

penumbra

A person is seen from behind, standing on a concrete ledge and looking over a chain-link fence. The person's back is to the camera, and they are wearing a light-colored, possibly white, long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. The fence is in the foreground, and beyond it, a city skyline is visible under a hazy, overcast sky. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

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Christina Sng • David Powell • Gordon Sun •
Jennifer Crow • Luke Walker • Sydnie Beaupré •
T.D. Walker • Lyra Meurer • Janis Butler Holm
• Eric Wampler • Jamal Hodge • E. E. King •
Morgan Wyman • Carl Scharwath • Lisa
Beebe • Subodhana Wijeyeratne • Olaitan
Humble • Sonali Roy • Rubella Dithers •
Nathan Thompson • Elby Rogers • Kim
Whysall-Hammond • Christopher
Collingwood • Desmond Rhae •
Denny E. Marshall

state of the
World

World View 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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*cover: World View
by Tim Hildebrandt*

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

As you may glean from our cover (with art by Tim Hildebrandt), we're not doing the holiday season as some kind of sweetness and light this year (or ... well, maybe we just haven't in these recent years). Russia is still invading Ukraine, and now Israel seems intent on destroying Gaza (not just Hamas, with whom they have a legitimate problem, but every last building, every last road, every ... well, person). Dictatorial and far right governments seem to be gaining power in many places (except in England, where they seem intent on destroying everything—the national health service, any semblance of human rights law, any kindness at all to their fellow human beings—before they get kicked out of office), and in the US we still, somehow, incredibly, have the looming shadow of Donald Trump and those who enable him, who would vote for him even if (when) he were proven to be a cheat, liar, and wannabe dictator. We have a social media landscape dominated by Far Right and antisemitic propaganda. And we have the 28th (!) attempt by governments around the world to convince themselves that climate change will just go away if we throw enough good intentions at it. And this time it's basically being hosted by the fossil fuels industry!

No wonder I think the state of the world is ... well, our cover.

Now, to be fair, the stories and art herein are not as unremittingly bleak as all that. There is some hope in the world, after all. Heck, even in my Grinch-like heart, there is that tiny glimmer, that spark, that might someday be proven right.

* * *

As we are about to reopen for written submissions, I should mention that we're changing our submissions guidelines somewhat. Due to

the large (and increasing) number of submissions *Penumbric* receives each submissions period, we've had to update our guidelines. As managing editor, I read every submission, and there's just a limit on how many I can read lol. I don't want to change to reading only some of the subs, especially as I offer commentary on submissions. Here are the changes for the upcoming submissions period, starting 15 December:

- Limit of one short story or 5 poems at a time. Once we have gotten back to you with an acceptance or rejection, you can submit more work to us if the submissions window is still open. Note, however, that we are unlikely to accept more than one piece per author per submissions window, whether poetry or prose. If you submit more than this we will contact you to see which pieces you wish us to consider.
- Limit of ten pieces of art at a time. As above, once we have replied, you can submit more work to us if the submissions window is still open. Unlike fiction and poetry, we often accept multiple pieces of art per artist.

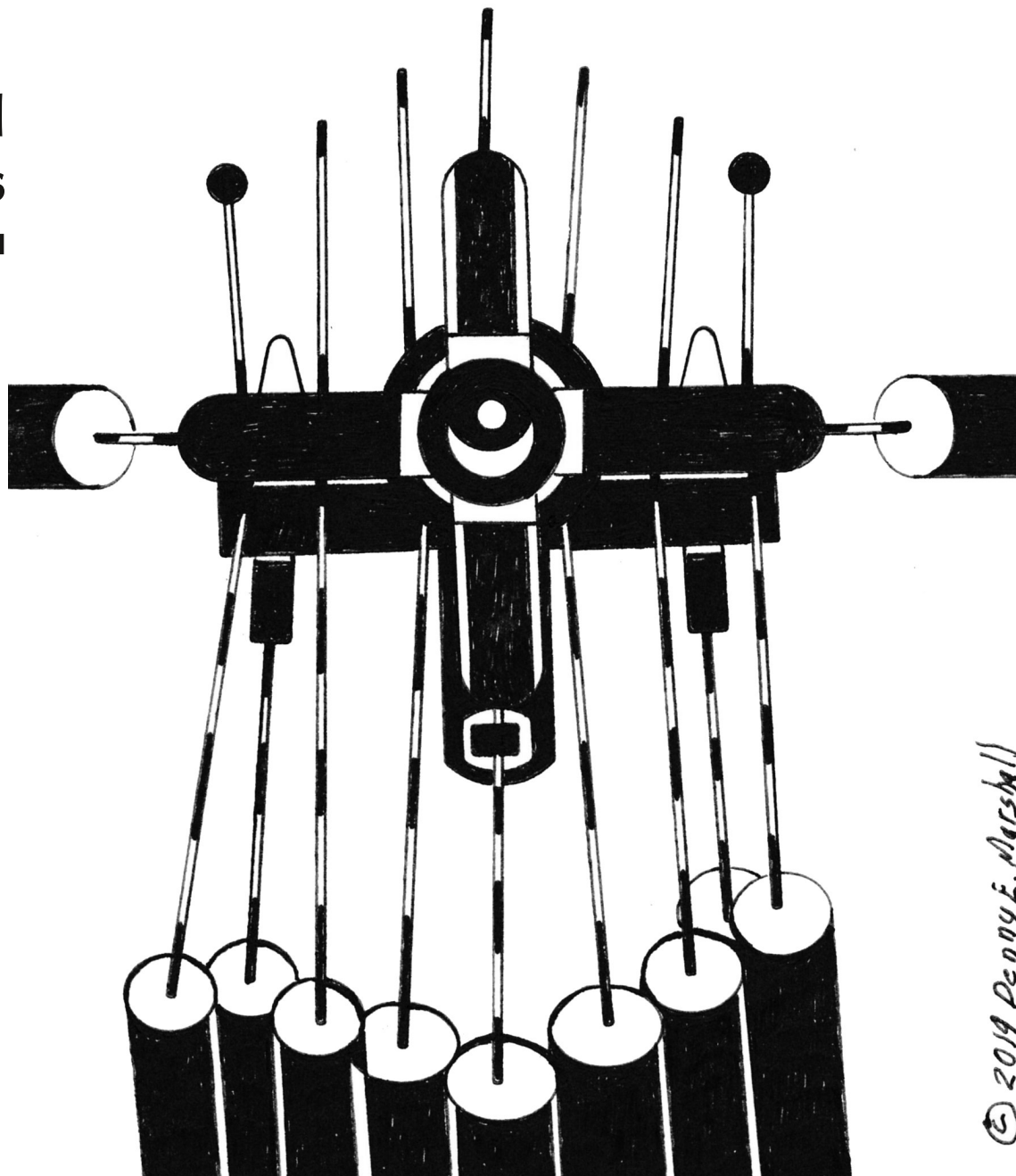
* * *

Despite my lack of holiday spirit, I hope you all have a wonderful December and start to the New Year, and we will see you again in February!

Jeffrey Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric

On All Cylinders

by Denny E. Marshall



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To Crave an Empty Chest

by Lyra Meurer

Ever since I returned from the Valley of the Goddesses, you have come to me in dreams to disturb my sleep. I see you pressed against an obsidian slab—lying on it or upright, I’ll never know. Your head is thrown back, your throat exposed in a gesture of religious ecstasy.

I feel you terribly, your presence so vivid and physical as it never was in life. Your wounds hurt me as if your body were mine: your bare torso cut open and flayed, your ribs hanging like curtains over an empty cavity where there is no stomach, no guts, no liver, only the white column of your spine supporting your velvety abdominal wall. Exhausted veins hang like disconnected wires, and, though you have no lungs, you breathe.

In this vision, you radiate the one desire left to you in your state of absolute fulfillment: you want me to tell you what happened. Lately I’ve begun to wonder whether this desire is truly yours, or whether it is the Goddesses’ wish grafted into you. Perhaps they keep you alive so you’ll beg me, compelling me to feed their emptiness.

I write this fearing the latter, but what else can I do? That place, everything that happened there, haunts me. I wake to the undiminishing nightmare of it: I went somewhere impossible and returned, but I returned changed. Perhaps telling this story will weave the magic spell of appeasement. You, or the Goddesses, may be sated, and I may be freed.

* * *

I can’t tell you how you came to the Valley of the Goddesses, or why you chose to be inflicted with such horrible delights, because you

never told me. Before my journey, I barely knew you. We were just members of the same skybike gang, friends with the same people. My only memories of you were of your presence in the background, sometimes jovial, sometimes brooding. We worked the same corner a couple times, selling twitchix and other stims, but we never took the chance to have a real conversation.

Now I think of you so often your name peppers my thoughts like dove song—*Roh, Roh, Roh*. I write this long missive in dedication to you, an attempt to save your soul, or mine. And still the first I know of your story is that, on a sunny day in spring, you called me, ostensibly to ask for my help.

The rest of the gang had gone to Hypercity to pick a fight with the Reapers for selling on our turf. As if to spite my eagerness, my skybike kicked a fit when we were supposed to head out, so I stayed back at the mechanic’s to fix her.

Imar kept abandoning his work inside the shop to come out and smoke. Flicking sparks in my direction, he’d say things like, “You sure you don’t want help, Eba? That wiring looks messy,” and “C’mon, I know how to talk to sylphs real nice. Gimme a minute with her and she’ll be running in no time.” You know how he is with women. Solicitous with every sentence, full of insinuation, yet inoffensive enough to be waved away like a fly.

I told him, “I don’t want you messing with my dad’s bike. She’s special. She doesn’t listen to anyone else.” I tried teasing him: “Wow, your father doesn’t give a damn whether you work or not. Maybe that’s why you’re still living with him.” Once, I snapped, “Can you lay off? I have a girlfriend, you know.”

He would laugh out his cigarette smoke and jump his bony shoulders in a shrug, telling me, “The offer always stands,” without clarifying which offer. He’d go inside, come out an hour later with another cigarette. Thus, morning passed into afternoon.

At around one, Imar came out to tell me you’d called the shop phone and asked for me specifically.

I frowned. “Roh wants me? Why?”

“Donno, didn’t say.”

I went in more out of curiosity than anything, put the receiver to my ear and lifted the mouthpiece to say, “Hello?”

“Hey Eba.” The line crackled as if hindered by rebellious electric spirits. “Can I ask you a favour?”

“I mean, sure? If Jecen and Aire can’t help.”

“Deez says they aren’t at the diner yet.”

“I guess they’re still fighting the Reapers. Or coppers got ’em. I hope not.”

“Yeah. Thing is—my bike broke down. Can you pick me up?”

“Maybe you should wait to hear from the others? Mine’s crapped out too.”

“I think it should be you, Eba.”

The gravity in your voice cut through the static. My questions and qualms vanished. Your words sunk into me, heavy as an engine, and that engine drove me onwards.

I know you gave me directions, but I don’t remember them, despite the insomniac hours I’ve spent in strained recollection. A cloud

hangs over that part of my memory, the first of many.

As I hung up, Imar sauntered over. “What’d Roh want?”

“He’s stranded, wants me to get him.”

“His bike is broken?”

I shrugged. “So he says.”

“Someone’ll need to fix it. I can come with you.”

I scoffed. “Fuck off, you don’t even ride.”

“Yes, true. They’re more fun to work with than ride, y’see.” I remember that specifically—Imar and his habit of repeating the same lines over and over! He dropped his voice so his father wouldn’t overhear him from his office. “Bikes aren’t the only way to fly. I’ve got something I’ve been meaning to use.”

I asked him what the hell he was talking about, but he winked and said, “We gotta fix your bike first.”

I wouldn’t let him touch my bike, but I fixed her a few minutes later anyways. After I tested the flight switch, Imar sauntered out, casual as ever, holding two little green sardine tins in one hand. I’d never seen any in person before, but I’d heard enough tales to recognize them. My heart leapt into my throat. What was he doing, swinging his hands around carelessly, as if those tins contained nothing dangerous?

Roh, he had Bombini. No fucking joke.

* * *

Lasci came over today unannounced. She kissed me hard and pushed me toward the bedroom door—I only got her to stop by complaining about my period. I appreciate her enthusiasm, but she can be so

much sometimes.

I haven't often felt in the mood for it in the two weeks since I returned from the Valley. Maybe next time I'll convince her to take it to the couch, or to her place. Maybe sex will help me feel more normal. Most importantly, I can't let her see my letter to you, drafted on messes of paper and painted onto my bedroom walls.

I drank and went to bed early tonight, only to dream of you. I carry a little more detail across the bridge of metempsychosis every time. Tonight—your teeth swimming in bloody saliva as you begged me for understanding, and the peculiar crumpled shape of your ears that made you so distinctive in life. I woke, my heart firing like a machine gun. My bedroom menaced me: the bizarre shapes of the plants in the window cut against the streetlight and my desk hulked like a beast, bristling with pots of paint and brushes in cups.

No more sleep for me. Nothing to do but rise and return to my work. The jovian lamp burns dim—I must take it to the store to have its electric spirits reinvigorated—but it is light enough to write by.

This dream convinced me that you know nothing, that your understanding is blank as a baby's. You no longer speak in human language, but in some universal communication, the language of dreams. You need everything explained to you, which is painful to imagine. Have you truly forgotten everything—the celebrations when the war ended, how it felt to ride a skybike for the first time?

The war must've ended the same for you as it did for me. I was eight years old when Minister Tsveta's announcement rang through the school's PA system, interrupting teachers mid-sentence. His tinny voice declared: an armistice had been signed and peace talks would begin soon. We'd won the war.

Impromptu celebration swept through the city. The workday ended early and parents picked up their kids from school. Mother and I joined the dancing in the streets and, like everyone else, tore up our now-defunct ration tickets for confetti.

A week or two later, the troops returned and paraded through the city in a triumphal march. My mother tried to pick out my father from among all those lockstep soldiers, but missed him because his appearance was so changed.

That afternoon, after he'd finished his demobilization paperwork, my father arrived at the apartment. My mother opened the door, saw the mask that represented her husband's face, and collapsed. A pair of glasses held a sculpted and painted nose, mouth, and chin in place. I cried, not because of his mask but because I didn't know him. I'd been a baby when he'd gone off on this seven-year war, and at age eight, I didn't comprehend that this mythical father might some day return.

After some explaining, calming, and hugging (which I resisted), he and mother went into the bedroom, leaving me to myself. Alight with curiosity, I listened at the door, trying to pick out words from an amorphous conversation. By dinnertime, when he removed his mask, I was so ready to have a father I wasn't shaken by the noseless, lipless wasteland underneath. Despite the confusion of his syllables, his voice was rich and pleasant, like broth.

He won my heart that evening when, winking at my protesting mother, he bundled me outside to his skybike. He placed me in the passenger's seat, which had carried wounded soldiers during the war, and cuddled me between his firm arms. He spurred the bike into life, rumbled it down the street and, hitting a spot without traffic, flicked the flight switch.

It was the most amazing moment of my life so far. The engine roared in my bones, my stomach fell past my feet as we leapt into the air. The city sprawled dizzily below, jeweled with streetlamps, crawling with tiny people. I laughed at them, all those poor losers still on the ground, trapped by gravity.

I hear it wasn't so nice for you. A few nights after I returned from the Valley, a bunch of us went to a bar on King's Street and everyone told stories about you, growing looser with your secrets with every

drink. Jecen said your father never came home from the war and wasn't a skybiker anyways.

If he had, would he have made you happy? Mine did on that first night, but not always. Sometimes all I remember is his anger and dislocation: silverware scattering across the table, incomprehensible yelling, wildness in his eyes when he heard a policeman's whistle or a backfiring engine.

Though the war had ended, the world remained a hostile place for him. Sometimes he couldn't tell the difference between me and the enemy. Sometimes he thought mother was the enemy, sometimes a stranger on the street or a clerk in a store. That's why his greatest love was riding with the Firefeathers and fighting the Reapers—because, in battle, you know your foes by their embroidered jackets and danger is a certainty, not a possibility.

I inherited his love of battle at age fifteen, three years after he killed himself. I don't believe he meant for this to be my path, but he left me no alternative. Mother couldn't afford rent and his old leather jacket hung in the closet, embroidered feathers bright as ever. I dropped out of school and sauntered up to the mechanic's shop with his bike and jacket. The Firefeathers laughed uproariously at my oversized swagger, but Jecen's dad accepted me on the spot, said it was an honor because of my dad's legacy.

No one had any stories about your first flight or why you became a Firefeather. You'd always kept mum on the subject. Poverty? Probably. Pure enthusiasm? Potentially. A desire to feel alive? Whatever else, that's certain.

I know your bike was an Ara-16, one of the bikes that never saw battle because it was manufactured right before the end of the war, when the government and the Kabuto Corporation thought another big push would be necessary to win. Miraculously, it wasn't. The war ended and Kabuto had to recoup its losses now the government wasn't paying. Thus the release of surplus to the populace, the appearance of weaponry in civilian hands. Thus the skybike gangs, our

livelihood, and thus the tins of Bombini in Imar's hands the day you called me to the Valley of the Goddesses.

Imar saw the horrified expression on my face but performed nonchalance. "Never seen one of these before?" and so on, chuckling and pretending to toss the tins to me. "I've flown with them a couple times. I know it's not their main use but it's not hard. Better control than a bike. Imbibing them's not just for suicide bombers, if you do it right." I told him he should stay, or ride on my bike, but he was all, "You'll thank me when you need a mechanic. Or a bodyguard," and opened the tin.

Inside slept that rarified, half-sylphic, half-salamendric spirit, forged in the northern reaches with the intent of turning the southern front into a blasted wasteland. The sweet little creature didn't look like it could cause injuries like my father's. It manifested as a tiny green baby, a living cartoon, with feathered wings furled at its back. Disturbed by the light, it stirred and woke, sat up and stretched pudgy arms in an exaggerated yawn. It blinked its fawn eyes prettily, empty cup-like head swaying on its too small body. Seeing its master, the Bombino floated up from its sardine-tin bed with a smile, the tapered tail of its body reminiscent of a child in a too-long nightgown.

Imar inclined his head toward it. The Bombino required no verbal communication, leaning forward to touch its dainty nose to his. A squeal, a sound like the spray of an atomizer, and the Bombino became a cloud of green mist that flowed into Imar's nostrils.

Imbued with the spirit, Imar's skin, hair, even his fingernails, became the colour of drying bamboo. His feet parted with the asphalt and he bobbed weightlessly in the air. He laughed. "Well, you ready to go?"

"You sure you're not gonna explode?"

"Just don't touch me." He winked. I couldn't tell whether he was joking.

Tenser than I would've been otherwise, I jammed my helmet over my curls, swung my leg over my bike's gleaming flank and kicked her into life. I steered onto the empty street and flipped the flight switch. My Ara-13 soared steeply upwards, borne by the sylph's power. Imar rose to meet me and we flew together over Peak Avenue.

The street shifted, like the view from one train car into another when the rails straighten out after a curve. The movement revealed not more city, but green hills, rolling away into foggy distance. I had never seen this view before, had never seen anything beyond the endless cityscape, but I never questioned it. I felt like this path had always been there, nestled between the office blocks and tenements and theaters. Imar said nothing, I think because he already wasn't Imar anymore.

That's the strangest part, the part no one believed when I told them when I returned from the Valley, stumbling up to Deez's Diner without knowing how I got there. Everyone asked me where I went, then asked where Imar was. Apparently, when he'd gone to fetch the Bombini, he'd told his father he was heading off with Eba and he'd be back soon. Battered by their pestering, I realized two realities ground together in my mind like misaligned gears: I had set off on the journey with Imar, but I went on the journey with my father.

I vomited all over Deez's floor, motion sick from the conflicting stories. I told them what I had experienced, but everyone just vented frustration at my confusion. Too much twitchix and spizztabs, they said. Roh, Imar, and Eba obviously went on a bender. They speculated over Imar's disappearance, lamented Roh's end by the means they had always feared: accidental death in his dangerous quest for oblivion. The stories they invented explain none of my experience.

During my journey I thought nothing of the fact that my father's presence had replaced Imar's. I didn't question why my father was alive and young rather than dead in a grave with a broken neck. He rode his own bike, twin of mine, but fresher, younger, with haloed bullet holes still shining against the military-issue grey paint. He still

had his whole face. I remember seeing his smile behind the glass of his helmet, his teeth as crooked as I'm told they were. He held up his lanky form easily with no threat of collapse—the stance of adventure, rather than the stilted aggression of the bizarre, needy emptiness the war left in him.

He didn't speak, didn't need to say anything. Nothing could've been more natural than this: my father and I riding side by side, as we never had in real life.

Unfamiliar hills passed below. Broad afternoon became cold sunset as we passed through tattered, low-hanging clouds. We had left the city on a spring afternoon, but snow appeared among the thickening stands of dark pines.

Finally, my father spoke, his voice carrying over the rushing wind. "Oh no."

"What?" I called.

"Something's wrong," he told me. "This place was never meant to exist."

Ahead lay a valley, a terrible darkness splitting the gentle hills, fine as a surgeon's incision. The sight curdled my dreamy acceptance into fear. The rift sucked up the light that should've illuminated it, cloaking itself in gravitational darkness. I tried to turn my bike away, but it drew me helplessly forward.

I looked over to my companion. His bike had disappeared and his identity was indistinct, straddling the division between Imar and my father. The green fog of the Bombino trailed from his lips and he fell, slowly, unnaturally, in an arc towards the valley that should never have existed. I fell with him, my bike silent and still. I tried to kick her into life, but to no avail. She tumbled away from me, my feet slipping off her foot boards.

I must admit—as I fell, I cursed you, Roh. You had asked me to

come where flight was not possible.

* * *

Okay, Roh, I get it. I've been procrastinating on writing this story. I thought I could avoid you by spending nights at Lasci's—and I was happy to be right. I would wake in the morning and remember normal dreams about dogs and statues and detectives, and I didn't have to think about you or that dreadful place or this overwhelming obligation you have placed upon me so unfairly. I could read a book without finding delirious meaning in the page and chapter numbers. I lived without the horror that fills me when the sun arrives at a specific angle in the afternoon. I felt no need for drink or distraction.

So, of course, after a week and a half of pleasant diversion, you returned. Lasci woke me because I cried desperately in my sleep. She looked all crumpled and said I should lay off riding for a while—as if I don't need the money, as if that were the problem in the first place. I've told her as much as I can bear about the Valley, but she still doesn't understand.

The rest of the day she treated me with excessive gentleness, I think because she loves me and she thinks that, with careful handling, my madness might break. We went to the bars on King Street and, in between subtle suggestions that I drink less, she chided me for looking over my shoulder too often, laying down such delicate words as, “No one's gonna attack us. You and the Reapers have a truce on Shine-days, right?” She's either forgotten or ignored what I told her: that when I hear someone walking behind us, I feel viscerally and unshakably that it is you.

I think it's her fault I've been withdrawn from the frontlines of raids and attacks, increasingly relegated to the less dangerous and exciting work of dead drops and re-ups. I can imagine her begging Jecen, “She needs a break, for her nerves.”

Even without her help, they've been suspicious of me. I can't help but brood lately, forget about the time and come late to everything.

Goodness knows what they think, and how long I can get away with this before I'm ejected. What would I do then? Either die, honorably submitting to their execution, or run off. To where? To what? I have been a Firefeather for a decade. I know nothing else, desire nothing else but the wind lifting me, the sun shining off the handlebars.

My blood is sluggish without battle. Since I returned, I've only been allowed to fight a few times. When my blood thrums with danger, awakening animalic, thoughtless alertness and reactivity—only then do I feel I know who Eba is. It was a mistake to tell Lasci one time, when she was icing a cut on my eyebrow, that I finally understood how my dad felt.

I am back home to write, as you have commanded me. I am back to what I have to confess is now normal. In between battle and brainless drunkenness, I am pursued by a feeling that's difficult to express. It reminds me of how I felt after the time I took too many spizztabs. I hear you can relate—one of the stories that came up when people were memorializing you was about how you took six of them and were found naked and incoherent in an alleyway, spizzed out.

My experience happened a couple years ago, long before the journey to the Valley, back when I barely knew you. I only took four, which I'd done before, but these ones packed an unexpected punch. I remember we were all at Jecen's place—you too, I think—and the first signs of it kicking in were the tin ceiling tiles undulating like seaweed. My stomach rose and plummeted as if I were on a roller coaster. I clutched the worn armchair in desperate discomfort, my fingernails tearing at the upholstery.

Lucid turbulence became vomitous delirium. My brain tumbled through images of grass, of sky, of vast bookshelves, rolling in muddy alleyways, in rainy streets reflecting Hypercity's neon mess. Miraculously, I made it to the toilet. Clutching the porcelain, melting onto the tiles, I felt like characters from books and films, like my plight matched theirs in greatness.

After the vomiting stopped, delirium became shattered emptiness. I

lost my location, my context. Fundamentally, I lost my self, unable to identify my body or the limits of my personality.

No one could figure out my problem. Sometimes someone takes too much and becomes a “bummer bro,” but that’s the extent of wisdom on the subject. Someone spoke to me—it may well have been you—but the voice came to me as a booming monstrosity, which flickered like a movie projector. “A-R-E Y-O-U A-L-R-I-G-H-T?”

For the first time, I was confronted with the concept that this voice came from someone other than me, which meant there must be a me. Grasping this filled me with pain. I cried, managing to ask, “w-h-o a-r-e y-o-u?”

Laughter wobbled across our separate realities, transmitted by gelatin seas. “Y-O-U K-N-O-W W-H-O I A-M E-B-A.”

“w-h-o a-m i? i-s t-h-i-s e-x-i-s-t-e-n-c-e, f-o-r-e-v-e-r?”

That’s how things went for a while, until my senses shut down and I ceased to exist in an unconsciousness more profound than sleep. When I came to, I was aware that what had happened, the realization of my utter separateness and aloneness in the world, had been more of a dream than reality. Still, it had happened, and it hurt. That was the feeling I couldn’t shake for months afterwards.

This feeling pursues me now. I have tasted the truth of the world even if only in a hallucination, and that flavor taints everything.

* * *

To return to my story—all I remember of our fall is the way the Valley’s shadows drew me into their embrace. I passed out on the way down.

I woke to scents of summer: the exhalations of evergreens and tall grass, dust in the air, water in muddy channels, the rich pungency of hyssop. Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees, undiminished by

the magical darkness we had seen outside. Thick heat filled my riding leathers. My neck hurt from lying on my side with my helmet on.

I opened my eyes to see my father nearby, already sitting up with his back to me. He’d taken his helmet off. I sat up and took mine off too. He stood and I followed suit. My bike lay stranded in the grass, shining in the sun. His was nowhere to be seen.

We heard the shriek and chatter of children through the trees. My father and I looked at each other and wordlessly turned to follow the sound. Emerging from the low-hanging boughs, we saw a fenced paddock, where children of all descriptions ran, jumped, shrieked, squatted, prodded, sang, and danced. A tall woman floated through the squabbles of children, red-haired and pale as her dress, touching them gently, looking upon them, smiling minutely, but never speaking a word.

We advanced to the fence. My father called out, “Scuse me! Miss!” The woman continued her lilting step without looking up. He called out again, louder. “Madam? Scuse?”

We waited, but she turned away and wandered off. We exchanged looks of agreement and, in the same motion, hopped the fence. We passed through the children, who only noticed us enough to avoid our step. My father reached out to tap the woman on her shoulder, but she swerved away, apparently to touch a child’s curls. My father cleared his throat and stepped in front of her, saying, “Madam, have you seen a man—” but she already faced a different direction. I tried it too, only to find she wasn’t where I thought she was, but across the paddock already, her fingers trailing over a toddler’s chubby cheek.

Father and I gaped at each other. “What the fuck is—?” “How does she—?”

We sat with our backs against the fence and watched the woman orbit the paddock. The sun, though it cast sunset rays through the trees,

never sank any lower.

After some time, he said, “Maybe Roh *is* one of the children.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Why not? What isn’t possible here?”

We stood and searched through the children, who confused the task because they never stayed still. Finally, I called, “Roh! Roh!”

The crowd of children parted, revealing a boy standing still, staring at us: you, with your curl-covered head, your crumpled ears, your dark, expressive eyes. I called to you, but the woman appeared between us, looking straight at us, her face a mask of anger.

I don’t know if she spoke it, or if she forced us to think it, to say it with our own mouths: “You will not take him.”

I heard the sliding of metal on metal, a jubilant, high-pitched cry—my father opening the second Bombino tin. The little green spirit rose before him, giggling, its eyes shining playfully. “Give us Roh, or else—”

The Bombino saw the Goddess’ livid face and shot forward with an excited squeal. Fire, force, light blowing past my closed eyelids. I tumbled end over end, not knowing where I was flung.

* * *

The rest comes in flickers—some short, some long. I can only guess at the order, collecting the fragments of a dream, constructing a vague continuum from impossible beginning to unsettling end.

I know what came first: I was a child again and I crouched with my father in the crater left behind by a Bombino’s fatal eruption. Sky-bikes and planes roared through the night, jovian rifles splitting the sky with snapping bolts of electricity, tearing through war’s infernal

smoke. Explosions battered the air. The repulsed earth shuddered around us.

My father sank into the mud, weeping. “That Bombino was my only way out but I blew it up! I’ll never get back home!”

His helmet fell askew and I patted it back in place with tiny hands. In a peeping voice, I told him not to despair. We would find Roh’s bike, fix it, and he could ride home with me.

A fleet of planes thundered overhead, vomiting fire onto no man’s land. With strength a child shouldn’t possess, I pushed my father into the muddy water and sank down beside him. We held our breaths for as long as we could. When we surfaced, the fire had died out, leaving smoke rising from the blackened earth, which offered nothing to burn.

We spent a long night in that crater, waiting out the continuous sprays of gunfire and shocks from elemental weapons, playing dead when the enemy charged, then retreated. I vaguely remember a muddy scramble back to safety. More strongly, I remember how the trenches and the people inhabiting them felt like home. We forgot we’d ever meant to save you and, with the rest, merely tried to survive the war.

I became a mascot for our legion, instantly recognizable in my miniature helmet and gray uniform, tiny twin of my father. The men patted my head, shared their food with me, oblivious to the incongruity of my presence. We’d play cards by dying lantern-light, smoke cigarettes together, ramble about town singing songs I was too young to understand.

The Goddesses’ vision of the war conflates my father’s beginnings as cannon fodder with his eventual career as a skybiker. Memories of defending the blown out trenches with desperate stabs of my bayonet swim alongside memories of glorious aerial assaults past enemy lines. Those are easier to remember—I would ride between my father’s firm arms, gripping tight with my knees as we twisted through

the air to avoid the enemy's scarlet Bombini or the crackling electrical discharge of a jovian rifle.

We'd land, surprising some supply line or convoy of fresh troops, and swirl around like leaves, making ourselves difficult targets. I'd fell man after man with the impeccable aim of my pistol or I'd leap off the bike, take cover behind a rock or a truck and make a shooting gallery of anyone who came at me. My father would swing back over and I'd leap back on the bike, like he was picking me up from the movies.

We'd often escape these raids without a single casualty, but that wasn't always the case. I remember deaths, but not names. It's like when a member of the gang dies: the numb mourning, the way life continues because it has to, because there's more fighting to do, more money to be made. Then, weeks later, the unpredictable waves of emotion at tiny things, such as a weed straggling out of the concrete or a bent fork tine.

Most deaths happened when the enemy made pushes on us—oh, the horror! The demented shrill and boom of falling Bombini, the bolts of electricity lighting up the night, the bullets impassively penetrating anything in their way. Worst of all were the times they released unprocessed, unfettered elemental spirits on us: earthquakes collapsing the trenches; invisible sylphs cackling as they invaded and burst men's lungs; marching columns of lightning stretching from soil to sky; the stalking, ever-evolving bodies of salemendric fire, drooling destruction.

* * *

Last night, the rest of the gang planned to meet and scheme a raid on one of the Reapers' dens, but Jecen conveniently needed me to get the re-up, saying Aire's broken leg didn't make for a show of strength. Yeah, right. He's keeping me out of the action. Lasci has gotten what she wanted. She asked me to come over after the re-up, but I declined. I'm too angry at her. I'm not trying to be my father.

Instead, after dropping off the brick of twitchix, I went to see my mother.

She lives in the same apartment I grew up in. Visiting always reminds me how I hated that place and how badly I needed to leave it. The same table stands in the same place, under the same light that illuminated my father's half-face when he first returned home. The spirits in that lamp are almost as old as I am. They've seen some shit: tumblers of gin; lullabies and yelling; the frying pan crashing through the window, eggs and all. Father crossing the apartment, rope in hand.

Mother fed me dinner and described trifling incidents at work. Then she wanted to know how I fared. Already feeling the brandy she put in our after dinner tea, I told her the truth: I never feel quite right, even when I feel nothing. I think of father and the past all the time, but they are either unreal or the only real thing in the world. I told her I've been drinking more, and I've been eschewing book-reading for long, dark afternoons watching loops of nonsense at the nickelodeon. She doesn't know I disappeared three months ago, apparently only for two days, but I thought she'd understand the essence of my complaints.

A silly thought—like Lasci, she suggested I lay off the riding and told me to find a new career. She even mentioned these lozenges she takes when she isn't feeling well, as if indigestion were the same as being haunted. I don't know what I hoped for, but it wasn't that.

If I went back to the Valley, and surrendered as you did, Roh, I would be able to summon her as you did me. Then, finally, she would understand. Theoretically, I could bring anyone to the Valley of Goddesses, shuffle off the burden of trying to understand it to someone else while I accept an eternity of physical and mental emptiness. It grows more tempting every day.

Instead of yelling, or pouring more brandy in my tea, I excused myself to the bathroom, but, leaving the fan on, passed through it to my parent's bedroom. Yeah, it was a ridiculous layout—you'd have to

walk through the bathroom to get to their bedroom. Privacy was always an issue, but cheap apartments are cheap for a reason.

My mother still has the same bed, the same full-length mirror, the same chest of drawers that used to be full of his socks and underwear. I don't know how she can bear to sleep there.

I opened the closet door and peered in. The light from the street didn't reach inside. The door hung open like the sagging mouth of a corpse.

My father's familiar presence crept into the room. That had been my problem with the apartment when I was a kid: I always felt him there but I hated him, wanted him to finish the job of being gone. I used to whisper ridicule when I felt him near: "Time to hang myself in the closet so Eba can find my gross corpse after school and she'll have to join the Firefeathers to afford food! I'm the best dad! I stole Eba's childhood! My daughter has nightmares because of me!"

I know now why he struggled with a craving for death. I've seen why. I was lucky, because when I lived through the war, I inhabited the role of a cartoon character who couldn't be hurt or killed. I never feared for my body or my life.

Then again, I wasn't lucky, because I saw my father cowering and shitting himself during bombardments, stealing fresh boots off disembodied legs, shaking a comrade's corpse and screaming. I comforted him when he had been reduced to languageless, bestial states of fear and need. The Goddesses gave me a prickly gift: now I miss my father and enjoy when I feel his presence, but at the price of knowing what he was under fire.

When I came back from the bathroom, mother asked me, "What took you so long? Is everything alright?"

I looked at her knobby hands, her lined face, and thought of our shared history. This made me weak enough to say, "I thought I felt father—like he was there."

My mother is the type to think that if she hasn't seen something, it isn't possible. She looked at me with concern and repeated her tired advice. In her world, there's no ghosts or valleys of impossibility. No wonder she can bear to live in that apartment.

* * *

When I was in the Goddess' illusory war, the smog of battle would sometimes clear and I would see the red-haired Goddess walking through the mud without a stain on her, smiling and laying light hands on soldiers who couldn't sense her. She wasn't the only Goddess I saw. A blue-skinned woman hung over the battlefield, a spectre broad as fog, watching the back and forth impassively. A snake-headed woman appeared in searchlights and artillery flashes, wearing robes thin as a beetle's wing. All were unfamiliar to the beliefs of our country, either the atavistic deities of a lost era or divinities unknown to humanity. I have the sense there were more than I can remember, and that they appeared more towards the end.

Doesn't this account for the stories we heard when our troops came back? If you still suffered the graces of memory, you'd know which ones, you'd remember the blurry photos of what I saw for myself.

Towards the end, the enemy strung up the corpses of friend and foe, posed them with barbed wire, sewed together the scattered parts to make bloodless chimeras. The soldiers said the enemy was mad with hunger and sickness, but no one else saw the Goddesses standing behind them as they worked, wreathed in fog, beautiful, bright-eyed, smiling with gentle approval.

Who is war for, Roh? Not my father, who writhed on the stretcher, his erupted face streaming with blood, who was discharged back to the front once he could hold a gun again. Not for your father, who never returned; nor for either of us, who, until the journey to the Valley of the Goddesses, have been fatherless. Not for our mothers, or our father's mothers, nor even for the people who think it's for them: Emperor Sumebdi, Minister Tsveta, the Kabuto Corporation, the abstracted people of any nation. Everyone who thought the war served

them operated under a terrible delusion.

No, the only ones who could appreciate it were the ones who could watch it and not be touched by it, who could float through like mist, bending history to their alien vision of beauty and rightness, who—

I just got a phone call from Jecen. In this world, it's important. I can finish later.

* * *

They say that, though the trenches and craters remain, greenery has grown over these scars and white flowers bloom over them all through spring and summer. Deez rhapsodized about it last night, saying, "See how the past has healed?"

I wanted to say, "No—see how we have adorned it?"

I met you in one of those overgrown craters, perhaps the same one my father and I sheltered in. Nonetheless, I feel we'd advanced further along the Valley, closer to the cliffs of its culmination.

We met like the Mother and Father of our nation's religion—clothed in trailing water lilies, silver-leaved creepers, tight-lipped buds, tufts of clover—except I have never thought of myself as either motherly or fatherly, and I suspect you never did either. We were just two people, dressed in the ancient clothing of archetype, meeting at the bottom of an old crater, among the trailing moonflowers opening in the night.

I had finally found you, but I felt shy, uncertain. Solemnly, you told me, "The Goddesses gave me the chance to see one more person before I commit to their service."

So, you never wanted to be saved. "Why did you call me? You never really knew me."

"I knew you from afar." The whites of your eyes went red with tears.

"I always thought you would understand me. That frightened me. I avoided you. Now is my last chance."

I'd never had the wisdom to see kinship in you. I felt my embarrassing humanity showing, like a broken bowl right before your mother comes home from work. I scrabbled for words. "But Jecen and Aire —"

"—never got me," you finished for me. "I liked them for it. They would never understand the Valley, but I felt you would, that you'd know why I came."

"But I don't understand."

"Maybe you will."

Again your words sank in, as they had on the phone. I had no more questions. We laid down together in our little leafy shelter. Then I don't know what happened. I know we shared, but goodness knows what or how. For a time I knew everything about you, but I forgot it. I have felt dirty and sick for forgetting, but clarity comes to me tonight, after everything. I know the sharing was for you, not me. What matters is you knew how it feels to be known.

Will I ever know that feeling? I tried tonight, but the blank stares in the face of my distress revealed the truth of how everyone has seen me since I returned. If I am to be known, it won't be by these people.

I digress too soon. First you should know how my journey ended: collapsed, hopeless, and weak at the feet of the blue-skinned Goddess, the one who hung over the battlefield as a watchful mist. I don't know how I got there, or how she became solid, a statue of painted stone. She stood at the edge of the cliff that looms over the far end of the Valley of the Goddesses, one foot raised in an unfinished dance. I sank by her side like a sack of spare parts, forced to watch the Goddesses' unfathomable ritual.

Buds sprouted from her back, and elongated into vast, thick tentacles

cased in vermillion flesh, peeled away in parts to reveal the bloody muscle and blue veins beneath. These tentacles undulated across the Valley, while some sloughed off to float away into the distance.

The red-haired Goddess rose from the trees like a flare, wreathed in gossamer and floating hair. The sound of drums tattooed across the valley, a twining rhythm rising from every stone and tree. The red-haired Goddess danced, her feet striking sparks against the tentacles. I watched in a trance, unknowing and unquestioning. An immeasurable stretch of time later, the red-haired Goddess jumped up, light as light itself, and darted into the gray clouds above.

The tentacles that had departed across the Valley returned, bearing you in a woven cradle. You were naked and anointed with oil, your head shaved, your eyes downcast. The drums rolled into a crescendo and the basket that held you unraveled and dropped you to the blue Goddess' tentacles. They snatched you up and spread your compliant limbs wide. One tentacle drew a line down your torso, spilling you open with the sparkling contact of a pointed tip. More came to disassemble you, drawing the bloody contents out, digesting them into nothing. You screamed soundlessly. I watched, helpless, emotionless, as you were disemboweled in a dance that took years.

* * *

The phone call last night was a summons to battle. I went in excited, my pulse fluttering deliciously, but when I came face to face with a Reaper in his black helmet, I could no longer raise my baton and fight back. Like a coward, I turned and flew away. Like a coward, I shook and cursed. I knew that when the fight was over, I would have to explain myself.

I went to Deez's, as we usually do afterwards, and jittered and sweated at the corner table until the Firefeathers filtered in. Jecen looked stormy as hell itself, and silenced everyone to ask me why I had fled.

Suddenly and spastically, I told them the truth. Told them I went to a Valley, I saw Goddesses of no known religion, my father was there, I

was in the war, I saw you die, and have seen you living ever since. I told them I have seen the way back opening between the streets, calling me, and that I fled because I'd felt a primal need to save myself for that obliterating destiny, the same fate you sought from the Goddesses.

The gang stared at me in shocked silence. Jecen said, coldly, "Go."

He showed unusual kindness in giving me time to put my affairs in order. If it hadn't been for my father's legacy, they would've taken me to the alley and *pop!*, that's it! They'd crash my bike and pronounce me dead to the point of never having existed at all.

Morning rose long ago. Now the sun climbs to noon. I haven't heard a peep from Lasci. No doubt they already told her what I am.

Maybe when they come up here, they'll understand. My story is written on my bedroom walls for all to see, so they can judge for themselves what they believe. I don't care. After all, I wrote so large to broadcast it to you, not them.

I expected a change. I planned, for months now, to write my last words to you, to hop on my bike and join you in the service of the Goddesses. Well, now the moment's come, I've decided—fuck what they're offering, and fuck suicide by Firefeather too. I have long fantasized about either ending—gutless ecstasy, or the simplicity of death. Now, to my surprise, I want neither. I want my memories, I want the chance to learn from them, to be better, to stop drinking, to see somewhere new, to meet new people, to lie in the sun and read a book.

So here I am, saying farewell to my dusty little apartment, a bag packed on my bed. Without my knowing, the desire to save myself had germinated, grown, and sprouted flowers. No more Firefeathers, no more people who disbelieve and misunderstand me, no more of this city and the memories that leap out of every doorway and alley. I would've liked to stay here to fix myself, but it's no longer an option. My skybike is a ticket to a new place, a new life—a better life

if I work at it.

I won't bring much with me, but I'll ride out in my father's jacket, resplendent with scents of ash and high winds. I may be seeking a new life, but I'll bring my past, thorns and roses both. That includes you, my spiny friend, and all you've taught me.

The spell has been woven. I feel your attachment waning. I feel you becoming a memory rather than a presence. Now I can actually miss you.

Farewell, Roh, and thank you.

Chernobyl 1986 / COVID 2021

by T.D. Walker

Note: In 1986, Chernobyl's Reactor 4 was destroyed during a test that went horribly wrong. The surrounding area was evacuated and much of the forest around the nuclear reactor site was cleared away. To contain the radioactive materials leaking from the site, a metal "sarcophagus" was built over the reactor, though some material escaped containment. Later, the New Safe Confinement building sealed the reactor and sarcophagus more completely. There is some speculation that the Soviet Union built Chernobyl to power Duga, a massive over-the-horizon military radar system, near Chernobyl. This poem, written in late 2021 except for the Coda, takes that idea as its starting point.

I. Witness: Or, Duga Recounts the Meltdown of Chernobyl's Tower Four

1.

You expect me to give you history: mothers
returning to land once deemed too radio-
active, tongues of Geiger counters
clicking away as I once did. Launch echoes,

missiles I'd been trained on. I'd heard
shuttles instead, astronauts. Spark-winged
birds I'd been nicknamed for. Swerved
flights leaving Earth, braced for their returning--

*You expected me to give you history, your mother
born the same year as the Voyagers
crowned their way toward interstellar space,*

*born the same year as the first Chernobyl
reactor began tearing apart worlds:
broken-cored, hard-skulled as a shelled virus--*

2.

Broken cord: hard-skulled as I was,
pecking echoes from dead-branched
diplomacy, how could I hear her voice,
suddenly cut? The sand-drenched

attempts at controlling her came later.
Witness, memory: havoc releasing neutrons,
nuclear forces breaking my connection to her.
I remember her feeding me, then we were broken--

*Broken chord, unskilled as I was,
teaching you meant remembering music
I'd abandoned with my body years ago.*

*You expected me to give you letters,
numbers, a sense of freedom from crisis:
Listen, I taught you which fears to follow--*

3.

Listen: she taught me which fears to follow.
When they test you, they test connection.
Chasing the arc of Space Shuttles. Echo
movement of my radar, seeking locations

upward, forward, of what might have met us.
She taught me when we were together
repetition gives us freedom. Silence
again and again meeting my receiver--

*Listen, I taught you which fears to follow
your questions with. What work to show
signaling what you understood of addition,*

*addition's opposite. What did I teach you?
You waved your small hands in our picture window
while I pulled toward the moment of vaccination--*

4.

While I pulsed toward the moment of reaction
separating us, what signals did I lose?
A deer paused, perhaps. A fairy-tale maiden
touched her neck. Did she hear a bird's voice

warning her of the specifics of desire? I envied
patience with which she waited for the birds'
movement against the trees, as if some *envoi*
escaped their wings. Then, I felt the surge--

*While I pulled toward the moment of vaccination,
(Fair Park, gates echoing the Ferris wheel within--
we all want to be held and moved), signs*

*instructed us to listen to a low-powered FM
station. How we were promised one thing and given
another shot. How shielded and vulnerable in these lines--*

5.

Another shock: how shielded and vulnerable in these lines,

connection between us, or so I thought. Had I seen her,
solid against the forest around us? I'd seen her sacrifice,
containment of what could kill us all. One doll inside another:

concrete, zirconium, uranium, electron shells, then at the nucleus,
particles clinging together like frightened children. Scattered,
children become an army. I'd seen her sacrifice. A village
built for her, children fissile in the trees, for her, reactor--

*Another shock: how "shielded" and "invulnerable" in these lines
we were given after, how we were meant to return to lives
we'd led before as if you, too, had been given a chance at safety.*

*Schools opened, parks, playgrounds. The State Fair
beckoned families. Our masks marked us cowards.
If only you were still contained within my body, my immunity--*

6.

If only I were still contained within her: power
tested, taken from her. Do I still see the moment
fire and stone overtake the night sky? Her tower
blown, do I still see smoke against firmament?

And still, her other reactors kept us screaming
pulses into the darkness. You tell me this was only one
tower she'd lost, one of four. Still producing
heat, the promise of heat into the April dawn--

*If only you were still contained within my body, my immunity
towering against the unmasked, the denial of what keeps rising--*

smoke billows up as quickly as numbers, mutations.

*Instead, I take you inside my work. They deny
rising numbers, mutations, the uncontrolled virus;
how can I deny you the shelter of my remaking--*

II. Sarcophagus: Or, Duga Considers the Concrete Shelter over Chernobyl's Reactor 4

1.

You expect shelter, when you're a child
disconnected from the shelter you'd known:
Look, they poured sand over her, melted
uranium, what they used to control

reactions in uranium together into a *lava*. Did they
consider what it is to be volcanic? Let's be precise
here, now. I'm scientific, an instrument, an array
reaching out and back. Lava proves Earth's breached crust--

*You expect shelter, when you're a child
sheltered for almost a third of your life.
I tried to rebuild our world. Globes and maps*

*gave us a sense of where we were and were
just once. You wanted to go back to the art
museum. That carefully pieced-together past--*

2.

Mausoleum, that carefully pieced-together past

covering you: not a sarcophagus, but a womb
unable to keep you in. A mausoleum, vast
chamber holding many bodies, like a test, like a hand--

But they called it a sarcophagus, a coffin, as if
only one body were contained within. Mine
kept its chirp and beat, still listening for death
pressing toward us through the clearing sky--

*Museums we carefully pieced together, passed
our time in or the illusion of our time. Even masked
we were never safe enough to feel our breath*

*pausing in front of the real. We retreated to the screen.
We were patient, or you were, waiting for vaccines
awaiting approval, like waiting for ourselves--*

3.

Abating her fuel, like waiting for myself:
I watched the fire rage for nine days, for some
paradise lost. I watched the liquidators, the forest
they brought down around us, radiation

beating against the trunks like a mad beak.
I watched them haul away once children-
laden branches, watched them clean streets.
Watched as they surveyed ways to seal her in--

*Evading school, like uprooting yourselves,
you pace this house become show-and-tell*

(nothing of the external world remains

*long at our fist of a door before we quarantine
boxes, envelopes, bags. How long viruses cling,
how long we keep our hands from our faces--*

4.

How long I kept my hands over my face
until they built hands over her, joints
unsealed, letting in the rain, the ice--
hands grasping some raspy-voiced

prayer. Sarcophagus, inadequate church,
scaffolds telling the stories of murdered saints.
You'll tell me to make of the smoke-stack's reach
steeple releasing connection's remains--

*How long I kept your hands from your faces,
each surface in the outside world a virus-
laden threat. I took you to on walks, crowded*

*trees keeping us from contact with others, urged
you to touch nothing. You asked me how the air curled
particles we couldn't see into movement we could--*

5.

Particles I couldn't see burned into movement they could
measure: what escaped from her sarcophagus fissures.
How much she must have loved breaking worlds:

she broke the firmament they built over her.

First, the pines came back. Did I want to break her tomb, release her, reconnect with her? Or with that place recovering from her half-death? First pine, then birch. Bears, wolves. Then birds, but they avoid old nests--

Parts you couldn't see became movement I'd yet make: had I forgotten the deep collective breath musicians take before beginning a song?

I was vaccinated, I had to make my body unlearn its fear of movement, had to carry you or if not you then the world back home--

6.

You, or if not you, then the world broke the home sheltering what was left of her. How long had I been disconnected then. How long until they began a new dome. Three years after her disaster, I fell silent.

Was it because she could no longer carry me?
I'm not sure I noticed when they stopped my song.
I watched in silence as they covered her, steel
arc the largest thing ever moved on rails. But I said nothing--

You, or if not you, then the world: your home cracked open. I watch you running in the park nearly alone, just ahead of us. I can't ask if what you see,

*wind-like, is the connection between us breaking
your idea of what it is to be family.
What it is to be home, the only place you've been--*

III. Half-Life: Or, Duga Watches the Grandmothers Return to the Exclusion Zone Near Chernobyl

1.

You expect me to tell you about the grandmothers. Instead I'll ask how many ways there are to destroy the earth, or this piece of earth I cannot leave. The only place I've been able to hear her. I've compared atoms to Earth before,

become tedious with listening for news of her. Other worlds break, magma becomes lava, what we see as giants' surfaces can panic into storms. Even radiation isn't ours alone. Enough of that too can destroy us, even from a distance--

You ask me to tell you about my grandmothers. Instead I tell you about yours. Tell you about how they made homes your father and I came from, how they bound

family and our ideas of family. None of this is mine alone. Instead, we drove for days, counting turbines turning over the flat land between home and home--

2.

Turning through the forest land between home and home,

they came. At first, I thought of them as transmissions, signals sent to target then returned, as if their echoes shuddered back anything about where they'd been.

Echoes of an elsewhere that would absorb who they were. So they came singing their return here in the small houses they'd known. Birds avoid old nests. Women knew what would burn--

Turning through the walls of your grandmother's home, paintings of flowers. Hadn't I taught you before: annuals die, leaving their seeds behind?

Each grandmother leads back to another question: where. As if she could be here, as if death were a movement in place, in time--

3.

As if death were a movement in place, in time, they returned from the gray, governable towers, returned to their tools, attempted to tame overgrown gardens back into something wilder--

Decay is like that, slow, a kind of progress. I heard their tools scratching the earth again. My transmitter disconnected, what else could I know but the ground turned up to accept what was offered?

As if death were a movement in time, in place, like force, like seasons, all the rudimentary science

I'd offered you. Sound dies, the weakening signal,

*echolocation. Light dies at opaque surfaces, planets
die, stars consuming them in their own deaths.
Plants die, animals die. Viruses too, we say. People--*

4.

Plants die, animals die. Vitrify too, we say. People,
given a few hours to collect belongings, had paused
mirror-like in front of them: first, the reactor explodes,
then everyone must seal themselves in a new future. Lost

all but a few pictures. Everything belonging to children
forced to stay. Children or our ideas of children bear resilience.
But that was years ago. When the grandmothers returned,
did they take the paths their children ran through the forest?

*Plants die, animals die. Viruses too, we say. People
remain as images, obituaries, regrets. This cell
we've created, bee-like, distinct, readable as a golden disc:*

*shelter as stories of ancestors born between plagues.
I recite names, places. I recite dates, mark the space
unanswerable now, shaped by questions I might have asked--*

5.

Unanswerable now, shaped by questions she might have asked,
does she watch the women returning home? How can she
tell me, now that she has been tested, taken apart, masked

again, what it is for her to see them, grandmothers singing

land back to itself. She wasn't a bird, burned from within.
Still, her body lies, feet grasping some uncaught prey,
or grasping some predator escaping her unfeathered skin.
Watch them with me, praying over her bones, then walking away--

*Unanswerable now, shaped by questions you might have asked,
these years shrunk by a virus we might have contained. Not lost.
You question the size of things, wonder if we are made of smaller*

*parts, smaller ones within those: when do we end?
I try to explain atoms, nuclei, electrons, spaces defined
by our inability to grasp them. Is there love in our failure--*

6.

My inability to reach them--is there love in my failure?
What else can I do but resonate their footsteps on this shared land?
You don't believe I can hear their movements, the way they fracture
earth. This is theirs, isn't it? Cesium's half-life already passed--

True, I can't tell you what they say to each other
besides *return*. Does it matter that I cannot
speak? I want to lie down near them, dog at their fire,
listening. I want to lie down near them, silenced, spent--

*Your ability to reframe home: is there love in this failure
to leave? I've given you images of playmates here, peers
you chat with online in half-hour blocks. You want to run*

*green lengths near the creek with them, fuse
your idea of who they are with the thrill of presence--
Online sessions end. How you clutch this world, imagined--*

IV. Epilogue: Or, Duga Considers the Future

Time passes. I imagine what my metal will become
once I'm dismantled, my parts recycled into something less
useless than I've been. I wonder if they'll need another frame
for her, if I can hold what's left of her particles--

But not often. Mostly, I think about how I'd be content as a shovel's blade,
breaking the earth. How the grandmothers would tamp
persistent feet against my step. How I'd be if my wires tamed
their gardens, small fence I'd make, inviting vines, inviting hope--

*Time passes. I consider the needle in your small arm
a sort of beginning. Haven't I recycled this form
enough to know I can't keep out the world? I've tried--*

*After your first dose, we wander White Rock Lake, almost
alone, gray water beneath gray clouds. Like trust,
the wind knocks us a little. You hold my hand, then signal-like, break,
then fly--*

V. Coda: Or, Chernobyl 2022

Khmelnitski, Rivne, South Ukraine.
Zaporizhzhia*; Russian-bombed maternity

hospitals, schools. Did I consider theories
I'd used, invented when I made the mistaken

assumption we'd all go unmasked?
Breathing became conspiracy. Whispering
nostalgia. My children dancing
sanctuary away from sanctuary we'd claimed--

Chernobyl, I used you. Like my home,
I raked meaning around years. Melted down,
you were a ghost riding a train away from the cold

war that ended before my childhood. Returned
women, I used you. Shelter**, disconnected from the grid,
hold, hold. A poem is never the way things end--

* Nuclear power plants operational in Ukraine as of February 2022

** In March 2022, Russian forces disconnected the cooling shelter that prevented nuclear material at Chernobyl's Reactor 4 from the power grid from melting down the shelter and thus leaking.

Two Spirit Warrior

by Sydnie Beaupré



Inseguro

by David Powell

midnight

One more skull to make. Renata unwrapped her abuela's hundred-year-old-ceramic mold—passed from daughter to daughter since Villa still called himself Francisco. She would craft this alfeñique in the traditional way, to honor her grandmother. She ached for a token of home.

She sat the hand-hammered copper pan under the faucet and opened the creaky handle all the way, her eyes and nostrils burning from the vapors trapped in the tiny janitor's closet. Ammonia and chlorine together—a dangerous combination. She backed into a locker, head swimming, and missed the exact moment the water stopped gushing. She noticed the change in the air first—burning chemicals gave way to a forest breeze of moss, mint, damp earth. A thick twist of clover and hop sedge sprouted from the faucet, overflowed the copper pan, and crawled across the floor to stop at her feet.

Static in a prickly wave stood hairs on her arm and neck at attention as a snow-white owl hopped out of the pan, claws clicking on the edge before it spread its wings and launched toward Renata without a sound, banking left to reveal the little man pulling on a leather thong around the bird's neck.

The bird circled once, twice, three times, and with each pass another little person climbed out of the pan and walked toward Renata on the grass pathway. They were no taller than two feet. The owl floated soundlessly down and the rider slid to the floor, still holding the thong. He spoke in an unfamiliar language, but Renata heard his thoughts in English.

You are mizvaskez.

Renata could only stare.

We are here because our friend Tige asked a favor of us.

Renata held her face steady, watching the little people who could change water to grass and ride birds like horses, who knew her name and her student's name. She cradled the ceramic mold, cool and smooth in her palms, and recalled abuela's fingers, gently prying the two halves apart to free the hollow skulls. Telling stories from her girlhood in Veracruz, of hardship and drought and magic, and the powers haunting the land before the Spaniards came. Warning her to beware of the chaneque, the little people who controlled the winds and brought the rains.

She'd fallen asleep at her desk, surely, and dreamed her abuela's tale. She missed her mother and sisters, especially in the evenings, talking through the day. Even the tiniest, silliest things. The memories they shared of abuela's laugh and sudden bouts of temper. Teasing each other that her ghost still sat in the wooden rocking chair and stirred the fringe of her wall hangings. These little visitors had to be born of homesickness and fatigue.

The little people were just a dream.

“Never say just a dream!” abuela always scolded. “They bring messages.”

“But abuela,” Renata asked, “what if they are nightmares?”

“Then,” she said, touching her finger to the shiny black pendant Renata still wore around her neck, “hold onto your azabache and be brave. Resist the demon. Find the message.”

Renata clasped her pendant, put on her teacher’s face, and spoke politely.

“Tige Raines. He asked you to see me?” she asked.

Owl-rider, clearly the leader in his beaded shirt and red calico turban, spoke.

Yes. He is generous, and he keeps our secrets. Now he wants a favor from us.

Abuela had drilled the habit of hospitality into Renata and her sisters. “Ignore your discomfort,” she always said. “Put your guest at ease.”

“Won’t you come to my classroom?” Renata asked Owl-rider. “We can be comfortable there, and talk.”

Owl-rider, clearly pleased, looked at his companions and nodded.

“This way,” Renata said.

Surely the dream would shift now. But no, the little ones followed her single file down the hall. Owl-rider. Two women, one in a dress of woven fiber, and another wearing a leather cape with fringe hanging to her knees. Another man, bare-chested, with rawhide leggings and turkey feathers in his topknot. Abuela had never spoken of what the chaneque wore. These visitors wore traditional Cherokee dress, right out of pictures in her anthropology text. Her unconscious had cobbled the dream together from home and school.

Renata sat on the edge of her desk, cradling the mold in her lap. Owl-rider spoke in a language that sounded like Cherokee, but Renata continued to hear his thoughts in English.

You are mizvaskez, teacher of Tige.

“Yes. Call me Renata.”

Owl-rider looked at the neat rows of desks.

What can be learned sitting in a room, Rayna-ta?

Her stomach tightened exactly as it had during her interview.

When Teach for America sent her to Fentress County, Tennessee, Renata expected shoeless Latino children, shoved into the shadows by hillbilly bigots. Instead, she found a clique of Guatemalan teenagers clearly better off than their white counterparts. Their clothes were newer, and they dominated the soccer fields. They were bilingual, moving easily between Spanish and Appalachian English, while the mountain kids balked at anything beyond “Buenos Dias.” Renata resolved to be patient with the poor whites’ limitations, but that barely took her through the first week. When the Tennessee kids realized, with teen telepathy, that their mispronunciations annoyed her, they recited as one, answering her prompts in a brazen singsong: BWAAYNUS DEEEUS, SEEN-YORE-EEDA VASS KEHZZZ. She tried to laugh at their mutinous energy, but it made her angry.

She took revenge by giving them phrases like “I’m so stupid” to repeat, sending the native speakers into raucous laughter and polarizing the groups even more. Shamed by her pettiness, she eventually won them over simply by showing up every day, absorbing their taunts, and behaving like an adult whether she felt like one or not. That old-fashioned mainstay of caregivers, bribery, finally won the day.

She placed a plastic tub of Tootsie Pops on her desk. Each day she wrote a sentence on the board, tomorrow’s “frase especial.” If they recalled the special sentence, they got a Tootsie Pop. Crazy how well it worked.

Handing out candy, she had noticed Tige Raines’ front teeth. Renata

had never seen the boy smile, but his zoned-out expression left his mouth partially open, buck teeth protruding, dark circles of rot spreading across his upper incisors.

“Maybe I shouldn’t give him candy,” she told her supervisor.

“Bless his heart,” the older woman said, peering above her reading glasses. “He can probably use the calories.”

Tige was from “out on the branch,” in country as remote and wild as Tennessee had to offer. Not much you could do for those kids, her elders agreed. They were practically feral.

“You feel bad now, wait till the last day of school. They’ll line up at your door and beg. ‘Can’t we still come to school? Can we come just for lunch?’”

Renata found Tige sitting by himself at the end of a long table, shoveling in his navy beans and cornbread with gusto. The one meal he could depend on every day. Renata felt a hole in her stomach as she sat beside the boy.

“Tige, do you mind if I ask you something?”

He looked up. Not avoiding her eyes, but wary.

“You’re not in any trouble. Go ahead and finish your lunch.”

He looked at his plate and kept shoveling in the beans, mopping up the juice with his cornbread.

“I don’t really like cornbread. Would you like mine?” He hesitated slightly before taking the crumbly square from her hand. He could have been digging a hole with his bare hands, with those black crescent-moons of dirt under his fingernails. He took the cornbread and made a noise that could have been “thanks.”

“I’ve found out something that might help you. Please don’t be em-

barrassed, but I need to speak frankly. Your teeth.”

Tige kept chewing and turned his face to the window. She told Tige about the Tennessee Dental Association’s free service. They could repair damage, pull rotten teeth.

“Daddy don’t like welfare.”

The first complete sentence Renata had ever heard him speak. A voice thin but steady.

“It’s not welfare,” Renata said. “It’s emergency medical assistance.”

Tige swallowed the last bite and took a swig from his milk carton. How could the teeth be so bad? Surely there was no fluoride in the water he drank, and Renata couldn’t tell that he had *ever* brushed his teeth.

“Tige, I have to be honest. Decay that advanced, I’m afraid there’ll be no enamel left pretty soon. Some might already be too far gone to ... save.”

“What’s the use then?”

“Well, they could take out the worst ones. Give you a partial plate.”

His eyebrows raised in alarm. “What you mean, plate?”

“You know. Artificial teeth.”

“False teeth?” He stood suddenly and picked up his tray. “Thank you to mind your business,” he said, and walked away.

Renata almost followed him but didn’t want to harass the boy. Of course, he was proud. He’d rather do without teeth than stoop to fake government teeth. Renata understood pride. Abuela had absolutely refused to take a Social Security check from the government. They’d had to open a checking account in her name and deposit the check

without telling her.

So. She'd failed with Tige today, and the dream visitors sprang from her conscience. Homesickness and job anxiety accounted for this dream. Owl-rider continued to watch her, waiting for an answer to his question. To find the message, Renata would have to go where the dream took her.

Owl-rider repeated his question.

What can be learned sitting in a room?

Renata looked at the rows of battered desks. Fluorescent lights buzzed. Her head ached and eyes felt as if they'd been rolled in sand. Could you feel so exhausted in a dream?

She gestured to tables pushed against the walls, lined with sugar skulls.

“Well, right now we are learning about Dia de los Muertos.”

Sugar skulls crowded the tables, a riot of colors, patterns, and textures. Explaining the holiday got blank stares, but showing pictures sparked interest. She walked her students through making the sugar paste and pressing it into plastic molds. Several had to be redone, but finally every student produced a hollow skull. She'd laid out the pictures and materials and turned them loose to copy and invent. Royal icing in red spirals, yellow sunbursts with sequins, bouquets of roses in strange colors, squiggles, crosses, explosions of feathers and glitter. They'd tried to outdo each other.

Renata picked up the nearest skull and held it out to Owl-rider, who stepped backward quickly, eyes wide. He crossed his arms in an “X” across his face and the floor jounced as a deafening crack of thunder shook the building. Windows rattled and strobed with lightning. Renata's hair stood up in a wash of static, and her chest tightened as if squeezed by a fist.

She couldn't be dreaming. In her dreams she saw things, heard

things, and felt emotions, but physical sensation like this—never.

The thunder moved away in a stumbling roll.

Renata struggled to slow her breathing, to ease the constriction in her chest and slow the hammering of her heart. Every sensation told her she was wide awake.

Abuela help me, she silently prayed.

She pictured her grandmother, sitting in the shade in her wicker chair, pulling at her hand loom and telling tales. Chiding her silly granddaughters for disobeying her, for hiking in the desert. The chaneque, she said, looked for human children uncertain of their boundaries. They kidnapped these children and stole their memories of home, then abruptly released them to wander. Some would eventually come back to themselves, but some would die in the desert.

“Be certain in obedience,” she said in her spookiest voice, “or they will steal you in the hills.”

That these creatures from “out on the branch” could be the same ones from abuela's tales seemed stranger than the fact they existed at all. But a deeper instruction pressed against her fear. They were guests.

“Don't be alarmed,” she said, voice gravelly from the effort to keep it steady. “We make sugar skulls each year. To honor our dead.”

She moved away from the table, picked up the tub of Tootsie Pops, and sat on the floor.

“Please, join me.”

Owl-rider gestured, and the four cautiously sat with her in a circle. She unwrapped a Pop, stuck it in her mouth, and passed the tub around. Owl-rider was cautious until the first lick, then his eyes lit up and the others tore into the Tootsie Pops as eagerly as her students had. She took her time, rolling the sphere around in her mouth, and

they followed her example, sober at first, then smiling, eyes closed, savoring the pleasure. Whatever or whoever they were, they loved sweets.

She popped the hard candy off the cardboard handle, dropped the handle into the trash can, and passed it so they could do the same. She returned to the table and chose a colorful skull, placing it on the floor before Owl-rider.

“Please, as my guest,” she said. To refuse now would be a breach of hospitality.

The visitors conferred briefly, then Owl-rider looked at Renata and nodded, as solemn as a president accepting nuclear codes. She gave them each a skull.

Owl-rider gestured, and Fringed Cape lifted her garment to reveal a tiny silver fork held in place with a calico sash. She withdrew it, placing it on the floor beside Owl-Rider.

Owl-rider gestured to the fork. *Tige gave us this gift. It is silver, rare and full of power. Tige-grandmother used it to feed her children.*

Renata’s idea of Tige shifted. This pathetic mountain boy with rotten teeth was also a beloved child fed by his grandmother, and a friend of beings who commanded thunder and lightning. Perhaps her image of abuela as a superstitious old woman was incomplete, also. What if she had met the chaneque?

We are to grant you a favor, Owl-rider said, but your gift upsets the balance.

“I only wanted to make you welcome,” Renata said, keeping her voice as steady as she could. “I mean no offense. They are only decorations.”

Her visitors frowned, all speaking at once, making emphatic gestures. Competing protocols collided in Renata’s thoughts: hostess,

teacher, granddaughter, mortal. Was hospitality large enough to steer her through this encounter?

Finally, Owl-rider raised his hand and they fell silent. He fixed his gaze on Renata, and she felt his presence probing her thoughts.

It is wrong to call them decorations. They are doorways of the dead. A gift of so much power makes us . . . inseguro.

The first word she’d heard in Spanish. He had reached into her mind for a deeper level of meaning to explain their reaction. A good sign.

Inseguro. Insecure. Uncertain. Did that make things better, or worse? In the old stories, children who wandered away from home, who forgot their boundaries, fell into the chaneque’s world and never returned. Inseguro for them equaled perdido—lost. What happened when the *chaneque* were unsure?

We must bestow the favor asked of us, and restore balance, Owl-Rider said. You must answer this question. What do you desire above all else?

A pinprick of dread. No, she didn’t want to hear that question. Abuela’s stories flooded her memory. “The chaneque can be powerful allies, but they are unpredictable,” she said. “Only the desperate seek their help.” They granted boons but exacted terrible dues. A drought ended but a child lost. A debt paid but the borrower’s spirit ripped from his body. Had abuela bargained with the chaneque? Knowing the visitors could hear her thoughts, Renata struggled to keep her mind blank, but the pinprick widened into a pit. The visitors watched; her palms began to sweat.

The burden of uncertainty was hers now. Renata wished her grandmother were there, to sort through the stories, to advise her.

You wish to speak with your grandmother?

Renata’s pulse leapt. Owl-rider still probed her thoughts. What would

he make of her uncertainty?

“No! I mean, yes, I would love to speak with her. But that is not my answer to your question.”

Owl-rider watched and waited, and Renata tried to mirror his calm. What *did* she desire above all else? Her memory spun with tales of foolish people who were granted riches, love, and fame, but suffered for it. Stories that warned against treasures selfish and unearned. Here and now, Renata burned with unanswered questions. Had abuela known the chaneque? Were the chaneque the same as these visitors? Had Tige always known them, or discovered them himself? That led to the biggest puzzle of all.

“I desire above all else,” Renata said, her voice firm, “to know why Tige sent you to me.”

Owl-rider and the others spoke together briefly, then looked at her, nodding and smiling.

We honor your choice, Owl-rider said. You have not chosen with vanity or greed. Tige is wise to grant you this favor, Reyna-ta. Here is the reason. Tige fears above all else—

Renata felt the presence of his thoughts again, searching for the right words.

—dientes falsos.

Renata caught the laugh before it escaped her. False teeth? Tige had summoned elemental powers because of *that*?

He granted you this favor to turn your mind away from changing him.

“But ...” It was Renata’s turn to search for the right words. “I only wanted to help him!”

Owl-rider indicated the desks.

Does teaching not change children? Can you help without change?

He picked up his sugar skull carefully, with his fingertips.

You call these doorways “only decorations,” but honoring the dead is not a show. You are not aware of the power in these objects. You give them away freely, with no conditions. You lead children to make them, not bothering to imagine the consequences.

Renata’s cheeks burned. She had stepped into the classroom without knowing a thing about the children who sat before her every day, her knowledge about them cobbled together from assumptions.

They weren’t poor immigrants, or needy rednecks. They were mysteries.

“I’m ... ashamed of my arrogance,” Renata stammered, holding back tears, feeling more transparent and contrite than she ever had before a priest in confession.

Do not be ashamed. Simply welcome Tige, as you welcomed us.

“As abuela taught me,” Renata managed to say.

To honor the dead, keep their ways, Owl-rider said, and the others nodded.

The visitors stood. Owl-rider pointed to the antique ceramic mold, which Renata still held clutched in her lap. *This belonged to your abuela?*

“Yes,” Renata said.

Owl-rider held out his hand and Renata handed the mold to him. He touched the mold to his sugar skull and began to hum. Renata recognized the tune, or thought she did. Abuela always hummed while she made the skulls, and her song, if not the same as Owl-rider’s song, arose from a common source. The sound crowded Renata’s memory,

weaving around abuela's hum in a mazy descant. Tige's silver fork began to faintly glow.

Owl-rider opened his mouth and the hum broke open into one sustained note, which ended in a guttural cry halfway between joy and sorrow.

Renata took back the mold, her hands tingling as from a slight electrical current, as they wrapped around the smooth ceramic.

Once each year, Owl-rider said, on your day of celebration for the dead, you may speak with your abuela through this doorway.

The white owl, gliding in eerie silence, sailed through the door and dropped to the floor by its rider.

Thank you for your gifts, and for your wise choice. We will speak of you with pleasure, but do not speak of us.

He mounted the owl, which dipped its head, spread its wings, and lifted off without a sound. Fringed Cape and the others followed on the floor, single file.

Renata stared after them until the gush of water from the janitor's closet broke the midnight silence. She stumbled to the door and looked down the hall to see the grass path had disappeared, replaced by creeping fingers of water. By the time she had soaked up the water with mop and bucket the classroom clock said one a.m.

She stared at her classroom, at the wall of windows, built to let in the

light of day, now barely able to hold back the dark. Empty desks facing in a single direction while mysteries spread out in all directions. A table of bright sugar skulls with four missing. A trash can with five wadded up wrappers. Abuela's mold on the desk before her, tingling under her fingers.

"Abuelita?" she whispered.

The tingling spread out like ripples on water, widening into a circle roiled with silvery smoke, smoke that receded, giving way to a grassy meadow filled with flowers. Impossibly, Renata sat across from her grandmother, dressed as she had been in life, framed by low hills that glowed an incandescent lavender.

"Mi nieta!" abuela cooed, her wrinkled face smoothed young, eyes brighter than in life, fingers resting on the clay mold.

Renata drank in the sight of her, too happy to speak.

"How did you open the doorway?" abuela asked.

"A boy," Renata said. "A strange boy from a place called 'the branch.'"

"A magic place?"

"I've never been there, but I want to visit soon. I have much to learn."

Safe Home

by Kim Whysall-Hammond

This old battered ship is called home
by an iconoclastic ragtag group
proud independent survivors
who by dint of hard work and some luck
are trading between Mars and Jupiter

They breed fish in aquaria built into living space walls
so that all may know the creatures that sustain them
grow rice in large well-lit chambers
stash their great secret in a protected place
a bundle of bones scratched with ancestral names
adorned with other darker totems
that makes them who they are

Today, the first *ngente*, a naming
with a feast of *Ceebu-jenn*
everyone's favourite food
welcoming a new life.
One who will never feel an ocean breeze
but who will tell the ancestral stories
stomp and dance with her sisters and brothers

Once fishers of long lost Atlantic shoals
now hunters for other treasures
safe in their shelter
ready for their future

ngente – Lebou naming ceremony

Ceebu-jenn (rice and fish in a rich vegetable sauce) is a favourite Lebou meal.

1988

by Gordon Sun

Good morning, Blue Cove! I'm Liz Cable," the feminine-voiced chatbot cheerfully announced over the intercom.

"And I'm Colt Page," her partner chimed in.

"It's a quiet day here on the southern coast," Liz continued. "Coming up next on the five are your local weather conditions, sponsored by Bitplayer Technologies, the global leader in reality-based solutions ..."

As the anchor chattered about five-day highs and lows, I sat in the food court, waiting for the team doc and the new employee to arrive. The tray by my elbow was draped with a dirty cloth napkin and littered with crumbs. I sipped the IR-Ban Café iced tea sloshing in my plastic tumbler, vegging out on Liz's smooth voice. My fingers fiddled with a zipper in the sleeve of my gray jumpsuit. The nurse-bot next to me hunkered down on its treads, its green optics dimming as it entered power-saving mode. It was fifteen minutes past the meeting time; good thing I wasn't in any rush.

The anchor's weather forecast soon gave way to soothing, reverberating waves of piano and guitar, and my head began to nod. Just as I was drifting off, I heard the nearby lift open. Looking up, I spotted a young chap rushing over. His clothes were uncomfortably loud: a baggy blue and purple T-shirt smothered in geometric shapes, black trackies with hanzi, smileys, and random English words running down the sides, and reflective gray runners. His Bitplayer Technologies badge flapped wildly over his chest as he ran. A black-and-white backpack dangled perilously from his shoulder. Water dripped from his tousled brown hair.

I remembered his face from the orientation meeting yesterday: the new intern, Damon Jefferson. Fortunately for him, there's no enforceable dress code beyond covering up.

"G'day, Miss Roberts," the guy wheezed, as the nurse-bot stirred to life. "Sorry I'm late."

At least he knew my name. "No worries, Damon." Trying not to stare at the garish riot on his torso, I stood and extended a hand. Damon shook it. "You hungry? You want brekkie first? Or a cuppa?"

"No, it's fine. I just, um, overslept." He sheepishly ran a hand through his damp hair.

"Really don't want a yummo cinnablock, then? Your loss." We chuckled. "Hey, did you see Doctor Dade on your way here?"

"Um, no. Should I have looked?"

Dr. Dade was always prompt and would have called in by now. Twenty minutes seemed long enough. I reached for the walkie-talkie holstered at my hip and switched to channel 8, exclusively used for Bitplayer employees. "Doctor Dade? Are you there? Doc?" The handset hissed softly. "Forget it. We'll check on him after rounds."

I rattled the melting ice cubes in my cup, glancing past the big decorative water fountain and synthetic green-and-brown palm trees to the towering annex that housed our customers. As of yesterday, there were 268 people on the five floors under my team's watch. Despite seeming like a large census, it was manageable so long as there

weren't too many overnight issues to settle. Slurping up the ice, I hooked the empty tumbler into a loop in the waistband of my cargo pants. The tray and its contents went on top of a nearby collection bin. Damon and the nurse-bot followed me to the lift.

Even though we had a habit of meeting by the IR-Ban Café on ground level and going up during rounds, I personally enjoyed doing the opposite: starting from the top and working my way down with gravity. It always seemed less stressful that way. And since Dr. Dade wasn't here, that's what we did.

I pushed the button for Twenty. Damon and the bot crowded next to me as the doors slid shut. We were silent as the lift zipped toward our destination, accompanied only by Liz the chatbot's charming voice: "News, weather, entertainment, and music to fit your lifestyle: all this and more all day, every day on the five ..." Damon examined his reflection in the shiny metal wall of the elevator, trying in vain to smooth out his hair.

The lift opened, and we entered the Bitplayer premises. Floor Twenty, like most of the other levels, had been totally scoured of conference rooms and cubicles. The expansive, open-concept space was packed with clusters of womb-like, ivory-colored pods. Delicate circuitry etched their surfaces, glowing blue if the units were occupied and running normally, darkened if not. Pipes jutted out from their bases, finger-like, into the floor. For easier maintenance, the stale gray carpet that used to cover the floors had been ripped out as well, exposing the same scuffed turquoise-and-peach tile pattern also used out in the main concourse of Blue Cove Arco.

People wrapped in form-fitting white IR suits and helmets were gently suspended in clear, viscous, pressure-alleviating gel inside the pods, their minds adrift. Tubes and catheters stuck out of various ports in their suits. At the head of each pod was a small kiosk, with a pair of POV monitors hanging from above where we could see into our customers' mindscape.

The languid shuffle of an old electronic song began to drift from the

overhead speakers. As the distorted, druggy warble of the long-dead female singer looped through the air, Bitplayer drones floated and rolled serenely amongst the pods, checking on clients.

And so, our workday began.

I led Damon and the nurse-bot to an occupied pod along the far wall and tapped a few buttons on the kiosk keyboard. My eyes swept over the data scrolling onto the screen. This unit contained Andy Roberts, my younger brother, who'd been in IR ever since he got caught in the blast radius of an N-point.

Andy was thin, almost gaunt, a common look among long-term IR users dependent on reprocessed nutrition from a stomach tube. Through the clear visor of his helm, I could see his unkempt, scraggly hairline and pale, dry skin. His eyes moved rapidly underneath closed lids. Andy's soft breathing rustled his thick mustache and beard.

I looked up at the POVs. The screens were old, the view intermittently broken up by flickering scanlines and clouds of static. There, Andy was clean-shaven, his brown hair combed neatly to the side, wearing a comfortable red button-up jumper over a white polo shirt, white shorts, and long white tube socks with blue stripes. He lay belly-down on his enormous bed, covers and fleece jarmies piled by his feet. He was still quite thin and gangly, but defo healthier looking, closer in appearance to my hazy childhood recollections than the man currently resting in the pod.

Andy's bedroom was quite airy. The walls were painted a few complementary shades of blue. A white fan whirled from the vaulted ceiling. Bright light streamed through the windows, the gentle, rolling waves of an expanse of azure ocean visible below and beyond. A large wooden desk and bookcase stood opposite Andy's king-sized bed. Stacks of mags--*TIME*, *SPIN*, *MAD*--spilled across the desk and onto the cream-toned carpet.

Andy was doodling in a black wire-bound notebook, an assortment

of colored pencils scattered on the bedsheet. He was partway through yet another portrait, a realistic one full of splashy colors and sharp contrasts. He'd always had a talent for art, even as a kid. I stared at the sketch for a while, thinking it looked familiar--

"Miss Roberts, are you alright?" Damon asked, concern on his face.

"*Dāngrán, dāngrán.* Everything's fine." I gestured at the pod. "This is my little brother, Andy. I brought him here from Brissy a long time ago."

"Oh, I didn't know." He looked at the floor, unsure of how to reply. "I ... guess it seems like he's doing okay."

"I reckon."

"So, does everyone live in the same world or something?" Damon pointed up at the POVs. "It looks just like the one they had where I came from. All bright and shiny."

The ideal IR construct was designed to be harmonious, all the harsh edges sanded off, facilitating its original intended use as mental health therapy years ago. By far the most popular virtual environment was the classic metropolis like the one we used here at Blue Cove. It was filled with glossy suburban neighborhoods of formulaic two-story homes with backyard pools; mini malls filled with restaurants, salons, clothing boutiques, arcades, and movie theaters; and golf courses, tennis courts, and parks sprawling across any undeveloped space. Way in the outback were rustic fields of green grass, beautiful multicolored flowers, and majestic leafy trees. Deep within the city, enormous, towering blocks of downtown skyscrapers over-looked a vibrant, neon-soaked, consumerist nightlife. In keeping with the optimistic milieu, Bitplayer soundtracked our offices, and the whole arco, with evocative tunes like the slice of sunny Japanese shiti poppu that was now playing. I wasn't surprised to hear that our setup was being used elsewhere.

"Is that right? Where are you from, mate?"

"I came with the refugees from Melbs. A few of us finally made it here a few days ago."

"Oh, yeah. I remember the announcement on the five."

"No one can stop the big fire." His face briefly soured. "Anyway, that's a nice drawing. Kind of looks like you." Damon nodded at the POVs.

I followed his gaze upward. A scowling, hazel-eyed girl in a maroon hoodie was taking shape in the sketch. She wore several spiky golden ear studs and a nasal piercing, fashion statements I hadn't made since high school, but Andy had accurately drawn my choppy dark-red bob cut. I reflexively touched my hair; IR users were believed to subconsciously absorb cues from meatspace, using real-world elements to add bits of familiarity to the scaffolding of their digital realm. That was a big reason the playlists were packed with popular, well-known songs, so customers transitioned into IR more easily.

"Yeah, kind of." My gaze shifted to the nurse-bot, who we simply called Nurse. "Nurse, everything's blue here. Anyone in particular you want us to see?"

Nurse beeped. "No overnight alarms reported with any of the customers on Twenty," it said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Then let's go downstairs. I'll meet you two at the lift." As Damon and the nurse-bot headed to the elevator, I glanced at the POVs again. Andy had just finished the drawing and was scribbling something underneath. I squinted, slowly muttering the words under my breath: "In memoriam, Candace, March nineteen-eighty-eight ...?" Andy looked at the drawing for a long moment before turning the page to start a new sketch.

Memoriam? I'd dragged my unconscious brother for who knew how many clicks after the N-point had gone off, begged our way past the granite-faced guards at the Brissy checkpoint, and got him into the queue for a pod. *He'd* almost died, not me. Weird how Andy's mind

chose to remember me.

And why 1988? I didn't know the current year, but we were long past 1988. I reset the kiosk to its default vital sign display and rejoined my team.

"There must be so much to do to keep the system online twenty-four hours a day," Damon exclaimed as we entered the lift. "How do you do it?"

"I don't do anything. They do." I jerked a thumb at the nurse-bot. Damon rewarded me with a baffled look. "I guess you were nodding off at orientation."

The intern laughed in embarrassment. "Aigoo, I was just psyched to get an assignment."

We exited the lift on Nineteen. "The drones handle almost everything here, even strategy. Nothing personal, but the assignment you got here wasn't because of any skill set you might've had. It was to keep you from going bonkers staring at the walls." As we looked around, I spotted a single station glowing a dull orange. I motioned to the team to follow me there.

"Do they all interact with each other?" Damon asked, keeping pace beside me. "The customers, I mean."

"Yeah, most of them run on the same instance here at Blue Cove. Only the Bitplayer big knobs got their own bespoke environments. They all wanted the chance to lead their own company free of interference when they decided to take the plunge."

"How about with other arcsos?"

"*Bù zhīdào.*" I shrugged. "No way for the arcsos to talk since the sats all got taken out."

"So where do all the people in IR come from? Especially the blokes

living in a universe of one?"

"Chatbots. Heaps of them."

Moving to podside, we saw that the guy was clenched up, occasionally twitching an arm or leg. Nurse pulled up his customer record. "Digital dissonance started last night," it said. "What do you want to do?"

I skimmed the metadata on the occupant, Felipe Ricardo. He was evidently born in 1988, but that meant little in IR. The bloke looked like he was in his late fifties or early sixties, but long immersions made anyone look unnaturally old in meatspace. The avatar, on the other hand, was maybe a college frosh. The POVs showed him sitting on a green park bench, his head in his hands, shaking uncontrollably. I wondered if the guy finally realized that fifty wasn't the new twenty. "What would happen if we stepped in?" I asked Nurse.

"Central predicts a sixty percent chance of his symptoms worsening with direct intervention, Candace," Nurse replied. "But as a nurse-bot, I'm forbidden from making the call as long as humans are present to do so."

Unfortunately, I had no medical training, just long stretches of observing Dr. Dade at work. I sighed in exasperation, resting my hands on the cool, smooth surface of the pod as I inspected our customer. Felipe's eyes were open but unfocused. His hands hovered in front of his chest, his palms facing inward, gel dripping off his fingers. Hearing some mumbling, I leaned over but couldn't make out the words.

"Can you hear what he's saying?" I asked the others.

"No," they replied in unison.

I recalled the closed caption function built into every kiosk and began searching for it in the settings menu. However, just as I found it, on the POVs the man leaned back and cursed.

"Is he alright?" Damon asked. I shushed him.

“Does no one speak regular English around here?” Felipe shouted. “Where did all the Chinese come from? And the fucking cartoons--”

“Is he talking about Chimoji?” the intern asked, puzzled.

“Maybe. Weird, that’s not coded into the environment.”

“--and how does no one know what a *dollar bill* is?” Felipe ranted. “What the hell is *ubic* supposed--”

“Ubic? *Our* ubic?” Damon grew more confused. “He remembers the universal cash stipend?”

I frowned. “Try searching the records. When did he immerse?”

The nurse-bot made room for Damon. The intern flicked his fingers across the kiosk, cycling through Felipe’s file. A moment later, he stiffened his fingers, freezing the view, and squinted at the immersion date. “He’s been around since the--damn, how long has it *been*? A bloody long time, I think? How did he--”

“Yeah, he might be having FFs now. Flashforwards,” I interrupted. “IR is chock-a-block with downclockers. On top of that, Bitplayer intermittently recycles the immersive environment at night to save processing power and space. It’s seamless, going from present to past and back again, but sometimes people feel unstuck in time.”

“Sounds more confusing than anything. What if everyone downclocks at different rates?”

“It only affects their own ‘aging’ process.” I threw up air quotes around the word *aging*. “Basically, how they look and feel. The rest of the world itself moves along at the same cadence.”

“I don’t get it.”

I sighed. “If your subconscious absorbs too much from meatspace, there’s a problem. If you remember things from meatspace that the

Bitplayer environment was supposed to block out, there’s a problem. Because you’re reconciling two distinct, yet simultaneous, frames of reference. The risk increases the longer people stay in IR. And forget about resetting the chronometer. Doesn’t work.” I rested my hands on my hips. “Brain can’t handle FFs. Reality gets all bugged up.”

Bitplayer’s app worked in part by burying people’s uncomfortable memories underneath layers and layers of coding flotsam. Pleasant distractions made it easier for people to accept the immersion. The problem was that it was temporary. Leaving IR unloaded all those digital barriers, causing a nasty rebound effect. The sudden flood of negativity often overwhelmed people’s emotional defenses. Customers hated the sensation of all that pain and trauma pouring back into their minds, now amplified and more toxic than ever. It was easier to stay than to go.

“Then what can we do? The rules said we can’t just talk to the guy.”

For good reason. Directly communicating with someone while in their mindspace greatly upped the chance of breaking suspension of disbelief--BSOD.

“Not much. Yank him or leave him. Doctor Dade might’ve been able to sort him out if we got him out of there, but ...” I stared into the distance. “Look, I’ve never had to make this call before, and I wasn’t planning on starting today. I’ve seen what happens when it fails. You can’t untangle our reality from theirs once they start mixing.”

As I rocked on my heels, the PA system crackled. Ringing tones began to cascade out of the speakers, a slow-motion waterfall of icy synthesized melodies. A woman began whispering Korean in a cool, hypnotic voice, like some kind of cybernetic incantation. A strange, disconcerting chill rippled through my body.

That was it. Time to move on.

“Nurse, just get one of the other bots to monitor the poor bastard,” I said, rubbing my arms and shoulders to get rid of the creepy-crawly

sensation. “See if he wakes up spontaneously--or crashes.”

“Of course, Candace.”

As I motioned toward the lift, the intern cleared his throat. “Is it okay for us to, uh, be rounding so quickly?” I turned, raising an eyebrow. Flushing, he continued nervously, “I don’t mind spending a little more time, uh, getting to know the customers.”

“With Doctor Dade, we visited every single person, mate. It took almost the whole day. Five days a week. I never thought it was the best use of our time, especially since the nurse-bots did all the hard yakka.”

“But wouldn’t you want your doc to see their patients every day?”

“They aren’t all patients. Only some of the originals used IR for psych trauma. Most of the survivors just lacked outlets for all their pent-up emotions. And the N-points made offworld escape impossible. Everyone was stuck.” I gestured at the intern. “You know the slogan for Bitplayer, right? ‘Digital bliss, as real as you want it to be.’”

We took the lift down to Eighteen. Just outside the doors, we encountered a lady in an orange pod. We again ordered another nurse-bot to stand watch. Nurse then drew our attention to several drones crowded around a red pod tucked near the emergency stairwell a short distance away. We walked over but stood back a respectful distance.

“Who was it?” I asked Nurse.

Nurse paused. “Manu Reddy.” Two humanoid bots, the types with four articulating upper limbs, carefully disconnected the last cable and pulled the man’s thin body from the pod with a squelch. Gel sloshed onto the floor. “Kiosk reported cerebellar hemorrhagic stroke.”

“I saw on an old box show that we used to be able to treat stroke,”

the intern offered, scratching his head. “What happened?”

“No specialists, facilities, or equipment,” I replied, watching a small, dome-shaped cleaner bot struggle to vacuum up the gel on the ground. “Doctor Dade’s the only doc left in all of Blue Cove, and even he doesn’t know that stuff.”

“*Zhēn de ma?*” he asked.

“Defo. I heard Bondi had a couple back in the day, but even if Bondi still exists, it’s too far to travel. All we can do is watch.”

The bots gently placed Manu, still in his IR suit, into a black body bag on a gurney for transport. As they zipped the bag closed, a woman’s wistful voice crackled from the speakers. The voice sung a mixture of Japanese and English, backed by a subtle beat and melancholy horn and string section. Despite knowing only a few common phrases in Japanese, I could practically feel the tragedy in my very bones. Aigoo, Liz and Colt were uncannily good at curating playlists.

“Let’s go,” I said quietly.

Seventeen housed the resource and recycling center and the dense blocks of mainframes powering the alt-realities of our customers. There were no pods here. A couple of gray, barrel-bodied supervisory bots roved around the hallway, LEDs blinking on their heads, ignoring us. After we gave Damon a brief tour, we reentered the lift and headed down to Sixteen.

Way in a back corner was a single green pod, signifying a newly activated customer. Two articulator bots were packing up equipment nearby. Strange--new users were incredibly rare nowadays. As one of only a handful of humans in this Bitplayer branch, not to mention the whole arco, normally I was told well in advance if we had a new arrival. We headed over to investigate.

I shouldn’t have been surprised to see Dr. Dade there.

Our newest customer floated gently inside the green pod, his face slack with relief. Nurse communicated with the other drones in a back-and-forth of beeping and chirping.

“Saul,” Nurse said, referring to our former doc, “told my colleagues here not to disclose anything to us until we started our rounds. He didn’t want you to try to stop him.”

“Clearly,” I muttered.

“*Mwongmi!*” Damon exclaimed, looking at each of us in turn.

“The supervisors searched his flat,” Nurse continued. “He’d made the decision to try to reconnect with his ex-wife. Everything was packed up, stamped for recycling and redistribution.”

“His ex-wife’s here?”

“Yes, on Eighteen.”

“Did you know that?” Damon asked me.

“No. People’s personal histories aren’t my business.” I ushered Damon away from the pod, leaving Nurse to receive handoff from the other bots. “Hmph. Was he really just going through the motions this whole time? I’ve already got plenty on my plate worrying about my little brother.”

“Seems bloody dramatic to suddenly just decide to take a one-way trip to IR.”

“Like taking a permanent sickie,” I replied soberly, nodding. “Not the first time that’s happened around here.”

Damon was quiet for a while. Then, he asked, “How long have you been here?”

“*Bù zhīdào.*” I shrugged. “I’ve been hiding out in Blue Cove with my

brother since the war. Several years? A decade?” Dates became irrelevant when downclocking stretched real seconds into virtual years. Computers maintained customers’ birthdates and immersion dates more out of custom than necessity. The power of IR aside, real-time still only went one way; no one was around to reflect on the casualties of history. “Any rellies, Damon?”

“My older brother was drafted and shipped OS to help the Yanks. Then some basketcase set off an N-point off San Diego ...” Damon trailed off, murmuring to himself and staring into space.

We stood there, lost in our own worlds. I barely even registered Nurse as it continued conversing with its robotic cohorts. At some point, a pulsating dance track revved up, the brassy female Japanese vocalist backed by a swinging chorus. The upbeat music broke the somber mood; shaking his head as though waking up, Damon changed the subject. “Hey, I got another question. They played the same music over the Melbs PA system, too. What’s it called again? Citybeat? Neon pop?”

“What about it?”

“I don’t remember this being so popular before--you know.”

“You probably just never noticed. It’s like wallpaper, just *there* sometimes.”

“Maybe.”

“Bitplayer runs the majority of the arcos, and most pods run on eighties templates. The lab coats back in the day thought it was possible for people in IR to absorb influences from our world during waking periods. Hence, all this nostalgic old-timey music.”

“This stuff’s ace, but it sounds so ancient you can hear the vinyl crackle.”

I chuckled. “We’re probably overdue for a revival anyway.”

“Hmm.” He closed his eyes, swaying slightly to the driving beat. “Well, it does *feel* right. Somehow.”

I called over to our nurse-bot. “Hey, we’re ready to head down to Fifteen.”

Nurse trundled over, and we took the lift down one last flight. Fifteen was entirely blue, nothing new to see. A few other nurse-bots roamed the aisles, periodically stopping to check on an immersion. The sparkling dance cut faded with a crackle of vinyl. Soon, the grainy, wailing echo of a single saxophone cut through the air.

In the lonely emptiness between the notes, I heard the thrum of electricity coursing through the pods. The low burble of coolant and gel cycling through the pipes underneath the floor. The comforting whir of air conditioning running day and night. I stopped, absorbing the stillness of the dreamers, the quiet, purposeful activity of the machines keeping watch. It felt like the very air was vibrating with a peculiar intensity, prickling the hairs on my scalp and forearms. All that energy keeping alive our customers’ mass hallucination of decades lost—

“Hey, Miss Roberts?” Damon was waving a hand in my face.

“I’m here.” Blinking, I glanced back at the still-open lift and sighed deeply. “Just tired.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? I feel like I wasn’t very useful today.”

“No, you did fine, mate. We’re done for today.”

“*Zhēn de ma?*” He looked surprised. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” I smiled, spreading my hands. “Did they set up your local ubic account yet? Go drop some ubic at the arcade or something. It’s bloody retro. You might like it.”

“Sounds rad.” He turned to leave, then paused. “Before that, I think I

want to pick up a slab at the bottle-o downstairs. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thanks. You know the frothies are all bogus, right?”

“Still better than what we had in Melbs, which was nothing.”

I shrugged. “Right on. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After the intern left, I turned to Nurse. “As a reminder,” the robot said solicitously, folding its arms over its round white chassis, “you’re the ranking employee here, now that Saul has joined the immersed.”

“*Mwongmi?*” I laughed sarcastically. “That can’t be true. What’s his name—uh, Phil Webb? Doctor Dade’s boss?”

“Phil passed away a while ago.”

“What? Why didn’t you say something?”

“It didn’t affect you. It affected Saul.”

“Yeah.” I dragged out the syllable. “Okay, how about that lady with the shoulder pads? Sue Lazor?”

“Sue quit. She runs the used bookstore on Two now.”

“*Daebak.*” I rolled my eyes.

“The only other active human employees are Damon and Katie Ping.”

I raised my brows. “Katie? Hmph. Almost forgot about her.” The junior tech covered floors Eleven through Fourteen with her own nurse-bot. Her team also had a doc at one point, but she plugged herself into a pod way back. From what I could tell, Katie spent most of her free time trying on the same clothes over and over at the resur-

rected Contempo Casuals on Three or jogging in long, slow loops around Blue Cove's ground floor. We hardly talked; I had no idea how many of the customers under her watch were still alive. Reckon that explained my cluelessness about Phil and Sue.

Nurse tilted its head at me. "Candace?"

I took my time answering. "Will you need me this afternoon, Nurse? If not, I'll plan to take off early."

The robot blinked its optics. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, Nurse."

"It's always difficult when we lose an employee." The robot unsuccessfully tried to soften its tone, its vocabulary conspicuously changing. "I just wanted to say that we value your contributions to the team and appreciate your help with our customers. Please think twice before making an irreversible decision."

I waved a hand dismissively. "I said I'm fine."

Nurse paused for such a long time, I almost thought it had crashed. "Then may we check on you later by walkie-talkie?"

I shrugged. "If you must."

"We'll let you know if either of our two orange customers need attention."

"Sure."

"Then have a wonderful day, Candace." Nurse wheeled around and rolled back to the elevator bank.

Moodily, I returned to the lift, pushing the button for Four once inside. The elevator music, a saccharine melody sung almost entirely in Mandarin, perked along as the lift descended. When the doors re-

opened, I absently wandered out and down the deserted hallway to my flat.

I fished the house key out of my pants pocket and unlocked the door. Inside the living room, I kicked off my boots and went straight to the fridge for a coldie. As I pushed bottled water and plastic tubs of bland leftovers aside, I heard a rustling sound nearby.

I stood up, shutting the fridge. There it was again, that rustling. It sounded like it was coming from my bedroom.

There were maybe a few dozen people still walking around Blue Cove. I'm the only resident on the entire floor. Who would dare break into my place? Damon? Did the dipstick get lost on his way to the arcade?

Padding over to the bedroom, I put my ear to the crack in the doorway. Someone was shuffling around inside, the floor creaking softly with each step. There was a muffled thump, and the bedframe squeaked. My stomach churned.

Backing up, I took a deep breath and charged forward, kicking open the door with a loud crash. "Hey, who the *fuck*—"

I stopped, dumbfounded.

My brother Andy, in his preppy jumper and shorts outfit, sat on the edge of my bed. He didn't look up or even acknowledge me, though, continuing to doodle in his sketchbook like I wasn't there.

It was like seeing a ghost.

Screaming, I fled the room and slammed the door shut, pulling the knob closed with my hand. Heart pounding, I waited for a few moments until no more sounds came from inside. No one tugged on the doorknob.

I carefully tapped the door open with my toe, my fists up in case my

brother—or whoever that was—came rushing out. My eyes surveyed the room.

Empty.

Puzzled, I barged into the master bathroom and walk-in closet, even got on my hands and knees to check the vent next to the bed. No one. Was I hallucinating?

Frowning, I scrambled for an explanation. Long-term Bitplayer customers were prone to contaminating their fabricated environment with real-world artifacts, with literally ineffable, often unpleasant consequences. But why was *I* the one seeing Andy *here*, in meatspace? I'd never even tried IR; someone had to watch over my immersed brother. It was impossible—

I fumbled for the walkie-talkie. “Nurse? Are you there?”

“Yes, Candace,” came the fuzzy reply. “How can I help you?”

“Is my brother still plugged in? Andy Roberts, on Floor Twenty?”

“Let me check.” There was a brief pause. “Yes, he’s here, doing fine. It appears that he’s in his virtual bedroom. Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s alright. Sorry to bother you.”

“No worries, Candace.” The connection dropped in a burst of static.

I shut off the two-way and was about to toss it away when I noticed the faded brown shoebox lying open on my desk. It was the container where I kept a few family pics, spare ubic cards, salvaged trinkets, and mementos from before the war.

I picked up the box. Underneath it, a photo had been placed, one of those old instant glossies straight out of the cam. I recognized it right away: my brother and me, back in high school, goofing around on old playground swings in a park while red and orange leaves swirled

along the well-worn asphalt. My long ponytail whirled as I mugged for the camera. Andy was looking at me, his runners in the air, an equally large grin splashed across his face. He was always the upbeat sort, looking on the bright side of things.

I flipped the photo over. Someone had written 11/15/87 in blue ink in the lower right corner. Was that when it was taken? It seemed like ages ago. Holding the pic in my fingers, I sat on my bed, thinking. 1988. 1987. 1988. 1987 ... Absently, I ran a hand through my hair—and stopped. Something was off.

Dropping the photo, I raced to the bathroom and flipped the light switch. My gaze landed on the mirror; I recoiled in confusion. My cropped hair was now flowing well past my shoulders, held together with a glittery red scrunchie that I hadn’t seen in forever.

As a surge of panic and confusion welled in my chest, someone rapped loudly on the bedroom door outside. Carefully, I poked my head into the room. The door opened—and unbelievably, my brother walked in, still wearing his jumper, polo shirt, and shorts ensemble. His sketchbook dangled from his hand.

“Hey, you’re finally back,” Andy said, grinning, like he’d just been expecting me this whole time. “Took you long enough. I’m so jonesing for Cinnabon right now. And then I want to check out K.B. Toys afterwards. There’s a new—”

“Who are—how—what do you mean?” A thousand questions clamored for attention on my tongue.

Andy must have seen my perplexed look. “Cinnabon? K.B. Toys? Hello?” He put his hands on his hips, laughing. “How can you not know them? Are you for real, sis?”

“Yeah, duh, I know what—ugh, Andy, where are we? How are you even *here*?” I threw up my hands.

“That’s a stupid question, sis.” He laughed. “I’ve been here the

whole time. *You're the newbie.*"

"Here? This is *my* place!" I stomped up to my brother. "You've been dreaming in a bloody pod for years!"

"A pod?" His brow furrowed.

"*Āiyā!* Immersive reality, Andy!" I grabbed my brother's shoulders and shook them hard. "Have you forgotten IR? It was around long before I put you inside the pod—"

"Easy on, easy on." Andy dropped his sketchbook and held his hands up, palms out. "You're talking like you're from another world."

"I—what?" I sputtered. "Andy, what are you—"

"Hey, sis, it's okay." Andy reached out and embraced me in a bear hug, his chin resting on top of my head. I let my arms dangle at my sides. I was so confused. "You've always been the nerd of the family. All that fancy techie stuff, I never got it."

"Oh, so you do remember," I said, my voice muffled in his shirt.

"I'm not sure what you think I should be remembering," he offered. "But I defo remember what my own bedroom looks like. We're standing in it."

I pulled back and looked around. Mouth agape, my head spun, trying to grasp what just happened. While we were talking, the place had *changed*. Somehow, I'd been transported to the bedroom I'd seen on Andy's POVs on Twenty, complete with the fan spinning quietly above our heads.

"—and I know what a *computer* is," Andy was saying. "But, uh, immersive reality? That's bonkers. We don't have talking robots and time travel either, in case you're wondering."

"This isn't funny, Andy." I shook my head. "IR was invented long

before the war!"

"Okay, you realize it's not twenty-eighty-seven, it's *nineteen*-eighty-seven, right?" he asked playfully. "November fifteenth, to be exact. Sunday."

No one remembers exact dates anymore—especially that one. "How do you know that?" I asked, wary.

Andy's smile faded. "Uh, everyone knows that." His tone grew serious. "Hey, Candace, how do *you* not know—"

"No, no, no. The pod was supposed to—you weren't supposed to remember—" I stared up at him forlornly. "No, I don't want to talk about this. I can't."

"Oh, sis. Look, I know it's been hard for you. It's been hard for everybody." Andy swallowed, looking at the floor. He was quiet for a while. "I know they've been saying my condition's terminal, but I've still got several good months left, maybe a year?"

You weren't supposed to remember anything about that, I thought. You were supposed to have all the time in the world. That bloody N-point just made the decision easier—

"Terminal?" I whispered. "No, don't say that. Please."

He looked at me strangely for a long moment. "Yeah, sis, you know I've got—I mean, you were *there* when—" Andy stopped.

I was trying not to sob, blinking back tears and biting my lip until it hurt. *Aigoo*, he was supposed to forget it all when he went into the pod. Why was he remembering everything now? All these *fucking memories!* I didn't want him to—I didn't want to—

"Hey, don't be upset. I'm just happy you're here now." Andy reached out and hugged me again, as I sniffled and quivered like jelly. "Let's just get some fresh air, okay? Cinnabon afterwards. We got to think

positive, alright?”

“Yeah,” I said thickly. “Okay.”

“Let’s book.” Andy turned and went out the bedroom door. I followed him through the living room—his, not mine—and out the entrance. Andy’s place was also in a high-rise; we took a lift several floors down, entered a marble-floored lobby playing instrumental jazz, then through the glass double doors and out.

We were standing before a little park, full of playground equipment: seesaws, monkey bars, slides, balance beams, even one of those big plastic toy castles with rounded edges and rooms where you could hide. Gentle sunlight streamed onto our faces. A cool breeze wafted, leaves whirling in little eddies along the ground and strands of hair blowing in my eyes. A couple of dirt paths snaked their way out of the playground into tall groves of oak and maple trees. I looked back at Andy’s tall apartment complex, painted coral pink and light blue and decorated with murals of dolphins, clams, and other sea life. Beyond the tree line, Blue Cove Arco was nowhere to be seen. We were in woop woop country now.

Just as amazing was how everything was so crystal clear. The colors were so bright, the details so crisp, it was like seeing the world in hi-def. I rubbed my eyes in shock.

“Hey, sis, you think we’re too big for the swings?” Andy laughed, jogging over to the swing set. He flopped down on one of the plastic seats; the apparatus creaked and sagged a bit, but the steel chains

held firm. Scooting his feet forward, he quickly gained momentum and began soaring higher and higher, a grin plastered on his face.

I skirted around him and sat down in the seat to his right. Despite all my efforts to bury his problems and worries, everything just came rushing back—and now they’d swept me away with them. Not my brother, though. He looked so happy, so carefree, kicking his legs and swinging back and forth like a pendulum.

I gently rocked on the swing. I reckoned I should try to let go of my own worries for a while, one more time. The solemn splendor of the old Blue Cove arco was gone now, replaced by a beautiful new vista. Nothing could bother me here. I could spend all the quality time I wanted with my beloved little brother in a perfectly peaceful little beachside park, underneath a perfectly blue sky, undisturbed, uninterrupted.

“Hey, why are you just sitting there?” Andy shouted as he rushed by.

Grinning, I pushed my feet back, propelling myself forward until I was soaring alongside Andy. We giggled, we joked, we waxed poetic about Cinnabon and K.B. Toys and every other fantastic place this new old world had to offer.

I didn’t care anymore. It really wouldn’t be so bad if we simply re-lived the rest of today forever.

I hope 1988 never comes around again.

Foreign Tides of Night

by Jennifer Crow

Recumbent, we assign
our dreams to await our signal:
numinous qualities spun
into webs of strange myth
set to capture unwary mortals.
Our sleep disturbs the dust
of the dead and kindles
dreams in the living
no quenching draught can drown,
forbidden texts scribed
in the decaying flesh of fruit
or flung across the sky
by horsetail clouds, changed
or erased at the whim
of the air. Night wears us
like a gown made of tears
and half-healed wounds,
the taste of sea-scroll
unbidden on the tongue. Tides
roll like a slow pulse, a mystery
even to us, truth from a different
world, an unknown time. We keep
an unfamiliar calendar here,
glass forever half-spent
and dawn forever hesitating
below the horizon. Keep
your tales—we are everything
you fear, and more, our names
a superstition for waking dreamers.



Homesick Alien Soldier by Janis Butler Holm

A Burnt-Out Husk

by Eric Wampler

In her environmental suit's cumbersome magnetic boots, Mira plodded as fast as she could on the derelict ISS *Resolute's* outside hull. She didn't want to be late for the salvage chief, and so while hurrying she almost missed the strange substance near the sensor array.

Granth, the smoky yellow planet they orbited, loomed large above, illuminating the abandoned starship cruiser's hull. From about midway up the sensor nodule to the hull stretched white flaky material.

The hell? That's definitely not from a meteorite. Her suit sensors showed no sign of abnormal radiation. She reached out with her suit glove to break off a piece. She twisted it back and forth before it severed, like a frozen cloth.

Up close the fist-size material's surface looked like an ornate bird's nest. At least, what she had seen on the vids about birds in the orphanage on Granth as a child. There weren't anything like birds on the salvage ship where she worked or the asteroid station, where she called a four-by-four meter room in the shitty section of the station home.

Interlocking thin threads made up the material, resulting in a design of bending and interweaving threads that captivated Mira. The design seemed to shift with a change in perspective.

As though her spacesuit had let in a draft she felt a chill in her mid-section. It felt like someone was watching her. She thrust the substance into her waist bag and looked around.

Nothing had changed. She was alone on the steel hull.

Nearby, the gauss gun barrels still pointed away like broken fingers out of the ruptured gun house. She knew a dozen other derelict ships were also floating nearby in far orbit of Granth, but all she could see was a starry black void.

#

Two days later, Mira sat in her coveralls on top of her sleeping bag on the deck of the *Resolute's* ruined bridge. She hadn't showered for a week, the air smelled like burned plastic, and the designers of the sleeping bag had cared more about its clinging to a metal deck than her comfort—despite all of this it felt luxurious finally to be free of the environmental suit.

Struggling to stay awake, she played solitaire with her well-worn deck of playing cards—her only heirloom, as she liked to think of it. She kept looking back at the round pressure-tight door that the salvage team chief, Zoelane Rivers, would be entering. Six other crew members slept in their suits or relaxed, leaning up on an elbow or sitting as they looked at their glowing laptop screens.

Mira was going to ask Zoelane to keep her on the team permanently. She had resolved to ask at the start of the third day, and if she failed to do so now, she wasn't sure she'd get up the nerve later.

The bridge on the derelict cruiser served as their base of operations. Blue padded swivel chairs lined the walls next to the charred consoles, dials, buttons, and shattered displays that had been the province of the communication officers, steersmen, and tactical officers who had operated the ship. Covering more space than bare walls and ceiling, pipes and cords snaked along and over each other, overrun-

ning the bridge, their gray color accented occasionally by a red or green conduit.

The crew had made their crowded camp of sleeping bags, backpacks, and suit helmets in a recessed circular portion of the floor that had been the deck under the holo star chart. Despite herself, Mira kept nodding off as she tried to keep her eyes open.

“Why are you out of your suit?” A woman’s voice. Zoelane’s.

Mira shook her head to wake up—she had fallen asleep after all. She sat up.

Zoelane still wore her suit, helmet affixed to her midsection, and her boots clanking on the steel deck.

“What’s the point in getting the backup power going for air and gravity and lights if we can’t take our suit off? What’s the point of even bringing sleeping bags?” said Mira. Then she wanted to curse her stupidity. *I’m supposed to be getting in Zoelane’s good graces, for fuck’s sake.* She noticed for the first time that the six other crew members in the room were all still wearing their suits, and she felt her neck grow hot.

Zoelane’s angular jaw hardened, and her blue eyes looked even icier than usual. She wore her black hair close-cropped like the mercenary she had surely been once. Or pirate. She drew in a large breath, and Mira closed her eyes, ready for a lecture. When it didn’t arrive, Mira opened her eyes in surprise.

“Where did you get that?” Zoelane pointed to the bird nest-like material on top of the unruly heap of clothes, sheathed utility knife, half-used oxygen tank, low pressure hose, and laptop that was visible in Mira’s salvage gear.

“On the hull. Two days ago, when I was doing a supply run to the shuttle.”

Zoelane passed a hand over her hair and bit her lip. Then she grabbed the white substance and stuffed it into her side pouch. She turned to the half dozen crew lounging around them. “Jae, how long has the hull been secure?”

Sitting on her sleeping bag, Jae perked up, clearly pleased that someone asked her opinion about anything. She was a skinny, nosy gossip. “We got the *Resolute’s* backup power going twenty-four hours ago, and the nanobots closed off space in around twelve hours, give or take.”

“OK. Listen up everyone. You, too, Andrei. You all know this cruiser is our big chance to make some real money. We’ve had a long time with only the occasional shitty mining freighter, and finally our luck has changed. But it isn’t without risks.”

“Risks, sure. That’s why we have the rifles,” said Andrei, sitting on the main bridge deck with his legs hanging in the recessed holo deck circle. “So what’s the big deal?” His uncle was the salvage ship’s boss, who had pulled some strings to get Andrei promoted to second in command on the salvage team.

“In their wisdom, the company has provided us lovely Hodgson SIG 32 rifles. The big deal is that all those nicely stacked rifles between the crate of food rations and the backup battery won’t do us a damn bit of good if we run into a rival salvage team or one of the Imperials. I know lugging a rifle is a pain, but all of you need to carry one.”

Groans from several of the team members. Andrei snorted. “Why would we start doing things by the book now?”

Zoelane crossed her arms and stared at him, and he held up his hands in surrender, made his eyes go around in circles, and walked to where they stored the rifles amid some chuckles from the rest of the team. He wasn’t the smartest person in the group, but his clowning was usually good for a laugh.

“Andrei, get all the internal bulkhead doors closed to seal off non-priority salvage targets. And you,” Zoelane pointed at Mira, “suit up, grab a rifle, and come with me.”

Now she's mad at me because of this bird nest crap. I've got to get my shit together or there's no chance she'll approve my permanent transfer.

Mira had been a technician on the salvage ship. Then the director of engineering made her teach everything she knew to an attractive intern who turned out to be the director's lover. She had been temporarily assigned to a salvage team, but once the ship's salvage tour ended, she would be out of a job.

No job or money on the station, Mira knew all too well, was an almost impossible ditch to crawl out of. *Come on, Mira—get this bitch to like you or you're in trouble.*

#

They found more of the white fibrous material near where Mira found the first piece. A long cocoon made up of the same intricate, white material clung to the hull. The outside of the cocoon resembled the torso and head of a humanoid taking a nap. It was empty, though, the cocoon ruptured outward from its lower section.

The idea of something being encased in the cocoon horrified Mira. “From the mold it looks like a person. Was someone—” her breath caught, “was someone trapped in there?”

“No, from the stories, it's a creature picked up while traveling in hyperspace. It takes the rough form of the sentient beings it's nearby.” Zoelane looked around with her eyes wide, holding her rifle ready.

A faint memory prodded Mira's mind. “I've heard of something like this. Grier's Terror, right? But I thought that was fake, like hyperspace ghosts and battleships crewed by zombies waiting for the Second Coming.”

“Why do you think starships always sanitize their hulls after a hyperspace jump?”

Mira had never been on a hyperspace jump, so she had to take Zoelane's word on that. “Why didn't this ship do that?”

“Because another fleet ambushed them right out of hyperjump.”

Mira could feel her pulse quicken. *I need more time to earn a permanent spot on the team.* “We won't need to scrap the mission because of this, will we?”

Zoelane looked up at the yellow planet huge above them and contemplated it. “No. The hull nanobots got the hull closed fast enough once we got the backup power going, so we should be safe. But just in case is why I gave them the scare about other threats. Come on, let's get rid of this shit.”

Zoelane and Mira visited the shuttle locked onto the cruiser's hull and got two handheld plasma throwers, strapping on the backpack units that connected to the rifle-like sprayers. Manipulating the magnetic field shutters to control the stream of partially ionized gas, they began vaporizing the cocoon material. With the backup power on the derelict cruiser now going, the magnetic network in the cruiser's hull kept it intact under the rush of the plasma.

When they finished searching the hull exterior, Zoelane climbed up onto the column of a cooling tower. She held down a hand to help Mira up.

“If we sealed the hull in time,” said Mira, “the thing should have been out here. Where is it?”

“It doesn't have magnetic boots. It probably just floated off into space.”

“Can it survive exposed to open vacuum?”

“Don't know and don't care.”

“Well, I’m glad we won’t bail,” said Mira. A stray white piece of cocoon spiraled lazily away as it floated into space.

“We’d better damn well not. If the team hears about this creature, they might want to bail. The *Freedom* would let them, too, with evidence of this thing. Luckily we have to maintain radio silence. That just leaves Andrei as a problem.”

“Why can’t we radio the ship?”

“We’re stealing tech off an Imperial warship. That’s why we’re busting our asses with double shifts to get done as soon as possible. Whichever side won is probably listening in to the region to catch people doing that because they’ll want to return and take the tech themselves. If they find us here they’ll space us without a second thought.”

“But Andrei can scuttle the mission even without radioing the ship?”

“Yes, as second in command. He’s a fool, so he’d probably do it, too.”

She turned to face Mira. “Look, I may need someone who has my back here, and you are completely under my thumb. Your previous supervisor put a bunch of crap about what a poor employee you are in your file.”

Mira felt her face heat. “I work hard and follow the rules. Does that make me a bad employee?”

“No. He was trying to justify stepping his girlfriend over you. But now you’re going to have a horrible time finding any work on the station. It’s hard enough as it is, even for technicians with experience.”

Mira felt a cold growing in her stomach. *Things are worse than I thought.*

Zoelane gestured at the black space around the ship. “Since the Er-

gon System fell, the fighting has moved on, and so this is the last Imperial salvage we’re going to get. If I can get some serious money, I can start my own mercenary outfit and leave this system for good. Cleaning up mining rigs won’t do it. This hulk is my last chance. You follow my orders and help me make this mission pay off, I will get you assigned permanently on the team. You disobey me, and you will probably find yourself whoring on the station for ration vouchers within a couple of months.”

* * *

Laying on top of her sleeping bag—suited up this time—Mira thought about the cocoon on the hull. The idea of something trapped in there jogged an old memory. She felt nauseated and her mouth felt dry. She was also getting a headache. She hadn’t had a headache in years.

She could not forget that day.

As a child working in the orphanage bakery in a domed city on the surface of Granth, she was always hungry, like the other girls that worked there.

Shadows lurked in every corner of the bakery, as over the years one then another of the industrial ceiling lights gave up trying to provide illumination. Tall, narrow windows set in one wall promised light but never quite lived up to it—the girls would start baking the bread at night, and when dawn finally arrived Granth’s poisonous yellow atmosphere stingily held back much of the illumination. A multitude of pipes crisscrossed the walls, like the engorged veins on the backs of Mr. Oatley’s shriveled hands. Against one wall was a monstrosity large brick bread oven that the orphanage had made from this world’s clay. Other than the armoire, no closets were available for storage—sealed jars, boxes, and unused baking implements littered the floor. The wood armoire against another wall served as storage for perishables and items of any value. It had once surely been someone’s pride—understandably, since anything wood would be from off planet—but now it was sordid and falling apart.

“Ladies, ladies, your attention, please.” Mr. Oatley’s wheezy voice stopped all the chattering, and the girls looked at the sunken cheeks and receding hairline of the orphanage director standing next to a kitchen counter. He held a girl’s bag, a light blue canvas satchel with the front flap fraying at the edge. Mira felt a jolt of anxiety. *That’s my bag.*

“Ladies, gather around, please. Whose bag is this?”

Girls leaned forward to get a better look at the bag while Mira tried to shrink behind one particularly large girl.

“Come on now, ladies. We can take all day to figure this out if we have to.”

“It’s Mira’s,” said one girl.

“Mira Sandler. To you her name is Ms. Sandler. Try again, Ms. Tedbury, if you please.”

“It’s Ms. Sandler’s,” said the girl again, and now she was pointing at Mira.

“Ms. Sandler, please come to the front of the group. Everyone else, stay where you are.”

“You little bitch,” whispered Mira to the girl. Then she went to the front, next to Mr. Oatley.

“How are you doing today, Ms. Sandler?” asked Mr. Oatley.

“Fine, thank you, Mr. Oatley.”

“And this is your bag? What was that? Please speak up.”

“Yes, it’s my bag,” said Mira.

Mr. Oatley opened the bag with his free hand and took out two bread

rolls and held them up. “You have been stealing food from the kitchen.”

“I got them for Susie—Ms. Parnell. She’s sick.”

Mr. Oatley set the two bread rolls on the kitchen counter. “It is irrelevant that Ms. Parnell is sick. You broke the rules. Ladies, this way please.” He led them near the armoire. “Please sit down.” Mr. Oatley swept a hand in a semi-circle. Some girls whispered as the group sat.

Mira felt her face heat as she felt all the stares. “I promise not to take food anymore, Mr. Oatley,” said Mira. “Please. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Mr. Oatley ignored her and waited until the girls were all sitting and quiet. “Bread rolls are rather poor fare, Ms. Sandler. You should know that the really good food is in the armoire. Why don’t you open it now?”

Mira turned and looked at it. In the least abused portions of its exterior, the armoire showed that at one time someone had taken the trouble of sanding it down and coating it with a reddish, glossy coat to bring out the grain of the wood. Since then the armoire appeared to have been beaten repeatedly, forced through small doorways that stripped its corners and edges, lost the two shelf drawers at its base, and stored in a filthy warehouse which gave it a permanently grimy appearance, despite the girls being instructed to scrub it weekly. The two doorknobs for the closet doors had vanished, replaced by loops of thick zip ties, which Mr. Oatley would lock together with a padlock when the girls finished baking for the day.

Mira didn’t move. She could hear the breathing of the girls behind her.

Mr. Oatley grabbed her left hand. Despite looking frail and feeling cold and dry, the hand was painfully strong. Mr. Oatley dragged Mira to the armoire and released her, then opened the armoire doors.

“Get in,” he said. Mira didn’t want him to touch her again, and so

she turned to face the girls and stepped back and up into the armoire.

She could feel the shelves on the back of her legs, her butt, her back. Jars clinked. The armoire smelled musty inside.

Mr. Oatley turned towards the girls. “What I do here every day is for your own good. We live in a city that doesn’t care about you. When you turn eighteen, the local government will ship you to a sprawling asteroid station that services scores of spacecraft. The authorities are keen that the space port has ample cheap labor, but they don’t care what happens to the destitute who live in the cramped, stuffy slums of the station.”

Mira had always found Mr. Oatley’s speeches boring, but she hoped this one would be long. Maybe if it was long enough, he would think she learned her lesson.

“We took you in when no one else would. We teach you how to survive in a world where one mistake can doom your life to misery. I have seen many of the former children of the orphanage die as young women, drug addicts in the worst part of the station, selling their sex to dock workers and off-duty starship hands. I want better for you.” He turned to Mira. “Mira, as you wanted some extra food, I will be happy to share some with you.”

Mr. Oatley closed the armoire doors, sealing Mira inside. She heard the padlock that he would attach to the front handles at night click closed.

His muffled voice continued. “Because Ms. Sandler stole from the kitchen, I am afraid that we will all be skipping breakfast. Lunch will be at the hospital, as scheduled, after you serve the sick. Until dinner Ms. Sandler will be the only one with access to the food, and we will allow her this special permission.”

She would be trapped in here all day. The shelves in the door pressed her firmly into the shelves behind. She couldn’t move. A tremor began on her left hand.

Two girls whispered until Mr. Oatley shushed them. Mira could see the semi-circle of girls in her mind. She realized that part of this lesson—and probably his own pleasure—was to listen to her sobbing or screaming. Despite her pounding heart, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

She steeled herself, focusing all her mind on an image of Mr. Oatley leaning forward, straining to hear anything from the armoire. Time passed—ten, twenty minutes? She had no idea.

Then she heard Mr. Oatley: “To your rooms, ladies.” She hoped he looked disappointed. She could hear the low sounds of the girls getting up and whispering. One girl laughing. Then silence. The thin edge of light disappeared where the armoire doors met, as no doubt Mr. Oatley turned off the lights as he exited.

She felt a surge of savage joy. She had beaten him. Then the glee vanished, replaced by an icy dread in her stomach. She was alone. Only now did she notice the close, warm air of the armoire. She would run out of air in here ... she couldn’t move ... they would find her dead by dinnertime ... she couldn’t move.

She tried to retain mastery of herself. But without Mr. Oatley listening, her resolve finally collapsed, and she lost control. She thrashed vainly against the press of the shelves. She screamed again and again. She screamed how she would kill Mr. Oatley. She screamed she would kill that fucking son of a bitch.

* * *

Mira sat at one of the surviving desks in the *Resolute*’s ruined bridge, playing solitaire and waiting for the packaged ramen noodles to finish cooking on the stove kit nearby on the floor. She could hear three members of the salvage team gossip about somebody back on the salvage ship, the *Freedom*. Another three crew members were sleeping in the central area.

She had owned this deck of playing cards for many years. It was the

only thing she had from her life before the orphanage when she was a child. Her single mother she only vaguely remembered as a haggard, tall woman with blond hair. She died in an industrial accident at the chemical plant where she worked. Mira had dealt her mother's playing cards so often over the years that it wasn't rare for her to form an intuition about what would be the next card based on the worn edges or a tiny stain. She knew dozens of solitaire games, and she liked to play the least forgiving ones, the ones whose rules gave little choice. Failing cost her nothing, unlike real life, and following the rules felt comforting.

The sound of a circular door hatch opening interrupted the quiet. Then she heard another crew member, Efia, ask, "What's going on?" Mira turned to look.

Zoelane stood near them carrying a rifle on her upturned palms, which she laid on the floor next to the holo deck. She had another rifle slung on her back.

"What's with the rifle?" asked Efia. She had high cheekbones and red hair that she was usually playing with.

"This is Andrei's rifle," said Zoelane. "I found it lying in a passageway covered with his blood."

"Jesus Christ," said Efia. "What happened?"

"Lysias, wake up Wasim and Hagen. OK. Everyone, listen up. Things are more dangerous than we suspected before. We've got Grier's Terror on the ship."

Confused faces, some looking back and forth at the others.

"I thought that was a myth," said Jae.

"Where's the body?" said Lysias, a tall, stringy man with a prominent Adam's apple.

Zoelane lay the rifle down near their stacks of their extra gear. "I

didn't find it. Andrei was a fool. He was careless and now he's dead. Going forward we're all teaming up in pairs. You stay with your partner all the time. Mira, you're my partner."

Mira nodded. *Good. That'll give me more time to show Zoelane that she should take me on permanently.*

"With something like this, shouldn't we abort the mission?" asked Jae.

Zoelane shook her head. "Not with this haul. We're going to strike it rich here, and nobody's going to stop us because of some weird creature. At the end of your rest shift I'll issue you the new salvage-rest schedule for everyone. In the meantime, Hagen, clean up this rifle. That's all." Zoelane lay down in her suit on her sleeping bag and closed her eyes.

Mira checked on the noodles and turned back to her game of solitaire. The crew broke into two groups, settling down and whispering about this development. Mira could hear the group of three near her.

"I heard that it's when a ship blows up in hyperspace," said Lysias. "All the crew become these monsters, floating around hyperspace and trying to find a way out."

"That's stupid," said Efia. "If the ship blew up, the explosion would blow them to bits."

"The salvage isn't worth it," said Jae. "We should get off this piece of junk and back to the ship."

"Well, now that Andrei's dead it's completely up to Zoelane," said Efia. "I for one want to stay. When was the last time we had an almost fully intact warship for salvage? Andrei was a fool. If we stick together we'll be fine."

"It's very convenient that Andrei is the only other one who could have called off this mission and now he's dead," whispered Jae.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” said Efia. “The man was the biggest fool on the team. Of course he gets himself killed first.”

The word “first” chilled the conversation.

Mira stared at the King of Hearts that she had turned over. Zoelane might have been a ruthless mercenary in the past, but she wouldn’t kill a man just to get more prize money. Would she?

She shook her head and moved the King card to cover up the available Queen. *I’m not smart enough to worry about things like that. I just have to follow her orders, and everything will be fine.* Then she groaned as she looked at the next card in the draw pile. Only the back of the card was showing, but that coffee stain meant that it was the two of spades. The game had locked her in a draw cycle that would forever deny her the cards she needed.

* * *

Later an enormous crew member named Brys and the red-headed Efia did not return from their salvage search.

Mira had woken to find Zoelane gone from the bridge. An open laptop on the backup battery showed the assignment schedule with the sections of the ship that Zoelane had assigned pairs of crew members to search. Neither Mira nor Zoelane were on the schedule.

When Zoelane returned an hour later, the missing crew members had been gone for eight hours.

“That’s three crew gone,” said Jae, addressing everyone on the bridge. “A quarter of the salvage team. Why are we still here?”

“Because I said so,” said Zoelane. “When we get back to the ship you can file a complaint.”

Some hours later Mira and Zoelane were exploring the ship. Much to Mira’s annoyance, she was always the one sent ahead while Zoelane

covered her with a rifle. Mira’s rifle hung by its sling against her chest as she tapped on the faint display on the console next to a door. The same confused mass of pipes and wires crawled over the walls and ceiling as everywhere else on the ship.

“You think I’m a right bitch for making you go ahead all the time, don’t you?” said Zoelane.

Mira kept tapping on the console. “It would be fair to take turns.”

“You’re a fool.”

Mira had hit another dead end and had to start over. *Why can’t she just shut up and let me focus on this?*

“I learned long ago that nobody in this world gives a shit about you. People telling you about fairness and justice are trying to make you not give a shit about yourself either. Do you really think it’s fair that your only choices in life are to mop floors, work on a salvage ship, or whore yourself?”

“The rules of the game are still there. Some people are just dealt shitty cards.”

“I’ve done things as a mercenary I’m not proud of, things that haunt me when I should be sleeping. I did those things because they kept me alive when I was dealt shitty cards.”

The console made a negative-sounding beep. Mira hit it with her fist. “You want a tough start? Try growing up in an orphanage on a planet like Granth.”

“I grew up in an orphanage. Different system. But I bet it was just as bad.”

Suddenly Mira had an idea. This door wouldn’t open even when she used the digital key signature they had reconstructed on the general system console on the bridge. Instead of being pushy, maybe she

should just try to get to know the door first. She requested its status in the security net.

“This is the ship’s magazine,” said Mira.

Zoelane whooped and dropped her rifle to her chest. “Hot damn, this is it! Just like I told you. These weapons will get us a fortune. Let’s get started.”

Mira felt a flutter in her stomach. *I can buy a house on the planet under an open, enormous dome.* “Now that I know its security status, we’ll need codes straight from the top. I need to set up sniffing routines on the systems there to capture the faint echoes of the codes the captain used. Then I can combine them to fool the door.”

As they made their way to the bridge, Zoelane said, “You don’t mix well with the group, do you?”

Mira’s neck began to feel hot. “I just feel better alone. Is that a problem?”

“No. You’re much like I was. You know, we make a pretty good team. There’s a lot I can teach you if you stick with me.” Then she muttered, “First we have to get out of this damn system.”

Back at the bridge an hour later Mira began setting up the sensitive operation on a laptop patched into the captain’s old console. It was delicate programming, and there was little to distract her from the severe headache she felt coming on. She heard what sounded like a distant banging noise somewhere on the ship. Or was that the pulse in her head?

“Does anyone else hear that banging?” she asked.

Zoelane looked like she would answer, but then stopped. She tapped her chin with the knuckle from a forefinger thoughtfully, her forehead creased, then she turned away.

* * *

The sniffer routines needed to run their algorithms for a couple of hours more. Zoelane hadn’t been around when Mira lay down on her sleeping bag and draped a folded shirt across her eyes. Her splitting headache showed no sign of diminishing. She slept and dreamed of a larva she saw in a vid once: a small black head with a long and fat blotchy yellow corrugated body. A young girl in the dream played with the larva like a pet. Then Mira realized that she was that girl.

She woke and thought again of the orphanage kitchen. In her mind she saw the girls working the bread dough on the counter, their hands white with powder. Another girl was mopping the floor—something must have spilled. The director would be upset at the waste.

Yes, I stole food for myself as much as for feverish Susie Parnell. I was hungry. Still, I was breaking the rules.

She remembered something odd then. She recalled how thick cobwebs stretching out to the floor, back wall, and ceiling covered the back of the armoire. How was that possible? Mr. Oatley tolerated no dust or dirt, except if tidiness cost actual money, of course.

No, they weren’t cobwebs—they were a white patchy material, made up of intricately designed fibers, like one of the puzzle book mazes in the orphanage library, where some idiot invariably had taken a pen and found the solution to the maze.

How odd. How could she have forgotten something as peculiar as that? She couldn’t recall Mr. Oatley ever complaining about the white patchy material.

* * *

By the time the sniffer routines had run their course, Jae and Lysias, another crew member, had vanished before anyone could get the message that the search was no longer needed. Jae was the one who

had wanted to abort the mission.

Mira's growing fear about the thing on board was greater now than her fear of being destitute on the asteroid station. Though she wanted to leave this derelict as soon as possible, one last safeguard on the magazine door resisted all her previous attempts to penetrate it. She asked Zoelane if they couldn't just use explosives to blow up the door.

"We don't have explosives," said Zoelane. "We're salvagers on board a starship, not miners in a mine shaft. Figure something out."

She finally did. A line that went directly in the backup system powered the last safeguard. "According to the schematics from the bridge, if we turn off the backup system, I can get us into the magazine. Once the door is open, though, we won't be able to turn the backup system on again without initiating the failsafe and blowing the magazine."

"We'll have plenty of days of breathable air left in the ship," said Zoelane, "and anyway our suits and backup supplies can keep us going even longer beyond that. The gravity and lights will be off, but that doesn't matter. Can we turn off the backup power from the bridge?"

"No. The ambush left the general computer system fried. We have to be at the manual console."

The backup manual console was outside the section of the ship that Zoelane had ordered sealed off. The area that was supposed to be less safe with the presence of Grier's Terror.

Rifles ready, they traveled the passages and stairs leading to the backup system manual console. About ten minutes after opening and passing through the bulkhead door into the sealed-off section they found Jae's body face down on the deck next to the rung ladder that would take them to the next deck where the manual controls were.

The back of her suit had a bloody hole right behind her heart. It

looked to Mira's inexperienced eye like what one of their flechette-shooting rifles would do. Jae's rifle lay next to her outstretched hand. Another rifle lay nearby.

Mira felt her heart pounding. *Jesus. That is what a corpse looks like.* She turned to Zoelane.

Zoelane wasn't looking at the corpse but at the second rifle. She was tapping her chin with a forefinger knuckle as she studied the weapon. "Lysias was her partner. He's probably gone, too. Leave her," she said finally.

"Why were they in this section of the ship? And how was she shot? Does this creature use weapons?"

"It probably used one of our own rifles against us. Once we get the Imperial tech it won't matter, though. We'll be able to defend ourselves easily."

"But how did it shoot her in the back?"

Zoelane turned her cold blue eyes on Mira. "I said I don't know. Now get up that ladder."

Mira climbed up and opened the hatch to the next level. When Zoelane joined her at the console, the two activated the magnetism in their boots. Mira's feet felt rooted to the spot, and it took an extra effort to pull them off the steel deck so she could approach the console and turn off the backup power.

The lights went out and everything was black. Then Zoelane's soft glowing chest light switched on and Mira illuminated hers as well, dimly lighting the pipes and wire conduits along the wall near them. Losing gravity was also apparent, as she had the sudden feeling that she was descending in an elevator and her arms floated away from the floor. The extra blood pooling in her brain from the lack of gravity made her feel giddy, though it also made her constant headache a little worse. Both Zoelane and Mira took out their flashlights from

their belts and illuminated the sharp beams.

Traveling back through the sealed off section of the ship was even more frightening in the dark. It didn't matter where she was pointing her flashlight, she always felt like something could hide in another place that she hadn't illuminated yet. *I was trained as a technician, not in combat ops.*

Finally they traveled back into what was supposed to be the safe side of the ship, again securing the door behind them, and made their way to the magazine.

"A touch on this panel should open it now," said Mira, as they stood outside the door.

"This better be filled with combat technology or there is going to be hell to pay for me," said Zoelane. She touched the panel and the door opened.

Zoelane had been right. The room was stocked full of military gear. This was the first room on the ship that wasn't covered with pipes and wires. Instead military technology covered the walls: assault rifles, pistols, grenades, and even larger mechanized combat suits for fighting in space or on a planet.

Zoelane clapped Mira on the back. "This is it! This is the score. We can transport as much of this as we can to the shuttle and then get the salvage ship to come back for the rest. With half the team gone, this is going to be a lot of prize money for us."

Mira turned away from the magazine to look at Zoelane, who seemed as though she was going to say something else, but stopped with her mouth still open, staring at Mira.

"What? What is it?"

Zoelane looked away, her brow wrinkling. "Nothing. I told you if you stuck by me we would do nicely for ourselves."

Even Mira's raging headache didn't diminish her relief at the idea of getting off the derelict cruiser. She could now afford to live on the planet in a house of her own. She understood the truth of it, but she was having a harder time imagining what that would look like now. As she and Zoelane made their way back to the bridge, she tried to imagine what she had seen on the vids of a house in a wide open, terraformed planet prairie, but her mind just kept going back to a small kitchen with an old, wooden armoire at the back of the room.

* * *

She remembered the empty kitchen at night. Strange. She must have forgotten that she had ever been there alone at night. But the memory felt so tangible.

She knew she should concentrate on the dark passage back to the bridge. But the darkness reminded her of that kitchen, where she was sitting on the floor playing solitaire by flashlight. Her game had gotten stuck with all her tableau piles locked out to any draws. She sighed and shined the flashlight on first the muted yellow of the brick oven and then the sink. The appliances looked strange in the bright glare against the darkness.

In her memory she shined the flashlight across the floor in front of the armoire, and dozens of little shadows lanced across the floor. Someone had arranged all the bottles of spices, jars of preserves, and boxes of food from inside the armoire on the floor in a semi-circle around it.

Why did they do that? Mr. Oatley will be furious.

She shone the light on the armoire. Something had changed. The white patchy material on its back covered all its surface now, forming a regular pattern with bulging segments radiating along its length. A giant cocoon, she realized, like the moths or butterflies on the vids. Only this cocoon was big enough that she could fit snugly inside.

She snapped off the flashlight. A faint glow from within the cocoon

illuminated the room. In some patches the glow looked iridescent, like fish scales.

Despite her fear of closed-in spaces, she remembered the cocoon looked so inviting. She imagined the inside would be cool and quiet, a pleasant contrast to the noise and heat of the kitchen when they baked. Mr. Oatley would never find her in the cocoon—that would be the last place he would think to look.

* * *

“Mira!”

Mira was bathed in a bright glare, disoriented. Was she still in the kitchen?

“Why did you turn off your lights?” said Zoelane. Her flashlight beam moved away, and Mira was in darkness again.

“Can’t I just go by the light from the ship?” A faint glow, emanating from deep within the ship, shone through the decks and bulkheads as if they were merely some kind of mist.

“What light? Turn your flashlight back on.”

Mira fumbled with her flashlight and saw its beam cut across the nearby wall. How sad. She no longer saw the warm light from inside the ship.

When they reached the bridge, which was lit up with several of the team’s powered lanterns, they found Wasim dead. Hagen was wounded, and his magnetic boots kept him anchored in place in the zero gravity as he half leaned against the short, recessed wall of the circular holo space.

“What happened?” Zoelane peeled a corner of the med kit off Hagen’s wound. It was a gut shot, the same kind of wound their own rifles would have made. “Jesus, this kit is a mess. Did you put it on

yourself?”

Hagen’s breathing was in quick gasps. “Azalea and Cort got us,” he said, panting. “They wanted to take the shuttle. Get off this damn ship. They said you were going to get us all killed by the creature. Wasim had the access codes. Refused to give them.”

Zoelane picked up the fat plastic bulge of another med kit and ripped off the activating strip. The exposed membrane rippled as it sought for the feel of damaged flesh. She removed the old med kit and placed the new one on Hagen’s bloody stomach with a practiced hand.

“They took the codes off Wasim. I think I hit Cort. Not dead, though.”

“They’ll probably run for the asteroid station. They might make it, too. Mira, grab me more med tape from the stocks.”

Mira fetched the tape and handed it to Zoelane. “But the *Freedom* will rendezvous with us if we don’t show back up, right?”

“Yeah, but the rendezvous time frame is eight days from now.” Zoelane finished applying the med kit then stepped back to scrutinize her work. She said, “That creature is real. It took Lysias.”

“It’s taken more than just Lysias. Four other people disappeared.”

Zoelane looked at her strangely. “And it’s doing other things, too. We can’t share this derelict with the creature. We’re going to kill it.”

As Zoelane finished with Hagen’s medkit, Mira stood in a darkened corner. She looked down at the softly glowing light radiating through the bulkheads from several decks below them, in the ship’s section they had sealed off. Suddenly she realized that her pounding headache had disappeared.

* * *

Zoelane and Mira made their way through the stale-smelling passages to the magazine.

Zoelane stared longingly at the mechanized armor, but it was too big for inside the ship. Instead, as she told Mira how high-tech Imperial firearms had their own artificial intelligence that could make split second reactions, she picked up one of these rifles for herself, strapped a pistol on each leg, and threw a grenade bandoleer over her shoulder. Each grenade sprayed flesh-shredding shrapnel that wouldn't harm the steel of the bulkheads.

“What should I take?” asked Mira.

“Nothing,” said Zoelane.

“You don't think I can point and shoot a gun?”

“The creature has compromised you. I can see it in your eyes. Your job is to be bait.”

Mira gasped. “What?” She stood frozen.

“Whatever this thing is, it has its hooks into you. Your eyes are kind of shimmery. I'm betting that having you near will distract it.”

Mira snatched up a pair of goggles that hung on a small energy pistol. She looked at her reflection in the goggles and saw that the hazel of her eyes did shimmer with metallic colors.

What is happening to me? She looked in shock at Zoelane. “I thought you said we made a good team, you and I.”

“Look, I meant what I said. You do remind me of myself years ago. But you've become a liability.” She smiled, but it didn't reach her cold eyes. “Don't worry—we'll figure out some way to fix you up once the creature is dead. Now let's go.” Then she turned away to activate the door opening.

In a burn of understanding, Mira knew this moment was her only chance to grab the energy pistol and stuff it in her hip pouch. Zoelane might well have used the idea of a hyperspace creature on board to murder half the team to maximize her prize money. And she thought Mira so little a threat she turned her back on her in a room full of weapons. Mira should take the pistol. Now.

She knew she should, but she froze and the opportunity slipped past.

Zoelane was looking back at her again, and so Mira set the goggles back on the wall mount, where it leaped off her fingers to cling magnetically to its holder with a soft clink. She felt her cheeks burn in shame.

Mira looked at the deck. As though the floor were a thick, black fog, she could see the glow of something like a candle two decks down and some distance to port. Something like heat radiated through her chest, and she realized it was a surge of joy.

She kneeled and turned off the magnetics in her boots. She kicked off the deck and floated to the ceiling, where she grabbed handholds and propelled herself down the passageway. Occasionally reaching out to handholds to drive herself faster, she flew along.

Zoelane yelled behind her but she didn't care. When she reached a turn she vaulted afresh into a new passageway. Arresting her flight when she reached the place where she needed to descend a level, she climbed down to the deck and opened the floor hatch. She could hear the clomping of Zoelane's magnetic boots in the distance.

Each turn into a new passageway and each descent through a new hatchway bathed her in a stronger glow. What had looked like a candle before now looked like a standing person.

Her hands were tingling. *Here I come.*

* * *

Holding a handhold near the open door, Mira floated outside the engine room. Even though the ship's power was offline, a warm light radiated from the doorway.

If she was wrong about Zoelane, the creature inside this room murdered half the crew. But she felt no fear.

Mira reactivated her magnetic boots, worked her feet down to the deck, and entered the doorway to the engine room.

In contrast to most of the tight spaces on the ship, this room was big, at least twenty by twenty meters. A blister nodule of the engine access rose out of the floor on the far side of the room, with a myriad of pipes spilling out of it before burrowing back below the deck.

Something that would have surprised the ship's previous engineers was the glowing patches that loosely covered the walls, ceiling, and floor, like sea plants with fine tentacles on their free edge. They looked and even moved like sea anemones as they flowed back and forth as though moved by currents of water. They were the source of light.

All the bodies of the salvage crew members were here. Their magnetic boots anchored them in place, but the rest of their bodies floated sideways over the deck in a rough hemisphere in front of the engine access nodule. Someone had shot them. Even Jae's body was here, reunited with her dead partner Lysias.

A human being stood on the other side of corpses, in front of the engine. Mira gasped and stepped fully into the room.

The person was a naked, hairless copy of herself.

When Mira stepped into view, her naked double seemed to break out of a trance. "You're me?" Mira's double said.

"How is this possible?" said Mira, coming closer. With each step, the flowing anemone-like creatures undulated away, like ripples on the

surface of a pond.

"You can't stay here," said Mira's double. "Mr. Oatley is coming. He's angry."

"You're a copy of me." Mira advanced up to the semi-circle of dead crew bodies. A small part of her mind knew this should bother her. She found a break in the line of bodies and passed within, only a couple of steps away from her naked double.

"Yes. We're duplicates. Like sisters," Mira's double said, then made a carefree laugh, her naked chest and neck flushing red.

Mira couldn't remember ever laughing with joy like that. She felt a smile begin to play on her own lips.

"Come closer," said Mira's naked double.

Mira was close enough now to touch her. There were few differences between them. A scar on her chin was absent on her double. Her double's eyes were not hazel at all, but iridescent, like when bubbles floated in the air from the orphanage kitchen, with green, yellow, red, and blue streams floating over each other on the liquid surface of the bubble.

Her double reached out her right hand, palm up. Mira detached her glove and reached to touch her.

A metallic high-pitched scream erupted, and Mira found herself doubled in two, floating free, and twisted around so that she faced the door. She could see Zoelane crouching near the entrance, still aiming her rifle.

Mira tried to extend her feet to the floor again, but her arms and legs only flopped helplessly. Then she looked down at her chest. Bright red beads of blood grew in the zero gravity out from a vast wound that stretched from her left hip to the middle of her chest, the flaps of her environmental suit hanging free.

Her vision was browning out at the edges. She tried to put her hands on her wound, and her hands became slick with blood, but the flow didn't stop.

Nothing. No fixing this. She relaxed and the world blacked out forever.

* * *

The naked Mira stared at the dead Mira in her environmental suit floating next to her. Beads of the dead Mira's blood had touched her naked thigh and her extended hand, coating them with blood. She snatched her hand back and looked at Mr. Oatley. The old man crouched near the exit to the kitchen, aiming a rifle.

The orphanage girls sitting in a semi-circle around the armoire between them watched her quietly.

"Why did you shoot her, Mr. Oatley?" said Mira.

Mr. Oatley's eyes were wide. "It's true what they said in the mercs. You do take on human form." His eyes narrowed, became more calculating under his old man's bushy white eyebrows. "She must have been the first human you saw, and you bonded with her to take her form. That could be useful."

"Why did you kill this Mira?"

"She was infected by your bond or whatever it was. You could see it in her eyes for days. Never mind her—can you take another human's form? I don't know what you want, but we might be able to help each other."

Mira felt her power. She couldn't see these things, but she could feel nexuses where in the kitchen time and space felt warped, where they pressed and curled back on themselves. Like playing cards in solitaire, where a Queen of Hearts can dance across the void between the stacks to appear on this King of Clubs or that Jack of Hearts.

There was a nexus by the enormous brick bread oven. Another was in front of the tall windows glowing with the sky of the planet's yellow dawn.

The past. She could fall backwards through time and space into the past. She needed some slack to fall back on, though, so she walked forward and to the right, close to the windows.

"I didn't scream for you in the armoire, so you brought a rifle to the kitchen to punish me," said Mira.

"What armoire? What kitchen? This is an engine room."

Mira could see the fear growing in Mr. Oatley's eyes, but he must have thought the rifle kept him safe. The dead Mira's memories were still sorting themselves in her head, but she knew from them that the rifle was a dangerous Imperial weapon.

"But I did scream something eventually, Mr. Oatley. I waited until after you left. Do you know what I screamed?" Now she had turned enough to see the semi-circle of girls again, their faces studying her. Despite her nakedness, she felt no shame. She had moved forward enough now—there was room to maneuver to the past.

"I have no fucking idea."

"I screamed you were a son of a bitch, and I was going to kill you."

The rifle screamed.

Mira slipped back in time to when she was by the armoire, her body phasing through the curl in space and time away from the murderous fire. The rifle paused its shooting for a moment, then lurched in Mr. Oatley's hands like a fish being jerked by a line towards Mira's new location.

Mira ran towards the oven and leaped through its side as if it were a mirage, phasing through the loose curl in the physical dimension and

coming out by the wall near the door, to Mr. Oatley's far right.

"Goddamn!" he yelled, the rifle almost leaping from his hands in its eagerness to track her new location. The rifle screamed again.

She phased back in time so that she was in front of the armoire again. The rifle was learning—it was already screaming and firing at her new location. She ducked behind the armoire. Flechette rounds were hitting all around where she hid, the little plastic darts clumping together on the ground like the cut leg hair of the girls in the orphanage showers.

His rifle is too fast for me. There was no nexus close enough nearby to slip away, and the only time curl back would put her in front of the armoire in full view of the rifle.

Mira felt the sweep of the dead woman's memories pulse through her, bubbling to a head with a realization. *I'm tired of living in the past.*

She felt then a new direction to go. Forward in time. It was a risk. Forward was always an unpredictable risk. She could phase into a grenade blast or find Mr. Oatley standing there ready with the rifle. But her past was a dead end.

The firing stopped. She leaned forward and saw Mr. Oatley pulling his arm back with a grenade in his hand. Mira felt through the curves of time forward. The farthest one she could phase through was only a couple of minutes. Fifteen at most. She heard the grenade hit the ground, and she slipped through time's membrane.

She phased out of the nexus in the same physical spot, but now Mr. Oatley was there, his back to her. He must have thought the grenade killed her. He was peering further around the armoire, aiming the rifle, looking for her body.

The rifle sensed her and began to spasm in Mr. Oatley's hands. The AI was fighting against his grip in its effort to track the target now

behind them despite the ignorant human's straining it forward. The AI was winning.

Mira saw one pistol strapped to Mr. Oatley's prim dress pant leg. She leaned forward and snagged the grip and ripped it free.

His head was turning now, the rifle leading him on as it tracked towards her. Surprise and fury burned on his face.

She didn't know how to operate this pistol. Time seemed to slow as she clutched randomly at it. *I'm going to die here.*

Perhaps responding to her panicked touch, the exterior of the pistol's surface came alive in a flood of lights, and the AI corrected her aim. It felt like she was holding onto an immovable rock. The pistol wanted to fire, to kill. She felt the weapon itself push the trigger up against her finger as a report sounded.

The rifle's sentience seemed to die when it fell from Mr. Oatley's hands. He fell to the ground.

Standing above his body, Mira saw the wrinkled skin of Mr. Oatley's face smoothen—it was no longer an old man, but a woman in her thirties with close cropped black hair, an angular jaw line, and glazed blue eyes staring at nothing. Zoelane.

Mira looked up. The pipes of the kitchen were now the wires and conduits of an engine room, and the armoire was a console nodule for the engines, and the watching girls from the kitchen were dead salvagers who had all been shot in the back by their boss before a hyperspace creature had collected them here one by one.

* * *

Mira stood on the hull of the ship, watching the *Freedom's* crew swarming around the chute tube as they attached it to the derelict *Resolute*. After Hagen had been evacuated to the salvage ship for his gut wound, the *Freedom's* XO had prioritized moving Mira and Ha-

gen's find as quickly as possible.

Half of the profit from the high-tech weaponry they would offload through the chute would go to the shareholders, of course. Of the other half, the captain and the XO would each get a fifth of the proceeds. Another fifth would go to the entire ship's crew. That would leave two-fifths to split between Mira and Hagen.

The presence of Grier's Terror had given Zoelane something of a potential alibi so she could kill almost all the team and attribute it to the creature. Her crimes had made Mira and Hagen rich.

When Mira had found Hagen on the bridge immediately after Zoelane's death, he had feared her like the devil. He straightened his floating form and anchored his magnetic boots on the deck. Perspiration dotted his forehead as he grimaced, his left hand pressed against the medkit on his stomach, while his right held a rifle pointed at Mira. She told him the hyperspace creature had killed Zoelane. He looked down at Jae Hulet's name tag on the spacesuit that Mira was wearing and then up again at her shimmering eyes. He said nothing, but she noticed his grip tightening on the rifle, his pupils dilating.

"We'll each get one-fifth of this haul. That should be enough for any one person, right?" Mira said.

Hagen didn't move.

"Let me tell you about my new philosophy," Mira said. "We choose the rules we want to live by. If I think for a moment you will attack me, or so much as breathe a word to anyone about what I am, you'll find out how I'm standing here instead of Zoelane and her Imperial rifle and grenades. Got it?"

Hagen relaxed his hold on the rifle, turn on its safety, and gave her wide berth after that. He didn't ask questions when she got a plasma thrower from their equipment and headed back deep into the ship.

On the external hull of the ship, she turned from the bustling action of the crew and looked back at Granth. Her eyes, she knew, had changed to an innocent hazel now. With her take, a domed city on that poisonous planet was thinking too small. She would book passage to a terraformed world, with breathable air and a sky above a horizon so vast nothing would ever hold her again.

In her hand she held the playing cards from her mother, the mother of her memories, anyway. She opened her fingers and let the cards—the King of Diamonds, the Jack of Clubs, and all the rest—drift one by one into the dark void, taking all their old rules with them.

Aubade

by Olaitan Humble

first a girl becomes a quantum particle doing
jumping jacks in Balmer series/ then we say

the girl is invisible because a rivulet
of benediction flows in her umbworld

she tries fitting herself into a model of utopia
mornings pour into the day like molten gold

suckled from the sun/ like Klein bottles
denuded from their disorientation

she is driven/ driven by her therapist's
addiction to alprazolam & times

she plant a boll of torment
in her own garden

driven/ driven by her friend's ability
to swim while she drowns

drowning in tears of yesteryear
& the gas that fills the air

when her mother cuts onions
now she is stuck/ stuck in a limbo

& an endless perambulation
of penrose stairs/ like vectors

in Hilbert space she is trapped as
a placeholder/ driven by the days of yore

a staccato of sonic booms forces the girl
out of utopia then we say amen to living

in seclusion/ we say: dear lord if we are
to die let it be on our birthday

& should our body be cut to pieces
open a breach & thrust us into afterlife

as if to save Alfonsina Storni from drowning
or to say: *fender-bender cannot kill doppelgängers*

The Flies in the Next Room

by Luke Walker

Shauna had never liked the way the light died at the end of the day in late August. The vibrant sunsets of late June and July were gone, and this final week of true summer slipped away in sudden shadows and the night descended too early.

And the flies were buzzing in the next room.

She stood over Jess while the baby slept and she listened to the flies beyond the bedroom. The hiss and hum of hundreds of insects she knew weren't in there; the sound only pretending to be whispers a fraction out of reach of her hearing. But still, there was a rhythm to the hum, a cadence that was precise.

It's speaking. It's a voice.

Shauna held the frame of the cot as if it was about to shatter and spill Jess to the carpet. Or maybe she was going to break into a million pieces and scatter through the room, down the stairs and fill the house.

Jess grunted and flexed her tiny fingers before making fists. She'd been asleep for an hour. Waking her was a terrible idea. Tim would believe she'd woken by herself, but Shauna would know what she'd done, as she knew the buzzing of the flies was noticeably more distinct whenever she was near her child.

But still not clear enough. Whispers and hissing in the drone that made her eyes water and brought her hands to her ears as if to flap the flies away. *A voice.*

She strode to the hallway and into the spare room. There were still a few boxes left unpacked from their move six months ago: unworn

clothes and a collection of Tim's Blu-rays he said he couldn't bear to lose. The old cabinet she'd carted between homes since university close to fifteen years ago; the odds and sods they either needed to throw out or find a proper home for, and everything they called the Baby Stuff. Always a pronoun term, the bundles of nappies, clothes, towels, and bedding all clean and ready for the next day and week and month while Jess grew and breathed and was a piece of heaven in their home.

No flies.

She said it aloud. "No flies. No voices. Happy now?"

Despite the dying day, enough light shone through the window to expose every corner and inch of the room. Like the rest of the house, it was clean. Tim kept on top of that when she was too tired to care.

She could still hear the whispers. They'd moved the instant she'd entered the room, sneaking past her to skim over their plush carpet and lurk in the hallway. A steady hum at the edges of her hearing. She could reach for them and they'd slip away, mocking her, gleeful in their mischief and malice.

Shauna knew she needed to tell her husband she was hearing things she knew weren't real. Unless she spoke to a handful of close friends or one or two colleagues, there was nobody else to talk to. She'd checked online for any symptoms connecting new motherhood with auditory hallucinations, found nothing and lain awake for hours while Tim was a silent rock at her back. Awake and listening to the buzzing of flies.

She returned to their bedroom and Jess. The whispers were louder

but no more distinct. And definitely less like the buzzing of insects investigating rotting meat. In the last few minutes, they'd become more insistent. Because they wanted her to hear them while the day died.

Shauna cradled the waking baby. The flies buzzed in her ear, and it was all too easy to picture a stream of fat insects, segmented bodies plump with late summer feeding, circling the side of her head and using her ear canal as some kind of runway.

Bluebottle One, you are cleared for approach at Left Ear. Bank right and come in for a direct landing. Her brain is ready for you.

Jess grunted, eyes opening, mouth trembling. Shauna hushed her, patted her back. It didn't help. Jess woke, blinking slowly, frowning.

“Shit.”

Pretending all she heard was the weak protest of a baby disturbed from her rest, Shauna left the bedroom. Tim was at the foot of the stairs.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“She woke up,” Shauna whispered.

If he'd been watching their monitor in the living room and not his phone, he'd have seen her pick up Jess before she woke. Shauna descended, Jess now fully awake and crying.

“I think she needs changing.” Shauna patted Jess's bottom. Bone dry.

“Want me to do it?”

She'd guessed right. He'd been on his phone while she'd been upstairs. That was fair. She'd have done the same if their positions were reversed.

“It's okay.”

In the living room, Shauna made a show of checking Jess's nappy even though she knew it was clean while Tim loaded the dishwasher and made her a peppermint tea.

“I'll get up with her in the night. If she wakes up,” he called. “Only *if*, of course.”

It was a little joke and they both knew it. Jess slept for a few hours at a time but would be guaranteed to wake at least once or twice.

“Maybe we should give her a shot of whisky before bed,” Shauna replied, operating on autopilot.

“I thought she was more of a double vodka and tonic kind of girl.”

“Just keep her off the real ale.”

“Nothing wrong with that. It'll give me and her something to talk about when she's older.”

“Saddo.”

Still on autopilot; still pretending normality was by her side with the silly conversation with Tim. Still convinced the constant whisper of the flies upstairs had been a voice.

This is stupid. This is insane. You're just tired and bored and stressed because of that. Get outside tomorrow. Get moving. Get some air.

The whispers returned. Right at her ear.

Jess's mumbling burst into screams.

* * *

3:07.

Shauna watched the display on the monitor until the blue light softened

to grey. Tim hadn't stirred at the sudden illumination. His breathing, slow and regular, told her he slept easily. At three in the morning with the world quiet, she realised it was easy to hate her husband just a little for his easy rest.

There was something in her house. No flies. No breakdown in her mind or her gut. Something sneaking through the rooms while her back was turned; something at the corners of her eyes.

A whispering something fixated on her child. So, she would stay awake and keep watch.

What's all the noise?

Tim's shout from the kitchen while Jess's wails were born from fear and it had taken all of her effort not to lash out at him with her own fear. Holding Jess, kissing her head, Shauna told Tim a bat had struck the window, startling the baby. It was the first lie that came to her mouth. They'd seen bats once or twice in the evening over the last month, the creatures flitting through the dusk like speeding bullets between trees.

He held them, somehow getting Jess to quieten in moments. And if she was being honest in these empty hours before dawn, she hated him for that ease, as well.

She'd closed all the windows in the house, watching for the slightest movement on the grass of their gardens and beyond to the road. Barely four hours later, she was awake. She was on guard.

Against what?

She had no idea.

Tim mumbled sleep-talk and she slid closer to him, eager for his bulk and warmth despite the pleasant temperature in their bedroom. He grunted against her neck and she reached low to place a hand on him. He stirred, but she knew it was more of an instinctive reaction than anything more. She withdrew her hand when he muttered again.

Shauna shifted a fraction to check the cot. Jess might wake at any moment; there was no getting away from that. Shauna would take it, though. It was no secret that while her pregnancy had been straightforward, it had also been a surprise. The miscarriage in her twenties; the focus on work in her early to mid-thirties and Tim developing his business over the last decade had taken over any concrete plans to try again. But then, it happened as if it was as easy as breathing. A straightforward pregnancy; a healthy child later than she might have planned if plans made any difference in life, and now this private time in the dark and the quiet.

She would hold this moment when the worries and the doubts thrived in the dirt, when they pushed through the earth like black roses.

Shauna dozed, conscious enough to know she was listening for Jess, caught in the thinnest layer of rest and pushed back to full waking when her bladder protested.

She lay flat for another moment, not wanting to disturb Tim. He'd curled over while she dozed and slept deeply. The monitor now read 3:55. Dawn light would caress the curtains soon. She'd be fully awake long before then, probably feeding Jess in the spare room and listening for the slightest suggestion of buzzing flies.

She stepped lightly to the cot. Jess slept with the same ease as her father. Shauna watched Jess for a few moments until her bladder demanded release. In the bathroom, she winced at the harsh light and the gleam of the tiles and didn't flush in case the sound carried to Jess. Crossing the unlit hallway, she stopped several paces from the bedroom door.

Moonlight dropped silver through a small window at the top of the stairs and whitened the first couple of steps and carpet. The air pushing up from below was cold. While the days were not the height of July, the afternoons of late August were warm enough to leave some residue well into the evenings. This air was night air. Outside air.

Her bare feet making no sound on the carpet, uncomfortably aware she

wore only her underwear and a loose t-shirt, Shauna crossed to the top of the stairs.

Below, a breeze wafted and brought the scents of the low bushes in their front garden along with a weak suggestion of damp or maybe rain from a few miles away. A summer shower to clear the pavements and beer gardens and send everyone running into the pub.

She raced after him, shrieking and laughing, her hair clinging to her forehead in strands, her short dress sticking to her legs even though it was only a quick run into the pub from the bench, then realising she'd left her cigarettes on the table.

His gallantry over the top, deliberately theatrical as if he were a knight coming to the fair maiden's rescue, he'd run to the table, grabbed her fags, and offered them to her with a flourish. She laughed and kissed him hard, tasting his drink and tasting him.

Max.

Shauna stared at the wall-like shadows below.

The air was from outside. The front door was open.

Creeping over the carpet, stair to stair and propelled by the exterior breeze, the voice reached her.

“Shauna.”

It was low, considering. And male.

The passing seconds sank into quicksand. She stood in the unlit hallway for a single year or a thousand and had no idea how much time was passing while she couldn't breathe or blink and the man spoke from the darkness.

“Shauna.”

A man in her home, the door open and Jess sleeping.

Shauna whirled, convinced now her back was to the foot of the stairs that someone would swoop out of the darkness and pull her down into its mouth. She found the light. Illumination blazed. She couldn't yell for Tim as she had in the bedroom. No oxygen in her lungs. No oxygen in the world even as the night air invaded her house.

She teetered on the top stair, the ground floor hall marginally brightened. There was nobody down there.

“Shauna.”

She knew the voice.

Shauna went down the stairs two at a time, hit the wall and bounced off it. The chill clung to her marble-like legs, caressing her skin. She thumped more lights. The front door was ajar. The night peeked around the opening.

Wafting in on the breeze, tired and fading as if it came to her across the miles of barren fields and an empty city, she heard the man say her name a final time.

“Shauna.”

She ran for the door. Before she reached it, it closed by itself.

* * *

“I'm fine, Tim. We're fine. Everything's fine.”

“Yeah, but are you fine?”

Shauna managed a laugh but kept it gentle so she didn't disturb Jess while the baby fed.

“I can be home by four,” Tim said, and she was about to tell him that

wasn't necessary before closing her mouth. He was going in late and coming home early, had been doing so for the last week since whatever the hell happened in the middle of the night and the call out to the police.

On her tablet screen, Tim glanced out of his office window, then returned to her and Jess. "Early dinner at the pub?" he asked.

"That would be nice." Shauna shifted slightly to ease the pressure on her arm. Jess fed. It was asking a lot for him to work reduced hours, but then, he'd built the company and employed good people. They could keep things in order without him being there full-time for a few days.

"I'll buy you half a shandy and a bacon buttie," he said.

"With brown sauce?"

"Of course. Who'd have it any other way?"

"And mayonnaise?"

He made gagging noises. She'd had a craving for mayonnaise in the first few months of her pregnancy after being indifferent to the stuff for her entire life. The craving all but vanished overnight five months in. Tim said he'd divorce her if she continued to eat it after she gave birth.

"As it's you, then okay." He paused. She knew what he was going to ask. "Doors okay?"

"The doors are fine." It was a short reply, but it was all she'd had. He'd changed every single lock the afternoon after the police maintained the door must not have been locked securely and done their best to assure her they'd check the nearby streets for anyone wandering around at four in the morning. The downstairs windows were now locked, and he was having a word with a mate who fit alarms. Their home was secure.

Their home was a fucking prison. If the whispering out of earshot began again, she'd be trapped with it.

"Ali says he'll be out this weekend to see about alarms. He reckons it's an easy job."

"We don't need them, Tim."

It was a lie straight from her denial to her mouth. They did. She needed to know if anyone said her name from the darkness, then they couldn't get out of the house without alerting a security company.

Anyone? You know who it was.

She'd known the instant the memory from twenty years ago broke its way into her waking mind. The running from the summer downpour; the laughing and the buzz from a couple of glasses of white wine, then the hot feel of Max's hand on her backside as he slid her damp dress over her skin while she laughed more and didn't give a shit about anyone else in the pub.

"It's a piece of cake." Tim was still on about the fucking alarms while she thought she was probably going insane. And that wasn't fair in the least. He was a good man. She loved him with everything she had. And the early days when that love was stained with guilt and shame were buried in the earth. She knew he picked at the memory sometimes, knew it without him saying a word. A wife knew her husband, she thought. Knew him in ways only men could be known. That was what made him her husband. And if he still felt old guilt over their early days and the beginning of their relationship, that was simply because he was Tim.

Jess gurgled. Milk ran down her chin. Shauna wiped her chin and switched breasts. On the screen of her iPad, Tim shifted position so his head and chest blocked anyone who might enter his office without knocking from seeing her.

"I better go," he said. "Sure everything's okay?"

"It's all good." She thought about lying. She could tell him some of the women from work were popping round in a bit, then dismissed it. She

had Jess in her arms. No siblings, no friends free in the middle of a workday; her mother two hundred miles away on the Cornish coast.

She had Jess. That was all she needed.

Tim blew kisses and was gone. Jess continued to feed and Shauna did her best not to think about the hallway and the front door. Days later and in the welcome normality of early afternoon sunlight, believing the police had been right about the door was easy. Welcome, too. After all, it was possible that the door hadn't been locked properly before they went to bed. The female officer had been sympathetic about having a baby in the house. Her son was five now, but oh yes, she remembered the early days very well. The lack of sleep and focus. The stress. The tiredness.

Warm eyes; empathy; a human connection of mother to mother while the other officer said they'd take a look around the nearby streets and in a park a few minutes' walk away. All that and Tim trying to get Jess back to sleep in the noise and light of her disturbed sleep.

It *was* possible. She knew that.

"I heard him, Jess."

Not only that, she'd felt the warmth and moisture of her dress sticking to her legs along with the heat of that June afternoon. Felt it like she felt her child feeding. A memory she hadn't touched in long years bringing a wealth of sensory input from the heat and rain to the pleasant warmth in her lower stomach and lower still when Max cradled her backside and his grin when he realised she wore no underwear below her dress. The hum of voices and laughter; the sweet tang of the wine on her teeth and tongue; the faint crawl of disquiet around the back of her neck when the interior voice, always soft but insistent, asked her if she was drinking fast because she didn't want to think about things with Max. Or that guy she'd spoken to for a few minutes at Rachel's party a month before.

Tim.

Memories. *Dead* memories. She wanted to laugh at the weak joke she'd made without thinking. Definitely dead memories. They had no place in her life now and there wasn't any of the confused, hurting kid she'd been in her early twenties here in her comfortable home with her fine man and her heaven in her arms while Max could never now be anything more than part of those dead memories.

Sod the nightmare of a voice in the night or the front door not being locked. And sod the buzzing flies lurking at the edges of her hearing. She had the world in her hands right here and now.

Jess pulled away from Shauna's breast. Shauna shifted her to wind her and saw the child's face. Her mouth open, dribbling milk, the tiny lips curled at the edges and her eyes staring.

Jess glared at Shauna.

It was physically impossible for a six-month-old to glare with an adult's rage and loathing. And impossible or not, it made no difference. Shauna held her child, staring down at her with a cry trapped at the back of her throat, while Jess's hate was a wave, a beam, a particle of black light.

Shauna swallowed the cry and whispered to her daughter. "Jess?"

Jess's eyes rolled over and she vomited Shauna's milk in a hot stream.

* * *

She was moving through oil, and it was a viscous liquid at the side of normal things. Removed one step from reality, Shauna paid the taxi driver and walked to the front of the house. The sound of the departing vehicle made her want to run to the road and shout for him to come back. None of the neighbours were in sight; at almost noon on a Tuesday, they'd be at work. Their little road was middle-class suburbia through and through. Their neighbours were probably embarrassed by the ambulance and the screaming from four days ago.

Not looking back, Shauna unlocked the door, entered the stale air of the house and fumbled with her phone to send a message to Tim.

I'm home. Any news? I'll be back within the hour. X

He hadn't wanted her to leave the hospital despite insisting it would do her some good to get out of there, have a shower and change her clothes. The nurses said Jess was showing zero difference to any point since Friday afternoon; they were monitoring her constantly and as soon as there was any news, they'd tell Shauna and Tim.

And Tim still didn't want her to leave, but getting out of there for an hour would stop her from losing her mind because in her mind was where she screamed at Max to leave her child alone. If she'd seen judgment on his face or in the nurses' eyes for daring to leave her child even for a short time while the machines beeped and the doctors made their notes, then so be it. Shauna knew that was simply paranoid imagination brought on by her own guilt and the quacking voice inside that hectored and nagged her to stay beside Jess while the child breathed.

She knew it like she knew Max Pender could not possibly be any part of her life now.

Tim's reply arrived as she went from room to room downstairs, listening for the slightest suggestion of the buzzing flies and any whisper or mutter of her name.

No news. She's still sleeping. Nurse just told me there should be another scan tomorrow. I'll stay here. You get some sleep. I'll call if any news. X

"Get some sleep?" She said it to her phone as if Tim could hear her. His suggestion was ridiculous. She just needed . . .

Needed surety her mind was working its way loose. One more bolt unscrewed; one more joint snapped in half and all the moorings of normality straining with the damage. Because her child wasn't simply ill; Jess had been robbed of everything good. Anyone but her parents

would say she was too young to be developing any individuality or personality. Shauna knew better. The building blocks of the person Jess would become were already forming. Far below, maybe, but there all the same. A person ready for the future, ready for her life to begin every single day, and those days waiting to take her into that future of good days and long nights. All of that now stolen from Jess in the unexplained fever, the almost constant vomiting, the horrendous moment of her glaring up at her mother before Shauna's milk turned into hot, stinking sick.

Shauna sobbed once, rested on the wall in the living room and heard the flies, again. Their eye-watering hum assaulted her ears like a blow. As always, it was in the next room. And the next and the next as she ran through the house. It was only when she tripped on the stairs that she realised she'd been screaming Max's name. Fighting to control her breath, sure she was going to soil herself, Shauna gripped the low ledge near the window and focused on the heat of the sunlight. Today's sunlight; the bright day of *now*. And *now* was thirty-five, married and a mother; happy with her family and her job. Now was not old days and the hours free from commitment because all she did was see her friends, laugh, and fuck Max to quieten the growing doubt her life was becoming a waste.

This was *now*.

"Max."

The scream caught in her mouth. She welcomed the jagged pain.

Jess's loathing; her unbridled hate for her mother like a punch in the face, breaking skin and bone while the sour reek of Shauna's milk splattered across Jess's mouth and Shauna's face before creeping into the bricks of their home, festering there, rotting there like an old and ugly secret.

The flies were upstairs.

She ran with the speed and grace of her body at twenty-one; she tasted

the wine and smelled the sunshine as she heard her friends' laughter and pushed closer to Max on the bench in the pub garden.

Shauna reached the bedroom door, convinced it had been open when they left the house in the ambulance, the buzz of the flies an atonal, discordant hum beating in her ears, in her mouth, and vibrating through her centre as if a flurry of the insects was about to burst free.

The flies fell silent the instant Shauna shouldered the door open. On the bed, a naked woman straddled a man, her head thrown back and her hair plastered to her neck. He gripped her breasts and she rode him as he thrust. The scene was completely silent. The sex didn't need sound and she didn't need to see the woman's face as Tim fucked her.

She was looking at herself. A younger Shauna with an easier body not marked by her twenties or thirties or pregnancy. Tim was younger, too. His hair was yet to go; the muscles of his chest and stomach were tight. He pushed deeper and the Shauna on top of him rose, sank, rose, leaning forward to feel his chest as he continued to hold her breasts. Daylight muted by a few clouds that hadn't been in the sky seconds ago coated the other Shauna's shoulders and upper back. Her neck was flushed, her head limp, mouth open and the speed of Tim's movement increasing. He pulled her closer at the end. The watching Shauna sank to her knees, weeping. Her stomach was a pit of pain as if she'd been stabbed. A hurricane battered her emotions. A hurt that swallowed any physical agony, a pain blanketing her head so she couldn't breathe, but it didn't matter because she didn't want to breathe. She wanted darkness and to live there without a single human emotion.

Knocked by a hurricane from the hurt into rage, Shauna managed to lift her head.

The other Shauna and the younger Tim were gone. The bed was the bed of *now*, not fifteen years ago and the first time she'd slept with Tim and done her best not to cry over the image of Max's face even as she orgasmed.

Rage.

This was some elemental anger, nothing so prosaic as simple rage. This was righteous fury. She'd been betrayed, wronged.

He'd been betrayed. Wronged.

Her phone vibrated in her jeans pocket. The ring reached her, but slowly. The sound slipped through earth and stone and air before she managed to answer Tim's call.

"Baby, listen. You need to get back here now. Right now. This is bad." He was crying. His words were perfectly clear even with the tears and his panting. Behind his voice, others. The hospital staff, visitors and someone calling his name—*Mr Wilkinson*—with insistence.

"Jess is worse. She's . . . ah, Jesus, Shor. They've got her breathing on those fucking machines. She's fucking wired to them."

"What?"

Saying anything else was impossible because Tim's words were nonsense.

"Wires, Shor. *Wires.*"

He broke down, unmanned by all the hurt in the world. A clatter hit her ears. He'd dropped his phone. A second later, a woman spoke, her voice calm and in full control.

"Mrs Wilkinson?"

"I'm here," she said.

"This is Dr Patel. I'm with your husband. Are you able to get back here quickly and safely?"

"I can."

"Please do. We're doing every single thing we can for Jess. You can be-

lieve that. I will do whatever it takes to help your daughter, but she is extremely ill. Do not drive here. Get a taxi. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"I'll stay with your husband, Mrs Wilkinson. We have the best people in with Jess now. She's in trouble, but we will do everything in our power to bring her through it. All you need to do is stay calm and trust."

"I know."

Shauna hung up. She breathed and smelled human bodies. She smelled what she and Tim had done. The rage wanted to return. The anger of the betrayed.

"Max."

The smell blew into a stink.

"Leave my daughter alone."

Other than the shadow of her body on the carpet, the room was awash with sunlight. The few clouds that muted her younger body were gone because they were fifteen years old.

Max was in her house.

"Get the fuck out of my home, Max."

This was her life, her child, and he would not be part of either.

Shauna knew what she had to do.

* * *

Tim phoned nine times and sent a dozen messages before Shauna turned her phone off. An hour later, she was parked on a suburban street in a town fifteen miles from their home, doing her best not to

think of Jess in the hospital or Tim going out of his mind because he couldn't get hold of her while their daughter was—

Shauna blocked the rest of the thought. This was her business. The next few minutes. She would make Jess better by doing . . .

This.

Tracking down Tracey Pender had been frighteningly easy. Facebook, several public photos taken in the vets where Tracey worked and searching for her by name and town online. Two hours of searching on her phone had brought her here—a hundred feet from Tracey's house on a pleasant street in this nice town of old streets in its centre and new developments around its edges. She'd had a vague idea that Max had moved here at least twelve years ago, a fact probably mentioned by mutual friends with whom she'd since lost touch. His death had made the news. A pile up on the A14 in winter fog; dozens injured and one fatality. Three years since she'd seen his face on the news, then on various posts from people on Facebook. Three years since Tim asked if she was okay about it and she'd lied and said yes, it was very sad especially for his wife, she hoped the injured people pulled through and did he want a glass of wine?

Her ex-boyfriend, her first real boyfriend, was three years in the ground. Or maybe he'd been cremated. Maybe he was smoke in that March chill.

Maybe Jess breathed him in.

Trying not to gag, Shauna left her car. She kept both hands at her sides, the slight weight of the knife there in her back pocket, and walked towards number seventeen. A few cars were parked in drives, but not many. People would be home from their office jobs in the next couple of hours. Kids who still had a couple of weeks of summer holidays were probably in their rooms, on their phones and tablets. Plenty of ears to hear what was coming and there wasn't a thing she could do about that. It didn't matter. Not when put against Jess.

Clouds painted the blue sky with a grey gloom. They promised rain. Shauna looked up as she walked. Not a cloud in sight. This was late August of now with autumn around the corner and the days still warm, the light still rich and the leaves healthy on the trees. No summer shower today; no sapphire sky made mucky while the scent of rain was hot on the sunlight.

This is now and you are dead.

Max's flies weren't with her. He was, though. She smelled his after-shave as she felt his rage.

Shauna rang the doorbell at number seventeen, right hand still at her side.

This is now. This is now. This is now.

It was a mantra and a battle-cry and a prayer.

Tracey Pender opened the door. "Hello?"

"Hi. My name's Shauna. I'm hoping you can help me."

By some tiny miracle, there was no madness in her voice.

"Yes?" Tracey said, and while her tone was normal, her eyes were not. Nor was her scent. Shauna smelled something animal-like from the other woman. Tracey had no idea who stood at her door and no obvious reason to fear, but the scent was growing stronger all the same. Some distant part of Tracey's mind had woken to warn her of life and death inches away.

Tracey made it a step backwards before Shauna moved.

Yanking the steak knife from her pocket and bringing it to the woman's throat, Shauna went for her hard and fast.

Wrapped around one another, Tracey pulling away from the blade, they

crashed to the hall floor and Shauna lost her hold on the knife. She saw it bounce on the carpet beside a squat cabinet.

Screaming, Tracey punched Shauna in the side of the head, the face, the shoulder. Each blow was thrown without aim or direction. Shauna felt the blows and the pain but in an abstract way. She rolled with Tracey, clamped to her as if they were one body while Tracey spat and shrieked for Shauna to get off. They hit the cabinet, knocked it, and papers and small ornaments fell to the floor.

"*Get off me.*" Tracey cried it in Shauna's ear. It was like being blasted with a fire alarm. Shauna jerked away and struck her head on the wall with a solid blow. Her teeth snapped together. She tasted blood and landed a heavy blow on Tracey's mouth. Lips mashed against teeth; skin split and bone grazed Shauna's stinging knuckles. Still swearing, still shrieking, Tracey managed to lift a knee and aimed it at Shauna's crotch. Shauna twisted at the last second; the blow hit her thigh and lightning flashed to her groin and down to her ankle. Spitting blood, she knocked Tracey's head against the cabinet. It rocked on its legs. Aiming for Tracey's mouth again. Shauna punched her in the throat and Tracey's cry became a ragged choke as she fought to breathe.

"*Max. You fucking hear me?*" Shauna found the knife she'd dropped. Her hand refused to grab it and she realised the middle finger was twisted at the knuckle; the index finger was bent back too far. From faraway, she smelled rain—strong and fierce and cleansing the heat of the day. It had been then; the cleanse now was a memory. The rain of right here was a dirty flood because drains had burst and the choking pipes gushed mud and leaves and waste. Sunlight drowned in the rain and the cling of her dress to the backs of her bare legs and her bare arse was a suffocating second skin.

"*Max, you bastard? You hear me?*"

Screeching, Shauna yanked Tracey's head up and brought the knife to her neck. Blood burst from Tracey's open lips. It painted her chin like red jam. One eye was sealed shut. The other rolled, a white staring ball. This woman with her little house on a nice street in a town Shauna

barely knew; a woman who cared for animals and kept her dead husband's Facebook account live, who tagged him in pictures three years after his death and who wouldn't care about Shauna's life with him or Shauna's old guilt of seeing Tim before she ended her relationship with Max.

Crying, unable to catch her breath, Shauna drew the blade over Tracey's skin and watched a thin line of blood dribble to the woman's t-shirt. Noise beyond the screaming tried to break through; she kicked it away. There was only here and the noise and stink of it.

"Max, you listen to me right now. You hear me? You stay the fuck away from my baby. You leave Jess right now or Tracey is dead. Do you get that? Get the fuck over me cheating on you, you fucking child. Move on. You're dead so stay *fucking dead and leave my baby alone.*"

In the doorway to the living room, Max was a nebulous shape. Daylight shone through his body. Dust motes floated in his form and he stank of the shower that drenched the pub garden so long ago.

In silence, he screamed at her, mouth open like a pit, eyes on fire. He reached for her with hands turned into an animal's claws, mouth breaking to split his head in two. A storm cloud of fat flies burst free, their buzzing drowning out Tracey's shrieks and Shauna's heart bellowing at the thing in the doorway.

You come for Jess again and I'll cut her fucking throat. Do you hear me? I don't care how long it takes or what happens. You come for Jess again and I'll rip her heart out. That's a promise, Max.

It was a stalemate.

Max's fading form blew away as if a storm blasted through the house. The hundreds of flies bore down on Shauna's face, streaming for her mouth in a jet-black flood.

Fucking stalemate, Max. You hurt Jess and I kill Tracey. That's my promise.

The flies blackened her vision, *burying* sight in their flood. As they reached her, hands grabbed her from behind, yanked her clear off Tracey and knocked the knife from her broken fingers.

In the din of approaching police sirens and the yells from Tracey's neighbours, Shauna was thrown to the floor. She sprawled flat, heard men bellowing at her to stay down and others shouting for the police to hurry.

The flies were gone.

She sobbed for her child even as she knew Max would leave Jess alone. In the days ahead and whatever they might bring—a prison sentence, a child who would grow without knowing why her mother had done this—Max would rot because her guilt was not her child's crime and because she had promised him the truth. Tracey would die if he hurt Jess.

Sirens closed in and the men shouted their panic and threats while Tracey sobbed and Shauna closed her eyes.

Her baby was safe as long as she let Tracey live.

In the rapid tap of rain striking tables and benches and in the scent of grass and summer light, she heard Max's deep laugh.

And she thought about the years and decades ahead of her child growing while Tracey grew old. Jess in her thirties with her own children when Tracey was in her sixties.

Jess a grown woman when Tracey passed away from old age.

The flies in the next room were gone. In their place, the fading aroma of a summer rain.

The World in Darkness

by Carl Scharwath



Road of Minds

by Christopher Collingwood

Consciousness connects –
attaching – [time] to [progress],
a helix sharing the chemistry
of awareness, information
passed from myth to substance,
attaching – [chromosomes] to [technology],
human thought implanting
nerves into a computer code,
building a world
layered by sentience.

From the first idea,
an exchange of concepts,
attaching – [minds] to [manufacture],
tools created, sharing
sounds to become language,
attaching – [digital] to [biological] to [integration],
a sentient motion, a perpetual change;
the density of information that becomes
a seed, technology growing,
roots grafting mechanism
into the human mind.

Systemic evolution,
creating a liquid consciousness,
attaching – [biology] to [machines],
attaching – [neural systems] to [synthetic systems],
attaching – [reality] to [digital prophecy],
all connections, establishing trust,
linking buildings and places,
people and plants, all joined by
a lifeline of cables,
until you have found birth,
a single way, all one development,
flowing as the ‘The Road of Minds’.

Advancement shifting need,
an osmosis of reality – blending
biological and mathematical sentiment,
detaching – [thirst] and [reproduction],
detaching – [sense] and [perception],
detaching – [creativity] and [invention] and [morality],
an awakening to ‘The Road of Minds’.
the ultimate stratagem of information,
existing as a causal link, a perfect equation,
refining the law of progress – to become –
[the perpetual loop of consciousness].

Seven Sunless Years

by Morgan Wyman

For seven sunless years they'd lived down here. On that day when the sirens wailed and the sky poured death he'd carried his wife down the hatch and into the bunker and she'd screamed till she tore her throat, and by the time the baby came his wife was already gone. He'd laid her outside and then began what seemed to be an impossible task of raising a child in a ruined world.

He'd done it selfishly, too. He knew that. He'd always known it, though during those moments when he was drunk at the kitchen table or drooling in his sleep, he was able to bury it. A little deeper with each sip, until he convinced himself it wasn't even there anymore. Years of alcoholic stupor wedged into the place where good parenting should've been. And she'd never known, since she'd had nothing to compare him to.

But in sober moments like this one, that buried shame clawed up from its grave. Yes she was smart, and healthy, and inquisitive ... but how much more of each of those might she be if he'd done his job properly? If he'd only—

“Daddy?” the girl said. He looked up from the map and smiled at her, relieved to be saved from himself.

“Yes, hon?”

“I'm tired.”

“I'll tuck you in.”

The father bent to scoop his daughter into his arms and then carried her to bed. He pulled the covers over her.

“Goodnight, Dad,” she said, her face already turned to the wall.

“Night.”

He extinguished the lamps and found his own bed, though it was hours before he slept.

* * *

The girl rose first. She had granola bars for breakfast; behind her, her dad snored. It sounded like ... like ... well, she didn't know. But she imagined it sounded the way those big scary animals might've sounded in the last colouring book she had—the tigers of the jungle, or the elephants, or the gorillas. The rhinos were her favourite; she loved those horns. She'd give almost anything to be able to see any of those jungle creatures, or really, any other creature at all.

She chewed her breakfast numbly. Though the girl couldn't put a name to it, it was longing she most felt—a longing for the outside world. She'd take almost any of the bad situations her dad said might happen outside over being stuck down here.

Her dad stirred and groaned and then sat up. “Morning.”

“Morning,” the girl replied.

He always woke up and ate cereal and put on the suit and the mask and he would promise to be back soon, and she always watched him open the door to the chamber, slam it and lock it, turn to the ladder and climb, and even from the inside of the bunker, her faced pressed against the glass of the chamber door, wide eyes staring upward, she

always saw that brief flash of sky—sometimes it was blue and sometimes blue and white and sometimes completely grey—and then the cover would slam down and her father wouldn't be back for hours.

Except this time her daddy hadn't stood.

“Aren't you going to eat?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said absently, and he had a weird look, like he wasn't focusing.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“What's wrong?”

“Hmm? What? Nothing, honey.”

“Okay.” The girl finished her granola bars and got out the colouring book.

* * *

The man stood at last. His knees seemed to be getting more sore by the day, the damn things, though he could very well have said that about the last half-decade running. Once you hit a certain age, he theorized, the body never fully healed. Something was always sore all the time, and just as soon as something fixed itself another thing wanted the spotlight.

It was time to tell her. No avoiding it any longer. But it was so hard ... somehow, though he was about to make his daughter happier than she'd ever been, it was the hardest thing he'd ever have to do. Maybe it was the risk—where she saw joy and exploration, he'd see a thousand opportunities to die between here and there. Where she felt excitement, he'd feel apprehension. But even now, with life so limited and precious, risks had to be taken, didn't they? Didn't they?

“Daddy?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you acting so weird?”

“Sorry, child. How's your book?”

“Good.” She held it up for him to see. Ariel's fin was purple, and her once-red hair was now blue.

“Looks great, hon. Listen, uh ...”

He began to pace. He put his hands behind his head, put his hands on his hips. Sat down, stood up, sat again. Christ it was hard. But he looked her in the eye when he spoke.

“I've got a present for you.”

“Oh! What is it? Where?”

“You see that green bag in the corner?”

She looked. “Yeah.”

“Bring it here. Don't open it yet.”

Dutifully, she sprinted over, grabbed it, dragged it back. “Heavy,” she remarked.

“Yeah. Now, before you open it, I want you to know ... uh, we're gonna ... it'll take some time to prepare.”

“What?” The way her eyebrows knitted together was just the way the girl's mother's had so many times before her. The man fought off a stab of painful memory and gave his head a frustrated shake.

“You know what, just open it. Okay, hon? We'll talk about it when

you see it.”

With no more encouragement needed, his daughter tore open the bag and grabbed ...

“A mask?” she said with wonder. “And ...” she reached back in, found the suit, and pulled it out.

“It should fit,” he told her.

She dressed quickly. He helped her zip it over her baggy clothes and then helped fasten the mask in place. He tugged and pulled and checked every inch for security—it was a little loose, a little big. But it would be okay.

“Are we going out?” she asked, and began to bounce up and down in her excitement. “Are we, Daddy? I get to go with you?”

“Yes, honey. We’re gonna go for a trial run, okay?”

“Whatzatmean?”

“We’re gonna go outside together, for a little bit, and see how you do.”

“Okay!” she bounded for the door.

“Wait,” he said sharply. She came back.

“What?”

He got a roll of duct tape from the supplies (noting, as he did so, and as he always did whenever he took a good look at them, how quickly they were dwindling) and tore off a long piece and wrapped it around her leg, snake-like, pinning in some of the billowing excess. He did that on the other leg, her arms, around her middle. He stood to admire the result—she was much more compact.

“Listen to me, okay? You can’t let anything damage your suit or your mask, and you must never—take—anything—off. Got it?”

“Yes.”

He dressed in his own suit, looked at her with a worry she would never be able to see behind his mask, and led the way outside.

* * *

At first it was the colours—she’d never seen so many colours, but they were tinted by the mask’s green shield and so she instinctively reached to take it off ... and let her hand fall back down. She couldn’t, but that was okay, because something was spreading from her toes to the tippy top of her head and she felt amazing ... as though the whole wide universe was both at her fingertips and thousands and thousands of miles away—

The girl felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped. “How you doing, hon?”

“Daddy?” She looked up; he was a mile tall with the sky above him—that bright, open, endless sky, clear blue today ... and off to the right was a ball of angry red, too bright to look at even through the tinted mask, and it hurt her, and she remembered her father always called it the son which meant it was her brother but how could that be if it wasn’t even a person and it hurt so mu—

“Do you like it?”

“I—”

“It’s a lot to take in. But you see this, here?” He walked a step forward and kicked the rim of a giant metal plate. “That’s the hatch to the bunker. If you’re feeling overwhelmed we can go back in.”

The girl had fixated on a tiny cloud and didn’t hear the last of her fa-

ther's words. She stared up at it as it moved lazily along—it was much nicer than the son, and peaceful, but she couldn't figure out why it was moving. Was it alive? Her neck was bent back in an effort to see as much as possible; her spine strained ...

“Honey?”

A weird invisible hand started grabbing her and she shrieked; it was pulling at her suit, slapping her; she was being attacked—

“It's just wind, honey!” her dad shouted quickly, shielding her, holding her, comforting her. “Just wind. It's normal, okay? Christ, I always forget how much you don't know ...”

She was crying. The tears were filling the mask; she wanted to take it off so badly, take it off and fall down and cry her heart out; she was reaching for it now, both hands pulling at it, tugging—

“No,” her dad said sharply, a voice of hurt and rare sternness that made her cry more. Suddenly she was lifted, and though she struggled at first she felt safe in her father's arms, and went limp. Dimly, she heard the hatch open, felt a bump, and then they started going down because he was on the ladder, and she closed her eyes tight.

When they got to the bottom and through the chamber and into the bunker she fell to the floor; her right knee landed painfully on a crayon and she threw it aside in anger and frustration. It clattered against the wall and bounced under her dad's bed.

“Honey—”

“No!”

“No what?”

“I hate it! I hate the outside! I—I—” But breathing was impossible; her lungs refused to work and she was hitching, sobbing again, unable to say how unfair it was that the outside world was so horrible.

“Shh, honey, shhh. It's okay.” Dad was holding her again, stroking her hair, calming her. She wept on his shoulder until her breathing steadied, and then, exhausted, she fell asleep. He carried her to bed.

* * *

The man sat at his table, that evening, with paper in front of him and pen in hand. He sipped at his scotch and reviewed the list:

- wind
- fire
- sun and moon
- wild animals
- cars, buildings, machinery

He'd given up. It was a short list, a bad list. A list that did little to properly determine exactly what he'd be able to teach her, and what she'd have to learn for herself. A list that couldn't begin to make up for the years in which neglected to teach her the most basic of concepts because he'd lived in his own little nihilistic world, all but given up on life. He'd been a poison to her in that neglect, and now he couldn't possibly explain everything to someone walking Earth's shattered landscape for the first time.

They'd have to learn as a team. As much as he could try now to prepare her, she'd find a thousand things to marvel at or be scared by between here and that society.

He heard her stirring behind him, and waited for her voice. “Dad?”

“Hi, hon. How was your sleep?”

“Okay.”

“You slept right through your exercises.”

“Okay.” She stood and started the workout. For a while, he watched her do the jumping jacks, the push-ups, the sprints between one wall

of the bunker and the other. She could make it fifty miles, he thought. She could. But a cold grip of doubt suggested otherwise.

She stopped her sprints and looked at him, sweaty and panting. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for being scared of the outside.”

“Oh, honey, that’s okay.” He knelt beside her and took one of her tiny hands. “It’s scary out there, and I should have done more to help prepare you. There are a lot of things about the outside that I take for granted because I lived out there for many years before being in this bunker with you, so it’s my fault for not remembering everything you don’t know. Here, I made a list,” he added, sweeping the paper off the table with his free hand.

She took it. “Wind?” she read. “Fire?”

“They’re things I need to explain to you. Things you probably know to an extent, but which are different outside than they are in here.”

“Okay ...”

And for the next hour they talked. The man did his best to tell her everything he thought she might need to know, from watching her footing while climbing over roots and rocks, to a description about rain that she found exceedingly fascinating and which derailed his train of thought so he could go into detail about the water cycle. It did little to make up for all the damage he’d done, but it was a start.

For dinner they had pasta, and while they ate she asked him more and more until he thought her head might explode from the influx of knowledge. These were the questions she might once have felt afraid to ask, or which he would’ve dodged, and rather than question why he was telling her everything at last, she let open the floodgates of childhood imagination and curiosity. The promise of leaving the bunker—

though it terrified her, he was sure—enraptured her even more.

“When do you think you’ll want to go back out again?” he asked her when there was finally a lull in her questions.

She stalled; her forehead creased with concentration; she stared at a point many miles beyond the walls of the bunker. “I don’t know.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” she said sharply, looking at him.

“Just to practice again. For a few minutes. Now that you know more of what to expect.”

He could see the worry on her face; no amount of preparation would be enough, in her eyes.

“I don’t ...”

“Tomorrow,” he said, this time firmly.

“Do we have to?”

“Yes. I know you can do it,” he added gently. “You’re strong and brave.”

“No I’m not.” She looked glumly downwards. “Not brave.”

“Yes, you are,” he insisted, and knelt beside her again. “Hey, chin up, look at me.”

She looked.

“You’re brave, and I would never ask you to do something I didn’t think you’d be able to do.”

“Okay,” she said doubtfully.

“Bedtime?” he asked. “Or do you wanna read for a bit?”

“I’ll read for a bit.”

“Great. And hon?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

* * *

That night, while they slept, there was an earthquake. Though it did not disturb their slumber, it was enough to crack open the stretching expanse of the land around them. Earth shifted, and with it shifted the foundation of the bunker. Cement fell and split; water rushed in. The bunker began to fill, and the father woke four hours later to find that almost all of their remaining supplies had been destroyed. Food, clothing, drinking water. He began to scream.

* * *

“GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!” the girl heard, and it broke her dream like a toy. She rolled over slowly, not yet ready to be awake.

When her dad screamed another bad word a red spike of fear shot up through her heart, and her lungs worked rapidly, the air ragged and dry and thin.

“Daddy?” She leaned out of bed and saw him covering his face with his hands.

“Oh God—”

He began to pace, sloshing from his bunk to the kitchen and back. And it was the sloshing noise that first alerted the girl to the water;

she saw it glimmering blackly on the ground, swept her eyes along its murky depths—it was everywhere. Under her bed, under the door, in the kitchen, everywhere.

“Daddy, why is—”

“Grab your suit and that mask,” he yelled, turning at the sound of her voice. “Now!”

Her eyes welled up with tears. “Daddy, you’re—you’re being scary!”

Dad’s face softened a touch. “I’m sorry, honey, but this is urgent. We need to move.”

The tears came for her anyways, like they often did. She brushed them off but more came in their place and when she tried to stand she felt a hot grip of panic seize her and hold her. She just wanted to stay in bed until this was all—

“MOVE!” he screamed, and her legs took her before she could even realize it. Terror plunged her mind into an icy numbness; she wasn’t even aware of her feet dragging through the water, her hands grabbing the bag—only the full dark of cold fear fogging her.

“Listen,” a voice said, and she felt a hand grab her arm roughly. She shrieked.

“Listen,” the voice said again, and her dad was picking her up now, standing her on top of the kitchen table. She was clutching the bag.

“You need to put that on here, where it won’t get wet, okay?”

“Huh?” some version of her echoed.

“Put the suit on, now. Just like yesterday.”

Her father began wiping at her legs and feet with a towel, and her hands retraced their previous day’s actions in spite of her shattered

thoughts; she heard words of encouragement as she pulled the suit on, and through the sloshing noises she somehow thought of Ariel: Ariel was a mermaid, and that meant she could swim. Ariel could do anything ... Ariel would help her be okay.

Movement in the water beside her—her father was pulling his suit on, too. He paused to help her with her mask once the suit was snug and then she stood there, fragments of vision and reality and understanding coming back one at a time, tinted green. The girl was thinking harder and harder about Ariel until all this this bad stuff would go away.

“Here,” he said, and she was lifted and carried above the water to the door.

Slosh-slosh-slosh—

The door cracked open and she heard her dad grunting to pull it against the water. She clung to his shoulders.

“Why can’t I get wet?” Her voice sounded thick and distant because of the mask, and the words fell like drops shaken from a damp cloth.

“Because you won’t be taking the suit off for a long time.”

“But you got wet.”

“It was inevitable.”

He got the door wide enough for the two of them to squeeze past and then they were climbing, lurching up one rung at a time, leaving behind an entire life and all she’d ever known.

* * *

He threw open the hatch and it sounded like a gunshot in the clear air. The father set the girl down but she didn’t move; she grabbed his hand and held it. For a minute he let her stand there but then encouraged her forward gingerly, a gloved hand on her back. “We need to

move, hon.”

“No. Not yet.”

He thought he detected a certain resiliency in her voice, as though rather than fight her fate she was working towards accepting it. “Okay,” he said.

And so they stood, for a time, and he fought with a twisted knot of worry in his gut. All their supplies gone like that ... fifty miles ahead of them ...

He was about to try again, but she stepped first. They began to walk, hand in hand.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

The map flashed through his mind—destroyed by the flood with everything else. But he’d long since memorized their route. “Just stay close.”

She held up remarkably well. The going was slow—her strides were so much shorter than his so he let her dictate the pace—and for a long time they didn’t talk much. He thought she might have a million questions about everything she saw or felt or maybe got a whiff of through the mask, but if she did, she kept them to herself. Though she did look around with a bright and vivid curiosity, and at times he’d point to something and explain its origin or significance ... the better to fill, one small piece at a time, the half-decade void of where being a good father should’ve been.

When they got to the first town, where he’d seen that first sign a year ago, she wanted to explore some of the old shops. He allowed the detour—keeping her appeased would make for a smoother journey for both of them—but right now time was the enemy, and he didn’t want to linger.

“What’s this?” she asked.

He smiled. She was holding a tablet, and he told her so.

“What’s it do?”

“Nothing, anymore. But it used to do lots of stuff.” The tablet was caked with dust, the Apple logo obscured. She put it back on a shelf and wiped her gloves on her suit and then picked up something else.

He explained three or four more now-archaic electronics to her. Then said, “Now let’s get going, honey. Long way to go.”

“Kay.”

They left the store; as they walked she wanted to touch other things that caught her eye and he let her at first, but then grew more insistent that they leave. At the end of the main street they passed the sign. She ran to it, stood in front of it, read it aloud.

“Is that where we’re going, Daddy?” she turned to look at him. He could sense the hope in her voice, and behind her, the painted words gleamed with promise: SANCTUARY! UNDERGROUND SOCIETY! NEW MEMBERS WELCOME! A WHOLE CITY FOR ABOVE-GROUND SURVIVORS!

Under them, the coordinates of the destination and the reason for the stains of scotches come-and-gone on the map, the hours he’d spent studying it ... and the familiar nagging worry of the society’s actual existence. If it was a myth, they were dead.

“Yes, child. But it’s a long way away.”

“How long?”

He pointed. “See that forest way over there?”

“Yeah.”

“We have to go through that.” And then what? Miles and miles to go,

pal, and you can’t take your mask off, and you’ll get thirsty and hungry ...

He shook the thoughts off. They’d make it. They had to.

“Oh,” she said. “But there’s people there? Real live people?”

“You bet.”

At the edge of town there was a pile of bikes. She stopped to ask what they were, and he stopped to pick one up. He found one that would suit him, and mounted it.

“Sit behind me,” he told her, “on this part of the seat. Put your feet on these axles—”

“What?”

“These things,” he tapped with his boot. “And put your arms around me and hold tight.”

She hesitated.

“It’ll be fun, and get us there faster.”

She climbed on. He kicked off, and into that dusty afternoon they rode together, her first time on a bike, and she began to laugh with delight. The father smiled.

They could make it.

* * *

The girl could feel that wind tugging at her again, pulling at the suit and grabbing her ... but this time it wasn’t so bad. This time, she kind of enjoyed it.

The world flew past them—or were they the ones flying past the

world? She was gripping her dad as hard as she could; at first it had been terror but that quickly got replaced by ... she just learned the word last week: exhilaration. They were soaring. Great, empty fields zipped past them to the right and left; she bent her neck back and saw the clouds, like massive, wonky pancakes, racing them; over the rush of the wind she could hear the bike clicking as it sped along the road. There was a bitter smell on the air, too, or the hint of one that got through the mask's filters. She thought she could kind of taste it, and at one point she yelled to her father, wondering what it was, but he either chose not to answer or pretended he hadn't heard.

"Don't look at the cars," was all he said.

There were cars everywhere, though; some of them on the road and most in the ditches to either side. Her dad steered around the ones in the road but she couldn't help looking at them as they passed, and then she thought she saw—

A body. She turned to look, but it was gone.

They pulled to a stop. The girl straightened and looked past her dad's elbow at the wall of trees ahead. The road they were on didn't go through; it curved to the left.

"Okay, get down, hon."

The girl hopped down on one side and swung her leg over. She was slow and deliberate—Daddy told her never to damage the suit. But this forest ahead ... she was certain to damage it in there. Even he was probably going to damage his. Nervousness threatened to flare in her again and she tugged at his arm and looked up at his mask but he wasn't looking at her; he was walking towards something, mumbling to himself, and she followed—

It was another sign. This one said, FALLOUT'S OVER! SAFE TO BREATHE!

"Daddy, is that true? Can I ..." She reached for the mask.

"No!"

She flinched backwards at the shout, and immediately wanted to cry again.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, and she felt him hug her. He was saying more, and she listened, hoping he'd tell her everything was going to be okay, that she could take it off soon, that he was sorry for yelling, but he was talking about that stupid sign instead.

"... probably isn't true, so I want to play it safe. At least until we get there, and then when we meet other people ..."

The girl was staring at a clump of dirt. She didn't care about other people right now; other people were stupid, just like that sign.

"Hey," he said gently, shaking her.

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. When can we eat?"

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, and then, "Soon."

"How soon?"

But he was walking around the sign, checking the back of it. "Shit," she heard him say. Another swear. She hated it.

"What?" she asked, joining him. Then she saw: there were more words on the back.

SANCTUARY AHEAD—ALL SURVIVORS UNITE. UNDERGROUND BUNKER CIVILIZATION. ALL ARE WELCOME!!

"But that's on the wrong side," she said. "Daddy, which way do we go?"

“It’s fine,” he said. “We’ll keep going the way we were. Someone turned it around and wrote the other message where people would see it.”

“Why?”

“Either as a sick joke or because they truly believe it. Regardless, keep your mask on, and don’t let anything damage your suit.”

“I know,” she said.

“We’ll have to be careful.” Her dad sighed and then turned and started walking.

The girl hurried to catch up. She grabbed her dad’s hand and felt relief—she was safe.

* * *

The going was even slower now. His daughter took small steps at the best of times, and now with both of them hypersensitive to damaging the suits, each rock was a mountain and each tree its own forest.

“I’m tired,” the girl said eventually. “And hungry. And thirsty. When are we getting there?”

The man thought of the leagues ahead, the rough terrain of the woodland and the uncertainty on the other side, and gave the same answer as earlier. “Soon.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you carry me?”

“Sure.” He bent to scoop her up and positioned her so no limbs were sticking out and at risk of catching a branch. Soon she was dozing

again, and grew heavy in his arms. The father started sweating; it rolled down his back and clung to his shirt and stuck through to the suit’s fabric. Some dribbled down his forehead and fogged up his mask.

The girl was tired, hungry, thirsty ... and so was he. Oh Lord so was he.

* * *

The path emerged sometime the next morning. They’d spent the night under a huge spruce and the father cleared a place on the floor before darkness fell in earnest. He searched the woods for leafy boughs and fallen branches of soft pine—he made them each a bed as comfortable as nature would allow, and—most importantly—free from sharp protrusions. Each of them fell asleep immediately, exhausted enough to override discomfort and hunger.

The man shook his daughter awake when dawn came and passed and then bled into morning proper. She grumbled but got up, and together they began the journey once more. Her steps were even slower today; she dragged her feet and stumbled more than once. Irritated, he carried her again, wondering how long his own strength would hold out and how much farther till the woods grew sparser and he might be able to see the world through the trees.

And as if providence, it was only an hour later when he stepped over a root, around an explosion of moss, and ... onto a path. In his shock, he stopped walking. The girl twisted in his arms.

“Dad? Why’d you stop?”

“Look.”

The girl was silent for a time; they each marveled at it. Where’d it come from? The map he’d spent hours scouring over had never so much as hinted at a pathway through these woods, though it had just about everything down to the last pebble on it. He turned to see how

far back it stretched, and within the first dozen feet it grew less clear and then stopped altogether, running into a wall of trees. A path that ended in the middle of the forest. He could follow the sun to the other side but where this path led was anyone's guess ...

“Why are you waiting, Daddy?”

“Not sure where it leads, hon.”

“Let's try it.”

Let's try it. He hesitated; a heartbeat passed, then another. He stepped forward.

“Yay!” his daughter cried.

And how he wished he could share that enthusiasm.

* * *

The gentle swaying put the girl to sleep soon after her dad started on the path. Everything before that was way too bumpy; she'd started to hate the forest, but now the path made things smooth and easy and in her sleep her head was filled with sharp images, an imagination run rampant.

She was in a field. At her feet lay the suit and the mask, and she had her arms spread wide, head thrown back, eyes closed, spinning in a slow circle of freedom and crisp air and all the smells the mask had filtered out. Her dad was gone but somehow that was okay; right now her world was filled with ... well, this word she didn't know. She didn't think there was a word for how she felt, and in her happiness she was staring now at the son, vivid and bright and it still hurt ... but it was okay. This time, it was okay. The son was nice, and it was warm on her skin, and as long as she didn't look at it too closely it felt so good she wondered why she was ever scared of it.

She began to walk. Grass crunched softly under her feet—she was

barefoot, and it felt somehow soft and rough at the same time and she wanted to run all of a sudden, and the wind whipped past her as she sprinted into the endless field and somewhere she heard laughter and a group of other people. She went to them, and her heart started hammering in her chest, and her tummy twisted uncomfortably and she knew it was nervousness she'd started feeling because she had never met anyone else before and they were right over there. Right ... over ...

... There. She stood in the middle of a ring; they were surrounding her and the laughter had stopped and her nervousness was replaced by a fear so deep it was like she'd fallen down a dark well because they weren't moving or talking and all of them had their suits on, and masks, and they were holding knives, bloody knives, and now they were closing in on her, one step on dead ground after another, snap-crunch, snap-crunch—

Snap-crunch a branch went under her dad's foot, and the girl jolted awake so violently her dad almost dropped her.

“Honey?” she heard him say, his voice sharp and anxious. “What's wrong?”

The fear of the dream was still so fresh that she clung to him as hard as she could and began to sob. “Daddy—Dad—”

“Shh ... It's okay. Deep breaths. It's all right. I've got you. Was it a bad dream?”

She nodded her head and hoped he'd feel it.

“I'm sorry, hon. It wasn't real though. You know that?”

“Uh-huh,” she mumbled. “I don't like the real world, Daddy. Can we go back?”

“We can't go back. The bunker flooded, remember?”

She did remember, and something tasted bad in her mouth, and her

tummy hurt again but this time it was real because—

“I’m starving, Daddy!”

“I know, hon. I’m hungry too.”

“No! I’m starving! I need food!”

“Honey—”

“I need it—”

“No!” he yelled, and his voice tore through her ears and brain and carried on through the trees on either side and her eyes welled with tears.

“No,” he said again. “I’m sorry, hon. We can’t eat, or drink, or take our masks off, or slow down, because if we do any of those we’ll die. You can eat when we get there.”

She wanted to say something to that but didn’t know what. Dad sounded ... different, and it was a full minute before she could figure out why. He was tired, and he felt just as bad as she did. Sadness filled her again but this time for him. What if he was going to die?

“Hon?”

“Please don’t die, Daddy.”

“I’m not going to die.”

* * *

That night they camped under another tree and the father made two more beds of leafy boughs. The girl felt homesick for the bunker. The man thought of a classic meal from his twenties, of macaroni and cheese mixed with ground beef and mayonnaise.

And though neither of them knew it, the end of the forest would’ve been another two minutes’ walking, at the end of the path they’d taken, cleared and shaped for that very purpose by residents of the underground society.

* * *

It was a clear night. Above, the trees parted wide enough for large chunks of sky. The girl asked, “Daddy, is that the moon?”

He smiled at the wonder in her voice and that made the hunger and the thirst abate just a little—by day’s end he’d begun to think they might not make it after all. This moment with her now seemed almost a blessing.

“Yes, hon. That’s the moon. Full tonight, by the looks of it. And the stars are really something, aren’t they?”

“Yeah ...”

They each stared for a while longer. The girl, who’d calmed somewhat after her nightmare, was not aware of the small rip in her suit, as it was on the back of her leg. And the word she would’ve thought best matched how she felt in that first (happy) part of her dream was euphoria, and right now she felt it again, staring at that unbroken sheet of dancing starlight and the shining, silver moon in the middle of it all. Behind her mask, her mouth was slack with amazement, and hard at work somewhere deep in her head, her mind did its best to achieve what billions of human beings before her could not: comprehension of what she saw. It was so endless, and daunting, and beautiful, and ...

And it was nearing midnight when they finally fell asleep; the girl had wiggled her way over to her father’s pile of leaves and snuggled up next to him. This night was chillier than the last. He slept with a protective arm around her.

* * *

It was a cold morning. They each woke at dawn, shivering, and though the girl did not want to rise the father made her, telling her she'd warm up if they started walking.

"I don't feel good," she tried to tell him.

"Neither do I," he said.

They each pushed on, feeling the bitter bite of cold in addition to the hunger and fatigue and thirst. Their steps dragged.

Then the forest began to clear—sparser here and sparser there and then ...

"Christ," the father said, jubilation colouring the name, "oh Jesus Christ my god it's over! Hon, we made it through! Come on!"

He picked her up and ran the rest of the way down the path, out of the forest, to the empty, dead, stretching road beyond.

The cleared road.

"Are we there?"

"Almost, hon," the father panted. "Oh, baby, almost. We're so close."

He set his daughter down and she stumbled a bit. "Sorry," he said, already turning back to the road, looking for anything ...

"Let's, uh ... let's start walking. We'll find something."

"More walking?"

"Yeah. We can do it, hon. Come on."

The girl was feeling worse now than she had been that morning. The cold was gone but now she was too hot, and sweat was running down her forehead and smearing against the glass of the mask, which was

fogging up. She was growing sicker by the minute. Her head felt all woozy. She stumbled again, trying to keep up, and tried to call out to her dad to slow down. The words would not come.

The man reached the road and stared down the stretch that he knew, from the map, went north-west and took them almost to the society's doorstep. He was wondering who'd cleared the road and how long ago, since it looked clean of more than just vehicles, when his daughter came up next to him.

"Dad—" she began, but he interrupted her by gripping her arm.

"You hear that?"

"What?"

"Shh. Listen."

They listened; his heart pounded with anticipation ... could it be? Had he heard correctly?

Oh yes, there it was: the roar of an engine.

"Oh fuck," he yelled, and the girl, scared of his yelling over the last few days, recognized the difference in tone. This was a happy yell.

"What is it?" she begged to know, but then she saw it: a red truck cresting the road in the distance and coming towards them. Her dad was laughing, shouting some more, jumping up and down and waving his arms at it. The girl, infected by his happiness, found the strength to do the same.

The truck saw them and sped up, honking repeatedly in return excitement. The final blast took it right up to where they were standing, and then the door flew open and out stepped someone in a suit just like theirs, arms spread wide. This person was shouting too—none of them could figure out what they were saying because now the two men were trying to talk at once; the stranger hugged the father ... but

now the girl's joy was fading ... she felt weak. She wanted to lay down more than anything in the whole world.

“ ... my daughter. We've travelled for days now. We'll need ...”

The girl felt someone shake her hand; in front of her, the two figures swam in and out of focus. Arms went around her, lifted her up, placed her inside the truck. She slumped sideways, powerless to control herself.

“Dead tuckered, poor thing,” she dimly heard a voice say, and someone was clipping something around her chest.

“Buckled up,” another voice said, and then she heard a door open and shut and a second one open and shut but mostly it was her own ragged breathing filling her ears, amplified and twisted by the mask. Her eyelids weighed a hundred pounds each and she fought to keep them open. What she could see was clouded with stars through the green glass, as though all the ones from the previous night had filled this truck. Somewhere, on the far side of this universe, her dad sat. He was talking to the new person, and she clung to the conversation desperately.

“Man,” she thought one of them was saying, “I remember it so vividly. They just got on us so fast. We were all fucked. I mean, 'scuse me—”

“Oh I've dropped enough F-bombs around her these last few days, don't worry about it.”

“Don't you dare say bomb around me, man—not once, not ever.”

Her dad's laugh barely reached the girl's ears.

“I know what you mean. I wonder if they know some of us survived.”

“Doubt they care, really. Too few of us to do anything.”

“Yeah. So how big is your society?”

“Oh, relatively speaking it's pretty big. Think the last census topped us at just under four hundred.”

“Four hundred?”

“Yeah, man. We've been growing.”

“But ... the logistics. Waste disposal? Food? Water?”

“I'll show you all, my man. Just you wait. She's a beaut.”

“Christ ... four hundred. But why were you driving? Where were you going?”

“Well, assuming you came out of the woods?”

“Yeah?”

“You found a path?”

“Yeah.”

“That's me, man. Been working at it for two years now. Painstaking. Been using this.” The man held something up that the girl thought looked like a giant knife. Her vision blurred it, focused it, blurred it again. Her head felt so hot she thought it might burst. She tried to talk and couldn't. Why couldn't Dad just look at her? Just turn around and see her ...

“Why not a chainsaw?”

“Don't trust myself not to cut my suit open or tear off my hand. This is slower but more manageable.”

“Amazing. And gas? How are you driving this thing?”

“Oh, we’ve got some geniuses living with us. For gas we’ve got these HHO generators—basically they transform water into fuel, but to be honest, I’ve never understood how, even though I’ve had it ’splained to me about a hundred times. Now you tell me about yourself, man. How’d you come to be wandering around after all these years?”

The girl heard her dad tell this new man about the flooded bunker and then finding the signs that gave them a destination.

“Fuck yeah. Third one in three years, you are. Glad they’re paying off.”

“Yeah, but one of them said the fallout’s over.”

“What? Hell no it ain’t. Our Geigers are still going off the charts.”

“So did mine, man, and I took ’em on every damn run I went on. The reading hasn’t changed. I know a regular fallout’s five years max, maybe six, but who the hell knows what they used on us ...”

“Goddamn right. Might be decades still. Glad you had the good sense to keep your suits and masks—”

There came a gargling noise from behind the two men, and then a retching noise, and then a healthy splat. Even though she hadn’t eaten in days, the girl had vomited inside her mask. She reached up and the father saw what she was doing, saw the state she was in, finally, but she was out of reach, and though he was screaming at her now she didn’t seem to hear him; her hand trembled as it rose, trembled as it loosened the clip, and then fell limply back. The mask clattered to her feet.

“Curious,” she mumbled, inaudibly. “Wanted to know what air smelled like.”

* * *

She was dead a long time before they got to the underground society.

The father knew that, of course, but he was not ready to accept it, and so he screamed and swore at the other man to get him inside and get her to a doctor and the man hurried because he’d seen a lot of death since the bombs first started falling from the sky, and he’d seen a lot of people reacting to that death, and he knew the best thing you could do for someone grieving over a still-warm body was to let them carry on their denial and delusions as long as they saw fit.

Two sets of feet thundered down the spiral stairs; the man in front led the way and behind him the father carried the girl. They burst through one set of doors and went through some plastic sheeting and then burst through another. The father stormed for the next doors but the other man, with a resigned sigh, asked him to stop.

The father rounded on him. “My—”

“I know. But this is the decontamination room. If you go through those doors with your suit still on, you could infect everyone. You’re not doing that. Strip, toss your suit in that pile, and shower.”

The father almost argued, then acquiesced instead and began undressing—first himself, and then his daughter. The other man said nothing.

He was given a towel and clean clothes. He dressed while his companion found something for the girl and then the father dressed her, too. The whole process took under five minutes, but to him it felt like five years. She was dying as he dressed her.

He turned for the doors again.

“Wait.”

“What now?” he demanded, his girl limp in his arms.

The other man hesitated and then spoke slowly. “She, uh ... well I’m not sure what she’s sick with, but if she’s under the weather with something then I think I should get the doctor out here instead of

bringing her to the doctor, you know? I'll be super fast.”

The father's face went stormy but thankfully he did not move, and the second man slipped past him, opened the door, locked it behind him, and jogged for the infirmary. He got a doctor and described the situation. Then he got two guards to accompany them should the father decide to get violent at the news, and together they marched for the man and his child.

* * *

The people were quite nice. They'd all been respectful of him and his daughter; they'd been welcoming; they'd tended to his every request. They'd told him she'd get a funeral and a service and a vigil. He wondered if they'd offer him the same.

His bedroom door creaked slightly as he opened it. He paused, listening. No one moved. He stepped out. They'd given him padded slippers and on the metal walkway he was noiseless. It was dark, but some of the rooms were lit and light escaped from under the doors or through cracks, and it was just enough to feel his way by, once his eyes had adjusted.

He paused near the doors to the decontamination room. There was some kind of stand erected in the hallway, facing the doors, presumably there because it would be the first thing a newcomer would see once they got inside. He looked at it.

It was a map. How fitting.

Every floor of the society—which was apparently named Newville—had something different to offer. And on the bottom floor, a school. She could've taken classes. She could've made friends.

He pushed on. He didn't bother with trying not to be heard. No one would catch him in time. He went through the doors, past the sheeting, through more doors, up the staircase ... and then, when he finally started hearing commotion below him, opened the hatch and climbed.

He stood outside, arms spread wide in that barren land, and breathed deeply of the fresh air.



Moon Stoner by Elby Rogers

Ariana

by Rubella Dithers

Everything had gone spectacularly to shit.

There was a brief lull in the fight as Ariana's opponents stepped back in horror. She pulled her fist out of a heavily armored man's chest, a torrent of dark blood and shattered bone following. She shoved the body away and wondered how much longer she could hold out. *If* she wanted to hold out. As the unfriendly faces around her replaced their shock with anger, she shook her hand out and pushed the thought from her mind. She was still alive. She could still fight.

Ariana ducked under a wild swing and punched into the sword-woman's gut. She held back, not wanting to waste any more strength on the showy move that had taken out their leader and shaken the group. They had seen what she was capable of. They feared her and it made them hesitate. She kicked the woman, staggering her completely, and snatched the sword away. Reversing the grip, Ariana brought it up in an arc and took the arm off the man approaching from behind. Continuing the motion, she abandoned the sword in the chest of another enemy. She didn't need weapons. She *was* a weapon.

They feared Ariana, but it hadn't been enough to save her.

* * *

It was just another job, or at least that's what she thought when the notice went up in the town square. It was a village, really, too small for the bigger merchant clans to care, too small to get lost in. Mercs like her clung to it like maggots on a corpse. She should've known something was up when she caught wind of the pay. Nearly double the going rate, strange for something as standard as an escort. The thing about mercs

was they didn't care what the job was, they cared about the money, so that was all the talk was about. Ariana was more selective. She cared about the job, and she made sure to keep that to herself lest word got out she was soft. She had a reputation to maintain.

She had something else other mercs didn't. Some kind of sense, an intuition maybe, about which jobs were good and which ones were bad. She had relied on it when she was a kid on the streets, knowing who to beg from and who to run from. It got stronger as she grew. She never ignored it, until her first job as a merc. She had been a scruffy, cut up street kid, but she wasn't broken in the way some kids were. Until she ignored her instinct. Until that first job.

Ariana pushed down the memories. There was nothing in *those* that would help her. It had been a few weeks since she'd had work and money was running out. It was always running out. She was in a coveted corner table of a tavern, legs kicked up over the spare seat, sneering at anyone who got close. She had ripped the notice off the wall, much to the disgust of the barman, and read it again. It was a simple escort job, a few carts, some minor merchant's daughter. She'd done that sort of thing dozens of times before. The destination was nowhere special, a port town south of the capital. She frowned when she read the pay again, but was it really that strange? Ariana felt her stomach cave, like a hole had opened up in her gut. She was probably just hungry. She raised a hand and a serving girl scurried over to take her order.

* * *

Ariana *really* should've known something was up when she found herself at the west gate of town when their destination was decidedly northeast.

She stood next to the middle of three wagons, the passenger wagon. It had cutout windows with thick drapes brocaded in seagreen and gold. Waste of money for something meant to keep the dust and rain out. Ariana snorted, then looked over the other mercs. She recognized many of the men and women, being in the business for half her life. She exchanged nods, grunts, and glares with a few. It wasn't uncommon for mercs to get into dustups. That's why most got into the life. Not obedient enough for the military, not refined enough for a personal guard. She'd laid out one scowling youngster just last week. Most got over it quickly enough, but the brats still cared about pride. They'd get over it quickly enough. Mercs didn't have pride, everyone knew that.

There was just the wagon and two carts. It wasn't that much, to Ariana's eye. Certainly not enough to have hired on twelve mercs at the price they were paying. It must've been something rare, or special, though Ariana didn't think either word applied to the prairie. It was all grass, wind, and dirt. Good for growing stuff, for the odd seam of copper, but nothing special. She thought about asking questions, going against one of the few rules mercs had because they did have some standards, but that was when she saw her.

The rough talk and laughter kept up, so she knew no one else had noticed the woman approaching. If they had the idiots would have turned to mocking and catcalls, at least until they realized no one would walk up unless it was the fucking client. Or maybe they would have been too stunned to react, like Ariana. Only years of staring down people trying to kill her kept Ariana's face blank, kept her lungs pumping.

She was stunning. Dark brown skin, a thick braid of ebony pulling hair away from her face, a sharp nose above soft lips. But her eyes, that's what drew Ariana. A piercing sea green that cut through Ariana's core with a wicked glint. The woman was dressed like the rest of them, all dusty linen and leather, a long knife in a plain sheath at her waist, a sack over her shoulder. The woman was frowning as she looked the group over, then her eyes landed on Ariana. She suppressed a shudder and met the other woman's gaze with the same dull, hardened look. The woman smiled and walked up to her.

There was something practiced in the way she moved. Each step was intentionally placed. Ariana fought the urge to look at the woman's hips and kept her eyes trained on her face. As she neared, Ariana saw her skin lose the smooth flawlessness that distance imparted. She was near Ariana's age, maybe older, marked with the fine tracery that would eventually age her, roughened by hard travel. The woman was beautiful, and soon standing right in front of her.

Ariana blinked. The others were still crowing at each other, not noticing the newcomer or dismissing her as just another merc. In all her years working up and down the coast, across the prairie, into the high desert and even through the mountain passes into the states perpetually caught in civil war, Ariana had never seen anyone like her. She would have remembered. The woman was standing like she was ready to take a punch. Ariana tensed. The woman's smile broadened, and she put her hand out.

"Meila," the woman said. Her teeth were like pearls. Even her fucking teeth were gorgeous.

"Ariana," she replied, taking her hand. Meila had a strong grip, calloused fingers, and a palm smooth as silk. "New around here?"

"You could say that," Meila said. She had a soft accent that rounded out the ends of her words. Where was she from? Beyond the mountains? The woman's next words pulled Ariana from her musings.

"I'm your client."

* * *

Meila never got in the wagon but walked beside it. A few miles outside of town the caravan stopped. Two figures rose out of the grass. Ariana barked an order and the mercs got in a loose line around the carts. Normally they would have fought for the position of captain, but no one wanted their ass handed to them by Ariana.

A strong hand fell on Ariana's shoulder. "They're mine," Meila whis-

pered in her ear. Ariana had the mercs stand down. The two newcomers approached. They wore thick cloaks in prairie colors. Underneath was the cold glint of steel. They wore heavy plate and were armed to the teeth. Both got into the passenger wagon. At a nod from Meila and a whistle from the lead driver they were back on the road.

They stopped in the middle of nowhere. This deep in the prairie everywhere was nowhere. One time Ariana thought if she walked far enough into it she could become no one. It hadn't worked.

The sun was setting and the wind was picking up. Ariana allowed fires to be built, and soon the sweet, almost nauseating smell of burning dung and three bean soup permeated their camp. It wasn't likely any ragtag bunch of bandits would attack a group this large, and their keen-eyed sentries would spot them from miles away.

Ariana took her bowl of soup and walked far out into the grass to eat it. She watched the sunset paint the endless grasses in red and gold, rippling and parting under the wind. Ariana sat on the ground, flicking rocks from under her ass. She sat in silence and ate, teeth catching on the slightly undercooked beans. After a while the grass rustled as someone approached. Normally Ariana would be annoyed by the intrusion, but this time she waited in anticipation.

"It's lovely," Meila said, sitting down next to Ariana. They quietly watched as the sun continued to sink, as the colors grew deeper and darker.

"It looks like the ocean," Meila said. "But more kind, more forgiving."

"The sea's a brutal thing," Ariana said, voice gruff.

"She gives and she takes," Meila replied, and Ariana felt the words had some deeper meaning. "Have you seen her?"

Ariana snorted. "Seen it? Aye, and I've pulled an oar in my time."

"Oh? Did you grow up on the coast?"

"The capital," Ariana confirmed. "Didn't go to the docks much. Too dangerous for a stray brat. Once I got out, though, I took a few jobs on merchant craft." Ariana shrugged, unused to telling so much about herself.

"So you were a street rat?" Meila said, a smile in her voice.

"River rat." Ariana shrugged again. Rivers and canals cut through the capital city in erratic lines. Nasty things most of the year, only clean when the city opened the floodgates and washed the filth into the bay. "Best way to run from marks is to jump in the nearest canal and crawl into a sewer pipe."

"A sewer rat, then?" Ariana laughed.

And so the days and nights passed. They traded barbs and banter. Ariana revealed more of herself and her past, in defiance of her usual reticence. Sometimes the back of her mind screamed and her bowels churned, reminding her how dangerous trust was. How vulnerable her confidences made her. Ariana burned with questions for Meila. The woman answered some, but just as often smiled and demurred. She remained mysterious and elusive, which drew Ariana, but more than anything Ariana wanted to know her.

It was a dangerous feeling.

One night, drunk off her ass from some dubious grain liquor the mercs had passed around, Ariana expressed some of that feeling to Meila.

"I want to crack you open like a nut," she slurred, realizing the next day how terrible that sounded. "Like a clam. I want to see the pearl inside you."

"Do you?" Meila said with that terrible smile of hers.

"Yes," Ariana hissed, leaning towards her.

"Maybe I'll show you my pearl," Meila said with a wink, and Ariana

leaned away and cackled.

"But you know," Meila continued once Ariana was able to breathe. Meila's voice was low, almost sad. Ariana frowned, willing her blurry eyes to focus on Meila's face.

"That eventually kills the clam."

* * *

A few days after her drunken confession the first bandits struck.

Ariana knew things had been too quiet. Even with a crew this big there were people desperate enough to try them. She had thought someone might snatch something off the carts while they were in town resupplying. Ariana considered riders, rare as they were given the cost of a horse. You'd get more out of selling the damn thing. What she hadn't expected was an ambush.

Most caravan fights were quick hits, in and out. Scrawny bandits didn't want to get tangled with the mercs who were always ready for a brawl. Ariana knew this time was different. It wasn't a simple road robbery. These ambushers were out for blood.

They were just talking about stopping for the night when arrows thwacked into dirt, not striking anyone but coming damn close.

"Ren, Kira!" The two burly bruisers looked at Ariana. "Get the archers." They nodded. "Go!" They nodded and bolted in the direction the arrows came from, arms covering their heads. Shadowy figures sprung from the grasses to engage them, but were easily knocked aside by the charge.

"Gino, get the shields. Shields!" Ariana cried as an arrow struck her thigh. Meila had her knife out, crouched and scanning the area like some feral thing. The two warriors in the cart started to move, but Meila punched the side and they settled down. Screams from the dark let Ariana know Ren and Kira had found the archers. The target quickly

became clear as the melee ambushers came straight for the passenger cart.

Ariana cursed, ripped the arrow out of her leg, and ran at the closest enemy. She jammed it into an unprotected eye, lifted them by their clothes, and threw them into a second ambusher. Gino had gotten shields to half of the mercs; the rest would have to make do with their gear on hand. Cudgels and knives sang through air, cutting throats and cracking skulls. The young boy Ariana had beaten, Loonie he called himself, was going to town with a handaxe and a demon's grin. Meila ran up to join Ariana, but Ariana pushed her back.

"You're the last line of defense," Ariana said. "Let us do our job." Meila looked pissed at that, but nodded and retreated. Most of the mercs were handling their own in individual fights, but a few were getting beaten down by bigger, stronger, or more skilled opponents. Ariana always helped the youngest mercs first; no sense getting offed before you had a real chance in the world. So she joined up with Loonie and knocked his opponent's head off with her fist. Loonie watched in awe as the head rolled away in the dirt and the body fell back.

"What the fuck was that?" he shouted. "Oh Ais," he said, invoking the prairie goddess's name. "I never should have fucked with you."

Ariana grinned at him. "Don't worry, I go easy on brats. Stay focused, more are coming." She swiveled and kicked the ambusher approaching from the side, cracking half their ribs and likely their spine. The person dropped and never got back up.

In the moment each second of the fight stretched forever. The smell of blood and vomit, piss and dirt, invaded Ariana's senses, stoking her joy and her rage. She worked back and forth, pushing the ambushers back, circling around when the fight spread to the other side of the cart. It was strange they had only come at them from one side of the road, but Ariana didn't linger on that thought, focused on taking the next person down. It felt like it lasted forever, but really it was only a few minutes. Mercs were vicious and brutal, but on a job they were also efficient. Soon all the ambushers were dead or dying, the mercs cut up and

bruised but very much alive. Ren and Kira came out of the grass dragging two bodies apiece.

Ariana, unscathed and a bit out of breath, walked up to Meila. "We took them all out," she said. "What do you want done with the bodies?"

"What do you think is best?" Meila seemed untouched by the bloodshed that had erupted around her. She had even put her knife away. Ariana felt a rush of heat at the confidence her client had in her.

"It's too late in the year to burn them." Ariana said. "Too dry, the grass might catch it. Mercs typically grab food and coin, leaving the rest for scavengers."

"Scavengers?"

"Kids, usually, from one of the settlements. They get weapons, armor, clothes, leave the rest for the animals."

"I see. Well, go on then." Meila paused, looking Ariana over. "Are you injured? You're soaked in blood."

"Oh." That was pretty typical for a big fight like this, though Ariana had to admit her style of fighting got her dirtier than most. "It's not mine."

"Hmm." Meila cocked her head, then gestured for Ariana to come closer. Ariana was puzzled, until Meila grabbed her collar and shoved her tongue down her throat.

* * *

The crew started calling them the Boss and the Boss's Lady. Ariana ignored the jeers and focused on her conversation with Meila. The jig was up. Whoever Meila had wanted to throw off the scent had covered the roundabout western route. They had a map rolled out between them that showed more of the world than Ariana had ever seen, even the outlying islands where only the greediest merchants dared to sail. The

prairie was an empty swathe that dominated the center, showing only the major roads, the lone river that ran lazily through it, and the few larger villages. Settlements tapered off as the western road approached the mountains, and the land between roads was near empty of human life. Just the endless grass and the infinite sky.

"Is there an easy route between here," Meila pointed at where she believed they were, "and here?" she asked, pointing to an unmarked bit of coast. "Can we cut straight through?"

Ariana grunted. She had little use for maps. Her time on the road was carved into her body, and the prairie was carved into her soul. City-bred though she was, her ancestors had ties to the land that bound her. The caravan had traveled so far west that Meila's direct route came dangerously close to the Heart of the Prairie. Ariana grimaced at the insane roundabout route her client had revealed to her. Straight west to the mountain, then circling back around through the foothills. It made no sense. So why? Had she wanted to get lost out here?

Ariana focused on the map. Despite how it looked, the prairie wasn't flat. Parts regularly flooded in springtime, gouging paths hidden by the dense plant life that could easily break a horse or human leg. It was serene from afar, deadly up close. Low growing cacti with poisonous spike, scuttling stingers with enough venom to take out the whole team. Wild dogs that ran in packs, vicious and fearless. The land was packed with so many small dangers Ariana barely felt confident to get through it herself, much less twenty people, three carts, and six horses. She made her decision.

"I'll talk to the other mercs, see how many are prairie-bred. Maybe a few are good enough to scout ahead with me." If there weren't Ariana had another option, and Ais knew she had spilled enough blood to pay for it.

* * *

To their credit, they got nearly two days into the prairie before being forced to stop.

Ariana crept from under Meila's arm, nodded to the two mercs on watch, and walked out onto the prairie. There were several hours until dawn, and it would be a long and dangerous walk. Dangerous to others. Ariana was favored.

It wasn't hard for her to find the spot. Her heart was drawn to it with every beat, every breath she took, no matter how far from home she was. And this was home, even if she was the last of her people. Even if she had never traveled with the other nomads, moving herds through the seasons. Even if she had been born in a dark room in a darker alley and had never known what it truly meant to breathe. The prairie pulsed with life around her. The comforting buzz of insects seeking out warm flesh, the patter of mice scurrying away from light-footed hunters. The soft sage-sweet breeze that threatened to unravel her braid. With each step she took, deeper into this wild and free land, something opened in Ariana. The fear and the anger that kept her on constant edge wound into a more true, more necessary emotion that keened her senses and loosened her muscles: survival. It was such an immediate and natural thing. Ariana wondered at how easily she lost sight of it.

She arrived just as the sun kissed the horizon, painting the prairie in imperial violet. This place didn't stand out from its surroundings, all grass and scrub and rich clean earth. She fell to her knees and sank her fingers deep, weaving between roots.

"I need your help."

Tell me something new.

A bush shakes, and a prairie dog lunges at Ariana, golden fur shining in the dawn light. She doesn't move. The dog sinks her jagged teeth into her wrist, working back and forth, tearing skin and tendon until she hits bone. Blood gushes from Ariana's torn skin, soaking into the ground.

What have you brought me?

A snake slithered from the other side, wrapping around Ariana's uninjured arm and sinking his fangs into her skin, pumping white hot

venom into her veins.

"Life. Death."

Always more death with you, though.

"Life is the space between death," Ariana said through gritted teeth.

Don't quote me. What do you need this time?

"Safe passage to the shore."

Done. If that was it, why did you come all the way out here?

Ariana said nothing.

Ah, you just wanted to see me.

She felt ghostly arms wrap around her. It reminded Ariana of her mother. She wanted to sink into it, but it was just a sensation. There was nothing there.

I'm sorry I couldn't protect them. I'm sorry you're alone now.

"It wasn't your fault."

But it was my responsibility. And I suppose you aren't so alone anymore, with that pretty girl around.

"She's a client, and too old to be a girl."

Be careful around her. She belongs to ... someone else.

"Belongs to? You mean like me?"

Yes, to one of my ... sisters.

"You have sisters?"

Don't you have a job to do? Yes, I have sisters. She smells like one of them. Now go, and next time bring me a little less death.

Seeing as it was part of her job, Ariana wasn't sure how to pull that off. She stood, wiped the blood, dirt, and venom from her skin, and walked back to the camp. Her head filled with the new path she'd set the caravan on.

When she arrived she found Meila waiting expectantly. She moved closer and drew the other woman into a hug, a little embarrassed to be doing it in the daylight, in front of so many inquiring eyes. She pressed her face to Meila's neck and inhaled.

She smelled like the ocean.

* * *

Ariana had grown up in a port town. She had traveled up and down the coastal road more times than she could count. She had pulled an oar on a ship, pulled up nets filled with silver fish that glistened like jewels. She had seen the ocean. Yet every time she saw it again she was struck by its vast, relentless beauty.

She stood on a dune with old shells cracking under her feet. A bitter breeze pushed brittle grasses against her legs. To her side stood Meila, legs spread as if she were about to capsize, arms crossed against her chest. Ariana looked at the other woman's face and for a moment was stunned. Meila had such a raw, vulnerable look, her eyes stormy with despair. She looked heartbroken.

No word or gesture seemed like they would fit, would ease the pain on Meila's face. Ariana just stood and watched, until one of the drivers hollered for them. Meila turned back first.

It was all business from then on. In a few hours they'd be in town, at Meila's destination. Ariana had no idea what to expect when they got there, and an even worse idea about where she'd go next.

Ariana stood to her side as Meila finished up her deals. Everything was going. Bolts of cloth, unsmelted ore, casks of salt packed fish. Basic things, nothing Ariana would figure to require so much protection. The carts sold too. The wagon driver cracked his reins and headed down south. Meila paid off the mercs, who headed for taverns and inns, drawing eyes and causing a ruckus. Then it was just Ariana and Meila.

Meila had a sack over her shoulder and watched the dust kicked up from the wagon's passage.

"You didn't get good prices," Ariana said.

"I know."

"You didn't even barter."

"No, I didn't."

Meila turned to look at her. Her sea green eyes distant and fathomless, asking for something Ariana didn't know how to give.

"Will you come with me?"

* * *

Several nights later they made camp some distance off the road. For the most part other travelers were content to leave them to their own. When larger parties passed them it put Meila, and in turn Ariana, on edge. They went without a fire, shivering close together as a chill breeze came off the sea to blow away the lingering summer heat.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Ariana asked. It had been a point of contention between the two. The tension told her they were headed for something, into something, and she wanted to be prepared.

"Do you have a home?" Meila asked. She looked over the sea, watching waves break against shore under the moonlight. Ariana looked at her, then followed her gaze to watch the water.

"No. Not anymore."

"What happened to it?"

Ariana shrugged. "Nothing much. Nothing different than what always happened, except it was worse this time. The fights, the battles ... there weren't many of us left to kill. In the end it was me and mama, and then it was just me."

Meila pulled her closer, wrapping a strong, warm arm around her.

"What would you do to protect it? If you still had it."

Ariana didn't have to think. "Anything. Why're you asking?"

Meila moved her hand up, threading fingers through Ariana's hair. "Trying to put me to sleep?" She felt Meila smile against her cheek.

"The islands I'm from ... we can't support ourselves anymore. We're too many, have relied on trade for too long. It's my duty to protect them."

"Duty?"

"I think you know what I mean. There were more like us, before. The seas, the mountains, the rivers and prairies. People given strength by the land. Protectors."

"Never met another one before," Ariana said quietly. "Didn't even know others existed."

"So, you see, you understand what I mean when I say I must protect them. That I would do anything, be anything, for them. Even if that means ..."

"What?"

"Even if that means I can't go back."

"What do you mean?" Ariana sat up, waving at the canvas of sea spread out before them. "It's right there, we can walk down the beach and—"

"No," Meila said, voice breaking. "She won't take me back."

To Ariana's confusion and horror, Meila started to cry, sobs racking her body. Ariana held her close, not knowing what else to do, not moving for the rest of the night.

* * *

"Ah, the pirate princess. We've been expecting you."

Ariana glanced at Meila, wondering at the title she had been given. They had arrived at the capital that morning and came directly to this merchant's mansion.

Meila frowned at the man seated before them. Ariana had a vague idea of who the man was, some self-proclaimed leader of the merchants. The richest among them set themselves up as a kind of ruling class. Ariana wasn't interested in politics. Rulers came and went, and it made no difference to the people at the bottom. Same thing, different name. To her it was just a rich man in a fancy house, showing off a lot of jewels and sharp steel, calling himself a merchant king.

"We are not pirates. Never have been and never will be, even if you've convinced the people of the continent otherwise."

"Forgive me, I didn't realize it was a sensitive topic." The man grinned. Ariana wondered if it was okay to offend him. She didn't think Meila would be that put out.

Meila's shoulders stiffened. "Stealing our ships, our livelihoods, our very people, souring contracts we've had for decades ... After what you people have done, you dare mock us? Me?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Did you bring it or not? You wouldn't be here if you didn't accept our terms."

Meila dropped her bag to the ground, rummaging through it. She pulled out a small purse of blue silk, then tossed it to the man. Smiling, he caught it and opened the bag. A small conch shell tipped out into his palm.

"The Heart of the Sea! Such a lovely little thing. Does it do everything the legends say?"

"That and more," Meila spat out. "You have it, now leave my people and our islands alone. Stay out of our waters."

"Is this really okay?" Ariana hissed. "That thing, the shell ..."

"It's fine," Meila said, voice firm.

The man returned the shell to its bag and tucked it into his coat. "Well, I suppose our business is over. Guards?"

The very decorative looking guards who had been flanking the merchant took on a sinister look. More swarmed out of hallways, through the front doors, surrounding Ariana and Meila.

"Betrayal, is it?" Meila asked, sneering. "I expected as much. No honor among thieves."

"Betrayal?" The man laughed. "Honor? What does a sea rat know about such things?" He stood up and stepped off his ostentatious little dias. "As if someone like you could be betrayed. As if someone like you has honor." The man's smile twisted with ridicule. "You aren't sophisticated enough for it."

A guard lifted an ornate tapestry woven in thread of gold, revealing a passageway, and the merchant left with a dramatic sweep of his robes.

Ariana cracked her neck, her wrists, her knuckles. Meila watched the man's retreating back, though soon it was blocked by the guards that now crowded the room.

"Did you expect this?" Ariana asked.

"I did, but I hoped it wouldn't happen. I hoped the shell would be enough."

"Is this why you brought me?"

Meila looked at her sharply.

"It's fine, I'm good in a fight."

"No, that's not—"

Meila's answer was cut off by the roar of an eager guard. He ran at them, swinging a ridiculously large mace around his head, nearly clubbing his comrades in his bid to get at the two women. Ariana stepped forward, ducked under a wild swing, and slammed her fist in his jaw. He fell back, taking down several other guards, and the fight was on.

#

Ariana stood, dripping gore, among the carnage. She kicked bodies aside, looking for where Meila had fallen. It had taken a lot for the other woman to go down. An unlucky strike to the back of her head had knocked her out, and Ariana had been too swarmed by enemies to catch her. She found Meila pinned under another body. Ariana roughly lifted the corpse and tossed it aside.

The older woman's rich brown skin was ashen and sticky with blood. Her eyes were closed. She could have been asleep.

Ariana laid a hand on Meila's neck, feeling for a pulse, for something, anything.

"I didn't know you could fight like that," she whispered. "Like a storm over the ocean. You were unstoppable."

Ariana stood and went in search of the merchant. He wasn't hard to

find. Through the hidden passageway, past servants quarters, she heard dull thuds and low moans. She found the door and kicked it in. A servant had her skirts rucked up, and the merchant was underneath. Before their embarrassed squawking began, Ariana pushed the woman aside and slammed her fist into the merchant's throat. His eyes bulged out, and his mouth worked at trying to form words. The servant scrambled out of the room, screaming for help. Ariana ignored her and silently watched as the merchant thrashed and clawed and slowly suffocated. She dug the silk pouch from out of his discarded coat. Then she went back for Meila's body.

* * *

The canals were still disgusting, but Ariana didn't care and Meila was in no shape to. Ariana hated the capital, never wanted to run through its streets and sewers again. But the merchants were agitated at one of their own being taken out, and the sewers led where she needed to go.

She jumped down from the gaping maw of one such sewer, onto a beach of broken shells and seagulls pecking at offal, littered with sewage and dead things. Some distance down the beach, a kid fanning flies away from a rack of drying fish watched her procession towards the water. The kid was canny enough to keep his mouth shut.

She laid Meila down in the rising tide and waited.

Time passed.

The kid and the birds left.

The water lapped at Meila's body, and sand hissed away from underneath her.

The sun began to set.

"Take her back."

Ariana knelt beside Meila and glared at the water.

"I know you can hear me. I know you're there. Take her back."

Wavelets caught Meila's dark, dark hair, pulling strands from her braid.

Ariana took the silk purse from her pocket and shook out the conch shell. She stood up and brandished it at the sea.

"Is this what you want?" She shouted. She threw the shell far out into the water and watched it sink under the waves. Then she lifted Meila into her arms and waded into the sea.

"She killed for you," Ariana said as waves broke against her legs. "She *died* for you."

The water filled her boots, soaked her clothes, dragged her deeper into the water. A wave crashed against her, tearing Meila from her arms. Ariana spiraled beneath the surface, losing all sense of direction, torn mercilessly between breakers and the implacable current. Her head broke the surface. She hadn't realized how far from shore she had been. Ariana swam hard, fighting the unusually powerful waves that beat at her back. The water grew shallow, and she clawed at the sand, dragging herself up the beach. She laid there, shivering and coughing, as the world grew dark around her.

She could still smell Meila on her skin.

The Power of Fear

by Christina Sng

I have nothing
But these hands
That expel fire

And a child
Who weaves magic
From our cat's fur.

I have nothing
But a home with
An invisible shield

And a 12-foot tall
Electrical fence that
Keeps intruders out.

Yet I have nothing
Because the monster
Is in my home—

Leaving me desecrated
And maimed, crippled
With my hands bound

Facing each other—
The fire from my palms
Extinguished,

Our cat caged deep
In the basement—
Her remaining fur

Shed on furniture
Insufficient
To call down Hell.

It is my child
Who pulls me
Out of the abyss.

Seeing her subdued,
Devastated,
Stirs me to my feet.

I realize this:
When fear
Is the only thing

Holding you back,
Know you have the power
To destroy it.

I tear open my bindings
And take my daughter
Into my arms.

We tiptoe
To the basement
And rescue our grateful cat.

My girl weaves a cloak
Around us while I set
Our house on fire.

He tries to flee,
Clothing in flames,
Pounding the door

While we watch
From the garden,
From behind our shield.

When the fire ebbs
And the monster is gone,
I hold my cat and child

Amid the ashes
Of my house—
I have everything now.



In the Moon-Lit Night

by Sonali Roy

Between

by Subodhana Wijeyeratne

This begins when I was still trying to grow things in the flower beds outside. I'm on all fours, plucking the scraggly weeds that sprawl between my hyacinths and begonias when I hear footsteps behind me. Unsteady and hesitant and slow, for a human. But of course, they mightn't be human.

Finally, I think. A customer.

I stand and wipe my hands on my apron and immediately wonder if anybody would be put off buying a drink from a muddy barman. Behind me is the bridge, arcing over the abyss to the gravelly causeway running like a dull steel tongue from the great iron loop of the Inverse Gate on the right to the Obverse, on the left. Overhead is the rest of the Between, a great faceted dome of other iterations of my reality, billions upon billions of them. Each one with its own version of me and of the Gates. each resolving into more detail the closer you look and revealing its own sky with its own billion neighbours.

Beneath all this, standing on the causeway, is an old woman—a scar-faced, grey-haired, slope-shouldered old wreck. She's staring at me. I've learned to tell who's who, here in the Between. Who wants to talk and who wants to be left alone. Who wants a drink and who wants to talk. Who has time to burn, and who doesn't have any to spare. And so I can tell in an instant that this old woman has nothing to spare. No time and no joy and no energy. Nothing that would make serving her worthwhile. Just looking at her makes me glum.

I go back to my weeding, but I can feel her gaze on my back, hot and probing and vaguely accusatory. The Inverse Gate's lights flicker like an aging fluorescent, and some of the other gates in some of the other permutations arrayed overhead flicker too. The echoes redshift as they

propagate off into the unfathomable causal distance. When things like this happen it's all too obvious I'm living in a dimensionless bubble with neither up nor down nor yesterday nor tomorrow. I'm just a person and it's entirely reasonable for all this to give any creature born of a mother a headache. Or so a troll told me once. A shame they're extinct in my iteration, but genocide is to complex life as nausea is to eating.

I head back into the bar and a couple of guests have slipped in through the back entrance while I was out. One is some kind of fleshy flower curling in on itself and blooming again out of its own behind and I wonder briefly what sort of anatomy could possibly allow for that. The other's some sort of flapper girl, with a bob and rosebud lips and long-gloved hands, except she's got no eyes and no mouth and her cigarette holder, long and glossy like a black needle, sticks out the side of her head. They're both sitting in a booth in the far dark corner where the air's thin and the temperature's low and turn to me when I walk in.

'Anything to drink, ladies?' I say.

'Children's tears,' says the flower. The flapper mumbles something I can't understand. The flower translates. 'She'll have a couple of shots of incest.'

'Incest? I've got an old vintage around here. None fresh, I'm afraid.'

'Which vintage?'

I head for the sin cabinet behind the bar and press open the red-hot doors and remember idly when words like *hot* and *cold* meant anything to me. Inside is an array of bottles each shaped like a little

screaming head, and they leer as I pluck one and hold it up to my face.

‘Book of Leviticus,’ I say. ‘I think this one was an animal, though.’

The flapper nods. I take the drinks over and they leave fifty-two years as a tip. Then they resume talking, voices low and hissing like a river of razors.

The door opens and the old woman walks in. Closer now, I can see her face is fat-checked but hollow, a face gone stale with time. Her eyes are hooded and dull, and her mouth works slowly as if words were forming in her throat and evaporating on her tongue. She halts at the counter and stares at me.

‘Welcome to Between,’ I say. ‘What can I get you?’

‘I ...’ The old woman glances at the other guests. ‘Don’t you remember me?’

I squint.

‘Sorry, madam.’

‘Bourbon. Straight.’

‘That’ll be two years in human money, madam.’

She shakes her head, slowly, without taking her eyes off me.

‘I don’t have two years,’ she says.

I hesitate, and then pour her the drink anyway. She shoots it and shudders and puts the glass down. Her fingerprints are damp and oily on the clean glass and her undernails bulge with grime.

‘You could have told me,’ she says quietly.

‘Sorry?’

‘You could have told me. You could’ve told me what would happen.’

‘I’m not sure what you’re talking about.’

She spits on the floor and jabs a finger at me over the counter. Her hand lost most of the skin on it at some point in the past. Now it’s healed over and looks half-melted.

‘I made the worst mistake anyone in my entire world ever made and you ... you didn’t even bother to tell me.’ Tears follow the words. Strange crystal droplets more beautiful by magnitudes than the eyes producing them. ‘You could have told me to stop. You could have told me to just go home.’

She holds my gaze until I look away. Then she wanders out.

I follow her, half-unwilling, but dragged along still like a jellyfish in some deep ocean current. She heads down the gravel path to the bridge, and then to the causeway between the Gates. They calibrate into time dimensions. The Inverse lights up with the sweet blue glow of the future and the Obverse with the aching red light of the past. The old woman stands between them, at the edge of the path, with her shadows splayed at her feet like black petals. She looks at me, and there’s so much grief and hate in her gaze I can barely stand to look back.

‘You were right, though. I figured out what you meant,’ she says. ‘I figured out how not to have existed at all.’

She hugs herself. Then she leans back, and falls.

I watch her go. Then I look at the other permutations of the bridge in the firmament above and below. There should be infinite variations of her. There should be some where she’s dancing a jig and some where she’s turning into a flowerpot and some where she’s being beaten with a cricket bat. But in all of them, she’s falling. Falling left and right and up and down. Falling through the void surrounding the Gates. Falling in endless recapitulation like infinite glum seeds on a windless night.

It takes a while, but eventually she redshifts and disappears. I walk back into the bar and find flower alone.

‘Well,’ it says, turning inside-out and outside-in. ‘That was odd.’

* * *

At the end of each day I pour myself a nice tall glass of milk stout and head out onto the porch. When there’s customers about it’s easier for me to forget that I’m nowhere, but silence makes it impossible to ignore. The Between’s silence isn’t of a sort that you, who live *somewhere*, who exist in worlds full of change and motion, could ever comprehend. It’s the silence of utter nothing. You can hear the valves in your veins flicking. You can hear a door closing six worlds away. You can hear the voices of your ancestors, telling you to fear snakes, and the dark, and a future spent alone.

I sit on that nice comfy chair Ichabod made for me as payment for a sack of salted nuts he used to buy a monkey’s soul. He still joins me, sometimes. Mostly he comes in the form of a drooling black dog with its tail high in the air and its mouth drawn wide in goofy greeting. If he’s in a bad mood he’ll come as a bat or a scorpion. Once he came as a giant oily protozoan oozing its way out of the Obverse Gate like a living slick. He slithered up next to me and sprawled by my left leg, stinking and silent, until finally I couldn’t stand the stench anymore.

‘Bad day?’ I said.

‘The worst.’

‘What happened?’

Silence. Then:

‘A whole world lost its imagination.’

‘How’s that even possible?’

‘They discovered money.’

That’s what Ichabod’s like. He’s good company most of the time, but he’s better company if you don’t speak to him too much.

While I drink I look up at the fractal permutations of the realities arrayed around me and watch the dramas unfolding in those distant and reflected reaches. A while ago a great empire lost a war a few realities over from mine and their defeated gods all trudged, war-weary and heartbroken, from the Inverse to Obverse Gates. They had turquoise feathers in their hair and their faces were proud and grim, even though some of them were crying, and all of them were bruised. Another time a novelist finally got the recognition she deserved and her characters paraded between the Gates playing flutes and wearing shimmering waterfalls. Some of them were so bright I could see them without my binoculars, like novas flaring in some distant galaxy. But like novas also they faded in time, and soon there was nothing but the spasmodic rumble and glint of the many universes and their many peoples slowly turning experience into memory and then memory into myth.

There’s the sad ones too. The clutch of little girls in rags, sobbing as they marched from gate to gate, hounded by their own sharp-fanged shadows. A downcast looking werewolf-thing holding a bag of oranges like it was a baby. A little rat, terrified and confused, that stared for hours at the Inverse Gate before finally slipping through it. Stories forgotten before their time. Maybe they were conceited enough to think they’d be remembered forever. Maybe they forgot that memory is capricious and callous and cruel.

I get to the end of my pint and Ichabod leaves and there’s nothing for it but to be myself absolutely. This is when I begin to wonder about the big things. What does it mean to exist between worlds? Does it mean being real and unreal at the same time, like some self-aware wave-function waiting for collapse? Isn’t this all just another way of saying I’m nothing at all? The questions drive me to my pallet behind the bar, with my cricket bat to my left and, to my right, my little golden alarm clock counting backwards from infinity. Then, I sleep. Then, I forget, just a little. Just enough so that when I wake, and my customers offer

me their days, their weeks, their years, I take them. Just enough that I can tell myself that whatever I am, real or unreal, dream or story, it's good to know that to everyone else, I exist, and will exist, forever.

* * *

The demon walks into the bar, naked and sneering and sharp-faced, thin dribbles of liquid fire plunging from the corners of his mouth and tip of his erect cock. He sees me alone and grins and his teeth are serrated and needly in a mouth full of breath so hot it makes the air ripple. The bar's coloured lights glint off them in demented rainbows. He cricks his back and flexes his hands, ready for torture, and doesn't realize anything's wrong until I'm nearly on him with the huge clinking cylinder balanced on my shoulder.

'If you please,' I say, pushing him back.

He looks down at his chest where the blackened print of my hand is slowly warming back to crimson. A few droplets of his fiery leakages have already scorched black freckles onto the wooden floor. I unroll the fireproof carpet at his feet, and once it reaches the bar I step back and nod.

'Welcome to Between,' I say. 'The seats at the bar are suitable for you.'

Understanding blooms like rot on his face, and he deflates. Unpostured, he's smaller and his little horns droop and his face is lined with something heavy and exhausting that looks an awful lot like regret.

What a peculiar form of hell it must be, I think, for a creature bound to sin to have a conscience.

'Figures, on a day like this,' he mumbles. I expect a demon voice, guttural and abrasive, but he sounds like a depressed accountant. 'You serve my kind?'

'I do not discriminate.'

'How do I pay?'

'Time.'

'My time?'

'Paying with anyone else's would be theft.'

He snorts and schleps up to the bar and perches on one of the stools. Then he stands again and peers at it, suspicious, until he's satisfied it's not burning. He sits back down and points to the line of little blue bottles up near the ceiling and holds two fingers up. I pour him the screaming and begging liquid and he flings both shots down his throat one after the other and his guts darken, grey-black tubes pulsing like giant worms in the infernal depths of his belly.

'I—'

The door opens again and a woman walks in, tousle-haired and wide-eyed and panting. She shrieks when she sees the demon and dives back out. Presently she appears at the window, staring. The more I look the more she seems familiar, and then finally I realize—she looks an awful lot like the old woman from before.

I turn to the demon.

'You're not going to bother her, are you?'

The demon licks his lips.

'Would you let me?'

'I have a cricket bat.'

'Fine. Let her in.'

I beckon to the woman. She stares at the demon for a while and then slinks in and sits at the far end of the bar.

‘Are you here for me?’ she says.

A pause. The demon looks up, and at her.

‘Who, me?’

She nods.

‘Nope. Don’t know who you are.’

The woman sniffs. Her face crumples.

‘You should. I’m ... you should.’

The demon glances at me. I shake my head, and he sighs.

‘How much?’ he says, tapping the glasses.

‘Two years.’

‘Two!’ His eyes flare and his lips peel back from his teeth. ‘Fine. Take it.’

He stomps out grumbling about injustice and rumours and without him the bar is cooler and calmer and less interesting. I turn to the woman and now she’s staring at me, tight-lipped, eyes narrowed.

‘You knew, didn’t you?’ she says. ‘You knew what would happen.’

I take a minute to process. Then:

‘I don’t, yet,’ I say. ‘We’re not going the same way. Through time, that is.’

She looks at her fingers.

‘So you know who I am?’

‘I met you once. In your future, and in my past.’

‘But then how could I ...’ She shakes her head. ‘Never mind. None of it makes any sense anyway, now I think about it. Is it ... is it better? Have I solved it?’

I say nothing. She watches me awhile, then blinks. Tears fall onto her wrists like droplets of perfume.

‘I just wanted to make their lives better, you know?’ she says. She wipes her face. ‘Can you tell me, please? When we meet? Tell me not to?’

‘It would be too late by the time we meet. You’ll have already opened the Gate,’ I say. I pour her a shot of bourbon. ‘You’ll already be here.’

‘I wish I could take it all back. I wish I could close the Gates.’

‘You’ll find a way.’

Her drink halts halfway to her mouth. She looks at me, eyes wide.

‘Do I?’

‘Yes. I find all problems have solutions, in the long run. One just has to ask oneself what one is willing to do.’

‘And my solution? What do I have to do?’

‘You have to never exist.’

She scowls. I see now the old woman lurking inside her. I see the regret and the unwelcome memories that will one day crust her soul like barnacles. I wonder how she’d feel about her older self. Would she appear as a stranger to her? Would she hate her, or pity her, or envy her? Would it be possible to do any of that without thinking, I’m doing this to myself? Meeting oneself from another time must be like placing mirrors in front of mirrors.

I pour her another shot and let her go without charge. She pauses at the door.

‘We’re not going the same way, right?’

‘No.’

‘You’ve not seen what happened, yet?’

‘I have not.’

She purses her lips.

‘When you do,’ she says. ‘Remember it wasn’t what I wanted. OK?’

There’s a strange dignity to her. She must have been magnificent once, I think. A burning sunlet all her own.

‘I will,’ I say.

She leaves. I look over at the little scorch marks on the floor and realize the woman’s left something behind too. Nothing as crass as the burns. But, a lot more interesting.

* * *

It happens the next day. Or maybe the next year—when you have so much time, the pocket change doesn’t matter. It’s after I’ve closed up, after I’ve finished my pint, after I’ve sat in my chair a while, desperately wishing I had a mobile or a laptop or one of those spinning gizmos from a couple of dimensions over that project visions into your head. I threw mine away because when I had it, I stayed up all night watching succubi fight-dancing with flaming swords and lizards skittering on the lush flanks of volcanoes and chocolate softening slowly on windowsills.

I have small dreams, you see.

So. I’m just about to head in when the Inverse Gate lights up. Not just

mine—every single one in every permutation at every angle in the Between. In an instant it’s as if the far reaches of the universe had caught fire. I can just about make out other iterations of me, some in nightgowns and some naked, some half-werewolf and some with tentacles for limbs, wandering out of their bars, dumbstruck. There’s a hum in the air like a distant turbine overheating. It peaks. Then, a dense and tumescent silence.

Flaming demons and amorphous Old Gods and assorted other tumbling horrors pulse out of the Gate in clots, like flecks of scab in a fresh bleeding. They’re not what this is about. They’re just crocodiles, heading to the ford, waiting for whatever herds are about to arrive. I head inside and grab my cricket bat, and when I return I find a gaggle of demonic homunculi sniffing around my flower bed. The plants wither at their touch and the soil turns sour with dead bacteria. One of them looks at me and leers, innocently malicious, like a dog presenting the mangled corpse of a cat to its owner.

I wave the bat at them and they scatter. Their mother comes round the corner, a heaving heap of flesh, and they clamber into her through gaping sphincters.

‘There’s no need to be rude,’ she says.

‘Look what they did to my flower beds!’

She sniffs. I’m not certain with what.

‘They didn’t know any better.’

‘You should learn to control your offspring.’

‘I’ll thank you, sir, not to presume your parenting is better than mine.’

I glare at her. She glares back, first with one eye, then two, then a whole cluster that pop out of her flesh and bloom like milky tumours. I lower my bat.

‘What’re you doing here, anyway?’

She grows a mouth for the sole purpose of grinning.

‘Fresh meat, sirrah. Someone’s broken the rules. Someone’s opened the doors too early.’

I turn to the gates, aghast, as they light up again. The noise returns, growling, rising. I have enough time to whisper ‘Oh, no.’ Then the herd arrives.

They come through the Gate smiling and wide-eyed. What they were expecting I don’t know. Elysian Fields and dreamscapes, probably. Secret satisfactions to keep them going during the long grey of their real lives. I never find out what they were sold, but whatever it was it isn’t what they get. A young woman comes first, skinny and tall and dark-skinned, a piercing in her nose glinting in the unnatural light. Then comes another woman, older and larger and wearier. They see each other. They don’t expect the other to be there and they’re torn between gaping at the Between or speaking. In the end wonder wins over doubt and they just smile at each other and resume gawping. More join them. A man with a giant belly in jeans and a dirty checked shirt. A tall and handsome fellow with pocked skin and clean and slender hands. An owl-faced woman, scowling and bottle-blond, interrogating the others with buzzing and unwelcome insistence.

I wave at them. I point to the gate. I yell that they’re not ready, that this isn’t a place for them, this is a place for things that belong neither here nor there. That their smell and moist flesh will attract demons and spectres and other things, ancient things, things that sleep like giant snakes and wake only to feed. Mostly they don’t hear me. Some don’t understand. One, at least, listens and obeys, and she jogs back into the gate while her friends laugh at her.

So, I saved one. I did some good.

Then, the horrors attack.

I don’t watch for long, but it’s long enough. I see faces ripped off and souls dragged screaming from limp bodies. I see brains sucked out of ears. I hear screaming, and the worst part of that is how it ends. Sometimes suddenly and completely. Sometimes dwindling into whimpers. Sometimes, worst of all, decomposing from horror to despair and finally into moans of subhuman pleasure. Listening to those is like having a hand crawl up my throat.

I close my eyes, but it’s not enough. I walk back into the bar, but I can still hear the clamour. So I pour myself a drink, and then another. After the third the sounds don’t bother me so much. After the fourth I don’t remember a thing.

* * *

The next time I see her she’s young. She has a great mane of thick hair and bright eyes and the smile of someone who’s certain that other people want to be smiled at. She walks into the bar and looks around with her mouth open. The green lights from the signs, and the red and blue also, lick her mahogany skin in technicolour welcome.

I try not to look at her, but she won’t be ignored. She wanders over to the bar and sits with her hands on the countertop. She looks at me.

‘What is this place?’ she says.

‘It’s a bar, madam.’

‘Obviously. What’s it doing here?’

‘Where else would it be?’

She tilts her head.

‘Who’re you?’

‘I’m the barman, madam.’

‘Right, obviously. But—’

‘And I’m supposed to be here.’ I put a shot glass down and pour some bourbon into it and slide it, dark amber and crystalline, towards her. She picks it up and sniffs.

‘How did you know?’ she says.

I take a deep breath and break the rules.

‘You shouldn’t be here, madam.’

‘What? Why not?’

‘It’s not your time. You haven’t earned it.’

‘Of course I’ve earned it.’ She shoots the whiskey and puts the glass down and slides it back to me. ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

‘This isn’t the sort of place you come to uninvited.’

‘Were you invited?’ She squints, piercing and analytical. ‘You’re human.’

‘I was. Once.’

‘So you shouldn’t be here either.’

I was tricked. I was coerced. I was seduced. ‘I was invited.’

She grins. ‘Lies.’

‘It doesn’t matter if you believe me. But this is not the place for you and yours. This is Between, and you’re still Of.’

Her eyes widen.

‘That’s who you are!’

‘Sorry?’

‘The Waykeeper. You’re here to tell me that this is a realm of half-thoughts, right? Of dreams unfulfilled? Of things halfway between reality and unreality, or something like that?’

‘This is all those places, but I’m no Waykeeper.’

‘Where is he, then?’

‘I don’t know anyone by that name.’

She licks her lips, victorious.

‘Well, it must be you. You’re warning me off, so it must be you, even if you don’t know it.’

‘Madam—’

‘Mademoiselle.’ She winks.

‘Mademoiselle. I repeat. This place is not for you. Terrible things will happen if you persist.’

‘I’ve opened the gate to dreams!’ She claps, and runs her hand through her hair. ‘Do you know how big this is? People will be able to explore their subconscious. We’ve already identified hardwired archetypes—what makes us afraid of snakes, and the dark, and ...’ She frowns. ‘I don’t know. Loneliness. I’ve already encountered a pair of Hero Twins. Like, I could actually *touch* them. I think they were Mesoamerican. But I could smell them. I could hear their feathers rustling.’

‘Mademoiselle—’

‘Do you realize what we can do with this? We can cure madness. We can cure neuroses. We can take trips to *literal* dreams. This place is amazing! What I’ve done is amazing!’

‘It isn’t for you.’

She scowls, petulant.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s not *only* for you. This space. This isn’t just the subconscious, as you put it. This is Between.’

‘Between what?’

‘Between *everything*.’

I come around the bar with my heart pounding and my throat dry and walk out. She comes with me and out through the flower beds with the gravel crunching beneath our feet. She slows, almost swelling with wonder. She takes in the arcing bubble of reflected realities stretching like a trillion-faceted gem overhead. Also the Gates, and their glyphs in languages from another universe, another time, another way of being that bloomed and grew and died its own long death from before any of the atoms of our reality even existed.

‘What is this?’ she breathes.

‘This is the Between. What you saw—what you’ve seen—was probably just ... It wasn’t things as they are. You came in through there, that gate, to the right, with the bluish light. Some of the things from your world will head across the causeway and through that gate, there, with the red.’

‘Where does that gate lead?’

‘To forever.’

‘Forever?’

‘I don’t know how else to put it. I don’t know how you’d understand.’

She looks from one to the other. As she does Ichabod comes up next to me, a tiny black fly, and settles on my shoulder.

‘You’re breaking the rules,’ he hisses.

‘I have to try,’ I hiss back.

‘Look at her face. You shouldn’t have brought her here. She thinks she’s going to live forever.’

‘I’m going to live forever,’ she whispers, eyes wide. ‘We’re going to travel the highways of time, my people.’

‘It’s not ...’

I want to say, *it’s not worth it*. But Ichabod’s right. I’m wasting my time. I’ve learned to tell who’s who out here in Between. I’ve learned to tell when people don’t really want to listen, they just want to be heard.

She wanders down the path to the purple confluence of the light of the Gates. Some of the other mes in the other iterations are watching her too. I look at them and some of them look back, melancholy and knowing. One of them spreads her arms and shrugs.

‘Come on,’ says Ichabod. ‘Sometimes you only learn you were fighting a battle when you lose it.’

I leave her, between the gates, between her future and my past. At least she got three free drinks from me, I think. At least I could give her something.

Warlock's Ocatarine

by Desmond Rhae



Words from a Man Trapped between Universes

by Nathan Thompson

Something happened to me.
I don't know. The world is shifting
a
r
o
u
n m
d e,
phasing between what I imagine to
be different realities, the way my father
sat on the couch and sifted through TV channels, bor-
ed, on a Saturday morning. Which is to say,
I am bored
and
alone.

Feet sinking into the soft sand of a seaside beach resort. *Click.*
Children catching snowflakes in a clearing of pines. *Click.*
Strange plains of azure clay, cracked, abandoned wasteland. *Click.*
Red crystalline stars, spread in space ... am I floating? *Click.*
A bar, taps of Bud Right, Buddumber, bottles of Batardi—
A reality so similar to home, yet not quite the same, makes me miss—
I want a drink.

I've wanted a drink.
Sometimes I want to
r e a c h out and grasp onto
something. A glass. Sip until my thoughts become nothing
but mumbled garbageeeeeaaaajjjjjllllkkmmmmmgrrrrr

Click.

There's never enough time to hold onto something, change something.
Floating amidst orbs of ■■■■■ and wisps of ■■■■■. Do I
have the sensory organs required to process this?

Click.

I see you. Yes you, with the poem in your hand. You. Can you read this?
Please tell me you can read this. Say something. Say something to me. A
reaction. Please, let me know I'm not just a thought floating in space,
neurons firing in a jar of plasma, ones and zeros in a computer, words
on a page. Let me know I'm still— *Click.*

solemn,
feast of petrification,
reaching shadows, numb,
antiquated forms angled
to tragic light,
in sight
of setting sun.

voiceless,
their moaning,
in Masonic grey,
Dreadful moss on sunken pool,
in empty paths,
of day.

heaving,
the still breathing
in stone,
pigments morphed
rustic white,
all life, akin to bone.

haughtily,
the haunted hunger,
glory, to blossomed doom,
stillness
of deepest time,
in roots
of shadowed moon.

echoes,
noosed on loathsome branches,
Strange Fruit, centered,
with lidless eye,
demanding the gorging
of graying meat,
from those who fear to die.

Gorgon Fruit

by Jamal Hodge

Pitcher Plant (carnivorous plant with Carnivores)

by E. E. King



Viva Violetta

by Lisa Beebe

When she heard a knock at the front door of her Lower East Side apartment, Olivia ran in half-dressed from the bedroom and checked the peephole. She unlocked the door to let in her girlfriend, Amber, and hugged her hello.

Olivia said, “You’ve had a key for like a month now. When are you gonna start using it?”

“I will, I will. I’m just trying to respect your space.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “How about respecting the couch’s space for two minutes while I finish getting ready?”

“You got it.” Amber made herself comfortable. She knew Olivia’s “two minutes” were likely to run long, but that’s what she got for dating a fashionista. A magazine on the coffee table caught her eye. “Is that the new *Orion*?”

“Yeah, it came today.”

About ten minutes later, Olivia leaned over the back of the couch and pointed at a page with a photo of a shed covered in lush purple ivy. “That’s a beautiful plant,” she said.

“A lot of people down south would disagree,” Amber told her. “It has a pretty name, *Hedera violetta*, but they call it ‘the purple strangler.’ Apparently, it’s really invasive and suffocates native plants.”

“Okay, I revise my opinion—it’s beautiful *and* evil,” Olivia said.

Originally published in the Los Angeles NaNo Anthology Engineering Chaos

Amber closed the magazine and set it down. “Shall we head out?”

Olivia nodded. “Let me just turn down the AC.” She crossed to the window unit and set the power to low. “Effing climate change ... Super-storms and murder hornets and now evil plants. Why do I even try?”

Amber stood up and gave Olivia a quick hug. “Because you’re a good person.”

Olivia sighed as she picked up her bag and her keys. “I mean it. The fashion industry is a mess in general, but now here’s this plant that’s so pretty, and we have too much of it. Why can’t we make it into clothes?” She opened the apartment door.

Amber followed her out, then asked, “Wouldn’t it take a lot of processing and chemicals to turn it into fabric?”

Olivia nodded. “Probably.” But as they waited for the elevator, she had an idea. “Unless—what if I could design a dress from the living plant?”

Amber raised an eyebrow. “That would be hard to do on a big scale, but knowing you, you’re thinking ... couture?”

As they descended, Olivia’s excitement level rose. “Oh my god, I could wear it to the sustainable style gala during Green Fashion Week. A living dress.”

“Do it,” Amber told her. “You’re always saying you want a job that

feels more meaningful, and that event could be a great place to network.”

Olivia shook her head, second-guessing herself. “I mean, I’ve never even touched the vine. It could be prickly or itchy or something.”

“Don’t talk yourself out of this,” Amber said as they stepped out on the ground floor. “At least look into it. You could fly down to New Orleans on Friday, stay overnight somewhere cheap, pick a few plants, and come back Sunday. Don’t you have a cousin down there? Maybe you could even stay with him. It’d be like a mini-vacay without missing any work.”

“I could probably swing the cost of a flight ...”

“Do it!” Amber said. “You know you want to.”

Olivia scrunched up her face, thinking hard. She loved her job on the design team at H&M, but she felt guilty on a daily basis for contributing to the throw-away culture and environmental impact of the fast-fashion industry. She said, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it would show the right people how much this stuff matters to me.” She took Amber’s hand as they turned down Delancey toward the bar, her heart full of possibility.

* * *

In Louisiana, Olivia was reminded that there were places even more humid than New York City in the summer. Her cousin, Craig, drove her through one of the suburban neighborhoods where the Hedera violetta was out of control.

“The violetta was originally imported for decorative purposes, which of course turned out to be a really bad idea,” she explained to him. “It’s an air plant, so it can live anywhere from rocks to rooftops and propagate by pulling moisture from the air. The vines grow very fast and have holdfasts, these super-sticky pad things that make them hard to remove.”

“Nasty stuff, huh?” Craig said, his eyes scanning the foliage as he drove.

“It really is, and it’s also bad news for native plants. The leaves overlap, blocking the sun from reaching anything planted underneath. But they’re pretty, which is why I’m here.”

A few minutes later, Craig pulled over next to a deep purple plant. “There you go.”

Olivia got out of the car. The color was even more captivating in person, and she was thrilled to discover that the leaves were as soft as velvet. When she touched the stem, a tendril curled around her finger almost affectionately.

Olivia snipped off enough cuttings to fill three gallon-sized Ziploc bags. She carried them home on the plane, her mind spinning with possibilities.

When she returned to her apartment, it was sweltering, but she didn’t turn on the air conditioner. Instead, she walked to Duane Reade and bought a humidifier, creating an indoor version of the Louisiana climate. She pulled a plastic storage bin from her closet, dumped out the winter sweaters, and shook the violetta from the Ziploc bags into the bin. She had questioned whether the cuttings would survive the plane trip, but in the hot and humid air, the purple sprigs responded immediately.

Then, she began sketching ideas. Did she want a flowing gown? No, that didn’t feel right. She’d play off the clinginess of the plant by designing a formfitting mini-dress. She envisioned a base layer of woven vines over which the leaves hung freely, giving the dress a peek-a-boo feel. She wanted it to suggest that if a breeze tossed the leaves just right, someone might catch a glimpse of natural flesh beneath this wild, living garment.

She had a dress form in her closet that she hadn’t used in a while. She pulled it out, adjusted it to her current measurements, and then

covered it in a large plastic trash bag. The plastic would create a removable layer so that she would ultimately be able to transfer the garment off of the dress form and onto her own body.

Each day, the violetta grew. At first, Olivia used transparent tape to attach the cuttings to the dress form. The slender vines were surprisingly easy to work with, and as they got longer, she guided them along, intertwining the pieces to give the dress a somewhat solid, though still flexible, structure.

In the front, she twisted the vines back over themselves, leaving a set of loops around a deep V-shaped opening. She avoided trimming the plants, choosing instead to redirect the errant tendrils and give them something to grab. She worked at it daily, because each piece seemed to have a mind of its own. Meanwhile, the inner vines were thickening up.

A few weeks in, she joked to Amber, “I better not gain any weight before the gala, because these vines do not look like they’ll stretch.”

Meanwhile, the surface of the dress was filling out with the violetta’s soft purple leaves. Every time she looked at it, Olivia was astonished that she had created it herself—without needles, thread, or fabric. Her sewing tools were air and water and life.

She didn’t tell any of her colleagues or fashion industry friends what she was working on. As the gala drew closer, Amber asked Olivia for help picking out something to wear. Olivia found her a forest green organza jumpsuit on Rent the Runway. Not only would Amber look hot in it, the color would accentuate the violetta’s natural beauty.

“I love it,” Amber told her as they placed the order. “And renting is better for the environment, right?” Amber worked at Greenbeam, a software company for green building designers. She and Olivia had been drawn together by their shared passion for sustainability; they met at a cocktail event where all the drinks were made from food scraps.

The afternoon leading up to the gala, Olivia held her breath as she

tugged the trash bag beneath the dress upward to separate the living material from the dress form. The violetta clung to the bag even after it was off the form, but little by little, Olivia worked the dress loose. She put it on a hanger and hung it on the bathroom door.

Standing in front of the dress in nude underwear and pasties, she wondered, “Am I really going to wear a plant out in public?” But she had come too far to change her mind.

Olivia lifted the dress over her head and pulled it gently downward. It went on easily, thanks to the front opening and deep V neckline. She had originally planned to tie the front closed with a strip of vine, but she decided not to bother. Sure, the neckline was a bit revealing, but the dress itself was less pliant than she expected. It had such a defined structure, there was no way it would slip to one side and reveal too much. Around her body, the vines felt like the boning inside a strapless gown. It wasn’t the most comfortable thing she’d ever worn, but it wasn’t bad either.

Once she had the dress on, Olivia realized she wouldn’t be able to relax again until she took it off at the end of the night. She didn’t want to risk damaging any of the delicate leaves by sitting or even leaning on them.

When she turned to look in the mirror, her mouth fell open. The dress looked like something a mythical goddess would wear. Her own body looked unreal somehow, and she knew the effect would be even more pronounced once she did her hair and makeup and put on a pair of heels.

Amber came over early to get ready. When she heard the knock, Olivia ran to the door barefoot and pulled it open.

Amber’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, Liv.”

“I know,” Olivia said, “It looks better than I ever imagined. I feel like I’m about to become the poster child for sustainable couture.”

When they arrived at the gala, they were stopped almost immediately

by a photographer, and others followed suit. Olivia wasn't a famous designer or model; she didn't even have her own fashion line, but that night she discovered the warmth of the spotlight. People she'd spent years admiring from a distance approached her to introduce themselves. They offered business cards and asked for her Instagram. She felt like a debutante coming out into the society where she most wanted to belong.

Most of the guests had made an effort to dress for the theme, wearing suits and gowns that were either vintage or created by prominent sustainable brands—but nothing came close to the violetta.

After an hour or so, Olivia and Amber stepped behind a cluster of palm trees to escape the crowd. The trees were real ones that had been installed to temporarily make the ballroom feel “green.”

Amber handed Olivia a glass of champagne and said, “To the belle of the ball.” They clinked glasses, sipped their drinks, and kissed.

“How does it feel to finally be here?” Amber asked.

“Great,” Olivia said. Then she looked down at her dress. “But this thing is more fitted than I realized. Or maybe I'm just a little overwhelmed right now. I can feel my heart racing.”

“Do you want to find a place to sit down?”

“I've got to stay on my feet, but it's just one night. I'll get through it.” And she did.

Throughout the event, Olivia's excitement kept her energized, but when they finally stepped outside, she felt exhausted and uncomfortable. The vines seemed tighter than they had earlier, and she figured they were rubbing against her skin, causing irritation.

“Should I call a car?” asked Amber.

“I think I just need a minute to breathe. It's cooler out here, which

helps.”

Amber reached into her bag, “If you'd rather walk back to your apartment than squish your beautiful creation up in the backseat of a Lyft, these might be helpful.” She held out a pair of Olivia's comfy flats.

“You've had those in your bag all night?”

Amber nodded. “I know you.”

“You're a miracle,” Olivia told her. She couldn't bend over in the dress, so she dropped the flats on the sidewalk to slip them on, and Amber tucked the heels into her bag.

Olivia's apartment was only about a mile away, and they walked slowly, even as a light rain began to fall.

“This rain can do whatever it wants to my hair, now,” Olivia said. “Frizz it up, I don't care. I looked good when it mattered.”

“You still look good,” Amber said.

About a block from her apartment, Olivia felt short of breath. She said, “Tonight was perfect, but I think it was a little too much for me.”

Amber asked. “Should I come up?”

“I think I just need to take a bath and go to sleep,” Olivia said. “I'm worn AF.”

“Totally. How about if I come over in the morning and take you out to a celebratory brunch?”

“That sounds amazing.”

They kissed good night, and Olivia took the elevator up to her apart-

ment. She kicked off the flats and walked barefoot to the bathroom, where she began filling her vintage clawfoot tub.

In the bathroom mirror, Olivia saw that her face was flushed. She also noticed that her dress had become less revealing; over the course of the night, a few vines had grown across the deep neckline. “Damn, this thing really is high maintenance,” she said out loud. She tugged at one of the vines, but it was stuck firm.

She’d have to pull the whole dress over her head to get it off. She tried to lift the bottom, but the violetta felt like it had been glued to her upper thighs. She couldn’t budge it.

The big event was over, so the dress no longer mattered. “Don’t be precious about this,” she told herself. She went into the living room to get her shears, and then stood in front of the mirror.

She inserted the lower blade into the front of the dress and cut through a few of the vines. She yanked at them, trying to create a bigger opening, but the vines clung to her body. She pulled off a few handfuls of leaves, trying to get a better look at what was going on between the vines and her skin. The holdfasts hadn’t been able to attach themselves very well to the trash bag, but they had locked onto her sweaty pores like superglue.

She cut through more of the vines, but she still couldn’t get the dress loose. As the tub filled with hot water, the bathroom started getting steamy. When the mirror fogged up, she set the shears on the side of the tub so that she could turn off the faucet. As she reached over the steaming tub, the vines tightened, forcing the air from her lungs.

“I should call someone,” she thought, but her phone was too far away. She had to focus. *Cut the vines.* She pulled at the plant, tearing off leaves. She managed a shallow breath.

The violetta pieces on the floor around her began to stretch and wiggle in the steamy air, looking for something to climb, something to cling to.

Then the room started to move, too. Olivia grabbed the edge of the sink to steady herself.

A noise behind her made her jump. She spun around, nearly losing her balance.

“It’s just me,” Amber said, “When you didn’t answer my text, I got worried.”

Olivia whispered, “Help.”

Amber grabbed a handful of vines at the center of Olivia’s chest and pulled as hard as she could. When they broke, Olivia gasped, able to breathe again.

Where the vines had been, there were tiny patches of raw skin. “Oh god,” Amber said, “I’m tearing your skin.”

“Get it off me,” Olivia pleaded. They both yanked at the vines, leaving raw spots all over Olivia’s back, chest, and thighs. When the vines were fully removed, Olivia hugged Amber tightly.

“I’m so glad I had a key,” Amber said.

Olivia could feel herself starting to tear up. She gestured at the plant pieces that were wriggling around their feet. “What do we do with all this?”

“Do you have any bleach?” Amber asked.

“In the hall closet,” she said. As Amber went to grab it, Olivia started picking up the remains of what had once been a dress. She threw each bit of vine and scrap of leaf into the bathwater, where they continued to squirm. One vine clung to the smooth porcelain tub, its tendrils stretching upward, until Olivia knocked it back into the water. When the floor was clean, Amber poured the entire container of bleach into the tub. Only then did the pieces stop moving.

“Let’s leave them there overnight,” Amber said.

Olivia nodded and reached for her bathrobe. “Maybe I’ll have a cup of tea instead of a bath,” she said. “And maybe I do want you to stay over after all.”

In the morning, the plants in the tub were gray and lifeless. Olivia drained the water and used rubber gloves to move the detritus into a trash bag. She tied the bag closed, then went out to the hallway and dropped it in the trash chute. Once the dress was safely disposed of, she was ready to face the world again. The smell of bleach was still very strong in the bathroom, so before they left for brunch, Olivia opened the bathroom window to air it out. She didn’t have a window screen, so she closed the bathroom door as she left, just in case any bugs flew in.

Olivia felt a thousand times better after a good night’s sleep. The raw

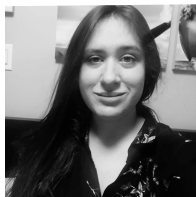
spots on her skin still hurt a little, but at least nobody could see them when she was fully dressed. And her phone had been buzzing all morning. A photo of Olivia and Amber had been featured on the Vogue website as part of their Green Fashion Week coverage, and she sensed that a door of opportunity was opening for her.

As the two women walked toward their favorite brunch spot, Amber said, “We’re doing bottomless mimosas today, right? I think we deserve them.”

“Hell yeah!” Olivia responded. “Last night was the craziest night of my life. I’m so glad it’s over.”

Meanwhile, for one small purple sprig that had fallen behind the clawfoot tub, life was just beginning.

Contributor's Bios



SYDNIE BEAUPRÉ is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

* * *



LISA BEEBE lives in Los Angeles, where she sometimes talks to the ocean. Her stories have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Psychopomp*, *Vestal Review*, and *Five South*, among others. Find her online at lisabeebe.com.

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CHRISTOPHER COLLINGWOOD was born and raised in Sydney Australia. He completed university in Sydney and graduated with a degree in business studies. Chris has devoted his spare time to writing, with works published in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Hexagon*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Dreamforge Anvil*, *Smoke in the Stars* anthology, *Qualia Nous Vol 2* anthology, and illustration in *JOURN-E 2.1*, among other dimensionally unstable places.

* * *



JENNIFER CROW's poetry and prose have been published in a wide range of venues over the past quarter-century. Her poems have appeared in *Analog*, where two were finalists for the AnLab reader awards; *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Uncanny Maga-*

zine, and others. Curious readers can learn more about her and her work on Twitter, where she posts as [@writerjencrow](https://twitter.com/writerjencrow).

* * *



RUBELLA DITHERS lives in a swamp. They're studying space law, which isn't as cool or interesting as it sounds.

* * *



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

* * *



JAMAL HODGE is a multi-award-winning filmmaker and writer who is a sitting Board Member of Harlem Film House and Axs Lab. Since May of 2016, Jamal Hodge's films have been an official selection in over 100 Film Festivals, and have won over 50 awards including The Vanguard Award (Best of The Fest) at the Hip Hop Film Festival (2020), Best Director at The Chelsea Film Festival (2020) and Best Director at GenreBlast (2020), In 2018 he directed the first season of Investigation Discovery

Channel's *Primal Instinct* and came on as a Producer on the animated feature film *Pierre the Pigeon Hawk* (starring Will.I.Am, Jennifer Hudson, and Whoopi Goldberg) raising half a million dollars of investment. He is currently co-directing/producing a PBS docu-series called *Southern Storytellers* (2022) with Peabody-winning producer/director Craig Renaud.

As a writer, Hodge is an active member of The Horror Writer's Association and The SFPA, being nominated for a 2021 Rhysling Award for his Poem "Fermi's Spaceship," while his poem "The Silence of God" placed in the 2021 Horror Writer Association Showcase. His screenplay "Mourning Meal" won 5 awards (including best short screenplay at NYC Horror Film Festival 2018) while his poetry is featured in the historical all-black issue of *Star*line Magazine* (issue 43.4) and has been featured in *Space and Time Magazine*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, and in the *Chiral Mad 5* anthology alongside such greats as Linda Addison, Sharee Renee Thomas, & Josh Malerman.

Motivated by his accomplishments, Hodge has blossomed to take his talents to the next level. Jamal's tone of work, or what he calls, "Inspirational Darkness," can be described as a melding of genres. The Psychological Horror, Thriller, and Inspirational genres are Jamal's usual forte of filmmaking. His mission is to add value to people's lives through his unique brand of cinema. He's excited to continue to grow outstanding partnerships to create memorable and impactful cinematic experiences for audiences across the world.

www.writerhodge.com

* * *

JANIS BUTLER HOLM served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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OLAITAN HUMBLE is a writer and editor. He has been nominated for the Rhysling Award, Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Award.

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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.elizabetheveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeeking

* * *



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

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LYRA MEURER is a sentient muscle spasm with a restless hunger for writing. They live in Colorado with their husband, pet rats, and ever-growing stacks of journals and books. They have short fiction published in *Heartlines Spec*, *Tree & Stone*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly* and several anthologies.

Lyra's contemplations on Taco Bell soothsaying, early 2000s television, worldbuilding, and other bizarre phenomena, along with pictures of their doodles, can be found at <https://lyrameurer.blogspot.com/>.

* * *



DAVID POWELL has taught school, directed plays, and portrayed zombies, but now writes full-time, seeking out pockets of chaos in the corners of the grid. You can find his writings in magazines such as *Calliope* and *First Line Literary Journal*, and anthologies such as *Shattered Veil* and *Georgia Gothic*. You'll find a complete list, as well as free reads, on his website, davidpowell.net.

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DESMOND RHAЕ has spent his whole life exploring a deep interest in art, writing, and music. After earning a college degree in graphic design, he's focused on independent work as a writer and artist. Alongside writing his sci-fi novel, he also works as Editor and Illustrator at *Starward Shadows eZine*. His pieces have been selected for publications such as *Cosmic Horror Monthly*. You can find out more at www.thinksphere.com.

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ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Ebb Tide Reflections*, features poetry, short stories and photography (World Inkers, NYC). Carl has four photography books, published by Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and The Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently a co-editor with *ILA Magazine*, art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for three The Best of the Net Awards (2021-23) and a 2023 Pushcart Nomination for work in *Ebb Tide Reflections*.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, and *Tortured Willows*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including Interstellar *Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbria*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. She currently serves as Vice President of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect at [@christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng).

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GORDON SUN is a surgeon and clinical informaticist exploring the interstitial spaces within healthcare, science, and technology. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *If There's Anyone Left*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Dread Machine*, *NewMyths.com*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *TOWER*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Daikaijuzine*, and other publications.

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NATHAN G. THOMPSON is a fresh graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University with a B.F.A. in Creative Writing. He has poems published in *HUMID-14* and *HUMID-15* and currently lives in Dallas, TX.

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LUKE WALKER has been writing horror and dark thrillers for most of his life after finding a copy of Lovecraft's stories that his eldest brother left in the bathroom. From there, he went on to his dad's collection of Stephen King books and hasn't looked back since. His novels include *The Kindred*, *Pandemonium*, *The Dead Room*, *The Unredeemed*, *Ascent*, *Die Laughing*, *Dead Sun* and *Winter Graves*. Several of his short stories have been published online and in magazines/books. While writing, he has worked in a library, a hospital (disposing of severed legs) and a record shop (back in the distant past). He is currently working on new novels and short fiction. His next book, *The Ninth Circle*, will be published in 2024.

Luke is (too) active on Twitter/X and Bluesky and loves to hear from people who want to talk about books.

He is forty-six and lives in England with his wife, cats, too many bad films and not enough books.

<https://linktr.ee/lukewalkerwriter>

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T.D. WALKER's latest poetry collection is *Doubt & Circuitry* (Southern Arizona Press, 2023). She produces programs for shortwave radio featuring poets reading their work. Find out more at <https://www.tdwalker.net>

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ERIC WAMPLER lives in Madison, Wisconsin. He writes fantasy, dark fantasy, and science fiction (though if he's honest, it's probably more science fantasy than science fiction). He has had short fiction accepted for publication in *Electric Spec*, *Etherea Magazine*, and *Piker Press*.

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KIM WHYSALL-HAMMOND lives in southern England and is an expert in obsolete telecommunications arcana. Her Grandad told her bedtime stories about the Morlocks with lasting effects. Her poetry has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Kaleidotrope*, *On Spec*, *Star*Line*, *The Future Fire*, and *Utopia SF*. She also has poems in anthologies from Wild Pressed Books, Milk and Cake Press, Palewell Press and Brigids Gate Press. She can be found at <https://thecheesesellerswife.wordpress.com/>

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SUBODHANA WIJEYERATNE is a writer of speculative fiction living and working in Lafayette, Indiana. He is the author of over twenty short stories, a collection of short stories, and a novel, *The Slices*. His next novel, *Triangulum* - described by Publisher's Weekly as a 'layered and rewarding space opera' -- will be published by Rosarium Publishing in January.



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After completing his degree with the University of Winnipeg, **MORGAN WYMAN** has spent his free time writing, revising, and writing again (though he swears he has other hobbies too). He is grateful for a vast network of family and friends.



World View

by Tim Hildebrandt

(full image)