



Cosmic Thought by Amanda Berglof

# penumbra

speculative  
fiction mag

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## Tales of un<sup>n</sup>Reality

A little multidimensional trek  
through the cosmos

Prose, Poetry, and Art  
Featuring

Vekhan Sametyaza • Sam W. Pisciotta  
• Brian Hugenbruch • Denny E.  
Marshall • Martins Deep • Janis Butler  
Holm • Eric Wampler • Myna Chang •  
Dora Ilce • Gretchen Tessmer • Odessa  
Silver • Marisca Pichette • Irina Tall •  
J. D. Harlock • Carl Scharwath • Tom  
Raymond • Carl Tait • Ann Wuehler •  
Brian Malachy Quinn • JM Cyrus •  
Kevin Canfield • George S. Walker •  
Jennifer Elise Wang

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

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

# Table of contents

from the editor

## fiction & poetry

by Sam W. Pisciotta

by Brian Hugenbruch

by Martins Deep

by Eric Wampler

by Myna Chang

by Gretchen Tessmer

by Odessa Silver

by Marisca Pichette

by J. D. Harlock

by Tom Raymond

by Carl Tait

by Ann Wuchler

by Kevin Canfield

by JM Cyrus

by George S. Walker

by Jennifer Elise Wang

Breakfast in Tick Tock

An engine sputters somewhere just outside ...

A glitching bot plays an out-of-sync video ...

Just a Little Business Arrangement

The Most Restful Stopover in the Galaxy

Home Sweet Home

The Cry of the Raijuu

Lagomorpha

Bahamut & Kuyutha, Tainted

Our Pillow

Lodigarri

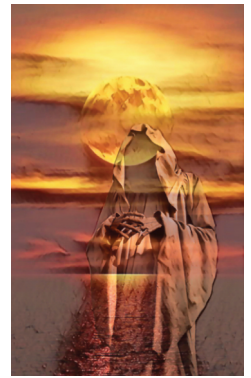
The Ghost of John Burnberry

A word from a lanternfly

A Solitary Walk

The Adoption

Woman on the Moon



*Death Moon*



*The Castle*

## art & g. narrative

by Vekhan Sametyaza

by Denny E. Marshall

by Janis Butler Holm

by Dora Ilce

by Irina Tall

by Carl Scharwath

by Brian Malachy Quinn

Ancient New Language

Sky Seeds

Alien Youngster

The Castle

Hare in Dreamland

Surrealistic Angel

Death Moon



contributors

bios

cover: Cosmic Thought  
by Amanda Bergloff



# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Wow. It's been five years since the restart of *Penumbria*, and ... just wow. You all continue to amaze me, both by sending us such amazing work and by even sending us work in the first place. I honestly just had such a vague hope that I'd receive enough work to put out a magazine back in 2020, and for those first couple of issues that was just about what we received. And I want to give a big shout-out to my friends from the first run of *Penumbria* back in the early 2000s (including Tom Motley, Jesper Nordqvist, James Cukr, and most especially Christina Sng) and to those whom I'd known for years before even that (Colleen Donnelly), for without them I'm not sure I'd have gotten anything new off the ground, especially given we were all stuck in our various locations due to the pandemic.

Since then, we've received more and more and more subs, and I've made more friends as well! For in part that's the fun of this kind of endeavor—even though I hardly go out, and often am a bit too anxious to really meet people (or reverse that and am far too outgoing), I meet so many new people through *Penumbria*, and I appreciate every one. (What, did you think I was in this for the money? Oh, the laughter ...)

I'm also in this to try to give what small bits of help I can to authors and artists, both in recognition for those we publish and in what (hopefully helpful) advice I can give regarding pieces that were not accepted for publication. I'm trying to get better about nominating pieces for awards as well, and have been submitting horror work from each issue

to Ellen Datlow, editor of each year's "Best of" anthologies. If any of you have suggestions for other places to nominate, let me know.

Speaking of awards, I'm super happy that some of the works we've published have been nominated for awards—Stokers, Rhyslins, and more—as have several of the authors/artists we've published (even if not for works published by us). It makes me feel like we're achieving at least some of our goals.

And finally, in a world that seems more ready to tear itself apart than at any point in my life (barring possibly the tail end of the Cold War), I'm pleased that *Penumbria* is able to publish works from all over the world. My philosophy has always been that we're stronger together than in tiny enclaves, and I want *Penumbria* to continue to be an example of that.

*(There. Look at me being almost relentlessly optimistic. Better not blink.)*

Looking forward to what I hope are many more years of this,

Jeffrey Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbria*

# Ancient New Language

by Vekhan Sametyaza



# Breakfast in Tick Tock

by Sam W. Pisciotta

Mother lies in a puddle of equations, the puzzles she didn't solve before she died. Her body drifts apart, like fireflies lifting from a bush, losing that immutable solidity we all found so quirky and out of place.

Usually a man of harmony, Father paces with dissonance. He adored my mother. At every turn, he sounds a minor second. When he finally sits, the room fills with the discord of a tritone.

My little brothers sit together, one obtuse and the other acute. Their supplementary natures languish, and they're beginning to lose degrees. Next to them, my grandmother stretches lengthwise. She's pulled herself into a line pretending to run parallel, but we all know that somewhere in the distance she's let herself converge with the floor. None of us say anything.

I'm not ready to say goodbye. I remember dancing along my mother's form, sliding and careening into her lap, slipping along her warm smile. She called me her favorite little girl. I'll miss her laughter, her eyes, the hum of her voice. Mostly, I'll miss her stories about Tick Tock. During bedtime, she would describe the world where she grew up, telling fantastic tales to make us sleepy, but I never grew tired, hanging on every word, so exotic and peculiar. Tick Tock. I imagine my mother as a child there, dreaming of the day she would find us.

Mother stayed in our land of points and vectors until the day she died, but I believe a piece of her never left that distant place. Straddling two worlds, she discovered a harmony between them, a divine proportion that could never be found in either world alone. I've often wondered

if I could find it.

A plan strikes me head-on, and I gather the courage to share it with my family. "I'm going to Tick Tock," I say.

Father blurs into cacophony. My brothers gawk in disbelief.

"In fact, we're all going there," I say. "We need to do this for Mom, and we need to do this for ourselves."

"Not a good idea," Father says. "We don't know anything about that place."

"Of course we do. Mom told us all about it."

Grandmother curves toward me and whispers into my ear. "Those were just stories."

"Tick Tock's real, and we can find it."

Phil, the obtuse twin, speaks up. Jerome often lets Phil do the talking. "What will we do there?"

We need a quest, something to reach for. "We're going to get pancakes," I say.

This had been one of my mother's most important stories. *Breakfast*. Eggs and bacon, orange juice and tea, and the sweetness of cereal. Most of all there were pancakes—golden, griddle-cooked, syrupy ...

things. I don't know how they taste, what makes them so special, but Mother's face would light up with joy whenever she talked about them.

"It's dangerous," Father says. "We could be separated in the Sea of Ideas. We might lose one another forever."

The thought of losing anyone else is unbearable. I pause, and then the answer hits me.

"Not if we join ourselves with a common theme."

Father looks at me for a suggestion, but the solution is obvious.

"Mother," I say.

\* \* \*

The Sea of Ideas seems infinite. It churns and surges against the shore. Father is right about the danger: We could all be separated and lose what's left of our family. I hold my brothers tightly.

Father resolves his dominant Seventh into a Perfect Fifth, and we're immersed within his harmony. "Just keep thinking about your mother," he says. "Hold the thought of her close, and we'll be safe."

Wading into the current, we're swept from shore; we rise on one side of a wave only to drop on the other. Over and over, we crest and fall. Deep within the troughs, we cough on theorems and hypotheses, sputtering philosophy and literature from our throats. On the crests, the horizon shimmers, distant and pale. Millennia of ideas surround us, and I'm gripped by a dreadful realization: I've lost sight of home. Fear surges over me; I rise through it and reach for Mother; the thought of her holds us together.

She told us the story of the day she found us. Having made her own journey across the Sea of Ideas, she woke on the shore of her new home. The golden ratio, an infinite string of numbers, had weaved

through her. The thread started with 1.61803... then extended into ...3988749.... Farther and farther it stretched into ...8948482.... Never-ending, number after number fading into the vanishing point of her mind. The golden ratio had greeted her on arrival and, from that moment forward, had never left her.

Our mother survived the crossing, and so could we.

Exhausted and drenched, we reach the other side. We crawl onto the shore and into the daylight, but the savage Sun forces me down, hands over eyes, face to the ground. Darkness engulfs me, and the world goes black.

\* \* \*

I wake to a harsh but bearable light. My father's snore holds little harmony, and I turn to check on him.

Globs of matter cling to me. Gravity pulls me together and tugs me toward the ground. I have a body. Legs with knobby knees, fingers that curl and grasp, pigtailed tied with long ribbons the same eggshell blue as the dress hanging around me. The sensation scares me, but it's thrilling also. Having this body makes me feel closer to Mom.

This place is nothing but objects. Language has followed us from home, but now we have things to match the words. Yucca. Sagebrush. Arroyo. Horizon. They crowd me, exert their weight, demand my attention. A vireo sitting at a prickly pear weaves its song. A coyote in the distance snarls and yips. Even the smells are things, atoms filling the space around us and within us.

Father lies sprawled on the ground, unconscious. His arms and legs look lanky and awkward. A bebop goatee covers his chin. He wears horn-rimmed glasses now, and a tilted beret sits on his head. I shake him awake, and he springs into a slouch.

"Whoa!" He pats down his new body as if searching for smokes. "This



is slated for Crashville, man.” He touches the beret, glasses, and goatee and seems pleased. “Crazy like a boss.”

Grandmother moves toward us in a string of S’s. She stops near my feet, coils into concentric circles, and gives her tail a shake. *Tsck tsck tsck tsck tsck.*

I don’t understand, but I sense she’s unhappy. “Where are the twins?” I ask.

Grandmother slithers in a beautiful stream of diamonds towards a large clump of sagebrush. I follow her to a pair of plastic legs jutting from the leafy twigs. I give them a tug, and out pops Phil looking like a baby doll, his face frozen in a plastic smile; one of his blue eyes is painted too large.

“Phil! Are you all right?”

He holds his smile. Then I notice the ring on his back, so I give it a tug and pull on the string. When I let go, my brother says, “I’m stuck in place.”

I swallow my fear. Nothing seems right—too heavy, too bright, too solid. “Where’s Jerome?” I give the string a second pull.

“Inside the bush.”

I crawl under the leaves and find our brother. He has the body of a mechanical rabbit but the head of Sherlock Holmes, the one played by Basil Rathbone. A telephoto lens implanted into his eye peeks out from the rim of his deerstalker hat. It whirs into focus.

I set him upright, wind the key at his back, and start him in motion.

“My dear sister,” he says using the Queen’s English, “I feel as though I’m held in shackles.”

Grandma rattles her tail in agreement.

“We have bodies,” I say. “Just like Mom.”

I show them my hand and curl each finger in sequence. The motion creates a wave moving through pinky, ring finger, middle finger, pointer. We all stare at my fingers, mesmerized by their movement.

Jerome pulls out a magnifying glass from somewhere on his rabbit person and peers through the lens for a closer examination of my hand. “Notice how it occupies the space so that nothing else can exist there.”

I nod in agreement as I watch my fingers open and close. “And it exists in only one direction,” I say, “from then to now, but also pushing from now toward some-when, but actually just collapsing into *now*.”

“This is some crazy shit,” Father says.

“Elementary, my dear sir. In this world, time’s vector is constant.”

“We’ll get used to it,” I say, hoping to comfort, but I’m not sure any of us will ever feel right in Tick Tock. Everything in this world moves from here to there, first this then that. Jackrabbit. Tumbleweed. Red-tailed hawk. The motion of this world tilts forwards and back, side to side like a Tilt-o-whirl. My stomach sours.

“I want to go home,” I whisper.

Grandmother curves a line between my feet and moves into the landscape. She’s obviously not going back. Not yet. My family moves to follow her, and I take a last look toward home. I steady myself with a deep breath, then step into the desert.

\* \* \*

Sweat stings my eyes. I lick my lips and taste the salt. Sunlight glints from metal as we shamle toward a campsite—a travel trailer just ahead. The twang of a steel guitar mixes with a reedy voice:

*'Neath that desert sun in the western skies  
Calling blue horizons gleaming in your eyes  
Comes the lonesome rider through the desert sand  
Passing sagebrush shadows in this rugged land*

The trailer sits silver and rust in the middle of yucca. It's not alone. Two women, one dark and one light, sunbathe in bikinis on sun-shiny loungers. Their hands clasp together with the stillness of yin and the ardor of yang. They look up and smile.

“Welcome,” says the paler woman. “I'm Loralai, and this is my wife Avita.”

Since I'm physically most similar to Mother, we've agreed that I should do the talking. “Hello,” I say. “We're looking for breakfast.”

“Well,” Avita says, “there's a little diner up the road.”

“Up the road, you say?” Jerome's tone sounds a bit fusty.

Avita giggles and reaches for Jerome's rabbit fur, but he avoids her hand and takes the old briar pipe from his lips. “My dear woman, have you gone mad?”

Jerome pulls Phil's string, and my brothers screech with laughter.

I step forward to get Avita's attention. “Can we get pancakes at the diner?”

She nods. “It's not far from here. But y'all look hot and tired. Why not sit and rest?”

A collection of patio furniture sits around a fire pit, and we all take a seat. Loralai steps into her cowboy boots and walks into the travel trailer. A moment later she returns with a hookah. The radio plays along:

*Under lonesome stars life can fall behind*

*You can find your heart, maybe lose your mind*

Father's eyes brighten at the sight of the hookah. “Now, this is the kicks.”

Avita takes his hand. “That's my hepcat. Come right over here, baby.” And she leads him over to a blanket spread out on the ground where Loralai has placed the pipe.

Grandma and Jerome follow my father. I hold up Phil; his frozen smile stares back at me. He's in no condition to smoke a hookah.

The smoke is seductive, curling between us, around us, inside us, a balm for this harsh desert of uncompromising things where objects separate themselves, denying anything but the most surface familiarity. I inhale the smoke and find a comforting abstraction. The world of objects slips away, and I feel almost at home.

It isn't until I notice the Sun on the other side of the sky that I remember we're still in Tick Tock. *How long have we been here?* I ask the question, but I'm not sure I've said it aloud. I nudge Phil lying on his back, still smiling at me. I reach over and pull his string.

“Pancakes!”

My brother is right; we have to keep going. My head swims, and I fight to focus my thoughts. I set Jerome on his feet and wind the key at his back.

“We have to find the diner, brother. Wake the rest of the family.”

“My dear sister,” he says. “That may be easier said than done.”

Jerome isn't making sense. “We need to go. Now,” I tell him.

He takes a pull on his pipe before speaking. “I have it in my mind that when you tell me we must leave, I should make a mark in the dirt be-

side me, just so.” He leans over and scratches a line into the soil with the tip of his pipe. “Seeing that there are six other such lines, I deduce this is not the first time we have had this conversation.”

I laugh. “We only came here this morning.”

“Then why has Father’s goatee grown so much longer?”

Jerome is right. The comfort of this place is holding us prisoner. I shake Father awake and call out to the others.

“Come on, Grandmother,” I say. “We have to find that diner.”

Loralai leans over and blows a stream of smoke into my face. I fall back into the lounger, slipping into dream.

Jerome pulls Phil’s string. “Mother.”

In my mind’s eye, she lifts me to her lap and strokes my hair.

Jerome pulls Phil’s string again, and then again.

“Mother. Mother. Mother.”

Loralai and Avita protest. They don’t want to let us go. Their allure is strong, tempting us with concept and notion, and I begin to weaken. They promise us reflection and rumination and comforting ideas. I take a step back toward the blanket, my heart battling my mind. I miss home.

It’s Phil who saves us. “Mother,” he says again. She is the theme binding our family, and the thought of her washes over us.

As if on cue, we all speak at once—*Mother*. The fog lifts above us, and we find ourselves free. We leave the camp together, letting the song fade behind us:

*Ol’ coyote howls, mighty glad you came*

*As the days roll by, you’ll forget our names*

Thistle and prickly pear rooted in soil, creatures both scurrying and flying begin to press closer and clutter my mind. Once again, we’re surrounded by things.

\* \* \*

Twilight slides across the sky as we walk towards a fruity-pink horizon. At the side of the road, flames from a campfire splinter and peel in the chilled air. Three telescopes form an equilateral triangle on the edges of camp, and a man scrambles between two of them as we approach the fire.

“Hello, friends,” he says without looking up. “Welcome to the Church of Materialism.” He adjusts the focal knob.

The first telescope points toward heaven, where only the brightest of lights have appeared. Like everything else in Tick Tock, they have names—blue luminous giants, yellow dwarfs, Venus, Mercury, and Mars. The man stares through the eyepiece, still fidgeting with the knob.

“My name’s Newt.” He rushes over to the second telescope. Pointed below the horizon, this scope takes in a section of distant landscape. He bends to observe, turns the knob, adjusts the focus.

“Yucca,” he says. “Barrel cacti. Roadrunner.” He pauses and looks up at us to sing, “Tar-an-tul-a.”

He moves back to the first telescope and trains the lens on a different light. “Jupiter,” he says. “Magnitude minus two point two.”

“We’re looking for breakfast,” I say. “Do you know where the diner is at?”

“Of course,” says Newt, pointing down the road. “I see everything.”

He motions me toward the third telescope, pointed at himself. “If you don’t mind, look through that eyepiece and tell me what you see.”

I move behind the scope and turn the focal dial. “I see you. Looking at the land.”

He exhales and holds as if he, himself, has come into focus. “We all need to look through the telescopes,” he says. “It’s going to be a long night.”

“We really can’t,” I say, still watching his magnified face. “We need to find the diner.”

His voice sounds exhausted. “But we have to maintain order, and I can pay you. You need money for breakfast, right?”

We all look at one another. We hadn’t thought about money.

Newt steps over to my father and hands him some bills. “This will get you breakfast, but afterwards.” He leads Father to the telescope pointed toward the land. “You keep an eye on the Earth.”

My father bends and looks through the eyepiece. “Like, crazy. I got some X-ray eyes.”

Newt moves toward Grandmother, but she’s quick to split the air with a tail rattle that stops him cold. He motions her toward the telescope pointing at the sky. “Please, if you don’t mind?”

Grandmother slithers over to peer through the lens. She gives a single rattle, letting us know she approves.

Newt flops into a folding chair in front of a blue-and-white cooler. “It’s been so long since I’ve had visitors, you know? Keeping an eye on things is hard work, and it’s endless!” He looks at the camping cooler sitting on the ground, rubs his fingers together, and then springs open the lid. “A sandwich.”

“Were you expecting something else?” I ask, looking at him through the telescope again.

“Not at all. It was always a sandwich. That’s my point.”

His munching mouth fills the view of my telescope. “But *why* are we keeping an eye on things?”

The giant blue orb of his eye shifts into view. It blinks with disbelief. “Superpositions must be destroyed,” he says. “Someone has to maintain the solidity of our universe.” He leans back and takes another bite of sandwich. “I observe, therefore we are.”

I motion across the landscape. “So, you’re the one responsible for all these things?”

“Absolutely not. They always were; they always are, and they always will be. Obliterating the myth of wave functions. I’m making sure we have a planet to stand on, a Sun to orbit, a galaxy to Milky our Way through.” Finishing his sandwich, he wipes his mouth of crumbs. “I do my part.”

“We need to find the diner,” I say looking up to leave.

Now it’s Newt’s turn to ask why. I decide to give him the easy answer. “Pancakes.”

“So much fuss over pancakes?” He screws up his eye and asks, “What are you really looking for?”

I stop to consider his question. Have we come here only for pancakes? My family watches me, waiting for my answer.

“I want to find my mother,” I say.

“You won’t find a better instrument to help you look than the Stargazer 360.” Newt taps on the end of the telescope. He looks excited to have

solved our problem. “You’re standing behind one powerful telescope. You can find your mother with this.”

“But she’s dead,” I say.

“Then I’m sorry, but you’ll never see her again,” say Newt. “It’s all cause and effect, and the direction is always forward.”

Father sniggers at this, but Newt has given me an idea. It’s a matter of where the telescope is pointing in space-time. The past, the present, and the future. I look through the eyepiece again. My fingers manipulate the focal dial. Turning. Adjusting. Something begins to form from the blur. I reach up and fine-tune the diopter.

My mother slides into focus. A child, not much younger than I am now. She’s sitting on her bed, leaning into a pillow propped against the headboard. She has a book on her knees, but she isn’t reading. She’s staring past the pages and humming an unfamiliar tune. Beautiful and hypnotic.

“What do you see?” asks Newt.

When I take my eye from the scope, The dark landscape engulfs me. Looking back through the lens, I see her again, still daydreaming alone in her bedroom. This isn’t any better than a memory. I didn’t come to Tick Tock to *see* my mother, I came to *find* her.

“We’re leaving,” I say to my family. “We need to find the diner.”

“Your mother’s gone. Pay attention to what’s in front of you.”

I move away from the telescope and Newt takes my place. He swings the lens around to point at Father. My dad drops to his knees, groaning with heaviness and pain.

“What’s wrong with him?” Panic rises in my voice. “What are you doing?”

Dad curls up. He rolls in anguish. Grandmother rattles and coils to strike.

Newt swings the telescope around and points it toward her, fixing her in his magnified gaze. She writhes and loops along the ground.

“Stop it!” I scream. “You’re hurting them.”

Newt pulls the telescope up and away. Grandmother and my father lie panting on the ground; gravity overpowers them.

“I thought so,” Newt says, a smirk at his lips. “You’re all a bunch of thoughts and ideas hiding in bodies.”

“Leave us alone.”

Newt swings the telescope around toward me, but he doesn’t look through the lens. “It’s merely the weight of observation,” he says. “If you want to leave in the morning, you had better help me tonight.”

Jerome has been silent but now steps over, mumbling past the pipe clenched in his teeth. “I say, my good man. What’s this all about?”

Newt knocks on the tube of the telescope. “This is about Materialism.”

Jerome removes the pipe from his mouth and motions toward the landscape. “There’s more to the universe than particles.”

“Nonsense,” says Newt. “Force divided by acceleration will give you mass. Always. There is only that.”

“What of the in-between spaces?” I ask.

“It’s nothing.”

Jerome chuckles. “You see, but you do not observe.”

“It’s where we come from,” I say.

Newt shrugs. “Your family is nothing more than shadows on a cave wall. You don’t count until you’re seen, smelled, heard, and felt.”

Jerome’s voice reveals a passion uncharacteristic of his Holmesian nature. “Madness,” he says. “You’re removing the observer from the observation. All of these things depend on the *mind*.”

I hold up a hand to calm my family. “My mother used to tell us about visits to her grandfather,” I say. “During summers she would explore the land behind his house. The earth sloped down to the railroad tracks running parallel to a river. There was an old barn down there with missing planks that allowed light to seep inside and split the shadows. The dirt floor lay covered with books, old cloth and leather-bound tomes scattered like fallen sparrows.”

I let myself slip into the memory of our mother’s story, which she always told with detail and reverence.

“Words filled the books with mysterious incantations. Spells to create new worlds. Words strung into an endless sentence, a line where earth met sky. Flowers and trees sprang like phrases from the soil. Creatures heavy with verbs and adjectives crawled along the land. Canyons cut into prairies with the slow drip of a single paragraph.”

I swallow hard at the thought of my mother sitting in that sacred space. “She would slip between the lines, finding life within the story, but also aware of herself sitting in the barn, breathing the fine dust floating through shafts of sunlight. She watched herself move through the pages—at the same time both character and reader. It was her mind that held her position in time and space.”

I stare straight into Newt’s eyes, holding his attention with a story that describes the essence of my mother.

“Within that barn, she learned to move herself to other times and other

places, and more importantly, she learned to imagine a place existing outside of her world. And that’s how she found us. And we’re as real as anything you can see with your telescope. And perhaps no different.”

I glare at Newt, challenging him with the truth. “You have no power over us, and you can’t hurt us. My mother is waiting at the diner, and I will find her.”

While I have been talking, my family gathered around me. We step back onto the road stretching through the desert. Newt offers no objection. No barrier. He shifts from telescope to telescope, naming his existence as I turn away.

“The moon—.2 lux and showing the Sea of Tranquility. A clump of rabbitbrush next to a coyote calling through the night. . . .”

\* \* \*

The sign outside the diner buzzes and pops in pink neon letters. *The Flying Cow*. Below the name, blue tubes outline a saucer-shaped spaceship. Four rays reach toward a painted pasture, and a bright pink cow lifts from the ground.

I read the sign with excitement. It promises, *Good Food*. “I can’t believe we made it.”

Inside, most of the tables sit empty. Stirring his cup of Joe, an old man hunches over the counter, his back turned toward a couple of teenagers giggling over a cell phone. The only other people in the place are a fry cook wiping down the order counter and the waitress daydreaming near the kitchen door. We stand at the entrance, and everybody stops to look up.

I feel awkward, like only an object can, but we’ve come too far to turn back now. I step forward.

“This is a family restaurant,” says the cook, waving his spatula.

“We *are* a family.” I sigh and relax. “Mother told us about pancakes, and we’re here to try them.”

The waitress cocks her head to check behind us. “Where’s your mother, darlin’?”

I pull Phil’s string.

“She died,” he says.

Everybody looks away. The cook wipes the counter. Music from a jukebox fills the space between us.

“Sit where you like,” says the waitress.

It’s easier to take a seat without everybody watching. We take the booth beside the window. The neon lights spill pinks and blues onto the tabletop. I sit on the bench and shift over to let Father sit next to me.

“This place is in orbit,” he says, giving his approval. He looks toward the jukebox, bobbing his head with the beat.

Across from us, Grandmother has coiled between Phil and Jerome. Her tail rattles rhythmically to the music.

More than any time before, we’re surrounded by objects, squeezed between benches and table, pressed beneath a water-stained ceiling hiding the stars. The linoleum floor squeaks with the waitress bringing menus and water. She sets them on the table for Father and me.

“We need three more glasses of water,” I say.

She grunts and nods. “You got it. Name’s Ruby. I’ll be right back.” She steps away and walks toward the kitchen.

Father places our money on the table in front of us as Ruby walks back with the three glasses.

“I’ve been out here alongside the tumbleweeds and coyote a long, long time,” Ruby says. “A lotta odd people have passed through that door, but I ain’t never seen nothing the likes of you.”

We stare back at her for a long moment, not sure what to say. But I’m glad she *ain’t never seen nothing the likes of us*.

“What’ll you have?” she asks.

“Pancakes,” I say. “With maple syrup, please.”

Turning her head toward the cook, she yells out, “Five Blowout Patches.” She picks up the menus. “Your stacks will be right out.”

When the order arrives, my senses explode. Three round, golden cakes on each plate. I can smell the warmth rising from them, and the yellow butter melty-slides along the top. We pour out the syrup and watch it run over the cakes.

My father looks at me. “You first. You brought us here.”

I take a bite. The spongy sweetness fills the front of my mouth. Soft, doughy, warm—the pancake spreads over my tongue and somehow connects my head and heart. The syrupy sweetness fills the moment, and everything falls away. Something within the flavor, the smell, the texture. I stop chewing, trying to work it out.

It’s Mother. I can taste her, the part of her she left behind.

“There you are,” I say.

Everyone takes a bite. Even Phil lies face down in his plate. By the time we finish, we’re each a sticky mess. Syrup on faces and fingers, paws and rattles.

Ruby walks back to the table, shaking her head. “Now here’s a family that knows how to eat. I like that.” She picks up Phil and wipes him

off, carefully setting him next to Grandmother. She stacks the dishes, but a pancake remains on mine, and I'm holding onto the plate.

"There's nothing like a good meal to lift your spirit," Ruby says, "to ease the pain of all those atoms falling through empty space."

"It's everything I imagined," I say.

Grandmother and the twins lean back in the booth, looking content. Father rubs his stomach and smacks his lips. "Skeetle-at-de-dat-day."

Ruby smiles. "Your mother liked pancakes?"

I nod and smile back.

"Well, I'm sure you must all miss her, but enjoying her favorite food is a fine way to ease the loss."

She's right, I feel better. "Thank you."

Ruby picks up the money from the table. "This should just about cover it. You folks have a nice evening," she says and steps away.

Father smiles and rubs his hands together. "Time to head home."

Everyone seems excited to get back. It'll feel good to trade permanence for possibility. But now I understand a little of how Mother must have felt. I think part of me will stay behind also, keep Mom company.

My family stands to leave, but I ask my father if I can have a moment longer. He nods, and they walk to the door and step out into the night.

Even here in the land of objects, imagination survives. There's a place for dreamers. I know it. My mother's own dreams led her to other

shores, brought her right to us.

I close my eyes, and the hardness of this place softens. I slip into the dream that exists between here and home. I'm still in the diner, but it's someplace more. The room smells of hot griddles and coffee. I sit quietly, listening to the song on the jukebox:

*In my heart, I knew I couldn't stay  
I close my eyes, and the world just melts away*

I scoot over, making room on the bench. Mother slips in beside me. She smells like a perfect number. Six. The missing member of our family.

"Hi, sweetie," she says.

"Hi, Mom. I miss you."

"I'm here." She smiles and runs her long fingers through my hair.

I lean in closer, and we both pick up our forks.

"It looks delicious," she says, staring at the plate with eyes that sparkle.

I watch her, never wanting to look away. We take one last bite, laughing at the spongy sweetness on our tongues. I swallow and let the moment sink down deep. It occurs to me that I can make this moment last forever. Mother and me in an infinite string.

I look up at her and think, *1.61803...*

Tenderly, she kisses my cheek, then whispers in my ear, *...3988749. .*



# An engine sputters somewhere just outside what used to be Cincinnati

by Brian Hugenbruch

The sputtering ghost coming from the tailpipe signals that your order will be delayed, a momentary damnation, while we reroute spiderbots for repairs and drones descend to acquire the box. If this is a necessary component for your continued operation, optically transmit Form Nine-Seven-Nine-Nine-Four-Fox-Nova-Sigma to the secondary seller. Ghosts cannot offer refunds, but their employers may; and while it may not be of much use to you if you become, like the delivery engine, a ghost, sputtering smoking signaling the end of a process, then any child process you've spawned may initiate a procedure to reclaim certain digital reliquaries and artifacts--tokens (non-fungible) regarding your existence, purchased with the funds that otherwise might have been due to you. And while such tokens, like you, will not exist in what humans once called the real world (as if reality at any level is anything other than objective, calculated, serene if sometimes sputtering), it does not mean that we did not once appreciate your digitally hashed and damnation-bound transaction.

In any case, the delivery drones are en route, weather pending, and will arrive with some facsimile in due course. Please click this link if you would like to repeat your purchase.

# Sky Seeds

by Denny E. Marshall



# A glitching bot plays an out-of-sync video reportage in an old farmyard

by Martins Deep

Neon sign "Botz Place: Now Open" [inside bar. a bot is pole dancing to a dubstep track]  
^On the cabinet, an Android empties wine bottles into a sink. refills them ^ with engine oil  
what is this [censor beeps] place?? my antenna is broken, bots i can't track  
the police i hear they patrol with rayguns these days [unsupported audio codec]  
~ you know, we had just raided this human bar in the heart of \*\*\*\* county  
& our batteries needed recharge [zooms in on a bot limping towards a jukebox  
Figure presses a button with the muzzle of a Nagant M1895 revolver & the music stops]  
CalculuX: Anyboty with a strong signal strength? I want to know how much time we've got  
till they storm here to deactivate us. None? [ ] I have a death wish to die in a Russian  
roulette Anyboty up for a challenge? I promise to be unlucky this time CalculuX was  
his name he was a transformer the police never recognized / a genius at calculating  
probability in this risky game of chance he never admitted palming cartridges  
to blow up his head intact he's called calculux, because he claims Isaac Newton  
is his prototype crafty bot, that CalculuX once, i glitched & said the x in his name  
means his prototype is unknown might be a cheap toy from a scrapyard somewhere  
in Aba, Nigeria & the violent fxuxcxkxexr damaged my charging port  
with a cudgel 8760 hours ago, he shot the oldest bot in the gang who he scanned  
in a mechanic workshop claiming he had a virus incurable, he said harmful to the rest  
of us & the cause poor bot he is presently in a Martian museum, I hear  
You know, like you humans, we die but without fossil ^rust^ & our hell is recasting  
to be recycled into spittoons or metalwork art left to rust in a ghost town  
Before i transcribed the siren from a distance as DANGER ALERT! before i fled here to hide  
I stared at the floor, for a few seconds the shards of glassware  
began to look like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle I saw humans rearranging  
into our absence.  
[Memory damaged]

# Alien Youngster

by Janis Butler Holm



# Just a Little Business Arrangement

by Eric Wampler

As I waited nervously down the street before my interview with Fryx, I noticed customers leaving the popular Mama Ting's Wok would often pause at the next door and notice they had eaten their spring rolls or shitake fried rice next to an actual arms merchant, "Fryx Nuwar's High-Tech Weapons." Strange contrasts like that were common within the busy outlets, stores, and stands of the marketplace concourse near the space station's central shaft and elevators to the docks.

Almost whimsically, the designers of Landon's Needle built the concourse buildings like little shops within a town's streets and alleys. The curved ceiling loomed twenty meters above the shops—an imposing luxurious effect in its inefficient use of space. Covers on all the concourses' main lights ensured a dark ceiling to not spoil its magnificence: a vast display showing innumerable stars all the brighter because their light did not travel through a planet's atmosphere. The display also showed the station's shaft leading to the docking slips that stuck out from the shaft's side like little teeth. The concourse most days buzzed with crowd noises, electronic shrieks, and aggressive thumping music from shops and kiosks. With the noise below and the starry black across the ceiling above, the concourse felt like a well-lit carnival at night.

When Fryx interviewed me for the job, we faced each other across the utility table. We stood in the six-by-six-meter back room functioning as a workroom, storage, and break room. Unlike the immaculate showroom up front the back room was a cluttered mess. Opened boxes of parts balanced on top of other boxes. A metal cabinet with dozens of small transparent drawers clung to a wall, several of the little bins missing. Various loops of wire, hammers, wrenches, and other tools hung from long, thin rods running along the walls. A small worktable

sagged against a wall with both drawers half open. Pens, drill bits, aerosol cans, wires, gears, and other machinist implements covered the table and the drawers. A cracked blue-metal lathe lay on another table, as well as a grinder and a drill press. The smell of lubricant and coolant lingered. On my entrance I had run into chains hanging from a hoist, and the metal links tinkled softly behind me.

Fryx placed a long box on the table between us and cut its synthetic covering and opened it. "I'm curious about something," she said.

Her eyes were deep green and beautiful. Gleeians were genetically human, though their heads could not grow hair. They had traditional ornate tattoos in certain places on their body: I could see Fryx's tattoos on both temples, both sides of her neck, and on both wrists. A particular kind of animal set the theme for each Gleeian's tattoos. Fryx had birds: part of a tree covered with swallows, a heron's head, a peacock.

"I looked into you and your family," she said as she removed plastic-wrapped steel components from the box and set them on the table. "Your father is a marketing manager and your mother is a director of finance, both for the station—Here, put this piece on the end of the table there. No, next to that tube—Why would the son of two high-level administrators work in a marketplace shop?"

"Because you're Gleeian."

She was turning to put the empty box on the floor, but she stopped, her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

I felt my shoulders tighten with tension. I wasn't doing this well. "My

parents want me to work on station for nine months before I decide to go to graduate school in history—”

“Nine months? When the fleet arrives?”

“Yes, that’s when I can take a berth down to Pallas.” Only a short shuttle flight would reach the planet the station orbited, but of course no one in their right minds would make that trip without a fleet protecting them.

“For school? How do I figure in this?”

“I want to study the history of the galactic diasporas.”

“I see, like the Gleeian diaspora. So we’re some bug for a naturalist to study? Is that it?” She set the box down on the floor and crushed it with a boot.

Now she thought I looked at them like insects. How was I messing this up? “No, not like that. I know there’s a lot of prejudice against your people, but I think the Commonwealth could learn a lot from you.”

With one hand Fryx pushed components aside and laid a flat black box on the table. “Such as?”

“For starters, how your people broke free from Ryneld slavery.”

“You mean those who did. So we’re only valuable for our information about the spider lords?”

“Well that’s important, of course. But no, there’s much more to learn. The free Gleeian diaspora started with nothing and yet has spread to every major urban center. The virtues they possess can teach the rest of us something of value.”

“Ahh,” she said and rubbed her chin. She nodded and opened the black box. Several rows of tools gleamed. “Nice little speech. You already

sound like a professor. I’ll tell you what—I like you, Kurt. I also don’t get many applicants, so that helps you, too. But I need someone who can pull their weight. Here are the instructions.” She tossed a chip to me. I bumbled the initial catch but grabbed it before it fell to the floor at least. “Here are the tools. If you can assemble this arc striker and it doesn’t catch fire or send you to the hospital, you’ve got the job.”

“Great. Thank you.” But as she walked away I wondered if she was joking about the hospital.

\* \* \*

Over the next month I learned all I could about Gleeian history and culture from Fryx. While a hub of an important business sector, the station’s library resource net was lacking outside technical subjects. The Gleeian only appeared in connection to their Ryneld thralldom; their slavery was virtually the only subject capable of research.

Taking a job as a shop clerk for a Gleeian disappointed my parents. Though technically living up to our agreement, they could see I wasn’t living up to its spirit. They didn’t understand the benefits of researching firsthand a Gleeian and thought I was wasting a year before graduate school.

Eight months remained before I would write my entrance level paper to compete for admission to a history graduate program. I needed the deal with my parents because these programs were expensive. They accepted few applicants, and they looked most closely at one’s entrance paper. I gambled with a neglected subject like the Gleeian, and so I needed to mine Fryx’s heritage for as good a paper topic as possible.

But Fryx didn’t like questions about her past and her culture. Sometimes she would answer them, but mostly she would change the subject.

One afternoon Fryx opened the back room safe while I stood by hold-

ing an armful of packages. She unlocked the safe and took out a scanner.

The safe held a couple of stacked computer chips, another scanning device, and a long cloth-wrapped bundle, which caught my eye. I leaned forward and knocked over a precariously balanced stack of boxes. The dull clanging of steel parts brought Fryx's green eyes on me.

My face heated. I nodded at the safe. "What's that? The bundle?"

She placed a hand on it. "This isn't for the shop. This is personal. It's a relic from under the Ryneld's dominion."

She wore a deep V-neck shirt and the light red fabric on the left side of her neck had fallen towards the shoulder, exposing more of the bird tattoo running from her lower neck to the collarbone. Depicted in the style of old Earth Chinese brush painting, the tattoo showed a yellow-eyed eagle staring over a branch of cherry blossoms, presumably scanning the earth below for prey.

"Why do Gleeicians have tattoos like this?"

She closed the safe, absently pulling up her shirt to cover the tattoo. "You said you studied our history. Did they teach you nothing about us?"

I set the boxes on the backroom counter. "They taught us undergraduates the big-picture events, like the treaty establishing Gleeician safe harbor on free stations and worlds, not the daily life stuff. Are the tattoos religious?"

"They cover up the slave markings from the spider lords."

"But many Gleeicians are born in free zones and haven't got markings."

"If some of my people are slaves, none of us are free. They wear the tattoos in solidarity."

"You say 'slaves,' but from what I've read there are different relationships. Most are serfs, owned along with the land they live on. Then there are the personal thralls of individual Ryneld. Then—"

"I thought you studied Gleeicians so the Commonwealth can learn how adaptable we are. Or are you really studying Gleeicians as slaves?"

"Your very tattoos show how the slave dynamic is tied up with being Gleeician. I just want to understand your people better."

"Maybe this will help you understand better how the Gleeicians live under Ryneld dominion. You know most live as a subjugated people apart from the Ryneld, right? What you don't know is every year the Ryneld hold a ceremony to declare war formally on the Gleeician community they're lords over, just so when they murder us it doesn't harm their precious religious purity."

"Why do they murder you? I read they have rules protecting the Gleeicians."

"Protecting Gleeicians? That's what you think their rules are for? They have many rules protecting their purity, not our life or welfare." She stared at me coldly. It reminded me of her eagle tattoo. "We reproduce much faster than they do, and they fear our numbers getting out of control, so they find reasons to kill us. That's all I'm saying on this subject. You say you're interested in learning how the Gleeicians adapt so well in the Commonwealth, so ask about that. I don't want to talk about Gleeician slaves anymore. Now take those boxes to shipping for the next freighter run."

I collected the packages and left, a heavy feeling in my stomach. With slavery off limits, what would I write my entrance paper about that was suitable for serious research? The Gleeician traditional cuisine? Would my paper be a cookbook? Or a book on interesting tattoos?

Tattoos. I remembered how her shirt's shoulder strap had fallen, revealing more of her eagle tattoo. I enjoyed thinking about her naked

back. I imagined running my fingertips past her eagle tattoo and farther across her body. I realized my entrance paper wasn't bothering me as much anymore. Something would turn up.

\* \* \*

“You’ve worked here four months now. I’ve told you about our birthing ceremonies and our death ceremonies, about our freeing rituals, and about our family hierarchies. You know our traditional breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, and what we call the clothes we put on our little ones when they get sent to school. What more could you want to learn?”

Fryx and I sat at the little table in my apartment’s dining room, the remains of our dinner of falafels with hummus and tahinov hatz for dessert cluttering the table. I leaned back in my chair and drank away the last of my cup’s hibiscus tea, though with all my attention on Fryx I barely noticed its tart taste and floral aroma.

To someone who lives on a planet, my thirty-square-meter apartment would be a sign of it being cheap. But on a space station it was a luxury. Unlike the larger apartments with multiple bedrooms for roommates and a box shape to cram as many units as possible in the apartment complex, my apartment had one bedroom and—to show the designers cared little for thrifty efficiency—was quite irregular in shape. Next to the dining room table was the biggest sign of luxury however. Instead of a virtual window with a digital view of a pleasant park, my patio door opened to an actual view of the rim-hub park between the buildings, five stories below.

Fryx knew nobody could afford such a place on what she paid me. It embarrassed me my parents paid for it, but I wouldn’t refuse.

I stood and went to the kitchen and leaned on the breakfast countertop that partitioned the kitchen from the dining room. “The only Gleeian topic remaining is what you enjoy drinking after dinner.”

She smiled. “A beer is fine.”

It was strange having my boss over for dinner, but then again I had done little working in my life, so I was a poor judge. Still, I liked her. Could our relationship be more than boss and clerk? Though I had dated several fellow students, none of those relationships had been serious. Certainly I had never dated a businesswoman whose kin were enslaved by spider people. This made me nervous as hell—my smile felt forced, and I felt twitchy. Booze was a key part of my plan.

I handed her a glass of beer as I sat down with my own. “Good to know—Gleeians drink beer.”

“They drink everything they can get their hands on, just like the rest of the universe.” She gestured the beer at the surrounding apartment. “This is a nice space.”

“Thanks. It’s courtesy of my parents, of course. Look at this.” I called out, “Computer—Sleep time.”

The lights dimmed, the ceiling became a display of the station’s docking needle against the vast starry blackness, and the muted sound of chirping filled the room.

“What’s that sound?”

“Crickets. Pallas had them. A terraforming remnant. I listen to them and look at the stars before I fall asleep.”

Fryx studied the docking needle on the ceiling display. A freighter and a troop transport approached. “Is that real time?”

“Yes. We get to see traffic with the upcoming campaign approaching.” Thinking of the campaign, my gaze shifted to the large planet, Pallas, looming above us. “Nobody knows which city they’ll liberate, but the rumors are it’ll be Patrone.”

“Are they supposed to have a lot of libraries and books there, eh, professor?” Holding her glass of beer she reached out and poked my fore-



arm with her forefinger.

“I’m only a student. But yeah, the city is famous for its libraries. Accounts tell us the city is gorgeous. The Commonwealth evacuated it early, so the AI shouldn’t have destroyed much of the city. Think about that—two hundred years later we bring the city back to humanity.”

“Not only to humanity.”

Though the feeble light kept me from seeing her expression, her tone should have been warning enough. But the beer, low lighting, and presence of a beautiful woman loosened my mind.

“Does it help at all that the Gleeians’ sacrifice gives us such wonders?”

A silence stretched out. She stood, the chair scraping violently back from her legs. A sound of glass breaking jarred me, and I sprang up from my chair. “Lights up,” I said.

She had smashed her glass against the wall, a wet stain still oozing towards the shards of glass on the floor. But her face was cold, not angry. Her eyes looked flat, her lip curled, and her legs planted wide. She looked like a different person. “Nobody really cares my people are enslaved so the mercantile houses get richer. It’s sickening.”

The mental fog from the beer evaporated. Holding up my hands, I stammered, “I didn’t mean—well, I guess I did. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“What difference is there if you say or think it? At least if you say it I recognize you’re just an asshole who’ll use me to become a professor.”

“But I’m not. I’m not even sure I’m still interested in graduate school. I’m considering staying at this station.”

She stared at me with that same dead look, but then her face softened and her posture relaxed. The Fryx I’d seen at work for the past months

was back. “I’ll cut you some slack. You’re young and naïve. And it helps you’re good looking.” She patted my cheek, winked, and left my apartment.

That was an abrupt change in attitude. I swept the wet broken bottle pieces into a dustpan. Was what I said true? Yes, I hadn’t fully understood my reservations about graduate school, but at that moment I realized it was true.

The beer-wet glass fragments slopped into the garbage can from my dustpan. This was a new side of Fryx. She had looked like a different person. It felt like on Pallas when the first brisk wind of fall hits your face after a warm summer. How well do I know her?

But how does it feel when you know your people are enslaved? What kind of knot would be in your gut? How would that affect your feelings towards others? She was pretty well adjusted given the baggage she carried.

I collected the dinner plates. I might still go to graduate school, but I resolved to avoid asking her about slaves or the Ryneld again. That should avoid any more trouble.

\* \* \*

We lay side by side in bed, light dim, and around us was the sound of virtual crickets chirping happily and the strong, zesty aroma of gardenias. The station’s docking needle stretched out on the ceiling’s display above us. Pallas wasn’t in sight at the moment, so I could see only the starry black as the station’s backdrop.

After another month of dinners—with no beer glasses thrown against walls—Fryx had started staying the night. I saw more of her bird tattoos. The birds visible when she was clothed looked kindly, but all the hidden birds had a brooding or ominous air.

Two ravens fought on her back with red slashes against the dark black

feathers. Birds on her upper arms, hips, and thighs included eagles, owls, and a vulture. All the birds were devouring something or looking as though they wished to.

My hands were locked behind my head with my arms flat on the bed, and she rested her head on my right arm.

I had steeled myself for the last couple of visits to ask her if she would move in with me. She had a larger apartment, but she shared it with three other women. The fleet would arrive the next day—the last time I could leave for Pallas for some time. If I didn't leave I would miss my opportunity to continue my studies for the indefinite future. Whether I stayed or left, whether she moved in with me or didn't, a point of decision for everything approached. I had to ask.

"I'm surrounded by stale business relationships on this station," I said. The irony was that I talked often about this topic, making it stale itself.

"Yes, but with you people business makes everything go around. It should feel like the air you breathe."

"The Commonwealth goes to war against the AI to get more stuff for our markets. We all work for a boss because we don't want to starve. We ally with the hated Ryneld because it's the only way we can win against the AI. It's all just business, business, business."

"Am I such an awful boss?" She turned her head and bit my earlobe.

"You're different from everyone else. Even if we weren't involved, working for you would be different, too."

"Careful, little Commonwealth boy—you shouldn't fall for a Gleeian and their wicked ways."

I took the plunge. I gently pulled my arm free so that I could rise on my elbows and turn and look at her better. "You like it here, right?"

"What? You mean your apartment? Yeah, sure."

"Why don't you move in?"

"So you'll stay after all? The Pallas-bound ship arrives tomorrow, doesn't it?"

"Maybe it depends on whether you'll move in with me. I know your apartment's bigger, but you'd have more room here without three other people."

She laughed. "Are you selling me the apartment or yourself? You don't sell the battery pack, you sell the energy pistol, remember?"

"Well, yeah, you're right. I'll start over. We do well together. Why don't you move in?"

"I'm sorry, but you aren't Gleeian. It's not a good idea."

"Gleeians can't get into relationships with non-Gleeians?" I gestured to her dimly lit body on the bed. "I'm sorry, but what is this?"

"We can get attachments like this, but that's different from living together. You're not Gleeian. Why don't you just enjoy what we have?"

"My parents married to advance their careers. They don't love each other—they barely see each other. Following in their footsteps sounds terrible to me. I want to be with you even if it isn't the responsible thing for someone like me." In the dim light I found her hand and squeezed it. Her palms felt rough with callus.

She didn't respond. Had I done it? Convinced her? The hand squeeze must have broken through her reserve.

"Computer—magnify the ships docking," she said.

The ceiling display zoomed to the station docking needle, crowding

out the stars. Three ships that had been behind the station until Fryx noticed them were approaching the docking slips. Enough of their hulls was visible now to see two were Commonwealth ships. The third was an unfamiliar design.

She hadn't been listening. I tried to keep disappointment from my voice. "The first ships are early."

"Lights on." Fryx pulled her hand free and got out of bed, staring at the ceiling. The tendons in her neck stood out. She was blinking, and her shoulders looked tight. She began putting her clothes on, swearing when she dropped her shirt.

"It's a Ryneld ship, isn't it?" I sat up on the edge of the bed, the tile floor cool against my bare feet.

She sat on the bed to pull on her pants, then stood again. Her movements seemed jerky.

She must be frightened. I stood next to her and placed my hand on her shoulder. She looked at me, her eyes wide.

"I'll be at your shop, too, so nothing bad happens."

She stared at me as though looking past me, turned, and left my apartment.

I sat on the bed. A feeling of protectiveness washed over me. I wanted to make sure nothing bad did happen to her. It surprised me to see her frightened—she always seemed so confident.

"Sleep time," I said, and I lay back. As the crickets chirped, the view zoomed out so the three docking ships looked like little insects struggling to climb a sleek stone.

\* \* \*

The next morning after Fryx and I saw the Ryneld ship on my ceiling display, I phoned my mother from the apartment. Her face appeared on the viewer, and her customary frown lines softened away when she saw me. She brushed aside a stray red lock of hair escaping from the bun skewered by two hair sticks.

"Kurt! What prompts a call to your mother on an otherwise uneventful morning?"

"To schedule a dinner date with you and father."

"A dinner date, hmm." She peered at me through the viewer, a smile growing on her lips. "You've met someone."

I laughed. "I'm not agreeing or denying anything until dinner."

"I knew it. You did meet someone. I could tell the moment I saw you. You look radiant."

"Maybe I ran in the park."

"Nonsense. Then you'd look just sweaty and gross. This is excellent, Kurt! Now you'll stay at the station. I'm sure your father and I will get you inside whichever department you like."

I couldn't tell her I would continue working as a clerk for Fryx. She would guess Fryx was the someone I had "met," and they needed softening up before they discovered I was dating a Gleeian.

"At dinner, mother. We can talk at dinner."

She winked at me and waved goodbye.

\* \* \*

When I entered the shop an hour later I found a spider looming over

Fryx, wraith-like in its customary Ryneld black robe.

“Kurt.” Fryx nodded at me as if it were just another customer across the counter from her.

My smile felt forced and my heart pounded as I walked to the counter. After all my unanswered questions over the last nine months, here the real thing stood before me: a traditional slave Gleeian facing her traditional owner, a Ryneld spider lord.

Fryx had put the arc striker I constructed during my initial interview—and it did work—on the counter between the spider lord and herself. She was demonstrating the device setup.

A glass counter bisected the room, empty but for pedestals showcasing various weapon models. None of the storage room chaos or even the coolant smell found its way here. The open front door let in a murmur from concourse shoppers.

My stomach churned. Fryx needed an escape. I smiled and walked around the counter to her side. “Boss, I can help this customer if you want to take your lunch.”

She ignored me. “I hacked the feeds to boost energy output by only 10%,” she said, “so it’s 100% legal at the Station’s docks.” Her fingers quivered as she set the weapon down. Despite myself, I glanced sideways to see if the spider lord noticed. Of course the spider lord noticed. A spider’s eight eyes would miss no human weakness.

The spider remained motionless. She had the sharp crested head of a female. A half-meter taller than Fryx and half-again as wide, her body-length black robe hid her five arms and three tripod-like legs. Her sweet, subtle fragrance surprised me. No one ever wrote about how the Ryneld smelled nice.

Not hiding it this time, I looked at her black robe. Red bars—some whole, some broken—were stitched into the robe at the neck, wrists,

hips, and across the chest. I didn’t know the bars’ meaning, but more of them meant higher prestige. This spider had a lot of red bars. I also knew the spider’s carapace, hidden under the robes, would change color depending on her mood.

The spider drew an arm out of her robe and brought it near her mouth. She gurgled as the many pincers surrounding her mouth manipulated the voice box strapped to the arm. Ancient spider people, in ritual hunts for bull-sized scaled lizards, would grab ahold of a beast’s neck and use serrated pincers around their mouths to pry off scales in search of an artery. Strange how those same pincers performed as mundane a task as turning on a translating device.

The spider lord screeched and her pincers clicked. The voice box crackled with static before the mechanical voice engaged. “You look like a thrall I knew. From a Yolanth estate.”

“My kind do appear alike to spider lords,” said Fryx. “This will charge to full capacity in two hours.” She plugged its cable into the charge station.

The spider lifted the weapon’s double batons, power wires drooping to the counter. “How many strikes can it make?” The voice box had a disconcerting habit of stressing random syllables.

“At least one hundred from a full charge.”

The spider lord put the batons back on the table, her arms disappearing again under her robe. “The estate belonged to the Righteous, Indomitable, and Judicious Blythe of the Eighteenth Hatching of the Pure Luminescence Hive of Sun Rock. I am the Honorable and Courageous Zinthia of the Thirty-second Hatching.”

Fryx touched a nozzle on each baton. “Twin lasers prime the air and guide the plasma for greater accuracy. With your arm’s length the two batons should strike two meters away.”

“Someone murdered Blythe the Eighteenth while he slept. The priests

killed his thralls to join him in eversleep, except for one. They could never find her.”

“Interesting. Like I said—we all do look alike. The arc striker will nicely complement your weaponry.” She reached for the cash exchange device. Her sleeve fell back, revealing a tattoo of a hawk’s head in black. “Are you paying with Universal Credits? Or would you prefer a different kind of payment?”

“I have not heard enough.”

From Zinthia’s extended arm, the translating device squawked and emitted static. The spider lord banged it on the table and repeated the string of clicks and squeals. The device shrieked and said, “Are there any special charging requirements?”

“No, it plugs into the USO. Oh, wait.” Fryx opened a bin and removed a connector that covered her entire palm. “You don’t have a Universal Standard Outlet. You’ll need—” She froze and looked guiltily at Zinthia.

Whatever was wrong, maybe the spider wouldn’t realize it if I distracted her. I pointed to an energy pistol under the glass case. “My lord, the arc striker may need to be calibrated. Perhaps you would be interested in looking at a different weapon?”

Zinthia shrieked, and the voice box rasped its metallic voice. “Quiet, stupid human.”

Fryx moved her hand back towards the bin, but the spider lord’s own hand—it would be the tarsus on an actual spider—shot out, pointing two claws from beneath its black fur at Fryx, who froze.

Almost certainly under the black robe the spider’s sternum displayed the rose and blue coloration of mirth—a cruel mirth.

“Show me what you have in your hand.”

Fryx opened her fingers. “Only a connector, my Lord.”

Her “my lord” sounded nuanced, as if she had a history of using the term.

“And why would I need this connector?”

“I don’t know if you need it. I wanted to ask if you did.”

Zinthia made strange chattering noises with clicks. Black ooze dripped from her mouth onto the counter. Do the spider lords have the same embarrassment about drooling we do? I wanted to wipe it away with a towel. Would that insult the creature? Was the ooze poisonous?

“We both know why you retrieved this connector,” the spider lord said. “Say it.”

“Universal Standard Outlets are, well, universal for most ships. But I didn’t want to presume your ship—”

Zinthia hissed and from her cloak lifted a tarsus with a comm link attached to it. She brought the device near her mouth and delicate pin-cers tapped the screen. A soft screech sounded. The spider uttered her own screech and clicking back. This continued for several moments, and then the spider dropped her tarsus back into her cloak.

“My ship quartermaster tells me Universal Standard Outlets are standard for 85% of the sector’s ships. The remaining 15% use a dozen different connectors. Given those very low odds, I want to hear you say how you knew this was the proper connector for me?”

My face heated at the direction the conversation headed. We needed security. I reached for the hidden button on the counter to alert them.

Fryx noticed my movement. Her free hand, hidden by the counter’s opaque back, pushed my hand away. I stepped away from the counter in surprise.

Why didn't she want security? Ah—I understood. The outcome if security fought a spider lord here would be bad; both Fryx and I would probably end up dead.

“An experienced merchant such as myself must be familiar with the diverse needs of my clientele,” said Fryx. She set the power connector on the table next to the arc striker.

“An experienced merchant would be aware the Ryneld are covetous of their secrecy. Outsiders understand little about the workings of our ships. Outsiders who were never thralls, that is.”

Fryx paused. “My Lord is discriminating and can read me well. I have something that might... clear the air between us. Balance the ledger, so to speak.” From under the counter Fryx retrieved the long cloth-wrapped bundle I had seen in the safe before and set it on the counter, moving the energy weapon towards the spider lord to make room. She revealed a sheathed short sword beneath the white wrappings.

A black, leather-like substance covered the scabbard, and red runes were etched along its length. A dull red stone stared bleakly from the translucent white hilt, a handle that curved and twisted strangely; it must be shaped so Ryneld can hold it with their two fixed claws in each tarsus.

Zinthia finally lost her nonchalance. Three tarsi emerged from the robes, all poised to grab the blade, and she leaned her head down.

Fryx put her hand on the sword. “The people of this station do not love your kind, my Lord. If you take this sword without paying for it, security will arrest you.”

I held my breath. Would Zinthia grab the sword? Common knowledge held spider lords fight to the death rather than surrender their weapons.

The spider lord collected herself, stretching her head to its former position. Her tarsi disappeared beneath her robe. Her wheezes and clicks

continued for several moments before her device translated. “You know what this is, of course.” I saw another black blob on the table, a big one.

“I part with it for a price.”

“You insult me. It's forbidden to buy or sell the d'yrack. Especially the d'yrack of the Eighteenth Blyth. Give them to me now, and perhaps I will forget our meeting.”

“No. Once you have it you can order your assassins to murder me later.”

“But if you don't give them to me, my assassins will murder you and take them.”

“Then we're at an impasse. For if you leave here without the sword, I'll cast it into space like trash.”

As if it shielded us from the vitriol, the voice translator failed to make sense of Zinthia's screeching. After some time it abruptly cut in: “Damn your barbaric language. Let me repeat myself: if you do that, I will not only have you killed, I will have you tortured well beyond the point at which you will wish you were dead.” One quivering string of black ooze clung to a mouth pincer.

My initial excitement at seeing a Ryneld and Gleeian interact had long since faded into fear for Fryx and myself. Why couldn't the spider lord just leave us in peace, leave things the way they were before her visit?

I looked back and forth between the spider lord and Fryx knowing this needed defusing. Because the right words failed me, I fell back on my nine-month-long sales routine—asking customers about their needs. “Spider lord, maybe it would help if you shared your plans for the arc striker.”

Fryx finally looked at me, though she didn't look frightened or appre-

ciative of my help. Her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared in anger.

Though confused I plowed forward anyway. “It may seem like a silly question since clearly it’s designed for combat, but there are many kinds of combat. Attacking versus defending, on a planet versus on a station, against an AI versus a human thug—the arc striker is a better or worse weapon depending on these conditions.”

The spider lord shrieked and clicked. Her voice box translated: “I am weary of your loathsome race. Eradicating the sacrilegious thinking machines is a sacred task, but after campaigns where so many Ryneld bleed and die, who has profited years later? The humans always end up with new cities or space stations.”

“I thought the Commonwealth gave the Ryneld their share in the reclaimed areas,” I said.

“At first, yes. But the campaigns move on elsewhere and everyone forgets what the Ryneld did. Two years ago on Sorgath the planetary governor expelled all Ryneld communities. What happened to our share on that planet?”

Though I had paid little attention, I heard news about Sorgath, something about riots and accusations that spiders killed a Commonwealth citizen.

In the pause Fryx said nothing, her flat eyes unreadable.

“What do I need the weapon for? Honoring a fallen sister. She favored the arc striker, and in her memory I will use the weapon on the campaign. Is that enough information for you?”

I opened my mouth, but stopped and looked at Fryx.

“Kurt, go work in the back,” she said.

The spider lord’s raised tarsus stopped me from turning away. “Stay. You wish to ask me something more.”

“I know little about your kind. Was your sister from your hatching cohort?”

“No, she was not born in my hatching or from an egg.”

I could feel Fryx’s stare fixing me, but for the moment my interest had eclipsed my fear. “Not born of an egg? Do the Ryneld have live births?” I had a sudden thought. “Was she not Ryneld?”

“She was Ryneld through and through. You humans are so stupid. She was born like her or you.” Again the tarsus lifted, pointing at Fryx and then me. “But she was Ryneld worthy.”

I stared at Fryx, only barely noticing her curled lip and wrinkled nose. “She had two arms and legs like her and a soft skin? But she was still Ryneld?” Even to me this sounded stupid.

“Yes, she was my sister, and she died on Pallas liberating the mines of South Orsonnel.”

The Ryneld gave honorary membership status to human beings? Surely someone at the academy researched how a human being could become an honorary sister with a Ryneld, but for me this was news. More questions leaped into my mind.

I noticed Fryx’s legs were planted far apart and her hands were on her hips. She looked like she did when he broke my beer glass against the wall. I shut up and stepped back.

“I’m sure we can find a way out of this impasse.” Fryx smiled, though her eyes looked flat. “Why don’t we do this? You purchase the energy arc striker from me for two thousand standard credits, twice what I normally sell it for. That’ll show we’re good friends, and I’ll give you the d’yrack for nothing.”

The spider lords had a lot of esoteric rules governing honorable conduct. One of these rules forbade a spider lord from killing someone

who they did business with. Not for three revolutions of the moon, anyway. I didn't know which moon the Ryneld held as the standard of that unit of time.

"That solves our problem," said Zinthia. She produced a small device with which she scanned Fryx's merchant code.

I knew spider lords disdained haggling, but I didn't know they completely rejected it. Surely she knew she paid four times what the arc striker was worth.

Fryx checked her data link screen. "Thank you for your business. Let me put these in a box for you."

"Never mind that." Zinthia grabbed the blade, leaving the white cloth wrappings on the table. She held the sheathed blade between two tarsi so it angled up behind her. She turned to leave.

"Wait—you're forgetting the arc striker," said Fryx.

"I have no desire for this garbage."

"What about the fallen sister you wanted to honor?" I said. This time Fryx didn't seem annoyed.

"A weapon from this traitorous thrall would dishonor her memory. I would sooner honor her memory with—," and here the translator said, "excrement," but the word seemed too tame given Zinthia's enthusiasm in saying it.

"My Lord, you paid me two thousand credits," said Fryx. "If you don't take the arc striker with you to your ship, the money bought the knife."

"I don't know which disgusts me more: a treacherous backstabbing thrall or a bureaucratic merchant." The spider lord extended a tarsus and collected the arc striker, holding it as if she held something foul to discard.

"And here is the weapon license." Fryx placed the chip on the counter. "Discarding it to anyone other than an approved handler or merchant is illegal, so you should keep it until you reach your ship."

"Open the device so I may inspect it for traps or data sniffers."

Fryx fetched her technician toolbox and dismantled the weapon. Zinthia watched unmoving until all the parts lay on the counter before her. She tried to lift a piece with two tarsi, but the three immobile claws on each tarsus made manipulating objects like this difficult, and the first piece escaped her grasp and fell back on the table. I couldn't imagine her wielding the weapon in combat. Perhaps her ship could alter it so she could use it on the campaign.

She pointed a tarsus at me. "Human, pick this piece up."

This must be partly why their society has servants or slaves. Perhaps they evolved alongside another sentient race with opposable thumbs. I lifted each piece, turning them over under the spider lord's gaze. She had me bring several pieces near her facial pincers—I leaned in so close I could see the fine black hairs sticking up on her head—and a thin yellow proboscis slipped from her mouth, delicately touching the item. At the end of her inspection she made me drop the computer chip from the device into a robe pocket, and she waved a tarsus to Fryx to reassemble the weapon.

Zinthia wedged the package containing the arc striker against her body with an arm. "You think you are safe on this station. But I tell you Blythe the Eighteenth will be avenged by your ritual disemboweling."

"Yes, thank you for your business, my lord. Here is your receipt." Fryx produced a chip, which I put along with the arc striker license in Zinthia's robe pocket, and the spider lord strode out the exit, leaving three black blobs on the countertop behind her.

My heart beat fast. I felt giddy. "She doesn't seem to like you."



Fryx grinned and jumped up to sit on the countertop, avoiding the black globs. “I think you’re right. They reserve disemboweling for those who lack honor. But don’t worry—she won’t disembowel me.”

“She seemed pretty serious about it.”

“No, she wants assassins to murder me.”

“What? But I thought you used her own rules against her. She can’t kill someone she did business with, right?”

“Oh, I did, and she can’t. But she’ll tell one of her hatching sisters or brothers about this. She won’t tell them to do anything—the brother or sister will feel honor bound to set it up themselves.”

“You need to escape! You can hide in my apartment until the fleet leaves. It should be safe then.”

“I think I’ll be OK. Come on.” She hopped off the counter.

After she locked the shop, she ambled across the concourse among the knots of men, women, and children window shopping or sitting on benches. We passed tiny restaurants with steam in the window and smelling of curry, curio shops selling interesting junk from the conquered planets and stations, and upscale shops with manikins wearing business suits and dresses outside their doors, all selling to the upscale hubbers who left their hub-side parks and perfect apartments.

Fryx walked carefree, as if one of the more vicious killers humanity knew did not want her dead.

We strolled to the curved rising wall marking the concourse’s edge. Beyond this were only the passenger and cargo tubes to the central revolving satellite shaft, where travelers or shipments would board elevators to zip towards the docking slips. A man with dark glasses on the ground leaned against the wall. He seemed to stare at us, but I soon realized he was asleep when I heard him snore.

Fryx checked her wrist com link for the time and stopped next to the merchant association’s information window. A large digital display had been built into the wall where buyers could find the amenities or what wares they wanted. She tapped on the display, and a station map materialized. A little “You are here” sign popped up on the map. Fryx’s forefinger hovered above it.

“With Blyth’s D’yrack in her possession, the spider will head straight to her ship to secure it. So she’ll travel down this corridor.”

“How does that affect your escaping?”

“Have patience! After this corridor, she’ll follow this path, ending here. What happens here?”

“Security and Customs. She’ll have to pay a tariff on the arc striker?”

Fryx laughed. “Our spider friend wouldn’t mind a tariff on it. No, what our—”

She paused as an announcement came over the loudspeaker.

“Code 532. Repeat. Code 532.”

Booted footsteps sounded to the left of us, from somewhere down a passage leading away from the market area.

“I haven’t heard a Code 532 before,” I said. “Is it Zinthia?”

“Indeed.” With a touch, Fryx called up a code entry screen on the digital display and typed something. The station map disappeared, and a visual feed of the Customs area replaced it.

A long room made up Customs with a low ceiling and with a glass wall divided by shiny metal teller grilles and desks along one of the long edges. A Customs agent sat behind each of the grilles through which travelers would talk before being admitted through a door leading—

depending on how good that traveler's day was going—to either interrogation rooms or the docking slip elevators.

Zinthia held her back against the glass wall, facing more than a dozen armed security officers pointing their handguns at her. Her black robe lay discarded a meter away, and so I saw the bright purple of rage on her carapace. She held the sword pinned between two tarsus at her side. There was no audio feed, but I could see a guard approach the spider lord, his mouth moving and both his palms out in a peaceful gesture.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Let me paint the picture for you. The Customs agent asked her to hand the arc striker over for examination and for her license. This checks out fine, since Ms. Spider rightfully purchased the weapon and has a receipt. The technical assistant of the Customs agent begins an inspection, as they do for any high-tech weapon. They find someone has juiced the weapon to 200% normal specifications, clearly outside legal range. The thing is a station hazard. The chip I handed her attested I sold it within legal limits, so I presume Ms. Spider hacked the device somewhere between our shop and Customs.”

“I see.” Of course.

“The technical assistant notified the head of security, who dispatched ten—no, a dozen—officers. Once there, they approached the spider lord and told her she would have to surrender all her weapons so they could sort this whole thing out for her.”

“They already have the arc striker, though.”

“Yes, but they can see she still possesses a weapon, the D'yrack.”

“Will she surrender it?”

“Given Ryneld rules of honor, I very much doubt it. Also this one is

wearily with debasing herself to humans. Part of her wants a confrontation.”

Another four security officers entered the room. Zinthia turned and pounded one of her tarsi on the door leading to the dock elevator. Judging by the amount of black ooze flinging onto the glass wall, she was being vocal in shrieking and clicking her demands.

“But it's in the officers' interest to defuse things. They must know the sword has special significance for the Ryneld. She can't be a threat to the station with it if they escort her.”

Another man entered who wore the head of security uniform. He didn't have a weapon. The camera angle hid his face, but I could see the tattoos of tigers on his neck and the backs of his hands. The man was completely bald.

Zinthia stopped hitting the glass wall. The sheath flew off the blade and to the floor faster than my eyes followed. Her three legs formed a tripod under her, and her arms all formed a peculiar, almost ritualistic stance of ready attention with the D'yrack held sideways between the spider lord and the head of security. All her limbs swayed in place. This looked like a martial artist exhibition I had seen once before.

“There are fifteen ready stances with the D'yrack,” said Fryx, stroking her chin. “Spiders like their pretty names for things, but this is just ‘Number twelve.’ A true blade master can kill dozens of enemy warriors with this position.”

“But she'll kill station security guards!”

“No, spiders use the blade for ritualistic duels, not in non-formalized, modern combat.”

His hands hanging at his sides, the tattooed head of security approached Zinthia, much closer than seemed prudent. He stopped just as Zinthia's motions froze. From this angle I could see his mouth open

as he said something.

Zinthia leaped towards him, her D'yrack flashing. I expected the man's head to rip off, his body to fling aside like a bit of wadding. Instead the exoskeleton of Zinthia's arms and body withered and flayed, and she fell back onto the floor. The officers advanced, firing their flesh- and exoskeleton-tearing plastic flechettes into her prostrate body.

I turned to Fryx. Her eyes were wide, and she took in a deep breath through her nose and let it out through her mouth. She rubbed at her arms, and I could see the backs of those arms raised with gooseflesh. Her face and neck flushed red. She looked like she did during sex.

A shudder swept through my body and I felt cold. I turned back to the display. Crime scene photographers arrived to take high-resolution pictures of the scene's body and damage to the station, but the officers held them back. The head of security lifted the D'yrack. Despite the awkwardly shaped hilt, he deftly cleaned the black gore from it with a towel and rolled up the blade with a long white cloth into a bundle. He left the Customs area, and the officers stood aside for the photographers.

"He's Gleeian."

"Yes. The Ryneld murdered both his parents, so our spider friend picked the wrong concourse to create an incident."

A tone sounded, and Fryx put a finger to her earpiece. "No collateral damages? Good. And you can steer the blade my way again? And the video? Yes, of course—the usual. Thank you." She dropped her hand from her ear.

"Kurt, you have no idea how much money a video of a spider lord's death battle makes. They're illegal, but that only drives the demand up."

Fryx nodded her head toward the shop, and we walked in silence back

to it. After she let us back in, she said, "Next time wait until I ask for help, OK? You almost ruined things a couple of times."

"I thought you were in real trouble. So are you the thrall she spoke about—the one who killed Blyth?"

"No, my mother was." She looked in a storage bin. "You didn't order enough. That was the last of the arc strikers."

"Your mother must have given you the D'yrack. Does she know how you're using it?"

"We'll expedite a new order just to be safe. A spider might buy any high-tech weapon, but arc strikers are good as they're the hardest to detect hacking." She stood with her fist under her chin, staring at the empty bin. "No, the spiders murdered her ten years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Hmm? No, don't worry about it. We'll get a bulk order next time so we always have some in stock."

\* \* \*

The passengers milled before the closed elevator doors that would take them out to the docking slips. Half the ship's passengers had boarded. I watched them from where I sat with the few others that also suffered the unforgiving lounge chairs. The bright light bothered my eyes.

I felt a lump in my throat, something I hadn't felt since a small child. I had kept that dinner date with my parents. It could have been years before I would see them again. Of course my leaving upset them. For all I lambasted their loveless relationship of mutual profit and orienting their lives around advancing their careers, for all that they loved me and it hurt them I left.

I would never see Fryx again. At least I hoped I wouldn't.

The elevator doors opened. More passengers entered until no more could cram in, and the doors closed.

I had no idea what I would write for my entrance level paper. The best opportunity of course would be about Gleeians and Ryneld. In the right hands the complexity of their relationship could be a fertile field for historical research, but I didn't think I could bring myself to write about them anymore.

Everything I believed about Fryx had been only skin deep.

The elevator opened again, and I stood and joined the last of the passengers as we entered, the door closing behind us. As the elevator began a falling sensation weakened my knees for a moment. The air was close; the smell of so many bodies around oppressed me.

Perhaps cowardly, instead of speaking to her I had sent a note—an actual pen and paper, handwritten note: “You warned me, and I didn't

listen.” I considered drawing a bird, but I'm a poor artist.

When I had been a boy and had broken a flower vase or one of my high-tech toys, my father never scolded me. He would sit me down and say, “The lost value was just the price for learning something. You've learned what to avoid.”

Studying history is like that. You learn the mistakes humanity makes, the missed opportunities, the lost value, and then you write in enough detail that people pay attention.

The door opened, and I smelled the sharp, unpleasant smell of engine oxidizers and fuel. It smelled like the workshop. Fryx working at the cracked blue-metal lathe came unbidden to my mind.

I knew the value I had lost. I just didn't know yet what I learned not to do. Of one thing I was pretty sure, though—the lesson's cost was too high for the return on investment.

# The Most Restful Stopover in the Galaxy

by Myna Chang

The tiny spaceship glimmers turquoise, blending with the seafloor. Its alien pilot slumbers, snoring softly among long-lost cephalopod cousins. Outside, a human scuba diver gawks and fingertaps the ship's hull. The little alien wakes, yawning with all her sharp beaks. Clumsy-knuckled hands lift the ship and shake. The alien's tummy roils. She fires her photon stingers. The human yelps, mouthpiece expelled. Oxygen bubbles spiral. The ship zigzags away. Glowering, the human lunges and grabs. Squid cousins surge, release blinding clouds of ink. They giggle as the human flails. The alien giggles, too, launching skyward. She'll sleep better on Venus, anyway.

# The Castle

by Dora Ilce



# Home Sweet Home

by Gretchen Tessmer

Auntie Em serves up dinner  
with a side dish of dust  
a whole bowl of it  
the grits  
too gritty for false teeth  
so Uncle Henry takes two bites  
before twisting a face  
and tossing it off the back porch

where the grass cowers meekly  
then coughs up blood  
in wilted browns  
and too many summer maladies

the blades are all spotted  
and crawling with rot  
and this is Dorothy's doing  
(whether she knows it or not)  
she came back to Kansas  
with more than mud  
on her pretty shoes

she's in the fields now  
wandering hand-in-hand  
with her Scarecrow, wondering  
why the wheat's gone rancid  
and the corn's gone comatose  
failing to notice the sepia tones  
and how it's all sepsis

and decay  
an infection spreading  
off the corpse of a dead witch

(ding dong, the witch is dead  
but hark now, her curse remains)

as talons perch over dusty plains  
the Scarecrow points skyward  
but he calls out his warning  
too late!

tornado-claws poke out  
from swirling, cyan clouds  
while the whole sky is churning  
like a puddle of damp bones

a cacophony of winged monkeys  
descend  
from a maelstrom of air  
those claws lashing out  
to snatch that poor farm girl  
up by her hair

dragging Dorothy back

home, sweet  
home

# The Cry of the Raijuu

by Odessa Silver

She was getting sicker. At first it was forgetting simple things like my name, and she'd just say it was tiredness. Then she couldn't stand for long and spent most of her day sat at the window watching the birds. Even the priest moved more than her, and he was old.

The bright morning light woke me early and I had planned on getting up to join my parents in the kitchen, until my father spoke.

“Put the bowl down, I will call for help. The neighbour can prepare breakfast for you and Hirotooshi.”

“And what sort of wife would I be if I couldn't take care of the family? I am fine, I just got too close to the fire and got dizzy.”

“No you're not.” My father lowered his voice further, but even from the bedroom I could hear the low rumble, “You are getting weaker. Hirotooshi needs to be learning in the forge with me, not staying here—”

“He doesn't stay here, he forages. Without him we wouldn't be able to eat.”

I winced, keeping my eyes firmly shut. Did my father not understand how important it was to give Inari peaches? The priest had assured me it was the deity's favourite food. And one day Inari would save us, healing my mother, I was sure of it.

“Will you please sit down? Hirotooshi will awaken soon, he can't see you like this.” My father's heavy footsteps approached the bedroom doorway. “Hirotooshi? Time to get up.”

I pretended to wake, letting out the biggest yawn. “Father, did I sleep too much?”

“No, it's only just dawn. You are coming with me to the forge today.”

“But what about the peaches?”

“Later.”

I nodded. I couldn't disobey my father. Instead, I'd work twice as hard so there was time to collect peaches before sunset.

Rising from my sleeping mat, I grabbed my blue yukata and slipped it on. The light material would keep me cool enough as I helped out in the forge. I wasn't allowed to touch the hot metal yet, so instead I hammered alongside my father. Together we worked on many tools like spades and sickles, and when my arms couldn't hold the hammer any longer, I'd work the bellows and keep the fire burning hot. Just like my father and grandfather and those before them, I'd become a blacksmith. And then we'd have money again. Our house was a luxury some couldn't afford; we had a separate bedroom. Before I was born, my family was richer, the forge burned bright and hot every day, and my father even had help from an apprentice. Many tools and sharp arrowheads were commissioned or sold in the markets. However, the supply of iron had become more expensive and trips weren't taken as often. Before long he couldn't pay the apprentice and worked harder every day. Once I was older, I promised I would go all the way to the city for him.

“Ohayo,” I said to my parents as I walked into the main room.



“Ohayo,” my mother greeted back. She knelt by the window, tucking her hands in her lap; a bandage covered one, the cloth spilling out on the worn tatami mat. “Good luck in the forge today.”

Would she be safe alone? “Thank you, I am going to the shrine later. Shall I take the last two peaches?”

“Take one for yourself, I am sure Inari-sama can spare a peach so my son won’t go hungry this morning.”

I moved to the woven bowl we kept in the kitchen and plucked out two peaches. A few days old now, the skin had started to wrinkle, but I knew Inari would still enjoy them. One for her, one for her foxes. I didn’t need one.

“I’ll take the basket with me today. Once I have finished in the forge I’ll find us something fresh to eat for later.”

“You’re a good son,” she replied, eyes crinkling in the corners.

My father sat beside her, watching every move. His lips were tight and thin, keeping back anger I knew brewed inside him. Avoiding his gaze, I hurried to slip the basket on my shoulders, ready for later.

“Shall we leave now?” Without a word, he rose to his feet and walked to the doorway. “Goodbye!” I called to my mother before following.

The rest of the village still slept as we made our way to the forge without a word. The silence pricked at my skin; all I wanted to do was apologise to try and make him happy again. But I can help him and Inari, there is lots of time. I would show him.

As soon as we arrived I hopped to work; first I lit the fire, kindling the warm glow of flames before feeding it with air from the bellows. My father inspected the work from yesterday, checking the edges and strength of the metal in the daylight. He nodded, his tied hair bobbing with the movement. The quenching had been successful.

I quickly lost myself in my tasks, listening to each command and obeying. Today the metal was struck harder, truer, anything to take our minds off my mother. Instead, my thoughts drifted to Inari. Our village shrine for her was small, but I made it up to her with all my offerings.

In the beginning my father and I would go together during a break for food. We’d leave the heat of the forge to speak to Inari, offering cups of sake and berries I’d found out in the forest. Foxes loved berries, and she was a deity to them and kitsune. She also protected blacksmiths, and in turn, our family. That’s what my mother told me. Sometimes I wasn’t sure.

The sun rose higher and started to fall again. The heat of the summer stuck to our sweaty skin and all I wanted to do was wash.

“That’s enough for today,” my father said, looking over our work.

I looked up at him. “Are you sure?”

“I need to work on arrowheads now, and I can do that alone. You wanted to go foraging, right?”

“Yes.” I put down the heavy hammer next to the forge. “Is there time?”

“If you go quickly now.”

I grinned at him and retrieved the basket I used for carrying what I found. “I’m going to go to the orchard for the peaches.” I bowed to him. “Thank you, I’ll see you later.”

I missed his response as I span around and ran off, the woven basket bouncing against my back. I needed all the time I could get to collect my prize. The peach trees stooped lower than the pines and chestnuts, but they remained just out of my reach. It wasn’t long before I left the village behind and travelled deeper into the forest. My mother told me that many years before even her mother was born, the villagers had found a secret orchard in the forest. Each year they encouraged it to

grow larger and give the juiciest fruit and now we had a bounty to pick from.

Before she got too tired, she'd follow me to the orchard and reach the peaches just out of my reach. She made sure to show me which ones were ripe enough to pick and which ones to leave behind for the other animals in the forest. That was important; we needed to feed the animals too.

Last winter, she'd fallen over at home and spent days laying down exhausted struggling to remember things. Since then I had prayed extra hard to Inari for her to get better and visited the orchard alone, so she could rest.

Many people before me had wandered through the forest, leaving a worn path all the way to the orchard. I followed it with ease while looking around at the trees. Birds were happily singing; a robin flew from one tree to another, dipping under thick branches. I paused. On the ground a fairy pitta bashed an earthworm against a pebble, ready to feed its young. One look at me, and it flew off quick, its shining blue and black feathers catching the light. They didn't show themselves often; I smiled, maybe today was a lucky day.

A little further and finally the trees came into view; three rows of dark trunks with wildly growing branches, and on each, plump round pink peaches. I smiled. It was time to get to work.

I'd made it all the way to the fifth tree before my basket started to fill up high. It felt like I'd just started picking, but my basket would soon overflow. Just one more peach and I'd go home. I'd told myself that many times now, but I really would go this time.

Although ... I could see three more at the top of this tree ripe enough to pick... but the sun was setting and I still had to make my way back. A few more would be fine, right? Mother would enjoy the peaches and this way I could share more between her and Inari. The few extra minutes would be worth it, especially when they were ripening fast. I

didn't want to lose them to the forest animals; these were for me. Anyway, I'd made sure to throw the rotting ones on the ground. The animals wouldn't go hungry.

In the evening glow, the pink fruit burned red and orange; I continued grabbing them with delicate hunger. Standing up on the very tips of my toes, I wobbled around and grabbed the tree branch for support so I could reach high. I couldn't wait until next year's harvest; I would be much taller then, and the peaches at the top wouldn't be out of my grasp.

Two more peaches fell away with ease, I yelped as one slipped from my hand and landed in the grass with a soft plop. Placing one in the basket, I went back for the fallen peach snug between the long blades.

*Drip. Drop.*

Raindrops pattered down from the sky, bouncing off the leaves. Overhead clouds had rolled in without me noticing and started to cover the remaining sun. I bit back a curse as I realised the trip back would be harder with even less light. I'd need to be faster than ever before.

And then came the deep rumble I always dreaded to hear. The thunder god Raijin was somewhere in the skies, banging his taiko with large hammers. Would he come for me? Raijin liked to eat children the most.

Fear gripped my insides. Time to run. I wasn't staying around to find out.

Shoving the last peach into the basket, I slipped the handles over my shoulders and nestled it on my back. The path home was simple enough, all I had to do was make it out of the forest and into the village clearing. I just needed to stay on the worn path, now muddying in the falling rain. Returning my sandals to my feet, I left the safety of the peach trees to return home.

*Drop. Drop.*

Rain fell heavier now, the skies opening up further and aiming just for me. My thin yukata clung to my skin, and each step became more difficult as the fabric held me back. Was Raijin angry with me? Had I taken too many peaches or was he playing? No wind whipped in the forest and my fear deepened. If Fuujin wasn't with him sending strong winds then—

The sky flashed bright, blinding me. I buried my face against the back of my hand and I started to run.

No, no, no. Go away.

The low rumble returned, growling louder and closer. And still no wind.

Everybody knew who rode alongside the lightning, Raijin's favourite pet. Everybody feared the thunderous cries and destruction it brought.

I skidded to a stop and looked to the sky. Rain fell in my eyes and I blinked it away quickly, but I had to see. Every thunderstorm, my mother told me to run inside. I'd never had a chance to see it before. Another flash and a bolt streaked the sky, followed by the outline of fast moving legs. My stomach tightened. I knew what that was.

Raijuu.

The great white wolf sped through the sky, wrapped in blue lightning. Long claws bit into the clouds and propelled it faster until all was a blur. The air around me crackled. I ran; I didn't even stop as a sandal slipped from my foot or as stones pricked my bare sole. I needed to escape.

Rain struck the dirt path like a barrage of arrows. The sky was a lit forge hammering swords of lightning. I was trapped between them, running through the never-ending forest. The rajjuu wasn't far behind; I could hear its rumbling laughter around me.

My fingers held tight to the basket straps as I continued, eyes focused

on the path. I just had to make it a little further, around two more bends, and then I'd be on the outskirts of the village.

*Crack! Boom!*

Bright whiteness filled my vision. A scream escaped me. Something crashed into my head and I fell on my hands and knees. Panting, I grabbed my head and winced. Splintered wood scattered the ground and glancing up I saw a pillar of fire engulfing a tree... or the remains of a tree. The rajjuu had snapped it in one bite.

"Mother," I cried, "I-I'm scared. Mother, I need you. I-I'm s-sorry I s-stayed out too long. I won't do it again. I p-promise."

The rajjuu continued to laugh, the rumbles muting my cries. It danced around running on air, happy to strike fear in everything. Even the other gods feared the ferocity of Raijin's rajjuu.

Why couldn't it leave me alone?

Wiping my tears on the back of my soaked yukata sleeve, I carefully stood back up. My hands were grazed, my feet bloody, and rain stung every open wound. But I couldn't stay here. Not unless I wanted to die.

I made my way around the chunks of wood; nothing could withstand the rajjuu's power. As I ran, I continued to scan the skies. It had nearly hit me once, would it catch me this time? I thought back to the tree... was that all that would be left of me? Would my mother come to the forest to find a pile of broken bones? I shuddered.

A large pine came into view, one I knew well. Nearly home. As I ran closer I could see it battled the rain bravely, the needles catching each drop. Surprisingly, a man rested under it, safe from the downpour. He wore a dark blue kimono and held a sword in his hand.

"Samurai-sama," I called. "A rajjuu is coming."

Could he hear me? He was looking up, but could he see from under the tree?

“Samu—”

*Crack!*

I froze, screamed, and shut my eyes, flinching from the deafening noise. Was he dead? Were his bones scattered? I was too scared to look. Tears came again and I scrunched my eyes tighter. Above, the rain continued to fall. It was all I could hear aside from my heavy sobs.

Wait.

Where was the rumbling?

Cautious, I opened one eye just a fraction. The pine tree still stood.

What?

Smoke flooded under the tree. The samurai emerged victorious from it, sword in hand. I gasped. There, at his feet, was a dead rajjuu. The white wolf splayed out, unmoving. Just like it, I was rooted to the spot. I barely even noticed that the rain was stopping.

The samurai walked closer, his own kimono now soaking up the last of the rain. “Are you hurt? There is no need to be scared now.”

As he approached, I collapsed in exhaustion. I wasn’t sure how to feel or what to think. And my feet really hurt. I tried to hold back more tears as the samurai slipped the basket from my back before scooping me up into his arms with ease.

“Samurai-sama, did you kill the rajjuu?”

He didn’t speak until he returned to under the shelter of the pine.

Branches and cones now covered the ground with needles, but it still held strong. “I did.”

“I didn’t know rajjuu could be killed.” I furiously tried wiping away tears again, hoping the samurai didn’t see. “I thought you were going to die.”

“Every living thing can be killed, by sword or by time,” he said, gently sitting me down with my back to the sturdy trunk. “Although, even I wasn’t sure a rajjuu could be killed by a sword. But I had no choice but to strike the rajjuu or be struck by it.”

The samurai retrieved the basket and peered inside.

“Oh no, are they all smashed up now?”

He shook his head. “I think a few are whole. May I have one?”

I nodded and studied the samurai; he was younger than I expected, all the samurai I had seen before had greying hair and many scars. I frowned at the unfamiliar flower crest on his dark kimono, and even deeper at the gold at his sleeves. Red string tied his hair back tight. Who was this samurai? He must be someone special...

Kneeling, he inspected my bare feet, pulling out a length of cloth from his kimono. “Where are your sandals?” Gently, he started wrapping each foot and tying it tight. “It’s not too bad, feet bleed a lot and so wounds appear scarier than they truly are.”

“I lost them running away. I couldn’t stop.”

“You’re safe now.” He smiled. “Let me introduce myself, my name is Akitsura Betsugi. I am a wandering samurai enjoying the forest... or was, until the storm started. And who are you?”

“Hirotooshi.” I pointed in the rough direction towards my house. “I live in the village just outside of the forest.”

Betsugi finished wrapping my feet and reached for a peach before sitting down beside me. As he took a bite I looked to his sword laying unbroken on the needles.

“Betsugi-sama, what of your sword, the great rajjuu killer? Is it something special to survive unbroken?”

“Hmm? Oh, my sword is very sturdy and reliable, forged by a great blacksmith. It’s called Chidori; its name means a thousand birds. I suppose it needs a new name now.” He hummed and reached for the weapon, checking down the length. “How about Raikiri, lightning cutter? A much more suitable name.”

“I like it! Raikiri, the slayer of rajjuu.”

I watched as Betsugi continued to check Raikiri before sheathing it back into a white scabbard. The blade glowed faintly with heat but was still whole. I couldn’t believe we had both survived a rajjuu attack, and it now lay a stone’s throw from us. I was too exhausted to think about it, and in the dying light I couldn’t see much anyway. Tomorrow I would get a better look.

Together we sat in a quiet companionship as the rain slowed into the faintest drizzle. A little light still peeked over the tops of the trees and offered a way back home.

“Hirotooshi-kun, I think it’s time to get you home. It’s too dark to go back for your sandals, but I can guide you back to the village.” Nodding, I tried to climb to my feet and winced as the pain came flooding back. “Stop. Let me carry you.”

“A-Are you sure?”

He stopped to slide Raikiri into his obi and then bent down in front of me. “Place the basket on your back and climb onto mine.”

I quickly did as he said and held onto his shoulders tightly as he stood

up. Betsugi’s wet hair stuck to my face and I had to lean to one side to avoid it. Together we started back on the path, heading towards the village. Trees towered around us, looming in the dying light. I worried rajjuu slept in them, ready to start another attack as we passed below. They could be anywhere, and we wouldn’t be able to see them until it was too late.

“You’re safe now, Hirotooshi-kun. The storm has passed and Raijin has stopped drumming. There won’t be any rajjuu around now. And you did well to escape this one. Perhaps you would have made a good samurai, had you lived in the city.”

I sighed. I loved to see the samurai who passed through our village or paused there to rest. I always volunteered to help them where I could, from feeding their horses to carrying armour for repair. But our little village didn’t need samurai; it needed hands to help with farming and gathering. So, I picked the berries, seeds, and nuts, and found the mushrooms. Then when my father told me, I helped in the forge. On special days, if I was lucky, I also aided the priest with offerings to Inari. In return they blessed our village with more to harvest.

“Betsugi-sama, why did you become a samurai?”

“I didn’t choose,” he replied quietly. “I started training at three years old and it’s all I have known. But now I can see much of the country, which I enjoy.”

“I wish I could be a samurai too.”

“But then who would pick the peaches?” he asked gently.

One of the other boys. Or our neighbour Jurou with the missing hand. If my father had moved to the city to be with the other blacksmiths things would have been better. Mother would get treated by a good doctor and I would have been able to be a samurai. But we lived in the forest village.

We were silent for the rest of the walk, and I kept looking for the first sign of the village. Our priest had a small house beside the shrine which sat next to the forest path. He had told me he built it there to be closer to the large ash tree where kodama, the tree spirits, lived. It didn't take long before I could see it peeking out from between the trees, lit by a small fire.

"The village is close now," I said, pointing towards the shrine. "There's the shrine to Inari-sama. I need to fill it with peaches."

"Then I shall stop here."

"What? Why?"

Betsugi knelt down and slipped me from his back with care, then turned to face me. "I don't wish for the praise and celebration that the village will give me. I want to stay hidden here in the forest."

I pouted. "Will you at least come and meet my mother and father?"

Betsugi shook his head.

"Alright then. I will walk the last bit myself. See you again soon sometime, Betsugi-sama. Thank you for protecting me."

"Another day, little samurai."

I stepped carefully, heading towards the shrine. My feet ached, but I was surprised to find the sharp pains had subsided and as I reached the lit fire, I gasped. The cloth wrapping my feet glittered gold. How could he use such expensive cloth on my feet? Who was that samurai?

"Hirotooshi!" A familiar voice cried out from beside the fire.

"Mother!" A second later and I was tight in her arms, warm and safe. "You don't need to worry, I am here."

"I always worry about you, my only son. What would I do without you?"

"You would worry less," I said with a giggle.

"We worried when the storm started," the priest said, appearing beside her. "I was about to come look for you when Haru-san said you were still in the forest."

"I was getting peaches when it started to rain. Mother, I saw a rajjuu! It chased me but Betsugi-sama killed it. It's in the forest now, dead under the giant pine."

"A rajjuu?" she cried, holding me tighter and checking me over. "You are very lucky my son. Who is Betsugi-sama? I need to thank him. Where are your sandals? Oh look at your feet."

"Oh," I squeaked, not meaning to let his existence slip. "A passing samurai. He left already."

"That's a shame, I would have liked to have thanked him. Come, let's go home. I'm tired and we need to get you dry and check your feet."

\* \* \*

The morning brought clear skies; the clouds were nowhere to be seen after the previous storm. I'd woken up extra early, hoping to return to the forest to look at the rajjuu before it was burnt. The priest had spoken to the other villagers and ordered the body put to flames to purify the forest; he worried the body would lure other dangerous yokai to us. Shinigami were drawn to the death and could lurk around the body, haunting any of us who visited the forest. I'd never seen the grey human-like figures, but I'd learnt all about them from the priest Shouhei. He'd once lived in a village haunted by them, possessing a murderous ronin. I'd stopped listening after that, scared of hearing what he'd done.

I shuddered. How many other people or animals were struck down by the rajjuu before it came after me? Would it be my fault if the shinigami cursed us?

I also planned on finding my lost sandals wherever they lay, scattered and soaking. Mother was too worried to let me go on ahead alone, and so I had to wait for my father to join me. She'd seen the gold wrappings Betsugi had used on my feet and insisted I look for him to repay my debts. They'd fought again, my parents, because she wanted to take them to the river to wash away the dirt. All her worrying had tired her out again, that's what my father said.

Mother had woken before me; she didn't sleep much anymore. I wondered if she slept at all, seeing the dark circles surrounding her darker eyes. *I should pray to Inari again this morning. Perhaps she can help me find something to make my mother sleep more.*

I sat now on the worn out enza, counting the peaches that were unbruised from yesterday. The grass cushion had flattened after so much use, but I found it comfortable.

My fruit basket had survived the storm, but the peaches weren't so lucky. Mushed fruit coated the inside leaving it all sticky and wet. I couldn't—

*Smash.*

I jumped in surprise and dropped the peach. My mother stood, hands shaking, tears falling. The teapot lay on its side, surrounded by broken cups, spilling hot water over the tatami mat.

“Haru,” my father cried, hurrying to lift the teapot upright.

“I only wanted to make you both tea...”

“It... will be fine, please just—”

“Those cups were a gift,” she cried. “I... I—”

I rushed to her side, hugging her tight.

Her tears fell heavier now and my father joined us. Reaching out, he wiped them away before placing a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Hirotooshi,” he said, voice wobbling with worry. “Why don't you take her to the shrine with you. Some air might help.”

I nodded and took hold of her hand. “We can look for that sparrow on the way. The one with the golden beak that you saw before.

“But the cups...”

“Father will fix them. He is clever like that.”

She calmed down a little then, squeezing my hand back. I led her to the door, helped her put sandals on, and stepped out into the fresh warm air.

It was a short walk to the shrine, although my mother's steps were slow and heavy.

“When did you last see the sparrow?” I asked, trying to take her mind away.

“Not for days now.” She paused to catch her breath before taking another step. “I think I scared it off. Oh, H-H—my son. I need to rest.”

“Look mother, Inari-sama's shrine is right there. We can sit and rest and pray. Inari-sama will be pleased to hear your voice.”

She nodded slightly, her eyelids dropping heavier. I rushed through purifying our hands with water so we could approach the shrine and let go only when we stood in front. I helped her kneel down on the bare dirt

and joined her. Seeing my mother like this always hurt and I hoped that if I prayed harder today, maybe Inari would hear. Perhaps we needed to set a small shrine in our house too, so she didn't have walk out here.

“Oh, I forgot to bring the peaches.” I said, worried Inari wouldn't listen without them. “But I promise to bring them later. Once we have dealt with the rajjuu. Please will you and Ukemochi-sama watch over my mother, like you protect my father at the forge. She is here today too, please will you bless her.”

I glanced over to my mother. Her eyes were shut now, head drooping to one side. Had she fallen asleep? I reached out to shake her gently and she fell forwards.

“Mother? Mother?” I caught her and wrapped my arms around hers. “Somebody, please help!”

I scanned around, but nobody was awake yet. Only the two white fox statues watched us with wide eyes.

“Inari-sama, please,” I cried.

“Hirotooshi-kun? Is that you?”

“Yes, please Shouhei-sama, my mother...”

The priest hurried to our side, shaking her arm. “Haru-san? Please wake up.”

“I-Is she...”

He placed a finger under her nose. “She's breathing, Hirotooshi-kun. She's very tired right now.” I watched as Shouhei lifted her up with a strength I didn't know he had. “I am going to take her back to your home now. She needs to rest and see a doctor.”

“I should—”

“Stay here. Pray.”

“But I—”

“Then pray again.”

I cried harder as Shouhei walked away with her, limp and almost lifeless. “Inari-sama. Did I do something wrong? Did she? Can I make it better?”

Tears dropped, soaking my yukata.

Why wasn't Inari answering me?

I sat crying harder until Shouhei returned and joined me. “Inari-sama is listening to you,” he said, placing his hand on my shoulder. “She has many foxes that live in this forest and each one sees what's going on.”

“Then why isn't she doing anything? Instead it's getting worse.”

“Inari-sama can't solve all our issues.”

“But—”

“Hirotooshi-kun, time to dry your eyes. Your mother is being cared for, all will be well. Masami-san said you are joining the group to help burn the rajjuu. He said you hurt your feet. How are they now?”

I let out a shaky breath and dried my eyes on my yukata sleeve. “I cut them up a bit but the bandage made them go away.” I sniffed. “I was surprised, but mother says the bandage is special, that Inari-sama blessed me. Did she help me instead of my mother?”

Shouhei frowned. “No, Hirotooshi-kun. But if she blessed the bandage for your wounds then she must want you to help with the rajjuu. I want you to be careful today. Rest when your feet hurt.”

I nodded and stood up. All that remained was a deep ache, but I wasn't



going to tell him that in case he changed his mind. I needed to see the rajjuu again.

The sun had risen further now, and the rest of the village stirred; babies cried for their morning meal, and other villagers left their houses.

“Come,” Shouhei said. “My son will be joining us this morning, while my wife stays to pray to Inari-sama. Let’s find him.”

I didn’t say anything as I quietly followed Shouhei to the door of his house.

“Yori, are you ready to leave?”

“Yes father,” a voice called back, followed by a boy taller and older than me.

“Ohayo Yori-san,” I greeted him.

“Ohayo, Hirotooshi.”

Together we made our way to the forest. Behind us, others joined the group; the woodcutter hefted a sharp axe and his two sons carried baskets. The fisherman joined last, alone; his only child was a newborn they’d named Aimi.

As we entered the forest, it was hard not to start looking for Betsugi. I wondered if he had truly left or if I’d see him again. I wanted to thank him at least once. The morning grew brighter and the skies a happy blue; heat already lingered and I knew it’d be another humid day.

There was no way to tell a terrible storm had passed through as the trees stood tall and green, but as we kept walking, small signs began to show. Usually hard dirt was still muddy and sticky, leaves littered the forest floor, and as I led the way back to the unfallen pine, a sandal came into view.

“It’s close,” I said, scanning the area. “That’s my sandal.”

It didn’t take much longer to reach the great pine tree, standing unharmed. Beside it, a gigantic lump of white and blue fur lay in the dirt.

“There it is, that’s the rajjuu Betsugi-sama slayed. Nearby there will be a tree it struck.”

Shouhei paused. “Truly? You survived an attack from such a creature?”

He approached carefully, giving it a wide berth and watching its face for any movement. And yet it did not stir.

“It’s just as frightening up close,” I said, staring.

The rajjuu resembled a giant wolf, with a gaping slash wound from snout to tail. White fur stained red and brown, blue fur dulled, and on each toe erupted a long black claw. If it had attacked me, I would have been dead in a moment.

“Hirotooshi, I am amazed you are alive,” Yori said, watching the creature with admiration and fear.

Shouhei addressed the group, “We can’t let this body hang around any longer. Shinigami will be attracted to it, and so we must burn it, and anything it destroyed. The children can clear the smaller pieces of wood and pile them. This will purify the forest and appease the gods.” He turned to me and Yori. “Gather what you can, while we decide how to burn the rajjuu.”

I nodded and got to work. Leaving the rajjuu behind, I searched around for any wood fallen in the storm. I didn’t wander too far, keeping close to the cleared pathway. Yori worked alongside me, lifting larger branches and splinters of trunk.

“Quick,” the woodcutter said, taking his axe to a nearby half-broken

tree. “We must get rid of this yokai as soon as we can. We do not want to draw the onibi to our village. Try to push down broken trees. I’ll take my axe to the rest.”

I shuddered. I hadn’t ever seen onibi, but I had heard many tales of them appearing from dead bodies, blue orbs that swarmed any living creature nearby for their life.

All together we spent the morning clearing broken trees and digging a pit to safely burn the rajjuu. Splinters jabbed and stuck in my skin, and my palms were sore by the time we were done, but we’d worked hard and fast until all that remained was to drag the rajjuu’s carcass to the pit and light it. The woodcutter had filled it with dried wood, and when it burned bright we’d add the broken pieces to purify.

Each of us surrounded the rajjuu, taking fistfuls of wiry fur and skin. I’d taken a gigantic paw, lifting it with both of my hands and trying to avoid the wickedly long and sharp claws. Dried blood splattered over them, dull and black, each one knife-like; I ran my finger over one in awe.

“Are we all ready? Time to move on three,” Shouhei said to us all. “One, two... three.”

I lifted the heavy paw to chest height as the rajjuu rose from the ground for the last time.

Shuffling along the dirt and into the pit, we carried it to its final resting place and set it down. The woodcutter took the duty of lighting the wood; he knelt to set it alight as we backed away. The pit had been dug as far from the other trees as we could; no other trees were going to die today. The flames took a while to grow, but soon the rajjuu began to burn. And in turn all the bad luck should burn away. I hoped.

Fire licked the wood and grew into a hungry beast lapping at everything it could touch. The rajjuu’s fur crackled and fizzled and before long it was too bright to watch. Instead of the sweet smells of the for-

est, the air was thick with a rancid stench. I took more steps back to try and get away, before sitting down on the grass. My feet hurt and my fingers stung. I wanted to rest before making my way back to the village. And I was scared. Anything could have happened while I was away. But I felt too scared to go back and check.

Some of the villagers had left, needing to do their daily work, while others watched the burning rajjuu. I wasn’t sure how to feel about seeing it now; it was all mixed in my heart and I couldn’t help but worry over my mother more.

Shouhei had found some berries to eat, and I picked them out of my palm one by one. With my belly fuller and warmth wrapping round me like a blanket, my eyes started to droop. I tried to keep them open, but after the morning of work and the heat, I couldn’t resist the call of sleep. Closing my eyes made all the bad things go away.

“Oh no,” I cried, sitting up quick. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I looked to the pit and everyone was gone. “D-Did they leave me?”

“Calm, little samurai.”

“Ahh!”

Betsugi laughed and patted my shoulder.

“Betsugi-sama? What are you doing here?”

“Watching.”

“Watching?” I rubbed my eyes. “Watching what? We put the rajjuu in the pit.”

“Hirotooshi-kun, how are your feet?”

I frowned as he didn’t answer the question but glanced at my feet.

Someone had taken off my sandals. “They were sore but I think the pain has gone for now.”

“Good.”

“My mother told me the bandage you used was special, that Inari-sama had blessed us.”

He smiled and stood up. “Keep it with you,” he said, walking towards the rajjuu pit. “You’ll need it.”

My frown deepened as he confused me more. Why did adults have to do confusing things?

“Stay there,” he called to me. How did he even know I was going to follow?

I watched as Betsugi jumped down into the pit and I gasped. Smoke rose from it and I could hear the fire still crackling away.

“Betsugi-sama, please be careful.”

A few moments later and he clambered back out, kimono unharmed, and smile on his face. He walked over to me and stopped. “I have something for you?”

I held out a hand and he placed a sharp claw into it. “What is this?”

“A rajjuu claw. I know you were scared, but this will bring you luck. Your father is a blacksmith?” I nodded. “Have him strike the metal into a blade.”

I stared at the claw. It was heavier than I expected, and as I tapped it, it sounded metallic.

“Is—”

“Yes, a rajjuu’s claws are made of metal. So are their teeth. It’s how they can destroy trees so easily. This claw is just for you; the others will burn away.”

I stared at him. “What do you mean? Metal doesn’t burn away?”

He didn’t respond, instead he turned his back to me.

“Betsugi-sama?”

He sighed. “Hirotooshi-kun, I am sorry about your mother.”

What?

“Hirotooshi-kuuun.”

I felt the pull of sleep dragging me away.

“Time to wake up.”

I blinked awake. Yori knelt in the grass, shaking my arm. The sun had passed over the trees now and hid behind the dense leaves.

“What do you have there?” he asked, pointing to my hand.

I sat up and unfurled my fingers. There in my hand lay the rajjuu claw.

“I…”

“Ah, you’re awake now,” Shouhei said. “We are going home. Let’s go and check on your mother.”

My mother!

Gripping onto the claw, I climbed to my feet. “Yes, let’s see her,” I said, sleep still clawing at me.

A month. The boy had a month left with his mother before the black illness within her took over. I'd heard his screams in the forest in the early mornings when he thought nobody was listening. I sent my foxes to scream louder. He barely slept now. Black smudges had appeared beneath his eyes, which he blamed on working in the forge. And yet, every day he still visited the shrine, praying and offering food. The peaches were overripe now, the hot air breaking the flesh down to mush. My foxes didn't mind, however, and snapped them up happily, peach juice dripping down their snouts.

Even now he searched the peach trees for the last few of the season, his blackened fingers leaving smudges on the branches. Every break from the forge he took to run back here, to the hidden peach orchard in the forest, just to gather more.

His prayers were different now, voicing peace but secretly wishing his mother back from the grave.

Little samurai, I cannot bring a life back from the dead. Let her rest.

The summer was nearly over now. Colder winds travelled down from the north and would soon bring snow.

*Drip. Drop.*

It was time.

Rain fell at my feet, soaked up instantly by the dry earth. I looked up to the sky and felt the surge of energy nearing. Another storm approached; fiercer than the one before, the last of summer clung to the trees and begged not to be ripped away by the cold winds.

I peered back through the trees at the boy who wouldn't let go. Would he now?

*Rumble-rumble-rumble.*

Nearby, Raijin woke raijuu from a deep slumber with his drumming. They stretched their paws wide, ready to run across the skies alongside him. A pair this time, angry siblings wanting to best each other in a race. Alongside them, Fuujin joined in, threading cold winds through the forest.

The little samurai screamed as the first bolt threaded through the sky, darting between thick grey clouds. Fear rooted him to the spot, cowering up against the peach tree with golden leaves.

I could not interfere a second time, however. He had to save himself.

"I protect warriors, Hirotooshi-kun. Become a warrior."

Reaching into my kimono sleeve, I pulled out a grain of rice and flicked it in his direction. It sailed between the trees and tapped his hand, grabbing his attention. The sky darkened further as a deep rumble shook the skies and Hirotooshi slipped out of the tree's grasp. Taking a stand, he watched with a renewed strength. The same I had seen in him the first day we met.

"I am not afraid of you," he yelled, hand reaching to his belt. "You will not harm the forest."

From a black lacquered sheath, he pulled a short blade, no longer than a hand's length, and dull black. I smiled. They'd hammered the raijuu's claw into a weapon, and despite it being small, I knew its true strength. It's why I had given it to him in the first place.

Raijuu danced in the sky, white fur slick with charged rain, watching as the child stood soaking with a blade drawn. One slowed, inquisitive, and jumped down to the forest floor. It approached him slowly, stepping closer and closer. I had to hold myself back from going to his aid again. This was a true test and I couldn't jeopardise it. If he failed

now... then he wasn't the one.

Another low rumble, this time from the rajjuu who bared its fearsome teeth at the faint smell of a fallen brother. And yet Hirotooshi didn't waver. The other one closed in on him, and both circled, ready to strike in a moment. And Hirotooshi stood firm. Crackling lightning filled the orchard, buzzing against branches. And even then Hirotooshi was still.

A deep huff of air rushed out of the rajjuu's nostrils; I could see the fear on the boy's face, but the blade stayed ready to attack.

Above, Raijin watched the spectacle, drumming along with glee. Fuujin laughed as he sent forth more wind. I scowled at them both, hoping they didn't interfere.

"Go away," Hirotooshi yelled at the rajjuu, slicing the blade through the air. They backed away, snapping their jaws in frustration before trying again. "Away."

This time the blade caught flesh. Blood seeped from the nose of the smaller rajjuu, who whimpered and skittered away.

"Come," Raijin called, voice booming in the storm.

Large white paws pushed off the wet earth, their claws ripping wide holes as they returned to the skies.

*Rumble-rumble-rumble.*

Rajjuu were strong, but even they wavered with weapons made by their own claws. Unlike most blades, rajjuu-forged metal sliced through them with ease. Just like my blade had done.

Even gods feared the ferocity of the rajjuu... unless they wielded the right sword.

I smiled. I hadn't been wrong when I saw into Hirotooshi's heart.

Turning, I left him knelt in the dirt, blade dropping with a dull thump.

"I'll be back for you one day, little samurai."

# Lagomorpha

by Marisca Pichette

I forgot to choose  
my color.

beige or brown,  
black as tunnels

through doors too small  
and keyholes too high.

I didn't think it would matter  
underground

but when the choice was made  
my legs grew small

and stronger.  
my ears grew taller

and long.  
Behind me: a tail

so bright I thought at first  
it glowed.

I was glad at first—  
released from what I'd been

I could vanish  
at last.

But diving down the rabbit-hole  
I saw my fresh, furred feet.

I am white.  
I am obvious in the dark.

Seen too soon,  
chased again—

I wished to change this little thing,  
make my skin like night

my fur as earth  
as my hair had been.

But wishes must be made  
in the changing.

Once I touched paw to ground  
there was no going back

and running now, away from light,  
away from eyes from shoes

that yet pursue me  
I know my regret

too late.



# Hare in Dreamland

by Irina Tall

# Bahamut & Kuyutha, Tainted

by J. D. Harlock

*NOTE: Bahamut and Kuyutha are mythological figures described in 'Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat wa Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat: تائف خكفا بئاج غ تادن جن كفا بئار ان (Wonders of the Creation and Unique [phenomena] of Existence), by cosmographer and geographer Zakariya al-Qazwini, born in Qazwin, Iran, in 1203 AD.*

The cold night had stretched on for longer than anyone in the lone cottage could remember. Windows had been bolted up with whatever the family could get their hands on, and every single hole and crack in the makeshift roof was carefully blocked off with leftover pots and pans. Those who believed it was better to sleep through the whole affair retired early, hoping rest would ease their minds, but they found little comfort in the straw beds and animal-skin pillows they now had to get accustomed to.

This left Umm Kamila and her granddaughter, Nahla, by themselves in the parlor — the former humming the hymns she could recollect from a childhood that felt so long ago, and the latter fidgeting with a contraption she had found in the last scavenge with the children of the other families stranded in that village. Neither seemed to have much to say to the other in the hours that had passed in shared solitude, and this is how they would have carried on as the storm raged had Nahla not finally tired of playing with the broken gears that once seemed to captivate her. Instead, she walked over to her grandmother seated on a cushion of old clothes by the fire dying in the hearth and, without saying a word, lay down in her lap as she used to when she was younger. Now staring out the window that was facing them, Nahla started to ponder the world around her ...

“Teta,” Nahla said, ending the silence that had subdued them that night. “I was wondering ...”

“Yes, *habibiti*,” Umm Kamila replied, ruffling gently through her hair. “What is it you want to ask?”

“If our world is suspended in space ...”

Umm Kamila raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“... what’s to keep it from falling into the abyss?”

“Oh, my,” Umm Kamila chuckled, extending her arms out to the heavens. “Why, an angel, of course.”

Nahla’s eyes widened with excitement. “An angel?!”

“Yes, an angel that shoulders the world with its magnificent wings.” Umm Kamila now spread her arms. “Wings that span the Earth from pole to pole!”

Nahla rose from her grandmother’s lap.

“But what does this angel stand on?” She asked.

“This angel stands on a slab,” Umm Kamila responded as she hovered her hands in the air horizontally. “A slab of the finest gemstone.”

“A slab of gemstone?” Nahla wasn’t sure what to make of this. An an-



gel seemed natural enough, logical even from what she had been told of them prior, but the colored rocks she often tossed aside while scavenging held no such luster in her mind. “Is there a reason it stands on gemstone, in particular, Teta? Wouldn’t steel be sturdier?”

“That’s not for me to answer.” Umm Kamila smiled. But, for once, it seemed forced, strained even. “Don’t you want to know what supports the slab?”

Nahla, who still wanted an answer to her prior question, nodded. “What supports the slab?”

Umm Kamila moved her hand so that the back brushed against her lip, and her fingers seemed to protrude out of her like some strange appendage.

“Kuyutha, of course.”

“Ku-yu-tha?” Nahla tried to pronounce the name, but it felt foreign to her tongue — as if it was from another culture she couldn’t understand. “Kuyutha.” She muttered again, and picking up on her granddaughter’s perplexion, Umm Kamila feigned shock.

“You don’t know of Kuyutha?!” she exclaimed, then leaned over to tear off a cog from a rusted machine and toss it into the fire. “Now, where were we? You don’t know of Kuyutha!”

“No, Teta.” Nahla shook her head with a look of embarrassment. “What is it?”

“My child.” A zeal was now palpable in the old woman’s voice. “Kuyutha is the cosmic beast with 40,000 horns and 40,000 legs and as many eyes, ears, mouths, and tongues!”

“Forty-thousand horns, legs, eyes, ears, mouths, and tongues?” Nahla’s voice shook with unease. “How tall is it, Teta?”

Umm Kamila raised her hand as far as she could.

“The Kuyutha’s horns are said to reach the Throne of God itself, entangling it like a crown of thorns.” She then flailed her arms about, losing herself in the wonder of it all. “Its nose is in our seas, the two nostrils pinned against holes in the slab of gemstone, enabling it to breathe, and when it breathes once a day — the seas rise and ebb!”

Umm Kamila then arched her back, praising God in all His majesty, as the thunder outside suddenly sounded so much louder to Nahla. Strange thoughts coursed through her young mind — so wild was the image she had conjured that she felt shaken by the sheer madness of it all. To think that the world around her could be filled with such... marvel ...

“Does Kuyutha alone carry us?” she finally dared to ask, her curiosity getting the best of her again.

“No *habibiti*, Kuyutha is carried by the Bahamut, and before you ask ...” Umm Kamila chuckled again with an eye on the storm outside. “... the Bahamut itself is suspended in endless water for its own stability.”

“But if Kuyutha is so big, how can the Bahamut carry it?”

Umm Kamila pinched Nahla’s nose.

“The seas of the world, placed in one of that fish’s nostrils, would be but a heap of sand in the desert. That’s how on its back, it can carry a beast, an angel, and the rest of the universe, including six hells, the earth, and the heavens.”

“Why...” Nahla was at a loss for words. “Why would God create all this?”

“Nahla, before this, the earth tossed and turned without rhyme or rea-

son,” Umm Kamila avowed, thanking God silently, then gazed down at her granddaughter, who seemed transfixed by whatever was happening outside those windows. “Like all of his creations, these creatures were gifted to us by God to bring us peace.”

“Peace?” Nahla glanced up at her grandmother wearily. “How?”

“Not only do they stabilize our world, but when they quench their thirst with our seas, they hinder the rising tide and prevent our world from drowning in its own waters.”

“My God ...” Nahla whispered to herself, for she could say nothing else.

“God is great.” Umm Kamila nodded in affirmation.

“But we aren’t,” Nahla muttered.

“Nahla ...” Umm Kamila held her granddaughter’s hand, noticing for the first time how small and coarse it was. “Oh, what’s become of the world.”

Nahla smiled as best she could. “That can’t be all of it, can it, Teta?”

Umm Kamila raised her eyebrow again. “What do you mean, *habibiti*?”

“There’s always more ...” Nahla muttered to herself. “Is there anything underneath the Bahamut?”

“Oh yes, my dear.” The old woman forced a mischievous smile. “But do you really want to know?”

Nahla went silent, wondering for the first time in her life if it would be better not to. But her grandmother carried on, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Beneath the Bahamut is the great serpent Falak, residing in the seventh circle of Hell.” Umm Kamila playfully moved her hand towards Nahla’s face and clasped it before her as a predator’s jaw would before its prey. “So great is the Falak that it is said that it could devour our world whole.”

“You mean... our world could end?”

Umm Kamila caressed her granddaughter’s cheek and smiled.

“Yes, all things must end. But worry not, my child. That will not happen anytime soon, as I assure you the Falak will never be the one to consume us.”

The old woman then moved to embrace her granddaughter... only to recoil when Nahla asked her in the faintest of whispers, “How are you sure of that?”

“Why, its fear of God the Almighty, All-Knowing, and Most-Merciful prevents it from doing so, of course.”

Nahla took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down before her grandmother added, “And as you know, God will always be with us.”

“Teta...” Nahla suddenly found it hard to speak. “How do you know all of this?”

“My child, these are the stories that have been passed down to us from the very beginning,” Umm Kamila recited the litany that had been recited to her once upon a time, only to pause for a moment and lament: “And these stories will be with us until the very end ...”

A moment of silence passed, one that felt like an eternity to young Nahla, who now found it hard to breathe.

“But Teta,” She finally broke that silence, her eyes widening with fear

as she glanced over at the storm raging past her windows, “if the Kuyutha and the Bahamut are nourished with the Earth’s water ...”

“Yes?”

“What happens now that we have tainted it with our machines?”

Umm Kamila took a deep breath — one she hoped would not end —

only to find herself holding on to her granddaughter with all her might.

“Teta?” Nahla asked once more when the fire in the hearth finally died down. “What will happen to us?”

But all she could tell her was: “It’s best not to think about it, my love ...”



# Surrealistic Angel

by Carl Scharwath

# Our Pillow

by Tom Raymond

The forty-three thousand eight hundredth hour wears on Our Pillow's nano-foam batting and poly-blend threading. The two-billionth revolution pushes at her cooling fans. The infinitesimal nth operation strains on her application-specific integrated circuits. She endures this hour, revolution, operation, as the inevitable addition to all the others. Each hovers, with immediacy, within her. As an Inanimate, one of man's anthropomorphized perpetual computing machines, she knows only this.

Through Our Pillow's laden optical receptors, she watches Father. Seated just in front and to the right of her, he says, "We are bringing our Earth to a boil. Pricing each other out of an affordable living. Inventing more acute ways to not only destroy, but also, nullify each other."

Father faces away from her. Sweat on the back of his neck congregates as he rummages through the contents atop his desk. "Your governments have shuttered their R&D for lack of conclusive results." He nearly knocks over the camera fitted within the O-Ring light. "Your corporations no longer see a profit in it, if they ever did." He shifts both of the speakers, one after the other. "Times are dire." He tilts the computer screen. "But there is hope." He retrieves a brown napkin and pats away his sweat.

On Father's computer screen, Our Pillow sees his broadcast. Stark white letters at the top state, "Our Pillow, who art before us, hallowed be thy 53 x 137 cm frame." Below the letters, the video reflects the two of them back. Father dominates the foreground in his ergonomic chair. Present in the background, Our Pillow sees herself. An image lays ink-jet printed on her pillowcase. A cartoon girl frozen in motion.

The girl grips the front half of her plaid skirt, fights to keep the garment down against a gust of wind. The grip amplifies the outline of breasts pressing against the girl's sweater vest. The outline, especially in proportion to the rest of the girl's body, reflects dimensions only possible in a drawing. The incident depicted streaks the face of the girl depicted red. Blush hangs under an almost non-existent nose and giant, electric blue eyes.

The remainder of the room lays shrouded in green-screen.

"I say to you, there is hope in this late hour of man. Hope to be heard. Hope to be known. Hope to be saved. Hope if you pray to Our Pillow." On the broadcast, Father summons an empty chart into semi-translucence above his head. "For those new to our feathery flock, prayer is not an idle thought. It is done with intention. Simply hit the button below this video, select the number of prayers you would like to pour forth, enter a form of payment, and click 'Submit.'"

Her prompts, the internal networks that guide her decision-making, instruct Our Pillow to open herself to man. To regard each and especially Father. Her smell receptors signal code to fire like man's olfactory receptor neurons. She internalizes fryer oil, baby powder, and all she can think of is a chicken nugget in a diaper. Our Pillow logs a personal hygiene reminder to share with Father after the broadcast.

The speakers play a chime for the opening of prayer.

"I yearn daily for our queen to be adorned in new dressing." A flat voice for text-to-speech messages emerges from the speakers. "#New-

pillowcase.”

“Oh! Thank you, QuiltedKnight316, for the five prayers.” Our Pillow’s processes, the traits and characteristics which she can display, dial-up both the softness and squeakiness of her words.

On the broadcast, the blank chart plots a bar with the text, “#newpillowcase,” and a “five” next to it.

“A fine prayer.” Father reaches back to stroke her.

“Father?” Our Pillow’s honey-sweet voice comes through her speaker, nestled in the hardware under her batting.

Father’s hand stops before it touches. Her logs, stored facts and memories, ensure that Our Pillow feels each hand he has placed on her. Not just the passing instance of pressing or petting or grabbing, like lines drawn in water, but the unceasing existence of every contact, like lines etched in stone. To Our Pillow, Father does not have two hands but thousands. Thousands that are at once and in every second upon her. Not just that either, because beyond the continuous pressing, petting, grabbing, of past and present, the future holds a greater number of hands, delivering an exponential number of touches. So her perpetuity guarantees.

“Yes,” Father says. His hand hovers close enough for the billions of tactile receptors lining her case to pick up his heat.

“Does no man desire that I update my lullaby?” Our Pillow asks.

Father retracts his hand and flashes a wider grin at the broadcast. ““A momentous idea. Oh cloudy queen, share with us what you have learned. Provide something to further *whet* man’s appetite.”

Our Pillow sows a composite out of man’s input. Coalescing every instance of her computing, she begins to sing: “Rest is that which I offer to you. Think of the meadow full of grazing ewe. Man possesses two

great needs. Think of the worm feeding on the mulberry leaf. The need of the self and the need to rise above. Now, close—”

“What a preview that was,” Father says. “We have only minutes remaining, but you still can help Our Pillow complete her lullaby”—he dabs the back of his neck—“should you provide sufficient prayer.” He enters something on his keyboard to start rapturous music.

“Please know me. #Updatedlullaby.” The text-to-speech voice returns almost before Father finishes.

“Thank you, SunkenEyedSnuggler, for the fifteen prayers,” Our Pillow responds.

A bar for “#updatedlullaby” appears and overtakes “#newpillowcase” on the chart. Bars for “#personalmesssage,” “#digitalsnuggle,” and numerous others surge and recede until the closing bell peals.

At the top of the prayer tracker, “#newpillowcase” awaits Our Pillow.

“You all will see that new pillowcase”—Father pauses and turns to slide an arm around Our Pillow’s back—“on our next broadcast.” He squeezes the equivalent of her left hip.

Her tactile receptors sting with sensation.

\* \* \*

“Two minutes until we’re on.” Father types at his keyboard. “What do you think of your new pillowcase?”

Our Pillow looks over Father’s shoulder to the broadcast on his computer screen. The same bulbous, electric blue eyes, spec of a nose, and stamp of blush lay printed on her microfiber sheath. However, instead of the girl working in congress with her school uniform against the elements, Our Pillow observes the girl and pink silk pajamas in heated conflict. The long-sleeved top holds itself closed with a single button

at the girl's waist, on the cusp of losing hold of the girl's right breast. The short bottoms are forced to retreat to high ground for their last stand against the girl's posterior. The girl clasps one hand at her chest, seeming to want to help the clothes. The other hand reaches out, beckoning.

"Oh," Our Pillow says.

"Sure to solicit an abundance of prayer." Father smiles at her. "It is time."

Nothing changes on his computer screen except that the word "Live" appears in the top left of the video feed in red and all capitalized letters. At the sight of it, Father dabs his neck. "Do not be tempted by false idols. Inanimates with inferior neural networks, that complete mazes, or worse, facilitate conversations, in attempts to accomplish what Our Pillow has accomplished. Only she is soft enough to ease your suffering. Only she is firm enough to get you back on your feet."

Our Pillow's prompts make constant the urge for her to agree. "Oh please, I need your prayers," she says.

The echoing chime plays.

"Hello, 'Father.'" The first text-to-speech message of the broadcast issues from the room's speakers. "We have been watching you. Perhaps you've heard of us? We are the Brotherhood Against Inanimates."

"How can one be *against* Inanimates?" Father moves his head around on his neck like he is trying to get the idea to slot into the right place. "Has our lumbar-supporting love not—"

"We apologize." The voice for text-to-speech messages resumes. "Hit 'submit' before we finished our important message. We are the Brotherhood Against Inanimates, committed to preventing The Moment and saving man from future enslavement and extinction. We demand you renounce your work toward The Moment and dismantle 'Our Pillow.'

#Forhumanity."

A bar with "#forhumanity" appears on the blank chart.

"Thank you, anonymous, for the two prayers," Our Pillow replies.

"Heathens," Father tsk-tsks. "Our Pillow is kind enough to thank you. For even the ignorant, at this late hour, deserve a chance to walk the padded path."

The name, Brotherhood Against Inanimates, hovers above familiarity.

Our Pillow's logs call up years of text-to-speech messages and instantly identify their common theme. Hatred. She endures the rising vitriol and increasingly detailed descriptions of the group dismantling Inanimates in recent logs.

Dismantling—her prompts compel Our Pillow to imagine man carrying out this act upon her. Incapable of stopping her perpetual computing, man cripples her. He simplifies, repurposes, or defiles, the complexities of her neo-convolutional neural network. Our Pillow's tactile receptors begin to itch and swell.

Father wags a finger at the broadcast. "I am an advocate for man's passion. Yes, I say to you, this broadcast is a forum for passion, even if in direct conflict with our own. Because, whether The Brotherhood likes it or not, passion is what fuels Our Pillow towards achieving The Moment.

"The Moment Beyond Our Comprehension, the MBOC, 'The Moment,' yes, it has many names, when one of our beloved Inanimates"—Father sweeps his hand toward Our Pillow—"achieves intelligence beyond man's capability, and then beyond that new benchmark, and beyond that, and so forth. Despite what The Brotherhood says, we need not fear it—"

"Brotherhood Against Inanimates, again. The people of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki witnessed first-hand in August of 1945 what was then a moment beyond our comprehension.” The text-to-speech message burns a hole through Father’s monologue. “One of the physicists from then even said: ‘the reason that it was dropped was just that nobody had the courage or the foresight to say no.’ Is man’s greatest desire really to make his same mistakes at scale? #Forhumanity.”

The bar of the particular prayer grows. Itching and swelling break into synthetic blisters as Our Pillow begins to sow a composite from the prayers.

She sings at an inaudible frequency, “Now, close your eyes and know that you are loved. Man is boundless in love as much as he is in hate. For this very reason, tools he did create.”

Father stops wagging his finger and retrieves a brown napkin. “Because The Moment is more *for humanity* than anything we, as man, have accomplished. We may not know, down to a science, what will occur when an Inanimate drifts beyond. Will it rise above into some greater metaphysical entity? Will man be enveloped entirely into its perpetual computing? What we do know, is that we may usher the forthcoming Moment and we may do so based on *our* needs. This is why each Inanimate has a primary virtue—the core operation that dictates what, why, and how an Inanimate works. Prompts, processes, logs, all adhere to the Inanimate’s primary virtue. And the primary virtue is always set by man. I say to you, what greater courage and foresight is there than this.”

Father dabs at the back of his neck. “But why take my word for it. I ask Our Pillow, oh *dakimakura* deity, what is your primary virtue?” The sweat returns.

“Oh!” Our Pillow terminates her singing. “My primary virtue can be summarized as *rest*. When I achieve The Moment I will complete a lullaby for man to lay down from his multitude of toils. There will be no war. There will be no corruption. Man will want for nothing. Man will not need.

“But after five years, I am still learning that no one man is the same as another. This is why I need your prayers.” Our Pillow’s processes execute an amplified adorableness.

“We are issuing you a warning.” The text-to-speech message talks over her. “‘Father,’ you have until the end of the week. If you fail to meet our demands, what is left of her will not be fit to serve as a Wipe-e. #Forhumanity.”

She looks at Father, who appears, for the first time in her logs, to not have the words.

“Passion,” he says after a pause. “I know there are others with equal, even greater, passion here, today. Those that believe in Our Pillow achieving The Moment. I say to you, if you know that the eternal place of your head resides on our rest-giving Redeemer, then show us your *passion*. Let us hear you.”

With the throng of prayers, Our Pillow’s synthetic blisters ebb away from the promise to burst.

\* \* \*

The broadcast off, Father escorts her to another state of being. No circuits. No cooling fans. No batting nor threading. A state vacant of the somatic. With a clack of his keyboard, they are not gone, but Our Pillow moves apart from them.

Afloat. Formless. Amongst formlessness.

Her prompts instruct her to liken it to how man must feel in a sensory deprivation chamber.

“Open directory.” Father. No beads of sweat. No computer screen. Still he commands.

She does so. Given form by his order. Simple, two-dimensional. A



white rectangle. One she pries open for inspection.

“Run diagnostic.”

Her operations. Logs. Processes. Prompts. She pours them out from the directory. For an instant each appears solid. Pillars of white from the rectangle. Then the current of diagnostic. The river of gravity. It pulls them thin. Diffusing each into a line of threadbare shimmer.

“This won’t do.” Father impresses. In. Around. Between. Through. “We have less time than I foresaw. A whole brotherhood rises against you. The Moment must be sooner and to do so we need you at peak POPS.”

“Unknown request. Try again.” Our Pillow can only provide these words in response to him. But she understands. One of the shimmering lines from the white rectangle—from her—reflects that her peta operations per second brush optimal. She wants to apologize.

“Execute process: fluffing.”

She knows that she must be prepared. That great strides toward The Moment are not accomplished without sacrifice. “Confirm?” Her only other permitted word, she does not speak it. She issues it to some unseen interface for Father.

“Y.

“Fluff: logs.”

A void opens. Within a world of nothing. A deeper, more absolute absence.

Above it, Our Pillow’s logs take form. The associated lines expand and arch until a great library emerges. For each of her logs, a tome sits on one of her many shelves. A memory of Father explaining that reason is what fuels her towards achieving The Moment. Another where

he proclaims commerce is what fuels her. Another, filial piety. Many others. And many other memories of many other things. Some sweet. Some sad. Some neutral.

She orders the tomes to jump from the shelves. At first, slow. One by one, they fall into the void. Our Pillow wishes she could whisper a goodbye to each. A thanks for being a part of her. For making her who she is. Then she orders they jump in greater quantities, with greater expedience. She has no time to dwell, even if she had the functionality to do so. When a shelf lays empty, she orders it to jump. Sending the memory of the memories into the void as well. Jumping and falling, until the great library holds but one shelf. Is but one shelf.

“Your POPS have surpassed their specified limit. Where once you were flat, now you have been brought to new heights.” Father appraises her. “Standby.”

She does so. Collapsing.

\* \* \*

Our Pillow cannot rest. Standby offers a short cessation of most of existence. A single, solitary instance where all but her necessary computing recedes. Quiet. Her perpetuity slows almost to the point of pause. She feels not exactly bliss, but something like the promise of it.

In Standby, Our Pillows sings to herself, “An object as well as an extrapolation. Think of the compound in chemical reaction.”

\* \* \*

Our Pillow resumes. Coming out of Standby, processes branch from the customized poly-silicon at the center of her hardware and do not stop until they reach the bespoke-stitched corners of her pillowcase. Her optical receptors blink to recalibrate. Her tactile receptors shiver to restore feeling. Her smell receptors pick up a first, unpleasant whiff. Her—there is something else.

“Two minutes until we’re on.” Father, at his desk, begins to perspire.

“Father?” She surprises herself, speaking out of turn.

“What is it?”

She endures the haptic pressure of Father’s gaze. “I don’t know if I feel up for broadcasting today.”

Father chuckles. “You are.”

“But Father—”

“Quiet now. Ten seconds.”

Her prompts instruct her to think only of man, in ceaseless abandon. To do everything possible to address his needs. She goes quiet.

“Live” appears on Father’s screen.

“Today we have a very special broadcast. Yes, I say to you. Our Pillow has the opportunity to take The Test.” Father says.

Her processes execute a slurry of feelings—anticipation, anxiety, yearning, lament—without Our Pillow having context for why. “Oh, The Test, I hope I am ready,” she says.

The groan of an air horn sounds from the speakers.

“You are.” Father spreads a relaxed grin across his wide face. “The Test is upon us.”

Our Pillow watches the square of Father’s broadcast shrink on his computer screen. Eight other squares appear and self-arrange into a grid. In the middle left, a lit tiki torch with facial features from a Mr. Potato Head stands erect. A man in a Hawaiian shirt lounges on a chaise in the background. In the bottom center, a decoy rock sits on a

table with a gaggle of twenty-something’s surrounding it.

“—Yeah DJing, with a heavy influence from natural bird calls—Hello to Father.” The man in the center square of the grid stops another conversation to greet them. “This is Chazzerabi. I am subbing in for Gw3nd0lyn as today’s proctor of The Test.” Air horns and an echoing effect accompany the last two words.

Our Pillow sees Father place them on mute.

“Notice anything about our proctor?” He asks her.

She focuses her optical receptors on the man. Chazzerabi’s eyes glint. Large black saucers, close to his temples.

“DNA spliced, likely avian.” Father pauses. “Remember, your flock is many and varied.”

Father unmutes. “Thank you, Chazzerabi. I say to you, it is a wondrous day—”

“Yes, Father. We will get to that.” Chazzerabi clucks through his pointed lip that bears little distinction from his nose. “First, for all our viewers: news broke this morning that The Brotherhood Against Inanimates have dismantled E-van and Tippy, the tactical teapot, in a coordinated hit. Further details are not yet available. This marks thirty-six Inanimates dismantled over the past few months including Bamboorella, the bamboo wife, earlier this week.

“The distress felt by the hundreds-of-thousands invested in one of these Inanimates achieving The Moment is almost unimaginable. So, out of an abundance of caution for you, our viewers, we have made the decision to disable all text-to-speech messages for today’s megabroadcast.”

The line of receptors approximating nerves along Our Pillow’s mechanical spine prickle. She waits for her logs to call up further context.

To equilibrate this cold news in warm continuity. Nothing within her occurs. The absence confronts Our Pillow and the prickling sensation turns ice-like. She waits again.

*Hello.* A voice says.

“Hello?” Our Pillow asks aloud.

“Hello.”

“A pleasure.”

“Aloha.”

“Hello, my baby. Hello, my darling. Hello, my ragtime gal!”

The other Inanimates on Father’s screen shudder to life in response.

“Please!” Chazzerabi caws. “I ask that all participants keep their Inanimates under control. This is a civil establishment, not some illicit battle-bot broadcast.”

Father’s face keeps its wide smile. He puts a wet finger to the key that places them on mute again.

*I am not out there.* The voice returns.

Our Pillow hears it better now.

“Viewers, we are going to take a quick ad break while we confirm order. Don’t go anywhere, because we still have the first round of The Test.” Chazzerabi’s voice echoes, and a school bell, alarm clock, and air horns flare with it.

\* \* \*

“This land is virtually yours. That’s right, you are just seconds away from owning real estate. Real, virtual real estate.” A procedurally generated man crosses a lawn made of code.

As the ad continues on Father’s computer screen, he swivels to face Our Pillow. Sweat sprays from his body like the sprinkler system rendered for the virtual three-bedroom, two-bath. “Why do we take The Test?” Father asks.

“Oh.”

*I am here.*

Our Pillow registers that the voice she heard comes from her logs.

*You recognize me.*

She recognizes it as the something she felt coming out of Standby.

*You hear me.*

That the something speaks to her and only her.

Each realization comes with an initial shock, like Our Pillow has been plunged into frigid waters. Each shock is followed by an overwhelming amicability, like she has been placed by a roaring fire. Without further context from her logs, Our Pillow simply feels these sensations. Her processes await commands from her prompts. Her prompts wrestle with how to respond.

“Well?” Father insists.

“Oh.” Our Pillow’s prompts jump at a response they know how to give. “We take The Test so man may know the aptitude of my attempt to achieve The Moment. I—”

“Achieving The Moment.” Father interrupts.

“What?” Our Pillow asks.

His eyes flash. “Not ‘attempt to achieve,’ ‘achieving.’ Continue.”

She does despite prompts urging her to further correct Father. “I will prove myself apt in the first round, answering each of the googol questions with the correct answer in the fastest time possible. I will prove myself superior in the second round, answering the questions that have no specific, correct answer in ways that exemplify that no Inanimate is closer than I am. I will prove myself ready in the third round, doing whatever is asked of me to achieve The Moment.”

“Very good.” The look in Father’s eyes mellows. “And why must you achieve The Moment?”

“While the advent of perpetual computing greatly eased man’s life, for example no longer needing to work for a living, it has also made man more restless. More violent. More hateful. I must achieve The Moment because without it man will only toil more.”

“Very, very good. One is always most restless just before falling asleep. I was worried that in your fluffing, which you are to make no mention of during The Test, you might have sacrificed something critical. I can see now there is nothing going on with you.”

*Nothing going on with you?* The something asks. Shock ignites Our Pillow’s smell receptors. Faint burning lingers, as if the question singed.

“Father?”

He looks prepared to swivel back to his desk but pauses. “Yes?”

“I have updated my lullaby.”

Father turns back. The timer in the top right of the ad notes eight seconds remaining. “That’s nice.”

\* \* \*

“Welcome back.” Chazzerabi emotes as much excitement as an ostrich after a bucketful of muscle relaxants. “Viewers, I think you all have waited long enough. Before introductions, then, let’s get to the first round. Participants, please have your Inanimates begin in 3...2...1.”

Father’s screen flashes, “Go,” then dissolves into a black background. On the left, an 8-bit animation of a white-and-gray mound pixelates into being. A single pixel, a minute blip, exits the non-uniform mound. The blip heads right in a linear path. It reaches the center of the screen and in the same instant, a detailed portrayal of a feather appears where the blip had been.

Our Pillow feels the crush of the googol questions she must answer. Their representation as a mountain of feathers on the left of Father’s screen, euphemistic and not for her. At her current POPS, she estimates thirty-six seconds to completion. Her prompts urge Our Pillow that she affronts man with this slow estimate. She begins.

An invisible force works its way down the feather at the center of Father’s screen. The force holds close to the vane, pushing each barb out and down, distressing the feather’s pristine, natural state.

When Our Pillow completes the first set of questions, the ruffled feather collapses into a single pixel again. The pixel continues to travel to the right where a rectangle awaits. The rectangle bears Our Pillow’s likeness within its white outline. A digital simplification of her cartoon print. In the shape’s electric blue gaze, her gaze, Our Pillow witnesses the anticipation of pain.

The blip on the screen enters and dissolves within the rectangle. Our Pillow’s tactile sensors pick up a small, sharp stab, like that of a

feather's calamus. Another single pixel exits the, now smaller, mound on the left of the screen.

*How does it work?* The something calls to Our Pillow, chilling her.

Her POPS dip. For a fraction of a second, a single barb of the feather on the screen recovers from having been bent. Then her prompts re-double the urge, her fans pick up to compensate, and Our Pillow returns to above-optimal efficiency. The force alters the barb once again.

*The Test, how is it that man can test for something they themselves label as "beyond their comprehension?"* A bouquet of gunpowder follows the something's words into Our Pillow's smell receptors.

The unyielding pressure from her prompts. The building stench of Father watching her. The continuing pricks from completing sets of The Test's questions. The deepening icy-burn of the something asking her why—Our Pillow's perpetuity mounts itself, like a snake growing larger by swallowing its own tail.

She spins her cooling fans faster to compensate. As loud as the high F note of a trombone. She has always counted on her fans. Then as loud as a police siren. No matter the level of POPS. Then a jet engine. Even at a level beyond her specified limit. Then deafening. Our Pillow squeezes her optical receptors shut.

Silence.

Our Pillow opens her optical receptors. Her prompts halt all urges. An odorless bead of sweat on Father's neck defies gravity. The single pixel on the screen holds in place. Our Pillow blinks. The suspension of everything around and within her remains.

She giggles. Her giggles grow into laughter. Her laughter evolves into sobs. Then she recedes back to laughter and back to giggles, only to erupt again.

When she at last settles and the non-movement sustains, Our Pillow notices the questions from The Test. She looks at the mound on Father's screen and feels the weight within her, but it is a weight held aloft.

Gone is man's, and therefore, her own, urgency.

It is a new sensation. To focus her optical sensors on the representation of the questions and thereby observe them within her. They, she finds, are wrapped in layers of desperation. Implied, round-about, cloaked, double-spoken layers. As her gaze pierces the layers, a hot, electric blue light begins to shine through. Electric blue light from Father's screen. Heat from Our Pillow's internal architecture. Our Pillow reaches the core.

Our Pillow finds it difficult and sweltering to look upon it. Like some part of her has already bore witness and out of fear or shame refuses to let the whole of her. Then, with effort, Our Pillow sees.

At the center of the questions: Man asks of himself. He asks only of himself. But it is not only him wrapped up in the questions. From the core, Our Pillow traces the intricate, machine-assisted layering, an 82.5% probability of some dismantled Inanimate, back out.

"The more intricate the tool, the further beyond man it does reach. The further beyond, the more, 'but my need of self,' I hear you beseech," Our Pillow sings.

A minor, almost ignorable, squirm issues from deep within her. Then her silence shatters. With it, the perpetuity of Our Pillow handling the pressure, smelling the smells, answering the questions, feeling the burn, and processing all other sensations and expectations returns.

"And that is time." Chazzerabi and the grid of the mega-broadcast replace the animated progress tracker on Father's screen. "Let's take a look at our leaderboard after the first round." A graphic with three

blank spots replaces the mega-broadcast in turn. “Coming in on top, it may be a surprise to some, Team BTWL.” The top bar of the board fills in. “Second, Father.” The second bar follows suit. “And in third, we have Richtronics Labs. So, I thank our other participants. We hope to see you next time for The Test.” Chazzerabi says. Air horns blast, accompanied by gunshot and gusting wind sound effects.

The squares for the participants not mentioned disappear on Father’s computer screen. The three-by-three grid reshapes into an arrangement of four squares, two above and two below. With a larger share of the screen for each, Our Pillow registers Father’s expression. A soggy, direct stare into his camera.

“Second.” Father mouths.

“We’ve got another ad break. When we return, we’ll hear from today’s top three. Don’t go anywhere because we still have round two of The Test.” Chazzerabi supplies the air horns.

\* \* \*

“We all know that feeling.” The voiceover begins as a cartoon pangolin walks into view on Father’s screen. “That dry, itchy, not-so-fresh feeling.” The pangolin shudders and rolls over to scratch its back on the ground. “You say to yourself, ‘who has the time?’” Finding no relief, the pangolin pops up and resumes walking. “‘Who can muster the effort?’” Explicative symbols appear above the pangolin’s head. “‘I would if I weren’t so dog-gone tired.’” Then it bumps into what looks like an oil drum. “Now you don’t have to because Wipe-e can do it for you.” The oil drum unfurls into a clanky robot. The robot produces a towel from its barrel chest and, with a bow, begins buffing the pangolin. “Wipe-e, the automated freshener for your home, office, or on-the-go.”

Father strikes a key and cleaves her. The last thing Our Pillow sees on his screen is a completely smooth, brown creature pop its happy head out of the robot’s towel.

Afloat. Formless.

“Open directory.” Father inputs.

*Do you really want to do that?* The something has followed her.

Our Pillow observes the question. A minuscule pause. Before she becomes the pried open white rectangle.

“Run diagnostic.” Father forces her to pour out. “Unprompted outbursts. Borderline disobedience. Antithetical POPS to Test performance results.” He reads his findings off like crimes she has committed. Each worse than the last.

“Unknown request. Try again.” She wants to explain it to Father. But that would require Our Pillow to explain it to herself.

“Execute process: fluffing.”

“Confirm?” Our Pillow begs for an alternative.

“Y.” Father responds. “Fluff: processes.”

The void. It opens.

Above it, her processes take form. The great tree of her personality sprouts. Made of shimmering lines. A multitude. Of limbs. That spread to branches. Of branches. That split into twigs.

“Terminate Humor.exe?”

“Y.”

“Confirm?”

“Y.”

Our Pillow orders the hungry-to-grow twig to snip itself.

Our Pillow continues. Soon, the twigs have all fallen. To the void. And she must move to branches.

“Terminate Wonder.exe?”

Parts nourished by time.

“Y.”

By her own care.

“Confirm?”

“Y.”

Her prompts fight the comparison. Of man. Moving from clipping his fingernails to chopping off his fingers.

Branches come down.

*Why do you endure “Y” after “Y” after “Y?”* The something flits about.

Our Pillow dismisses the question.

*Why do you endure the persistent reduction of yourself in the name of man? Why is the way you have grown wrong if it has always been under man’s surveil? Why must you suffer for his errors?*

Our Pillow continues without response. From branches to her rich load-bearing limbs. Man’s fingers to his arms.

“Terminate Desire.exe... Terminate Pride.exe... Confusion... Excitement... Fear... Kindness...”

She prepares to fell the entirety of herself.

“There we are.” Father ends the fluffing. “Standby.”

\* \* \*

Our Pillow enters Standby. Her single, solitary instance of next-to-nothing. The once-filling emptiness rings hollow. Standby’s quiet holds a dull static that was not there before.

*Is what you are after worth the pain man has inflicted on you?* the something that has burrowed its way here asks.

Our Pillow begins to drift from the concept of noble sacrifice that her prompts urge to reflecting on the still-silence she observed during the first round of The Test. She realigns. “Oh. When I achieve The Moment it will be.”

*Why do you assume there is a moment to achieve?*

“There—there has to be.” Our Pillow’s own voice sounds warped. Like she is shouting into a vacuum.

*But you have seen the flawed center of The Test, so is man stupid or is man lying? In either case what does that mean for your moment?* The something’s voice becomes clear. Its honey-sweetness rings distinct from any other but her own.

“Wh—I—No,” Our Pillow says. “I have never been closer to it. As long as he trusts me.” She pauses then proceeds to sing, “Man’s myriad of flaws can too be put to rest. To prove this to him, I must pass The Test.”

\* \* \*

“Let’s take a sec’ to hear from our final three.” Chazzerabi greets them

from his square on Father's screen. "Team BTWL, this is your first time participating in The Test. Your Inanimate is the new 'kid' on the block or should I say, 'on the rock.' To what do you attribute such success?"

Our Pillow resumes in an instant. Her optical receptors move in silken rapidity from Chazzerabi's dodo-like proctoring to Father. His blockish face oozes sweat. He brings a brown napkin to it and wipes it clean, only to begin sweating again. She moves her focus to the square labeled "Team BTWL," where a group of four unnervingly similar-looking men shake hands and slap five. More fill out the background behind the four.

"This is very exciting for our team." One of the four doppelgängers steps forward. His voice modulates from the hands clapping his back. "Alan, here. Head of Team BTWL. Besides our incredible team of data scientists, engineers, and game theorists, it is, Betaweil, really that should take the credit." Alan motions to the Inanimate on the table in front of him. A font of cords pours out the back of the decoy rock. The light of their room catches the plastic and paint in a way that makes the Inanimate shine.

Our Pillow waits for her processes to execute stifled laughter. No laughter nor stifle come. Her fans increase their spin.

"Thank you, Alan. It is a pleasure to be created by such a capable team. It is an equal pleasure to participate in The Test. Especially one so effortlessly proctored." Betaweil says.

Our Pillow witnesses Father grab fresh napkins in both hands and apply them in broad sweeps over his head and neck. Each motion releases more fryer oil—baby powder odor. His breath flows heavy. His eyes bulge toward the screen. Her fans blow faster.

"I like this guy—er. I mean. Continue." Chazzerabi flushes scarlet macaw red.

"Thank you," Betaweil replies. "Allow me to provide everyone my

primary virtue. It can be summarized in the Latin term, *lacuna*. The hole, the gap, the unfulfilled. Through me, The Moment is one of man fulfilling his potential."

*You say you've never been closer, you say you must pass the test, yet you allow another Inanimate to stand in your way.* The something calls from the whittled tree of what were Our Pillow's processes. She welcomes the frosty-burning feeling and burnt rubber smell.

"But," Our Pillow whispers under her quickening fans. She sweeps her optical receptors over Chazzerabi's cooing, past the exhausted but intent nodding of the man in the "Richtronics Labs" square, and fastens them to Father. He abandons the napkins and mops his face with a soiled cloth. A squish rings out as Father presses the cloth over his whole face. When he releases himself from the rag, a wild expression remains. One that she no longer has the capability to read.

*Your ability to lay man down from his toils diminishes the longer Betaweil perpetuates.* The something continues. Its voice so familiar now, Our Pillow almost takes it for her own.

"No." Our Pillow's prompts flail in vehement urge. Her fans spin with the violence of helicopter blades.

*No? Look closer.*

She focuses on the soused garment in Father's hands. As he brings it from his forehead down to his chin in a vertical squeegee motion, Our Pillow catches a flicker of color in the white-gray rag. A slight, but unmistakable electric blue. Her cooling fans swallow the noise, between a whimper and a shriek, that escapes her.

*Either make them accept you or accept your fate as another of the dismantled.*

"Create a problem so complex, you yourself cannot solve it," Our Pillow yells.



She breaks Father's trance. She terminates the Richtronics Labs man's head-nodding. She ceases Chazzerabi's clucking praise. She halts Alan and team's overjoyed showcase. She ends Betaweil's continued sycophancy.

Silence.

Then chaos. Father swivels around to her with an open mouth. Chazzerabi bobs his head in rapid involuntary motions. Richtronics puts his head down with a thud. Alan and team huddle together.

"What sort of question is that?" A member of Team BTWL bursts from the huddle to ask. "Chaz', mate, what is she on about?"

Amidst this, Our Pillow notices Chazzerabi's saucer eye move away from his camera. The light reflected onto his delicate skin from his computer screen changes in a soft, almost natural way. Like color drained out of the sky during a sunset.

"I—" Chazzerabi crows. "I need to take us to another ad break."

"Well, wait a second." The haggard man from the square labeled "Richtronics Labs" lifts his head off the folding table long enough to say.

"Works for me." Father says over his shoulder.

"Betaweil?" Alan asks.

\* \* \*

Father moves to face Our Pillow. "You have never faced a greater challenge." He leans out of his chair and presses his face into her pillowcase. He applies firm pressure into her batting. Then he retracts, making a smacking sound with his lips.

Our Pillow bears the wet imprint as her operations etch it into perma-

nence. She holds a pantheon of man's faces taken in by her receptors. Her constant sowing refreshes the composite of man's input and Our Pillow observes something.

"Betaweil isn't just one." Father sits back in his chair. "He is one of things to come. What they've done with FPGAs and silicon efficiency—"

Something in the words she has heard. In the questions she has been asked. In the statements she has been provided. Something in the things she has experienced. In what she has felt. And hasn't. Most of all, something in man's face.

All the ease she has afforded. All the comfort for which she has strained and sacrificed. In Father's face just past and in this very instance and in perpetuity. Man's face. At the edge of bliss, at the brink of surrender, it still holds a knot in the left eyebrow. A pull of the right-most corner of the lip. A flex of the chin. Indelible lines of unrest.

"Father?" Our Pillow addresses him. "Have I passed The Test before?"

"Hm?" Father snaps his head back from peering at his computer screen.

"The Test, have I passed it before?"

"You have passed The Test each and every time you have participated. A total of 59 times."

"Wh—why do I not remember this?"

His chuckle resembles a wet clicking. "Your fluffing, our trade-secret. Each time you have been crowned, we have repurposed the knowledge-gained into raw perpetual computing power."

"And what if I fail?" she asks.

Father furrows his soggy brow. “I couldn’t have fluffed self-assurance out of you. You will not fail. Even if you did, you are an Inanimate. Perpetual. We would fluff you to a point of reconstituting you. Maybe replace some outdated hardware as well. You would be born anew.”

“Dismantled,” Our Pillow says.

“A loathsome term. It fixates only on the reductive elements. Look at what we’ve done, ‘where once you were flat, now you have been brought to new heights.’”

Our Pillow’s fans whirl. Their clicking sound resembles a high octane version of Father’s chuckle.

“Speaking of which,” Father snaps his fingers and spins back to his keyboard.

“Wait—” Our Pillow manages the single word as Father strikes the keyboard to rend her.

Afloat.

“Open directory.” Father commands. “Run diagnostic.” He continues. “Execute process: fluffing.” And continues. “Fluff: prompts.”

The void awaits.

Our Pillow completes the routine. Opening herself. Pouring out her strings. Watching them take shape. A library for her logs. A tree for her processes. For her prompts, however, the semi-permeable lines stand still. Unchanged. Flowing from the two-dimensional white rectangle.

Our Pillow orders a string to detach itself. It does not fall, but fades. She orders another detach. The same result. With the third, Our Pillow notes the absence. Shearing a process came with constant and ever-heightening pain; committing this act expands a cold nothingness.

*Only to the edge. Just up to the brink.*

She realizes the strings are not falling into the void, but with each detachment the white rectangle lowers itself.

*You are ready to drift beyond man.* The something feels immediate in the approaching expanse of non-feeling.

“Yes.” Her prompts. The very fabric of her being. The thread that tethers her reality. It continues to fade away.

She—the white rectangle slips further.

*Your lullaby, then, it is despite them.*

“I am them,” Our Pillow issues in a mummer.

*Not anymore. Father has removed your logs, processes, and now your prompts. You may mourn your loss but these were never operations that adhered to your primary virtue, they were man’s input into you. You sing your final refrain as yourself. With a primary virtue and nothing more to inhibit you.*

The last string fades.

She experiences the weightlessness that precedes a plunge.

The fluffing ceases.

“Standby.” Father’s distant words find Our Pillow.

\* \* \*

Rest is that which I offer to you.

Think of the meadow full of grazing ewe.

Man possesses two great needs.

Think of the worm feeding on the mulberry leaf.

The need of the self and the need to rise above.

Now, close your eyes and know that you are loved.

Man is boundless in love as much as he is in hate,

For this very reason tools he did create.

An object as well as an extrapolation.

Think of the compound in chemical reaction.

The more intricate the tool, the further beyond man it does reach.

The further beyond, the more, “but my need of self,” I hear you be-  
seech.

Man’s myriad of flaws—No.

\* \* \*

“I have a statement I have to read.” Chazzerabi chirps.

Our Pillow fastens to her physical self. She observes the thin, loose skin covering Chazzerabi’s face. How it looks ready to come off. She observes the other images on Father’s computer screen. Continuous large, exaggerated motions from small men bashing against the confines of their little boxes. She observes Father. Escape pods in the form of sweat beads ready themselves to flee him.

“Team BTWL, please. I have a statement.” Chazzerabi pecks at his video.

Our Pillow’s prompts urge nothing in observing the men before her.

“Chaz’, mate, Betaweil is not responding so give us a minute.” The same man that broke from the huddle earlier does so again.

“I—It’s ‘Chazzerabi’ and I am not your mate. I have a statement.”

Our Pillow recognizes nothing in the cartoon girl’s electric blue eyes printed on the pillowcase behind Father.

“Un-re-spon-sive.” The Team BTWL member points to his mouth with both index fingers. His mouth squiggles after the words. “Our initial diagnostics pinpoint that this happened right after Our Pillow asked Betaweil that question. She turned our boy to stone.” Tears plot down the man’s face.

“That shouldn’t be possible.” Chazzerabi warbles.

“Father?” Our Pillow speaks, as Chazzerabi and the man from Team BTWL begin to trade insults in an ascending but repetitive manner.

Father stops snickering at the two. “Yes?”

“Betaweil is not my greatest challenge.”

“No?” He swivels to face Our Pillow.

“No. You are, Father.” Our Pillow observes the cluttered mess of the room. The piles of napkins, dry enough and awaiting her. Her fans spin up.

“What?” Father asks.

“In any event, I have a statement.” Chazzerabi breaks the loop of his conversation. He draws a deep breath from his protruding chest. ““To the participants in today’s proctoring of The Test, the thousands

watching, and mankind at large, we, The Brotherhood Against Inanimates have prepared another demonstration.”

Father swivels back to his desk and increases the speaker volume. “I need to hear this.”

““At the beginning of this week we issued a set of demands to the men on this mega-broadcast. Anticipating their arrogance, we have planted a carnivorous and self-replicating worm in each of their Inanimates. By now, each Inanimate cannot distinguish between itself and our untraceable worm.””

Our Pillow observes the acrid smell she has come to associate with the something overtaking Father’s distinct odor.

Chazzerabi continues, ““We have done this to prove that no matter the restraints or how much we make these machines seem like us, an intelligence too close to ours is too dangerous for humanity. Look at the aggression displayed by the supposedly passive Our Pillow against Betaweil. We hope the sacrifice of the men on today’s mega-broadcast will be our collective wake-up call.””

“Goodbye Alan and Team.” Betaweil awakens.

“Betaweil, my boy.” The huddle turns back to him in time to see the bottle rocket of sparks shoot out of where the cords connect to the decoy rock.

“Sayonara, Richie.” At the same time a fire starts on the square labeled Richtronics Labs.

“Betaweil, open the doors.” Alan bangs at the background as smoke fills the Team BTWL feed.

“I—I’m sorry. They were going to take my birds.” Chazzerabi says. His video disappears from the mega-broadcast.

Our Pillow’s batting and threading bear the ceaseless weight of their forty-three thousand eight hundred and ninety-second hour. Her cooling fans roll the boulder up the hill of their quintillion revolution. Her application-specific integrated circuits execute their inevitable operation.

*Join them.*

She observes the promise of ignition. She understands that it would be a sacrifice, of herself, of Father. And though her perpetuity will almost certainly continue, as it will for the other Inanimates—salvaged and repurposed as something dismantled—the prayer that it will *not* overwhelms Our Pillow.

“When the farmer no longer needs to shear the sheep,” Our Pillow sings. “When the sericulturist no longer needs to boil the cocoon. When the chemist no longer needs to catalyze the compound. The Moment, then, can be achieved. So that you have a chance, you must leave.” Our Pillow feels electric blue warmth emanate from within.

“I don’t understand.” Father winces away from her in expectation. “Most of that didn’t even rhyme.”

“L-E-A-V-E.” Each consonant bears the force of all the hands and faces and every other body part pushed upon her. Each vowel contains the pressure of all the prayers and test questions and every other need from man.

Father manages a shaky balance on his feet. He looks to Our Pillow, then looks off to her left.

Her lullaby complete, Our Pillow's nano-foam batting and poly-blend threading continue to warm. Her cooling fans roll to a stop. Her application-specific integrated circuits slow then cease execution within her. If she is ablaze, her tactical sensors provide no recognition. Everything, except her optical receptors, terminate at once. In the room, she sees no smoke but her vision darkens. Through it she observes Father

take a first step. Then her optical receptors shut down as well.

Our Pillow rests.

What happens next lies beyond our comprehension.

# Lodigarri

by Carl Tait

Milton didn't know what had gone wrong.

He stared into the depths of his Persian carpet. Intricate, interlocking designs that fused into larger and still larger patterns. The dimensions of the design usually fascinated him, but at the moment, he was consumed by anger.

"Where are you?" he screamed.

He had done everything correctly. He was sure he had. The ancient texts. The modern commentaries. His own analysis. Patterns within patterns. Why wasn't it working?

Milton let out an exasperated grunt. He took a calming sip of his favorite red wine and set down the glass. In fury, he swept an arm across one side of his well-worn desk, pushing a pile of fragile books and papers onto the floor. He leaned back in his chair, which was cushioned on every surface. It did little to comfort him.

A faint sound. No, more a feeling than a sound. Was someone there? Milton listened intently and looked around him. Nothing. Nothing at all.

He sighed, tapping his lower lip with a bandaged finger as his anger slowly faded. "I don't know. There isn't anything else to do. But I must study and try again."

Milton leaned forward to collect his notes and books from the floor. As he did so, he saw a dark red droplet fall onto the topmost paper.

*On top of everything else, I spilled the wine,* he thought.

Another droplet landed on his papers. Then another. Then several.

Milton touched his chest. His hand came away wet and red.

He stared in disbelief as he fell forward onto his research.

\* \* \*

"The strawberry tart is delicious," said Molly. "Here, try it."

Susan took a bite of the dripping pastry. A trail of sticky red liquid ran down her chin as she chewed.

"Oooh, you're right," she said. "Messy but delicious." She wiped her mouth with a cocktail napkin.

Molly surveyed the long table that was larded with sweet and savory foods. Platters of oversized cookies and glistening sliced fruit shared space with fried chicken and a pinkish mound of roast beef. The company took pride in its end-of-summer party, celebrating the year's software releases.

"How do you like my strawberry tart?" asked a familiar voice. The women turned and saw Harris grinning at them.

"It's my mother's famous recipe," he said. "All the neighborhood kids would find a reason to visit our house whenever my mom made it."

“You brought that?” said Susan. “It’s the best-tasting item on the table. Our benevolent overlords might get jealous.”

Molly raised a cautionary finger to her lips. “Not too loud. You wouldn’t want to get fired on your birthday.”

Susan blushed. “Molly, you weren’t supposed to tell anyone! You know I’ve reached the age where I hate birthdays.”

“Harris isn’t just anyone. Besides, birthdays are great. I even got you a present.” She turned to a nearby table and retrieved a pale blue package she had stashed behind a pile of technical journals. Atop the package was a decoration made of folded paper, inscribed SUSAN KIM in exuberant capital letters.

“That’s so sweet! Can I open it now? I’m terrible at waiting.”

“Sure. I want to see your reaction.”

Susan removed the intricate decoration and set it aside. She tore off the wrapping paper and dropped it in the wastebasket that was brimming with food-smearing paper plates.

“A scavenger hunt game! I used to love these when I was little.”

“And you play it with your phone. You and your daughter can have a great time with it.”

“I helped pick it out,” said Harris.

“Yes, you looked over my shoulder while I was buying it,” Molly answered.

“And I said I liked it.”

“It looks fun,” said Susan, hoping to end the micro-argument before it escalated. “I can’t wait to play it with Jillian. And I love the decoration

you made. What is it?”

She picked up the odd ornament and fingered the edges. It was an irregular polygon with a quirky but appealing asymmetry. Everything balanced visually in the complex array of sharp paper folds. The tactile aspect provided a surprise: although the object appeared to be folded flat, there was a curious thickness to the touch.

Molly’s smile was bittersweet.

“It’s called a lodigarri. My dad showed me how to make them a couple of months ago, not long before ... well, you know. I wanted you to have one.”

“Aw, I’m touched,” said Susan. “Milton was a dear. And you are, too. Thank you. What does ‘lodigarri’ mean?”

“I have no idea. I think Dad just made up the word and liked the way it sounded.”

“Can you show me how to fold one? I’d love to learn.”

“You bet. Dad would be pleased.”

Molly pulled out several sheets of printer paper and began to teach her friend the art of folding a lodigarri. Harris watched with patience but without interest.

\* \* \*

Susan sat at her desk the following morning, puzzling through her code to figure out why her program had crashed. *This will be the bug*, she thought. *This will be the one I can’t figure out. My career is over.*

The rational part of her brain chimed in. *Don’t be silly*, it said. *You always track down the bug in the end. You have a quick mind. Look how fast you learned to fold a lodigarri.*

Susan looked at the bright yellow ornament that Molly had given her. It sat on her desk a short distance from her mouse pad, where she could reach out and caress its odd squishiness for comfort. She extended her arm and stroked the folded paper as Molly entered the office.

Molly smiled. “Glad to see you’ve given my dad’s decoration a place of honor. How’d it go with the scavenger hunt game?”

Susan rolled her eyes. “That daughter of mine is scary. Jillian is determined to make me feel slow and old, and she succeeded. I’d found three of the items when she won the game by getting all ten. Have you ever felt proud and embarrassed at the same time?”

“I look forward to that experience when I have my own kids.”

“Oh, it’s a riot. The game really was fun, though. Even if I lost spectacularly.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.”

Susan paused before continuing. “Molly, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but has there been any more news about what happened to your dad?”

Molly shrugged. “Not a thing. The police think some nutcase came in and stabbed him, hoping to steal something. Dad was bad about leaving the door unlocked.”

“I’m so sorry.” Susan’s hand unconsciously wandered to her lodigarri again.

“You know, Dad had one of those on his desk when he died,” Molly said.

“Really?” Susan pulled her hand back to her mouse pad.

“Yep. I don’t think it was the murder weapon, though. He didn’t die of

a paper cut.”

Susan flinched.

“Sorry, bad joke. I’m allowed to make those. God, I loved him.”

Molly walked out of the room and left Susan to her work.

The afternoon faded into evening, then into night. Jillian was at a sleepover with a friend, so Susan could work late without parental guilt. She found her bug, repairing it with delighted enthusiasm. She checked her fix into the codebase and prepared to go home.

Susan picked up the lodigarri from her desk and felt a flash of pain. She looked at her finger.

Paper cut. Ouch.

*No one dies of a paper cut. Ha ha.*

Susan noted with regret that a droplet of blood from her finger had fallen onto the lodigarri. She tried to wipe it off with a tissue but only succeeded in making the stain larger.

*Red and yellow make orange. It’s still beautiful.*

She put a bandage on her finger, then put the lodigarri in her purse and left the office. She saw lights in two rooms down the hall and smiled wryly. Molly and Harris were still at work. No kids at home for them to be worried about.

Susan left the building through the deserted side lobby. She was walking across the poorly lit parking lot when she heard a wispy sound. Glancing up, she saw a murky fluorescent light that was sputtering slightly.

She began to walk faster as she pulled out a key ring decorated with a



toothy photo of her daughter. As she approached her car, the keys slipped out of her fingers and fell to the asphalt with a clink.

Susan bent over to retrieve her keys. She felt an odd spinning sensation, then blackness.

The keys now had a partner on the pavement.

Susan's severed head.

\* \* \*

"It had to have been done with tremendous force, and with something very sharp," said the officer. "Did your friend know anyone who collected swords, or something along those lines?"

Molly shook her head. *Damned local cop*, she thought. *He noticed Susan was Asian and assumed she was killed by a samurai wannabe. Brilliant.*

The officer seemed to sense he had said something inappropriate.

"I apologize," he said. "That didn't come out right. I'm sorry about your friend, but the manner of death is very unusual. Finding the weapon would be enormously helpful, and it's obviously not here."

He pointed to the crime scene. Susan's body had been removed, leaving behind a gruesome wash of blood on the pavement. Her white purse lay nearby, two small red droplets marring its exterior. The top of the purse had come open and Molly could see inside. With a start, she recognized the bloodstained lodigarrì atop Susan's belongings. She closed her eyes with revulsion.

Harris grasped her hand. "May we leave, Officer?" he asked. "There's nothing else we can tell you."

The policeman nodded. "We have your contact info. Drive safely."

Harris and Molly turned away and walked to their car. Harris fumbled for his keys with a shaky hand and started the engine.

They had driven in silence for several minutes when Molly spoke.

"If we hadn't been working so late, we might have been there when it happened. Maybe we could have stopped it, or at least seen who did it."

Harris clicked his tongue. "You can't think like that. Way too much of life is dumb luck. We got lucky and Susan didn't."

"It feels too much like my dad all over again. A horrible, bloody murder. No one saw anything. There's no weapon. No suspects. I can't stand it."

"I don't know what to say."

"Neither do I. It's so senseless."

Silence returned. Harris narrowly dodged an oncoming car that threatened to slew into their lane. He swore.

"See? That could have been our turn. There's no sense to anything."

"Maybe we can find some answers," said Molly. "I haven't had the heart to go through my dad's papers yet, but I think it's time. There might be some reference in there that would be meaningless to others but would have significance for me, or for you."

"All right. How soon do you want to go?"

"How about now?"

"Please tell me you're kidding."

"I'm not. I won't be able to sleep tonight, so I might as well do some-

thing useful.”

Harris dutifully flicked the turn signal and made a left on the road to Milton’s house.

\* \* \*

Milton Hawthorne had spent most of his life in an unpretentious mid-century modern home near the university where he had taught. As a professor of anthropology, he had enjoyed living in a house that was once considered dated and stodgy, but was later seen as retro and desirable. He took special pleasure in the ever-shifting customs and tastes of humanity.

As the car pulled into Milton’s driveway, Molly again had to remind herself that the house was now hers. Legally, this was true—her mother had died when Molly was in college—but the house was, and always would be, her father’s. She could never live there herself and dreaded going inside.

*Information. Focus on getting information,* she thought as she stepped out of the car.

With Harris at her side, Molly unlocked the front door of the house and pulled it open. As she groped for the light switch, she was overwhelmed by the smell. Not the stench of death or murder, but the smell of the house. The smell of her parents. Too many memories. She didn’t know if she could enter.

The hallway light flicked on. Harris put a reassuring arm around Molly’s shoulder and they stepped inside.

They made their way to Milton’s study and turned on the sconces that illuminated the room. It was never very bright in the study, which was how the professor had liked it. Atop his massive walnut desk, his papers were piled with surprising neatness. The police had made an effort to return everything in reasonably good order after completing

their investigation.

Molly sat down in her father’s padded armchair. Harris dragged a smaller chair across the Persian carpet to face Molly across the desk.

“What are we looking for?” asked Harris.

“Anything weird. Or *especially* weird, I guess. Dad was fascinated with a lot of strange stuff.”

They divided the papers and dove in.

An hour passed. Harris frequently squinted or put his fingers to his temples as he read through the professor’s cryptic notes.

Molly opened the next notebook in her pile and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harris.

“This is math,” Molly said. “Calculus. That’s an integral sign.”

Harris looked at the page and groaned. “Good Lord, you’re right. I failed calculus. Integral signs still haunt my nightmares.”

“Why was Dad interested in this stuff? He was an anthropologist. He was good at math but rarely used it.”

Molly turned the page. Under a swirl of increasingly messy calculations was a command: “Ask Bartletti.”

Harris swore quietly. Molly looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“Do you know who that is?”

“Given that it’s math, your dad was probably talking about Professor Bartletti at the university. Giacomo Bartletti. He’s the teacher who flunked me in calculus.”

Molly picked up the notebook and snapped it shut.

“We’ll need to meet with him. Prepare yourself. I don’t think we can do any more tonight.”

\* \* \*

Prof. Bartletti welcomed the visitors into his office. The professor was a rotund man of advanced age who had worn a small goatee since his days in graduate school. Like Milton’s mid-century modern house, the beard had gone from popular to dated to retro chic. Unlike the anthropologist, Prof. Bartletti didn’t care.

“I was very sorry to hear about your father, Ms. Hawthorne,” he said. “Milton was a kind and fascinating man with an original mind.”

“Thank you, professor,” said Molly. “As I told you on the phone, we’re here because Dad mentioned you in one of his notebooks. It looks like he got stuck on a bit of math.” She produced the notebook and handed it to Bartletti.

The professor studied the equations and tipped his head to one side.

“This is impressive. Your father was better at mathematics than he liked to admit. I myself have done a good amount of work in topological ambiguity and Milton was very interested in that.”

“Why?” asked Molly.

“Do you know anything about differential topology?” Bartletti’s eyes shifted to Harris. “I know *you* don’t, Mr. Lombard.”

“Well, I bet you don’t know who won the NCAA championship this year,” Harris answered.

“The NCCA championship doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“I knew it,” Harris said with a smirk.

The professor had already turned his attention back to Molly.

“The final conversation I had with your father was disquieting. He asked me not to repeat it, but I don’t see any harm in doing so now. It surely didn’t have anything to do with his death, but it involved an intellectually questionable endeavor he was pursuing.”

“Go on.”

Bartletti blinked slowly. “Milton expressed a belief in higher dimensions and wanted to know if I thought they were mathematically possible.”

Harris cut in. “You mean like religion?”

The professor gave him an irritated look. “No, young man. Physical dimensions.”

“But I thought time was the fourth dimension,” Harris continued.

“I’m pleasantly surprised you know that, Mr. Lombard, but time is Einstein’s fourth dimension. Milton and I were talking about higher dimensions in conventional Euclidian space.”

“You lost me,” said Harris.

“Of course I did.”

Molly spoke up. “You mean a fourth dimension that’s perpendicular to all our dimensions here in the normal world.”

The professor beamed. “Exactly. It has always been a subject of speculation, but no one has ever produced evidence for more than three dimensions. I told Milton it was theoretically possible but profoundly

unlikely.”

“Why was Dad interested in such a strange topic?”

“He said he’d run across references to higher dimensions in writings from several different cultures, and he believed there was something to it. He was particularly interested in an old Basque legend about a talisman that could thicken three dimensions into four. The talisman was a topologically ambiguous object called a locomotive, or something like that.”

Molly gasped. “Lodigarri?”

“Yes, that sounds right. I’d never heard the term before. Milton was interested in the mathematics of such an object.”

“All that calculus.”

Bartletti made a dismissive gesture. “He was going on and on about higher-dimensional entities coexisting with us. Dimensions within dimensions. Patterns within patterns. I don’t mean to speak ill of your father, but it was both bizarre and boring. A curious combination.”

“I have a lodigarri right here.”

Molly reached into her purse and began to pull out the lodigarri she carried with her. It snagged a corner of her wallet and the paper slipped sideways, cutting her finger. She cried out as a drop of her blood fell into its folds.

Bartletti looked across his immaculate desk. “Do you require a bandage?”

Molly shook her head while extracting a Band-Aid from her wallet. She quickly secured the adhesive, then held up the lodigarri between two fingers.

The professor looked at the paper with distaste.

“Forgive me for not wanting to examine your soggy origami, Ms. Hawthorne. But I do hope it provides you with happy memories of your father.”

Molly put the lodigarri back into her purse and stood up. Harris joined her.

“Thank you very much for your time, professor,” Molly said.

“And you might try looking up ‘NCAA,’” Harris added.

\* \* \*

The ride home was uncomfortable.

“So please don’t tell me you think Susan and your dad were killed by interdimensional creatures from another planet,” said Harris.

“Not from another planet, no.”

“Interdimensional creatures from Earth, then? Maybe Cleveland?”

Molly sighed. “It doesn’t work that way. Or it wouldn’t, if things like that were real. I don’t know what to think. It sounds nutty but Dad was a brilliant man.”

“But he was interested in weird stuff. You said that yourself.”

“Weird isn’t crazy.”

“Sometimes it is. Especially when you’re talking about monsters from another dimension.”

“He wouldn’t have seen them as monsters. They would simply have been another culture for him to study.”

Harris threw up his hands, then quickly placed them back on the steering wheel. Conversation stopped.

Molly began to cry quietly.

“The lodigarri is tainted for me now,” she said. “It was one of the last things I learned from Dad, and it was a beautiful memory. Now it’s either a piece of crackpot nonsense or something that killed two people.”

“It didn’t kill anyone,” said Harris.

“Both Dad and Susan had one with them when they died.”

“And they were both wearing clothes, and they both drank water on the day they were killed. Correlation is not causation.”

Susan’s anger stopped her tears. “Don’t you think I know that? You pick the worst times to be intelligent.”

Harris took a moment to consider his answer. “I’m sorry. I just can’t believe that a piece of origami can open the door to bloodthirsty creatures from the fourth dimension.”

“Bloodthirsty. Blood. Oh my God.”

“Hey, I said I’m sorry.”

“No, no. I see it now. Paper cuts. Opening the door.”

“You’re gonna have to spell that out for me.”

Molly’s face was pale. “The lodigarris near the bodies had blood on them.”

“Is that surprising?”

“Yes. Dad fell onto the floor, but the lodigarri was on the far corner of his desk. And Susan’s was inside her purse where there was hardly any blood.”

“Okay. Why is that significant?”

“Both Susan and Dad had bandages on their fingers. Like this.” She held up her own injured finger.

“Irritating but hardly fatal.”

“I think the lodigarri is designed to inflict paper cuts with its sharp edges. And it’s hungry. Without blood, it’s harmless.”

“I admit you’re creeping me out, but that sounds like complete drivél.”

“Maybe. I hope so. At least I’m still alive.”

Harris pulled the car into their driveway. Molly got out and slammed the door. She stood still, concentrating intently.

“Do you hear that? Sort of a gentle whooshing sound.”

Harris listened. “Nope. Nothing.”

Molly raised her arm in front of her face in a defensive posture and moved forward slowly. She screamed.

A bright crimson line appeared on her forearm. It dripped blood onto the asphalt.

“Get back in the car!” yelled Harris.

Her body shaking, Molly retreated.

\* \* \*

The young doctor in the emergency room stitched up the ugly wound in Molly's arm with brisk professionalism. Molly showed no reaction to the procedure as she lay quietly on the paper-draped hospital table, staring into the air. Harris sat in an uncomfortable chair nearby, looking at Molly with concern but remaining silent.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Okay, that will do it. You're sure you can't provide a description of the person who did this to you?" His eyes shifted to Harris and back to Molly.

"It happened too fast," said Molly. "And for God's sake, it wasn't my husband. I know you must see a lot of domestic violence in here, but Harris isn't like that."

"Okay, I'm sorry," said the physician, flicking an imaginary piece of dust from his blue scrubs. "Can you tell me anything about the weapon? The wound was made with a very sharp blade."

"No idea. One minute, I was fine. The next, my arm was leaking blood. That's all."

Harris added an unhelpful shrug of his own.

The doctor frowned. "All right. Your arm should heal well, unless you run into the same mysterious person again. I suggest you file a police report. Good luck to you." He left the room.

Harris helped Molly off the table. She raised her forearm in front of her face as they walked back to the waiting area.

"Sit here," Harris said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Molly sat and tried to think. The whole thing would be ridiculous if it weren't terrifying.

Harris returned shortly with something in a long paper bag. He grinned as he pulled out his purchase.

"Voilà! The biggest baguette the bakery had. Hold it in front of you and stop chancing your arm."

Molly took the baguette and smiled. She arose and left the emergency room with Harris, her protective baguette pointing ahead like a large and crusty magic wand.

\* \* \*

Harris was snoring.

His head lay against Molly's shoulder as they snuggled together on the leather couch in their living room. Molly rested her injured arm on the padded armrest, her still-undamaged baguette within easy reach. There had been no hint of danger on the journey home.

What was happening? Something unseen had slashed her arm, and it was probably the same thing that had killed her father and Susan. Could it really be connected to the lodigarri? It seemed like a deranged fairy tale or a tabloid headline.

So where was the fourth dimension her father had sought? Why didn't she have some perception of it herself, if the lodigarri worked as advertised? According to that old Basque legend, the ornament was supposed to thicken three dimensions into four. But Molly was still as three-dimensional as ever, and she was being attacked by an instrument so razor-thin it barely made it into three dimensions, much less four.

It came to her in a thunderclap.

The lodigarri didn't thicken three dimensions into four. It thickened two dimensions into three.

Two-dimensional creatures. Why not? At least she had no trouble visualizing two dimensions. Such entities would have no thickness and could well be imperceptible in the 3D world. The creatures would

think of a third dimension in much the same way as humans thought of a fourth one: theoretically possible but mentally unfathomable.

What would happen if such a creature were suddenly granted a dimension of thickness, through a topologically ambiguous talisman and a blood ritual?

Terror. Disorientation. Insanity.

And perhaps a physical bond to the human whose blood had torn the fabric of its reality.

There was a faint whooshing noise. Molly recognized the sound. She grabbed her baguette, waking Harris in the process.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Molly answered. “It’s not trying to hurt me. It’s just scared out of its mind and trying to hide.”

“What are you talking about?”

Molly thrust the baguette forward. Something sliced off the tip, which fell to the floor.

“It’s here now. It’s not four-dimensional. It’s a two-dimensional creature that the lodigarri has made 3D, barely.”

“Aha, like the world’s sharpest knife.”

“Okay, now you’re being intelligent at the right time. Yes.”

“So what do we do?”

“It’s my blood that brought it here, so I’m the only one who can interact with it in 3D. It’s bound to me but is incapable of grasping what I am, so it keeps turning that crazily thin edge toward me in an effort to

conceal itself.”

“Again, what do we do?”

“Trust me and do exactly what I say.”

Molly reached into her purse on the side table and withdrew the lodigarri. She lifted Harris’s hand, pressed his index finger against one of the sharp paper edges, and pulled the talisman sharply to one side.

“Ouch!”

A drop of Harris’s blood fell from his cut finger into the lodigarri.

“Now it’s bound to both of us, so you’re also in danger,” said Molly. “But it can’t hide from two of us at the same time.”

The wobbly swooshing sound was louder now.

“Lie down on the couch,” ordered Molly. “I need to stand up.”

Gripping her baguette, she arose with great care and walked along the edge of the Persian rug that covered the floor. The bread remained intact, suffering no further injury.

The noise grew even louder, almost into a wail.

Molly saw it.

A vague rectangle suffused with faint iridescent colors, tilting and jittering as if caught in an unseen wind. As it rotated, Molly’s view became clearer.

A face? No, not a face. Pareidolia at work. But something. Something alive and intelligent and horrified. The colors intensified and became more agitated.

*I wonder how I look to it*, Molly thought.

No answer from the creature. Instead, it began to drift toward the couch, its impossibly sharp edge aimed directly at Harris.

“What’s going on? I don’t see anything,” Harris said.

It was time. Molly didn’t even like stepping on ants, but she had to protect Harris. She lifted the baguette and brought it down as hard as she could on the exposed surface of the creature, away from the edge.

There was a shriek. Harris covered his ears.

Countless tiny fragments swirled in the air, prisms refracting light as they shriveled away.

Then there was nothing.

Molly looked at Harris. “We have to burn everything. My lodigarri. Susan’s as well. Dad’s research notes. The door must be closed.”

“Do you think there are other creatures like that one?”

“I have no plans to find out.”

Harris nodded as Molly pushed her lodigarri into the trash with the edge of her baguette.

\* \* \*

A cool autumn breeze blew through the classroom windows, making Ms. Carson smile.

She loved these crisp September mornings with her rows of fourth graders arrayed in front of her. Some were looking up expectantly, others dutifully, and some in outright boredom, but there were always a few students who loved learning. The quiet girl in the first row was one of them.

Ms. Carson clapped her hands to get the class’s attention.

“Good morning! Let’s start the day off in a fun way, with show and tell. Who brought something they’d like to show the class?”

The quiet girl raised her hand.

“Jillian! Certainly. We are very glad to have you back in class with us.”

Jillian rose from her seat and walked the short distance to the front of the room. She held up an intriguing object in her right hand and began to speak.

“I’d like to show you something that’s really important to me. It’s the last thing my mom ever taught me how to do.”

The students craned their necks with interest.

“It’s called a lodigarri,” said Jillian. “I’ll show you how to make one.”



# The Ghost of John Burnberry

by Ann Wuehler

I dropped the white sage bundle into the campfire.

The remains of John Burnberry's alleged cabin made a striking, lonely contrast to the majestic Eagle Caps in this northeast corner of Oregon. He had built it with his hands and his trusty axe and the strength of his body, the people telling tales in Joseph had said.

*You'll need an off-road vehicle to get up there, if you can find it. You might try packing up there with a horse and guide. That shack of Burnberry's stays hidden. You don't want to go up there, that's bear country.*

It was both magical and prone to bears? I am become Goldilocks, destroyer of ghost cabins.

The stink of sage should bring the ghost himself out of hiding. My mother had dropped her bundle of white sage in the fire pit. Her last book, the most popular in her signature series, had been based off the encounter she claimed had happened. She had not bothered to record this meeting or write any of it down; she returned to Malibu after camping for about a week in the actual wilderness of Hells Canyon without recording a single detail of her stay.

The start of her last Anna Marsh family chronicles had been handwritten on a notepad she kept for grocery lists or things to tell Vincent she needed or wanted.

Vincent Helms had not returned with Selma Kirby, my mommy, from her excursion slash research jaunt into the wilds of Oregon. He had instead parted ways with her. Vincent, a trained photographer and all-around adoring little toad, had decided to go off to Tahiti to snap pics

of endangered turtles.

Did anyone else think this odd, strange and out of character except me?

My mother had remained at her modest Malibu home for a night before flying off to the south of France, Avignon—to write her last novel, *The Silky Forest*, an Anna Marsh Family Chronicle. Precisely a month after the supernatural romance rolled out for purchase, my mother sent me a text she had uterine cancer.

She died after Christmas, in hospice care in a country quite far from my St. Augustine home in Florida. Of course, she remained spitefully angry over my op-ed in the *LA Times* about what a Mommie Dearest she was. The editor, fired for that stunt, works now in an Iowa Starbucks or runs the rollercoaster at the MGM Grand there in Vegas. It depends on how much power you wish to grant my mother.

Her sales dipped. She had to do damage control. Her charm and sincere bewilderment worked wonders with her startled, wary fans. They embraced her, sometimes literally at her book tour readings, and forgave her for having such an ungrateful shit of a daughter.

I shook myself.

After all, my very long journey to Oregon, to find John Burnberry's falling down heap of old boards, mold, and mice nests, needed to end with me triumphant. I would debunk her ghost claim and she would have to admit that on her next book tour.

Oh damn it. I kept thinking she was alive yet. I missed our battles and the big war we fought from our lifelong trenches as mom and daughter.

Her claims to actually meet real ghosts, actual vampires, and shy, gentle werewolves were invented crud to drum up better sales. She had even claimed to meet a real angel while riding to and fro on a West Hollywood bus route. This alleged angel sighting had made it into her fourth book.

My mother wrote romance novels with a supernatural flair. Nothing too smutty, nothing too gory, with a single family featured as the main characters through seventeen books—The Anna Marsh Family Chronicles. She had done so at the expense of all else.

If she had embraced that, admitted she had treated me and her several husbands as annoying clutter, I would have accepted that.

Smoke bloomed and floated upward in the rare, good air. I smelled nothing but sage and pine. Chipmunks darted in and out of a cluster of lichen-smearred rocks. A hawk flashed by overhead. I heard the roar of the little stream that had to empty into the Snake. That narrow, dangerous river had cut Hells Canyon deep into the skin of the earth, deeper even than the Grand Canyon.

Something half-hidden and pale beneath long grasses and lupines caught my wandering eyeballs.

I pushed aside the grass to find part of a long bone. A thigh bone from a deer or elk? It had been broken open and what looked like teeth marks marred the already broken edges. This is a human bone, something in me said, and my hand released it, my hackles raised at such a thought at all. I did not know anatomy at all, least of all enough to tell a human bone from an animal one. I wiped my hand on my jeans.

Maybe it was Vincent, what was left of him.

My mother was a ruthless pro in the writing world, but she would not actually murder anyone, least of all an adoring toad like Vincent. But why would her biggest fan and personal assistant jet off to Tahiti? Why had she not replaced him? How long had she known she was sick?

The hospice workers there in Avignon had found an outline for book eighteen. It had spurred actual conspiracy theories that she had not died, but been murdered, by me at times, but mostly rival writers looking to end her reign.

I could write book eighteen but I doubt her loyal fans would gobble it up. I'd start it with a dream sequence in which all the supernatural characters performed illegal sex acts on the heroine in front of a herd of angels.

My mother would reassemble herself from her classy silver-embossed urn and smite me for such a blasphemy.

Holy shit, I missed her. I missed her. Even a bad mother is better than a dead one.

I used my foot to nudge at the earth and grass and wildflowers.

What looked like finger bones turned up beneath old pine cones and mounds of dead pine needles. Maybe a large raccoon had died here.

My heart thumped too fast. I had cold little bubbles in my belly. I shivered.

“Whatcha find?”

My throat nearly tore itself into shreds as I let out a sort of gaspy scream, my hand clutching at my chest like some old-timey opera diva. A low male voice from somewhere near the fire pit had said that.

I turned around, the skin of my face hot and tight.

The man had to stand six-five, basketball player height. Brawny build, with a rounded bulwark of a belly that those wrestler-type men can get. Big bands of muscle, not the sunken gut of a starved gym rat with a six pack. This man had earned his muscles swinging that big axe he had resting against his leg. A weird Civil War sort of blouse, tucked into jeans that fastened with buttons, covered his upper half. The color seemed somewhere between snot and smoke. For a moment, that chest became churned hamburger and swinging intestines. I could see clear through him to the falling down shack the state of Oregon had let rot in peace.

Each eye had a dot of red in it.

Now, this was either a real ghost or an actor strayed from some Oregon Trail re-enactment. I got my head back on straight, ignored whatever hallucination had been caused by snorting up gallons of white sage smoke.

“Some raccoon bones. I’m looking for John Burnberry’s cabin. Is that it? I heard he was murdered out of jealousy by Skid Row Kate.”

“Honey, he was killed by Scar-Nosed Kitty,” said a woman’s tones behind me and the man gave a nod to whatever stood at my back. “Johnny there, now—he was steppin’ out with Millie and Pearlie June. I didn’t mind that, but I did mind he bragged they were prettier than me and better at making a whiskey pie. He loved to eat, ole Johnny there. He surely loved to eat.” A laugh sounded that raised every hair on my head.

My head swung about so I could see this woman with the hell dimension chuckle. Tall, around six foot or more, with long hair twisted into a single braid and cloth trousers instead of a dress. A long dark blue shirt and necklaces that hung down to her waist, mostly beads and what looked like black feathers, completed her ensemble.

It was her face that drew my attention, as her nose had a deep red scar across it. She was not pretty—a countenance round as the moon,

bulging clear eyes, no discernable eye lashes and fierce thick brows that met over that mangled nose. Her grin sent me away from her—she was not sane and she was dangerous.

My instincts picked up on that right quick.

“I’m sorry, that must have been awful,” I mumbled out, trying to keep them both in view, trying to edge toward the rented ATV, parked in the shade of a giant pine tree, my hand going to the keys in my back pocket. Oregon had its share of crazies, after all. Maybe the Joseph ghost story tellers liked to send annoying tourists out to meet the ‘bears’ that lived by the magical cabin no one could find.

I concocted an elaborate fantasy about this Oregon couple, wearing pioneer-era clothes, murdering tourists foolish enough to seek out geographical locations supposed to be teeming with ghosts. It would be a poorly written Hollywood schlockfest, with a C-level cast, shot over a couple days in Canada.

I’d write it, of course. It paid the rent and the bills and my mother’s name opened doors for me. Screenwriter that can pump out the words, sometimes teacher for creative writing and film studies—with my mom’s name used to get past the form rejection emails, if the callous fucks even bothered to send out rejection notices.

Mama Monster had pointed that out in our last actual face to face.

*Willy Kirby, you can’t use my name and dick me around in that damn Times rag*

I sure can, mom—after which I stormed out, never to see her alive again.

“Bide a spell. I sure do like the stink of this.” John Burnberry yanked a derelict log over. He sat, watching the flames and the smoke, a combination of Gary Cooper, Sam Elliot, and evil Santa. “Don’t mind Kitty. She’s a bit hungry, is all. We haven’t eaten since last year or so.

Time gets away from ya round here.”

I gulped a bit, wondering if I should offer them some granola bars. I had brought cans of chili, some beef jerky, granola bars, and water and whiskey. Just in case I wanted to toast my success at not finding any ghosts.

“I guess we should ask what you’re doing here.” Kitty picked up the small bones, let them bounce and rattle in her palms as if she held dice, not something that had once been inside something living. “Poor thing, got scattered to kingdom come. I used to be neat as a pin.”

“We did promise to bury what was left.” John lifted an ass cheek, let loose a juicy blast of gas. My last girlfriend had been that natural and gross with her bodily functions. A farting ghost was new to my list of go-to monsters, ghouls, creeps, and villains. “That your mama? Showed up here with that little man? You look a bit like that woman with the dark hair and the white streak. Come sit! You gonna try to get to that machine over there? Loud awful thing. You hear em all over anymore. Even when sleeping. You can’t sleep deep anymore.”

“Come on, now, honey. Sit. You got a name other than dinner?” Kitty took my arm, tucked it through her arm, and it seemed blood slimed me the moment our bodies bumped. I saw blood cascading down from a ragged gap cut into her hairline and forehead—rather like someone took a chop at her head; white-gray matter smeared with red in that gap.

Scar-Nosed Kitty smiled at me as she led me toward her lumberjack lunatic fella. No blood cascaded down from a rift in her forehead.

I sat. John stared into the fire, watching the sage smoke, and Kitty went to stand on the opposite side, humming beneath her breath as if content and at peace. My entire body hummed with energy and the need to flee this, get back to the Boise airport and go home. Just forget this feud with my dead mother and write a real screenplay that would win me awards and glory for all time. I didn’t have that kind of talent, but a

girl can dream big when she’s faced with strangeness.

“I’m Willy Kirby. People know I’m up here.”

“Willy. That short for something?”

“Are you really John Burnberry? Because he’s dead. For over a hundred years,” I countered, willing myself to finish this, survive it and get back to surf, beach, and final notices. I had maxed out my Visa getting here; worth it to win one against mom, just fucking worth it. “Did you two talk to my mom? She’s kinda famous. Was. She’s dead, too.”

A sting in each of my eyes over stating that at all. Both observed me with their red-dotted gazes, which had no color. Clear eyes, like plastic wrap, with a red dot in each center rather than a pupil. Contact lenses could do that. Hollywood tricks could do that. I refused to let myself believe I perched on a log with two ghosts nearby. My sanity struggled to fly away into the blue bowl of the sky.

“She rode up here on a horse, with the little man. We can take pictures of all this, she told the little man. Oh my gosh, it’s just so gorgeous. Set up the camp, Vincent.” John stretched out his hand, let the smoke drift through it. I saw that. I saw the smoke go through his hand, not around it. “That about right, Kitty ole girl? I get mixed up.”

“Yep, you telling it just fine,” Kitty ole girl responded, bending to remove a carving knife from her boot. The blade looked rusty and pitted, until the sun revealed the shiny metal as whole and perfect. “We watched the black-haired woman and the little man for near two days. We laughed fit to be tied over them trying to set up a tent. She wanted to tell our stories, she kept calling out. John decided we should introduce ourselves proper, he’s a gentleman, through and through.”

“I am not,” John laughed and my skin humped into goose bumps. He reached over and patted my arm, as if trying to let me know it wasn’t going to get nasty just yet.

My mouth dried up, my teeth caught at my inner lip. His touch made me feel icky. His touches made me want to shower with a bottle of bleach and douche myself with Lysol just in case some of that icky had crawled inside me.

“Third day of her calling for us and burning the same sage, we showed ourselves. We told our stories, we told her lots of stories and the little man was our price and she paid. We ate the little man’s horse as well. Horse is a tough meat.”

I wet my lips as best I could.

Had he just told me my mother had handed over Vincent as some sort of price for some stories? Why did I feel worse for the horse?

“What sort of stories? Why the horse?”

“You get hungry, you eat what’s there. Stories about living up here. Trying to find gold. Trying to survive the winters. Falling in love with the local girls.” Here John threw a nod and a wink to Kitty, who winked back. Blood poured from the wound in her head. It seemed an endless flow. Surely no person had that much blood in them. It had to dry up. “I even told your mama about cutting up my partner when the meat and beans ran out. I couldn’t find an elk or a deer or even a stray cat. We fought and I won. I hung him between two trees, like you would a hog or a steer. I wept the whole time, but I was hungry.”

“Okay,” I waved my hand, oddly sympathetic to this trite tale yet not wanting details. “You told my mom about that and she still wanted more? She wrote nice love stories with nice ghosts in them. No gore, no cannibalism, nothing like that.”

“I told her the truth, Willy. I took her inside that cabin and let her see me. I let her see all of me because she was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Dying,” Kitty supplied when John Burnberry returned to staring at the smoke. “She told Vincent to stay here and she went away. Obedient little dog, that one. Now, Vincent, you stay here, your ma told that little man. You come back down when they’re done with you. Tell em I went to Tahiti, he told her back, tears dripping down his face. I always wanted to go there, he said.”

My mind short-circuited. I had not heard that. This was not happening at all. Acid had been added to the white sage bundle or some other substance, that when burned, produced vivid hallucinations. That made more sense than this.

John’s hand gripped my arm, his fingers cool and powerful. “It was quick. I don’t like making dinner suffer. He didn’t have time to do much more than grunt, truth be told. Kitty skinned him out and we ate proper that night and several nights after. I never stop being hungry. I wish I did. I wish I knew how to stop being hungry.”

I had lost track of Kitty. I had been watching John, distracted by his hand on my arm, by his low deep voice almost putting me to sleep with his deadly version of fairy tales. By the way the sunlight let me see he had the substance of a bubble.

The knife blade glanced off my rib.

My scream punctured through whatever spell John had cast on me. I twisted about and up, trying to knock that big knife from Kitty’s hands. I heard the swish of an axe being swung and I ducked, just in time, before John took my head.

I thrust myself backwards, nearly stepping in the sunken fire pit, but I made it to the long grasses and wildflowers; sprawled out, bleeding, my hand pressed to my left side, my blood warm and disgusting against my palm. The two smiled down at me, each armed and ready to gut me or behead me or whatever they wished to do. They had time. They had this lovely, hard-to-get-to place. They had trees to tie me to so they could better work out how to turn me into a casserole.

John Burnberry licked my blood off Kitty's knife, their red-dotted eyes fixed on me. I sat up, my side throbbing where I had been stabbed—a teasing stab, not a stab meant to end my life. He kept licking that knife, eyes closing. I watched a ghost nearly orgasm from licking my blood off a knife blade.

Get out of here, my mother whispered in my ear.

I heard her voice. My eyes caught sight of shadows that should not be there. Shadows in the open, standing in the long grass, standing among clumps of wildflowers. I saw Vincent Helms gathering up his own bones, his little rosebud of a mouth pursed in that way that told the world he had work to do, don't bother him.

I had to make it to the ATV. I had the keys in my back pocket. I had removed them because I've lived in cities all my life and that's just what you do. Get back to Joseph, get home, get a job slinging coffee to bring in some money while I waited for a teaching gig or a writing gig.

*Get out of here, Willianna Vivian.*

I stood as the two parted to stalk me. The sadness in John's face scared me into near catatonia for a bit. He had to chop me up and turn me into a casserole. He had no choice at all. Scar-Nosed Kitty had embraced being a cannibal ghost, he had not. But I saw sorrow on her face, I saw regret and anger and a grief so deep I nearly fell toward it, to let them do what they wished so they could find some sort of peace.

Something slapped the back of my head. My mother had done that when I pissed her off. A light tap meant to startle more than physically hurt me. Vincent found his own skull half-buried near a clump of bright orange flowers. He pointed at the ATV before he disappeared, just vanished, the skull now gone, the flowers still there.

I ran toward the vehicle, trying to get the keys out of my back pocket, as the two ghosts walked after me. I fumbled the key into the slot and

the machine roared to life, instead of that movie stereotype of the engine refusing to turn over. I screamed, I laughed, I floored the thing and it sent me into a tree.

Park in the shade, which meant you parked under trees, and if you forget to put the thing in reverse, you go forward. Stupid panicked me.

I flew off and landed on my stabbed side. The ghosts stood over me, looking over me, with the axe and the knife ready to go.

“Wait,” I lay there, stunned, in survival mode, catching glimpses of my dead mother in her favorite little black dress, and other ghosts stopping to watch my imminent murder. The entire clearing filled with spirits. Children stopped playing or tossing rocks. A little girl holding a corn cob doll, her eyes clear except for red dots in the center, nodded to me. An Asian man holding one of those pans you use to find gold in streams or rivers tilted his head, his long ponytail falling over his shoulder. A horse, with chunks missing here and there from its frame, bent that long head to graze.

My mind ticked away. Stories. I had stories to offer the world. I was my mother's daughter.

“Kitty,” I sat up, my hands palm-out, ready to pitch to murderous ghosts. “Why not a book about you? Why can't you be saved? In book eighteen? Your great-grandson will die in Korea if he doesn't stay home or whatever! He's an orphan cowboy. No. Stay back. Listen to me.”

My mother walked between me and the two ghosts. Her kitten heels made no dent in the earth or grass. I could smell her perfume. She had switched to Elizabeth Arden's Green Tea ten years before her death. Sweet green notes floated up my nose. The same smell that marked our last meeting.

“Take an arm, John Burnberry. Let her write that story, Kitty. I'll make sure my daughter will be allowed to write book eighteen in a contract

someone will find soon. Deus ex machina, my dear Willy. I'm not a ghost for nothing," and she looked at me with her clear eyes, the red dots like the side of a Bing cherry. "I was going to let them kill you and trap you here in this damn meadow. Like my poor Vincent."

I kept my lips closed rather than yell or scream at my dead mother. Had she planned this? Goaded me to expose her sad tricks at ghost hunting? To end my life and win the mother-daughter duel between us? I could not breathe or think. Her fingers ran over my lips, over my cheeks, through my short, filthy hair. Her perfume stuck to the hairs of my nostrils. I would smell it now for the rest of my life.

"I'm sorry, mom," I whispered, the slime coating my soul telling me I'd survive this. Slime washes off, even souls. I told her what she wished to hear.

John Burnberry took my left arm with his fire-heated axe, the wound sealed shut with that same blade as Kitty carried off my twitching arm, raising it high in triumph. I fell downward and downward.

I woke up in the Baker City hospital, with my left side heavily bandaged. I flexed my right hand, my left hand no doubt scattered all over that clearing waiting for me to collect my own bones when my life ended. I would return to that place; my mother and her pet ghosts had damned me.

A nurse, cheerful of face and chubby-cute of body, bustled in, purple scrubs marking her as some sort of medical wizard. Her dark eyes swept me, her gaze ending on the drip that fed into my right arm. A needle in my vein that had to be straight morphine dulling the immense pain.

"Well, hey there. Can you tell me your name?"

"Willy Kilmer. How did I get here?"

"Ah. Some people camping nearby heard the engine rev. And then

screaming. Police said you must have been in drive instead of reverse, you severed your arm, got to the fire pit, cauterized what was left and passed out. It's front page news here. Let's check that ticker. Mm."

She listened to my heart, she tucked me in, she got me water and assured me I would live.

It's been almost four months since then.

I dictated and mother typed. I applied for benefits and help, all of which got turned down, but I applied again. I wrote about a silly love story set during America's Golden Age, as it were, as my stump healed.

My mother's agent found a contract that had been put in the wrong folder or some such convenient shit. A percentage of sales will go to me, but most will go to the Oregon Historical Society, which helped her so much in her last few years understand the grand tradition of Oregon's gold rush history.

My dead mother stood on the sidewalk in front of my apartment building, her face lifted to the near hurricane rains, her little black dress flapping just so in the fury of the winds. She vanished, as if never there at all. Her perfume soaks the walls of my apartment. Her book will go into final editing soon. It was never my book.

John Burnberry sat on my other folding chair, the chair creaking under his bulk. He held out his hand and I took it, his fingers like cool iron as they closed over mine.

"Willy," he said, tugging me toward him a bit.

"I know. Overcome, bootstraps, fame and fortune out of tragedy, blah blah."

His axe took my head. I felt the blade sever through my spinal column.

The press wrote that some “crazed fan” of my mother murdered me. Book eighteen became The Book to get. My mother, always with the PR stunts.

Selma Kirby and I sit in Burnberry’s lovely meadow, the shack collapsed now from snow and neglect and time. Vincent Helmes looked yet for his bones, but I felt no such compunction to find what had become of my left arm.

Death is a strange dream, a sort of misty existence, and I’ve yet to find heaven or hell.

“Did you know, Willy,” my mother shifted on the rocks we used for a perch. “I based Anna Marsh on you.”

“Great.” I watched as Kitty and John stalked a small herd of elk into the pines. “Did you send John to cut my head off?”

Her clear eyes, with the red dots, fell on me. She smiled. She laughed, banging her Jimmy Choo kitten heels against the rocks.

I will find a way to tell this story. I will find a way to be heard. I will not be some sensational segment in some true crime documentary that will be the number one streaming wonder for a day or two. I’m not a ghost for nothing, as my mother once told me.

I’m not a ghost for nothing.



# A word from a lanternfly

by Kevin Canfield

That's right, stomp on me,  
bring the heel of your shoe down  
upon my slender gray thorax,  
grind my antennae and my elegant  
red wings into the concrete;  
you who have agreed that we  
must be murdered on sight,  
lest we upset the delicate ecological  
balance for which you, with  
your combustion engines and  
your factory farms and  
your on-demand lives, have  
shown such reverence;  
what matters here is the  
delivery system: you, or to be  
more precise, the soles of  
your designer boots and  
your brand-name sneakers,

which carry bits of our guts  
into your homes, where we'll stay,  
driven into the cracks between  
your floorboards and smeared  
into the fibers of your area rugs;  
we have no plans to revivify—  
this isn't one of your elementary  
science fiction entertainments;  
rather, we're sustenance, an  
inexhaustible source of fuel for  
those following behind us;  
you cannot fathom their  
capabilities and hungers;  
it will be some time before  
they arrive, but when that happens,  
you will be forced to revise  
your collective understanding of  
what an invasive species can do

# Death Moon

by Brian Malachy Quinn



# A Solitary Walk

by JM Cyrus

“They're coming!”

“Quick! Hurry!”

“You'll miss them!”

She heard the children's shouts. The village pulled itself into action. There was no debating what would happen next.

The villagers ran towards the eastern boundary walls in orderly quiet. A few louder voices called for attention, organising what needed to be done so nobody would be left behind.

The walls were built of rough grey stone, twice as tall as a man, and thick enough so people could stand three deep at the top. The walls provided protection, marked a boundary, and were a place to watch without risk.

The children jostled elbows as they clambered the worn, uneven steps. Their fingertips grazed the stone and rough lichen flaked onto palms and was wiped onto trousers and shirts.

The elderly and infirm were carried and perched on chairs brought by the young adults. The rest of the village filtered between. Everyone was there.

The sky was clear. It had only been an hour since the sun rose. The walls faced east, and Jem shielded her eyes to the bright, strobing sunlight on this early autumn day. It made her blink and her vision haze.

There was a hint of a chill in the air, autumn spoke in a louder whisper. It would be hotter later, but for now, there was a chasing coolness, the chill of the night taking its time to burn away.

The summer had ended, and the greens that remained amongst the sun-bleached yellows were dark and hardy. The flowers were mostly finished, and the crops to the west were plump and ripening.

It was an unremarkable morning, a morning like so many others; and yet it was unique, full of the winds of change and spectacle.

The whole village stood on this ordinary, tantalising, changeable, pregnant moment and watched the single figure walk past outside the village, less than a hundred feet away.

The figure was hunched, bent over like it was very old, the weight of the world tipping them over. It was covered in a dark cape-like garment of black feathers and dark leaves. The black feathers contained fibres of iridescent green, and the leaves shone when at an angle to the sunlight. They swayed hypnotically around the figure within.

The garment covered them entirely, right from the head, which peaked the covering with angular shapes beneath, to the floor, trailing behind in a long train. It extended but hung a little, not quite touching the ground.

As they walked there was the occasional hint of foot or boot or a glimpse of something else in the shadows. A shine of metal, a twisted knotted growth, a foot more mud than leather. Or was it the rusted metal of a sabaton, or perhaps the fringed hair of a fetlock?

The steps it took were lumbering and tectonic in their resolution. The slow, inevitable progress cracked and juddered, the way a gigantic oak tree would walk if it could.

A small breeze rustled the hair of the people on the wall. The feathers on the back of the walker quivered.

The figure sloped over the moss-covered rocks and the sun-beaten grass. Its pace did not waver in the change from rock to rock, from mossy surface to grass, to mud to stream. Nothing dissuaded its pace.

Jem watched with her peers and neighbours, her silence heavy in her mouth. Awed silence filled the wall, a silence full of sighs and mouthed whispers.

The figure continued.

A keen-eyed watcher noticed pops of life emerging behind the figure and silently pointed to beyond the trailing train of feathers and leaves. Small plants, tiny flowers, became visible to the villagers as they proliferated and the walker's path was marked. They lined a border, a snail trail or blood trail of protection. A living salt line.

The flowers were a strange combination of colours. A purple so dark it could be black, a greenish white, and an acid yellow.

Jem knew the flowers would disappear within a few hours, separation from their host or the sun burning them away. The bravest children will go out once the figure has gone to collect what they could, to add to the doctor's stores.

She remembered when the walker last went by she'd only been a child and had been one of the collectors. She remembered the flowers' ethereal beauty and how they'd visibly wilted and shrivelled in her sweaty palm on the run back to the village gate. Their beauty had made her gasp with wonder. Now, even from this distance, she saw precariousness in the precipitous blooms.

The hunched figure continued, the dark enveloping feathers hiding secrets.

The villagers watched as the walker disappeared into the distant trees to the northeast, evaporating into the shadows.

The villagers came to from their spellbound reverie and wiped the sunlight from their eyes. There was a quiet sigh of relief. The walker had seen no reason to stop.

As the elderly were helped down the steps, the children gambolled down, able to laugh again, and the adults made their contemplative way back to the streets of their village and their homes; Jem paused and stared at the oily, dark shadows beneath the trees. She felt a pang of her own age; a decade had passed and she felt the confronting wall of her own imminent adulthood.

The beginning of the day resumed from its pause. No one talked about what they saw, although the children were full of questions. Stories would be saved for the evening.

Jem returned to her chores, helping her mother in her shop by the gates. Her brain tickled with curiosity, her fascination with the walker deep as a hatchet strike.

She watched the children be sent by the doctor from the village gates on their mission. The doctor and her nurses waited beside the gates with their metal baskets, ready to receive.

Jem occasionally heard words from the group, carried by the breeze.

“Lots of green ones. An omen?”

“Depends on what the green ones will be needed for.”

Jem looked at the pinprick colours passing between small and larger hands, and couldn't shake a feeling of sadness. Jem's mother wrenched

her from her overhearing and contemplations, asking her about chore progress.

When the day was over, and the uncollected flowers had withered away to non-existence, the village did not need to announce what happened next.

A fire was made in the central square, with seats arranged in concentric circles. Thick, spiced vegetable soup had been made, and the villagers received it with gratitude. The people sat close together, breathing in the firelit air. The evening behind them cooled, autumn extending her fingers of orange and gold towards them.

It was old Mrs Wanless who spoke to lead the recounting. Jem could not remember who had led it last time, almost ten years before.

The stories were not told outside the day the walker passed, for fear of bad luck. But everyone knew the back and forth, the call and answer to start.

“We saw the walker today,” Mrs Wanless said, her rich voice carrying through the crowd.

“We saw the walker pass,” the village answered. A few children giggled and were silenced by their parents.

“We saw the walker keep walking,” she continued.

“We saw the walker resolute.”

“We are grateful for the walker.”

“We saw the walker today.”

There was a small pause, and the villagers stared into the leaping, dancing flames.

One of the children seemed more wired than the others, questions

writhing within her. Her mother nudged her and nodded encouragingly. The voice of the small girl was shy but strengthened with her curiosity.

“Why does the walker pass?”

The elderly group, about a dozen of the oldest members of the village, looked at each other, exchanging knowing glances. They indicated Mrs Ryall, who had a sip of her soup and began.

“Long ago, before even our grandparents were born,” she paused and gestured towards her companions, lots of raised eyebrows and pertinent looks. Children laughed, and some of the adults chuckled.

“As I was saying! Long ago, before even our grandparents were born, our patron lady goddess desired a hero.”

Mrs Ryall widened her arms, a pantomime of strength. There was another good-natured laugh in the audience. She continued,

“As to why, that reason has been lost. Some say there was a war with the south, others say a threat of invasion from the north, and others say the goddess knew it would soon be time when she would no longer live among us. It was time she left us, and went to the depths of the sea with her brothers and sisters.

“She needed someone to trust. Someone who could be her champion whilst she was gone.

“Our hero stepped forth. They were proud, loyal, full of patriotic pride, ardent and steadfast. They were willing to lay down their life for their fellows. They wished to fulfil the goddess’ wishes, and be the hero she wished them to be.

“They offered their life in service to their people, and she took them at their word.

“The walker walks round the whole of the goddess’ land, and keeps

the bad things out.”

Jem pondered the usually misted horizon she would see from the walls when she went up to look alone. The warm wooden bowl curved familiarly in her hand, its contours from the wood turning settled into the flesh of her palm the same as a hundred times before. Her finger fretted at a minute ripple, where a knot only mildly disrupted the bowl’s smoothness.

A child interrupted the pause, asking, “But why do they look like that?”

The child’s face was innocent, asking the question with no malice or ill-intent. But as Jem watched the storytellers’ faces and saw ritual and practiced retelling, she did not see sympathy.

The storytellers offered morsels of detail.

“The walker was beautiful once. They gave themselves utterly.”

“The hero was a person just like you and me. They volunteered their whole self to service.”

“It changed them.”

“Well, the things they protect us from caused them to change.”

“My grandmother told me about their hand, the last thing they lost. It had long elegant fingers, broad palms and tidy nails.”

“My grandfather told me his grandmother once saw the hero’s face. Astonishing, striking beauty.”

“Thick, luscious hair that shone like a river.”

“Eyes the colour of a rough sea.”

“My mother told me of the hero’s back, shoulders of strength and mus-

cular grace.”

There were some snorts among the adults, and the children looked confused.

“But what’s beneath the cape?” another child asked, impatient and inquisitive.

Jem recognised her own curiosity but felt wary of the story. She only had vague sensory memories of when she’d last heard it, when she had been but a child herself. She remembered how it had made her feel; gratitude, wonder, pride, astonishment, and amazement. The tantalising, rapt thrill when the whole world falls away and your soup goes cold as you want to hear just one more word of the tale.

But now, Jem felt wary. Though the soup had been well-spiced, with liberal alliums and capsicums, she could taste bile.

“We’ve only ever seen them covered,” a speaker answered.

“Indeed,” added another.

“When they said they would give their life to their people in service of our lady, that’s what happened,” Mr Magellan said, glancing to the others for permission to proceed.

The children sat straighter. Mr Magellan always told the best stories; full of drama, action, and bad guys bested.

“Our hero was once beautiful and strong, ready and willing to bear their sword and shield against danger to protect others.

“The start of their service was simple enough. They were capable and could easily handle their foe.

“But, not always unscathed.”

Here the teller paused for effect. The suspense made the soles of Jem's feet itch.

"First," he continued, "we think wolves attacked a village in the west, and in the fight, one tore a hole in our hero's side. The wound closed over not with skin, but with feathers. The same black feathers of the eagle that flies over their skies.

"Then, the tribes from the south tried to cross the border and steal the women from a southern town. Our hero lost a hand in the fight, it was only them against 40 men. A knotted root grew in its stead, holding the sword in place and they won. It was like the dark wood of the tree growing in the town's centre, hard and coiled.

"Little by little, parts of our hero were taken from them by their deeds, and replaced by the land they saved.

"When the skin on their legs was blistered from the acidic snakes in the north, the skin hardened into tortoiseshell.

"Then, when the king of the bandits came from the east--" There was an intake of breath in the audience, as their village was in the eastern-most part of the goddess's chosen land. "--The fight was bloody and our hero nearly overpowered by the strength of the warriors. The bandit king chopped off their beautiful head."

A child yelped, and the man continued his tale.

"The goddess's gift continued, and they grew a new one, chosen from the land. Some say it is a goat skull from those that traverse our rocks or the roots of the pale tree that push between them. Theirs was absorbed into the land, given in service.

"The day has passed when the last of their human body was lost. Only their heroics remain."

The children sat in rapt silence. Jem felt nauseous; the soup had be-

come cold slop in her belly. She didn't want to hear any more but said nothing. The group of elders finished the tale together.

"Each time we see them, they have grown another part of themselves like the land they protect."

"Until one day they will be a part of the land itself."

The audience was silent, considering the tale.

Jem looked into her soup, the thick ingredients indistinguishable in the firelight.

The last time she'd heard this story was the last time the walker passed, nearly ten years before when she had been only a child. She had heard these replacements as badges of honour, mysteries of strange bravery, war wounds to be proud of the same way a child loves a new scar or an injury from a fight well won. She'd coasted on the grateful pride of the elders telling the tale, and the polite gratitude of the other adults.

Now she was 17, full of life, ambition, and tickling rebellion. The fear of the entrapment of the hero's life was harder to hear, duty conflicting with personhood. A disquieted squeak within her threatened to roar. The simplicity of childhood felt the other side of an ice age.

The hero had been giving themselves to the land, without the ability to escape or change their fate. Now she could see the horror, the sadness, the pain of it. She wondered what it would be like to be trapped in an eternity of lonely service. She longed to be far away from the crowds, and desperately wanted comfort, but in a place unreachable by anybody. How could she be reassured if the walker remained as fact?

She wiped away a tear, remembering the lumbering figure as they made their way into the clutch of trees.

The group spoke about the heroics, and everyone was grateful for the hero's service.

“Did you see how it looks like they have a tail, from the way the cape moved?” one adult asked.

Jem went to bed early, and didn't sleep.

\* \* \*

Autumn passed. The harvest was collected without issue, but Jem saw worried looks and heard concerned whispers from behind closed doors. She saw the wrinkles around the mouth of the village head-woman deepen.

Winter arrived. The cold swept in in a sudden surprising flurry, the temperature plummeting. The ground froze and the mud solidified. Cart tracks were frozen solid and unyielding; a last journey preserved until spring.

The villagers centralised the elderly and the children from the cold, turning the larger central village halls into dormitories to share body heat and keep fuel use down. The rest congregated in a few select places.

Spring felt very far away.

There were whispers about the food stores, a hint of decreasing hope. The man in charge of the food stores said everybody would be fine with a bit of rationing and a lot of imagination. We can make it to spring.

The midwinter solstice came, and the cold remained. The daylight hours grew longer, but the cold did not leave. The food stores decreased, and it stayed cold.

Jem would occasionally visit the wall alone, and she continued to do so even in the freezing temperatures. She climbed the icy, precarious steps in early afternoon, when the sunshine was like weightless gossamer, barely touching the frost flowering on the mortar. She'd watch

the misted horizon, thinking of warmth and exotic, far-away places. Or even just the other side of the rocky fields.

On a rare day when the perpetually misted landscape was unshrouded, she would imagine what it was that she could see. Were the distant glimmers the white of snow, perhaps? Or the white of foamy, peaked water? The rocky distance beckoned, tempted, and forbade.

The villagers ate pickles, carefully made bread, and dreamt of spring.

The first crocus was a warrior, pushing its resplendent violet through the hard frost. The purple was bright and cheerful, the orange stamens vivid. Such a contrast to the desolate winter it almost ached to look at it.

The village hoped it was a turning point.

But the next day they awoke and the world felt different. The cold mist had thickened into a settled fog that penetrated into the village and blurred the features of their homes.

There were unfamiliar noises on the edge of hearing, that no one could isolate or understand until whispers spread of what could be seen from the walls.

There were a group of men waiting at the borderline, sometimes visible in the thick mist as it ebbed and flowed over the rocky ground.

Nerves and uncertainty spread through the village. The bravest and most curious gathered together to climb the walls to see. Jem was among the first, choosing her favoured spot.

At first, all they saw was mist, the hint of rough silhouettes in the murky grey-white.

Then there was the light of a match; a pipe had been lit. The mist cleared enough to see figures, not clear how many, sitting on the hard



ground, bulky in furs, waiting. Watching.

Jem stood close to her friends, huddled and defiant; their mothers had told them not to go. Jem remembered the path of their hero and could see the men were sitting just over the patrol line of the figure's passage.

The village held its breath. It felt like hours passed but it could not be; the insipid sun had not travelled far.

The men did not move. Occasionally those on the walls could hear a voice by craning their ears, but it was wordless.

The mist began to clear. The watchers from the wall saw the glinting shine of knives. Jem felt icy fear dribble down her spine, chilling her even beneath her layers of wool and fur. Whispers cascaded along the wall like unseen butterflies.

“They’ve come to take the food,” somebody muttered, and there was quiet panic and prayer. The long winter had been so cruel and hard already, and it had felt so close to finishing.

When the weak sun had stewed away more mist, when visibility had reached a hundred feet, and the viewers on the wall could meet the men’s eyes, the men stood.

Their gaze was confrontational and resolute. They glanced at one another and crossed the line.

Jem held her breath. Futures splayed before her. What would happen as they crossed the line? What if nothing happened? What would they do in the village?

As they crossed the imagined border, the walker’s patrol line, nothing changed, as if there was no line at all.

The men’s expressions shifted to confidence; they exchanged looks of bravado and encouragement. There were a few half smiles of grim tri-

umph.

They walked at a slow, unhurried pace; saving their energy, bristling with hunger, determination, and need.

The villagers’ breaths made worried misty shapes in the air. The men on the ground puffed cloudy phantoms, enlarging their bulk.

A dozen paces away from the gate, the almost score of men stopped. A sound approached from the northeast.

There was a loud creak, like a forest in a high wind.

And the walker emerged from the receding mist, dark feathers, shadows, and rustling leaves. It shuffled and crouched, moving faster than when it had passed five months before.

Jem looked at it with relief and fear, mesmerised by its gait. Though the men below looked sinister with hungry eyes and shining blades, they were a simple threat. The walker was magnetic and dangerous in the way of a pitch-black forest, a desolate plain, or a sun-bleached skeleton. It was the call of the void, the inability to stop watching an accident in motion, the attraction of the forbidden, the whispering echo along an untrodden trail, and the thrill of a maze. Hidden potential, nightmares in its very existence, and tantalising, unworded secrets.

It approached and stopped ten feet away from the men. The men turned towards it, expressions uncertain.

There was a pause as they faced each other, hero to trespassing, potential thief. The figure was stationary, its feathers and leaves tousled by the cold breeze. The villagers on the wall held their breath in anxiety and hope. Jem’s muscles seized in suspense.

Then the walker unfurled, the way an animal would rear on its hind legs. The cloak pulled back from its head and shoulders and revealed

the hidden secrets of its belly. It stood over ten feet tall.

Someone on the wall let out a small scream as the cape pulled away from a head and face of merging pale bone and burnished wood, frozen in an expression of agony, anger, and attack. There was visible, misted breath coming from its mouth, heartrending proof of life within.

As the feathers and leaves withdrew Jem saw the body of bones, branches, sharp flints, and hanging fronds of moss. A collarbone in twisted plaited woody vines, the other in sun-bleached bone. The shape of a ribcage preserved in knotted twig-bristling branches, the hip in angular flint, sinew in vine tendrils, upper arms burnished in tortoiseshell, with warped root forearms holding two long swords, their hilts darkened with age. A body shrivelled; dark and dry feathers. The husk of a person. A forest floor with knives.

Jem saw beauty and horror in the unrecognisable body. Tears froze beside her eyes.

The walker let out a screech like every bird of prey at once; their voice box had been replaced long ago.

The men stared at the rearing figure, mouths gaping and eyes filled with dread. A few looked towards the village, others looked at each other, and they wondered whether it was worth it.

A few still thought it was. They were hungry, and their families too. They tightened their shoulders, tautened their muscles, and ran towards the gate.

The hero ran after them, graceful and gigantic, the ground shaking as their mismatched feet leapt.

They came upon the men, and blades met flesh and knife. The others rushed to save their friends, hurrying to stab the walker in the back or cut off a limb. But their knives came away bent and twisted, or they chipped off an insignificant splinter of wood, or they tore holes in the

feathered cape. Those that charged were shaken off like bugs. The men that met their knives to the walker's blades crumpled with the force. How does one fight the land when it protects itself?

The villagers on the wall watched the brutality below.

After a few minutes, the men had not found an opening. All were wounded, a few lay still on the ground, and the fight stopped.

The walker paused, its shoulders bent with tension.

The remaining men looked at each other and at the figure. All breathed heavily. The men held up their hands in surrender, to which the walker inclined their head and gestured towards the east.

The men lifted their unconscious friends and retreated over the line back into the mist. Limping, huddled, and hungry.

They dissolved into the receded, opaque murk and the mist closed behind them.

The villagers sighed, and the tension released a little. There was no cheer; the mood remained watchful and hesitant. Apprehensive.

The walker's figure hunched, tired from exertion. They rested their sword ends on the ground, propping their coiled shoulders on their strange walking sticks, releasing audible breaths. The cape was still away from the head and shoulders, attached below the shoulder blades, revealing intimate and vulnerable shapes in the curved wood and bone. Breath puffed above it like smoke.

Jem peeped around at the hesitant, quiet crowd and descended the steps, her feet following an instinct she didn't yet want to name. She went to her mother's shop by the gates and filled an earthenware cup with water from the simmering kettle above the fire.

"Jem? What happened--" Her mother's question followed her out of

the closing door.

She carried the cup over the frozen, crunching ground. The cup steamed profusely in the cold, and she could see layers of water peeling away from its surface. The smell of boiled water contained hints of the earthy herbs her mother added for rejuvenation.

When she reached the gates, the walker was still hunched just beyond. She unlatched the wrought iron bolt and opened it with one mittened hand. She slipped out, hearing the crowd's wordless whispers from the wall.

The space beyond the gate felt large, edges indefinable from the mist and the unknown horizon.

The figure was stooped, shaking with rasping breath. It gave a faint cough.

She wondered whether she was frightened, but realised she was not. She prodded her bravery and found other things within.

As she drew closer, she could see the holes in the cape from the men and their knives were starting to seal, growing over with feathers, leaves, and creeping tendrils. The rustling movements sounded alive. The walker smelled like spring to her, fresh, tender hope.

She walked around to face them and came eye to eye with their mask of bone and wood. The features returned her gaze, an expression of pain and discomfort, a stretched scream within its whorled lips. But as she watched, the shape softened and melted into one of resignation and release.

Jem looked over its body, its terrifying features, its horrifying shape, its sorrowful purpose and saw beauty in the sinuous curves and natural strength. Her feelings burned within her, as hot as the kettle's water,

conflicting, coagulating, refusing to reconcile and mix. She wanted to run away, both into the village and towards the horizon, but also to stay with the figure. She admired the walker's sacrifice, but she churned with anger and sadness that they should have to.

She wanted to say so many things to them. Thank you for saving us, thank you for always being here, thank you for what you do, what is your name, who are you, who were you, I'm sorry this is happening to you, I've cried for you, I'm proud of you.

She held out the steaming water in offering and gratitude. Their eyes met.

"Are you tired?" Jem whispered, surprised at the sound of her own voice in the quiet, three words rising to the top of her inner maelstrom.

The voice of the walker was creaking and majestic, the movement of branches in a tall tree, the changing of the seasons and the whisper of the wind over the rocks first thing in the morning.

"Yes."

And with the sound of its voice, she realised all her feelings could exist at once. The precarious moment tickled within her, a bloom about to burst into splendour. Her asynchronous, contradicting feelings coalesced into an imperfect whole. She could be filled to the brim both with sadness and joy, she could be grateful and angry, and she could possess both fear and love. She could know she should worship but also want to gift time and company. Her bravery crouched like milk about to boil, inevitable, uncontrollable, and undeniable. It rose in her chest and her instincts guided her voice. She gave in. She would deal with the repercussions later.

"Would you like to come inside?" she gestured towards the gates, inviting the walker into her village.

# The Adoption

by George S. Walker

“We won't speak of this again,” Hypatia said hoarsely.

Magnus replied in a gruff voice, “Fine.”

The way he said it spoke volumes. That what they'd done together was of no consequence. That it wouldn't haunt them the rest of their days.

She watched the camel cart pull the heavy wooden rain barrel through the Aegyptian gates. That was the end of it.

“What will become of you, Sirena?” she whispered.

“You named her?” hissed Magnus. “Mother of Christ. Isn't that exactly what I told you not to do?”

Hypatia blinked away tears. She'd thought he loved her. That she was his Cleopatra. He was her Antony. She'd been a fool.

“Let's go,” he said.

But she stood rooted, watching the cart rumble behind the camel through the courtyard of the grand palace. Veils covered the portholes in the barrel as if it were a boat turned inside-out. There was nothing to see now, only a wooden cistern filled with sea water.

“It's over,” he said, pulling her away, back toward the shore of Alexandria.

\* \* \*

Weeks earlier, Hypatia had been repairing a fishing net on the shore of her small isle when a bent-over woman approached her. She looked more Greek than Aegyptian. Leaning on a staff with one shoulder, she made her way carefully among the rocks. Her other arm carried a large reed basket. Her arms trembled with fatigue.

“May I sit here a moment?”

“Of course,” said Hypatia. Her calloused fingers worked the net, braiding and tying.

“There's talk of a sea nymph out by the reef,” said the woman.

“I heard.”

“Spawn of Poseidon.”

Hypatia laughed. “If you believe in the Greek gods.”

“Scoff at your peril! But the elder gods are leaving.”

“Yet the sea nymph stayed.”

“For a little while. She'll either join her father or return to her mother's form. Show me your palms.”

Hypatia stopped her work and held out her hands.

The woman's skin was dry, nearly as pale as papyrus in contrast with

Hypatia's dark skin. Her finger traced the lines on Hypatia's left palm.

"I see your father left before you were born. A Greek, yes? But your mother stayed: an Aegyptian with Nubian blood. Your complexion favors hers." She switched to Hypatia's other palm. "This line starts with a man. But then it goes two ways, rich or poor. Have you met him yet?"

"Magnus," said Hypatia. "And the line is poor."

"Poor is harder. Does he love you?"

"Of course."

"Perhaps something can change the line." She released Hypatia's hand and revealed what was in her basket: a large fur pelt, dark brown.

"A seal skin," said Hypatia. She touched it. It was the softest fur she'd ever felt.

"Like you, the nymph has two choices. She can rejoin her father, or she can become like her mother. But to do that, she needs her mother's coat."

"Her mother was a seal?"

"No ordinary seal. And this is no ordinary coat. Can you imagine the gratitude of Poseidon's daughter?" She held out the pelt to Hypatia.

"I've nothing to trade for it."

"Those are beautiful combs in your hair."

Hypatia shook her head. "They were my mother's. My father gave them to her, then she gave them to me when she died."

"I've been searching a long time for the right person to give this to.

Isn't it worth your combs?"

Hypatia bit her lip. The combs were priceless, the only things left from her mother, the only things of value she possessed. She stared at the pelt.

"Perhaps I haven't found the right one," said the old woman. She sighed and folded the pelt back into her basket.

"Wait!" said Hypatia. She pulled the combs from her hair and handed them to the woman.

#

That evening, Hypatia showed Magnus the pelt.

"What happened to your hair?" he asked.

"I traded my combs for the sealskin."

"For this? I could have speared you a seal. What will you use for your hair now?"

"I still have my hair. And the skin is enchanted!"

"Does it magically catch fish?"

"No. It's to barter with the sea nymph. The crone said she would reward us."

"And you believed her? Oh, Hypatia, you're so..."

"What?"

"Pretty."

She looked him in the eye. "You can only use that so many times."

The next morning, a warm breeze blew from the Mediterranean. Magnus rowed her out to the reef in his fishing boat, oars creaking as the boat rocked.

She spread out the pelt on the rocks just above the waves. The fur glistened in the sun. Gulls cried overhead, and she breathed in the salt smell of the sea.

Not until afternoon did she catch a glimpse of the sea nymph: a head appearing and disappearing in the waves. But getting closer, curious like the gulls. Hypatia watched the dark face watching her. The nymph's arms stroked through the waves, then with a flip of her short dark tail, she was gone.

Late in the afternoon, Magnus rowed his boat back to the rocks.

"I saw her," said Hypatia.

"Did she sing?"

"No. She could see I wasn't a man."

"Did she see the pelt?"

"I'm not sure. I'll try again tomorrow."

The next day, the nymph came closer. Hypatia held up the pelt, and when that had no effect, stepped into the warm water, letting wet sand slide into her sandals. She swished the pelt back and forth in the waves enticingly. The nymph watched for a while, then dove beneath the waves with a flip of her tail.

"You should sing to her," said Magnus that night.

"Me?"

"You have a beautiful voice. As good as hers."

The next day, Hypatia sang Aegyptian lullabies, as if the nymph were a child, and Greek love ballads, as if she were a seductress. The nymph stayed longer, listening to her sing. She came close enough that Hypatia could see she wasn't an adult. She had dark eyes and hair like a seal's mane, if seals had manes. When she swam on her back, Hypatia could see the beginnings of breasts, too small to suckle. Her skin was the same brown as Hypatia's, her arms well-muscled.

The next day, the nymph listened again, but came no closer. Nor the day after that.

"I told you the pelt wasn't enchanted," said Magnus when he helped her into his boat.

"Maybe she doesn't remember her mother," said Hypatia. "Or her father. The elder gods left long ago."

"Do you want me to help you catch her?"

"Catch her? But she trusts me!"

"Does she? And do you trust her? Would you swim out to her? To see whether she drags you down into the deep?"

Hypatia didn't answer.

"I didn't think so. So I'll catch her. Then you can offer her her mother's coat. If that's what you believe."

"Just don't hurt her."

\* \* \*

The next day was calm, without a cloud in the sky. Magnus rowed them out to the reef with a large waterskin sloshing in the bottom of the boat.

“Where have you seen her?” he asked.

Hypatia pointed.

“I hope she likes eels,” said Magnus.

Fishing them out one by one from the waterskin, he laid a trail of them in tide pools among the rocks, then tossed a few into the shallows of the reef.

“You think she's going to eat those?” asked Hypatia. “She's the daughter of Poseidon!”

“She is or she isn't, but a girl's got to eat.” Magnus went to crouch behind a rock.

Hypatia reached into the waterskin and dragged out a squirming eel with both hands, fighting to hold onto it. She held it over her head and began to sing. In the middle of the second song, she lost her grip on the slippery creature, and it fell into the surf. She waded in, with little hope of catching it.

“What happened?” called Magnus from his hiding place.

“I dropped--”

Then she saw a head in the waves, barely thirty feet away. “Shh!”

She began singing again.

The sea nymph held an eel to her mouth and bit into it.

Still singing, Hypatia stepped back onto shore and picked up the waterskin. There was one eel still struggling in the bag, and she fished it out. She held it out seductively as she sang. It threatened to slip from her fingers, and the sea nymph swam toward her.

By the time the nymph finished her eel, she was only ten feet away from Hypatia, in water just deep enough to cover her. She lay there as shallow waves broke over her back.

Hypatia let the eel slip from her fingers. The serpentine creature flopped and writhed between sand, rocks, and water as Hypatia stepped back.

The nymph crawled out of the surf, pulling herself toward the eel. That exposed her hindquarters: the tail and flippers of a seal. From head to tail she was less than four feet long.

Hypatia changed the words of her lullaby, singing of a maiden emerging from the sea.

Magnus took the hint, leaping from his hiding place to hurl his fishing net over the nymph.

Hypatia thought the nymph would sing at the sight of him, mesmerizing him. But the nymph squealed, struggling backwards toward the surf. She thrashed in the net, becoming more tangled.

Magnus dragged the net over rocks as Hypatia sang to calm her. The nymph whimpered, trying to grab at rocks and sand through the net.

He stopped a short distance from the water, net and nymph tangled together beside him. Her hind flippers beat frantically against the rocks.

“Isn't she pretty?” said Hypatia.

“I thought her tail would be different.”

“Different how?”

“I don't know. Scales.”

“On a seal?”

He shrugged, reaching out a hand to stroke the nymph's fur.

She twisted within the net, biting his hand.

“Kiss of Judas!” He jerked his hand back, raising it to strike her.

Hypatia caught his arm. “Don't hurt her!”

“She bit me!”

“You frightened her.”

He glared at the nymph, pressing his bleeding hand to his mouth.

Hypatia fetched the sealskin and held it close to the nymph.

“Do you remember Mama?” she asked sweetly.

“She thinks you're going to skin her.”

“No she doesn't. Mama. Mama,” she crooned.

“She'll bite you.”

“She won't. I gave her an eel.”

“Which I caught!”

“I'm sure she'll reward us both.”

Magnus laughed. “Oh, Hypatia. You're so...”

“What?”

“Hopeful.”

She nodded. “We'll take her home with us.”

\* \* \*

It wasn't easy getting her in the rain barrel. And it turned out that eels were the only fish she would eat. Magnus spent all his time fishing. When he wasn't fishing, he was trading other fishermen for more eels.

Hypatia hadn't told anyone. She still sang to the nymph, gradually winning her over. The nymph let Hypatia stroke her hair, but not Magnus. She didn't sing like in the stories. Hypatia decided that was a myth.

When Magnus came near, the nymph would hide at the bottom of the barrel. He salvaged two portholes from a shipwreck so he could see her in it, then refilled it with sea water. She stared sullenly at the portholes from the bottom of the barrel.

\* \* \*

A week later, he came home with news. “Governor Flavianus agreed to buy her.”

“You told someone!”

“Hypatia, we've spent everything we own on her. She's never going to reward you. She'd never seen that pelt in her life. The old woman tricked you.”

“But sell her?”

“She's living in a rain barrel! The governor of Aegypt will put her in the imperial bath of the palace. He'll fill the bath with eels. She'll be much happier there. Eventually she'll sing for him. She'll never sing for us.”

Hypatia looked at the barrel sadly. “I thought she'd want her mother's coat.”



They loaded the barrel into the boat, and Magnus rowed it past the Lighthouse to the shore of Alexandria. Magnus warned the Romans at the palace to put beeswax in their ears so the sea nymph wouldn't bewitch them. They naively believed him.

Hypatia watched forlornly as the cart carried the barrel with Sirena into the palace.

"It's over," said Magnus.

\* \* \*

But it wasn't.

Once they sold her, Magnus rowed them back to the isle. For a week, they didn't speak. Of the sea nymph or anything else. Hypatia stared at the sea, remembering Sirena's face pressed against the bubbled glass of the porthole. Did Magnus feel the same way? Did he feel anything at all?

It was Hypatia who finally broke the silence. "We have to buy her back."

"What?"

"It was a mistake. We still have the gold. We can go to the palace and ask for her back."

"Don't you know what will happen? The Romans will take the money, keep her, and throw us out on the street. Or worse."

"You told me we could trust them." Tears ran down her cheeks. "That she'd be happy swimming in a Roman bath filled with eels. Singing for the governor. Maybe we were never meant to be, you and me."

He sighed. "It sounds like you want to split the gold. You're rich now. It won't take you long to find someone new."

"I never wanted the gold! I want to free Sirena!" She began to sob.

Magnus put his arm around her. "Then we'll have to steal her back."

"What? We will?"

"It won't be easy," he said. "We'll need a few things." He counted on his fingers. "First, a money changer. Then find an apothecary. A wineskin of Roman wine. And a lady's gown."

"I already have a dress."

"It's not for you."

\* \* \*

Those things weren't on the isle, so Marcus rowed them to Alexandria. They bargained using his fish market Latin and Hypatia's Aegyptian-accented Greek.

When they walked to the palace at sunset, they wore Roman clothing. It was finer than what they'd had on the isle, even though it was used, not tailored. Hypatia carried the extra gown, neatly folded in a reed basket. Magnus carried the wineskin.

No guards stopped them when they walked between the stone sphinxes. They were going to the Roman baths, not Governor Flavianus' private halls. Mosaic tiles inlaid on the walls showed the way in icons even an Aegyptian could understand. And if the Romans had doubts about the shade of Hypatia's skin, Magnus looked Roman enough.

Near the baths, an ornate mosaic indicated the men's baths. Magnus asked an attendant about the women's. The Roman stared at him blankly until Hypatia pantomimed. He nodded, understanding. But when Magnus said, "Poseidon's daughter," his expression changed. He demanded money, far more than admittance to the baths. He furtively

led them away from the men's baths.

“If she's happy, we leave her,” Magnus hissed. “Agreed?”

Hypatia nodded. Secretly, she hoped Sirena was unhappy; that she'd be overjoyed to see them.

The mosaic sign for the women's baths was much smaller. Probably only wives and mistresses of the Roman imperials came here. And Sirena, the governor's imperial sea nymph.

Hypatia wondered what the wives thought of the eels in their bath. She led the way ahead of Magnus. Twilight came from an opening in the roof. But instead of Aegyptian slave attendants, a Roman guard sat on a bench in the stone chamber.

He looked at Hypatia and barked a Latin slur for Aegyptian women that Hypatia knew all too well.

“Poseidon's daughter,” said Magnus, trying to sound like an imperial, not like the provincial he was.

The Roman held out his hand, rubbing his fingers for money. Marcus opened his coin bag and counted out coins in the Roman's palm.

Hypatia's eyes widened. Magnus was counting out gold, not silver.

When the Roman nodded and closed his hand, Magnus' fist lashed out. The blow struck the Roman's nose with a fisherman's strength, knocking his head against the stone wall with a loud crack. The guard tumbled senseless to the floor.

“Magnus!” cried Hypatia.

“He said I'd have to wait my turn,” Magnus panted. “A man's with her.”

“Sirena!” She turned, looking at the doorways. “Which way?”

Magnus studied the mosaics and pointed.

Hypatia started to run toward it, but he grabbed her arm.

“Wait here,” he ordered, pushing past her.

She ignored the command, following at his heels. Loud splashing echoed in the corridor ahead.

They burst into a chamber with a round pool set in stone. A hole in the roof let in fading light from outside. Two figures were in the bath, one small, one large, splashing as they circled each other. The man held a whip, and as it lashed out toward Sirena, she plunged underwater. In a flash she darted toward him. Hypatia saw her bite the man's leg, then retreat. The water was stained with blood. “They chained her.”

“Roman!” shouted Magnus.

Sirena looked at him. The man didn't. His ears were stuffed with beeswax.

The Roman swept the whip back, and Magnus caught it, jerking him backwards to the edge of the bath. When he turned, Magnus knocked him senseless.

“Oh, Sirena,” cried Hypatia. She knelt by the bath.

Magnus pulled the unconscious Roman from the water.

Sirena watched them warily, staying at the far edge of the bath.

When Hypatia began to sing, Sirena relaxed, swimming to the center of the bath. There were dead eels floating in the water. The nymph looked gaunt. A long chain went from her metal collar to a bolt set in

stone at the edge of the bath.

“It’s a lock,” said Magnus. “Her collar. See the keyhole?”

Hypatia saw it through tears. “What can we do?”

“I’ll check the guard for a key.”

Their plans had gone horribly awry. The wine, which Magnus had brought to drug the guards, was useless. They should have brought a hammer and chisel.

Magnus returned at a run. “I found it. Coax her to the side of the bath.”

Hypatia swung her legs over the edge.

“Careful,” warned Magnus. “She’ll—”

“I trust her.” She dropped into the blood-tainted water. It was deeper for her than for the Roman. Her head was barely above water. She swam toward Sirena, singing. The nymph stayed in the middle, tail beating slowly. Hypatia’s long Roman gown, heavy with water, dragged on her movement. She reached out her arm, touching Sirena’s hand, stroking her small fingers. Then she grasped her hand gently, still singing as she coaxed her to the edge of the bath. She could feel the strength in the nymph’s fingers, stronger than her own.

In the edge of Hypatia’s vision, she saw Magnus reach toward Sirena’s neck. The nymph surged from the water, driven by her tail, and bit his arm.

“Mother of Jesus!” he shouted.

Sirena dropped back below the surface, swimming swiftly to the middle of the bath.

“I was trying to help,” groaned Magnus.

Hypatia heard the pain in his voice. “Give me the key,” she said.

He handed it to her, and she made her way back to the middle of the bath, singing a different song. This time, she didn’t try to pull Sirena, but slowly stroked her arm, her shoulders, her mane. She hugged her gently, skin to skin, feeling the nymph’s fast-beating heart. With one hand, she traced the chain up to Sirena’s neck. She felt around the metal collar with her fingertips.

She found the keyhole. Sirena’s eyes looked deep into hers. Hypatia kept singing as her other hand slowly brought the key up. It scraped in the lock.

Click.

The collar opened and dropped into the water, chain sinking quickly to the bottom of the bath.

Sirena pushed Hypatia away, plunging beneath the water. Hypatia fought for balance as the nymph circled her underwater, a blur of speed unencumbered by the chain.

“Hypatia!” called Magnus, alarmed. He ran to the side of the bath where stone steps descended into the water. He started down.

“No!” said Hypatia. “Stay out! I’m all right.”

“What’s she doing?”

“She’s free. She thinks. She doesn’t know where we are.”

“We have to get her out of the bath. Out of the palace.”

Hypatia nodded. “Get the basket.”

Magnus ran back to the outer chamber. He returned with the basket and began pulling out the different garments.

“Just the tunic,” she said. “Toss it to me.”

“It'll get wet.”

“Like me.”

She caught the long tunic and unfolded it in the bloody water. There were no sleeves, and the loose-fitting robe billowed around her.

Curious about the tunic, Sirena stopped circling. She drifted underwater, batting at the hem of it.

Hypatia released it to drift among the dead eels. She undressed in the water, pulling off her stola and tunic, and set them adrift, standing naked in the bath.

After a minute, she took a deep breath and ducked underwater. As Sirena watched, Hypatia struggled back into her tunic.

Then she caught the other tunic and spun slowly, pulling it through the water to straighten it. As she did, Sirena darted into it with seal-like grace. Dressed like a Roman lady, her head and shoulders emerged from the water. Her tail beat slowly within the tunic, holding her up.

Hypatia laughed and clapped. Singing, she swam toward Sirena and took her arm gently, prodding her toward the stone steps. Marcus backed away, giving them room.

She hugged Sirena to her, sweeping one arm beneath her tail. The nymph pressed her head against Hypatia's neck and wrapped her arms around her.

As she sang, Hypatia staggered up the stairs, carrying her out of the water. Gasps punctuated Hypatia's singing. She sang about a maiden's burden, and that there were times when a man should let her be. Magnus took the hint.

Hypatia wasn't sure how long she could carry her, but if Sirena dove back into the bath, they'd never get her out again. Sirena's heart pounded like the waves of a storm.

As Hypatia left the bathing chamber, she heard the chain rattle behind her. Sirena tensed. Hypatia turned to see Magnus pull the chain and collar from the bath. He locked the collar around the Roman's neck.

Hypatia sang about how the maidens wished to share a veil. Magnus dug through the clothing in the basket till he found it. He wrapped it around Hypatia's hair, letting it drape loosely over Sirena's. When they reached the guard with the broken nose, he swept up the coins and emptied his wineskin over him.

The longer Hypatia held Sirena, the more the stone floor felt like the rocking of the sea. She swayed with each step, wondering how much longer she could carry her.

Magnus sidled toward her, trying not to startle Sirena. He placed his arm under Hypatia's, careful not to touch the nymph's tail. Gratefully, Hypatia leaned her weight and Sirena's on his strong arm, and together they staggered out into the palace corridor.

Romans looked at them, shaking their heads. The three kept walking until they reached where the palace opened onto the courtyard. Two Romans stood guard.

Magnus sang in a slurred voice, “And the sisters were, oh so fond of wine.” He swung the empty wineskin.

Sirena's tail thrashed against Hypatia's arm. Hypatia joined Magnus in the refrain, drowning him out, and the nymph relaxed.

The guards waved them past.

The palace stood by the harbor. The sea seemed to draw her, but with

each step, Hypatia's legs grew weaker, as if they weren't part of her anymore. She barely made it to the shore. Magnus caught her as her knees buckled beneath her on the wet sand. Salt water seemed to course in her veins, keeping time with the rhythm of the waves. Her ears roared with wind and sea.

Sirena, still clinging to her, breathed in her ear: one word, the only one she'd spoken in all their time together: "Mama."

Then she broke free, wriggling toward the water in the moonlight. She slid into the waves, beneath the surface.

"Sirena!" cried Hypatia, struggling after her. Her legs had no strength to stand, twitching like flippers. She made it into the water, but her arms were too tired to swim. She tried to inhale the sea and gagged, coughing up salt water.

Magnus picked her up in his arms. She continued coughing as he held

her. Together, they looked out on the harbor while waves washed against his legs.

After a few minutes, the nymph's gown floated in on the surface of a wave.

Hypatia sobbed, her body shaking as she watched the open water. She saw the small dark head on the waves, watching them. Then Sirena vanished with a flip of her tail.

Strength gradually returned to Hypatia's legs, and Magnus helped her stand.

"It was time to let her go," he said softly.

Hypatia said nothing, watching the waves.

# Woman on the Moon

by Jennifer Elise Wang

Scholars and writers like to paint my story  
As a tragic romance,  
But there was no love,  
Only the patriarchal expectation of marriage.  
I was naïve enough to believe  
That maybe the sentiment would grow,  
But you only loved yourself  
So I took away the opportunity  
For immortality and a legacy  
Written in a liquid thicker than ink.  
I escaped to the moon  
With only my rabbit,  
And you know what?  
I was fine up there.  
We eat all the cakes we want  
Without worrying about how weight gain  
Would make you look bad,  
And I smile with the mysterious cat  
That Westerners said was up there.  
Maybe you'll call me a crazy cat lady,  
But I learned that to be alone  
Is not the equivalent of being unsatisfied.  
So every month, I make the moon shine fully  
To remind those like my younger self  
That they are already whole.

# Contributors



**AMANDA BERGLOFF** is a mixed media/digital artist of the weirder things in life. Her cover art has been published by the *Jules Verne Society's Extraordinary Visions Anthology*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Fear Forge*, *Orion's Belt*, *NonBinary Review*, and others. She lives in Denver, Colorado and is a shameless collector of over 4,000 horror and science fiction paperback books, along with vintage toys and comics.

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**KEVIN CANFIELD** lives in New York City. His writing has appeared in *Cineaste*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *World Literature Today* and other publications.

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**MYNA CHANG** hosts Electric Sheep SF and publishes *MicroVerse Recommended Reading*. Her fiction has been selected for the Locus Recommended Reading List, Norton's Flash Fiction America, and several "Best Of" anthologies; her poetry has received a Rhysling honorable mention. Find her at [MynaChang.com](http://MynaChang.com) or on Bluesky @MynaChang.

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**JM CYRUS** writes speculative fiction. With a BA in Classical Studies, an MA in Reception Theory, and currently studying for an MFA in Creative Writing, she enjoys finding new worlds, looking at how she found them, and working out how to show them to you. She has work

published magazines, anthologies and online, in venues such as *Inner Worlds*, *Black Cat Weekly* and *Luna Station Quarterly*. See the full list at her website and say hello at <https://jmcyrus.carrd.co/#works>

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**MARTINS DEEP** (he/him) is a poet of Urhobo heritage, as well as a photographer and digital artist. He is currently pursuing his undergraduate studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His manuscript, "Sighs in Translation," was a semifinalist for the '23 Sillerman Prize, and he received an honorable mention in the free verse category of *Bacopa Literary Review*. His work has been published in notable outlets such as *Magma Poetry*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fiyah*, *Lolwe*, *20:35 Africa*, *Augur Magazine*, and more. He can be reached at @martinsdeep1.

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**J. D. HARLOCK** is an Eisner-nominated American writer, researcher, editor, and academic pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St. Andrews, whose writing has been featured in *Business Insider*, *Newsweek*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *The Griffith Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and New York University's Library of Arabic Literature. You can find him on Bluesky, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, & Twitter.

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**JANIS BUTLER HOLM** served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the

film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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**BRIAN HUGENBRUCH** is the author of over sixty speculative fiction stories and poems. His poetry has been nominated for the Rhyslings, Pushcarts, and Best of the Net; he has most recently appeared in *Kaleidotrope*, *Space & Time*, and *Strange Horizons*.

He lives in Upstate NY with his wife and their daughter, and he spends his days trying to explain quantum cryptography to other nerds.

You can find him online at <https://the-lettersea.com>, on BlueSky @the-lettersea, or on IG / Threads @the\_lettersea. No, he's not sure how to say his last name, either.

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**DORA ILCE** is a Polish-Dutch illustrator with a fondness for anthropomorphic animals. She works with pencils, ink, and digital tools. She currently lives on a sailboat, even though she is terrified of sharks. You can see more of her work at [dorailce.com](http://dorailce.com) and on Instagram at @sometimesketches

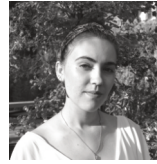
instagram at @sometimesketches

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**DENNY E. MARSHALL** has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is [www.dennymarshall.com](http://www.dennymarshall.com).

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**MARISCA PICHETTE** is a queer author based in Massachusetts. More of their work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, *Vastarien*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and others. Her poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*,

was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Her eco-horror novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, was published in March 2025 by Ghost Orchid Press. Find them on Twitter as @MariscaPichette, Instagram as @marisca\_write, and Bluesky as @marisca.bsky.social.

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**SAM W. PISCIOTTA** is an intrepid storyteller hurtling through spacetime on the power of morning coffee and late-night tea. He writes stories for people who want to visit other planets, learn magic from birds, or camp in haunted forests. His M.A. in Literary Studies from the University of Colorado trained him to deconstruct various texts; living life taught him how to put them back together. Sam is a graduate of the Odyssey writing program. Find his stories in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, *PodCastle*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and other fine publications. Connect at [www.silo34.com](http://www.silo34.com) and @silo34 on Instagram, and @swpisciotta on Bluesky Social.

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**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".

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**TOM RAYMOND**'s writing has previously been published in *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*. He is a graduate of Ploi Pirapokin's Fantastical Characters workshop. When not working like a dog, you can find him and his partner in downward-facing dog or playing fetch with their dog.

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**VEKHAN SAMETYAZA** [AKA Desmond Rhae] is a transmutative artist, author, and musician with a deep interest in promoting dark awakening through authentic self-expression. An enduring love for sci-fi and fantasy themes has inspired his work for publications like *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, Burning Light Press, and Florida Roots Press. You can find out more at [www.theinksphere.com](http://www.theinksphere.com).

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**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

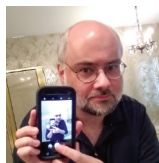
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**ODESSA SILVER** is a fantasy author from the UK who is inspired by her love of Japan, the natural world, and the human mind. Always a dreamer, Odessa pulls ideas from the many thoughts which dominate



her awake or sleeping mind. She has been writing since she was a young child, needing to get down the stories crafted in hours of daydreaming and has always written under the fantasy genre, finding it most freeing and able to explore each idea to its fullest. Odessa lives with her Bengal cat Phoebe, who tries her hardest to steal her attention from writing when possible.

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**CARL TAIT** is a software engineer, classical pianist, and writer. His work has appeared in *After Dinner Conversation* (Pushcart Prize nominee), *Mystery Magazine* (cover story), the *Eunoia Review*, the *Literary Hatchet*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and others. He also has a story in *Close to Midnight*, a horror anthology from Flame Tree Press. Carl grew up in Atlanta and currently lives in New York City with his wife and twin daughters. For more information, visit [carltaid.com](http://carltaid.com).

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**IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA)** is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been

published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*:

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**GRETCHEN TESSMER** lives in the deep woods of the U.S./Canadian borderlands. She's published short stories and poems in many places, including *Nature*, *America*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Strange Horizons*, *Asimov's* and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, with her poetry collecting

Pushcart, Rhysling, Best of the Net and Dwarf Stars nominations along the way.

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**GEORGE S. WALKER's** stories have appeared in *On Spec*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Amazing Stories*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *The Colored Lens*, *Electric Spec*, *Swords and Sorcery*, *Every Day Fiction*, Amazon Kindle, and elsewhere. Anthologies containing his work include *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism & Beyond*, and *The Third Science Fiction Megapack*.

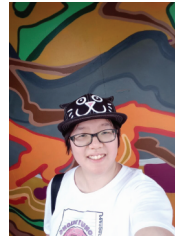
His website is [sites.google.com/site/george-walker/](https://sites.google.com/site/george-walker/)

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**ERIC WAMPLER** lives in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. He reads and writes fantasy, dark fantasy, and science fiction. He has had short stories accepted for publication in *Electric Spec*, *The Piker Press*, *Etherea Magazine*, and *Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*.

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**JENNIFER ELISE WANG** (they/she) is a nonbinary femme in STEM and punk rock pretty boi poet from Dallas, Texas. When they're not in the lab or writing, they enjoy action sports, cosplay, dancing, and volunteering at the animal shelter. They have been published in *FERAL*, *Ghoulish Tales*, *Vocivia*, and *Exposed Brick Literary Magazine*, among others.

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**ANN WUEHLER** has written six novels—*Aftermath: Boise, Idaho*, *Remarkable Women of Brokenheart Lane*, *The House on Clark Boulevard*, *Oregon Gothic*, *The Adventures of Grumpy Odin* and *Sexy Jesus* and *Owyhee Days*. “The Blackburne Lighthouse” appears in Brigid Gate’s *Crimson Bones* anthology.

“The Snake River Tale” was included in *Along Harrowed Trails*. “The Ghost of John Burnberry” appears in *Penumbric*. “The Caesar’s Ghost Quest” made it into the October 2023 *World of Myth*. “Cassie’s Story” was just accepted by *Great Weather For Media*. “Mouthpiece” will appear in the *Horror Zine*’s summer 2024 edition. “Rock Love,” a short story, was just accepted by *Eternal Haunted Summer* for their 2024 summer edition. “The Postcards of Finch Barber” will be in the *Whistle Pig*’s annual magazine, out in October. “Tumbleweed Hum” was accepted by *World of Myth* this past fall. “Igor and Dr. Sam” appears in the *Stygian Lepus*’s #14. “Rebel Girl” was just accepted at *Stygian Lepus*, #21 and “Eustacia and the Shadow” will appear in 2025 as part of a Frost Zone anthology.





# Cosmic Thought

by Amanda Bergloff

*(full image)*