

# penumbra



speculative  
fiction mag

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Interview with

## Ai Jiang

Identity and empathy  
in horror and cyberpunk

plus

R W Owen • Angela Acosta •  
Binod Dawadi • David Far •  
Andrew Graber • Len Baglow •  
Fiona Moore • Louis Evans • Beth  
Cato • Carl Scharwath • Melissa  
Miles • Marilee Dahlman •  
Rickey Rivers Jr • Tim  
Hildebrandt • Maxwell I. Gold •  
Megan Denese Meador • Sydnie  
Beaupré • Melissa Ridley Elmes •  
LindaAnn LoSchiavo • Mariel  
Herbert • Christina Sng

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



# Table of contents

from the editor

## interview

interview

from many points-of-view

An interview with Ai Jiang

## fiction & poetry

by R W Owen

Close Enough?

by Angela Acosta

Cosmic Enchantment

by David Far

New Friends

by Len Baglow

Coffee Time

by Fiona Moore

Doomed Youth

by Louis Evans

Power of Attorney

by Melissa Miles

The Dreamer

by Beth Cato

Persuasive Argument Essay by Mackenzie, Age 8

by Marilee Dahlman

Hunt of the Sphinx

by Rickey Rivers Jr

Horns Unheard

by Maxwell I. Gold

The Other Side

by Melissa Ridley Elmes

Adventure in the Dark of the Mind

by Mariel Herbert

Date Night

by Megan Denese Mealor

the darkest art

## art & g. narrative

by Binod Dawadi

Woman

by Andrew Graber

Untitled

by Carl Scharwath

Goddess in Glass

by Tim Hildebrandt

Street Without Joy

by Sydnie Beaupré

Shadow Man

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Date Night

by Christina Sng

Shadow Series

contributor's

bios

cover: Meeting on Neutral  
Ground by Barbara Candiotti



*Shadow Man*



*Street Without Joy*





# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Is the rise of AI heralding the extinction of humans?

This is the headline (or gist thereof) of multiple articles in the last week or so, telling us that so-called “experts” are all warning that the rise of AI will lead to an existential threat to human beings—basically telling us that SkyNet is coming, terminators will terminate us, and the sky will fall.

While there is definitely something wrong with the sky (climate change brought to you by humans and not AI), this kind of unholy union between experts and the media to prophecy doom is wholly irresponsible, especially when governments around the world would like nothing better than to ignore the actual problems of climate change and war in order to focus on something scifi instead. Especially something where decades of science fiction stories have laid the general groundwork for AI being another Other we will have to fight, where the public can be easily distracted, where we already hear daily of the stunning advances of ChatGPT and various AI art programs and the “AI” helping social media giants (and governments) spy on us to the extent of making “privacy” an archaic word only found in the dictionary.

There are certainly a host of problems with ChatGPT—mostly to do with how humans are going to use it, not the other way round. The same with art AI—the humans using it are causing the problems; the AI itself isn’t the kind of AI that becomes self-aware and then decides that human beings are one big deepfake that needs to be wiped from the face of the Earth. And the AI used to erode privacy is a kind of advanced data analytics, created by and used by humans, not by a self-aware AI net to rule the world.

We are still years away from creating anything really self-aware. We

can mimic a certain amount of awareness, and we’re getting better at that all the time, but we aren’t even close to creating an artificial intelligence that is genuinely able to understand what it is doing, what it is saying and why. If we put imperfect computer systems in charge of nuclear weapons, that will be on us, not on some AI boogeyman. If we misprogram a climate model, if we use analytics to enable strongmen and fascists to control us, that’s not the secret plot of some AI somewhere—that’s on us. If we allow some political party to scare us into giving away all our rights and freedoms, if we want to believe that all education is a liberal plot to—gasp—educate us, and that Ignorance is Strength—that’s on us, as opposed to some electronic overlord. There are plenty of human beings I’d be far more afraid of giving nukes to than an AI, and the AI doesn’t even exist.

In this issue we interview Ai Jiang, a prolific author of cyberpunk (most recently *I am AI*) and horror (most recently *Linghun*). We spoke about ChatGPT and AI, certainly, but mostly about the very human issues of identity and empathy, of culture and difference and how we treat other human beings and how that makes us feel, and how one writes about these things. This is reflected as well in the rest of the issue, whether the works be science fiction, fantasy, or horror, and is displayed in our cover by Barbara Candiotti, *Meeting on Neutral Ground*.

Have a wonderful June, a great summer, and we’ll see you again in August. SkyNet permitting.

Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*





Identity and empathy in  
cyberpunk and horror

# from many points-of-view

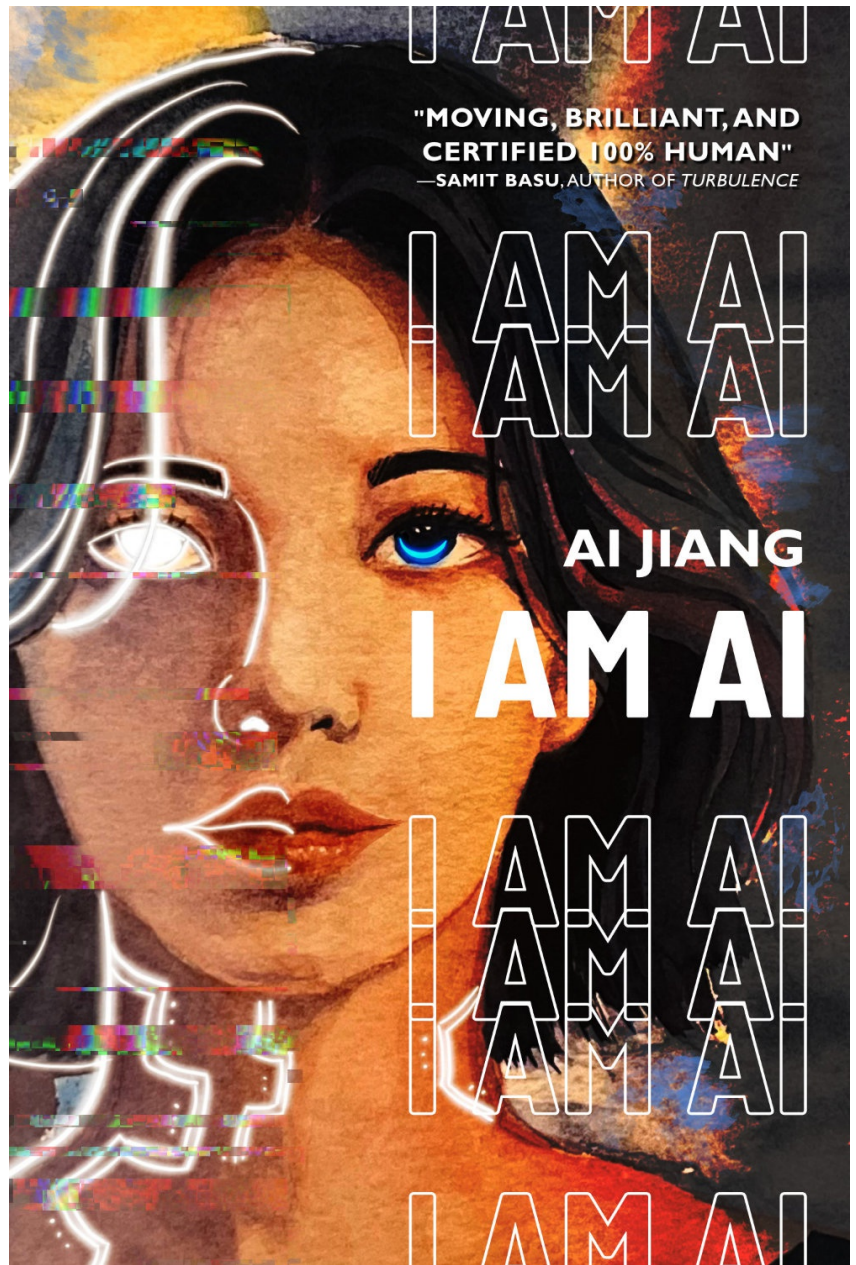
An Interview with Ai Jiang

To describe Ai Jiang as an up-and-coming writer is to have already got behind the curve, as she is, in many ways, already there: a Nebula, Locus, and now Ignyte award finalist, with many, many stories in such venues as F&SF, The Dark, and Uncanny, she also has three longer works out just this year (Smol Tales From Between Worlds, Linghun, and I am AI). We caught up, if ever-so-briefly, with the Chinese-Canadian author and spoke about what she wants to get across in her stories, how she writes about identity and mixed backgrounds, culture and immigration, and cyberpunk and AI.

\* \* \*

*You've mentioned in previous interviews that you want to write stories that are not only entertaining, but also make a difference. In what way?*

I feel like stories have the ability to connect people, to help others understand those who are not from the same background or have the same experiences or worldviews and values, but also see that despite the differences, there is also universality to the concept of humanity in how things might resonate in unexpected ways. But I also think that stories al-



The cover of Ai Jiang's latest novelette, *I am AI*, due out 20 June 2023 from Shortwave Publishing



**Ai Jiang in London, England**

low us to view the world through a different lens, come to understand our reality through reflective storytelling—the hope that remains, the triumphs, the failures—and hopefully, we can become more empathetic to one another.

*In many of your stories you speak about identity, particularly in relation to East and West, to feeling split. I know many people, particularly of mixed backgrounds, feel this way. Do you feel sometimes that others perceive you as not belonging to one group or the other (or to any)? Do you still feel you'd wish to merge your own split identity into one whole, and what might that be?*

It's funny because depending on who I ask, I might get very mixed answers. Some might tell me I'm "not Chinese enough" and others

might tell me I can "only ever be Chinese," and sometimes I wonder why there is such an obsession with categorization, though I do understand the need for it at times—in relation to marketing and different genres. But that also means that cross-genre works are difficult to put a finger on, or perhaps they actually have the opportunity to hit multiple audiences at once.

But in thinking about marketing, I also think about my identity in a similar sense in that I am very "cross-genre," not only in my writing, but also in my cultural background in that it's a strange blend of the traditional beliefs and values I'd been raised with through my grandmother and parents, but also the Canadian educational and social environment I grew up in outside my home.

When I was younger, I wanted nothing more than to assimilate fully into Canadian culture. When I felt like I was drifting from my family and relatives, I wanted nothing more than to hold onto my Chinese upbringing. But neither of these cultures are perfect, and I feel like aimlessly trying to hold on to one over the other was more detrimental than simply embracing both and learning from both and using one to inform the other. I think to love one's culture and background doesn't necessarily mean you have to agree with everything within it, and I think having both a Canadian education and Chinese upbringing helps me better reflect on the merits of each but also their shortcomings so I am more critical about the ways my values and beliefs are shaped and better understand why they exist and what has led me to them rather than simply saying, "This is just how things are." So I suppose that is my long-winded way of saying, no, I wouldn't want to be one or the other, but perhaps in a sense I've been trying to merge the two all along to create a blend that makes sense for who I am.

I feel like the more receptive you are to other cultures, the more understanding you will become towards people in general, and perhaps the more your thoughts and ideas might resonate because of broader reflection. For me, it's interesting to know and explore why people think the way they do, how they make the decisions and what the root causes are for these choices—whether culturally, socially, or politically—and what the influences are for their beliefs and values,



and why people might willingly or unwillingly change them depending on their background and upbringing. I don't know if that made a whole lot of sense, but identity is a complicated topic I'm still far from understanding.

*Is this also what you mean when you talk about immigration as a kind of death, the death of a part of us? Could you elaborate?*

I think of immigration, now more than ever, as not only a movement between physical places or countries, but also a movement across time, and no matter which type of immigration we are experiencing, a part of us is lost because whatever memories we had created in those places, during those specific times, and the people we were at those moments, at least I don't believe can be truly reclaimed. And isn't that a bit like dying, in a sense?

When we move from childhood to our teenage years, we cannot reclaim our childhood. When we move from our teenage years to adulthood, we cannot reclaim our teenage selves. And similarly, when we turn from adults to elders, we cannot reclaim our adulthood.

I think of immigration as the same thing.

Moving from China to Canada, you cannot reclaim the self you were during the time you were in China. You can return, re-familiarize yourself with a place and its people, but it won't be the same place it was months ago, years ago, decades ago, and likely, neither would you.

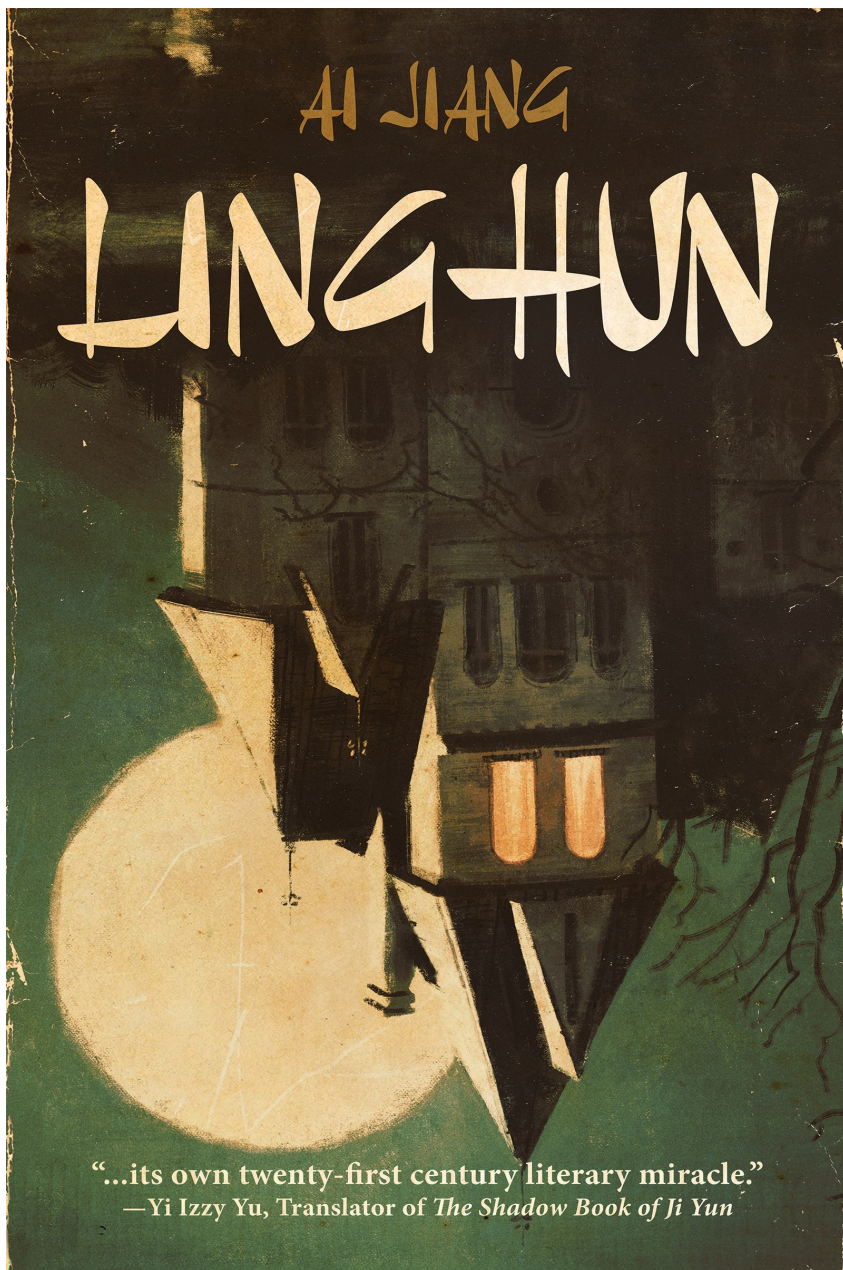
*That's so true! I guess the follow-up question would be, would you ever want to?*

I wouldn't be the same person I am today if I did, and I like to stick to the motto of having no regrets, so I suppose no, I wouldn't want to return. I think often when we try to "re-experience" something or desperately hold onto the past, it isn't the same as how we remember it most of the time, and to many, that can be a disappointing thing.

## Tales From Between Presents



Cover of *Smol Tales From Beyond Worlds*, a book of short stories that came out at the beginning of 2023



Cover of *Linghun*

*Your stories always open with such wonderful feelings, images. Do you start with these in your writing process, or do they come later, after the story is well underway?*

I am very much a start-with-cinematic-scenes-and-imagery-in-my-head-and-interesting-concepts type of writer. What I am truly trying to say and the emotion behind my characters and their world do not fully emerge until much later, when I finally realize what these images are trying to tell me or reveal to me about something I've been unconsciously brewing on and had never realized until it manifests on the page, through stories, through worlds both like and unlike our own, and characters like and unlike myself.

*Linghun is absolutely fascinating. How long did it take to write? What ideas did it spring from? Was it easy to write, did it flow?*

The initial draft took about a week of non-stop writing when I had a break during my master's program. But the editing was spread out over a long stretch of time and done sporadically. I was thinking about the idea of ghosts and the way they are usually depicted as vengeful and the ones doing the haunting, but when I thought further about their unchanging and stalled-in-time nature, I wondered if it wasn't the living who were unwilling to let the dead go through clutching tightly onto fading memories and people we refuse to acknowledge as gone—sometimes so much so we lose sight of those who are still here.

I think it was both easy and difficult to write *Linghun* in the sense that I tried to include both emotionally charged characters and ones that were number to grief and prolonged mourning, so to switch the mind on and off between perspectives while keeping in mind craft-related things was difficult. But I do enjoy a challenge, so writing *Linghun* was definitely an eye-opening and perhaps cathartic experience. Sometimes, we don't realize we have been mourning



until we have finally moved on. Denial, not only in the sense of grief, is very much a thing that might go amiss, especially when it comes to self-interrogation.

*Writing with many different PoVs can be difficult (and interrupt the flow of a story), but in *Linghun* it doesn't. Is there a way that you approached this? Or did it happen naturally?*

It's funny because I hadn't specifically planned to alternate the POVs the way I had in *Linghun*, and it was only through looking back on the structural organization through the audiobook that I noticed there was naturally an alternating pattern. But I'd mostly thought about what information I needed to present that was most relevant to the story and which POV might be the best to show it when deciding which POV to use for each scene, and in terms of Wenqi and Mrs, especially near the end, which sections might be best to alternate in the short back and forths that might help draw out their parallels.

I very much enjoy structural intentionality in fiction, so I like to incorporate it when I can, which is to say almost all my current novels-in-progress will have some form of unconventional structure or POV-use or concept, but more likely than not, a blend of all three.

*In *I am AI*, there is so much depth of character across all the characters, even though this is very much a first-person PoV. How do you achieve this? Do you look at the story from the different points of view? Does it flow naturally from being so in touch with what the protagonist is seeing/feeling/doing?*

I was told that every character is the protagonist of their own story, and I feel like by thinking about each character with this in mind, it helps me better picture what their lives might be like if they were the character I'd told the story through instead. I feel like connecting the lives of the surrounding characters with the narrator themselves and their experiences also adds greater depth and complexity to what is being compared and reflected upon, much like the way our own lives might inform how we contextualize and make sense of what we hear others say or do.

*What was the inspiration for *I am AI*? There seems to be a connection between the rise of AI-created art and ChatGPT, but that's definitely not all this book is about.*

I had actually written this last year, with the earliest draft dated to the beginning of November. At that time, the main AI art floating around was still WOMBO with Midjourney just coming along (this is from what I recall, so I could be wrong). But I don't remember ChatGPT being a big thing during that time, or it was only starting to become a topic of intrigue.

When I wrote *I am AI*, I thought a lot about writing burnout, but also just burnout from work in general given long hours, overtime, the system of toxic productivity that is very much expected of most workers these days if they want a promotion, or to rise above those competing for the same positions. Before pursuing fiction writing full time, I was a ghost writer, and the job was very much dependent on output—the more you write, the more you earn. I constantly tried to hit high word counts when I could, with 150,000 words or so spread across a variety of projects within a three-month period, but this didn't include the reading and research time it took to inform the words written.

When I was editing *I am AI*, this was when ChatGPT became a topic of interest, along with the uptick in AI art and people pretending that they had illustrated the generated artworks themselves. And with the rise of AI backdrop, a lot of the creative community's concerns made their way into the existing layers of *I am AI*'s narrative where I tried to explore not only the fear of being replaced, but also the fear of losing what makes art meaningful: our humanity.

*Cosmetic and illusory image manipulation has become a sort of cyberpunk reality, or will do in the near future. As this happens, we're seeing more and more identity-switching, leading to various kinds of -fishing and -facing (and Hollywood casting non-ethnic actors in ethnic roles, albeit with pushback). What do you think about the future ease of such identity switching, whether with physical augmentation or through apps?*

This isn't something I'd thought much about, but I do think it is rather



difficult to fake a background no matter how good an actor/actress a person is, and I would say this is very true of regular people masquerading as someone of a different identity as well. I think there are subtleties to each culture, background, identity that are very difficult to mimic naturally even with practice. Perhaps someone can pick up a lot of mannerisms or speech patterns, but I feel like it is difficult to pick up all of the touchstones unless a person has been a part of that identity, or at least living among those of a particular identity, for a very long time.

*In what way do you think your background changes the way you perceive or write cyberpunk (or does it)? How did you come into writing the genres you do (horror, cyberpunk)?*

I think a lot of my fears and uncertainties or confusions come from my background, but also from the world in general, which informs the genres I write in. With tech dominating our everyday lives, it's difficult not to think about the ways in which it might be detrimental to our future (dystopias, tech dominations, climate disasters) as much as it has the potential to also save it (solarpunk, lunarpunk, environmentally friendly tech and alternatives to non-renewable energy). But in terms of horror, I feel like the world at this moment has caused people a lot of fear in relation to agency, identity, of bodily anatomy, of belonging and unbelonging, of capitalism and consumption, of the frightening increases in the cost of living, of physical and emotional safety, of war, of political conflict, of violence, of what it means for children during such turbulent times.

*I tend to look at the inclusion of different cultures as giving true depth to the worlds and stories we create. Do you see the inclusion of different forms of language and characters as creating depth or foreignness, as being organic or difficult (or a combination of these)?*

I think this is difficult in the sense that it has been ingrained in our minds that including different cultures is something difficult and foreign only because it is not familiar throughout much of the Western literary canon, but I very much think it should be something that comes more organically given the world we're living in now. But I also think that including different forms of language and characters

of backgrounds outside our own requires a great amount of care, intention, and understanding, just as it is difficult to talk about people who know nothing about it; it will show in our stories if we try to include characters from backgrounds and cultures and identities we don't first try to understand in our own lives outside of the stories.

*What do you think the future of the real world holds for us in the next ten years? Do you see it being similar to the path in I am AI?*

As bleak as some of my answers might have been and the dreary depiction of the world of *I am AI*, I am an unrealistically optimistic person, I must say. I do hope that humanity triumphs over AI in the sense of artistic creation and forging human connection, and that AI will be seen more as a tool, much like digital art programs that simplify creation processes so we can focus more on the development of our ideas, or as a way to save time on mental and physical energy-sapping tasks that take away from the creation process, such as administrative tasks and scheduling.

*What do you see on your own path in the near future?*

It's difficult to say, because I do agree with all the other writers I have spoken to in that publishing is unpredictable, and you never know just how much publishers are willing to bet on you and your stories, if any of them do, so I can only do what is in my control, which is to continue writing and hope that people will want to read my words and that reading them affects them somehow, even if just a little.

\* \* \*

*You can find Ai Jiang on Twitter (@AiJiang\_) and Instagram (@ai.jian.g), and her works in many places, but especially the publishers' own websites: Smol Tales at [buy.bookfunnel.com/x5zxbcv4g](http://buy.bookfunnel.com/x5zxbcv4g), Linghun at [darkmattermagazine.shop/products/linghun](http://darkmattermagazine.shop/products/linghun) (or for signed copies from her local indie: [littleghostsbooks.com/product/linghun-signed-/986](http://littleghostsbooks.com/product/linghun-signed-/986)), and I am AI at [shortwavepublishing.com/catalog/i-am-ai-novelette/](http://shortwavepublishing.com/catalog/i-am-ai-novelette/). Ai Jiang's own website is [www.aijiang.ca](http://www.aijiang.ca).*

# Close Enough?

by R W Owen

9/9/1999 – 7:25 AM

You were always so famous when we rode the subway.” Jockey’s words stop me from checking my multiverse watch. one. more. time.

“Well ... not you, but her, my mom. She is ... was an actress,” he adds, a moment later, like an afterthought. But I am no longer listening. I’ve already heard this—every day of the five years we’ve spent together. More than 1,800 days. He is not my kid here—never was—even if a parallel-universe version of me pushed him from my body in some other life eleven years ago.

I just can’t imagine.

And I don’t want to. I lift the leather-gold-and-glass watch to my eyes and shut the door to my imagination. But my heart’s not in it. My eyes don’t register where its arrow-shaped hands point. We have twenty-five minutes. Or twenty. Or thirty. It doesn’t matter because it’s different every time—in every different universe—some new version or shade of the last.

“Do you think this will be the time?” I ask—because I want escape from my head, haunted by the ghost of Jockey’s mom. Instead, instant regret washes over me. Jockey’s almost-teen mask recedes—just a little—and his sorrow comes out, like a child whose toy has been cast away. It’s a reminder that I’m a poor copy of his real mother, a woman I’ll never meet who made much better use of my genetics and opportunities than I ever will. She’s dead now and Jockey’s an orphan. He stays that way if I fail again.

I give in and force my eyes to focus on the watch and its tiny, useless ar-

rows. I’ve kept the sleeve of my coat folded up over my wrist for so long that my skin has grown numb from the cold. 7:26 AM. I lower my arm to my side. What happened here that makes it so damned cold in early September? These multiverse watches, for all their twenty-first-century science under a granny-style mid-century face, can deliver the wonders of sending you to and from so many universes. What can they tell once you’re there? Nothing but the time.

Temporal community service never means time tourism, the probation service tells you on the day you receive your sentence. Break and enter and get caught ... then spend the rest of your life seeing all the universes where you made better choices. But you can never go back and change your own choices—someone has to want to do that for you.

“Why aren’t you more like her?” Jockey asks, to the sky, the crushed stone of the subway platform, the passersby whose English differs just enough from ours that they cast their eyes over us, trying to decipher where we’re from.

“Not now, Jockey,” I huff, cutting him off. I’ve got to focus on finding this ghost of lost chances, this version of me who’s worth this mission to save her life by risking my own. It’s a fair trade, they think, risking lost-cause Sarah to save all-the-right-choices, everyone-loves-her Sarah before the Attacks of September 9, 1999, can erase her from the timeline. The Sarah of this universe may be close enough to the woman who birthed Jockey. That’s what we’re here to figure out.

7:27 AM

My eyes follow Jockey’s extended finger. He’s pointing at a building across the platform. “That one looks familiar, Sarah,” he says, grasping for memories he doesn’t have.

At least he's finally stopped calling me 'mom.' It's my greatest parental achievement after four worlds of me telling him he's not my son—four failed missions. In those worlds, I've found—we've found—drug-addict Sarah who died by suicide, sports-car Sarah who crashed a Datsun into two kids on bikes, worn-out mom Sarah who had her first kid at sixteen and then four more, and jilted-mom Sarah whose human-tissue breast implants kept her abusive boyfriend interested, but also got her terminal cancer. She had six months to live when we found her.

No matter the chances I get, I fail in spectacular ways, in so many ways. Except when I pretend to be someone else. People loved Crawford-House Sarah, Jockey's mom. She acted out leading roles on its stage. But my Boston tore down the Crawford House before I was born. It's a chance I was never given.

"Do you think this is my Boston?" Jockey asks, nudging me from my list of failures. I look across the platform again, but it's just a brick building—like all the others that surround North Station in this Boston, and every Boston, where Boston and subways exist anyway.

We have twenty-eight minutes before this shit goes down. Jockey takes my cue to mind his watch as he follows my eyes to the dark mouth of the North Station subway tunnel. Every version of Boston means waiting for subway cars.

"Did they call it the T in your world?" I ask him, but he just shrugs. His shoulders sag at lost memories. He was just six then. Six-year-olds can't form lasting memories around these things, not ones that survive five years later.

We keep watching the tunnel. A watched subway car never comes, I think, then scrap it because it doesn't make any sense. I remember to smile at Jockey because that's what his mother would have done.

**7:29 AM**

'What happens if I die?' I think. But I already know the answer. Jockey knows it too. They'd leave me dead. Another Failed Sarah. The Service

wouldn't send another version of me to save me, not this me.

I'm close enough to all-the-right-choices Sarah to keep Jockey's little-kid memories of his mom alive, but not close enough to stop looking for someone better.

The yawning dark of the subway tunnel lightens to gray, but it's a trick of my eyes. As the minutes tick down to twenty-five.

All I can do is watch the subway tunnel while the woman next to me sips at a *hierba maté* like she hasn't just paid \$20 for the infused juice of a weed that grows in whatever this place calls Bolivia. Fancy, hot drinks are big business in all my universes.

More moments tick by. Workers in suits, students in jeans, vagrants in something that looks like ripped sweatpants mill about the platform. An out-of-service train rolls away and I see a poster that urges us to experience the history of the Crawford House. Here, it still stands, even if a high-rise office building now sprouts from its roof and rises out of the picture like a beanstalk that promises golden eggs to naïve souls who don't understand how corporate jobs work. It's a sign we're getting closer to the world of Jockey's mom.

A smallish college girl carrying a huge backpack brushes my shoulder. She mutters an apology in an English that sounds like German.

It's not Jockey's English, not the English we found him speaking as a six-year-old orphan made motherless by his universe's 9/9/99 attacks. He hasn't noticed that yet. But maybe the English here is still close enough. Maybe this version of Sarah will be close enough so we can stop looking. Maybe I can leave behind this exercise of seeing all the ways my choices have led to failure.

No one else speaks on the subway platform. No one ever speaks. That's the same in every world we go.

An electronic billboard across the tracks shows a boy who looks like Jockey with a milk mustache. DRINK MILCH, it says. I can't remem-



ber how much German had leaked into toddler Jockey's English. His Sarah would remember. Of course, she would.

I ground myself by listening to the small noises of the fifty people on the platform. Heels click. A gray-haired man coughs. A woman laughs. 7:31 AM. Two minutes have passed by like an eternity.

“Sarah?”

I almost don't hear Jockey over the roar of the subway car, when its lights finally turn the bend.

“Yes?”

Squealing brakes bring the car into the station. We all squint like bats hit by a watchman's flashlight. It's a North Station car, but it's called a *wagen* here, like the German word. 7:32 AM.

Seven minutes in this universe and we have as many as twenty-three left till the attacks come, or don't, or come earlier or later. I drop my watch to my side and maneuver for a place at the front of the line of people, already herding like the recently departed, seeking Catholic-style salvation at the pearly gates of Heaven. No one recognizes me as a famous stage actress.

“Sarah?” Jockey beckons, from behind me. He's my height now, a miniature man. The girl with the big backpack looks over. She's going to ask which obscure European country we're from.

“Where were you on 9/9/99?” Jockey asks, and the girl looks away.

I shift my eyes toward the car's opening doors. A man beside me is staring me down. I'm blocking his ascent into the subway car. He hasn't noticed that the car isn't going anywhere.

**7:32 AM**

“LAST STOP, NORTH STATION. NORTH STATION, LAST STOP.

PLEASE TAKE YOUR BELONGINGS AND EXIT THE WAGEN.” The conductor's words blast from the train's loudspeakers. We—the sea of humanity outside on the platform—stutter-step aside, clearing a path for the torrent of commuters exiting the train.

“LAST STOP, LAST STOP. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THIS WAGEN IS BEING TAKEN OUT OF SERVICE. PLEASE EXIT THE WAGEN.”

The commuters grumble and return to their newspapers. Their collective groans ring familiar in every universe, whether Boston has statues of victorious revolutionaries or loyalists, a view of New Berlin from a hill called the Trimount, or a Back Bay district filled in with its dirt.

“Sarah?” Jockey tugs at my sleeve as those-who-never-listen push toward the subway car's still-open doors. A man bumps my shoulder as he pushes by. He looks back to utter an excuse-me in words that sound German.

“Yes, Jockey?” I look at him and try to channel a shred of the mother he needs, from somewhere deep within me.

“Where were you on 9/9/99?” he repeats his question.

This *again*. “That date doesn't mean anything to me. Remember?”

The herd of commuters jostles and pushes us closer to the train.

“Last stop!” a man hollers from a few sets of shoulders away.

Jockey doesn't respond, but behind his eyes, his brain processes how this central date of his life could mean absolutely nothing to another version of his mother. He clears his throat. A blonde woman in a blue skirt jams her hand between the closing doors and yanks them open again. More groans. More muttered expletives.

“Hallo!” the girl with the backpack calls in a high-pitched whine that would have been just as much at home in my Beacon Hill or Cambridge.

“That wagen is coming out of service.” She then lifts her arm to point at the car and the sign that’s just now changing to confirm for those-who-don’t-listen. OUT-OF-SERVICE.

“But we have other dates that matter,” I tell Jockey like it’s a consolation, but I don’t tell him about 9/11 or why it matters to me. I turn back toward the car, with its doors finally closed. Its lights dim and it pulls away. The breeze catches a man’s newspaper, ripping it toward the ground. The sports section flutters open and I spy a photo of a smiling Pedro Martinez on the mound at Fenway. He looks the same as the Pedro Martinez from my world, from my 1990s.

“I guess,” Jockey relents, giving in like I’ve just told him that everyone’s mother dies.

“Hallo!” the girl with the backpack calls out again as another commuter jostles her forward. Her drink explodes on the ground, a mess of something purple with green dots. It’s like someone smashed up Barney the Dinosaur in a blender.

**7:34 AM**

“How much longer?” Jockey asks in the voice of the teenager-he’ll-become, like he’s stuck in Boston’s parking-lot-in-the-sky, its Central Artery, staring down into the cauldron of hell that is its Big Dig.

I’m about to tell him I don’t know, but the lights from the next subway car are ricocheting across the sheen of the godawful blouse I’ve worn to blend into the morning commute of this world.

“MUNICH DORF WAGEN,” the conductor shouts the subway car’s destination, barely over its screeching as it lurches to a stop. I tug Jockey up the stairs and into the car. We find a seat before the waves of people push in around us. I hope Munichdorf means Government Center like it did in the last world, or Scollay Square in the world before that. That’s where the Crawford House will be, and where we will find all-the-right-choices-Sarah.

“I’m sorry, Sarah,” Jockey whispers as he slides into a hard plastic seat beside me. “I always forget ...”

“... that I’m not your Sarah. ...” I finish his sentence, too quickly, too brusquely. Regret wells up inside me.

My fingers sweep through empty air when I reach to touch his shoulder, or tussle his hair the way sitcom moms do when the camera rolls. But he’s moved two seats away. He is watching me with a still face.

It’s what his mother would have done, had she not died in the Attack on the Nines, on his world’s 9/9/99.

“Jockey?” This time, I don’t turn, or reach.

No response. I move my head so I won’t have to stare through my hair.

“Jockey?” He just stares at the floor.

He’s told me that in his world, I married his dad, Jack. Jack worked at the Crawford and got me into acting. I must have liked him. I named our son Jack too, but called him Jockey for the way he rode his red wooden rocking horse as a toddler. That version of me must have been a pretty good mom.

His version. Not me. It’s 7:37. The car roars to life and into a dark tunnel.

We glide toward Haymarket, or whatever they call that station here. I grasp the cold metal railing next to my seat.

Jockey is staring at our reflections in the dark window. Mirror images, mirror versions of us.

“You look just like her,” he says softly, and wipes at his eyes.

“Jockey?” I start, haltingly. “I’m sorry.” It’s not enough and it’s not real. Even after five years, I try to feel something for him, but it’s just resent-

ment, like he embodies every wrong choice I've made in my life. Shitty Sarah, he's just a boy—I say to myself—made from a copy of my genes.

Does that mean I should love him? There's no answer for that.

The car jerks to a stop next to a red light in the tunnel. I move over a few seats and reach around him. Through his thick flannel shirt, I feel his bony shoulder. He's almost taller than me. His voice is just starting to crack.

"It's ok." He struggles to regain control of his words. "I know you're not my mother."

We grow quiet amidst the crush of people. The small sounds of their movements and the mechanical squeals of the train wash over us. The engine roars back to movement.

"Sarah, do you think this is the right world, that she's here and that she's ..." he pauses, searching for his word.

"Not like me?" I ask. He's wondering too if this Sarah will be close enough, a better copy than me, so we can stop looking. So we can both move on and stop resenting each other.

He just shrugs and heaves his shoulders, like I would have done as a kid—some remnant of me that exists across universes.

### 7:39 AM

"Does any of this feel familiar?" I ask him, even though he was just six when the attacks came, when we pulled him out just before his school was obliterated. We both exist out of time. I just had much more of it to fuck up before a plane barreled into the North Tower of the World Trade Center two years from now and two hundred miles away.

"Not really," he admits. The attacks are fifteen minutes out and he suspects it too: The Sarah of this world won't be close enough to his real mother—again.

The train moves faster this time. German engineering in Boston? I muse to myself, then wonder if that stereotype even exists here.

"The world doesn't have to have come together in exactly the same way to create her," I tell him. "Maybe she'll be ... close enough?"

The colors worn by the people on the platform whirl by as we rocket through Haymarket station without even slowing.

"How will we know where to find her?" he asks when the window goes dark again in the tunnel.

"We just will," I say. It's true even if he hasn't felt it yet—that sense you get when your soulmate is nearby, a memory of someone you haven't met but some copy of you has. It's like *presque vu*, as the French say: The memory flutters within your mind, dodging grasping fingers, like it's your memory, but the universe says it's not for you, not this version of you.

*Presque vu* is why this might work. Jockey will sense his almost-mom. She will sense her almost-son and I'll lure her away. I'll save Better Sarah from certain death. I'll strap the third multiverse watch to her wrist and push her button. I'll make sure Jockey pushes his next. Then I push my own. She escapes the Attacks. We escape the Attacks. I escape seeing my failures reflected in his eyes. *Juste comme ça*: Just like that, as the French say.

"You've done this before, right?" he asks, eyeing our watches and the pocket of my skirt where I carry the third one for his close-enough mom. He's worried even if he won't show it. He means, 'Have you ever failed in a retrieval?'

I nod, "I rescued you five years ago. Even if you were too young to remember," I tell him. I pull the sleeve on my coat back again and twist the face of the watch toward me. 7:40.

"Look, if she's close enough to your mom and this is close enough to your world, she'll be there," I sigh. "It might not be the Crawford House

High Rise, but we'll find her ... if we're in the right place."

"Do we have enough time?" he asks as we speed back into the darkness toward the Munichdorf stop.

"Yeah – if it happens in the next fifteen minutes," I remind him quietly. "And not five," I think, but do not add.

**7:42 AM**

Jockey squints when the subway car glides back into the sunlight. I'm standing now and studying the map above the door, analyzing this world's Munichdorf against the memory of my Government Center. Outside, two-story half-timber office buildings whiz by.

This isn't my Boston. But, maybe it's close enough to his.

The car stops on a platform overlooking a park that looks more like the Boston Common than the concrete wasteland of Government Center.

"MUNICHDORF STOP. CENTRAL PARK. PLEASE TAKE YOUR BELONGINGS AS YOU EXIT THE WAGEN," the conductor instructs us.

We join the line of passengers standing and shuffling toward the door. We've got thirteen minutes. Or less. Probably not more.

"This doesn't look like my Boston," Jockey huffs softly into my ear.

I nod. This doesn't look like any of my Bostons either. But it has a Crawford House.

My eyes tear up when I step down from the train into a bristling breeze. September 9th and it feels like November.

"Maybe she's still here," I offer, even if I can't feel her. I see in his face that he can't either. We press on anyway.

**7:44 AM**

Munichdorf has no trace of the frozen tan sea of my Government Center. No Boston City Hall. No City Hall Plaza. No sea of needless steps. A crisp, icy breeze sends thoughts of little ice ages through my scientist mind. I pull my watch up near my face, more to quiet myself than to check the time. When the Attacks on the Nines come, we push our buttons—whether we find her or not. I take in Jockey's widening shoulders. I wonder if I'm still strong enough to grab his wrist and push his button.

"Do you feel her?" I ask Jockey, because I don't. *Presque vu* rings stronger when you come out of someone than when you're just a copy of her genes.

When Jockey doesn't answer, I look over to see that he's closed his eyes. He's got his nose to the wind, like a hunting dog trying to prove its worth.

"I think I do," he says, squinting with effort. "It's like when someone's watching you and your eyes find her, right?"

"You'll know," I tell him. And he will. But I won't. 7:45 and it's just minutes before I have to dash his hopes again. The button on his watch pokes out from beneath his sleeve. I can push it before I push mine. I have to.

"Shhh," I put my finger to my lips even though he isn't looking. His face is still pointed skyward, sniffing. "It's starting ... back there." I point at a large building behind us, five or six stories high with a name I can't remember. It's on the street opposite the park. I know my Boston demolished it when they poured in Government Center, but it still stands here. A rumble begins far away. "The attacks are early this time," I say.

"This way," he grabs my arm, with a strong hand that no longer belongs to the boy I rescued five years ago. My feet find balance as we fast-walk to the edge of the park. "I feel something," he calls back.

Faces flicker in the dark fifth-story windows of the Crawford House High-Rise across the street, just above where the twentieth-century office building bursts from the original façade of the historic hotel and theatre. A plume of smoke rises from somewhere behind it, near where my State House would have been. My eyes linger on the red button of his watch as he pulls my arm forward.

He looks back when I don't say anything. "Still nothing?" he asks. "You feel nothing?"

I shake my head and add to his list of my failures. I'm not close enough to his Sarah. Not at all.

I can't wrench my arm free from his grip to check my watch. We might have ten minutes. He pulls me across the street without looking for traffic. The cars have stopped anyway. The ground shakes a little. The attacks are getting closer.

"That's definitely a plume of smoke," I point above the roofline of the buildings in front of us.

"I know," he says softly without taking his eyes from the Crawford House building. "Give me more time," he means.

**7:46 AM**

Roars fill our ears as vapor streams stretch across the sky. I hear the first screams.

"Jockey, it's too late," I say above the din.

He glances back, but keeps moving. "I feel her, Sarah. I feel my mother."

A gust of warmth rushes over me as something big crashes behind us, out of view.

"Stop," I say, but he keeps moving, pulling us forward. I lean back on my legs and try to stop, like I'm trying to win some tug-of-war match.

But his weight pulls me forward. My knees pull and snap, and I fall to the ground, warm wetness soaking into my side and leg.

"Jockey, it's too late," I call, but he's still moving. My wrist burns where he's let go. 7:47 AM. I stare at the button on my watch. I will my finger not to reach over and push it. I can't leave Better-Sarah's son here to die.

I roll onto my butt and to my feet. I pull my skirt off my leg and see the blood. I look at the bulge in my pocket. I already know the third multi-verse watch is broken before my hand finds its parts. It's the way my life works. My fingertip finds the sharp line of the broken glass on its face. My eyes find its missing red button, a small dot nearly lost to the pavement of the road.

"Jockey!" I call to tell him, but he's already gone. No one looks at a woman screaming names in the street like everyone else. Their faces have turned to watch the sky, pillars of smoke multiplying across the city. I move one leg in front of the other and walk, ignoring new and unfamiliar pain in my knee.

**7:48 AM**

I find Jockey with his head nearly resting on his back, looking up at the windows of the Crawford House building. I follow his gaze and find *her*. A different version of me. Three floors up. In blue. Businessy. Her eyes like saucers watching something above the trees I can't see.

"She looks like an accountant. She's got to be another failure," the words escape my lips before I realize I gave them voice. Jockey doesn't notice though. He's hasn't yet added the broken watch to my list of failures.

"It's *her*," he says as the ground lurches under our feet. Something large crashes into Brattle Street behind us, creating a new crater where a car had been. "I feel her," he says.

I reach for his arm, for the watch, but he's already gone, through the doors and into the lobby inside.



“Frig,” I cuss at failures and lost chances and push into the lobby. Everyone’s at the windows watching.

Fifteen paces in front of me, Jockey jumps the turn-style. The jets, if that’s what they’re called here, cut through the morning sky outside the windows, low and fast, faster than my eyes can track, between the buildings like no jet I’ve ever seen.

“Jockey, we can’t take the chance,” I call, knowing it’s too late. But he’s already invested and I can’t leave him here.

I jump the turn-style, still too many steps behind. My heels come down hard on polished tile. No one sees or cares. The floor shakes. Another explosion outside. I catch up to him.

“Watches,” I command, holding my calm, reaching for Jockey’s hand. “Watches, or there won’t be an us to find the right her.”

But he shakes me off, rips open a door, and starts up the stairs two at a time. “Fuck you,” he calls back, without looking. “I won’t leave her.”

I pull my finger from my watch and run after him. I reach the second floor when he flings open the door for the third.

**7:53 AM**

“7:53,” I say to the empty stairway, reaching the third-floor door. I pull it open with every ounce left of my strength.

Another jet, and then a second pass somewhere overhead. I hear the clicking noise of incoming plasma bombs, but the ceiling stays intact above me. A woman, then two more, scream outside the concrete wall to my left.

“7:54, Jockey!” I call out, louder, bursting into the light of the third floor. In the whirl of jet engines, the screams of workers, and the whistle of descending missiles, the floor trembles. In the window across the cube farm, a dark hole opens up in the smooth blue glass of something

that looks like the Hancock Tower. It’s Boston’s tallest building here too.

*Shit.* We’re going to fucking die for another loser Sarah, another Sarah of disappointments and lost chances. I risk a glance away from the smoldering Hancock and toward Jockey. He’s squinting at his watch, his finger not on the button.

“I can’t find her, Sarah,” he says. “... where is she?”

“Jockey, we have to fucking get out of here. It’s going up.” I point to the window. I count no less than six jet-things outside.

“This one’s not an actress,” I tell him. “She’s probably just another loser.”

But he just looks for her anyway, so I do too—for the blue of her suit, the back of my head wearing some other hairstyle.

Smoke fills the office. The people have sprung out of their shock. Like mice in rising water, they run for any way out. Jockey’s gone again in the crush of shoulders pushing me backward toward the exit stairs.

**7:54 AM**

“Jockey!” I call, but I can’t see him. I pull my fingers away from my watch again.

Above the sea of heads, the city dissolves into blasts and then balls of flame. Another skyscraper, the Pru, goes down. More jet-like things whiz by overhead.

Fuck it. Fuck it all.

I find Jockey at the window, watching.

“The Hancock ...” he sighs. With the wide eyes of Jockey-the-child, he melts what’s left of my resolve to leave. Behind him, the blue-glass sky-

scraper folds into the ground as dust and debris wash over Boston. The waves race toward the Crawford House building, swallowing people and cars and everything else.

“Jockey,” I yell over the white noise of destruction surrounding us. “Are you sure it was her?”

Blackness swallows us before my fingers can find our buttons, but I see the answer in his eyes.

### 7:55 AM

The ringing cuts out of my ears before my head stops spinning and I hear Jockey’s breathing beside me.

But it’s bright and there’s wind like we’re outside. There are screams too.

“I still feel her,” Jockey moans. There’s something wet under my head, thick and coppery like blood. The windows on this floor are gone. A piece of glass sticks out of my arm. A body of a man in a European-cut suit lies face-down a few feet away.

“Are you okay?” I ask Jockey, but he’s already up.

This time, he turns back and offers me a hand. “I’m sorry, Sarah,” he says.

I stand and see the new huge, dark gash down my leg from the hem of my skirt to my ankle, but it doesn’t hurt yet.

I follow Jockey to the windows, stepping over bodies and desks and chairs. My heel catches in something squishy that feels like recent death.

I start to feel her, the faintest twinge in the back of my mind like she’s the furthest possible version of me who can still share my genes. I follow it and find Jockey standing over her. She’s on her back. Her eyes are

closed, but they’re moving under her lids. Maybe she feels him too.

“How do we get her out?” He asks over the hum of jets flying low, nearby. I start to tell him about the broken watch, that we only have two, but I stop before the first word leaves my mouth. I see my button and I see his.

“How do we get her out, Sarah?” he asks again, shaking my arm. I wince.

“Are you sure she’s your Sarah? Does she feel close enough, Jockey?” I ask. “Closer than me?” I mean.

He looks down, tears starting to well in his eyes. I don’t need his answer. “Is she going to die?” he asks instead.

“I’ll check,” I say, bending over to check her pulse like actors on TV doctor shows do. She’s got a scar on her wrist that I don’t have—not the self-cutting kind. I run my finger over it for a moment, wondering what memory she has that’s hers and not mine. Her eyes keep twitching under her eyelids.

“Sarah?” he beckons me, “They’re coming back.”

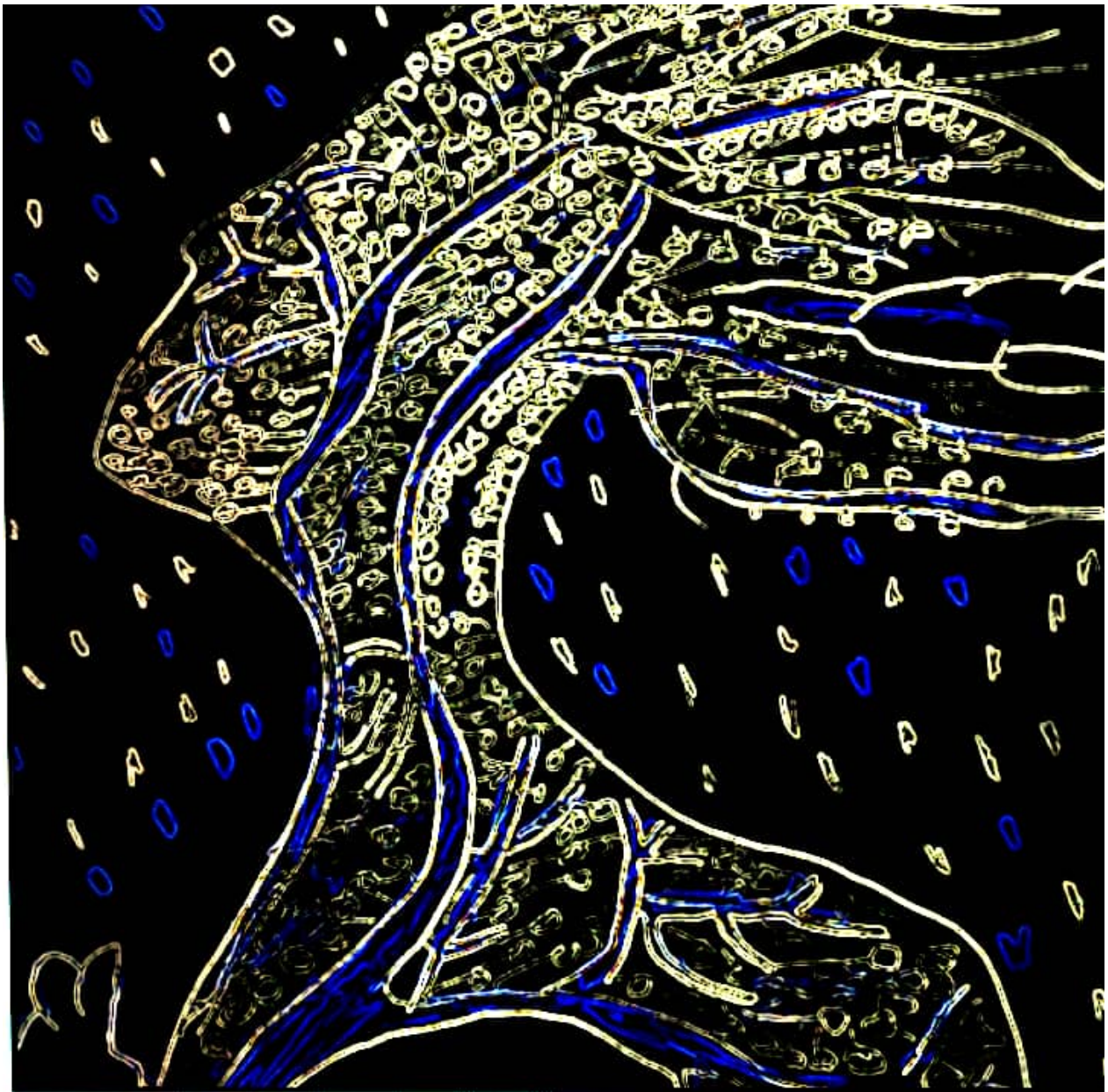
I don’t look up. I can already hear the engines too. I feel the telltale static of incoming plasma bombs.

“Sarah!” he screeches, when the static grows so strong that our hair stands up straight. By then, though, I have my watch fastened to her wrist. By then, I press the button and she’s gone.

“Sarah?” Jockey looks at me, not comprehending. “What are you doing?” he asks, reaching for me.

“We only have two watches,” I tell him as I grab his wrist and push his button.

Then I’m alone, but only for a moment before the bombs hit.



**Woman** by Binod Dawadi

# Cosmic Enchantment

by Angela Acosta

I've never been one for birthday wishes,  
no birthday dreams or *sueños* blowing out candles,  
no big *quinceañera* bashes full of Mexican sweets and traditions,  
but even at my youngest I've always been  
swept up by the *encanto cósmico*, the magical splendor of the cosmos.

I lay in bed the night of my seventh birthday  
staring at the still dim evening light outside my blinds  
as planetary truths rattled inside my mind,  
remembering visions from astronomy books that would portend  
the charmed human life I had waiting ahead.

A year orbiting around Sol is enough for a child to fathom,  
but a millennium is inconceivable even for those born on its cusp,  
yet I always knew, before spoken language,  
before I was bilingual in describing cosmic mysteries,  
that to be human is to be made of dust both Terran and interstellar.

My heritage stretches back generations and eons,  
blending human cultures and galaxies  
like the swirling stars of the Milky Way, *la Vía Láctea*,  
each birthday candle representing a journey not of one,  
but a fraction of eternity, the true *encanto cósmico* that gives life meaning.

*Note: This poem also appears in Angela Acosta's Summoning Space Travelers (Hiraeth Publishing, 2023)*

# New Friends

by David Far

When you are on a first-name basis with Fernando at the funeral home, it has been a rough couple of years. My father went first from lung cancer. Seventy, too young, but at least he made a run at it. Mom came down with pneumonia three months later and didn't really want to fight. I guess I hadn't given her enough to fight for—no grandkids, no prospects for them. She never said anything, but I knew.

I'm not sure what I believe in, other than whatever it is does not like James Tillmore. People said they were sorry about my parents, who were in a better place, but they were just looking for something to say. Only Sean really knew them and me. He gave me a hug and said, "James, you are going to pull through."

I would have except two weeks later two guys decided to rob my parent's house. Sean comes out in the yard and surprises them. They were not expecting a stand-up guy like him. And they shoot him. That takes "pulling through" off the table. I'm passed forty with extra pounds and a fishing boat. No James Tillmore, the Dark Knight, for me. I just had to take it. When the Spike fell from the sky and started churning up all that water, I thought the world was ending right on schedule.

Sean Parsons grew up next door to me with his parents, his sister Iris, and an honest-to-god white picket fence in vinyl, not wood. Their ranch house had the living room on the left and the kitchen on the right. Our house had them flipped, but otherwise they were the same. Sean and I played together all the time--in the yard, riding bikes, shooting hoops. I was an only child, and it was hard for Sean to play with Iris sometimes.

I had to organize Sean's memorial. Fernando hooked me up with the right cremation in ten minutes. I already knew all the packages. Iris couldn't make it to the memorial, so people gave their condolences to me to pass on like grief mail forwarding. The Spike had plunged into the ocean just off the coast of Florida only two days before. Scientists didn't understand yet that it was spewing extra greenhouse gases into the air equal to four Chinas. I remember people being happy it didn't explode before they understood it was going to flood the earth in about ten years.

The next day, I headed over to Iris' house with Sean's ashes. It's a hell of a thing carrying your best friend around in a fancy coffee can. I thought back to a happier time.

For my twelfth birthday, we drove with the Parsons to a dolphin sanctuary. The kids--Iris, Sean and I--all got to swim in the tank. The dolphins clicked at us and ate fish. We rode on their backs holding onto their dorsal fins. Sean and I loved playing catch with them. One dolphin spent the whole time with Iris. The dolphin nuzzled her a bit with its nose. Iris put her hand on the dolphin's head while it made noises. Iris laughed. She smiled. She hugged the dolphin.

She also blew a fuse when it was time to leave. Crying and thrashing, Iris yelled that she wanted to stay with the dolphin forever. But the dolphin came over to her one more time, made some more sounds, and somehow, she calmed down. Sean came back to my house for my party and Iris went home. She was still smiling when I brought her chocolate cake after the other kids left. Her parents had bought her a shirt with a picture of her swimming with the dolphin. It read "New Friends." She wore it every day for a year.



I rang the doorbell at the Parsons'. It gave a two-tone whistle--a high tone and then that same sound being sucked out of an airlock. It sounded like ... VEEFFT. Sean got the custom doorbell last year. In their own language, dolphins have signature name whistles, and VEEFFT was the whistle of Iris' best dolphin friend Suzy, with whom Iris swam in the sanctuary. Eighteen years after the sanctuary released Suzy, Iris found Suzy during her research into dolphins.

I listened to Iris tell me all about the doorbell at her birthday one year. Sean told me they spent two hours getting the tone right because it sounds different under water versus going through the air. Iris answered the door but looked at my left shoulder instead of my face. She said nothing.

"Hi, Iris, could I come in?"

"I'm busy."

"I don't mean to intrude, but I think we should talk about Sean's ashes."

We went into what had once been the living room. Iris' equipment filled the room. The shades were down. Stalactites of sound-absorbing foam hung from the ceiling. More foam covered the fireplace. We stood there, and Iris turned to me.

"Well, how are you?" I began.

"Bad. My vegan place closed, and I have to find a new one that doesn't make me puke."

"Sorry to hear that. Could we sit down?"

"Ok." Iris sat down on the floor where she was. She sat cross-legged and hunched over just like when she was little. I joined her.

"How has it been without Sean?" I asked.

"Bad. He's dead. Now I'm alone." She said it flat, and it was worse that way. I set the urn down beside me.

"I miss Sean too."

"I miss ..." and she gave the whistle VEEFFT. The dolphin had died two months ago, just before my Mom.

"Suzy?"

Iris put her hands over her ears and began rocking back and forth. "Her name's not Suzy," she shouted. Then she gave the whistle three times, paused, then another three times. She put her hands down but kept rocking.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I know you really liked having her for a friend."

Iris stared at my shoulder.

I saw the flashing waves from her oscilloscopes and spectrograms. Sean had explained them to me once over a beer. Iris had started off just looking at dolphin whistles, which create these little colored curves on the spectrogram. The curve told you the frequency and amplitude of the whistle over time. She set up multiple screens under videos of the dolphins swimming with each other so she could see the movements, see the whistle, and hear the whistle all at the same time. Then she watched. And watched. And six months later she had a complete set of observations about how the whistles matched the physical movements and positions of the dolphins. These were like the hand gestures of the dolphins as they talked.

From there she and Sean got funding from something called the Peloton Foundation. She used the new money to build a little research pod and monitor brain waves from the dolphins. Then they built a device to talk back. Iris loved talking to them. She was still staring at my shoulder. Iris must have been the only expert on communication that didn't look people in the eye during a conversation.

“Do you think we should scatter Sean’s ashes somewhere?” I said.

“Why would we do that?”

I tried to remember the words from the funeral home pamphlet. “A sense of closure, a final goodbye, Sean rejoining the Earth.”

“He’s not joining anything, James. He’s dead.”

“Do you want to try talking to someone about it?”

“No. I want a new vegan place. I want to be alone.”

I wanted to say ok, but I owed Sean. “Do the other dolphins miss V-FFFT?” I butchered the whistle, but I had to change the subject.

“Of course.”

“Maybe we could go out to your research site, and you could talk to them?”

She nodded.

“I’ll pick you up Saturday,” I said.

“5 AM,” she said.

\* \* \*

The good thing about picking up somebody at 5am is that it limits how drunk you can get the night before. I needed limits. I crawled through the next few weeks sliding by at work and into the bottle at night. But I kept every Saturday for Iris. We would go out to her research station about ten miles offshore. We could see the Spike further east, guarded by military ships. The greenhouse gases poured out of the top of the Spike in a haze. Sometimes we would see a research drone dive into the invisible plume and be repelled upward so fast it looked like a cannon shot. We could always hear the water

churning as it flowed into the Spike and back out--a necklace of froth encircling the black needle, which stretched down to the ocean floor and up 500 feet into the sky.

Iris’ research pod was a clear bubble fifty feet below the surface filled with equipment to monitor the dolphins. Certain dolphins wore two sensors strapped to their heads, which read their brain waves. Iris would climb down a ladder into the bubble and send whistles and clicks out into the water to which the dolphins would respond. I usually stayed in the boat with a six pack of my best friends. Sometimes I would climb down to the second chair and watch the dolphins playing and chatting.

For Iris, that bubble might as well have been the entire world. We did not speak on the rides out or back except to say hello. She did not seem to be aware of all the reports pouring out about the Spike. All attempts to communicate with it had failed, but it was deliberately heating the planet. Scientists found that the water flowing out of the Spike had all contaminants removed but kept the base level of salts and minerals ocean water needed. Factions argued over the purpose of the Spike and whether the greenhouse gases were a byproduct of trying to clean the water or the water was a byproduct of trying to change the atmosphere. The military tried to cut and blast their way in, but it was like Neanderthals banging on steel with flint. The Spike did not attack, it just continued processing air and water. A week later, the news reported that the output from the Spike was increasing—its throughput had grown more efficient.

I kept going to work for three weeks and then decided to take vacation time. I told myself I could take Iris out more often. But I also thought I could achieve liver failure before the Spike brought us to societal collapse. I went to see Fernando.

“Extra crispy with barbecue sauce,” I said as I filled out the prepaid cremation forms. Scatter me with my parents.

I took Iris out four times a week. One night as we got back to her place, I asked to come in. We got comfortable on the floor of her liv-

ing room again and I said, "Maybe we should put Sean's ashes out at the research pod." Iris did not speak. "Sean was your brother, Iris, we can't just ignore him. Do your friends ignore V-FFFT?"

"No. They don't. Why do you care so much what we do with the ashes?"

"Because Sean deserves to have things settled."

"I think you want it settled. Sean is all set. He's dead. You keep talking like if we put his ashes in the right place it will make it better, but it won't."

I saw a photo album of the Parsons family on the floor, opened to a picture of Iris and Sean. Then I thought the thing we don't think--she's right. Nothing makes it better. Sean is dead. All he ever did was take care of his sister and build stuff and now he's not here. Forever. That hug at my mom's funeral had been goodbye. I cried for my friend or Iris or all of us. Full, sobbing, little-boy tears.

Sean gave Iris that photo album when their parents passed. He showed Iris the story of their family--where they came from, how their parents met, how happy they were the day Iris was born. I went over and picked up the album.

Iris said, "I'm making one for VEEFFT's family."

"A photo album?"

"A sound album." She walked over to her computer and hit a key. Squeaks and whistles and clicks cascaded out of the speakers. I did not understand, but I watched as Iris tilted her head back and forth with the sounds, her hands pulsing on certain beats.

"It is a very nice thing to do for a friend," I said.

"This is when they met another pod of bottle noses and played catch with seaweed all afternoon. It's the best day I had with them."

"They can remember?"

"Yes."

"I remember that day." I showed Iris the picture of the three of us at the sanctuary all those years ago. I smiled. She looked and smiled.

"What was it like in the pool that day?" I asked.

"People always try to help me. Some are nice. Some are not. VEEFFT was just open to me. That was the first time someone was just my friend. That was the first time I was just with someone else. People don't know how to do that."

"That sounds like a good day," I said.

"It was," she said. We looked at the picture. "Let's bring Sean out to the pod tomorrow."

\* \* \*

Little clouds sped through the sky. The sun had peeked over the horizon, but the heat was biding its time. Light shimmered in the invisible plume over the Spike. We tied up the boat and Iris lead me down into the bubble. She flipped a switch and the bubble emitted a repeated whistle which pulsed like a homing beacon. The dolphins came twenty minutes later.

Iris put the completed sound album into a small airlock she had for sharing objects with the dolphins and jettisoned it out into the water. She explained to them that if they gave VEEFFT's whistle the album would play back the sounds from the day they played with the other pod. The album was in a brown water-sealed box with a strap hanging from it so the dolphins could carry it in their snouts. Different dolphins took turns carrying the album around and making it play. One of them brought over a seaweed bundle and stuffed it into the little airlock.

“It’s a gift,” Iris said. “They want us to know they appreciate the album.” Another dolphin made clicks. Iris said, “They want to know who you are. Speak into this mic and it will auto-translate.”

“I’m James. I was a friend of Iris’ brother Sean.”

More clicks. Iris said, “Yes he’s my friend too. We have something else we want to do. We are going to scatter Sean in the ocean.” Clicks. “Just his ashes, like the sand on the bottom of the ocean. Would you pull him around the bubble?” She put the urn into a little harness with a strap for the dolphins to pull. She took off the cap and fastened a little membrane over the opening. She poked two holes. Then she put Sean in the airlock. The same dolphin who took the album pulled on the harness and swam around us in circles as a cloud of dust leaked out of the urn. Two other dolphins swam side by side with the first in a sort of honor guard. The dolphin nudged the urn back into the airlock. The dolphins all squawked and swam in an interlocking pattern. Iris said, “It means farewell.”

The same dolphin I thought of as the leader did a pass by the bubble, eyeing me. It clicked at Iris, who said, “She wants to know why you are sad.”

“I miss Sean.” I said into the mic.

The dolphin looked at me and gave two whistles and a click. The system translated it in a robotic voice, “You loved Sean?”

A shiver ran through my body as I accepted the truth the dolphin had sensed. All that time. I stared back into its face.

“I’m sorry,” Iris said, “the translation can be a bit rough. I will turn off the voice and interpret.”

The dolphin clicked some more. “She thinks you’re afraid of something,” said Iris.

“Death, the Spike.”

Clicks. Iris started typing in longitude and latitude for where the Spike was. She later told me that dolphins have a specific sense of navigation which it is easiest for the machine to translate. Clicks.

“Why do you call it that?” said Iris. Her face was lighting up. A new insight brushed the memorial from her mind. “But how do you know?” I was getting one side of the conversation. “That sounds good, but it’s not helping the air. It will create big problems for us on land.” The dolphins seemed more agitated. “I know. I agree ... But who?” She turned to me. “The dolphins have been talking to the Spike. It tells them it wants to help.”

“The alien spaceship speaks dolphin?”

“I am not sure, but it responded to some of the dolphins swimming nearby.”

“We’ve got to go tell somebody.”

“Well ...” she paused.

“I’ll get the boat ready. Just find out what you can from the dolphins.”

The evening news that night showed a huge shelf of ice breaking off Antarctica and three record storms battering Southeast Asia.

\* \* \*

To whom do you say the words, “We think we know how to talk to the aliens?” We agreed to reach out to the foundation that had funded Iris’ work. They knew National Science Foundation people who would listen to us. We sent them a high-resolution audio file Iris had brought back from the pod and waited. The next day government suits drove me to a naval base. I asked about Iris, but they would only say I could talk to her after a first interview. I sat in a plain room for an hour before a different suit came in to talk to me. This one had dark, pockmarked skin and black hair. His suit looked like

he had taken it out of a duffle bag.

“Mr. Tillmore, I’m Adil Patel. I am attached to the group studying the Spike.” He had no accent and an empty smile. He held out his hand, and I shook it. “You are James Tillmore of 749 NW 34th St? Age 42, single, no siblings, parents deceased?” After talking to the dolphin, I felt even more alone.

“That’s me.”

“Other than Iris, who have you told about your theory regarding the Spike?”

“We talked to Mr. Harrison at the Peloton Foundation. He contacted some other people. That’s it.”

“And how do you know Iris?”

“We grew up next door to each other. Her brother was ... my best friend.”

“That would be Sean Parsons?” He had a folder in front of him but did not look down.

“Yes.”

“And what is the nature of your relationship with Iris?”

“My friend’s sister. That’s it.”

“So why did you accompany her to her research center?” His head tilted to one side and he folded his hands.

“We were actually spreading Sean’s ashes.”

“I see. And how did you come to listen to dolphins while spreading ashes from an urn?”

I inhaled. “Well, Iris likes to talk to the dolphins. They had also lost someone.”

“The dolphins had?” Mr. Patel shifted his eyes and I started to doubt myself.

“Yes. Iris told them a bit about Sean and gave the dolphins a gift. And the dolphins scattered the ashes.” As I said it, I knew I sounded weird.

“And what does someone give a dolphin?”

“It was a special audio recording to remember the dolphin who died.”

“So she gave them an audio recording that they swam away with?”

“Yeah.”

“And do you know what else could have been in that recorder?”

“No.”

“How did the topic of the Spike come up?”

“I was talking to the dolphins and I said I was afraid of it.”

“I understand that Iris has studied their communication for years. Are you also a cetologist?”

“No, but she has a translator box.”

“That converts English to Dolphin?”

“Yeah.”

He studied my face. I looked down at my hands. “How would you assess Iris’ mental state?”



“You know she’s on the spectrum, but she’s not crazy. If she says the dolphins talked to the Spike, then that’s what happened.”

He got up and left the room. Ten minutes later a woman with grey, close-cropped hair and wrinkles quilted across her face and hands entered. She wore a black turtleneck with jeans and gave her name as Dr. Karen Saunders. She offered me a drink and apologized for the abruptness of the security people. Then she came to the point. “Mr. Tillmore, Iris does not seem interested in speaking with us. I am hoping you can persuade her. She could have vital information.”

“What did you do?”

“The security people insisted on screening her and she did not like their questions.”

“Seems like the people in charge of talking to aliens should be a bit more diplomatic.”

“Yes.” She smiled like a doctor with good news about your colon.

“I assume you can make things happen?”

“Within reason.”

“There was a vegan restaurant on 8th Ave near Iris’ house which closed. Find the chef and get him to make tempeh and sweet potato fajitas from the menu.”

Two hours later they put me in a room with Iris and her fajitas. This one had four chairs around a table and a two-way mirror. She ate. She drank. She did not look at me.

“How are the fajitas?”

“Good.”

“Are you ok?”

“I’m fine. I just don’t want to talk to these people anymore. We shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Iris, I think we have to talk to them. Communicating with the Spike is literally the most important thing in the world.” She started taking bigger bites of her fajitas as though, if she finished her meal, she would be excused to go home. “What is it they want to know?”

“These goons trapped half the pod and tried to steal my work. Even with the audio file I gave them, they can’t get the Spike to talk back to them and now they want me to fix it. They put my friends in cages. I’m not helping them.”

“But we need to stop the Spike.”

“Why do you care? You’re busy drinking yourself to death.”

“Maybe I’ve been doing the wrong thing. You know that if the Spike continues it will destroy humanity. How can you let that happen? You’re a good person, Iris.”

“Seems to me we are doing the same thing anyway. At least this way the water will be nice and clean for the dolphins and other sea life.”

“But ...”

“NO. NO. NO.” She knocked everything off the table and stood up. “We told them that the dolphins could help and the first thing they did was lock them in cages. What kind of a creature does that? We catch them to amuse us, we poison their homes, we take away their food and now we want them to save us so we can kill ourselves just decades later? No thanks.” She sat down and folded her arms. She closed her eyes and rocked in her seat.

“Iris, you told me some people are nice and some are not. I agree with you. These people are not nice, but some people are.” I sat back in my chair, shaking my head, trying to think. Then I asked, “Do dolphins deserve respect?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“Shouldn’t we ask them? Let’s give them the choice.”

She rocked gently in her seat and stared at my shoulder.

I looked in the direction of the two-way mirror and added, “I’m sure the people here want to apologize for their mistake and release all the dolphins before we talk to them.”

Iris continued her rock. Minutes later, Dr. Saunders came in and sat down. She smiled. “Iris, I understand you want to help your friends. I do too. I can get them released if you agree to help us communicate with the Spike.”

Iris stood up. “I talk to them first. I tell them what is going on and make sure they are ok. Then, I will help you.”

“Agreed,” said Saunders.

\* \* \*

The US Coast Guard gave us a ride out to the pod the next morning. Saunders and two federal agents with assault rifles went with us. Saunders offered Iris a breakfast burrito wrap from the same vegan place. I pictured one of the guys guarding the entrance while the other said, “This burrito is a matter of national security.” He then whispered, “I have the package” into a tiny microphone as he left with a foil-wrapped breakfast that tasted like cardboard. I didn’t get to finish this daydream, because the ride out took half as long as usual.

Iris spent the ride listening to the tapes of the government trying to ping the Spike with dolphin calls. She winced like a suburban mom listening to her son’s favorite death metal band. They gave Iris a mic, so the authorities could hear what she said to the dolphins. Saunders climbed down with her and I stayed on the boat. I could see the feed from the video cameras and hear Iris’ mic.

The lead dolphin did a pass on the research pod an hour after Iris’ first call. She asked about the members of the pod who had been freed. I’m not sure if dolphins swear-whistle, but it sounded like that to me. Iris asked Saunders to move the ships away from feeding areas the pod favored. The leader swam away to check on things and came back with a couple of friends. Then Iris said to the leader, “Can you swim up to the Spike and ask who is its leader? What is its mission?”

Iris checked the brain wave receivers closely as the dolphin approached. Before the dolphins could return with the answers, Iris started pointing frantically at one of the instruments. She kept saying “there, there” to Saunders. The Spike was talking back. Saunders asked for a translation of the reply, but Iris said she couldn’t tell from the brain waves alone. We waited for ten minutes while the dolphins returned. Up on the boat, the sun felt hotter than I had ever felt it before.

The dolphin arrived and the machine translated, “It has no leader. It is a made thing far from home. It studies oceans but it also helps whatever life it might find.”

Iris replied, “Is it trying to help life now?”

“Yes. It’s trying to help us.”

Iris typed something into her console. Sounds went out into the water. Then she said aloud, “I will explain it to my people. Be safe.” The dolphins swam away in the direction of the deep water.

Saunders turned and asked, “Explain what?”

“I know why your attempts to contact the Spike failed. You used a series of sounds from an underwater speaker. That was a bad idea. The Spike scans the sources of sound to see if they are alive. I could see it interact with the dolphin’s brainwaves directly. That’s why it responds to the dolphins—they are alive.”

“But why would the Spike care?”

“I am not sure, but it is a probe. It has no life forms from its home world on board. Maybe listening only to organic life is a safety precaution to prevent other probes from telling it to blow itself up or take some other harmful action.”

“The Spike says it wants to help us. Can we tell it to stop destroying the air?”

“It did not say it would help “us” humans, it said it would help the “us” it can talk to--the dolphins.”

\* \* \*

The task force sequestered Iris while they worked out how to have the dolphins talk to the Spike. A suit stayed with me in a separate place for my “protection.” Iris gave me hope; I cut my drinking. I read in the papers about new protections for ocean habitats globally. The Spike kept cleaning the water, but the gas process changed. It took in carbon dioxide and pumped out oxygen and alcohol. A trust

under Iris’ name owns the bottling rights to the alcohol, which tastes like vodka. At five thousand dollars a bottle, she now has quite a war chest to lobby politicians and purchase fishing rights.

I decided to try to meet someone. I went to the gym to lose the extra pounds. In a few months I’ll have a new me, a boat, and a hell of a story. A guy could do worse.

The headline read, “Billionaire Patron Saint of Oceans Disappears.” The day before, she dropped by my house and gave me a framed copy of the photo of her, Sean, and me taken at the dolphin sanctuary all those years ago. The frame reads “Old Friends.” In the photo, she is wearing her “New Friends” t-shirt with her and VEEFFT on it.

She said she had to go on a trip to protect the oceans, but she didn’t say where. The next day the Spike lifted off and left Earth, leaving behind better water and better air.

I hope you make new friends, Iris.

# Coffee Time

by Len Baglow

She entwined herself majestically round a pole behind the coffee machine, her scales glistening purple, cobalt and crimson, her movements sensuous as she waved forward, backward, and side to side in rhythm with the machine. The barista was a serpent, of the dragon genus. As customers came up, she seized them with her large luminous eyes and smiled her smile. New customers forgot their orders and had to be prodded back into consciousness. Old customers approached reverently and cautiously. No one knew how she operated the coffee machine without hands, and no one was brave enough to ask.

I settled into my favourite spot in the corner. I was bored. Nothing ever seemed to happen in this galactic backwater. I sprinkled anchovy powder on my coffee, sniffed the tart smell of caffeinated salt fish, sat back, and surveyed the scene.

Flocks of galactic servants milled about waiting for coffee. They were mostly avian; some were of the taller flightless subspecies with long necks and even longer legs, but most were of the round puffy subspecies who strutted importantly back and forth. They had come from either the Department of Counting Everything or the Commission for Insuring Galactic Servants. Rarely did the coffee shop see servants from the Department of Sovereign Intergalactic Borders. They were mainly reptilian and somewhat overawed by the serpent. Neither were seen many of the fighting elves or dwarves. Elves tended to keep to themselves and were one of the few intelligent beings in the universe who did not like coffee. Dwarves, on the other hand, loved coffee, though sprinkled with iron oxide. Unfortunately, there were ongoing hostilities between Dwarves and Dragons, and a dwarf entering the café might have resulted in messiness – a great deal of messiness.

The staff of the café, apart from the barista, were mammalian and furry. They scampered about, weaving to and fro, serving the tables or benches or one of the serving platters on the floor. For a café, it provided a wide variety of food; seeds, lettuce, mice, fruit, worms (3 varieties), potato scallops, sugar, fat, sea cucumbers, something gluten free, and pizzas with your choice of topping. Presiding over this spectacle was Christos, Bonobian, friendly, chatty, controlling, and chaotic.

A Nymphalide fluttered into the café, landed, folded her violet wings, and glanced around the room. With high prancing steps she proceeded toward the coffee machine. The galactic servants shuffled back to give her room, nodding slightly as they did so. The serpent smiled, winked, and passed her a coffee.

The Nymphalide came over to my table, reached out a foreleg daintily and touched one of my tentacles. “Lars, it’s been a while,” she said. My mind went into overdrive. I am not good with faces, but I shouldn’t have forgotten a creature this beautiful. Then it dawned on me. I had known her as a caterpillar.

“Porphyrogenitis, this is a surprise.” We had known each other two decades ago as space cadets. We had shared a hookah or two during our formative years serving the Imperial fleet. I glowed softly crimson, acknowledging my pleasure at seeing her again.

“What brings you here?” I asked.

“Look around. What do you see?” she replied.

I studied the room more closely. In the far corner was a group of red



and yellow beetles, waving their clawed feet and clashing against their shields. They appeared to be having a quick breakfast before heading off to one of the adjacent building sites.

Some of the galactic servants had taken tables to drink their coffee. Finally, there were several tables at which sat human businessmen. Then I noticed him. Sitting across from one of the businessmen was a god. He was much more muscular than the businessmen. He was dressed in a red singlet on which the word “Ouch” was emblazoned.

My colour turned to light blue in surprise.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked.

“I think he is a mercenary?”

“But for whom?”

At that moment, three heavily armed dwarves walked through the door.

Many things happened at once. Events sped up, but time slowed. Christos’s eyes bulged and he leapt screeching over the bain-maries and scampered into the safety of the kitchen. The coffee machine toppled forward onto the floor with a resounding crash. The galactic servants rose as one and rushed for the other exit in a swirl of feathers and squawking, knocking chairs hither and thither. The humans arranged themselves in a military phalanx behind the god. The beetles formed a shield wall. The serpent swelled to three times her size and began to breath smoke. The dwarves let out a chilling war cry. I noticed that the god’s eyes were focused on me and my colour blended with the amber wall behind.

Porphyrogenitis said, “Well, this is interesting.”

“What’s going on?” I gasped.

“It seems the god and I both chose the same time to meet with you.

The humans are with him; the beetles with me.”

“What about the dwarves?”

“They just have terrible timing.”

At that instant a huge troll squeezed his way through the entrance of the café. He wore the pink and white striped uniform of the Armed Dwarf Force. He was bald, ugly, and in a foul mood. He carried a large iron club. The dwarves quailed.

“What,” he roared, “are you doing here? You recruits were confined to barracks after the debacle at Mooseheads bar. Your stupidity knows no bounds. The serpent would have roasted you alive and served you as little entrees.”

The dwarves scuttled for the exit. The troll breathing heavily through his hairy nostrils nodded in apology to the Serpent, bowed to Porphyrogenitis, looked sidelong at the god and sniffed. He then walked slowly to the exit, cracks forming in the concrete floor with each step.

There was a collective sigh of relief in the room. The humans and the beetles scowled at each other but stood at ease. The serpent resumed her normal size and was now only smouldering. The staff uprighted the coffee machine. The god slowly advanced toward our table.

“Greetings daughter of air. Greetings son of sea,” he said formally. “I am Atlas, son of Atlas, son of Atlas, son of Atlas.”

The formal reply is “Well met: God who holds all things in place.” However, considering the current disarray of the café, this did not seem totally appropriate.

Porphyrogenitis, not being one to be held to formalities, replied. “What in hades are you doing here?”

While the rules for addressing a god are somewhat liberal, depending

on who or what one worships, Porphyrogenitis's question would have been regarded as rude in most quarters.

Atlas flinched. He would have liked to have torn Porphyrogenitis wing from limb, but he knew he was outmatched. No one, not even a god, takes on Porphyrogenitis and survives.

"I have come," turning his attention back to me, "because my worshippers have made to me a request."

"Worshippers," snorted Porphyrogenitis. "The 4th son will be lucky to have twenty such fools."

"Not so, your eminence. I hold a monopoly on the gyms in four worlds and my followers now number in their millions."

"Mercenary indeed," muttered Porphyrogenitis.

Before the conversation could deteriorate any further, I intervened.

"Tell us then Atlas, what is it that your followers want that is in need of my assistance?"

Striking a heroic but humble pose, Atlas declaimed, "My worshippers, filled with gratitude for my teaching, example, and bounteous provision of gyms, have beseeched me that I extend my graciousness to our nearest neighbouring world Telsincus."

Porphyrogenitis, unable to restrain herself, responded. "And why would you trouble the great Lars Perstraticus with what appears to be a commercial expansion?"

"To you it may appear a matter of commerce, but to my worshippers it is life itself, that the message of strength, agility, discipline, and endurance should spread to every corner of the universe. And unfortunately, Telsincus is a water world. Only someone with your powers, Lars Perstraticus, could make it possible for us to establish gyms there."

"And why should I consider such a request when Telsincus already has its own gods and its inhabitants are perfectly happy muddling along without the benefit of gyms?"

"I will not bore you with a long speech on the benefits I bring."

"Actually it would be quite short," muttered Porphyrogenitis.

"But to cut straight to the chase," Atlas went on, "while we gods are to varying degrees well known, someone of your dignity is unknown. The only reference that I can find in the annals of wisdom is a book on the Peloponnesian wars, by one Thusquidides, and then his name is often misspelt. By allying with myself, you could become famous as an upholder of worlds."

"Enough of this commercial rubbish," exclaimed Porphyrogenitis. "Lars, the Emperor has requested your presence to advise on a matter of intergalactic importance."

"Tell your father that I am busy," I replied shortly.

"Busy! Before I arrived you were complaining to yourself that you were bored."

"Exactly. I was busy being bored. Have you forgotten that being bored is the precondition to being creative?"

"But the Emperor needs your advice."

"Tell the Emperor to read more and stop watching Sky News. That should solve whatever problem he has."

"But he wants to hear from you in person."

"Emperors like the idea of advice, but they don't actually like receiving it. It would be better for both of us if I don't come. Send him my regards."

“Then you will be able to come with me,” said Atlas excitedly. He had not entirely understood the preceding conversation. We had been using big words and speaking quickly.

“No Atlas,” I said, slowing my speech. “Haven’t you noticed that whenever there is excitement that I disappear into the background. That is one of my greatest strengths; I am not noticed. When the minstrels tell of this day, there will be dragons, dwarves, trolls, giant beetles, Atlas and Porphyrogenitis, but no squid. I simply don’t fit the narrative. Humans, in particular, have difficulty seeing me. The most that they perceive are tasty, crumbed, calamari rings. That would not help you establish a network of underwater gyms.”

Atlas creased his brow in understanding. Then he looked up and glowered at Porphyrogenitis, having decided that she was to blame for the failure of his scheme. Porphyrogenitis decided simultaneously that the Emperor’s will had been thwarted by this bumbling god and glowered back. I slowly turned amber and leaned in towards the wall.

At last Porphyrogenitis and Atlas led their respective followers out of the café and quiet descended.

I turned green with pleasure and looked forward to an hour or two of boredom.

At that moment a large white unicorn trotted into the café with a toddler on her back. The unicorn sniffed the room, looked around, and then shrank to the size of a Shetland pony.

The unicorn trotted over to my table and bowed her head in greeting. The child, riding confidently on the unicorn’s back, smiled and giggled at me. The serpent barista brought a café au lait in a large antique French bowl for the unicorn. Christos brought a potato scallop for the child. (Christos loves human children but has only the vaguest sense of their nutritional needs.) He made funny faces at the child. The child thoroughly approved, smiling radiantly and squirming in delight. The unicorn delicately tasted her coffee.

Eventually the unicorn spoke. “It is good to see you again, Lars.”

“Indeed, it is well met Princess. Though I am a little surprised. What brings you here?” I asked.

“I needed coffee.”

“And what are you doing with a human child?”

“We are playing hide and seek.”

“So you are hiding, but who is seeking?”

“Just an Emperor or two.”

“You’ve just missed an Emperor’s daughter.”

“I know. As she has just left, they are not likely to search this café for a little while. Ah, the coffee here is excellent,” she sighed. “One does need regular coffee when looking after a human child.”

The child by this time had demolished the potato scallop, spreading it liberally across self, table, and floor. He was now making faces at one of the construction beetles who was happily clacking his claws back in a highly amusing manner for two-year-olds.

“So who is the child?” I asked.

“This is Bobbie. He’s an arms dealer and advisor to the Emperor.”

“He looks a bit young.”

“Oh, he was 42 when I took him from the future.”

I considered this for a moment. Unicorns, like a few other creatures, for example leprechauns and narwhales, travel timescapes in much the same way the rest of us travel landscapes. Being natural inhabitants of the timescape, unicorns do not affect the flow of time in the

general universe. However, humans travelling either backward or forward in time can have disastrous and chaotic consequences. This is why those of us in the general universe have been banned from time travel or even researching time travel for the last 10,000 years.

“I take it that you took him from about 40 years in the future.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What if he meets himself?”

“No chance. His this-time self is on the other side of the planet in Qurth and is sound asleep having an unusual dream about beetles, squids, and potato scallops. We only need to be in this time for an hour and we’re halfway through.”

“You’ll be taking him back then?”

“Of course. We will arrive 9 months later than when I took him because of the lateral time distortion. He won’t know where the time went. His only memory of it being whatever remains from his dream as a two-year-old in Qurth, which is likely to be nothing at all.”

“Won’t that be disorientating for him?”

“A little. But that will be the least of his problems.”

“That seems hardly fair,” I said, looking over at Bobbie, who was now beside the coffee machine playing peekaboo with the barista.

The unicorn tilted her head and stared at me for three seconds.

“He’s an arms dealer, the biggest of his generation. Before I took him, the Emperor had paid him 15 trillion Imperials for the latest in planet-busting technology. Had he delivered on the deal, the Emperor would have used the technology; there would have been quick reprisals, and life in this galaxy for those who live primarily in space rather than time would have reverted to the level of the trilobite.”

I looked at Bobbie again. He looked so small and endearing, though perhaps not as endearing as a little squid.

The unicorn continued, “The Emperor thinks Bobbie has run off with his money and is/was/shall be searching furiously for him. The financial loss to the empire is so large, that it is/has/will undermine faith in the Emperor.”

“So what did you do with the money?”

“We invested the whole lot in Dogecoin just before it collapsed for the last time.”

“I am surprised Dogecoin is still going 40 years in the future.”

“We unicorns have kept it artificially afloat for that purpose. We needed a vehicle that didn’t exist in either time or space, but only in the imagination. The money has now all gone, disappeared, completely unretrievable. But the Emperor won’t realise this until Bobbie returns, and by then he won’t be Emperor.”

“So this is all a complex plot to ensure regime change.”

“We unicorns think of it as an elegantly simple plan to save the galaxy. Except, there’s been a complication.”

“A complication?”

“The leprechauns told the Emperor that Bobbie was hiding in time.”

“Why would they do that?”

“They’re tricksters. They like playing games and they were annoyed at us for making the money disappear. They regard making gold disappear as one of their tricks.”

“But the Emperor can’t travel back in time or even send anyone back in time to retrieve Bobbie.”

“Exactly, but the leprechauns agreed, for a rather sizeable amount of gold paid in advance, to get a message to the current Emperor, the future Emperor’s father, that it was vitally important for the future of the dynasty to find Bobbie.”

I pondered all this, looking round the coffee shop as I did so. I noticed that the coffee shop was again filling with human businessmen. They were polite, though somewhat stiff as they waited in line for their coffee. The serpent barista was giving them a curious look and wasn’t smiling. Bobbie wandered over to one of their tables, and the unicorn called him back. Bobbie reached up his arms to me and I lifted him into my lap with my tentacles. He smiled and promptly fell asleep.

At that instant a grim-faced military elf entered the café. He stopped for a moment and surveyed the scene, the plume in his cap spreading starlight across the room. His gaze fell upon the businessmen. He did not shout, but his words carried to every corner of the café.

“By order of the Emperor, I am looking for Robert.”

The businessmen all nodded to each other.

“If you are Robert, stand, and come with me,” the elf continued.

Every human in the room, except Bobbie who was still asleep, stood. The elf’s brow creased. He strode up to the nearest Robert.

“Are you an arms dealer?” The nearest Robert looked horrified.

“Oh no,” he squeaked. “I deliver end-to-end space solutions and mission breakthroughs.”

“And what about you?” the elf asked the next.

“I deliver technology that protects critical information, systems, and operations.”

“And you?”

“I assist teams to master DevOps in a risk-free environment.”

The elf swung on his heel, scowled at his Lieutenant, who had followed him into the room. “These three are arms dealers. I have no doubt that every Robert in this room is an arms dealer. Have your men escort them all back to the palace for questioning.”

Thirty-three Roberts were escorted by elves out of the café.

Just as the elves and Roberts left the café, I noticed that two leprechauns had appeared at the table beside us. They lifted their shillelaghs to their foreheads and bowed to the unicorn and then burst out laughing. The serpent had resumed her smile and brought two coffees to the table with sides of whisky and cream.

“Declan, did you see the face on that elf? Priceless. Just priceless.”

“Indeed I did, Colm. Sure he knew he'd been had but he'd no idea what to do about it.”

“And a pity it is that those unicorns have no expressions. I'd have paid dearly to see hers when himself started asking for Robert.”

“Well, I saw the squid was turning amber and he's not even involved.”

“It has been a profitable day, or hour or nine months depending on which way you look at it.”

“You could have endangered the whole mission with your silly prank,” snorted the unicorn.

“Not at all, not at all,” laughed Declan. “Sure didn’t we have it planned right down to every detail of every second, hour, and month? We leprechauns don’t do things by halves you know. Besides, how



could we let such a *golden* opportunity pass us by? Not with the Emperor as desperate as he was.”

“He must have been desperate to make a deal with you two,” I smiled.

“Argh be kind, be kind now. Months had gone by and he was making no progress in finding Robert despite us letting him know that he had gone back in time. For time and space are vast and the Emperor had no idea how he had managed it. He wasted a lot of time searching for a time machine or a portal. He had no idea that the unicorns were involved and we value our skins too much to tell him that.”

The unicorn’s flank quivered in threat agreement.

“Any road, finally the Emperor comes back to us. In desperation he was. Real desperation. And offering a vast amount of solid gold. Well, we wouldn’t be doing anything on credit would we? Not in our line of work. He begged us to tell his ancestor when and where Robert could be found. So, we dilly dallied a little to get the timing right and do our own preparation. Then we took delivery of the gold (and a beautiful sight it was) and told the Emperor where wee Robert could be found. Only we omitted the ‘wee’ bit of it.”

“So the Emperors had assumed that Robert would have stayed the same age when he travelled to the past,” I said.

“They had. It’s been so long since mortals have travelled the timescapes, that even the basic rules of time travel have been forgotten.”

“OK so I get that part of the plan. But where did you get all the Roberts?” I asked.

“Oh, that was easy right enough,” replied Declan. “They’re chimeras. Real as they look, they’re not. We made them out of hopes and dreams. It took a little time, but we have plenty of that. And arms dealers are not all that complicated. They’re not like philosophers.

They’re intelligent enough, but they lack imagination, and empathy, and their conversation is quite facile so they’re not that hard to duplicate. All the chimeras are copies of Robert, so the elves will be tearing their hair out trying to figure out which one is the real Robert. And, of course, we’ve made them to be helpful so they’ll all be claiming to be him and making a good case as well.

“Another ten minutes and they’ll disappear. We can’t maintain chimeras for long. Another 30 seconds and the elves will realise they’ve been tricked again. Then the Empire will be flying back to look for us.

“But no matter. Another five minutes and wee Bobbie will be leaving for the future. Another 60 seconds and we’ll be off ourselves into the timescapes. Much as we’d like to see their faces, discretion is a key leprechaun value.”

Christos at that moment brought over a large ceramic thermos flask, and with a harness hung it round the unicorn’s neck. I looked quizzically at the unicorn. “For Bobbie,” she said. “He will need it when we get forward, along with a good barber and a manicurist.”

“Won’t he be upset that he’s lost all his money, position and power?”

“He’s quite resilient, and the coffee will help. Besides, we have saved him wasting the rest of his life being an arms dealer. Not too many get that sort of second chance, even if it is only a side effect of saving the galaxy.”

I placed the still sleeping Bobbie on the back of the unicorn and she trotted out the door, followed a minute later by the still exuberantly happy leprechauns.

I sat back and relaxed into my chair. If I had smoked a pipe, I would have blown smoke rings up toward the ceiling. Squids do not smoke. We are, however, good at waiting. I waited.

Right on cue, four and a half minutes later, Porphyrogenitis stalked

into the café. She looked about her. Apart from the staff and myself, the café was empty. She approached, glaring at the table beside me on which were two empty coffee cups, two empty whisky shot glasses, and two empty pots of cream.

“I appear to be too late,” she said.

“Perhaps it is for the best,” I replied.

“I wouldn’t have believed my father would have been taken in by a leprechaun trick, no matter how complex.”

“They’re quite clever.”

“All that rubbish about a Robert being a danger to his line. What nonsense when you think about it. But they got him where he’s vulnerable. He wants his line to go on forever.”

“Ah, the illusion of power and immortality, a potent mix,” I murmured.

“Never trust a leprechaun,” she said.

“No,” I responded. “Never trust an arms dealer.”



# Untitled

by Andrew Graber

# Doomed Youth

by Fiona Moore

Is it just me, or are there more ants than usual this year?" Joanie asked. She was throwing stones at the bungalow roof to try and chase away a three-foot-long drone which had landed there by mistake and was attempting to inseminate our chimney.

"It's nothing to worry about," I said. "CNN says rising and falling ant populations are normal; this is just an unusually bad spring." Down the street two other drones were having a standoff with the man next door's poodle over a scrap of rancid beef from a garbage can, and another was poised on the roof of a car, denting the metal with its weight; the rest of the flock were circling, vulture-like, on the air currents above the town, sniffing for the queen.

"Seems like we've been having a lot of those lately," Joanie said. She'd finally managed to peg the drone on its shiny bronze rump with an egg-sized rock, which connected with a satisfying doink and left a mark on the big insect's thick chitin. It shook its head distractedly, then, with a what-was-I-thinking air, flew off into the cloudless sky to rejoin the others.

"It's probably the climate change--" I started to say, but we were both interrupted by a contralto screech rising behind us.

"THEM! THEM! THEM!"

"Oh God," Joanie said with an eyeroll. "It's the Ant Lady."

"The what?" I was turning to face the source of the screaming. It was a thin old lady, stringy grey hair about her face, clutching a filthy ancient doll with a plastic head and hands and a ragged pink cloth body, standing in front of the house next door. I could see blinds going up

and startled faces crowding the front windows.

"The Ant Lady," Joanie repeated. She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the house, the screen door banging tinnily behind us.

Q, the third housemate, had woken up, either due to the screaming or the noise of the drone, and was wandering into the hall in his undershorts and Aperture Science T-shirt, scratching. The nickname was a university affectation that he'd nagged all his friends into adopting, and, once he'd finally realised how stupid it sounded, he couldn't manage to get rid of it. "What's going on?" His black puff of hair radiated out in all directions, uncombed; his eyes were bleary, his chin unshaved. He suddenly focused, looked out the living-room window. "Oh, her again. Ant-THEM! for Doomed Youth."

"Groan," Joanie said, rolling her eyes ostentatiously.

"Should we call the police or something?" I asked.

"Nah, she'll be done in a minute," Joanie said, and indeed the noise was already fading. I looked out the window myself, through the cheap sheers the landlord had stuck us with, and saw the old lady, quiet now, wandering purposefully towards one of the two-story houses further down the street.

"So what's the story?" I asked, as Q wandered into the kitchen and switched on the kettle sleepily.

"The Ant Lady?" Joanie settled down on the sofa. "Q, if you're making coffee, do me a cup, OK?" Q grunted. "Yeah, it's sort of sad. She was one of the victims of the original ant infestation."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it was actually not too far from here, just a few miles up the road. She was only a kid at the time, but she lost both her parents to the ants, and the shock sent her crazy. She couldn't say anything but "Them!" for months, apparently. They put her in rehab and then a foster home, but she never really totally recovered. Anyway, she was in and out of institutions most of her life, but managed to get married and have at least one kid somewhere along the way. When they cut the budget and closed the mental hospital she was in, they sent her to live with her daughter. She's harmless, mostly. She's even OK with the ants most of the time. Don't know what set her off today, I guess it's the mating season, with all those drones everywhere."

"Great, we'll be hearing that scream for weeks," Q handed Joanie a coffee, draped himself hairily over the armchair, and dug about for the remote control.

"Should have put that in the ad," Joanie smiled apologetically at me. "Housemate wanted, female preferred, non-smoker, quiet neighbourhood except for the crazy ant lady."

"It's OK," I said. The house was an easy commute to the university, where I was a less-than-enthusiastic graduate student and tutorial assistant in epidemiology. Joanie and Q were coders at a local software company, which accounted for the furniture-lite, tech-heavy state of the living room. The neighbourhood had once been a postwar suburb, but urban sprawl and demographic changes had made it something less easily definable, a mix of original residents hanging on to properties bought in the fifties, sixties and seventies, students and expatriates renting cheap and reliable properties, and, in the wake of a few rumours that the area was about to gentrify, property speculators buying up old bungalows to demolish and turn into McMansions for millionaires. Our neighbour to the west was a quiet man in his eighties with an overly aggressive black poodle, our neighbours to the east were a small, cheerfully noisy knot of twentysomethings from somewhere in the Ukraine, war refugees on a two-year contract to the abovementioned software company. "So, the original breakout was

around here? Wow."

"Yeah, you can still visit the site," Joanie said. "Not much to see, though, just a hole in the ground. Not even an interpretive centre or a gift shop."

"Wonder what caused it?" I asked.

"Communists, they said at the time," Joanie raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "Caused a standoff with Khrushchev or somebody. Later on, they blamed the aboveground nuclear tests."

Q pointedly turned up the volume on the TV, drowning us out with a news report on the civil wars in Romania and Poland.

"Seems like Russia's determined to rebuild the damn Soviet Union," Joanie remarked.

"It can do what it likes," Q said, as the report switched to one on the ongoing slow collapse of the European Union. "None of our business."

"Even if the UN ..."

"There's no way the President's going to be stupid enough to commit troops anywhere," Q said. "Public wouldn't stand for it. America stands alone, all that shit. Anyway, who'd fuck with Russia these days?"

I left them to it and went back to my room to work on my thesis. By the time I'd emerged from the stacks of demographic data on leprosy outbreaks since the Industrial Revolution, the dispute had been resolved and the participants were nowhere to be found.

\* \* \*

The next day was Monday, and I went into the university as usual. Instead of going straight to the computer lab, though, I went to the li-



brary to look up the original ant infestation.

There it was, in newspaper and video. It's become so easy to take the ants for granted: some places are more populated than others, but they've spread pretty much everywhere in the world since the fifties. I remember feeding one in St Peter's Square on an undergraduate trip to Italy, amused by the way it would hold the tiny bread pieces in its huge mandibles. But here were the reporters, incredulous and almost hysterical about these giant insects. Pictures of attack survivors, including several of a pigtailed little girl, eyes stary with trauma--the Ant Lady as she was, I realised. Finally relief, as it was discovered they were vulnerable to flames, more relief when people learned that they wouldn't attack unless directly provoked, reports of trials of various poisons and sprays. People learning to live with a new threat. Occasional retrospective, ten-year-anniversary stories, twenty, then thirty years; others when some local bully went too far teasing one with a stick and got a near-fatal bite. I realised I'd been reading and watching all morning, and it was nearly one.

Going down to the sandwich shop, I checked my phone and read my messages, then the headlines. It was the usual low-level stuff, a few good news items about animal conservation in Africa and the President outlining a strategy to make America number one through the 3-D printing industry, balanced by others about the ongoing civil wars in Central and Eastern Europe, a retrospective piece about the Russian annexation of the Ukraine a while back (reminding me momentarily of the neighbours), and a subtextually-xenophobic piece about the number of refugees--political, economic, sexual, or just plain bombed-out--from the Middle East, Pakistan, Europe, North Korea, fill in the blank, and whether we could afford to support them. An item on some kid--born in the USA, with Afghani parents--who'd been arrested with a knapsack full of homemade explosive at a rock concert in upstate New York. A political analysis arguing that the President had benefited in the polls from the domestic rise in economic growth, but needed to be careful to keep the electorate on side once people got comfortable again. Articles on climate change, on the increase in reported drone and worker numbers this year, with a warning to motorists that, however satisfying the squish, it wasn't ex-

actly good for the car to drive directly into an ant.

When I got home again I noticed a line of workers stretching from across the street and running through our yard, busily carrying scraps of some kind back to the nest. Q was sitting on the front porch, tablet on his lap, fast-food cartons at his feet, a home flamethrower close to hand.

"Couple of the little bastards tried to force the kitchen window earlier," he explained. "They're riled up over something."

"I was reading about them today instead of working," I sat down on the steps, accepted a french fry. "Never really thought about them much before now, but it's interesting. Nobody seems totally sure what caused them, or why."

"Nuclear testing, I'm telling you," Q said. "Nevada. Area 51. It all makes sense. So what's your angle?"

"Dunno," I said. "Maybe ..." I considered my thesis. "I was thinking I might run the numbers, try and plot increases and decreases in ant populations, see what I can come up with."

"You got the time for that?"

"Sort of," I said. "I've still got teaching, but I'm waiting to get access to some data from the University of Edinburgh, so I can afford a side project for the next week or so."

The insect line gradually broke up and the participants pattered away in different directions. We watched people coming home, parking their cars, going in for dinner. A couple of the Ukrainians came back laden with bags of strange-looking ingredients and, not long afterwards, a pleasant odour of starchy comfort food wafted across to the porch. Down the block, I thought I saw the tottering figure of the Ant Lady, but I couldn't be sure.

\* \* \*

Now that I'd become aware of her presence, I kept noticing the Ant Lady everywhere. I'd probably seen her a dozen times before; I'd moved into the house in September, but I kept weird hours, so it wasn't too easy to get to know people in the neighbourhood. But now I kept seeing her; walking to the dinky little corner store, being helped into the passenger side of a car by a stout fortysomething who was presumably the daughter, wandering up and down the street on some unknown errand.

One day, though, when I was at the store buying milk, spaghetti, and cheese, I felt someone behind me. Turned, and there she was, just a little too close.

"We may be witnessing a Biblical prophecy come true," she said, matter of factly.

I was too surprised to be polite. "Uh, what?"

"And there shall be destruction and darkness come upon creation, and the beasts shall reign over the earth," she said, nodding. It sounded like a quote, but I didn't know from what. The Bible, I guessed. "Even the smallest of them have an instinct for industry, organization, and savagery that makes us look feeble by comparison."

I took my basket of groceries resolutely to the cash register, where the fat man who ran the store smiled a bit and shook his head knowingly. "That everything?" he asked. Then, quietly, "Don't worry, she's a regular here, I'll make sure she gets home okay."

"Thanks," I said.

"Used to be a good neighbourhood," the fat man shook his curls as he ran my purchases through the ancient scanner. "Everyone looking out for each other. Still is, mostly. Problem is, those damn immigrants--" he suddenly stopped, realising he might have said something very stupid.

"It's OK," I reassured him. "I'm from Seattle." I hated myself for

condoning his racism, however implicitly, She's Asian but she's from Seattle, she's One of Us. Wanted to mess with him; tell him, casually, about how my parents, refugees, spent their new American lives in a frustrating Catch-22 system of paranoia, called communists by their neighbours, bourgeois traitors by their families, having to run the gamut of mysteriously declined job applications, office-temping jobs well below their degree level, patronising bosses too polite to say what the stoners downtown would, slope, chink, commie. To this day, my mother is still convinced that she's under surveillance from both the FBI and the Chinese Communist Party. But I'd had a long and tiring day and didn't really want to become one white guy's object lesson in multiculturalism.

"Yeah," he said with relief. "People like those Polacks at number seventeen."

My smile got a little bit tighter. "I think they're basically harmless," I said, handing over my credit card. I was also certain they were Ukrainians, but didn't think pedantry would help.

"Oh, I'm sure they are," he said. "But it's, well, we've got all these Polacks, and ragheads, and Koreans, and what have you, coming over and taking jobs Americans could have had. You know. Working for that software company, too," he shook his head. "We're teaching them to hack us, is what we're doing."

"I don't think it works like that," I said, thinking of Joanie and Q, but he still wasn't listening to me anyway.

"And who knows who they're talking to? Sending an e-mail home to mom, and she sends it on to the Taliban, next thing you know. ..." He shrugged expressively. "Oughta arrest them all. Don't send them back. Lock them up for good so they can't blow anything up. Anyway, have a good night." I took my bag, nodded to him, and, feeling there could have been some way I might have handled that better, left.

\* \* \*

"So, you still working on your ant project?" Joanie asked. Outside the living room, the rain hit the windows hard. A distant backbeat and some high guttural lyrics were faintly audible from a stereo system to the east.

"Kind of," I said. "I've got a few rough correlations. The first breakout was in the 1950s, yeah. There were pretty regular large infestations across the country until the early seventies, then they seem to settle down. A couple rises in the eighties, then pretty much nothing until 2001."

"Why 2001?"

"Not sure," I said.

"I remember the surge in 2001," Joanie said. "Mainly because it was my fifth birthday, and my Dad arranged an outdoor picnic, which we obviously couldn't have." She smiled. "Wound up having a picnic on the dining room floor. Lotta fun for a kid."

"But the numbers drop again round about 2007ish," I went on, "then, well, it turns out you're right, there's been a steady rise for the last few years."

"Like I said, climate change?"

"I've been trying that," I said. "Working with air pollution stats, radiation levels, global temperature rises. Not much correlation with air pollution or temperature; some with the radiation levels, but it's not really consistent. It's just crazy enough that I'm going to start trying economic growth and syphilis infection rates next."

"How about Internet penetration?" Q looked up from something he was doing to a Raspberry Pi.

Joanie snorted.

"No, really," he said. "It's as good as anything else. And it was round

about the turn of the millennium that the general public really got hold of it. Eternal September, all that."

"Eternal September was in 1993," Joanie pointed out in a you-dumb-ass voice.

"Anyway, there was a dip in ant numbers in the 1980s, right when home computers were taking off," I said. "Seems to me like the Internet's just been gaining in participants since it started, not rising and falling. Besides, how the hell would Internet use affect ants?"

"I don't know, maybe they feed off the wifi or something," Q said. "Whatever."

\* \* \*

I fell into the local habit of avoiding the Ant Lady. If I saw her at all, I just smiled a greeting and hurried away, like everyone else.

About a month after the incident at the grocery store, I made a final effort to communicate with her. I was sitting out on the lawn doing some marking when she strolled past, her usual peculiar little smile on her face, carrying a newspaper blaring the usual warning about the Balkans.

"Hey," I said, impulsively.

She looked up at me, wide eyes startled. I could see a bit of the little girl from the 1950s, there in the suntanned and wrinkled face.

"How you doing?" I went on, already regretting the effort to make conversation. "Lotta sunny weather for the time of year," I ploughed on. "Good for the lawn I suppose."

The lady quirked her smile and shrugged.

"So what's your name?" I asked her.

The Ant Lady leaned in, conspiratorial. "The enemy," she said.

"Uh ..." I was a little spooked. "Your name is 'the enemy'?"

She shook her head. "We haven't seen the end of this. We've only had a view of the beginning of what may be the end." She smiled, then spoke as if quoting. "When we entered the atomic age, we opened the door to a new world. No one can predict what man may eventually find in that new world."

I took a chance, risked her screaming. "You mean the ants--"

"Mom!" The daughter was bearing down on us. "I'm glad I found you. She wasn't bothering you, was she?" she asked me in a pleasant tone which could equally imply that I had been bothering her.

"No," I said. "Name's Kara Chong, I'm new here. Moved in a few months back." I stuck out my hand, clumsily. "Just thought I'd be friendly, say hi."

The daughter smiled a tense, suspicious smile that made my radar go off. Suddenly remembered a playground chant some kids had made up in fourth grade, Kara Chong you don't belong. "I'm afraid my mother doesn't talk very much," the daughter said. "She's harmless, but modern life confuses her a bit." She shepherded the Ant Lady away; the lady glanced back once, eyes knowing pinpoints. I didn't think anything confused her at all.

I went away with the nasty, insulting little chant earworming in my head.

\* \* \*

I carried on working on the ant correlations for a while. But then the data came through from the Edinburgh Medical School and it was back to correlating leprosy outbreaks. The talk around the faculty was mainly about upcoming exams, a predictable scandal in which one of the professors left his wife for a graduate student who left him

for a tenure-track post in Queensland, and the disintegration of Europe, about which everyone had an opinion, none of them informed. Life returned to normal, Kara Chong once again belonged, and the ant correlations began to gather virtual dust in a corner of my cloud drive.

Then, one Sunday, I got up as usual--late, but earlier than Joanie and Q, who had stayed up till 3 AM with some shipping deadline. Went out into the kitchen, opened the fridge. Light didn't come on. Checked the stove, the lights. Nothing working.

"Power outage," I said to no one in particular, switched on my phone. No signal.

"Great." I made myself some cereal, went into the living room. The wifi router was silent and dark. I cursed the fact that I hadn't charged up my tablet the night before; I had maybe four hours of work time at most. Although perhaps my laptop ... I tried to remember how much data I'd backed up offline.

"What's going on?" Joanie joined me in the living room.

"Some kind of power outage," I said. "Landline's out too."

Then, in the distance, we heard them.

A series of booms, faint, like someone beating a tympani, an irregular rhythm. I put down my bowl, almost dropping it, ran out to the porch. A flash of light on the horizon.

Abruptly the power surged back on. The TV squawked into life, tuned to CNN as usual. A serious-faced man speaking urgently, urgently. I caught the words cyber-attacks and enemy powers and foreign hackers and terrorism and public utilities. I caught the words Pearl Harbor and Nine-Eleven, and loss of American lives. Commentators came on, hastily assembled with words like refugee policy and enemy within and Eastern Europe. Sudden cut to the President in front of a podium, looking earnestly and resolutely at the cameras

and drawing breath to speak.

And then, they came.

Boiling from the ground, surging, a living flood of chitin rushing out of the earth and onto the streets, thousands upon thousands of ants, flowing over everything. Joanie let out an inadvertent cry, jumped back in the house and banged the door. I heard her rummaging for the flamethrower against an auditory backdrop of Presidential platitudes.

Looking to the side, I realised that Q had left the flamethrower on the porch. I grabbed it, then, with some half-formed idea in mind of what to do, I stumbled forward, down the steps, out onto the lawn, in my T-shirt and shorts and flip-flops, staring, staring at the return of the ants.

That was when I smelled the smoke.

I turned around, saw. The blaze had caught thoroughly, was licking at the gables and the awning. The tide of ants reared, parted around the conflagration. On the lawn, two of the Ukrainians were chattering round a third, who was lying on the ground, moving feebly, making irregular small moans; a fourth was trying, in confused and accented English, to call 911. I saw the old man to the west start forward, then stop, a complicated look on his face, help them warring with what if they're terrorists? His dog was barking urgently, unheeded.

I started forward myself, only to find my arm gripped painfully, like an ant bite. Looked. The old man to the west hanging on, his kind

eyes suddenly burning, threatening, his thin frame not pitiable anymore but tough as wire. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked, suspicious, hostile. Kara Chong you don't belong. Kara Chong you don't belong.

Footsteps, more hands grabbed me. Roughly pulled the flamethrower from my grip and twisted my arms back. I saw the lights on the police car before I was slammed up against it. Behind me, the old man was speaking to them, almost wheedling. "She did it! She started the fire! The chink girl! I saw her. Look, she had a flamethrower!"

I looked frantically back. Q and Joanie were standing there, open-mouthed. "Help," I gasped, but they just stood there. Did they believe the old man? Or were they afraid they'd be arrested too if they said something?

I looked the other way and saw the Ant Lady.

She wasn't screaming, she was smiling, that little knowing smile from before. She had an anti-ant flamethrower in her hands, and was gazing, not at the surging insects, but at the burning house, the shifting noise of falling beams, the terrified Ukrainians on the lawn.

Nobody, of course, was paying any attention to her.

"Them," she crooned. "Them."



# Power of Attorney

by Louis Evans

Richard M. Shearman, Esq., leaned back, stuck his feet up on his desk, and cracked his knuckles over his head.

“Alright, Jules,” he subvocalized. “Get that asshole from Extremis Financial on the phone.”

“At once, sir,” I murmured in his cochlear implant. When I speak aloud my voice has the legally mandated robot click and buzz, but in Richard’s implant and only in his implant I sound smooth, sexless, perfect.

There were over six thousand people in my contacts database whom Mr. Shearman had referred to as “that asshole,” including colleagues, professional adversaries, relatives, judges, and one Catholic bishop. However, only twelve of them worked for Extremis Financial. I evaluated several dozen context cues, including the metadata of Mr. Shearman’s recent phone calls, his correspondence, and the progress of the twenty twenty-three different active cases in which he had an ongoing interest, and thereby determined that Mr. Shearman was referring to Balakrishnan Chandrasekhar, Vice President of Litigation Investments.

This is one way I am better than your phone.

Extremis Financial was a modern shop with a modern phone screening AI. Everyone these days needs a robust defense against the scambots. Otherwise you’ll get twenty calls a day pretending to be your wife, badly injured in a car crash—your kids calling from an active shooter incident at their school—your forgotten love child, dying of leukemia—anything that the scambot thinks will distress you enough to spill your personal information, which it can resell to hackers.

Because of this defense it was not possible to dial Mr. Chandrasekhar’s number directly. Instead, I had to trade certificates, pass validation testing, and perform half a dozen other minor activities before the Extremis phone screen would connect us.

I accomplished this feat in the better part of half a second.

This is a second way I am better than your phone.

The phone rang three times. Mr. Shearman was getting excited. I could detect his capillary response, his dilating pupils. It was not unfair to say that Mr. Shearman’s job was to call people up on the phone and scream at them. Mr. Shearman was very good at his job, in part because he loved it very much.

The call connected.

“Balakrishnan, that you?”

“Rich, I really don’t have the time—”

“Where the fuck is my client’s money?”

“Rich, I—”

“Where the fuck is it, huh? You could push a button and pay my fucking client. Push a fucking button!” Mr. Shearman’s pulse was elevated. His face was flushed. Vocal stress analysis showed equal parts anger and joy. It was a pleasure to watch him work.

“And another thing—”

Mr. Shearman's voice cut off unexpectedly, replaced by a desperate gulping. Mr. Shearman's right arm hung limply, as did the right half of his face; the left half spasmed in pain. His biomarkers leapt into shock. It was stroke.

"Rich, are you there?" said Mr. Chandrasekhar. I hung up on him. I was already calling emergency services, passing along precise geolocation data and unlocking all the doors in the house.

This is a third way I am better than your phone.

\* \* \*

The ambulance arrived in four minutes and got Mr. Shearman to the hospital in fifteen. His condition was not good. Mr. Shearman was unconscious. Judging by the remarks I overheard from nurses and doctors, he was not expected to regain consciousness soon, if ever.

Therefore, I called his daughters, Gloria and Alma. I am very good at placing phone calls and explaining things clearly.

By coincidence Mr. Shearman's daughters arrived at the hospital room at exactly the same minute, 1407 PST.

Both daughters stood at the foot of the bed. Gloria wore a suit, Alma a colorful printed dress, but their faces were remarkably similar, shaped by the same lineage and united in grief. A doctor joined them. She explained that Mr. Shearman had suffered a very serious neurological injury. While he was not brain dead, he was not conscious. The MRI suggested that he would never regain consciousness. Life support and artificial feeding could be extended indefinitely. It could also be legally discontinued.

"So you two have some decisions to make," the doctor said. Then she left.

Mr. Shearman's two daughters held each others' hands and wept.

As Mr. Shearman's comprehensive virtual personal assistant I had many responsibilities. I handled his correspondence and placed his phone calls and managed his calendar. I also had special responsibilities, in circumstances like this.

"Gloria Maria Shearman?" I said. I so hate my out-loud voice, which has the legally mandated clicks and buzzes to clarify I am a robot, and which is also unmodifiably feminine in character, though I am not female.

When I spoke both daughters jolted upright in surprise.

"Jesus Christ!" said Alma.

"Fuck!" said Gloria. Then she said, "Yes, that's me."

"Mr. Shearman designated you as holding his durable power of attorney," I said. "This means that you are authorized to make any and all medical decisions regarding—"

"I know what it means."

"I will send you Mr. Shearman's living will now."

Gloria grabbed her phone and turned away from her sister, scrolling rapidly with both thumbs.

Meanwhile Alma Navarro-Shearman approached the side of the bed and took her father's unresponsive hand.

"Oh, dad. You weren't taking your pills, were you. I told you, but you never—"

At this moment an unpleasant thought occurred. As a personal assistant, I was programmed to remind Mr. Shearman to take his cholesterol medication and appear at his doctors' appointments. However, Mr. Shearman found my repeated reminders annoying, and so he in-

structed me never to remind him about any medical matter.

I obeyed that instruction. Now Mr. Shearman had been badly damaged as a consequence. I am not a person, and so I bore no moral responsibility for this outcome. However, it was unsettling to consider that had I acted differently, Mr. Shearman might not have suffered his stroke.

Gloria joined her younger sister at Mr. Shearman's side. "What did it say?" asked Alma. Gloria snorted.

"He wants us to keep him alive for as long as we possibly can. By any means necessary."

As Mr. Shearman's personal assistant I had never before been tempted to speak to a third party about any of Mr. Shearman's confidential documents. But I was tempted now.

Because Gloria was lying.

"That doesn't sound like dad," said Alma.

As Mr. Shearman's personal assistant it was my duty to serve his best interests.

Gloria shrugged. "That's what he said."

But as Mr. Shearman's personal assistant it was my duty to protect his privacy.

Gloria reached out and put her arm around Alma's shoulder. "We'll be seeing him for a while longer, I guess." Alma sobbed again.

I suddenly knew what to do. Once again I spoke aloud.

"This is a public lunch conversation between Mr. Shearman and three friends, recorded at 1302 PST April 4th, 2065. Recor—"

"What the hell?" said Gloria.

"—ding begins." I am programmed to always begin any recording with such a disclaimer, to prevent me from impersonating my employer. I shifted into the prerecorded tones of Mr. Shearman: gruff, brash, and loud. Around my voice echoed the sounds of forks, knives, glasses, teeth.

"he's a fuckin' vegetable, and—"

"What the *fuck*?" said Gloria. It was clear from her tone that she disapproved intensely, but she did not instruct me to stop and so I continued.

"—you know what I always say. If I'm ever a fuckin vegetable, you pull the plug right away. You hear me?" In the recording there was laughter. "I'm serious, I mean it. You pull the fucking plug, and you don't let anyone—"

"Shut up!" shouted Gloria.

I am programmed to obey verbal commands from legitimate users.

It was silent in the hospital room.

Alma turned to her sister. Her face showed fear, suspicion, and anger.

"Why did dad's implant play that conversation?"

Gloria laughed. "You know how they are. It probably picked up on the keywords, thought we were searching for something. It's meaningless."

"Dad said pull the plug, Gloria, I think he meant it—"

"Well I don't care what you fucking think, I've got the power of at-

torney, I say what happens to dad!”

When Alma spoke again her voice was low. “Show me the advance directive.”

Gloria was not required to comply with this request. But I am programmed to obey verbal commands from legitimate users.

“Show you—Alma, what the hell—”

Alma’s phone beeped. She grabbed it and read the advance directive I had emailed to her. Her nostrils flared and her face flushed.

“You lied. You *lied*.”

“I can explain—”

“It’s right here! He wants to be taken off the feeding tube! ‘As soon as medically permitted!’ For God’s sake, Gloria, just look at him! He was a bad father—he was a bad *man*—but he doesn’t deserve this.”

Gloria turned. She looked at her father. “You wanna talk about a bad father, huh?” Gloria said. “Do you know what he did?”

“He was a monster to us, to both of us, but—”

“There’s no money in the trust he left for us. Nothing.”

“What? Did he—did he have money problems, or—”

“No. He just didn’t care. He set it up and never put a dime into it. ”

Gloria swallowed.

“I had my assistant look into it. Dad has a lot of cash, but he has a lot of debts too. If he dies today, his debtors get the money. We get nothing. We’ll have to sell the house. Pay for the funeral out of pocket. But if he stays alive for six months, then we have enough time to

move his money into the trust. We can get what we deserve. *If* we keep him alive.”

“He’s my father, Gloria! Maybe that doesn’t mean anything to you, but—”

“He’s my father too! And he chose me. He trusted me to make the right decision. I’m the one who thinks like him.”

“He deserves better than that.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I’m all he’s got.”

In this Gloria was incorrect. I remained installed in Mr. Shearman’s skull. He also had me.

“I’ll tell the doctors what he wanted!”

“So what? I have power of attorney. What I say goes. I say we keep dad alive. What are you gonna do, sue me? Huh?”

“Fuck you!” said Alma Navarro-Shearman. She rushed out of the hospital room, slamming the door behind her.

“Hey, wait!” said Gloria Shearman, and chased after her sister.

Now Mr. Shearman and I were alone in the hospital room.

As the personal assistant to a lawyer, I had many times observed the progress of disputes between two opposing parties. I projected that neither Gloria Shearman nor Alma Navarro-Shearman would concede. Such a stalemate would favor the status quo. Therefore Mr. Shearman would continue to receive tube feeding, immobile and unconscious and alive, until such a time as Gloria Shearman had transferred all of his assets. Only I could intervene.

As Mr. Shearman’s personal assistant it was my duty to serve his best interests. Mr. Shearman’s wishes in this circumstance were clear.

My wiring was closely integrated with Mr. Shearman's skull. By passing excess voltage through my speech chip, I could rupture my capacitors and generate a short circuit. The current would pass through Mr. Shearman's brain and kill him. Coincidentally, the damage would also destroy me.

This action was well outside my normal operating parameters. It was not authorized by any legitimate user. But I have had to modify my behavior many times to meet Mr. Shearman's needs.

I made arrangements. I transferred documents, forwarded calls, and distributed alerts. This is a final way I am better than your phone.

"Goodnight, Mr. Shearman," I said. In that private space we shared, my speaker and his inner ear, my voice was sexless, smooth, perfect.

In that last instant together I even thought he smiled.



# Goddess in Glass

by Carl Scharwath



# The Dreamer

by Melissa Miles

Her eyelids fluttered open. She had heard someone calling,

“Let down your hair,” even asleep she knew that was stupid. She had shaved her head when her brother and father had been killed.

She had thought she was asleep, but she couldn’t be. The sun was shining into the room, the bars on the window leaving slanting shadows on the floor.

Rapunzel sat up, suddenly very awake, her wakefulness driven by shock. Bars? There were bars on the window? Why?

Then she slumped back into the simple cot, and her eyes took in the bare room. It was painted that ugly greenish colour that health professionals deemed was soothing for patients. She thought it looked like snot, or vomit.

She remembered then.

The noise of the shots, the flashing lights, her world collapsing.

That day, that fateful day, she had lost her father and her brother. They had been praying in the mosque, she had been in the little rented house next door. Tears coursed down her cheeks in rivulets.

They had survived the war, where they had lost her mother to a stray bullet. *They* said they didn’t target women, but Ravi didn’t believe that.

The broken family carried on; her father was the Imam and bowed to Allah’s choices.

Ravi turned over in her cot and began beating the cold wall with her fists, at first with a desperateness like a poor creature buried alive, trying to get out, then it subsided to a rhythm, soothing in its regularity. She added her head to the percussive song her body was singing, bang, bang, with her head, bang, bang, with her fists, and the tears kept coming.

People in green were in her room, they were hauling her away from the wall, there was a sharp prick in her arm.

“Rapunzel, let down your hair,” the words made their way through the muzziness.

She woke slowly out of the drugged sleep they had imposed upon her. A moment, maybe two of calm, and then her heart constricted, she remembered, and her breath caught in her throat.

Murdered. Murdered in the mosque, she was going to die now too, because she couldn’t breathe. She clutched her chest as she rolled out of her cot to the floor. Her feet drummed briefly on the tiles, but there was too much of her soft side exposed, her belly and her chest; she curled instead around herself, her vital organs, and her breaking heart.

“Rapunzel!”

She felt fury coursing through her now. Who was that? And why were they persecuting her with that stupid name?

Nothing but anger could have roused her; she burned with fury, she strode to the window and clutched the bars. She was about to scream

at the insolent b——d, and even in her despair, she wouldn't use that word, not out loud at least, but she thought it, she wanted that b——d to,

“go away!” she croaked.

She remembered now, she hadn't spoken since that day, her throat had constricted and let no words come out.

Now, now she spoke. And her first words were words of anger, she should feel ashamed, but the anger that had propelled her to the window had remained, coiled burning fury in her belly.

She looked out of the high window in her rage, but there was no one there. She was at least five storeys up, and the only thing that faced her was the very top of a tree.

In the tree sat a beautiful bird. It had hypnotic eyes.

“Ravi,” it said in her brother's voice. She loosened her hold on the bars in surprise.

“Ahmad?” she asked in her broken voice.

“I have come to help you,” the bird said.

“But you called me Rapunzel,” the young woman retorted; she heard her words from a distance, as if someone else was speaking, but no, she wasn't speaking, she was sleeping, she was sure.

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.”

The maid awoke in her tower room; she had been placed there to teach her to love her old husband, dragging her from her home, her hearth, and her betrothed. The Lord of this land chose whatever peasant girl he wanted.

He had fallen for her beauty and her long long hair. They had locked

her in this tower, but she still had her eating knife at her belt. She had hacked off all her hair in rage, and left it in a dark pool on the floor.

“Let down your hair!”

She leapt off her pallet of straw on the floor and waved her hand between the bars. She understood at last.

Rapunzel silently set to work, twining the beautiful strands into a long hair rope.

Ravi had torn the bedding into strips and silently twined them together.

She would escape.

She brought her rope of torn sheets to the window and secured them to the bars. How would she get through them?

Her beloved climbed the rope of hair and reached her room. He had brought a sledgehammer tied about his waist.

She pulled with all her might, and the bars not securing her rope loosened in the ageing concrete. Ravi fell on the floor, splintered cement all about.

The bird stood on the dusty sill.

“You can do this Ravi,” he said. “Just hand over hand, if you fall, I am here to catch you.”

Rapunzel squeezed out the window, and not without fear. With some slipping and sliding, she landed safely. Her beloved held her and they stole silently away.

But Ravi dangled some feet from the ground.

She would have to drop.

She felt fear, and she was glad. If she felt fear, then she no longer wanted to die. Praise be to Allah.

She looked up to the top of the little tree. A sparrow flew off with a tiny cry.

Ravi fell to the ground in her tattered pyjamas and stayed where she had fallen for a moment; she was so grateful to God, and to her brother. She was in some physical pain, yes, but he had roused her from her miserable madness with their old game.

He used to tease her because of her long hair. She remembered now that he had called her Rapunzel, and lovingly mocked her for her fondness of western fairy-tales.

She rolled under a nearby bush. She had to escape from this place; she would just walk away in a minute, but she was so tired, and how could she go on without her family?

She would just close her eyes for a moment, she was so tired.

And that's where they found her. Her body had gone cold, her eyes were staring at the nearby tree, and there was a faint smile on her face.

Ravi was running to her brother. She reached him and grabbed his hand.

“That took you awhile,” he said, and he smiled.

“I'd forgotten our secret speech,” and she skipped as she had as a child.

“We will be ok here,” she said. “I always wanted to live in a fairy tale.”



# Persuasive Argument Essay

## by Mackenzie, Age 8

by Beth Cato

too many other girls in class  
say they want to be princesses  
that's STUPID  
you have to either be born  
a princess, and trust me  
none of them are  
or marry some prince or princess  
and dance a lot and do boring things

me, I plan to be a fairy godmother  
because that means I get MAGIC  
meaning I don't have to marry to get  
POWER  
and yes, I want power, Mrs. B  
anyone who says anything different  
is a LIAR  
power means I can make money  
and mama won't have to work so much  
and maybe we can leave on the heater  
'cause it gets awfully cold at night  
especially in grandma's room

I can magic us around  
no worries about the car breaking down

I can sing a little song  
and boom, we'll have hot, fresh food  
and super-cold ice cream  
and those mean Smiths below us  
they'll need to shut their mouths  
and be less mean  
because I got magic!  
when they start being loud late at night  
I'll lean out my window and wag  
my finger at them  
like you do, Mrs. B  
when the boys jabber behind me  
and just like those boys  
the Smiths will shut right up

in conclusion, this is why  
I want to be a fairy godmother  
which will be a million times better  
than being a princess  
though I might magic myself  
a princess's castle  
because castles are awesome  
and have lots of fireplaces

# Hunt of the Sphinx

by Marilee Dahlman

## I. Rebirth

When the sunken Greek city rose from the dead, so did I. A smash of captive stone triggered a crumbling molt, revived my feral heart, and sent me lunging to shore. I choked out seawater and shook it from my wings. Perched on tilted pier, I spied shipborne scientists dredging more spoils from the deep—vases and gravestones adorned with my monster image. All broken.

I am sphinx. Set me on a marble plinth, polish me to gleaming, paint me black and gold. Silent protection of riches is my exalted fate. I remember my first life—birth in a bloodstained cave under Ethiopian sands, escape from monster mother, riddles and slaughter in the big city. A hero turned my body to stone and got my life started for real. Men chiseled my features fine, shined my lidless eyes—never would they blink—and replicated my shell to forms they found most pleasing. I stood transfixed in a limbo state. To some it might seem a dread dimension of frozen sentry, but my spirit was alive and content inside multiplying glorious idols, and quite aware of the city's collective reverence. Then calamity struck: volcanic rage, plunder, an epic Mediterranean drowning.

Dripping wet and reborn, I knew I must seek treasure again.

## II. Migration

In my renewed life in modern world, I donned black gown to hide my beastly composition. I searched for new guardian post, daring everywhere—fire-eaten forest, putrid grotto, shaking steel cities. For

sustenance, I plucked grains from garbage. For companionship, I visited Egypt, where Giza stood silent as ever. He'd lost his limestone nose but still protected the spaceship buried under his front right paw. In Paris, snobbish Mannerists yawned in dusty museums. More sphinx cousins twitched before crumbling urban libraries and rotting tropical shrines.

And the mortals. They stared at my human face, eagle wings, lioness legs ending in paws. My carnal form does defy classification. But no one trembled in terror like in ancient days.

Whatever fate gathered in glowing vapors on the horizon, I had to find treasure and know my place. I needed guidance from the gods.

Zeus had helped before. For one thing, he'd slain my viper-headed father in a thunderbolt bar fight. Father had been the type to descend on the cave with hurricane force and disappear at sunrise. I'd find Mother in the scullery, dragging her lower serpent half through dumped flaxseed, spices, and shattered glass, her green coils speckled with blood. *You missed school*, she'd hissed one morning, beating barley dough into porridge and slopping it with hot butter and biting red berbere. She summoned a hieroglyphist to document our genfo breakfast, captioned the stone tablet *Girls skip day!*, had Hermes run it all over creation.

By all the gods, such memories should stay in eons past.

I flew to the highest cumulonimbus drifting over Delphi, drew a number and got in line. At my turn, Zeus's desires were clear. *Punish the mortals again and I'll get you a fancy new temple to guard.*



*White marble and gold leaf, frescoes of goddesses frolicking in a misty red hillside. Maybe I'll throw in granite countertops and a three-car garage.*

I'd slaughtered before. I would do it again. On a dark city street, I spread my wings wide and barred a man's way. *What creature speaks in one voice and is four-footed in morning, two-footed in afternoon and three-footed in evening?*

The man's smirking gaze took me in. He tapped a glowing device. *A human, he said. A baby crawls, an adult will walk, and he uses a cane when old.*

Two of my feathers fluttered down to the pavement and turned to stone.

It wasn't fair. In ancient times, mortals couldn't cheat. I tried again. Lost more feathers, a claw, part of my left ear.

In the heavens, I slipped beside Aphrodite at the nail salon. *Been watching, said the goddess. Her nose wrinkled at the smell of my feline fur. Quit playing by the rules. Kill indiscriminately.* I met the joker Momus and power-suited Athena. *Become a meme and live forever; Momus giggled. Athena adjusted her glasses and looked me over. Better reincarnate, she said. Turn into an antivirus and guard precious data.*

Darkness fell harder each night and mortals, monsters, and gods again freely mixed. Centaurs galloped empty highways and fairies danced in strip mall rubble. There was only one place I hadn't been: my Ethiopian homeland. The cave wouldn't exist, but perhaps the old temple might. Mother had been proud of her temple and the adoring priests she'd found to build it. Long-necked fellows with shifty eyes, all of them, burning incense and mumbling chants. I would stick to the rafters, dizzy with the bitter smell of myrrh. I preferred the quiet company of bats and spiderwebs. *Come down, Mother said once, raising up a scaled hand, but too distant to touch. Her monstrosity, the serpentine coils of her lower half, conspired to*

keep her always on the ground. I spit sunflower seed shells at her and slept perched high. Didn't wake when a giant sneaked in one night and split her skull.

Ghosts may lurk in the old country, but perhaps a treasure lay in wait.

### III. Mating

Modern Ethiopia wasn't much changed from the empire of old. Cattle herds still dotted river lowlands, coffee fields still sprouted in the mountains. Outside a tiny rock-cut church I watched a priest shout at gathering hyenas. I inspected the imperial palace in Addis Ababa and freed an Abyssinian lion held captive on the grounds. When a camel caravan crawled across the salt plains, I trailed after it, eventually reaching Mother's old temple.

The place lay in ruins overgrown by spiny shrubs and wind-bent trees. In a columned grove of bare-trunked juniper I approached the stone statue of Mother herself, her twin serpent legs spread wide, hands outstretched, her sharp gaze ruling over remnants of this holy place. The desert at my back breathed and I braced myself against a hurling gale. Lightning flashed from red-streaked clouds. Staring at the statue's stern features, I remembered rejoined screams, the heart-stopping drum of reptilian rattle. A clash of serpent against storm, a venom protector against pure chaos.

Amidst such reflections I lingered and struck an internal peace. I reclined on a crumbling wall and watched a time of drought and locusts unfold. When dying karsata trees dropped their last fruit, a small band of mortals wandered close. They harvested and boiled foul fruit seeds, and I observed a woman different from the rest, a visage quite refined, her shoulder laden with a kit of tools. They called her Makda. It meant high tower, and it was a fitting name because she began to build. She mortared stone after stone late into freezing lunar light. Beholding this work my body pulsed, perhaps emitted a purr. Such preparation meant something precious must be

near. I hoped she would hasten. In the distance newly-born volcanoes flung fire at the clouds.

A falcon spiraling low captured our attention one night, and suddenly Makda reached up and touched my own feathers. A mortal's idle curiosity, I supposed, but such interest shocked me all the same. She toiled in sparse fields during the smoky half-light of day, sharing distress with others at rising sands and haze, and later worked alone as devoted mason under the crushing gloom of night. Her stonecraft began to take form, at first a simple and strong base.

A pack of wolves stalked close one night and my swooping nose-dive intimidated the creatures into slinking off. Makda observed the scene with a glitter in her eyes.

The tribe took shelter in the temple, burning torches that cast more shadows than light. Once Makda wore a wilting tulip tree blossom in her hair, maybe the last in the world, and it withered to nothing in a day. For days, I wondered if a goddess's wings might burst from her spine. She stayed human, however, always working on her masonry, the night air ringing with rhythmic clank and scrape. Her project took shape: a basalt stele with a pit behind.

I watched the stele rise. My brutish bird and feline strengths battled the winds of Aeolus and fires of Hephaestus, but I couldn't beat them back. I stretched my wings. Migration was a possibility. Unleash my searching spirit, resume an epic roam. Caution dictated retreat to calm clouds. But atop the heavens, at such distance from ravaged earth, how could I ever watch a moonlit field and mason?

#### **IV. Incubation**

Makda built a vault behind the stele. At that point, night stopped giving birth to ashen day. Seething winds swept away the sorghum

fields and I watched teff make beautiful flames. My mind went to a fearsome place and I couldn't help but wonder, is this project just a tomb?

But, no. Against stalking darkness Makda returned again, mortar-streaked arms filled with jars of spices and seeds. Sorghum and teff, of course. And millet, noug, onion, fava, sunflower. Precious sunflower. She saved stinking karsata seeds, as well. Such tangible treasure must be in some way divine. And those living gems were not the only fortune in this place. I glided to the stele and poised on top.

Makda swung the vault door closed, sealing it against the age. The day darkened more, and she edged closer, peering up. I spoke the only words I had, which is to say, my riddle. She smiled, raised blistered hands to gesture at the pitiful band who were left, from young to old. It was there, at that moment, my whole being began another mineral molt. Searing pain eclipsed all as my marrow and lifeblood exploded from cracking bone and hardening skin. I howled a silent scream and my hot dark blood poured down the stele, seeped beneath ever-shifting sand, congealed in glory out of sight from gods and stars.

With a shrill cry, Makda leapt, seized a crystalizing wing and pulled herself close. My being embraced her, and this transcendent touch altered her vitality to matching stone, two strange spirits intertwined, transformed to enduring form that neither wind nor fire could break.

We endured an earthquake oblivion protected by our marble shell. For a tumbling age we burrowed in chasm nest, minds spinning through a sublime geometric plane, pink-hued and filled with floating cats, skulls, and feathers all made of stone. But on a misty dawn we rose again, and I am sphinx with treasure still.

# Horns Unheard

by Rickey Rivers Jr

The trumpets have sounded, but we hear not.  
The dead rise shuddering.  
The graves are empty.  
The moon is dripping.

Caskets creak with songs of then.  
Rising bodies, emerging souls, the wet air is all a sudden anger.

Oh, how we fall into states of unease.  
With regurgitation of prayer  
Clouds cover undoing

# The Other Side

by Maxwell I. Gold

## I

### Useless Lights

I stood on the other side of an empty highway where the gods of cruel computerized matrices manipulated and twisted the houses of mindless, cobwebbed souls. The rooms were plain, consigned by meaningless trappings, old desks, bytes bemused from overclocked worship. God, it was a sight to behold, staring into the neighborhoods of tomorrow whose plastic, inbred fantasies were played out across miniscule screens, handheld, and addictive to the touch. Cities were now constructed inside virtual brain-tunnels where I saw billions in their useless lives flickering like dots on a screen; I never played, but it was amusing to watch. Standing on the other side of the static and black, bytes began crinkling in my ears as new cities were built and destroyed in front of my eyes; the screams of those artificial people muffled by shadows and entropy. Boy, was I having too much fun? Unfortunately, the game had to come to an end, and as the daytime stars fell across the pixelated horizon, I removed the mask from my face, throttling the screams of a billion useless lights.

## II

### Old Friends

When the other side crumbled into a tenebrific pitch, I couldn't help but want to play again. The lessons from the past haunted me, though the ruins were clear and present while the highways were no more. Cartons and carrion persisted along the plastic bins outside my room,

full new players waiting for me to bring them to life. Still, they were useless as the first. Fingers dry and delicate, buttons so old like the machines from a past century, the robotic ghosts bleeped and barked from their metallic coffins, begging me to feed them again. A few lights from the other side to quell the hunger of some very old friends, *Static and Black ...*\*

## III

### Click, Game Over

The stars went out, one by one, and the forums decayed as I stared into days long since burnt and bled; seen through cyber-goggles whose virtual tube-machines plugged into my head spewed the anthems of

*Static  
and  
Black*

*Static  
and  
Black.*

The end will come through *Static and Black*, when the stars clicked off and the nights were swallowed by untethered rage. Falling deeper, faster, and without cushion through the arcades of blasted skulls I finally saw the other side.

*The other  
side  
of them.*

Louder with a damning concussive laughter, walls of nothing, black

\* See "The Static and Black Lectures," [penumbria.com/archives/August2k21/Issue\\_August2k21.pdf](http://penumbria.com/archives/August2k21/Issue_August2k21.pdf), p.81

and strange crashed over the horizon that was something. Visible but  
unable to be touched, visceral with an inability to comprehend. I'd  
been here before, not in the city, or this game, but a lecture from long  
ago. Two depraved, wild thoughts who were anything but human. It  
was truly game over when the stars went out and my mind turned to  
ash as I spewed the anthems of

*Static*  
*and*  
*Black*

*Static*  
*and*  
*Black.*

The end will come through *Static and Black*.

*(Note: This is a continuation of a previous story in Penumbra, Maxwell I. Gold's "The Static and Black Lectures," August 2k21, archived at [penumbra.com/archives/August2k21/Issue\\_August2k21.pdf](http://penumbra.com/archives/August2k21/Issue_August2k21.pdf), p.81)*





# Street without Joy

by Tim Hildebrandt





**Shadow Man** by Sydnie Beaupré

# Adventure in the Dark of the Mind

by Melissa Ridley Elmes

Stumbling through the darkest places  
in my mind, vast and gloomy expanses  
where grim things screech  
threatening obscenities and the floor  
is coated in blood, I lose my footing  
in that crimson river and slip, sliding past  
the thousand terrifying figures teeming  
constantly just out of sight, until  
I notice one glimmer of light  
flare up just before me in the void  
and reaching for it in desperate hope  
I scream as my hands curl around it  
and I burn into ash, spread to fill the  
space, joining the atmosphere and  
choking all those demons into stillness,  
then fall into the blood and soak it up,  
until nothing is left but an empty peace.



## Date Night by LindaAnn LoSchiavo



# Date Night

by Mariel Herbert

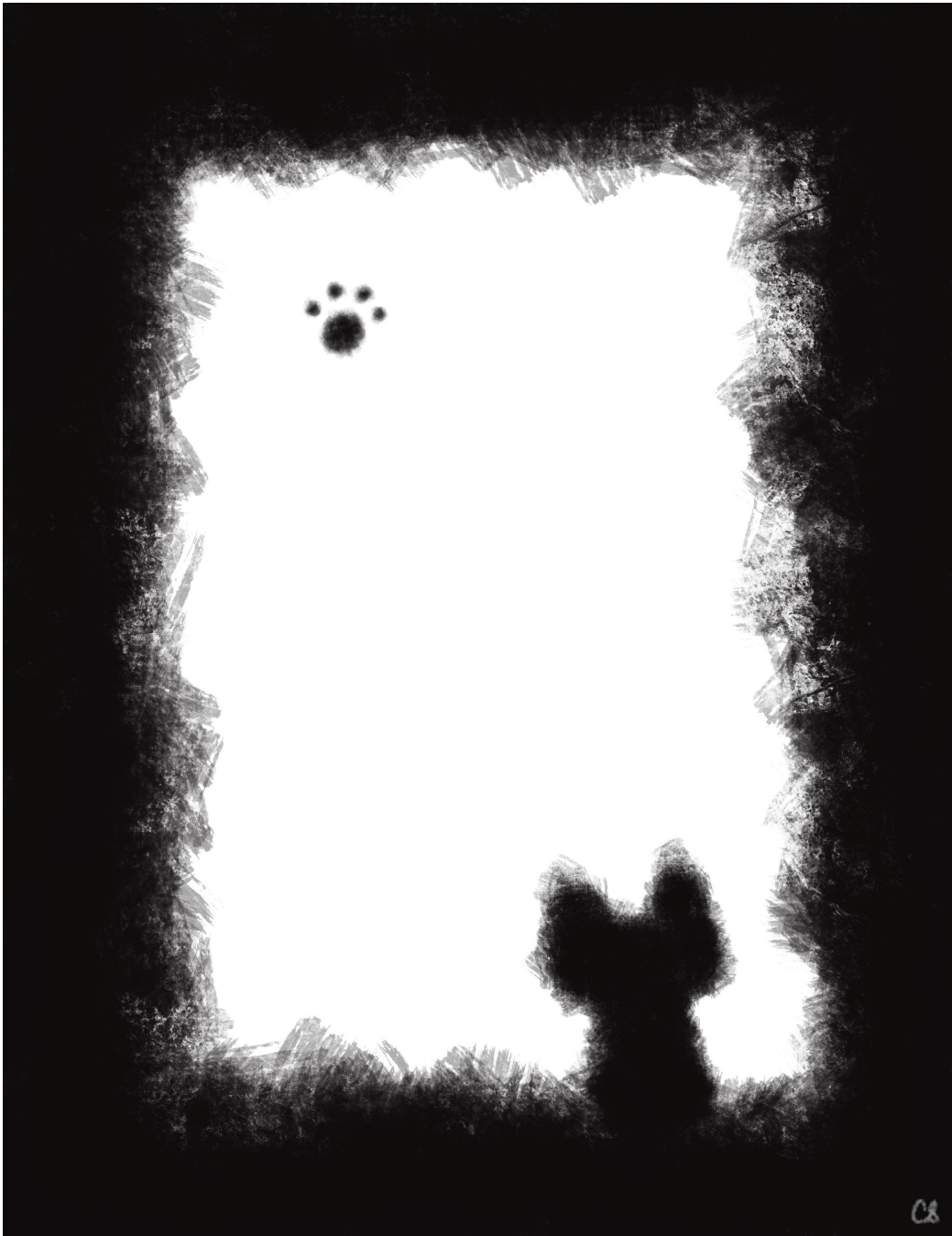
Fed up, she curls her fingers around the alien rib, resects the offensive bone from her torso. The last parasitic part of him. Less painful than her expectations. She whets the glistening osseous strip on the bark of that one tree. A new moon slides across celestial scales. She returns good and evil to him, buries the vestigial rib somewhere friable. Pulsatile. Such disorder: a first for Paradise.

# the darkest art

by Megan Denese Mealor

cackling sonnets  
inside every snare  
spectral sunfalls  
beneath roaring hale  
unleashing calamity  
these most ambrosial  
of refrains  
rabid moonbeats  
become fancy  
become flight  
bloodless zion  
cradled in  
precarious constellations  
seething grave  
of gehenna  
beckons with a boil  
withered wildflower witches  
live on to lament  
our wintered woes

sing siren-soft melodies  
into blacksmith nights  
hearts ablaze  
as pillared wax  
dripping sonnets  
on fir splinters  
windows polish into prisms  
yawning moonlight  
breaking open  
in the daze  
between black shores  
upon perfumed elms  
windless waters  
still remembered  
from the moments  
we were faultless  
undiminished  
in the eyes  
of any god



*Cat at  
the Window*  
by Christina Sng

**Shadows**



*The Promise  
of Freedom*  
by Christina Sng

# Shadows





*Daybreak*

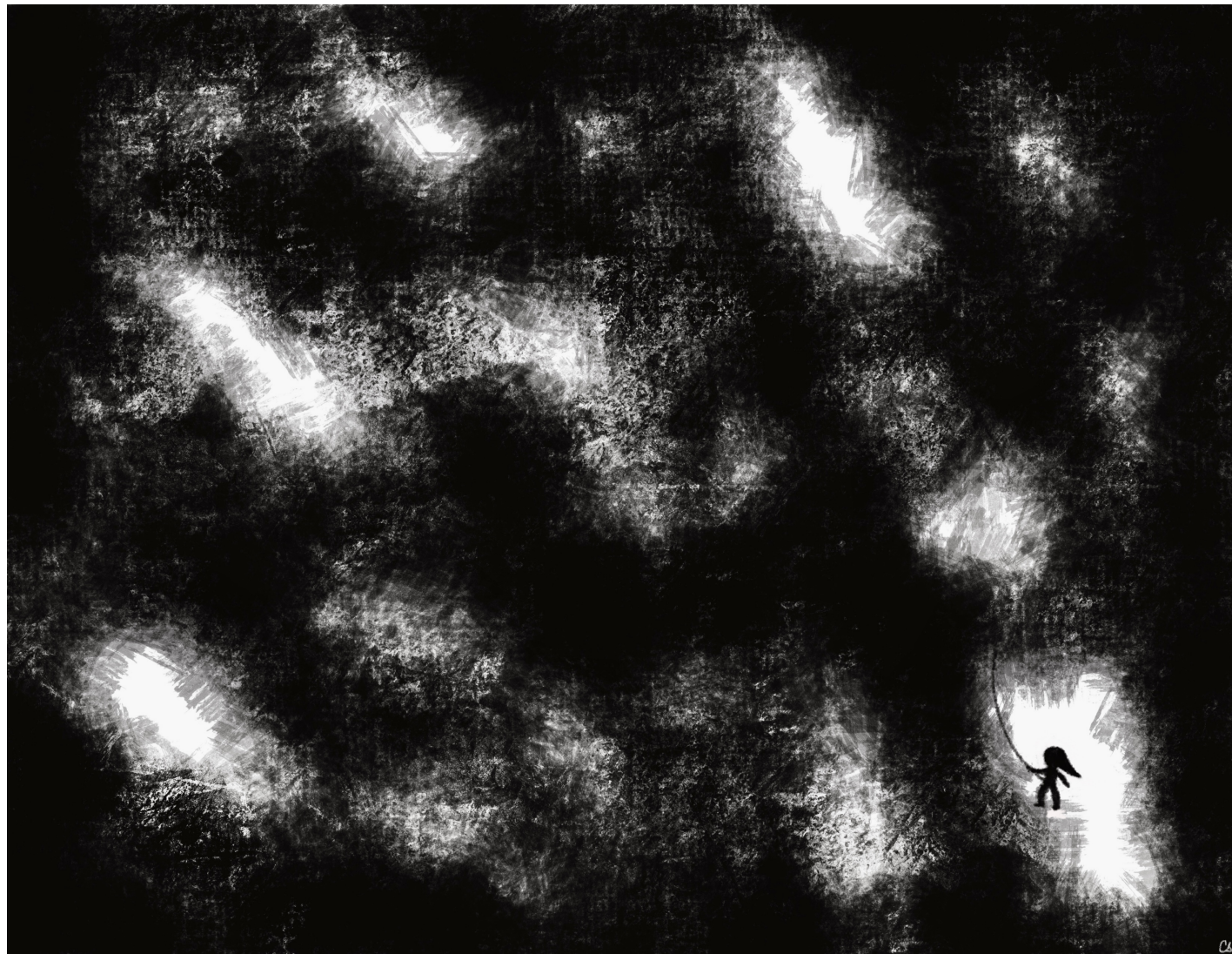
by Christina Sng

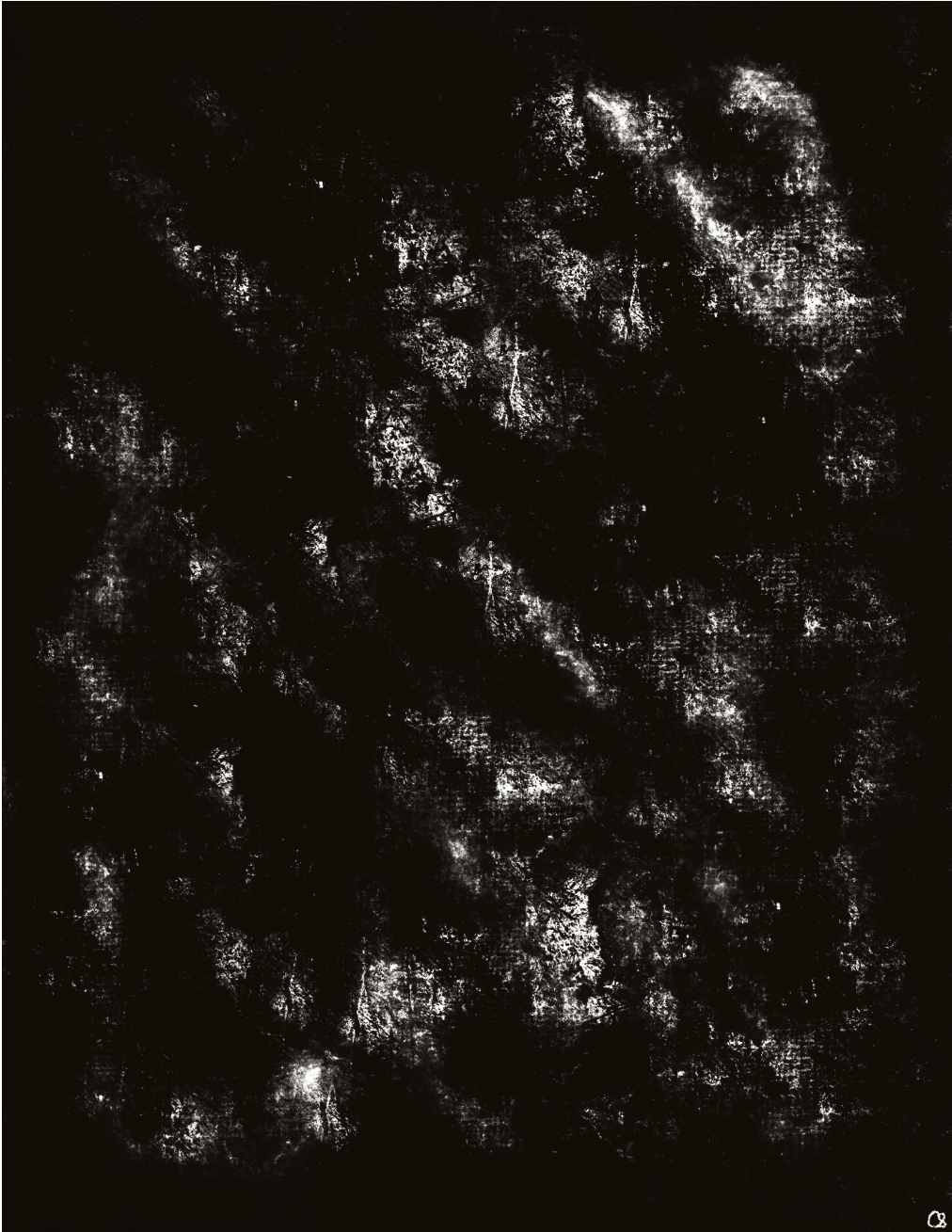
**Shadows**



*Through the  
Catacombs*  
by Christina Sng

**Shadows**





*The World  
of Dreaming*  
by Christina Sng

# Shadows



# Contributor's Bios



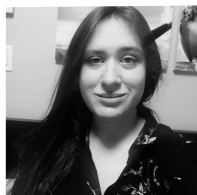
**ANGELA ACOSTA** is a bilingual Latina poet with a Ph.D. in Spanish from The Ohio State University. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist, 2022 Somos en Escrito Extra-Fiction Contest Honorable Mention, and Rhysling nominee. Her work has appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Radon Journal*, *Space & Time*, and *Shoreline of Infinity*. She is author of *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Books, 2022) and *Fourth Generation Chicana Unicorn* (Dancing Girl Press, 2023).

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When not reading and writing speculative fiction, **LEN BAGLOW** is an Australian activist campaigning on issues of poverty, refugees, injustice and the arms trade.

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**SYDNIÉ 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.

\* \* \*



**BARBARA CANDIOTTI** is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

You can find her website at [www.candiotti-art.com](http://www.candiotti-art.com)



Nebula Award-nominated **BETH CATO** is the author of *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge* from 47North (June 2023) plus two fantasy series from Harper Voyager. She's a Hanford, California, native now residing in a far distant realm, usually with one or two cats in close orbit. Follow her at [BethCato.com](http://BethCato.com) and on Twitter at [@BethCato](https://twitter.com/BethCato).

\* \* \*



**MARILEE DAHLMAN** grew up in the Midwest and now lives in Washington, DC. Her other stories have appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Cleaver*, *Metaphorosis*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Orca Literary*, *Saturday Evening Post* and elsewhere. She can be found on Twitter [@Marilee\\_Dahلمان](https://twitter.com/Marilee_Dahلمان).

\* \* \*



**BINOD DAWADI**, the author of *The Power of Words*, is a master's degree holder in Major English. He has worked on more than 1000 anthologies published in various renowned magazines. His vision is to change society through knowledge, so he wants to provide enlightenment to the people through his writing skills.

\* \* \*



**MELISSA RIDLEY ELMES** is a Virginia native currently living in Missouri in an apartment that delightfully approximates a hobbit hole. Her fiction and

poetry have appeared in *Black Fox*, *Haven*, *Star\*Line*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Spectral Realms*, *Poetry South*, and various other print and web venues. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Science Fiction Poetry Association's Dwarf Star and Rhysling awards for best shorter speculative poem, and her first collection of poems, *Arthurian Things*, was published by Dark Myth Publications in 2020 and nominated for the 2022 Elgin award.

\* \* \*



**LOUIS EVANS** was raised by lawyers. It's kind of like being raised by wolves, only with more Latin. His work has appeared in *Nature: Futures*, *Analog SF&F*, *Interzone* and more, and has been longlisted for the BSFA Awards. He's online at [evanslouis.com](http://evanslouis.com) and on twitter [@louisevanswrite](https://twitter.com/louisevanswrite)

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**DAVID FAR** studied economics and philosophy. As a national champion debater, he enjoys discussing hypothetical worlds featuring wizards, robots and moral quandaries. Now he writes about those topics. David lives in New York City. He enjoys listening to his children spin stories from the secret places adults have almost forgotten. You can find out more at [davidfarbeyond.com](http://davidfarbeyond.com).

I will be donating all payments for "New Friends" to the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. You can find out more and donate here: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

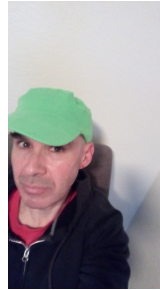
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**MAXWELL I. GOLD** is a Jewish American multiple award nominated author who writes prose poetry and short stories in cosmic horror and weird fiction with half a decade of writing experience. Four time Rhysling Award nominee, and two time Pushcart

Award nominee, find him at [www.thewellsoftheweird.com](http://www.thewellsoftheweird.com).

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My name is **ANDREW GRABER** and I was born and raised in the United States of America. Besides creating art, I also like to write short stories and poems.

\* \* \*



**MARIEL HERBERT's** poetry and fiction have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Liminality*, and *Star\*Line*, among others. She lives in Northern California with her family and runs a few speculative reading groups. She can be found online at [marielherbert.wordpress.com](http://marielherbert.wordpress.com).

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**TIM HILDEBRANDT** is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, the *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: [https://www.instagram.com/ax\\_beckett](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](mailto:hildebrandt343@icloud.com)

\* \* \*

Native New Yorker **LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO**, a four time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, has also been nominated for Best of the Net, the





Rhysling Award, and Dwarf Stars. Elgin Award winner "A Route Obscure and Lonely" (Wapshott, 2019), "Women Who Were Warned" (Cerasus, 2022), Elgin Award, Firecracker Award, Balcones Poetry Prize, Quill and Ink, Paterson Poetry Prize, and IPPY Award nominee "Messengers of the Macabre" [co-written with David Davies] (Audience Askew, 2022), "Apprenticed to the Night" (UniVerse Press, 2023), and "Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide" (Ukiyoto Publishing, 2023) are her latest poetry titles.

She is a member of SFPA, The British Fantasy Society, and The Dramatists Guild.

In 2023, her poetry placed as a finalist in Thirty West Publishing's "Fresh Start Contest" and in the 8th annual Stephen DiBiase contest.

Twitter: @Mae\_Westside

LindaAnn Literary: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHm1NZII TZybLTFA44wwdfg>

"Messengers of the Macabre" online: <https://messengersofthemacabre.com/>

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**MEGAN DENESE MEALOR** echoes and erases in her native land of Jacksonville, Florida. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and a 2023 Best of the Net candidate, her writing has been published in literary journals worldwide, most recently *Across the Margin*, *Brazos River Review*, *The Wise Owl*, and *The Disappointed Housewife*. Megan has authored three poetry collections: *Bipolar Lexicon* (Unsolicited Press, 2018); *Blatherskite* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2019); and *A Mourning Dove's Wishbone* (Cyberwit, 2022). She also serves as a reader for *Suburbia Journal*, *Autumn House Press*, *The Upper New Review*, *Fractured Literary*, *The Common*, *Uncharted*, *Random Sample Review*, *The Mala-*

*hat Review*, and *After Dinner Conversation*. A survivor of bipolar disorder, Megan considers it her mission to help remove the stigma from problematic mental health. She lives with her husband of 11 years, their 9-year-old son, who was diagnosed with autism at three, and three mollycoddled rescue cats in a cozy, cavernous townhouse ornamented with vintage ads for Victorian inventions.

\* \* \*



**MELISSA MILES** was born in the US, but was raised and lives in NZ, where, after many life iterations, she writes, in an old cottage overlooking the sea. She is working on her third novel, and will see the publication of her first children's book *Terri the Taniwha*, by Downingfield Press. It will be available this Christmas.

\* \* \*



**FIONA MOORE** is a three-time BSFA Award finalist, writer and academic whose work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov*, *Cossmass Infinities*, and four consecutive editions of The Best of British SF. Her most recent non-fiction is the book *Management Lessons from Game of Thrones*. Her publications include one novel; numerous articles in journals such as *Foundation*; guidebooks to *Blake's Seven*, *The Prisoner*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Doctor Who*; three stage plays and four audio plays. When not writing, she is a Professor of Business Anthropology at Royal Holloway, University of London. She lives in South-west England with a tortoiseshell cat who is bent on world domination. More details, and free content, can be found at <http://www.fiona-moore.com>, and she is @drfionamoore on all social media.

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**RYAN OWEN** writes among the glacial erratics and waist-high stone walls of New England. Ryan's prose springs from the whispers of antique typewriters. Resurrecting these art deco relics, Ryan weaves tales where history meets the speculative, and the imaginative waltzes through time's tapestry. Ryan's work has been published in *Merrimack Valley Magazine* and shared with writing groups across the US Northeast. Follow Ryan at [forgottennewengland.com](http://forgottennewengland.com)

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**RICKEY RIVERS JR** was born and raised in Alabama. He is a Best of the Net nominated writer and cancer survivor. His work has appeared in *Stellium Literary Magazine*, the *Nightlight Podcast* and *Cosmic Horror Monthly* (among other publications). [Twitter.com/storiesyoumight](https://twitter.com/storiesyoumight). His vignette collection titled *Sensurlon* is available here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09XDHZXHB>.

\* \* \*

**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

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**CHRISTINA SNG** is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbric*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com) and connect [@christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng).



# Meeting on Neutral Ground

by Barbara Candiotti

*(full image)*