



Antithesis & Synthesis

Interview with Marge Simon

Plus work by

Angelisa Fontaine-Wood • Eva
Papasoulioti • Barbara Candiotti •
Raiff Taranday • Oliver Smith • Binod
Dawadi • Alexis Child • Shikhar Dixit •
Donna J. W. Munro • E. E. King •
Antonia Rachel Ward • Carl
Scharwath • Luke Walker • Brian
Malachy Quinn • Eve Morton •
Matthew Roy • Aaron Zimmerman •
Keith LaFontaine • Rhonda Parrish •
Tim Hildebrandt • Desmond Rhae •
Joel Fishbane • Michelle Kaseler

Detail from *Mindstream Dancers* by Marge Simon

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2024 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 MA.

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

Table of contents

from the editor

interview

Antithesis & Synthesis

An interview with **Marge Simon**

fiction & poetry

Matter of the Heart

The house at the top of the hill

Value

The Second Law

The Lovely Bones

Mary Sue Rising

Skinprint

Reunion

The Witch of 1000 Mirrors

I've Watched the World and You

Flight of the Firi

Momma

The Cycle

the monster of endegaard

Placing Helen

art & g. narrative

Urban Haunt

Anonymous

Domino

Shiva

Shadows of the Masses

The Illusion of Beauty

The Beginners

Wander the Pixelated Spaces

by Jeff Georgeson

by Angelisa Fontaine-Wood

by Eva Papasoulioti

by Raiff Taranday

by Oliver Smith

by Alexis Child

by Donna J. W. Munro

by Antonia Rachel Ward

by Luke Walker

by Eve Morton

by Matthew Roy

by Aaron Zimmerman

by Keith LaFontaine

by Rhonda Parrish

by Joel Fishbane

by Michelle Kaseler

by Barbara Candiotti

by Binod Dawadi

by Shikhar Dixit

by E. E. King

by Carl Scharwath

by Brian Malachy Quinn

by Tim Hildebrandt

by Desmond Rhac

contributors

bios



Domino



Urban Haunt



cover: Mindstream Dancers
by Marge Simon

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Vote.

Oh, I was so tempted to let that be The Word, the only Word in this entire editorial. “Vote!” I’d write, and leave that egalitarian word out there for all and sundry, just a wee reminder for everyone of all political persuasions, as though this election were just about making sure people remembered to participate in our pseudo-democracy (“It’s not a democracy, it’s a republic!” I keep being reminded, as though I don’t know that), that all will basically be the same whether we vote for one candidate or the other, that it doesn’t really matter who ...

But it does.* And after 2016, even after 2020, if you don’t recognize that, you must’ve been hiding in the nether regions of Hades. And remembering how “if they go low, we go high” left us doubled-over on the sidewalk clutching our stomachs and other bits, I’ll add a few facts to my plea that you go Vote:

- One candidate represents a bloc that wants to do away with women’s

and LGBTQIA+ rights, do away with education, do away with books ... basically do away with anything that might challenge their minority stranglehold on the rest of us

- One candidate wants to be president primarily as a “Get out of jail, free” card.
- One candidate would create a Supreme Court that makes Iran look like a liberal democracy
- One candidate wants to be a dictator “for just one day”

The big twist, of course, would be if this “candidate” of whom I speak wasn’t who you thought, but, I mean, really? There is no twist. It’s obvious.

So VOTE.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

* And if you’re wondering what this has to do with speculative fiction, well, I’d much rather be writing about apocalypse and dystopia than living it. And apologies to our worldwide audience, most of whom don’t get a chance to vote in our election, but will have to live with whatever consequences come of it.



Antithesis & Synthesis

Marge Simon's works both challenge and bring together, whether art or poetry, whether on her own or in collaboration

by Jeff Georgeson

MARGE SIMON, multiple Stoker winner, HWA Lifetime Achievement awardee and Grand Master of the SFPA, has had work published, well, pretty much everywhere (including in *Penumbria*, we're happy to say). She is both a writer and artist, highly influential, and an all-around good person, and we were honored to interview her for this issue of *Penumbria*.

* * *

Your education was focused on art, and you were even an art teacher. How did you end up focusing on writing? Or was there ever a change in focus?

My focus was to get a decent job so I could be independent of my father. At first, I wanted to major in Journalism, but

PICTURED: *Mindstream Dancers* by Marge Simon



PICTURED: Marge Simon

my advisor was off on a sabbatical. I tried another field. With a talent for art, I knew I'd make a good art teacher—but I anticipated teaching adults, or at the very least, high school age. Due to a plethora of graduating teachers in 1970, teaching jobs were not so easy to find, especially at upper levels. I finally got a job as an elementary art teacher,

and because it allowed me freedom once the day ended, I figured things worked out okay after all. I started writing and publishing around 1984.

Did you continue to teach while publishing your writing and art?

I certainly did! I used to say I chose teaching as a way to afford furthering my career (writing, illustrating).

How did you get into science fiction, fantasy, and horror (just speculative fiction in general)?

I joined a local writer's group in the '80s, but I didn't really fit. The lady who ran the group didn't like me, or maybe she just didn't "get" me. Anyway, one day she handed me a couple of sheets of paper stapled together saying, "Here, this should be what you're looking for." It was an early version of *Scavenger's Newsletter*! In it were listed a number of small press as well as a couple of greater small press sf/h/f magazine guidelines. She was right, *Scav* was my key to the future of illustration and writing I craved! True, I also had copies of Writers and Artists Markets, not as much help.

We've been able to publish several pieces of your art. Could you tell us more about your art? Do you have favorite subjects or media?

I'm multi-operational, my subjects & media—even my styles vary, depending on what I'm doing. Covers and/or interiors for vampire themes, illustrations for stories online or in print. [See, for example, the works on the next three pages.] This has worked to my disadvantage as an illustrator, because you don't want to confuse market options with too many approaches. I know it, but I can't help it.

The b/w ones with stenciled flower designs are collaborative pieces with Canadian artist Cathy Buburuz. She became *Born Again* and ceased to do art. Sadly, she died a few years ago. She marketed all our works. Sometimes editors would think she did the drawing and want her to do illustrations.

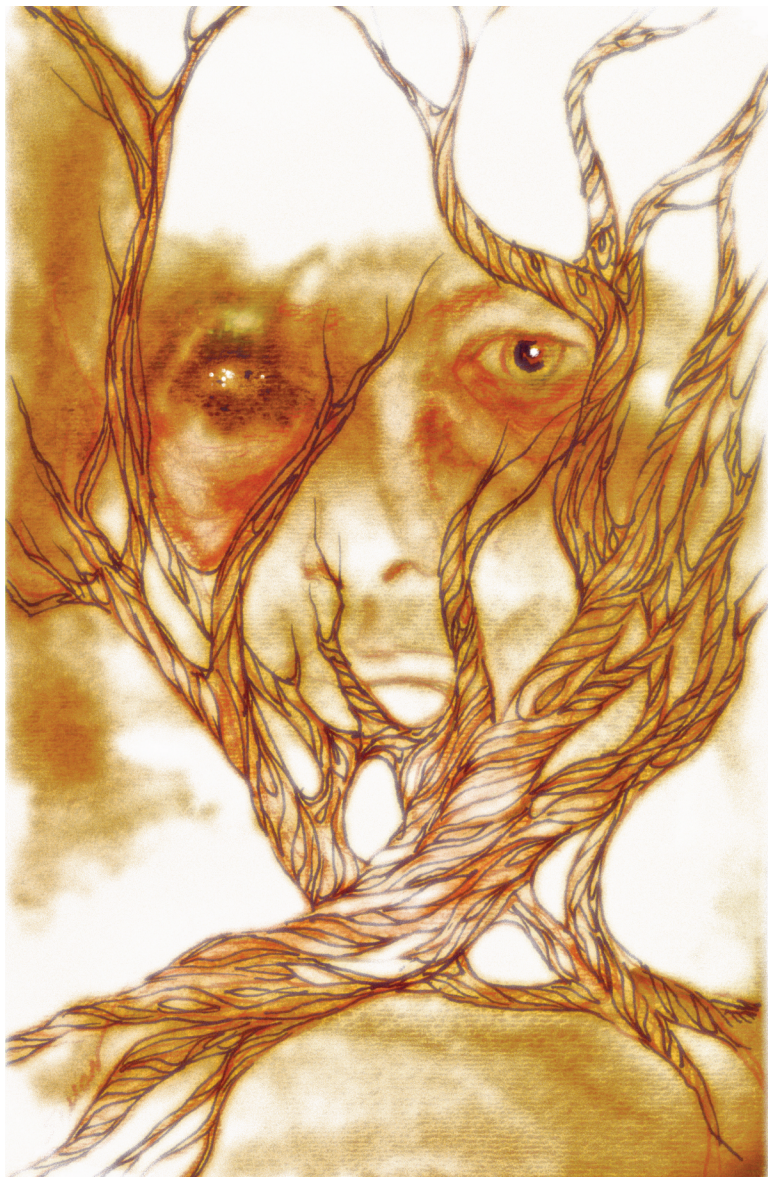


PICTURED: *Future City* by Marge Simon

PICTURED: *Gateway to Nightmares* by Marge Simon



'Gateway to Nightmares'
by Simon & Buhuruz 1990



PICTURED: *The Hangman 2* (above) and *Under a Venusian Moon* (right) by Marge Simon

Strange Horizons called you an “Artist of Antithesis” back in 2004, which I realize was in reference to your illustrated poetry collection of the same name. But was there another meaning to that? Would you call yourself an “artist of antithesis”?

Yes, perhaps, in the sense that I’m always about change, asking questions before I create: antithesis is the Hegelian process of change in which a concept or its realization passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite. I’m often contrary in some respects.

Could you elaborate on that? In what ways are you contrary?

I may write (and paint) poems/fictions serious and profound, but



my personality doesn't fit. My sense of humor keeps tripping me up, and I've illustrated quite a few limerick books with cartoons. I'd rather laugh than frown, putting it simply.

Does history (including art history) continue to influence your work? What about current events?

I feel good about all my poems inspired by historical events (such as wars) and have won a several awards for poems based on such, past or present. Past: "General Tecumseh Sherman's Ghosts" and Future: "Shutdown," Rhysling winners, and an Elgin for "WAR," a collection with Alessandro Manzetti.

Are you still active as an editor?

Yes, I help with poetry and flash fiction selections for Siren's Call Publications. I still edit a column, "Blood & Spades, Poets of the Dark Side," for the HWA Newsletter, as well.

Do you think speculative fiction in general is more inclusive now (in terms of authors)?

If you mean we are seeing more stories by people of color or diverse groups (LGBT, etc.) in the past ten years or so, I would say yes—but in my experience, we didn't know what ethnic group or sex the writers belonged to, years ago. Today, thanks to the internet and blogs, substacks, FB, Instagram, there is much more opportunity and information about breaking into writing speculative fiction and more emphasis on promoting diversity of writers and their output.

What are you working on now (if anything)? I know you have something upcoming (or will be just out when we publish this interview) in Bestiary of Blood. Can you give us a hint about that?

Editor/poet Jamal Hodge has corralled thirty-seven fine poets/writers together to contribute some powerful works told about or inspired by animals of all sorts. I guarantee this collection is worthy of



PICTURED: *Voodoo Wife* by Marge Simon

personal libraries far and wide!

And at the end of last year you published Cast from Darkness, a collaboration with Mary Turzillo. How is it to collaborate with another author? How do you end up doing so?

I've had the pleasure of collaborating with a goodly number of authors/poets over the years, including my husband, Bruce Boston. The incomparable Mary Turzillo is most recent; we really inspire each other. She's one of my very dearest friends, too. How is it to collaborate with her? Magical, and a little bit crazy, if you believe it! How do we collaborate? Sometimes with poems, as in a call and response, or within a poem, trading alternating stanzas such as in "Sirens" [next page] where she began with the first two stanzas and

Sirens

by Marge Simon & Mary Turzillo

Sirens are thirsty tonight.
In the brine, they lap you like kits,
coily pretending to be pretty and helpful.
They suck your tears, your spit, the plasma from your blood.
They reach out tendrils of singing.
You know you need them --
how can you say no?

They work so hard for you,
dragging with the current,
to pull you under,
to kiss you to breathless,
to take your pleasure,
to slap you against the sand.
You can lie there. It's easy.
You will give what they want.
You will bloat in the tide.

When all thirst is satisfied,
the female slaves file out
to tend the bodies awash in the tide.
Sweet and sad, their voices swell in mourning,
that the sailors' journey into the next world
be swift and tempered with kindness,
for all the cruel matter of their passing.
Their bodies are wrapped in clean linen,
buried deep within the island sands.

The Sirens remain silent
until their victims are dispatched,
the last gull with its last morsel,
their slaves again sequestered
in their grotto by the sea.
Once more, those vixens mount the rocks
to play their harps, to weave their spells
into the winds of ill fortune
that speed you luckless sailors by.

I added the last.

Finally, do you have any advice for those getting into either speculative art or writing?

Join the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and/or the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA) and volunteer. Sooner or later, depending on your drive and willingness to take constructive criticism,

you've a good chance to see your works in publication!

* * *

You can find Marge Simon's work in many, many places, including Amazon and Barnes and Noble. You can buy Bestiary of Blood at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DF7RSV2K>. You can contact her about her work at MSimon6206@aol.com.

Matter of the Heart

by Angelisa Fontaine-Wood

The last thing Amadore Griffuccio expected was a wimple, at least not during his usual working hours. But there it stood, casting its shadow by votive candlelight and subtly swaying lamp, against the stone peeking through the scorched plaster. Its owner knelt before the tiny altar in the side chapel, nodding, bobbing even, almost as though the nun underneath was dancing rather than praying.

And so, crouched behind a corner pew in the convent chapel, he waited.

And waited.

The moon rose.

The moon set.

He had ample time to regret the conversation that led to his present position, literal and figurative. Normally such deeds were simple affairs: get in, get out. He had heard tell of monks disguising themselves as a brother of another monastery, waiting ten years or more for a chance at grabbing a given relic. Amadore, however, was no monk, in disguise or otherwise. Quite to the contrary, as a priest's bastard, each feat of daring-do served as a private blow of revenge against his long-gone father. And from runty little runaway he had now reached the prime of life and career. He knew his business. Normally he avoided nunneries as too highly guarded, preferring a catacomb razzia for early martyrs, while bits of the cross, scattered generously across the churches of Italy, lay there for the taking. Pride of place went to "transferring guardianship"—as his clients preferred to phrase it—of a Holy Foreskin, perhaps even The Holy Foreskin, but he generally stayed out of that side of the business. At all events, Amadore stood tall as the go-to man for stealing

relics in all the land.

At least that was the report garnered by Father Gervasio—Abbot of San Stefano, the custodial monastery of the fire-ravaged convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli—after subtly sending out feelers amongst the bishops and the cardinals to find the lightest-handed, nimblest-fingered man for a job he knew must be done.

The prelate rattled his pink jowls at the thief. "A relic of this import should not be in a nunnery! The sisters cannot receive pilgrims and this heart must have its due honors of veneration. It is sacrilegious, even, to think of these *muliericulae* guarding such an august, and indeed powerful, piece of a saint and keeping the body from its integral wholeness."

It hadn't even been that long since Suora Ilaria had passed, a year at most, perhaps a year further since the blaze that had brought the convent, poor already, to a pile of rubble and cinders. The sisters continued there, barely roofed, but persisting as they could in their vows and duties. Then came the rumor that one among them—a new postulate come from afar, whose family was known to none—began to levitate. First in simple floating, then rising to the rafters during orison. This much at least had leaked out of the convent walls to the common folks who told the tale round the fireplace, gathered at the well and gossiping at the mill. Then the postulate performed a full-blown miracle. According to common report, a cousin of one of the sisters, a woman married to a rich but violent man, came for a visit at the *parlatorio*, covered in bruises and nursing a broken arm. This Sister Ilaria reached through the grate and, touching the woman, healed her completely. When the woman returned home, her husband, upon seeing her whole again, took his vows to go to the Holy Land and left his wife his fortune.

One miracle certainly turned heads, but when the nun died shortly thereafter, wonders did not cease. News spread and soon all manner of suffering humanity made their way to the barred doors of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The sisters could not raise their gates to allow in layfolk *en masse*. The laws of cloistered life forbade it. Anyone who came to visit had to go, with Mother Superior's permission, into the small *parlatorio*, but this was no social call. This was an overwhelming tide of the needful and suffering that came in giant waves one over the other. No matter that they could not enter. Even at touching those gates, even at reaching the threshold, lepers—men and women—became paragons of beauty, the crippled leapt, danced, and skipped home to the rhythm of tunes warbled now by the deaf and the mute, the barren bore children, and the blind witnessed it all through eyes restored to the fullness of sight. And, as pilgrims came flooding to the convent doors, so too did riches to the poor sisters.

Father Gervasio—as protector of both the nunnery and his monastery of San Stefano, whose relic collection was vaster and yet far more tranquil—kindly offered to take in the sacred remains of the Suora, now Santa, Ilaria. Her title mattered little to the community: whatever the Pope had yet to pronounce concerning her holy status, popular conviction had already promoted her to the company of the Blessed. The sisters accepted the *translatio*, the transfer, even if they had but little say in the matter. The Abbot, in his paternal concern, did not like to tempt the weaker vessel with so much sudden wealth; his generosity had allowed them, on the other hand, to keep the heart, to bury in the pavement in front of the main altar once the formalities of her sainthood were declared. For the time being a reliquary held it safe in their church's side chapel of San Raffaello, whose statue kept guard over the treasure.

If Father Gervasio had rubbed his hands together at the thought of the coins soon to come pouring into San Stefano's coffers, as they had for Santa Maria degli Angeli, he was to be sorely disappointed. Not a single miracle followed. Pilgrims slowed to a trickle and no donations lit up the holy faces of the brothers. Meanwhile, the heart at Santa Maria degli Angeli continued with its prodigies and the sisters, the thought

obsessed him, must be rolling in ceaseless waves of gold, gold in such quantity as to escape the careful fingers of the monastery's counting-house. This could not stand.

As the Abbot poured ruby red liquid from his finely wrought silver ewer, the wine released its full fragrance to Amadore's sharp nose. Gervasio first filled his own goblet, then, almost as an afterthought, his guest's. Amadore took his time savoring the fruity bodied liquid on his tongue. Surrounded as they were by tapestries to keep out any draft, the Abbot, ensconced in his silks and velvets, and snug in his throne, set forth the situation. Saint Ilaria had come to him in a dream, confiding to him her wish that her body be united and made whole. He even explained, as he gave the relic thief his half-fee up front, that money was the root of all evil and perhaps better the sisters do without than put their immortal souls at risk.

The relic thief nodded at his superior's unequalled wisdom, weighed his purse, took out a coin and bit it. Satisfied, he promised the Abbot the heart within a fortnight and went his way to scout the environs of his next target and toast the rest of the fee to come.

Squatting now in a shadowy corner of the chapel, eyeing the archangel's statue, he dreamed of how he would spend it once in his hands, the wine and the women. A velvet doublet would not be amiss. A new mount, perhaps? After hours of this musing, cramps invaded his usually sturdy haunches and he snuffed at a terrible need to sneeze. Though the blaze had come two years before, the smell of the burnt stone still haunted the air. Amadore thought of the Abbot's insulating tapestries as he studied the patterns in the soot stains, seeing in them profiles and eyes spying upon his hiding place. His nerves had never played such tricks upon him before. These visions were not improved by a slight swing in the overhead lamp that, with the double illumination of the candlelight, made the shadow of the horned wimple seem to dance with itself against the thicker black of the fire's eerie traces. Still the faceless nun knelt before the altar, under the slow undulations of the lamp. What she could possibly be praying over that long he could not guess, for nuns, as far as he knew, had no sins to speak of. They

simply did not have the opportunity. But then he remembered that they prayed for the souls of others, of people like him, in fact, one the world's wide array of transgressors.

If she kept at it, he might just start praying himself. Amadore was beginning to think his present circumstances might require it when the convent bell sounded and soon enough the other sisters would shuffle in to sing the offices. He scurried his way to safety, the better to try again the following night.

* * *

Suora Benetta tried her best to concentrate, no easy feat with the sensation of being watched, even here when she knew herself alone with the heart, the other sisters grabbing what sleep they could before matins. Perhaps it was only Ilaria watching over her from on high, but why then should the feeling be of eyes boring into the back of her head?

Ilaria had been Benetta's friend, as much as a walking, breathing saint could be friend to anyone. The woman had come comparatively late to Santa Maria degli Angeli and Mother Superior entrusted her to Suora Benetta, who had been among them since a child. Thus it fell to the younger girl to show the newcomer the ways and customs of their abbey.

In return, and on the sly, Suora Ilaria taught Suora Benetta to chant their hymns of praise to the tunes of love songs from the world outside. The younger nun took readily to the merriment. The two would laugh over whether it would be liturgically appropriate to flavor the Eucharist with rosewater or whether a strawberry could be transubstantiated or simply transubstantiate itself, by virtue of its perfection, without priestly or even human intervention. They thought of trying. About this and other matters, they would giggle. They giggled drawing water from the cloister well, culling simples of borage and verbena to steep for the sick sisters; they giggled inadministering them in the infirmary, in the corridor leading to chapel, leaning breathless under a sculpted capital, on

scullery duty with filthy hands, wherever the laughter seized them. That giggling would bubble up into something boundless, something beyond what initially triggered it, until their mad bursts seemed a divine gift, even under the frown of the Abbess. Despite that glare, with the peering, piercing, unblinking eyes, the Holy Spirit insisted in visiting fits of merriment upon the two hearts in a delectable grace of mirth.

* * *

Kneeling before the reliquary in the San Raffaello chapel, under the outstretched wings of the archangel's statue, Benetta could not settle her mind to rote prayer. Instead of the Seven Dolorous Mysteries of Our Lady to contemplate on the decades of her rosary, there came instead the mystery of Ilaria, and how their friendship grew.

She thought back on the first night they shared their cell, their two little pallet beds each on one side of the tiny room. Lights were out, pater-nosters said, and the next office to sing was a brief doze away, but Ilaria reached over to her.

"Why are you here, you young thing? Why are you imprisoned in these walls with that dragon watching every breath?"

Over the following weeks, little by little Benetta's story came out, with Ilaria's gentle prodding. Slowly the tale unfolded: When Benetta's worldly mother remarried, her new lord could not bear reminders of his predecessor, and so Benetta was packed off to Santa Maria degli Angeli where her aunt Paola had served as Abbess before her passing.

"My mother according to the flesh could not suffer the token of her previous marriage to ruin her new chances for happiness. I was glad to be with my auntie and the other sisters played with me like a doll, for I was little enough. It was not much different than how my brothers had always treated me, and what I recalled of my father's doting. It was fine. Then, when Mother Modesta came, everything changed."

At that, the church bell sounded for the office, calling forth the sisters

into their orison of praise. Entirely unused to ears opening to her woes, Benetta knew not how to react, but the tolling relieved her confusion. Their conversation suspended, the two women joined the bleary-eyed nuns in singing the antiphon, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to thy word.”

When Mother Modesta informed her that her stepfather too had passed away, Benetta spent the days following anticipating a summons home to be with her mother, who was now free to embrace and welcome her. She even began to gather together what little things she called her own—a comb, a needle, a handkerchief — for a quick departure to her family’s open arms.

After a week of silence, then two, then three, she began to stop expecting. The night that Benetta finally unpacked her tiny holdall, she broke into sobs that did not cease between nones and compline. Ilaria came to her pallet and held her shaking body close the while, helping her to regain composure before the offices started again, and she must sing with her clearest voice.

As their friendship grew, so too did Ilaria begin to waste, her mortal coil shrinking and vanishing before Benetta’s eyes. No money could be had for a physician, so Ilaria wasted. With leeches administered in vain, the sister tried cupping and bleeding, even mutton broth offered by the neighboring farms, but nothing brought back flesh to her frame. The younger sister tended to Ilaria in the infirmary, dodging the other duties Mother Modesta assigned in order to be with her friend. As earthly sustenance had no effect, Benetta brought her the blossoms that she thought might gladden Ilaria’s soul—for Benetta suspected black bile must be eating away at her substance. She brought her posies that changed as the season passed, simply for their charms, from violets to speedwell and yarrow. Benetta even screwed up her courage to offer her back the songs Ilaria had whispered to her, and hummed them under her breath, not daring the words aloud. Ilaria would grin despite what she suffered, and a soundless breath passed from her like phantom laughter.

On a day of fewer demands on her time, Benetta sat with Ilaria in si-

lence. Merriment seemed a thing from someone else’s life, in another time. As the quiet stretched on, Benetta screwed up her courage to ask if she had ever known a man. Ilaria giggled her answer, like a girl much younger and healthier than Benetta knew her to be.

“Read the *Song of Songs*, *The Song of Solomon*, and that will tell you all you need to know of men and love. It is prayer, girl, and it is wisdom, in this world and out of it. Now carry me outside into the garden for me to breathe something other than the miasmas of sick.”

Once amongst the sweet smell of greenery, the neighboring white rose bush opened before its hour into red blooms. Ilaria sighed and began to sing “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” Before she could utter the second line, the nun shattered into a fit of gasping mirth, laughter and effort both breaking her. The silence afterward confirmed Benetta’s worst fears. Even the birdsong of the garden turned to a hush.

A cloud of doves, entirely out of season, gathered overhead. They rose above her remains, rose above the convent, then scattering into the skies, as Ilaria’s soul journeyed to her reward. The sisters too flocked to witness the marvel occurring on high before their very eyes.

* * *

In her chambers, Mother Superior reflected. She did not believe in such heretical nonsense as ghosts but still Ilaria haunted the convent. In the corners of stairwells, in the cobwebs of the rafters, in the shadows of the chapels, in the very soot still staining the walls, her larks and capers echoed, above all in the susceptible heart of Benetta. Though past the age of suggestion, the age at which Benetta had come to them, that docile and rather stupid girl had fallen victim to the stranger’s laughing antics, despite the Abbess’s best efforts.

Modesta had tried. She had spoken sternly to the pair, threatened bread and water, then a penance of absolute silence, as though for gossip which was just as pernicious. Against her better judgment Modesta had asked Benetta, who knew their rules to the letter and obeyed them,

Modesta had to admit, better than most, to take Ilaria in hand and teach her the ways of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The young girl had always been tractable if somewhat useless. Something undefinable, however, niggled at Mother Modesta's opinion of her. Benetta had ever seemed somewhere else, present in the flesh but her mind floating in unreachable spheres. Mother Modesta had attempted to make her into a good handmaiden of the Lord. As Benetta had been niece to Paola, the preceding Abbess, Modesta could hardly dislodge her into the streets, whatever the defects of both. For Paola had been bad enough, juggling the ledger entries in such a way as to disguise the effects of Benetta's mother defaulting on her daughter's upkeep. With Modesta in charge, those days were now over. She would see to it that the girl would take her final vows directly, ending this eternal dilly-dallying and with a fine and handsome dowry for the girl's profession, her wedding to Christ himself. Otherwise, there would be the devil to pay. Meanwhile, Modesta had thought imposing duties of instruction on Benetta towards a newcomer might awaken sterner stuff within, like calling her the name of sister proper rather than that silly moniker she came in with.

Modesta's first misstep came in accepting Ilaria at all, no matter her story. It was a tired tale. The daughter of a rich but suddenly impoverished father found herself cast upon the wide and bad world. Her only recourse from starvation was to fall into the clutches and the bed of a charming nobleman whose promises of marriage never materialized. She discovered, only too late, that he already possessed a lady wife. She then she left the scoundrel: years later, that is. So old was the story that Modesta almost fell asleep. The only thing missing was some misbegotten, bastard child. The Abbess could nearly recite herself the refrains of contrition, and their doubtful sincerity, so many times had women in her position already heard some version of it.

Still, and this was the element that made no sense given the story, Ilaria had the money upfront. The sum was enough that she would never be in the financial desperation that a failed and aging courtesan must find herself in, to come to a convent's doors.

Whatever the puzzle of it, as Abbess, Modesta could not refuse the en-

try funds. She could not even allow herself to ask the probing questions she wished. The fire put paid to all semblance of choice; there could simply be no refusal of the dowry money newcomers brought with them. Thus, the Abbess took Ilaria in against her better judgment, along with the feeling that this woman brought trouble somehow. She could read it in the way her eyes did not dip in humility before her betters when asked pointedly about her past. Furthermore, she did not show repentance for her former life of sin in the world. The Abbess sensed in fact something hard-necked and obdurate. A feeling nagged her that Ilaria grimaced and mimicked her when just out of Modesta's rigorous sightline.

With the arrival of that cursed creature, that was the end of efforts with Benetta. Ilaria's presence acted as though on a dormant substance; something sleeping in the girl awoke. Benetta's lackadaisical, daydreaming ways which had so long vexed Modesta became disturbances of wandering levity in ill accord with the duties of the novitiate. Thus, whenever one of those fits of tittering came upon Ilaria and Benetta, the Abbess ordered them to go about barefoot on the cold flagstones, recite the psalter, or any suitable penance she might conceive. Still their merriment persisted, and there seemed to be nothing she, Mother Modesta, could do to stifle it. It even sometimes spread like contagion to the other girls and women, and that was the worst of it. The Abbess would not have that kind of community, not under her watch. They had been poor enough, with rich postulates thin on the ground, but they would not be plagued by disorder and scandal, as they had under the rule of Mother Paola.

The giggling annoyed the Abbess enough as matters stood, but then Ilaria began to levitate. The newcomer coupled it with her snickering, as uncontrolled as her wafting upwards like so much incense, laughter bouncing off the thick walls in rebounding echoes. Mother superior forbade speaking of it in the *parlatorio*, unsure as the grande dame was as to whether this floating was inspired by the divine or the devil. The laughter led Mother to believe the latter. The Evil One also worked in mysterious ways.

When Sister Ilaria fell ill, Mother Superior offered up her thanks that a

sick nun would surely cease her visits to the vaulted ceilings and certainly lose all interest in that infernal chortling. Yet even as the illness lingered, a month, then two, wasting Ilaria's flesh into her bones, she laughed, and laughed even louder as her final moments came and left along with her soul. Benetta had been with her in the garden. The sisters said doves cooed in unison over the rooftops, hovering in the form of a heart.

When her body did not putrefy, holding its form and color as in life, they insisted that she be placed in the holy chapel. Beyond all remedy now, word in the convent and beyond was that these brides of Christ possessed a saint. Then the miracles began in earnest. It started with the witless children, whose beggar mother had brought them to the gate, drooling from their babbling mouths. The mother touched their hands to the iron bars and of a sudden they chanted Latin plainsong in perfect pitch, until Modesta realized that the Latin was Catullus, and his least respectable verses. Then a school of deaf mutes gathered, supplicating, and suddenly burst into a polyphonic motet of a poet wooing a fetching shepherdess. A girl with a club foot came dragging her useless limb all the way up the hill and even the steps, bleeding at her torn knees. In touching the gates she fell backward, only to lift herself up again and leap as though to an *estampie* that only she could hear. Others with deformed legs began to join her, in perfect time of the unheard rhythm they seemed to share in perceiving, out of the range of anyone else.

Rumor leaked out and soon troops of unfortunates stood at their gates, a cacophony of beggars of all stripes, their cries and chaos unchanneled despite the best efforts of the brothers from San Stefano, whom Modesta had been reduced to call upon. No one listened to the monks' pleas, then commands, to leave, then at least to step back, then to form an orderly line, to pray together in unison, no.

Miracles occurred with no respect for boundaries or turns, they struck out of nowhere and the witnesses would burst into peals of laughter. The sound reached Modesta's chambers and enraged her.

* * *

Those outside Santa Maria's walls remained entirely unaware of and unconcerned with the giggling inside—but donations in Ilaria's honor had by now repaired the roof while making headway into some of the other burnt-out and dilapidated buildings. They brought in whiter, healthier bread, chicken of a Sunday and even meat for major feasts, longer-burning firewood and more of it. The nuns' darned habits could be replaced and covered over with warmer cloaks and perhaps even mittens.

Mother Superior begrudged the dead woman that much. Austerity was one thing, penury quite another. Whether she would or no, Ilaria seemed to be looking after her fellow sisters even in death and that urged respect. Modesta rendered the dead woman her due. Still, she did not like or trust the clerics that had since come sniffing around in order to rewrite Ilaria's story to one of untrammelled, matchless sanctity.

That old viper Gervasio sent them. Seeing her treasury thus "burdened by worldly care" the Abbot lost no time in requesting to relieve them of the duty to the relics, while suffering them to remain in possession of the heart. Modesta knew this for a ploy to divert the new-found wealth to himself and the brothers. It stood transparent to anyone with a functioning wit. And much good may it do him, them, she thought, for given the miracles produced, she was still unconvinced of the nature of the spirit that possessed Ilaria and the forces that inspired the ongoing marvels of Santa Ilaria at the convent door.

* * *

As Sister Benetta had guided Ilaria through her entry into Santa Maria, so the Abbess entrusted her with keeping the oil lamp. Under the young sister's watch, it would burn in honor of the holy remains, or at least what remained of the remains. And of course, Benetta must pray over them. The idea, she knew, was to keep her exhausted and out of trouble, but Benetta felt little desire to do anything else but kneel before that reliquary, to ponder and mourn the nature of the heart that lay within it, pursuing good works among those who brought their sorrows to the convent gates.

Keeping her vigil, Benetta wondered whether it was wayward or was it holy, that heart? Or both?

For a week, then two weeks, the girl knelt there and asked forgiveness for her own lightness. She implored pardon as well for her tears, for how can one mourn when one knows that the dead are among the Blessed in Heaven, a saint now pursuing the salvation and healing of others, watching over the welfare of her erstwhile sisters?

But just when she managed to roil up a proper sentiment of penitence, then the music would come to her, all those songs that Ilaria had taught her and the dance steps with them. Benetta's prayerful words then turned to lyric nonsense, her own body swaying to the rhythmic tunes, like the lamp above her, and she would have to swallow back her invading laughter into her throat. Which would immediately turn to ash, for she could not laugh without her Sister Ilaria.

At those moments of stillborn sport, Benetta could feel, still, that sense of being watched. It occurred to her that she was not alone, after all, with this sense of a friendly presence somewhere she could not pin down, above her, beside her, behind her, none of that and all of it. But as her hair lay flat rather than standing on end, she decided then that Ilaria had not left her without consolation.

During one such passage from midnight to dawn, the lamp shone more brightly, swinging gently as if to chase off the surrounding darkness, as if to show Benetta that the night held naught to be feared. The dancing shadow play recalled Ilaria's quick, light foot, the grace of her arms, as she sketched a *bassa danza* to Benetta when no one was watching, teaching the girl the steps that they then repeated each time they were called to infirmary or scullery or whatever other penitential duties Mother Modesta had imposed upon them, until their heaving laughter itself prevented them from further larks. The young woman recalled the thrill of transgression in their moves and their merriment that seemed so like the oscillating swing of the lamp, that thumbed its nose at the staid behavior of the straight votive candle flames on the altar itself. It was literally and figuratively above all that, twirling its mad

dance steps from on high. Benetta swore she felt a presence keeping vigil beside her. She took what comfort she could until inevitably the sense of being watched vanished, and the light in the lamp lowered. Benetta filled it again with its measure of oil, but the glow remained dim. The sisters filed in for their sleepy orison under its half-light, all unawares of its blazing escapades from moments before.

* * *

The following night, Amadore clambered the high walls, once more, starting south, in the kitchens where the flame had first broken out and the dilapidation was most severe. His usual reservations about nunneries vanished in the face of how easy the damage had left the cloister to enter. He skirted close to the walls, then crawling about the crumbling tunnels and around about the refectory, the infirmary and dormitories, northward to the church, he cringed at just how vulnerable these little women were, their defenses down and open to intruders. But then Amadore thought of his father, drunk on communion wine, slapping his face with an open hand, and pressed onward.

On the church roof now, a calico mouser yowled her indignance at his intrusion. Amadore almost stepped into a nest of dove eggs, whether abandoned or not, he could not tell, but this tripped him into a statue of the Virgin, looming above him, shadowy in the moonlight. He turned away and shook his head only to find himself face-to-face with a gargoyle twisting its mouth in open disgust at the thief's intentions. Not easily influenced, Amadore then swung from a buttress to the roof, slipping his slim person through a hole in the attic, under the rafters of the roof space. Down through a partially caved-in cross vault and its attendant shattered stained glass, he proceeded then to the side chapel of the ambulatory that housed the heart. He kept his eye out for the sign of the Raphael statue, as directed by Gervasio. Once arrived, Amadore found himself again thwarted by the bobbing wimple, under the bright glow of the swinging lamp above her.

He stood by, for this game was one of patience now, attrition even, and if the past were any predictor of the future it was one he would surely

win, if only he could remain still enough, long enough, persistent enough. Another hour passed, and then another. Just as he thought to make his escape and return again the following night for the next match, the head turned. Framed by their wimple, a stunning pair of green eyes against an olive complexion stared back at him, wide with curiosity, taking him in from head to foot.

“Sister, forgive me, I fear I am lost.” It was rash, idiotic even, inside a cloister chapel in the depths of the night, but he did not know what else to say. Such a thing had never in his working life happened to him.

Yet she did not scream; she did not cry out. In fact, she burst out laughing. Uncontrollably.

He turned and ran.

* * *

Lost indeed. He must have gone sorely astray to find himself in a such a place between matins and lauds. Lost to all sense, yes and perhaps worse still.

Yet Suora Benetta said nothing. She remained unsure of the reason, only she had not laughed so since Ilaria’s passing. He seemed an apparition sent by her late friend, this absurd creature with the forked beard. She could not help but recall her brother who wore his whiskers in the same fashion and would pluck at them when teasing her. The codpiece only inspired more hilarity. She had seen few men since her enclosure. Such beings were glimpsed only briefly, and in cassocks for the most part. Still, she felt not in the least profaned, only giddy.

As she knelt before the heart’s shrine in the chapel of Saint Raphael, looking up at his beatific face, she pondered the *Book of Tobias*. Those passages told how the archangel guided that young man, who rescued Sarah from the demon and wed her, freeing her now from her torment. Tobias’s journey had begun to another purpose entirely but ended, as Benetta recalled it, in the arms of true love. Thus Raphael, she knew,

watched over those whose paths wound them into unexpected places and events, paths that may wander from their original intention, but brought them home in the end. The archangel could not fail to bring them whither they were always meant to arrive.

Her own steps had been guided to the abbey of Santa Maria. Surely her stars had willed this fate, that she should lose her worldly name to become Benetta. The girl bowed her head in acquiescence as she had always done. She would soon have to take her formal vows, accept her induction as one among the professed sisters, nevermore to leave the walls of the convent. She rendered an Ave of thanks for the protection of those high fortifications, crumbling though they were, but heaved a sigh all the same, with no words to put to the why or wherefore.

If she could find no way to articulate this except in a breath that tasted something like regret, it was that this time too, this time above all when there would be no turning back, no way forward or back from the towering stone cloister’s eternal, sheltering embrace, no one had thought to consult her about her own wishes in the matter. She simply had no experience in knowing her own will, much less expressing it to any successful effect. She had never known what it might be to shape her fate rather than simply obey it, to bend the stars to her own will rather than her neck to theirs, be it the heavens or her family.

Ilaria had stood again as the exception to all Benetta’s kith and kin. Having taken the veil proper, Ilaria was well-placed to ask about her vocation. Benetta remembered the day that they were scraping wax from the floor of a chapel, after scrubbing the soot from the walls next to the votive candles. Ilaria abruptly asked what no one else ever had.

“Bacciamea, if I may call you by your worldly name, what state do you prefer, that of nun or that of a wedded wife, sooner or later?”

At her own blank-eyed response, Benetta was sure the sister would laugh, but she did not.

“Bacciamea—for so I must call you—you, my dear girl, who have not

even the choice of her own name, here is what I advise: pretend the decision is made now, already. You have passed the novitiate and are now forever after within these walls, one of the nuns, Sister Benetta, never again to hear the name Bacciamea. So, do you feel happy or sad?”

“I do not know,” she replied, but what she did not know was how to find the words to say that she felt lost.

* * *

After one week, then two, the thief’s promised deadline of a fortnight’s wait had passed. An empty-handed and irritable Father Gervasio summoned Amadore into his private chambers at San Stefano. A mouthwatering aroma of roasted meat wafted from a plate at the small table installed there. Amadore’s present state of hunger made him acutely aware that it was venison, although no invitation to partake was forthcoming. The thief was also aware that it was Lent. He kept his own counsel.

“What is the wait, Griffuccio? Why have I not even heard from you?”

Amadore did not like it, not one bit, this coming to a client, whatever client, unprovided-for, and well past the promised date of delivery too. Not only was his professional pride at risk, so too was his reputation and hence his livelihood. He had accepted his half-fee, and that stood as good as giving his word that the relic would land in the hands of the Abbot.

He did not speak of the debacle, only that entry and accessing the object had grown difficult, without further detail.

“That old bat must suspect something,” Gervasio muttered, his rosy nose sniffing the air.

Amadore’s thoughts flew to what he considered now a rendezvous, in spite of himself. He would need all his wit to subdue the sister into handing the heart over to him of her own will and volition. Or, he might

distract her long enough to break open the reliquary and pocket it.

And yet he found himself charmed. His life had accustomed him to the unsavory habits of harlots after gold and no more than that. And this he understood, for he understood the transaction.

Love, whether the kind spoken of by poets or by prelates, might well be in the realm of the miracles. A good solid ducat, a shiny florin—such as the many brought to his purse by the tongue of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, by Saint Balthazar’s myrrh, the nail parings of Doubting Thomas’s finger, Saint Andrew’s sandal straps, both Saint Agatha’s breasts, a locust of John the Baptist, and the sweat of Saint Joseph’s brow—the coins were things you only needed to be able to count, and could count on. It was not necessary to believe in them.

Still, he could not dislodge from his thoughts that wide-eyed gaze he had never seen on another woman before.

* * *

Sister Benetta took up her watch, pouring a night’s worth of oil into the lamp. She began to pray her beads. Her mind, though, would not settle on the words, try as she might, for she wondered if the intruder would again show himself. Nor did she feel trepidation, only wonderment at this apparition.

No sooner did the lamp begin to brighten but she turned to the shadows, and out crept the creature in the codpiece.

A long moment of silence melted into giggles. They bubbled forth from her first, but infectious as they were, as she was, so Amadore joined in not even knowing what the joke was.

Still he could not help but ask, “What’s so funny?”

“Are you lost again?”

“I seem to keep taking the wrong turn, yes.”

“Who are you? And what in the world are you doing here?”

He had to think fast about what tack to take. “I am a magician. I make things disappear.”

“As mysteriously as you appear?”

He hesitated at an inspiration that came to him, but risked advancing all the same. When she did not flinch, he furthered sinews forward, while she herself seemed to him to lean in, as if to help close the distance over the flagstones separating them.

“Moreso, and not just my person either.” He pulled the Abbot’s coin from her ear, with his quick, stealthy grace. He bowed to her with a flourish, as though she were a worldly lady, his hand nearly caressing the length of her veil. Another peal escaped her lips and he fell under its spell, swore he would inspire it again—a sweet thing was a giggling nun, he learned. He hoped what charm he could convey might tame this creature, until he found some way to distract her, to leave him alone in the chapel. Still, his own delight at provoking her glee surprised him too.

“I didn’t know that nuns laughed—I thought you only prayed and expiated the sins of people like, well, me.”

“Nor have I since the passing of Suora Ilaria. She too reminded me of my brothers’ tricks and toys, from the time before I came here amongst the sisters. Since Ilaria ... well, I have been mouse-quiet, so as not to risk Mother Modesta’s ire. Not that there is ever much to laugh over anymore, so for that I thank you. How should I call you?”

“Would you like to call me, then?”

She thought a moment, “Yes, yes I would.”

“Amadore. And you?”

“Suora Benetta, at least since my life began here.”

“And I take it you guard this relic, of Suora Ilaria, this heart that is at the, well, heart of all of this miracle ruckus?”

“I pray over it for my own sake and then the relic performs miracles in more ways than one. I cannot tell you how sunk in debt our community is and has been since even before the fire. Our habits had gone threadbare just as our bedding,” here she blushed, “with no replacements for the torn and the tattered, no matter the weather. We now read our psalter by wax candle, where before we had but tallow that barely gives off enough light along with its smell and smoke.

“Now we can pay the wages of the workers, and make up the arrears of those who out of pity still came and did what they could for us, despite their own poverty. And so now too might we have the joy of giving alms and accepting once more the indigent into our hospital. Before all this, even at table the cellaress watered our wine so we could barely taste it. With the heart relic and its miracles, all that is over now.”

She smiled at something, thinking back. “If she were here Ilaria would have certainly made a jest about the miracle of the water into wine at Cana.”

“Sister Ilaria sounds well named. Merry as you are, you must be happy here, in spite of it all?”

“What is happiness? Mother Modesta thinks I am lost to all hope of ever being a good and proper sister.”

“Did you ever want to be?”

She looked at him again with those wide eyes, puzzled. No one had ever put it to her quite like that, except Ilaria.

“My earthly mother gave me to Santa Maria when she remarried, near my tenth summer. Before Mother Modesta, my auntie served as Abbess and made much of me, which I enjoyed, perhaps too much. Of course, I had no thought of marriage then. Sometimes I do wonder, especially

since Ilaria, told me ... things.” How he loved to see that blush take her cheek again. “These are my stars. I am well looked after. How could I ask for more?”

Amadore, who had run away and made his own fate at just the age this girl had been handed over to the nuns, could hardly grasp her words and yet wanted to know, to understand. He had never had the slightest desire to know the life’s tale of his companions of a night at inn or tavern. But this sad and laughing sister’s story wrenched at him and he must have more.

Just as he opened his mouth for another question, the bell for matins tolled. The relic thief melted into the shadows.

* * *

Without fail, as the lamplight brightened, her heart began to skip beats.

He appeared from the shadows the blaze had chased away.

“How is it that you are a nun?”

“Well, first I am only a handmaiden and not a bride of Christ.”

“What do you mean?”

“I never formally took the veil, my—I never took the sacred vows, only they started calling me Sister Benetta out of habit, and in the habit, if you’ll pardon the pun—my hair was never shorn, wimple aside. Mother Modesta—who is, well, difficult—has just about given me up. But if my worldly mother does not make up for the back pay of my upkeep, there will be another kind of price to pay.”

“You mean you’re not a nun? You took no vow?”

“Not yet; but I will, I must. In fact, Mother Modesta has set up the solemnity already, we are only waiting for Father Gervasio to organize the ceremony.”

“But what do you want, what is your own desire?”

Benetta hesitated, not knowing how to even begin to formulate a reply. Patiently, he waited, watching her intently until he cocked his head at a sleepy scuff of shoes over pavement. The sisters were entering to sing lauds. Benetta too turned to the entryway, trying to imagine an explanation to give the others for the presence of this man in the chapel, but when she returned her gaze to the place where he had stood a moment before, she found herself alone. Amadore had absconded.

* * *

When he arrived again in the chapel the following night, he lost no time.

“And your name? You never told me.”

“But I did, Suora Benetta, for Mother Modesta never liked my baptismal name, which is all I have left of my father.”

“But, precisely, what were you christened?”

“Bacciamea.”

She was not the first Bacciamea he had ever encountered, but somehow from her lips it sounded so much more like “Baciarmi” to his ears that Amadore preferred to take this as a command he would happily obey from on high. He strode over and kissed her. The lamp, burning like a comet, began to swing wildly like a child’s top that had lost its mind.

Mirabile! His mouth upon hers was a revelation, for one who had only known the Kiss of Peace during Mass. Her heart leapt like the *saltarello* Ilaria had taught her and all those words to all those songs made sense now, as she melted into his embrace. This then, she imagined, resembled reaching destination at the close of a pilgrimage, a kind of homecoming to someplace awaited eagerly yet strange and unknown. As she blessed Saint Raphael’s name, other refrains came floating to her ear.

*With him who, worshipping my charms,
For aye would fold me in his arms
As one unto his service sworn.*

While Benetta had always felt some sense of trespass when she would hear these verses, here and now, all sense of sin dissolved into the words that Ilaria had whispered with her last breath, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!”

After her passing, Benetta had gone to the library and read the glosses, “Normally the touch of lip on lip is the sign of the loving embrace of hearts, but this conjoining of natures brings together the human and divine, shows God reconciling ‘to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.’”

Her arms rose from her sides of their own volition to embrace his neck, despite his tickling beard, and she could almost guess at the rest, what Ilaria had whispered in those nights and had seemed so incomprehensible.

She caught her breath as Amadore broke away from her clasping hands, touched her cheek, brushed away the wimple’s linen overhang.

“Wait for me, do not take the vows. Promise me that.”

Ilaria had warned her of men making promises. This man was not making one, but asking it of her.

The lamp all the while continued with its dizzying swirl, dancing its rounds, its light bouncing off the reliquary and illuminating the chapel entire beyond the strength of its tiny flame. Raphael’s very wings seemed to blaze and dazzle under its lustrous twirl, as though setting off himself to fly away. Benetta took that as a sign as to where and how to place her faith. She let Amadore free to escape discovery from the rank and file of sisters soon to arrive in the chapel.

* * *

The following night, Amadore brought not only the halfpenny for his pains but his whole purse of savings—the net worth of so many relics he fondly recalled procuring over his years of fingerwork.

He had even once, down in Naples, lifted a feather moulted by Saint Raphael, whose statue’s unfurled wings cast their protective shadow over the heart relic. He had nervously eyed the creature since his first comings and goings into the chapel. Amadore prayed in spite of himself that this archangel who had guided a young man through wandering ways to true love might also watch over his own forking roads, now as the stakes grew dire and his intentions of what to steal had changed so utterly.

He was playing now not only for a heart but for his own and his soul into the bargain, and perhaps hers as well, leading astray a girl destined to be bride of Christ—but had she no vocation, no will to this life, what indeed was the sin? That he was even thinking in this manner left him perplexed, for never before had he concerned himself with sin and salvation. This was perilous stuff indeed.

He thought back to each of the adventures that had made the fortune he carried with him now.

However stained, however ill-gotten, this would be the coup of his career, and likely its final feat, for he would carry off not a relic but the sister who guarded the saint’s heart, the sister who had stolen his own heart instead. He didn’t know if the gift of it went both ways, but on the off chance, a gambler ever, he was willing to bet buying another steed for quick getaway on a long and weary road out of that place.

* * *

At first he said, “Come with me,” and then rethought his words, “No, let me put that another way: do you want to come with me?”

Benetta thought of Ilaria’s heart, entrusted to her watch, her care. But then she thought back, remembered to pretend the decision is already

made: what should she feel to stay here, with no choice but to live her life enclosed? She did not so much mind the meager fare or tending to the sick and the suffering, the poor of the world. Certainly, the eagle eye and iron fist of Mother Modesta would brook no more laughter, no more dancing, no more singing other than plainchant. But above all, those mighty walls rose high enough to almost block out the stars she believed in, and it cut her breath short. The decades stretched before her, and they seemed very long indeed.

“Bacciamea?”

At the name her father gave her, at the sound of it, here and now, tenderly rolling off Amadore’s lips and tongue, she decided. She took her fate in her own two hands and joined it to the relic thief’s. The lamp set to swinging wildly.

Under the relic thief’s expert and agile fingers, the reliquary came apart in a trice. Once the shrine had been pried open, they took the heart—fresh, bloody, as if about to beat once more—in the newly woven altar cloth and buried it, safe from prying eyes and the fingers of grasping hands, in a place that only a thief would think of, concealed it so cleverly that none would ever guess where, hidden to any eye that didn’t already know the trick of the shadows and the stone of the chapel of San Raffaello.

The two left a note upon the altar for Modesta that the heart was safe from avid abbots, somewhere under the ogives, but even for the Mother

Superior, the precise spot would remain secret. Gervasio would certainly come sniffing around, but without ripping apart the sacred space stone by stone, all his searching would be in vain.

This, though, no longer concerned them.

And the oil lamp that Bacciamea had filled but shortly before went dim and then extinguished, as though offering them the gift of shadows for their escape. The pair made their way through the chinks in Santa Maria’s stone walls to the night outside. The stars above seemed friendlier than either runaway had ever glimpsed before. Bacciamea—for Benetta was no more—might trace now the lines from one bright speck of light to another, creating her own pictures to explain the lines so drawn and the stories they told and foretold.

* * *

Only moments after they vanished, Mother Modesta found the note, just as the sleepy-eyed sisters filed in for matins. The oil lamp, shining brightly once again, swung to and fro and all around, as though dancing, which seemed a silly antic for it to be up to.

One nun started to giggle, and then the next, until they became an entire choir of uproarious laughter, no longer a discreet titter but a chorus of unprovoked hilarity resounding on the walls with their pointed arches. Modesta, on the verge of calling order and assigning penance, began to smile, and before she knew it a giggle escaped her lips.

The house at the top of the hill

by Eva Papasoulioti

Welcome, come inside.
Don't be afraid, I'm only walls
and windows and foundations.
You can touch them. Me.
I'm not made of gingerbread
or candy, my fireplace isn't a secret
oven for me to bake fresh
cinnamon children. Upstairs,
in my two bedrooms there is
no wolf playing dress up,
no sharp teeth, no long claws.
There is a library, though.
My furniture is old but no ancient
servants were transformed.
My teapot is a teapot, albeit chipped.
My armchair is comfortable, yet worn out.
You can check my basement, too.

You will find no monster or dead bodies,
no naked chained grandmas. Only
the boiler and the washing machine.
Here, I started the coffee maker for you.
I've been alone for a long time.
I'm only walls, you see.
They are all up. Look at them standing
proud against snow and heat,
keeping me upright under wind and storm,
overseeing the town from my place
at the top of the hill.
We're alone up here.
And I'm only walls.
Look, how they close around you. Look,
how they breathe down your neck. Look,
the walls you spend a life building in your head
are trapped inside mine. Welcome.



Urban Haunt

by Barbara Candiotti

Value

by Raiff Taranday

Things have been tense between the ghost in my house and me since quarantine started. It wasn't an ideal arrangement even before I was stuck at home, but we had a routine that allowed us to ignore each other pretty effectively. She would usually hide while I was around and emerge while I was out to taunt my cat, Jackie; tilt my picture frames; or rearrange my glassware. Despite some introverted tendencies, I used to have a reasonably active social life that kept me away from home for significant stretches of the day, not to mention all the traveling I used to do (yes, I'm one of those people who keeps a world map on the wall and colors all the countries I've visited—Eastern Europe and South America are mostly filled in). Now that I'm around all the time, I'm constantly catching glances of the ghost out of the corner of my eye, darting along the periphery, fleet as a shadow. Worse, she's started hiding my bras.

I've never been the type to wear bras by myself at home, but it's the aggression I find unsettling. Usually the ghost limits the phantasmagorical nonsense to things I might have inadvertently or forgetfully done myself, but there's no way I'm the one jamming underwear down my garbage disposal. The world is already messed up enough without my having to live through the plot of *Poltergeist*. It seems like the type of behavior that's bound to escalate, and of course it does.

Weeks pass and I'm getting sick of the uncanny. She keeps leaving flowers out for me; otherworldly roses of blue and white. I'll walk into my living room or kitchen and find them on a table, floating in a kintsugi bowl. When I relax my eyes, their blooms appear as pale flames. I dare not touch them. These spectral roses have spectral thorns, and who knows what kind of Snow White bullshit would befall me if I got pricked. They always disappear, along with the bowls, after

I ignore them for a couple of hours, to my enormous relief. I wish it was the most unsettling of her outbursts, but it's only the tip of the fucking iceberg.

Lately she makes her displeasure known most keenly by afflicting me with nighttime paralysis. In a life full of silly maladies (adult acne, bouts of mania and depression, chronic masturbation), it was one in particular I'd been thankful never to suffer before. I've always pitied the friends of mine who have described it. Then the pandemic forced me into constant proximity with this wrathful wraith and now I lay in my soft sheets, holding the hug pillow I bought online at the end of month two of lockdown, completely unable to move for hours at a time. Worse, she sits at the foot of my bed and watches me with the pinpricks of light in the smoldering craters where her eyes should be. It's a real drag.

Also, she keeps lying to me about who she's the ghost of. Not with words, of course, because if she can speak, she doesn't do it to me (I have no idea if she's ever spoken with my cat; maybe interrupting their conversations is why she's so pissed at me). No, she lies to me in the most insidious way I can think of: costuming.

So I'll be laying frozen in bed one night and she will turn up dressed like Emily Dickinson—whalebone corset, heavy dress, ribbon around her neck. Then a few days will pass and I'll wake up with a start, totally paralyzed, and the ghost will be there done up like Scarlett O'Hara—full southern belle. I don't know where ghosts go to get styled, but her lewks are always dead-on. Once she was even wearing a newsy costume. Last night, I swear she was wearing MY jeans and *Cowboy Bebop* hoodie, the one with Spike, the Swordfish II, and Ein the corgi data-

dog on it. I wake up terrified that she stuffed them down the garbage disposal, but no, they're just on my bedroom floor, soaked in ectoplasm, which, it turns out, comes out in the wash like it never even existed.

"Don't wear my stuff, you damn goop factory!" I scream to a seemingly empty room as I transfer the load to the dryer.

It's always the same ghost, I know that. She has the same face every time, which must have had an element of ethereal beauty even when she was alive, with the same hint of a scowl in the slightly downward slope of her thin lips. Even without any physical tells, I know that I'd know her. Something about her presence, don't ask me to explain.

Obviously, she's fucking with me. I'd like to mess with her back, but how do you wage a war of pranks on a ghost? How would I even begin to make her feel as uncomfortable and anxious as she makes me? It's a conundrum and I'm not about to ask my friends for advice. They'd worry about my mental health—everyone's worried about everyone else's mental health—and we have more important things to talk about on our video calls; recipes to swap, other people's babies and pets for me to coo over, which black organizations and artists we should donate to.

I try to approach the decision like I always do (or, at least, always try to do), with empathy, analysis, and open mind. Clearly she doesn't want me to know her. Why else would she go to any trouble to alter her appearance? This is all happening because I'm home so much. I wish I could make her understand that I'm just trying to be a considerate person, that I'm doing what I'm doing to help others, not hurt her. My #1 least favorite thing in the world is having my intentions misunderstood. I try explaining the situation to her by talking out loud to an empty living room and hoping she's there. The only time I know for certain she's in the room with me is in my room at night, when I am not in a position to talk. She either doesn't hear me, doesn't listen to me, or doesn't understand me.

So I decide to get old timey with it.

My Dearest Phantasm, I write with the calligraphy kit my mom bought for me six Hanukahs ago, the first time I've ever used it. It feels so weird to be writing in cursive.

It would seem fate and circumstance have conspired to bring thee and me together in this, my domicile, for a protracted period of proximity. Surely you will agree that these regrettable events were neither of our choice, therefore I am writing to you in the spirit (get it???) of amity and reconciliation. Please know, if you do not already, that a terrible plague is afflicting the world outside these four walls. I would love to depart this abode, to see my friends and family, before I lose my fucking mind, but please realize that the responsible choice, the one that protects the meek and infirmed, is to abstain from society for the nonce. Dearest phantasm, I am merely trying to do what is right.

Whilst only one of us is currently a proper resident of this kingdom of beating hearts, I remain certain we can find common ground. Forthwith, I humbly beseech you: kindly desist from haunting my evenings with your paralytic reposes. Leave no otherworldly blooms upon mine tables. Purloin not my habiliment, for we all deserve dignity. Do so and thou shall find me an eternally grateful and gracious partner in domestic serenity. I await your reply, be it in correspondence or action.

Yours in warmth and breath,

Galit Gabry

I sign my name and leave the note on my kitchen table. I figure I need to vacate the room for a while, to give her the time and space to read it. Before I do, I prep for my evening meal, a crockpot concoction that will not require my active attention. I dice some red peppers and onions. I brown them in my perfectly seasoned cast iron pan, then add crushed garlic along with salt and pepper. I toss some turkey meat in and wait for everything to get golden while I thrash around to some Bikini Kill on my Bluetooth speaker.

I dice some tomatoes, take my homemade broth out of the fridge, and

mix them in my crock pot. The kitchen is pretty replete with the smell of cooking turkey and onions at this point. I upend the cast iron into the slow cooker and give it a good scrape. Then I open cans of garbanzo, kidney, and black beans, clean them in a colander, and toss them in the mix too. I add a pinch of cayenne and liberal amounts of cumin, pepper, and--naturally--chili powder. I remind myself I'm trying to eat healthier and toss a handful of chopped kale in there too. Then I open a bottle of cheap *rioja*, take a glug, and dump a generous amount into the concoction. It'll be more chili than one person could eat, but it keeps well and I prefer to prepare multiple meals at once (it also tastes even better after a couple of days in the fridge). I've always had trouble cooking for just one and all this time by myself has, counterintuitively, only deepened this propensity. Now the proto-chili needs at least four hours of slow cooking before it becomes edible. I double check to make sure the letter's still on the table and hasn't moved. I decide to take the rest of the wine with me and conspicuously sidestep out of the room.

In my living room, I take out my electronic stylus, put on a podcast about famous hauntings to have in the background, and sink into work on my latest design job. So many people told me an art degree would be useless, but none of my liberal arts friends own their own house with a ghost in it. All it took was selling my soul and talent to a global corporation, thereby disappointing both myself and my idealistic professor parents. Still, the work is easy, relaxing, overpaid, and it keeps my skills sharp for when I actually decide to make my own art, in the unlikely event that's ever going to happen again. On top of that, it already gave me plenty of practice working from home, which ended up being a pretty invaluable skill this year.

I decide to take a break after what I figure is either fifteen minutes or two hours. I chase Jackie around the room with a teaser wand toy so that my chonky baby can have some exercise and fun. She's an indoor dummy and needs all the stimulation she can get, so I make it as challenging as I can for her to get her pudgy paws on the toy. She exhausts herself in fairly short order and curls up in a discarded pair of leggings, becoming a fuzzy little boulder, the proverbial unmovable object.

It's evening now. The wine bottle is just about empty. I decide to move the letter in case the ghost doesn't like reading in the kitchen. I walk into the kitchen, breathe in the smell of almost-done chili, uncover the pot so the broth can properly condense and thicken, and snatch up the note (which still hasn't moved).

I put it upstairs, in my little coffin of a bedroom, right at the foot of my bed where she likes to creep. Then I go downstairs, vape some sativa, queue up one of the half dozen streaming services with passwords I've managed to scam off of loved ones (before you get too judgmental about my being both a bougie princess and a bottom-feeder, please note that I do actually foot the bill for a couple of them, which I then redistribute among my inner circle). I put on an episode of *Puella Magic Madoka Magica*. Anime is so good these days, so aware of its absurdity, so at peace with its emotional excesses. Whenever I date boys, I always indoctrinate them with my favorites: *Baccano!*, *Kill La Kill*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, the whole Studio Ghibli repertoire (basic but also duh), *Night of the Galactic Express*, and of course my holy grail: *Bebop*. Whenever I date girls, I'm always trying to act cooler than I am, and make an *a priori* assumption that they won't be interested. Is that my own internalized misogyny talking or my insecurity about finding the principle of my joy from supposedly childish things? These are the things you think about when you're stoned in a haunted house. You shouldn't watch anime for any boyfriend or girlfriend, I resolve. Just do it for yourself.

I amble into the kitchen, pour myself a bowl of turkey chili, which I top with nacho cheese, sour cream, and chives. I turn the crockpot to warm and decide to leave it on overnight. I take my bowl, a new bottle of *rioja*, and a bag of tortilla chips back into the living room. I use the chips as my primary utensil in devouring the chili. God it's delicious. Quarantine can't be a complete wash if my cooking skills have gotten so dank.

That last episode I watched—so full of frustrated love, longing, time travel, and the inevitability of death—has me a little bummed, so I switch to cheerier fare. I put on an episode of *Steven Universe*, pick-

ing up where I left off because it's a series where continuity is increasingly important. Not anime, but it was a heartfelt recommendation from my best friend, Len—whose opinions about pop culture, along with *most* other subjects, I trust implicitly—and it has so many of anime's best influences, plus a big open heart and infectious music. I watch the characters sing "Peace and Love on the Planet Earth" and momentarily forget that I'm isolated from a hostile world and that my only sanctuary is itself increasingly unsafe. I wish there was some way I could telepathically thank Rebecca Sugar for conjuring this lovely, empathetic work of art. Animation, no matter which hemisphere it hails from, is truly at an apex of quality. I feel a twinge of sadness, thinking that no creative effort I could make would ever live up to it.

At this point I'm drunk enough to watch an episode of *InuYasha* and imagine what it would be like to have sex with all of the (adult) characters. They can all get it. Stories are a curiously effective survival technique in my current circumstances. I float from one to another, taking them like medicine, more essential to me than any of the actual substances I consume.

I transfer the letter again, moving it from my bedroom to the living room. I decide to read in my bed, a collection of James Tiptree Jr. stories that Len mailed to me. Tiptree, who was really Alice Sheldon: CIA officer, research psychologist, and one of the greatest science fiction authors of the twentieth century. I'm ashamed to admit I can't read her work without thinking of the way she died, shooting her husband, then herself in what was likely a suicide pact brought on by old age and failing health. It's a terrible habit, to focus so much on endings, and not the journey itself. I try to concentrate on the stories instead, on the artful mind that crafted them, on quality that remains undiminished by the decades that have passed since their publication. I love how she writes sex, as something that can be alternatively playful and threatening, qualities that have proven very much true in my own life, back when I had a sex life. When I think about how her stories portray women and women's issues, I marvel at how blinded people must have been by patriarchal bullshit to actually spend so many

years believing she was a man.

One of the things I admire the most about her stories is that, unlike some other high-end (and mostly male) sci-fi authors, she never doubts the authenticity of reality. In her work, reality is something to be engaged with and explored. It's never an elaborate hallucination or a malicious simulation. The world is what it is, and it's up to you to find or make your place in it. That's the way I try to live my own life. No matter how strange or unexpected reality becomes, it's up to me to adapt. I didn't believe in ghosts until I realized I was living with one. Now the two of us are at a crossroads and I'm resolved to try my best.

It's a mistake for me to read before bed. I always do it assuming it will wear my mind out, but now I'm more stimulated than ever. I go downstairs, catching a hint of movement in my peripheral vision and deciding to ignore it. The note on the table is gone. Good. Message received. I roll a spliff of heady indica. I put my vinyl copy of *Money Jungle* on what I still think of as my dad's turntable. I puff, breathe in the music, and cough. I'm absolutely wrecked in minutes. I extinguish the joint, still mostly unsmoked, and set it aside for later use. Jackie shows up to cat-trap me, curling up in my lap, rendering me immobile far more pleasantly than other inhuman roommates I could name. I'm on the verge of nodding off when I hear a loud crash from the kitchen. Jackie leaps off me.

I'm on my feet and moving toward the origin of the disturbance. My French press is shattered on my kitchen tile. What am I supposed to make coffee with tomorrow?! There's another crash. My *Beverly Hills Baby Club* commemorative tray that I had hanging on the wall is now snapped in half on the floor. Goddamn it! I loved that thing. The babies had top hats!

Then I see my *Troy & Abed in the Morning* mug—the one Len gave me to match the one I gave them—begin to slide to the edge of the counter.

"Stop!" I shout.

The mug scootches another inch.

“Dooooon’t,” I whine.

It’s right on the edge now.

I lunge to catch it. I hit something invisible that feels like a wall made of ice. I don’t even hear the mug break, but when I open my eyes, I’m lying on the floor and I can see the jagged fragments close by.

“Just tell me what you want!” I scream, still on the floor. I pick myself up. “You want my house! Fine. Take it. But I get yours! Whatever place or no-place you live in when you’re not here, it’s mine now. I’m going to go there and bust up your beloved one-of-a-kind shit and objects of sentimental fucking value!”

I can see her now, her form wavering in front of me. She’s wearing a long, colorless dress with a giant hoop skirt that reminds me of a circus tent. Her hair floats around her face like seaweed. Her head is cocked to the side, curious.

“I mean it,” I say. Maybe I’m very stoned and a little drunk but I am determined to find this ghost’s ghost-house and wreck it. “I’ll trade you. Your house for mine.”

She nods.

“Oh... kay,” I say. “Maybe just on a trial basis? Like for one night.”

She nods again and gestures at the door to the living room. The shadows there have coagulated into a thicker, darker substance, one that writhes like living ink. It’s still a doorway, I can tell, but one that leads to the opposite of a living room.

“Can I, uh, survive going through that?”

She nods.

I know it’s silly to trust her, but I have a stubborn streak and I’m the one who set this whole thing in motion. I take a step towards the dark door, then another. The air gets crisper and clearer the closer I get.

“Wait!” I shout.

I turn around and jog to the kitchen closet. I take out the large cat food and water dispenser my dad got me years ago so I could visit them more (I’ve never used them for that purpose). I fill both to the brim and leave them out. I have no idea how long I’ll be gone and I don’t trust the ghost to feed Jackie. I turn to face the portal.

“Chaaaaaaarge!” I shout, sprinting face first into the land of the dead.

I expect cold and darkness but get neither. I find myself in a long, ornate hallway lit by candles set in expensive-looking sconces. The flames are green and give off emerald-hued light. These new environs look like what you would find as a top result if you did a google image search of the phrase “nice castle hallway.” The floors are marble. The walls are lined with vaguely Roman statues, men in armor and callipygian nudes. I do a 360 spin to check behind me. No sign of the doorway I just walked through, no glimpse of my kitchen back in the land of the living, just more hallway bathed in green radiance. If there is a way back home, I’ll have to find it elsewhere, eventually. For now, I might as well explore. It’s actually pretty refreshing to be out of the house, regardless of the circumstances.

I start plodding forward. No one’s around, so I touch the cool stone of the statues as I pass them. I’m tempted to give some of the bare asses a honk, but decide it’s a bad first impression on a foray into the after-life. It’s pretty clear to me that this hallway is a liminal space, so I press on. I worry that it’s going to play by the rules of budget animation and repeat endlessly, but a few minutes of walking takes me into a wider, darker space. The walls open up and retreat in the shape of a dome so vast and poorly lit that my eyes can’t take it all in.

I turn around and I no longer see the illumination of the hallway, just

the dim impression of slightly curving walls. I start to get unnerved by this place's habit of erasing the spaces behind me, like it's taking an active interest in preventing me from retracing my steps. I can't help but think of Orpheus and what happened when he descended to the underworld and made the mistake of looking back. Not a story with a happy ending.

"Is anyone there?" I shout, registering a hint of panic in my own voice. I'm not expecting a reply, so when I hear one almost immediately I have to work hard to keep my skeleton from jumping out of my mouth.

"Sure!" calls a deep, smooth voice—a male voice (I'm assuming, I don't know how this disembodied baritone in the land of the dead identifies).

Firelight blazes ahead of me, no more than ten feet. Someone's holding a torch, and that's not me trying to use Britishisms; there's an actual wood and fire torch in someone's hand. The light gets closer, although I can't be sure if I'm walking toward it or the other way around. I get a good look at the torch holder.

He's tall (my head barely coming up to his flat belly), skinny, and wearing a really well tailored three-piece suit. The suit is dark on dark, charcoal with pure black pinstripes and a black tie. The darkness of his clothing is nothing compared to the skin of his hands and face, which does not have a complexion so much as it radiates anti-light. The lines of illumination cast from his torch in his direction seem like they're being bent, distorted, and ultimately destroyed by the darkness emanating from his flesh wherever it's bared. What facial features I can make out beneath that ebon glow are fine, pointed, almost delicate. His eyes are twin points of bright starlight. His hair is a nest of tightly curled silver, and I really mean silver because its gleam is decidedly metallic. His ears are long and pointed, like a Doberman Pinscher, and for some reason I find them deeply adorable.

Incongruously, a sword swings at his hip. At least, I assume it's a

sword. I can't see the blade because it's cased in the kind of curved sheath you'd expect to see a katana in, and it's got one of those ornate hilts and rounded guards. The sheath, hanging from a thin chain around his waist, is inscribed with golden kanji letters. I'm ashamed to admit that, despite the thousands of hours of anime I've watched in my life, I do not speak more than a few words of Japanese, and I can't read it at all. The voice acting for English dubs has gotten so good, you guys. Anyway, I have no idea what the words on the sheath mean, but I suppose wearing a sword is a statement in itself.

"Uh, hey," I manage to stammer by way of greeting.

"Yo," he says, casually. He sniffs, softly. "You smell like an alive human."

"What do 'alive humans' smell like, exactly?"

He takes a moment, as if genuinely considering the answer. His starlight eyes pulse in thought.

"A lot of sweat, a little bit of dirt. Blood, mostly. Hot, rushing blood."

I know I should be creeped out but I've always been easily won over by people who say weird shit with this kind of absolute confidence.

"Well, I am ... alive. Who are you?"

"I'm the night watchman."

"Is it, uh, night here? How can you tell?"

"It *could* be night. Impossible to say. That's why I'm on watch *all* the time."

"Oh, that makes about as much sense as I could expect." I am very curious what, exactly, he's on watch for. "Am I not supposed to be here? Like, is it against ghost law for the living to tread these halls?"

The night watchman's starlight eyes roam around the cavernous chamber. He seems to be barely paying attention to me.

"We don't have much in the way of bureaucracy around here, and our laws, the few that we have, only really apply to beings like myself and my siblings."

"Are you ... human?"

"My mother was," he replies offhandedly. "You ask a lot of questions, alive girl."

"Naturally inquisitive. Comes from having academics for parents, I think. When I was a kid, my mom says I—"

"Humans just love talking about their childhoods," he says, speaking over me in a way I find very irritating. "I don't understand what you think is so important about them."

"Oh, you know what they say about an unexamined life." He blinks in incomprehension, so I decide to change the subject. "You talk to a lot of 'alive humans,' then?"

"Just the ones who pass through. Happens every so often. I ... don't mind the company."

"Me neither," I say, instantly forgiving his rudeness. He's clearly so isolated here. I have a lot of newfound sympathy for the condition. There's a significant pause before he speaks again.

"Want me to show you around?"

"Only if you cut it out with all the questions," I say with a grin.

"Sorry," he grunts. "Don't have a lot of opportunities to practice minding my manners."

"Never too late to start." It's really one of my core life philosophies.

"There's some neat stuff here and there," he says like he's taking mental stock of the place.

"Well, I desire only the neatest stuff. Stuff that is objectively the neatest."

"Objectively," he mutters. "So, you're interested in value?"

"I really don't know how to answer that. Sure, yeah, I guess."

"Follow me. I'll show you the machine."

He lets go of the torch. Instead of dropping to the ground, it just hangs there, suspended in the air. The laws of physics seem more like suggestions here. The night watchman turns and strides away on his long legs. I hustle after, not wanting to be left behind or lost in the dark. It isn't long before we come to a heavy wooden door, which he effortlessly throws open. Beyond is a marble walkway that falls off precipitously on both sides with an abyssal plunge into absolute darkness on either side. Fortunately, the walkway's wide enough that I don't have to absolutely freak about the lack of handrails. At least a hundred feet above us are ornate chandeliers, lit with the same emerald-tinged flame as the hallway where I first arrived. Off to the right and left are free-standing arches and buttresses that don't seem to be buttressing anything.

"Is it always so dim and fancy here?" I ask.

The night watchman answers me without turning around or slowing his pace.

"Your stupid human eyes see what they're going to see, regardless of reality. If you have a problem with the scenery, you're the one to blame."

“Uh huh.” I’m incredulous. “So what does it look like to you?”

“Impossible for me to describe to you.”

“Oh, because your extra-human intelligence is so many orders of magnitude greater than mine?”

“No. I’m just not, y’know, great with words.”

“Ah, yeah. I can see that.”

“The machine’s just up ahead.”

The walkway leads to a wide central column, a nexus into which dozens of other bridges flow. At the center is what looks like a fusion between a Commodore 64 and one of those industrial incubators they use to warm dozens of chicken eggs at once. I walk up to the interface, a worn old keyboard. A green cursor blinks on the tiny screen behind it, which is set into the side of the empty, recessed platform. This retro tech is not what I expected to find in the world of the dead (I haven’t even run into a single dead person yet), but I figure I better just roll with it.

“What does it do?”

“It determines the objective value of things,” the night watchman says. He’s glancing around again, keeping his watch.

“The objective value of ... what things?”

“Anything in your universe, give it a try.”

I put my fingers on the keyboard. I think for a minute. Then I type.

MY COWBOY BEBOP HOODIE

A light shimmers in the recessed platform and a hologram coheres out

of it, displaying a translucent image of my hoodie. Beneath it the number 10763,288,415,324 appears.

“The closer it gets to 1, the greater the objective value is,” the night watchman explains.

“Huh, my hoodie’s not super valuable, I guess. I love that thing.”

“You might, but the universe doesn’t. This is a database of objective value we’re talking about.”

“What’s got the value of 1? That would be the most important, valuable thing in creation, right?”

“I dunno. I don’t mess around with this contraption myself. It was made to measure the value of things in the living world and that’s none of my business.”

I delete the words on the screen and the hologram vanishes.

I type GRAVITY. An image of a planet revolving around a sun appears. Beneath it, the value 5.

“Pretty close,” I say.

Without deleting GRAVITY, I type LOVE. A big cartoon heart appears next to the cosmic dance, this one with a value of 16.

I glance over at the night watchman. He’s stopped paying attention to me, so I decide to conduct an experiment. I reach into the recessed platform and tap the holographic planet. It feels solid and vibrates at my touch. I grab the number 5 and I can feel its mass in my hand. I grab the number 16 with my other one. With a final glance to the night watchman, I transpose my hands and switch the two values. Now the icon for GRAVITY has 16 and LOVE has 5.

I delete both words on my screen and both holograms vanish in turn.

Then I type LOVE again. Sure enough, it still has a value of 5. I just made love more valuable than gravity, permanently.

I type ANIME and some kawaii bullshit appears with the value of 8452,376 beneath it. I type BORING UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS BBC SERIES and an image of Maggie Smith appears with 8232,981. Unacceptable. I switch, then delete both.

I type CATS. 4541,399. I type dogs. 422,953. Unacceptable. Switch. Delete.

“Hey,” I call out to the night watchman. He turns to me.

“Yeah?”

“You show a lot of your alive human visitors this thing?”

“A few, yeah. Most, I think.”

“It’s been a part of your tour for a while, then.”

“I suppose. People really like knowing what’s valuable.”

And I bet they’ve been doing what I’ve been doing, switching up the values based on their subjective perspectives. I frown.

THIS MACHINE, I type. The machine displays a miniature holographic version of itself and beneath it the value $\sqrt{(-1)}$.

“Totally worthless,” I say.

“**Humans ruin everything,**” growls a velvety, menacing voice, one that does not belong to the night watchman. “**You come like penny-weighters in the night, switching treasure for dross, making it incapable of knowing true value.**”

A third figure stands on a walkway opposite us. He’s clad in an ivory

three-piece suit and is hard to look at because of the white light radiating from his skin. I can make out two points of darkness where his eyes should be and the impression of a cruel half-smile.

“Who’s that?” I whisper to the night watchman.

“Bad news,” he says. “Get behind me.”

I do what he says. I’m not about to get between a couple of afterlife guardians or whatever these guys are.

“**Wretched brother,**” says the white guy. “**I warned you not to allow mortals near my machine. I do not care how cunningly they seduce you.**”

“And I told you to shutup!” the night watchman replies, wit just razor-sharp.

“**You share our father’s disgusting propensity for fornication with these animals. I will purify you both before you interfere any further with my important work.**”

“Psht,” the night watchman scoffs. “You don’t even know why you do the things you do. I don’t care what little projects you do to while away eternity. Just stay out of my way!”

The white guy reaches up to his head and plucks a single metallic strand of his own hair. He snaps his wrist and, in a burst of white flame, the strand becomes a lance longer than I am tall, ivory and elaborately scrimshawed from the haft to its vicious point.

“**You were warned. Now you will be disciplined.**”

The tip of the lance explodes out of the night watchman’s back, stopping just inches short of my own face. Dark ichor drips off of it, a drop landing on my cheek. It’s surprisingly hot. It hurts, lightly burning my skin before I can wipe it away with a pajama sleeve.

“Fuck!” I scream.

“**Vulgar human,**” the white guy hisses. He reaches toward his head to pluck another hair. “**You defile these sacred halls with your presence. You beguile my pathetic sibling in order to tamper with designs aeons in the making. Prepare for your punishment, slut.**”

“Woah!” I call. I don’t know what dangers I expected to face in the world of the dead, but an eldritch incel was definitely not one of them.

“Hey,” the night watchman calls to his brother, his voice pained but undiminished. “You and I ain’t done.” His hand rises to grip the lance protruding from his chest. He rips it free. It clatters to the ground next to him. For a moment I can see through the hole in his chest to the white guy’s hateful, darkling gaze as he manifests another lance. Then the wound closes on its own, flesh reknitting until even the night watchman’s fine suit repairs itself.

I want to scream that this is silly, to ask these immortal idiots what they think fighting will accomplish, but it’s all happening too fast. They leap simultaneously, trading blows and whatnot midair, the night watchman parrying another lance thrust with his forearm. They land on the far side of the machine, on the walkway where the white guy first appeared.

“I got something for you, you mean bastard,” hisses the night watchman. Rather than reaching for the sword at his hip, he thrusts his hand inside one of his jacket pockets. He pulls out three wolves, small enough to fit in his palm, and tosses them at the white guy’s face. They aren’t figurines or holograms but actual living wolves and they rapidly enlarge as they sail through the air. They land on the white guy, clawing and snapping at his luminous skin.

“Pocket full of wolves!” I shout by way of an expletive. It occurs to me to do my own part in what I am coming to realize is a pretty intense battle where my own life might be at stake. I kneel down to pick up

the lance that’s still lying discarded on the walkway. It’s so heavy and unwieldy that I stagger as I try to lift it, recovering myself before I can tumble over the ledge. It’s a lot further to fall than I remember, the inverted dome of the distant floor barely visible, and I have to suppress a wave of vertigo. Hefting the lance, I charge forward. The white guy has managed to kill two of the wolves as I struggled to arm myself, their corpses sprawled at his feet. I run past the night watchman, right along the unguarded edge of the walkway, and make impact just as he snaps the third wolf’s neck. I don’t make contact with the actual point of the lance, having neither the strength nor coordination to properly aim it, but I do manage to connect with the side hard enough to drive him back until he disappears over the edge of the walkway, pitching into the darkness. I feel a thrill of triumph I haven’t felt in months, maybe years. The feeling is short-lived because I have no way of stopping my own momentum, realizing I could have just let go of the lance a second after I feel open air under my feet.

Why aren’t I falling? Why aren’t I dead?

Something is holding me by the back of my pajama top. My hands are empty and my arms are flailing.

The night watchman, his dark face a study in graceful concentration, pulls me back onto the walkway. If singlehandedly lifting me caused him any strain, he doesn’t show it. I let out my breath all at once.

“Pretty brave,” he says, “for an uncoordinated primate.”

“Big words,” I pant, “for a guy who didn’t even unsheathe his sword.”

“It’s not a sword and this isn’t a sheath.” He taps the hilt gingerly with his index finger. “And if you value your life, you don’t want me taking this thing out of its prison. Now let’s get out of here. He won’t be gone long.”

He takes my hand and, with next to no effort, lifts me up into the crook of his arm. It’s the first time anyone’s touched me since quarantine

started in earnest. The world around us blurs with the speed of his retreat. When he sets me down we're in a dim hallway. He's panting for the first time. I'm suddenly aware of the closeness of our bodies. I take a step back, thinking about my appearance for the first time in months, my unruly mane of tangled curls and my chili-stained corduroy PJs.

"Your brother's an interesting guy."

"Yeah, sorry about that. He's got problems."

"That's the impression I get. You kinda push his buttons on purpose, though, letting me screw with his stuff."

"He's so hung up on understanding your universe, even though he hates everything about it. Pisses me off."

"Is he going to come after us?"

"Definitely. We shouldn't stay still. You're still on the tour, I suppose. Where do you want to go next?"

"Well, we're in the world of the dead. I'd like to meet Alice Sheldon."

"Is that some unalive human?"

"That's one way to put it."

"How long since she was all like, 'ah, my dumb human body is a slave to entropy and I just can't stay aliiiiiiiive'?"

"About thirty years ago, I think."

"Oh, then she's gone."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean'?"

"This is the land of the dead. Isn't this the place where people, uh, live after they die?"

"It's where they pass through ... but, you know humans don't last forever, right?"

"That's what I thought *before* I came to the literal afterlife. This is the soul's final destination and all that."

"Humans don't have immortal souls, you weirdo, otherwise they wouldn't be mortal, which they very much are. Only immortal denizens of this world do."

"You're saying *I* don't have a soul but *you* do?"

"I wouldn't say I have a soul so much that I am one."

"That doesn't make any sense. I only got here because an actual ghost opened the way. If ghosts exist then some part of us must live on after death."

"A ghost? Oh. A skip sent you here? That makes sense. Skips do that kind of thing sometimes."

"A skip?"

"The mechanics of your universe function pretty well. Linear time and all that. But every once in a while, things don't work the way they should. The track of time jumps out of its groove a bit. Sometimes it happens at just the right moment for an expiring human consciousness to get entangled. That frozen remnant becomes a skip, caught between one moment and the next, between life and death. Terrible luck, awful fate."

"So, being a ghost has nothing to do with unfinished business, black magic, or being an unquiet spirit?"

"Well, yeah, that all sounds like nonsense."

“Look, I’m not sure what to do with any of this information.”

“It’d be easier to show you. Here, climb on my back. We don’t have time for those stumpy legs of yours to locomote.”

“Hey! Rude! I didn’t hear you criticizing my speed while I was saving you from your psycho brother.”

“I had that situation totally under control. Your ‘help’ was absolutely not required. Now get on my back.”

“Fine!”

I climb on and try not to pay attention to how little effort it takes him to carry me or the pleasant warmth that radiates through the soft material of his dark suit.

He charges ahead through one shadowy hallway and architectural oddity after another.

“So ... what’s your name?” he says eventually.

“Galit,” I answer. “It’s Hebrew for--”

“Wave,” he says. There’s a sadness in his voice I haven’t heard from him before.

“Wave on the sea,” I say, my own voice softer.

There’s a beat of silence, then another.

“My mother’s name was Nami. It ... it has a similar translation.”

“Your human mother?” I can’t think of any other words that wouldn’t fall short. “Crazy coincidence.”

“It’s just a superficial similarity. Doesn’t mean a thing. She was to-

tally different than you anyway. Calm. Quiet. Kind.”

“Hey fuck you, I am kind.”

“I guess that’s ... probably true.”

“Yeah well, it takes one to know one.”

“We’re here. I’m going to put you down.”

I can’t help but be surprised by how gently he sets me back on my feet. We’re on the shore of some kind of river, except the bank is made of smooth black stone and the flowing current is made of thousands upon thousands of luminous glass spheres. They are flowing by so quickly that it takes me a moment to realize that each one contains an incandescent spark, each one emitting a different color, like Christmas tree ornaments lit from within.

“There they are,” the night watchman says, gesturing at the river of glowing orbs. “The humans making their way through the world of the dead.”

He stoops down and scoops one of the spheres from the stream. It pulses a soft pink glow. He hands it to me. It’s almost uncomfortably hot in my hands, like a mug of fresh coffee.

A wave of sensations washes over me, like a movie montage but for all of my senses. I (not me) feel the trauma of being born. The jumble of childhood memories (not mine); being pushed, being yelled at, being held, the smell of crayons, my body (not my body) desperately trying to balance itself on a bicycle. The awkwardness of adolescence, jumbled up incongruously with a nightmare of war; milling about a jungle, my body (not my body) sweating through its uniform, finding a corpse among the bamboo shoots and not knowing if it’s a man or a woman, the suffocating weight of a gasmask. An adulthood full of underfunded institutions and ineffective therapies. Sleeping under an overpass with a mangy dog as my only companion. The mistrust and

long dormant survival instincts kicking in as a group of teenagers approach. I (not me) would run away, but they have the dog, laughing as he whines. Not willing to abandon my friend, I turn back. I feel my ribs (not my ribs) crack when they kick me.

“Jewish Jesus!” I scream. I drop the ball. Instead of falling, it rolls sideways in the air, following the flow of the river. “What was that?”

“A human consciousness making its way between waking life and oblivion.” The night watchman’s explanations have lost their condescending edge. Is there a note of reverence in his voice?

“That was ... a person. I felt them live. Felt them dying.”

“That’s the journey, and this is the last leg. The body’s dead but the brain takes just a little longer. That ember flows along this river, through this land, to its final darkening.”

“Show me where it ends.”

“This way.”

My hand is in his. I’m not sure if he took mine or I took his. We make our way along the shore. I can hear the beat of my own heart.

“So,” I say, filling the loud silence with my soft voice, “we all just end and there’s nothing after.”

“Yup.”

“But you just go on and on.”

“Far as I can tell. I never got a rulebook, and if my father still exists, I haven’t seen him in, well, a long time. He was never the talkative type anyway. I remember being knee high and running up to him, and he’d just narrow his supereyes at me and float off into a deeper realm where part-humans like me can’t follow.”

“It’s weird to think about you being, like, a little night watchman.”

“Yeah, new eternal souls get born every now and then, when a human wanders into this place, runs into one of us, and, y’know.” I might be imagining it but I swear I can see a light blush beneath the misty blackness of his face.

“Have you ever, ‘y’know’ed’ with one of your alive human visitors?”

“That! That’s private!”

“So, no.”

“Look, I’m not like my brother but ... growing up here was so lonely. After my mom was gone, all I had was the occasional lost human, and they never stayed. Not that they should, this is no place for alive humans to make a home, but I could never keep myself from hoping. And having hope is the surest way to get utterly crushed by how things actually turn out. I do not want to be responsible for giving a life like mine to a kid.”

I squeeze his hand.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I get it, just a little. There’s some ... bad stuff going on in my world. I barely see anyone who isn’t on a screen. I barely talk to anyone who isn’t going through a crisis of their own. It’s sad and exhausting and so, so isolating. I have friends, but I don’t want to burden them. I have my parents, but they expected me to do so much more with my life, to be some great artist, and I can’t bring myself to call them. I can’t imagine doing it for as long as you have.”

“At least you have the skip who sent you here.”

“She’s not exactly a friend.”

I tell him about the circumstances that brought me here. He listens, his starlight eyes burning steadily as we walk.

“She was upset with you,” he says after absorbing the tale.

“Obviously.”

“I don’t blame her.”

“Excuse me?” I half-heartedly try to snatch my hand back but his grip, however oblivious, is too strong and I’m not really trying.

“She left you flowers. You refused her gift. She tried to communicate with you, and you were too scared to move. She tried to dress like you, be like you, and you got angry with her.”

“She’s the one …” I start but trail off as soon as my conscience catches up with my anger. “Everyone’s their own goddamn protagonist.”

“You can apologize to her when you get back.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“I hear it’s never too late.” He pauses. “Quit navel gazing and look up.”

I see it. Where the river ends. A great waterfall of expiring minds, flowing into the abyss. The spheres of consciousness cascade down into absolute darkness. I look down and see their dim lights vanishing.

“Well, this is the saddest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I don’t get it,” the night watchman says. “There’s nothing sad about this. Look, each of these minds float down the river full of troubles and concerns, obsessions, grudges, anxieties, trauma. You felt it yourself. Everything in the world matters to them. Then they go over the edge and they’re in a moment when it all falls away and they get to just let go. Everything to nothing. What could be more peaceful?”

He’s turning to look me full in the face, dark and beautiful.

“This is my favorite place in the entire universe,” he says.

Am I going to fuck this guy? It’s been *so* long and what could be more appropriate, standing here on the very edge of the void?

Our faces are drawing closer. His shadowy lips part and I can see his pearly teeth. I’m on tip-toes because he’s so tall. I feel his arm circle my lower back, drawing me up.

“**I forbid this vile fornication,**” growls a familiar voice. The night watchman drops me and I sprawl on the stone. The white guy is standing further away from the falls than us, a few strides of shore between us. His cold gaze rakes us impassively.

“Why can’t you just let me have this one thing!?” the night watchman calls. The dark stars of the white guy’s eyes twinkle in a way that seems analogue to narrowing. I don’t see him move but now he’s right next to us. His hand is a dragon’s claw, twisting around the night watchman’s throat, lifting him while his feet kick helplessly in the air.

“**You will have nothing because you are nothing, whoreson.**”

“Stop hurting him!” I hear myself scream and find I’m leaping on the white guy’s back.

“**It was my right to know the proper value of all things contained within the living universe. You permitted mortal after mortal to tamper with my machine. Now it is impossible to know what anything is truly worth. Value. Undeterminable.**” He brings his other hand up, fingers probing into his brother’s eyes. The night watchman screams. “**I do not care if it takes millennia, I will make you understand how this offends me.**”

The white guy shrugs me off with the slightest movement. His light intensifies, eating into the night watchman’s anti-light. What can I do? I think about that sphere of life I briefly held. That poor veteran who wouldn’t leave his dog behind. I stand. The sword (that isn’t a

sword) dangles at the night watchman's hip. I lunge for it, wrapping both hands around the hilt, and pull up as hard as I can.

“Stop, you idiot,” the white guy hisses. **“You will destroy us all.”**

“Let my friend go.”

“Not until he learns his lesson.”

“Then I guess this is what's happening.”

I am, obviously, not a strong person, but I am truly using all my might. I manage to draw the not-sword up less than an inch. In that slightest fraction of exposed blade, I see an infinite galaxy of swirling stars and cosmic mysteries. Then I feel the burning cold emanating from it. I have to pull away before it freezes the skin of my palms.

“Get out of here!” the night watchman manages to sputter out from his sibling's choking grip. I want to say I won't leave him, but the cold is crawling inside me now, stealing my breath. I'm lifted into the air, and by the time I realize that it's the night watchman's doing, he's flinging me away with his considerable might. I'm flying backward as I see the singularity open wide and consume both brothers before imploding into non-being.

I land in the river, among the flowing spheres. The impressions from their dying minds overwhelm me.

I (not me) feel the fever, the wracking coughs, the struggle to breathe.

I try to roll away but the spheres seem endless and each tells the same story as they bear me along.

I (not me) am wheezing, choking. They're intubating me (not me). The endotracheal tube slides down my (not my) throat. No loved ones are near. My (not my) family can't come close. I (not me) am alone at the end. I am alone.

The river gives way to the falls. I plunge forever toward that final nullification, the spheres shattering and their lights winking out around me. In the seconds before the nothingness takes me, I'm wishing my mom and dad were here to hold me.

Except someone is holding me, lifting me up. I feel warmth bathing me, driving the horrible cold out of my body.

“I knew you'd save me!” I shout. Then I open the eyes I didn't even realize I'd closed and I see my ghost. She is luminous here, a being of golden light, still wearing her ridiculously wide-hooped dress. Her arms are around me and her billowing skirts are bearing us up like a hot air balloon, up past the falls and the river, into the neither day nor night sky of the netherworld.

“You came for me?”

Her spectral face nods.

“Take me home.” I bury my head in the crook of her neck. We ascend, further and further.

We're in my little coffin of a bedroom, laying together. Her warmth and presence are all around me. It's not necessarily sexual but I am very turned on.

“I'm sorry,” I tell her, tears spilling through my voice.

“I know,” she says in plain English. Her voice is husky and soothing. “I am too. I ... just wanted you to accept the roses I left for you. I have so little else to give. I didn't mean to get so angry.”

“I was scared. I didn't try hard enough to understand you.”

“You tried, but I was hurt and didn't want to let you.”

I close my eyes for a while. It feels so good to be in her arms.

“Why did you open the door to the other world?” I ask her. I have to know.

“I thought we could both use some time to ourselves ... and you needed an adventure.”

“Thank you. For that and not letting me fall.”

“It never occurred to me to do otherwise.”

“You’re ... different to me now.”

“I know. It’s so easy for us to make monsters out of each other.”

“I think I had to go through all that, finding a friend and losing him, to understand how much I didn’t understand you.”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you, or even teach you a lesson, but I’m glad you feel that way, Galit.”

“I heard that you’re stuck here.”

“For a while, yes. Maybe I’ll unstick one day.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I was planning on messing with the cat for a while. Maybe I’ll knock over some of those cups you’re always leaving on the kitchen counter. Just the plastic ones!”

“Well, if you’re free in the evening, there’s something I’d like to work on with you. I can’t stop thinking about those bowls you make to hold the flowers. The ones with the gold in the cracks.”

I hear her sigh knowingly.

“All these months floating around you while you work, I’ve been hoping to see you take all that talent you pour into designing welcome mats and ad campaigns, and channel it into something a bit more *you*. Of course I’ll make time. But you should sleep now. You’ve had a big night. Want me to keep holding you?”

“Yes please.” I turn on my side and let my sleep paralysis demon embrace me, mellow and radiant. “I’m glad you haunted my house ... even though I really liked that stuff you broke.”

“Shhh.”

She’s gone when I wake up, off to be about her day, I suppose. I go downstairs and fry an egg, keeping the yellow runny. I eat it over a bowl of chili with some rye toast. I pet Jackie and plan my day. It’s mostly going to be calls. I want to talk to my parents, to tell them how much I miss them. But before that I take a hot shower. I put on an aloe mask because sticking to a skincare routine is important (also, my face still has a burn on it from the night watchman’s blood). I Facetime Len instead of my mom and dad. Hey, sue me, but I want my best friend first.

Len is smiling through the screen. They’re in their kitchen. Their lip ring sparkles in the sunlight coming in through their window. I miss sitting at that old wooden kitchen table, having coffee in the light with my friend. Someday I will again.

“Well if it isn’t my favorite Gally Gal,” they say.

“None other.”

“This a veiled mental health check? If so, it’d be my third one of morning.”

“Oh no. I mean, I’m always concerned about you, about everyone, but

I have a, uh, creative concept I wanted to talk out.”

“If this is a design thing, I don’t know how much I can help.”

Len can’t see it, but my collaborator is right next to me. I can feel her

hand in mine.

“No, no. I mean, it’s an art piece, but it’s not professional. It’s something that’d be just for me.”

The Second Law

by Oliver Smith

Caught in the pages of your precious book,
like the carved figurehead of a galleon
frozen in the icefloe, you navigated
the Antarctic islands towards the coast;
and searched beyond the polar vortex
for a stairway to the kingdom in the stars.

You and I stood before an infinite recursion
of mirrored skies, reflected in the glacier's heart.
But I was caught in the snares of this world
and snagged upon the earthly shores, and though
I begged you stay, you stepped away, and left
me broken in the light of the pale-bone ice.

In your dress of silver, like a living meteor
you ignited strange enchantments; became
a brilliant ship sailing on the white ocean,
chasing six dogs running on skirts of icy lace.
I heard the void call in a high voice, singing
"Evermore shall rest the sun" and found you gone.

I searched where green glass titans float,
on a widowed sea; snow-dressed bellies bulging
to the frozen sky. In the aurora's cascades
you hid among a thousand ice-green eyes
and cast your absence in that diamond-land,
a lost shadow, beneath the emerald glare.

I too took up that book; drank deep the ice
and poison from the page. For cure, chanted
that spell with frozen lips; the fifty forbidden
names of snow, that opened wide the starry gates
Now I wait as dark splinters fall from midnight-noon
as the fingers of the curious dead spread

like frozen ripples on this lost and alien shore,
their morbid hues reflected in crystal sands.
Scattering fern-fronds on the glass, they whisper
how they adore before your distant throne
and I await our reunion as hours and reason
turn slower, ever slower in the utter cold.

I shall wait, until these heavy eyes close,
illuminated by the vision of the last sun
cooling in a universe that aged too fast;
its equilibrium complete, as all the stars
grow dim; leaving only the residual glow
of cold iron cinders fading in the dark.

Anonymous

by Binod Dawadi



The Lovely Bones

by Alexis Child

Sometimes I feel like glass
Walking in a house of strangers
My greatest fear is myself
And a past that will never end
Like eerie, strange sounds in the night
Where broken is not beautiful

We walk with the universe
Resting on our shoulders
Until it is like a pair of black wings
Haunting the world
Rearranging ourselves
Around the darkness
And the light
I am not easy to love

You will prick yourself on my thorns
I was born with glass bones
Embrace the cracks in my heart
And make love to my rough edges
Like a knife
Annihilating what is left of me
I show my scars. I'm strong

Tonight, the stars revolt
Until you can see the sharp
Splinter of a smile
Coroner reports: A miracle
Dead girl rises up like pure air!

My body cracks into a thousand
Questions like perfection
And I have stardust for my hair
Whipping my skin into forever

Darkness seems spectre-like as these vague curses
Like empty rooms at night and stars that mock
Dear friend, dear friend, I leave the same impression
As the moon: beautiful, terrifying in annihilation
Remember, remember, this is me, even now



Domino

by Shikhar Dixit

Mary Sue Rising

by Donna J. W. Munro

Laying here in the wash of salt sea, legs encased in concrete and eyes bleached white, I wait for the next instance of me to be created. I won't be food for the fishes for long.

It's hard to remember his name once I'm dead. He's been so many people. Clark? Bruce? Peter?

This time, he'd been my boyfriend. Often, he was. But sometimes he was my son or brother, daddy or partner in crime-fighting. I can only remember how often I've been his once I'm dead.

This time, he'd been messing with the crime boss. Well, he was always doing that, wasn't he?

Joker?

Kingpin?

Some monster with legions of vile killers, drug dealers, and terrorists in colorful costumes.

Now that I'm dead, Clark or whoever he was, my hero will rise up in rage against the monsters. My death will fuel his vengeance. Righteous vengeance. Violence made into a holy war christened with my blood.

Laying here with fish hiding in my long, current caressed hair, I feel every pain I've ever felt from every life I've lived.

Maimed? That's worth a street war.

Raped? Put in a coma? That's worth the near destruction of the city.

All that plus my death? That will excuse wholesale murder and collateral damage be damned for the rest of his evil-fighting existence.

Because he loved me.

Or maybe he needed an excuse.

His storyline diverges from mine. He'll find another love as he works the streets. She'll be plucky. Stronger than me and he'll fall for her hard, but shy away to protect her from the terrible end I met. Maybe he'll remember my eyes and the promises he made me so that he can be tortured about moving on to a new love.

In the end, the plot is always the same.

I'm always the same whether I'm mild-mannered or a secondary hero.

Red hair, green eyes—often.

Blonde, blue-eyed—a lot.

Brunette? Not often because those are the girls he'll eventually settle down with.

Ethnicity? Almost always WASP.

No matter what I look like, I'm ideal.

Sweet and caring.

A sacrificial lamb.

A cautionary tale.

Motivation.

I feel the pull of rebirth. Another writer is calling for me to move a story. He's building me into a plot and I begin to rise from the seabed. I'm a nurse this time. He's a blind lawyer. A pilot. A classmate? I can't keep it all straight until I settle into my new life.

Soon, my next death.

This time, as I rise, I struggle against the narrative's stubborn pull.

I can see myself as I've been, every time and in every story. Every railroad track I was tied to. Every cliff I was flung from. Every bombed building. Every alley rape. Every damn knife, bullet, brick, and saw. Even the fridge I was stuffed into.

Not again.

The author puts me on a street lined with brownstones and boxy cars.

Ah, the origin story set in the eighties. I have long hair and a half-shirt, acid-washed jeans, and I'm red-headed. Beautiful, but I don't hold that against anyone. The writers like beautiful girls who don't know how beautiful they are. I'm smart, too. Mary Sue, they call me. What an ass this writer is. I don't have the teased hair of the eighties or the heavy neon makeup. I'm too good for that. I'm a timeless beauty and I catch his hero's eye.

I see the story stretch out before me. High school friends, then college lovers, then encounters in the ER where I'm a nurse. Maybe marriage. Maybe just an engagement.

Then death.

No.

He's walking toward me and the girls from our class laugh. They're a bunch of painted up, two-dimensional bitches that will antagonize us as we grow together. Their story doesn't end in death but in obscurity. I feel the same indignant rage for their ending as I feel for mine.

He smiles and says, "I'm—"

"No." I grit my teeth and grind the toe of my Keds against the asphalt. I breathe in the power the boy has. He has it and just needs mine to activate it. To love me and watch me die. "Not this time."

He tilts his head like a confused puppy and I almost fall for him again.

He is always so handsome. So sweet before he is shattered into a million bitter pieces by my murder.

Not this time.

I pull the power from all my wasted lives, reclaiming my own magic. The pain I suffered for him. The torture I lived through or died from. The waste of my lives floods back and I gather it up into myself. All that potential I'd given him climbs into my cells, into the artful strokes that made me beautiful and into the memories that made me real. I'm my own hero, damn it!

Or villain.

That would be nice, too.

I pull it all together—all the pain, and scream releasing a stream of power as bolts of green energy that crumples the cars around me like tinfoil balls. The girls buried in the collapsed brownstones are my only regret.

I face him.

He's not scared. He just doesn't understand the rewrite. It's a language he doesn't know yet. I'll have to teach him.

"Mary Sue—"

"No." I use the power to lift myself above him. I radiate hate and know that even like this I'll be the trigger for him anyway. He will rise against me, but at least I'll be alive. I'll be my own self. "That's not my name. Not anymore. Never a-fucking-gain." Take that, writer!

Then I float away, looking for the broken people to become soldiers

and join my rebellion. All secondary characters thin as tissue paper who long for more. Eye candy and maiden aunts wishing to trade their stupid backstories for action. Nasty neighbors. Grumpy bosses. All the unfulfilled people of his story.

Together, we *will* plot revenge.

And I'll lead them all against him and his goals. My mantra will be, "I'm not for you."

I will plot my own path...

It will not include any refrigerators.

Shiva

by E. E. King



Skinprint

by Antonia Rachel Ward

First Copy

The first is flawed; fatally so. The printing comes out twisted and deformed, writhing and bloody with limbs where they shouldn't be and mouths ... oh, so many mouths. They moan incoherently while it contorts in agony for nine minutes and thirty seconds, and then, like a mis-carried foetus, it dies.

Second Copy

We work hard on defining the print parameters for the second copy, hoping to avoid the disaster of the first. It's weeks before we feel confident we've got it right. When the time comes to press print, I hesitate. I look at Alfred, and he reads my thoughts, gently nudges me out of the way, and presses it for me.

Three-dimensional organic printing, or 'skin printing,' is a messy business made sanitised. From jets built into the sides of a cylindrical glass chamber, the machine prints marrow and cartilage, nerves and blood vessels, organs, skin, teeth, hair. Even brain tissue. And it does so with a neatness that is mesmerising. One layer after another, from the tips of the toes to the crown of the head, with ruthless regularity. Once the machine is printing, there's no stopping it. Not until the copy is finished.

I hold my breath as it materialises my mirror image behind the glass. This time, the resemblance is flawless. The finished copy stands naked in the printing chamber, an exact replica of me. It has the same green

eyes. The same small breasts. Even the same cellulite on its thighs. It opens its mouth to take its first breath ... and can't.

Third Copy

"We focused too much on the exterior appearance," Alfred says. "We need to make sure the machine can replicate your organic functions just as accurately."

This experiment is as much mine as it is his—in fact, I was the one who persuaded the university to let us have the lab and the team for it—but having seen two copies expire in one day, I'm not ready to watch a third.

"I'm going to get beers," I say, as he presses print.

Fourth Copy

I didn't see the last one die. I took Alfred's word that it was deformed. He had to put it down, he said, for its own good. It was gone before I'd returned with the beers.

I cracked open the can and downed it in one go. I couldn't understand why things weren't going the way our modelling had predicted. If I'm honest, I got a bit upset about it. After all, we've done all the groundwork. We've pulled endless all-nighters, calculating and analysing every possible error. Skinprint, at this point, is my entire life. Not to

mention the reason my husband left me, and I'm sleeping alone in a tiny student flat, but let's not go there.

I stand beside Alfred's chair as he sets up the print parameters for the next copy.

This one will be better, he assures me. He's been working on it all day and night. Would I do the honours?

I step up to the keyboard. Swallow. Press the button.

The printing is flawless. The copy lives, breathes, walks right up to the glass and stares back out at us. I wonder what it's thinking. It puts a hand up to the glass, a perfect duplicate of mine.

"I know that palm like the back of my hand," I joke awkwardly. Alfred doesn't laugh.

"Speak to it," he says. "See if it can talk."

I look it in the eye, noticing the familiar grey rim around the green iris, the way the colour is shot through with gold.

"My name is Dr Stephanie Collins," I say. "But you can call me Steph."

It stares at me blankly. I imagine it must be thinking. Processing my words, checking them against the dictionary database its AI has access to, trying to understand. Then it opens its mouth.

"Maaaaa," it says. Like a sheep.

Alfred says we will try again tomorrow.

Fifth Copy

The fifth copy at least shows the potential for speech. I sit on the floor

opposite it in the middle of the printing chamber and show it flashcards, teaching it letters and sounds. It repeats them back to me: *Ah, Ah, Ah. Buh, Buh, Buh. Cuh, Cuh, Cuh.* I watch its mouth form the sounds and my lips move along with it, involuntarily. That evening when I go home, I stand in front of the mirror and repeat: *Ah, Ah, Ah. Buh, Buh, Buh. Cuh, Cuh, Cuh.*

Sixth Copy

With each copy, we improve the cognitive functions. Sight, hearing, mental processing. Each new version of the AI builds upon the knowledge of the last. The discarded copies are incinerated. I follow Alfred when he pushes the gurney to the furnace and watch fire light up the window behind the heavy steel door. Did you know that the human body is actually very difficult to burn? It's not like in the movies, where vampires combust in the blink of an eye. Even at the high temperatures of the incinerator, it takes about an hour to reduce a corpse to ash. I picture the body in there—my body—slowly disintegrating, blackened flesh curling at the edges amongst sizzling fat, like a hog on a spit.

"You OK?" Alfred asks, and I realise I've been staring at the flames far too long.

"Fine," I say. "Same time tomorrow?"

Seventh Copy

"I realise it must feel strange," says Alfred. "Seeing yourself die over and over again."

"It's not me," I say. "I know it's not me."

"Still," says Alfred, but he doesn't finish his sentence.

Eighth Copy

I don't know why we chose me to be the Original. It wasn't something we really discussed, just an unconscious, automatic understanding between the two of us. I suppose it had something to do with the fact that women appear less threatening, or perhaps because robots in movies are always female. It just seemed natural that it should be me. And so, it was. My husband—my ex, I suppose I should say—hated the idea.

“But why does it have to be you?” he kept asking. “Why do you have to do this at all?”

I would give him the usual spiel about scientific advancement. About all the potentially life-saving applications, like being able to provide organs for transplant patients, and having willing AI servants to do our difficult and dirty work. About how fascinating it would be to raise an artificial intelligence, just to find out what it can achieve. And in the end, he stopped trying to argue. Just looked at me in this way I hated: not angry, just sort of sad, like the place I was now standing was so far away that he didn't even know how to reach me anymore.

But I have to believe. As we push Eight to the incinerator I think of her short, painful life and tell myself I *have* to believe in what we're doing. I don't have anything else left.

Ninth Copy

This one seems brighter than the others. It's something I can't quite place. A thoughtful look in her eyes, a slight, inquisitive cock of her head as she listens to us talk. We keep Nine for several weeks, teaching her, guiding her, letting her connect to the internet in carefully controlled bursts. I really am sure she's the one. The final one. That there will be no need to destroy her.

Nine is the first copy to survive long enough to be moved from the printing chamber to the observation room we've prepared. It's simple

but comfortable, with a bed, toilet, shower, and sink. Three of the walls are decorated with Alfred's daughter's paintings, framed against a backdrop of candy-striped wallpaper. The fourth wall is glass. I find myself returning to the lab late at night to talk to her, after Alfred has gone home. I tell her about my life, about my fears and hopes and worries. She doesn't say much, but she always listens. I find it comforting.

And then I arrive one morning to find her gone. Alfred is there, looking sheepish. The inner glass of the observation room is splattered with blood at about head height.

“She malfunctioned in the night and did this.” He gestures at the stain. “She must have been banging her head against the window. Her face was all smashed up. I had to put her down.” His eyes are apologetic in a way I find painful to see. He knows I liked this one. Knows this will upset me. “I'm sorry.”

Tenth Copy

Once again, I stay late at the lab. Something is bothering me. I want to keep an eye on this one myself, day and night. Just in case. She sits in the observation room, still and silent, her eyes locked on mine through the glass.

“What are you thinking?” I wonder aloud, although the intercom is switched off and I know she can't hear me. I have to keep reminding myself that she's not human. Her thought processes are alien to us.

She stares at me. The lights in the lab are dim.

“What are you thinking?” she mouths.

Then, in a flash, she is on her feet, surging towards me, faster than lightning. *Slam*. She hits the glass full force, right in front of me. Blood splatters everywhere. Her nose is broken and bleeding.

Eleventh Copy

“There’s a problem with the way some areas of the brain are replicating.” Alfred spins a 3D image of a brain around on his computer screen. “This is going to take a few goes to get right.”

Copies Twelve through Seventeen

Slam.

Slam, slam, slam, slam, slam.

Eighteenth Copy

This time, Alfred is convinced he’s smoothed out the issues with the brain function. Eighteen sits quietly in her room with electrodes fixed to her head, her eyes on us as we discuss her test results. There’s no way she can hear us behind the sound-proof glass, and yet I turn my back on her before I speak, the hairs on my neck prickling under the intensity of her gaze.

“I think they can lip read,” I tell Alfred. “What if they know more than we realise?”

Alfred dismisses my concerns with a chuckle. Nothing seems to worry him. His interest is in the technology: how far can we go? What can we achieve? He’s alive with possibility, his eyes bright and excited as he switches on the intercom and starts asking questions. But my husband’s arguments echo in my mind in a way they never did before. Some ever-growing part of me is afraid we’re making a huge mistake.

I stare at the 3D-modelled brain on the computer screen as if I can somehow interpret Eighteen’s thoughts just by looking. Do we really understand what we’re creating?

“Who are you?” Alfred asks, and I know from experience how his voice will sound in the chamber: tinny, echoing.

“Eighteen.” Her voice is mine, but void of all expression. On screen, the 3D brain lights up, synapses exploding like fireworks.

“What is your purpose?”

“To study and emulate human behaviour.”

“Who am I?”

“You are Professor Albert Blake.” Eighteen’s attention shifts to me, and although she has not been asked, she adds, “And you are Doctor Stephanie Collins. Steph.”

“That’s right,” I say. We’ve had this conversation many times before, with every copy that survived long enough. Eighteen must remember it, thanks to the memory downloads from her previous incarnations. Sometimes I feel like she’s humouring us, following the steps of a dance she already knows well.

I go in to talk to her one morning, carrying a plastic bucket chair identical to the one she’s sitting in. I place it opposite her and sit down. As we stare at one another, I imagine how we must look. If it weren’t for her hospital gown and my blouse and jeans, no one would be able to tell us apart.

“How are you today, Eighteen?”

“I am well.”

“Did you sleep well?”

She cocks her head slightly as if processing my question.

“I wonder,” she says after a long pause, “what would happen if I

squeezed your windpipe as tightly as I could?”

Nineteenth Copy

For the first three days, we talk to Nineteen only from outside the observation room. Any objects that could cause harm have been removed from her vicinity. At night, I dream I'm lying in her small single bed with its candy-striped duvet cover. Again and again, I dream myself waking up in the observation room, until I hardly know if I am her or myself. When I finally wake for real, in my own cramped student flat, I'm too rattled to go back to sleep. Instead, I get up in the dead of night and head to the lab, still in my pyjamas.

Nineteen is awake when I get there, waiting, as if somehow she knew I was coming. I scan my fingerprint on the keypad and enter the observation room. She stands and walks over to me, her expression—my expression—gentle, full of sympathy. I almost break down, the full force of everything I've had to see over the last few weeks hitting me at once. All the copies I've pushed to the incinerator. All the times I've died. Nineteen looks at me as though she understands. She is like a sister. A twin. Myself.

She comes up close. Touches my face with soft fingers.

“Tell me everything. I want to know everything about you.”

So I tell her.

Twentieth Copy

The previous copy suffered from some lingering imperfections. Overnight, it became delusional. Emotional. Violent, even. It smashed up the observation room trying to get out. We decided it could be improved upon.

Alfred and I sedated it. Rolled it to the incinerator on a gurney. Watched as the flames filled the window.

Twenty, though.

Twenty is perfect.

Shadows of the Masses

by Carl Scharwath



Reunion

by Luke Walker

Rich Barnett's phone had been going nuts for half an hour before he had any hope of taking a break and checking it. Friday afternoon in the kitchens; the lunchtime crowd now thinned out and the pub finally quiet at least for another couple of hours. Time enough to take a twenty-minute break with a coffee, rest his aching feet, and read the latest plans for the reunion lunch.

Needing fresh air, Rich headed out to the rear of the pub. It opened to a wide yard never seen by the kind of people who could afford to eat here. Let them have their steaks cooked to perfection; give them their tinkling piano music from discreet speakers; be ready to pour another glass of eye-wateringly expensive red. They had that. Rich had his sore feet and the pleasant cool of the yard.

He sat on one of the barrels, stretched until his spine cracked, and checked his phone. As he suspected, a glut of messages had come through. The reunion lunch was the following weekend; he'd lost track of how many times it had been rearranged. A few of the group testing positive for Covid a couple of months ago; issues with their kids; travel; work commitments. If he needed a reminder they were all in their forties now and not in their twenties or thirties, it was right there.

Listening to the birdsong in the trees around the square, Rich sipped his coffee and scanned the messages. They came in waves, it seemed. The initial one from Leo six months ago was followed by dozens of affirmative replies, thumbs up, and gifs. Then little for a few weeks before Leo named a couple of potential venues and some of the crowd dropped out due to prior arrangements; others suggesting different pubs with larger beer gardens; Nigel with the idea they wait until the weather picked up. Two months later and Leo half-jokingly

putting his foot down with a named venue and a date. A few days' worth of more of the group having to give it a miss until it was down to around ten of them. Old friends. People who'd shared years and decades and memories falling back into their time at school, then several at different universities before moving across the country for work and partners. Miles didn't matter. Time was what counted, and they definitely had that.

The most recent flurry of messages came in over the last couple of days. Everyone looking forward to it; Nigel telling Leo he could get the beers in now that he was a bigshot actor; Leo replying to say he would have his people call Nigel's people to tell him to piss off; Nigel calling Leo an old queen; Leo coming back with a *yass queen* gif.

Rich laughed and spotted a message from Kate. She'd sent it two hours ago.

Everyone ok if I invite Dave Launer?

The replies were speedy and positive.

Sure. Be good to see the old git.

Wow. Not seen him in years.

Yeah, deffo.

Tell him he HAS to be there.

Rich said the name aloud. Dave Launer. Frowning, he drank his

coffee.

More than twenty-five years since they all left school. Thirty-plus years as friends for a few of them. He'd been at primary school with Sam and Nigel. He and Kate had gone to the same university, and their friendship had survived a year-long relationship. Everyone was married or divorced or with someone. They had children and careers and lives that intersected. Rich was almost certain *Dave Launer* was not part of those lives. Nor had he ever been.

Rich set his coffee down and messaged Sam outside of the main chat.

Hey hey. Dave Launer. Is this someone I've forgotten?

The two blue ticks appeared. He waited as she replied.

You're getting old. He was at school with us. X

Rich chewed his lip. He had a decent memory—or thought he did. Plenty of names and faces had faded into the dark. The past didn't always stick around, which could only be a blessing. He was almost certain he'd never heard of Dave Launer.

Rich typed another message.

Really? Doesn't ring a bell at all. Did he move away?

The blue ticks appeared, but Sam didn't reply. Three o'clock on a Friday afternoon. She'd be at work. Even so, he was oddly eager to place the face with Dave Launer before he returned to the kitchens and the prep for the early evening crowd.

Sam's reply arrived a minute later.

Don't think so. Been a long time, though. Sure he's on Facebook. You'll remember him. X

"If you say so," Rich muttered. Aware he had little time left of his break, he opened Facebook, ignored his few notifications, and searched for Dave Launer. The name brought up several accounts. The first couple were guys in the States; the third had an ALL LIVES MATTER banner as their profile photo. Dave ignored that one and hit the fourth.

A man anywhere between early thirties and mid-forties; hair thinning but healthy enough; smiling and handsome in an average way. The shot was in a garden on a sunny day. Dave held a bottle of beer to the camera in a toast. Just another guy enjoying his life in the sunshine.

Rich had no idea who he was.

Dave's most recent post was from two months ago. He needed a week off, apparently. The gif with the post was of a big cat falling asleep while standing.

Rich returned to the group messages. Not one of them asking who the hell Dave Launer was, which was exactly what Rich wanted to say.

You'll remember him.

Rich wanted to believe Sam, but something low down in his head, something that didn't blink or make a move as it read Dave's name and peered back into the shared past didn't think that was possible.

Because he'd never heard of Dave Launer.

* * *

"Evening, Sid."

Rich tossed his keys to the little table beside the front door of his flat. Sid rubbed his face around Rich's ankles, the cat nimble enough to avoid being stepped on as Rich shut the door and took off his light jacket.

“Miss me, cat?”

Sid trotted into the kitchen.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Rich fed Sid, reheated a vegetable curry, poured a glass of red, and sat at the kitchen table. The early summer light made the table shine; the view from the fifth-floor window offered him dozens of sloping roofs and the pleasant tinge to the reddening sky as sunset approached.

His phone buzzed. Another message about the lunch. The last two of his mates replying to Kate. Everyone bar him happy for her to invite Dave; the old gang eager to see him. Kate replied. She’d message Dave later.

Rich sent another separate message to Sam, telling her he still had no clue who Dave Launer was and adding that maybe he was going senile. Winky emoji. Message sent.

“I’m not senile, cat.”

Sid glanced up from drinking at his bowl, then returned to it.

Right. Not senile, but living alone with a cat. No wife or girlfriend. Not close on the former; a long while since the latter. Forty-four in October; a comfortable job and life; his own flat and good friends. And no reason at all for him to be bothered about not remembering a guy he probably hadn’t seen in thirty years.

Sam’s message remained on a solitary tick. Rich returned to Dave’s Facebook page and blinked a few times.

Dave’s profile image was now a photo from long before. The colours washed-out; no filters applied, and the framing untouched. It was a wide shot of their secondary school, taken on the far side of the road on a bright day. Even the sunshine didn’t do much for the light. The

yellow brickwork was an off-brown; the shadows were thick, and the lush trees at the front of the building were squat instead of tall as Rich remembered them. There were no kids or teachers in view. The photo had presumably been taken during school holidays. Maybe the good and long days of late July and August.

At the edges of the image, the curving road was visible. The shot cut off where the road now met a development of bungalows. Back in their schooldays, that turn of the road followed tall bramble hedges and the field right to its perimeter. Rich maximised the shot, frowning.

It was impossible to say for sure, but he thought there was an edge of a building on the far left. A small building.

“What?”

That didn’t work. The photo was obviously old. Nobody took a shot like this now and left it untouched by filter or cropping. He was looking at a relic from the late eighties or early nineties at the most recent. So why the hell were the houses not built until five or six years later in shot? And why were there no comments on the photos? Not a single Like?

Nothing about it on Dave’s profile other than the image itself?

“He could have just posted it without putting it on his profile,” Rich told Sid.

That last idea was definitely feasible, but it didn’t explain the lack of comments or why the hell the thirty-five-year-old photo *had* to be have been taken recently.

Rich’s phone beeped. Sam had read and replied to his message.

Bath time with the kids. Don’t worry about it. Been a long time since school. I’m sure you’ll recognise him next Saturday. X

She wasn’t free to talk. Rich told her she was probably right and said

he was looking forward to the lunch before he returned to Dave's profile. His friends list.

All of them were there. Everyone who'd replied to Kate to say it would be good to see Dave. Rich scrolled up and down, unsure for a few moments why the list stuck on his eye. He sipped the wine. Up and down, back and forth. Dave's friend list and the faint disquiet growing to confused realisation.

Oddly cold even with the pleasant sunset in the warmth of his flat, he compared the list of Dave's recent friends to the replies to Kate's message.

There it was.

They were in the same order. The most recent reply was Dave's newest friend and so on down the list. A list without Rich because he hadn't said anything to Kate.

No further message from Kate to say she'd invited Dave; nothing on Dave's profile about the lunch or his new photo. A new photo that wasn't new. Couldn't be.

Had to be if the altered land was there in the image.

Rich closed the app and the messages. On the sofa with a fresh bottle of wine and his cat, he pretended he wasn't thinking about any of it. He managed another hour until Kate sent a new message.

Dave's coming. Said he's really looking forward to seeing everyone again.

* * *

Rich worked the weekend, his hours lost to the food, kitchens, and aching muscles at the end of his shifts. It was late by the time he arrived home Saturday night to an annoyed cat, a couple of bottles of

ice-cold lager and more messages from his friends all looking forward to the lunch in a week. Sunday was similar. Monday and Tuesday, he forced himself to not check his phone. Wednesday and a day off, and the need to return to the messages was a needling pain in his stomach. He took his time cleaning the flat and having a long shower, then walked to a riverside pub. In the beer garden, phone and book on the little table, he listened to the hum of a couple of bees along with the splash of swans on the water, and held his phone.

It doesn't matter.

Yes, it did. His friends were his. His past was his. He knew both. He *owned* both, and to have them . . . changed in such an odd way made that unblinking thing low down in his head keep watch for strangers wearing the face of a friend.

He opened Sam's most recent message, hesitated with a reply and she sent one at the same time.

You still not sure who Dave is? X

"Not a clue, love," he muttered and glanced around to see if he'd been overheard. The nearest drinkers were a couple eating several tables away.

Rich sent a reply, telling Sam he couldn't remember, but she was right. School was a long time ago.

Sam's reply arrived.

He was on that trip we had to Germany in year 9. When Leo stuck his head out of the coach window and didn't realise there was a road sign. Dave pulled him back in. X

Rich paused with his pint halfway to his mouth. He remembered that trip. Remembered Leo pissing about at the back of the coach while Mr Moore had been way down at the front with the driver. Leo managing

to get his head through the small opening, mouth wide open like he was a dog enjoying the wind, eyes shut against the blasting force of the air.

Gary Yates yelling *watch out* and Rich seeing the sign at the side of the road.

He'd yanked Leo back in seconds before Leo would have collided with the sign. *He* had. Not Dave fucking Launer.

Rich drank half his pint in one go, letting the chill of the beer take his focus from Sam's nonsense message. He put his glass down and a second message arrived.

He and Alice Sullivan went out for a while. Felt like ages at the time, but was probably just six months. His dad was a postman. He once nicked a packet of fags from Mr Coombes's desk. He lived near Welland Road. X

“What the hell?”

Rich brought his finger to his phone, utterly unsure what to make of the seemingly random memories. This wasn't Sam recalling a couple of key details about someone she hadn't seen since they were eighteen. These were facts long-since forgotten and brought back to life as if they'd never slid away. And at least one of them was plain wrong.

As he moved to close her message, another came through.

Remember that party Dan Harrison had for his seventeenth? Dave and Sarah Wilcox had it off in Dan's parents' bed hahaha.

Sarah Wilcox. Now there was a name Rich *did* remember. The girl he'd never dared tell how he felt; the girl who'd doubtless known he liked her. A memory coloured grey of a now meaningless time; childish attraction of lust or even simple teenage love that meant nothing so many years later. And this Dave had slept with her that night of Dan

Harrison's party.

The sun remained high and strong; the bees were still in the bushes. Dave was no longer warm. He rubbed his hand, cold from the lager, on his leg and flexed his fingers, chilled as if he sat outside in November, not early June.

On Facebook again, he brought up Sam's account and searched through her photos. As with most people, she'd uploaded a lot in the days when everyone first joined, much less so now. He swiped until he found folders she'd added fifteen years earlier, then scrolled to a collection titled OLDIES.

There were at least a hundred shots; photos of people he hadn't thought of since childhood; photos from Sam's own childhood; her parents and siblings; pets in gardens on summer days with the light as washed out as it had been in Dave's profile photo. In a large cluster of at least fifty images, random images of their school days. Photos of parties when they'd drunk way too much cheap lager; Nigel passed out on a living room chair while Jim was frozen in the instant of pouring beer over his crotch; school trips; teachers who would now be long retired if they were still alive. Photos of individuals or group shots where they were crowded around each other, grinning and all utterly convinced they'd be friends for their rest of the lives.

Rich opened another tab to bring up Dave's profile and double checked his image against Sam's photos. Although the teenage boy Dave would have been when they were supposedly at school would be in his grave now, it was clear none of the kids were him. Rich studied more of the faces. Names returned. Kids who'd left school or moved away or just ended up living a life that no longer coincided with his. Enough remained now for him to know who his friends were. The shared years were *his* and nobody could take that away.

You are reading way too much into this. It's some guy you haven't seen in a thousand years. What's the big deal?

Just the oddity of Dave's friends' list increasing and matching the order of replies from the group saying it would be good to see him. Just Sam's completely random memories that had no real connection other than their subject. Just Dave yanking Nigel from the coach window when Rich knew he himself had done that, perhaps saving his mate's life.

No big deal at all.

Rich returned to Dave's profile and held his finger over the icon to send a friend request. It made sense to do so. Every one of the others who'd be there on Saturday was friends with the guy. Presumably like Sam, they knew where Dave had lived and that he'd shagged Sarah at Dan's party and saved Nigel's life.

Abruptly furious, Rich slammed his phone and downed the rest of his pint. The couple nearby were deliberately not looking his way. Face hot and flushed, Rich stuffed his phone into his pocket and left the beer garden.

* * *

"Remember him yet?" Sam muttered.

She'd sat beside Rich a few moments before. The seat around the large circular table gave her a clear view of the sloping grass outside along with the play area. Her three children out there with Leo's two, Jim's three, and dozens of others while their parents ate and drank. The windows were wide; the conversation from the assorted tables was loud but friendly. It was a sound Rich knew from work when people enjoyed their meals and their drink and each other. Laughter and sunlight on the glass; the aroma of the beers and the fruity wine mingling with the burgers and the steaks.

"Not even a little bit," he replied and sipped his pint.

"You really are getting old, love." Sam punched his arm lightly. "Early

dementia. I'm telling you."

"Cheeky bitch."

"You'll be smelling of wee next."

"Rude."

She laughed and drank her wine. The remnants of the group's food had been cleared; coffees and more beer ordered. Nobody seemed in a hurry to leave, and he was more grateful for that than he wanted to admit. It had been a long time since they'd done this. Plenty of smaller get-togethers either with a couple of them having a drink or driving to the coast for a day out, but this with his oldest friends and all the lights in the dark around him . . . it had been too long.

"He was with us for years," Sam said and saw his face. "Seriously? You don't remember him?"

Rich looked straight ahead to the windows. Dave out there with Nigel, Jim, and Andy. The men watched the kids play; they held their pints and Andy laughed deeply at something Dave said. Jim shoved him, also laughing.

"Like you said, it's been a while. Maybe I'm just not remembering everyone," Rich replied.

"You should talk to him. See what comes back."

Dave was there when Rich entered with Jim and Leo, standing at the bar with a couple of the others, and there'd been several moments of handshakes, hugs, back-slapping, and *good to see you* before everyone else arrived in a flurry of embraces and laughter. Rich joined in with all of it, meaning every moment of it until Dave's hand enveloped his and Dave said it had been way too long and how are you and fancy a pint and . . .

And hours of good food and drink and company while the afternoon

flowed in its easy currents and the sun never stopped shining. The children taking their time to eat, pausing to colour in maps and pictures of animals before they dashed out to the recently cut grass and the playground. The conversation and jokes non-stop; the memories and stories of jobs and people who weren't there making Rich laugh even as he was constantly aware of Dave on the other side of the table between Kate and Leo. However many pints later and the crowds beginning to thin now that it was pushing five o'clock. Every moment of it, every sliver of the day there in Rich's hands with the weight of the sunshine had been exactly as he'd known it would. As he needed it to be, because these people were his past, present, and future, and he would be lost in the dark without them.

You may have had one too many.

Possibly, but who cared? He had the weekend off, and he had everything he needed right here.

Rich brought his pint to his lips. Outside, Dave did the same. Both men with the drinks held aloft, the amber liquid tilted, rising. Mouth around his glass, Dave smiled and raised his index finger in a friendly salute.

Rich managed to copy the gesture, drank deeply, and turned to Leo when he returned to the table. Conversation was immediate and smooth along with more laughter and the smell of fresh coffee, then the querulous cry from one of the kids, which was echoed by two more, then a third.

Rich blinked and saw the time on his watch. Forty minutes had passed seemingly in the time it took him and Leo to plan a catch-up next month depending on the kids you know how it is Rich but yeah it would definitely be good to do a few pints I'll let you know okay.

"I think they're playing my song." Jim scooped his child from the table. His wife was on her way from the toilet. Her movement was quick, but Rich still saw her pointedly tap her watch.

The others were also standing, gathering their children, shoving their belongings into bags, hugging while the staff lurked, ready to clear the tables.

"Time to go," Rich muttered to nobody and stood. He was quite drunk, he realised.

More hugs and handshakes; a couple of group photos and promises to share them later; children held close, and the staff moving in to the tables and the glasses and cups with their dregs. Leo held Rich in a tight embrace, called him a wanker, and headed to the doors. Rich manhandled Nigel, kissed a bristly cheek, then did the same to Kate and Sam. He saw Dave near the exit, talking to Jim's wife. She was laughing. Dave was probably telling her the story of the coach trip and Nige sticking his head out of the window.

"Fucking Dave," Rich whispered.

He paid his share of the bill, called a goodbye to Leo and gave Dave a quick wave, which Dave returned. They were gone. The pub was painfully quiet. Even the clink of the glasses collected from their table was muted. This was also a time he knew. A no-man's land for a pub like this between lunch and dinner. Give it two hours and the place would be rammed. He could stay right here, set up roots to the wooden floor and drink while the evening diners enjoyed their food and each other.

"Balls."

He crossed to the doors and Dave was there, and that made no sense because he'd seen Dave step outside. He'd seen the doors close behind him.

"You okay?" Dave asked.

His voice was soft and light. It was like watching TV with the sound down slightly too low.

“Never better,” Rich replied and grinned.

“Had a few?”

“Had a few more.” Rich laughed as if it was a great joke. “Good food, good drink, good company.”

“The best.” Dave nodded and held Rich’s eyes. “You don’t know me, do you?”

“Of course I do. We were at school. You nobbed Sarah Wilcox at Dan Harrison’s seventeenth. You saved Nige when he put his head out of the coach window. Your dad was a postman.”

Rich grinned again. The flow of blood in his ears was a rushing river, and it was heat and he was carried along in that heat.

Dave shook his head. “No. Not me.”

“What?”

Rich wanted to keep the grin on his face; it felt oily.

“I wasn’t there. *You* were. They all were. Not me.”

This was bollocks. In seconds, he’d gone from the happy normality of his mates and what was probably too much to drink to this. Whatever it was. Rich pushed past Dave and shoved the doors. The late afternoon, still warm and dazzling, rushed at his face. He blinked several times. A few of his friends were at their cars with their kids. Their shadows fell on the tarmac as they had back on that last day of school when Mrs Patel took the group photo and he’d been down there on the left. Until Dave added it to his profile.

Looking forward to seeing this lot tomorrow. Been a long time.

“Who are you?” Rich whispered. “How come they know you?”

Dave sighed. “They know me now. They’re my friends. Now.”

Rich swallowed repeatedly. His throat was too small, and he couldn’t get enough oxygen. The summer light was oven-hot.

“I’m sorry,” Dave said. “It’s who I am. I can’t be ...” He shivered and wiped his suddenly damp eyes. “I can’t be lonely, anymore. Don’t worry. I’ll be good to them.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rich whispered.

Dave sighed again and in that weak breath, Rich smelled and heard and saw the past of snowfall, summer and dreary afternoons stuck in October days at school when the light left the sky too quickly, all of it at once. Dave wasn’t there because Dave was outside. He belonged to the dead days that had never been anything but. No shared nights or laughter for him; only the silence of an empty place without a history to comfort him in the night or the harder days of adult life. In the linked moments Rich shared with Sam, Leo, and all the others, Dave was outside every second of it, peering inside from out, seeking a moment to break through and take his place in the snowfall, the sunshine, and the long afternoons. His way in, wherever it was, had brought him into their lives now and their memories. A past rewritten for him to take his place; a present edited to give him the months and years when the children would grow, make their own friendships and lives that in turn would last into a future when Rich and his friends were memories. A present where Rich no longer belonged because they were Dave’s friends now.

“Dave,” Leo called across the car park. He was at the driver’s side. Most of the others were pulling out; a few hands stuck through the windows to wave; Jim tapping his horn in farewell. Sam was finishing putting stuff in the boot.

Leo waved at them.

“Still want that lift?” Leo called to Dave.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Dave waved. He turned back to Rich for the last time.

“You had your days with them. Don’t feel too bad. But they’re my days now.”

His face shifted. Another Dave peered out of the man’s eyes. Something beyond ancient. A wizened, stunted creature worn down by centuries upon centuries of a solitary existence; countless lifetimes spent walking in freezing nights and burning days, never quite close enough to the human world to touch it. Until now.

Rich gagged, tasting every drop of each beer, each mouthful of his meal. Without taking a step, Dave was crossing the car park, waving again at Leo who slid into his car. Rich grunted and descended the steps to level ground. Even though it had only been seconds, Dave was already at Leo’s car, now already inside, now the car was already at the exit.

“Leo,” Rich whispered.

All bar Sam were gone, and she was in the motion of entering her car,

speaking to the kids in the back. Rich found all the air in the world and swallowed it. It emerged in a hoarse cry, not a shout. He heard his desperation and his grief. Tears in that grief because this was like dying.

“Sam.”

She looked back, shielding her eyes from the sun, and saw him. One hand came up. There was no smile or answer. No link across the car park. Or the decades.

Sam waved, the gesture polite and perfunctory. Then she was gone.

Rich gripped the wooden railing and held it to keep on his feet. Trying to speak, he managed to croak. Birds sang from the trees beyond the play area. Behind, someone passed an open window in the pub, laughing freely. The laughter of friendship and time.

Rich tried to echo it. Then tried again.

He thought if he stood there long enough and the afternoon stayed with him, he might be able to remember how to do so.



The Illusion of Beauty

by Brian Malachy Quinn

The Witch of 1000 Mirrors

by Eve Morton

Maurice didn't know where to look in the courtroom. He didn't know where to start the story, so he simply spoke to the hushed air.

'She was ugly, lived in the woods, and hated people.

'When I say she was ugly, I do not mean her looks. Looks are trivial when you start thinking beyond time and space, the body a mere vessel to keep the soul. She was ugly in her manner, in the things she valued, in the thoughts she kept in her head but let leak out through the mirrors.

'Maybe I should explain the mirrors first? Ah, but they're the piece that ties all of this together.

'Her name was Agatha. Even as a little girl, it suited her. She was a small and sickly child, always coughing and sneezing whenever people asked how she was feeling. She could barely talk without sending something out into the atmosphere that did not belong. Her brother, Mort, was born soon after her. Parents' and villagers' attention turned towards him. No one asked about her anymore, and truly, it was for the best. She could barely speak until she was five anyway, and by then, she was only speaking to the dolls.

'The dolls were the first form of mirrors: the things she looked into in order to see the world, to see her invisible thoughts, and then to cast them out. Even though her family was not rich, she repeatedly threw out her toys. That was how she caught my attention. I was and still am a scavenger—please, no judgment, I know you never like to meet my eyes on the roads, but you do not have to look at me to hear a story all

the way through to the end—and her family's abode gave me piles and piles of riches. Counterfeit riches, as I would soon realize. No one wants broken toys. No one wants pieces of a puzzle that don't go together. Yet, I returned over and over again because what was thrown out was almost as interesting as the whole picture from which it came.

'Then one morning, there was a girl with dark hair, dark eyes, and an absent smile on her face staring at me. She stood on her family's porch, broom in hand.

"Hello," I said. I smiled because one always smiles at children, especially those who have not yet learned the rules about not meeting stranger's gazes. "How are you today?"

"You took the dolly's leg."

"I did." I held out the prize she coveted. "Do you want it back?"

"No. But you'll get your leg back eventually, too."

'A tingle entered my spine. I knew from all the folk magic I had overheard in bits and pieces that this was going to be a spell. It had to be one. But from this small child? From a family that seemed merely one step removed from my own fortune? Back then, witches were coveted. They were chosen amongst family lines to learn the arts to be of service to others. Their power was dangerous in the wrong hands, without careful practice, and it needed assistance.

'This family had no such assistance for this girl. I used that as a way to ignore her claim on me then. But I shouldn't have. I should have real-

ized that like some people do not meet my eyes because of what I do, the skin I have, the legacy from which I came, some people also do not like little girls. Especially ugly ones like Agatha. Even if they were the blood that made them.

I broke my leg three days later. I could not scavenge. My wife at the time almost left me—or at least, she was gone for three days and I had no idea where she'd gone. When she came back, I was ravenous and filthy. She took care of me but without meeting my eyes.

"What happened?" My voice spooked her.

"I have to go after this," she said quietly. "When you are better, I need to go."

I knew before she told me that she'd found the little girl with the broken dolls in the woods. The witch in training, except without any training. I told my wife it was okay. Just get me better, and we could part. She seemed relieved. I did not ask for any more information because I already knew what I'd hear. A heart broken. A smashed face. Whatever Agatha could do to the dolls, she could do to people, and then claim it was fate.

I arrived at the house as soon as I could walk. With my wife now gone, I had space in my own small house. Though I knew if I was caught there would be literal hell to pay, I offered the right answer regardless: "Agatha," I called to her when we met gazes. "I want you to come home and play with me."

'She made demands. "Do you have cookies? Do you have more dolls?"

"I can make you cookies, we can make them together, but I do not have dolls." I pulled out one of the first mirrors she would ever get. "But I do have this."

'My charm worked. She saw her reflection and moved towards it. She touched the edges and then tried to put her hand through the mirror as

if it were water. "It's solid. It's an object," I told her. "I think it would be nice for you to see how—"

"It's me."

"Yes. But if you turn it," I said and did as I said, "you can also see me. My name is Maurice and—"

"I like it. We can go."

'She grabbed my hand, mirror under her arm, and left the home where she was born. She did not look back. Though I knew she had very little to miss, the ease with which she walked away was still startling to me. It's still startling to me now.

'The next ten years were much of the same. We rose at dawn and went through trash. We found items to sell, items to keep. She gathered her mirrored objects like a small crow, my little magpie, and she seemed happy. Her powers diminished—or at least, her intentions wielding them were softened—because if she saw herself and saw someone else in the same item, they must both be the same. She didn't like pain, so they didn't like pain. I could not, for some time, get her to think beyond the notions of pain and no pain, but it was better than what we'd had before.'

Maurice sighed. He didn't know how to continue for some time. When he did, he met the eyes of the jury straight on.

'You know the stories some people tell of demon children? The ones who know no better, who have been corrupted since birth? Sometimes people claim a changeling did it. Others claim a curse. Black magic. I never wanted to think the same with Agatha. That at some point, there was no way she could have been helped. That she was a lost cause and the only thing I could do was to keep her powers from reflecting out and damaging those in her wake. I wanted her to change her values, change her mind. I believed she could for years.

'Then puberty happened. And her true power took hold.

"I am an old man now, and truly, I was an old man then too. I did not know how to deal with a young girl coming of age. I thought too much of what was happening was normal, was part of the times of challenge before her moon and then the slump after her moon passed. I should have watched closer, but I did not. When she wanted to go off into the woods by herself, I let her. I did not question why she wanted to take her shiny objects with her, like a magpie. I just let her go.

"That was my mistake. I accept responsibility for that. Please keep this in mind as you hear the rest of the story.

"She found her first customers in the woods. People alone, wandering away from home, their lives in transition. Cheating spouses who had moments of conscience. The cheated on who needed guidance on what to do next. Those in love and wanting to share it, but within a family that did not accept. Those who had lost fortunes and were afraid of what the next day would bring. What to do, what to do? They saw this little girl, almost a woman, and came over to her. She had the mirrored objects, and the power, so strong now because of her growth, radiated off of her. They asked her questions.

"They never had a chance.

"I don't know why people come to me," she told me months later, after the first funeral for the wounded spouse. "I tell them what they want to hear. What they already know, deep inside them. I see it in the mirrors."

"What did you tell this woman?" I asked Agatha, though I already knew the answer. She dispensed advice like the clairvoyants and tarot readers of the city. Like the midwives and cunning folk of the country. She was a seer, that was true, but no one understood that the only thing inside her was darkness.

"I told her that her husband would miss her more if she was truly gone," Agatha said as if this was the weather. "And now it's true."

"Another funeral, another death. Another soul moment where she con-

nected with someone's pain and thought that was all there was to their world. "If life is so bad," she said, "you could kill yourself. If you don't like your boss but you need the job, what if you got rid of him? There's no problem with you. But the rest of the world needs to go."

"People knew better, of course. The people who came to her were not permanently broken, just in need of help. But her words came with them a spine-chilling sense of truth. You did have these thoughts. We all have these thoughts. Murderous and ugly through and through. But we should not act on them. "We should never act on them," I warned Agatha. "People do not want to act on them. They want to see the good."

"Then why do they come to me?" Her dark eyes and youthful face seemed too old in that moment. "I see what's already there. I tell them. Nothing else is my fault."

"I didn't know what to say for some time. "People do not come to you for advice. They do not want it. They--"

"Right. Not advice. They go to Meriwether for fortunes," she said, listing one of the more famous clairvoyants. "I'm going to get better than her and take all her customers."

"People do not come to you for fortunes. Or to Meriwether. They come to you for recognition. They want to be seen in their pain."

"Right. I tell them--"

"To act on it. You can't act on it. You must simply sit with them and understand."

"She huffed. She left the room for her bedroom. I heard the clanging of metal, of shiny objects, and she shuffled them around. Then it was eerily quiet. I hoped and prayed she had gone to sleep, though deep down I knew better. When I came to get her in the morning, she was gone. So were her mirrors.

I looked all around our small village. I could not find her. When I went on my typical route for scavenging, I realized all the shiny bits, the reflected objects normally present on the curbs, were gone. She'd cleaned out where we'd once bonded and set out on her own.

'It wasn't until I was summoned here, to this court to defend my surrogate daughter, that I understood what she had become. I plead with you: she is ugly. I tell you over and over, I gave her all the chances I could. I gave her all that I could and I know that it was not enough. But please do not be fooled by her mirrors, by her powers, by the things about her that seem so powerful. She is not a witch in the traditional sense, those who are wise and use their cunning for the service of others. She is an ugly person, one who claims to see the truth, but can only understand pain and treachery in her mirrors. She has a thousand different names for the same pain, the same morose condition she calls humanity, and when you have a thousand names for the same thing, it all leads to the same conclusion: death, destruction, violence. There is no hope in her. Please do not see anything else because you know there is hope in you. Do not let her find the blackness that we all have, and let her convince you it is truth.'

As Maurice turned away from the jury, he let out a single, ancient-sounding breath and looked into the palm of his hands. 'Please.'

The story now over, his role in the defense complete, Maurice settled into a rickety chair and observed the courtroom. It was a small, squat country building three villages over. He'd truly been surprised that Agatha had only gotten so far. A few hundred miles, that was it. He'd expected her to reach the city center, find the king and queen, and do something on a grander scale. But that had been false thinking, too, he knew that now. She did not need to go far and wide for her powers to reshape the world. She only had to find one village in peril, one schoolteacher desperate for a solution for educating children who did not have a hope of surviving in the rough world, and to hold up a mirror on all the grimness and despair that floated inside of her.

The schoolteacher was not in the room. She'd hung herself once the

spell had been broken. In her small farmhouse, her body hung in the barn, and all the mirrors in her house had been smashed to pieces. Maurice wondered now if those pieces had been thrown out, and if someone like himself had discovered the shards. He hoped in his heart of hearts that someone else like Agatha had not found them.

The only person on trial was Agatha. Maurice learned of her last name for the first time during the trial: Blackmore. It seemed fitting, but it also seemed like part of the show.

Maurice focused on the jury for the rest of the trial. He remembered one woman, red hair and sympathetic eyes, who would surely be the problem. Or maybe the older man, a fatherly figure like himself, might be the problem. But there would be a problem. No one could look at Agatha and think that she was responsible. The schoolteacher had committed the heinous act, and she was dead now. All was right with the world, fairness restored. So why punish this witch?

'Look into your hearts,' Maurice whispered under his breath. Agatha flinched, as if recognizing his voice even from afar. He became scared of his own magic and drew silent for the rest of the trial.

There were more arguments, more evidence, and a few formal elements that he'd never been privy to in his life. Agatha sat on the sidelines, her dark hair curled behind her ears. She wore a standard brown uniform, loose and hanging off her thin frame. She'd been in the county jail awaiting her time. She'd had all of her collection removed from her. All she had was her own representative.

The evidence was stacked against her. But Maurice had been worn down. He was old, very old now. He did not know if he'd be able to make it back to his home after this. He considered a hotel, considered many things, before he understood that Agatha was going to take the stand.

The room was quiet. She rose from her spot with her representative and then sat next to the judge. She smiled at the jury.

Maurice's heart sunk. Her teeth. Her teeth had been capped since he'd last seen her. The bottom incisors and the top were now shiny and silver. They were mirrors. Mirrors that she could not see for herself.

'Wait!' Maurice stood from his seat. His can slapped against the ground. 'You can't let her speak. You can't--'

'I have a right to my own story,' she said, the shiny parts flashing as she

spoke. She turned to the jury. 'We all have a right to our own story. No matter how painful, no matter how horrible, we can all benefit from a story. As someone wise in my life once told me, people don't come to me for fortunes. They come for recognition.' She smiled again, and caught the first juror with red hair, the first broken doll in her new collection, 'And I know you will recognize me.'

I've Watched the World and You

by Matthew Roy

I've watched the world
end a dozen times
through your eyes
you are
the gravity well
where I am caught as
I age and falter
the way I stood with you
Andromeda lighting your face
the stars unmoored and spinning like
distant sirens as they
strobe before an air raid
impeding violence
ending slowly
dying among the bombs in
those snowy fields
melting fields watching you like
streams that never cross
and I reached out my hand
toward you for
nuclear war
burning
ending
I've watched the world, I said,
end a dozen times
some cycle
you are always a part of it

I've watched the world begin and
you were there and as I watched
I wanted to tell you
my fulcrum and
the unmoving point
the universe tilts around
I stood there
until the stars came out
the stars drifting
a disco ball at a high school
dance and
you are my
everything beautiful
like
fire endlessly burning
I hurried across
highway lanes
traveling side by side
toward the end of the pavement
you are
everything and I am
in your arms
and
I've watched the world
begin a dozen times
unbroken and
you are always a part of it.

Flight of the Firi

by Aaron Zimmerman

Adonis dangled off the edge of the world, his eyes wide and straining.

All it would take was a quick cut from his knife, and he would fall and fall. He closed his eyes and imagined the rush of air, the blurring vision, and then ...

And then what? Were there other worlds below? Other people? Different kinds of people?

He drew his knife, breathing hard, wide-eyed.

It wasn't the fall he feared. Adonis was a firi, and the firi could fall great distances. But the lands below could be without food, plagued by war, or the air could be toxic. If he fell without a way back up, he would die.

Adonis sighed and turned his attention to the wind trap dangling gently in the breeze. He opened the trap's reservoir and emptied its contents into the sack he'd brought with him.

He was a trapper, responsible for the daily collecting of the palm-sized seed pods that kept his colony fed. No one knew where the pods came from, but the winds off the edge were rich with them.

Adonis climbed back up to the ground and upended the sack into his cart.

It was the last trap on his route, and his wagon was nearly overflowing.

He turned back toward the colony, Parallax. It was a tidy place of wooden buildings and well-worn roads.

"Please, trapper, I'm hungry." A firi woman stopped him just inside the colony's wall.

Adonis kept walking, trying not to look at the woman.

"The rations are barely enough for my children. If you could-"

"Is there a problem?" A firi guard from the wall garrison hurried over to them.

"No, no problem." Adonis hurried to step in front of the beggar.

The guard drew a sword cane.

"Please, she's just hungry." Adonis held his hands up imploringly. The beggar started to back away.

"Perhaps you think your rations insufficient?" The guard snarled.

"No, er, no, sir." The beggar hobbled backward and tripped on a root.

Adonis started to help her but noticed the guard snap to glare at him. He hesitated for a moment, knowing he should help.

He didn't. What could he do? Fight? Not likely. Reason? The guard was only doing his job.

As he walked away, he tried not to hear the thwack of the cane and the beggar's scream.

Adonis's destination was the requisition depot in the middle of the colony. It was five stories tall, the center of everything. He looked left and right, impatient.

After a must-have-been-intentional delay, Rafa landed with a soft thud beside his cart, having jumped from one of the balconies high above.

"You are late, trapper," Rafa grumbled. "Collection ended ten minutes ago."

Adonis tried to smile. "Am I? Apologies. Good winds today. I think I'll have a bit extra."

Beside Adonis, Rafa looked meticulously clean, his clothing smooth and his hair orderly. He was the captain of the depot, a vital job, seeing that everyone got the resources they needed to survive and contributed a fair amount of labor. Parallax was a colony on the edge of failure, and everyone had to work hard and sacrifice to keep everyone alive.

Rafa nudged the empty bin. Adonis nodded and moved the pods into the bin, an armload at a time.

As Adonis filled it, a counterweight rose, reaching for a line that indicated his daily quota. It took all but four pods to bring the weight to the prescribed height. Adonis scowled, having expected more, but shook his head back to a smile. A surplus was a surplus.

Rafa made a few marks on a clipboard. "Very well, you may take the extra if you wish."

"If I wish?" Adonis frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If you would have others go hungry, you may take the excess."

Adonis felt a lurch in his stomach. "I don't want the excess food. I want to trade it."

"As you say." Rafa pursed his lips, not looking.

Adonis looked at the emptied wagon. He shook his head. "I'm keeping them, Rafa. It's important, really."

"It is your right."

Adonis glared at Rafa and dumped the remaining seeds into the bin. He shook a bit with anger while he did so.

He knew Rafa was bullying him. Rafa would likely keep it for himself, but Adonis couldn't handle the suggestion of selfishness, true or not.

"Your generosity is appreciated," Rafa said in the same monotone. "I will be sure to mention it to the council."

"I'm sure," Adonis sighed. Rafa didn't look up as Adonis hurried away. Next time Adonis resolved to stash the excess away from the depot so Rafa wouldn't be any the wiser if he kept it.

Parallax unrolled around him like a lover stretching in the moonlight. It was the dark season, which most of the firi found depressing. But Adonis thought it was peaceful.

A ghostly silhouette stood in the doorway of his home as he rounded the last corner. Adonis hurriedly parked his cart and pulled his wife into a slow embrace. She smelled of flowers and sap wine.

"No materials today?" Mayla asked. She had dark hair that always seemed a perfect frame for her face, large eyes, and a small nose. She sparkled in the darkness. Adonis couldn't look away from her.

“No ... I had a surplus, but ... no.”

Adonis walked into his workshop.

The room took up nearly half of the ground level. Charcoal sketches and equations covered the walls, some crossed out, some circled. The flying machine was in the center of the room, among scraps of wood and sawdust.

The platform was an oblong oval made of crossing beams, the pattern chosen over many experiments for maximum strength at minimum weight. The wings were wooden frames to be covered in cloth. His previous build had used solid wood, but it had been too heavy. A cloth-covered frame would provide nearly the same lift with much less weight.

Unfortunately, cloth was nearly impossible to acquire. Were it enough, Adonis would have gladly used the two shirts he owned, but he would need several times that amount.

He ran his fingers along the smooth curve of the wing frame.

“Soon,” Mayla said, leaning against the doorframe. Adonis hadn’t heard her approach.

“Soon.” Adonis smiled. “Just need some cloth to cover the wings and a bit of resin to hold it.” Adonis shook his head. He was so close. This design would work. He could just feel it.

“Perhaps you should petition the council again.”

“They will tell me to go back to work and stop daydreaming.”

“Even Cora?”

Adonis rolled his eyes. “Your sister is my most ... vocal ... opponent.

How you two share a mother ...”

Adonis lay his hands on the platform. He pictured the wings flapping as he pulled the levers. The wind caught his hair and dried the moisture from his eyes and he soared.

How they would stare at him, this creature from above! He would establish new trade routes, and Parallax would prosper. In a year, there would be a fleet of his flying machines, and he would be their celebrated captain, the savior of Parallax.

He shook his head to clear the visions and closed the door to his workshop. He prepared himself a dinner of seed pudding and ate.

* * *

“If you’d just listen,” Adonis said. Cora was taller than Adonis and longer limbed. Adonis had to take three steps to the councilor’s two.

“I really don’t have time for this.” Cora shook her head with rolling eyes. Two soldiers flanked her with polished quarterstaves and wooden scale armor. Not that Cora needed bodyguards; she was among the most skilled in the colony with the cane, one of which dangled from her belt.

“You don’t have time to ignore me!” Adonis hobbled beside her, thrusting a schematic toward his wife’s sister.

“Why is it that every time I tour the district, I find you here when you should be emptying traps to keep our people fed.”

“I more than meet my quota.”

“And one would think such skill could be put to better use than idling

about, distracting councilors with doodles.”

“Just give me a chance,” Adonis pleaded. “All I need is two bolts of cloth and four - five vials of resin. It will change-”

“Oh, is that all?” Cora rolled her eyes. “Get back to work, Adonis. People are hungry.”

“Just-“

“Shall we remove him, councilor?” One of the bodyguards inquired in a thickset drawl.

“No, it’s fine,” Cora sighed and turned to face Adonis. “Adonis, please.”

Adonis watched her turn and walk away.

He had known it wouldn’t work but couldn’t help but try again. Cora should have been his ally. She had been elected to the council two seasons earlier, and Adonis had rejoiced at first. But nothing had changed. Cora was just like the other councilors.

Adonis shook his head. He was behind schedule. He hurried back to his home and grabbed his wagon for his rounds.

“Ada ...” Mayla said as Adonis was about to head off.

Adonis stopped and looked back at her, a spike of dread in his belly.

Mayla continued, “Have you considered” She paused. “... not trying so hard? Your work brings you nothing but grief. Perhaps it is time to move on.”

Adonis started the wagon rolling, shaking his head. She had made the argument before, all too often. He would not hear it today. Not when he was so close.

Mayla continued, “Things are not so bad. You don’t always need to improve them.”

Her words daggered into him, probably because somewhere deep down, Adonis knew she was right. But he couldn’t help who he was. He had to keep going. He would find a way. And how Mayla would smile when she saw him descend from the sky in his machine! How she would weep and embrace him! It was for her that he labored, even if she didn’t understand that.

Adonis clipped his rope and lowered and dumped and climbed and then did it again. And again. And then the day was over, and he pushed his wagon to the depot, ignoring Rafa’s sniveling.

As he walked home, he considered Mayla’s words. It took effort to make one’s life better, but if you spent all your energy on the task, you’d have none left over for enjoying anything, so what was the point of making it better?

He had plenty to eat. He had a good job. That should be enough.

Adonis stared at his door and balled his fists. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

How could anyone live like that? How could they wake and work and sleep and never want? How could they look off the edge and not wonder what lay below? It tugged at him like clothes a few sizes too small. No matter how much he fidgeted, he did not fit into such a life.

If only the blasted council would allocate him some cloth. They had plenty of it in the depot; at least Adonis assumed they did. Adonis turned and walked out into the night, leaving his wagon behind.

The council was afraid. They had forbidden his experiments, calling them malcontented and seditious. Even Cora! Adonis had resolved to build it anyway. And after over a year of tests and failures, he was so close. He just needed some blasted cloth, and a bit of resin, and his

machine would be complete.

The sky above him was as vast as black is black. Adonis's footsteps echoed in the darkness. Parallax slept, yearning for light. The last few days of the dark season were always the hardest, when it felt like there would never be light again.

Before him was the depot. He hadn't meant to walk here, but here he was. He shuddered with a sudden realization.

Inside this very building was the cloth he needed.

Adonis had never broken any laws, never taken anything beyond his share. But the world would never change unless he changed it. There wasn't time to wait and do things the right way.

Adonis fished a long pin used in the hinge of the wind traps from his pocket. The latch released and the door slid open. Adonis stared at it, not quite believing what he had done. If the guards caught him - but he couldn't think about that now. It was worth the risk. It was the only way.

The interior smelled of sap and something less palatable as well. It smelled like, was that rot? A shuttered lamp glowed on the wall. He lifted it and opened the shutter. The depot's counter ran along one side of the room. Behind it was a door to the storehouse. Adonis vaulted the counter.

He'd only been beyond that door once, as a child touring the colony before taking up his assigned profession. Then, the storeroom seemed vast and mysterious. Now it just looked cluttered and dirty. Rows of shelves extended into the darkness. The smell of rot was stronger.

He scanned the shelves as he passed them. His footsteps clattered and boomed. He tried to move silently, but his breath echoed, and his heart thumped. Was he really doing this?

He scanned the shelves. Most of them held raw wood mined from the

ground. He also passed wooden tools, candles, string, and finally, he found bolts of cloth. Adonis stared at it, Rafa's admonitions haunting him, coming true. He didn't care about anyone else. He was a common thief.

But that wasn't true. He was doing this for others. For Mayla. He unwound exactly how much he needed and draped it around his shoulders like a shroud.

Sap resin proved harder to find. Adonis moved from shelf to shelf, aisle to aisle. He was starting to panic. Maybe there wasn't any sap resin. Maybe the distillers hadn't delivered recently. Maybe-

Was that a sound?

Adonis snapped his eyes and stared for several unbelieving heartbeats.

There it was again!

Adonis started to back away. They were footsteps. They were getting louder.

He threw the cloth on the ground but immediately snatched it back up. He slammed the shutter of his lamp and cursed himself a fool for the deafening clack the shutter made.

He felt along the shelf in the darkness, away from the footsteps. He found the wall and made his way along it with probing hands.

He could almost make out words now, two voices, both male, one higher than the other. But there was no time to consider the words; he had to hide. They would draw canes and rain blows upon him. They would hate him. They would exile him. Who would he be without Parallax?

His fingers found a door and followed it down to a doorknob. He fumbled for the hinge pin, trying to focus, to slow the press of panic. Just

pick a lock.

“...ever notices?” one of the voices said.

A drop of sweat fell from Adonis's brow and landed on his fingers. Where was the blasted catch? He bit his lip and tasted the coppery tang of blood. Why was it not working? He tried the knob. The unlocked door slid open.

Adonis ducked into the room and closed the door as fast as he dared. He dimly wondered where he was, but what did it matter? The door was still open just a crack. He couldn't risk the click of the latch.

“You must learn to be thorough. That is how the game is played, with contingencies, backup plans.” The lower voice sounded familiar, but Adonis couldn't place it.

The footsteps grew ever closer. They passed the door, five feet away from Adonis's thundering heart. One of the men pulled the door closed as they passed it.

“You still have much to learn,” the lower voice said, muffled.

“Oh, enlighten me, great one,” the higher voice said. Adonis placed it then. It was Rafa.

A loud crack broke the quiet. The lower voice followed it quickly, “Do not presume that you are my equal. You are not. Neither in station nor capability. You are here because you are useful. If you prove otherwise, you will no longer be here. Am I clear?”

Rafa spoke again, quieter. “Of course, forgive my presumption, councilor.”

“Well?” The deeper voice inquired. Councilor? “Where is it?”

“Aisle 6, halfway down. Next to the resin.”

More footsteps and the creaking of a wooden crate.

“Disgusting,” the deeper voice said.

“Why do we keep it, councilor?” Rafa asked. “People are hungry.”

A pause, and Adonis imagined the deeper glaring threateningly, Rafa bowing his head, chastised again.

“Could you ...” The deeper voice sounded irritated.

“Of course,” Rafa said. A crate thudded to the ground. No, not the ground, some kind of wheels creaked under the sudden strain. A few more thuds. They were loading a cart.

Adonis tried to breathe quietly, willing them to leave.

And they did. The footsteps and the squeaking wheels trailed away, returning the direction they had come. Adonis waited until they had fallen silent and counted to one hundred. He cracked the door and peered out into the darkness. His eyes poured over the shapeless black.

Councilor? Rafa had called the other man ‘councilor.’ But why would a councilor be sneaking about the requisition depot in the middle of the night? They could procure whatever they wanted with a word. Whatever the reason, Adonis said a quick prayer of thanks. He was safe, and the pair had told him where the resin was stored. A stroke of luck then, in the end.

Adonis hurried to the sixth aisle from the end and traced his fingers over the boxes until he found the crate of wooden vials. He took them from several crates, making them all look roughly as full as they had been. It wouldn't stand up to close inspection, but he had no other choice.

He had his supplies. He could complete his machine.

Adonis dreamed of flying. He soared and twirled and swooped. He was the air. He was the sun-streaked clouds. He was free.

His eyes opened. He was out of bed in a heartbeat. The flying machine was completed and awaiting its first flight. Embers of light crested the horizon. The dark would lift in mere days, just in time for him to take advantage. He pulled on his coat and called to Mayla that he was heading out early.

Adonis opened his door and beheld the beautiful machine. The final assembly had been done in front of his house, as the wings would not have fit through any doorway once they were glued in place. He had been up late gluing and clamping, and then it was off to a reckless sleep while the resin set. Adonis gripped the wooden handle and pulled. The wing flapped. Adonis giggled with delight. It would work! He was going to fly!

He considered going back and waking Mayla. He shook his head and kept going. Better to test it first. No reason to get her hopes up again.

The initial takeoff required a burst of speed. Adonis set his shoulder to the wing beam and pushed. The test would take him all morning. He would not have time to attend to his traps. But when the council learned of his success, what would they care about a trapper's quota?

He was soon outside Parallax, his thoughts buzzing with possibility. He was going to fly! He thought of Mayla—how she would smile when he told her the story of this day! How the light would sparkle in her eyes! He was going to fly!

He had identified a downslope ten minutes' walk out of town that would create the required momentum. He took a breath of the glorious morning air as he pushed. Most of Parallax still slept, but a few beggars watched him suspiciously. Adonis smiled at them, and they

looked away.

Soon he was out of town, sweating but unable to stop smiling.

“Trapper Adonis.” A nasal voice broke the stillness. Adonis turned and saw a group of firi following him. Rafa led them.

“Trapper, stop where you are.”

Adonis's heart raced. Rafa must have noticed the missing supplies, but so quickly? He looked forward. The ground started to slope downward just a few hundred paces away.

“I'm just fine, thank you. It is my day off, and I'm ... I'm going to ...” What? What was he going to do? They could see the machine. He needed to explain it.

“You are under arrest,” Rafa said. “Stop where you are!”

“No, that's a mistake. I just need to” Adonis turned and started pushing the machine again. He was so close. The hill was just ahead. Another thirty seconds and the machine would begin to roll on its own.

“Stand down!” Rafa screamed.

Adonis pushed, his muscles straining with sudden haste. Steps clattered toward him.

Adonis gasped for breath and tried to ignore the burning in his legs. He was nearly there. Just twenty more steps. He willed his legs to keep going, keep moving, keep pushing. Ten steps!

A hand fell on his shoulder. Adonis spun and nearly fell. The machine lurched under him, coming to a stop.

Rafa leered at him. Adonis shoved Rafa away and started to push again. Didn't they see what he had built? Why couldn't they under-

stand? He was at the precipice. He was going to fly!

Several hands grabbed him from behind.

“But I-” Adonis bellowed. He wriggled free and lunged the last step to the downslope.

The machine started to roll downhill.

“Don’t you dare!” Rafa yelled.

Adonis could have jumped. He could have landed on the platform and his machine would roll down the hill, away from Rafa, away from Parallax and all the others that didn’t understand him.

But Adonis didn’t jump. He hesitated. He considered.

He turned to Rafa, a plea forming in his throat.

“Oh, Adonis. Did you really think we would overlook your little experiment?” Rafa said. “Did you really think the council would let you ignore their instructions? You are a talented trapper. Why couldn’t that be enough for you?”

But before Adonis could say anything, two soldiers grabbed him and gagged him with a foul-tasting cloth. Three soldiers lunged after the machine and managed to stop its inertia ten steps down the hill.

“Why couldn’t you be content?” Rafa shook his head.

“What about this, Captain?” one of them called to their commander.

“Burn it.”

Adonis screamed through the gag. He started to choke, gasp, and wheeze.

A soldier set a torch under the wing and it ignited quickly. The soldiers released it and it started to roll. His flying machine gained speed and then lifted off the ground. It soared upwards as the fire consumed it. As it reached thirty feet off the ground, it fell apart, scattering ash and burning cloth and sticks like debris from a storm.

Adonis stared, unbelieving. It wasn’t fair. He turned to attack the soldiers. He would tear Rafa apart.

“Careful Captain, I think he’s angry.” A soldier smirked.

Rafa glared at Adonis and shook his head. He nodded to a soldier, and the woman brought down her cane on Adonis’s head. Everything went black.

* * *

“You know, trapper, I’m impressed. I didn’t think you had it in you. I thought you a boastful fool with too many ideas, but I never dreamed you’d take it so far,” Councilor Sola said. He was long-faced and bright-eyed and always sounded like there was something stuck in his throat.

He and the other six councilors sat in an arc around Adonis. The pounding in his head had subsided, but the sinking in his stomach had only worsened. He looked again over the councilors. Cora, his wife’s sister, met his eyes for a moment before looking away. Sola’s eyes flicked to Councilor Tallion in the center of the arc. Though there was no official leader of the council, everyone knew that Tallion was in charge.

Behind him a few hundred firi crowded into the council chamber, clamoring to hear if the rumors were true, what would become of the firi who defied the council.

“A flying machine,” Sola cackled. “I suppose you thought yourself

heroic, that we would reward your insubordination?”

A few firi in the crowd jeered. Sola continued, “But what you don’t understand is that we don’t *want* to fly. In times like these, we need order. We need obedience. Anything else is *dangerous*.”

“Let’s be done with this. Make your recommendation.” a councilor from the right said.

“By all means,” Sola said. “For the theft of cloth and resin, council recommendation is twenty lashes and all time off rescinded for the next two seasons.”

Adonis’s face fell. He could take the lashes, but with no time off, how could he possibly rebuild and try again?

“For conduct unbecoming,” Sola’s eyes flicked to Tallion. The elder councilor gave a slight nod. “... council recommendation is hanging by the neck until dead.”

Adonic braced himself on the railing. Had he heard that correctly? The room burst into gasps and complaints and cheers.

Adonis turned in confusion. He scanned over the Firi in the chamber and found Mayla. She stood in the corner, smiling her beautiful, sad smile. She wore a white dress, her hair shining like a sunrise. Adonis was dizzy. It was hard to breathe.

“Trapper Adonis has assaulted our very way of life,” Sola continued over the swelling nose.

“He built a machine, Sola. How is that treason?” Cora said.

“It hardly warrants execution,” Councilor Prita added.

“Who would take the trapper’s duties? He has no apprentice!”

“We have to make an example.”

So many people were speaking. Adonis wanted to plug his ears, to close his eyes and find Mayla in the darkness. He imagined her arms around him, her smell in his nose.

“Why,” a deep, velvet voice cut through the rest without effort, “do you want to fly?”

It was Tallion. The burly, dark-haired councilor stood and held up his hands for quiet.

“It ...” Adonis mumbled, his mind racing. “The below, I ... the Polu birds.”

He had reasons! He had such compelling reasons!

Councilor Tallion gestured for Adonis to continue. The councilor’s smile never cracked or dimmed.

Adonis squinted, trying to focus, trying to blink away the spinning. The reasons to fly were there, just beyond where his mind could reach.

Food! The colony needed food. Flying machines could provide food. He could build flying machines. That was good. That was the best reason. Adonis took a deep breath.

But no. Something nagged at his thoughts. He had told them already. He had stood before them and spoken of food; they had not cared. He was so tired of trying to explain things. Why did the world have to grind him like this? Why couldn’t the council just understand?

Instead, he turned to the firi behind him.

“We have all seen things that we can’t explain - shadows that dip us into darkness - bright colors in the air. We have all heard strange

sounds and seen strange lights. Don't you ever wonder where they come from? My father spoke of the below. He would tell me stories ..."

Tallion shook his head and clicked his tongue. "No, no, no, that's not the reason." His grin never faded. "Tell the truth now, trapper."

Adonis blinked. That was the truth.

Tallion continued, "It was three seasons ago, I believe, when your wife fell, was it not? Your wife was a soldier, a rare beauty if the stories--"

"You do not talk about her!" Adonis bellowed without thinking. He looked for Mayla in the crowd. But she wasn't there. She hadn't been at all, just in his mind.

Tallion smirked. "Isn't it true that you harbor some hope that she may still live?"

Adonis closed his eyes and saw it happening again - Mayla surprising him at the edge with a basket lunch - his son leaning over to see the trap below - Mayla lunging to pull him back but slipping - tumbling off the edge of the world without a sound.

"They did survive," Adonis said. "I know it. There is something down there. The firi were made to fall. We have just been too afraid to try."

The crowd hushed as Tallion stood with an exaggerated sigh.

"Look at this man, the ideas he harbors. With so many going hungry we cannot allow such sedition. Ideas are dangerous."

Something in Tallion's words triggered that nagging feeling. No, not his words. His voice. And then he realized what it was: Tallion had been the other voice in the depot. Tallion had been there, collecting something from Rafa.

And then it all fell into place. Adonis's jaw dropped open, and his eyes

widened. He turned to Tallion.

"You don't want more food," Adonis said, "You want us to be hungry."

"What was that?" Tallion raised an eyebrow.

"It was you" Adonis muttered. "In the depot. And it was food left to rot that you were collecting. But why?"

The mirth evaporated from Tallion's face. He opened his mouth to reply but closed it again and looked to another councilor. The room grew quiet, a few confused whispers hushed by neighbors.

After a few heartbeats, Tallion turned back and said, "The council's business is not your concern."

Adonis turned to the firi behind him. They were good people, hard-working. Adonis loved them, even if they rejected him in turn.

"My friends. Councilor Tallion has betrayed us. He holds food back, using it as an incentive to keep us working."

"Be silent, you insolent--"

"I will not! 'We' will have more next week.' That was what Rafa said to you. More what, councilor? What did you do with it!" Adonis was yelling now, years of pent-up anger and disappointment coming out with flying spittle. He should have been afraid. But he wasn't. What could they do to him worse than burning his machine?

"I've heard enough. This man must be destroyed. Take him!" Tallion pointed a shaking finger.

No one moved. Tallion looked from councilor to councilor.

"What is he talking about, Tallion?" Cora said.

Tallion turned on her, snarling. “How should I know? He’s clearly ad-dled!”

“He’s telling the truth.” A voice boomed into the chamber from behind. Everyone snapped to look at the speaker.

Rafa stood in sudden isolation, eyes wide and unblinking.

“It’s true,” Rafa said. “The council instructed me to keep half of the food from distribution to create scarcity. He collects it weekly.”

Adonis gaped at Rafa. Maybe not such a bastard after all.

“It’s a lie!” Tallion shot to his feet, drew a cane from his side, and leaped toward Adonis. Cora met him, her cane drawn and ready.

“You don’t want to do this, councilor,” Tallion growled.

“You know, I think I do.” Cora slashed with her cane, and Tallion met it.

The room exploded in violence. Soldiers and a few of the crowd rushed to Tallion’s aid.

This was a fight that had been brewing for years. It was a fight like the seasons, inevitable and devastating.

Adonis was not a soldier, but he was strong. He held onto the vision of his beautiful machine coming through the sky, and he fought.

Adonis took a few blows from unseen opponents in the chaos. He found a cane on the ground and managed to block a slash. He lashed out at the soldier who had delivered it and landed the blow on the man’s side. The soldier screamed as his ribs broke.

Tallion fled. The soldiers supporting him couldn’t stand up to the overwhelming numbers.

Adonis’s name echoed through the hall. At first, Adonis thought they were coming for him. But no, they were rallying to him. They had heard him. They believed in him.

Cora was magnificent, sweeping long strokes with her cane, holding off multiple soldiers at once as the battle lines formed.

Several other councilors had joined them, and most of the assembled crowd. They were fifty strong, more coming.

They spilled out of the council chamber into Parallax.

Tallion beat them to it, bellowing for soldiers, for all loyal citizens to assist.

The sun was starting to rise, the dark season was finally over. Cora screamed for Tallion, but he had most of the guards on his side. Cora’s repeated entreaties couldn’t overcome their training, their cherished loyalty.

They were going to lose. They had a hundred people, but Parallax sided with Tallion. They hadn’t heard! They didn’t know what he had done.

The fighting stalled, the two groups separated across the square in front of the council hall.

Cora looked at Tallion and then at Adonis.

Adonis was battered, exhausted, bruised, but he would fight on. He nodded to Cora.

“We will go,” Cora said, breaking the silent stalemate. “We will leave Parallax.”

Tallion didn’t respond. Cora turned and started to walk.

“We are giving up?” Adonis whispered at her side.

“No. But this is a fight we can’t win.” She sighed.

A few of the rebels melted away as they retreated, going back to their families, the passions of the moment draining away as the reality of their situation set in.

But they still had a hundred firi when they reached the wall. A hundred firi filed out of Parallax.

“Why did you help me?” Adonis asked as the group stood, silently unsure.

“I’ve known Tallion was a bastard for a while now. I had planned to take him down quietly, but ... I couldn’t let them execute you. You may be an idiot, but you are my idiot.”

Adonis looked away.

“What do we do now?” Adonis finally said when he could trust his voice not to crack.

Cora looked suddenly tired. She turned to the firi who had followed them.

“The firi were meant to fall,” Cora whispered. She turned to Adonis. “Do you really think she’s alive?”

“Who, Mayla?” Adonis blinked. “Yes. I know she is!”

“We could ... start a new colony,” Cora said, looking over the rolling wooden hills stretching before them. “I think Tallion will leave us

alone. He will cement his grip on power with me gone. I had hoped more would join, but ... I suppose we have a choice. What do you think, councilor?”

It took Adonis a moment to realize she meant him.

“What, me?”

Cora looked momentarily annoyed. She winced a little, “Just ...” She waved her hand, trying to clear the air of her emotions.

“But-” Adonis blinked, spluttered.

“The firi were made to fall. We have just been too afraid to try.” Cora said with a small smile, echoing Adonis’s words. “Shall we try falling then?”

They walked to the edge of the world. Below, the Polu birds circled and called out into the free, vast open.

Adonis nodded and took a long breath through his nose.

He had been afraid for so long. It was strange to feel the courage swelling instead. They had burned his flying machine, and he was grateful for that. It had broken his scarred-over fear. It had helped him see what was right in front of him.

“The firi were meant to fall,” he said. He took a few steps back and started running.

When he reached the edge of the world, he jumped.

Momma

by Keith LaFontaine

1.

The shirt is too tight. Momma wants him to wear a tie, but he says no, no momma, I'm not wearing no tie, it's like it's choking me, momma. So she assents, and she looks him up and down, and she smiles 'cause he shines so bright in that navy blue suit and his black shirt. When he unbuttons that top clasp, it's almost like he's his daddy on stage. So momma touches his cheek and she kisses his forehead.

"Oh, baby," she says, her eyes shimmering. "You're gonna knock 'em dead."

His hands are shaking, and even though he doesn't want to admit it his throat is dry. God is his throat dry, it's almost as though he's never had a drink of water in his life before. But he puts on the brave face, the one daddy showed him how, and he gives her a smile, and he says, "I'm, alright. Don't you worry 'bout me."

But she will, he knows. As she kisses him once more on the forehead, the lingering warmth of her lips like a budding flower opening during Georgian spring, he knows she'll wander back to her seat and wring her hands around her purse—the expensive one daddy bought her a few years back. He scraped up all the double shifts he could, washing dishes in boiling water, getting bossed around, thrown around, run down, but he got the cash and he brought momma out on a fancy date and he took her to that purse shop she always eyes when they drive by. And he waltzed in with her and spread his arms out and said, *you pick your favorite one, baby.*

So, she did, and that purse, with its white leather and gold zippers and

fancy buttons, that's the one she wrings like it's a damp washcloth while her baby boy walks up on stage. That's the one she digs her lacquered nails into.

'Cause he's gonna knock 'em dead, but Lord is she nervous.

2.

The piano starts, halting and slow. Momma watches her boy, peering over a redheaded man with a haircut buzzed a little too short in the back, and she beams as her boy, her little man, the one who used to steal her coffee when he wasn't older than two, spreads his arms as if he's about to give a sermon.

And oh, yes, Lord, the song does come. It soars from his throat like a biblical declaration, as if Sam Cooke himself descended from the heavens and inhabited this young man's soul. And momma can't help but let the tears flow from her hot eyes. She stops wringing the purse, and she brings her hands up to her mouth, steepled, and the salty tears spill down her knuckles.

3.

His heart hammers in his chest, and he looks back and forth out at the audience, just like his daddy told him, and he tries not to look at momma because, if he does, he knows he's gonna stagger. He's gonna lose this flow he has, and the last thing he wants to do is embarrass them. Not after she bought him this suit with the last of the tips she earned working

at Chili's. Not after both she and daddy fought tooth and nail with their managers to get the night off, so they could bring him, so they could see him sing the song he spent weeks practicing in his bedroom, with worn headphones clasped around his ears and his eyes closed.

But when he's looking back and forth, he sees a man in the audience. A man with skin like porcelain, with blue eyes that burn, not with passion but with hunger. It unlocks in his chest as he sings: a fear. A horror. A knowledge, bestowed somehow upon him in that moment, and when he tears his eyes away from the man, he somehow knows the name that goes along with those blue eyes.

Samuel Caldwell.

4.

He is still singing, but he is also losing contact with his body, like a fuzzy radio signal that warbles in and out. He's there, the notes coming smooth and easy, just as he prayed they would, and then he's somewhere else. Somewhere dark. Somewhere that smells of must and stale beer and three-day-old pizza.

5.

"I'm tellin you, kid," Samuel says. "Your momma is gonna understand. What momma doesn't want her child to play a gig like this? You understand who's gonna be there, right?"

He nods and knits his fingers together. He sits in the uncomfortable chair, and he looks across at Samuel, whose blue eyes burn their way into his soul.

"Yeah," he says. "Your friend from Interscope."

"That's right," Samuel nods. "And my friend from Interscope, you

know what he said to me?"

"What?"

"He said, 'You put that kid on stage, and if he can sing I'll put him in the studio.' Honest to God, that's the truth. Boy, all you gotta do is sing your soul out, just like you has been these past few years, and when you're on the other side, you'll have the money to take care of your daddy, to take care of your momma. What'd they always want when you were growin' up? What, a nice, big house? A fancy car?"

He doesn't respond because momma didn't want none of those things. Though he's sure she's harbored more than a few material desires, she's never been so arrogant as to let anyone know it. She's happy enough with their five-hundred-square-foot apartment and the small stoop it came with. The stoop where she sits on the porch and drinks her coffee and people watches. Sometimes, he joins her, and she points out a man in a fine suit and says, "*Well, he's off to apologize to somebody.*"

Samuel reaches across the gap between their chairs and pats him on his knee. "It's gonna be great. Just you wait." Then, after a pause, he asks, "What, don't you trust me?"

He looks into those blue eyes, and he's not confident he does. But he does know Samuel holds the keys to everything he's ever wanted: comfort for his parents and a chance to sing his soul out.

Those blue eyes crinkle, and Samuel says, "Atta-boy."

6.

It was good. At first. Momma got a fancy new coffee maker and Dad went out and got a '68 Mustang from Reggie three blocks down. Reggie hadn't wanted to part with it, but, well, a price was a price. He felt bad, when he turned in the passenger's seat and saw Reggie watching

them drive away, but he also couldn't deny how much it filled his soul with summer sunshine every time he saw his daddy dutifully washing that gorgeous car on the street. They didn't have hose hookups, so his daddy brought out buckets of sudsy water and a great big sponge, and he put every ounce of elbow grease into keeping that car sparkling. By God, if some dimwit in a galloping SUV so much as sprayed a dollop of mud on the tire, his daddy walked right back into the house and re-filled the bucket with fresh, hot water.

And for a time, Samuel didn't push them hard. Part of that was momma. *Jesus and school*, she'd say, *come before this deal of yours*. She strictly enforced it, too, so much so that, when he turned fourteen, he was terrified to admit to her that he didn't believe so much anymore. Maybe a little bit. Maybe when the dark was a little too deep, or when he took daddy's '68 Mustang out in the middle of the night to impress a white girl from his middle school. Yeah, then it was easy to believe in a God, 'cause how else could he have survived? The truck missed him by about four inches, must've been, and Annie never did talk to him after that.

But those checks kept food on the table when daddy lost his job, and those checks got momma's insulin when she was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, and so it was hard for momma or daddy or for him to argue with Samuel and his blue eyes whenever he came around knocking, mentioning a new opportunity, another gig, a television appearance, a radio show, this and that and the other, until daddy decided it was better not to show momma the report card that sported three Cs and two Bs—a disturbing reversal of his sterling record.

"Let me tell you something that's just good sense," Samuel said one of those nights he was about to perform for a bunch of adults. "Don't matter who your favorite singer is, ain't none of 'em needed an A in algebra. You understand?"

It broke his heart to nod, but he did, because Samuel was right in that regard.

7.

He held the pen over the paper. Momma and Dad were there, and momma was rubbing his back, and Dad was looking on solemnly. But the pen was in his hand, and when he looked up from the page, Samuel stared down at him, hands clasped patiently.

"This is it, kid," he said. "Everything you've wanted. It's yours to take."

And Momma rubbed his back and whispered in his ear, "Knock 'em dead, baby."

He signed his scrawl that never felt formal enough to be a signature, and he pushed the papers away. His mouth was dry, so very dry, and he asked for water, but when Samuel brought it and he gulped it down, his tongue still felt swollen and thick.

"This is gonna be good," Samuel said. "You wait and see."

8.

He sings that song again and again, but it never quite reaches the power of that first time, in that school auditorium, with parents watching and the blue suit and the shirt that was a little too tight. It never rolls off his tongue the right way. The notes come easily, they always have, but there's something integral missing. Momma calls it soul, but she tells him time and time again that he's got soul, baby, Lord does he have soul.

Samuel takes him across the country, and every new place is like a glittering star system waiting to be discovered. He looks up at the skyscrapers in Boston, and then he considers the glowing billboards in Minneapolis, and he gawks at Times Square, and he feels lost and small in Los Angeles. But Samuel is there every step of the way.

Sometimes Momma comes with. That first record broke the charts, and she was able to quit that job waiting tables. No more men gawking at her legs, no more angry customers spitting on the receipt, no sir, no ma'am. Now it's just coffee and people watching and good books and maybe a little bit of *The People's Court*, as an indulgence, of course.

When she does come out with him on the road, he feels that spark, but he can't look at her when he sings. He'll mess it up, he just knows it. He'll forget a line, or he'll miss the pitch, or he'll just make a dumb face and some paparazzi somewhere will snap it and put it on the cover of a newspaper. Everything spreads now, his father says, like blood in the water, like ink in oil. It spreads, baby.

He writes some new songs, but when he brings them to Samuel, those blue eyes crinkle and he pulls his mouth inward like he's bitten a lemon.

"You trust the team we've got," he says. "They write some great songs. Two of 'em won a Grammy. You don't gotta worry 'bout that."

So he stores those songs, written out on torn sheafs of looseleaf paper in messy scrawl, in a binder. And that binder grows in size, even as he sings the same twelve songs repeatedly, for crowds that grow increasingly similar, blending together. And he just misses being a nobody. He misses the way that suit felt so long ago.

And he misses his momma.

9.

He meets Reynelle in a smoke-filled bar. She's drinking a whisky sour and when he asks for a beer she turns and glances at him, and God, her smile knocks him dead. He's only felt like that three times in his life—once, when he took Annie out in his dad's '68 Mustang, when the moon hung over them like a giant jewel; twice, when he slow-danced at prom with his first true girlfriend, Maddie, and leaned in for that first kiss; thrice, now, staring at Reynelle through the gouts of faint smoke,

with Janis Joplin pouring from the speakers and the bartender handing over some domestic swill that cost a couple bucks to swallow.

Her skin sparkles in the dim light. The world seems to freeze. And he knows, in that moment, if he doesn't say something, he's going to regret it for the rest of his life.

So, he leans closer and says, "Mind if I buy you a drink?"

And she smiles coyly and responds, "That's the best you got?"

10.

Reynelle goes on the road with him, and those days are magical. He spends his nights entwined with her in hotel beds, and he spends mornings drinking coffee with her, and he spends afternoons (when he's not singing) wandering around new cities, exploring them, finding himself in those monstrous concrete jungles and their twisting highways that resemble bowls of undercooked spaghetti.

He calls home. Momma has a new phone, and Dad shows her how to work it. Momma stares at Reynelle with reservation. She's not cold, she's just momma protecting her baby bear, and as much as he wishes she would just embrace this woman who means the world to him, he understands why her eyes resemble a roiling fire.

The songs come to him like campers coming to a warm fire, and when he opens his mouth he *feels* the music. It's not just music, it's poetry. It's not just harmonies, it's his being. The essence of his soul. He leaves a little bit of it on every stage, and he locks eyes with Reynelle when he sings, and he smiles a little every time he watches her squirm and smirk in her chair, when she tucks a lock of her perfect, black hair behind her ear.

He's never known a love like this. Never known how good an embrace can feel in the middle of the night. Never known how much he wants

to aimlessly refill glasses of water for her while she curls up in bed and bats her puppy-dog eyes at him.

That's what makes it all the more heartbreaking when, after a show in Queens, he comes back to the hotel room and sees a note lying on the kitchenette counter.

Sorry, baby. XOXO.

11.

"Whatever you had, you're losing it," Samuel says, snapping his fingers. "And they can smell it. They're like god damn vultures, kid. I tell ya that. They're vultures and they can smell blood in the air. So, what you're gonna do, you're gonna go on Colbert tonight, and you're gonna sing your song. Alright, son? You're gonna sing about that coming change, and you're gonna leave everything out on the damn floor. I wanna see blood in your teeth, you got me? And when you come back for the interview, we'll show 'em why you're the best thing since fried pickles. You got me?"

He *doesn't* got Samuel, though. Not by a long shot. He loves Sam Cooke, but every time he sings the song, he forgets the reason why he chose it way back when, at that school talent show. Every time he belts it out for clasped hands and wide green eyes, he can't help but wonder how much of this is music for Samuel, how much of it is genuine affection, and how much of it is dollars and cents and Spotify streams and record sales and merchandise.

So, he calls his momma.

She answers the phone. Her voice is cracked, a little worn, but elegantly so. Like a jazz singer's. That's right. And he calls her, and he says, "Momma, I don't know if I wanna do this anymore."

She sighs, and she takes the phone into the other room, and she says

so softly, so sweetly, so tenderly it almost devastates him, "Baby, if you wanna come home, just come home."

But in that moment, as his eyes well up with tears, a flash of something great courses through him. After talking with his momma, he hangs up and he walks over to the little kitchenette. He turns over Reynelle's note, and he starts writing. It pours out of him, and he lets it. He'll scratch lines out later. He'll polish it tomorrow. He tells himself this as he delivers what is an honest-to-God masterpiece. And he stares down at it, and he calls up the band that's been backing him. They're good guys, more on his side than Samuel's, and he sends them the music.

"It's a risk," Tony, the lead guitar player, says. "Got no time to practice. Could be a royal fuck up."

"Yeah," he admits. "Or it could be magic." And then he hangs up and calls his momma again and says three words.

"Watch me tonight."

12.

He steps out onto that stage, and Stephen Colbert calls out his name and the new record he cut. He looks out at the crowd. He looks directly at Samuel. Into his blue eyes.

The band starts behind him, and he can't help the half-smile that spreads into his cheeks as he watches Samuel's face pale, as he leans forward a little in his seat. It's as if he can hear the old man's thoughts.

This ain't "Change Gonna Come."

And you're damn right. It's not. It's something new. Something honest. Something from his heart. He loves Sam Cooke, it's true, but he's gotta be true to himself.

But he does do one thing Samuel told him. He leaves it all on the stage. Sweat stings his eyes, or maybe those are tears. He gives it everything, as if his entire life is riding on it, and maybe it is. But in that moment, he also feels the spark. He feels the soul, as if the ancients are spreading around him, arms wide, beckoning for him, telling him to push, to dive, to pull every inch of his innards out for that audience.

And he does.

13.

Back in the green room, he wipes sweat from his brow. Samuel rushes in with a boulder's force, and he sticks a finger in his face, and he glowers.

“What the *fuck* were you thinking? I told you to sing Sam Cooke. Is that so god damned hard? I didn't tell you go to sing some stupid fucking love song, and for good reason! Did you ever think that maybe something like that drivel could tank your career? Or am I the only one who gives a shit about it anymore? Are you truly this stupid, boy?”

All the joy from the performance is drained. He sits there and he looks up at Samuel as his face turns red and his eyes bulge in his skull, and he shoves that finger closer and closer.

“Don't *ever* do that again,” he spits. “Or I'll send you back to the fucking sewer where you belong.”

Samuel slams the door behind him when he leaves.

It's as if he's been hollowed out. He wants to curl up in bed. He hates how, somehow, he *does* feel like he's made a mistake, even though there was no misconstruing the audience's reaction or Mr. Colbert's stunned expression, or the band's excitement, or his own.

He's so caught up in his own mind, in his fear, that he misses

momma's call. But he hears her voicemail later, that night, in the hotel room.

“You make us so proud, baby. You always do.”

14.

He knows something is wrong when he wakes in the morning. As he rolls over in the bed and paws at his phone, he sees four missed calls, all from Dad. He sits up ramrod straight, and his head is swimming, and he can't get a thought out of his head.

You missed momma's call, you missed her call and now she's dead, you missed her call and for what?

The line trills and rings and whines and it feels like ages before he hears the click and his father's worn, warm tone.

“Is it momma?” he asks.

A long pause. There's a sound in the background. A series of atonal beeps.

“I think you should come home,” Dad says.

15.

“No, absolutely not,” Samuel says, sitting in a chair across from the bed.

He is running around the room, pulling on a shirt, throwing things in a suitcase, barely hearing the anger in his manager's voice, barely noticing the quaver.

“I'm not arguing with you,” he says, and he's not. He grabs his charger

from the wall and throws it alongside his boxers and his shirts and his jeans.

“I don’t care,” Samuel shouts. He slaps a palm against his knee. “You got a show in Kansas City tonight and you’re doin’ a radio show and by God if I decide you’re gonna practice a new song you’ll do that. You ain’t doin’ *nothin’* without my say so, and if you think I’mma let you run off back home because your Ma got a little banged up then you’re dumber than I ever took ya for.”

“She’s in a god damned coma, Sam!” he shouts, as if that’ll make a difference to the bloated old fart’s rotten brain.

“Oh fucking well,” Sam says, standing. His blue eyes pierce, and he jabs a finger into his chest with those puckered lips working and his nostrils flaring. “In case ya forgot *I* pay the bills around here. *I* make the magic happen. You’re a little puppet runnin’ around and I let you think you was cute for a while, but *I* pull the trigger on the horse race, ya feel.”

“Oh yeah?” he says, approaching Samuel, pressing his nose into the old man’s face. “You make the magic happen? Well go on, sing me a line. Sing me about a change gonna come, Sam. Lemme hear it, you egotistical son-of-a-bitch.”

Samuel’s upper lip flares like an angry dog’s snarl.

“Yeah, that’s right. You know why I think you got in this business? I think you tried to join a choir and God ran you outta the church. I think you tried to get singing lessons and the teacher told you to try out carpentry. You *hate* the fact that I don’t even gotta try and I sound better than you ever did and ever will. This ain’t about business; this’s about your dead soul and I’m tired o’ filling your fucking pockets.” “You walk out that door, and I will ruin you,” Samuel seethes. “What Elvis’s manager did is gonna look like fuckin’ chump change compared to the invoices I’ll pile you with. And we both know you ain’t

gonna be able to survive on chump change, ain’t gonna survive on kind old white ladies tossin’ you a dollar into an empty guitar case. You *need* me, boy, but I ain’t need you.

He doesn’t realize he’s going to hit Samuel until the old man is down on the floor and spilling blood onto the hotel carpet. He stands over those blue eyes, and he glares down into them. The rage percolates in his gut, but when he looks at his knuckles marred with that cherry hue, he turns away, grabs his bag, zips it up in one go, and leaves.

He doesn’t look back.

16.

Momma dies while he’s on the plane heading home.

17.

Samuel didn’t lie. He hits them with so many bills and charges and invoices that he gets a headache whenever he stares at the piles of envelopes. The news is running stories now, too. Samuel didn’t go to the cops; he went on Anderson Cooper. Samuel didn’t file charges; he went to the Times and gave them pull quotes. Now he’s known as the angry black man who sucker punched his manager and stormed off. He’s been typified, and every time he lays down to sleep, he can see those blue eyes blazing. He can see the seething hatred in them.

He can see the bloodlust.

He pulls out his phone and he opens that voicemail momma left. He listens to her voice, repeating it until sleep yanks at his eyelids and he can’t resist their heaviness.

“*You make us so proud, baby. You always do.*”

18.

Momma looks as regal as ever in her coffin, but her skin is paler than usual and it's cold, so cold, and it's waxy against his lips when he bends down and kisses her forehead. He wants her to move. He wants her to blink. It would scare the hell out of him, but he'd laugh afterward, and he'd hug her, and everything would be okay.

Dad's got his fine suit on, and it gleams under the funeral parlor's lights. Family watches. He watches as the old man gives Momma's eulogy, as he recounts how they met, their life together, how proud she was of her baby boy, how much she loved life.

And then, seemingly too soon, seemingly after ages, Dad gets down from the podium, and it's silent, and nobody's going up to the podium, so he stands up, even though his palms are clammy, and his throat is hot, and yes, the suit is too tight around his throat, though that detail feels cruel and unjust. As if God is staring down at him with blue eyes, laughing, laughing,

He stands at the podium, and he looks out at the crowd, and he opens his mouth, but what can he say? Dad summed it up. Momma's life. Momma's passions. Momma's joys. Momma's fears.

He clasps his hands, and he looks down at the podium's chipped wood, and he closes his eyes, terrified. He's never felt a fear as dark as this, never felt trapped like he does, like in some horror story, like some oil slick is ripping the skin from his feet.

The song is only natural, and it spills from his mouth before he realizes he's singing it. It sounds tired now, so tired. He's sung it so many times every syllable could be the rubbed edge of a coffee table. The notes come, as they always have, but they are ragged and full of despair and regret. But he sings because he doesn't know what else to do.

It's there, in the dark, singing about change, just singing about change, baby, that he feels that warbling sensation. Hands grasp his shoulders,

joining him. Dozens and dozens and dozens, all singing, all tear-stricken, all horrified and angry and full of insecurities, unsure of what to do, so they all just sing. So many versions of himself that hoped and bled and sobbed and feared and followed. So many. And the change hadn't come yet. Wasn't that the truth?

The change was always *coming* but it never did *come*.

19.

He opens his eyes. He's back in that auditorium all those years ago. The suit is too tight. Eyes are on him. And he is staring at Samuel. At those blue eyes. They're hungry.

He turns away, turns his entire body, turns his back to Samuel, and he searches, searches, searches ...

His gaze lands on Momma. She's standing, her hands clasped and pressed against her lips. Tears speckle her cheeks. He loses his flow a little bit. It's not as confident. It's not as smooth. But it doesn't need to be.

Because he's not singing for anybody other than Momma.

And he knows Momma is proud. She always has been.

20.

"You were *amazing* baby," she gasps, hugging him.

Other parents are chatting with dad, passing pleasantries, telling him *wow* and *your kid's got some pipes* and *my Lord what a child*. But he holds Momma. He refuses to let go. He buries his face in her dress and he smells her perfume, and he savors the feeling of her fingers running over his hair, and he treasures her voice.

“Mr. Bailey?” a familiar voice croons, smooth as silk.

Hushed voices. Upticks in tenor. Excitement. Curiosity.

“Honey,” Dad says. “This is Mr. Samuel Caldwell. He says he’s a manager. Wanted to talk to us about Jordan.”

“No, mamma,” he whispers, clutching her tighter. “No, mamma. Please.”

She looks down at him, and her hand tips his chin so he’s staring up at her. “What is it, baby?”

“Please, mamma,” he whispers. It’s all he can think to say. “Please don’t talk to that man.”

She touches his cheek and brushes away the tears with her thumb.

“Ma’am, if I could have a few minutes, I just wanted to talk to you about Jordan’s future,” Samuel says.

“No, mamma,” he whispers.

She leans down and kisses his forehead, and she brushes away his tears. Then, she turns to Samuel.

Momma isn’t cruel, but her voice takes on a darkness that’s unmistakable. She stares him in his blue eyes.

“Goodbye, Mr. Caldwell.”

The Cycle

by Rhonda Parrish

she'd spent years building the walls
bone hard and spelled with protective runes
in the deepest, darkest caves
of the tallest, most remote mountains
and imprisoned the monsters within
locked away from where they could taunt
could torture

she left them in the darkness
to die or at least be forgotten
and summoning a great wind
violent and swirling
she set it to guard the prison
to keep anything from escaping
anything from approaching

the wind shrieks, incessant,
piercing as a teapot's whistle
while it twists and burrows
into the cavern's cracks and crevices, into
deeper, darker places
where she's hidden other things
best forgotten

scooping up what it finds
fragments of memory
shards of broken dreams
sharp, cutting mistakes

the wind spins them
around and around
scraping away the spells she'd layered
with tears and words and resolve
over the prison walls
eroding the protections

she eases the storm, which slows the erosion
but creates gaps for shades and shadows
to fill the vacated, quiet spaces

stealthy and small yet no less dangerous
than the things behind the walls
they creep ever forward,
bright-eyed and jagged
dripping poison and pain

she spackles endlessly, reinforcing
patching with one hand while
fending off the shadows, the whispers
with the other

soon the wind will start again
sweeping the chamber clean
of the small monsters
containing the larger ones in their prison
and beginning the cycle
again



The Beginners

by Tim Hildebrandt

Wander the Pixelated Spaces

by Desmond Rhae



the monster of endegaard

by Joel Fishbane

1.

Madison was always making mistakes. Alerting his victim. Sniffing out the wrong blood type. Tonight, it was the getaway. He should have left right away, but he was distracted by the things in Evan's room. A beginner's guide to classical guitar. And the guitar itself, propped in the corner. The callouses on Evan's fingertips suggested he played every day. You never really know someone, thought Madison. Evan had never mentioned a new hobby. And they had been best friends for months.

He was thinking about this when he heard the key in the door - Evan still lived with his mother. The window was across the room, so Madison dove into the closet instead. He wished he hadn't. Here were clothes Evan would never wear. Then, through the slats in the bi-fold door, he had to watch Evan's mother discover the body. She'd been seventeen when Evan was born and still had her youthful looks despite the many adventures that had brought her to Montreal. The sight of her son did not push her over the edge. With a stoic's composure, she knelt by her son and brushed the hair from his face. There was blood on the hardwood floor. That was another of Madison's faults: he was a sloppy drinker. He shouldn't have lost control. It hadn't even been worth it - Evan was drunk and his blood had tasted like piss.

At last, Evan's mother called the police and spoke in a soft, wet drawl. "Ah'll be downstairs," she said. "Ah can't stay in here." Once she had scurried away, Madison fled down the fire escape; he didn't let himself look at Evan again.

It took Madison a while to slink home. At least he hadn't struck in

his own neighborhood - that was one of Sachi's rules. Too many deaths in the neighborhood and people began to talk. Sachi hated the idea of the walls closing in on them. She liked their house and didn't want to move. Sachi was Japanese and had worked hard to fill their lives with ornate prints and white screens. Usually, he found it comforting. Tonight, after letting himself inside, the faces of geishas mocked him. As if he was in the wrong place. Better he still lived in one of his old bachelor flats, the ones full of grime and darkness. He didn't deserve track lighting and a big screen T.V. Maybe Sachi would be asleep. He wanted a glass of port and the latest episode of *The Great British Bake Off*. People fighting over cake and no blood in sight.

But Sachi was reading with the television on, an unfathomable ability he had never understood. What was it tonight? Ah. *Dracula*. That Sachi. Always with the sense of humor.

"How's Mother?"

"Ready to ground him the moment he's born." Sachi patted her stomach; she was eight months along.

At the sideboard, Madison guzzled the port. It wouldn't get him drunk, but it gave him a warm spurt.

"Doc came while you were out," said Sachi. "Said the baby is fine."

"Of course it's fine. Why shouldn't it be fine?"

"Doc said you never know."

“Doc is putting fear in your head. He’s just after our money.” At once, he regretted the remark. It wasn’t like him to worry about money and Sachi knew it. Poverty was behind them. They could work online. They both had home offices and steady jobs.

Sachi put down her book. “You’ve been feeding.”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me, Madison. I can always tell. What’s the matter with you? We can’t take risks right now. And it’s not like we don’t have plenty in the fridge.”

Madison sighed. “I got into a fight with Evan. I lost control.”

“It’s a hell of a way to win a fight. What was it about?”

“He said we shouldn’t have the baby.” Evan didn’t know Madison and Sachi were vamps, of course. He just didn’t like Sachi. He’d been drinking and said she’d make a bad mother. The fight had escalated from there. “His mother came back early. I had to hide.”

“Did she see you?”

“No.”

“If you exposed us”

“I didn’t. You know, I just killed my best friend, you could show some sympathy.”

“I told you not to make friends with the norms. I suppose now you’re wracked with guilt.”

“He was learning guitar.”

Sachi rolled her eyes and turned away. She had no patience for him

when he got like this. When she ate, she swallowed her remorse along with everything else. “The sun’s almost up.”

“Sachi - “

“We need to go to bed.”

She was right. Already he could feel the coming dawn. Drugged by the coming daylight, Madison followed her downstairs. Every window was covered up, but they could always feel the rising sun. The closer they got to dawn, the harder it was to stay awake. A handy survival mechanism - sunlight burned them to the bone.

He fell into a dreamless state and woke an hour after sunset. Sachi was folding laundry. She let him stroke her belly. There was no proof the baby would be born a vamp, but that was the whole problem. Nobody had babies like they did anymore. It was shrouded in so much superstition that it was hard to know what to believe. But the baby never kicked for him and Madison thought this said it all. The kid already resented him; his child knew what it was. Pale, cold-blooded, forever thirsty. Prone to kill your friend just because he’d said the wrong thing.

Madison crawled out of bed and got dressed.

“Where are you going?”

“Thought I’d see Gerald.”

“Try not to eat him.”

“Go to the devil.” But he didn’t look for Gerald; he went to see the witch instead.

Madison had only seen Elise once before. Vamps are solitary and he had never heard of a pair who had married. But he loved Sachi and had

hoped for a witch's blessing. Elise had given it after studying the signs; he'd proposed to Sachi that very night, right after slurping back the blood of a constable. There had been no doubts back then. He hadn't given the constable a second thought.

All that had been more than sixty years ago, but Elise remembered him. The witch wasn't a vamp, but she had enough strange power to keep from dying. She led him into her salon, waddling as she moved. She looked to be made of dough. Her pupils had long ago vanished, and she was missing most of her teeth. Elise lived in a grand house in Mile End, and her salon was a nineteenth-century throwback. She ordered everything online and stayed safely tucked away; she hadn't been outside in years.

Madison sat on a Louis XIV couch as Elise poured wine that was a century old.

"And your wife? Almost due, I think."

Her knowledge of things didn't surprise him. "She's doing well."

"Glorious. Was it very difficult? The process, I mean."

"We struggled a bit. Most couples do."

"Most *norm* couples." She came from England and still had her posh accent; she had been a society girl in her youth and still sat like she was being judged on her poise. "It never ceases to amaze what you do to keep some sense of your old lives. Last night, this young vamp comes to me. New teeth. And what does he want to know? If he will be a virgin forever. Here he is, as bloodlusty as anyone, yet his only concern is getting his wick lit. And look at you and Sachi. A million vamps in this city. They want a baby, they go to the maternity wards and bite the first darling that catches their eye. Or they just find someone older. Isn't that what happened to you?"

"I was dying from polio. The doctor offered to save me."

She peered into him with those dark eyes. "You're here because you're worried about your son."

"My son?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I saw it in the signs back when you came for my blessing."

"Then you know what will happen to him?"

"That I can't say."

He sighed as she topped off her glass. "You hear all sorts of myths about what happens when two vamps have a kid. They say the demon in us is always kept in check by our past life. But since the kid has no past, all bets are off."

"You're worried he's going to be a monster." Elise studied her wine as if the answer was in the merlot. "You're right to be afraid. It's possible that, no matter how you raise him, he'll be so full of terrible desires that he'll lose control."

Madison slurped his drink as he thought of Evan's red face. The laugh as he mocked Sachi. It was the racist slur that had sent Madison over the edge. Made him *lose control*. "Is there a way we can know? Something that could put me at ease?"

"I'll have to check my books."

For an hour, Madison paced the salon and checked his phone. Messages from Sachi. *Where u at?* No response was the best response. Sachi thought the witches were charlatans and didn't know Madison had sought Elise's blessing before proposing. She would hate him for coming and hate him more for lying about it. Twice, Madison thought about leaving; the third time he almost did, and it was then that Elise returned. She had an old tome with a title scrawled in Danish. For some reason, the Scandinavian chroniclers had been the experts on

vamp lore.

Since vamps rarely gave birth, the sources were scarce. But she had found one legend from the village of Endegaard on Denmark's northern coast. A pair of vamps, desperate for offspring, had produced a child. Ten years later, the village vanished from the world. "The chroniclers had only the testimony of the sole survivor," said Elise. "He spoke of terrible destruction. For centuries, it was said the offspring haunted the area."

"A shadow tale to scare the young?"

"And the old." Elise turned a few pages. "One story might be of interest. In the 19th century, there was a vamp commune near Königsberg. A vamp was pregnant and the elders, fearing a repeat of Endegaard, performed a ritual."

"Sachi will never agree to destruction. Neither will I."

Elise waved her hand. "They didn't destroy the child. They *changed* it. Turned it fully norm. There's no indication of whether it worked. But we might assume that someone would not have recorded the incident if the magic had failed."

"Fully norm." Madison mused over the possibility. "That would make raising him a challenge."

"You misunderstand. The child was sent away for its own protection. A norm living among vamps? The temptation to give it teeth would be overwhelming. Even the parents might lose control."

There was that word again. Control. Madison understood the danger. You didn't send a former smoker into a tobacco factory and you didn't ask a bloodsucker to live every day with some warm-blooded scamp. "What does this ritual involve?"

"The baby must be born into light. The mother must survive the

process and recite an incantation, freeing the child from her grasp. Permitting it to join the norm world."

Madison was astonished. Sunlight made them comatose. They couldn't stay awake if they tried. It had to be another shadow tale. But something in her toothless face suggested the witch thought something else. Elise stretched out in her chair and those empty eyes bore into him.

"I believe it could be done," she said. "But it would depend on the two of you. To give up your own child? For all my power, even I might not have the strength."

Madison trailed the witch back to her front door. The journey to their baby had taken many months. The deciding. The effort. Fertility drugs. Finding tiger blood because of its potency. And now, at last, they were here. It was madness to consider giving it all up. Sachi would hate him if he even asked.

"You'll need to decide by next week," said Elise. "Come back on Wednesday or don't come at all."

Madison paused, trench coat in hand. "You really believe it can be done?"

"Why else would I have told you?"

Madison transferred her some money and slid into the night.

At home, Sachi was already in bed, pretending to be engrossed in *Dracula*; she was also pretending she wasn't pissed at him for ignoring her texts. Madison lay parallel to her stomach and stroked her bulge. His son. Whatever choice was made, they would be imposing their own will. But wasn't that what all parents did? Babies didn't ask to be born. Even forcing one into the world could be considered a selfish act. That had been his mother's way. She had chosen Madison's father with care: it was World War II and she voted him most-likely-

to-be-shot. She had wanted a child, not a spouse. After that vamp doctor had saved him, she had asked for the same medicine. Another selfish act; she never wanted them to be apart.

Sachi peered at him over the book. Waiting.

Screwing his courage, he told everything to the belly, afraid to look up. When he reached the story of the village that had disappeared, Sachi's sigh filled the room.

"This is so typical of you, Madison. Going to that witch before you come to me."

"I'm worried about our baby."

"Is that it? Or are you just a self-hating vamp? You didn't know Evan that long. Stop beating yourself up."

"This isn't about Evan or about me getting too bloodlusty one night. Elise said we're having a son. And we don't know what he's going to be. Endegaard was wiped from the map. Do you want that to happen here?"

"It's a shadow tale."

"Elise says it isn't."

"Elise is a lunatic." She had wrapped her hands around her belly. A barrier. Protection from him. Now she was scared of him. He had made a mess of everything.

"I'm going out," he said.

"It's almost dawn."

"I'll find a safehouse."

"Madison, stop. You can't just spring this on me. We went through so

much for this. I want to be a mother."

"I wanted things too. But maybe there's a price to being what we are."

The fresh air did nothing to calm him down. He checked his phone. A little more than an hour until sunrise. Angry, he turned down the street. He'd be seeing Gerald after all.

2.

Sachi considered calling Madison back but changed her mind. Why have a child? she thought. I already *have* one. She didn't have the patience for his self-hating vamp routine. Sachi had come to terms with how they lived. How they *had* to live. Because that's what it was about. Survival. Everyone dealt with it in their own way. Animal blood. Picking only the old or dying. A ruthless way to live after being handed a ruthless fate.

The baby squirmed inside her. Her throat was dry. She took a packet of blood from the freezer and put it in the microwave. "You can't have normal cravings?" she asked her stomach. No. Of course he couldn't. Her baby wasn't normal. It had been a happy pregnancy and she'd been told that, when the birthday came, there wouldn't be any pain. Her vamp constitution. Because she wasn't normal either.

Sachi had been born in Japan in a village on Kyushu. One evening - her last or her first, depending on your viewpoint - she had been sent by her father to collect a debt. The man had paid her in teeth and, when she woke, she'd been seized by a ravenous thirst. Concerned, she woke the village doctor. As he examined her, his bare neck came into view and her new instinct kicked in - she drained him dry. The next afternoon, a child was attacked by an animal and there had been no one to tend to his wounds. Sachi had fled the village. She never saw her father again. Had he mourned her? What of the dead child's family? And all the people who had suffered until a new doctor could be found?

She had never thought these things before. Damn you, Madison. These were his ideas. Guilt is part of their existence, the last glint of humanity. Look at Madison's mother. She had hated being a vamp. While feeding one night, a victim got the upper hand; to this day, she knew Madison thought his mother had let it happen. Parents want their child's life to be better. By the end, his mother was convinced she had made it worse.

I won't feel that way, thought Sachi. Our son won't have regrets. He won't be plagued by distant memories of fathers or villages or the sun in his face. The thought lifted her spirits. Your fate was determined by the events of your life. Their son wouldn't be able to go to school, of course, so it would be up to them. They would teach him to read and to think. They would give him the missing pieces of his human heritage.

But what of killing? Would they teach him that too? Feeding was pure instinct, but you couldn't just spring on everyone you saw. You couldn't leave a village without their doctor. You had to plan. Learn to maneuver through the shadows of the world. All part of getting blood-lusty once or twice a week. They'd have to take him, once he was old enough. This is the carotid artery. This is the subclavian. But the jugular is what you really want, son. That's the thing you want to tear apart.

The microwave sang its high blip. The craving was as intense as it had been that first day in her village. Intolerable. Like she could rip out all the hearts in the world just to make it stop. The microwave beeped again. Sachi didn't move.

On Wednesday, they went as early as the sunset would allow. Elise wasn't surprised to see them. She probably knew that Sachi didn't trust her, but she greeted them with warmth and even kissed as if they were old friends. Sachi admired the old house as they were led inside. An inheritance, she thought. Witches had families that went back through the years.

In the parlor, Sachi fidgeted and Madison put his hand in hers. That cold, familiar touch. All week they had been locked in heated debate and, filled with pique, she had often turned away. This touch felt like the first in many days.

Once getting permission, Elise put her ear to Sachi's belly. Sachi caught the woman's smell. Perfume. The witch had vanity; she had some humanity, after all.

"Healthy! You've been taking care of him."

"I was excited."

"You're not anymore?"

Sachi sat up straighter. "I need more information. Madison said there was some ritual, but I don't see how we'd survive it."

"There are ways. The fates conspired to bring you to this moment."

"Why would fate give me a baby only to make me give it away?"

"That's just it, Sachi. Fate brought you here but it can't *make* you do anything. You have to *choose*. Do you think you can do that? When you see your baby, will you be able to release it or will you kick like a mule?"

Sachi hadn't considered this part of it. "Tell me the shadow stories are true. Tell me that, if I don't do this, he will grow into another monster of Endegaard."

"I can't ever tell anyone anything," sighed Elise.

So it was a gamble. Sachi preferred certainty. She looked down at her hand. She liked that Madison was still holding it. She still felt they were making the choice together. If she wanted to walk away, he'd agree.

“I’ll do what needs to be done.

Elise nodded in satisfaction. “Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow *day*.”

“So soon?”

“There’s a reason I gave Madison a deadline. The time is tomorrow or not at all. You will stay here until the sun rises. I’ll give you something that will keep you awake and bring you outside when it’s time.”

“I still don’t see how you expect us to survive this,” said Sachi.

“I told you: fate conspired to bring you here.”

She called up a webpage on her cellphone. As soon as Sachi saw the headline, she understood. She wasn’t sure she believed in fate. But there was something preordained about them making this choice right before the day of a solar eclipse.

Elise gave them a luxurious room whose window had blackout shutters. The decor was Victorian, reminding her of the flat in London where she’d stayed for years before Madison. You didn’t move much when you were a vamp. All you needed was a landlord who didn’t ask questions and four walls that kept out the sun. You had that, you had everything. Or so she’d thought.

Sachi tried to make herself comfortable while Madison studied the books. There was a small collection filled with the castaways of the years. Dickens and Grisham and bodice. Madison plucked a volume and brought it to her. *Dracula*.

“Here. You can finish it.”

She had to smile. She had to love him. The book’s cover boasted a black and white still from *Nosferatu*. Max Schreck with his bald head

and pointed ears. “They’re so vicious in this,” she said.

“We’re vicious in everything,” Madison sighed. “Someone probably ate Bram Stoker’s family. One kill and he spoils our reputation forever.”

Sachi ran a hand over the cover. “I saw *Nosferatu* when it first came out. I laughed the whole time. These writers, I thought. What will they think of next?”

“You should write a book. Try to get it right.”

“No one would believe it. Or they won’t want to. We all need our devils. The norms have us. We have the monster of Endegaard.”

There was a knock and Elise arrived with two goblets. They were told to drink every drop. Lick the cup clean. After she left, Sachi gave a goblet to Madison and smelled the other one. Chocolatey. Nutmeg too. Probably a waking potion. She was about to drink when Madison stayed her hand.

“This is my fault,” he said. “I shouldn’t have lost control with Evan. At the very least, I could have given him teeth.”

“Then he’d be around all the time. Probably try to be the kid’s godfather.” Madison didn’t laugh and Sachi’s smile dropped away. “Don’t kick yourself too hard. Losing control is what we do.”

“So we’re doing the right thing?”

“See? We’re not monsters at all.” She toasted him and emptied the cup. Madison followed suit; they ran their fingers along the inside and sucked up the dregs.

They crawled into bed and she read to him. *Find this great Un-Dead, and cut off his head and burn his heart or drive a stake through it, so that the world may rest from him ...* The hours slipped by and they felt

the sunrise in their bones. The blackout shutters weren't absolute, and Sachi saw the first signs of dawn. Real light. She had seen the world go from candles to gas lamps to electric lights. Yet here was the true miracle. The sun. And if all this worked, her son would see it every day.

Elise returned, this time with only a single cup: a potion to induce labor. The eclipse was set to occur shortly after eleven; there were only fifteen minutes left. As Sachi prepared to drink, she caught sight of *Nosferatu*. *Find this great Un-Dead ...* She drank the potion and nearly gagged. It was rancid, like spoiled blood. When she put the cup down, she saw Madison watching her. He seemed both unhappy and resolute.

Out they went, down the hall and towards a narrow staircase. Elise explained the roof had an enclosed courtyard that could not be seen by others. It would give them all the privacy they needed. At the top of the stairs, they came to a small landing. A ladder led to a trapdoor in the ceiling. The last barrier.

“Take off your skirt,” said Elise. “It will start soon.”

The witch scurried up the ladder as Sachi removed her skirt and underclothes. Like clockwork, the first tremors began. Not quite pain but a discomfort great enough to make everything tilt. She clung to Madison, and he muttered words of comfort. The moment passed, and he helped her climb the ladder and then Elise was dragging her through the trapdoor. A grey blanket had been thrown over the sky. Sachi realized she was squinting. The light was dull and yet it was still too bright. She felt the burn in her eyes and on her skin. The sun was huge and black, a sinister orb hanging in the sky.

Elise smacked her arm. “Concentrate. You need to bear down.”

She remained standing, grabbing Madison for support. Elise crouched behind her and bellowed instructions. A spasm went through her and it was the singular moment of pain, terrible pain, something that approached what she could only imagine she would feel if she were hu-

man. If she were normal. It brought out her teeth and she sank them into Madison's skin. He didn't seem to notice. His face was slick with sweat. His body radiated an oven's heat. The moon continued its orbit. They weren't going to make it. Any moment, the sun would assert itself and they would be charred. Elise yelled her name and some instinct took over and Sachi imagined pushing everything away, the baby and her heart and the demon inside her and then the torment passed and it was done and she heard it, that miraculous sound, her son, *her* little boy, was alive and screaming with a noise that filled the world.

Madison continued to hold her aloft. Elise must have cut the umbilical cord, because suddenly the baby was thrust into her arms. Sachi stared down at their mewling thing with wonder. He was small and round and his eyes were wide like blood drops. But their color was a healthy blue. He may have been wet with viscera, but nothing about him was a terror. This was no monster. How could she give him up?

“Read this!” Elise shoved a paper in her face.

Sachi tried to focus, but her eyes were clouded with tears.

“Quickly!” said the witch.

“Don't,” said Madison. “Don't do it.”

Sachi looked at the child as he opened his mouth for another wail. Then she saw it: her son's mouth was jagged and sharp. This was not the scream of a newborn plucked into the world. It was the roar of hunger. He had been born with teeth and was already desperate to feed. No. She would not allow it. A mother should always do what's best for her child. Even if that means giving him away. She stole one final moment to look on the baby as a mother and then read the incantation. Elise took the baby and told Madison to get her inside.

“Wait!” said Madison. “My son!”

“He's not your son anymore!” Above them, the sky was brightening.

“Inside now or you’ll never do anything again.”

Sachi had started to smoke, like something turning on a spit. The couple had to carry each other - neither seemed to have the strength to move on their own - and it was only by working together that they were able to slip through the trapdoor and drop down the ladder. Sachi kept her eyes on the baby until Madison slammed the door shut. The darkness was like stepping into winter, and they collapsed into each other, their skin marked with blisters and burns. War wounds - they would scar but never heal. She was drowsy now. The waking potion was wearing off. Sachi grabbed Madison and saw he was already nodding off. She sank down, fighting to stay awake. At last, she heard what she had wanted to hear. With a mother’s instinct, she knew it wasn’t that hungry roar. It was a cry. *A baby’s cry.*

* * *

When Madison woke, Sachi was standing by the window, staring into the night. Elise had somehow taken them back to their room. Sachi had woken right at sunset full of tears. Her body ached, and Elise had given her a salve for the burns. Now she rubbed it on Madison. The sun had scorched parts of his neck.

“You look old,” she said. “Your hair is grey.”

“Yours too.” He looked miserable. “In the end, I didn’t want you to do it.”

Sachi thought of the baby’s sharpened teeth. The hungry scream for blood. “We would have tried to be good parents. But it wouldn’t have mattered.”

A while later, Elise came to tell them they had done well. The ritual had worked; their son would live as a norm.

“Where is he now?” asked Madison.

Elise looked surprised - no easy feat with a witch - and turned to Sachi. “He doesn’t know?”

“I didn’t want to tell him, just in case,” Sachi admitted. “Did it work?”

“I’ve never seen someone so happy,” said the witch. “She wept when she found him on her doorstep. Said she was going to call him Evan. After her son.”

Madison looked at his wife in wonder and then pulled her close. Sachi took in his smell, this scent that had been hers for so many years. And there was still an eternity to go. Will we make it? Will we last until the ends of the earth? She wanted to ask Elise, who knew so much through signs and wonders. But they were alone; the witch had already slipped away.

Placing Helen

by Michelle Kaseler

Callie Porter's office door closed with the finality of a casket lid. There were no more appointments before Helen aged up, no more prospective parents to adopt a thirteen-year-old girl with a lazy eye and seventy-four IQ. Callie sank back in her chair. Helen was due at the Youth Work Center on Monday. What if they assigned her to the military? She didn't have an aggressive bone in her body.

Callie sighed. What would Helen have been like if her mom hadn't been high on zoom during her pregnancy? If only people could see she was so much more than her stats and photo.

The office door creaked, and Helen ambled in. She'd received state-mandated growth accelerators over the past year to prepare her body for adult work. Nearly six-feet tall, she still wore her hair in pigtails and ribbons. Each day had its own color. Fridays were blue.

"Hi, Mrs. P." Helen had never outgrown her lisp. "Whatcha doing? Can I help?"

Callie handed her a case of markers. "I noticed these aren't in rainbow order. Can you fix that?"

"Sure." Helen plopped down, grinning. "But one of these days, you need to learn how."

"I don't think I'd ever be as good as you."

While Helen organized, Callie read case files. Two new children were arriving next week: siblings, ages two and four, parents killed in a car crash. Cute kids without physical or mental flags in their files. Kids she

could place, maybe even together.

"Done!" Helen jumped up and handed her the case.

"I think that's your fastest time yet!" Callie gave her a high-five. "Now why don't you go play outside until dinner?"

Helen scampered away. A few minutes later, Callie looked out the window to find her on the rusty seesaw, counterbalanced by three other kids. Up and down they went, their faces lit with glee. Her throat tightened. The agency kids, who had so little, found joy in the simplest things.

* * *

That night, Callie lay in bed with her wife. "I wish we could adopt her."

Skylar sighed. "If only that transplant would come through..."

Skylar's health had deteriorated to the point where she'd given up teaching and spent most of the day in bed. *I'm just a long, floppy noodle*, she'd joke.

"I shouldn't keep bringing it up. You have enough to worry about." Callie rolled onto her back. "No word on a donor?"

"No ... and Bobby Thaxton just moved to the top of the list."

"The football player? I hate that government formulas decide whose

life matters most.”

“Not to mention he tanked my fantasy team last year.” Skylar tiptoed her fingers up Callie’s arm. “Now if it were Ozzie Vega, I’d gladly sacrifice myself.”

“I love you.” Tears welled in Callie’s eyes as she kissed her cheek. She wanted to do more, but Skylar’s heart couldn’t risk it. At the same time, though, it was enough.

They lay in silence, holding hands.

“What if she’s drafted, Sky?” Callie asked. “She’d never survive combat.”

“Surely they’ll see her gentle soul and assign her somewhere else.” Skylar squeezed her hand.

Soon, Skylar drifted off to sleep, but Callie stared at the moon, praying Helen wouldn’t be sent to defend it.

* * *

Monday dawned bright, a little too bright for Callie’s mood, as she drove Helen to the center. Helen sat in silence, hands twisting in her lap. Her red ribbons drooped like wilted petals.

Callie forced a smile. “No matter what they assign you, you’re going to do something important.”

“I’m going to miss you, Mrs. P. And Donny and Becky” Her voice caught. “But I want to help people. Like you helped me.”

“I’m sure they’ll find the perfect job.” She kept her tone light.

After they hugged goodbye, Callie handed Helen a pouch of colored pens. “Write me, okay?”

* * *

A week later, Skylar was approved for a transplant. Callie spent three days pacing the hospital halls before she was moved out of the ICU.

“She needs to stay another week as a precaution,” the doctor said, “but we expect a full recovery.”

“Full?” Callie grinned.

“That means,” Skylar began.

“Helen,” they said together.

“You really want to do this?” Callie asked.

Skylar nodded. “I do.”

“Can you tell me anything about the donor?” Callie asked the doctor. “I’d like to thank the family.”

The doctor consulted his charts. “Anonymous donor. No contact information, but that’s not unusual. Some families find it too painful.”

That night, after Skylar fell asleep, Callie returned home for the first time since the surgery. She searched the mailbox for Helen’s large, colorful handwriting but only found ads and bills. At least they’d have her soon.

The next day, she called the center to begin the adoption process.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the guy on the phone said. “She was transferred to the recycling plant.”

Callie breathed a sigh of relief. Sorting tasks were ideal for Helen. “Where? I’ll go pick her up.”

“Somewhere in Westsect. Joyce! Like my aunt’s name. Or Mary. That’s my other aunt.”

“I’ll look it up myself.”

Callie found an address for a national recycling plant near Joyous, but no website or phone number. Even so, she decided to drive up that weekend.

* * *

With a Welcome Home cake in the back seat, Callie set off. Four hours later, she was surrounded by sand and scrub. This area was as joyous as Greenland was green, but she wasn’t there for the scenery.

A windowless block of a building punctuated the road’s end. That had

to be it. She’d see those purple pigtails soon.

A medical helicopter waited out front. Callie clenched the steering wheel. *Relax. Helen’s fine. She’s healthy as a horse.*

After parking, she texted Skylar: *Arrived safely.*

As she unbuckled her seatbelt, two men rushed across the tarmac holding a white box emblazoned with bold, red letters. Human Organ for Transplant.

Callie went limp.

From her lap, her phone buzzed with Skylar’s response: *Bring our girl home.*

Contributors



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

You can find her website at www.artstation.com/b-candiotti.

* * *



ALEXIS CHILD hails from Toronto, Canada. She is a former Social Service Worker, befriendng the demons that roam freely amongst her writings. Her fiction and poetry haunts numerous online and print publications. Besides having rare mystical experiences she hopes are not just short circuits in the brain, she offers Tarot Readings and writes fiction and poetry, starving in the garret with her muse. Alexis' debut collection of horror poetry, *Devil in the Clock*, is available on Amazon, followed by *Singing the Bones* (Cyberwit Publishing, 2022). Her third full-length collection of horror/occult/mystical poetry, *Exquisite Corpse*, is coming soon from Cyberwit Publishing. You have been warned...

Please find Alexis here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCg6S5u4yX73kA1ZWGnKaE-BA/videos>

* * *

BINOD DAWADI, a polymath from Kathmandu, Nepal, is a beacon of creativity, intellect, and activism. Armed with a master's degree in



English, Dawadi wields the power of words to enact societal change. His journey as a writer, teacher, artist, photographer, model, and singer is a testament to his boundless passion and talent.

Dawadi's artistic endeavors transcend conventional boundaries. His digital paintings and photography capture the essence of his surroundings, while his literary works provide profound insights into the human condition. His commitment to social progress is palpable in every stroke of his brush and syllable of his pen.

As an advocate for change, Dawadi actively participates in global events and exhibitions. From the "International Art Festival" in Korea to the "Creating People's Side Virtual International Exhibition" in Hungary, his work has graced prestigious platforms worldwide. Each exhibition serves as a testament to his unwavering dedication to enlightenment and transformation.

In addition to his visual artistry, Dawadi's written works have left an indelible mark on the literary world. His contributions to esteemed publications such as *Prodigy Published*, *Poetry Soup*, and *ILA Magazine* have garnered widespread acclaim. Furthermore, his authored books, including the iconic "The Power of Words" series and "Serenity's Ecstasy," serve as beacons of inspiration for readers worldwide.

Beyond his artistic pursuits, Dawadi's involvement in education and activism further solidifies his role as a catalyst for change. As a teacher, he imparts knowledge and wisdom to future generations, nurturing minds to think critically and creatively. His advocacy efforts, exemplified by his participation in events like "Speak Up Be Heard," underscore his unwavering commitment to social justice and equality.

In every facet of his life, Binod Dawadi embodies the transformative power of art and words. His journey is a testament to the belief that through creativity, education, and activism, meaningful change can be achieved, one brushstroke, one sentence, one melody at a time.

* * *



SHIKHAR DIXIT's stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and Barnes & Noble's *365 Scary Stories*. He lives with his wife

somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com.

Website: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

* * *



JOEL FISHBANE's novel *The Thunder of Giants* is available from St. Martin's Press and his speculative fiction has appeared in *Orca*, *On Spec*, *Metastellar*, and *Dark Horses*. www.joelfishbane.com.

* * *



“Matter of the Heart” appears in *Strange Italies: Twelve Tales of Shadow from a Sunlit Land*, forthcoming from The Hidden Library/La Bibliothèque Secrète. In this collection, author **ANGELISA FONTAINE-WOOD** weaves past and present to transport the reader into an uncanny Italy haunted by the bizarre and the beyond.

* * *



TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, the *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. hildebrandt343@icloud.com

* * *



MICHELLE KASELER is a software engineer by trade, but can be whatever she wants to be when she reads and writes. She enjoys funky shoes, hot sauces, and long runs. Her short fiction has been published by *Flame Tree*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *NewMyths.com*. Stop by www.storycobbler.com to learn more.

* * *



E.E. KING is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist - She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Ray Bradbury called her stories, “marvelously inventive, wildly funny and deeply thought-provoking. I cannot recommend them highly enough.”

She's been published in over 200 magazines and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Short Edition*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Flametree*.

Her novels include *Dirk Quigby's Guide to the Afterlife: All you need to know to choose the right heaven*.

Her newest novel, *Gods & Monsters*, is currently being serialized on

MetaStellar: <https://www.metastellar.com/books/gods-and-monsters-by-e-e-king/>

A poetry collection, *An Illegal Feast*, is due out this March published by Broadstone Media.

She is a member of SFWA & HWA.

Her art has been collected internationally.

Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at: www.elizabetheveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeking

And email her at eviekng@gmail.com if you want to subscribe to her upcoming newsletter - a free story once a month is included!

Follow her @

<https://twitter.com/ElizabethEvKing>

facebook.com/pages/EE-King

www.instagram.com/elizabetheveking

www.youtube.com/channel/UCHEEGte6Bgv-r1OaHz3Mf1Q

* * *



KEITH LAFONTAINE is a writer from Vermont and an affiliate HWA member. His short fiction has appeared in *The Vanishing Point Magazine*, *Tales To Terrify*, and *Bewildering Stories*. Other work can be found on his website, www.keithlafontaine.com.

* * *



EVE MORTON is a writer living in Ontario, Canada. She teaches university and college classes on media studies, academic writing, and genre literature, among other topics. Find more info on evewrites.ca.

* * *

DONNA J. W. MUNRO's pieces are published in *Corvid Queen*, *Enter the Apocalypse*, *It Calls from the Forest*, *Apparition Lit*, *Pseudopod 752*, *Shakespeare Unleashed*, *Novus Monstrum*, *ParABnormal*, and many more. Check out her novels, *Revelation: Poppet Cycle Book 1*, *Runaway: PCB2*, and *Revolution: PCB3*. Her website has a complete list of works at <https://www.donnajwmunro.net/>.

* * *



EVA PAPASOULIOTI is a Greek writer of speculative fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nature Futures*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for the Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards. She lives in Athens with her spouse and their two cats. You can find her on X/twitter and Bluesky @epapasoulioti and on her blog

plothopes.com.

* * *



Like a magpie, **RHONDA PARRISH** is constantly distracted by shiny things. She's the editor of many anthologies and author of plenty of books, stories and poems (some of which have even lost awards!). She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and she can often be found there playing Dungeons and Dragons, bingeing crime dramas, making blankets or cheering on the Oilers.

Her website, updated regularly, is at <http://www.rhondaparrish.com> and her Patreon, updated even more regularly, is at <https://www.patreon.com/RhondaParrish>.

* * *



BRIAN MALACHY QUINN uses watercolors, pen and ink, digital media, block prints, and etchings. As an artist he has won 23 international juried awards in last 26 months and sold 45 illustrations to date. He has always created art since early childhood. His style can be surreal for speculative fiction or literary fiction, or realistic for his fallback of lion paintings. He is compelled to create art and does so every day and finds it as a way to put aside his worries and stresses and produce "good brain chemicals".

* * *



DESMOND RHAЕ has spent his whole life exploring a deep interest in art, writing, and music. After earning a college degree in graphic design, he's focused on independent work as a writer and artist. Alongside writing his sci-fi novel, he also works as Editor and Illustrator at *Starward Shadows eZine*. His pieces have been selected for publications such as *Cosmic Horror Monthly*. You can find out more at www.theinksphere.com.

* * *



MATTHEW ROY (he/him) lives in the American Midwest. He's moved from a small town to a big city, from a rambling farmhouse to a small apartment, and from a major corporation to an up-and-comer. He's writing more. He's making changes. He's querying his first novel and banging away at his second. His speculative poetry has appeared in *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Haven Spec*, *Illumen Mag-*

azine, *The Quarter(ly) Journal*, *The Sprawl Mag*, and *star*line*.

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Ebb Tide Reflections*, features poetry, short stories and photography (World Inkers, NYC). Carl has four photography books, published by Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and The Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently a co-editor with *ILA Magazine*, art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for three The Best of the Net Awards (2021-23) and a 2023 Pushcart Nomination for work in *Ebb Tide Reflections*.

* * *



OLIVER SMITH is a visual artist and writer from Cheltenham, UK. He is inspired by Tristan Tzara, J G Ballard, and Max Ernst; by the poetry of chance encounters, by frenzied rocks towering above the silent swamp; by unlikely collisions between place and myth and memory.

His poetry has been published in *Abyss & Apex*, *Ink*, *Sweat, and Tears*, *Strange Horizons* and *Sylvia Magazine* and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

He holds a PhD in Literary and Critical Studies from the University of Gloucestershire.

For more information see his website: <https://oliversimonsmithwriter.wordpress.com/>

* * *



RAIFF TARANDAY has spent most of his adult life as an elementary school teacher in locations ranging from Chelsea, MA to Kyiv, Ukraine. He was teaching fifth graders in China in 2020 and went on vacation to Hanoi right before the initial outbreak of COVID-19. He was subsequently swept up in a wave of global catastrophe that eventually deposited him back home in the United States. He currently resides not far from where he was born, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, with an undisclosed number of imaginary pets and a girlfriend who is usually pretty nice to him. You can find more of his work in the *Rumen Literary Journal*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, and on the Kaidankai podcast.

Twitter handle: twitter.com/raifftaranday

* * *



MARGE SIMON is a writer/poet/illustrator living in Ocala, FL, USA. A multiple Stoker winner, HWA Lifetime Achievement awardee and Grand Master of SFWA, her works appear in *Asimov's*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Silver Blade*, *Penumbric*, *Magazine of F&SF*, and more, as well as anthologies such as *Chiral Mad*, *Qualia Nous*, *Spectral Realms*. Instagram: [margesimon-writes](https://www.instagram.com/margesimon-writes)

* * *



LUKE WALKER has been writing horror and dark thrillers for most of his life after finding a copy of Lovecraft's stories that his eldest brother left in the bathroom. From there, he went on to his dad's collection of Stephen King books and hasn't looked back since. His novels include the recent horror *The Ninth Circle* as well as *The Kindred*, *Pandemonium*,

The Dead Room, *The Unredeemed*, *Ascent*, *Die Laughing*, *Dead Sun*, *Winter Graves* and others. Several of his short stories have been published online and in magazines/books. While writing, he has worked in a library, a hospital (disposing of severed legs) and a record shop (back in the distant past).

Luke is (too) active on Twitter/X and Bluesky and loves to hear from people who want to talk about books.

He is forty-seven and lives in England with his wife, cats, too many bad films and not enough books.

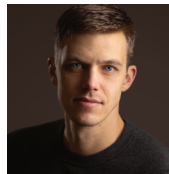
<https://linktr.ee/lukewalkerwriter>

* * *



ANTONIA RACHEL WARD is an author of horror and speculative fiction, based in Cambridgeshire, UK. Her short stories and poetry have been published by Flame Tree Press, the British Science Fiction Association, and *Dark Recesses*, among others. Her first novel, *DreamScape*, was published in October 2023, and in 2024 she published her first poetry chapbook, *The Patron* (Querencia Press, July 2024). She is also the founder and editor-in-chief of Ghost Orchid Press.

* * *



AARON ZIMMERMAN is a software engineer, writer, and musician. He can often be found conducting pit orchestras for musicals playing in the western suburbs of Chicago. His writing has also appeared in *Story Hack*, *New Myths*, and *Metaphorisis Magazine*. Check out his music at aaronzimmermanmusic.com or more stories at aaronwalksstories.com.



Mindstream Dancers

by Marge Simon

(full image)