a strength that surprised him. “Where did you put him, Rigas, what did you do with him?”

He took a step back, only to find himself trapped against the stucco wall. A thorn from the bougainvillea dug into his side. “What do you want from me, wretched woman? You've been looking down on me for years. What is it that I've done to you this time, huh?”

“I want to see the angel!”

He wrangled free of both the plant and the octogenarian, swung the garden gate open, and slammed it as fast behind him as he could. “You stayed out in the sun too long, that's what!” He ran across his garden, past the cracked flagstone, and into the house.

* * *

Mayor Rigas struggled to open his eyes as the banging from the front

door reverberated through the house. Between the creaking of the windowsills and the shadows on the ceiling transmuted into vengeful angels, he had gotten little sleep.

When he opened the door, he was confronted by the cherry face of Father Iakovos.

“Magda, she knows,” said the cleric and stomped into the house.

The Mayor followed. “She came to see you?”

“She spoke to crazy old Thomas.”

“Where did she find him? He hardly comes to town.”

The priest ran his finger down his beard. “That’s the point! Apparently, that mule of his, Velzevul, ran off yesterday and Thomas found the beast near the silver mine. He spotted Magda snooping around. She told him about an angel hidden nearby. Some vision. The crazy man burst into the church half an hour later, flinging his arms about.”

“Damn that beast with the Devil’s name. And damn the old crow, why is she so persistent?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Father Iakovos grabbed the Mayor’s forearm. “It would mean her Dimitri and the baby are in Heaven.”

The Mayor slumped his shoulders. *Dimitri. Her late husband. The old gossip also claimed she had a stillborn; no children for them after that.* “I see.”

“We have no choice, Theo, we have to tell her.”

“Why don’t you take a seat, I’ll make some coffee.”

The priest nodded and reached for his cigarettes.

* * *

When the *Agios Nektarios* moored two weeks later, it delivered two surprises. The first was lanky Yannis Rigas, decked out in jeans and square sunglasses. The Mayor hugged him, kissed both his cheeks and held his face. “I missed you!” he said and fought the tears.

Yanni pointed at the purple sea. “So, it’s true.”

The Mayor wrapped his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Let’s go home. Lots to catch up on.”

As he turned to leave, though, he caught a glimpse of the second surprise. The petite blonde from the TV had just stepped off the ladder, followed by two men., two women, and a haberdashery of boxes with *Fragile* labels.

“Why don’t you go on ahead, I’ll catch up,” he told Yanni and headed to intercept the strangers.

“Ah, Mayor Rigas, I presume.” She beamed a perfect set of white teeth at him and extended a manicured hand. “Anna Stamatiou, Channel Three News.”

“I know who you are, of course, Ms. Stamatiou.” The Mayor put on his cordial face with voice to match. “I’m just surprised to see you all the way out here.”

She swiped the vista with her palm. “This is sensational! People can’t stop talking about it! Everyone’s curious.”

“Some freak geological event, we’re told.” He looked down at the cracked concrete, then caught himself and carried on with his smile.

“Oh, but this is so much more! We sent the segment with Captain Andronikos to news outlets all over Europe. The university in Athens is also asking ... everyone is, really. You’re famous!” Her eyes veered

past the Mayor. “Hey!”

“Hey!” the Mayor heard, turned, and found his son grinning behind him.

“We met on the boat.” Her smirk formed a dimple on her cheek. “Yanni told me all about you and your lovely town.” She took a deep breath. “You know, with all this, I’m sure the mainland won’t ignore you anymore.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Oh, simple. I’d love to interview you, on camera.” She pointed to the boxes stacked behind her. “I want to hear your story, your island’s story, all of it. I want to learn about the purple sea, of course, but there’s so much more.”

“I don’t know Ms. Stamatiou ...”

“Dad, it’ll be great,” chimed Yanni. His eyes weren’t looking at his father.

Ms. Stamatiou and crew stayed at the inn. They laughed a lot, stayed up late, bought everyone drinks, tipped handsomely. She spent the week chatting with the Mayor, who then watched from afar as she interviewed his son, the apothecary, others. The twins fidgeted, but stayed true with the geological storyline.

The Mayor swallowed his chuckle when she interviewed Father Iakovos. The fat man was bursting to peddle Lipsoneri as God’s chosen destination. But he kept glancing across at the Mayor during the interview and managed to behave.

The reporters boarded the *Agios Nektarios* the following week, seen off with hugs and kisses.

“When are *you* heading back?” the Mayor asked Yanni as the silhou-

ette of the old boat receded.

“I thought I’d stay for a while.” He pointed at the purple sea. “I’m curious.”

The Mayor beamed a smile, patted his son’s back. “Wonderful. Just wonderful.”

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, the Mayor headed to the silver mine.

Up the hill, he pulled apart the dead branches concealing the entrance. Past the lip, a tunnel sloped downward for a hundred feet, filled with the musky smell of earth and roots. Most of the side tunnels had collapsed, except for one.

He climbed down the stone steps and looked across the chamber, its chiseled walls still covered by the crumbling skeleton of a scaffold. “How is he doing?”

“Same as always,” said Magda in a soft voice that echoed in the cavern, and caressed the angel’s face with a damp cloth. He lay on a cot, covered in a cotton sheet.

“But he’s alive?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Did you speak to the reporters?”

“Pfft, they wouldn’t want to talk to me.”

“And if they did?”

“Oh, relax, Rigas. Why would I want them to know about our angel?”

“Have you had more, ahh, visitations from ... what was his name?”

“Zadkiel.” She shook her head. “No need, not anymore. I know what I need to do and that suits me fine.”

* * *

The Mayor should have guessed Yanni would stay in touch with Ms. Stamatiou. After a whispering phone call, his son had darted out and didn't return until hours later. He beckoned the Mayor to follow him to the square.

Under the hundred-year-old fig tree, the entire village jostled for a seat near the TV. They yelped when they recognized themselves, thrusting elbows at one another when they spotted their neighbors on the screen. After the show finished, they treated each other to cold beer, young wine, and—as the night dragged on—fiery raki to accompany the songs and rowdy laughter.

For the next few days, the buoyancy was palpable. People grinned when they crossed his path, spoke a little chirpier. From what conversations he caught, they hardly mentioned the purple sea.

“Look at that,” he told Kyr Giorgo on their evening strolls by the water's edge. He pointed to the lanterns that flickered in the water, lurking dorado and seabream.

The apothecary nodded. “Nobody's scared of the sea anymore, are they?”

“Why should they be? Only good things have happened since.”

“If you exclude how full of air the Father's head has become. Did you notice how packed the church was for Sunday service?”

“Ha. Yes. But come on, even old Magda has simmered down. You know, she actually smiled at me the other night when I went to check

on the angel.”

Kyr Giorgo's eyes widened. “A miracle indeed.”

“And look at this!” The Mayor pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

Kyr Giorgo read the letter, slowly at first. “For real?”

“Check the signature. It's from the Minister himself! Not just a doctor, but a budget for a Health Center. Surgical room and X-ray machine to boot!”

“Nobody wants to look bad to a reporter, huh,” said Kyr Giorgos with a wry smile.

“Who cares?”

“Didn't Pavlo want to try to be a medical technician?” Kyr Giorgo slapped the Mayor's back. “So, now you'll have both your sons back on the island, eh?”

The Mayor thrust his hands in his pockets and carried on walking.

The following morning, however, Makis Zonaris showed up at the Mayor's doorstep. His face was tense.

“Maki, what is it?”

“The sea, Mayor.”

“What about it?”

“It's losing its color.”

“What?”

“The purple from the grotto! It’s going away!”

The Mayor glared at Maki.

“We went inside, Mayor, my brother and I. With the angel moved up to the mine, I guess his blood ... it’s getting diluted and the color’s petering out.”

* * *

The Mayor’s living room was once more filled with a blue haze that watered his eyes and scratched his throat. He told himself it was the priest’s chain smoking that bothered him.

“So? What if the sea turns back to blue?” said the apothecary.

The Mayor glared at him. “You can’t be serious!”

“Why not? Everything would just go back to normal and that would be that,” said Maki to his brother’s nod. “What do you think Father?”

Father Iakovos took a deep puff, making the tip of his cigarette sizzle. “Hard to believe God would be so cruel, send us an angel, only to take his blessing away.”

“Hogwash,” croaked Magda from the far corner. “The angel is still here. It’s your fancy promises washing out.”

The Mayor watched Yanni step into the middle of the room. *I had to let him in on this, what choice did I have?*

“Please calm down,” the youth said and paused. It was a trick the Mayor had taught him. Take a moment, use silence to gather everyone’s attention. “The purple sea, it’s going to bring changes. Money to fix our homes and churches. Safety. A future.” He cast a sideways glance toward his father. “Better healthcare. If we let this go, we go back to what we were. A dot of nothing.”

“Wait. Who are you to have a say in this?” snapped Maki from the couch. “You left, you’re now Athenian.”

“Calm down, everyone,” said the Mayor. “Mrs. Magda, how’s the angel?”

She crossed her arms. “About the same.”

“And you? Any more visions?”

She glanced across at the priest and shook her head, while Yanni turned to his father.

“What Yanni’s trying to get to,” said the Mayor, “is that it wouldn’t hurt if we drew a little blood from him.”

“What?”

“Outrageous!”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Blasphemy!”

The Mayor fended off the wall of shouts with his hands. “Please! All I’m saying is we draw a little blood. Come on, you’ve all been through this! It’s but a pinprick!”

“And drop a little in the water, see what happens,” added Yanni.

“I swear to my Maritsa’s memory. First sign of distress from the angel, or any other untoward sign, and we stop immediately.”

The room filled with glares.

“Well, there’s nothing in scripture against it,” said Father Iakovos three puffs later.

“What if he doesn’t have veins?” asked Kyr Giorgos.

“He must,” said the Mayor. “You saw the blood. Besides, we’re all created in His image, people and angels, right Father?”

The priest nodded, reluctantly.

“Mrs. Magda. You are the closest to him. The Archangel Zadkiel has surely heard our proposal. If it’s a bad idea, he’d send us a message ...”

The old woman took three steps to the middle. “Have you all lost your minds?” She extended a callused finger toward the Mayor. “Don’t you dare lay your filthy claws on my angel, Rigas, hear?” She turned to the priest. “Why don’t you burn your vestments and go slither to the coffeeshop. And as for you lot ...” her voice trailed as she turned to the twins, “You know better, so go on, scuttle along before this lot turns whatever brains you got left into stupid soup.”

“Mrs. Magda, be reasonable,” said the Mayor.

“Yes,” said the apothecary. “Think of the village, the island, our future.”

The rest stared at the floor.

“You listen here, the lot of you. You take one step into the mine, and I’ll go to the newspapers. And if you think I don’t have the gall, try me! I might be old but I’m not stupid.”

She grabbed her walking stick and tapped her way out of the house without throwing a single glance behind her.

* * *

Kyr Giorgos and the Mayor huddled over the blue metal table in the main square’s coffee shop.

“It’s a calamity,” said Kyr Giorgos.

Mayor Rigas took a sip from his bitter coffee, looked at the tree crowning the square. A line of ants struggled to climb up its gnarly bark. In the foliage, the cicadas mocked them in fine voice. Beyond, the tips of the waves looked bluer. “You tried again last night.”

“I did,” said the apothecary. “But the old bat stood guard by the mine. I swear, soon enough she’ll grow fur and start howling.”

“You could slip her a pill or something.”

Kyr Giorgos’ nostrils flared. “You mad? At her age, she might die!”

The Mayor took another slow sip.

“Theo!”

“I know ... I know ...”

“Maybe we ought to tell the world about the angel after all. The island would still be an attraction. It doesn’t have to be like the scourge of Tinos. I mean ... look at Patmos. Pilgrims still visit the cave of St. John, no?”

“Bah. People go to Patmos for the beaches.” The Mayor leaned closer. “Another year, maybe two, we’ll be a footnote.”

“Dad! Dad!”

Yanni was sprinting past the pier and into the square, with muddy jeans and wild eyes. Father Iakovos huffed behind him, bunching his robe up in his hand. From the commotion, the cicadas stopped singing.

Mayor Rigas stood up. “What’s wrong?”

Yanni stooped against the tree, panting. “It’s Magda, she had an acci-

dent,” he said between gulps of air.

The Mayor looked at his son, at the apothecary, at Father Iakovos who had joined them.

“It’s true, I’m afraid,” the priest said, wheezing.

“What happened?” asked Kyr Giorgos.

Yanni wiped sweat off his brow. “I was heading up to the mine to check on the angel ... you know. Next thing I knew, Velzevul was there, flailing about. I thought he might have been bitten by a snake or something and I reached to grab him. I must have spooked him. He kicked his hooves and broke into a gallop.”

“And?” asked the Mayor with a voice filled with dread.

Yanni shook his head. “He ran straight at Magda, knocked her off. She tumbled down the hill. By the time I reached her, she had a nasty gash on her head and wasn’t breathing.”

“No!”

“Afraid so,” said the priest. “A terrible tragedy.”

The Mayor narrowed his eyes. “You were there too?”

“Why, yes, the boy called me.”

“We should go to her! Now!” said the apothecary, but the priest’s hand stopped him.

“Kyr Giorgio, she’s gone.”

“The stupid mule killed Mrs. Magda?” said the Mayor and stared at Yanni.

His son’s gaze focused on the root of the tree, except for the brief glance he threw toward the priest. “Yes, dad, that’s what happened.”

“Never seen Velzevul trot, let alone run,” said the apothecary. “Have you, Theo?”

“No.” The Mayor glared at his son, at the priest, at the ants crawling around the tree. “But Yanni’s right, he might have been bitten by a snake or something.”

“She’s with the Lord and her husband now,” said Father Iakovos. He crossed himself and furrowed his brow until the rest of them emulated him.

* * *

The church bells rang their mournful sound and the two hundred and twenty Lipsonerians shuffled toward the cemetery exit, steeped in incense and soft whispers. Even Thomas had come down from his farm, dragging Velzevul with him. The Mayor had fought to have the animal put down, but not too vociferously.

“Poor Magda,” said the farmer.

“Yes,” the Mayor replied. “Tragic. But she was old, had a full life.”

Thomas shook his head. “What was she thinking, climbing up that hill?”

The Mayor adjusted his black jacket. “Who knows? Lost her mind, obviously. Did you know she claimed to have visions?”

“Yeah, I did hear something about that,” said Thomas. He reached for Velzevul’s reins and mounted the beast. The mule glared at its rider, whipped his tail, and scratched his hoof into the ground. A firm rib jab later, he brayed and took slow steps in the direction of the hills.

The Mayor turned his face toward the dispersing congregation.

The apothecary followed his gaze. “No Yanni?” he asked.

The Mayor wiped his face to hide the blush. “Not feeling well since Magda’s accident. I suggested he stay home.”

“Not heading back to Athens, then?”

The Mayor picked at his fingernails. “Thought he might hang around, help out ... at least for the summer.”

“Ah.”

The two old men stepped off the cemetery gate and down the thistle-covered hill toward the harbor. Beyond, the sea shone a radiant purple.

Deep Space Feeding

by Denny Marshall



© 2018 Denny E. Marshall

Cetacean Reunion

by Linda Neuer

As dolphins drift near the water's surface
with half of your brain awake, ever vigilant,
the other half asleep in dreamless rest,
echolocate to the warm green of the Eocene
where the Tethys Sea dissolves 50 million years.
Early whales roam the river delta of the Punjab,
long before the Himalayas climbed the sky.
As pakicetids, you could hear underwater
before your legs became fins, your tail became flukes.
With no humans and their nets to entangle,
the wolves with whales' ears evolve
from foraging the land and freshwater shallows
to ambulocetids, furry crocodiles comfortable in brackish water
to dorudons with fins and tiny, hind legs,
aquanauts breaching the salty oceans of the world
from Egypt to verdant Antarctica to the Americas.
Echoes of evolution flow through deep time
when past and present meet. Near the river's surface,
dolphins drift in dreamless sleep, half-awake with one eye open
while on shore, pakicetids dream nestled in the sedges of the Punjab.



by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

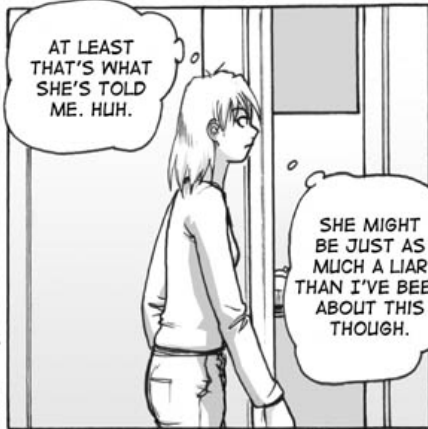
I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to 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!

Like mentioned earlier, the lights activate automatically when you rise from the bed.

They also slowly dim down when you have laid down for a while. If you to turn the lights on or off regardless, they also react to voice commands.

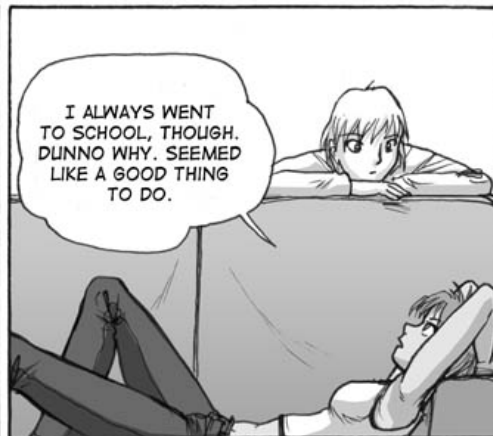
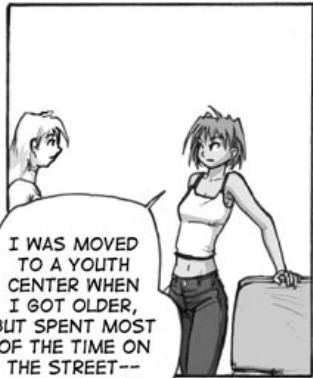
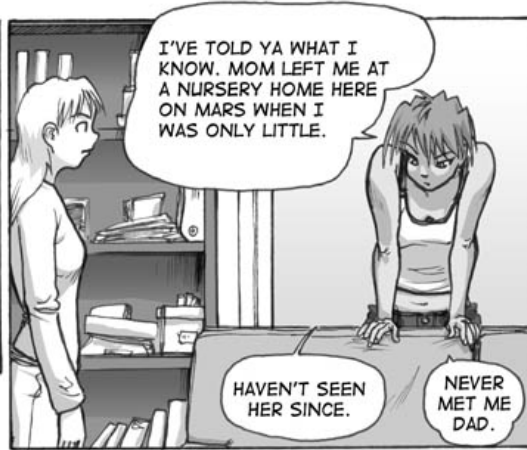




NOTES

Jill has reset the image frame to show (random) pictures again.

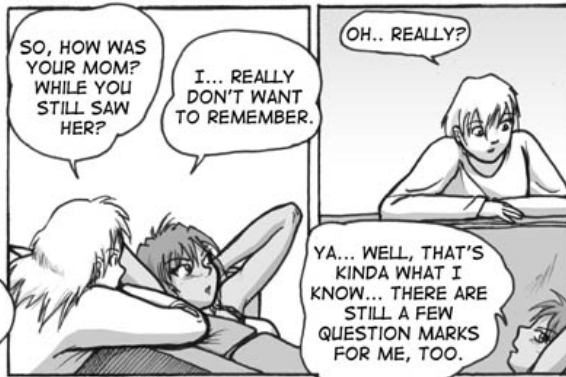




NOTES

The contents of that shelf seem to change for every time it's pictured...





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NOTES

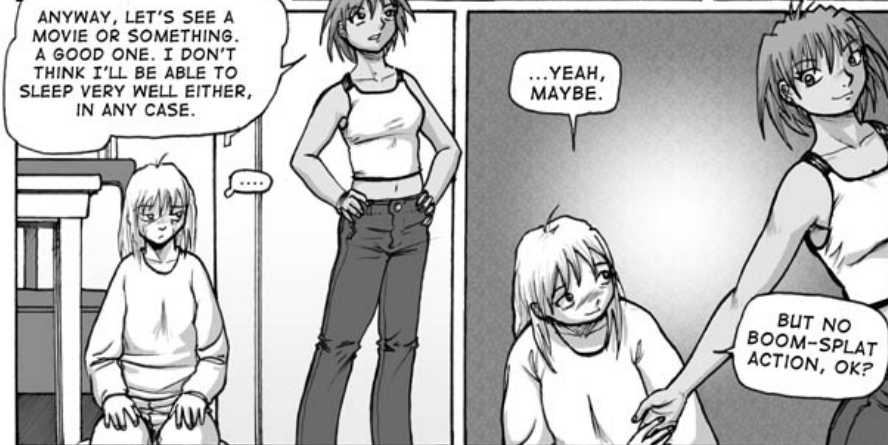
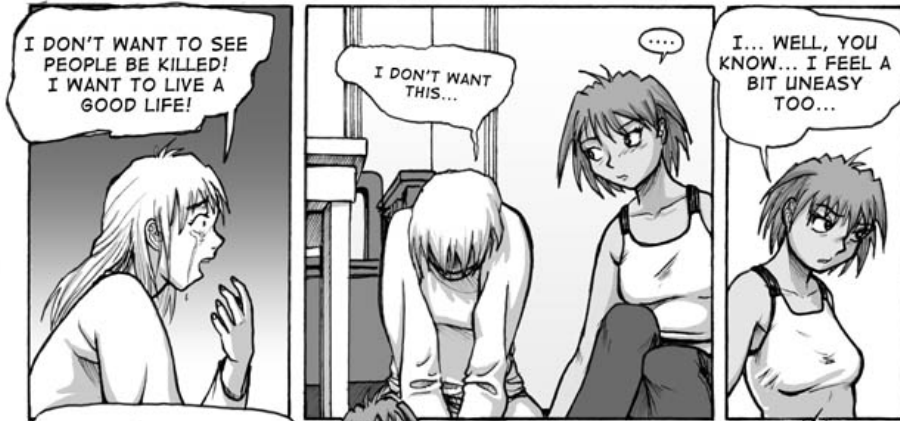
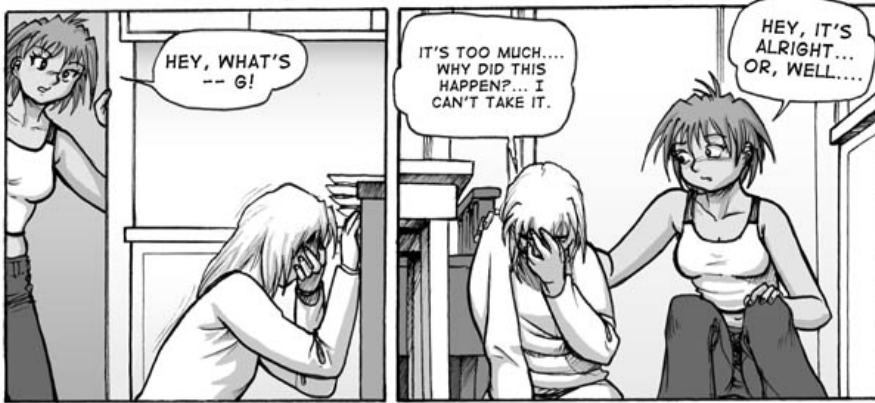
Hope the shock effect is good enough...

Good news for me but perhaps bad news for *Mondo Mecho*!

I've gotten quite a large job that will take a lot of time, and the time I can spend on MM may be very limited...

I can't say if I'll be able to update regularly from now on, but I will try my best! You have the notifying list so you know.





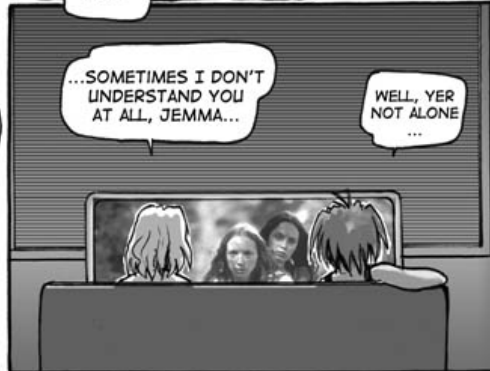
NOTES

I realized there was only one page left of the current storyline, I really had to do it... Would be a bit dumb to leave that hanging for a year.

Because of this job I'm doing now, and that I cannot yet reveal to the Internet, I have no possibility to work on MM for the moment. I simply have no time over. Sorry for this, but I have no intention to cancel the MM story. It will be continued when there is time to do so again.

But I'm afraid it will be quite a while.





NOTES

[no notes this page]



Contributor's Bios



KRISTA CANTERBURY ADAMS lives in Columbus, Ohio. Her influences include Algernon Blackwood, Anne Rice, Hilda Doolittle, and Anne Sexton. She is a published poet, as well as a member of the HWA. Her work appears in *Altered Reality Magazine*, *The Dark Sire*, *Carmina Magazine*, *BFS Horizons*, and *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*, among others.

* * *

SOPHIA. N. ASHLEY (she/they) are writers of poetry & fiction. Winner of the Bkpw Poetry Workshop Contest 2021, & Pushcart Nominee. They have works previously published in *Star*Line Science Magazine*, *The Quills Journal Nine*, *Stonecrop Review* & elsewhere. They are the author of "Dumb Mandate." On Instagram, they are @sophi-aashley631.

* * *



GUSTAVO BONDONI is an Argentine writer with over three hundred stories published in fifteen countries, in seven languages. His latest novel is *Jungle Lab Terror* (2020). He has also published another monster book, *Ice Station: Death* (2019), three science fiction novels: *Incursion* (2017), *Outside* (2017) and

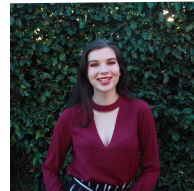
Siege (2016), and an ebook novella entitled *Branch*. His short fiction is collected in *Pale Reflection* (2020), *Off the Beaten Path* (2019), *Tenth Orbit and Other Faraway Places* (2010), and *Virtuoso and Other Stories* (2011).

In 2019, Gustavo was awarded second place in the Jim Baen Memorial Contest and in 2018 he received a Judges Commendation (and second

place) in The James White Award. He was also a 2019 finalist in the Writers of the Future Contest.

His website is at www.gustavobondoni.com

* * *



NICOLA BRAYAN is a young, aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be

found on Instagram at @an.aesthetic.mirror.

* * *



JOSEPH CARRABIS has been everything from a long-haul trucker to a Chief Research Scientist and held patents covering mathematics, anthropology, neuroscience, and linguistics. He served as Senior Research Fellow and Board Advisor to the Society for New Communications Research and The Annenberg

Center for the Digital Future; Editorial Board Member on the Journal of Cultural Marketing Strategy; Advisory Board Member to the Center for Multicultural Science; Director of Predictive Analytics, Center for Adaptive Solutions; served on the UN/NYAS Scientists Without Borders program; and was selected as an International Ambassador for Psychological Science in 2010. He created a technology in his basement that's in use in over 120 countries. Now he spends his time writing fiction based on his experiences.

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EMMIE CHRISTIE's work tends to hover around the topics of feminism, mental health, cats, and the speculative such as unicorns and affordable health-care. She has been published in *Intrinsick Magazine* and *Allegory Magazine*, and she graduated from the Odyssey Writing Workshop in 2013. She also enjoys narrating audiobooks for Audible. You can find her at www.emmiechristie.com.

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VICTOR T. CYPERT is a writer of short stories and poetry. He holds an MFA in writing popular fiction from Seton Hill University. His work has appeared in *Lamplight*, *Illumen*, and *The Wild Musette Journal*. He lives in Alabama.

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SHIKHAR DIXIT's stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and *Barnes & Noble's 365 Scary Stories*.

He lives with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com

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OLADOSU MICHAEL EMERALD (he/him) is an art editor of *Surging Tide* magazine, he is a writer/poet, digital/musical/visual artist, a footballer and an intending political scientist.

He has many publications and awards recorded to his achievements. His works have been published or forthcoming on *native skin*, *the maul magazine*, *afrocritik*, *paper*

lantern lit, *better than Starbucks*, and elsewhere.

He tweets @garricologist.

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J.D. HARLOCK is a Syrian Lebanese Palestinian writer and editor based in Beirut. In addition to his posts at *Wasifiri*, as an editor-at-large, and at *Solarpunk Magazine*, as a poetry editor, his writing has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, and the SFWA Blog. You can always find him on

Twitter and Instagram posting updates on his latest projects.

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TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, *the Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. hildebrandt343@icloud.com.

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NICHOLAS (NICO) KATSANIS' poetry and short stories have been published in *The Delmarva Review*, *Literally Stories*, *the Umbrella Factory* and *The New Verse News*, amongst others. One of his stories has also led *All That's Left Are Stories*, a sci-fi anthology available through kindle. Nico enjoys traveling and has visited half the planet; laptop and notebook underarm, he

hopes to visit the other half while editing his debut novel.

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E.E. KING is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking."

She's been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Short Edition*, and *Flametree*. She's published several novels. Her stories are on Tangent's 2019 and 2020, year's best stories. She's been nominated for a Rhysling, and several Pushcart awards.

She's shown at paintings at LACMA, painted murals in LA and is currently painting a mural in leap lab (<https://www.leaplab.org/>) in San Paula, CA.

She also co-hosts *The Long Lost Friends Show* on Metastellar YouTube and spends her summers doing bird rescue.

Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at: www.elizabethveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeking

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NICOLE J. LEBOEUF is a New Orleanian writer of short speculative fiction and poetry appearing in such venues as *Cast of Wonders*, *Departure Mirror Quarterly*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Apex Magazine*. She currently lives in Boulder, Colorado with her husband and an agent of chaos cleverly disguised as a small rabbit. She skates under the name Fleur de Beast with Boulder County Roller Derby. She blogs at nicolejleboeuf.com and tweets at [@nicolejleboeuf](https://twitter.com/nicolejleboeuf).

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AVRA MARGARITI is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Armenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter ([@avramargariti](https://twitter.com/avramargariti)).

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DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

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LINDA NEUER is from Miami, Florida. Recently, some of her poems have been published in *NewMyths*, *Utopia SF*, *BFS Horizons*, *Space & Time*, *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Jupiter*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Quantum Poetry Magazine*, *Sangam*, *Lily*, and *Astro-poetica*.

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

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ROSIE OLIVER has been in love with science fiction ever since as a teenager she discovered a whole bookcase of yellow-covered Gollancz science fiction books in Chesterfield library. It sent her on a

world-spinning imaginary journey that has seen her have nearly 40 short stories published - one ended up in the *Best of British Science Fiction 2020* anthology, being awarded three Silver Honorable Mentions and eleven Honorable Mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest, and blundering her way to contributing to a scientific research paper while investigating background stuff for a novel. She is currently concentrating on writing science fiction novels... yes plural, meaning in parallel!

You can find Rosie online at rosieoliver.wordpress.com.

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MARSHEILA (MARCY) ROCKWELL is a Rhysling Award-nominated poet and the author of multiple books, short stories, poems, and comics. She is a disabled pediatric cancer and mental health awareness advocate and a reconnecting Chippewa/Métis. She lives in the desert with her family, buried under books. Find out more here: www.marsheilarockwell.com, @Marcy-Rockwell.

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JENNIFER LEE ROSSMAN (she/they) is an autistic cowbird still struggling with the pressure to be something she isn't. Follow her on Twitter @JenL-Rossman and find more of her (usually queer, disabled, and/or autistic) work on her website <http://jenniferleerossman.blogspot.com>

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NOVYL SAEED can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username @lyv0n.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbria*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect @christinasng.

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LYNN WHITE lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award. Her poetry has appeared in many publications including: *Apogee*, *Firewords*, *Cap-sule Stories*, *Gyroscope Review* and *So It Goes*.

Find Lynn at: <https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077/>



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(full image)

by Tim Hildebrandt