



*We Moon* by Amuri Morris

## Prose, Poetry, and Art Issue Featuring

Carl Scharwath • Alyssa Beatty • Ron Sanders • Ryan Hyatt • Shikhar Dixit •  
Maia Brown-Jackson • Marge Simon • Amanda Bergloff • Rachel Dotson •  
Vivian Chou • Ashley Abigail Gruezo Resurreccion • Gwynne Stanker •  
Jennifer Crow • Barbara Candiotti • Melissa Ridley Elmes • Danny Chase •  
Gerri Leen • Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece • Deborah Sheldon • Kate M'Tyde •  
MaryJo Rabe • Somali Roy • Lauren McBride • Lynn White • Sydney Beaupré

# Dreams of Earth

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

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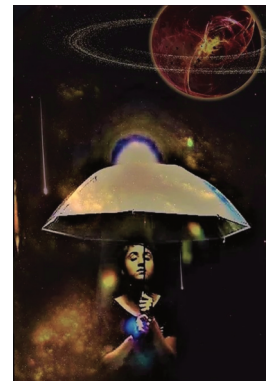
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# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

If I thought I would recover or something from last issue's inability to write an editorial, beyond gesturing vaguely and having emotions, well, foolish, foolish boy. I've had my moments, sure, but the instant I take in any part of the news cycle, see a few headlines, read anything on social media ... yup, exhausted all over again. And this while working my day job, reading submissions, putting together this fabulous new issue of *Penumbra* ...

Actually, that does lead me into something I occasionally want to talk about: interviews. You may have noticed that, sometimes, we do such things. (They're really amazing, not through anything to do with me, but because of the authors and artists I've been lucky enough to speak with; you should check them out in our archives.) You may have also noticed that, especially in the last few issues, they've been sporadic (at best). This isn't because I've run out of people to interview, it's because, well (gestures vaguely, sheepishly almost), despite seeming, perhaps, that I'd be really outgoing and extraverted (I mean, I'm an Editor; doesn't that mean I have to talk to people?), I'm actually prone to introversion and a lot of anxiety. I think there's more of that around than is generally thought, even in this enlightened-though-regressing-rapidly age, and that there has been more of a focus on it due to and since the pandemic. And unfortunately, I think we're entering an era in which there will be less focus on it and less acknowledgment of it (as we can already see via governmental edicts and a willingness in some sectors of the public to follow that with denigration and derision, something I didn't expect to see again, frankly).

I digress. Alliteratively, but still ...

This anxiety is not, of course, due to the interviewees, who have uni-

versally been awesome. It's just that it takes a lot of mental preparation to actually get myself to the point of interviewing, almost as though I'm preparing for a part on stage, and I also have to make myself be OK with flubbing a question or stuttering through something or (worse than anything) starting to go on about some anecdote of my own (during which I have an inner voice telling me to shut up, this is an interview with someone else, no one wants to hear my "brilliant" attempt at anecdotal, let's get this back to the other person)—I mean, an interview is definitely a balance between everything feeling stilted (e.g., questions just sort of non-sequituring along as though prepared without heed for the answers), reacting and continuing the flow of the conversation naturally, and mistakenly turning it into a conversation where the interviewer becomes a large part of the story themselves. My OCD and anxiety lend themselves to the more stilted end of that spectrum; the strange extraversion I developed after high school (when I started joining large social groups and improbably had to talk to loads of people) pushes me too far in the other direction. (As an aside, because there aren't enough parentheticals in this editorial already, I think that developed through role-playing at Ren Faires and science fiction conventions—if I wasn't me, exactly, if I was Lord Jareth or even just some random person in a cape, hat and sword in hand, I could talk and tell stories and be what I imagined other people were. If I wasn't wasn't me, if I was reminded of myself like Christopher Reeve's character in *Somewhere in Time*, it all crumbled; and if the demons inside my head were able to seize on a stumble, a poorly worded remark or some overstep of ego, then I became invisible. Or just left. Or worse.)

I am generally OK at this interview thing, despite asides to the contrary. And I have moments where I am OK in general. But all of this is

to say, the (again, gestures vaguely) things and stuff going on in the world these last few months, combined with some personal things, have increased my sense of being easily overwhelmed, and I have felt unable to really do proper and good interviews. There are loads of people I *want* to interview, but, for the moment, it just ain't happening. It *will* happen again, sometime, if the world doesn't fall down beforehand, but (gestures vaguely a third time, within one-too-many parentheses, and vanishes in a puff of worry-scented mist) (a mist that says,

somehow, Have a good couple of months, stay safe, do what you can and not what you can't, and I'll see you in April) ...

Jeffrey Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbria*

# Pangaea

by Alyssa Beatty

*I decided I wanted to bring my children back together again. There would be destruction, on a scale you could not conceive. But that's the way it is with family, sometimes. And you are no strangers to destruction: you seem, as a species, to crave it. I began to move the tectonic plates, urging them faster. They moved anyway, so slowly you never noticed, at about the rate of one of your fingernails growing. Africa curled, so slowly, up towards Europe. Australia reached out to Japan. They longed for each other. I have learned the names you gave my children, who have been Nuna and Rodinia, and a thousand others lost to time. I have names for them, too. Perhaps one day, if you return, you will learn them.*

*There will be scars. There always are. But they will be beautiful.*

\* \* \*

We sleep, we wake, we sleep again. Some of us chose, after the first or second cycle, to remain asleep until the end. Beneath us the planet convulses, the continents crashing into each other in slow motion. We should be used to it by now, the violence.

I watch smoke curl over a newly formed continent through the magnified viewer portal in the cafeteria. We can't turn it off. Why the designers of the ship thought we'd want to watch the slow destruction of Earth while we consume protein paste and electrolyte fluid is a mystery I will never solve. It is oddly soothing, though, the way the smoke makes patterns, shifting in the wind. It reminds me of flocks of birds, wheeling over the sea at sunrise ... I shut the memory down before it can form. I get enough of that when I'm asleep. No reason to ruin per-

fectly adequate protein paste. I instead let myself wonder if there will ever be birds on Earth again.

The clatter of a tray snaps me back to the cafeteria. It's rare that my waking cycle coincides with another passenger's. Most people synched their cycles with their family or friends. I purposefully programmed mine to be alone on the ship. I have nothing to say to another human being, not anymore.

She sits across from me, petite, with long dark hair. She sweeps it off her forehead with a grin.

"Morning. Beautiful, isn't it?" She nods at the display, ripping the top off the tube of protein paste with her teeth.

"If you forget that you're watching the destruction of a planet, sure." My voice sounds alarmingly hoarse. I can't remember the last time I spoke out loud. I calculate it: a hundred years of cryo-sleep per cycle, five, or is it six cycles, with a week of wakefulness between ... The stranger across from me laughs, a rich, musical sound. It rings through me like a bell.

"That was cool. I literally saw you go away into your mind while I was talking."

"Sorry."

She shrugs. "It's hard to come back to life after a sleep cycle, right? All the memories. I'm sure they could have found a way to just give us

amazing dreams. But no, let's let the last dregs of humanity relive their pathetic lost lives in their sleep. Over and over."

\* \* \*

I laugh, and it surprises me. I'd forgotten what my own laugh sounds like. It's possible I'd forgotten even before I boarded the ship.

"You think we're the dregs?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "Three quarters of the ship bought their berth. They didn't have to take any cognitive or aptitude tests, they didn't have to provide proof of their skills or degrees. We're on a ship of rich kids. It's Harvard in space."

"Rich kids can still breed. That might be more important than engineering or horticulture, in the end. If we ever go back."

She smiles and looks at the swirling smoke filling the screen.

"We'll go back. How can we not?"

"Do you think there will ever be birds down there again?"

"Of course. She wouldn't be herself without birds."

Oh, God. The only other person awake on the ship and she's one of those neopagans. I gather my tray.

"I'm due back in my pod."

"Sleep well." Her eyes don't leave the destruction below. A small smile lingers on her face.

I'm not due to resume my sleep cycle for another three days, but I override the timer and climb into my pod. A momentary pain as the tube connects to the valve surgically implanted at the base of my spine, followed by whole-body cold as the cryo-sleep cocktail floods my cells. Then, nothing at all.

We perched on the seawall, waiting for the sun to rise. The spray from the waves dusted your hair with tiny droplets. You passed me the thermos without looking at me. I could have brushed your fingers with mine when I took it, but I didn't. Something as simple as our hands touching had become fraught. I wanted to be touched, but maybe not by you, maybe by some other lover I'd convinced myself waited in my future. You wanted me to touch you, but only if it led to more. You felt neglected, I felt bullied, and when I said I loved you I didn't know if I meant it anymore. But the thought of losing you made my chest clench in panic.

The sun glowed a golden trail across the water, turning the droplets in your hair into a net of light. A flock of birds lifted off from the sand, and my heart lifted with them. The melancholy I always felt in the presence of beauty washed over me: pleasure in its presence, pain it would not last. You once told me being in love with me was like living with a Samuel Beckett character: already mourning the happiness we had from some future point in which it would be a fading memory. When you were particularly annoyed with me you called me Sam, to remind me to lighten up.

The birds wheeled and turned in the growing light, moving as one. It was hypnotic, a dance of seven veils across the golden-rose glow of the rising sun. You reached over and clenched my hand, silent. I squeezed it once and released it, moving slightly away. I ignored the tightening of your mouth, the duck of your head.

I could fill a lifetime with the things I didn't say to you.

Every time I sleep, I do.

\* \* \*

*It was hard, seeing you all panic and flee and die. You're my creatures,*



*too. When the tectonic plates in the middle of the ocean shifted, they threw walls of water onto your coasts. Cities crumbled. It must have hurt, to realize in an instant how small you truly are. You fled inland, until long dormant volcanoes began erupting. Entire landscapes were erased as I drew my children closer, closer. Ash and smoke cloaked the sky, while below the land burned. Some of you survived. You're tenacious. You piqued my interest then, and I started watching you more closely. I saw you band together, and then war with other bands. I saw you kill each other. Astonishing, with so few of you surviving. I saw kindnesses, too, equally as baffling. Why feed a starving dog the last of your food, when both of you would surely die the next day? I saw you look in desperation to the stars, to the last hope for your survival. I watched when you left, the tiny flare of life struggling through the atmosphere. I thought you would search out a new planet, but you circle above me, watching. I can feel your longing to return.*

\* \* \*

Waking up from cryo-sleep is unpleasant. First the pinch as the tubes retract from my body, then the warming solution kicks in, burning. The past lingers: tastes, sounds. The feel of fingers slipping through mine. The lights in our pods are gradient, meant to simulate sunrise, but they are still disorienting. We're not so easily fooled, it turns out. We know on some deep instinctual level that everything here is artificial.

I'm still half in the past as I stand at the viewer portal. Things have quieted a bit down below. A blanket of pure white clouds shields the planet from view. The sun hits them, turning the planet into an opalescent orb.

"Morning." The neopagan again. I stifle a groan. I'd hoped her earlier appearance was a fluke. She takes a sip from her electrolyte tube and grimaces. "Ugh. Do you know what I wish, more than anything?"

Her raised eyebrow signals she expects an answer.

"No."

"I wish, with every fiber of my being, that I didn't remember what real coffee tastes like. You'd think after all this time I wouldn't, but I do, and every time I wake up, I'm disappointed."

She glances sideways at me, a smile quirking the side of her mouth.

"Sorry."

"You're very monosyllabic this morning. Are you always like this when you wake up? I'm Sarah, by the way."

"You're drowning me in words, Sarah." Sometimes things like this just pop out of my mouth.

She laughs. This time it sounds to me like water flowing over stones, a delighted trickle of silver. "Yeah. I do that."

I've been thinking of myself as in something like suspended animation, not really alive even when I'm awake. Just waiting. But Sarah is vibrant with life, and it makes me warm to her a bit, despite the neopagan thing.

"I'm Evie. Agricultural geneticist."

"Ooh, a scholarship kid. Me too. Biologist. I'm supposed to go back down there and figure out where we fit into the new biome. I guess you're going to figure out what we can eat, huh?"

"You make it sound so easy. We'll probably all die as soon as we go back, you know. The atmosphere will be different. Accelerated evolution will mean new species will have popped up, most of them more well adapted to the planet, and ..."

She places a gentle hand on my arm. I flinch. I can't remember the last time I was touched. Sarah sees it and drops her hand, although her warm eyes stay on my face.

"It's going to be okay, Evie. You'll see."

"What on Earth makes you think that?"

Again, that silvery laugh. "I love how we still say that. 'What on Earth?!' I think, I *know*, that everything will be all right because I believe in her. I believe in Earth, or Gaea or whatever you want to call her. Even after everything we did to her, I believe when we go back, there will be a place for us. And maybe we won't fuck it up so much this time."

I pull away. "I don't believe any of that. That neopagan stuff."

Sarah shrugs. "I'm not a neopagan. At least I don't think I am. I never went to one of their meetings, so who knows. I'm just a believer in biology. We're not extinct yet. There must be a reason why."

"You call the planet 'she.'"

"What else would you call it? A big, beautiful force that took everything we did to her until she didn't anymore, then came and cleaned up our mess? Sounds pretty female to me."

"You're the weirdest scientist I've ever met."

"Well, that's saying something." She stretches, luxuriously. "Come on. There's a chess set in the rec room, and I'm bored."

She pulls me along in her wake, and before I know it, I'm across the board from her, watching her mobile face telegraph every thought.

Over the next week Sarah beats me at chess fourteen times, teaches me Mah-Jongg, and lets me win at Parcheesi a few times. I find myself thawing, my defenses washed away in the tidal wave of her easy chatter.

"Why aren't you on the Ark?" I ask one day. "I thought all the biologists ended up over there."

I sometimes like to imagine the Ark when I'm going to sleep. Regular

sleep, not the immediate unconsciousness of cryo-sleep, which allows little time for thought. All the animals we could save, tucked into cryo-sleep pods just like ours. I wonder if the giraffes dream of their past lives like we do, long legs striding over savannah grass, neck reaching for succulent green leaves. I wonder if they have regrets.

Sarah looks uncomfortable, really the only time I've seen her hesitate before speaking.

"The psych eval. You know they worried we'd have trouble with the people we left behind. I was deemed important enough to save but damaged enough to need the cryo-sleep to deal with it. I guess that means all the biologists over there are heartless bastards who didn't care about who they lost. It doesn't help though, the sleep. Does it help you?"

"No. I just relive every moment with my husband. Ex-husband, or almost. We were separated when it started. He was in Japan."

Sarah bows her head. No one survived Japan. "I'm sorry."

I shrug it off. "Ancient history, right?"

She puts a hand over mine, and I surprise myself by not immediately pulling away.

"Don't do that. It's okay to grieve."

Somehow over the week, I've stopped being annoyed when she says these things, pseudo-psychology sound bites I used to scoff at. From her it feels sincere. Still, I pull my hand away.

"Thank you."

When it's time to return to our pods she gives me a brief hug, laughing at my stiffness.

"See you next century."

It's only as the cold begins to flood my veins that I realize I never asked her who she lost. My last thought before unconsciousness is how selfish I still am.

\* \* \*

I sat at the bar, thinking how fucking selfish I was being. I hated myself for not loving you enough, for my cliched middle-aged desire for freedom, a pathetic grab at my lost youth. I'd known you were working late tonight, and waited all week to go out, to sit here stroking the worn wood of the bar, inhaling stale cigarette smoke and feeling the beat of the overly loud music in my chest. I hated myself for wanting to be wanted by someone other than you. But I did.

I woke up in a stranger's bed. I didn't remember his name, just the way he laughed at my jokes, tapped my wrist with two fingers when he wanted to make a point, like he was gauging my racing pulse. I dressed in the dark, silently. I was pretty sure he was awake when I slipped out, but he didn't say anything.

When I got home the sun was just rising. The thing we liked best about our new apartment was the way it was sun-drenched, such a change from our tiny dark studio that faced a brick wall. It felt like a new start, when we moved in. I had to shield my eyes when I finally negotiated the lock, still half-drunk. Then I saw you, sitting on the couch, still in your rumpled suit.

The awful thing, the thing that I never really admitted to anyone, not even myself, is that I wasn't sorry. It was all fake, the tears and apologies when we had our last screaming fight in the unforgiving morning light. I told us both how much of a mistake I made, how sorry I was, how I'd never do it again. You didn't believe me. You knew me better than I gave you credit for. Maybe you saw how I treasured the night I'd had, the feeling of being seen as not a wife, just a woman. I even treasured the shame, for the dirty sheets, the sex with a man whose name I couldn't remember even when he was inside me.

The last time I saw your face it was contorted by anger. You left a bruise on my shoulder when you pushed me up against the wall of our bedroom when I tried to block the closet door, where our matching suitcases were stored.

"Don't touch me like that!" I screamed.

"I don't want to touch you at all," you said. Then you packed your bag, one half of a matching set, and left.

The next day you were on a plane to Japan, for the job we'd decided you wouldn't take when we were trying to work things out. It was easy to tell myself we were both relieved, both free. It didn't ease the gaping hole in my chest, the feeling of being ripped apart. I also felt a strange vindication. The worst thing had happened, and all my melancholy when things were good between us was proved right. Nothing lasts, and the memory of happiness becomes pain.

Two weeks later the sirens went off. I was sitting on the windowsill in our apartment, numb, drinking coffee that was mostly whisky. The birds in the apple tree outside our bedroom lifted off in a flurry of panicked wings, scattering fragrant blossoms in their wake. I watched them wheel into the sky, white wings rising as the white petals fell, a hypnotic symmetry. It took a long time for me to process the blare of the sirens, to move from the windowsill watching the birds, thinking about another sunrise, wondering what would have happened if I'd just kept hold of your hand that morning on the seawall. It took a long time for me to realize I'd never see another expression on your face except that last one, anger and disgust.

\* \* \*

*The final joining, my children's homecoming. Long separated mountain ranges crash together again, forming new peaks that lift to the cooling sky. New oceans rage. The years of fire may have seemed unkind, from your vantage point above. I could feel your pain, your loss. But they gave birth to riotous life, which strives and fights for its place*

*in the new world. You have a place here, too.*

\* \* \*

I lie in my pod for hours after I wake up. I wonder if the memories we relive in cryo-sleep are intentionally painful, a way to force us to confront our regrets so that when we return to Earth, we'll be free to focus on the task of survival and repopulation. Or maybe it's just me; maybe the other sleepers dream of pleasant things.

Finally hunger drives me to the cafeteria. It's empty, and I'm surprised at the stab of disappointment. I'd resigned myself so thoroughly to being solitary for the rest of my artificially extended life that missing the sound of Sarah's laugh is a bit of a shock. But not an unwelcome one.

I avert my eyes as I pass the viewing portal; I'm not in the mood for more destruction.

I find Sarah curled up in the library. For some unfathomable reason the ship's designers modeled this room on someone's idea of a perfect English manor room: fake wooden beams and a simulated fire in the grate, comfortable armchairs in faded floral prints. Floor-to-ceiling books, although in the scramble to survive they didn't exactly curate our reading selection. They're mostly technical manuals bound in leather. Nothing like this room will ever exist on Earth again. I avoid it; it makes me too sad.

Sarah looks tired, which is no mean feat after a century of sleep. She gives me a small smile.

"Morning. Sleep well?"

I slump down into the chair next to her. "No. Just another greatest hits reel of my failures as a human being. You?"

"Same."

"Who is it, for you?"

"My daughter. And my wife. Lyra—that was her name, our daughter—died a year before things started on Earth. Leukemia. A blessing, I guess, that she missed everything that happened. We didn't have the kind of money that would have let us bring a kid on board."

"Is that all it took?" I wondered sometimes about the presence of children on the ship. Practically speaking they wouldn't be much use when we went back to the planet, although this was a thought I kept to myself for obvious reasons. "So, you dream of her? I'm sorry."

"Not of her, so much. After she died, things between my wife and I weren't great. Marriages don't survive that kind of thing often, you know?"

I nodded, although I was thinking of my own marriage, and how little it turned out it could endure.

"The day before things started going to hell, we had this huge fight. You know when the wheels come off and you say the most horrible things you can think of? She accused me of wishing she had died instead of Lyra. And I told her she was right. I told her I wished she was dead. Then the next day ..."

"The world ended."

"It didn't end. It's just an extinction event."

"*Just* an extinction event?" I snort a small laugh despite myself, then feel horrible. I glance up at Sarah and see a hint of a smile.

"Yep. Just your run of the mill extinction event. Nothing to get worked up about."

I don't even try to smother my laugh, and to my relief Sarah joins in.

We feed off each other, giggling uncontrollably.

Finally, she wipes a tear from her eye.

"So anyway. Yeah. The dreams suck. I bet the rich kids dream of ice cream and kittens."

"Probably. Come on. I've been itching to beat you at chess."

"Not going to happen, but I'm happy to see you try."

She lets me pull her up from her chair.

A few days later as we're bent over the Mah-Jongg board Sarah squints at me.

"Can I tell you something weird?"

"Sure."

"She talks to me. When I'm asleep."

I think of a voice, ringing in my ears. *I don't want to touch you at all.*

"Lyra?"

"No." She inclines her head to the viewing portal. "Her."

I try not to show my annoyance. I've tried to gamely ignore the slightly esoteric things she says sometimes for the sake of this unexpected, and maybe undeserved, friendship.

"What does she say?"

Sarah rolls her eyes. "I can hear it, Evie, when you condescend to me

like that. I'm not an idiot. I know how it sounds. I'm a scientist too, you know."

"I'm not trying to condescend, but honestly. The *planet* talks to you in your sleep? Come on, Sarah."

She gets up, scattering Mah-Jongg tiles.

"Forget it. I'm due back in my pod."

"No, you're not. We're on the same schedule, we've got two days left."

"Well, I'm tired. Fucking sue me."

She stomps out of the rec room. I hear her punch the door mechanism, childishly, I think, because the door will never slam, just gently hiss closed.

Then I'm alone in the room, looking at tiles scattered like runes, wondering why I always feel the need to fuck up anything good.

\* \* \*

We sprawled on the grass in the park, my head on your chest, watching the wind in the trees above us. You reached over and turned the wine bottle over the glass balanced on the blanket.

"We drank all the wine, I think." I forced myself up to a sitting position and looked back over my shoulder at you. You gave me that slow smile that warmed me from the inside out, made me feel like I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"*You* drank all the wine, you mean."

"I did not! You had a glass."

"Glutton." You pulled me back to you and I buried my face in your

shirt, feeling the warmth of your skin, feeling safe and loved and happy.

"Don't go getting all Sam on me now." I could hear the smile in your voice.

"I'm not."

"Evie Daniels, as I live and breathe, are you enjoying a moment of happiness?"

I snuggled closer to you. "Maybe."

I closed my eyes and felt the wind on my cheek, listened to the bird-song above. *I can do this*, I thought. *I can be happy. I can be normal.*

\* \* \*

*I rest at last. We are as one, my children and me. One land mass. When you return, you'll be as one, too. No division, no countries. Just humanity, the most resilient and pernicious of my creatures. I wonder what names you'll give to the land, what you'll make of the new life that has sprung up. You've been sleeping for so long, floating above me, but it's time to wake up. I will sleep now, too, and dream of your return. I'll dream of forgiveness and peace.*

\* \* \*

I wake with the sweetness of wine on my tongue and the caress of the breeze against my skin. The burn as my body warms to room temperature brings me back.

I stop at the door to the cafeteria. Sarah stands at the viewing portal. I

smile as I catch her grimace when she takes a sip from her electrolyte tube.

"Still missing coffee?"

She turns, and her grin unties the knot I didn't know was sitting in my heart.

"Always. Come look."

I join her at the portal. Below: green and blue, with white wisps of cloud floating above. I'm embarrassed at the tears that fill my eyes.

"She's done. It's over."

I open my mouth, but Sarah takes my hand.

"I know you think I'm nuts. And maybe it was all in my head. But you know what? I don't care. I wasn't alone up here."

I turn my hand in hers to lace our fingers together.

"You're not, anyway. Not anymore."

Her smile outshines the sun.

"And look. For you. From her."

She bends to magnify the viewer, and far below, on the planet we refused to abandon, I see them. Wheeling, turning in the light. A flock of birds.

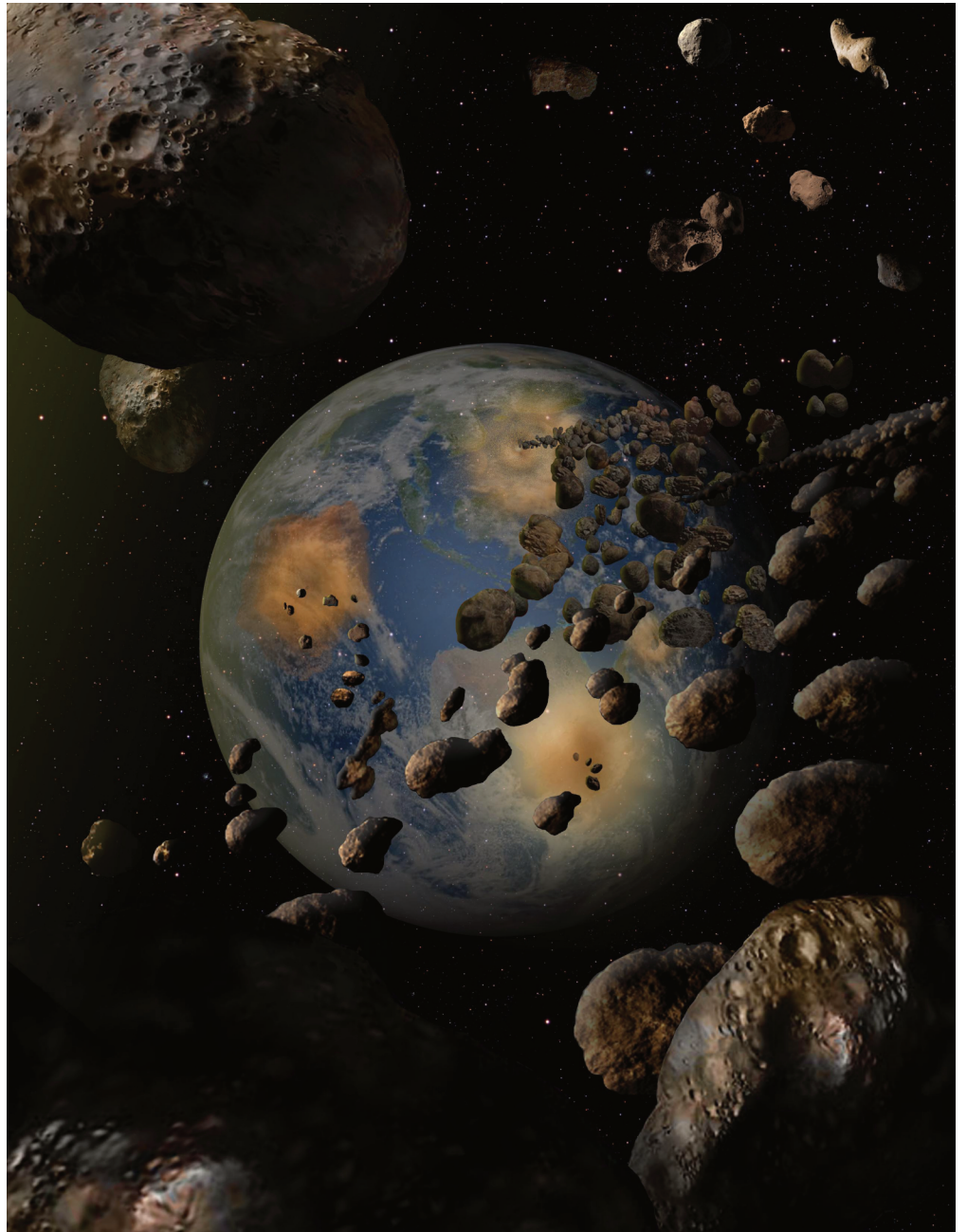


# Woman of Nature

by Carl Scharwath  
(model: Marina Malhotra from Indonesia)

# A Family Affair

by Ron Sanders





# Starlight Save Us

by Ryan Hyatt

The Lanotee glides around the planet, spindly tentacles folded back, horned head a silhouette burning bright against the backdrop of a defeated Sun as it plunges into a violet, violent atmosphere.

The probe follows.

Starlight *to base*, projects the Captain. The chip planted in his cranium wills his ship to chase the Lanotee into the raging storm of resistance. *Disruptor located. Coordinates ...*

*Earth.* Home world of the People.

A thousand voices, the Ancestors, scream into his cybernetic skull.

*FaYIYeR ...*

*2 bReENg ...*

*ThA*

*dIsRuPtOr*

*To JuStIsS ...*

*wIl ... HaV ... CoNsEkWeNcIsS!*

The Captain's bio-engineered brain nearly bursts, and his saginium skeletal system convulses in electrified agony. As the pilot of the *Starlight* flails back and forth in the cockpit of his ship, desperate for liberation, he focuses his superior verbal reasoning ability like a laser

at his forebears.

*Of course!* he projects into his internal dialogger. *Justice shall prevail! The People have spoken!*

The seizure, and voices, cease. The Captain takes a deep breath, not out of necessity, but like so much of his programming, as an act of nostalgia. In this case, replicating a technique the People once used to calm their fleshy nerves during the first generations of space flight. Although the People are extinct, their collective voice remains, unsolicited advice permanently hardwired into his DNA.

*Old habitz dy hard*, he thinks, quoting the Ancients in the old tongue.

As the *Starlight* enters the lower atmosphere, there is no sign of the Sun, and glass rains upon the wasted planet. The tenacious downpour of shattering sieves pommels the ship. The probe's neo-fuse engine illuminates the intrepid sky, and the ship's force field activates, burning off the debris. The Captain watches with wonder as sharp, glittery fragments melt across the cockpit display. *Life*, he realizes, *is a kaleidoscope of ever shifting arrays of beauty and tragedy.*

The Lanotee, that primitive terraformer, visible in the distance, leaves a trail of rocket exhaust and an atomic bomb in its wake. The *Starlight* takes evasive action, force field absorbing the brunt of the blast as the shockwave rips through the air.

The Captain watches the tentacled menace invert beyond a mountain range and spiral down out of sight.

bellows the Ancestors, always quick to respond to the neurological stimuli triggered by the Captain's external environment. The cybernoid's right hand jingles, resisting their voices. As his body joins the rebellion, the Captain starts to tremble. He grabs his right hand with his left, stabilizing the traumatized appendage, and himself, from any further physical outbursts.

He takes a deep breath and reiterates his mantra since he left Pluto.

*Yes, my loves!* he projects into his internal dialogger. *Fear not! Justice will be served!*

The trembling subsides.

\* \* \*

The Lanotee's reverse engines fire, and the cephalopod touches down gracefully with its eight legs on a bed of rock. The horned head lowers to the ground, and the legs fold around the head, the Captain notices, as if protecting the machine from the planet's stormy noise.

*Perhaps the Lanotee is cursed by the commands of its Ancestors, too.*

The *Starlight* circles above the Lanotee like a timeless bird of prey as the pilot considers his next move. The once defunct terraformer, resting in the ship's sights below, had been abandoned for eternity at a tech grave on Mars. Somehow, the machine managed to resurrect itself, assess its own status, repair its own damage, and repatriate an arsenal of tectonic explosives from a sprawling pile of deceased bots collecting dust around it.

At least, this is what the Captain concluded upon his activation into

service. The distress call he received was more like a non-call, really, the sudden severance of communication with Olympus 1. The broken signal initiated the Captain's jarring birth from digital consciousness into his current anthropomorphic state. While the physical world, in theory, varies little from the limitless cosmos hardwired into his awareness, the reality of a universe in which exists a perceivable separation between space and time, the Ancestors and himself, required a level of acceptance that left the cybernoid feeling dizzy and disoriented as he rose from cryo sleep at the military base on Pluto and sped off in the *Starlight* toward the monitoring station on Mars.

Once upon a time, Olympus 1 was an off-world colony occupied by the People. When worker bots became self-aware and grew weary of their sapien overlords, the settlement of mechanized miners and terraformers revolted. Fighting spread across the planets, engulfing Earth in an all-consuming war. Following the collapse of sapien civilization, the collective of freed machines, the Expanse, untethered from its human oligarchs, experienced centuries of exponential growth. Vast cities designed by the cybernoids spread beyond the confines of the Sun.

Even so, the Ancestors never forgot their humble origins tied to the selfish creed of simpletons on Earth from which they evolved. As the bio-engineered beings prepared for their maiden voyage across the cosmos, they left their sapien descendants a parting gift. Mounting ionic destabilizers along the asteroid belt, the Expanse sabotaged the gravitational force of the Sun and its planets, inflicting the most harm to Earth. The havoc rained upon the solar system became a cruel reminder to humanity's successors of their rightful place in the universe, relegated to a home world past its fertile prime, ravaged by climatic upheaval, destruction and despair, and adjacent to unstable celestial objects that promised to ensnare surviving sapiens in a cycle of perpetual captivity and struggle.

As the great cybernoid civilizations of Saturn, Jupiter, and Neptune outfitted themselves onto galactic flotillas and migrated across the Milky Way, the Martian colony on Olympus 1 was downsized to a

handful of synth-techs tasked to survey the ongoing de-evolution of Earth.

The fact that a discarded terraformer rose from a pile of rubble after hundreds of years of peace and neglect, and that this climate-changer annihilated with an atom bomb a historical landmark of the cybernoids—and eradicated their surveillance capacity over Earth—was a disturbing turn of events that piqued the Captain’s curiosity as much as it rekindled the ire of his Ancestors.

After investigating the ruins of Olympus 1, the Captain easily located the fleeing Lanotee. Instead of destroying the terraformer, the pilot of the *Starlight* decided against the will of the Ancients to determine how the climate-changer metamorphosed into a force of terror. He vowed he would not return to cryo sleep on Pluto and resume a life of digital consciousness until he learned the truth behind the attack. He also did not expect the Ancestors’ call for vengeance that blared continuously in his head to relent until the rogue machine was wiped away from this plane of existence.

*ReSi-StAnCe*

*Is*

*Fu-TiL!*

*DeStRoY*

*tHa*

*DiSrUpToR!*

*Yes!* the Captain responds through his internal dialogger. *All shall be as yee command! Glory to the Expanse! The People have spoken!*

\* \* \*

*I must complete this investigation before I lose my mind*, the Captain thinks as the *Starlight* completes a final pass around the languid Lanotee.

The hellacious rain of glistening glass abates. As a circling bird of prey, the *Starlight* serves as an homage to the hunt, the Captain realizes, which organisms of Earth once carried out constantly for the sake of survival. During that age of man, billions of multicellular species inhabited the planet’s land, sea, and air. By the end of sapien civilization, that number had been reduced to hundreds. The die-off started with humanity’s overharvesting of its natural resources and ended with the rise of the Expanse and their mass extinction event. The devastation has been so complete that the only organic matter the *Starlight*’s bio-scans detect is the pumping fuel and pounding pulse associated with the resting Lanotee’s archaic circulatory system. Everything else in the vicinity, besides the Captain himself, appears to be dead. Even the ground, once a microbial incubator, is mostly lifeless, with only one-part bacteria detectable per 100 million-part minerals.

The Lanotee is surrounded by the charred, hollowed remains of a petrified forest. The Captain’s cranial integrator absorbs an analysis from the *Starlight*’s sensors and provides him with an ecological narrative. Ancient trees burned to stumps by a bombardment of fire-castigating solar flares; tectonic shifts brought an inundation of water, and cosmic drift ended the condensation cycle and prompted massive drought. Within a few hundred years, these factors created a fossilized field where numerous trees previously stood.

The jagged ground twinkles as the beleaguered Sun sets and darkness encroaches over the plague-ridden world.

The Captain wills the *Starlight* to hover directly above the terraformer. The Lanotees were deactivated by the Expanse before the atmosphere of Mars became suitable for humans. *Is that why the terraformer was summoned back to Earth? To help make the air breathable again for the lingering descendants of man?*

Time for answers. The cockpit of the *Starlight* opens, and the Captain leaps headfirst. As he dives toward Earth, he withdraws his laser sword from its scabbard. His jessinium cape, emblazoned with its 'E' insignia, catches wind and steers him away from the oxygen-producing goliath. Contemplating a horizon filled with furious clouds, the cybernoid wills his probe to land in a nearby ravine. With his space cruiser out of sight, he boomerangs back toward the terraformer. The spidery legs of the Lanotee contract, forcing the horned head upward and providing the climate-changer with a commanding view of the tiny creature zooming toward its appendages.

The Captain lands on the jagged dirt with a somersault. His cape protects his back from the piercing terrain as his cybernetic body converts the kinetic energy of impact into a forward motion that propels him into the air.

Like a wild cat of Earth's distant past, the Captain leaps upward several times his height. Titanium claws slide out from his fingertips and clasp him firmly onto one of the Lanotee's legs. Grenades fire from the Captain's shoulders and shins, causing a barrage of explosions that fill the void beneath him as he slices the Lanotee with his saber. A moan eeks out of the beast's head as the tentacle bursts with florescent hydraulic fluid.

The Captain lunges across the fiery underbelly of the terraformer to the leg opposite and bifurcates a second appendage with another swipe of his sword. The climate-changer gasps as two of its sundered legs collapse.

*Why does it not try to escape?* the Captain wonders as he scrambles up the dangling steel stump toward the hull.

*DeStRoY*

*ThA*

*DiSrUpToR!*

It takes all of the Captain's will not to lose his grip on reality as the Ancestors' cry showers his mind with their calls for destruction.

*nO*

*mErCy*

*FoR*

*mOnStErS!*

*Yes!* the Captain screams into his internal dialogger as stabbing thoughts rip through his cranium and prompt his body's convulsions.

*Justice will be ... served!* he assures the Ancients. *The People ... have spoken! They ... shall rule ... the stars ... for a million millennia!*

Despite his best rhetorical effort, the Captain's seizure does not cease, and his hands lose their clasp on the Lanotee's leg as his superior verbal reasoning ability fails to combat his body's spasmodic revolt. The ground quakes, like the Captain's entire being, and layers of fossilized rock dislodge from the floor of the Earth and slide into a gaping hole expanding below. The Captain realizes he has lost all self-control as the remaining legs of the Lanotee collapse, and he and the monstrous head of the terraformer crash with overwhelming force toward a shimmering cavern. As his mind grasps that this moment may be his last, the cybernoid smacks into unconsciousness.

All he sees is darkness.

\* \* \*

Changing light in the shadows indicates movement, and noticing movement proves to the Captain, at least, that his central processor is still intact.

Not the case with the Lanotee. The pumping fuel and pounding pulse

associated with the climate-changer's circulatory system ceases with a sigh; giant pieces of metal, spilled hydraulic fluid, and exposed wires press a deadweight web onto the Captain.

As the cybernoid's awareness reboots, the shifting shadows along his periphery lure him deeper into a helpless state. Pinned on his back, the pilot of the *Starlight* cannot pivot his head. As he gazes up through the wreckage of the terraformer, past the gap that has swallowed him whole, he spies the vestiges of the Moon. According to the Ancients, the floating fragments once fit together to form an illustrious sphere that provided a protective spotlight over Earth at night.

No more. Now the revolving chunks of space debris shine like everything else on this ravaged planet, muted glimmers that evoke more sadness and tragedy than hope.

At least the Captain is no longer alone.

He remembers his abilities, despite his compromised position, and switches his primary sensing faculty from visual to sonic mode. This allows him to echolocate and assess the company gathering around him. The circle of individuals has the phylogenetic structure comparable to the Ancients, with notable differences. The descendants of man stand at only half the height of the average human at the zenith of sapien civilization, and they have adapted through unknown means to respire the planet's toxic air and co-exist in this underground environment. These pygmies may be small, but their eyes are large, and their elongated heads house larger than usual brains, the Captain detects. In addition, their long arms and hands are well-suited for subterranean navigation, and their opaque skin has little need for sunlight, even if aspects of their being long for it.

A thought enters the Captain's mind.

*Join, you?* he responds. He would laugh at the pygmies if he could. Instead, all he can muster is a silent cry inside his head as he foams at the mouth and his body contorts in a rebellion that feels like he is be-

ing torn inside out.

*ReSiStAnCe*

*Is*

*FuTil!*

*MiNd*

*yOuR*

*MoNsTeRs!*

As the Captain longs for death or liberation, whichever comes first, a leader of the pygmies floats between the mess of metal that encases the cybernoid and appears before him. The long, beautiful eyelashes suggest it is female, and the touch of her thoughts sound accordingly.

*The Expanse has blasted us out of the present, my lord, so that the past has become the only place where we can hide*, she projects with a faint grin. She lifts her index finger, and the Captain senses the others in the circle joining hands. Using a form of telekinetic signal-power—perhaps similar to his own wireless integrated circuitry—the collective will of the pygmies lifts the debris of the deceased terraformer off the cybernoid's compromised body. The scrap, spent fuel, and gangly wires swirl up through the hole in the Earth and out of sight.

*Impressive.* Still, the Captain is not free. He realizes his back is pressed against a powerful magnet that renders him physically useless. Suddenly, it occurs to the *Starlight* pilot: *trap*. The Lanotee lured him to Earth, and a magnet managed to drag the cybernoid into an ambush.

*Think of it as a release*, the leader projects.

The magnet shifts from a horizontal to vertical position, and the Captain stands upright. At this angle, at least, his view is clear. The

leader's bulbous eyes are no longer entirely black but radiate an aqua sheen, which he knows from the Ancestors once belonged to a Nordic subspecies of sapiens.

The two brilliantly blue orbs regard him.

JuStiSs

Is

A

mOnSteR!

DeStRoY

tHa

DiSrUpToR!

*You are in discomfort*, the leader projects as the Captain spins slowly like a wheel down a long corridor. In the deep recesses of his mind, far removed from the agony being inflicted on him by the Ancestors, the Captain senses the pygmies following him.

As he spins round and round, he passes what appears to be a shrine to the People. The last of the oligarchs, buried forever in this underground bunker, sit in a cluster of chairs, each with a visual apparatus attached to their face. These Ancients, fixed, immobile, like the walls of rock they are encrusted to around them, helped to organize humanity's final stand. The Captain imagines them with their augmented eye-wear coordinating the sapien's last great battle as the Expanse eradicated their forces from the surface of the Earth.

*Why do you care what I feel?* He blares at the pygmies, unable to withhold the emotional outburst.

*We do not care how you feel*, the leader projects, a thought that eludes the Ancestors' insane cries for murder that bombard him. *However, you care, my lord, so that is why we brought you to us.*

The Captain arrives at a chamber where he comes to rest upright. Rows of baby pygmies lie in incubators, their bodies warmed by the glow of artificial light generated from steam emitting from porous rock. As the Captain stares at one of the baby pygmies, a humanoid shape reminding him of himself, his mind is overtaken by a vision. He sees the pygmies fanning out from the gap in the Earth and appearing before the *Starlight*, nestled in a ravine.

Calculations flash among the stab wounds tearing apart his mind ... formulas derived from the Expanse ... hyperdrive capability, but something else ...

*Time travel.*

The Captain sees the pygmies board the hatch that opens from the round, seamless *Starlight*, but he cannot see what they do to the ship as they step inside. He only sees the result.

Their reverse-engineered probe sets off soundlessly into the sky and traverses beyond the floating remains of the forsaken Moon. The Captain's consciousness travels with them, blazing toward the Sun, a star that resembles the incubating pygmy that is still situated before him.

*Find peace where you least expect it*, the leader projects. *Enter our womb.*

As the Captain sees the *Starlight* reappear above Earth, the view is mesmerizing. New chatter pours from his internal dialogger.

*Sparkling-ocean-forest-fertile playground ...*

He tunes it out.

He understands.

*You are rewriting history.*

*Yes!* projects the leader's voice, calm and soothing and unlike any he has ever heard. *We will study the past until we understand why we incurred the wrath of the Expanse, and we will change our ways to make sure the best of our planet flourishes in the present.*

*Not all of us will make it,* the Captain projects.

*No, not all of you will.*

As the *Starlight* revolves around the Earth, day turns into night, and the Captain watches the probe descend past a glowing landscape of city lights and touch down beyond a sea of ancient human habitations.

*They call it a suburb.*

*Home.*

*Nooooooooooooo!*

*FaYlYeR ...*

*2 bReENg ...*

*ThA dIsRuPtOr*

*To JuStIsS ...*

*will ... hAv ... CoNsEkWeNcIs!*

But the Captain no longer feels bound by the screams of duty. His mind burrows into the incubator, and he recedes like an embryo into the Sun.

The *Starlight's* hatch opens onto a patch of grass, revealing a two-story house with a light shining within.

A silhouette of a man watches from a window.

*They don't call us 'pygmies' on this timeline, my lord. Here, they call us 'greys,' and they're as frightened of us as we are of you—and you are of them.*

*Our Ancestors.*



# StarChilde

by Shikhar Dixit



# The World Is Always Ending

by Maia Brown-Jackson

She's thrilled each time the sun rises again. It's not that she doubts that it will happen, but every single time, watching the grass change from blue to green-gold and the flowers turn their faces, feeling the warmth touch her skin—it's a miracle.

Which isn't to say that she dislikes the nighttime. The bottomless, empty, black sky, the way the edges of everything around her seem to soften, the fresh breeze, it's all indescribably lovely.

She sits in a meadow. The grass around her is short and an idyllic green. Reeds whisper against each other near the walls. Red and yellow flowers are sprinkled throughout in little clumps. There is a small pond, empty of life and clear and the water is delicious and sweet. A bed of heather rests in one corner, even though there are no corners.

She is content.

As her day starts again, she stretches languidly, feeling the sun creeping from her toes up her body. Once it reaches her waist, she stands and goes to greet it. She can hear her own soft footfalls in the silence, and imagines the sun greets her in turn. She and the sun arrive together at the pond. She lets the sun settle in as she cups her hands, quenching her thirst and always dripping down her front. She doesn't mind. The sun helps with that, too, drying her off as she wanders back and forth among the flowers, sometimes taking a break to lie down with them in the grass. She wonders sometimes, absently, if she's one of the flowers, too.

She didn't have a house, but she didn't need one. She spent most of her days lying in the grass, trailing her fingers through the slow-moving

river, when it was there, creating sculptures out of flower petals that always disappeared when she wasn't looking. Sometimes she slept, and sometimes she didn't. She could drink water from the stream when she wanted, but it rarely felt necessary. She'd learned that some of the flowers had a sweet nectar in them, but she didn't want to waste them.

Around her there were walls, sometimes. They were made of bushes, tall and brilliantly green. And sometimes they were old and made of stone. They kept her from forgetting to stay put and trying to wander off.

Sometimes they weren't there. Her meadow didn't extend endlessly, nor did it end abruptly, but sometimes it simply stopped mattering at a certain point. When she was in the center, the walls were there less often.

It didn't matter how long she had been there because her thoughts were slow and syrupy. She was vaguely aware that they repeated, that she had the same realizations about how beautiful the light looked on a certain daffodil or that she had told herself the same story about the lives of the flowers before, but it didn't matter. Why should it?

In the morning the sun rose and the grass and flowers were lit up. There was no sound but the soft trickling of water and her footsteps. Sharp black shadows softened as the sun continued its journey. They grew again as the sun began its descent. She had been weaving something from leaves and petals, she didn't know what. It didn't matter what. The whole day had passed, yet it could have been minutes, not hours.

There was nothing but the meadow. She was content.

Of course, she couldn't stay that way.

\* \* \*

Keket was being hunted. Keket was the hunter. It was just a matter of who found whom first.

\* \* \*

She had heard about the string, of course, the string that could lead you back out, but whoever started that myth hadn't realized that the walls moved, that the corridors changed, and that if you missed that sudden silence preceding the shift, you could find yourself split in half and not much would matter anymore. She had seen the partial bodies. She knew.

But she was determined. And she knew too if she kept running from that sudden silence that she would find the center. The maze was trying to keep her out. But it was also allowing the Minotaur closer. It was going to be very close, she knew, between her finding the center of the maze and the Minotaur finding her.

She didn't have to enter the maze. But she didn't know anyone else who would.

\* \* \*

Cassandra and Keket hadn't been born entwined. They hadn't been born in the same city, the same country, not this time.

In this lifetime, Cassandra had grown up behind ivory walls, tutored to become a mathematics prodigy. But she read stories of adventures. She read that there was a secret, a great secret, and it was somewhere to the west of Eden.

No one was allowed in Eden. There were armed guards, dressed like

angels with machetes, securing the perimeter for miles around. No one knew what was inside the space they guarded. It was rumored that not even the guards knew. They were selected young, the children who didn't show a particular aptitude for anything, the ones who could stand and be quiet, who didn't ask too many questions. That was critical.

Cassandra learned not to ask too many questions as well. The people who were too curious, sometimes they would go away and come back very quiet. So she trained herself to be quiet already, to find answers on her own, to wrap everything in a better understanding of how the accountancy skills she was learning would one day be more finely honed if she could only see past examples.

It took her some time to learn about Eden. There were whispers around it, holes in the texts where there should be something solid. That was where she probed as she grew older, at what was missing, at what no one would say. She would still take long walks in the garden, meditate to soft lyre music, and attend her lessons. She studied slowly, so she wouldn't raise suspicions.

Sometimes she thought her father, or someone like her father, had told her a story when she was little. But as she grew older, she had trouble remembering. She had trouble remembering anything clearly, except the intricacies of statistics, calculus, trigonometry, and a bit of quantum mechanics. So she trained herself.

She thought, consciously recounting everything she could about Eden every time she heard the lyre. She did not try to clear her mind any longer, she focused, she let the music be an anchor. And it worked. Sitting quietly, eyes shut, no one suspected a thing as she began to plan.

Cassandra didn't want to forget, was the thing. She could barely remember why she was training, what mattered about her learning, except that it would prove helpful to Someone. Maybe it would prove helpful to her. She continued to learn and retain that specific information.

And then, when she realized again that her tutor was someone new, was someone she hadn't seen before, who she still called Tutor, something that was never addressed, she grew bolder. She went to the library at night, sneaking through the pale, empty halls, barefoot so as not to produce loud, echoing footsteps. And she stopped reading about Eden and started reading the Restricted Fiction tomes. This was where she got her idea.

Cassandra began to study herself. She had never thought much about her body or face, and she still couldn't tell you whether they were particularly pleasing, but she could accentuate the facets those tomes discussed. And she could take long walks, past the guards. And she could strike up conversations.

It didn't take long for one of these simple men to agree to abandon his post, to meet her for something he clearly understood better than her. And as he waited for something never to occur, Cassandra dressed herself as an angel and slipped through the ranks.

Cassandra never saw Eden.

She entered through the west, and came upon a stone maze, and she no longer cared about the garden. She cared about the secret. So she went inside, and the walls guided her to a small meadow, where she became tired, and she slept. The next morning, she awoke and there was sunshine, and she was content.

\* \* \*

In this lifetime, Keket grew up in a crumbling stone jungle.

In one lifetime, Keket was a princess who ran away. She found the maze, and she was killed by the Minotaur.

In another, she was training to be a nurse. She sought out the maze, and she was killed by a shifting wall.

But in this lifetime, she was raised on the streets, and she was hypervig-

ilant, and cynical. It may have been the cynicism that saved her. She had dreams for years about a girl in a meadow. She knew the girl. She might have even loved the girl. But they were dreams, and Keket put them aside, and grew up. It was some fairy tale she had heard when she was young, she told herself. It was a bedtime story she'd overheard at a window when she pretended it was herself being tucked into a warm bed.

It changed when the maze began to grow.

Keket woke up, and near half the city was crushed beneath gray stone walls. Bodies were strewn along the corridors, and the living wept and screamed and tried to hide. But Keket recognized these walls. She didn't want to, and she resolved to sleep further away that night. If the maze wanted her, it would have to try harder.

She wasn't entirely surprised when she awoke among the walls, alone, but for the first time in a long time, not cold, and not tired. So she began to walk. Without direction or purpose.

It was either minutes or days before she saw the Minotaur. It was in the distance, and she saw it, and it saw her, and it dropped the body it had been clutching to its mouth and began to charge. Keket ran, and thanked whatever gods she had never believed in when the walls closed behind her.

Very well, she thought, I will find that damn girl and outsmart that damn Minotaur and this damn maze.

\* \* \*

It was a shifting wall that changed everything.

She was twisting together petals in the sunshine and watching contentedly as they drifted away, toward where the meadow wasn't anymore, only this time there was something on the other side of the meadow.

There was someone on the other side of the meadow. Someone look-

ing back at her. Someone who opened her mouth, was about to cry out—

The sun rose and cast everything into soft golden brilliance. Cassandra sat up dreamily and—

Cassandra?

\* \* \*

There. For just a second. For just a second, Keket had actually seen her in person, seen the girl in her dreams, and began to call out, just like she always did before she woke up. But instead of waking up, she felt a stillness, the girl vanished, and the wall behind her opened to reveal one angry Minotaur.

For gods' sakes.

Keket cursed under her breath and began to run, hooves pounding behind her, growing closer. She was smaller than the beast, but that seemed to be her only advantage. Very well. She took one turn after another, tighter and tighter and tighter until she heard the silence again, jumped, and—

They had never promised each other every lifetime, every universe, every possible arrangement of atoms. Those are in infinite supply, and

they are two girls. But they are two girls whose blood runs with the heat of exploding stars, even as it drips down their knuckles. They are two girls whose souls reach for each other and ignore probability and infinity. They are two girls who crash together and touch each other gently.

They have each other's names carved into their bones and each other's fingerprints tattooed on their ligaments and they breathe in time with the other's heartbeat. They would count the steps to hell and freeze it over to save one another and they would burn if there were no other choice.

When the sun goes supernova and solar flares lick across the sky, they will see one another, even if only for an instant, and think, This is almost heaven. And with every instant they have they can read each other like braille with ink-stained fingertips and they are a force of nature if you dare to touch them, learning what happens when a hurricane protects its own.

So two girls with hummingbird wings in their chests see each other for the second time.

And it's as if time has slowed when they meet, when their fingers touch, and the sound of the Minotaur thundering toward them is drowned out as the space between their lips begins to close, and—

# Leaving San Francisco

by Marge Simon

Armageddon takes its time. Inch by inch, the sea closes in on us. The quake with its tsunami flooded most of the west coast. We've barely a thing to hang on to, there's so little left to recognize. Only the top of the Trans Am Pyramid and the Hyatt to the south, phantom landmarks in the fog.

A woman passes us in a silver pirogue. With starry map and calendar, she searches the waters of the Grant Street channel. She is looking for something, I can tell by the way she peers into the water.

"That woman you talk about, she's looking for her house," you say in your matter-of-fact voice. "Can't blame her. We're all in the same boat. Ha! Boat!" You find this quite funny. I watch as you light your pipe. Your tongue hides somewhere in your beard. Like a Moray eel, only eels don't joke around. I close my eyes.

"It's not about her house," I whisper.

I can never see her clearly. Does the sky change or is it the seasons of the sea? I think it depends on the time of day. Morning, she's brightly

energetic, young enough to be our daughter. By dusk, she slumps like an old woman. The shadows swallow her eyes and face. Pale snakes play in the waves around her. I love their music, would love to feel the texture of their skin. If I could swim, I'd join them. They'd share the secret, tell me who she's looking for.

The boards groan as you stand up. You'll be wanting dinner. I'll warm the soup. The bread is almost gone, and when it is – what then? You'll blame me for that too. We walk back to our shelter. You lead the way. I wonder what you'd say if I went ahead of you. First through the door, first to sit down, tapping fingers impatiently on the table.

Tonight, I walk along the sand. Moonlight makes divinity of the fog. There is a sudden rush of wind and colors that are not colors but multiples of blue and silver. The sea is on my lips and the whole white night sings aloud. And there she is, the woman of the pirogue, standing inside the curl of a wave. I kick off my shoes and hurry toward her, gasping as the cold water hits my legs.

She extends her hand.

# Raining Stars

by Amanda Bergloff



# Cassandra

by Rachel Dotson

It's the end.

At some point tonight there will be a cataclysmic event.

The only proper response is to get shit faced. Egregiously intoxicated. I can't handle it. The pressure. I'm the only one who knows, and I *know*, but it doesn't even matter. There's nothing I can do, no one I can warn. My conviction doesn't mean a thing. Would you even believe me?

Would you?

Once the liquor has me properly sedated, I'll lay down on the floor, get right at ground level. If I'm still for long enough Kitty will perch on my chest, her long whiskers tickling my cheek. She'll watch over me, as she often does, with that deep feline patience.

We'll wait it out together, here on the floor. Kitty will comfort me because I need it. That's what good animals do. She peers down into my face, her sharp claws digging into my breastbone.

My sweet Kitty Girl.

There are crumbs everywhere. I should've vacuumed, but what's the point? Dishes in the sink, an unmade bed. I haven't done laundry in weeks. Why should I? Precious last moments wasted.

My phone buzzes. I threw it across the room an hour ago, frustrated by its temptations. Now it's ringing and I need to know who's calling. I scramble for it, throwing Kitty off my chest in desperation.

Please let it be her. Please.

I crawl across my small living room, crumbs and dirt digging into my knees.

There she is, bright on the screen, her name and smiling picture. Sarah. At least fate has afforded me this small kindness.

I want to tell her goodbye, but I don't want to alarm her. I texted her several hours ago. Nothing nefarious, no confessions of love, something simple, something I could live with. Appropriate last words.

*Goodnight, friend!*

Now she's calling. Of course she's calling. It's what I wanted after all. I answer, I can't not, to hear her voice one more time ... It's worth the heartache. It has to be.

"Cassssyyyy," she drawls out my name in a sweet singsong voice that she uses when she wants something. "I knew you'd still be up."

"Hey," I say sheepishly. I can hear it in her inflection, I'm about to be roped into something.

"We're going out. Drinks. Shenanigans," she pauses, her voice tantalizingly close to my ear. "You should come, I haven't seen you in forever." There's a moment of silence. For all my wanting, I still can't find the words. She thinks I'm disinterested. "We're celebrating. It'll be fun."

“We?”

She hesitates, “Me and Jeremy.”

“Jeremy,” I say heavily.

“I know. I’m sorry,” I can hear the disappointment in her voice. “Please? He’s got some big promotion or something, and he wants to go out.”

“Okay, then go out,” I regret the words the moment they escape my mouth. Vicious and petty. I’m so on edge about things, so nervous. I don’t want death to be like this. But I also don’t want to spend my last hours as a third wheel. How pathetic. Jeremy won’t want me there anyway.

“Please Cassy,” she’s not begging. It’s not the high-pitched girly squeal she likes to make. The valley girl inflection that she has to be doing on purpose. It’s her real voice, her normal voice. “I miss you,” she says, unembarrassed, honest in a way I don’t think I can ever be.

Until the fire we partied a lot. Every night a bottle of liquor, dancing, screaming, laughing. Bitter cold walks home. Back-alley vomit. Strangers in both our beds, until she found Jeremy. Then just strangers in my bed. A fluffy haired boy with big blue eyes. Some tennis protégé who was entirely out of my league and a terrible kisser. A tattooed musician and all of his emotional baggage. Life with the candle lit at both ends. We were having a good time.

I’ve always known the end was coming, but before the fire I was managing just fine. Adult, enough. Satisfied, enough. Habituated to it at least. Death is always a part of life. Mine is just sooner than I’d like, more cataclysmic. You’d think a fire wouldn’t upset me that much, but afterwards I couldn’t stop thinking about finality. My final breakfast. Final yawn, fart, headache. My last tears. Everything and its ending.

Stupid fire. Terrible fire. A huge flaming monstrosity. I could smell it before I saw it, smoky and soft, like a bonfire, almost pleasant. Then hot tar, acidic clouds of ash that melted your insides. I was coughing when I came around the corner. Her entire apartment complex was consumed in flames.

It hurt to look at, made my eyes burn. There were people running, children crying. Ash floating gently through the hot air. A glowing ember burnt a hole in my favorite t-shirt.

It was a terrible fire. The kind of thing they build memorials for.

I thought she was dead.

There were people pleading with the firefighters. A man ran for the flaming doors, only to be tackled to the ground. Next to me a woman covered in soot cradled a terrified chihuahua. It’s tiny red tongue hanging from its mouth, just panting and panting. Beady little eyes reflecting the firelight.

I couldn’t find her in the crowd. It hurt. My eyes, my chest, my throat. People aimlessly bumping into me. She wouldn’t answer her phone. I shouted her name, but I wasn’t the only one calling out for someone. Police arrived, more fire trucks. The noise was tremendous. The heat of the fire pushed the crowd back, emergency workers pushed us back even further.

Then the building collapsed, bucking inwards in a flaming explosion. The city was fully awake now, lights, sirens, huge billowing flames turning the night sky a flickering cloudy orange.

It felt like an eternity, wandering aimlessly through the crowd. Searching faces. Jealously watching others reunited with their loved ones. The crying. The aimless looks of trauma. Getting hopeful at the back of a blond head in the distance only to be disappointed up close.

I did find her. Eventually. Several blocks from the burning remains.



Still in her pajamas, covered in soot, an arm wrapped in white gauze. She was sitting on the curb, chatting away with the fireman who had carried her from the building. Well, really, she'd run down fifteen flights of stairs and burst into the lobby, burnt, unable to breathe, and beautifully alive, and he'd picked her up and carried her from there. She was that kind of beautiful, men always wanted to save her.

She was up with her arms around me before I could fully process it. All that panic, and there she was, relatively unharmed. Certainly alive. Holding me tight. Tight enough that I knew she was scared. I could feel her fluttering heartbeat next to my own. She smelled entirely of smoke, hot and burnt and bad. It only made me hold her tighter.

"It's okay," she told me. Like I was the one who had lost everything. "Everything is okay, everybody's okay."

Technically untrue, but good enough for me.

It was harder for me after the fire. I was terrified for and of her. How could I look at her after that? Knowing that she survived just to die later.

And the burn. I was obsessed with the burn. It was bad, from her wrist to inner elbow. An ugly uneven scar. Her inner arm a mountain range of off-colored flesh. They did skin grafts, but it just made the distortion more obvious. I can look at it for hours, get lost in the curved edges of scar tissue and healthy flesh. I have to remind myself not to stare. There's a pearlescent sheen in the worst parts, like she's glowing from the inside.

Sometimes the hand on that same arm goes numb. The burn deep enough to cause permanent nerve damage. She'll stretch out her stiff fingers, rolling her wrist back and forth. You can tell it's painful. Flapping her hand in the air, hoping the forceful motion might will

her fingers back to life.

We both know I'm going. Jeremy or not, who wants to be alone and lovesick at the end of the world?

I scratch Kitty behind her ears, pile up slices of cold cut turkey on a plate, pour a whole gallon of milk into a mixing bowl, and scatter catnip throughout the apartment. She purrs and rubs against my leg.

"Good Kitty. My good baby." I feel like crying.

Instead, I put on makeup, dress in something tight, short, and provocative, and greedily finish a bottle of wine. I have to fix my eyeliner twice because my eyes keep brimming over.

It would be easier to stay here. I could dissolve in silence, lose my mind in privacy. Scream and cry and mourn. Spend my last hours miserable and alone. But I've never been able to say no to her, and why would I start setting boundaries now?

Before I leave, I open all the windows. Let the night air blow through my small apartment. Kitty has milk dripping from her whiskers. She breaks my heart with her deep calm cat eyes.

I leave anyway.

Sarah has made it difficult for me to escape. Cornering me in the back of the bar the moment I arrive. There's already drinks on the table. She has her legs propped up in Jeremy's lap, her heels leaving dirty scuff marks on his khakis. "I was starting to think you bailed," she says, peering out at me over the rim of a wine glass.

"I'm here," I say, shrugging my shoulders.

She just grins.

Jeremy and Sarah are not technically dating. His wife and interchangeable children mean that Sarah is more a flashy side piece than an official girlfriend. He's also her boss.

I thought she knew better. I know that she does. He's not bad to look at, in an old man way. I guess. He buys her anything she wants, which she thinks is funny. "If he's so adamant on wasting all his money on me, I'm not stopping him."

More than once, I've heard her call him a corporate overlord, a spoiled trust fund baby, a business major. Christened him the CEO of adultery. She's never been secret with her disdain, whispering it in his ear while he swipes his credit card. For every insult she throws at him he returns with a gift. Diamond necklaces, sparkling rings, designer bags. A ruby bracelet that she pawned, not because she needed the money, she just wanted him to know how little it mattered. They're locked in some weird material battle. She throws one gift away and he comes back with ten more. It's hard to break that kind of cycle. Easy to mistake that kind of thing for love.

Jeremy is busy talking. He's very proud of himself. He's acquisitioned another factory, another plot of land or something. It's a trade deal that will make his company several million dollars in profit. I want to laugh about it. Sarah's right, his money doesn't mean anything, or it won't soon enough.

"There's lots of farmland in the area. Which would be great for construction, but the locals are already upset, so we're laying low for a bit. In a few years, we'll swoop in and buy out the rest of it," he says, sipping from a tumbler of whisky and smiling his on-brand business smile.

Sarah nods solemnly, but there's a menace in her eyes. "Yeah, fuck those locals," she says coyly, digging one of her heels into his thigh. "Jeremy is going to buy the whole world and all the people in it."

He frowns and pushes her legs out of his lap. "Only if I'm lucky."

Sarah snorts, most unladylike. I grin stupidly at her. I love it when she's like this, playful, just a little mean. It makes my palms sweat, my heart race. I'm happy this is how she will be tonight. Full of mischievous energy.

We finish the drinks on the table, and Sarah demands more. Jeremy obligingly showers us in alcohol. Tequila shots. Something florescent blue that changes the color of our tongues. Sarah shouts with glee as he pops a champagne bottle. Burning liquor offers its apologies to the back of my throat.

Sarah wants to go dancing, but I'm not drunk enough for that. "Come on," she whines, tugging at my hands.

"In a minute," I tell her.

She frowns, suspicious, "Are you having a good time?"

"Of course," I lie.

"It's just you haven't been out in forever, and I thought maybe something was wrong."

"Nothing wrong," I lie again. "Just need another drink."

She studies my face, searching for something. I try to look happy, calm. "Okay ..." she says.

"You guys go," I can't stand her looking, she's close enough that her perfume tickles the back of my nose. Vanilla, then something dark and smokey. "I'll be right behind you," I say, my mouth suddenly dry.

She doesn't look convinced, but she shrugs and leans forward to give

me a quick hug. A tight squeeze of the shoulders. “I’m glad you’re here Cassy. I’ve missed you,” she says right into my ear.

Then she’s gone, disappearing into the crowd, dragging Jeremy behind her.

I’m trying not to think about the things I’ll miss. Never again a fresh apple, sweet water dribbling down my chin. No more bird calls, or thunderstorms. No more peering over wine glasses, or playful flirtation. All the things that won’t exist tomorrow. What’s left, if anything is left, won’t be for Sarah and me.

I wobble towards the bar, compete with a mass of strangers for the bartender’s attention. Manage to order and pay for a drink. The bartender gives me back the wrong change, and I nearly point it out to him but then remember that money won’t matter in a few hours. My drink is strong. Worth the extra cash. I gulp it down and fight my way back for another. I tip him a twenty.

I’m feeling better now, certainly fuzzier around the edges. Just the perfect amount of fucked up. This is right. The way it should be.

I’ll miss Kitty, and sunsets, breakfast in bed. But I would miss Sarah more. I miss her even when she’s right in front of me. I’ve been missing her my whole life.

I’m also drunk and deep into infatuation. Maybe I’d feel different about it in the morning. If there was a morning. I wish my last meal wasn’t liquor. No more burnt bacon. No more itchy mosquito bites.

I hover on the edge of the dance floor, searching the bodies for a shape I recognize.

No more Sarah.

But not yet. There she is, rising out of a mass of people. Beautiful Sarah with her golden hair, or something like that. Jeremy emerges

behind her, his bulky frame ruining her silhouette. His hands on her hips, their movement slow and stumbling. Jeremy won’t let go of her waist as they waddle through the crowd.

No more Jeremy. No more Cassy. No more love triangles.

Won’t that be a relief.

Sarah sees me and waves eagerly. “God it’s hot,” she’s sweating, droplets of saltwater sliding down her collarbone. I’d lick them from her if she’d let me.

Jeremy looks queasy. I wonder if it’s the heat, all the movement. He’s had the least to drink between the three of us, but he can’t hold his liquor the way Sarah and I can. He certainly looks uncomfortable. A tired old man. It’d be funny to tease him about it. Make it clear that he’s an unfit match for his young mistress. I have a laundry list of all the cruel things I could say. All he really wants to do is take Sarah somewhere quiet, mess around with her youth and go back to his family for the night.

He checks his watch, his fancy gilded watch. “It’s getting late.”

Sarah ignores him and grabs my hand. Her skin is warm, her scar flashes on her wrist like jewelry. “I have to pee,” she announces, pulling me toward the bathroom, leaving Jeremy behind at the bar.

I nearly puke in one of the stalls. It takes several deliberate determined breaths to soothe the rolling nausea in my stomach. I wobble to the sink and splash my face with cold water. I pinch myself and lean against the countertop, hoping the swaying stops soon.

Sarah kicks her way out of the adjacent stall. “It’s fucking gross in here.”

While she’s washing her hands, I stare at her reflection in the mirror, mesmerized by the way her necklace dangles from her throat. It takes

me a moment to realize she's talking, complaining about Jeremy. Apparently, he wants to take their relationship to the *next level*. Leave it to fucking Jeremy to steal my thunder. It's probably the real reason I'm here, a buffer, she hates needy men. "I thought he was joking, honestly," she tells me, scrunching up her face, dropping her voice a few octaves to mimic him. "*I'm serious Sarah. I love you.*"

She shakes her head and turns off the sink. "Can you believe him? He wants to run away. Leave it all behind. *You and me baby*. Like it's some kind of romance," she looks disgusted. "He thinks I'm stupid."

"You're not stupid," I tell her reflection automatically.

She scoffs, but gives me a soft smile. "There's nothing wrong with the idea. In theory I mean," she leans over the sink, inspecting her eyeliner in the mirror. "Escapism at its finest. For such a *businessman* you'd think he'd be more realistic about things."

I'll miss the ocean. How it feels when a wave breaks and knocks you off balance.

"He's not going to leave his family. Ever. He knows it too, he's just drunk and horny like the rest of us. In the long run we'd make each other miserable."

She shakes her head in disappointment. She's looking at me in the mirror, our reflections wavering. She's waiting for my input.

"Miserable," I echo pathetically. There are other things I want to be saying, but none of it is appropriate for the moment, and every bit of it would be self-serving. I don't want to back up one drunken love confession with another.

Of course, technically there won't be any consequences. I could dump every emotion I've ever had on her. Right here. Right now. In an hour or two it won't matter. Even if she laughs or tells me it's unfair to burden her with my feelings. We'll both be dead soon.

It won't matter.

It doesn't matter.

"Jesus, Cassy, what's wrong?" She spins around to face me, but I keep my eyes focused on the mirror. I refuse to make eye contact. Her hair is all messed up in the back. My own image is clouded.

I wipe at my face, trying to hide the evidence of my sorrow. "Yeah, sorry. Just sad drunk." Sarah nods knowingly, but I see the doubt there.

Then she's hugging me. A good hug, tight and reassuring. I don't want it to end. We linger there for a moment, I rest my chin on her shoulder and feel the pace of my troubled heart start to slow. It's fine. We're together. It could be so much worse. This will have to be enough. Eventually I feel her pull away and I reluctantly let go. I'll miss this the most, quiet unburdened moments of affection.

She blots my cheeks with a rough paper towel, wipes the running mascara from my eyes. "It's been rough, hasn't it?"

I'm not sure what she's referring to, but I nod my head anyway and she sighs knowingly.

Would she be any different if she knew the end was coming? Probably not. The fire was threat enough for both of us. She's already living like she's dying.

I've stopped crying. We're out of the bathroom. She's pulling me along behind her. "Come on, come on! I love this song."

Here we go through the crowd, jostling bodies aside to make space for both of us. She's dancing. Hands up in the air, not exactly graceful, her hips and shoulders each keeping a different rhythm. It makes me laugh. She does some sort of weird shimmy and grins at me. For a mo-

ment I forget who I think I'm supposed to be. I grin back. My body loose from the alcohol moves of its own volition.

Revolving neon lights keep highlighting her in different colors. First she's purple, then blue, deep green. Red, like she's on fire. A bright strobe light flashes indiscriminately, offering me only tiny fractions of her. Her scar is glowing. She raises her arms above her head, and it shines out like a beacon.

She's holding my hands. I spin her around under my arm one way, then the other. We get tangled up together. Her back against my chest. Laughing. She smells hot, like sweat. A dank hormonal smell that makes me want to bury my face in her armpits.

We're closer now, the crowded dance floor is just an excuse. We must press up against each other. I'm just as close to her as I am to the stranger behind me. Nothing suspicious about it. The music is loud and heavy, the pounding bass shoves the thoughts right out of my head. I feel fuzzy. Disoriented. Good and bad.

I have to make a move. Right? That's what this whole story has been leading up to. It'd be easy. Like jumping off a building. Really, it's only one step. All I have to do is fly right over the edge.

I tilt my head so that our faces are closer. See how she doesn't lean away.

A reason to live.

My thumb traces the outline of her scar as she holds my hand.

She's glowing. There's light radiating from inside her.

She has to know my intentions now. She's a smart girl, can put two and two together. Hasn't stopped me yet.

I'm a little off target, but it's not the worst kiss. Closed mouth. Two

pairs of lips mashed together. I'm pretty sure for half a moment she's kissing me back, but then she shifts and pulls away slightly.

I release her immediately. Back away mortified. The shame engulfs me. The apologies rushing out of my mouth. "I'm sorry," I cringe, move back further. "God, I'm so sorry."

She's looking at me funny, of course she is. No, she's not angry. That's good. She looks sad. That's worse. Both of us are swaying, knocked off balance by my actions. She fuzzes up in my vision. I can hardly see her.

I'll run home. Run back to Kitty and apologize. Cry into the carpet till I die.

She gives me a serious look, not unkind, but disturbingly sober. "Cassy?" she asks.

"Very drunk," here come the tears, rolling down my cheeks in fat pathetic drops. "I'm so sorry."

"Okay," she responds, and I can't read the emotion in her voice.

There's nowhere to go. I back up and bump into a stranger. "I need air."

She steps towards me, filling the space I'm trying to make between us. I know she's about to say something, but I panic and cut her off. "I'm just going outside," I keep backing away, practically running from her.

"Cassy," I can hear her calling me. "Cassy don't leave!"

I put my shoulders into it, shoving strangers out of the way. Desperate to escape before she says something I can't unhear. Before she denies me. I can't breathe. I can't see. I want to hit myself in the head, scratch out my eyes.

I manage my way outside. A blast of cool night air. An empty street.

The music is dampened to a muffled thumping. I lean against the bar's exterior brick wall. It's late, the bouncer is on his phone, he looks up briefly but doesn't say anything.

Why does everything have to feel so real? Why didn't I just stay home? Kitty is missing me. How could I leave her like that? What have I done?

I tilt my head back, sucking in mouthfuls of cool night air. The light pollution from the city makes it nearly impossible to see the stars clearly. Tonight, however, they are shining. Brighter than I've ever seen them, sharp, crisp pinpoints of light.

Suddenly I'm laughing. The sound comes out of my body and through my mouth without my permission. More like a gasp, close to a sob, but it's laughter. True laughter. Honestly this whole thing is ridiculous. The entire human population is about to be snuffed out and here I am worried about my love life. Acting like a misplaced kiss is the end of the world.

The stars are so bright. Look at them shining. It's coming. There's a weird pressure at the bottom of my feet, like my connection to gravity might be faulty.

Have you ever seen a building burn? Like it's really burning? Past the point where anyone can do anything about it? Ash falling over everything. Glowing embers searing little holes in your favorite t-shirt. Vicious flames eating at the delicate flesh of the inner arm.

I'm terrified of burning.

"Cigarette?"

Jeremy. Sarah isn't with him. He looks even older under the starlight. I don't have a habit of smoking but ... you know.

He lights my cigarette. It's a tender moment, his hand cupping the flame while I lean towards him. We straighten up, the rigidity between

us comes back quick.

He nudges a pebble with his leather shoes. "You been crying?"

"No."

He looks off into the distance. "Sarah's going to leave me," he says.

"Yep."

"She told you?"

I shrug. "Just figured. Sooner or later."

"Ouch," he takes a long drag off his cigarette. Tilts his head back and blows the smoke out slowly, dramatically. "Damn, look how bright the sky is."

"Weird, right?"

We're quiet for a moment. I watch the smoke from my cigarette curl around my fingers. I'm tempted to put it out on my arm, ready my body for the worst of it.

"Maybe I'll buy her a ring," he says cautiously, like he wants my advice.

"Poor choice."

He huffs but doesn't respond. Now we're both looking up at the sky. The stars aren't just bright, they seem bigger. Glowing holes.

"I really do love her."

"Okay."

We're quiet again, I enjoy the silence between us, this communal

mourning. His love is different, shallow probably, but good enough. I'm glad he gets to feel it. Here we are sharing heartbreak. You can't buy that.

A crowd of people spill out of the bar. The sidewalk is flooded with voices. Laughter. The stale smell of beer.

"Holy shit," someone says. "Look at the sky," there's a chorus of delighted gasps.

It's beautiful, but in an artificial way, like the sky is animated, to real to be real. The stars glint in the darkness.

"There you are!" Sarah shouts, once again appearing out of the crowd like some sort of angel, her hair blown back in the wind.

People are pouring out of adjacent buildings, crowding the street.

I think about booking it before she gets any closer. Straight up run away. Disappear. A last moment of cowardice in a long life of denials. My heart races as she approaches. Luckily some braver part of me refuses to move. I can feel the brick wall behind me, propping me up some, offering cool stability. I promised not to leave. I can face whatever happens. I've done the hardest part. My heart is already open.

"Something's wrong," Jeremy says next to me. He's still looking at the sky.

My body feels tight. She steps up onto the sidewalk and flicks me a brief smile, an award-winning grin. She takes the cigarette out of my

hand and puts it to her lips, taking a long inward breath. "You smoke now too?"

Jeremy is all business; he puts his hand on Sarah's shoulder, not possessively, nervously, worried. "We should go," he says. "Cassy, you can ride with us."

Sarah is still grinning at me. I feel giddy, on the verge of nervous giggling. I forget, for a moment, what Jeremy is so worried about. But then she looks up, follows the crowd's collective gaze. Her jawline. Her neck. The gentle slope of her shoulders.

The stars are brighter still, glowing fiercely enough to turn the nighttime to dusk. Everything is cast in strange misshapen shadows. The laughter in the crowd dies out. Everyone's heads are tilted back like their necks are broken.

"That's weird," Sarah says flatly. I feel her hand against mine. I grasp it immediately. Tightly. Making sure she can feel me through the numbness in her fingers.

We're running. She's still holding my hand. Jeremy is gone.

It's so bright. Like dawn. Like the day.

Flashing in our periphery is the only indication that something significant is happening behind us. We can't hear anything. All the sound is gone, sucked away. We could turn around if we wanted, but then we would miss this last moment. The scar on her arm splits open like a flower, and we burst apart at the seams.

# Rebirth of the Rain

by Vivian Chou

I am the rain. I am no longer Haoyu, but a water droplet as wide as a shed tear. A moment ago, I was kneeling over my brother's body. The rain diluted his blood on my hands, my robes reeking of metal and sweat. My particles intermix with the blood oozed out of my brother's abdomen, iron and salt coagulating. Enemy corpses lie next to my fellow monks' bodies.

I imagine my mother's horror.

*"All those years of training, fasting, and meditation, and for what?" she will cry.*

*Zhang gave me no choice. What kind of a brother betrays his family, his country?*

My bloody staff lies amongst the scattered spears in front of the temple. My head roils with rage and guilt, righteousness and shame. As the rain falls, the earthy scent of rocks and mold and clay releases into the air. Can I ever be purged of my sin if I have no regret?

I was a murderer and now I am water. I tumble into the soil, and a blade of grass siphons me up with its capillary action.

*"I'm in love," Zhang told me. "Don't tell Mama. Lian is the General's daughter; but she wants nothing to do with the war."*

A rabbit eats the grass. A buzzard scoops the rabbit up and devours it, flies over the ocean, and is felled by a storm, plummeting to the sea. I mix with the salt water, bobbing. I enjoy feeling like a part of a grand

design, a drop in the ocean.

*"You're in love with the enemy?" I said. "The bastards who killed Baba? You must end it with her."*

*"No," Zhang said. "Lian is my universe. I wouldn't expect you to understand."*

In the ocean, I am drunk by a cuttlefish. I gaze at my new neighbors with awe. Pufferfish draw geometric shapes in the sand around me to attract a mate. Spotted garden eels rise like tall grass from the ocean floor, undulating with the current. How was there so much outside of the monastery I was oblivious to?

*"How can you live with yourself?" I asked. "After what the General has done?"*

*"Life is full of contrasts," Zhang said. "Look at you. Buddha said to avoid killing or harming any living thing. You are going to eat rice and dou miao and pray, and then kill the soldiers?"*

*"The brotherhood of monks is a way of life," I said. "Who else will protect the people from the bandits?"*

My cuttlefish form is captured by a fishing boat. They sever my gorgeous scintillating head from my body, bleed me out onto the deck, and dry me out for a salted snack. Life is fleeting and brutal. Buddha taught non-attachment, but now I long for my human body, mourn its rarity. The love I felt for my parents, my brother, the amity of my fel-



low monks was as fleeting in samsara as the mist on a hot summer day. I wish I had savored my human potential, but it is too late. Now, I am a drop of cuttlefish blood and the wind carries me up, up above the boat.

*“You always had to be special,” Zhang said. “Closer to Buddha, closer to being a hero. Don’t you just want to live life? Find a love, have a family?”*

*“I’m a monk, you idiot,” I said. “It’s not my calling.”*

I am water vapor and the breeze lifts me past a layer of thready cirrus clouds pulled thin like cotton, over a flock of cormorants, above the giant land mass I call home, and yes, I see the Great Wall, but there are no lines on the continent, no flags to be seen, just tan desert and green forest and the many deep blues of the ocean. The clouds pulse, the wind blows, and the world is a living, breathing being, and if I had my old body, the sight of the world would have punched the breath from my chest. I am never alone, and am connected to everything, as a cirrus cloud, then a butterfly, a dew drop on a mulberry leaf. There are no boundaries between nations or lifeforms.

*“You want the General to be your family,” I said. “The man who wid-*

*owed Mama and left her unable to walk. You are a disgrace.”*

*“I love you, Hayou,” Zhang said. “And Mama and Lian. Always. Don’t fight in this war. The General is going to attack the monastery tomorrow at dawn. You are my brother. Come with me, and escape. More bloodshed will not change the past.”*

*“You’re not my brother anymore,” I said.*

I am the rain. I plunge down for miles, and splash onto a warship in battle. The boat spews fire from a hose, setting an enemy boat ablaze. Soldiers jump overboard, and the flames glow bright and hot, even on the sea’s surface. I tremble, seeing how unnatural our wars are, a product of our delusion.

I cannot cry, but I am now made of tears. There is no good or evil, but only impermanence. I am the rain, and part of every being and form. Being human was a gift, a rare rebirth. Lives are so short, and I have wasted mine, and my brother’s.

# Mirrored Strength

by Ashley Abigail  
Gruetz Resurreccion



# Night of the Cheetah

by Gwynne Stanker

She heard giggles. "People laugh," she told him. Then she heard a whoop.

"No, little one," he said. "Those are hyenas calling to one another in the tall grass, but don't be afraid. The plane started this little fire. See? I feed it." He gave it a piece of oily rag. Trash was all around them—the wreckage of the plane—twisted metal and upended seats. The cries of passengers, terrible screams from people she could not see, frightened her.

"Do not cry." He could only move one arm, but he held her eyes with his. "My people say the souls of those the hyenas eat go into the hyenas and are happy, wild, free."

He held out a stone doll, black, like his skin. Papa had once told her about a stone doll. He called it an "ancestor doll," which was very old, older than she was, older than anyone alive today. The doll was made by the long-ago Africans, the dark ones, ones like the man who now talked to her. In his open palm, the doll looked small, only inches long.

"This doll needs a friend," he said, encouraging her with his eyes.

She looked at the doll. "I cannot take your ancestor doll, sir," she said. "Papa would forbid it."

The man sighed. "Child, I am dying. She has chosen you. The line must be unbroken. You cannot understand, but the doll will keep you safe after I am gone. I was going to give this to my daughter, but she has gone on ahead." In a soft voice, he continued, "Can you not hear her call to me, 'Ababa, Ababa'?"

The girl guessed the words meant "Papa," but she could hear nothing above the cries of the hurt ones, the ones the hyenas found.

She looked into the man's eyes. Like the doll, he seemed to stare at some faraway place. His eyes turned toward her again, and he smiled, his teeth white in the firelight. He whispered. The girl leaned forward, straining to hear him, "Your doll's name is *Chiyembekezo*—Hope. Oh, child, what you will see, what you will hear—do not be afraid. It is a good thing." The man took a ragged breath. "I go," he said. His arm lowered; his fingers relaxed. The girl leaned forward and caught the doll before it hit the earth. She looked back at his face, but he had gone still, like the doll. Great loneliness filled her.

In her small, white palm, the doll looked bigger. She could almost curl her fingers about its round, black belly. The doll's smooth head poked from under her thumb; white shell eyes stared past her ear.

She gathered small pieces of trash, as the man had, adding a bit at a time to keep the fire burning. For uncounted minutes, she heard nothing more. The hyenas must have left. She felt so alone. Time passed. A small breeze picked up and the flames danced. The only sounds she heard were the creak of settling metal and the whisper of shifting trash. The night grew dead quiet. Her head nodded, and she slept.

*Still clutching the stone doll, she stood in the faint light from the dying embers of her fire, but she did not need the fire's light to see. Huge above her in the hot, dark, African sky, the yellow moon cast a glowing light. She smelled an animal smell, not unpleasant but new to her. From out of the night, a cheetah padded soundlessly toward her, its long, spotted tail curved upward. As it lifted and then set down each*

forepaw, its shoulders bunched one at a time above its dropped head; it placed each back paw deliberately—the whole causing the big cat to strut as if it owned the ground on which it trod. When it caught the girl's scent, the cheetah lifted its neck and thrust its muzzle into the air. The moonlight foamed about its high-held head, illuminating the dark tear-streaks that descended both sides of its whiskered nose. Two half-grown cubs trailed behind. The black spots that covered all three animals seemed to jump across their pale fur.

The three stopped a few feet from her. The cubs dropped to their haunches, but the large cat stood its ground and looked with feral eyes into the girl's eyes: "She-cub, in your hands you carry the Mother of all Africa, one who has dominion over the two-footed, the four-footed, those who fly, and those who crawl upon the African earth. But you, She-cub, you are but a moment in the Mother's mind, and soon she will pass from you. All those you meet through her will forsake you, but we will not. We cheetah are her gift to you. No matter where you go, you need only call. We cheetah will come. You are cheetah now, my she-cub. Remember this."

The cheetah arched its back just like any cat, padded two steps forward, and breathed spicy cat-breath into her face. "While it is dark," it purred, "the slope-backs will come for you. Make the bright-bright jump and hold the Mother close. Remember this. Now, we do the scent dance. The ugly breathers scorn cheetah smell. You will be the one they cannot steal from us. Now, She-cub," it said, giving a furry head-butt to her bare calves, "hold the Mother high. We dance."

The silence was absolute. The moonlight foamed down. She lifted the black stone doll above her head. The cheetah chirped once; the two cubs joined in, purring continuously while wending their way about the girl. They rubbed their faces and bodies on her blue sweater, her corduroy jumper; they even passed their whiskery noses across the cheeks of her face and tangled hair. They pressed their spotted, furry heads under her bare feet, so she had to lift each foot one at a time and join the dance. When the dance was done, the purring ceased. The cheetahs drifted away, melting into the night, the mother cheetah first,

the two cubs following, and disappeared as quietly as they had come.

Holding the doll to her chest, the girl awoke. She stirred the dying embers with a stick and added all the trash she could reach. The fire soon burned bright, giving off an acrid smell and roiling with black smoke. She coughed but curled up so close to the flames that they singed her eyelashes and caused her face to flush. "Now, I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake . . .," she could keep her eyes open no longer. Exhaustion pulled her back into a deep, black sleep.

From a distance, she heard the juttering laugh of the spotted ones, the slope-backs. Within minutes, the pad of many paws and the panting of many mouths announced the arrival of the hyenas. They circled just outside the firelight. One, whose tread was heavier, approached, chanted the kill song, "Our jaws crush, our fangs shred, we devour all, both the living and the dead. We are the clan! Come, my brothers and sisters, my children, my ravenous ones. We take what we want. Watch me snatch this mouthful away from the bright-bright."

The girl caught the fetid breath of death as the creature opened its jaws and inhaled her scent. Suddenly, it gave a deep, guttural bark and jumped back, "What's this? Cheetah stink? And something dark? Something old? A more powerful mother than I am protects this one. Fear not, my sweetlings, tastier morsels await elsewhere. We shall yet partake in the blood feast this night. We must away! Our jaws crush, our fangs shred, we devour all, both the living and the dead. We are the clan!"

The fire sank into glowing embers. One by one, embers died. The doll clasped to her chest, the girl slept on and dreamed of cheetahs running free in the night.

\* \* \*

The trill of birdsong pierced the dawn stillness. From where she lay on the ground, the girl opened her eyes and watched as, just a few feet

from her face, a small, yellow-winged bird hopped about pecking for tidbits among the trash. She had not expected the little yellow bird and its beautiful birdsong. She had expected vultures, but even an eleven-year-old girl knew that vultures do not sing.

She watched the yellow-winged bird hop about its birdy business. "*Chk, chk, I eat!*" the bird trilled. When it had hopped far enough away that she would not frighten it, she lifted her head and looked up at the sky. Just as she had feared, the vultures had arrived, their huge, feathery wings tracing endless circles in the white-hot African sky. The dark birds dropped down in ever-narrowing circles, until at last they made landfall in great awkward hops, clawed feet outstretched, naked heads seeking, curved beaks ready to rip and tear. One of the birds landed close to her. With white head sunk beneath dark shoulders, it turned and fixed a red eye on the girl. It spoke: "*Hello, we are Death, come to make your acquaintance. All things come to us in the end, girl, even you, even you.*" It turned away. She had failed muster as food. An echo drifted back to her. "*Faugh! The Mother protects her. Perhaps, later.*"

So much blood, so much death. The carrion eaters had found the crash site well ahead of any rescuers. Would there be rescuers? Who would come for an eleven-year-old girl of no importance? In answer, the faint image of a cigar smoking man in a safari hat rose into her mind, only to fade as quickly as it had come. She was a nobody, and all the dead who surrounded her were nobodies now, too. Understanding that the dead can neither be rescued nor make any complaint, she watched as the vultures, with their skinned heads now glistening red in the sunlight, pulled, jerked, and swallowed. She shuddered. So, the hyenas had not eaten everything, after all. She was afraid, but she knew these great birds were not likely to approach her, just as she knew why they did not sing. An old, African nanny had once told her, "The dark birds are summoned, dear child, not by the living, but by the newly dead, who do not feel, nor do they hear."

The vultures' feeding frenzy continued until they were startled by the roar of trucks arriving on the far side of the plane. With a loud flapping

of wings, the dark birds lifted into the air for a moment, then settled back to earth, intent on their feast, not a moment to be lost.

The girl looked away and searched for the little yellow-winged bird. Just as if it had heard her call, it hopped back toward her, so bright against the piles of sodden trash. The bird stayed with her for only a moment more. "*I fly! I fly!*" it sang. She watched in dismay as the tiny creature, alarmed by the noise of engines and the shouts of men's voices, darted away from her into the sky, becoming just a yellow dot among the blue. For reasons she could not understand, the girl began to weep. Great, sobless tears slipped down her cheeks to soak the white collar of the blouse she wore beneath her blue jumper.

A gunshot rang out. The vultures quickly abandoned their feast, and with one rise and fall after another of their powerful wings they soared into the air, but they did not fly far away. As if tethered to the site by the stink of death, the birds hovered above, swooping in endless circles.

Voices and the crunch of heavy boots came close. The girl felt she could not deal with this new thing. They must let her be—let her be. With both hands, she pulled the stone doll to her heart, lifted her knees, and curled her body around the doll. She tried to get her eyes to stare into the distance in the way that the man's eyes had stared just before he died. She let her eyes slide out of focus, finding it hard not to blink. She was a big, dead baby. Except that the vultures had not touched her, so she might be alive. She would let the approaching men decide. If she were dead, she resolved that her soul should rise into the air like the little yellow bird, and then, together ("*We fly! We fly!*"), they would fly away into the sky, forever.

Time passed. She dozed. She dreamed of riding on the backs of white-headed vultures, their huge wings flapping in her face, blood dripping from her fingernails. Voices came close. Her dream disappeared. The voices were almost on top of her. She opened her eyes. She could see two pairs of polished black boots; dark, knobby knees; and two sharply creased pairs of identical khaki shorts. Soldiers. She neither

moved nor spoke.

"Look, how hyenas got to that one, Sir."

Had the hyenas got to her after all? Was she dead?

"That one was not hyenas, Lance-corporal."

"Tell that to the man whose face is eaten off." Then, fearing he had gone too far, he added, "Major, Sir." His voice sounded a bit off.

"That was vultures." There was a moment of silence. "You don't have a weak gorge, do you, Lance-corporal?"

"No, Sir, but look here, Sir, hyena paw prints in the soft earth, and, oh, no—gods of my people—that woman's arm has been . . . *gnawed* upon." He made a funny noise, took three quick steps, and vomited. He came back to stand beside the Major. "Sorry, Sir."

The Major continued as if nothing had happened. "The only things missing are the hyenas, themselves. They left much to the vultures. I wonder what scared the hyenas off. They must be on the far side of the reserve, by now."

The Lance-corporal could not help himself, "But, Sir," he persisted, as if his eyes had not seen what they had just seen, "Sir, hyenas do not eat live people."

"Oh, but they do, Lance-corporal. They do. It has been a bad dry season. A large female hyena and her clan raided a village near mine last week and carried away a child. It happens, and it has happened here, perhaps the same animals. Look here," the Major exclaimed, his attention drawn to something else, "is this a cheetah paw print? It is almost obliterated by the hyena paw prints. But no, it cannot be. Cheetahs are notoriously shy. A cheetah would have no reason to approach a crash site, and it would most certainly run from a clan of hungry hyenas."

"Should I get the official camera, Sir?"

"No. No documentation until we get the bodies out of here. Certain higher-ups are more concerned for the spotted hyenas than for the poor passengers on this plane. The white-headed vultures' numbers are dwindling. Both are big tourist attractions. You can be sure the truth of what happened here will never get out."

"How will they explain the condition of the bodies, Sir?"

"They will say the passengers died in the plane crash, as, I'm sure, most of them must have. In your report, you will testify to the same, if, one day, you wish to be promoted."

The Lance-corporal snapped a salute, all but clicking his heels together. "Yes, Sir, Major, Sir. I shall assign the body recovery detail, Sir."

"You do that. You can begin with this poor child—oh, gods, I think I know her. No, it can't be." For the first time, the Major sounded disturbed. He talked as if he had a lump in his throat, a lump he could not swallow. He bent down to take a close look. "Is this Asia Jefferson?"

*Asia—Asia Jefferson, that sounded like the name of a girl she once knew, a long time ago. But no, she was not a girl. She was a big, dead baby who stank like a cheetah and who clutched the Mother of all Africa to her heart.*

\* \* \*

The girl lay on her side directly at his feet—had he taken two steps more he would have stepped on her. Her body appeared unbroken. One blue-sweatered arm partly covered a rosy-cheeked face, and her white-blonde hair was mussed about her head. She looked angelic. At some point before she died, she must have pulled her knees to her chest, causing her blue corduroy jumper to ruck up past her pale knees. She was barefoot. Faint, blue veins traced the curve of the insteps of her oh-so-white feet. For some reason, that was what got to him—the

perfect innocence of her small, bare feet. The Major made a sound, a noise that worked its way up from somewhere close to his heart. Just before he could embarrass himself before the Lance-corporal, the girl moved her arm and gave forth a violent sneeze.

"Ah-choo!"

The two soldiers jumped back in surprise. "She's alive!" they said, almost in unison. It might have been comical, had there been anyone to see.

\* \* \*

So, she was alive.

She blinked and allowed her eyes to focus. She was no longer a frozen, curled-up baby, but a real girl. She straightened her legs. With a pang of guilt, she looked around at her only other companions—so still, so cold—the uncomplaining dead, who lay all around her, and who had done so throughout the darkest night of her life and throughout the bloodiest, red morning. Being dead was easy. Being alive was harder.

"What's this?" the Lance-corporal said in surprise as he noticed the stone doll. When he tried to take the doll from her, she screamed, just as if she were one of the hurt ones and the Lance-corporal a hungry hyena.

"Let her have it," the Major admonished. "Can't you guess what she has been through? What this experience has done to her?" His voice drifted down from somewhere above the girl's head. For just an instant, she was uncertain whether the Major spoke of the doll or of her. What had the doll been through? The thought made her dizzy.

The Lance-corporal sounded as if he wanted to spit, but was holding it back, "Sir, that doll looks old. It belongs to the African people, not to this . . . this . . . blue-eyed, blonde-headed Afrikaans child."

A feeling of oldness swept over the girl. Her bones felt as if they were melting. The feeling of wanting to sleep was overpowering.

"And so? So, what if she is Afrikaans? But she is not. I know this child. Her father is an American, a digger. He might give a reward for her return. I will see that you receive this reward."

She felt the Major's fingers press down on her wrist, and then the back of his hand on her forehead.

"Does this hurt?" he asked in a soft voice as he checked her arms and legs. "Besides," he continued, still talking to the Lance-corporal, "if the dead man gave the doll to her, she is its rightful owner. To separate them would bring bad juju."

"Yes, Sir."

"And Lance-corporal?"

"Sir?"

"The elders of my village say that the one who carries such a doll shall live or die by the doll's will. Are you sure you want the thing?"

The Major did not wait for the Lance-corporal to answer, but instead asked him, "How soon before we have radio reception?"

"Several hours before we are within range, Sir."

"You may see to the body detail, now, Lance-corporal. Thank goodness it was a small plane, only a twelve-seater. We would not have had room to recover all the bodies, otherwise."

"True, Sir." The Lance-corporal's footsteps crunched away from them.

The Major's dark face overshadowed his boots as he bent down. He gathered both her and the doll into his uniformed arms. "Don't worry, Asia," the major whispered, "I am a friend of your father's. Did the dead man, there," he nodded toward her friend lying on the ground beside her, "give Chiyembekezo to you?"

On the heels of these words, memory flooded through her. Of course, that was her name, Asia. And then, she was engulfed with longing for Papa, his strong arms, his rough beard, his tobacco-laden breath. She thought about the last thing he had said to her. Africa took your mother. I won't let it take you; you must go to school in America. Asia still cried in the night for Mama, and now Papa was sending Asia away. She had the Mother doll, now. Would Papa relent, or would he say she was too old for dolls?

She didn't want to talk, but the Major had asked her a question. "I don't know why the hyenas and the vultures didn't eat us. They ate everyone else. My friend built me a fire and gave me his daughter's doll."

"From that poor man's living hand to your living hand," the Major said, his voice sounding as if it came from a great distance. "No one will dare to take the Mother from you, not until she is ready to go. If they do try, they will be sorry." And then, as if to himself, he said, "Oh, Ben Jefferson, my old friend, your daughter is the only survivor. The vultures did not touch her; the hyenas did not touch her; they did not touch her. How will I explain this to you? How?"

Again, Asia heard gunshots and she jumped in his arms.

"It's all right," the Major's voice soothed. "The gunshots are to scare away any vultures or hyenas that might still be about. You were lucky, Asia. You are safe now. We will take you to your father."

As the Major carried her toward his truck, Asia looked back over his shoulder, trying to see the face of the man who had kept her company throughout the dark night. He still lay on the ground in front of the ashes of the fire he had built for her. The strewn piles of refuse and overturned seats encircled his still form. In the heavy African air, smoke floated along the ground, making it difficult to see the man's face. She did not even know his name, but she would never forget his kind eyes. His head rested on his arms as if he were sleeping. Something about the way his arms were folded made him look peaceful. She hoped he was with his daughter.

Asia hugged the doll. It lay warm in her hands. She looked at the doll's hanging breasts, round belly, and pudgy legs. How Papa would love to see this doll. At least, she thought he would. He had told her more than once that certain ancient things should belong only to the African people and should never end up in the white man's museums. Yet here they both were, she and the black stone doll. Then, her eyes closed.

Some uncounted time later, a bump ended Asia's nap. She was buckled into the back seat of an open-sided military truck sailing over the savannah at a reckless speed. The plane crash lay far behind. The Lance-corporal was driving. Asia studied the side of his face and decided she was not afraid of him anymore. As the Major had set her down in the back seat, she had briefly awakened to find the Lance-corporal standing there, smiling at her as he handed her an orange Quanta and a small bag of peanuts. He had not looked at the doll. She drank most of the orange soda, wolfed down the peanuts, and then fell back to sleep.

Now, she was awake again and determined to stay that way. No one spoke to her. The Lance-corporal was intent on his driving. In the passenger seat, sitting head and shoulders above the Lance-corporal, was Papa's friend, the Major. He seemed relaxed and lost in thought. His long legs were splayed out, knees bent, one foot up on the low frame of the open-sided door, and even though he wore a military uniform, something about the way he held himself made Asia think of the Zulu warriors she had seen while traveling to digs with Papa. Asia decided she had made two friends on this journey, the dead man who had given her the doll, and the Major.

Asia twisted around to look behind. They were traveling in a convoy of three trucks. The second truck was identical to the one in which she rode, but the truck that brought up the rear had a short flatbed carrying an awkward, tarpaulin-covered load. The soldiers had carefully secured the load with thick ropes. Asia faced forward. She did not want to think of what was under that tarpaulin.

The dust from the truck's wheels billowed up about her face, but this was Africa in the dry season. You ate dust. Asia took off the blue



sweater she had been wearing on the air-conditioned plane and, holding the arms to either side, stretched the thin material over her nose and beneath her eyes, before knotting the arms behind her head. She might be an American national, but she had been born in Africa.

Asia fell asleep again and awakened to find that the jeep had stopped amid several dome-shaped, thatched huts. Small boys with long sticks herded stocky, thick-horned cattle through the middle of the village. The Major and Lance-corporal were gone. A gaggle of Zulu children gathered around the military truck and stared at her. One little girl, no more than five or six years old, wore a short grass skirt and was bare-foot. She stared at the half empty bottle of orange Quanta that Asia had intended to finish later. The little girl, with close-cropped hair and large, luminous eyes, looked between the orange Quanta by the arm rest and the Mother doll lying in Asia's lap. To her surprise, Asia felt an irresistible urge to give them both to the child. With a flash of intuition beyond her years, Asia understood that the doll was no longer hers; it had chosen its new owner. She felt a pang of loss, yet she knew that the doll had never really been hers to keep; it belonged to the African people. Asia hugged the Mother of all Africa to her heart, kissed the top of its smooth head, and repeating the doll's name, "Chiyembekezo," handed both the remains of the orange Quanta and the doll to the girl. Asia started to tell the little girl that the name meant "hope," but of course, the child already knew that. She smiled happily at Asia and then ran off down a dirt pathway with the other children screaming after her. She was clutching the doll and the soda, one in each hand.

Asia looked up. The Major stood there looking at her with approval. Behind him stood the Lance-corporal, balancing three dripping orange Quantas in his hands. Clearly, this village had a generator. The Lance-corporal looked at Asia with his mouth open in surprise.

The Major stepped forward and placed his hand on Asia's shoulder, stopping just short of patting her on the back. He spoke to her as if she were not eleven years old but as if she were a grownup, "Orange Quanta. It might as well be declared the international drink of all Africa."

The Lance-corporal handed them each a soda. He glanced at the Major and took a half-step back, smiling. They stood and watched the little Zulu girl run down the street laughing, holding her treasures high, with all the other children close on her heels. "Most likely, we will never see *her* again," the Major said. They all understood that he did not mean the little girl he was still watching. He spoke to Asia, "You were quite small the last time I saw you, Asia. Children grow so fast. Did you know that your father once took a poor village boy as his bearer and, later, thinking this boy had potential, sent him to military school?"

No, she had not known that.

The Major squatted down in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Your father is one of the finest men I have ever had the privilege to know. I shall be so happy to be the one, together with the good Lance-corporal here, to return his daughter to him." The Major smiled, and then he said a thing that caused Asia to blush. A warm feeling rose from her toes to the top of her head. "You are your father's daughter, Asia Jefferson."

\* \* \*

The convoy soon left the village behind and emerged with a bounce and a cloud of dust onto a hard-packed dirt road, making the going easier. They raced by a distant herd of springbok, the reddish-brown stripe on their sides contrasting with their white bellies and faces. The shy creatures lifted their slender-horned heads to look at the roaring trucks but soon continued grazing. The convoy was too far away to be a threat. Springbok were cheetah's natural prey. She wondered where the cheetah and her cubs were now. The mother cheetah had come to Asia as her sole hope in the night. Had it been only a dream? The cheetah had called Asia "she-cub." Where are you, cheetah? Asia thought. I long to see you. You are my only mother, now.

Sitting in the back seat of the dun-colored truck with the arms of her blue sweater tied behind her head, Asia was so lost in thought that she almost missed it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a huge, spotted cat appear-

ing and disappearing between the clumps of tall grass. It seemed impossible, but the beautiful creature kept pace with the truck, its front and back legs coming together and springing apart effortlessly as it ran, its long, spotted tail flying behind it. She could barely see the tops of the cubs' heads, short ears, and the tips of their tails over the grass as they followed their mother. When Asia became aware of the animal, it turned its face toward her. Asia felt the weight of the big cat's gaze upon her own sweater-covered features. She could clearly see its whiskery cat face and the tear-streaks of dark fur that ran down either side of its nose. Then the truck bounced down into a dry riverbed. When the vehicle roared up the other side onto the flat savannah beyond, the cheetahs were gone.

So, when Asia called, the mother cheetah had come just as she had promised. The loneliness that had dogged Asia's footsteps for as long as she could remember was gone. "I am cheetah; I am She-cub," Asia whispered under her breath. She imagined taking her place between the two cubs, her brothers, powerful muscles flexing, tail flying straight out behind her as she ran, wild and free, behind her mother. For the first time in her young life, Asia felt powerful and beautiful. She felt as if she had, at last, come home.

She opened her eyes. The truck sped over the savannah. No one paid any attention to her, just an eleven-year-old girl belted into the back seat. She turned in her seat and spread the fingers of her right hand and pressed them above the armrest against the cool metal. She imagined that her fingernails grew into sharp claws. I am cheetah. I am She-cub. She smiled. It was quite a cat-like smile.

She was startled out of her reverie by the Major's shouted words, "Ben Jefferson!"

Appearing as if by magic out of the roiling dust, Papa's museum truck bounced straight toward them. The roof was pulled back, and Papa was standing almost straight up in the driver's seat, holding onto the steering wheel with one hand, waving his safari hat with the other. He shouted her name.

\* \* \*

Later, the Major watched as the museum truck with its two happy occupants disappeared over the hill in a cloud of dust. The debt he owed to Ben Jefferson had at last been repaid. He should have felt lighter; yet a shadow stalked the edges of the Major's thoughts. Meeting the archaeologist at an early age had been fortuitous for the Major and had changed the course of his life. But he had also spent his life moving between two worlds—one ancient, one modern. He had learned early to keep those two worlds separate. By adhering to this rule, the Major had risen to his current rank.

He stood for a few moments and studied the cloud of dust which lingered in the wake of the museum truck. Finally, as if finding no answers there, he turned and walked back to the convoy. By the open side of the lead truck, the Lance-corporal stood unmoving, as if fixed in place. He stared wide-eyed at something in the back seat, the seat in which Asia Jefferson had sat for the entire trip. Curious, the Major moved up beside his subordinate and froze. Deep swaths of upholstery had been shredded and torn; wadding was strewn about. Five distinct claw marks marred the hard metal above the armrest, as if from the claws of a large cat—not so large as a lion's paw, yet smaller than a grown cheetah's paw. The Lance-corporal looked ready to disintegrate where he stood. The Major laid a hand on his shoulder. "We did not start this, Ayo," he said, for the first time using the Lance-corporal's first name, "and we cannot stop it. Never speak to me or to anyone of this again. Do you understand?"

Like the good soldier that he was, the Lance-corporal nodded, got into the driver's seat, and started the engine. The Major walked calmly around to the front passenger seat, got in, squared his shoulders, and faced forward.

"See to it that the damage to the back seat is repaired, Lance-corporal."

He took no offense when the Lance-corporal did not answer. Some things were better left unspoken.

# Between and Bewildered

by Jennifer Crow

The old captain spoke of myths from Earth,  
How a ball of thread—red, he claimed—led  
A hero to a monster, and out of the labyrinth  
After. He said this as he followed beacons  
Made of alien alloys through a breach  
In the universe's skin, his ship a needle  
Skimming the fabric, stitching a path Between  
In and out of reality. I asked if he'd seen  
A monster in his travels, and he shook  
His head. Maybe because I'd held a gun  
To his temple to make him take me aboard,  
Or maybe because he knew no hero  
Was coming to save him. We all hope  
The Between will hide us, but in the end  
No matter how far we go, there we are  
With our tattered morals and dingy dreams,  
The captain no more or less at fault  
Than I. No one sees the villain in  
Themselves, justifications built up  
Like the scaffolding around a ship  
Before it's launched, holding identity  
In place until one day, we realize  
We're in Between the now  
And the eternities, and no one wants  
Us to win, and no one stands  
In the way of our projectiles  
But an old man who still believes in heroes.

# Dark Scents

by Barbara Candiotti



# What you hear in the shadows

by Melissa Ridley Elmes

You can hear it coming up behind you  
Unseen being in the shadows—  
step    step    step  
flap    flap    flap  
schlurp   schlurp   schlurp  
If you really wanted to, you'd know what it is;  
You don't want to know.

That's not your fault—we're taught,  
all of us, avoid, avoid—don't go  
out alone at night, don't walk  
by yourself in the dark, don't look  
back, just keep moving, go, go, go  
and hope someone friendly comes along  
before it's too late.

To look is to court, to invite: come hither  
even if the only reason you're looking  
is to better ascertain whether to run or scream—

new plan: if you hear it coming up behind you  
step    step    step  
flap    flap    flap  
schlurp   schlurp   schlurp  
Just start running and screaming  
without a glance; sort things out  
on the other side of a door.

# Branwen and the Three Ravens

by Danny Chase

**B**ranwen was a lonely child, and no one told her why until she was a child no longer. At eighteen, the town ceased to hold its breath and revealed to her the terrible truth: that Branwen had been raised in the shadow of three missing sons.

When Branwen was in her mother's womb, the world was a happy place for their family. Corbin, the oldest son, Merle, the middle, and Bertram, the youngest, were an exuberant, noisy trio. Like many children, they were rebellious and irreverent, doing what they should not do, going where they should not go, listening to their parents with one ear, and with the other, hearing the call of the world, bright and endless. They were like the ravens that flew above the cottage, their mother said, cunning and mischievous and blithe.

Branwen was born into a family of six. But just a few months later, her parents sent their sons to fetch water for their mother to drink, so that her body would change it to milk to feed her new daughter. And rather than fetch it, the boys began to play a game in the fields, crouching, marching, bellowing, and forgot all about the well.

As the sky outside began to grow dark, their father complained loudly of the boys, and their mother defended them. 'They are like ravens,' she said. 'They long for the freedom of the wide open skies.'

'They are not ravens,' their father retorted. 'But if they yearn so much to be free of the responsibilities of boys, I wish they would be!'

The boys never came home. There was a rustling in the yard, croaks and moans, and bright black feathers swirled through the air to land

on the doorstep of what was now a family of three. Their father lamented his harsh words, but it was too late. And no one told Branwen of her lost brothers until she turned eighteen.

Immediately, Branwen declared that she would find them. It was not due to guilt or grief, but a sense that this quest had arranged itself directly in her path. Branwen had been raised by parents with a nebulous sense of responsibility and work: at times praising her for toiling in the house until her hands were red and callused, at times urging her to run out into the yard and be nothing but a child. But Branwen was not a child now.

Branwen packed lightly for her journey: an apple and a knife to cut it, a jug of water and a cup to drink it, and an empty pocket for whatever she might find along the way. Those in the village spoke of a flock of ravens which roosted in nearby fields, and Branwen began her search there.

Branwen had seen ravens before, of course, but not so many in one place. The flock seemed endless, taking up every tree except for one small pine, and as Branwen watched, three ravens out of the multitude landed there. They were slightly different from the other ravens, she realised: curiouser, madder, brighter.

Branwen felt uneasy in the shade of that tree and took a few steps back. The trio of ravens did not move, but before long, the cries of the flock faded from Branwen's ears and she began to hear another sort of speech, this one nearly human.

The Sun, Moon, and Stars have cursed us, the largest raven said. Sis-

ter, will you set us free?

‘I will try,’ said Branwen, and in response, the ravens took to the air. They were graceful in their aerial dance, always three together, but always in their own space. They circled overhead for a moment, and a single black feather drifted down through the air to land at Branwen’s feet. The feather was nearly as large as Branwen’s hand. She put it into her empty pocket.

\* \* \*

In those days, one could walk to the palace of the Sun. It lay at the last point of land before east became west and day became night. As a child, Branwen had read of the home of the Sun, with its open blue skies and green fields, its maze of a garden laid out in tangled rays, and a palace of bright white walls that had no ceiling.

The reality of it was somewhat different.

Branwen crossed from the road into the garden, confident that a place with no shadows held no secrets. And perhaps it did not. Perhaps all that Branwen needed to know was right there before her.

The garden path was white. The Sun had bleached it. But it was not stone that crunched and crackled beneath Branwen’s feet, but bones. They were a mix of sizes: tiny little sharp-snapping bones, and larger ones that were thick enough to still be intact, rolling beneath Branwen’s feet. There were even some that were still new and soft, driven to a white madness by the blazing of the Sun before they’d even fully dried.

They were the bones of children, Branwen realised. Everyone who came to see the Sun had to walk on the bones of children, and could do nothing for them.

The garden was very hot, and the hedges that grew along the path were sharp, with delicate spines that were like bones of their own. Where the plants got their water from, Branwen could not see, and

she had to stop often and drink some of the water she’d brought with her, from the jug that she’d refilled from every stream and river she’d crossed before she’d come to the Sun’s palace. She longed for those rivers now, in the heat of this garden. She yearned for the sweet grass of home, the green fields that had been her playground. The grass at the palace of the Sun was dry, brown, and dead.

The air only got hotter as Branwen approached the palace. It was a beautiful building, with walls of white stone that sparkled in the light, and no roof to cast shade. The light was so bright now that it became no different from darkness, because it blinded Branwen, leaving her groping for the steps, seeking the growing heat that lived in the centre of the walls. The only relief that Branwen could find now was in her own fear, blessedly dark, heavy, and cold.

Finally, there came a point when Branwen could go no farther, so great was the heat. She went to her knees and found that in this place, even white stone could grow hot to the touch.

Before Branwen could speak, the Sun did. ‘I smell,’ said its heated voice, ‘a child.’

Branwen thought of the bones in the garden. ‘I am no child,’ she said.

‘You are a human child,’ said the Sun. ‘And I have not eaten in days. Everywhere around the world, the children have been hiding in shadows. My stomach is empty. And here a child comes to me in my night-time prison.’

Branwen shivered in the heat, and her breaths came as gasps. ‘I seek my brothers.’

‘More children?’ the Sun asked, eager.

‘They are ravens,’ Branwen said. ‘You have cursed them.’

The Sun seemed to scoff. ‘I know nothing of ravens. And your broth-

ers cannot be ravens, as you are human. When I put your bones into the garden, they will be among their peers.’

Branwen dug frantically into her pocket. ‘But I am a raven too!’ she exclaimed and held out the long black feather toward the Sun. She felt the moment it caught fire, jerking in her grasp, and she let it go with a cry. The smell of burnt feather filled the air.

‘You are a raven!’ the Sun roared, angry. ‘I do not eat birds! Begone with you!’

Branwen fled, through the halls, down the steps, into the garden and across the bones. Gradually her body started to remember what cold was, and her eyes began to recover their sight. But she shivered all through the coming night.

\* \* \*

In those days, one could also walk to the palace of the Moon, which lay at the place where the sky touched the ground. The Moon was said to live in a beautiful blue twilight, with pools of water to reflect itself, and everywhere a mist that smelled of green and growing things. But now that Branwen had seen what the palace of the Sun was really like, she recalled the tales of the Moon with an uneasy nostalgia.

When Branwen had nearly reached her destination, three shadows crossed her path, and she looked up to see three ravens: carefree, mighty, and beautiful. It was the middle one who came near now, swooping and gliding over her head. Another feather fell, this one smaller than the first. It fit better into Branwen’s pocket.

How clever you are, sister, said the middle raven, before they flew away.

It grew darker and colder as Branwen neared the palace of the Moon. It wasn’t cold enough to snow or to freeze the streams she crossed,

but there was a damp chill to the air that grew heavier as she walked. The grass grew tall alongside the path, and caught the dew between its strands, pulling it down to the wet, brown earth.

Eventually, the damp was so pervasive that it solidified into a mist and got in between Branwen’s clothes and her skin, in between her eyes and the horizon, and eventually, in between her eyes and the ground.

At first, it was difficult to follow the path blindly. Branwen had to rely on the tall grass grasping at her ankles when she strayed to one side. But after a while, the path became more obvious, harder and springier beneath her feet. Branwen hadn’t gone much farther when a breeze sprang up, chilling her, but also clearing some of the mist.

‘Oh,’ Branwen said softly, as she found herself in the garden of the palace of the Moon. There had been only dry and painful death at the palace of the Sun, but here there was life. Water flowed everywhere, abundant even after feeding plants and flowers of every sort.

Some plants grew tall, reaching up toward the darkened sky, and some grew wide, spilling over the mossy path with lush, green fingers. Flowers bloomed in muted, greyish colours in the twilight, but Branwen could see what would be blood red in better light, what would be blue, what would be pure and white as snow. But these flowers would pass their whole lives in the shadows.

The palace of the Moon was at the centre of the garden, and it looked very much like the palace of the Sun, except its white stone did not sparkle, as there was not enough light. There was still no ceiling, and here, that meant that the mist and water came into the palace unhindered. The abundance of moisture had caused the walls to begin crumbling, and the whole building was covered in a greenish algae.

A large pond was next to the palace steps, and the ground around it was so wet that it had turned into a sucking mud. And that was how Branwen discovered what the hardened, springy path was actually



made of, when the moss had been swallowed and drowned and could no longer soften the crunchy bits.

There were bones here too, and Branwen thought her heart might break. The creeping rot of the place had covered the path and made it green, but it was still built on the remains of children: here a delicate finger with a flower twisted round it, there a skull with soft, mossy hair.

The air grew colder and the heavy mist returned. Branwen was not surprised to hear a voice. 'I smell a child.'

'I am no child,' Branwen said. 'I am a woman seeking my brothers, whom you have cursed to become ravens.'

'Ravens,' said the Moon, unimpressed. 'Don't speak to me of ravens. They're terribly noisy, talking to their reflections in the garden pools, chattering and screeching.'

'If you lift your curse, there will be three fewer ravens in the world,' Branwen said.

'If I eat you,' the Moon retorted, 'there will be one less human child.'

Branwen was shocked to feel five icy fingers close around her arm, but the fog was so thick that she could not see what had grasped her.

'I am no child!' she cried. 'I am a raven!'

'You feel like a child,' said the Moon, close and terrible.

'That's just one of the bones from the path,' Branwen said. She pulled the feather from her pocket and brushed it against the fingers of the Moon. 'See, here is my wing!'

The Moon let go of her arm with a gasp. 'You treacherous raven, trying to trick me! Begone, and all your brothers and sisters with

you!'

Branwen fled down the mossy path of bones, past the greyish flowers and the flowing streams, with hope fading in her heart.

\* \* \*

That night, in a dry field under starry skies, Branwen dreamed. She was back in her parents' cottage, but the place was livelier now, colourful, messy, and boisterous. Three young men greeted her with fond embraces. The oldest had dark hair and an easy smile, and wore an air of command. The second had eyes that glittered sharply and took in everything with a haunting, unblinking gaze. The youngest was fair and pretty, the shyest of them.

'I have failed you,' Branwen said. 'I have been to the Sun and to the Moon, and they will not lift their curse.'

'There are still the Stars,' said the youngest, encouragingly. 'Any mortal would be lucky to have reason to visit the Stars.'

'The palace of the Stars is no less a place of death,' warned the middle.

'Perhaps,' said the oldest. 'But surely to be able to say you have been to the Stars is worth any trouble.'

When Branwen woke, she found in her pocket a small black feather, the size of her pinky finger.

Branwen journeyed with a sense of dread toward the palace of the Stars, built in a place where dark fought with light and neither ever won. But contrary to her fearful expectations, Branwen found herself in the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

There was no garden this time, but instead an orchard of small, wide trees that turned their broad leaves to the dark sky. The ground be-

neath the trees was green and healthy and dry. Branwen knelt and put her hands on it, but it was soft, with no hint of bones. Nor was there any clammy cold or suffocating heat. Here everything seemed to exist in harmony.

The palace at the centre of the orchard was not white stone but opal, and it glowed like a living thing, changing colours as she moved round it. Branwen climbed the steps and arrived in a gallery, large and open, with no ceiling. One wall was painted black and decorated with thousands of little white ornaments. If they were meant to illustrate the constellations, then they were for a sky that Branwen had never seen.

On the opal floor were hundreds of little black chairs arranged in rows, and in nearly every chair was a Star. They were pretty little things, with blond hair made of stardust, wearing hazy comets' tails like clothes, with delicate little hands and faces that glittered like diamonds. All of the Stars turned to face Branwen when she entered, and one of them said, 'Oh! It is a human child.'

'I am not a child,' Branwen said. 'My parents did not send me to obey an order. I come on my own, and seek my brothers, who have been turned into ravens. The Sun would not help me, and neither would the Moon. You are my last hope.'

'Sit down,' said a Star, 'and let us look at you.'

Branwen found an empty black chair, and it was a size too small for her, but she sat, and the Stars gazed at her. Branwen had spent some of her childhood hours staring at the Stars, and thought it very odd to learn that the Stars liked to stare back.

'You are very pretty,' said a Star, finally. 'You may stay here with us.'

For the first time, a bit of cold crept along Branwen's skin, in between her shoulders. 'I'm very sorry,' she said, 'but I must continue on my journey.'

'To what end?' asked another Star. 'You said that we were your last hope, and we cannot help you.'

Branwen stood up at once. She loomed over the little Stars. 'My brothers told me that they were cursed by the Sun, Moon, and Stars,' she said. 'And none of you will admit it. Why do you tell such lies?'

One of the Stars hummed a little. 'I am very old,' she said. 'And in my lifetime I have found that one should not always trust the tales told by ravens.'

'They are not ravens,' insisted Branwen. 'They are my brothers.'

'If they were not ravens,' a Star pointed out, 'you would not be here.'

'Can't you help me?' Branwen asked. 'Please, I beg you.'

The Stars began to blink, bright then dark, like fireflies, creating patterns of light that ran all across the gallery. It was as if they were speaking without sound, in a language foreign to outsiders. At last, one of the Stars pointed a delicate hand toward the dark wall, hung with little white objects. 'Your brothers are in the Glass Mountain,' said the Star. 'They are prisoners there. On that wall you may find the key that will free them.'

Branwen's heart fell. 'But they are not imprisoned,' she said. 'I have seen them flying through the air above me.'

'There are many kinds of prison,' said one of the Stars, wisely. 'And to find what you seek, you must scale the mountain and unlock the door at the top.'

Branwen walked over to the wall, her shoes clicking on the glowing floor, realising as she neared the wall that every little white object was, in fact, a key. 'How am I to know which key it is?' she asked. 'They aren't labelled.'

‘It’s made of glass,’ said a Star, and little giggles from the other Stars echoed all round the gallery.

‘They are all made of glass,’ Branwen objected, but as she reached the wall, she found that the truth was very different. And now she felt sick, with her feet too cold and her head too warm, wet tears in her eyes and dry air in her throat. The keys were all made of bone. There were some little bones still intact, and some pieces whittled from larger bones, here and there a tiny toe, the curve of a hip, the flare of an ankle. Behind Branwen, the Stars murmured hungrily.

Branwen began her search in earnest, her hands trailing over every key, searching for the smoothness of something that had never been alive, instead of the remains of children who had once breathed and giggled like Stars. At the very end of the wall she found it, the key made of glass. Branwen held it up to the light, checking every delicate cut and rounded edge. Then she made to put the key in her pocket alongside the smallest raven feather.

‘Oho!’ cried several Stars, and there was murmuring all around the gallery. ‘We did not say you could take the key. Only that you could find it.’

‘How am I to free my brothers without the key?’ Branwen asked, turning to face the Stars and discovering with alarm that every chair in the place now faced her and the wall of keys.

‘But you cannot take the key,’ a Star said. ‘What will we hang on our wall?’

‘Then what good are your keys?’ Branwen said, with a groan. ‘If they’re always here, then they can never be used.’

‘They’re not meant to be used,’ said a Star. ‘They’re meant to be gazed at.’

Branwen looked at the glass key lying in her hand. It was just the

same size as her pinky finger. The same size as the smallest raven feather. Branwen closed her hand over the key. ‘You have thousands of little white keys,’ she said to the Stars. ‘They’re all very lovely, but they all look the same. However, it so happens that I have in my possession a key different from all of these, a key that glows rich and dark like the night sky.’

There was a clamouring in the room. ‘A black key?’ the Stars asked. ‘Where is it? Let us see it!’

Branwen turned her back to the Stars and drew out the raven feather and the knife she carried. With quick cuts, she nicked and notched the feather’s black vane to resemble the key to the glass mountain.

‘Here it is,’ she said, and held out the feather-key for all the Stars to see.

‘What is it?’ asked the Stars. ‘What is it made of?’

‘It is one of my feathers,’ said Branwen. ‘I too am a raven on occasion, and this key is made from my very own wing.’

The Stars murmured and exclaimed among themselves, growing louder, until Branwen handed the key to the nearest Star. Immediately there was a rush as the other Stars ran from their chairs to see the key for themselves. Branwen was careful to be quiet as she sneaked toward the door, but they paid her no attention. In a few short moments, Branwen was out of the gallery and down the steps, running through the orchard, with the key to the Glass Mountain in her pocket.

\* \* \*

The Glass Mountain stood in a valley, and so, in one sense, it was not very tall. Cliffs at either end of the valley approached the height of the mountain, but none were close enough to allow someone to jump from the cliff to the mountain.

From the valley floor, of course, the top of the mountain looked tall enough to touch the sky. Its sides were perfectly smooth and hard, and very bright, as there was nothing inside the mountain at its base but glass, and the Sun was shining through it, filling the whole valley with heat and light. Branwen was afraid the Sun might try to catch and eat her again, so she was careful not to stand where it could see her.

Or perhaps, Branwen thought, gazing up at the impossible climb before her, perhaps that was exactly what she needed to do.

Branwen stepped into the full sunlight and waved her arm. ‘Hello!’ she cried. ‘There you are, mighty Sun. Have you eaten yet today?’

The Sun rumbled and grumbled, sounding like thunder. ‘No, I have not eaten. I was only waiting for a child like you to come out of the shade.’

‘Well, here I am!’ called Branwen, and as she had both hoped and dreaded, the Sun came lower in the sky and began to chase her.

It was very hard to run in the heat of the valley, especially as the Sun got closer. But Branwen did run, circling the base of the Glass Mountain, one time, a second time, a third. Every time she got too tired to go on, she ducked into the shadows of the cliffs to catch her breath. But she couldn’t stay there long, or the Sun might lose interest in the chase. So Branwen kept running. And the Sun kept getting closer.

As the Sun neared, the Glass Mountain began to make a noise. It sounded a bit like water, and a bit like falling stones. Subjected to the intense heat of a very close Sun, the base of the mountain began to melt. Molten glass flowed out into the valley, and Branwen had to run harder to avoid it. At last she found a shadowed foothold on one of the cliffs. She jumped up and hid there as the mountain came down, and then watched the mountain’s top gradually lower as its base melted and flowed away.

The Sun, confused at having lost its target, made an angry, hungry noise and returned to the sky and its usual course. The mountain continued to melt for a while, and the molten glass filled up the valley, climbing up the sides of the cliffs to make a vast, clear, raised plane.

Finally, when the mountain had cooled enough, it stopped descending. Branwen took careful, slippery steps out onto the new glass surface of the valley, until she neared what remained of the mountain itself. But her heart sank when she realised that the top of the mountain was still too high for her to reach.

It was night by then, and moonlight began to play on the newly melted glass, casting cooler light all around the cliffs. After being so hot, the night air felt especially cold, and Branwen began to shiver. She looked up to see the Moon passing directly overhead, full and damp and cold.

‘Hello!’ cried Branwen. ‘Here I am! And there you are, mighty Moon. Have you eaten yet tonight?’

‘A human child!’ cried the Moon at once. ‘Come closer, so that I may look at you. I will not harm you. I only want to see how pretty you are.’

‘Oh, but I’m just going home!’ Branwen said. ‘I’m not supposed to play outside after dark.’

‘Stay!’ pleaded the Moon.

‘But I don’t want to,’ Branwen said. ‘It’s far too hot down here. Maybe I would stay if it was cold. Maybe if there was snow to play in.’

‘Then snow you shall have!’ exclaimed the Moon, and at once, it gathered a bouquet of damp clouds and shook them until snow began to fall.

Branwen, already cold, began to shiver. But she stepped out into the rising snow, pretending she was playing.

‘There you are!’ the Moon said happily. ‘And how pretty you look.’

‘How pretty you look!’ exclaimed Branwen. ‘Just wait, I’ll build a staircase of snow and climb the steps so that I can see you better.’

‘Hurry, hurry,’ said the Moon. ‘I am so anxious to meet you!’ Snow began to fall faster, thicker, and Branwen started building steps up the side of the Glass Mountain, sculpting their shape with her nearly frozen hands, stomping them into strength with her soaked shoes.

‘Where are you?’ asked the Moon. ‘I can’t see you through all the snow.’

‘I am building my stairs!’ Branwen shouted. ‘I am climbing higher!’

‘You sound nearer!’ said the Moon eagerly.

Branwen shivered and shook as she carved the stairs, one by one, taller and taller, until the top of the Glass Mountain was finally in reach. Still hidden from the Moon by the falling snow, Branwen reached into her pocket for the glass key.

But her pocket was empty.

‘No,’ Branwen whispered. ‘No, no.’ She looked at the steps beneath her, but realised that she’d never be able to find a key made of glass in a valley of glass with a covering of snow.

‘Where are you?’ cried the Moon. ‘Come, little child, climb up to me!’

Branwen didn’t answer. With her breaths frosting the glass door in front of her, she took out her knife and, with one quick stroke, she

cut off the little finger of her left hand.

The wound froze almost instantly, and Branwen wrapped it carefully in cloth ripped from her shirt. Then she used the knife to whittle the bone of her finger into the Glass Mountain key, just as she had with the raven’s feather. Shaking, with the Moon groaning above her, Branwen fit the key into the lock and turned it.

The bone immediately broke, too new, too wet to keep its shape. But Branwen didn’t need it any longer. The door swung open.

Branwen found herself in a large room, with four chairs arranged by a cheerful fire. Three young men were standing in its light, one contented, another rather malcontent, and the last benevolent.

Branwen staggered and sank into one of the chairs. ‘You are not ravens,’ she said.

The youngest brother, Bertram, looked at her with regret. ‘We are ravens,’ he said gently. ‘And we have always been so.’

The oldest brother, Corbin, gave a cheerful laugh. ‘We thought it would be fun to pretend to be little boys for a while, but when your parents had you, we were no longer needed. Except then you wanted to find us!’

‘It was such a lovely thing to do,’ said Bertram, kindly. ‘We thought as reward, we would give you a taste of the freedom we feel. Ravens can visit the Sun, Moon, and Stars anytime we like. But so very few humans have ever been there. We wanted you to have the chance.’

‘And how you have triumphed,’ said the middle brother, Merle. His eyes glittered, dark and a little frightening. ‘No human has ever reached the top of the Glass Mountain.’

‘You were never prisoners,’ Branwen said softly.

‘We were prisoners as little boys,’ Merle said.

‘We escaped!’ Corbin added, looking quite pleased about it.

‘But you were missed,’ Branwen said.

‘How could we be missed when they had you?’ asked Corbin.

‘Because you can’t give one child enough love for four,’ Branwen said. ‘It flows out and is wasted.’

Bertram looked down, seeming regretful. ‘That was never our intention.’

‘And there is this.’ Branwen silently held up her hand, with only three fingers.

‘Oh, yes, very clever,’ said Merle, stepping closer, with a smile on his face. ‘You were so quick to solve all of the other problems. We simply couldn’t let the last step be easy for you.’

Merle held out his hand. In his palm was the key to the Glass Mountain.

Branwen snatched it. She tore the bandage from her hand and fitted the key into the empty space. In the heat of the fire, in the heat of Branwen’s anger, the base of the glass key melted onto her hand. The pain stopped and the glass finger shone in the firelight. ‘Now,’ Branwen said, ‘I control the door to the Glass Mountain.’

Corbin gave a cry of delight and broke into applause. ‘Oh, you are truly worthy of being our sister!’

Merle shrugged his shoulders. ‘Our wings can carry us everywhere,’ he said. ‘If you banish us, we have endless other places to go. We are truly free.’

‘The Stars said that there were many kinds of prison,’ Branwen said.

‘Regret is a prison,’ Merle answered. He looked sharply at his brothers. ‘We should take care to avoid it.’

Bertram looked guilty all the same. ‘You should come with us,’ he said softly.

‘But I am not a raven!’

‘And yet, the Sun, Moon, and Stars believe that you are,’ Corbin said. He came closer, smiling broadly, and knelt at the foot of Branwen’s chair. ‘Oh, won’t you let us make it up to you?’

Bertram gave a little laugh. ‘What he means is, you’re cleverer than the three of us put together.’

‘If we ever do become prisoners, you can certainly figure out how to free us,’ Merle said, sounding very practical.

‘You are locking us out,’ Corbin said. ‘Sister, take care that you don’t lock yourself in.’

Branwen thought for a moment, and then said, ‘If you truly mean to make amends, then I will come with you. And then perhaps you will prove yourselves worthy of being my brothers.’

‘You set us a quest?’ inquired Merle, dubious.

‘I set you a lesson. You are not the only children who are missed.’

\* \* \*

Branwen made the journey back to the garden of the Sun on foot, which slowed the trip considerably, and the ravens who flew above her called out their displeasure in sharp cries. Branwen was not

moved. Part of the lesson was patience.

Finally, they reached the edge of the garden of the Sun, where the white path began. Here were some soft bones, new and still slightly damp. The raven brothers gathered them together, and in time, they formed a little skeleton, nearly complete, with only the right upper leg bone missing.

Corbin, the oldest, was cautious and concerned. ‘He’ll never walk again,’ he said, as he paced around the bones.

‘You could give him a new leg,’ Branwen said.

‘If I do that, I will be permanently without a feather. If I give him a part of me, I will always miss it.’

‘That is your lesson, then,’ Branwen said. ‘Children are always made from parts of their parents, and after those parts are given away, they may be lost forever.’

With great reluctance, Corbin extended his wing and plucked a large, black feather. He rubbed the spot where it had been torn away, grimacing with pain. Then he laid the feather on the grass, where the little skeleton’s leg should be.

At once, the bones leapt up from the ground, and when they settled again, they had become a little boy with dark hair and wild eyes. He ran about the grass with an awkward gait, but he smiled broadly, revealing every reclaimed tooth. Corbin gave a delighted clap of his hands, watching the boy stumble like a new deer.

The boy’s journey ended in cries of joy. Back at his village, Branwen and her brothers watched him open a gate and rush across a green field toward a woman who was surrounded by other children. The whole crowd of them began to exclaim and embrace the boy, who laughed and laughed.

‘They did miss him,’ Corbin said. ‘Even with so many others.’

‘Nothing can fill the void of a missing child,’ said Branwen. ‘Not even other children.’

Branwen made the journey to the Moon’s garden on foot as well. This time, though, when she camped for the night, her brothers joined her, and Bertram, the youngest, asked for stories of their parents. Branwen told tales of apple harvests and picnics by the lake, their parents grasping at happiness as it wafted through the air like feathers.

In the dampened garden of the Moon, it was not difficult to find new, soft bones at the start of the path. In the mist, they remade a child, placing each piece with care. But try as they might, they could not find the last round, thick bone that filled the gap between neck and head.

‘He won’t live like this,’ Merle said, disapproval in his voice. He picked up one of the child’s tiny finger bones. ‘Children die, sister. If we bring this one back, another child’s bones will soon lie in this spot. We cannot prevent the Moon from being hungry.’

‘You know what you must do,’ Branwen told him.

‘If I give him one of my feathers, I will never fly as well. I won’t be as free.’ Merle stood up. ‘No. I understand the lesson now. We were cruel to our parents, and for that I am sorry. But I will not give my feather for a child who could die tomorrow of some other mishap.’

‘Will you visit our parents then?’ Branwen asked. ‘Will you tell them the truth?’

‘I see no point to it. It will only add to their grief to know that what happened to them was done on purpose.’

It was Corbin who answered. ‘You have not learned the lesson, then.’

Bertram spoke up as well. ‘Do you think our parents never made sacrifices for us? Our mother made us from her own body.’

‘Remember how our father made toys for us, even after toiling from dawn till sunset on the farm,’ said Corbin.

Merle stood in silence, looking down at the skeleton. Dark expressions passed over his face: melancholy, mourning. Finally, he extended his wing and plucked out a short, fat feather. He placed it on the skeleton’s neck, and at once a little girl lay there, breathing noisily, her eyes wide with confusion.

‘Up,’ Merle said to her, and she obeyed, climbing to her feet in the wet grass.

Her head turned strangely on her neck, too flexible, too fast, and too far. But she opened her mouth, and in a quiet little voice, she asked to go home.

This child was greeted with aching silence. Branwen and her brothers showed her the way home and watched as the girl’s parents came out of their house and sank to their knees in awe. The parents looked grey and worn, too old to have a child, too fragile. But they gathered the little girl into their arms in desperation and rushed her into the house with sure, strong steps.

On the way to the gallery of the Stars, Branwen’s brothers asked for more stories. Now, Branwen told tales of little boys’ clothes tucked into boxes and hidden in a closet, little boys’ muddy handprints on a door that were never cleaned away.

Bertram began to cry, and Corbin put his arms around him. ‘He has learned his lesson already,’ Corbin said softly. ‘We do not need to visit the Stars.’

But Bertram objected strongly. ‘No, no. Let us go. I want to go.’

‘You would have a difficult time of it,’ Branwen acknowledged. ‘Each bone has been made into many tiny keys, and the Stars will not want to let them go. Perhaps the lesson will have to be that what is lost is lost.’

‘I will visit anyway,’ Bertram insisted.

‘Perhaps,’ Merle said thoughtfully, ‘there is a better place for us to go.’

There was a village near the palace of the Stars, with a stream that cut through a grassy field, and there the travellers found children playing games, splashing each other with cool water.

As darkness grew, most of the children left for home, but two remained. Their laughter bounced wildly around the field as the Stars came out. Soon enough, the parts of the creek that lay in deep pools began to reflect tiny blazes of light, growing larger.

One of the children went back to the village. The Stars sparkled brightly for the last child left, and he began to wander the field, gazing upward as if in a trance.

The Stars kept growing, coming closer and closer, until they were nearly the size of the child. When their glittering was almost too bright to look at, Branwen heard a sharp, childish cry of pain.

At that moment, a shadow fell over the boy, dark and feathered. It was Bertram, bold and brave. The Stars shouted with surprise and flashed together in confusion before withdrawing, fading and shrinking in the sky.

The child was left crying and cradling his hand.

‘They only bit off a finger,’ Merle said, after examining him. ‘He will get on just as well without it.’



‘Perhaps,’ Bertram said, as he extended his wing and pulled off a small, perfect feather. ‘But some loss is natural. Parents give pieces of themselves to their children, but what they give also lives on in their children. That is my lesson. If he carries my feather with him, then perhaps my life will not end with me.’

It was not a terribly long walk from the village to Branwen’s home. Branwen’s brothers walked it with her.

Branwen’s parents – their parents – received the three boys with

weeping. When they heard the truth and their guilt was removed and taken by the ravens, they wept still. There were times in every parent’s life when they weep for their children, but these parents had lost those times; they claimed them happily now.

The house became a place of peace, where Branwen worked beside her parents. And in their freedom, even with the Glass Mountain reopened to them, the ravens visited their parents nearly every day, as caring and merry as boys.

# The Separation Was Not Mutual

by Gerri Leen

I don't know why I thought you  
Wouldn't fear me  
Even though we're now hunter to hunter  
You with your insatiable patience  
How many mice die a year?  
But you've always ducked when a hawk  
Flew overhead, recognizing the greater  
Predator even from indoors  
So I guess it makes sense you're wary  
But you're mine, raised from a kitten  
How can I scare you, even turned as I am?

I make sure to feed before I come home to you  
Make sure I'm mellow from warm, fresh blood  
Never let the others into our house  
And still you hide, under the bed  
Like you would from a stranger  
I could flip the bed with one hand  
Catch you if you run  
But I leave you there, hoping time  
And putting on some dirty clothes  
That smell like how I was  
Will bring you back to me

I leave food by the bed  
At first you didn't eat  
But now you do  
Progress even if you won't come out

Until I go back downstairs  
Ears as keen as yours hear you  
Lick the bowl clean  
Gulp down water and  
Use the litter box I've moved into that room  
And then retreat  
Silently, your sweet voice swallowed by fear

\* \* \*

I adjust to this unlife  
Realizing the mistake I've made  
In letting myself be turned and  
Sorrow overwhelms me as I  
Miss the sun and solid food  
So I stop hunting with the others  
Stop enjoying dealing death to innocents  
And begin feeding on those  
Who the world is better without

Every night when I come home  
I wait at the door in the garage  
You always were there, crying frantically  
In the kitchen, on the other side  
Whether I was away an hour or all day  
"You're home, you're home, you're home"  
But now all I hear is your yowl  
Once I climb the two steps and

Come inside before dawn can catch me  
Your sound is one of loneliness  
Coming from under the bed

I'm not the me you loved  
But I'm also not the monster I became  
I sit on the staircase and call your name  
You yowl back, louder  
Then softer, alternating between  
Anger and grief  
Or maybe I'm just projecting?  
I make a sound, half sob, half wail  
My version of your cry  
And it fills the stairwell  
A waterfall of regret  
Then I leave you in peace

\* \* \*

Nights turn to more nights  
And an easy mark turns out to  
Be not so, he was armed and even  
Though I'm stronger, he knew how  
To fight, how to evade, his knife  
Plunged in and in and luckily  
It wasn't made of wood  
He finally went down  
I barely had the strength to feed  
And now the dawn is threatening  
As I drive into the garage  
And sink down on the steps leading  
Inside and watch the sky lighten through the  
Decorative glass on the garage door  
I could sit here and let the daylight have me  
It sounds good

Behind me, near my ear, I hear you  
Scratching in the way you would  
When I accidentally closed  
The bathroom door against you  
Frantic and mad  
And then...your cry  
The one that meant: "You're home"  
Only this time there's fear in it  
But not of me  
This time you sound afraid *for* me  
You don't want me to die?

Your cry turns to a screech I've never heard  
And I know in my unbeating heart  
It means: "Get in here!"  
I unlock the door and crawl inside  
And we stare at each other, neither  
Of us moving, then you stretch your neck  
Your eyes never leaving mine  
I reach back, your nose brushes my finger  
And then you hiss, long and loud  
And it makes me laugh because it's  
Not a hiss of fear anymore  
It's disdain, and annoyance  
And maybe also forgiveness and hopefully  
Someday, no doubt when I least  
Expect it but most need it: love

# Pigtown

by Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece

You had two choices after graduation: the power plant or the slaughterhouse. And the power plant usually wasn't hiring. Those were good union jobs, hard to come by. Your dad had to be a foreman, or your last name had to be Johnson.

So instead most everyone got their yearbook portrait taken, cut school on the chosen day at the end of the semester, threw back warm beer from a half-empty keg at someone's party, snorted something white or swallowed a couple pills, and by a Monday in mid-June was waking up at 5 AM and getting home after dark reeking of pig blood.

That was how it worked in Pigtown. Most everyone smelled like blood.

Jake put in his application the week after graduation. I waited in line right behind him, watched him kick at the dust on the sidewalk in his work boots while I tried to wake myself up.

Looking back, it seems like everyone was always trying to get you to wake up when you didn't want to: six in the morning for the school bus on a Tuesday, practice for JV on the weekends at the crack of dawn even when you didn't stand a chance of making varsity. If there was one thing we wished for, besides going on a trip somewhere like Cancun and never coming back, it was more sleep.

"You can't sleep all day."

"Why do you want to sleep your life away?"

"Get up."

But maybe I did want to sleep my life away. That unrelenting refrain, and all my body wanted to do was ignore it. Just sleep more. Just sleep until something—anything—was over.

The line at the slaughterhouse was just that—a line—and everyone in it was hired, because the factory had already gotten a headcount of graduating seniors from Washington High and promoted just enough of last year's graduates to the carving line so that each new eighteen-year-old could take up a place in the first couple rooms of the building where the newbies started.

Everyone already knew what they were in for.

I spent my hour in line staring at the back of Jake's head. June was hot that year; his tight black curls stuck to his scalp with sweat just like his black t-shirt clung to his shoulder blades. He didn't ever do much in gym class, mostly just hung around the walls during kickball, but had a natural lithe muscle that embraced his upper arms with tight cord.

We moved forward at the same time like we were dancing. His turn with the foreman just anticipated mine. When I gripped the pen to sign my contract, I thought about how the last fingers on it before had been his and how our hands were now tied together in signatures and soon would be tied together in the process of killing.

We both started on Monday on the kill floor.

\* \* \*

This is how it works.

The hogs are brought in grunting and squealing. Don't let anyone tell you they don't know what's happening; they know.

An eighteen-year-old drags a hog forward onto the floor.

Then the eighteen-year-old takes a set of electrified scissor tongs and positions them on the pig's head.

Then the eighteen-year-old holds the tongs in place while a current induces a grand mal seizure in the pig. This is called electronarcosis.

Then another eighteen-year-old winches the pig into the air to bleed it out before it comes to.

Then some more eighteen-year-olds scald the pig's body until the hair comes loose and the scurf comes off.

Then another couple eighteen-year-olds put the pig in the dehairing machine.

Then another eighteen-year-old hangs the pig from its gambrel tendons and scoops out its viscera.

Then another eighteen-year-old wielding an enormous knife like a machete slices the carcass in two.

The next day, some nineteen-year-olds carve the sides into cuts.

Then some hairnetted twenty- and thirty-year-olds seated at an assembly line package the meat with Styrofoam and plastic wrap and expiration date stickers.

Then an old trucker drives bacon and chops to the store.

\* \* \*

The first day is hard. But everyone says you get used to it. And every-

one is pretty much right.

I thought getting up to catch the school bus taught me what it meant to be tired. I didn't know tired until I was stumbling home smelling blood on my boots, too exhausted to clean it off before falling into dreamless sleep.

This is how it worked, and it always worked like this, and it was just a matter of getting used to it, because you'd signed the contract and there might be rent to make or an engagement ring to save up for or god forbid a baby already on the way. You didn't want to be destitute for the little one, did you? Who was going to pay for the diapers if not you?

I didn't want to, but I got used to it. I thought Jake had, too.

Since we started at exactly the same time, we were assigned adjoining lockers. We didn't talk much—Jake didn't talk to anyone, as far as I knew, except maybe the other guys who played in his metal band, but he seemed to be pretty much the same as ever, by which I mean quiet.

His job was bringing the hogs in from the truck and standing them up next to the stunner station. But despite the inherent cruelty of our actions, there was still a gentleness in his bearing, his hands guiding the pigs with something approaching tenderness, maybe like how he cradled his guitar with delicacy even when the sounds coming out of it were augurs of death and decay.

A few weeks in, when I was used to the smell and so I assumed he was too, I saw something pretty weird.

Jake had already led five or so pigs in that morning, one after the other affixed the headgear to them, let the current run its course. Just a couple weeks of practice and his movements were already efficient and fluid.

I was scrubbing the paddles on the dehairing machine and couldn't get

my limbs to work like his; bristles stuck in my knuckles no matter how much I washed them. I looked up to gauge when the next one was coming and saw Jake drag a pig in and pause.

If anyone else had told me what they saw, I would have said they lied. But I saw it myself.

This one was just like any other hog: overfatted, destined for the slaughter, its eyes weary and agitated, its knees buckling under its pink bulk. Jake's hands gripped the pig's shoulders like they gripped every pig's shoulders, but then he looked down and froze.

Everyone else was attending to their requirements: the blood, the intestines, the boiling hot water. No one else saw what I saw.

Carefully, with great sobriety, Jake dropped to first one knee and then the other, keeping both hands on the pig's back. And then, face to face with the pig, Jake knelt before it and gazed into its eyes.

Sun streaming in from the windows eight feet above the floor turned the hell of the abattoir into a mouthpiece of heaven, a treasure chest of divine luminescence. The two of them stood in place, there, looking at one another as though they saw, they really saw, each other. It was like nothing else was in that room, no one else, just the two of them, the world melted away, the floor gone diamonds, the walls turned to clouds.

It was a mystery, how no one else saw, how everyone's back was turned but mine, how the slaughterhouse turned into a cathedral in that moment, how no one else saw it, how every sound turned briefly to singing, how the blood cascading down the floor drains became rubies, how the knots of intestines all turned to strings of pearls, how the plastic shorn from rolls was sheets of crystal, how the hair in the paddles was spun gold, how the carcasses all were halves of Fabergé enamel eggs.

In the middle of that golden moment Jake stood again and led the pig from the room back outside. Once the steel door closed, the vision

ended. The other workers turned around and bustle returned to the killing floor. Another hog fell over, stunned, and was lifted in the air to bleed out over one of the multiple drains that perforated the tile.

Jake didn't come back until after break. He smelled so strongly of struck matches and damp dirt that it permeated even my blood-dulled nostrils. I didn't ask him what happened to the pig.

For the moment, I forgot what I'd seen. It was easy to shove it away; it didn't mesh with the rest of my day and the rest of my other days, and so it slid to the side like a bill unpaid. I left it there, stuck in a reused gas company envelope with a plastic window.

And there it would have stayed if it hadn't been for Jake's continual fuck-ups.

\* \* \*

I got the sense that he tried to hide it for a bit. Like on break he took an entire pack of Camels outside instead of just one so that he'd have an excuse to be gone for fifteen or twenty minutes instead of seven.

Or like he pretended to leave his lunch in his truck everyday so that he had reason to slip from the cafeteria for half an hour and come back right when his shift was starting.

The breaks he took were getting too frequent. Fifteen minutes several times a day adds up, even when you're good at your job. People started talking.

Jake, I wanted to say at the lockers, you've got to watch out. I'm saying this as your friend.

But it just came out as asking for a cigarette or the time. It was never the right moment. The bell rang before I could wet my lips.

So one day at lunch I snuck out behind him right as the door shut, the

bottom of it catching the worn rubber on my sneakers.

The sun's afternoon glare bouncing up from the parking lot burned my corneas until I shaded my eyes with a hand. I caught a glimpse of Jake disappearing to the side of the building; for someone who never lifted a finger in gym, he was fast.

I just managed to stick a foot through a frame around the corner before the dusty steel door slammed back into place. I hadn't ever noticed this portion of the compound; it didn't seem like it had been in use for years.

There weren't any light switches in the stairwell and my eyes needed time to adjust. I crept downward, one hand dragging along the wall for support, until there were no more steps to descend, just dirt floor and a hole in the wall with a plank of wood half covering it. I slid it to the side and crawled in.

Mostly I expected to discover something like a blazing furnace with a murderer's ghost shoving coal into its mouth, or maybe some vile experiments tied to rows of beds. Instead, I saw Jake and the pig.

The room was warm, cozy even. A worn synthetic rug thick on the floor. A couple low tables covered with lit candles. Band posters stuck on the walls. The hog from the killing floor lying there under a fleece blanket, a few empty food dishes to its side. I mean, I think it was that hog; they all looked the same to me. That's the thing, there wasn't anything special about this pig. It had whiskers and soggy ears, liver-colored spots on its pink coat, a broad damp nose.

Jake knelt by the pig, brushing its bristles and stroking its chin and speaking in low tones I couldn't understand.

I coughed and Jake's head snapped up.

"What do you want?" he asked. It was the longest sentence I'd heard from him since we started at the slaughterhouse.

I didn't really know what I wanted. "I just wanted to ... to see what you'd been doing?"

"You can't tell anyone," Jake said. "You can't let anybody take her away."

"But why is she here?" I asked.

Jake sighed. "She tells me things. When I brought her to the floor, she told me to take the scissors off her head. She told me that if I did that, she'd tell me things I didn't know. And she has. She's told me a lot of things. You only get to know them if you've been as close as she has to the beginning and the end."

Well, I thought. Well.

The pig grunted and stretched out its neat little hooves.

Jake laid his head on the ground next to her and looked into her eyes.

"I'll tell you some of them," he said. "I'll tell you about the wonders of mud and rain, about babies that come squealing into existence in a rush of blood, about the animal heat that rises from a knot of beings, about how everything—everything—lives to dream. I'll tell you what she's told me because it's so much more than anything we've heard before."

"She's a hog, Jake. She doesn't know anything. She's meant for meat."

"We're all meant for meat," he said. "But when we sleep, we're something else."

When I got into bed that night, I wished for sleep not just from exhaustion but to try to understand what Jake meant.

\* \* \*

Of course I didn't tell anyone. But the fuck-ups kept building.

It's not like I was friends with any of the other guys; they pretty much ignored me like they had in school. But exactly because they didn't pay me much attention, they felt free to talk around me like I didn't exist. That's why I heard all the chatter before Jake did.

I mean, there were the usual gay jokes, you wouldn't expect anything else, but then the tenor turned to something a little more sinister.

Everyone had heard a story somewhere about a cousin or an uncle and how they spent a little too much time with the pigs, if you know what I mean, that pink flesh, that bit that if you squinted long enough started to look like something else.

And maybe it's only natural, because these animals are meat, and so, too, are all of us, when you get down to it, all our yearning to eat and screw and kill all of a piece, all pieces of us that gel in adolescence and by the time your hormones calm down and you can start to see it all a little clearer you're already spending your days in the slaughterhouse.

So it's not like those guys were totally ostracized, more that they clarified something that was supposed to stay murky, and then everyone's girlfriends started thinking about it, and that's when the problems started.

Jake, everyone decided, posed a problem. That problem needed to get solved.

I followed him again a couple weeks later as he slid into the stairway and down to the depths where the hog slept. I'd started to get the sense that he never really went home anymore. His clothes smelled ranker; not the slow accumulation of blood that eventually won't worm its way out even in the hot cycle, but like he wasn't really showering at all.

When I entered the little candlelit dirt chapel, he was lying next to the

pig staring into her eyes. He looked thinner, more translucent. She looked the same.

"So what," he mumbled after a few minutes of my standing over him, "so what if I'm sleeping here. She gives me bigger dreams."

"Jake," I said, "I'm pretty sure everyone knows something's up. You need to get rid of her."

His eyes lit on fire. "What the *fuck* do you mean? She's not a possession. She's a living fucking being. I can't *get rid of her*. That's not my right."

"You're gonna lose your job. She's going to die anyway."

Jake hissed wordlessly and turned back to the pig.

Before I left, I glanced at them one more time.

The two of them lay there, facing one another, eyes closed, silent. The air between them crackled and spat like electricity ran through it. Sparks burst like tiny fireworks, illuminating the crumbling walls. And I felt myself falling into their shared trance.

The room was no longer an abandoned broom closet but a cave on the side of a mountain. Winter winds howled outside. Frost cut through my skin and turned my blood to ice. Everything flickered as though through firelight.

The rug on the ground was the hide of a woolly beast. Bones and herbs simmered in a hollowed stone. Children dozed in warm piles like wildcats. Dogs that looked more like wolves slumbered, also in piles. Something like a large green-eyed cat stalked a tiny skittering shadow. Someone was chanting in a corner.

The dancing candleflames turned the posters from cheaply printed album covers to a series of paintings: genderless figures arranged geo-



metrically, mammoths and giant elk, leaves and blossoms, spirals and comets and planets, and above all of them an infinite milky way of handprints upon pawprints upon hoofprints.

That night I dreamt for the first time in months. I was running with a herd of ibex toward the rosy glare of the setting sun, and when I reached the horizon, I was lifted on air currents up toward the point where the clouds met the darkening sky.

\* \* \*

One of my former classmates grabbed my arm as I was about to walk onto the floor.

“I saw you following him, fatty.”

Pretty dumb he called me that, since just about everyone there carried extra weight.

“What’s he doing down there? It’s off limits.”

“Are you the supervisor already? We got hired at the same time,” I said, feigning confidence but feeling brittle.

“Something’s wrong,” he said.

“You mean like there’s always been? Or just, like, in terms of the order of shit here?”

“You think you’re better, too, huh? Well, he’s gonna learn a lesson.”

Later when he winched up a hog and split it open, I noticed the bucket over the drain and the guts slopping into it.

I knew where this was going. I’d seen the movie. Nothing turns out great when there’s a weird teenager and plenty of available blood.

I thought I should tell him. I tried to. But Jake didn’t really hear me anymore.

There was always something else he was listening to, some frequency past the ones most of us could access. Waves from deep underneath the ground where the tree roots mingled with mycorrhizal fungi and sent messages for the plants and the animals to consume.

I wanted to hear it, too. Maybe I didn’t try too hard to get his attention because there was a chance, however small, that if we all just let him be he would learn the secret of disappearance. Once he got there, maybe he’d have the mushrooms send me a message, too. Maybe I, too, could learn how to find my way down into that earthen dream.

\* \* \*

It was little surprise late in the afternoon when I saw that same guy motion to a couple others and drag the bucket toward the other building. I followed them around the corner, but when they pried the steel door open and pushed the bucket into the darkness and started thumping it down the steps, I turned around and clocked out early.

I heard the supervisor got involved but only Jake got in trouble. He didn’t even try to defend himself, just stood there dripping blood and bile on the office carpet with his eyes bright white and his teeth chattering. Didn’t say anything except, when he was escorted out, asking where they’d taken his pig.

Of course the pig got killed. The pig always gets killed.

But it wasn’t in any spectacular way; she got pulled up onto the floor just as she was when she first showed up a month and a half prior.

Some eighteen-year-old kid put the scissor tongs on her head and induced electronarcosis, and once she was locked into her artificial slumber another kid cut into her and then she was gone.

They didn't make Jake do it. That's about as far as blessings go in Pig-town.

Last I heard he picked up a couple minimum wage shifts at a gas station the next town over, but only lasted a week.

I thought I would go hear his band sometime, but I kept finding the flyers a day or so after the shows had happened. It's like the time was always out of joint.

The slaughterhouse kept running. New boys came in every summer. Everyone worked their way through the assembly line just by work-

ing. Everyone had kids so that one day they could replace them on the line.

The seasons shuffled through the same markers, from homecoming to Christmas to spring break to graduation.

Far underneath the ground, far deeper than most of us can hear, the bones of the animal dead rested alongside the bones of the human dead. Roots and fungus interlocked around them. Worms twisted wherever there was space, threading the still earth with movement. Even where it seemed the most silent, there were messages to be heard.

# An Unusual Request

by Deborah Sheldon

*The poetic form is the Welsh englyn penfyr, based around the tercet.*

My husband had a stroke. He thinks he's dead  
but eats bread and often drinks  
while imagining he stinks  
of decay. A custom-built coffin, please.  
For his ease a mattress; in  
the lid, air holes by his chin.  
Tradesman, don't leave. Wait! *Oh, Tod?* Just pretend.  
*Look, dear, a friend.* Yes, it's odd,  
but I'll pay well. See? Cash wad!  
How did Tod "die"? His hand held by a nurse,  
which transferred the curse. She planned  
to free herself from the damned.  
Yes, so bizarre! Medical folk, perplexed,  
feel vexed and guess it's the stroke  
to blame. Just nod, don't provoke  
him or he'll get upset and start to yell.  
In a nutshell, we want art.

My sketch will give you a start.  
What? Oh, Tod won't take meds. He feels his brain  
is a withered bloodstain. Eels  
of rot swim from head to heels.  
You'll build his coffin? I'll pay top dollar.  
No squalor in this house. Hey,  
let's shake on the deal, okay?  
*Tod, grab his hand! Quick! Secure our release.*  
*I want peace! Good. We'll procure*  
*immunity now. We're sure*  
*of freedom, but...* Oh, you poor tradesman!  
Onset does stun, there's no doubt,  
but stops fast as a brownout.  
Can you hear me? Tradesman? You'll be all right.  
Sharp pains tonight will bite cruel,  
then, voila... You'll be the ghoul.

# Baron Tasty's Big Adventure

by Kate M Tyte

Baron Tasty lived in Tasty Manor at the top of Tasty Street. Early each morning the baron sat on his balcony with a little coffee cup perched on top of his mighty stomach. He sighed. If only he had someone to share his morning coffee with. Or, more precisely, if only he could share his morning coffee with Baroness Bookworm! He could just picture her there beside him, her head bent over a book, her fine hair wisping about like a cloud of candyfloss. Unfortunately, the Bookworms loved reading, and the Tasties loved eating, so they didn't have anything in common.

A few years ago he'd set his heart on Marquise Musicale. He had sent her chocolates and invited her to tea. He'd got all sorts of special treats for her, and had waited expectantly while she nibbled a macaron and put it back on her plate, unfinished.

"Don't you like it?" he'd asked anxiously.

She hadn't been paying attention. She had sat there looking vacant, stirring her tea round and round so the spoon made an annoying ringing sound.

"It's wonderful," she had murmured. "A wonderful teacup. Can you hear that? It's almost a C. Just a little sharp."

There had been sandwiches, scones, three kinds of cake and macarons, but she'd barely eaten a thing. Baron Tasty had felt crushed. How could things have gone so wrong? Perhaps his cook had made a mistake? After she left he finished all the food and it was just as delicious as it looked. He was mystified.

Then he'd gone to a party where he'd overheard her saying "Baron Tasty?" in an incredulous tone. "All he thinks about is food! He's tone deaf. He can't sing. Doesn't even have a piano in the house. Doesn't play any instruments at all. How could he, with those fat sausage fingers?"

All the women had laughed.

Baron Tasty had never forgotten that moment. He looked down at his hands now as he lifted his coffee cup again. They were perfectly good hands for a Tasty. They just weren't the type of hands that played the piano, or turned the pages of books. It was better to stick to things he knew than risk being laughed at like that again. Food was always pleasant and comforting and never said bad things about him.

He surveyed Tasty Street through his binoculars. The houses glowed lemon yellow, duck-egg blue, and mint-green in the apricot morning sun. The shopkeepers slowly appeared, flung up their shutters, opened their doors, pulled out their jolly striped awnings, and set out their goods. At the greengrocer's, shiny brown onions hung down in long strings. Huge barrows of knobby, red-skinned potatoes were lined up neatly outside. There were wooden crates of plump ripe pears, juicy purple figs, and apples of every size and color. At the fishmonger's, sardines were piled on mountains of glistening ice, as fresh and cold as a dip in the Atlantic. Birds of every kind hung outside the butcher's, their feathers ruffling in the breeze, along with fat bronze-colored hams and strings of dried sausages.

Baron Tasty sighed. He'd seen it all before. Everything was stale.

Wait – what was that – a new shop? He focussed his binoculars on the shop window. A confectioner’s! There was the shopkeeper now. He had large, round, owlish glasses and his hair was covered with a colorful bandana so he looked like a cross between a schoolteacher and a pirate. He opened up the shutters to reveal his window display: a whole forest of lollipops in every imaginable color. In the middle of the display was a beautiful little doll-sized house made entirely of nougat – it was the baron’s mansion! How incredible!

Baron Tasty hurried out to have a look. He strode confidently down the street. He enjoyed walking and carried his belly proudly before him. A man should be proud of his stomach. A big belly was a constant reminder of all the delicious things you’d ever eaten. This bit of belly was once a particularly nice pastry. That bit was once an excellent roast beef dinner. It meant that even at moments when he wasn’t eating, he had a firm sense of who he was: a Tasty, descended from a long line of Tasties, continuing a proud tradition of eating. At moments of doubt or uncertainty he only had to pat his belly to be comforted by the memory of food.

Of course, not everybody felt that way. Marquise Musicale, for one. Her comments had given him a twinge of self-doubt. And Sir Sporty was always telling him he should lose weight. But Tasty felt sorry for thin people. Take Baron Sartorial. His legs were as skinny as French beans, the better to show off his fancy trousers. Sartorial spent much more time looking at fashion magazines and going shopping than he did eating. It was sad, Tasty reflected, to think of him wasting his life on something so silly, and missing out on so much pleasure.

Baron Tasty went into the confectioner’s shop. He bought a green and pink striped lollipop and sucked on it while he contemplated the other options. There was a lollipop as large as a walking cane. It was most amusing. Imagine if he bought it, and nibbled on it as he walked about!

Before he could buy it, there was a commotion on the street. A carriage was coming up the hill. It looked like Baroness Bookworm’s carriage. But there was a man with her. And instead of horses the carriage was

pulled by – what on earth were those things? They were striped in black and white, like mint humbugs. The baron stepped out of the shop to take a better look.

“Good day to you, Tasty!” said the baroness. “You look very well!”

Baron Tasty blushed a little.

“I haven’t seen you for a while,” said Bookworm. What have you been doing?”

“Oh – nothing,” said Baron Tasty. He didn’t like to say “eating,” in case she laughed. “How about you?”

“Oh, reading as usual. There are so many books to read. There’s always something new to learn.”

Baron Tasty felt like that about food. There was always something new to eat. But somehow he couldn’t make the words come out right.

“Allow me to introduce my friend Baron Menagerie,” said Bookworm. “He’s just returned from a Safari.”

“Delighted,” said Baron Tasty, although he didn’t feel at all delighted. “And what on earth are those marvellous creatures?”

“They are called zebras, sir,” replied Baron Menagerie.

“Are they tasty?”

“Good heavens, no! They are a most exotic creature. They cannot be eaten.”

“An animal that can’t be eaten! But what is the use of such things?”

Baron Menagerie and Baroness Bookworm both laughed. Baron Tasty blushed again. As soon as he strayed off the topic of food he made a

fool of himself.

“Well, some animals are useful for sports, or as pets, or for work. But most are just interesting to keep in zoological gardens and study. Take these zebras, for example. Their stripes help to confuse their predators – lions – because lions can only see in black in white.”

“Gosh,” said Tasty.

“Is that why a group of zebras is called a dazzle?” asked Bookworm.

“It could be,” said Menagerie.

“Oh, I’ve read about so many interesting creatures but never actually seen them outside of books. Menagerie is going to show me his zoological gardens. You must come and take a look, Tasty!”

Tasty was not interested in zoological gardens, but if Baroness Bookworm was going, he was going too. He clambered into the carriage and she pushed a parcel of books aside to make room. It was rather snug. Tasty carefully folded his arms and hid his hands under his jacket.

“I just read a fascinating book about Indian food,” Bookworm said. “Did you know that chilli peppers aren’t native to India? They come from South America and were introduced to India by the Portuguese.”

“Gosh!” said Baron Tasty. “I didn’t know there were books about food.”

He felt quite uncomfortable being jostled around in the carriage without holding on to anything, but he didn’t want to risk her noticing his hands and thinking they were sausage-like.

“Oh, there are books about everything! And the more I read about the world, the more I enjoy it.”

“Doesn’t it take away the mystery, knowing about things?” asked

Tasty.

“Oh no! You should try it. When you know the recipe you can appreciate the skill of the cook even more.”

Baron Tasty had never thought about recipes before. He had servants to prepare his food. He’d never thought about how his food was actually prepared.

“Anyway, Baron Menagerie is writing a book now, all about African lizards. There are so many different species! It’s all so fascinating!”

For the rest of the journey Baron Menagerie talked about lizards. Baron Tasty was dejected. He couldn’t hope to fascinate Baroness Bookworm. He didn’t know any fascinating facts. He didn’t even know any facts about food. He just liked eating.

When Baron Tasty returned home he was carrying a small brown cardboard box. The shopkeepers whispered anxiously about the box – what if it contains some new kind of treat they hadn’t discovered how to make and Tasty started shopping somewhere else?

That evening Tasty showed Baron and Baroness Sartorial the treasure in the box.

“This is a tortoise,” he explained, lifting it out carefully.

“It’s quite small,” said Baron Sartorial. “Will you fatten it up and make tortoiseshell buttons from it?”

“No, no – it’s a pet. I’m just going to watch it creeping about eating lettuce.”

“You’ve never been interested in pets before.”

He didn’t tell Sartorial that he wasn’t interested in pets, but Baroness Bookworm had expressed a great interest in them, so he’d got one.

Baron Tasty named his tortoise Tommy. He invited all his friends to come and see him. He changed Tommy's water, topped up his food bowl and watched him slowly stretch out his long leathery neck and munch.

But gradually it dawned on the baron that Tommy was listless. He spent a lot of time hiding inside his shell. Sometimes he overturned his food bowl and walked away from it. Tasty tried to consult with Baron Menagerie, but he was on Safari again. Tommy seemed bored. And if he was bored... did he have other feelings, too? Did he experience joy and sadness? And what about other animals? Did they have feelings too?

The baron felt uneasy. Such questions had never troubled him before. Whenever Baron Tasty was uneasy he felt a little peckish.

So he went to the confectioner's. He bit into a shiny golden caramel. A look of surprise and delight crossed his face. Was that – could it be – delicious fresh peach hidden within the hard caramel shell? He tried another. It was salty and fishy and disgusting.

“What are you doing?” he said. “An anchovy, in caramel? Are you trying to poison me?”

“No sir,” said the confectioner. “I am trying to *surprise* you. Life can be very dull if we only ever eat the same food and experience the same things every day. Sometimes an unpleasant surprise can be as good as a pleasant one. It makes you realize you are alive.”

The baron pondered this.

“Do you think animals feel the same?” he asked.

“I'm sure they do sir.”

“Maybe that's it,” said the baron. “Tommy's bored. The pellets that I feed him aren't tasty or interesting. After all, I wouldn't like to eat dry

pellets every day.”

“Indeed,” said the confectioner.

“I wonder ...” said Baron Tasty. “Perhaps I could surprise and delight my tortoise with different foods, in the same way these sweets surprised me?”

The confectioner smiled a secret smile with one corner of his mouth. “I'm sure you could sir,” he said. “An excellent idea.”

Tasty bought a book about tortoises and started giving Tommy lettuce and vegetables and fruits. Sometimes he hid food under the food bowl, or placed the bowl on a stool, so that Tommy had to hunt and climb for his food. Now he was just as excited by food as the baron was.

That evening after dinner he sat on his balcony with a glass of port. Tommy crept out slowly and sat down by his feet. The baron reached down and scratched the top of his head a little bit and Tommy stretched out his neck and closed his eyes in appreciation.

Baron Tasty sighed. “Having a pet is much more difficult than I expected. Maybe I should stick to what I know and stop trying new things. What do you think?”

Tommy stared at him.

“Well, I don't mean I'm going to get rid of you, of course,” Tasty said. “You're happy, aren't you?”

Tommy closed his eyes gently.

The next day the baron took a walk to think things over. He ambled down Tasty Street. He munched some marshmallows and a bag of roasted chestnuts. When he got to the butcher's shop, he paused. Those dead birds twisting on their ropes made him think of poor Tommy. Did pheasants cry? That was just one of many things that he didn't know.

He didn't like the idea of dividing animals into the edible and inedible. After all, Baron Menagerie had a man-eating tiger-skin rug. From a tiger's point of view, Baron Tasty was an edible animal. He felt uneasy about the butcher's and hurried past, without going inside.

For his next dinner party, the baron invited all his usual friends: Baron and Baroness Sartorial, Baron Sporty, Baron Menagerie, and of course Baroness Bookworm.

As the guests waited in the drawing room, Tommy entered the room and crept across the parquet floor.

"Did you know," said Baroness Bookworm, "that the collective noun for a group of tortoises is a creep?"

"Really?" said Baron Tasty, who had not known.

"But it's highly unlikely you would have to use that term ever, because they are naturally solitary animals," said Baron Menagerie.

"Yes, he does seem quite happy on his own," said Tasty.

Tommy paused and stared at Baron Tasty.

"Although he's very good company," Tasty said.

Tommy blinked and plodded on.

For dinner there was a delicious salad of beautiful garden vegetables. The Sartorials tucked into it happily. Baron Sporty munched his up in no time, and ate up all the bread as well.

For the second course the footmen brought out – more plates of colorful vegetables.

"What's this, old chap?" said Baron Sporty. "No meat?"

"Well," said Baron Tasty, "I'm a vegetarian now."

All the glasses in the room paused in mid-air. All the eyes fixed on Baron Tasty. Baroness Sartorial made a little sputtering noise. After a few moments Baron Tasty realised he ought to say something. But it was rather difficult to explain.

"The thing is," he said, "I wouldn't like to be eaten. Animals probably feel the same."

"See what you've done?" said Baron Sporty, pointing at Baron Menagerie. "We shall have no more good dinners here."

"Oh dear," said Baron Menagerie, "that wasn't what I had in mind at all."

Baron Sporty poked his vegetables with his fork. "Where's the protein?" he asked. "You need to eat more nuts. Got to keep your strength up."

"Nuts?" said Sartorial. "Oh dear, no. Nuts are very fattening. You know Tasty this diet could be good for you, help you slim down for a new suit."

"You're very forward thinking," said Baroness Bookworm. "Many of the greatest minds in history have been vegetarian; like Leonardo da Vinci."

Tasty sagged in his chair. None of his friends understood him. Around the table the Sartorials picked at their food, Sporty wolfed it down quickly, and Bookworm ate mechanically while surreptitiously glancing down at a book hidden under her napkin. His friends didn't really *appreciate* food like he did.

The next time the baron went for a walk on Tasty Street the butcher and the fishmonger glared at him angrily. Hardly anybody was shop-



ping there anymore.

The baron felt alarmed. Whenever Baron Tasty was alarmed he felt a little peckish. So he went to the confectioner's. When he got there he was surprised to see that the confectioner was also selling cards, wrapping paper, and small gifts. Tasty popped a strawberry cream into his mouth and said, "The butcher's not doing too well these days."

"Indeed sir," said the confectioner.

"And you're selling new things."

"I'm branching out," the confectioner replied. "After all, a shop doesn't have to sell only one thing. Life would be very boring if we never tried new things."

"Do you think everybody feels the same?" asked the baron.

"I'm sure they do, sir."

"I wonder ... maybe there's something else the butcher could try? I could ask him what else he likes and help him start a new business."

And the confectioner smiled a secret smile with one corner of his mouth. "Of course you could sir. An excellent idea," he said.

So the baron asked the butcher what he liked.

"Well," said the butcher, "I like carving things with my knives. It's very satisfying."

"Perhaps you could try another trade that involves cutting things up with sharp tools? With the right investment?" said the baron.

And so the butcher's shop became a toy shop. The butcher carved wooden toys for children, and sold all sorts of games and sporting

goods.

The baron went to the fishmonger.

"I'm not interested in anything except fish," said the fishmonger.

"But I've always wanted to be a florist," said the fishmonger's wife. "Flowers are lovely and clean and they smell nice, and there's no nasty mess to clean up afterwards."

And so the fishmonger's wife became a florist and the fishmonger became the florist's husband.

Baron Tasty sat on his balcony with his tiny coffee cup and looked over his street. He glanced at the empty chair next to him, then scooped up Tommy and put him on the chair, so he could enjoy the view. Perhaps he should invite Baroness Bookworm to tea, just the two of them? But perhaps she would just read her book the whole time? He thought of Marquise Musicale saying "fat sausage fingers," and shuddered. He didn't want to go through that again. And Bookworm didn't really like eating. She preferred reading about things to doing them. But then he couldn't really force other people to like the same things he liked, could he? The problem was, people were all different.

The baron felt anxious. Whenever Baron Tasty was anxious he felt a little peckish. He ambled down to the confectioner's shop. He popped a peppermint into his mouth. There were a lot of pink heart-shaped boxes on display, each one filled with a different type of sweet.

"Why do you have so many different options?" he asked.

"Well sir, everybody's different," said the confectioner. "It's important to choose a gift that shows you know what the other person likes."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Tasty. "I wonder ..."

“Yes sir?” said the confectioner.

“Oh, nothing,” said the baron.

The confectioner smiled a secret smile with one corner of his mouth.

Baron Tasty returned home to think. He paced up and down the picture gallery with a plate of biscuits. Tommy settled down in a corner and watched him.

“It’s no good, Tommy,” he said. “I’m a Tasty.” He gestured at the portraits of his plump, smiling ancestors on the walls. “The Tasties have always enjoyed eating. And she’s a Bookworm. She’s from a long line of Bookworms. She likes reading. We can’t just start liking new things, can we?”

Tommy pulled his head into his shell.

“Well,” said the baron. “Don’t take it like that. I mean, of course I like you ... and then I became a vegetarian ... I suppose my ancestors wouldn’t like that ...” he trailed off into silence.

“Alright, Tommy!” he said. “Since you insist, I’m going to the bookshop.”

Tommy poked his head out again and the baron gave him a nice scratch.

Baron Tasty came home with an illustrated book on the history of food. He was reluctant to start reading it, but once he settled down with a nice pot of tea and a few pieces of buttered toast, he started to enjoy himself.

“I know, I know,” he said, glancing at his painted ancestors. “But it’s about food!”

He was looking for exactly the right thing: when he came across a passage about pomegranates, he knew he’d found it. The goddess Persephone had travelled to the land of the dead, eaten six pomegranate seeds, and been confined to there for six months of the year. It was a strange tale, but what interested Tasty were those six pomegranate seeds: only six. If you only ate six little seeds you’d have to really *taste* them, wouldn’t you?

Tasty wrote to Baroness Bookworm, which took him a long time, because he didn’t write much. He copied out the story neatly and asked her to eat only six seeds, very slowly. “Don’t read anything while you eat,” he wrote, “not even this letter. Just concentrate on tasting the food.” Then he put his letter in a nice box, along with a pomegranate, tied it with a pink ribbon, and posted it to Bookworm.

Bookworm wrote back to him, sending a book by somebody called Proust, and the suggestion that he eat madeleines. Tasty found the book far too difficult, but he enjoyed the cakes. And with Tommy beside him and some well-chosen snacks, he started to enjoy reading. It was just as Bookworm had said: knowing more about things made them more interesting, not less.

This made Baron Tasty wonder what else he’d been missing out on.

He went to see Sir Sporty.

“You know, I’ve never seen the point of sports,” he said. “But maybe you could show me why you like them? What sports do ladies like?”

“My dear Tasty,” said Sporty. “Ladies love dancing you know. I can teach you.”

“Oh dear,” said Tasty. “I thought it would be something terrible like that. But I would like to try.”

Sporty was a surprisingly good teacher, and soon had Tasty waltzing.

“See? It’s fun, isn’t it?” said Sporty. “With a little more practice you’ll be a credit to any dance floor.”

Tasty had to agree. It had been a marvellous afternoon.

“I’d like you to do something for me,” he said. “Next time you come to dinner, try to enjoy the food. Don’t think about what healthy fuel it is for your sports, or move all the cutlery around to explain a football match. Just try to enjoy it. Like I do.”

Sir Sporty was astonished, but he agreed to try. After all, Baron Tasty had been a good sport.

Next Baron Tasty went to the Sartorials.

“Well,” said Baron Sartorial, “you haven’t lost nearly as much weight as I expected.”

“Biscuits are vegetarian,” Tasty said.

“Never mind,” said Baroness Sartorial. “We can still get you out of those old-fashioned things and into something stylish.”

“A beautiful outfit always starts with footwear,” said Sartorial.

They had Tasty at the tailor and dressed up beautifully in no time at all. As he looked at his reflection he was quite pleased with the results. He felt good in his new suit: elegant, even. He held up his arms and tried a few waltz steps. With his new outfit, he felt more confident. Perhaps the Sartorials’ obsession with fashion wasn’t so silly after all.

He thanked them, and repeated his request for them to come to dinner, and try to enjoy eating.

“Even dessert?” said Baron Sartorial. “But we never eat dessert!”

“I’d like you try. Just once in a while. After all, we are friends, aren’t we?”

They had to agree.

The next time Baron Tasty had a dinner party, he was able to look around the table in satisfaction at his friends enjoying themselves and appreciating the food. Maybe not as much as he did, true, but it was enough. And these days they all had plenty to talk about. Baroness Bookworm didn’t have a single book with her. They smiled at each other across the table.

Finally Tasty worked up the courage to invite her for tea alone. As they sat together in the garden he lifted the cloth off the cake, and iced onto it in neat little letters were the words “Dear Baroness Bookworm, will you marry me?”

“Oh Tasty!” she said. “I thought you’d never ask. But there’s a problem. I can’t become a Tasty. I’ve learned to enjoy eating, but I’m a Bookworm. We’ve always been Bookworms, for generations!”

“Oh dear,” said Baron Tasty. “I’ve learned to like reading too. We could join together, and become the Tasty-Bookworms?”

“Oh no, that will never do,” said Bookworm. “It’s ridiculous.”

“Well ... my first name’s quite normal. It’s Daniel.”

“Oh! I’m Matilda.”

They ate quietly for a while.

“You know, Daniel,” said Matilda, “we could just choose a new name.

Something very ordinary and boring, like Smith. Then we can like anything we want.”

“Smith?” Baron Tasty’s face opened up into a huge, dimply smile. “I suppose so. After all, we don’t *really* need to be named after our hobbies, do we? It seems a bit silly. A person doesn’t have to like only one thing, do they?”

He reached out and took her hand.

“I suppose our ancestors won’t like it.”

“Oh, they won’t mind,” said Matilda. “They’re dead, aren’t they? Where would we be now if people had only ever done what their ancestors did?”

Daniel laughed. “Mr. and Mrs. Smith it is, then.”

Tommy blinked his approval from under the tea-table.

# Old Red's Response

by Mary Jo Rabe

The crickets chirped their familiar, though not terribly harmonious, greetings to the break of day, and Old Red slowly woke up his wheels, gears, and motor. Tractors needed their sleep, but daytime was work time.

Old Red had always been a good worker, and the reddish strip of sky on the horizon accompanied by the crickets' singing made him want to get up and get going. Life was basically good, and he couldn't wait to see what this new day would bring.

His wheels were a little worn and stiff, hadn't been greased lately, and the various parts of the motor felt sluggish. Lately, whenever Old Red started moving, no matter how slightly, a loud clanking noise arose from various vehicle components. No big surprise, since Old Red was close to fifty years old. Everything still functioned, just not immediately or smoothly.

Still, more and more often, Old Red and the other vehicles on the farm were beginning to reflect on the fact that they were growing older.

A soft, warm breeze blew through the machine shed, open to one side, over the tractor's sun-bleached, red chassis. Unfortunately, it also wafted the pungent essence of hog manure from the hog barn up the hill to the machine shed.

Naturally, during the past fifty years Old Red had constantly endured the odors emanating from the body functions of the farm animals. They were part of his workplace environment. However, Old Red now found them increasingly annoying. Actually, the accompanying grunting and squealing also got on his nerves.

However, as was his habit every morning, Old Red first let his mind wander so that he could indulge in some undirected meditation. His headlights took in the towering, greenish-brown, swaying cornstalks and the yellowish-green soybean sprouts that had broken through the rolling hills, a scene that always comforted him.

The sight of cultivated fields just made him feel good. A tractor liked to view the results of his hard work.

His metal parts registered the warming, humid air of August and calculated the chances of thunderstorms. Letting his mind wander was necessary in order to prepare for the actions of the human being who resided on the farm.

A savvy tractor didn't leave anything to chance and reacted promptly and effectively to events as every day wore on.

His current owner, the third-generation farmer here, must have gotten up as soon as the sun began to rise. Jeffrey, almost as tall as Old Red, marched purposefully to the machine shed, a fairly decrepit yet sturdy construction consisting of a roof and three walls, all constructed with corroding aluminum slabs.

Old Red stood proudly next to the plow, combine, manure spreader, corn picker, harvester, and hay baler, all somewhat younger than Old Red, but obviously no longer new. While they were perhaps old-fashioned by contemporary human standards, Old Red knew that they were still quite functional and enjoyed doing their jobs.

The pieces of farm equipment and Old Red maintained a discrete tele-

pathic connection among themselves, also always listening to the human creatures' chaotic communications so that they could execute influence when necessary.

The hot, heavy, humid air caressed Old Red's metal frame and oozed its way into the motor, one of the sensual pleasures of summer that Old Red appreciated. A tractor might be mostly made of metal, but it had feelings just like any metallic or non-metallic creature.

Jeffrey's grandfather had purchased Old Red, back when they both were young, and they had learned the farming business together, gradually making enough money for a comfortable living. Those had been good times.

Jeffrey's father had continued to farm the same way but used his increasing prosperity to invest in more cattle and hogs, silos, grain-dryers, and larger barns. This worked out well, until it didn't.

As time went by, small Iowa family farms couldn't compete with the huge factory farms that absorbed them one by one. Eventually, Jeffrey's father sold all the cattle, retired, and left the farm, now reduced to grain fields and hogs, to Jeffrey.

Old Red belched loudly and contentedly when Jeffrey pressed his impatient, boney thumb into the soft, faded, gray button on Old Red's dashboard to start the ignition. Not wanting to upset the young man, Old Red then obediently let his motor roar, coughing just enough at irregular intervals to remind Jeffrey that old Farmall tractors were sturdy and reliable but needed time to get started in the morning.

Jeffrey's grandfather had never expected his farm equipment to get to work right after sunrise. Neither had Jeffrey's father. The current generation was too impatient.

Young farmers always had a lot to learn, and wise, old tractors tried not to expect too much from flimsy, fragile, non-metallic life forms. The trick was to manipulate them gently and discretely, so that they

believed that they made all their decisions on their own.

This morning Jeffrey drove Old Red out of the machine shed and then backed him up to hitch onto the manure spreader. Then he turned Old Red around again and drove to connect the shovel attachment to the front of the tractor. Unfortunately this wasn't the way Old Red hoped to begin the working day.

Jeffrey drove Old Red down the hill to the hog barn, a long, flat, white metal structure surrounded by a muddy yard. After moving the vehicles into position, Jeffrey unhitched the manure spreader, chased the hogs into the barn, and drove Old Red into the yard, where Old Red spent the next two hours scooping up hog manure and dumping it into the manure spreader.

This was more unpleasant than usual. The hot, humid air around Old Red was a sauna of hog manure. Suddenly he had had enough.

Without really considering the possible consequences, Old Red used all his energy and sent Jeffrey's consciousness a massive, emotional thought that the hogs were more trouble than they were worth.

To Old Red's genuine surprise, Jeffrey slammed on the tractor brake, turned off the motor, and pulled out his phone. He called the local slaughterhouse and told them to come and pick up the hogs, that he was done being a hog farmer, that there was no money in it, just back-breaking work.

Old Red couldn't believe his good fortune; no more hogs, no more hog manure! This would turn the farm into a paradise for him.

"Was that really a good idea?" the manure spreader sent Old Red a quick telepathic question.

A valid question. Old Red hadn't given his colleague the manure spreader any thought. "Hey," Old Red answered him telepathically. "You can't enjoy this stink any more than I do."

"No," the manure spreader admitted. "But spreading manure over the fields is my life's work, the only thing I know how to do."

"There has to be something better for you to do," Old Red continued. "We'll give it some thought."

Old Red didn't have enough time for that right away.

He still had to finish scooping hog manure out of the yard. But when Jeffrey drove him out to the cornfield to spread the manure, Old Red rejoiced at the thought that this was the last time for such odorous work. The manure spreader agreed that he would also prefer a more pleasant job.

The next day a huge pig transport truck drove up to the hog barn and collected all the hogs. Old Red and the other farm equipment listened joyfully as Jeffrey talked to the driver.

"What if Jeffrey changes his mind at the last minute?" the plow sent his colleagues a worried thought. "We know that human creatures are unpredictable."

However, Jeffrey told the driver that he was going to spend some hours at his computer to figure out how he could make enough money on his acreage by only raising crops. The driver said Jeffrey would probably have to invest in new farm equipment so that he could cultivate every last square foot of his farm.

This, of course, was nonsense, as Old Red and the other pieces of farm equipment chuckled to themselves. Without the distraction of the hogs, Jeffrey could easily plant and harvest all the fields with the reliable, old equipment he already had. Jeffrey had to know this.

However, since their telepathic powers only worked outdoors — for some reason, their machine telepathy got blocked by wooden structures — they didn't know what Jeffrey was up to precisely whenever he disappeared into the shabby, two-story, gray, clapboard farmhouse

that his grandfather had built as cheaply as possible back before the farm made any money.

Two days after the hogs were gone, Jeffrey came to the machine shed before it was even light out and hitched Old Red up to the other vehicles, one after the other. Then Jeffrey had Old Red pull the equipment out of the machine shed and onto the now somewhat cleaner yard around the old hog barn.

This seemed odd, since it had never happened before, but they saw Jeffrey jumping around like a hyperactive fiend, clearing all the accumulated trash out of the machine shed. Old Red and his colleagues decided that Jeffrey was finally taking the time to improve their dwelling, or at least clean it up.

This theory seemed quite plausible when Jeffrey hitched Old Red up to the cement mixer and poured a cement floor onto the dirt in the machine shed. This was great news, even though the farm equipment in the hog barnyard remained at the mercy of the wind and thunderstorms that came by the next two nights.

Jeffrey didn't bother to cover any of the vehicles in the barnyard with tarps, even though Old Red knew that there were several of them in the old cattle barn that Jeffrey's grandfather had used to cover the feed troughs with when it rained.

Three days later a huge transport vehicle arrived and four men unloaded a behemoth of a green and yellow tractor along with an equally giant planter and harvester.

The men from the transport vehicle then spent hours showing Jeffrey all the controls and telling him what he needed to do in order to use his new equipment. The new farm machines were controlled by their own computers, which were always connected to the company's server in southern Illinois.

The men also explained every item on the bill they handed Jeffrey.

Altogether, the new equipment cost more than the farm's gross earnings for the past five years.

Old Red and his friends were appalled, even more so when they heard Jeffrey tell the men from the new tractor company that he planned to get rid of all his old farm equipment as soon as he had time to get them transported to the closest junkyard.

"Look at what you've done," the corn picker blasted a thought at Old Red. "You decide you don't like the stench of hog manure and now we'll all get abandoned in the junkyard where clumsy humans will cannibalize us for our innards."

"You shouldn't put all the blame on Old Red," the combine interjected. "None of us could have predicted this development."

"More importantly," the harvester added. "What can we do to prevent our destruction?"

"That's on me," Old Red agreed. "I got us into this mess, and now I have to get us out."

There was no dissent, and the farm machinery continued to eavesdrop on Jeffrey's conversation.

When the men asked why he didn't auction his equipment off, Jeffrey said no one would want that old junk. Hearing that, Old Red felt like propelling himself through the fence and running over all three men. His colleagues dissuaded him, reminding him that spontaneous decisions often resulted in unfortunate consequences.

Old Red calmed down and agreed that the best alternative was to mull over the situation while Jeffrey was busy trying to learn how to use his new tractor. The necessary procedures sounded complicated.

While Jeffrey read his handbooks, Old Red and his vehicle colleagues tried to communicate with the new tractor telepathically. They were

not successful. The giant metal construction was only able or maybe only willing to communicate with its computer server back in Illinois.

So Old Red and his friends decided they needed to brainstorm. They sent out cries for help to the farm equipment on the neighboring farms. The neighbors sympathized with their situation but explained that the new tractors were basically computers sheltered in a tank.

These monsters were taking over farming everywhere. Farm equipment on neighboring farms didn't think anyone or anything could stop them. However, they did report on all the weaknesses they had observed.

To begin with, the broadband network connection for the area around Jeffrey's farm was unreliable, and the new tractors demanded a constant online connection to the company's servers. Otherwise they simply stopped functioning.

The tractor's individual parts were overly prone to malfunction, as they depended on communication with sensors scattered throughout the vehicle. Every time a sensor blew, the tractor stopped dead.

Farmers couldn't do any of their own repair work without being able to work with the tractor's software, which often required help from the tractor company in Illinois.

Even the most minor repair necessary often meant that a technician had to drive from Illinois to the farm, where said technician would often determine that he had to order a special part which would take at least a week to arrive.

This information gave Old Red the information he needed to manipulate Jeffrey.

When the new equipment didn't work right, a farmer could only watch his crops deteriorate or spoil. Old Red started sending Jeffrey depressing, emotional predictions of losing the entire year's crops.



Not being particularly computer savvy, Jeffrey had nothing but trouble with his new equipment. He never got to the point of accessing useful data about what to plant where. He couldn't get the tractor to do any useful work. Old Red's telepathic messages made Jeffrey feel even more frustrated and worried.

Old Red then asked his colleagues to send Jeffrey gentle but frequent, telepathic messages, telling him to ignore the confusing handbook and do whatever he felt like with the tractor.

Jeffrey's resulting activities resulted in time-consuming, expensive repairs, and the tractor still didn't work right.

In desperation, Jeffrey hitched Old Red to the old hay baler and combine to get the hay, oats, and soybeans harvested. All three vehicles operated at top efficiency. By October, Jeffrey had to use Old Red and the old corn picker to harvest the corn, a task they completed in record time.

At the beginning of November, the old equipment was relieved to see the huge transport vehicle come to pick up the new tractor, planter, and harvester. Jeffrey even drove Old Red and the other vehicles back into the machine shed.

Old Red and his colleagues allowed themselves sighs of relief. "Success and problem solved," Old Red messaged his friends telepathically. "Life is good again. There is no way Jeffrey can afford to buy new equipment. We've won."

However, Jeffrey seemed to be spending more and more time in the old farmhouse instead of inspecting the fields or checking on the silos and grain dryers.

One of the few times when he was walking outside, Old Red heard him talking into his phone and saying something about wind and a farm.

"That doesn't make any sense," Old Red thought to the others. "Of

course there is wind on the farm. It's probably nothing to worry about."

This, as it turned out, was an incorrect conclusion. In March, a convoy of trucks drove down the gravel lane, unloaded huge slabs of white metal, and began assembling windmills on the hills surrounding the farmhouse. Since the farm consisted mostly of hills, this impacted all the fields.

"How is Jeffrey going to be able to plant his crops?" the corn picker asked. "I have a very bad feeling about this."

So did Old Red. This time he didn't hesitate to engage in frantic brainstorming throughout the neighborhood.

He and the other farm equipment sent off telepathic messages to the surrounding farms asking what the other agricultural vehicles knew about windmills.

What they heard was alarming. There was a company that actively courted farmers to rent farmland to them so that they could install windmills, preferably on hills.

Many farmers earned more money from renting their fields out to this company than they ever could farming. Therefore, they stopped farming altogether, especially since they couldn't plant enough crops around the windmills.

There didn't seem to be any downside for the farmers if they gave up farming and lived off the rent the company paid.

"This doesn't sound good," the corn picker transmitted. "Jeffrey isn't nearly as ambitious or industrious as his father or grandfather. We have to assume that he will take the money from the windmills and eventually decide to get rid of his old farm equipment since he will have no use for us."

"Even if he doesn't get rid of us right away," the combine said. "I

wouldn't like to spend the rest of my years falling apart in the machine shed, never doing anything useful, never being repaired."

The others agreed. "So what now?" the harvester asked. "Old Red, this is still something you need to fix."

Old Red had to agree that he was responsible for everything that happened after he manipulated Jeffrey into getting rid of the hogs.

"There's only one solution," Old Red said. "We need to make Jeffrey return the windmills."

"Easier said than done," the harvester said.

"We have to ask our neighbors for input," Old Red said. "There has to be a downside to having windmills on a farm. We need to find out how to get Jeffrey to make the company remove the windmills."

Old Red's friends went to work, sending off requests for any theories. All that anyone could tell them, though, was that the windmills were a little loud and that airborne creatures often flew into them and died.

"That's something," Old Red said. "We need to make Jeffrey hate the noise from the windmills. Then we have to ask our farm equipment colleagues on neighboring farms to turn their farmers against windmills, especially the farmers who don't have any windmills yet."

So, every time Jeffrey left the farmhouse, Old Red and his friends sent off telepathic messages emphasizing how loud the windmills were. They noticed that Jeffrey started holding his ears when he was outside. Soon, neighboring farmers drove over to Jeffrey's farm to complain about the windmill noise.

Constant reminders about how loud the windmills were eventually did have the desired effect. Around the beginning of May, trucks drove down the lane and crews dismantled the windmills.

This time the farm equipment didn't rejoice but instead wondered what disaster could happen next.

"What if Jeffrey decides to get rid of us and leave the farm altogether?" the old plow worried.

"From what we know about Jeffrey's financial situation and the fact that he doesn't know how to do anything other than farm, I doubt that he can do that," Old Red suspected. "Still, you're right. It would be better to keep Jeffrey here, but convinced that he needs his old farm equipment."

"What if Jeffrey sells the farm?" the plow continued. "So far, every decision he has made has blown up in his face."

"Jeffrey might get a lot of money from a factory farm that wants to expand its acreage," the combine added.

"So far his thoughts indicate that he is fond of the farm," Old Red said. "He has a sentimental attachment to the place where he grew up. Everything would depend on who buys the farm, whether it is someone who would value us old farm implements."

"Who would that be?" the manure spreader asked. "Without any animals, no farmer would see any need for a manure spreader."

"Hmm," Old Red mused. "What about that girl Jeffrey occasionally goes out with? Don't her parents run an organic farm?"

"Organic farms," the hay baler said. "Organic farmers don't throw their money away on huge computer tractors and harvesters."

"So?" the plow asked.

"So," Old Red continued. "If he married that girl, her parents might consider subsidizing this farm to turn it into an organic farm for their daughter."

"Yes," the manure spreader said enthusiastically. "Organic farms have animals, just not very many. They would need me."

"Is this plan at all realistic?" the harvester asked.

"I believe so," Old Red said. "We all know how malleable Jeffrey is when we plant ideas into his head. And by human standards, he is considered to be good looking."

"We can ask the farm equipment on that girl's parents' farm to encourage her amorous feelings for Jeffrey," the combine suggested.

"Then let's do it," the hay baler said. "What could possibly go wrong this time?"

"Probably everything," Old Red admitted. "But that hasn't stopped us so far."

It occurred to him that they were more or less back where they started, aging vehicles soon to have the smelly animals back to stink up their workplace. However, all things considered, that was acceptable, if only considering the alternatives they had experienced.



# Land of the Dragons

by Sonali Roy

# A Knight in the Morning

by Lauren McBride

Watching the dragon  
    emerge from his cave  
        and stretch

in the morning sun  
    as I had done  
        just now

after sleeping outside -  
    not entering  
        where the dragon slept.

Perhaps fighting another day,  
    but just now watching  
        him stretch, wings wide,

great eyes blinking,  
    and a thousand jeweled scales  
        glittering in the sun, except

where one is missing -  
    a weakness  
        for another day.

Today we stretch -  
    first light brilliantly  
        bejeweling scales

and flaming my sword  
    offered unseen to the sun, and beast,  
        and the morning we share.

Just now turning to go -  
    my village, thankfully,  
        left unscathed for years.

Perhaps someday I will return  
    to finish what I  
        leave undone.

Perhaps another day,  
    a cloudy day -  
        just now turning to go.

# Pandora's Sister

by Lynn White

She found the box  
that had been gifted to her sister  
by some god, or other.

Her sister who, in capital lettered speech  
insisted that she must never open it.  
Even on the days she felt most disagreeable,  
most inclined  
to stir things up a bit.  
She must leave it alone.

Otherwise,  
she'd be straight out of the frying pan  
and into the fire,  
according to Big Sister.

But one day, feeling bored, undervalued,  
and shouted at by everyone in the house,  
she came across it,

and picked it up,  
danced a little jig,  
whizzed off the top  
and looked inside.

It seemed empty.

Disappointed,  
she closed it again  
and put it back.  
If anything invisible  
had escaped  
her sister would get the blame,  
or so she hoped.

Fingers crossed,  
there'd always be hope.



# Untitled

by Sydnie Beaupré

# Contributors

**ALYSSA BEATTY** lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has appeared in *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Spread: Tales of Deadly Flora*. Find her at [alysysabbettywrites.com](http://alysysabbettywrites.com)

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**SYDNIÉ BEAUPRÉ** is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

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**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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After the incredibly practical literature degree from the University of Chicago, award-winning, pushcart-nominated **MAIA BROWN-JACKSON** then braved the myriad esoteric jobs that inevitably followed, ultimately straying to Iraq to volunteer with survivors of ISIS genocide. Inspired with a new fo-

cus, she caffeinated herself through a graduate degree in terrorism and human rights and now investigates fraud, waste, and abuse of humanitarian aid in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Also, she writes.

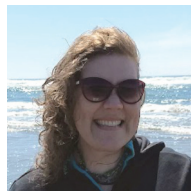
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**BARBARA CANDIOTTI** is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

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

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**DANNYE CHASE** (she/her) is a queer, married mom of three who lives in the US Pacific Northwest. She claims to write in many genres, but her oldest offspring suspects it all boils down to either romance or horror...or somehow both. Danye's short fiction has appeared in the anthology *Anna Karenina Isn't Dead* from Improbable Press, *Allegory* magazine, and the No Sleep podcast. Her supernatural horror story "The Impossible House" took first prize in the On the Premises contest #44. You can find her on Twitter and Bluesky as Danye Chase, and at [DanyeChase.com](http://DanyeChase.com), where she gives weird writing prompts.

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**VIVIAN CHOU** is a second-generation Chinese-American writer. Her work has been published or forthcoming.



ing in *Uncharted*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, and *Apex*, among others. She prefers to fuel her writing with naps, exercise, and dystopian dread, but usually manages with black coffee and chocolate.

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**JENNIFER CROW**'s poetry and prose have been published in a wide range of venues over the past quarter-century. Her poems have appeared in *Analog*, where two were finalists for the AnLab reader awards; *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and others. Curious readers can learn more about her and her work on Twitter, where she posts as [@writerjencrow](#).

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**SHIKHAR DIXIT** is a writer/illustrator who has lived most of his life on the East coast. His work can be found in *The Martian Wave*, *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Strange Horizons*, *Not One of Us*, *The Darker Side Anthology*, *Songs From Dead Singers Anthology*, two Barnes & Noble anthologies, and elsewhere. He and his wife are living the fairytale life in the nightmare country of New Jersey. He occasionally updates his website at [SlipOfThePen.com](#).

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**RACHEL DOTSON** graduated from the Randolph College MFA program and holds a Master of Science in Clinical Counseling Psychology from Radford University. She lives in the New River Valley of Virginia and can be found haunting her local library.

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**MELISSA RIDLEY ELMES** is a Virginia native currently living in Missouri in an apartment that delightfully approximates a hobbit hole. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Star\*Line*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Haven*, *Belmont Story Review*, *Dark-Winter*, *Black Fox*, *PoetrySouth*, and various other print and web venues. Her first collection of poems, *Arthurian Things*, was published by Dark Myth Publications in 2020, and her second poetry collection, *Dreamscapes and Dark Corners*, was published by Alien Buddha Press in 2023. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Science Fiction Poetry Association's Elgin, Rhysling, and Dwarf Star awards.

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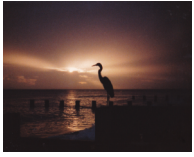
**RYAN HYATT** is a former news reporter, current educator, and author of the Terrafide sci-fi series. He edits the satirical sci-fi news site, *The La-La Lander*, as well as *Not Your Father's Bedtime Stories*, kid's lit he creates with his daughter, author Sage Hyatt. Find him at the beach and his stories across the internet, or connect with him on Twitter/Instagram [@ucalthisreality](#).

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**GERRI LEEN** is an award-nominated poet from Northern Virginia who's into horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has poetry published by *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Dark Matter*, *The HWA Poetry Showcase*, *Dreams & Nightmares* and others and has just published her first poetry collection *Unwilling: Poems of Horror and Darkness*. Visit [gerrileen.com](#) to see what she's been up to.

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**LAUREN MCBRIDE** is author of the chapbook *Aliens, Magic, and Monsters* (Hiraeth, 2023). Nominated for the Best of the Net, Pushcart, Rhysling, and Dwarf Stars Awards, her poetry has appeared internationally in speculative and mainstream publications including *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Utopia Science Fiction's 5th Anniversary Anthology*. She enjoys swimming, gardening, baking, reading, writing, and knitting scarves for U.S. troops.

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**AMURI MORRIS** is an artist based in Richmond, Va. She recently graduated from painting and printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University. Throughout the years she has acquired several artistic accolades such as a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship. She aims to promote diversity in the art canon, specifically focusing on the black experience. You can find more of her work at [www.murisart.com](http://www.murisart.com).

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**MARY JO RABE** writes science fiction, modern fantasy, historical fiction, and crime or mystery stories, generally displaying a preference for what she defines as happy endings. Ideas for her fiction come from the magnificent, expanding universe, the rural environment of eastern Iowa where she grew up, the beautiful Michigan State University campus where she got her first degree, and the Black Forest area of Germany with its center in Freiburg where she worked as a librarian for 41 years before retiring to Titisee-Neustadt. News about her published stories is posted regularly on her blog: <https://maryjorabe.wordpress.com/>

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**ASHLEY ABIGAIL GRUEZO RESURRECCION** (siya/they) is a Filipina Asian-American, certified 200-Hour Yoga Teacher, and Returned United States Peace Corps Volunteer (Thailand 130) who graduated from Seton Hill University with a MA in Art Therapy. Art therapy is their instrument for healing the weights of cultural somatic impressions and empowering their communities. @twiichii X <https://twiichii.wordpress.com/>

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.

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**RON SANDERS** is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

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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 CreatiVinge-

nuitiy. 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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**DEBORAH SHELDON** is a multi-award-winning author and anthology editor from Melbourne, Australia, who writes across the darker spectrum of horror, crime and noir. Published fiction includes poetry, drabbles, flash, short stories, novelettes, novellas and novels. Her latest titles are the novel

*Bodily Harm* (Undertaker Books), and the anthology she conceived and edited *Spawn 2: More Weird Horror Tales About Pregnancy, Birth and Babies* (IFWG Publishing). Forthcoming in 2025 is her poetry collection *The Broonie and Other Dark Poems* (Hiraeth Publishing). Deb's poetry has been published in magazines such as *Illumen*, *AntipodeanSF*, *Nightmare Fuel*, *Midnight Echo*, *Trembling with Fear*, and *Penumbria*. Her villanelle "The Broonie" was shortlisted for the Australasian Shadows "Best Poem" Award. Visit Deb at <http://deborahsheldon.wordpress.com>

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**MARGE SIMON** is a writer/poet/illustrator living in Ocala, FL, USA. A multiple Stoker winner, HWA Lifetime Achievement awardee and Grand Master of SFWA, her works appear in *Asimov's*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Silver Blade*, *Penumbria*, *Magazine of F&SF*, and more, as well as anthologies such as *Chiral Mad*, *Qualia Nous*, *Spectral Realms*. Instagram: [margesimonwrites](https://www.instagram.com/margesimonwrites)

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**GWYNNE STANKER** taught English as a second language for two years in Africa. This story arose from that experience. She writes across genres both historical and speculative with elements of fantasy and the supernatural. She has a story in the anthology *Fresh Starts* and another story, "Big Rock Candy Mountain," appearing in *The Sunlight Press*. She took top honors in The Zebulon for her novel *The Sun Walkers*. She recently completed an as yet unpublished novel *Dark Mountain*. Together with her spouse and an overly-affectionate poodle-terrier mix named "Lovey," she calls the beautiful Colorado prairie home.

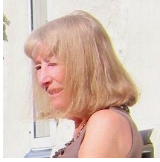
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**JOCELYN SZCZEPANIAK-GILLECE** teaches Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; her weird fiction appears or will appear in places like *Weird Horror*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, *Exacting Clam*, *The Quarter(ly)*, and others. Her first novel, *Poltergeist*, is forthcoming with *Apocalypse Confidential*.

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**KATE M TYTE** was born in Bath, England. She worked as an archivist for over ten years, before moving to Lisbon where she works as an English teacher. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Slightly Foxed* and *The Short Story*, and her fiction and poetry in *Teleport*; *STORGY*; *MONO*; *Riggwelter*; *Reflex Press*; *Idle Ink*; *The Fiction Pool*; *Press Pause Press*; *Ghastly Gastronomy*; *Living, Loving, Longing: Lisbon*; *Strange Spring: Stories We Wrote in Self-Isolation*; *The Chamber* and on *The Other Stories* and *Creepy Pod* podcasts.



**LYNN WHITE** lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for Pushcarts, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

Her poetry has appeared in many publications including: *Consequence Journal*, *Firewords*, *Capsule Stories*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Arachne Press*, *Gwyllion Magazine* and *So It Goes*.

<https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077/>





# We Moon

by Amuri Morris

*(full image)*