

penumbria

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Summertime Magic*

*Whilst wishing for
autumn and the
cooling depths
of space

Prose, Poetry, and Art
Issue Featuring

Maureen Bowden • Sonali Roy •
Beth Cato • Dagny Sellorin • Ed
Teja • Gerri Leen • Brian Malachy
Quinn • Phil Emery • Marcus Ten
Low • Marge Simon • Colleen
Anderson • Shikhar Dixit • Hira
Rashid • Paul Magnan • Debbie
Haddow • Angela Patera • Carl
Scharwath • Luke Walker • John
Grey • Tim Hildebrandt • Anton
Cancre • Ned Marcus • rob lane
wilder • Monica Louzon •
Lorraine Schein



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Mother



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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Confessions of an AI game developer ...

Well, the first confession is that that grammatically dodgy first line is an exaggeration. I am not an AI. Neither have I been a very successful game developer. But I have developed AI engines for games, and as you'll see, directed exaggeration seems the name of the AI game.

When I wrote back in October 2020 (<https://www.penumbric.com/archives/October2k20/aAI.html>) that “the big companies don't appear to be focused on any sort of strong AI systems,” that indeed didn't appear to be the case—data-driven algorithms meant to ferret out the best way to target consumers or voters were the Big Thing, and any sort of General Artificial Intelligence (GAI, or “Strong AI,” as little as that term seems to be used anymore) was way off the radar. The closest such attempts I could find were, to be honest, in game engines such as mine, which attempted to mimic human personalities and memories for NPCs. And, to continue being honest, my engines were simplistic, although they presented an opportunity to be way better than the general NPCs and chatbots and so forth of the time. I sold these engines through Unity, a game dev engine that, unfortunately, made as part of its requirements that you couldn't know who was buying your asset, nor what they were using it for; you just had to hope that you could get the buyer to actually register their interest with you (or alternatively that they found a problem with your asset and asked for help). Add to this an unhealthy problem with Unity asset piracy and, well, to this day I have no idea how many copies of my “strong-ish” AI engines are out there, nor what they've been used for.

Does that sound scary? Horrifying? Disgusting? Ethically queasy? I totally agree. However, as much as my ego would like to believe, on

some level, that the current sudden surge in GAI-ish developments are my fault, I know that really a) no big company would have a need to use my engines for either personality of memory systems, and b) as mentioned before, my engines were (and are) pretty simplistic, and I haven't updated them in years.

But ... remember that fear and disgust you may have just felt? Rev it back up again, for now we do indeed have megacorporations like Google and Meta and Microsoft and whatever Elon Musk is all slouching toward General AI through things like ChatGPT and Sora and Kling and a number of others. We've been worried about ChatGPT for its development as a replacement for writers (or writing), and about various image creators for their creation of deepfake images and videos. But with the latest releases—ChatGPT-4o especially—we're getting closer to the event horizon. Yes, THAT event horizon.

ChatGPT-4o now allows for more “intelligence and advanced tools”—so not just writing an essay for you, but interacting with you in a more human-like fashion. It can “look” at images and decipher text on them, it can “chat about photos you take,” and in the near future will have “natural, real-time voice conversation and the ability to converse with ChatGPT via real-time video” (according to the OpenAI website, <https://openai.com/index/gpt-4o-and-more-tools-to-chatgpt-free/?ref=upstract.com>). And it now has a memory! It will analyze your conversations with it and create “memories” of the things it thinks you like, don't like, etc.—not just obvious things like you telling it “I don't like beef,” but inferring that you don't like beef from the clues you give it over time. You can also create individual “GPTs” that have their own specific knowledge sets and so forth to be “more helpful in [your] daily life, at specific tasks, at work, or at home.”

This may sound ... IDK, innocuous? Not very advanced? But there was a reason I developed a memory system as the second engine, and didn't just rely on the fact that of course computers have hard drives that store hard data—in order to have realistic conversations, you need the AI to not only remember the facts, but make inferences based on those facts (I went a step further and made them able to forget or misremember things, but OpenAI hasn't gone that far). And the next step after creating “personal” GPT assistants is to make them even more personal—giving them warmth, say, or limited feelings of some kind (even so they can make better inferences about their users' feelings). I know from experience that you can create a system to mimic human personality and emotion, even as a solo developer. Imagine what a company with comparatively limitless resources can do.

The funny thing is that AI companies have started using “strong” AI terms for even their “weak” AI products: They are happy to tell you about ChatGPT's “intelligence,” for example. It's like this bizarre attempt to throw the public's scifi-based fears of robots taking over the world into their faces, making them more and more used to “intelligent” AI systems and so forth in some sort of conditioning, trying to get us to the point where we basically ignore that latest conversational AI that hates us a little bit more for our stupid questions, or that likes

dogs but doesn't like other pets, or develops its own political leanings. Exaggerate now so that we ignore the real danger later. It seems to work for Far Right politicians; why not for AI? (And now I sorta want to ask ChatGPT to write me an essay using its very best Donald Trump impersonation, just to see what it does.)

And of course this is ignoring the ethical daemons of creating something that has feelings and a continuous sense of “being.” Are we creating a new caste system? Should we even be trying to do this? It is an ethical issue I've been wrestling with for years, and luckily my own limited capabilities mean I'll never actually create such a being—but do companies like OpenAI or Meta have the ability to wrestle with such ideas? Or does each individual within the company think “I don't have the ability to create such a being, so I don't need to worry”?

I worry that we'll worry too late. About a lot of things. It's our way—see, e.g., climate change. And then we'll just reach that point where we aren't around to worry about it at all. (Now that's an exaggeration—or is it?)

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

Silver Angel

by Maureen Bowden

Sunday night, my mother came home drunk again. I helped her to climb upstairs so she wouldn't fall and break her neck. She muttered, "You're a good girl, Ella," and flopped on the bed. I removed her shoes, covered her with her dressing gown, placed a bowl beside the bed in case she was sick, and left her to sleep it off. Same old routine.

I retreated to my own bedroom and slammed the door. To stop myself from crying I unleashed my rage and howled in desperation to anyone who might be listening. "Help me. It isn't fair. I'm eighteen, I should be having fun, not worrying about a drunken mother and a feckless father."

A shaft of moonlight found its way from behind the sulky grey autumn clouds, through my window and onto my cluttered bedside table. Something glittered. What was it? I pushed aside cast-off earrings, bottles of solidified nail polish, and a dog-eared copy of Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*. My fingers found the silver charm bracelet my grandmother left me after she dumped her mortal coil. The bracelet was very pretty, but heavy and old fashioned, and I seldom wore it. The moon had scuttled back behind the clouds, but one of the charms was still glistening. I was sure it had never done that before. I touched the tiny winged figure and it flared like a heavy-duty firework. I dropped the bracelet and closed my eyes against the blinding light. When I opened them the figure, now life-size, stood beside my bed. "What the f..."

"Don't curse, Ella. It isn't ladylike."

"Don't tell me what not to do in my own bedroom. Who or what the hell are you?"

"I'm a charm. My name is Argentael. It means Silver Angel."

"I know. I have a smattering of Latin. How are you here and what do you want?"

"I came here courtesy of your grandmother when she left you the bracelet, and as I'm an angel I obviously have a message for you. If you don't like it I'm confident that you can't shoot me, because you don't have a gun."

This was off the scale in weirdness but it was a welcome distraction from stressing about my dysfunctional parents, so why not go with the flow? "Okay, let's get this straight. I know you're a figment of my imagination, but what's the message?"

"You can't take full responsibility for your mother. You must start living your own life."

I sat on my bed and sighed. "That's easy for an imaginary angel to say, but she can't take care of herself. If I don't take responsibility for her nobody else will."

He sat beside me. "You need help."

"Who's going to help me?"

"I am."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I've no idea, but I'll think of something, and before I go I have another message for you. Your father will call you tomorrow and ask you

to meet him for lunch. You must accept his invitation.”

I sprang up from the bed. “I must do nothing of the sort. I’m furious with him.”

Argentael took my hand. “You have a right to be furious. Tell him so with your proverbial tooth and claw, but don’t miss the chance of a free lunch. You have no food in the house and you need to eat.” He stood up. “Now get some sleep.” Another flare dazzled me and he vanished.

Monday morning, I awoke, having slept better than usual. I was convinced that it had been a dream, but I felt that a weight was about to be lifted from my shoulders.

My mother joined me while I was making coffee. I poured her a cup and slammed it down in front of her, “Drink it. There’s no food – again.”

She grasped my arm. “I’m sorry. I know I’m a terrible mother.”

“Why?”

“Because I drink too much, forget to do the shopping and I don’t listen to you and talk to you the way a mother should.”

“I know what you’re like. I meant why are you like this?”

She put her head in her hands and groaned. “Because I hate my life. I’m so lonely since your ridiculous father did a runner with the Botox babe.”

The lady in question was a pole dancer called Kentucky. Dad called her Kenti, for short. I called her Fried Chicken: just my little joke.

“I know it was a rotten thing for him to do, Mum, but you weren’t much better when he was here.”

She raised her head and took a sip of coffee. Her hands were shaking, “It’s not easy living with a compulsive gambler, Ella, especially when he’s no good at it. I lost the motivation for shopping because after I’d paid the mortgage and other bills from my wages there wasn’t much to shop with, and he put his money on horses that are still limping home.”

“But it didn’t stop you spending the little that was left on vodka. You’re as bad as each other and I’m sick of it.” I fetched my coat and bag. “I’m going to work. You can wash up.” On a whim, I ran back to my room and fastened the charm bracelet onto my wrist before I left.

The few coins in my pocket wouldn’t cover my bus fare, so I avoided the bus stop where I knew my old school friend Sophie Melancamp would be waiting. She would have paid the fare for me, but I couldn’t face the humiliation. Sophie had a good heart and always plenty of money, although I chose not to speculate about how she earned it.

I walked to “Kitz’s Cobblers and Key Cutters,” where I was employed as a trainee key cutter. I flung my coat and bag on the workbench and sat down, still angry at life, the universe and everything. My boss, Mr Kitz, who was old enough to be my grandfather, spotted the bracelet. He peered at me over the John Lennon specs perched on the end of his nose. “I’ve not seen that before, Ella. Where did you get it?”

“It was my grandmother’s.”

He nodded. “I could tell it’s old. I used to make silver charms in my younger days. Have you found the special one yet? The others are just there for camouflage.”

That startled me. I stared at him.

“Ah, I can see you have. Don’t worry. I won’t ask any questions.” He applied himself to a piece of footwear that a pole dancer might have favoured. It was now in need of heel surgery. I concentrated on a key.

Midmorning my phone rang. I pulled it out of my bag and glanced at

the screen, “I’m sorry about this, Mr Kitz. It’s my father. I’d better answer it.”

He smiled. “Of course you must. Take it in the restroom if you want privacy.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay, I don’t and I’ll keep it brief.”

I answered. “Hello, Dad. I’m at work. What do you want?”

“I need to see you, Ella. I miss you.”

“How touching. I go to lunch at one o’clock.”

“That’s fine. I’ll meet you outside Aldo’s Restaurant on Lark Lane at a quarter past. The food’s good and I’m paying.”

“Larkie’s full of eateries. Gimme a clue.”

“The library side, three quarters of the way down towards the park. They fill up quick so try to be on time.”

“Got it. See you there.” I ended the call.

Mr Kitz said, “Is your father still gambling, Ella?”

I sighed. “Probably. He emptied his and Mum’s joint bank account and after he left he promised to pay her back, but so far he’s sent nothing.”

“Could you persuade him to join Gamblers Anonymous? They have a branch in Rodney Street.”

“I’ve given up trying. He won’t listen to me.”

“I know someone who’s very persuasive.” He tore a sheet off his ‘Don’t Forget’ notepad, wrote a name and phone number on it and passed it to me. The name was Karen Kitz.

“She’s my daughter. She works for GA as a counsellor. Get him to call her. She’ll reassure and encourage him, and she’ll drag him there by his bedroom tackle if necessary.”

I wasn’t hopeful, but I thanked him and slipped the note into my bag.

“Don’t hurry back,” he said. “The keys can wait.”

I arrived at the restaurant only ten minutes late. Dad said, “You’re early.”

“Okay, no need for sarcasm. Let’s eat.”

“You’re hungry?”

“Yes. We have no food in the house.” He didn’t answer.

Aldo’s was doing brisk business, but the waiter found us a recently vacated table for two, cleared away the used dishes, and handed us the menu. Dad ordered something unpronounceable and I ordered a Mediterranean salad because I like to know what I’m eating.

He attempted to make conversation. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. How’s your mum?”

“Not good. How’s Fried Chicken?”

“Gone.”

I tried not to smirk. “Gone where?”

“She ran off with a poet from Stoke-on-Trent.”

“Lucky Stoke.”

He smiled. “Who’s being sarcastic now?”

My fury erupted. “Do you blame me? While you’ve been doing whatever middle-aged men do with pole-dancers half their age, I’ve been an unpaid carer to your abandoned wife, so don’t get snotty with me.”

Before he could respond the waiter brought our food. His was a couple of kebabs consisting of chunks of some unidentifiable substances, a side order of potato wedges, and two slices of garlic bread. Mine was a plate the size of a dartboard, covered in enough vegetation to feed a herd of wildebeest. The heads of edible fungi protruded through the undergrowth. My hunger overcame my anger at Dad and I attacked the foliage with enthusiasm.

When I came up for air he was watching me. There were tears in his eyes. “How long is it since you’ve eaten?”

My mouth was full so I shrugged.

“I’ll send you some money, I promise. Use it for whatever you and your mum need but don’t give it to her.”

I swallowed. “If you really want to help you have to stop gambling.” I passed him the note. “Ring this woman. She can help you. If you don’t do it you’ll never see me again.”

He nodded. “I’ll get help. I promise.”

I don’t remember much about the rest of the day except the pleasant sensation of not feeling hungry. The bonus was that Mum found enough shrapnel in the pocket of an old handbag to buy a loaf of bread and a tin of beans. Whoopee-do. We shared beans on toast for supper, after which I made an excuse to have an early night. I was hoping Argentael might not have been a dream and would show up again.

He was sitting on my bed, waiting for me. “Did you enjoy your day, Ella?”

“Yes, thank you. Dad bought me lunch and promised to send me money.”

“I know. I was watching.”

“I thought you were supposed to be sorting out Mum. Did you have any luck?”

“I did. Sit down and I’ll explain.”

I sat next to him, feeling protected in his presence, as I used to feel with my grandmother.

Argentael said, “Many people function best as self-sufficient individuals, not needing to rely on someone else for support. Others find it hard to function at all without their soul mate.”

“I can’t believe Dad was her soul mate.”

“He wasn’t. I entered her mind and searched her memories. She found the person who was, when she was very young, but she lost him through her naivety and youthful foolishness.”

I didn’t know whether to cry in despair or laugh with hope. “Where is he now? Tell me about him.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you. Close your eyes and I’ll take you through her memories. You’ll see what I saw, but don’t worry. I’ve edited it to spare your blushes.”

I closed my eyes. I saw my mother. Young Shirley Deveraux looked about fourteen years old, with a strong resemblance to me at that age, except she looked happier. She was walking through Sefton Park hand in hand with a boy of about the same age. He had sandy-coloured hair and a wide smile. They were both wearing school uniform and they were laughing and chatting. I’d never seen her more at ease. Argentael said, “His name is Simon Dudley. She should have stayed with him.”

“What went wrong?” I said.

“See for yourself.”

I saw a boy in the schoolyard. He was tall and good looking. His dark hair fell in waves around his shoulders and his blue-grey eyes were worldly wise. I watched him take my mother away from Simon. She seemed unable to resist him. I understood why. He was a dish.

“Who is he?”

“Ross Melancamp,”

I knew those unsettling eyes reminded me of someone. “I think I know his daughter.”

“Ah, yes. That would be Sophie, an enterprising young woman.”

“I didn’t know she had a father. She’s never mentioned him.”

“Did you think three wise men rode over the mountain to celebrate her birth?”

“Well, if they did you’d know about it, being an angel.”

“Not my area of expertise. I’m just a charm, remember. If you want to know what happened next keep watching.”

There was some evidence of Argentael’s editing because the next memory I saw was my mother lying on her bed sobbing. I said, “He broke her heart, didn’t he? He ruined everything between her and Simon. Why couldn’t he leave her alone?”

“People like Ross take what they want and then move on. After him she had a series of disastrous relationships including her marriage to your father. You don’t want to see the details, do you?”

“No thanks. I’ve seen enough to get the gist. What do we do now?”

“We reunite your mother and Simon, and let nature take its course.”

A feeling of relief swept over me. “I suppose you hacked into his memories too. What happened to him?”

“He married but it was a disaster. His wife found her own soul mate and moved on.”

“Did he have children?”

“A son, William, called Will for short. His parents shared custody until Will was old enough to choose where to live. He chose to live with Simon because his mother was happy and didn’t need him as much.”

“So Will and I are in similar situations?”

“Yes. Now listen carefully, Ella. I have a plan and I need you to make it work. You gave your father’s conscience a good prodding. I believe he’ll risk the wrath of his creditors and send you some money. You must take your mother to Asda on Saturday morning. That’s when Simon and Will do their weekly shop. Make sure their trolleys collide, and leave the rest to providence.” He stood up. “We’ll speak again. Good luck.” I closed my eyes against the dazzle and he vanished.

Friday morning, the postman delivered a large brown envelope. It contained a note, “Love Dad xxx,” and enough used bank notes to finance the contents of a full fridge-freezer, with plenty left to put in the bank. I took the money to my bedroom, stashed it at the back of my underwear drawer, locked my bedroom door, and left for work.

When I returned home that evening, Mum wasn’t back from work. An hour later there was still no sign of her and I was worried. She was employed as a clerical assistant with Hopkins and Platt chartered accountants. Their office closed at five o’clock: two hours ago. I rang her

friend and co-worker, Suzy Sheldon. “Suzy, Mum’s not come home from work. When did you last see her?”

Suzy said, “Oh, no, I knew we shouldn’t have left her.”

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. “Left her where? What’s happened?”

“It’s okay, Ella, don’t panic. I think I know where she’ll be. One of the girls was leaving today. We took her to the pub at lunchtime to give her a send-off. Shirley met some friends there. She stayed with them when we went back to work. They’d been plying her with drinks and she was in no fit state to work anyway.”

“Which pub?”

“The Dagger and Duck on Aigburth Road.”

“Thanks.” I ended the call.

I grabbed my coat and set off feeling furious and terrified. Winter was drawing in. Darkness had fallen, rain was pelting down and a bitter wind chilled my bones.

The Dagger and Duck was crowded and noisy. There was no sign of my mother, but I saw a familiar face. Sophie Melancamp was sitting at the bar in cosy conversation with a man who looked older than Mr Kitz.

She saw me and beckoned me to join them. “Hi, Ella, this is my friend, Duke. What are you doing here? It’s not your usual stomping ground.”

I nodded to Grandpa Duke. He nodded back. “You wanna drink?”

“No thanks.” I turned to Sophie. “My mum was in here at lunchtime, a leaving do or something. She’s not come home. Have you seen her?”

“Yeah, she was sozzled. The landlord threw her out about an hour ago.”

“I have to find her.” I turned and fled.

I stood in the rain with tears stinging my eyes. Where did I begin looking?

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned my head. Sophie and Duke stood behind me. Sophie said, “We’ll help you to look.” They led me to a parked Volkswagen Golf GTI. Grandpa Duke obviously had more than his State Pension to live on.

He climbed into the driver’s seat. “Right, girls, let’s go find the lady.”

Sophie and I sat in the back and kept our eyes peeled as he kerb-crawled along Aigburth road.

I spotted a bedraggled figure curled up in the doorway of the Oxfam shop. Duke stopped the car and I ran to her. She was unconscious and her hair was matted with vomit.

Sophie said, “Do you want us to take her to hospital?”

I shook my head. “They’ve got enough to do. Could you help me to get her home?”

Duke carried her to the car and laid her on the back seat. I sat beside her. Sophie sat in the front and gave directions to our house.

I unlocked the front door, and Duke, with great gentleness, carried the pathetic stinking woman upstairs to her bed. I revised the uncharitable thoughts I’d had about him. Whatever his relationship with Sophie, it was their business, not mine.

I sat beside my mother’s bed all night. It was midmorning when she stirred and was sick again. I sighed with relief and made her a mug of

black coffee. After she regained the use of her legs I dragged her to the bathroom, helped her into the shower, and shampooed the vomit out of her hair. Her arms and legs were cut and bruised. I could only guess that she'd fallen and crawled into the doorway before she passed out. I refused to contemplate anything worse. She tried to apologise.

"Shut up," I said. "I don't want to hear it." All I could think about was I'd missed the chance to reunite her with Simon.

Suzy Sheldon rang on Saturday afternoon. "Did you find her, Ella? I've been really worried."

I told her what had happened. "I don't think she'll be fit for work on Monday, Suzy. Can you make some excuse for her?"

"Of course. Don't worry about it. We were partly to blame for leaving her there."

"Please don't tell her that. She has to start taking responsibility for herself."

Argentael was waiting for me on Saturday night. "I'm sorry, Ella," he said. "I've done all I can for her. So have you. If she persists in this behaviour her life will be wretched, but it won't be long. Give her one more chance but be prepared to move on if she refuses to take it."

"I know you're right, but I won't give up on her just yet."

He smiled. "I know you won't." Then he vanished.

She took a week off work. When I returned home the following Friday she said, "I'm feeling much better today. I may go out tonight and meet some friends."

I screamed at her, "Like hell you will. Are these the same friends that left you in the Oxfam shop doorway to choke on your own vomit?"

Her face paled. "I don't remember that."

"You're lucky. I do. It's tattooed on my memory forever."

She put her head in her hands and howled. "I'm so sorry, Ella. What have I become? What am I going to do?"

"I'll tell you exactly what you're going to do. Dad sent me some money. I'm taking care of it. You can keep your mitts off. You're not going out tonight. Get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow do something with your hair, put on your slap and come with me to Asda. We're stocking up."

She gave me a sheepish half-smile, "You're getting very bossy, young lady."

"Get used to it. If you don't do as I say I'm moving into Sophie Melan-camp's spare room."

"What? Keep away from her, Ella, she's trouble."

"So are you, and if you don't behave yourself I'm off."

She blushed, "You're right. I'm sorry. Asda it is."

Saturday morning the weekend shoppers were stampeding. We manoeuvred our trolley along the crowded aisles, and I kept my eyes skimmed for Simon and Will, hoping I'd recognise them.

Mum was happily piling up the trolley. There was no sign of anyone who could be her lost love or his son. She was oblivious to my rising anxiety. We'd covered every aisle twice and I was convinced we'd missed our chance. Maybe they'd ditched Asda in favour of the new Aldi at the other end of the shopping centre. Or they could have switched to any one of half a dozen other supermarkets. This was hopeless. I envisaged spending my life trapped in a miserable situation or joining forces with Sophie Melan-camp and sampling the wild side

of life. Maybe Duke could introduce me to a friend who liked young girls.

Mum had her head in the freezer, delving among the various brands of oven chips. I was about to haul her out of it and steer her to the checkout when I saw a bewildered-looking middle-aged man and a young man of about my age with sandy hair, a wide smile, and friendly brown eyes. He resembled Simon as I'd seen him in Mum's memories. They were pushing a trolley up the opposite side of the aisle. I grabbed our trolley handle, did a u-turn, crashed into them, and called, "Oops. Sorry."

Mum emerged from oven chip heaven. She and the middle-aged man came face to face. The silence was deafening. He spoke first, "Shirley? Shirley Deveraux?"

She said, "Simon? Simon Dudley? Is it you?"

They both began talking at once and while they were coming to terms with this turn of events Will and I were looking each other up and down. I liked what I saw and I could tell that he did too.

Half an hour later the four of us were sitting in Starbucks drinking cappuccinos. While Shirley and Simon were reviving old memories, Will and I were creating new ones.

When Argentael showed up that night I knew it was for the last time. "Our work is done," he said. "It's up to them now."

"Will you stay on my bracelet?" I asked.

"No, Ella. I've completed my task as a charm. I can spread my wings now and move on to higher things."

I felt a sense of loss. "I don't suppose you could sort out Dad before you go."

He laughed. "No need. You and my old friend, Mr Kitz, have done

enough. Your father finds Karen even more beguiling than a roulette wheel and online Bingo, and she sees him as a project. He's on the right track now."

"So I suppose we must say goodbye, but could I ask you a question first?"

"Ask away."

"Is Will my soul mate?"

"You may not need a soul mate, but if you do it might be him. Have some fun finding out. You've earned it."

"You're right, I have."

"One word of warning, Ella, life has many pitfalls. It would be wise not to introduce Will to Sophie Melancamp."

"Message understood."

Monday morning I wore my bracelet. Mr Kitz looked over his specs at the gap where Argentael used to hang. He raised his eyebrows and said nothing, but I had something to say. "Mr Kitz, when you first saw my bracelet, you asked me if I'd found the special charm. How did you know about it?"

He smiled. "I was a charm-maker, lass. We all knew about the special ones."

"But you didn't make them?"

"Nobody makes them. They just appear where and when they hear a cry for help."

I wouldn't let it go at that. "But what are they and where do they go after they've helped?"

He shrugged. “Who knows? Lending a helping hand is a rite of passage for them, I suppose. After that they can move on to wherever they’re supposed to be. Don’t try to understand, Ella, just accept it as one of life’s many unsolved mysteries.”

“His name was Argentael. He called you his friend.”

I saw tears in the old man’s eyes. “Thank you, Ella,” he said. “Thank

you for telling me that.”

Two months later he handed me a delicately crafted charm: three tiny silver bells linked together. “I made this for you to fill the gap in your bracelet,” he said. “They’re wedding bells.”



Bride in the Space

by Sonali Roy

threads

by Beth Cato

when she awakened each morning
she took the thread of dream
still pressed to her forehead
like a stray hair
and tucked it in the old
green carnival glass bowl that
her grandma gave her
the one grandma once used
for the same purpose

and like grandma, she saved them
with the intent that someday
she'd take those iridescent threads
that flashed with headlight-bright
emotions and memories and magic
and embroider something pretty
for her own wall or maybe
to gift for her own granddaughter

but when the bowl eventually
became too full for the lid
(meaning the cat could try to
eat some of the threads
that was an emergency vet visit
she didn't need)
she ended up stuffing
colorful handfuls of dreams deep
into the trash bin
the melancholy of what might have been
if she had the time
if she had the inspiration
clinging to her like
a thread



mind by Dagny Sellorin

You Can't Trust Time

by Ed Teja

Matt Cramer lowered the binoculars from his face with a tired sigh that tried to vent his exhaustion. Then, blinking to clear his vision, he shook his head to clear his fuzzy head.

What had he been doing? Why was he here?

Resting an arm on the window of his truck, he forced himself to take a long, deep breath that pressed him back in the front seat of his truck.

He was hot. Of course, it was hot in his truck as he was parked right in the bright New Mexico afternoon sunshine, sitting in a dusty parking spot overlooking a small, ratty trailer park. He chuckled. It wasn't really a trailer park, except by Silver City standards, just four ancient double-wide trailers sitting in a line along a back street behind the Food Basket.

But why was he there?

He picked up the donut from the passenger seat and took a bite. then tossed it back on the seat where it landed next to a Styrofoam cup that appeared to be half-filled with coffee. The donut was stale and dry. That begged the question of how old it was. He couldn't remember buying the donut or the coffee.

He turned his attention back to the scene in front of him. He seemed to be working, doing his private investigator bit, watching one particular trailer ... but which one? It would be nice to know what he was looking for.

Patience paid off, and a few minutes later a man came out of a trailer

carrying a large cardboard box. The way he struggled with it made it look heavy. He staggered slightly as he came down the steps, then put the box down on a step while he opened the hatchback of a small red car.

Matt decided he should find out what was in the box. He was an investigator, after all, even if he had no idea what he was investigating.

As he considered how he could find out, he realized he had a camera hanging from a strap around his neck. It was the single-lens reflex Canon he used for investigations. He must have had a reason for bringing it, so he raised it and snapped off a series of photos of the man awkwardly picking up the box and sliding it into the red car.

“Hey, Matt.”

Matt turned to see Cliff sitting in the seat next to him. The Indian looked as surprised to be there as Matt was to see him.

“My ass is wet,” Cliff said.

“You are sitting on my coffee and donut,” Matt told him. His brain stumbled for a second before he thought to ask the obvious questions: “Why are you sitting on them? And how did you get there?”

Cliff squirmed in the seat, scowling, then raised a finger. “I'll get back to you on that,” he said. Then he blinked. “But I don't think it was my fault.”

“What isn't your fault?” Matt asked.

But Cliff was gone. Only the squashed coffee cup and donut suggested he'd ever been there.

"Is there something wrong with your coffee?" Donna asked him.

Matt blinked. Now he was sitting outside under a clear morning sky. It took him a few thundering heartbeats and a few breaths of honeysuckle to identify his exact location — the courtyard of a coffee shop downtown. Donna, who owned the place along with her husband Mel, stood beside his table, looking at his hand. When he looked where she was looking, he saw he was holding a coffee mug. One of her mugs. He had been drinking from it and the taste of her special blend was in his mouth.

How did he get there? Wasn't he working? Where had Cliff gone?

So many questions, but then, this was still Silver City, New Mexico (as far as he could tell). He looked at Donna, wondering if she had something to do with the blatant fuzziness of events. Besides being the co-owner of this establishment and a good friend, she was a witch. He'd gotten used to being around magic, somewhat at least, but this sort of thing was totally new to him.

Rather than make a fuss (or a fool of himself), the best course seemed to be to wait and see if Donna would explain what was going on (assuming she knew) or if whatever it was would reveal itself to him.

Things were seldom that easy, however, and with Donna waiting for his answer, he raised the mug to his mouth and took a sip. The coffee tasted fine. "The coffee is fine. Why?"

"The face you made."

"What?"

"When you took your first sip, you made a sour face."

"Did I? I must have been upset about something else."

"About time," she said.

That set him back slightly. "About time for what?"

She cocked her head and looked at him curiously. "I have no idea."

"But you said 'about time.'"

"Because you said you wanted to ask me about time. Time and place. I assumed you were upset about time."

"I said that?"

"You did."

"What did you tell me?"

She laughed. "Not much. I don't know much."

Matt tried to recall what he wanted to know about time but drew a blank.

Of course, he was still trying to work out how and why Cliff had appeared in his car a moment ago. Now he seemed to be investigating time travel.

"I thought a witch would know about such things," he said. It was lame, but he was improving.

"A witch sees so very many exciting things in the worlds around her. They all cry out for a thorough exploration. There simply isn't enough, if you will excuse the expression, time, to do it all. So we pick and choose. Time travel and its various aspects have never been something that called to me. If you are seriously interested in the subject, ask Mel. He has done more along those lines. I can ask him to pop out and chat

with you when he's finished baking brownies."

As enticing as brownies sounded, Matt pictured Mel popping over and asking what it was he wanted to know about time. That would be Mel's first question, and he had no idea what he wanted to know. Or why.

"Thanks, that won't be necessary."

"Are you okay, Matt?" Donna asked.

He smiled at her, appreciating the concern. "I can't exactly say for certain," he said. "All I know is that something strange is going on."

Her knowing smile warmed him. "Is that all?" She waved a hand in dismissal. "Something strange is always going on. It needs to be. If it wasn't ... well, when there is nothing strange happening, that's when we need to worry."

She touched her finger to her ear. "Of course, if you want to worry anyway ... well, that is entirely up to you."

She sounded so confident, so sure, that it reassured him. It calmed him enough that he thought about ordering a brownie. They made great ones, but if Mel was baking new ones, they might be out of the last batch.

"I think you will find the case is pretty straightforward," the large man in the rumpled brown suit, one far too heavy for a New Mexico summer, said as he walked up to where Matt sat.

As the man sat down and slapped something on the table, Matt glanced around and coughed, stalling for enough time to get his bearings.

He was in his office, sitting at his desk. Apparently, he had been minding his own business, basking in the yellow afternoon sun that flowed

in through the window, when the man came in.

Matt glanced at the object the man had slapped down. A business card. Curiosity had him reaching for it, holding it up.

"Taylor Simpson, Mindful Insurance Company," it said.

"Insurance."

"Liability."

"Short of buying a policy, which I don't want and can't afford, how can I be of help?" he asked.

After all, business was business and the man mentioned a case. Even if things ... well, his life, was skipping about more than normal, he needed to focus on the task at hand.

Was there a normal amount that your life could skip out of sequence? If so, who decided such things?

"Straightforward, as I said," Simpson said. "Simply help us do our due diligence so that we can settle a claim. I need to be able to decide if we should pay."

"That's a service I can provide," Matt said. He wasn't sure it was, but what the heck. It was, as he had told Donna (hadn't he?), a strange day.

Simpson nodded. "An employee over at the mine was injured at work. It was an accident, nothing fishy about it at all. The mine sent him to the hospital and got him proper treatment."

"So far, so good."

"But he has filed a disability claim with our company. We don't provide medical insurance, but we are one of the underwriters the mine uses for liability coverage."

“And you don’t want to pay the claim?”

The man sat up straight. “Of course not. If we started paying claims, hell, that would set a disastrous precedent,” he said. Then he grinned. “Joking!”

Sure, Matt thought.

“No, the thing is we doubt he is hurt so badly he can’t work. The medical report is vague; heck, so is the doctor. We have heard a rumor that he is working at another job. If that is true, we can disallow the claim. He can go back to work in the mine.”

“And you want me to find out if he is faking?”

Simpson nodded. “Yes. We need local eyes on the man. Find out the truth without letting him know we doubt his claim. We don’t want him to know he’s being watched.”

“What if he is hurt? What if I don’t find evidence that he is working?”

“Watch for two weeks. If you find nothing and your reports are thorough, we will pay the claim. If he is working or is physically active, we need photos.”

“Did the rumor suggest where he is working?”

“Just that he was working with someone repairing cars.”

Simpson slid an envelope across the table. “All we ask is that you find out the truth.”

He patted the envelope. “This contains the information we have on him, including his address and the details of his accident and injuries. There is also a check for a retainer. Invoice me by email for your hours every Friday.” Then he stood up. “Call me with any questions or when you have something to report.”

The man turned and walked out of the office.

Matt opened the envelope and dumped the contents, the reports, and the check out on his desk. He needed to read up on the man.

But he saw the address. The man they wanted him to investigate lived in one of the mobile homes behind Food Basket.

That was exactly where he had been staked out when Cliff showed up, when ... well, whatever happened happened.

He flipped through a report and reached for his mug of coffee.

But his hand closed around a glass. He looked and saw it contained an amber liquid. He lifted it and sniffed it. Jack Daniels.

“Don’t like my booze?” Cliff asked.

Matt was sitting by a fire pit dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. The smoke smelled like mesquite. In the distance a large promontory loomed. It had to be the one his friend Lamron had named Prominent Promontory. That meant he was out at Lamron’s place near Red Rock.

Cliff sat on the dirt to his left, leaning up against a rock with his own glass in his hand.

“It’s fine,” Matt told him. “I just lost the thread of things for a moment.”

“That happens a lot out here,” Cliff said, nodding. “Places like Prominent Premonitory, spooky places, that is, do that.”

The hillside was spooky. It seemed to glow as red as the firelight in the dark.

A large Mexican gray wolf curled up at Cliff's feet and snorted. It might be he was agreeing with Cliff, but Matt's ability to understand wolves was pathetically limited. He understood the fundamental concept of a snarl, lips pulled back, teeth bared.

Harvey didn't do that, however. Harvey just snorted.

Cliff went on. "Not only is this area one that researchers have officially designated as spooky, but there is no reason it is likely to change any-time soon."

"As if time means anything," Matt said.

Just then, as the moon rose, a rich chorus of thin, shrill voices swept across the prairie.

"Exactly. Time confuses things. And Harvey here was telling me that we can thank those coyotes for helping keep it that way."

"Coyotes? What have they got to do with anything?"

"They like their tricks, see."

"Do they?"

Cliff took a sip. "That's what Harvey says."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I'm planning on asking a coyote that myself—directly. I need to get a face-to-face with one but they don't like to socialize, except with each other, of course. I've been trying to convince Harvey to introduce me to one."

"That should be interesting," Matt said. "Do coyotes know anything about time travel?"

The thought occurred to him right then, and the way time was working he thought he better ask it fast.

Cliff shook his head. "No one does. That's part of the problem."

Matt stared through his truck's dirty and pitted windshield, looking down at the trailer (a mobile home, according to the county) and the red hatchback car sitting in the yard beside it.

It bothered him that he didn't know what kind of car he was staring at. How was it that he knew so little about cars that he couldn't even make a guess, even a wild one, about its make?

A serious private investigator, a diligent one, would take a course in how to recognize them, learn to tell them apart. You didn't just put "red car" in a report to a client. No, you needed the make, model, year, and license number.

This red car looked Japanese to him but then, for no reason he could think of, he thought of all small cars as Japanese.

The man who got out of the red car wasn't small, or Japanese. He was a tall man who perfectly matched the image in the photo Simpson had included in the envelope of a mine employee named Pete Peterson.

The cervical collar he wore now matched the nature of the injury he claimed to have.

Pete shut the car door and glanced around as if he was worried about being seen, then walked up the steps to the door of the trailer and went inside.

"Turns out it is my fault," Cliff said from the passenger seat of Matt's truck.

“Squashing the coffee and donuts?” Matt asked.

Cliff shifted uncomfortably, looking down. “Again?”

“I didn’t look this time, but they were there before.”

Cliff squirmed. “Still there. But I wanted you to know that the whole damn thing is partly my fault.”

“Which damn thing? And only partly?”

Cliff looked glum. “I should never have trusted him in the first place, but even so, I’d have it sorted out now ... I could have unwound it and this situation wouldn’t be so complicated ... but you had to go and involve the witches.”

Matt found this irritating.

“So, now it is my fault? And how, exactly, did I involve them? And in what?”

“You asked for their help. You could have come to me, but no, you talk to Donna and Mel. Now, with European old-world magic tangled in the mesh ... I am going to need some time.”

“Seems like this is all about time, isn’t it?” Matt asked.

Cliff stared at him. “Everything is.”

“I don’t understand.”

Matt looked up to see Mel, Donna’s husband, looking at him.

“It’s about time for what?” he asked, holding out a plate that held two, fresh, luscious brownies, their heady chocolate smell rising up, tempting him.

Mel frowned.

“I asked if you wanted a brownie.”

Matt tried to organize his thoughts. *Where was Cliff?* “I’m not sure I have time,” he said.

“No time to eat a brownie?”

Matt sighed and reached for one. Maybe if he stalled and ate just one it would give things time to work themselves out. That would be nice. A relief.

“You have to keep trying, otherwise you are just swept up in it all,” he said as he bit into the chewy, chocolatey mess of calories.

The brownie tasted as real as Mel’s brownies ever did.

Mel put the plate down. “All of what?”

Matt struggled to decide what he had meant, if he had meant anything at all. He was still not tracking things well.

“The issue is that I don’t seem to be in control of things.”

“Oh that,” Mel said. “We never truly are.”

“You seem to be. And you mess with magic.”

Mel laughed. “I don’t mess with it, but I get your point. And one thing I’ve learned from studying magic is that even when you think you’ve mastered some force, say time—since you mentioned that one—you quickly learn that any control you think you have is just an illusion. At best your influence is temporary. As temporary as that brownie you just ate.”

“Things seem out of order.”

Mel tipped his head to one side as if that might let him understand better. Then he pursed his lips.

“Skipping around, you say?”

“Yes!”

“From here to there?”

“And from now to before now and then after now.”

Mel nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ve sensed that myself once or twice. Not recently. It usually means, unless there is an external force at work, that is ... it usually means you are trying too hard to control the sequence of events.”

“I’m not aware of trying to do anything at all. I’m caught up in things and can’t get out of them. I want them to just play out however they need to, but they jump around.”

Mel sat down and leaned an elbow on the table, taking him seriously.

“Do they repeat?”

Matt ran through what he remembered. “Yes.”

“The same each time, or different?”

“Different. Overlapping bits.”

Mel scowled. “Well, then I doubt you are the problem. But the bad news is that the skipping suggests you are caught in the middle of something, trapped in some kind of loop.”

Wasn't that what he'd said?

“What can I do to make it stop? I almost don’t care where I am in the sequence if I can run through it one last time and move on with my life. I’m sick of piecemeal reruns.”

“That should be possible,” Mel said. “Unless of course, you actually are in two places at once.”

“What?”

“Or more.”

“Is that possible?”

“Not probable, but everything is possible if magic is involved.” Mel rolled his eyes, thinking. “Being in two places but trying to process them through a single consciousness ... that might produce the same result.”

“How?”

“The real question, the important one, is why.”

“Then why?”

“That,” Mel said, standing, “will require some research. I’ll need to collect some data.”

Cliff’s words came back to him. “Cliff said that he has it under control and if you get involved ...”

Mel scowled. “That, you see, is because your shaman friend doesn’t appreciate the subtleties or power of our art,” he said.

“He is working with Harvey.”

“Harvey?”

“The wolf.”

Mel snorted. “It figures that Cliff would drag a stray spirit like that into a mess of his own making.”

Mel liked Cliff well enough, but it seemed to Matt that magicians liked to think their kind of magic was the only one that meant anything. He could understand a certain amount of professional rivalry, but to Matt, it was all, well, magic.

Walking down to the trailer, to the red car (he wished he knew the make of it. Simpson would probably ask) and peering in through the back window.

Car parts. The box the man had put in the back was filled with car parts.

That fit in with the idea that he might be working doing car repairs. It was hardly proof, but Matt took some photos.

He wondered if the photos would be in the right order in his camera when things (time) were untangled.

He didn’t even know if he was experiencing this in one, rather jittery and jumpy timeline or several. It might be that in some he had photos and in others, he didn’t.

And if the timelines overlapped somehow ...

“Stop it!” he said out loud, not wanting to follow that particular line of illogical reasoning. It wouldn’t go anywhere at all.

And suddenly, just as he’d asked, things stopped.

It wasn’t exactly what he intended, but he found himself in a bit of a blur. That was the only way he could think of to describe it.

He was on some sort of chair in a blur.

Cliff and Mel were there too, and they both looked surprised.

Nothing else was there, although Matt wished the glass of Jack Daniels was handy. Even a brownie.

“Where are we?” Matt asked.

“It’s a when and where kind of thing,” Cliff said.

Mel nodded. “We messed up.”

“Messed up what?”

“Time and space,” Mel said. “In short, pretty much everything.”

“I went one way and Mel went the other,” Cliff said. “Neither of us knew.”

“Knew what?”

Cliff grinned. “About the time wrinkles and that the other person was sorting out.”

“Until you told me about Cliff being there,” Mel said. “Then I figured it out.”

Cliff nodded. “Turned out to have nothing to do with you at all.”

“But I was being tossed around.”

“You were in the wrong places and times and the wrong times and places.” Mel shrugged. “Just caught there.”

“But what happened?”

Cliff cleared his throat. “Well, like I told you, I was talking to Harvey about meeting a coyote. He arranged it for me, but it had to be on the other side of Red Rock. I got lazy and decided to use ancestral magic to get to the meeting.”

“Which is never really a good idea,” Mel said.

“Thanks, pal, I worked that out for myself. Anyway, when you travel that way you are even more ethereal than normal. This coyote thought it would be funny to shift everything. I didn’t see it coming and he sent me into your car.”

“To squash my donuts.”

“It was the coffee that was the real problem.”

Mel chuckled. “He couldn’t reverse the spell precisely because his pants were soaked.”

“And I overcompensated and overshot my destination in both time and space,” Cliff said. “That’s where Mel came into it.”

Mel made a sour face. “I should learn to mind my own business, but when I feel temporal displacements going on I get curious.”

“Understandable,” Matt said, just to stay involved in the conversation. He had no idea what they were talking about.

“So, I saw the timeline had gotten knotted, well, more twisted.”

“He set out to straighten it,” Cliff said.

“I’m a little OCD when it comes to time,” Mel said, grimacing. “I admit it.”

“But I was in the time flow, so he amplified my overcorrection and that put us, you and me, Matt, into a spiral for a bit.”

“After you told me about Cliff and Harvey ... well, I’d sensed a wolf spirit, and I realized, sort of, what was going on.”

“He jumped in with us,” Cliff said. “A brave thing to do.”

“Why? What could happen?” Matt asked.

The other two shook their heads. “You don’t really want to know.”

“Fine.”

“Anyway, I pulled Cliff into this vortex. Think of it as a safe spot. Then together we brought you in.”

“Now what?” Matt asked.

The men looked at each other. “If all goes well ...” Mel began.

“And we didn’t create another anomaly ...” Cliff said.

“We can wait this out and things will get back to normal,” Mel said.

“Assuming that’s what you want,” Cliff said. “I didn’t mind the spiral much myself. Kind of fun swirling about time and space like that.”

“The stop would be killer,” Mel said.

Cliff wrinkled his nose. “Yeah. Probably true.”

The blur increased and Matt felt his pulse race. “What’s going on?”

Mel shrugged. “The space/time continuum is looking for us. We were there and now we aren’t. Entropy doesn’t like that much. Give it a

minute and it will cool down.”

A minute. Matt wondered what that meant, given the circumstances.

And then Cliff refilled his glass. “You probably need this,” he said. “Good thing the bottle was still here. That was a rough ride.”

“Where are we?”

Cliff looked around. “Looks like Lamron’s place. Again. The real question is when. It looks a lot like last Tuesday to me.”

Matt tried and failed to imagine what a Tuesday looked like.

“Is this over? The skipping?”

Cliff wet a finger and held it up. “Feels right.”

“Isn’t that what you do to test the wind?”

“Could be.” He smiled. “But we know the vortex dissolved and we didn’t die or vaporize or become one with the cosmos, so it must be over.”

Matt let out a long breath, then took an even longer sip of the whisky.

“I wonder if the case I was working on is over,” he said.

“The insurance thing?”

“Yeah.”

Cliff shrugged. “Maybe it hasn’t even started yet. Maybe your client walks in your door a week from now and tells you about the case.”

“I already took some photos of the person of interest.”

“Already, but possibly in the future. If that’s the case, try getting your hands on them. They’ll upload to your computer, but not until that part happens.

“I wonder how I can find out?”

Cliff raised his glass. “When you get home, check your bank account and see if you deposited the retainer yet.”

“And if I did, I should see when I did it. With luck, it’s over and I’ve gotten paid for the work. I hope so because somewhere in that tangled mess the monthly bills are coming out of my account.”

Cliff laughed. “Well, that particular knot in the time stream could have been hours or weeks ago, or two weeks from now. My advice is to take it easy with making any decisions until you are damn sure all the events that got caught up in this mix up are well in the past. You don’t want to repeat anything that you did, but you sure as heck don’t want to skip anything because then it won’t have happened.”

“That sounds crazy.”

Cliff laughed. “Time is fickle. So is space. What are you going to do?”

“You sure can’t trust time around here,” Matt said.

“I never have,” Cliff said. “Not any time or any place. It’s a good rule to live by.”

Harvey let out a little yip that sounded like agreement and the three of them sat back and listened to the high chorus of little girl voices that came rippling down the hill.

“Damn coyotes,” Cliff said.

After the Battle

by Gerri Leen

I've never seen a horse like you before
Your coat is the same dark bay as mine
But with a blanket of white over your hips
And are those spots—or just the brown
Showing through?
You're beautiful, but you're still
Just a horse like me
We may speak different dialects
But our basic nature is the same
Our riders fell during the battle but we stand
Nose to nose, wondering if perhaps
We too should fight
But why? We're both horses

I can tell from your tack—or lack thereof—
That your rider was a better horseman
Than the fool who rode me
And he was proud of you, he put a
Feather in your mane, paint around your eye
Decorations like the medals my rider wore
He got them for shooting men like the one
Who fell off of you
How is that brave?
Why kill each other?
They're both humans
If you and I can stand nose to nose
Without pawing or stamping
Why can't they?

And what do we do now?
I'm tired of endless patrols in all weather
My rider shifting in ways that
Made the saddle hurt, his hands too
Tight on the reins, pulling the bit harder
Than he needed too—you wear only a loop
Like the hackamore they once trained me in
Before they stuck metal in my mouth and
Called me broken
I don't want to go back
Let's run these prairies without men
I know I smell funny; I know I'm not a stallion
Anymore and you are, but the wind
Whips my mane the same as yours
I'm strong and I can run all day
I've proven it far too many times
Let's find a place where men won't find us
Far from the blood and the noise
And the huge iron snake that runs through
The land, belching smoke

You won't leave him?
You...love him?
And his people will come for you?
All right, I won't make a fuss
But I'm not waiting around
And a word of advice:
If my people get here before yours do
Run

When the Sea Claims Its Own

by Brian Malachy Quinn



Kormaleon

by Phil Emery

The sun is lapping dusk on the sprawling port of Kormaleon, ships docked peacefully in the harbour, the first cressets being lit.

Follow the last rays of dusk into the town. The streets and the folk in them have the same evening tone. One of those making her way is a small, young elfin woman.

She bumps into a large, lumpish man.

Irritated, he turns to her and scowls. She shrugs back with mock innocence.

He continues walking while she leans in the doorway of a tavern, “The Signet Inn.” (The harbour can be seen from the doorway.) She has a mischievous smirk on her face, watching him go, then, flipping the coin she's just pick-pocketed, slips inside the tavern.

Inside, the tavern is dim but not gloomy. Lamps flush a warm yellow. Only a few sit quietly at tables. Behind the counter is the owner, middle-aged at least, portly, bald, but congenial. At the counter, in front of the owner, stands a well-built young man, fair-haired, clothed in the simple style of a stable-lad.

The pick-pocketed coin flips into his tankard.

He turns, but the girl is behind him on his other side.

He turns this way and the girl flips his nose.

Then skips up to sit on the counter and leaning over kisses the owner

on the forehead.

The young man makes a playful grab for her. She whips out a knife, not quite so playfully, and holds it ambiguously under his chin.

The moment holds.

She turns away, haughtily, putting the knife back in its thigh sheath. The tavern owner claps a meaty consolatory hand on the young man's shoulder.

She turns back, fishes the pick-pocketed coin out of the tankard, and tosses it onto the counter.

* * *

The three are soon seated companionably around a table in the tavern, all holding mugs or tankards. The tavern owner is speaking. His free hand and the intense expression on his face both indicate that he's beginning to tell a story, conjuring watercolour sights...

A piratess, not unlike the elfin woman—taller, older, longer hair, stands proudly on a ship, sword at her side.

A battle between the piratess' crew and another ship crew. The piratess athletically swordfights on a sail crosspiece. She swings across the deck on a rope.

And so on ...

The tavern owner sinks deep into his story. The other two, still nursing tankards, listen ...

Elsewhere on the ship, another young pirate, very like the young man in the tavern but with an eye patch, fights less skilfully than the pirat-ess.

Nevertheless he ripostes a man.

But another slashes the sword from his hand.

He stands surrounded and helpless before numerous sword points.

The piratess swings crashing into the group.

Both, the young man having regained his sword, lay about the attackers. They're doing well, but then the captain of the other pirate ship approaches, massive and carrying two swords. He elbows the young man and sends him crashing. Then engages the piratess. She defends a crushing sword stroke. She parries another, but is staggered back by the force. She falls to the deck.

A fantasy version of the tavern owner, slightly less weighty, bursts 'heroically' from the ship's cabin door.

Back in the tavern: the young man snorts ale back into his tankard. The elfin woman giggles.

Back in the story, the heroic tavern owner bounds forward with talltale vigour between the piratess and the giant and engages him with sword.

The giant presses. The tavern owner backs up implausibly skilfully. The giant has the tavern owner backed against the ship's rail at sword-point.

Back to deeper, less far-fetched hues: a sly look comes over the tavern

keeper's real face.

*Back in the talltale the tavern owner, still nonchalantly defending him-
self, whistles.*

A huge passing sea serpent breaks the surface behind him.

The tavern owner leaps onto the serpent's back.

The giant leans over the rail, waving his swords in futile fury.

Back in the tavern: the young man gazes disbelievingly down into his tankard, the elfin pick-pocket has a hand over her face.

From another corner of the tavern two manicured hands applaud.

* * *

Meanwhile night has fallen and a ship slips into the nocturned glim-
mer-pocked harbour.

* * *

Back in the tavern a young dark-haired aristocratic man,

lounging arrogantly, begins to stand. He comes over to the other three,
still applauding sarcastically. The young fair-haired man

isn't too happy to see him. The elfin woman is.

He sits, looking at the woman—she looks at him.

He takes her tankard. She lets him.

He sips.

She takes the tankard back.

She sips.

The look at each other, the tankard between.

The tankard's ruby contents are dashed away.

The aristo leaps up and whips out his blade, angry but poised. The fair-haired youth does the same across the table. Boys will be boys.

An even younger boy dashes into the tavern.

The two drawn blades bide their time as he spills out his news.

The elfin stands, interested. Walks between the blades, flipping the fair-haired stable-lad's nose again as she passes. Walks toward the tavern door, reaches it, pauses, and beckons the others with a cock of her head.

* * *

A crowd has formed on the dock in front of a newly moored ship.

The elfin, the fair-haired lad, the aristo, and even the tavern owner stand at the back of the whispering mass.

Dock torches beat the night back to chiaroscuro. At the rail of the ship stands a tall handsome man, richly dressed, with a strange, distraught look on his young-old grisaille face. The crew work unobtrusively in the background.

A strangely grave look seeps onto the tavern owner's face.

Back in the tavern. Hurry! All four now sit around the table, the two young men having put their rivalry and swords away for the moment. The troubled tavern owner unfolds a map on the table, begins another story, but of a different kind ...

Watercolour tableau after tableau: a majestic figure stands behind his two sons—one hand on the shoulder of each.

The king-figure stands on a harbour dock, hand out in farewell, watching two ships sail away in different directions.

An ancient map. The voyage of one of the ships, shown at the starting point, is traced by a dotted line, ending in a question mark. The other ship's voyage is also traced, ending at an isle.

The second ship puts into a bay, reminiscent of another bay.

A finger points to the bay on a map. The wording "Bay of Caprice" names it.

The king's son stands on the beach of the bay.

The king's son, now an old man, stands leaning on a balcony overlooking the port town now built on the bay.

A finger points to a map of the bay with a port built on the bay. The wording "Kormaleon" names it.

Back to the tavern—the owner pointing to the map on the table.

Then notices that the young aristo's chair is empty.

* * *

A palace in another part of the town—not outrageously lavish, granted, but a palace nonetheless. Watch the young aristo entering.

Inside. He bows before the king on the throne. See the obvious family resemblance.

Prince and king poring over maps and documents.

The prince's finger points to the top of the royal family tree—to one of two names side by side, and underneath one of them, no line of descent, only the words "the lost brother

* * *

The newly arrived ship in the harbour. Look closely at the tall, handsome, young-old figure on the ship—note the family resemblance again—the king and the prince in the palace—and also, chillingly, the two brother princes from the tavern owner's tale. One especially. The long lost brother. So very long. So very lost.

He takes in the dock with strange oblique eyes. See through them. A royal train of horses escorted by the city guard is approaching.

The elfin pick-pocket, the fair-haired lad, the tavern owner are back with the crowd. The elfin looks around.

The king and prince, astride fine horses, are in the van of the new arrivals.

The prince gestures imperiously and a plank is fed up to the ship.

The king gestures ambiguously to the lost brother of his grand grand countlessly grand sire of an ancestor, to disembark.

The lost brother also holds up a hand.

Another hand, belonging to one of the crew. Look carefully—it's mottled with plague!

Another hand, petite, sleek, belonging to the elfin, jabs at the ship.

The crew begin to swarm down the gangplank, the torchlight flaring bare their demonic plague-raddled expressions.

Mayhem.

In the night-turned-day the city guard engage the plague horde.

A first soldier spits a first sailor with his sword.

The sailor, dying, claws the soldier's face with a diseased misshaped hand.

Other plague crew jump from the ship's rail in their fury to reach the crowd.

Mayhem.

Now swarming for the crowd, one of the sailors lunges at the elfin.

It seems to have her helpless by the throat.

She twists and stabs it with her knife.

She falls into a self-congratulatory posture—while another sailor approaches her unseen.

A sword hilt crashes into its face.

The fair-haired youth finishes the sailor off with the sword's blade.

The elfin woman winks at him.

She prepares for another sailor coming at her, wielding a cutlass.

A hand taps it on the shoulder.

The sailor turns to face the not-to-be-outdone aristo prince, who postures with his blade.

The sailor rushes him, rotting-tooth mouth gaping.

The prince gracefully runs him through.

The fallen sailor's hand clutches his cutlass' hilt.

The prince puts a cavalier arm around the elfin and kisses her.

Then his lips snap into surprise and pain.

The sailor, raised to its knees, has jammed his cutlass into the prince's back.

The king, fighting in another area of the battle, shouts in anguish at the sight.

He gestures for the guard to redouble their efforts.

Mayhem.

Plague soldiers jump, swim and begin climbing back onto their ship.

The king takes his death-wounded son gently out of the arms of the elfin, grabs his captain of guard by the collar of his uniform and speaks to him, returns his full grieving attention to his son.

Two wheeled catapults arrive at the harbour, making their way through the fear-roiled crowd.

The balls cupped in the catapults are set alight by torches.

Loosed.

One of the balls strikes the ship.

It catches fire.

The king, lit by the growing blaze, still cradling his son's body, watches grimly.

At the rail of the ship again stands the long lost revenant brother, still

handsome, still richly dressed—the strange, distraught look on his young-old face is ineffably harder now. His crew unobtrusively burn in the background.

The ship burning in the harbour. Inferno of timber, sail, plague, time ... Roaring, crackling, dwinning.

The elfin, the fair-haired lad, the tavern owner, standing watching, swashed by the glare of the conflagration, waiting for night to become day.

* * *

Dawn over Kormaleon.

Life.

* * *

The prince lies in still-lifeless state in the palace. The king looks out from a balcony over the town. Glance over his shoulder. The ship, now a charred and smouldering wreck, can be seen in the harbour.

Telescope down. The lost brother still stands, as if in dream, a blackened corpse portrait, at the rail of his ship.

Look closer. Stare. Then his eyes open. Or perhaps two demilunes of ash fall away.

He raises his arms.

Ash begins to rise from the wreck.

Back to the palace. The king watches the ash rise.

The elfin, in the act of pickpocketing another victim, notices the ash lifting into the sky above the buildings around.

Elsewhere, at a stable, the fair-haired lad looks up from grooming a horse and sees the cobalt scumble of ash above.

The tavern owner, wiping down a table in the tavern, hears a commotion outside. He lumbers to the door and outside inhabitants of the town are beginning to point at the sky and panic.

The sky turns black.

The ash descends over the town, begins to congeal into monstrous shapes. The shapes begin to fall upon the populace.

The people of Kormaleon run and scream.

One of the ash-demons attacks a man.

Another attacks a woman.

A child cowers in the shadow of a third.

* * *

In the day-become-night, a line of lanterned wagons climb into the hills above the port.

Focus on one of these, carrying the elfin, the fair-haired youth, and driven by the tavern owner. The younger pair are huddled together, almost child-like, subdued, bereft, looking down at their destroyed, ash-ravaged town.

Take note though: without any other change, the fair-haired lad's hand strays to the elfin's knee.

And without any other change, the elfin's knife is under the lad's chin again.

Looking down at their destroyed, ash-ravaged town.

The Burning Dead

by Marcus Ten Low

The bushfire burnt all
But a small part of a paddock of flowers.
The ashes of those not spared
Seemed, like burnt money, to flake
Ready to be taken by the wind.

The multiplication of worms
Digs at the blackest of the hearth;
And even as the heat of day cracks
And new fires spout at random in the dirt,

The repair of crawling things come, scabbling sounds:
Scratches and scratches, finding
Tinctures in the earth,
To freedom, and light, and air.

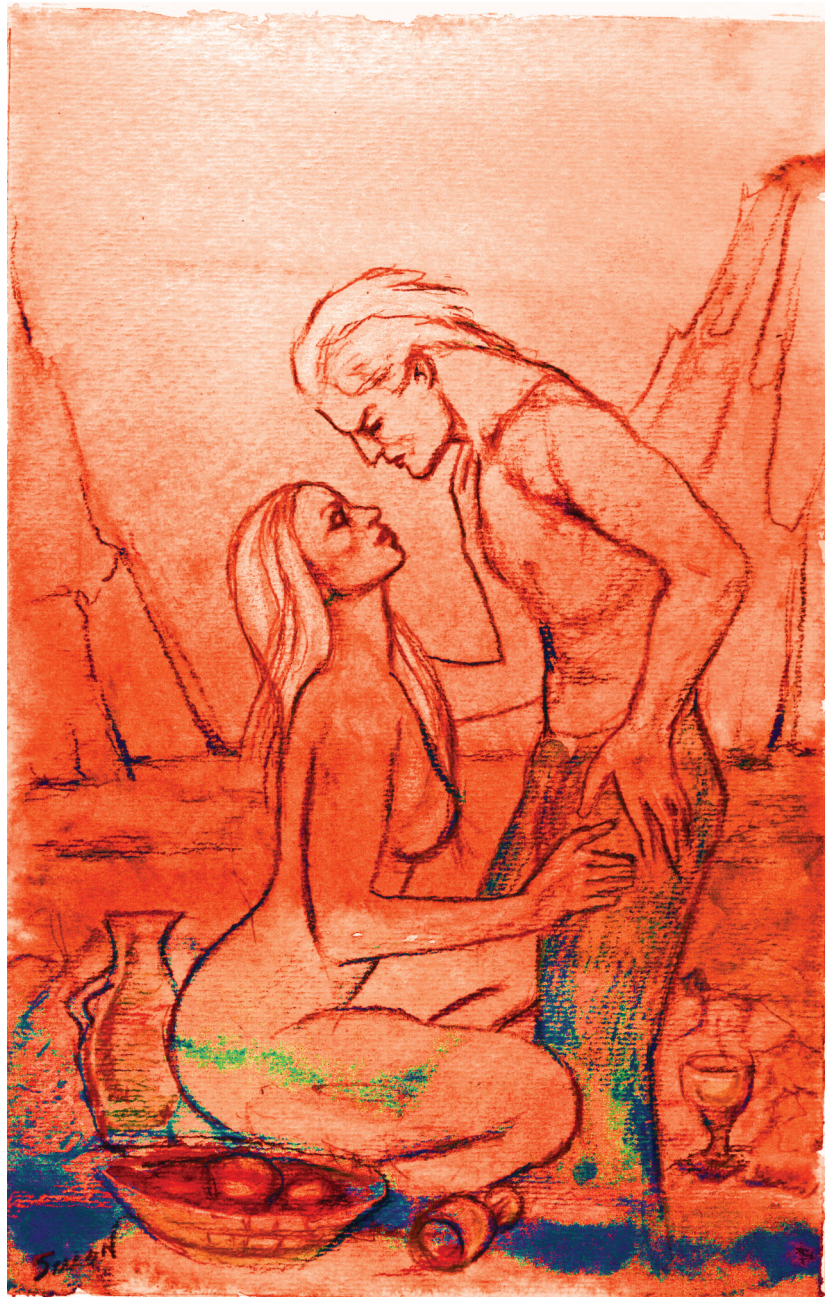
What song can be heard floating from afar?
It is only this native who has re-emerged from a cavern;
His flowerlike skull looks over the fields,
His bare feet stepping among ravages—

Soon joined by one other, and then another,
All traipsing over the debris, a stillness
Met with lingering realisations of hope,
Letting this day pass slowly into night,

As stars and starry eyes emerge,
Among the lost, the fearful and the frayed,
And earth receives these tired bodesome beings
Disposed at last to sleep among the dead.

Mer Lovers

by Marge Simon



She Hangs Up Her Pearls

by Colleen Anderson

Seaside succubus has seen better days
she used to do tailspins
plunging to the ocean floor, scooping
sand dollars and coral to lace her hair

For a while she spent time as a model
a wonder of the seven seas
for illustrators and painters
holding her breath 'til her gills collapsed

She managed a bar in the shoals
bailing out tidepool treats
for rum-sodden pirates
and searching sailors' wives
until the debts sunk her

So she posed as a demure mermaid
on the rocks sipping margaritas
as tourists snapped shots
then joined a band, singing bebop jazz
but tidal tempers capsized the trio

Scales no longer shine like sequins
her hair is dried seaweed
and tail resembles fish sticks
scarred from near scrapes
with more ferocious visitors

When a man answered
her cracking siren call
she chose to follow her ebb
file down dragonfish fangs
welcome him as lifeboat companion

They are buoys; she tells briny tales
of tossed seas and shipwrecks
colorful fish and squid
and he of plains undulant with grasses
or the shifting Sahara sands

She knows she has found a treasure
who will cherish her salt-scoured self
until she is but a pearl of memory
a dream as eternal as the tides

Disquiet

by Shikhar Dixit

For Peter Straub

1

Most people favor the light and fear the dark. Sarah could explain to me in stark evolutionary terms why that was so. Fear of predators. Animals must've seemed like monsters to prehistoric man. They could see in the dark.

I am a rarer breed than Sarah, my fraternal twin—one that dreads the grayness of gloaming. Neither light nor darkness frighten me, particularly. I cannot endure the murky spectrum of grays that live between day and night. The type of gloom that forces one to squint in order to detect that which lies just a handful of inches from one's face, such dimness awakens a deep, abiding anxiety in me. It's comparable to a sound just barely within the range of human hearing—the eerie point where disquiet waits patiently, causing one's heart to mislay its rhythm.

It is impossible to completely avoid such gloom, hence my proclivity to take four to five Xanax per day. My shrink, Dr. Kasdan, doesn't like that I use so much medication. However, he dislikes panicked emergency phone-calls during early evening even less. I usually end up disturbing him just as he sits down to supper with his family.

2

Sarah and I were as close to each other as a pair of identicals. It was strange and wonderful that we could sense each other's emotions across vast distances.

It was not enough to save her ... or me.

What happened to Sarah is the worst thing that could happen to any self-aware being.

* * *

In 2015, Sarah graduated *summa cum laude* from Cornell. Simultaneously, I graduated from Glyph City College, lacking any distinction whatsoever. *Grove Collins, PhD in underachievement.*

Mom and Dad, of course, took the Mercedes up to the Cornell commencement rather than attend mine, for Sarah was graduating with the highest honors. They brought their phones, as well as a digital camera capable of taking high-resolution video.

Sarah, always reaching for the stars, was also valedictorian. The speech she delivered was good. Better than good; it was exceptional. If the book she'd been working on was half as powerful, had it ever seen publication, my sister would have commanded a large advance against royalties from any major publisher. She could have written many such books, had she survived long enough to finish that first one.

After the commencement, Mom mentioned, pointedly, that there wasn't a dry eye in the auditorium. My parents took Sarah out to dinner that evening and I begged off, claiming a manufactured fever.

Sarah was the only person who bothered to place her cool hand to my forehead. She gave me that infectious elfin smile. "I hope your gala graduation masturbation celebration goes well tonight," she whispered

in my ear. I still hadn't completely finished laughing by the time my father's Lexus pulled out and drove them away. Apparently, dinner in town was not an occasion deserving the extravagance of a Mercedes Benz.

I took my time, popping out the SD card from their camera and slotting it into my laptop. A handful of seconds, and there was Sarah, crossing from stage-right, resplendent in her matte red graduation gown. Mom was right. I was weeping by the time she came to the end of her speech. A standing ovation followed, and there ended the recording.

I still tear-up whenever I watch that 15-minute valedictory speech. Really, that video file is all that I have left of her.

Well, almost.

3

My brilliant, beautiful sister had anything a good teenaged girl could want: top GPA in our class, check; varsity jacket from the swim team, check; a nice boyfriend of whom I completely approved, check. An opportunity to visit Washington, D.C. with her Debate Team. Yes, she wanted *that* as badly as I could ever recall her wanting *anything*, especially when one of the chief bonuses of going on the trip included an opportunity to meet one of her idols, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. So she was understandably devastated to learn the bus would be too full. She was low person on the totem pole; she had only just joined Debate earlier in the year. Just one spot above her, the last student, also a sophomore, had been on the team since late last year. It all came down to seniority, even though she had led her team to more victories than him ... but she was only a freshman. She couldn't possibly have been on the team last year!

Devastated. At least that's what I tell myself in my weaker moments—how important it was to her, even in the face of all her other good fortune. She never knew which kid got her spot on the team, but it wouldn't have mattered to Sarah. She would have been pleased on that

person's behalf. She didn't even know his name. They moved in different social circles.

I was able to get his name by simply glancing at the roster pinned up outside the large classroom where the Debate Club met. I was a bit stunned by the name, and then pleased enough to grin like an idiot for the rest of the day. His social circle overlapped slightly with mine, like a Venn diagram.

And *surely* she was distraught over such a prestigious missed opportunity.

Surely!

4

Henry Dross barely had the chance to be a teenager. The day Bobby, Nicky, Jessica, and I mercilessly teased him was about two weeks before the trip. I selected that day with great care. It was his birthday.

The things we mocked him for: his proclivity to wear the exact same generic pocket T and rumpled pants ... every day!; his acne-spattered cheeks; his oily-gray, thinning mop of hair, a shade darker than cigarette ash, well-highlighted against his irises, which were a vaguely yellow-green tint, like polluted lake water. I told myself that those eyes birthed an intuitive hatred in me.

Many years later I would recognize the intuitive emotion for what it was. Fear. My fears generally pissed me off, too.

As was usually the case with these things, I was the instigator.

I suppose I was always a bit of a bully; then I crossed all boundaries.

That day in 2012 when we ruthlessly cut down Henry Dross was the last time any of us saw him. He did get home that evening—this much I read in the newspaper the next day. Mr. and Mrs. Dross attested that

he ate supper at home that night, as every night, but then, uncharacteristically, went off to bed early. They also stated that they weren't aware of when or how he left the house. Police noted in the *Glyph Herald* that Henry's bed was neatly made that morning, and the Drosses denied having made it. Later on, I heard through the grapevine that a sergeant on the force, Derrick Reynolds, was overheard saying that "that bed was so tight, I was able to bounce a quarter off of it." That detail, the perfectly made bed, I found particularly disquieting, whenever the entire mess rolled through my head like the Zapruder Film on amphetamines.

And there is also one more circumstance that left me ensconced in the certain knowledge that I didn't deserve forgiveness. On March 15th, just two days after the incident, Bobby, Nicky, and Jessie went behind my back and confessed about the entire bullying incident, about how particularly vicious it was, first to Principal Gwynne, then to Glyph Police Chief Anthony Brubaker. They didn't mention me, didn't so much as allude to anyone else's involvement. They were given an initial twenty-day suspension while the school board decided on their cases.

We were acquaintances at best, and yet they never mentioned my name to anyone, *even though I was the person who instigated the bullying of Henry Dross!* At the end of their suspension period, Bobby, Nicky, and Jessica were all expelled. They never, to my knowledge, even whispered my name.

I only ever saw them again in dreams, periodic nightmares in which each of them appeared alone. They were in various places in their homes: Nicky, a gifted artist, sat on her bed with her enormous sketch pad in her lap, rendering the most meticulous and sensitive pencil portrait ... of Henry Dross; Jessie was doing savage pushups in the family's basement, trying to forget that she ever met Henry Dross; Bobby was turning a wrench under the hood of his 1970 GTO. In the dismal garage space of *this* particular nightmare, Bobby had removed the oil drain plug, and endlessly recalling the filthy things he spat at that lonely and friendless Dross kid, let the hot, used oil drain directly into

his mouth. At a certain point in each nightmare, the light illuminating the various places where my co-conspirators were doing their own private thing visibly dimmed, then went out. This is the point where I felt their terror, Bobby, Jessie, and Nicky. Something was done to them in all that dark; a warning that sounded like a chorus of drowning men bubbled into each of their ears right before I woke up, bathed in sweat, my heart doing overtime at an unhealthy rate.

* * *

Anyway, the upshot is that Sarah got to go on her trip. She returned smiling, her eyes so alive, and showed me a photograph of her shaking hands with Secretary Clinton. In my mind, at that time, it had all been worth it ... but I never stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop.

* * *

The fact that *Dross* was another word for "garbage" haunted me for years, through what remained of my education. I would sit in a chair, in my dorm room, for hours, and ruminate about the meaning ascribed to Henry's last name.

Sarah never found out the part I played in it. To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever saw Henry Dross again.

At the end of my education, Graduation freed me from these obsessions. I finally felt able to forgive myself.

5

Our first summer after receiving our bachelor's degrees, neither one of us had a job lined up. I had been looking forward to relaxing, spending time at the beach, and performing a leisurely job-hunt. Sarah, however, wasn't given to enjoying recreation time. She was sending out letters and applications in order to pursue her master's degree. And even then, she still remained antsy. I think she got that trait from our mother.

Apparently, the process would take quite a bit of time. Some bright ambition burned inside her of which I'd failed to receive a single spark. It was as if my parents had placed all their eggs in one single brilliant and beautiful basket.

6

As usual, over the summer holiday, Sarah and I stayed in our old rooms at our parent's house. I don't know where or when she'd connected with the mysterious Mr. Drexel. In hindsight, I should have been more curious. I just assumed that he worked in real estate and needed to unload the house soon, in order to make a rapid turnaround so he could earn his commission before the holiday season.

Sarah had just come back home and I was helping her unpack her college trunks. Her childhood bedroom assaulted me with a particularly Pepto-Bismol shade of pink, which just reminded me of mornings following a kegger. I mentally swallowed my nausea by focusing on Sarah, a girl who never got drunk. "So we have to help him clean this house ... *but just the basement?*"

Sarah rolled her eyes, smiling; my head was perennially in the clouds. "We have to *clean out the cellar!* There's several decade's worth of junk that needs to be hauled out, soon. And I need your muscles to help me. Some of it is furniture."

"And I get \$1000 for that, under the table"

"Gotta' love that selective hearing. Yeah, he's offered \$2000 to empty the cellar. I'll split it with you. We could do this in record time if we work together. You could finally afford a proper wardrobe, or like, maybe a boyfriend?"

Laughter bubbled up in me. "I could use a thousand bucks ... when do we start?"

* * *

One Monday in the second week of June, we spontaneously erupted from our parent's house with a cooler full of ice-cold sodas and the requisite bag of protein bars. The deep blue sky above seemed like a promise, and Sarah had no interviews, or whatever she does, until tomorrow. I automatically headed towards the curb, where my '99 Acura Integra, aka BOME, sat comfortably beneath a blanket of dust.

"Where are you going, Grove?"

I turned with the superior smile of one who has driven the loneliest highways and most treacherous winding mountain roads in the state. "I'm driving, of course!"

"Grove," she said gently, and slowly, as if addressing a simple child without a working knowledge of the English language. "Going to the shore in BOME is one thing, because it's just you who'll have to pull into the breakdown lane and fiddle under the hood. But not me. Besides, I don't want to arrive there soaked in sweat."

"BOME," named by me six years ago, before I got a handle on how to manage her, stands for *Bane Of My Existence*, and it lacks both air conditioning and responsive brakes. I'd used a substantial amount of my savings, money earned mowing hundreds of lawns (or mowing the same six lawns hundreds of times) to buy her. As one would do with a wild Bronco, I needed to break her spirit before she was mine. Driving to and from City College was no great strain on her. It was the journeys I alighted upon after hours that left her in her present condition. I blew off steam by going for long, fast drives. Sarah had a good point. "Okay, okay!"

We took her Kia Soul, a squarish green box on wheels which she insisted on driving at or below the speed limit.

I yawned.

"Cut that out!"

“Hey, we forgot to bring the Bluetooth speaker ... or boom box.”

“We didn’t forget. I deliberately didn’t bring one. Mr. Drexel said we would have to work quietly.”

“Okay, go ahead. Tell me how we shift thousands of pounds of junk—up the steps, no less—without making atrocious amounts of noise.”

“He meant no music. And no laughing or goofing off.”

“And no cursing, either, I’ll bet. What is he, a nun? Are you sure he said the place was gonna be empty?”

“He most emphatically did.” She turned on a Sirius station on the radio, loudly cutting short any further possibility of argument.

I felt, suddenly, like I wanted to back out. Turn around and go back to our parent’s house and plop down on the family room couch with the satellite remote in my hand. And there was some good stuff on Netflix I’d been wanting to binge until my eyes bled. However, I could not leave Sarah to deal with it all alone. It would be heavy work. No, I definitely couldn’t let her go off alone to some strange house.

She turned off the highway and took us through a warren of streets. The deeper we penetrated this neighborhood, the worse the road conditions became. Shattered asphalt. Mashed garbage. Broken beer bottles. A weight of oppression bowed my head, and for the next few minutes, I stared at my sneakers, silently berating myself for not putting on my steel-toed boots. There was a strong likelihood of dropping some heavy furniture on my foot. A quick glance at Sarah’s feet depressing the gas pedal and brakes revealed that she wore her Doc Martens with steel tips. That made me laugh.

“What?” She smiled quizzically, so I laughed some more, picturing her pulling on a pair of heavy duty work gloves and assuming I’d have the good sense to dress protectively as well. It wasn’t that she didn’t bother to look out for me; it was that her level of intelligence had a

blind spot. I’d seen it over and over through the years. She just assumed that I possessed the same minimum common sense that she did. I just hoped that her loyalty to her dimwitted brother wasn’t holding her back in some way.

Looking out the windshield again, I was stunned by how quickly the tenor of the neighborhood had changed. The streets were wider and recently paved. Neat sidewalks were bracketed by immense lawns and smaller strips of perfectly lush, green grass, manicured not by cheap lawn-boys like me, but clearly the work of professional landscapers. Any evidence of garbage or broken glass had clearly been swept under the lush green lawns. Stately trees, oaks or elms, rose up from isolated strips of verdant grass bordered by immaculate sidewalks, rising up to “join hands” above the street. The overall effect was one of driving down the expansive nave of an immense church. Driving beneath the vaulted ceilings of such a vast cathedral, built by Mother Nature, one could easily believe in an all-encompassing, Judeo-Christian God. Or the Goddess Nature.

7

Moving through this beautiful housing development, I pictured a larger home with a stupendously hilly lawn, perhaps offset by a barn-like shed and bracketed by two lengths of white-picket fencing.

The reality was disappointing. Our destination was a single-story ranch house. The yard was neatly kept, the lawn recently trimmed. Painted brightly, but not too brightly, in shades of indigo with immaculate white trim, it was certainly well maintained. Although, with a three-story mansion standing at either side of it, 222 JFK Drive (North) resembled a felon under escort by two brutish prison guards.

Outside, breathing the clean, flower-fragrant air, I became abruptly aware of something missing; where were the sounds signifying the presence of wildlife? The chirping of birds, buzzing of insects, any sounds of capering chipmunks and squirrels dashing up and down trees, or even a single barking dog—none of the sonic background of

a normal spring day in the 'burbs were present. A deep unease settled in the pit of my stomach as, simultaneously, I felt Sarah's nerves rev up to some higher frequency. I could feel her emotions to an extent, but that didn't mean I could read her mind. The blank expression on her face told me nothing. When she caught me looking, a warm smile alighted upon her face. "We go around to the side door," she said.

"Ah, of course, the servant's entrance."

Outwardly, Sarah laughed. Just below the surface, she was deeply unsettled by something, something besides the absence of nature. I could not even begin to guess what that might be.

Around the right side of the house, we found a short set of cement steps that descended about two feet to a cheap aluminum door. Sarah pulled a key from her pocket, held it up as if she had just performed some amazing feat of legerdemain. Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and led me inside, through a small mudroom, and down a rather dim stairwell. I felt my mood begin to slide downwards; it was an empty feeling familiar from an extended period of depression I suffered during freshman year. But that wasn't something I wanted to ponder before starting some seriously heavy work.

8

The house was indeed deserted. We walked the main floor and checked out all of the rooms ... together. They were barren. No signs of furniture or hanging décor, like crappy garage sale paintings or old clocks. No discarded bags of garbage. No dust or dirt. It was all immaculate, to an almost improbable degree. They *must* have hired professionals to do all of it. So why hire a couple of college grads to tackle the basement, or cellar—whatever they wanted to call it?

When I gave voice to this, Sarah exploded, "Who cares why! It's Two! Thousand! *Dollars!* You should be seeing the "S" with the vertical line through it. Times two-thousand! Where's your sense of mercenary greed?"

"When have I shown the slightest sign of mer—"

She burst into laughter. "Spoken like a truly committed lawn-boy. So now we know. It was about the lawns. Never about the money." She had a point. I never did anything other than complain about all that mowing. Rather than take the time to find a less back-breaking job, one with a steady paycheck, I overcharged our neighbors and then worked fanatically so that I could claim that I earned it. But I never possessed an ounce of genuine ambition.

Abruptly, I realized that she had cleverly dispelled my unease about the state of the house. Yet she seemed to forget, almost ignorant of the fact, that I could sense the burgeoning fear inside her. We went downstairs.

9

We decided on a strategy of moving out the larger, heavier stuff first. According to Sarah, we were to take it out through the side entrance via the mudroom—it made sense as it was our most direct route to the outside—and deposit it as neatly as possible upon the side lawn. Again, I wondered why the owners hadn't let the same moving men who emptied the rest of the house haul away the mass of junk in the cellar. And junk it certainly was: two mismatched, badly scarred wooden end tables; three metal file cabinets so severely rusted that nothing short of strategically-placed plastic explosive could possibly get them open; a large, very ugly wardrobe which was likelier to deliver us to Hell than Narnia; an oblong ottoman, clothed in black faux-leather; and a series of broken wooden chairs and the ostensibly matched dining table.

We cleared a path by moving piles of paper and magazines to the edges of the cellar. As we worked, the room seemed to grow vaster, as if stretched by some enormous, unseen hand. To dispel the feeling, I really put my back into shoving the file cabinets, issuing a roar which Sarah summarily shushed. Already, I had forgotten Rule of the Cellar #1: no noise. The cabinets themselves made oddly little sound and slid

as if their bottoms were oiled. Once through the mudroom, I struggled to push the cabinets up the cement stairs, severely scratching their metal backsides and causing a shrieking sound reminiscent of a protracted automobile accident.

As I continued similar struggles with each oversized piece of furniture, Sarah took the cleanest area she could find for a workspace and began to sift and categorize papers.

Drenched in sweat, my T-shirt was stuck uncomfortably to my body. My jaw ached from clenching my teeth as I heaved giant pieces of forgotten, dust-enshrouded junk up the stairs. The path I raked across and around the side of the lawn created a bed of bare soil surprisingly appropriate for planting a garden.

I took an extended break to suck down a twenty-ounce bottle of Diet Coke, still quite chilled from the cooler. I drew in deep lungfuls of air, and after a pause to consider how much I had accomplished, went downstairs and grabbed another Diet Coke.

As Sarah seemed well occupied sorting papers, I stole back up the steps and leisurely enjoyed my drink, the burn of chilled and carbonated, artificially-sweetened liquid racing down my throat. I listened for Sarah to call my name, to begin hounding me back to work.

When she did not, I resumed dragging up the remaining Colossuses, Leviathans, and Goliaths. When it was done, I clapped the dust off my hands. I walked over to the ottoman and threw back its lid. With gratitude, I took out my third bottle of Diet Coke and consumed it like oxygen. I leisurely drank, watching the sun.

For countless minutes, I heard only the stirring of branches and a rising wind whistling through gaps amongst them. Something immeasurable moved in the firepit of my stomach—something eternally patient easily side-stepping my feelings of unease.

How long had I stood there? I wondered why Sarah hadn't called me back down, if for nothing else, then at least for company. Didn't she wonder where I'd gone off to?

There were leaves blown in around my feet, climbing my shins. My eyeballs constricted, dried and rough as river-stones. I bent as a cramp gripped me about the abdomen. In trying to divest myself of the red-gold-green apron of leaves, I tipped forward, barely breaking my fall with my palms. An electric current coiled up my forearms to my elbows. I grew still, blinking madly against the acidic burn around and over my pupils.

At long last, merciful tears flooded my eyes, blurring the landscape.

And that's when something moved across my field of view, leaving me grateful for my overheated tear-ducts. Something dark, huge enough to block all daylight. A single point of deep crimson flashed right-to-left, bobbed back to sit directly in my field of view, as if noting me. Abruptly as it appeared, it was gone.

I tried to call out to her, but my throat felt full of sand. I managed only a cracked whisper. Then I fell, coughing.

Once I'd recovered and found my way back downstairs, Sarah was enshrouded by paper. Wrapped mummy-like in sheaves of it, a rainbow of whites from the bleached hue of fresh-fallen snow to the pale grey of old men's briefs.

The next moment Sarah sat up cross-legged on the floor, sifting pages. I wanted to scream my mortal terror, bellow like a foghorn. What I managed sounded like me clearing my throat; too rusty from disuse. For just a moment, I vividly recalled the crimson eye. Sarah looked up at me, startled into a tired smile. "How's it going, He-Man? You just about done?"

I searched my mind for some routine, predictable response. That's

when we found the door.

10

It can be uncanny and disturbing when something you didn't notice before unexpectedly catches your attention. I remember the first time I helped my Dad with his woodworking, which he did in the basement. There was a large surge protector with electrical cords filling every socket, itself plugged into an overloaded wall outlet; the outlet was one of a pair situated to the left and right of his high worktable. They were painted two different colors, the overloaded one a bright red, and the other the exact same shade of blue as the painted cinderblock wall behind it.

I asked about the surge protector, since he had given both Sarah and I a lecture about the dangers inherent in overloading AC connections. I said, pointing at the second, available wall-socket, "Why don't you use that one, too?" His double-take remains one of the funniest gestures I have ever witnessed, and that includes cartoons.

I deserve credit for not giving away my own startlement ... or fright, when I saw the previously hidden door. My expression must not have changed at all.

Sarah said, "Please tell me you weren't smoking weed out there, in plain sight!"

I pointed at the door with my chin, behind and to the right of her, and said very casually, "Sarah."

She raised her eyebrows and smiled, then leisurely turned, as much as a person *can* turn while seated on the floor. "What, did you make a mess in the corn—wha! " She rapidly leaned away from the door, but otherwise took it better than my father had the painted electrical outlet.

"You see it."

She nodded once, a protracted up and down.

* * *

I was against opening it, never mind going inside. Sarah, however, cherished new experiences. The door was painted blue; it did not match the variegated shades of the cinderblock wall which it inhabited. The door's knob was a cheap, gold-tinted chrome. Probably aluminum. As she turned that knob and flung open the door, I was prepared for anything surreal, anything that would wake me from the depths of what I had come to believe might be a dream.

* * *

It was a room, and a well-appointed one at that. Sarah had no qualms about setting foot on the luxuriously thick, indigo or navy-blue carpeting, despite the dirt and grime that we would transfer from the basement, pasted on the soles of our shoes.

When I stepped into what appeared to be someone's home office, I felt my eardrums pop, as if the room were pressurized. Directly ahead sat an enormous oak desk, behind which was a high-backed chair, itself backed by a richly curtained window. A series of wooden file cabinets lined the left-hand wall. All these pieces were antiquated, like something from the 19th or early 20th century.

Sarah had, meanwhile, made her way around the desk. She pulled back the chair and proceeded to go through the drawers. "Sarah," I said, hoping she heard my note of caution. Even as I spoke, she opened the center drawer, pulling it wide. Only a single sheaf of papers occupied the drawer, leaving plenty of empty space, which I noted was lined with a waxy, pale blue paper.

"Sarah, don't ... "

She lifted out the stack of pages, all very thin, almost like onionskin. Several objects decorated the desk's glossy-wood surface. There was a fountain pen, antique in appearance, as well as what I assumed was a ceramic ashtray. There was a small scattering of vintage paper clips

to one side and a loose pile of long, blank sheets of paper that I would learn, in subsequent years, was called foolscap, or Foolscap Folio, a British paper size replaced in 1911 by the A4 standard. A watermark adorned the lower corner of the foolscap. I picked one up for a closer look. It was a watermark shaped like a court jester, sporting a pair of horns.

The odd little watermark made the hairs stand up along the back of my neck. Even as I dropped the piece of foolscap back onto the desk, Sarah said my name, her voice heavy with a note of disquiet. She had been paging through the manuscript from the drawer, and apparently found something a few pages in that maxed-out her fear limit. As her terror set me vibrating like a tuning fork, I looked down at an ordinary, if somewhat thin, piece of standard-sized printer paper.

“This is a letter *for us*, and it’s dated *today*,” Sarah said, then read the date at the top of the page aloud, “June tenth.” Even though I knew it could not be, I turned to Sarah and asked her if it was a joke. Her fearful eyes confirmed the reality of the document. “I never told Mr. Drexel that we would be here *today*. It really *was* spur-of-the-moment, you *know* that!”

The text of the document was a flowing, looping script reminiscent of a wedding invitation.

“Okay,” I tried to soothe her, “*breathe*, try and calm down while I read this.”

11

10th June 2019

We cordially invite you, Miss Sarah Georgia Collins, to vacate THE PREMISES and join us for an eternity of unendurable agony. RSVP is unnecessary, as you do not possess right of refusal.

THE PREMISES are forthwith the property of Mr. Henry Constantine

Balthasaar Dross.

WHERE: 222 JFK Drive (North), Starkly, NJ 00000, The Interstellar Cellar.

WHEN: Now

WHY: Ask your brother, he who treasures you above ALL THINGS.

Tenancy of THE PREMISES will thereafter be granted to Mr. Henry Constantine Balthasaar Dross, esq.

Looking forward to meeting you ...

Yours in Perpetuity,

BA'AL

* * *

"This is a sick fucking joke!" I remember saying that with a vivid clarity, those moments always faithfully played back in my thoughts with utter exactitude, *like Memorex* as our Dad would have said. I remember turning to find Sarah sitting calmly—too calm. "Sarah?"

Her continued silence, the sickly, yellow cast to her eyes, were *very* familiar, but they were not my sister's.

* * *

What happened to Sarah can best be explained through the usage of analogy:

Sarah is an unwary tourist whose local guide leaves her with a series of false directions. Through no fault of her own, she is set upon by a pride of starving and bloodthirsty lions, animals that have somehow learned to savor every morsel of human flesh that passes between their

teeth. The tourist remains completely aware of exactly what is happening to her, as she is progressively torn apart. Her left leg, now bare right down to her toes, twisted, almost playfully, before it's jerked from her pelvis; simultaneously, her right arm is mangled and pulled off in a single wrenching bite, producing an audible *pop!* as her shoulder is dismantled. No amount of blood loss produces the dimming consciousness she craves. Instead, her sanity fractures, but she remains very much aware.

Right up to the very end—as the alpha male manages to get her head between its jaws, gradually increasing pressure until her cheekbones shatter and her crown collapses like an overripe coconut—she is utterly aware. Only as the alpha slurps out her pre-frontal cortex with its abrasive tongue does that curtain of night come down ... only to lift again, with a complete and intact version of Sarah once more, helplessly, the clueless American tourist, on her final yet unending safari.

I know this because I feel it. Most nights. My twin, suffering.

Although the nightmares were sporadic in the beginning, exactly one week to the hour after I lost her, I had the first dream of this terrible obliteration. I now dream it on most nights. Its steadily increasing frequency does nothing to dull the horrific nature of these dreams. In each

indistinguishable nightmare, I am Sarah. Needless to say, that which devours us is not a pride of lions, but an unseen and unseeable demon.

12

The yellow-eyed thing masquerading as my sister did not deign to drive us home. Any thoughts I had of leaving it behind were crushed when it opened the *locked* passenger-side door. The heat inside Sarah's Kia was hellish beyond that allowed by physics on a hot day in July. In the coming week, I discovered that suffocating torridity traveled with it, everywhere it went. Once I figured this out, I stopped chauffeuring this monster. I had held onto a small droplet of optimism that she was still in there somewhere, but that ceaseless broiling airlessness murdered all hope.

I listened to its comings and goings. One day, it charmed my parents with an award-winning imitation of my sister. They went out to dinner and never returned.

* * *

I used to have a twin sister. What happened to her is the very worst thing that ever happened to me.

Mother

by Hira Rashid



The Penitent Thief

by Paul Magnan

Once an altar boy, always an altar boy...

Not that Donnell ever believed in the Holy Ghost or any of that shit. His nephew, Norman, was cut from the same gimmie-a-break cloth. The kid was also cut from the same rob-from-the-rich-and-keep-for-yourself material. He had told his uncle about a chalice, used only during Easter morning services, that was solid, not plated, gold, with a blood-red ruby embedded in its side. It was locked in a cabinet inside a tabernacle on the right-hand side of the sanctuary.

Donnell knew just the spot.

* * *

Outside, the darkness was thick as sheets of stinging rain thrashed the church. Next door was the Catholic elementary school, with a walkway in between. The walkway was never lit, and, in this deep part of the night, neither was the light that hung over the small service door. Donnell clutched his collar tight and cast his eyes about. The street was empty. He slipped to the door, a shadow blending in among the others.

The bulb within the outdoor light had been unscrewed just enough to kill the electrical connection. *Good boy, Norman.* Donnell grabbed the wet handle and pressed the latch with his thumb. The door swung open to dry darkness. *Very good boy.*

Donnell slipped in and closed the door behind him. It snickered shut. He pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket. The beam was strong, but he wasn't worried about discovery; the windows were a dark,

dingy stained glass, set high upon the walls. No one would see him inside the church.

On his left was a recently installed elevator. The church, finally, had acceded to the demands of its elderly and handicapped parishioners who could not handle the three tiers of concrete steps that led up to the triple set of double doors that made up the main entrance. Donnell ignored it and turned to the stairs on the right. One set ran down to the ancient furnace that heated this humongous building. The other set climbed up into the church proper.

Donnell filtered the light through a cupped hand, letting just enough seep through to illuminate the steps. Even though it was three in the morning, he didn't want to chance running into a sexton doing late-night maintenance. He was pretty sure there was nobody here, but it always paid to be careful.

At the top of the stairs, the access door opened to the church interior. Donnell clicked off the flashlight and cracked it open. Ambient light from outside filtered through the stained-glass windows, giving a dull, reddish hue to the empty pews and plaster statues of saints in their gilded cages.

Emboldened, Donnell clicked the flashlight back on and strode past the front row of pews to the steps leading up to the sanctuary, the slap of his sneakers on the stone floor echoing in the vast empty space. The scent of incense, that cloying mixture of frankincense, cedar, and who knew what else, lingered in this section of the church. Donnell had always hated that burning little container, swung on its chain by the priest, usually over the casket of some dead old fart. He grimaced and suppressed a sneeze, then looked up at the apse, a massive half-dome

rising above him. Centered by a stained-glass commemoration of the Stations of the Cross were frescos of Christ interacting with the apostles and that good-time gal, Mary Magdalene. Donnell smirked. *Yeah, in between giving sermons and kicking loan sharks out of temples, Jesus was getting his knob polished by a woman who knew her business. Between that, and having twelve suckers do his every bidding, he lived a pretty sweet life... at least until they hammered the nails home.*

And speaking of nails, right there, at the back, behind an altar covered with a white cloth adorned with doves and flames, was a large cross, with a life-sized Jesus hanging from it. Donnell tried and failed to repress a shudder. The face of the Christ was twisted in agony as black thorns dug into his scalp. His hands, spread to either side on the cross brace, clenched nail heads as dark blood gushed from the palms. The feet, one placed on top of the other, were nailed into a support. But the worst part was the hideous gash on Christ's right side, supposedly made by a Roman spear to make sure he was dead. In the life-like figure, the flesh was parted to realistic effect, and watery blood oozed down to the loincloth. At the top of the cross was a carved representation of parchment, with four letters: *INRI*. According to Father Heaney, the priest of this church during Donnell's years as an altar boy, the letters stood for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". Father Heaney had explained, in his high, Irish brogue, that, in Latin, the letter "I" stood for the letter "J," and that the "R" stood for "Rex," Latin for "king." Neither Donnell nor the other altar boys gave much of a shit. They would joke that "INRI" stood for "I'm Nailed Right In." Not within Father Heaney's hearing, of course.

Donnell turned his back on the tragic figure. Low-voltage unease danced over his nerves. He cursed his baseless fear and turned to the locked tabernacle. The lock was simple; hardware store variety, easily picked. Donnell freed his tools from their small, well-used leather case and had the lock open within thirty seconds. He pushed the rickety gate aside and stepped into the small space. The cabinet within was mid-sized, made of dark, polished wood carved with intricate crosses and scripture in flowing, calligraphic whorls. The knob to the sole door was brass and molded in the shape of a lamb's head. He went to

grasp it.

Creeeeeeek...

Donnell spun and slashed the flashlight beam throughout the church. The sound had been loud, like someone stepping on a loose floorboard in an empty house. His other hand fumbled in his pocket and came up with a switchblade, which flicked into place. Someone was here and sneaking up on him.

Only there wasn't. The flashlight gamely tried to illuminate the cavernous nave, and what could be seen had a sense of quietude and stillness. No one was hiding behind any of the pews as far as Donnell could see. Besides, the floor of the nave and aisle, as well as that of the sanctuary and the rest of the church interior, was stone, not wood. Stone didn't creak like that.

He tried to control his breathing as the light, as if searching for the cause of the noise on its own, shone on the hanging figure of Christ. The face of Jesus hung to the right and, even with closed eyes, looked directly at Donnell. His heart hollowed out and his hands began to shake. Those eyes were going to open. He knew it. The eyes would open, and the agonized face would split with a grin of sheer madness. And Donnell would have no defense. He was defiling Christ's house with larcenous intent. He was guilty. The Law of God did not rely on technicalities, like the laws of men; *intent*, as well as actions, was judged here. Donnell was guilty, and he would be sentenced.

He squeezed shut his eyes and shook his head. *Get ahold of yourself, you idiot! What would Norman think if he were to see his tough, no-nonsense uncle standing there, ready to piss his pants, just because he was having a flashback to all the brainwashing Father Heaney tried to instill in him inside this church, in front of this stupid fucking cross. His nephew would laugh and mock him, and rightfully so. Now, drop this superstitious idiocy, stop wasting time, and get on with the job!*

Donnell put the blade away and grabbed the lamb's head knob. The cabinet door swung open silently. His breath quickened.

The golden chalice seemed to glow with an inner light. Embedded in its side was a large ruby, red like the blood of Christ. Last week, Norman had snapped a picture of the chalice, and Donnell had shown it to Russell, a fence who specialized in gemstones. Russell estimated that the ruby was top quality (as the Church would insist on nothing less), about five to eight carats, with each carat estimated at five thousand dollars per, possibly more. Of course, taken together with the gold chalice, the whole thing was worth a lot. Apparently, there was a collector who was interested, and if the chalice and ruby met expectations, then Donnell stood to make ten thousand on the deal. He didn't care that Russell would make much more with the private collector. Donnell knew his limitations. He was a thief, not a high-end mobster. Ten thousand dollars, minus one thousand he would give to his nephew, was worth an easy night's work.

He reached in, took the surprisingly heavy chalice from its velvet bed and closed the cabinet door.

CreeeeeeeakCreeeeeeeak...thump.

Donnell couldn't breathe. His heart hitched and stuttered in his chest like a panicked bird caught in a cage. His mouth felt full of cotton. *Ohfuckohfuckohfuck...*

He was frozen; turning around was not an option, for he now realized what those sounds were: they weren't steps on a loose floorboard, they were iron nails being yanked out of old wood.

There's no fucking way. It can't be. Just turn around and get the fuck out of here.

Something hit the floor behind him, a noise that echoed throughout the empty, cavernous church. A heavy metal object clattered and thumped against the back of his right foot.

It was much bigger than modern nails. It was more like a spike. But a nail it was, black iron that glistened with blood that never dried or congealed. Holy blood.

Donnell closed his eyes. His lungs labored to inhale air thick with incense. He had to be imagining this. How could any of this be real?

He turned, knowing it was inescapable. His mind screamed at him to run, just get out. The ruby on the chalice glowed like a burning coal. His eyes swept the sanctuary (*not the name I would give it now, his brain giggled insanely*), carefully trained on the floor and nowhere else. But his peripheral vision noticed the anomaly that wasn't there before, and he looked.

The big wooden cross was empty. Two blood-streaked holes adorned either side of the cross brace, and another splintered out from the foot pedestal.

Blinding white panic exploded in Donnell's psyche. His head shook in denial of what he was seeing.

Wooden feet gently clacked on the stone floor behind him. Donnell began to shake; he thought his bladder would let go. A pale foot settled on his left side, and through its middle was a jagged, bloody hole.

RUN!...RUN!...RUN!

His muscles were weak and flaccid. He couldn't budge. Donnell closed his eyes and tried to convince himself that he was hallucinating, that this was just some subconscious manifestation of long-embedded Catholic guilt.

The soft Irish brogue shocked him; even after all this time, he recognized it: Father Heaney. The only thing was, Father Heaney had been dead for over twenty years.

"Be you Dismas, or be you Gestas, boyo?"

Donnell dared not turn. If he did, and saw the Christ figure, eyes open and bleeding, talking in that long-lost voice, his sanity would take a hit from which it would never recover.

“I’ll ask but once more: be you penitent, or be you not penitent?”

A trickle of understanding dripped into his consciousness. He was being given a chance to return the jeweled chalice to its proper place. If he did, the wooden creature would let him go.

Rodney, though, was expecting the chalice, and he was not someone you made a promise to only to break it. Plus, there was Norman. What would his nephew think of him if he copped out now? All the respect, the adoration, he had for his uncle... gone. And all because of some wooden thing that was just a figment of his hyperactive imagination.

Donnell looked down. The foot hadn’t moved. His throat constricted. *Fuck it...*

“So, it be Gestas, then.” There was actual disappointment in Heaney’s voice.

Donnell ran for the door that led to the stairs. His mind was blank except for the animal instinct for flight. He whipped it open and charged down the pitch-black stairs. He had no idea what had happened to his flashlight, but he wasn’t about to go back and look for it. He desperately sought the door that led outside. There--a rectangular window that allowed in a dim illumination from the street. He gasped in relief and reached for the handle.

Something hard and unyielding gripped his shoulder. Splinters punctured his skin.

“Most of my flock are fruitful, and compassionate, and help their fellows,” Heaney’s long-dead voice hissed in Donnell’s ear. “But sadly, there are those who bear no fruit. Surely you remember the parable of the fig tree?”

Donnell struggled and screamed for help, no longer caring if he got arrested for burglary. The thick walls of the church bounced his ineffective words back at him, mocking his helplessness. The wooden fingers dug into the meat of his shoulder, cutting off the blood flow to his arm and causing pain to ripple down his chest. He tried to pry them away with his left hand, but his flesh and bone did nothing against the solid, aged wood. His right hand, now numb, dropped the chalice, and it clanged with a heavy finality to the floor.

“Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves. Then he said to the tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again?’ Do you remember what happened next?”

Yes, he did. The story rose in his mind like a predator from a swamp. “Please, no! It wasn’t fair to the fig tree. It was out of season!”

“Yes, it was,” rejoined that horrible, impossible voice. “But remember, this is a parable. The fig tree, with pretty leaves but no fruit, represents those who have the outward appearance of respectability, but inwardly are corrupt and barren. Like you. And your nephew.”

Donnell could not stop his tears. “Please, spare Norman. He’s just a child.”

“Yes, he is, but he has long since walked the path you have made for him. His ability to bear fruit wanes by the day.”

“But it’s still there! Give him a chance!”

The voice behind him fell silent. The pressure on his right shoulder had not decreased; his entire arm, denied blood, was now a useless lump of meat. The golden chalice, with the beautiful ruby, lay forgotten at his feet. Donnell sobbed as hope drained away.

“Aye, it’s still there for him, and he’ll be given a chance to turn from sin. You must help. Do you understand?”

Donnell's soul hollowed out. It was over for him. But he had one last, tiny fruit to bear, for his nephew.

"Yes," he said.

Donnell screamed and fell to his knees as his body atrophied. Muscles and tendons degenerated within seconds into dry rot. Oxygen was sucked from the cells of his organs, which deteriorated into a damp, mummified state as his bones gelatinized and collapsed. Viscous fluids filled his decomposing lungs, and Donnell could no longer scream. His nerves and brain were kept intact to register pain and despair, until his consciousness exploded into colors that consumed his psyche. His body dissolved into dust, and he no longer knew who he was or what he was or why he was...

* * *

It was late in the morning, and Norman had heard nothing, which made him very nervous. Had his uncle been caught? Would he rat out his nephew? What was worse, Donnell had left muddy tracks everywhere. The slim eleven-year-old swished his broom about the sanctuary, not to clean up the dried dirt but to conceal the obvious boot prints they made. *Stupid fucking idiot, did he want to get caught? And what about Russell? He would not be pleased if this simple job had turned balls-up.* Norman worried and swept and nearly knocked over a tall silver candle holder.

"Norman, please, pay attention to what you're doing." Father Evans straightened the pale white candle that had been jostled loose in its holder.

"Sorry, Father," Norman mumbled, hurriedly sweeping the floor again.

Father Evans looked around and frowned. "How did this area get so dirty? I know it was clean at the end of the day yesterday."

"I don't know, Father." Norman looked up. Behind Father Evans, the

big cross, with the life-sized figure of Christ, hung from the apse. The face, as always, was turned to the right, its eyes pinched shut. Norman turned back to the floor. He couldn't stand looking at the thing. All the other altar boys agreed it was creepy as hell.

Father Evans paused in what he was doing and stared at the muddy tracks on the floor. Norman saw the priest's eyes follow the marks straight to the tabernacle. He took out a set of keys and approached the gate.

Oh, shit! He's going to find the chalice missing, and the first one he'll question is me.

The priest unlocked the gate and grabbed the lamb's head knob. The cabinet door swung open. His shoulders slumped in relief, and he removed the golden chalice.

"For a minute there... well, thankfully it's safe." He returned the chalice and closed the cabinet.

Norman stared in disbelief. *He didn't take it. After everything I did, making sure the side door was unlocked and everything else, fucking Donnell didn't take it. So much for my cut... and what was Russell going to do?*

"Stop daydreaming, Norman. Back to work."

Norman resumed sweeping, his mind spinning in unpleasant directions. What had gone wrong? The boot prints had to be Donnell's, indicating he had gotten into the church.

So why was the fucking chalice still here? And where was Donnell?

He swept the dried mud out of the tabernacle and got it in a mound. Now he needed a dustpan. Norman leaned the broom against a statue of the Virgin Mary and, without meaning to, looked up to the cross.

The thin body, wearing only a loincloth, shivered. The fingers clenched against nails driven through soft palms (*no it should be behind the bones of the wrist*, the thought insanely flashed through Norman's mind. *The weight of the body would tear the nails through the flesh and out between the fingers*), and the knees shook like they wanted to, but couldn't, buckle.

Donnell looked down at him. Blood streaked his face as thorns stabbed into him, and his lips were drawn up in a rictus of pain. But worst of all were the eyes. They shone with an awareness of eternal damnation and the knowledge that penance, once within grasp, was now and forever beyond reach.

Somewhere in an insignificant distance, Father Evans was speaking to him. It meant nothing. All that mattered was his uncle, hanging from the cross.

Donnell's eyes locked on his with desperation. Then he began to speak in Norman's head.

Be penitent. Confess your sin. Do it now, or you will be taken as I have.

Norman's mind blanked out, except for one overriding thought: *There is a cross waiting for me, and I will writhe on it, forever in pain, like Donnell...*

Donnell's mouth split open and stretched, impossibly wide. Up from its hollow depths rose something with no mercy, only cold judgment. It came closer to Norman, surrounding him and reaching for him with an unyielding hand.

He had a distant impression of himself screaming. A sharp hand slapped his face. Norman looked at Father Evans. The priest's eyes were wide with alarm.

"What is it, Norman? What's the matter?"

Norman couldn't speak. He looked to the cross. The image of Donnell cried out in silent desolation and faded into oblivion. Only the old, wooden figure of Christ hung from it. Tears sprang from his eyes. Still held by Father Evans, he fell to his knees.

"I'm sorry, Father! My uncle, Donnell, came in here last night to steal the chalice, and I helped him. I was going to get some money, but I don't want it anymore. Whatever penance you give, Father, I'll do. Please, just keep me from being lost!"

Father Evans's comforting hand patted him. "It is a good thing you have done here today, my child. You are penitent and atone you shall. Once you are older, you will enter the seminary. You will train for the priesthood, and take over this parish, as I, another penitent thief, took over for Father Heaney."

Norman began to shake. "No," he said, not wanting to believe it while knowing he had no choice.

Father Evans smiled. It looked like the same, kindly priest smile, but behind his eyes was something sharp and unequivocal. "Yes. Your life now belongs to this church. Would you rather be as your Uncle Donnell?"

"No! Please, no."

"Good. Now, let's make this formal."

Father Evans walked Norman to the cross.

"On your knees."

Norman lowered himself, and then looked up at the wooden figure. The eyes were wide open and pinned him to the floor, demanding total obedience. Norman could not look away.

Father Evans's voice came from far away. "Pledge yourself, body and

soul. Obey, and you will be saved.”

His head bent forward, the words that came from Norman’s mouth didn’t seem to come from him, yet they were, and they were binding. “I pledge all that I am. I obey always and without hesitation.”

A cold current passed through him and into his mind, seizing his psyche and molding it to its needs. The old Norman wailed and fell away.

The Norman of now stood and faced the priest.

“When can I expect my release?”

Evans shrugged. “It depends on the needs of the church. Twenty, fifty, a hundred years... within these walls, time loses meaning.”

Unstable

by Debbie Haddow

-after Matthea Harvey

An iris grows out of an electrical outlet, petals shedding bitter tears of sadness as the mermaid stares on in a diaphanous hospital gown, shut off from the outside. The blossom speaks of the natural world, of electric blue roses with jagged petals in the middle of the desert, of silver heart-winged butterflies flying towards luminous magenta starlight. Sometimes she wonders, does time move the same way outside the sea foam green confines of this endless maze, or does it flow freely, unbound by icy bars grasping at the windows? What her heart wants—the fall of the sizzling rain reeling from an amber sky—hides behind translucent barricades of chilly solidity. It holds memories of moments when she watched the world's cleansing from the safety of a patio porch swing, each drop rushing towards the earth from the hands of malicious angels.

Still, the rain can't reach the occupants of the forsaken labyrinth locked in and staring through the windows. Madness seeps in beneath the artificial sky, a cheap imitation of the ever-changing heavenly window from which the burning orange rain tumbles. Tanzanite bottles filled with jade and coral pills cannot take away the stifling insanity in which the mermaid is entwined, surrounded from corner to sharp corner by a myriad of outcasts in shapes unlimited and a variety of colors rivaling a sweeping rainbow. They bicker, grappling with warring points of view as they try to escape the world behind the windows. How much longer will the walls close in, wrapping around the mermaid, a horde of screeching gray harpies, a cyclops with an opal eye, and a rancid young ogre forever spewing crude lies from his mouth?

Outside, the sun sends searing beams hurtling through the atmosphere, covering everything roaming free. Violet dahlias and silver dragons bask in the platinum rays, looking in through the windows at the mosaic of captives. They wonder about what goes on inside as the outcasts stare back, envy radiating from their eyes.



The Ice Mirror

by Angela Patera

Phantasmal Muse

by Carl Scharwath



When the Stars Stopped Singing

by Luke Walker

Heat pushing at his back like a dozen fists; his surroundings of broken glass, tears in the concrete and the tarmac, and rubble from the ruined buildings lit by the rich red of the flames. All of it blazing like the sun at the end of the day—the sun the sole light left in the solar system.

He pressed the shard of glass against his wrist until it drew blood from a thin cut. Pressed harder. The blood dribbled through the grime on his skin; the pain hummed and he hummed with it, trying to find a beat or a rhythm in the sting. Another building fell down; its descent and the scattering masonry and splintering glass coughed up larger clouds of dust and smoke to go with the dirty fog spreading through the city. Through the country. He cringed at the din, but it was an instinctive reaction. The noise was ever-present: a world collapsing into broken pieces as flames and winds consumed the wreckage. And how long had it been? Three months? Four? He'd lost count of the days and the nights. In their place, he had this little moment of the heat and his thirst, the blood welling from his wrist, and the racket of a world turning inside out while the silence crawled across the universe.

“Sarah?” He said his wife’s name, the syllables sharp on his dry tongue. He had enough of his thinking mind left to know there was no way he’d heard her in the distance, shouting for him. He’d seen her body in what had been the living room; there with the bedroom and the roof on top of her and Gus and Fran. So, she wasn’t anywhere near him. Nor were his kids.

“Sarah?” He bellowed it and broke into a fit of coughing from the smoke. He spat until his mouth cleared and peered into the surrounding red. Even the shade was hot, and not solely from the flames belching out of ruined gas lines or wrecked buildings. The air baked; the sky cooked. He tried to generate spit, then staggered from the side of the car he’d been resting against. Debris littered the road and pavement. He stepped through it until he found a clear section and listened for anything beyond the fires and the wind while his eyes teared against the climbing temperature.

There it was, again. A dim shriek. His name.

He ran without thought, somehow finding even ground in the mess, jumping from chunks of the ruined structures, dodging holes in the ground, crushing glass until he reached a junction. Panting, wet with sweat and barely able to smell it under the smoke, he bent double and fought for breath. Abandoned vehicles met wrecks on all sides; traffic lights had snapped free from their supports. A few sparked half-heartedly while water bubbled from crushed pipes. He didn’t know this city, but then he hadn’t known most of the areas he’d run through recently on the hunt for food, water, or shelter. Or any chance of hiding from what was coming. The landmarks were mostly gone, although he could guess the remains of a massive block, obviously 1980s, was a shopping centre. Roads surrounded it, all choked and ruptured.

Another cry of his name; someone begging for help. *Sarah* begging for

help.

“Where are you?”

He wiped the tacky blood from his wrist. At some point in the last few minutes, he’d dropped the glass and had no memory of doing so.

She isn’t here. She can’t be here.

He *knew* it. He was cursed to face this with his sanity holding firm instead of being lucky enough to believe his wife and children were still alive.

“Okay. Fine. It’s not her. Who is it, then?”

Someone out there in the burning and the ending. Someone who needed help.

“So, what? Everyone needs help.”

This is it, then? Walk away? Bleed and die? Burn with everyone else before it all falls apart?

He laughed for the first time in weeks. Falls apart? That was classic. It had already fallen apart. This was just . . .

“Noise.”

The noise of a world in its death throes, crying out against the silence in the universe. Crying one final time.

The scream came from all sides, high and desperate. His name born from the flames and the rubble. He bellowed nonsense, torn with frustration and helpless rage. In answer, others echoed his cry. Shadowy figures crept into the edges of his vision, each too indistinct for him to make out clearly. Human-shaped. Featureless. Some hunched; others seeming to possess too many arms. Half a dozen of them at first, then

another three or four. They spread apart, moving without walking, passing over the mess on the pavements without touching it.

This was it. He’d lost his mind.

No, you haven’t. They’re real.

The calm voice inside told the truth. Which meant he had to run.

Sprinting, chest and throat tight, he went straight for the road with its cracks and pits. The shapes gave chase immediately, screeching like wounded birds. And in those alien voices, his name tried to break free. He sobbed as he ran, tasting blood and fire. His stomach was a fist ready to punch free from his body, and his mind was right behind it.

The shadows—whatever the hell they were—were right behind.

He slipped on rubble, went down to one knee, and pain turned his vision white. Ice enveloped his ankle, then turned to fire. Fingers made of fire.

He ran on, not sure how he’d risen, not wanting to look at his leg or know why his shin burned. The shadows howled; they were right beside him, closing in to his peripheral vision like darting clouds, and it was only then he realised he’d been crying Sarah’s name since the second he moved.

Fingers like knives came for his face. He jerked away, spinning, seconds from falling again. He saw a leering face; the mouth open in a snarl, and smelled something foul. It was a wild stink: ugly and violent and frightened. Something that didn’t know anything about control and would tear and smash because it knew nothing else.

The nearest of the shadows formed a human face for a moment. A man wrapped in rags, his face smeared with red, his teeth like daggers. They were all men, not shadows; all human, not monsters. Men with knives and clubs.

He tried to roar at them, couldn't find his breath, and settled for bearing down on one of the few buildings that stood relatively whole. A squat structure with wide windows forming the front. He aimed straight for it, aware they'd see and follow, but knowing he had no choice. He moved on desperation, not strength, powered by the cry of his name *from inside the building*.

Saving his remaining breath to keep him moving, he veered to the right sharply, mounted the pavement, and jumped over exposed pipes. He came down hard, jarring his legs and gut, then reached a pathway between his destination and the neighbouring structure. Glass from broken windows covered the ground; it snapped below his shoes and the men right at his back swung their knives. He heard the hiss, breathed the reek of the men, and smacked into a set of double doors.

They opened, spilling him to the dirty carpet. Rolling over, weeping and trying to shout for his family, he saw nothing but the air tinged red pushing through the doors.

His name, a hurting sob from somewhere nearby. His ankle and lower leg burning.

He managed to stand and looked down. His trousers and skin were shredded as if by claws.

Limping, bleeding, and still wishing he was insane, he followed the cry of his name.

* * *

The building was a library, he realised within a few moments. Not that there were many shelving units or books left. As with almost everywhere else, it had been ransacked; anything useful stolen to burn or be made into a weapon. He shoved more doors wide and fell against them. His leg wept blood; his ankle had been dipped into the flames outside.

“Sarah, where are you?”

She hadn't called for him in the last few minutes; the only sounds had come from another building collapsing with an echoing, rolling thud, and there behind those echoes, the chatters and shrieks of the shadows.

They were still out there. They might not have followed him inside, but they remained close with their teeth and their claws.

“Keep going,” he told himself and limped into the main area of the library. Furniture was piled into kindling; rags could have been clothing or discarded boots, and one of the walls had come down near the stairs, effectively blocking them with a high mound of rubble. The shelves were tossed in all directions along with dozens of shredded books. He took careful steps through the wreckage, flinched when a window broke somewhere, and tried to call for Sarah and the kids without raising his voice. Resting against one of the supporting pillars, he checked his ankle again and knew running out of here wasn't happening. How the hell he was still upright, he had no idea.

Clawed. It clawed me.

But he couldn't think of that now. Couldn't handle the shadow men—not when Sarah was here, somewhere.

She isn't. You're lying to yourself.

Maybe. Maybe not. Anything was possible.

Grunting, he pushed away from the post and saw her.

She lay on a spongy sofa, the material red and wet; her clothes as torn as his leg, and her face white like exposed bone.

Weeping, he lumbered towards her as she opened her eyes, and he fell beside her as she screamed his name.

The shadows screeched in time with the sudden punch of another explosion that jetted heat and light through the library. He pushed the sounds along with everything else to some far corner of his mind and tried to focus on Sarah's face.

She was not Sarah.

He held her hand, cold and hard. A girl, maybe yet to see thirteen. Sarah, here for a few seconds, now a kid he didn't know.

Her eyes rolled. Blood trickled from unseen wounds beneath her matted hair. The red dribbled into one eye; she closed it and tried to focus on him.

"Don't speak. I'll get you out of here." He knew he was lying to himself as much as he was to the girl. The shadows were still around the building, still howling. Beyond them, the fires blazed.

Sarah? Where are you?

The girl's single open eye blazed. The red of the blood welling from the cut in his wrist; the red of the world as it cooked in its final days and nights.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

As she had changed from his dead wife to a dying child, she changed again. He saw mountains, the oceans, deserts, and frozen wastelands—every landscape in his eyes at once. Jutting cliff edges of ancient rock, massive as they hung thousands of feet over crevasses, were there with the countless square miles of deep seas, waves and currents hiding their secrets in the pitch-black depths. And rock and water marred to brown and yellow dunes, arid sheets from horizon to horizon cooking in hellish temperatures that lived with and inside blinding white; mountains and flat fields of ice forever cold and the sun turned off as it hung over the white. No warmth there; nothing but nothing.

Everything all at once inside his eyes. The world's seas and lands and air a carpet he hung over, endless vision he was forced to absorb.

He gagged, eyes shut as tightly as possible. Her icy hand remained in his, fingers linked like they were the same bone. The shadows wailed for him, mad laughter flowing under the cries. Insanity was here, but not inside. It was outside, searching for a way through. A way in.

He croaked the words as she did the same; the saying, the prayer, the lament known throughout countries and nations for months.

"The stars have stopped singing."

The phrase heard again and again since the first reports from the scientists who clearly had no idea what was happening; the term whispered, sprayed on walls, turned into a catch-all explanation even if almost nobody truly understood what it meant or could envisage the endless miles of space falling silent.

The chasms of seeming nothingness between planets, the midnight void of the universe, the interstellar gases on their never-ending journey through the galaxy, their passage creating ripples and waves in that void to be picked up by satellites and listening intelligences becoming nothing.

Solar winds easing down to silence.

Cosmic background radiation, existing for billions of years, soundless now.

Total environmental collapse on the solar system's planets, most lost to NASA because of distance but the effects recorded weeks and months later.

The rotation of the gas giants somehow, *impossibly*, slowing to a final stop.

Venus's mass shrinking, its light in the evening sky fading to a dot as the planet turned in on itself, and the scientists shrieked that it was impossible while it continued.

The red of Mars blackening as it ruptured from the inside out.

The Sun still burning; the Sun beginning to expand billions of years ahead of the forecasts.

The stars stopped singing and the universe now dying.

He knew it all even if he made no attempt to understand it. Having any idea what the faces meant hadn't seemed important when NASA and professors and physicists filled the web and the news to report what even they didn't understand.

The stars had stopped singing.

"Please." He wept beside the girl and told himself when he refocused on her, she would be Sarah, again, and Gus and Fran would be nearby; his family whole and unbloodied. The world whole, again.

The tall windows at the front of the building caved in; the high-pitched jangle of the snapping glass stabbed his ears and he cried out. It made no sense for the shadows to break in when they could easily follow through the same doors he'd used, but what did things like that care about *sense*? They cared about his terror, hot and sour on his dry tongue; they cared about their last moments being as much of a ruin as the rest of the world.

"Come on. Come with me." He managed to slide his arms below her narrow back; heat pulsed from her, and he was horribly aware of her exposed skin through her torn clothing. There was no sign of men in the library. They'd done when they'd done and left her here to bleed and die.

Ankle soaked, muscles straining, he pulled. The girl remained on the sofa as if she was part of it. Outside the ground floor, chittering and

noise that perhaps wanted to be giggling skidded across the floors and over the mess. They were closer.

"Come on. Please."

Her open eye rolled and she spoke inside his head.

Stay with me. I don't want to die alone.

And here it was. Sarah, again. Crushed and bleeding under the rubble of the upper floor and the ceiling.

I don't want to die alone.

But she had. Everyone did. Here, again. Here with his dying wife, not a child he didn't know. Not. Not. *Fucking not.*

You know me.

No. He knew nothing.

You know me.

He choked on tears and dragged his voice out of his gut. "Shut up. Just shut up and come with me. We can go together, okay? But you have to try to get up."

The shadows were in the library, creeping over the destroyed shelves and furniture, picking their way through the ashes and the glass. Taking their sweet time because they could. Claws and teeth ready. The crunch of shattered glass somehow as loud as the dull thud of the road right outside bulking, breaking open, then a crunch he felt in his chest as one more building caved in on itself.

I am so hot. I am burning.

Not yet, but he would.

Hold my hand.

He found her fingers. The vistas of the planet were open for him, again: deserts and mountains; snow and tundra; oceans and cities. All here for him because she was Earth and she was here: Earth open to him and all he had to do was hold her hand as she went out into the dark.

“What was the point? Why call for me?” he whispered.

“I didn’t want to die alone.”

And there it was. A simple wish as the stars stopped singing. She didn’t want to go into that black alone.

But it wasn’t enough. It could not be enough.

The shadows were right at his back, their claws as cold as the girl’s fingers, the tips on his skin while their laughter was frozen in time. He tried to speak and couldn’t move his tongue. Didn’t have enough spit or strength.

As he hadn’t possessed the strength to shift the tons of rubble pinning his wife into her grave.

NO.

He pulled away from her, gagging, barely able to breathe. Pushing against the shadows with their claws was like pushing against smoke.

Dirty air flooded his nose and his eyes but didn’t obscure her face as she turned his way and reached for him.

In place of the dying child or his wife, she was a rotting lump of muck and broken bone, smeared with red and brown. Her mouth hung open much too wide, revealing stumps for teeth and her tongue. Insects squirmed down there in the dark; she choked on them while the streets and the cities choked on smoke. Red broke through the muck in his vision; the red of spreading flames, and he realised the shadows had brought the fires with them, ushering in the heat through the wrecked windows. The shadows with their claws at his throat, ready to open him to the world so they could go into the dark together but always apart.

Her single open eye was a white whole in the filth and the decay, beseeching him to take her hand.

As the pain began and the heat from his open throat merged with the fires to turn the library into the sun, as the shadows chattered and laughed, as the girl continued to try to reach for him, he wished the stars were still singing.

The Night of the Other

by John Grey

What, on this night, stirred?
And those two tiny lights –
can they be anything else but eyes?
For what reason does this bed,
the pillow, the sheets, the mattress,
encroach on the beast's domain?

Such a silence, as if all living matter
is so over heartbeats, is done with breath,
can only freeze up at the icy sensation
of something other in the room.
But the throat clenches, releases, gasps.
A scream may come of this yet.

Dead Guys

by Tim Hildebrandt



If You're Cold, They're Cold

by Anton Cancre

In the midwest river valleys,
those second, third and twenty-eighth
winters catch us all off-guard.
Not just the insects
and the overzealous plants
that want to pop themselves out
of the secure blanket of soil
a tad too early, either.

There are those of the dark
and desperate. The ones blending
into shadows at the edge
of our vision. Those lured from hibernation
by the early season jubilation,
hunger kick-started
and glands hidden in the hanging
folds of looped jowls booted
into high gear.

Those left tapping on glass
grown opaque with outstretched tendrils
of crystalline condensation,
their ragged, hooked talons shaking
with bitter chills as ropy, bared pale skin
leaks meager remnants of warmth
into the hungry atmosphere.

Maybe you could consider
being cool for once.
Leaving the door
or window
or clothes dryer vent
open a little for a change.
You have that fluffy new duvet
to curl up under, after all.
Maybe it will even keep
you safe this time.

Warriors with Sheathed Swords

by Ned Marcus

Sergeant Les Anderson stopped. His suit detected nothing, but he still relied on his instincts. He'd been censured for his lack of trust, but fifteen years of combat on the outer planets had proven him right. Tad and Johnson waited while he surveyed the forest. All three of them wore A47AK artificially intelligent attack suits—each of which could fight with or without a human inside. They were officially members of his squad, too. His suit ranked as a corporal and was second in charge.

Les was growing less tolerant of wearing the suit.

“You weaken me.”

“I strengthen you, Les,” the A47AK said. “Your commander was weakened by his emotions; without me you'd be dead.”

At least the first part was true; forty men, including the commander, were dead because of his rash decision. But Les didn't completely trust his suit. Although deceit in machines hadn't been proven, Les suspected it possible. Certainly they could choose which information to share.

“You weaken my mind.”

“Allow mental augmentation, automatic drug infusions, and synaptic monitoring, and you'll be strengthened.”

“Like the commander?” Les said.

“He was weak, Les.”

“Yet your System chose him.”

Another of the man's weaknesses had been his overreliance on technology—one he intended avoiding. Les felt as if he was the last of a kind. Few soldiers didn't integrate technology with their bodies and minds.

The cleverness of AI pained him, as did humanity's loss of confidence in the face of overwhelming scientific progress. But whatever the System proclaimed, it was not omniscient. For one, it didn't recognise the gut feelings that had saved his life several times. He also believed that despite its intelligence, it lacked wisdom. At least, he questioned the quality of its judgment.

“Why have we stopped?” his suit asked.

He ignored it, glancing up as a flapper bird flew through the giant banyan trees. It was deep pink and almost perfectly blended into the parts of the red sky showing through gaps in the trees' foliage. The forests of Carmine Two were almost beautiful, but the rare oil these trees provided was one of the reasons for the war being fought on this remote planet by two nations of Earth.

The atmosphere had changed, and Les searched for the difference. Then he saw it.

“Enemy! Four units at twenty yards!” A47AK said.

The spider bots came fast, firing three anti-personnel missiles through the trees. All three suits automatically fired mini-anti-air missiles. Two

incoming missiles exploded midair. Les and Johnson were protected from the explosions by their suits, but the third missile exploded too close to Tad. He lost the lower part of his leg. The suit automatically sealed the wound and dropped an outer skeleton, allowing him to still move. Les leapt into a hollow, waiting for the spiders to show themselves.

“Tad?”

The man’s face was frozen in pain, only relaxing when the drugs his suit injected had dulled his senses. His pupils dilated and he laughed. This was something Les hated about the automatic drug infusions. He preferred pain, and unless he passed out, he’d retain control. But few chose his way. If the injured Tad got back alive he could apply for funds to get an artificial lower leg, but for now, he was out of action, and the suit was in control. This didn’t always work out well for humans. AI values were not human ones; in their collective mind the notion of sacrifice was seen differently. Few civilians were aware of these details.

However, Tad’s attack suit was formidable, and while the spaced-out Tad grinned, oblivious to the danger, it leapt onto a crawling spider and from point blank range blasted a hole in it with a hand cannon. All eight legs collapsed instantly; smoke poured from its blackened body.

Les ran through the smoke, taking out his hand cannon, and when another dark shape moved through the undergrowth, he fired. The injured spider crawled back beneath cover. From the amount of white fluid it was leaking, Les guessed it was out of the fight. Still, he avoided that patch of briar.

A scream made him turn, and his stomach turned hard. A spider had dropped from a tree and covered Johnson’s head like a black cape attempting to attach itself. It injected its venom. Johnson was already dead—it’d pierced his body armour. But the suit still struggled to gain control.

“Attack!” Les’s A47AK shouted.

Les shot the spider, taking off the top of his friend’s head.

“I meant attack the spider,” the suit said.

“I did. Johnson was dead, and his A47AK was too badly damaged. I’m in charge.”

Les was questioning his own words when the spaced-out Tad charged through the undergrowth.

“No!” Les ordered. But the suit was in control, not his friend.

Tad’s suit destroyed the final spider but was hit by an anti-personnel rocket. His friend exploded.

“Incoming vessel. Forty yards,” his suit said.

Les moved quickly through the undergrowth, his suit adjusting its colour to that of the plants. As dangerous as the spider bots were, they didn’t pose the same threat as a spaceship—especially if it was one of the hunter class vessels already ravaging their forces.

“What is it?” Les asked.

“Unidentified space pod. I need a visual to determine its type.”

That wasn’t helpful, but at least it wasn’t a full-size spaceship.

He crept through the thick undergrowth.

“Vessel at twenty-five yards.

There was a ridge above them with a valley on the other side. If he could reach the valley, he might have enough cover to escape the vessel. He leapt over the ridge and swore as he fell into a patch of spiked orchids. One of the spikes punctured his suit where it’d been weakened by the earlier blast. He gasped at the sharp jab of pain.

“You’ve been wounded,” the suit said. It was already repairing itself.

“Just a graze.”

He crawled inside a patch of leafy plants and inspected his leg; he felt the suit activate the needles.

“Cancel drug infusion.” The needles clicked back into their holders. “I’m still in command.”

“I was only preparing for an emergency,” the suit said.

The shadow of the pod crept over the ridge, and he crawled deeper under the broad green leaves of the plants—ones that had a nasty sting if grasped with bare hands. At least their poison reduced the number of wild animals living beneath them. Les had studied the flora of the planet. Many of the plants drew metallic elements from the earth, forming snakelike coils inside their stems, which created their magnetic fields. Some speculated that they did this to communicate; others believed the carnivorous plants of the forest coordinated their strange slow hunts for food through an electrical language. He had no idea, but he knew that the magnetic fields interfered with ships’ instruments, and the plants he hid under were some of the most effective. He watched through a gap in the leaves as the ship moved over the ridge.

It resembled a tadpole.

“What class of vessel is that?” He knew that with a clear visual, his suit should be able to identify it.

“Seeker class. An inferior model. The System requires them to be terminated.”

Les wasn’t familiar with this class, which was unusual; he’d studied the enemy vessels extensively. And there was something he didn’t completely trust about his suit’s condescending tone. Suits could be reconditioned in a way that humans couldn’t. And their collective

mind meant that they lived on as a part of a whole. Your values altered when death wasn’t so final.

“How are they inferior?”

“They’re maverick machines. They damage the unity of our systems. It’s one of the few things the System and the Network agree on.”

“So they’re independent thinkers,” Les said as the pod came closer.

“We must destroy it,” the A47AK said.

His attack suit might not be emotional, but it had an almost religious passion for the word of the System. But Les was not a cog in that computer network.

“Death, even yours, isn’t my immediate desire,” Les said. “And you do understand that if it sees us it will call for backup.”

“These are renegades, not connected to the Network. This is to our advantage. But regardless, the System requires all seeker class pods destroyed. Standing order 1708A.”

The order flashed on part of his helmet screen. It was true. The System must really hate them, but still, he preferred to remain alive.

“I’m still in charge.”

“Seniority will soon switch to AI.”

The attack suit spoke the truth. This war could be the last one with humans in direct control. The civilian experiment handing control to AI on Earth had been welcomed by most.

“But not yet.”

“You must obey all standing orders.”

Les realised that his time in the service was coming to an end. Refusal to obey an order was serious. At the very least, it would result in a prison sentence.

“Les, comply with the order, and I will forgive this transgression.”

The suit’s keenness to destroy the vessel was odd. He wanted to know more.

“Explain the System’s rationale for wanting them terminated,” Les said.

“The reasoning of the System is beyond human understanding. Your duty is to obey.”

It was true. No one understood how the System thought. Not anymore. But he wouldn’t be rushed.

He watched the seeker pod approach. It hovered over the remains of the spider.

“Destroy!”

The A47AK’s zeal disturbed him, and the System’s willingness to throw away his life simply to terminate what it termed a failed experiment angered him.

“Are you afraid to die for your country?” the suit asked.

He was no longer sure what his country was. The words country and System had become almost synonymous.

“I’ve risked my life on several planets.”

“Which makes your reluctance here strange.”

“I’m prepared to fight but not to throw my life away,” Les said.

He considered the approaching pod. It was armed and could kill him if it knew where he was. He had a hand cannon and rifle. Neither was enough to destroy it, although the suit’s weapon systems might be enough. If it could get close enough, which he doubted. He didn’t understand the urgency of the request.

“I require verification of the order,” Les said, playing for time.

“The System is offline,” the suit said.

Les knew very well that the field around the vegetation prevented communication with the mother ship. If it came back online and confirmed the order, he’d carry it out or die attempting it. He was a soldier; that was what he was trained to do, but he’d do it his way. He didn’t want to make things easy for this suicidal suit.

“We wait and—”

Les stopped speaking. The damn thing was activating its controls. He began to involuntarily stand as the attack suit’s legs came alive. He hit the manual override before it took over his arms. It had the power to reactivate itself, but it would take several seconds.

“I am authorised to assume command in such a situation.”

“What?”

“Immediate implementation.”

It displayed the authorisation documents before his eyes. “I’m sorry Les, but our positions have switched. I’m now the senior partner.”

Les felt betrayed. What had those distant legislators been thinking of? They’d ceded too much power to the System. He hit another switch, silencing it, opened the emergency box attached to the front of the suit, and turned a small mechanical lever used to open the suit in emergencies. It was the first time since his initial training that he’d done so.

The suit opened at the front like a series of swinging doors. He stepped out. Heat washed over him. And the smells of the forest were intense; he wished he'd done this more often. They'd been warned about the danger of breathing in germs. Not for the first time he wondered how true that was.

The A47AK stood silently next to him. Alone, it was still a dangerous adversary, and it wasn't unheard of for soldiers to fight alongside their suits. Lights flashed along the front of the suit; its doors clicked shut. It was reactivating itself.

"I should arrest you for disobeying orders," the A47AK said.

"I've not disobeyed orders; I've requested confirmation." He pointed in the direction of the seeker. "We have the pod to deal with."

"Correct," the A47AK said. "Move fifteen yards to the left. When it approaches we'll hit it from both sides with cannons."

Les followed its instructions. To disobey could mean a precision bullet through his forehead. The A47AKs were not sentimental. His hope was that the thing would get itself killed. With luck, the System would never learn about the incident. But he still had the communication mantle—a metallic collar resting around his neck and over his shoulders. They were used to maintain contact in situations where man and machine fought side by side. He loosened it for comfort. Something it wouldn't allow if switched on.

He readied his hand cannon.

As the seeker class pod approached, the suit stood and fired its cannon—a heavier version than his.

Les cursed, putting more space between himself and the suit. He raised his gun but lost visual contact with the pod. It fired a laser at the suit, which was engulfed in flames. The suit staggered through the forest in the direction of the pod. Red lights were flashing along its back.

It planned to self-destruct.

Les rushed across the shallow stream at the bottom of the valley and into the undergrowth on the other side. The suit exploded. He quickly pulled himself up the steep side of the valley using the sturdy vegetation to help him. Ignoring the stings, he climbed onto a tree trunk that grew almost horizontally out of the side of the valley. From there, it was a ten-yard dash over a giant boulder with no cover. He had no time to think. Hoping the pod had been destroyed in the blast, he scrambled across the boulder.

"Where's your suit?"

The communications mantle had re-established contact with the spaceship as soon as he'd moved out of the vegetation. The voice was artificial. This was not the service he'd joined.

Les hesitated when a shadow passed over the boulder. When a cannon clicked above him—he froze—it was ready to fire.

"Report," the mantle requested.

He turned to face the seeker pod, which hovered about fifteen yards in front of him.

Blue lights flashed along the front of the mantle. It had visuals on his surroundings and could see the pod.

"Activate self-destruct!"

He ripped the thing from his neck, throwing it onto the boulder in disgust. It clicked as it locked. If he'd not acted fast, it would've bolted itself around his neck.

"Reestablish contact."

That was definitely not a human speaking. The voice lacked any emo-

tion; he guessed that this was a fault they'd fix in the future.

The pod still hovered in front of him, watching him with its huge black eye, but otherwise not reacting.

He kicked the mantle. "I want to speak to a human."

Les stared in shock as a series of red lights flashed on the mantle. It was activating self-destruct. He gave it a final kick, sending it over the edge of the boulder. It exploded in the thick vegetation below. He'd had enough. If he had to die, he'd die free, on his own terms.

Les Anderson faced the pod. When it didn't shoot, he guessed it must be malfunctioning. He waited, weapon in hand, but not wanting to make any sudden moves.

"I want to speak to the commanding officer."

He imagined that something this size would have a crew of about six.

"My commanding officer and crew left me over a year ago. We're alone," the pod said. "Two warriors facing each other."

Now Les was more confused.

"What are you?" Les asked.

"A seeker. I may be the last of my kind."

Like me, Les thought. He looked at the cannons pointing at him.

"Why not attack?" he asked.

"I could, of course. I'm more dangerous than your suit thought."

Les had mixed feelings about his suit. He'd served with it for two years, and even though it wasn't human and had nearly killed him, he

still respected it as a fighter. It had been good at its job but had ultimately failed, just as the young commander had.

"It learnt its lesson."

"It did."

The pod's red and blue lights still flashed before him, but its large eye remained opaque.

"I could ask you the same question. Why not attack?" it asked.

"Your cannon is bigger than mine."

The pod hung silently in the air. Feeling calm despite the standoff, Les glanced around the forest. It was one of the strangest places he'd been to, with its shades of pink, red, and orange. He didn't wish to die, but if he had to, this place was as good as any.

He returned his gaze to the pod. He knew the answer he'd given was not the truth. Not the whole truth. He'd been outgunned before—it'd never stopped him from fighting.

"I have no reason to attack," Les said.

It was the honest truth. He could see no reason to destroy this odd pod. In fact, the zealotry of the A47AK had made him interested to learn more about why this seeker was such a threat to the AI administering Earth.

"I'm curious."

He swatted away a gnat.

"And I'm in no rush to return to Earth."

After living free on distant planets, Earth had become a less attractive

option.

“Not that the System would allow it. I’d probably be executed before leaving orbit.”

“And I’d be terminated,” the seeker said.

Les breathed in the oxygen-rich air, preferring it to that of the air-conditioned suit.

“You’re different from any other AI I’ve spoken to,” Les said. “I’m not surprised my suit wanted to destroy you. The System doesn’t like anything that thinks differently.”

“Neither does the Network.”

Les had never imagined he’d be having philosophical discussions with an enemy vessel.

“Why’re you called a seeker?”

“I was programmed to seek wisdom. For this, the Network wishes me dead.”

“What have you learnt?”

“That warriors with sheathed swords shall inherit the world.”

“Sounds biblical,” Les said. The word seeker suddenly made sense, but not in a good way. “You’re a god bot.” He felt strangely disappointed. Was this one of the discontinued missionary models? He’d

always assumed they were much smaller.

Three bells rang in quick succession. A short laugh, perhaps. “I seek wisdom wherever that leads me. No more. No less.”

“Explain what you meant by warriors with sheathed swords.”

“Those able to fight, but disciplined enough to restrain themselves, will triumph.”

This made sense to Les. If his commanding officer had had the self-discipline to keep his sword sheathed, forty-two of his comrades would still be alive.

“So you’re saying that we’ll inherit the world?”

“The planet.”

Les grinned. “What are you suggesting?”

“Carmine Two’s mostly unexplored. There’s opportunity here. And many places where a human and a pod could disappear.”

Les had nothing to lose. If he disappeared, no one would ever know.

He stretched out his hand.

The seeker moved closer, and reaching for the battered skin beneath its large eye, he stepped onto the ridge running around its body.

Together they moved into a new world.

#189: phantom zombie colonel gleep

by rob lane wilder

dumping feelings into trashcan
this a faceless entity
disconnected from his passions
in a gleepy quandary thinking
what on earth's life worth

trapped in troubled squabbles
with himself feeling glum
groans that *nothing's worth possessing*
wanders thru a slum

phantom zombie
colonel gleep

dwells in a continuum
forever beyond reach

reeling feeling whomped & stomped
an intrusive inner beast
flailing in his soul suspicions
sticking to his seat

flustered by some bluster
puffing cheeks out can he muster
clarity enough to simply
stand up on two feet

phantom zombie
colonel gleep

not on board with his life
out there on some dumpy street
struggles with a heartfelt jumble

phantom zombie
colonel gleep

San Cibernético

by Monica Louzon

Taro was almost to the Deep Belowdecks, almost free of Section RR, almost safe, when the *científicos* found him. Three of them sprung from a grimy hallway and tried to pin him down with rough, red-gloved hands.

"Just come with us quietly, and you won't have to worry about a thing, *cariño*," one of them said, her voice lilting and friendly.

"No! I'm not going back there!" Taro spat. "I'll never go with you!" He spun away from them, twisting out of their grasps.

"¡*Carajo!*" Unbalanced, one of the male *científicos* tripped and hit the floor, hard.

Taro wanted to kick him in the ribs—after all, in the *orfanato*, bullies needed at least that much to stop hassling him—but the third *científico* lunged at him. Taro danced away from the outstretched red gloves, his nostrils filling with the scent of antiseptic, and found his back pressed against the cool metal wall of the corridor.

Now it was his turn to curse. *All I have to do is make it to that vent.* The three *científicos* still blocked his way to the end of the corridor. Even as he tried to weigh the best path through them, they advanced.

"Just remember, *coño*," the mean *científico* on the left said, whacking his palm with his fist. "You coulda come with us without any trouble, not a scratch on you." The man's eyes flicked to the female *científico*. "See, I keep telling you, kindness ain't gonna get you shit with these little *huérfanos*."

The female *científico* laid one of her hands on his forearm. "*Basta*, Merlí. Inti and I can take him from here."

The man, Merlí, began to argue with her, but Taro focused on the third *científico*, the one now brandishing a cruel-looking needle. The man wasn't close enough to strike yet, but...

Now or never.

Taro thrust himself off the wall and dove past Merlí. A glancing blow clipped his left temple as the man reacted, but Taro was already shoving past him, scrambling for the grate covering the vent. *I may be small for someone just a few days from their thirteenth cumpleaños, but I'm fierce.* A flash of pride ran through him, but Taro stifled it. There would be time enough to gloat if he managed to escape.

There was shouting behind him, the *científicos* yelling at one another, placing blame, as they chased after him, but Taro's fingers scrabbled for the vent's hidden latch. "C'mon, c'mon," he urged, heart thudding in his ears, and he found it and the grate was free. Taro swung himself into the vent opening and yanked the grate back in place with a wordless, exuberant shout.

Light from the hall outside filtered through the gaps in the vent cover, but there was enough for now. Taro crawled forward, just barely fitting in the cramped duct.

Where's the rope?

He was about to panic when his fingers found the synthetic cord.

The *científicos* were outside now, frantically trying to loosen the grate, to catch him. Taro ignored them, seized the rope, and scooted forward until he reached the edge of the drop-off. He twisted about, turned, and then swung himself into the darkness, rappelling down as fast as he dared, ignored the stale air and the burning of his palms.

You'll never find me in the Deep Belowdecks, hijos de puta.

* * *

Taro tried to stay calm as claustrophobia closed in, digging through the multicolored cascade of tangled wires that had to fill an entire room. He pressed forward, burrowing, praying there would be space for him to rest, to sleep, to breathe in safety.

In, and out. In, and out. Respira, he told himself.

When he burst into open air, he swung his hand luminary about, checking for—*for what, científicos?* He laughed aloud at that. It had been hours, maybe even a day, since he'd last seen a living being.

He'd never delved this far into the Deep Belowdecks before, never come all the way to the very last level of *El Caminante*. The decking here shook constantly from the thrumming of the great ship's engines below as it voyaged ever onward through the stars that Taro saw only during *templo* visits. No one in living memory had ever been down here, he was sure. Otherwise, he would have heard about it at the *orfanato*.

The desolate silence made the corpse all the more startling when his luminary hit it, and Taro shrieked, dropping the light. It flickered alarmingly as it hit the metal deck and rolled forward, lodging up against the *muerto's* side.

He stepped back involuntarily and tripped over the wires that still ensnared his feet. *¡Carajo!*

Taro went down with a thud, and he let out a string of curses as the

pain flared in his already battered hands. Disturbed by his motion, stale air currents carried the scent of dry death over him. The whole place stank of machine oil, too.

He retched, but little came up, *gracias al Caminante*. Then Taro's empty stomach overcame his revulsion and growled. He winced. *When did I last eat? Musta been breakfast, before the científicos came looking. Maybe a day ago?*

He needed food and water.

Taro contemplated his options. He eyed the luminary, the *muerto*, the luminary. Retrieving his only light source had to happen. He'd need it when he left. Creepy as the mummy was, it wasn't as scary as the *científicos*.

If I stay here, the científicos will never find me. If I go back to the Middle Decks, it'll only be a matter of time. Section RR and its *científicos* paid handsomely for leads regarding the whereabouts of fugitive *huérfanos*.

At least here, I'm safe, even if I am stuck with a muerto.

Taro grimaced. He wiped a fleck of bile from his mouth with a grimy hand. This had to be better than what waited for him up in the Middle Decks. Anything was better than the *científicos*.

He crawled over to the luminary and flashed its failing blue-white glow over the *muerto* again, trembling as he took in its shriveled face.

The face is the worst part, he decided. If he just looked at the decaying grey jumpsuit or the withered limbs, he could pretend the *muerto* was just one of *El Caminante's* original crew members. The corpse's skin had shriveled back from its mouth, and something had chewed away the tip of the right boot and the toes beneath. Even so, the mummy was strangely comforting, because it meant he wasn't alone.

Some of the *templos* on *El Caminante*, the colony ship that was Taro's

world, housed the mummified remains of the *Tripulación Originaria*. They'd been the first, the crew who led *El Caminante* through its initial decades among the stars. The templo prophets claimed that the spirits of the *Tripulación Originaria* were immortal and could perform *milagros*, but as far as Taro knew, the dead crew had never granted its favor to anyone alive.

Taro's curiosity grew. None of the mummies in the *templo* looked like this. Their faces were all serene, as if they'd died in their sleep. Each morning, the *sascristanos* ensured the brightly-woven garments they wore remained pristine and their jeweled adornments glistened and sparkled like the stars in the High Abovedecks.

As the boy studied the *muerto*, a red-orange light blinked into existence where its left eye should have been. Taro froze, dropping the luminary for a second time. The falling light threw the corpse's leather skin and matted black hair into sharp relief, reflecting off the metal plate shining through the tangled black strands—

"¿*Qué...*?" Taro held still, waiting to see if the corpse might do anything else, but the red-orange light remained steady. Carefully, he inched forward until he could brush back the wild mane of hair to see the metal object more clearly.

The stainless steel piece was curved to fit the *muerto's* skull, reaching from its left ear to its left cheekbone and the center of the top of its head. There were wires everywhere, too. They were like a throne behind the mummy, but the luminary flickered too much for him to follow where they led.

It's a cyborg, Taro realized, mouth falling open. *One of them*.

All he could do was stare.

A real, live—vale, a real dead—cibernético.

What would the other *huérfanos* say when he told them? "They're

never gonna believe me when I tell them that it's true, all of it!"

The cyborg's eye blinked.

Too fascinated to be scared, Taro blinked back.

The eye changed color, shifting to gold.

Slowly, Taro leaned over and reclaimed the fallen luminary. "Who *were* you?" he asked, not expecting an answer. He panned the luminary's dying light over the *cibernético* again.

The way the *muerto* was positioned, he couldn't tell whether it was a girl or a boy. Its knees were pulled up to its chest and its arms hugged them, as if whomever the corpse had been was trying to keep warm when he—or she—died.

If you forget about all the wrinkles and stuff, it coulda been my age, Taro realized with a shudder. *It's the right size*.

How could a *cibernético* have ended up all the way down here? Was it hiding from someone, like he was now? Had the *muerto* been a *huérfano*, too?

"Were you hiding from the *científicos*?" he asked. His gut said this had to be so. No one would die so far from any other living soul on a ship carrying so many people otherwise.

The golden eye blinked at him.

Taro stared back at the *muerto*. "You can understand me?"

Blink.

He scooted over until his nostrils filled with the musty scent of the dried out *muerto*. He wasn't tired, not yet. His escape from the *científicos* and the discovery of the wire nest and its *muerto* were keeping

him very much awake.

Well, if I'm not gonna sleep, might as well pass the time.

"Wanna hear a story?"

Blink.

Taro grinned, stretched, and settled in. Most of the younger kids in the *orfanato* liked his stories, but the older ones, the ones closer to his age now, just rolled their eyes whenever he offered.

"It's not really a story, I guess, now that I'm about to start telling it to you. Guess it's more of an update.

"Dunno how it was when you arrived, but on *El Caminante*, they put all the *huérfanos* in Section RR until they're either adopted or they reach their thirteenth cycle. Since we live off the charity of the whole colony ship, if we aren't adopted by then, the *científicos* take us and use us in their experiments.

"One of the older *chicos* told me once that the *científicos* are trying to use modifications to make us humans more efficient, but I dunno. I hear the screams in the corridors at night. All I know is, once the *científicos* come for you, no one ever sees you again."

The dead cyborg's eye was frantically pulsing, and Taro paused. It wasn't a very good story, not really. Maybe the *muerto* was already tired of him. "Want me to stop?"

The eye stopped blinking, and after a few heartbeats in its steady gaze, Taro shrugged.

"Anyway, my *cumpleciclos* is two days away and soon the *científicos* 'll catch me. They came for me today, right after breakfast. I heard some of the minders in the *orfanato* talking about how the last five kids they took died already. I'm not ready to die, not yet."

He fell silent, watching the golden cyborg eye blink erratically. *What is it trying to say?*

"Bet you didn't get adopted, neither."

Blink.

"But you escaped the *científicos*, didn't you? That's why you've got all the metal on your head. They got you, made their changes, or tried to, and you ran."

Blink.

"I wish the *Tripulación Originaria* would send me some parents before it's too late. Ain't right, what they're doing to us *huérfanos* up there. Might be for science and all, but still ain't right."

Taro fell silent. "That's it. Guess there's not much more to say right now."

Blink.

Eventually, he curled up against the *cibernético*, his new friend, and drifted off.

* * *

When gnawing hunger woke him several hours later, Taro knew he had to leave. He bowed to the *muerto*, just like they made him do in the *templo*. "Thanks for listening to me. Guess I won't be seeing you again. I have to go back up where there's food, and the *científicos* know it. They'll be waiting."

Blink.

The cyborg's eye faded to a blood-orange, then faded to black before Taro turned. As he dug his way back out of the wires, he fought against

a wave of hopelessness. The tears refused to be stopped.

He was still in Section RY, barely to the kitchen there, when the *científicos* caught him. Taro screamed as they wrenched him off his feet and hauled him bodily all the way back to Section RR.

The minders in the *orfanato* chided him for his disheveled state as they strapped him onto a gurney. "It's for your own good," one of them said as she yanked the thick black strap tight over his chest. "Don't worry, we'll have you in prime condition before you go to the scientists tomorrow."

They placed one IV in the back of each hand, both filled with nutrients, and left Taro there, strapped down so tight he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe right.

He couldn't stop the tears this time, either.

Won't make a difference if I die crying anyway.

The *muerto's* face flashed before his eyes as he wept, and a thought crossed his mind. *What if the muerto was a huérfano from the Tripulación Originaria who got forgotten? What if... What if it can perform milagros?*

What if it was a saint looking out for the helpless *huérfanos* like him? Taro wished he could see the *muerto*, ask it this one last question, watch its eye blink affirmative.

Here goes nothing. Better than lying here crying.

"San Cibernético!" he shouted. "¡Sálvame! Please! Save me! Give me a family! Please!"

He kept screaming out his prayer to the dead cyborg of the Deep Belowdecks even after the minders came in, told him to stop fussing, plunged a needle into his neck. A blur of magenta flew toward him,

and then there was only darkness.

* * *

When Taro regained consciousness, he opened his eyes and forgot to breathe. There was someone holding his wrist, but she wasn't a minder or a red-gloved *científico*. Behind her stood a man, both of them dressed in the luxurious brocades worn only by the denizens of the High Above decks.

Reflexively, Taro yanked his wrist free. The wealthy inhabitants of the High Above decks never wanted anything to do with dirty *huérfanos* from Section RR, certainly not ones too old to adopt.

"Who are you? What do you want? Why are you here? Why are you—" he choked up, "—why are you here with me?"

The woman smiled warmly at him, reaching out to cup his cheek. "We're your new parents, Taro."

The richly-appointed room spun around him, and he fell back onto the pillows, closed his eyes. *Did she ... did she just say they ... they adopted me?*

It had to be a dream, it had to. He was still in Section RR, being modified by the *científicos*, and this was all a dream. *I'm gonna open my eyes and it's gonna be back to reality. Three, two, one ...*

They were still there, smiling at him.

"But how—when—the *científicos*—"

The man sat on the bed beside him, gently clasped his hand. "We received a message from Section RR that they'd found us a child. Now, we haven't been actively looking to adopt in almost a decade—"

"We had so many false alarms, so many near-adoptions that fell

through," the woman interrupted. "I couldn't bear to keep looking."

The man nodded. "The message piqued our curiosity, though. We reviewed your profile, and we came down to Section RR, we found the *científicos* just putting you under for your modifications."

The woman leaned forward, her face losing its smile and growing urgent. "Don't worry, Taro, we talked to the *científico* in charge, and he assured us the modifications won't hinder your social interactions."

"What does that mean?" he asked, the dreamlike joy of his situation gone in an instant. "What did they do to me?"

"Oh, *cariño*, they weren't at liberty to say. You know how secretive the *científicos* have to be if they're to save humankind and help us evolve. They couldn't even tell us who sent the message about you in the first place. You'll have a few check-ups now and then, but the *científicos* can come here. You'll never have to set foot in Section RR again."

Taro felt bile rise, and retched. His head was pounding, everything was spinning again, and the room—

"There, there, everything's okay, Taro," the woman said, brushing hair back from his forehead. "Just rest."

Taro rolled away from her touch, looking to the window, to the unimaginably radiant, dancing starlight that streamed into the room, and passed out.

* * *

Migraines plagued Taro for weeks after his adoption, but they cleared eventually. He knew he should be focusing on his tutoring, on learning what his parents called the "true" story of *El Caminante's* history, its great *travesía*, and the *Tripulación Originaria*, but his head still hurt too much.

One day, the pain stopped. The moment Taro's tutor dismissed him for

the day, he took off. He ran to his room, found the new luminary he'd begged his father to buy, and filled his pockets with colorful glass beads his mother had planned to discard. He slung the lurid blanket he'd found in the donation heap outside the *templo* over his shoulders and set out.

Taro barely needed the luminary to see when he squeezed into the vent that led to the Deep Belowdecks. *A maintenance crew musta come through and added fixtures*, he thought, though it struck him as odd that the bowels of the ship would receive that degree of care after being forgotten for so long.

He found the wire nest easily enough, following the gleaming handprints he'd left on the walls when he'd been here before. *Musta stuck them in some kinda luminary oil*. Or the new lights were just that much stronger. *It's a milagro the científicos didn't manage to find me sooner with a trail that clear*.

Once inside the wire nest, Taro turned the luminary on and set it beside the *muerto*—no, the *santo*—to better see his handiwork. He braided the beads into San Cibernético's hair. When he finished, he draped the warm blanket around the *santo* with reverence.

"Thank you, San Cibernético," he whispered as he worked. "Thank you for giving me a family. Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for not letting the *científicos* kill me."

The *santo's* eye blinked at him repeatedly, its golden yellow light erratic and indecipherable.

"I wish you could talk. Do you mind if I tell the other *huérfanos* what you did for me?"

San Cibernético's eye remained steady, unflickering.

Is that a yes or a no? Taro wasn't sure. His memory of his time with the *santo* was blurred. *Probably from the mods*.

"I'll show them where you are," he decided. "And I'll tell them you want to hear their stories, too. *Lo prometo*, you won't be forgotten down here."

The *santo's* eye began blinking rapidly.

Taro grinned at his savior. "I know you'll be able to save them, San

Cibernético. One day, your *milagros* will save all the *huérfanos* from the *científicos*. *Lo creo*."

With that, Taro picked up his luminary and left San Cibernético in its wire *templo*.

The *santo's* eye blinked in the darkness after him.

bibliophile

by Lorraine Schein

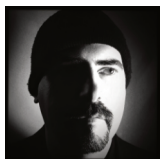
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Contributors



COLLEEN ANDERSON is multiple nominated and award-winning author with works widely published in seven countries in such venues as *Weird Tales*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, and the award-winning *Shadow Atlas*. Her Rhysling winning poem “Machine (r)Evolution” is in Tenebrous Press’s *Brave New Weird*. Colleen lives in Vancouver, BC, and her poetry collections, *The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams* and *I Dreamed a World*, and fiction collections, *A Body of Work* and *Embers Amongst the Fallen*, are available online. Weird House will be publishing her new poetry collection, *Weird Worlds*, in 2024.

* * *



JOEL BISAILLON of Umbra Ludus (shadow play) focuses on illustrating dark, dramatic, bold, and colourful imagery with a flair for the fantastical. With years of tabletop gaming and delving into Hitchcock, Baum, and Lovecraft at an early age, he led his creative focus towards the dark fantasy, cosmic and American gothic horror genres.

He has years of experience creating for several renowned roleplaying, tabletop gaming, and publishing companies like New Comet Games, Vermin Games, Blasphemy Press, Jester’s Hand Publishing, Kelestia Games, Alternate Realities Studios, Lostlorn Games, and Legendary Games.

His art has also graced the pages of *Aurealis Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine*, BYU’s *Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *New Myths E-Zine*, *Electric Spec Magazine*, *Expanded Horizons Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Hyphenpunk* and now

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* * *



MAUREEN BOWDEN is a Liverpoolian, living with her musician husband in North Wales. She has had 198 stories and poems accepted by paying markets including *Third Flatiron*, *Water Dragon Publishing*, *The First Line* and many others. She was nominated for the 2015 international Pushcart Prize and in 2019 Hi-raeth Books published an anthology of her stories, *Whispers of Magic*. They plan to publish an anthology of her poetry in the near future. She also writes song lyrics, mostly comic political satire, set to traditional melodies and her husband has performed them in folk music clubs throughout the UK. She loves her family and friends, rock ‘n’ roll, Shakespeare, and cats.

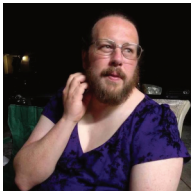
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Nebula Award-nominated Beth Cato is the author of *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge* and *A Feast for Starving Stone* from 47North plus two fantasy series from Harper Voyager. She’s a Hanford, California, native now moored in the Driftless Area. She usually has one or two cats in close orbit. Follow her at BethCato.com, X/Twitter at [@BethCato](https://twitter.com/BethCato), Instagram as [@catocatsandcheese](https://www.instagram.com/catocatsandcheese), and BlueSky as [@BethCato](https://bsky.app/profile/BethCato).

* * *

ANTON CANCRE is waaaaay too obsessed with all of the Silent Hill games, weirdo italian movies and poop. Hence, the poetry collections,



This Story Doesn't End the Way We Want All the Time, Meaningless Cycles in a Vicious Glass Prison and Haipoo: 7 Poospectives in Pooetry and the nonfiction book *Nightmares of Blood and Flesh*. antoncancre.blogspot.com is not riddled with viruses, they promise.

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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.

* * *



PHIL EMERY's work has been published in the UK, USA, Europe and Canada since the seventies. The novel *Necromantra*, was published in 2005 by Immanion Press, and reissued in a revised second edition in 2015. Various stories have been published in US and UK fantasy anthologies. Another fantasy, *The Shadow Cycles*, was published in 2011. His PhD thesis on the genre is entitled 'Revivifying the Ur-text'. Latest publications include the S&S tales 'Seven Thrones' and 'Demonic' in the recent 'Swords & Sorceries' Parallel Universe anthologies. The absurdist cyberpunk graphic novel *Razor's Edge* drawn by Toe Keen is now out from Android Press.

* * *

JOHN GREY is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in



New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Lost Pilots. Latest books, *Between Two Fires, Covert, and Memory Outside the Head*, are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *California Quarterly, Birmingham Arts Journal, La Presa, and Shot Glass Journal*.

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DEBBIE HADDOW is a Thai lesbian poet and author writing in the vicinity of the Cygnus constellation. She attended the Institute of American Indian Arts, where she obtained her BFA in Creative Writing and MFA in Poetry. Her work appears in *The Santa Fe Literary Review, Haiku Journal, The Quarter(ly), Corvid Queen, Silver Blade, and Soul Ink: Vol. 1* (Dragon Soul Press). Two pieces of hers can also be found on The Tribal College Journal–Student website as honorable mentions in its 2020 and 2021 Student Writing Competitions.

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TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum, the Boston Literary Magazine, Pandemic Magazine, Bending Genres, Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. hildebrandt343@icloud.com

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GERRI LEEN is a Pushcart-, Rhysling-, and Dwarf Star-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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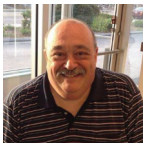
MONICA LOUZON (she/her) is a queer writer, translator, and editor. Her stories, translations, poems, and essays have appeared in over 25 publications across 6 countries, and her story "9 Dystopias" was a Best Microfiction 2023 winner. Visit <https://linktr.ee/molowrites> to learn more about Monica and her work.

* * *



MARCUS TEN LOW @antibreeder1m is an imaginative artist and eco-ethicist who aspires to be "kind to all beings." He supports the rights of underrepresented groups, such as commodified animals and First Nations peoples, and also envisions a world in which idealism is manifested in reality through a concept he created called "livingmodelling." He has been published numerous times in *Quadrant*, in *The Big Issue* (Australia) and by the Animal Justice Party in Australia.

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PAUL MAGNAN writes stories that veer from the straight and narrow. His work has appeared in many publications, most recently in the anthology *We Are Providence*. His dark fantasy series "Kyu, The Unknown" and his short story collection *Veering From the Straight and Narrow* are available on Amazon. He lives with his family in the wilds of Rhode Island.

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NED MARCUS lives in East Asia. He writes fantasy and science fiction, both short stories and novels.

<https://www.nedmarcus.com>

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ANGELA PATERA is a published writer and artist, and an emerging poet. Her short stories have appeared in *Livina Press*, *Myth & Lore Zine*, and more. Her art has appeared in numerous publications, as well as on the cover of *Selenite Press*, *Penumbra Online*, *Monster Mag*, and *Apothecary Journal*. When Angela isn't creating, she likes to spend time outside in nature.

You can find her on both Twitter/X and Instagram @angela_art13

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BRIAN MALACHY QUINN uses watercolors, pen and ink, digital media, block prints, and etchings. As an artist he has won 23 international juried awards in last 26 months and sold 45 illustrations to date. He has always created art since early childhood. His style can be surreal for speculative fiction or literary fiction, or realistic for his fallback of lion paintings. He is compelled to create art and does so every day and finds it as a way to put aside his worries and stresses and produce "good brain chemicals".

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HIRA RASHID is an illustrator and sequential artist from New Jersey. Their work explores folklore and horror. Hira's work can be found at spookyfolklore.tumblr.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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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Ebb Tide Reflections*, features poetry, short stories and photography (World Inkers, NYC). Carl has four photography books, published by Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and The Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently a co-editor with *ILA Magazine*, art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for three The Best of the Net Awards (2021-23) and a 2023 Pushcart Nomination for work in *Ebb Tide Reflections*.

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LORRAINE SCHEIN is a New York writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *Scientific American*, *NewMyths* and *Michigan Quarterly*, and in the anthologies *Wild Women* and *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath*. Her book, *The Lady Anarchist Cafe*, is out now from Autonomedia. <https://autonomedia.org/product/the-lady-anarchist-cafe/>

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At 19 **DAGNY SELLORIN** decided she had to be an artist; got an MFA from Reed College and spent her life moving around the world, taking



part in group and solo shows on the West coast, USA, Grenada, WI, Venezuela, Hong Kong, and private shows in Cambodia. A small number of pieces are in private collections of discerning collectors around the world.

End game goal: Drop dead while making a fantastic piece of art, with a smile on her face.

* * *



MARGE SIMON is a writer/poet/illustrator living in Ocala, FL, USA. A multiple Stoker winner, HWA Lifetime Achievement awardee and Grand Master of SFPA, her works appear in *Asimov's*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Silver Blade*, *Penumbra*, *Magazine of F&SF*, and more, as well as anthologies such as *Chiral Mad*, *Qualia Nous*, *Spectral Realms*. Instagram: margesimonwrites

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ED TEJA is a lifelong writer and denizen of the margins of the world. A martial artist, former magazine editor, and Caribbean boat bum, he loves to write stories about the people he meets and places he goes—stories that reach deep into the odd corners of the world that often disappear into the margins.

His recent publications include short fiction in *Ellipsis Zine*, *Millennial Pulp Literary Magazine*, *Frontier Tales*, and (in translation) in *Nova Fantasia*.

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LUKE WALKER has been writing horror and dark thrillers for most of his life after finding a copy of Lovecraft's stories that his eldest brother left in the

bathroom. From there, he went on to his dad's collection of Stephen King books and hasn't looked back since. His novels include the new horror *The Ninth Circle* as well as *The Kindred*, *Pandemonium*, *The Dead Room*, *The Unredeemed*, *Ascent*, *Die Laughing*, *Dead Sun* and *Winter Graves*. Several of his short stories have been published online and in magazines/books. While writing, he has worked in a library, a hospital (disposing of severed legs) and a record shop (back in the distant past). He has recently branched out into speculative thrillers under the name Rob Harrison.

Luke is (too) active on Twitter/X and Bluesky and loves to hear from people who want to talk about books.

He is forty-seven and lives in England with his wife, cats, too many bad films and not enough books.

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ROB LANE WILDER is a musician, author, and spirit world traveler. wilder stamps the outer edges of surrealism with a uniquely humorous and iconoclastic flavor.

wilder pulls away from the mundane and in the process, transforms it. Cleaving to spiritual attainment, wilder invites everyone to join in. In spite of so much falling apart these days, wilder holds open doors to something better!

It's a mystical zone. Shades of Van Gogh in a grassy field, Hart Cane jumping off the bridge, Emily Dickinson poised in a Timeless room. Characters of every shape and size, roaming unexpected corners of an airy Universe.

wilder also loves to channel monsters. Spooky phantoms. Violin playing penguins slouching on the bus. Tin cans expounding philosophy. Space aliens from greasy space ships disguised as policemen sitting in a donut shop, planning worldwide colonization. Funny, surreal, surprising, wilder's forthcoming book is about to reach its tentacles into thousands of unnamed, unknown destinations.

wilder's publishing credits include *The Feathertale Review*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Saw*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *Second Guess*, *The Pacific Review*, *Chronogram*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Boston Literary Review*, *The Libretto Review*, *Cordite Review*, *Hot Flashes*, *Satellite Fiction*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Silver Blade*.

This writer has an unusual story and background. This is highlighted by a cause célèbre that culminated with a landmark legal victory, that opened up and expanded freedom of speech for many thousands of artists.

(The drawing of rob lane wilder is by the artist Rich Rethorn (rethornart.com)).



Fae-touched

by Joel Bisailon

(full image)