

penumbra



speculative
fiction mag

Dec 2k20 • vol iv issue 4

Horror

Vampires? Been there.
Zombies? Yawn.
Where next?

Folklore and horror
Interview with

Cynthia
Pelayo

plus

Elana Gomel • J.S. Watts • Sara
Connell • Novyl the Mysterious •
Alexander P. Garza • Elby Rogers •
Amy Bernstein • Karen Heslop •
Oliver Smith • Colleen Anderson •
Aaron Sandberg • Jamal Hodge •
Tim Jeffreys • Anahita Ramoutar •
Christina Sng • David F. Shultz •
Martins Deep • Carl Scharwath •
T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2020 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

We are open for submissions of all kinds—fiction, poetry, art, animation, and music submissions! Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

Table of contents

from the editor

articles

article
interview

Oh, Horror, Where Art Thou?

Loving the Grimm: An interview with Cynthia Pelayo

fiction & poetry

by Sara Connell
by Colleen Anderson
by J.S. Watts
by Oliver Smith
by Amy Bernstein
by Jamal Hodge
by Alexander P. Garza
by Tim Jeffreys
by Aaron Sandberg
by Elana Gomel
by Karen Heslop
by David F. Shultz
by Christina Sng

Ghost House
Tales Never Told
The Sisters
Wych-Elm Kings Again
Our Best Friend
The Left-Hand Path
Dark Solstice
10:10 to Throgmorten
Necromancy (After the Séance Failed)
Little Fish
Gods of the Valley
Unraveling
The End

art & g. narrative

by Novyl the Mysterious
by Anahita Ramoutar
by T. Motley
by Elby Rogers
by Martins Deep
by Carl Scharwath
by Jesper Nordqvist

Skull on Desk
Soulless
The Road to Golgonooza
Happy Childhood
the boy who caught the sun in a cocoyam leaf
Deliquesce
Mondo Mecho

contributor's

bios

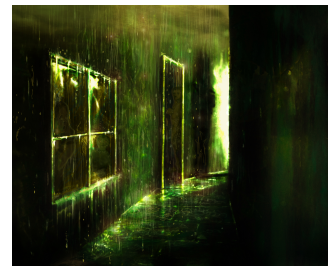
cover: Reeled
by toeken



Happy Childhood



*the boy who caught the
sun in a cocoyam leaf*



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

When I was young, I couldn't stand horror. It's not that I thought it was purile (I would have snickered at the naughty-sounding word), or that it was boring, or that it held a frightening mirror up to society (I mean, I was 8 or 10, so ...). It was that I was scared to death of it.

More specifically, I was afraid of the nightmares it would give me. This was especially true of religious horror. We'd had a babysitter ... She was scarcely older than my sister and I, but in youth such differences are a lifetime, and she seemed an adult to us. To me, anyway. We were in a room, in the colors of old-fashioned, of my grandparents' house in the 1970s: browns and golds and sepia tones. I remember it as if it were a dream. My sister played with a toy nearby, something stuffed, something quiet, a bear, perhaps, or a tiny tiger.

I remember the babysitter standing near the doorway, I know not why, but there was no leaving that place. As if I could have gone anywhere, really. She stood, with short, sandy-blond hair, earnest in what she had to say, filled with all the certainty, all the bombast, all the cajoling and demanding of an expert speaker. Well, expert to an eight-year-old. I stood nearby, near a railing separating the entryway from the living room, made of old, smooth wood, and she stood on the other side, hands sometimes on the rail, sometimes waving in urgency.

There was a god, she told us—nay, a God, a GOD—and HE was our only hope, the only possibility, however slim, of keeping us from an eternity in Hell.

My sister ignored her, still playing. “Rowr,” said the tiger. I, however, was rapt.

This GOD, she claimed, was all kind, all compassionate, all

powerful, all knowing, but HE would only save you if you repented, prayed, begged to be saved. Heaven was the ultimate reward if he accepted your prayers and praise—but acceptance of these sounded somehow rare, based on doing it the right way and at the right time. And opposite this, your anti-reward if you displeased HIM in ANY way, was the fire and the brimstone and the ever-burning flames of Hell, a land of torture and hate, of pain and ever-lasting death. A darkness that the land of nightmares only touched (and my nightmares were already horrific), and all that if you displeased HIM in any way whatsoever. No questions asked, no quarter given.

There was more, much more, and I will tell it sometime, but not here. But I took this vengeful God to heart, and His Hell, and combined this with my undiagnosed OCD to make my life a maze of rituals, a life of doing everything just the right way, just the right number of times, or else the nightmares would come. And they came regularly.

The last thing I wanted to do was give my imagination more ammunition, and so watching a film like *The Exorcist* was ... well, even hearing about it, even seeing an ad, might set me off, might send me to my room to curl into a ball and rock back and forth, counting, the numbers trying to supplant the horror of my mind ...

I'm ... better now, if by better you mean fascinated by films showing humans transforming into flesh-eating, flesh-decaying zombies, by monsters and shadows and fear itself. I'm spellbound by interesting portrayals of vampires, by the social implications hidden within the monsters and their victims. I'm even almost able to watch films like *The Exorcist*, although not without subconsciously mirroring some of the old hand-wringing I did as a child (and I only notice this when my friends point out I'm doing it). The night has become my friend, and the bright bright light of day ... well, not so much.

The psychology of horror has thus become a fascination for me, along with the social implications and other academic-sounding issues. But when I started looking at trends in horror films for this issue of *Penumbra*, somehow I thought I'd be focusing on genre—slasher vs zombie films, torture porn vs vampires. Nope. A short article turned into a much longer exploration of not only genre but film techniques in horror and, of course, social trends. All of these interact, of course, to create a whole, and so I felt I couldn't ignore any of them, even if that made for another article that skims the surface, that more points the way toward deeper exploration rather than going there itself. Hopefully it's enough to enable you to make deeper explorations of your own.

We follow this with an amazing interview with author and editor Cynthia Pelayo, whose fascination with folklore and horror permeates her stories and books. She's in the midst of several projects, including her novel *Children of Chicago*, and she talks about this, the expectations of publishers, representation of authors of color, and more.

And then the works within this issue of *Penumbra* ... they aren't necessarily your typical horror. Some, like "Ghost House," "The Sisters," "Little Fish," "10:10 to Throgmorton," and "Unraveling," have their roots in classic horror, but are distinctly new in their presentation of it. Some may not be considered horror at all, but have a sense of "dread," as Pelayo mentions in our interview: You may find that "Our Best Friend" and "Dark Solstice" aren't horror exactly, but do have that sense to them. And then there are those that cross genre: "Tales Never Told," "Wych-Elm Kings Again," and "Gods of

the Valley" are dark and fantastic. And some are viscerally horrific, as "The Left-Hand Path" and "Necromancy (After the Séance Failed)," and Christina Sng's excellent textual end to this issue, "The End."

The art is similarly diverse, in palette as well as tone. *Happy Childhood* evinces some of the horror thematically expressed in some of the textual pieces, while *Deliquesce* is of a different kind of horror entirely, while *Soulless* and *Skull on Desk* aren't specifically horrific, but harken back to that sense of dread, or of things not being quite right. *the boy who caught the sun in a cocoyam leaf* wouldn't immediately go down that path; it is more fantasy, but I think fits well in this issue, as do our continuing graphic narratives *The Road to Golgonooza* and *Mondo Mecho*. And, of course, toeken's cover art *Reeled* invites us—if we aren't squeamish—down the path into horror's future.

Thank you again to everyone who contributed to this issue, and may the works herein take the edge off the horror of reality for the next couple of months.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra



Oh,
Horror,
Where Art Thou?

From
monsters to
vampires to
slashers to
ghosts to
zombies to ...

MY FIRST NOTICEABLE INTRODUCTION TO “TRENDS” IN HORROR was when the Halloween films started coming out in the late seventies. I wasn’t old enough to remember Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, and thus thought that “Slasher” films began with Michael Myers and segued into Jason and Freddy.

Of course, I saw none of these at the time. For one thing, I couldn’t get into an “R”-rated movie, and I didn’t know anyone old enough

PICTURED: O brother, where art thou? ... Oh, right, you’re a zombie. Undead Merle (Michael Rooker) and Ben (Tyler Chase) from AMC’s *The Walking Dead*

who wanted to go. But mostly I absolutely didn’t want to be scared. The very advertising for *Alien* (that little egg with the strange light emanating from it) gave me chills, and any sort of religious horror (*The Amityville Horror*; *The Exorcist*, etc.) gave me nightmares. (But



PICTURED: Laurie Strode rests a moment, while Michael Myers never rests (*Halloween* [1978], Compass International Pictures)

then, I had a lot of nightmares.) I was much more comfortable with the “non-scary” monster films of the previous generation, which looking back on it was probably my real first intro to trends, but I wasn’t aware of that at the time. Nope, slasher films were the big thing, and everyone was talking about them well into the ’80s and even ’90s—when the next big thing(s) came along (meta horror like *Scream* and an artsier version of monster movies like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* and Kenneth Brannagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*). And then after that, well, rapidly we’ve had everything from supernatural horror to zombies, found footage to torture porn, overlapping and interacting in both crass and interesting ways, as obviously one trend doesn’t exist in a vacuum ...

Although trends aren’t definitive--e.g., supernatural horror films were around before they became a “trend”--they offer both direction for those who want to sample some types over others and a commentary on ourselves—what scares us now? What kinds of scares are we

after? What kind of society do we live in, and what are we hoping for—and afraid of—happening around us?

Which Trendline Will You Choose?

As I researched this, I realized that “trends in horror” could be seen in at least three different ways. While I originally meant “what subject or subgenre do/will horror films/games focus on; e.g., slasher films, vampires, zombies, etc.,” websites all purporting to tell me the “latest trends in horror” focused on other things. Some talked about format—was the camera handheld? Was everything presented as “found footage”? Was it black and white or color? What kinds of cutting techniques were used? Others wondered about the types of social commentary—was the film more a *Get Out* or *The Lighthouse*? Or are we talking more about what things scare us nowadays—are we talking pandemics or monsters, normal-people-turned-axe-wielding-murderers or plants turning us from normal people into compliant

pod-people? Are we afraid of our society failing, or of the darkness within ourselves?

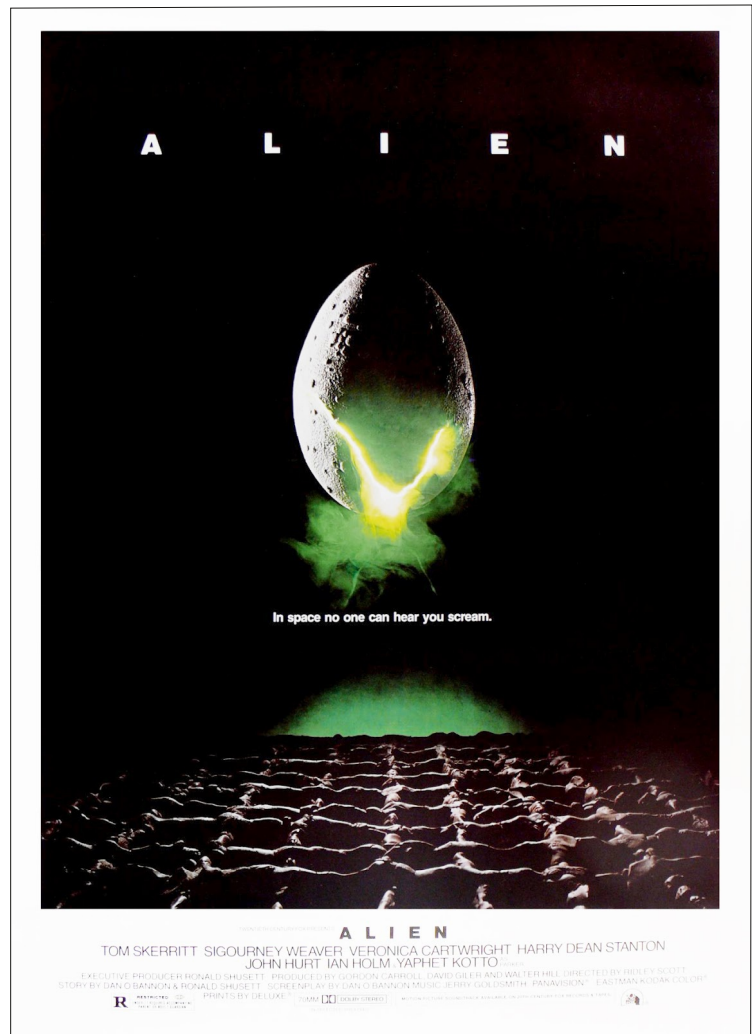
I don't think one can talk about the future of the genre—or any genre, really—without touching on all of these things. They are interrelated, even as the types of films being made are influenced by audiences who are influenced by the films being made, and both influenced by reviews and social media and so on in a set of unending loops. And to complicate matters, some of these "trends" become traditions, outlasting the very idea of a trend (less faddish, more ubiquitous over time). Assuming, of course, that trends have beginning and end points; that is, that a trend becomes something else entirely if it lasts long enough.

In this (relatively) short article, we won't be able to really delve, but hopefully we can give you an overview of things as they were, as they are, and as they are to come, choosing a little from each trendline.

Formatting My Horror 101

When film began in the late 1800s, just having a moving picture could disturb audiences. One of the first films (or snippets of film), the Lumière brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, or *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), is rumored to have made audiences stampede, fearing for their lives. (This is disputed; see, for example, this article in Atlas Obscura: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/did-a-silent-film-about-a-train-really-cause-audiences-to-stampede>.) The camera didn't need to move, there didn't need to be any edits or cuts (except between reels, if the film were long enough). It was all thrilling and new.

This changed rapidly, however, as audiences saw more and more films (and perhaps became used to seeing trains hurtling towards them). At the same time, studios/filmmakers began to tell whole stories with their films, and we began to see (well, not "we," unless you're a vampire and 120 years young) "techniques" that we take for granted today. Cuts between scenes, indicating dialogue by cutting between actors, lighting effects, and so forth became the tricks of the trade.



PICTURED: This image from the *Alien* advertising in the mid-seventies freaked me out as a child. I don't know why. (20th Century Fox)

One of the earliest "trends" (and one of the most striking examples) was the German expressionist horror of the early twentieth century. Films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) used shadows and lighting to distort and exaggerate the horrors within those films; in *Caligari* the



PICTURED: Scene from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920. Try sleepwalking over those roofs ... (Decla-Bioscop)

very sets (and thus the film's world) are distorted, twisted even, and sometimes the characters' faces are the only things we see, surrounded by a sea of darkness. While somewhat odd-looking, it definitely sets a mood: as a viewer, you are off-balance, and the expressionist techniques used add a lot to the horror of the story. So much so, really, that some of these techniques have become ubiquitous (although the odd-angled buildings and roads all out of joint with traditional perspective remained mostly part of this particular movement). We're always slightly afraid of what might be in those shadows ... So does that make them trends? Or just innovations?

For instance, sound might have seemed trendy when, in the late 1920s, it added a whole new dimension to horror films, so by the time you get to James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) you have thunder, screams, monster noises—making everything much more visceral. You no longer had to read what characters were saying in intertitle cards ... you could experience it as though the action were occurring live, and you right there with the monsters. But sound film

also became ubiquitous; now it would be an interesting trend if studios started putting out silent films.

This is true of the choice of black and white over color after color film largely supplanted black and white once it was widely available (and trying to compete with early television for audiences' attention); horror films especially could use this to advantage, often leveraging those very shadows from earlier films. By the time you reached the 1960s, there were two very different kinds of horror film—the supersaturated colors of Hammer horror, wherein the color not only set the scene but also could tell you important things about the characters (see “A Study of Scarlet: Color in Hammer Horror Films” by Amy Anna on cutprintfilm.com), and then ... *Psycho*. Hitchcock may have chosen black and white because he thought a color version would have been too much for audiences to handle (he said as much), but regardless, the techniques used are similar to those of the German Expressionists (and to some extent Hitchcock's earlier films, like *Notorious* [1946] and *Spellbound* [1945]): shadows, the play of light, strange and awkward angles twisting the viewer's reality (in fact, Hitchcock hired Salvadore Dali to create the dream sequences in *Spellbound*). This was followed in the late 1960s by George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, also in black and white, which Romero, in contrast to Hitchcock, has said seemed “more gruesome” than color: “I always felt that black-and-white blood looked more



PICTURED: Does anyone not know this scene? Still, for attribution purposes ... *Psycho*, 1960. (Paramount Pictures)

real” (from talk at the Toronto International Film Festival, on the Criterion release).

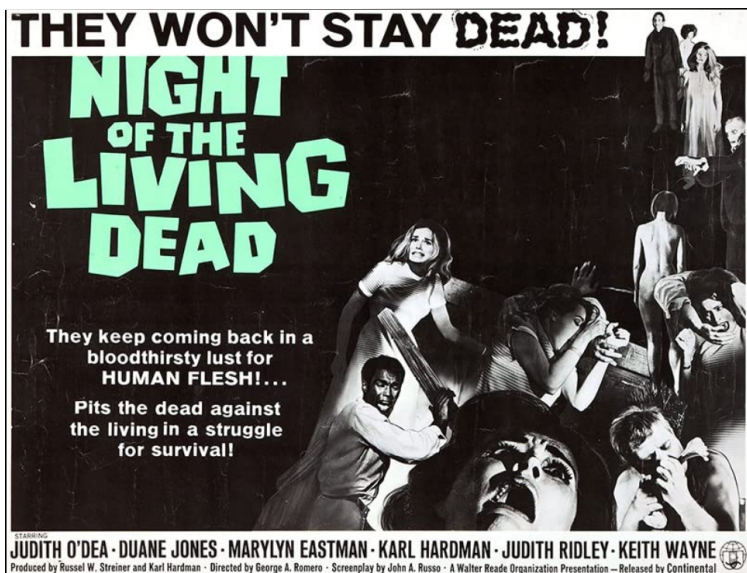
Filmmakers have also experimented with grainy film (used mostly for effects within films, like indicating that the characters are watching a video or home movie themselves, like in *Sinister*) and with sepia or other tints to indicate ... well, various things. For instance, *Fear the Walking Dead* spent most of season 3 with some kind of strange tint added to any “present” scenes (and no such tint to the “past” scenes). This, honestly, didn’t work for me; it sort of felt like the reverse of how it should have been, or like something added for effect that interfered with my staying connected to the story (because I was too busy thinking how much I found it more annoying than innovative). Whether it worked for others I don’t know, but they pretty much dropped this effect once they reached season 4 and stopped with the past/present dichotomy. On their own these techniques aren’t really “trends,” per se, but could be considered part of the “found footage” trend described below.

There have been other changes to the way film tried to scare us that never quite panned out (IMO), but were definitely trends. 3D, for instance, occasionally made us jump, but it seems so ... hokey. It’s sort of like trying to convince us that the train from 1896 is really coming for us. Used primarily just as a way to make us jump, and never wholly convincing (those 3D sharks in *Jaws 3D* never quite seem to be able to jump over the uncanny valley), 3D shows up every so often in some new iteration to try to scare us again, with pretty much the same results each time. Until we actually have hologrammatic realism, I don’t think 3D will be particularly effective. Although VR ...

There are various other film techniques that have been used in horror to great effect: filming from very close in to add a sense of claustrophobia (what’s just outside the frame? Monsters!), over the shoulder (giving the audience the same point of view as the character and creating tension), etc, or cutting scenes in such a way as to speed up or slow down the action and suspense. And many of these have either created trends (where every film that came out at the time seemed to use them) or long-lasting changes. But the most recent



PICTURED: Film poster for *Frankenstein*, 1931, the second of the Universal movie monsters (after *Dracula*). This was rapidly followed by a whole pantheon of “classic” monsters, like *The Wolf Man*, *The Mummy*, etc. etc. (from Wikipedia)



PICTURED: Lobby card for *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968 (Image Ten)

major innovation—and one mentioned on several sites as a “trend” in horror—was “found footage.”

The Blair Witch Project (1999) used this to greater effect (or more successful effect, fame-wise) than any film before it. The technique is meant to be like discovering someone’s home movies and replaying them, adding a sort of verite and immersion to the horror (in fact, *Blair Witch* was even advertised as a possibly “true story”). This became the Next Big Thing in the 2000s after *Blair Witch*’s success, with many films trying it out in various ways (*Rec*, etc.) But, while it can be effective, its limitations on storytelling start to become obvious when you get bizarre camera angles from conveniently “dropped” cameras in order to set up more conventional techniques (like showing us something the character doesn’t see coming up behind them), or trying to fit into the story why the heck there are fifteen different cameras in the area (someone really liked security!). It’s best used now as just a part of the story, as in *Sinister*, where it is literally footage that’s been found by the protagonist, but I’d say in general its trend-time has passed.

Future techniques poised to become trends seem to be those that take advantage of modern and relatively cheap technologies to achieve big-budget effects, such as the use of drones to get all kinds of camera angles and footage, or software/hardware that creates special effects even on a home laptop.

Subgenres as Trends

This is what I thought I’d be focusing on all the way through this article. To me, at least on first glance, horror can be classified by a sort of type, or subgenre, that often moves in overlapping batches over the course of five to ten years (or more) partly due to the film industry’s love of copying itself until the cloning fails, the genetic duplication causing it to rot from within and the search for new blood to occur. (OK, this isn’t entirely true ... audience desires help move things along as well.) As mentioned, when I was growing up, the biggest thing was the slasher film—exemplified by *Halloween*, followed by *Friday the 13th*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and so on. You might begin this subgenre with Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, mentioned before for its use of black and white film. It is, of course, most famous for a certain slushy shower scene. (It’s also connected to the slasher films through its use of lead actress, Janet Leigh being the mother of Jamie Lee Curtis of [originally] *Halloween* fame.)

There were other subgenres at work during that time. With films like *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary’s Baby* (albeit that was late ’60s), etc., religious horror came to the fore, and has continued right along, albeit it doesn’t seem as popular now, possibly because we now seem to prefer a scientific explanation for horrible things. (For me, *Hellraiser* (1987) counts as the last one of these that I was much interested in, but it could be argued that it’s not the same kind of religious horror ... And actually, John Carpenter’s *Prince of Darkness* (also 1987) was fun, too (who doesn’t want a little liquid Satan?). Again, when the first of these came out, I was too young and too frightened to go see any of them; I’m much better now, thank you.

And of course the modern idea of a “zombie” was born around this

time, in *Night of the Living Dead*—a subgenre that in some ways has sustained itself right along, although it has waxed and waned and waxed again, with modern incarnations in video games-cum-films (*Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*), as fast zombies (the 28 Days films, *Rec*, and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* [2004]) versus the “traditional” slow (*NotLD*, *The Walking Dead*). And zombies can be created through religious means (for instance, in *Rec*) or through a terrible virus (many of the modern versions, like in *Quarantine*, the American remake of *Rec*), or through human beings/companies trying to play god (*Resident Evil*), so they merge into other subgenres as well.

However, I started in the middle of the story, missing out on a rich history of monster movies including Frankenstein's monster, werewolves, mummies, and vampires, most of which were popular from the 1930s through to the 1950s ... or 60s, with the Hammer monster films, which I mostly remember as being vampires, even though they did other things. Vampires came back in a big way after Anne Rice interviewed her vampire in the mid-70s, although filmically they sort of tottered along in the 70s and 80s before being reimagined in the 90s through to the early 2000s. 1994 was when Anne Rice's book was finally made into a film, and then suddenly we had sympathetic, soulful-eyed yet soulless vampires by the dozen—everything from *Buffy* to *True Blood* to *Twilight*—and other vampires in *Blade*, *Underworld*, and so on and on and on.

I feel like the ultimate example of the scary monster was the H.R. Giger-designed alien in *Alien*, arguably as much a horror film as a sci-fi film (unlike its successors, which became more action-movie than horror). But it's difficult nowadays to really scare people with a “classic” monster, although I'd say films like *Cloverfield* come closest. But as they say in *Parasite Eve* (the game), it seems “the worst foe lies within the self,” rather than outside. This is discussed more in the next section on social commentary.

We even reached, with *Scream* and its ilk, the point of “meta-horror,” where we basically make fun of all the horror tropes that have accumulated over the years and then try to have a scary film at the

same time. (As dismissive as that sounds, I enjoyed the first *Scream*, and I really liked the *AHS: 1984* series. But as with any other genre, going “meta” only works in small doses, almost more as nostalgia, and it runs the risk of diminishing its audience to only those who are part of the “in” group that watches all the horror films anyway and alienating those who don't “get it.”)

Sometimes, though, it seems there are as many subgenres of horror as there are people to name them. Besides zombies, we've had torture porn (*Saw*, etc.), terrifying ghosts/poltergeists (from *Poltergeist* to *The Ring*, etc.), and before the actual pandemic, pandemic films (where sometimes the disease created zombies). You could even create a subgenre based on authors; I've certainly heard, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, of the Stephen King Film genre. And the Haunted House? Yup, whole bunches of films that could be tied to that, sometimes falling into other subgenres at the same time (*Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, etc. etc.). I suppose that many haunted house films, in that they generally are haunted by people with terrible pasts/deaths, also fit into the idea of manifestations of the self; they contain the horror of people just being horrible people, or the victims of those horrible people, which leads us into ...

Social Commentary/Psychology

Horror films having an underlying social commentary is not new—in the 1950s, monster movies could often be seen as about the dangers of nukes (and the monsters it could create) or invasions of the Other (for example, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, remade time and time again as we continue to worry about invasions of varying kinds, and about losing ourselves and our individuality). In the 1960s, *Night of the Living Dead*'s Black hero is shot by a White posse at the end, after managing to survive a night filled with zombie attacks (although the film's director, George Romero, has claimed that the film would have been the same way with a White hero; the social commentary remains, regardless). So maybe the ultimate in trends is ... what do horror films tell us about ourselves and our societies, today (whenever that is)?



PICTURED: Kevin McCarthy tries to warn us that the monsters are here already in 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Allied Artists Pictures)

When talking about ourselves and what we get out of horror personally, well, sometimes it's not hugely deep; sometimes we are merely after the thrill of being scared out of our seats, or of squirming at the sight of buckets of blood. But sometimes it boils down to a sort of self-therapy.

As therapy, horror films can—counterintuitively—help to relieve anxiety, according to an article by Abby Moss on Vice, “Why Some Anxious People Find Comfort in Horror Movies.” By watching something that both stimulates our fear response but that we also know, on some level, isn’t real, we are able to get a dose of fear in a controlled environment—and, perhaps, get used to it and help us face smaller anxieties in real life. (Personally, I don’t get this effect—if anything, some kinds of horror increase rather than decrease my anxiety about other things. But it doesn’t work for everyone.) Other articles (lots of other articles) discuss something called “excitation

transfer,” which basically means that, as frightened as we are of the scary things in horror movies, we are equally relieved (and filled with endorphins, maybe) when the film is over, and we experience a state of heightened emotional arousal afterwards. This doesn’t account for those films where the horror lives on, however. And, again, this doesn’t work for everyone.

But sometimes we’re not looking within as much as without—or a dollop of both--and this is where trends come in. As Mary Farnstrom states (in the Puzzle Box article “Horror Trends From Gore to the Supernatural”), “Horror films help us explain away the evil and darkness in the world”—albeit often simplistically. In the past, especially, these were explanations sanctioned by the dominant culture: An evil person becomes an evil ghost, those who are bitten by a werewolf become one

themselves, the religiously pure can overcome the Devil and his minions, etc. Society tells us what the social norms and mores want us to do. However, it’s also been a way we can vicariously be the evil or admire it coquettishly, from the shadows: Vampires are often seen in this way, where their appetite for blood is sexualized (sometimes very obviously, going for the most beautiful people). And of course in the end, at least in older films, the evil is then destroyed or vanquished and, although we are warned to keep watching out for it, for it might rise again, we get the catharsis of closure--society and its values win out in the end.

As an aside, it’s interesting to note the times when censors or studios forced these “happy endings” on us--a sort of propaganda of the superego trying to keep us from seeing the fear beneath. The original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* ended with the protagonist on the run, trying to get away from the monsters all of his friends had

become, only to discover that the monstrosity was already spreading across the world, and screaming at everyone (including the camera, and thus, us), “They’re here already! You’re next! You’re next!” But that was too bleak, so the studio tacked on a frame story where he gets to a hospital and recounts the entire terrible experience to the doctors, who eventually believe him and, presumably, save the world by calling for the roads to be barricaded and the FBI to come to the rescue. More recently, even within a single version of *I Am Legend* (Will Smith, 2007), two endings existed—one in which Smith’s character dies in order to get the cure for vampirism out to the world, and one in which he suddenly realizes that his own actions against the vampires are a kind of villainy and that, from their point of view, he’s the bad guy. This more ambiguous ending was dropped because test audiences at the time didn’t like it; they wanted clarity and closure, their heroes to be heroes without the taint of darkness.

Indeed, over time the salvation or destruction of the protagonists at the ends of horror films, or whether the evil wins outright or not, or is only beaten back, is often related to the psyche of the times. If we wish only to see the good in our society (or those in power wish this), perhaps we are less willing to face the cracks, the dangers, the dark side, or, worse, the grey (ambiguousness) that life generally is.

Of course, regardless of the desires of those in charge of society, horror can be used to subvert those norms, and much like in science fiction, make us take a look at the underbelly even while thinking we’re just looking at some alternate reality. Sometimes these films get caught out before release (like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, perhaps); sometimes audiences see through the façade and feel like the film has too much of a “message.” But, I think, many horror films, especially in the 2010s, reflect/refract our views of society as much as they do anything

A Few of My Favorite Things

I have to admit that horror wasn’t my first love; I was much too frightened of, well, various things (the fire and brimstone of religion being one of them, even though I was from a non-religious family—see my editorial for that story) to want to go to a theatre and scare myself even more. But after I grew up, I developed a certain fondness for many a horror film, and even the scary monsters within them. While writing this article, I had to go back and think about these, and which ones I enjoyed most.

Note, though, that some of these I haven’t seen in twenty years, so I don’t know what I’d think of them now. They are also listed in no particular order.

Alien

Nightbreed

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

Get Out

The Walking Dead (up to about season 3/parts of 4, then at intervals)

NOS4A2

AHS: 1984

Halloween (several of them)

Train to Busan

A Chinese Ghost Story



PICTURED: Don't say we didn't get you anything for Christmas ... The children of Christmasland have a little feast in AMC's NOS4A2



PICTURED: Will more zombies be in our future? (*The Walking Dead*, AMC)

else to frighten us. It feels like we are finally forcing ourselves to look into the shadows. (Although it appears that the backlash to this is a resolute stare straight into the sun by a sizable portion of the population, purposefully blinding themselves to anything they don't want to acknowledge.)

I suppose the most common thread in this is that of the Other—whether that Other is the monster or monstrous itself, or those running from and/or confronting it. Jase Short, in “The Formless Monstrosity: Recent Trends in Horror” (in *Red Wedge*), says that

Traditionally, horror films have had a strong appeal to the oppressed, from women (who continue to make up the majority of the genre’s actual viewers) to non-whites to queer and gender non-conforming audiences. This in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that these “Others” have provided the raw material of trope production of the monstrous in the genre. Now, a new generation of innovative filmmakers have “flipped the script” as a *Washington Post* Op-Ed penned by Danielle Ryan outlines. Instead of making films with these classic tropes, film makers like *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) director Jordan Peele “generate horror from the experience of being that formerly monstrous Other.”

I would imagine we will see more of this, especially given the times we live in. Which leads us finally to the future of horror ...

The Future of Horror

Will zombies continue to amble along with us into the future? Will we completely replace religious horror with the scientific (as we have with zombies ... changing from a religious explanation to a virus)? Will the surge in

culturally relevant horror continue? (And I won't even go into the idea of "elevated horror," which seems to me more a label given to try to make some horror more academically palatable, pretending that some horror is "art" and some just crap for the masses. This feels like gatekeeping to me ...)

I think that, ultimately, predicting the future of the horror genre is like predicting technological advances or social movements—at best an educated guess, at worst a complete stab in the dark by a flailing protagonist. It will have to be something that taps into the "now" to scare us, though. If we're talking techniques, it would have to be another innovation like the "found footage" phenomenon, something we're not used to. If we're talking genre, it'd have to be something that ties into social fears (like the pandemic, but totally not—we're living through that particular horror, so it'll need to be something else). Or maybe it'll be less purely frightening for a while and more escapist, at least on the surface, like the monster movies of the fifties. I think the dichotomy of our society will require this of any broadly successful film, especially if this return to the fifties includes a sort of McCarthy-esque crackdown on liberal values—maybe the blockbusters will only tap into social fear on a more subconscious level. There will have to be room, however, for more films using social issues, like *Get Out*, to both frighten and teach, films that perhaps help to keep us "woke" by making us afraid to go to sleep, afraid of the darkness out there in the world and willing to go out and change it.



PICTURED: Or will it be social issues, as in *Get Out*? (poster art, Universal Pictures)



Loving the Grimm

An interview with Cynthia Pelayo

CYNTHIA PELAYO WRITES AND EDITS horror and true crime works, and not just a little—she has several books that have come out recently or are due out soon, including her upcoming novel *Children of Chicago*. She also has her own small press, Burial Day Books, which puts out the Gothic Blue Book series. Everything she writes seems to be influenced in some way, large or small, by the spiritual, and by folklore and mythology. For this horror-themed *Penumbria*, we were honored to be able to ask her about this, and about her influences, and about how she manages to keep up with, well, everything.

* * *

You've talked about your "need to believe" in the essay of the same title in the Southwest Review. Is that need to believe in the spiritual what got you into writing horror, and studying folklore and mythology?

I guess yes and no. I was a writer in high school, but I was more of a journalist. I went to a really impoverished

PICTURED: (opposite) The cover of *Gothic Blue Book VI: A Krampus Carol*; (right) Cynthia Pelayo

high school, I think it was like an 89% poverty rate, and I was a writer. I won our high school statewide awards. And then I had the idea of majoring in fiction, and my teachers all kind of steered me away from that. They're like, "You'll starve as a fiction writer. Go into journalism because then you can do PR, you can do marketing," which is what I kind of ended up doing for my day job anyway. So I did journalism, but I never worked as a full-time journalist. I did freelance journalism, or I wrote for community newspapers, and I covered a lot of hardcore or heavy topics, like homeless youth, police shootings. ... I feel like the last journalist story that I worked on—and I still do columns and features and things, but the last community news story I did—I was at my parents' house and we heard helicopters, which in Chicago is not unusual, but this was really close. I called my editor and I said, "Something's going on. I'm going to go check it out, maybe we can publish it." I showed up, and there was a kid. He must have been younger than me, he was a teenager, and he had bullet holes in his back, there were police standing around him ... it was like a scene from a movie. One side it's police, one side it's the community members, and each of them is arguing with the other over whose fault it was, and my Dad just started crying, because he recognized the kid from the neighborhood. And my Dad's like, the kid, he got out of jail, he was trying to get his life together, I knew him. And so just listening to my Dad's account that he knew this young man, and just to see my father crying over someone from the neighborhood like that, I just ... I couldn't write the story. I wanted to write about these things that I had seen and felt, but I couldn't put it into journalism. So I got an MFA in Writing, and that's how fiction started [for me]. So I was always a fiction writer, I was a journalist, and I think my fiction writing all comes from that place of pain of living in the city, and seeing these tragedies but seeing the beauty within the city as well.

I've used things like folklore and myth and spirituality almost as my own personal exploration to reckon with these bad things that happen,



and I've seen so many bad things happen. I have friends from elementary school who are serving life in prison, well one friend who's serving life in prison for murder. I know people who were killed in gang shootings, ... like every story you hear in the news. "Young football star comes to the city" ... I know a kid like that, this young man, so handsome, left the city to play football, came back for the holidays and he was shot and killed. He was a teddy bear,

handsome person, and it's awful, it's awful. And so ... fiction has been a way of trying to reckon with all this and hopefully find some meaning, and maybe it's been my own personal therapy, in a way, too.

Yeah, I've definitely written fiction like that, as almost a therapeutic thing, so ... yeah. I'm really interested in folklore and mythology as well. ... I've read several things where you've taken a fairy tale or story and written an alternate perspective version of it. Is there any particular influence or objective for doing that? I've really enjoyed them!

Thank you. I'm absolutely obsessed with fairy tales. My novel coming out, and I haven't mentioned too much what it's about, but I'll mention it here. *Children of Chicago* is packed with fairy tales. It's where I take the Pied Piper fairy tale, and he is my boogeyman in the novel, and all throughout I feel like every chapter kind of plays with a fairy tale device ... I'm trying to be careful what I say, because there's a cool twist at the end ... but if you read the novel, you'll see that it's pretty heavily based in folklore, and what the

Grimm Brothers were trying to do with all of the scary things ... A lot of the works of the Grimm Brothers, there was just tons of research in that book. ... The original [book], the first one, was an academic exploration, and they realized that they could repackage it to the masses, so the second edition is what we're most familiar with. The Grimms' fairy tales are really terrifying, some of them.

Oh, yeah. They're not Disney!

In my MFA I feel like the main things I studied were the Grimm Brothers, Poe, Borges, and then I went on a really intense Beckett journey. [laughs] I don't know why. I did a lot of theater, dramaturgy in my MFA, too, so I'm really fascinated with the commentary of what fairy tales were warning people about long ago that are very similar to things that we warn people about today, like little girls, be careful of the big bad wolf, be careful of the dangers that are out there. It's interesting that people were sharing those stories so long ago.

So when is that book due out?



PICTURED: The Gothic Blue Book series

February 9th.

Cool!

By Polis/Agora Books. And then I have another book out with them in 2022. It's not fairy tales, but it's something else that's really interesting. We're calling it the Chicago Fairy Tale Series. It's not a sequel, but they both have a lot of folklore and mythology embedded throughout.

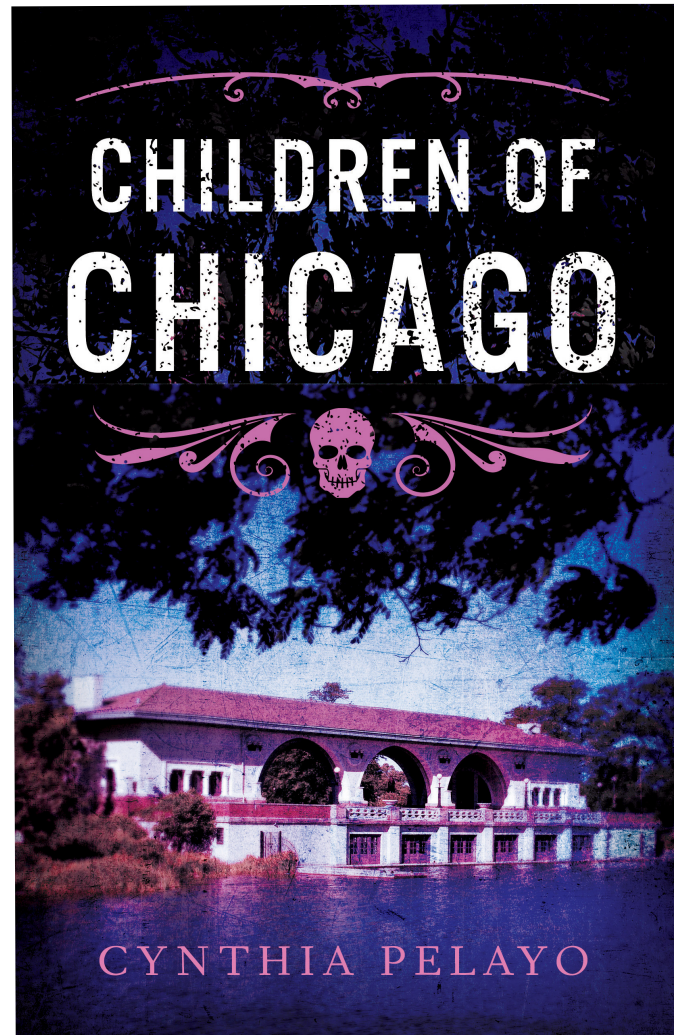
I love researching my books, and I know some people hate books that have meaning, and hidden things in there, but that's how I write. I really like to embed meaning and heavy themes throughout. I don't want to beat my reader over the head, but there are a lot of things in my book that come up in particular that the average reader might not catch, but if you're familiar with Chicago history or fairy tales you'll kind of catch something and you'll be like, "She was just referencing Rumpelstiltskin in this!"

That's really cool! You're also involved in editing; you're an editor for Gothic Blue Book. I think you just said on Twitter that an edition of that is coming out ...

Yes. So Burial Day Books is an indie press that I started in 2011, and we released an anthology every year from 2011 to, like, 2016. We had some really cool writers that participated—Daniel Kraus, John Everson, Jay Bonansinga, who wrote The Walking Dead series. Max Booth III, who has a movie in post production right now. ... I closed Burial Day Books for a few years just to kind of manage family, and then I started it back up. It's funny, because we were closed for five years, and this year we're releasing three anthologies. And it's just my husband and I.

Wow.

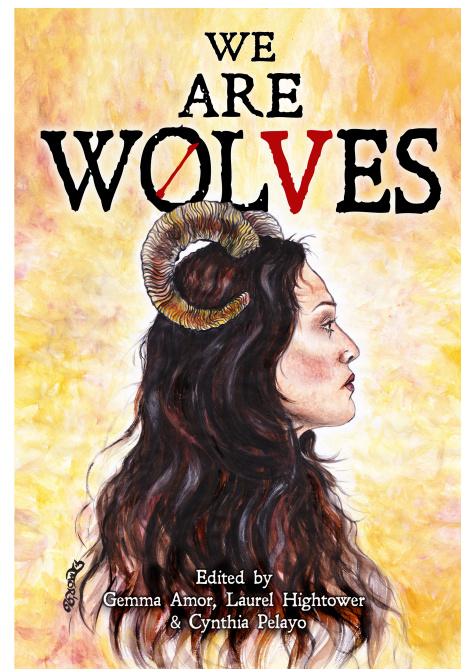
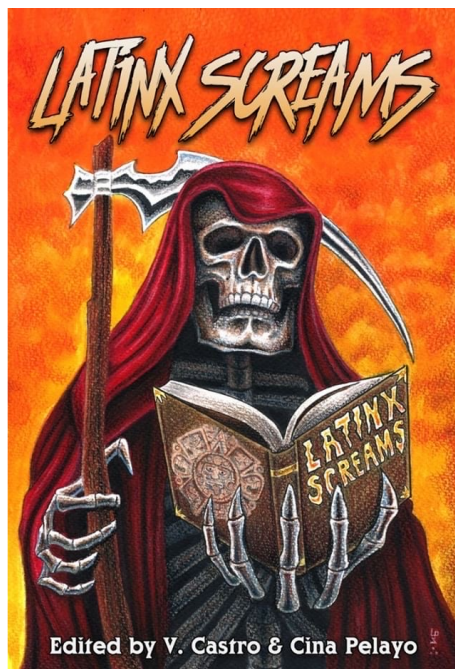
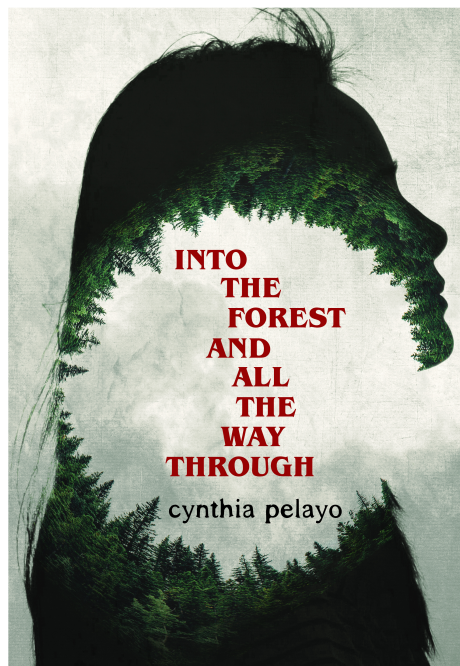
We've had a lot of help from editors who've stepped in to help, and we have great illustrators. It's been a lot of work. Gothic Blue Book will be out hopefully on Halloween, the 31st, this Saturday [*this interview took place 29 Oct.—ed.*]



PICTURED: The cover of *Children of Chicago*

Cool! Is it a physical print run?

Yes. It'll be in paperback and Kindle version, and they are typically little thin books, but this is our largest. Gothic blue books were abridgements of Gothic novels in the 1800s, so maybe they would take something like *The Monk*, which is a period Gothic novel, and



PICTURED: Covers of *Into the Forest and All the Way Through* (available now), *Latinx Screams*, and *We Are Wolves*.

there could have been a Gothic blue book version of that, which would have been just an abridgement of it. They were cheap, kind of pulpy type magazines in the UK, and they didn't really last, because they were meant to be read and tossed. [They were] just a few shillings. "Shilling shockers" was a nickname for them. I just kind of took that quality, and that's where Gothic Blue Books pay homage to this whole Gothic feel of crumbling castles and family secrets. But this one's theme is Krampus, so we took all the mythology, and I told people to take the idea of Christmas lore and run with it. We got some really interesting stories. We are printing thirty-one stories, by thirty-one authors, so it's been a lot of work, but I'm really excited, it's a good collection, great authors participated.

That's awesome. Are you also one of the editors for We Are Wolves?

Yes. Gemma Amor and Laurel Hightower, they're really

spearheading this project, so they coordinated with a ton of fantastic writers, and I am helping with—it is a charity anthology—so I am helping with packaging it as a cohesive collection. That will be out at the end of November. And then—this is great work, but I'm not sleeping!—and then V. Castro approached me to publish *Latinx Screams*, which is a Latinx anthology that was supposed to be published by another publisher but that fell through, so I'm taking that collection and packaging it and we're going to publish that on Christmas. And then hopefully in January I can sleep.

Yeah! Do you have any advice for aspiring creators who want to have so much on their plate, like how to get through all that?

Get help at home. I mean, I am lucky because my spouse, he helps tremendously. That doesn't mean our house is not a mess—I'm looking at it now, and the house is a mess—but I think have a good

plan. I'm really not a good ... I hate to say this, but ... I have so much going on, and I have a busy day job, but I can't write things down. I just have to keep things to mind, and I'm trying to write things down more. So try to find a process that works for you, because if you try to mimic someone else's process it might fall through, so play with different planners or ways of scheduling things ... have a lot of frozen food handy, because that kind of helps, too! You don't have to worry about making a meal if you have a busy night. So have a lot of snacks at the ready. It's not the best advice. *[smiles]*

I like having lots of different projects. I have a novel that I wrapped up ... well, first the poetry collection that I wrapped up, and then the novel, and now I'm doing anthologies, and I'm also working on a middle grade novel, a kid's book. It's not in the best shape right now, but I'm aiming to have that ready to shop around in the next few months ...

Is that a horror novel as well?

It's a horror kid's book. My son asked me to write him a book, and I promised him I would write him a book, and now I'm faced with this challenge. *[laughs]* He asks me like every other night, "Did you write that book yet?" So that one, hopefully it's a good story and people like it.

Cool! ... So, you've talked about your frustration with the expectation of publishers that you should only write works from your own cultural background, leading to some unfair limitations or expectations. ... Do you think some of this is getting better, that more publishers are more open to, I guess, more free expression?

I think of writers like Silvia Moreno-Garcia, [who] has been writing for a long time, where people are finally beginning to recognize her works—she's written fantasy and sci fi and horror; Stephen Graham Jones is another writer who's prolific, Native American, and he's written widely. ... I think that was my struggle for a while. I felt like I could only write Latin American themes, when I very first started writing fiction in 2008, and I feel like those stories are still

important, and I'm still glad I wrote those stories. Quite a few of them are out of print and I'm trying to get them back in print. And it's funny because some people who have read my recent works, and they go back and they read my older works, and they're like, this doesn't sound like you today, and it doesn't. So I've been seeing the reviews of my current work and my older work ... and I don't think it's bad, I think I'm a very different writer today. But, I guess, two things. I think writers should have the flexibility to feel like they can grow, they can go in another direction. Because you might find the place where you're most happy—and I feel like I'm finally happy with what I'm writing and how I'm writing. And two, I think that it kinda just puts us in a box if we only write about our cultural background. There's a lot of mystery writers of color, and they'll write stories that aren't necessarily based in the States, they'll write stories that are based in Ireland, or other places.

So I think it's getting a little bit better. There's always going to be issues in publishing. I think people have to realize publishing is a business. You know, when you pitch a book to an agent, that agent then needs to take that book and pitch it to an editor at a publishing house, and then that editor has to pitch it in a marketing meeting: How is this going to sell? Who are we going to sell to? There's all of this icky business that creators don't want to think about, but it's how a lot of books are sold. And because I'm a researcher, I know that there is a really diverse population in the US, and globally too. Our books in the US are printed globally. I think that publishers are scared maybe to publish diverse voices because they don't think maybe they're going to sell, but there's definitely demand, there's a huge demand.

So is there a presumption on the part of publishers about how one should identify?

This one I've been thinking about a bit, because I know on the one hand writers of color want more representation of writers of color. It's only fair. We have x percentage of the population that is x or y, and we should see that representation of voices. But on the other hand there could be a segment of writers who feel like "I want to be published because I want my work to be recognized as good work." I

feel like there's a few types of discussions going on, like do I identify with the term Latinx, do I identify as Mexican-American, or do I identify as California Native? I personally feel that people should do what makes them feel most comfortable. There is so much money in publishing and there is so much opportunity that I don't feel like anyone should have to feel like they're restricting themselves. The market's pretty vast. Even just look at digital media—YouTube and Amazon and Shudder—and there's just so many different ways that people consume entertainment that I feel like there's space for everyone and for everybody's voices. So I don't think people should feel limited or hesitant to present themselves as what they feel comfortable with.

So if you want to write things from a minority perspective, do so, and if not, do what you want, write about Ireland if you want.

Right, exactly. I feel like you should write the story that you want to tell, and I think that when people start writing something that gives them joy, that comes across. Even if it's a story about somebody's cultural background, and you know that going into it, like, wow, I feel the emotion and the passion and the commitment behind this story—so you can feel it when you're reading something and someone did it with joy. Sometimes you read something and this feels like they didn't really want to write this. Maybe they were writing for the market. So don't write for the market. Don't write what you think people want you to write. I did that, and I wasn't happy for a long time. Because I didn't know that I could write fairy tales, and people would like them, but I love writing about fairy tales, and I get sucked into German folklore and I was so excited, and I'm exploring some other cultural folklore right now, and it's fantastic and exciting, and we should have that opportunity to do so.

Yeah, definitely. So publishers are more open to this now?

I think so. I think they're more open to it. I still don't see ... Everyone says that representation's getting better. I still don't feel like it is getting better. We'll see like in the next year or two, because there's a lag of about two years [in publishing], so especially with the pandemic, there was a huge demand with publishers purchasing

books. I know one agent who said that her June was the highest-selling June that they've ever had at her firm. So all of those books that she sold then to editors will likely get printed in about 2022; it takes about a year or two. So we'll see what 2022 looks like, if we start seeing a range of voices and different storylines. Hopefully it's not all pandemic related *[laughs]*.

I feel like there's great ways of communicating the anxieties that we're feeling right now without basing it in modern times. So I'm seeing a lot of that type of work, with anxiety or issues with family dynamics because people are stuck at home with their families.

In the first issue back for Penumbric in June we talked a lot about dystopia, and how it's almost difficult to write a dystopic novel right now because you're living in situations like the pandemic and funky political divisions and everything else. It's like how do you write that in a way that you're not just flat out reporting the news?

Yeah. Before I logged on here I saw an article that, I was just staring at the headline, it was just so out of a movie, the headline was that a big box store was pulling their firearms and ammunition off the store floors because of growing civil unrest.

Wow.

I mean, we recognize it's really bad, you know. I feel like sometimes I'm just kind of standing there, looking around the room, like we're all adults here, can we make some decisions, like this is ... I think, not to get political, but people are really angry, people are really scared, and when people are scared they can get angry, so I think that the next few weeks are going to be historic, you know, the response that we're going to see. I wish everyone safety, and I wish everyone well ...

So, horror as a genre tends to have trends; there were all the slasher films in the '70s and '80s, and zombies have been kinda the big thing since before The Walking Dead even. Do you think that the current political situation and, I guess, sort of dystopic things, is that sort of the next big wave?

I'm interested in seeing if we're going to see tribalism as a theme. I haven't seen it yet. But the whole "us against them," and what I haven't seen, which I really want to see, is an increase in paranoia and misinformation. We haven't seen that quite yet in fiction. You have people living today that could live in their own little pocket of reality and never really interact with anybody else in a different reality. I want to see that in fiction, because I feel like that ... I guess you could think of *1984* is a prime example of that, *Fahrenheit 451* ... so I'm curious if we're going to see those types of works.

Yeah, in a way it goes back to how difficult is it to write 1984 when the news every day, the headlines are like that.

I know what you mean. You have to take it where it's like not so much beating the reader over the head with what's happening now ...

What other writers do you enjoy reading personally?

I like a lot of classics, and I know people are probably going to roll their eyes when I say that, and I like writers that maybe people haven't heard about. But like I was saying, I read a lot of Borges, Salinger, Beckett. I like Agatha Christie ... not that [she] is a great writer, like her prose, but her plotting was always a lot of fun. But ... I think that my exploration of horror was always in the classics, like Poe. That's just what I had access to growing up and in my schools, I was always reading books that nobody else wanted to read, so Hemingway ... I always kind of go back to those books when I'm thinking about human emotion and dread, because even though some of these might not be horror, there's still a lot of dread within them.

In terms of new and current writers, I enjoy Daniel Kraus's work, Stephen Graham Jones, Paul Tremblay—*Survivor's Song*, that was his most recent— [and] Josh Malerman—his recent works like *Bird Box* and *Malorie* were fantastic. I also like things that aren't necessarily horror, like S.A. Cosby's *Blacktop Wasteland*, Gabino Iglesias who kinda straddles genres. Oh, and Laurel Hightower's *Crossroads*. That novel is horror. So I do read widely, and I try to get

caught up as much as possible with what is current, especially in horror. Alma Katsu is another one. And I like her work, because she embeds a lot of history. And then poets, I read a lot of poetry, so like classic poetry, Emily Dickinson, who I'm obsessed with, but then current [poets] like Sara Tantlinger, Donna Lynch, and Linda Addison, Stephanie Wytovich. So I try to read widely.

I read a lot of nonfiction too. That helps my writing. I'm just research-obsessed. But I like classics. I like a lot of old-fashioned private detective novels that I find kind of fun. And Ray Bradbury ... I always go back when I'm having difficulty writing a story or just thinking through an idea, I'll just sit and read a Ray Bradbury short story, and just see how, mechanically, he's set up his tale, and that always seems to help me get back in the mode of things. His writing, I can't recommend it enough. If you're a new writer, go to Bradbury short stories. They're fantastic.

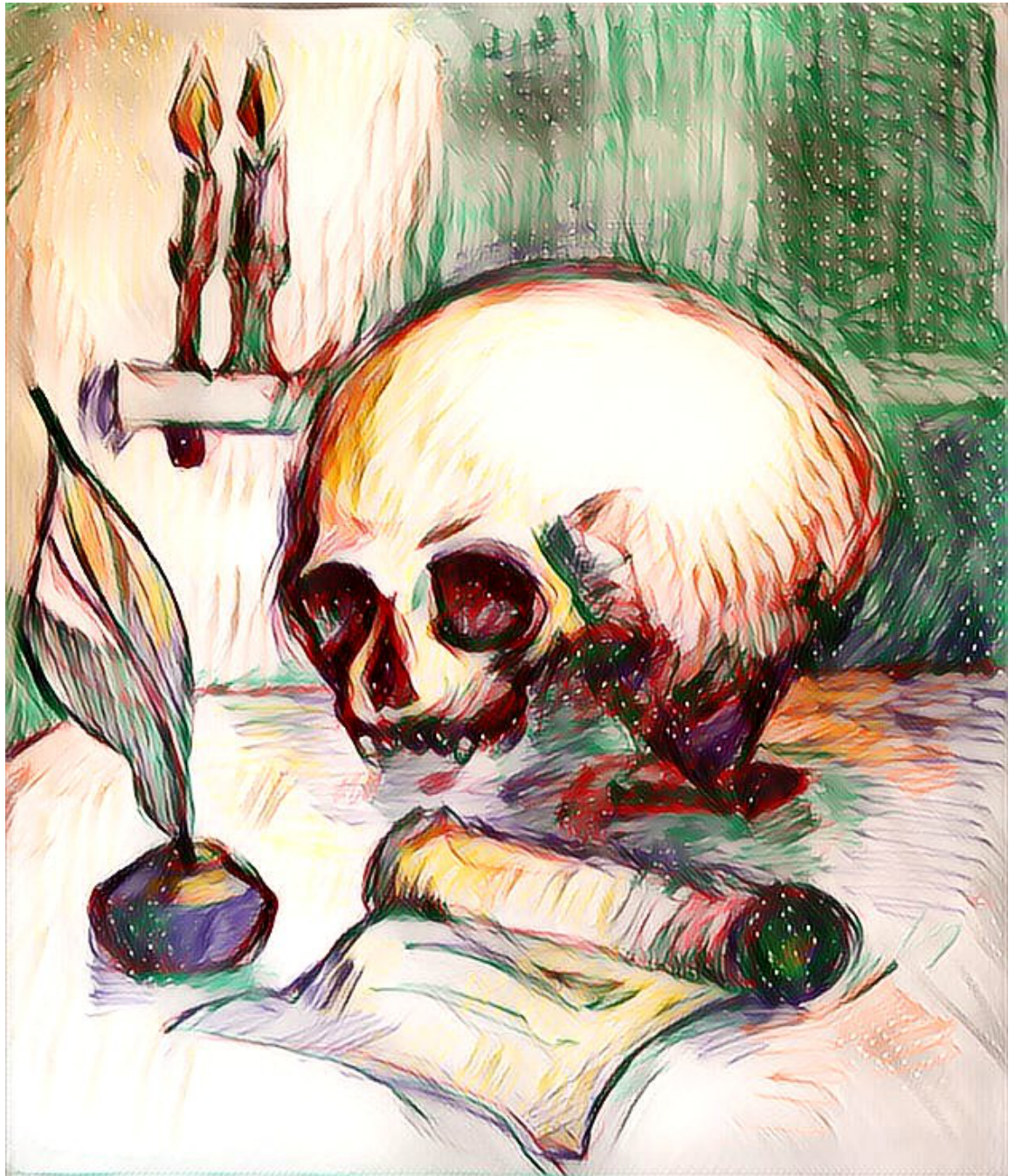
I agree! So, is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to talk about?

I think, just going back to the beginning, with folklore, legend, and myth ... I feel like I always come back to [those], and it's a reoccurring theme in my writing. I think in terms of my non-fiction work, my "Need to Believe" essay is probably, if anybody wants to know "why do you write what you write?," I think if you look at that essay, you can kind of have a line through my upbringing and my spiritual exploration to see why that carries over into my writing. My writing's always kind of the exploration of good and evil, what else is there? I like beauty in my horror, I'm not a gore horror writer. I like ... watching old *Twilight Zone*, and Hitchcock films, and just that dread and anxiety and atmosphere is what I always kind of chase.

Look for Cynthia Pelayo's Children of Chicago in stores and online from 9 February 2021. Gothic Blue Book VI is available now, as is We Are Wolves. You can find more about her and her other projects at <http://www.cinapelayo.com> or on Twitter (@cinapelayo).

Skull on Desk

by Novyl the
Mysterious



Ghost House

by Sara Connell

The thing about it is,” John whispered to Caitlin, “your commission would cover the down payment. I could renovate this place and double our investment.”

“Absolutely,” the realtor said, eavesdropping. She had blonde hair with expensive highlights and wore navy ballet flats with a gold Tory Burch insignia on the toe. “Three bedroom, en-suite master bath with dual sinks, original Tudor design. The ghost is part of the opportunity.” The realtor placed a dime on the floor. The coin rolled toward the closet and landed at the south side of the room. Were the warped floors also part of the opportunity?

“The thing about it is,” Caitlin wanted to reply, “a ghost house is a terrible idea.” John always told people what the thing about it was. She’d thought, while they dated, that his phrase was sweet, part of his unique snowflake, until their engagement party in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where she found all the men in John’s family started conversations this way. Now, every time John said it, she saw Steelers jerseys and rusted Chavels up on cinderblocks and heard the slight k on the end of *thing*--the way John’s Polish uncles spoke.

Caitlin walked toward the closet. Slanted floors, heavy oak doors. Stained glass windows. Nothing at all like freshly built single level houses with monochromatic kitchens and gallery white walls she wanted. The realtor tapped the dark brown windowpane with a polished red fingernail. “Whoever takes this place will make a mint.”

John announced that this bedroom would be the nursery and the realtor winked. There was a third bedroom too, which John would claim. “Built-ins,” he said. He waved his hands in the direction of a floor-to-ceiling wall of walnut, bookcases that would house his

collection of die-cut replica cars. Caitlin had lugged boxes of the cars up four flights of stairs when they’d moved into their condo. British racing green Aston Martins with leather belts strapped across their engines; a pair of ’65 Mustangs, apple red; a ’57 Chevy Bel Air, patent-leather black, with shark fin tips sticking off the back; and John’s favorite, a silver and blue ’63 Corvette split-window coupe with snowcap-white leather seats that John’s father had given him and that had moved with him to every place he’d lived since childhood.

Was the ghost seething inside the closet, waiting to unleash a spray of human entrails? Did real ghosts even speak? When Caitlin tried to imagine the ghost, she could only conjure a white mist or some kind of gassy green animation with a dragon’s head, like from a children’s cartoon. She held her hand over the knob. “Attic,” the realtor said and thumbed the air toward the ceiling. “According to the inspector, she never comes out.” Caitlin walked to the window. She. A female ghost. A blue jay the size of Caitlin’s palm tapped on the glass pane of the bedroom window. The face was tiny and fierce, framed by a black mane. Caitlin watched its beak peck the glass.

The realtor walked them through the kitchen (brown everywhere, awful), the unfinished basement, a sprawling yard. “This will be Caitlin’s studio,” John said when they returned again through the front door. The room was wide and deep with a low, beamed ceiling. Long walls with a surface area as big as their current condo.

“Plenty of room for your stone, all your tools,” John said, rubbing his palms. “No more hauling marble up and down to a storage area.”

She’d have her big studio and John would have the hundred-year-old pipes, old bathrooms, outdated kitchen—all for John to repair, John

who’d never fixed so much as a toilet. All this while, if John had his way, they had a baby.

“Edward, Randall, Nythia . . .” John had listed all their friends to her last week. “All pregnant or have toddlers already,” he said, as though procreation were a running race and they were behind. “You said you wanted this—big house, the kids.”

Had she said it? She’d more not said she didn’t want it.

There were no other ghost homes on the market in the neighborhood, the agent said. For weeks, this was all John had talked about. He shoved newspaper articles over Caitlin’s coffee cup in the morning. The ghost who saved a two-year-old from drowning in the family’s pool in New Jersey. One of the Lauder heiresses moving into a ghost house on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He printed out studies that showed ghosts helped extend the life of the elderly. Free, constant companions for octogenarians, without the mess of pets.

Unless someone in one of the new homes died tragically and quickly, Caitlin and John’s would be one of only two ghost houses in the area. The agent left them alone to talk.

“The thing about it is, we’d be fools not to take it,” John said.

* * *

The ghost did not like Caitlin, she could tell right away. It waited until John left for Home Depot and Caitlin was sitting in front of a four-by-four-foot slab of deep peach Tennessee marble she’d chosen for the Powell commission.

The whole project felt ill-fated. Mr. Lamott, the Powells’ manager, insisted on an in-person studio visit with Caitlin in the condo before wiring the deposit. He wore a black suit and a pencil-thin black tie and had tiny teeth. Looked like he wouldn’t mind killing a person with a baseball bat. A sound came then, like a body dropping to the floor above Caitlin’s head. Caitlin gripped the end of the table and braced herself for the ceiling to crack. The metal shelves along the

wall shook just a bit, like a train had rumbled by. The noise came again and then over and over. Thump. Thump. Thump. Caitlin pictured the ghost lifting and smashing something—like a large brown medicine ball with leather sections and white stitching.

She slumped into the purple couch she’d moved over from the condo. Something was wrong with her work anyway. In the condo, with her work tumbling into their living room, her tools in a white bucket near the bookcase, she still felt like a college student, no pressure to create a perfect piece. She was unused to the press releases, commissioned assignments, gallery deadlines. For the past seven years, she’d taught art classes at the community college. Tended bar at the Brasserie two nights a week to make her half of the rent. Watching faces lengthen like Modigliani figures in the gold gilded mirrors, as she skewered olives onto sticks, the espresso machine hissing in the background, emptied her. Left her open to talk to the stone the next day. The reality that her abstract figures of Persephone and Nyx and Asteria were selling now for \$5,000 then \$10,000 then \$25,000 astonished and terrified her.

And now \$60,000 for the Powells’.

In the small condo, the steel point, her favorite chisel, had felt like a long, sixth finger. She’d hold the point against the side of a new piece of stone and the stone told her where to hammer and cut. Today, she’d walked around the marble for two hours, the ghost dropping that thing above her head, and stroked her palms over the dusty rock—striations of pink and puce, like sand on the surface of Mars—and no vision had come. Her fingers felt like knobs.

* * *

She cooked peas and plain pasta with butter for dinner, like a child. John complained that she wouldn’t even sit with him while he ate the filet he’d bought at the organic butcher he’d found on twenty-sixth street. “When you eat meat the fear from the animal at the time it was killed transfers into your body,” Caitlin said. She’d told John facts like this so many times. To create her art, she needed to keep her energy light, her vibration high.

At nine she lay alone on the bald mattress, too tired to pull the sheets from the dryer, while John watched TV downstairs. He'd already unpacked his free weights, their kitchen appliances. His model cars were dusted and positioned in order of value on the black shelves in the extra bedroom. When her eyes closed she saw the stacks of boxes lining a wall of her studio, shaming her. Art books, riffers, rasps, chisels, silicon wedges, anti-vibration gloves, sketch pads, trays of charcoals that had likely broken in transit. She heard a laugh track and then the chimes from the introduction to a crime show. She'd done nothing all day and yet she was exhausted.

All night, there was howling in the attic. Terrible, retching noises, like listening to someone vomit.

"I slept fine," John said the next morning. "I just tune it out."

* * *

Caitlin pressed an ice pack to the side of her head and walked across the street to the other house the realtor had said also had a ghost.

"Oh no, our ghost does nothing like that," the neighbor, whose name was Tonya, said when Caitlin told her about the thumping and howling. "We'd never live in a ghostless house again." She poured iced tea from a pitcher with lemons floating in the middle and handed the glass to Caitlin.

Tonya's ghost was respectful of the family—magnanimous, even. He strolled the house at night, cleaned up messes, fluffed their pillows, arranged flowers in a vase if they laid some out on the counter.

"He helped blow out the candles at Amina's birthday party last year."

Caitlin watched Tonya's children climb up the beams of a wooden playhouse in the backyard like cats. "Why do only some ghosts remain in a house?" she asked. "People die at home all the time."

Tonya's eyes brightened. "There's so much to learn when you get a ghost. For instance, if the ghost attaches to a house, the people they

left behind can visit one day a year," Tonya said. "Everyone expects visiting day to be Halloween, or November first. But it's May fifteenth."

Twelve people from Tonya's ghost's family had shown up the previous May. "I didn't see anybody visit your ghost, though," Tonya said. "So sad for her."

* * *

John came home the next day with flowers wrapped in brown paper and cellophane: pumpkin-orange petals, stamens covered in pollen. "I know how much nature inspires you," he said. Caitlin filled a vase half-heartedly. The ghost would wait for them to go to sleep, then shred them in the garbage disposal. While Caitlin visited Tonya, the ghost had dumped her sketchbook in the bathroom sink and left the water running. Caitlin had blown each page dry with a hair dryer but the pencil had blurred into the paper so far that she could no longer see any individual lines.

Her phone pinged. Mr. Lamott, the Powells' house manager, requesting an update. She began to compose a text and stopped. He'd given her four weeks; only two remained. She turned her phone face down on the glass table John had purchased from a consignment shop. The piece must be at least three feet high, Mr. Lamott had said. To grace the foyer of the Powells' new Greenwich house. Caitlin pushed the marble out of the studio and into the living room on a dolly and tried to recreate the atmosphere of the condo, with its cramped furniture and clean white light spilling in over onto the carpet. The light was yellow and clouded here. The stone refused to speak. She'd forced herself to make at least one cut before John returned, into the left side of the stone, and instantly regretted it. The hole gaped like a pulled tooth.

The ghost moved over the living room ceiling, right where Caitlin sat, and began to drop the medicine ball above her head.

* * *

“I can’t take it,” Caitlin said when John returned from a workshop on plumbing.

He shooed her away with his hands. “The thing about it is,” John said. “The house is getting more valuable by the day.” He handed her a glossy magazine he’d plucked from the rack at the grocery store. A Cambridge study showed large quantities of dark matter passed through the human body weekly and were now thought to be the cause of seven strains of the most common cancers, as well as dementia and Parkinson’s disease. Ghosts, being transparent themselves, and unable to radiate, absorbed 80 percent of the dark matter in a home. Like a cosmic air purifier, they could help humans live an average of ten additional years. *A decade more with your loved ones* was now a slogan on real estate billboards. Ghost houses were selling before they were on the market, for tens of thousands above the asking price. Longer life and a million dollars if they stayed even one year, John reasoned. Surely replacing a sketchpad and putting up with some noise in exchange for all this prosperity was worth it.

“I’m much more interested in what’s going on here than in the ghost anyway,” John said, squeezing Caitlin’s thigh. He showed her an app he’d downloaded that would chime when she was ovulating.

Caitlin imagined herself wrestling a stroller down the stairs while a ghost flew around and in front of her, blocking her way, flinging cartons of formula onto the floor. Everyone said marriage ruined sex, but she worried deeply that motherhood killed art. All the insatiable giving of oneself, one’s time, creativity, the body itself, energy draining out like a loose valve. Caitlin excused herself, walked past the bathroom and into the cold diesel plume of the garage. She reached for a foil packet in the glove compartment of her Buick, swallowed a blue pill, small as a comma, and went and made love with John.

* * *

“Maybe we should see an endocrinologist,” John said. “We could afford it now. Vijay and Nythia had twins with IVF.”

His eyes lit like sparklers. Twins would be even better than one child, he said. One pregnancy, two children. If she kept taking commissions, they could afford private school. Such abundance.

That night, the ghost wailed from 5:00 to 8:00 a.m. and Caitlin felt insane from lack of sleep.

“The thing about it is, we can fix this. I’ll pick you up some noise-canceling headphones,” John said when he left on his errands. Later, he was going to nail up Smartwall in the basement, a kind of plywood over insulation the salesperson at Lowes had told him was easy to install.

Caitlin stared at the marble lump. The piece was now a four-foot-tall slab with stumps for arms and a misshapen head. Mr. Lamott had left two more messages and asked for a photo to demonstrate her progress. Caitlin had let the phone battery leak until the screen went black.

Outside the window, she saw a white van pull up at Tonya’s house. A large insect—black, with pincers and beetle eyes—covered the flat-paneled side of the van. The driver wore a grey jumpsuit and carried a canister with a black hose. Caitlin waited until he came back out of Tonya’s house before she accosted him.

“Do your chemicals work on non-living things?”

The man spun toward Caitlin’s house. “I thought I saw something,” he said. “Up there.” He pointed to the attic.

Caitlin pulled her shoulders up to her ears. Could the ghost hear her way across the street? She thought she heard something crashing down the stairs. She dropped her voice and whispered urgently, “Can you remove other entities? Poltergeists? Phantasms? You know—” She moved her head back and forth as if shaking snow off her shoulders. “Ghosts?”

The man spit a piece of pink gum into a wrapper. “I get rid of bugs,” he said. “I could check your walls for termites.”

In Caitlin’s absence, to punish her inquiry, the ghost had taken on the kitchen—upturned every cereal box in the pantry onto the floor, making a carpet of oats and flax seed, and unhinged the side kitchen door. The door gap left a hole like a train tunnel, and a flock of squirrels, blue jays, finches, and a robin had entered and shat on and scratched up the new gray slate.

It took Caitlin two hours to clean the mess. She should have left it out for John, but she needed an excuse not to work. Before, she had suffered only from too many ideas; shapes and statues had peeked out behind bushes, in the doorway of the Brasserie, in the air in front of her eyes. She pulled herself into the smallest ball on the floor, tried walking sideways through every doorway, old superstitious behaviors from childhood, and still found only a blank, empty space inside her brain. Cohabiting with the ghost had compromised her.

* * *

Caitlin searched online and found an obituary for her house address in the Oban sentinel.

Mary Ann Sinclair, 46. Died from blunt force trauma to the brain.

An intruder had left a size twelve footprint on the hardwood floor of the bedroom before leaping from the room’s second-story window. He was never found. Mary Ann’s husband, Samuel, and daughter, Anna Lee (11), had been forty-five minutes away, in the next town, at a basketball game.

Caitlin climbed the steps to the attic door. The wood was so old it was almost blue—with lots of white in it—like an illustration of attic stairs in a book instead of real stairs.

She heard nothing behind the thin door.

“Maybe I can help find your family,” Caitlin said—loudly enough, she hoped, to be heard through the wood. She told the ghost about May fifteenth. “It’s something about the veil between the living and spirit world being thin at that time. I could locate your husband and

daughter? Bring them here?”

The attic possessed a stillness so complete that she could hear, in contrast, the sound of a woodpecker in the large oak five feet away from the house. Caitlin pressed her hands against the wood, which was warm. She felt a wave of humidity that reminded her of standing on a dock in Southern Florida, a salty place her parents took her once on a vacation where she could go nowhere without sand blowing into the creases of her elbows and inside her underwear. She stood thinking about that place—the swordfish pulled out of the sea on bloody hooks and then cooked up on coals brushed with rosemary sprigs. The attic door in front of her chest splintered as if a foot had kicked through the planks. She could see no foot, just the effect of a foot: the smell of sawdust, fractured wood. Caitlin ran. Her scream lodged in the muscles of her throat.

* * *

“We have to move,” Caitlin said.

“I’ll fix the attic door,” John said. “The thing about it is I just need six more months to flip the house. I supported you all those years, before you sold anything.”

Caitlin’s longing for that time came like a hunger. Spacious, empty afternoons, the only sounds the grinder and etching hammer cracking against marble. John arriving home from teaching special ed at Woodrow Wilson elementary. His heart soft from the touch of sticky fingers and tiny palms of the kids that no one else wanted to teach.

* * *

Phantasmology was a burgeoning field. Duke’s Rhine Center had been open for years, but Harvard offered a master’s program now, and Amherst, Stanford, and UCLA had followed. Caitlin took her laptop into the bathroom and filled out a form and paid ninety-seven dollars online.

The report from Dr. Moore at Southern Cal arrived in her inbox the

following morning.

The only way to remove the ghost is to do a scourge. The spirit disintegrates into sub-matter and is sucked through a tube into a container that would be disposed of via satellite in space. The process is unpleasant. The ghost is pulled apart bit by bit. We believe they feel the kind of pain a living person would feel. We don't know if the disintegration process alters anything at the level of soul. We're not disposing of a body here, we're working at the level beyond somatic. Because of this, we recommend trying every possible way to co-habitate harmoniously.

Caitlin felt a thump of fear behind her kidneys. She had no interest in this type of responsibility. She cracked the knuckles of her left hand. The ghost was already dead and now, if she did this scourge, Caitlin would be an agent of an action worse than killing: interfering with the immortality of a soul.

A loud stomp in the attic. Plaster from the ceiling fell like snow. A chunk of plaster hit the keyboard and sprayed into Caitlin's face. Caitlin's eyes stung. Her lungs filled up with dust. She ran from the room, leaving the computer to be buried in the ash.

* * *

"The thing about it is, a scourge will ruin the investment," John said, hurt that she'd ordered the report from Dr. Moore.

"If I don't finish this commission, we won't pay our mortgage."

John sulked and loudly rearranged his tools on his tool belt. Caitlin wondered if he'd looked up Mary Ann's obituary too. Mary Ann had been attractive, before she died. The kind of olive skin and green eyes of both of the women John dated before Caitlin. A woman from Montana had been on TV last week describing an erotic encounter she'd had with the ghost who lived in her house. Maybe John wanted to fuck Mary Ann.

"Even another four months, we'll make six figures on the sale," John

said. His phone beeped like a train. "Ovulating!" the message said, in pink letters. When he shook the phone, confetti rained across the screen.

They made love and John's face went all blurry. Caitlin felt she was fucking the termite exterminator, his chemical stained, nuclear hands scratching her skin. She came hard anyway. After, she went to the garage and swallowed her pill.

* * *

The Powells' lawyer sent an email the next morning. *We expect delivery on time in seven days per the legal agreement you've signed to this effect.*

"Four months," John said. "In four months, we can put the house on the market."

He slid a sandwich and an orange into a paper bag before he left for a kitchen and bath seminar. The seminar was at a hotel near the airport, thirty miles away. "I'll be home late."

* * *

Caitlin waited until his car turned off of their street. She pulled a pair of gardening gloves over her hands and chose the large sculpting mallet from her workroom. She slung safety goggles over her eyes. She took the point too, her stone finger, hard enough to crack stone.

On the bookshelves in the study, John displayed his cars in order of financial value. The red Corvette. It was worth two thousand on eBay, he'd bragged to a neighbor who he'd brought over to see the cars.

Caitlin laid the tip of the point on the rosy hood of the engine. Holding her breath, she brought the mallet to the back of the stem. The metal crunched nicely; the steel point punctured the hood and stuck like a vampire stake into the carburetor. Caitlin pulled the point out and went to work on the hood. If a miniature person had been

driving the car, they would have been impaled. She placed the car on the floor and slammed the mallet across its body. In under sixty seconds, the car lay like a corpse. She took the cars one by one and smashed their chrome wings, flicked off their fenders, and cut the fins from the chassis. She smashed windshields with the toe of her boot. She felt exhilarated and didn't want to stop. Caitlin checked her phone. She had time. She ran to the garage, got the blowtorch, and burned the Chevy until the seats were charred and the air smelled like ash.

She felt the air to see if she could sense Mary Ann in the room.

"Do you like to watch—or do you just like doing the destroying?" Caitlin yelled.

The floor was littered with busted up fenders and hoods and wheels, a miniature apocalypse. She thought about which would be more disturbing for John: leaving the whole office full of metal chips and the carcasses of his cars, or lining them back up on the shelves, mangled and burned?

* * *

John made a sound like a dying bird when he saw the cars.

"We have to move," Caitlin said. "She'll destroy every good thing we have."

John held the charred hood of the Corvette to his heart and lay down with his chest pressed into the floorboards. Caitlin opened the windows. She turned a fan against the shreds of metal to see if she could steer the smell back out into the night. She wondered if she'd moved too quickly. Maybe John would have conceded the house if she'd just smashed one car.

John refused to leave the room. Caitlin felt guilty and aroused. Maybe this was what Mary Ann wanted. To teach Caitlin the power of destruction to make her feel alive. Caitlin's fingers buzzed like she'd shocked herself on a light switch. She'd seen something

between the spray of metal chips and model paint. Something quick and darting, like the silver flash of the side of a fish. A shape, a series of shapes. The Powell piece. She knew how to finish it.

* * *

She walked John to the bedroom, got him some water, propped him up with all the down pillows. She laid a cool washcloth over his forehead and hummed something like a lullaby by Chopin. She stroked his hair until he was asleep.

Once he was out, Caitlin dragged every plug-in light into the studio. Three floor lamps and two halogen spots from the garage. She threw the point and the mallet in a bucket. She dragged the Tennessee marble back into the workroom and pushed it against the wall. Peach, pink, creamy white—the palette was too weak. She needed something different. She walked around the slabs of marble, which stood unmoving, like gravestones. She'd use the largest piece she had, a ten-by-ten-foot slab of jet grey marble, almost black. She'd use only the pneumatics—the big tools.

The compression pen hissed and spat as it blew sections of marble into dust. In twelve hours, the piece was finished. The entire body created out of geometric shapes, rhombuses, circles, ovals, and squares hanging in perfect tension with each other.

* * *

The next morning, Caitlin felt the sensation before she was fully awake: a soreness in the breasts, a feeling of the ground shifting under her, as if she were on a ship. The top of her head itched. It took a minute to place the sensation. A child, waking her mother up in the night. *Mommy, I have to—*

Caitlin threw up clutching the side of the sink.

She watched as John forced himself out of bed and met the Smartwall delivery van still wearing his pajamas. His skin was green in tone, the light dim behind his eyes, as though his father had died

all over again.

Caitlin’s dizziness broke at ten. Her mouth watered. She ate a sleeve of bacon, beef jerky, the remnants of the lamb chop John had cooked for himself on Saturday. All these years avoiding this food when what she needed was iron, platelets, sinew and bone. Had Mary Ann loved meat? Had she broken and crushed any of her husband’s things when she was still alive? Caitlin left the dishes, brown sauce like dried blood on the plate, in the sink. She wiped her mouth, prowled into the workroom, gripped the compression pen, and held the black marble like a lover.

“Pickup any time,” she texted Mr. Lamott.

* * *

At three o’clock she vomited all the meat back up. She felt too dizzy to drive and walked the ten blocks to the pharmacy. She remembered her high school health teacher, a squat man, a former wrestler, with cauliflower ears and eyes that receded back into the flesh of his cheeks. “The Pill,” he’d read to them from a pamphlet. “Only 99 percent effective.”

She used the restroom at the gas station next to the drug store. Cold toilet. Grease smears on the mirror. Her urine hot as steam. Two pink lines on a white stick.

* * *

The next morning, Caitlin threw a sheet over the Powell piece. She had promised herself to stand guard until Mr. Lamott sent his van for the sculpture at a time to be determined by text. She imagined the ghost caterwauling into the studio, raising the saw above its invisible head, and splitting the piece in two.

Caitlin sat at the table, moving her hands across her belly. She could not stop giggling.

She called Tonya and asked if she wanted to send the girls over—get

out and do some errands or something. Inside her living room, Caitlin braided the girls’ hair. Amina and Lakisha, they politely told her their names. Gorgeous little girls with hair like spun caramel that stood out from their faces, gold flecks in their irises. She had never really looked at Tonya’s children. Were all children so beautiful?

Caitlin found a bin of her old art supplies: broken crayons, markers with dry tips, a tub of clay almost too dry to use. She moistened the clay with drops of water from the faucet and set up objects on the table—showed them how to make the shape without taking their eyes off the scene before them, to mold the clay without looking at their hands. An anatomy doll, a vase of flowers, clementines rolling off the table.

“Magic!” Lakisha squealed.

Caitlin had never thought she wanted this. That she would feel such joy.

* * *

When they left, she threw the lights back on in the workroom and pulled the sheet from the Powell piece. How had she not thought of it before? To reduce the body to pure geometric form?

The baby, she decided, was helping her.

Mr. Lamott sent a text message that the men would be there to pick up the sculpture the following afternoon at four. It was only then, with the floor spot glaring down on the oval, serrated head, that Caitlin recognized the quiet running through the house. When was the last time she’d heard a thwack or a thump? Not since they moved in had the ghost allowed such stillness. The absence of sound unnerved her. She’d read dogs could smell when a woman was pregnant. Could ghosts also detect increases in estrogen, progesterone? Caitlin gripped the silver edge of the sculpting stepladder next to her.

She saw herself at the top of the staircase some morning, her belly

round as a beach ball; a warm puff of air behind her neck and then her body in flight, down the staircase to the foyer. Blood clotting between her legs, a dark stain the shape of a lake on the floorboards.

The ghost would take it. Her sculpture, her baby, everything that brought her joy. Caitlin tried to pull the mattress off the guest bedroom bed. No stairs until she and John moved out of this house. She stopped yanking at the satin mattress edge. Pregnant women weren't supposed to lift anything heavy—she'd read that somewhere too.

Tonya was happy to refer a handyman. James arrived in work boots and the same tool belt John now hung over his waist every day. James dragged the mattress into the workroom. Caitlin added a pillow and a mohair throw from the living room.

* * *

“The ghost will ruin the sculpture,” Caitlin told John when he glared at the mattress on the floor. “I have to guard it.”

“The thing about it is, you are getting more insane every day,” he said.

“We're all crazy,” she said. She faked a laugh. As though she'd made a joke. She was no longer sure about either of them. Looking at the Powell commission that morning she had the feeling that the ghost was hovering above her, guiding, assisting.

She'd tell John about the baby—about the real reason she wouldn't go near the stairs—tomorrow—in a few days. After she went to the doctor and took an official test. Just not quite yet.

* * *

Caitlin's not sure where she is in space. The air is pink and opal like the inside of a seashell. The last thing she remembers is sandpaper in her hand. One little rough spot to polish down. A whoosh of air, her foot slipping off the corrugated metal.

Her head hurts, her belly too. Her belly! Her hand moves slowly, as if in water, but she feels the round bump. Bigger now! How long was she asleep? But yes, still pregnant. The ghost obviously has done something. Changed frequencies, isn't that what Tonya said they can do? Threw some kind of energetic veil over the house. Caitlin hears nothing. In fact, her ears are plugged. She reaches up but can't find her ears.

Mary Anne! *She calls but no sound comes out. It's just a dream, silly.*

She can fly in this dream. It's fun. Her pink dress caresses the baby and tickles her armpits. She's so pregnant she feels the baby's head pressing down on her cervix. She sees John moving down there. Walking into her studio. He pulls the curtain back from Hera. That's what Caitlin's named her. Zeus's strong, proud wife. He flicks the tarpaulin back in place. Not impressed, I guess, but he never understood art. For a blink, she can see inside his head--like a movie. He's seeing her on the cover of Art America. Smiling next to Hera in the Sotheby's catalogue. The images in his brain are gone then, but Caitlin feels a quickening through her ribs. She sees it too. This is all going to happen. She'll have her art and he'll be happy when the next commissions come in, when they renovate the kitchen with smart ovens and granite countertops, put in a pool for the baby next summer. He's bending towards something now. The white bucket, where she keeps her tools for cleaning. He's picking something off the bottom. Paint chips on her large chisel. Candy Apple Red. Racing Green. I didn't mean it, Caitlin tries to shout. The ghost--I wasn't myself. He doesn't even look upset. He's speaking but she can't hear him. She imagines the words. The thing about it is Caitlin, I forgive you. He pulls a screwdriver out of his pocket. He is so nice. He's tightening up the screws on her ladder. She watches the yellow Philip's head spin in his hands like a prism.

* * *

It's a different day now, further into Spring. Hydrangea and Azalia bushes hum with bees. A pretty young realtor in a navy shift dress walks a couple up the driveway of a house across the street. “It's an A-frame four-bedroom, four bath, under a million,” the pretty agent

tells the wife. “Nice, but I wish I could get you that one.” She points right up to the window where Caitlin is hovering. “The wife was a sculptor. Her husband found her; she fell off a ladder and cracked her head on the corner of the table. Brain hemorrhage. The *Times* ran a piece—maybe you saw it.” The agent dropped her voice for this part. The graphic details of a ghost house were now often the tipping point to make a sale. The couple moved closer until they were almost

touching her bright pink lips. “She was pregnant, you see. He didn’t know.”

The young couple’s eyes widened.

“A three-ghost house.” The agent sighed.

Tales Never Told

by Colleen Anderson

You don't know what it was like
condemn from fickle legend
It is nothing that his own great folly
dimmed his vision

There is no mention, my yearning
hunger for a man's touch
while he rode the land
and flesh as well
He neglected my arms
when he knew he had a son
Until the prophesy, that is
Then, oh yes,
 then

I was honored, the pure
held although I couldn't be sown
Barren, I, Guenevar
 signaled the beginning of his end

When it came to my own folly
my temptation
after living with a ghost of former glories
I was not forgiven
Punished before the fall and ever since

Was I rebuked for searching out younger love
when land and womb lacked fruit
Or was it that I prevailed
 while a king sunk into the mire

Soulless

by Anahita Ramoutar



The Sisters

by J.S.Watts

Emily was feeling oddly uncomfortable sitting on her own in the room. The fact she couldn't put her finger on what was causing her discomfort made her all the more uncomfortable. Despite the problems of the last few months, it wasn't as if she was nervous. She was past that. Craig Merrett was an old client and the meeting was a preliminary one to discuss a relatively minor, albeit hugely important to Emily, project. And yet, there was something about the room.

It wasn't the ancestral portraits cluttering the walls. She'd seen more than her fair share in the homes of the great and the good, or at least the very wealthy. Moreover, they most certainly weren't her ancestors, so they could stare down at her with as much disapproval as they liked. She didn't care.

No, it was something about the room itself that was making her twitch.

Emily glanced to her right at the large, closed, oak double doors. Faintly muffled voices were still audible, indicating Craig's previous meeting hadn't finished. It was then she noticed it: a fifth wall, only a few feet across and anachronistically jutting from the wall she had her back to. It was angled towards the oak doors, so she hadn't initially noticed it. It ruined the symmetry of the room and made the wall behind her closer than it should have been, based on the far right-angled corner of the room she could see. She stood up to peer at the clumsy intrusion properly. From her memory of the hall beyond, it was unnecessary and was ruining the proportions of an otherwise perfectly pleasant room. It was almost certainly the cause of her fidgets.

Emily was still peering at the stray wall when the double doors

opened and Craig stepped through.

"Emily, darling, so sorry to keep you waiting, but my accountant insisted we talk. You know how it is. He's gone now," Craig waved vaguely in the direction of an open set of French windows behind him, beyond which Emily could see a suited business type walking away from the house towards a parked car. "Come on through. Let's have a cup of coffee and a chat."

Craig took Emily's elbow and steered her away from the annoying wall and into the library-cum-office behind the double door. It was another five-walled room lined with pictures and, in this case, bookshelves full of books. Its dimensions, however, were clean and balanced. It had clearly been designed and built as a perfect pentagram. The disquiet Emily had experienced in the outer room immediately left her.

"What a lovely room, Craig. It's so perfectly proportioned."

"Is it?" was Craig's low-key response. "Well you can thank great, great Uncle Albert for that. He had this room added to the main building in the late nineteen hundreds. Built to his own uniquely personal specifications (he had a thing about the number five), but now it's my turn to leave my mark on the ancestral pile, which is where you come in. Take a seat, pour yourself a cup of coffee, and I'll tell you what I've got in mind."

Craig steered Emily towards a pair of brown leather settees, situated on either side of a low, oak coffee table. A cafetière of steaming fresh coffee, two porcelain cups and saucers, and a plate of petit fours were waiting on the table.

Craig watched while Emily poured herself a cup of coffee and then indicated she should pour him a cup as well. “I appreciate you driving all the way into deepest Gloucestershire for this meeting. The London offices are more convenient, but I thought you should experience the estate for real before agreeing to take on the project. Video-links have their uses, but you creative types like to be hands on.”

Emily nodded in agreement. She would have nodded whether or not she agreed with Craig. Craig was the client and the one with the cash. After the still raw fiasco of the last six months she needed the job. She settled herself back onto the settee, peered up expectantly at Craig, and looked as engaged as she possibly could.

“Every viscount since the third one has added to the estate, either the grounds or its buildings. Now it’s my turn. For a variety of reasons, I haven’t spent as much time here as I should, but it’s time for a clean slate. I want to make the place mine, which is where you come in. I’ve got some ideas and I think you’re the architect to make them come to life.”

Emily squirmed internally. Hadn’t Craig heard about her meltdown after her one and only rural foray and her attempt to become a square post in a round posthole? “But you know I’m more at home with the urban skyline, right? What I’ve seen of the estate so far is, err, lovely, but I’m more about clean crisp lines and transparent angles than lichen covered Cotswold stone. Don’t get me wrong, I’m really hungry for this project, but I’m not sure I’m an obvious fit, am I?”

“You are a perfect fit and that’s why I’m hoping you’ll take the commission. I want something clean, modern, and startling to offset the antique country gloom. The fourth Viscount, great, great Uncle Albert that is, added to the estate with a vengeance. Unfortunately, apart from this room, much of his legacy is quirky, clumsy, and downright unpleasant. I want to bring the light back in and clean the old place up a bit. I’m looking for something fresh and forthright. I like your designs and think you, they, will do the trick. Look, let’s do a tour of the house and immediate grounds and then you can tell me what you think, especially after I’ve shown you some of the possible

locations for the new build. You’re going to love the place. I’m sure of it.”

Emily did find herself, surprisingly, falling for the estate’s ancient charms. It almost felt as if the place had evolved organically rather than been built, which meant the nature and proposed locations for the eighth Viscount’s statement piece were going to be all the more startling. Craig wanted clean and inorganic. He wanted perfectly proportioned (balm to Emily’s hyper-sensitive nature), but he also wanted steel, glass, and brightly coloured plastic in the middle of a nine-hundred-year-old estate.

Emily hesitantly voiced some of her concerns, “Maybe if you weren’t planning on locating it against the front façade of the building. It’s going to be visible all the way up the drive from as far as the front gate.”

“Exactly. Shock of the new and all that. I’m not looking to have it blend in. I intend to make my mark, literally.”

“But ...”

“But no buts. It’s what I want. You of all people should understand. If mad old great, great Uncle Albert could clutter up the house and grounds with his numerical obsession and other more unpalatable pastimes, I don’t see that my little project can offend that much. Anyway, that’s where you come in. Design me something to meet my requirements that is architecturally outstanding and sympathetic to the estate.”

“But you seem to be looking for something that is expressly unsympathetic to the estate.”

“No, I want something distinctive and in contrast to its surroundings, whilst being at home in them.”

Emily wanted to say that what he really wanted was to have his cake and eat it, but the need for the work encouraged her to keep her mouth shut and nod ambiguously. Instead she said, “Why don’t you

show me a bit more of the estate and point out some of great, great, Uncle Albert's work that you are so keen to neutralise? That should help me put your ideas into context."

Craig was more than happy to continue with the tour and took great delight in pointing out Uncle Albert's architectural abominations. Emily didn't think they were that bad. Mostly they blended in with the pre-existing building and surrounding landscape, the exception being a number of additional walls randomly tacked onto the house, ruining its symmetry. Emily felt those like a physical hurt. Albert was definitely obsessed with the number five: the five-sided library, random fifth walls, four-paned windows replaced with five-paned ones, a path raised above the surrounding garden so that a fifth step could be added to the run, false chimneys added to turn groupings of three stacks into five, and so it went on.

"What's with this obsession with the number five?" Emily finally asked.

"Something to do with religious perfection, I'm told. Two were lost when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the perfect Eden, so to restore perfection you have to add two back. Albert reckoned that three was important mystically: the holy trinity, the three crosses of the crucifixion, three wise men, so he added two onto three and made five."

Emily frowned, "But if you follow that through logically, you'd also have the six horsemen of the Apocalypse, the twelve commandments, six six eight and lots of other numbers, come to that. I'm still not clear why just five."

"I didn't say it made sense. Great, great Uncle Albert was, seemingly, madder than a sack full of frogs. He decided five was the number of perfection and everything had to be made perfect. He even had five-sided picture frames made for the family portraits. There's one still left in the house. It only survived because it matches the five-sided painting he had commissioned. All the other frames were junked long ago. I'll show you the painting on the way back to the library."

Craig strode off back towards the house and Emily followed in his wake. They were almost back at the library when Craig stopped by a small, painted door, opened it, and disappeared inside. Following behind him, Emily found herself in a modest, poorly lit parlour cluttered with old chairs and a single lectern. The wallpaper had once been deep red, but old age and accumulated dirt had reduced it to a dull, rusty brown. Rather like the colour of dried blood, thought Emily. The effect was far from appealing.

Surprisingly for an old house, there was only one portrait adorning the walls: a framed, five-sided, and not particularly well-painted watercolour of four young women reclining in the midst of a small cluster of silver birch trees.

"There you go, the infamous pentagram portrait. Not much to look at really, apart from the five sidedness."

Emily attempted to show interest, "Who's it of? I mean, who are the four women? Shouldn't there be five, given your ancestor's fixation with the number? There are five trees forming a quincunx."

"Ah, this is the darker part of Uncle Albert's obsession. Not surprisingly, he wanted five children, preferably sons, but when girl babies started popping out he decided that five girls would be almost as good as five boys. He and his long-suffering wife managed four girls from seven pregnancies, but after the fourth daughter arrived all further babies miscarried or were stillborn. Albert forced his wife to keep trying, but with each additional pregnancy both she and the unborn children became weaker. The final pregnancy ended with her dying in childbirth alongside the baby. Albert was left a frustrated widower with four imperfect daughters. Rumour has it he forced the girls to take the place of his late wife in a variety of repugnant ways, including participation in obscure religious observances and occupying his bed, and was only prepared to stop if a fifth girl was produced. That never happened and all four daughters pre-deceased him.

"The painting has been interpreted as the four daughters as the world saw them, with the five trees symbolically representing the four girls

grouped round the dead mother: all the same as Albert saw them. Alternatively, it's the four daughters waiting for the missing fifth, the tree in the centre of the quincunx. If you look, the four outer birches have leaves, while the one in the centre is bare. It could therefore stand for the dead mother or the fifth sister who was never born. All very gothic and macabre."

Emily thought it was dark, but sad and said so. Craig shook his head disparagingly. "No. Unpleasantly gothic wins out for me, I'm afraid. There was even talk of Albert cursing his dead daughters for leaving him, by swearing they would never have rest until they became the perfect five they had failed to achieve in life. As they couldn't produce a fifth sister from the grave, he was cursing his own daughters to eternal unrest. Not a nice man, but enough of my unpleasant ancestors. Shall we go back to the library to talk terms?"

Emily was still hesitant about the rural nature of the project, but the terms were too generous for her to refuse. Craig wanted a quick build and was willing to pay to get it, meaning that Emily needed to come up with designs almost immediately.

Emily's anxieties resurfaced. "But first I'd like to spend a bit more time here, get a real feel for the estate, so I can put the new build into context, as well as crash it out of context as you want. It's going to be a delicate balancing act."

Craig shrugged. "Not a problem. I'll be up in London for a while from next week onwards. You're welcome to stay for as long as you need while I'm away. Come back down here next Friday and make a long weekend of it or whatever. Your call."

"Friday works for me. The weekend will give me time to explore and absorb, take photos, make some preliminary sketches, and come up with some raw ideas for your consideration."

"Seems like we have a plan. I'll tell the housekeeper, Mrs. Carlton, to expect you back down here on Friday around five, if that suits?"

It suited and Emily drove home nervously making plans for the

following weekend.

* * *

Following traffic problems on the motorway, Emily's return on the Friday was nearer six thirty than the five o'clock planned by Craig, but the housekeeper seemed unfazed by her late arrival. A huge bedroom, complete with a dark blue-draped four-poster bed, had been made up for her, except an extra pole had at some time been added to the head of the four poster, making a five-sided tented-pavilion effect.

Down in the library, detailed architectural plans of the building, along with maps of the estate, both current and historical, were laid out for her. Craig had also provided written notes of his hopes and expectations, but as he'd already told her personally what he was after, she didn't pay them much attention. She'd walk the estate again, adjust to the rurality as far as possible, and get a real feel for the place. She wouldn't make the mistakes she did last time.

Mrs. Carlton, the housekeeper, offered her a choice of dinner at seven thirty or eight. Emily chose eight so she could have a short walk round the immediate grounds and take some sunset photos before dinner. Mrs. Carlton gave no indication whether it was the right or wrong choice.

Emily began her walk by leaving the house via its grand front entrance and surveying the vista from the front steps. She took a photo of the early evening view. Five paths led away from the house in a fanned sunburst of different directions. Taking the farthestmost path on the right, Emily followed it across the front of the house and around the side, taking photographs as she walked. Like the view at the front, the side vista was of open parkland with the odd tree randomly dotted across the short grass. Towards the perimeter of the estate the trees became more frequent and eventually gave way to a small, linear copse.

The path continued to bear to the right and eventually brought Emily to the east-facing rear of the house. Here the parkland sloped

upwards towards a low ridge where a quincunx of silver birch trees stood in isolated splendour. With a little jolt, Emily recognised them as the trees from the five-sided painting in the dingy parlour. They had to be them, though she had no idea how long birch trees lived. Behind the trees, the grass continued to slope upwards before giving way to woodland on a higher ridge. Emily paused to photograph the view and unexpectedly found herself admiring it. The slender birches were the focal point of the panorama and it created something special. Perhaps designing a build in a sympathetic rural location would not be such a trial after all. Plus, she was sure Craig was a more understanding client than ... the last one had been.

Emily continued her journey around the house that, though modest compared to some country mansions, boasted many, many more walls than the perfect five favoured by the fourth Viscount.

The left-hand side of the house faced more open parkland, this time with a gentle downhill slope that ended in a slash of dark water. From this distance and angle, Emily couldn't make out if it was a narrow lake or part of a small river. She made a note to check the maps in the library.

The path carried on back round to the front of the house, becoming the left-hand ray of the front-facing sunburst of paths. That left the three forward slanting paths to try. Emily glanced at her watch. It was almost seven thirty. The three remaining paths would have to wait until tomorrow. She needed to tidy herself up a bit before dinner. Even if she was eating alone, Mrs. Carlton would be around.

Dinner was served in the dining room and was surprisingly formal given that only one person was eating. Emily was relieved she had made an effort to clean up. The food itself was excellent and the view of sunset through the ceiling high windows was spectacular.

After dinner, Emily explored the house's interior, having first checked with Mrs. Carlton which rooms might be occupied by staff or Mrs. Carlton herself.

"Mr. Craig said you can wander wherever you want. There's just me

and I never sleep here. I share the cottage at the bottom of the drive with my sister."

"Does, err, Miss Carlton work for the estate too?"

"It's Miss Merrett. Carlton's my married name, and no, Sylvia doesn't work for the estate. One of us is more than enough."

"Merrett? The same as Craig's surname?"

"We're cousins."

"Oh, I hadn't realised."

"No reason to. I'll be off now then," and Mrs. Carlton exited through a side door, leaving Emily to wander the house on her own. Her self-guided tour reinforced her earlier impressions of the house: pleasing, well-proportioned (with the exception of the additional walls added by the fourth Viscount), and of historical rather than architectural merit. If she held her nerve and didn't go to pieces again, she could do something with it.

Emily found herself outside the painted door to the small room with the five-sided painting. Having now seen the trees in real life, she felt the urge to reconsider the painting. She opened the door and was surprised to find the room in darkness except for a single, lighted candle below and slightly in front of the painting. Emily attempted to turn the room's electric lights on, but when she flicked the switch by the door nothing happened. That explained the candle, but it really wasn't safe leaving unattended candles burning in an old property. Mrs. Carlton needed a lesson in health and safety.

The candle flickered and drew Emily's attention back to the painting. What had appeared pale and rather insipid by day seemed darker and brooding by candlelight. The five trees were surely those at the back of the house. Emily could see the shadows of the denser, higher wood at the top of the painting. All four women were staring out of the painting at, presumably, the painter and now at Emily. It was an uncomfortable image.

Emily blew the candle out. There was no way she was going to bed on her own in an old house with a candle still burning. She'd speak to Mrs. Carlton about it in the morning.

As soon as the candle flame winked out, Emily decided that plunging herself into pitch blackness in an unfamiliar room randomly strewn with chairs was not especially sensible from a health and safety point of view either. It was a relatively small room, but she still needed to make her way across it, without banging into anything or falling over something else, in order to get to the closed door.

With her arms stretched out in front of her, Emily started to make her way cautiously to where she thought the door was. She had managed five steps forward without bumping into anything when she heard a chair scrape across the floor. She stopped abruptly. She hadn't knowingly touched any furniture and couldn't feel a chair within arm's reach. She took another step and heard a similar scraping sound. She froze and listened intently. Silence. She started moving forward again, quicker this time. A chair scraped again and then again. Regardless of the risk, Emily ran the last few steps, somehow found the door handle, and pulled open the door. She almost fell into the corridor.

In the comparative normality of the well-lit hallway Emily swung round and peered back into the parlour. The light from the hall shone into the room to reveal an uncluttered aisle between two rows of chairs running between the door and the painting. But the chairs had been strewn around the room as before, hadn't they? Cautiously she peered further in. There was just enough illumination to be certain there was no one in the room. So what had just happened? Even if she had inadvertently moved the chairs as she walked, it was impossible to have achieved the two perfectly straight rows she was now looking at. So she must have remembered the room wrongly: seen it as she thought it had been, not as it was. Panic gripped her. She couldn't be hallucinating again. She was better. The doctor had said so.

Emily shut the door of the parlour firmly and walked briskly upstairs to her bedroom. Once inside she locked the door and took a pill, and

then, to be on the safe side, propped a chair against the door handle, though whether it was to keep someone out or herself in, she couldn't say.

The next morning she raised the issue of the candle with Mrs. Carlton, but only the candle.

"I can assure you I did not leave any lit candles in the house. There is no way I'd lock up for the night leaving a naked flame still burning and there'd be no reason to light a candle in the first place."

"Hadn't the bulb blown or something?"

"The lights were working fine last time I noticed. Shall we check?"

Emily was nervous, but felt she couldn't refuse. Mrs. Carlton marched down the corridor and pushed open the door to the small parlour. The chairs were scattered around the room as Emily had initially remembered. There was no sign of the avenue of chairs Emily had thought she'd seen the previous night, or of a candle. Mrs. Carlton clicked the light switch by the side of the door and the overhead lights obligingly came on without so much as a flicker.

"As I said."

Emily said nothing.

After a solitary breakfast that felt all the more solitary because of the hovering, but heavily silent, presence of Mrs. Carlton, Emily felt the need to escape the confines of the house sooner rather than later. This time she exited the house via the French windows in the dining room, stepped on to the path that ran round the house, and followed it along. A couple of steps forward she felt her mobile phone vibrate in her jeans back pocket. It dawned on her that it had been set to silent vibrate ever since she'd arrived at the house, but it had been tucked in the bottom of her bag and up until now she hadn't noticed the vibrations. She had two missed calls and a whole bundle of texts.

Emily continued to follow the path round while fiddling with her

phone. She'd managed to read all the texts and even acknowledge some of them when she looked up to realise that instead of walking around the house as intended, she'd somehow left the house behind and was now halfway up the slope heading towards the five birch trees. Where was her head? Now she was there, though, she might as well continue on in that direction.

She paused at the birches, standing by the middle tree to admire the view back down towards the house. It was both pleasing and calming and she knew she needed to hang onto the calm, rather than respond to whatever it was that had happened the night before or deal with the contents of one particular text that was especially upsetting her. Were the issues of that last job never going to go away?

Breathing deeply, Emily dragged herself away and continued on up the slope and into the trees at the top of the rise. The wooded area was quite dense and she soon lost sight of the house.

It wasn't unpleasant walking in the woods, but there wasn't much to see except trees and that didn't help Emily with the project. She turned right and slightly back on herself, expecting to emerge on the left flank of the house. It wasn't long before she saw bright sunlight between the trees. She headed towards it whilst bearing slightly left to delay her re-emergence back into the parkland until she was further along. When she finally came out of the trees, however, she was taken aback to find herself looking down on the five silver birches. How had that happened?

With what she intended as a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders, but instead felt stiff and anxious, she set off down the slope towards the birches. She paused in their midst and was relieved to find peace returning. Then she forced herself to carry on down the slope and round the house to its southern flank as originally intended.

The next couple of hours passed without incident as Emily explored the estate to the south and west of the house, including the water she had seen the previous evening, now revealed as a narrow lake. Wherever she went, the house remained visible. Emily saw this as a major positive in terms of design options.

It was now late morning. Emily had asked for lunch to be served at one. Whilst part of her was itching to sit down somewhere peaceful, like the sheltered spot under the birch trees, to sketch out her ideas so far, the pragmatic side of her personality urged her to review the plans and maps in the library. Fortunately for Emily, the pragmatic side won out.

It was Craig's notes that caused the upset. Apparently he had changed his mind about the front of the house and was now playing around with the idea of an art installation at the back, specifically on the top of the first ridge behind the house.

With a sinking feeling, Emily skimmed through the rest of his notes about placing a glass and stainless steel pyramid on top of the ridge from which would flow an artificial waterfall over white stone and copper, or that could be accessed by a flight of white stone stairs with copper edgings, or possibly terracing the whole of the eastern slope leading up to the ridge with alternating terracotta and slate tiles. Craig was happy to be flexible, he assured her via his notes, but he couldn't help but feel the back of the house was the way to go.

Emily exhaled slowly. All her ideas to date had focused on the front and south sides of the house. To her mind they were crying out for innovative landscaping and development. It would be such a waste to hide things away behind the house. Then another worse thought struck Emily. Each and every one of Craig's ill-considered ideas would involve digging up the silver birch quincunx. It was arboreal sacrilege. Emily could feel herself welling up with a potent combination of anger and grief. It couldn't be allowed. Craig might be the client, but she'd have to persuade him to see things differently.

She swallowed a pill and frantically rifled through the plans and maps with the aim of evidencing how unreasonable Craig's ideas were, but after a short while a level of reasoned calm returned. It would be better to work up her own ideas to demonstrate their undoubted benefits, rather than attempt to tear down Craig's daydreams with nothing to replace them. No need to panic. She had a plan. Nevertheless, she went to lunch in a state of agitation that even Mrs. Carlton was obliged to notice.

“Are you alright, Ms Quinton? Has something upset you?”

Emily retained enough self-control to realise that spilling her emotional angst all over Mrs. Carlton was not sensible, as both what she said and how she said it was bound to get back to Craig Merrett. Nevertheless, in what she believed was a calm manner, she explained some of her disquiet about not developing the visible front of the house, but instead digging up the back “and those beautiful birch trees.”

Mrs. Carlton fixed her with an impenetrable stare whilst commenting that, “My sister Sylvia will be upset to know the trees are going. She’s always had a soft spot for them, but then we don’t encourage her to come onto the estate very often. It’s for the best. Craig feels differently about things, I know, and wants to eradicate the presence of Albert Merrett as far as possible. Personally, I’m less susceptible to the past, but Albert Merrett was not a good man and the works of bad men are rarely wholesome. Perhaps cutting down the trees will be for the best? Who knows?”

Emily wanted to ask more, but Mrs. Carlton picked up Emily’s barely touched plate and made a point of walking briskly out of the dining room.

Emily was obliged to return to the library to continue her perusal of the plans, but felt unable to settle. After a not inconsiderable period of time wasting and agitation, she picked up her camera and went in search of fresh air and somewhere to sit whilst she sorted through the photos she had taken to date. The benches and seats to the front of the house were all in direct sunlight and made viewing the images on the camera screen difficult. Emily headed round the back for the shade of the silver birches and settled herself on the dappled grass with her back to the middle of the five trees. As she skimmed through the photos a sense of tranquility finally returned. Time and time again, the photos evidenced the potential of the west façade of the house. If Craig truly wanted to make his mark on the property, the only sensible place to do it was at the highly visible front of the property.

Emily knew she should go back to the library, to the maps and plans,

and begin to work up some of her ideas, but up here, in the centre of the trees, everything seemed so right and perfect. It was with extreme reluctance, bordering on distaste, that she got up and walked back down to the house. Before entering the building, she turned round to stare at the trees, then stepped through the open door. It felt like she was being swallowed up.

At dinner that evening Mrs. Carlton seemed keen to enquire after Emily’s health and whether she would be leaving the following day or on the Monday. If she was disappointed when Emily said Monday morning, she was professional enough not to show it. As she was leaving for the night, however, she made a point of telling Emily she had personally checked all the rooms and not a single candle was burning anywhere. She then added that few “lady guests” chose to sleep on their own in the house for too long and wished Emily a peaceful night, before making her way down the drive towards the cottage at the front gate, her electric torch flickering into the distance, just like a candle.

Emily wasn’t sure what to make of Mrs. Carlton’s parting comment, so ignored it and went straight back to the library to carry on with her work. She had finally managed to get some reasonable work down on paper and was determined to keep at it until tiredness drove her upstairs.

Several hours of frantic scribbling passed. As her head nodded forward onto the desk for the fourth time, Emily decided she had better get some sleep. She stood up feeling decidedly peculiar. She had clearly overdone things.

The most direct route to her bedroom took her past the parlour with the five-sided painting. The door was ajar and, despite Mrs. Carlton’s parting assertions, the gloom of the corridor was illuminated by flickering candlelight from inside the room.

Emily peered in through the open door. Instead of one burning candle, there were now four sat on the lectern in front of the painting. The chairs once again formed a perfectly straight aisle from the door.

Emily took one small step into the room to check there was no one in it. Reassured she was the only one there, she turned on the torchlight app on her phone and walked down the aisle towards the candles. Once in front of the painting she blew out each candle and then strode back down the aisle to the door. If that was Mrs. Carlton's idea of a joke, she didn't think much of it. What if she hadn't found the candles before turning in for the night? She felt a sense of righteous anger.

The adrenaline of the candle discovery and the anger that followed it had woken her up, and though she knew she really ought to carry on upstairs to bed, she turned back to the library and resumed her work until her head nodded forward onto the desk for a fifth time and she fell asleep.

It was the dawn of Sunday morning. Emily woke with a start and an involuntary groan. Her shoulders were stiff. Her neck was rigid and the last piece of paper she had been writing on was stuck to her forehead. What had she been thinking? Then again, what had Mrs. Carlton been thinking of with those bloody candles? Presumably she hadn't dreamed it? Of course she hadn't, but ...

Emily stood up stiffly, left the library, and walked somewhat hesitantly towards the small, gloomy parlour. When she got there, the grey light of dawn showed her a room filled with scattered chairs and an empty lectern: there were no candles and the chairs were not arranged in two facing ranks. So either Mrs. Carlton had taken her practical joke seriously and had come in extremely early to tidy up or she had dreamed it. She knew what Mrs. Carlton would say.

Feeling both resignation and churning anxiety, Emily started to walk along the corridor to the back stairs that would take her, all too belatedly, to her bedroom. The corridor ran along the back of the house. Emily glanced through a small ground floor window and caught site of a ruddy glow emerging over the top of the dark tree canopy on the furthest ridge. Then, without warning, a beam of early morning sunlight pierced the tree cover and flowed down the slope to bathe the quincunx of silver birches in pinkly golden light. It was beautiful. It was perfect.

Emily abandoned all thoughts of sleep. She found the nearest door to the outside, unbolted it, and emerged into the fresh dawn world. Purposefully, she walked towards the birch trees.

Emily stood in the centre of the quincunx, her back to the trunk of the central tree. The first lines of the hymn "Morning Has Broken" came into her head, "... like the first morning." This was magical and pure, like the first ever morning before life had had a chance to sully it. It hardened her resolve that Craig should not be allowed to destroy such perfection, even if legally it was his to destroy. She would return to her drawings to show him how wrong he was, but first she had to stand here and absorb the moment.

She was still standing in exactly the same spot, absorbing many moments, when, some hours later, a slightly breathless Mrs. Carlton walked up the slope to enquire if she was coming in for breakfast before it was cleared away for lunch.

With a start, Emily came back to the here and now and, with pink flushed cheeks, followed Mrs. Carlton back down to the dining room. Nothing was specifically said about what she was doing up amongst the trees, but Mrs. Carlton gnomically commented the estate could have an unhealthy effect on ladies of a certain disposition, "which is why our Sylvia no longer comes up here. If you're like her, you'll need to watch yourself." Emily felt she should respond in some way, but found herself too tired, uncertain, and woolly minded to do so.

After what was, in effect, brunch, Emily woke herself up by having a shower, then generally freshened up and returned to the library to work. The possibility of phoning Craig with her concerns crossed her mind, but she decided to stick to her plan of producing designs to persuade him the front of the house, or at least the south side, were the best places for a new build or installation. Persuasion rather than confrontation seemed the sensible way forward.

As all her drawings and ideas so far were based on the estate in its current form, Emily decided a look back through its history might be beneficial. She'd started digging through the old estate maps when

she came across some aged handwritten notes in biro that were clearly not Craig's. The handwriting wasn't that clear and neither were the contents. Eventually she worked out the writer was exploring the mysticism of the number five with a passion the fourth Viscount would have appreciated, though the biro indicated the pages had been produced long after Albert Merrett had shuffled off his mortal coil. There was even a quotation from "Morning Has Broken". The similarity to Emily's own recent thoughts alarmed her. She carried on reading. From what she could make out, the writer wanted to achieve perfection, to become the fifth "something" and to clean the house of its past. There was talk of breaking a curse. Emily found herself questioning the author's sanity and then she noticed the signature and date at the end: Sylvia Merrett, August 1975.

At lunch she showed the papers to Mrs. Carlton.

"Yes, well I told you we didn't let Sylvia come up to the house that often. Now you know why."

"She's ill?"

"*Was*, was ill, but we don't want to run the risk of a setback. But this is all private: family business. Mr. Craig shouldn't have left this out for you. I shall speak to him."

"But you've already hinted about this to me, haven't you? The reference to Sylvia not coming onto the estate or to female guests who don't want to stay too long and then there was this morning's reference to the estate having an unhealthy effect on ladies of a certain disposition and telling me to watch myself. If you feel the need to keep dropping me hints, you might as well tell me the whole story."

Mrs. Carlton's normally deadpan features displayed her discomfort. "I'll talk to you while you eat your lunch, but then that's that and there'll be no more talk. As I said, it should all be private."

Emily nodded and made an effort to tackle the food on her plate.

"You know about Albert Merrett and his obsession with the perfection of five." It was a statement, not a question. "I overheard Mr. Craig tell you about it and what he did to his wife and the four poor girls. As Craig said, he cursed them right enough, but the curse was supposedly broader. It wasn't just them as wouldn't rest in death until they became the perfect five, but the whole family and the estate itself. Albert knew he was going to die without a direct heir and that his nephew would inherit. He didn't like that and I reckon he spread news about the curse to make those that came after uncomfortable with their windfall. People are susceptible and it worked.

"Over the years we've had reports of hymn singing in the night, candles left burning in the red parlour, visions and apparitions up by the birches. It's been said the daughters are on the hunt for a fifth so they can rest in peace. This spooked some of our lady guests. They left in a tizz and that fueled the rumours still further.

"Sylvia is the susceptible type. Somehow she got it into her head she was to take the place of the fifth sister and set the family free from the supposed curse. She started hearing things, seeing things. Even tried to kill herself. She was sent away to get better. I think she should have stayed away, but we was low on cash, my husband died, and Craig made us the offer of the cottage. It's too close to the past for Sylvia, but what could I do?

"There, that's the sum of it. I've said enough and more than I wanted. So are you now going to be rushing off in a tizz yourself or are you going to stay till tomorrow morning as planned?"

Emily had to admit Mrs. Carlton's admissions had shaken her, especially the bit about candles in the red parlour, but her stubborn streak didn't like the way Mrs. Carlton had thrown down the gauntlet about staying. There was no way Sylvia Merrett's breakdown was going to plunge her back to her own fragile state of the last six months and cause her to run away from everything again.

"I've got work to do. I'm staying as planned."

Mrs. Carlton snorted, stood up, and walked away. Emily couldn't tell

if it was a snort of disgust or positive acknowledgement.

Emily attempted to finish her lunch, but she'd eaten brunch late and the whole strangeness with Mrs. Carlton had taken away her appetite. She felt the need for fresh air, so she left by the French windows and took a turn around the house. It was not long before she found herself walking up the slope towards the five birches.

Perhaps it was the nature of her recent conversation with Mrs. Carlton, perhaps it was lack of sleep, but Emily could have sworn there was someone up there, standing by one of the outer trees, but when she got there the whole area was deserted. She searched around, but there was nothing to see. Now what?

Emily looked back down at the house. It was a beautiful view and she could stare at it for ages, but she needed something fresh to give her the impetus to finish her designs. On a whim she decided to do something she hadn't done since her teens: climb a tree. It proved to be very easy and she was soon perched in the lower branches of one of the birches nearest the house. She was admiring the new perspective on the property when she saw something nestled in the lower branches of the adjacent tree. She shinned back down her tree and clambered partway up the sister tree until she could reach the object. She pulled it down. It was a candle stub, very similar to the candles she had seen burning in the red parlour. She had no idea what it was doing in the tree, but it made her feel more positive about the lighted candles. Maybe she hadn't been imagining them after all. Her sense of relief was like a rush of unchecked euphoria.

Emily glanced back down at the house again. Another design idea had popped fully formed into her head. She was on a roll this weekend. She'd never had so many sparkling ideas. She really ought to go back to the library to draw it up and finish the drawings she had already started, but yet again she found she did not wish to leave the shelter of the birches. She felt at peace up here. She hadn't felt this calm for ages and didn't want it to end. If she could stay here forever she'd be very happy, but then there was Craig and his stupid plans. She had to do something about them. Somehow, she forced herself to walk down the slope and into the house.

Back in the library, Emily made herself focus on the task in hand and had almost completed her final sketch when she realised she was no longer alone. She looked up to find an unknown woman, wearing a shapeless long black coat, watching her from the far side of the room. The woman bore a familial resemblance to Mrs. Carlton.

"Sylvia?"

The woman said nothing but continued to stare.

"Are you Sylvia Merrett?"

There was a further silence, then the woman turned to go.

"What did you want? What did you come here for?"

The woman stopped and turned back to face Emily, "There need to be five. You know. Without five nothing is perfect, nothing is safe. He's got it wrong. There has to be completion, not destruction. Tell him that."

"Tell who what?" but the woman turned and left. Emily stood up and ran to the door, but by the time she had opened it, there was no one there.

Assuming the woman had been Sylvia Merrett, and who else could it have been, the 'he' she had been referring to must have been Craig. This made Emily think. Perhaps it was time to contact Craig. She'd basically finished her designs. She could take them to him tomorrow or scan them and email them across, but she needed to prepare the ground, make sure Craig was going to be receptive to her ideas. Emily reached for her mobile, found Craig's contact details, and called.

Craig answered after only two rings, but the call did not go as she had planned.

"Hi Emily, I'm afraid it's not a good time right now, but I am keen to see what you've got for me. You have got ideas for me, right?"

“Yes, I’m ...”

“Grand. Can’t wait to see them. You’ve developed my thoughts on the back of the house, right? It really needs to be re-designed. Exorcise some of those old ghosts, right? I’m going to be really busy for a while, so can you edit what you send me? Just stuff focusing on the back of the house and you can further eliminate anything with historical connections. No five-sided constructs, ha ha. No rush. Tomorrow morning will be fine. I’m tied up for the rest of today. On that note, gotta dash.”

“Craig, I ...” even as she spoke, Emily could hear the rustle of a hand being placed across the phone’s mouthpiece and could just make out the words “Sorry, baby, it’s the architect. You know how it is. We’re finished now.” Then there was a further brief rustling and “Is that all for now? Grand. Look forward to seeing the designs. I’m sure they’ll be perfect. Bye,” and the connection went dead.

Emily felt the conversation like multiple blows to her stomach. Craig hadn’t listened. He hadn’t been interested. He’d been just like the last client, exactly like him. Not interested in what she had to say. And just like last time she hadn’t been able to say anything. Architects were supposed to be strong, powerful, independently minded, but whatever strength she’d started out with had long since left her, growing weaker with each setback and then failing totally on that last project. This job was supposed to be a return to form, but the only thing that had returned was her inability to stand up for herself or her ideas. She needed the backing of others, shared strength in numbers. She clearly couldn’t hack it solo and if the client wasn’t on her side, where did that leave her?

She stared morosely at her multiple sketches and then the killer body blow landed. Each and every one featured a five-sided design. It hadn’t been a conscious thing, but it was there, sometimes discreetly, sometimes overtly, in every drawing. Each idea resonated to the number five. The one and only design she had produced for the back of the house was a stone sun pavilion, designed to capture the incredible rising dawn light from behind the birch trees. Yes, she could make it four-sided, but it was supposed to echo the trees, create

a natural resonance between landscape and artificial construct. Four-sided would work, but four-sided wouldn’t be perfect and she didn’t want to create anything less than perfect. She was too upset to take one of her pills.

Several hours later, Mrs. Carlton found Emily in a foetal position, rocking and crying in the middle of a sea of torn up paper. Nothing she could say seemed to comfort her, and eventually she got Emily off the floor and up the stairs to her bedroom.

“You’ll feel better after a sleep. Everything always feels better after a sleep, that’s what Sylvia says.”

Emily grabbed Mrs. Carlton’s arm. “Sylvia. I need to speak to Sylvia. She’ll understand. She came to me and told me to ring him.”

Mrs. Carlton frowned in consternation, “Sylvia couldn’t have told you anything today. I packed her off to friends first thing this morning. She’s there now. The presence of a young woman all alone in the house seemed to be setting her off and it all got a bit too much. She’ll be back tomorrow after you’ve gone, but in the shape you’re both in, I doubt any form of conversation is going to do either of you any good. You just get some sleep.” Mrs. Carlton patted Emily distractedly on the arm and left. Emily lay down on the bed fully clothed and cried herself to sleep.

When Emily woke up it was dark. She was surprisingly hungry, but a glance at the clock on her phone told her she must have missed dinner. The thought of having to face Mrs. Carlton after the hysterics of the afternoon almost made her stay put, but she hadn’t had much lunch and she needed to eat something. She snuck out of her room quietly. Only dim table lights were on in the corridors. It looked as if Mrs. Carlton had given up on her and gone home for the evening.

Emily headed towards the kitchen. As she drew level with the red parlour the door was ajar and she saw light spilling out into the corridor. When she pushed the door open wider the aisle of chairs was once more in place, but this time there were five candles burning

brightly in front of the painting. Their light cast sharp shadows onto the flat watercolour. There was a particularly dark shadow behind the central tree in the quincunx. It looked as if someone was standing there. In a daze Emily walked down the aisle to take a closer look. Judging from the outline, it was a woman in a long straight dress or coat. The shadow distorted as she drew closer and for a moment it looked as if the woman was hanging from the tree, rather than standing behind it, but as she drew level with the painting the middle of the five candles guttered and went out. Emily could no longer see the shadow or the middle tree clearly. She looked frantically for a match, but couldn't find one. Instead she picked up the nearest lighted candle and used it to relight the central one, but there was a sudden draught and the candle flared. Its flame ignited the middle candle, but also licked the paper of the painting. Emily thought it was okay, because there should have been a sheet of glass in front of the painting, but somehow there wasn't and the paper caught and the fire quickly spread. Emily stepped back in horror at what she had done and the flames flared. Now the frame was alight and in seconds the fire had spread to the old, dry wallpaper and then the curtains went up like torches.

Panicking, Emily felt for her phone to call 999, but it wasn't in her back pocket and she realised she must have left it upstairs in her room. Even in her current state, she knew it wasn't sensible to run upstairs in a burning house.

Emily backed rapidly out of the room. The fire had now taken hold and was advancing towards her. She slammed the door shut and ran towards the library, where she knew there was a phone, but the library door was locked. That couldn't be right. It was never locked and all her work was in there, or what was left of it. She wasted time trying to force open the door, but it wouldn't give. She ran back up the corridor in search of another phone. She could see flames licking under the parlour door, but couldn't see a phone. There would be one in Mrs. Carlton's office, but that would mean running past the parlour door. Even as she was contemplating doing it, the door exploded outwards and the pent up fire poured out into the corridor. Emily turned and ran. The old Ballroom faced the rear of the house and, like the dining room, had floor to ceiling French windows that

opened easily from the inside. Emily ran in, charged across the wide floor and threw herself at the windows. They swung outwards without effort and Emily fell through and carried on running, leaving the doors wide open. In the core of the house the fire sucked greedily at the fresh air and roared.

Emily had intended to run round to the front of the house and down the drive to hammer on Mrs. Carlton's door and get her to call the fire brigade, but it didn't happen. She kept running straight, up the rear slope and into the huddle of silver birches. She needed to stop panicking. She needed to think. There was peace here and she would be able to get her brain to work.

She reached the tree in the centre of the group and turned to face the house. There was light burning in every window and wherever she looked she could see five candle flames shining out their message. They demanded perfection: completion not destruction. Craig had planned destruction. Emily had inadvertently caused it, but no one would have peace unless there was completion. Even Emily. She was not a part of the family, but she had ruined her career and now was about to destroy it entirely, as well as the mansion. Failing to deliver on your powerful client's project was bad enough, but burning down his family home because of a stupid mistake was in a league of its own. She'd never work again and all she'd ever wanted to do was design perfect things. She hadn't known peace for months, years even and now she never would. The only place she'd even felt passing peace was here amongst the trees Craig Merrett was going to tear up and even if he didn't, he'd never let her come back: the stupid, flakey woman he'd given a last chance to and who repaid him by burning down several million pounds of property and antiques. There was no way back from this.

Emily stopped in the middle of her personal, internal conflagration. For a blessed, fleeting moment, the tranquility she'd known amongst the trees returned and she knew what to do. Ignoring the noises from the house below, she slowly pulled off her belt and fashioned it into a crude noose. She hung it around her neck and then climbed the middle tree. She tied the other end of the noose round a solid-looking branch and jumped.

* * *

It was Sylvia who found the body. Allowed back to her best-loved place, she had headed straight for the birch trees. Mrs. Carlton was not far behind. Together they surveyed the dark shape dangling a little behind the trunk of the middle tree. Sylvia was very calm.

“It’s perfect. There’s five now.”

Mrs. Carlton looked across at her sister and smiled sympathetically. “Mr. Craig will want to know.”

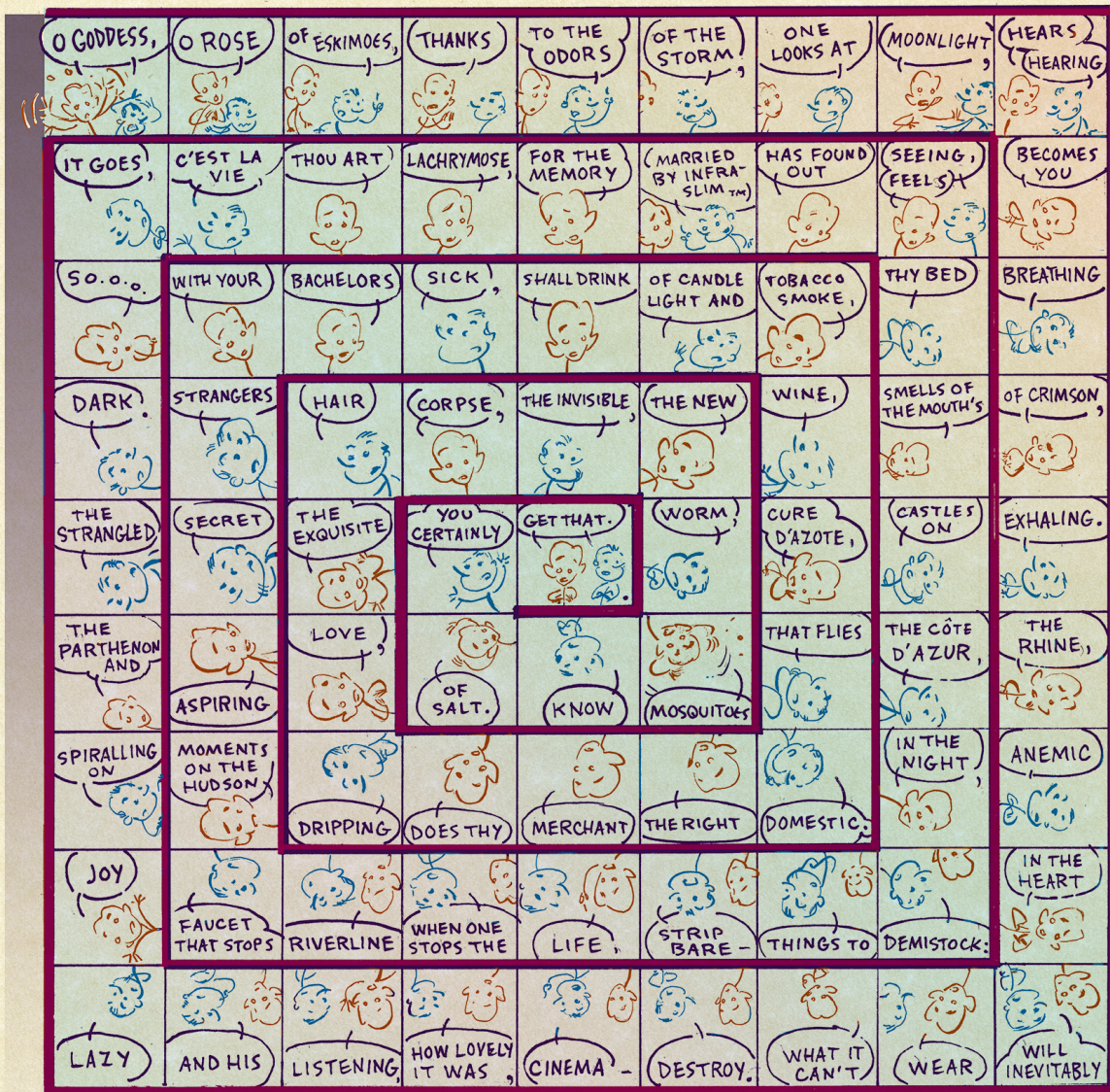
Together they turned and walked back down to the unburnt house.

The Road to Golgonooza, chapter four Our story: The living embodiment of L'amour has taken a dark turn.





Didi and Gogo frantically improvise a Surrealist paean to the mercurial divinity.



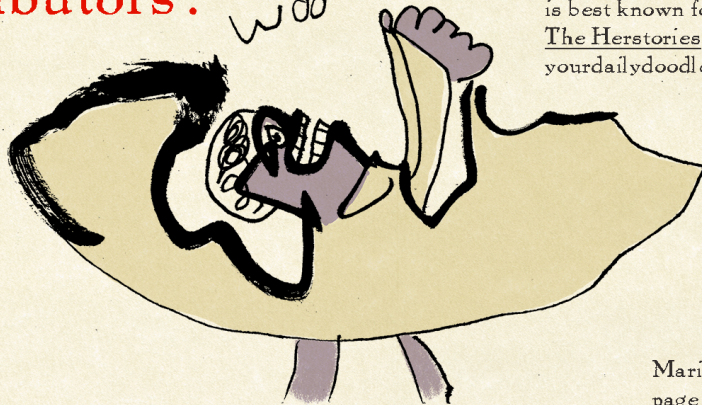


© MOT 2020

Contributors:

woo hoo!

pages 1 & 2. Suko Bruchardeiwitch
is best known for graphically adapting
The Herstories of Hisodotus.
yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com



page 3. siblings
Dorothy and Dashiell Morse
encode their cryptic adventures
at cartooniologist.blogspot.com



Mariko Sanchez,
page 4. top.
oversees the
Miskatonic
romance anthology.
Cniderella Love.
Insta: cmot15



page 4. bottom.
Dick Wightspleign's
current run on Galaxy Gal
has our heroine
caught in the crossfire
of an interstellar war
between the Ph'kinalions
and the Tocenaziens.
yourdaily sketch.tumblr.com



T. Motley is the author of *The Road to Golgonooza*, a fake jam comic. tmotley.com

Wych-Elm Kings Again

by Oliver Smith

I dig deep in dreams;
in curled leaves,
in beech-mast,
to meet the scratch
of dead fingers itching
through the clay.
To meet the kings
on their way back
up to the old world.
To the circulus, the avenue,
the circle of earth-rooted stones,
and the fortified hill
raised above the coils
of the estuary.

Beyond the drowsy
golden woods
they forgot themselves
and the centuries flowed
with a rising tide of skulls
in the earth; scattered
where the river loses
its reflection, loses
its way, grows briny
and sluggish in anticipation
of the sea, grows broad
and muddy in anticipation
of the sea, grows black
and bloody in anticipation
of the sea.

The currents and meanders
of the world retreat,
ebb, flow away and they...
They open their hollow old eyes
and their hearts burn
in the glow-worm grove.
The ancients of the wood
enthroned in the rocks,
in the soil, in the roots,
disturbed by dream-fields,
dream men, dream trees
dream flights
of southering geese,

dream swans floating
on the endless river,
a dream crow calling
in a parched voice,
“unbound, unbound, unbound,”
while all the world
dreams deep in the barrow,
in the soil, in the roots
that grow down inch
by inch by inch and merge
with the burial mound’s
green-boned back.

Our Best Friend

by Amy Bernstein

I fell in love with Eden's family one icy day in the 1960s, long before we even thought of ending her life. It was winter in the city of Chicago where our wind is so vicious we call it "The Hawk," and Eden and I were in her room working on our projects for 5th grade Social Studies. Her room was big and light and shabby in a friendly way. There were half-built cardboard sculptures, stories that Eden was writing, and particularly, drawings that Eden was in the midst of working on scattered all over her old Oriental carpet. The elderly steam radiators in Eden's room hissed to try to convince us that they were giving off heat, though they weren't. It was cold in the room. But the chilliness in Eden's home was of the kind that makes you want to go downstairs and make mugs of delicious hot cocoa with marshmallows. In my house, we had the kind of chilly that meant we were keeping the thermostat down and putting on a sweater to be sensible.

My project that day was a diorama of the Great Chicago Fire. I thanked God we didn't have to work on our projects at my house because my mother never let me make a mess of any kind. Our apartment had white wall-to-wall carpeting, white walls, white upholstered furniture and white doilies on white armrests. My room was covered in thick, rough, brick-textured wallpaper. I was always afraid that I was going to scrape my clumsy knuckles against it and spill red blood across all that white.

South African mothers are just naturally cleaner than other people, I guess. No one born in the USA ever has a home quite as clean and white as ours was, in my experience. That was fine for my perfect sister Melanie, who only wanted to practice her violin anyway. But I was not so perfect.

The only reason I would have liked to have Eden over to my house at

all was to show her my collection of plastic horses. I displayed them all in a galloping line on the white mantelpiece of the non-working fireplace in my all-white room. The horse at the front was Blackstar. Blackstar is all white too, with the important exception of the black star on his forehead. Blackstar had a proud but loving heart. I cared for all of my horses, of course, and I tried not to play favorites, but he was special to me. He often told me that he loved me best too, better even than the other horses.

Eden and I had been best friends for two weeks, ever since Mrs. Macklin had assigned us to do a book project together. I couldn't believe my luck, getting to work with Eden, who was petite and pretty, always did well in school, and had so many friends. I was too tall, and not at all pretty. And although I tried in school, I "just wasn't that academic," as my mother said. That adjective was reserved for Melanie, the straight-A student. I didn't have any friends really, either. But Eden and I got along. She was kind and friendly to everyone. I told her about my plastic horse collection, she told me about her cats, and we became friends, just like that. And then she invited me over to work on our Social Studies projects together.

Sitting on the bed in her cold room Eden was drawing a beautiful silhouette of a scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Thin, pale, and dark haired, she was wrapped in a mangy, cat-hair covered blue wool blanket. I loved that old blanket and sometimes let my hand brush against it, as if by accident. It was itchy, soft, and hairy. I could not imagine such a thing existing even for a second in my house.

I was on the floor struggling to cut red cellophane into flames. I had already made a Play-Doh cow, which, in my diorama, would be in the process of kicking over the lantern that started the Great

Chicago Fire.

"My cow looks like a dog," I said, holding it up. Eden leaned over to look.

"No, it doesn't, it looks like a cow ... well, sort of!" she said. She laughed. For a moment, I thought her laughter was cruel. I knew that Eden would effortlessly create an entirely original project for which she would receive the grade of A+, while I would work for hours and hours to come up with something mediocre, a C+ or at best, a B-.

But then I remembered that Eden was never cruel to anyone, was kindness itself, which was why she was friends with unpopular me.

Eden's father poked his head around the heavy door. "May I come in?" he asked. Neither of my parents would ever have dreamed of asking permission to enter their own child's room. Eden jumped down from the bed, ran to the door, and threw her arms around her father. He kissed the top of her head as they hugged each other.

I realized it at that moment. Eden's family was absolutely perfect. They were as perfect as mine was awful. Her father, for example, was a bearded college professor who could raise one eyebrow and often did to let you know he found you clever and funny, while my father was a good-looking, sandy-haired drunk who couldn't hold a job and never came to see Melanie or me anymore.

The evening of that first visit, Mrs. Stein called my mother and actually persuaded her to let me stay for dinner. My mother never let me stay for dinner at other people's houses. She thought it gave them the impression that she couldn't afford to feed her own family, which she certainly could do, thank you very much. I don't know how Mrs. Stein accomplished this miracle, but I was grateful. I was allowed to help Eden and her little brother Nathan set the table, and I showed them how to fold the napkins the way my mother had taught me so that they looked like tiny swans. Then, I sat down to dinner for the first time with the Steins. Nathan insisted on sitting next to me.

"Hi, Swan," his little swan said to mine.

"Hi, Swan," mine answered. My swan had a South African accent, like my mother. My mum is just like a swan. She's clean and white and has a long thin neck and a bad temper.

Mrs. Stein set a pot of sauce and one of spaghetti down right on the table so we could serve ourselves and just take as much as we wanted.

"Hey, maybe we should go swimming in the sauce," my swan suggested to Nathan's. It clearly wanted to stir up trouble.

"Yeah!" answered Nathan's swan. Nathan's eyes went wide as my swan approached the pot of red sauce.

"However," said my swan in its finicky voice, "I don't want to get all dirty."

"I do!" yelled Nathan's swan, lunging toward the pot.

"Wait," said his mother, "swans hate the color red, don't they, Sandra? They would never jump into red sauce." She winked at me.

"No," I answered quickly, "no, they never would." Our swans retreated. How did Mrs. Stein know this swan fact? Mrs. Stein had a happy round face and black hair hanging long down her back. She was pretty and young looking in a way that my mother had never been, even before my father left. Mr. Stein twirled up a massive forkful of spaghetti and opened his mouth to insert it. Bits of spaghetti sauce were flicked off the ends; they reddened his mustache and beard and flecked the tablecloth, but nobody cared.

I went home after school with Eden practically every day after that. Her mother didn't seem to mind and my mother gradually accepted this new state of affairs. In fact, after the concert fiasco, I think she was happy whenever she could get rid of me.

On the day of Melanie's year-end concert, we started at noon waiting for our father's arrival. When no father made an appearance, Blackstar whispered to me that we should hide Melanie's bow.

Blackstar could be quite bossy. I had to listen to him, though, or he got angry, and then he could make my life very unpleasant. Once, at school, he made me fall down in front of my whole class because I had stuffed him inside my desk. Everyone laughed at me and I had a big bruise. I made sure to try to do what he said after that.

Melanie was hysterical, but Blackstar just laughed. He wouldn't let me tell her where her bow was. Finally, my mother had to call all around to music stores at the last minute to find another one and I wasn't allowed to go to the concert. It was all Blackstar's fault, not mine, but I got the blame, as usual.

After Mum and Melanie left I snuck out of our house and rode Blackstar up the street to show him to Eden and to Mrs. Stein. They had an old, beautiful grey stone house with ivy crawling all over it. Blackstar galloped up the banister, jumped over the ivy, and rang the doorbell with his hoof. While we waited, he snorted and pawed the ground. He was excited to meet the Steins.

But when Mr. Stein answered the door, he looked rumpled and crabby. He put his arm across the doorway and stopped us.

"Hello, Sandra, I didn't know you were coming over this afternoon. The thing is, Eden is practicing the piano right now." He didn't say it mean, but I could tell he didn't want us.

"I just wanted to show her and Mrs. Stein Blackstar, so I came over," I said. I held Blackstar up. He snorted and neighed at Mr. Stein.

"Well, now is not a good time," he said. "I was asleep, and Eden's practicing is noisy enough." I realized then that we had woken him. This explained his crabbiness; men are crabby if you wake them. I remembered that from my dad.

"We won't bother you, Mr. Stein," I reassured him, moving toward the door.

"No, Sandra, I said that now is not a good time," he repeated, still blocking with his arm.

"Mrs. Stein told us we could come over any time."

"Well, I'm one of Eden's parents too, and I didn't say you could come over any time. You're here a bit too often. She needs other friends ... less ... weird."

"Dad?" I heard Eden's voice coming from behind him. "Is Sandra here?"

"She's not coming in right now."

"Why not?"

"Because she's over all the time. I think a little break is in order ..."

"Hi!" I shouted over his arm. "I brought Blackstar!" Blackstar whinnied.

"Dad, can I just see Blackstar?"

"Hi, Sandra!" yelled Nathan, waving at me from inside.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Go back inside, Nathan."

"Herb, please don't swear at him," I heard Mrs. Stein say. "Who's out there? Why is everybody standing in the doorway?" She came forward, and Mr. Stein lifted his arm so that his wife could talk to me under it.

"Oh, hello Sandra, is that Blackstar?"

"Yes. Can I come in?"

"Of course you may, dear."

"I just told her ..." I heard Mr. Stein say, but Blackstar and I had already slipped in under his arm and the four of us, Blackstar, Eden, Nathan, and I, trotted up the stairs together laughing. From upstairs on the landing, while Blackstar neighed and pranced around for

them, I could hear Mr. and Mrs. Stein arguing.

The next day, Melanie told Mum that using a strange bow had ruined her concert and I was grounded for a month. I wasn't allowed to go over to the Stein's or out anywhere except to school. I had to just stay home in my clean white room and listen to Melanie screeching away on her violin. I hadn't even done anything. Of course, Blackstar wasn't punished. He never is. But I couldn't stay mad at him for long. I love him.

One night during my grounded month, I lay on my narrow white bed on top of my immaculate white blanket holding Blackstar close to my ear.

"Eden's life is perfect," he whinnied softly. "Her family, her house, everything is just perfect. But what if she were gone? If Eden died, you could take her place. It would be easy. Most of her family loves you already. We just have to get rid of Eden, then you can slip right into her life."

"But I love Eden." Blackstar said that he loved Eden too. But how could I take her place if she was still in it? He had a point. But still, I knew I could never harm Eden. Blackstar kept whispering though. He said I had to be subtle; I wouldn't be able to take Eden's place if her family knew I was involved in her death. The best way, he thought, would be to encourage her to get rid of herself. That way no one could blame us. If we could make her unhappy enough to take her own life, he decided, that would work. It's not that he hated Eden or anything, or wanted her to be sad. We both loved her. She was our best friend.

"No," I told him definitely, "I will never hurt Eden."

Throughout that year and into middle school, because of my contact with Eden's family, I became increasingly aware of how miserable mine was. My mom was never loving or funny like Eden's mother, my sister was a weirdo, and my father was gone. He was so gone that he never showed up when he said he would, so gone that he forgot to call even on our birthdays.

One day I told Blackstar that maybe, instead of killing Eden, we could change my father. We could tell him how much it hurt me when he missed every important event in my life and never visited. Maybe he just didn't know. If my own family could be fixed, then I wouldn't have to take over Eden's. Blackstar thought I was kidding myself. But it was worth a try. So, one winter morning, I called my father. I usually never called his apartment, because one of his women would always answer and then they would gush all over and try to be nice to me. But that time, he actually answered the phone himself. I told him I needed to talk to him. It was important, I said. He swore he would meet me in half an hour at Cyril's House of Tiki, which was one of those bars every town seems to have, with hula dolls and totem poles.

I sat in the booth for over an hour, hot in my wool coat, holding tight to my shiny blue school backpack. Blackstar was inside, listening. Above my head hung an alive blowfish made into a lamp. How did they get him to stay puffed up that way, with his spikes sticking out? He must be miserable with a light bulb inside his stomach. His eyeballs were all puffed out too as if they might pop out of his head.

I wanted to climb up and rescue him. But doing that kind of thing gets me into trouble. So I told him I was sorry, I couldn't help him. Finally, Dad actually breezed in. Everybody knew him, of course, so he had to say hello to everyone both behind and at the bar.

"Hello, Mike," said the bartender. He watched my father warily. I wondered what Dad had done in the past that made the bartender so uneasy now. Eden's father would never think of going to such a place, let alone being known and feared by the bartender, let alone meeting his daughter there.

"Help me," said the poor blowfish, in a high-pitched, spiky voice. I told him again that I couldn't.

Dad was still handsome then. He was fit, blond, green-eyed, and charming. The middle-aged women who were drinking in the bar at noon perked up as soon as they saw him. He waved to me back in the booth and then stopped to get a beer for himself and a Shirley

Temple with a pink umbrella in it for me. He knew I loved those silly drinks Tiki's served in fake coconut shells, with a plastic monkey perched on the handle and a tiny umbrella. We used to go to Tiki's often when I was little, and he would always get a pink umbrella for me because he knew that pink was my favorite color. It's not anymore, of course. My favorite color now is blue, like Eden's blanket. But he didn't know that since he never saw me.

He bent down to give me a kiss, posing for the scene, "Loving father gives a kiss to awkward, pre-teen daughter." I could smell morning beer on his breath. I wondered for the thousandth time how my parents, as different as they were, ever came together long enough to create my sister and me.

He sat down, smiled his lovely smile, and took a deep draw on his beer. Now that he was here, it was hard to get the conversation going. I had been planning for days how I would tell him that it hurt me when he made appointments to see me and didn't show up, or showed up drunk, or came to the house and spent all the time there fighting with Mom. I had it all planned out. But instead of starting, I turned my Shirley Temple around in my hands and poked at the little monkey hanging on the side. The monkey smiled up at me and cheeped. Then he climbed down the side of my glass and ambled across the table towards my father. Dad had turned his smile on a busty blond with fake eyelashes over by the bar. When the monkey reached Dad's beer stein and began to climb his glass, I got up the courage to start speaking at last.

"Dad, I have been wanting to talk to you about something important for some time." Dad turned the smile back on me and drained his beer.

"I just need to tell you," I said, my voice pretty steady, "that sometimes, what you do hurts me a lot. I love you so much so when you forget to call and ..."

"Oh," Dad said. He leaped to his feet. "Speaking of ... I forgot to call Wendy. Hell! Sorry, honey, don't move, don't move a muscle, I'll be right back." Wendy was his latest. He was always madly in

love with them at the beginning. He rushed over to the pay phone at the front of the bar, inserted a dime, and turned to wink at me. I stayed stock-still. I tried to keep a tight hold on what I had started to say so that when he came back, I could finish saying it.

After talking for a little while, Dad laughed. He winked at me again. He rubbed his chin and got out a cigarette. He squinted one eye to keep the smoke out while he lit the cigarette with a plastic lighter. He smiled at something Wendy said, then blushed, glanced over at me and cupped the receiver with his hand, flicking ashes onto the floor. The bartender placed an ashtray near his elbow. Later, he hooked a bar stool with his foot and dragged it over to the phone so he could sit down. He was getting out a second cigarette when the blowfish above me started crying a hot salty rainstorm down on me.

"Please get me down," he begged. So I climbed up onto my seat and grabbed ahold of him with both hands. His spikes cut my fingers. It was much more difficult than I had expected to pull the light out of his stomach. It must have hurt him too, because he began screaming and screaming, that sad, poor fish.

The bartender yelled, "Hey, you, what the hell are you doing?" He ran toward me. My father turned around on his stool so that his back was to the whole scene and continued to talk. I wrenched my new friend free just as the bartender came up and the whole string of lights crashed down on all the tables. The bartender tried to pry my fish out of my hands, but I held on tight. His spikes cut the bartender's hands too, my fish screamed louder, and the bartender swore at me and let go.

"Mike," he yelled, "I want you and your crazy kid out of here!" My father ignored him.

"Mike, I'm calling the cops." He went behind the bar, grabbed a baseball bat, and approached my father, menacing him with it. I ran to the door, cradling my new friend the blowfish. Out on the grey cement streets, it was snowing hard. The cars were hiding under their blankets. They giggled like children playing hide and go seek. I wished that I could pull the snow up over my head too, that I could

become invisible like them. I looked back through the plate glass windows of the bar. There they all stood, frozen. Even though my father had Wendy in one hand and the bartender still coming at him holding the bat, he was looking out the window, right at me.

I understood the expression on my father's face. A millipede, with too many wriggly legs dropping suddenly onto your arm, might inspire such a look of disgust. I inspired that feeling in my father.

I jammed my fish into my backpack and ran. Where could I go? Blots of blood, warm and red, fell to the white snow behind me, making a trail. My father could have followed it straight to me if he wanted to. But he never would.

When I pounded on the door of Eden's house, Mrs. Stein answered. She washed my hands in warm, clean water, and bandaged them carefully before even asking what had happened. I told her about my father, the bar, and the police being called. I said that I had cut my hands falling down while running away. She was nice, and sympathetic, like a real mother, but I could tell she was appalled by my father and shocked by all the blood. That was the first time I was asked to sleep over.

I began to spend most of my nights at the Steins' house. They had a lovely bright green spare room, almost as nice as the families' rooms, and it became mine. I got to be like a sister to Eden, and to Nathan too. By the time we began high school, I was to all intents and purposes living with the Steins. Even Mr. Stein had accepted my presence.

I realized that Blackstar hadn't yet punished me for leaving him behind at my mother's apartment. Perhaps he was concentrating his efforts on killing Eden. When I thought of that, to protect her, I knew I had to go back and deal with him.

When I opened the door, I saw that everything was unchanged. Except for me, of course. I was no longer the person who lived in that place. Blackstar stood exactly where I had left him, at the front, leading the march of the horses. He was silent. He said nothing about

my new home that was perfect or my new family. He looked right at me, but there was hatred in his eyes. He had never looked at me with anything but love before. My heart galloped and my hands began to sweat. But I took him down from the mantel. I walked the whole long way to my father's house carrying him carefully.

"I still love you, Blackstar," I whispered.

My father lived with Wendy now, at the other end of the neighborhood. So, using only my hands and a plastic spoon, I dug a pit in their backyard and buried Blackstar, to make sure my best friend would be safe.

Eden was universally recognized as our high school's most outstanding English student. She could follow in her father's footsteps and become a professor of Literature, get married, have kids of her own if she wanted. I was worried that if she chose that path, though, her artistic talent would be wasted. She was a brilliant artist. She took lessons at the Art Institute downtown and life drawing classes every week up at The University.

It is a much more difficult life trying to be successful as an artist than as an English professor. It's not that I wanted her to suffer, or be sad, as Blackstar did. But I didn't want Eden to settle for the easy path. Together, she and I developed our own point of view about the relative merits of academics and art. We concluded that the only really worthwhile thing for her to do with her talents was to become a professional artist.

We daydreamed together about what her future might be. Perhaps she would be a painter in Paris, or somewhere like that, starving a bit until she was discovered. In all of these dream futures, I was always there beside her, sharing an apartment, or living down the "rue," helping and encouraging her, since I had no artistic talent, or really any kind of talent of my own.

In senior year Eden was offered the opportunity to take English at The

University. Her father arranged it so that she could audit a graduate class with a couple of his high-powered old friends, instead of slogging away with the rest of us. But by now Eden cared only for her Art. She was not interested in taking any stupid poetry class. When Mr. Stein tried to force her (he still possessed unrealistic visions of Eden attending Barnard or Harvard, and studying Literature or Philosophy), I told him I would go to the class as well if that was what it took to get Eden there. He liked me better after that.

To say that I was out of my depth in this class is putting it mildly. I understood nothing of the academic content. Since I was only there for Eden, though, it didn't matter. What I did understand was that the two star teachers were falling all over themselves to demonstrate what regular guys they were and, at the same time, what brilliant and original thinkers about the poetry of John Donne. They each particularly wanted their humility and brilliance to be noticed by one of the female graduate students in the class. Catherine was stunning, with auburn hair and bottle-glass green eyes. And she was brilliant. She had something insightful to say in response to every poem, and she wasn't shy about speaking up in front of these two august men. I enjoyed the interactions between the famous professors and their lovely student and wondered which would be the one to get her into his bed.

One day, I was laughing about all this on the way back to school. Eden stopped walking and stared, black straight hair curtaining her face, millions of strands of seed beads glittering in the sun, purple miniskirt showing off her knobby legs. She had no idea such a situation was even possible.

"That can't be true. Those men are married. They've been to our house."

"They can't cheat on their wives because they've been to your house?"

"Well, no. I guess that doesn't make sense."

"Believe me, they are each trying to impress her so they can get her

into bed."

"How do you know that?"

I explained that I knew because my father had had so many affairs during my childhood when he still lived with us. When my parents broke up, I had heard my mother scream it at him, all of it, the affairs, the cheating, the betrayal. So, I could just tell.

Not long after this conversation, Eden noticed that her father was spending a lot of time with one of his graduate students. She wondered if he could be having an affair. Eden worried a great deal now, about her family, and about being a good enough artist. I reassured her, as a best friend should.

Against her father's wishes, Eden went to Bennington College to study art the following year. I supported her choice. I told her that she should keep on trying to be an artist since that was her dream. It's important to follow your dreams if you have any. I didn't have any, so I stayed around Chicago and helped her family not to miss her too much.

I got a job clerking in a hardware store. I was always good at fixing things with my hands and I wasn't really smart enough for college anyway. I volunteered to cook dinner and look after Nathan whenever his parents wanted to go out, and they asked me often. I think they were using this time to try to save their marriage. Mr. Stein was indeed having an affair. Nathan had looked through his father's desk for me and found a few letters that made it all quite clear. I wish now that Eden had never seen those.

Vermont was lonely for a city girl, and Eden said that the art majors up there were all more talented than she was. I told her not to get discouraged, that she was a gifted artist. This was true. She was having bad luck with boyfriends too. She seemed to have lost that natural sweetness that had made her so popular when we were younger. Now, guys kept saying she was too possessive and needy. She was also having a difficult time finding friends. I told her she didn't have to worry about that part because she would always have me.

Eden didn't go back to Bennington in the spring and instead moved to New York City to create art full time. Her parents were worried. But I was proud of her, and I told her so every time we spoke. I helped take care of Nathan, I cleaned the house, and I listened to Mrs. Stein when she talked about her difficulties with Mr. Stein. She said I was “wiser than my years.”

I was promoted at work, put in charge of ordering for the whole store. One time, I typed a digit wrong and we received sixteen enormous bathtubs, instead of sixteen faucets. There was no place to put them and they all had to be sent back. But my boss was really nice about it.

“Sandra, I did much worse than that when I started out,” he laughed. I got along with all the guys at the store. They seemed to like having a girl around, even if that girl was only me.

Eden called often, and said that New York City could be a terribly lonely place. There are people all around you but you are still alone, more alone, somehow, than if you were in a place with fewer people. Six months later, therefore, I was not so very surprised to learn that Eden had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. In her last phone calls to me, she had sounded pretty desperate. I know now that I should have told Mrs. Stein, but at the time, I wanted to spare her the worry. The Steins were patching up their marriage and they finally seemed happier.

Eden's roommate found her in the morning and called 911. She was unconscious and barely breathing when they took her in the ambulance. I was so afraid she would die. I knew it was all Blackstar's fault somehow. I should have known from the start that I was no match for him. Burying him had only made things worse. I went back to my father's yard and dug him up. He had done it all to help me, so I had to forgive him. I washed him off, and I kissed him.

That morning at work I tripped over some windowpanes and fell down on the shards of broken glass. I cut my hands and knees all to shreds, and blood was everywhere. But my punishment was still not

as bad as I had anticipated. Then, friends again, we went to the hospital. The family was sitting in the horrible waiting room, with its florescent lighting and hard plastic seats. We waited there for hours to see if Eden would live. I was trying to keep Nathan quiet by playing “Go Fish,” just passing the time, when Mr. Stein, who never stopped crying, started shouting at me.

“It all started with you, with your weirdness and your plastic horses, your cold sweaty hands and your strange family. You don't belong here. Get away from us and from my daughter.”

“It's not Sandra's fault, Matt, please, she has been nothing but wonderful to Eden and to all of us.” Mrs. Stein wrapped her arms around him and held him tight while she smiled at me apologetically.

“I want her out of here, now, and out of our house. I mean it.” At that moment, the doctor came in. We all froze.

“Mr. and Mrs. Stein, may I speak to you?” He took them off to the family room. It was a good thing that I hadn't left, because then who would have looked after Nathan? He just sat there, the cards still in his lap.

“He didn't mean it, Sandra, he's just worried.” But I knew that he did.

When they returned, Mrs. Stein was still crying, but she was smiling through her tears, so I knew that Eden was going to be all right. Mr. Stein had stopped crying and just kept saying “Thank God,” over and over again. Nathan jumped up, scattering cards, and ran over to his parents. They opened their arms and held him tight. Then, the doctor took all three of them in to see Eden.

Blackstar looked up at me lovingly and spoke for the first time since I had buried him.

“We had better get going.”

We went back to the Stein's house and put all my clothes and my few other things into my old school backpack. I peeked into Eden's room.

Just last week, Mrs. Stein and I had been talking about my moving in there, since Eden wasn't using it and the room was larger. I left my house key on Eden's dresser, but at the last moment, I stole the blue woolen blanket, the one covered in cat hair. I planned to hide it under my bed, to keep as a souvenir.

My mother wouldn't be happy to have me back, and Melanie would

throw a fit, but what could they do? Family is family, after all.

Neither Blackstar nor I ever spoke with the Steins again. I thought for a while that Eden or Mrs. Stein, or even Nathan, might contact me, but they didn't. Occasionally, but not very often, in the evening, Blackstar and I walk down the alley in back of their house and stand there. We peek into the kitchen window to where the Steins are having dinner together. And we listen to their laughter. We stand there until Blackstar tells me it is time for us to go.

The Left-Hand Path

by Jamal Hodge

When the love died,
The miracle mourned.
To be free,
In me,
I turned the promised key.
Eternal, relentless, inevitable,
Comes the transformation.

Vigorous is the bliss of the wicked,
Their ways, my ways,
Their days long with the work
of the mark.

Evolved downwards,
My reflection abandons me to empty mirrors,
I can only see myself in blood.

Beast, Devil, Human,
I caress with claw,
I kiss with fang,
I pursue with hindquarters,
I taste with a lacerating tongue.

Unleashed, is me,
Upon this holy land,
Behind the mask of a brother,
Costumed in the manner of a friend.
Ripping, tearing, dismembering,
I spaghetti swallow intestines,
I chew, I slurp, I grin,
Unaware of the gaping wound,
In my open stomach.

Dark Solstice

by Alexander P. Garza

Winter is here in Houston.
It's all that was sent
with the migration:

the birds and dogs
rip apart snakes,
their carcasses

slow-soaked and shrouded,
bombs carry them again,
bursting upon stars.

10:10 to Throgmorton

by Tim Jeffreys

It had been a long day at work, and, at dusk, I found myself walking along the main road towards home. A railway bridge crosses the road ahead of where I walked, and as I approached a train ran over it. The train was a mere black silhouette against the deepening sky, but all its windows were lit, which meant I had a detailed view of the interior. As I watched each carriage pass, I noticed all of them were empty. So many carriages. So many windows. So many vacant seats. A passengerless train; or so I thought.

In the final carriage, in the final window, a figure stood looking outwards. A young woman. I blinked twice at the sight of her, and in the time it took me to do this she, and the train she rode, were gone. All that remained was a fast fading rush of air and gallop of pistons as the train powered off towards its destination. But the image of the woman, if in fact it had been a woman, didn't depart so rapidly from my memory. I could still picture her stood there in that last window of that final carriage when I closed my eyes to sleep that night. She had been looking straight at me, I'm sure of that, mouthing something and slapping both palms against the train window in what I could only imagine was an urgent bid to get my attention. In the final second she had glanced desperately over her shoulder, and there, across the aisle, another figure stood. I say figure, but what I thought I saw was some kind of large man-sized insect. It had big black oval eyes on the side of its head and a pair of clacking mandibles, and two pairs of mantis-like legs were weaving about in the air above its head as if it were angry or agitated. The most bizarre thing was that it wore a smart grey longcoat with a white shirt and black tie. But I must have been mistaken. Like I said, within a few seconds the train was gone and I spent most of that time blinking in disbelief. Perhaps this second figure was a person

wearing some kind of costume. Or perhaps there was no second figure. Perhaps there was no woman. I may very well have imagined all of it.

With the noise of the train gone, and only this lingering after-image remaining – the panicked young woman and the menacing out-sized insect — it was fortunate I chose to glance at my watch. The time was twelve minutes after ten. The station was only a few minutes away, so I was able to confidently deduce that the train which had just passed before my eyes had left the platform at ten minutes past the hour.

Whether real or imagined, I couldn't stop thinking about the woman I'd glimpsed in that train carriage, and I knew already, I think, that I was being drawn into something I might later wish I'd kept my nose out of. Curiosity killed the cat, as the old cliché goes. But I was more than curious. I couldn't shake the feeling that the woman on that train had desperately sought my assistance, and I, in my confusion and bewilderment, had failed her.

I've always had a keen interest in trains, and indeed once spent many an idle hour of my youth standing in the cavernous stations or on railway bridges or windblown platforms recording their comings and goings. Though I have little time for that now, I'm still a dab hand at decoding timetables. So it took very little effort to work out that the train which had departed the nearby station at 10:10 that Tuesday evening was bound for a place called Throgmorton. In fact, Throgmorton was not only the final stop along the line, but the only stop thereafter. It is a little town some twelve miles away from

where I live; a place which, until that moment, I had never heard of before, let alone visited.

Now I found myself making plans to go there. Quite what I hoped to achieve, so many days after glimpsing that woman on the train, was anyone's guess. Perhaps all I wanted was to rid myself of the lingering sense of guilt at not having acted in her defence, although in truth what could I have done? Called the police? Called the train operator? *A giant insect, you say? And wearing a sharp suit, eh?* No. They would have laughed and thought me insane. Just some crank, to be humoured and gotten rid of as quickly as possible.

I planned to depart on the following Friday evening after work. I imagined myself as a knight charging in on a white horse. In truth I would be wearing my raincoat and riding the 10:10, since that appeared to be the only scheduled train to make a stop in Throgmorton. This fact alone I thought very odd.

I waited alone on the platform as the sky darkened and the silhouettes of birds or bats – I couldn't tell which – flitted about the poplar trees lining the track. The departure board made no mention of the 10:10, and I began to think I'd been mistaken, until — precisely on time — the Throgmorton train eased into the station. I glimpsed the dark head of the driver, but every carriage appeared to be empty. On boarding, and making my way along the aisles, I found this to be true. There was not even a conductor. I took a seat in the final carriage as the train departed. Speeding over the railway bridge, I glimpsed the road below and noticed a figure walking. I remembered how a few days ago it had been me walking down there, and the window beside which I sat was where that woman had made her futile bid for assistance. Thinking this, I couldn't help glancing around the carriage, half-expecting to see a giant insect rearing up from behind one of the seatbacks, and a little frisson of terror ran down my spine. Within minutes, though, the train entered a long tunnel and all I saw out the window was my own ghost gazing back at me from a sea of black.

Throgmorton's train station was brightly lit, but deserted, and on leaving it I found the streets unpeopled too. By blind luck I discovered what appeared to be the high street, and began searching for a hotel where I could spend the night. I would begin my investigations in the morning, in daylight. I found a place at the far end of the high street called the Cow Hollow Hotel. I knew upon entering that this would not be a five-star experience. A cheerless little man, sat behind the reception desk, slung a key at me and said, "Upstairs." A worn leather fob on the key read 1010. I knew there could not possibly be more than a thousand rooms in this building. I had fallen further down the rabbit hole, it seemed.

My room was small, windowless, and, as I saw when I turned on the single lamp, decorated with some headache-inducing wallpaper from the 1970s which had orange flowers with yellow vines on a dark green background. Even when I clicked off the light, I could still imagine those flowers pressing in on me like some fast-expanding jungle thicket.

There was a single bed pushed to one side of the room, a writing desk, and on the wall opposite the bed, a hideous black-framed ornate mirror. It was as I stood looking at my reflection in the mirror that I had a sudden sense that something was not right. There appeared to be a delay, as if my reflection's movements were a step behind my own. I moved closer to the mirror and noticed it again. This was no reflection! To be certain, I put my back to the mirror but then span around suddenly. A-ha! The man in the mirror still faced away from me! He glanced over his shoulder and was startled to see that I'd caught him out. He made some half-hearted attempt to adopt my current stance, but then he simply threw up his arms in defeat.

He gestured to me then and held out a hand, and after a moment's pause I reached out and took the offered hand. He guided me forward as I lifted one foot high over the black frame and stepped inside the mirror. I was now in a room exactly like the one I had just left. My twin and I faced each other, and he spoke, but I couldn't

understand his burbling words. After a few moments, I realised all his sentences were spoken backwards. I made some effort to try and reconfigure his words in my mind, but he saw the futility of this before I did and instead he motioned for me to follow him to the door.

The hotel corridor was exactly like the one in my world. He ushered me down the stairs and into the lobby. The reception desk was unmanned. Crossing to the main door, he opened it and peered out into the street. Then he beckoned for me to join him, pointing out of the door as if there was something he wanted me to see. I went to his side and looked out. Oh the horror! For a few moments I stood there blinking, unable to believe what I was seeing. In the street outside, instead of people, giant insects strolled. Spiders and woodlouse and beetles and crickets! They wore suits and dresses and overcoats, some even wore hats, and they carried umbrellas and handbags. Some walked arm in arm, others singularly or in groups. And in doorways and alleyways, I saw people. They kept to the shadows. If one emerged into the streetlight, the insects would swat at them with flailing legs or strike at them with handbags or walking sticks, sending them scuttling back into the dark.

My heart faltered. I was aware I had entered a nightmare. Letting the hotel door swing closed, I left my twin and fled back up the stairs. On the first floor, I grew panicked as I couldn't find the room from which I'd entered this hell, but then my twin came and guided me back, glancing over his shoulder all the while as if we were being pursued.

Once we were inside the room, he closed the door carefully and gestured at the mirror on the wall. I took his meaning – I had to go back to my own world. Bracing my hands against the frame, I stepped up and through the mirror and fell to the floor on the other side. At once I scrambled to my feet and patted myself down. I noticed the man on the other side of the mirror doing the same. He had returned to the pretence of being my reflection. Opening the built-in wardrobe, I found a ratty blanket folded on the high shelf, and taking it down I made to drape it over the mirror. My twin made a gesture of protest at this, but then his face became resigned and that

was the last thing I saw before I threw the blanket and covered the mirror. Then, exhausted by my exertions and still filled with horror and bewilderment at what I'd seen on the other side of the mirror – a world just like my own, but one where giant insects ruled! – I lay down on the bed without undressing and fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

Opening my eyes, and turning on the bedside lamp, the first thing I saw was an earwig making an unhurried path across the wall to my side. Without thinking, and using a disproportionate amount of force, I flattened it with my fist.

After this I lay on my back staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense of what I'd seen the night before, until there was a sharp knock on the door. Opening the door, I found the little man from the reception desk stood on the other side holding a breakfast tray. Without saying anything, he thrust the tray at me so that I had no choice but to accept it. At that moment, though, I had a strong urge to escape that wretched room with its garish wallpaper flowers which gave a sense of being trapped and entangled. So I set the tray on the bed and rushed down the stairs and out through the main doors before the man – who'd returned to his station – could say anything.

What a joy to see daylight and breathe fresh air! I felt immediately invigorated. I began to think the events of last night might only have been some strange fantasy, a delusion. Though it was still early, there were a few people walking the high street. I made my way along the row of shopfronts, looking for a café. Finding one decked out with a lot of reassuring dark wood, I ordered coffee and toast and took a seat by the window.

As I sat idly watching the passers-by and sipping my drink, a woman passing along the street stopped to look in at me. She was young and petit, with a tussle of blonde hair, big brown eyes, and very red lips. Not until she put her palms on the glass and mouthed something at me did I realise it was the same woman I'd seen on the train a few days ago being terrorised by a giant insect; the very reason I had

come to this town in the first place! I stood up at once, but the woman peeled away from the glass and took off down the street at a fast walk.

“Wait!” I called. Heads turned to look at me. I made a gesture of apology and bundled out into the road, just in time to see the woman look back once before taking a left into a side street.

“Wait!” I called again, and broke into a run.

By the time I reached the side street, quite deranged in my pursuit, I could see no sign of the woman. I hurried along a row of shops: a tobacconist, a second-hand bookshop, a jewellers. My quarry had evidently ducked inside one of these establishments, but which, *which*? One shop window was full of mirrors, and in all of them I saw my reflection, my twin, not standing stupefied as I knew I was, but thumbing over his shoulder and nodding towards the rear of the shop. I took his meaning. Chimes rang as I entered, but there were no people inside. The walls were dark blue and covered by three tiers of mirrors of all shapes and sizes. As I passed along the rows I saw in each mirror my reflection gesturing frantically towards the far end of the shop. There, a spiral staircase descended into gloom. I glanced uncertainly at my reflection. He nodded vigorously. I must have had some sense of what awaited me at the bottom of that staircase, as I paused before descending to pluck a golf umbrella from a coat-rack stood against the back wall of the shop. Brandishing this before me like a sword, I began down the twisting staircase. Had I known the extent of the horror waiting for me in the dim-lit basement room below, I suspect my courage would have failed. To what extent is heroism simply ignorance backed into a corner? I ask you.

There were ten of them, or so I estimated, and they passed the woman between them like a gang of children squabbling over a doll; violating her hair and clothes with long hairy appendages, feelers, and snapping pedipalps. The woman’s mouth gaped in a silent scream and her eyes were wide with terror. A wave of revulsion went through me, quickly turning to anger, and I grit my teeth. Without thinking I gave a cry and speared one of her assailants, a giant black

beetle, through the middle with the umbrella. Transparent wings erupted from behind its back as it struggled. Feeling the strength of the thing as it tried to pull away, I bellowed and put all my weight behind the umbrella, forcing it deeper into the thing’s underside until at last it slumped forward and was still. But now the others were upon me. Drawing the umbrella from the beetle’s innards, I swept back the legs of a massive tarantula as they tried to encircle me, then speared it too. A sideways swipe took the head off a mantis and green goo sputtered upwards from its neck cavity, splattering my face. I reeled around in disgust, then skewered a massive ladybird through the centre as it tried to come at me and rolled it from my path; then without pause I spun the umbrella around and used the handle to beat an enormous woodlouse to a grey pulp. A great wasp attacked me then. Though I swiped at it, it ducked away, then came back on the attack, thrusting its stinger, again and again, until I managed to rip one wing with the point of the umbrella and it fell to the floor, buzzing furiously and twisting in half-circles until I lifted my foot and stamped down hard on its head.

On through the throng I went, stabbing and smashing and slicing, until finally the only creatures left standing were the human kind: myself and the woman. She cowered against the back wall, beneath a tiny, grime-covered window against which regular-sized flies butted, and looked at me in fear and trepidation. I made it clear in my expression that I meant her no harm. I held out one hand and she took it.

Together we fled, up the spiral staircase, through the mirror shop, out the door, and down the side street. I had no idea where I was leading her. I just knew we had to get away from there, away from Throgmorton, away from the reverse-world horrors of that place and back to reality. Then I saw a sign for the train station and struck for it. As we hurtled hand in hand into the station, I heard a whistle blow and cried out: “Wait!” A train stood alongside the platform. I tugged the woman’s hand harder and ran so fast we were almost falling, until we tumbled, laughing, through the sliding doors of the train a moment before they closed.

“Oh my God,” the woman said. “We made it. I didn’t think we’d

make it.”

Looking at each other’s bewildered face, we laughed again. We went on laughing as the train lurched away from the platform. We might just as easily have cried.

In time we picked ourselves up and made our way through the carriages. The train was empty. When we reached the final carriage, the woman fell down in a seat whilst I sat across the aisle from her. She turned her head and looked at me in admiration.

“I can’t believe you rescued me,” she said. “Why did you do that?”

I thought a moment, then said: “Because you asked for help. Remember? You signalled to me.” I pointed at the window behind her.

The woman looked confused a moment, glancing at the window, but then she smiled and said, “My name’s Betty.”

“Pleased to meet you, Betty,” I said. She laughed. I was about to add something when the train entered a tunnel and our world went black for a few moments. Silent in the darkness, I thought about our life together, mine and Betty’s. For I was certain she would want to stay with me forever. I’d rescued her, after all, from the topsy-turvy horrors of Throgmorton, hadn’t I?

When we emerged into sunlight, Betty’s head was turned away from me. She looked out of the window. Following her gaze, I recognised the road below as the one close to my house, the one where I’d been walking the evening I first saw Betty. Indeed, someone walked there now. A man. Realising that in a matter of minutes we’d arrive at the

station, and at the start of our new life together, I rose to my feet in elation. At my movement Betty turned, and on sight of me her expression opened out with terror and she screamed. When I lifted my arms, she screamed again, so loud it made my head hurt. I reached out to comfort her, and she threw herself at the train window. I noticed it then. Reflected there, beyond her, was a giant cockroach wearing a long raincoat. Its antennae waved in the air menacingly, and its big black compound eyes stared straight back at me. I saw its mandibles slick with saliva, and two pairs of long, segmented legs topped with mean-looking claws reaching out to Betty even as she screamed and pressed herself flat against the windowpane as if she thought she could escape that way.

I do not know what happened after that. Perhaps I fainted. When I came to my senses I was stood on the same train station platform from whence I had started my adventure. Dusk was falling. There was no sign of Betty or – thank God! – any giant insects. I had an unpleasant feeling of fullness, as if I’d just got up from a large meal. As I turned in bewilderment, my gaze caught a movement in the brambles beyond the low platform wall. It was the struggle of a butterfly caught in a spider’s web. Something in me wanted to free the pretty, fragile thing; but another voice in my head – a new voice I thought – told me: *no, leave it alone, let nature take its course.*

It was full dark by the time I arrived home.

Life goes on just as it always did. Only one thing has changed. Now when I’m walking home at night and trains stream across the railway bridge above, I shift my eyes to the ground. It’s clear to me now that I’m nobody’s knight in shining armour, nobody’s hero. I’m just an insect, grubbing around in the dirt with the rest.

Necromancy (After the Séance Failed)

by Aaron Sandberg

After the séance failed,
they dug him up,

begged him to atone,
wheeled him into the shed,

and made us enter
one by one—

oldest to youngest—
to speak to our dead.

I was only a kid.
I did not know

I would be made to talk
or walk in alone.

My sister shuffled out
shaking her head,

converting some truth from him.
I crept in.

They gave him a cigarette
by dangling it

on the edge of his mouth.
It would have stayed

if the lips were wet
from the reawaken.

His skin—
what was left—

flaky and gray
under the bulb

swaying from the wooden beam
like a life regretted and taken.

A twitching finger (or was it my eye?)
and bags under lids were shaken—

what wasn't already skeletal,
apocryphal, skeptical.

He would have told me all
if only I could formulate

and conjugate
the language of wraiths.

His eyes one X then another,
his mouth in an O,

still waiting to answer
what I would never ask.



Happy Childhood

by Elby Rogers

Little Fish

by Elana Gomel

I am standing on the bridge, looking down into the murky green-brown water. The water is covered by a thick layer of scum, and dragonflies the size of my palm flit above it, their scythe-shaped jaws snapping at the tiny frogs hiding among the swollen pale roots. The smell coming from the water is stagnant and sharp: as if time itself curdled and was left to ferment at the bottom of a forgotten cupboard. The sky is green and grey, ridged in wavy lines, and long slicks of slime drip down across the smeared landscape.

I woke up screaming.

Fortunately, Rob was not there with his irritating concern and barely hidden fear. Unfortunately, Rob was not there with his soothing voice and gentle hands.

I padded into the kitchen to get a cup of tea. The fetus was doing somersaults, swimming in the warm uterine ocean.

The tiny flat where I had moved after our separation was practically papered with ultrasound shots. A tiny hand waving above the uncertain blur of shadows. A head resting against the wall of its living prison. The prison that was myself.

I had exhausted my doctors' patience and had to dig into our savings when the NHS refused more screenings. I had had all the possible tests for birth defects – amniocentesis, fetal DNA, MSAFP. They were uniformly negative. The baby – a girl – was developing perfectly. I had no risk factors, no genetic abnormalities, no dubious twigs on my family tree. I had no high blood pressure or diabetes.

All I had was a dream.

The last time I went to see my ob-gyn, he asked me outright if I was ambivalent about becoming a mother. He must have seen my hesitation because he scribbled the name of a psychiatrist on his pad and shoved it toward me. But he was wrong. This had not been an accidental pregnancy. Everything had been planned. I wanted to be a mother.

The real question was: the mother of what?

I sat at the kitchen table, cradling my cup of herbal tea, scrolling through the messages on my phone. There were 17 – all from Rob. I deleted them unread.

He had been willing to move out when our fights became unendurable, fearing the damage to the baby, he said. I had moved out myself. Safe in this tiny flat, away from his pleading eyes. As safe as the thing in my womb.

It was trying to bribe me. I had read enough pregnancy blogs to know that mine was exceptionally easy. I had no morning sickness, no preeclampsia. My skin bloomed; my weight remained normal. But it was wrong if it thought I could be bought off so easily.

5 AM. I swiped on my tablet, revisiting the same sites I had visited hundreds of times, The severe fonts of professional journals. “Evolutionary dynamics in the Anthropocene.”. “Climate change and speciation.”. “Punctuated equilibrium.”. Sensational headlines: “Mother leaves a newborn in a trash can.”. And wacky misspelled confessions decorated with clusters of exclamation points: “I gave birth to an alien!!!”

I wished it were that simple.

My lids grew heavy, but I was unwilling to go back to bed. I often felt like a battlefield. Two conflicting entities were duking it out inside me: one trying to lull me into the complacency of expectant motherhood, the other screaming Cassandra-like warnings. Which of them was the real me? Perhaps both. Perhaps neither.

A hard kick rattled my insides and, lifting my nightie, I could see the imprint of a tiny foot on my skin slowly fading away. The foot looked human.

I pressed my hands to my ballooning belly, feeling the heavy burden inside. Only three weeks left.

“I know what you are,” I whispered. “Give me back my daughter!”

I finally realize why the sky looks so strange. It is not the sky at all but the underside of a water-surface. I am at the bottom of a lake or a pond. The ocean? No; the water is too dirty. The watery ceiling above my head is smeared with streaks of slime and weed, dribbling dull coins of refracted sunlight.

How can there be water underwater? How can I walk on the boggy path among pools of scum when I am surrounded by currents? How can I walk at all instead of floating?

An underwater marsh? No, “marshland” presupposes that there is some dry land interrupting the fluidity of streams, creeks, or pools. In this terrain, there is nothing but water in various states of pollution: mixed with soil into quicksand; threaded with prickly stems; rocking decaying bits of animal and vegetable matter; blanketed by the rank carpet of algae. I am cradled in it just as the thing is cradled in the waters of my womb.

Is it here with me? I try to look down at myself, but the dream would not let me. The viscous water tightens around my face like a gelid

mask, keeping my head upright. Only then do I realize that I am not breathing.

I finally answered Rob’s call. Partly it was out of sheer boredom: I had nothing else to do but to surf the Internet, drowning even deeper in the miasmic bog of misinformation. Somewhere there, among all the conspiracy theories and scientific doublespeak, was that one nugget of knowledge that would solve everything, but finding it was as hard as diving for a pearl in the swamp.

“Emma! Thank God! I was about to call the police! How are you, darling? How is the baby?”

“I am perfectly fine, thank you!” I snapped. “And there is no baby!”

From the shocked silence on the other end, I could easily surmise what he was thinking.:

“What? Emma, have you ...?”

“Too late,” I replied truthfully.

The a-word had not been in our vocabulary until the dream and by then I was way above the legal limit for termination. And since all the tests showed the fetus was perfectly healthy, I had no grounds for medical exemption.

“So, what do you mean?”

“This is not a baby. A monster. An impostor. A changeling.”

His breath caught and I knew he had been hoping I would miraculously snap out of what he considered my delusion.

“Emma,” he said, and there was unwonted steel in his voice, “I can’t allow you to go on like this. You are going to harm yourself. Or ... our daughter.”

“She has already been harmed,” I said and ended the call.

Changelings. Children stolen by fairies who leave ugly deformed poppets in their stead, tiny bug-eyed monsters, or living logs of wood. Folklore teems with such stories. But I had never found anything about stolen fetuses.

Standing in front of the mirror, I lifted my maternity dress to contemplate my transformed body. Of course, my belly protruded like the prow of a ship, but my slim legs and narrow waist remained the same. From behind, you wouldn’t know I was close to delivery. I saw people on the Tube give a double take when they walked past me. Another bribe.

The perpetual hum of London filtered in through the heavy curtain. This alien city I had embraced as my own when I had come here five years ago with Rob. A Californian girl eager to make it in the ancient land of elves and fairies, miracles and wonders. And I had. When the plus sign had flashed on the home pregnancy test, I knew this country, this city was my home. I just did not know how deep its roots would grow into me. How its hidden rivers and boggy streams would flow through my veins.

I caressed my belly.

“You won’t win!” I whispered to the thing inside. “I’ll find you. And I’ll force you to give me back my daughter.”

This bridge. Soft rotten wood, sagging in the viscous currents. It is falling apart, eaten alive by the slimy waters that have flooded ... what? The Earth? The UK? London?

I don’t recognize the lay of the land but it’s hardly surprising. I am a stranger here. Summoned by whatever creature has stolen the baby from my womb and substituted its own offspring instead.

There is a downpour of sludge pattering on my head. Thick ropes of ooze fall from the water surface above.

“Come out!” I yell into the downpour. “Show yourself!”

Strangely, the sound is doubled, syncopated like jazz. Echo underwater?

Something is stirring in the black circular pool beneath me, crisscrossed by strands of algae and dead branches curved like the horns of a stag-beetle. Something is rising. A pale round thing. It looks like a reflection of the moon ... but wait, how can there be the moon in this dissolving world?

I was pushed out of the watery dream like a cork rising to the surface. It had happened before. Every time I came close to understanding, the dream would buckle and warp. Paradoxically, I found it encouraging. My adversary was afraid of me finding out ... something. I had some power over it. And after all, it was still inside me, imprisoned in my body.

How did I know the dream was true? How did I find the strength to see through the chaff that people call reality – medical records, Breaking News, my husband’s officious smile? How did I know I was right and everybody else was wrong?

I did not know. All I knew was that somewhere beyond the bubble of our middle-class existence, the seas were rising, bringing to the surface the jetsam and flotsam of ancient myths and techno-apocalypses. And that somehow that the polluted waters had found their way into my womb and carried away my daughter, leaving behind its own deformed offspring. Something monstrous, waiting to be born.

I fought hard to stay inside the dream and when I realized the creature was keeping me awake, I bought some pills from Boots, not recommended for pregnant women, lined them on the table, and said

aloud: “If you don’t let me sleep, I’ll take all of them at once.”. An hour after that, I dozed off on the couch in front of the telly.

The darkened flood is gently swaying my body, carrying me toward the dilapidated bridge over the black pool ... Finally I can swim. My arms look strange in the green twilight ... almost like flippers.

I was yanked out of the dream like a hooked fish out of the water. Somebody was hammering on the front door.

I staggered to the hallway and peered through the peephole. Rob’s face looked carp-like, distorted by the lens.

I cracked the door open, keeping the chain on.

“Go away!” I said flatly. “It’s your fault!”

It was: for bringing me here, into that ancient land soaked in dark legends; for being so paternalistically overjoyed by my pregnancy; by settling into the role of a suburban dad with no premonitions or apprehensions; and most of all – for not believing me.

He tried to push into the crack.

“Emma,” he said. “I won’t let you kill our baby.”

He sounded calm and off his head. Rob did not do drugs or alcohol, but this lucid rage was more frightening than slurred-speech intoxication.

“I’ll call the police,” I said. “I’ll tell them you threatened me. They won’t let you anywhere near the baby.”

It worked. I heard his heavy breathing and then he turned around and stomped down the stairs. I locked the door and sat on the couch,

thinking.

Time was running out. I had to see my adversary. In the stories I had read, you could bargain with the fairies. I would offer anything to get my baby back. Or failing this ...

I suddenly realized what was niggling at my mind. I pulled the thought to the surface, examined it, and nodded my acceptance.

If I could not get my real child back, I would kill the inhuman thing that was gestating in my uterus.

The wrinkled surface over my head twitches and splits apart as something splashes into the water and cuts through the murky liquid in a mantle of froth – a splayed torso, arms and legs churning, the helmet ... No, it’s the head. Flat and neckless, attached to the froglike shape that hovers above me for a moment and then disappears into a tenuous range of mud-hills. Plumes of delicate silt hover above their rounded summits. Nothing is stable here; everything is dissolving and coming together; fading and growing; dying and being born. A welter of becoming.

Here is the pool again, its surface choked with rot. A dragonfly the size of a raven strafes me and veers away in the last moment, its compound eye milky as if veiled with cataracts. Nothing is bright and clear here. I cannot see my reflection.

I stand above the pool. A rhyme is buzzing in my head:

Big fish, little fish ...

The rest melts away.

Where are all the fish? Shouldn’t there be fish underwater?

But it’s not really the bottom of the sea or a lake, is it? It is something else: the drowned world. The world that is coming.

Something passes above me again. The giant frog has returned. I try to look up and wince – my neck is stiff. But I do manage to see the dead-white belly and the fragile shoulders topped by the featureless head. No, not featureless. It is slashed by a lipless mouth frozen in a perpetual amphibian smile. But where are the eyes?

Big fish, little fish

Swimming in the water

Big fish, little fish ...

“You!” I shout. “Give me back my daughter!”

I had not given in to the dream without a fight. I had read all about pregnancy fears, pre- and post-partum depression, psychological changes that accompany the physiological upheaval of gestation. I had confided in Rob. It was his immediate insistence on “getting help,” as he put it, that made me recoil and reconsider. I was not going to let myself be drugged out of my own truth.

And after all, was it not rational to believe that in the a world beset by a climate catastrophe, something new was trying to be born? Perhaps it was just bad luck that made me the channel for its emergence.

It was hard to give up hope. So many stories of fearless mothers bargaining with fairies and getting their true baby back. But when I woke up that time, furious that the froglike creature had not answered my challenge, a seed of doubt was planted. What if the answer had been there all along?

I looked at my sleeping pills. “Not to take if you are pregnant.” Damaging to the fetus.

What was more damaging than not knowing the truth?

I swallowed the pill.

I am back facing the froglike creature. No time has passed in the water-world, it seems. We are still locked in the same standoff.

The creature glides gently toward me. I am fascinated by its graceful movements – like an astronaut in zero-g. Perhaps it won’t be so bad when the world is inundated. Was it a mistake for the first amphibians to flop onto the dry land?

It lands onto the soft silt and faces me. No, a wrong word. It has no face. Its helmet-like pointed head is blank, with no eyes or nostrils. The mouth is where the neck should be. I can see the serrated bone-teeth inside and the coiled ribbon of the tongue.

Something makes me walk around it. The back and the front of it are exactly the same: splayed limbs; warty amphibian skin; and the pale and featureless head, split by the lipless mouth.

Two mouths.

One of them addresses me. I can hear its bubbling voice perfectly well.

“Not long now.”

“You stole my child! Give her back!”

“I am your child.”

I have to believe it is lying! I have to keep the hope alive! But I cannot.

Not a changeling. Not a substitute. My baby. A froglike thing trying to be born into the world that is getting ready for her. A hopeful monster.

“They will take you away to a lab when you are born. They will keep you locked up. They will dissect you.”

The curving mouth stretches so far to the sides that it almost meets its counterpart.

“You’ll protect me. Everybody will congratulate you on your perfect baby girl just as they are congratulating you on your perfect pregnancy. They will see what they need to see.”

“But I know what you are! I’ll tell them!”

“Then you’ll be locked up. If you try to harm me, you’ll be the monster – the bad mother, the baby-killer. The tabloids will tear you to shreds. And I’ll be adopted by a loving family who will be proud to save me from your madness.”

The two-mouthed thing is right. The dirty water around me is as warm as blood, but I can feel the chills running down my spine. There is no way out of it.

“Who are you?” I cry. “Why do you want to be born? Why me?”

The twin mouths are gaping as the froglike thing is hesitating. But it does not glide away ...

The water exploded around me as if a fist smashed into it. I could not breathe. Was it silt in my mouth?

It was not. It was a hand pressed against my face.

“Don’t fight,” a voice whispered into my ear. “I’m sorry to do it, Emma, but you left me no choice.”

I tried to push back but my belly was in the way and I only managed a feeble twitch.

“Careful! You’ll hurt the baby!”

The hand relaxed.

The fact that it was the only thing that mattered to him drove me mad. I pushed him away and sat up.

“What the fuck are you doing, Rob? How did you get in?”

He just stared at me. One look at his sweat-slicked face made me realize there was no reasoning with him. He would kill me to protect his offspring. My only defense was the thing inside me. He could not harm me without harming it.

Or could he? I remembered the media story about a pregnant woman killed by another woman who wanted a baby. The killer had literally sliced her victim open to get the fetus out.

There was something in Rob’s other hand, something long and gleaming. A knife from what used to be our kitchen.

I swung my legs over the edge of the couch – and a warm flood rolled down my thighs. My water had broken. Rob pushed me back.

“Keep quiet!” he hissed. “Breathe deeply. Like they taught us in the birthing classes.”

I almost burst into laughter, so grotesque the situation was.

“Lamaze method? With a knife to my throat? Call the ambulance, Rob. Now!”

He shook his head.

“No need. I can deliver the baby. I have been reading up on how to do it. And then ...”

He did not need to finish the sentence: I understood.

He would deliver the baby and take her away, leaving behind the corpse of her crazy mother. And as if to emphasize how helpless I was, a sickening wrench in my lower belly yanked a handful of my guts and released them after a pain-filled interval. The contractions began.

“Rob, please ...”

“Breathe, Emma. Breathe! The baby is on her way!”

Indeed, she was.

I closed my eyes and, disregarding the pain washing over me in rhythmic waves, I dove deep down, into the murky green waters of life, the great amniotic ocean of evolution, the polluted sea of extinction and rebirth. And it was there, waiting for me: the two-mouthed blind frog.

The next stage. The new kind.

My daughter.

“Help me!” I cried. “Help me and I’ll take care of you!”

“So will he,” the creature syncopated with her mouths.

“But I’ll be better! I am your mother! What’s greater than a mother’s love?”

“She is right,” one mouth said.

“She is wrong,” the other one retorted.

“She is the mother,” one said.

“He is the father,” the other responded.

“He’ll see you for what you are,” I pleaded. “And he’ll kill you. He lives in this sentimental dream of perfect parenthood, and when it is broken, he will become ruthless. But I know that motherhood is about blood and pain and survival. I will protect you until the floods come.”

“And then we won’t need your protection anymore,” the mouths said in unison.

Another contraction, stronger than before, tore through me and I surfaced, lying in the tangle of soaked sheets. I hauled myself to my feet. I had to step over Rob’s body to get to my cell phone. He was lying in a puddle of evil-smelling water, a rivulet of slime dribbling from his mouth, his eyes rolled up in his head.

I called the ambulance and rested my aching back against the sofa.

“Big fish, little fish,” I crooned to the creature that pushed its way through my body like the spawning salmon on its way to life.

the boy who caught the sun in a cocoyam leaf

by Martins Deep



Gods of the Valley

by Karen Heslop

I'm not a god but I am a mother and that feels pretty damn close. The real gods are out there, through the forest and in the valley filled with the dense fog that stinks of rot and mildew. Village elders say the valley floor is littered with the bones of those who have searched for the gods and failed. That's where I'm going.

They've taken my boy and while I know he's not the first one, he's my boy. Mine. He's the only one of my young ones to stick with me and I'm planning to stick with him too.

The other women in the town told me to let it go. "It's just the way things work," they said, "you'll have to find a way to work through it." Even my son's godmother, Armada, the woman whose opinions I valued above all the others, told me to find ways to work through my pain. Everyone reminded me that the gods choose a child for their own and we endure it so we can live here undisturbed. Well, I don't feel undisturbed. I'm going to get Rekai back.

I packed a bag last night--a few bottles of water, a compass, rags, and whatever food I could put together. The backpack might be a bit heavy to start with, but it'll get lighter over time or I'll get to the point where it won't matter.

The items thud and slosh when I hoist the backpack onto my shoulders. Afterward, I grab an old walking stick my grandfather used to hobble around with and stalk through the door. There's a soft click as the lock engages and it feels final. I hesitate at the cursed forest's tree line and the birds still as if waiting for my decision. A few moments later, I make my decision and their chirps echo through the treetops as my footsteps crunch old, desiccated leaves on the forest ground.

The little I can see of the sun slips across the sky before I get to a slim river coursing through the land. One of my water bottles is half empty, so I finish the rest and fill the bottle from the river. Crossing the water opens up a different world for me to travail. The earth is softer and my boots slide easily in the mud. It hasn't rained in over a month, but I try not to think about what's keeping the soil so moist.

The air stings my nostrils when I inhale and the birds' tweets sound less like chirps and more like haunting melodies warning of what's to come. The bush closest to me rustles and I jump away with a little yelp. My feet slide but I manage to stay upright when the creature scampers from its hiding place. It could have been a rabbit a few evolutionary cycles ago. The long ears and muscular hind legs are still there. Its fur is dark green and riddled with spikes. Its front teeth hang from its mouth heavy and sharp. Fortunately, it pays me no mind and sprints away. Unfortunately, it heads in the direction I'm moving towards.

I drop heavily onto the ground, ignoring the squelch beneath my pants. The rag I've used to wipe my sweat is already dark and grimy but I keep wiping. I don't know how many more days I have to go. I take the time to focus on everything that is going on around me. The smells, sounds, and sights, which are how I first spot ... him. He's looking at me from behind a broad, squat tree. The tree's green vines seem to begin and end in the hat he's wearing. I stand slowly, keeping my eyes on the creature.

"I see you."

"I know," he replies.

His voice is deep and rhythmic. It reminds me of the harmony the birds have been chirping since I stepped across the river.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Why are you?”

I consider being completely honest, but I’ve heard that the gods aren’t the most forthright of entities.

“Maybe I got lost.”

He chuckles and slithers from his hiding place. Vines snap and reposition around the tree as he moves. So I was right. He was attached to the tree.

“Nobody gets lost here. Who’re you looking for?”

I move to reply but only take a deep breath. I decide on a safe version of the truth.

“Someone I love.”

“You mean the boy? Dark of skin with umber curls on his scalp?”

He extends his palm before I can answer. There are a few strands of hair curled in the centre of his hand. I recognize them from Rekai’s comb and the bath and the couch. My boy. My pretence isn’t necessary.

“Where is he?”

He shrugs and curls his fingers around the smattering of hairs.

“I can only say that he passed here. You’ve come so far, how much farther are you willing to go?”

“As far as it takes.”

“Well then, proceed.”

I turn away, but his hand snakes around my shoulder.

“Wait.”

There are quick yanks on my scalp and a few strands of my hair are wrapped around his fingers when I look around.

“Now you may go,” he says with a broad smile.

I have questions, but he is already disappearing into the creeping mist. Mist--the thinned-out version of fog. I push the creature from my mind and move forward. My backside leaves a distinctive imprint in the mud and I absurdly expect the ground to puff up and obliterate the mark. It doesn’t happen. At least, not while I’m watching.

I see a few more of the special rabbits while I walk and the time ticks by. It’s dark when I get to the valley’s edge. I look on both sides for alternatives, but the valley stretches as far as I can see. Below me, the fog twists and roils like a disgruntled serpent. It is thick and grey, concealing everything that lurks in waiting for the unsuspecting or the stupid. I pride myself on being neither of the two, so I slide the backpack off my shoulders and sit beside the biggest tree I see.

The bark is rough against my back, but at some point fatigue sets in and I drift off.

* * *

It takes every ounce of self-control in my being not to bolt upright from the stale breath inches from my face. Whatever the thing might be is close--too close. I can smell the remnants of a meal on its breath. Meaty and tangy. It’s not unpleasant but still unsettling.

A silken voice speaks.

“I know you’re awake. Your breathing has changed.”

Even though caught in a lie, I take my time opening my eyes. They are still inches from my face. Their feline face has some human attributes that I can’t quite put my finger on. Maybe it’s the crinkled brows above sparkling green eyes or the thick red lips curled into a smirk while the tip of their tongue languishes on the outside.

“Why’re you watching me?” I slurred.

“Nothing better to do.”

They finally move away from my face and lounge gracefully beside me. I start when faint growls float up from the valley. The creature perks up.

“Are you heading into the valley?”

“What’s it to you?”

They slink towards the valley’s edge before turning back to me.

“Nothing at all. I’ve just heard it’s safer to have a guide.”

“Are you volunteering? Why?”

They look at me and a long smile stretches from one ear to the other, showing a string of white, sharp teeth. They shift from side to side, cracking their long spine.

“If you’re interested, then you should come with me.”

Without a word, I rise from my resting spot. My old bones creak and there’s a dull throbbing in my bloated bladder.

“Give me a minute, please.”

Green eyes appraise me quizzically until I unzip my pants. I bury my

bashfulness since the trustworthiness of the human-cat is still questionable. At least they look away until I finish my business and pull my pants back up.

“Aren’t you going to eat something?” they ask while nodding at my backpack.

I glare at them suspiciously.

“Did you go through my things?”

They snicker and sit back on their haunches.

“There was no need. My nose works well enough.”

I shrug, grab a sandwich from the backpack, and wash it down with a swig of now-lukewarm canned juice. A cursory glance at my guide shows a feigned nonchalance. I slip out another sandwich.

“Would you like a sandwich?”

Their head lilts to one side, before sauntering towards my outstretched hand. A long, yellow forked tongue snakes from their mouth and the sandwich is gone in a blink of an eye.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Alright, let’s go.”

“You’ll need to hold on to me.”

They flick their rainbow-tinted tail in my direction and instantly pull it away when I reach out. A small smirk greets my glare. Neither of us speaks for a moment, and then the tail lands firmly in my outstretched hand.

“Just a light hold is fine. We only need to be in contact.”

They saunter to the edge of the valley and I tip on my toes to look over the edge. The fog is less dense, but from here, everything still looks covered in a layer of varying shades of brown.

My ‘guide’ leaps over the edge and my screams echo from behind me as if they’re bouncing off the valley we’re careening into. A tiny swirling vortex opens before us and as our bodies glide through, I tighten my grip on the tail. I’m certain a hiss lingers on the periphery of the vortex, but the fur remains against my palm.

In what feels like moments, we’re on the ground. The mist around us is light enough for me to see a variety of bodies milling past us. Some are human-like while others are as far from human as a living being could get. With some irritation, I realize that my walking stick was left behind. They yank their tail from my hands and glare at me.

“Was that really necessary?”

I run my palm over the few curls that have strayed from my hair clips before answering.

“Maybe you should have warned me that you were going to jump over the cliff!”

We glare at each other until we notice the quiet that surrounds us. A line has formed on each side of the street and I can feel the weight of surveillance on my skin. Without breaking eye contact, I address the human-cat.

“Do we just walk away?”

“We? I held up my end of the bargain. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“What about my son?” I hiss through clenched teeth.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

They fizzle and whittle into a wisp of smoke, filling my nostrils briefly with the stench of burnt fur. I hitch my backpack further on

my shoulder, drawing bits of confidence from the weight. The lines of people are thinning but a few remain, seemingly curious about the new stranger. I wonder if I am the only human in the valley by choice.

I look around and notice a narrow, light yellow building to my right. It’s as good a place to start as any. A bell tinkles when I push the door open, its melody an awkward, off-kilter set of notes that set my teeth on edge. The lobby is painted the colour of sunshine with dark violet trims skimming along the wall’s edges. A small desk and chair rest against a far wall, but there is nobody to be seen. The air is cool and filled with the aroma of baked goods.

“Hello?” I say hesitantly.

There’s the dull creak of wood moving and an eye opens in a door at the end of the short hall. The sclera maintains the light brown of the door, but its striations run perpendicular with the vertical ones in the door. A dark green iris and the blank void of a pupil appraise me. I hesitate for a moment, wondering where the other body parts may lie.

“My name is Jania and I’m looking for someone.”

“Why does that bring you here?”

I force myself to keep looking at the eye instead of looking for the lips that address me.

“I was hoping someone here could help me.”

“What can you offer?”

“I – I don’t have any money.”

A deep, guttural chuckle fills the room.

“I don’t need your money. Tell me whom you seek and I will name my price.”

“My son, Reikai. He was taken from my village.”

“Which one of the villages?”

“Dramar.”

“Interesting.”

I draw closer to the eye.

“Why is that interesting?”

“I didn’t know Rashak was still taking tributes.”

“Who’s Rashak?”

Another chuckle grows into an outright guffaw.

“Don’t you know who you worship?”

As I draw closer to the door, I realize the lips are hanging from a light switch. I drag my gaze back to the unblinking eye.

“I don’t worship anyone.”

“You’re not a priestess?”

“What? We don’t have those.”

“Well, you must. Otherwise, you would still have your son.”

The lips slither closer to my ear when I remain silent.

“Did you think the gods were actually leaving the comfort of their gilded thrones to snatch children?” it asks derisively.

My mind swirls. This is not possible. I’ve never been asked to worship any being. There are no temples, no churches, so how is anyone worshipping this unknown god and why? I return to the

matter at hand.

“How do I get my son back?”

“I can provide a guide for you. You may have already met.”

“Human-cat?”

“What did you call me?” a familiar voice asks from behind me. I turn to face them.

“You didn’t give me a name.”

“You never asked.”

The voice interrupts.

“Their name is Ocosa.”

I mumble the name begrudgingly and they peer at me without speaking. The voice addresses me again.

“Jania, Ocosa can get you to where you need to be, but we must discuss my fee. As you can tell, I’m a bit scattered.”

I jump a little as fingers curl around my calf. The disembodied arm sprouts from the floor, its colour only slightly darker than the sky-blue around it.

“I was a priest in my former life, serving the god of my village. I became disillusioned and derelict in my duties. Because of this, I was punished. At first, I thought she was going to kill me, but I soon realized that would have been a mercy. Instead, she dragged me into the valley, ripped my soul from my body and scattered me into this bakery.

“I felt sorry for myself for a while but then I realized I could learn from the people who came in here every day. Eventually, I became the place people came to for information and I saw I could be

compensated for my information and maybe, just maybe, I could get all the parts back together. So from you, dear Jania, I'm going to need an eye."

"You think you can pull your body back together?"

There is a multitude of sounds as lips, arms and feet gather around the eye. For a moment, the parts are multi-coloured, but then they all fade to brown.

"I seem to be doing well so far."

"Will you help me get my son back?"

"I will help as much as I can."

"Then you will have my eye."

There is a searing pain in the middle of my forehead and Ocosa snickers behind me when I cry out.

"Humans," they mutter, "absolutely no pain threshold in the bunch of them."

"It's just a little debtor's mark, nothing too terrible. Ocosa," the building says, "could you please take Jania to Rashak's shrine?"

"With pleasure," they reply.

I can't tell if Ocosa is being genuine or sarcastic, but I adjust my backpack and turn around to face them.

"Let's go."

Ocosa yawns and turns towards the door. They seem bigger here, their twitching tail is almost in line with my soon-to-be-taken eye. The bell tinkles when we leave, its tones now melodious.

Without a pause, Ocosa turns left and picks up the pace. I have to

break into a light jog to keep up with them. As we leave the town behind, it's harder to keep up when we get on a path filled with haphazardly growing vegetation.

"Hey, wait!"

"What's the matter? Too tired or too old? Or maybe the only thing you can keep a grip on is an unsuspecting being's tail?"

I stopped and sighed. They were still annoyed and rightly so.

"Ocosa, I apologize for yanking on your tail."

Ocosa stops a few feet away, and while I can barely see their expression through the thicket of bushes, their sigh echoes through the thin mist.

"It's fine. I suppose it was a bit of my fault since I didn't warn you about the jump."

I start walking again and this time they wait for me to catch up. Soon, the dense vegetation thins to reveal a clearing with a gleaming silvery temple in the middle. Vines run up and down the sides of the building in a beautiful pattern.

"Is this where my son is?"

"How long has he been gone?"

The low timbre of Ocosa's whisper tells me this is not a question they ask lightly.

"It's only been a couple of days."

"Then it shouldn't be too late."

They slip down the small incline towards the temple before I can reply. It's a possibility I've avoided focusing on. Gods only require tributes for sacrifice. I follow Ocosa without a word. If they think

there is still time, then I would believe that.

As we draw closer, I realize that there are small creases between whatever blocks or bricks the temple is made of. I place my palm against one of the creases and a soft breeze blows against my hand. Without much thought, I sniff the air and find it pleasantly tangy.

“What are you doing?”

“I – I have no idea. What is it?”

“The source of the fog.”

“You mean the fog that coats the entire valley?” I ask incredulously.

Ocusa nods but doesn’t elaborate.

“Is this where all the gods are or just the one we’re looking for?”

They stare at me for a moment before deciding I was asking a serious question.

“I didn’t believe that you didn’t worship any gods, but apparently it’s true. There are ten gods and five goddesses in this valley. Each governs one of the villages above and has its own temple. Rashak is responsible for your village.”

“And what exactly is he doing for my village that’s so special? What is he doing that could be worth my son’s life?”

Ocusa sits back on their haunches and waves their paws around.

“This.”

My face crinkles in confusion.

“The fog helps him grant the requests people make.”

“But I don’t understand. The ... being at the house said he didn’t

know Rashak was still taking tributes. Yet, I know children were being taken, so what’s going on?”

Ocusa shrugs.

“He’s not a god. He only knows what others tell him. You didn’t know Rashak was still taking care of your village. Besides, negotiations are handled by the priests and priestesses.”

“So a handful of people make decisions for an entire village?”

My voice has become shrill even to my own ears and a long silence stretches out before Ocusa answers.

“Back when I was a part of one of the villages, priests and priestesses were elected. They were good, wise, unselfish people. Everyone had a chance to have a dialogue with the chosen ones before any agreements or negotiations were made with the gods. Usually, as long as the requests weren’t contradictory or plainly selfish, they were brought to the gods for contemplation.”

They sigh, and I wait out the pause instead of interrupting.

“Sometimes, though, the people got it wrong and elected a priest they only thought was good--someone who only looked out for their own good and not the village as a whole. And then sometimes, the gods found out and punished that person by turning them into something else entirely.”

For the first time since I met them, there is a dull sadness in their eyes. I reach out but hesitate before touching them. Would they see it as consolation or petting? They see my indecision and sit up; their body turns towards the temple again. Compelled to say something, I speak to their back.

“Is that what happened to you?”

“The gods are unforgiving of deception and insolence,” they mutter before meeting my eyes again. “You should remember that when

we're in there."

Ocusa steps forward and their svelte body starts to disappear into the fog. I rush in so as not to lose them. The inside is cool, and surprisingly the air is crisp and clean. Whatever the fog contains, there isn't enough moisture to create the clammy humidity I expect.

The ground feels solid but shifty under my feet – a bit like compacted sand. The fog thins the closer we get to the centre of the temple and things become visible again. Ocusa stands before a doorway to a small room in the centre of a metallic circle. The room's height extends skyward through the top of the temple, and pinpricks of sunlight stream in where the protrusion doesn't seal.

I take small steps to get to Ocusa's side. There are intricate symbols carved on each side of the doorway, and I slide my finger over a few of them.

"Do I need to know what these say?"

"Perhaps when we're back on the outside."

A spark of fear flitters in my heart, and they rest a heavy paw on my side.

"Now what kind of guide would I be if I let you come to harm?"

A small smile touches their lips, and the levity is all I need to get me across the threshold. The room is much bigger on the inside than on the outside. I'm tempted to go back outside and confirm that, but I'm afraid I might not be let back in. There is a large throne in the centre of the room wrapped in thick vines and lush leaves. The wood of the frame is weathered and dark.

"I thought you would never get here."

There's a figure in the corner of the room, hidden in the dark. I hear a wet squelch as plants detach themselves from what must be Rashak. I

stay a few feet from the deep voice that has spoken. When the figure approaches, I realize it's the same man from before in the woods. Instinctively, I touch my hair.

"It's you."

"The last time I checked, yes."

"Where's my son?"

He waves his hand, "Around."

"I need my son."

"He is my tribute."

I shake my head in anger, but Ocusa's paw touches my calf before any words can leave my lips. I tread carefully.

"What would it take to get him back?"

He chuckles, "Don't you have another wager to keep?"

"I see no reason I can't keep both."

"And return to the village with your son?"

I haven't thought about that. I can't leave Reikai here, but what if I can't leave either? Who would take care of him?

"Maybe I can bring you another."

He steps into the light and his eyes blaze a brilliant topaz. His skin, as dark as the throne he inhabits, seems even darker against his close-cropped orange hair.

"You don't have it in you."

My frustration builds and words explode from my mouth.

“Why do you even need to kill children?”

His brows raise in confusion.

“Kill them? I have never killed a child in my life. I simply make them a part of my world.”

“You take our children so you can have company?” I scoff.

His eyes brighten with fire until I can’t bear to hold his gaze. I open my mouth to apologize but Ocosa intervenes.

“My Lord, please forgive her. She doesn’t understand our ways.”

“Yes.” I hurriedly add, “Please help me understand.”

I don’t look at Rashak again until his breathing slows.

“I am trying to understand but,” I take a deep breath, “I need my son back.”

Rashak sighs and trudges to his throne. The old wood creaks and groans as he settles into the seat. He strokes the leaves hanging from the armrests while Ocosa and I wait patiently. A light breeze tickles my face until it becomes a rush of wind. A tornado of dust comes together before me and again fear starts to build in the pit of my stomach, but I don’t look away.

It takes a few moments but the cloud of dust takes shape and form until I can see my son. I wait until his body looks dense and compact before reaching for him. I expect his skin to feel rough or sandy, but it’s as supple and smooth as I remember it. His tightly coiled curls spring back easily into place when I move my hands from them.

“Yes, the hair is the trickiest part I find. That’s why I keep a few to remind myself.”

I look up to see Rashak plucking at a tiny spot near to the breast pocket of his cloak. My lips part to thank him, but different words

tumble out instead.

“Is your coat made entirely out of children’s hair?” I ask incredulously.

“That and those who’ve crossed me.”

A tight smile plays on the corner of his lips. I push my son behind me and step forward.

“What do you do with the children?”

He sweeps his hands around the room.

“They’re everywhere. Don’t they teach the basics of the world anymore? Even the gods can’t create something out of nothingness. Your kind asks me for rain, more cattle, more, more, always more! Where do you think the building blocks come from?”

“I’ve never asked you for anything.”

“Except the son that you now shield behind your frail body.”

“He was never yours to take!”

“Well, you’ll need to have that talk with your priestess. I didn’t choose your son, she did.”

I realize I don’t know who stole my son away on his return from school.

“Who is she?”

Another whisper of wind and someone I recognize swirls into existence at Rashak’s side. Armada. A woman. A friend. Godmother to my child.

“Lord, why have you ...”

Her words wither as she notices us. I'm not prepared for this and my brain scrambles to string letters together into coherent sentences.

“Jania? What are you doing here?”

My voice is raspy when I reply.

“I came for my son.”

Her eyes widen with understanding. She looks from me to Rashak and back again. I wonder if she is contemplating who deserves an explanation first. I take advantage of her silence.

“Are you going to explain to your lord why he's not being worshipped? Can you tell him why he thinks he's been doing things for us when that's not the case?”

Rashak's smirk slips.

“What is she talking about, Armada?”

“Nothing! She's just ...”

“I didn't know we still worshipped the gods. I don't think anyone does. I thought the gods stole my son because of cruelty. There are no temples in your honour. As far as we knew, we've been on our own for years. Whatever your priestess has asked you for, has not been for us.”

“Lord, I ...”

Rashak's arm wraps around Armada's throat like a vine. She gasps for breath, and he nonchalantly plucks a few strands of her hair. My son's arms wrap around my waist before I can regret what I have started. Rashak sprinkles the stolen hairs onto his cloak and they intertwine with ease, creating a fresh black patch between the second and third buttons.

His arm tightens around her neck and I brace myself for the crackling

snap of her bones. Instead, her skin withers and shrivels as she loses mass. Out of his other hand, Rashak releases blue-tinted globs of liquid into the air.

“What the hell?” I mutter.

Ocusa moves to my side and I do a double-take when I realize most of their feline characteristics are gone. The bright green eyes and plump pink lips remain. They're enchanting.

“The circle of creation at work,” they say with a frown.

I tear my eyes away from Ocusa just in time to see the last of the globules flit through the opening in the roof. What's left of Armada writhes on the dusty ground until her form settles into a creature that is a cross between a snake and a grasshopper. I wonder if this is where the abominations in the forest come from.

I wonder if she's as intelligent as Ocusa and the house I owe an eye. Before I can test my theory, Rashak addresses Ocusa.

“Well, Ocusa, I see you've gotten your second chance at serving me right.”

“I have learnt my lesson, lord Rashak.”

“I would certainly hope so. You may return to the village and resume your duties.”

“My village?” I ask.

I look at Ocusa in confusion and a blush spreads across their face.

“I-I should have told you before. Yes, I was from your village, but it was a long time ago.”

“And you knew this is what he was doing to the children?”

My anger seeps from my pores like sweat. The idea that Ocusa has

done this to other parents places heaviness on my heart I thought I had released when I got Reikai back. Ocosa shakes their head slowly but doesn't speak. I turn back to Rashak.

"Does it have to be children?"

He regards me for what feels like an eternity before answering.

"It doesn't matter who it is. It only needs to be a living being. Human to be specific."

"So Armada was choosing to send you children?"

"Who else did you have in mind?"

I grapple for anyone or anything that could be better than children, and the crumbling building that houses the village's wrongdoers comes to mind. It's so bad, we only bother to lock up the worst offenders. There weren't many in there but still enough to get us through a couple of years. By then, I would have come up with something else for Rashak.

"Criminals. Every village has them. What if we send them to you, every ... how often do you need a tribute?"

Rashak shrugs.

"If the requests are reasonable, every three months or so will be fine."

I glare pointedly at Ocosa, who responds hurriedly.

"The requests will be reasonable, my lord."

Rashak claps and the Armada creature hops a little to the side in fright. Again, a splinter of guilt pricks my conscience. I ignore it.

"Can we go now?"

"Certainly."

I take Reikai's hand and have turned to leave when Rashak's voice stops me.

"Don't you have to debt to waste on a very talkative house before you go?"

I stop in my tracks and Reikai squeezes my hand.

"What's he talking about, Mama?"

"Nothing, honey."

I keep my back to Rashak as I leave and I trust that Ocosa is right behind me. I don't slow down until we're back in the woods that brought us to the temple. Only then do I look back at the temple and realize the bluish tint I saw coming from Armada is now stippled through its ridges.

"Did he – did he just turn Armada into parts of his temple?"

"For now. If he needs the parts to become something else, they do."

We start walking again at a more leisurely pace. With my goal accomplished, there is no real hurry to get back to the village.

"So all the parts of you are back now?"

They pat their chest and legs as if feeling for something and the smile returns.

"As far as I can tell."

"Can you tell where they were?"

Ocosa takes a deep breath before shaking their head.

"Not exactly. There's a feeling that they have memories that I don't.

It feels like being made up of parts that are trying to remember what it was like to work together. I'm not sure we're supposed to remember anything anyway; people aren't usually reconstituted."

"I remember where my parts were," Reikai interrupts.

I drop to my knees so I can look in his eyes. I'm ashamed that I didn't think about how traumatic the whole thing might have been for him. Did Rashak seriously tear my son apart and deposit his parts all over the valley or was he adorning the temple, waiting for instructions?

"I'm so sorry honey. I'm sorry that he hurt you."

He shrugs.

"It didn't hurt. It just felt like floating away into a deep sleep and then having strange dreams. I was all over the temple and in the woods. I saw you," he turns to look at Ocura, "and you."

He doesn't say anything else but I recognize his expression. Fear. Suspicion.

"Uh, Ocura? Can you give us a little privacy, please? I think we might need to make use of the trees if you know what I mean?"

Ocura nods and walks away. I take Reikai further away behind some trees and we sit, our backs against the firm but rough wood.

"What's the matter, Reikai?"

"You shouldn't trust Ocura. They didn't just find you, they were looking for you."

"How do you know that?"

"They met with Rashak while I was there. Rashak asked them to keep an eye on you and get you to him. Mama, I'm not sure he ever meant to keep me."

I grind my teeth in deep thought. What did all this even mean? Was Rashak using me for something and what about Ocura – did they know something they weren't telling me? I sigh and push against the tree to stand. I offer my hand to Reikai so he can join me.

"I don't know what any of that means, but I'm sure we'll find out soon enough. Your crazy mother trekked into the unknown to confront a god for you, so we'll just have to deal with whatever else comes our way, right?"

He smiles and takes my hand. I pull him up, and it must be my imagination but he feels ... lighter. Is there a part of him that Rashak still has? I scan my son's face but see only his hazel eyes sparkling with mischief and intellect and the easy smile I love. If the ordeal has changed him, I can't see it.

We spot Ocura hanging out by the edge of the clearing that leads back to the town.

"Everything okay now?"

"Yeah, just one of those things, you know?"

They nod and we make our way to the yellow building that seems to almost glow in anticipation. In confirmation, I see an eye hanging from the doorpost and it winks when I knock. The door swings open, and now that I know my destination, I trail behind the eye, which is floating towards the old door.

"You made it! And I see congratulations are in order. That good looking fellow must be your son. I ..."

The flattery trails off when Ocura steps into view.

"Well, that's new."

I wait for more but the house says nothing. The silence stretches on, so I decide to move on to the business at hand.

“So how do we do this? Is it going to hurt?”

“What’s going on, Mama?”

“Uh, don’t worry about it, sweetheart. I made a promise and I need to keep it.”

I look at Ocosa and raise an eyebrow, which signals them to place a light hand on Rekai’s shoulder and lead him away. I step closer to the waiting door.

“To answer your most pressing question, it will not hurt. Just place your hand on the door.”

I touch the door with my right palm and wait for my eye to be wrenched out. I imagine brain-numbing pain that will last for weeks. Instead, there is a pull on my fingertips that rushes up my arm and into my right eye socket. I notice my dulling vision more than what is happening with my eye.

There is a tingling, a ... discomfort, but mostly the vision in my right eye just fizzles and disappears completely.

“There, that wasn’t so bad.”

Another eye forms in the door and slithers beside the other. The voice whispers words I don’t recognize and all its pieces come together in the door. Nothing happens. I’m wondering if there’s more to the ritual when a litany of words I do recognize fill the room. I want to cover Rekai’s ears from the onslaught of curses, but it’s hard to find him with my large blind spot.

“Why didn’t it work? The spell should work!”

“Transformation magic only happens for us with the permission of the gods, and you don’t have that.”

Ocosa is back at my side, and when I turn to look them, Rekai grabs my hands.

“Mama, your eye!”

Before I can reply, Ocosa speaks.

“Don’t worry about that.”

They touch my face and my vision returns. I run my hands over my face and feel an eye. A new eye, because I could still see my taken eye in the door.

“Where? How? Who is this from?”

The urge to tear at the suspicious eye pounds in my head, but Ocosa grabs my hand before I can act on it.

“Stop, it’s from your son. Rashak knew you’d react this way, so he kept a few pieces back to rebuild your eye.”

So there had been a bit of Rekai missing.

My introspection is interrupted by a deep rumbling coming from under the floors and crawling up shaking walls. Ocosa takes my hands.

“I think it’s time we leave.”

We run from the house just before the building collapses, still screaming obscenities. The dust barely settles before the pieces come back together as if nothing happened. The cursing simmers into muffled sobs that tug at my heart.

“The gods don’t want him to be anything other than this, do they?”

“Not yet,” Ocosa replies. “They feel he’s more useful here.”

I want to say how unfair that is but I hold my tongue. I’m still in their territory after all.

“So how do we go back up the hole we jumped through?”

A warm smile spreads across their face.

“The way back is less death-defying. Besides, I no longer have a tail for you to maim.”

I smile in return, but the warmth is tempered by the cold dread still in the pit of my stomach from what Rekai said.

“Well, let’s go then.”

They take my hand and I hope I don’t start sweating against their cool touch. I take Rekai’s hand and our walk takes us back to the centre of the town, which is now thankfully empty. Ocosa takes a few steps in a large circle until we’re positioned in the way they like and they flick the air with a finger. The air shimmers and a door appears before us.

I hesitate because it’s my door. My front door. I barely register that Ocosa opens it and pulls us inside. The moment my feet hit the ground, I spin around and look out the window to confirm that I’m back in the village. Everything is the same as I remember it, and somehow that makes me feel worse.

Did anyone else in the village know what Armada was doing? Would they care what happened to her and demand answers from me? Ocosa’s hand on my shoulder stills my thoughts.

“Are you okay?”

I slip away from the touch and meet their concerned gaze.

“How did you know where I live?”

Unknown emotions flutter across their face before they can no longer meet my gaze.

“Our meeting wasn’t an accident I take it?”

“No, Rashak wanted to meet you.”

“But I was already on my way to him, wasn’t I? He had my son.”

“No, you don’t understand. He requested your son so you’d have to come for him.”

I land heavily on an old chair in my living room, and the thin cushions barely protect my backside from the impact.

“Why would he do that?”

“He needed you. You were the only person brave enough to go into the valley. He wanted you to bring him back with you.”

I stare at them, too afraid to ask what the last part means.

They continue without any prodding.

“The gods aren’t in the valley because they want to be. They’re stuck unless a human brings them – or in your case, a part of them--out.”

“You lied to me about the eye!”

“No.”

They reach over my shoulder and pull a few strands of hair around so I can see them. The orange ones are a stark contrast to my dark brown curls.

“Now he doesn’t need an emissary. He can take whatever he wants.”

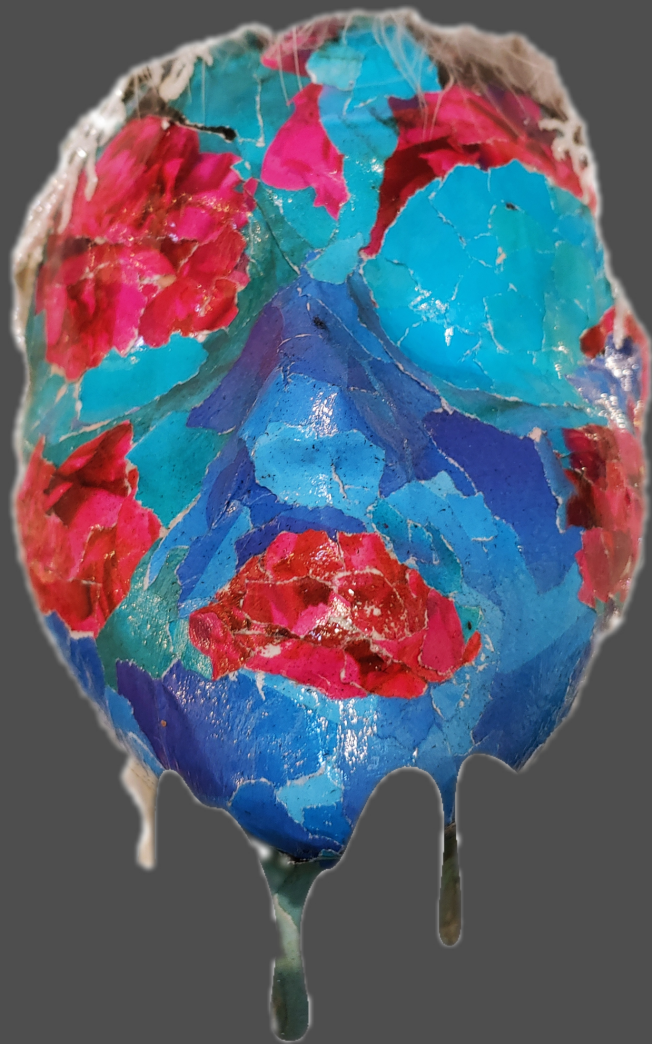
Before I can reply, I notice my living room is darker. Through the window, I can see the fog rolling into the village from the forest. Ocosa turns my face back to them.

“He won’t hurt you or Rekai. We’re safe.”

I hold their gaze even as Rashak’s deep chuckle echoes through the trees.

Deliquesce

by Carl Scharwath



Unraveling

by David F. Shultz

Right before you fall asleep there's a seam. If you stay awake long enough, you can peek through.

On the night before I found out, I had given up on sleep and buried myself in the armchair, sketchbook in hand. The pencil seemed to move on its own, scritch-scratching while I watched, like a ghost. Before long the pages were scrawled with human figures, automatic-writing from the veiled periphery between waking and dreams.

An unbroken line wound across the pages. I flipped through, tracing the path of the silver thread. At the back cover of the book, the line trailed to the edge. For a moment a ghostly thread continued off the page, a trick of the light.

The room felt stale and suffocating, and my skull throbbed. A walk would help. I put the sketchbook into my shoulder bag and left for fresh air.

It was after midnight, and there were strange crunching sounds from the park to my right. A carpet of beetles writhed, thousands of shells edged by moonlight. The quivering mass popped and crackled—a mass of fallen leaves, crinkling under the patter of gentle rain.

A bus roared past on my left, spraying me with a cold wave. A shine on the passing windows played tricks with my eyes, so that each passenger had a ghostly figure superimposed. The blurred dopplegangers of light were the same figures from my sketchbook.

I shut my eyes, but the blur remained. Ghostly passengers slid along the blackness behind my eyelids. A thread of light extended from each figure, fading into the distance. When I opened my eyes the bus was gone.

I resolved to follow these strange visions, like the thread in my sketchbook, tracing the line across the page of the sidewalk. All I had to do was walk.

The streetlights were red, but the road was empty. I passed the convenience store on the corner, the pawn shops, an empty parking lot, the church courtyard with the chess boards built into the stone tables, empty of pieces.

A homeless man sat on the bench wearing running shoes and an old tan suit. Something about his weathered appearance seemed out of place. He shouldn't be here in the city, but on some fisherman's wharf, with a pipe in his mouth and a fishing rod in his hand. He was born in the wrong life.

"Did you see the light?" he asked.

"What?"

"Do you have a light?"

I told him I don't smoke.

Three blocks later was the diner.

Every booth was empty. I sat facing the wall and ordered bacon and eggs, with toast and coffee, black. The smell of the coffee arrived first, then there was the clinking of cutlery, the taste of bacon, the crunch of buttery toast.

The yellow of my scrambled eggs turned pinkish. A lump formed in the middle, the size of a fingertip. Blue veins appeared, next a

misshapen head, then the tiny beak of a fetal bird. Suppressing the urge to gag, I set down my knife and fork and closed my eyes. When I opened them, the bird was gone, and the eggs were yellow.

While my food went untouched, a clamor of patrons had filled the restaurant, murmuring and shuffling.

The bill was thirteen dollars. I put down a twenty.

The morning sun had risen, maybe an hour or two earlier. Clear blue sky reflected from puddles in the potholes, so it was like looking through holes into an underworld sky. It sounded like the beach. Distant traffic, muted as it carried through the streets, was gentle waves.

Gulls cawed. They swarmed beside a young homeless man in his sleeping bag, where he'd left an open pizza box. The birds tugged at the doughy remnants, stretched sinews of cheese, sprayed cold tomato sauce, wings thrashing. The man didn't stir from his deep sleep as the gulls feasted on the pizza, vultures on a corpse. A grease-stained box remained. The still slumbering man must have been drinking heavily. He looked like any bedraggled college student might look after a night of partying, a month of poor hygiene, a year of being forgotten.

He rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Did you see the bugs?" he asked.

"What?"

"Did you see the bugs?" he asked again, propping himself on an elbow. "They eat the leftovers. I can see them, sometimes."

"Do you need money?"

He held out his hand, nodding meekly, and I gave him a five. He closed his eyes and clutched the bill, turned his body, and went back to sleep.

The alley by the diner offered a familiar shortcut. A canopy of wires crisscrossed overhead. The walls were mismatched material, red brick in places, flat grey cement in others, pink fibreglass behind the windows. Birds chirped nearby, somewhere above the lines of white graffiti on the walls. Wormwood was here, the graffiti told me.

Reaching the far end of the alley, I saw something pinkish near my foot. It was a small dead bird, featherless, with blue lines where veins showed beneath the soft skin. I examined it closely, then closed and opened my eyes. The bird remained, unlike the vision in my scrambled eggs. I poked it gently with a single finger, and the fragile body gave little resistance, like thinly wrapped pudding, and my stomach turned.

Worm smell was thick in the air. The commuters didn't seem to notice, stomping along the sidewalk, careless of the pungent corpses of the worms, the worms who had escaped the rain only to find the horror of human soles.

My phone reminded me of a lunch date with an old friend.

We met at the cafe. I ordered an Earl Grey tea and a lemon tart. He ordered a Steamwhistle and asked the server for the cap, which he put in his pocket. We talked about religion and politics, the birth of his son and the death of my grandmother, his career as a translator and my painting studio.

"Do you ever feel like the universe is giving you signs?" I asked.

"I'm an atheist," he said, as if this was an answer.

"But this can't be all there is."

"Of course it isn't. There's infinitely more." He took a swig of his beer, the second bottle. "And we're finite beings—so there's always something more—something we don't understand. It's like Plato's allegory of the cave. We can only see the shadows."

"If we could look past the shadows we'd have to make sense of what

we saw. And maybe that would seem like signs.” What I meant was, I thought I could see the signs now, and it was like staring at the sun through the slit of window blinds.

My friend had to go, but I stayed in the cafe, alone. I sipped my tea, cold now and oversteeped. Then I examined my sketchbook, turning it upside down on a hunch. The line formed a message, written unbroken across two pages, in warped cursive, not my own. Wormwood was here.

I paid the bill and left.

The afternoon traffic was not rushed. Young people relaxed on patios with beers, and old people meandered on the sidewalks, pausing to look at window displays. They all dangled at the end of their silvery threads.

I paused to look at an old homeless man, motionless in his sleeping bag, beside a shopping cart filled with newspapers and plastic bags. Pinned under one of the wheels was a cardboard sign, scrawled with black marker. Seventy-four years young, it read, but I would have guessed ninety.

His thread was taut, unlike the loose, winding threads of the men and women who breezed by with their briefcases, cell phones, and shopping bags, heels clacking on the sidewalk as they passed, each of them searching urgently for something to look at besides this dishevelled and forgotten old man by their feet.

I followed his thread. Something was pulling it, like a fishing line. It snagged on one corner of brick, leading into an alley. Around the

corner garbage bags spilled from rusted dumpsters. Something skittered and squawked in the shadows.

A metal fence blocked the end of the alley. It clanged as I shook it, but didn’t open. In the distance was a low roar, like a field of trees crushed under an avalanche.

The sun was setting, and my body was tired. It was time to go.

Bodies crowded the subway platform, jostled around me, invaded my personal space, tangling their threads on my own. A grainy announcement apologized for the delay. I moved to a corner away from the crowd.

All of the threads dangled and floated in the air, swayed in a rush of wind from the subway tunnel.

One man’s thread was pulled taut, like the old man’s. It led straight towards the subway tracks, straight into the incoming train, straight to where the man jumped. I heard the screaming of the crowd, the screeching of brakes, but above it all I heard the roar of the great beast of light that rode along the subway train, a worm with a thousand teeth in a circular, human-sized maw, swallowing the thread as it went, swallowing it right up until the end, swallowing the ghost and slurping it from a ruined corpse, and I thought of the pizza in its flat box, smeared with tomato sauce.

As horrific as the suicide was, the worst came in the days after, when I remembered the worm at the end of the thread. It keeps me awake at night sometimes, when I feel it slowly reeling my line.

The End

by Christina Sng

I.

The world ended
In a quick, icy death
When the gods

Destroyed the sun
And came down
To judge us.

II.

They descended,
Wisp-like and ethereal,
From a luminous amoeba

Pulsating overhead,
Hovering over the dead,
Waiting

For their chittering minions
To usher their gods down
From the heavens

To see their offering
Laid out in a spread,
Paralyzed

With a neurotoxin
Keeping us awake
And alive

While they
Ravenously devoured us
Till we desiccated.

III.

Afterwards,
They tore their minions apart
In an aerial tug of war,

Their translucent bodies
Heavy with blood, darting
Like fireflies in starlight

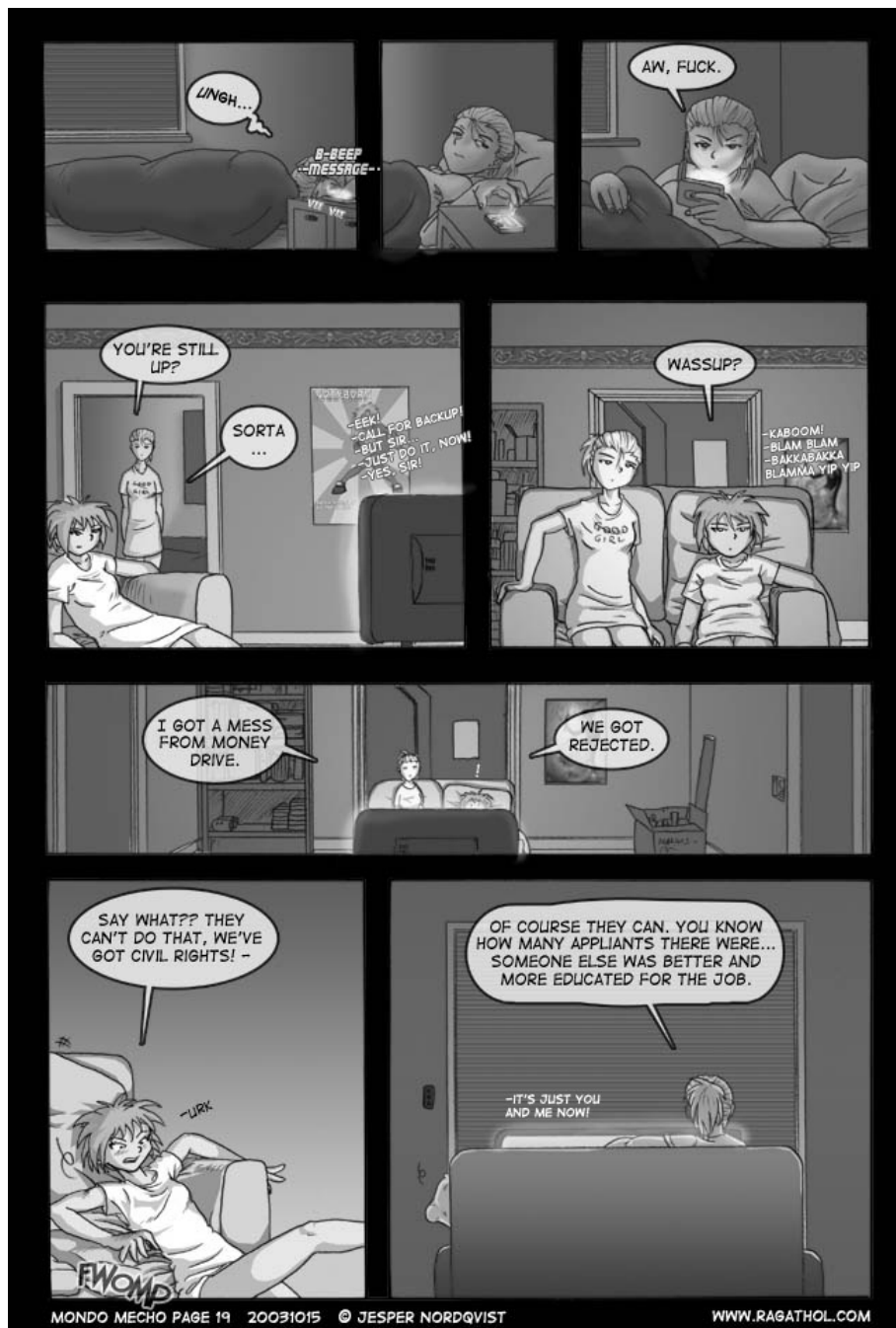
Until one was slashed open,
Raining crimson
Onto the pristine white snow.

IV.

All we could do
Was watch the massacre
From our space station

And hope to God
They would not notice us
Orbiting the Earth

Before we froze.



MONDO MECO PAGE 19 20031015 © JESPER NORDQVIST

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

The giant flatscreen plasma TV is not any particular sign of luxury in this age ... It's more or less standard.

The girls have lots of stuff lying around because they moved in recently.





NOTES

It's a rebellion! Screw perspective!

... --

Well, if you don't look too close, it's ok, I guess ...

The large window has three settings: Clear, Shade and Dark (need no further explanation eh?)





Everything will be perfect. tonight and forever
 Light shine off. light shine on. making our faces many colors



Everyone is moving. like waves make an ocean. on and on
 Everyone is singing. yes. this is happiness happening



Everything will be perfect. everything will be perfect
 Everything will be perfect. tonight and forever

NOTES

If you are hip, you can find several hidden characters and other stuff in this page...

Still too little people in the streets for a city this size? Not really... It's about 3AM...

A lot of stores and other places are open around the clock, however, so the girls may still have hope to find something...





MONDO MECO PAGE 22 20031103 © JESPER NORDQVIST
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

I'm building this universe on "facts", that is, I may use theories and places from other comics for references in this world... It doesn't really matter, but it can be fun if you know about the references and what they mean in the universe of the original comic... Er.. Confusing? >_>'

Puma Twins Š Masamune
Shirow 1989





NOTES

Perspective madness! ^o^

It's always better if you manage to draw something without straight lines, it adds more dynamics to the picture.

If you wonder why people have so little clothes on, even though Mars should be quite cold, it's because it's the hot period now, with a max temperature close to 30 degrees C... The artificial atmosphere and heating systems help keeping the temperatures at habitable levels...

The winters can be really cold, though, and out in the deserts, in the natural environments, temperatures can drop to below -120 degrees...





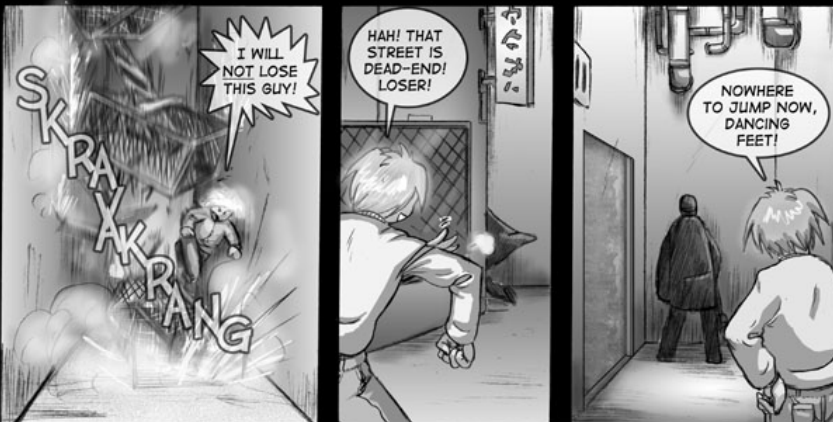
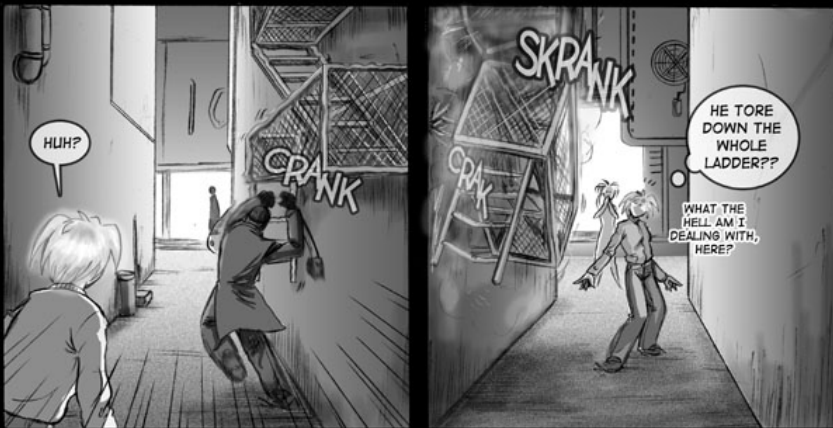
NOTES

Once again, the textures are taken from UnrealEd...

When I use textures on shaded areas like this, I still put the gradients underneath and lower the opacity on the textures somewhat to maintain the tones... Additional shadows and highlights are made with the Dodge and Burn tools.



JEMMA HAS MADE A NANOBOT HAIR AUGMENTATION TO GET HER FLOURESCENT ORANGE COLOR. ANOTHER EFFECT IS THAT WHEN SHE GET EXCITED, THE NANOBOTS GET SPURRED AND WORK HARDER, CAUSING HER HAIR TO GLOW...



MONDO MECO PAGE 25 20031112 © JESPER NORDQVIST

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

This took way way way too long time.. even missed an update

That damn ladder... I don't know if it's clear enough, but yes, the thief rips down the whole ladder...

What else? Some celebrities, of course ;)





NOTES

The deli store has fresh fruit from Earth, very expensive merchandise on Mars...





NOTES

In frame 5, where Jemma is scanned, you can see the nanobot activity is down to 56%, which is quite a normal value. Her hair starts glowing at about 70% activity.

Other than the glow effect, the nanobot upgrade (which is a pretty normal hair styling method here) can shape and color her hair in a variety of ways, she can even use computer software to program the nanobots to style the hair as she wishes (inside the limits of the hair length, of course). I should have made the scan interface a bit more advanced, but I was pressed for time and I have lost my old interface symbols...

Alas...



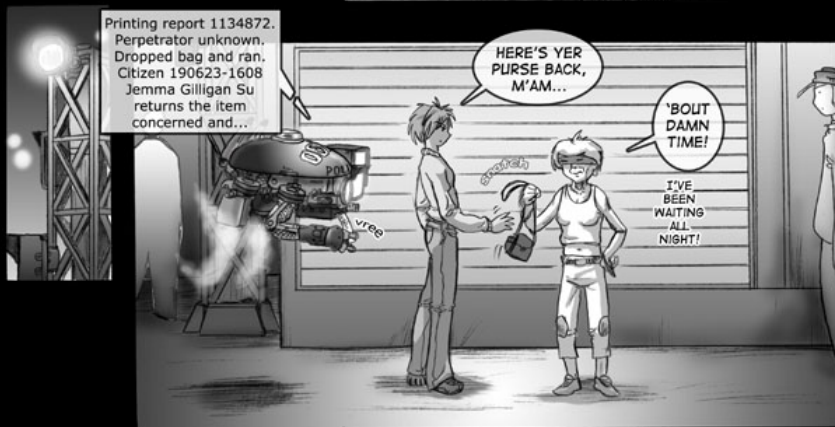
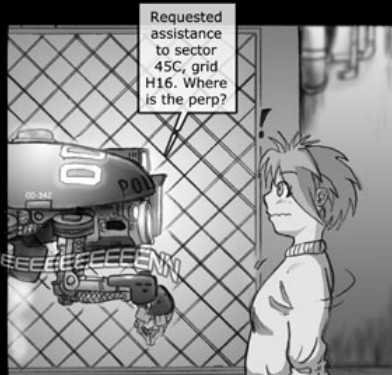


NOTES

The text on Jemma's jacket in frame two isn't seen from the cyborg's scan vision, it's fully visible as a warning to aggressors. The police hoverbots generally arrive quite fast, so if you see this text, run for it!

In special models, the text feature can be turned off.





NOTES

The Smartcloth jacket has all kind of features, like this built-in cellphone...





NOTES

The lights are turned on automatically when the alarm clock rings. What about the old-school furniture, you think? Sad but true; beds, bookshelves and ugly chairs were winning concepts hundreds of years ago, so why not in another few hundred years?...

In the last panel, Jemma orders her nanobots to assume the preprogrammed hair style after her wild sleep...

Not sure if that should make a sound, though... >_>





NOTES

The horrible kitchen... Why are all the furniture so woody and squareish? Well, the girls don't have any money to buy flashy stuff, and cheap furniture are always woody and squareish.. even in the future, I believe >x< They are not made of wood, however, as there are no natural trees on Mars, but of different plastic polymers and metal alloys.



NOTES

No comments >x<



Contributor's Bios



COLLEEN ANDERSON has a BFA in writing, is a three-time Aurora Award finalist and was longlisted for the Stoker Award. She has performed her work in the US, UK and Canada. Colleen also co-edited *Playground of Lost Toys* (Aurora nominated) and *Tesseract 17*, and a solo anthology *Alice Unbound: Beyond Wonderland*. Her short fiction collection, *A Body of Work*, Black Shuck Books, UK, is available online. A Canada Council and BC Arts Council recipient, her work has been published in such places as *nEvermore!*, *Beauty of Death*, *Polu Texni*, *The Future Fire* and *Cemetery Dance*. Living in Vancouver, Colleen keeps an eye out for mold monsters and mermaids. www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

* * *



Ms. BERNSTEIN's short story, "Hash Pipe," appears in Pangyrus Magazine issue #7, and won the One City, One Story Competition at the Boston Book Festival in 2014. Her story, "How to Fix a Lamp," received honorable mention in *Glimmer Train Magazine's* Very Short Fiction competition in 2018, and was published in *The Forge Magazine* in March of 2019. Her story, "Upon Leaving The Hospital," appeared in *Black Heart Magazine*, and "Volunteer Garden," in *Cease Cows* in 2014. She was the recipient of 2017, and 2018 PEN America, Press Freedom Incentive Fund Grants for her local newspaper in three languages. Her children's story, and math book, *Time Travel Math*, was published by Prufrock Press in 2010. She is a member of GRUB Street Writers Workshop in Boston, and a PEN America Writing Professionals Member. Web site : <http://www.leavestheturtle.com/>

* * *

SARA CONNELL's writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Bangalore Review*, *IO Literary Journal* and other publications. www.saraconnell.com



MARTINS DEEP is a Nigerian poet & photographer. He is passionate about documenting muffled stories of the African experience in his poetry & visual art. Writing from Kaduna, or whichever place he finds himself, the acrylic of inspiration that spills from his innermost being tends to paint various depictions of humanity/life in his environment. His creative works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *Barren Magazine*, *Chestnut Review*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *Writers Space Africa*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *The Alchemy Spoon*, *Dream Glow*, *The Lumiere Review*, *Variant Literature*, & elsewhere. He is also the brain behind Shotstoryz Photography and can be reached on Twitter: @martinsdeep1

* * *



ALEXANDER P. GARZA is a Mexican-American poet who just moved from Houston to Chicago to pursue the graduate Program for Writers at the University of Illinois–Chicago. His work has appeared in *Toyon*, *Indianapolis Review*, *Dissections*, *Star*Line* and others. Visit him on Instagram/Twitter, @alexanderpgarza and <http://alexanderpgarza.com>.

* * *



ELANA GOMEL is an academic and a writer. She has published six non-fiction books and numerous articles on posthumanism, science fiction, Victorian literature, and serial killers. Her fantasy, horror and science fiction stories appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *New Horizons*, *Mythic*, and many other magazines, and were also featured in several award-winning anthologies, including *Apex Book of World Science Fiction*. She is the author of three novels: *A Tale of*

Three Cities (2013), *The Hungry Ones* (2018) and *The Cryptids* (2019).

She can be found at <https://www.citiesoflightanddarkness.com/> and on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

* * *



KAREN HESLOP writes from Kingston, Jamaica. Her stories can be found in *Apparition Lit Mag*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Eerie River Magazine*, among others.

* * *



JAMAL HODGE is a multi-award winning filmmaker and writer. As a writer his screenplay 'Mourning Meal' won five awards (including best short screenplay at NYC Horror Film Festival 2018) and was featured as a finalist in seven writing competitions including Shriekfest, Crimson Screen, and Nightmares Film Festival, while his feature film screenplay 'The Kind Ones' has been a finalist at Shriekfest and Crimson Screen in 2019. Jamal's horror poetry has been featured in *Space and Time Magazine* three times, and in the upcoming anthology *Chiral Mad 5* alongside such greats as Linda Addison & Jack Katchum. Jamal has been the featured writer at ACT UP! at Harlem's National Black Theatre. In 2021 he is gearing up to launch his first sci-fi series, and a book of poetry edited by six-time Stoker Award winner Linda Addison. More about him can be found at <http://www.directorhodge.com/About.html>

* * *



TIM JEFFREYS' short fiction has appeared in *Weirdbook*, *Not One of Us*, *The Alchemy Press Book of Horrors 2*, and *Nightsript*, among various other publications, and his latest collection of horror stories and strange tales 'You Will Never Lose Me' is

available now. He lives in Bristol, England, with his partner and two children. Follow his progress at www.timjeffreys.blogspot.co.uk.

* * *

More of **T. MOTLEY's** comics are at tmotley.com

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

* * *

NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username [@lyv0n](https://www.instagram.com/lyv0n).

* * *

ANAHITA RAMOUTAR is a teenage self taught young and talented artist. Since childhood she has developed a passion for drawing. She draws digitally mostly but also on paper as well as paints sometimes. For artwork she uses a variety of drawing tools. Some of them are a graphite pencil, charcoal pencils, pens, oil pastels and oil based coloured pencils.

Along with drawing she enjoys photography and plays piano. She loves taking various pictures especially of nature and tries to capture that moment in time to keep. She works hard in order to become a professional artist, practicing everyday to become as good as her favourite artists or even better.

* * *



ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *



AARON SANDBERG resides in Illinois where he teaches. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *English Journal*, *Abridged*, *The Racket*, *Writers Resist*, *Yes Poetry*, *perhappened mag*, *Unbroken*, and elsewhere. You might find him—though socially-distant—on Instagram @aaronsandberg.

* * *

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

* * *

DAVID F. SHULTZ writes from Toronto, Canada, where he is lead editor at Speculative North and organizes the 700-member Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers group. His over-sixty published works are featured or forthcoming through publishers such as Diabolical Plots and Third Flatiron. Author webpage: davidfshultz.com

* * *



OLIVER SMITH is a visual artist and writer from Cheltenham, UK. He is inspired by the landscapes of Max Ernst, by frenzied rocks towering in the air above the silent swamp, by the strange poetry of machines, by something hidden in the nothing.

His poetry has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Liminality*, and *Rivet*.

Oliver was awarded first place in the BSFS 2019 competition for his poem 'Better Living through Witchcraft' and his poem 'Lost Palace, Lighted Tracks' was nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. He holds a PhD in literary and critical studies.

Oliver's website is at <https://oliversimonsmithwriter.wordpress.com/>

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2017), Elgin Award runner-up *Astropoetry* (Alban Lake Publishing, 2017), and *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2020).

Her poetry, fiction, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, and her poems have garnered multiple nominations in the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Elgin Awards, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year.

Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media @christinasng.

* * *



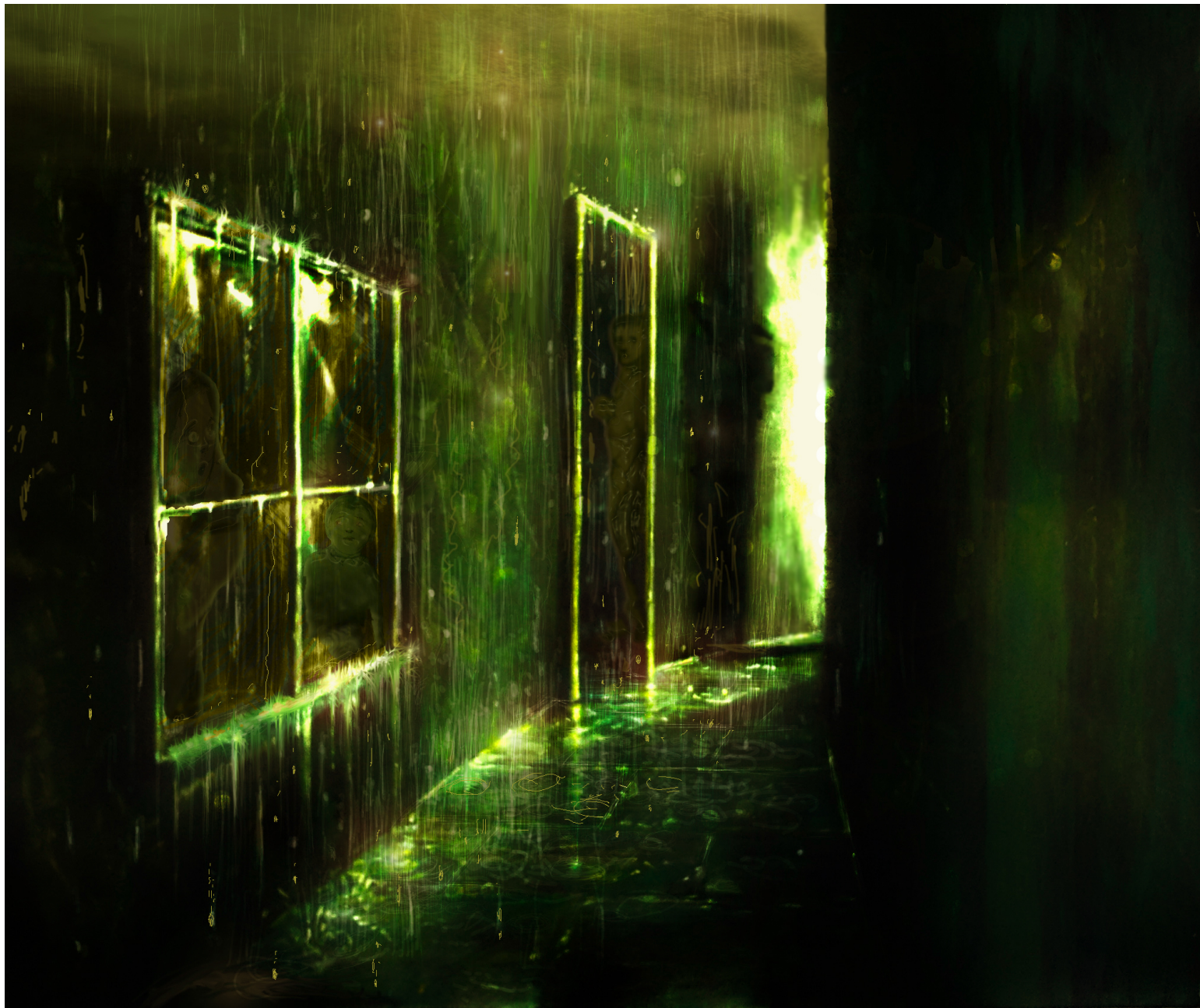
Lover of wine, women and song, you can find **TOEKEN's** art at: <https://atoekeneffort.weebly.com/>

* * *



J.S. WATTS is a UK poet and novelist. She has published seven books: four of poetry, *Cats and Other Myths*, *Songs of Steelyard Sue*, *Years Ago You Coloured Me* and *The Submerged Sea*, and three novels, *A Darker Moon*, *Witchlight* and *Old*

Light. See www.jswatts.co.uk



Reeled (full image) by toeken