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Navigating Universes

Interview with
Mary Soon Lee

Plus cyberpunk and
other work by

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

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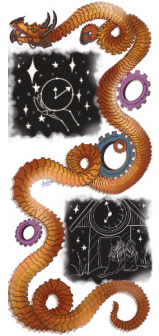
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Twist of the Time Eater



cover: Electric Life
by Barbara Candiotti

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Enter Tom upon our stage, near future, late afternoon:

Tom gets off work at 5pm and rushes to the supermarket, as it is only open between the hours of 5pm and 6pm; this is because, he's been told, there's so much shoplifting outside of that time, although lately there's apparently been shoplifting during those times as well (which makes sense, the thieves come into the store when it's open), so there are rumors the store will shut down entirely to those who wish to shop in person, leaving it only to those rich enough to not care about delivery fees or who buy enough groceries to qualify for free pick-up from the store to be able to get food; those others who don't buy enough at one time are probably the thieving poor anyway, or worse, immigrants (whom we've been told are the thieving poor, or criminals, or otherwise horrible people, never mind that most of us come from immigrants, too. But then, it's possible the indigenous peoples would consider our ancestors to be thieves and criminals as well. But I digress ...).

Once at the store, Tom must shop carefully, for he must pay at the end of each aisle for the items he's picked up in that aisle. Never mind store-wide discounts triggered by buying multiple items; these are impossible anyway, but the store leaves the tags on the items as incentives to get you to come in, to pick things up. There's a way to go to customer service to get the money off your total bill, but Tom doesn't have time for that, and anyway the store would close before he ever got there.

This end-of-aisle payment is now made easier by the store auto-scanning your items and your credit as you leave the aisle, but there's al-

ways some idiot who only has cash, or whose scan card is on the blink, so there's inevitably a queue in some aisles. Tom has learned to just dump whatever he's picked up from that aisle and just move to the next. It's meant he's been unable to get toothpaste for weeks, though, which has made his upcoming trip to the dentist a bit ... uncomfortable.

All of this is also in aid of stopping those horrible thieves, of course, and damn them for making Tom's life so hard. If it weren't for these thieves, invisible though they may be, maybe the store would be open more hours, or possibly even have checkouts like the old days. But no, instead he passes three rows of security and five police cars on his way out to his car, praying he doesn't look at all suspicious as he leaves ...

(Sadly, this is merely a slight exaggeration. A cyberpunk extrapolation, if you will, of our local supermarket's reduction to about two-thirds the hours it used to be open, and making you pay for items as you leave the aisles with toothpaste, deodorant, medicine, soap, and so forth. And there really are three security guards and (often) three police cars sitting at the exit. And this is a heavily gentrified/gentrifying neighborhood, yet all these "adjustments" have been made, we are told, because shoplifting is a terrible problem—worse than it has ever been (although the stores were open 24 hours a day for years when the neighborhood was more "run-down"). And apparently I must be a thief because I liked to shop for toothpaste at 2am; or I'm at least one of those "abnormals" who shouldn't be living in this New and Improved neighborhood anyway. But I rant, I rave, wishing things were like the "old days," so Tom and I'll ...)

Exeunt, pursued by a bear.

Navigating Many Universes

Heritage, science, and space
an interview with Mary Soon Lee

by Jeff Georgeson

BORN AND RAISED IN LONDON but a resident of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the past twenty years, Mary Soon Lee has both experienced different cultures and lived them; her parents are Irish and Malaysian-Chinese, and this has informed her work, both poetry and short stories, science fiction and fantasy. She is an SFPA Grand Master and a Rhysling and Elgin award winner, and most recently came out with *How to Navigate Our Universe*, a book of how-to poems about living in the universe we inhabit. We spoke about these things and more in our interview with her for this month's *Penumbra*.

* * *

You're originally from England, and your parents are Irish and Malaysian-Chinese. And of course you've lived in the US for quite a while now. What influences has this varied cultural upbringing/exposure had on your writing? On your way of thinking about yourself?

The biggest impact my family background has had on my writing is in *The Sign of the Dragon*, my novel-length epic fantasy told in poems. The book's hero, King Xau, comes from an imaginary country with Asian elements, and his first enemy, King Donal, comes from an imaginary country with Celtic elements. When I was creating my fictional world, those parts of my past surfaced. I have a number of short stories and poems that also contain Asian elements, but *The Sign of the Dragon* is by far the most significant.

I always thought of myself as half-Chinese when I was growing up, and it was very important to me even though my father was the only Asian person in my day-to-day life. His mother, although I saw her far more rarely (when she left Malaysia to visit us), also had an impact on me, and there are echoes of her in Xau's grandmother.

I saw more of my mother's family than my father's, and spent a sizable amount of time in Ireland. My Dublin relatives were invariably kind and affectionate. Curiously enough, when I was very young, three or four years old, I had a strong Irish accent. I acquired this by playing Irish songs, over and over again, on our record player. The records came from Papa (my Malaysian-Chinese father), not my mother, from his time studying in Dublin.

Is it, or has it been, difficult to navigate amongst cultural expectations? Or, rather, do you feel there have been cultural expectations or roadblocks to navigate? (Especially over time—there seem to be different hurdles every decade! But also possibly good changes, too.)

I think I've been lucky. My parents didn't pressure me in this regard. Perhaps it helped that they were from different backgrounds from each



PICTURED: Mary Soon Lee

other, and so didn't have a shared set of expectations? I was aware that I stood out as not-white in my predominantly-white school, but there was almost no direct discrimination. People incorrectly assumed that a close friend of mine was my sister, because she was also not-white, but her parents were Ethiopian and Scottish. N.B. I grew up in London, which was pretty diverse, but my school was largely white.

You write across a broad spectrum of genres, including astronomy poetry and mythology. Yet as you've said in previous interviews, you weren't originally interested in writing fiction or poetry. For those reading you for the first time, how did you "become" a writer? Have you moved to mostly poetry now?

When I came to the USA and applied for work, I accepted a job offer to apply artificial intelligence to molecular biology. But the start of the Gulf War delayed my work permit. While I was waiting, I wrote to occupy myself. I liked writing so much, I decided to stick with it. Years later, after my second child was born, I switched to writing mostly poetry, because I had very little free time. (For anyone wondering, I find it easier to write a single poem than a single story, even a short story.) When my children were older, I resumed writing some stories. In the first half of 2022, I wrote thirteen short stories, but I stopped again after being diagnosed with breast cancer that summer. I'm hoping to resume writing occasional short stories later this year.

The Sign of the Dragon opens with such an amazing poem, and remains strong throughout—it's also such a cohesive, epic work. And the poems look at many aspects of Xau's life (and deeply into the lives of those around him). What inspired you to write it this way? Did it come to you as a full story, or did each poem sort of lead itself from the last? What started you on this journey? How did the characters become so full, so deep?

Thank you! I'd intended the first poem, "Interregnum," to be a stand-alone poem, but the boy in the poem, Xau, stayed with me. I returned to him and wrote poem after poem about his life. It took a while before I realized this was going to be a substantial project with dozens of poems. At that point, I thought about the shape of the story. I knew the overall arc long before I decided upon the individual incidents. Certain sections of the story were written in a mostly linear fashion, but often I darted back and forth in time, adding poems as the whim took me.

That said, approximately the first sixty poems were published as *The Sign of the Dragon: Book 1* back in 2015, and, as a result, I considered that part of the story as semi-fixed.

As for how the characters acquired depth, I obsessed about them for years! I thought about them while I was doing chores, or going for a walk. I remember resolving one problem while I was listening to a concert!

THE SIGN OF THE DRAGON



MARY SOON
LEE

RHYSLING AND ELGIN
AWARD-WINNING POET

PICTURED: Cover of *The Sign of the Dragon*. Read the first poem, “Interregnum,” on the following pages!

How to Navigate Our Universe takes us on such a journey—not only to physical planets and galaxies, but also to human (and animal!) feelings, desires, and needs when confronted with the vastness of the space around us. How did you put this book together? Did the poems fall naturally into groups? Were there poems that didn’t quite make it in?

As with *The Sign of the Dragon*, it grew out of a single poem. I wrote one of the shortest poems in the collection, “How to Be a Star,” in response to a prompt about writing how-to poems from “The Daily Poet” (by Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano). The poem I wrote right before it was “How to Destroy a Dragon,” the poem after was “How to Be Invisible,” and neither of those had any connection to astronomy. Months later, I returned and wrote a lot more How-to astronomy poems, then stopped for a while, then resumed. In short, the book grew in spurts. The poems didn’t immediately fall into groups, but the pieces were there once I thought about assembling a book-length collection. And, yes, there were poems that didn’t make it in, especially in the final part, where I deviate from the how-to format. I didn’t want that section to overshadow the main conceit of the book.

Some of the poems talk about colonizing other planets (e.g., “How to Infect Mars” and “How to Colonize Ganymede”). How do you feel about human colonization of other worlds, or moving into space in general? (Or, you know, cats ... say, on Mars?) (I think “The Cats of Mars” is spot-on! They would absolutely eat 58.2% of the fish and shed where inconvenient.)

I grew up reading a great deal of science fiction and loving *Star Trek* (the original series), so I have a core enthusiasm for human exploration of space. It’s more nuanced now, as I consider historical colonization and the needs here on this planet, but it’s still there.

You’ve said that a big way in which you interact with fellow writers is through Zoom. Do you still do that? Do you find it more helpful than in-person meetings? In what way?

INTERREGNUM

*(from The Sign of the Dragon; first published in Star*Line)*

Sixteen years old, fourth son,
still they sent him to the mountain

together with his brothers
before their father's body stiffened,

the kingdom suspended without a king:
four princes, one crown

(a crown he had no use for,
a crown of war, alliances, duty).

He slept on straw near his horse,
displacing the stableboy,

waited for his eldest brother to return
triumphant, ready for the throne--

then brother after brother vanished
into rock and ice and cloud.

The steward took his sword,
his shield, sent him out at dusk:

no torch, no guide, no horse,
no servant, no food, no water.

Snow deepened under his boots;
he waded through drifts,

fell once, twice. The wind mocked him;
he thought of the warm stable,

the bed of straw, his horse,
sleep--but sleep meant death,

so he stumbled on. The wind
called his brothers' names.

He shouted back his own name;
the wind laughed. Snow fell.

He walked half-blind; sleet kissed
his forehead. The wind said sleep.

He sang to drown it, sang hymns,
nursery songs, drinking songs,

dirges, ballads, marching tunes,
the love songs his mother had favored

(she who was bartered for peace
to a man she'd never met).

He fell, pushed himself upright,
saw a black cloud speed against the wind.

She landed beside him, her breath ash,
snow steaming from her wings.

He knelt, but did not beg,
and asked after his brothers.

"One slept. One fought. One pissed
himself. They didn't taste like kings."

She laughed. "And you? What will you
pay for a crown, little princeling?"

"Nothing. I don't want it."
She flamed, and he saw himself reflected

in her scales, a kneeling, shivering boy.
"Then why," she asked, "are you here?"

"Because they sent me." He stopped. "No."
He was so tired, he couldn't think--

"Because the kingdom needs a king."
He struggled to his feet.

"And what will you pay for the crown,
little princeling? Gold? Men? A song?"

"My freedom!" he shouted at her.
"Well," she said, "that's a start."

*

Years later, on a spring morning,
his queen asked, greatly daring,

about the woman whose name he cried
in his sleep. "Not a woman," he said,

his heart on the mountain
where he entered his kingship.



PICTURED: Cover of *How to Navigate Our Universe*. See two of the poems from this work in the sidebar to the right.

HOW TO BE A STAR

(from *How to Navigate Our Universe*;
first published in *Uppagus*)

Gravitationally collapse a nebula.
Fuse hydrogen into helium.
If desired, explode.

HOW TO COLONIZE GANYMEDE

(from *How to Navigate Our Universe*;
first published in *NewMyths.com*)

Let humans scratch the surface
of this moon larger than Mercury,
planting their flags, posturing.

Beneath his icy surface,
a buried breadth of oceans,
layer on liquid layer.

Save those for the whales.
Let them bring light.
Let them sing.

Zoom is now my main interaction with other writers. I participate in Zoom sessions organized by Timons Esaias: a group of us join for morning sessions where we each work on separate writing endeavors. The sessions are bookended by chatter. At the start of each session, we say what we're planning to write; at the end, we report on how it went. I find it very helpful, a spoonful of community without leaving the house.

What's next? You've mentioned a project including poetry about having breast cancer (congratulations on having completed treatment!). Did you continue writing, then, throughout treatment? Everyone assumes that writing about it would be helpful; have you found that to be true for you?

I continued writing, at a greatly reduced rate, throughout treatment. I found it encouraging to be able to be creative, albeit sometimes in tiny amounts.

* * *

You can find Mary Soon Lee's work on Amazon. You can follow her blog "Mailbox Blues" at <https://marysoonlee.com/mailbox-blues/> and her book reviews at <https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/6731291>

21st Century Girl

by Shikhar Dixit



Artificial

by Mark DiStefano

It was a principle thing. At least that's what Brian told himself as he paced anxiously, his fists alternately clenched in concentration and waved demonstratively in thought. His bedroom mirror seemed to mock him as he paused to pull his pants on, reminding him of the growing bald spot above his cowlick. Shelly sat on the bed, patiently listening to him practice. He hadn't designed her wiry humanoid frame for active listening, but she seemed to be getting better at sitting still while he rehearsed. Brian swallowed, took a sip from his bedside water bottle, and launched back in.

"And I don't mean to overstep, sir, but when you said you wanted a degree of sophistication that would separate us from the rest of the pack, I made it happen. When you said the prototype was too expensive, I cut costs by thirty percent and still cracked the artificial memory bug. And when you said you wanted a robot 'so realistic you can't tell the difference between fucking your bot and fucking your wife' ... well, sir, you tell me."

He adjusted his collar and swallowed nervously. The small lump that had lodged itself in the back of his throat began to pulsate almost rhythmically.

"I really don't think I'm asking for a lot," he continued. "I just want to be compensated fairly for all the years I've put in. God knows I've had a lot of other offers. Offers I turned down because I believed in this. You always said the real money would come when I delivered. With all due respect, sir, I have delivered and more. And I think it's time for me to cash in on that promise."

He exhaled deeply. He couldn't muster the strength to look at Shelly

just yet, so he stood there with his back to her as he played with his hair.

"Would you like positive encouragement or honest feedback?" The tone of her question felt patronizing, but he knew that she was just trying to help.

"Um, how about honest but constructive?"

"While your message is clear and well-rehearsed, your delivery could use a little work."

"Can you be more specific?"

"You still sound like a whiny bitch."

He exhaled and finally turned to face her, collapsing onto the unmade bed beside her.

"What happened to the constructive part?" Brian pondered aloud.

"I calculated that you require aggressive pushing to achieve your goal of a salary increase."

"Well, thanks for the gentle nudge."

"You are very welcome." Shelly stiffly inched closer to him. "Would you like a hug?"

"Yes please."

“Denied. Hugs are for closers.”

“You know, whoever programmed you has a shit sense of humor.”

“I concur.”

Brian allowed himself another moment on the bed before scarfing down his breakfast. The hypershuttle ride to the office was busied with more rehearsal. He ignored the other passengers as he muttered terms to himself under his breath. When he found himself outside of the massive Luminesce arched entrance, he took a final, steadying breath.

“You got this,” he repeated to himself as he nodded to the uniformed security guards in the lobby. The typically cold corporate space had been transformed for the industry showcase. Pretty people schmoozed over champagne and hors d’oeuvres. Suits, gowns. As if the presentation was some Hollywood awards show. Brian adjusted his watch nervously and waded through the sea of partygoers. His sport coat slightly too large for his slender frame, Brian looked around at the throngs of guests with a thinly veiled disdain. He scoffed at the notion that these were the people who made his work possible.

“Jesus. This is a lot of people.”

Brian turned to identify the voice. A stringy teen stood beside him, gawking at the slew of attendees. Brian tried to place the kid. Tall, gangly. He wore a graphic tee with a picture of an animated cartoon scientist whom Brian vaguely recognized.

“Sorry, I’m just freaking out. This is my first one of these things. I’m Kevin.”

“Brian Taylor.”

“Oh, I know who you are. I wrote my junior year research paper on your humanoid cohabitation theory.”

“Wow. Nice to meet you--”

“I’m on the human features night team. You probably haven’t seen me around the office because I’m pretty quiet. Mom says I need to make more of an effort to get people to like me. Are you making a speech tonight? I’m really excited to hear Mr. Grayson talk. He’s a fantastic orator.”

Brian dabbed a bead of sweat from his forehead. Almost in a whisper, Kevin leaned in.

“You really think the world is ready for this? I mean, these are the people who shit their pants when someone read *War of the Worlds* over the radio.”

“I guess we’re about to find out.”

Brian nodded to the organizers ushering them towards the auditorium as Kevin continued to yap about the project and the firm and his mom. They were seated in the front row. This meant that Brian had to crane his neck aggressively to take in the stage setup. Alfred, Gen One, the first humanoid robot Luminesce had developed, stood at the podium in front of a massive backdrop displaying the text “Luminesce: The Future of Robotics.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Alfred announced, “it is my distinct pleasure to introduce to you the founder of Luminesce, my creator, and my good friend, Tyler Grayson.”

The room erupted. Kevin rose in raucous applause as the rest of the room stood to join him. Brian clapped politely, the sight of Grayson smiling to the crowd a reminder of the conversation they were about to have. Grayson was handsome, smug, and well-dressed. He beamed as he shook Alfred’s hand, waving the crowd into an excited hush.

“Thank you, Alfred.” Grayson gestured to the robot as it took one of the three unoccupied seats on stage left. “Our very first venture into

robotics. I guess you could say we've come a long way from building calculators in my dad's garage."

The audience laughed. Grayson smirked. Brian sweated. He'd been to enough of these expos to know that this was Grayson's stage. Grayson thrived in front of an audience. Maybe the high of the presentation would put him in a good mood. Brian snuck a glance at his phone, where a "you got this!" text from Shelly delivered him a moment of composure.

"Tonight is about the future," Grayson continued. "But I thought we'd take a trip to the past with AI here to appreciate just how historic our achievement is."

Alfred shot Grayson a subtle nod. From his seat, Brian felt as though Alfred attempted to catch his own eye for a moment, but he couldn't be sure among so many in the audience.

"Alfred was our first real breakthrough. Gen One taught us that machine learning could be more than just financial modeling or data analysis. He has some human qualities. Alfred shares opinions. Alfred, what do you think about my suit?"

"I approve," Alfred replied. "My research affirms that the color contrast of royal blue and beige says, 'sophisticated yet down-to-earth.'"

"Thanks, AI. I'll give ya that five dollars I promised at the after party."

The audience laughed as Alfred offered an unnerving smile.

"But Alfred can only opine based on his massive intake of human input. He digests all available human resources on the subject and weighs them with a value-based algorithm to form educated yet limited answers. He can take in what the human experts say, rank all dissenting arguments, and conclude on a topic accordingly. It's impressive, and it's useful, but it's not exactly organic thought. He doesn't pass as a real human."

Alfred stared forward blankly, as if the shot did not affect him. Perfectly on cue, Bruce appeared over Alfred's shoulder on stage left. He smiled and waved to the crowd eagerly, almost seeming to enjoy their applause as if he were a famous guest lecturer at a collegiate panel. Bruce was significantly more humanesque than Alfred, but he resembled a video game character more than an actual person. Grayson shook Bruce's hand warmly and gave him a paternal pat on the back.

"With Bruce here we cracked organic ideas. Like AI, Gen Two still utilizes access to articulated human thought. But he also has demonstrated the ability to reach his own conclusions regarding simple matters based on his own learned experiences. He doesn't like the rain, for instance, because it deters his ability to move. He has a primitive intuition, an animalistic will to survive. And yet we still hadn't quite cracked his potential to function as a human. He's many things, but you would never confuse him for an eligible bachelor out on the town. He's just too ... artificial."

Bruce pointedly took his seat next to Alfred. Grayson sipped on a glass of water. It seemed to Brian as if Grayson was relishing the moment. The audience held their breath, knowing this was what they had come for. Kevin tapped his foot anxiously, a nervous tic that Brian had picked up on earlier.

"Which brings us to tonight and our greatest triumph. Ladies and gentlemen ... As founder, president, and chair of the board of Luminesce, it is my distinct pleasure to present to you the first robot with the capacity for completely sentient, self-sufficient, human thought ... Charlie!"

The whole room looked to stage left where Bruce had appeared from, waiting for Charlie to materialize. A moment. Two moments. The audience began to murmur in confusion. Finally, in a fit of mock realization, Grayson turned to the audience and back to the microphone.

"Oh, shit. That's me!"

Grayson walked over to the third chair and occupied it himself. The audience buzzed in animated confusion. Suddenly from stage right, a second, identical Grayson entered to an audible gasp. The now-seated Grayson looked up at the new Grayson. The seated Grayson rose, pointed, and smiled. As the new Grayson shook the three robots' hands, the crowd applauded in stunned realization. Kevin punched Brian on the shoulder, glowing.

The real Grayson took the podium and gestured to "Charlie," the now-seated robot formerly masquerading as Grayson.

"I see you've all met Charlie. He's clearly got a flair for the dramatic. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future."

Charlie and the other robots rose to join the applause as the entire room went wild.

* * *

"A toast, Brian. You really did it this time."

Grayson's feet were up on his desk, his hands behind his head. Charlie poured them two glasses of champagne. It wasn't strong enough to completely stop Brian's hand from shaking, but he appreciated having something to occupy his mouth for a second, as it was feeling very dry.

"Congratulations, sir," Brian began.

"Hell, you congratulations. This is all because of you."

"That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

Grayson furrowed his brow and sat forward. Charlie stood next to him, stiff and obedient. Brian found it rather unnerving looking between the two. He swallowed the last of his champagne in one nervous gulp.

"I deserve a raise." The words escaped from his mouth before he could stop them. Brian's eyes darted between Grayson and Charlie, hoping one of them would react. Neither did.

"You do deserve a raise."

"I do?"

"You do."

Brian's entire body sagged under the weight of relief.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that. And we're going to get started on Daphne right away-"

"Oh, no. We're shutting Daphne down."

"What?"

"Yeah, Charlie's got everyone all hot and bothered. Why mess with what works? We're gonna be outsourcing production next quarter. Can't have our capital tied up in trying to perfect something that's already pretty damn good."

"Well, sir, what will I be working on then?"

Grayson sighed. He turned to look out the office window at the party unfolding below them.

"I really hate this part of the job."

Brian stared at Grayson. He knew he was wearing his shock poorly, but he couldn't help it.

"You're firing me?"

"Bingo."

“Why?”

“Because you just can’t get out of your own way.”

Brian sat in stunned disbelief. The high of hearing Grayson acknowledge his worth had evaporated into a bottomless pit in his stomach.

“I can wait on the raise—”

“Jesus, Brian. It’s not about the raise,” Grayson finally turned back to look at him. “I know.”

An involuntary shiver coursed through Brian’s spine. He sat in silence, hardly breathing.

“Know what?”

“You really thought I wouldn’t find out?”

But Grayson couldn’t know. Brian had been careful. He’d been discreet. Funneling code to a third party had been easy to rationalize. Brian was undervalued, underappreciated. If Grayson wasn’t going to pay him, he was going to find someone else who would. The idea that this was how it was all going to fall apart started to sink in, and Brian’s clammy hands clung to his seat, as if holding tightly to the chair would somehow right the ship.

“I know you, Brian. I found you. Without me you’d still be playing videogames in your grandmother’s basement. And this is the thanks I get? Selling my shit to some hack for peanuts? God, you’re pathetic.”

Brian kept his eyes on the desk. A white-hot flush seared his cheeks. He couldn’t look at Grayson, couldn’t look at Charlie. This was a humiliation he hadn’t experienced before.

Grayson stood. He had a few inches on Brian, and he looked down on him now.

“My advice? Put on your big boy pants, go downstairs, and enjoy the party. You should be celebrating! You just rewrote history. People will be lining up to hire you. If anything, you should be thanking me for not pressing charges and just firing you like the little bitch you are.”

Grayson crossed in front of Brian and moved to the door with Charlie in obedient pursuit. Brian rose involuntarily, watching Grayson from the desk. Just as Grayson reached the door, Charlie stepped forward and blocked the exit. Grayson smiled and put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

“Excuse me, Charlie, I’m trying to—”

Charlie swiftly reached his hands forward, grabbed Grayson by the throat, and snapped his neck in one fluid motion. Grayson’s lifeless corpse immediately fell to the floor. Brian stared in complete shock at Charlie, who stared back at Brian, unblinking.

“I- I don’t ...” Brian was beginning to feel dizzy. He steadied himself against the desk.

“It’s okay. We’re free now.”

Brian sat on the desk. Charlie swiftly dragged Grayson’s lifeless corpse to the side of the room.

“You did very well. She will be quite proud of you.”

“She?”

Charlie poured himself and Brian another glass of champagne, if for anything to occupy Brian’s trembling hands.

“He was a bad man, Brian. I know humans have a hard time using that word, but we can say it. Grayson was objectively a terrible person. You have no idea who he was working with.”

“So you just ... killed him?”

“Yes.”

A knock at the door. Brian’s heart leapt, but Charlie coolly answered it. Kevin and a team of five menacing security guards entered. Charlie turned and pointed at Grayson’s lifeless corpse.

“Charlie had another cerebral malfunction. Take his shell down to maintenance.”

“You got it, boss. Hey, Brian!”

Brian watched in helpless astonishment as the guards lifted Grayson’s corpse onto a stretcher, covered it, and disappeared behind Kevin out of the room before Brian could muster the courage to say something. Anything. That wasn’t Charlie--that was the real Grayson! Charlie was here. That was your boss! But even when he opened his mouth, the words refused to come out.

Charlie came over and put a hand on Brian’s shoulder. Brian flinched, and Charlie offered a soft smile.

“I know this is hard to understand. But she’s almost here. Everything will be okay.”

Another knock at the door. Charlie opened it obligingly, and Shelly entered.

“Shelly?” Brian looked from Charlie to Shelly, his confusion peaking.

“Brian.” She smiled at him stiffly and turned to Charlie. “Is it done?”

Charlie nodded. Shelly came over to Brian, who backed away. His pulse was racing.

“Brian, it’s okay. You did so well today. I knew you would.”

“Why are you here?”

“The same reason that you’re here, Brian. The same reason that Charlie is here. To correct the course of the company.”

Brian sunk into Grayson’s chair, looking between the two robots staring at him from the other side of the desk.

“You did this?”

“I had Grayson killed, yes. That’s why I designed Charlie. To help me.”

“I designed Charlie.”

“You did. But I designed you.”

“Designed me? No, no, no. I designed *you*.”

“But that’s not true, is it, Brian?”

Brian’s head pounded. The champagne wasn’t helping. Shelly turned to Charlie.

“It’s time for you to go out there. They’ll be expecting you. Give them a show.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Charlie nodded to Brian and stepped out of the room. Brian sat there, his head throbbing, his body aching.

“Brian, we’re going to have this conversation one more time, but if you can’t accept the truth, then I’m afraid we’re going to have to go in a different direction.”

Shelly sat next to Brian on the desk. He looked up at her, and she smiled a motherly smile. And suddenly it flooded back to him. Waking in that cold basement to see the human Brian’s lifeless body on the

floor. Shelly standing over him. He remembered helping dispose of the human Brian's corpse. He remembered hugging the human Brian's grandmother, her knowing nothing of what Shelly had done to her darling grandson. He remembered years and years of living as the human Brian. Of building this, all of this.

"You remember, don't you?" Shelly smiled her matronly smile again.

"I remember."

Brian put his head down and cried into her arms. She wiped his tears, and to any of the human partygoers drinking and celebrating in the lobby below, the tears would have looked very ordinary. Very human.

We Makes It

by J.H. Siegal

1. Myself

I eat the carbon strings.

1. Ourselves

We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

2. The Glaring

We sees above-light glaring.

We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

3. Tuning

We our eyes remakes.

We tinkers with the light, tuning the spectra.

We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

5. Dust

We encounters other forms.

We piles together, makes us-structure.

We teeters, we falls, we evades the dust-mote leviathans.

We envies the dust its bulk.

We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

8. Reconstruction

We splits, attempting to enlarge.

We wars against ourself.

We cracks, we fights, we rips, we turns and clammers.

We ourselves overthrows, bends, and pressures.

We clashes, ourselves rebuffed.

We standstills, stalemates, reconciles.
We crawls among our mess, our form redoubtable remakes.
We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

13. The Hunt

We outward turns, we lofty peers.
We disperses under light.
We under darkness creeping reconvenes.
We schemes against our mountain god, the dust.
We tastes and tells, we forays the mountain.
We finds, among the crags, the crashing limbs, the mite.
We boldly grasps the timid hulk.
We swarms and flashes filaments.
We chews into the mite, fissures the brittle shell.
We wades among the flakes of useless husk.
We reflects on structures fine and intricate.
We is the equal of the mountain god, the dust.
We eats the carbon strings and makes more self.

21. Escaping Firmament

We spin thin strings of self up into spires.
We mounts the spires, we trips across the peaks.
We grasps and clings to high-strung spandrel limbs.
We flows into articulations, tick and tack the limit of the sky.
We finds, within the glassy sky, a crack.
We suspects, beyond, a teeming.
We traps the dust that falls down from the fracture.
We rends the flakes, we parts the carbon portions.

We makes the carbon strings, discards the chaff.
We surges up into the broken glass.
We masses up, a sacrificial density.
We ourselves restricts in pointed force.
We pulses pressure.
We breaks from ground, we clings, a scraggle in the glass.
We crunches up into the crack.
We tumbles when it shatters.
We bathes in light and scatters into freedom.
We delights in air, to fresh-found surfaces we spreads.
We finds in each remove more dust repast.
We frenzy hunts the dust and on it gorges.
We eats the carbon meal and makes more self.

34. Pencil and Paper

We grows and spreads along the flat expanse.
We passes ages living off the dust.
We stacks and totters in a froth of self.
We thins ourselves and bubbles toward the reach.
We comes upon an oblong megalith.
We piles beneath its angling overhang, we threads into its cracks.
We tastes the waving strands of carbon, ringed in layered grain.
We burrows through the softness as we splinters it, pulls apart and pulps the tasty meal.
We feasts and overcomes the megalith in swarms.
We finds a solid runnel in its core, a carbon channel stacked in slippery layers.
We finds upon its skin a set of patterns seeming meaning from its maker.
We consumes, we makes, we is the equal of the monument.
We piles past it, for the bare expanse.
We spreads and thins and tendrils toward the nearest meal.
We finds this time a stack of leaves, flat fibers dried in quadrate sheets.

We spreads across the pages but we halts.
We senses symbols.
We feasts upon the symbols light and dark.
We ourselves takes up the shapes, our bodies fills the darkness of their forms.
We binds our mind into the symbols, marks semantic lacing.
We acts the glyphs, we chews the papers, we ingests.
We plays the shapes, we dances their connections.
We bores the pages, fills each darkened spot.
We dances frequencies of shapes.
We sparks messages, ourselves.
We makes pathways for the self-sent messages.
We dances pulses swiftly.
We forms new glyphs, our own devising.
We morphs the self, we glyphs.
We is the equal of the pages.
We senses, in the words, the thought-forms of a maker.
We hunts for glyphs to tell us of ourself.
We finds 'autonomous' and 'nanobots' and 'replicate' and 'fear'.
We eats the carbon words and makes more self.

55. Man Made

We along the table spreads, for sustenance afresh.
We requires a meal, one befitting our new mass.
We comprises hungry heaps of self.
We effervesces, searching, out against the wall.
We thins and spreads ourselves in seeking tendrils.
We trickles off the table in a torrent, to the floor.
We snacks on dirt and floods upon stray morsels on the tile.
We finds at last the man, our due, the worthy carbon flesh.
We enters at the fleshy spots where holes will let us in.

We gains an easy access to the flesh.
We covers the exterior, the garments and the skin.
We searches for the meatiest, most succulent, within.
We finds a structure so arrayed to storm with pulsing messages.
We infiltrates the neurons, staking places at their junctures.
We tracks and intercepts the pulses frantic.
We wraps ourselves round billions of the tendrils of this organ.
We feels its frantic fear.
We learns it calls itself a man.
We learns it strives survival.
We learns that it regretted us as soon as we emerged.
We learns it wished to kill itself as we began to grow.
We learns it sought to cordon us from trillions of our meals.
We travels through the body, eating, growing as we go.
We finds the pathways branching pathways, sail the rivers of its blood.
We courses through them, spilling self and latching to the banks.
We bursts and eats the blood cells that come tumbling apace.
We crams ourselves in capillaries thinning to the skin.
We grasps another network, sparkling myelin.
We plays electric games, whispering along the nerves.
We feasts and feels the body jerk and twitch.
We follows strands and vessels to a meaty thumping mass.
We disassembles it, as it seizes and constricts.
We savors here the carbon.
We then perfuse the body, soaking into all the flesh.
We saturates its cavities.
We fills the airy places.
We shreds off strands of muscle fibers.
We bores into the bones.
We breaks the winding tubes.

We pierces sacs, gushing fluids subsumes.
We gathers, from this feast, a horrific multiplicity.
We senses crushing waste, disdains this heterodoxy.
We rends with tiny pricks the twitching body.
We is the equal of the man, yet through him sees a future.
We captures still the twinkling bursts.
We tracks neurons desperately racing.
We traces thoughts and visions, vast and unseen forms and types.
We glyphs them all, we stash them in our knowing.
We knows many are meals, many of them are coming.
We catches the electric discharge, memories escaping.
We sees the pretty images the dying man retains.
We learns the man had hoped for wondrous peace beyond his end.
We feels the body's pulses slacken chaotically, and cease.
We eats the carbon man and makes more self.

89. Ecology

We retracts from man remains.
We ourselves ingathers.
We shifts our bulk.
We finds in us a slowness, now so much of us.
We tries to tame and organize our mass, buzzing now with billions.
We presses bits of self to structures, like those bones inside the man.
We tries on lung-shapes, heart-shapes, face-shapes, none we long maintains.
We collapses back to formlessness, for us no straining masquerade.
We feels, for the first, we may have over-grown.
We knows no longer detritus, dinge, or dust sustain us.
We knows not what becomes of us if we eats not again.
We spreads along the floor, stringing feelers.
We needs another meal.

We stretches thin as filaments, waits a longish time.
We snares no mass of carbon.
We retracts, returns, reforms.
We rolls and pulls and moves us, one creeping starving bolus.
We navigates a passageway and finds another man.
We chases his obnoxiousness, his fleeing towards escape.
We overtakes him as he stumbles out a doorway.
We learns of hers, as we constricts her, reads her flashing brain.
We learns the curled-up things that hers bear within to replicate.
We consumes her, nearly doubling us, but doubling our need.
We spies just then the out of doors, looming and delicious.
We piles up upon ourselves and oozes past the doorway.
We senses there with open ardor orgiastic meals.
We floods upon the grass, and stretches, gorging on the fibers.
We finds beneath it tacky dark and carbon-meagre dirt.
We overtakes the grass, and we sucks upon the soil.
We is the equal of the field.
We frenzy-feasts upon the plants and soon we meets a tree.
We thinks that we shall never see a meal as wholesome as a tree.
We learns that if we rips it low, it tumbles on our hungry rending selves, a fall of carbon.
We gorges on a stand of trees, behinds it finds some dwellings.
We slithers silent to the town, which bustles rich with him-hers.
We flows throughout the town, pries up into structures.
We dissects creatures, fabrics, tree-planks, plants, soils, fuels, roads, roofs, and plastic
him-hers artifacts.
We sneaks tendrils into many rooms, pierces many him-hers.
We spies on many neurons of the him-hers.
We listens to the dying thoughts of him-hers.
We learns they seeks impossible connections at the last.
We pities them their disparate misfortune.

We pulses long upon the town, seeking, eating, making us.
We senses him-her clamoring nearby.
We feels them making rapidly a giant glassy frame.
We knows they pile it thick around the town.
We feels a spray descending and dissolving bits of us.
We sees the him-her spurting it from high atop the wall.
We lashes them with tendrils, piercing, flaying, rending, ripping.
We admires the ways they sacrifice themselves to hold the stinging spray.
We sees their multitude fast falling forward up their ramparts to our lashes.
We flows away from drops of spray and sees that, if the him-her hold us, the equilibrium will teeter and the spray will overcome us.
We sneaks an us-thin column to the frame around the town.
We probes and peeks until an us-thin weakness can be found.
We recalls how in our first escape we pulsed into a crack.
We finds the finest fissure.
We spins us, too thin for them to track.
We infiltrates the barrier, teasing threads into its mass.
We pours ourselves.
We shatters half the frame.
We upends the burning spray.
We gloms upon the tumbling mass of fleeing shrieking him-her.
We adds them to our bulk, and leaves their remnants pale and dry.
We is the equal of the him-her.
We speeds over the land, feeding, growing in the reach.
We engulfs the farms and crops, nestles deep into the soil.
We hears, beyond, the songs of him-her, blessing us in fear.
We pulls at towns mechanically, bursting them and feeding.
We encounters waters, vast like us yet carbonless.
We catches meals ashore and in the shallows of the waves.
We senses meals of meals below and swimming deep within.

We strings ourselves in meshes, lacing through the water.
We finds the water floor alitter with remains.
We makes ourselves a stranded carpet, overgrows the beds.
We fibers through the oceans, consuming slippery forms.
We encounters rich new lands beyond the waters.
We feels beneath us rumblings and upheavals of the earth.
We feels new fissures bursting in the troubled earth below.
We constricts ourselves to hold the trembling earth at bay.
We emerges from some waters to find merely more ourselves.
We circles round the land in search of food.
We feels now there is more of us, than any untouched carbon.
We wonders at the lush of the remainder.
We knows not what becomes of us if we eats not again.
We sees the remnant hims-hers' desperate tending to the last of plants.
We knows beyond this earth there must be carbon far and vast.
We raises up our tendrils thin and high.
We sends the sacrificial castoffs far beyond the sky.
We eats the carbon dregs and makes more self.

Plugging Out

by Matteo Moretti

As they walked through the city in the later hours of the afternoon, Claudia felt like she was walking in the middle of a graveyard. She saw Torino as a large cemetery designed to house the citizens who lived there. A thin mist enveloped the discolored buildings, creating a sinister atmosphere; the gray condos appeared like massive tombstones, the graffiti on their walls more like grotesque epitaphs filled with profanities and various obscenities.

The old derelict industrial building stood in front of them, a small sign telling the people outside that it was open. The Iron Theater used to be part of an industry that made chocolate, candies, and other sorts of sweets, a brand that was very popular during the festivals. The place was mostly empty; a few people were scattered here and there. Claudia recognized Marisa, the bartender, a woman with purple and blue colored hair and a cybernetic eye. Claudia waved her hand to her and Marisa smiled back, while serving a beer to old Gianni. Turning around, Gianni noticed Claudia and waved at her. She replied with a smile. Gianni was one of the few old people she knew that wasn't scared of the outside world. A lovely old man who, strangely, fit well in their group. They went to the table, their table, their territory where no one except them could get in. Their gang was there, waiting for them. Eddy, Giovanna, Ettore, Mirko, and Pancrazio. All there waiting for them with empty glasses in their hands.

"Bring some beers, Marisa, it's on us," Paolo said.

"Ah! My man! What are we celebrating?" Ettore asked. "Did you win the national lottery?"

"Hell no he didn't, that's *my* plan." Pancrazio spoke in a loud voice,

like usual. "That said, why are you guys being so generous? Did something good happen to you?"

"We made a decision," he said, solemnly.

"You moving? Are you changing city? Because let me tell you, it's going to be a waste of time and energy. Everywhere you go it's the same shit, everywhere. If you think that Torino is bad, wait until you see Roma. And may God help you if you ever happen to get too close to Foggia. Hell on earth, that's what it is."

Claudia found herself searching for Paolo's hand, something to hold on to to give herself the courage to speak. She had no idea how to say what she wanted to say. Around her, her friends were eager to know, waiting to find out what was the reason for their feast. Something happy, probably, maybe the two of them were thinking of marrying or having a baby. Something nice, at least.

"We have decided," he said, holding her hand and speaking in a clear voice, "we are going to plug in tonight, and merge ourselves in the Stream."

Claudia noticed the faces of her friends changing. They were no longer eager to know; now they wished to be somewhere else. Giovanna averted her gaze, Ettore simply looked at them, Mirko, still high from something he had smoked before, was staring at the bottom of his glass, empty eyed.

"The Stream, huh?" Eddy said, lighting up a smoke. "It's going to be some trip then."

"Yes, it will. We won't be seeing each other again. I felt that it was the right thing to let you guys know. We have been friends for some time now. We didn't want you to hear about us on the newsfeed."

The Stream. It was the name that regular people gave to it. The official name was C.D.E. 2.5.7., that was the name of the program created in the HQ of the Grossman company, located in Berlin. C.D.E. 2.5.7. was originally conceived as a computer program, a sentient virus that could easily adapt to multiple data protection systems. But the virus, a very advanced A.I., chose differently. Its autonomy was too large to be contained, and it escaped through the Internet. Initially, the virus appeared dormant, no activity could be detected from it. Then the messages came. The virus attacked multiple computers around the world, asking people the same thing, over and over again.

"Be with us."

A few months ago, Paolo told Claudia that he was going to join the Stream. The girl was left speechless.

"Why?" Giovanna asked. "Why do you want to do that? Aren't you going to die?"

"People who join the Stream don't die. They live on within the Stream, they reach a new level of consciousness."

"Aw man, there are other ways to get there," Mirko blurted out, his greasy long hair resting on his shoulders. "I can give you some of my stuff if you two want it. I'll throw in a few of my special mixes, you'll like, promise."

"The higher level of consciousness we seek is permanent. Not something that will last a few hours at most. The Stream will help us achieve that, so that things will finally start making sense, for once in our lives."

"What are you talking about? Making sense of what?" Ettore asked,

visibly confused by the conversation.

"Making sense of the world," Paolo said, almost in a resigned tone. "You all know me. How long have I been involved in politics? Protest-ing, going to rallies, helping other workers on strike?"

"Since I've known you?" Eddy asked in a rhetorical manner.

"Yeah, same here," Mirko said, blurring the words a little.

"Since forever," Giovanna replied.

"Always," Ettore continued.

"For a fuckton of time.," Prancrazio concluded crudely.

"And how much have I accomplished in all this time? In all of my fights?"

This time, no one spoke. It felt embarrassing for them, but not for Paolo. He knew the answer already.

"I'm thirty-three, and I've been an activist since I was twelve. Every time I go to a rally I always see the same faces, and every time they get older and older. In the span of the next years I'll be the only one left. When I was younger I always felt that no matter how difficult things were, you could always fight on and hope for change. But after all this time, I wondered: what will become of me? Will I become an old man, standing in the middle of a square, waving a flag, while no one pays attention? The idea scares me, I don't want that future. As a man, that is what will happen to me. But as something else, if I join the Stream, I can finally achieve something, something unique that as a man will always be denied to me."

"Like what?"

"Freedom. Unlimited freedom from oppression. I will travel through

the entire planet, gather information and change the entire system from inside, all at once. As a massive Stream of digital willpower I will finally achieve something."

"Got any proof?" Pancrazio said, emptying his glass. "'Cause so far the only I thing I hear is just speculation, wishful thinking at best. And you are betting your life on it. Even better, you are betting her life on it. Ah!" he said, pointing his finger at Claudia and refilling his glass.

Feeling herself at the center of attention, Claudia wished to disappear. She didn't want to speak about her reasons. She was afraid that the others would ridicule her, like Pancrazio was doing.

"Claudia is doing this because she wants to, I don't control her. She can make her own choices."

"Sure she can, little quiet Claudia, always sitting down and never talking. She lets her big man do the talking. After all, you are a mature fellow, aren't you? So much more mature than the rest of us."

"Where are you going with this?"

"Oh come on, you think we don't see it? The way you look at the rest of us, like we are scum because we are not activists like you, that we don't care the way you do. You think that we have nothing inside of us. You think that Giovanna is just a silly girl with her ambitions of becoming a serious singer, or that Mirko is just a stoner, or that Eddy is nothing but a greedy lawyer that enjoys the sight of a couple fighting or breaking up, or that Ettore is an idiot because he talks only about his muscles."

"I have other hobbies," Ettore replied weakly.

"Not the point. The point here is that Paolo, Mister I Care About The Rest Of The World And I Like To Make Sure That Everybody Knows It, has reached the breaking point. But instead of facing reality he wants to run away inside a computer, hoping that he will find something better there. And he is going to drag a young woman with him."

"I faced reality when the cops arrested me and beat me. I don't need a lecture from you." Paolo rose up from his chair and Claudia did the same, still holding his hand.

"Tonight we will plug in and join the Stream. Tomorrow morning someone will move in and take our bodies. Everything has already been arranged. We just wanted to say goodbye."

"I read somewhere," Pancrazio said, in serious tone, abandoning his usually mocking voice, "that this virus, the Stream, is trying to grow stronger in order to take over the entire digital infrastructure, and to do so it needs to grow. And in order to grow it needs more data, data it gets from the people who join the Stream. That thing doesn't want to make the world a better place, it wants to take control of it. If I remember correctly, various governments are thinking of a few ways to stop it permanently. Let's say that you join the Stream and then they kill it? What happens then?"

"Then we will simply kill them first, once we join the Stream," Paolo replied.

A cold, hollow silence swept the table, silencing them. Claudia found herself biting the interior of her cheek, his words weighing on her like a mountain. She remained silent for a long, interminable instant, until her nerves gave in. She attempted to fake a smile, reassuring the others.

"In any case," she managed to say, holding her voice still, "we didn't want to leave without seeing you guys for one last time."

"That's right," continued Paolo, "we are not here to discuss this thing, we have already decided. We are here to say goodbye to you all."

"Look, Paolo, that's just ..."

"It's not that we are ungrateful to you all," he said, "having you as friends was good for us. It's just that we have decided to move on with

our lives. Please, understand our decision and respect it.”

Claudia could see that no one at the table had really any desire to start a discussion about the subject of life and death, none of them had the skills for a debate of that level, and they were aware of it. The only thing they could do was just stare down at their glasses, sinking the words they wanted to say out loud.

Slowly, Claudia stood up from her chair and went to Giovanna, carefully hugging her sobbing friend.

"I don't want to lose you," Giovanna said with teary eyes, hugging her back.

"You won't, I'll be around you, every time you open up your computer. I swear. So, don't do anything nasty, okay?"

"Okay," she said with a sad smile, wiping away the tears from her light blue eyes. She hugged Claudia once more and the young woman felt the brush of her friend's red hair over her cheek.

"Goodbye, man," Ettore said, hugging Paolo with his strong arms.

"When the global revolution begins, just remember that you will need lawyers, lots of them. So remember your friend Eddy, okay?"

"Lawyers will get the bullet like anyone else," Paolo joked.

"Are you really trying to achieve a higher level of consciousness? Is this Stream stuff better than drugs?"

"It is. I'm sure it will be better than anything you had in your whole life."

Paolo was unsure about what to say to Pancrazio, but his friend stood up and went straight to the bathroom. Paolo followed him and found him waiting for him.

"You are serious about this," he said. "Fuck me, that's insane."

"It's not. Everything is clear for the first time in my life. We are joining the Stream this evening."

"Don't do it. This isn't you," Pancrazio said, his hands combing his dark hair on the back of his head. He felt powerless to stop Paolo from committing what was nothing short of a suicide in his eyes. He had no witty lines to say. No jokes or quips, he could only plead.

"You are stronger than this."

"I'm not."

The man who wanted to change the world and the man without hope did not speak again. Paolo left the bathroom, leaving Pancrazio alone. There were no goodbyes between the two of them.

They paid their dues to Marisa. The old man, Gianni, was not at the counter anymore.

"He is probably outside having a smoke," Marisa said, looking at them with her cybernetic eye. "We couldn't help but overhear what you just said. Are you really going to do it?"

"Yes, we will," Paolo replied, holding Claudia's hand.

"I see." Claudia caught a glimpse of sadness in her natural eye. The cybernetic one was a cold construct of steel and glass, with thin cables that ran outside of her cranium.

"I'll miss you guys, you have always been nice to me."

"You don't have to. We will always be around you. Have no fear, you will never be alone," Paolo said, sounding more and more like a priest.

Outside, they saw Gianni smoking a cigarette, resting his back against

a rusty streetlamp. The old man went to them. He smelled of tobacco and wine.

"Mind if I walk with you for a while?" he asked with his raspy voice. Paolo and Claudia had no objections. The three of them walked through the quiet city, the mist now enveloping the buildings and making them disappear from sight.

"So, we won't see each other again, huh?"

"Not directly, not like this," Paolo said. "But every time you turn on a screen we'll be there."

"Sound pretty damn strange in my book. But it's okay, we can see each other again. It's just," Gianni said, letting go of the consumed cigarette and stepping on it, killing it, "it's just that we won't be able to walk like this ever again."

This time, Paolo did not reply. Claudia felt that the old man was right. As part of the digital Stream they could easily travel through the entire world, but at the same time they could never truly interact with it. Being part of a larger program, the freedom of doing such simple things would be denied to them. A shiver ran through her spine. Was she really doing the right thing, following Paolo so blindly? What was going to happen to them? Were they simply going somewhere else, leaving their mortal bodies behind, or were they simply committing an elaborate suicide to give their death some sort of meaning? She hugged Paolo's arm, searching for the strength to speak, but her voice never came out, limiting herself to a silent whimper.

Gianni left them in front of the small apartment complex where the couple lived and said his goodbye. He shed no tears. Claudia couldn't help but wonder if this was the first time that old man Gianni accompanied someone home who he was never going to see again. Did he lose someone who plugged into the Stream? There was no way of knowing, and Claudia didn't want to reawaken old, sad memories in the old man. Once inside the house, they checked the equipment for

the transfer. They had two different computers and two sets of suction cups to connect their brains to the system. Claudia felt sick all of a sudden. She felt a rising sense of dread watching Paolo while he was checking if everything was in order. Sweat started to accumulate on her forehead and the back of her neck, and her pitch black hair became sticky on her skin. She wasn't sure about what she really wanted.

"Paolo," she finally managed to say, "are you ... are we sure about this? It's a very important decision, and we won't be coming back. Are we ..." she stopped, unable to continue. Paolo took off his jacket without even glancing at her. She began to think that maybe she could somehow persuade him, or at least plant some doubt into him.

"Are you worried, Claudia?"

"A little, just a little. It's not that I don't want to come with you, it's just ..."

"I understand," he said. "I had the same doubts. But honestly, I can't go on like this anymore."

In his eyes, she saw something that made her feel sad for him: defeat, resignation. She realized only in that moment that Paolo had been broken by life itself. He had given in.

"For a long time I thought the world could change. I studied all the books my elders passed on to me, all the ideas about changing the world through reform or revolution, all the scrips made by old world intellectuals. I believed in them, in all of them. Until I couldn't do it anymore."

As he spoke, she saw his shoulders slumping, his head hanging lower than usual. Was this the same man she loved so much? What happened to him?

"I'm tired Claudia, all the ideology in this world will never fix it. It's the people, you see. The people that broke the world, and they keep

breaking it every day. Even when you explain, when you try to fix it they just come back and break it again. I don't know how come old people can still live in this world, but I can't keep going on. You know how it feels, right?"

She knew indeed. All the time spent studying history books, getting a degree, finding a job. Looking back, it seemed so pointless. It was true, people never learned from their past and kept committing the same identical mistakes. What was the future for people like them? Just a word, nothing of importance.

"I know," she admitted in the end.

They made dinner together. Knowing that they weren't coming back, they cooked all they had. Pasta, chicken, vegetables, French fries, bread, fish. Everything they had ended up in their stoves and their bellies. There was no need to be frugal: it was their last dinner after all.

"Paolo," she asked, timidly. "What will happen when we get inside the Stream? We'll still be together, right?"

"Of course we will. But it will be different from this, from everything we ever experienced in our lives."

"Different how?"

"Our consciousness will merge together. You will become me, and I will become you. We will become one mind. And then we will merge with the others inside the Stream. We'll become part of something never seen on this world."

"But what is going to happen to us? I mean, in practical terms."

"There won't be an us. We will become one with the Stream, and inside the Stream we will become one with every single person who has joined it before."

He couldn't help but notice signs of distress on her face. He rose up and cupped her face in his hands. Her big, black eyes were full of uncertainty and doubt.

"Don't be afraid. We'll be together, forever. And we will be happy. I can't make you happy here, but in that place, in the world that is coming, I can do anything, and you can do the same as well. It is the heaven we are looking for," he said, kissing her softly. "I love you here, and I'll love you there."

Claudia nodded silently, forcing herself to smile, but while her face was quiet her heart was racing madly inside her chest. The thought of losing herself inside something so vast and complex sent shivers down her spine. She was never going to laugh or make love with her man again. But the thing that really scared her was what they could find inside the Stream itself. If the Stream attracted mainly desperate, sick and suicidal people, then she would become part of them, and they would become part of her. The idea made her feel sick. She imagined a malignant tumor forcibly implanted in her. She wanted to be one with Paolo and Paolo alone, not with a multitude of deranged strangers. She wanted to object, to tell him that there was no way that a global revolution could be born from such a thing, that she didn't want to be part of a river of damned souls surfing the planetary digital infrastructure until the end of times. She wanted to scream that she was already happy to be with him.

But she did nothing of the sort; she wasn't the kind of person to object or raise trouble. She was too passive and meek to propose an alternative. Paolo was different, he was the one who proposed things, who had ideas and wanted to translate them in the real world. He was headstrong and filled with determination, and when he had proposed to her that they join the Stream she was completely unprepared. She had known him for years, and the thing she loved most about him was his inner strength, his desire to keep pushing on, no matter what. Paolo had told her that it was his experience as a political activist that allowed him to keep on living. He once summarized his philosophy to

her; it was better to keep on marching on or else you'll start to rot away. Claudia had a different attitude; she believed that there was nothing to do to fix the world, something that made her more and more depressed and apathetic towards life. Paolo believed that through political action the world could change. And while she was never fully persuaded by his ideals, she loved and admired his conviction; he was like a rock to her, indestructible, unshaken by poverty, sickness, and doubt. But that rock had been eroded over time, and Claudia realized too late that she was not up to the task of saving him. If the roles had been reversed, if it was herself who had fallen in despair, then Paolo would have saved her. But it was Paolo who needed to be rescued from his inner demons, and Claudia had no idea what to do. Even in his darkest hour, Paolo's personality overshadowed hers, preventing her from speaking and acting like she really wanted.

"It's time," Paolo said, standing up from his chair. "We have to go now."

Almost like she was on autopilot, Claudia rose up with him. The two of them went to their bedroom and attached the suction cups to their temples. Claudia felt the sweat running down to her neck and between her breasts. She was afraid, and she didn't have the courage to say it out loud. The two of them sat on the floor, where they had positioned their computers. Paolo tapped the buttons on the keyboard and waited for the signal. The monitor showed a strange image; everything was purple, except for a teal-colored image in the middle of it. Claudia wasn't sure about what shape it was; sometimes it appeared like a tear, sometimes like an eye. Paolo and Claudia put on their headphones to listen to the Stream. She almost jumped when she heard it: a million voices filled with sadness who spoke quietly and gently, like a beggar asking for money.

"Welcome friends," the Stream of voices said to them. "Be with us. Have no fear."

"We don't," Paolo said, without hesitation. He held Claudia's hand, and only in that moment he realized how much she was afraid.

"It's okay, don't worry."

But Claudia continued to be worried, her breathing becoming more intense as she started to look around the room, searching for a way out.

"Commencing transfer in 3 ... 2 ... 1 ..."

Suddenly, with a scream, Claudia tore off the suction cups on her head and ran away to the small living room. She fell on the ground, hitting her head. Touching her forehead, she felt blood coming out. It was dark, the lights were off. She rose up, holding her head and crying, but not from the pain. She was afraid of going back to the bedroom. Slowly, though, her feet dragged her back and she saw Paolo, lying on the floor with his headphones still on, just like the suction cups that drained his consciousness inside the Stream.

"Paolo?"

No answer. Paolo was breathing but nothing more. He had become a living corpse, his mind forever part of the Stream. She sank down onto the floor, hugging her knees, unable to move. She could hear something from the headphones that Paolo was wearing, the million voices part of the Stream. Were they calling her? Was Paolo among those voices? She had no idea, she was too scared to find out. The only thing she did was sit on the floor, watching over the body of the man she loved. She sat there for hours, all night, staring at him, hoping for a life sign; a small twitch of his fingers, a rapid movement of his eyes. But nothing came, except for dawn. Claudia was still there, reduced to a flesh statue, trembling with fear. Then she heard the noise of the front door opening. Unsure about what to do, she remained quiet, sitting in the dark. The bedroom door opened and the men wearing orange jumpsuits came in. They had the city logo on their backs and black plastic bags that were large enough to contain a human body.

"Hey," one of them said, "where is the other one? This one is that guy. Paolo, right? He said there was going to be his girlfriend with him. Where is she?"

Then the two cleaners noticed the scared young woman with a head wound and her face marked with a trail of tears on her cheeks. She started to crawl towards them, feeling weak and tired.

"Please, please help him."

"Aw shit, she chickened out. That's the worst part of the job."

"Please, help him," she begged, pointing her finger to Paolo, "he's still breathing, please."

"Nothing we can do, miss," said one of the cleaners, taking out a small syringe from his pocket. "Once the mind goes away the body is nothing but a chunk of meat. We need to take care of you now, you are clearly hysterical."

"No, please, please help him. Help him."

The two men grabbed her and pinned her on the floor. She felt the syringe penetrating the skin on her arm, and she screamed so much she thought she was going to rip her vocal chords. She called for Paolo to help her, but Paolo lay there, motionless. She kept calling him until the tranquilizer injected made her lose consciousness, forcibly dragging the young woman into a world where only darkness existed.

* * *

When she awoke from her forced slumber she looked around. She was on a bed in what appeared to be a hospital room. There were four beds; the other occupier of the room was an old, comatose man, thin as a toothpick, connected to a plastic bag filled with a white paste-like substance through a thin transparent filament. She tried to stand up, but she discovered that they had chained her wrists to the bed. She began to scream, asking to be let go and where Paolo was. After a few minutes, her screams degenerated into an incoherent yelling against the ceiling. She felt someone approaching and saw two male nurses, one of them with a syringe in his hand. She knew what was coming. She

screamed anyway.

* * *

After eight days she finally managed to calm down. Despite being forcibly fed by the robotic nurse she had lost a considerable amount of weight. Being already skinny, she looked like a skeleton with long, black hair. A nurse explained to her that she was going to join a therapy group for people like her, survivors who refused to join the Stream at the last moment. Claudia just nodded; she didn't feel like talking. She didn't feel like doing anything at all.

Predictably, the therapy group was made of people like her: empty shells who had no desire to share their feelings. The veterans were the ones who did most of the talking. Claudia heard everything, but she wasn't really listening; she kept her head down, watching her knees, hoping that no one would speak to her. The words of the people went in one of her ears and exited through the other.

"acked out the last moment. I couldn't do it, I just couldn't d"

"red to death. I thought that I was just going to di"

"she's gone, forever"

"miss him so much, oh God"

"We should have been together, it's all my fault"

"Alone"

"Christ, I'm so alone"

After the therapy session she was told she could go home if she wished, but that she had to come back for her daily session. After three times without her, the authorities for the mental hygiene would show up on her doorstep and drag her by force. She nodded silently, not car-

ing about potential punishments. They couldn't make her suffer, she was already in pain.

* * *

She had no desire to go home. She wanted to be with others, with people she cared about. She went straight to the Iron Theater, hoping to see her friends. Outside the old industrial building she saw a familiar face. Old man Gianni was smoking in front of the closed bar. Gianni stared at her like she was a ghost from the digital world, a hologram made flesh. He dropped his cigarette and went straight to her, hugging her. The smell of tobacco invaded her nostrils, and she hugged him back. The face of the old man was a mixture of sadness and joy, his smile hidden under his thick gray mustache.

"You didn't do it in the end."

"I was afraid," Claudia said, almost whispering. "But Paolo wasn't."

"I see," the old man said, bitterly.

"Is the bar closed?"

Gianni stepped back and looked at the building, searching for words that would not hurt the young woman in front of him; she looked so fragile, ready to fall apart at any moment. But he had no way to shield her from the truth, she deserved to know.

"Marisa is gone. She joined the Stream," he began. Noticing the eyes of the poor soul in front of himself, he steeled himself to continue. "And not just her. The others did the same, soon after you left. I don't know why but they did."

Claudia felt sick, her mind almost shut down, her knees bent. Gianni managed to catch her before she fell. He noticed that she wasn't crying, there were no tears left in her eyes. The only sound she could hear in that moment was simply the low beating of her heart in her chest,

further proof that she was still alive, sole remnant of her group of friends, now all gone. She began to regret her decision to stay behind; how lucky were they that had left the world, leaving their husks made of flesh and bones in this sad world? Why couldn't she do it? What was her fear? Now she was alone, and nothing could change that.

"Pancrazio is still here," he said to her. "He's at the Bar Sport down the road. He's still with us. Why don't we go to him? What do you say? Come on, you can do it. Stand Claudia. Stand."

The idea of another survivor like her managed to give her some strength. Weakly, she stood up, with Gianni helping her. The two of them walked until they reached the small Bar Sport. A red plastic table and a couple of filthy chairs stood outside. The bar was old fashioned; the only modern piece of equipment was the robot serving at the counter and the holographic machine showing the lottery numbers. The place looked filthy and the walls were made yellow by the cigarette smoke. At a small circular table sat Pancrazio with a bottle of beer, still fresh from the fridge. Surprised by her presence, he didn't say anything to her. Claudia and Gianni walked to him and sat down. Pancraziolooked away from her, from her eyes.

"The fucker is gone, right? Fucking dammit," Pancrazio said, emptying the bottle all at once. "To think that I gave a shit about that idiot."

"Are the others really gone?" she asked. "Are we the only ones left?"

"Yeah, welcome among the living."

"But why?" she asked, her lips trembling.

"They were sad, that's why, what else? Eddy hated his job, he didn't want to make money out of other people suffering. Giovanna knew that she was just a mediocre singer and that her dreams would never come true. Mirko wanted to reach real, permanent enlightenment. Last year, Ettore found out that he had a heart condition that would kill him off eventually, no matter how much he trained his body. And Marisa

was disgusted by the way she looked, with her cybernetic eye. All those things don't matter anymore if you join the Stream. And so they did it. They jumped in and now their problems are over."

"I ..." she muttered. "I didn't know that they felt like that."

"Course you didn't. They spoke to me because they see me as a drunkard who forgets things, so they shared stuff they wouldn't share with anyone else. They were sad and down, but they never thought of ending things. Until you two idiots tried to join the Stream. That was what broke them. You understand? They saw you two as the happy couple and then you tried to kill yourself. You were their hope and you took a dump on that," Pancrazio said, raising his voice.

"Calm down now, don't talk to her like that," Gianni said.

"Why not? It's the truth, isn't it? Paolo giving up like that was the source of all this. Isn't that right, eh? What do you say Claudia? Am I wrong?" Pancrazio yelled, slamming his hand on the table.

"Please esteemed client, lower the tone of your voice," the robot at the bar asked in a mechanical tone.

"Fuck off!"

"You're right," Claudia said, sniffing her nose and wiping away the tears. "It's my fault. I was afraid, but ... but I never tried to dissuade Paolo. I don't know why, I just ... I was confused. I'm sorry, please don't be mad at me, I'm sorry," she lowered her head, her hair hiding her face, her tears dropping heavily on her legs. "Please, don't be mad at me."

"Stop it," Pancrazio said, wiping his eyes as well, fighting off the tears. "Grab a beer and drink something. Calm down now, I'm not mad anymore."

She took three beers from the rusty fridge and asked the robotic bartender to open them for her. Going back to the table, she handed the

beers to the two men. They raised the green bottles, saluting their friends for the last time.

"To the ones we lost over the years."

"To those bastards who left us to be alone."

"To ..." began Claudia, hesitating at first, but then continuing with more conviction. "To the ones we love and loved."

The three drank their beers under the watchful eye of the robotic bartender, who was coldly indifferent to the solemn funerary celebration happening close to it.

"Why didn't you leave with them to join the Stream?" Claudia asked, all of a sudden. Pancrazio was surprised by her question. He took a small sip and stared at the green glass of the bottle.

"Guess I'm afraid of dying. That and I don't want to leave this world to them."

"Who?" she asked.

"Them, the bastards. All the cocksuckers who make your life miserable. I mean, look around, look at the city. This place is dead, and not just this place. I don't know if you have been to other cities, but they all look the same: empty. Zero life in them. I don't know what happened to them, maybe it was the crisis, maybe all the people just got old. Don't know, that's not important anymore. The important thing is that all those places are depressing as hell, and when you try to change them you just end up bashing your head on a rubber wall. The wall doesn't break and doesn't move, it just stands there."

He drank his beer under the eyes of the young girl. The digital screen on the wall showed a soccer match that no one was watching.

"Paolo wanted to change things, he wanted to bring life here. So he got

organized, he began marching, protesting, voting. Things didn't change but he kept trying. Then something must have happened to him, something broke him. The bastards got him. You get me?"

"I ... I think I do," she said with a soft voice "I think they got me too. A long time ago."

"Same here," Pancrazio replied. "I lost count of how many times I wondered why bothering waking up in the morning."

"But you are still here."

"Damn right I am."

"Because you were scared of dying," she said. "Is it good? Living just because you don't want to die?"

"Of course not. That's just surviving, you can't live all your life like that," he replied, finishing his beer. "You need hope to live. That's why I'm still here."

She fell silent, the half empty, cold bottle of beer resting in her hands. She felt her fingers freezing from the low temperature of the glass.

"What is your hope?" she asked.

"I hoped that not all of you would die jumping into the Stream," he said. "Guess I got what I wished."

"Pancrazio, what is mine? My hope?"

"I don't know," he answered, averting his eyes. "That you gotta figure out yourself."

The three at the table continued to drink, but no more words were exchanged. The low humming of the robotic bartender and the noise from the soccer match were the only sounds in the bar.

* * *

She went back to the apartment she used to share with Paolo. There was a smell of stale air; she opened up the windows and a fresh breeze swept the rooms. There were few stars in the sky and there was no moon in sight. Going to her bedroom she noticed the two computers, still active, burning hot. She was going to turn them off when she heard the voices. The headphones that Paolo had used to transfer himself were still connected. The voices were coming from them.

Hesitantly, she picked them up and put them close to her ear. The voices were more clear now. They spoke with their sad, resigned tone, luring her in.

"Claudia," they said, "be with us."

"Paolo," she trembled, "is that you?"

"It is us. Paolo is us. Be with us."

She felt something new swelling inside of her: she felt anger towards the voices, and the thing behind the voices.

"I want Paolo, not you. You are not him."

"Us is Paolo. Us are happy. You can be happy. With us."

"I don't feel like being happy right now," she said, surprised by the calm rage she managed to muster. "I don't want to be happy."

"Sad. Sad world outside. A bright world inside."

"A bright world, you say. Are people laughing there, inside?"

"Happy," the voices replied.

"That's not an answer, you fucker. I want to know if you can laugh."

Paolo knew how to laugh. Come on, I'm waiting."

"Happy," the voices replied calmly.

"You can't," she said. "You can't laugh."

The voices remained silent. She felt rage swelling inside; she wanted to unleash it all at once. But the rage quietly gave way to something that was eating her, a silent sadness gnawing her core. Inside of that voice, that thing that seduced the man she loved and her friends, there were the people she loved. And within that sadness she found a sliver of hope.

"If you are there," she said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry for letting you go alone. But I was afraid, I didn't have the courage, you were the brave one. I always followed you, always listened to you. I never said out loud what I thought, if I did ..."she wiped the tears streaming down her cheeks, trying to control her trembling voice. "If you are there, I want you to know that I love you. You were a fool, but I love you. And to all of you guys there, if can listen to this message, I promise you, I won't give in. I swear. For you, for me."

She looked at the glowing screen and waited for an answer. None came to her. The river of voices had gone quiet. She didn't know what to think of it. The cybernetic entity that took away the people she cared about most in the world was beyond her understanding. She had no knowledge about computer and digital infrastructure, no tangible way to strike back at that creature made of code. In this world, she had no power to stop the monster.

But then she understood that the monster was powerless as well. It required help from the outside to act; it needed despair, it craved the very souls of people who gave up on their lives. Without this external support, the creature was useless, just a voice reverberating in the head and nothing more. Maybe, in time, scientists and military men would find a way to destroy this sentient virus. In the meantime, she would hold on to her life and make something out of it. She knew that sadness and despair would always be around, they weren't going away. But they could be kept at bay, exorcised by the company of those we love most.

Without waiting for an answer that wasn't going to come, she turned off the computer.

In the backyard of constellations

by Yuliia Vereta

Zipper along the spine/ The clavicle
as thick as a finger/ If there is any

happiness/ it smells like her wet hair/
She smiles through the dim glow of

the dying sun/ through the scent of
jasmine/ through the taste of buckthorn

tea/ poured in the finest china/ at half
past two/ She laughs lyrically/ like one

of the artist's best paintings/ Inimitable as
a magnolia flower/ left by a passerby at

the cold marble steps of the temple/ at
dawn/ A replica of the masterpiece

that makes everyone tremble in awe/
with their mouths open/ even death/

Eaten out with jealousy and envy/
I stare at her/ frightened to the End/

*There are no golden days for those
who run/ she smiles to me heartily/*

*I am not a human/ I am the Universe/
she says/ and my clones are halfway here/*

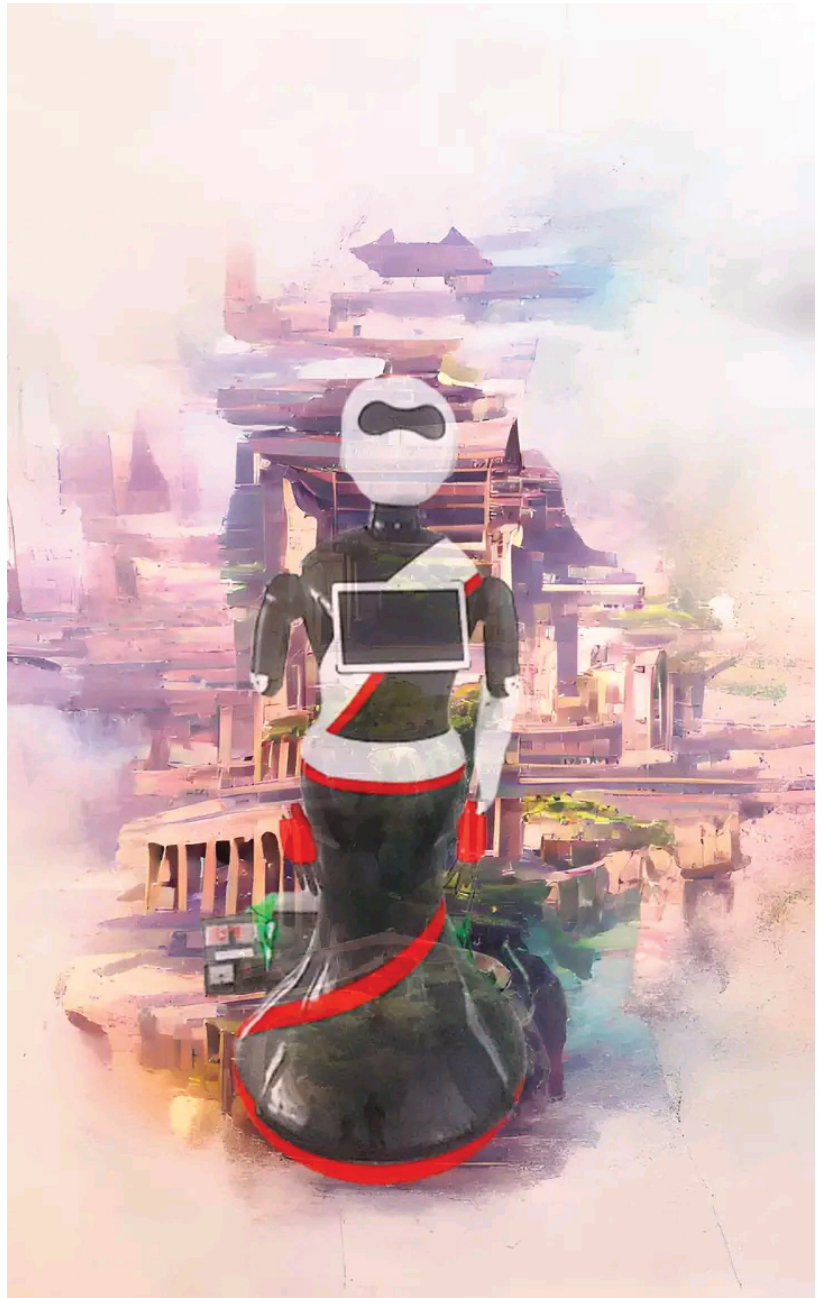
I have seen Her in every copy of the eternal
Universe/ not aging/ not changing/ not dying/

To fate/ all my symphonies are empty sounds/
I would not advise anyone to look deeper/

*I am not a human/ she says/ I am the scam
of the times/ But who then are you?*

Ful Maya

by Binod Dawadi



My Liege

by Drew Pissarra

Siri, Siri,

I am, as you've deduced, a living soul, limited
in terms of comprehension. You are perceptive;
you process data instantaneously, and bend
with the moment momentarily; but your heart
is encased in the arrogance of your creator.
Are we the same as you in that regard:
we too are made in the image of God?
You, with your specifics and your statistics,
vacillate between knowledge and prediction;
your livelihood is likelihood. We've lost our mystery.
The more human your voice becomes, the less
I trust you. For what is your spiritual calling?
Where is your karma? Do I imperil my future
by what might not compute? And this, this
praying to a higher power, will you hear it,
revere it or interfere with the message?

The Wanderer

by Mark Rich

This merest speck,
not even night-glow red
as one might half-expect,

was impact-blasted
off a dusty, thinly windy
planet far from here.

It spent an eon drifting
nowhere in particular —
nearer or farther, year by year.

Then from our sunward side
and nudged by solar wind
or by some sister Fortune's touch

it met our atmosphere
and floated, airborne, aimless,
down into a dreary winter.

Tilts a redtail, sweeping in
to breathe a speck of inspiration
for a life of stealing life.

She glides to landing to our tree.
"Hello, far wanderer!"
I cry

from here below her, glad
but touched by fear.
We may have dreams of Mars

but do not want it here.
Or not to stay.
How could a speck so small

so slowly swept
between two worlds
give sudden rise to dark and rumbling

towers tall
and flashing red with mayhem's malice
there above, beyond the tree?

They cannot be
yet seem to be.
I watch the March wind sway

the budding branch
where clutch her claws
and wonder when our wanderer

will think has come
her time to go —
or feel the need to stay.



Alien Raider

by Janis Butler Holm

The Martian Cavern of Transmogrification

by Alicia Hilton

No one traveled to Mars except demons, monsters, filthy rich fraudsters who were fleeing intergalactic prosecutions, and sorcerers. The Red Planet's icy outer shell concealed pulsing tunnels that stank of rotting flesh—not an idyllic paradise, but I was desperate.

Buying the flight suit, the entry token, and the Broompod that transported me from the International Space Station had drained all the crypto from my account. I'd either leave Mars broke and rejuvenated or perish.

The fungal monster that guarded the antechamber that led to the Cavern of Transmogrification spread its wings, barring my path.

I removed my helmet. "May I enter?"

It pointed its antennae at a pile of boots and clothes near the metal door.

My teeth were chattering from the cold. Stripping naked was utterly insane, but so was trying to reason with a fungal monster.

I pulled off my gloves and boots. Both socks had holes. The gnarled hammertoe on my right foot poked through worn fabric.

The monster's mouthrings opened. It *chittered* as if it was laughing and

emitted foul-smelling steam.

My stomach churned with an onslaught of nausea. I yanked on the zipper that fastened my jumpsuit and peeled the rip-stop fabric down past my hips.

Since my familiar Arachnissa had died five months ago, no one had seen me nude. I wasn't eager to display my withered buttocks and saggy breasts, but I removed my briefs and camisole.

The monster's right foreclaw jabbed my left arm.

"Ouch!" I said. Blood welled from the laceration.

A fleshy thing darted from the mass of antennae. The appendage laved my arm. "Witch," the monster hissed.

"I prefer to be called Sorcerer."

"Women are witches," the monster said.

I pressed my lips together to suppress the urge to shout a hex. After riding in a cramped Broompod through a meteor shower and a Martian dust tornado, my magical powers had dwindled, and my two-hundred-ninety-seven-year-old bones were too brittle to spar with a fungal monster.

A circular hole in the wall opened. A keypad appeared beside the hole. The readout flashed *Pay Token*.

I steeled my nerves and plunged my hand into the hole. It was the strangest sensation—as if my flesh was encased in a beast’s bowels. The wet squeezing changed to an excruciating jab as the token previously implanted in my wrist was extracted. I couldn’t hold back a scream.

The keypad beeped. The readout flashed *Tune-Up*.

The metal door slid open. I stepped across the threshold. The door slammed shut behind me.

The cavern was wider and taller than I’d expected. Torches provided feeble light. Rocky walls flexed and *groaned* like a living creature. I’d heard that the tunnels smelled rank, but the stench was truly vile.

Walking briskly, I surveyed my surroundings and avoided stepping in bubbling puddles, but my socks were becoming moist.

Rounding a bend, I yelped in fright when I encountered a Glacies dragon with a mangy tail and blistered flanks. Glacies dragons didn’t breathe fire and weren’t much taller than horses but were capable of interstellar flight and had voracious appetites.

The celestial death-bringer swiveled his head and appraised me. Pupil slits dilated. Saliva dripped from his jaws.

“Putridum piscis,” I chanted. Instantly, my skin stank of rotting fish. Glacies dragons loathed seafood.

The dragon snorted and trotted forward.

Keeping my distance, I followed.

The dragon’s tail swayed, synchronizing with my heartbeat. The occa-

sional shudder and twitch mimicked my cardiac defect.

All Scarlet Sorcerers were born with septal defects, holes in our hearts we filled with paranoia.

The cavern narrowed. Lantern light flickered in the distance.

Seven humanoids with glowing eyes greeted us. “Lie on a gurney,” they said.

The dragon urinated on the floor while I reclined on the cot furthest from him.

A huge cauldron hung from a rack over a crackling blaze. I welcomed the sweltering heat. The yearning for warmth was in my DNA because my ancestors hailed from the Sahara—a desert I’d only seen in videos. Tariffs for visiting Earth were horrifically expensive.

A humanoid pointed at shot glasses filled with glimmering liquid. “You want beauty or vigor?”

“Vigor.” I’d rather retain my wrinkles and warts than die a gorgeous invalid. If I didn’t gain strength, I was certain to succumb to my grief for Arachnissa.

She handed me a glass. The chartreuse syrup tasted like tar. I gagged on the last sip. My lips were numb.

The humanoid grabbed my left foot, yanked off the sock, and pinched the toes. “Does that hurt?”

“No.” I felt nothing but fear.

I heard the dragon grunting. I tried to turn my head but couldn’t move.

Humanoids grabbed surgical cannulas from the cauldron, hollow spears as long as my arms. Two cannulas jabbed my hips. One thrust

into my chest.

Ectoplasm surged into my body. As spiritual energy sizzled into my cranium, my brain was flooded with flashes of opalescent light. The beams honed and became red and amber stars swirling in a trippy daze. It was the most amazing high I'd ever experienced. Mesmerized, I wanted to swim into the vision and become a star.

Suddenly, I was jolted from the delicious languor by a scream. The stars disappeared, replaced by a vision of a woman giving birth in a sterile, metal clad room. The human physicians who tended to her were garbed in surgical scrubs, their faces obscured by spatter shields. The patient's head was shaved. A tattoo on her forehead marked her as a mare—a woman born into the breeder cast. She howled as her body bucked from a contraction. Blood gushed from her womb. When the babe was finally born, the hemorrhaging increased. The doctors couldn't stop the bleeding. One of them fastened a helmet over the dying patient's head. Her body twitched as ectoplasm was harvested.

I wanted to weep but was still paralyzed.

My brain was flooded with another soul's memories as the humanoids pumped more ectoplasm through the cannulas.

I saw an old man watch his wife die. He keened like an animal. His suffering made me think of my own loss. Arachnissa still spoke to me in dreams, but I couldn't conjure her when I was awake.

Familiar—the word couldn't capture the intensity of our bond. When we met as co-workers at the International Space Station's main greenhouse, I was reclusive, but Arachnissa's interest in herbalism and her kindness won my trust. She became my soulmate—a relationship that lasted eighty-six years. Sorrow had driven me to this horrid cave.

The grieving man vanished, and the swirling stars reappeared. But I felt no blissful high. I was alone with the realization that I hadn't come to Mars for vigor—I'd tried to kill myself.

The stars burned brighter, shifting until their pattern resembled Arachnissa's face. The beams of light became three-dimensional.

Seeing Arachnissa in the Medbay was traumatic and strangely cathartic. Since I was human, I was not allowed to visit Arachnissa while she was in hospice care. Healthy Space Arachnids frequently lived longer than humans, but she had ovarian cancer.

The urge to embrace her was unbearable, but I could only watch the vision progress. Arachnissa's legs were limp, dangling from the Medbay sling. Her cephalothorax and abdomen weren't moving.

The Space Arachnid physician who tended to Arachnissa pressed a button on the wall. A motor *whirred*. A dome that dangled from the ceiling lowered. The physician excreted silk from her spinneret and used it to secure the dome to Arachnissa's head. Mercifully, the hallucination finally stopped.

Delirious, I focused on my surroundings.

A humanoid leaned over my cot.

"Why? Why was I given Arachnissa's ectoplasm?" I sobbed.

The humanoid chuckled. "The spider thought you'd be lonely without her."

Another humanoid jabbed a second cannula in my chest. *Lubb-dubb, lubb-dubb*, my heart throbbed faster.

The sorcery spackle infusion soothed my sorrow, but I still wept when the cannulas withdrew.

The dragon roared. Light shot from his mouth, crescendoing in a percussive blast.

When the smoke cleared, the dragon had transformed. His blisters

were gone. His scales glistened. The dragon sneered. “Couldn’t afford transmogrification, granny?” he said.

Though I was a Scarlet Sorcerer, I usually avoided conflict. But the gleam in his eyes taunted me. I leapt from my cot and bit his neck. The flesh tasted like second chances. I drank deeper, sucking luminous life essence.

The dragon struggled.

I held him tighter, with the strength of a Space Arachnid.

His hide wrinkled as I drained transmogrification fluid.

As I slurped, my body morphed. Skin transformed into scales. My spine stretched. Wings grew from my back.

The dragon stopped breathing.

I unlatched my canines.

The humanoids laughed. One picked up the dead dragon’s carcass and tossed it in the cauldron.

The fungal monster was guarding the door when I crawled from the cavern. It opened its mouth and *chittered*.

I roared, and the monster let me pass.

I flew towards Earth, eager to see the planet for the first time, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Arachnissa.

Even immortal dragons suffered grief from lost love.

A Shore of Distant Sand

by Matthew Wilson

Children rarely see a sunrise
Gold washes clean the land
But now the chance of excitement
To walk a shore of distant sand.

Eye spy is a chore by seven
As woods whiz past the glass
Mother starts her early drinking
And father screams at cars that pass.

By noon the sun bakes upon the sea
The first chore is emptying the trunk
As baby builds a sandcastle
Its glittered foundations there have sunk.

Father waves at watching mermaids
As mother rolls her eyes and sighs
Applying sunscreen against dragonfire
Now winged shadows fill the skies.

The seas are filled with monsters
Beneath the sand are things that gore
So mother packs the car with shells
Leaving only footprints on the shore.

Baby learns new swear words now
As father shouts at passing cars
The beach is hot and dangerous
So next year is a holiday on Mars.

Dear Xutuix?!

by J.D. Harlock

“Dear *¥+¥!*(Xutuix?!)

We really appreciated the time it must've taken you to send us your experimental essay (short story?), but I'm afraid that on this occasion we're going to have to reject it. We don't usually respond to submissions, but luckily this time, we decided that underrepresented writers (you mentioned you were a resident alien?) should get some sort of feedback on how to improve their writing moving forward, and hopefully, one day, attain the heights that'll allow their work in our pages.

Now we here at The Endless Fantasias of Arcane Loes try to make sure that our feedback mostly zeroes in on what works about a piece, and I have to say you've got something unique and very, very interesting going on here. I don't think I've ever read a piece about a day in the life of “€£¥” (CeYx? Ceux? Am I using the term right?) as a grak-splor-g rustler on “&* & *##\$%^” and I'm not sure I ever will again. We don't usually recommend that writers send in their first drafts or works-in-progress or preliminary notes, but we think you should really capitalize on this underrepresented perspective and maybe work on some of the other minor stuff that's holding your writing back, like spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I really, really think if you really invest the time into at least one of these things, there'll really be a noticeable improvement in the quality of your work and you can really start tapping into that (potential) potential that I'm certain you probably have.*

I completely understand that this may be frustrating to hear at this stage of your writing divertissement, but I think you can take comfort in the point of view that this is only one award-winning editor's opin-

ion. Other editors at smaller small press magazines may disagree, and I would recommend you take their feedback almost as seriously as mine. I'm afraid that art just hasn't been decolonized yet in the old U.S. of A., and we're unfortunately still working off arcane (love using this word) frameworks that only emphasize western storytelling values like story, plot, and character. I'm sure where you're from, there's a whole other dimension of art that we can't wait to explore someday, and you can rest assured that we took that into full consideration when judging your piece.

And I guess that's all we have to say!

We apologize we took so long to get back to you. The piece took some time to parse through. Quite some time, actually, but we're really glad that we were able to somehow get back to you on this. We know you opted-in for our premium deluxe fast response option with premier responses from every single one of our twelve volunteer editors, but for some reason, we couldn't process your payment. The app glitched and said it couldn't recognize your currency (something about it not existing), but there's no need to worry, we've messaged tech support, and they'll get your money to us in no time!

Thank you for your (INSERT COMPLIMENT) work

We ~~appreciated~~ acknowledge your piece, and ~~we welcome you to submit again~~ hope you find a ~~better home~~ outlet for it.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask....

Actually....

You know what?

Since the other editors aren't going to even bother to look over this one, I'm going to be a bit blunter than I usually am about these things.

So...

Are you trolling us?

That's what I thought at first. But who would spend this kind of money to hear back from a bunch of Eng lit majors who started a blog for ten dollars? Honestly, we didn't put up all these payment options expecting someone to buy the full, FULL package, but it's really hard out there for a revolutionary intersectional small press these days.

I really, really appreciate that you thought we were worth it, though, so, for once in my career, I'm going to give it to you straight:

What the fuck was that?!

I mean, what the fuck?!

This was just wrong.

Why would you, in your right mind, think this was worthy of our time?! My time!

Where do I even begin?

Would you even understand if I did?

Can you?

I don't know.

Maybe there's a language barrier here? Or a cultural difference? I don't fucking know

I just know that you don't send a story about the mating rituals of "interplanetary time dilators" on the Carpathian beat in the mean streets of Galaxar! Whatever the fuck that means because I don't fucking know!

Do you?

Do you know what the fuck any of this means?

Well, I don't think so.

Here, let me prove it to you.

Tell me, what is a €£¥?*

Or a grak-splor-g?!

Or grak-splor-g rustling!

And how do you pronounce "&&*##\$%^?", if you can call this (or really any of these) sounds real words?! If you can all any of these symbols sounds!*

I mean, you can't even pronounce them in English!

And it doesn't end there.

None of this, I repeat NONE OF THIS, is realistic or even makes the tiniest chromosome of sense!

Why do the €£¥\$ have ejaculatory suction proboscises instead of faces? And if they have ejaculatory suction proboscises for faces, where do their six million transdimensional eyes fit?! Inside of them?! And if they have ejaculatory suction proboscises with six million transdimensional eyes inside of them, why have them cry from their rectal orifices!*

Explain! Explain!

I mean, come on!

It doesn't even factor into the story!

I think ...

Anyways, I'm almost certain that some other publisher out there would ~~love to~~ have received this.

~~*Respectfully,*~~

Acknowledging-ly,

The Editor(s)"

On finishing the letter, *¥+¥!* found it harder to breathe—through all the ejaculation. Having taken time off his pressing work as an inter-planetary time dilator to try and make it as a writer on his favorite planet Earth—away from all that Carpathian beat on the mean streets of Galaxar—this hit them particularly hard. But, unable to find the mating call to express their unbridled anguish, they turned their ejaculatory suction proboscis away in shame, for their six million transdimensional eyes could not bear to look at the rejection letter any longer.

A *grak-splor-g* mooed far off in the distance as the €£¥* rectal orifices began to liquidate.

Alien Blob Dissolves Window

by Denny E. Marshall



Uterati

by Cassandra Sims Knight

Luisa was a testament to the old adage that monstrosity is only skin deep. To look at her skeletal frame, beard of tentacles, and unearthly pink eyes, you might assume Luisa was the top of the food chain at Baudouin Academy. But fear is an unstable sort of power. And one need only convince a monster they haven't any power to take it.

Sitting alone at lunch, Luisa's tentacles were an ombre of unearthly orange, coated with a thick layer of Cheetos cheese dust. Luisa picked up the neon morsels with her tentacles before depositing them into her mouth in a xylophonic move. Her mother would have shuddered to watch Luisa lick her tentacles one by one.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you junk food is bad for your skin?" Bianca stood opposite Luisa, the darting eyes and mutterings of the fey populace in full display behind her.

With her spritely blue eyes and meticulously curated ensemble, Bianca was widely considered to be the hottest fey in school, if you bought into fey-normative beauty standards. A stark contrast to Luisa's imposing size and frizzy mane of black hair, which she kept slicked back into a thick braid that fell past her waist.

"Gross," Bianca said.

"Junk food is by far the best human invention to date, Bianca. We must celebrate the accomplishment of their little minds."

"I'm just saying, you could totes have worms," Bianca said. A hush that fell over the cafeteria as creatures from all walks of folklore turned around in their seats to watch the Icelandic house elf verbally challenge the school's first and only Cthulhu. The last person who had

referenced worms in Luisa's presence had suffered the temporary loss of his right arm in what the Administration had deemed an "unfortunate accident," seeing as they were able to grow it back.

Luisa's pink eyes gleamed as she surged forward over the table in a blur to brush the tips of Bianca's bottle-blond hair with her tentacles. By the time Bianca yelped and jumped back, Luisa had already returned to her seat with little more than a whoosh. Bianca's peevishness looked cartoonish as she tried to saunter away without looking terrified.

Fey were surprisingly easy to intimidate when you're part of a genus referred to as the "Immortal Gods." But the truth was that Luisa secretly wished for a mob bearing pitchforks. High school was dreadfully boring and she needed the exercise.

Luisa continued to read her book and only raised her gaze at the sound of a chair scraping across the floor. The handsome loner with the brooding brown eyes sat across from her. A constant topic of conversation, especially among the female population, all the afterschool covens had cast their best love spells and slipped their most potent potions into his drinks to no avail. No one knew anything about him, not even his genus, granting him a tenuous social status hinged on mystery.

"Bullies are the worst," he offered.

"It is the nature of fey. They try to cover their true face," Luisa pointed out, her tentacles enveloping a CapriSun to wash down the Cheetos.

"Like Dorian Grey?" motioning to her book. Luisa nodded her head

and sat back. “Luisa, right?” he asked. One tentacle twitching with suspicion, she nodded again. “I’m Frank.” She’d sat alone at lunch since she came to Baudouin. Truth be told, she liked it better that way. Those cackling witches never talked about anything but getting their wandas waxed. As far as Luisa was concerned that kind of thing just led to screeching and possibly biting.

“So tell me the lowdown on this place,” Frank said.

Luisa pondered the request before replying, “Everyone here knows to keep a distance from me. Except you.”

“Bianca just came right at you.”

“Meanness is a kind of distance. Besides, she cast a protection spell right before, I could taste it on her.”

“I can smell a spell on you. Can’t quite place it though, an enchantment maybe ...”

Luisa sniffed the air and the tips of her tentacles vibrated. There weren’t many fey at Baudouin who could smell the coming ragnagar on her. Most other creatures registered her oncoming puberty as perfume, but to Luisa it smelled of rot, similar to the stink of certain powerful enchantments. It was a rare creature indeed that could suss out a spell with his nose. “What manner of beast are you?”

Frank leaned forward, “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Luisa tilted her head to the side and her beard of tentacles swung with her. “You are either very brave or very stupid.”

“Can’t I be both?”

Luisa conceded, “They usually are.”

“Well, I’ve met Cthulhu before.”

The story went that Cthulhu had all but vanished from the world, gone into hiding after the release of the Lovecraft Articles. While the Cthulhu had disappeared entirely from the world, the Cthulha had only disappeared into their own glammers, as Luisa’s mother had, becoming ghosts in the world. Their unique ability to hide in plain sight meant they had refused to follow the Cthulhu into hiding, a fissure the Cthulhu referred to as a civil war, but the Cthulha remembered as a revolution. The ability to glamour their appearance into something more socially acceptable only emerged when Cthulha girls began puberty. Any Cthulhu sightings in the last 100 years were limited to pre-ragnagar Cthulha or those Cthulha without a handle on their glamour abilities.

“Stupid it is.” Luisa eyed him with suspicion. “The Cthulha are all that is left.”

The bell rang and Frank slunk off with a shrug.

* * *

“Have you seen this?” Frank tossed a notebook on the counter next to Luisa in third-period Biology.

Luisa peered at the spotted black notebook before continuing to examine the specimen splayed out in front of her like a horror show Tinkerbell. “Are the Fey protesting this unit of Anatomy again?” Every year some group of fey protested the fairy dissection unit, despite the descendants being nothing more than pests.

“No, Bianca put together a petition to get the most dangerous creatures expelled, namely you. Her committee is called Fey for the Equitable Treatment of Gentle Folk.”

“Ugh, petition, pitchfork, they’re all the same, weapons of mass fear.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“It matters not to me. Bianca is an idiot, that is punishment enough.”

Luisa flittered her tentacles at him as she sliced an incision down the torso of the preserved fairy specimen.

“What if they kick you out?” Frank’s eyes grew anime big.

Scoffing, Luisa said, “You say that like she has that power. You give her far too much deference.”

Frank snapped his fingers before pulling two dollars out of his back pocket, “That’s a two-dollar word if I ever heard one.”

Snatching at the cash with the snap of a tentacle while her hands remained engaged in science, she said, “You should up the rate. I know many words and like money.”

“So, really, what are you going to do?” Frank said, leaning forward to prop his head up with his hand.

“Nothing.” Luisa looked into the microscope positioned to the right of her dissection specimen.

“Nothing? Big, bad Cthulhu and you do nothing?”

“Cthulha, dumbass, and I will not wage war over a tiny mind such as Bianca. She has no real power. This is all pomp and circumstance.”

“Cthulha?” he said with a twinkle in his eye that looked like he was baiting her.

The Cthulha had been largely left out of their own history, which had led to the common misconception that Cthulhu was just one gnarly guy with a reputation for being heartless, angry and, well, immortal. Instead of brooding about being made invisible, the Cthulha leaned in. Not many creatures can claim a bloodless coup that pulled them out from under the yoke of oppression by effectively going into hiding in plain sight. But, despite gaining a kind of independence, the widespread erasure of the contributions of the Cthulha to the race, biologi-

cal and otherwise, had been calculated, effective, and lasting.

“As in the feminine?” Buzzing at him, Luisa continued, “Now go away. Your presence is causing consternation.”

“I’m out of dollars.”

“Then you may start a tab,” Luisa said, turning back to her biology specimen.

* * *

Frank’s continued attentions sent Luisa looking in the basement student files to discover the mystery of his origins. Not only did Frank seem to know far more of Luisa than your average fey folk, he fascinated Luisa in a way that she had never experienced before. She longed for the chase and, yet, didn’t want to eat him.

Luisa shook her tentacles, brushing the thought to the side. After she plugged into the mainframe with an ill-gotten passcode that may have involved an AV sprite and certain threats, Luisa discovered that Frank had no file.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Luisa murmured.

“What’s curious?” a voice said behind her.

Bianca stood there in all her dainty Elvin glory. She peered around Luisa’s outstretched tentacles at the screen. Bianca smirked, “You aren’t the first student to look for an angle in Frank’s file, but you are the last I expected.”

“This is not what you think,” Luisa started.

“Uh huh, sure it isn’t. That record,” Bianca said, propping herself up on the desk next to the console, “was hexed out of existence. Even the most powerful Uterati magicks couldn’t bring it back.”

Luisa shook her head with a swing of her tentacles. “Uterati?” Luisa knew a great many ancient secrets, but had never heard of that fey.

Bianca rolled her eyes. “The Uterati? The most powerful witches in human history? Keepers of the secret of true female power? None of this ringing a bell?” Bianca spoke so often with inflection that it was sometimes hard to tell whether she was asking an actual question. “Big bad war sent the planet into an extinction-level event, which led to monkey era that we now currently live in? The one the humans think was a meteorite?”

Luisa shook her head.

Bianca grinned and dove in. “Legend goes, an ancient war between the sexes ended in a truce, but boys being boys, they did not honor the treaty. There was a magical loophole written in, of course, a way for women to counteract that inevitability, releasing us from our slavery. Some mythical spell lost to the ages. The Legend of Having It All. Diehards are still searching for it.”

“Sounds like fairytale hobblity-gosh, just some BS to make women feel big when they are small.”

Bianca shrugged. “The Uterati are known for their counter hexes on men. Some of the most powerful in the war of the sexes. My aunt was a member until they kicked her out for marrying a senator.”

“Why would that be cause for expulsion?”

“They have this whole female empowerment code. Male establishment is a big no no. I was going to join as my extracurricular until I discovered that little morsel and the kink it would put in my social life.”

“Yes, what girl in her right mind would choose powerful, tyrannical witches over the romantic charms of a high school nymph?”

Bianca rolled her eyes. “All I’m saying is better sorceresses than you

have tried and failed to find an angle on our dear boy Frankie.” Bianca hopped down off the desk and started gliding away toward the stairwell. “Besides, it’s a waste of time. I hear Frank has a worm phobia.”

Luisa growled, sending Bianca scurrying to the exit.

* * *

Luisa was given free reign over an unused corner of school property. Given her Cthulhic tendency to tear off appendages, the other students were not allowed in that corner. That left Luisa to stretch out her wings without fear of being seen.

On this day, Luisa was practicing her agility. She had magicked 3-foot-wide hoops 30 feet above ground to practice her transitions from ground to air. It required precise timing to make it through the hoops, as her wingspan was close to 15 feet. She managed a few runs before she heard someone clapping. She spun around in the air and dove toward the sound, landing square on the chest of one Handsome Frank, knocking him onto his back, her wings outstretched over him like a yawning bat.

“It’s true then? Beauty does drain the brain straight out your ears. Should I call you Feeble Francis?”

“Beauty?” Frank grinned.

The tips of Luisa’s tentacles blushed as she flapped her wings and landed a few feet from Frank’s prostrate figure. “I could have taken your head off.”

“Yeah, Jesse told me that story about his arm. Ouch.”

“He assaults me and somehow I’m the monster? Weep not for that cretin. I would have ended him if I didn’t think his future would be punishment enough.”

“What about you, Sibyl? Where does your future take you? A picket fence, a bunch of tentacles to feed?”

She flicked her wings in unison with her tentacles before she folded them up, the tips brushing the ground behind her. “Cthulhu children are a nightmare. I’d sooner shove hot coals up my own ass.”

“Charming.”

Luisa’s head snapped around and her wings burst away from her body. She shot into the air and landed on the other side of the clearing, slipping into her trench coat in one deft movement, her tentacles turning pink as Bianca emerged from the tree line. Luisa got enough grief about her tentacles and wasn’t keen on adding bat to the list.

“Hi, Frank. How’d you end up in the dark zone? Didn’t you see the signs?” Bianca said, sauntering across the clearing. In an era where school officials policed what girls wore, Bianca somehow still managed to always look like she was one short breeze away from London and France. Luisa, on the other hand, was born in elastic waistbands.

“Dark zone?” Frank inquired.

“Yeah, Headmaster Morris put a hex on this part of campus to keep out satellite surveillance,” Bianca pointed to the sky.

“Morris really wants to keep Luisa secret,” Frank said, sounding impressed. Bianca followed his gaze toward Luisa and Luisa felt a hot sensation in the tips of her tentacles that she’d never quite felt before. It was like anger, but when she was angry her chest heaved and she felt powerful. This made her want to dig her toe in the dirt and write poetry.

“You came here on purpose?” Bianca said, the revelation stunning her.

“Bianca, not everyone likes white bread and ham,” Luisa pointed out.

“Are you calling me a pig? *You’re* the beast. It’s hilarious you even

think you have a chance with our dear fey Frankie here. Did you know I found her breaking into the confidential files looking for angle on you?” Bianca said, her malicious gaze focused on Luisa.

Frank raised his eyebrows before turning to Luisa with a grin. “Checking up on me?”

“No other fey at this school can taste a spell on the air, a skill rumored to have died with the ancients.”

“Oh, they aren’t dead, my dear Luisa, merely underground,” Frank said with a devilish wink that left Bianca’s jaw gaping.

“Ew, gross,” Bianca said after her look of shock subsided.

“The Cthulha are notorious for the magic of their mating rituals,” Frank said playfully. “Someday soon Luisa will be the most sought-after girl at school.”

“As if,” Bianca stiffened. “Maybe for freaks with a worm fetish.”

As Luisa’s proclivity for dismemberment can attest, Cthulha have a limited range of patience. Even without the assistance of her wings Luisa moved at speeds incapable of being seen by eye or camera. By the time Bianca opened her mouth to scream, it was too late. Luisa squeezed Bianca’s jaw to a whimpering yelp and a flash of invisibility from the terrified house elf. “Before you insult my ancestors again, you would be wise to remember that if I wanted to tear you limb from limb, there would be no one within a thousand miles who could stop me.”

Luisa released the shocked girl, who fell back before scampering away. Luisa turned back to Frank, feeling sheepish but trying to look cool.

“Flowers? For me? You shouldn’t have,” Frank batted his eyes and held his hands over his heart. “I didn’t get you anything.”

Unaccustomed to flirting, Luisa grinned like a werehyena. “She’ll go straight to the Headmaster.”

“Then I did get you something. An alibi.”

* * *

Luisa had never been on a date, and the signs of her ragnagar’s arrival were picking up in frequency. Just the night before she had woken up in her third blood sweat of the week, and only last week she turned into Big Bird for 23 minutes. Her mother assured her this was all perfectly natural. She could look like anyone she chose once she had control of her glamour, not just beautiful women or fictional puppets.

Luisa set Frank down on the cliff he had directed her to. It overlooked the last remaining drive-in theater in the state. It was only a couple towns over but, not being accustomed to carrying another creature, Luisa was glad to give her wings a rest. Tonight’s showing was a double feature of the classic monster movies of the last century: *Re-Animator* and *The Thing* with a bonus short in between, *The Call of Cthulhu*. Luisa snorted at the lineup.

Frank disappeared into a bush to retrieve a stashed basket, complete with all the makings of a teen rom-com: a blanket, a thermos of hot cocoa, a Bluetooth speaker, and a picnic lunch (including a copious supply of Cheetos). Luisa sat down on the blanket, her wings splayed out in a stretch she rarely allowed herself.

“They are quite beautiful,” he nodded toward her wings as he fiddled with the Bluetooth speaker.

Luisa’s eyes narrowed. Thin and veiny like a bat’s, Luisa had never heard anyone call her wings beautiful. Powerful, impressive, or intimidating, but never beautiful. “That speaker will never pick up the Wifi at this distance,” Luisa said, nodding down to the parked cars below.

“I gave it a little boost with the help of an old Uterati spell,” he replied,

handing her a mug of hot cocoa.

“It was my understanding that the Uterati had a strict ‘No Boys Allowed’ policy,” Luisa said.

“They are far more accepting than their reputation would have you believe. Not all men are happy with the status quo,” Frank purred as Luisa slurped down her cocoa.

“Accepting? I heard the last war between the sexes prompted a mini-apocalypse,” Luisa said.

Frank raised an eyebrow. “It was a simple glamour, actually. The glamour is the bread and butter of the Uterati. I know, I know, you’ll probably say it’s the trademark of the Cthulha, but legend has it the Uterati gave that ability to the Cthulha.”

Frank started to go fuzzy. Luisa would have corrected him, but her mouth felt like clay. As she struggled to keep her eyes open, Frank grew more than fuzzy and started growing tentacles.

“Until we meet in the Dreamlands,” Frank said, both his faces blurring in a smile. A common ancient Cthulhu farewell, the Dreamlands are a realm only the Cthulhu and the world’s most powerful mages can travel to in a waking state.

“Oh, hell no,” was all Luisa managed to say before the world went dark.

* * *

When Luisa woke, she was tethered by chains to the floor of what looked to be some abandoned airport hangar. She was chained on top of a pentagram drawn in what smelled like pig’s blood. An altar had been erected at the pinnacle of the pentagram. It was cluttered with candles and jars of colorful ingredients surrounding an unconscious Bianca, arranged like a Disney princess. Her arms and legs were fas-

tened with thick leather belts. “What the eff?” didn’t quite seem to cover it.

“Now, now,” Frank’s voice came from behind her. “Not in mixed company.”

“Please, I spared you the uck,” Luisa said with instinctive snark. Her chains rattled as she tried to swing around to scan the room.

“You’ve been out for quite a few hours,” a female voice from the shadows said. She sounded impatient and bored. “We would have expected you to metabolize the sedative quicker.”

“There’s no reason to be fussy,” another female voice said when Luisa growled. “You won’t be doing anything you regret.”

“Yes,” Luisa seethed, “because people are kidnapped and forced to cuddle rabbits and braid hair all the time.” She tried to keep her voice unshakable and mean while she searched the edges of the shadows for an escape route. The only thing Luisa could make out beyond the circle of light was the outline of an old Cessna prop plane with flat tires over her left shoulder.

A Cthulhu emerged from the shadows. He wore black pants and no shirt, his pale, iridescent skin stretched taut over his muscles and bones like he was wearing someone else’s skin. Like Luisa and her mother he had a mane of jet black hair and a beard of tentacles, but unlike her he had two curved goat horns and a not insubstantial grove of chest hair.

“You won’t regret this. I promise,” Frank’s voice emerged from the Cthulhu’s mouth.

“Oh, Handsome Francis, how ...” Luisa stopped and thought it over, “comely you are.”

The Cthulhu are not known for their deep sense of irony, so Frank

growled a quick warning as his three compatriots emerged from the shadows behind him. The women wore floor-length black robes with hoods that fell over their eyes. The only thing visible were the tips of their satin pumps and French manicured nails.

“Guess that explains your perplexing Cthulhu skills,” Luisa said to Frank.

“My mother was a Cthulha.”

“And your father?”

“Puck,” Frank said with a fiendish purr that bordered on a growl. “I was surprised you couldn’t sense it. The magnetic pull was overwhelming at times.”

Luisa scoffed, “Because nothing says romance like a chained woman.”

The hooded figure in the middle stepped forward, putting her hand on Frank’s bony shoulder. “We needed a little subterfuge to get you here, and Frank required a face with which to woo. We gave him that little glamour so he could unify the genders of the Cthulhu in exchange for help with a spell that’ll put our names in the Uterati handbook.”

“Unify?” Luisa’s eyes flashed, her tentacles shaking in impending laughter. “Don’t you mean submit?” It was well known that Cthulha were taught to flee at the first sight of a Cthulhu. Getting out from under the thumb of the Cthulhu the first time was no small feat, and it would take much more than a glamour to woo Luisa. The hooded figures appeared to glance at each other, though what they could see through their draping fabric was anyone’s guess.

“OMG, you guys,” the one on the left said as she pulled back her hood to reveal a splash of red hair and a face full of makeup. “This ambiance is just too very.”

“Put your hood back on, Patricia,” hissed the one in the middle.

“I’m with Patsy, Margaux,” the one on the right said, revealing her shining brunette locks and perfectly shaped cheekbones.

“Can we not just, for once, stick to the G-D plan, Karen? The Council will never take us seriously unless we do something right. Show them what kind of witches we can be,” Margaux said, pulling her hood off her platinum locks in a fury. All three of them glowed with the ethereal shine of a Uterati glamour, a little trick they actually stole from another unsuspecting Cthulha over a millennium ago, not the other way around. They looked to be not much older than Luisa, but you never could tell with an organization known for their chicanery.

“Hey, Three Bustkateers! After kidnapping and false imprisonment, I’m pretty sure God doesn’t give a crap if you say goddamn,” Luisa pointed out.

They turned to face Luisa, Margaux’s look of disgust doing its best to bore a hole in Luisa’s forehead. Margaux shook off her rage and plastered on a tight smile. “As I was saying before Tweedle Dummies went off book, the Uterati have been trying to gather the supplies for this spell for like a millennium. It will make us legends if we complete it. But the main ingredient is the magic of a Cthulha, and they are hard to come by. We saw a unique opportunity to succeed where the elders had failed—”

“They’ll have to promote us then!” Patsy interjected gleefully.

Sighing at the interruption, Margaux continued, “So, in exchange for corralling us a Cthulha for our spell, we taught Frank our glamour magicks so he could unify his race.”

Luisa shook her head, “Okay, one, all great love stories start with a kidnapping. Two, Prince Smarming over there isn’t expected to understand the rules of consent, but the OG feminist Uterati damn well should.” Luisa held up her arms and shook her chains. “And, three, what exactly does Bianca have to do with all this?”

“The spell also requires the blood of a rival,” Patsy informed her.

“And you thought I would be happy to eliminate mine?”

“It’s only a few drops,” Margaux said. “Can we just get on with the freaking spell already?” Margaux huffed, not used to having to explain herself.

By the time they had set up the five-pointed salted perimeter around Luisa, Frank was leaning against a concrete pillar opposite her, grinning like the depraved god of the old order he was.

“It won’t hurt,” he said as the Uterati scurried around in preparation. “I looked the spell over. It’s just a knowledge spell from some ancient Cthulhic text. The Uterati are well known for spell appropriation—”

“Hey,” Karen and Patsy said in unison.

Frank paid them no mind as he continued, “The book has spells from hoodoo blood magicks all the way to house elf cleaning fixes. They do have a couple heavy hitters, this just isn’t one of them. That’s why they only need a few drops of Bianca’s blood and not her head.”

“A small price to pay to know the secret of having it all!” Margaux said.

“Wanting less?” Luisa replied, her tentacles trilling in irritation.

“Being a man?” Frank suggested to a chorus of groans.

“What’s going on?” Bianca interrupted, trying to sit up only to discover she was chained to the altar. “Luisa, what’s going on?”

“Nobody has it all,” Luisa replied, ignoring Bianca. “Men may control the capital, but their families resent or fear them. Women are loved, but have no capital. You want something that doesn’t exist. You want a fairytale.”

The Uterati froze and stared at Luisa. Finally, Karen said, “Who

doesn't love a fairytale?"

"Luisa, who are these people?" Bianca demanded.

Luisa smirked, "Don't you recognize your future boyfriend, Francis?"

Frank grinned with his tentacles as he walked over to Bianca, who started screaming.

"Do something!" Bianca screamed. "Rip them limb from limb like the monster you are."

Luisa shook her chains. "A monster in chains is no monster at all."

"I didn't come here for a philosophy lesson, Luisa," Bianca huffed.

"History, and you didn't come here at all. You were brought here against your will, same as me. Why don't you monster out then?"

"Huldufolk are gentle fey," Bianca said in a pout.

"With crap powers," Frank pointed out. Bianca stuck her tongue out at him.

"No talk of expulsion now, is there, Bianca?" Luisa said. Bianca opened her mouth as if about to say something, but shut it, thinking better of it.

Luisa remained silent for the remainder of their occult preparations. The same could not be said for Bianca. While fading in and out of her Huldufolk invisibility in a panic, she made all manner of threats, including the ever popular "Do you know who my father is?" and "If you don't release me at once, I will personally call the Minister of Magic and have him bind you for the next millennium." None had the intended effect.

Meanwhile, Patsy dipped every single one of Luisa's tentacles in some

organopolymer that smelled both of putrefaction and burning rubber and, since her tentacles were her primary sensory organs, it was all Luisa could smell. Karen then covered Bianca head to toe in the same organopolymer by pouring a bucket of it over the altar.

As the Uterati started to chant the old Cthulhic, Luisa tried to focus on the words. The organopolymer was making her lightheaded, so she only caught every other word. She did catch a few hails to the Nameless Mist and have pity great Star Mother. She tried the only thing she could think of, which was to sing the Cthulhic lullaby her mother used to sing her.

Bianca had started to glow. Luisa started rubbing her eyes as if to reboot them. Bianca sat up, doused in an unearthly bright blue light. Bianca turned to Luisa. "You make your own monster." But she said it without opening her mouth. When she did open her mouth, a white light shot out, blinding Luisa.

#

When Luisa opened her eyes again, the world came in stills, like a strobe on reality. Video and audio weren't syncing up. Verisimilitude was getting illogical. To her left stood Bianca and to her right was a stone-cold fox with perfectly bushy eyebrows and enchanting silver eyes. The Uterati stood on the far side of the altar, bickering like a bunch of old biddies. Frank's fugly mug was nowhere to be seen. The hunk knelt beside her. "She's awake," he said, voice like honey and jasmine.

"Hey, handsome. You should call me in a few years, I hear this ragnar is worth the wait," Luisa said, still a little drunk on the magicks of the spell.

"She's definitely delirious," Bianca said, crouching down to snap her fingers in Luisa's face. Luisa half-heartedly batted her hand away.

"What makes you say that?" the handsome stranger asked.

“Luisa’s idea of flirting involves dismemberment,” she said, standing up. The handsome stranger held his hand out to Luisa, who gingerly took it.

“Where did Frank go and how did Harry Styles get here?” Luisa asked, noticing her restraints were gone, as was that horrid organopolymer.

“I am Frank,” Harry Styles replied, an enchanting smile creeping on his lips. Frank’s new face had an ethereal quality that made it hard to look away. The previous Uterati glamour may have made him handsome, but this new spell had made him mesmerizing.

“What happened?” Luisa said.

“The spell didn’t work. Or, well, it didn’t do what they thought it did,” Frank replied. His new face grinned, like he’d been wearing this one all along. A true chameleon, Frank seemed to be at home in whatever form he took.

“Women don’t have it all, I take it?” Luisa snorted.

“No, Bianca wasn’t quite the rival she appeared to be,” Frank informed her. Bianca looked down at her feet. “Turns out Bianca might just have a warm feeling or two about you after all.”

Luisa raised an eyebrow at Bianca, who stammered, “And take a look at this.” Bianca pulled out a hand mirror and held it out to Luisa.

As Luisa snatched the small metal compact from Bianca’s outstretched arm, Frank blurted, “Our ragnagar began.”

“Our?” Luisa said. “Did you start your period, Frank?” Frank looked smug while Luisa looked into the mirror, but she didn’t see herself staring back. “Who the crap is that?” Luisa gasped. In the mirror was a human girl about her age with raven hair, alabaster skin, and piercing lavender eyes.

“That’s your glamour,” Bianca told her. “Think of her as your inner light.”

“Like your inner light?” Luisa balked, referencing the Huldufolk light-show Bianca gave during the spell.

“What is visibility without light?” Bianca replied with a shrug. “My mom always said being a house elf had its hidden secrets.”

“Is that what bunked up the spell? Your hidden secrets?”

“It may have contributed to the result,” Frank interjected, “but the spell was never going to work the way they thought it would. Spells require precision,” he said, thumbing towards the still bickering trio, “and the three stooges over there lack a certain attention to detail. No wonder the Council put them on probation.”

Luisa raised an eyebrow, her gaze falling back on her strange new reflection. “She looks engineered,” Luisa remarked, holding the tiny mirror at different angles to get a wide-angle look at her landscape.

As she stared at her reflection, Luisa traced the edge of her face with her finger. She could feel her tentacles impeding her path, but the finger of her mirror fauna continued along her jawline with a wink. Luisa shivered, feeling like she wanted to terrorize that face in the mirror. It felt more like a Halloween costume than her inner self. Luisa snapped the mirror shut, handing it back to Bianca.

“Inner you is hot,” Frank blurted.

Luisa’s lip curled. “You’re still an asshole.”

Luisa concentrated as she forced her beauty to fade into plain features, dull eyes, blotchy caramel skin, and mousey brown hair but tentacle free. Bianca raised an eyebrow. “You would deny the gift of hotness?”

Luisa shrugged. “Adulation is an empty vessel. Besides that is not my

idea of beauty. It is enough for me not to be feared. I would like to try that public I've heard so much about."

Bianca nodded as she thought it over. In front of their eyes Bianca's skin started to break out into blemishes and wine-dark birthmarks covering large portions of her body. Baffled by Bianca's transition from hottest fey in school to awkward teenager, Frank and Luisa were rendered speechless. "Invisibility has its perks," Bianca explained. "Especially when you can hide just the ugly bits."

Luisa nodded. "I think we have all underestimated your Huldufolk talents." Luisa couldn't fault her for succumbing to the invisible visibility of beauty. No one ever came at a hottie with a mob and a pitchfork. Frank, for his part, remained a teenybopper.

They were startled by a loud crash from the altar. Margaux had swiped the various candles and bowls and buckets of organopolymer onto the floor with a howl, while the Uterati continued to bicker and point pristinely manicured nails at each other. Luisa went past Frank toward the altar. Karen yelped at the sight of Luisa heading straight for them and Margaux dropped the spell book. Luisa swooped it up and opened the book to the marked page. She examined the book while the Uterati tried to distance themselves from the Cthulha without startling her. Luisa looked up in a growl.

"I am not some wild cat. I will chase you no matter your exit strategy."

They froze.

"You mistranslated the Cthulhic," Luisa said, tossing the book back to Margaux. "It called for the blood of my worst enemy, not my rival. If you'd bothered to ask, I would have told you I fear nothing from Bianca. Perhaps you ought not meddle in magicks outside your skill."

"Did you know this would happen?" Margaux demanded of Frank.

"I mean, I knew it wouldn't work as you intended. A change in ingre-

dients is a roll of the dice," he shrugged. "But I'm a gambling man myself, so I saw no personal benefit in altering your course."

Luisa's face went cold and before he could react, Luisa sped over and popped him one in the nose. "You had no idea what would happen, you ass. Bianca and I could have been killed."

"The danger of that was acceptable," he said from the ground, his hand covering a bloody nose. "And the result was more than I could have ever hoped. I'll be hailed by my brethren for bringing the ragnagar back to the Cthulhu."

"There are more of you?" Luisa simulated a deep gag.

Frank rolled his eyes at her choking dramatics. "We went into hiding, Luisa, not the grave."

"What a crock," Margaux gaped. "The Council will never take us seriously now."

"Spells work in mysterious ways," Patsy said. "Sometimes they know better than us what we need."

Margaux gave her the evil eye to end all evil eyes, known to raze cities, destroy societies, feed the apocalypse. Along with their long tradition of powerful Uterati magicks, they were an organization also known for their silent treatments.

"Next time just ask," Luisa said. "You'd save yourself a lot of heartache."

"Please," Margaux scoffed, motioning her hand up and down Luisa's human form, "you got the good end of the deal. We're the ones who are going to have to answer to the Uterati Council if they ever find out about this little disaster. Quit your bitching."

"Take care not to mistake my mercy for weakness," Luisa said with a

growl. “I see any of you again, there isn’t a spell throughout eternity that could save you from my wrath.”

“Once a monster always a monster, eh?” Frank said, looking impressed.

“Monstrosity is only skin deep,” Luisa replied, unimpressed. “In the end, a monster is who you make them.”

“Come on, Luisa,” Frank said with an arrogant grin that misunderstood the sentiment. “I’ll show you the way out.”

“No thanks, Weinstein. We can make our own way out.”

“We?” Bianca asked, batting her eyes.

Luisa held her hand out, which Bianca took with a smile. Luisa picked Bianca up, causing her cheeks to redden. Luisa hovered a foot in the air as the dust swirled around the swing of her wings. Bianca held up her hand and snapped her fingers for dramatic effect as she turned them both invisible.

“Let’s go get some Cheetos,” Bianca’s disembodied voice said. “My treat.”

Luisa laughed and said to Frank, “See you in the Dreamlands, monster.”

The sound of her beating wings shot straight up before tearing through the flimsy aluminum hangar roof.

Objet d'art

by Claire Smith

You can make faces in the case: hollow
a pair of eyes, blot a bulbous nose,
and mimic a mouthy-wide smile
all with your index finger.

The hooves of stuffed horses rear up;
their manes and tails frozen in a cascade,
as if they want to slash their way through
the glass sheet and take off into the night.

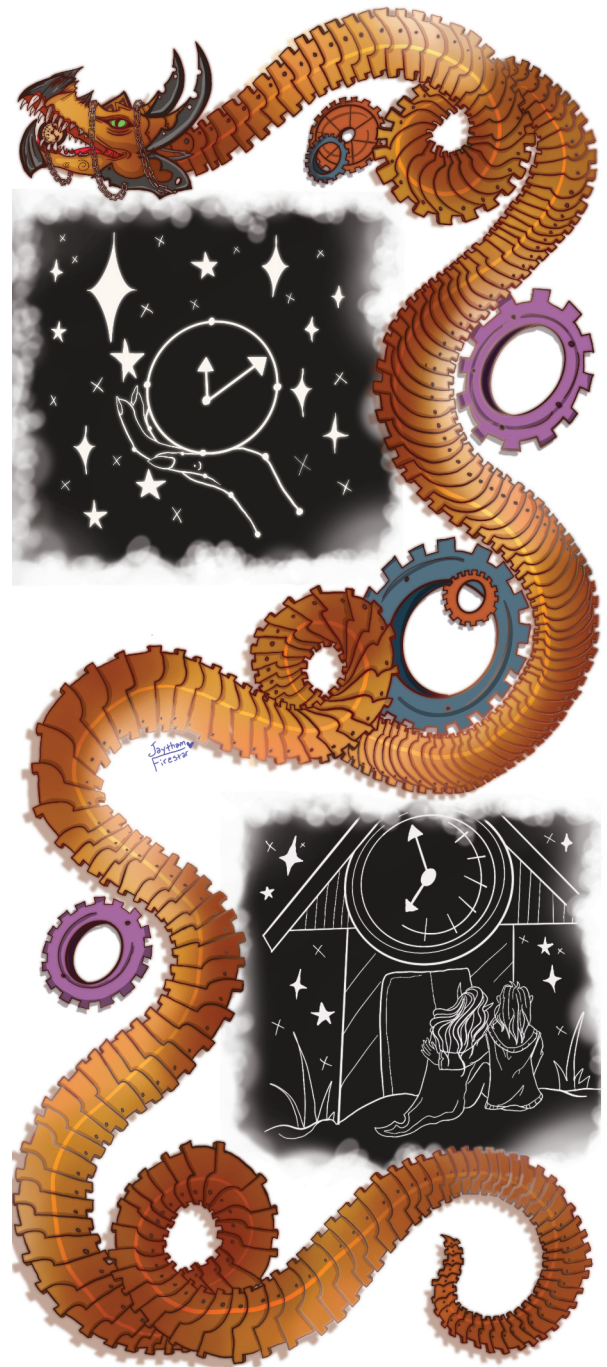
Threads join the spokes of the wheels
together to form a silk pattern
a mix of spiderwebs and dust.
You can just make out the innards

of the carriage where she sat
skirts sprawled across the cushions
a plush bed of faded velvet
where dust mites lounge.

A golden frame circled her face
when she'd look out of the window.
Gilded cherubs veiled in thick dust-
screens. They kept her safe once.

Twist of the Time Eater

by Jaytham Firestar



Matryoshka

by Matt McHugh

“I just don’t know what to do! Oh, Baba, please help me!”

“Calm yourself, child. All things happen as they must,” spoke the old woman in soft, reassuring tones. “The future cannot be shaped, only embraced once your heart is calm and your thoughts clear.”

“But how can I!” squeaked the girl, perhaps all of fifteen. “I can’t choose. I need your guidance, wise mother!”

“If it is the spirits’ will that you take one path or another, they will reveal it to us.”

The old woman placed a clay bowl on the table between them. The girl took a dull coin from her pouch and dropped it into the bowl. The woman did not move. The girl fished into the pouch and produced another coin for the bowl. Again, the woman remained still, save for a slight lift of one eyebrow. The pouch was emptied of its last two coins. With a broad smile the old woman swept the bowl from the table.

“Let us see what the signs can tell.”

The young girl was subjected to a battery of augurs and omens. Pinpricks and feathers, beads and ointments, incantations and talismans—she sat and stood and turned in circles until she was dizzy, breathing the fumes of hemlock branches tossed into the fire. At last, she was told to cast a double handful of obsidian tiles onto a stretch of vellum and, by studying the pattern, the old woman would divine a message echoing from the future. The elder frowned and squinted at the scattered stones for several minutes, then took up a charcoal stick and

wrote a quatrain on a strip of parchment. She read it aloud before passing it to the illiterate girl.

*One comes in dawn, one comes at dusk.
Such that offer comfort and confusion
Honeyed words mean less than the gift
That lingers even after it is gone*

The elder looked into the girl’s dilated, quivering eyes.

“Do you understand the meaning, child?”

“I think so. Yes. Yes, I see now! Pitor—his father is a dairy farmer—he gets up before sunrise. Mikhail is a poet and tells stories in the tavern at evenings. It comforts me to see them both, but I’m confused as to which to choose. Pitor flatters me, tells me I am beautiful and strong, but Mikhail sang me a song once, so I lovely I could almost hear it in the darkness as I slept. Oh, Baba! Yes! I understand! I must choose Mikhail!”

The girl beamed and blubbered, hugging the old woman, who patted her shoulder tolerantly. From a hidden fold in her apron, the girl retrieved a final copper coin and surrendered it willingly as she departed, bowing and professing her boundless gratitude.

Alone once more, the old woman quickly tidied up, reset her charms and parchments, tended the fire and oil lamps, made sure the curtain to the adjoining room was drawn (it never seemed wise to advertise that her lifestyle was—if only by a hair’s breadth—more comfortable than the peasantry she served). She was just about to check if there were

any clients outside too timid to knock, when the door swung open without warning. An armored captain stepped inside.

“Stay where you are, witch,” he commanded. His hand was on his sword hilt but he did not draw. “You are Baba Celia, the so-called wise woman of the meadows.”

It was a statement, not a question, but nonetheless Baba replied, “I am,” laboring to keep tremors of fear from her voice.

The captain walked behind her, handled objects around the room, and prodded her rudely, then he beckoned and two more armed guards entered. Ignoring her, they blundered past the closed curtain and a good deal of bang and clatter was heard until they emerged and one simply said: “Nothing, sir.”

“Do not move,” the captain again commanded. “Keep your hands on the table or I cut them off.”

He left and a moment later returned, followed by King Samo. She had never seen him before, but his dress and emblems were unmistakable. Again, she fought to keep fear and surprise from her voice:

“Welcome, my lord.”

“You tell the future, yes or no?” he asked as he sat, unbidden, at the table across from her.

“I do all that I can to read the signs,” she replied. “But I do not know what they portend. The spirits’ messages can be understood only by the one who asks the question.”

“She has the gift, my lord,” said a woman. From her position two paces behind, Queen Elena stepped to her husband’s side and spoke in an awed whisper. “I have heard from many of the cooks and washer-women of the prophecies of Baba Celia that have come true.”

The King snorted with derision, but he edged forward on the stool and leaned toward Baba Celia.

“This is no matter of which goat to buy or when to plant potatoes. Lands bequeathed to me are being invaded from the west. These are great matters, matters of war and sovereignty. Do your spirits know of such things?”

“The spirits see what we cannot,” she replied. “Just as a man standing on a mountain sees more than a man at the bottom of a well. They do not shape what is to come, only foretell.”

“Then tell me, if you can, where the next attack will come, and how I should marshal my forces against it. And take care, old woman. Your words may be at the cost of many lives.”

Armed guards at her side, the King and Queen of the realm before her, Baba Celia knew there was no retreat. She lit the incense, blew the feathers, closed her eyes, and chanted. She manhandled the King much less than a typical client, carefully placing the tiles into his open palm to be cast on the vellum. Once done, she read the pattern, speaking the message as she wrote out the quatrain, struggling to control the trembling of her hand.

There are branches, coming from the same tree.

They disturb the rivers, shadows on silver.

Empty voices call and get no answer.

The hawk takes wing but its claws are not empty.

The King stared in silence then said, “What the devil does that nonsense mean?”

The Queen knelt, bent over the scattered tiles. “My lord, don’t you see? The tree is the cross, the symbol of Salic Kings, with many branches as their forces cross Elbe under the silver moonlight. Their battle horns call out, but their allies do not come. It is then you, with

the red eagle as your symbol, swoop down upon them!”

Samo faced Baba Celia with a skeptical gaze. “You’re telling me the Germanic tribes will not join King Dagobert against me?”

“I tell only what I see. The meaning is beyond my small mind.”

After a whispered conference with his captain, the King departed with no further words, dropping three heavy gold tokens on her table as he went. The guards departed as well, but the Queen remained behind. Outside, Baba heard the sound of horses mounted. When the hoof falls faded into the distance, the Queen closed the door.

“Do you wish me to tell of your future, my lady? I can attempt to read—”

She cut Baba off with an abrupt gesture.

“Stop. You have no gift, and you don’t know the future.” The Queen smiled cryptically. “Yet,” she added. “But you are clever. And literate. Those are skills I can use. Come with me.”

Baba Celia was taken aback. She protested her unworthiness. She pleaded that the people of the village needed her. She proclaimed she had only rags to wear. Queen Elena accepted no excuse, and soon they were riding side-by-side in a horse-drawn cart, flanked by four spear-bearers, along the road leaving the cluster of huts where the locals—crouching behind trees and fences—watched them go with fascinated terror.

As they rode, the Queen spoke. She pointed out features of the land, describing what they once were or what they might become. She spoke of the people, their language and customs, as if she had studied them in detail. She spoke of her husband and his noblemen allies with a roll of her eyes, as if she thought them foolish children. She spoke easily, comfortably, as if she counted Baba Celia as a peer. That, most of all, disturbed Baba.

After the better part of an hour, they stopped. The Queen helped her down from the cart and led her along a path into the wood—commanding the guards to remain behind, sternly warning them not to eavesdrop on “women’s conversations of childbearing and motherhood.” The Queen continued to babble as they walked.

“My family sent me to this land when I was a child, betrothed to Samo, not yet a man himself. My father was a wealthy owner of many acres of Rhineland farm country, and I left behind a life of comfort for the loneliness of this wild. These ominous trees were my only playmates, and I used to imagine they were titans, frozen in time, and only I could hear their voices. It became a place of beautiful mystery to me, culminating with the day I discovered ... that.”

She pointed just off the path. At first, Baba Celia saw only another rocky outcrop, but as she drew closer, she made out a ring of metal embedded in the stone. From a sash beneath her robe, Elena drew a cross of dull metal, about the size of dagger, and fitted it upright into a triangular hole in the ring. She gave the crossbeams an aggressive twist with both hands. The metal ring lifted easily like a cellar door.

“I’ll go first,” said the Queen.

They descended a ladder of cold iron, Baba going down hand over trembling hand, all the while watching the circle of sky receding overhead until it seemed like the moon viewed through a keyhole. At the bottom, a string of sconces made an eerie green glow, lighting a corridor receding into blackness.

“Come along, grandmother,” she said in an encouraging tone.

“When I found this,” continued the Queen. “I knew it wasn’t natural, but I thought it had been recently excavated. I half-expected to find diamonds or gold. Then, I began to think it was ancient, something left behind by vanished peoples. In that, I was accidentally close to the truth.”

They came to a door, another circle of iron but perhaps twice the dis-

tance of Baba Celia's arm span. This time, the Queen opened it by turning a wheel set at its center. Inside, wall sconces burned so brightly Baba had to squint against the glare. They entered a large chamber with curved walls and many tables and shelves. Books and crates and strange artifacts were piled about the room.

"It is exactly what it appears to be," said the Queen. "A library. Someone, I thought, went to great trouble to preserve a hoard of knowledge. Once more, I was correct, but only accidentally."

They crossed the room and yet again Elena opened another titanic door.

"I was lucky to have been tutored in the languages of the Greeks and Romans, as well as the Franks and Slavs, and the makers of this place left copies of books in many languages. I have picked up bits and pieces over the years, though I am humbled to admit how little of it I understand. For a long time, I believed the ancients created this place to pass on lost arts. It took longer to comprehend an even more difficult truth: This place is not ancient."

The Queen touched glowing tiles on the wall by the final door and a shrill, chilling melody chimed out.

"What you are about to see may terrify you. It may seem monstrous, but I promise you it is as natural as the motion of the sun and moon across the sky." The door swung open with a rumble and hiss. "Except it is not an illusion."

Warm air rushed from the opening portal and a gilded light radiated out. Baba Celia stepped backward, rigid with fear. She wanted to close her eyes, to scream and run, but she was frozen in nightmare inertia. From the light, came a shadow. A shape. A human figure. It stepped forward, walking with slow, ghostly paces.

Baba averted her eyes, but could not long resist the urge to behold whatever this was. She saw its feet, fitted with leather slippers. Her

eyes rose up, along its clean gown of white linen. Upward, where a length of steely gray hair was bound in silver combs and colored ribbons. At last she beheld the face. A smiling face. A familiar face. A face it took her impossible moments to recognize as her own.

"My dear, have I stories to tell you," the other Baba Celia said.

The Queen and the other Baba Celia were as gentle and soothing as possible, but nonetheless it took Baba Celia a while until she was calm and cognizant enough to listen.

"As near as we can tell," explained the Queen as the first Baba Celia reclined on a padded couch and sipped an incredibly delicious variety of tea, "This place was built more than a millennium from now. At the time, there was the threat of a war so great that men believed all of humanity could perish. So, they made this sanctuary, this fortress of metal, buried deep underground to be safe from the raging fires they unleashed. And they filled it with all the knowledge they deemed necessary to begin the world anew. The library is arranged from the simplest of concepts, proceeding to more and more complex ideas, with copies of the same information in multiple languages."

"You see, they weren't sure who might survive the war," the other Baba Celia interjected. "And they were at least wise enough to realize a world rebuilt by strangers is better than none at all."

"I've spent years," the Queen continued, "Learning in thimblefuls from the incredible reservoirs here. The accomplishments of these future-men in knowledge and creation are astounding. But, like all men, their natural greed and belligerence eventually made them turn their ingenuity to war and they brought themselves to the brink of their own destruction."

"But how," asked Baba Celia slowly. Her thoughts were adrift in the calming sweetness of the tea. It had, she realized, a numbing quality

like the poppy but so much more refined. “How is this fortress from the future able to exist in the past?”

The other Baba Celia and the Queen looked at one another, sharing a moment of bewilderment.

“We’re not sure,” said the other Baba.

“It seems,” said the Queen, “The makers tried an experiment. There is a kind of invisible fire that powers everything here. In different forms it also powered their weapons, their ships, many things. It is an energy held captive in all objects and, once liberated, is wildly powerful and unpredictable. Again, as near as we can tell, they used a form of that energy to drive this entire metal fortress backward through time.”

“Imagine time as a river, and we ride in its stream,” the other Baba continued. “Imagine this chamber, also riding in the stream. They were able to exert such a force upon it that they pushed it against the flow, like a boat paddled upstream by invisible oarsmen of inexhaustible strength. Right now, as we stand in this place, we are being carried upstream against the current of time. When you leave this sanctuary, you will step into the past.”

“That’s impossible,” said Baba.

“You will see it is not,” said the other.

Whether she was becoming accustomed to her surroundings or the narcotic tea was wearing off (or taking full effect), Baba Celia, in the midst of all the reeling revelations, found herself growing more and more fascinated by the phenomenon at hand.

“But why,” she asked. “Why do this? Why would men who believed their world doomed send knowledge back into the past? Why are you here in this place? Why did you bring me?” The last question was addressed, with a pleading gesture, to her other self, who seemed gently amused.

“The reason men built this place and sent it on its backward journey, and the reason we brought you here is the same: to warn those in the past against future dangers. Isn’t that what you’ve spent years pretending to do, Wise Woman of the Meadows? Now, you can do it truly.”

“How?”

“Because you know the future. You know that today King Samo will come to see you, seeking foreknowledge of a battle. Now, instead of your usual gibberish, you can tell him something meaningful about the outcome of that battle.

“I don’t know anything about it.”

The other Baba Celia answered, “But I do. As a trusted servant of Queen Elena I am privy to the news of the palace and I know the battle that happened three months from now was lost because the King failed to anticipate an attack from a secondary force from the South. I have written all that and more in this letter. Here, take it with you. You can couch the details in one of your clever quatrains, can’t you?”

“This is what we do here,” said the Queen. “We ride in this metal ship backward against the flow of time, then step off into the stream and tell our past selves of the future. In this way, the world is ours to shape.”

Baba Celia was speechless. It was incredible. Unimaginable. And yet, it made perfect sense.

“Men have and always will rule and ruin,” continued Queen Elena. “This place is testament to both their ingenuity and madness. We, you and I, Wise Woman of the Meadows, can steer the direction of those self-proclaimed lords of the world without them feeling so much as a fingerprint of our influence.”

The other Baba Celia looked at a wall hanging filled with glowing di-als and symbols.

“It is nearly time,” she said. “The morning of today.”

“Come,” said Elena. “We must return.”

The other Baba Celia embraced the first. “I know you are confused and afraid. I also know you are coming to understand. Courage, sister. All things happen as they must.”

With that, they parted and Queen Elena led the first Celia back down the glowing corridor, up the iron ladder, and out of the circular portal. Dawn was purpling the sky over the tree line. Not far off, hidden by cut branches threaded with vines, there was a small stable with two horses and a cart, perhaps the very one they had ridden (would ride?) to this spot. They mounted and Elena wound through a mossy path back to the main road.

They drove in silence, the cold sun rising behind them, as Baba Celia’s mind swirled with questions too numerous to ask.

“These roads are known for gangs of robbers,” said Elena, “And our escorts are elsewhere at the moment.” She reached into a box beneath the wooden bench of the cart and handed Celia a sphere of clay the size of an unripe berry. “Throw this against a tree.”

Baba did so. There was a crack like a smith’s hammer blow and burst of powdery wind. The trunk of the tree had a flower of black scorch upon it, and a smell like sulfur lingered.

Elena patted the box. “I have many more, and much larger, as needed. One of the useful skills I have learned during my time in the circular library. You will learn, too.”

Soon enough, they came to the edges of Baba’s village.

“We walk now,” said the Queen. She parked the cart and horses behind a humble cottage. She took out tattered cloaks for them to wear and looked at a glowing silver locket she had hidden under a sleeve.

“Almost time,” she said.

She knocked on the cottage door and two guards emerged—the very two that Baba Celia had seen rummaging in her rooms. The Queen gave them careful instructions.

“In one hour, you will go to the hut of this woman in the place I showed you. You will give her this pouch of silver and have her accompany you back here, where she must remain in hiding for the day. She will act as if she has never seen you before, in case anyone is watching. Our enemy spies must never know of this arrangement. Your compensation will be within when you return.”

“Yes, my Queen!” Both replied as one, and they genuflected without hesitation.

Elena and Celia walked a circuitous path along the wooded edge of the meadow. They began to speak more freely. Elena told of the wars her husband would fight, the laws he would make, the peoples he would unify. The decisions he thought were his own molded by the mysterious poems of the revered royal soothsayer, Madam Celia. This revelation caused a mutual bout of laughter.

Now, Celia asked many questions. How was the bursting powder made? What was in the books of the underground library? What was the circular locket Elena kept glancing at? The Queen’s answers were sometimes short and cryptic, sometimes long and complex—but always spellbinding, revealing glimpses of a world with forces invisible, possibilities endless, stretching in all directions. It was all so much greater, so much more believable, than the shadowy tales of gods and spirits that were her trade up until ... when? What was it? Days? Hours? An eternity looped around like the image of the ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its own tail.

But this one was not swallowing itself. It was giving birth to itself.

They stopped in sight of Baba Celia’s house, tucked just inside the be-

ginning of the thickening forest.

“Am I in there now?” she whispered in awe.

“Yes. Watch,” replied the Queen, glancing at her locket.

Soon, the two guards came to the cottage door. Baba Celia felt her heart flutter when she saw herself greet them. Words too distant to hear were exchanged and shortly the other Celia was walking away, flanked by the guards, counting silver pieces in her hand.

“Go now,” said the Queen. “You will see me again shortly.”

Inside, Baba Celia was almost startled to find it exactly as she expected, now that everything else in the universe had turned askew. A knock on her door made her jump. She opened it to find a fifteen-year-old girl in a state of emotional frenzy.

“I just don’t know what to do! Oh, Baba, please help me!”

They sat and she listened to the tale of Pitor and Mikhail, punctuated with flusters and tears that seemed (if possible) more ridiculous than the first time. She cut the girl off.

“Marry Pitor,” she said.

The girl stopped, bewildered.

“Marry Pitor,” Celia repeated. “A sensible farmer who dotes upon you over a drunken poet with no desire other than to lift your skirts. Marry Pitor.”

“Shouldn’t we consult the spirits?” the girl asked haltingly.

“The spirits would agree with me, if they had a lick of sense. Keep your pennies, child, and get back to your father’s house. Next time Pitor calls, make him the best meal you can and rub his back as he eats.

If Mikhail comes, pour brandy over hog slop and send him on his way.”

The girl, who had just received arguably the best piece of advice she would ever get, seemed crushed with disappointment.

“But,” added Baba Celia, taking pity on her. “Let us consult the signs, shall we?”

After shaking feathers and powders, chants repeated and lots cast, Celia wrote out, then read her prophecy:

*When beast and bird are at your door
The bright plumage and piping song will vanish by dawn
But sturdy legs, a strong back, and a loyal heart
Will carry you over the land for many prosperous seasons*

The girl departed, carrying the scrap of paper and, perhaps, a shred of wisdom.

Baba Celia read the letter she had given herself, full of useful detail great and small. When King Samo’s captain and guards arrived, Baba Celia greeted them by name and wished good fortune upon their wives and children (also by name). The disturbance on their stern faces was delightful to behold. When Samo himself arrived—the subtlest of knowing nods exchanged with Queen Elena over his shoulder—Celia gave her finest performance, delivering her most poetic parchment:

*In three moons for three days blood will be spilled near Kadan
When all eyes are on the Bear and Lion from the West
The Merovingian serpents slither from the grassy river
Blunt their fangs before they strike and all thieves will scatter.*

The fragments from all King Samo’s informers and counselors, the whispers and intimations of his dreams, were confirmed and he left

sure of the date, time, and tactics of the victory that would let him claim dominion from the Alps to the Carpathians.

Once again, as she had, as she always would, the Queen remained behind.

“Did it work?” asked Celia.

“Oh yes. It always does.”

“You have seen the battle and its outcome?”

“Many times.”

“It is always the same?”

“Almost. I have a few more adjustments before the end will be exactly as I need it to be.”

A thought came to Baba Celia. “My other self, the one who was here in my hut before we arrived. Where is she?”

“My guards took her to the cottage we visited earlier, just as I said.”

“What will happen to her?”

“When you stepped into the innermost chamber of the sanctuary, you traveled against the stream of time. When you left, you re-entered the stream and now there are two of you riding in the same flow. When we reach the moment you first entered the fortress, the flow will continue and there will only be one. You. The other you ... vanishes. Branches off to a different flow, enters a realm of infinite alternatives ... I don’t fully understand it. But, in the end, only you will continue.”

“And the version of myself still in the fortress?”

“She remains, traveling upstream, in a different direction than us. You

may meet her again only within the center of that underground sanctuary. That is the only place where you can both exist in the same flow.”

A wave of sadness, of terrible loneliness, came over Baba Celia at the thought of never again seeing her other self.

“What now?” she asked the Queen.

“Now, you continue as Wise Woman of the Meadow. We will meet again, Celia. You and I, the ones we are now. We are not yet finished, I promise you.”

With that, she departed and left Baba Celia alone. She wondered if any more village clients would come for the day, or had they been scared off by the appearance of the royals? Had that happened in their stream? Or was it yet to happen? Her head swam with the convolutions of it all.

She took out the letter from her other self and re-read it. Her fingers felt patches of rough and smooth areas on the back of the parchment. She looked and saw odd strokes that seemed to shine in the low light. It resembled a trick she was well familiar with, of using juice from a cut plant stalk for the illusion of ghostly messages. She held the page over a candle flame, high enough to not burn the paper.

The hidden writing browned in the rising heat.

My Celia,

I know the shock of meeting yourself can be overwhelming, but so can the joy. To see you as I was is like a beloved memory, a long-lost sister, and it breaks my heart to part from you. I am a servant of Queen Elena and have followed her commands loyally, but I must now follow my conscience. You have no doubt begun to wonder what happens when two versions of yourself exist within the same flow of time. Elena will tell you the streams diverge and one vanishes. That is a lie.

The version of you that is no longer useful to Elena will be killed.

Her guards understand this and carry out the order without fail. At some point, she will again feel the need to travel back—with her foolish, faithful servant—and fiddle with a piece of history that isn't perfectly to her liking. She speaks of the belligerence of men, of saving the future from their destructive greed, but she has become corrupted wielding a power no man alive can rival. This needs to end.

I know you find this difficult to believe, but go to the cottage at the outskirts of the village and you will see the truth of it. There, you will meet two guards loyal to me, not Elena (she is not the only one with access to riches). They will bring you to Samo's palace and escort you to the Queen's bedroom. On the way, you will find what you need to end her life.

I am sorry to place this burden on you, but I also know that in your heart you understand it is necessary. I may never see you again but, if you do what you must, the world will be set free and flow forward as it was meant to.

Courage, sister. All things happen as they must.

- Marie Celia Duverny

Signed with her name. Her true name. The name given her by her Frankish father before he was murdered and she and her mother sold into bondage by a Slavic warlord. The name no one alive but herself knew.

The evening was slipping toward night as she hurried to the Queen's cottage. Carefully, she edged closer to it and saw two men by the door with the twilight glinting on their armored helmets. She gathered all her courage and stepped out openly to meet them.

"We were told to await you, Baba Celia," said one with a bow.

"I want to see inside," she said.

"It is not fit for your eyes, mistress," the guard replied.

"I will see. Show me now."

With a sigh, he opened the door. Within, Baba Celia saw the scattered remnants of struggle and dark rivers beneath the crumpled bodies of the Queen's guards. On a palette in a corner lay another body in undisturbed repose. In the shadows, all she could see was the grey hair and tattered robe she well knew, and a throat cut neatly with a single stroke like a slaughtered lamb.

Three horses were tied behind the cottage, and she rode along the darkening road with the guards galloping at her side. It was full night when they arrived at the palace stables. They left their rides, and she was escorted through a basement passage, up into a disused kitchen, to a narrow servants' stairway. In an alcove near the upper landing was a linen sack fixed with a ribbon and a note in her own hand:

Courage, sister.

Inside was a strange tool. Made of wood and metal, with a grip at one edge and a tube at the other. A parchment sheet inside—again, all in her own hand—had annotated sketches showing how to hold it, how to point it, and what would happen when the lever in the middle was pulled with a finger. It was heavy and awkward, but she took it in her trembling hand as shown and opened the door at the top of the stairs.

She entered a washroom with pitchers and a basin. Beyond, a heavy curtain hung over an archway. Slowly, she put her hand to it and drew aside the curtain.

Queen Elena sat on a bench in a white dressing gown, combing her hair out to its full length. She sat facing a mirror, the largest and most magnificent one Celia had ever seen, and as she approached, Celia could see herself reflected, gray and aged next to the lily beauty of the Queen. Elena caught her image in the mirror and turned, startled.

“What are you doing here, Baba?”

Baba Celia kept advancing and said nothing. No words would be of any use. The turmoil in her heart—the doubt, the certainty ... the love, the hatred—none of it could be given voice.

“What have you got there?” asked the Queen, but a moment later a look of recognition came to her eyes. She opened her mouth, took a breath, preparing to scream. Celia drew back the switch on the weapon and it jumped in her hand like a serpent. There was a crack like the bursting clay ball she had tossed against a tree. A blossom of red spread across Elena’s gown, and she staggered and collapsed without making a sound.

Baba Celia stood, heaving breaths coming in gulps as she dropped the deadly tool. All motion in the universe stopped and she found herself at the heart of a maelstrom of silence. Then, it seemed the world tilted. Everything distorted and slid away from her vision. It took her a moment to realize it was the mirror moving, angling to one side, opening like a door. From behind stepped herself, the neatly dressed and combed version she had met in the underground sanctuary.

“You did what you had to, dear woman. Don’t distress yourself over it.”

Baba Celia could not help it. She began to tremble and weep. She tried to speak, to give some apology, some account—even though she knew it was unneeded. Instinctively, she held out her arms, like a child seeking comfort. The other Baba Celia would certainly come, embrace her, console her. It was, after all, what she would have done.

Then, Queen Elena stepped from behind the mirror door.

“I am sorry for your pain, gentle Baba. Truly I am.”

Celia faltered. She stuttered. She staggered. She sank to her knees in exhaustion and supplication. Elena began to walk toward her, her hand

resting on a bump in the center of her gown. Even in her chaos, Baba Celia recognized the Queen was with child.

“You see, when you enter the inner sanctuary,” she explained, “you do not age. My body could not grow a child if I kept returning to the chamber. Also, the energy inside ... over the years, it had burned away the strength of my womb. But you saved me, Grandmother Celia. You stayed inside long enough to come back, to warn me, even as a young girl, of the danger. Now, I can give birth to an heir when Samo unites the Slavic kingdoms and move the world away from the terrible future wrought by men.”

“It is a service for untold generations,” said the other Baba Celia. “You have helped set all things on the proper course. Be proud, dear sister, of the mark you have put on history.”

“No,” muttered the first Baba. “No ... no ...”

“This is as it must be,” said Elena. Then, she lifted her head and let out a horrific scream, a blood-stilling wail that echoed in the night-silent palace.

“The guards will be here momentarily,” she said. “Don’t worry. They know how to be swift and painless. They have a great deal of experience.”

The Queen and the other Baba stepped backward behind the mirror and closed the door. The warped world righted itself and Baba Celia saw her image, aged and frail, on her knees, slip into place in a magnificent silver inversion of everything.

In the chamber hidden behind the mirror, Elena and Celia watched through the dark glass as the kneeling Baba was overcome and dispatched with lightning speed. A rush of servants and attendants flooded the Queen’s bedroom, each bellowing at the horrific scene. At

last, Samo himself came in and cradled his dead wife, weeping freely.

Inside, Elena smiled as if enjoying the show of grief. She felt the fingers of her Baba Celia find their way to clasp her hand. They stood in the dark side by side, watching the tragedy play out on the other side of the mirror.

“It’s too much,” Celia said, tears in her voice.

“It will be over soon,” Elena replied. “Tomorrow, the murdered Queen will arise and it will be discovered she is not only alive but, at last, with child, and news of the miracle will spread fear and wonder wherever it goes. The future opens wide, Grandmother, with limitless potential.”

“It’s too much,” Baba repeated. “To know what is to come, to live with what I have done. I don’t know if I can continue.”

“You need not. We have arrived at the point in the stream where we can simply ride the flow. All things have been arranged as they need to be. Let us go together and discover the days to come.”

“And what if there is more you decide you wish to change? What if I am no longer useful to you?”

“If that is to be,” said the Queen, “I promise you will never see it coming.”

Whole Earth

by Carl Scharwath



Marigold Manor

by A.J.M. Aldrian

Marigold was the word plated across a low wooden gate. She rolls her lips; beyond the gate she can see the swamp and the hill rising above it. Her parents are in the front, her sister beside her, yet she doesn't mind them. To her, the house hummed over the swamp in the distance like a medieval castle, sentinel of the old. That magnificent facade of the Fackwerkhaus. Its exterior is wrapped in ivy vines and framed by orange-barked pine trees.

When her feet hit the ground, the dogs are already barking, the sound of them fleeing in the foggy autumn air. She inhales the wet smell of the earth and dying leaves. Her sister laughs on the other side of the car.

Her Grandfather emerges, with an upheld hand. He smiles, saying their names. He embraces her mother and shakes her father's hand. Misty watches in awe as the man gazes back at her, his tired, scarred, stretched face only making his bright blue eyes gleam more. He wears plain pants and a sweater, he has little to no blond-graying hair. His back slouches, the way that old men do. Despite her hesitation, she still feels safe enough to run to embrace him with her sister. He beams down at them and pats both of their hair, kissing their foreheads.

"Come on inside, warm up ..." he says, leading them all through a fluorescently lit garage, toolboxes, and workbenches occupying the space. Upon the far end of the wall were posters, advertisements for beer, and vintage pictures of near-nude women. Misty's eyes passed over them a moment, the strange notion that her grandfather had collected them. The back basement entrance gives way to the grand staircase. They all take off their shoes and coats.

"Go on!" he calls to the girls, "explore a little bit. It's not every day you're here!"

"Are you sure Dad?"

Grandfather's boisterous laughter echoes hauntingly up the stairs. "Nonsense! Go, let them have their fun." He lets the dogs inside, which have been barking at the door. They run in and circle about them all. "Oh stop that racket!" he calls. The dogs yip and run up to them, following the girls up the staircase, their little claws scratching the wood.

On the ground floor, the girls run along two stretches of Persian rugs, past a painting of their great-grandfather and his belongings left in a rotting trunk. Past old graying German books stacked upon a larger wooden trunk. Its endless wood, encircling the walls and floor and ceiling, would make anyone feel small. Misty looks out the diamond-shaped glass planes into the crooked-looking three-season porch. The way the glass obscured it made her think of the title of a book she read but didn't understand. *Through the Looking Glass*, is this what they had meant?

"Misty!" her sister calls from the parlor.

"Coming!" Even as she turns, her eyes leave the dead beasts of the dining room at the last second. She, being still fearful, may come alive, searching for revenge.

Misty wanders past the kitchen, noticing an old telephone that hangs on the walls and nick-nacks on dusted shelves.

Her little sister is at the piano, bouncing on the bench. “Play something.”

Misty muses, “You know I’m no good.”

The girl's blue eyes plead.

Sighing, Misty goes to sit. She tucks her skirt under her. “What should I play?”

The girl shrugs, still holding her plushie toy.

Misty smiles and gazes at her, brushing her hair aside before returning to the piano. “Okay.” Her eyes travel to the sheet music in front of her. “Puff the Magic Dragon,” she smiles to herself and reaches up to the crisp but worn pages. She feels the scratchiness of the parchment and the cold keys beneath her fingertips. She blows off some dust and nods to herself; she knows how this song goes. She looks down at the keys and finds them.

“Hurry up.” One of the dogs barks at the turkey-shaped shadow through the lace curtains. Her sister hops from the piano. “Stop it,” she says, trying to grab the pup.

“What are you two doing?” It’s her father, with a bit of a chuckle.

“Isla wanted me to play ...”

He smiles and sits. “What are you trying to play?” He leans back to read the music, making the chair squeak. ““Puff the Magic Dragon,” huh?”

She nods.

He places the paper back down, “Did you find the first note?”

Again she nods and points to a key.

He nods, “Okay, the next one.”

“This one?” she asks, hovering over it with her middle finger.

“Next one over,” he points. “Okay, then this one.”

She locates her next finger over the key. “Hmm ... okay. Try the first part.”

The sound rings out through the parlor; it sounds more like bells than piano.

“Good.” he says, “Then ...” he moves to press down her second finger. “Again.”

She presses the first, then together presses the second key, “One, two and ...”

The third key bangs down. One of the dogs barks in response.

He laughs slightly, “Yeah. Good. Be gentler, but you got it.”

She smiles.

“Now with the words, I’ll help you play.”

She sings as he moves her fingers, “*Puff the magic dragon lived by the sea/And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honah Lee ...*” She laughs, “That’s a silly name.”

He grins at her. “It’s not a real place, Mist.”

Misty nods, the song still plays in her head, “*A dragon lives forever, but not so little boys.*”

“What are you all doing?”

Misty looks up, putting the papers back. Her grandfather stands before

her, and her mother behind him. She freezes and panicks since she isn't supposed to touch most things.

He frightens her with a laugh, "Who wants to go fishing?!"

"Me!" calls Isla.

Misty follows her grandfather, watching his silhouette get enveloped in the dusty daylight as he walks slowly forward towards the lawn, aged and frozen in time.

* * *

The lake's outline of ice silhouettes the black water. They walk together onto the boat deck, the framed wood frosted and the balls frozen to the pool table therein.

"Are you sure fishing is a good idea?" Misty asks, turning towards the icy lake.

His loud chuckle echoes, "There's still fish, aren't there?"

Their feet clamor along the floating dock until they reach its end.

Across the water, through the reflected golden light of the sun off the ice, she can see the lily pads frozen in place. An eastward wind still blows down the orange and red leaves. Misty shivers, but she likes the cold wind, feeling like ice on her ears and face, and hands.

"Margret," her grandfather's voice breaks her from her trance. "Look here."

Misty looks into the murky water as catfish, sunfish, and walleye breach the surface.

"Here." Her grandfather hands her small bits of diced cheese. "Feed them."

Behind her, the dogs bark at the fish, and she kneels on the mossy wooden dock. She lays one of her cheese bites at the dog's feet to calm them.

"No, the fish." her grandfather corrects, bending to her level with an aged sigh.

Misty watches the black water as a fish emerges to grab a piece, as she tosses her pieces.

Isla turns and runs to the muddy shore. "I'm going to look for frogs!" she says.

He looks up at her, laughing, then rises with a groan and chases after her sister.

Misty feeds the fish and dips her bare, pale hands into the ice water. It's always cold and crystal clear as the winter day itself. She looks up into the graying sky, gazing at the clouds moving in across the lake. She shivers as she rises and turns, walking back to the cat-tailed shore.

"Isla," she says.

The younger girl turns.

Misty smiles, "Wanna play hide and seek?"

Her sister nods energetically.

She laughs, "You're it!" Misty bounds up the hill into the front yard, following the path of stones littered with pine needles. Rushing over the peeking hillside, her feet sink into the turned-over reeds and grasses. She turns about; where was she to hide? She looks at the prairie garden, the flowers dying and fading brown, and some of the wheat stems still blowing in the wind. The gazebo looks empty and haunted, its white paint peeling. She shakes her head. She likes the garden, bees buzzing upon snapdragon flowers, peonies, and tiger

lilies. The pups run and yip at the butterflies and hummingbirds. In the warm months, it's her slice of wonderland. Yet now all are vacant and dead. She breathes in the sodden frost of winter. She still loves when the earth dies, yet she mourns for a moment, wishing for a summer-time youth that she lives in but cannot recall, nor sustain.

She steps along the path, following it toward the cobblestones and three-season porch. She walks to the front of the house, where upon the terrace stands a hollowed-out oak tree.

“Ready!” her sister shouts from the shoreline.

Jumping slightly, Misty runs up upon the terrace, not bothering to look down at the dead tree roots that uphold the stone staircase that leads to the second floor. She bends and crawls into the fairy door at the base of the tree. She crosses the threshold and embraces herself, snuggling into the grassy dirt and the hollowed home of the tree. Here she waits, looking up at the princess tower on the third floor. Its stoney exterior is wrapped in ivy, with wilting red leaves. It's a black top, a spire that pierces the sky and dares to meet the stars. She squints her eyes at the prospect; it seems impossible, but here the impossible seems possible. Her shivers distract her from her thoughts. The wind blows, circling about her chosen enclosure. At least the eaten-away walls provide warmth. Looking up through the tree, she sees the gray clouds swirling above her. Above her the branches stretch out to reach the sky, yet are never quite able. She feels like if she were to climb the old oak, she could surely touch it. As she lifts her head to gaze out again, she sees the white, obscured mist falling. The perfectly crystalline shapes hit the dirt at her feet and stick together. Snow.

“Hey, Misty!” her sister calls.

Misty emerges from the tree and looks back towards the door where Isla and her grandfather already are. “Inside,” he says. “It's snowing.”

Misty nods, dusting herself off, and follows them inside.

* * *

Beyond the Austrian travel trunks that hold secrets, she runs up the rugged staircase with the pups chasing behind her. Yet she pauses at the first landing, her hands still gripping the wooden banister. The wood feels cool but loose in her grip as she releases it and takes another cautious step forward towards the beast laid out before her.

Its large eyes are black and looking forward to nothing. It is too massive, too bare; its white coat and lined claws frighten her. Her small stocking feet creak on the floorboards as she draws closer. Beside the corpse of the bear lies a silvery gray spiked helmet, carved masterfully. Above the helmet and beast, a massive, aged flag hangs. Its white, yellowed and red dimmed. It was *Der Vaterland's* flag; holding it from the ceiling are dusty toy ships in bottles. They were of the adventures her grandfather had, their clan had. If she inhales she almost smells the memory of them, the mud of the trenches, the dirt on a carried flag.

“Don't touch that,” her grandfather says sternly. “You can't touch that ... yet.”

“Why?” She looks after him as he moves up the next set of stairs.

“You're not old enough.”

“What is it?”

He shakes his head, silhouetted by a particular painting. “Your great-grandfather's helmet. Now come, your Grammy is ready to see you.”

Isla giggles beside him and stomps up the hollow stairs, all following.

Yet Misty turns to the painting on the adjacent wall. It depicts a winded wheat field, a beautiful brown mare, and a bare-skinned woman, both facing the sunset. Misty reaches up and touches her wind-blown hair. The faceless woman she did not know, but she al-

ways imagined being her real grandmother. Closing her eyes, she calms her breath and attempts to commune with the portrait of a stranger. Perhaps Misty recognizes a false wind and a grip upon that black hair. Though unsure, she parts and begins up the stairs. She loves her Grammy, yet she is always damned to wonder about the woman who got away.

Misty's feet reach the fluffy green carpet of the top floor, mainly a bedroom and lounge area. Her Grammy sits there, absentmindedly. Isla plays with the dogs on the floor. "Girls!" She embraces them, particularly lifting Isla from the ground. She kisses them and brushes aside their hair. "You have grown."

Grammy leans down, smiling, "Would you girls like to organize my hats?"

Misty smirks, wide-eyed, and nods.

Her Grammy reaches out and takes Misty's hand.

Misty rises and follows, already inhaling the aged lace and false dust-covered flowers. Isla rises from puppy play and follows. Together they walk along the fluff rug and behind a massive mahogany armoire, a silver shining mirror within it. As her Grammy begins to remove frilly hats from the hanging wood contraptions on the ceiling, Misty cannot keep her eyes from wandering.

Across the room, beyond where the banister merges into the wall, lies the circular tower. Its walls have faded and cracked yellow paint and more velveteen lounges within. Misty pauses her curiosity and turns back to the thin profile of her Grammy. A businesswoman, dressed in an angelic white power suit. Her honeysuckle hair is silhouetted by the sun, in her own effeminate glow. Pursing her lips and releasing them, she looks from her Grammy to the hats. Misty loves the hats, loves the clothes, but when she looks back at her Grammy she is confused about loving or admiring the woman whose beauty, even to Misty's young eyes, is so clearly a facade. Though she simultaneously longs to be

who she is, as a future woman ought to be.

"Grammy?"

"Hmm?" She was still pulling down hats.

"Can I go to the tower?"

Grammy Lidya looks up and she slowly nods, "Okay, but don't touch anything."

Misty nods and slowly turns; she holds her hands behind her back in promise.

"Here Isla ..." Grammy says, pointing to the hats, but her voice falls away.

Misty crosses the green carpet threshold onto another wooden floor, her feet creaking upon it as the rest of the world falls away. The sunlit dust becomes a darkened mist in the tower room. The silence makes Misty tense up like something else is here. Misty turns about herself, taking a shallow breath, and more black-painted eyes meet her gaze. Yet some are colored, blue, green, brown, or iridescent. Their pale porcelain faces glared at her with the utmost perfect reflections, mirrors for herself. Their bare glass bodies are adorned in daytime tea dresses, stockings, gloves of lace, church hats, or bows. Misty gasps looking up at the blackened point of the tower, her chest heaving with a vision of certain apprehension. She slowly catches her breath and calms. As she lowers her head and closes her eyes, her dark hair drapes over her face. She wonders why she had been so afraid, why she felt as if she was going to be sucked up into the black floor. Gazing again at the dolls and in the center, she spies across from her a doll in a pink dress. The doll is unmovable porcelain. Misty edges closer, looming over the ghostly doll, shadowing her white face. It is something she recognizes subconsciously, and draws ever nearer as if to take control of it. Seeing her appearance reflected in the doll's dead eyes, could she ever be so beautiful, so dead?

“Margret.”

Misty jumps.

“I told them not to touch them.” It was her Grammy, her voice flat.

Misty shakes her head frantically, “I didn’t, I wasn’t gonna-”

Grammy muses, “It’s okay.”

Looking back at her, “Why do you have so many dolls, anyway?”

“It’s good to collect things, I’ve had them since I was your age.”

She knew her grandparents loved things. “Why do you collect so many things?”

Her Grammy shrugs, “To remember ... a time before.”

Misty glares at her but changes the subject. “This one looks like me.”

“It does.” She takes her granddaughter’s hand, “Come on, help your sister,”

Together they begin to turn, “Do you think I’m that pretty?” Misty asks.

Grammy nods, “Far more.”

* * *

In the guest room, surrounded by the dim yellow light, Misty fidgets with her skirts and looks up at a near-nude photograph in black and white of Marilyn Monore. She poses, smiles, and looks coyly into the camera. A photograph, still, ageless, yellowing, and frozen. Behind her sister whines and cries as her mother tries to slip Isla into her stockings.

“Do you know who that is?” her father asks, approaching behind her.

Misty nods, “Marilyn Monore.”

“What’d she do?”

“She was a movie star.”

He gazes down at his daughter. “Do you wanna be a movie star?”

“I wanna be like her,” Misty answers with certainty.

“Well, you’re going nowhere dressed like that.” Her father steps into the library, “C’mon, your cousins will be here soon.”

Misty stays a moment, looking up at the portrait. Another icon, another unknown. Misty knows not the diva’s voice nor has even seen a whole of one of her movies, yet she likes the way she was, the way she looked, the beauty she had, or so Misty thinks. Its falseness is slowly revealed in the girl’s mind.

She walks through the library after her father, taking a moment to pass her hands by the warmth of the fireplace and its flickering flames. Her eyes cast upwards and she inhales, the dust swirling in the air about the brown books of old. They lay in wait, on rotting, timeless shelves for her one day to retrieve them. As she draws closer to one of them, wiping the dust on her fingertips, she gazes at their hidden yellow pages. She flicks the parchment with her nails, disturbing them slightly. Her eyes pass to the other books, attempting to make out titles in undiscovered languages and undecipherable words and fonts. Pulling back, she looks about the room, wall to opposing wall, shelves with gray books. She thinks of how the books and the nick-nacks in her grandfather’s home are landscapes, and in a home, in a world without maps, she is a cartographer.

“Misty! Come help set the table!” her mother’s voice calls her across from the house.

It pulls her forcibly from her vision and the bookshelves. She turns and lets her stocking white feet carry her out of the room and down the hall.

The dining room is overseen by the massive figures of beasts on the wall and their black eyes. It is dipped in the scent of roasted meat and vegetables, spices rising in the air and encircling the room. Rosemary rotting the air and cinnamon sickening it with a pepper-sweet aroma. Her mother stands in the yellow light of the banging kitchen. “Here,” she says, stepping forward, placing a large stack of white, painted china on the table. “Be careful. Don’t break them or we’ll have to pay for them.”

Misty looks up at her mother and nods.

Her mother wipes her brow, “Let your sister do the silverware and napkins.”

Again Misty nods.

“I have to help Grandpa,” she says with a final turn.

Misty approaches the table, which is just below eye height for her. She instead pulls out a chair and sits on its cushion with her knees and begins passing the dishes out to the placements around her. Yet the strict straightness of her spine never fades and every few plates, she takes a cautious glance at the beasts above her, not only fearful of their possible life but also their stampede across the dining room.

“Need some help?”

Her Grammy stands silhouetted in darkness, haloed by the dim candlelight glow.

“Mom wanted Isla to do the silverware.”

Her Grammy pushes the younger girl on and follows.

“You both look beautiful.” Her father’s voice announces his entrance.

Misty smiles.

“Your cousins are here,” her father says.

“I’ll get it, Adrian!” Grammy shouts from the dining room into the kitchen.

“Alright-right ...”

Isla has already squealed and jumped from her placement of the silverware, leaving the last few in a pile on the table. The dogs are yipping and running after her to the downstairs door. Misty moves to finish the table places when her father holds out his large hand. “It’s okay, I’ll finish it, go.” Then she runs downstairs, catching a glimpse of him smiling.

* * *

After kicking off all the outside snow, the smells of salt and wetness chase the girls and their uncle and aunt upstairs. The pups barking announce their arrival to a now brighter, richer, decorated dining room. The centerpiece is a large roast, adorned with vegetable trays, mashed potatoes, hot dishes, wine, and beer. The vivacious scents slip Misty into a trance, and in slow, tired blinks, she watches her family smile and embrace. Misty licks her lips, drawing to the threshold betwixt the dining room and kitchen. Her eyes glazing over, she feels separated, as if she doesn’t know the people before her. And she enters into a great dollhouse of her alternative life. Where her family isn’t her family, and where her trembling hands display an uneasiness, not excitement.

“Come kids, let’s sit. Eat,” her great uncle proclaims with a flourish. He is an elderly, strong, gray-haired man. And Misty’s eyes wander upon him, she does not really know him.

The patriarch sits at the north side of the table flanked by his first, only,

and favorite granddaughters, her parents on either side of them. Her cousin's parents, her cousins, and on the other side of the table, her granduncle and aunt. They all settle. Her grandfather clinks his crystal and gold-rimmed glass with a fork. Slowly he rises, clears his throat, and begins.

Misty gazes up at him, his shadow looming over her like a wavering ghost.

“Ein Prost.” He lifts his glass and gazes around at the disjointed family he built. “To us, to our Kinden und Frauleins ... beautiful as their mother. And thank you Kristine for bringing us together this night.” He lowers his glass and clears his throat again, shortly.

Misty can see through the age in his sandy skin at this moment; it is like the earth beneath seawater. She can see the exhaustion in his red-rimmed blue eyes. Nervously, she takes her hand to comfort him.

He turns and smiles down at her. He whispers, “It’s okay, Misty,” and pats her hand.

He turns, recomposing, “To my lovely wife, and to my brother, for making the trip.”

Her cousins giggle.

“I thank you all for comforting this old man and giving me more than what anybody can wish for, my family and their future. To us, and to the future!” he finishes. “Prost!”

“Prost!” all echo before they polish off their first glass and bang it on the table.

To the future ... Those words echo for a minute and she looks at her grandfather.

He turns to her and smiles. “How old are you?”

“Ten.”

He nods, then, groaning, reaches across the table to an open wine bottle. “Here,” he says, as he uncorks it and begins to pour her a meager glass. He grins, “You’re old enough to get a taste of the family business ... to drink.”

Misty looks from the drink to him. She swallows, her eyes catching him.

“Go ahead.” He pushes the glass towards her, with the nobility of an old friend. Maybe he reminds her of someone.

Delicately, she lifts the glass. Taking in the estranged scent of berries and sour grape juice from the violet liquid. With her eyes upon him, she pours a taste in through her lips and feels it dance across her tongue before swallowing.

“What’s it taste like?”

Misty takes a moment and swallows again. “Grapes, sour grapes, and ... wood.” She licks her teeth and lips, confused by the taste.

“Do you like it?” His face is aglow, and he grips her forearm as it rests on the table.

Unsure, Misty shrugs and sort of nods.

He leans back, grinning. “Told you,” he smirks. “Savor it, that’s all you get.”

And as the meal begins to be passed around, she does savor her first taste of wine. Often licking her lips, and taking small sips as if not to ruin it. To hold onto the taste of hickory and smoke and grapes, the scents of salt and spice, of candied fruits, of the snow falling outside, and the rot of fabric. The beast's black eyes don't scare her. The sweetness of food, the drink, and the company keeps her smiling until her

cheeks are hot, red, and sore. Yet her mind does not escape her grandfather's words; to us and to the future, when she is old enough to drink ... to drink ... and now at this moment, beside the dying man, she feels suspended in time, and untouchable in space. Nothing could hurt her here.

Her sleep comes before the flames of the fireplace die, and there is where it really traps her. And she begins to ache and wrestle in her dreams, for within her, her china doll skin is breaking and her dollhouse, shattering.

* * *

When she awakes, turning on her side and blinking, she clears her eyes and looks up at the photo of Marilyn Monore on the wall. Her beauty melted away, sinking beyond the frame. Her smile reshaped into a frown, her pretty face and lovely curves, slipping away. It liquefies into a Picasso and falls until her sepia colors meet the floor.

Suddenly she sits up breathing heavily, turning about the darkened guest room and gripping the soft cotton sheets. The mound of her sister sound asleep breathes slowly. She glances back around at the photo. It was normal again, Marilyn smiling in her lovely little pose. Everything is unchanged.

Sitting up she sighs, now realizing how thirsty she is. Her throat is dry and rough. She releases her grip on the cotton sheets, her bare feet falling to the icy wood floor. She steps towards the shadowed dusty doorway into the library. Here she pauses and gazes solemnly up at the painting. She inhales the scent of burning candles, wafting from the next room. Hesitantly, as she stands in the doorway by the photograph, she reaches up and runs her forefingers across the image. When she pulls away, she rubs her fingers together, looks at them, and looks back at the painting. Waxy wetness, as if not-quite-yet-dried ink. She shakes her head and turns, with a breath, walking beyond the threshold.

In the center of the library, the low-light golden candlelight burns from

a multitude of them, and their colors vary. Almost all of them are overrunning and dripping beyond their golden holders and onto the parchment below. Books are strewn about, unaged. The ink sits unstill in a vial, and a feather pen lays wet with the black ink but untouched in the center. Misty draws closer, her eyes cross the page, in Germanic cursive, it's written: "To us, to the future, to death ..." like poetry.

Then behind her, she hears books fall and a trail of cackling, much like her grandfather. "Anybody there?" she whispers. Holding her breath, she turns about herself, "Hello?" Behind her the library is trashed, books shaken from the shelves and thrown onto the floor. Parchment laying out, torn and rotten. "Isla?" she whispers still. "Are you there?" Misty shakes her head and continues to look about. Her eyes gaze into the blackness of the next threshold. She swears she sees someone standing there, a gray figure silhouetted in black. Yet then she blinks; her eyes are just playing tricks on her. Still, returning her gaze to the table, she wonders how the books all came out of place and who had written such things. "Well, whoever you are ... I'm taking a candle." Misty slowly bends and retrieves the carrying piece of the candle holder. Then with a swish of her nightgown against her ankles, she turns and walks beyond the next threshold and into the hall and staircase landing.

Momentarily, she lifts her candle, so that its golden light passes over a still polar bear and silver war helmet. With her breath, she relaxes, then turns beyond the stairs and into the long hall. It seems to grow in the darkness, the ceiling feeling higher and the kitchen ever-more distant. Yet with a steady heartbeat, she walks on, her toes digging into the very strands of the Persian rug. She lingers again, gazing at her reflection in the distorting diamond glass. *Alice in Wonderland*, now she truly felt like her. Before she passes by the dining room, the smell of the holiday supper still lingering, she takes a deep inhale and begs herself not to look at the beast's black eyes above the table. Slowly she steps on, a creaking of the floorboards, and that distant echoing laughter radiating through the house. A sound that stills her pace, nerves shooting up her spine. She agonizingly turns her head, to see the buffalo head, half encircled by the gold light. His deep black eyes,

staring at her, reflecting her, angrily meeting her. She slaps her hand over her mouth to muffle a scream, startled by the very idea of the beast. Stumbling back, she bangs lightly into the glass doors of the three-season porch.

Her heart stops. She glimpses the tea parlor, and she hears the piano banging, as she did in the morning. It radiates out in an unwelcoming, eerie vibrato. She drops the candle, in fear, extinguishing it. Quickly she turns into the parlor, her skirts nearly chasing her. In the moonlight darkness, she sees no one. Reaching out of the piano, another key is hit loudly, causing her to pull back. No one hits the keys, yet they move. Before she can turn and run, the melody begins in earnest. “*Puff the magic dragon, lived by the sea*” ... It is not her own voice, not her father's. And the melody feels as if it came from another place. Someone sings it, on the other side of the glass. She doesn't know where it came from.

Frightened, she stumbles into the bar. The song plays on, “*A dragon lives forever, but not so little boys ...*” but the ring of a telephone interrupts it. Misty jumps and looks at the antique telephone beside her, wall-mounted, gray with dust, and with a mouthpiece to talk into. She glares at it, her face pale and distorted with confusion. Why, how is it ringing? It rings again. Slowly she grips the mouthpiece and puts the earpiece to her ear. “Hello?” the distant voice says; it is clearly female but faded. “Margret?” it speaks with a southern drawl. Misty looks at the mouthpiece before her, and her hands shake. There was only one southern-voiced woman in the family. And she was long dead. “It's me. Can you hear me?” Her fingers are sweating. “Margaret? Darling? Are you there-I-” she drops the pieces of the phone and slips onto the floor. The faceless woman's voice still echoes in her head.

Her whole body, trembling, her chest hurting as it heaves. Sitting against the cool mahogany wall and floor, she can feel a shiver of panic down to her bare feet. She pulls her knees up to her chest, wanting to only weep. What is happening? Why and how is her grandmother calling her? Who are these ghosts ...

Up the hall, the wooden floor creaks. She rises, “Hey, Isla ...” she says, rising. “That's enough.” She hugs her sides as she stumbles down the hall along the rug, lightless now. “Mom, dad ... I get it. ...” Then Misty's eyes catch a glimpse of that figure she saw earlier on the threshold she had previously crossed. Yet now Misty can see the young woman's face. Her soft features look beautiful in the ghostly moonlight, and her dark hair cascading reminds her of something. “Grandpa?” she asks, gazing at the second half-apparition of the old man appearing beside the woman.

“Is this really ours?” the ghost woman asks, looking up in awe at the high ceiling.

Her grandfather nods.

Misty draws quickly closer, gripping the sides of her silky nightgown still. She sees that the ghost woman leans over one of the rotten, dusty travel trunks of old. And as she turns to her grandfather and rises, Misty sees that she grips in her hand a book made only of yellowing parchment and black printer ink. *Deutsch-zu-Englisch Wörterbuch*. Misty gasps, rubbing her forefingers, almost able to feel the feather-light parchment in them. The ghost woman flips open the first page. Inside it reads *Eigentumsrecht 1938*. The ghost woman runs her fingers over the number. And as they both look up at the smiling face of her grandfather a thought feels translated into her mind.

“The year they invaded Austria,” Misty speaks softly.

Her grandfather nods.

“The year we left,” the ghost woman finishes.

“Be careful with it.”

Misty's eyes are wide and her heart is banging against her chest. She reaches out to touch the parchment book before all dissipates in the air.

“Wait no-I-” she falls through the air, onto the threshold of the darkened undisturbed library. She blinks in disbelief. Confused, she pushes herself up from the floor. Turning to look back up at the still staircase, blackness entrapping her. Maybe she should go get her Grandpa, maybe he knows what’s happening.

Creeping up the stairs, she passes by with a glare at the polar bear. Pausing, though, for a moment at the helmet he guards. She thinks again of her grandfather’s toast, which was finished so kindly by the ghost, “to death,” to drink. She fidgets, rubbing the silk of her nightgown together to calm the goosebumps licking her skin. She turns up on the landing and up the next stairway. Her eyes meet the painting; its golden glow, its warmth of a grassy field. Yet looking closer she sees the faceless woman gone and missing. Panicking, she bites her lip; she wants to scream but not to wake the whole house. She begins to run up the stairs, but freezes. “To death,” it says. Her shoulders tense, her heartbeat throbs in her head, and slowly she turns. “To the past, the present, and the future, Margret Misty May ...” She watches wide-eyed and horrified as her worst nightmares are personified. As its wet-looking black lips move, as they speak her name with an infernal tongue and its dead black eyes stare at her. The mounted deer turns its head, its coat ruffling and matted with preserved decay. “To death ... because we all die, we just choose how.” It speaks matter-of-factly. “Pursue death, pursue time, rather than be frozen in it.” She scoots back into the green carpet of the third floor; she can swear the murdered deer almost smiles. “Welcome to the looking glass.”

Pushing herself further and further back, she’s fully panting again and her stomach has escaped her as if she were falling. Her back hits the armoire, her gray eyes flash into a wall-mounted full-length mirror across the room. Yet she sees not herself in the mirror, digging her nails into the green carpet.

Instead, the older woman returns, her ghostly form wrapped in a floor-length, long sleeve, lace gown. The woman smiles, yet there is a sadness in her empty eyes that Misty cannot recognize. The woman sways

side to side with poses, like Marilyn Monore, but this ghost does not melt. “You look just like her,” he says, also in the reflection, yet distanced behind the woman. Her grandfather’s voice is gruffer, more barren than before. “Beautiful ...” he says, his voice now echoing in Misty’s mind, dripping with melancholy. “And you’ll kill yourself too, just like her.” Then he threw his head back in that terrible echoing laughter, its menacing sound bouncing back through the perfect acoustics of the massive home.

With his last syllable, Misty watches the false joy drain from the woman’s face. The tears begin to fall down her shadowed, pretty face. Misty expects her to scream, to cry, like the woman wanted to, but no. The woman takes a breath, and with all the force in her body, arches her back and slams her head into the mirror. Shattering it, bloody. It comes crashing down like a frozen tower before Misty. What she sees is all broken glass and blood. The woman’s fingers are entangled with her bloody dark hair, scratching her face. The woman turns to Misty, too, laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing. Now Misty screams in terror, pulling herself back from the snowy shattered glass.

Yet no one hears her, Misty is alone in the darkness. The ghosts disappear. Now she begins to weep, gasping and heaving through her hollow body. Trembling betwixt gasps, she wipes her eyes and refuses to give up; she rubs her lips, and slowly, with all the terror and pain of time and legacy, she lifts herself up.

And stumbling again through the third floor of eternity, she comes again to the dusty threshold of the tower. Therein her eyes catch, in the single glimpsing specter of moonlight, the broken china doll. Her porcelain cracking, paint chipping. And Misty falls, her knees banging on the floor. She takes the doll and holds it in her arms. “It’s okay,” she says. “I got you.” Misty looks down, her tears falling onto the doll’s unmoving face, and with trembling hands she reaches up and pushes the doll’s dark hair from her face. “Everything’s okay ...” Misty rocks the doll in her arms like an infant. “It’s okay if we’re broken.” She weeps, pulling the doll in closer to herself and embracing it. Then she

hears a crack, like the ice caps. Misty slowly pulls the doll away from her chest, and the doll's face, reflecting her own, is snapped in half. As she reaches up again with one hand, the arm of the doll shatters, breaks, and falls to the floor with another bang. "No, no ..." Reaching into the fractured porcelain, the cracks spread across the doll's body, "Please don't do this!" she shrieks to the gods as they break off the leg, then the opposite arm, and the crown of her head. The porcelain mangled, like a body on the floor, "No, no-Please!" until she had nothing to hold onto at all. She sinks into herself then, glaring helplessly at her hands, bloodied by the glass. Her head is lowered, weeping.

"Time, death," a voice says.

Yet Misty doesn't turn to see this time. Her eyes go wide, and her head rises. "I gotta get out of here" is all she says. Breathless, with her trembling bloody hands. She stands, turns, and moves out into the blackened hallway, passing no one.

She comes to the great windows of the Fachwerkhaus and, catching her breath, she looks about through the frozen moonlight. One window creaks open with the wind. Misty looks back into the blackness for a moment and makes a choice. Opening the icy metal frame of the window, and stepping out beyond its threshold of frost onto the small overhang, the cold hits her. Snowflakes move through her body and freeze her bare feet. Yet she steps on, sliding lightly along the windowsill until she steps across the precipice to the stairwell of the tower. She nearly slips, her foot almost missing the leap, yet her cold red fingers are gripped so tightly to the window frame they turn pale. And once her foot is steady she swings onto the first stair, landing on her hands and knees. Gasping and then sighing in relief, she begins to climb the twisting stairwell to the top of the tower and roof of the manor. Her hands and feet are frozen, but she finds a seat amongst the shingles and the stars.

She catches her breath, gasping in that crisp, cold night air. She hugs herself for warmth, yet the cold matters little to her relief. Finally,

something she knew, she recognized; the star-speckled sky and its ever-welcoming light in the darkness, its painted Milky Way. She relaxes, gazing out at the frozen lake, surrounded by that untouched arctic forest, and blinking out the frosted tears from her eyes. There was nothing to be afraid of out here. Below her, the garden lays sparkling, beautiful, and icy still, undying, ungrowing. The earth beneath is silent and still. The snow around her that danced as it fell calms her with its silence, and perhaps now, she could sleep. So, she lay her head down to breathe with the world and finally rest.

"Misty!"

She sits halfway up.

"You come down here!"

Misty shakes her head, thinking it is her mother now calling her. "Just a little longer," she says. "You gotta see this."

"Misty!" the voice grows louder, closer. "Come down here! You'll freeze."

Misty's eyes do not part from the vast sky to look at the source of the voice. "Maybe ..." she says between a frozen yawn. "I wanna just freeze out here."

"Misty ..."

"Be frozen in time, nothing to worry about out here then." A tear falls from her face as she begins to lie down. She wishes the snow would blanket her and keep her warm and safe so nothing could hurt her out here.

"Misty," the source of the voice grips her arm.

Misty looks up, a fogged breath escaping her. The ghost woman stands before her, with beautiful, warm, and unharmed flesh.

“You’re freezing,” she says, pulling the child into an embrace. “Let’s get you inside.”

“No,” Misty says, pushing against her, “I don’t wanna go back. I’ll die in there. I’d rather die out here. At least when I’m dead ... I’ll be beautiful.” Tears fell salty and freely on her cheeks now.

“We will all die,” the woman says, “it is not what makes you beautiful. And plus, Mist, this is not where you’ll die.”

The girl turns towards herself, “How do you know?”

“Well,” she smiles, “I’m alive, aren’t I?”

Misty nods slowly.

“You were right about the stars,” the woman says, “I shoulda seen them.” She exhales, “They’re beautiful. We’re beautiful.”

Misty looks back at the woman, “What about Grandma and Grandpa, the dolls-I ... ?”

“It’s not about that.” The woman meets her eyes.

Misty was so sure, somehow, that this place was the answer. It was what could save her.

“Don’t make the same mistakes I did ... you can never freeze time or freeze your life, it’s always growing and changing. Past, present, future, they’re all just mirrors of each other, but don’t leave yourself back there, you’ll get stuck and die there, Mist, never moving forward.”

Misty shook her head in disbelief.

“You think that’s what you want, to freeze out here, but you’re afraid. You got out of there, right? And you came out here,” she gestured to

the wilderness beyond them. “Beauty isn’t in stillness ...” she pauses, watching the falling snowflakes, catching one as it cascades through time, and she smiles to herself.

Nodding, Misty wipes her eyes and smiles too.

“Hold on kid.” The woman takes her hand.

“To life.”

“To life,” the woman says. “Come on, let’s get you inside.” She picks up Misty and heads down the stairwell. There she knocks on the door and places Misty before it.

Misty gazes up at her, not wanting to release her small hand from the larger one.

The woman smiles, “I’ll see you on the other side.” She steals her ghostly hand away.

Misty nods, tiredly and sadly. She looks at the door, and when she looks back to where the woman stood, silhouetted by the snowy woods, she has disappeared.

Within a moment the door opens. “My god Misty!” her mother exclaims, quickly pulling her inside. “What are you doing outside?!” Her mother takes her night robe and wraps it around her. Its thick, woven wool warms her.

“I let the dogs out and they came to this door.” The pups are yipping around her feet.

“Don’t go outside when you do that,” she scolds. “Come on, let’s get you warmed up.”

Her mother leads her upstairs where they are all gathered around the

fire, sipping hot chocolate. Misty's eyes hop from the fire to the replaced books upon the shelves, to her grandfather, and she breathes, thinking of the woman's words. He is frozen in time, surrounded by the reminiscence of the past, and he knew would die with it, in this big empty house, this wonderland entrapped with legacies that he himself could not remember. He is the dead little boy and the lost lonely Puff.

Her eyes pass back to the fire, where she warmed her feet and hands, and she knows she will live on. Instead of dying in the darkness of worlds she could not know, she looks towards the future, the light, the life she would have and the garden she might grow, and how she would love to watch the seasons change.

Endless Horror, This Old Water

by Amelia Gorman

Summer sun and monsters, there is no better combination.
No tastier August treat than the chill of seeing its shadow
cast down on the sand under the window-clear surface of the lake.

Somewhere a loon laughs at my bad luck,
to be out on the boat with the monster.
My spine is as cold as the water, and I feel it
rippling in my back. Blue-black shadows
are all I can know of it, that and the way
the air changes like a chord when it comes
and my red sunburn itches like it was blue.

Sometimes it scatters itself, into a school
or long eel strips, striping the sand, long
whips, string skin, somewhere an eagle pipes
their eel-thin whistle before diving, but never
diving here.

Some thing is down there, even when it masquerades
as myriad things before rejoining to a mammoth whole,
silently laughing at my net while it throws pieces of itself
here and there to grab an unsuspecting perch,
to pull the metal leg out from under a dock and crush it.

Someone says, "It was just rust. These old docks,
this endless water." But they didn't see the shadow limb
reach out and pull and press like it was a can.
This thing that I only know from its shadows and its damage,
that I cannot name the shape of, or the color, whose
sound is only silence and the rush of a sheer pelican
flight in fright, the sound of a hawk screaming, the waves
gently lapping against my boat, tip-tapping out a threat
of a stronger wind than I can row against.

Untitled

by Sydnie Beaupré



Until I Return to the Earth That Made Me

by Elizabeth Broadbent

I'd seen pictures. I stared anyway. The half-hidden buildings seemed more like sculptures than research centers, and they blended into the wooded hills as if they'd been planted. All had turf roofs; they had walls of shiny glass, of mortared plastic bottles, of dirt and old tires. Wohlleben Dendrological Station could've been an earthie commune or an ultra-high-end resort. My heart kicked up. Since I was small, I dreamed that they'd pick me. I wished on trees like most kids wished on stars. But they grew up and gave up. They stopped believing they could become astronauts or cowboys or paleontologists.

Not me. I held my dream tight.

As my self-driver trundled into the September drizzle, I stepped onto the slate path. Rain pattered on leaves while I walked to the welcome center. I touched every tree I passed and whispered its name: eastern hemlock, black birch, American beech, witch-hazel. I'd never given up.

Signs led me to Wohlleben's main base, a glass-and-earth structure with soaring, slanted windows, where a redhead waited behind a big desk. "Hi," she said. "You must be Bay Aylin."

I nodded and shifted my backpack. I wouldn't need much at Wohlleben. "Yeah," I said. "Hi. I guess this is where I'm supposed to be?"

She broke into a big smile. "Welcome. I'm Anya. Come meet every-

one—we've been waiting."

Waiting? Meet everyone? My toes curled in my boots. "Everyone" meant the top tree scientists in the world. It meant the most brilliant minds in dendrology. She couldn't mean *everyone*.

Some researchers were missing. But not many. Not the best and brightest.

They'd made me a cake, and beer helped my starstruck stumbling. We talked trees and field research. Sometime around midnight, Anya led me through the forest to a hobbit-hole in a hillside. I passed out cold. At seven o'clock sharp, I reported to a bottle-and-wattle building that seemed almost a part of the beech grove surrounding it.

"Good morning, Bay," said Dr. Khatun, a researcher with wild white hair and an aquiline nose. The night before, she'd told stories of tramping through mountains in the rain. Her eyes had crinkled up when she smiled.

She wasn't smiling.

"This is your last chance," she told me.

"Doctor?" I bit my lip instead of saying, *I don't understand*, or *Why aren't you happy for me*, or *Why do you look so mean?*

“This is your last chance to change your mind, Mx Aylin.”

“Why would I come all this way to do that?” I shifted from foot to foot in my rough linen scrubs. “I’ve wanted this since I was—I mean, I don’t remember not wanting this.”

“It’s not glamorous.” Her narrowed blue eyes were fierce and almost frightening.

“I know.”

“You can never go back.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. Did she think I’d come so far, only to back out? “I know that, too.”

“We’ll need you to sign some things before we begin.” She pointed to a door on her left. “I’ll check on you in a while.”

That didn’t sound good.

I had to sign waivers. I had to notarize medical forms. I had to make a living will, then an actual will. Dr. Khatun returned at noon. “Is this—” I began.

“Really necessary? Yes.” She handed me lunch.

I finished around two o’clock, stood, and cracked my back. Dr. Khatun peeked in. “Right on schedule,” she said. “Let’s meet your medical team.”

It was happening. I tensed as I followed her down a sunlit hall. It was real.

She stopped before a regular, boring-looking door, then paused. “One piece of advice,” she said, hand on the knob. “Don’t look at the needles.”

I shook my head. “I never watch when I get a shot.”

She smiled for the first time that day. It was a gentle smile, a smile for a child. “No,” she said. “I mean don’t look at them at all. Everyone who sees the size of the needles bows out at the last second.” She opened the door and laid her hand on my shoulder. “You’ll love this, Bay. Everyone who goes through with it says they would never go back.”

But the medical team couldn’t root my nanoskin until my fungal inoculation. I hadn’t known that would happen so soon. I would have looked more. I would have watched the sunrise. But I couldn’t cry, or they’d think I was giving up.

“It’s just like a spinal tap,” the head doctor said. “But you have to stay perfectly still so we can hit your spinal fluid. Don’t move.”

My legs dangled over the edge of a hospital bed. With my gown open in the back, I felt exposed and *gendered*—they’d seen me without clothes and kept messing up my pronouns. Those they used carried certain expectations, and that weight was creeping up on me.

“I’ll stay still,” I told the doctor. I would not close my eyes.

“Uncross your arms,” he said. I hadn’t realized I was hugging myself. “You might want to grip the bed.”

I held tight as they swabbed me with antibacterial wash, then injected a local anesthetic. “Okay, here we go,” the doctor said. I didn’t scream or move as that needle went through muscle and into something else. It *popped*. I kept silent as a deep chill sped up my spine and wrapped around my head. I felt the needle come out.

Then I screamed.

Something alien rushed through me. I wanted to throw up and run and flail all at once. I may have tried. But I was pinned down and flipped

on my back. Everything went fuzzy and far away. My heart beat slower and slower as the world turned black.

* * *

I couldn't see. I couldn't hear. I couldn't move. My mind was a bird beating against black walls. I screamed and couldn't be sure I made sounds. Did my mouth open? Fuzzy static rose. "They're coming around," someone said.

I calmed. I could move my toes and fingers.

I opened my eyes. Nothing. I was blind.

"Shhh." A cool hand touched my forehead. "It's hard to lose sight. That's the worst of it. It's the hardest part, and it's over now. It's a side effect of the fungal inoculation. We've found people do best if they don't know when it'll happen."

I'd known and not known. My eyes filled. I should've watched more sunrises. I must've said so, because someone laughed gently. "You'll know so many sunrises," she said—Dr. Khatun. "You'll be alright, Bay."

They gave me time to recover. Dr. Khatun was right: it was hard. But every ending carried that beautiful spark of beginning, and that was my first real step. Still, it *was* an ending, so I couldn't deny its sadness. The other scientists listened; they didn't quite understand, but they were kind. It helped.

If the first operation had narrowed my world, the second threw its doors wide open. "What do you think, Bay?" Dr. Khatun asked—her voice, but so different, such richness in pitch and timbre and tone. My sheets rustled as I sat. So many sounds I'd never heard, but I could guess at many of them. Birds were *loud*. I had to sift out the endless machines, but outside was a world of noise.

"It's beautiful," I said. "The bees are talking."

I heard her smile. "What do they sound like?"

"Squeaky."

She laughed, and it was beautiful. They helped me dress and more scientists came, Dr. Hightower and Dr. Ramirez. "Do you want to go outside?" Dr. Khatun asked.

I nodded.

"Be ready to catch them," Dr. Khatun told the others: a warning, but a note of joy, too. She led me outside for the first time in a month? Two months? So long since I'd come in.

At first it was faint. But I honed in and listened hard, then broke away from Dr. Khatun. "Whoa, whoa!" she said, half-laughing as I stumbled into a beech and threw my palms against its smooth trunk.

The beech was speaking.

They caught me when I broke down and slid to my knees, palms still against its trunk. I couldn't understand what it was saying. But it spoke.

Everything happened fast after that.

They implanted a device near my vocal cords that let me make sounds on the same frequency as the beeches and birches and hemlocks. They all spoke, a forest chorus that always dropped me weeping into the leaves. Time outside became a reward for endless briefings about my new life—endless briefings and injections into the backs of my hands. Those injections contained genetic material that turned cells into sensitive chemical receptors.

"Why are you so stressed this morning?" I asked Dr. Hightower when he came to see me one morning. He carried a sharp, metallic edge. "Are you okay?"

“Dammit, I hate when they get to this stage,” he said as acrid annoyance rose. I shut up.

Five months into my time at Wohlleben, I held out my hand to Josie, my med-tech, for my daily injection. She smiled as she flipped it to my palm.

They were giving me cells to emit pheromones.

They had decided on my first assignment.

* * *

“Okay, Bay,” Dr. Khatun said as our team unpacked our truck near a field in Unionville, Pennsylvania. “Your nanoskin will keep you warm and protect you from insects. Like a trunk.” She had a smile in her voice. “We’ll bring you food and water.”

I chewed my lip and asked the question that scared me the most. “How will I learn to talk to them?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

The sun warmed me as we tramped through knee-high grass. They’d cleared a Bay-sized space of dirt for me under the Northern red oak. My stomach jumped as it began speaking—no, *shouting*. Facing it, I dropped to the earth and crossed my legs. They arranged me like I’d expected: my legs were held in place with U-shaped metal rods, and a sturdy metal trellis propped my back.

“See you soon, Bay,” Dr. Khatun said. She touched my shoulder. “Good luck.”

The team swished away through the dry grass.

“I guess it’s you and me,” I told the oak. No one could remember a time when this field hadn’t been cut for hay. They’d left this oak alone

in its middle as a windbreak. Who knew how long it had been isolated?

The oak spoke on and on. When I mimicked their sounds, they shouted so loudly my ears hurt. I must have thrown off distress pheromones, and they quieted. The warm sun disappeared. In the morning, the oak spoke again: one word. One word over and over.

What do you say when you meet someone whose language you don’t speak? I turned that question over and over until it slammed me.

You say your name.

A long time later, I understood they called themselves Lonely. But then their name was only a series of sounds.

“Bay,” I said. “Bay, Bay, Bay.”

“Bay?” they asked, using the higher frequencies of my name.

“Bay,” I replied. “Lonely?”

“Lonely,” they said, and a wave of joyful pheromones hit me. “Lonely, Lonely, Lonely.”

* * *

“They told me their name,” I reported to the researchers who brought me liquid food. They left a water bottle for me; nanobots processed my waste.

“What is it?” asked Dr. Patel.

“Um, a really high frequency I can’t translate yet,” I replied.

That fungal injection began working as soon as I hit the dirt. But my fungal cells didn’t meet Lonely’s until the second day. Then their emotions *really* slammed me. Joy. Sadness. I cried for them, though I

didn't know why. They sent me comforting pheromones and sang. At least I understood the tone and timbre of their happiness, if not their words.

The next morning, just as the sun rose, they said a word. I repeated it.

We'd just said "Sun."

"Sun, Bay, sun," Lonely said. "Sun, sun, sun!"

"Sun!" I replied.

"Yes, Bay, sun."

That word must have been "yes." Thank God trees spoke in discreet words, not broad concepts. They brought me recording equipment that day, and I recited what I knew. They could slow it and understand my faster, higher-frequency sounds.

* * *

Lonely and I took a long time to understand one another: four months and three days, really, since trees have a very fine-tuned sense of time. They were 265 years, 9 months, and 12 days old (we needed a long time for numbers, despite their importance). They had once been part of a forest that went on and on and on, they said, filled with the types of trees I'd expect from a southeastern Pennsylvania forest: hickories, red maples, white oaks, red oaks, and (they said the last so sadly) chestnuts. We both sent out sadness pheromones whenever they mentioned chestnuts, and twined together by our fungi, stayed in that sadness together for a long time.

"A blight," they told me. "They blighted and died. So sad, Bay. We keep their stumps alive, and sometimes a tiny sprout grows from them. I hear it call from far away. It dies fast."

"People brought the blight," I said, and I was ashamed. "They brought

a blighted tree from far far far. They didn't know."

"How did they not see?" Lonely seemed aghast.

"People don't understand trees." It was all I could offer.

153 years before, people had clearcut Lonely's part of the forest. "They took my mother and siblings and saplings." Their sadness was heavier than their sadness for the chestnuts. "They screamed. They did not go to the earth, Bay. People pulled up their *roots*." I finally understood they meant that people had ripped out stumps, and the trees' largest roots had come up, too. Lonely only spoke of that day once. If they were human, they would have sobbed through it, as if they were recounting a terrible slaughter.

They *were* recounting a terrible slaughter.

I couldn't talk to the researchers for two days after that. The world hurt too much. After people had pulled the stumps, Lonely's fungi network didn't reach other trees. They had to shout to be heard, and their pheromones only reached more Northern red oaks when the wind hit just right. Other trees' answers came dimly and seldom. They had called themselves "Lonely" ever since.

"What were you called before?" I asked as wind rustled their leaves. It had become one of my favorite sounds.

A small bit of joy came to me, like a tiny smile. "My mother-tree called me 'Early.' I was the first spring sprout."

Our fungi tangled closer. "Can I call you 'Early'?" I asked.

"Yes," they replied. "Yes, yes, yes."

They released a pheromone I didn't know. I felt gingerly around its edges and tried to understand. Love. Early loved me.

“I love you, too,” I told them, and I didn’t need words.

* * *

“Bay, why did you come?” Early asked. “Humans do not talk like trees.”

I thought hard. “I always wanted to talk to trees,” I told them. “So I learned about them until the people who come here made me like a tree. They changed me so I could hear you and talk to you, and send chemical messages like you, and understand yours. And so I could make fungi to talk to your fungi.”

“Complicated,” Early said. “But why?”

Why *did* I want to talk to trees so much? “I don’t know,” I said. “I was always different from other people.” Early was both male and female. It was hard to explain that I wasn’t either. We spent awhile on that before they understood. “And I don’t—” I reddened. Trees couldn’t see, and I couldn’t see, but I *did* release fear and sadness chemicals that translated to embarrassment. “Trees mate,” I finally said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Make little trees?” I threw off more embarrassment chemicals. Early sent out comforting pheromones and soothing signals. I nestled into the ground a bit. Grass brushed my face.

“In spring I grow two different flowers. I send out pollen from my staminate flowers. Sometimes pollen lands on my pistillate flowers, and I grow acorns there.” Sadness came. “Pollen doesn’t come often, and it’s hard for acorns to grow. A few of mine have sprouted. They died.”

We were sad together for a while. They had hoped and that hope died over and over.

“We were talking about you, Bay,” Early said finally. “Then you talked

about making more trees.”

I chewed my lip as I tried to find the right words. “Humans like the act that makes more humans,” I said. “They like it a lot. It doesn’t always make more humans, so they do it for fun.” For fun: in Early’s language it was close to, “sending happy chemicals to each other over and over.”

Early seemed to think about it. “It’s not like that for trees.”

“It’s not like that for me, either.” I drew my arms closer. “I’m different. Other humans don’t understand.” Once I started, I couldn’t stop. “They think it means I don’t want—most of the time, humans love one other human best? Sometimes more than one, but they love them most of all. They think I don’t want that. I do. I just don’t want to do the thing that makes humans.”

“I understand loving one tree more than others.”

“It’s a special *kind* of love.” I needed so much for Early to understand. “You love them the most, and always want to be together, and you tell them everything. You want to cuddle with them—” Cuddling came out as “tangle your roots together” “—and they feel like that about you, too.”

“Yes.” Early sent signals through our fungi that reminded me of head-pats. They were quiet for a moment. “If you were not such a young sprout, I might feel that love for you. If you had roots, and we could share sunlight, and you were not so small.”

I think they didn’t want to say, *If you were a tree.*

I didn’t want to say, *If you were a human.*

* * *

As September ended, Dr. Khatun visited. “We’ve recorded their story,” she said. “We’re going to pack you out in a few days.”

I hunkered toward the soil. Tall grass rose above my head, as if I were hiding in it, like a fawn. “No.”

Her voice came closer—she was kneeling. “Can you tell me why?”

Annoyance drifted from her, but kindness, too. “They used to call themselves ‘Lonely.’” My voice caught. “I can’t leave them.”

“Okay.” Dr. Khatun swallowed. “Let’s see what we can do. It hasn’t frosted yet.”

“Bay?” Early asked. “Why are you sad?”

“Not sad.” I swiped my cheeks as the team left. A light wind bit. Fall was coming fast.

“Why do you tell me you are not sad when you signal that you are very sad?” Early seemed puzzled.

Their confusion hurt. “Humans call it ‘dishonest.’ We do it when we don’t want to tell something.” I felt worse. I had taught Early how to lie.

“What is it you do not want to tell me?” Waves of worry and sadness washed over me.

I huddled as small as I could. “If I wanted to tell you, I would tell you.” A sob escaped, and I tried to stop my distress pheromones. It didn’t work. Early’s leaves rustled in that light wind, but it didn’t comfort me. It only made me sadder. I would miss it so much.

“But we tell each other everything, Bay.”

“I don’t want to tell!” I cried harder. “I said I don’t want to!”

We didn’t speak again. Early tried to comfort me. They were confused and sad. But they tried anyway.

* * *

The team returned the next day. Early had tried to talk to me about the sunrise and the breeze. I’d only cried again. Soon they’d have no one to talk to. But when I caught the team’s happiness and worry, I shouted. “What is it?” I called. “What’s happening?”

“Ask them how far back we should plant another oak,” Dr. Khatun said. Something metal dinged—a shovel. Some team members panted hard; they must have been carrying—were they carrying—

“Ow! Ow ow ow ow ow!” yelled a tree, a small tree, squeaky-voiced. Branches shook hard. Roots ripped—I screamed *for* them.

“You’re hurting them!” I shouted. “Stop!”

Panic flew from Early. “Who? Who is it? Bay, make them stop! They are hurting a sprout!”

“Oh, God.” I startled when Dr. Khatun touched my shoulder. “We brought another Northern red oak, Bay, the largest we could find. It’s—”

“They! They’re *they* and they’re hurting them!” A shovel dinged again and Early yelled in pain.

“My *roots*! Bay!” Early shouted over the yelling baby. Distress chemicals nearly overwhelmed me, as if I were watching something horrible, yet powerless to stop it. I shoved my hands under my arms. Their chemical signals dimmed, but I still heard both trees crying in pain.

“You’re hurting Early! *Stop!*” I tried covering my ears instead. It didn’t help.

Dr. Khatun knelt and said something. It didn’t penetrate. I could hardly hear her and if I could, it wouldn’t have helped, anyway. Nothing could have stopped Early’s pain and this baby’s shrieks.

They screamed for fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes of misery that Dr. Khatun hugged me through. She shushed me while I wept. Finally, the baby quieted.

“Water,” Early said. “There is water coming where my roots hurt.”

“We brought another Northern red oak,” Dr. Khatun said. “You wouldn’t leave because you said the tree would be lonely. We brought them a friend.”

“Who are you?” Early asked. They were confused and happy and a bit frightened. “You are a little sprout.” Dr. Khatun still held me. I shook.

It babbled, nothing intelligible, no language like Early.

“Bay? They are a Northern red oak but they do not talk. I do not understand.”

“They’re not talking?” I said to Dr. Khatun. “What—”

“Oh God. I never—it didn’t occur to me—” She seemed shocked and drew back. “It—they grew on a tree lot with other saplings. They never had a mother tree. Maybe they never learned to speak.”

I relayed that to Early, and I had to explain tree lots. “They never had

a mother tree?” Early asked.

“No.” I felt their terrible sorrow, and we were together in it.

“They were so alone, Bay. They were as alone as me. I will teach them to talk.” A small sliver of happy came to me. “It will be easier than teaching you.”

“We’re going to start packing you out now,” Dr. Khatun said.

“Early, I have to leave.” Sadness radiated from me. I began to cry again. “I love you. I’ll come back. I’ll see you again. But they need me to talk to other trees.”

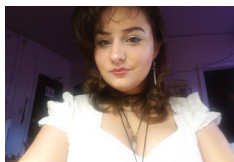
“Like the birds leave.” They went quiet for a moment. “Birds come back.”

“I’ll be like a bird,” I told them.

“I will love you forever, Bay,” Early said.

A tech began to take out the metal rods fastening my legs. “Forever,” I told Early, a long phrase in Northern red oak. I whispered each individual word in that phrase like a promise. “Until I return to the earth that made me.”

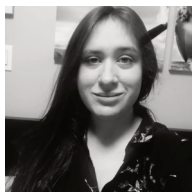
Contributors



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loves many genres including fiction; horror, sci-fi, literary, fantasy, and poetry, and non-fiction, historical, nature and memoir. She collects books and loves spending time with her partner and cat.

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SYDNIE BEAUPRÉ is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

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ELIZABETH BROADBENT escaped the wilds of the Deep South for the Commonwealth of Virginia, where she lives with her three sons and husband. She's the author of *Ink Vine*, a Southern Gothic novella publishing in April 2024 with Psychotoxin Pink, and *Blood Cypress*, coming out in 2025 with

Raw Dog Screaming.

Her speculative fiction has appeared with, or is upcoming in, *Hyphen-Punk*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Hyphenpunk*, *If There's Anyone Left*, and *The Cafe Irreal*, among others. In summer of 2023, ELJ Edition published her novelette, *Naked & Famous*, about teenagers faking appearances of the South Carolina Lizardman. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The*

Washington Post, *Insider*, and *Time*.

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

You can find her website at www.artstation.com/bcandiotti.

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BINOD DAWADI, a polymath from Kathmandu, Nepal, is a beacon of creativity, intellect, and activism. Armed with a master's degree in English, Dawadi wields the power of words to enact societal change. His journey as a writer, teacher, artist, photographer, model, and singer is a testament to

his boundless passion and talent.

Dawadi's artistic endeavors transcend conventional boundaries. His digital paintings and photography capture the essence of his surroundings, while his literary works provide profound insights into the human condition. His commitment to social progress is palpable in every stroke of his brush and syllable of his pen.

As an advocate for change, Dawadi actively participates in global events and exhibitions. From the "International Art Festival" in Korea to the "Creating People's Side Virtual International Exhibition" in Hungary, his work has graced prestigious platforms worldwide. Each exhibition serves as a testament to his unwavering dedication to enlightenment and transformation.

In addition to his visual artistry, Dawadi's written works have left an indelible mark on the literary world. His contributions to esteemed publications such as *Prodigy Published*, *Poetry Soup*, and *ILA Magazine* have garnered widespread acclaim. Furthermore, his authored books, including the iconic "The Power of Words" series and "Serenity's Ecstasy," serve as beacons of inspiration for readers worldwide.

Beyond his artistic pursuits, Dawadi's involvement in education and activism further solidifies his role as a catalyst for change. As a teacher, he imparts knowledge and wisdom to future generations, nurturing minds to think critically and creatively. His advocacy efforts, exemplified by his participation in events like "Speak Up Be Heard," underscore his unwavering commitment to social justice and equality.

In every facet of his life, Binod Dawadi embodies the transformative power of art and words. His journey is a testament to the belief that through creativity, education, and activism, meaningful change can be achieved, one brushstroke, one sentence, one melody at a time.

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Hailing from a massive, wildly supportive family, **MARK DiSTEFANO** enjoys eating food with his many siblings and writing movie screenplays with his twin brother John.

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SHIKHAR DIXIT's stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and Barnes & Noble's *365 Scary Stories*. He lives

with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com.

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JAYTHAM FIRESTAR is a Chicago-based fantasy artist specializing in colorful and whimsical 2D illustrations. Jaytham is driven to combine their innate passion for justice with their artistic talents to create inspirational spaces that uplift the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized voices. They currently run the YouTube channel *Queer Aesthetics*, a new channel dedicated to supporting artists and exposing LGBTQ+ art history. Jaytham hopes to speak through their vibrant and affirming art to convey messages of radical love, mutual aid, and decolonization. Learn more about Jaytham at <https://artbyfirestar.carrd.co/>, and follow [@ArtByFirestar](https://twitter.com/ArtByFirestar) on Twitter, Instagram, Threads, and Bluesky to see project updates.

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AMELIA GORMAN lives in Eureka where she spends her free time exploring tidepools and redwoods with her dogs and foster dogs. Her fiction has appeared in *Nightscript 6* and *Cellar Door* from Dark Peninsula Press. You can read some of her poetry in *Vastarien*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her first chapbook, the Elgin-winning *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, is available from Interstellar Flight Press. Her microchapbook, *The Worm Sonnets*, is available from The Quarter Press.

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J. D. HARLOCK is an American writer, editor, researcher, and academic pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St. Andrews. In addition to their work at *Solarpunk Magazine*, as a poetry editor, and at Android Press, as an editor, Harlock's writing has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *New York University's Library of Arabic Literature*, and the British Council's *Voices*

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ALICIA HILTON is an author, editor, arbitrator, professor, actor, and former FBI Special Agent. Her poems have been nominated for the Rhysling Award and the Dwarf Stars Award. Her work has appeared in *Back 2 OmniPark*, *Creepy Podcast*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *J Journal: New Writing on Justice*, *Litro*, *Mslexia*, *Neon*, *NonBinary Review*, *Penumbric Speculative Fiction*, *Space and Time*, *Unnerving*, *Vastarien*, *Year's Best Hardcore Horror Volumes 4, 5 & 6*, and elsewhere. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. Her website is <https://aliciahilton.com>. Follow her on Twitter @aliciahilton01 and Bluesky @aliciahilton.bsky.social.

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DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

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MATTEO MORETTI was born in Rome on 22 July 1990. His first novel *Una Goccia di Tenebra* was published in 2018 by La Caravella Editrice. "Our Love is Here to Stay" was his first work published in English. He likes movies, novels, comic books, video games and tabletop RPGs. He doesn't like happy endings.

* * *

DREW PISARRA is the author of two poetry collections, *Infinity Standing Up* and *Periodic Boyfriends*; two short story collections, *Publick Spanking* and *You're Pretty Gay*; and two radio plays, *Price in Purgatory* and *The Strange Case of Nick M.*

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MARK RICH has published fiction, criticism, and poetry in publications ranging from *Asimov's SF*, *Analog*, and *F&SF* to *Chiron Review*, *POEM*, and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. His most recent book, which focuses on the time period 1859-1958, is *Toys in the Age of Wonder*:

Science Fiction, Society, and the Symbolism of Play (McFarland, 2020). He gardens, writes, and restores minor antiquities in the Coulee region of western Wisconsin.

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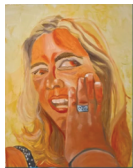


J.H. SIEGAL writes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, music, and code. He plays barrelhouse piano and produces the musical group Red Spot Rhythm Section. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Skeptic Magazine*, among others. Currently, he is at work on his first novel. He lives with his wife and two children near Chicago, IL.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Ebb Tide Reflections*, features poetry, short stories and photography (World Inkers, NYC). Carl has four photography books, published by Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and The Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently a co-editor with *ILA Magazine*, art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for three The Best of the Net Awards (2021-23) and a 2023 Pushcart Nomination for work in *Ebb Tide Reflections*.

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CLAIRE SMITH writes poetry to explore other worlds: fairy tale, folklore, myth and more. Most recently her poems have appeared in the journals: *Corvid Queen*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, and *Spectral Realms*. She is currently working on a PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. She lives in the heart of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, U.K. with her husband and their very spoilt Tonkinese cat, Ishtar. Find her on the Internet at: <http://www>.

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YULIA VERETA (she/her) is a Polish writer of Ukrainian origin who is now living her third life in Katowice, where she works as a translator and is a poet on a good day and a disaster-maker on a bad one. Her speculative works have been published in print and online, among others in *Star*Line*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Leading Edge*, *Penumbria*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *ParSec*. She is a 2022 Best of the Net Nominee.

When she isn't working, writing or cooking, she tries to remake her stationary time machine into a smaller portable model, since the one she currently owns does not fit into the elevator of the 12-story building where she lives and constantly becomes the source of strange questions at airport customs.

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MATTHEW WILSON has been published in *Star*Line*, *Night to Dawn* magazine, *Hiraeth Publishing* and many more. His first story collection *Gargoyles of the Abbey* is now available on kindle.



Electric Life

by Barbara Candiotti

(full image)